

# from HEARTH to HEART

TALES OF WINTER LOVE AND MAGIC



# EDDINS & ST. JAMES

Hearth to Heart: Tales of Winter Love and Magic  
*by Jac Eddins and Marissa St. James*

**Renaissance**

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## **HEARTH TO HEART**

Tales of Winter Love and Magic

Edited by

**Jac Eddins & Marissa St. James**

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## INTRODUCTION

Please, come in. The weather is crisp and cold tonight, and a few good friends have gathered to make this a memorable evening. The fire is bright and the air smells of burning pine. An occasional cone bursts with a loud pop and sends showers of sparks up the flue. Find yourself a spot and get comfortable while I get you a drink to chase away the chill. There's plenty of food at the buffet, so feel free to help yourself.

Tonight, everyone is bursting with a holiday story to tell. They're sure to inspire warm feelings, and maybe a chuckle or two. A young woman finds "The Hat" in a second hand shop and something unusual happens. Can the old felt hat be a clue to the past?

A lonely shopkeeper has no reason to celebrate in "An American Christmas Carol"—until...

A little English boy is scarred by an unexpected event one Christmas. Will the next year bring understanding with "The Bright Star"?

"Polly Schneeburger, aged Eight and a Quarter" is a little girl who's too smart for her own good and wants the lead in the Christmas play. What will she do next?

If wishes were horses ... a young girl can only hope for "The Christmas Pony" to brighten the holiday.

"The Two Santas"? Now there could be a bit of confusion; wonder what the end result will be.

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Returning to one's roots can bring the best of days and memories. A young woman returns to her home with a child. Is all what it seems to be? Something is missing in "A Hole in My Christmas".

Gloria wants to belong to the 'in crowd.' She learns the meaning of a true friendship, with "Her Christmas Knight".

Adella is a young lady getting over the loss of her mother, but that doesn't mean she can't discover the "Gift of Love" at Christmas, and the source is a dream come true.

Can you imagine Emily's disappointment when she learns she'll be spending Christmas alone? Maybe "Snow Angels" will have a hand in that.

Have I piqued your curiosity? I hope so. A few of our storytellers are new here, but all have wonderful tales to relate. What is better than spending an evening before a fire with friends, sharing tales of the past and present? Won't you sit with us by the hearth and let the fire warm you while the stories warm your heart?

Who knows, you may have a tale of your own to share.

## AN AMERICAN CHRISTMAS CAROL

**Jac Eddins**

"Darn it!" Lucille muttered under her breath and stuck her pricked finger in her mouth. The crimson ornament with the sharp edge, the one that had fallen from its branch, dangled not quite where she had wanted to place it. Now it could stay there! The tree glittered with mini-lights of red and green and sparkling silver tinsel. Red plaid bows gave it a retro flavor. It stood six foot high, a perfectly groomed example of a Christmas tree—except that the handsome top angel in his white satin robes would not light up.

That angel was the one concession she made to Christmas spirit. She still had no idea why she bought the thing many years before, but somehow she could never get around to tossing it away. Her son had always joked about it. She should have known anything she discovered at a flea market for so low a price had to be faulty!

If it weren't for people expecting it, she wouldn't waste time setting the tree up and decorating it. Her customers came into her shop with windblown hair and cold-reddened faces, eyes bright as stars, and the goodwill in their hearts that only Christmas lighted. They chose from her stock of unusual gifts, picking special presents for their loved ones. She envied them. Five years had passed since she had a loved one to buy anything for. The first two years after he left, she bought and wrapped gifts, set them under the tree

and hoped Jimmy would come home. He didn't. In all that time she hadn't received a single card or phone call. Her only son meant it when he stormed out and declared he would make it on his own, and be what he wanted to be. And, in her pride, she had made no effort to reach him.

One more day remained of the frenetic pace. Tonight she could close the door, lock her shop, and spend the day tomorrow resting and watching TV. Maybe Bob, her sometime date, would get away from his children and visit her in the evening. He had asked her to spend the day with them, but she just couldn't get over the feeling of being unwelcome there, as if she were intruding. His wife had passed on some ten years before, but to his children she would always be his only love. Were all kids like that? If Jimmy were still at home would he be as hostile to her relationship with Bob?

For just a moment she let herself remember Christmases past, back when Louis was alive and the house filled with music and laughter on that special day. The soft buzz of her alarm snapped her back to the present. Five minutes. She glanced into the mirror and smoothed back her dark, silver frosted hair. Maybe it wouldn't be too busy this morning. She could use the money, but without help it would be a rough day. She had to keep alert, too. Several gift sets had been shoplifted in the last few days, and she couldn't afford much more of that!

Her good friend, Fran, down the street at the temp agency, said she'd try to send some help if she found some bright person she could trust. That would be a Godsend today. Lucille closed her eyes a moment in silent prayer. "Oh,



please, send me some help today," she murmured to herself. She left the back room and made her way into the shop itself.

A smiling, dark skinned man stood just outside the door. He tapped on the glass and mouthed the words, "I'm here to help you."

Lucille hesitated a moment and studied the man's face. The color was not the reason for the high incidence of crime in the area; it was the poverty and desperation which bred it. Maybe one day she could afford to move the shop up onto the main row rather than the riskier side street. She continued to look him over, cautious in an area so close to the ghetto. His clothes were neat and clean, neither cheap nor expensive; he was neither a drifter nor one of the trouble-making wiseguys. His dark, shining eyes met hers evenly and he smiled a radiant, friendly smile that reached her heart.

Fran wouldn't send her anyone she couldn't trust. Lucille opened the door and the young man entered, still smiling.

"You're here to help?" she asked, just to make certain.

"Yes, ma'am. I had a call that you needed me."

"Very well. I'll give you the papers to fill out for when I pay you. What shall I call you?"

"Michael."

"Mike?"

"I prefer Michael," he said.

Clerking in a small store didn't take a Ph.D. In a matter of minutes Lucille covered all the main areas he needed to do the job. She unlocked the shop door, took a deep breath and prepared for the day's rush.

The morning passed in a parade of customers picking up last minute gifts and layaways. Lucille noted with some pleasure that her helper didn't remain idle in the few lulls of store traffic. He pitched right in and rearranged shelves the shoppers disturbed, dusted and polished.

Her small stereo unit played a continuous stack of CDs, all bright Christmas songs. She had become so accustomed to it she scarcely heard it any longer. Once in awhile, when 'Silver Bells' came on, it would intrude itself into her consciousness. She loved that one. It reminded her of a Christmas season long gone, walking with her mother across the small city park after a day at the office. Her first job had been in the same building where her mother worked, and they made their way to the bus stop together after hours. If she closed her eyes she could see the snow falling, smell the crisp cold air, and hear the ringing little bells of the street Santas begging passersby to remember the poor. Across the way the carillon of the Methodist Church rang out the old carols. She missed her mother more with each passing year.

When did Christmas lose its magic for her? When, year by year, she had less packages to wrap and place under the tree? When that season brought painful memories of loved ones no longer there to celebrate? The final stroke came when her son went his own way and she found herself truly alone.

At noontime she noticed two small dark skinned boys in the shop without an adult. That often meant trouble in her mind and she remained nearby, keeping an eye on them. A customer asked her a question. When she finished answering,

a quick glance showed an empty spot on the shelf that had been filled moments before. One of the boys had already slipped out of the store and the other was on his way.

Before the child could exit, Lucille caught him by the collar.

"Where's that perfume set?" she demanded of him.

The shabbily dressed boy said nothing, simply stared at his scuffed and worn sneakers.

"Either you or your friend took that," she accused. "Was it you?"

The boy shook his head but did not look up at her.

"If you don't give it back, I have no choice but to call the police."

His thin shoulders shook, but he uttered no words.

Michael came to stand beside her and studied the child a moment. "Did you steal something, Raymond?"

Again the boy shook his head. It bothered Lucille that Michael knew the boy by name. The bell over the door jingled and she looked to see the second boy return. He came to her and raised a tear stained face, at the same time handing her the stolen perfume.

"My brother din't do it. I took it. I wanted sumpin' real nice for my mama for Christmas. She work so hard for us an' we don't got no money t' get her nuffin'."

The lump in her throat prevented Lucille from swallowing. In the little brown skinned boy she saw a picture of her Jimmy, years before, proudly presenting her with a lopsided ashtray he made in school. It never mattered she didn't smoke; it was one of her most precious Christmas gifts. She forced a frown. "Would you be willing to work for that?"

The boy's eyes widened. "Oh, yes, ma'am. I sure would."

"If you promise to sweep the front sidewalk each morning for a week, you can have it."

"An' my brother can go? You ain't gonna give him t' no policeman now?"

"No. No policeman."

"That was a nice thing you did," Michael said when they had gone.

Lucille shrugged, embarrassed.

"Why did you think the boy was lying?"

"Well, when he wouldn't look me in the eye—"

Michael gave her a sad smile. "Black children are taught not to meet the eyes of people in authority. They're taught it's disrespectful."

"I am so sorry. Really. I never knew that. But, you knew the boy—"

"I know the family. Good people. The boys' father died of an overdose five years ago, when Raymond was a toddler. Their mother works as a cleaning woman, long hard hours for little pay. She could make money selling drugs, or herself, but she's a good Christian woman and she's doing her best to raise those boys right."

Tears suddenly welled up in Lucille's eyes so she could hardly see. Thank heaven the store was empty of customers at that moment. Michael saw it and brought her his handkerchief. In a mood totally unlike her she accepted his strong shoulder and let the tears fall.

"If only I had been a better mother! If I had listened," she sobbed. "Maybe then my heart wouldn't have this void. If I only knew where my own son was—if I could tell him..."

More customers arrived and Lucille pulled herself together. Mistakes or no, life went on. As usual on Christmas Eve, business dwindled to nothing by afternoon and they could close early. The image of the two dark children, desperate to make their mother happy, remained with her. Her own son showed his Irish heritage in his freckle dotted fair face, and yet there had been something so familiar in the children. The day had been particularly profitable, and, in a surge of holiday spirit, Lucille turned to Michael. "I'd like to do something for those kids. Maybe it's a little guilt from the way I reacted, but I'd really like to. Would you pick the things out for me? Some nice toys their mother couldn't afford, perhaps."

Michael gave her that sweet smile of his. "Small toys. Ones the other kids won't take away from them. If you want, put the rest of what you'd have spent into some food for their holiday dinner."

Lucille agreed. She gave Michael a hundred dollar bill from her own pocket. "If you'll take care of that, I'll close and draw up your check. Hurry back, though. If you're not here by three, I'll have to mail it."

Michael paused at the door and turned back. "Merry Christmas. Remember, when love fills your heart at Christmas, miracles happen." His smile lit the room and then he was gone.

Lucille worked about doing all the things necessary to close the shop for the next days. She was straightening her cubbyhole of an office when she heard the bell over the door.

"Be right with you, Michael."

No answer came.

A little frightened and nervous, worrying who might have entered, Lucille entered the store. She looked and looked again. Her eyes filled with tears, blurring the face she wanted to see. Her voice came in a hoarse whisper. "Jimmy!"

A moment later she was enfolded in her son's arms.

"I'm sorry, Mom—"

"Hush! Nothing matters but you're here!"

Time passed in a haze, until Lucille realized it was after three o'clock.

"Let me make up Michael's check before I leave," she said. "I can drop it in the mail on our way. Then we can go home and make it a real Christmas."

The papers she gave Michael to fill out were blank. She dialed the temp agency to ask for the information. Jimmy fiddled with the tree lights while she phoned

Fran answered. "Oh, Lucille! You just caught me. I'm closing up, too. I'm so sorry. I just couldn't find anyone to help you today. I hope it wasn't too bad."

Lucille hung up, thoroughly confused. "She said she didn't send Michael. Now, where—"

"You don't know how happy it made me when he called."

"Michael called you?"

Jimmy bowed his head. "He told me how unhappy you were and he knew how I missed you, too." He gave a little

laugh. "He also told me it was time to stop my stubborn pride and come home."

"He told you that? But how did he know..."

All at once, something in the light system came together. The angel atop the tree lit up, sending its radiance throughout the store.

Jimmy slipped his arm about his mother. "Fixed it. You know, that's the first time in all the years you had that thing I ever saw it light. Funny, too. I never noticed the angel was black."

## **A BRIGHTER STAR**

### **Fretherne**

It's very upsetting when your grandmother dies at Christmas and you are only five; it's even more upsetting if you killed her yourself. It takes more than a year to get over something like that, and now, that Kevin was six, and it was Christmas again, it still bothered him.

Last year Gran and Gramps had come up in the train to stay for Christmas. Kevin loved trains and meeting them at the station with his mother, Susan, was very exciting for him. They parked their blue Jaguar in the station car park and then climbed up the wooden steps of the passenger bridge that took them over the tracks to the platform on the other side. He strained to look through the gaps in the steps at the rails beneath him and worried a little in case the rickety bridge broke under their weight and let them fall down onto the railway track. His mother pulled impatiently at his hand and told him not to worry about it; the bridge was over fifty years old and had not collapsed yet. A strange strangled voice echoed around the station from the public announcement system. He listened but could not understand a single word it said.

It was cold standing and waiting. The wind blew through the open platform and from the old bridge he could see icicles hanging. He wished he could go and get one of them. English



winters don't often give a white Christmas, even there in the north, but it was certainly cold enough for snow.

The big diesel engine thundered into the station; he could even see the engine driver in the cab. The driver actually waved at Kevin but he was too surprised to wave back. The noise almost stopped except for the sound of doors opening. The almost empty platform was suddenly full of people struggling with suitcases and packages. Gramp was out of the coach first with two suitcases and he turned to help Gran down the step. She was carrying two parcels and almost forgot her stick. His mother kissed them both. Gramp picked him up high in the air and said how much he had grown. Kevin hated this; he was sure Gramp would drop him and he would fall on the grey concrete, or worse still, over the platform edge and onto the line.

Gran wanted to kiss him; he hated that even more, Her glasses always poked him when she kissed him. After a warning word from his mother he submitted to it with all the grace of a five year old on his best behaviour.

Gramp wouldn't let Susan carry either of the suitcases but she did manage to talk Gran into letting her carry the two parcels. Gran struggled with the steps over the bridge, holding on to one side, so she didn't need to use her stick until they were back in the car park. Halfway up the stairs she was out of breath and complaining about a pain in her chest. They all had to wait for a couple of minutes until she felt better. Then, horror of horrors, she insisted on holding Kevin's hand as if he was still a baby. Kevin had wanted to watch the train leave and perhaps see the driver in his cab

again but Gran pulled him along to the car. Gramp sat in Kevin's place in the front seat by Susan and Kevin had to sit in the back with Gran. The parcels fascinated him; some instinct told him that inside was something very interesting and it was for him. He asked what was in the parcels and they all laughed and said that they were for Santa to bring him on Christmas night. He couldn't understand why, if they were for him, he couldn't have them now and save Santa a trip. They all joined in singing the carol playing on the car radio. The Jaguar was still warm from the trip to the station. He hated it when he had to sit on the leather seats when they were cold. Gran would stop singing if they drove into traffic and kept telling Susan to be careful. Susan laughed a little, but Kevin noticed it wasn't her usual laugh and that her knuckles were showing white where she was gripping the steering wheel so tightly. Gran was asking him about school; he hated school, about his teacher Miss Black; he hated her too. From the driver's seat Susan told him to behave and answer properly. Gran told Susan to look where she was driving. Susan's laugh was now distinctly brittle.

Next morning Gran wanted porridge; but she didn't want it lumpy. Gran wanted toast; but she didn't want it too brown. She didn't want it too light either. She told Susan that Gramp wanted a proper cup of tea. Finally Susan gave up and allowed Gran to cook her own porridge and to make Gramp's tea. Kevin looked at the colour of Gran's toast but it seemed the same as his.

Susan cleared the table and broke a cup. She was using the best crockery too because of the visitors. Kevin had been

warned to be very careful with his cup and saucer twice during breakfast. Gran insisted on picking up the pieces and doing the washing up.

"After all," she said, "we don't want anymore broken." Colin, Kevin's dad, kept quiet, with his nose buried in the morning paper. While Gran was in the kitchen Gramp took his false teeth out. This fascinated Kevin but horrified Susan. Colin appeared not to notice. Gramp said he would just give his teeth a rinse in the kitchen sink and joined Gran in the kitchen. Kevin followed him to see what he would do. Through the serving hatch he could hear Susan talking to Colin in a quiet, hissy sort of voice that meant she was cross. He even heard her swear. He wondered what he had done to make his mother so angry.

Gran and Gramp said they were going to take Kevin to see Santa at the Cresco supermarket. Susan offered to drive them there but Gran refused. She said that Gramp wanted to smoke and Susan didn't allow it in her Jaguar. Cresco ran a free bus service that picked up locally from the corner of their road. It was often full with old age pensioners without cars or mothers with children off to do the weekly shop. Kevin was thrilled. He liked the big green double-decker bus much more than the Jaguar. He wanted to ride upstairs in the bus and lookout over the top of the hedges into the fields on the way. Gran couldn't climb the stairs to the top deck because of her bad leg, so she travelled downstairs, while Kevin went upstairs with Gramps. In the Jaguar it only took ten minutes to drive to Cresco. It was a big out of town hypermarket set in he countryside. The bus, though, had to take an indirect

route, picking up passengers at different stops, so it took nearly forty minutes. The passengers didn't mind; after all it was a free service from Cresco.

Upstairs, Kevin sat by the window. Gramps was smoking his pipe and didn't say much. Gramp had grown up in the countryside and he pointed at the horses from the riding school stables being exercised. They were walking slowly around a frosty field by the old gravel pit. Gravel was no longer being dug from the pit and it had been allowed to flood and form a large lake. Even from the bus Kevin could see the lake was frozen. Perhaps he would get some ice skates for Christmas and he could skate on the lake. He could see the horses' breath smoking in the cold air. Gramps took his pipe out of his mouth and told him that the horses would be glad to get back into their warm stable. One mile farther on and they turned into the huge car park for Cresco's. The bus drove right up to the entrance of the store because so many of the passengers were old and a little unsteady on their feet. There was no point in risking lawsuits from elderly customers slipping in an icy car park.

Inside the store was decorated with paper streamers, plastic holly and synthetic gaiety. The girls on the checkouts were wearing little red Santa hats with a bobble and the announcement system was playing Christmas carols. Collections were being made for charities and, raffle tickets were being sold in the foyer but Gran and Gramps hurried past the rattling collection boxes without stopping. The local church had set up a nativity scene with half size figures. Gran made Kevin admire the baby Jesus in his crib and stroke the

real lambs in their little straw lined pen that made the stable scene live. Kevin thought one of the plastic shepherds looked like Gran except he had a beard and no spectacles. Gran thought the little live lamb was so sweet; Gramps was wondering if it would be on the frozen meat shelf at four pounds twenty pence a pound by Easter. Kevin just thought it was boring and wanted to hurry on to Santa's Grotto.

All was not well in Santa's grotto. Santa Claus's breath smelt of beer and peppermint. His eyes were bloodshot. The little girl in the queue before Kevin had sat on his lap for the photograph. Terrified by his gruff voice and strange white beard she had wet herself on Santa's knee. Santa stomped off out of his grotto leaving Kevin and the queue just standing there. One of Santa's little helpers, a middle aged woman, in an elf costume, took over. She sat Kevin on her knee for the photograph and asked if he had been a good boy that year. The flashlight picture showed the look of blank amazement on his face, and, without saying a word; he was tipped off her knee and sent on his way with a little present. The present turned out to be a plastic gun that made a loud noise like a machine gun when you pulled the trigger. Gramp had to take it off him in the bus going back because the noise was irritating the other passengers. Seeing the disappointed look on Kevin's face Gramp joked that he might kill the bus-driver with the gun and they would all have to walk home.

By five o' clock in the morning on Christmas day Kevin was awake. His parents had been in bed for three hours, and after celebrating their own little Christmas treat away from the rest of the family, had been asleep for two hours.

Now misery is a solitary pleasure but happiness craves company. Kevin found his stocking at the foot of his bed where he had left it the night before. It wasn't empty anymore, though; it felt satisfyingly full of little packages. He took it and scampered into his parents' bedroom and climbed onto their bed. On the way he managed to wake Gran. In contrast to Kevin, Gran was not happy. Gran was also short of sleep. Last night she had lost an argument with Susan about cooking the Christmas turkey overnight. Susan would have called it a discussion and not an argument of course. It was Susan's opinion that they would be awake early and there would be plenty of time to roast the turkey in time for lunch at one o' clock on Christmas day. Worse still it looked as if Susan was right.

Gran had retired to bed with her knitting at ten-thirty while Gramp had stayed up drinking and helping to put up decorations. She had lain awake knitting until one in the morning. Hearing Gramps on the stairs, she had pretended to be asleep so she could snap at him for waking her up when he got into bed. She didn't get much satisfaction from this because, with several stiff whisky macs inside him, he had fallen asleep and started snoring within two minutes of getting into bed. The snoring didn't disturb her, she was well used to that. What did disturb her was the sound of the bed creaking after Sue and Colin had gone into their bedroom. The suppressed giggles and little gasps, though barely audible, drove her into a fury. She elbowed Gramps to wake him up and told him to get up and go and tell Colin she could hear a burglar. Gramp was a little deaf and just muttered

toothlessly that it was probably Father Christmas and to go back to sleep.

Reluctantly, Susan woke up as Kevin climbed into their bed. Colin looked at the alarm clock with a groan of disbelief. In the next room he could hear his mother ranting on at Gramps. This Christmas was not starting well. Sue gave Kevin a kiss and started to get out of bed to go down and switch on the oven. She wouldn't trust the automatic timer for something as important as a Christmas lunch. Seeing Colin smile she realised she was not wearing a nightdress. They both collapsed into giggles. Colin said what a treat it would have been if she had bumped into Gramp on the landing but the shock might have killed his mother. Susan slipped into a dressing gown and went downstairs to start the turkey roasting.

A few hours later everything was better. Around the tree lay a mass of wrapping paper from the opened presents. Susan was squashing it up and putting it into a plastic bin bag; while Gran was carefully folding bits and putting them into a neat pile to use again next year; she liked things folded neatly and put away. Gran was much more cheerful now. Earlier on she had sneaked into the kitchen and turned the oven down low so that the baked potatoes and parsnips would not be overdone. The turkey had not been cooked through at one so lunch had been an hour late. Although she didn't make a big thing about it she pointed out that if it had been cooking overnight it would have been ready. Tactfully, Susan refrained from pointing out that if she hadn't turned the oven down the turkey would have been ready. Gran

reinforced her point by taking some indigestion tablets for the pain in her chest. She put it down to heartburn from insufficiently roasted turkey.

Sue was much too tired to bother arguing. Anyway, the nice thing about Gran was she would insist on washing up the mountain of used pans and plates. Gramps would play with Kevin. Susan and Colin could then sneak off back to bed for the afternoon. Colin had already given her one of his special secret smiles when his mother wasn't looking. So why argue; everyone was happy.

Gramps stretched out on the couch snoring sonorously. Gran, after finishing the washing up, was sitting in an armchair, knitting. Colin and Susan had slipped away upstairs while she was washing up. Now, after the climax of Christmas morning, and the heavy Christmas lunch, Kevin was overtired, a little bored and fretful. He wanted to go out on his new bicycle but he couldn't without his dad. Gran's heartburn was a little worse and it was making her irritable. She told Kevin to try on the new bright yellow rubber boots she had put under the Christmas tree for him. He had unwrapped them, taken one look at them and decided they were girlish and he didn't want them. They were full two sizes too big for him but Gran said that was to allow for growing and for now he could wear nice warm thick woollen socks.

Now, a little petulant and overtired, Kevin refused point blank and said he didn't want them. Gran insisted. In a battle of wills she was not going to be defied by a five year old. He stamped his foot and shouted at her. She had never allowed Colin, or his brother, to do that when they were five and she



was not going to allow Kevin. She swooped out of the armchair, caught him by his jersey and gave him a stinging slap on his bare leg.

For one moment he stood rigid, then dancing in pain and rage he snatched up his plastic gun, aimed it at her and pulled the trigger.

"You wicked little boy," Gran shouted. "You'd kill your own Grandma." Breathing heavily and clutching her chest, she sat back down and took another indigestion tablet. Kevin fled to his bedroom, terrified of what he had done. Gramps, oblivious, continued to snore.

On Boxing Day Gran stayed in bed much to Susan's relief. Gran was still blaming the heartburn on the turkey being undercooked. Kevin avoided going in to see her until Colin told him to take her knitting in to her. She was sat up in bed drinking a cup of tea and she looked very little and very old. Nothing was said about yesterday and the gun at all. Gran asked him to tell Gramps to turn the TV sound lower. He was a little deaf and she could hear it upstairs. Kevin realised that somehow yesterday was a secret between them.

Next day, when Gran was still no better, Susan called out their doctor. He was grumpy about being called out during the holiday for a case of indigestion. After a cursory examination he prescribed some gaviscon and told Gran to see her own doctor when she went home if it was no better. She died of a massive heart attack that evening at seven o' clock. Susan had taken her up a little light dinner to eat and found her, sat up in bed with her knitting, dead. The tearful Susan noticed she had just completed a row.

Kevin knew he had killed Gran with his plastic gun. He hid it under his bed. He was kept out of the way in his bedroom while arrangements were made. A tall man in a dark suit was talking to his mother and father downstairs. Kevin knew he must be a detective. Kevin had seen enough detective programmes on TV. At the end of each show they always caught the killer and took him away. His mother found him in a flood of tears after the undertaker left. She talked to Colin and they rang a friend who offered to let Kevin stay with his family until the funeral was over. Kevin was a bit worried going out in the car in case he was being taken to prison, but then he realised his mother and father must be hiding him from the police.

The following year was horrendous. Susan explained to Kevin that although he could no longer see Gran she could still see him. Gramps moved in to live with them. Not the cheerful old Gramps from last year though. This was an unhappy man rapidly growing old. Kevin, too, became withdrawn. In the garden he had made himself a little den and would spend hours just hiding in it. Once, after a loud knock on the door he vanished for four hours and Susan found him hiding under his bed. He had problems at school. During one morning playground break he had vanished completely and after a search of the school he had been found hiding in den he had made in the coal shed. On the headmaster's advice, he had been seen by an educational psychologist. Kevin did the tests but was very careful in what he said. The psychologist had reported back to Sue and Colin that Kevin was of normal intelligence but seemed to have

some deep seated feeling of guilt. This was probably a result of too early and too strict potty training. This had the effect of transferring some of the guilt onto Susan. There were strains in their marriage too caused partly by Gramps coming to live with them and by Kevin's withdrawn and unhappy nature. Sue took anti-depressants prescribed by the doctor but could not stop worrying about Kevin. The death of his Gran seemed to have hit him very hard. At least Gramps seemed to be able to talk to the boy. Christmas was again approaching, but Christmas now would always be tainted by the sudden death of Gran.

During one of their chats Kevin asked Gramps where dead people went. The old man tried to explain about heaven. He told Kevin that Gran now would be looking after the baby Jesus at Christmas, just as she had looked after Colin when he was a baby. Kevin thought about that a great deal. His school put on a nativity play each Christmas. Kevin, because of his withdrawn behaviour, was not really suited to a speaking part so he played the donkey. The small stage at the school had been made up to look like a stable, although Kevin had never been inside a stable. He remembered the riding school stable on the way to Cresco's but he had only seen the outside of that. He remembered too that one of the plastic shepherds at Cresco's Christmas crib last year had looked like Gran. So it all seemed to be making a little sense. He wanted so much to tell Gran that he hadn't meant to kill her. He had just thought it was an ordinary plastic toy gun from the shop.

Gramps even took Kevin to see Father Christmas at Cresco's again. This time it was quite a jolly Father Christmas not at all like last year's. Kevin, still a devout believer in Santa, wondered how he could change so much in twelve months. When Kevin sat on his knee and was asked what he wanted for Christmas he hesitated and then said.

"I want my Gran back." Santa looked at him and then at Gramps standing there with a tear shining in his eye. He asked Kevin where he thought his Gran was. "She's in heaven with the baby Jesus," said Kevin. The kind hearted old actor playing Santa then took a little time to tell him it was all right, his Gran was up in heaven but she would still be watching out for him. Kevin refused to take a present and went off clutching his Gramp's hand.

The morning of the day before Christmas Eve, again, and Kevin had brightened up a little. Colin and Sue had been collecting some of his old toys, the ones he never played with anymore to give to a local children's home. Colin had found the plastic gun under Kevin's bed. Seeing that Kevin was in a more cheerful mood than usual he surprised him by suddenly producing it from behind his back and giving Kevin a good burst from point blank range.

"Got you!" Sue and Colin were amazed to see Kevin burst into tears and run into his bedroom, slamming the door. This caused an argument between Sue and Colin; arguments between them were becoming a regular thing now. Upstairs in his bedroom, hidden under the bed, Kevin waited to die. He had shot Gran just like that and now it was his turn. He couldn't tell Colin or Sue or Gramps without them knowing he

had killed Gran. Somehow he had to find Gran in heaven and make it all right again.

He pulled on the yellow Wellington boots that Gran had bought him. Now they nearly fitted him. He knew where she would be. She would be looking after the baby Jesus. He slipped into the rest of his outdoor clothes without being noticed.

He listened to his mum and dad arguing in the lounge and slipped out of the kitchen door. He ducked down below the hedge so they would not see him through the window and walked quickly to the corner to wait for Cresco's free bus. There were plenty of people waiting, mostly families with children. No one noticed he was by himself; he just mixed in with the queue and got on the bus when it stopped to pick up. He went upstairs just like he did with Gramps and looked over the hedges into the fields. The lake by the riding school stable was frozen again. He got off the bus and went into the busy store. The Christmas crib from the local church was still there and the little lamb was bleating. The plastic figure of the shepherd that looked like Gran was there too. He waited till there was no one near and spoke to it. It was just a plastic figure. Puzzled, he walked around the store past Santa's grotto. Perhaps Gran only came there at night, he didn't know. He also thought that maybe they were just plastic figures. It wasn't a real stable, it wasn't a real baby Jesus and it wasn't a real shepherd. All he knew was he would surely die. His Dad had shot him with the same gun he had shot Gran with.

One of the ladies on a cash desk asked him if he was lost and he said that his mother was waiting for him outside. He walked out through the door into the cold winter afternoon. Not knowing where to go and feeling the cold he walked around the car park. He threw some stones onto the ice in the ditch at the end of the car park but the ice didn't break. After a while he went back into the warm shop. It was so busy that they had left a big pile of empty cardboard boxes against one wall. Customers could help themselves to a box to take their purchases home but most of them didn't bother. It was easier to wheel the trolley out and unload it into the car's boot. He looked around and when no one was looking he squirmed into one of the larger boxes and lay there hidden. He could watch the crib through the split in the bottom of one box and see all the people going in and out. While he lay there hidden, he wondered what dying would be like. At least it didn't seem to hurt much.

At home he had already been missed. Colin checked on his bicycle; it was still in the garage. Sue checked his room and found his duffle coat and his blue ski cap were missing. They checked his den in the garden and the other secret hiding place he sometimes used in the garage. Colin got out the Jaguar and they drove around looking for him. They checked the few friends from school he might have gone to but no one had seen him. Susan telephoned the police. The policewoman on the other end of the line was very reassuring; after all it wasn't her son that was missing. The same woman police constable rang up an hour later to ask if he had turned up.

Then she drove around to the house in a panda car expecting to find that the lad had returned home.

She took a description and told them that at least he had not been involved in a road accident. She said not to worry, children usually turned up once they are hungry. While Colin drove the Jaguar one way she took Susan the other in the panda car. There was still no sign of Kevin and it was already dark enough for them to need to use the car headlights. It was also bitterly cold and it would get far colder during the night. His description had now been circulated to all the police in the area. The policewoman sensitively questioned Colin and Sue. Was Kevin in any trouble? Who were his friends? Had they told him off? Carefully she noted Kevin's fondness for hiding in dens for hours on end. She and a colleague visited the houses of his school friends. They arranged for a dog handler to make a search. Sue was by now very upset. Colin gave the police dog handler a pair of Kevin's socks and the dog sniffed them suspiciously. It set off out of the house and walked around by the hedge and then confidently set off up the road. The dog stopped at the corner. They tried the other side of the road and around the corner but the dog just looked as baffled as a police dog can look. The dog handler asked if Kevin would have got into a car with anyone? Colin said they had warned him never to do that. They asked the people in the house on the corner but they had been out all day and seen nothing.

The dog handler radioed back to the station and told them he suspected the boy had been abducted into a vehicle. The lost child enquiry now took on a life of its own. A senior police

officer, Superintendent Cladster, took charge of the enquiry. He set up a full search procedure for implementing at first light the next morning. The local radio and television stations were informed and requests were made for viewers in the area to check their gardens, sheds and garages to make sure Kevin was not hiding there. A cut down picture of Kevin's face was shown on TV. Actually it was the same picture taken last Christmas on the lady elf's knee with the same look of blank amazement on his face. The police superintendent had grandchildren of his own of Kevin's age and he knew they could not survive a night outside at below freezing temperature. He appointed the same policewoman that had visited Colin and Sue earlier to be the family liaison officer to stay with them and give them some support. He had a bad feeling about this case and to make it worse it was Christmas. Two local sex offenders were pulled in to the station and questioned. One had a clear alibi and was released after two hours; the other was kept in overnight assisting police with their enquiries.

Back at Cresco's Kevin watched as the last minute shoppers went through the checkouts. He was feeling thirsty and a little hungry by now. He could worm his way in and out through the pile of boxes and had relieved himself against the wall where it wouldn't show. Now he lay quietly, watching. Watching the shelf stackers filling shelves for Christmas Eve the last shopping day, watching the cleaners with their electric polishers going up and down the aisles, and he listened. One man and a boy working the four-hour evening shift started flattening the cardboard boxes putting them in a



neat pile for removal tomorrow. They were gradually working their way towards him. He squirmed back but it was going to do him no good they were going to flatten and stack every box.

The television appeal brought in a record response. Over eight hundred people telephoned in to say they might have seen Kevin. Each call was carefully logged, given a reference number and fed into a searchable computerised database. The calls were from all over the country and although all of them were well intentioned, none of them seemed a definite sighting. Ominously, two witnesses reported a large white van in the area although they could not actually link it with Kevin. Call reference number KEV00433 was actually from a check out girl at Cresco's and she reported seeing a lost boy wearing yellow boots at the supermarket. Reference numbers KEV00262 and KEV00298 both referred to a little boy seen at Belmart's Store wearing a duffle coat and accompanied by a man, and there were another five from other shops. It seemed no more or no less significant than the other calls. Cladster called in to see Sue and Colin to tell them of the tremendous response. They were bearing up well and Cladster delicately approached them to consider making a live TV appeal themselves. This always generated a great response from the public and of course it would mean that Superintendent Cladster would appear on TV as well. In fact the responses they had so far had already overloaded their ability to process the information.

The policewoman asked them again to check the description. A fawn duffle coat—that was good thought

Cladster. At least that would give some protection if the poor kid was still outside. A blue ski cap? He queried this and established it was a sort of baseball cap with a peak. Blue jeans—not so good if they were wet they would not protect the child much from the cold. He realised how much he wanted the poor little boy to be somewhere out in the cold, somewhere where they would find him, the alternatives he didn't want to think about.

"What sort of shoes was he wearing? It says on the statement brown leather lace ups?"

"Yes," said Susan, "his school shoes." Gramps got up and left the room; they heard him climbing the stairs. He returned with Kevin's brown lace up shoes. Sue and Colin searched the house. It seemed impossible but none of his shoes were missing. Cladster could not imagine the child out in December without shoes.

"Could he have taken his football boots?" he asked thinking of his own football mad grandson. Gramps reminded them of the yellow boots Gran had bought Kevin last Christmas.

"He wouldn't wear them, they were too big for him and he thought they were sissy," said Susan. They spent twenty minutes looking for the yellow boots and finally they were convinced he was wearing them. Cladster telephoned in the revised description. It was entered into the computer and the database cross-referenced it with the report of the boy at Cresco's. He dispatched a search team to Cresco's.

Back at Cresco's Kevin knew he was going to be found in the next few minutes. The pile of boxes was now down to a

quarter of its original size as the man and the boy worked away at them methodically. Through the crack in the bottom of the box he could only see them occasionally but he could hear them coming ever closer. He could even hear the slightly tinny buzzing from the headphones the boy was wearing from his Sony Walkman. He could see the steel reinforced toe caps of the man's boots as he kicked the bottom of the boxes in with practiced ease before folding them flat and putting them on the neat pile. He thought about making a run for it but he knew the main entrance doors were locked. He lay quietly, hardly daring to breathe as the box, next to his, was taken from the pile and noisily squashed flat. He shrank up into a ball and shut his eyes tightly. He was going to be caught now.

Flashing blue lights and police sirens wailing three squad cars pulled onto Cresco's car park and the first two officers hammered on the outer doors. The box flattening was abandoned and the man released the catch on the door. He sent the boy off to find the evening shift supervisor and allowed in the other police. In another police car the woman that had made the report was brought to the store and she showed the very spot she had seen Kevin and the door he had walked out. The dog handler and his dog tried to pick up a scent and although the dog seemed to follow a scent once outside it became confused. The dog handler was told to search the outside of the store and the car park surrounds. He cursed his luck as he and the dog walked around on a hopeless quest in the freezing night air while his colleagues stayed in the warm supermarket. The dog seemed to quite enjoy it though. Inside the store a cursory search was made.

The woman was quite sure she had seen Kevin leave and had not seen him come back in again. The dog handler brightened up a little when the rest of his colleagues were sent out to comb the area. There was a deep water-filled ditch behind Cresco's car park. It was covered with a thin layer of ice. The police obtained some broom handles from the supermarket and probed through the ice into the muddy bottom of the ditch. Each one of them quietly praying to himself that he would find nothing. They found five Cresco's shopping trolleys in the water under the ice but no body.

Inside his cardboard box Kevin was paralysed with fear. The police were after him. He had heard the sirens and seen the lights. How had they found out? He lay as if dead in the box not even daring to peep through the crack in the bottom in case they found him. All those hours spent hiding in his den helped. He could be quiet. He could lie still. He was undetectable. The two box breakers resumed work but from the other end of the pile. The foreman called them away and said to leave the rest. There was a small distribution of Christmas goodies. Each of the staff received a plastic bag containing some groceries as a small token from Cresco's for Christmas. By the time they had finished complaining about how small the token was it was the end of the shift and they all left. The store was secure, locked, the dim security lighting was on, the burglar alarm was set and it was empty except for Kevin. He lay still and quiet, watching, waiting.

There was no way that Sue and Colin could sleep. It was two in the morning. The policewoman, who they were now calling Maureen, made tea for them and urged them to try to

sleep. If they slept perhaps she could get a couple of hours on the couch. She was dreading a telephone call from the station. Now, that she had developed a relationship with them it would be her job to tell them any news. She didn't think the news would be good. Maybe that a little body had been found dumped, murdered, by the side of a road by some pervert or perhaps to say they had found the child drowned or even frozen to death. She hoped it would be frozen to death. That would be better than the other horrible thing. Perhaps he could still be alive hiding in someone's garden shed. A duffle coat and a garden shed might just get him through the night safely. She wondered why the kid hid in dens; his mum and dad seemed nice and normal. The best lead so far was the Cresco sighting. She had asked how he could have got to Cresco's and then Gramps had remembered the bus that stopped on the corner; the very corner where the scent had run out for the dog. Tomorrow they would question the other passengers. Already a possible sighting on the bus had been reported after the revised description had been broadcast on the Ten o' clock news, complete with a brave appeal from Colin and a tearful Susan. Maureen smiled, remembering the avuncular but self-important Superintendent Cladster had managed to get himself on TV as well. Still she thought there could not be a better man leading this enquiry. He really did care.

Like some cautious nocturnal animal Kevin eased himself out of his box into the dim security lighting. He was thirsty and hungry. First of all he visited the crib. There was no sign

of Gran and the baby Jesus lay in plastic silence in the manger.

Very quietly and listening carefully, he prowled the darkened aisles of the super market. He found a refrigerated shelf with milk but ignored that to go to the soft drink section. He pulled down a two-litre bottle of Coca-Cola and tried to undo the cap. He couldn't do it, it was too tight and it had that tricky little plastic seal on it. He put it back and took a can instead. Warily he walked around gathering a nocturnal picnic from the shelves. Chocolate biscuits and sweets, even an ice cream; a little round box of cream cheese triangles, he was spoiled for choice. Although he knew it was stealing it didn't seem to matter when he was already a murderer. He took his picnic to Santa's grotto and sat in Santa's chair to eat it. With all the fancy lights out it just seemed like any other part of the store. Carefully he gathered up all traces of his food and put them in the rubbish bin near his hiding place. He sat down by the crib and started to wait. He wondered if he'd die before she came. Time passed very slowly. He could not tell the time but he watched the small hand of the wall clock creep around to five. Still there was no sign of Gran. He sat quietly, waiting, watching, and hoping. Gradually his eyes closed and he fell asleep.

Suddenly he heard noises. He looked up and saw the little hand of the clock was now pointing at seven. Someone was unlocking the entrance door. It could be the police back to get him again. Staff were entering, the lights were being switched on. He ran back to his hiding place and scuttled into his box. He desperately wanted to pee.

"Someone obviously abducted him from the car-park."  
Cladster dominated the morning search team briefing.

"Couldn't he have got back on the bus?" bravely a junior constable challenged him.

"Not without someone noticing him."

He had a team trawling through criminal records and bringing in all known child molesters. He had police officers interviewing every kid in Kevin's class at school. He was holding a press conference at eleven-thirty just in time to catch the lunch-time television news. It wasn't enough. Although he was totally decisive in front of his team at the briefing he was haunted by the prospect of a six year old lost outside somewhere in this weather. The kid liked to hide in dens. Snow was forecast for later too. Suppose, just suppose he was freezing in someone's back garden, somewhere he should have had searched. Where could he have built a den? The dog teams would have found him. No, it had to be an abduction.

Christmas Eve was the busiest day of the year at Cresco's. By the time it was officially opened at eight o' clock the car park was nearly full. A tide of customers swept through the shop, stripping the shelves, the staff fought to keep up with it, a constant stream of trolleys through the cash outs, a constant stream of goods out of the storage area and onto the shelves. Lorries pulled in and were unloaded, the boxes of goods moved into the storage then almost immediately moved out again and onto the shelves. The empty box pile around Kevin accumulated. He wriggled deep into the pile and relieved himself then squirmed back into his box. with that

comforting thought he fell solidly asleep. He woke about lunchtime in the semidarkness, confused and wondering where he was. For a moment he wondered if he had died already. He ate a couple more of the chocolate biscuits then fell asleep for a while longer. He was bothered about Gran. It came to him. Jesus was born in a stable, a real stable, not a supermarket with a plastic crib. The riding school stables that Gramps had pointed out to him; he must go there.

Outside, in the rather grey daylight, the police repeated their search of the car park and the ditches. A team of dogs was used to scour the fields in each direction. Door to door enquiries were made. Each farmhouse, each cottage even the riding stables were visited and a search made of outbuildings. The police worked quickly and efficiently. It was Christmas Eve, snow was threatening and it would be dark by four o' clock in the afternoon. More reports of possible sightings from different parts of the country continued to pour in. The whole country was desperate to help. Search teams composed of volunteers and lead by police officers walked the fields. Susan and Colin were at the Cresco car park sat in an unmarked police car with Superintendent Cladster watching the search teams report back to him. An exhausted Maureen had been sent off duty at mid-day and ordered to get some sleep. Not twenty-five yards from them and inside the supermarket Kevin slept on in his box. Now it was growing dark. The first few flakes of snow were falling. Cladster was more worried than he showed. Colin and Sue felt they were in a nightmare.

Kevin woke again. His little body was stiff from lying on the cardboard. He wriggled through the boxes until he could



see out. It was thronged with shoppers all loaded down with bags and eager to get home on Christmas Eve. He could see it was dark outside. He waited until a family of two parents and five children were walking towards the automatic entrance doors. He scuttled out and just tagged along behind them. He was through the doors and out into the car park. He walked between the parked cars and found a hiding place behind a trolley store. He waited an hour until the store was closing and the car park was emptying. There would be no evening shift tonight on Christmas Eve. He could see a police car parked, illegally, near the entrance and after a time that too left. He skulked along in the darkness avoiding the ditch and into the field that the police had so rigorously searched earlier. He walked across the fields following the bus route back to the riding school. He had to keep climbing fences to cross from field to field and it was very dark. At one point he thought he was lost until he found the lane again and followed it for a while. Every time he saw approaching car headlights he ducked down in the frozen ditch by the side of the road and waited till it had passed. The fourth car he avoided was Cladster driving his mother and father back home from the supermarket.

He really was cold now; colder than he had ever been before in his life. He kept his hands deep in his pockets except when he had to climb a fence. Even that seemed to take more and more effort. In his pocket he still had some chocolate biscuits and a triangle of cheese. His little fingers were too cold to peel the aluminum foil off the processed cheese and he sort of bit and chewed it out of the wrapper

ignoring the metallic taste. There were people about at the riding stables. Bright lights and the clanging of buckets of water and mash as the horses were fed and watered. He managed to get into the hay store and that was at least warmer than outside. He snuggled down in the loose hay on top of the tight packed square bales and watched. And waited. He knew that Jesus was born at night because the wise men had seen a star in the sky. He looked out of the open front of the hay store but the sky was cloudy with just an occasional flurry of snow falling out of it. He could see no stars. He wondered how much longer he would last before he died. Gran had died the day after he shot her.

Maureen, wearing plain clothes, sat in the house with Colin and Sue. Her own Christmas plans now were forgotten. It didn't seem like Christmas anymore. There were trimmings around the lounge and a tall Christmas tree stood in one corner. She thought about suggesting they decorate it ready for Kevin when he came home but said nothing. Weighing on her was the black thought that Kevin would not be coming home. He had been missing now for over thirty-six hours. A doctor had spoken at the morning briefing for the search team and warned them that a child could not survive these temperatures if he was outside. If he wasn't, if he had been abducted, she knew the chances of him ever being found alive were remote. The TV was on with the sound turned off. Susan was very quiet. She looked at Colin and spoke her first words for two hours.

"I want to go to church. I want to go to the midnight service." Colin looked at Maureen and she nodded. She knew

they wanted a little privacy as they came to terms with the probable loss of their son. Susan had a mobile telephone in her handbag so she wouldn't be out of touch. They went upstairs to change. Maureen suddenly realised that Colin and Sue had still been wearing the same clothes they had on yesterday. They asked Maureen to stay at home and look after Gramps. Colin drove them to the church in the Jaguar. Most of the congregation recognised them; not because they were regular churchgoers, but from their TV appeal. They were careful not to stare but prayed just a little more fervently than usual.

Colin felt light headed from lack of sleep and not eating. Phrases from the service seemed to resonate through his head. 'There was a bright star seen in the East'. He fiddled with the hymnbook as familiar carols were sung. He felt breathless. 'Fear not said he for mighty dread had seized their troubled minds. His hand reached for Sue's, The Angel of the Lord came down and Glory shone around'. He slumped down to sit in the pew. Sue sat beside him. He prayed as he had never prayed before. He felt tears starting down his face. He knew he would never see Kevin again alive. He started to sob uncontrollably. Sue stood up and quietly led him out of the church followed by the sympathetic eyes of the congregation. Sue held him tightly in the car while his body was wracked with sobbing.

"Take us back to Cresco's." Susan was crying quietly as she drove the car and made no argument.

\* \* \* \*

Even in the hayshed the cold was extreme. Most of the hay was tied in tight bales so he could not cover himself in it. It felt late. He felt ill. All of the chocolate biscuits and cheese were gone. The stables now were in darkness except for one light shining from the upstairs window of the house. He crept over to the stables through the thin covering of snow. He could hear little snickers and whinnies coming from the horses inside. He reached the door and waited, listening. The door was locked with a large hardened steel padlock. He couldn't open it; he felt his way around the wall looking for a window or another door. It was really dark on the far side of the stables away from the house. Suddenly he heard a snarl and a rushing white body flew at him.

The chained up Alsatian watchdog had been listening to him as he worked his way around. It had waited patiently, with the fierce cunning of its breed, anticipating him coming within range. The dog leapt to the limit of its chain. Its teeth snapped shut inches from Kevin's face. He had been knocked flat but at least was out of range. The dog set up a furious barking. Kevin turned and ran blindly across the snow-covered field. Lights were going on in the house and a door was opening. He ran blindly and panic-stricken across the field into the comforting darkness. The ground slid from under his feet and he realised he was sliding over the frozen lake. There was an almighty cracking sound and he was down and in the water. The ice-cold water shocked him to his core. He kicked and struggled against the blackness as the water closed over his face and into his mouth and up his nose. He

felt ice under his hands giving away again and again. A freezing blackness, the chill of death, overcame him.

Back in the stables they had found his small child footprints in the snow and went back in to telephone for the police. They turned the Alsatian loose and followed it down to the lake. In the beams of their torch they saw the shattered ice and the black water shining. The dog rushed into the water but howled and came out immediately. They worked around the margin smashing the ice and reaching in. The water was colder than they could stand. They waded around the margin hoping desperately they would find him alive but the intense cold drove them out.

At Cresco's car park, deserted except for their Jaguar, Susan stood in the snow flurries. Colin was crying in the back of the car, somehow he knew that Kevin was gone for good. He had been the strong one all day but now he had lost hope. Sue knew that Kevin had been here and she felt close to him. She was not ready to let go. The car door opened and Colin stood besides her pointing at the sky. 'A bright star was seen in the East'. They could see a brilliant light in the sky some distance down the road. They started the car and drove towards it. The light seemed to be hovering over the riding stables. It was now too brilliant to look at. It was not still but moving slowly. They got out of the car and heard a mysterious loud beating sound. The light was coming down. 'The Angel of the Lord came down and Glory shone around'.

Colin realised it was a police helicopter with a searchlight sweeping the fields. A grim faced Superintendent Cladsters met him. He explained they had been called out to the stable

but Kevin had fallen through the ice on the lake and there was very little chance for him. Police divers had been called out and would search the lake presently. The helicopter had been sweeping the field with its searchlight and a heat-seeking infra-red camera just in case Kevin had managed to crawl unseen from the lake. Colin could not take it in. 'Fear not said he for mighty dread had seized their troubled minds'.

"You mean Kevin's in the lake?" It took two policemen to stop him rushing in. "I've heard of cases where children in ice cold water have survived for thirty minutes underwater."

"Leave it to us please." Cladster's own eyes were filling with tears. He was thinking where had the kid been all day. If only they had found him. What else could he have done. If he ordered his men into the deep water he would probably lose some of them and the child must already be dead. It was now over fifty minutes since the telephone call from the stables. Police squad cars and even the fire brigade were streaming down the country road with sirens screaming. Standing in the cold was the dog handler. Volunteers from the police and fire brigade were wading into the icy water. No man could stand more than five minutes. One fireman shouted he had found something. He was feeling underwater with his foot. He took a deep breath and forced himself to lower himself into the icy water. He returned to the side carrying one yellow rubber boot. Three others took his place and felt around the spot but just beyond the bottom shelved down into deeper water. They were dragging the deeper water with hay rakes from the riding school but could locate nothing. Of course they could not reach the middle.

Cladster took them to a squad car and sat them down in the back. Susan white faced and dry-eyed Colin again sobbing. Although it was hopeless Cladster ordered the dog team to search the fields to see if they could pick up a scent and sent the helicopter off to resume its infrared sweep. He knew they had missed nothing before. He turned to talk to them, to assure them that everything was being done. His mobile telephone rang. He answered it. He looked at Sue and Colin and asked the driver to take them back to Cresco's. They looked at him puzzled. He started to say something and then stopped. They were met in the car park by another squad car. Apparently Cresco's automatic burglar alarm had been tripped but no sign of a break in. They had searched the shop and they had found ... he cautioned the officer to keep quiet. He asked Colin and Susan to follow him. The constable led them to the crib. In the straw of the sheep pen a bedraggled and naked Kevin was sleeping peacefully. By the side of him was a pile of wet clothes neatly folded.

Susan woke him gently. His eyes opened and he smiled to see her.

"Mum, Gran was here she brought me here from the water."

Cladster was pleased to witness a Christmas miracle. What a tough little kid he must be to have walked all the way back after getting out of the lake. He couldn't understand how the helicopter sweep had not picked him up, but there again children are full of surprises. No, it didn't make sense but he was not going to argue with that. Funny how the poor kid had hallucinated about his Gran though.

Meanwhile a very puzzled dog handler had been following a set of tracks in the snow. He thankfully received the radio message to stand down. The snow flurries were gradually obliterating them but unmistakably they were the prints of a small boy and an old woman. By the side of the adult footprints was the clear imprint of a walking stick.



## **STARRING POLLY SCHNEEBURGER, AGED EIGHT AND A QUARTER**

### **Fretherne**

Well, one doesn't like to complain, or to be a bad sport, just because one hasn't been cast in the part one richly deserves. After all, the important thing is that it is a good show.

I spent the whole year preparing for it after the fiasco of the performance last year, and now Miss Bainbridge has given the part to Susan Powell. It isn't even as if Sue Powell was pretty. Well, she is all right, but rather mousy and plain compared to me. And she is huge, of course. Her costume would need to be the size of a marquee. She is also shy and nervous; so how does Miss Bainbridge think she will cope with being the star?

I didn't make a fuss. I didn't cry, or throw myself on the floor screaming, although I felt like doing that. After all, that hadn't worked last year. It was perfectly obvious to me that Miss Bainbridge hated me. I merely looked over at her where she sat by the piano and rolled my eyes to heaven and pursed my lips—the way Mom does when Dad wants the football game on TV while there is an old film on. Miss Bainbridge pretended not to notice, but carried on reading down the cast list. With mounting fury, I realised she was not giving me any of the speaking roles. Obviously, the woman had no idea what she was doing. Who made her the producer

and then allowed her to be the casting director as well? It's hardly democratic is it? There again, she had worked for the Democrats and she knew that Mom worked for the Republicans, so politics could be behind it. Well, I wasn't going to just allow this to happen.

As Miss Bainbridge read out their names the lucky ones, the favoured ones, the pets, the untalented sneaky creepy ones, the sons and daughters of Democrat voters, left the line and walked across the stage to Miss Stevens to collect their costumes. Timmy Tang, the smallest boy in the class, but with the loudest voice, was to play the front end of the donkey. Like huh! How much talent does that take to just have to bellow hee haw? Just as well really, he was too dumb to remember any other lines. Earl Sallaway was to be the chief shepherd. The one with the speaking part! A chief shepherd—and he still wets the bed!

Well, I ask you, what did the woman think she was doing? That left ten of us standing on the stage looking down at that incompetent Flo Ziegfeld wannabee, the powerful Queen of Evil, Miss Bainbridge. The ten of us contained grade three's dumb, shy, talentless, naughty and me. She looked up with that bright pretend smile; her little glasses glinting in the light, and told us we could be shepherds. Yes shepherds! She thought that I was going to sit about wearing a tickly beard and singing carols about glory shone around, and all the glory would go to Sue Powell. She can think again.

In the program for the nativity play the shepherds' names would be altogether in a row of print while Mary would have Sue Powell's name in a line to itself. Even Earl Sallaway would

have a line to himself opposite chief shepherd. So that was what spiteful, nasty, don't-know-what-she's-doing, wears-blue-pants-that-make-her-bottom-look-big, Miss Bainbridge thinks. Well, she had another think coming.

I pursed my lips again. Rolled my eyes and shook my head slowly from side to side again. Miss Bainbridge pretended not to notice me. Miss Stevens walked carefully down the little stairs at one side of the stage. The same stairs I had pushed Carol Simpson down last year when she was spoiling the show by standing in front of me and singing too loudly. Anyway, that was last year and I wasn't one to harbour a grudge, and it wasn't as if her ankle was really broken. All that screaming and crying with the audience able to hear it—and then her mother had stood up from the fifth row back, in front of everyone, and pointed at me as if it was my fault. Much to my amazement, Carol Simpson had now been cast as one of the three kings, and what was worse, the one that got to carry the gold. No one even knew what myrrh was or what frankincense looked like, but the box of shiny gold-sprayed cardboard coins really did look something.

Miss Stevens appeared again from the side of the stage and walked across to the piano to talk to Miss Bainbridge. They whispered together for a while. Clearly, Miss Stevens was telling Miss Bainbridge that I should be playing Mary and she had made a mistake. Miss Bainbridge stopped talking and looked at me. I took my chance.

"I don't want to be a shepherd, Miss Bainbridge." She looked up at me, the false pretend smile back on her face. Her glasses glinted cruelly in the stage lights.

"Are you sure dear?"

"Yes, Miss Bainbridge." I was going to continue, to tell her I knew all of Mary's words. Then I thought 'no', let her stew a while. Her pretend smile grew even wider. Her little eyes squinted up at me.

"Well, Polly dear, we don't want you to do anything you feel is beyond you. Miss Stevens has just told me that we have only eight Shepherd's costumes anyway. Perhaps it might be better if you just worked backstage. In fact, remembering what happened last year, perhaps that would be best. You can help Miss Stevens in making sure everyone is dressed and ready before they go on stage."

Miss Stevens looked horrified. At least she could see what a big mistake Miss Bainbridge was making in not giving me the leading part. She whispered urgently into Miss Bainbridge's ear and looked at me. I rewarded her with one of my most beatific smiles. Miss Bainbridge slammed the piano closed and said loudly, "No, Miss Stevens, she will help you and that is it." Miss Stevens stamped loudly away, clearly in a bad temper.

So Miss all-knowing Bainbridge had refused to listen to Miss Stevens. She was intent on having her own spiteful way and ruining the show again this year by not letting me play Mary. Well, the show must go on, as we theatricals say. Again, with great difficulty, I managed to prevent myself from rolling on the floor and screaming. After all, I could do that later at home when I told mom about it. Instead, I contented myself by putting my hands on my hips and tapping my foot on the floor the way Mom does when Dad comes in late and

she is waiting for him to explain why. However, Miss Bainbridge didn't offer an explanation. Once again she pretended not to notice me.

Well, I was still livid when I got back home that afternoon. To make things worse, Mom was out playing tennis. Rosita met me, gave me a hug and some ginger cake to eat in the kitchen. She could tell I was upset about something, but her English isn't terribly good, so she couldn't ask me what was wrong. I didn't feel like trying to explain it to her in Spanish. Well, to be honest, I don't really speak Spanish except for a few words Rosita has taught me. To Rosita, eating always helps with every problem. She took me into her kitchen and sat me down at the table. She fussed around me a little, hugged me again and asked me what I would like to eat. You know it really is coming to something when a girl has to go to the maid for sympathy because her selfish mother is off out playing tennis.

One thing about Rosita: she is always on my side. Hector, my little white scottie dog, also tried to console me. He is such a little pet, although he is inclined to be snappy. Daddy used to call Hector the world's smallest rotweiler. He doesn't call him anything now, not since Hector bit him and took the tip of his little finger right off. You can't blame a little dog for being loyal to his mistress and getting jealous of other people. Poor little Hector didn't know that Dad is my daddy, did he? I mean, he isn't anyway. Mom only married him two years ago, and I only call him dad to be nice to him. It wasn't as if Hector actually ate the finger tip. He only buried it in the garden, so surely the doctor could have sewed it back on. I

really don't know why mom doesn't divorce the bum; it isn't as if I haven't told her too often 'enough'. At least next time she could marry a man with a proper name; not a stupid German one that no one can spell; a proper American, and one who will look good on movie posters when I become a star. What chance do I have with a name like Polly Schneeburger?

I felt a little bit better after the ginger cake and a glass of diet coke.

I went upstairs with Hector and got my Barbie doll out. I pretended she was Miss Bainbridge and told her exactly what I thought of her. Then I made her be Susan Powell. I tried to make her look more mousey, like Susan, but after a while got bored with that. Anyway, it was difficult because Barbie looks much more like me than like Miss Bainbridge or Susan Powell. I started throwing her across the room so Hector could pick her up and give her a good chew before bringing her back to me. To see how clever Hector was, I let him see me throw Barbie out of the window and sent him downstairs to bring her back. He did it once and trotted all the way back up the stairs carrying her in his mouth, snarling and growling at Rosita when she tried to take it away from him. The second time I tried it Hector ran downstairs and out into the garden, but just buried her in the flowerbed. It didn't really matter. Christmas was only two weeks away and I was sure to get another one. I added Barbie onto my present list. It was now half way down the second sheet of paper. It also showed how intelligent Hector was. He had entered into the spirit of the

game and thought he was burying Susan in the flowerbed for me. How I wished he was!

Rosita came out to see what Hector was up to. She really ought to know better than to mess with Hector. Hector waited until she tried to shoo him out of the flower bed, then he barked at her and chased her back to the house, snapping at her heels. She ran into the house shouting for me to come and save her and slammed the back door on poor Hector. I do declare, that little dog has such a sense of humor. I felt so much better after having a good laugh.

I telephoned Susan to congratulate her on getting the part of Mary. I think she was surprised to get the call because I never bother speaking to her much at school. As usual, her voice was very quiet and she seemed nervous but, after a while, she felt at ease with me and not so overawed. She said she was very nervous about playing the part and was sure she would forget the words with all of the mothers and fathers watching. It seemed a good idea to remind her that the principal of the school would be watching, too, and lots of the parents would bring video cameras, so, if she got it wrong, they might send it into a television show because it would make people laugh at her. I told her if she went wrong I wouldn't let my mom send the tape, but I couldn't do much about the other parents. Her milk-and-water, simpering little girl voice really annoyed me on the telephone, especially when she asked me if I had wanted the part. I forced myself to laugh and told her I wouldn't dare to play that part. It was so unlucky. I reminded her what had happened to Carol Simpson last year. Even after my nice friendly encouraging

telephone call she still seemed very nervous. In fact, I think she was crying a little. You simply can't help some people, I find.

Mom drove her Jaguar back from the tennis club still wearing her white tennis dress. The navy blue of the Jaguar really does show it off to its best advantage. She used to be one of the best players in the club until she needed glasses. There was no way she was going to wear glasses, so now she can only win points if she serves an ace or from long slow lobs to the back of the court. She simply can't see the ball coming if she approaches the net. Still she does look good in a tennis dress and with her blonde ponytail fed back though a baseball cap and her golden suntan—as long as you don't notice the cellulite.

I waited until she was talking to Rosita, then made my entrance into the kitchen. Mom said Hi and asked how my day went. I sighed deeply and looked out of the window with my lips quivering and I bravely fought back tears. Mom didn't notice. Rosita was complaining about Hector snapping at her. You would think a maid would know better than that. After all, it was her that started on poor little Hector. I tried a few more deep sighs and sat down with my head in my hands. Mom still didn't notice, but then she told me Hector would have to go for dog training. I stared fixedly at her thighs as if I could see some cellulite, although you can only see a little from behind her, not from in front—but she is so self conscious about that and it does upset her terribly. Rosita tried to tell her I had come home from school upset. If I'd come home having hysterics I don't suppose mom would



have noticed. She would be far too busy matching her nail polish to the jaguar.

Finally, she did ask me what was wrong. I blinked back through tears and told her.

"I don't want to talk about it, mom. You wouldn't understand."

"That's Ok, Polly. You don't have to tell me everything. I'm not one of those prying moms who wants to know all of your secrets." She turned back to Rosita. 'I expect she's had a little tiff with one of her boyfriends. You know how she's sweet on little Earl Sallaway.'

This just shows how incredibly shallow my mother is. I hate Earl Sallaway, and it is over three weeks since I used to like him. How could I be sweet on him? He still wets the bed. I know because it was written on the wall of the school, and it must be right because it was me that chalked it there after I saw him talking to Sue Powell. How could I bear the humiliation of my mother spreading a slanderous rumor like this. Mud sticks, you know, and one day when I am really famous, horrible stories like this will appear in the tabloid newspapers. Earl Sallaway would be the type to kiss and tell. I'd had to chase him all over the playground and give him a Chinese burn to make him kiss me, so I expect he will tell that part too. I bet he doesn't mention that he was crying. I sat down, sighed again and slowly dissolved into tears.

Rosita flung her arms around me and hugged me. Mom was still chattering on and taking no notice. I tried some uncontrollable racking sobs. She paused for a moment and actually looked in my direction. I thought, well, that's as good

as it's going to get and, between sobs, I blurted out how Miss Bainbridge was humiliating me. Well, I will say this for mom, she did actually listen. I waited for her to suggest she telephoned the school principal to get Miss Bainbridge fired. Mom was looking at her nails; that's always a bad sign. She looked up at me. 'I expect it's because of that trouble at last year's nativity play,' she said. So, one year later, that was still being held against me. I intensified my sobbing, but it had no effect. Sometimes I wonder if it's worth living at all.

So, once again there is no support from my parents. This girl has to fight in her own corner of the jungle, unloved and uncared for even at Christmas. How many times did I cry myself to sleep that week? And who cared?

\* \* \* \*

At school I didn't give Miss Bainbridge the satisfaction of seeing how I hurt inside. The whole week leading up to the show I was at my sweetest. Miss Stevens understood, though, because she even told me that I didn't need to help with the costumes and tried to keep me out of the dressing room in case I was upset. Miss Bainbridge kept sending me back in. I couldn't help noticing that Miss Stevens and Miss Bainbridge were not speaking to each other at all now. They were trying to keep the costumes clean so, after the final dress rehearsal yesterday, they were not dressing up for the final run-through practice today. While the rest of Miss Bainbridge's class were on the stage in the hall I was left in the dressing room. I tried on Mary's costume. Well! Can you imagine the size of that Susan Powell? It was so big I was lost

inside it. She couldn't possibly be that big, could she? Well, she must be, because at the final dress rehearsal yesterday it had fitted her. I really couldn't get into the part when I ran through her lines because it felt as if I was wearing a circus tent. I'm not usually allowed to wear any makeup, but those in the play were wearing stage makeup. There was a special stick of black greasy stuff to put over eyebrows to make them thick and black. I tried a little of that on. Miss Stevens came in and started shouting at me to take the costume off. She told me she didn't want me helping, and I was only there because Miss Bainbridge had insisted.

How much humiliation am I supposed to take? This time I thought it would be a good idea to kick and scream and roll on the floor. So I did. How was I to know I was also rolling on the stick of black stuff and getting it all over the costume? Miss Stevens appeared to be having hysterics. There didn't seem much point in both of us screaming and crying, so, I got up off the floor and told her not to worry. I would get Rosita to wash the costume ready for tomorrow. I put it into a plastic bag, ready to take home with me. After a while Miss Stevens stopped crying and went back into the hall to start shouting at Miss Bainbridge. Miss Bainbridge can be quite nice really. She said that I needn't bother helping Miss Stevens anymore. Tomorrow I could come into school, give the cleaned costume to Miss Stevens, then go home again and come back later with my mom just to watch the show from the hall. That way, she said I could see if anyone made any mistakes and I could tell her who was good and who was bad in the show. I told her I already knew Sue Powell was going

to be bad and why not stop her from playing Mary. Her little glasses glinted and she told me that was enough.

I gave the costume to Rosita and she put it on a speed wash all by itself. I sat there sadly watching the blue and white costume whirling around inside the washing machine window. Hector knew how unhappy I was and tried to cheer me up by snapping at Rosita's ankles until she sent us both out back to play. Hector looked so cute after he fell in the swimming pool and dried out so white and fluffy in the sun. He looked just like a baby lamb. Yes, he looked just like a baby lamb.

Rosita dried and ironed the costume. She wanted me to put it on for her so she could see me in it. I walked around the kitchen with the huge costume ballooning around me saying Mary's lines. Rosita thought the costume being too big for me was upsetting me. I didn't have the heart to explain to her that I wasn't playing Mary. She told me she could fix the costume for me. Humming away to herself in Spanish, she took a tape measure from her handbag and measured me. She really is frightfully clever with her hands. She opened up all the seams, cut off the surplus material and then used the sewing machine to sew it back up again. It was lovely. It fitted me exactly; in fact, it was a little tight, and there was no trace of the black greasy stuff. I did all of the words of the nativity with Rosita pretending to be Joseph and Hector playing the innkeeper—until he started snapping at Rosita and had to be put outside again. It was such fun. I knew all the words of Mary's part and the costume fitted me so neatly.

The next morning I took the costume in to Miss Stevens. She looked at it to check it was clean and was quite pleased. I find so-called adults can be so unstable. She even gave me a frosty smile and told me she wouldn't be needing me anymore. Well, I was quite sure I wouldn't be needing her either. Miss Bainbridge told me I could go home until the nativity play started at two-thirty, so I went home and played with Hector. Mom was out again and only Rosita was in. The telephone rang at quarter to two. It was Miss Stevens. She seemed over-excited again, and in the background I could hear Sue Powell crying. Miss Stevens was complaining that the costume was too small for Sue and demanded to speak to my mother. I called Rosita over and handed her the telephone. Rosita is a little frightened of the telephone and always speaks only Spanish when she answers it. Hector had dug Barbie back up, so we went off to the swimming pool to try and drown her again. I could hear Rosita chattering away in Spanish on the phone. I wondered if Miss Stevens speaks any Spanish. I somehow don't think she does.

I got ready, put Hector on his lead and walked into school. He can be a little troublesome at times so I gave him one of the pills mom keeps by the side of her bed. They usually quiet him down quite a lot and often he settles down for a good long sleep. There was no one in grade three's home classroom so I put him down there to sleep. He looks so cute when he's asleep, all lovely and white and fluffy.

I couldn't resist peeping into the dressing room. Miss Bainbridge and Miss Stevens were in there shouting at each other. Sue Powell was sitting down in a tee shirt and pants

with her costume jammed over her mousy fat head. That silly little Timmy Tang was wearing the big plastic donkey head and practising his hee-haws at the top of voice. That moron Earl was walking around with the cuddly toy that was supposed to be a lamb in his arms, practising his single line of dialogue. The rest of the class were more or less dressed and ready to go, but some of them were upset and crying. You would think these adults would realise how sensitive young children placed in their care are and would stop shouting. I mean, you might expect this sort of thing in a public school but not in a high class private academy. I walked over to Sue Powell and pulled the costume off from over her head where it was jammed on her shoulders. She just carried on crying. I slipped into the costume and tapped Miss Bainbridge on the shoulder.

"It's alright, Miss Bainbridge. I'm here. I can do it. I can even get into the costume." She stopped shouting at Miss Stevens and looked at me. Her face was pale except for a red spot on each cheek. She didn't say anything, but I could see a vein pulsing in her forehead. I started running through Mary's lines for her. Miss Stevens was glaring at me and pointing at the costume. I don't know—you try and help people out and are they grateful? No, they're not.

"We will not be requiring your help today, Polly. In fact, we think you've helped enough already. Now get out of that costume."

I couldn't believe my ears. Who did she think was going to play Mary? Miss Stevens was going around to all the girls, trying to find one the costume fitted and wasn't already

crying. It was more like the slipper scene from Cinderella than a nativity play. I just sat down and quietly bided my time. None of the girls who were willing to play Mary would fit the costume. The ones that would fit were already crying and too frightened to play it. I sat there, smiling politely, and saying nothing. Miss Bainbridge and Miss Stevens looked over at me and then looked at each other. They both nodded and smiled. I made up my mind to pay them back a little by not being willing at first when they asked me. Let them coax me into it. Let the show start a little late. It would be even more dramatic then when I made my entrance. That stupid Tiny Tim Tang was irritating me with his constant hee-hawing from behind the donkey's head. The rest of the cast were looking at me. There I was, dressed and ready to go, ready to save the show for them. Some of the girls were drying their eyes and even the shepherds were looking at me with admiration in their eyes. At that moment I felt a star was born.

But no, that spiteful, short sighted, jealous, Democrat voting Miss Bainbridge still was not willing to take the chance I was giving her. She turned away from me, the Mary costume in her hands. She strode across the room and pulled the donkey head off of Tiny Timmy Tang. She thrust the costume into his hands and told him to put it on. Then she pushed the donkey's head over Sue Powell's stupid fat face. 'Right' she says, 'you two are swapping roles. It will go fine.' Her evil smile was back on her face. Timmy protested that he didn't want to play a girl. She silenced him with a glare. He said he didn't know the words. She told him she would whisper them to him on stage. She said she would hide

behind the manger. I felt hot tears starting to course down my cheeks. Once again they were ganging up on me. She looked over at me. Her glasses glinted. The smile grew wider. "No need for you to stay in here, Polly, dear. You go and find a seat in the audience so you can enjoy the show." I stumbled blindly from the room and went back to pick up Hector. I needed his blind puppy love in this cruel world where everyone hated me. I stood in the wings of the stage crying quietly while the rest of grade three filed past me. Earl Sallaway stopped and put his arms around me. He whispered that he thought I should be playing Mary and letting a boy play her was so silly. I smiled at him. Perhaps I had judged him too harshly. I think maybe I will marry him.

"Wait Earl," I said. "I want this Christmas show to be a success, even though I can't be part of it. Do your best. Do it for yourselves; do it for grade three; do it for me." I took the silly cuddly toy pretend lamb out of his hands and put the sleeping fluffy white Hector into his arms. "Now you look like a real shepherd with a real lamb. Go for it. Break a leg!" I smiled through my tears, kissed him bravely in spite of him trying to duck, and wished them all the best. The strange thing was that, in spite of all they had done to me, I meant it, too. I took a seat in the second row to watch the show.

It was really wonderful. The hall went quiet, the stage lights came up and the curtains opened to show Mary kneeling down praying. Debbie Olsen sprang lightly onto the stage dressed as an angel and, considering what she is like, was quite good. She remembered all her words—although Timmy didn't say any of his as Mary. From the second row I



could hear Miss Bainbridge hissing his lines at him, but he just stood there looking bewildered. I must say, though, Rosita had made a lovely job of Mary's costume. It really did fit him very well. The beauty of this age old story was gripping all of us in the audience—anxious mothers feeling for their children and proud fathers with the little red eyes of their video cameras winking as they recorded the moment for posterity. Miss Bainbridge had a hit on her hands even without me. It was running faultlessly. Admittedly, Sue Powell was not heehawing, so we had a very quiet donkey. Tim, as Mary, was not saying his lines in spite of Miss Bainbridge's whispered prompts, but it didn't matter. The Three wise men entered with their gifts. I noticed Carol Simpson bumping into the others as she tried to keep well away from the steps. It was so lovely to watch the Christmas story that I was forgetting all my disappointments. Then came the most important part when the shepherds filed into the stable, led by my Earl holding the sleeping Hector in his arms. I was so proud of him; he was really trying to look like a sleeping lamb. All of the audience was silent watching. No one coughed or whispered as we all watched the magic on the stage. We waited for Mary to speak as she placed the doll in the manger.

Well what did you expect? Miss Bainbridge had to spoil the whole thing. I could see her crouched behind the manger tugging on Timmy's costume and hissing the lines at him. How did she think she could hide behind a little manger? Her bottom looks huge in those blue pants she wears. Poor little Tim was bewildered. He had been happy behind the donkey's

head with the limited lines, but now he was dressed up as a girl, playing a part he had never practised and Miss Bainbridge was tugging at his costume and hissing at him to speak. Everyone was staring at him and the stage was crowded with all of grade three—all of grade three except for me. I sat alone in the second row, wishing them on to success. Timmy was bewildered. He didn't know what to do, but he knew he had to say something. He looked around and then back down at Miss Bainbridge. He cleared his throat and looked up. He was little, but he had a powerful voice. At the top of his lungs he shouted "heehaw! heehaw! heehaw!". The audience started to titter, then to laugh. Miss Bainbridge hissed at him to stop. He gave one final heehaw, as loud as he could, before starting to cry.

Now, you can't blame Hector. He isn't used to donkeys. He woke up in Earl's arms and looked sleepily around for the source of the noise. He still looked like a lamb, though. Well, he looked a bit like a lamb anyway, a rather snappy lamb. One quick snap at Earl and Earl dropped him on top of Miss Bainbridge. Somehow, the good, faithful Hector knew she was the cause of me being miserable the last week, so he growled and snapped at her behind the manger. Above the noise of his little barks we could all hear Miss Bainbridge hissing 'good doggy' at him. Hector wasn't having any of that. He started barking louder and ran behind her so he could snap at her ankles. Meanwhile, Tim walked to the front of the stage and was rather pleased that his heehawing had gone down so well with the audience, so he started doing it again louder and louder. He took the donkey head off of Sue Powell and put it

on over his Mary costume. Sue, as you might expect, was crying again.

All the audience was laughing and everyone with a video camera stood up to get better shots as Miss Bainbridge pushed the manger over spilling out the hay and the doll. In a frenzy, she scuttled about on all fours around the stage with Hector snapping at her heels. The shepherds were jumping down off the stage to get out of her way. Hector picked up the doll and gave it a good shake before jumping down from the stage and bringing it over to me. It seemed like a good time for us to leave and go home.

Well, let's hope Miss Bainbridge has learnt from this year's fiasco as she so obviously didn't from last year's. I'm not one to hold a grudge. As I said before, I'll be ready for next year's show.

## **BEGIN EXCERPT**

### THE GIFT OF LOVE

#### **Donna Gonzales**

(Donna Gonzales has lived most of her life in Southern California. Her interest in writing has its roots in the stories she made up for her nieces and nephews when she was a teenager, and later, her children. She started her first two novels when she was still in high school. She earned her degree in Literature and Writing with an accent in writing. While there she worked on the school newspaper and magazine.)

Contrary to popular belief it does rain in southern California.

Adella Stephenson crossed the parking lot in her high heels, trying to avoid the worst of the puddles. They weren't always easy to see in the darkness. She held her lap top computer over her head as a makeshift umbrella, but it did little more than keep her blond hair dry. Her navy blue business suit was already damp.

It was true: troubles came in threes. She found the right rear tire of her Honda was flat. The rain wasn't supposed to arrive until midnight, but here it was. She was wet, unhappy and alone in a dark, deserted parking lot. Tears ran freely down her cheeks. It couldn't get much worse.

Adella had been working late evenings. Her best friend, Jean, and the rest of her companions from the insurance office helped keep her busy and her mind away from the loss of her mother just weeks before. They kept her from breaking down in tears when the memories flooded back. Today she had actually been able to laugh about Jean's on/off love affair with Mike from the same office.

It didn't mean forgetting. Not for one single moment of the day could she free herself from the stone cold heaviness inside her. Tuesdays were especially difficult. She had always lunched with her mom on Tuesdays.

That morning at eleven her phone rang. She picked it up, expecting to hear her mother's voice arranging where they should meet. Her mother always called at eleven o'clock. Her sister-in-law, Karen, sounded like her mom for a minute before Adella realized it wasn't her.

Karen invited her to a family get together the next Saturday, the last Saturday before Christmas. Karen's cheery voice traveled over the phone line, coaxing her to accept. "Come on. You can't shut yourself away from life. I know how hard it is, but the company will do you good."

Adella agreed to come and pleaded another call as an excuse to hang up. It was the quickest way to get off of the phone without crying. At least Karen hadn't been trying to set her up with a date. Karen's marriage to Adella's brother, Sam, had been 'made in heaven'. She wanted only to have Adella as happy as she. Adella wanted that, too, someday, but she wasn't in a hurry.

She unlocked the Honda and put her laptop inside, out of the rain. Her cell phone was back in the apartment; she wouldn't be able to call for help. The telephone call the day her mother died had come to her on the cell phone. Every time she went to pick it up the memory returned. She couldn't bring herself to use it again.

There wasn't much else she could do. She had changed a tire before and she could do it again.

Troubles don't always come in threes; sometimes they come in fours. The first nut loosened without much trouble, but the rest would not budge no matter how she pushed or pulled on the tire iron. She kicked at it, and broke her heel. Tears started again. Wisps of her blond hair escaped the bun at the nape of her neck, and plastered themselves to her face. Her clothes, by now, had soaked through.

Adella gave up. She rested in the driver's seat, sheltered from the rain and sobbed. If it were only a year later! Things would be better wouldn't they?

Taped to the dashboard was the last shopping list her mother had written. Adella often taped the list there so she wouldn't forget to pick up the things for her mom on her way home. She couldn't bear to take the list off and throw it away. It was as if, while that list remained there, she still had part of her mother with her.

She heard a car start up in the far corner of the parking lot. The smart thing would be to ask for help, but she couldn't bring herself to speak to anyone, not red-eyed from crying and looking like a drowned rat. Alone and miserable, she sat behind the steering wheel and read the shopping list over and

over until it burned itself into her mind like the prayers she learned as a child. Reciting it soothed her and kept her from thinking.

Five pounds of sugar, two grapefruit...

It's Christmas and there's no mom.

Hot chocolate, low calorie spread...

How can there be Christmas without mom?

Spaghetti, toaster pastries, frozen peas

What did mom want toaster pastries for?

Laundry detergent, hazel nuts, shampoo,

Oh, yes, Keith had been coming to visit and Karen wouldn't buy those...

Salt, black pepper, ketchup...

Good old mom; she always spoiled us, no matter how old we were.

Dishwashing liquid, two packs of tissues...

The headlights of the other car bathed the Honda in light. That car swept past, then pulled to a stop with the lights still on. The slanting rain on her windshield made it difficult for Adella to see clearly. She watched a shadowy figure get out of the other car and hurry to the driver's side of her car. He wore some sort of fisherman's hat with the brim pulled down against the rain and she could not discern his features. She opened the window a little.

"Are you okay Adellie ... Adellie?"

Hearing her nickname of years gone by surprised her enough that she hesitated in responding. She hadn't been called that since middle school.

"You do recognize me, don't you?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak without starting to cry again. "You stay in there. You look as if you're already soaked through. I'll fix your tire."

The man's voice sounded familiar somehow. It had to be someone from her office block who knew her as a child, but at that moment, her mind numbed with her grief.

Adella watched in silence while the fellow went about changing the tire. There was a draught of cold wet air when he opened the hatch back and retrieved the spare. She reached for her door handle.

"No don't get out," he said. "Start the engine up and run the heater. I'll be done in another five minutes."

Moments later the job was finished. He put the punctured tire in the back and replaced the tools. Despite her grief she managed to thank him. He closed the hatchback and came back to the driver's window.

"Now get yourself off home out of this rain. I'll see you at the party. We'll have plenty of time to chat then."

He returned to his car, a curiously lonely looking figure. He lowered his headlights and waited until she drove away. The little Honda began to warm up. Her clothes were still wet but at least she was no longer cold.

Who was he? He must have meant the office Christmas party on Thursday. She could thank him properly then.

Back at her apartment she entered the unusual silence. She hadn't the heart to decorate without her mother. Had mom been there, the place would have sounded with carols, sparkled with light and color. The air would have borne the scent of cookies baking in the oven. The tears fell once more.



Adella went to bed with only an apple for a snack and for once she didn't cry. She did lie awake for a time. That man has been so kind. I really have to find a little thank you gift for him. The poor guy had got himself soaked and late home just to help me. What would be nice? Maybe a big candy bar. Aftershave is too personal. Maybe a good book or a really nice flashlight to keep in his car. Yes, that would be a good idea.

\* \* \* \*

Thursday morning, Adella stood behind her desk and looked down from the tenth story window into the parking lot. A little earlier a small bunch of white roses arrived at the reception desk for her along with a note saying "See you at the party." Jean had teased her a little about it because it was unsigned. Sunshine filled the parking lot now, the puddles gone, and she could make out her Honda in its usual place near the entrance. One advantage of getting to work early was getting a good parking spot. She studied the rows of cars and tried to guess which one belonged to her rescuer. She really hadn't been able to see much of it in the dark and rain.

Jean came by Adella's cubicle with some papers for her to sign. She handed Adella a sprig of mistletoe with the papers, "Christmas party at lunchtime. Use this wisely."

"It'll just go wasted," Adella answered her with a mix of sadness and a holiday smile.

Jean laughed and reached across to steal Adella's chocolate doughnut, then laughed when Adella snatched it back. That was more like Adella of the past.

Two hours later the party was in full swing. The office manager gave his usual boring speech. The crowd cheered when he promised to keep it short, subdued yawns and groans when he didn't. Before long many of the staffs' faces had sparkling eyes and flushed faces. More holiday bottles passed about and voices grew louder. Jean vanished into the printing room with Mike, clutching her mistletoe.

Adella remained by herself in a corner. Some of her colleagues might think her aloof and unfriendly, but her grief was still too new and it did discourage some of the men who took this occasion to utilize the traditional purpose of mistletoe.

Adella had looked forward to the party, to returning to a normal life—as normal as it would ever be again without her mother. She planned on surprising her rescuer with his present, perhaps even a friendly hug. If he did work there he had not come to the party. That was unlikely. He could work anywhere in the building, or the next for that matter. But how did he know her? How could he call her by a childhood name?

Adella's fragile good spirits drained slowly away. Alone in the crowd, she watched her tipsy office mates enjoying themselves, looking forward to Christmas. She slipped away quietly, clutching the wrapped flashlight in one hand, the roses in the other. Not until she reached the parking lot did she break down in tears.

\* \* \* \*

The Christmas gathering with Karen's family would be a bright spot in an otherwise dreary season. Had it been ten

years since the last celebration she attended at Grandma Fisher's?

Adella got up early Saturday and began preparing 'granny's peas'. Karen had asked everyone to bring a dish and particularly requested those. Her mother had taught her the recipe when she was just a slip of a girl, just as her mother had been taught in turn by her own mother. No one was certain who the grandmother of the recipe was, perhaps they should be called 'great-great-great-granny's peas'. Whoever originated the recipe, the dish was always welcomed as their contribution to the meal.

First she sautéed grated onion and a bit of finely chopped lettuce in butter, then added the peas and a little water. The peas simmered so the flavors could blend. The peas couldn't cook too long or they would get mushy. Adella had watched her mother do this often. In a way, her mother was there with her this morning in the kitchen. It made a warm, comforting feeling, one she hadn't known the last weeks.

Adella dressed carefully. At first she planned to wear plain, dark garments in keeping with her mourning. Mom wouldn't have like that; all her mother ever wanted was her happiness. She wore dark slacks, but with a cheerful holiday top. She twisted her long blond hair in one French braid down her back. Karen's Uncle Jack would be there at the party. Years ago he constantly teased her with, "When are you going to comb that wild mop of yours?" He couldn't say that today. She finished her makeup and, at the last moment, added a touch of glitter. The image in the mirror gazed back at her and it was as if her mother's blue eyes looked into her own.

But her mother's eyes had never looked so sad. She forced herself to smile; today she was going to enjoy herself.

Quarter to eleven came and it was time to leave. It took an hour to drive to San Lopez from her house in Twin Peaks. Karen and Sam would get there about half past eleven, and Adella wanted to arrive after them. She paused for one last look in the mirror. What would her mother think of how she looked? A wistful smile touched her lips. Mother would be pleased she was going. Adella had no intention of impressing anyone. She just wanted to look good for Grandma Fisher. It took a real effort for her to take her cell phone with her on the drive, but she had to get her life back to normal. A woman driving alone needed one.

Adella pulled up across the street from her destination. There were already several cars parked outside Grandma Fisher's and she had to park up a few houses.

The house looked different. The yellow house with green trim she remembered was now white with three shades of grey trim. Last time she'd been there, Grandma Fisher's rose garden had been a few bushes near the garage. Today roses lined the whole driveway.

Shirley came running up before Adella could get out of the car. "Karen said you were coming in a little blue car. I've been watching for you. Come on in, everyone's eager to see you."

Adella climbed out of the car and the women hugged one another. Adella took a step back and looked the woman over. "Shirley, I hardly recognize you. I hope I remember the rest of your family!"

"Don't worry about it. I have trouble remembering their names, too. One year they tried to make us wear nametags, but everyone either took them off, or traded them. You know this dizzy family! Uncle Jack looks almost the same except his hair is mostly grey. He's still a tease."

Adella talked while she retrieved her packages from the car's trunk. "Are you married? Is Babs here? What about Bobby?"

Shirley helped her by carrying the pot of peas, "Yes, but my husband couldn't make it this year. Babs is here with her husband and baby."

At the front door, Adella spotted Grandma Fisher. The old lady looked smaller than Adella remembered, and moved slower. Grandma still had that twinkle in her eyes. One not-so-little cousin took the pot to the kitchen. Could that big high school kid be little Thomas that she used to baby-sit? Another youngster she couldn't put a name to put the gifts under the tree.

Adella took off her jacket and hung it in the coat closet. She blushed a little, remembering kissing Keith in that same closet when she was twelve. She had been so frightened he would tell everyone, and that Uncle Jack would tease her about it, that she hadn't gone to any more gatherings afterwards.

Grandma Fisher introduced her around the room. Some of the names were familiar, and others were not. Uncle Jack studied the young woman before him. "It almost looks like you combed your hair," he quipped.

Adella laughed, "Some things never change."

Aunt Anita hugged her. "Never mind him. You look fabulous. It's wonderful to see you."

She didn't see Keith or Bobby. Perhaps they'd come later. She wasn't going to ask. She had come to see all the family, not just her childhood friends.

Karen entered the living room. "Hi Adella," she said, "glad you could make it. Sam went on an errand for Mother, he'll be right back." Adella found herself able to relax a little and laugh about things that had happened at the parties years ago when they were children. Still, inside her, was the aching loss of her mother, yet here, surrounded by old friends, it hurt a little less. She didn't have to hide or pretend to be happy, and, after a little while, she found she wasn't pretending. A few of the family gave a few gentle words of sympathy, but sensing her mood, changed the subject back to family news.

The front door swung open and in walked a tall man with sandy brown hair. He carried an armload of packages with his face hidden behind the poinsettia balanced atop the pile. The children mobbed him and, from the excited cries for Uncle Keith, Adella concluded that it must be Keith. He obviously recognized her. He crossed the room to her and gave her the plant. "Merry Christmas, Adellie."

She recognized the voice at once. Color mounted her cheeks, more so when she noticed they were the center of attention. She could see Karen smiling and exchanging looks with Grandma Fisher.

"I didn't know you without your fisherman's hat!" She tried to say the words lightly but her heart raced and pounded in

her ears. She thanked him for the plant, then put it down to help him off with his windbreaker. He opened the clothes closet to hang it up and she started to blush again. He was smiling. Did he remember that quick fumbled kiss in the closet ten years earlier? Her face burned. She needed fresh air and used the excuse that she would take the plant out to her car before anyone bumped into it. Keith was too quick for her. He picked it up and carried it out of the house in front of her. They walked side by side to her car. Keith told her how sorry he was to hear about her mother and then told her he was working in the next office building to hers.

Young Thomas was getting more packages from out of his parent's car and he gave them a cheeky grin as they walked by. With the confidence Keith's arm gave her, she reminded Tom that she used to change his diapers. It was fun to see someone else blush for a change.

Adella admitted she hadn't recognised Keith that Tuesday and she found she could laugh with him about it. With the plant safely stored in the Honda, she turned back to the house, but he gently took her arm in his and suggested they stroll around the block. He said he needed to stretch his legs after the drive. His arm was warm and comforting where it linked with hers. Her heartbeat was almost back down to normal.

At first they talked about past Christmas parties. They laughed again at how Uncle Jack had packed a small pair of ear rings for Karen inside a box three feet square and used a couple of bricks to weight it down. Keith reminded her of the year they put real candles on the Christmas tree and the

trimmings caught fire. Sam put it out by squirting Pepsi on them. One time someone switched the labels on the presents around. Maybe that had been Uncle Jack, too. The children hadn't been the only ones capable of mischief.

Gradually the talk turned to themselves. They were both single. Adella laughed to herself. Undoubtedly, Karen, the notorious matchmaker, had checked on that. Neither of them had pets; neither of them liked rap music; they both loved living in Twin Peaks, although Keith had only moved in two weeks earlier. He'd been offered the manager's job there for the software company he worked for. That meant moving back from Dallas to work at head office. She didn't usually find it easy speaking with men, but Keith was so very easy to talk to. Her heart gave another leap when he jotted down her cell phone number.

A short distance from the house Keith drew her to a halt. Adella looked up into his green eyes, questioning.

"Do you remember when I kissed you in the closet?"

She felt her face grow warm with blushing and denied it. He reached into his pocket and produced a small sprig of mistletoe with two little white berries on it and held it over her head. Her heart beat in double time. Time stood still. His lips drew slowly closer. A thrill of anticipation ran through her, but, at the same time, thoughts of her mother turned her cold. This couldn't be right.

Two long beeps and then a short one broke the tense silence.

"That means dinner is ready," she said and twisted away from inside his arms. She ran towards the house. Keith



followed, leaving the sprig of mistletoe behind, crushed underfoot.

Before the blessing on the food, Grandma Fisher bowed her head and asked for a moment of silence. "Sam and Adella lost their mother last October. In your prayers, please ask God to help them through this first Christmas without her."

Sam stood beside Adella, holding her hand. He, too, had lost his mother and he brushed away the moisture from his eyes with his free hand. Adella had been so involved in her own grief she hadn't thought of Sam. But Sam had Karen and the two kids. Perhaps that helped him through.

\* \* \* \*

Everyone pitched in with the work at the Fisher gatherings. Adella donned an apron and helped Grandma Fisher clean up after dinner. Aunt Anita filled the dishwasher while Adella wiped up. The younger cousins carried dirty dishes in and helped put the clean ones away. Barbara and Shirley wrapped and covered the leftover food to store in the refrigerator. All the while the women chattered away.

By keeping busy, Adella also avoided Keith. She had control her blushes and get herself in hand. They still had to open gifts. What would mom think ... romance? So soon? If she knew Keith, he would manage to find a place near her for the gift exchange. She didn't want to admit she wanted him to.

Keith did. She was rather pleased he did.

\* \* \* \*

At half past four the party broke up. Everyone seemed to be leaving at once. Grandma Fisher accompanied Adella to her car and gave her another hug. "Remember this," Grandma told her. "The only thing a mother wants is happiness for her child. That's all your mom would want for you. Honor your mother by remembering all the good things and don't let grief spoil your life."

Keith and Sam waved goodbye from the front doorstep.

Five minutes down the road her cell phone rang. She closed her eyes, took a deep breath and answered.

"Hi, there," came over the line.

Adella recognized Keith's voice. "It didn't take you long to call me."

"It's still early. Can I follow you to your place? Perhaps we could grab a quick bite or something."

"I couldn't eat anything." Maybe I'm reading too much into this. Maybe he just wants to be friends and spend some time together. "But I'll wait for you at the gas station by the freeway entrance. You can follow me from there. I need gas anyway."

While she waited for the gas tank to fill, she freshened her lipstick and smoothed her hair. What on earth am I going to say to him?

In no time he was there, smiling. "Hi, there. Long time no see."

"Hi, yourself. It's only been fifteen minutes."

"To me it was a long time." Keith looked down into her eyes. "What do you want to do after we drop off your car?"

"I don't know." Adella deliberately studied the changing numbers on the gas pump. "I'm still stuffed from the dinner."

"I'm not hungry either. We can't talk in a movie theatre. Bowling alleys are too noisy. Maybe we could walk around the new shopping center in Twin Peaks and window shop."

"Okay. That sounds good." Adella reached to put the nozzle from the pump back. Keith reached for it, too, and touched her hand. The warmth sent a thrill through her. It's only been a month since Mom died. I shouldn't feel this way about anyone yet.

\* \* \* \*

Bright lights and colorful decorations adorned the shopping center. Keith and Adella strolled along, admiring the window displays, and talked about the Christmas gathering, the weather, and how much shopping they had left to finish. When they turned a corner they found a Christmas tree lot had been set up along the sidewalk. Adella stopped, her face ashen, and tears clouded her eyes.

Keith moved closer and gripped her arm. "Is something wrong?"

"Christmas trees. I can't—I don't know how I can shop for a tree this year." Adella's voice quavered, "Mom and I always bought our tree together. The last few years she didn't want to bother with one in her apartment so we shared mine. She spent most of the holiday there at my place with me. I'm sorry—I'm getting so emotional. It seems whenever I turn around something else reminds me—"

Keith took her hand. "I know how difficult it must be for you, especially this time of year."

Adella nodded, thankful for his supportive arm and warmth. "The hardest part will be getting the tree. I've never bought one myself. I'll do it next week. I can't skip it; Mom wouldn't want me to go without a Christmas tree."

Keith gently cupped her chin in his hand and looked down to her tearstained face. "Let's try something. We can look around this lot together, then maybe next week will be easier."

"That might make it easier." She didn't pull away when he slipped his arm around her shoulders.

They walked along judging the merits of the different trees. Cedars were attractive but the prickly branches made unpleasant trimming. At length Adella decided the spruce, the one her mother always chose, was really best after all.

An hour later, Keith drove Adella home. At her door, Keith stepped close and put his hand on her shoulder as she turned the key. She opened the door, and immediately flicked on the light. She avoided his eyes, shook his hand and said, "Good night. Thank you for everything." Then she stepped into the apartment and gave a quick wave 'good-bye' before closing the door. Alone inside, she turned and leaned against it, her heart pounding.

\* \* \* \*

On Monday morning a bouquet of red roses arrived at the reception desk for her. A note came with them saying he

would meet her by her car after work. It was signed simply with a K. This created quite a stir in her office.

Her friend Jean's curiosity got the better of her and she asked whom they were from. Adella told her about Keith and, when she finished, Jean smiled and said, "It's been awhile since I heard you laugh. It sounds good."

They looked out of the window and Adella pointed out Keith's car. He had managed to park near her. Jean, and her other office friends, were eager to see the man who had made her smile again.

At five o'clock Adella delayed going to her car. She visited the powder room to apply fresh lipstick and comb her hair. When fifteen minutes passed she judged everyone else had time to pull out of the parking lot.

When Adella came out of the office, Keith was waiting by her car. The parking lot wasn't empty. People sat in their cars acting as if they had reason for delaying departure. Keith didn't seem to notice, he stood there, smiling, a red carnation in his hand. Adella pretended not to notice her co-workers sitting in their autos.

"I'll follow you to your place," Keith said, handing her the carnation. "Then we can get a bite to eat, and maybe shop for Christmas trees. If you're up to it. I don't have my tree yet, either."

It didn't matter that her colleagues were watching.

\* \* \* \*

Down town, they ate a hamburger together, sharing a container of fries the way she often had with her mother.

Keith was easy to be with. Buying the trees turned out not to be an ordeal at all. Before long they had a pair of trees lashed to the roof of his SUV. They drove back across town to her apartment and, together, maneuvered the tree up the stairs into her apartment.

Adella indicated a small square table with a white cloth, and Keith put it down. "I'll hold the cloth down while you turn the tree." Adella's voice caught, "That's how Mom and I did it. I turned the tree while she held down the cloth."

"Are you O.K.? It's okay if you need to cry a little now."

"For some reason," Adella said, "I don't need to cry. I'm sad and happy at the same time. Does that make any sense?"

Keith moved closer. "Yes it does."

Adella found her breath short. She searched desperately for something to say at this awkward moment. "Would you like some hot chocolate?"

"That sounds great." Keith backed away. "Would you like me to stay and help you decorate?"

"Yes, thank you. That would be nice. Could you get the box of decorations while I fix the hot chocolate? It's in the hall closet, first door down the hall on the right. It's marked right on the box so you shouldn't miss it."

Adella came back from the kitchen wearing her Christmas apron to find Keith unpacking the carefully wrapped ornaments. She carried a tray with two cups of hot chocolate and a plate of homemade cookies. They shared the cookies while Keith checked the tree lights. The tree was lovely and the room filled with the resinous scent of its needles. It really

began to feel like Christmas. How can it be Christmas without mom?

The lights worked first time and they sat down to drink the hot chocolate. Keith held her hand. She laughed at his chocolate moustache. He told her she had one too. They looked in the hall mirror together and laughed. Again he took her in his arms and she backed away, unsure.

"Adellie am I going to have to get in the coat closet with you again before I get to kiss you?"

Once again she hesitated. In her mind she heard Grandma Fisher's voice. "Your mother's greatest gift would be your happiness."

She laughed again, but she wasn't unsure anymore. She turned her face up to him and gazed into his green eyes. Their lips met. Afterwards, she looked again into the wall mirror at two very happy people. Her chocolate moustache had disappeared, but she also noticed that her mother's eyes, looking out from her face, were not sad anymore.

Merry Christmas, mom. For all of us.

THE HAT

by Sheba Harris

(Sheba McBride Harris has told stories all her life. Born and raised in the Blue Ridge Mountain Foothills of North Carolina, she looks for stories everywhere. As a Nurse, Wife, and Mother, she finds stories in every day life. As avid antique collector, she looks at objects as adjuncts to life, each with its own story to tell. The Hat, while purely a work of fiction, reflects her interest in these antiquities, and how they play a significant, if often forgotten, part in life.)

It was just an old velvet hat, its brim scuffed and worn. Dibs and dabs of the nap were missing, as if tugged upon by an uncountable number of fingers over the years. It might have been red at one time, but now its dark shade had aged to the mellow color of deep rust.

The vintage clothing shop window showed it rather badly, stuck down in the left hand corner of the hazy old glass, as if placed there to just fill up space. The foam head, which displayed it with its painted on eyes and lips, had tiny pox marks of brighter white, as if the inanimate object had suffered from severe acne at one time in its sad life.

Sylvia didn't know what drew her eye to the hat. It hadn't been her first choice. Instead, she had admired the black lace dress centered in the pane. Its long delicate sleeves spread wide as if to embrace the passerby. But, the hat drew her inside and it was the hat she requested to view, to hold, to touch.

"It's not the best in the shop." The saleslady pronounced each word carefully, a wisp of an English accent creeping through. "But, to each his own, as I always say."

It was not the condition of the hat the older woman referred to, but rather the price. Surely there were more expensive items in the shop. Pricier examples of haberdashery which the old lady wished to sell. The old woman knew it but she didn't know that Sylvia knew. Some things were just better left unsaid.

"Here you go, dear." The older woman said, giving the hat a gentle shake to dislodge some of the accumulated dust. A small cloud of grey particles rose to hang in the air a few



seconds before falling to seek another resting place. "Take all the time you need to look. I'll just be in the back when you decide upon something."

Sylvia took the hat in both hands, as if it were a precious thing. Its immediate warmth made her fingers tingle slightly. Turning it this way and that, she studied the structure of the artfully made old type man's hat: a low crown, with a deeply slung brim, the kind, if on a man's head piece, would be tugged in acknowledgement of respect, but this was a lady's hat. Its brim turned down stylishly in front and folded up in the back.

Rubbing the pads of both thumbs against the remaining nap, Sylvia lifted the hat toward her face and inhaled the scent of old dust, long storage, and a faint whiff of Rose water. Amazing, the smell should still cling to it, but it did, an echo of time past, of hands touching, of peoples life's the hat had touched and had been part of.

Sylvia closed her eyes and let her mind go where it willed. She saw nothing but darkness for a time, then light. She felt lighter, too. Newer, somehow, and vibrant, as if life was something to be lived. She had the sensation of good times, of falling in love with each new day. Slowly, her vision cleared and she saw the pictures in her mind, dimly at first, but brighter and brighter, those things they had witnessed over the many years of its life.

A young girl stood in front of a mirror, her long blond hair bound by a net so that it barely grazed her shoulders. Her blue eyes danced with amusement as she took the brand new millinery creation from the open hatbox, and balanced it

delicately atop her head. She pouted in concentration, turning her head from side to side; admiring the new headgear perched atop her everyday hair do.

"It'll just have to do." The girl pronounced, her uncertainty ringing loud and clear. "I think it will go well enough with my dress. The dance is tonight, and there's no time to shop for another.

"It will be fine, Margaret." An older woman soothed her from where she stood, out of sight of the mirror. "Jimmy will like it, I'm sure."

"It's James, Mother." Margaret pointed out the tone of her voice matching the eye rolling expression reflected in the glass. "He doesn't like to be called Jimmy anymore. He is joining the Air Corps."

"He's still 'Jimmy' to me." Mother replied. "And, he's too young to be joining the service. He's only eighteen."

"Eighteen is considered a man, Mother," Margaret pointed out. "And we are at war. We need all the men. Besides, I think he'll look wonderful in uniform."

The soft flop click sound of a new 78 record falling on the record player punctuated her wistful sigh. Jimmy Dorsey's music seemed suddenly sad and far away. Distorted by time and space, the music sounded just too fast and happy to fit the times. Pearl Harbor was still too fresh, too painful to allow for such frivolity.

"Really, Mary Margaret!" Mother's voice took on an exasperated edge. "Do you have to play this music so loud?"

"Music sounds best when you play it loud," Margaret replied. She took the hat off her head and placed it back into

the box. "You can hear the beat better. You're so old fashioned!" The rest was lost when darkness enveloped the hat again; the lid to the box blocked any more of the conversation.

\* \* \* \*

A whirl of color, loud music, and people laughing all mingled in the next scene Sylvia perceived. Muted gaiety, dancing, people generally having a good time in spite of the clouds of war hovering over them, glimpses of color, red and green streamers hanging from a large mirrored ball. A large Christmas tree stood at the centerpiece of it all. An American flag with its 48 stars was a secondary focal point, hanging proudly from the rafters of the hall.

Sylvia could hear snatches of conversation here and there, mumbled words of childish things, school, and hot rods. There were also bits and pieces about war, of fears not quite yet made real, death, injuries—not so childish things, but with a childish slant of denial. Of things that happened to other people, and not themselves—Of dreams of great things, all looked at by people with their whole lives ahead of them.

The next glimpse of the hat's past life was darkness again. But this darkness was different, with pinpoint pricks of light—A big full moon over head. She felt the coolness of a night breeze. Not exactly cold, but Sylvia shivered in empathy, and unconsciously tightened her grip on the hat, as if it might blow away with the breeze—fragments of a warm winter's night unobstructed.

"Jimmy—James." Sylvia recognized Mary Margaret's voice, but it was low, breathy, and almost raspy. "My hat! You're going to crush my hat!"

"Well, just take it off." A rough hand grabbed the hat, impatient and almost painfully shoved it on a shelf-like space. Cool metal on the warm brim—must have been the dashboard of a car. "It's just a silly old hat! There, are you happy?"

"I had to pay for that hat out of my allowance and it cost almost two dollars! Do you know how long I had to save up to get that hat?" Mary Margaret protested. "My Mother would kill me if anything happened to it."

"Like your Mom wouldn't kill you if she knew what we were doing." James half laughed, half groaned. "Necking in the back seat of my car is not exactly considered proper you know."

"My mother would have a hissy fit!" Margaret laughed, deep and throaty.

"She'd do more than that if she knew it wasn't the first time." James laughed with her.

"But, it might be the last." Margaret's voice held a sad, trembling note. "You leave next week."

A long silence followed, but Sylvia knew the scene had not changed. The stars still twinkled overhead; the moon stared down at the young lovers in lover's lane. There were, eventually, sounds. Soft words, the creak of material against leather seats, the rustle of fabric being pushed up, or moved around. The sounds of growing desire, of flesh meeting flesh, and ultimately sighs of satiated need.

The scene faded from Sylvia's view, probably because there was nothing left of importance to be seen or heard. It was the darkness afterwards that was so hard to decipher. It seemed to go on for an eternity. No sounds, no light, just infinite, lonely darkness.

Visions slammed into her unexpectedly—a choir singing an old hymn, "How Great Thou Art". A feeling of loss flowed over her, of bereavement, as if the innocence of the time had somehow died too.

Fast forward to another Christmas. A smaller tree this time, with a few brightly wrapped packages beneath. Another party, apparently, but with a smaller group of people. They were a mixed group, with family and friends. Conversation mainly centered on the war, the losses, the threat to home coming from far away.

"Your Father always loved Christmas." Mary Margaret's mother's voice sounded tired, beaten. "I hate that he ... couldn't be here."

"I miss him too, Mom." Mary Margaret's voice mirrored her mothers.

"So, fast—he was taken so fast."

"I think I'm going to bed, Mom." Mary Margaret sounded sad. "I have to work tomorrow. Make my excuses for me, please!"

"But, it's Christmas day."

"I know, but with the war, they need the planes." Mary Margaret answered on a sigh. "I'll get home as soon as I can."

Mary Margaret's room somehow looked and felt different. There was no Tommy Dorsey playing on the Hi-Fi. The stuffed animals no longer kept watch on the bed. The room, once vibrant with happy feeling, was dull and gray.

Sylvia watched the reflection in the mirror as Margaret removed the stickpins, which held the hat in place. The long blonde hair was the same, the blue eyes not as lively, the porcelain skin now more milky pale. Margaret wore the same red dress she had worn the night of the previous Christmas party, but it looked sad. Wrinkled. Well worn. She laid the hat carelessly atop the dresser, and Sylvia's perspective changed yet again.

"Oh, Jimmy." Margaret whispered. She picked up the oval shaped picture frame perched upon the doily covered dresser top. "Why haven't I heard from you?"

Darkness again! Total, breathtaking darkness overwhelmed Sylvia. It resembled a perception of death many people claimed knowledge of. Knowing of its existence but unable to do anything about it—a sentient feeling of time passing without really being witness to it.

"Miss? Are you alright?"

"What? Oh, yes. I'm fine." Sylvia jerked back to reality with a start. The old shopkeeper was standing at her right elbow, a look of concern clearly showing on her face. "How much for this hat?"

"Oh, that old thing?" The clerk asked. "Two dollars should cover it. In fact, I feel a bit guilty charging that much for it. Shall I wrap it up for you?"

"Two dollars is fine." Sylvia dug into her purse to find two one dollar bills. "I'll carry it as is. Thanks."

\* \* \* \*

Arriving home, Sylvia hurried to her bedroom. On the dresser were three photographs, yellowed with age. The first was in a round antique frame, a posed picture of soldier, his leather jacket looking crisp and military.

The second picture was of a woman. A girl really, with a gray dress and matching hat. If in color, the outfit would have been a bright Christmas red.

Laying the hat down gently between the two, she picked up the third frame. A wedding picture of the forties era. The young man dressed smartly in his dress uniform. The bride decked out in white, with a long veil trailing beside her and down the steps of the church. A Christmas tree served as the backdrop for the picture, its glory dimmed somewhat by the smiles on the faces of the couple, and the gray of the picture itself.

Mary Margaret had heard from James again. This much Sylvia knew. Her grandma had told her the stories of their life together many, many times.

He had been shot down over England. After spending six months in a hospital, he was sent home to recuperate. Six months later, on Christmas day, they had wed.

Grandma and Grandpa had been together for almost sixty years now. Their family large, and dreams strong. Margaret had quit her job as a riveter to raise a family and take care of

Hearth to Heart: Tales of Winter Love and Magic  
*by Jac Eddins and Marissa St. James*

their home. James flew commercial airplanes for a living until he retired.

In fact, they would be arriving shortly, for Christmas dinner. Sylvia couldn't wait to show Grandma the hat. She was sure she would remember.



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## **A HOLE IN MY CHRISTMAS**

**Helen Lucas**

## CHAPTER 1

"Wake up, baby girl. We're almost there."

The lumpy pink bundle in the back seat shifted slightly and emitted a muffled reply. Georgia Adams smiled. Molly had been asleep since they passed the Bucksnot exit and gave no sign of waking now.

Georgia slowed her ancient Stanza to a crawl and turned off the two-lane and onto the farm road leading to the family spread. She drove carefully; it was a hard enough turn in daylight on a summer day, but on the longest night of the year in driving rain mixed with sleet, it passed treacherous. She slowed even more at the cattle grating. The noise of going faster over the evenly spaced beams would startle Molly, and she just couldn't face a fussy three-year-old after a full workday and a five-hour drive.

She wondered briefly if all the family would be here this year.

The Voice in her mind answered. Every single one of them. It looks like a freckle convention.

For as long as she could remember, the Voice had been the essence of being home to her. In her adulthood, she had pondered how to classify the phenomenon—a mental imaginary friend, a personification of the warmth of her family, a psychic link. At length she had just accepted it. This choice had proved especially provident the first weekend she came home from Memphis State University, full of a new

sense of maturity and worldliness, and found she had not outgrown the Voice.

Is the gate open? Keeping up her side of the silent conversation was second nature to her now. She scarcely thought about it anymore.

Somebody's going out now. We all heard you comin' across the grate.

Of course. The grating served as an infallible herald. It announced that a vehicle had entered the little valley outside Lobelville, home of the Crutcher family for six generations.

Sure enough, as the blue sedan crept down the backside of the ridge, Georgia could see a figure, wrapped up in a slicker and ubiquitous Stetson, moving steadily toward the gate. She increased her speed to intercept him just as he pushed it open: she'd hate to make anyone linger out in this miserable weather.

She stopped just beyond the swing of the gate and waited. A few seconds later Georgia heard a slight tapping on the rear passenger-side window. A figure barely discernable stood in the encompassing darkness of a country night, but the glow from the dashboard lights illuminated a gentle hand curling into a slow waving motion. Georgia turned in time to see Molly wave back shyly. Only her face and one dimpled hand were visible outside her fuzzy blanket.

The figure moved forward and pulled the latch on the front passenger-side door. It didn't open and Georgia scrambled to release the lock.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't realize—" she began.

"No harm done, Cuz," the figure drawled with the soft inflection native to middle Tennessee. He folded his long legs into the tiny car. "Still driving the Barbie-mobile, huh?"

Jesse.

Of course, Jesse. Who else did you think would come out in the sleet to open the gate for you?

Georgia's smile lit the night and was all the answer that was required. Jesse reached over to envelop her in a strong, if somewhat dampish, bear hug. "Welcome home, George."

Georgia squeezed him back. His big frame could take the hardest hug she could render.

"Thanks, Jesse." Georgia turned toward the back seat. "Cousin Jesse, I want you to meet my daughter Molly."

"How do you do, Cousin Molly?" Jesse spoke as formally as if he'd just been introduced to the governor. He reached into the backseat and shook the visible little hand. He seemed unfazed that it was Molly's left hand he was shaking.

"I'm your cousin?" Molly asked in her tiniest voice.

"Yes, ma'am," he answered, his voice now hearty and assured. He turned slightly to wink at Georgia. "You see, your mama and I are fourth cousins. That makes you and me fourth cousins once-removed."

Georgia took in the bemused look on Molly's face. "She's a little young for genealogy."

Jesse paused only slightly, then explained, "You're a cousin to anybody your mama's a cousin to."

"Oh."

Georgia gave her cousin a half-grin. "Score one for you, Jess," she whispered, then aloud she asked, "Where are we staying?"

"Your mama's already got a house full. Y'all will stay at Aunt Myrtle's house with me."

He'd been living in her grandmother's house since the old lady had died this past May. Grandma had even left him the place in her will.

It's still "Aunt Myrtle's house" to him.

The Voice was amused. Probably always will be.

She drove on down past the houses of uncles and cousins on the right and turned into the drive of the first house on the left. Though midway of the valley, it stood where the land widened between the road and the creek, the first spot wide enough to build a house with any size to it.

"Just pull on around back into the garage," Jesse said. "I doubt it'll flood this time of year."

"Flood?" Molly stood up suddenly to lean between them. Her two enormous eyes reflected her fear.

"Yeah." Jesse got out and then reached into the backseat for the toddler. "The creek's well-behaved most of the year, but gets kinda rambunctious in the spring."

"Huh?" Molly said from her perch against his shoulder. "He talks funny, Aunt George—I mean, Mama."

Jesse and Georgia exchanged a brief glance. "Mind your manners, Molly," Georgia chided.

"It's all right, punkin," Jesse replied. "You're probably plum tuckered out and your manners just sorta slipped." He hitched

her onto one arm. "Let's get you and your mama inside and into bed. She looks plum tuckered out, too."

"Mind your manners, Cousin Jesse," Molly countered.

He let out a great, deep chuckle and squeezed her gently.

"My daddy's gonna love you, Molly."

Jesse grabbed the biggest bag out of the trunk with his free hand, and then led Georgia through the basement and up the stairs into the kitchen she knew as well as her own.

"We'll put you all upstairs in the front room. Sandra Kay won't get here till tomorrow afternoon, and we'll put her brood in the back two."

"Where are you...?"

"I stay in Myrtle's room downstairs." Jesse's voice sounded flat.

He's no more over his bereavement than I am.

Well, after all, he's the one who's stayed, the only one of the sixteen cousins in this generation who works the land and sees after the older relatives. He was the one who found Myrtle after the stroke, drove her to the hospital, the only one with her when she died in the emergency room.

Jesse stopped at the bedroom door and nudged it open with the toe of his boot. "This little 'un is already out again," he whispered. He placed the bag on the floor and eased Molly onto the bed in one lithe move. He looked back at Georgia. "Seems like she's adjusted well enough."

"Oh, there's still some rough times," Georgia answered him softly over the lump in her throat. She locked her arms around him. "Thanks again, Jesse."

He hugged her back and kissed the top of her hair. "'Night, George. See ya in the mornin'."

What a sweet guy.

The Voice almost snorted. Oh, he'd just love to hear you say that. All the men wanta be called "sweet".

## CHAPTER 2

Georgia knew where she was even before she opened her eyes. Sweet lavender, sharp camphor, musty old mementos by the closetful, and sun-dried sheets all lent their essences to the smell that would forever mean warmth and love. She felt the unmistakable caress of a feather bed, its ticked pillows covered in hand-embroidered slips. She heard the sounds that were, of all things, the confirmation that she was in her grandma's house: the squeal of the Franklin stove door being opened, wood clanking against the iron sides as they were chunked in, and the beloved crackle of combustion that signaled the start of the new day.

Somebody's started the fire.

Jesse.

I shoulda known.

Yep.

Georgia's eyes snapped open. She sat up abruptly, instantly awake. "What are you doin' in here?" she hissed.

"Mama?" The watery call came from somewhere deep in the feathers.

"Shhh, Molly, I'm here," Georgia said softly.

Jesse grinned crookedly. "Shh, yourself. I'm just warmin' up the room, so you and Little Bit don't freeze when ya get up. B'sides, you ain't got nothin' I ain't already seen."

"On somebody else maybe!"

"Well, now, as I recollect, when we were eight or so—" He stopped, laughing quietly as he ducked a pillow, embroidery



and all. "Come on down and let's talk. It snowed in the night, and everything's real quiet out. I s'pect she'll sleep a while longer," he said, nodding at the other side of the bed, where Molly had quieted again.

"I'm not getting' out of this bed until you leave."

Jesse pulled the door to behind him when he left, but not before she heard him chuckling.

Got your goat, didn't he?

Whose side are you on?

Yours, darlin', always on yours.

Georgia pursed her lips crossly, but rolled out of bed, careful not to disturb the covers and let in a blast of cold air on the sleeping child. Not that it would matter much: she'd let Molly sleep in the same double-knit shirt and pants she'd worn all yesterday and they'd turn the meanest draft. It wasn't as if the little double-knit sleepers represented any real advantage over her daytime clothes.

But Georgia did change from the clothes she'd slept in, just for appearance sake, even though the stove hadn't had time to thoroughly warm the room.

If I don't, Jesse will no doubt have something to say about it.

No doubt.

In the kitchen, Georgia stopped to breathe in the solid, homey smell of Jesse's mega-coffee. He liked it rich and strong, so strong that he claimed he could use it for bug-and-tar remover after it cooled.

"What's for breakfast?" she asked.

"Whatever you make."

"What?" she exclaimed, feigning shock. "I'm the guest here!"

"Well, I'd do it," he drawled, grinning, "but you know how it's likely to turn out."

"Hmm. Point taken." Georgia began by lifting the flour sacking tacked up over the shelves on the back wall that comprised the pantry. "I'll bake something so it'll warm up in here."

Georgia had realized as a little girl that the reason there was no Franklin stove in the kitchen was that it would have been redundant in the days when the house was built. Then, the oven would hardly have cooled from the making of one meal until it was going again for the next one.

Jesse sat quietly at the table, cradling his coffee mug in his big, work-roughened hands. He looked up deliberately at Georgia, his eyes hooded. "Do you want to use Aunt Myrtle's trencher to do biscuits?"

Georgia turned from the pantry to face him. Something in his manner made her pause.

"Well, it's just..." he began, then cleared his throat. "See, nobody's used it since ... well, since May."

"I suppose I could try."

"She could make them like nobody," Jesse continued, smiling now.

He wants to talk to somebody about it.

So, let him.

Georgia hesitated. Should I hug him?

Naw, just make the biscuits.

She got out the shallow wooden dish and removed the tea towel that had always covered it. Her breath caught in a gasp, and her eyes misted a little. It still contained the flour Grandma had put in it that last time. She gathered herself together: her mom, and probably Jesse, too, had had to deal with much more in "goin' through the things" as was required of the next of kin.

You better believe it.

Georgia dumped the flour out into the lard can that served as refuse bin and went through the familiar motions of sifting flour, adding the salt and baking powder, cutting in the shortening with sliding motions of fingers against thumb. Jesse just kept talking throughout the process.

"She always talked about Mrs. Wage's biscuits when she did this," Georgia reminded him. "How they were so good, and how little she worked the dough." Georgia shifted her weight to one foot and paused, a floury fist placed unconsciously on her hip. "Did you ever know a Mrs. Wage?"

"No," Jesse said, laughing out loud, "but you're right. I remember that now." His laugh faded. "Those must have been some biscuits."

Georgia finished the first cutting and re-patted the dough. "So are these, just you wait." She cut the second batch, and then rolled up the remnants into the oddly shaped, serving-sized balls her dad had called "cat's heads".

"I'm not going anywhere." Jesse took another long draught of coffee, when a thin wail came from upstairs.

Georgia looked in panic at her hands, now doughy up past her wrists.

"And then again, maybe I am," Jesse said, rising from his chair. He took the steps two at a time, calling Molly as he went.

The biscuits were already coming out of the oven when Jesse came into the kitchen with Molly on his hip. "We had to change our clothes," he explained seriously.

"Oh, I'm sorry, honey," Georgia said, reaching for the child. "I shoulda woke you sooner, so you could go in the potty."

"No!" Molly insisted, holding Jesse in a pint-sized hammerlock. "I DID went in the potty."

Jesse barked a laugh. "No, George, we had to put on our Christmas clothes. And do you know why?"

"Why?" George asked in not-entirely-faked puzzlement.

"Tell her, Squirt."

Molly flung out both her arms. "'Cause it's Christmas Even!"

He gave her a squeeze and smiled as proudly as if she were his own. "That's 'Eve', but you got it mostly right."

"OK, Cousin Jesse," Georgia started placidly, "if we wear our Christmas outfit today, what will we wear tomorrow?"

"Well, maybe Santa will bring us another one."

Georgia glared at him. He knew there was no time to go get another outfit with everything going on today, even if he couldn't know there was no money for such a purchase.

Jesse just winked at her. "Have a little faith, Mama. Now, let's eat those biscuits."

Georgia served up the biscuits with fried eggs and bacon. "Have some of this jam, Molly. Great Grandma Myrtle made it from strawberries Jesse grew right here on the farm."

Molly looked at the jam-covered biscuit just going into her mouth, held so close that her little eyes crossed. "She did?" Her voice resounded with incredulity and wonder.

Jesse leaned back in the chair, his face taking on a perturbed look. "The really hard part is the growing that I did." He thumbed his chest.

Molly blinked at him, then explained patiently, "But, Cousin Jesse, you didn't do your part in heaven like Grea' Gra'ma did."

"Well, ya got me there," Jesse admitted, while Georgia hid her smile behind her coffee mug.

When Molly had finished and was exploring the big dining room that adjoined the kitchen, Georgia cocked her head and stared at Jesse. "You make a pretty good daddy, Jess. How come no smart woman ever snatched you up?"

"Well, many's the one that's tried," he bragged in an atrocious Western accent.

She swatted him with her napkin. "No, really, Jesse, why haven't you married?"

He shrugged. "Why haven't you remarried?"

"I asked first."

"Simple enough, I guess. The woman I love doesn't love me back."

"Oh, Jesse," Georgia said on a sigh. Then, she pursed her lips. "Where is this moron woman? I'm gonna beat her up!"

"Oh, yeah, I bet she just quakin' in her boots about that."

She whacked him with her napkin again.

He laughingly deflected the blow with upturned palms, a universal sign of surrender. Then he quieted again and repeated, "Why haven't you remarried?"

Georgia got up, gathering dirty dishes as she went, while she tried to form a sensible answer.

"Mama!"

Georgia, grateful for the timely interruption, turned as Molly charged into the kitchen. "What?!"

"There's lotses of peoples comin'!"

"How many is lotses?" Jesse asked sincerely.

Molly set her arms akimbo and thought momentarily. "About twelvety-seven."

"Oh, no!" Jesse covered his cheeks with both hands.

"What?" Georgia and Molly asked at the same time.

"We've only got twelvety-three chairs!"

Georgia whipped her napkin at him once more, but he danced out of the way. He grabbed Molly up and held her where she could see out the windows of the front door.

"Who is it?" Georgia called from the kitchen. She hurriedly set the dishes in a pan of soapy water to soak before the egg yolks dried.

Lord knows when I'll get back to these dishes.

And He ain't tellin'.

"Looks like your ma, my dad, and all four of your uncles."

"All four?"

"Yep. They haven't been together since Aunt Myrtle's funeral. Remember how they all stood together, all wearin' dark blue suits?"

"I remember," she stated coldly, joining him at the window, "how you whispered to me that they looked like a set of kitchen canisters and almost made me laugh out loud at the service." She looked at the six figures trudging through the scarcely one-foot of snow like they were slogging across Siberia.

You're right. It does look like a freckle convention.

Told ya.

Jesse opened the door and stepped out onto the screened-in porch with Molly. He held open the screen door just as his father, Joe Crutcher, got there. Joe was the official storyteller and sometime preacher of the Crutcher clan. Since May, he had also been the eldest member in the valley, though there was an older Crutcher in a nursing home near her children in Zachary, Louisiana.

"Who's that pretty girl ya got there, Jesse?" Joe's smile was ear-to-ear, and Molly reached for him instantly when he lifted his arms to her.

"This here is Molly," Joe said, handing the child off skillfully.

"Molly, is it?"

"Uh-huh," Molly replied. "Who are you?"

"Why don't you know me? I'm your Cousin Joe."

"Aren't you my cousin?" Molly asked Jesse doubtfully.

All the grown-ups, now collected on the porch, laughed.

"Why, honey, half the folks in this valley are your cousins, and the other half are your uncles and aunts," Joe explained.

"Y'all come on in," Jesse said and led the way.

Amid stomping of snow-encrusted boots and hanging of what seemed like dozens of scarves, gloves, hats, and jackets, all the elders clustered into the front room and arranged themselves on any available sitting place. Jesse and Georgia sat side by side on the end of the big four-poster bed that had always stood in the corner for any extra guests that stopped by.

"They all gots seats," Molly noted accusingly.

Jesse shrugged innocently, and then turned to the assembly. "To what do we owe this honor?"

As they had all their lives, Georgia's four Crutcher uncles, Neal, Goat (whose real name, James, had never been used), Howard, and Bobby Dale, were satisfied to let Joe be their spokesman.

"We need to consult with you two on some of our Crutcher family traditions for this year."

"That's us," Jesse whispered to Georgia out of the side of his mouth, "more traditions per capita than any other family this side of I-65."

She pinched him sharply in the ribs, having determined that swatting at him with a napkin was ineffective.

"Ow!" he yelled. "Behave!"

"Both of you behave," said Georgia's mother, Julie, who, as the only sister in a family of five, was accustomed to the ringmaster role.

"Georgia, you know that every year at our Christmas Eve service, we let the newest member of the family be the Baby in the manger."



"Yeah," Georgia said dubiously, not seeing where Joe was headed.

"Well, this year we figured Molly was the newest member of the family, seein' as how she just joined us this fall."

Georgia shot a quick glance at Molly, now seated on Joe's ample lap and momentarily distracted by playing with his bolo-string tie. "I don't know but what it might be too soon for her to feel like a part of our family."

"Nonsense," said Julie, brusquely. "Molly," she called a little louder, "do you want to be the Baby in our Christmas Eve service?"

Molly looked up from the sliver tips of the tie. "I'm too big to be a baby."

"Why, honey, you'll always be my baby, just like your mama is still my baby. Come on over here and sit in Grandma Julie's lap a while."

Molly looked Georgia up and down, as if trying to see her as anybody's baby, but went to Julie nonetheless.

"Thank you," said Joe sotto voce, rubbing the tops of his thighs. "That bony little bottom had teeth in it. Well, Georgia, what do you think?"

Jesse caught the consternation in Georgia's eyes and cleared his throat. All eyes turned to him. "Well, we could do like we did in '62, the year after all five of us were born, and all of us were big enough to crawl out of the cradle, and there wasn't another baby due for several months."

"And that would be?" asked Howard.

"Y'all had the kid carry a baby doll up and put it in the cradle."

"How do you know that?" Neal asked. "You weren't even two years old then."

"Mama told me," Jesse said, "and she's got a memory like an elephant."

"Well, that's certainly true," Joe said, maybe a little ruefully, and all Georgia's uncles nodded.

"OK, then, that's what we'll do this year," Julie said. She began to explain to Molly what would happen that night in the little white chapel at the end of the Crutcher valley.

"If we've done it that way before, then I guess it's all right," said Goat, standing up and reaching for his jacket.

Jesse whispered to Georgia under the noise of the group standing, grabbing outer gear, and moving toward the door. "Whew, we're saved: Crutcher family traditions are upheld for another year."

"One other thing, Jesse," Joe said, standing with the others. "We want to have the story tellin' here at Aunt Myrtle's house like we always did."

"I hadn't planned on anything any different."

"Good," he said, nodding his head. "We'll see you this evenin' then."

"Bye, baby," Julie said, hugging Georgia and handing Molly back to her. "Come on over to the house this afternoon and see the others."

Georgia nodded, knowing without asking that "the others" were her sisters and brother, their spouses, and their kids. Julie certainly did have a full house, and Georgia was glad she and Molly had been assigned to stay in the relative quiet of Jesse's house.

Not to mention having better bathroom access here. Only until Sandra Kay gets here; you know what a bathroom hog she is.

"Mama, I can't 'member all those peoples," Molly said sadly.

"Don't worry, Molly," Jesse said, going onto one knee to talk with her at her eye level. "I've been tryin' to learn their names all my life, and I still get them wrong sometimes. Shoot, your Grandma Julie even calls her own kids by the wrong names."

"Really?"

Georgia nodded. "Sometimes, she really gets confused and calls us by the pets' names."

All three laughed.

They spent the rest of the day in preparation for the evening and day to come: wrapping presents, last minute baking, visiting relatives up and down the valley, and for Georgia and Molly, long naps. Jesse spent that time to work off some physical and emotional tension at the woodpile.

### CHAPTER 3

The little chapel filled with Crutchers, every pew a sea of freckled faces and hair that ranged from strawberry blond to carrot-top to deepest auburn, occasionally iced with silver. Among the family groups Georgia noted strategic absences. She smiled, knowing most of those missing were at their respective houses putting the final touches on items that would appear in the night and in the morning be attributed to Santa.

Others were missing, though, who weren't at home in clandestine occupations. Like Grandma Myrtle, whose passing had been so shocking, and comforting, in its benevolent brevity. And like....

Georgia drew in a shaky breath, looking through misted eyes at the golden child standing in the pew beside her.

They shouldn't have died. They were so young.

The young die, too, Georgia.

They had so much to live for. They've left such a big hole in my life.

Take comfort that the crash took them instantly.

But Sharon was my best friend—I miss her so much sometimes it hurts.

Yes, but if Molly couldn't be raised by her own mother, there's no one better than you to do it.

But what about a father for Molly?

He may be closer than you think.

The opening chords of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing", played loudly, if not entirely in tune, on the well-worn upright, drew Georgia from her reverie. Jesse stood on Molly's other side and kept the child from leaning too far into the next pew where her new Grandma Julie sat. What the singing may have lacked in tone and technique, it made up for in sincerity and enthusiasm. When the song ended and Joe stepped up to the simple wooden podium, Georgia found her eyes misty again.

It's lucky the next thing is a prayer: I'd hate to have to explain to Molly why I'm crying.

You don't need to apologize to her for your tears.

The service proceeded swiftly in the interest of getting little ones to bed sooner than later. Before Molly had even begun to wiggle from attention loss, it was time for her to carry the doll, fittingly wrapped in swaddling cloths, to the almost-life-size crèche at the front of the church. A rousing finale of "Joy to the World", and the Crutchers dispersed, hugging and laughing and wishing each other "Merry Christmas".

Georgia and Jesse, with Molly on his shoulders, walked back to Myrtle's house with Sandra Kay, Jesse's younger sister, her husband Jack, and their three school-age kids. When the house had quieted, Jesse sat with a pajama-clad Molly by the now cheerfully glowing stove and read "The Night Before Christmas".

Georgia watched them from the bed, a constriction in her chest that she didn't want to dwell on. She managed a smile when Jesse carried the child, now pie-eyed with sleepiness, over to her.

"Y'all sleep tight now," he said in that deep voice of his, that rolled over Georgia's frayed nerves like sorghum. It was entirely possible that she was asleep before Molly.

\* \* \* \*

Tarnation!

Georgia sat bolt upright in bed, the vestiges of sleep brutally scattered, but after a cursory glance around the darkened room, she was without a clue as to what had awakened her so abruptly. Her feeling of unease was too strong to consider trying to go back to sleep, so she slipped out of bed. She found her loafers just under the bed and shrugged a flannel shirt on over her nightgown. She slipped downstairs by the light left on in the kitchen. As she passed the front room, a peculiar scratching sound she couldn't identify drew her attention to the porch.

Coyotes?

Not likely. Go see.

Not by myself, I don't!

Georgia eased over to her grandmother's old room to rouse Jesse, but from the open door she could see he wasn't inside.

Go on, chicken.

She crept to the door and peered out the window. The moon reflected brilliantly off the snow.

Just like in the poem.

Quit stallin'.

Keep your shirt on.

Georgia scanned the ground outside the porch and was just about to decide she was a real nut case, when a blur of motion in her peripheral vision caught her attention. To the right of the door a man's booted foot stuck through the ceiling of the porch. It was stuck through far enough that bare, hairy leg showed above the boot, and the movement she had seen must have been an unsuccessful attempt at extraction.

But Georgia recognized that boot and for that matter the bare, hairy leg. She clutched the shirt tighter around her and quietly let herself out into the yard.

"Jesse Crutcher, have you lost your tiny mind?" she whispered hoarsely.

His expression indicated that he was not very long on patience at that moment. "Don't start," he warned, barely audible even in the early hour stillness.

Georgia stepped a little further out into the yard and studied the sight on the porch roof. Jesse, awkwardly listing toward his wayward limb, knelt on one of two planks laid parallel to the edge of the roof. His hands held what looked to her like two miniature ski poles, and around and behind him were a regular, but indiscernible, pattern in the snow. "What in Sam Hill are you doing?"

His glare was fierce even in the quiescent moonlight. "Comin' to terms with my personal inadequacies, okay? What does it look like I'm doin'?" He wriggled ineffectively and grunted sharply in pain. "Help me get outa this mess, will ya, and I'll tell you every mortifyin' detail."

Georgia hustled back onto the porch, pulled a ladder-back chair under Jesse's trapped foot, and climbed up onto the

woven seat. She winced upon seeing the deep scrapes on his exposed skin that lead all the way up to the ragged hole in the roof.

Above her a muffled voice instructed, "Take the blamed boot off—careful!—and I'll just pull my leg out."

She did as told, but knew from the low-pitched whistle that he got as hurt coming out as he had going in. She stepped out onto the top of the stairs and stretched up to hand the boot back.

"Much obliged," Jesse said softly. When he was re-shod, he limped mincingly along the planks to the ladder propped on the side of the roof. The ski pole things were tucked under his arm.

Georgia held the ladder firm, and then slipped beneath his arm to support him back into the house. She settled Jesse into a chair at the kitchen table, then asked, "You want coffee or hot chocolate?"

She was grateful to see that comfortable, familiar grin.

"What kinda choice is that?"

"Right," she said, reaching for the cocoa. "Now, tell me what that was all about."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Well, it would have been really great, if I hadn't fallen through the cock-eyed roof."

"You know, I don't think I've ever heard you swear before."

"I've got a lotta catchin' up to do, then, don't I? You gonna talk or you gonna listen?"

Georgia made a zipping motion across her lips.



Jesse harrumphed. "Like I was sayin', it was a real good idea." He leaned over to painstakingly remove his boot and roll up his ripped pants leg. "I'd seen it in a drawing in a book of cowboy poems years ago, but can't exactly remember the poem now. Something about how hard the daddy worked at Christmas to make everything magic for the kids. Anyway,"—he grunted as he sat back again—"the picture showed the daddy up on the roof makin' sleigh marks and reindeer prints in the snow." He looked up sheepishly. "I got to thinkin' about Molly and her losin' her folks and all, about how I really wanted to make this Christmas good for her. So..."

"So?" Georgia prompted gently.

"So when Neal got his buck at Thanksgiving, I asked him for two of the feet." He reached the ski poles from up off the floor and laid them on the table.

Georgia saw to her disgust that the little dowels ended in a pair of deer hooves. "Eewww, get those nasty things off this table," she hissed.

Jesse grinned widely. "You're in serious need of a frog or two down your back."

"Whenever you think you're man enough."

"Oh, yeah?" Jesse sprang up toward her.

She could tell the instant his weight came down on his hurt leg. "Sit back down, dummy." Her voice was kinder than her words. "You couldn't find a frog this time of year anyhow."

"That's all that's saved you, woman."

Georgia tipped her head to one side. Jesse'd called her a million things over the years, but that "woman" sent a little shiver of feeling through her insides she didn't entirely

understand. She served them up their chocolate in mismatched mugs and sat down across the table from him.

After several minutes of companionable silence, Jesse set his mug down. "You never answered me."

"About what?"

"About why you haven't remarried."

Georgia turned her head away and looked out the wide window over the sink. The moonlight glowed a pale blue, and the world at peace contrasted sharply with the anguish she felt about Jesse's innocent question. She drew in a slow, deep breath and released it even slower.

"This isn't easy for me, Jesse. Let me tend to your leg while I muddle through it."

He nodded and propped the injured limb on another chair to make it easier for her. She brought the shoebox, which held the first-aid supplies from the pantry, and knelt beside the chair.

"Richard and I never had what you would call a picture book marriage. We were never ... well, balanced with each other."

"You mean he never loved you as much as you loved him."

She smiled and teased him mildly. "You gonna talk or you gonna listen?"

The zipper motion he made on his lips followed the deep U of his smile.

"I suppose in the end it came down to the fact that I thought of marriage the way we do in the family." She motioned vaguely up and down the valley. "Lasting forever,

giving all of yourself to the other, merging so much that the two of you are really one person."

She paused in her application of antiseptic lotion to blow away its sting on the raw scrapes.

I'm probably negating all the good of the medicine by blowing germs all over him.

Hush. Love cures better than peroxide ever could.

"I'm afraid that for Richard marriage meant little more than getting sex any time he wanted it and not having to use a condom either." Georgia couldn't help the way her voice broke.

Jesse growled when he righted himself and pulled her onto his lap. "Dickie Adams is the biggest fool I've ever known." He crushed her into a ferocious hug and propped his chin on top of her head. "Or likely ever will. Want me to beat him up?"

She responded to the raillery in his voice with a feeble chuckle.

He squeezed her again. His cheek pressed against hers.

Too late, she reached to brush at the tears there.

"Oh, Georgia, don't cry," he said tenderly and began kissing the tears away.

His lips touched every one in turn, and then kissed her eyes.

Georgia tipped her gaze to his face, so near hers. Artlessly, as naturally as breathing, each moved toward the other.

Their lips joined with a sweetness, a rightness, that moved Georgia to tremble. Then, Jesse deepened the kiss, transformed it into something more, something grander, and she drank him in, like rain to a thirsty land.

The kiss grew to encompass their whole beings, all of their bodies, all of their souls. And all the beauty, joy, and abundance of a Christmas midnight coursed through them.

With a shudder of his own, Jesse broke off the kiss and set her slightly from him. His head dropped back, his eyes closed.

"Jesse?"

He swallowed, his Adam's apple coursing up, up, up, and then down. "This wasn't s'posed to happen." His eyes opened, staring unfocused at the ceiling. "I killed two trees this afternoon so this wouldn't happen."

"I don't understand...."

He stood up and set her on her feet. "Neither do I, George. Go on to bed now. I'll straighten up down here." He leaned to kiss her lightly on her forehead. And even if he lingered just a moment longer than customary for cousins, he still did turn away from her.

"Jesse."

"Hmm?"

Her fingers trembled as they brushed her sensitized lips. "Merry Christmas, Jesse."

When she paused on the stairs to look back, he had not yet moved.

## CHAPTER 4

Christmas Day was bright and chaotic and overstuffed with gifts, favorite holiday foods, relatives, wonder, and laughter.

To Molly's delight, and Georgia's relief, Santa had indeed brought her a darling outfit of white corduroy and a white sweater trimmed with Christmas bells, as well as an eye-popping array of toys, games, and books. Her stocking overflowed with a tangerine, two tiny toy cars, Brazil nuts, a new gold dollar, miniature chocolates, a bottle of bubble stuff with wand attached, and a huge peppermint stick.

Georgia experienced the day to its fullest, but found her thoughts time and again returning to what had happened in the kitchen the night before. Jesse seemed unaffected by it, or at least, seemed to have put it from his mind.

She hoped to clear the air between them while Molly was napping, but when she came downstairs, Sandra Kay said he had left. He hadn't said where he was going, only that he'd be back before the family gathered for its traditional story swap that evening.

By the time the early December night had fallen, Myrtle's house was alive with lights and voices. Crutchers and their kin filled the connecting living and dining rooms. A few even spilled over into the kitchen.

One by one the favorite stories were told: O. Henry's "Gift of the Magi", Dickens' A Christmas Carol irreverently reset in the rural South, the Mexican tale of Le Pastorales recounting

how the peasant shepherds and St. Michael had protected the Holy Family on that first Christmas Eve.

But the most favorite of all were the beloved Christmas cowboy poems. Joe recited Waddie Mitchell's earthy classic "The Book", and then Jesse performed the whimsical "The Christmas Waltz" by Buck Ramsey to clapping and cheers.

As the applause faded, Joe raised his voice over the crowd's murmuring. "We've got a treat this year, like nothing I ever recall before. Our Georgia Ann has written a Christmas poem and set it to music. So, y'all get ready. Georgia?"

Georgia groaned inwardly. She had forgotten telling her mom about her song. Of course Julie would have told Joe, and probably neither of them would have considered that she might not want to perform it here in front of all the family.

"Well, OK," she said good-naturedly. "But y'all hafta help me on the chorus."

When those gathered gave a general assent, Georgia lifted the guitar from its place on the wall. She was vaguely aware that somebody had likewise taken the fiddle down.

I might have known the Crutchers would jump to join in.

Well, they're all natural musicians. Ya couldn't count the number of guitars, fiddles, and pianos they've worn out amongst 'em.

What if they don't like it 'cause it's country?

Are you kiddin'? This valley is only an hour out of Nashville; they only got two kinds of radio stations here—country or western.

What about gospel?

OK, three.

Georgia began an intro, and before she got to the end of the vamp, the fiddle and another guitar had joined in the regular progression of chords. "OK, now, here's the chorus:

'There's a big gap in my Christmas.

It's because that you're not here.

There's no tinsel on the cedar.

There's no garland on the stair.

There's no fruitcake in the oven.

There's no eggnog in the bowl.

'Cause you're somewhere else without me,

In my Christmas there's a hole."

Her guitar repeated the triplet in the last line as an interlude, and then she began the verse, her accompanists barely faltering on the thirds and sevenths.

"I don't wear my reindeer earmuffs,

Wear no bells on my lapel,

Put no wreath up on the front door,

Put no cute cards in the mail.

I can't make myself go shoppin',

Stay away from all the malls,

Haven't sung a single carol,

Made no friendly neighbor calls.'

"Now, y'all sing!"

A score of voices filled the room, singing along, splitting in simple, then complex, harmonies.

Georgia sang another verse and chorus, and then broke into the bridge.

"I worked real hard all Labor Day

To be a grade-A b—better not.

And then along 'bout Halloween  
I was nothing but a witch.  
Thanksgiving Day, I gave no thought  
Of what I should be thankful for.  
And then late on December first  
You walked right out my door."

When the final verse and chorus were done, the extended backup choir repeated the chorus on their own. Cheers, applause, hoots, and whistles erupted throughout the room.

Georgia's face was aglow as she took her bows. She lingered until the accolades faded, then excused herself to the kitchen for a well-earned drink of water.

She thought herself alone as she leaned against the sink, looking out the back door. She was briefly startled as a big male body slid intimately behind her, but then she recognized it and sank into its firm curves.

"I'd like to fill up that big hole in your Christmas," a drunken voice whispered coarsely in her ear, his insinuation both vulgar and unmistakable.

"Jason!" Georgia whipped around and out of contact with the man. "I didn't know you'd come in," she stammered, her heart in her throat. She faltered back, right up against the door.

Jesse's older brother strode over and leaned toward her, his hands pressed to the door on either side of her head. She felt trapped both by his nearness and by all the tangle of social convention: don't make a scene, don't fight with a relative, don't jump to conclusions.



"Does that mean you're just rubbin' up against anybody's body?" He grinned in self-appreciation of his wit. "One hot little cat, ain't ya," he slurred and bent closer to her.

In a flash, he was yanked off her and spun around. Jesse had him by handful of shirt, but Jason had spent too much time in redneck dives. Painful lessons had sharpened his reflexes, and he planted a facer right aside Jesse's nose.

Jesse staggered back, as stunned by the blow as by the pain. When he regained his senses, he charged his brother, and they instantly grappled into an unholy embrace.

"H'yere now!" Joe barked from the doorway into the dining room. He waded into the two men and elbowed them apart. "This isn't the first time I've had to separate the two of you, Lord knows, but I did hope you'd grow out of it some day."

The brothers glared at each other, but said nothing.

"What's this all about?" Joe barked.

"He was botherin' Georgia."

"I didn't notice her objectin'."

Jesse lunged at Jason again.

"Back off!" Joe ordered.

Jesse withdrew to the other side of the kitchen, as if proximity to his brother would be too tempting.

"All right, then," Joe said. "You okay, Georgia?"

She nodded.

The elder puffed his cheeks, and then blew the air out. "I was just comin' to tell y'all that the folks are callin' it a night. Come on with me, Jason. I b'lieve you shoulda called it a night a while back."

The two men left the kitchen.

"You okay, Jesse?" Georgia asked meekly.

"Oh, sure," he said, wiping blood off the top of his lip with the back of his hand. "Just peachy."

"Let me fix—"

"No." He inclined his head toward the front of the house. "You go see everybody out."

When the others had made their way to their respective house or billet, Georgia came back to the kitchen.

Jesse sat at the table with his head bent forward, a partly bloody cloth pressed to his face.

"I'll get you some ice."

"I already got some snow." The cloth and the swelling garbled his words.

She knelt down to look up into his face. "Thanks, Jesse. I really needed help just then."

"Yeah, that's me—a knight in shinin' armor."

"I can't believe he hit you like that. And you didn't even get the satisfaction of hittin' him back. Yet." She tried to coax him into a smile by flashing one of her own.

"Yeah, that's me—the masked avenger."

"Durn it, Jesse," she snapped and turned to fix them both something to drink. "Don't denigrate yourself like that. The whole family thinks the world of you. They practically hang on your every word."

"Yeah, that's me—keynote speaker at the freckle convention."

Georgia froze in the middle of popping two cans of Coke. "What did you say?"

"What? When?"

She looked straight at him. "I heard you. You said, 'keynote speaker at the freckle convention'."

"So what?"

"You know so what: you're the Voice!"

"I don't know what—"

"Yes, you do. You're the Voice in my head. Tell me the truth, Jesse, or I'll never speak to you again!"

Oh, yes, you will. You can't help it.

"Now cut that out!" She shook her head, spun to the side and then back again. "I just can't get over it. It's been you all along. All this time." She marched over to him and tilted his face up.

Jesse winced. "Watch it!"

"Oh, uh, sorry. It is you, isn't it?"

He nodded.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged out an elbow. "I guess I don't have a good reason, George. It was just a way to be near you, close to you, to be in your thoughts."

"You wanted to be in my thoughts?" she said, a hint of wonder in her voice.

"Yeah," he said, pushing her hair back over her ear.

"Always have, always will."

She swallowed. The tiny beginnings of a thrill fluttered in her heart. "Jesse, am I the moron woman that doesn't love you back?"

"Naw," he said, "You're fairly bright most of the time."

He was grinning that old Jesse grin, the grin she loved so much.

Loved so much.

She did. She did love him so much. "Jesse," she asked excitedly, "do you love me? No funnin' now."

He folded her into his big, warm arms. "Yeah, George, I love you."

"I love you, too, Jesse." She looked up at him. "Oh, Jess, what are we goin' to do?"

"Don't know, kid, but we'll work things out."

"Oh, what about the family?"

"Just one of those things we'll work out. Why don't I drive over to Memphis and visit with you and Molly, and we'll talk?"

That'd be just fine.

Merry Christmas, George. I do love you.

Merry Christmas, Jess. I love you, too.

## **THE CHRISTMAS PONY**

**Lorene Poe**

(Lorene Poe, is the former editor of Casualty Adjusters Guide, an advertising publication. Ms. Poe spent several years working as a reporter/photographer, and columnist. She's been working on novels involving the Alaskan gold rush, and the American Depression. Ms. Poe resides in Texas at present and does advertising for several local merchants.)

"Mama look," Amy cried.

Her mother glanced toward the Johnson's corral, but flicked the reins to urge the horse on to the house. The wagon bumped on over the rough, winter frozen ground.

Amy pointed out a brown and white pony in Seth Johnson's corral. A white blaze on its well-shaped forehead highlighted wide, intelligent eyes. "Look at Mr. Johnson's new pony. He's just what I want. "He is perfect, Mama. He'd make a perfect Christmas present." Amy's bright eyes held a pleading light.

At the hitching post before the house, Sarah Bolton climbed down from the wagon and secured the horse. With a sigh, she faced her excited, young daughter.

"Amy, remember what I told you," she said. "Don't count too heavily on a pony for Christmas. Come on, we are here to see the Johnson's new baby."

"But Mama, Christmas will be my tenth birthday." She had wished and hoped, and had even included a pony in her prayers.

"Amy."

"Yes, ma'm." Amy didn't mention the pony again, but she refused to give up hope.

"Another two weeks," Mama said. She held Cora Johnson's new son in her arms, "and you would have had a Christmas baby."

"I was a Christmas baby," Amy announced proudly. "This Christmas will be my tenth birthday, so that is when I plan to get my pony." Both events were, by Kansas tradition, the customary dates for receiving a pony.

"Amy," her mother's voice was firm, "We will discuss this later."

"Yes, Ma'm."

Amy took a last, long stare at the pony as her mother drove out of the Johnson yard. She had been learning to ride on her brother Jimmy's big red horse, Rusty, and was eager for a pony of her own.

"I'm going to name him Blaze," she said suddenly to her mother.

"Amy..."

"Yes, Mama."

\* \* \* \*

Thoughts of Blaze filled her mind next morning on the walk to school.

The sound of hoof beats came from behind her. That would be Gracie Farnsworth on her black pony Nubian, Nuby for short.

"She can't ride well," Amy thought, "and the way she slops up and down in the saddle looks silly." Gracie learned that riding technique at some school in the East. Her father had sent her there for a while after her mother died. When she returned she seemed an entirely different person from the friendly, outgoing Gracie who had gone away.

Nuby overtook Amy and slowed to a walk.

"Good morning," Gracie said brightly. "I love not having to walk to school. Riding Nuby is so much nicer."

"I'm sure it is," Amy replied, suddenly jealous and resentful. Those feelings vanished when she thought of Blaze. After Christmas she would have Blaze, then she could ride to school.

"See you at school," Gracie called cheerfully. She jabbed her heels viciously into Nuby's flanks and clutched the reins to keep her balance. Unused to such treatment, Nuby reared on his hind legs, his front hooves pawing the air.

Gracie shot backward over the pony's tail and landed sprawling, but unhurt, on the cold ground. She clenched her teeth angrily and glared at Amy as she got to her feet. The pony bolted off toward a stand of trees nearby.

"Look what you did!" Gracie almost shouted as Amy helped her up. "I could have been killed, you stupid thing! You made my pony run away."

"No, Gracie. I didn't do anything to him."

"You scared him with that stupid, ugly coat you wear. Where did you get that hand-me-down, anyway, from your grandmother?"

Amy gritted her teeth and forced herself to ignore the biting words. "Come on, Gracie, I'll help you catch him."

They chased the colt around the field, but he eluded them.

"I need to rest." Gracie sat down on a log and rubbed her knee. "My knee hurts. It could be badly injured. You catch him. You made him run away."

Nuby was frightened and confused. He didn't want to be caught.

Amy approached the colt slowly, step by step, holding out her hand for him to sniff. She remembered sitting on the corral fence with her brother one day and watching Mr. Johnson calm an excited young mare that way. The mare had responded well to his gentle, quieting method. She inched closer, holding out her hand and speaking softly.

Nuby eyed her suspiciously. The pony's fear subsided as Amy's soothing tone and gentle touch calmed him. She held one hand under Nuby's muzzle and stroked the long top of his nose with the other. He sucked in the air as she gently blew into his nostrils.

Grace watched, fascinated. Amy and the pony seemed to carry on a mysterious sort of conversation. Jealousy bubbled up inside. Nuby was her pony; why didn't he respond to her that way instead of always shying away from her? Her pique increased when Amy suddenly mounted and walked Nuby to where she sat on the log.

"I think he's all right now," Amy said. "He just seemed to be upset and a little scared."

It was you who scared him. Now, get down off of my pony."



Gracie took the reins and started to climb into the saddle, but stopped and eyed the pony suspiciously. Once more she started to mount, then paused.

"Afraid?" Amy challenged. Hot anger boiled inside her.

"I'm a Farnsworth," Gracie said defiantly. "I'm not afraid of anything." She swung into the saddle and urged the pony forward by flapping the reins. She did not, however, jab Nuby with her heels. Not this time.

When Amy arrived at school sometime later, Daisy Mueller, her best friend, and some of the other girls hurried from around the pot-bellied stove to meet her with reports of Gracie's transparent lies. The little group that hung around Gracie because she was the banker's daughter was busily attending to her every word and whim.

The morning started with arithmetic, learning numbers for the three children in the first grade row. The lessons progressed in each row with suitable difficulty for each grade through the eighth. The squeak and screech of slate pencils on cold hard slates was reminiscent of a barn full of yowling cats. Only Gracie refused to use a noisy slate pencil, and insisted that Papa order chalk for her. It was used by all of the girls in the eastern school. Then progress was made through spelling on eight levels.

After those subjects finished Miss Taylor read them a Christmas story. "After lunch we will decorate the Christmas tree," she informed the class. A glow came over her once pretty face and shone in her eyes behind the small spectacles perched on her nose. She loved Christmas, and looked

forward to the annual party in this little one-room school on the prairie.

Emaline Taylor had been eager to teach young minds, and blindly accepted the ruling that teachers were not allowed to marry. She had no family or children, and the annual Christmas party at the little school was a celebration all her own. She pretended, for a little while, that the children were really hers and dreamed a secret dream and lived a secret life in a fantasy where she, too, had a family and children.

"We will also draw names for exchanging gifts," Miss Taylor said.

"Can we have snow for the party?" asked a first grade child.

"We can hope so," Miss Taylor said with a smile.

"Do you know what a White Christmas means?" she asked them.

"Is it something special?"

"Yes. Very special. Falling snowflakes on Christmas bring joy and good fortune. A white Christmas means the year ahead will be filled with love and happiness."

Everyone hoped for a white Christmas, but so far this year, except for one light snowfall that had lasted on the ground just overnight, there had only been swirls of snowflakes in the air. The lake had a skim of ice, but not thick enough to skate on. Every day Miss Taylor warned the children not to go on the ice.

The cloakroom smelled of wet wool and gamy boots. At lunchtime, Amy and Daisy retrieved their lunches from there

as quickly as they could. They joined the group around the big pot bellied stove and opened the small metal buckets.

While they listened to a discussion of Christmas wishes, Amy ate her sandwich of cold biscuit and fried pork, while Daisy rapidly consumed three biscuits and wild honey.

"I'm getting a new pair of boots from the Sears and Roebuck catalog," said one of the older boys. "I got to pick 'em out when Ma drew that picture around my foot to send in with the order."

"I want that new Winchester rifle in the catalog," said Amy's brother, Jimmy. "The new model 1890 slide action .22 rimfire. It looks real good."

"I want a pony," Amy said. "The new brown and white one in Mr. Johnson's corral. I saw it when Mama and I went to see the Johnson's new baby."

"I saw that pony when I went there with Papa," Gracie said. "Amy, I hope you won't be too disappointed. Mr. Johnson told Papa that pony costs almost as much as Nuby. Can your daddy afford that?" The cruel remark slid glibly from Gracie's tongue.

Gracie's friends sought to stifle their giggles behind their hands. They all knew Amy's father could not afford a pony that expensive.

\* \* \* \*

"Hey Amy, come and walk home with us." Daisy called to her. Amy joined her and two other girls. They were soon overtaken by Jimmy, on Rusty, and some of his friends on their horses. The horses sauntered along beside them while

the boys discussed the best type of box trap for catching rabbits.

"Last one home is a rotten egg!" Gracie challenged them, galloping past them on Nuby. Her heels dug sharply into Nuby's sides, causing him to shoot ahead. Bits of frozen snow sprayed from Nuby's hooves as he sprang forward sending small, icy clumps of snow flying. One struck Amy's cheek and she winced in pain. It left a cold trail as it slid down her face.

"That Gracie is a show-off!" said Aaron. "Let's catch her."

He and another boy raced after the retreating Gracie. The rest of the children looked on in disgust.

"Let her go," Jimmy said. "She sure don't know how to take care of a horse. If she ain't careful she is gonna fall again and break her neck."

"Even worse," Daisy said, "she might cause Nuby to break a leg."

"I just wish I had a pony," Amy said. "I wouldn't run it on icy ground the way she does."

\* \* \* \*

Ice on the lake grew thicker each day as the temperature dropped. By Thursday, some of the older boys went sliding on the ice on the way home from school. On Saturday morning Amy and Jimmy arrived on Rusty to find most of the kids from school already sliding around on the lake. Daisy's brother, Aaron, was pulling her on his sled. Amy carried an old pair of strap-on skates that Mama had dug out of a trunk. They were the skates she had used as a girl. "I've been saving them for you," Mama said.

Amy sat down on a log, and strapped on one of the skates. When she looked up, Gracie Farnsworth had arrived at the lake riding Nuby. Gracie had planned to impress everyone with her new stylish Blondin strap-on skates, with the fancy ankle supports. The skates, and her skating abilities, were both from the school back east.

"But, first I'll make an entrance," Gracie thought to herself. "If I walk Nuby out onto the ice everyone will notice. My royal blue skating outfit looks really fabulous against Nuby's black coat. They'll be green with envy." She giggled and urged Nuby forward.

"Stop!" Jimmy cried. "Don't bring Nuby onto the ice, you stupid girl!"

Gracie defiantly hit the pony with her quirt. Nuby shot forward several yards. He sensed the danger beneath him and tried to stop. He slipped and slid his eyes rolling frantically. A splintering sound arose. Nuby fought to keep his balance. Two of his hooves shot from beneath him and he fell. Water spouted into the air. The ice caved in, engulfing both pony and rider. They disappeared under the water, then shot to the surface, flailing frantically.

"Help! Help!" Gracie screamed.

Tom Bolton and Banker Farnsworth, each abroad on errands, arrived at the lake at the same time. The boys were on their stomachs on the ice, shouting at each other in their efforts to form a human chain that would reach Gracie. Under their weight, creaks and groans of protest rose from the ice. The boys scrambled backward. Gracie clung to the edge of the hole screaming. "Come back! Come Back!"

"I'm coming, Gracie," the banker called. "Papa's coming!"

The buggy dipped sharply beneath his weight as Banker Farnsworth descended to the ground. He hurried toward the ice, his bulk rocking from side to side.

"No, Farnsworth," Tom called. "The ice won't hold you, or me. One of the boys can crawl out and throw a rope to her. Jimmy!"

"No, Daddy," Amy cried. "I'm the lightest. Let me go."

There was no time to debate. Tom tied a rope under Amy's arms. "Don't be afraid," he said. "It ain't far out there, maybe 20 feet. "The boys will hang onto your rope and play it out to you." He grabbed the lariat from Rusty's saddle.

"This," he said, "is what you need to take to Gracie. I'll help Mr. Farnsworth hold onto one end here. You take the coiled end out to throw to Gracie." Her father placed the coiled lariat over one arm. It rested on her shoulder and hung beneath her arm.

"You crawl a ways, then undo a loop from your shoulder," Tom said. "When you get there you throw this braided-loop end to Gracie. From there, it's up to her. When she gets a good hold on it we'll pull her out."

"Whatever you do," he added, "don't get near Nuby. He could drown both of you. We'll try to get him out next, but we gotta get Gracie out first.

Amy nodded, then walked with determined steps out onto the ice. There she got down on her stomach and began to crawl toward the gaping hole. The line of boys held the end of the rope tied around her waist. Tom and Mr. Farnsworth held the end of the lariat.

"Lay on your belly and crawl slow," Tom's words echoed in Amy's mind. She inched forward.

"I'm coming, Gracie," she called. "I'm coming."

"Hurry, hurry!" Gracie called. "I'm slipping."

Crawling on the cold, slick ice was more difficult than Amy expected. A few inches at a time, she moved ahead. When she neared the hole, the ice beneath her sagged ever so slightly.

"That's far enough Amy!" Tom called. "Now, throw the lariat."

Fear showed in Gracie's eyes as she clung desperately to the end of a driftwood log frozen into the ice. Nuby's large rolling eyes reflected the same fear. The pony struggled, churning the water around him.

After a deep breath, Amy heaved the rope overhand toward the trapped girl. Her heart sank when the lariat fell to the ice, short of its goal. Frightened by the sudden activity, Nuby whinnied and struggled frantically around in circles churning the water all about him.

"Nuby! Get away, get away!" Gracie screamed in fright.

"No, no," onlookers groaned in unison.

"Amy!" Jimmy called. "That's my Lariat. You know how to throw it. You can rope a post good as me. Rope that driftwood. Hurry up!"

On the third try, the lariat landed on the driftwood log close enough for Gracie to grab a firm hold. The two girls were pulled in and lifted from the ice. Cheers rose along the bank. Banker Farnsworth wrapped Gracie in a carriage robe

and lifted her into the buggy. She sat there shivering, with chattering teeth.

"What about Nuby?" Jimmy called. "We can't just leave him out there."

A screaming whinny came from the lake as Nuby once again tried to crawl from the hole. Struggling frantically, he got his front hooves on the slick surface, weakened by the forces pounded against it. The ice cracked and shattered, sending Nuby skidding sideways, his leg twisting and turning into a grossly unnatural shape. He screamed in agony and fell backward, sinking deep into the dark water. Confused and in pain, he attempted to swim, moving in circles as he struggled upward. A powerful thrust of his hind legs sent him surging upward toward the light. Pain stabbed through his head. He rammed into a hard surface that barred his way. Desperately, he shoved against the underside of the ice, kicking frantically as his lungs strained for air.

"He's trapped under the ice!" Jimmy shouted. He pointed to a section of the ice that rose and fell erratically, as if some sea monster struggled under there.

"He can't get out!"

"There he is! There where the ice is moving."

Nuby surged as powerfully as he could toward the source of light, ramming against the ice with his shoulders. The ice gave way before his desperate assault and heaved upward. He followed, gasping desperately at the life giving air, gulping mouthfuls, inhaling it in great gasps. The twisted leg refused to work properly and he found it difficult to stay high enough in the hole to have his head out.



On-lookers saw Nuby's head appear in the water circled with ice, and realized he was trapped. They watched helplessly as Nuby struggled and fought to get more of himself above the ice. His eyes rolled in terror. He whinnied pitifully and churned three legs frantically.

"There ain't no way we can get ropes on him to get him out of there," Tom said. "It's hopeless. He could struggle there in that hole for hours. I'll have to shoot him."

"That's my responsibility," the banker said. "May I borrow your gun?"

Tom stared at him in astonishment. He hadn't figured Mr. Farnsworth for such an undertaking. His respect for the man grew.

"Of course," he replied and brought the rifle from the wagon. He hesitated.

"Only his head us up," he said. "It needs to be..."

"I know," the banker replied. "A shot through the top of the head." At the edge of the ice he took a solid stance and aimed. He waited for just the right position.

Nuby churned three legs frantically to keep afloat under the ice. He bucked and reared his head, crying pitifully. His body heat was slipping away rapidly in the frigid water.

With confidence, and obvious knowledge of what he was doing, the banker took careful aim, and waited. In his sights was the narrow space between Nuby's ears; the one spot that would be fatal with one shot. Now if Nuby would only toss his head forward. The minutes ticked by. The rifleman waited patiently for the right shot to end the little pony's suffering. Slowly, Nuby began to turn, working himself around until the

back of his head was in the gun sights. Nuby reared his head, crying into the air with head thrown back.

CRACK! The explosion of the rifle was followed by Nuby's voice changing from whinny to heart-rending scream. Echoes vibrated in the air. Nubby sank from sight beneath the water, leaving a trail of red stained bubbles. A final gush of large red bubbles boiled to the surface in a mound of gurgling froth. One by one the bubbles burst in tiny sprays of red that stained the water a bright crimson, faded to dull red in the water.

Amy stood crying silently, clinging to Jimmy's arm.

\* \* \* \*

From the carriage, Gracie had watched it all, her eyes never leaving the doomed pony.

"Amy," Gracie said between blue lips, "it's all your fault! You scared Nuby and caused him to run out onto the ice! You got him killed! You almost got me killed, too!"

"No, Gracie!" Jimmy flared angrily. "She wasn't anywhere near you. You made Nuby go out on the ice."

"Yeah! You!" Aaron's eyes were full of unashamed tears. He shouted at Gracie. "Now he is dead. You should be ashamed. Nuby is dead!"

Gracie looked around at the angry faces staring at her.

"He was just a pony!" she said defensively. "Papa will buy me another one. The one at Mr. Johnson's ranch."

"No." Amy cried. "That's my pony."

Banker Farnsworth flipped the carriage reins and took his daughter home to be warmed and pampered. That night,

when he went to check on Gracie as she slept, he saw this beloved image of his deceased wife with new eyes. For the first time, he saw the motherless child he allowed, and helped, to become a spoiled brat. He had showered her with whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted it, in an attempt to compensate for the loss of her mother.

She had watched the colt die, and appeared unmoved.

"Her mother would not like what I have accomplished," he thought sadly.

\* \* \* \*

A fox in the henhouse can cause a lot of damage, sometimes in unexpected ways. A great commotion of terrified squawking, clanging feed buckets and sounds of chase announced another raid by Old Sly Fox, the local chicken thief. Tom Bolton raced into the night with his rifle. The crafty fox escaped from the henhouse, darted into the barn, and slipped into the stall of Gretchen, the cow. The sudden encounter resulted in a stomping, biting confrontation in which the fox escaped, but Gretchen suffered a broken leg from a fall. Her fate would be to serve as meat for the Bolton table, not to provide milk.

\* \* \* \*

"Can we afford a cow and a pony?" Sarah asked Tom anxiously.

"No," he replied. "The money I made working extra, and the butter and egg money only add up to one or the other.

The cow is milk for the family, and earns money from the butter and extra milk. It has to be the cow."

"Poor Amy. She has her heart set on a pony," Sarah said.

"Not just any pony," he replied. "She wants the one she saw in Seth Johnson's corral. I spoke with him after you were there to see the baby. He said he would hold it for me."

"Do you suppose..." her face brightened with hope.

"I spoke to Seth on the way home," he cut in, "about paying the pony out on time. He has too much in it. With Christmas and all, he just couldn't do it."

Sorrow gripped Amy's heart when she overheard this conversation from the hallway. So there would be no pony, even though her parents had tried hard. And Gracie Farnsworth would get her way again. She had caused Nuby's death, and hadn't seemed to care. Now she would have Blaze.

"Poor little Nuby," Amy thought. "Poor Blaze. She'll kill him too." She hugged her pillow in her arms and cried for Nuby, for Blaze, for her parents, and for herself. She cried for them all until she fell asleep.

\* \* \* \*

Banker Farnsworth greeted Tom and ushered him into his office with profuse thanks for saving Gracie's life. "Your Amy is a brave little girl," the banker said. "You must be very proud of her."

"Yes Sir. That's why I'm here."

Tom explained that, if he could borrow enough money to buy another cow, he could still get the pony for Amy. With

money from extra work, and the butter and eggs, he could repay the loan.

Banker Farnsworth listened then looked over the mortgage papers already held by the bank on Tom's ranch. He figured and figured before he finally spoke.

"Tom, I'm sorry. You're mortgaged to the hilt. The bank can't go another dime." He watched Tom's face drop a little, and saw the light of hope dim in the friendly brown eyes. The banker knew the pleasure of gifts to a beloved daughter, and recognized Tom's disappointment, but there was nothing he could do. When Tom had gone, Mr. Farnsworth stared out of his office window for a long while. He owed a debt to a man who had saved his daughters life, and that man was in need of help.

And his daughter needed help.

He sat thinking for a long time. At last he rose and called his assistant. "We might have a white Christmas yet," he said softly to the empty room.

After hearing Banker Farnsworth's instructions, his assistant nodded, donned his coat and hat and called for his buggy.

Banker Farnsworth, pleased with himself, and a little sad, left his office and walked to the Emporium. Gracie had fallen in love with a fur-trimmed coat in the window there. She had made it quite clear that her death was imminent if the coat did not appear under the Christmas tree.

\* \* \* \*

Tom arrived home with a large black and white cow tied to the back of the wagon. Her udder was enormous.

"I see you got the loan all right," Sarah said when he entered the kitchen.

"No, the bank turned us down. I spent the pony fund for the cow."

"Did you talk to Mr. Farnsworth?"

"In person. He said the ranch is mortgaged to the hilt. He couldn't loan us any more."

"What a mean man! And after you and Amy saved Gracie's life. He could have made some kind of allowance for that."

"We mustn't judge, Sarah. The bank's money doesn't belong to Farnsworth. He's just the overseer you might say."

\* \* \* \*

Talk at school centered on what was referred to as "Gracie's accident," and her attitude about the death of Nuby.

"Gracie Farnsworth caused Nuby's death, and she doesn't even care," Jimmy said to a group gathered around the big pot bellied stove. "Then she blamed it on Amy. "I don't like her," he concluded.

"My dad said Mr. Farnsworth's assistant went out to the Johnson stables and bought that pony for Mr. Farnsworth."

"So she is going to have my pony," Amy thought. Disappointment welled inside, a sorrow that ached around her heart. She wanted to cry, but refused to let the others see.

After two days of forced confinement, of being fussed over and pampered, Gracie reappeared at school alone, and on

foot. Her little circle of friends rushed to meet her at the gate, babbling the news of her father's purchase.

Gracie's frown turned to delighted laughter.

"Papa told me I have to walk to school the rest of the year because Nuby is dead," she said. "And he's already bought me the pony! He's punishing me by not giving it to me right now. I thought he had lost his mind."

\* \* \* \*

Each evening on the way home, Amy and Daisy stopped to watch skaters on the ice. Everyone strictly avoided the end of the lake with the gaping hole.

"Look at Miss High and Mighty," Daisy said. Gracie leaned against a tree beside the lake, staring silently at the place where she and Nuby had gone through the ice.

Amy suddenly felt sorry for her. "She must be sorry about Nuby," She said.

"Gracie are you crying?" Daisy asked cattily. "I know you must be just heart broken after killing Nuby."

"He was just a stupid pony!" Gracie declared defensively. She flounced away toward the road. Amy and Daisy followed. It was getting cold anyway.

Amy had a strong urge to cry. She stopped to stare at the hole where Nuby had last been seen.

"Now she is going to have Blaze," she thought. "Will she hurt him, too, or kill him?"

\* \* \* \*

Two days before Christmas was the traditional school Christmas party with refreshments and gift exchange. Amy had drawn Daisy's name and made her a needle case with embroidered flowers on the top.

At ten o'clock, a rider delivered a box to Miss Taylor at the school. "I'm bringin' it for Miss Gracie," the cowboy said.

After placing the box in the cloakroom as directed, he handed a small, slim package to Miss Taylor. Attached was a small envelope.

"Merry Christmas, ma'am," the rider said, tipping his hat. When he had gone, Miss Taylor read the note, raised her eyebrows and placed the note in her pocket before returning to the lesson. She slipped the small package into her desk drawer.

Hand made ornaments and paper chains adorned the Christmas tree. Jars contained sprays of red China Berries from the bush that the mayor's wife had brought all the way from back east. Clumps of mistletoe found growing in the trees along the river were hung around the room. Slates with pictures drawn by the smaller children sat propped up around the room for decorations.

Traditionally, the girls baked cookies for refreshments. Miss Taylor always made a pot of hot chocolate on the pot-bellied stove in the classroom.

Shortly after the bags of cookies began arriving, the classroom filled with the tantalizing aroma of vanilla and sweet spices, making it difficult to concentrate on sums.

The atmosphere in the classroom was one of subdued excitement. After lunch there would be more lessons, then



the Christmas party. It would begin with refreshments, followed by recitations and the singing of Christmas carols.

For a make shift table, two bales of hay from the horse shed had been brought in and topped with two planks across the top. A piece of flowered oilcloth covered the planks and hung down on each side.

A small ice-encrusted tree branch shattered against the windowpane. Miss Taylor went to look out. The big cottonwood tree rocked slightly, its ice-sheathed trunk squeaking and crackling with brittle sounds.

"The wind is rising," she thought, "and the temperature is dropping even more. By three o'clock it will be miserable for the children who have to walk home."

"Children," she said, turning from the window, "how would you like to skip lunch and spelling and have our Christmas party now?"

Happy laughter greeted that question. All hands shot into the air. Agreement was unanimous.

"Girls, please put your cookies on the table while I make hot chocolate.

We will have our refreshments first, then exchange gifts."

Gracie marched to the cloakroom and retrieved the box, which had been delivered to Miss Taylor. "Is there room for my cookies?" she asked innocently as she approached the table.

"Of course, Gracie," Miss Taylor said.

Gracie opened the box, took out a white tablecloth, and spread it over the flowered oilcloth. The children all exchanged glances of surprise but no one spoke. Plates of

cookies were placed on the table. From a pillowcase-like bag Gracie withdrew a long silver platter and stood holding it in both hands.

"I don't believe that is enough room, Miss Taylor," she said. The other offerings were hastily crowded closer together to provide room.

With elaborate care, Gracie arranged goodies on the silver platter. Cook had gone to great pains. There were little decorated cakes, and cookies shaped like bells, stars and Christmas trees. Gingerbread men with raisin eyes made the display truly impressive. The smaller offerings seemed plain in comparison.

"Now we can celebrate properly," Gracie said. "Cook made these lovely cookies so we would have something nice to serve."

The children consumed the refreshments along with a second pot of chocolate. All the cookies on plates disappeared, while the offerings on the silver platter remained virtually untouched. Each first and second grader chose a gingerbread man and a cookie.

Daisy enthused over the needle case, and Amy gratefully wrapped the knitted scarf from Daisy around her neck. Gracie declared name drawing ridiculous and refused to participate. Everyone else received a gift while Gracie pretended it didn't matter. Last of all, Miss Taylor gave each of the children a hand-trimmed handkerchief that she had made in her long evenings along.

Gracie felt an unexpected lump in her throat as she received her only gift.

"Merry Christmas, Gracie," Miss Taylor said. Her voice was gentle. It stirred memories of another gentle voice, her mother's voice.

"Thank you, Miss Taylor. Merry Christmas."

"Go straight home," Miss Taylor told the children. "No snow fights!"

She instructed Aaron to ring the bell for early dismissal. Sounds from the school bell rang out across the prairie. The children hurried to leave for the holiday. When they were gone, Miss Taylor took the slim package from the desk drawer and opened it to find a book of poetry by Lord Byron.

She read the note again.

Merry Christmas

Compliments of Mr. Edward Farnsworth

\* \* \* \*

Dirty looking clouds hung low, turning the day dark and eerie, holding a threat of premature darkness. Amy hurried along beside Daisy, her collar turned up against the wind.

"I can't believe she really brought all of that stuff," Daisy said, "and acted so snobby about it. She used to be so nice before she went away to that eastern school."

"I know," Amy replied. "Look. She's stopped at the lake again."

"Hop in kids." Tom Bolton had pulled the wagon even with the girls. "I heard the school bell," he said. "With this weather, I figured Miss Taylor must be lettin' out early. The bell don't usually ring in the middle of the day like that." The girls scrambled into the wagon.

"I tossed in a fork full of hay, and your Mama sent along this quilt." Tom said. "Spread it out. We'll pick up the rest of the kids up ahead. Giddap, boy!

\* \* \* \*

Amy awoke and sat up in bed. It was Christmas morning! It was her tenth birthday! This was the day that Blaze ... Then, she remembered.

It was Christmas, and it was her tenth birthday; but it was not the day she would receive a pony. Today was the day Gracie would receive Blaze for Christmas. She began to cry. Her big pillow muffled her sobs, as it had last night when she cried herself to sleep. "Amy," she heard her mother call. "Come down. We're going to open the presents."

There had been a new church bonnet from Kansas City for Mama, and a gold chain and watch fob for Tom. Jimmy shouted with delight at his new Winchester slide action .22 rimfire rifle. Amy received the black riding boots she would need for riding a new pony.

Mama had made her a new dress and there was a lace handkerchief for church. They were lovely things, but they didn't replace Blaze.

Tom glanced out the window and saw Seth Johnson ride into the yard leading the brown and white pony. A big, red bow decorated the pony's chest. On it's back was a gleaming new saddle.

"I'll find out what is going on," Tom said. He went out to meet Seth Johnson in the big drive as small flakes of white swirled in the air.

"Mr. Farnsworth sent his assistant from the bank," Seth explained. "He paid for the pony the day after Gracie fell through the ice. He said it was for Amy, but for me not to tell anybody. I was to keep the pony and deliver it this morning.

"I heard Mr. Farnsworth turned you down at the bank, so I figured you ought to know about this. The banker is doin' something nice and don't want anyone to know about it.

"What about the saddle?" Tom asked.

"His man delivered that yesterday. It goes with the pony."

"I feel bad now for calling him a mean man," Sarah said. She had arrived in time to hear Seth's explanation.

"Yes," Tom said. "Now we don't need a loan."

"And Amy has her pony." She turned and hurried into the house.

"Amy! Amy!"

The front door burst open. Amy's boots clattered on the planks as she dashed across the front porch and down the steps with Jimmy close behind. She threw her arms about the beautiful brown and white pony's neck. "Is it true?" she cried. "Is he really mine?" A twinge of fear edged her voice.

"Yes, Amy. He is really yours," Tom said.

She patted the big red bow on Blaze's chest and stroked his mane. Then she rubbed the bold white splash on his forehead. "Blaze," she said with near-tears in her voice. "Your name, my gallant steed, is now, Sir Blaze."

"I'll get Rusty," Jimmy said excitedly. "Let's go for a ride."

"Oh look, Tom, it's snowing," Sarah said. They watched the pair ride out across the pasture. "We got our white Christmas!"

Amy and Jimmy rode across the open fields laughing and chattering.

"I'm real glad you got the pony," Jimmy said.

"Yes, but I can't help feeling a little sorry for Gracie. I really think she is sorry about Nuby. Daisy and I have seen her at the lake twice, just staring at that hole in the ice where he disappeared."

"I saw her, too. She used to be so different."

They circled the windmill on the south range and rode to the lake to watch the new sleds several fathers had been building for Christmas. From there, it would be a short ride home.

"No one is here yet," Amy said. "Oh, look, Jimmy."

Gracie was at the lake again. She was just standing and staring at the big hole in the ice where Nuby had disappeared. She was crying softly.

They approached silently, hoof beats muffled in the snow now covering the ground. Amy slid from her saddle and went to Gracie.

"Are you all right?" she asked softly.

Gracie jumped, startled. "Yes! No. Oh, Amy. I feel so bad about poor Nuby. I should never have made him go out on that ice. Now the poor little thing is dead, and it's all my fault."

"Gracie, you didn't mean for anything to happen to Nuby."

"No, but it did. Then, I blamed you. Amy, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it. I was just acting like those girls in that school back east. Now everybody hates me, and I don't blame them. You hate me. Even Papa hates me. I hate myself." She began

to cry in earnest. "I wish things could be like they were before I went to that hateful school.

"Gracie, I don't hate you at all. No one does really. We just don't understand you sometimes. Now you're home. Forget that school."

"I always liked you real good, Gracie," Jimmy said. His ears flamed red and brown freckles dotted his pink face.

"Amy, I'm glad you got the pony," Gracie said. "You know how to take care of him. I might have hurt him."

"We'll take you home," Amy said. "You can ride on Blaze with me."

They arrived at the Farnsworth home as Seth Johnson was coming from the barn with Mr. Farnsworth.

"Gracie!" her father called. "Where have you been? We've been looking for you."

Gracie slid to the ground. "I was at the lake where Nuby is, Papa. I feel so terrible about, about..." she ended in sobs.

"Papa I'm so sorry."

"I know, Honey," he put his arms around her. "Cook told me how you've been talking to her about Nubian." He nodded to Seth who trotted to the barn.

"There is something I want you to see."

Seth reappeared leading a buff colored pony with brown mane and tail. On his back a new saddle bore the name 'Grace' carved into the leather. On the pony's chest was a large red bow; twin of the one Blaze was wearing.

"He's beautiful," the trio chorused.

Gracie hurried to the pony's side, then hesitated. "I'm afraid," she said.

"I don't really know how to ride well. I could hurt him."

"Don't be afraid, Gracie," Amy said. "I'll help teach you."

"So will I," Jimmy said, his ears flaming red again. He dismounted and moved to Gracie beside the pony. He locked his hands together for a step.

"May I do the honors, ma'am?"

"Thank you." Gracie smiled. She placed one foot on the step and mounted.

"What are you going to name him?" Jimmy asked.

She hesitated, "I feel like I'm back home at last, here on the range. I believe I'll call him Ranger."

Banker Farnsworth watched the trio move away amid a delicate lacework of swirling snowflakes.

"Her mother would be pleased," he said.

"Yes, sir," Seth replied and mounted his horse. Halfway down the long tree-lined drive he tipped his hat to the approaching Farnsworth carriage. Edward Farnsworth stepped forward with a smile and assisted his guest to the ground.

"Welcome, Miss Taylor," he said. "I am pleased that you could join us for Christmas dinner."

He indicated the trio riding across the field in the snow.

"This," the banker said, "is what I call a Real White Christmas."



## **A TALE OF TWO SANTAS**

**H.K. Snapp**

The signal turned red. Samantha Evans sighed and stepped on the brake. At this rate the signal would change at least twice more before she made it through the intersection.

The driver of the battered Chevrolet in front of her could not possibly see out the rearview mirror with the backseat piled so high with shopping bags. Street lamps adorned with red and green garlands and strands of Christmas lights stood guard over the waiting cars. Elves and twinkly trees, sleighs and brightly wrapped packages decorated every shop window in sight.

Samantha reached for the radio knob, remembered that the airwaves would be choked with Christmas carols, and switched on the CD player instead. Vivaldi's Four Seasons filtered through the Honda's speakers. She massaged the back of her neck, trying to relax.

The best thing about Christmas was that it would be over soon. Songs about bells and mangers would end, and the tinsel would come down. Most importantly, traffic would get back to normal.

\* \* \* \*

Listing to one side under the weight of her briefcase, Samantha picked her path from the parking garage. Rock salt crunched beneath her boots and she kept her eyes on the

ground, wary of wet patches that might conceal ice. Somewhere a bell-ringer was at work, and she concentrated on keeping the insistent jangling rhythm out of her head where it might alter her pace. Panhandling is illegal, she thought, unless it's Christmas. Funny, the ringing seemed to be getting louder.

She came to an angry halt when she saw him, standing right outside her building on the sidewalk, and not four feet from the bottom of the steps. He was a little less shabby than the other Santas she'd seen working the town these days. He was wearing real boots for one thing, and the fur trim on his red coat was actually white rather than gray.

"Ho ho ho," he roared. "Merry Christmas. Can you spare a little something for the needy?"

Samantha set her jaw. Someone was going to hear about this outrage. "Your beard is crooked," she said, and marched past him, up the steps, and into the lobby.

\* \* \* \*

The secret to a really superior rum and Coke was leaving the Coke at the store, Samantha reflected. After a couple of drinks and a scathing call to building management she felt much more like herself and ready to do some work.

She brought her briefcase to the dining table, lined up her pens, and switched on the laptop. While it booted she carefully selected a less gnawed-on than the rest pencil and placed it between her teeth. She opened the top file and shuffled through the time cards and payroll forms for Kwik 'N

Kleen Drycleaners. "Mary Anne Williams," she said, lifting the first card. "This is your lucky day."

\* \* \* \*

"Look Mommy, Santa Claus brought me a Barbie." Amy, six and all blonde curls and dimples, shook the box excitedly beneath her mother's nose.

"Yes, honey, isn't that nice." Joyce smiled at Santa from her place in the armchair, her eyes warm with approval.

"What did he bring for you, Matthew?"

Matt flipped long bangs out of his eyes and tore into wrapping paper decorated with cartoon characters on ice skates. "Cool!" he cried and held up a shiny box illustrated with pictures of the toy cars it held. "Smash-up Derby. Hey Sammy, wanna play?"

Samantha smiled. She'd known since she was his age that Santa was really Daddy in a rented suit. It had been the paper that tipped her off. Why would gifts from the North Pole always be wrapped in the exact same paper patterns available at the Evans house? She would never tell. Daddy looked kind of handsome in the rented suit with his own work boots—speckled with shiny bits of solder from the plant—poking out beneath the oversized trouser legs. Besides, it was rather like having gum at school, a sweet delicious secret, too good to spoil by blabbing.

"Can I open mine first?"

"Sure," Matt said agreeably. He slid off the couch and began attacking the tape sealing the box. "Check out your loot. I bet it's not as good as mine, though."

Sam slid her finger between the folds of foil paper, careful not to rend and tear the way Matt and Amy did. Slowly, savoring the suspense, she peeled away the wrapping to reveal a brown box, smelling of cardboard and promise. The flaps were tucked one under another and when she tugged at one they all flew open, revealing charcoal pencils and pastels, two heavy sketchbooks, a set of watercolors. These were real art supplies, the kind grown-up artists used, not the crayons and coloring books and tempera paints of past Christmases. Her throat filled up with gratitude, squeezing her "Thank you" down to a barely audible croak.

"My elves told me you just turned thirteen, and I told them to pack you up some goodies fit for a teenager," Daddy/Santa said.

Sam ran to hug him, pressing her face into the pillow beneath his suit, careful not to throw herself at him too hard in case he might fall.

Matt had freed his cars from the plastic bags and strips and bits of wire. Squinting for accuracy, he laboriously applied decals, stopping often to check his results against the ones shown on the box. Amy stopped waltzing her doll across the top of the television set and asked, "What about Mommy, Santa? Did you bring her anything?"

"No, not now. Santa only brings presents for children," Joyce said.

"Maybe you could give her a kiss," Sam suggested.

Santa's nose and cheeks were as red as the picture of Santa in Amy's storybook, and his blue eyes twinkled with mischief. He swayed slightly, considering, a silly grin

spreading until the corners disappeared beneath the false beard. "Good idea, kiddo."

In three steps he closed the distance and bent over Mom. Amy giggled as Santa planted what Matt would call "a big wet one" on their mother.

For some reason Mom wasn't kissing Santa back, and for an instant Sam wondered if she knew he was really her husband, but quickly dismissed the idea as ridiculous. Of course Mom knew. But then why was she shoving him away, pushing him with both hands?

When he stepped back Mom's face had gone chalky, except for uneven blotches of color on her cheeks. "I need to see you in the kitchen right now."

The two adults disappeared through the swinging door, but their voices carried.

"You promised you'd stop, Gary, and here it is Christmas."

"Aw, c'mon honey, I only had one—"

"Do you really think I can't tell?"

"Don't do this, Joyce, it's Christmas."

"Just another drunken holiday is what it is."

"I am not drunk."

"I've had enough of your lies and broken promises. It isn't good for you, or me, or the kids. I want a divorce. Just ... just get what you need and get out."

Amy whimpered and tried to climb into Sam's lap. Their heads turned in unison to watch Santa come out of the kitchen and go upstairs. After awhile he came down carrying a suitcase. His face bent down and he didn't look at her on his way to the door.

"Why did Santa steal Daddy's suitcase?" Amy whispered.

Matt listlessly pushed one of his cars back and forth across the carpet. "There is no Santa, is there Sammy?"

The sound of her mother weeping came to her from the next room. Sam felt like Alice down the rabbit hole, falling and falling with no end in sight.

"Of course there is."

"But that wasn't him, was it?"

Sam didn't know what to say. "No."

Amy burst into tears, buried her face against her big sister's not-quite-flat chest.

"Who's gonna take care of us now?" Matt asked. "Mom doesn't have a job."

Sam shrugged. "I guess she'll have to get one."

\* \* \* \*

A shrill warbling jerked Samantha from sleep. She sent one hand on an exploratory mission among the items on the nightstand. Fumbling, she felt the curved cool surface of a glass against the back of her hand, and an instant later heard it shatter against the hardwood floor. She located the ringing phone and brought it under the covers.

"Hello?"

"Hi Sammy, it's me. I can't believe I caught you home. How's it going?"

"Fine," she mumbled. Her mouth felt packed with cotton. She flung the covers back. Morning sun that had found its way in through an opening in the curtains pierced her eyeballs like darts.

Amy took the phone away from her mouth long enough to shout at someone in the background to stop jumping on the bed, an order greeted by a chorus of youthful protest.

"The reason I'm calling is, well, you know Monday is Christmas."

Samantha rolled to the far edge of the bed, away from the broken glass on the floor, and stood up. "Yes, I know." Stepping as gently as she could so as not to jar her skull, she started toward the bathroom.

"Well, um ... Mom asked me to call you and see if you'd be coming to dinner this year."

"I have to work." She brought down an old coffee cup from the top of the medicine chest, ran water, and added two Alka-Seltzer tablets from the nearly empty box by the sink.

"Surely that old Scrooge lets you off on Christmas."

The tablets fizzed even more slowly than usual. "I'm behind on my payrolls. Funny thing about people, they still want to be paid even if it is Christmas."

"What about the evening? We could make it a supper."

Samantha poked her finger into the cup, hoping to speed the process. "I don't think so. Maybe after tax season."

"But that won't be 'til April," Amy said. "We miss you. It's like you moved to another country instead of across town. Remember when we were kids—"

"Yes, I do. I'm sorry Amy, I have to go. I'm late for work."

She thumbed the handset's power button and lifted the cup, draining it.

\* \* \* \*

Santa was absent from his post, but he'd left his kettle behind. Only a fool would go off and leave it like that, brimming with change and paper bills. From the top step Samantha looked in every direction until she spotted him in the postage stamp sized park across the street. He had a rope over his shoulder, pulling a sled packed with children around the swing set. Peals of laughter rang out, punctuated by shouts of, "Faster, Santa Claus, faster!"

Coming around the far turn, the Santa saw her and raised an arm in greeting.

"Are you all ready for Christmas?"

Mrs. Guisinger, an elderly woman who Samantha had seen get on and off the elevator on the fourth floor, stood next to the kettle, her arm plunged into the depths of her vast pocketbook.

"As ready as I'm going to be," Samantha said, grateful for the excuse to be seen lingering here.

The old woman withdrew her hand, triumphant, a five dollar bill clutched in fingers knotted with arthritis. "Isn't that the way it always is?" she asked, and tucked the money into the pot.

"You know someone's just going to come along and steal that."

"Oh, I doubt it." Mrs. Guisinger shaded her eyes with her hand, peering across the street. "Doesn't that just look like fun?"

"I suppose," Samantha said.

\* \* \* \*



"You're late. Leonard said you would see me at ten. That was three minutes ago."

Samantha juggled her keys trying to find the one that would unlock the office door. It was typical of Mr. Cantrell to make an appointment for her on a day when she was not scheduled to work, and even more like him not to bother telling her about it. She forced her lips into a wide smile.

"I'm truly sorry, Mr...."

"Werner. Of Werner Industries. Leonard said you would be here by ten o'clock. My old accountant suffered a heart attack and I need my payroll done by Tuesday morning."

There it was—the square brass key. She slid it into the lock. "If you'll give me a minute to shut off the alarm, I'm sure I can help you out."

Rather than waiting, Werner followed her in, firing words at her back, "Ten o'clock, Leonard said, Tuesday." "Uh huh, yes, I understand," she said. His perpetual frown deepened into a scowl when he saw her desk. "Just let me clear a space. Have a seat and I'll be right with you."

Her desk, piled high with bulging green folders held together with rubber bands provided a stark contrast to those used by the other associates. She looked around for a clear place to make a new stack, and had to settle for the floor.

"Now then, let's see what you've brought me."

Werner shoved a manila envelope across the desk at her. Behind him was a long glass wall and behind that was Cantrell's office. His desk, polished until it glowed, was uncluttered by so much as a pink 'while you were out' slip.

"I need it by Tuesday," Werner was saying for the umpteenth time.

"I understand. I'm sure I can have it ready for you by then."

\* \* \* \*

"There's no reason to put that up," Matt said. "Mom can't afford to buy us any presents."

Sam straightened one prickly plastic and wire branch and slid its stem into a hole in the green wooden pole that passed for a tree trunk. "It's Christmas," she said. "We have to have a tree."

Amy stretched out one finger and touched the fake pine needles almost reverently. "Santa Claus can't come if we don't have a tree."

Matt swallowed, and Sam knew he wanted to tell the secret. Not because he wanted to be mean, but to save his little sister from being disappointed on Christmas morning.

"Santa can come whether we have a tree or not," Sam said.

"Even though we're welfare kids now?"

Matt's body tensed at the reminder. Sam felt sorry for him. He still bore a bruise on his left cheek from the last fight he'd been in at school. "Especially since we're welfare kids."

"Lori from school said when she was on welfare all she got for Christmas was one candy cane and some socks."

"Maybe she wasn't as good as you."

Later, after the tree was up and the lights plugged in and working, Matt caught her alone in the hall. "What are you

telling her all that junk for? You know there's no Santa. Mom and Dad bought all that stuff. Now there's no money."

Sam thought of the garage. It made a wonderful hiding place since Daddy had taken the car and no one went out there anymore. If Matt had bothered to do a little snooping he might have found her new secret in the form of a dozen gifts she had stashed out there. She'd purchased them all, with paper route money, babysitting money, I'll-shovel-your-walk-for-a-dollar money. Maybe if it snowed again she would be able to earn enough cash for ribbons.

"You don't know everything," she said.

\* \* \* \*

Shopping basket in hand Samantha planted her feet, determined to hold her position in front of the produce cooler. A heavysset woman in a teal sweat suit banged into her hip with a heavily laden cart, but Samantha refused to budge. Every year at this time stores artificially inflated their prices, gouging rabid holiday shoppers, and she was not going to move until she'd selected the best head of lettuce.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't see you."

Samantha eyed the contents of the cart. Like most of the others careening up and down the aisles it was full of frozen pie crusts, cans of cranberry jelly and solid pack pumpkin, and a turkey large enough to feed a small army. Of course her fellow shopper couldn't be bothered with a little thing like paying attention to where she was going; she was too busy planning for the annual feeding frenzy.

Samantha made her choice and completed the rest of her shopping quickly, a pint of half and half, a pack of bathroom tissue, a new box of Alka-Seltzer, keeping careful count so as not to exclude herself from the express lane. She was not interested in spending any longer than necessary listening to the Muzak version of Silent Night being inflicted upon her from overhead.

\* \* \* \*

"Can I help you with those bags?"

Her hands ached with the combined weight of briefcase and groceries. "Why are you still here?"

The Santa's lips curled into a grin, but his eyes held the barest trace of a frown. "Is there some reason why I shouldn't be?"

"Only my lease."

"No one else seems to mind."

"I mind."

His gaze locked onto hers. "I'm sorry to hear that, but I have permission to be here and I'm staying." The bell began to move, slowly at first, rapidly gathering momentum and volume.

Safely secured inside her apartment she poured a drink and set about putting away her groceries. No sooner had she closed the refrigerator door than the phone rang.

"Hey Sammy, it's Matt. How are you?"

"I'm fine. How's business?"

"It's good. We're opening a satellite office on the north end."

She settled into a chair, fiddled with the latches on her briefcase.

"Amy says you aren't coming for Christmas again this year."

"Yes, that's right."

"I know you blame Mom for Dad leaving, but it wasn't her fault."

Even to herself her voice sounded cold. "How do you figure that? She threw him out. On Christmas Eve."

"He was drunk. She was tired of it. Sure her timing could have been better, but—" she could almost hear the shrug.

"He wasn't drunk. He'd only had one drink. I heard him say so."

"Not yet maybe, but he would have been. You know how he was."

Samantha swirled her drink, swallowed some. "At least he had a job. At least we weren't on welfare. He worked hard. Not like Mom."

Matt's voice was smooth and dripped with reasonableness. "Things were different then. It wasn't so easy for a woman to get a good job. She didn't drive."

Spite and venom washed through her. "I found work, and I was only thirteen. I half killed myself getting up every morning to deliver newspapers in every kind of foul weather, staying up late to watch people's kids. My grades tanked. I had to go to community college."

She listened to her brother's breathing and waited to see what he would say. When he kept his silence Samantha went on. "Even if I'd gotten the grades I couldn't have gone four

years. I had to hurry up and get to work so I could send you. So you could go on to start your own business and be the big boss."

"No one ever asked you to do all that, Sis. But thank you for it. You know, if you wanted to go back to school I could—"

"No."

"It wasn't your fault either, Sam."

Another short pause followed.

"So, can we expect to see you Monday?"

"No."

"I see. I'm sorry I bothered you."

This time the silence was absolute—the dead emptiness of a severed connection.

\* \* \* \*

Samantha woke up on Christmas Eve morning profoundly grateful that she'd brought home enough work to last the next two days. She would not have to go out into the frantic throng of day-before lunatics, or so she thought until she went to the cupboard. She'd thought she had enough to last, and a feeling of uneasiness coiled through her intestines when she saw the dangerously low level of liquid remaining in the bottle. She wasn't sure how late the state liquor authority would be open today, but it would certainly be closed tomorrow. Hastily donning her coat she hurried out.

"Doing a little last minute shopping?"

Her patience, already worn thin, snapped. "Look, you, I don't know why you're still here. My lease expressly forbids this kind of thing, and I want you to leave me alone."

All the jolliness went out of Santa's expression. Go ahead and get mad, Samantha thought. Why should I be the only one?

"I understand that's what you want. I'm not so sure that's what's best for you."

Samantha's breath came quickly, sending out short puffs of steam into the frosty air. "News bulletin, Santa," she said, heaping as much derision on the word as it would hold.

"What's best for me is none of your concern."

"But it is my concern, Sammy. If you'd—"

In her mind fire doors slammed shut, closing her off from both the rising tide of hot fury and whatever else he might have said.

"If you're still here when I get home, I'm having you arrested."

He reached out to her with one mittened hand. It took every ounce of control she possessed, but she restrained herself from striking it. "Don't touch me. Don't talk to me. Go away."

She gave the fraudulent Santa a wide berth and rushed by him. She reached the parking garage, half expecting to feel his fingers grasping the back of her coat at any second. You have no right, she thought, no right. How had he found out her name? Maybe he'd seen her pick up her mail, taken it from the label on the box in the lobby. In that case he was some kind of stalker.

Muttering beneath her breath she slid behind the wheel of her car, keyed the ignition. Her foot stuttered against the accelerator, sending the Honda rolling backwards into the

aisle in a series of gut-shriveling lurches. She stepped on the brake. "Calm down," she whispered. "You're fine. Everything's going to be fine."

The echoing blast of a horn startled her, sending her heart tumbling against her ribs. She glared at the faceless silhouette of the driver in the car behind her. One shadow hand rolled in a hurry up gesture.

"I'm going," she said. "Keep your socks on."

Samantha steered toward the exit, and the other car followed closely. At the gate she swiped her resident parking card. The yellow arm rose and she edged forward. Cross traffic approached in a straggling line of vehicles too close together to allow her to pull out. Near the edge of her vision she could see the Santa, still in his usual place on the sidewalk, his head down and his bell dangling silently at his side.

"Don't even think of coming over here," she said. "Don't—"

Her warning was interrupted by a thump. Despite all the pressure she could exert on the brake the car leapt forward and into the path of a black van. Suddenly the world was swept away in a cyclone of blurred lines and colors, the sound of squalling tires. Twin explosions of pain erupted in the side of her head and her shoulder. Pebbly bits of glass, green as old Coke bottles, showered around her. The air filled with the sickly sweet odor of antifreeze steaming against a hot engine.

"Sammy? Are you all right? Please talk to me."

She tried to say, "I'm fine," but everything was slipping away.

\* \* \* \*



Hospital sounds drifted through the open door, the drone of nurses' voices, the calm bing-bong of somebody's call light. Only one eye obeyed Samantha's command to open; the left was apparently swelled shut.

"Welcome back, honey. How do you feel?"

Turning her head was the most exquisite torture, but she was rewarded for the effort by the sight of her mother, perched on the edge of a hideous blue vinyl chair in the corner of the room. She'd changed since Samantha had seen her last. Her face had filled out just enough to erase that haggard look, and her long mousy hair was now short and auburn.

"They called you?"

"No. They called Matt, but he and Amy are both out of town at their in-laws'. They're on their way. When one of them gets here I'll leave if you want me to."

Samantha remembered having chicken pox. At the age of eight, just having her mother awake and nearby had provided as much relief as the cotton balls dipped in calamine lotion Mom had always at the ready. Then there was the time all three of the kids had come down with the stomach flu and she'd been there again, never sleeping, cleaning up horrible messes and doling out ice cubes made from ginger ale.

She tried to shrug. Her left shoulder protested vehemently.

"Don't do that. It was dislocated. They've put it back in place, but you have to keep still or it may pop out again. You also have a moderate concussion, but the doctor says you can

come home tomorrow if you get through tonight without any problems."

Home: The extension office where she sometimes slept in addition to working. Samantha thought of the Werner account waiting at the apartment, and imagined explaining herself to Werner, or worse, Cantrell.

"It's late because I was nearly killed in an accident."

"But I needed it on Tuesday."

"Now Miss Evans, I would not have thought I'd ever find it necessary to speak to you on the topic of responsibility. You've always been so reliable until now. Do tell me, where were you going in such a hurry?"

If he asked that, she decided, she would look him right in the eye and tell the truth. "To buy booze. I needed it so I could work and work and never feel or want to do anything else." She wouldn't tell him the rest. "Because I'm just like my dad."

"Why did you come?" she asked.

Joyce rose from the chair and came close enough to brush away a strand of hair that had fallen into Samantha's face.

"Because I love you," she said.

"I know how hard it was for you, the way things were. I should have gone back to school sooner, gotten a job. I just kept thinking your father would be back any day, that he'd get himself straightened out and come home."

Samantha reflected back on those days. Her mother had often wandered the house, her head tilted as if she was listening for something. Now she thought she knew what that something was. The garage door.

"I guess I was expecting a miracle," Joyce said. "I'm sorry, Samantha."

"Hello, Joyce. Imagine meeting you here."

Her mother's eyes widened, her mouth forming a perfect circle of either surprise or alarm. It seemed to take a long time for her head to turn the few degrees until she could see past the bridge of her nose to the person standing in the door.

It was him, the creepy bell-ringer. He'd removed his hat and beard, revealing silver hair and deep lines that formed parentheses at the corners of his mouth, but she knew him by that ridiculous red suit, would have known him anywhere.

"Gary?"

The words, "Get out," died on Samantha's lips as real recognition dawned. "Why didn't you tell me who you were?"

Her father's forehead flushed pink and he shifted his weight from one booted foot to the other. "Well, kiddo, maybe I thought you'd take to me easier if you didn't know who I was right away."

In more naïve times Samantha had often fantasized, coming up with hundreds of ways her parents might someday be reunited. At least a dozen of those had involved a scene exactly like this, where they came together at her bedside. She closed her eye, wondering what sort of drugs she'd been given to produce such a vivid dream. It was pleasant enough, irresistibly soothing, listening to them speaking in hushed tones. After a while, she drifted.

\* \* \* \*

Matt stood at the window, gazing out over the city. From her horizontal position Samantha couldn't see it, but she could imagine how still and dark it must look now that night had fallen, with the shops closed and the streets nearly deserted.

"Hi."

"Hey, Sis. How are you feeling?"

"Like a frog that's been stepped on."

He grinned. "I bet. I hear you got hit twice, once in the rear and once from the side. Maybe when they cut you loose you ought to stay with Mom for a few days, let her fuss over you."

A fresh image of the Werner file sailed into her mind, work that filled nothing but time. She gave it a mental shove and to her surprise, it went.

"Matt, while you're here. Did you mean it the other day on the phone when you offered to help if I decided to go back to school?"

"Sure did." He raised his brows. "Are you thinking of taking me up on it? Telling that greedy old weasel you work for where to get off?"

"Well, no. I was thinking maybe one class, just for ... something different."

He poked her gently in the arm. "You mean for fun. Go ahead, say it. You want to have some fun. Good for you, even if you did have to break a window with your melon before you could see the light."

Matt dragged the chair closer to the bed and settled into it, folding his hands together and studying his thumbs. "So," he

said. "I have to ask. Do you think they'll get back together? She never divorced him, and he has a five year pin."

It hadn't been a dream after all. "I don't know. I think things like that only happen in movies.

"What's a five year pin?"

"You know, for sobriety. It'd be cool wouldn't it, if they did reconcile after all these years."

Samantha told herself to be reasonable. It would be good enough just to call either of them on the phone, or maybe they wouldn't mind if she dropped in once in a while. She was too old to be lying here wishing for the impossible, and yet not only did she wish it, she was astonished to find herself believing it might happen.

"It would be cool," she said, and tried to laugh at herself for being so ridiculous. Instead of the chuckle she'd intended, a strange strangled sound came out.

"Hey, don't cry. Are you all right? Want me to ring for a nurse?"

"No, I'm fine," she said, and this time it was true.

## **HER CHRISTMAS KNIGHT**

**Marissa St James**

Locker doors slammed shut in discordant rhythm while young voices shouted to one another, laughing. Students milled about the corridor, sharing events of the day. Some hurried on their way to game practice, or club meetings, while others hefted their backpacks and headed for the nearest exits. Teachers patrolled the corridors in an effort to discourage loitering in the halls. A group of girls glanced about and giggled.

"Earth to Danny." Mike leaned over and spoke to his best friend, trying again to get his attention.

"Huh?" Danny jumped at Mike's voice close to his ear. The school corridor was unusually noisy, but that was to be expected a few days before Christmas. Danny glanced once more at the giggling girls, then turned to his own locker. He pulled out his backpack and stuffed books and papers into it, not caring at the moment about crumpled homework assignments.

Mike followed Danny's gaze to the giggling group. "Why do you bother with her? You know Gloria doesn't give two cents about you." Mike grabbed Danny's arm as his friend started to move away. "Look, Danny. You've been trying to get a date with her for the last four years and she keeps right on snubbin' you. When you gonna learn?" Mike released his friend's arm, zipped up his jacket and gave the girls one final look. They were walking away, but Gloria slowed long enough to look back and smirk.

"What do you have against her?"

"What do I..." Mike stared at Danny in disbelief and followed him to the end of the hall. "Nothin' much. She treats you like dirt, but you still want to go out with her? You got rocks in your head or somethin'?"

"She's not really like that, Mike. It's just those girls she hangs out with." Danny glanced over his shoulder at his best friend, and let his vision slip past Mike to the retreating girls.

Danny thought Gloria was the prettiest girl in the senior class. She was certainly one of the most popular. She pushed back her thick blond braid from her shoulder as she strolled through the hall, her blue eyes cold as the winter day. Her face had a hint of roundness to it; a small nose turned up at the tip and full lips were tinted pink with a light lipstick. The way she used makeup fascinated Danny. She didn't look as if she used it—not like the other girls who seemed to believe more was better. That was one way he knew Gloria was different. Long ago, he had sensed something deeper in her that waited to surface. He never did understand why she wanted to be part of that group, why was she trying to be something she wasn't. She wasn't like her friends, but he didn't know how to prove it. So he waited.

"Let's go, hot shot," Mike spoke again, his words laced with disgust. "We're gonna be late for warmup. We got that big game tonight."

"Yeah," Danny agreed absently, "let's go."

\* \* \* \*

Gloria Hickok headed for the nearest exit, anxious to get home. Being accepted by the most popular girls at school had been a dream come true. She was invited to their parties, and had dated a couple of the more popular boys. Tonight was the biggest party of the season and Gary was picking her up. Gary had been captain of the football and baseball teams for the last two years. He was sought after by many girls, but he was particular about whom he dated. Gloria had been surprised when he paid her so much attention and asked her out. Tonight was their first date and she wanted it to be perfect.

"It sounds positively delicious," Loreen declared. "I can't wait to see it."

"What sounds delicious?" Gloria asked as she turned her attention over to the group.

Marilyn stared at her, dumbfounded. "Where have you been the last few minutes? I was talking about my new dress. Dad paid over a hundred dollars for it. I am going to be the belle of the ball." She raised her chin in a smug attitude.

"Yeah, where were you, Glo? Thinking about Danny Butler?" Jan sneered.

"Of course not." Gloria tried to control her blush and hurried on. "I was thinking about my date with Gary Lowell."

"You're going with Gary? How do you rate?" Marilyn shifted her bookbag and followed her companions to the parking lot. She carefully avoided the layer of hard snow, flattened and made slippery from many footsteps.



Jan nudged Gloria. "Ignore her. She's been trying to get Gary's attention all year." She stopped to unlock the door of a new BMW. "Well, I'm off."

"You certainly are," Marilyn snickered and high fived Loreen.

Jan straightened at the implied insult and opened her mouth to retort.

Gloria laughed and gently pushed the girl's jaw closed. "Ignore her, she only made a small joke."

"A very small joke," Marilyn added. "Never mind. See you later at the party."

Gloria wandered away, offering a wave over her shoulder.

"Does she know what she's in for?" Marilyn asked Jan.

"Not yet, but after tonight, she'll really belong to our group."

\* \* \* \*

Gary, with a hand at the small of Gloria's back, guided his date into the house. Gloria couldn't believe the Lowell house when she stepped through the door. Holiday trim in red, green, gold and silver decorated the downstairs rooms. Garland twisted gracefully down the length of the staircase banister and small ornaments hung at measured intervals. More garland draped the walls, pointing the way down the hall. In a smaller room, off to one side of the hall, crepe streamers hung from the edges of the ceiling to the center, where folding Christmas bells hung in profusion. Most of the room remained in darkness, the only light coming from the hall.

Gloria stepped into the room at the end of the hall and stared upward at the tall evergreen tree dominating a corner of the ballroom—a real ballroom. The tree must have been a good ten or twelve feet tall, loaded down with all sorts of ornaments, garland and lights. Silver and gold tinsel hung from every branch, swaying gently in occasional drafts of air, and twinkling in the room's soft light.

To one side of the tree, stood a long buffet table loaded down with a myriad of holiday treats, from sliced meats, lobster and potato salads, to delicate and delicious looking desserts. Gloria's mouth watered at the sight, and her stomach made a little noise, reminding her she hadn't had supper. The center of the table held a huge crystal punch bowl with a red beverage in it. Pieces of fruit floated on the top. The curved handle of a serving ladle hung onto the edge, while the bowl of the ladle remained hidden in the liquid, it's outline visible as a shadow in the bowl. Small tables were grouped close to the larger table, but far enough away from the dance floor so they wouldn't be in the way of dancers. The house was more like a small mansion. Of course, Gary was from one of the wealthiest families in town.

Gloria's obvious stare bordered on awe. While her family was far from poor, they could never afford anything like this. One day, she promised herself she would know what it was like to live a wealthy life.

"What do you think?" Gary asked. He slipped his arm about her waist and pulled her closer.

"It's gorgeous," she replied. Her heart beat faster as he lightly kissed her temple.

"Not as gorgeous as you, honey. Come on, let's dance." He grabbed her hand and led her onto the dance floor.

Gloria felt like Cinderella at the Prince's ball. A chilling premonition ran up her spine. She shook off the disturbing feeling, determined to enjoy herself for as long as the fairy tale lasted.

The evening flew by in a whirlwind of fantasy. Gloria reveled in every moment. And why shouldn't she? She might never have the chance to be in such famous company again—two well known senators and their wives, the state governor—she never fully realized the influence Gary's family had. His father owned an important company, but until now, Gloria had no idea how important. She imagined the rich life she could have with Gary. Her own life couldn't begin to compare with this.

After a late buffet, Gary led Gloria upstairs to an empty sitting room. "You can see the stars, clear as anything from here," he told her when she balked at being alone with him there. He gently pulled her into the room toward the French doors that closed off the small balcony.

"Time you were nice to me," he purred as he backed her against a wall.

"Wha ... what?"

"You heard me. Time to pay for your date."

Gloria panicked. How could she have been so foolish? "You don't want to do this, Gary."

"Sure, I do." He moved in closer, and pinned her arms against the wall. He eased his hold on her when she stopped fighting him, and leaned forward to kiss her. Before he

realized what had happened, he dropped to the floor like a ton of bricks and groaned in acute pain.

"I don't owe you anything. Don't ever come near me again." Gloria stepped around Gary lying curled up on the floor. She was satisfied she'd made her point quite clear. He continued to groan. Gloria pulled her long skirt aside and ran from the room.

Gloria caught a glimpse of Marilyn and Loreen gawking at her wild escape. She ignored other heads turning in her direction and ran down the stairs into the foyer, stopping just long enough to grab her coat before running out the door. It closed behind her with a satisfying slam.

\* \* \* \*

Gloria paid the cab driver and exited the vehicle, thankful he happened to be driving by when she needed him. She was also grateful to her mother for insisting she always carry a little 'mad money' in case of emergency. Tonight had certainly turned out to be one of those. The driver pulled away. She stood motionless on the sidewalk and looked up at the darkened house. Above it, the constellations shone brightly in the clear sky. She shivered in the brisk air—or was it something else? Gloria approached the house quietly, as if afraid to disturb anything. She wasn't ready to answer any questions about the party. She needed time to cool off.

A few moments after she eased the door closed behind her, she stepped into the living room and shivered again. Something was wrong; the house was too quiet. She heard none of the usual late evening sounds. Maybe her parents had

gone out to dinner. They sometimes did that when her father worked late.

The doorbell rang and Gloria nearly jumped, startled. She held one hand over her rapidly beating and closed her eyes for a moment. Who would be ringing the doorbell at this hour? Maybe Gary followed her home and thought he'd get even for what she did. No, Gary wouldn't be comfortable moving around much any time soon. She made sure of that.

Gloria peeked through the curtains, surprised to see who her visitor was. "Do you realize what time it is, Danny?" she berated him as she yanked open the door. "What are you doing here?"

Danny stared at the lovely vision standing in the doorway and suddenly found himself tongue-tied. Her clenched hands rested against her slender hips, holding back the open edges of her coat.

"Well, what do you want?"

"I ... I heard about your father and came over to see if you needed anything."

"What are you talking about?" Gloria turned her back to him and switched on the nearest lamp. She was aware that Danny followed her into the kitchen. She ignored him, discarded her coat on the nearest chair and set the teakettle to boil.

"The accident. I heard about it on my police scanner." Danny stepped back out of her way. Gloria rummaged around a lower cabinet and brought out a can of cocoa. She placed it on the kitchen counter.

"If this is some kind of sick joke to get my attention, Danny Mitchell, you will regret it." With every word, she took a step forward, forcing him backward, until he was almost to the partially closed front door. "You're jealous because I was invited to Jeff's party and you weren't. Get over it and don't come back unless it's to apologize for being cruel." He stepped outside and she slammed the door in his face.

"Gloria..."

"Go away, Danny." Gloria marched back to the kitchen where the teakettle whistled merrily. She spooned some of the dark cocoa powder into a mug, spilling a light film of particles onto the countertop. "How could he come up with such an awful lie?" Gloria spoke into the room, willing herself to calm down. She'd never known Danny to pull a stunt like this before. "He's jealous," she repeated. She opened the refrigerator door to get the pitcher of cream. "I've turned him down so many times, he's trying to get even. He picked a sick way to do it."

Gloria slammed the fridge door shut. A yellow piece of paper caught her eye. She pulled the post-it from the refrigerator door and quickly scanned the note. The small pitcher of cream fell to the floor with a crash, splattering its contents on the bottom of the fridge door and a nearby cabinet. Most of the liquid pooled on the floor by her feet. Color drained from her face as she reread the note. I've gone to the hospital. Your father's been in an accident. Mom. The post-it fluttered to the floor and settled on the small, thick puddle of cream.

Disbelief. How did Danny know? He said he'd been listening to the police scanner. Danny! Gloria grabbed her coat and ran to the front door. Would he still be there? Don't count on it. You told him to leave and not come back till he apologized..

"Danny?" Gloria ran into him, and felt him grab her arms to steady her. "I'm sorry I yelled at you. I should have believed you."

"Don't worry about it. You're entitled, under the circumstances. Come on, I'll take you to the hospital," he offered. Danny guided her to his car and opened the passenger door, closing it again after she'd slipped inside.

The ride took ten minutes, but to Gloria, it seemed like forever. What could have happened? Asking Danny didn't help. He had little information besides the accident victim's name as it had been given to the dispatcher.

"How could they even give that over the radio?" she fumed.

"Somebody goofed big time," Danny replied. He reached to his right and took her hand in his for a moment. "It'll be okay, Glo. Everything will be okay." He gave her hand a light squeeze for assurance, then let it go to concentrate on the road.

When they arrived, Gloria didn't wait for Danny to exit the car, but ran to the emergency room entrance. She spotted her mother sitting alone on a corner sofa dabbing at her eyes with a limp handkerchief. "Mom?" Gloria called softly, approaching the older woman.

Evelyn Hickok stood and held out her arms. Her daughter hurried over. She sniffed, and tried to smile, but red rimmed eyes told the truth. She hugged Gloria, holding her tightly as only a mother could, and fought back another round of tears.

Gloria stepped back and studied her mother, unaware of Danny as he found an isolated seat not far from them and waited quietly. "What happened, Mom?"

Evelyn sniffed again, and rubbed at one tear stained cheek. "The police said he was driving along Quidnick Road and hit a patch of black ice. He wasn't going fast, but the ice was near the edge of the road. He couldn't get the car back under control quick enough and he went over into the ravine. The car rolled over several times before it stopped. It was a good thing he had his seatbelt on or he might not have survived this long. The airbags weren't any help. They don't know how long he was down there before somebody spotted him and called for help. Fire department had to use the jaws of life to get him out of the car."

"How bad, Mom?"

"They don't know. There are no broken bones, but he's still unconscious. The longer it takes for him to come around..." Evelyn's voice broke and she sobbed against her daughter's shoulder.

"It'll be all right, Mom. He'll be all right. He has to be." Gloria wrapped her arms about her mother's shoulders and fought back her own tears. She had to be strong for both of them. Gloria guided her mother back to the sofa and sat next to her, entwining her fingers with that of the older woman.



Evelyn's hand was red and chafed. Gloria thought how it was unlike her mother. What had she been doing when the police arrived at the Hickok house? Probably getting things ready for the family's annual get together on Christmas Eve. Mom was always preparing something for some special occasion, if not for her family, then for one of the neighbors or her volunteer work. Where were these people? Why weren't any of them here to comfort her mother, as she'd comforted them in their time of need? Gloria wondered if they even knew about the accident. Her thoughts were a constant jumble, creating a mix of feelings she tried to keep hidden. In turn, she was angry with her parents, and the world. That was foolish, and she knew it.

Someone stepped in front of her and offered her a cup. Gloria looked up to see Danny holding out a cup of hot chocolate. She smiled wanly in thanks and wrapped her hands around the insulated cup. The heat felt good. Danny said nothing, but went back to his seat. Gloria watched him pick up a magazine and flip through the pages. Why is he still here? He doesn't have to stay.

She took a sip of her drink and studied the unassuming boy. What did he want from her? He hadn't said a word since they arrived at the emergency room. He sat in that chair, looking through magazines, as if he were waiting for someone, or didn't have a care in the world. He'd certainly kept his distance from her—not like Gary who couldn't keep any kind of distance between them. Gloria sighed and took another sip of her drink. What Danny did or didn't want wasn't important now. Her father's recovery should have been

what she focused on. But to do that only made her worry that much more.

Leaving her cup on the small corner table, she got up and began pacing about the room. It was small, but comfortably furnished. She wondered how many people had sat in this room, waiting for news of a family member. How many of them had been blessed with good news? How many of them went away in tears, never to see their loved one alive again? Gloria mentally kicked herself. She couldn't afford to think negative thoughts. She had to be there for her mother.

She looked at her watch and tapped on the crystal wondering when it had stopped, then glanced up at the wall clock. Only two hours had passed since she'd arrived. It felt like she had been here forever. Why didn't a doctor or nurse come in to tell them something—anything. Waiting was becoming a strain on her patience. Gloria stood in the doorway of the waiting room and watched nurses and interns move in and out of curtained cubicles. Somebody had to know something. She hurried over to the nurse's station. "'Scuse me..."

"Her family's in the waiting room, doctor," the nurse told a middle aged man.

At least Gloria thought he was middle aged. Graying hair and a neatly trimmed beard hid some of the lines in his face. The man wore a white lab coat, like all the other doctors, or interns, or whatever they were. The man returned the chart, mumbled something, then headed off in the direction of the waiting room.

"Scuse me," Gloria tried again to get the nurse's attention. The nurse glanced up and back again to her charts. "Can you tell me anything about my father, Bill Hickok? He was brought in a few hours ago and we haven't heard anything yet."

"Sorry," the nurse replied without looking up again, "you'll have to wait to speak to the doctor."

"What doctor?"

"I don't know. I don't have your father's chart here, so I don't know who was assigned to the case. You'll have to go back to the waiting room until someone calls you."

Frustrated, Gloria returned to the waiting room and shook her head when her mother looked up. "Why is it taking so long to find out something, anything?" Gloria plopped down next to her mother and sighed.

Evelyn slipped her arm about her daughter's shoulders and eased her closer. She gently kissed the top of her daughter's head, as Gloria rested against her. "I don't know, honey. But they say no news is good news. We can hope it isn't too serious." Evelyn sighed.

Gloria glanced across the room where Danny slouched in his chair, dozing. She wished she could do the same, but worry wouldn't allow it. She got up again and paced the room.

There were holiday decorations about the room. Simple snowflakes dangled from short strings, to decorate the small tree in the corner. A set of icicle lights draped about the branches, and tinsel hung in scattered clumps, as if a child had decorated it. That was probably it. Some kid had been given the task of decorating the tree to keep them busy.

Gloria touched the bows on a couple of boxes under the tree and discovered how light the packages were. Somebody had wrapped some empty boxes to complete the holiday effect. Gloria realized this setting, as simple as it was, was more effective than all the decorations in the Lowell house. A small sense of calm filled her, looking at the sight.

Gloria saw a sudden movement from the corner of her eye and jumped when Danny startled awake. He looked around, wide-eyed, then recalling where he was he relaxed, rubbed at his eyes and yawned. In a way, Gloria envied him, but then again, it wasn't his father lying in a hospital bed while his family waited here for answers too long in coming.

"Gloria," Evelyn called softly, "why don't you go home and get some sleep. At the very least, you need to change your clothes so you don't ruin your gown."

Gloria looked down at herself. The cranberry gown had begun to show wrinkles. She'd completely forgotten about it. "I'm not tired, Mom. I'd rather wait here with you."

"Let Danny take you home, honey. You can come back later."

Gloria began to protest but was cut off. "I'll bring you back later, Glo. I promise. Let me take you home so you can get some sleep and change your clothes. You'll feel better." Danny crossed the room to stand before mother and daughter.

"What about you, Mom? You've been here a lot longer. You need to sleep, too."

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine. Now go, and I'll see you later. Danny, get her home safely, I'm counting on you."

"Yes, ma'am." Danny grinned, and waited for Gloria.

They stood outside the door of the Emergency Room looking up at the sky. It was at least a couple hours before it would start getting light. Danny zipped up his letter jacket and turned up the collar and Gloria overlapped the edges of her coat. The snowflakes that had begun to fall when they exited the building were quickly becoming thicker, floating downward in the still air.

Gloria allowed Danny to take her arm and escort her to his car. They sat in silence while he let the engine idle to warm up the vehicle. She glanced at him cautiously, wondering what he wanted from her. Every boy wanted something from the girl he was trying to impress. It confused her, to have Danny behave in a concerned manner and act the part of a gentleman. Was he going to be nice to her now, then demand something of her when she least expected it? No, that didn't sound like him.

She had noticed him in school, in a couple of her classes; he had some of the best grades. Her friends didn't like the 'studious' type. They preferred boys who liked to party—boys like Gary. Gloria frowned for a second. He was another problem she'd have to deal with eventually, but not now. She didn't want to think about him. She leaned back against the car seat, sighed and closed her eyes.

She woke with a start when Danny gently shook her. "Glo, you're home." He got out of the car and went around to her door, opened it and handed her out. They walked to her front door, leaving footprints in the thickening snow cover.

"Give me a few minutes to change my clothes, then we can go back to the hospital."

"No good. You need to sleep, and I have to check in with my mom. I'll be back to pick you up..." he glanced at his watch, "...say about ten thirty. How's that sound?"

"But I should get back."

"You don't need your mom worrying about you, too. I'll be here for you at ten thirty. I promise."

"All right. Ten thirty," she conceded reluctantly.

She entered the dark, silent house, then leaned against the door after closing it. She listened to his car move away. Gloria had seen something in his eyes she didn't want to acknowledge, but couldn't ignore. There was concern there—and something more. She hoped it wasn't pity for her situation. She trudged up the stairs to her room and fell across her bed in an exhausted sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Gloria woke to bright light streaming into her room. Her rumpled gown was twisted about her legs, making it difficult to move. She freed herself from its confines and glanced at her bedside alarm clock. It was nine o'clock. That gave her enough time to shower and have something to eat before Danny showed up.

A short time later, in the kitchen, she dropped two slices of raisin bread into the toaster, and turned on the burner beneath the teakettle. Her cup from the night before still sat on the counter. The puddle of cream had dried about the edges. Gloria groaned and got some paper towels to clean up

the mess. Her mother would probably shoot her for breaking her favorite creamer. Gloria sighed.

She finished cleaning up last night's spill, just as her toast popped up. She buttered the slices and poured hot water into the cup, stirring the cocoa mix until it dissolved. The doorbell rang and she glanced at her watch. Danny was a half hour early. She barely got the door open when Marilyn and Loreen marched in. "Let's go girl! We've got some serious shopping to do today."

Gloria returned to the kitchen and the two girls followed her. She turned to face them. "Sorry, I can't go with you today."

Marilyn and Loreen glanced at each other. "But you have to go. You said you'd help us pick out some new dresses." Gloria thought Marilyn sounded whiney.

"I can't. My dad was in an accident and my mom's been at the hospital all night. I have to get over there for her."

Both girls looked disappointed and pouted. "I guess that means you're not going to Connie's party tonight?"

"Party? You expect me to think about parties when I still don't know if my Dad will be all right? I never realized, until now, how shallow you and the rest of your crew really are. I don't think I want to be part of your clique anymore. While you're shopping and spending your daddies' money, don't bother to think of me and what I'm going through." Gloria herded them out of the house and firmly shut the door behind them. "What did I ever see in them?" she wondered, amazed she once thought she could be like them.

She turned away from the door, and the bell rang again. If they were coming back to tell her off, she'd really give them a piece of her mind. She yanked the door open to find Danny standing there.

"Wow. If looks could kill..." he commented with some amusement. "Did you and your friends have a falling out?" He followed her into the kitchen.

"They're not my friends. Would you like some hot chocolate? I was just about to have some when they showed up."

"Sure, if it's not any trouble." Danny sat on a stool at the breakfast bar. "They never were your friends, and you're better off without them. You're a smart girl, Glo. There are a lot of kids around school who would value your friendship."

"I'll think about it," she replied abruptly, then turned away to straighten the kitchen."

\* \* \* \*

A short time later, Danny and Gloria entered the emergency room and looked about the waiting room for her mother. Instead of finding Evelyn, they faced Gary Lowell when he stormed into the room, a thunderous look on his face.

"You owe me a Christmas present," he told Gloria, totally ignoring Danny. "After last night, I mean to collect. Real soon." The implication came out as a nasty threat.

"How did you know I was here?" Gloria flushed crimson, dismayed to face Gary now, in front of Danny.



"Marilyn and Loreen didn't waste any time telling me you were here with this loser." Gary glanced at Danny.

"What about last night? Gloria, what happened?" Danny asked, moving closer to her, and taking on a protective stance.

Gloria blushed even more, embarrassed to admit what had happened at the party, but sensing Danny's insistence. "He ... tried to force himself on me."

"Tried," Danny repeated. "What happened?"

Gloria raised a jean-clad knee to demonstrate her response to Gary's unwanted attention.

"Is that right?" Danny drew back his right arm and let his fist fly into Gary's face. He took great satisfaction watching Gary stumble across the room and fall over a chair. His nose bled all over his jacket. "You and your so called friends stay away from Gloria. None of you are good enough to hang around with her. Now get out of here, before I do more damage."

Evelyn hurried into the waiting room. She stopped short when she saw Gary sprawled against one of the chairs and Danny standing over him. She gave her daughter a quizzical look, but got no answer.

Gary managed to get to his feet and rubbed the side of his finger against his nose. It came away covered in blood. "One of these days, Mitchell..." He pulled a handkerchief and swiped at his nose, then stormed out of the waiting room into the cold morning air.

"Gloria, your father's awake, and asking for you. The doctor says he's going to be fine, and should be home for Christmas."

"Oh, Mom," Gloria sighed with relief as she hugged her mother. "That's the best news..."

"Why don't you two go visit with him. I'll wait here for you."

"No, you don't," Gloria announced. She grasped his arm before he could turn away. Her warm smile showed in her eyes. "I want Daddy to meet my Christmas Knight."

## **SNOW ANGELS**

**Tatiana Tonn**

The snow continued to fall heavily outside, covering the city in a blanket of white. It had been snowing for the past two days, and the newscast predicted the storm would last for at least another two. Emily sat quietly in front of her computer, staring at the screen. She sighed deeply, and then clicked open her email inbox, dreading to read her email. There it was before of her, an email from him. Her hand wavered a moment, before she opened it. She blinked back her tears; the message couldn't be any more to the point.

"So sorry, hon ... flight's been cancelled, don't think I'll make it out for Christmas ... Maybe we'll shoot for sometime this spring ... Love ya, Vince."

Disappointed, Emily signed off and pushed her chair back away from her desk. This seemed to be their luck. They had planned at least three other get-togethers in the past year and every time something went wrong. She couldn't entirely blame Vince for it; there wasn't much he could do about the weather. With another heavy sigh, she picked up her wineglass and made her way into the kitchen to refill it.

Emily set the glass down on the counter, moved to the refrigerator and took out the open bottle of Merlot. A few bags of groceries still sat on the counter, waiting to be unpacked and put away. At this moment Emily didn't care if they stayed there all weekend; most of the perishables were

already in the refrigerator. That sinking feeling had been in her stomach all day and now that Vince wasn't coming it was worse. She just didn't care about anything right now.

She refilled her glass, but left the bottle open on the counter. In her present mood it wouldn't be long before she would be in there to refill her glass again. Maybe by then she'd have enough ambition to put away the rest of the groceries. She took a sip from the glass and walked back into the living room.

Emily seated herself on the couch, picked up the remote and started flipping through the channels. She was tired of the news, about how this was the worst storm to hit the city in more than twenty years. That would have made her four years old last time it was this bad. She didn't remember it. Great, lovely ... but why did it have to be this year, of all years? Why did it have to be now?

Nothing but syrupy, heartwarming Christmas programs filled the channels. She gave up and turned the television off, opting for music. There wasn't much on the radio stations either. Most of them had already begun their marathons of Christmas carols. Life just wasn't getting much better.

Emily flopped back on the couch, closed her eyes, and listened to Bing Crosby croon "White Christmas" in the background, scoffing at the irony. As much as she tried not to think about Vince, she couldn't shake him from her mind. They had both planned this weekend for months now, and it really seemed they were finally going to meet again. But, of course, good old Mother Nature had other plans for them.

Emily and Vince had known each other for well over ten years now. They went to high school together, and though they never actually dated, they had been the closest of friends. Everyone used to joke that one day they would wind up married, but, after high school, Vince joined the Army, Emily went away to college. They kept in touch for about a year, but eventually lost contact, each going in their separate way. Time went on. Emily graduated from college and moved to Greenwich Village, or "The Village," as the locals called it. Last she heard, Vince was stationed somewhere overseas. It was just blind fate that brought them back together.

A year earlier, Emily had gone home for Thanksgiving. She was rather surprised when her mother said there was a letter waiting for her. Emily hadn't lived in the family home for well over five years. She couldn't imagine who would have written to her there. What a pleasant surprise—if not altogether shock—it was for her when it turned out to be from Vince. He no longer was in the Army and was living near Fort Lauderdale, Florida. The letter said very little more than that, other than he hoped to hear from her. He included his phone number and email address.

Emily waited a week before finally gathering the courage to email him, and, by that Christmas, they were talking on the phone. Not a day passed where they didn't speak to each other one way or another. It didn't take long before they rekindled much more than an old friendship, though they both had been reluctant to admit it to the other.

\* \* \* \*

Emily jumped, startled when the phone rang. She sat up from where she had dozed off on the couch and rubbed her eyes. The phone kept ringing while she looked around the living room, trying to get a bearing on her surroundings. The empty bottle of Merlot sat on the coffee table and the radio still played Christmas carols in the background. Outside the window snow continued to fall lightly, but the sky was a lighter shade of gray.

She read the Caller ID and picked it up, a mix of bittersweet emotions filled her and she spoke softly, "Hello?"

"Hello, beautiful." Vince's his voice was smooth as warm butter. Emily couldn't help but smile. As upset as she was, hearing his voice always brought that smile to her face.

"Vince," she answered. Her voice echoed the smile, but held a touch of her sadness. "I read your email..." She tried to hide that she didn't want to make him feel any worse about not making the trip than he already did.

"Yeah. Now you know why I moved south ... I can't say I envy you right now ... Well, other than the skiing might be great," he said with a half-hearted chuckle. His voice faded in and out a bit. She could hear music in the background.

"Where are you?" she asked. It was obvious from the Caller ID and all the background noise that he was in his car.

He paused a moment before he answered, and she feared he had been disconnected. "I'm on my way to make sure your Christmas present gets delivered," he finally answered.

Emily bowed her head and bit her lip. Here she was, wallowing in the misery of spending Christmas without him,

and he was trying to compensate for it. "Vince, you don't have to do that."

"Yes, Em ... yes, I do," he replied.

Emily's heart swelled with love for this man, though she just chuckled slightly. "So, tell me you aren't sitting home all day today, Em ... Are you at least going to your parents' for dinner?"

Emily stifled a yawn and ran her hand through her light brown hair. "Well, they weren't expecting us 'til tomorrow," she said, stretched a bit, and came to her feet. Her legs had grown leaden and that freight train moving through her head didn't feel too good either.

"Em, you aren't going to spend Christmas Eve sulking in your apartment, are you?" Vince sounded genuinely concerned, though the question came off a bit more as if he were teasing her.

Emily laughed slightly, making her way into the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee while they continued their conversation. Cordless phones came in handy. She grimaced when she saw the three bags of groceries that still needed to be put away.

"No, Vince, I'm not..." She reached over, grabbed the coffeepot and filled it with water. From the coffee canister she measured out enough for a rather strong pot of coffee. The way her head throbbed, she was going to need it. She made a mental note not to drink wine on an empty stomach anymore and set the pot on the stove.

"Em, I'm serious ... promise me you won't spend the day moping around the house. It's Christmas Eve. You shouldn't be sad on Christmas Eve,"

Emily leaned back against the cabinet. Vince was right. Christmas was her favorite holiday, always so full of joy and festivities, but right now she just didn't feel like celebrating. She couldn't begin to imagine what she was going to tell her parents tomorrow when they asked where Vince was once again.

"I have a few things to take care of today. A few presents to wrap. I'm supposed to meet my sister for some last minute shopping. I'll be too busy to mope," she assured him. She reached over, took a coffee cup from the dish rack and poured coffee into it.

"Alright, Em ... You do what you have to do. I'll talk to you tonight to cheer you up a bit, ok?" Vince wasn't really convinced she was all right, but he wasn't about to press the issue.

"Ok, sweetie, I'll talk to you later then." She opened the refrigerator to get the half and half and noticed the bowl where two filet mignon steaks were marinating for their dinner. Those were for the wonderful meal she had planned for them that night. Now she'd waste them on a lonely dinner with her cat. Emily poured a bit of the cream in her cup, replaced the container and quickly shut the door. She blocked away the reminder that her plans lay in ruin.

"Em, I'll make this up to you, I promise. "His voice became muffled by the static on the line. Before Emily could answer, the call was disconnected.

\* \* \* \*



By the time Emily showered and headed out to meet up with her sister at Herald Square it was well past noon. She was running late. They were supposed to meet for lunch before taking Kim's children to see Santa at Macy's. She stepped out of her building, breathed in the cool air and glanced up at the still gray skies. The snow had stopped falling, but the newscast had guaranteed there would be more snow before nightfall. Emily walked the few blocks to 2nd Ave and turned left, heading to the subway entrance.

It had snowed roughly six inches in the past two days, but the weather had little effect on the regular hubbub of the neighborhood. Emily walked along amid streets cluttered with the usual commotion of cars and trucks. Many people worked outside, shoveling the snow or salting the sidewalks. A pack of a half dozen Chihuahuas on leashes made their way toward her, pulling an elderly man behind them. A snowplow barreled its way down the street, momentarily drowning out the little dogs' incessant yipping. She nodded to the old man and his pack of dogs as she passed. A little farther on she found a break in the mound of snow piled along the curb and crossed the street. The subway entrance lay ahead.

Emily made her way down the steps and made her way through the turnstile. She headed for the platform just as the train was pulling in. Passengers filed out as soon as the cars came to a stop, many of them holding bags and packages from last minute holiday shopping. Emily managed to step into the car just before the doors slid closed. The subway lines moved swiftly through the underground, carrying the New Yorkers to whatever their destinations. The train lurched

away from the platform and she held onto one of the poles to keep her balance. She noticed an empty seat toward the front of the car.

Emily picked up a copy of the New York Times someone had left behind on the seat and flipped through it. At the next stop she watched more people pile into the railcar, like cattle being herded into a pen. A very pregnant woman made her way toward the front of the train. Emily got up and offered the woman her seat, a small sacrifice as she was getting off at the next stop anyway.

She managed to squeeze through the crowd near the car doors just as the train pulled up to the 34th St. platform. While waiting her turn to exit she looked back at the expectant woman. In a way, Emily envied her. Chances were the woman was going to meet someone very special; she was just meeting her sister. What a way to spend Christmas Eve! She stepped out onto the platform, and, with a heavy heart, made her way to the bustling streets above.

\* \* \* \*

The cold, crisp air outside filled her lungs, far more pleasant than the stale smell of the subway. Once again Emily walked along under gray skies still heavy with snow. She smiled at an older woman standing in front of a storefront and holding two cups of Starbuck's coffee. The woman's reddish brown hair stuck out from beneath her knitted cap. The woman spotted her, too, and burst into a big grin.

"Em!" she made her way toward Emily, offering her one of the cups. Emily smiled and took the cup. She took a sip and

found, to her surprise, the coffee was still fairly warm. The woman, slightly shorter than Emily, brushed a strand of her unruly hair back into her cap.

"Thanks for the coffee, Kim. Where are the kids?" Emily greeted her sister.

Kim chuckled "The kids couldn't wait to see Santa. Ron's inside with them." She pointed to her watch. "Running a little late, are we?"

Emily grinned sheepishly, "Sorry about that. It was a long night."

Kim's green eyes sparkled with mischief and she gave a little laugh. "It's all right, something came up last minute, anyway. We haven't been waiting very long. I take it Vince made it in all right last night?"

Emily frowned slightly and answered, "He didn't make it in."

Kim stopped walking. "What do you mean he didn't make it in?"

Emily grimaced; she wasn't really ready for the Grand Inquisition. "His flight got cancelled because of the weather."

Kim studied her sister a moment before commenting. "I'm sorry, Em ... I know you were looking forward to his trip here."

Emily shrugged. The sisters headed for Santaland. Kim let the subject drop, for the moment. The pair made their way through the throng of last minute shoppers, stopping now and then to admire the decorations that adorned the department store. The low murmur of childish voices drifted above the roar of shoppers trying to get that perfect last minute gift.

"Auntie Em!" the shrill little voice of a four-year-old girl rose above the noise. The little girl came barreling at Emily full speed. Emily smiled and bent over to pick her up.

"Did you see Santa, Melissa?" she asked, gently tugging on the collar of the little girl's red coat. Red Shirley Temple curls bobbed as the little girl shook her head.

"I asked Santa for a pony," Melissa giggled happily. Her father walked up behind them carrying Jonathan, her one year old brother.

"Merry Christmas, Emily," Ron said. He handed the baby over to Kim before leaning to kiss Emily on the cheek.

"Merry Christmas, Ron," Emily smiled. Ron, a Bayonne, New Jersey police officer, had a rugged look about him. His sandy blonde hair always looked as if he just got out of bed, a perfect match for Kim. He had piercing blue eyes that could look right through you. Although he had reached his mid thirties he had a youthful sense of humor and the joy of life of a fifteen year old

"Are you girls done shopping?" He didn't see any bags and began dreading further hours of scouring the shops. He was well aware of his wife's shopping habits, especially when her little sister, the fashion major, was in tow.

Kim shook her head. "I only wanted to let the kids see Santa, and maybe Rockefeller Center. Remember how Mom and Dad used to bring drag us here every Christmas, Em?"

"Do I!" Emily laughed. Their parents brought them on a yearly pilgrimage to New York City each Christmas, starting with a trip to this very Macy's to see Santa. After that they would visit the usual sights: Rockefeller Center, the Fifth

Avenue holiday window displays, F.A.O. Schwarz. Sometimes they took a ride through Central Park in one of the horse-drawn carriages. Most times, their father insisted they walk, in order to "truly appreciate the experience." Usually, though, the day would end up with tickets to the Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall. That had been something both Emily and Kim enjoyed very much. Emily suddenly became grateful she was going to be spared the humiliation of having Vince listen to her father's recounts of her and Kim's attempts at being Rockettes when they were younger.

Though it was quite a walk, the group decided to take in the sights by foot. They moved slowly down the Avenue of the Americas. Emily walked hand in hand with Melissa. The little girl, who had never been to New York before, gaped about her, completely in awe of the sights.

"Aunt Em, look! It's Santa!" she would gleefully squeal and point out as they passed one of the many street-side Santa's that were out and about, ringing their little bells and asking passers by to remember the needy. Melissa squealed with delight near the end of their 13-block trek when they turned down W. 48th St. and the Pokemon Center came into view. "Mommy, look Pokemon!"

While they waited for Ron and Kim to catch up, Emily took Melissa to the glass windows, letting her look inside the Pokemon Center. Kim and Ron had been passing Jonathan back and forth to each other, both wishing they had remembered to bring the stroller. The group continued down W. 48th St. headed for Fifth Avenue. They passed Barnes &

Noble and Kenneth Cole, then turned and headed toward Rockefeller Center. The Rockefeller Center tree loomed up directly ahead of them. Melissa stared, awestruck at the mere size of the tree, barely squeaking out a comment about "all the pretty lights."

The Rockefeller Christmas tree had all its usual splendor. The massive spruce illuminated the New York sky as it did every other Christmas before. The 75 foot tall Spruce came from some front yard in Maine and had been decorated with more than 25,000 multicolored lights, individually wrapped around each branch. In the distance, they could hear a band playing carols. A group of carolers were setting up on a platform before it to perform for the crowds of holiday visitors.

Ron made them stop every so often; pulling out the little disposable camera he had brought to take pictures in front of some store's window display or other point of interest. He reminded of her childhood, when not an angel or toy soldier was safe from her father's camera. She watched Kim and the children smile happily as Ron snapped off a few more pictures.

Emily glanced at her watch. It was after 5 o'clock. She pulled her cell phone from her purse. Had Vince tried to call her? She hadn't heard it ring. She sighed. No messages waited for her. She was about to put the phone back when it began to ring. Her heart lifted when Vince's cell phone number came up on the display. She stepped into a nearby shop's doorway where she hoped it would be a little easier to hear him.

"Hey, beautiful," he said after she managed a quick hello, "Having fun?"

Emily smiled though her heart ached. "Loads," she said with a touch of sarcasm. True, she enjoyed the sights of the city; she just wished he was here with her.

"Where are you? I hear music," Vince chuckled softly. He could hear the commotion behind her.

"Rockefeller Center, Kim and Ron wanted to bring the kids here," she explained. She put her other hand to her ear, covering it so she could hear him a bit better. "Where are you?"

"Making dinner," he raised his voice so she could hear him better. He guessed, correctly, from the noise behind her, she was struggling to hear him.

"Sounds like fun," she said, a little disheartened. She should be cooking those steaks for him right now instead of sightseeing with her sister's family. It wasn't unusual for him to call her from his home on his cell phone. He was forever forgetting to put his cordless home phone on the charger and finding it dead.

"Well, you guys have fun. Why don't I talk to you later when you get home?" he said.

Emily glanced over at Kim, who was looking to see where her sister had gone. Kim mouthed the word "Vince", and Emily nodded her head in affirmative. Kim grinned, then turned back and whispered something to Ron. He, too, burst into a big grin and nodded.

"I don't think I'll be gone too much longer," Emily told Vince. "They want to take a ride in a horse drawn carriage but

I think I'm going to duck out of that. I hate feeling like a fifth wheel." Emily stuck her tongue out at Kim and Ron, certain they were making fun of her.

"Oh, honey, you should take the ride. I bet it's beautiful." Vince's soft voice tugged at her heart.

"I could think of someone else I'd rather be taking it with," Emily said with a sigh, gently chiding him. She flushed with guilt the moment after she said it. It wasn't his fault he wasn't there with her. "Maybe I will go. Melissa keeps asking if I'll see the 'ponies' with her."

"Good, you do that." Vince either hadn't picked up on her little comment, or had just chosen to ignore it. "I'll give you a call at home in, what? An hour?" he asked.

Emily thought a moment, calculating the time of the carriage ride and the subway ride back home. "Make it an hour and a half. I'll talk to you later, then."

"All right, Em. Have fun. Tell your sister I said "Merry Christmas." Talk to you later, beautiful," Vince whispered before hanging up.

Emily hung up her cell phone and placed it back in her purse. She made her way toward Fifth Avenue where Ron and Kim were already waiting for her in a carriage.

"Hurry up, Aunt Emily ... we're gonna be just like Cinderella!" Melissa beamed from inside the carriage.

"Yeah," Emily mumbled to herself, "Only Cinderella had a happy ending."

\* \* \* \*



Snow had started falling again when Emily made her way out of the subway station. The carriage ride had been pleasant. Melissa loved the views from the carriage, window displays along Fifth Avenue and especially the decorations at FAO Schwarz. Emily said her goodbyes to Kim and Ron back at Rockefeller Center, and took the subway home. It was no more than a ten-minute ride before she was back at the 2nd Avenue Station.

Emily turned onto her street. It would be another ten minutes to her apartment and she wished she had taken a cab—if she could have found one this time on Christmas Eve. The snow was picking up, and the chill wind began to cut through the fabric of her jacket. Emily pulled her bright red scarf tighter around her neck and picked up her pace. She sighed in relief as her building came into view, her breath curling into a white cloud in the cold air.

She stepped inside the building, warming herself up a bit before heading toward the stairs. The scent of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies filled the hallway. Mrs. Tompkins was baking. That sweet old lady would be bringing some up to her later that evening. She always did. Emily chuckled and made her way up the stairs.

On the third floor she took her keys from her purse and headed for her apartment at the end of the hall. The heavy aroma of roasting beef filled the hallway. Emily remembered the steaks marinating in her refrigerator. She and her big tabby, Tiger, were going to eat like kings tonight. She turned the key in the lock and opened the door calling out, "Hey, Tiger, I hope you like steak."

The keys slipped from her hands. The soft twinkling from the lights on her Christmas tree mixed with the gentle glow of candlelight in a warm welcoming. Rose petals were sprinkled across the rug, leading from the door to the dining area. Emily followed the petals, stopping at the doorway to the kitchen. The tantalizing smell of roasting steak permeated the air.

"Plan on feeding my dinner to the cat? Or where you going to share yours?" came a soft voice from behind her. She spun about, toward the voice, nearly in tears.

"Vince?" her voice was barely a whisper and filled with disbelief.

His russet colored eyes sparkled in the soft candlelight. The table was elegantly set for two and between the two candlesticks were a dozen long-stem red roses. Vince leaned forward, his face no longer hidden in the shadows.

"Merry Christmas, beautiful." He flashed her one of his heart-melting boyish smiles as he crossed the short distance between them.

"Oh, my God. Is it really you?" she whispered, the tears threatening to spill as she wrapped her arms around him. She ran one hand in a lingering caress of his cheek, assuring herself she wasn't dreaming. Vince wrapped his arms around her in a loving embrace.

"I should like to think so," he winked, kissing her softly on the forehead. "Now, I think you need to go relax in a nice, hot bath, while I finish dinner."

Emily opened her mouth to speak, but Vince gently pressed his finger to her lips. "Don't argue, Em. The bath is

already drawn. You'll find everything you need already there waiting for you."

She found the bathroom equally decorated with candles. The soft scent of roses filled the misty air; rose petals floated gently in the tub. Slipping out of her clothes, Emily climbed into the tub. The warm water enfolded her in luxurious comfort. Lying back, she closed her eyes, letting the delicate fragrances from the bath and the candles mingle, flooding her senses. If this was a dream, she didn't want to wake up.

\* \* \* \*

A gentle rapping against the door jolted Emily back to reality. She had lost all track of time in the bath, and wasn't sure how long she had been in there. Emily grabbed the plush towel and wrapped it around her before acknowledging the knock.

"Yes?"

"Dinner's nearly ready, darling. I thought I'd give you enough time to get dressed and join me," Vince called from the other side of the door.

"Oh, okay. Thanks. I'll be out in a few minutes." She wrapped her robe around her and slipped into her bedroom. Laid out on her bed were a scarlet satin cocktail dress and black strapped-sandals. She quickly dressed in the clothes, stopping a moment in front of the mirror to admire Vince's selection. The dress flattered her. She pulled her hair into a twist, secured it with a few bobby pins and made her way to see if Vince needed any help in the kitchen.

Emily leaned against the doorframe, watching him remove the steaks from the oven broiler. He hadn't changed much physically, other than filling out a little. His face no longer had a slender boyish look; his jaw had firmed, more pronounced and angular. Vince's hair had been quite long and curly in high school. Now it fell just to his shoulders. A black Armani suit replaced old faded jeans and tee shirts that Emily swore had comprised his entire wardrobe. She couldn't help grinning. "You sure did clean up well."

Vince turned and laughed. "I didn't want you to feel overdressed."

Emily shook her head, giggling softly, "You really do look good, Vince. I just never thought I'd see the day you wore a suit."

Vince laughed. "I never thought I'd see the day when you'd wear a red dress. I guess we're even."

Vince flashed her another one of his grins and said, "You're dynamite in that dress, Em. I thought you'd look good in it"

Emily felt her cheeks flush, but she managed a bit of a smile.

"Are you hungry?"

"Famished. I'm living off two cups of coffee today." Emily helped him find the serving dishes.

"I've got it under control, Em. Have a seat at the table; I'll bring dinner out in a minute. There's a glass of wine waiting for you,"

Soon they were seated at the table. Vince raised his glass. "Merry Christmas, Emily."

She touched her glass to his and murmured, "Merry Christmas, Vince."

\* \* \* \*

The pair ate dinner with very little chatter between them. Vince cooked the marinated steaks she had in the refrigerator, and made a baked potato and fresh salad as the sides. For dessert, Vince pulled out a slice of rich chocolate mousse cake and set it in front of Emily.

"Aren't you having dessert?" she asked, noticing he had only set out one piece of cake. Vince sat back down in the seat across from her.

"No, I need to watch my girlish figure," he grinned, rubbing his stomach. Emily smiled and shook her head.

"Seriously, I'm not much into chocolate," he responded after a moment. Emily took a bite of the cake. The rich, silky chocolate melted in her mouth.

"This is really good, Vince," she said and took another bite. Vince smiled and leaned back in his chair. "I'm glad you like it, Em. I made a special trip just to get that for you."

Emily raised one eyebrow. She waited a moment before broaching the subject. "Speaking of trips ... I thought you said your flight was cancelled."

Vince grinned. "It was. I drove."

Of course! It all made sense now. When Vince called her last night, he was already on the road. And the call this afternoon—he was right here making dinner!

"Figured it out, did you?" he said. His eyes sparkled with that touch of mischief. Vince straightened up in his seat and leaned forward.

"I'm not sure I want to know how you got in, though," Emily chuckled.

"Snow angels," Vince laughed, the twinkle in his eyes letting her know he wasn't going to let her in on his little secret. "Suffice to say we have waited far too long for this to happen. I wasn't about to let a little thing like snow ruin Christmas for you ... for us."

Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes, and she struggled to keep them from spilling. She was truly and deeply madly in love with this man. There was no way she could imagine a Christmas better than this.

Vince watched her a moment, his hand sliding across the table and resting on hers. He gave it a gentle squeeze.

"Em...?"

"Yes, Vince?" her voice wavered slightly, and she quickly took a deep breath, trying to keep her composure.

"Emily Rose McTiernan, will you marry me?" Vince slipped an open black ring box onto the table. Emily stared open-mouthed at the beautiful diamond set in white gold. It was another moment before she was able to force any sound to escape from her lips.

"Yes!" she finally blurted out, the tears now running down her cheeks in unrestrained joy. Vince rose from his chair and moved to her side. He slipped the ring on her finger and gently pulled her to her feet. His lips brushing against hers and he whispered, "I love you, Emily."

"I love you, too, Vince."

"I told you, Em ... nothing was going to stop me from being here tonight."

"You'll have to thank those snow angels for me," Emily whispered, her hand gently caressing his cheek. Vince chuckled and pointed to the empty Starbucks coffee cup sitting on Emily's coffee table.

"You can thank her yourself, tomorrow."

"And to all, a good night."

**THE END**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

Jac Eddins is a former corporate officer and director of retail sales for a chain of stores. This mother of eight, now a grandmother, lives on the Jersey shore. In addition to her success in short story and novels, Ms Eddins has served as editor and mentor for several published authors. She has run a writing workshop online for the past seven years. At present she is completing a fantasy adventure trilogy. When she isn't writing, she spends time cooking, needlework and beadwork—and spoiling grandchildren. If dreams come true, she'll one day retire to her beloved Scotland.

Fretherne lives in the north west of England with a wunderbah fraulein (every man should have one) and several very old and very ungrateful motorcycles.

Helen began telling stories about 17 years ago and writing them down 5 years later, but in truth, started much earlier, as every seannachie\* does, listening to and learning the stories of my own Scotch Irish family. After raising a daughter and son, she retired and began pursuing writing and storytelling full time. She specializes in telling Celtic tales and writing love stories. Her husband is her main supported in these. (\* SHAWN-a-chie, say the 'ch' as in 'loch'. There is no English equivalent: it is a blend of storyteller, writer, bard, sometimes genealogist.)

H.K. Snapp lives in a small city in southwest Ohio. She shares her home with a husband, a ten-year old daughter, a



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medium-sized dog and an extra large cat. She is presently at work on her first novel.

Marissa is a New England Yankee, a Rose Award nominee author and freelance editor. She spends most of her days reading, writing and editing, while her cat supervises. When she's not working in the writing field, she likes to work on counted cross-stitch projects.

Tatiana is a computer technician who writes in her spare time. Born and raised in New Brunswick, NJ, she currently resides in Florida with her family.

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