



A CHRISTMAS  
HOMECOMING

... because it's never  
too late to be forgiven

MARYANN  
DIORIO

# A Christmas Homecoming

MaryAnn Diorio

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## **A Christmas Homecoming**

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## Dedication

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, with deepest  
gratitude and praise

To my precious daughters, Gina Luciana Diorio and  
Lia Cristina Gerken, for their faithful support and love



## Praise for MaryAnn Diorio

MaryAnn Diorio has won several awards for her novel *The Madonna of Pisano*, formerly entitled *Sicilian Sunrise*, including the following:

First Place in the inspirational category of both the 2011 Colorado Romance Writers Heart of the Rockies Contest and the Space Coast Launching a Star Contest.

Second Place in the historical fiction category of the 2011 Romance Writers' Ink Where the Magic Begins Contest.

Second Place in the inspirational women's fiction category of the 2009 East Texas RWA Southern Heat Contest.

Third Place in the women's fiction category of the 2006 ACFW Genesis Contest.





Sonia Pettit pressed her hand against her chest in a vain attempt to ease the gnawing, endless ache in her heart. In a few short days, she'd mark the seventh Christmas since her daughter's frightful disappearance. A sudden, unannounced, and, worst of all, voluntary disappearance with no explanation, no sense, and no forwarding address. A disappearance that had incinerated Sonia's soul and left it a cold heap of ashes.

Outside the living room window, autumn had long since passed, leaving behind bare branches, scrawny bushes, and gray-white skies. A soft snow fell, dusting the yellowed lawn of the 1920s Victorian home she and Rick had purchased as newlyweds twenty-nine years earlier. The home in which they'd raised their children.

But those early happy times had turned into a nightmare.

She leaned her forehead against the windowpane, her eyes searching far into the distance. More times than she could count, she'd riveted her gaze on the sidewalk leading up to the house, hoping against hope her daughter would suddenly appear. But each time, Jody's imaginary figure would evaporate into nothingness.

Sonia blinked back the stinging tears. Truth be told, some days worry clawed at her, tearing her heart to shreds. But there were other days, just as wrenching, when rage gripped her to the point she never wanted to see her daughter again. Like a scorching iron, raw

pain seared the edges of her memory, leaving only blame to vent the hurt.

After all she'd done for her child. To have Jody leave without warning, without saying good-bye, without so much as an "I'll be in touch, Mom." Nothing. Just cold, heartless rejection fueled by arrogance and ingratitude that bordered on the cruel. A vicious slap in the face to a mother who'd given her life for her children.

Sonia turned at the hissing sound coming from the kitchen. She rushed to the stove where her soup had boiled over. She reached the pot just in time to remove a rattling lid from its precarious perch. A small puddle of homemade chicken soup covered the gas burner. She turned off the gas and moved the bubbling mixture to a back burner. Then she took the dishcloth hanging on the faucet and carefully wiped up the mess just as Ben walked into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Ben. I'm making your favorite homemade chicken soup for lunch later."

"Morning, Mom." Ben scratched his disheveled head in a valiant attempt to jerk himself to wakefulness. "Got any coffee?"

Sonia pushed down her anger and forced a smile at her lanky twenty-two-year-old son. The second-born of her womb. The son with the tender heart gone awry. "Just made a fresh pot. I'll pour you some."

"Thanks." He yawned. "I'm not awake enough to pour it myself."

She took a large blue mug from the cupboard and held it in her left hand while she poured coffee into it with her right. She handed the mug of steaming brew to Ben. In a few months, he'd be graduating from college and moving right into a job with a local

accounting firm.

His father would have been proud of at least one of their two children.

She squelched the painful memories. Christmas was coming, and she needed to put on a smile for Ben, if not for herself.

“So how’s my favorite son this morning?”

Ben sat down at the kitchen table and stretched out his long legs. “Come on, Mom. You know I’m your only son. So why call me your favorite?”

She sat down in the chair next to him. “Because you are. You don’t have to be my only son to be my favorite one.”

He grinned. “But what if you had another son, would I still be your favorite?”

“Of course, you would. It has nothing to do with numbers. No matter how many children I had, each one would be my favorite—you and Jody hold an equal place in my heart.”

His eyes narrowed. “You can say that after what she did to our family?”

Sonia shifted in her chair, her thumb outlining the handle on her coffee mug. “Yes.” Her breath caught on a snag of hesitation. “Yes, Ben.” She looked him in the eye. “I can still say that.”

He slammed his coffee mug on the table, splattering the hot liquid all over the green vinyl tablecloth. “She ups and leaves without telling anyone where she’s going. Just a stupid note that says, ‘I’ve gone. Don’t come looking for me. I need my space.’ Her space? Sounds more like her own selfish way to me.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “Seven years! How many private investigators and how much money have you spent on finding her?” He stood.

"You should have listened to Dad. Let her go. Don't try to find her. He never forgave her, you know."

"What makes you think Dad didn't forgive her?"

"How could he? Look at the hole she left in his heart—a hole that devoured him and sent him to an early grave." He looked beyond her, peering out the window. "A hole that would swallow me up if I let it." He shook his head. "But I won't. My anger against her is all I have to keep me from falling in."

"Withholding forgiveness is never the answer, Ben."

He towered over her, fire in his eyes. "Who are you to talk? You haven't forgiven her either. You just pretend you have."

She lowered her voice, tamping down the anger threatening to spew forth. "Forgiveness is a decision, not a feeling."

Ben's glare cut deep. "Spiritual platitudes. That's all you're handing me. I'll never forgive her for what she's done."

The sword of truth pierced Sonia's heart as she watched Ben storm out of the room. If she were honest with herself, he was right. She hadn't truly forgiven Jody either. As much as she loved her daughter, Sonia wanted Jody to suffer as much as she herself had suffered. As much as Rick and Ben had suffered. She wanted Jody to pay for all the pain she'd caused. By walking out on her family, Jody had left a wake of anger, confusion, and shame that had rocked their world, leaving them bruised, shaken, and shattered. Worst of all, Rick had taken his daughter's disappearance so hard that Sonia was sure it had caused his death. How could she ever forgive Jody for that?

She rose and turned her attention back to the soup pot. She lifted it from the back burner and replaced it on the front one, then turned the gas to low heat. Chicken soup made a good lunch on a cold day.

But on this cold day, she no longer had an appetite.

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Jody Pettit O'Dair held one blond-headed child snugly on her left hip as she pushed the other in the two-seater stroller. She'd picked the perfect day to take off from work to spend time with her children. Not a cloud in the brilliant blue sky. And the temperature was warm enough to take a swim, if one wanted to, in beautiful Sydney Harbor. Too bad she couldn't spend every day with her kids. But a divorced, single mom had few, if any, other options.

She gazed at her three-year-old twins. They'd taken well to Hilda, their Irish-born babysitter. Too well. Each day when Jody picked them up after work, she fought pangs of jealousy at the sitter's daily reports. "Micah slid down the slide all by himself today. And Greta loved the kangaroos at the zoo." The childless, middle-aged woman clapped her hands in delight, oblivious to the pain she was causing the children's mother.

Jody guided the stroller toward a sidewalk café overlooking the harbor. Its beauty never ceased to ignite her imagination and remind her of why she'd chosen this city as her place of escape. From the moment she'd seen a photo of Sydney in her junior high school geography book, she'd been captivated.

She hoisted Micah from her hip to her arms and

headed toward a small corner table at the back of the café, in front of the large window. It would afford her some respite from the jostling crowds of tourists and Christmas shoppers flooding the sidewalks this time of year. Christmas always made her sad anyway when she remembered the life she'd foolishly left behind.

*Too soon old and too late schmart.* Her father's words, spoken with a feigned German accent, came back to her as she recalled one of his favorite sayings.

How she missed him.

She pulled the stroller close to the table and set Micah in one of the chairs. Greta squirmed in her stroller seat, eager to be released from its confines. She wanted to be free.

Just like her mom.

But what had freedom brought? Only heartache and trouble. A man who'd taken advantage of her, lied to her, and then left her penniless. Two children she loved but always worried about. A job she hated but desperately needed.

This wasn't the good life she'd expected when she left home.

Micah climbed down from his chair and rushed toward his sister. She giggled until he grabbed hold of her curly blonde hair and made her screech.

"Children, hush. Be good for mommy."

The waiter arrived. "What may I bring you, ma'am?"

"One large cranberry juice on crushed ice and two small cups of apple juice for the children."

The waiter nodded. "Be right back, ma'am."

Jody looked out the window at the crowds of people on the busy city street, everyone heading somewhere. Where was she headed? Long years of

searching for freedom had left her only more imprisoned than ever.

The waiter returned with the drinks. "Here you go, ma'am. Enjoy this fine day." He left the check on the table and departed.

As Jody tasted the cool, refreshing drink, the twins began to fuss again. She offered them their apple juice. After a few sips, they pushed away the cups. Funny how they usually reacted exactly the same way to similar situations. It had to be genetic.

An American accent coming from a middle-aged couple at a nearby table caught her ear. Although Sydney was a cosmopolitan city, she didn't often hear American accents. The sound tugged at her heart with longing and remorse. She'd been gone so long, with no news of family or friends. It was her fault, of course. All her fault. Her plan to find freedom had backfired. Instead, she'd become a prisoner of her own selfish desires.

She drew in a deep breath. The early afternoon sun shining through the window warmed her fair skin. On the other side of the equator, back in Falls Church, Virginia, winter was in full swing. One thing she'd never get used to, no matter how long she lived in Australia, was Christmas in summer. The two were an incompatible match.

Signs of the season abounded everywhere. Shoppers hustled in and out of stores, carrying large shopping bags filled with gifts. Sidewalk vendors peddled miniature gingerbread houses whose delightful designs and spicy aromas filled the air. Across the street, a large Christmas tree, decorated with gold and silver bells, stood in the storefront window of a department store. Along the sidewalk,

hand-woven baskets of red-berried holly hung from Victorian streetlamps whose posts were wrapped in red and green ribbon. From a loudspeaker atop a music store, strains of *Silent Night* filled the afternoon air.

The music transported Jody to another time, another place. Falls Church at Christmastime was a Currier and Ives postcard. Shop owners of City Center vied for attention and sales as they decorated their storefronts with colored lights, frosted windows, and homemade wreaths. Mom had probably already placed the large Christmas wreath on the front door in anticipation of the season. The wreath the two of them had made together from acorns that had fallen from the large oak tree in the backyard.

Jody swallowed the lump in her throat as she pictured the freshly cut, long-needled pine sitting in its corner in the living room, where it sat every year for as long as she could remember. Mom never used store-bought decorations. She'd always insisted on making her own or having Jody and Ben make them. Year after year, Mom would take out the same old decorations, now worn and crumpled, and display them proudly on the tree. She'd add a few new homemade trimmings and then finish everything off with the silver tinsel garland that should have been trashed years before. Mom was a traditionalist if Jody ever saw one. Suddenly she yearned to be home in that living room, trimming the tree with Mom, Dad, and Ben.

But could she ever go back? Would they welcome her or turn her away? Would they understand how sorry she was for what she'd done, or would they disown her? What would she do if they rejected her? Where would she go then, and with two small kids?

Micah threw a tantrum right in the middle of the café. Jody swallowed the last of her cranberry juice then swept him off the floor. "I'll have none of that, Micah O'Dair, do you hear me?" He kicked and scratched 'til she had him strapped securely in the stroller, next to a dozing Greta. How the child could sleep with her brother screaming at her side Jody would never understand. Maybe she'd slept, too, when Ben had tantrums.

But then, Ben never had tantrums.

She did.

Her stomach tied into a knot. She couldn't go home. Not now. Not ever. Best to banish the thought forever. Some things in life were just impossible.

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Sonia put the soup pot in the fridge. Ben hadn't wanted any. Said he'd promised to meet some old high school friends for lunch. Catch-up time during Christmas break and all that good stuff.

She shut the refrigerator door and leaned her back against it. She was losing Ben, too. Not physically like Jody but in a way that was far worse. She was losing Ben's heart. She'd tried hard to be a good mother to both of her children. But somewhere along the way she'd failed. Failed miserably.

Like a dark pall, fear overshadowed her. The same icy fear that had stalked her life ever since Jody's disappearance. The same fear that had intensified its grip on her since Rick's untimely death. Would it ever go away? Would she ever find peace again?

Sonia made her way toward her favorite chair by the big bay window in the den. Her "fellowship chair"

she called it. The precious place where each morning she met her Lord and had fellowship with Him.

Outside, the snow continued to fall, covering the branches of the old oak tree with bands of white trim. Except for the sound of an occasional passing car, all was quiet.

She sank into the soft cushions and reached for her Bible. The Word of God always brought her comfort, even in the worst of storms. Now, once again, she sought its healing balm within its pages.

Her spirit fed on the words before her. "But if you will not forgive, neither will your Father that is in heaven, forgive your sins."

There it was again. The command to forgive. But what did it really mean? Did it mean becoming a doormat to ill treatment by an ungrateful daughter? Did it mean condoning Jody's despicable behavior? Did it mean letting her off the hook with no consequences?

Ben was right. She had not forgiven Jody. At least not from her heart. She'd hung on to the perverse pleasure of wanting her daughter to pay for the pain she'd caused them. Vengeance the Bible called it. But the right to inflict punishment belonged only to God. Yet she'd tried to take that right into her own hands. She'd wanted to punish Jody.

She'd wanted to play God.

She burst into tears, seeing for the first time the depth of her sin.

Conviction nudged at her soul. "Father, I want to forgive Jody, but I can't in my own strength. She hurt me too deeply. Yet, I want to obey you, Lord. Help me to forgive my daughter. Restore our broken relationship. Bring her back to me, Lord. I pray in

Jesus' Name. Amen."

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Jody sat at her work computer and re-read the e-mail from Mr. Grossman's office. In her six and a half years as an administrative assistant at Grossman Manufacturing, an American firm based in Australia, she'd met the big boss only once, and that was at the orientation for new employees. Even back then, he'd seemed formidable and totally unapproachable. When she'd gotten the message earlier that morning to report to his office at eleven o'clock sharp, her imagination had run wild. Why did he want to see her? What could she have done wrong? The misdeed had to be something terrible. She racked her brain for possible reasons for the boss's summons. It was all she could do to keep from panicking for the two hours before the meeting.

Shortly before eleven, she left her cubicle and headed for Mr. Grossman's office located on the floor just above hers. Nervously flexing her fists, she took the elevator to the third floor and walked down the long hallway to the large suite at the end. Her heart pounded and her mouth was dry. She forced her mind not to picture the worst. As she approached his office, she rubbed her sweaty palms against her slacks to dry them. Then, taking a deep breath, she opened the door into the reception area.

A middle-aged, well-coiffed receptionist sat at a small desk, her eyes glued to a computer screen.

"Excuse me. I'm Jody O'Dair. Mr. Grossman asked to see me."

The woman looked up and smiled. "Yes, Mr.

Grossman is expecting you. I'll tell him you're here. His office is through the door on the right." She pressed an intercom button and announced Jody's arrival.

Jody's heart raced. She walked through the door, and the smell of an extinguished cigar struck her nostrils with force. She coughed. Sandra, her co-worker, had warned her about the boss. He was old-school business, the fading breed that made decisions over strong black coffee and high-priced cigars. He was a patriot, too, and bought only cigars manufactured in the Eastern United States.

Jody approached the desk. The room was large and spacious, with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking downtown Sydney. On one wall, built-in mahogany bookcases displayed leather-bound volumes and several bronze sculptures. In the background, Jody could barely hear Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* playing on the radio.

She stopped at the desk. Behind it sat the man who held her future in his hands.

He looked up, a sheaf of papers in his hands. "Good morning, Mrs. O'Dair."

Yes. He was old school, all right, still using Mrs. instead of Ms.

"Please have a seat."

Jody sat down in the narrow brown leather chair in front of the desk and clasped her hands in her lap. "You asked to see me, sir."

He pushed his glasses against the bridge of his nose. "Yes. Yes, indeed. I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Mrs. O'Dair, but we find it necessary to dismiss you."

A rush of fear shot through Jody's veins. "Dismiss

me? But you can't dismiss me. I need this job."

Mr. Grossman peered at her over the upper edge of his wide-rimmed glasses. "I understand, Mrs. O'Dair. For that very reason, it pains me greatly to have to let you go, but I simply cannot afford to keep you. The board and I have agonized over this decision, but there is nothing else we can do to avoid bankruptcy. Business has plummeted dangerously in the last several months, and I must let several of my lower-level employees go."

"But what will I do? I have two small children to support." She would not cry, especially not in front of him. "I'm all alone." The last words cut deep into her soul even as she spoke them. Yes. She was all alone. No one to go to. Nowhere to turn.

"Perhaps you will find another job, although I know things are tough for everyone in this economy. I will be happy to give you an excellent reference. You have been one of our better employees."

His words swirled over her, like storm clouds being driven in circles by a raging whirlwind.

She sat there for a moment longer, struggling to process what had just happened. "Are you sure you can't put me in another department? I'll do anything. Even scrub floors. Only please don't fire me."

Never did she dream that her desire for freedom would bring her to the point of utter desperation. Of abject begging. Of relinquishing her dignity and self-respect just to survive.

"Mrs. O'Dair, if there were something I could do for you, I would surely do it. But there is no work I can offer you at this point." He stood, signaling her dismissal. "I will, however, keep your file in the event that something does come up."