



AN
Orchard Hill
ROMANCE

KARA LYNN
RUSSELL

Finding
Joy

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by

Kara Lynn Russell

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Finding Joy: An Orchard Hill Romance

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Dedication

To my brother, Bob. It never fails to amaze me how alike and yet how very different we are.
Your accomplishments inspire me to keep striving for my own.

Prologue

“But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy.” Psalm 5:11

“Are you sure this is going to work?” asked Misty.

“Of course I’m sure,” Pansy snapped back. “I’ve been doing this since you were in diapers.”

“Really? That long?”

“Yes, really. I started making matches right after I was first married.” Pansy got a faraway look in her eyes. “My dear husband and I were so happy. I wanted to share that with everyone.”

Misty stared at her in disbelief.

“What? You don’t believe me?”

“I’m just having a hard time picturing you trying to spread happiness.”

Pansy took on a severe look. “I’ll have you know I’ve worked hard in my life to make others happy.”

She opened her mouth, then, obviously thinking better of it, closed it again.

The older woman pretended not to notice. “So when did you make your first match?”

“When I was in high school.” Misty sighed. “I fixed up all my friends with the perfect dates for prom.”

“And none for yourself?”

“More like a dud for me. I think I knew right then and there that I was destined to match others,

yet remain single myself.”

“Not anymore. The wedding is in a few weeks.”

That cheered Misty—and even Pansy looked happier.

“Who would believe that you and I would be walking down the aisle together, Pansy?”

“Not me. I never thought I’d marry again, period, never mind be marrying *your* father.”

“While I marry your son at the same time?”

They laughed. It was a bit difficult to believe that they’d spent so many years trying to outdo each other as the town’s matchmakers only to end up as family twice over.

Misty was the first to recollect that they had business at hand. “The wedding’s only a few weeks away, and then we’ll both be gone.”

Misty’s future husband had taken a new job in a different part of the state, and Pansy was moving to her future husband’s retirement home in Florida.

“That means we only have a little time left to get Pastor Isaac settled. We have to get moving on this.”

“I know, I know. It’s just that I’m not sure—”

“Trust me,” Pansy interrupted. “Pastor Isaac has incredible radar where matchmakers are concerned. If he suspects we’re trying to match him up with Joy he’ll run the other way faster than you can say, ‘here comes the bride.’”

“But your niece—”

“Is the perfect candidate. Isaac doesn’t know her. She’s engaged, so she’s not at risk of losing her own heart, a definite possibility for someone else where Isaac’s concerned.”

There was a reason Pastor Isaac had gotten so good at avoiding matchmaker’s traps.

“But can she act?” asked Misty.

“Certainly. This is a girl that’s got more than a little spunk. When I suggested it to her, she thought it would be a hoot.”

“If you’re sure...”

Pansy scowled. “Haven’t I already said that I am?”

“Well, all right. I have too much to do to come up with something else anyway. Who knew closing a store would be this much work?” Misty lamented. She was the owner of the health food store The Green Scene, at least for a few more weeks. “When does Delilah get here?”

“Delia,” Pansy corrected her sharply. “As if I would have a niece named after someone like that.”

“All right, all right. It’s not like the temptress from the Bible story is the only person who’s ever had that name,” grumbled Misty. “Besides, she is sort of playing the part.

“*Delia* gets into town on Friday night. We’ll introduce her to Isaac at church on Sunday. I can’t wait to see his face when she starts batting her eyes at him.”

The women giggled at the thought.

“So Delia is set up as the decoy,” Misty agreed. “We still have to get Isaac and Joy together.”

“Yes.” Pansy wrinkled her brow. “How shall we set that up?”

“I’ve got that one covered.”

“What have you got in mind?”

“Pansy, Isaac knows you won’t be back in after in the New Year, right?”

“Of course.” Pansy had been the church secretary for more years than Misty cared to remember, and she knew it would be hard for Pansy not to come back, but a woman in her seventies had a right to retire.

“But did he know you’re quitting early so you can get ready for your wedding?”

“I am?”

“I really think it’s too much for you to take on and still work.” Misty smiled slyly.

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A matching smile slid over Pansy's features. "I think you're right, Misty."

Chapter 1

“Pansy, you can’t do this to me. You can’t leave in December. It’s one of the busiest times of the year for us.” It pained him to beg, but Isaac had no choice. There was no way he’d make it through December without a secretary. “Plus think of all these weddings coming up. I don’t know what’s been going on, but Orchard Hill has gone wedding crazy lately.”

“I happen to be the bride in one of those weddings,” she reminded him unnecessarily.

“I know, but—”

“Listen Isaac, you know I’d never leave you in the lurch. I’ve given this a lot of thought, and I know who we can get to fill in. She’ll be perfect.”

Hope glimmered there for a few seconds. If it was someone Pansy approved of...

“I think you should ask Joy.”

Hope fizzled and went out like a cheap sparkler on the fourth of July. “Joy Harper? Our organist, Joy?”

“Is there anything wrong with Joy?” Pansy appeared highly offended at his doubtful tone.

“Of course there’s nothing *wrong* with Joy. It’s just...she’s just...I can’t see her doing the job, Pansy.”

“Well, I think she can.”

“You’re going to be hard enough to replace without a temp messing everything up before we can

hire someone.” Isaac thought Pansy was as much a fixture here as the lights or the stained glass window in the gathering space.

Her expression softened. “I’m sure you’ll find someone who can take my place. But until then...well, Isaac I don’t think you have much choice.”

‘You don’t have a choice.’ Isaac hated those words. He hated feeling forced into something. He especially hated being forced into this for two reasons. First, he didn’t think Joy would survive in the busy church office. She was acutely shy and his secretary needed to be good with people...or else be like Pansy. She knew everything about every member of the church and most of the citizens of Orchard Hill. Nobody dared to sass her. Joy, on the other hand, would most likely be hiding under the desk by lunchtime.

The second reason was even bigger and much harder to admit. As strange as it seemed, Isaac had developed a crush on her. In regular life, she was a mess. In the presence of people, she became clumsy and tongue tied, and he felt a strange sort of affection for this hopeless case. But when there was music involved, Joy Harper was a completely different person.

Or perhaps even a completely different being. Music transported her to another place, another plane of existence where she could be mistaken for an angel. It wasn’t just the long golden hair or her sweet face. It was the happiness and serenity that radiated from her when she played. He often found excuses to be near the sanctuary or choir room when she practiced.

And her voice. Isaac had only heard her sing a few times. She absolutely refused to sing in front of people. But sometimes, when she thought she was alone in the building, he heard her sing along with

the music she was playing. She seemed even more an angel then.

He, the sworn bachelor, was in love with both of them —the shy, confused young woman and the angel with the heavenly voice that together made up Joy Harper. And now it looked as though he would be confined in a small office, day after day with her.

“Lord, what are you trying to do to me? You know I can’t do this. There has to be someone, anyone besides Joy. Please help me find her.”

The Lord declined to do any such thing, and on Friday, after Pansy declared she wouldn’t be in to work again—ever—he accepted the inevitable and decided to drive over to Joy’s house.

He had to get the address from the church directory, and he realized he’d known Joy for years and had never been to her house. But that shouldn’t have surprised him, knowing her problem with social anxiety.

What did surprise him was Joy’s house itself. It was more like a mansion from a Gothic romance novel than a house. Maybe it was just December’s grayness that gave that impression, he told himself. Still, it was an imposing place for such an unimposing woman.

He drove through the open gates, into the circular drive and parked by the front door. Frantically, his mind made one more, last-ditch effort to come up with the name of someone—anyone—who could fill in for Pansy besides Joy.

Nothing. He came up with a big fat blank. Isaac forced himself to go up to the door and knock.

Joy drained the last of the tea from her mug and set it down. Then, she closed the book she’d been reading and took a few minutes to think. The volume in her lap bore the title *Overcoming Fear through Grace*.

She'd read a whole shelf's worth of books on overcoming social anxiety, so she didn't know why she bothered with one more. But she'd hoped this book was different. This book, written by a Christian, added prayer and bible study to the usual techniques for overcoming painful shyness.

This time, she was really going to do it, Joy promised herself. She was going to set goals and force herself to meet them. And her biggest goal centered around two small bits of paper.

She'd bought two tickets for a Christmas concert in Green Bay, featuring several very popular Christian artists. The concert was an annual event, and she'd wanted to go for years. But, just thinking about being trapped in the crowds of people made her stomach knot painfully. She'd almost given up on the idea of going when she'd found the book. This year, she would make it she promised herself. All she had to do was find someone to use the second the ticket.

Joy set aside the book and gave the room a quick look to make sure everything was in order. She didn't want to make extra work for Rosie. Then, she went to the kitchen. Rosie, the housekeeper and cook was there. She was the only servant that Joy had kept on after her grandfather had passed away. He'd left her the house and enough money so that, if she was careful, she could support herself and pay Rosie's salary. Her job as organist helped.

Rosie was the closest thing she had to a mother, and Joy knew the older lady would have difficulty finding a job if she were sent away. Not that Joy wanted to do that.

Rosie gave her a warm smile. "It's cold today. Better bundle up if you're going out to feed your birds."

Joy returned the smile. "I will.

She had a number of feeders that could be seen

from all the windows at the rear of the house. When she was growing up, she was never allowed to have a pet. Her grandfather firmly believed that animals did not belong in a house. The birds that came to the feeders were the closest she ever got. For years now, she'd maintained all the feeders and spent hours outside in the summer watching the birds. In the winter, she couldn't be out as long, but she stayed out as long as she could.

Isaac was surprised when an older woman he didn't know answered the door. "Does Joy Harper live here?" he asked.

"Who wants to know?" The woman studied him with suspicion.

"I'm Isaac Larson, the pastor at Joy's church."

The woman's face lit up. "Come in, Pastor," she said, stepping back.

"May I speak with Joy?"

"Certainly." The woman led him to a room that reminded him of a Victorian parlor. "She's filling the bird feeders, but I'll call her in."

The large window at one end of the room drew Isaac. It had a view of the back yard. There seemed to be plenty of bird feeders to fill. And they must need to be filled often he guessed. It was one busy bird restaurant out there. A broad lawn sloped down and away from the house. There were beds that must have flowers during summer and walks flanked by concrete planters. The lawn was also dotted with mature trees and shrubs which, no doubt, attracted the birds.

Then he saw her. Joy was standing completely still, the sunshine turning her hair to gold. A chickadee flew down to her outstretched hand and took some of the seed she offered. When the tiny ball of fluff took flight, another eagerly took his place.

Joy's face was alight with happiness, and she

looked more like an angel than ever, standing there with birds fluttering all around her. A brilliant red cardinal rested briefly on her shoulder and then flew away again. She laughed, and Isaac's heart skipped a beat. What was he doing here?

He forced himself away from the window. When Joy came in a few minutes later she'd shed her heavy winter clothes, but her cheeks were still rosy from the cold. She looked more human and less other-worldly, but still beautiful.

She came in hesitantly, as if she were the visitor instead of him. "Pastor Isaac?"

He forced a smile onto his face even as he thought about how out of place she looked in this room, with its formal, outdated furnishings. "Hello, Joy."

"W-would you like to sit down?"

"If you don't mind. There's something I'd like to talk to you about."

He took a seat in one of the overstuffed armchairs while Joy perched on the chair opposite from his. "What can I help you with?"

She looked as likely to fly away as one of her feathered friends. How could anyone look so uncomfortable in her own home? "This is an interesting house," he said abruptly. "It's not exactly the kind of place I pictured you living in."

"It was my grandfather's house. I grew up here."

"I saw you outside, with the bird feeders. That was amazing. You literally had the birds eating out of your hand. How did you do that?"

She ducked her head, and her hair fell like a curtain, hiding her face. "It just takes patience."

The older woman bustled in, carrying a heavy silver tray. "I thought you might like something warm on such a cold day," she said matter-of-factly and began pouring tea.

Isaac couldn't believe this. He was sitting in a

shrine to the styles of a hundred years ago, was being served tea. It was surreal.

“Isaac, this is Rosie, my housekeeper.” Joy accepted a cup and saucer from the woman with a thank you.

“Nice to meet you, Rosie.” He put out his hand, offering to shake hers, but she handed him a cup and saucer instead. He almost dropped it in surprise.

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” Rosie replied crisply. “There are cookies on the tray. Please help yourself.” She exited as quickly as she’d entered.

The conversation faltered and died there. Joy offered him cream and sugar for the tea. He declined. She picked up the plate of cookies and offered them to him. He noticed that her hand shook just a little as he took one.

Then, there seemed to be nothing left to say. Isaac spent a few minutes sipping tea and nibbling at the cookies, which were very good. Joy just sat, taking a sip from the tea every now and then.

Isaac cleared his throat. “I suppose you’re wondering what I’m doing here.”

“Oh no. You can visit whenever...I mean, I’m glad that you’re here.”

“Thank you. Joy, I believe you know that Pansy is giving up her position as church secretary.”

“Yes, after she gets married she said.”

“She’s opted to quit early so she can have more time to get ready for both the wedding and her move.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that.”

“So, as you can see, I’m in a bit of a bind. December is a busy time, and I really can’t manage everything by myself.”

“Maybe you can get someone to fill in temporarily.”

“I’ve already thought of that. That’s why I’m

here.”

She raised her face to look at him, her expression puzzled. “I don’t understand.”

There was no way he could work with her. He’d never be able to keep his mind on church bulletins and confirmation lessons with her there. The only thing he’d be able to think about was Joy herself. This was all a huge mistake.

But he had no choice, so Isaac plunged ahead. “Could you fill in for Pansy? Just until after Christmas or until I find someone else.”

Joy’s expression changed from puzzlement to understanding to alarm in less than thirty seconds. “Oh no...I couldn’t possibly...I don’t know anything about...”

“I understand that you aren’t familiar with the job, but if you could keep up with the filing and answer the phones and do a few other things, I know I could keep my head above water.”

Her hands were now shaking so badly that her cup rattled against its saucer. She set them down on the tray and clenched her hands together. “But Isaac...the people. You know...how I am.”

Isaac reached out and covered her hands with his. Her skin was icy to the touch. “I know, but Joy, I really need you.”

“Are you sure there isn’t someone else?”

“One month before Christmas? There aren’t even any temp agency workers available.”

She gave him a brief, tight smile. “So I’m your last chance.”

“I didn’t mean to put it that way, but, um...yes.”

“Are you sure that having no one wouldn’t be better than having me?”

“I know this will be hard for you, but I believe you can do it.” *I just don’t know if I can*, he added silently.

Joy closed her eyes and was silent for a few

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moments. Then she took a deep breath and without opening them, she answered, in a voice so tiny and breathy that Isaac had to strain to hear it. "I'll try."

He gave her cold fingers a squeeze before releasing them. "Thank you, Joy."

"When do you want me to start?"

"Monday morning, nine o'clock all right?"

She nodded. "I'll be there."

Chapter 2

Isaac exited quickly after he'd gotten her to agree, leaving Joy with a feeling of dread in the pit of her stomach. She took the tea tray back into the kitchen where she knew Rosie would be waiting.

"Joy, I'm so proud of you," Rosie crowed, not even bothering to conceal the fact that she'd been eavesdropping. "This is just what you need to draw you out of your shell."

"Or to send me further into it," she muttered as she set the tea tray by the sink. "And what's with the high tea?"

The housekeeper snorted. "That's hardly a high tea. Your grandmother, God rest her soul, would have been embarrassed by our meager hospitality. But I didn't have time for anything more."

"Why did you have to bring in anything at all?"

"When the minister calls on you, you make him feel welcome."

"It wasn't exactly a social call." She almost wished that it had been. Joy secretly considered Isaac too handsome to be a minister. She was sure she wasn't the only woman who enjoyed the sight of him, tall and broad shouldered, in the pulpit on Sunday mornings. His dark hair was always neat and cut very short, but she suspected it would curl if he let it grow out. He would be totally unbelievable as a man of the cloth if it weren't for those dark eyes

that expressed so much as he gave his sermon.

Rosie ruffled Joy's hair as if she were still a small child. "It doesn't matter. He still came to see you. Maybe I shouldn't go to Geoffrey's house for Christmas just yet. You might need me here."

"I think I can manage to take care of myself for a few weeks, and with this job I won't be home much anyway. Besides, your grandchildren would be so disappointed if you didn't go, Rosie."

The woman frowned. "They would. I guess I'd better go, but you take care of yourself, missy. I'm going to be checking up on you."

"Oh, Rosie." Joy gave her a tremendous hug. "What would I do without you?"

"You know you're like family to me, don't you?"

"I know. I love you."

"I love you, too."

Joy thought that maybe Rosie was the only one who had ever loved her, outside of her real mother. Her grandmother had died before she was born, she didn't know her father, and her mother had died when she was eight, leaving her with only one living relative—her grandfather. And he'd been less than welcoming when she'd arrived here as a frightened child whose whole world had been turned upside down.

On Sunday morning Isaac noted the warm looks that passed between Ian O'Neil and Lily Robinson. He resigned himself to the fact that there was going to be another engagement announcement soon. It looked as though there would be no after-Christmas lull for him this year, Isaac thought, as he removed his robe and stole in his office after the service. Nine couples—now that he'd agreed to marry Susan Schmidt and her fiancé—expected him to officiate at their weddings. There were ten if you counted Shaun and Patience renewing their vows —before Easter.

And it would all kick off with Misty and Pansy's wedding on the Saturday after Christmas. He wondered what had happened in Orchard Hill this past year to cause this huge matrimonial urge.

Although he didn't really feel like being social, Isaac left his office and went to the gathering space to participate in the post-worship coffee hour. He only hoped he could avoid being caught in a discussion of what type of wedding cake was best or how to incorporate all the items from the old "something blue" rhyme.

Before he even had a chance to get a cup of coffee, Pansy Parker accosted him. "Isaac, I'd like you to meet my niece Delia. She'll be visiting me for a few weeks to help me pack up the house."

A tall, slim woman with sparkling brown eyes accompanied Pansy. He offered her his hand and welcomed her to Orchard Hill Community Church. She responded with a firm grip and a wide smile.

"Pastor, can you entertain Delia for a few minutes? I want to take Joy aside and show her a few things she'll need to know. You don't mind, do you Delia?"

The woman's smile turned sly. "Not at all, Aunt Pansy. I'm sure we'll be fine."

Pansy was gone before Isaac could say anything. For a seventy-five year old woman, she could move quickly when she wanted to.

"Is this your first visit to Orchard Hill?" asked Isaac.

"No. I've been here a few times. I'm surprised we've never met."

"Yes, well, I guess that is surprising." Isaac mentally rummaged through his supply of small talk and was about to make a comment on the weather when, to his horror, Delia wound both her arms around one of his and cuddled up to his side.

"It really is a nice town. Maybe I should visit

more often.”

He tried to slide his arm away, but she held on. What was going on here?

“I’ll be here for a while. You could show me around some day.”

“Uh, I’d love to, but I don’t think I’ll have time. This is a busy season, and I’ll be training a new secretary.” Isaac stepped back, hoping she would let go, but she moved with him instead.

“Oh, that’s a shame. What about your evenings? Are you free then?”

“Um...nope. There are always meetings and confirmations, and Sunday School program practice...” Was he going to have to chew his own arm off to escape?

“Surely you don’t have to be at all those things,” Delia purred. “You can’t work twenty-four-seven.”

Isaac was spared from having to answer by his best friend Joseph, who walked over to them. “Hello Delia,” he said, casually drawing her away from Isaac. “Do you remember me?”

“Yes. Joseph Velasquez, isn’t it?”

“Good memory. Visiting your aunt?”

While Joseph distracted her, Isaac slipped away. Who would think prim and proper Pansy Parker had a niece like that! He grabbed a cup of coffee and started to circulate through the room, taking time to talk to as many people as possible. Joseph caught up with him again after the crowd had thinned out.

“Thanks for saving me back there,” Isaac said to him.

“That was weird,” Joseph replied. “I’ve met Delia before, and she didn’t act like that.”

Isaac shrugged. “I guess you just don’t have my charm.”

“Very funny. Meanwhile, if you’re so charming, why am I marrying a beautiful woman while you’re spending your nights home alone?”

“You know why. If I went on one date with a girl, the gossips would have us walking down the aisle. And then, if things don’t work out one of us gets torn apart by them.”

“I think you’re a little paranoid.”

“It’s happened to me before. I try not to repeat the worst of my mistakes.”

“So that’s it. You’re a bachelor for life?”

“Maybe. Who knows what God has planned for any of us? All I know is: I won’t ask a woman out unless I’m sure she’s something really special.”

At that moment, the office door opened. Pansy came out, followed by Delia, and then Joy.

“How will you know she’s special if you don’t even go out with her? Isn’t that what dating is all about?”

Isaac’s eyes locked onto Joy. “I’ll know.”

At five o’clock on Monday morning, Joy gave up on pretending to sleep and got up. Rosie’s son had picked her up yesterday afternoon and Joy was alone now until after the holidays.

Knowing that in a few hours she would be in charge of the church office filled her with so much anxiety she felt ill. In an effort to prepare herself she spent some time reading both her Bible and her latest book on social anxiety. Following one of the book’s suggestions, she wrote down a Bible verse on courage on a small slip of paper: “in God I trust and am not afraid. What can mere human beings do to me? Psalm 56:11” She read it over several times and then slipped it into her pocket.

Isaac was there to greet her when she walked in the office door. A connecting door linked the secretary’s office and Isaac’s.

“Morning Joy. I have a busy schedule today, so let’s go over a few things.”

Isaac showed her where to record his

appointments. Then he gave her some notes for next Sunday's bulletin. There was a template for it on the computer. She was to find it and create the bulletin. There was filing to do, and the phone needed to be answered. The quilter's group was meeting today and they would expect Pastor Isaac and Joy to come down and have lunch with them.

By the time Isaac had finished, Joy's head was already swimming. He disappeared into his office while Joy eyed the computer with unease.

She didn't know anything about computers. Her grandfather had despised them and refused to allow one in the house. Joy hated to admit it, but every time she thought of buying one, she failed to go through with it. The memory of her grandfather's disapproval was enough to dissuade her.

After looking the machine over, Joy managed to find the 'on' button. The computer beeped and began to whir. Beyond that nothing seemed to happen. Hesitantly, Joy touched the keys. Still nothing.

Fifteen minutes later when Riley O'Neil walked in, she still hadn't figured it out, and was near tears. Luckily Riley was one of the few people that she felt almost comfortable with.

"Joy, what are you doing here?" he asked. "Don't tell me Pansy is sick."

"No," she replied. "She's quit so she can have time to get ready for her wedding and the move. I'm filling in."

"Oh. Well...that's nice."

He was too polite to say anything, but Joy was sure he was thinking how unsuitable she was for this job.

"There wasn't anyone else available." She wanted to cringe at the defensive tone in her voice.

"I'm sure you'll do fine. What...um...what are you working on now?"

"I'm working on..." She tried frantically to think

of a clever fiction and then gave up. She was too nervous and frustrated. "I'm working on turning on the computer."

To his credit Riley didn't laugh. He looked over her shoulder to see what she had done.

"Um, Joy, the monitor needs to be turned on." He pressed a button under the computer screen and it came to life.

Joy dropped her head into her hands. He must think she was a total idiot. At least it was Riley and not Pastor Isaac.

Riley laughed and patted her shoulder. "I'm guessing Pansy didn't have time to train you before she left."

Just then Isaac came out of his office. "I thought I heard you out here, Riley," he said and then stopped. His gaze lingered on Riley's hand, still resting on Joy's shoulder.

"Joy was having a bit of trouble with the computer," Riley explained.

"Oh...Thanks for helping then. Come into my office for a minute, will you? I want to talk to you about the kitchen renovations."

"I thought the kitchen was finished."

"It is, but now that the kitchen looks so good, the hall seems shabby by comparison."

The men moved into Isaac's office and Joy found herself alone again. She hated to do it, but she thought she would have to call Pansy about the computer. She let the phone ring and ring, but there was no answer.

The day didn't improve from here. Joy continued to work at figuring out the computer but the phone rang and people stopped in, and every time she returned to it, she forgot what she had been doing and had to start all over again.

By the time one of the quilters came in to say that lunch was ready, Joy was near tears again. She

didn't think she could handle a group lunch, but didn't know how to get out of it.

Isaac emerged from his office, where he'd been holed up all morning. He took one look at Joy and then ushered the woman out of the office.

"Thanks for the offer of lunch, but since it's Joy's first day, I thought I'd take her out."

"That's certainly nice of you, Pastor," the woman responded.

"Not at all. I owe her big for stepping in." Isaac spoke to Joy over his shoulder. "I'll just say hello to the ladies, and then we can go."

Isaac hoped he was doing the right thing. Joy certainly looked like she wasn't up to lunch with a gaggle of older women, particularly ones like Cora Applebaum who would be looking for gossip to spread. On the other hand, skipping the quilter's potluck luncheon so he could take Joy out might excite even more gossip.

And he had to admit he was probably mostly to blame for Joy's bad morning. He'd shut himself up in his office without offering her a lick of help. But the outer office was too small and she was too tempting. He'd felt an unreasonable surge of jealousy when he'd found her alone with Riley. It was unreasonable because Riley's heart was truly taken by his fiancée, Grace. Logically, Isaac knew this, but he couldn't deny that seeing Riley's hand on Joy's shoulder had given him a jolt.

"Do you want to go to the Apple-A-Day Café?" Isaac asked.

"It's very nice to offer to take me for lunch, but..." Joy stopped and bit her lip.

"But what?"

"But I hate for you to miss the quilter's lunch. I don't want them to feel slighted."

"They won't. It will be fine, Joy."

"Then...then could we just get a sandwich at

Grace's? It will be quieter there than at the Café."

"Sure. I'll get my coat."

It *was* quiet at Grace's. The Grace Place was a coffee shop, run by Riley's fiancée. Although the emphasis was on the beverages rather than food, Grace did serve soup and sandwiches at lunchtime.

Isaac purposely chose a table in the middle of the room rather than a booth. A booth was too intimate and people would talk. He was used to it, but it would hurt Joy.

"So I take it the morning didn't go well," he said before taking a bite of his ham and cheese on rye.

"No, not really." Joy just picked at her turkey and cheddar on whole wheat.

"I'm sure it will get better," Isaac offered.

Joy didn't reply, and they ate in silence for a while. She looked so miserable that Isaac finally asked "Is there anything I can do to help?"

She didn't say anything, and for a moment he thought he was off the hook. Then, in a tiny voice he barely heard even though he was sitting across the table from her, she replied, "I don't know how to use the computer."

"I'm sure you can learn. How much do you know?"

"When Riley was in earlier..."

"He said he was helping you."

"He was showing me how to turn the computer on."

Isaac was stunned. "Wow. You really don't know anything about computers, do you?"

"No. I never touched one before today."

"I thought everyone had to learn at least the basics in school these days."

"I was homeschooled by tutors, and my grandfather wouldn't allow a computer in the house."

"Did you have any brothers or sisters?" he

asked, forgetting about the computer.

“No, it was just me and my grandfather.”

He was beginning to understand. He didn't ask about her parents. It was obvious they either were dead, or had abandoned her. Either way, he didn't want to bring up painful memories. Better to get back to the matter at hand.

“I can give you a quick lesson on the computer when we get back. I have an appointment at two, but I can show you the basics before then.”

“I should have told you that I didn't know how to use it right away,” Joy admitted. “If you don't want me to come back, I'll understand.”

He had an out. He could let Joy go, and no one would get hurt. But then he'd be back where he started, with no secretary at all. Which was worse?

And if he let Joy go now, she'd feel like a failure. Her confidence was already dismally low. No, this was not an out for him.

“Of course I want you to come back,” he assured her. “It's your first day. First days are always hard.”

Back in the church office, Isaac did attempt to teach Joy a little about the computer. He showed her what the mouse was for, and how to open a program.

“Double click on that icon,” he said pointing to the one that would open the template for the church bulletin.

“Double click?”

“Like this.” He leaned over to take the mouse from her. This turned out to be a huge mistake. His hand covered hers on the mouse. Suddenly his senses went on high alert. He felt the softness of her skin beneath his hand, and breathed in the light flowery scent that Joy wore. He turned his head to look at her and became mesmerized by her soft hazel eyes.

The sound of the office door opening forced him back to the present, and he abruptly straightened.

What had he been doing? Oh yes, double click. “Just press the left button two times,” he said and then turned to see who had come in.

It was Misty Green, and for some reason she had a huge grin on her face. “I hope I didn’t interrupt anything.”

“Just a computer lesson,” Isaac told her.

Misty crossed the room to the bank of cubbies that served as mailboxes for church staff and leaders. Misty was the choir director and Isaac suddenly remembered that she was getting married and moving away as well. He had to find a new choir director. Great. One more thing to add to his list.

“Can I borrow your secretary for a bit,” Misty asked. “I want to go over some new music with her.”

“Yes,” said Isaac, perhaps a bit too enthusiastically. “I can spare Joy for a little while.”

As Joy and Misty walked to the choir room, Joy reflected on Isaac’s swiftly given permission for her to go. He’d said he could spare her for a while. More like forever, thought Joy. By the end of the day he’d be convinced that having no secretary would be better than having her.

“Why are you looking so down?” Misty asked. “I’d be a whole lot happier if Pastor Isaac cozied up to me like that. If I were a few years younger, of course.”

Joy thought about that moment, when his hand had covered hers. She couldn’t deny that she felt something. She felt something every time she came close to Isaac. But there was no way he’d look twice at anyone like her.

“What music did you bring?” she asked, turning the conversation to a subject she could handle. Misty opened her folder and began to show her.

Nearly an hour and a half later, Misty had gone, and Joy was absorbed in learning the new music.

When she was wrapped in music, the rest of the world ceased to exist for her. She forgot all about the computer and the phone, and even Isaac, as she played.

This time when she came to the end of the piece, she heard someone clearing his throat. Whirling around, she saw Isaac standing there. How long had he been there? How long had she been here? Glancing at the clock confirmed her suspicions. She'd stayed too long.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to take so long." She stood and began gathering up the music. In her haste some of the sheets flew out of her hands.

She dropped to her knees to pick them up. Isaac sank down next to her, his nearness causing her to fumble the sheets even more.

Instead of picking up the papers, he put his hands over both of hers. "Joy, it's all right. I don't mind that you stayed to practice."

She looked up at him and their gazes locked. In the pit of her stomach, she felt a curious flutter, caused by nervousness and...something else she didn't recognize. She tried to pull her hands away, but Isaac held them.

"You're a different person when you play the piano," he said quietly. "Which one is the real Joy?"

"I don't know what you mean."

Instead of answering Isaac lifted one hand and cupped her cheek for a moment, then softly stroked her long hair where it fell over her shoulder. "I think the real Joy is the one in the music."

Joy's heart began to beat faster. She didn't know what was going to happen next, but what did follow would have been among her last guesses.

Isaac leaned forward and kissed her, gently covering her mouth with his own. She felt a tremor run through her body. He moved away, and she wanted to cry.

But it turned out he'd only broken the kiss so he could draw her closer to him. Another kiss followed, and Joy dared to put her hands on his sides. Kissing Isaac felt like music.

Abruptly he stopped. There was a look of horror on his face. "Joy, I'm sorry. I- I don't know what came over me."

She stared at him, struggling to put words together.

"You don't have to be sorry."

"Yes, I do. I shouldn't have kissed you. It was...inappropriate." Quickly he gathered the scattered papers and standing, he tucked them back into their folder.

Joy watched him from her position on the floor. When she made no move to rise, Isaac took her hands and pulled her up. In an instant he went from apologizing to kissing her again. Joy was lost in a whirlpool of sensation and emotion.

And then suddenly, he thrust her away from him again. This time he took a few steps back and turned away from her. "Joy," he said, his voice rough. "Go home, please."

She fled, not even bothering to take the folder with her music.

Heavy clouds hung low in the sky, creating an artificial twilight. Joy made it home without shedding a tear. She stumbled in through the kitchen, dark and silent without Rosie, but it was just as well she wasn't here, Joy told herself. Rosie would know something was wrong and wouldn't rest until she'd dragged it out of her. And this was something Joy couldn't tell Rosie. Kissing the pastor—she'd be shocked.

She scrambled upstairs to her room where she changed from a skirt and blouse to a pair of faded jeans and a heavy sweater. She was getting ready to

serve the birds their afternoon meal.

The tears began as she was putting on her gloves. She yanked a stack of tissues from a nearby box and shoved them into a pocket, picked up her five gallon pail of birdseed, and headed outside, regardless of the tears.

There were several different types of feeders. Some hung from the trees, cylinders with dowels for perches. Thistle seed went into these to attract nuthatches and other small birds. It was difficult for the bigger birds like blue jays to feed from them. Some birdfeeders, she'd mounted on posts and those opened from the top. Joy filled these with a seed mixture that was almost half sunflower seeds. Another type of feeder was like a little cage that hung from a branch. She filled these with suet.

As she worked, she relaxed. She was able to stop crying and to think about what had happened.

Isaac had kissed her. Really kissed her. Her hands stilled as she remembered it. Okay, that wasn't helping.

Joy gulped in several breaths of the cold air to clear her head. He'd kissed her and then apologized. And then he'd kissed her again and told her to go home. Talk about mixed signals.

What did she do? Did she go back to work tomorrow? Should she pretend nothing had happened or should she insist that Isaac give her an explanation?

Ha, that was funny. She'd never insisted on anything in her life. Except for maybe her music lessons and her birdfeeders. Those were the only things she'd ever asked her grandfather for.

At eight she already had a couple of years of piano lessons under her belt. Once her grandfather had heard how well she could play, he was very willing for her to continue.

The birdfeeders were another matter.

Grandfather hated them. He said they spoiled the yard and looked tacky. She wasn't sure, but Joy thought maybe Rosie had had a word with him and convinced him to let her put up her first feeder. Every time she added one, Grandfather would fuss, but sometimes she caught him watching the birds and if not smiling, at least not looking as fierce as he usually did. And he had given her books about birds several times for Christmas.

But Joy didn't think she could insist that Isaac give her an explanation. Even thinking about discussing it made her stomach knot.

She stayed outside for a long time, until the cold had seeped through her winter coat and chilled her through and through. By then the twilight was natural and not brought on by heavy clouds.

She had thought her situation through again and again. There was still one big question unanswered—should she go in to work tomorrow or should she consider herself fired?

There was no hot cocoa or tea waiting for her when she came in, reminding her again that Rosie was gone. The house was dark and depressing without her. Joy shook with cold, her teeth chattering as she filled the kettle and put it on the stove. Rosie would never have let her stay out so long.

And on top of it all, she had to make her own supper.

Isaac found himself on Joseph's doorstep that evening. When he'd first come to Orchard Hill years ago, he'd helped Joseph through the death of his wife. The two men had become close friends over the years. Usually Joseph came to him for counsel. But now, Isaac didn't know what to do or whom else he could talk to.

He was not surprised to find Joseph's house

empty. In resignation, Isaac walked across the yard to Harmony's house. Now that they were engaged, Joseph and his family seemed to spend most of their time there. He'd hoped to catch Joseph alone, but it didn't seem that would be possible.

He knocked on Harmony's back door, and Joseph's youngest son, fourteen year old Peter answered. "Hi Pastor," he said. "Are you looking for Dad?"

"Yes, is he here?"

"He's here somewhere."

"Any idea where?"

"I think he's upstairs. I'll take you."

"Thanks."

Peter and his brother Noah had been doing homework at the kitchen table. Noah said a quick hello and then returned to his books. As they walked through the living room they encountered Joseph's triplet nieces playing with dolls. His daughter Abby was sitting on the steps talking on the phone.

"This really is a full house," Isaac commented.

"Yeah," Peter replied with a grin. "But we like it that way."

They found Joseph and Harmony in the sewing room in the middle of a heated argument.

"But the house is perfect for it," Harmony was saying. "It's a great idea."

"It's a terrible idea," Joseph countered. "Don't you think you have enough to do without adding another career to the mix?"

"What do I have to do? I don't even have a job right now."

"And you don't need one. Think of all the time you already spend on the kids and their multitude of activities, and we're not even married yet."

"Hey, Dad, Pastor Isaac is here to see you."

Harmony and Joseph stopped arguing at once and turned toward the doorway.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt anything,” Isaac said. “If this is a bad time...”

“Don’t worry about it,” Peter commented as he turned to go back downstairs. “They’ve been having the same fight for weeks now. They’ll remember where they left off.”

Harmony looked like she wanted to sink into the floor. “I’m so sorry Isaac.”

“I don’t mean to be nosy but as your pre-marriage counselor, I feel safe in asking ‘what’s going on here?’”

Joseph pointed a finger at his soon-to-be wife. “She wants to turn my house into a hotel after we get married.”

“A bed and breakfast. It would be perfect, and I know Joseph can do a wonderful job on the renovation. He did this house after all.”

“I have nothing against women having careers, but in our case Harmony, the kids need you.”

“That’s why this would be perfect. I’d just be next door, like I am now. Besides, what did you do before me?”

“We depended on Hope a lot, but I don’t think we can do that anymore.” Joseph’s sister, Hope, had recently become engaged, just one more victim of the wedding bug that had spread through Orchard Hill in the last year.

Isaac held up his hands. “All right, this sounds like a serious disagreement. Why don’t we save it for your next counseling session?”

Harmony and Joseph, both looking relieved, agreed.

“What did you need, Isaac?” asked Joseph.

This was the part where he had to admit that he needed help, that there was a situation he couldn’t handle.

Isaac had no problem rounding up volunteers and delegating jobs. He enjoyed counseling others

and helping them overcome their problems. But it was different when you had to admit your own life wasn't perfect. He might be able to choke it out in front of Joseph, but there was no way he was going to say anything in front of Harmony.

His gaze dropped to the floor. "I just...um, needed to talk to you about something."

"What's up? No, let me guess. The Sunday School teacher wants to bring live animals into the sanctuary for the Christmas program again."

"No. This is a...personal matter."

Harmony's eyes widened as she caught on. "Oh...Where are my manners. I'll just slip down to the kitchen and make some coffee. If you'll excuse me..."

"What's the matter, Isaac?" asked Joseph, concern for his friend evident in his eyes.

He blew out a breath. This wasn't easy, and looking around at piles of fabric, bunches of lace and half-finished dresses hanging on the back of the door wasn't helping. "Can we go over to your place...or at least somewhere a little less...feminine?"

Joseph looked around. "I see your point. Let's go."

Joseph told Harmony where they were going and dropped a kiss on her cheek. Isaac heard his whispered apology for the argument before they left.

Concern for his flock always came first with Isaac. "What's the problem between you two?" he asked Joseph as they trekked back across the lawn.

"Marrying into my family is going to take a lot of adjustment," he said. "I don't want Harmony to take on too much."

Isaac looked back at her house, with light coming from many of its windows, the faint sound of happy voices filtering out across the yard. Then he considered Joseph's dark house ahead. "I think she's adjusted."

“Like you said, let’s save it for our next visit with you.” They climbed the porch steps and Joseph led Isaac through the back door and into the kitchen.

“Want anything?” asked Joseph, indicating the refrigerator.

“That’s a very tempting offer since I know Harmony has been cooking for you, but I’ll decline for now.” Isaac pulled out a chair and sat at the table.

Joseph grabbed a plate of cookies from the counter and joined Isaac at the table. “You’ve got to help me out with these,” he said. “I’m going to weigh three hundred pounds by the time we get to the wedding.”

Isaac bit into a cookie. They were oatmeal with dried cranberries and white chocolate pieces. “Tell Harmony these are great.”

“Harmony didn’t make them. Peter did.”

“Peter?”

“Yes, he’s following in Harmony’s footsteps apparently. With two bakers in the family there’s no hope for our waistlines.”

Isaac could hear the pride in Joseph’s voice, behind the complaint.

“But we didn’t come over here to talk about cookies. What’s the matter Isaac?”

It was easier to discuss the cookies. “I don’t know where to start.”

“Just tell me what it’s about. You’re worrying me with all this beating around the bush. This isn’t like you.”

Isaac leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. “Today was Joy’s first day.”

“Didn’t it go well?”

“You could say that.”

“So what? You need to fire her, and you don’t want to hurt her feelings.”

“No.” Isaac sighed and opened his eyes, leveling

his gaze on Joseph. "I kissed her."

Joseph's jaw dropped. He looked like a fish pulled suddenly from the water, gasping for breath. Then he closed his mouth and shook his head. "That is the last thing I ever expected to hear from you."

"I really made a mess of it, too." Isaac related the whole incident to Joseph.

When he was finished Joseph took a minute to mull over the situation. Then he said "You're about the most date-shy man I've ever known. Why Joy? Why now?"

Isaac slumped down in his chair and laid his arms on the table. "I don't know. But I do know that Joy is the last person I should date."

"Why? Because it will cause gossip? You keep using that excuse but it's wearing thin."

"It's not an excuse," Isaac snapped. "I know what kind of damage gossip can do."

Joseph leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. "Tell me about it."

"All right. When I was an intern, I dated a few girls in my congregation. Whenever I broke up with any of them, the gossips would dissect the whole relationship. I could handle that. I know a pastor is sort of a public figure, and his life is always open for discussion."

"So what's the problem then?"

"One time, and I have no idea why, the gossips decided that a girl I had dated had treated me badly. Rumors started, everyone took sides, and she ended up leaving the congregation."

"How do you know that would happen again? Orchard Hill is a different community. Maybe they won't react the same way."

"I can't chance that with Joy. She's already so shy; it would kill her to have everyone discussing her, judging her." Isaac laid his head down on the table. "What do I do?"

"I guess you apologize and don't kiss her anymore," Joseph suggested.

Isaac raised his head enough for one eye to peep out over his arms. "I don't know if I can do that if we're going to work together."

"Are you saying you have a problem with self-control, pastor?"

His friend's use of his title was a dig, but Isaac let it go because he deserved it.

"Look, I didn't intend to kiss her today, but it happened. It could happen again."

The room grew silent as both men contemplated the problem. Then Joseph said, "Let me see if I have this straight. You're attracted to Joy, so you're worried you might...kiss her again, but you won't ask her out because you're afraid she could get hurt."

"Isn't that what I've been telling you for the last quarter of an hour?"

"So you really care about her."

"I do. I have for a long time, now."

"You certainly kept that secret well. I had no idea."

"That's the point, isn't it?" Isaac rose and began to pace. "What should I do?"

"The way I see it," Joseph said "You have two choices. You can do nothing, or you can take a chance and ask her out. Go somewhere outside of Orchard Hill. The gossips won't catch on right away."

Isaac shook his head. "I can't chance it with Joy."

Joseph watched his friend as he circled the kitchen. "Then I guess you'll just have to get over her."

"I can't do that either. Don't you think I've tried?"

"Isaac, Joy has led a very sheltered life. Maybe it would be good for her to get out and experience the

world a little more. Sometimes even a little heartache is good for you. Builds character and all that. I think I remember you telling me something like that once.”

Isaac stopped pacing. “Okay, I think I’m going to choose option number three here.”

“I don’t remember there being a third option.”

“The third option is this—pray for self control and continue to admire her from afar. And get her out of my office. That’s what I need to do. Put some space between us again.”

Joy didn’t show up for work the next morning, and initially, Isaac was glad. By noon, he was swamped, and by three o’clock he had no idea how he would finish his sermon and the bulletin and the announcements by Sunday or how the newsletter would get out and the bills be paid this month. He missed a meeting with the other Orchard Hill clergy because no one reminded him about it. By the end of the day, he was feeling pretty much hopeless.

At the end of his rope, Isaac made a decision. He was desperate. She would be disappointed. She would probably yell at him. But he had to do it. He picked up the phone and dialed Pansy’s number.

“Pansy, I’m begging you,” he found himself saying “Please come in just for a couple of hours tomorrow and help me get things straightened out.”

“Is Joy having problems?”

“I...I sort of fired Joy.” More like scared her away, but Pansy didn’t need to know everything.

“What! After only one day? Isaac Larson what did you do to that poor girl?”

“Nothing.” *That I’m going to tell you about*, he added silently. “It just didn’t work out, okay.”

“Well, I suppose I could come in for a couple of hours, but don’t think this means I’m coming back.”

“I won’t ask you again, I promise.”

Isaac hung up the phone, relieved to have that taken care of. Now he had a bigger problem to deal with. He closed up the office and drove to Joy's house.

Once again, it struck him how out of sync with Joy's personality this place was. Her grandfather had passed away. Why didn't she sell the house and move somewhere else?

He heard music playing softly as he stepped up to the door and rang the bell. There was no answer. After a minute or so, he rang again. He had to ring the bell four times before the music stopped and Joy herself opened the door.

Afraid she'd shut it in his face if he hesitated, Isaac blurted out "Joy, I need to talk to you."

She looked at him for a minute, as if considering it. Then she stepped back and said, "All right. Come in."

"Why didn't Rosie answer the door?" he asked.

"She's on vacation, at her son's house until after Christmas."

They were alone. Isaac hadn't expected this. "Maybe we should go to Grace's and get some coffee."

"No, I can make coffee if you want."

He didn't need coffee. He needed a chaperone. But on the other hand, it was unlikely that anyone would notice his car from the street. The house was set back, and the top of the circular drive was hard to see from there. He wanted to get this over with, so he decided to stay.

Joy took him to a different room than the formal parlor Rosie showed him to. He knew instantly that this room belonged to her. It held a piano with sheet music piled on it, worn but comfortable furniture, shelves of books, and a set of French doors flanked by windows, allowing an excellent view of the yard—and the birds.

Nothing matched in this room. It looked as

though it someone had furnished it with cast-offs and then left it in comfortable disarray. The piano, a baby grand that took up more than half the space, was different though. It was polished to a high sheen and obviously an expensive instrument.

Instead of sitting, Joy went to the window, crossed her arms over her chest and stared out. Isaac, not knowing what else to do, joined her there. "I wanted to talk to you about yesterday."

Her gaze never wavered from the window. "I'm a bit confused about that."

"Yes, well, I'm sorry."

She made no reply and so he went on. "I suppose after yesterday, it's obvious that I find you...attractive."

Still she said nothing and continued to look out the window instead of at him. She wasn't going to make this easy, but what did he expect? That she would laugh it all off and tell him it was okay.

"But I don't think it would be a good idea for us to see each other."

"Why not?"

That was a bold retort coming from Joy, who had never questioned him on anything before. Isaac was a little surprised.

"Listen, Joy..." He found himself moving closer to her in spite of his promise to himself that he would keep his distance

"A pastor's life is examined by everyone in the congregation, and sometimes farther out into the community. I live under constant scrutiny and that would extend to...to anyone I dated."

He put his hands on her shoulders and turned her so he could see her face. "I couldn't do that to you, Joy. You know you couldn't handle it."

Her expression was bleak and it twisted his heart. Without thinking he drew her into an embrace. Joy buried her face in his chest. Regret

tore at him because she felt so perfect in his arms.

They stood like that for a long time, until the sun had sunk low in the sky, and the bird feeders cast strange shadows across the lawn. All the birds had long since flown away to their nests.

“I should go,” he forced himself to say. There wasn’t anything to be gained by staying here longer. Joy didn’t say anything, but she lifted her face and her eyes were clearly asking him not to leave.

Isaac felt his heart break, torn in two by his desire to do what was right and his feelings for Joy. He tried to explain himself again. “I’m only doing this because...I care about you, Joy.”

He kissed her one more time, one last time. He promised himself that it would end here. But if this was the end, he wanted to remember everything, the scent of her hair, the warmth of her body and how it fit with his, feeling her heart beat against his chest and the sweet softness of her lips pressed against his. This was the end.

After he left her, Joy sank into one of the armchairs in the room and thought things through. The memory of that last kiss tended to distract her, but by the time the darkness filled the room, she thought she had a handle on things.

Isaac cared for her. That was incredible. She’d admired him for years—in the sort of distant way one does to someone she believes is unattainable, completely out of her league. The fact that he’d noticed her at all was incredible and wonderful.

And he was walking away from her before they even tried a relationship, because he believed it was the right thing to do.

Joy had no doubt of his sincerity. A person who sat on the sidelines and observed everything, she knew Isaac even better than he seemed to know her. He was, above all, an honorable man with an open

heart for all those in need. She knew he would never intentionally hurt her.

But he believed that association with him would hurt her, and he may not be wrong, she admitted. The idea of being the center of the congregation's attention, even in a positive way, sent a shiver through her. There were grounds for Isaac's thinking.

He never meant to tell her about his feelings. Only a moment of weakness had revealed them. She wouldn't have guessed otherwise. And in his momentary lapse, he'd revealed his feelings. It was as if a treasure had been dangled in front of her and then snatched away.

He refused to pursue a relationship with her because she'd never learned to conquer her social anxiety.

Noticing how late it was getting, Joy rose and dutifully made supper for herself. Rosie would ask about that when she called, and Joy didn't want to lie. Her heavy heart chased away her appetite, and she barely ate half of the soup and sandwich she'd made.

"I wish I didn't know," Joy thought as she got ready for bed. She tucked herself in and then reached for her Bible to read and pray a little as she did before sleep each night.

She'd been stoic up until now, but the tears she'd been holding back since Isaac left, began to escape, sliding down her cheeks, one after another. Unable to concentrate, she skipped the reading and went straight to the prayer.

She opened her heart before the Lord and laid everything before him. Then exhausted, she fell asleep.

"What in the world happened in here?"

This explosion of words marked Pansy's entry

into the office.

“It’s only been two days,” she cried and then pointed an accusatory finger at Isaac as he emerged from his own office. “What did you do?”

It was judgment day and the wrath of Pansy Parker descended upon Isaac.

“I can’t believe this,” she mumbled as she bustled around the office, straightening, sorting and organizing as she went. “It looks like a tornado swept through here.”

Isaac dared to defend himself. “How do you know this is my fault?”

“Because vandals would have had to break in and the door is still in tact.”

He retreated to his own office and waited for the commotion to die down in the outer office. When it was finally quiet, he poked his head out cautiously. “All clear?” he asked.

Pansy shot him a glare so icy he was afraid it might leave frost bite. “No, it is not. Come here young man and explain yourself to me.”

Not even his own mother would have presumed to speak to him in such a tone anymore, but rather than being affronted, Isaac was abashed. He came forward, feeling like a child being called before the principal.

“Why did you fire Joy?”

“She didn’t even know how to turn on the computer.”

“You could have taught her,” Pansy argued. “You didn’t just abandon her and lock yourself in that office did you?”

Isaac hung his head. “I might have.”

“Joy would have been fine, if you’d given her a little support, you know.”

“I know.”

Pansy sighed and sat down in her chair. She motioned for Isaac to take a seat next to her.

“You know I’m not one to gossip, Isaac. Well, not much,” she amended hastily. “But maybe it would help if I told you a little about Joy.”

“No, really, you don’t have to...” His voice trailed off as Pansy fixed a stern look on him. Not as bad as the ice glare earlier, but enough to make him close his mouth and listen.

“Joy’s grandfather, Gabriel Harper, was a good man but rather a tyrant. He ruled his family with more discipline than love. When his wife passed away, their daughter, Amy, had a hard time and Gabriel was a stoic. I don’t think she received any comfort from him.”

“What does that have to do...?”

“Don’t interrupt. Do I do this to you while you’re giving a sermon?”

“Sorry.”

“Amy ran away. Gabriel didn’t hear from her for a couple of years. Then she wrote to tell him about Joy’s birth, but she never came back to Orchard Hill. She died when Joy must have been about eight or nine. Of course, her grandfather was her only living relative.”

Pansy paused and shook her head before going on. “Gabriel took her in, but only because there was no one else. He took care of Joy, but he never showed her a scrap of affection, and him a Christian man. I just don’t understand...Well, anyway, Joy grew up in a difficult atmosphere. She received far more criticism than encouragement. And worst of all, Gabe kept her hidden away at that house, like...like Rapunzel.”

“Why did he do that?”

“He was ashamed of her, Isaac, because she was...” Pansy paused and then drew closer to him. He leaned forward to hear her whisper “illegitimate.”

Isaac sat back, unsure what to do with this

information. As soon as she'd finished her story, Pansy was up and bustling around again. "I'm making you a list," she said "Of what needs to be done every week. If you can't keep up, you'll have to try to find volunteers." She smirked at him. "In December."

Joy woke late the next morning. Sunlight filtered through the lace curtains in her room, making patterns of shadow and light across her bed. She immediately remembered Isaac's visit the night before and started the morning under a cloud in spite of the sunshine outside.

Downstairs in the music room, she gazed out over the yard and saw that it had snowed the night before. Everything lay beneath a clean blanket of white, making the world seem new and untouched.

Joy wished that she could be new, too. She wished she could leave her timid, anxious personality behind and be given a new self. Wandering to the bookshelf, she ran her hands over the volumes she'd collected on overcoming shyness and curing social anxiety. Why hadn't any of them helped?

Next to her favorite chair, her latest volume lay. The Christian worldview from which it had been written didn't seem to help at all. Joy noticed the tickets to the Christmas concert in Green Bay sticking out. She'd bought the tickets and made a goal to ask someone to go with her. She hadn't asked anyone yet.

Maybe the reason she couldn't overcome her shyness, was that she'd never really made the effort. She read books, she made plans, but she didn't really take any action.

Joy sat down in the chair and opened the book, taking out the tickets. She already knew how Isaac felt about her, and that he was willing to sacrifice

his own wishes to keep her safe. What was she willing to do for him? Was Isaac worth the risk of humiliation and possible heartache? She ran her fingers over the slips of paper. Yes, she decided. Yes, he was.

Joy arrived for choir practice earlier than usual that night. Slipping in through a side door to avoid seeing Isaac, she went to the choir room and took out the music for the evening. Misty arrived only a few minutes after her.

After exchanging greetings, Joy gathered her courage. She slipped a hand into her pocket to touch the piece of paper that she'd written today's verse on. "With God all things are possible," Joy reminded herself. She'd decided to create two more goals. Not only was she going to ask Isaac to the concert, but she'd also promised herself she was going to get a pet. Tonight at choir practice she would take care of the third goal.

"Misty, I wanted to talk to you about that new piece we've been practicing."

"Which new piece?" the choir director asked with a smile. "It seems like we have so many at this time of year."

"The one for the Grace Place Christmas party." Every year Grace held a Christmas party at her coffee shop. She served cookies and hot chocolate while local groups took turns performing Christmas music.

"Oh yes, that's a beautiful song. You know, we're still looking for a soloist for that one." Misty was always trying to get Joy to sing. She was one of the few people who knew what her voice was like. After years of refusal, Joy thought Misty probably continued to ask out of habit rather than any real hope that Joy would change her mind.

Prepare to be amazed, Joy thought. Then, aloud

she said, "I'd like to take that solo, if you don't mind."

Misty was beyond surprised, shocked into speechlessness for a few moments.

Joy decided she was rather enjoying this.

"Do you mean it?"

"Yes," she answered with a solemn face. "I'm ready."

That night when Misty asked them to turn to their music for that song, Joy felt her heartbeat speed up and her hands become sweaty. Then Misty asked one of the choir members, who could also play the piano, to switch places with Joy. When she announced that Joy would be doing the solo, a ripple of exclamations went through the crowd.

Joy took her sheet music and went to stand with the singers. Everyone was smiling at her, and those who were close to her patted her back or squeezed her hand to show support.

They were all looking at her. She could feel their gazes even when she turned to face Misty. Her stomach began to churn. She was going to throw up, right here in the choir room.

Joy touched her pocket and remembered her bible verse. She could do this, she told herself. There were worse things than queasy stomachs and sweaty palms. She'd already memorized the piece, so when the music began, Joy closed her eyes and followed it, as though she were alone. At first, she feared her stomach would get the best of her, but then she became caught up in the music, and everything else faded away.

When the last note of the song was finished, Joy heard applause all around her. It took her a minute to realize that they were clapping for her, for her solo.

Misty came forward and gave Joy a hug. "That was just wonderful, honey. I'm so glad you decided to

sing with us.”

“Thank you. I’m glad, too. Would you just excuse me, please?” With as much dignity as she could manage, Joy left the room. As soon as the door closed behind her, she ran to the bathroom and was sick after all.

But she rinsed her mouth out and went back to the choir room, glad to be behind the piano again for the rest of the night. Before they left, Misty asked everyone to keep their new soloist a secret. “It will be a wonderful surprise for Grace’s party.”

Joy gathered her music, but she couldn’t escape without most of the choir wanting to congratulate her personally on trying to overcome her stage fright.

People were pressing around her and all talking at once. Panic rose within in her and she felt dizzy and unable to breath for a few moments. Then Misty broke up the crowd, sending people on their way home.

Joy thought she was the last to leave, except for Misty, who stayed to lock up, but Angel Marcel, the choir’s newest member, was waiting in the hallway. “I know Misty shooed us all away from you, but I really wanted to tell you how much I enjoyed your singing.”

“Thank you,” Joy replied stiffly. She wanted to be friendlier, but she wasn’t used to praise and unsure how to respond.

“Let me buy you a cup of coffee,” Angel begged. “You sang so beautifully and on your first time through. You deserve to celebrate.”

At first, Joy meant to refuse politely. She’d taken a big step tonight, and all she could think about was going home where she could be alone. But then, she decided, Angel was right. She did deserve to celebrate.

They spent an hour and a half lingering over

their drinks. Angel took care of most of the talking, and Joy was content to listen. She discovered that she liked Angel and could almost relax with her.

Angel's cell phone rang, and she dug through her purse, looking for it. "I'm sure that's Jeff," she said, referring to her fiancé. "He's dog-sitting for me tonight."

She found the phone and pulled it out. "Hello, Jeff...Yes, I know choir practice has been over for...that long? I'm sorry, but...Oh, I'll tell you about it when I get there."

"Thank you for the coffee," Joy said.

"Thank you for coming with me. I'm still sort of new in Orchard Hill, and I could use some more friends. I'm sorry to break up the party, but...well; my dog can be a bit of a handful."

"Is he a big dog?"

Angel laughed. "No, she's pretty small. The problem is that she's turned out to be an escape artist. And just lately she's figured out how to open the refrigerator."

"I've never had a pet," Joy said, without even stopping to think.

"You really should get one," Angel urged. "Orchard Hill has a great animal shelter. Go and visit. I bet you won't be able to come home alone."

Isaac managed the office much better the rest of the week, although he had to give up a few hours of sleep to do it. But working kept him from dwelling on Joy, and what Pansy had told him. A naturally compassionate person, it was difficult for Isaac to think about Joy's upbringing. Obviously, her grandfather had been wealthy enough to take care of all her physical needs, but he'd seriously neglected her emotional needs.

On the other hand, it was just as difficult for Isaac to forget what she'd said. Pansy's story

haunted him. Had he done the right thing by telling Joy he cared for her, but then walking away? He thought he was protecting her, but maybe she didn't see it that way. Maybe to Joy, he was just another person who withheld affection from her.

On Friday afternoon, Isaac had an appointment with Ian O'Neil and Lily Robinson, yet another in an endless series of pre-marriage counseling appointments. He looked forward to it with a complete lack of enthusiasm.

In fact, when the appointment time came up, Isaac was buried in some research for the Bible study he led. He didn't realize Ian and Lily were there until they knocked on his door.

"I thought Joy was filling in for Pansy," Ian said as Isaac ushered them over to the small sitting area in his office. It was more personal than staring at each other across his desk.

"She was," Isaac replied, "but..." But what? I fired her? How could he tell them that? "But I realized that I could do without a secretary until after the holidays."

Ian took a seat next to Lily. "She doesn't seem too broken up about it."

That caught Isaac's attention. "What do you mean?"

"She adopted a pet from the shelter this week and brought it into my office for a check up." Ian was a veterinarian and donated a considerable amount of his time to the shelter.

Lily was a volunteer at the shelter. "I was with her when she picked it out. She was so happy. I don't think I've ever heard her say more than two words together, but she wanted to know absolutely everything about taking care of her pet. It was like playing 'twenty questions.'"

Isaac had to get this straight. "We're talking about Joy Harper? Our organist, Joy?"

Ian and Lily both nodded. “She was really excited. I think it may be her first pet,” Ian added.

“Lots of people don’t get pets until later in life,” Lily reminded him.

“And most of them are sensible enough not to start out with a difficult case,” Ian replied, reminding her of her stubborn insistence on adopting a formerly abused cat who had serious trust issues, much like Lily herself. “But I’m glad you did, because you wouldn’t even talk to me before that cat came along.” he quickly added.

Isaac didn’t know what to make of it. He decided he’d think about it later. Right now he needed to focus on Ian and Lily, who by now were staring into each other’s eyes with love-sick expressions on their faces. If he waited any longer to begin the session, he feared they’d forget about him all together. But Isaac couldn’t resist asking “What kind of pet did she get?”

Lily smiled. “The perfect pet for Joy —a canary.”

Joy was so proud of herself she could hardly keep from smiling all day long. Not that this was a bad thing. She’d met two of her goals already and she thought that maybe she had the start of a friendship with Angel as a bonus.

She looked up, hearing a trill of a song from Mozart, her canary. She wondered what Rosie would say when she came back after Christmas. Mozart was definitely a good idea. She’d sat in her car outside the shelter for twenty minutes before she mustered up enough courage to go in. Luckily the volunteers just assumed she was there to look for a pet, because Joy could hardly get two words out, let alone give them an explanation.

She’d oohed and aahed over the dogs and cats, but when she saw the lone canary in a cage on the dryer, she knew he was for her. Her shyness ebbed

as she became concerned with the process of adoption and finding out how to care for the canary. It wasn't until after she'd gone home that she realized how much she'd talked to Lily. She recognized her from church, but didn't really know her.

Buoyed by her successes, Joy decided to set another goal for herself. She'd been sitting with the phone in her lap for half an hour, trying to decide what to say. Then she realized that all this analyzing was preventing her from actually making the call. She pulled out the slip of paper that held her latest Bible verse, Psalms 118:6—The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? She read it three times and then picked up the phone.

On Sunday, Isaac only saw Joy from afar. He saw her at the organ of course during the sermon. And he saw her heading towards the Sunday School rooms afterward. He knew she would be playing the piano for their Christmas program.

He was relieved. He wouldn't have to face her during the coffee hour. But he did see Delia Parker. A lot. Every time he turned around, she was at his elbow.

He hoped that Pansy hadn't encouraged Delia. He'd heard that Pansy occasionally dabbled in matchmaking, and the last thing he needed was her idea of the perfect helpmate.

By the time Monday rolled around, Isaac was exhausted from trying to do his own job and Pansy's. He pulled out his calendar. How many more days until Christmas—until the holiday rush was over and he could reasonably hope to find a new secretary or at least a competent temp worker?

With a sigh of resignation, Isaac closed his date-book and started to work on some notes for this

week's confirmation class. After about ten minutes, he was actually nodding over it, half asleep. The sound of the door of the outer office jerked him awake.

Great, he thought. Who could that be?

Isaac heaved himself out of his chair and forced what he hoped was a welcoming smile on his face. He crossed the room and opened his office door to find...

Joy putting her purse into Pansy's desk.

"Good morning," she said in seemingly calm voice. She sat in Pansy's chair and turned on the computer.

Maybe he was still sleeping. This couldn't be real.

"Joy? What are you doing here?"

"I'm working." She was pulling files out of Pansy's inbox, not even bothering to look at him.

"But...but...why?"

"You need a secretary."

"I thought we discussed why you couldn't be my secretary."

"No," she replied, still not looking at him. "We talked about why you couldn't date me, not..."

"All right, but I thought you understood..."

Joy stood up. "I'm going to make myself a cup of tea before I start. Do you want anything?"

Isaac shook his head and watched her walk out of the office.

Joy made it to the bathroom before she lost the contents of her stomach. She hoped Isaac hadn't seen how hard it was for her to do this. She hadn't even been able to look at him.

But she was going back in there, and she was going to do her job. Because she had to prove to herself that she could. Originally, the idea of showing Isaac she could change had motivated her.

Then, once she'd begun confronting her fears, it was more about seeing how far she could go. She thought she'd long ago given up the hope that she could lead a normal life, but now...

She'd sung in front of people. She'd had coffee with a relative stranger—and enjoyed herself. She'd adopted a pet. What else could she do? Whether things worked out with Isaac or not, she was glad she'd made the decision to move forward.

She'd spent most of the weekend working with Faith Fielding, the elementary school's secretary. When her son Kevin was younger, Faith had helped with many of the Sunday School's Christmas programs, so Joy did know Faith, although they hadn't spoken recently.

Once again, her courage had paid off. Joy was amazed that Faith not only showed her how to use the computer for both word processing and accounting, but she gave her a crash course on the other duties of a secretary. She had been the secretary at Orchard Hill Elementary for over ten years.

And was now engaged to the principal, Andrew Thomas. She was one of the brides scheduled to walk down the aisle in the coming year.

Joy had barely gotten back to her desk and seated herself when the Isaac's office door swung open. "I have a meeting," he said, striding swiftly past her.

"When...when will you be back?"

"After lunch. Maybe."

In fact, he didn't come back until it was time to close up for the day. Joy had to reschedule two appointments that he'd missed, and she had a stack of phone messages for him, but she'd made it through the day. She had the newsletter put together and had it ready for copying and mailing. She'd caught up on the filing and paid the bills. And

she'd managed to greet and speak to every person who came through the office door that day.

Admittedly that wasn't many. Clouds had rolled in and a damp chill had descended over everything. Joy was glad to be going home. Her work day had been a success, but her personal life had taken a turn for the worse. Isaac was avoiding her.

She was just shutting down the computer when Isaac came in. He stopped when he saw her. "You're still here?"

"I was just leaving, but if you need anything..."

"No."

"You have some phone messages on your desk."

"Thank you."

He was obviously waiting for her to go, so Joy came around the desk, shrugged into her coat and went to the door. He caught her arm as she passed.

"Did you drive?"

"Yes."

"It's raining and everything is turning to ice. Do you want me to take you home?"

Everything was turning to ice. Isaac certainly had. Maybe he'd realized that he'd been mistaken about his feelings for her. At any rate, she didn't want to force herself on him.

"No, thank you. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I'll see you tomorrow, Pastor."

After Joy had gone, Isaac shuffled into his office and sat down at the desk without bothering to turn on the light. He flipped through the pile of phone messages she'd left on his desk.

A groan escaped him as he saw that he'd missed two appointments today. He thought his schedule had been clear. The appointments were both—what else?—pre-marriage counseling. He was suddenly glad he'd missed them. He was sick to death of

talking about commitment and love and everything else that had to do with the married state.

There was a knock at the door—which he realized he hadn't closed. He recognized Shaun Thiesen's silhouette in the door. Isaac had been counseling, and to a certain extent, mentoring, the younger man. Shaun was not here for pre-marriage counseling. He was already married and had a baby on the way. But he and his wife had only recently reconciled after a separation. To celebrate, Shaun wanted to renew their vows. It might as well be another wedding, Isaac had thought.

"Come in, Shaun."

Shaun came in, followed by Joseph Velasquez.

"Anyone else out there?" Isaac asked with a weak grin.

"No, just us." Joseph flipped the switch and Isaac winced as the lights came on.

"So, to what do I owe the honor of this visit?"

"We heard you were AWOL today." Shaun flopped down onto one of the chairs in the sitting area.

"I took a mental health day."

Joseph came and stood across the desk from Isaac. "So we gathered. Anything you need to talk about?"

Isaac dropped his head into his hands. "How did you find out about this anyway?"

"One of the appointments you missed today was with my sister," Joseph told him. "She was worried about you."

"Tell her I'm sorry I missed the appointment, and I'm fine."

"She said Joy was working today." Joseph sauntered over to the sitting area and joined Shaun.

Great. They weren't leaving any time soon. Isaac raised his head and said in a clear voice, "I. Don't. Want. To. Talk. About. It."

"I must have told Isaac that about a hundred

times in counseling,” Shaun remarked. “You know what he did when I said that?”

“Let me guess,” Joseph replied. “Made you talk about it anyway?”

“Yeah. He just sits there and waits until you start talking.”

“Like he’s got all day, and he’s happy to spend it staring at you.”

“Exactly,” agreed Shaun. “And pretty soon you find yourself spilling your guts because you can’t stand the silence for another second.”

“The weather is getting nasty out there,” Isaac reminded them. “I believe you two have a wife and a fiancée who will both be worried if you don’t get home.”

Joseph continued, “And if you try to talk about something else as a diversion, he sees right through it and steers you back to whatever it is you need to talk about.”

“Seriously, I’m tired. I just want to go home.”
“Couldn’t these guys take a hint?”

“You know what I think his problem is?” Shaun asked Joseph. “I think it’s all these weddings that are getting to him. Too much stress.”

“That could be part of it,” said Joseph. “But I don’t think that’s all.”

“Guys, I said I don’t want to talk about it.”

“We know,” Joseph said to him over his shoulder. “We weren’t asking you to talk about it.”

Shaun sat up in his chair. “Hey, I think I know the rest. It’s really hard planning all these wedding ceremonies when you’re alone...”

“But there’s someone you love...” Joseph added. “And you have no intention of ever doing anything about it.”

Isaac rose from his seat at the desk and walked over to his friends, the intruders. He crossed his arms and glared down at them. “So if you two are so

smart, then what exactly do you think I should do about it?"

Shaun and Joseph exchanged looks. In chorus they responded "Want to talk about it?"

Isaac groaned and collapsed onto a chair. Sometimes friends were a mixed blessing.

Though nothing had been resolved when Shaun and Joseph left, Isaac had to admit he felt better for talking about it. He thought he could probably manage to stay in his own office tomorrow.

The next morning, Joy was very careful as she filled her birdfeeders. The walkways in the garden were slick from yesterday's rain, frozen into a sheet of ice. She felt sort of bad about feeding the birds and leaving. She was used to spending time with them before going back in, but the icy walks had already made her late.

She was even more nervous today than she was yesterday. What if Isaac made her go home today? What if he was angry that she came back?

Maybe she should stay home today. Yes, she'd be better off staying home. She couldn't do this after all.

Joy stopped and took several long deep breaths. She remembered how good she felt when she'd sung the solo. Well, after her stomach had calmed down, anyway. Did she really want to crawl back into her shell?

No, she didn't.

She finished getting ready for work, mentally building up her "determined to succeed" attitude. Before she left the house, she slipped the Christmas concert tickets into her bag. Maybe today would be the day she'd ask him.

A nearby farm delivered Christmas trees to the church that day. Pansy usually decorated the tree that was set up in the gathering space, while the

Sunday School children decorated their own tree. Decorating the big tree in the sanctuary was a youth event.

Joy wasn't sure where the decorations for the tree were stored. Isaac was in his office today, but he'd barely said two words to her. Should she ask him or not? Okay, she should, but Joy didn't think her bravery had yet extended itself to asking grumpy men for help.

Well, she supposed she could call Pansy. The last few times she'd phoned Pansy for help, she'd gotten no answer. This time, thankfully, she picked up.

Pansy's instructions led her down to a basement storage room that was filled to bursting with various boxes and items that were only used occasionally by the church. Joy flipped the light switch and a bare bulb snapped to life. It wasn't enough light to illuminate the corners of the large room, and so Joy went in search of a flashlight. She began picking her way down the aisles, reading the labels on the various boxes. Thank goodness they're marked.

The phone rang, and no one answered it. Isaac heard it, but he thought that Joy was in the office so he didn't pick up. The phone continued to ring.

He got up and peeked into the outer office. It was empty. He walked over to Joy's desk and picked up the phone. "Orchard Hill Community Church, Pastor Isaac speaking."

Pansy's crisp voice came over the line. "Isaac, all this packing I'm doing has got me so confused. I gave Joy the wrong location for the Christmas decorations. They're in the supply closet on the top shelf. I told her they were in the storage room downstairs."

"Pansy, it's not like you to make a mistake like that."

"I'm seventy five years old, I'm getting married and moving across the country. Give me a break," she snapped.

"All right. I'll tell her when she comes up."

"No, you'd better go get her. She could be searching through that storage room all afternoon."

Isaac sighed. "Right."

"Oh, and by the way, Delia says 'hello.' She thinks I should invite you over to dinner this week."

"Um...I'd better go find Joy. I'll talk to you later Pansy." He quickly hung up the phone.

So Pansy *was* trying to set him up with her niece. Luckily he'd seen through that one.

Isaac went downstairs to find Joy. It had been a long time since he'd visited that storeroom. He'd forgotten how dark and dusty it was. At the entrance he called out, "Joy, where are you?"

"Back here."

He turned in the direction he thought her voice came from. "Pansy called. She said she was mistaken about the decorations being down here. Come back up."

"Okay."

Isaac jumped as Joy popped out from behind a stack of boxes, practically under his nose.

"I'm sorry."

"That's all right. Let's go back." Isaac allowed Joy to precede him out of the room and up the stairs.

"Where did Pansy say the decorations were?" Joy asked.

"In the supply closet on the top shelf." Isaac wanted to disappear back into his office, but he knew how high the top shelf was, and he doubted Joy could reach it even using the step stool Pansy kept there. "I'll help you."

"Thank you."

He retrieved the box and brought it out by the tree. He watched as Joy opened it and began to sort

through the ornaments inside.

“I should really get back to work,” he said.

“All right.” She didn’t even look up at him. Somehow this bothered Isaac. Here he was putting all his willpower into not touching her, and she seemed totally oblivious to him.

“Do you need help untangling and testing the lights?”

This time she did look up at him, and that look was blank. “I have to test the lights?”

“Yes, you don’t want to go through all the work of putting the lights on and then find out that there’s a short in the string.”

“Oh.” She studied the mass of cord and tiny bulbs in her hands. “Maybe I can just do the rest and then add the lights later.”

“Joy, the lights have to go first.”

“They do?”

“Haven’t you ever decorated a Christmas tree before?”

“Well...um...no.”

“You don’t have a tree at your house?”

“When Grandfather was still alive, he had the staff take care of it. After he passed away...I only kept Rosie on, and she’s gone at Christmas, so I never bothered.”

That was the saddest thing Isaac had ever heard. He found himself kneeling on the floor next to her. “All right. I’ll show you how to do it.”

For the next hour or so, he and Joy strung lights and garland and hung ornaments on the tree. And, Isaac realized he was having fun. When it came down to placing the angel on top of the tree, he handed it to her. “It’s your first Christmas tree. You should have the honor.”

Her eyes lit up, and her cheeks flushed with pleasure. Isaac took her free hand to steady her as she climbed onto the step stool and placed the angel

on top of the tree. He plugged in the lights, and she actually clapped her hands in excitement as the tree lit up.

“Isaac, it’s beautiful. Thank you for helping me.”

She looked far more like an angel to him than the doll on top of the tree. He enjoyed the time they spent together. Until now, her shyness had placed a wall between them.

Joy seemed different the last couple of days. She was still shy and hesitant, but not tongue tied and panic stricken. What was going on?

“Isaac...”

Joy had taken her attention from the tree and was looking at him now. She was clutching the edges of her cardigan in a clearly nervous gesture. Maybe she wasn’t so different after all.

“There’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“OK. What?”

She dropped her gaze to the carpet.

“Joy,” he prompted “What is it?”

“Would you...would you...?” She hesitated again and then finished in the tiny, breathy voice he was more familiar with. “Would you put the box back in the storage closet for me until it’s time to take the tree down again?”

“Sure.”

Joy was downhearted about her failure that day. She’d been so close to asking him to the concert, and then her courage had deserted her. Apparently, she wasn’t cured yet.

“The concert is this weekend,” she told Mozart as he flitted about in the large cage she’d bought for him. “If I don’t ask him soon, it will be too late.”

Rosie called and was delighted with how well the secretary’s job was going, and she was surprised about Mozart.

“I’m surprised you found a canary at an animal

shelter. Don't they mostly keep dogs and cats?"

"Yes," Joy agreed. "But they told me they get an occasional small animal. Mozart's owner passed away and none of the family wanted him. Wait until you hear him sing. He sounds beautiful."

"Maybe you should go back and get a puppy or a kitten, something you can cuddle."

"I don't know Rosie. Maybe someday."

The subject switched then to whether she'd been eating, and if she was dressing warmly enough.

"I heard there was freezing rain up there this week. Is that right?"

"Yes, Rosie. It's still very slippery, but I promise I'm being careful."

"Be extra careful for me, all right?"

"I promise." Joy knew she was too old for Rosie to fuss over her like this, but she enjoyed it. It was good to know someone was watching out for her.

At five o'clock the next day, Isaac came out and locked his office door behind him. Joy looked up from her desk to say good night.

"Aren't you going home?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Choir practice tonight. I figured I might as well stay until it starts. There's no point in going home and coming back."

"What about supper?"

"I'll get something later." She hoped that not eating beforehand would make another emergency trip to the bathroom unnecessary.

"You have to eat."

"I will. Later. Right now I have a few things to catch up on."

"You eat like those birds you love so much."

"Actually birds eat quite a lot, especially at this time of year. It takes a lot of energy to keep warm."

"It takes a lot of energy to work all day and then play for the choir."

Joy hated arguing. If Isaac didn't leave her alone, she'd show up at choir with her stomach already upset.

"Isaac, please..."

He held up his hands. "All right. I'm going."

After he left, the office was deafeningly quiet. Joy hummed to herself as she typed up the minutes for the council meeting. Typing was still a slow job. She used what Pansy had called the biblical method of typing—seek and ye shall find.

As Joy became absorbed in finding the right keys to strike, the rest of the world faded away. Without realizing it, she switched from humming to singing Christmas carols softly. Maybe that was why she didn't hear the door open.

A cough got her attention. She jumped a little as she looked up and saw Isaac standing in front of her.

"How long have you been there?"

"A few minutes."

"Well, why didn't you say something?"

Isaac shrugged. "You were singing. I like to hear you sing."

Joy's face warmed. He liked her singing. Now she was sure she'd made the right decision in asking for the solo.

"I brought you supper," Isaac said in a gruff voice.

Joy raised her eyebrows in surprise. "You did?"

He lifted a wicker hamper up and set it on her desk. "I can't have you fainting away. People would say I'm overworking you."

Joy looked at the hamper. "How much food is in there? Am I supposed to share it with the rest of the choir?"

"No." Isaac hesitated and then asked "But would you share it with me?"

He'd brought her food, and he wanted to eat with her. Hope filled her heart. "Sure. Thank you,

Isaac.”

He was going to pull a chair up to her desk but Joy stopped him. “I have a better idea.” She went out into the gathering space and turned on the lights for the tree they had decorated. “Let’s eat out here.”

She had to go down to the kitchen to find a small tablecloth they could spread on the ground. Then Isaac set out the food. It wasn’t fancy—sandwiches, grapes and chips. But he’d made it for her, and Joy was happy.

Sitting next to the softly lit tree, Isaac talked about his family. Joy loved hearing about his childhood, and the time passed quickly. When she glanced at the clock she was surprised to see that it was almost time for choir practice to begin.

She was tempted to skip it or at least be late. Then it occurred to Joy that now was the perfect time to ask Isaac about the concert. The picnic was almost a date in itself. Asking him to go with her to the concert wouldn’t be such a big step.

Isaac finished the story he’d been telling about spending summers on his grandfather’s farm, and she mentioned it was almost time for her to go. “Thank you again, Isaac. I really enjoyed our picnic.”

“It was nothing,” he insisted.

“No, it was very nice of you.” It was now or never. “There’s a Christmas concert in Green Bay on Friday. I have tickets.”

“I think I know which one you mean they’ve been advertising it on the radio.”

“Would you like to go with me?”

The question clearly surprised Isaac. “Go...with you? Do you mean like a date.”

Her voice had deserted her so she merely nodded.

“I thought we’d talked about this. I can’t go out with you, Joy.” He began picking up the remains of their picnic. “I’m sorry. You know I wish it were

different.”

Joy said nothing as she helped Isaac put things away. *No, he doesn't wish things were different. If he did, he'd risk it, but he doesn't really want to take a chance on me.* She wouldn't be sorry though. She might have failed with Isaac, but she'd found her courage, and that was enough in itself.

She made it through choir practice, although her performance felt a little wooden. Afterwards, Angel suggested they go out for coffee again. “I warned Jeff this might happen, so he's prepared to stay with Cherub a little longer.”

“Cherub? Is that your dog's name?” asked Joy as she fell into step with Angel. She was glad Angel had suggested this because she didn't want to go home to an empty house just yet, and didn't think she was up to asking about it after her earlier rejection.

“Yes. My cousin Misty said a cherub was the perfect companion for an Angel.”

“I hope Jeff doesn't mind dog-sitting a little longer.”

“Actually he loves Cherub as much as I do. He's just not as patient with her little quirks as I am. Anyway, I bought a lock for his refrigerator so we should be fine.”

Settled in at the Grace Place, with a cup of peppermint tea and Christmas music playing softly in the background, Joy began to relax. Angel talked about Jeff and their wedding plans. She wished she could tell Angel about her problems with Isaac, but she wasn't ready just yet.

The concert did come up, though. Angel mentioned that she and Jeff wanted to see it but that tickets were sold out. “Next year we won't wait so long to call.”

“I have tickets,” Joy blurted out.

“Really? Lucky you. Who are you going with?”

Joy reached into her purse and pulled out the tickets. “No one. It turns out I can’t go. You and Jeff should use them.”

Angel’s face lit up, and Joy decided she’d made the right decision. It took a little convincing to get her to take them, but by now, Joy didn’t want to go anyway.

When they emerged from the coffee shop, fat flakes of snow were drifting down from the sky.

Angel frowned. “I love snow, but we don’t need this.”

“A layer of snow over the ice we already have will make everything even more slippery,” Joy agreed.

The women carefully made their way to their cars. They said good night and went their separate ways.

At home, Isaac wondered if he’d made a mistake by telling Joy he wouldn’t go with her to the concert. Maybe he’d been dodging relationships for so long, it was a reflex. He remembered telling Joseph that he wouldn’t ask anyone out until he found someone really special. Was Joy that person?

He knew she was. And he’d been serious when he’d said he wouldn’t date her because of what she might suffer at the hands of the gossips. But lately, Joy had been different, braver. Maybe it was time to lay down his defenses.

The next morning, Isaac decided to ask Joy if her offer to go to the concert was still open. He got to work early and then waited impatiently for her to arrive. The time for her to start work came and went and there was no sign of Joy.

He wondered if she was upset with him because he’d refused her offer. Would she skip work because of that?

That simply wasn’t acceptable, Isaac decided,

picking up the phone. He let it ring about fifteen times and finally hung up. Maybe she was on her way. Another fifteen minutes passed, and still she hadn't come in.

He heard the door to the outer office open and was up out of his seat before he even thought about it. It wasn't Joy, however.

"Good morning Angel. Can I help you?"

"No," she replied. "I'm looking for Joy. I wanted to give her these." Angel held out a plate of cookies.

"She's not here," grumbled Isaac. "She's late obviously."

"That's too bad. I wanted to thank her."

"Thank her for what?"

"She gave me a pair of tickets for a concert in Green Bay. Jeff and I wanted to go, but it's sold out. When I told Joy, she pulled out a pair of tickets, and said she couldn't go so we should use them."

"When did she do that?"

"We went out for coffee last night after choir practice."

Isaac considered this information. Joy was a sensitive person. If she'd really been upset by his refusal, he doubted she'd have made it through practice. She certainly wouldn't have gone out afterward. "She didn't say anything about me, did she?" The words came out before he thought what he was saying.

Angel looked puzzled. "No, we didn't talk about you at all."

It didn't seem as if she were mad at him. So where was Joy? "I'll just give her a call," Isaac said. "See what the problem is."

He let the phone ring at least twenty times before hanging up. "I think I'll stop by and see what's keeping her." He tried to keep his voice light, but the smallest bit of worry had squeezed its way in.

“Do you mind if I come along?”

For all her insistence that she wouldn't let Isaac's refusal bother her, Joy was upset. She'd managed to push it to the back of her mind for the evening, which she supposed was proof that she was getting a handle on her anxiety. But once at home alone, the memory returned, along with her old friends, doubt and self-loathing. It made for a long night. She finally fell asleep in the wee hours of the morning.

When she opened her eyes again, it was day. Joy turned her head and looked at the clock. Shocked, she sat up with a jerk. She was late for work.

Joy threw off her covers and went about her morning routine double time. She could skip her own breakfast, but one thing she wouldn't do, was leave without feeding her birds.

Hurriedly Joy bundled up and went outside to fill the feeders. In her haste, she wasn't as careful as she usually was, ignoring the treacherous layer of ice lurking just beneath the snow. She'd filled most of the feeders before she hit a particularly bad spot. Her foot slid, her knee twisted, and she came down hard, striking her head against a concrete planter.

Something was tickling her just below her chin. She should move away, Joy knew, but for some reason her whole body ached. The tickling sensation increased and finally she had to shake her head. The whir of wings brought her back, even while the motion of her head made her stomach turn.

A chickadee must have burrowed into her scarf, hoping to keep warm. She shooed away another one who was cuddling next to her cheek and then lay still for a few moments, trying to piece together what had happened.

Joy tried to sit up and was forced to sink back as

spots danced in front of eyes and her stomach gave her a serious warning. But she couldn't lay here in the snow. She'd freeze.

Slowly, and with much protest from her sore body, Joy sat up, using the planter she'd hit her head on for support. When her head stopped spinning, she decided to attempt standing up.

This was a mistake. Not only did the spots come back, but her right knee gave out as soon as she tried to put weight on it. With a cry, Joy fell back into a heap in the snow.

She tried to flex her knee. It felt swollen and stiff and painful. Great.

Joy hooked one gloved hand onto the side of the planter, pulled herself back into a sitting position and waited for her head to clear.

With horror she noticed a smudge of red on the planter where she'd hit her head. Blood. By slowly turning her head, she saw more blood in the snow where she'd lain. This was not good. It was really, really not good.

No wonder her head hurt. She decided not to take off her gloves so she could explore the damage to her head. Getting inside was more important. Plus she wasn't sure she really wanted to know yet.

If she couldn't stand, she couldn't walk. Unfortunately, the only way to get back to the house was to scoot like a three legged crab up the path. One good thing about being alone, she thought: no one to see this.

Her progress was slow. If she moved too swiftly, her head swam, and her stomach heaved. Soon she was shivering so hard it was even difficult to scoot along the path.

Finally, she made it to the house and scooted up the steps and into the entryway. A few more feet, and she was in the kitchen where it was warm. Not that she could feel it yet.

Sitting on the floor, Joy attempted to get her outer clothes off. The snow that had accumulated was melting, dripping into puddles around her. Her fingers were stiff and uncooperative.

First, she pried off her gloves. Maybe she wouldn't be so clumsy then. Next she pushed off her stocking cap. Part of it was matted to her hair with dried blood, and she had to pull it free. Not wanting to look at it, Joy tossed the hat away from her. Then she started to unzip her coat.

As the heat penetrated her skin, sensation returned. And the initial sensation was pain—sharp, shooting, burning pain in her hands. She'd suffered in silence so far, but with this new development, Joy couldn't hold in her cries.

She leaned back against the kitchen island and sent up a prayer. This was one situation she didn't think she could handle by herself.

Angel and Isaac stood outside Joy's front door. He put his hand out and rung the bell again. "Where is she?"

"Is it locked? Maybe we should just go in," suggested Angel.

It was locked. "Let's go around to the back."

They tromped through a foot of snow to get to the back door. Angel stopped when she saw all the birds and bird feeders. "This is amazing."

Isaac spotted the pail of birdseed left under one of the feeders. Joy must have been out here this morning. He didn't stop to look at anything more. "Be careful, the walk is slippery," he warned Angel before climbing the steps to the back door.

As soon as he stepped into the entryway, he heard the small whimpers of pain. He didn't stop, but moved through to the kitchen.

The bottom dropped out of Isaac's stomach the moment he saw Joy. She was as pale as the linoleum

she sat on, her hazel eyes brimming with tears. She held her hands, clutched to her chest.

Isaac dropped to his knees next to Joy. He heard Angel come in and gasp. He felt her move past him, but all his attention was focused on Joy.

“What happened?”

“I fell on the ice.”

As he moved closer to her Isaac noticed the blood in her hair. “Did you hit your head? Did you pass out?”

“Yes.”

“Are you hurt anywhere else?”

“My knee. I can’t stand.”

Angel came back with a quilt. “Help her out of her coat. We have to get her warm.”

As he pulled the coat from her, Isaac told Angel. “She needs a doctor. I’m taking her to the hospital.”

Angel nodded, wrapping the quilt around Joy. “I’ll get some of her things together and then follow you.”

“But your car is at the church.”

“I’ll call Jeff. I’m sure he’ll pick me up.”

Isaac didn’t wait for her to check with Jeff before lifting Joy up and carrying her out to the car. Angel went ahead so she could open the doors for him.

“Call the hospital and tell them we’re coming.” He set Joy in the front seat and buckled her in. He took a moment to study her. He didn’t like the glassy look that had crept into her eyes. He shook her gently. “Joy.”

She blinked. “What?” Her voice sounded smaller and softer than he’d ever heard it before.

“Stay with me, all right. Don’t fall asleep.”

“I’ll try.”

But in the short time it took for him to come around to the driver’s side and slide into his seat, Joy’s eyelids had started to close.

He took her cold hand in his. "Joy, wake up."

"I'm sorry." Her words came out slow and sounding slurred.

"Sing for me, Joy, please."

"Not now, Isaac."

"Yes, now. I'll sing with you. How about 'Jingle Bells.'"

It was definitely not her best performance, but Isaac managed to keep her singing and awake until they reached Orchard Hill's small hospital. Angel must have remembered to call because there was an orderly ready with a wheelchair when he pulled up. He'd never felt more helpless in his life as he did standing in the waiting room, watching Joy be wheeled away from him.

He'd done a fair amount of waiting room vigils, but never like this. Before, it was always someone else's loved one that he waited for news about. Usually he was with someone and was busy offering comfort and support.

But this time he was alone, and he was the one in need of support. Isaac was seeing things from an entirely different perspective.

And the worst part, he grimly acknowledged, was that as far as the world was concerned, Joy was nothing to him. She was a member of his congregation and of the church staff. Right now that seemed like a pretty insignificant way to describe his connection to her.

He'd always prided himself on his strength in tough situations and on his willingness to trust the Lord no matter what. Now he knew those attributes had never really been tested.

Joseph found him. It seemed a strange sort of reunion. He'd sat in waiting rooms with Joseph before, when his wife was at the end of her life, losing her battle with breast cancer. Although he knew that Joy's prospects were not so dim, Isaac

couldn't help feeling that their roles had been suddenly reversed. Had he had that pitying look on his face when he sat with Joseph? Isaac sincerely hoped not.

"How did you know I was here?"

"It's a small town. When I heard about Joy, I knew you'd be here."

"You're the only one that would draw that conclusion. Except for Shaun, maybe."

"That's the way you wanted it, Isaac."

"I know. I'm just coming to the realization that I'm an idiot. Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"I tried," Joseph said. "You know she's going to be all right, don't you?"

"I know. It's just...the way she looked...the pain in her eyes...the blood."

"Back up. Tell me what happened. I didn't get any details."

Isaac went over everything with him. "I keep thinking about what might have happened if I hadn't decided to go looking for her. And wondering why I didn't go sooner."

"You know you'd tell anyone else not to blame themselves."

"Yeah well, I'm discovering it's a lot easier to give that advice than to take it."

Joseph turned away, but not before Isaac noticed the smile he was trying to hide. "What's that look all about," Isaac demanded.

"I'm not happy that this happened," he told him. "But it is just a little funny to see you in this position."

"Thanks a lot," Isaac huffed and slouched down in his chair.

"You always seemed to have all the answers. It's good to see you acting sort of human."

Isaac snorted. "Sort of human. Again, thanks."

"Even if you are the pastor, it's OK for us to see

that side of you.”

Isaac mulled over that statement while they waited. Did he try to project some unrealistic image of perfection to his congregation?

On the other hand, wasn't a pastor supposed to be a model for his flock? A person couldn't be both weak and strong at the same time, could they?

Was that the real reason he'd refrained from dating for so long? Because relationships were unpredictable and emotional, and if you messed up...

It looked bad. Had he really been protecting Joy? Or himself?

“I should have said ‘yes.’ I should have taken her to that concert.”

“Excuse me?” said Joseph. “What are you talking about?”

“Never mind. Would you wait for the doctor? I want to visit the chapel. Come and get me if you hear anything.”

“I will,” Joseph promised.

The chapel was quiet and peaceful. Thankful, Isaac sunk into one of the chairs that were placed in rows before a simple altar. He let the peace flow into him before bowing his head to pray. He needed to have a long talk with his Father.

Joy was in the hospital for a long couple of days. When the doctor heard that she would be alone at home, he refused to release her until he was sure she could function on her own.

The days were a blur for Joy. The first night, she'd been woken frequently by the fear that the concussion would send her into a coma. Once they decided it was safe to let her sleep, she was out all of the second day and night. She woke on Saturday morning, feeling somewhat better, but a little fuzzy on all that had happened.

Joy lay still—less pain that way—and tried to

put the fragments she remembered into order. She knew she'd fallen. She remembered the doctor explaining that she had a concussion and mild hypothermia and a sprained knee.

What had happened between the fall and the hospital? How had she gotten here? She allowed her mind to drift, as trying to force the memories back seemed to send them scudding out of her reach. For some reason "Jingle Bells" kept running through her mind. How weird.

Joy opened her eyes and looked around. Cautiously she turned her head, relieved to feel minimal pain, and saw Misty Green sitting by her bedside.

Maybe she was still dreaming because Misty seemed to be surrounded by a bank of flowers and balloons. When she saw that Joy was awake, Misty smiled. "How are you feeling, hon?"

"I'm all right." Her voice sounded scratchy and rough to her ears.

"How about some water?" Misty poured her a cup of water from a pitcher by her bedside and Joy gratefully accepted it.

"Where did all the flowers come from?" she asked after she'd taken a drink.

"Oh, from lots of people. Let me see." Misty pointed to the largest arrangement. "The choir went in together on this one. The roses are from Angel and Jeff. The balloons are from the Sunday School. They'll miss your playing at their program tomorrow. This plant is from Grace and Riley. Grace put in a gift certificate for her shop, too."

Joy interrupted Misty's explanation. "Do I have a roommate?"

"Why no, sweetie. You've got the room all to yourself."

"Then...are those *all* for me?" There must be some mistake. She knew she didn't have that many

friends.

“Of course. This one here is from your housekeeper and her family. When she couldn’t reach you, she called the church. Isaac had a terrible time convincing her she didn’t have to come right back.”

The thought of Rosie brought tears to Joy’s eyes. She almost wished Isaac hadn’t talked her out of coming back. But then again, she didn’t want her friend to miss time with her family.

“And over here,” Misty walked around to the other side of the bed and Joy turned her head to follow her. “This one is from Isaac.”

Joy felt her mouth drop open. Isaac had gotten her a Christmas tree? It must have been nearly three feet high and sat in a pot on a table. It was decorated all in white and gold with a beautiful porcelain angel on top. Again Joy felt tears gather in her eyes.

“He must really think you’re something special,” said Misty.

Joy chose not to answer that remark. “Has he been here?”

“He’s pretty busy at work. But he’s been filling your bird feeders every day.”

Joy suddenly remembered her new pet. “Oh, no. Has anyone been feeding Mozart?”

Misty gave her a strange look. “Honey, you must have hit your head pretty hard. Mozart’s been dead for centuries.”

“Mozart is my canary.”

“Oh, the canary. Isaac took him home for now and Ian told him how to take care of the little ball of fluff. You see, there’s nothing to worry about.”

That was good, Joy thought, because she didn’t have the energy to stay awake much longer, never mind take care of anything herself. She drifted back into sleep, wondering about all the people who had

sent gifts to her.

Joy came home from the hospital the next afternoon. She still hadn't seen Isaac, and told herself it was silly to expect it. She was no one special, just a member of the congregation, right?

She had no idea so many people cared about her. Before this, she would have said that no one at the church would miss her except for the fact they'd have to find a new organist.

She supposed most of the people that sent her things were only doing their Christian duty, but she was still grateful. Instead of being intimidated by all the attention, it had actually boosted her confidence to know she mattered, even a little bit.

But nothing could have prepared Joy for the surprise that came when it was time for her to go home.

Pansy Parker and Misty Green came to get her. She'd been told a ride had been arranged for her, but was hoping that Isaac would come. She tried not to show any disappointment.

It was strange to have Misty and Pansy together and not hear the ultra-polite bickering the two usually fell into. Maybe they'd decided to get along now that they would be family.

When they pulled into her driveway, it was filled with cars. "What's going on?" she asked.

"Oh, a few people wanted to welcome you home," Misty said.

A few people? There must be a dozen cars in the driveway and on the street. Surely she didn't have that many friends.

Isaac appeared at the door when they pulled up. Joy's heart jumped at the sight of him. He looked like he'd stepped out of an ad for holiday shopping, wearing a red sweater and jeans. His coat was unzipped and a scarf hung around his shoulders.

Red cheeks attested that he'd been outside lately.

Isaac opened her door and offered Joy a hand to help her out. Misty appeared at her side with her crutches. She was getting used to using them, but steps were still difficult and Joy looked with dread at the ones leading up to her house.

He must have read her expression, because Isaac waved Misty away, scooped up Joy and carried her up the steps. "You're looking much better than the last time I saw you," he said as they entered the house."

"And when was that?" she asked, feeling brave while he had his arms around her. He hadn't visited her the entire time she was in the hospital.

Instead of putting her down, Isaac carried her through the house and back to the little sitting room she'd claimed as her own. He set her down on the sofa. "You don't remember?"

"I think the last time I saw you was at the church...just before choir rehearsal." She didn't quite have the nerve to bring up the concert tickets.

Isaac pulled a colorful afghan off one of the chairs and spread it over her. Joy realized that they were alone in the room. Where had Misty and Pansy gone? Where were the people whose cars were parked out front?

She fixed her attention back on Isaac as he knelt next to her by the sofa. He took her face in his hands, his touch pleasantly cool on her face. "The last time I saw you, was when they wheeled you away at the hospital."

Something clicked into place in her head. She pushed his hands away and blurted out "You made me sing 'Jingle Bells' all the way to the hospital!"

He laughed. "It was the only way I could think of to keep you awake. I don't know much about head injuries, but I knew you shouldn't fall asleep before the doctor had seen you."

“But how did you know...?”

His amused expression melted away into one of concern. “When you didn’t come in to work, I came looking for you. I wish I would have come sooner.”

“That’s all right. I’m glad you were there.”

“Angel was with me. She came in with cookies she’d made as a thank you for the concert tickets.”

“Oh.” So he knew about that. She dropped her gaze and studied the afghan. Its multicolored rows were a fascinating diversion.

“She brought you back a t-shirt, by the way.”

“She did? That’s nice.”

“I wish I would have said ‘yes’ to you, Joy.”

“Well, I guess it’s a good thing you didn’t. As it turns out I was busy that night.”

“Somehow...”

He hesitated and Joy dared to look up at him again. She didn’t understand that look that had come over his face. “What is it?”

“Somehow I think that if I’d said ‘yes’ to the concert, none of this would have happened.”

“Now, that’s just silly. How could you be responsible for me falling on the ice?”

This time it was Isaac who looked away. “I don’t know. I’m just telling you how I feel.”

The door opened and Hope Velasquez came in. “Hey, Isaac, I don’t mean to interrupt your little chat, but there are some people waiting for Joy—and they’re getting cold.”

“I’m sorry. I got distracted.”

Hope grinned. “I see that. Welcome home, Joy.”

She answered Hope’s smile with a small one of her own. “Thank you.”

Isaac got to his feet and went to the window, pulling open the drapes. Joy gasped as first a lit Christmas tree, and then a crowd of people were revealed. She looked around for her crutches and discovered they hadn’t made it inside with them. In

fact, she saw Misty and Pansy, who must have ducked around to the back, and Misty was still holding the crutches. Now why hadn't she just brought them in?

Joy stood, intending to hop to the window, but Isaac swept her up again and carried her over. Everyone cheered and waved as she appeared.

Closer now, Joy was able to see what the tree's decorations were made out of. "Isaac, is that...?"

"Strings of popcorn and cranberries. All organic, donated by Misty. Plus pinecones covered with peanut butter and rolled in birdseed. You won't have to worry about feeding that crew for a while."

And it wasn't just the fir tree in front of the window that was decorated. All the trees in the yard had been festooned with edible ornaments. Laughter bubbled up inside her like a fountain. "Not for a day or two at least. This is wonderful! Whose idea was this?"

"Well," Isaac told her, "with no secretary I had to make some time to get everything done in the office. So I decided to go with group appointments for my brides and grooms. They wanted to do something for you. And since cooperation is a big factor in marriage..."

The crowd had obviously had enough of the cold and surged into the house. On their way through the kitchen, they picked up trays of cookies and mugs of hot spiced cider.

"Isaac, put her down before you drop her," someone scolded. And Joy found herself back on the couch in short order. Everyone was anxious to help, tucking the afghan back around her, offering pillows for her injured leg and fetching refreshments for her. Joy greeted each of the eleven couples that had gathered to welcome her home.

Some of the guests started carrying in her flowers and balloons and setting them around the

room. Angel brought her the t-shirt from the concert. "I'm sorry you couldn't go, Joy," she said. "I wanted you to know that Jeff and I appreciated your gift."

Jeff added "Next year, we're going again, and we're taking you with us."

Happy, but overwhelmed, Joy had little to say to her crowd of well-wishers. She hoped they would understand from her smiles how grateful she was.

Before too long, Pansy's voice cut through the room. "All right now, let's remember that Joy is supposed to be recovering. Everyone clean up after yourselves on the way out."

Within a few minutes, the room cleared out. Only a few people lingered. One was Angel, who stopped to ask "Joy, do you think you'll feel up to playing for the Grace Place party tomorrow night?"

"I think so. I'll have all day to rest tomorrow, and if I don't feel well, I can leave after our set."

She added in a whisper "What about your solo? Do you still want to do that?"

Joy nodded. "Of course."

"I'll see you tomorrow night, then."

Isaac was suddenly there. "What's going on tomorrow night?"

"It's the Grace Place Christmas Party," Angel told him. "You didn't forget, did you?"

"Joy, don't you think that might be too much for you? You just got out of the hospital."

"I know, but I want to go."

"Well...then I'll take you."

"Oh no, I might want to go home early," she protested. "I don't want you to have to leave, too."

"If you aren't there, I won't want to be either," he replied.

Joy felt her breath catch at that statement and noted Angel's look of surprise. Before she could reply, Sarah Rogers shooed them away. "All right, the party's over. Our patient needs her rest."

Angel and Isaac both said their good-byes, and when Joy looked around, she realized that Sarah was the only person left in the room.

“Sorry, but you’re stuck with me,” she explained. “I’m your babysitter for the evening.”

“Babysitter?”

“Misty made up a schedule, so you won’t have to be alone for the first couple of days. Pansy got people to contribute food. Your fridge and freezer are both full. You won’t have to cook until next spring.”

Joy stared at her. It was unbelievable. The gifts, the party, the decorations for her birds, and now this—food and companionship. It was more than she could comprehend. Without warning, she burst into tears.

“Joy, are you all right? Are you in pain?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. I just don’t understand...you don’t even know me that well. Why would you all do so much for me?”

Sarah sat down on the couch next to her. “Because we’re all in the same family, Joy.”

“What do you mean? I don’t have any family?”

“Of course you do. You have your church family. And we’re only the Orchard Hill branch of the family of God.”

Joy sniffed. “I wish I’d had my accident sooner, if that’s what it took to show me that you all cared so much.”

At that moment, Isaac walked back in. He was carrying the canary’s cage and saying “I forgot about Mozart. I put him in the laundry room while everyone was here.”

Then he saw Joy’s face and stopped in his tracks. He set the cage down and went over to the sofa. “What’s wrong?”

Sarah waved him away. “Nothing. Joy’s just a little overtired. It’s perfectly natural after something like this.”

“Joy, are you sure?”

She nodded and dredged up a smile for him. “I just need to rest a little.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t go to Grace’s party tomorrow after all.”

Her smile turned into a frown. “Isaac, I already told you, I’m going.”

“Not if you aren’t feeling up to it.”

“Hey,” Sarah interrupted, “don’t start an argument with the invalid. Remember, she needs to rest.”

He backed down with obvious reluctance. “All right. I’m going home. Call me if you need anything.”

Sarah stood and steered him away from the sofa. “Just because Joy likes birds, it doesn’t mean she wants you to act like a mother hen. Now hang up that birdcage and make yourself scarce.”

Joy saw him smile just a little before he answered, “Is that any way to talk to a pastor? Especially the one that’s officiating at your wedding.”

“It is when he’s acting like a lovesick puppy,” she teased.

Isaac picked up the cage and hung it back on its hook. “A mother hen or a lovesick puppy? Which am I?”

Sarah pretended to consider. “The latter, I think.”

Isaac approached the sofa again on his way out of the room. “Well, since I’m that transparent...” He stooped and kissed Joy’s cheek before exiting.

Joy’s face grew hot. Shock and delight mingled, sending butterflies whirling in her stomach.

Sarah was trying to wrestle a smile under control, but it kept breaking out. “That’s enough excitement for you, for one day,” she told Joy. “I think it’s nap time.”

“I thought you were a speech therapist, not a

nurse,” Joy answered, hoping to avoid any comment on Isaac’s kiss.

“I am, but I nursed my brother through so many ear infections and other childhood illnesses, that it’s become like a second career.” Joy was not so out of the loop that she didn’t know Sarah’s story. Her mother had been frequently ill, and Sarah had been forced to take on adult responsibilities much too young. She, like Joy had had very little self confidence when she’d first come to Orchard Hill.

Then Sarah had taken on the responsibility of helping David Daniels care for his orphaned niece. Now she seemed very self assured, and Joy was convinced it wasn’t all connected to that huge diamond ring David had bought her when he asked her to marry him.

Sarah slipped away and left Joy alone. She fell asleep to the sound of Mozart’s singing and didn’t wake until after dark. Now the lights of the tree outside were all she could see of her wonderful gift, but she didn’t mind. Joy remembered how Isaac had shown her how to string the lights on the church’s Christmas tree. Without realizing she was doing it, she brought her hand up to touch her cheek where he’d kissed her.

It wasn’t an easy task, finding an outfit that went with a knee brace. Joy finally decided on a deep green sweater and a long, flowing skirt that hid the bulky brace pretty well. She braided her hair and added a matching scarf. When she was finished getting ready, she hobbled to the front room where she could see the driveway, and sat to wait for Isaac.

Harmony and Hope had been with her for most of the day, but knowing that Isaac would be arriving soon, they’d felt safe in leaving Joy alone. After all, they had to get ready for Grace’s party, too.

Joy wasn’t used to being around people so much,

and although she was grateful for their help, she welcomed some time to herself. Especially as the time for the choir's performance drew near, and her nerves began to tighten. Once she was settled in a chair and her crutches were tucked away, Joy took out the slip of paper with the Bible verse she'd chosen for the day: Luke 2:9-12. "An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them 'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.'"

Closing her eyes, Joy imagined herself on the tiny stage in Grace's coffee shop, the choir behind her. She would be like that angel, singing the good news to the people who gathered, and *she* would not be afraid.

It was a little difficult to convince herself of the last part, but she was determined to go through with this. Joy thought of the supper that Harmony and Hope had fixed for her—that was now in the garbage can. She felt bad, but no matter how delicious it was, she just couldn't force any food down right now. There would be food at the party. She'd eat after she sang. OK, so it would only be Christmas cookies. As Sarah had pointed out yesterday, her fridge was packed with food. She'd eat when she got home.

Joy had time to read the verses over three more times before Isaac got there. He came in before she could retrieve her crutches to get to the door.

He must have seen the light on in the front room, because he walked straight in rather than going to her sitting room in the back. She saw the concern etched on his face. "How are you feeling today?"

"Better," she replied. Nerves were causing her stomach to roll like a stormy ocean. She didn't want

to talk.

Isaac, on the other hand, seemed to expect a full report from her. "How's the knee? Does your head still hurt? Are you sure you feel like going tonight?"

She gritted her teeth. "Yes, I'm still going."

His hands cupped her face and studied her closely. "You look pale."

"I'm fine. Can we please just go?"

"Are you...nervous?"

"A little." No, she shouldn't have said that. Isaac was going to think she was worried about being out among people. He didn't know about the solo. Well, crowds did make her nervous, but not like this.

"We don't have to go yet. We could...talk a little first."

"No, thank you."

"You're sure?"

"Positive." Annoyed by his attitude, Joy took her crutches and heaved herself to her feet. She'd already figured out there was absolutely no way to be graceful with these things, but she'd forgotten the slip of paper still lying in her lap. It fluttered to the floor and Isaac bent to pick it up.

Maybe she should stay home if this was the way things were going to go this evening.

He read the paper. "Memorizing scripture?"

Joy sighed, deciding she might as well confess. "I've been using verses that talk about fear or overcoming it to help me with my shyness." There. Now he knew that she wasn't doing it alone. Would he be disappointed?

"That's a great idea. Is it working?"

"I think so."

"Of course it is! I wondered how you'd changed so much lately."

"I admit I couldn't do it by myself." Maybe he'd change his mind about wanting to take her to the Christmas party.

“Why would you think you had to, Joy? Everyone needs a little help now and then. And we should draw strength from the Lord.”

That was it? He didn't think she was an idiot?

“Let's get going then.” Isaac grabbed her coat from where she'd hung it over a nearby chair and held it out.

Now she just had to find enough courage to sing in front of about a hundred people. Her stomach twisted again.

“Yes, let's go.”

The party was in full swing when they got to Grace's. Servers were circulating through the crowd with trays of hot chocolate and Christmas cookies. There were a large number of Orchard Hill Community Church members there, including all of Isaac's pre-marriage class. Joy knew that usually it would have taken Isaac a long time to get through the crowd because he would stop and talk to many people. Tonight he merely waved at everyone before escorting Joy to an empty table for two.

Joy wondered how there happened to be an empty table here when there were people standing along the walls, stuffed around tables and crammed into booths. Then she saw a little sign that said 'reserved' on the table.

Servers offered them hot chocolate and cookies. Joy refused any just now. Before Isaac could ask, she told him, “I'd rather wait until after the choir performs.” He seemed to be satisfied with that.

There was already a group performing—a trio singing to guitar accompaniment. They were good, but Joy was too distracted to pay attention.

When Grace passed by, Isaac caught her attention. “When does the choir sing?”

“In about twenty minutes. I put them into the program as early as I could so Joy doesn't have to

stay late.”

Joy appreciated everyone’s concern, but she was starting to feel like she was about five years old.

The time dragged on. Their friends from the Orchard Hill Community Church all stopped by their table to ask how she was doing. She tried to be polite, but her nervousness was growing, and it was difficult for her to make conversation. Her stomach rolled, her palms were sweaty and her shoulders were so tense they hurt.

Isaac must have noticed her growing agitation, because he reached across the table and took her hand—in public.

He hadn’t argued when Sarah told him he was acting like a lovesick puppy. He’d even kissed her in front of Sarah. Now he was here, with her, in front of half of the town of Orchard Hill and he was holding her hand. He was publicly showing he liked her and she was about to make a fool of herself on stage.

Her hands started to tremble and Isaac frowned, tightening his fingers around hers. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Before she could answer, Grace announced that the Orchard Hill Choir would be singing next. Angel and Misty stopped by their table to collect her. She hobbled over to the piano. Angel handed her the music, and she readied herself for the first song.

Joy took a deep breath, forcing herself to focus. Once the music started she would be all right, she told herself.

And she was. They had four songs to perform. By the time they were into the third, her focus had switched from herself to the music. As usual, that was all it took to make her forget her shyness.

But then, they got to the fourth song. One of the choir members came down to take her place at the piano. She had to rise and go to the stage.

It wasn’t easy to maneuver herself up there.

There was only one step up to the stage, but between her crutches and her knees knocking together, it seemed like a slow and difficult journey.

An excited murmur ran through the crowd as she took her place with the choir. This was definitely unusual. Joy never sang.

Misty turned to the crowd and announced that Joy had finally agreed to come out from behind the piano and sing for them. “She’ll be performing the solo for this arrangement of ‘Silent Night.’”

Joy looked out at what seemed like thousands of faces in the audience. Her stomach rolled, and she had to clench her jaw to keep from being sick.

With horror, she realized that on crutches and wearing a knee brace, there was no way she could make it through the crowd to the bathroom on time if she were sick.

She was going to humiliate herself. She was going to humiliate Isaac. Why did she ever think she could do this? Frantically, Joy tried to remember the bible verses she’d chosen for the day, but her mind was a blank.

The music started, and she tried to focus on it. She felt her mouth moving, but wasn’t sure if she were singing or not.

Her solo was coming up much too fast. She moved forward and waited for her cue. Then suddenly it was there. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Her chest was so tight, she couldn’t get a breath. Whatever came out of her mouth was too quiet to be heard by anyone. Joy wished the stage would just open up and swallow her. She couldn’t sing, and she couldn’t run. She was trapped up there with everyone looking at her.

And worst of all, Isaac was going to regret ever setting eyes on her.

Joy felt a warm hand slip into her cold sweaty

one. Surprised she looked up to see Angel standing there. She gave Joy an encouraging smile, and then began to sing.

Joy was not alone. Taking heart from the support of her friend, she forced in a breath and added her voice to the song. Together, their voices flew through the notes like birds, swooping and gliding. It was exhilarating. Their part ended too soon. And then the whole song finished. They were done.

Applause exploded from the crowd, But Joy only cared about the opinion of one person. Her eyes searched the crowd for Isaac. Then suddenly he was there, right in front of her, a huge grin stretching across his face.

Choir members were leaving the stage, offering congratulations and patting her shoulder as they went by. Joy barely noticed. Her entire attention was focused on the man in front of her.

“Joy, that was amazing.”

“I almost blew it. If Angel hadn’t stepped in…”

“That doesn’t matter.”

“Did I embarrass you?”

Isaac put his hands on her shoulders. “Joy, you could never embarrass me.”

His words warmed her, made her relax. A smile cautiously teased her lips, but their moment was interrupted by Grace.

“Hey you two,” she said, a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Don’t look now, but you happen to be standing under the mistletoe.”

Joy glanced up in alarm. Isaac didn’t bother to look. He just put his arms around her and kissed her. Not a peck on the cheek, but a full contact, on the lips, toe curling kiss.

Joy looked up again, just to be sure. “But Isaac, there is no mistletoe up there.”

“Who cares?” he asked and then kissed her

again, in front of God and everybody.

As soon as she stepped—or rather hopped—off of the stage, well-wishers surrounded her to congratulate her on her first performance. The next singing group was ready to start, but the audience wasn't ready to listen.

Afraid that she would be overwhelmed by all the attention, Isaac did his best to accept all the compliments and good wishes on Joy's behalf. When the commotion finally died down and the next group started, Isaac led Joy back to their table.

"Are you ready to go home?" he asked.

Her eyes were shining like stars. "Not yet. Now I want some cookies and hot chocolate."

Isaac looked around but for once, there were no servers near by. "I'll get something for you. Just wait."

Riley was at the counter. Isaac asked for the chocolate and cookies.

"Joy did a great job up there," Riley said as he handed Isaac a steaming mug and a plate of cookies.

"Yes, she did, didn't she?"

"I don't think I've seen you with a date since you started here at Orchard Hill."

"You haven't. I gave up dating for a long time."

"Looks like the right woman drew you back into the game."

A lightness buoyed inside Isaac. He felt as if he might take wing, like one of Joy's friends. The right woman. That was Joy. "Yes, I think so," he replied.

"Now tell me one thing," Riley asked, leaning closer to Isaac. "Who does the pastor go to for pre-marriage counseling?"

Isaac laughed, feeling the rumble of it deep within him. "That's a good question, Riley."

It wasn't long after the cookies and hot chocolate were gone that Joy's head started to nod a little.

"Hey," said Isaac, shaking her lightly by the

arm. "Let's go home."

Joy nodded, and they began the process of making their way towards the door. The little coffee house was packed solid with people. After wishing about forty of them a Merry Christmas they found themselves out on the sidewalk.

"Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?" he asked her.

She ducked her head. "No, you didn't."

"I like your hair like that."

"Thank you."

Isaac helped her settle into his car before stowing her crutches in back and getting himself into the driver's seat. Joy was quiet on the way home, and figuring that she was tired, he didn't try to draw her out.

Once he'd gotten her home and settled on the sofa in her sitting room, Isaac knew he should leave, but didn't really want to. The party was too noisy for conversation. He wanted to spend more time with Joy, but he also didn't want to keep her from her rest. "Do you need anything else before I go?" he asked.

"No, but..."

"But what?"

"Do you really have to go already?"

"No. I just thought you were tired."

"I am tired, but I'm still excited from the party, I guess. I don't think I can sleep yet."

That was all the encouragement he needed. Isaac pulled up an ottoman for Joy's injured leg, and then sat next to her on the sofa.

"Thank you for taking me to Grace's tonight." Joy said.

"I'm glad I did. You're amazing, Joy."

"What do you mean?"

"Last month you'd never have even considered singing with the choir, never mind performing a

solo.”

“It ended up being a duet.”

“That doesn’t matter. What does matter is that you’ve made some incredible changes in your life. That’s what makes you amazing. That, and your incredible musical talent, your gentleness and faithfulness...”

“Stop Isaac. You’re going to give me a big head.”

“That could never happen to you, Joy.”

“The truth is...The truth is that I did this for you, Isaac.”

“What do you mean?”

“Go look at the second shelf on my bookcase. Read the titles.”

He got up and did what she asked. “They’re all about overcoming social anxiety.”

“I’ve been reading those books for years,” Joy explained “and none of them ever helped. But when you said that you couldn’t go out with me because...well, you know...it was sort of the last straw for me. It made me determined to finally take action to solve my problem.”

“I realize...that you might not feel the same way about me that I do about you, but...but I’m still glad I’ve done this. I know I have a long way to go to overcome my anxiety, but I’ve made a start and...and I’m happier with myself than I’ve ever been. It doesn’t matter whether you...care for me like I care about you...I’m still happy.”

“You should be happy. I know how hard this has been for you.”

“So, if all you’ve done recently is...out of guilt about saying ‘no’ to the concert...then don’t worry. My accident isn’t your fault, and you don’t have to keep being nice to me.”

She thought he was being nice to her out of guilt? Isaac shook his head, unsure of how to reply to her.

He turned away from her, toward the window and tried to gather his thoughts. “Joy, I’m not trying to be nice to you because of the accident. It’s just that...” He paused, running his fingers through his hair in frustration as he struggled to find the right words. “I brought you into the hospital and they took you away, of course. I was just left there...alone. And I realized that if anything happened to you, I would be devastated and no one would ever understand why.

“I haven’t dated anyone—wouldn’t date you—because I thought I had to set a perfect example for my congregation. If I couldn’t have a guarantee that a woman was ‘the one’ for me, I didn’t even want to start a relationship. I was too proud to risk making mistakes and looking foolish in front of my own congregation.

“You aren’t the only one that needed to change, Joy. I had to realize that it’s better to take a chance on making a mistake than to let life pass me by.” He felt he hadn’t explained himself well, that she wouldn’t understand, but when he turned around to face her, her expression told him differently. It gave him the courage to finish. “I love you Joy. I have for a long time, but I didn’t act because I was filled with pride. I’m putting all that aside now. I don’t care if we both stumble around and fall on our faces—literally or figuratively—in front of the congregation, as long as we’re together.”

Joy’s smile quivered, and tears filled her eyes. She hastily wiped them away with her sleeve. “Isaac, that’s the sweetest, most wonderful thing anyone’s ever said to me. And if you don’t come over here and kiss me right now...”

He didn’t give her time to finish that threat. Before she finished speaking, Isaac had her in his arms and placed a tender kiss on her lips.

As busy as he was on Christmas morning, Isaac had promised to pick up Joy for the service. She was cleared to drive, but her knee brace—which she hoped to be freed of soon—made it difficult.

He arrived early. She was filling Mozart's water bottle when she heard him knock and then call out. Isaac didn't wait for her to answer the door, but came right in. "I'm in the kitchen," she called back to him "but I'm heading into the back parlor. I'll meet you there."

When she saw him, she knew instantly that something was up. His expression was tense, and he was walking back and forth in front of the window. When she came in he took Mozart's water bottle from her and popped it onto the canary's cage.

"Merry Christmas," she said tentatively. "You look very handsome today."

Instead of a reply in kind, he abruptly asked "Why haven't you ever moved, Joy?"

"Why would I?"

"This house isn't you. For one thing, it's huge. I don't think you even use a third of the rooms in this place."

"But this is where my birds are. They're so used to being fed; I don't know what would happen to them if I moved anywhere else."

He nodded. "What about the way it's decorated? Most of the rooms I've seen look like they're from the set of *A Little Princess* or some Victorian tale like that."

She shrugged, puzzled by this conversation. "My grandfather liked everything this way and I guess, I'm so used to it, I've just never thought about changing anything since he died."

"But would you mind if it was changed? I mean, I couldn't...that is, would it bother you?"

Thoroughly bewildered by his behavior, Joy could only shake her head. He was pacing back and

forth like a sentry again. She'd never seen him so agitated.

Since Grace's Christmas party the two of them had been practically inseparable. They worked together at the church office all day and then had supper together afterward. Over the weekend, he'd taken her Christmas shopping. Joy had never had so many presents to buy, but she wanted to say 'thank you' to all her new friends.

He'd been the very embodiment of patience that day. She'd been slow and awkward on the crutches, indecisive over her purchases, and easily distracted by all the Christmas hoopla; but Isaac hadn't complained once.

Surely he couldn't be nervous about the Christmas service? She'd seen him on Christmas day many times without a hint of this sort of behavior.

"Isaac, is something wrong?"

"Huh?" He looked up, and she realized he'd completely forgotten she was in the room.

"Is there some reason you're wearing a path through my rug there?"

He looked sheepish as realization crossed his features.

"Do you want to get going? It's early yet, but if you have things to prepare..."

"No, I came early because I wanted to spend a little time with you before the service. Once we get to church, I'll be too busy."

"All right. Would you like some coffee? Something to eat?"

Isaac shook his head. "No, I'm fine. I just want to be with you."

That statement was the best Christmas present she'd ever received. She hobbled to the sofa and sat down. "Then come and join me."

Instead he started pacing again. She didn't think he was aware of it and decided not to say

anything yet.

“This has been a strange year in Orchard Hill. I’ve never seen so many engagements in such a short time. It was driving me crazy for a while.”

“It does seem like there’ll be a stampede to the altar in this coming year.”

“Yes.” He stopped moving, and she could tell he’d drifted away from her again. Then suddenly he turned to her and said “How would you feel about joining the herd?”

“What?”

“It seems like there have been engagement announcements about every other week all year. Today, I’d like to take my turn to make an announcement.”

Was he saying what she thought he was saying? “Isaac, can you please be a little clearer? What exactly are you asking me?”

They stared at each other until he said “I’m asking you to marry me, of course.”

She put her hands to her suddenly hot cheeks. “Me?”

“I’m certainly not talking to Mozart, and you’re the only other living being here.” His tone, sweet and loving, contradicted his flippant answer.

“But...but Pastor’s wives are supposed to be friendly and outgoing...Excellent hostesses...leaders in the church...” She didn’t think she could do all of that no matter how hard she worked to get over her social anxiety. In fact, by the way her heart beat had sped up and her stomach was starting to knot, she could tell it hadn’t gone away at all.

Isaac sat next to her on the couch. He reached out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear and caress her cheek. “Says who? I’ve never seen a handbook for the perfect pastor’s wife. All I know is that you’d be the perfect wife for me. Nothing else matters.”

She felt her muscles tense and knot and it grew harder to draw in a breath. He couldn't actually want this. She'd end up disappointing him, embarrassing him. If she really loved him she'd say 'no' right now.

"Joy." The gentle note in his voice broke through her racing thoughts. "Look at me."

Her gaze moved up to connect with his. "Don't think about anything else but you and me. Do you love me?"

"Of course."

"Do you want us to be together?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe God wants us to be together?"

"I don't know."

"I do. We've had some long talks about this lately, and I'm very sure."

He should have stuck with his first assessment of her. She was crumbling, her anxiety destroying her from within. Isaac deserved someone so much better.

He reached into his shirt pocket and handed her a slip of paper. "I thought this might happen," he said. "I came prepared."

Joy read from the paper. "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear...1John 4:18."

"I'm not claiming to be perfect, but with His help, we can come close enough."

She stared at the slip of paper, reading it over to herself. The fact that he'd brought her this impressed her deeply. She realized he understood her. He knew who she was and he still wanted to marry her.

Love or fear? Would she follow her heart or succumb to her fear? The agitation he'd shown earlier seemed to have left, and he was waiting patiently, as if he had all day for her answer.

There is no fear in love...There is no fear in love.

The words swirled around in her mind and they sounded over and over again. She was not afraid of loving Isaac, only of disappointing him.

But what was it he'd said to her on the night of the Christmas party? Something about it being better to risk making a mistake than to let life pass you by. How many years had she wasted, hiding in this house, while life passed her by? What was the point of trying to change, if she refused to accept the benefits of that change?

"Joy," Isaac prompted "what are you thinking?"

Like a key had turned in a lock, her muscles released their tension and a sense of peace and happiness flooded through her. "I think we should make that announcement."

"Can you be clearer? What exactly is your answer?"

"My answer is..." She paused and looked up at him, knowing that she must be grinning like an idiot. "My answer is yes. I'll marry you, Isaac."

He caught her up in a fierce embrace and kissed her. From somewhere, a ring appeared and Isaac slid it onto her finger. "This was my grandmother's," he told her. "I hope you like it, but if you don't..."

"It's perfect," Joy assured him.

Joy went through the Christmas service feeling lighter and freer than she could ever remember. As she listened to the traditional reading from Luke, chapter two, she thought she'd never understood 'the good news of great joy' so clearly before.

At the end of the service, just before the final hymn, Isaac declared that he had an announcement to make.

Whispers rippled through the congregation. Not giving herself time to think about it, Joy stood from the organ. Misty slid onto the bench and whispered "Go ahead. I've got this."

Isaac saw her and gestured that she should

come and stand by him. She felt like she was floating, crutches and all. In front of the congregation, she and Isaac stood together, his arm around her shoulders. "Do you want to say it or should I?"

For the first time in her life, Joy answered 'I will' to a question like that. Looking out over the sanctuary, filled with people...no, with friends...Joy spoke out loud and clear. "Pastor Isaac asked me to marry him this morning, and I said 'yes.'"

The congregation's response was deafening. They clapped and cheered, and Joy was certain such a ruckus was never heard before in a church. She didn't mind though.

When the noise had died down enough, Misty began the opening notes of the closing hymn, 'Hark the Herald Angels Sing.' Isaac insisted she stand with him to shake hands with the congregation and wish everyone a Merry Christmas.

Joy was not foolish enough to believe her shyness had suddenly disappeared, but for right now she was free of it, and she intended to enjoy it while it lasted. She smiled and shook hands, received congratulations and hugs and compliments on her beautiful antique ring.

When it was Pansy's and her family's turn in the line, Joy saw that Pansy's niece was still with them as well as a man she didn't know. Delia introduced him as her fiancé. Joy noticed a look of surprise cross Isaac's face, followed by suspicion. For some reason, he said to Pansy, "We'll talk about this later."

The older woman beamed at him. "You mean you'll thank me later. And Misty, too."

Isaac's booming laugh rang out. "Maybe I will," he agreed.

Joy had no idea what that was all about, but she was too happy to care.

Finding Joy: An Orchard Hill Romance

Epilogue: New Year's Eve day

"You're a beautiful bride."

"Don't be silly," Pansy said, although Arthur's compliment pleased her. "I'm too old for that."

"All brides are beautiful," he reminded her. "It's the aura of happiness around them."

"Misty is the one that looks beautiful," Pansy insisted.

"I'd given up all hope of ever seeing her wedding day. Or another wedding day for myself. And I'm delighted with the husband she chose. Your son is a good man, Pansy."

"You and Perry both look remarkably handsome."

Pansy straightened Arthur's tie and adjusted his boutonniere. She was glad they'd decided not to observe the silly superstition about it being bad luck to see the bride before the wedding. At their age, she figured, they wanted to spend as much time as possible together. Misty, on the other hand, was hiding out in the dressing room until the ceremony.

"I can't wait to see my daughter," Arthur told her.

"I'm sure she outshines us all. I'll just go check on her and see if she's ready." Pansy kissed Arthur's cheek before going in search of Misty.

When she saw the woman who had been her rival for years, now about to become her step-

daughter as well as her daughter-in-law, Pansy's eyes misted over with happiness. "You look lovely."

"You don't think it's too much for a fifty year old bride," Misty asked, plucking nervously at the skirt of her long white dress. "Although I'm proud to say, I deserve to wear white, it does seem a bit much."

"It's perfect," Pansy assured her. She herself had opted to wear a suit but not wanting to appear too dull and sensible on an occasion like this; she had bought it in a deep violet color instead of her usual navy, and paired it with a frilly blouse in a lighter shade of the same color.

If Misty had gone for the heavily beaded and lace trimmed dresses that younger brides often chose, she would have looked ridiculous. Instead, to Pansy's approval, Misty had chosen a white dress in a soft flowing fabric, beautifully cut and elegantly simple. It was perfect for her.

"It's been quite a year," Pansy said.

"Just think, one year ago we'd started that silly bet, and we were plotting on how to outdo each other. You did cheat a little, working on Grace and Riley before our official start date of January first," Misty reminded her.

"Yes, but then you brought Angel in from out of town. I hardly think that was fair either," retorted Pansy.

"What about Hope doing all your work for you with Joseph and Harmony?"

"She asked for my help. What about you with Patience and Shaun? Can we count that as a match since they were already married?"

Almost family, or not, Misty could still ruffle Pansy's feathers. The women stared each other down until a smile broke through Pansy's ire. She schooled her expression back to one of irritation, but evidently not before Misty had seen it. She snickered.

That was all it took. Both women were set off into giggles. They laughed together until tears ran down their cheeks.

Once their laughter had subsided, Misty spoke more solemnly. "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm going to miss you Pansy."

"Unbelievable, isn't it? I'll miss you, too."

"But we'll be family now. We won't lose track of one another."

"Easter at your place and Christmas at mine," Pansy declared.

"Every year," Misty promised.

As easily as laughter had come, tears followed, and the formerly sworn enemies embraced until a knock on the door interrupted them.

"Ladies, we're ready to start." It was Isaac.

"We'll be right there," Misty called and they both raced to the mirror to see if their emotional outbursts had left them ruffled in any way.

"He's certainly been in a better mood lately," Misty observed as she adjusted her bodice.

"I can't imagine why," Pansy replied with a wry tone as she brushed a speck of lint from her sleeve.

They looked at each other and giggled again.

"I know this sounds crazy," said Misty, "but I had more fun working together on that one match than I did on all those I did by myself this year."

"But either way we did a great job. We matched up nine couples and found husbands for ourselves to boot." Pansy repositioned a bobby pin to hold a curl more securely.

"Plus got replacements for ourselves here at the church." Misty fluffed her hair.

"I think Isaac was relieved when Joy told him she didn't want to be his secretary any more."

"Being the new choir director does suit her much better."

"And Patience will do a wonderful job as Isaac's

secretary.”

Shaun’s wife had jumped at the job once Pansy told her a bassinet, and then a play pen, could easily fit next to the copier in the work room that adjoined the office. Her baby would be making his or her appearance early in the next year.

“I’m not sure Isaac really appreciated that,” Misty commented.

“It’s the perfect solution. He’ll get used to it. Besides, he might need a little practice with babies before long.”

The women grinned at each other again.

“Well, our grooms are waiting,” said Misty.

“I think they’ve waited long enough.” Pansy held out her hand for Misty to take.

Together, they walked towards the sanctuary, the men they loved, and their new lives.

The end of the year has arrived, and now we know who the best matchmaker in town is. We sincerely hope you've enjoyed visiting Orchard Hill, and would like to let you know that all nine stories will soon be available in a special edition print trilogy.

Look for it in 2009.

*For more information about all the Orchard Hill Romances, visit The Wild Rose Press website or visit the Orchard Hill blog at:
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