

*Viara Lynn Russell*



*White  
Rosebud*

**NICK** AND  
*Noelle*

Nick leaned forward, resting a hand on the counter on either side of her. "Did it ever occur to you," he growled, his face inches from hers, "that we'd have no problem getting along if you weren't so stubborn."

Noelle folded her arms across her chest. "Did it ever occur to you that *you* might be the stubborn one?"

"I'm trying to be nice."

"Well try harder."

He refused to back up and knew she couldn't as the counter was behind her. "Have lunch with me."

"What?"

"That's what I came in to talk to you about. I wanted to take you to lunch to talk about decorating the church for Christmas."

"Lunch?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Wherever you like."

Noelle placed her hands on his chest and pushed. He didn't move.

"What's your answer?"

"I didn't know I was being given a choice."

"You are. What's your answer?"

"Really, Ni—"

"And if 'really Nick' comes out of your mouth one more time today I'll..." He stared at her mouth. She was close enough to silence with a kiss. He was suddenly aware of her palms, still flattened across his chest. For several heartbeats he stood there, incredibly attuned to her nearness, her warmth, the smell of her shampoo.

Had he lost his mind? Abruptly, he backed away.



# Nick and Noelle

by

Kara Lynn Russell

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Nick and Noelle

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## **Dedication**

For Paul Petersen, my dear father-in-law, who  
believed Christmas should be lived every day.



## Prologue

Excitement fizzled like soda pop bubbles in Noelle Granton's ten year old stomach. It was the Sunday before Christmas and she was finally playing Mary in the Sunday School Christmas Program. She'd waited for this role since she was in kindergarten, and she was finally going to get to sit next to the wooden manger and hold the baby Jesus doll in front of the whole congregation. Noelle knew this was the most important day of her life.

All the Sunday School children were lined up in the hallway outside the sanctuary waiting to go in and re-create the Nativity for the congregation. Noelle closed her eyes and listened. She could just make out that the lector was reading Isaiah, one of the prophecies about Jesus. They would be going on soon.

Suddenly someone shoved her from behind. She caught her balance and then turned around to glare at a pair of shepherds who were roughhousing. One of the teachers stepped in and scolded them.

Boys were hopeless.

"Are you ready, Noelle?"

Especially this boy. She turned to the boy who had spoken, Nick Jensen. "Of course I'm ready. Are you?"

"I have the whole Christmas story from Luke memorized," he informed her.

"Big deal. We don't have to say anything. Besides, I've had it memorized for years." She added



that last bit just because she didn't want him to think he was smarter than she was. Otherwise, she'd never brag like that; it was kind of rude.

Nick Jensen was a constant thorn in her side. They were rivals at school and at church. Even though they weren't supposed to be competitive, Nick and Noelle always raced to see who would be first to complete memorization assignments.

She didn't mind being beaten, but Nick was usually the only one who could routinely beat her at everything. She could have lived with *that*, but there was one thing about Nick that she couldn't forgive — his birthday.

His birthday was on Christmas, just like hers. She loved knowing she and Jesus were born on the same day. It made Christmas her favorite holiday. But while she loved sharing her birthday with Jesus, she definitely did *not* like sharing it with Nick.

They had been born on the exact same day. That meant people were always comparing them. They both got good grades and behaved well at school. They were both part of the same church family. They both had Christmas names—hers being the French word for Christmas and he being named after St. Nicholas.

But in spite of all these similarities, there was a huge gulf between them. Noelle was the daughter of wealthy parents and Nick had only his uncle. People naturally felt sorry for Nick and went out of their way to praise him even for little things. They marveled at his intelligence, his nice manners, and his excellent behavior.

She felt like everyone just expected these things from her; that her hard work didn't mean as much as Nick's because she had a family and money, and he didn't.

And these comparisons were the worst at Christmas, because everyone looked at her gifts and Nick's gifts. His Uncle Larry couldn't afford anything remotely like what her parents could, and she felt like everyone thought she was spoiled and snobbish.

To make things worse, her parents and Nick's parents had been friends. Now that his parents were dead, her parents felt the need to watch over him.

And while, even at her age, she knew Nick had no control over his birthday, his family or what other people said, she still couldn't stand him.

Now, this year, when she'd finally been awarded the coveted role of Mary, *he* was playing Joseph. *Ugh!*

The Sunday School teacher leaned over and whispered, "Time to go on. Remember to walk in slowly."

She reached up and straightened the scarf that covered her hair. Then she and Nick began their walk up the long church aisle to where a manger with a doll baby waited. The scarf wouldn't stay straight on her head, and she became distracted with fixing it.

Halfway up the aisle, Nick stepped on the hem of her gown. She tripped and went down hard. Her hands were holding her scarf, so she failed to catch herself with them. She slammed face first onto the floor.

That's how, instead of sitting at the front of the church, holding the baby Jesus doll, Noelle ended up in the emergency room with a broken nose. And that's why she looked like a raccoon in all her Christmas and birthday pictures that year. She really hated Nick Jensen.

Even Jesus would understand after this, wouldn't he?

## Chapter One

Noelle ran a finger over the bridge of her nose as she remembered that Christmas. She could still feel the slight bump where it had broken. Here it was, more than fifteen years later, and Nick was still getting her into trouble.

Pastor Thorn cleared his throat, bringing Noelle's attention back to the matter at hand. She glanced over at Nick sitting next to her, and then back at Pastor Thorn, seated behind his desk. The desk was piled high with papers and books. He'd cleared the middle of the desk or she and Nick wouldn't have been able to see him at all.

"I understand," said the pastor "that you two have a history of...rivalry."

Noelle winced. That was putting it mildly.

"Now, competition is a fine thing in its place, but..."

"But we took it too far," Noelle admitted. "I'm truly sorry."

"It was my fault, really," said Nick. "This was Noelle's first Saint's Parade. I know how things should go..."

"If I'd just thought it out a bit more..." Noelle interrupted.

Nick leaned forward in his chair. "But the kids know me. I could have stopped them."

"Really Nick, anyone could see..."

"Do you two hear yourselves?" Pastor Thorn rubbed his forehead, as if to forestall a headache.

“You’re competing over who gets the blame for the whole fiasco.”

Noelle put a hand to her mouth before any more foolish words could tumble out. Pastor Thorn was right. They were acting like children.

“The fellowship hall is a disaster. The drapes will have to be replaced...”

She zoned out while Pastor Thorn ran down the list of damages—fire damages, water damage, broken ceiling tiles, pest control services, and so on. She knew it all by heart and she deeply regretted inciting her small group of teens to try to outdo the other groups.

The Parade of Saints was held every year around All Saints Day as an alternative to a Halloween Party. Part of the festivities included skits performed by the church’s youth group for the younger children that depicted the lives of some of the legendary saints. Noelle’s group had Joan of Arc. Nick’s had St. Patrick. Some of the kids decided it would be a good thing to go for realism—as in real fire and real snakes.

“Pastor, we are well aware of what happened and I...” Nick paused, glancing at Noelle. “I mean, *we* accept full blame. We’ll take care of the damages.”

“Yes, Pastor. If you have an estimate I’ll write out a check for you right now.” Noelle reached for her purse.

Nick grabbed her hand. “I can pay for my half.”

“I never said you couldn’t, but you know I can afford all of it.”

“The whole town knows what you can afford. That’s not the point. It’s a matter of responsibility.”

“Fine then. I’ll write out a check for my half.” She shook off his hand and picked up her purse from beside her chair. Why did he have to be so pigheaded?

“That’s enough,” roared Pastor Thorn, rising from his chair. “Haven’t the two of you ever gotten along?”

Nick and Noelle looked at each other. Noelle was certain—she saw it in his eyes—they were thinking the same thing. She bit her lip and dropped her gaze.

“So how much should I make that check out for?” she mumbled.

“This is not about money,” said Pastor Thorn, sinking back into his seat.

“You don’t mean you want us to do the repairs ourselves, do you?” Talk about penance!

“What’s the matter,” taunted Nick. “Afraid you’ll ruin your manicure?”

Noelle shot him a furious look but managed to hold her tongue.

“What I want,” the pastor stated slowly and precisely, as if they didn’t speak English all that well, “Is for you two to learn how to get along. Separately you both have much to offer the church. Together—you’re a disaster waiting to happen.”

“All right. So we won’t work together in the future. That should take care of it,” grumbled Nick, slouching down in his chair.

“Nick, Noelle, you need to work this out.”

“How do you propose we do that?” asked Noelle.

“I’ll be happy to tell you,” said Pastor Thorn. But he didn’t look happy at all. “I think I’ve found the perfect task for the two of you.”

Nick and Noelle groaned in unison. Pastor Thorn continued. “I want the two of you to decorate the church for Christmas...together. Plan it, get the decorations, and put everything up. Just the two of you.”

Noelle bit back another groan. She rather do all the repairs to the fellowship hall by herself.

“What if we decline,” asked Nick.

“Then I’m afraid I’ll have to ask both of you to resign as youth group advisors.”

Noelle gulped and exchanged looks with Nick. He didn’t look happy. No matter what Pastor Thorn said, she knew the whole thing was her fault and that the youth group meant the world to Nick.

“If you two will excuse me, I have a lunch appointment. Please feel free to use my office to start planning your project.” The Pastor rose, shaking his head and gathering a few papers.

Then he left, closing the door behind him. Noelle kept her gaze on her hands, which were clenched in her lap. She didn’t want to look at Nick and see his anger directed towards her.

It wasn’t fair. After years away, she’d returned home to find that Nick was still the best looking man she’d ever known. He still had that tall, lean body and velvet brown eyes. Looking into them was like drowning in chocolate. But he was oblivious to her as a woman, and so their childhood rivalry continued. Couldn’t the guy have developed a pot belly or a receding hairline? Noelle silently added this deficiency to her list of reasons to dislike Nick. Still she had to try to do the right thing here. Even if it benefited Nick.

“I’ll resign, Nick. You’ve been working with the youth for years.”

This evidently didn’t please him. If anything his scowl deepened. “That won’t cut it, Noelle. We have to do this project or we’re both out.”

Noelle thought for about the hundredth time since she’d moved back home, that maybe she’d made a mistake. She just didn’t seem to be fitting in anywhere. Still, she had to try, for her mother’s sake.

“Maybe I could just join another church,” she mumbled to herself.

“That would kill your mother,” protested Nick. Nick had grown close to Gladys over the years while she was away, building her career in retail.

Sharing her mom with him was another sore spot for Noelle.

“I was kidding.” Sort of.

A silence fell between them. Finally Nick spoke. “Are we really that bad, Noelle? Do you dislike me so much that you couldn’t stand to work on this one thing with me?”

“I don’t dislike you Nick. But you have to admit we seem to bring out the worst in each other.”

“That was one thing when we were kids, but we’re adults now. We should be able to get along.”

“Well, yes...” But it was so much easier not to when it came to Nick.

He turned toward Noelle. “I think we should do this.”

She considered, trying to estimate how much more damage they could do to the church if things went wrong.

“We can get along,” Nick sat up in his chair again, enthusiasm building on his face. “In fact...”

“In fact what?”

“I challenge you.”

Noelle covered her face with her hands and slumped down in her chair. A challenge. He was already making it into a competition. “Challenge me to what?”

He grinned at her, a vast improvement over the scowl he’d been wearing. “To get along with me, of course.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“You don’t think you can do it, do you?” he teased.

She might as well be back in grade school. Noelle had to resist the urge to stick her tongue out at Nick. “I can so.”

“Prove it.”

She gave in. “All right. We’ll decorate the church together.” It was too bad she’d never learned to resist a challenge from Nick.

This would not end well, she was sure.

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Later that day, Noelle pulled into the driveway of her childhood home, a stately colonial. It was a nice house in a nice neighborhood, but not an elaborate one that boasted wealth. Noelle’s father loathed the lifestyle of the rich and glamorous—the lifestyle his parents had led. He’d happily put it behind him when he married her mom. Noelle was glad of that fact.

Her father had passed away several years ago. Then last spring her mother had suffered a heart attack. As the only unattached member of the family, Noelle decided she needed to take care of her mom, so she quit her job as a buyer for a home decorating store in Minneapolis, gotten out of her lease, and moved back to her childhood home.

Not that her mom needed taking care of on a permanent basis. Not yet, anyway. But Noelle had to acknowledge that a day would come when her mother would need her. She intended to be there for that. At first, taking care of Mom had eaten up a lot of her time. But as her mother’s health improved Noelle found more time to work on her pet project. She wanted to open her own store.

She gathered her purse and a couple of bags of groceries she’d picked up then went inside. Her



mother, Gladys, was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a cup of tea.

“You’re home,” she said as Noelle walked in.

Noelle set the groceries on the counter and stooped to kiss her mother’s cheek. “Yes, I’m home.” She moved back to the counter and began unpacking bags. “How was your day?”

“It was good. I went out to lunch with Sara Craig. Do you remember her?”

Sara Craig had been Noelle’s piano teacher. How could her Mom ever think she’d forget all those scales? “Of course I remember her. Where did you go?”

“Oh, just downtown to the café. Then we decided to do a little window shopping.”

“Window shopping? I hope you were dressed warmly.”

“Don’t worry, we didn’t go far. Sara wanted to see how your shop is coming along.”

Noelle was preparing to open Joyeux Noel, a store specializing in Christmas items. “Well it’s coming along, but it’s not ready for window shopping yet.”

“We pressed our faces up against the glass anyway.”

“Did you see anything interesting?” teased Noelle.

“Nope. Just a bunch of boxes and some shelves lying in pieces.”

“Deirdre’s brother is going to help us put them together on Saturday.”

“You were lucky to find Deirdre,” said Gladys, referring to the teen Noelle had hired to help.

“Yes, it was a good idea you had—calling the school and asking them to recommend someone. Dee’s

been a good helper, and I think her family can use the money.”

Noelle finished unpacking the groceries and sat down at the table with her mom. “So, what should we have for supper?”

Gladys shrugged. “I had a big lunch. Whatever you want is fine.”

“How about a salad and grilled chicken breasts?”

“That sounds lovely. What did Pastor Thorn have to say today?”

Noelle stiffened, and then consciously relaxed her muscles. She didn’t want to upset her mother. “He asked Nick and me to decorate the church for Christmas.”

“Well that makes sense.”

“It does?”

“Of course,” said Gladys. “You own a Christmas themed store, and he owns a Christmas tree farm.”

“That’s true.”

“And I don’t know anyone who loves Christmas more than the two of you.”

“Maybe we just love it because of our birthday.”

Gladys smiled, a faraway look in her eye. “I remember meeting Nick’s mother when the two of you were born. If you and Nick had come any closer together, that doctor would have been in real trouble.”

Maybe that’s when the rivalry thing had started between them, Noelle mused. They both wanted to be born first. Of course, Nick won that, too.

Noelle rose and went to the refrigerator. “I think I’ll start supper.”

“You know, I still miss Lydia after all these years.”

Gladys and Nick’s mother had become quite close when their children were small. Lydia had died of

cancer when Nick was six. His father had died in a car accident a couple of years before that. He'd been raised by his Uncle Larry, on the Christmas tree farm. Nick had taken it over a few years back.

"I know, Mom. I'm sorry."

"Ah well. That's old news." Gladys sighed. "What can I do to help you?"

"Why don't you set the table," she suggested as she took out the ingredients for the salad.

## Chapter Two

Early Saturday morning, Nick pulled up in front of Noelle's shop, right next to her sporty little car. It was an old brick building, in the heart of the town's "historic" downtown. Although, a town of this size wasn't really big enough to differentiate between the historic district and anywhere else. He figured that without the tourist trade, Noelle would never be able to keep a specialty shop like this running here.

With a sigh he shut off the truck's engine. Working with Noelle was not going to be easy, but he was determined to do it, so he may as well get started. He owed Noelle's family a lot for all they had done for him over the years. He couldn't repay them by always being at war with her. He tried to think of himself as an honorary brother, but somehow that role had grown increasingly difficult.

At that moment, Noelle came out of the coffee shop next door carrying three large Styrofoam cups. She looked great. But then she always looked great...hair up, nails done, designer clothes. That was everyday stuff for Noelle. Sometimes he wondered what she'd look like in a pair of old, ripped jeans and a tee shirt, her long blonde hair hanging down her back.

She was at the shop door, struggling to get her keys out of her purse and to hang on to the coffees.

Nick jumped down from his truck and came up behind her. He reached around to take the keys from her. "Noelle, let me help you."

Too late, he realized she hadn't heard him coming. As he grabbed the keys, she started, losing her hold on the coffees and dumping all three down her front.

He felt like a complete idiot. This was not the way to start their new, cooperative relationship. "Are you all right? Did you get burned?"

"No," she said.

*He* may have though, because the look she gave him could have left scorch marks. They stooped to pick up the now empty containers and Noelle's purse, lying in a puddle of coffee.

They both grabbed one of the cups at the same time. Nick tugged. She didn't let go.

"I've got it," he said.

"No, I do. I'm fine."

His first instinct was to pull harder and take it from her, but he resisted and let her have it. He was not going to argue with her today, he reminded himself.

She opened the door to her shop and led the way in. They threw the ruined cups into a large garbage can in the middle of the floor.

"Nick, did you want something?" asked Noelle, trying unsuccessfully to cover up her irritation.

"Yes, but hold on. Are you sure you're okay? The coffee didn't burn you anywhere?"

"No, the coffee merely warmed me up from the outside, instead of from the inside, thank-you."

"You'd better get out of that wet coat."

"I know that," she snapped, and then turned and went into the back room. "Oh no."

When he heard her exclamation, Nick followed her. She stood with her back to him, hanging her coat on a peg. "What's the matter?"

“This blouse is ruined.” She turned around, the wet fabric clinging to every curve. She was wearing one of those camisole things underneath her blouse, which was good, because the white blouse was now completely transparent.

Nick felt his jaw drop.

“I’ll have to go home and change.” As she walked past him, he managed to snap his mouth shut and follow her to the front of the store where she was grabbing her wet purse off the counter.

“Nick, would you mind doing me a favor? Two teens named Deirdre and Drake Simmons should be here any minute. Can you wait for them and tell them I’ll be right back?”

“Sure.”

She was going out in public? Like that? Didn’t she realize she looked like a contestant in a wet T-shirt contest? He had to say something.

“Noelle, wait—”

“What?” She turned back to face him.

He couldn’t put two words together in his brain, never mind make them come out of his mouth. This was definitely one of those times when it was hard to think of Noelle as a sister.

“Nick, I have to hurry.”

“Um...Your coat?” he croaked.

“My coat is soaked. It won’t do me any good. Don’t worry. My car should still be warm.” She pushed the door open.

“Noelle—”

“Now what?”

He didn’t know what to say or where to look. He pulled off his own coat. “Here, take mine.”

She pushed it away. “I don’t need...”

“Noelle, for once in your life don’t argue with me.” He tried to put every ounce of authority he could muster into his voice.

It worked. She rolled her eyes but allowed him to help her into the coat. “I’ll be right back. Just stay until the kids get here, okay?”

“I’ll stay. Leave the coat on.”

“Really, Nick I’m not going to catch pneumonia,” she called over her shoulder as she walked out.

Nick welcomed the blast of cold air that hit him before the door closed behind her. Pneumonia was the last thing he was worried about her catching.

He had only a few minutes to regain his poise before the door opened again, and two teens stepped in. The girl looked a bit nervous, but her brother positively radiated with surly teen attitude. Two smaller children trailed behind them. They must be the helpers Noelle was expecting. What were their names again?

“Hi,” said Nick. “Noelle asked me to tell you she’d be back in a few minutes.”

The kids stared at him.

“She was carrying in some coffee,” he explained. “I was going to help her with the door, but...”

“Oh, t-that’s what the mess on the sidewalk was,” said the oldest girl. “Are you ...um... a friend of Noelle’s?”

“Possibly,” Nick replied. “I’ve known her since we were kids, but after the coffee incident, I’m not sure she’ll want to claim me as a friend.”

The girl laughed, and the older boy even softened enough to smile. They were a ragged looking bunch, wearing clothes that had seen better days. The eldest boy was in serious need of a haircut, and the youngest boy looked like he’d gotten one from a very inexperienced stylist.

“W-we can get started without Noelle,” said the oldest girl.

“I’m Nick, by the way.” Nick offered his hand to her.

She took it shyly. “I’m Deirdre. This is ...um... my brother, Drake,” she said, indicating the long haired teen. “We’re twins.”

Drake stepped forward and shook Nick’s hand. Nick couldn’t help but notice the wary look in the boy’s eyes, and he wondered about their home life. Stooping down, Nick addressed the two younger children. “And who do we have here?”

“I’m Ryan. Pleased to meet you, Nick.” The boy shook Nick’s hand, and Deirdre looked him with pride.

“I can read,” announced Ryan. “I’m learning at school this year.”

Before he could respond to that, Nick felt tiny fingers tugging at his shirt.

“I’m Kendra,” said the girl, the smallest among them, Nick thought she couldn’t be more than five. She was cute as could be with blonde curls and light brown eyes.

Ryan was also fair haired as well as tallish and thin, but Nick figured he couldn’t be more than six or seven years old. Drake and Deirdre were darker than their siblings, with dark brown hair and eyes. “I’m pleased to meet all of you, too,” said Nick. “I thought Noelle was only expecting two people, though.”

Deirdre blushed. “Sh-she was but ...um... Dad had to work and we couldn’t f-find a sitter on short notice. Do you think Noelle will...um...mind?”

She looked so distressed that Nick felt moved to reassure her. “No, I’m sure it will be fine.”

“Can we get started?” Drake shifted from foot to foot, impatient.



“S-sure,” She showed her siblings where to hang their coats in the back.

“Oh no, Noelle’s new coat is a mess,” Nick heard Deirdre exclaim from the back. New? His guilt went up a notch.

The kids trailed back out into the store. Drake leaned against the counter. What do we need to do?”

“Um...Noelle wanted some help putting up these shelves.” Deirdre indicated a jumble of metal on the floor.

He knelt and starting sorting through the pieces. “Do you have a screwdriver in this place, Dee?”

“I’ll check,” she disappeared into the back.

“I think I have one in my truck. Phillips or flathead?” asked Nick.

A few minutes later the guys were wrestling with the shelves and Deirdre was settling her younger siblings in a clear area of the floor. She handed them crayons and coloring books.

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Noelle checked her reflection in the hall mirror before leaving home for the second time that morning. She hoped her day wouldn’t continue as it had started. If she had her own personal dictionary, Nick’s picture would be next to the word frustration. He had frustrated her by his rivalry all through school. When he grew out of his skinny boy’s body and into the one he had now, and began to show the character of a confident and honorable man, she knew a totally different kind of frustration. She wanted a new kind of relationship with him, one that didn’t involve a never ending battle of one-up-man-ship. But she didn’t know how to go about it.

It was torture, having all those new and tender feelings about him and knowing that he never even noticed her, except as his rival for whatever honor

they competed for that week. But she couldn't stop competing with him because then she'd lose his attention all together. His last triumph was beating her out for valedictorian, by a hundredth of a grade point.

Noelle had been furious. This was their last contest, she knew, and he had won it. He'd forever be the one with the last prize. She'd hardly spoken to him for a week before graduation. And then, by the time she'd realized how badly she was behaving, it was too late. He had left town for a summer job.

As she gazed into the mirror, she wasn't really seeing herself. She was thinking back to the Christmas of her freshman year in college. She'd been happy to be home and excited about the church's Christmas party for the older youth. She knew a lot of the friends she hadn't seen since the summer would be there.

"Noelle, wait up," Janey Larson had called. Noelle turned at the door of the hall and waited for her friend to catch up. Janey, a tiny tornado of a person, swept the taller Noelle up into a tight hug. "We've all missed you around here,"

Noelle gladly returned her friend's hug. "I've missed all of you too. I couldn't wait for tonight so I could see everyone." The two girls hurried into the crowded room and soon there were hugs all around as she was welcomed back into the group.

"Is anyone else coming tonight? From out of town, I mean," Noelle asked her friends.

Janey mentioned a couple of their classmates. "And of course Nick's here," she finished, gesturing to across the room where her un-dearest friend stood talking with some of the guys.

The sight of Nick filled Noelle with guilt. She dreaded talking to him. What would he say when he

saw her? Would he remind her what a poor sport she'd been?

It turned out that Noelle didn't have to worry about what Nick might say because he didn't talk to her all night. It had to be deliberate. He couldn't accidentally overlook her in this small group.

Why wouldn't he talk to her? Was he that angry with her? Was he worried that she'd be rude to him? She had to find out. She watched him out of the corner of her eye. He looked good—very good—in a new pair of jeans and a blue and white striped button-down shirt.

Noelle tried to speak to him all night, but they were both surrounded by others, and she didn't find a single chance to talk to him by himself. She thought she might have to ask him in front of everyone else or forget about the matter. Then the party started to break up and, as Nick returned the CD player to one of the Sunday School classrooms, Noelle saw her chance. She slipped out and followed Nick to the dark education wing.

He had set the CD player on a shelf. When he turned and saw her there, she said "Nick, I'm sorry I wasn't very nice about you winning valedictorian. I was a brat. You worked hard and you deserved it." She held out her hand to him.

He just stared at her hand, and she thought for a minute he wasn't going to accept it. Was he going to throw her bad behavior right back in her face? Then slowly, he reached out and took her hand. Instead of shaking it, as she expected, he pulled, drawing her to him until they were separated by only inches.

He looked into her eyes, his expression unreadable, and her heartbeat sped up. He let go of her hand and slipped his arms around her waist.

“Nick, what...?” Before she could finish her question his mouth covered hers.

Farm work and playing sports had given him a lean, hard body. In comparison, his mouth was soft and moved gently against hers. She slipped her arms around his neck and let him pull her to him more tightly.

He deepened the kiss, and a million butterflies took flight in her stomach. Then, just as abruptly as he'd pulled her to him, he set her away. She struggled to breathe. He gazed at her, his eyes dark and intense. He caressed her cheek, touched her hair...and walked out, without saying a single word to her.

She stood there, knees shaking, head buzzing for countless moments. By the time she pulled herself together, he was gone.

The next day she went to his Uncle's house, intending to demand an explanation, but he had already left again for college.

She'd never found out why he'd kissed her like that all those years ago. She'd had boyfriends since then, but none of them had been able to top Nick's kiss—not even close. Now here she was, years later, still stuck in old habits with no idea how to change them, no matter how badly she wanted to. Even when the guy made her dump coffee all over herself, she was still waiting for him to kiss her again. Yes, Nick was the very definition of frustration.

Noelle sighed and grabbed her purse. She didn't have time to stand around daydreaming. His coat hung over the back of the couch where she'd laid it when she came in. It was denim with a thick fleece lining and it smelled of pine—a definite plus to living on a Christmas tree farm.

If she were smart, she'd grab another coat and get this one back to Nick ASAP. But the smell was heavenly. She shrugged into it. He probably left as soon as the kids arrived, and he'd never know she'd worn it for more than the trip home. She wrapped it around her and inhaled the scent of pine and Nick.

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Nick looked up from the shelving unit he and Drake were putting together when he heard the door open.

Noelle walked in, wearing a fresh designer outfit, new lipstick, and—his old coat? Surely she had more than one coat to choose from in her closet. Why would she wear his?

Noelle raised her eyebrows in surprise. “Nick, you’re still here?”

“Yes, I wanted to apologize again.”

“You don’t have to. It was an accident.”

Deirdre appeared at Noelle’s elbow. “Um, I hope you don’t mind, but...” She explained about having to bring Kendra and Ryan to work with her.

“It’s okay for today,” Noelle told her, “but let’s try to avoid it in the future. There are just too many breakables in our stock. It’s not really a good place for children to play.”

Even as she said this, Kendra was reaching for a porcelain angel placed on one of the built in wall shelves. Noelle took the angel down and showed it to her. “It’s pretty, isn’t it?”

The little girl nodded. “She’s a pretty doll. Can I play with her?”

Noelle shook her head. “I’m sorry, honey. This angel is just for looking at, not for playing with.” She set the angel back on the shelf, and Kendra reluctantly went back to her coloring book.

Noelle turned her attention back to Nick and Drake. “Wow, those shelves are really going together fast. Dee, help me move the finished ones.”

The men continued to put the lightweight metal shelves together while the women arranged and rearranged them until they came up with a configuration they liked.

When the last shelf was in place, Noelle declared them done for the day, even though it was only a little after noon. “You can’t spend your whole Saturday at work,” she explained to the kids with a smile.

She stood at the counter and wrote out a check for Drake. “Thank you so much for your help today, Drake. Deirdre, make sure you mark your hours on your time card.”

Finally, she turned to Ryan and Kendra. “You two were really good today. I hardly heard a peep out of you.” She handed Ryan some bills. “I want you two to take your big brother and sister out to lunch, okay?”

The children agreed with enthusiasm and rushed to Dee and Drake.

“Oh, Noelle, you don’t have to do that,” cried Dee.

“It’s okay. You deserve it,” Noelle told them. “I was bringing you coffee this morning, but...”

Nick shrugged. “Sorry, guys.”

“This is better,” Deirdre exclaimed. “Thank you for including Ryan and Kendra.”

“You’re welcome,” Noelle assured them.

There was a happy discussion on where to eat lunch while the kids put on their coats. After the door closed behind them, silence settled over the shop.

Nick looked at Noelle. He liked the way she’d treated the kids. She’d been kind, without being condescending.

Noelle cleared her throat, and he realized he'd been staring. He looked away.

"Thanks for sticking around and helping."

"It was the least I could do after..."

She held up her hand to stop him. "Really Nick, it was an accident. I don't want to hear another word about it."

"Okay, but send me the bill for cleaning your coat and clothes."

"No."

He arched an eyebrow. "No?" Feelings of admiration drained away as his irritation built. Did she think he couldn't afford it?

"Your work this morning has more than covered it. There's no way we'd be done this early without your help."

He walked over to her. "I didn't stay to make up for the coffee spill."

Noelle took a step back and bumped into the counter. "Then why did you stay?"

"Because I never got a chance to talk to you. That's why I stopped here in the first place." What was it about Noelle that could take him from even tempered to furious in mere seconds?

"You could have done that at any time."

"Well, I didn't. That doesn't mean you can count my help as pay. Send me the bill."

She lifted her chin a fraction. "No."

Nick leaned forward, resting a hand on the counter on either side of her. "Did it ever occur to you," he growled, his face inches from hers, "that we'd have no problem getting along if you weren't so stubborn."

Noelle folded her arms across her chest. "Did it ever occur to you that *you* might be the stubborn one?"

"I'm trying to be nice."

"Well try harder."

He refused to back up and knew she couldn't as the counter was behind her. "Have lunch with me."

"What?"

"That's what I came in to talk to you about. I wanted to take you to lunch to talk about decorating the church for Christmas."

"Lunch?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Wherever you like."

Noelle placed her hands on his chest and pushed. He didn't move.

"What's your answer?"

"I didn't know I was being given a choice."

"You are. What's your answer?"

"Really, Ni—"

"And if 'really Nick' comes out of your mouth one more time today I'll..." He stared at her mouth. She was close enough to silence with a kiss. He was suddenly aware of her palms, still flattened across his chest. For several heartbeats he stood there, incredibly attuned to her nearness, her warmth, the smell of her shampoo.

Had he lost his mind? Abruptly, he backed away. "Do you want to go to lunch or not? Yes or no this time."

"Um...y-yes, I guess. Just let me freshen up first." Noelle slipped around the counter and into the back room.

She sounded upset, and it was his fault. Nick considered himself a patient man, but somehow Noelle always pushed him over the edge. He didn't even know of a particular thing about her that did it. It was just...just *her*.



He paced while he waited, trying to release some of the energy that flooded his body after their exchange. He couldn't figure out what it was that goaded him to test his will against hers. It wasn't like there was something wrong with her. She was a nice person. She tried hard to do what was right, being unfailingly kind to other people and taking her responsibilities seriously. Moving back to be with her mother was proof of that.

So what was it that always put him on guard whenever she was near? Whatever it was, he had to eliminate it and make peace with her. Otherwise he'd lose respect for himself. How could he teach the kids in the youth group about friendship and God's love if he couldn't even get along with someone like Noelle?

He tossed aside his good intentions when she came out of the back room and handed him his coat. "I'm ready," she announced.

"Where's your coat?" he asked.

"I left it at home, but it doesn't matter. I'll be fine."

"It's my fault you can't wear your own coat. You'll wear mine."

She was going to argue. He could see it as clearly as he could see a blue sky clouding over before a snow storm. But something in his expression must have changed her mind. She allowed him to help her into the coat. "Now was that so hard?" he grumbled.

"What?" she looked up at him, confused.

"Agreeing with me. Was that so hard?"

She smiled then. "Yes. You don't know how much effort it takes." But her tone was teasing, so he relaxed.

"Where do you want to go for lunch?"

"Anywhere's fine with me."

"I invited you, you pick."

“No, I’m being sweet and agreeable today. You pick.”

“Sweet and agreeable? That will never last.”

“So you’d better enjoy it now.”

With the tension broken between them, lunch went better than he had foreseen. Of course they never got around to discussing the details of their project, but they agreed to meet next Tuesday to go through the decorations the church already owned. And they didn’t have any more arguments. In fact, lunch had been fun. They’d talked over old times, remembering youth group outings and school events. Maybe there was hope for them yet, he decided.

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“So I heard you and Nick had lunch today,” said Gladys while they were washing dishes that evening.

*How did she hear about that already?* “Yes,” Noelle answered. “We needed to talk over our decorating project. We’re going to get together next week to start.”

“Wonderful. I’m glad to see you two getting along for a change.”

“Nick and I have always been friends, Mom.”

“Friends? The way you fight, I thought you were more like brother and sister.”

Noelle didn’t particularly appreciate that analogy, since her feelings for Nick were far from sisterly. Of course, she’d die before she’d admit that to her mother, especially since Nick evidently didn’t feel the same way about her. The way he’d backed off when he realized how close they were said it all. That’s why she decided not to argue with him anymore. What difference did it make? Now, she just wanted to get this project over with so she could stay as far away from Nick Jensen as possible. It was the

only way she would keep her heart and her pride in tact.

## Chapter Three

Thanksgiving grew nearer, as did the grand opening for Joyeux Noel. The store was set to open on the Friday after Thanksgiving, the official beginning of the Christmas shopping season. Each evening she could spare, she worked late, and this evening, since her mother was going out with friends, Noelle seized the opportunity to set up a display of a Victorian Christmas Village in the picture window of her shop. As she reached to place a figurine there was a loud knock at the shop door. She almost dropped the delicate piece.

She set down the figurine and went to the door. Nick stood outside, and he didn't look happy. What had she done now?

She opened the door and let him in.

He pushed past her into the store. "What are you doing?"

"I'm setting up this display. Why?"

"Because you were supposed to meet me at the church forty minutes ago."

She gasped. "Is today Tuesday?"

"Yes. It usually comes after Monday, you see."

"Oh, Nick, I'm sorry. I'll just finish up here, and we can go right away." Noelle rushed around, picking up the empty boxes the figurines had come in and taking them to the back. She grabbed her coat—or rather his coat—and hurried to the front of the store.

"Are you still wearing that?" he asked incredulously. "I thought you'd forgotten about it?"

She had forgotten about it—forgotten she was supposed to give it back. She felt herself flushing with embarrassment. “I’m sorry Nick.”

“You like my coat, don’t you?” It sounded like an accusation.

“I guess I do. I really didn’t mean to keep it. Here, you take it right now, or I’ll forget again.”

“Do you have another coat with you?”

“No.”

“Then you know what I’m going to say.”

She bit her lip and nodded. “I really am sorry.”

She was surprised when he smiled at her. “Why do you like it? It hardly seems to be your style.”

“Well, it...” She dropped her head and mumbled her answer.

His hand came up and caught her chin, lifting it so he could see her face. “Could you repeat that?”

“It smells good,” she answered in a small voice. Her skin tingled where he touched her, and she stepped back to break the contact before he could see how it affected her.

“Smells good?”

“Yes. It smells like pine, like your trees. It must be wonderful to wake up to that smell every morning.”

Nick stared at her and then laughed. “I guess I’ve lived there for so long, I’ve stopped noticing. Thank you Noelle.”

“For what? For stealing your coat?”

“No, for reminding me how lucky I am. And let’s just say you’ve adopted the coat.”

“I’ll buy you another one,” she offered, noting the faded, worn condition of the one he was wearing.

“I don’t need you to buy me things.” His voice changed from lighthearted to hard in a second.

“I didn’t say you did, I just wanted...”

“Can’t you just accept a gift from someone?”

“But...but you didn’t mean for me to keep it.”

Nick took the coat from her and held it out for her to slip into. Then he pulled the coat up over her shoulders and lifted her hair free of the collar. His fingers brushed the skin on the nape of her neck, and she shivered. “It doesn’t matter,” he said. “The coat is yours now. Let’s go.”

Deciding it would be easier for them to each drive their own vehicles, Nick followed Noelle to the church. On the way he wondered about Noelle and the coat. If she liked the pine scent, couldn’t she just buy some in a bottle? He knew it was available. She’d probably be selling it in her shop. Could there be another reason she liked the coat?

Was there a glimmer of hope that she might have some of the same feelings for him he had for her? He squashed that hope quickly, as he thought of how she’d offered to buy him a new coat. She probably thought of him as a charity case.

Granted, he’d received quite a bit of charity from her parents. Even though the gifts had been anonymous, he knew where his expensive basketball shoes had come from and how Uncle Larry had been able to afford to send him to Washington D.C. with the rest of the National Honor Society kids. Noelle’s father had even set up an account to help fund Nick’s schooling. Maybe Noelle had a reason to think of him as a charity case. But he couldn’t help wishing she could see him as something more.

While they waited at a stop light, he allowed himself to drift back in time to the one kiss they’d shared. He really didn’t know why he had done it. He hadn’t planned to kiss her. He’d avoided her all night because he was afraid she’d still be mad at him, and he hated it when she was mad at him. But he couldn’t

help noticing her. She wore a fuzzy white sweater and had her golden hair piled loosely on her head, reminding him of an angel. Maybe it was just that he hadn't seen her for so long that her beauty struck him anew.

He wasn't the type of guy to go around grabbing women and kissing them. In fact normally, he would frown on that sort of behavior. But, still, he didn't have it in him to be sorry for kissing her. He still remembered the way she felt in his arms and the scent of her perfume.

A car behind him blared its horn. The light had changed. He shook himself out of his daydream and stepped on the gas.

When they arrived at the church, everything was dark. The Christmas ornaments were stored in a windowless room in the basement.

Noelle shivered a bit as they went downstairs to the basement. "Are you cold?" he asked.

She shook her head. "It's just that usually when I'm here, this place is filled with people. It's so still now. It's a bit unsettling."

He put an arm around her shoulders—a purely gentlemanly gesture, he told himself—and steered her toward the storage room. He unlocked the door with the key Pastor Thorn had provided, opened the door, and found the light switch.

The light flickered on, revealing a jumble of boxes, odds and ends and spider webs. "Yuck," exclaimed Noelle. "Let's find the Christmas stuff and get out of here."

"Are you afraid of a little dust?" he taunted her, but she didn't bite.

They waded through the cartons until they found the ones marked Christmas. Nick carried the first one out and set it down in the hall. He turned and

ran right into Noelle, who was behind him carrying another box. Reaching out he was able to steady her and keep the box from falling.

“What are doing?” He took the box from her. “These are heavy.”

“Not that heavy. I can help.”

“You wait out here. I’ll get the rest.”

“No way. It will take twice as long then.”

He wanted to tell her it would take three times as long if she kept arguing, but he knew where that path led and he wasn’t going to go there. He drew a deep breath. “Noelle, please let me do it. I promise it won’t take long.”

She blinked in surprise. Obviously this was not the response she was expecting. “Okay. I guess I can start opening them up while you do that.”

Nick went back for the next box. They could do this. They could get along.

Once the boxes were lined up and opened in the hallway outside the storage room, they began to sort through them. It was not a pleasant job.

“I think these are the same decorations that were being used when we were kids. The church really needs some new things.”

Nick picked up an antiquated string of lights. “I think you’re right. I wonder if there’s any room in the budget for new stuff.”

“Let’s make a note to ask Pastor Thorn.” Noelle looked around for her purse, and found it on the floor next to one of the boxes. She opened it and pulled out a small day planner and pen then carefully entered the note about calling Pastor Thorn.

“You’re too organized,” he teased.

She shook her head. “No, I’m not organized enough.”

“Why do you say that?”



“I didn’t remember about tonight. I’m sorry Nick.”

“It’s no big deal. Forget it.” He leaned over her shoulder and read some of her entries. “Wow, that’s quite a to-do list you have going.”

She nodded. “I know. I don’t know how I’m ever going to be ready for the store to open by the day after Thanksgiving.”

“It doesn’t have to be perfect, you know.”

She stared back at him, shocked. “Yes, it does.”

“Why?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Why not?”

“You just wouldn’t. Drop it Nick.”

Her angry tone surprised him. He wanted to snap back, but remembering her response before, he chose a gentler approach. “Explain it to me. I’ll try to understand.”

She shook her head. He could see tears welling up in her eyes, but she blinked them back. He knew she would never give in to such a show of weakness in front of him.

Surprisingly this made him angrier than her hostile attitude had. Why couldn’t she display a perfectly normal human emotion in front of him?

He turned away. “Fine. Let’s just get back to these boxes. I want to get finished sometime tonight.”

Silently, they continued to sort through all the decorations. Any camaraderie they’d established was gone. After a bit, he looked over to see Noelle holding a doll—the very same baby Jesus doll she should have held in the Christmas pageant all those years ago.

Unable to stop himself, he moved over by her. She hastily tried to put the doll aside, but he took it from her. “I remember this,” he said.

She nodded. "From the worst Christmas pageant in church history."

"You know I didn't mean to trip you. I felt bad about your nose."

"Of course you didn't mean it. I know that."

"You were mad at me though."

"I couldn't help it. I looked like a raccoon for Christmas and my birthday."

"At least it healed perfectly."

She quickly covered her nose with her hand. "What do you mean? There's still a bump."

"Is there? I can't see it." He pushed her hand aside and ran a finger down the bridge of her nose. "I can't feel it either."

She blushed. "You're just being nice."

"No," he insisted. "I'm not. You have nothing to worry about. You're beautiful."

Noelle looked away and cleared her throat. "I think we've done all we can for tonight. Where should we put these boxes so we can get at them again?"

"There's an unused Sunday School room down the hall. That should work."

"That sounds like a good place," she agreed. "I'll repack everything and you can put them away."

He smiled, knowing she was purposely letting him do the heavy work, as he would have insisted anyway. Maybe they weren't so hopeless after all.

"Are you coming to the youth group meeting tomorrow night?"

"Yes. I'm trying to talk Deirdre and Drake into coming."

"That would be nice. I think it would be good for them."

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Noelle *was* successful in bringing the two teens the next night, but only because she told them

Kendra and Ryan could go to Wednesday night Kid's Church. They were on babysitting duty again. "You're parents work an awful lot of hours, don't they?" she asked Deirdre.

The girl blushed and stammered, "I—I guess they do. It's all right w-with us though."

Drake glared at Noelle.

"I'm sorry. I didn't meant to imply any criticism," she hastily apologized.

It was board games night for the youth group. At first Drake and Deirdre hung back and were reluctant to join in. Noelle saw Nick say something to a small group of kids, and they immediately came over and invited twins to join in their game. They went reluctantly, but before long they began to have fun. By the time the game boards were put away, Deirdre was chatting and laughing with a couple of other girls. Drake was sitting with a group of guys. He wasn't exactly joining in the conversation, but he was listening and had lost his habitual scowl.

The meeting ended with a few songs and a prayer. Nick made an announcement about Christmas caroling, and Noelle remembered how much he'd always enjoyed that event. Then it was time for snacks. As the teenagers milled around the snack table, Nick came to stand by her. "It was a good idea to invite them."

"Thanks. I think they take a lot of responsibility in their family. I'm glad to see them having fun."

"Drake seems like a good kid."

"He is, but he seems angry a lot of the time. Maybe that's just teen angst."

"Maybe. I've been thinking of hiring someone to help me out on the farm. Do you think he'd be interested?"

"Sure. You should ask him,"

As everyone was preparing to leave, Nick approached Drake about a job. He gratefully accepted, and they agreed to meet and discuss the details after school the next day.

Deirdre looked at Noelle, her eyes shining. “Thank you so much Noelle. I know Drake would never have gotten this job without you.”

“I’m sure Nick would have hired him without my recommendation.”

“Maybe, but we wouldn’t have met Nick if it weren’t for you. And we wouldn’t have come tonight if you hadn’t invited us.”

“I’m glad you came. It looked like you made some friends.”

Deirdre shrugged. “M-maybe. We had fun anyway.”

“Come again, any time,” Noelle urged.

## Chapter Four

On the Monday of Thanksgiving week, Uncle Larry hung up the kitchen phone and turned to Nick, who was washing the dishes. "That was Gladys Granton."

"Oh, what did she want?"

"She invited us to Thanksgiving dinner. I said yes. It's bound to be better than ours."

"What, you don't like the way I prepare frozen pizza anymore?" Nick chuckled.

"No offense Nick, but between the two of us, we'd burn water. I'd rather go to Gladys's house."

Nick shrugged. "Sounds fine to me. Who else will be there?"

"Noelle, of course. Jake and his family can't make it, but Natalie and her family will be there."

Nick would have preferred Noelle's brother over her sister, Natalie. She was a bit of a busybody. Still, Larry was right, it was better than anything they'd make for Thanksgiving. Nick loved his uncle, and appreciated all that Larry had done for him, but one thing he hadn't been able to do, was teach Nick any of the domestic arts. The farm house hadn't had anything remotely reminiscent of a feminine touch since his mom had passed away.

Larry was being unnaturally silent. Nick glanced at him as he rinsed plates. He seemed lost in thought. This was definitely uncharted territory for Larry. "What's up," He asked his uncle.

"Gladys is a bit upset about Noelle."

Nick set down the pan he was about to scrub. "Oh, what's Noelle doing?"

"It seems she's putting in a lot of hours at that new store of hers. Plus, she's still fussing over her mom like she's been since the heart attack. Gladys says Noelle is exhausted."

Nick remembered her insistence that everything in the store had to be perfect. He shook his head. The woman was crazy. She was going to hurt herself and that would hurt Gladys. Someone had to show her that. He decided he was going to be the one to do it. Who else was there? Gladys certainly wouldn't.

Deciding not to put it off, he stopped at the store first thing the next morning. He noted briefly that grey clouds were building in the sky. It looked like the first snow of the season wasn't far away.

The door was unlocked, so he walked right in. Noelle was standing with her back to him. When she heard the door close she whirled around, her blue eyes wide.

"What is it?" he asked.

She pointed to the floor where the porcelain angel Kendra had admired lay in pieces.

"So? We'll get a broom and sweep it up."

"No, Nick. You don't understand. When I got here this morning the door was unlocked. The angel was like this when I came in. Someone was in the store last night."

"You mean someone broke in?"

She nodded. As the idea sunk in, Nick's gut twisted with emotion. He was angry that anyone would do this, relieved that Noelle hadn't been there when it happened, and worried for her future safety. But stronger than all these emotions was the need to take care of her, to protect her.

"I'm calling the police," he said.

“No, it’s my store. I’ll do it.”

“You’ve had a shock. Let me call the police while you sit down.”

“If you think I’m going to faint or something, forget about it, Nick. *I’m* calling the police.” With that, she flipped open her cell phone and began pressing buttons.

“You have the number memorized?” he asked.

“No, but I have it in my contacts.”

While she placed the call, Nick began to prowl around the store, looking for other signs of a break-in.

Noelle looked up from her phone. “Don’t touch anything,” she called to him.

“I know.” Did she think he was stupid? Anyone who’d ever watched a television crime drama knew better than to touch anything at a crime scene. Nick shoved his hands into his pockets anyway. He felt useless, and that made him even surlier.

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Noelle eyed Nick as she waited for her call to go through and noted the tense set of his shoulders and the dark look on his face. She had a feeling he was going to be a problem, but she felt equally strongly that it would be futile to try to get him to leave.

Her hunch was right. He was a pain during the police interview. He tried to answer every question for her, until the officer, who seemed to think Nick was her boyfriend, asked him to stop.

By the time the police left, she had had just about enough. She stood by the door that the police officer had just left by, waiting to usher him out. “Thank you for your concern Nick,” she said, trying to keep her voice calm. “But there’s nothing else you can do here. Go home.”

“Me? Go home?” He looked incredulous.

“That’s what I said.”

“A break in is a traumatic event. You’re the one who should go home. You should take it easy today.”

That did it. The break in had scared her, more than she cared to admit, but being treated like a helpless bubble brain only made it worse. The fragile control she’d been holding onto shattered. “I’m not some swooning Gothic heroine,” she screamed. “I am a fully capable adult, and this is my business. I’m going to do my work for the day. Something another business owner in this room might want to consider.”

“I would, but someone has to keep an eye on you,” he yelled back at her, leaning down until he was almost nose to nose with her. “You’re worrying your mother to death.”

Surprised, she took a step back. “What? Who told you that? I’m still taking care of her. I make her supper every night. I do all the shopping and cleaning.”

“Plus you work these insane hours. She’s worried you’re going to exhaust yourself.”

“If my mother is worried, then she should talk to me about it.”

“I bet she has, but you didn’t listen. You’re so wrapped up in this place.”

“I just want it to be a success.”

“No, you want it to be ‘perfect.’ I’ve got news for you. Nothing is perfect.”

Noelle knew she was losing it. Tears prickled her eyes, and she blinked them back. “No, but everyone expects it to be. If it isn’t, they’ll say I’m spoiled and lazy. People will think I’m a rich girl playing store. I want to be taken seriously.” Her hand flew to her mouth, too late to stop the words.

Nick looked at her strangely. She knew he was putting two and two together in his head, and would figure out this was what she’d been talking about



other night at the church. She took a few steps away from him and stood looking down at the shattered angel, not wanting to see his face when he realized.

“Is that what you think?” he asked incredulously.

“No, but everyone else does. I have a good family, I have money, I have opportunities. “To those whom much is given, much is expected.””

He grabbed her shoulders and turned her, forcing her to look at him. “Does that mean no one ever expected much of me?”

“Whatever you did, people praised you. If you got an A it was because you worked hard and overcame obstacles. If I got one, it was no big deal. Everyone thought that’s what I should be getting in the first place. You see, no matter what I do, I can’t beat you.”

“I never knew you felt that way,” he said quietly, dropping his hands to his sides and stepping away.

She took in several big gulps of air. She was a mess, and she knew it. She hated Nick seeing her like this. “Nick, I want you to go. I’m saying things I shouldn’t be saying. Please go now.”

He stood eyeing her with uncertainty. She realized his sense of honor demanded that he make sure she was all right before he left. “I don’t need you. I’ll be all right by myself.” Her words almost choked her.

“If you’re sure,” he said, his voice carefully unemotional, but he didn’t move.

“And don’t call my mom. If you think she’s worried about me now, you can’t imagine how much worse telling her about this will make it.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it. Any more orders for me, your highness?”

“Your highness. Very flattering. But at least you’re finally being honest. That’s how you’ve always thought of me, and that’s why you liked beating me at

everything for years. You loved to be the one to bring me down a little.” She was trying to hurt him now. She was driving him away with her words. “The only reason you were ever nice to me was for my parents’ sakes, wasn’t it, because they tried to help you. All I am to you is an obligation. Well, here’s a news flash for you. I’m all grown up, and I don’t need you to take care of me. You can put paid to that debt.”

Nick turned without another word and left the store, and the door slammed behind him. She shivered as the sharp sound echoed through the shop. She didn’t move until she heard the truck door slam and the engine start. When she knew he was gone, she sank to her knees in the midst of pieces of the porcelain angel. She felt a shard pierce her pants and cut her knee, but she didn’t care. It didn’t hurt as much as her shredded heart. She’d succeeded in driving Nick away.

It was the exact opposite of what she wanted.

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Nick spent the day worrying about Noelle. After he’d cooled down a bit and thought about their argument, he realized she’d probably been overwhelmed by the scare she’d had. He shouldn’t have reacted to what she’d said. He shouldn’t have gotten mad and stormed out. He’d let her down.

He forced himself to stay away from the store. No doubt his presence would be unwanted. Instead he pumped Drake for information the next day. They were sitting at the table, Drake with a plate of food in front of him, Nick with a bottle of soda. Nick always insisted that Drake sit down and have something to eat before he started in on work.

“Did Deirdre say anything about a break in at Joyeux Noel?” he asked, trying to sound casual.

Drake's mouth tightened. "Yeah, she told me." He bit into the ham sandwich he'd made at Nick's invitation.

"I think Noelle was pretty shaken up. She's okay, isn't she?"

Drake swallowed his bite of sandwich. "She's your friend. Why are you asking me?"

Nick shrugged. "I just thought maybe you'd know."

"All I know is, she doesn't have to worry—and neither do you. It won't happen again."

"How could you possibly know that?"

Drake put down his sandwich and looked Nick in the eye. "I can't say how, but I just know, okay."

Nick gazed back at the teen and read sincerity in his eyes. "I don't know how you can make that guarantee, but I'll trust you."

The teen lowered his gaze back to the table, but not before Nick saw the flash of pleasure in it when he said he trusted him.

"Besides, I wasn't worried about Noelle."

Drake seemed to find something very amusing about that. The corners of his mouth turned up. "Yeah, right."

Nick didn't like the way this was going. He drained the rest of the soda from the bottle in one long drink then rose from the table. "Finish up there. We have a lot of work to do."

"Sure," answered Drake, not even trying to hide his grin now.

Nick went outside, slamming the door behind him.

## Chapter Five

Noelle sat at her dressing table. It was Thanksgiving, and the house would soon be filled with guests—extremely annoying guests like her perpetually matchmaking sister Natalie, along with her husband and children. Worse, Gladys had invited Nick and his Uncle Larry to dinner. Noelle hadn't seen him since their fight at the store, and she wasn't looking forward to having their first meeting in front of her family. The weather reflected her mood. It was cold and grey with heavy clouds covering the sky, but no snow yet.

With a sigh, Noelle began putting up her hair. She wondered if she should change out of the pant suit she'd chosen, but decided not to. She'd already changed six times, and if she hadn't made up her mind yet, it wasn't likely to happen.

Was Nick still mad at her? Would he even talk to her today? What if the family noticed they were fighting? Noelle shook her head. Squabbling was the norm for her and Nick. But this went much deeper than their usual disagreements.

She looked into the mirror in front of her and touched her nose. He'd said it was perfect, that she was beautiful. Did he mean it or was he just trying to make her feel better. A tear trickled down her cheek, and she wiped it away. She had to stop this or she'd be putting her make up on with a paint roller to hide the damage. Nick wouldn't think she was beautiful then.

Resolutely, Noelle blinked back her tears. No matter what Nick thought of her, she was going to apologize. It was the right thing to do. Whether he accepted her apology was his business.

She did her best to cover up the evidence of her tears, took a deep breath to gather her courage, and then went downstairs to face her family.

Things started out well. Natalie was perfectly nice and the children, Tara and Robin, were being well behaved. Even Natalie's husband Jeff managed to tear his attention away from the football game on television long enough to exchange a few pleasantries with Noelle. Then the three women headed into the kitchen to start dinner and Natalie pounced.

She was already annoyed with Natalie when Nick and Larry arrived. Nick came into the kitchen with the store bought pies he and Larry had brought as a contribution to the dinner. He caught her eye and mouthed "we need to talk." In spite of her good intentions to apologize, she pretended not to see. Now with Natalie scraping her nerves raw, she didn't think she had the strength to face Nick.

"Hi Nick," said Natalie who was happily peeling potatoes at the counter. "How are you? I haven't seen you for ages."

As Natalie chattered on to Nick, Noelle did her best to make herself invisible while mixing together the ingredients for cranberry punch. Maybe she succeeded too well, because Natalie decided to enlist Nick's help in arranging Noelle's love life.

"...and I keep telling Noelle that Scott Thomas would be perfect for her. We were friends in high school and I'm sure he'd be interested. I could arrange a date..."

“Natalie, please don’t talk about me like I’m not here,” interrupted Noelle. “I’m sure Nick is not interested in your fiendish plans for me.”

“What’s so fiendish about wanting to see you happily married?”

Noelle rolled her eyes but didn’t answer.

“It would be nice to see you settled, dear,” offered her mother.

“I am settled,” Noelle countered. “I live with my mother and own a business. That sounds settled to me.”

“That sounds pathetic to me,” said Natalie. “Doesn’t it sound pathetic to you, Nick?”

Nick looked at Noelle and she felt herself blushing under his appraisal. “I think it’s her life. She should do what she wants,” he finally answered.

Natalie turned to study Noelle, too. “She’s just scared of being hurt. Noelle, you’ve hardly dated at all since David. And that was over two years ago.”

That did it. The last thing Noelle needed was for her sister to give Nick a rundown of her unsuccessful romances. “Natalie, can you just drop this, please? I’m sure Nick couldn’t care less about my former boyfriends. I’m going to get the ice ring for the punch. When I come back, there’d better be a new topic for conversation.” She slipped through the door to the garage where her mother kept a small chest freezer.

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Nick watched Noelle go out the side door to the garage. Now was a perfect time to talk to her about their fight. The things she said had been painful, but Nick realized there was at least a partial truth to them. “I’ll help,” Nick said as he followed her out.

She was leaning against the freezer with her face in her hands.

“Noelle, what’s wrong?”

She jumped at the sound of his voice and wiped her eyes. “Nothing.”

He forgot about their fight. “Are you crying over this David guy?” For some reason that bothered him—more than he cared to think about.

“I’m not crying.”

“Natalie said he broke your heart.”

Noelle turned away from him, toward the freezer. “Really, Nick. You know better than to listen to Natalie.”

He put a hand down on the freezer, preventing her from opening it. “Well then, who is this David guy?”

“No one. Just an old boyfriend.”

“*Did* he break your heart?”

“I thought I’d made it clear that I didn’t want to discuss it.” She took a couple of sideways steps along the freezer, putting some distance between them.

Nick was learning that coaxing worked better with Noelle than demanding, so he checked his frustration. “Please tell me why you haven’t dated since this David.”

“It’s not that I haven’t dated, it’s just that...I sort of lost interest in it.”

“And why would that be?”

Noelle shrugged. “I guess I was naïve before him. He took advantage of me.”

Fury jolted through him. “He did what?”

“No, no,” exclaimed Noelle, shaking her head and waving her hands to emphasize that he was on the wrong track. “That didn’t come out right. I didn’t mean...what you think.”

Nick took a deep breath and counted to ten. “What did you mean?”

“It’s too embarrassing. I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What could be that bad?”

“Why do you want to know? Don’t you get enough entertainment out of humiliating me yourself? You want to hear how someone else did it?”

As usual, he felt his temper slipping out of control. He hung on to his emotions with his last ounce of restraint and said gently, “Please, Noelle, I want to know. I’m not going to make fun of you.”

Noelle sighed and rolled her eyes, then gave in and told him. “I overheard David bragging to his friends about how he had it made with me. He was going to marry me and use my money to finance his career, while still hanging on to his high school sweetheart on the side.”

Nick was surprised. Only a fool would think Noelle’s money was worth more than Noelle herself. “He was an idiot.”

“Since then, when a guy asks me out, I always have to wonder, if it’s because he likes *me* or...” she hesitated.

“Or just your money.”

“Yeah.”

“I guess there’s a downside to everything, including having lots of money,” he admitted.

“I’m sorry for what I said the other day, Nick.” The words slipped out before she could consider whether it was the right time to say them.

“I think you’re oversensitive about what other people think, but I do have to admit, you have a point.”

“I don’t mean to complain. I am very blessed.”

“And I don’t think you’re a spoiled brat.”

She looked up at him, those big blue eyes drawing him in like the tractor beam on the death star. “You don’t?”

“I don’t. I think you’re...”



“I’m what?”

When she went all soft and sweet on him, there was only one way to describe Noelle. “Irresistible,” he whispered, and for the second time in his life, he pulled her into his arms and kissed her. The reality of once again kissing Noelle far outshone his daydreams. She was soft and warm and exactly what he’d been craving for the last seven years. He could go on kissing her forever, but the moment was cut short by the sound of the door opening.

Noelle leaped back from him as Natalie leaned out from the kitchen. “What are you two doing out there? We need the ice ring for the punch.”

“Just...just talking,” Noelle called back, her voice distinctly unsteady. “We’ll be right there.”

The door closed and Noelle turned her eyes back to Nick. “Nick, that was...”

“A mistake,” he responded flatly. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.” He reached around her, opened the freezer and pulled out the ice ring. What had he been thinking? She’d just told him she wondered if guys went out with her for her money or herself? Which category did she think he’d fit in? He already suspected she thought of him as a charity case. And judging by the way she jumped away from him, she obviously didn’t want to be associated with him in a romantic way. He was an idiot. What had made him think someone like Noelle would want him? He’d just embarrass them both if he tried to pursue her. He took the stupid ice ring into the house before his anger got the best of him, and he smashed it into a million pieces on the cement floor.

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Noelle stared at Nick’s back as he strode away from her and back into the house. He’d kissed her, and it had been every bit as wonderful as the first

time. She'd waited years for that kiss. Then just as she thought everything was falling into place for them, he'd turned cold.

The kiss was a mistake? How could something so wonderful be a mistake? It was a kiss that woke her slumbering heart with its warmth. Then just as quickly, he turned her world dark and cold by walking away. A chill washed over her as she considered that he might have kissed her out of pity, because of what David did.

This had to be the worst Thanksgiving of her life, and it wasn't even dinner time yet. How would she get through the rest of the day? Right now having the stomach flu sounded better than spending the day with Nick. She wondered if she could fake it, and then decided she didn't have the acting skills to pull it off. It was back to the kitchen with Natalie, her own personal love connection hostess, for Noelle.

## Chapter Six

Dinner couldn't have been any more agonizing for Nick if he'd been sitting on a chair full of nails. Gladys had seated Noelle next to him at the crowded table. That put her near enough for him to smell the sweet scent of her perfume. They were packed in so closely that their shoulders brushed. He caught her every movement from the corner of his eye. How was he supposed to ignore her when she was invading his senses like this?

He was careful to give her all the space he could. He even made sure their hands didn't touch when he passed serving bowls to her. To make matters worse, Natalie just wouldn't let up about fixing Noelle up with someone. In Nick's opinion she stunk as a matchmaker. He'd never heard such a list of losers before in his life. It sounded like the roll call for "Jerks R Us." If Noelle had shown the faintest interest in any of them, he'd...

He'd have said nothing. Because he told her the kiss was a mistake, and it wouldn't happen again. He'd just been protecting himself against her imminent rejection, but now he couldn't very well turn around and object to her potential dates. Nick continued to chew and swallow, but he could have been eating cardboard for all he noticed.

"How about Ben Miller?" Natalie suggested.

"Who's Ben Miller?" Gladys asked.

"He owns the insurance agency downtown. He's got great manners, and he always dresses so nice."

*No way*, thought Nick. *Noelle could do way better than that*. Never mind that he counted Ben as one of his friends.

“Or Austin Summers,” Natalie continued.

“I thought he was engaged,” said Noelle.

“He was, but they broke up. So I guess he’s back on the market.”

Nick ground his teeth so hard one would think he was trying to chew marbles rather than mashed potatoes. He knew why Austin and his fiancée had broken up, and it had to do with a cute waitress who happened to be rather generous with her affections. And he also knew that that wasn’t Austin’s first indiscretion. In fact, to Nick’s way of thinking, his fiancée had been way too forgiving.

“Natalie, there has to be something else we can talk about besides this,” Noelle protested.

“Yes,” agreed Uncle Larry. “This is Thanksgiving. Let’s talk about what really matters. What did you think of the football game today?”

Natalie’s husband Jeff was quick to give his view, and Nick relaxed, but only marginally. Sooner or later Natalie would succeed in fixing up Noelle, and he’d have to sit back and watch. He slid a sideways glance at her. Her head was bowed, and she was pushing her food around on her plate rather than eating it. Why couldn’t he have handled things better in the garage? Why did he have to give in to the urge to kiss her? Why couldn’t he have thought of something better to say about it? Couldn’t he have laughed it off as a casual kiss between friends?

But no, he had to apologize and tell her it was a mistake—a knee-jerk reaction to protect himself from her scorn. There was no way she’d ever be interested in him now, and when she did start to date someone else, he’d have to just sit back and watch.

A headache started to form behind his eyes as he pictured her laughing and smiling with someone other than him. Then a worse scenario entered his mind. What if she met another David and wasn't lucky enough to catch him this time?

Gladys's excellent dinner was turning into cement in his gut. The meal went on at a torturously slow pace, and Nick was grateful when it was finally over. But he couldn't eat and run. It would be rude and he couldn't hurt Gladys's feelings. He and Jeff offered to clear the table while the women took care of leftovers and dishes.

After they finished with the dishes, Gladys brought down the Christmas ornaments, and they all helped decorate the tree Nick had given her. Noelle spent most of the time dancing around him. It was pretty hard to avoid someone in the limited space around the tree, but she managed. She wouldn't even look at him.

As soon as they were finished, he announced he had to go. "Tomorrow is the beginning of the Christmas shopping season. I'll be selling some of our trees downtown. Most of them are sold to retailers or charity groups for fund raisers, but I like to sell a few myself."

"Why is that?" asked Natalie.

Nick shrugged. "I like getting out among people once in a while—especially when Christmas spirit is in the air."

She grimaced. "You sound just like Noelle. What is it with you two and Christmas?"

"It's the time of year when the whole world stops to remember what's really important," Noelle replied.

"And people actually remember that we should be nice to one another," added Nick. Their eyes met and a moment of understanding passed between

them. He wished there could be more between them than this. Maybe he should ask Natalie to fix him up with someone. Maybe dating someone else would get Noelle out of his system.

He looked at her again. Fat chance. He was well and truly stuck on her.

A slight, hesitant smile hovered on Noelle's lips. "Maybe I'll see you tomorrow, Nick."

"I doubt it," he replied, trying not to wince as her smile fled and she dropped her gaze. "We'll probably both be busy. It's your grand opening and all."

She finally looked up at him, and he saw a question in her eyes. This time it was he who looked away.

"We'd better figure out a time to meet and finish up with decorating the church. We're almost out of time for that," she said.

The church! He'd forgotten about that. Now he was going to have to spend time alone with her. Best to get it over with. Then he wouldn't have to see her anymore.

"Yes," Nick agreed. "We're almost out of time."

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Later, on the way home, Larry asked "What was the matter with you today? It was nice of Gladys to invite us and she gave us a terrific meal. Why were you such a bear all day?"

Nick groaned. Uncle Larry was not known for picking up the subtleties of human emotion. If he'd noticed that Nick was out of sorts, it was a sure thing that everyone else had. "I've got a pounding headache," Nick told him. That, at least, was true.

Uncle Larry nodded. "Yeah, women will do that to you."

"What do you mean?" He hoped his uncle hadn't picked up on the tension between him and Noelle.

“Natalie sure was a chatterbox today. Geez, who wanted to spend half the meal talking about Noelle’s love life?”

“Not me,” Nick replied emphatically.

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Opening day at the store was the busiest of Noelle’s life. From the storefront window she could see Nick down the street, selling trees. Drake was there helping, and Noelle thought she saw Ryan and Kendra, too. The weather had turned colder and snow had been predicted by weather men. Noelle wondered if Nick was warm enough in his old coat, and then reminded herself that it didn’t matter to her. Later, when she sent Deirdre out with a thermos of hot chocolate for them, Noelle told herself it was because she didn’t want Drake, Ryan and Kendra to suffer. If Nick benefited from her kindness, it was irrelevant.

It was good to be busy. She wouldn’t have time to think about how mixed up things had gotten between her and Nick. Instead she would concentrate on sharing her favorite thing with her customers—Christmas and the true gift God had sent to all people.

She was happy the store was a success and that all her hard work was paying off.

But her heart told her success wasn’t enough anymore.

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Advent had already begun and the church wasn’t decorated. Noelle knew she had to talk to Nick. They hadn’t spoken since the kiss. The kiss that Noelle played over and over in her mind, until she remembered Nick saying it was a mistake and wouldn’t happen again. Every time she thought about it, she wanted to curl up in a ball and die.

And yesterday her Mom said Natalie and family were coming back for Christmas.

They were supposed to be spending the holiday with Jeff's parents, but they had decided to go on a cruise for the holidays instead. Noelle wondered if she should start looking for someone to date just to shut up Natalie. But no, that wouldn't be fair.

Leaving one of her clerks to mind the store, she walked down the street to Nick's lot. Nick was with a customer, but Drake was standing around warming his hands on a mug of steaming coffee.

"Hi," she said. "Will the boss be free soon?"

Drake nodded in greeting. "He just has to load up their tree."

"Are Ryan and Kendra looking forward to Christmas?"

Drake shrugged. It occurred to her that Drake's parents may not be able to afford to give him and his siblings much of a Christmas. She immediately decided that she would give Deirdre an early Christmas bonus.

She watched Nick look up from tying the tree to his customer's car and notice her. He definitely did not look happy to see her. He finished with the tree and walked over to her.

"Hi Noelle," he said. "Did you need another tree at your house?" A surly tone crept into his voice.

A blush heated her cheeks. "No, I wanted to tell you that I called Pastor Thorn. He says there isn't enough money in the budget for new Christmas decorations."

"I guess we'll just have to make do with what we have, then."

"Not necessarily. I have an idea." He didn't respond, so she continued. "We don't need anything fancy or elaborate. If you donate Christmas trees for



the gathering space, the fellowship hall, the youth lounge and the Sunday School hallway, I'll donate the ornaments we need. Oh, and we'll need an extra tall tree for the sanctuary."

Nick considered. "That doesn't sound fair. You're giving a lot more."

"That's not important, Nick. We'd both be contributing what we have to give."

"How about I'll throw in the lights and we'll call it even."

She couldn't believe he'd agreed so easily. She was thrilled and had to stop herself from reaching out to him. "Thank you, Nick. It's going to be beautiful; I know it."

"When do you want to do this thing? My schedule's pretty full. I want to get it finished as soon as possible."

His gruff tone put a damper on her spirits. She didn't understand, so she just decided to stick to the facts. "Will this Saturday work for you?"

"Don't you have to work?"

"I hired a new clerk last week. She and Deirdre can cover for me."

"Fine then. Saturday's as good as any other day."

## Chapter Seven

Noelle went to the church early on Saturday morning, but Nick was there before her. “He really can’t wait for this to be over,” she thought sadly.

They spent the whole day decorating. A whole painful day together. They put up trees in the Sunday School wing of the church, in the fellowship hall, the youth lounge and the gathering space. They twined strings of white lights around the beams in the sanctuary, reminiscent of a starry sky. The tree in the sanctuary was the largest of those they’d put up, well over eight feet tall. By the time it was almost finished, Noelle was exhausted.

The church looked beautiful. They’d worked hard, but had hardly spoken to each other at all—not even to argue. They were putting up the last of the ornaments when Noelle realized something.

“Oh, no!” she cried.

“What’s the matter?”

“I forgot the star for this tree. I’ll have to run back to the store. You go ahead and finish up. It will only take me a few minutes.”

“I’ll come with you.”

“You don’t have to. I can—”

“I’m not letting you go to the store alone at this time of night,” insisted Nick. “It’s already been broken into once.”

Noelle glared at Nick. Why was he always treating her as if she were helpless? “There hasn’t been any more trouble since then.”

“I’m still going with you.”

“Oh, all right. But I’m driving.” Noelle thought she could retain that much control at least.

“Fine,” conceded Nick.

They made the trip in frigid silence. Noelle pulled up to the store and turned off the car.

She felt Nick’s solid presence at her back as she opened the door to the shop and walked in. The store was dark, but with surprise, Noelle realized she could hear voices in the back. She stopped abruptly and Nick ran into her. She stumbled, but he reached out and steadied her. They exchanged glances, and she realized he heard the voices, too. Noelle started to walk toward the back, but Nick stopped her. “Stay here,” he whispered and headed toward the back door.

Noelle didn’t argue. She just followed him, one hand fumbling in her purse for her cell phone. As Nick reached the back room he flipped on the lights. Noelle’s mouth dropped open in surprise. On the floor, in a circle of sleeping bags and food wrappers sat Drake, Deirdre, Ryan and Kendra.

“What’s going on here?” she asked.

The kids froze. Deirdre looked like she was about to cry and Drake looked angrier than usual. Ryan and Kendra were frozen in fear.

Noelle repeated her question and Deirdre sprang to her feet. “I’m s-so s-sorry.”

“Do your parents know where you are?” asked Nick.

“We don’t know where our parents are,” Drake answered. “Our Mom left a long time ago. Dad remarried. Ryan and Kendra’s Mom is dead, and now Dad took off too.”

“We t-ried to keep going,” Deirdre said. “But...um... Drake and I couldn’t find jobs at first and we were ...um... evicted from our apartment.”

Suddenly the “break in” made sense. Kendra had probably broken the angel while playing with it, and the kids had probably just forgotten to lock the door on their way out. “Don’t you have any relatives who could help you?” Noelle asked.

“Not any that would take all four us,” said Drake. “Deirdre and I have a different mother than Ryan and Kendra.”

“And we don’t want to be split up,” Deirdre exclaimed.

“Come on,” said Drake to his siblings. “Let’s get the sleeping bags rolled up. It’s time to go.”

“But I don’t want to sleep in the car again,” whined Kendra.

“You’ve been sleeping in your car?” cried Noelle, aghast. “No, you can’t do that again.”

“You can’t want us to stay here,” growled Drake. “And don’t even think about calling social services. We’ll be long gone before they get here.”

“But you can’t...” began Noelle.

“Don’t tell us what we can and can’t do,” Drake shouted. “Our Dad shouldn’t have left us, but he did. Now we make our own decisions.”

Nick stepped in and laid a hand on Drake’s arm. “Let me make a suggestion.”

“What?” The angry teen snapped.

“You can stay at my place for now. We have to do something to get you settled, but I promise we won’t call social services yet. And if it comes to that, Noelle and I will talk it over with you before we call them.”

Drake and Deirdre stared at each other. Finally Drake said. “All right. You’ve both been good to us, so I guess we’ll trust you.”

Relief poured over Noelle. "Thank you Nick," she said. "That's an excellent idea."

The children started to gather up their things so they could move to Nick's house. While Noelle helped Kendra get on her coat, she noticed the little girl felt hot.

"Are you feeling all right, honey?" she asked.

Kendra shook her head. "My ear hurts."

"Deirdre," Noelle motioned the girl over. "I think she's running a temperature, and she says her ear hurts."

Deirdre knelt down beside her sister. "Oh, no. It could be another ear infection. I have some pain reliever for her in my bag. Deirdre got out the bottle and the tiny measuring cup that went with it. She poured out a dose and gave it to Kendra. "That should take care of her temperature, too."

"We can take her to the doctor in the morning," said Noelle.

"No," Drake and Deirdre cried at once.

"What? Why not?"

"You aren't her parent or guardian," answered Deirdre. "You can't give consent for her to be treated. And when they find out we don't have a parent or guardian..."

"Then we're back to social services stepping in," finished Nick.

Noelle sighed. Helping these children would not be easy. "All right. Let's get you all out to Nick's house."

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The star for the Christmas tree was forgotten as they helped the children get settled at Nick's big, old farm house. Deirdre and Kendra chose one bedroom. Drake and Ryan decided on the one next door. Noelle tried to discreetly keep track of their possessions as

she helped the girls unpack. She started to mentally compose a shopping list for them.

By the time they were all ready for bed, Kendra's fever had dropped, and she fell asleep. Noelle decided they could afford to wait until the next day for the doctor. She went downstairs to let Nick know the girls and Ryan were in bed for the night. He and Drake were having a very serious discussion at the kitchen table. When she came in, Drake got up and left the room with a mumbled "g'night."

"I guess I'll go for the night, too. I'll call you tomorrow morning. We have to figure out a way to get Kendra to the doctor. Also I've started a list of things the kids need. I'll pick them up later this week." She grabbed her coat—his coat—from the back of a kitchen chair where she'd left it. "It's a good thing Larry decided to leave early for Florida this year."

"Yes," he agreed. "Uncle Larry couldn't keep a secret if his life depended on it."

"I don't remember him leaving so early in the year before."

"He leaves earlier every year. I think he has a girlfriend in Florida."

Noelle laughed at the idea of Nick's retired bachelor uncle living it up in the south.

"I guess this night didn't turn out like we planned," said Nick.

"I'll stop by the church tomorrow and put up the star," she assured him. "That's the only thing left."

"No, leave it. It's too high. I don't want you climbing that old ladder by yourself. I'll do it."

"What, the ladder's safer for you?"

Nick squeezed her shoulder and gave her a slight shake. "Noelle, I have enough on my plate. I don't need to worry about you falling off that ladder."

“Why should you worry about me at all?” It wasn’t as if he cared about her...and she wasn’t about to set herself up for *that* fall again.

“Look, for tonight will you just promise me you won’t try to put that star up by yourself?”

“Fine.”

He tilted her chin up. “Look me in the eye and promise me.”

“I promise.” Noelle pulled back from him before he saw too much in her eyes. “I’m tired. I want to go home.”

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Early the next morning, Nick saw Noelle’s car coming back up his driveway, and she wasn’t alone. An elderly gentleman carrying a messenger bag got out and followed her to the door.

Nick opened the door before they could knock. She looked so fresh and pretty, her hair neatly arranged; her clothes perfectly coordinated. The only thing that didn’t fit was his old coat. It made him smile to see her wearing it. It was way too big and about as far from coordinating with the rest of her wardrobe as a person could get.

“Sorry to drop in so early,” she said as she breezed past him and into the house. “This is Dr. Cooke, a family friend.”

“What?” Drake was just coming down the stairs. His eyes turned from sleepy to wary as he saw the stranger and heard his introduction.

Noelle held up a hand to ward off Drake’s outburst. “He’s retired and he’s agreed to see our patient no questions asked, if that’s okay with you.”

Drake thought it over and then nodded. “I’ll go get her.” He turned and went back upstairs.

Nick offered a hand to the white-haired doctor. “Thank you so much for coming.”

Dr. Cooke shook Nick's hand. "I'm happy to be of help. I understand there are some unusual circumstances to this case, and I trust Noelle to handle them. I've known her since she was just a child."

"Could I get you some coffee while we wait?"

"No thanks. Noelle's already supplied that."

Nick guessed that she'd bought the doctor one of those expensive coffee drinks she liked so much.

It wasn't long before Drake came down holding a sleepy Kendra. Deirdre was right behind him.

Dr. Cooke took a few moments to speak to Kendra before he started his exam. He was gentle and quick. His messenger bag, an updated version of the doctor's little black bag, held his instruments. In no time at all, the elderly man had finished.

"You were right Noelle, it is an ear infection." He took some sample packs of antibiotics from his bag and explained how to use them. "Has she had problems with ear infections in the past?"

"Y -yes," offered Deirdre. "Her ears seem to ...um... bother her a lot."

"I'm happy to help," said Dr. Cooke "but if this little girl is prone to chronic ear infections then this is just a temporary fix. She needs to see a specialist. If these infections aren't taken care of, it can result in a hearing loss.

Drake and Deirdre exchanged worried looks. Drake came forward and shook the doctor's hand. "Thank you," he said. "If you give me your name and address we'll pay you when we can."

Dr. Cooke waved away Drake's offer. "This is nothing. I'd far rather see your sister get the help she needs. I'll give you my card, but only so you can contact me if you need any further help. No payment is necessary."



As they turned to leave, Nick pulled Noelle aside for a moment before she followed the doctor out to the car. “We’ve got to talk. Are you free for lunch around one o’clock.”

“Yes, we can walk to the café downtown if you want.”

“All right. I’ll meet you at the store.”

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Nick arrived at the store at one. He and Noelle walked down to the café, leaving the shop in the hands of a clerk. The air was cold and crisp, but there had been no snow yet. Over lunch—a salad for her and a burger for him—they discussed the Simmons kids.

“Drake told me his father’s parents are dead,” Nick explained to Noelle “and it doesn’t sound like there’s anyone else on that side that could take them. Drake and Deirdre’s grandmother—their Mom’s mother—would take them, but he’s afraid she wouldn’t want Ryan and Kendra. She’s quite elderly and not in the best health. A pair of good teenagers like Drake and Deirdre she may be able to handle, but not two younger children.”

“Where is Drake and Deirdre’s mother?”

“They don’t know. She’s a musician and has always traveled a lot. I guess she just stopped writing and visiting years ago.”

“Do Ryan and Kendra have anyone?”

“There’s an aunt that lives in the Chicago area, but they don’t know how to contact her. And of course the older ones are afraid she’d take Ryan and Kendra, but not them.”

“Anyone else?”

“No, that’s it.”

Nick watched Noelle as she pondered the problem. Today she was wearing a red sweater with

embroidered snow men on it. Whatever she wore, she always looked good. When Noelle finally spoke, he found he'd momentarily forgotten what they were talking about.

"I think we should check out the aunt."

Nick blinked. "Oh, you mean Ryan and Kendra's aunt."

Noelle rolled her eyes. "Really, Nick, who else's aunt?"

He gritted his teeth. She was already starting in on the 'really, Nick's.' "How are we going to do that? We can't exactly call her up and say 'hey we've got your niece and nephew.'"

"No, there has to be a more subtle way of figuring things out. Do you have her name?"

"Yes," he said. "What about an internet search?"

"I suppose it's a starting place, but I think we'll have to do more than that."

"What do you propose?"

"I'm going to hire a private detective."

"What?" Nick threw his hands up in the air. "Don't you think that's a little drastic?"

"No, I don't Nick," she insisted. "We have to find a place for those kids or else call social services. And if we call social services, they'll take off."

He could see she was becoming agitated. She was tearing her napkin to little bits and not eating. "Okay, okay. Maybe we could try a private detective, but I'll pay for half."

"The kids are living with you. You're housing and feeding them. That's your half."

"All right." This time, he supposed that actually made sense.

"What about the star for the tree?"

"I can stop by the church and put it up before I go home again."

“Oh no, you don’t,” Noelle protested. “If that ladder isn’t safe enough for me to climb by myself, it isn’t safe enough for you either.”

Nick wanted to object, but decided not to. “How about we do it tonight, after you’re done working?”

“Tonight’s my night to work late.”

“How about tomorrow?”

“I have shopping to do tomorrow.”

“Shopping? Can’t you do that another night?”

“It’s for the kids. They need a lot of stuff.”

“Well, then I’m going, too.” What was he doing? He’d been trying to finish their decorating project so he wouldn’t have to see her anymore. Why was he insisting on accompanying her on, of all things, a shopping trip?

Noelle glared at him. “Shopping is my area of expertise. I can do it by myself.”

“Fine, I’ll just carry the packages, then.”

“Nick, that’s ridiculous. I can do it by myself.”

He folded his arms and matched her glare. “I’m coming along.”

Noelle muttered something under her breath about stubborn mules. Nick smiled. “What time should I pick you up?”

## Chapter Eight

He came to regret his offer to carry the packages. “Noelle, you have to stop.” Nick groaned, peeking around the towering pile of boxes he carried. He had shopping bags slung on both arms. “I can’t carry any more.”

“Let’s take this stuff out to the car,” she suggested. “Then we can hit the stores down there.” Noelle pointed to an as yet unexplored wing of the mall.

“Don’t you think you’ve bought them enough? You’ve got toys for the little ones, mp3 players for the teens, books, DVDs, more clothes than they can wear in a week and enough fancy soap and shampoo and stuff to last them until they’re in their thirties.”

She looked up at him with sad eyes. “But they have so little Nick. I can’t help it.”

He sighed. How could he fault her for having a compassionate and generous nature? “All right, let’s take these out to the car. But only that one group of stores after that and this pack horse is finished.”

“Thank you, Nick.”

They’d decided to take Noelle’s car since it had more appropriate storage space than Nick’s old truck. While they were stowing the shopping bags in the trunk, her cell phone rang. Noelle checked the caller I.D. “It’s the private investigator,” she announced before flipping open the phone.

Nick finished with the bags while Noelle talked. After a bit, she hung up and turned to him. “Bad

news. These people aren't parent material. The investigator said the aunt is married to a real estate developer. They're childless by choice and enjoy a real jet set life style. What are we going to do now?"

He looked down at her. She seemed ready to cry. "Don't give up. We'll pray about it and see where God takes us next."

She nodded. "Of course. God has it all under control. I shouldn't forget that." In spite of her brave words, Nick could see her chin quiver—a sure sign tears were close. But she wouldn't let them fall. Once again, he felt a surge of irritation that she wouldn't share herself with him.

She could hold back the tears, but she couldn't completely hide how she felt. She stood before him, the emotion naked on her face making her even more beautiful. He longed to take her in his arms and hold her close. But he reminded himself that she didn't want his comfort. He shoved his hands into his pockets.

"It will be all right Noelle. They have us."

"But we're not legal guardians. And we're too young to be parents to them, Nick. You know we are."

He liked the way she said "we." He liked the idea of being part of a family with Noelle. In spite of that, he knew what she said was true. The Simmons kids needed a real guardian.

"It's late. Let's sleep on it. We'll talk about it again tomorrow."

Noelle nodded. "All right. I don't think I want to hit that last group of stores any more. Let's just go home."

Noelle drove them back to her shop where Nick had left his truck. They divided up the packages. He took the things the kids needed immediately, and she

kept the things they'd decided to give them as Christmas presents.

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A few days later, Noelle took Monday afternoon off at the store. She knew the kids had an early release from school that day. When the bus dropped them off at Nick's house, she was there with shopping bags full of cookie ingredients. She was glad Nick wasn't there. His kindness and concern toward the Simmons kids made him even more attractive than before. It was becoming harder and harder to pretend she didn't care about him.

"Let's surprise Nick and make him some Christmas cookies," she told the kids. Ryan and the girls enthusiastically agreed. Drake didn't join in at first. He said he had some homework to do. But soon the happy noise from the kitchen, and the smell of fresh cookies drew him. He joked and sang Christmas songs with the rest of them while frosting and decorating the cookies. It was good to see Drake relax and have fun for a change. Noelle seldom saw the tense, wary look leave his face. She was thankful he had an opportunity to drop his worries, if only for an afternoon.

She also noticed that Deirdre's stutter had decreased. She guessed that meant the girl was feeling more secure. She paused in rolling out more dough and sent a quick prayer, asking God to help Nick and her find the kids a secure home, so they could heal more fully.

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When Nick stepped into his house that evening, the first thing he noticed was the delicious aroma wafting through the air. The smell of baking cookies did not normally come from his kitchen.

"Hello," he called out. Was he in the right house?

“We’re in here,” Deirdre called back from the kitchen.

Kendra rushed out to greet him. She had on an apron that hung to her ankles and smudges of frosting decorated her face. “We’re making Christmas cookies, Nick. Come see.”

With a smile, Nick took her hand and followed her into the kitchen. Drifts of flour, sticky spoons, and bowls of frosting covered the kitchen in disaster, and in the middle of it all stood something truly unexpected—or rather, someone.

Noelle was taking a tray of cookies from the oven. Her face was rosy from the heat, and her blue eyes sparkled. She wasn’t exactly wearing the ripped jeans and old t-shirt he’d dreamed of seeing her in, but worn jeans and a blue sweater that matched her eyes was just as good. And her hair was hanging loose, just as he’d imagined it. It fell in rippling waves to the middle of her back. She looked better than the house smelled.

“Hi, Nick. I expected to have all this cleaned up and be gone before you got home. I guess I lost track of the time.”

“That’s okay.” He didn’t know what else to say, but he was saved by the kids who clamored around him, showing off their creations. The cookies were rolled thin and cut perfectly, so he knew who’d done that part. But the frosting and sprinkles were all the work of the kids. The cookies dripped frosting and shimmered with colored sugar.

“I didn’t mean to take over your kitchen,” apologized Noelle, as if he’d caught her doing something scandalous. “But I remember how much fun my brother and sister and I always had baking cookies. I guess I wanted to relive that with the kids.”

“It was a great idea,” Nick assured her “as long as you don’t take all the cookies home with you.”

“Did you see how many cookies we made? What would my Mom and I do with all these? We’d both look like blimps if we tried to eat all of this.”

“Even Drake helped,” Ryan broke in. “At first he wouldn’t, but he heard all of the fun we were having and he had to join in.”

Drake shrugged. “It was kind of fun.”

“Did you make Christmas cookies with your family when you were a kid?” Ryan asked Nick.

“No, we didn’t go in for baking much. I always liked going caroling with the youth group, though.”

“We should do that. They’re going on Wednesday,” Deirdre said.

Drake rolled his eyes. “No singing for me.”

“That’s what you said about the cookies,” his sister reminded him.

Noelle began running water in the sink and added a squirt of soap. “I think that’s the last batch of cookies in the oven. I’ll just clean up, and then I can go.”

A chorus of protests started when Noelle mentioned leaving. Nick waited until the noise died down and said “You all helped make the mess. Why don’t you all help clean up. And while you do, I’ll run back into town and pick up a pizza.”

Nick’s suggestion met with unanimous approval from the children. “But,” Noelle protested “I have to get home to make supper for my Mom.”

“I’ll stop in and tell her you’re having supper with me. And I’ll pick up something for her if she wants.”

He saw her hesitate, but obviously she couldn’t resist the pleading looks Deirdre, Ryan and Kendra gave her. Drake didn’t exactly plead, but he’d



dropped his attitude for the time being and waited expectantly for Noelle's answer.

"All right," she conceded "I'll stay."

"Well, that's settled then," said Nick putting on the coat he'd just taken off. "I'll get the pizzas."

"We'll have this all cleaned up when you get back," Noelle promised, as Nick went back out into the night.

While everyone pitched in and cleaned up the kitchen, they shared stories of their favorite Christmas traditions. They were wiping up the last of the crumbs when they saw the headlights of Nick's truck coming back up the driveway

True to her word, the place was spotless when Nick got back with the food, and as they sat around the table eating pizza, he was glad he and Noelle had chosen to help the Simmons themselves instead of handing them over immediately to social services.

After supper, the older kids went to finish homework and the younger two went to change into pajamas. Alone in the kitchen, Nick watched Noelle place about a dozen cookies on a paper plate. "I'm taking these home," she told Nick. "The rest are all yours."

As she rummaged around in his cupboards until she found some plastic wrap to cover the cookies, Nick realized that in spite of his resolve to get over her, he was helpless to suppress the longing that built within him. He yearned to have Noelle in his house, doing domestic things, making everything better somehow.

He envisioned himself coming home to this kind of scene every night, to light and warmth, the aroma of good food and most of all, to Noelle. To walk into the kitchen and see her smiling at him, stopping in the act of taking something out of the oven like

tonight. The wave of emotion hit him so hard that his knees felt weak for a moment, and he clutched the back of a chair.

He realized with a sense of total helplessness that he was in love with Noelle Granton, and there was nothing he could do about it.

“Nick, are you all right?” She had paused in the act of tearing a piece of plastic off the roll and was looking at him with concern.

He shook his head to clear it, even though he felt like he had just seen things more clearly than ever before. Perhaps he should try to cloud his head, rather than clear it. “I guess I’m tired, and it just hit me.”

“I’ll be out of your way in just a second. Unless you need me for anything else?”

Anything else? He needed her for *everything*. “No, I’ll be all right.” A *blatant lie*. “You go on home.”

She didn’t look convinced, but he insisted she go. Still, when Noelle finally did leave, Nick thought the house lost much of its light and warmth. She could take over his kitchen anytime. As if she’d ever want to.

## Chapter Nine

Noelle arrived home that evening with a plate of cookies and a smile on her face.

“Where did you get the cookies?” asked Gladys when Noelle brought them out after supper.

“I baked them with some friends this afternoon.” She offered the plate to her mother then took a cookie for herself.

“Would these friends be the kids you’ve been helping?”

Noelle choked on her cookie. Once she’d cleared her throat she asked “How did you know about that? No, let me guess. Dr. Cooke? So much for patient confidentiality.”

“Don’t be too hard on him. He assumed I knew. What’s the situation there?”

Noelle briefly explained how the kids were afraid of being split up and would most likely run away if social services were called. She also told how she’d followed up on the lead about their aunt and how it hadn’t worked out. “Nick and I have decided to just leave the situation until after Christmas. If we haven’t thought of anything by then, I guess we’ll have to call in social services.” Thinking of that sent Noelle’s spirits plummeting.

“Who are these children, Noelle? You can trust me not to blab.”

With a sigh, Noelle gave in and told her mother everything. She doubted if her mother would know the families involved anyway.

“I hope you’ll be successful in helping them, dear. It’s a good thing you’re doing.”

Gladys changed the subject to the holiday celebrations. She invited Noelle, Nick and the kids to dinner the next Saturday, just a few days before Christmas.

“All of us? Do you mean it Mom?”

Gladys laughed. “Of course I do. I always enjoy having Nick around. And I admit I’m curious about the children.”

“You won’t ask too many questions, will you? Drake is very protective of them all, and Deirdre just worries so much.”

“It sounds like the two eldest have done a good job taking care of each other and their younger siblings.”

“They’re good kids, Mom.”

“I know that, honey.” Gladys’ eyes softened and she reached out and took Noelle’s hand. “And you’re a very good daughter, the best.”

Tears sprang to Noelle’s eyes. “Really Mom? But I’ve been working so much. I haven’t spent much time with you lately.”

Her mother laughed. “I don’t need you to sit around and hold my hand. I know the heart attack scared you, Noelle, but I’m doing fine now. I have lots of friends, and I’m still very active.”

“I guess what you’re saying is, you’ve got your own life.”

“Yes. I really appreciate all you’ve done for me while I was recovering, but I think it’s time for you to get a life, too.”

“What do you mean? I have a life.”

“You have a job. There’s more to life than that.”

Noelle frowned. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that after New Year’s you should find your own place.”

“How will that help me?”

Gladys shrugged. “It will force you to look to friends and neighbors for society.”

“I do that now. I’m involved at church.”

“Your work with the youth group is great honey, but you could do more if you weren’t hovering over me all the time.”

Noelle lowered her eyes and remained silent.

Gladys continued. “I know that David hurt you with those terrible things he said, but you can’t just give up on people because of it.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do, and I’m not just talking about dating. Since you broke up with David you’ve been slowly cutting yourself off from people.”

“In the back of my mind,” admitted Noelle “I keep wondering if they really like me for who I am.”

“You can’t let that prevent you from reaching out to people,” Gladys warned. “Remember Jesus and the ten lepers? Only one came back to thank him. But he kept loving people no matter how they felt about him.”

“I know you’re right Mom, but it’s hard. It’s really hard.”

“Noelle Granton, you are not a person who doesn’t do things because they’re ‘hard.’ You’ve always been one who enjoyed a challenge. This is your challenge.”

“All right, Mom,” Noelle quietly agreed. “I’ll start looking for a new place.”

“Good. Now don’t you worry about this dinner with Nick and the kids. I want to do it all. It’s my gift to you.”

Noelle wanted to protest, but then she took a closer look at her Mom. The woman was the picture of health. She radiated an energy that had been missing when Noelle had first moved in. "If you're sure."

"I'm sure, dear. You just concentrate on those children and on getting your shop through its first Christmas. Planning this dinner will be a breeze compared to that."

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The shop did keep Noelle busy. Holiday shopping was climbing toward a frenzied peak as Christmas drew near. Noelle was glad she didn't have to worry about her Mom, but she was still worried about the kids. They had yet to find someone to take them. She feared that they would have to call in the authorities after Christmas.

If that were the case, Noelle was determined they should have the best Christmas ever before that happened. She had so many gifts for them; she couldn't fit them all under the tree.

Wednesday night was the night scheduled for the youth group and their families to go caroling. Noelle had changed her mind about going. She'd been caroling before and kept thinking about how everyone huddled together to keep warm. The last thing she needed to do was spend an evening pressed up against Nick. She'd never get over him at this rate.

When she got home from work, she changed out of her work clothes, put her hair into a pony tail and slipped into a comfortable pair of jeans and a green sweater with snowflakes embroidered on it. She had Christmas presents to wrap. She was up to her elbows in paper and bows when the doorbell rang. A few seconds later, Gladys called up to her. "Noelle, someone is here for you."

“I’ll be right down,” she answered. “Who could that be?” she muttered to herself as she came down the steps. It was a good thing she didn’t try to guess, because she’d never have gotten it right. She stared at the handsome blonde man lounging in the living room.

“Austin Summers?”

He grinned at her. “Surprised, aren’t you?”

“Well, yes. What can I do for you?”

“You were going caroling tonight, weren’t you?”

“Actually...”

“Great.” He stood up. “I can give you a ride.”

“How did you know...”

“I was talking to your sister Natalie the other day, and she said you were going.”

Suspicion stirred in Noelle. “Why were you talking to Natalie?”

“She called about ordering a ham for your mom for Christmas.” Austin’s family owned one of the grocery stores in town—not the one that Gladys usually shopped in.

“How did this lead to the subject of caroling?”

Austin shrugged. “I don’t know. We were talking about Christmas in general, and somehow it came up.”

“Yeah, I’ll just bet it did,” grumbled Noelle under her breath.

“And she said you needed a date for caroling.”

Her mouth dropped open. “She told you I *needed* a date?”

He laughed. “Don’t be embarrassed Noelle. We all hit a dry patch once in a while.”

She didn’t know whether to laugh or scream. Natalie had gone too far this time. She was just going to set Austin straight and then she’d call her sister and tell her in no uncertain terms what she thought

of her matchmaking efforts. Noelle opened her mouth to speak, but Gladys came into the room with coat, scarf, earmuffs and mittens for her.

“Here you go, dear. I want you to bundle up. It’s cold tonight.”

Before she knew what hit her, Noelle found herself swaddled in winter outerwear and on her way out the door with a man she *did not* want to be with.

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Nick and the Simmons kids got to the church early, but by the time they’d pulled out the Christmas songbooks from storage, a steady stream of teens and their families began to trickle in to the church basement.

Nick, who was in charge of the event, took time to greet everyone and talk to them for a minute or two. But he kept one eye on the door, waiting for Noelle to appear. Finally, he decided she wasn’t going to show after all. He called for everyone’s attention and began to go over the route they would take and the songs they would use. They were going to visit church family shut-ins and make a stop at a nearby nursing home. The kids had requested stopping at a few other places where favorite church members or family lived, and Nick had included those on the route as well.

He was just finishing up when Noelle walked in. He couldn’t stop the flicker of joy he felt at her presence any more than he could prevent the sharp stab of anger when he saw whom she was with.

He finished his speech and led the group in prayer. As people began to put on hats and gloves and grab songbooks, He made a beeline for Noelle. “Hi,” he said. “I didn’t think you would make it.”

“Oh, I had to. My sister made sure of that.”



It was easy to see that Noelle wasn't happy about something, but Nick didn't know what. Maybe she wanted him to make himself scarce so she could spend time alone with Austin. Too bad, because that wasn't happening. Even though he knew he'd never have Noelle, there was no way he was going to leave her in the clutches of someone like Austin Summers. The man had more girlfriends than a squirrel had acorns.

"I see the Simmons kids made it. I'd like to talk to them for a minute before we leave," she said.

"Sure thing," Austin answered, and Nick's jaw clenched at the proprietary hand Austin placed on her back as they moved through the crowd.

The caroling was going well, and as the night wound down, Nick reflected that he should have considered a career in acting. He thought he'd put on a pretty good show tonight, acting as the fun, in control leader of the group and Christian role model, while harboring thoughts of violence against Austin the whole time.

The way Austin was constantly touching Noelle made Nick see red. Not that he was doing anything inappropriate for a church outing. But those little touches, holding her elbow, as if she couldn't step off a curb by herself or rubbing her arms like it was twenty below instead of twenty above, were tightening the knot of anger that burned in his stomach.

The only thing that allowed Nick to keep it under control, was Noelle's complete lack of response to Austin. If she'd cuddled up to him or gazed at him with those beautiful blue eyes, Austin Summers would have been history, right there.

After the caroling was finished, the group went back to the church for cookies and hot chocolate in

the lounge. Nick could see that the Simmons kids had had a great time. Drake and Deirdre seemed to have found their niche and for tonight's family event there were even enough younger kids for Ryan and Kendra to have someone to play with. Nick tried to concentrate on this positive aspect and forget Noelle.

"I thought Noelle was going to be with us," whispered Ryan to Nick at one point, as he grabbed another cookie off the tray Nick was passing around.

"So did I, buddy," he replied. "But we had fun anyway, didn't we?"

"Yeah, I guess so," answered Ryan, unable to hide the disappointment in his voice.

That did it. It was one thing for Noelle to neglect him, he didn't expect anything else from her, but he wasn't going to let her get away with ignoring the kids.

He went over to where Austin had Noelle cornered and handed him the tray of cookies. "Hey, Austin, do me a favor and pass these around. I need to have a word with Noelle."

The other man looked unhappy at the interruption, but he couldn't get out of it without appearing rude. Reluctantly, he took the tray and waded into the crowd. Nick took Noelle's arm and dragged her into the kitchen.

Before he could give her the chewing out she deserved, she turned to him, a look of relief evident on her face and said "Thank you for saving me."

*What?* "Um. You're welcome."

"I can't believe my sister would stoop to this. What business is it of hers who I date or even if I date? She's crossed the line this time. I don't care how late it is when I get home, I'm going to call her and..."

“Noelle.” Nick had to put his hand over her mouth to stop the tide of angry words. “What are you talking about?”

She blinked, and then pushed his hand away. “I’m talking about Natalie calling Austin and telling him I needed a date for caroling.”

“She did what?”

“You heard me,” Noelle huffed. “She fixed me up on a date without even telling me.”

“So, you’re saying you didn’t want to come with Austin tonight?”

“No. And he’s been monopolizing me the whole time. I haven’t been able to talk to anyone without him breathing down my neck.”

“Are you going out with him again?” It seemed like a silly question, but he had to be sure.

Noelle glared at him. “Aren’t you listening? Of course not! Did you know his fiancée broke off their engagement because he was seeing someone else behind her back?”

So she did know about that. This changed everything. Nick began to relax as his anger ebbed away.

“Natalie better start getting her facts straight if she wants to continue matchmaking—and she’d better find herself a different guinea pig because I’m through.” She crossed her arms, leaned back against the counter, and scowled at him.

Strangely, Nick felt better. Of course he shouldn’t feel good that Noelle was so upset, but it was infinitely better than finding out that Austin was the new love of her life. And Noelle was pretty funny, all worked up like this.

“Through with getting help from your sister or with dating in general?” he asked.

“With dating in general,” Noelle responded. “Through with dating, romance and men. I give up. There’s no one out there for me and if there was, he wouldn’t need Natalie to point the way.”

Nick’s amusement ebbed away. “Don’t say that. Of course there’s someone out there for you.”

The sound of the kettle whistling distracted them. It had been left on the stove in case more water was needed for hot chocolate. With a sigh, Noelle pushed away from the cupboard and went to turn off the stove. Then she moved the kettle off the hot burner. “Frankly Nick, I don’t care anymore. The single life looks good to me.”

Nick turned her around to face him. “Honestly, you’re too good a person to spend your life alone. Don’t give up”

“You’re a great one to talk. I haven’t seen you with a date since I moved back. Why don’t you follow your own advice?”

There was a challenge in her eyes that he couldn’t look away from. “So you want to try your hand at matchmaker? Who should I go out with?”

“Hmmm. Let me think.” Nick’s heart sped up as she slid her hands up his arms, pulling him closer. He leaned forward, placing his hands on either side of her. She lifted her face and...Pain seared his hand. Jumping back with a yelp, Nick realized that he’d placed it on the still-hot burner.

Noelle grabbed his hand. Her cheeks had gone pink with embarrassment. “Nick, I’m so sorry. Let’s get some cold water on that.”

He felt like he was about two years old as she led him to the sink and bathed his hand in icy water. When she turned off the faucet, he snatched his hand away. “Thanks, it’s all right now.”

She began opening cabinet doors. "I think we have some burn ointment in one of the cupboards. Let me look."

"You don't need to. It's fine."

Noelle paused in her rummaging. "Let me see it."

He held his throbbing hand behind his back. "No."

"Nick, don't go all macho on me." When she went back to searching, he started to back out of the room.

"I don't need you to tell me whether or not I'm fine."

"Aha." She held up a jar. "Now give me your hand."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Nick Jensen, if you leave, I'm coming after you and the whole youth group will know what a big baby you are."

Big baby, was it? More like a huge fool. "You wouldn't dare."

"Try me."

Nick studied her face. She wasn't joking.

"Oh, all right. If it makes you feel better, you can put some ointment on my hand."

"Thank you. I'm sure it will make *me* feel better." She bit her lip, and he had the feeling she wanted to laugh at him.

He held out his hand, the palm still red from the burn, but not blistered. He'd survived worse.

She opened the jar of ointment and scooped some out. Then she took his hand in hers and smoothed on the salve. Her touch was gentle and soothing and even beneath the burn he felt a tingle of awareness.

She looked up at him, eyes wide, her sweet mouth turned down with concern for him. "Is that better?"

How could it not be?

The door swung open and one of the moms came in, saving him from making a fool of himself. "Someone said there was more hot water in here."

"Yes, in the kettle," Noelle told her.

"Thanks, Noelle. By the way, Austin's looking for you."

"Oh. Thanks. I'll be right out."

The woman nodded, grabbed the kettle and went back to the lounge.

Nick pulled his hand away. "Do you want me to tell him to get lost? I can take you home."

She shook her head as she closed the jar of ointment and put it away. "You have the kids. I can make it from here to my house with him."

"If he tries anything..."

She smiled at him, but her eyes were sad. "I'll know who to call. Good night Nick."

She left, and he stood wondering. Did he imagine it, or had Noelle almost kissed him? He must have been dreaming, because he couldn't think of a single reason why her feelings towards him would have changed.

Maybe it was a reaction to Natalie and her matchmaking, a sort of "I'll show her" type of thing. Yes, that must have been it, so it was a good thing she hadn't actually kissed him. It looked like no matter what, he'd been destined to get burned tonight.

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Noelle thanked Austin for taking her, and with a few quick moves managed to evade his hands and lips, making it into the house unscathed. She should call Natalie. In fact she would call Natalie, but it could wait until tomorrow. Right now, her heart felt so heavy, she wondered how she could still stand upright. She dragged herself upstairs, knocked on her

mother's door and told her she was home. Then, she went to her bedroom. It was still covered with wrapping paper, ribbons, bows and unwrapped presents, and she began to pick up everything.

She'd tried to kiss Nick, and it had ended in disaster. Reserved by nature, she didn't normally initiate kisses with men she wasn't dating—and certainly not at a function she was attending with a different man. Of course, going with Austin had not been her choice, but still. A tear splashed onto the piece of wrapping paper she was folding.

It had been incredibly daring for her even to try to kiss Nick. Why would she think she could pull it off? Maybe it was a good thing he'd burned his hand and stopped her. It had saved her from the humiliation of his rejection.

Of course he'd offered to get rid of Austin and take her home himself, but that didn't mean anything. Nick thought it was his duty to look after her. It was hard being someone's unwanted responsibility when you really wanted to be his girlfriend.

In an uncharacteristic fit of anger, Noelle swept everything off her bed and onto the floor. Then she stretched out across the mattress, buried her face in her pillow and let the tears come.

## Chapter Ten

On the night of the dinner, Noelle drove out to Nick's. The clouds of the day had rolled back to reveal a brilliantly starry sky. There was still no snow on the ground, but Noelle was hoping for a white Christmas. She loved the snow and the way it blanketed everything and made it sparkle.

She wanted to help the kids get ready for her Mom's big dinner. She'd brought them new clothes for the holidays and took them all to get haircuts. Ryan was relieved to have someone other than Deirdre to cut his hair. Noelle could understand why.

While the other kids finished dressing, she showed Deirdre how to apply some light makeup. When they were finished, she turned to Noelle. "It will all be over soon."

"What will?"

"Staying with Nick. All of us kids staying together. Christmas is almost here, and you haven't found anyone to take us."

"Well, not yet."

"I know you did your best." Deirdre gave Noelle a hug. "Thank you for everything."

"But we failed. You just said it."

"But you tried. You and Nick tried your best for us, and that's more than anyone else has ever done."

"So...So you're not mad at me?"

"Mad? How could I be mad at you? These last few weeks have been the best of our lives," Deirdre exclaimed. "And I know if we have to be separated, I



can count on you and Nick to help me keep in contact with my brothers and sister.”

Noelle’s heart warmed. “Dee, I think your thanks is the best present I’ve ever received.” She hugged the girl who had become such a good friend, in spite of the difference in their ages.

When everyone was ready, Noelle and the girls left in her car. Drake, Ryan and Nick followed in the truck.

When they reached Noelle’s house, Deirdre looked over at Noelle nervously. “Are you sure your Mom will like us?”

“She’ll love you,” Noelle assured her. All of the kids were jittery though. They stood clumped on the walk, looking at one another.

“Hey,” said Nick “you can’t all just stand there like deer in someone’s headlights.”

The kids laughed, and the tension lifted slightly. Gladys opened the front door, and the light from inside poured across the walk and fell on them. “Come in, come in” Gladys called. “There’s someone here who wants to see you.”

The kids looked at each other in confusion. “Who could that be?” wondered Deirdre. “Y—you don’t think your mom called s-social services, do you?”

Noelle felt a stab of pain in her heart when she heard Deirdre’s stutter return. “No, of course not. My Mom wouldn’t do that.”

Drake had that look in his eye, as if he were ready to bolt. In desperation, Noelle shot Nick a pleading look.

“The only way to find out who wants to see you is to go in.” Nick began gently herding the kids toward the door. They stepped into the entry way. Beyond that they could see the living room and the lights

shining on the Christmas tree. Gladys took their coats and the kids shuffled into the living room.

A small, white haired lady sat on the sofa. When they came in, her face lit up with a smile.

Deirdre gasped. "Grandma? Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me." She stood out and held out her arms. "I've been so worried about all of you."

Deirdre and Drake rushed to hug her, followed by Kendra and Ryan. Soon they were tangled in a group hug. "Why didn't you come to me when your father left?" she asked.

"We thought you were sick," said Drake.

"I was sick, but I'm better now."

"We didn't think you'd want to be bothered with us," added Deirdre. "Or that maybe you...you wouldn't want..."

"Of course I want to be bothered with you," their grandmother insisted "with all four of you. It doesn't matter if Ryan and Kendra aren't blood relations to me; they are to you. That makes them my family, too."

Noelle was so shocked she couldn't get a word out. Nick spoke for her when he said to Gladys "How did you do this? How did you find her?"

"Just a coincidence, I guess. Marsha worked for me as a cleaning lady a while back. I remember her telling me about her daughter and her twin babies. There couldn't have been too many Drakes and Deirdres in our area. So I looked Marsha up. I was delighted to find out she was the children's grandmother."

It didn't matter what happened the rest of the evening. Gladys could have served dirt for dinner and everyone would have happily eaten it. The joy radiating from the newly reunited family was overwhelming.

As Noelle watched Deirdre and her brothers and sister interact with their Grandmother, she realized that all the gifts she'd given them were nothing compared to the gift of having their grandmother. She suddenly saw the meaning of family in a new light. She thought of Mary and Joseph with that new baby, and then of how God sent that baby to make the whole world a part of his family. *That's what it's all about; in the Kingdom of God we're all family.*

## Chapter Eleven

Unfortunately, even after evenings like that, you still had to get up and go to work the next morning. After working nonstop all day, Noelle was looking forward to doing as little as possible that evening, but just as she walked in the door the phone rang. It was Pastor Thorn.

“The church looks great, Noelle,” he said. “It looks like you and Nick really came through for us. And you proved that you could get along. I’m sorry I didn’t get a chance to talk to you about it sooner. You know how busy this season is.”

“Thank you Pastor Thorn,” Noelle responded. “We both wanted everything to turn out well.”

“There’s only one thing I’m puzzled about.”

“What’s that?”

“Why is there no tree topper on the tree in the sanctuary?”

The star! Noelle had forgotten all about it. “Sorry, Pastor. That was an oversight. We’ll get it fixed right away.”

Noelle finished her conversation with Pastor Thorn and called Nick’s house. There was no answer.

She knew Nick wouldn’t like it, but she was going to put that star up tonight. She felt so bad that they had forgotten that she didn’t want to wait.

Noelle explained to her Mom where she was going and quickly left. She would stop at the shop and get the star and then go to the church.

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Nick pulled into his yard and shut off the truck. His house was dark. He had gotten used to coming home to lights and supper and people. Now that the children were gone and Uncle Larry was still in Florida, his house felt unbearably lonely. He remembered walking into the kitchen and seeing Noelle taking that tray of cookies out of the oven. Substitute a pot roast for those cookies, and that would be something to come home to. With a sigh, Nick climbed down from his truck and went inside.

The message light on his answering machine was blinking, but when he played it all he heard was the click of the phone being disconnected. So he checked the caller ID - Noelle.

Nick picked up the phone and dialed. Gladys answered and Nick asked for Noelle.

"I'm sorry Nick," she said "but Noelle left a few minutes ago. Pastor Thorn called and asked why the star was missing from the tree in the sanctuary and she went to put it up."

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Noelle entered the dark church. The strange stillness bothered her as it had the last time, and she was sorry Nick wasn't with her. She shook her head. No more of that. She wasn't going to waste her time mooning over someone who kissed her and then wished he hadn't.

Noelle found the tall step ladder in the custodian's room. It was heavy but she managed to half carry it, half drag it into the sanctuary and set it up. She shook it and thought it seemed fairly sturdy.

Taking a deep breath, Noelle tucked the star under one arm and climbed to the top of the ladder.

It didn't feel quite as steady from the top. She held her breath and leaned over to put the star on the

top branch of the tall tree. It hung crookedly, so she adjusted it until was just right.

Noelle leaned back. Suddenly the ladder wobbled. She tried desperately to regain her balance as the ladder swayed beneath her. Then just as quickly as it had starting tipping, the ladder came back to rest on all four legs.

Noelle sighed with relief. Then she looked down. At the foot of the ladder, holding it steady, was a very angry Nick.

“Come down here,” he growled at her.

Noelle’s heart, its rate already accelerated from balancing on the shaky ladder, skipped a beat. She’d never seen him this angry. His scowl was darker than a threatening storm cloud, and even from her lofty perch she could see the pulse beating in his throat. Noelle sat down on top of the ladder, keeping her gaze fixed on him and said, “I’m not sure if I want to.”

“Stop kidding around.”

“I think I may be safer up here.”

“You’re wrong.”

Deciding that it wouldn’t help to antagonize him, she slowly descended the steps. When she came within his reach, Nick grabbed her around the waist and lifted her off the ladder. She tried to back away, but he held on to her.

“You promised you’d wait for me to do this.”

“I know.”

“So why did I find you at the top of this ladder?”

“Because...Because we forgot, and when Pastor Thorn reminded me, I felt bad and wanted to get it done right away. I did call you, but you weren’t home.”

“This is about you, isn’t it? You and the ridiculous standard you think people hold you to.”

She bit her lip and nodded, unable to meet his angry stare.

“Do you know what went through my head on the way here? Do you know what I imagined?”

“What? That you’d finally be rid of me?” she mumbled, her gaze still locked on the floor.

His hands tightened on her waist. “Will you be serious for one minute?”

“I thought I was.”

Obviously, she’d gone too far, because his fury boiled over and he shouted at her “Of all the irresponsible things for you to do, Noelle. Do you enjoy driving me crazy? Do you enjoy making me worry? You’re going to be the death of me. I swear I’ve never met anyone as infuriating as you.”

Noelle cringed and put her hands over her ears. “Stop it, Nick, stop it.”

His tone changed from anger to something she couldn’t identify. “Noelle, look at me.”

Slowly she lifted her head until her gaze met his gaze. He let go of her waist and cupped her face in his hands.

“I don’t want to get rid of you. I couldn’t stand it if you got hurt.”

Noelle thought her heart would break right through her chest, it was pounding so hard. Slowly he brought his head down to hers and kissed her tenderly.

Then he seemed to realize what he’d done and he hastily stepped away from her. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

“You didn’t?”

“I’m sorry Noelle. Look, I’ll put the ladder away. You can go home.” He seemed just as anxious to get away from her as he had been to get close to her a few seconds ago.

She was so confused. “You can’t keep doing this to me.”

He began to fold up the ladder, shutting her out as if she weren’t even there.

“This is the third time you’ve done this. You kiss me and then you just walk away.” Noelle felt sobs welling up in her chest and she tried unsuccessfully to choke them back.

Now it was he who couldn’t meet her eyes. “I said I was sorry.”

“It may not mean anything to you, but you’re breaking my heart.”

Her cry of misery echoed in the empty sanctuary, and Nick froze. Slowly, he put down the ladder and turned to her. “What did you say?”

Tears were running down her cheeks now, but Noelle didn’t care. Every time he rejected her, her heart crumbled. She had to finish this now. “I said you’re breaking my heart. If you don’t love me, then stop kissing me. You make me hope for something I can’t have.”

“What do you hope for Noelle?”

“For you, of course. I’ve been waiting for you since you kissed me that first Christmas after graduation.” Her throat filled up with tears and she couldn’t say any more. What was the use anyway? She was just embarrassing herself, throwing herself at a man who found her troublesome at best. The kisses were strange aberrations, but that’s all they were to him—aberrations.

Noelle turned and fled the church blindly. In the parking lot she fumbled with her keys, trying to unlock her car door. Sobs wracked her body, making it hard to hold her hand steady enough. Then from behind, strong hands gripped her shoulders, turning her around and pulling her into his embrace.



“Just let me go Nick,” She pushed at his chest, trying to get free, but he held her tightly.

“Noelle, listen to me.”

“Why? So you can tell me what a mistake you made?”

Still holding her against him with one arm, he took her chin in his other hand and forced her to look at him. “You said to stop kissing you if I didn’t love you. But I do love you.”

Noelle stilled in his arms. “What?”

“I said I love you.”

“Do you mean it?”

“Yes, absolutely.”

She searched his face and found the answer she wanted in those gorgeous brown eyes. They were warmer than she’d ever seen them. Looking into them was like drowning in *hot* chocolate. Noelle felt the feather soft touch of the year’s first snow flakes on her cheeks. “I love you, too Nick.”

He brushed the snowflakes from her face. “So can I kiss you now?”

In response, Noelle turned her face up to his, inviting his lips back to hers. “Yes, Please.”

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Those few flakes of snow turned into a blizzard. Children rejoiced as school was cancelled and they got to start their Christmas vacation early. But the roads were cleared by Christmas and Nick thought the glistening snow and the frosted trees made for stunning scenery as he drove into town. He was invited to Gladys’ house for Christmas dinner. It was in some ways a replay of Thanksgiving, minus Uncle Larry, who had extended his Florida vacation.

He brought his pies into the kitchen where Gladys, Noelle and Natalie were making dinner. Noelle flashed him a smile from the corner where she

was making the punch. Gladys kissed his cheek and took the pies. And Natalie, predictably, started in on fixing Noelle up with someone.

“Nick, help me. She’s too picky. She won’t go out with anyone I suggest.”

“Don’t worry about it Natalie.”

“But she’ll never find someone by herself.”

Nick winked at Noelle and saw Gladys turn away to hide her smile. “I think she already has.”

Natalie shrieked and dropped the potato she was peeling. “Noelle, why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because I knew you’d react like this.”

“Well, who is it? Do I know him?”

Noelle glanced at Nick. “I think you do.”

“Where did you meet him? How long have you known each other? Is it serious?”

Nick answered for Noelle. “She met him in the hospital and they’ve known each other forever.” He caught Noelle’s gaze and held it as he finished. “And yes, it is serious. Very serious.”

Her eyes softened at his last words, and he couldn’t look away. He didn’t think he’d ever get used to her looking at him like that.

She cleared her throat. “Um, I think I’ll just go get the ice ring for the punch.”

A grin spread across his face. “Let me help you with that.”

“Hey, wait. I still don’t know who it is. And when was Noelle in the hospital?”

They stepped into the garage and Nick shut the door behind them, cutting off Natalie in mid-rant.

“Let your mom tell her,” he said as he pulled Noelle to him. “We have better things to do.”

With a smile, Noelle wrapped her arms around him and said “Merry Christmas, Nick.”

“It certainly is.” He dropped a kiss on her mouth just as the door opened, and Natalie barged in.

“Come on Noelle, you have to tell me who...oh.” Natalie froze as her gaze passed from Noelle to Nick. She shook her head and went back into the kitchen. As she was shutting the door, Nick heard her say “Mom, I hope you don’t want that ice ring anytime soon.”

He and Noelle burst out laughing. He recovered and mingled kisses with her giggles.

Finally, she sighed and said “I think we shocked Natalie.”

“She deserved it. What was she thinking, setting you up with Austin Summers?”

“We should probably go in and face the music. Natalie’s probably broadcast the news to the whole town by now.”

“Good. Then everyone will know you’re taken.”

“I didn’t know you were the jealous type.”

“Where you’re concerned, I intend to be.” And he meant it. He never dreamed it would be possible for Noelle to love someone like him. But now that he had her heart, he wasn’t giving it back—ever.

He brushed a stray lock of hair behind her ear and eased away from her. “I’ll get the ice ring.” He pulled it out of the freezer and grabbed Noelle’s hand. She opened the door, and sounds of laughter and happy conversations washed over them, blending with the wonderful smells of the meal. But still they hesitated to step through the door.

Noelle smiled at him. “Merry Christmas, Nick, and happy birthday.”

He smiled back. “I don’t think we’ve gotten along this well since we were born. But this is definitely a trend that I intend to continue.”

## Epilogue

### *December, One Year Later*

Noelle stepped onto the stool and reached up to place the star on the top of the Christmas tree—on her and Nick’s tree. It was their first Christmas together as husband and wife. Nick reached out and lifted her off the stool. They both stepped back and took a look at the newly decorated tree. It stood by the window of the living room in the farm house. Now that Nick had someone to look after him, Larry had decided to permanently move to Florida with the understanding that he could visit in the summer when it got too hot in the south. So, after they were married, Noelle moved into the farm house, and the place had finally received the feminine touch it had been missing all those years.

Sighing and snuggling up against her husband Noelle declared “The tree is beautiful.”

Nick stroked her hair, hanging loose down her back. “Not as beautiful as you,” he told her.

The compliment both pleased and embarrassed her so she chose to ignore it. “I have a present for you.”

“It’s too early for presents.”

“Not for this one. It can’t wait until Christmas,” Noelle insisted.

She put the stool away in a closet and brought back a small, wrapped gift box.

“Why do I have to open this now?”

“I really don’t think you’ll want to wait for Christmas to open this one.”

“But I didn’t get you anything.”

Noelle laughed. “I don’t know about that. Will you quit arguing and just open it.”

Nick pulled off the white satin bow and tore away the shiny red foil paper. He opened the box and found a Christmas ornament inside. “Is this from your shop?”

She nodded. “I had it engraved. Read what it says.”

Nick hooked his finger through the thread loop and lifted the ornament. It was a silver picture frame. On the top part of the frame ‘2008’ was inscribed.

“Oh, I get it. It’s one of those ‘first Christmas together’ ornaments. But honey, you put next year’s date on it.”

Noelle couldn’t keep from smiling. “I know. Keep reading.”

He read the bottom words and sucked in his breath in surprise. “It says ‘baby’s first Christmas.’” He looked at her for confirmation. “Our baby?”

Noelle’s smile spread into a happy grin. “Yes, our baby.”

Still dangling the ornament from one finger, he hugged her tightly and spun her around.

“Nick,” she shrieked “You’ll knock down the tree.”

He put her down and flashed her a sheepish grin. “Sorry. I probably shouldn’t be doing that to you anyway.”

Noelle tried to look stern, but she knew she failed completely. “I guess I don’t have to ask if you’re happy. I know we didn’t plan this, but...”

“But the best gifts are surprises. And this baby is the best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

Noelle's heart melted. She couldn't believe they'd spent so many years competing and arguing. Who knew how wonderful things could be when they cooperated? "Why don't you hang the ornament on the tree? I baked Christmas cookies today. We could have some now."

"You baked cookies?" He quickly put the ornament on a prominent branch of the tree. "Can we have them with hot chocolate?"

Noelle felt another laugh bubbling up inside her. If she were any happier she'd explode. "It must be true that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach."

"Hey, I'm going to have to make sure I get my fair share of those cookies, if you're going to be eating for two."

"You'll get fat," Noelle teased as she led the way to the kitchen.

"Well you're going to get fat, too. I'll just be keeping you company."

"Hey watch it, buddy. Comments like that could get you a night on the couch."

"Oh, yeah." Nick's eyes were full of mischief as he pulled her close and kissed her thoroughly.

Noelle sighed. "I might let it go. But just this once."

## A word about the author...

Kara Lynn Russell at a glance: • Married to a guy who puts the happy in my ever after. • Mother of four (and still mostly sane) • Live in a small Wisconsin town in the heart of dairy country. • Currently work at the local public library. I got into library work by hanging around until they decided to put me to work. • I love reading genre books: romance, fantasy, and mysteries. I have a special fondness for those with a Christian slant. • I write romance and children's stories • I love making lists • Best motivation to write: Avoiding housework!

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