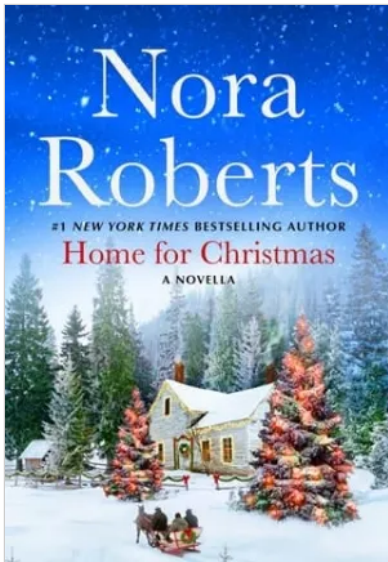




Home for Christmas

Author: Nora Roberts

Category: Romance

Description: A Christmas second-chance romance sizzles as a man who once chose career over romance returns to his hometown to woo the love of his life, from #1 New York Times bestselling author Nora Roberts.

Jason Law has traveled the world, earning accolades for his in-depth journalism, reporting on history-making events.

But during that decade on the road chronicling other people's lives, he didn't live his own.

Now, back in his small-town home of Quiet Valley, New Hampshire for Christmas, Jason wants to give his heart to Faith Monroe.

Ten years ago, he chose his career over their love, a decision he deeply regrets.

To rekindle their relationship, Jason will have to earn Faith's trust and prove to her that when they're together, it's a wonderful life...

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Not for the first time since Jason had decided to visit his hometown did he feel foolish.

After all, it was very likely he wouldn't even be recognized.

He'd left a thin, defiant twenty-year-old in a scruffy pair of jeans.

He was coming back a man who'd learned how to replace defiance with arrogance and succeed.

His frame was still lean, but it fitted nicely into clothes tailored on Savile Row and Seventh Avenue.

Ten years had changed him from a desperate boy determined to make his mark to an outwardly complacent man who had.

What ten years hadn't changed, was what was inside.

He was still looking for roots, for his place.

That was why he was heading back to Quiet Valley.

The road still twisted and turned through the woods, up the mountains and down again, as it had when he'd headed in the opposite direction on a Greyhound.

Snow covered the ground, smooth here, bumpy there where it was heaped over rocks.

In the sunlight trees shimmered with it.

Had he missed it? He'd spent one winter in snow up to his waist in the Andes.

He'd spent another sweltering in Africa.

The years ran together, but oddly enough, Jason could remember every place he'd spent Christmas over the last ten years, though he'd never celebrated the holiday.

The road narrowed and swept into a wide curve.

He could see the mountains, covered with pines and dusted with white. Yes, he'd missed it.

Sun bounced off the mounds of snow. He adjusted his dark glasses and slowed down, then on impulse, stopped.

When he stepped from the car, his breath came in streams of smoke.

His skin tingled with the cold but he didn't button his coat or reach in his pockets for his gloves.

He needed to feel it. Breathing in the thin, icy air was like breathing in thousands of tiny needles.

Jason walked the few feet to the top of the ridge and looked down on Quiet Valley.

He'd been born there, raised there. He'd learned of grief there—and he'd fallen in love. Even from the distance he could see her house—her parents' house, Jason reminded himself and felt the old, familiar surge of fury. She'd be living somewhere else now, with her husband, with her children.

When he discovered that his hands were balled into fists, he carefully relaxed them.

Channeling emotion was a skill he'd turned into an art over the past decade.

If he could do it in his work, reporting on famine, war, and suffering, he could do it for himself.

His feelings for Faith had been a boy's feelings.

He was a man now, and she, like Quiet Valley, was only part of his childhood.

He'd traveled more than five thousand miles just to prove it.

Turning away, he got back in the car and started down the mountain.

From the distance, Quiet Valley had looked like a Currier and Ives painting, all white and snug between mountain and forest. As he drew closer, it became less idyllic and more approachable.

The tired paint showed here and there on some of the outlying houses.

Fences bowed under snow. He saw a few new houses in what had once been open fields.

Change. He reminded himself he'd expected it.

Smoke puffed out of chimneys. Dogs and children raced in the snow.

A check of his watch showed him it was half past three.

School was out, and he'd been traveling for fifteen hours.

The smart thing to do was to see if the Valley Inn was still in operation and get a room.

A smile played around his mouth as he wondered if old Mr. Beantree still ran the place.

He couldn't count the times Beantree had told him he'd never amount to anything but trouble.

He had a Pulitzer and an Overseas Press Award to prove differently.

Houses were grouped closer together now, and he recognized them.

The Bedford place, Tim Hawkin's house, the Widow Marchant's.

He slowed again as he passed the widow's tidy blue clapboard.

She hadn't changed the color, he noticed and felt foolishly pleased.

And the old spruce in the front yard was already covered with bright-red ribbons.

She'd been kind to him. Jason hadn't forgotten how she had fixed hot chocolate and listened to him for hours when he'd told her of the travels he wanted to make, the places he dreamed of seeing.

She'd been in her seventies when he'd left, but of tough New England stock.

He thought he might still find her in her kitchen patiently fueling the wood stove and listening to her Rachmaninoff.

The streets of the town were clear and tidy.

New Englanders were a practical lot, and Jason thought, as sturdy as the bedrock they'd planted themselves on.

The town had not changed as he'd anticipated.

Railings Hardware still sat on the corner off Main and the post office still occupied a brick building no bigger than a garage.

The same red garland was strung from lamppost to lamppost as it had been all through his youth during each holiday season.

Children were building a snowman in front of the Litner place.

But whose children? Jason wondered. He scanned the red mufflers and bright boots knowing any of them might be Faith's. The fury came back and he looked away.

The sign on the Valley Inn had been repainted, but nothing else about the three-story square stone building was different.

The walkway had been scraped clean and smoke billowed out of both chimneys.

He found himself driving beyond it. There was something else to do first, something he'd already known he would have to do.

He could have turned at the corner, driven a block and seen the house where he grew up. But he didn't.

Near the end of Main would be a tidy white house, bigger than most of the others with two big bay windows and a wide front porch.

Tom Monroe had brought his bride there. A reporter of Jason's caliber knew how to

ferret out such information.

Perhaps Faith had put up the lace curtains she'd always wanted at the windows.

Tom would have bought her the pretty china tea sets she'd longed for.

He'd have given her exactly what she'd wanted.

Jason would have given her a suitcase and a motel room in countless cities. She'd made her choice.

After ten years he discovered it was no easier to accept.

Still, he forced himself to be calm as he pulled up to the curb.

He and Faith had been friends once, lovers briefly.

He'd had other lovers since, and she had a husband.

But he could still remember her as she'd looked at eighteen, lovely, soft, eager.

She had wanted to go with him, but he wouldn't let her.

She had promised to wait, but she hadn't.

He took a deep breath as he climbed from the car.

The house was lovely. In the big bay window that faced the street was a Christmas tree, cluttered and green in the daylight. At night it would glitter like magic. He could be sure of it because Faith had always believed so strongly in magic.

Standing on the sidewalk he found himself dealing with fear.

He'd covered wars and interviewed terrorists but he'd never felt the stomach-churning fear that he did now, standing on a narrow snow-brushed sidewalk facing a pristine white house with holly bushes by the door.

He could turn around, he reminded himself.

Drive back to the inn or simply out of town again.

There was no need to see her again. She was out of his life.

Then he saw the lace curtains at the window and the old resentment stirred, every bit as strong as fear.

As he started down the walk a girl raced around the side of the house just ahead of a well-aimed snowball. She dived, rolled and evaded. In an instant, she was up again and hurling one of her own.

"Bull's-eye, Jimmy Harding!" With a whoop, she turned to run and barreled into Jason. "Sorry." With snow covering her from head to foot, she looked up and grinned. Jason felt the world spin backward.

She was the image of her mother. The sable hair peeked out of her cap and fell untidily to her shoulders.

The small, triangular face was dominated by big blue eyes that seemed to hold jokes all of their own.

But it was the smile, the one that said, isn't this fun?

that caught him by the throat. Shaken, he stepped back while the girl dusted herself off and studied him.

“I’ve never seen you before.”

He slipped his hands into his pockets. But I’ve seen you, he thought. “No. Do you live here?”

“Yeah, but the shop’s around the side.” A snowball landed with a plop at her feet.

She lifted a brow in a sophisticated manner.

“That’s Jimmy,” she said in the tone of a woman barely tolerating a suitor.

“His aim’s lousy. The shop’s around the side,” she repeated as she bent to ball more snow. “Just walk right in.”

She raced off holding a ball in each hand. Jason figured Jimmy was in for a surprise.

Faith’s daughter. He hadn’t asked her name and nearly called her back. It didn’t matter, he told himself. He’d only be in town a few days before he took the next assignment. Just passing through, he thought. Just cleaning the slate.

He backtracked to walk around the side of the house. Though he couldn’t imagine what sort of shop Tom could have, he thought it might be best to see him first. He almost relished it.

The little workshop he’d half expected turned out to be a miniature of a Victorian cottage.

The sleigh out in front held two life-size dolls dressed in top hats and bonnets, cloaks

and top boots.

Above the door was a fancy hand-painted sign that read Doll House.

To the accompaniment of bells, Jason pushed the door open.

“I’ll be right with you.”

Hearing her voice again was like stepping back and finding no solid ground. But he’d deal with it, Jason told himself. He’d deal with it because he had to. Slipping off his glasses, he tucked them into his pocket and looked around.

Child-size furniture was set around the room in the manner of a cozy parlor.

Dolls of every shape and size and style occupied chairs, stools, shelves and cabinets.

In front of an elf-size fireplace where flames shimmered, sat a grandmother of a doll in lace cap and apron.

The illusion was so strong Jason almost expected her to begin rocking.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting.” With a china doll in one hand and a bridal veil in the other, Faith walked through the doorway.

“I was right in the middle of...” The veil floated out of her hand as she stopped.

It waltzed to the floor with no sound at all.

Color rushed away from her face, making the deep-blue eyes nearly violet in contrast. In reaction, or defense, she gripped the doll to her breast. “Jason.”

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Framed in the doorway with the thin winter light creeping through the tiny windows she was lovelier than his memory of her.

He'd hoped it would be different. He'd hoped his fantasies of her would be exaggerated as so many fantasies are.

But she was here, flesh and blood, and so beautiful she took his breath away.

Perhaps because of it, his smile was cynical and his voice cool.

"Hello, Faith."

She couldn't move, forward or back. He trapped her now as he had so many years before.

He didn't know it then, she couldn't let him know it now.

Emotion, locked and kept secret for so long struggled against will and was held back.

"How are you?" she managed to ask, her hands like a vise around the doll.

"Fine." He walked toward her. God, how it pleased him to see the nerves jumping in her eyes. God, how it tormented him to learn she smelled the same. Soft, young, innocent. "You look wonderful." He said it carelessly, like a yawn.

"You were the last person I expected to see walk through the door." One she'd learned to stop looking for. Determined to control herself, Faith loosened her grip on

the doll. “How long are you in town?”

“Just a few days. I had the urge.”

She laughed and hoped it didn’t sound hysterical. “You always did. We read a lot about you. You’ve been able to see all the places you always wanted to see.”

“And more.”

She turned away, giving herself a moment to close her eyes and pull her emotions together. “They ran it on the front page when you won the Pulitzer. Mr. Beantree strutted around as though he’d been your mentor. ‘Fine boy, Jason Law,’ he said. ‘Always knew he’d amount to something.’”

“I saw your daughter.”

That was the biggest fear, the biggest hope, the dream she’d put to rest years ago. She bent casually to pick up the veil. “Clara?”

“Just outside. She was about to mow down some boy named Jimmy.”

“Yes, that’s Clara.” The smile came quickly and just as stunningly as it had on the child. “She’s a vicious competitor,” she added and wanted to say like her father, but didn’t dare.

There was so much to say, so much that couldn’t be said. If he had had one wish at that moment, it would have been to reach out and touch her. Just to touch her once and remember the way it had been.

“I see you have your lace curtains.”

Regret washed over her. She'd have settled for bare windows, blank walls. "Yes, I have my lace curtains and you your adventures."

"And this place." He turned to look around again. "When did all this start?"

She could deal with it, she promised herself, this hatefully casual small talk. "I opened it nearly eight years ago now."

He picked a rag doll from a bassinet. "So you sell dolls. A hobby?"

Something else came into her eyes now. Strength. "No, it's my business. I sell them, repair them, even make them."

"Business?" He set the doll down and the smile he gave her had nothing to do with humor. "It's hard for me to picture Tom approving of his wife setting up a business."

"Is it?" It hurt, but she set the china doll on a counter and began to arrange the veil on its head.

"You always were perceptive, Jason, but you've been away a long time.

" She looked over her shoulder and her eyes weren't nervous or even strong.

They were simply cold. "A very long time. Tom and I were divorced eight years ago. The last time I heard he was living in Los Angeles. You see, he didn't care for small towns either. Or small-town girls."

He couldn't name the things that stirred in him so he pushed them aside. Bitterness was simpler. "Apparently you picked badly, Faith."

She laughed again but the veil crumpled in her hand. "Apparently I did."

“You didn’t wait.” It was out before he could stop it. He hated himself for it, and her.

“You were gone.” She turned back slowly and folded her hands.

“I told you I’d come back. I told you I’d send for you as soon as I could.”

“You never called, or wrote. For three months I—”

“Three months?” Furious, he grabbed her arms. “After everything we’d talked about, everything we’d hoped for, three months was all you could give me?”

She would have given him a lifetime, but there hadn’t been a choice.

Struggling to keep her voice calm, she looked into his eyes.

They were the same—intense, impatient. “I didn’t know where you were.

You wouldn’t even give me that.” She pulled away from him because the need was as great as it had always been. “I was eighteen and you were gone.”

“And Tom was here.”

She set her jaw. “And Tom was here. It’s been ten years, Jason, you never once wrote. Why now?”

“I’ve asked myself the same thing,” he murmured and left her standing alone.

Her dreams had always been too fanciful. As a child Faith had envisioned white chargers and glass slippers. Reality was something to be faced daily in a family where money was scarce and pride was not, but dreams weren’t just for nighttime.

She'd fallen in love with Jason when she'd been eight and he ten and he'd bravely vanquished three boys who'd tossed her into the snow.

It had taken three of them. Faith could still look back on that with a sense of satisfaction.

But it had been Jason fiercely coming to her rescue and sending her opponents scattering that she remembered best. He'd been thin, and his coat had been too large and mended at the elbows.

She remembered his eyes, deep, deep brown under brows drawn close in annoyance as he'd looked down at her.

Snow had coated his pale-blond hair and reddened his face.

She'd looked into his eyes and fallen in love.

He'd muttered at her, hauled her up and scolded her for getting in trouble.

Then he'd stalked off with his ungloved hands thrust into the pockets of his too-big coat.

Through childhood and into adolescence she'd never looked at another boy. Of course she'd pretended to from time to time hoping it might make Jason Law notice her.

Then when she'd been sixteen and her mother had sewn her a dress for the spring dance at the town hall, he'd noticed. So had several other boys, and Faith had flirted outrageously, with one goal in mind:

Jason Law. Sulky and defiant he'd watched her dance with one boy after another.

She'd made sure of it. Just as she'd made sure she looked directly at him before she'd stepped outside to take the air.

He'd followed her, just as she'd hoped. She'd pretended to be sophisticated.

He'd been rude. And he'd walked her home under a fat full moon.

There'd been other walks after that—spring, summer, fall, winter.

They were in love as only the young can be, carelessly, heedlessly, innocently.

She told him of her longings for a house and children, for lace curtains and china cups.

He told her of his passion to travel, to see everything, and write it down.

She knew he'd felt trapped in the small town, hampered by a father who gave him no love and little hope.

He knew she dreamed of quiet rooms with flowers in crystal vases.

But they were drawn together and tangled all the dreams into one.

Then one night in the summer when the air was sweet with wild grass they stopped being children and their love stopped being innocent.

“Mom, you’re dreaming again.”

“What?” Up to her elbows in soapy water, Faith turned.

Her daughter stood at the doorway to the kitchen, snugly wrapped in a flannel gown

that came up to her chin.

With her hair freshly brushed and her face scrubbed clean, she looked like an angel.

Faith knew better. “I guess I was. You’ve finished your homework? ”

“Yeah. It’s dumb having homework when school’s nearly out.”

“Don’t remind me.”

“You’re grumpy,” Clara declared and eyed the cookie jar. “You should go for one of your walks.”

“Just one,” Faith said, easily outguessing her daughter. “And don’t forget to brush your teeth.” She waited while Clara rooted through the jar. “Did you see a man this afternoon? A tall man with blond hair?”

“Uh-huh.” Mouth full, Clara turned back to her mother. “He was walking up to the house. I sent him to the shop.”

“Did he—say anything to you?”

“Not really. He looked at me kind of funny at first, like he’d seen me before. Do you know him?”

While her heart began a slow, dull thud, Faith dried her hands. “Yes. He used to live here a long time ago.”

“Oh. Jimmy liked his car.” She wondered if she could talk herself into another cookie.

“I think I will take that walk, Clara, but I want you in bed.”

Recognizing the tone, she knew the cookie would have to wait. “Can I count the presents under the tree again?”

“You’ve counted them ten times.”

“Maybe there’s a new one.”

Laughing, Faith gathered her up. “Not a chance.” Then she grinned and carried Clara into the living room. “But it won’t hurt to count them one more time.”

The air was brittle when she stepped outside and it smelled of snow.

There was no reason to lock the doors in a town where she knew everyone.

Bundling her coat closer, she glanced back at the second-story window where her daughter slept.

Clara was the reason why the house wasn’t cold, why her life wasn’t empty when both things could easily have been true.

She’d left the tree burning and the lights around the door sent out festive color.

Four days until Christmas, she thought, and the wonder of it came home again.

From where she stood, the town looked as pretty as a postcard with the strings of lights, the tree with its star in the town square, the street lamps burning.

She could smell smoke from the chimneys and the bursting scent of pine.

Some might find it too settled, others would find it dull. But Faith had made it a home for herself and her daughter. She'd altered her life to suit her, and it fitted her well.

No regrets, she promised with one last glance at her daughter's window. No regrets at all.

The wind picked up a bit as she walked. There'd be snow for Christmas. She could feel it. She'd look forward to that, not back any longer.

"Still fond of walking?"

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Had she known he'd find her? Perhaps she had. Perhaps she'd needed him to. "Some things don't change," she said simply as Jason fell into step beside her.

"I've found that out in one afternoon." He thought of the town that had stayed so much the same. And of his feelings for the woman beside him. "Where's your daughter?"

"She's sleeping."

He was calmer than he'd been that afternoon, and determined to stay that way. "I didn't ask you if you had other children."

"No." He heard the wistfulness in her voice, just a sigh of it. "There's only Clara."

"How did you pick the name?"

She smiled. It was so like him to ask questions no one else would think of. "From the Nutcracker. I wanted her to be able to dream." As she had. Dropping her hands in her pockets she told herself they were simply two old friends walking through a quiet town. "Are you staying at the inn?"

"Yeah." Amused, Jason rubbed a hand over his chin. "Beantree took my bags up himself."

"Local boy makes good." She turned to look at him.

It was easier somehow walking like this.

Odd, she realized, she'd seen the boy when she'd looked at him the first time.

Now she saw the man. His hair had darkened a bit but was still very blond.

It was no longer unkempt, but cut in a carelessly attractive style that had it falling over his brow.

His face was still thin, hollow at the cheeks in the way that had always fascinated her.

And his mouth was still full, but there was a hardness around it that hadn't been there once.

"You did make good, didn't you? You made everything you wanted happen. "

"Most everything." When his eyes met hers, she felt all the old longings come back. "What about you, Faith?"

She shook her head, watching the sky as she walked. "I never wanted as much as you, Jason."

"Are you happy?"

"If a person isn't, it's their own fault."

"That's too simple."

"I haven't seen the things you've seen. I haven't had to deal with what you've had to deal with. I am simple, Jason. That was the problem, wasn't it?"

"No." He turned her to face him and slid his hands up to her face.

He wore no gloves, and his fingers warmed against her skin.

“God, you haven’t changed.” As she stood very still he combed his fingers up through her hair, then down to where the tips brushed her shoulders.

“I’ve thought about the way you look in the moonlight countless times. It was just like this.”

“I’ve changed, Jason.” But her voice was breathless. “So have you.”

“Some things don’t,” he reminded her and gave in to the need.

When his mouth touched hers, he knew that he’d come home.

Everything he remembered, everything he thought he’d lost was his again.

She was soft and smelled of springtime even when snow dusted the ground around them.

Her mouth was willing, even as it had been the first time he’d tasted it.

He couldn’t explain, even to himself, that every other woman he’d held had been nothing but a shadow of his memory of her.

Now she was real, wrapped in his arms and giving him everything he’d forgotten he could have.

Just once, she promised herself as she melted against him.

Just once more. How could she have known her life had such a void in it?

She'd tried to close the door on the part of her life that included Jason, though she'd known it wasn't possible.

She'd tried to tell herself it was only youthful passion and girlish fancy but she'd known that was a lie.

There'd been no other men, only memories of one, and wishes, half-forgotten dreams.

She was holding no memory now but Jason, as real and urgent as he'd always been.

Everything about him was so familiar, the taste of his lips on hers, the feel of his hair as her fingers raked through it, the scent of man, rough and rugged, that he'd always carried with him even as a boy.

He murmured her name and drew her closer, as if the years were trying to separate them again.

She wrapped her arms around him, as willing, as eager, and as in love as she'd been the last time he'd held her. The wind whipped around their ankles, puffing up clouds of snow while the moonlight held them close.

But it wasn't yesterday, she reminded herself as she stepped back.

It wasn't tomorrow. It was today, and today had to be faced.

She wasn't a child any longer without responsibilities and a love so big it overshadowed anything else.

She was a woman with a child to raise and a home to make.

He was a wanderer. He'd never pretended to be anything else.

“It’s over for us, Jason.” But she held his hand a moment longer. “It’s been over for a long time.”

“No.” He caught her before she could turn away. “It isn’t. I told myself it was, and that I’d come back and prove it. You’ve been eating at me half my life, Faith. It’s never going to be over.”

“You left me.” The tears she promised herself she wouldn’t shed spilled over. “You broke my heart. It’s barely had time to mend, Jason. You won’t break it again.”

“You know I had to leave. If you’d waited—”

“It doesn’t matter now.” With a shake of her head she backed away.

She would never be able to explain to him why it hadn’t been possible to wait.

“It doesn’t matter because in a few days you’ll be gone again.

I won’t let you whirl in and out of my life and leave my emotions in chaos. We both made our choices, Jason.”

“Damn it, I missed you.”

She closed her eyes. When she opened them again, they were dry. “I had to stop missing you. Please leave me alone, Jason. If I thought we could be friends—”

“We always were.”

“Always is gone.” Nonetheless she held out both hands and took his. “Oh, Jason, you were my best friend, but I can’t welcome you home because you scare the hell out of me.”

“Faith.” He curled his fingers around hers. “We need more time, to talk.”

Looking at him she let out a long breath. “You know where to find me, Jason. You always did.”

“Let me walk you home.”

“No.” Calmer, she smiled. “Not this time.”

From the window of his room, Jason could see most of Main Street.

He could, if he chose, watch the flow of business in Porterfield’s Five and Dime or the collection of people who walked through and loitered in the town square.

Too often he found the direction of his gaze wandering to the white house near the end of the street.

Because he’d been restless, Jason had been up and at the window when Faith had walked outside with Clara to see her off to school with a group of other children.

He’d seen her crouch down to adjust the collar of her daughter’s coat.

And he’d seen her stand, hatless, her back to him, as she’d watched the children drag themselves off for a day of books.

She’d stood there a long time with the wind pulling and tugging at her hair, and he’d waited for her to turn, to look at the inn, to acknowledge somehow that she knew he was there.

But she’d walked around the side of the house to her shop without looking back.

Now, hours later, he was at the window again, still restless. From the number of people he could see walk back to the Doll House, her business was thriving. She was working, busy, while he was standing unshaven at a window with his portable typewriter sitting silent on the desk beside him.

He'd planned to work on his novel for a few days—the novel he'd promised himself he'd write.

It was just one more promise he'd never been able to keep because of the demands of travel and reporting.

He'd expected to be able to work here, in the quiet, settled town of his youth away from the demands of journalism and the fast pace he'd set for himself.

He'd expected a lot of things. What he hadn't expected was to find himself just as wildly in love with Faith as he'd been at twenty.

Jason turned away from the window and stared at his typewriter.

The papers were there, notes bulging in manila envelopes, the half-finished manuscript pages.

He could sit down and make himself work through the day into the night.

He had the discipline for it. But in his life there was more than a book that was half finished. He was just coming to realize it.

By the time he'd shaved and dressed, it was past noon.

He thought briefly about walking across the street to Mindy's to see if she still served the best homemade soup in town.

But he didn't feel like chatty counter talk.

Deliberately he turned south, away from Faith.

He wouldn't make a fool of himself by chasing after her.

As he walked, he passed a half a dozen people he knew.

He was greeted with thumps on the back, handshakes and avid curiosity.

He'd strolled down the Left Bank, up Carnaby Street and along the narrow streets of Venice.

After a decade of absence he found the walk down Main Street just as fascinating.

There was a barber pole that swirled up and around and back into itself.

A life-size cardboard Santa stood outside a dress shop gesturing passersby inside.

Spotting a display of poinsettias, Jason slipped into the store and bought the biggest one he could carry.

The saleswoman had been in his graduating class and detained him for ten minutes before he could escape.

He'd expected questions, but he hadn't guessed that he'd become the town celebrity.

Amused, he made his way down the street as he had countless times before.

When he reached the Widow Marchant's, he didn't bother with the front door.

Following an old habit, he went around the back and knocked on the storm door.

It still rattled. It was a small thing that pleased him enormously.

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When the widow opened the door, and her little bird's eyes peered through the bright-red leaves of the flowers, he found himself grinning like a ten-year-old.

"It's about time," she said as she let him in. "Wipe your feet."

"Yes, ma'am." Jason scrubbed his boots against the rough mat before he set down the poinsettia on her kitchen table.

No more than five feet tall, the widow stood with her hands on her hips.

She was bent a bit with age and her face was a melody of lines and wrinkles.

The bib apron she wore was covered with flour.

Jason smelled cookies in the oven and heard the majestic sound of classical music from the living-room speakers. The widow nodded at the flowers.

"You always went for the big statement." When she turned to look him up and down, Jason found himself automatically standing tall. "Put on a few pounds I see, but more wouldn't hurt. Come, give me a kiss."

He bent to peck her cheek dutifully, then found himself gathering her close. She felt frail; he hadn't realized it by looking at her, but she still smelled of all the good things he remembered—soap and powder and warm sugar.

"You don't seem surprised to see me," he murmured as he straightened up.

“I knew you were here.” She turned to fuss at the oven because her eyes had filled. “I knew before the ink dried where you signed the registration at the inn. Sit down and take off your coat. I have to get these cookies out.”

He sat quietly while she worked and absorbed the feeling of home. It was here he’d always been able to come as a child and feel safe. While he watched, she began to heat chocolate in a dented little pan on the stove.

“How long you staying?”

“I don’t know. I’m supposed to be in Hong Kong in a couple of weeks.”

“Hong Kong.” The widow pursed her lips as she arranged cookies on a plate. “You’ve been to all your places, Jason. Were they as exciting as you thought?”

“Some were.” He stretched out his legs. He’d forgotten what it was to relax, body, soul and mind. “Some weren’t.”

“Now you’ve come home.” She walked over to put the cookies on the table. “Why?”

He could be evasive with anyone else. He could even lie to himself. But with her there could only be the truth. “Faith.”

“It always was.” Back at the stove, she stirred the chocolate. He’d been a troubled boy, now he was a troubled man. “You heard she married Tom.”

And with her, he didn’t have to hide the bitterness.

“Six months after I left I called. I’d landed a job with Today’s News.

They were sending me to a hole in the wall in Chicago, but it was something.

I called Faith, but I got her mother. She was very kind, even sympathetic when she told me that Faith was married, had been married for three months and was going to have a baby.

I hung up, I got drunk. In the morning I went to Chicago.

” He plucked a cookie from the plate and shrugged. “Life goes on, right?”

“It does, whether it tows us along with it or rolls right over us. And now that you know she’s divorced?”

“We promised each other something. She married someone else.”

She made a sound like steam escaping from a kettle. “You’re a man now from the looks of you, not a bullheaded boy. Faith Kirkpatrick—”

“Faith Monroe,” he reminded her.

“All right then.” Patiently, she poured heated chocolate into mugs.

After she set them on the table, she seated herself with a quiet wheeze.

“Faith is a strong, beautiful woman inside and out. She’s raising that little girl all alone and doing a good job of it.

She’s started a business and she’s making it work.

Alone. I know something about being alone. ”

“If she’d waited—”

“Well, she didn’t. Whatever thoughts I have about her reasons I’m keeping to myself.”

“Why did she divorce Tom?”

The old woman sat back, resting her elbows on the worn arms of her chair. “He left her and the baby when Clara was six months old.”

His fingers tightened around the handle of the mug. “What do you mean, he left her?”

“You should know the meaning. You did so yourself.” She picked up her chocolate and held it in both hands. “I mean he packed his bags and left. She had the house—and the bills. He cleaned out the bank account and headed west.”

“But he has a daughter.”

“He hasn’t laid eyes on the girl since she was in diapers. Faith pulled herself out. She had the child to think of after all if not herself. Her parents stood behind her. They’re good people. She took a loan and started the doll business. We’re proud to have her here.”

He stared out the window to where the boughs of an old sycamore spread, dripping with snow and ice. “So I left, she married Tom, then he left. Seems Faith has a habit of picking the wrong men.”

“Think so?”

He’d forgotten how dry her voice could be and nearly smiled. “Clara looks like Faith.”

“Hmm. She favors her mother.” The widow smiled into her mug. “I’ve always been

able to see her father in her. Your chocolate's getting cold, Jason."

Absently, he sipped. With the taste came floods of memories. "I hadn't expected to feel at home here again. It's funny. I don't think I felt at home when I lived here, but now..."

"You haven't been by your old place yet?"

"No."

"There's a nice couple in there now. They put a porch on the back."

It meant nothing to him. "It was never home." He set the chocolate down and took her hand. "This was. I never knew any mother but you."

Her hand, thin, dry as paper, gripped his. "Your father was a hard man, harder maybe because he lost your mother so young."

"I only felt relief when he died. I can't even be sorry for it. Maybe that's why I left when I did. With him gone, the house gone, it seemed the time was right."

"Maybe it was, for you. Maybe the time's right to come back again. You weren't a good boy, Jason. But you weren't so bad either. Give yourself some of that time you were always so desperate to beat ten years ago."

"And Faith?"

She sat back again. "As I recall, you never did much courting. Seems to me the girl chased after you with her eyes wide open. A man who's been all the places you been oughta know how to court a woman. Probably picked up some of those fancy languages."

He picked up a cookie and bit into it. “A phrase or two.”

“Never knew a woman who wouldn’t flutter a bit with some fancy language.”

Leaning over he kissed both her hands. “I missed you.”

“I knew you’d come back. At my age, you know how to wait. Go find your girl.”

“I think I might.” Rising, he slipped into his coat. “I’ll come back and visit again.”

“See that you do.” She waited until he opened the door. “Jason—button your coat.”
She didn’t pull out her handkerchief until she heard the door close behind him.

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The sun was high and bright when he stepped outside.

Across the street a snowman was rapidly losing weight.

He found the streets as he'd found them yesterday on his drive in—full of children fresh out of school.

He felt the surge of freedom himself. As he headed north, he saw a girl break away from a group of children and come toward him.

Even bundled in hat and scarf he recognized Clara.

“Scuse me. Did you use to live here?”

“That’s right.” He wanted to tuck her hair into her cap but stopped himself.

“My mother said you did. Today in school, the teacher said you went away and got famous.”

He couldn’t stop the grin. “Well, I went away.”

“And you won a prize. Like Marcie’s brother won a trophy for bowling.”

He thought of his Pulitzer and managed, barely, not to laugh. “Something like that.”

To Clara he looked like a regular person, not someone who bounded around the world on adventures. Her eyes narrowed. “Did you really go to all those places like

they said?”

“That depends on what they said.” In tacit agreement they began to walk together.
“I’ve been to some places.”

“Like Tokyo? That’s the capital of Japan, we learned that in school.”

“Like Tokyo.”

“Did you eat raw fish?”

“Now and again.”

“That’s really disgusting.” But she seemed pleased all the same. She bent and scooped up snow without breaking rhythm. “Do they squish grapes with their feet in France?”

“I can’t say I ever saw it for myself, but I’ve heard tell.”

“I sure wouldn’t drink it after that. Did you ever ride a camel?”

He watched her bullet the snowball into the base of a tree. “As a matter of fact, I did.”

“What was it like?”

“Uncomfortable.”

It was a description she readily accepted because she’d already figured it out for herself. “The teacher read one of your stories today. The one about this tomb they found in China. Did you see the statues?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Was it like Raiders? ”

“Like what?”

“You know, the movie with Indiana Jones.”

It took him a minute, then he laughed. Without thinking he tipped her cap over her eyes. “I guess it was, a little.”

“You write good.”

“Thank you.”

They were standing on the sidewalk in front of her house.

Jason glanced up, surprised. He hadn’t realized they’d come so far and found himself regretting he hadn’t slowed his pace a bit.

“We have to do this report on Africa.” Clara wrinkled her nose.

“It has to be five whole pages long. Miss Jenkins wants it in right after Christmas vacation.”

“How long have you had the assignment?” It hadn’t been that long since his school days.

Clara drew a circle in the snow at the edge of her lawn. “Couple of weeks.”

No, he realized with some pleasure, it hadn’t been so very long. “I guess you’ve

started on it.”

“Well, sort of.” Then she turned that quick, beautiful smile on him. “You’ve been to Africa, haven’t you?”

“A couple of times.”

“I guess you know all kinds of things about climate and culture and stuff like that.”

He grinned down at her. “Enough.”

“Maybe you should stay for dinner tonight.” Without giving him a chance to answer, she took his hand and led him around to the shop.

When they walked in, Faith was boxing a doll. Her hair was pinned up in the back, and she wore a baggy sweatshirt over jeans. She was laughing at something her customer had said. “Lorna, you know you wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“Bah, humbug.” The woman put a hand on her enormous stomach and sighed. “I really wanted this baby to make an appearance before Christmas.”

“You still have four days.”

“Hi, Mom!”

Faith turned to smile at her daughter. As she spotted Jason the spool of ribbon in her hand spun in a red stream to the floor. “Clara, you didn’t wipe your feet,” she managed to say, but kept her eyes on Jason.

“Jason! Jason Law.” The woman rushed over and grabbed him by both arms. “It’s Lorna—Lorna McBee.”

He looked down into the pretty round face of his longtime neighbor. "Hello, Lorna." His gaze drifted down, then back up. "Congratulations."

With a hand on her stomach she laughed. "Thanks, but it's my third."

He thought of the scrawny, bad-tempered girl next door. "Three? You work fast."

"So does Bill. You remember Bill Easterday, don't you?"

"You married Bill?" He remembered a boy who had hung out in the town square looking for trouble. A few times Jason had helped him find it.

"I reformed him." When she smiled, he believed it. "He runs the bank." His expression had her giggling. "I'm serious, stop in sometime. Well, I've got to be moving along. This box has to go into a locked closet before my oldest girl sees it. Thanks, Faith, it's just lovely."

"I hope she likes it."

To keep her hands busy, Faith began to rewind the spool of ribbon. A puff of cold air came in, then was cut off as Lorna breezed out.

"Was that the bride doll?" Clara wanted to know.

"Yes, it was."

"Too fussy. Can I go over to Marcie's?"

"What about homework?"

"I don't have any except that dumb Africa report. He's going to help me." Jason met

her smile with a lifted brow. “Aren’t you?”

Jason would have dared any man within a hundred miles to resist that look. “Yes, I am.”

“Clara, you can’t—”

“It’s okay ’cause I asked him to dinner.” She beamed, almost sure her mother would be trapped by the good manners she was always talking about. “There’s no school now for ten whole days so I can do the report after dinner, can’t I?”

Jason decided it wouldn’t hurt to apply a little pressure from his side. “I spent six weeks in Africa once. Clara might just get an A.”

“She could use it,” Faith muttered. They stood together, looking at her. Her heart already belonged to both of them. “I guess I’d better start dinner.”

Clara was already racing across the yard next door before Faith pulled the door of the Doll House shut and turned the sign around to read Closed.

“I’m sorry if she was a nuisance, Jason. She has a habit of badgering people with questions.”

“I like her,” he said simply and watched Faith fumble with the latch.

“That’s nice of you, but you don’t have to feel obliged to help her with this report.”

“I said I would. I keep my word, Faith.” He touched a pin in her hair. “Sooner or later.”

She had to look at him then. It was impossible not to. “You’re welcome to dinner, of

course.” Her fingers worried the buttons of her coat as she spoke. “I was just going to fry chicken.”

“I’ll give you a hand.”

“No, that’s not—”

He cut her off when he closed his fingers over hers. “I never used to make you nervous.”

With an effort, she steadied herself. “No, you didn’t.” He’d be gone again in a few days, she reminded herself. Out of her life. Maybe she should take whatever time she was given. “All right then, you can help.”

He took her arm as they crossed the lawn. Though he felt her initial resistance, he ignored it. “I went to see Widow Marchant. I had cookies right from the oven.”

Faith relaxed as she pushed open the door of her own kitchen. “She has every word you’ve ever written.”

The kitchen was twice the size of the one he’d just left and there were signs of a child in the pictures hanging on the front of the refrigerator and a pair of fuzzy slippers kicked into a corner.

Moving with habit, Faith switched on the burner under the kettle before she slipped out of her coat.

She hung it on a peg by the door, then turned to take his. His hands closed over hers.

“You didn’t tell me Tom left you.”

She'd known it wouldn't take him long to hear it, or long to question. "It's not something I think about on a daily basis. Coffee?"

She draped his coat over a hook and turned to find him blocking her way. "What happened, Faith?"

"We made a mistake." She said it calmly, even coolly. It was a tone he'd never heard from her before.

"But there was Clara."

"Don't." Fury came into her eyes quickly and simmered there. "Leave it alone, Jason, I mean it. Clara's my business. My marriage and divorce are my business. You can't expect to come back now and have all the answers."

They stood a moment, facing each other in silence. When the kettle let out a whistle, she seemed to breathe again. "If you want to help, you can peel some potatoes. They're in the pantry over there."

She worked systematically, he thought angrily, as she poured oil to heat in a skillet and coated chicken.

Her temper was nothing new to him. He'd felt the brunt of it before, sometimes deflecting it, sometimes meeting it head-on.

He also knew how to soothe it. He began talking, almost to himself at first, about some of the places he'd been.

When he told her about waking with a snake curled next to his head while he'd been camping in South America, she laughed.

“I didn’t find it too funny at the time. I was out of the tent in five seconds flat, buck naked. My photographer got a very interesting roll of pictures. I had to pay him fifty to get the negatives.”

“I’m sure they were worth more. You didn’t mention the snake in your series on San Salvador.”

“No.” Interested, he put down his paring knife. “You read it?”

She arranged chicken in the hot oil. “Of course. I’ve read all your stories.”

He took the potatoes to the sink to wash them. “All of them?”

She smiled at the tone but kept her back to him.

“Don’t let your ego loose, Jason. It was always your biggest problem.

I’d estimate that ninety percent of the people in Quiet Valley have read all your stories.

You might say we all feel we have a stake in you.

” She adjusted the flame. “After all, no one else around here’s had dinner at the White House. ”

“The soup was thin.”

Chuckling, she put a pan of water on the stove and dumped in the potatoes.

“I guess you just have to take the good with the bad—so to speak. I saw a picture of you a couple of years ago.” She adjusted a pin in her hair and her voice was bland.

“I think it was taken in New York, at some glitzy charity function. You had a half-naked woman on your arm.”

He rocked back on his heels. “Did I?”

“Well, she wasn’t actually half-naked,” Faith temporized. “I suppose it just seemed that way because she had so much more hair than dress. Blond—very blond if my memory serves me. And let’s say—top-heavy.”

He ran his tongue around his teeth. “You meet a lot of interesting people in my business.”

“Obviously.” With the efficiency born of habit she turned the chicken. Oil hissed. “I’m sure you find it very stimulating.”

“Not as stimulating as this conversation.”

“If you can’t stand the heat,” she murmured.

“Yeah. It’s getting dark. Shouldn’t Clara be home?”

“She’s right next door. She knows to be home by five-thirty.”

He went to the window anyway and glanced at the house next door. Faith studied his profile. It was stronger now, tougher. She supposed he was, too, had had to be. How much was left of the boy she’d loved so desperately? Maybe it was something neither of them could be sure of.

“I thought of you a lot, Faith.” Though his back was to her she could almost feel the words brush over her skin.

“But especially at this time of year. I could usually block you out when I had work to do, deadlines to meet, but at Christmas you wouldn’t let go.

I remember every one we spent together, the way you’d drag me through the shops.

Those few years with you made up for all the times as a kid I woke up to nothing. ”

The old sympathy welled up. “Your father couldn’t face the holidays, Jason. He just couldn’t handle it without your mother.”

“I understand that better now. After losing you.” He turned back. She wasn’t looking at him now but bent industriously over the stove. “You’ve been spending Christmas alone, too.”

“No, I have Clara.”

She tensed as he walked to her. “No one to fill the stockings with you, or share secrets about what’s under the tree.”

“I manage. You have to alter life to suit yourself.”

“Yeah.” He took her chin in his hand. “I’m beginning to believe it.”

The door slammed open. Wet and beaming, Clara stood dripping on the mat. “We made angels in the snow.”

Faith raised a brow. “So I see. Well, you’ve got fifteen minutes to get out of those wet things and set the table.”

She struggled out of her coat. “Can I turn on the tree?”

“Go ahead.”

“Come on.” Clara held out a hand for Jason. “It’s the best one on the block.”

Emotions humming, Faith watched them walk out together.

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They were still humming when the meal was over. She knew her daughter was a friendly, sometimes outrageously open child, but Clara had taken to Jason like a long-lost friend. She chattered away at him as though she'd known him for years.

It's so obvious, Faith thought as she watched Clara stack dishes. Neither of them noticed. What would she do if they did? She didn't believe in lies, yet she'd been forced to live one.

The other two paid little attention to her as they settled down with Clara's books. In the easy, flowing style he'd been born with, Jason began to tell her stories about Africa—the desert, the mountains, the thick green jungle that teemed with its own life and its own dangers.

As their heads bent together over a picture in Clara's book Faith felt a flood of panic. "I'm going to go next door," she said on impulse. "I have a lot of work backed up."

"Mm-hmm." With that, Jason dismissed her. A laugh bubbled in her throat until it ached. Grabbing her coat, Faith escaped.

They were more than toys to her. They were certainly more than a business.

To Faith the dolls who filled her shop were the symbol of youth, of innocence, of believing in miracles.

She'd wanted to open the shop soon after Clara had been born, but Tom had been adamantly set against it.

Because she'd felt indebted, she'd let it pass, as she'd let so many other things pass.

Then when she'd found herself alone, with a child to support, it had seemed the natural thing.

She worked long hours there, to ease the void that even the love for her daughter couldn't fill.

In her workroom behind the store were shelves filled with pieces and parts of dolls.

There were china heads, plastic legs and torsos.

In another section lay the ones she called the sick and injured.

Dolls with broken arms or battered bodies were brought to her for repair.

Though she enjoyed selling and found a great creative thrill in making her own dolls, nothing satisfied her quite so much as taking a broken toy that was loved and making it whole again.

She turned on the light and her radio and set to work.

It soothed her. As time passed, her nerves drained away.

With crochet hook and rubber bands, with glue and painstaking care she replaced broken limbs.

With a bit of paint and patience she brought smiles back to faceless dolls.

Some were given new clothes or a fresh hairstyle, while others only needed a needle and thread plied by clever fingers.

By the time she picked up a battered rag doll she was humming.

“Are you going to fix that?”

Startled, she nearly stabbed herself with the needle. Jason stood in the doorway, hands in pockets, watching her. “Yes, that’s what I do. Where’s Clara?”

“She nearly fell asleep in her book. I put her to bed.”

She started to rise. “Oh, well I—”

“She’s asleep, Faith, with some green ball of hair she called Bernardo.”

Determined to relax, Faith sat down again. “Yes, that’s her favorite. Clara isn’t much on ordinary dolls.”

“Not like her mother?” Interested, he began to prowl the workroom. “I always thought when a toy broke or wore out it got tossed away.”

“Too often. I’ve always thought that showed a tremendous lack of appreciation for something that’s given you pleasure.”

He picked up a soft plastic head, bald and smooth, that grinned at him. “Maybe you’re right, but I don’t see what can be done about that pile of rags in your hand.”

“Quite a lot.”

“Still believe in magic, Faith?”

She glanced up and for the first time her smile was completely open, her eyes warm. “Yes, of course I do. Especially at Christmastime.”

Unable to help himself he reached down to run a hand over her cheek. “I said before that I’d missed you. I don’t think I realized how much.”

She felt the need shimmer and the longing plead inside her. Denying both, she concentrated on the doll. “I appreciate you helping Clara, Jason. I don’t want to keep you.”

“Does it bother you to have someone watch you work?”

“No.” She began to replace stuffing. “Sometimes a concerned mother will stay here while I doctor a patient.”

He leaned a hip against the counter. “I imagined a lot of things when I was coming back. I never imagined this.”

“What?”

“That I’d be standing here watching you stuff life back into a rag. You may not have noticed, but it doesn’t even have a face.”

“It will. How did the report go?”

“She needs to do the final draft.”

Faith glanced up from her work. Her eyes were wide with the joke. “Clara?”

“She had the same reaction.” Then he smiled as he leaned back. The room smelled of her. He wondered if she knew. “She’s a bright kid, Faith.”

“Sometimes uncomfortably so.”

“You’re lucky.”

“I know.” With quick skillful movements, she pushed the stuffing into place.

“Kids love you no matter what, don’t they?”

“No.” She looked at him again. “You have to earn it.” With needle and thread she began to secure the seams.

“You know, she was out on her feet, but she insisted on stopping at the tree to count the presents. She tells me she had this feeling there’s going to be one more.”

“I’m afraid she’s doomed to disappointment. Her list looked like an army requisition. I had to draw the line.” Putting down the thread, she picked up her paintbrush. “My parents already spoil her.”

“They still live in town?”

“Mmm-hmm.” She’d already gotten a sense of the doll’s personality as she’d worked with it.

Now, she began to paint it on. “They mumble about Florida from time to time, but I don’t know if they’ll ever go.

It’s Clara. They just adore her. You might go by and see them, Jason.

You know my mother was always fond of you. ”

He examined a slinky red dress no bigger than his palm. “Your father wasn’t.”

She grinned at that. “He just didn’t quite trust you.” She sent him a quick, saucy

smile. “What father would have?”

“He had good reason.” As he walked toward her, he saw the doll she held.

“I’ll be damned.” Charmed, he took it, holding it under the light.

What had been a misshapen pile of rags was now a plump, sassy doll.

Exaggerated lashes spiked out from wide eyes.

Curls had been sewn back into place so that they fell teasingly over the brow.

It was soft, friendly and pretty as a picture.

Even a full grown man could recognize what would make a small girl smile.

She felt a ridiculous sense of accomplishment at seeing him smile at her work. “You approve?”

“I’m impressed. How much do you sell something like this for?”

“This one’s not for sale.” Faith set it in a large box at the back of the room.

“There are about a dozen little girls in town whose families can’t afford much of a Christmas.

There are boys, too, of course, but Jake over at the five-and-dime and I worked a deal a few years back.

On Christmas Eve, a box is left on the doorstep.

The girls get a doll, the boys a truck or a ball or whatever. ”

He should have known. It was so typical of her, so much what she was. “Santa lives.”

She turned to smile at him. “He does in Quiet Valley.”

It was the smile that did it. It was so open, so familiar. Jason closed the distance between them before either of them realized it.

“What about you? Do you get what you want for Christmas?”

“I have everything I need.”

“Everything?” His hands cupped her face. “Aren’t you the one who used to dream? Who always believed in wishes?”

“I’ve grown up. Jason, you should go now.”

“I don’t believe that. I don’t believe you’ve stopped dreaming, Faith. Just being with you makes me start again.”

“Jason.” She pressed her hands to his chest, knowing she had to stop what could never be finished. “You know we can’t always have what we want. You’ll leave in a few days. You can walk away and go on to a hundred other things, a hundred other places.”

“What does that have to do with right now? It’s always right now, Faith.” He drew his hands through her hair so that pins scattered. Rich warm sable tumbled over his fingers. He’d always loved the feel of it, the smell of it. “You’re the only one,” he murmured. “You’ve always been the only one.”

She closed her eyes before he could draw her close. “You’ll go. I have to stay here. Once before I stood and watched you walk away. I don’t think I can bear it if I let you in again. Can’t you understand?”

“I don’t know. I know I understand I want you so much more now than I ever did. I’m not sure you can keep me out, Faith.” But he backed away, for both of them. “Not for long anyway. You said before I didn’t have a right to all the answers. Maybe that’s true. But I need one.”

It was a reprieve, it was space to think. She let out a long breath and nodded. “All right. But you promise that you’ll go now if I answer?”

“I’ll go. Did you love him?”

She couldn’t lie. It wasn’t in her. So her eyes were direct and pride kept her chin high. “I never loved anyone but you.”

It came into his eyes—triumph, fury. He reached for her but she pulled away. “You said you’d go, Jason. I trusted your word.”

She had him trapped. She had him aching. “You should’ve trusted it ten years ago.” He swung from the workroom and into the frigid night.

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Quiet Valley bustled with Christmas energy.

From a jerry-rigged loudspeaker on top of the hardware store roof carols rang out.

An enterprising young man from a neighboring farm got a permit and gave buggy rides up and down Main Street.

Kids, keyed up with lack of school and anticipation, shouted and raced on every corner.

The skies had clouded over, but the snow held off.

Jason sat at the counter in the diner and sipped coffee while he listened to town gossip. Word was the Hennessys' oldest had the chicken pox and would be scratching himself through the holidays. Carlotta's was selling Christmas trees at half price and the hardware store had a sale on ten-speeds.

Ten years before Jason would have found the conversations mundane.

Now he sat content, sipping his coffee and listening.

Maybe this was what had been missing from the novel he'd been trying to write for so long.

He'd been around the world, but everything had always been so fast paced, so urgent.

There had been times when his life as well as his story had been on the line.

You didn't think about it when it was happening.

You couldn't. But now, sitting in the warm diner with the scent of coffee and frying bacon he could look back.

He'd taken assignments, a great many of them dangerous, because he hadn't given a damn.

He'd already lost the part of himself he'd valued.

It was true that over the years he'd built something back, inch by gritty inch, but he'd never found the whole—because he'd left it here, where he'd grown up.

Now he just had to figure out what the hell to do with it.

“Guess they serve almost anybody in here.”

Jason glanced up idly then grinned. “Paul. Paul Tydings.” His hand was gripped by two enormous ones.

“Damn it, Jas, you're as good-looking and skinny as ever.”

Jason took a long look at his oldest friend.

Paul's hair was thick and curly around a full, ruddy face offset now by a bushy moustache.

His bull-like frame had assured him a starting place on the offensive line.

Over the years, it had thickened into what was politely termed a successful build.

“Well,” Jason decided. “You’re as good-looking. ”

With a roar of laughter, Paul slapped him on the back. “I never expected to see you back here.”

“Nor I you. I thought you were in Boston.”

“Was. Made myself some money, got married.”

“No kidding? How long?”

“Seven years come spring. Five kids.”

Jason choked on his coffee. “Five?”

“Three and a set of twins. Anyway, I brought my wife back for a visit six years ago and she fell in love. Had a jewelry store in Manchester, so I opened one here, too. I guess I’ve got you to thank for a lot of it.”

“Me? Why?”

“You were always filling my head with ideas. Then you took off. It made me think I should try my hand at seeing a few places. In about a year I was working in this jewelry store in Boston and in walks the prettiest little thing I ever laid eyes on. I was so flustered I never imprinted her credit card. She came back the next day with the blank receipt and saved my job. Then she saved my life and married me. Never even would have met her if it hadn’t been for you talking about all the places there were to see.

” Paul nodded as his coffee was served. “Guess you’ve seen Faith. ”

“Yeah, I’ve seen her.”

“Throw a lot of business her way being as three of my kids are girls and all of ’em are brats.” He grinned and added two packages of sugar to his coffee. “She’s as pretty as she was when she was sixteen and dancing in the town hall. Settling in this time, Jason?”

With a half laugh he pushed his cooling coffee aside. “Maybe.”

“Come by the house and meet the family, will you? We’re just south of town, the two-story stone place.”

“I saw it driving in.”

“Then don’t go out again without coming in. A man doesn’t have many friends who go back to red wagons with him, Jason. You know—” he glanced at his watch “—seems to me Faith breaks for lunch about now. I’ve got to get back.” With a last slap on the back, Paul left him at the counter.

Thoughtfully, Jason sipped at his coffee.

He’d been away ten years, a long time by any standard, yet everyone in town he ran into saw him and Faith as a couple.

It seemed it was easy to blink away a decade.

Easy for everyone, he added, but for himself and Faith.

Maybe he could brush away the years, the time lost, but how could he ignore her marriage and her child?

He still wanted her. That hadn't changed. He still hurt. That hadn't eased. But how did she feel? She'd told him the night before that she'd never loved another man. Did that mean she still loved him? Jason dropped a bill on the counter and rose. There was only one way to find out. He'd ask her.

The Doll House was crowded with children.

Noisy children. When Jason walked in, shouts and laughter bounced off the walls.

Helium-filled balloons hugged the ceiling and cookie crumbs littered the floor.

In the doorway of the workroom was a tall cardboard castle.

Just in front of a shiny white curtain stood a puppet of Santa Claus and a green-suited elf.

With a lot of chatter and exaggerated effort, they loaded a glittering golden sleigh with colorful boxes.

Twice the elf fell on his face while lifting a box and sent the children into peals of laughter.

After a great deal of confusion, all the presents were loaded.

With a belly-bursting Ho-ho-ho! Santa climbed into the sleigh.

Bells jingling, it rocked its way through the curtain.

To the clatter of applause, a series of puppets crossed the stage for bows.

Jason saw Mrs. Claus, two elves and a reindeer with a telltale red nose before Santa

took the stage with a ringing Merry Christmas!

He didn't even realize he was leaning back against the door and grinning when Faith popped around the castle for a bow of her own.

But she saw him. Feeling foolish, she took another bow as the children clambered up. With the ease of a veteran kindergarten teacher, she maneuvered them toward the punch and cookies.

"Very impressive," Jason murmured in her ear. "I'm sorry I missed most of the show."

"It's not much." She combed her fingers through her hair. "I've been doing it for years now without much variation." She glanced over at the group of children. "It doesn't seem to matter."

"I'd say it does." He took her hand and brought it to his lips while a group of girls giggled. "Very much."

"Mrs. Monroe." A little boy with carrot-red hair and a face full of freckles tugged on her slacks. "When's Santa coming?"

Faith crouched down and smoothed at his hair. "You know, Bobby, I heard he was awfully busy this year."

His bottom lip poked out. "But he always comes."

"Well, I'm sure he'll find a way to get the presents here. I'm going to go in the back in a minute and see."

"But I have to talk to him."

The pout nearly did her in. “If he doesn’t make it, you can give me a letter for him. I’ll make sure he gets it.”

“Problem?” Jason murmured when she straightened up again.

“Jake always plays Santa after the puppet show. We give out a few little things, it’s nothing really, but the kids depend on it.”

“Jake can’t make it this year?”

“He caught the chicken pox from the Hennessy boy.”

“I see.” He hadn’t celebrated Christmas in years, not since... since he’d left Faith. “I’ll do it,” he told her and surprised himself.

“You?”

Something in her expression made him determined to be the best St. Nick since the original. “Yeah, me. Where’s the suit?”

“It’s in the little room off the back, but—”

“I hope you remembered the pillows,” he said before he sauntered away.

She didn’t think he’d pull it off. In fact, five minutes after he walked away, Faith was sure he’d changed his mind altogether and continued out the back door.

No one, including the group of kids with mouths full of cookies was more enchanted than she when Santa walked in the front door with a bag over his shoulder.

He had the chance for one booming Merry Christmas before he was surrounded. Too

stunned to move, she watched the children bounce and jump and tug.

“Santa needs a chair.” Jason sent her a long, intense look that had her swallowing before her feet could move. Dashing into the back room, she brought out a high-backed chair and set it in the center of the room.

“Now you have to line up,” she began, scooting children around.

“Everyone gets a turn.” Grabbing a bowl of candy canes, she set them on a table beside the chair.

One by one, the children climbed up on Jason’s knee.

Faith needn’t have worried. She’d had to school Jake to make the right responses, and most importantly, not to promise and risk disappointing.

After the third child had climbed down, Faith relaxed. Jason was wonderful.

And having the time of his life. He’d done it just to help her out, perhaps even to impress her, but he got a great deal more.

He’d never had a child sit on his lap and look at him with complete faith and love.

He listened to their wishes, their confessions and complaints.

Each one was allowed to reach in the sack he carried and pull out one gift.

He was hugged, kissed with sticky mouths and poked. One enterprising boy had a good grip on his beard before Jason managed to distract him. Happy, they began to file out of the shop with their parents or in groups.

“You were great.” Faith turned her sign around after the last child had left to give herself a chance to catch her breath.

“Want to sit on my lap?”

Laughing, she walked to him. “I mean it, Jason, you were. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate it.”

“Then show me.” He pulled her down onto his lap where she sank into pillows. She laughed again and kissed his nose.

“I’ve always been crazy about men in red suits. I wish Clara could have been here.”

“Why wasn’t she?”

With a little sigh, Faith let herself relax against him. “She’s too old for all this now—so she tells me. She went shopping with Marcie.”

“Nine’s too old?”

She didn’t speak for a minute, then moved her shoulders. “Kids grow up fast.” She turned her head so she could look at him. “You made a lot of them happy today.”

“I’d like to make you happy.” Reaching up, he stroked her hair. “There was a time when I could.”

“Do you ever wish we could go back?” Content, she let herself be cradled in his arms. “When we were teenagers, everything seemed so simple. Then you close your eyes for a minute and you’re an adult. Oh, Jason, I wanted you to carry me away, to a castle, to a mountaintop. I was so full of romance.”

He continued to stroke her hair as they sat, surrounded by dolls and the echo of children's laughter. "I didn't have enough of it, did I?"

"You had your feet on the ground, I had my head in the clouds."

"And now?"

"Now, I have a daughter to raise. It's terrifying sometimes to realize you're responsible for another life. Did you...?" She hesitated, knowing the ground was dangerous. "Did you ever want kids?"

"I haven't thought about it. Sometimes I have to go into places where it's tough enough being responsible for your own life."

She'd thought of that—had nightmares about it. "It still excites you."

He thought of some of the things he'd seen, the cruelty, the misery. "It stopped exciting me a long time ago. But I'm good at what I do."

"I suppose I always knew you would be. Jason." She shifted again so that her eyes were level with his. "I am glad you came back."

His fingers tightened when she rested her cheek against his. "You had to wait until I was stuffed like a walrus to tell me that."

With a laugh, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "It seems to be the safest time."

"Don't bet your life on it." He pressed his lips to hers and felt hers tremble. "What's so funny?"

Choking back the laugh, she drew away. "Oh nothing, nothing at all. I've always

dreamed of being kissed by a man in a beard wearing a red hat and bells. I've got to clean up this mess."

When she rose, he hauled himself up. "The timing has to click sooner or later." She said nothing as she gathered up bits of colored paper. Jason picked up his sack and glanced inside. "There's one more box in here."

"It's for Luke Hennessy. Chicken pox."

He looked at the box, then back at her. Her hair curtained her face as she pulled a sticky candy cane from the carpet. "Where does he live?"

Still holding the candy, she stood up. Some might say he looked foolish, padded from chest to hips, wrapped in red and with his face half concealed by a curly white beard.

Faith thought he'd never looked more wonderful.

She walked to him to pull the beard down to his chin.

Her arms went around him, her mouth found his.

Her kiss was warm as it always was, full of hope and simple goodness. Desire raced through him and settled into sweet contentment. "Thank you." She kissed him again in friendship. "He lives on the corner of Elm and Sweetbriar."

He waited a moment until he was steady. "Can I get a cup of coffee when I get back?"

"Yeah." She adjusted his beard again. "I'll be next door."

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

He had to admit, it had given him a kick to walk through town.

Kids flocked after him. Adults called out and waved.

He was offered uncountable cookies. The biggest satisfaction had been the awe on the young Hennessy boy's face.

That had topped the wide-eyed shock of his mother when she'd opened the door to S. Claus.

Jason took his time walking back, strolling through the square.

It was strange, he discovered, how easy it was to take on the personality of a set of clothes.

He felt... well, benevolent. If anyone he'd ever worked with had seen him now, they'd have fallen into the snow in a dead faint.

Jason Law had a reputation for being impatient, brutally frank and quick-tempered.

He hadn't won the Pulitzer for benevolence.

Yet somehow, at the moment, he felt more satisfaction in the polyester beard and dime store bells than he did with all the awards he'd ever earned.

He was ho-hoing his way along when Clara stepped out of the five-and-dime. She and the little brunette at her side went off in peals of giggles.

“But you’re—”

One narrow-eyed stare from Jason did the trick. Cutting herself off, Clara cleared her throat and offered her hand. “How do you do, Santa?”

“I do very well, Clara.”

“That’s not Jake,” Marcie informed Clara. She stepped closer to try to recognize the face behind the puffs of white.

Enjoying himself, Jason sent her a wink. “Hello, Marcie.”

The brunette’s eyes widened. “How’d he know my name?” she whispered to her friend.

Clara covered another giggle with her hand. “Santa knows everything, don’t you, Santa?”

“I have my sources.”

“There isn’t any Santa really.” But Marcie’s grown-up sophistication was wavering.

Jason leaned over and flicked at the fluffy ball on top of her cap. “There is in Quiet Valley,” he told her and nearly believed it himself. He saw Marcie stop looking beyond the beard and accept the magic. Deciding against pressing his luck, he continued on down the street.

It wasn’t easy for a fat man in a red suit to slip into a door inconspicuously, but Jason had had some experience.

Once he was in the back room of Faith’s shop, he shed the Santa clothes.

He wanted to do it again. As Jason slipped into his own slim slacks, he realized he hadn't had so much fun in years.

Part of it had been the look in Faith's eyes, the way she'd warmed to him, if only briefly.

Part had been the simple act of giving pleasure.

How long had it been since he'd done something without an angle?

On an assignment there was constant bargaining.

You give me this, I'll give you that. He'd had to toughen himself against sympathy, against compassion to find the truth and report it.

If his style had a hard edge, it was because he'd always gone for the story that demanded it.

It had helped him forget. Now that he'd come home it was impossible not to remember.

What kind of man was he really? He wasn't sure anymore, but he knew there was one woman who could make or break him. Leaving the suit in the closet, he went to find her.

She had been waiting for him. She was ready to admit she'd been waiting for him for ten years.

Throughout the rest of the afternoon, Faith had made her own decisions.

She'd made a success of her life. Though the search hadn't always been easy, she'd

found contentment.

Confidence had come with the years and she knew she could go on alone.

It was time to stop being afraid of what her life would be like when Jason left again and to accept the gift she'd been offered. He was here, now, and she loved him.

When he came into the house, he found her curled in a chair by the tree, her cheek resting on the arm.

She waited until he came to her. "Sometimes at night I sit like this. Clara's asleep upstairs and the house is quiet.

I can think about little things, enormous things, just as I did as a child.

The lights all blend together and the tree smells like heaven.

You can go anywhere, sitting just like this. "

He picked her up, felt her yield, then settled in the chair with her on his lap. "I remember sitting like this with you at Christmastime in your parents' house. Your father grumbled."

She snuggled close. There was no padding now, just the long, lean body she knew so well. "My mother dragged him into the kitchen so we could be alone for a little while. She knew you didn't have a tree at home."

"Or anything else."

"I never asked where you live now, Jason, whether you found a place that makes you happy."

“I move around a lot. I have a base in New York.”

“A base?”

“An apartment.”

“It doesn’t sound like a home,” she murmured. “Do you put a tree in the window at Christmas?”

“I guess I have once or twice, when I’ve been around.”

It broke her heart, but she said nothing. “My mother always said you had wanderlust. Some people are born with it.”

“I had to prove myself, Faith.”

“To whom?”

“To myself.” He rested his cheek on top of her head. “Damn it, to you.”

She breathed in the scent of pine while the lights danced on the tree. They’d sat like this before, so long ago. The memories were nearly as sweet as the reality. “I never needed you to prove anything to me, Jason.”

“Maybe that’s one of the reasons I had to. You were too good for me.”

“That’s ridiculous.” She would have shifted, but he held her still.

“You were, and still are.” He too stared at the tree.

The tinsel shimmered in the lights like the magic he’d always wanted to give her.

“Maybe that’s why I had to leave when I did—maybe it’s why I came back.

You’re all the good things, Faith. Just being with you brings out the best parts of me. God knows, there aren’t many.”

“You were always too hard on yourself. I don’t like it.

” This time she did shift so that her hands were on his shoulders and her eyes were directly on his.

“I fell in love with you. There were reasons for it. You were kind though you pretended not to be. You wanted to be considered tough and a troublemaker because you felt safer that way.”

He smiled and ran a finger down her cheek. “I was a troublemaker.”

“Maybe I liked that, too. You didn’t just accept things, you weren’t afraid to question.”

“I nearly got kicked out of school twice because I questioned.”

The old anger stirred. Had no one understood him but herself? Had no one else been able to see what had been racing and straining inside him? “You were smarter than anyone else. You’ve proved that if you needed to.”

“You spent a lot of time defending me, didn’t you?”

“I believed in you. I loved you.”

He reached for her face in an old gesture that melted her heart. “And now?”

She had too much to say and not enough ways to say it. “Do you remember that night in June, after my Senior Prom? We drove out of town. The moon was full and the air was so sweet with summer.”

“You wore a blue dress that made your eyes look like sapphires. You were so beautiful I was afraid to touch you.”

“So I seduced you.”

She looked so pleased with herself he laughed. “You did not.”

“I certainly did. You would never have made love with me.” She touched her lips to his. “Do I have to seduce you again?”

“Faith—”

“Clara’s having dinner next door at Marcie’s. She’s going to spend the night. Come to bed with me, Jason.”

Her quiet voice raced along his skin. The touch of her hand to his cheek seared like fire. But tangled with his need for her was a love that had never grown old. “You know I want you, Faith, but we’re not children now.”

“We’re not children.” She turned her face to press her lips into his palm. “And I want you. No promises, no questions. Love me the way you did on that one beautiful night we had together.” Rising, she held out her hand. “I want something for the next ten years.”

With their hands linked they walked up the stairs. He pushed away all thought of the other man she’d chosen, of the other life she’d lived. He, too, would block out ten years of loss and take what was offered.

Night came early in the winter so the light was dim.

In silence she lit candles so that the room glowed gold and shifted with shadows.

When she turned back to him, she was smiling, with all the confidence and knowledge of a woman in her eyes.

Saying nothing, she came to him, lifted her mouth and offered everything.

Her fingers were steady as she reached for the buttons of his shirt.

His trembled as he reached for hers. Murmuring, she waited for the brush of his hands against her skin, then sighed from the sheer glory of it.

They undressed each other slowly, not tentatively, but with the quiet understanding that every moment, every instant would be treasured.

When he saw her, as slim, as lovely, as unexplainably innocent as she'd been the first time, his head spun with needs, with doubts, with desires.

But she stepped to him, pressed her body against his and dissolved all choices.

She was stronger than she'd been. He could feel it, not in muscle but in spirit.

Perhaps she had changed, but the longings that were racing through him were the same as they'd been in the boy on the brink of manhood.

As heedlessly as the children they'd once been, they tumbled onto the bed.

They didn't relive the experience. It was as fresh, as wildly thrilling as the first time.

But they were man and woman now, more demanding, hungrier.

She drew him closer, running her hands over him with an urgency just discovered, with a turbulence just released.

She'd waited so long, so very long and wouldn't wait a moment longer.

But he took her hand and brought it to his lips. He quieted her tumbling breath with his mouth.

"I hardly knew what to do with you the first time." Gently he nuzzled at her throat until she moaned in frenzied anticipation. Raising his head, he smiled at her. "Now I do."

Then he took her places she'd never been.

Higher, still higher he drew her, then just as suddenly plunged her deep where the air was thick and dark.

Trapped in the whirlwind, she clung. She'd wanted to give, but he left her helpless.

Tender, soft, easy, his fingers caressed until her body shuddered.

He drank in her sigh with lips abruptly urgent, ruthlessly demanding, then patiently soothed her again.

Sensations rocketed inside her, leaving no room for thought, for reason or even for memories.

When they came together, it was everything for both of them. Time didn't slip back but trapped them and held them close in the here and now.

He kept his arms tightly around her and they were quiet.

With her eyes closed, she absorbed the unity.

She loved, and for the moment there was nothing else.

For him both ecstasy and contentment were troubled with questions.

She was so warm, so free with her emotions.

She loved him. He needed no words to know it and never had.

But the loyalty he'd always understood as an intrinsic part of her had been broken. How could he rest without knowing why?

"I have to know why we lost ten years, Faith." When she said nothing, he turned her head toward him. Her eyes glistened in the shifting light but the tears didn't fall. "Now more than ever I have to know."

"No questions, Jason. Not tonight."

"I've waited long enough. We've waited long enough."

On a long breath, she sat up. Bringing her knees to her chest, she wrapped her arms around them.

Her hair cascaded down her back. He couldn't resist taking a handful.

She'd been his once, completely. No one else had ever touched her as he had.

He knew he had to accept her marriage, and that her child belonged to another man,

but he needed to understand first why she had turned to someone else so soon after he'd gone away.

"Give me something, Faith. Anything."

"We loved each other, Jason, but we wanted different things." She turned her head to look at him.

"We still want different things." She took his hand and brought it to her cheek.

"If you had let me, I would have gone anywhere with you. I would have left my home, my family and never looked back. You needed to go alone."

"I didn't have anything for you," he began. She stopped him with a look.

"You never gave me a choice."

He reached for her once more. "If I gave you one now?"

She closed her eyes and let her forehead rest on his.

"Now I have a child, and she has a home I can't take away from her.

What I want doesn't come first." She drew back far enough to look at him.

"What you want can't come first. Before somehow I never thought you'd really go.

This time I know you will. Let's just take what we have, give each other this one Christmas. Please."

She closed her mouth over his and stopped all questions.

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Source Creation Date: July 30, 2025, 8:07 am

Christmas Eve was magic. Faith had always believed it.

When she awoke with Jason beside her, it was more than magic.

For a while, she simply lay there, watching him sleep.

She'd imagined it before, as a girl, as a woman, but now she didn't need the dreams. He was here beside her, warm, quiet, and outside an early morning snow was falling.

Careful not to wake him, Faith slipped out of bed.

When he rolled over, he smelled her—the springtime scent her hair had left on the pillowcase. For a few minutes, he lay still and let it seep into his system. Content, he lay back and looked at the room he hadn't been able to see in the dark.

The walls were papered, ivory, with little sprigs of violets.

At the windows were fussy priscillas. There was an antique rosewood bureau cluttered with colored bottles and boxes.

On a vanity was an old-fashioned silver-handled brush and comb.

He watched the snow fall and smelled the potpourri on the stand beside the bed.

The room was so like her—charming, fresh, and very, very feminine.

A man could relax there even knowing he might find stockings draped over a chair or

a blouse mixed with his shirts.

He could relax there. And he wasn't letting her go again.

He smelled the coffee before he was halfway down the stairs. She had Christmas music on the stereo and bacon frying. He hadn't known it would feel so good just to walk into a kitchen and find your woman cooking for you.

"So you're up." She was wrapped from head to foot in a bright flannel robe. Desire dragged quietly at his stomach muscles. "There's coffee."

"I could smell it." He went to her. "I could smell you the moment I woke."

She rested her head on his shoulder, trying not to think that this was the way it might have been—if only. "You look as though you could have slept for hours. It's a good thing you didn't or the bacon would be cold."

"If you'd stayed in bed a few more minutes, we might have—"

"Mom! Mom! It's snowing!" Clara burst through the door and danced around the kitchen. "We're going to go caroling tonight in the hay wagon and there's snow all over the place." She stopped in front of Jason and grinned. "Hi."

"Hi yourself."

"Mom and I are going to build a snowman. She says Christmas snowmen are the best. You can help."

She hadn't known just what reaction Clara would have to finding Jason at the breakfast table. With a shake of her head, Faith began to beat eggs. She should have known Clara would be willing to accept anyone she'd decided to like. "You have to

have some breakfast.”

Clara fingered the plastic Santa on her lapel, tugging on the string so that the nose lit up. It never failed to please her. “I had cereal at Marcie’s.”

“Did you thank her mother for having you?”

“Yeah.” She stopped a minute. “I think I did. Anyway we’re going to build two of them and have a wedding and everything. Marcie wanted the wedding,” she added to Jason.

“Clara would prefer a war.”

“I figured we could have that after. Maybe I should have some hot chocolate first.” She eyed the cookie jar and calculated her chances. Slim at best.

“I’ll fix it. And you can have a cookie after the snowman,” Faith told her without bothering to turn. “Hang your things by the door.”

Scrambling out of her coat, she chattered at Jason. “You’re not going back to Africa, are you? I don’t think Africa would be much fun at Christmas. Marcie’s mother said you’d probably be going to some other neat place.”

“I’m supposed to go to Hong Kong in a few weeks.” He glanced at Faith. She didn’t turn. “But I’ll be around for Christmas.”

“Do you have a tree in your room?”

“No.”

She gave him a wide-eyed look. “Well, where do you put your presents? It’s not

Christmas without a tree, is it, Mom?"

Faith thought of the years Jason had grown up without one. She remembered how hard he'd tried to pretend it didn't matter. "A tree's only so that we can show other people it's Christmas."

Unconvinced, Clara plopped into a chair. "Well, maybe."

"She used to say the same thing to me," Jason told Clara. "In any case, I don't think Mr. Beantree would like it if I left pine needles all over the floor."

"We've got a tree, so you can have dinner with us," Clara declared. "Mom makes this big turkey and Grandma and Grandpa come over. Grandma brings pies and we eat till we're sick."

"Sounds great." Amused, he looked over as Faith scooped eggs onto a plate. "I had Christmas dinner with your grandparents a couple of times."

"Yeah?" Interested, Clara studied him. "I guess I heard somewhere that you used to be Mom's boyfriend. How come you didn't get married?"

"Here's your hot chocolate, Clara." Faith set it down. "You'd better hurry, Marcie's waiting."

"Are you coming out?"

"Soon." Grateful that her daughter was easily distracted, she set the platter of bacon and eggs on the table. Ignoring the half-amused lift of brow from Jason, she took her seat.

"We need carrots and scarves and stuff."

“I’ll take care of it.”

With a grin Clara gulped down chocolate. “And hats?”

“And hats.”

A snowball hit the kitchen window. Clara was up like a shot. “There she is. Gotta go. Come soon, Mom, you make the best.”

“Soon as I’m dressed. Don’t forget your top button.”

Clara hesitated at the back door. “I’ve got a little plastic tree in my room. You can have it if you want.”

Moved, he only stared at her. Just like her mother, he thought, and fell in love a second time. “Thanks.”

“Sokay. Bye.”

“She’s quite a kid,” Jason commented as the door slammed behind her.

“I like her.”

“I’ll give her a hand with the snowman.”

“You don’t have to, Jason.”

“I want to, then I’ve got some things to take care of.” He checked his watch. It was only Christmas Eve for so long. When a man was being offered a second chance, it wasn’t wise to waste time. “Can I get an invitation for tonight?”

Faith smiled but simply pushed the food around on her plate. “You’ve never needed one.”

“Don’t cook, I’ll bring something.”

“It’s okay, I—”

“Don’t cook,” he repeated, rising. He bent to kiss her, then lingered over it. “I’ll be back.”

He took his coat from the hook where it had hung beside Clara’s. When he was gone, Faith looked down at the toast she’d crumbled in her hand. Hong Kong. At least this time she knew where he was going.

The snow people in the side yard grinned at him as he struggled past. Boxes balanced, Jason knocked on the back door with the toe of his boot. The snow hadn’t let up a whit.

“Jason.” Speechless, Faith stepped back as he teetered inside.

“Where’s Clara?”

“Clara?” Still staring, she pushed back her hair. “She’s upstairs getting ready for the hayride.”

“Good. Take the top box.”

“Jason, what in the world have you got here?”

“Just take the top box unless you want pizza all over the floor.”

“All right, but...” As the enormous box in his arms shifted, she laughed. “Jason, what have you done?”

“Wait a minute.”

Holding the pizza, she watched him drag the box into the living room. “Jason, what is that thing?”

“It’s a present.” He started to set it under the tree then discovered there wasn’t enough room.

With a bit of rearranging, he managed to lean the box against the wall beside the tree.

He was grinning when he turned to her. If he’d ever felt better in his life, he couldn’t remember it. “Merry Christmas.”

“Same to you. Jason, what is that box?”

“Damn, it’s cold out there.” Though he rubbed his hands together now, he hadn’t even noticed the biting wind. “Got any coffee?”

“Jason.”

“It’s for Clara.” He discovered that feeling a bit foolish didn’t dim the warmth.

“You didn’t have to get her a present,” Faith began, but her curiosity got the better of her. “What is it?”

“This?” Jason patted the six-foot box. “Oh, it’s nothing.”

“If you don’t tell me, you don’t get any coffee.” She smiled. “And I keep the pizza.”

“Spoilsport. It’s a toboggan.” He took Faith’s arm to lead her out of the room. “She happened to mention when we were building the snowman that some kid had this toboggan and it went down Red Hill like a spitfire.”

“Spitfire,” Faith murmured.

“And snow like this is just made for going down Red Hill like a spitfire, so…”

“Sucker,” Faith accused and kissed him hard.

“Put that pizza down and call me that again.”

She laughed and kept it between them.

“Wow!”

Faith raised a brow at the noise from the living room. “I think she saw the box.”

At full speed, Clara barreled into the kitchen. “Did you see? I knew there’d be one more, I just knew. It’s as tall as you are,” she told Jason. “Did you see?” She grabbed his hand to drag him back. “It has my name on it.”

“Imagine that.” Jason picked her up and kissed both cheeks. “Merry Christmas.”

“I can’t wait.” She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed. “I just can’t wait.”

Watching them, Faith felt her emotions tangle and knot until her bones ached with it. What should she do? What could she do? When Jason turned with Clara, the lights from the tree fell like wishes over their faces.

“Faith?” He didn’t need words to recognize distress, pain, turmoil. “What is it?”

Her hands were digging into the cardboard of the box. “Nothing. I’m going to dish out this pizza before it’s cold.”

“Pizza?” Delighted, Clara bounced down. “Can I have two pieces? It’s Christmas.”

“Monkey,” Faith scolded gently, tousling her hair. “Set the table.”

“What is it, Faith?” Jason took her arm before she could follow her daughter into the kitchen. “Something’s wrong.”

“No.” She had to control herself. She’d managed everything for so long. “You overwhelmed me.” With a smile she touched his face. “It’s happened before. Come on, let’s eat.”

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Because she seemed to need to keep her thoughts to herself, he let it go and followed her into the kitchen where Clara was already peeking into the cardboard box.

He'd never seen a child plow through food with such unrestrained glee.

He'd never known Christmas Eve could be special simply because there was someone beside him.

Clara swallowed the last of her second piece. "Maybe if I opened one present tonight there'd be less confusion in the morning."

Faith seemed to consider. "I like confusion," she decided and Jason realized the conversation was an old tradition.

"Maybe if I opened just one present tonight, I could get right to sleep. Then you wouldn't have to wait so long to creep around and fill the stockings."

"Hmm." Faith pushed aside her empty plate and enjoyed the wine Jason had brought. "I like creeping around late at night."

"If I opened—"

"Not a chance."

"If I—"

"Nope."

“But Christmas is just hours and hours away.”

“Awful, isn’t it?” Faith smiled at her. “And you’re going caroling in ten minutes, so you’d better get your coat.”

Clara walked over to tug on her boots. “Maybe when I get back, there’ll be just one present that you’ll figure isn’t really important enough to wait until morning.”

“All the presents under the tree are absolutely vital.” Faith rose to help her on with her coat. “And so are the following instructions. Stay with the group. Keep your mittens on, I want you to keep all your fingers. Don’t lose your hat. Remember that Mr. and Mrs. Easterday are in charge.”

“Mom.” Clara shifted her feet and sighed. “You treat me like a baby.”

“You are my baby.” Faith gave her a smacking kiss. “So there.”

“Jeez, I’ll be ten years old in February. That’s practically tomorrow.”

“And you’ll still be my baby in February. Have a good time.”

Clara sighed, long-suffering and misunderstood. “Okay.”

“Okay,” Faith mimicked. “Say good-night.”

Clara peeked around her mother. “Are you going to stay until I get back?”

“Yeah.”

Satisfied, she grinned and pulled open the door. “Bye.”

“Monster,” Faith declared and began to stack plates.

“She’s terrific.” Standing, Jason helped clear the clutter. “Little for her age, I guess. I didn’t realize she was almost ten. It’s hard to—” He stopped as Faith clattered dishes in the sink. “She’ll be ten in February.”

“Umm. I can’t believe it myself. Sometimes it seems like yesterday, and then again...” She trailed off, abruptly breathless. With studied care, she began to fill the sink with soapy water. “I’ll just be a minute here if you’d like to take your wine into the living room.”

“In February.” Jason took her arm. When he turned her, he saw the blood drain from her face.

His fingers tightened, bruising without either of them noticing.

“Ten years in February. We made love that June. God, I don’t know how many times that night.

I never touched you again, we never had the chance to be alone like that again before I left, just a few weeks later.

You must have married Tom in September.”

Her throat was dry as bone. She couldn’t even swallow, but stared at him.

“She’s mine,” he whispered and it vibrated through the room. “Clara’s mine.”

She opened her mouth to speak, but there seemed to be nothing she could say. Lips trembling, eyes drenched, she nodded.

“God!” He had her by both arms, nearly lifting her off her feet before he backed her into the counter.

The fury in his eyes would have made her cringe if she hadn’t been willing to accept it.

“How could you? Damn you, she’s ours and you never told me.

You married another man and had our baby.

Did you lie to him, too? Did you make him think she was his so you could have your cozy house and lace curtains? ”

“Jason, please—”

“I had a right.” He thrust her away before he could give into the violence that pushed him on. “I had a right to her. Ten years. You stole that from me.”

“No! No it wasn’t like that. Jason, please! You have to listen!”

“The hell with you.” He said it calmly, so calmly she stepped back as though she’d been slapped. The anger she could argue with, even reason with. Quiet rage left her helpless.

“Please, let me try to explain.”

“There’s nothing you can say that could make up for it. Nothing.” He yanked his coat from the wall and stormed out.

“ You’re a damn fool, Jason Law.” The Widow Marchant sat in her kitchen rocker and scowled.

“She lied to me. She’s been lying for years.”

“Hogwash.” She fiddled with the tinsel on the little tree on the stand by the window. Cheerful strains from the Nutcracker floated in from the living room. “She did what she had to do, nothing more, nothing less.”

He prowled around the room. He still wasn’t sure why he’d come there instead of heading for Clancy’s Bar. He’d walked in the snow for an hour, maybe more, then found himself standing on the widow’s doorstep. “You knew, didn’t you? You knew I was Clara’s father.”

“I had my ideas.” The rocker squeaked gently as she moved. “She had the look of you.”

That brought a peculiar thrill, one he didn’t know what to do with. “She’s the image of Faith.”

“True enough if you don’t look hard. The eyebrows are you, and the mouth. The sweet Lord knows the temperament is. Jason, if you’d known you were to be a father ten years back, what would you have done?”

“I’d have come back for her.” He turned, dragging a hand through his hair. “I’d have panicked,” he said more calmly. “But I’d have come back.”

“I always thought so. But it—well, it’s Faith’s story to tell. You’d best go on back and hear it.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Can’t stand a martyr,” she muttered.

He started to snap, then sighed instead. “It hurts. It really hurts.”

“That’s life for you,” she said not unsympathetically. “Want to lose them both again?”

“No. God, no. But I don’t know how much I can forgive.”

The old woman raised both brows. “Fair enough. Give Faith the same courtesy.”

Before he could speak again, the kitchen door burst open. In the doorway stood Faith, covered with snow, face washed with tears. Ignoring the wet she brought in with her, she ran to Jason. “Clara,” she managed to stammer.

When he took her arms, he felt the shudders. Terror flowed from her into him. “What’s happened?”

“She’s missing.”

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“They’re going to find her.” Jason held her arm as they both stumbled through the snow to her car. “They probably have already.”

“One of the kids said he thought she and Marcie went behind this farmhouse to look at the horses in the barn. But when they went back, they weren’t there. It’s dark.” Faith fumbled with her keys.

“Let me drive.”

She gave him no argument as she climbed in the passenger side. “Lorna and Bill called the sheriff from the farmhouse. Half the town’s out there looking for them. But there’s so much snow, and they’re just little girls. Jason—”

He took her face in his hands, firmly. “We’re going to find them.”

“Yes.” She wiped away tears with the heels of her hands. “Let’s hurry.”

He couldn’t risk more than thirty miles an hour. They crept down the snow-covered road, searching the landscape for any sign. The hills and fields lay pristine and undisturbed. To Faith they looked unrelenting. But while fear still overwhelmed her, she’d conquered the tears.

Ten miles out of town the fields were lit up like noonday. Groups of cars crisscrossed the road and men and women tramped through the snow calling. Jason had barely stopped when Faith was out and running toward the sheriff.

“We haven’t found them yet, Faith, but we will. They won’t have gone far.”

“You’ve searched the barn and the outbuildings?”

The sheriff nodded at Jason. “Every inch.”

“How about in the other direction?”

“I’m going to send some men that way.”

“We’ll go now.”

The snow was blinding as he weaved through the other cars. He slackened his speed even more and started to pray. He’d been on a search party once in the Rockies. He hadn’t forgotten what a few hours in the wind and snow could do.

“I should have made her wear another sweater.” Faith gripped her hands together in her lap as she strained to see out the window.

In her hurry she’d forgotten her gloves but didn’t notice her numb fingers.

“She hates it so when I fuss and I didn’t want to spoil the evening for her.

Christmas is so special for Clara. She’s been so excited.

” Her voice broke as a ripple of fear became a wave.

“I should have made her wear another sweater. She’ll be— Stop! ”

The car fishtailed as he hit the brakes. It took every ounce of control for him to deal with the swerve. Faith pushed open the door and stumbled out. “Over there, it’s—”

“It’s a dog.” He had her by the arms before she could run across the empty field. “It’s

a dog, Faith.”

“Oh, God.” Beyond control, she collapsed against him. “She’s just a little girl. Where could she be? Oh, Jason, where is she? I should have gone with her. If I’d been there she—”

“Stop it!”

“She’s cold and she must be frightened.”

“And she needs you.” He gave her a quick shake. “She needs you.”

Struggling for control, she pressed a hand to her mouth. “Yes. Yes, I’m all right. Let’s go. Let’s go a little further.”

“You wait in the car. I’m going to walk across this field for a bit and see if I spot something.”

“I’ll go with you.”

“I can move faster alone. I’ll only be a few minutes.” He started to urge her toward the car when a flash of red caught his eye. “Over there.”

He gripped her arm as he tried to see through the snow. Just at the edge of the field, he saw it again.

“It’s Clara.” Faith was already struggling away.

“She has a red coat.” Snow kicked up around her as she ran.

It fell cold and wet to mix with the tears that blinded her vision.

With all the breath she had she called out.

Arms spread wide, she caught both girls to her.

“Oh God, Clara, I’ve been so scared. Here, here now, you’re frozen, both of you.

We’ll get to the car. Everything’s going to be fine. Everything’s all right now.”

“Is my mom mad?” Shivering, Marcie wept against her shoulder.

“No, no, she’s just worried. Everyone is.”

“Up you go.” Jason hauled Clara up in his arms. For one brief minute he gave himself the luxury of nuzzling his daughter. Looking back, he saw Faith gathering up Marcie.

“Can you manage?”

She smiled, holding the still weeping girl close. “No problem.”

“Then let’s go home.”

“We didn’t mean to get lost.” Clara’s tears ran down his collar.

“Of course you didn’t.”

“We just went to look at the horses and we got all turned around. We couldn’t find anybody. I wasn’t scared.” Her breath hitched as she pressed against him. “Just Marcie.”

His child. He felt his own vision blur as he wrapped his arms tighter around her.

“You’re both safe now.”

“Mom was crying.”

“She’s okay, too.” He stopped at the car. “Can you handle them both on your lap in the front? They’ll be warmer.”

“Absolutely.” After Faith had settled in with Marcie, Jason handed her Clara. For one long moment, their gazes held over her head.

“We couldn’t find the lights of the house with all the snow,” Clara murmured as she held on to her mother. “Then we couldn’t find the road for the longest time. It was so cold. I didn’t lose my hat.”

“I know, baby. Here, get your wet mittens off. You, too, Marcie. Jason has the heater turned all the way up. You’ll be cooked before you know it.” She ran kisses over two cold faces and fought the need to break down. “What Christmas carols did you sing?”

““Jingle Bells,”” Marcie said with a snuffle.

“Ah, one of my favorites.”

“And ‘Joy to the World,’” Clara put in. The heater was pumping warm air over her hands and face. “You like that one better.”

“So I do but I can’t remember just how it starts. How does it start, Marcie?” She smiled at Clara and snuggled her closer.

In a thin, piping voice still wavery with tears Marcie started to sing. She was nearly through the first verse when they came to the rest of the search party.

“It’s my dad!” Bouncing on Faith’s lap, Marcie started to wave. “He doesn’t look mad.”

With a half laugh, Faith kissed the top of her head. “Merry Christmas, Marcie.”

“Merry Christmas, Mrs. Monroe. See you tomorrow, Clara.” Marcie barely had time to open the door before she was scooped up.

“What a night.” There were waves and cheers as the car weaved through the crowd.

“It’s Christmas Eve,” Clara reminded her mother. The world was safe and warm again. “Maybe I should open that one big present tonight.”

“Not a chance,” Jason told her and tugged at her hair.

Faith turned Clara in her arms and squeezed tight.

“Don’t cry, Mom.”

“I have to, for just a minute.” True to her word, her eyes were dry when they arrived home. An exhausted Clara dozed on Jason’s shoulder as he carried her inside. “I’ll take her up, Jason.”

“We’ll take her up.”

She let her arms fall back to her sides and nodded.

They pulled off boots and socks and sweaters and wrapped Clara in warm flannel. She murmured a bit and tried to stay awake but the adventures of the evening took their toll. “It’s Christmas Eve,” she mumbled. “I’m going to get up real early in the morning.”

“As early as you like,” Faith told her as she pressed a kiss to her cheek.

“Can I have cookies for breakfast?”

“Half a dozen,” Faith agreed recklessly. She smiled and was asleep before Faith pulled the blankets around her.

“I was afraid...” She let her hand linger on her daughter’s cheek. “I was afraid I’d never see her like this again. Safe, warm. Jason, I don’t know how to thank you for just being there. If I’d been alone—” She broke off and shook her head.

“I think we should go downstairs, Faith.”

The tone made her press her lips together. She’d be ready, she promised herself, to handle the accusations, the bitterness, the resentment. “I think I’d like a drink,” she said as they walked downstairs. “Some brandy. It looks like the fire’s gone out.”

“I’ll take care of it. You get the brandy. There are some things I have to say.”

“All right.” She left him to go to the little cabinet in the dining room. When she came back, the fire was just catching. He straightened from it and took a snifter.

“Do you want to sit down?”

“No, I can’t.” She sipped, but it would have taken more than brandy to steady her nerves. “Whatever you have to say, Jason, you should say it.”

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She stood looking at him, her back straight, her eyes burning with emotion, her hands clasping the snifter tightly.

Part of him wanted to go to her, gather her close and just hold on.

He'd found a child and nearly lost her in the same night.

Did anything else matter? But inside was a void that had to be filled.

Questions, demands, accusations had to be answered.

There had to be an accounting before there could be understanding, and understanding before there could be forgiveness. But where did he start?

He walked to the tree. There was a star on top that shed silver light over all the other colors.

"I'm not sure I know what to say. It isn't every day a man turns around and finds himself with a half-grown daughter.

I feel cheated out of watching her learn to walk, hearing her talk, Faith.

Nothing you can do or say can ever give that back to me, can it? "

"No."

He turned to see her holding the brandy at waist level.

Her face was very pale and calm. Whatever emotions she was feeling she managed to restrain.

Yes, this was a different Faith than the one he'd left.

The girl would never have been able to exert the self-control the woman did. "No excuses, Faith?"

"I guess I thought I had them, then tonight when I thought I'd lost her..." Her voice trailed off and she shook her head. "No excuses, Jason."

"She thinks Tom's her father."

"No!" Her eyes weren't calm now but brilliant. "Do you think I'd let her believe her father had deserted her, that he didn't care enough even to write? What she knows is basically the truth. I never lied to her."

"What is the truth?"

She took a steadying breath. When she looked at him, her face was still pale but her voice was calm again. "That I loved her father, and he loved me, but he had to go away before he even knew about her and he wasn't able to come back."

"He would have."

Something rushed into her eyes but she turned away. "I told her that, too."

"Why?" The fury came back and he fought against it. "I have to know why you did what you did. I lost all those years."

"You?" Her temper was less easily controlled than her grief. Years of holding back bubbled inside her and burst out. "You lost?" she repeated as she whirled around.

“You were gone and I was eighteen years old, pregnant and alone.”

Guilt flared. He hadn’t expected it. “I wouldn’t have left if you’d told me.”

“I didn’t know.” She put the brandy down and pushed back her hair with both hands.

“It was just a week after you’d gone that I found out I was carrying our baby.

I was thrilled.” With a laugh, she wrapped her arms around her chest. For a moment she looked heartbreakingly young and innocent.

“I was so happy. I waited every day, every night for you to call so I could tell you.” Her eyes sobered.

The smile faded. “But you never called, Jason.”

“I needed time to set things up—a steady job, a place I could ask you to live in.”

“You never understood it didn’t matter where I lived, as long as it was with you.

” She shook her head before he could speak.

“It doesn’t matter now. That part’s over.

A week passed, then two, then a month. I got ill, just tension, morning sickness, but I began to realize you weren’t going to call.

You weren’t coming back. I was angry for a while, acknowledging you just hadn’t wanted me enough. Small-town girl.”

“That’s not true. That was never true.”

She studied him a moment, almost dispassionately.

The lights of the tree fell over his dark-blond hair, glimmered in the deep, deep eyes that had always held their own secrets.

Restlessness. “Wasn’t it?” she murmured.

“It was certainly true that you wanted out. I was part of Quiet Valley and you wanted out.”

“I wanted you with me.”

“But not enough to let me go with you.” She shook her head when he started to speak. “Not enough to let me come to you until you’d proved the things you needed to prove. I didn’t always understand that, Jason, but I began to when you came back.”

“You weren’t ever going to tell me about Clara, were you?”

She heard the bitterness again and closed her eyes against it. “I don’t know. I honestly don’t.”

He drank, hoping it would warm the ice in his veins. “Tell me the rest.”

“I wanted the baby, but I was scared, too scared even to tell my mother.”

She picked up the brandy again but merely warmed her hands with it. “I should have of course, but I wasn’t thinking clearly.”

“Why did you marry Tom?” But even as he asked, he realized the old jealousies were fading. He only wanted to understand.

“Tom would come by almost every night. We’d talk.

He didn't seem to mind me talking about you and God knows I needed to.

Then one night we were sitting on the porch and I just broke down.

I was three months pregnant and my body was changing.

That morning I hadn't been able to snap my jeans.

" With a shaky laugh, she ran a hand over her face.

"It sounds so silly, but I hadn't been able to snap my jeans and it was terrifying.

It made me realize there was no going back.

Everything just poured out while we sat there.

He said he'd marry me. Of course I said no, but he began to reason it all out.

You weren't coming back and I was pregnant.

He loved me and wanted to marry me. The baby would have a name, a home, a family.

It sounded so right the way he said it and I wanted the baby to be safe. I wanted to be safe."

She drank now because her throat ached. "It was wrong, right from the beginning. He knew I didn't love him, but he just wanted me, or thought he did.

The first few months he tried, we both really tried.

But after Clara came, he couldn't handle it.

I could see every time he looked at her he thought of you.

There was nothing I could do to change the fact that she was yours.

” She paused and found it easier to say it all.

“There was nothing I would have done to change that. As long as I had her, I had part of you. Tom knew it, no matter how much I tried to be what he wanted. He started drinking, picking fights, staying out. It was as though he wanted me to ask for a divorce.”

“But you didn’t.”

“I didn’t because I... well, I felt I owed him. Then one day I came home from taking Clara out and he was gone. Divorce papers came in the mail, and that was that.”

“Why didn’t you ever try to contact me, Faith, through one of the magazines or newspapers?”

“And say what? Jason, remember me? By the way, you have a daughter back here in Quiet Valley. Drop in some time.”

“One word—one word from you and I’d have left everything and come back. I never stopped loving you.”

She closed her eyes. “I watched you walk away from me. I watched you get on the bus and leave me without a trace. I stood there for hours, half believing you’d get off at the next stop and come back. I was the one who had to stay behind, Jason.”

“I called. Damn it, Faith, it only took me six months to get something started.”

She smiled. “And when you called I was seven months pregnant. My mother didn’t

tell me for a long time, not until after Tom had left. She said you made her promise.”

“I needed my pride.”

“I know.”

That she didn’t question. He saw the way she smiled as she said it, as if she’d always understood. “You must have been terrified.”

Her smile softened. “There were moments.”

“You must have hated me.”

“Never. How could I? You went away but you left me with the most beautiful thing in my life. Maybe you were right, maybe I was. Maybe we were both wrong, but there was Clara. Every time I looked at her, I could remember how much I loved you.”

“How do you feel now?”

“Shaky.” She laughed a little, then folded her hands, determined to do what was right. “Clara should be told. I’d prefer doing it myself.”

The idea made him reach for the brandy again. “How do you think she’ll take it?”

“She’s learned to get along without a father.

It doesn’t mean she hasn’t needed one.” She sat up straight and raised her chin.

“You have a right, of course, to see her whenever you like, but I won’t have her bounced around.

I also realize you can't be here for her all the time because of your work, but don't think you can just pop into her life and out again.

You'll have to make an effort to keep in touch with her, Jason. "

So this was another fear she'd lived with, he realized. Maybe he deserved it. "You don't trust me, do you?"

"Clara's too important." She let out a little sigh. "So are you."

"If I told you I fell for her before I knew, would it make a difference?"

She thought of the toboggan, of the way he'd looked when Clara had thrown her arms around his neck.

"She needs all the love she can get. We all do. She's so much like you, I—" She broke off when her eyes filled.

"Damn, I don't want to do this." Impatient, she brushed tears away.

"I'll tell her tomorrow, Jason. On Christmas.

You and I can work out the arrangements.

I know you're leaving soon, but if you could stay a few more days, give her some time, it would make it easier for all of us. "

He rubbed at the tension at the back of his neck. "You never asked me for much of anything, did you?"

She smiled. "I asked you for everything. We were both too young to realize it."

“You always believed in magic, Faith.” He pulled a box out of his pocket. “It’s nearly midnight. Open it now.”

“Jason.” She pushed her hands through her hair. How could he think of presents now? “I don’t think this is the time.”

“It’s ten years past time.”

When he thrust the box at her she found herself gripping it with both hands. “I don’t have anything to give you.”

He touched her face, almost hesitantly. “You’ve just given me a daughter.”

Relief poured through her. Instead of bitterness, she heard gratitude. Love, never dimmed, shimmered in her eyes. “Jason—”

“Please, open it.”

She pulled off the glossy red paper and revealed the black velvet box beneath. With fingers not quite steady she opened it. The ring was a teardrop, frozen in place, glorious with the reflected lights from the tree.

“Paul told me it was the best he had.”

“You bought this before you knew—”

“Yeah, before I knew I was going to ask the mother of my child to marry me. We’ll be legal, the three of us.” He took her hand and waited. “How about a second chance? I won’t let you down, Faith.”

“You never did.” Close to tears again, she reached out her hand to his cheek. “It wasn’t you, it wasn’t me, it was life. Oh, Jason, I want this. Understand, all I’ve ever

really wanted was to be married to you, have a family with you.”

“Then let me put the ring on.”

“Jason, it’s not just me. If it were, I’d leave with you this instant. We’d go to Hong Kong, Siberia, Peking. Anywhere. But it’s not just me; I have to stay.”

“It’s not just you,” he repeated. He took the ring and tossed the box aside. “And I have to stay. Do you think I’d leave you again? Do you think I could leave what’s upstairs or the chance to have more that I can watch grow up? I’m not going anywhere.”

“But you said—Hong Kong.”

“I quit.” When he grinned, he felt the pressure of years melt away. “Today. That was one of the things I took care of this afternoon. I’m going to write a book.” He took her by the shoulders. “I’m out of a job, I’m living in a room at the inn and asking you to marry me.”

The breath backed up in her lungs. Her heart was pounding.

Yes, she’d always believed in magic. It was standing in front of her.

“Ten years ago, I thought I loved you as much as it was possible to love. You were a boy. In the last few days I’ve learned that loving a man is something quite different.

” She paused and saw the ring in his hand explode with the joyful lights on the tree.

“If you’d asked me ten years ago, I’d have said yes. ”

“Faith—”

With a laugh, she threw her arms around his neck. “You’re going to get the same answer now. Oh, I love you, Jason, more than ever.”

“We’ve got years to make up for.”

“Yes.” She met his mouth with equal hunger, equal hope. “We will. The three of us.”

“The three of us.” He let his forehead rest against hers. “I want more.”

“We’ve more than enough time to give Clara a baby brother or sister for next Christmas.” Her lips sought his again. “We’ve got more than enough time for everything.”

They both heard the bells peal out from the town hall. Midnight.

“Merry Christmas, Faith.”

She felt the ring slide onto her finger. All wishes were granted. “Welcome home, Jason.”