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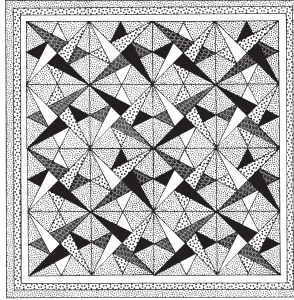
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## CHAPTER ONE

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*Victorian crazy quilts were so called because they were wild and haphazard, broken into splinters of color and shape. While appearing unplanned, much time was spent cutting and arranging the random pieces of fabric into beautiful, practical art.*

A tiny red toboggan careened out of control down a snow-and-pinecone-frosted cardboard hill, skidded sideways across a mirror-glass pond, and scattered miniature china figurines on ice skates before embedding itself in a toy pine tree near the front steps of a ceramic Victorian house.

Libby Morrison watched dispassionately as the holiday display self-destructed as the wayward sled wreaked havoc with her work. She felt no sense of frustration or anger at having to rebuild the scale model Christmas scene for Tia Warden's store window or that one of the tiny figurines now had a missing arm and that another had snapped in half.

She'd become accustomed to chaos. Libby sat back on her heels, her jean-clad legs balancing athletically, her long spine straight. She studied the mess and murmured, "One step forward, two steps back." The display for Tia's Attic was a microcosm of her own reality right now, a tedious upward climb

punctuated by far too many backward slides. If Libby had ever liked toboggan rides, she didn't anymore.

"Did I hear a crash?" Tia materialized over the top of the display cabinet. Like a life-size Christmas elf, she was dressed in a holiday-red, figure-fitting wool dress with oversized green buttons. She wore a pointed felt hat and gigantic globe earrings that resembled Christmas tree ornaments.

"I'm having trouble setting up the miniature village display the way you want it. Fake snow is slippery."

"Don't worry about it. I'll sell every item out of this cabinet by December 24 anyway. Leave the toboggan on a flat surface if it keeps sliding down the hill. I don't want to risk breaking anything more if it falls again."

"Good idea." Libby moved the little sled to a safer resting place and stared at the village she was creating. If only her own problems could be solved so easily. She sighed and inquired wistfully, "Isn't it about time for tea?"

Jenny Adams, the third portion of the trio that had been friends since childhood, joined them at the table in the store-room. While Tia brewed the tea, Jenny and Libby moved wrapping paper, packing peanuts, and bubble wrap to make a space for themselves and two plates of Christmas goodies.

"Who baked the *Krumkaka*?" Jenny picked up a pale flaky roll of the gossamer-thin cookie, stuck her tongue in one open end, and bit down. "Melts in your mouth."

Blonde and blue-eyed, Jenny was as Scandinavian as the cookie she was eating. "Mike would love this," she said, referring to her second husband, a mutual childhood classmate. She sighed blissfully with sugar-induced pleasure on her face.

"Who else?" Tia put a chipped sugar and creamer set from her damaged goods inventory on the table and poured tea into three colorful mismatched mugs. "Libby, Princess of the Kitchen, of course."

"I thought Jenny was Kitchen Princess now that she has her

own bakery and catering business.” Libby took an elaborately decorated Christmas cookie from the tray Jenny had brought for them when delivering baked goods for Tia’s upcoming Christmas open house.

“*Sanbakkles, fattigman, lefse, and rosettes.*” Jenny itemized the delicacies on the plate. “How do you find the time, Libby?”

“It’s therapy. Nothing like immersing oneself in a mixing bowl full of sugar, butter, and flour. That’s about all Norwegians use except for a little flavoring to make this stuff.” *And work keeps me from thinking too much about what’s going on at home.*

Tia groaned and fell into the chair like she weighed three times her one hundred and fifteen pounds. “Oh! It feels good to take a load off.” She chewed on a Santa cookie’s head and inquired, “Jenny, do you think we’ll have enough food for the open house?”

“I added 20 percent to your estimate, and I’m baking every day until Christmas. If you run low, I’ll refill your order. No problem.”

“You’re a gem. I can’t tell you how much it means to me to have your help. This is the first year I haven’t had to agonize over goodies for the sale. And, Lib, you’ve put in more nights here this month than a cat burglar. Thank you.”

A crease marred Tia’s flawless ivory forehead. “Tell me again why I do this every year?”

“Because you have the prettiest, most innovative gift shop for miles around, silly.” Libby poured herself more tea.

“Then why do I suffer from a guilt complex every December?”

“Are we going to have the commercialism-versus-the-true-meaning-of-Christmas debate again?”

Tia put her head in her hands. “Every year I try harder to put Christ back into Christmas in my personal life, yet at the store I order more cutesy knickknacks and gewgaws for people to lust after. Do I have a double standard?”

“Not everyone is as passionate about what Christmas really means as you are, Tia,” Jenny said. “Without your store and your

seasonal parties, some people would never be reminded what the holidays really represent.”

“You think?”

“You are the only store owner I know who serves birthday cake on December 24 with ‘Happy Birthday, Jesus’ written on it. And, despite those gewgaws you sell, anyone who comes by your front window knows they’re shopping with a Christian.”

“The manger scene gets more beautiful every year,” Libby agreed. “Love that new camel.”

“Its fur is real—llama fur or something. Little kids love it.” Tia brightened. “During the school holidays, I’ve hired high school girls to read the Christmas story to them while they eat the camel cookies Jenny supplies. Mothers love that.”

“Creative marketing at its best—both secular and Christian,” Libby murmured. “Tia, sometimes you amaze me.”

“After all this time? You should be accustomed to me by now.”

“There’s no getting accustomed to a kaleidoscope, Tia.”

Tia was about to respond when the phone rang. She picked up the extension hidden under a pile of bubble wrap on the table.

“Tia’s Attic, Tia speaking.” Then she extended the receiver to Libby. “For you.”

Libby frowned as she reached for the phone. “I wonder who’s calling me here. Mom and Dad are at the Senior Citizens’ Center for the Christmas dinner and pageant.”

The frown turned into an expression of concern as she listened to the voice on the other end of the line. When Libby hung up, she was as white as the artificial snow that had seeped throughout the entire shop during the holidays.

“That was the Senior Center. Mom wandered away during the pageant.”

Tia stood up. “I’ll get my coat. . . .”

“They’ve already found her. Daddy alerted the staff, who went right out to look for her. She’d fallen in the snow near the sidewalk.” Tears flooded Libby’s eyes. “She was trying to get to the

Nativity scene.” She brushed away the moisture with the back of her hand, leaving a trail of mascara across her cheek. “She told the man who found her that she wanted to touch the baby Jesus.”

Tia and Jenny were on their feet embracing their friend almost before the words were out of Libby’s mouth.

Without a word, they spun into action. Jenny threw a sheet of butcher’s paper over the boxes of baked goods and scooped her jacket off a stack of undecorated Christmas wreaths. She bundled Libby into her fleecy coat and hat while Tia informed her clerks that they would be leaving for the day. Tia had the keys for the car out of her purse and the door open when Jenny led Libby into the garage and to Tia’s car.

Snow fell like the fleecy white puffs in the snow globes in Tia’s gift cases, and night closed in on them as quickly and suddenly as a clamped hand.

“Are they still at the Senior Center?”

“No. The staff insisted she be checked out at the hospital. They’re at Oakview Community.”

“Gotcha.” Tia expertly navigated rush hour traffic, intensifying snow, and the onslaught of night. They were at the emergency room in record time.

“I’ll park. You find Mr. Morrison,” Tia directed as she pulled up to the entry.

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Jenny led the shaken Libby into the harshly antiseptic light of the ER waiting room and steered her toward the reception desk to avoid an emergency triage occurring in the hallway. Libby moved like a block of wood in her hands.

Jenny’s stomach lurched at the unwelcome glimpse of a man lying on a gurney, mouth open, skin pale and waxy, his eyes fixed. A trickle of blood meandered from the corner of his mouth.

*Lee.* Her first husband’s memory loomed in her mind. His face

during the last moments of his life had not been unlike that of the man on the stretcher. *Get a grip. This is Libby's time, not mine.*

She hadn't been in a hospital since Lee's death other than a time or two for her stepson Luke's appendicitis. Tonight brought back deep, gut-wrenching memories.

"You both look like death warmed over." Tia's brisk, business-like voice was a welcome splash of cold water on their psyches. "Mr. Morrison is over here. I'll check on Libby's mother."

They found the old man shriveled into an uncomfortable-looking plastic chair with chrome legs and arms. Jenny was shocked at the sight of him. What had happened to him, the man she'd always considered a second father? When had he gotten so old? How had she missed the deterioration of this man so dear to her?

Libby sank to her knees in front of her father, and it occurred to Jenny that Libby had aged, too. She was the athlete in their trio, leggy and strong. Libby had won the races, gathered the trophies in competition, played a bruising game of tennis, and displayed a wickedly accurate golf swing, yet tonight her shoulders were stooped and her agile frame carried far too little weight.

"What happened, Daddy?"

"I looked away for just a minute!" Mr. Morrison bleated. "She was there and then suddenly she wasn't! A lady in a Mrs. Santa Claus suit was handing out candy. I know how much your mother loves those hard Christmas candies, so I . . ."

"And she wandered away?"

"I don't know how she had time to get so far," the old man said, puzzled. "She isn't as steady as she used to be, and . . ." His face collapsed and tears leaked from the corners of his eyes.

"They found her outside in the snow flailing like a big fish, trying to get to Jesus."

"Oh, Daddy . . ." Libby felt something breaking inside.

Libby was grateful when Tia distracted her. "Your dad can see your mom now. While he's with her, the doctor wants to speak with you."

“Pray for her, Libby,” her father whispered as a nurse led him away.

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Libby and Jenny followed Tia to a cubicle behind the registration desk.

Waiting inside was a brisk, no-nonsense-looking woman with graying hair knotted carelessly into a bun. She wore her unused glasses just above the furrow line on her brow as though she had eyes in her forehead. Her jaw was square and abrupt, but her eyes were pools of soft, compassionate blue.

“Hello, Libby.” The blue eyes shifted to Jenny and Tia.

“These are my friends Tia Warden and Jenny Adams. I’d like them to hear what you have to say about Mom.”

“Very well. Please sit down. There are extra stools along the wall.”

They perched like three large sparrows on a high line wire as they waited for the doctor to speak.

The physician studied the chart a long time before looking up. “I’m Dr. Hazard, by the way.” A twinkle in the doctor’s eyes stopped Tia from opening her mouth. “And I’ve heard all the jokes about my name and my profession, thank you. Besides, I’m not nearly such a hazard as is avoiding medical attention when one needs it.” Now that Dr. Hazard had everyone’s full attention, she turned to Libby.

“Your mother was very confused when she came in. She hadn’t been outside long, but at her age it doesn’t take very long in these temperatures to show signs of hypothermia. I’d like to keep her here for observation overnight, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” Libby said, “but is she . . .”

“Going to be all right?” Dr. Hazard poked the glasses with her index finger and they slid to her nose. “Mentally or physically?”

Libby sagged weakly against the wall. Did the doctor already

suspect the family matters she had been so deliberately trying to hide?

“So you *are* aware of your mother’s mental state?”

A pang of anxiety shot through Libby. *Exposed.*

“She’s confused sometimes, but usually not at home. I thought she’d be fine at the Senior Center. She and Daddy go there often. I can’t imagine what she was thinking. . . .”

“About Jesus, apparently.” The doctor smiled. “All in all, a very good thing to think about—just not when you feel the need to get across a snowy yard and crawl into a Nativity scene. She behaved as a child might, wanting the prize without considering the cost.”

“It’s just been the past few months that she’s done odd things like this,” Libby said.

“She’s acted like this before?” Tia was shocked.

“It wasn’t anything, really. Just getting turned around in a store or not being able to find her way back from the bathroom. Once Daddy searched the entire mall before finding her in a sporting goods store holding a volleyball, asking anyone if they’d like to play.”

“No way! Your mom?”

“They both laughed it off. Acted like it was the funniest thing either of them had ever seen or done. I thought if Mom and Dad weren’t upset, then I shouldn’t be. Besides, one incident wouldn’t have scared me so much, but . . .”

“There have been others?” the doctor prodded.

“Mom hasn’t been sleeping at night. She prowls the house like a cat getting into mischief.”

“What kind of mischief?”

“One night last week she turned on the oven. She thought she was baking and filled it with Tupperware and cereal boxes. The smoke alarm went off, and I had to call the fire department.”

“Oh, Lib, and you didn’t tell us?” Jenny cried.

“Is there anything else?” Dr. Hazard persisted.

Libby steeled herself. “Mama wandered away from us at the Mall of America while I had her trying on shoes.”

“Are you kidding? That place is *huge!*” Tia blurted, horrified.

“I called security right away. Daddy was so frantic he was no help at all.” Libby tugged agitatedly at her hair. “What was I thinking to bring a confused woman and her elderly husband into a space so filled with lights, color, and sound that it would overstimulate a stone?”

Tia moved forward on her perch. “So what happened? Obviously, you found her again.”

“I combed the store in which we’d been shopping. People poured past me. It was dizzying. I nearly frightened myself to death imagining what Mother must be thinking. Have you ever thought about how many hiding places there are in a department store? Racks of clothing are angled together in rows long enough to hold an entire battalion of snipers. There are mirrored walls hiding changing rooms and enough storage cubbies to confuse a SWAT team. I was going in circles around a maze of racks and half walls designed to direct traffic in circuitous directions around every bit of merchandise. I couldn’t walk a straight line. After a while, the mannequins began to look like predators. And poor Mama had left her shoes behind. . . .

“I couldn’t imagine what she must be feeling. Everything took on the speed and color of a carousel ride—spinning, whirling, splashes of light. Voices turned into a cacophony of noise.”

Libby had a rapt audience.

“I ran around like a chicken with my head cut off until I decided I had to calm down and start thinking outside the box, like my mother instead of myself.”

*Like a confused mind rather than a logical one.*

“I knew Mother wouldn’t go near the escalators. I was scared of them as a child, afraid that if I didn’t jump off in time, I’d be sucked into the basement or wherever all those stairs were disappearing. Mom made it a habit never to use them and it’s held over until now. I knew she’d be reluctant to use an elevator either because she was trapped in one once during a malfunc-

tion. Logically, she probably hadn't left the store, but she'd been gone nearly an hour by then. . . ."

Wiping away a tear, Libby murmured, "Then security found me and took me to the lingerie department. She'd crawled under a bottom rack full of pajamas to hide. The clerk had spied her soiled bare feet and the hem of her dress."

"How did you get her home?"

"They took her to the clinic at the mall and had her checked out." Libby's voice broke. "All she would say was, 'Somebody stole my shoes.'"

When Libby had composed herself, Dr. Hazard gently continued. "Does your father spend a lot of time with your mother?"

"Almost exclusively. They are each other's best friend. They've always shared similar hobbies and interests, and the older they get, the more they depend on one another."

"Is it possible that he's been covering for her? Perhaps your mother has been confused for a longer period of time than you realize."

Libby wanted to put her hands over her ears and pretend this wasn't happening. Unfortunately, she couldn't deny what she'd seen and experienced in the past few weeks.

"It's very threatening when a spouse changes," the doctor continued. "It's easier to do whatever it takes to make things appear normal than to admit something is going wrong."

"What do you mean?" Tia demanded when Libby remained silent.

"I'd like to run some tests before answering that. We have excellent neurologists and geriatricians on staff. We'll do a comprehensive medical history and a complete physical workup."

"What exactly would be involved?" Libby couldn't prevent the tremor in her voice. She felt terrified inside, as though her organs were turning soft and shivery.

"You and your father can help with the medical history. We'll need to know if any family members have suffered dementia or

related problems. We'll want to access her medical records. It is also routine to check her thyroid and to do a mental status test."

"What's that?"

"We'll start by asking her things such as who our current president is, the date, et cetera. She'll be asked to remember lists of things we give to her as well as answer questions that will give us an idea of the clarity of her thinking."

"How long will it take?"

"It could last a few hours." The doctor's expression softened. "It sounds difficult, I know, but it's necessary. It will give us an objective view of your mother's impairment."

As though she could read Libby's mind, Dr. Hazard added, "I'm afraid the family's subjective impressions of the patient just aren't enough. It will also provide us with a baseline. Then, when your mother returns to us, we will be able to measure whether or not her condition has progressed or if medication we might give her is working."

"I see."

Libby's thoughts whirled with strange behaviors her mother had exhibited recently and the angry emotions she'd experienced as a result.

It was like being angry at a baby for crying or messing her diaper when she was doing the only thing she knew how to do—be a baby. How could she be upset with her mother for the regression Mom surely must hate as much as Libby did?

Libby felt tears forming in her eyes. "I try to understand her, Doctor. Sometimes I think I try too hard."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm so afraid. Everything I see or hear, I've begun filtering through what my mother must experience. One day I opened my closet and was so bombarded with all the color and texture that it was impossible to decide what to wear. Standing there feeling overwhelmed made me realize what Mom is going through.

"It has to be ghastly—not remembering the flavors of her

favorite foods, opening familiar cupboards and being surprised by what's inside, looking at photos of people she used to love and not recognizing them anymore. It breaks my heart to think of her suffering that way."

"Libby, you're running on emotion, not logic, right now," Dr. Hazard interjected. "With some rest you'll be able to put things in perspective. You may feel better once we have a better handle on your mother's condition. We'll do the usual blood work, an MRI—that's magnetic resonance imaging—and whatever else we need to do to rule out things such as a tumor."

Libby was not consoled.

"She won't be in here much longer than I'd keep her anyway," the doctor soothed, "but as long as we're in the business, we might as well see what we can see."

"And what do you think you might find?" Jenny inquired. Libby appeared too shell-shocked to ask more.

"Dementia. Senility. Beginning Alzheimer's. Her thyroid could be over- or underactive. She might have a vitamin deficiency. This could stem from something as simple as too little nourishment to—"

"I feed my parents!" Libby's shoulders trembled indignantly beneath her woolen sweater.

"I simply mean that some older people—not necessarily your parents—do not get proper nourishment and as a result have problems with confusion. Your mother's problem could be very simple or very complex—like Parkinson's or a series of small strokes."

Libby's silence spoke volumes.

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"What can we do for you?"

Libby shivered. "Get Daddy settled first." The house was cold and silent without Mother.

“He’s already lying down,” Jenny said. “I told him we’d have soup later.”

“I’ve got an idea.” Tia disappeared into the kitchen where the others could hear loud clanking and the rush of running water. She returned with a wash bucket filled with warm water and a hint of suds.

“Soak your feet in this. Famous old Warden wives’ method of getting the chill out of your bones. I grew up seeing my grandmother’s feet in a bucket of water. If it wasn’t for the chills, it was for corns and bunions, pedicures, or who knows what—soup for supper for all I know.”

“Yuck!” Libby yelped.

“Speaking of soup,” Jenny said tactfully, “maybe I’ll make my grandmother’s famous Friendship Stew.”

“What’s that?” Libby asked suspiciously.

“Dump together whatever kinds of canned soups are in the cupboard and make dumplings out of store-bought biscuit mix. According to my grandmother, it’s good enough for anyone’s best friend.”

After dinner, Libby’s bones felt considerably warmer. She donned a pair of wool socks and a jogging suit while she was upstairs to check on her father.

Mr. Morrison was lying on the bed reading a Bible—her mother’s Bible.

“Whatchadoin’, Dad?” She sat on the side of the bed, her hip tucked into the curve of his body.

“Just looking at your mom’s Bible.” He chuckled softly. “Look at these pages, will you! Have you ever seen so many notes and underlined passages in a book before? I can’t see how she was able to read this anymore.”

“She probably didn’t have to. She had most of it memorized.”

“That’s true. All the years she taught the Bible classes at church, the Sunday school lessons . . . She gave a lot of years and energy to the church or, more correctly, to the Lord.”

"You gave a few yourself," Libby reminded him.

"But most of what I had to give involved my back, not my brain—building projects at the Bible camp, shoveling snow, fixing the plumbing at every ladies' meeting because they never seemed able to find a plumber. . . ."

"And you don't think that's important? Who could even listen to Mom teach if the toilets were overflowing? You two are a good team."

"Were. *Were* a good team. We're faltering now." His voice cracked.

"No, Dad, that isn't true. You've been everything Mom needed you to be. When you were down, she helped you up. Now you are helping her. That's what you taught me about good relationships."

She stroked his forehead and saw how weary he was. Gently, she pulled the comforter over his body.

"Daddy says he doesn't want any more stew and that he thinks he'll just doze off for the night," Libby announced when she returned. A smile quirked the corner of her lip. "And he wants me to get the recipe for your stew, Jenny."

"Ha, ha!" Jenny chortled. "Friendship Stew never fails." She took the recliner across from Libby and Tia.

"I made a fire. If you are still chilled, I don't know how to help you. My bag of tricks is now empty," Tia said.

"I'm fine." Libby looked at a small stack of literature on the coffee table. "Physically, at least."

"The doctor said you didn't have to read the material she gave you right now, Lib. Do it when you can absorb it. Besides, just because she gave it to you doesn't mean . . ."

"That Mom might have Alzheimer's?" Libby inclined her head. "I'm not an ostrich, Tia. It's entirely possible. But it will have to slap me in the face before I accept it."

"Can they be sure if it really is Alzheimer's?" Jenny asked.

"They announced it to the world when President Reagan got

it,” Tia pointed out. “I heard a commentator talk about the early symptoms. Memory loss—short term first, then longer term.”

“You mean like calling someone on the phone and forgetting what you wanted to tell them or that you’ve *already* called them?” Libby received dozens of calls from her mother in a workday.

Tia ignored the question to skim the material the doctor had given them. “Another sign is change in behavior. Sweet, quiet individuals may become grouchy, short-tempered, or quick to argue. Irritability is a common symptom, as is having trouble performing normal, familiar tasks.”

“Like cooking dinner and paying bills?” Libby often found her mother agonizing over the checkbook. It wasn’t as though she didn’t remember to pay the bills. It was more like she couldn’t remember *how* to do it. The checkbook had become such a source of trouble in the house over the past year that Libby and her father had taken over the task that Mrs. Morrison had been in charge of since before Libby was born.

“Or being unable to express oneself, to find the right words for what you mean. I do that now,” Tia said.

“You’re never at a loss for words,” Jenny pointed out.

Libby shivered in her warm outfit. “Let’s change the subject, OK?”

“Cold again?”

“Mostly around my heart.” Libby stared out the window at the swiftly falling snow and was reminded of the little sled in Tia’s shop display. What would become of this toboggan ride with her parents? Would they make it safely through or would they crash somewhere along the way?

“I’m making tea,” Jenny announced abruptly.

The tea-with-cream-and-sugar ritual had helped them think through many a crisis since childhood. Foggily, Libby hoped it would help tonight.

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Then the doorbell rang and Mike, Luke, and Spot Adams burst into the entry on a gust of wind.

Mike and his son had blended seamlessly into the trio that had, as children, vowed to be best friends forever, adding a masculine point of view to the mix. Luke added the energy of youth; and Spot, total affection and a dash of comic relief. It was a recipe that was turning out just right.

Jenny struggled to shut the door against the bitter gale before turning to kiss her husband in greeting. "Brrr. Your nose is like a Popsicle! Yours, too, Luke." Then she eyed the eager dog at her feet. "And yours has its own built-in refrigeration system!"

The dog gave an unrepentant whine and dropped onto the discarded snowmobile suit his master had shed. He gave Jenny one long, loving stare; closed his eyes; and fell asleep.

"If I could learn to relax like that dog does," Tia commented, "I'd be limp as a wet noodle at work."

"Whooooeee!" Mike squatted in front of the fire and poked at it with a tool from the basket by the fireplace. "It's turning nasty out there. We're in for some bad weather." Jenny moved to stand next to him, her hand on his shoulder. He tipped his head to one side and rubbed his cheek on the back of her hand. Love radiated between them. "Luke and I brought our sleeping bags just in case you ladies decided to get stranded. We didn't want to miss a party."

That, Jenny translated, meant "We want to be here for Libby, too."

Meanwhile, Luke scooted on his belly under the Christmas tree to rattle the gifts.

"I can understand why you do that at home," Jenny observed, "but why are you doing it here when you know none of the gifts are yours?"

"For practice. Dad calls it 'fine-tuning my craft.'" He held one

to the light. "This is socks. Six pair. Probably Gold-Toe brand 'cause I've seen Libby's dad wear them before."

"You're good!" Libby said with a touch of amazement.

Luke grinned modestly. "I know. So far I'm getting a model car, books, two pairs of jeans, and a tape player."

"Ha!" his father said. "It's a set of measuring spoons, a used toilet seat, bib overalls, and a karaoke machine."

"Aw, Dad!" Luke grinned at his father.

"You'd better watch out, Luke. Someday he might decide you actually deserve bib overalls and a used toilet seat."

Nonplussed, Luke asked, "Do we have food for this storm?"

"Too bad you're so shy and retiring, young man. You'll never get anything you want that way." Jenny ruffled her stepson's hair. "Come. Help me take in the tea things. Libby has enough Christmas baking in the kitchen to carry us through Easter."

The Morrison kitchen looked like Jenny's own shop. Sometime in the last twenty-four hours, Libby had baked enough dough to make sidewalls and roofs for half a dozen gingerbread houses. There were bags of gumdrops, licorice sticks, pretzels, and other various and sundry sweets to use for housing materials and decorations.

"Wow! Did we ever pick a great place to get snowed in!" Luke's eyes gleamed, the proverbial kid in the candy shop.

"Hold on, buster. First of all, you can't eat Libby's housing development. Second, who says we're snowed in?"

"Dad. He told me Libby needed moral support. Besides, I know how Dad gets when you aren't around."

"How's that?"

"Lonesome," Luke said, as if she'd asked the world's dumbest question.

Jenny's heart felt as though it might swell right through her chest wall and float away. After Lee died, Jenny had never expected to find a love so sweet and so right as the one she had

now with her childhood classmate Mike Adams. Mike and Luke were gifts to her from a God who knew all she needed in her life and had given it to her tenfold.

God did answer prayer. Even those so deep and wordless that the heart didn't know for what it was asking.

"Can we have these tonight?" Luke held out a plate of assorted goodies that Libby had put together for the break room at Tia's shop. At the rate the weather was deteriorating, there'd be no shop to open or employees to feed.

"Probably. Let's ask Libby." Jenny left the cozy clutter of the kitchen carrying the teapot and mugs. Luke followed with the food.

Mike and Tia were hooting with laughter over an old Burns and Allen routine on television in the other room. Libby was smiling wanly at Spot who, ever sensitive to underdogs like himself, was licking Libby's hand.

Two hours later Luke unfurled his sleeping bag near the fireplace. He slept on his back, his arms thrown wide, in a trusting, childlike pose. Spot, who sometimes seemed more human than canine, slept next to him. He, too, was on his back, doggy legs splayed wide, tender underbelly exposed.

"Utter trust and contentment," Mike observed. "Look at those two. Can you see what they're saying?"

Tia looked at Mike as if he'd lost his mind. "They're saying they're exhausted, of course."

"More than that. See those exposed bellies? If Spot were still out fending for himself, he'd never let that soft, vulnerable part of him show, in case something wanted to take a hunk out of him. Here, he trusts us to not hurt him. Luke, too, by the look of it."

"You do say the most amazing things sometimes, Mikey." Tia reverted to his childhood name. "I never dreamed that you'd grow up and turn out so well."

"You never dreamed I'd grow up at all. Remember the time you got a detention because I was throwing spitballs at you?"

Tia's cheeks reddened. "That was one of the *few* times I was in trouble at school."

Mike covered his head with his hands. "OK, OK, sorry about the spitballs."

"Just for that, you can mulch my lawn in the spring—free of charge." Mike was the owner of a successful landscaping firm called How Does Your Garden Grow?

"You drive a hard bargain, lady."

Tia reached for Libby's hand. "Looks like you have plenty of company tonight. Has anyone looked out to see if the storm is still raging?"

"Can't see in front of your nose," Mike said. "Guess we really are snowed in. It must be true—be careful what you wish for, you might get it."

"Or pray for," Jenny added.

As if on cue, they shifted themselves until they were in a circle, holding hands, silent but for the wind shaking the eaves and the crackle of dry wood burning.

"Dear heavenly Father," Jenny began, "thank you for this safe haven in the storm and for friends to share it with. Even the storms—especially the storms—are yours, Lord. We can't change them; we can only rest in your protection until they pass. Help Libby to remember this as her parents weather their own personal storm. Bless the doctors and nurses who are caring for Mrs. Morrison. Give Libby and her father wisdom and courage and insight for whatever is to come. Help us all, Lord, for you are the only true help we have. Amen."

A chorus of amens reverberated through the room and into the night.