

FLAMINGO

Christmas

HOLIDAY
HEARTWARMERS
BOOK ELEVEN



Mimi Barbour

NYT Bestselling Author



Flamingo Christmas

Book #11 – Holiday Heartwarmers

By

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Flamingo Christmas

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Description:

When business woman, Sue Ross, found an email in her inbox from a distraught father asking her to make a stuffed toy flamingo for his small, injured child, she dropped everything. The very next day, she created a lovey as close as possible to the image he'd attached. Picturing the poor little girl in the hospital drove her on, and when her connection to the man fell apart, she became sick with worry, knowing she had no way to reach him.

Seeing his tiny Lisa in a coma, her body wilting more each day, Art felt like his lonely life as a child-rearing widower would never return to any semblance of normalcy. Until he met a lovely woman in the hospital that came to decorate the waiting room on the children's floor. Her lovely smile, warm heart, and constant kindness reached out to his worried heart and made him wonder.

Could he believe in miracles?

Dedication:

This book was written for a very close and well-loved friend of mine who has been the perfect travel companion, the most supportive reader of my work, and one of the kindest women I know.

I'm so glad to have you in my life, Sue.

Xo

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Prologue

The dark scared her the most.

Every nearby sound appeared amplified when one couldn't see. The smell of cedar wood surrounded her so that each breath she took seemed filled with a rotten taste.

Choking, she began to cry while clinging tightly to the stuffed toy her daddy had grabbed for her at the last minute.

Why didn't her mommy come and get her? She hated it in here. Her daddy had promised they'd be back soon, but it seemed like forever she'd had to wait.

Remembering the horror she'd seen on her parents' faces and their adamant orders for her to stay hidden, she didn't dare disobey.

Instead, she clutched her new fuzzy friend closer in her arms so she could put her face into the softness of the furry pink body. Finding solace from her companion, she whispered, "You're here, Lovey. You're my friend. We'll be okay. Mommy and Daddy said so."

For what seemed like hours, the little girl and her stuffed flamingo waited. Until finally, when her little heart felt it would burst from so much fear and sadness, the top of the chest opened, and loving arms reached inside. They lifted both her and her new toy into their warmth, her parents together, blessing her and telling her what a good girl she'd been.

They hadn't forgotten her.

When the gunman had rampaged through the store, killing more than a few people, she'd been saved.

Chapter One

Sue Ross loved flamingoes.

Ever since she was a child, her mother had given her a special addition to add to her collection for every occasion and her assortment had grown over the years to where she had a room in her apartment designated just for her indulgence.

Other people would tease her and even make jokes about her commitment, but she ignored their taunts and went on her merry way, happy with her hobby. In fact, she'd become so enamored that after school she'd stumbled on a way to turn her so-called hobby into a career. In college, she'd specialized in design art and had begun to make her own flamingo items in various styles including ceramics, artwork, and cloth. Having a great time with her favorite collectible, she came up with incredible new ways to display the magic bird.

Eventually, she'd worked with a friend to help her build a wonderful website, and in a short time, it gained a large following. Her sales were beginning to grow so much that she was forced to rent a workspace and hire extra help, which made her content as she could concentrate on the designing.

Crafting and constructing yet more flamingo artifacts made her one of the happiest people she knew. And with the Christmas season only a few months away and orders piling up, she faced every morning filled with enthusiasm to get back to the job.

Really, how many people were able to work with something that gave them as much joy as Sue experienced daily? To say she felt lucky would be an understatement. Unfortunately, today she had to contain her joyous nature when she met up with her two closest female friends who were both going through hard times.

Neither of them were in the same place in their lives as she was, and it made things difficult to say the least. As much as she loved them, she always had to hide her happiness or get dissed about her penchant to be smiling... all the time.

According to one of her closest friends, Jacquie, she was out and out annoying at times. Though normally a happy person herself, her family was going through a rough patch, and naturally it affected Jacquie strongly.

And her other close friend, Colleen, always seemed to have upsets in her love life that would be downers for anyone else, yet she somehow managed to keep a smile on her face.

Getting ready for the day, Sue made up her mind to play it low-key, meet with her friends and be supportive for their troubles and then beg their forgiveness because of her overload at work.

Thankful it had been her turn to choose the restaurant for lunch, she'd picked a favorite spot close to her small shop where they produced, packaged, and sent out the items she sold. There was a sewing area where the three machines ran constantly and the colorful materials they used filled the shelves to overflowing.

Then another larger area in the back of the building had work tables loaded with ceramic birds of all sizes and shapes, some funny and others just out and out gorgeous, waiting to be painted and glazed and then loaded into the kiln to be fired.

The room she spent the most time in was filled with artwork. Various paintings or drawings dedicated to their mascot flamingo. Her specialty was detailing the bird in hysterical poses to bring cheer to all who saw them. The cuter and funnier she could make them, the better they sold.

Reaching the restaurant first, she took out her cellphone and opened her emails. Waiting for her was a message from a distraught father who'd

found his daughter's favorite flamingo destroyed in a car accident. According to his comments, he'd do anything to replace it as soon as possible.

Seems his child had been holding it when the car was t-boned, and the stuffed lovey had been torn apart and covered in blood. When they'd taken the four-year-old to the hospital, the well-loved flamingo had been left behind and no one could tell him where it ended up.

Right now, she wouldn't be allowed any personal toys in the ICU. But when she healed from her surgery and was taken to her own room, he desperately needed to have a similar flamingo waiting for her.

He ended the request with these urgent words:

Miss, I know the toy was quite old because my wife bought it to give to her before she passed four years ago. I'm just praying it might be possible for you to have one that's similar, or if at all possible, the same. It would bring a smile to my baby's face.

Art

Completely immersed in the saddest tale she'd heard in some time, she didn't see Jacquie and Colleen standing at a distance watching her. Finally, when she sensed eyes on her, she smiled at them and promptly broke down in a flood of tears.

Chapter Two

Colleen reached her first. “My god, Sue. What’s wrong, honey?”

Sue felt silly for her distress but even so, when she tried to explain, her words came out interspersed with hiccups and sobs. “I-I got a-an email from a father. Poor man...” She couldn’t go on. Instead, she held out the phone to Jacquie who read the message out loud.

“He says here that he needs a copy of that flamingo as soon as possible but there’s no address. Wait, there’s an attachment.” In seconds, she opened that part of the message and they all saw the image of the stuffed toy.

“Oh no, it’s not one of mine.” Sue knew immediately it wasn’t from her line of merchandise. “I have no idea where he purchased this.”

“Could you make one like it?”

“Sure. I suppose. But it doesn’t really show the size or anything.”

Jacquie, who was an engineer, took the phone. “I’d say it would be about a foot tall. See, look at the chair it’s sitting on. If you take the measurements of a regular kitchen chair, it’s easy to see how high the bird is.”

The other two girls looked at the image and nodded. “You’re right. It must be about twelve inches. Which would make the widest part about half that size.”

“Could you replicate the costume?”

Feeling a little better now, Sue nodded. “Probably. We could come very close to the image in fact.” She scanned the email again and sent a return message.

Dear Art, I’m very sorry for your trouble, and I pray your little girl makes a full recovery. Though the picture you sent of her flamingo isn’t from one of our lines, we could most likely make a good copy of the toy. Can you

let me know where you are and if it would be possible for you to come and see what we can offer. I'd like to make one as close as possible to the original.

Kindly, Sue Ross.

Owner of – “Flamingoes”

Once she'd sent out the reply, they all placed their regular orders and then began taking turns talking, updating their lives since their last get-together.

Jacquie, whose siblings were dealing with older parents, had a list of grievances. Her days were suddenly brimful with calls from her newly relocated parents who didn't like their assisted living arrangements.

In fact, just this morning, her father had been locked out of his building because he'd forgotten the door code. Rather than ring a bell to get the attention of one of the caretakers, he'd climbed through the shrubs to make his way to their apartment window and scared her mother half to death by pounding on it to get her attention.

Incensed, Jacquie admitted, “I was horrified to think the foolish man would choose to crawl around on his hands and knees through the bushes rather than ask for help. He's so worried that we'll think he's becoming forgetful that he'd rather hide the fact that he forgot the number.”

“How did you find out?”

“Oh, Mom was so mad about it that she blabbed on him.”

They all laughed, but Sue added, “The poor man. To feel that insecure in his own home.” She felt bad for him. She knew what her own parents had gone through after they'd decided to make the change to a senior living arrangement. It took months before they felt comfortable but now they loved it... had more friends than they knew what to do with – proven by the last call from her father who'd pretended to be out when a knock sounded on his

door. His voice lowered to a comical whisper. “Your mother’s getting her hair done, and I finally have the place to myself. I don’t want company, so I’ll just wait until whoever’s there takes the hint and leaves.”

“Oh, Dad, you’re a devil. I guess I’ll have to call first before I come knocking.”

“Good idea, pet. I’d hate to miss one of your visits.”

“Sweet talker.”

He’d laughed and added, “But truthful.”

Jacquie sighed. “I hope they settle in soon. It bothers me to see them so upset. Dad wanted to move back home, and it took us some time to remind him we’d sold the old house. The rundown place had become a nuisance of work and worries. None of us had time to handle their problems, and they’d gotten past their ability to deal with so many issues themselves. And you know what it’s like to hire people nowadays. They’re either late, incompetent, overpriced or worse... they just don’t show.”

Sue nodded, remembering her own battle with her folks the year before. Thankfully, her mother had been the driving force behind them selling their forty-year-old house as she had friends already moved to the place they finally chose.

“They’ll settle down. But you might have to help that happen for a bit. Maybe if you meet some of the other offspring whose parents are there, you might be able to make introductions and that way they’ll get to meet folks.”

Colleen who’d been quiet until then, piped up. “You’re both just so lucky that you still have your parents around you. I miss my mom more every day.”

Sue saw the sadness her friend couldn’t hide and reached out to hold her hand. “You can share mine anytime. I told you that before. They love you and are always tickled when you drop by.”

“I do enjoy stopping in every so often and seeing how they’re coming along. Being in real estate, I’m often out their way.” Colleen turned to Jacquie. “In fact, I have an older couple who just put their house on the market and it sold in a week. They’re excited about moving to the assisted living home where your folks are now. Maybe we can get them together eventually. No doubt, they’ll be lonely too.”

“That’s a great idea. When will they be moving?”

“Next week. They want to be settled before Christmas. I really like these people. You can tell they’re still sweethearts after fifty-five years together. And they both have a good sense of humor. In fact, their only child is moving to Victoria to be close to them, and they’re delighted. They’d be perfect friends for your folks.”

While Jacquie and Colleen continued the discussion about Jacquie’s parents, Sue kept glancing at her phone, waiting to get a reply from her latest message to Art. Since the distraught father had reached out to her, she’d somehow imagined he’d be as anxious to get her answer as she was to hear from him.

Heartsore, she couldn’t help wondering what more she could do. After all, she had no phone number or way of connecting with him if he didn’t answer her email. Deciding she’d wait for a little while and then send him another message, she knew one thing for certain. It had suddenly become of the utmost importance for her to fulfill this obligation.

Chapter Three

Art Reyes was heartsick when he realized he'd lost his cellphone. He'd been in the hospital waiting room all morning, pacing from one end to the other and trying desperately not to give in to his despair... to keep hope alive.

Hanging on by a tiny thread, frantically trying to maintain his cool, they'd finally allowed him to be with his daughter Lisa, who'd survived her surgery and was taken to the ICU.

The last time he remembered using his phone was to contact a place he'd found online that sold all kinds of flamingoes. He had a desperate need for one to replace Lisa's precious lovey, especially now when she'd be needing the comfort the stuffed toy had always given her.

He'd had to search all their pictures until he'd finally gotten a clear shot of Jingles, and he'd been able to include it in his request that they might replace the one he'd lost. Thinking back, it made sense that he probably dropped his phone in the waiting room and then forgot about it.

Once he'd gotten permission to be with his little girl, all else had been forgotten. Walking into her room, he couldn't believe the condition of his beautiful baby girl. Though she'd been safely locked in the car seat behind him, her area of the SUV had gotten the brunt of the damage. Being t-boned by a drunk driver in the middle of the morning had been an unexpected shock.

Thankfully, his airbag had opened to save him from too much of the flying glass. But her poor face had many contusions and with blood spray everywhere, it had been difficult to make out her normal appearance. After he'd regained consciousness, only seconds after the ambulance attendants arrived, he'd begged them to help him free himself from the wreck. "I'm fine.

It's my daughter who's hurt. Please. Help me. She needs me." And so they had.

Witnessing Lisa's condition in the ambulance had weakened his body to where every muscle had liquefied. With sirens screaming as they flew to the nearest hospital, he'd stayed back to give the attendant room to work. And he'd prayed harder than he'd ever done before.

Seeing her now, between the tubes and bandages surrounding her small delicate body, he had to force himself to stay upright and not collapse. Worried the nurses wouldn't take kindly to him becoming another patient, he stiffened his back, gulped down the bile that threatened to appear, and swallowed the sobs stuck in this throat.

God help him, she looked so tiny in her bed. So defenseless. His little angel didn't deserve any of this horror. The doctor's had explained that she'd sustained broken bones in her left arm and her pelvic area. And because of the swelling, they couldn't tell how badly her head had suffered. She'd taken quite a beating, and yet the car seat had thankfully done its job in protecting her, which gave them hope.

"Mr. Reyes," said the doctor with compassion written all over his tired, middle-aged face, "we have to give her time for the swelling to lessen before we'll know for sure if she sustained more head injuries. She took quite a jarring."

"How long will it be before she's awake?"

"We're purposely keeping her out for now... to give her body time to heal. She's a healthy little girl and has a good chance to mend fully."

"But you can't say with total certainty?"

"I have a good feeling, sir. Look let's not go to the dark side unless we have to. Give her a few days, and I promise our staff will keep a close eye on her."

What else could he do but agree? He'd known in his heart that if she died, he'd be dead inside too. He'd had the same thought when he'd lost Lisa's mother, Janette, four years earlier. It had been his baby's needs that had pulled him through.

Though Janette hadn't always been a ray of sunshine, especially after she'd lost her first two pregnancies, Art still loved her and wanted them to have a family. He'd tried to jolly her out of her sudden irrational fears, but she'd become stubborn and decided no more. It wasn't meant to be. Therefore, when she refused for them to use birth control he didn't understand her reasoning.

Then she found out she was pregnant.

Once again, her worries stressed them both until she safely passed the first trimester. After that, she'd done the best she could for a woman who suddenly became wildly afraid of giving birth. Art stuck with her, helping her with everything, trying to make this time as easy as possible.

During those months, he secretly thought she had an unreasonable dread and had tried explaining that millions of women had babies safely every year. He'd even promised they would get her to the hospital in plenty of time for her to use the drugs that would help get her through the worst. And all had gone as planned except no one knew she'd have an adverse reaction to the drugs. Or that she'd collapse and die on the delivery table.

Unable to save the mother, the doctor's had worked hard to bring the tiny baby into the world. When Lisa appeared, they'd passed her to him and from that moment on, he'd known why he'd been put on this earth.

He'd fallen so deeply in love with the child that even without Janette to help, he'd become the best daddy that classes, books, YouTube videos, and a lot of support from his parents could make him.

Being a father had taken up his whole life, and he'd thought until the

day before that he had done a pretty damn good job. But then everything had fallen apart. That morning, his boss had issued an ultimatum. He had to start working in the office at least three full days a week.

Since he'd brought his infant home from the hospital, he'd been working from his home office and loved having the time to be with her. Accounting might not be an exciting job, but he'd been good at it and enjoyed the challenges of taking on such daunting work.

Also, the firm he'd been employed by had a wonderful reputation. They'd had more contracts than they could handle and had been willing to make this arrangement with him as long as they got results...which they always did. Then came the pandemic and they depended on him even more.

But now that Lisa was four, he had to agree that his firm had been pretty lenient so far and with their increased business, they really did need him to be there like they insisted.

"How about I come in for half days and put Lisa in a daycare for the afternoon or mornings?"

"Nope. Not going to work, Art. We need a person on site full-time. Many days our meetings run late, and we have to be available at the drop of a hat. Nowadays, business people expect us to be at their beck and call at any time. And you know we've lost Hal to retirement and Irene is on maternity leave. I need you now more than ever."

He saw the dismay that Art couldn't hide and pressed his advantage. "Look, my friend, we're being generous about a full work week. Anyone else and I'd insist. But I get it. So, until Lisa begins school, we'll deal with having you here for three days. But we need you to start next week."

"Right. Okay. I'll make some arrangements. I figure Tuesday through Thursday will work better for me as that'll give me the long weekends to bring work home with me too."

“Fine. However it’s best for you. Just let me know, and I’ll start making arrangements and get a big office set up for you rather than just the small cubicle with a desk you’ve been keeping these last years.”

Art smiled, knowing his boss, John, was trying to cheer him up with this bribe, but he hated the thought of having to leave Lisa for even three days a week.

While he sat by her side, thinking about his life, watching for any change in her tiny face, he again searched his pockets for his missing phone. *Jesus, really? How could he have been so careless.*

He slipped out the door and returned to the waiting room, praying that the nurses might have found his cell, or some honest citizen had turned it in at the counter. No such luck.

“Art?”

He looked up and saw his parents flying down the hallway and knew they must have caught the plane as soon as he’d gotten through to them about the accident.

“Mom, Dad.” He hugged them both, feeling a huge wave of gratitude to have them near. “I’m sorry you had to cut your vacation short in Miami. But I knew you’d want to be here for Lisa.”

“And for you, son. We’re shocked to hear about this accident. How is our girl?”

Chapter Four

Sue couldn't concentrate for the rest of the day. She must have checked her phone a dozen times, hoping to see a reply back from Art, the man whose hospitalized daughter had lost her stuffed toy.

Finally, after everyone else left for the night, Sue began to sketch the stuffed flamingo showing in the image. The one she couldn't stop thinking about all day. Opening up the attachment, she printed it out, hoping to get an even better view.

Deciding that Jacquie's measurements had been correct, she worked on her drawing until her eyes became blurry, and her shoulders ached. Standing back, she nodded her head in satisfaction. It was as close as she could get without having the original.

Rubbing her eyes and then stretching, arching her back muscles, she decided to leave it for now and would begin searching out the materials tomorrow as soon as she got into the shop. She could get help from the others as they knew even better than her what stock they had.

Before closing down for the night, she again checked her phone. She'd sent Art two messages and had gotten zero replies. Hopefully, she'd hear back the next day.

Packing up her belongings and locking up the place, she made her way to the back lot where they had a small area for parking. As she neared her car, the hackles on the back of her neck began to warn her that something was out of place. Stopping before she stepped fully into the darkened area, she looked around and listened carefully.

The motion light that usually came on didn't, which in itself seemed weird. She listened again.

Nothing.

Quit being so silly.

But her intuition wouldn't be silenced. Unsure of whether to continue to her car or return to where the lights were brighter on the sidewalk, she hesitated.

And that was her biggest mistake. Whoever had decided to make mischief got sick of her indecision and stepped in front of her with a gun in his hand aimed for her belly.

Now she could clearly see the male figure who'd decided to make trouble. His eyes looked young and scared and his hand wavered. A black balaclava-type ski mask covered most of his face. His voice sounded weak but defiant. "Give me your purse, lady, and they'll be no trouble."

Knees threatening to crumble, Sue took two small steps back. "I-I don't have a lot of money on me. I'm sorry." Instantly feeling stupid for apologizing, she held out the bag, her hands trembling wildly.

Suddenly, she remembered her phone and the need to keep it with her. How could she stay in touch with Art and the child who needed her? "Please, may I have my phone back. You can take everything else, but I really need that one item."

"Shut up. And get on your knees."

Terrified but defiant, Sue added, "Look, a man whose little girl is in the hospital reached out to me, asking if I could make him a new flamingo... for his daughter. That's what I do. Make stuffed toys. She's been hurt... in an accident. He might email me again. I need to have my phone in case he does."

"I don't give a rat's ass, lady. Just shut up and close your eyes, or you'll be sorry."

Not thinking clearly, unaware of just how much danger she was in, she lifted her hands in a begging way. "Please. It's all I'm asking. I won't

even call the police if you'll just give me back that one item. Please.”

She didn't see the butt of the gun as it descended toward her head. But she did feel the pain before she blacked out.

Chapter Five

When Sue stirred, the sound of the siren brought her fully awake. The pain in her head warned her not to move. And so, she lay there with her eyes closed wondering if she should be glad to be alive or angry for having had this experience at all.

Living in Victoria, British Columbia, a safe place by all accounts, she never expected anything like this to happen. Although, she'd been warned recently that the Saanich neighborhood had been changing. A lot of gangs had recently started to appear in the high schools, and there'd been more arrests reported in the papers every day.

Her parents had been adamant about her relocating her business to a better section of the city, but costs everywhere had risen to where the thought of moving had become a huge nightmare.

Sure, her business had been making money over the last year, but things weren't that solvent for her to make such a huge change, and she'd been waffling about what to do.

Seems her mind had been made up for her tonight. Bad enough she had to go through such a nightmare, she never wanted any of her employees to suffer the same way.

Upon reaching the hospital, the ambulance attendants stayed with her until the hospital staff took over. Once they'd finished examining her in the emergency area, she asked to be able to leave.

"Not likely, honey." The nurse seemed sympathetic but not hopeful. "You got quite a smack on the noggin and lost a good deal of blood before they found you. Unless you have someone with medical experience to be with you, I'd say the doctors will insist on you staying here with us overnight."

“I don’t. Have anyone experienced. But I’m sure a friend will stay with me. Would that be okay?”

“Look, take my advice, and let us look after you. It’s really late now, and surprisingly, it’s been a slow day. We do have a bed for you. In the morning, they’ll take more CT scans to be sure you have no lasting damage, and then we can talk about you leaving.” She tapped at the portion of Sue’s face where they’d put needles to freeze it and nodded with satisfaction. “You’re ready. I’ll get the on-call doctor to put the stitches in. We don’t want any lasting scars, do we?”

Considering that Sue would be the one with the scars, she had to smile at how the warm-hearted nurse had looped herself into the equation. “Okay. You’re right. I won’t bother anyone tonight. Other than a vicious headache, I think I’m fine. I’ll behave.”

“Good.” The nurse patted her arm gently. “I’ve given you some medication that will help with the pain soon. And I’ll be in to check on you a lot over the night.”

True to her word, the nurse did visit Sue often and made sure she didn’t pass out for any length of time though her body seemed to have a mind of its own and she kept drifting off. Sleep would overcome her, but only for a short time before she’d be woken by the nurse calling her name.

Finally, toward morning, she decided to get up and use the washroom and found out just how weak her body had become when she slid to the floor. Instantly, the nurse appeared, brought over a wheelchair, and helped her to sit. Feeling silly, Sue apologized. “I don’t know why I collapsed. I didn’t understand how weak I am.”

“It’ll be better soon. I know you haven’t been able to sleep and that makes you exhausted.” Eventually, with the nurse’s help, Sue used the facilities and then returned to her bed. Almost at the same moment she

crawled in, the doctor appeared on morning rounds and did a full neurological exam, checking her functions and reflexes. Then she examined her vision, eye movement, and reaction to light.

Once she finished, Sue admitted, “I felt quite weak this morning, doctor. And my head aches terribly.” Feeling a bit weepy, she tried to make her voice strong and only managed to have it come out in a strangled whisper.

“I can understand the pain, Sue. You really did take quite a knock. Look, I want to send you for more scans. And though we’ve been holding off the police from their investigation, they are waiting to get your statement.”

“Can I have something to drink first? I’m so thirsty.”

“Of course. We’ll provide you with some smaller meals and lots of juice.”

By the time Sue had given all her information to the police and had settled down after her latest scans, she felt somewhat better.

Searching through her belongings, she suddenly remembered she had no purse and therefore no phone. How could she make a call to her folks for them to come and get her? And to call her staff and let them know she wouldn’t be there for the next few days.

Suddenly, she moaned. Tears dripped down her face at such a seemingly insurmountable problem and only when a voice at the door questioned if he could help, did she stop weeping and wipe her eyes.

The man appeared uncomfortable for his snooping. “I’m sorry. I was passing by and heard you suffering. Is there anything I can get you?”

Sue quickly sniffed away her upset and swiped at her eyes. “No, please don’t apologize. You’re very kind. I was just feeling sorry for myself. You see I was attacked last night—”

When she saw the shock the man didn’t hide, she reiterated, “I’m fine.

I mean, he hit me on the head and took my purse, but that's all. I guess I could be considered lucky because that's all he did."

The handsome man approached her bed slowly, looking a bit discomfited by her admission. "I'm sorry. That you were hurt and no doubt frightened. How horrible."

"Right? I was leaving work, and the fool came from out of nowhere and insisted I give him my belongings. He wouldn't listen to reason when I asked if I could at least keep my phone. Instead, he hit me with his gun."

"A gun. He held you at gunpoint and you argued with him? Good Lord, lady. I'd say you're lucky to be alive. Your phone couldn't have been that important."

Unable to explain that she'd been frantic to keep it in case Art messaged her back, she just nodded and then winced.

"I wanted to call my folks to let them know I'm in the hospital. I need them to come and look after me."

"Of course, you do. It's strange you lost your phone because that happened to me yesterday also. I had to go out and buy a new one. You can use it if you like." He held it out.

"Yes, please." Sue took the proffered phone and made her call, thankful that she had memorized her father's number. While she waited for an answer, she really took a good look at the man who had walked over to the window to give her privacy. His face seemed ravaged with worry, his cheeks were drawn, and his warm brown eyes were bloodshot yet held sympathy for a total stranger.

She'd instantly felt his empathy and appreciated his caring attitude. Before she could ask him about his reason for being in the hospital, her father's questioning voice sounded in her ear.

"Well, hi there?" He obviously hadn't recognize her as the caller. Not

until she began to cry. “Susie? Is that you? What’s wrong?”

“I’m fine, Dad. But I’m in the Victoria General. C-can you come? I need you.”

Her father didn’t ask the numerous questions her mother likely would have pelted out. Instead, he said the words she needed to hear. “We’re on our way, baby. See you as soon as possible.”

Finished with her call, she held the phone out. “Thank you.” She sniffed again and used a tissue to mop up her tears. “I’m sorry. I’m usually not this weepy. I guess it’s getting hit on the head that’s making me so emotional.”

The man approached and took his phone in one hand and patted her arm with his other. “Hey, you have nothing to apologize for. Get better soon.” When he left the room, she watched his tall body move away, his lanky form pleasing.

Darn... she forgot to ask his name. Or why he had appeared in her hospital room. She could only hope he wasn’t there to see anyone in a bad way. Something told her that he was, and her heart went out to the kind stranger.

Chapter Six

Once at home, Sue couldn't get over how different her place seemed now. After being released from the hospital, her parents had made her stay with them for two days while they plied her with every treat they could think of to cheer her up.

Her mother even took out the Christmas tree and ornaments knowing that Sue loved this time of year and would visit every season to help them decorate.

For Sue, it wasn't just slapping up a tree and a few statues. She would go to so much trouble that her father often grumbled that they lived in a hallmark Christmas movie.

Not having near as many ornaments at her place other than her flamingo seasonal collection, she loved to splurge when it came to indulging her mom's passion. That woman had gathered her holiday stock for years and had a huge selection to choose from. Which delighted a girl who loved to go all out.

And so, over the couple of days of recuperating, she got busy and pretty soon, their apartment looked beautiful. They had other residents streaming in all evening to see what she'd accomplished, and the compliments had flown until her head started swelling.

Laughing at the memory, she bustled around getting ready for work and thought about the one discord to those easy times. She hadn't heard back from Art. Day after day, she'd checked her emails and waited. Even though she'd lost her phone, she could still open her Hotmail account on her laptop and see what activity had gone on. All her regular emails had continued to flow except one from him.

Over the phone, she'd talked with her girls in the workplace, and

they'd found her drawings and gathered the materials they thought would best match that particular pattern. She'd also sent them the image in color so they would choose the exact replicas.

Today, being her first day back to work, she intended to make the stuffed toy the best way she could, and just maybe, Art would contact her.

Thinking over the email address he'd used, she actually wondered if there was a way to find him through that info. It hadn't consisted of a first and last name like so many others. Instead, he'd just used his first name with a set of numbers and a Yahoo account. No doubt, the police might be able to locate the man behind the address, but a girl with very little online knowledge was pretty well screwed. Guess she'd just have to wait for him to get back to her... if he ever did.

Packing one of her old purses with her new phone and personals, she snatched her second set of car keys and drove to work. Parking in the back lot, she made a note to herself to have her dad organize the repairman to come and install new sets of motion lights rather than just relying on the one that hadn't helped her a bit. She wanted the whole area to be well lit from now on.

When she stepped out of her car and walked past the spot where she'd lain in the gravel, she saw the amount of blood there and gulped hard. Goodness, no wonder she'd been such a mess. Stumbling slightly, she went to unlock the doors and open the blinds.

Soon, the other three girls who worked with her arrived and after catching up with hugs and well wishes, they got down to work. During her absence, orders for Christmas had piled up and they were suddenly very busy.

Before she could concentrate on anything else, Sue gathered the special material the others had laid out, and she began making the exact

replica of the toy in her drawings. Glad that Art had sent the image in color, she knew the materials they'd chosen would work. Putting her head down, she soon had the stuffed toy finished and staring at her.

Now she felt better. If he did reach out again, she would be ready. A voice whispered in her ear, and she jumped back from her stool, dizzy from the unexpected movement.

“Jacquie? Hi. You startled me.”

Laughing, Jacquie grabbed Sue's shoulders to balance her and turned it into a hug. “I was worried about you. Seeing you in the hospital so pale and shaken made me wonder how you were getting on now that you're back at work.”

“I'm much better and glad to be back at the shop. It's getting extremely busy, which is good for business.” Sue sat down and patted the stool next to her. “Sit. Tell me how you are. How're your parents?”

“That's why I'm here. I just dropped them off at their place a few blocks away. They took off from the home this morning. It was hours before they reached out to me to pick them up in the old park they used to like to go to. I looked everywhere for them and had forgotten that place.”

“Of course you would. I remember you saying how worried you were that they weren't getting enough fresh air.”

“That's right. After Dad's knee replacement, they kinda stopped venturing out much at all. But now, they're so unhappy, they wanted a taste of the old neighborhood. Walked to the bus stop all on their own and made their way there. Then they were too exhausted to get back themselves.”

“How sad. I'm sorry for them. I wish you could have placed them in the senior's home with my parents. They might have settled down better with people they knew.”

“I know. I thought about it but both of them need assistance with their

medications, and Dad's getting feebler all the time. I don't trust them to be on top of things, and the staff at your parents' home weren't willing to look after them."

"No. You're right. My folks are still very functional. Mom, especially, likes to entertain and be involved in a lot of activities."

"See... my mom and dad lead a much quieter life. But they still miss their neighbors and their old place. I don't know what to do anymore. I want them to be happy. They assure me they'll be fine. And I might be tempted to believe them if that assurance wasn't followed by them sadly looking at each other and sighing."

"What about that couple Colleen mentioned earlier? You know, the ones who were planning to move into the same place as your parents."

"Their move fell through. They opted to move closer to their son on the mainland in Abbotsford."

"That's too bad. You know, maybe they need to live in a smaller place. I saw an advertisement yesterday for an assisted living arrangement in a big old house. The owner is a nurse and has made four small one-bedroom apartments and uses the large communal kitchen for everyone. Seriously, it looked quite homey with nice large windows and gardens all around. Would you like me to go there with you and look into it?"

"Would you? I'd be very interested. Where did you see the ad?"

"Here it is." Sue opened her phone and sure enough, she found the site she'd seen the day before. "There's no address, but there is a phone number. Let's call."

Jacquie's face gave away her delight when minutes into the conversation she made arrangements to go there directly to see the place.

"Tell me. What happened?" Sue had been sitting there listening, her fingers crossed, and her heart beating hard.

“The woman told me she’d had a list of people and turned them all away as she’d filled her spots before she’d even opened her doors. Then one of her chosen families lost their partner the day before yesterday, the day they were supposed to move in. Now she suspects there might be a vacancy.”

“How sad for the other couple but it might be just the thing for your parents.” Sue took a moment to grieve for the unknown couple and then she asked for more details.

Jacquie shook off her own sympathetic feelings and straightened her shoulders. “I’m very sorry for the other family too, don’t get me wrong. But if this works out for my mom and dad, I’ll be forever grateful. Would you come with me to look into the place? She said we could go now.”

“Yes, of course I will.” Sue gathered her belongings and noticed the project she’d been working on all morning. “Look. This is as close to Art’s flamingo as I can come. What do you think?”

“I think you have one of the biggest hearts I’ve ever known. I hope he does get back to you and is grateful for all this effort on his behalf.”

“It’s for his little girl. I just wish I knew how to find her.”

“Me too. There must be a way.”

“Yes. That’s what I thought. But I can’t think of anything other than going to the police and getting laughed at.”

“They wouldn’t laugh, Sue. They might think you’re a bit weird is all.”

Both giggling, they carried their good feelings along with them as they drove to the address Jacquie had written down. Surprisingly, it was only a block away from the place Sue’s mom and dad had settled into.

Once they arrived, they saw a lovely old Queen Anne Victorian-styled home with stained glass windows and wonderful gardens all around. “It’s too good to be true,” Jacquie whispered in awe. “It’ll be a fortune.”

“That’s just it. When I scrolled through the site, I was shocked at the price. I believe it’s probably close to what you told me your parents are paying now.”

“Which is already outrageous. These new assisted living accommodations are ridiculously priced. If my parents hadn’t gotten a great deal of money when they sold the old place, there’d be no way they could afford to live like this. Thankfully, they both have good pensions too.”

“Then this is going to work. My only worry is that there must be stairs. Your dad couldn’t handle that, could he?”

“No. But she mentioned that the vacant apartment is on the first floor. Besides, they installed an elevator.” Jacquie grabbed Sue’s hand and held it tightly. “Let this be the one.”

“It is. I can feel it. Look at those lace curtains in the bay window. Your mom will be in her glory.”

An hour later, the girls left with papers in hand and a guarantee that the suite would be theirs if the new widow chose not to take it now that she’d be alone.

Margaret had cautioned them. “When I talked with Lilly this morning, she was still deeply grieving for her husband and couldn’t give me any firm answer to whether she would still be likely to come or not. I couldn’t force the issue, but I did remind her that we have all couples here. Which might be upsetting to her. I gave her until the end of the week to get back to me. But between us, she came across as a rather soft person who looked to her husband to make all their decisions. She didn’t seem all that excited to be moving, and it was his love of gardening that had made him decide on the change in the first place. Most likely, she’ll stay where she is now.”

Jacquie and Sue had politely agreed that the other woman had the first refusal. And their sympathies were with her for sure. But both understood

Margaret's position. Before leaving, Jacquie had reached out her hand to shake with Margaret. "Thank you for letting us take up so much of your time. I really appreciate it."

"I'm glad to meet you, dear. I could tell on the phone that you were terribly worried about your parents, and after meeting you in person, it warms my heart, it really does. So many young folks turn a blind eye to the needs of their oldies, and that I find sad. Just because people get older, doesn't mean they're done. There's a lot of living left once a person reaches their golden age. My plan here is to give them a safe environment where they can blossom and live out their time in harmony with others, doing whatever it is that makes them happy. And the more the youngsters stay involved, the better for everyone."

As if solely by instinct, Jacquie reached out and hugged the kind, middle-aged woman in front of her. "You'll let us know as soon as you can when we can bring Mom and Dad to view the apartment."

"Of course, Jacquie. You have a good day now." Margaret smiled warmly, waved when they got to the bottom of the stairs, and closed the door.

Sue gazed around her, spying a hand-holding couple sitting on a bench in the far corner of the yard, both wearing warm jackets and engaged in a happy conversation.

She turned to see a ramp on the side of the veranda, hidden behind the hydrangea bushes. Most likely it had been installed no doubt as a lifesaver for those in a wheelchair or who had trouble walking and climbing stairs. Sighing, she admitted to having a good feeling here and her fingers crossed as she surveyed the rest of the quiet neighborhood.

"I love everything about this place." Jacquie's enthusiasm was catchy. "I can't wait for Mom and Dad to meet Margaret. She's such a doll. And she's a fully licensed nurse willing to look after her clients. When we

examined the suite, I had a good feeling. Do you think that's a sign?"

"I hate to rain on your parade, but I have to caution you that it's not a for-sure thing yet. It's probably a bad idea to say anything to your parents until you know for sure."

"You're right. It'll kill me, but I'll behave. I'm so thankful you were scrolling through the internet and found the ad."

"Truthfully, I'd been looking for info on the hospitals, trying to come up with some way to reach out to Art and his daughter."

"Well if you ever do find him, I will personally thank him for sending you that request."

Chapter Seven

Day after day, Art slept, ate, and basically lived in the hospital as his princess hovered between life and death. She'd shrunk to the size of a sparrow in front of his eyes, and though he'd prayed more than he'd ever done before, nothing seemed to change.

Each day, the doctors told him that she could wake up, that the swelling in her head had receded quite well but still, she kept them guessing. Why didn't she open her eyes?

Eventually, they moved her into a private room and though she still had tubes everywhere, the swelling on her face had receded. Her broken bones had started to heal, and she'd begun to look like his little girl again.

As he'd done a million times, Art moved over to stand by the window and stared out at the scene he'd memorized. This time of night, all he could really see were the lights of the city twinkling in the distance, and it popped into his head as it always did about how much Lisa would love to see them.

Clutching the book he'd been reading until his voice had thickened, he straightened his shoulders and turned to see his mother rushing in, flowers in her hands, and a bag filled with new books no doubt. His wonderful mom had provided them with so much reading material that he could start a library.

"Hi baby." She leaned over the bed and kissed Lisa's forehead before coming to him with her arms opened for his hug.

"You look exhausted, Art. You should go home and get a good night's sleep in your own bed. I've brought my things and can stay with our girl. I really don't mind."

"Thanks Mom." He hugged her close, hiding his face in her hair, then put her aside. "I couldn't leave her for the whole night. I'll just zip out and grab a change and a shower and be back. The sleeping chair they set in here

is quite comfortable now that I've gotten used to it. I'll be fine. Thanks for coming to stay with her while I'm gone. I'd hate for her to wake up without having someone she loves close by."

"I know. It's what you say every night. Okay, off you go. I'll be here when you get back."

Grabbing his jacket from the back of the chair, Art left the hospital and drove to his place. Once there, as he often did, he went into Lisa's room and sat on her bed, imagining her snuggled against the pillows, her toys surrounding her, waiting for him to open the book of the night. She'd be as before... strong, healthy, and laughing at his teasing.

Looking around, he suddenly opened his eyes and remembered his earlier worry about Jingles, her favorite toy, that didn't make noise anymore. Gosh, he'd forgotten how important it had been for him to replace that darned flamingo.

Suddenly, he realized the need was still there. When she woke up, it would be the first thing she'd ask for. He'd better get on it again. Taking out his phone, he went to his older messages and sure enough, he found the reply the nice woman from Flamingoes had sent him.

Hold it, she'd sent two messages, and he'd ignored them both. Not intentionally, but nevertheless, he'd put that emergency at the back of his mind, hadn't he?

Maybe now it was time to get back to it. She'd asked for his input so she could make a replica. That was promising. Taking his phone, he clicked on the email and sent her a reply.

Hi Sue,

I'm sorry it's taken me so long to answer your kind email, but my little girl is still very ill and hasn't woken up from her accident. I'm hoping that maybe with her flamingo nearby, she'll be responsive to the toy, and it

might help her to fight her way back, or at the very least, ease her mind. Of course, I'd be willing to give you a description in person if you believe it might help you make a replica.

Thank you for your time,

Art Reves.

Before he could hit send, his phone rang. Terrified of bad news, he exited his browser and opened the phone to hear his mother on the line.

“Darling, Lisa moved. I saw it myself. She moved her hands. The doctors are with her now. You better come back.”

“I’ll be there as soon as possible. Don’t stop talking to her.”

“I won’t. Just get here.”

Chapter Eight

Work at the studio had become ridiculous. With orders piling up they hired two more girls to come in, one to help with the artwork and the other as a seamstress. Sue put in twice the hours as anyone else and by the end of the day, fell into her bed exhausted.

The only time she took off was to help her mother with the hospital's decorations and to find a few hours for a lunch date with Jacquie and Colleen.

After four days of constant phone calls back and forth with Jacquie – Sue trying to keep her in a positive frame of mind – they got the news they'd been praying for. The suite was theirs if they still wanted it. Margaret had called while they'd been dining at a local restaurant.

Considering that this day had been the worst, with Sue trying to keep Jacquie from falling apart, the call couldn't have come at a better time. In fact, they'd been arguing about whether Jacquie should call Margaret yet again to ask if she'd heard anything. "Trust me, hon. Margaret knows you're serious. One call a day is sufficient for her to get it."

Face alight, Jacquie exclaimed, "She said I can bring the parents around in the morning. Will you come with us? I'm so nervous. I don't want to say anything that will put Mom and Dad off, and they love you and trust your judgement."

Flattered, yet knowing Jacquie spoke the truth, she didn't hesitate. "Of course I will. I'm excited to see what they think of the place."

The next morning, both girls watched as Margaret seduced Jacquie's parents with promises of a wonderful new lifestyle. One where they could pitch in with cooking in her glorious, updated kitchen, featuring a huge old wooden farmhouse-style table and chairs where they could, if they wanted, share meals with the others. Jacquie's mother lit up from that news because

she'd missed not having her own kitchen and being able to make her specialties.

They would also be welcome to help as much as they desired in the outside garden beds or even the large greenhouse behind the garage where the other residents had already started to gather seeds for their spring planting.

And... everyone was also welcome to spend whatever time they preferred in the communal living room featuring a huge-screen television rather than hiding away in their own small apartments. Or work out in the gym they had set up in the sunroom where one could get their steps on a treadmill, ride a stationary bike, or just use the weights set up high to make them accessible. In other words, they would have the run of the house and many things to keep them occupied.

She even arranged for them to meet the other four couples who lived there, and it turned out that Jacquie's father had worked with one of the men back when he'd been a youngster slaving on the railroad, or so that's how they described those times. They both had stories to share of the good-old days.

Once the girls had taken the oldies out for a nice lunch at their favorite restaurant and promised to help with the move on the coming weekend, they were finally able to settle her excited parents back in their place. Their guarantee to return that evening with boxes and packing paper sealed the deal. It delighted both the girls that her parents couldn't wait to start packing.

As Jacquie drove Sue back to her place to pick up her own car, they agreed on one thing – how good it felt to make others happy, especially those they loved.

Later, driving home, Sue's glee dampened when she thought about a

wee little girl waking up, her arms empty while yearning for her special friend.

Sue and Jacquie sat with her parents the first night in their new home and both girls were ecstatic at the oldies' excitement. Jacquie leaned over and whispered to Sue, "I haven't seen them this happy for quite some time."

"I know. They really like Margaret, and all the other folks seem quite lovely. Did you notice how many of the men pitched in to help us with the move? I have a feeling Margaret hand-picked everyone for their open and giving personalities. That smart woman knew they would all have to get along, and so she made sure to find folks who would be willing to share their personal space. It's amazing, isn't it?"

"I know. I'm so relieved. I mean, Mom and Dad gave me such a good home and a safe upbringing that I feel it's the least I can do to make their last years as happy as possible."

"You're just lucky their few ailments are mostly physical and can be treated. While we helped with the move, I noticed many of the folks at their old place weren't – shall we say – living in the real world."

"You mean those sitting around in wheel chairs with vacant stares. I know. As bad as I always felt for them, I'll admit to you that they gave me the willies."

"Me too. But think about how it must have been for your folks. How horrible it would be surrounded by sad, dysfunctional people when you have all your marbles."

Jacquie sighed. "It's true, they are lucky. Dad says it's their good food choices and healthy lifestyle that's kept them strong. He's probably right. For now, they're happy and that's all that matters."

"I agree." Sue smiled infectiously. "Did you see the Christmas

decorations they had piled in the dining room? I asked Margaret about them, and she said they'd be putting their tree up tomorrow. That her nephew was going to help them. He's already done the outside lights, and they look wonderful."

Jacquie nodded. "I know. She got my promise to help them. You're the Christmas lady. Would you go with me? You know I'm a klutz when it comes to decorating."

"Can't, sorry. Promised Colleen I'd go to dinner with her. She needs to talk about Barb."

"Better you than me. I'm almost glad I'll be stuck at Margaret's then... as much as I dread looking a fool."

"You'll be just fine. And if her nephew is the same man in the picture she has on the mantel, and if he's single, you just might be in for a real treat."

"Yeah, with my luck? He's probably married with five kids and a pregnant wife."

Giggling, Sue stood. "You're such a Debbie Downer." She added, "I need to stick with the plan though. I'm worried about Colleen. Barb's been away a lot. It scares Colleen. She thinks she might be losing her. I know it's a tough time for her right now. She wants to get pregnant but hesitates because she's not sure Barb's all in with the plan."

"Right. I remember now. She told us they'd chosen a relative to be a sperm donor. And all was in place."

"Yeah, kind of. But now everything is up in the air."

"Poor Colleen. As much as neither of us care for Barb, she is Colleen's choice and we've always supported her. I just hate to see her getting hurt."

Sue thought about her answer before finally spurring it out. "I can't help thinking a breakup sooner than later could be for the best."

Jacquie nodded. “You’re so lucky. I’ve gone through boyfriends like a girl changes her earrings. Even Colleen has changed her mind a few times. But you, one teenage crush in high school that petered out followed by a serious boyfriend in college. He immigrates to Scotland, and you’ve been free ever since. Don’t you miss the excitement of being in a romantic relationship?”

“Sure. Of course I do. But I don’t want to be involved in... in flings. You know, sex and partying. I want a true commitment with love.”

“Well, good luck with that, girlfriend. Good luck with that.”

Chapter Nine

Art raced to the hospital with a glow on his face and prayers reverberating in his head. *Please, please let my baby wake up.*

But it wasn't to be. By the time he'd arrived, Lisa had settled back into her comatose state and the doctor had left him only optimistic words to brighten his disappointment.

He questioned his mother continuously about how she moved. "Did she speak or make any sounds, Mom?"

"No, no. Her hand just reached as if she searched for something. I gave her the doll you have next to her; told her we were waiting for her, but she just sighed, and her hand dropped."

"Maybe she was reaching for me." Art's guilt almost destroyed him at that moment. "I should have been here."

"Art Reves. Stop it. You can't be in this hospital room every second of every day. You mustn't do this to yourself. She wasn't awake, honey. But she's getting closer."

The doctor chimed in. "It's really just the first step, Art. Lisa's beginning to get stronger and will no doubt, in her own time, become more and more alert. You mustn't be disillusioned. Moving as she did is a good sign."

Counting the days as they passed, he watched for other movements and wasn't disappointed. As if Lisa reached for something no one could see, her little fingers would stretch for an infinitesimal moment and then drop back to her side. Not once did she open her eyes.

His parents encouraged him to feel hopeful, but he just couldn't. Worried sick about her possible demise, over the next while, he continued to lose weight and became like a skeleton of his old healthy self.

Day after day he sat by her bed and read her stories, talked to her, and urged her to wake up and speak to him. He used every bribe he could think of, from her favorite movies to her penchant for chocolate-mint ice cream cones.

Each day, the hospital began decorating for the coming Christmas season, and he humbugged it to himself and everyone who would listen. How could the world celebrate when his Lisa lay there unmoving? He didn't understand and certainly couldn't join in the festivities.

One afternoon, a commotion in the hallway startled him, and he made his way to the door to find a woman with a push cart filled with colorfully wrapped gifts approaching the waiting room where they'd erected a large tree.

It was the same female he'd seen in the hospital weeks before, the one who'd caught his attention and had stayed in his thoughts for some time.

Just as she came closer, he saw the wheel of her trolley bend sideways, and most of the presents cascaded to the ground. Comically, the girl cartwheeled, trying to grab as many as she could before they fell and she ended up on her backside instead.

Rushing forward, he tried to stop the accident but ended up tripping on one of the wheels that had broken away, and landing on the floor beside her. "I'm sorry. I didn't see the ah... the wheel in time."

Laughing, still surrounded on the floor by the packages, Sue joked. "Oh, I watch it all the time. It's a good series."

Not missing a beat, Art replied, "It's on my recordings so I'll probably get to it one day."

Enjoying their silliness, they both cracked up and didn't make any moves to stand until one of the nurses who saw the accident rushed to help.

That's when they both scooted around, gathering the wrapped gifts,

and piled them in a stack.

“I’m so sorry.” The female’s voice sounded melodic, sweet, and soft, and it gave Art pleasure to hear it. “I was just dropping off these gifts for the children’s tree. We do it every year.” She looked closer and seemed to recognize him because she added, “Hi” in a soft voice.

“Hi.” He replied. Then he smiled and added, “Please don’t apologize. These things happen.” His gaze caught her smiling eyes and something shining deep inside – like a secret only she knew – that made his heart stop. She looked back at him, and they stared at each other, both still grinning. A noise close by brought them back to earth, and he quickly moved.

“Here let me help you right this silly thing.” He lifted the offending cart and shoved the wheel back into place, locking it down. Then he helped her pile the rest of the packages again.

He watched until the two women – both carefully wheeling the buggy, one on each side to be sure it made the trip – were out of sight. No doubt, they would be stacking the gifts near the children’s tree, the one beautifully decorated by a mother and daughter who lived nearby that came to take on the challenge every year.

He knew this happened because one of Lisa’s older nurses told him the story, trying to get him into the spirit of the season. As scroogey as he felt, even he could tell they’d put in a huge amount of work. Not just adorning the large tree, but the whole room shone with lights, gorgeous ornaments, and all done with childish themes. What had gotten his attention had been the rather adorable flamingo angel decorating the top.

Suddenly he remembered his own flamingo troubles. Returning to Lisa’s bedside, he searched for an answer to his last email and felt his stomach drop. *Oh, no!* He’d never sent the message... it still waited in his draft folder. What an idiot!

Reading it over to be sure it made sense, he quickly clicked send and hoped the woman called Sue would still be interested in helping him. Seeing his Lisa fading away before his eyes made it imperative for him to replace the one toy she'd carried with her everywhere.

Though it had become slightly ragged over the last four years, he often wondered if she'd clung to it in the same way she would have clung to her mother had she lived. Carrying it with her all day, she could only go to sleep if she held it close. In fact, just the night before the accident, he'd had to override her wishes for Jingles to bathe with her, telling her that if the stuffed bird got wet, it wouldn't be able to sleep in her bed.

"Daddy, really?" She'd sighed as if she were the adult and he the child. "Did you forget that we could put him in the dryer?" Her childish sarcasm delighted him because at her age it seemed hilarious rather than argumentative.

Pretending to take her seriously, he waited seconds before replying. "We could, that's right. But dryers take a long time, and you have to go to bed in..." He looked at his watch... "in ten minutes."

Lisa had sat thinking his answer over before replying. "Okay. He can just sit and watch me have my bath then."

"Right. As he always does."

Thinking back to his many discussions with his parents over her strong attachment to Jingles, he'd ended up seeing their point of view. His mom had often reminded him that it had been Janette who'd bought Jingles as a Christmas gift before Lisa was born. By the time the little girl could understand, the whole family made her aware that it was a gift from a mommy who loved her. Therefore, she probably still identified the toy with her unknown mother.

Though the jingling feature had long since stopped working, just the

feel of the toy in her arms seemed to satisfy the little girl. Being a man who's feet were firmly planted on the ground, it became more and more difficult for him to continue allowing her this strange dependence on a toy.

But when his father had pitched in with his opinion, it had made him think long and hard. "Does it make Lisa happy to have this toy? Yes, it does. And we want her to be happy, right? Seems like a no-brainer to me."

Hearing that philosophy out loud, he'd decided to leave well enough alone. And so he had, to the point that they'd had to return to the house more than once when Jingles had been accidentally left behind.

Now, when his baby girl needed every advantage they could give her, he kicked himself mentally for having forgotten her love for Jingles. How could he have been so careless?

Hearing the door to the room opening, he turned and saw the same woman he'd met in the hallway. She just poked her head in, and her soft voice hesitated before she spoke. "I'm sorry to intrude. The nurse said you might be able to help us in the waiting room. Seems the tree is about to collapse, and we have no idea how to shore it up. Would you be able to come?"

Art stood quickly and went to where she waited by the door. "Of course." He glanced back at Lisa who hadn't moved all morning. "Of course I can help you."

Following behind the young woman in her attractive black yoga pants and bright red sweater, he arrived just in time to stop the crash. One of the nurses he'd become attached to because of her gentle ways with Lisa was using her strength to keep the tree from falling over.

As soon as she saw Art, she called out. "Help. Please grab the tree before it falls."

Art race forward and using his long arms, he was able to stabilize the

tree in time. Pushing it backwards, he gave orders. “Can one of you check to see if the stand is okay?”

On her hands and knees, Sue wriggled under the tree and soon found the culprit. “The stand is barely clinging together. No wonder it’s not holding the weight. I think we’ll need to replace it.”

Art carefully set the tree sideways over one of the visitor’s chairs and then he joined her down below. “Yep. I can see cracks on both sides. Would they have any heavy tape around that we could use to keep it together?”

The nurse laughed. “We’re in a hospital filled with bandages and tape. I think I can get something that would help.” She disappeared for a few minutes while Sue sat on the floor next to Art and waited.

“Do you think tape will hold it together?”

He grinned toward her, his expression teasing. “Not sure they’d be willing to operate, so bandaging it seems to be the best we can do.”

Sue giggled. “You’re right. If we can get it to last for this year, I’ll be sure to replace it so this won’t happen again.”

“You come every year to help out over the holidays?”

“My mother started it when I was a child with pneumonia, and I had to stay here for Christmas. She decided to make it fun for everyone who could participate. And strangely, most of the residents had come to celebrate and even the staff got involved. Over the years, it’s become so popular that we’ve kept up the tradition.”

“I have to admit, the tree in the entrance to the hospital is very attractive, looks like a professional job. Did you do that one as well?”

“Yes. But I’ll admit that the one I take most pleasure in is this tree in the children’s ward. We make it less commercial and more suited for the kids.”

Paying close attention this time, he looked around the room and

noticed the fairytale atmosphere that any child would love. In every corner, high up on colored shelves, they had tucked magical characters dressed for the holidays. Bears with fancy hats, elves dressed in Christmas suits, and Santas of every shape and size, all interspersed with greenery and fairy lights woven throughout.

Someone with an incredible imagination had continued the theme around the room yet left space for the many easy chairs where the visitors would sit in groups to visit.

Then he again spied the flamingo angel, and his heart dropped. In a husky voice, he admitted, “My favorite decoration is the tree topper.”

Sue looked to where he pointed and smiled. “Mine too.”

Before they could share more, the nurse bustled in with a basket filled with bandages and tape and the next few minutes were spent repairing the tree stand and then setting the tree upright once again.

“It worked.” Sue looked at the other two, a smile shining on her satisfied face. “Thank you for your help.” She’d turned to Art and unconsciously held her hand out.

He took it gently and squeezed. “Hey, glad to help.” The nurse added her thanks. “Mr. Reyes, I wanted to let you know that we’ll be in before lunch to bathe Lisa. You could take that time for yourself.”

“Thanks, nurse. But I’ve already been away from her longer than I should be. I’ll stick around.” He would be watching his phone now for a reply to his message. With the holiday just around the corner, it seemed even more imperative for him to find another Jingles.

Leaving the two women behind, he hurried back to his post near his daughter. Sue turned to the nurse and made a comment. “What a nice man. I hope his Lisa gets well soon.”

“We all do, and not just for her sake. That man is the nicest person

and deserves his happy ending. I've never known anyone as loyal and caring as he's been ever since the accident." Nurse Emmy turned to Sue. "I'm glad we could save this tree. I think it's the best one yet. The children who've seen it so far love it."

"It is pretty. I'll just straighten everything out a bit since it's been juggled around and get a tree skirt to cover the bandaged stand."

"You know, I wouldn't cover it myself. Most of the kids here know what it's like to wear bandages and will get a kick out of seeing their tree wearing some too."

"I never thought of that, but you're right. Fine, we'll just leave it the way it is. But I'll place the gifts back like they were, and it'll be good as new."

Laughing, the nurse added, "That's our aim here in the hospital. To fix things as good as new."

Chapter Ten

Dining with Colleen put a blight on her happy mood, and yet Sue didn't regret being with her friend and hearing about her problems. In fact, having another, cooler head learn the situation – one with a different point of view – seemed to settle Colleen.

“Sue, I know you and Jacquie never really liked Barb but—”

“Hey. Stop that. It's not that we don't like her. It's that we don't believe she's the woman who'll make your dreams come true. All you've talked about these last few years has been about starting a family and settling into a committed relationship, right?”

Colleen looked glum but admitted the truth. “Yeah. I'm tired of the dating game and would love to have a home and a steady partner.”

“Do you actually believe, and I mean with all your heart, that Barb is the girl who feels the same way?” Sue knew the answer before she put out her question, but she needed Colleen to see the truth too.

It took quite a few seconds before Colleen sighed, shook her head, and then dropped her face into her hands. “No. She's all about partying and getting high. I keep praying she'll settle down and grow up, but she seems to be getting worse. Now she's away so much, I seldom get a real read on where she is.”

“Yet, you still want to try and hogtie her to your future? If it was me, I'd be terrified.”

Colleen looked up from her hiding place. “I am. But I love her. She's got a big heart, and she makes me laugh. Yet, you're right. That's not the best credentials for a steady relationship, is it?”

“I'd say it's up to you, but for me, I'd want a person alongside me in a marriage who shared the same dreams I do. But then, that's just me.”

Colleen's tears began to fall from eyes overflowing, and she put her head on Sue's arm. "I wish you were gay."

Laughing, Sue hugged her hard. "Sorry, pal. You're just not my type."

Serious now, Colleen swiped at her cheeks and asked, "What is your type? I've often wondered."

An image of a tall, lanky man sitting on the floor of the hospital waiting room, grinning at her like a partner in crime, came into her mind and wouldn't be shut down, "I've never really given it much thought. I've always figured I'd recognize him when I see him."

"Didn't you think what's his name... ahh, Paul was the guy? When you moved in with him, we were all waiting for wedding invitations."

"I did for a while. We got along so well, and we seemed to be a perfect match. Between you and me, when he told me he had an important question to ask me, I was sure he'd be on his knees with a ring. I remember getting ready to meet him that night, and I could barely breathe."

"Because you were excited?"

"No. That's the strange thing in all of this. I was terrified. Every time I thought about marrying him, doubts crowded in and scared me. I thought I had all the answers, but I didn't. When he finally asked his question... if I'd be willing to move to Scotland with him, I knew the answer was a resounding no. How could I leave my home here in Victoria and my parents? I knew then if I really loved him, I'd go to the ends of the earth to be with him. After a serious discussion, we parted as friends. I haven't met anyone else whose sparked my interest since."

Colleen's expression still held a question. "You really do love Victoria, don't you?"

"What's not to love. We live on the edge of the ocean, with mountains

in the distance, in a gorgeous flower-filled city that brings millions of tourists every year. Of course, I love it. Truthfully, I'd hate to ever leave."

Colleen laid her head against Sue's arm. "I wish my future could be as simple as yours, meet a man, fall in love, and start a family. For me, the world has always been tougher, and my chances of happiness aren't nearly as good."

"You're probably right. Being gay can't be easy. Thank goodness you live in Canada where it's been accepted for years."

"Yep. I've thanked God more times than you'll ever know."

Sue nodded, understanding Colleen's sentiments, having gone through different biases surrounding her friend that still exist in some folks who aren't open-hearted.

Wanting to take the onus off that subject, she added, "Yet it's not all sunshine and roses for me either. I know I'm only thirty, but my choices have dwindled as well. I've tried to meet men, but it seems that the older one gets, the less opportunity exists. Many of the guys I've dated have too much baggage, others only want to party and get laid, and the rest who appear normal are already married. It's not easy being a single woman in today's world."

Colleen lifted her drink to toast with Sue, her tone soft. "I never thought about it in that way."

It was Sue's turn to put her head on Colleen's shoulder. "Look at us, crying in our beer."

"We're drinking margaritas." Colleen's dry comment made Sue laugh before she added, "Does it matter? Look, I have no doubt we'll both find our one-and-onlys as long as we're willing to wait for the right person."

Smiling bravely, Colleen added, "Guess it's you and me girlfriend, two lonely spinsters perched on a shelf with our claws ready to snatch our

next victim.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

Chapter Eleven

The next day seemed to start a change. When she arrived at work, Sue instinctively felt something was wrong but couldn't quite put her finger on exactly what bothered her.

Then she opened her emails and read the latest message from Art and the sun began to shine. The man had finally written back to her, saying he'd be happy to meet as soon as possible to discuss the flamingo for his sick little girl.

She answered him instantly, happiness lighting up her heart.

I'm so relieved to hear from you, Art.

I'll be happy to come to the hospital today and deliver the flamingo if you prefer.

Let me know,

Sue.

Within a few seconds, she received a reply that thrilled her.

Hi Sue,

Yes, please. That would be perfect. We could meet in the children's floor waiting room. The one they've decorated for Christmas.

Thank you for answering. It means more than I can say.

Art.

Filled with anticipation, Sue went to the shelf where she'd put her latest creation...

... and found it empty.

What??

Frantic, stomach becoming instantly nauseous, she searched everywhere, thinking the rather large toy might have been put away inside one of the cupboards. Or even in her own small office which was filled to

bursting with different products, bulky materials, and various art supplies.

It has to be here... somewhere. As her hunt continued, her optimism slowly diminished, and her heart began flooding with fear. *God, where could it have gone?*

Finally, rushing into the open space where her employees worked at different stations, she tried to keep her voice normal and not scream out her frustration. “Do any of you know where that flamingo on the glass shelf went?”

The newest recruit, Joan, answered, her unsteady voice filled with instant worry. “I sold it yesterday, Sue. An order came in while everyone was at lunch, and it fit perfectly. I’m sorry, I didn’t know the toy was special. I just wrapped it up and put it with the day’s shipments. I’m really sorry.”

Having the same thought as everyone else, they all rushed to the front of the shop only to find that the day’s orders had been picked up and would be on their way in the mail.

Knowing her dismayed expression must be obvious, Sue stopped the girl whose face looked devastated. “It’s my fault for not telling you, Joan. The others knew I’d made this flamingo for a little girl who’d been in an accident, but you couldn’t have known.”

Scrambling now, Sue went searching for more soft plush to make another copy and found that the particular pink fluffy material had been all used up. Dismayed, she called her supplier and was told that the delivery would be a week away.

Frantic now, Sue got online and checked every known store that might sell that style of flamingo. At the end of the morning, her search had been in vain. That particular size of flamingo was either no longer in stock or the delivery date would be well after the holidays. When her phone rang, and she saw her mother’s name, she answered almost in tears.

“Susie, what’s wrong? You sound upset.”

“It’s about the flamingo I made for the little girl who was in an accident.”

“Oh no. Please don’t tell me she passed.”

“No. Not that. Her father finally reached out and wants to meet. I’d made a toy according to the image he sent me. Actually, the exact replica of the image he’d sent me. But one of the new girls sold it and its been mailed. Now that we’ve completed our Christmas rush, we’re out of that same material. I’ve tried to find more pink plush, but my supplier can’t send me another batch until the new year. I don’t know what to do.”

“Oh dear. That is a problem. Did you check online?”

Almost in tears, sadness eating away her optimism, she answered, “I did... all morning. Anything that might have worked can’t be delivered before Christmas.”

“What about your own collection. You have more flamingoes than anyone else I know. Could you have something that might fit the bill?”

Untangling from her slumped position, Sue shot to her feet. “I never thought of that. You’re right. I have some that are still in their boxes, those I never played with because they were collectibles. Maybe I can find one like it or even enough of the same material for me to make another.” Hopeful now, the tears that had been hovering all morning fled to be replaced by confidence. She had so many flamingoes that surely one would be suitable. “Thanks, Mom.” Just as she went to hang up, she remembered her mother had called her. “Wait. Was there something you needed?”

“Yes, actually. I wanted to let you know that Jacquie phoned to tell us about her parents’ move, and we invited them for dinner on Christmas Eve. She’s bringing a date, their landlord’s nephew, Ken. Seems he’s new in town and hasn’t met a lot of people yet. Can you make it? It’s Christmas, so I

thought it would be fun to have a bit of a get-together. Maybe Colleen can come too. And there's a new couple who just moved in next door and they're bringing their daughter with them, so we're having quite a bunch. I'd really appreciate your help dear."

Knowing her mother's penchant for collecting strays and making them welcome, Sue agreed. "Sure. Of course. And yes, give Colleen a call. She's at loose ends now that she's broken off her relationship with Barb. I'll be there early to help you. But I gotta go home now and check my collection. I'll let you know how it turns out later. Bye, Mom."

Being pulled in so many directions at once might have upset most people, yet Sue never felt that way at all. Quite the contrary. After seeing that poor man in the hospital, she'd counted her blessings, knowing she had a full life filled with many wonderful friends. Unfortunately, this flamingo situation had been the one flaw in her otherwise happy world and had kept her in a tizzy.

Driving to her apartment, she ruminated on just how lucky she was. Trying to keep her spirits up and hope alive, she sang carols and forced herself to keep her speed within the limit. If she could only find a flamingo close to the size and color that Art needed, she'd be able to relax and enjoy the coming holiday.

Hands trembling, she had to try inserting the key twice before she got the door opened. Accepting that having even the slightest chance to do something for this little girl and the father who cared so much for her had become the most important thing in her world, she prayed to find the toy.

Rushing to the room where she stored her collection, hundreds of flamingoes of every shape and size, she flung open the closet doors where she'd stacked many of the boxed collectibles.

Surveying each item, knowing the image by heart after staring at it so

many times, she started to feel less optimistic. There were some she could probably take apart for the material and some of the faces might be pretty close to the style in the photo, but none were exact.

Not until she spotted the box near the back with the word “Jingles” written on the side. Then her heartbeat ramped up. Reaching deep, she slid it out and looked in through the plastic to see the exact toy she’d been searching for. Carefully opening the flap, she withdrew the fluffy, stuffed bird and hugged it to her chest, her face sliding over the softest material imaginable.

When squeezing it in a certain way produced the jingling sounds, she giggled with relief. It was perfect.

Chapter Twelve

Arriving a bit early to the hospital, her parcel stored carefully in a tote bag, Sue found the waiting room empty. To pass the time, she checked the tree again to make sure all was fine. She made out the many wrapped presents donated by not only her store, but several others in the neighborhood. Again she thought about how lucky they were to live in a place that cared so much for their sick and lonely citizens.

She crouched down and read some of the tags, many she'd placed on packages herself. The messages read Girl – ages 2 to 4 or Boy – ages 5 to 7. No one wanted to give an impractical gift that might disappoint rather than delight.

She heard the door open and stood, looking forward to finally meeting the man who'd reached out and turned her normal world upside down.

“It's you.” She squeaked her surprise and then coughed to cover up her shock.

The tall, lanky man with the warmest brown eyes she'd ever seen appeared astounded. “You're Sue Ross?” He grinned and added, “I should have known it would be you.”

Not understanding exactly what he meant, she smiled and said, “Yes. I'm the flamingo lady, the one you wrote to. I tried to contact you more than once. When you finally answered today, I was thrilled. Especially because I have a great surprise.” She held up the bag she'd been carrying like it stored precious jewels and pulled Jingles from the interior. Holding it out to Art, the man who looked as if he'd been turned to stone, she whispered, “See, the exact replica.”

In a voice strangled with astonishment, Art's voice cracked. “It's Jingles. Oh my god, it's him. Her flamingo.”

“I wasn’t sure because it looked a bit raggedy in your picture.”

“It’s him. Her special lovie.” Suddenly Art came to life and flew towards her, gathered her in his arms and twirled her around with her feet unable to touch the ground. “You found him. Oh my God. Thank you. I can’t tell you how much this means to me, or what it’ll mean to Lisa.”

Lisa! All this time, she’d believed Lisa to be his wife? The woman he refused to leave alone in her hospital bed. Why she’d imagined that, especially since she’d found him in a room on the children’s floor, she’d never know. Finding out that Lisa was the same little girl who’d been in her thoughts for ages, everything seemed to all fit into place. As if it was meant to be.

Art snapped her out of her thoughts by taking her hand and pulling her along with him. “Come. Let’s give Jingles to Lisa. She’s been sliding away from us more every day. I just know this toy will be the one thing that will make her happy.”

Chapter Thirteen

Art felt as if his feet were no longer on the ground, this sudden happiness lessening what had appeared like an interminably heavy load. Seeing the young woman waiting for him with the perfect flamingo, the same woman who'd been pestering his thoughts since their last meeting, he couldn't believe his first reaction of shock.

After all, hadn't she been the girl who'd decorated the children's tree? He should have sensed she'd be the one who'd come to his rescue. Opening the door to Lisa's room, seeing her lying there so quiet, her tiny form unmoving, his heart dropped as it always did. Creeping closer, he began to tell the little girl a story.

"Honeybunny, I want you to meet Sue. She's the angel who found Jingles for us and she's here to return him to you." He placed the flamingo near his child's side and in seconds felt his breath leave his body and his knees give out.

Lisa's hand ever so slowly began to reach out, her fingers weakly trembling, digging into the furry body of the toy. He'd have landed in a heap on the floor without Sue's strong arms to help him to the side of the bed.

Both adults held their breath watching as the child searched for something. When her fingers found the fluffy wing and clutched it, they both let out a sigh of delight.

Fixated on her every move, they saw Lisa's face change. One of her cheeks quivered as the side of her mouth rose into what one might describe as a smile.

Sighing, the child pulled at the toy bringing it an inch closer and then drifted off into what looked to be a satisfied sleep.

"We need to tell the doctor." Art looked at Sue through his tears.

Even though he spoke those words, he didn't seem to have the strength to move.

"I'll ask the nurse to get him. You wait with Lisa."

Before she could leave, he held her hand to keep her beside him.

"You saw it too. She smiled, right?"

"Looked that way to me." Sue's voice broke over the words, and she wiped away her own tears. "I did see a change, but I don't know if it was unusual. Has she moved her hand before?"

"A little. We all figured she searched for something. Now I'm beginning to believe it was Jingles. Did you see the way she pulled her toy closer, even if only a tiny fraction."

"Yes. Maybe it was her way of telling us to put him in her arms."

"You think so?"

"I do. Plus, it couldn't hurt."

Art leaned over and very carefully lifted Lisa's arm and placed the toy right by her chest. Then he put her hand around the snuggly's neck the way he'd seen her carry her friend a million times before.

Satisfied that Jingles was perfect, he sat back, and they both watched. A sigh seemed to be torn from the lips of the child. Her fingers clutched the toy ever so slightly, and her face again moved into what one might say was a smile. Slowly, she tightened her hold on the soft plush of the toy and stayed that way.

"She's happier now, isn't she?" Art needed reassurance.

"Oh, yes." Sue sniffed, her pulse finally settling down. "She's safe now... with her special lovey. I know exactly how that feels. It used to be my way to face the dark... or any other times that scared me as a child."

She sat back and looked at the father now wrapped up in his delight.

"One day I'll show you and Lisa my collection and tell you the story of why I

began collecting flamingoes in the first place.”

She left the room in search of the nurse, her tears under control enough so she could speak.

Minutes later, the doctor agreed with them. “She’s taken a turn for the better. Her pulse has stabilized, and her color is returning.”

Fearing her earlier paleness, Art felt a huge sense of relief. He stood back while they did their examination and watched as both the nurse and the doctor’s faces beamed. Giddy, he could barely wait for them to finally share their results.

When the doctor spoke, Art listened to words that he’d prayed to hear for what seemed like forever.

“I don’t know what happened but it’s like a miracle. I can’t believe how much she’s improved since I saw her last.”

“Sue found her favorite toy. Same as the one Janette had bought for her before she died. Lisa’s carried it around ever since she was old enough... well until the accident.”

The doctor appeared confused but hopeful. “Whatever you did to bring about this change has made a huge difference. If she continues like this, I have every hope she may come back to us.”

Art waited until the doctor and nurse left the room to turn to Sue. “Thank you so much. I don’t have enough words to tell you what this means to me.”

“You don’t have to put your feelings into words. They’re written all over your face. Look, I’ll leave you now so you can be with your daughter. But if you don’t mind, I’d like to come back and see her again.”

“Of course. Anytime.”

“How about around dinner time. Is there anything I can bring you?”

Maybe a special coffee or a favorite hamburger? Please, I'd like to help."

Art thought about his one craving and shared. "I'd love a Timmy's breakfast sausage biscuit and a double-double. It's a favorite treat anytime of the day when I can get away and allow myself to be spoiled."

"You got it. I'll be back later then. And if you think of anything else, just text me. I'll send you my number." As she opened the door, she turned back to see the lovely man clutching his daughter's hand so he could place a gentle kiss on her knuckles. With that sweet image in her head, Sue headed back to the office to help her staff with the million chores they still had left before the holiday.

Chapter Fourteen

Sue swore later that her feet never touched the ground for the rest of the day. That she floated on clouds and concentration was impossible. When she called her mother with the wonderful news, her mom actually broke down and started to weep.

“I’m sorry for being such a waterspout. It’s just that I couldn’t get the poor little girl out of my mind. When you texted that you found Jingles, and it was the exact flamingo you’d been searching for, I felt wonderful. But then the doubts began creeping in. What if the child didn’t react? Now you say she did, and I’m honestly thrilled.”

“Mom, you’d have been a mess if you’d witnessed Lisa’s reaction. Lisa, that’s the girl’s name... seemed to sense that her favorite lovey had found her. I swear her little fingers clutched at it. Right in front of our eyes, she became peaceful. Oh, I don’t know how to describe it. But when the doctor examined her, he called it a miracle.”

“That’s wonderful. I’m going to knit Jingles a fancy Christmas scarf. Do you think she’d like it? You always loved being able to dress your toys up for the holiday.”

Sue laughed. “Sure, Mom. But remember, Lisa’s still in a coma. I pray she recovers completely but no one can say for sure.”

“Just put Jingles to work, and she’ll listen.”

Giggling, Sue reminded her mother of how often her noisy toys would surprisingly lose their ability to make sounds.

“Blame that on your father. He hated listening to all that racket and found a way to silence every one of them. All I’m saying is that when you were little, you loved hearing your flamingoes chatter. Said your babies were talking to you.”

After a little more conversation, Sue hung up and got busy finishing the many chores still on her to-do list. By the time she could lock up the shop, she glanced at her watch and saw the time had flown by.

Hurrying to her car, she noticed the brightness of the now well-lit parking area. Looking toward the light, she made out the intermittent snowflakes floating in the air. Cameras attached to both corners of the building gave her a new sense of security. Thanks to her father and the electrician he hired, she felt a lot safer.

Once she did a drive-through at Timmy's for her dinner order, she noticed how much her heart sped up the closer she got to the hospital. By the time she'd arrived in the corridor, she almost ran to get to Lisa's room.

Skidding to a stop at the door, she straightened herself so as not to appear too anxious and then gave a little knock on the door before she opened it and looked inside.

Art bolted up from his chair by the window as soon as he saw her. So did the middle-aged woman who'd been sitting closer to the bed. Tiptoeing into the room, Sue smiled her hello after passing on the sack of food, and with a quick nod, she went to the bed to gently touch the hand of the girl firmly clutching her flamingo. "Hello, princess. I see you still have Jingles with you. He's such a handsome bird."

Turning, relief hit her because she'd not only doubled Art's order but had gotten two egg-salad sandwiches and a box of donuts as well. When he reached her, she handed him the coffee she'd been holding with care. That's when she noticed how welcoming his gaze appeared and how his wonderful smile lit up the warmth in his brown eyes.

"Thank you, Sue." Taking his coffee in one hand, he reached his other to lead her forward. "I want you to meet my mom, Lorna. She came to sit with us. She's delighted at the improvement in Lisa." He turned to the older

woman and smiled. “Mom, this is Sue Ross, the angel I told you about. The girl who went to so much trouble to find Jingles for our girl.”

“Hi.” Sue held out her hand and had it ignored as the warm-hearted woman moved in to hug her instead.

“My dear, you are truly an angel. Lisa’s so much better. I can’t believe the improvement.”

Sue smiled and hugged Lorna in return. “I’m just glad I happened to have Jingles. When I first saw the image Art sent me, I’d created as close a replica as I could from the details in the picture. But then one of my new employees, not knowing about why the toy was so special, sold it and shipped it out. It was my mother who reminded me to check in my personal collection, and there he was at the bottom of my closet. I’d never taken him from the box as it was a collectible.”

“Thank God for your mom’s quick thinking.”

“Truthfully, I’ve never been so happy as when I saw that box. The thought of disappointing Art and Lisa weighed heavy.”

Art looked up from where he’d been laying out the food on the small table and grinned. “Not only did she bring Lisa her lovey, but she brought us treats for supper as well.”

Sue laughed at his glee when he took the first mouthful of his sausage biscuit. The smells from the hot food made her mouth water. “I brought lots so there’s enough for everyone. I never got a chance to eat after work, came straight here, so I hope you don’t mind me joining you.”

“Please do. I guess you didn’t get my message. I wrote to tell you to bring a treat for yourself too. Mom, come join us. There’s enough food here for an army.”

Both women opened the cans of ginger ale while Art sipped his hot coffee, and then Sue passed out the wrapped food. Sitting together, they

talked about Lisa's improvement. Lorna glowed as she explained. "As the day wore on, Lisa became... ahh, better and better. I don't know how else to describe it."

Art swallowed his mouthful and added, "The doctors are flabbergasted. I think they all believed Lisa might not recuperate. Now, after the last round of tests, they're all pretty positive there's a good chance for her to return to normal."

Watching him eat, Lorna looked pensive, hesitated, and then decided to speak. "Your dad and I were truly worried, Art. We could see her slipping away right before our eyes. Not only her... but you too. I bet you've lost thirty pounds, weight you can't afford to lose."

Art smiled at his mother and ruffled her short blonde curls. "You're such a worrywart. But I'll give you this one. I have lost weight, and I haven't slept properly for a long time. In fact, if you don't mind, after I finish this last biscuit, I'd like to head home and grab a quick shower and change. Then I'll come back to stay the night with her."

"No. I can stay, Art. You should take Sue out for a nice walk along the beach and get some fresh air. Then maybe sleep in your own bed tonight. I promise I won't leave her for a minute."

Art looked at Sue and then his mom. Hesitating, he weighed the need to get some fresh air, and not leave the room he'd been living in for what seemed like forever. When he noticed the determined gleam in his mother's eyes, her parental attitude that warned him not to push, he caved.

"You're right. Lisa's better than she's been since the beginning. As long as she has someone with her she loves, I know she'll be fine. I'll call every few hours."

"I've no doubt. Now go. Take a walk and have some time to recoup."

She might not be completely out of the woods but she's on the mend and it's just a matter of time."

"You'll call if there's any change... anything."

"Yes, master. I will call. I promise. Now go and leave me with those donuts."

Chapter Fifteen

Art hadn't felt this alive in a long, long time. Leaving the hospital filled with such hope was like a dream come true. He guided the woman with him to his car before realizing he'd taken it for granted that she'd want to spend time with him.

"Sue, I'm sorry. I haven't asked if you want to walk along the Inner Harbor with me. It's one of my favorite places, especially later in the evening after the traffic has lessened. I like seeing the parliament building all lit up and the colored Christmas lights reflecting on the water."

"I'd like that. When I drove here from the shop, I noticed a few flakes beginning to fall." They both looked up and saw the proof of her words. She reached out and caught a silver fleck on her hand before it melted. "I love the snow and though the weather is a bit cooler, it's surprisingly beautiful. It'll be a nice evening to walk along the water."

As they drove, they discussed the weather until he pulled into a parking spot below the walkway. Taking her hand to help her from the car, they meandered while he replied to her comments about his mother.

"I really liked your mom. She's a happy soul, isn't she?"

"Always. She's wonderfully supportive, both her and my father. Right from the beginning, they flew back from their vacation in Florida. And since then, they've been with me every step of the way."

Once on the spacious walkway, they moved to a bench and sat together, still holding hands. While watching the intermittent flakes falling, they stared out over the water where harbor lights illuminated areas with an enchanting glow.

Art turned to Sue, his need to talk about the accident uppermost in his mind. Other than the police, he hadn't been able to share the horrors of that

day. Yet he wanted... no needed to put into words the nightmare he'd been reliving over and over until he thought he'd go crazy.

She looked back at him, her expression open and her soft smile inviting. Did she know how he'd bottled up the dreadfulness and let it eat away at his very soul?

Deciding there couldn't be a better time to confess, he described the abject shame he felt every time he saw Lisa lying so still in her bed. His voice shook with self-reproach, and his face looked shattered.

Sue couldn't stay silent and reminded him about what she considered the crux of the incident. "You said a drunk man t-boned your car, Art. There's no way you could have known it would happen, no way you could have avoided the accident. If anyone holds any blame, it's the fool who drank too much and then decided to get behind the wheel of a four-thousand-pound weapon."

He looked over the still dark water and let her words enter his consciousness. Words others had tried to say to him, but he'd refused to hear. Suddenly, a warmth washed over his body, and he sighed... the relief overwhelming. Without realizing his intentions, he wrapped her in his arms, and holding her close, he balanced his chin on her head.

"My God, you're right, Sue. I guess I knew it all along, but I refused to accept it. I think I had to be the one to suffer... to be the failure. How could I let myself off the hook when my beautiful baby lay there dying."

"And now?" She made her voice very soft.

"Now I recognize it's not about me, is it? It's about what's best for Lisa. All I can do is love her, pray for her to come back to me, and accept it's out of my hands." He sighed so long that he worried his wretched feelings might cause a breakdown. In the dark of the hospital room, he'd cried so many times, he'd be surprised if there were any tears left.

Then he felt the wetness on his cheeks and knew these tears were different. They weren't created from anger and dripping with fury. Instead, they were warm and healing. He stood and held the gentle woman in his arms for a long time before he stepped back to see her questioning gaze.

Standing there staring into a face he could love... did love, he slowly lowered his lips to find hers waiting. The kiss filled with questioning tenderness almost brought him to his knees. In the midst of so much pain, how could he have found such strong desire... such a wonder of emotion. It seemed impossible for any man to go from the depths of despair to such giddy heights in twenty-four hours. He clung to her, rocking her ever so slightly, knowing he'd remember this moment for the rest of his life.

Art knew that after the death of his wife, he'd given up finding love again. Now it seemed inconceivable for him to move forward without his wonderful Sue being a part of his world.

Art stepped back and looked into her face. Stars shone from glowing eyes that watched his every move. Clearly, she wore a look that told him she was also invested in this moment with him. That she felt the same wonder as he did. He kissed her again. This time with all the passion she stirred in his body.

And wonder upon wonder, she kissed him back in the same way.

Chapter Sixteen

The next day, Sue couldn't wait to close up shop so she could go to the hospital. Most of her day, she spent living in her dreams of the night before. Visualizing when Art had kissed her, treating her like spun glass.

After they'd shared that beautiful moment on the harbor, he'd asked her, his voice tender, "Would you mind coming with me to my place so I can grab a shower? Then I'll drive you back to the hospital where we left your car?" He'd grinned cheekily and added, "I promise to behave."

"Of course, I'll come with you, and I'd rather you didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"Behave." She giggled at his look of astonishment.

When they arrived at his dark, dreary home, all her romantic thoughts fled. This wasn't the surroundings that could keep her romance alive. It was the gloomy cave of a man living through hell.

While he went into his bedroom, she looked around and decided to get busy. First, she cleaned off the dirty dishes from the counters and sink, shoving them into the dishwasher she first had to empty. Obviously, someone had been in a hurry and hadn't taken the time to look after the well-appointed kitchen. Next, she opened the windows and doors to let the fresh air in and tried to bring some semblance of tidiness to the overall disarray.

Entering the room, his hair freshly washed and wearing a different pair of jeans topped with a bright blue shirt, Art stopped dead. "God, Sue. I'm so sorry about the condition of the place. Honestly, I'm usually a good housekeeper. In fact, my mom says I'm practically anal about keeping it nice. But—"

"But when a man's daughter is lying in a hospital bed fighting for her life, housekeeping is at the bottom of his priorities. I truly understand. I'd be

the same way. I don't mind helping."

He'd approached her then, his face filled with tenderness and his whole manner that of a man who couldn't believe his luck. "You are wonderful, Sue Ross. I can't believe you came into my world at a time like this."

When his lips found hers waiting, he kissed her long and hard. His hands holding her so close, he felt like a teenager on the brink of his first time with a female.

Before things got too carried away, he pulled away. "I need to get back to the hospital, and yet I want to stay here and spend the night holding you in my arms."

Sue's sigh of forgiveness made him smile. "I know, but we can't. Lisa needs you now. We'll have other times to be together."

"Lots of times?"

"Lots of times."

"You promise?"

Sue giggled. "You're like a little boy not willing to give up a treat without being sure it'll be there next time. Fine... I promise."

The next day, working against the clock, Sue talked with Art many times during their hours apart, but there'd been no change. Though Lisa still seemed better, she hadn't woken up.

At one point, Sue had called, and Lorna had answered the phone. "Hi, honey. Art said you might phone, and he didn't want you to get a dial tone. He's with the doctors right now. They had some ideas about changing Lisa's meds and wanted to run that by him before they did."

Sue's stomach clenched with the news that Lisa still hadn't woken up. "Between us, I was so sure she'd open her eyes."

“Me too. I kept waiting all last night, praying. It’s like she’s hovering so close but not quite able to push through the last barrier. You might think me silly, but I dream of her being with us for Christmas. Although my son’s a real grinch about that particular holiday, my husband and I have always tried to make it the best celebration for a little girl. We spoil the dickens out of her for that one day, and Art’s not allowed to rain on our parade.” Lorna’s voice clearly held a smile, and it warmed Sue’s heart.

“My goodness, you have to meet my folks. Talk about Christmas crazy, those two are over the top when it comes to this holiday. I’ve learned a lot from them, and it’s not all about what one receives. But how we can help others have a good day too. It’s why we decorate the hospital every year. And we supply many of the gifts for the sick kids who can’t be at home.”

“You know, we’ve only helped in the soup kitchen and done our turn with the Salvation Army kettles, but this idea of providing for the children is one I’d like to be involved with in the future... especially after having my granddaughter here this year.”

By the time Sue had finished her conversation with Lorna, she’d invited her and her husband for Christmas Eve dinner at her mother’s and felt like she’d made a true friend.

“My fingers are crossed that this new medicine works exactly the way they hope. I’ll be along after work, and if Art feels the need to make a dinner order, tell him to let me know.”

With all the girls pitching in and working hard, they were able to finish their various chores early. Happily, Sue closed the shop and invited the bunch for a nice happy-hour celebration. While they sat around a booth at one of their favorite local restaurants, Sue held up a glass of apple cider and toasted the rest of them. “So you know, we’ll be closed until after the

holidays, ladies. And since we've done extremely well with Christmas sales, the time off will be a paid break."

Everyone cheered, many with relief at knowing they could relax for the next five days without worrying about their smaller paychecks.

Because she knew their feelings, having been there herself at certain points in her life, Sue added, "We can all breathe easy, right? Just have fun with our families. I hope you all have a very Merry Christmas."

Excited about the news, everyone began talking at once. With their spirits high, jokes and stories were shared and lots of laughter followed. Eventually, they gathered around for hugs and well wishes before everyone went their own way.

Sue's next stop was at her parents' home to update them on what had been happening at the hospital. Once there, sitting with mugs of hot chai tea by the kitchen island – their favorite place to gather – she told them as much as she knew herself.

"According to Art's mom, they're going to start Lisa on new medicine, and Art's pretty hopeful it will bring the results we're all praying for. That she'll wake up."

"Is she showing any signs of doing so?" Julie's voice held concern that any mother would feel for a child.

"No more than she did when she first got Jingles. Art says she clutches the wing of the toy so tight no one can take it from her. He's imagining that she's clinging to what is keeping her with him. It's the most nerve-racking thing I've ever seen. You'd swear the child's just sleeping, and that she'll wake up if you make too much noise."

"Speaking of noise, how did she react when you made Jingle's special sounds for her?"

Starled, Sue admitted, "I forgot to do that. I meant to. But we got to

eating and chatting and then I left with Art. His mother was desperate for him to leave the hospital and get some fresh air, so we walked along the Inner Harbor and talked. That poor man has been carrying the guilt of the accident since it happened. None of it's his fault." Sue described the details and both her parents made sounds of sympathy.

Her father spoke first, and his words were shocking. "I know how he feels. As your father, it's exactly how I felt when we had to shove you into that fancy trunk in the furniture store and leave you there for hours."

Her mother reached over to hold his hand tightly. They both looked wretched, and Sue tried to smooth over the moment. "I was fine, Dad."

She couldn't stop him. Once her father began confessing, he was like a runaway train. He couldn't be stopped.

He stared into her eyes, his filling with tears she'd never seen him show before. Shocked, she reached for his hand and held it tight. "I'm fine, Dad," she repeated."

"No. You suffered horribly. You've just pushed it all away in your mind, and in those days, one didn't go to a counselor about these things. We got on with life. But... I've never forgotten. To this day, I still wake up in a panic."

When Sue went to speak again, her mother stopped her by squeezing her hand and giving her a look that mothers everywhere use to control their child without words.

Her father never noticed. Still deep in the past, he continued. "Once I knew I couldn't get back to you, I felt so useless... so devastated. I'm your daddy. You relied on me to protect you. Yet for your own safety and your mother's, I had no choice but to hide you. With those three crazy, lunatic gunmen roaming in the mall and shooting everyone who moved, it was our best chance to survive. Yet I feared every single moment that you would try

to get out of the trunk, and they would see you... shoot you like they did so many others.”

As if he'd run out of words, he laid his head on his arms and his shoulders shook with the grief of those moments.

Finally, Julie tried to comfort him with logic. “Honey, even the police were held off for hours, and once they were finally able to control the situation, they commended us for our quick thinking. Sue was safe in that trunk while others were massacred. We all came out alive and that's what matters. And it was your quick thinking that kept us that way.”

“Daddy, she's right.” Sue went to put her strong arms around him from behind. “You're the one that flung that toy in with me, do you remember? It was you who seemed to know I shouldn't be alone... and I wasn't. I had a soft comforting presence in that snuggly toy, and it's what kept me from losing my mind. I remember whispering to that lovey for a long time and finally, holding it close I was able to sleep. You did that. You thought of giving me that toy so I wouldn't be alone. And I've always loved you because of your devotion. Whenever I look at my collection, I think of your thoughtfulness, yours and Mom's, and it makes my world safe and happy.”

Julie spoke then, her weepy voice filled with confession. “It's why we all joined together and started you on that flamingo collection. Maybe it was to salve our conscience, I don't know. But every time we presented you with yet another flamingo, you lit up like you did when we opened the trunk and reached for you.” She turned to her husband who had wiped the tears from his face. “Remember, honey?”

He nodded. Listening to his wife, a smile beginning to form, he held Sue close and waited as if he knew what was coming. Julie continued. “With your face wreathed in smiles and your eyes shining with love, clinging to that

silly bird with a choke hold around its neck, you spoke words I'll never forget. In a solemn voice, you reached up to be lifted and said, 'Hi, Daddy. Me and my fwend was good. Wight?'"

Now laughing, sharing a healing hug, Sue changed the subject so her father might be able to move on. Only it wasn't to be. He spoke and they all listened. "If Art feels guilty, it's his right as her daddy. And in this case, he wasn't at fault... but then neither was I. Didn't change a thing. We're men. Protecting our family is what we're supposed to do. So be gentle with him, okay?"

"I will Dad, and thanks for sharing that story. I never knew before how it felt from your side. And how terrifying it must have been for you and Mom. I can't imagine what you went through."

Her mother cleared her throat and spoke with authority that neither Sue nor her father would question. "We can't dwell on the past except to use it as a way to deal better with the future, right? Now... tell us more about Lorna Reyes and her son."

"It's funny you should mention her because one of the reasons I came to see you is to let you know that I invited her and her husband to Christmas Eve dinner. I hope you don't mind."

"Of course, we don't mind. We're always happy to meet new people and host them for the holiday, you know that. I just wish that Art and Lisa could be here too."

They all nodded in agreement until Sue closed the subject by saying, "I'll be happy if Lisa's awake and well enough to spend that night with her daddy."

Chapter Seventeen

Art felt hopeful after speaking with the doctors. They assured him that Lisa's vitals had improved, and they figured it was only a matter of time.

But they'd said that before when she first arrived at the hospital. Thoughtful, trying to stay positive, he returned to his daughter's side where his mother told him about Sue's phone call, and her subsequent invitation.

"I said we'd love to go, but after thinking about it, I realized you might like to be there too. We could always stay with Lisa and give you a break."

"No, you did right. Number one, I wouldn't leave her on Christmas Eve, and number two, Sue never invited me. Therefore, you and Dad go and have a good time. From the things she told me about her folks last night, they sound like people you'd really like."

"I know. Did she tell you how they celebrate the season by focusing mainly on helping others? It made me aware that Dad and I could do more. I'm going to question them about whatever groups they belong to so we can join."

"Hey... you and Dad do your part. Every year you take a stint at looking after the Salvation Army kettles and you give your time to the food bank. I've always admired your dedication."

"And yet there're times we have to talk ourselves into helping. We've become lazy as time goes on. But no more. Seeing the many people who work to make the hospital less frightening for the kids on Christmas, I understand now how important it is."

Art looked pensive as if he wasn't sure whether to share something with his mom or not.

"What is it, honey?"

“I’ve always belittled this holiday myself as being a commercial joke. Well, until I had Lisa. Now that she’s gotten older, it’s all she’s been talking about lately. In fact, while we were driving that day, she kept pointing out the lights in the store windows and how Santa would be getting ready.”

He looked at his mom and saw her guilty smile. “She said you took her to the Bay to see Santa.”

Lorna looked uncomfortable and began to speak in her defense. “I don’t know what she asked for. I wasn’t allowed to get close.” Lorna began chuckling. “The little devil asked me to keep her photo with Santa as she wanted to give it to you as a Christmas present.”

Art took her hand then and held on. “No blame here... but you and Dad have filled her head with all that nonsense about being a good girl so Santa would bring her the presents she wanted. And just before that racing car came out of nowhere, she made a confession. She told me she asked for a new mommy.”

Lorna sat back in shock. “She did? Oh no. What did you say?”

“Nothing. Before I could say anything, the car smashed into us. But it’s been on my mind ever since.”

“I’m sure it has.” Lorna chuckled and then grinned with a cheekiness that made him return her smile. “Looks like her wish might be coming true.”

He had to laugh. “You mean Sue, don’t you?”

“You like her. I can tell. And son, it’s a good thing. In fact, it’s what Janette would have wanted for you... and for Lisa.”

Looking pensive, he finally nodded. “You’re right. I know it. And I do like Sue... a lot. But I can’t give any thought to our relationship until my daughter is back with us.” He frowned and the earlier happiness drained out. “If I were to lose her, I wouldn’t be fit for anyone.”

“And that’s not going to happen, Art. She’s getting better. And soon,

she'll open her eyes and all will be right in our world.”

“From your lips to God’s ears, Mom.”

Chapter Eighteen

Art looked up as Sue entered the hospital room, his welcoming smile warming her to her toes. She'd never felt this way about anyone before. That her whole being depended on the happiness of another.

On the way to her visit, she'd stopped to pick up some food for Art and his parents. Though they hadn't given her any orders, she brought a couple of pizzas, some drinks, and sweets with her just in case. "I hope you don't mind, but I haven't eaten dinner and wanted to share my food with you all. I kinda figure that most folks like this type of fast food, so please dig in."

When she stepped forward, Art came closer and reached for her, his hands warm and gentle. He helped her with her packages, and it just seemed natural to step into his hug.

Lorna greeted her in the same way and Sue experienced such gratitude at their welcoming ways that she almost broke down. What a wonderful feeling it created when others cared about seeing you... that you mattered to them so much that it lit up their faces.

Once Art helped her remove her jacket, she eventually moved close to the bed where a sleeping little girl rested peacefully, clutching her lovey. "How is Lisa today?"

While Lorna peeked into the food parcels, the obvious smells of fresh pizza getting to her, Art stepped closer to Sue. Sadness cloaked his expression and Sue felt his staggering worry.

"She hasn't moved, well other than to cling to Jingles."

Sue sat close to the child and whispered. "I want to tell you a story, Lisa. It's about Jingles." She turned to look at Art and Lorna who were both watching her now. "I looked the toy up online and found an article that I knew I needed to share." Again, she leaned closer to the child and began.

“Once upon a time there was a little princess called Honey. Now Honey had been born with a huge problem. She was blind, which means she couldn’t see. Her papa fretted a long, long time about how he could help his darling child. Finally, he came up with the idea to make her a special toy that could sing to her. He spent a long time trying to decide how this toy should look and remembered that when he’d been a boy, he’d seen a large pink bird at the zoo. That incredible majestic flamingo had appeared magical to him. Yet it made him smile every time he remembered the creature, and he’d never forgotten. And so he began to fashion a pink fluffy bird to give to his Honey. When he handed her the lovey, in her excitement, her hands clutched the toy so hard it broke the singing function and instead the bird jingled – a noise that delighted her. And so she called her pet Jingles. When her daddy realized how much she loved her friend, he made many more for other children to love too.” She smoothed her hands over the child’s hair and finally caressed her cheek softly. “Your mommy gave you a Jingles too, but I haven’t heard it talk to you yet. Should we listen to what it says?”

Sue reached over knowing exactly where to squeeze the toy to get the jingling noise to begin. Sure enough, the happy sounds filled the room.

“Oh my God!” Art was the first to exclaim out loud.

They all watched, mesmerized as Lisa’s eyes began to flutter. In Art’s excitement, he slipped to the floor, kneeling there, his hands in prayer while tears filled his eyes.

Sue held her breath, watching the child’s eyes finally stay open to peer around her as if she searched for something or someone. How she knew what it was Lisa wanted, Sue could never explain afterwards. But at that moment, without hesitation, she lifted Jingles in front of the child and thrills flooded her whole body when the little girl’s hands reached so painfully, lifting awkwardly to clutch her lovey. Once she held it to her face, she sighed

and said one word. “Da-dd-y?”

Art flung himself as close to her as he could without hurting her. Spreading gentle kisses over her face and hands, he whispered brokenly. “I’m here, princess. Daddy’s here.”

Chapter Nineteen

The celebration that night had to be controlled so as not to wake the now peacefully sleeping child. Once the doctors had finished their examinations and concluded the change in medications had done their job, they left the room, happy with the results.

Neither Art nor Sue argued with their prognosis. They just clung to each other and smiled, Art winking at Lorna so she wouldn't feel left out. Thrilled, needing to share their joy with her husband, Lisa's grandpa Cory, Lorna instantly called him with the wonderful news, and he'd arrived lickety-split to share in their happiness.

Once Sue met him, she understood where Art had gotten his good looks and warm personality. The man was a dreamboat, caring and kind, and he obviously doted on his granddaughter.

As the evening wore on, Lorna and Cory eventually left as the next day was Christmas Eve, and in the morning, they were in charge of the Salvation Army kettles in front of the Bay downtown.

Before they left, Lorna happily admitted to Sue something that made her smile. "I like being in front of that large store because they have so many wonderful decorations, and it puts most folks in the spirit of giving."

Cory leaned in to correct her. "She means it puts her in good spirits." Then he thought about what he said and added, "Which doesn't seem as important as usual because I've never felt more blessed than I do tonight."

Lorna piped up. "Me too. Nothing could make me happier than to know our angel has returned to us. Now we can really celebrate Christmas."

Art smiled, his face wearing a rueful grin. "Never thought I'd say this, but now Christmas will become my most cherished holiday too. How could it not?"

Once they were alone, Art held Sue's hands and she could see him struggle with his words. Finally, he just burst out, and she loved that he didn't hold back.

"I don't care what the doctors said. You're the reason Lisa found her way out of the fog. She said it herself, didn't she?"

"You mean when she said she'd been lost?"

"Yes. She couldn't find me. Then she heard Jingles and knew where to come. All the time we've talked and read to her, we didn't get through. Yet the sound of her toy brought her back."

Sue touched his cheek to get his attention. "I'm thinking it's the connection to her most beloved toy that pierced her sleep. Somehow she knew Jingles would be with you. And you're the one she wanted the most."

Art's face lit up and he gave her a smile Sue would never forget.

"You believe that?"

"I'll always believe that."

"Okay. Then I'll believe it too. But we might as well keep the doctors happy and let them take the credit." He leaned in to kiss her softly. "Promise me that you'll stop me if I pinch her just to see if she'll wake up."

"I know how you feel. It seems too good to be true. Poor little girl, she's missed weeks out of her life and yet she appeared almost normal when the nurse was questioning her. I'm amazed at how quickly children heal. I wonder if they'll allow her to come home for Christmas."

"The tests they did tonight were all reassuring. But they have more to do tomorrow, so we'll keep our fingers crossed."

Sue stood to leave and found herself wrapped in his arms again. She leaned her face into his neck, clung around his waist, and sighed with delight. When his lips found hers, she swooned.

"Do you feel like I do right now?" Art stared into her eyes, and she

didn't hide any of her delight.

“I do. I know Lisa's your child, but I'll admit to being personally ecstatic. And since she woke up, I have this crazy urge to jump for joy. Not only because she's come back to you, but because in all this misery we found each other.”

“Yes. You get it. That's exactly the way I feel. How lucky can a man be when the two most beloved people in his world are safe?”

Epilogue

A Christmas wedding!

Sue couldn't get the thought out of her mind. That night, after she helped Art put Lisa to bed, they returned to the kitchen to clear the dishes. And as they often did, rather than get right into their chores, they ended up sharing another glass of wine for him and tea for her.

"Hey, come here and let me hold you. I haven't had a chance since this morning. I want to feel you close." Art kissed her with pent up desire, and she sunk into the delight of his passion. After moments where their breathing became somewhat ragged, she knew if she didn't stop them now, they'd end up in the bedroom. "Later, baby. Quit trying to get out of helping me clean the kitchen."

Laughing, his voice husky, he admitted, "You'll always come before the dishes, sweet girl."

"Behave. I have something I want to discuss with you." She hugged him and then took his hand to lead him back to the table. It's where they often ended up to discuss their days.

"You know how we've been going around in circles as to when we should hold the wedding."

"Uh huh. In my defense, I opted to have it as soon as possible. It's you who's been putting things off."

She leaned in for another kiss before settling back in her chair. "I can't get this thought out of my mind. What about a Christmas Eve wedding?" She held her breath and watched Art's expression. When she saw the instant delight, her heart settled, and satisfaction reigned. "You like the idea."

"I love the idea. It's a lot closer than waiting until next summer. You

know I want to put a ring on your finger before the new baby is born.”

Sue caressed her belly and giggled. “Our baby is just a teeny blessing right now and yet already, we both think of the child as a part of our world.”

“Well, you’re past the first six weeks and everything is gloriously normal. Let’s see, you’ll be just three months into the pregnancy at Christmas.”

“Yep. And admit it, you’re the old-fashioned daddy who wants to make us legal. Living together isn’t enough for you, is it?” As soon as she saw his expression, she relented. “And you’re right. Lisa is getting older and even though she seems to have accepted me as her new mommy, it would be best if we have a wedding day for everyone to remember. Besides... you know I want to marry you. I’ve known you were my destiny almost the first moment we met.”

He leaned in and kissed her again. “Me too. And I think your idea of a Christmas wedding is fantastic. It would be the perfect time to make the baby announcement too.” He reached for her hand and fondled it, his head down, as a shy look replaced his earlier enthusiasm. “Do you think it’s silly of me to want to wait until the first trimester is past, and we know for sure the baby is safe?”

“Not at all. You and Janette went through a terrible experience getting pregnant. I agree that I wouldn’t want to tell everyone about our baby, accept all their best wishes, only to have to contact them with bad news. And you had to do it twice. Once Lisa came along, I bet you were on tenterhooks the whole time.”

“We were. It was both exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. Yet Lisa’s here with us today. And she’ll be the one most excited about the wedding.”

Sue nodded happily, envisioning the bright smiles lighting up a little

girl's face.

Art's comment ended in a question. "If we keep it small, we could hold the ceremony here, right? I knew I wanted this big old barn of a house for a reason."

"Great idea. Hey, wait a minute, you said we had to have a huge place to fill with brothers and sisters for Lisa."

"And my diabolical plan has already started." He reached over and patted her belly ever so gently. "Hi, little one, I'm your daddy. And before you're born, Mommy is going to make you a brand-new flamingo lovey of your very own."

"I've already created the image I'll use and it's the cutest toy ever, with an expression of adoration, so every time our baby looks at it, she or he will see love. And before you ask, it will have a jingle in its belly too."

He laughed. "That's the most important part."

On the morning of the wedding, everyone woke up feeling the excitement of the day. Having Art sleep over at her parents' place gave Sue the opportunity to let Lisa sleep with her as a treat.

When she opened her eyes, it was to see the little girl peering at her with big eyes, and a bigger smile, her well-worn Jingles clutched close in her arms.

"Hi, Mommy. Are you awake?"

"Nope. I'm just sleeping with my eyes open." Sue laid back with her head on the pillow and the swell of love for this delightful child filling her heart.

"You can't sleep with your eyes open. Jingles says so."

"Yeah, well Jingles doesn't know about my magic powers. I can tickle little girls in my sleep too." Sue purposely lifted her hand in a

searching motion toward Lisa who giggled her delight. “You’re awake.” She launched herself into Sue’s arms. “It’s our wedding day. We have to get dressed.”

Sue held her close and whispered calmly, “Not for hours yet. First we need to make a waffle breakfast for our special ladies.”

“With blueberries and bacon too?”

“Sure. Why not. Let’s spoil them so everyone’s in a good mood for later when we all have to get dressed up and have a wedding.”

True to her word, Sue gathered the group of women who’d opted to spend the night together into a workforce and soon they were gathered around the table with mounds of delicious blueberry waffles, fruit salad, bacon, orange juice... and of course, most importantly, mugs of fresh coffee.

Laughter and gaiety filled the decorated dining room where the other women lavished love on both her and their miracle girl, Lisa. When Sue looked around at the space they’d allocated for the ceremony, every bone in her body turned to mush.

Art, working with both of their fathers, had created a wonderland where they would be married in front of the large Christmas tree. They’d built a movable archway covered in garlands and tiny flamingos, even down to the flamingo-shaped pink lights where later the minister would perform the ceremony. She couldn’t have asked for a more perfect setting.

Not to be outdone, the women had constructed a dream on the staircase of greenery, pink tulle, and lace bows. And placed on every stair, Sue had brought her collection of flamingoes where they were attached by ribbons so as she walked down the steps they wouldn’t be swept up in her skirts.

She’d even found a pale pink wedding gown that she loved. As soon as she saw the ruffled skirt gathered just under her breasts and the pearl-

decorated bodice with the incredible yet removable train, she thought of a princess and her world became perfect. The saleswoman had come up with the devious way of leaving room for her growing tummy and after her final fitting the week before, she felt certain it would be perfect.

And Colleen, with her girlfriend Hillie, had fashioned the exact dress in Lisa's size so she would feel part of the ceremony.

Looking over at the two girls who'd stayed the night so they could dress together before the wedding, Sue had to laugh. She remembered exactly one year ago when her mother had held a wonderful Christmas Eve dinner and Julie's new friends had brought their daughter, Hillie.

One look, and the two girls had known they belonged together. The next year had been a rollercoaster of love, marriage, and special treatments so now Colleen was as pregnant as Sue. Hillie, being a dream of a homemaker had brightened up all their worlds with her happy ways and her adoration for their friend Colleen.

Seeing Colleen rub her tummy made Sue smile tenderly and sneak a caress for her own belly. Barely managing to keep her secret, dying to tell the world and especially her closest loved ones, she bit her tongue. No way did she want to spoil Art's surprise announcement. Instead, she focused on Colleen, Hillie, and Jacquie who were all enjoying their breakfast treats.

Colleen suddenly reached over to hug her. "It's all turned out hasn't it? When I remember last year at this time, how lonely and devastated I felt, almost to the point of ignoring your parents' invitation, it was only knowing you and Art would be coming to share your wonderful news about Lisa that made me get off my tush and face everyone."

"Thank God you did. Or you might have missed out on a whole world of happiness with Hillie."

"I know. It scares me how close we came to missing each other. Yet

other times, I feel that it was meant to be.”

Thoughtful, Sue asked, “Do you think you still would have met?”

Colleen sat thinking for a moment and then added, “Ye-ah. I mean think about it. Can those pivotal moments be that fragile? Miss an event and miss the one person in the world meant for you?”

“Truly, I don’t know. But it’s kind of frightening, isn’t it? Take mine and Art’s story. What would have happened if I hadn’t found Jingles in the back of my closet that day? And if we go back even further, what made my father grab the one stuffed toy from that selection in the store when I was a child? The one he gave me so I wouldn’t be alone when they put me in the trunk to keep me safe. And then they turned it into a reason for my collection. No collection and there wouldn’t have been a Jingles. You’re right. When you think about it, our futures can actually depend on simple moments in time.”

Before they could delve further, the doorbell rang, and the florists arrived laden with arrangements and bouquets and the excitement stopped more discussion.

While they were all getting dressed, they kept the doors open to the hallway so the girls could visit back and forth. Music played in the background, mixing with the laughter and chatter.

Colleen entered Sue’s master bedroom where Julie and Lorna had just finished helping Lisa put on her matching dress. She and Jacquie were bridesmaids and had chosen short, styled dresses that were a soft pink, in a similar style to Sue’s, and very classy.

“Honey, can I borrow Jingles for a minute?”

Lisa held out her newly washed toy to Colleen, her face puzzled but totally trusting. “Sure, Auntie Colleen. Mommy washed Jingles for today and she’s pretty now. See the Christmas scarf Gramma made for her?”

Colleen took out a gift and passed it to the little girl. “Hillie and I made something special for Jingles too, but we wanted you to open it for her.”

Seconds later, delighted cries were shouted from a child filled with joy. “You made Jingles a dress like mine and Mommy’s. It’s beautiful.”

Colleen took the dress and carefully pulled it over the toy’s head and tied the ribbon at the back of the neck to keep it in place. “Now everyone’s dressed for the wedding. Right?”

“Oh yes.” Lisa glowed with happiness as she looked in the mirror at her new mommy. “Now we all look pretty.”

While waiting for the wedding march they intended to play for Sue, her two bridesmaids, and the flower girl, Lorna and her mother stopped to hug the bride before descending to stand at the bottom of the stairs with the rest of the guests.

Julie whispered, “Are you ready to get married?”

“I can’t wait.”

She kissed her daughter and went to where her husband waited to lead his daughter to the archway and her groom.

Her mother-in-law held back to whisper to Sue. “This is the first chance I’ve had to get you alone for a few seconds. I wanted to warn you that I overheard Lisa talking to Santa at the Bay yesterday. You’ll never guess what she wished for... a baby brother or sister.”

“Really? That’s wonderful.”

“It is? I was worried you’d be upset.”

Wearing a secret smile, Sue patted Lorna’s hand and said, “We might have a special Christmas announcement for everyone after the vows. So please, hold your breath for just a few moments longer.”

For days, people talked about how emotional Lorna appeared when she staggered down the decorated stairs.

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***If you enjoyed reading this story, you might like to read one of the earlier books in this series called [*Christmas is for Everyone.*](#)

Description: Christmas is for Everyone:

Ginny can't walk past the old man caught in a snowstorm, especially when he isn't dressed to be outside, doesn't know his own name, or where he lives. When the blizzard blows out of control, she's thankful he's safe in her tiny apartment where she and her son can care for him... and the puppy he rescued while wandering in the park.

When the Deputy Police Chief comes to her door in response to her call about finding a lost person, everything in her world turns upside down. The storm intensifies, the power shuts off, and because of the vicious weather, she's forced to have this handsome stranger spend the night. Two people stranded together by circumstances outside their control... it was the best night of her life.

Amazon International link: <https://mybook.to/christmasisforeveryone>

Afterword:

Thank you so much for reading *Irresistible Scrooges*.

I loved writing this story called Flamingo Christmas, and I hope you enjoyed reading it too. If so, I would ask you for a favor. Wherever you purchased this collection, please take a few minutes and leave an honest review. Authors enjoy hearing that readers like their stories, and hopefully, others will read your words and choose to buy the book because of your sentiments.

My website at <http://mimibarbour.com> now has all my books listed with links to the various publishers to make it easy for you to return to where you bought the book and to find my other work.

While you're there, I'd really appreciate it if you would sign up for my newsletter so I can keep in touch. <http://bit.ly/MimiBNewsletter>. I only send out newsletters approximately twice a month. It's usually full of giveaways, contests, and freebies along with my personal news. (You have my word that your address will never be shared.)

Hugs,

Mimi

Also author of...

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All Mimi's books can be found on her Amazon Author Page:

<http://bit.ly/MimiBarbourAmazon>

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Website: <http://mimibarbour.com>

About the author, Mimi Barbour

MIMI BARBOUR: New York Times & USA Today Best-selling, award-winning romance author has written nine series, many single-titles and is involved in a huge number of box collections.

She lives on the beautiful East coast of Vancouver Island and writes her books with tongue-in-cheek and a mad glint in her eye. The fans all agree that it's the fascinating characters she creates which makes her writing so entertaining and brings them back for more of her magic.

"The favorite part of my job is meeting the characters from each new book. Designing them the way I want and having them act however I think they should. It's thrilling, especially when most of my make-believe folks are people I would love to interact with in reality."

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