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**Hyannis**

Harwich

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Falmouth

Woods Hole

**Falmouthport**

snold

NANTUCKET SOUND

Martha's Vineyard

Nantucket

# Christmas at Blue Hydrangeas

**MARIANNE SCIUCCO**





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For Lou, who makes every Christmas wonderful.



# Chapter One

Sara stood at the kitchen sink, up to her wrists in suds as she washed the morning's dishes, her eyes riveted to the scene outside the picture window.

This was not the Christmas she had in mind.

A heavy snow was falling, obscuring her view, her visibility penetrating just a few feet into the backyard. Fat, white flakes covered last week's blanket of snow, making it look new again, pristine and untouched. Yet the picture-perfect scene dismayed rather than pleased her, and she sighed, her shoulders tensing.

At least three fresh inches covered the driveway and the paths that led to the back door and the garage. If no one arrived to help, she'd soon need to shovel them clear. She checked the time. Kenny from the tree farm was due to arrive within the hour with their tree, his trusty plow attached to his truck. Perhaps he'd agree to clear out the driveway when he finished his deliveries. She could handle the walkways.

The bird feeders, empty of seed, swung wildly from their posts in the harsh wind, and she thought of the cardinals and finches left to fend for themselves in the storm. After she shoveled the walkways, she'd dig a path to the feeders and stock them to overflowing.

Just past eight o'clock and the day was already consumed by the weather.

A strand of auburn hair escaped the red bandana she'd tied around her head to keep her curls in place, and she reached up to push it back in.

In anticipation of the stormy day, she wore a cable knit sweater in a deep shade of indigo that made her blue eyes sparkle, layered over a white turtleneck, and navy wool slacks. A red gingham apron protected the outfit from her morning tasks.

Casting a final glance at the snowy scene outside, she finished washing the dishes and left them in the drying rack, moving on to other chores.

With a house the size of Blue Hydrangeas, their 12-room bed-and-breakfast in Falmouthport, Massachusetts, a picturesque village perched on the edge of Nantucket Sound, she always had something to do. They'd opened their doors for the first time this past summer and business was brisk. Their six guest rooms were fully occupied most weeks with honeymooners, golfers, and antique shoppers. The fall's lull in tourism had given them a chance to catch up on heavy housework and maintenance, but now Christmas was upon them - tomorrow! - and she had a to-do list to finish.

Fortunately, the weather service had forecasted the storm earlier in the week - just a few inches, they'd predicted, no need to worry - and with her husband's help most of her list was checked off. But two days ago, Jack had to make an unexpected trip to New York City for a legal matter, a deposition of some sort for the drug company he used to work for, and she was alone at the house, awaiting his return. She'd have to finish the rest of her list on her own.

She didn't mind. She loved to bake and cook. It's why she became an innkeeper. Her chores and preparations for the holiday helped distract her from thoughts of Jack, traveling hundreds of miles in this wretched weather. She worried about him making his way along I-95 at a snail's pace, driving into the storm as it traveled south from New England into New York. He'd called just before bed the night before and promised to be home by noon.

She'd thought her worrying-about-Jack-on-the-road-days were over when he retired from his job as a district sales manager. He'd traveled the east coast from New England to Maryland for years and knew the interstates well. She trusted his handling of his Cadillac in any conditions and knew if the roads became too dangerous he'd use his common sense and wait out the storm in some diner or truck stop.

She was also concerned about her son, David, a graduate assistant at a large university in Boston. He'd called a week ago to say he was bringing a friend home for Christmas, no details, but they couldn't leave the city until he completed work on a research project for one of the professors. Boggled down with grading his first set of finals and papers for the entry level English courses he taught, he fell behind at the semester's end and had to catch up. He'd called earlier that morning and said they'd hit the road around nine and would arrive before lunch.

The holiday prep was also a sort of therapy, keeping her mind off the troubling fact that this would be the fifth Christmas without their precious daughter Lisa, who had drowned in a tragic accident on their summer vacation. Time heals all wounds, they said, but Sara had concluded long ago that some wounds never heal, and the loss of a child topped that list. She'd set aside her sorrow and do whatever she could to ensure they'd have a happy holiday despite their painful loss.

She glanced out the window once more and uttered a quick prayer that both of her men would come home safe and soon.

## Chapter Two

With the dishes done, she took a break from the kitchen and went upstairs to prepare rooms for David and his mystery guest. She opened the doors to his room and her favorite guest room, The Dunes. Its soothing and evocative colors were inspired by the beach at Race Point Light, the barren seashore at the tip of the Outer Cape. She hoped David's friend would like it. Both rooms, now closed for several weeks in the off season, felt chilly. She tossed an extra blanket on each bed, opened the curtains to let in the daylight, and switched on the vents to the central heating.

Seeing the rooms in order, she returned to the kitchen and again rolled up her sleeves and washed her hands. She gathered her recipes and perused the lists of ingredients, gathering flour, sugar, eggs, and butter as she went along, humming "Deck the Halls." An hour later, dozens of sugar cookies cut into Christmas shapes - bells, trees, angels - lay cooling on the counter. She took cookies and candies baked weeks ago out of the freezer and set them on the table to thaw: Luscious Linzer Tarts, impeccably formed gingerbread men, and rich chocolate fudge. True, it would only be four of them this holiday, but it was *Christmas*, and each of them deserved their favorite treats.

The kitchen smelled delicious with the scent of vanilla. She snatched a cookie in the shape of a candy cane from the still warm baking sheet and took a bite, savoring it. While she relaxed for a moment, a blur of dark fur leaped down from the top of a cabinet and swirled around her legs. She bent down to pat the black cat, murmuring, "There you are, Fluffy. I was wondering where you were hiding."

Fluffy purred in response. He was a handsome tuxedo cat with a patch of white fur on his chest and white socks. Much to his chagrin, Lisa had given him his undignified name when he was little more than a sweet ball of fur, giving them no indication that he would grow into a persnickety feline who rarely came when called. Deep into his middle age he kept to himself, especially when guests were around, and had a few select hiding spots that even Sara had not discovered. Happy for the momentary company, she reached into the treat cannister and hand-fed him a few. He gobbled them up and then walked away with a switch of his tail, climbing onto a windowsill to watch the storm. She peered out of the window too and noted another inch of fresh snow on the ground. Time to get out the shovel.

She bundled up in an old parka and headed outside. The snow was light, and she cleared it with ease. She enjoyed working in the frigid weather, the cold air stinging her cheeks, her body made warm by her efforts. While she worked, she hummed a medley of Christmas carols.

The wind whipped the snow around her, and she remembered the empty bird feeders. She cleared an additional path to them and filled each with seed. She couldn't bear to see her birds suffer. Satisfied, she moved on to the front of the house and was almost finished clearing the front walk and stairs when the sound of an approaching motor vehicle broke the silence. Seconds later, a pickup truck carrying a load of Christmas trees made its way up the drive.

She finished removing the last of the snow from the entrance to the house. "Come on in," she called to the truck's occupants as they exited the vehicle.

Minutes later, two burly men carried a magnificent Colorado Blue Spruce, ordered direct from the tree farm, up her front walk and into the house. She guided them into her formal living room and indicated the space in front of the window, a tree stand in place.

"Right there will be fine, Kenny," she told the man in charge. His partner, Tom, was younger and smaller and never said much. She shed her parka and gloves, dropping snow onto the hardwood floor, and made a mental note to mop it up as soon as the men left.

"Do you want us to set it up for you?" Kenny took a small saw out of his pocket.

She nodded, and the men proceeded to cut an inch or so off the tree's trunk. They stood the tree to its full height and inserted it into its sturdy metal stand. While she gave instructions, they positioned it to its best advantage.

"A little more to the left. Now back a bit. Not that far back. Ok, that's good. Leave it there."

Pleased with the positioning of the tree, she waited while they secured it. They stood when finished and stepped back to appraise it with her.

"It's a nice tree," Kenny said. "We cut it down just yesterday morning." He took a deep breath. "The room already smells like pine."

She inhaled, closing her eyes. "It's wonderful."

"Anything else we can do for you before we hit the road? The snow's getting heavy. The town's plows can't keep up with it."

"How bad are the roads?"

"Getting worse by the minute."

Her hopes plummeted. "But the weatherman on the radio said the heavy snow will end later this morning."

"Haven't you heard?" Kenny raised his bushy eyebrows. "Old news. The storm's taken a new path. Most recent report says it's supposed to get worse before it gets better. *A lot* worse."

"What are you saying?" She'd turned off the radio after the weather report to enjoy the silence and hadn't kept up with the news.

"A blizzard is on its way, the second big one this year. Seventy-eight will go down in history as one of the snowiest years ever."

"But it's Christmas Eve," she cried, and immediately felt silly. Mother Nature didn't care about Christmas Eve.

"That look on your face tells me David and Jack aren't home yet."

"No," she revealed, even more disheartened. The thought of another blizzard to rival last February's Great Blizzard of 1978, terrified her. The power had gone out. No heat. No stove. They were snowed in for days. But they were together, camped out in front of the fireplace, keeping warm, able to heat up cans of soup and brew coffee. It was a miserable welcome their first winter as

full-time Cape Cod residents. During those long, cold days she considered going back to New York, but remembered the winters there were also wretched. She bucked up and soldiered on.

And now this.

Kenny shook his head. "Well, I hope they make it home before the officials close the bridges."

Her eyes widened. "Close the bridges?"

"Yes, ma'am," he solemnly said. "The Army Corps of Engineers are talking about shutting them down if it gets too bad. If they do, no one will be able to get on or off the Cape."

"Oh dear." She suddenly needed to sit down and landed on the couch. "I have no way to reach Jack and David, no way to let them know. I don't even know where they are."

"Don't worry, I'm sure they'll be fine, and home any minute. Now, is there anything else we can do for you before we go? We've got a truckload of trees to deliver."

Sara couldn't think. Her mind was racing.

The men waited a moment, and then Kenny turned to his silent but hardworking partner. "I guess we can go." They turned to leave.

Sara came to her senses. She stood and reached into a pocket, pulling out a few dollars. She handed each man a small tip. They stuffed the bills into their pockets, broad smiles on their weather-worn faces.

"Thank you, Mrs. Harmon," Kenny said. "Listen, it was a little rough coming up your driveway. I'll plow you out now and I'll try to come back later to keep it clear. All right?"

She nodded. "I'd appreciate it."

"No problem." He made for the door, Tom close behind him. "And Merry Christmas. I'll be seeing you around town soon, I'm sure." The men let themselves out.

She stared at the tree, seven feet tall, six feet wide at the bottom, and ideal for the corner it occupied. She and Jack had driven out to the tree farm months ago and selected it from acres of possibilities. It was a new tradition for their new life on the Cape. She'd let it rest a while before piling on the decorations.

# Chapter Three

By noon, most of the Christmas dinner was prepped: A ham, seasoned and ready for the oven; a scalloped potato casserole, pre-baked and cooling on the counter; a variety of vegetable dishes; and a pot of applesauce simmering on a back burner.

The dining room table was set for four with her best china, crystal, and silverware on a white linen tablecloth with matching napkins.

She gazed upon the holiday preparations with satisfaction, but when she glanced out the window and saw the storm showed no signs of abating, she once again worried about Jack and David. Where were they? Stranded on the side of the highway? What if they'd gotten into an accident? Tired of the silence and her racing thoughts, she turned on the radio and waited to hear the weather report.

"This just in," the announcer came on at last. "Expected snowfall for today is ten to twenty inches, heavier along the mid-Cape. Coastal areas will get a little reprieve but expect temperatures to drop to the low teens. It's going to be a cold one folks, and travel is miserable. Even Santa will have difficulty making his rounds."

By nature, Sara was a practical woman, not prone to hysterics and anxiety, but after losing Lisa she no longer took anything for granted. This latest report was troubling and brought back more memories from last February's blizzard. Hundreds of people were stranded on the road in freezing temperatures, their cars disabled when they ran out of gas, leaving them with no heat, no food, no water. Some people never made it home. What if that happened to Jack? He could be a hundred or so miles away, stuck on some impassable highway, alone. The thought of him freezing in his car today of all days, Christmas Eve, brought her to tears, and she wiped them away.

"I'm being overdramatic," she muttered. "Jack will be fine. And David will be here any minute. Such foolish thinking. I need to keep working and stop worrying. But first - lunch."

As much as she didn't want to hear about the worsening storm, she couldn't turn off the radio. If the bridges closed, she wanted to know right away, even though there was no way to reach Jack or David, to tell them they might not be able to come home, and to ask them to wait somewhere safe for the storm to pass.

She sat down to a lunch of yesterday's homemade chicken noodle soup and saltines, and went over her to-do list, checking off completed tasks. She had yet to bring the tree decorations down from the attic, and still had several gifts to wrap. She finished lunch, cleaned up the kitchen, and, just in case the power went out, gathered a few candles, a lantern, and a box of matches before resuming her chores.

The attic was freezing, and she wished she'd put on a jacket before climbing two sets of stairs to get to it. Everything stored there was orderly and organized, and within moments she located the boxes of decorations. She brought them down one by one and set them by the tree, which had relaxed a bit since its arrival. It seemed a little fuller on one side, and she rotated it an inch or so to improve its presentation. As an artist, she had a keen eye for such things, and her artistic sense

added a touch of the unique and whimsical to her holiday decorations.

Weeks ago, she and Jack had prettied the house with greenery, electric candles in every window, and poinsettia plants on table surfaces in the most-used rooms. A matching set of holly wreaths adorned the front door, festooned with fresh cranberries, pine cones, and red velvet bows.

They saved the tree decorating for Christmas Eve, a tradition since the early days of their marriage.

She loaded the record player with a stack of Christmas classics, and Bing Crosby was soon crooning "White Christmas."

"You've got that right," she laughed, and started opening boxes.

In minutes, strings of colored lights lay strewn across the floor. She plugged them in to check they'd all light and replaced the few bulbs that didn't glow.

Boxes of ornaments were opened, revealing family heirlooms and her children's handmade creations, many of them crafted at her own kitchen table. These childish decorations had always made her smile, but since Lisa's passing they now brought a touch of sadness, too.

She fingered the lopsided ceramic angel her daughter had made at age eight and stroked the oversized plaster bulbs created at age twelve. Tears threatened, but she wiped them away. Losing a child at sixteen was tragic, impossible, but it had happened to them, and she would not allow it to define the rest of her life. She focused on the happy times when heartache reared its ugly head and threatened to rob her peace of mind. Remembering the happy times saved her from the dark times. As she studied Lisa's handiwork, she remembered the day each was brought home with joy and pride in the achievement. Each of these one-of-a-kind ornaments was a blessing.

Relieved to find none of the ornaments had broken since stored away a year ago, Sara organized them into small groups according to size, color, and type. There was the squad of Santas, some jolly, others serious, and the assortment of angels, some heavenly, others fun. The treasure trove preserved from her own childhood featured hand-made and store-bought ornaments and earned their own places of honor on the fir's branches. She'd strategically and artfully place them on the tree later.

She unwrapped the final ornament – an exquisite angel in velvet robes with long, flowing hair, a relic from her mother's own childhood. This would be lovingly placed on the tree's top, after everything else had found a home. She gazed at it with love. This year, Jack would have the honor of placing it.

The phone rang, and she startled. In her absorption with the decorations she'd forgotten about the outside world. Was it Jack? David? It was well past one o'clock. She hoped it wasn't bad news.

She peeked out the window on her way to the phone. The snow continued to come down in heavy flakes. Her walkways were again covered. Good thing she didn't mind shoveling.

As soon as she answered the call, her sister Emily asked, "Sara, is everything all right? I heard on the radio you were in for severe weather."

"You heard right, Em. We're in the middle of a snowstorm, a blizzard. What about you?" Emily lived in upstate New York, about fifty miles west of Manhattan. She mentally kicked herself. Why hadn't she called Emily earlier? She might be able to shed light on what travel woes Jack faced.

"It's bad here, too, although it sounds much worse where you are. Is Jack home yet? What about David? I hope you're all hunkered down together."

"No, Em, I'm here alone. Jack is still traveling from New York, and David is on his way from Boston. I'm worried. I hear the bridges will close if the storm gets worse, and it's worse every time I look out the window."

"They say it's a big one, but not as big as February's."

"That blizzard was a nightmare. I can't believe we're getting hit with another one."

"I wish I could relieve your worries, but the storm is just getting started where I am. If Jack left early this morning he's probably through New York, into Connecticut, and maybe into Rhode Island by now. Unless the highways are closed."

A new worry. "Have you heard anything?"

"About the highways? No, but then I don't pay much attention to the road reports. The only time I travel on the interstate is when I visit you." Emily lived a quiet life in a small town surrounded by her seven children.

"How are Ed and the kids?"

"We're all good, except for this nasty cold making the rounds. The baby's the last to come down with it, but the worst is over. They'll be in fighting form come Christmas morning when this place turns into a circus."

"Did our gifts arrive?" Sara and Jack had shipped gift-wrapped toys and an outfit to each child, as well as small gifts for Emily and Ed, and an assortment of Sara's Christmas cookies.

"They're sitting under the tree. The kids are dying to open them. I've got all I can to do to keep them distracted. And the cookies were delicious, thank you. Unfortunately, I couldn't save any for Christmas Day. They were gone almost as soon as I opened the box. Did our packages arrive?"

Emily was a whiz with knitting needles and spent most of her free time fashioning sweaters, hats, scarves, and mittens for her brood. She'd sent along one of each for Sara, Jack and David, all expertly turned out, along with a homemade fruitcake, Jack's favorite.

"Waiting to be opened on Christmas morning. And thank you. Jack will love the fruitcake."

"I baked it with an extra dash of love just for him," she said, and Sara sensed her smile across the miles. Emily had always had a soft spot for Jack, her favorite brother-in-law. "Be sure to keep me posted on Jack and David. I'm worried too."

"I'm sure they'll be home soon, Em, you don't need to worry." Sara didn't want to add to her sister's concerns for her own family battling colds and the weather. She was anxious enough for the two of them. "I'll let you go back to the kids. Wish everyone a Merry Christmas for me." They made

their goodbyes.

## Chapter Four

Sara bundled up a second time in her winter gear to shovel the latest snowfall. She estimated eight fresh inches had fallen overnight with no sign of the storm's passing. As soon as she cleared the walkways, a new layer covered her efforts. At this rate, she'd have to shovel every hour, at least until David or Jack arrived. Once her family was safe and sound the snow could fall all night. In the morning, they'd dig out after breakfast and presents. Church wasn't until 11:30. Plenty of time.

The snow had grown heavier since the morning and she struggled, her breath labored, her back sore from bending and lifting. She took a break and spotted her neighbors doing the same futile chore, and called out to them, wishing them a happy Christmas. It was uplifting to see people out and about. Although Kenny and Tom had stopped off earlier with her tree and Emily had called, she was beginning to feel lonesome.

Back inside, she shed her cold weather gear, frozen stiff, and left it in the laundry room to thaw. She filled the tea kettle and set it to boil. It was almost three o'clock, and still no word from or sign of her son. In good weather, the drive from Boston to Falmouthport was about two hours. She'd never had to wait out a storm like this with her son *en route* to home.

"Please God," she prayed, "bring him home."

She prepared her tea and sat at the kitchen table, reviewing her to-do list as she sipped, scratching off completed tasks. She had a few gifts to wrap before starting on dinner. It would be a feast of seven kinds of seafood, another tradition, handed down from her Italian grandmother. Fried calamari and oysters would kick off the meal as appetizers, followed by a stew made with fresh haddock, shrimp, clams, scallops, and lobster. Home-baked bread and a green salad would accompany the stew. Dessert would be a light lemon cake, baked yesterday. Two bottles of wine – red and white – waited on the table to be uncorked.

She gathered her wrapping supplies and started with the shirts and socks she bought her husband and son before moving on to the small watercolors she'd painted for them, each one a landscape depicting views of Falmouthport. Each year, Sara painted them something special, and not sold to the greeting card companies or book publishers she worked for. They were treasured gifts from the heart.

For Jack she'd painted a seascape with sailboats heading out to sea, inspired by the harbor half a mile away. They walked there daily to watch the boats coming and going.

David's painting was of the well-trod path off Falmouthport Road which led to the beach, complete with blooming beach roses on either side. He walked it most days in summer when he went for a swim or run.

She finished wrapping and decorated each gift with bright curling ribbon. She stacked them in a corner of the family room with the others she and Jack had bought, to wait for placement under the tree after later on. She admired the pyramids of presents covered in shiny foil paper and whimsical sheets printed with illustrations of Santa, his elves, and reindeer, as well as a few with cheerful

snowmen. It would be a happy Christmas.

The next time she checked the storm's progress, another inch of snow had fallen. She watched it come down, mesmerized by its beauty, in awe of its danger. Such a pretty sight, yet potentially deadly. She shook her head, clearing such thoughts.

The wind battered the house, shaking the windows, and she shivered, pulling her sweater tighter around her thin shoulders. She should start a fire.

As she stepped away from the window, the sound of a vehicle approaching from the north broke the silence. She clutched the drapes, peering out.

An old Jeep Wagoneer struggled to make its way up the street, braking as it neared the inn. It turned into the driveway, slipping and sliding as it made its way to the house. Who was it? She didn't know anyone who drove a Jeep.

She ran for the back door and threw it open. The vehicle came to a stop and parked a few feet away. The driver cut the engine, the doors opened simultaneously, and two figures exited.

David and his guest had arrived at last.

## Chapter Five

"Hurry," she called, opening the door as far as it would go, gesturing them inside. They pushed past her and entered the house.

Sara slammed the door on the snowy day and joined them in the kitchen.

"Thank God! I've been waiting for you all day. I'm so glad you made it in one piece."

David peeled his outerwear off and collapsed in a chair, cradling his garments in his lap.

"I'm exhausted. What a miserable ride."

"Who drove?" Sara regarded the young woman who had taken the seat beside her son with surprise. When David had mentioned he was bringing a friend home for the holidays, she assumed he meant a young man. She never expected a woman.

"Anne. She's from Maine and used to driving in all weather conditions. It's her Jeep."

"Anne." Sara assessed the delicate looking blonde with shoulder-length hair, olive-toned skin, and bright blue eyes. She was lovely, and very welcome. David hadn't brought a girlfriend home in ages. He claimed he was too busy to date. No wonder they'd seen so little of him this semester.

"Anne, please meet my mother, Sara Harmon. Mom, this is Anne Tabor."

Sara offered her hand and Anne clasped it, smiling warmly into her eyes. "It's a pleasure to meet you. David raves about you."

"How kind of you to say. He hasn't told me much about you." She gave her son a questioning look and he squirmed.

"Yeah, well, we've been so busy I had no time to call."

"Or write," Sara said. "Or visit." She shook her head. "But all is forgiven. You're here now, which is the most important thing, right?"

David and Anne glanced at each other.

"I told you she was great," he said.

Anne pulled a shiny red package out of her oversized shoulder bag. "I hope you don't mind but I brought a little something for our dinner tomorrow." She handed Sara the box. "I made it myself."

Sara accepted the gift with pleasure, curious about its contents. She lifted the cover and peeked inside. The delightful aroma of gingerbread wafted out.

"Fresh gingerbread," she exclaimed. "How wonderful. It will be perfect for tomorrow."

"I'm so glad you like it," Anne said, a blush of pleasure spreading across her cheeks. "It's one of my favorites."

"Anne makes a mean gingerbread," David said, gazing at her with more than admiration for her

baking abilities.

Sara stared at her son, now twenty-four years old, a man, and so much like his father, with his six-foot frame, broad muscular shoulders, and sandy brown hair, although his was a little – no, *a lot* – longer than Jack ever kept his, which had turned white shortly after Lisa's accidental death. David had a certain glow about him. He looked different. He looked *happy*. No doubt the young woman to his right was responsible for that. *Hmm*, Sara thought, *something's going on here. Something good.*

She gathered their garments and hung them on hooks in the laundry room to drip-dry.

"So, are you two hungry?" she asked as she reentered the kitchen. She opened the refrigerator and took out the chicken noodle soup.

"Starved," he said. "We haven't eaten since breakfast."

She poured two healthy portions into a pot and set it on the stove, turning the burner to medium high. "Coffee?" she asked, picking up the percolator. They nodded, and she prepared the pot, setting it on a back burner. She placed bread and butter on the table and they reached for it.

"Sorry we were so late," David explained. "We were waiting for the snow to stop or slow down before heading out, but when we heard on the radio that the expected storm was predicted to meet head on with another that was supposed to stay at sea, we hit the road before traveling became impossible. We planned to grab some lunch on the way, but the roads were so bad we didn't dare get off the highways. When we finally got on to the side roads, all the stores and restaurants were closed."

"That's what happened?" Sara asked. "Two storms collided?"

He nodded. "The weatherman said the storm from the east was moving fast, and it veered toward the Cape mid-morning. The Falmouth area may get up to two feet of snow on top of what we already have. He also said Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard are getting hammered. They'll be lucky if they're shoveled out by New Year's."

"And no one saw it coming?" she asked, struck by the seriousness of the situation. Jack was out there. Alone.

"It caught everyone by surprise, even the National Weather Service." He picked up a second slice of bread and slathered it with butter.

"Well, it sure caught your father and me by surprise," she said, and dropped into the nearest chair, overwhelmed with worry.

"Where is Dad?" he asked. "Too busy to greet us?"

"No," she said. "He's not here."

"What do you mean?" he asked, his bread forgotten. "Dad's not back from New York?" He no longer looked relieved to be out of the storm.

She shook her head.

"But you've talked to him," he queried, "right? Today?"

"Not since last night," she whispered.

David and Anne locked eyes.

"It's a blizzard out there, Mom," he said. "There are very few cars on the roads."

"The plows can't keep up with the storm," Anne explained. "In some places, the roads are almost impassable. My Jeep has four-wheel drive, which is the only reason we made it."

"We couldn't go faster than twenty miles per hour most of the way," he added, "and the visibility was only a few feet in front of us."

"It took us more than four hours," Anne said.

"And on a clear day it takes less than two hours," he finished.

A speechless Sara slouched in the chair, staring at them.

"When did your husband leave New York?" Anne asked.

"He planned to leave early this morning," Sara said.

"It's a 250-mile trip," said David. "If he's only able to go twenty miles per hour, like we did, it could take him at least twelve hours."

"I can't imagine driving in that miserable weather twelve hours," Anne said.

"How was it traveling over the bridge?" Sara asked.

"Sloppy and slippery," David said. "Why?"

"Kenny from the tree farm mentioned they might close the bridges if the storm gets too bad."

"The Bourne Bridge was open for us," said David, raising an eyebrow.

"But right after we crossed over we heard on the radio that the governor is declaring a state of emergency and may close the highways," Anne said.

"Oh dear," Sara said. "Jack might not make it home tonight."

"Dad should've come home *last* night." David rose from the table to pace across the floor, a nervous habit he'd picked up from his father.

Sara defended her husband. "He had no choice, David. He was on pressing legal business that couldn't wait. His deposition was rescheduled *three times*, and the case had to be settled before the end of the year. When we spoke last night, the forecast was for just two to four inches. We had no idea how severe this storm would be until it picked up this morning."

Anne turned to David. "Maybe your father made good time early in his trip. He could be over the bridge for all we know."

David filled three cups with coffee and brought them to the table.

"If he can't make it I hope he'll pull over at a truck stop or motel to wait it out," Sara said,

grateful for the hot, caffeinated drink.

"If he stops, he'll call," said David. "Then at least we'll know he's okay."

"Eat your soup and drink up," his mother said. "We're in for a long night."

## Chapter Six

The fire gave the living room a comforting glow. David squatted on the hearth to reposition a few of the logs as Anne and Sara arranged their chairs closer to the heat. Outside, the storm raged on, snow still falling at an inch an hour, the wind battering the northernmost side of the house.

"It's so cozy in here." Anne took a sip of her second cup of coffee.

David stood to replace the screen in front of the fireplace." Mom works very hard to make the inn a welcoming place."

"It's fabulous," Anne said. "How many rooms do you have?"

"Twelve," Sara said, "two bedrooms for family, six for guests, the kitchen, dining room, living room, and family room. Oh, and I have a studio in the attic."

"That's impressive. And you designed it yourself?"

Sara nodded. "We copied an old captain's house in downtown Falmouth but added the modern conveniences."

"We've also got several gardens," David added, "including wildflowers and a cutting garden, and Mom planted twenty-four blue hydrangea bushes along the driveway."

"So that's why you call the inn Blue Hydrangeas," Anne said.

Sara nodded. "When Jack and I first came to the Cape on our honeymoon, the fluffy blue flowers captivated me. I tried growing them at our home in New York, but they never turned the shade of blue I wanted. The soil's not acidic enough. When we built this house, the first thing I did was put in the hydrangeas."

"David says you paint them as well," Anne said.

"Yes, they're my favorite subject. I design greeting cards for several small publishers. Not just hydrangeas, I paint seascapes and landscapes, too. Moving here has inspired me."

"That sounds lovely," Ann said. "I'd love to visit the inn in summer, to see the blue hydrangeas in their glory."

"I'm sure you will." Sara liked this young woman and hoped David's intentions toward her were serious. Blue Hydrangeas would be the ideal setting for a wedding. *Slow down Sara*, she chided herself. *Getting a little ahead of the situation, aren't you?*

"Nice tree, Mom," David said, approaching it.

"We still need to trim it."

"No time like the present. Anne, want to give me a hand with these lights?"

They got to work encircling the tree with the strands of colored bulbs while Sara supervised.

"Perfect," she said, when the last strand was hung. "I'm so glad we had enough. I was worried. We've never had a tree this size."

"It's a beauty," David said. "Let's hang the ornaments."

It took almost an hour. Each ornament Anne picked up required an explanation of its history.

"I can't believe the stories behind some of these angels," she said. "Some of them are antiques."

"My mother took excellent care of them," Sara said. "They were her grandmother's, and she handed them down to my sister Emily and me."

"Is she your only sibling?"

"Yes, she's my baby sister. We're six years apart. She lives in upstate New York, in a small town called Monroe."

"David said you lived there before retiring to the Cape. You must miss her."

"I do, but we visit each other several times a year. Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No, I'm an only child," Anne said, "but I plan to have a big family someday, lots of kids underfoot."

"Really?" Sara glanced at David, who seemed not to be listening.

"Definitely. Four or five, at least," Anne said.

"Sounds like quite a crowd."

"I love kids."

"What's your position at the university?"

"I'm working on my Master's in medieval literature."

"How fascinating," Sara said, impressed.

"It is. Right now, I'm teaching seminars in classical literature."

"Do you write?" Sara asked.

"I'm afraid so," she sighed. "I'm working on a novel."

"Anne's brilliant," David said. "She's already been published."

"It was just a small literary journal." Anne downplayed the achievement.

"She was the first in our class to publish," David responded with pride. "A short story."

"Fantastic," Sara said. "Can I read it?"

"I'll send you a copy," David said. "I bought a few extras."

"He bought *fifteen*." Anne rolled her eyes.

"Hey, I'm your number one fan."

*This is going better than I thought*, Sara mused.

The final ornament found its place on the tree and they stepped back to admire it.

"It's beautiful," Sara said. "I can't wait for Jack to see it." Mention of the missing Jack put a momentary damper on their enthusiasm, but Sara shook it off. "I'm sure he'll see it soon. Help me play Santa, David. All the gifts are wrapped and in the family room."

Together they dragged the boxes of gifts into the living room and placed them under the tree.

"This is the nicest Christmas I've had in a long time," Anne said.

"Where are your parents?" Sara asked. "Back in Maine?" She'd wondered about them since the minute Anne arrived. Such a lovely girl should be home for Christmas.

"No," Anne said. "They're deceased." Her eyes filled with tears she quickly wiped away.

"I am so sorry." Sara wanted to kick herself for spoiling the mood.

Anne waved away her concern. "Thanks. It's been years. My mother died of breast cancer when I was in grade school, and my father was killed in a car accident my freshman year in college. I've been on my own since."

"No other family? No grandparents?"

Anne shook her head. "Just an aunt and uncle in Ohio. I don't see them often, although we write."

"How sad. It must not be easy for you."

"I had to grow up fast. That's why I'm looking forward to having my own family."

"And she'll be a terrific mother someday." David drew her into his arms and placed a quick kiss on the top of her head. "Change of subject." He defused the moment. "What's tonight's dinner menu? I hope fried calamari and oysters are part of the plan."

Sara, enchanted with their affectionate display, was grateful for the switch in conversation. Too much to absorb all at once. "Really, David, do you think I'd forget your favorite dishes?"

"Just checking." He smiled. "When are we eating?"

"I thought we'd wait for your father."

"How long do you plan to wait?"

"I don't know. Until nine?"

"I hope he'll be here by then."

"We'll have to start cooking at eight. We've got almost two hours."

Anne stifled a yawn. "I could use a nap."

"Let me show you to your room," said Sara.

Once David and Anne were settled in their rooms, she went up to her attic studio. It had been closed for days, and the room had a penetrating chill. She put on the heavy old cardigan she kept on a hook by the door and turned up the thermostat, prepared to stay a while. She hadn't expected Anne for Christmas, but now that she'd met her and suspected she meant a great deal to her son, she wanted to present her with an appropriate gift. She drew a fresh canvas from a box and placed it on her easel. Anne would also receive one of Sara's exclusive paintings on Christmas Day.

# Chapter Seven

More than an hour had passed before Sara put the finishing touches to Anne's painting. She studied it a moment, ensuring it was flawless. Once satisfied, she cleaned her brushes and put her paints away.

Downstairs in the kitchen, she found David sitting at the table, writing in a tattered notebook with deep concentration, a steaming cup of coffee at hand.

"I hope I'm not interrupting," she said.

He closed the notebook. "Not at all. I'm just jotting down some notes for a class I'm teaching next semester." He gestured toward the coffee pot on the stove. "I made a fresh pot."

"Thanks a million. I need something to pick me up *and* warm me up." She fixed a cup and joined him. "Where's Anne?"

"She wanted to take a bath. I hope you don't mind."

"Why would I mind? She's my guest. This house is her house."

He smiled. "Thank you."

"So, tell me about her. How did you meet?"

His smile broadened. "We met the first day of training for the graduate assistants. She went to a small liberal arts school in Maine and transferred to Boston to continue her studies in Medieval Literature."

Sara raised her eyebrows.

"Yeah, she's more of an egghead than I am." David was a student of American Literature. "We got off to a rather rocky start. After our first seminar, I bumped into her at the refreshments table, and spilled my coffee all over her feet."

"I bet that was awkward," she said.

He grimaced. "She was wearing sandals."

"Ouch!"

"Ouch is right. First degree burns. I walked her over to the infirmary and waited while she got first aid. I couldn't apologize enough. I offered to pay her medical expenses, but she refused. I think she just wanted me to go away. We'd missed the second seminar, and the third, and final, was underway. And these seminars were mandatory, you know. I felt like an idiot."

"I'm sure she knew it was an accident," his mother assured him.

"Of course. But still, I messed up her day."

"And her feet."

"She was trying to make a good impression, too. She was a little hung up about being a country girl in the big city. She'd only been to Boston once before, and that was to tour the college."

"And then you came along."

"Yeah. She never saw me coming." He picked up his empty cup and stared into it. "After the last seminar, we met with the instructors and explained what had happened. They gave us a quick summary and excused our absence. It was dinner time at this point, so I offered to make the day up to her with a pizza at Luigi's, the best restaurant in the North End. To my surprise, she accepted, and we've been seeing each other ever since."

Sara risked prying. She had to know. "Is this an exclusive relationship?"

"Since day one. We get along great, rarely a disagreement or a harsh word, like you and Dad. We're connected. We both love to read and write. We love going to concerts, Italian food, and staying in on Sundays with the papers and pizza. It's all good."

"Sounds like you're serious." She tried not to sound too hopeful.

"You know, Mom," he leaned toward her. "I think I am."

The phone rang and they both jumped. Jack! Sara answered the call with a breathless hello.

"Oh, Sara, I'm so glad you're home. It's Father Jeffries. I need your help."

Father Jeffries? Sara's expectations crashed. She was sure she'd hear Jack's voice on the line. She caught David's eye and shook her head.

"Hello, Father Jeffries. What can I do for you? Surely Midnight Mass is canceled? I doubt anyone will venture out in this weather tonight."

"Oh, of course we canceled Midnight Mass. It's too *dangerous* out there." The old priest sounded frazzled.

"What have you heard, Father? Are the bridges still open?"

"As far as I know they're open, but the roads are *horrendous*. That's why I'm calling. You see, Sara, I have a family here in need of assistance."

"Oh?" He had her complete attention. "What can I do to help?"

"An Eastham mother and her two children were on their way to Brockton to celebrate the holiday with family. The storm was well underway before they could leave. The mother had to work today. She's a nurse on the day shift at some nursing home down there." He paused to take a breath. He tended to ramble and lost his way in even simple conversations. She waited for him to continue.

"The snow's not too bad further down the Cape," he went on, "and she thought she could make it in her Volkswagen Bug, but as soon as she got to Hyannis the car broke down, perhaps the alternator gave way, or the starter, or something, you know I understand little about these mechanical things. Anyway, I was on my way back from my hospital rounds when I happened upon them, and I couldn't just *leave* them there on the side of the road."

"Of course not."

"I drove them to a phone booth to call for a tow truck but they're all busy plowing the roads. No one would come out for their car for *hours*. So, I brought them back to the rectory with me, but I can't keep them here *overnight*. It wouldn't be *proper*. So, I'm calling around to find out if one of you innkeepers can take them in. You're the last on my list, Sara. I would be happy to pay you."

Sara knew Father Jeffries had a flair for the dramatic, but still she was breathless following his story. There was only one answer.

"Of course, I can accommodate them. Oh, those poor dears. What a terrible night to be stranded. And on *Christmas Eve*. I can have a room ready in minutes. And I'll accept no money, Father, not a penny."

"Sara, you're an *angel*," he exclaimed. "I'm so relieved. I'll bring them there right away."

"That will be fine, Father."

"And how is everything with you? I trust everyone is home safe and sound."

"I'm afraid not, Father. Jack had to go to New York for a legal matter and hasn't come home yet. That's why I asked about the bridges. I heard they might close."

"Sara, are you *alone*?"

"No, my son David is here with his girlfriend, Anne. We're waiting for Jack. He should be home shortly."

"Well, I'm sure he's taking it very slowly. I will say a quick prayer for his safe return. Now, I must tell this little family the news. The mother will be so thankful. She's a widow. Did I mention that?"

"No, Father, the poor woman." She pitied the young mother she had yet to meet.

"It's an awful story, a *sad* story. I'll let her give you the details. Right now, I need to see them settled for the night. I'm expected to dine at a parishioner's home within the hour, and I can't have them tagging along. See you momentarily." He hung up.

"What was that all about?" asked a concerned David when his mother returned to the table.

Sara repeated her conversation with their parish priest. "We're going to have a houseful for the holidays."

"Is there enough food?"

She glanced at him with reproach. "Are you kidding?"

"What's going on?" Anne walked into the kitchen dressed in jeans and a thick white sweater, fuzzy pink slippers on her feet. Her damp hair graced her shoulders. Her pretty face was free of makeup.

David got up to pour her a cup of coffee. "We're having company. Mom invited a stranded mother and two children to stay here tonight."

"That's so generous of you." Anne accepted the mug he handed to her.

"We always have room for those in need. If we don't, we make it," Sara said.

Anne stood by the picture window, gazing out at the side yard. "The walkways are clear. Did you shovel them out, David?"

He nodded. "Yeah, but it's coming down faster than I can move it."

"Leave it alone for now," Sara said. "We'll dig out again in the morning."

Anne took her coffee to the table. "Who's coming? Someone you know?"

"No," said Sara. "She's a widow from Eastham with two children. Their car broke down and they have no way to get back home. I'll put them in one of the guest rooms. I better get it ready, because they'll be here any minute."

"Let me help." Anne followed her upstairs.

# Chapter Eight

Minutes later, they returned to the kitchen, having turned down the beds in the Garden Room with fresh towels and extra blankets on each.

Sara suspected the children and their mother would most likely be hungry, so Sara again took the dependable pot of chicken soup, now almost depleted, out of the refrigerator and set it on the stove over a medium-low flame. She poured milk into a smaller pot and set it on the back burner for hot cocoa.

The front doorbell rang and she rushed to open it, finding Father Jeffries and the unfortunate young family on her doorstep.

"Please come in." As she stepped out of their way, snow blew into the house and hit her in the face, causing her to recoil. "Hurry, hurry! It's bitter cold out there."

Once everyone was in and the door was closed tight she turned to appraise her guests.

The children, a boy and a girl, seemed about five and six years old. They wore tattered jackets that exposed their delicate wrists to the elements, and their battered shoes were also unsuitable for the weather. Their mother draped a protective arm across each child's shoulders. She was also underdressed: No boots, no hat, and a man's jacket with a broken zipper.

"*Oh dear*," Sara thought, then brightened, welcoming them into the house. "I'm Sara Harmon. Welcome to my home."

"Thank you for taking us in," the woman said, her head high, her tone both doubtful and full of gratitude. "I'm Eleanor Atwood. Everyone calls me Ellie. My daughter's name is Julia. She's five. And my son, Danny Junior, is six."

"And a half," corrected Danny. He had a wary expression and clung tightly to his mother and sister, who gazed up at Sara with wide eyes, thumb firmly implanted in her tiny mouth.

"You're right," Ellie said. "A half a year makes a big difference."

"It sure does," agreed Sara. "This is my son David, and his friend Anne."

"Let me take your coats." David gathered their inadequate garments and hung them in the laundry room.

Sara squatted to the children's eye level. "I bet you're hungry. Let's get something to eat."

Danny and Julia broke out in smiles and detached from their mother to follow Sara into the kitchen.

"Please Ma'am," Ellie pleaded as she trailed after them. "I can't pay you for the room *and* a meal. I brought sandwiches for the ride. They'll do for our supper." She pulled a brown paper bag out of her beat-up shoulder bag.

"Now, don't you worry," Sara reassured her with a pat on the arm. "It's my pleasure to provide you and your children with a hot meal and a warm bed. I'll accept no payment. You'll need money to pay for your car repairs."

Ellie dropped her head and stared at her feet. "Thank you," she whispered.

"So, everyone's okay?" Father Jeffries had followed them, carrying an old suitcase bulging at the seams. He grunted with his efforts, then set it on the floor in a corner.

"We're fine, Father. Please, go to your dinner." Sara led him to the door. "And thank you for bringing this family to us. We'll take good care of them." She opened the door. In the blustering snow she could see only a few feet in front of her. "Merry Christmas, Father. Be careful out there."

"Merry Christmas, Sara. We'll talk again tomorrow." The old priest ventured back out into the storm.

In the kitchen, the children and their mother sat at the table, watching as Anne ladled the chicken soup into two small bowls.

"Would you like a cup of coffee?" Sara asked Ellie. She nodded, and Sara placed it on the table along with a small pitcher of cream and the sugar bowl.

Ellie preferred her coffee black and took a grateful sip. "Mm, that sure hits the spot." She took another sip. "Thank you again for taking us in. I had no idea what we'd do. Thank God Father Jeffries came along and rescued us."

Anne placed two bowls in front of the children, who turned to their mother for permission before they started eating. She gestured for them to go on, and within seconds they were slurping their soup.

"I'll heat yours up a little more," Anne told Ellie. She placed a box of soup crackers on the table.

"Thank you," Ellie said, and reached for the crackers, doling them out to the children and taking a few for herself.

"So, Ellie, Father Jeffries told me you're from Eastham," Sara said.

Ellie nodded. "Yes, Ma'am. I've lived there all my life." Anne brought her a bowl of the now steaming soup and placed it on the table. She took a tentative taste, which must have pleased her because she eagerly took a second.

Sara allowed her to eat uninterrupted for a few moments before asking the many questions she had as to why this little family was now sitting at her table. "May I ask where you were going in the storm? They say it's a blizzard. I heard the governor may close the highways."

Ellie frowned, placing her spoon on the table. "I was trying to go to my sister's in Brockton. It's our first Christmas without my husband and we didn't want to be home alone. I worked the day shift at the nursing home, so we couldn't leave until after three. By that time, the roads were a mess, but passable. But it didn't matter because the car broke down, and I thought we might have to spend the night on the side of the road."

"You must have been terrified," Sara said, also grateful Father Jeffries had come along.

"Yes, Ma'am. I was afraid we'd freeze to death."

"Well, you're safe now. Have you told your family where you are?"

"Yes. Father Jeffries let me call them from the rectory."

The children finished their dinner and started to grow fidgety. Danny teased Julia by tapping on the back of her left shoulder.

"Stop," she whined, swatting his hand away.

Anne took over. "Is it all right if I bring the kids into the living room to see the Christmas tree?" she asked Ellie.

Danny jumped out of his seat. "Christmas tree? Please Mommy! Say yes."

"Say yes, Mommy!" His sister parroted.

Ellie nodded. "Thank you," she said. "That would be terrific. I didn't put up a tree because we didn't plan to be home, so I'm sure they'll enjoy it."

Anne took each child by the hand and led them out of the kitchen, David close behind.

Ellie sighed. "I didn't plan much of a Christmas for them," she confessed, her eyes downcast. She was a plain woman, dressed in a man's hand-me-down flannel shirt, perhaps her late husband's, washed out jeans, and scuffed at the toes work boots. Her skin was tight and dry, her hands chapped. She looked like a woman who worked long, hard hours. "My husband passed away three months ago, and the money's been tight. You see, he didn't have life insurance. We didn't think it was necessary, and we couldn't afford it. He was only 33. But I guess nobody expects a head-on collision will happen to them."

Sara sat silent, allowing the weary young woman to talk.

"My family planned to make their Christmas. I couldn't buy many gifts. It's a struggle to make the rent, to buy food." She slumped down in her chair and fingered the buttons on her worn flannel shirt. "My sisters and parents purchased most of the toys on their lists, and a few necessities, like new boots and jackets. Looks like they'll miss getting them on Christmas morning. With my car out of commission, who knows when they'll get them." Her eyes were glossy with tears she impatiently wiped away.

"I'm so sorry." The thought of the children waking on Christmas morning with nothing from Santa broke Sara's heart.

"They'll just have to understand." Ellie picked up her napkin to dry her eyes and crumpled it, tossing it to the table. "Our lives are not the same since Danny died. I'll make it up to them another time." She looked forlorn, and Sara reached out to her, grasping her hands.

"Well, you can always count on Santa Claus. I wouldn't feel so hopeless quite yet."

Ellie gave her a wry smile. "I'm sorry to dispel your illusions, Sara, but I stopped believing in Santa Claus a long time ago." She stood up and stretched, her flannel shirt pulling tight across her middle.

Sara almost gasped. "My goodness, you're expecting."

Ellie looked down at her protruding abdomen and stroked it with both hands. "I'm six months along."

"Do you have a doctor?"

Ellie nodded. "I go to a clinic in Orleans that offers reduced fees. I've got that much settled." She picked up her family's empty cups, bowls, and silverware and placed them in the sink. "May I use the restroom?"

"Of course. Let me show you to your room. It has a private bath."

Once Ellie was comfortable, Sara went into the living room to see what David and Anne were up to with the kids. The brightly lit tree cast a spell upon the room, and the scent of fresh pine was pungent. Everyone was on the floor putting together the old train set David and Jack used to set up around the tree. *Magical*, Sara thought, reminiscing on Christmases past. The ache in her heart over Lisa's absence swelled and she stifled it. She had much to be thankful for this evening. She would save her grief for a more private time.

"I forgot all about the train," she said, taking a seat on the floor.

The children chattered nonstop while they helped Anne assemble the track.

David was examining each car, making sure it was operational. He smiled at his mother. "It took me a few minutes to find it, but I thought there was no better night than tonight to set up this baby."

Sara looked at the happy children and nodded. "Indeed. I'm so happy you thought of it."

"I also brought down the old box of Christmas books we used to read. Anne plans to read a few to the kids later."

"Wow, that is so cool," Ellie said as she rejoined them. She sat on the floor between Julia and Danny to help. "I had one just like it when I was a kid."

They spent the next quarter hour setting up the train. When it was complete, David switched on the power and it started chugging along the track, circling the tree. The children stood beside it in delight, clapping their hands.

"Look, Mama." Julia pointed to the train, now gathering speed.

Ellie joined in their exuberance. "Isn't that something?"

Mesmerized, they watched the train go around two or three more times.

"I say it's time for cookies." Sara rose from the floor in one graceful movement.

"What kind of cookies?" asked Danny, eyes still locked on the chugging train.

"All kinds of cookies. Want to help me serve them?"

He shook his head. "I'm staying here to watch the train."

"Me too," his sister echoed.

Sara left for the kitchen with a lighter heart than she'd had all day. She arranged an assortment of cookies on a platter. Remembering Fluffy, who had wisely remained absent during the excitement of the children's arrival, she set out his dinner and a bowl of kibble. He'd come out when the coast was clear. Before she left the kitchen, the phone rang, startling her. *Please let it be Jack.* She rushed to answer. "Hello?"

"Hi honey."

Relief! His warm voice stirred a frisson of gratitude in her heart.

"How's everything at home?" he asked.

"Oh, Jack! I'm so happy to hear your voice. Everything is fine. David is here with Anne, his new girlfriend, and we're waiting for you to have supper. Where are you?"

"I'm stuck in Buzzards Bay. This storm has turned into a disaster. The roads are impassable, and the bridges are closed. I'm afraid I won't be home any time soon."

Sara's heart sank. Buzzards Bay. Less than 20 miles away. She closed her eyes. *But it's Christmas Eve*, she wanted to say, but didn't, because, of course, it wasn't his fault. She was just happy he was all right. "What are you going to do? Where will you stay?"

"I'm at an all-night diner. They've taken in several travelers stuck here because of the bridge."

"I'm glad you're okay, Jack, but I miss you." In all their years of marriage, it was their first Christmas Eve apart.

"I miss you too." His voice sounded tired. "What else is going on at home? Tree up?"

"Yes, it is, and David set up the train set. It still works. Wait till you see it."

"Sounds like you're having fun. Has anyone shoveled out the driveway?"

"Kenny from the tree farm has been by twice with the plow. He promised to come out again in the morning. Everything is fine here. And, I've got a surprise for you. We have visitors."

"Visitors? What visitors? I thought David was only bringing one friend. And did you say it's a girlfriend?"

"Yes. She's lovely, and he says he's *serious*."

"Well, I'll be," Jack said, a smile in his voice. "I can't wait to meet her. Who are the other visitors?"

Sara told him the story of Ellie and the children's broken-down car and Father Jeffries' timely rescue. "They're adorable children, Jack, and it's such a sad situation. I want to make this a happy Christmas for them. I have a few ideas."

"I'm sure you do," he chuckled. "It will be a welcome change to have children in the house for Christmas. It's been a long time."

"It's wonderful. Hey, how did the deposition go?"

"I guess it went all right. I was in the hot seat for three hours but didn't have much to add to the defense. The case is closed as far as I'm concerned. Listen honey, there's only one phone here and other people want to call home, so I'm signing off. I love you, and I don't want you to worry about me. Leave the light on. I'll try not to wake you when I come in."

"Wake me. I want to know the second you arrive."

"You've got it. Give David my love. I'll see you soon." He ended the call.

# Chapter Nine

David led the children into the kitchen for hot chocolate and cookies, their sweet voices still chattering about the train.

"Did I hear the phone ring?" he asked his mother between bites of a snowflake-shaped cookie iced with white frosting.

"Yes," she said. "Your father called. The bridges are closed, and he's stuck in Buzzards Bay."

He shook his head. "Where's he riding out the storm?"

"At some all-night diner crowded with travelers unable to cross the bridge. He'll head home as soon as the roads are clear and the bridge resumes travel."

"The storm's that bad?" Ellie asked.

"I'm afraid so," Sara said.

"What about Santa?" inquired a troubled Danny. "How will he bring our presents?"

Sara met Ellie's worried eyes. Before his mother could answer, she said, "Don't you worry about Santa, Danny. No storm is too big for him. He'll get here, but remember: Not until you're sound asleep."

Ellie tousled his light brown hair, badly in need of a trim. "It's almost bedtime," she said. "Finish your snack and we'll go up to bed."

"Miss Anne promised to read us a story," Julia reminded her.

"And I will," Anne said. "After you finish your cookies and cocoa, I'll tuck you into bed, and read a few stories from the pile of Christmas books."

Julia smiled and slurped up the rest of her hot chocolate. "I'm finished."

"Do you mind?" Anne asked Ellie.

She shook her head. "Of course not. I'll visit with Sara a little longer."

"You can help prepare our Christmas Eve dinner," said Sara.

Once Anne and the children disappeared upstairs with a short stack of Christmas stories, Sara, David, and Ellie went to work preparing the seafood stew. Sara had done all the prep work earlier, so it was just a matter of assembling the ingredients. They talked about life on Cape Cod, past Christmases, and family off-Cape.

Ellie came from a rather large clan, most of whom, including her parents, had emigrated from the Cape over the years for work. She'd stayed behind and married Danny, also a lifelong Cape Codder. His parents had moved to Florida long ago, and his only sibling, an older brother, had relocated to New Bedford. It was just the two of them and their children, left behind in Eastham.

Ellie had little to no family support easily available. A neighbor watched the children while she worked, but that was it.

"Perhaps it's time I move off-Cape too," she mused as she helped Sara fill the pot with the ingredients for the seafood stew. "My sister knows someone with an available apartment a block away from her house, and someone else who hires nurses at the hospital. But it would break my heart to move away from the Cape's natural beauty and raise my children in the city."

"I understand," said Sara. She dropped a handful of succulent scallops into the pot. "Jack and I came here on our honeymoon and made sure to return every year for at least two weeks. When we got to the time in our lives when we could permanently relocate we built this house and plan to stay here forever."

"Anne and I live way up in Boston," David said as he dredged the oysters in flour, preparing them for the fryer. "It's like another world compared to the Cape."

"I want my children to grow up with an appreciation for the natural world," Ellie said. "The ocean, the beaches, the wildlife. Clean air. Room to breathe." She looked down at her hands, chapped and rough. She moved her hands down to her sides to hide her bitten nails. "But if I can't make enough money to live on, and don't have anyone to help raise them, I guess we'll need to make some sacrifices."

"Maybe you can move back in a few years." Sara tried to sound encouraging.

"A temporary move," Ellie said thoughtfully. "I hadn't thought of that." She gave Sara a hopeful smile.

While the stew simmered, Sara fried the calamari and oysters, and David stirred the pot on the stove with the dipping sauce.

Anne joined them, looking pleased with herself.

"Are they asleep?" Ellie asked.

Anne nodded. "Only took four stories."

"A record," Ellie noted.

"They're darlings," Anne said.

"Thank you. I do my best."

"You're doing a great job."

It was almost nine when the calamari and oysters were gone, and the stew had simmered long enough. Sara ladled the rich mixture of seafood laced with potatoes, celery, and onions in a milky broth into soup crocks, and set a bowl before each of them. No one uttered a word until the last bowl was empty.

"Delicious." Ellie patted her round belly. "I can't thank you enough for sharing your Christmas Eve meal with me."

"Having you here made it so much better," Sara said.

"Seconds anyone?" offered David.

Anne and Ellie proffered their bowls and he filled them again.

Sara sat back, a satisfied smile on her face. "You know, when I woke up this morning I had no idea I'd be sitting around the table tonight with two sweet children asleep upstairs. This is truly a gift for me."

"Speaking of gifts," David said, "can I talk to you in private, Mom?"

"I'll take care of the dishes." Anne started stacking bowls.

"Let me help." Ellie gathered the silverware.

Sara and David retreated to the living room, where the tree looked even more stunning lit up against the backdrop of the dark night outside, and the firelight. It consumed more of the room than Sara had anticipated, quite possibly their largest tree ever, and it was magnificent.

"I'm so happy," she said. "Everything is working out. Your father will be home before morning, I can feel it, and we'll have a wonderful Christmas day with the children."

"Speaking of the children," he said. "I believe they're expecting a visit tonight from a certain fellow in a red suit and a white beard. What are we going to do about that?"

"You're right, and Ellie told me she has very little for them. I thought of all the games and toys stored in the basement – yours and Lisa's. Would it break your heart if we parted with a few of them to gift to Julia and Danny from Santa?"

"You read my mind." He smiled. "And I know *exactly* what I want to give to Danny. Come on."

# Chapter Ten

Sara and David made their way down the basement stairs as soundlessly as possible, not wanting to alert Anne and Ellie to their mission. It would be a surprise for everyone.

The basement was huge, with several rooms, one of which was stacked with boxes carefully packed, organized, and marked with their contents. David reached for a box marked "David's baseball."

It took Sara a minute to find one of the boxes she was looking for. "Do you think Ellie will mind that we give the children gifts?" She checked over the box for signs of what it held. All she saw was "Lisa's toys" written in Jack's precise block lettering in permanent black marker.

"Why would she?" David inspected an old baseball glove. He cast it aside. There were plenty more in the box.

"She seems to be a proud woman, and I don't want to insult her."

David met her concerned eyes. "Wouldn't it be worse if Danny and Julia woke up on Christmas morning and found nothing from Santa under the tree?"

She nodded. "You're right. We need to think of the children. Their poor mother has enough on her mind right now."

"Yup," mumbled David, as he picked up a well-worn baseball glove the size of a small boy's hand.

"You're giving him your Mickey Mantle glove?" It was once his most prized possession.

He pushed his hand into the long-abandoned glove, stiff with age, and flexed his fingers the best he could. "It could use an oiling, and there's a can of oil in the box. And a brand-new ball, still in its packaging. Think Danny will like it?"

"Danny will love it, but don't you want to save it for your own boy some day?"

"No guarantee I'll have a boy someday, Mom, but there's a boy here tonight, and nothing would make me happier than to watch him unwrap this on Christmas morning."

"That's very unselfish of you." He had always been altruistic, but this small gesture surprised her. It was *Mickey Mantle*, his hero!

"This thing's been collecting dust for years. In fact, I forgot all about it until tonight." He peeled the glove off and picked up the ball and can of oil. "What did you find for Julia?"

Sara's choice wasn't so simple. Her gift would be chosen from Lisa's discarded toys, toys she held onto not only for future grandchildren but also to cling to her memories of her beloved daughter. She was not yet ready to part with one single thing, but also knew her selfishness would deprive a little girl of Christmas joy, and she could not bear to be the cause of her disappointment.

"I don't know. I need to poke around in these boxes a little bit. I forgot half the stuff in them. You don't have to stay here with me. Go upstairs and keep Anne and Ellie company. Leave the ball and glove with me and I'll sneak upstairs to wrap them. "

He glanced at her with skepticism. "You sure you'll be okay? You haven't looked at this stuff in years."

"You're right. I didn't even go through it before the move, just put it on the truck and unloaded it here unopened." She lifted the cover off the box, unleashing old dust from their home in upstate New York, and sneezed.

"Don't stay down here too long, okay?" He headed for the stairs.

"*You've* been down here long enough. Go back to our guests. I'll be fine."

He left her alone to search through the collection of dolls, toys, and games Lisa had once played with: An Easy Bake Oven, a Lite Brite, Lincoln Logs, baby dolls that talked, wet, and cried, and a collection of Barbie's and her paraphernalia to rival any girl's. Seeing them stirred deep feelings of sorrow, but Sara stifled them to finish the task at hand. Julia's sweet face haunted her, and she envisioned her response to each one of these once cherished toys presented to her on Christmas morning. After several minutes, she made her choice.

# Chapter Eleven

Upstairs, she found the others gathered in the living room, drinking a second round of hot chocolate while admiring the tree. Christmas carols played on the record player.

David stood by the window, looking out into the night. "Guess what? It's stopped snowing."

Sara rushed to his side to see for herself. "I think you're right. That means Jack will be home soon!"

"It may take some time for the roads to be cleared. And for the bridges to reopen." He joined Anne on the couch and pulled her close. "Tired?"

She nodded sleepily.

"Let's go to bed," he said. "It doesn't look like much more is happening here tonight." They rose.

"It is late," Sara agreed. "Morning will be here before we know it. Good night you two," she called after them as they headed for the stairs.

"Good night," they said as they headed for the stairs.

Ellie bid them a good night, then turned to Sara. "I'll try to keep the children in bed as long as possible tomorrow morning. I don't want them to disturb you."

"Nonsense," said Sara. "It wouldn't be Christmas morning without the noise of excited kids."

"You're too kind." Ellie said as she followed her out of the living room to the kitchen, carrying a load of empty mugs. "I'm sure you're relieved your husband will be home for Christmas."

"Of course. It wouldn't be Christmas without Jack. We've been married thirty years."

"And David's your only child?"

A shadow crossed Sara's face, but she shook off her sadness. "We had a daughter, Lisa. She passed away five years ago. She was sixteen."

"I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have asked." Ellie looked mortified to have raised such a sensitive subject.

"It's all right. I've had lots of practice saying those words."

"May I ask what happened? Was she sick?"

Sara shook her head. "She drowned. At Corn Hill Beach."

Ellie sagged against the counter. "I heard about it on the news. How tragic."

"Not a day goes by I don't relive that horrible day, wishing I had done just *one* thing differently." Sara wiped at her tear-filled eyes.

"What a terrible heartbreak to bear. I miss Danny, but if anything happened to one of my children – "

Sara interrupted. "Your children will be just fine, Ellie. My Lisa had a freak accident. It just happened. Still, I blame myself."

"I'm sorry I brought back sad memories."

"Don't be. It's only natural to ask. It seems all of us here tonight are living with some sort of heartbreak. That's life, as they say." She checked the clock. "Look at the time. If we don't go to bed Santa won't come down the chimney. That will be sure to ruin tomorrow."

Ellie smiled. "You almost make me believe."

"You must believe, Ellie, otherwise, he won't come."

The two women went upstairs. Ellie slipped into her room without a sound, careful not to wake the children.

Sara entered her attic studio. Her night was not over. She had one more Christmas gift to paint.

# Chapter Twelve

After midnight – Christmas morn! – the house was quiet, too quiet. A restless Sara tossed and turned in her bed, unable to sleep, wondering and worried about Jack. Fluffy, asleep at her feet, failed to bring comfort. Outside, the night was still. The storm had passed. The wind had ceased. The moon lit the fresh, white landscape with a warm glow. Jack was sure to be home soon.

She dozed off. And there it was! The click of a lock. The sound of a door creaking open. Footsteps in the foyer.

She jumped out of bed and into her slippers, wrapping her long flannel robe around her waist, tying its sash as she crept out of her room so as not to wake the others. She paused at the sight of a small, still figure on the landing.

Danny.

The boy clung to the railing, his gaze riveted on the living room, where the towering tree remained lit. A figure crouched before it, rearranging the packages surrounding it, a figure in a heavy red parka and black boots, a red cap on his head.

"Santa!" Danny exclaimed.

The figure turned.

Jack. His cheeks ruddy from the cold, his blue eyes at first surprised, then twinkling. His neatly trimmed white beard only added to the Santa Claus effect.

"Ho, ho, ho," he exclaimed in a rich baritone, then put an index finger to his lips, instructing the boy to be quiet.

Sara hid in the shadows at the top of the stairs, enchanted with the moment.

"You should be in bed, Danny," Jack admonished the boy.

Danny gasped. "How do you know my name?"

"I'm Santa. I know the names of all the little girls and boys. Have you been a good boy, Danny?"

The boy nodded.

"Well, don't spoil it now. Go to bed. And don't tell anyone you saw me, you hear?"

Danny turned to head back upstairs but paused for one final look.

Jack gestured for him to move along, and seconds later the door to his bedroom gently closed.

Sara emerged from her hiding place and descended the stairs.

"You're home," she said. She reached for Jack and they embraced. "I see you met Danny."

Jack laughed. "He scared the heck out of me."

"I think you scared the heck out of him. You look just like Santa in that parka. I forgot you were wearing it."

"Well, I didn't want to let him down. He seems like a sweet kid."

"What did you put under the tree? Presents?" She bent down to inspect the recently laid packages.

"Now, you leave that alone." He shooed her away. "Santa picked up a few things while he was away."

Several packages in shiny paper and satiny bows captivated her. "For me?"

"Not only for you. I picked up some things for David. I was also able to buy a couple of things for Danny and Julia at the diner, which was also a gift shop. I figured you wouldn't have anything for them, given the storm and all."

"You'll find out in the morning," she teased.

"It is morning."

"It's the middle of the night. You must be exhausted. Let's go to bed. Something tells me tomorrow will be a busy day, busier than we expected."

She went with him to the kitchen where he freed himself of his winter garments and hung them in the laundry room.

"You're soaked," she cried, noting his pants were wet from the knees down.

"I had to walk home from the end of the street. The snow's knee-deep in some spots. Sorry I messed up your floor." Puddles formed by his feet.

"Nonsense. It's only water." She grabbed a towel and wiped it up.

Jack switched off the light and grabbed her by the hand. "Time for bed."

They ascended the stairs as quietly as possible and were soon asleep.

# Chapter Thirteen

Early morning light streamed through the cracks in the curtains, awakening the contented inhabitants of Blue Hydrangeas on Christmas day.

Sara woke to see Jack standing by the window, peering out. She went to his side, tying the sash of her robe tight to ward off the morning's chill.

"Merry Christmas, Sweetheart." She snuggled up against him.

"Merry Christmas, Sara." He nuzzled her hair.

"It looks so beautiful." She gazed out over the front yard, where everything was covered in a blanket of white. Virginal. Silent. The sun had yet to make its appearance, but she saw a glimpse of it through feathery cirrus clouds passing over a neighbor's house. The furnace kicked on, and a blast of warm air from the heat register blew across her toes.

"We haven't had a white Christmas like this in years," he marveled.

"Good thing David and Anne are here to help us dig out."

He turned toward her and wrapped her in his arms. Their lips met in a deep kiss, leaving each of them a little breathless.

"Now *that's* a proper good morning." He reached into a pocket in his robe and extracted a small gift box wrapped in shiny gold paper tied with a white ribbon. "I got you a little something in New York."

Sara reached for it, eyes shining. She tenderly tore the paper and ribbon away and opened the box, revealing an antique sterling silver hair comb embedded with tiny pearls. "Jack, it's gorgeous." She turned it over in her hand. "Such exquisite work."

"Handmade, nineteenth century. I thought it was perfect for you." He took the ornate comb from her and used it to smooth her hair away from her face, fastening the errant strands behind her left ear.

She went to the mirror and gazed at her reflection. "It *is* perfect. Thank you, Jack." She stroked the comb. "But you'll have to wait for your gift. It's under the tree."

"Let's go get it!"

They made their way downstairs, careful not to disturb Ellie and the children, whose bedroom door was closed tight. They peeked into the living room and saw the tree, lights on, filling the room with Christmas spirit. At its base, the collection of gifts wrapped in bright, colorful paper, ribbons, and bows seemed larger than it had the night before. *What had Jack done?* Sara wondered, but then remembered a trip to New York always resulted in gifts galore. She smiled in anticipation.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee grew stronger the closer they got to the kitchen.

"Good morning, Merry Christmas," they called out as they entered.

David and Anne sat at the table, steaming cups in hand. David introduced Anne to his father and he sat down to join them.

"Thanks for fixing the coffee." Sara grabbed the pot and poured for Jack and herself.

"I turned on the oven for the French toast casserole," David said. The dish sat on the counter, waiting to be baked.

Sara checked the temperature and slipped it into the oven.

"That looks yummy." Anne poured herself another cup of coffee. "Family recipe?"

"My grandmother's. I make it every Christmas."

"My mom used to make special recipes for Christmas," Anne said. "She made this baked omelet full of ham and cheese. And gingerbread waffles with warm chocolate sauce." She grew wistful. "I have the recipes. Perhaps I can make them for you sometime."

"Sounds delicious. I'm always looking for new recipes."

"Anne's a terrific cook," David said.

Jack smiled at Anne. "Way to a man's heart," he said.

Discarded wrapping paper littered the table.

"You've exchanged gifts?" Sara asked.

"From Anne." David held up a leather-bound journal. It was the size of a college notebook, the paper unlined. He feathered the pages.

"For all his great ideas," Anne said.

"That ought to last a while," Jack observed.

David elbowed him. "Hey, my mind's always working."

"And what did you get?" Sara asked Anne.

She displayed her wrist, exposing a watch with a thin leather band and a huge face with oversized numbers.

"Because she's always running late," David explained.

"Am not," Anne countered.

"It's a lovely gift," Sara said. *And practical*, she thought. *Nothing romantic. Yet.*

"Speaking of being late, when do you plan to go to church?" Jack asked.

"I don't know," Sara said. "Are the roads clear?"

"If not, no need to worry. We can always go to the five o'clock mass," Jack said. "The roads

should be clear by then." He turned to Anne. "Will you go to church with us?"

"Of course, I wouldn't miss it."

That was a relief to Sara, who never missed mass. "Let's find out what Santa brought," she said, rallying everyone into the living room.

They settled onto the couches. Jack turned on the radio to a station playing Christmas music and set the volume to a comfortable level. From upstairs came the sound of giggling, followed by a door opening and footsteps pounding down the stairs. Danny burst into the room, his sister not far behind.

"I'm so sorry." A breathless Ellie followed them. "I tried to contain them, but they heard you down here and couldn't wait any longer."

"Don't worry," Sara assured her, "we want you to share the morning with us. And it looks like there might be something for the children under the tree."

Danny and Julia crept close to their mother, suddenly shy, and gazed longingly at the presents under the tree.

Sara made the introductions to Jack and left the room to get Ellie a cup of coffee.

Jack shook hands with Ellie and then with each child, who looked up at him in wonder.

"Where did *you* come from?" the boy asked.

"Danny!" Ellie scolded.

Jack chuckled. "I live here. I was caught in the storm last night and came home very late."

"Like we did?" Danny asked.

"Something like that," Jack said.

Sara entered the room carrying a tray laden with the pot of coffee and all the fixings, along with two small mugs of warm milk. She poured Ellie a cup and refilled the others.

"I thought I heard something on the roof last night," she said. "Did anyone else?"

"Was it after midnight?" David went along with the ruse.

"I think so," she said. "Sounded like something huge and heavy landed on top of the house."

"I heard footsteps." Anne also played along.

"Sounded more like reindeer hooves to me," Jack said.

Ellie smiled and sipped her coffee.

"Santa Claus!" Danny shouted.

"No." Sara shook her head. "It didn't sound like Santa Claus to me."

"How would you know?" Danny questioned. "Nobody's *ever* heard Santa. It *could* have been

him."

"Maybe," said his mother. "And if it *was* Santa, he might have left something for you and your sister under the tree."

"Can we look?" Danny headed for the closest pile of gifts, Julia on his heels.

"Let me help." David crouched down on the floor and started rummaging through the packages. "Here's one. And another one. And another one." He handed out the packages addressed to the children with tags that read, "From Santa."

Ellie watched from the sidelines, counting the packages. "I don't recognize that paper," she whispered to Sara, who shrugged. Ellie sighed. "You didn't."

"No, I didn't. Maybe it *was* Santa."

"May we open them Mommy?" pled a fidgety Julia.

"Go on."

The children tore into the packages, exclaiming over each one.

There was a doll for Julia with a miniature diaper bag stuffed with all the essentials, and a toy dump truck for Danny with enormous wheels. He tried it out on the carpet, making truck noises. They found coloring books and crayons. Danny opened the package containing the Mickey Mantle baseball glove and ball and for the first time all morning was struck silent.

"What is it, Danny?" Ellie's head was spinning with the number of gifts *someone* had left under the tree for her children.

"A glove! And it fits me just right." He turned it over, admiring the way it looked on his hand.

"Come here, buddy." David tugged the glove further over Danny's hand, tightening the fit. "How's that? Better?"

The boy nodded.

"How about we go outside later and throw some balls?"

"In the snow?"

"Yeah, we'll shovel out the driveway. There's plenty of room."

"This is the best Christmas ever," Danny cried, and ran to hug his mother.

Julia sat under the tree, struggling with a package covered in thick, shiny paper.

"What is it, baby?" her mother asked.

"I don't know." The child, breathless from her exertions, tore the paper away to reveal the gift. She sat with it on her lap, jaw dropped.

Ellie rose to get a better look. "What is it?"

"A house," said Julia. She gently moved the miniature doll house off her lap and on to the floor beside her. "Look, Mommy." She showed her mother how the front door opened and closed.

Sara's father had constructed the house for her when she was just a child herself and put it together with intricate detail. It was two stories high, each story just six inches from floor to ceiling. It had a gabled roof and a wraparound porch. Each level consisted of one room filled with tiny furnishings: A couch, a chair, end tables with lamps, and a fireplace. A canopied bed, chest of drawers, night table and lamp. A bassinet. Tiny dolls slept in the bed and bassinet. Julia lifted them from their slumber and cradled them in the palm of her hand.

"Look, Mommy. They're sleeping."

"Yes, they are, honey." She looked over at Sara, who watched the child with joy on her face, her eyes glistening with tears. She too became teary-eyed. "Thank you," she mouthed.

Sara smiled back. "You're welcome."

Jack leaned over and murmured in his wife's ear, "That looks familiar. Are you sure?"

She nodded. "It looked like it needed a little girl."

He pulled her close and kissed her softly on her cheek.

# Chapter Fourteen

With the children preoccupied with their toys, the adults exchanged their own gifts. Jack and David loved the small watercolors Sara had painted for them, exclaiming over the attention to detail that made each scene seem so real. Anne looked on in awe, amazed at Sara's talent.

"This is exquisite, Sara." She held up the one Sara had painted for her son. "David mentioned you were talented, but I had no idea you were this good. I'm impressed."

Sara beamed under her praise. "How sweet of you to say." She reached for another small package under the tree. "I have one for you, too."

Anne took the gift with hesitation. "I'm touched," she said. "Thank you." She unwrapped the gift, revealing a painting of the inn in its summer splendor, the blue hydrangeas lining the driveway in full bloom, heavy with the fluffy blue flowers. "This is stunning, Sara. It makes me want to come back to see the inn when it really looks like this."

"I hope you do." Sara gave her a warm smile before catching David's eye and giving him a conspiratorial wink. "We would love to have you visit anytime."

Ellie and the children sat in their own little corner, opening the gifts she had for them: New socks and pajamas. Disinterested, the children went back to their toys.

"Oh, well," Ellie sighed. "They mean something to me."

"Sit here, Ellie. I have a gift for you." Sara searched under the tree again.

Ellie demurred. "Please, Sara, no gifts for me. You've done enough."

"Nonsense." Sara presented her with a gift that looked a lot like the ones she gave to Jack, David, and Anne. "Your presence here is a gift for us. We haven't shared Christmas with young children in many years."

Ellie took the gift and turned it over in her hands, marveling at its wrappings: White butcher's paper hand painted with miniature pine trees decorated with colorful strings of lights. "Such unique paper, Sara, did you make it?"

Sara nodded. "I did, but only for the art I created. The rest of the papers I bought. I don't have *that* much spare time."

Ellie gingerly unwrapped her gift, and once revealed stared at the canvas inside. "I don't know what to say," she said. She showed the portraits of Julia and Danny to the others. "They seem so real. You captured them completely," she told Sara.

"They're so full of life and beauty it was easy," Sara said.

"When did you do this?"

"Last night, after everyone went to bed."

"You shouldn't have stayed up so late for me, but I'm happy you did. Thank you. I will treasure it always."

"Me too." Anne gazed at her painting with delight.

"My pleasure. I'm glad you like them," Sara said.

The phone rang.

"Who could that be?" Jack wondered aloud. "We're all here."

"I'll get it." Sara went to the phone in the kitchen and picked up on the fourth ring. "Merry Christmas!"

"Good morning, Sara, and Happy Christmas to you, too." It was Father Jeffries. "I trust everyone had a good night?"

"Yes, Father," said Sara. "Jack came home around one o'clock, all in one piece. We just finished unwrapping our gifts. The children are thrilled. Santa managed to find them here and left them some new toys."

"That's terrific. And I have another gift for them: I got in touch with Ellie's sister, and her brother-in-law will be coming first thing tomorrow morning to pick them up and bring them to their house, so they will see family at Christmas after all."

"Wonderful news, Father. She'll be so happy."

"And I found someone to tow her car to a repair shop. He'll look it over tomorrow and give her an estimate. I also managed to find some emergency funds to help pay for the repairs, so she'll be back on the road in a few days."

"Father, you're a miracle worker." The day looked brighter and brighter for her new friends.

"May I please speak to Ellie, so I can tell her myself?"

"Of course." She put him on hold while she notified Ellie she had a phone call.

Jack, David, and Anne had started clean-up, gathering the discarded wrapping paper, ribbons, and bows and stuffing them into trash bags.

"It takes so long to put it all together and just minutes to tear it apart," Sara lamented, and pitched in to help pick up the mess.

They had the room back together by the time Ellie returned and told them her news.

"I'm glad that's settled," Sara said. "You must be so relieved."

"Absolutely. I was worried about how we would get home and how I would get to work."

"I'm hungry," announced Jack. "How about some breakfast?"

The delicious aroma of the French toast in the oven lured them back to the kitchen.

# Chapter Fifteen

When breakfast was over, Ellie dressed the kids in outdoor clothing as best as she could with some help from Sara, who dug through a closet for sweaters and scarves that might fit them. Once covered from head to toe, they went out with David and Anne to play catch in the snow. Jack and Sara shoveled out the walkways, loaded the bird feeders with seed, then joined the game of catch. When they were all chilled to the bone they went back into the house with rosy cheeks and much laughter.

Ellie helped Sara make the final preparations for dinner while Jack, David, and Anne went to the living room with the tired children, watching over them as they lay down for a nap by the Christmas tree, covered in one of Emily's hand-knit afghans.

"Everything smells so good," Ellie said as Sara popped the ham into the oven. The scalloped potatoes, buttered carrots, and Brussels sprouts waited on the counter for their turn in the heat. "You must have been cooking for days."

Sara smiled. "I love to cook. It keeps me sane."

"It's therapeutic," Ellie agreed. "When Danny died, I baked for a week. Chocolate chip cookies, layer cakes, banana bread. I had so much food I had to give it away."

They laughed.

"But it just distracted me from the pain. When I ran out of ingredients, I fell apart."

Sara took her hand. "That's understandable. You were in shock. Now, I'm not going to tell you it will get a little better each day, or some other pabulum. It may not. But with time you *will* move forward, away from the pain. You'll have your new baby, and perhaps a new home and job to look forward to. You'll never forget Danny. You'll always love him. But you'll spend more time thinking of the happy times you had together, and not the sadness."

"Thank you. No one has told me that. Everyone keeps telling me to snap out of my grief, but I just can't."

"No one can. You take as much time as you need. It isn't anybody else's business. Take care of yourself and the children and live one day at a time."

Ellie pulled a tissue out of her sleeve and wiped away her tears.

"Why don't we see what everyone else is doing? Dinner will be ready soon," Sara said. They left the kitchen, leaving behind the day's melancholy.

# Chapter Sixteen

The table was set, the candles were lit, and room was made for the additional guests. It had been months since so many had assembled at Sara's table. She sat at the end, watching her family, her friends, laugh and joke with one another. It was a blessed Christmas. Jack was home, returned from the storm unscathed. David had brought them Anne, whom she suspected would be sharing her Christmas table for many years to come. And Ellie and the children had entered their lives, finding a soft spot in Sara's heart. She was determined to stay in touch with the little family. The expectant young mother needed support while she made her plans to leave the Cape, and Sara wanted to help. Julia and Danny also needed support, and some fatherly love. She was sure Jack and David would also want to stay in their lives.

Jack cleared his throat and got everyone's attention. "Time for grace."

They bowed their heads.

"Dear Lord, we thank you for the blessings of this day. Our safety from the storm, our warm home, a delicious dinner on the table, and our new friends, Anne, Ellie, Danny and Julia. We ask for your continued graces in the new year. Amen."

A chorus of *amens* went around the table.

"Now, dig in," Jack ordered.

Platters and bowls were passed around the table. In minutes, lighthearted conversation filled the room.

Outside, snow blew across the landscape, light flurries, no danger. Hungry birds clamored around the bird feeders, filling their bellies. Up and down the street, the neighbor's homes were lit from within with a warm glow as families enjoyed their holiday.

*Yes*, Sara thought, it truly *was* a blessed Christmas at Blue Hydrangeas.

The End

## A Note from the Author

Thank you for taking the time to read *Christmas at Blue Hydrangeas*, the prequel to *Blue Hydrangeas, an Alzheimer's love story*. The inn is a special place, one that readers have told me they want to visit again and again. I wish there was a place like Blue Hydrangeas on Cape Cod, but right now it only exists in my mind. It was a pleasure to write about Jack and Sara in the years before her Alzheimer's, and I hope you enjoyed meeting them and their family. The natural sequel to this is the story of David and Anne's wedding, and I will soon be at work writing *A Wedding at Blue Hydrangeas*. To receive news of this and my other writing projects [please subscribe to my newsletter](#).

# About the Author



Marianne Sciucco writes contemporary and YA fiction. Her stories are considered "clean," meaning free of graphic violence, gratuitous sex, and offensive language so you can feel comfortable sharing her books with friends and family.

She says she's not a nurse who writes but a writer who happens to be a nurse. A lover of words and books, she dreamed of becoming an author when she grew up but became a nurse to avoid poverty. She later brought her two passions together and writes about the intricate lives of people struggling with health and family issues.

Her debut novel, *Blue Hydrangeas, an Alzheimer's love story*, is a Kindle bestseller, Indie Reader Approved, a Book Works *Book of the Week*, a *Library Journal* Self-e Selection, and a 5-star Readers Favorite. Marianne's work with Alzheimer's patients and their families led her to help found the organization [AlzAuthors.com](http://AlzAuthors.com), which vets books and blogs about the dementias for those who need to read them.

Marianne has also published a Young Adult novel, *Swim Season*, an Official Selection in the Young Adult General Fiction category of New Apple's 2017 Annual Book Awards for Excellence in Independent Publishing and a Book Works *Book of the Week*. *Swim Season* is based on the author's 11 years' experience as a Swim Mom, and the longest book she hopes she'll ever write. She prefers shorter fiction, and has published three short stories: *Ino's Love*, the award-winning *Collection: Daisy Hunter Story No. 1*, and *Birthday Party: Daisy Hunter Story No. 2*. *Dinner at the Tamarack Inn: Daisy Hunter Story No. 3* will release in 2018. The Daisy Hunter stories are loosely based on her childhood experiences. Visit her [Amazon page](#) for details on all her stories.

A native Bostonian, Marianne lives in New York's Hudson Valley with her patient, reliable husband and their beautiful, brainy daughter. They are ruled by Mr. Chance, a rescue cat who thinks he rescued them (he may be right but please don't tell him), and Charlie, another rescue who loves to challenge Mr. Chance to be Top Cat. When not writing, Marianne works as a campus nurse at a community college and teaches classes in independent publishing. She enjoys books, the beach, and craft beer, preferably all at the same time.

Follow her Adventures in Publishing on her [website](#), [Twitter](#), and [Facebook](#).

# A Request from the Author

If you enjoyed this book, please post a review. Your comments do matter. They help others decide on whether they want to take a chance on a book by an unknown author. And I read reviews, so I can get feedback and improve my writing. Ready? It's simple: Just go to my Amazon page

[amazon.com/author/mariannesciucco](https://www.amazon.com/author/mariannesciucco)

and select *Christmas at Blue Hydrangeas*. Scroll down to where it says, "Customer Reviews," click on the box that says, "Write a Review," and start writing! One or two sentences will do.

Thanks again for your support.

Marianne Sciucco