

John and Mari : A Christmas Story
by Kate Simon

John Holmes sat down at a table at Gran's coffee shop. It was unusual for there to be any open tables. The place was usually full of students from Markham University. Two days before Christmas meant the college town of Davenport was all but deserted. Located between Philadelphia and New York, the town was largely a bedroom community for executives who took the train into the city every morning. The remaining residents worked for the University or businesses that depended on it.

John had taught at Markham for more than thirty years. He loved his students and they were equally fond of him. He'd been a godfather at more christenings than he could count. He received numerous invitations to spend the holidays with alumni or other professors and their families but he always turned them down. John spent his holidays reading something other than student papers. He opened his book and sipped his Sumatra blend.

Mari Kelly walked into Gran's and ordered a large Chai and a chocolate muffin. It wasn't so much a muffin as it was an excuse to have chocolate cake before lunch. She was enjoying actually having down time during the holidays. She'd stepped away from her landscaping business to finally do something she wanted to do. She'd gone to Markham right out of high school on an academic scholarship but she'd had to drop out before her last semester. When her parents were killed in a car accident she had to run the family business. It felt like she blinked and it was twenty five years later. Now, she was taking at least a year off. She was finally going to write the story that had been playing itself out in her head for decades.

John glanced over at the woman who sat down two tables away. She looked familiar, very familiar. She appeared to be in her mid forties and had a slight tan despite the fact it was December. Unlike almost every woman in Davenport, she wore no makeup but she was stunning none the less. She had magnificent, deep chestnut hair that hung just below her shoulders. He'd only ever known one woman with hair like that. No. It couldn't be. She opened up a laptop and took handful of sugar packets, lids and stirrers and set them out over the table. She ran a set of keys in between the items until she sat

back and said,

"Oh bugger! I was afraid of that. You can't get there from here."

John smiled and walked to her table. "May I be of assistance?"

She held her hands up in exasperation, staring at the mess in front of her. "My world makes no sense...wait that doesn't sound like I meant it."

"I took it to mean that your initial mind map of this fictional world isn't fitting the emerging narrative."

She finally looked at him and smiled. "Okay, maybe it did sound like I meant it. Dr. Holmes, it's good to see you again."

"Hello Marigold."

"My God, how do you remember me? It's been twenty five years."

"I had thousands of students over the years but only one named Marigold Sunshine."

She rolled her eyes. "That's what happens when you're conceived at Woodstock."

Mari fought to stay calm. She couldn't believe he was standing in front of her, John Holmes, PHD., English professor and tenured campus heartthrob. Not much had changed in twenty five years. His crystal blue eyes still made her heart skip. His graying temples only added to his distinguished look. He pointed to the chair next to her.

"May I?"

"Of course," she smiled.

"I'm not used to seeing people using my parageography techniques outside the classroom."

"Your course in the geography of fictional worlds helped me in my writing, explaining something to someone they've never experienced."

"Have you been writing since college?"

"Some, mostly shorts. I was too busy working."

"I was surprised when you left school."

She was genuinely shocked he'd even noticed her absence. "How did you know I left?"

"I notice all promising students. Why did you leave? You were so close to graduation."

"My parents were killed in a car accident between fall and spring semesters my senior year. I had to run the family business."

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

She tried to smile. "That's okay. It was a long time ago."

"What business?"

"Kelly Landscaping. I have a nursery and a retail side and we also landscape a number of businesses."

"That big place out on Route six? I've been there, you have a great selection."

"Thanks. If I'd know you were there I would have given you the friends and family discount."

"I'll remember that, but I'm afraid I have a black thumb. I seem to kill all my plants. Cicero has a particular disdain for potted ferns."

"Cicero?"

"My cat. I found him a couple of years ago about on Christmas Eve. I was walking home from church and I heard this meow." He snickered. "A very loud meow. I found this one eyed kitten hiding under a car, trying to avoid the snow. So I took him home. He's been ruling my roost ever since. He came right to me." He took a sip of his coffee. "He knew a soft touch when he saw one. So what has brought you to creating your world out of coffee stirrers?"

He smiled at Mari and she had to remind herself this was Dr. Holmes, the most popular prof on campus. He was just being nice.

"I hired a general manager to take over for me. I'm giving myself a year to finally do what I want."

"What do you want to do, Marigold?"

"Mari," she smiled. "My friends call me, Mari."

"Are we going to be friends, Mari?" he asked.

"Well, you haven't been my professor for twenty five years so I think it's safe."

"Then you must call me John."

"Okay...John."

"You never answered the question. What do you want to do?"

Mari restrained herself from saying something wildly inappropriate. "I want to write, not just as a hobby. I want to finish the novel that's been pinballing around my head since your class."

He sat back against his chair. She thought he looked impressed. "That sounds wonderful. I'd love to hear about it."

"Oh I wouldn't want to bother you with it."

"It wouldn't be a bother. I'd find it very interesting."

"It's Christmas. I'm sure your busy."

"No. I take this time for myself as well." He held up his book. "A little pleasure reading."

"Le Morte d'Arthur? That's a little pleasure reading?"

"It is for me."

His smile was just about melting her bones. She sipped her chai and hoped he couldn't see her hand shake. "Well, if you're going to listen to my story, you'll have to let me help you with your black thumb issues."

"Oh, I don't think anyone could cure me of that."

"You'd be surprised what I can do."

He studied her for a moment and gave her another slow smile. "I don't think I would."

John had always been curious about Mari Kelly. She'd always sat in the front row of his class taking copious notes. It was a great pleasure for a professor to find a student so focused on her studies. Many students took his parageography course thinking it would be an easy elective. They were surprised when they realized the study of fictional landscapes was no easy A. As he recalled, she was one of the few students that year who had earned an A.

She was a beautiful girl, completely natural. Unlike her fellow students, her jeans had dirt and grass stains that said they had seen real work. And then there was her hair. Her deep chestnut brown hair had gold highlights from the sun, not a hairdresser. After she finished his course he found himself watching for her on campus. He'd see her sitting

under a tree reading between classes. He'd never seen her with anyone else, male or female. She was a solitary person, just like him. When she disappeared from campus he'd missed seeing her. He checked with the administration and found she'd officially withdrawn from school. He had given a thought to tracking her down but he quickly dismissed it. A professor chasing after a student was something he could never do. Even if he could convince himself it was only out of concern.

"I should probably get going," said Mari. "I'm sure you have something better to do than listen to me ramble about my writing. You must have some Christmas plans."

He smiled and shook his head. "No, the holidays are a quiet time for me."

"You never married?" she asked.

"No. Why do you seem so surprised?" He thought he could see her blush.

"Well, you're..." she waved her hand like she was looking for a word. "You're you."

"What does that mean?"

"You were the most popular professor on campus. All the girls were always mooning over you. And if I recall, a few boys too."

John laughed out loud. "Well I think that was more about currying favor with a professor."

"No it wasn't," she said quietly.

His heart actually skipped. Did she...? No. He had to get back on track. "What about you? Do you have a house full of little Marigolds?" He was immediately sorry he'd asked for the look on her face.

"No, never married. No kids. Just a lot of work."

"I know what you mean."

The barista came to their table. "I'm sorry to interrupt but we just got a storm warning. That snow storm they'd been watching has just turned our way. They're expecting it to start in the next hour and not stop until tomorrow night. Two feet at least. I'm going to close up so I can let my people get home before it hits."

"Oh boy," said Mari.

"Of course," said John. They gathered their things and walked to the lot. "Mari, I was serious when I said I wanted to hear about your book." She smiled and reached into her bag. She pulled out a business card and wrote her number on the back.

"Here. When you feel you miss the ramblings of a confused student you can reach me here."

"It was great to see you Mari, and I will call you."

She smiled like she thought he was humoring her. "It was great to see you too."

He was walking to his car he heard Mari start her car. Or try to. A grinding sound caught his attention and he turned to see Mari banging on her steering wheel. He returned to her car and knocked on the window. She rolled down the window and sighed.

"Can I help?"

"Oh, it's okay. I'll call someone."

"Mari, the town is about to shut down. Everyone has been told to stay off the road. You're not going to get anyone." He looked up at the snow that had picked up in the last few minutes. I'd offer to take you home but Route six is going to be a parking lot with everyone trying to get home." He was surprised to see her eyes fill with tears. He opened her back door and grabbed her laptop. "Come on. My house is down the street"

"Oh, I couldn't."

"Sure you can," he smiled. "Mari, I can't leave you here. Please."

When she nodded and grabbed her purse John realized for the first time he was happy about a blizzard.

John pulled into his driveway and parked. His small English cottage was within walking distance of campus so he walked to class most days. He'd bought it with Abigail in mind, even though she'd already been gone ten years by the time moved in. It was just the kind of place they'd talked about having one day. Even when she was sick and they knew time was short she talked about having a home. She wanted him to put down roots. She'd made him promise.

It was small, two bedrooms upstairs, living room and kitchen were small but more than adequate for his needs. He'd converted the dining room into a home office and library. He and Cicero spent most evenings there. He went over papers while Cicero batted around whatever toy had peaked his interest.

"I need to warn you about Cicero. He's a bit...antisocial."

"Antisocial?"

"He hates people."

Mari laughed. "Does he hate you?"

"He tolerates me most days. With strangers he tends to leap out and frighten them. All black, one eye, hissing, he can be intimidating."

She smiled. "Thanks for the heads up."

He grabbed her laptop from the backseat and led her up the walkway. He opened the door and called out. "Cicero, I'm back and I've brought company so behave yourself." He turned toward Mari and shrugged. "I find it's best to warn him."

"Why wouldn't you?"

"Some people think it's odd I talk to my cat in complete sentences."

"Some people are wrong."

He looked at her and smiled. "Let me take your coat." He hung it in the hall closet. Mari walked into the library and looked around.

"Oh this is beautiful. You must spend a lot of time in here."

"I do."

"What am I smelling?"

"Mulled wine. I make it in the slow cooker. If you'd like some I think I have some gingerbread."

"Mulled wine? Gingerbread? You're too tall to be a hobbit. Let me guess, It's Cicero. Don't worry his secret is safe with me."

John laughed. "Have a seat and I'll be back." He got some mugs and a ladle and poured them each a mug of the warm drink. He took a sip of his and smiled. "Perfect." He walked back into the library and handed Mari the mug.

"Oh that's delicious."

"Thanks. It's my one tradition I do for the holidays." He glanced at the doorway and noticed Cicero in the doorway. Mari looked over and smiled.

"Hello. You must be Cicero, I'm Mari." She set down her mug and extended one finger toward the cat. "It's very nice to meet you." She held still and waited. John couldn't believe what he was seeing. Cicero walked toward her and sniffed her finger then rubbed his head under her hand. With no warning he jumped in her lap and placed his paws on her chest. He got very close to her face and sniffed.

"Cicero get..."

Mari held her hand up slightly to stop him. "Hello Cicero. I've been told you're antisocial. You seem perfectly fine to me." The cat head butt her and she stroked his head. "You're such a handsome fellow, Cicero. Two eyes are overrated." The cat curled up in her lap for what John recognized would be an extended pet.

"I don't believe it."

"What?"

"He's never done that with anyone."

"Except you."

"Rarely."

Mari smiled and stroked his dark fur, kicking Cicero's purr into high gear. "He must be difficult to live with."

"He's not that bad."

She looked up and winked. "I was talking to the cat."

John laughed and sat back watching Mari. He was jealous of his damn cat. "Mari, I have a guest room so you can stay here tonight."

"Oh, I couldn't."

"You aren't going to find anyone to take care of your car for at least a day."

"I just hate to be an imposition."

"You're not. I'm sorry it's not possible to get you home."

"You're right about Route six. We all know what happens during rush hour let alone weather like this."

"Is there someone you should call? Let them know you won't be home."

Mari looked back down at Cicero and continued petting him. "No," she whispered. "I won't be missed."

John had spent his life reading all the great works of literature. He had never read anything that caused him more sadness.

Once Cicero wandered off, Mari browsed John's library. "You have a very eclectic collection, Melville, Grisham, Baba Yaga?"

John moved next to her. "Russian fairytales. It was a gift from a former student, Jake Sokolov. He was a freshman my first year as a graduate assistant. I was surprised when he went into the Marines after graduation. I thought for certain he'd teach Russian language and history. He was brilliant. We've kept in touch over the years."

Mari smiled. "So I'm not the first student to disappoint you."

John was startled and reached for her hand. "I was never disappointed in you. Simply surprised."

She smiled and opened up the book. She point to the Cyrillic writing. "Do you speak Russian?"

"No. Jake translated it for me. It's an old Russian proverb. Word is silver, silence is gold. He gave it to me when I flew out to his wedding last year. It was nice of him to invite me. I never met a movie star before."

"Movie star?"

"Jake's sister. She got married too. So did their other brother."

"Jake Sokolov. Wait, Marina Sokolov?"

"Yes. She's very nice."

"Holy crap! You were at the wedding of the century."

"How do you know about that?"

"It was headline news."

"Well, it was good to see him again. He finally found someone after all these years." He needed to get out of such close quarters with her. "How about I show you the guest room? You can get comfortable."

Mari followed John up the narrow stairs. The upstairs had two bedrooms and only one bathroom. It was just as tidy as the downstairs, decorated with comfortable pieces and warm colors. John set her laptop on the bed. "I hope you'll be comfortable."

"I'm sure I will. Your home is lovely."

"Thank you."

He glanced out the window and whistled. "It's piling up fast."

"Oh my God. That's at least six inches."

"It looks like we made it home just in time."

Mari set her purse on the bed. "So what would you be doing now if you weren't entertaining me?"

"Am I entertaining?"

His smile was having a dangerous affect on her. "Fake it till you make it," she thought and pasted on a nervous smile. "I'm finding you mildly amusing."

John laughed. "Good to know. Well the only thing I had on my agenda today was reading and cooking some dinner. Maybe watch a movie."

"Oh yeah, what movie? Manchurian Candidate? From Here to Eternity?"

"Die Hard."

"What?"

"It's a Christmas movie."

She shook her head and smiled. "John Holmes you are quite a surprise." She thought she saw a strange look in his eyes before he smiled.

"Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Let's have some lunch and then we can start the film fest."

"Sounds like a plan."

John smiled as he watched Mari polish off her burger. It was good to have company. Especially company that was so lovely. He'd dated over the years, mostly fix ups from colleagues. There was nothing more he hated than pity for the poor, lonely widower. But Abigail had been gone thirty years and he was only human. None of the casual relationships ever crossed into serious territory. It had never even entered his mind.

He stood to do the dishes and Mari joined him. He'd never bothered with a dishwasher because it was just him.

"Where are the dish towels?"

He pointed to the far cabinet. "Bottom drawer." Mari bent over and her hair fell in her face. She grabbed the towel and stood, looking around the kitchen. She pulled a pencil from the note pad, twisted her hair into a bun and held it fast with the pencil. She caught him staring.

"Cute trick," he smiled.

"I know it's ridiculous for a woman my age to have hair this long but I can't seem to get around to chopping it off."

"Good Lord, woman, never do that." He was shocked at his impulsive response. He turned his attention to the dishes.

"What?"

"Your name isn't the only reason I remembered you," he said quietly. He rinsed the dish and told himself to get a grip. He was a grown man. Time like he acted like it. "Mari, I hope I'm not crossing a line, but you said we're friends." He smiled, hoping it would make his point.

"I'm eating your food and sleeping in your house so I think that's an appropriate designation."

"Okay then. I don't understand why you're single. You're a beautiful woman. Men must ask you out all the time."

Mari looked shocked, then rolled her eyes. "John, I'm just not that type of woman." She dried the dish and set it on the counter.

"What do you mean?"

She turned around almost in exasperation. "I never wear makeup, the last dress I

wore was for an employee's wedding five years ago and I have the hands of a farmer."

He took her hands in his and he heard her gasp. They were rough and calloused, showing the signs of a lifetime of hard work. "All of those things may be true, but none of them speak to the fact that you're a beautiful woman."

"Thank you," she whispered. She tried to turn her attention to the next dish but he gently slipped his hand under her chin and forced her to look at him. He stepped closer "What are you doing?" she asked.

"What I wanted to do twenty five years ago and didn't dare. What I still want to do." He got a breath away. "Should I stop?"

She smiled and whispered, "No."

He leaned in and gave her the softest of kisses.

Never in her life had she imagined John Holmes would kiss her. She'd imagined kissing him many times but never thought he would kiss her. It was a sweet, gentle kiss. She pulled away, smiled and pointed to the dishes. "Those dishes aren't going to wash themselves."

John nodded and smiled. "Yes ma'am." He picked up the sponge and continued. "You're a bossy little thing, aren't you?"

"Damn straight. Can't run a business with twenty employees and be a push over."

"How many?"

"Most of my employees work offsite. When my grandparents started the nursery it was small, literally a Mom and Pop store. I grew up working there. They expanded a bit over the years but when I took over I started bidding on bigger contracts."

He handed her the last dish. "I am very impressed Ms. Kelly."

"Thank you, Dr. Holmes."

"You still found time to write."

"The best I could. If I'm away from it too long I get antsy."

"I'd like to read your work."

"Oh, those are mostly contemporary, nothing historical. The closest I got to historical was a story set in the late 1930's."

"Get your tablet. I'll be in the den."

"Excuse me?"

"You have all you work on your tablet. I would like to read it." He smiled. "I'll be in the living room."

She stared as he walked out of the kitchen. She'd been talking about writing all day. It was time to put up or shut up.

He sat down living room and wondered if he was pushing too hard. Mari Kelly was almost as much a mystery to him now and she had been twenty five years ago. Maybe her writing would give him some insight. All he was certain of at this point was that he very much wanted to kiss her again.

Mari came into the living room holding on to her tablet like it was her precious child, which he supposed it was. "Okay. I've pulled up the story I mentioned. It's set in the late thirties." She extended the tablet to him but quickly pulled it back. "Are you sure you want to read this, John? It's mostly a romance."

"Please Mari, I really want to read it."

She hesitated but handed him the tablet. "I'm going to help myself to some more wine. Do you want some?"

"Yes, thank you." He watched as she left the room. What was she so nervous about? The subject matter or that he wouldn't like her work? He began reading the story of Michael and Claire, the children of Irish immigrants who grew up to run competing construction companies.

"I have an excellent offer for the property Ms. Monahan. If you'll give me the name of the new company president, I will present him my offer."

She smiled and closed the file she was reading. "That would be me."

"What? You're a woman."

"Thank you for noticing but I am the president of Monahan Construction." She rose and walked around her desk. "I own every nail, every truck, every square foot of board." She walked close enough that he could smell lavender. She spoke quietly. "Everything you see belongs to me. I intend to keep it that way."

John laughed. He imagined this was how Mari had to be in her business life. Mari came back into the room and handed him a mug of the warmed wine. He was only conscience of her watching him for a few moments as he got involved in the story.

Spending time in a bookstore was one of his favorite things to do. He mostly gravitated to the mystery section, Grisholm and Connelly were his favorites. He'd always ignored the large romance section. Now he was beginning to think he'd been missing something. There was sex in mysteries, but mostly it was devoid of passion. Not so in Mari's work.

"You are a good man, Michael. I saw it in your eyes that first day. I saw the good man, waiting to come out. He's the man who gave me a chance to prove I'd be a good business partner. He's the man who showed me respect in front of his men so they would respect me." Her voiced struggled with emotion. "He's the man who set me a perfect birthday tea and sang Danny Boy to me. He's the man in my bed right now. There is a good man in you but most of the time you keep him locked away. I hope one day you will let him out for good." She gave him the sweetest of kisses. "I hope I will see that day."

John continued to sip his wine and read about Michael and Claire. He laughed at the last scene, a final tip of the hat to the hero's rough childhood. He set down the tablet and smiled. Mari looked like she was about to jump out of her skin. He stood and picked up his mug. "I'd like some more wine. Can I get you some?"

She jumped out of her chair and pushed him back on the sofa. "Oh no you don't, John Holmes. I did not just sit here for an hour watching you read for you not to tell me what you thought."

He laughed as she sat down next to him. "I thought it was terrific."

She gave him a wary smile. "Really?"

"Really. Your characters were well defined, their motivations were clear. You captured the mood of the time." He smiled. "The love scenes were... very real."

"John are you just...?"

"Being kind because you're my guest? No. I would never disrespect you like that."

If you were still my student I'd give you an A."

"Really?" This time he smile was genuine.

"You have a gift, Mari. No matter what you do, never stop writing." He was surprised when she threw her arms around him.

"Thank you, John. I can't tell you what that means to me."

He rubbed his hand down her arm. "You're welcome, Mari." He wanted more from this moment but he didn't want to push her. "Hey, I think I promised you a movie."

Mari smiled. "Do you have any popcorn?"

"As a matter of fact I do."

John returned with the popcorn but stopped as he saw Mari bent over looking in his entertainment cabinet. The woman knew how to fill out a pair of jeans. He tried to clear his head to something more appropriate than ravaging his former student.

"Did you find the disk?" he asked.

"I did, but that's not all I found." She pulled out a trophy he'd stuffed in the back of the cabinet. "What's this? A trophy for sculling?"

He set down the popcorn and took the DVD from her. "I try and get on the river when the weather's good. It's good exercise."

"You must be pretty good."

"I'm okay."

"This is a first place trophy."

"For my age group."

"And how many were in your group?"

"A few." He set the DVD in the player and turned on the TV.

"What constitutes a few?"

"Twenty."

She looked at his chest and smiled. "That explains it."

"Explains what?"

She sat on the couch and tucked her bare feet under her. She reached for her mug and sipped her wine. "You forgot to hit the play button."

John picked up the remote and for the first time in forever, felt the glorious

confusion.

They had both finished their third mug of wine by the time Bruce Willis was crawling around in the air shaft. "Welcome to the party, pal!" all three shouted.

John turned to Mari and smiled. "You didn't tell me you were a fan."

She grabbed the bowl of popcorn and put a piece in her mouth. "There's a lot you don't know about me."

"I do enjoy research," he said with a smile. Mari tossed a piece of popcorn at him and it bounced off his forehead. "Oh no you didn't."

"Oh yes I did," she giggled. She tossed another piece and this time he caught it in his mouth. "Such talent, professor. I'm impressed." She tried to toss another piece when he caught her hand, upending the rest of the popcorn on the floor. She squealed and giggled as he pinned her back on the couch.

"Oh no you don't" He laughed. He held her tight and looked into her dark eyes. He stilled and whispered her name. She leaned up and gave him a soft kiss. He released her hands and she threaded them around his neck. She pulled him into a deep kiss and showing him she was as passionate as her writing. They made out on the couch like a couple of teenagers until he pulled away.

"Mari, when something happens between us, I don't want it to be because of the wine."

"When?" she smiled.

"When."

They'd finished Die Hard II when John suggested they think about dinner. Mari followed him into the kitchen as he looked into the fridge.

"I'm not all that hungry. I polished off a lot of wine and popcorn," said Mari.

"How about soup and a salad? I think I have some fresh rolls."

"Sounds great."

Mari put together a salad while John heated the soup. He looked at her slicing tomatoes and thought how perfect she looked in his kitchen. "Don't get ahead of yourself," he thought to himself. He poured the soup and set the bowls on the table. He set out the warmed bread and they had a companionable meal. John was finding he was as comfortable in their silence as he was in their conversation.

"What?" asked Mari.

"Excuse me?"

"You're staring."

"No, I'm not," he smiled.

"Yes, you are."

"Okay you caught me. I guess I'm not used to having such a lovely dinner companion in my home. Cicero is not nearly as attractive."

"Shush. Don't let him hear you say that. He'll be devastated."

"I think he'll survive."

"Speaking of which, where is he. I haven't seen him for hours."

"He's probably asleep on my bed. It seems to be his favorite place when he's not tormenting guests."

"Or demolishing house plants."

John smiled. "Or that."

"So, why aren't you?"

"Why aren't I what?"

"Used to having a dinner companion. You're a very handsome, successful man. I imagine you have many opportunities."

"Well, first, thank you," he smiled. "I've dated over the years but nothing serious

came of it. My friends tried fix ups but that never worked out."

"Oh, do you get poor man fix ups?"

"What?"

"I get the poor woman fix ups. Friends always think if you're not in a relationship you couldn't possibly be happy. 'Poor Mari. All alone in that house, poor woman. Let's fix her up with cousin Fred."

John laughed. "God, I hate those."

Mari finished off her meal and smiled. "That hit the spot."

He picked up his dishes and took them to the sink. Mari grabbed a dish towel as they fell into a easy pattern of him washing while she dried.

"Mari, I was thinking. Once the snow stops we'll need to get you dug out of Gran's lot."

"I can call one of my guys. Part of our landscaping business is snow plowing. They don't mind the OT. I'll have them dig you out too."

"That won't be necessary. My neighbor Vince has a snow blower. He does mine when he does his own."

"That's nice of him,"

"Ahh, not that nice. He bet me he could beat me in our last scull race."

Mari laughed. "Did you beat him bad?"

John snickered. "By three lengths."

"I'd have loved to have seen that."

He looked at her and smiled. "We start training in April. Maybe you'd like to come watch."

"I'd love that," she said softly. She set the last of the dishes back in the cabinet.

"Okay, so that's covered. What are your plans after?"

"After what?"

"Tomorrow's Christmas Eve." He realized she looked suddenly uncomfortable.

"I wasn't planning anything. Probably eat too many sweets and watch some old movie."

He took her hand and threaded his fingers through hers. "Mari, I would love to spend Christmas Eve with you. I might even whip up a little more mulled wine for the

occasion." He held his breath hoping, for the first time in a very long time, a woman would say yes.

Mari smiled. "Would there be chocolate chip cookies?"

"I might be able to arrange that."

"That sounds wonderful."

John watched Mari as she sat on the floor of the living room playing with Cicero. She held a long stick that looked like a fishing pole. At the end of the string was a feather toy that squeaked every time he smacked it. "You don't have to entertain him."

"I don't mind. He's a sweet boy, aren't you Cicero?" She reached out and scratched behind his ear. Cicero head butted her hand and curled up in her lap.

"I've never seen him act I like this."

"Like what?"

"Friendly, normal. He's usually too busy hissing at guests to get petted."

Mari smiled as she ran her hand over his soft fur. "He's not unfriendly. He's just misunderstood, aren't you baby?"

He snickered when Cicero's purr kicked into high gear. "What's to misunderstand? He hisses and scratches. That says antisocial to me."

"He's scared."

"Scared?"

"He probably doesn't see all that well. He only has one eye so he wouldn't have any depth perception. He's afraid he's going to be hurt and no one but you has taken the time to prove him wrong." She stifled a yawn. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's not the company. I been running on farmers hours for years."

"That's fine." He reached his hand out and helped her to her feet. "Let's get you tucked in." Cicero meowed his protest. John looked at the cat and pointed to the stairs. "Back off greedy. Go upstairs and go to bed." The cat headed toward the stairs but turned back and meowed before going up the stairs.

Mari laughed. "Did he just tell you off?"

"I believe he did."

John followed Mari upstairs and opened the door to the guest room. "Can I get you

anything?"

"Um, actually, I hate to ask."

"Mari, just ask."

"I don't have anything to sleep in."

John chased away a wildly inappropriate thought. "I think I have something that will work." He went into his bedroom and came back with an old Davenport T shirt and a pair of gym shorts. "How about these?"

Mari took them from his hands and smiled. "They're perfect. Thanks."

"Well, I'll let you get some rest. Let me know if you need anything else."

She rested her hand on his arm. She leaned in and gave him a soft kiss. "Thank you for everything."

"You're welcome."

John laid in bed idly stroking Cicero's fur. He glance over at the clock and it read two a.m. He'd been tossing and turning for three hours. "What am I going to do?" he asked his cat. "I don't want to scare her off. Is it creepy I used to be her professor? It was twenty five years ago so there's nothing inappropriate now, but..." The cat meowed and nipped at his hand. "Ow. Bugger. I'm not used to this. I don't know what I should do next."

Cicero jumped off the bed and walked to basket of toys in the corner and rooted through until he found a large felt mouse. He picked it up with his mouth and pushed open the bedroom door. He heard another door open and John realized Cicero was going into the guest room.

"Cicero, no..." he whispered as the door opened wide. He saw Mari not in bed, but standing at the window. The cat walked over to her.

"Well what do we have here?" She leaned over and accepted the gift. "Thank you, boy," she said and rubbed the cat's head.

"I'm sorry, Mari. He's bringing you a gift. I think he has a crush on you."

"That explains the two mice I found on the bed. I think he's being a good host. It's his version of a mint on the pillow."

"Couldn't sleep?"

She smiled and looked out the window. "No. I heard the snow plow go by. She

turned and looked out the window. "There is at least two feet out there and with the wind the drifts getting rid of it will be killer. My snow teams are going to be working their asses off tomorrow." She touched the window. "Everything is so quiet. The world is so loud, you can't hear yourself think anymore. I like it when it's like this."

John came up behind Mari and looked out the window. "It's really pretty like this."

"Yes, it is," she whispered. She rubbed her hands over her arms.

"Chilly?" he asked as he rubbed her arms.

"A little," she said as she leaned her head back against his shoulder.

"I'll get you another blanket."

She turned toward him and smiled. "I have a better idea." She slipped her hands up his chest and linked them around his neck. She pulled him into a deep kiss. She pulled back and whispered, "Stay."

He smiled. "Are you sure?"

She led him to the edge of the bed and slipped his hands under her shirt. "Yes."

He pulled her close as he ran his hands up her sides and cupped her breasts. He kissed her as she did the same, running her hands along his back. "Take this off," she whispered. "Please."

He smiled. "Yours or mine?"

"Both."

He quickly pulled his t shirt over his head when she gasped. "What?"

She ran her hands over his chest and arms. "My God," she whispered. She looked at him and grinned. "Why professor, you're ripped."

He smiled. "I'm glad you approve." He started to slide his hands up under her T shirt. "May I?"

"Please."

He slipped the shirt up and over her head and it was his turn to gasp. "So beautiful," he whispered. He leaned her back on the bed and covered her with his body. He kissed and teased her body. He nipped at her ear, neck, shoulder. Her moans pushed him further. He slid down her body alternating between using lips and tongue.

"Oh God," she murmured.

He carefully slid down her shorts and panties. He explored her legs, moving up to

her thighs, kissing and teasing her with his tongue. He could feel her heat.

"John, please," she pleaded.

He pushed off his shorts and boxers then raised himself over her. He kissed her deeply. "Mari," he whispered as he slipped inside her. She met his passion with a fire of her own. She drove him with her moans and whispers until he could feel her body spasm around him. It drove him over the edge as he cried out her name.

Mari set the table while the pancakes cooked on the stove. She shouldn't be so full of energy considering how little sleep she got last night. John Holmes was a complete surprise. The seemingly reserved English professor was actually a very passionate man. Not to mention built like a brick bunker. She flipped the pancakes and smiled at the memory of his heavily muscled torso.

"Good morning."

She turned around to see John standing in the doorway. He was wearing only his gym shorts. "Good morning. The coffee is ready."

He walked toward her and slipped his arms her waist. "Coffee can wait." He gave her a soft kiss. "You're up early."

"Farmer's hours. By now I'd normally would have been at work for an hour." He placed a kiss on her neck and pushed aside the edge of her T shirt to kiss her shoulder. Mari giggled. "Your pancakes will get cold."

John gave her a bone melting smile. "That's why they invented microwave ovens." He gave her a deep kiss as he ran his hands inside her shorts. He pulled back and smiled as his hands found only bare skin. "Yeah, breakfast can wait."

Mari smiled and slipped her hands around his neck and returned his kiss. He rubbed his hands under her T shirt and was about to pull it over her head when they heard a pounding at the front door.

"Yo! John, you up? I'm freezing my ass off out here."

John rolled his eyes. "You've got to be kidding me. That's Vince from next door. I'll get rid of him."

Mari smiled as she watched him walk out of the room. She'd never ogled a man the way she did John. All that rowing had given him a back that reminded her of carved cathedral doors. She turned her attention to finishing breakfast, but she couldn't stop smiling.

John's hope of getting rid of Vince quickly vanished as he blew past him as he opened the door.

"Put some clothes on, dude. No one wants to see that."

"Vince, it's not a good time."

"Ah, come on John. It's not like you've got a woman here." He started heading toward the kitchen. "I got your driveway finished and now I need coffee."

He nearly ran into Vince when he stopped dead at the sight of Mari. He couldn't blame the guy. Her long legs and round ass looked great even in his gym shorts. Her mane of hair was tamed into a messy ponytail on top of her head.

"Ahhh," Vince stammered. "Hello."

"Hello," she said with a smile. "You must be Vince. Would you like some coffee?"

"Yeah, that'd be great."

"Take it to go," John growled.

Vince turned back to him and smiled the smile of a friend who was about to raze the hell out of him. "Introduce us, John."

"Vince this is Mari. Mari, this giant pain in the ass is my neighbor, Vince."

Vince extended his hand and smiled. "It's very nice to meet you, very nice."

"Down boy," said John.

"Hello, Vince," said Mari as she handed him a mug of coffee. She poured a mug for John and handed it to him.

He mouthed "Sorry" but to his surprise she smiled and gave him a quick wink.

"So, how did you two meet?"

John sighed and sipped his coffee. He would make Vince pay for this the next time they got on the river.

"I was John's student a very long time ago." She set a plate of pancakes in front of him. He looked over at Vince who was sipping his coffee and snickering. Oh he would make him pay big time.

"What do you do, Mari?"

"I have a landscaping and nursery business. Kelly's."

"Kelly's? I go there a lot. It's a great place."

"I'm happy to hear that. Next time ask for me. I'll make sure to give you the friends

and family discount." She sat down at the table with her coffee and a plate of pancakes.

"I'll do that." Vince drank down the last of his coffee and stood. "Thanks for the coffee. It was nice to meet you, Mari."

"Nice to meet you too," she smiled.

"I'll see you out." John stood and followed him to the front door. "You do realize I'm going to make you pay for this."

Vince laughed and slapped him on the back. "Totally worth it." He smiled. "She seems really nice."

"She is."

"I'm glad for you. You deserve a good woman." He opened the front door and laughed. "I can't wait to tell Sharon."

John rolled his eyes. That's all he needed. Vince's wife would make him even crazier than Vince did. He shook his head and smiled. "Vince. I love you, buddy. Now get the hell out of my house." He could hear Vince laughing even as he closed the door. He walked back into the kitchen to see Mari calmly eating her breakfast. "I'm really sorry about that."

"It's fine. He seems nice," she said as stood.

"Oh, he's a peach."

She got the coffee pot and topped off his mug. Before she could move away he grabbed her around the waist and pulled her into his lap. He pulled the pot out of her hand and sat it on the table. "Now where were we before we were so rudely interrupted?"

Mari got out of the shower and wrapped herself in a towel. She'd called Riley before breakfast knowing he'd already be out plowing. He'd dig out her car and get it towed to the garage. All she needed now was a way to get home. She didn't want to ask her employee to pick her up at John's. She walked into the guest room to change back into her own clothes.

"Mmmm. Very nice."

Mari smiled when she saw John standing in the doorway. He'd change into a sweater and a pair of jeans. Damn, the man looked great in jeans. He approached her and slipped his hands around her waist. "Ahh, I should get dressed."

"Don't bother on my account," he smiled as he gave her a soft kiss.

"One of my employees is going to take care of my car. I hate to ask but I'm still going to need a lift to my place. That way I can pick up my truck."

"Your truck?"

"Of course. I have to carry product to and from job sites. It's a little hard to carry a couple of hundred pounds of mulch in a sedan."

"It's no problem. I still want to get a few things for dinner."

She slipped her hands around his neck. "Don't forget my chocolate chip cookies."

"First on my list."

She felt suddenly shy but she forged ahead. "John, should I bring an overnight bag?" He smiled and gave her a deep kiss. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Definitely."

"There's one more thing I wanted to ask. I know you go to church on Christmas. Would it be okay if I came too?"

"I'd love it."

John wasn't sure what to expect when they pulled up to Mari's house. He'd been to Mari's nursery several times but had never noticed the farmhouse about 200 yards behind the retail building. It was a well maintained farmhouse that looked to be one of the

older homes which had been there long before Davenport had become a yuppie haven.

"Wow. I thought I had a short commute."

Mari smiled. "It does make it easier for me on bad days like this." The parking lot to the nursery and both driveways had been cleared. "It looks like your crew's been hard at it."

"They're a good team. They work in short shifts on holidays so no one person has to work too long."

"Why don't you start your truck? Make sure the cold hasn't drained the battery."

"Good idea." Mari walked around to the side of the house and hit a button for the garage door. Inside were walls covered with well organized tools surrounding a large green flatbed truck. She turned the key and the engine turned over. She turned off the truck and jumped out. "Well, that's good. Would you like a quick tour? I don't have a Cicero waiting to attack."

"I'd like that."

He followed Mari through a well designed but looked like little used kitchen. The living room and dining room area were a traditional design. Large, comfortable furniture with antique lamps. The only nod to modern design was a big screen TV mounted on the wall. John smiled at the pictures on the wall. There was a picture of Mari, about six years old, standing in the nursery, surrounded by an explosion of colorful flowers. "Oh look at you," he smiled. "You're so cute."

Mari shook her head and smiled. "That was a long time ago."

John touched under her chin. "No, you're not a cute little girl anymore." He gave her a soft kiss. "Now you're a beautiful woman."

"Thank you," she whispered. She pointed to a picture of a young couple in their late twenties. The woman had the same long dark hair as Mari. The man had the same high cheek bones and eyes as Mari. "My parents. Kathy and Michael. Old school hippies. The only reason they got married was my grandparents wouldn't leave him the business if I was born.." she made air quotes. "out of wedlock." She pointed to an older couple in their late eighties. "Mary and Liam Kelly, straight from 'County Mayo God bless it," she said with an adorable brogue. "They were good people. All of them."

"You miss them," he said, brushing her cheek.

"Every day." She shook off the memory and smiled. "Hey, you could help me with something. Come up to my bedroom," she said and turned toward the stairs.

"I'd be delighted."

"Down boy," she laughed. "I just need your opinion on something." She led him upstairs to her bedroom. From the soft colors on the flowered bedding to the light woods of the furniture the room was very much a reflection of Mari. She opened her closet and walked in the back. After digging through the rack she came out holding a black shift dress. "I've never been to your church. How is this for services tomorrow?"

"It's a lovely dress, but why?"

"Why what?"

"Why the dress?"

"Because it's Christmas and you get dressed for church."

He smiled, took the dress out of her hand and set it on the bed. "First, they may have cleared the roads but there is still two to three feet of snow out there. You walk outside with bare legs and you'll freeze. Second, and most important, you'll hate wearing it, won't you?" When she blushed a little he knew he was right.

"I don't want to embarrass you."

"That's not possible. Wear what ever you're comfortable in." He took her hand and they both sat down on the bed. "I like Marigold Sunshine Kelly just the way she is. Please don't change."

She looked at him and smiled. "You really mean that, don't you."

"Yes I do," he said as he leaned in and gave her a kiss. He began to deepen the kiss when she pulled away.

"If it were any other day I wouldn't want to stop this but this is Christmas eve and someone promised me chocolate chip cookies. If you don't get going you won't find any."

John smiled. "You are very serious about cookies."

"Professor," she smiled. "I am always serious about chocolate."

John pulled into the local strip mall and parked. He snickered when he saw a Kelly's Landscaping truck plowing the back of the lot. Her people would be working hard today. The snow wasn't the heavy, wet type. This snow was light and perfect for snowballs. There was just so much of it that it would be weeks before it was gone. The only people who were happy about this kind of weather were little kids and skiers. Maybe one more. He looked up at the sky and smiled. Maybe one lonely English professor.

The market was jammed with last minute shoppers. He might get lucky because things that should have sold out yesterday didn't because the storm kept everyone home. His first stop was the bakery where he scooped up a large tray of cookies. He'd be able to keep his promise. He found a small turkey breast that would be enough for the two of them. He picked up some vegetables and rolls, not quite sure what else to have. They were out of pumpkin pie but he didn't mind so he grabbed a mince pie for dessert. Most people liked pumpkin but he loved mince pie served hot with vanilla ice cream on top. He spotted a gift basket of assorted chocolates he thought would go nice with a bottle of wine. It could be a little something for Mari on Christmas. Not really a gift, a token is all. It's not like he had a tree to put it under. He looked at his nearly full shopping cart and realized this little holiday dinner was turning into a something more.

After waiting in the line of harried Christmas shoppers he made his way back to his car and loaded up the groceries. He was about to get into the car when he glanced down the length of mall and saw the flow of men coming out of Pride's jewelry store. "Last minute shoppers," he thought. They hadn't talked about it. He hadn't even considered it. He had the basket of chocolate and wine. What could it hurt to take a look?

Sales clerks were running back and forth between men trying to decide on what they would get their wives. He'd seen deli counters at high noon that weren't this busy. He glanced in the cases and saw earrings and rings that were nothing Mari would ever wear. Necklaces that were pretty but either too elaborate or too extravagant for this stage in their relationship. Relationship? That set him back on his heels. He realized that's what he wanted. He want Mari in his life. She was extraordinary and he wanted to get to know all about her. This was the first time he was picking out a gift like this since Abigail. He thought of her, forever young and so delicate. "Abby honey, she's special. I hope you'd

approve."

"Doctor Holmes?" A young girl came up to him from behind the counter. Julie Warren had been his student the previous semester. She'd been a surprise to John. Economics majors usually did not excel in his class.

"Hello Julie. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas. What can I help you find?"

"Hey, I've been waiting forever," shouted a middle age man in a red plaid coat and in desperate need of a shave.

"Chill out, Charlie. If you don't behave I'll ignore you completely. You don't want Sandra mad at you. I know I wouldn't."

"Won't you get in trouble for that?" John asked.

"No. Charlie's always a pain in the ass. Besides, my aunt owns the store and I'm her best salesperson."

"Good to know."

"What can I help you find?"

"Well, I was thinking..." he stumbled. "I want something for a woman but nothing too...Oh Julie I'm not really sure what I want."

"Okay, let's see. Have you been seeing her long?"

"No."

"So you want the "I like you and want to give you something but don't freak out, I'm not going overboard" gift."

John smiled and sighed. "Exactly."

"I know just the thing." She led him to a case with necklaces on display. "Is she a girly girl or is she more tailored."

"Definitely not a girly girl."

She smiled and unlocked the cabinet. "I think I have just the thing." She pulled out the display neck and set it in front of him. "What do you think?"

John smiled. "It's perfect." Julie had picked a simple necklace with a charm of a snowflake. Embedded in the charm were small diamonds that made it shine. The snowflake was about the size of a nickel.

"It's white gold with a few small diamonds for shine. Not too flashy. I think it's pretty."

"You're right, Julie. You are very good at this. I'll take it."

Mari packed a bag and picked a pair of slacks she could wear with boots. She packed the Aran knit sweater her mother had made for her. After packing up her car, she pulled into the back entrance of her shop. She disabled the alarm she did a quick walk through. Just like on farms, nursery workers didn't get a day off. Who'd ever been scheduled had already completed the morning chores. She looked at the decorated tree in the main room. It was comparably small, only five feet and lit with multicolored lights. She'd learned a long time ago to only decorate the tree with fabric or unbreakable ornaments. There was too much traffic through this space for anything else. She thought for a moment and smiled. "Why not?" She unplugged the lights, grabbed one of the tree bags they sold, and pulled it down over the tree. She unscrewed the tree from the base and tilted it to the side. Years of working on crews had made her deceptively strong. She carried the tree out to her truck and loaded it onto the flatbed. She went back for the base snagged a wreath while she was at it. After leaving a note for employees that she had taken the tree, she got back in the truck. She was about to turn the engine over when she thought what good is a Christmas tree without something to put under it. "I hope the mall's not too crowded."

So much for hope. Kelly parked her truck in the back of the lot and made her way toward the mall. She stood in the middle of the crowded atrium and looked around. "Now what?" She didn't want to get something inappropriate. Even though they were sleeping together it had only been days. When she saw the sign for Harrow's she smiled. Books for a professor. That's a great idea.

Or not. She was immediately overwhelmed by the number of titles for sale. She knew he liked mysteries, but she didn't know which ones he'd read. She'd about given up when she saw a section sign that read 'gifts'. The shelves were full of writing gift sets, stationary and diaries. She smiled when she spotted a slim leather bound book of blank pages. It looked very masculine, something she would find in his library. She looked around and found a pen set made of rosewood. Satisfied with her choices, she went through the checkout line.

Mari made a quick stop at the pet store to pick up some toys for Cicero. She took a minute and walked to the back of the store and looked at the available puppies. The

local shelter used the space for adoption drives. They were all so sweet. She'd often thought of getting a dog. Having company would be nice but she'd always be out working and thought it wouldn't be fair.

As she made her way out of the store, she noticed the store across the hall. Maybe, just one more gift.

John was putting the groceries away when he heard Mari's truck pull into the driveway. He opened the door and smiled, realizing how happy he was to see her. He walked out to meet her when he spotted the loaded flatbed. "What's all that?"

"I hope you don't think I'm overstepping but I brought something from my store." They walked to the back of the truck and she pulled down the tailgate. "It's the Christmas tree from my store. I never put one up at home and it looks you don't either. I hope you don't mind but I thought..."

He stopped her with a kiss. "I think it's great." He saw great relief in her smile. "Come on. I'll help you get it in the house." An hour later they were sitting in the living room admiring the first Christmas tree either of them had in years.

"One more thing," Mari said. She pulled some wrapped gifts out of a shopping bag and set them under the tree. "No self respecting Christmas tree doesn't have gifts," she smiled. "I know we didn't talk about this but it's just a little something."

John smiled and gave her a kiss. "In that case." He got up and opened the hall closet. He pulled out the gift basket and the wrapped box from Price's and set them under the tree. "No self respecting tree, indeed."

"Oh is that chocolate?" She knelt in front of the tree and reached for the plastic wrapping. He playfully slapped her hand.

"Not yet. Dinner first."

"What are we having?"

"Turkey of course."

"Of course. No self respecting Christmas dinner..."

"Exactly."

"When?"

"About two hours." She smiled and leaned toward the gift basket. "Oh no you don't,"

he laughed as he pinned her to the floor. He smiled and gave her a kiss. "I missed you today."

"I missed you too," she said softly.

He kissed her again and lost himself in her scent. Her soft whispers coaxed him on. He pulled her sweater up and over her head, revealing a pink bra. He ran his finger over the lace edge. "Pretty"

"I was feeling girly for a change."

"Mari, you are a beautiful, sexy woman."

"Sexy," she laughed. "I have never been accused of that."

"Then allow me to make up for that miscarriage of justice." He slipped off her jeans and took a moment to admire the scene. This beautiful woman in his home was wearing very little. Talk about your Christmas miracles. He quickly removed the lingerie and began a slow exploration. He studied every moan, every gasp. He wanted her to lose herself in the moment. He took pleasure in her response. He traveled the length of her tasting and nipping until he could feel her heat. He took her in his mouth and teased her until she begged for more. When she finally crashed over the edge it was like nothing he'd ever felt. The look on her face was so beautiful. She pulled him into a passionate kiss and nipped at his ear.

"That was amazing."

"Yes it was."

"Only one thing. You still have your clothes on."

"Yes, well I have a dinner to put on before you eat all that chocolate." He tried to raise himself up but she held him fast. She ran her hands down his hips and over his ass.

"John, you are not thinking about dinner right now. I can tell." She giggled. "Boy, can I tell."

"I can restrain myself until later." He gave her a kiss. "As difficult as that may be." He stood and reached his hand to her, helping her to her feet. "Get dressed and you can snap the beans." He handed her the panties and her sweater. When she reached for the rest of her clothes he took her hand and smiled. "Don't bother."

"Excuse me?" she laughed.

"The jeans will just slow me down."

"Yes, zippers can be so bothersome." She tossed her jeans aside. "I wouldn't want to cause you any difficulties, Professor."

He gave her a playful slap on the ass. "Good. Now come help me with dinner."

John watched as Mari walked around the kitchen wearing nothing more than her dark green v neck sweater and a tiny pair of panties. She caught him staring and smiled.

"What?" she asked.

He walked over to her and gave her a deep kiss. "My restraint is wavering." The kitchen timer went off and he laughed. "You've been saved by the bell." He turned off the timer and pulled the turkey out of the oven while she set the rolls and green beans on the table. John carved the small turkey breast and set it on the platter. While Mari set out the mashed potatoes and gravy.

They had a relaxed dinner talking about their work and literature. The conversation turned toward Christmas past. "Did your family do a big Christmas?" asked John.

"Oh yes. My Nana would do all the cooking. There would be enough food for a dozen people. We go to Midnight Mass and then presents in the morning. Since I was the only child and grandchild they spoiled me rotten."

"I don't know about that. You don't seemed spoiled to me."

Mari smiled. "Thanks."

"Have they been gone long?"

"My grandfather died when I was ten. My Nana, a year later. I think she died from a broken heart. She was never the same after Pop Pop died."

"Your parents died in the accident?"

"Yes. Drunk driver."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You know what it's like to lose someone."

"Yes. my wife Abigail died of acute leukemia. She was twenty seven." Mari didn't say anything. All she did was reach for his hand. It was all he needed. She was what he needed.

"Hey, do you have room for dessert?" he asked.

Mari gave him a big smile. "I love dessert. What is it?"

"Pie. They were out of pumpkin so I got mince. I hope that's okay."

"I love mince. Do you have any vanilla ice cream?"

John looked at her and smiled.

When they finished the dishes they made their way back to the living room and Mari curled her long legs up on the couch. Still wearing only panties and her sweater John was having a difficult time thinking about anything else.

"How about some wine?" he asked.

"I'd love some."

He poured them each a glass of a nice Cabernet. Mari held up her glass.

"Merry Christmas"

"Yes it is," he replied as they touched glasses.

She smiled and took a sip. "Oh, that's good."

"I'm glad you like it."

She set her glass down and grinned. "Presents now?"

"Yes, presents now."

John loved that she squealed like a little kid. She jumped off the couch and reached for the gift basket. "Hold on, grabby." He sat down next her on the floor and handed her the basket. "Merry Christmas."

She leaned in and gave him a kiss. "Merry Christmas." She opened the plastic and looked through the assortment. "Mmmm, yummy."

"The wine is the same we're having now."

"I hope you'll share it with me."

"I think that can be arranged."

Mari reached under the tree and pulled out a wrapped box. "For you."

John looked down at the first Christmas present not from his siblings, he'd opened in years. He'd gotten gifts from students and coworkers, but nothing like this. "Thank you, Mari." He touched her cheek and gave her a soft kiss.

"You don't even know what it is. You may hate it."

"No, I won't," he said softly. He opened the box and took out a leather bound

notebook. "It's very nice. Thank you."

"Open it."

He opened the book and saw Mari had written in it.

*The Adventures of Sir John of Davenport
and Faithful Companion, Cicero*

Sir John of Davenport was a worthy knight of the realm. He had slain many dragons and earned many tributes from the king. He lived in a fine castle with many servants. All was well, except with Sir John. He became restless and was determined to find a new dragon to slay.

He embarked on his quest with his companion, Cicero. Sir John had found Cicero during one of his quests, a prisoner of the last dragon. Cicero had promised to stay by his side forever if only he would free him from the dragon. Sir John thought on this and decided there could be advantage in having such a companion. He was well spoken and quite bright. Unusual to be sure since Cicero was a cat.

"We have been walking through this wood for days. Do you have any idea where we are going?" asked Cicero

"Not yet, but we are headed in the right direction."

"How do you know?"

"I just do. Adventure lies ahead."

Cicero shook his head. "Humans. You are confounding creatures."

John turned the page but it was blank. "Mari, that's wonderful but where's the rest?"

She reached under the tree and handed him a narrow box. He opened it and found a beautiful rosewood pen set. "Remember that assignment you gave us where one person writes a page and the other person writes the next. You're up."

He pulled her to him for a deep kiss. "Thank you," he whispered. "I love it." He reached under the tree and handed Mari a small box. "For you. I hope you like it."

She opened the present and gasped. "Oh John, it's beautiful." She pulled it out of its box and admired the snowflake's shine. "Will you help me put it on?" Mari held up her

hair while John fastened the clasp. She stood and looked at her reflection in a small mirror. She touched it and smiled. "It's so pretty," she whispered. He came up from behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. He placed a kiss on her neck.

"So are you," he said.

"I have something else for you but it's upstairs. Oh but first, where's Cicero?"

"Probably asleep somewhere."

She pulled a small gift bag out from under the tree. "Cicero, come here, baby," she called.

"That never works." As if to prove him wrong on purpose Cicero walked in the room and meowed. "Furry little bastard."

"Hush," Mari laughed. "Come here, I have a present for you." She opened the bag and pulled out several catnip mice and a few jingle balls. She pulled one of the mice out of it's bag and Cicero pounced, grabbing and biting the mouse. "I guess he likes it."

"I would say so."

"Okay. I'll be back in a minute." She gave him a quick kiss. "Think about the next chapter."

John stood and watched as she walked up the stairs. "Next chapter, indeed."

John sipped his wine and watched as Cicero flung his new toy in the air. He'd never seen Cicero so at ease with anyone before. When he thought about it he realized he felt the same way. This all felt so right, like they'd been together for a long time, not a couple of days. He was trying to sort things out when Mari called down to him.

"John, can you come upstairs?"

His mind went blank when he saw Mari kneeling on his bed. She was wearing a red satin camisole with some lace across the top and what looked like matching shorts. The only other thing she wore was the snowflake. "Wow," he whispered.

"Merry Christmas."

"It certainly is," he said as he pulled her into a deep kiss. He pulled back and ran his fingers over the lace. "This is really lovely but can I ask why?"

She looked shocked. "What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't normally wear something like this would you?"

"No, not normally."

"I love it but I never want you to feel uncomfortable."

"It's funny, but with you I don't. I haven't felt like this before and I kind of like it."

"Felt like what, sweetheart?"

She gave him a sly smile. "Sexy."

He thrust his fingers into her hair and all but growled, "Hell yeah, you are." He pulled her to him in a crushing kiss. She pushed back and moved up toward the headboard.

"Professor, you're wearing far too many clothes. Why don't you correct that issue?" He heard her snicker as he struggled to get his clothes off quickly. He dropped them on the ground as she smiled. "Much better, Professor. Much better." She held out her hand to him and he let her take the lead. She pushed him on his back and then straddled his waist. She ran her hands up his chest and down his arms. "You look so...delicious." She looked up and smiled. "Better than chocolate."

"I'm flattered," he laughed.

"I think I want a taste." Mari leaned over and placed a kiss on his chest. He gasped when she replaced her lips with her tongue. "Mmmm. I was right, delicious. She began to travel down his body alternating between lips and tongue. She trailed kisses down his stomach. She teased and tormented him until she took him in her mouth.

"Oh God," he gasped. He tried to focus, to not lose control, but she was making it damn near impossible. He finally had to beg. "Mari, please." Her smile was one of a woman of passion and power. She slipped off the small shorts and pulled the camisole over her head. He tried to move but she pushed him back on the bed. She brought herself over him and took him in. The sight of her above him, eyes closed, head back, reveling in her power over him was the sexiest image he'd ever seen. He held on to her hips until he felt her body tighten around him. It was then he lost what control he had left.

John opened his eyes to bright sunshine. Rolling to his side he found Mari still curled up next to him. He smiled thinking of how she had taken control last night. She had given him her passion but more important she had given him her trust. That was something he would treasure. He placed a kiss on her neck and whispered, "Good morning."

"Mmmm. Good morning." Mari rolled on to her back and smiled. "What time is it?"

"A little after seven."

"What? I never sleep this late."

John slipped his arm around her waist. "Well, someone was pretty busy last night."

She brushed her hand over his cheek. "I guess I was." She gave him a soft kiss. "I like waking up with you."

He returned her kiss. "I like it too." There was a sudden movement on the bed when Cicero leapt up and crawled up John's leg. The cat meowed and head butt him. "Somebody's hungry."

Mari reached her hand over to pet Cicero's head. "He's not the only one. What time is church?"

"Nine. Why don't you grab the shower first while I take care of this one and get breakfast started?"

"Sounds like a plan," she said. As she tried to get out of bed he grabbed her by the hand and pulled her back.

"First things first." He put her hand to his cheek and leaned in for a kiss. "Merry Christmas, Mari."

"Merry Christmas, John."

He smiled as he watched her walk to the bathroom naked. He pet Cicero and smiled. "What do you think about that, old man?"

"Meow."

John laughed. "My thought exactly."

Mari looked in the mirror and checked her reflection. She looked like she always did but somehow she didn't. Her hair looked good, fluffed out, presentable. Her brown slacks were free of grass stains. Her Aran sweater was in good shape despite the fact it was about thirty years old. Her mother had made it for her for Christmas and only wore it on holidays or when she was missing her family. Under the sweater a green blouse, in deference to the holiday. So why did she look different? It was almost like she didn't recognize herself.

She went into the kitchen and saw John in gym shorts and a Markham T shirt trying to get Cicero off the counter. She smiled when he relented and gave the cat a piece of sausage. When he turned and caught her staring he smiled and she suddenly knew what it was. She knew what was different. She was in love.

"Hey you made it just in time. Cicero was about to steal your sausage,"

"Well, we can't have that can we?" She bent over to pet the cat's head. "I like you a lot but never stand between me and a good meal."

"Good to know," he said as he gave her a quick kiss. "That's a beautiful sweater.

"My mother made it for me. I only wear it on holidays."

"Sit, your eggs are ready."

"What time do you want to leave for church?"

"Eight thirty. Actually if you don't mind I'd like to walk. The parking lot's always a zoo on holidays. It's not that cold and it's only two blocks away."

"That's fine."

John poured her coffee and started in on his own meal. Mari looked at him and thought, "You're in love with him. Now what?"

John enjoyed Mass at St. Thomas. It had been one of the things that had convinced him to buy his house, having the Episcopal church so close to home. He'd always drawn strength from his faith, especially when Abby died. He had put his faith in God's plan for him. Now he was here with Mari. He knew he wanted her in his life but he wasn't sure what was the next step. For the first time in a long time, he was afraid. The service had been beautiful, Father Patrick was in fine form but there was something else he needed to do. "Would you mind waiting here for a moment, until the church clears? There's

something I need to do."

"Of course," Mari smiled. She glanced at the parishioners filing out. "Isn't that Vince?"

"And Sharon, his wife. Prepare yourself, there's no avoiding it."

"Well look who it is," said Vince as he extended his hand. "Merry Christmas, buddy."

"Merry Christmas, Vince."

Vince reached his hand over to Mari. "Merry Christmas, Mari."

"Merry Christmas, Vince."

Vince's wife, Sharon stood next to Vince with a grin that told him she was going to give him a hard time. "Merry Christmas, John."

John placed a kiss on her cheek. "Merry Christmas. Sharon this Mari Kelly."

Sharon's smile got even more broad. "It's very nice to meet you. John, if you two don't have any plans tonight you have to come to dinner."

"Oh, I don't know Sharon, it's Christmas and you have the kids."

"No. It's just us. Michael and Kathy stopped by this morning before heading out to her parents."

Knowing he was cornered, he looked at Mari. She smiled and nodded. He looked back at Sharon. "What time?"

"Great! See you at four."

Vince smiled and pat John on the back. He knew no one could ever say no to Sharon. "See you later, buddy."

He watched Sharon and Vince file out of the church and turned to Mari. "Are you sure you're okay with this. Sharon did corner us but that's her specialty."

"Honestly, I'm never that good in social situations but they seem nice."

"They're good people." He glanced up toward the altar and saw the area was clear. "I'll be right back." John walked to the altar, blessed himself and knelt. He looked at the cross and searched for the right prayer. He realized there was no script for what he needed to say. He began his prayer quietly. "Dear Lord, I need your guidance. I've always been a man of faith. You have guided me through my darkest hours when Abby died. I've trusted in your plan for me but now...I'm scared. This is all happening so fast. Mari is a

wonderful woman. She's honest and real. Abby would have liked her. I think I'm in love with her but am I the right one for her? I need you to show me the way." His thoughts were interrupted when he heard a door open and saw a little blonde girl walk on to the altar from the vestibule. She smiled at him and waved.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"John. What's yours?"

"Mary."

"Mary where's your family?"

She pointed to the side door. "Mama's talking to Father Patrick." The girl looked at John as if she was studying him. She turned and walked to one of the floor displays and pulled out a large red carnation. She turned back and handed it to him. "Here."

"For me?"

"No silly. For her." Mary pointed to the back of the church where Mari was waiting for him.

"Mary Katherine are you in here?" Mary's mother was standing at the vestibule door.

"Here I am, Mama." Her flustered mother took her by the hand.

"Mary Katherine, you know better than to wander off. I'm sorry, sir. I hope she wasn't a bother."

"Not at all," he smiled. "Your daughter is charming. It was very nice to meet you, Mary. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Johnny." Mary smiled as he watched her mother lead her out the door.

John looked at the cross and wiped a tear from his eye. He whispered, "Thank you." In all his life only one person had ever called him Johnny. It was Abby.

John walked to the back of the church where Mari was waiting for him. He smiled and handed her the carnation. "This is for you."

"Didn't the little girl just give this to you?"

"She said it was for you."

"That's odd."

He smiled. "Actually, it's not." He took her hand in his. "Come on, let's go home." They walked out into the deserted parking lot.

"Wow, they cleared out fast," she said.

"They always do. I wait so I don't have to walk through traffic."

John looked around the empty lot. Next to the church parking lot was a field that was used for ball games and picnics in the spring. The snow had been dug out and pushed to the very back of the field, leaving plenty of space for parishioner's cars.

"Is this where you found Cicero?"

"Yeah. Some people dump unwanted animals here. They assume that the church will find homes for them."

"That's horrible. Who does that?"

John smiled and gave her a quick kiss. He took her hand. "Come on. Let's go." Then they heard it. The quiet of the snow covered area allowed the sound to carry.

"What is that?" asked Mari.

"Uh oh, somebody did it again."

"Oh my God, no. Where? We have to find it."

"Mari, it's okay. We will."

They walked around the back of the building where the sound seemed louder. It didn't take long to find it. There was a box next to the dumpster. Inside was a shivering puppy.

"Oh John, he's freezing."

"Don't worry, sweetheart. I've got him." John reached down and picked up the puppy. He didn't look older than ten or twelve weeks. "Come on, let's get him out of the cold."

As soon as they got the puppy home Mari took him in her arms while John ran upstairs for a few towels. He grabbed an old sheepskin bed of Cicero's. He went back to the kitchen to find Mari curled around the puppy with tears in her eyes.

"Sweetheart are you okay?"

"John, who would do this? He's so sweet." The puppy was still whimpering. "Do you think he's hurt? He won't stop crying."

He ran his hands over the puppy's body and felt it shiver. "I don't feel anything. I think he's just cold." He wrapped the dog in towels and set the bed on the floor near the heat register. "You can set him down here."

"We don't even know if it's a him."

John picked the puppy out of her hands and flipped it over. "Congratulations, it's a boy." He set the puppy on the bed. Despite the fact that it was a small cat bed, it still was much bigger than he was.

"He's probably hungry. What should we feed him?"

"He'd probably be fine with some wet cat food until tomorrow." John dished out some of Cicero's food and set it on the floor next to the bed.

"He doesn't seem to know what to do with it," said Mari.

John stuck his finger in the food and held it to the dog's nose. He sniffed, then licked then dove head first into the bowl of food. "That's better, isn't it boy." Cicero chose this moment to discover who was this usurper.

"Uh oh," said Mari.

"You behave yourself, cat," said John.

They stood still as Cicero approached the puppy. When the puppy spotted him he gave a playful yip. He sniffed the puppy then licked his head. The puppy head butted Cicero who returned the greeting. He climbed into the bed with the dog. He grabbed hold of the puppy like he was a kitten, pulled him close and began grooming the puppy.

"Since when do cats groom dogs?" asked Mari.

"Probably around the same time a male cat decided he'd play Mama cat." John smiled as his antisocial hissing machine wrapped his paw around the puppy and curled up with him. "He has to have a name."

"How about Tiro?"

"Cicero's companion. I like it."

"John, how could anyone be that awful to abandon a puppy like that?"

"Well, they weren't all bad."

"What? How can you say that?"

"If they were all bad they would have put him in the dumpster where we never would have heard him. They put him in a box next to it on one of the busiest days of the year at church. They assumed someone would find him."

"I guess your right."

"It also means Tiro wasn't just lost. We don't have to look for who owns him."

"No, they don't deserve him. Although I wouldn't mind you kicking their ass."

John laughed and put his arms around her. "I didn't realize you had such a violent streak."

Mari smiled. "When properly motivated." She smiled at Tiro who appeared to have fallen asleep in his new parent's arms. "Now what?"

"Well, it looks like we have a dog."

"We? You mean like joint custody? Half his time at my house, half at yours."

John smiled and took her hand. "No, that's not what I mean." He cupped her cheek in his hand and gave her soft kiss. "I want you to stay."

"Stay?"

"Move in."

"What?"

"I know this is happening fast but neither of us are impulsive people. I want you in my life. Not just for dinner dates or the occasional trip to the movies. I want to bump into you in the bathroom in the morning. I want to go grocery shopping with you and argue over what to make for dinner. I want to share every day things about life with you. I want to go to sleep with you in my arms and wake up the way every morning. Mari, I'm in love with you. I hope you will give us a chance." His heart pounded at the look of shock on her face. He would never forget his sense of relief when he saw her smile.

"I'm in love with you too," she whispered.

"Mari," he said as pulled her close. He took her hand and led her upstairs.

John looked in on Cicero and Tiro. The puppy was sniffing around the floor while Cicero kept watch from the sheepskin bed. "Need a trip out, little man?" He scooped up the puppy and took him outside. John found a windblown spot next to the house low enough for Tiro to complete his mission. He set the dog back in the kitchen and watched as he waddled over to Cicero. He bumped Cicero's head and yipped. He imagined they were having quite the conversation about outside.

He poured himself a glass of wine and sat down in the library. He sipped his wine and thought of Mari asleep in his bed. Their bed. He smiled and reached for the book she'd given him for Christmas.

Mari stretched and looked at the clock. She'd been asleep for a couple of hours. She smiled at the slight ache in her muscles. She couldn't believe that the handsome professor she'd longed for all those years ago had fallen in love with her. Little Marigold. She got out of bed and picked up his dress shirt, inhaling the fresh scent of a man. Her man. She put on the shirt and buttoned a few buttons. Going downstairs, she found John in the library at his desk.

"Hey there."

John looked up and smiled. "Hi" She walked toward him and leaned over, giving him a kiss. He put his hands around her waist and pulled her into his lap. "My shirt never looked so good."

She spotted the notebook on the desk. "What are you doing."

"I just finished my assignment. Do you want to read it?"

"I'd love to." Mari picked up book and tried to move off to the wing chair when John pulled her back into his lap. "What are you doing?" she giggled.

"I want to hear you read it."

"You can't hear me from over there?"

"I'm an old man. This is better."

"Hah! Old man." She opened the book and smiled. "I can prove otherwise." He laughed and kissed her neck.

They'd been walking in the wood for five sunsets when Sir John stopped.

"What is it?" asked Cicero. "A dragon? A beast? I'd settle for an unruly raccoon at this point. Anything that you can slay so we can go home."

"Hush. Can you hear that?"

"Hear what? All I hear is my stomach growling. Do you have any roast bird left?"

Sir John glanced at his companion. "A proper cat would catch his own food and wouldn't need for me to catch it and roast it for him." He took a cloth from his bag and unwrapped a piece of their last meal.

"A proper cat wouldn't be able to tell you what you hear is yonder." He turned and twitched his head toward a large oak tree. He took the food from Sir John's hand.

"I see nothing."

He set down his meal in disgust. "Do I have to do everything for you? Look up, human."

Sir John gazed into in canopy and saw a vision. There was a beautiful woman high up among the branches. She wore a long gown, green as meadow grass. Her hair was long and dark like the mighty tree in which she perched. In her hair were different flowers from the wood's floor. "What is this?" he asked. "Are you real or an apparition?"

The woman studied him. "I am very real. Who are you? What are you doing in my wood?"

"I am Sir John of Davenport and I am on a great quest. Will you answer my question? Who are you?" The woman scrambled down the tree and alighted softly on the ground.

"I am Princess Marigold and this is my wood. You trespass."

"Your wood?"

"Yes, a gift from my parents, the King and Queen."

"Would your mother the Queen approve of you climbing trees?"

The princess' smile made his heart race. "Who do you think taught me?"

"Oh John, that's wonderful."

"Thank you. I had an excellent head start thanks to you. " He held her tight. "What I said about her smile...Mari, I meant it. All those years ago in my class, you were so serious, so focused. I wondered what you looked like when you smiled. When you finally

did, well. My thoughts were not appropriate as your professor, but they were perfectly normal as a man."

She gave him a kiss. "I was serious because I couldn't look at you."

"What do you mean?"

"You were so handsome. All the girls were mooning over you. I didn't want to embarrass myself."

"I WAS so handsome?"

Mari gave him a playful poke in the ribs. "Stop fishing, professor." She stroked his temple. "The grey hair makes you look even better."

"Ah, thanks sweetheart." Her eyes softened and he thought for a moment she might cry.

"You're welcome...my love."

When they finished reading their story they went to check on Tiro. Cicero had apparently taken a break from his new parental responsibilities while Tiro slept.

"He looks comfortable," said Mari.

"I had him outside earlier so he should be fine while we're next door."

"What do you think he is? I'd say he was a beagle but he's so tiny."

"He's got the beagle coloring. He's probably a mix." Mari grabbed a couple of chocolate chip cookies off the table.

"You'll spoil your dinner."

"Somebody made me hungry." She took a defiant bite.

"We better get going." They walked upstairs and began getting dressed.

"Are you sure jeans are okay for dinner?" asked Mari.

"I promise," he said as he zipped his own jeans. "Vince and Sharon are good people and they don't stand on formality."

"Fill me in. They have one son?"

"Yes, Michael, a computer exec. He and Kathleen have three very rambunctious kids." He glanced at the picture of his family on the dresser. He'd better tell her now because sure as hell, Vince and Sharon would. "Speaking of family, I told you about my

brother and sister."

"Yes, twins. Quincy and Chloe."

"It's become a tradition to spend New Years together."

"That's nice."

"We all go to Quince's place in Clear Lake."

"Clear Lake?"

"It's near Houston. He's an aerospace engineer at NASA. I'm supposed to fly out on Friday."

Mari hesitated as she brushed her hair. "Oh. Well, I'm sure you'll enjoy seeing your family."

John took the brush from her hand. "Sweetheart, I want you to come with me."

"What?"

"Come with me. They have a big house on the Lake. There's plenty of room. Even with all the kids."

"The kids?"

"He has five under the age of twelve."

"Good grief. John, I can't just descend on them. I'm a stranger."

He slipped his arms around Mari's waist and pulled her close. "Sweetheart. It's you and me now. We're a couple, right?"

She blushed a bit and smiled. "Right."

"Believe me, after all these years alone, they will be happy for me." He reached for his phone and hit a button.

"What are you doing?"

"I won't have you worrying over this. Hi Quincy. Merry Christmas. How are Caroline and the kids?" He smiled and nodded. "Good. Look about New Year's. Yes, I'm coming. I'm bringing someone. Yes, a female someone. Her name is Mari. No, we don't need two bedrooms." He turned away from Mari. "Quince, what's with the inquisition? I'm bringing my girlfriend to meet you and the family." He stopped and turned back towards her. "Yes, Quince. I'm in love," he smiled. "For the first time in thirty years. Yes, she is very special. Okay. We'll see you Friday." He hung up the phone and smiled. "See, they're looking forward to seeing us."

Clear Lake, TX.

Quincy Holmes disconnected the call from his brother and set down his phone. "Well, that was interesting."

"Who was it?" asked Caroline as she was putting the last of the Christmas dinner on the table.

"John. It appears he's bringing his girlfriend with him on Friday."

"Excuse me? John? Your brother, John. The Mr. Chips of Markham?"

"Yeah."

"Who is she? What does she do?"

"Her name is Mari and I have no idea what she does."

"What? How could you not ask? Call him back. We don't know who he's bringing around our children."

"Caro, we can't. We have to trust him."

Caroline placed the last vegetable on the table. "I suppose you're right." She walked out to the deck and yelled to her children on the beach. "Kids, dinner's ready." She looked at her husband. "That bird's not going to carve itself, mister."

"Yes, Ma'am" he smiled.

Caroline looked back out at the beach to see which child would be a straggler. She didn't have to guess. Peter was a quiet child and very focused. Once something caught his attention he was difficult to divert. Apparently something washed up from the lake was more interesting to him than the dinner she'd spent all morning making. "Peter Matthew, get in here right now." She heard a distant, "Coming, Mom," The rest of her children filed in and headed toward the table. "No you don't. Wash up first. I won't be serving sand with my turkey." Her children, including Peter, disappeared to their part of the house to wash up. She couldn't get over the idea that John would be bringing a woman. In all the years she'd been married to Quincy he'd never introduced them to anyone. He wasn't experienced with women. Who was she? Why hadn't they heard about her before? She muttered to herself, "What kind of name is Mari?"

Mari took a deep breath and took one last look in the mirror. She was wearing her green v neck sweater and jeans. Her hair looked okay at least that's what John said. He looked wonderful. His jeans fit perfectly and the pale blue sweater made his eyes sparkle. She watched as he bent over to pick up his sneakers. He caught her sneaking a peak.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said but knew her blush would give her away.

"Tell me."

She flamed red. "I was checking you out," she said quietly as she fussed with her hair.

He took the brush from her hand. "What did you say?"

"I was looking at your butt, okay?" she smiled.

"Oh yeah?" he laughed.

"Yeah." She slipped her hands around his neck. "For the record, Professor, yours is particularly fine."

"Thank you, sweetheart," he smiled and gave her a quick kiss. "As much as I'd like to continue this analysis of body parts, it's almost four."

John handed the bottle of wine he brought to Vince. "Merry Christmas."

"Thanks, buddy. Come on in."

Sharon entered the room wearing a Christmas apron and a smile that told him he should be ready for the Spanish Inquisition. "Hi. I'm so glad your here." She gave John a hug but he was surprised when she hugged Mari. "Welcome, Mari."

"Thank you for inviting us."

Sharon spotted the wine in Vince's hand. "Oh yummy, Vince why don't you pour?"

"I was just about to do that." He set the bottle on the sideboard and pulled four wine glasses from the cabinet.

"Dinner's just about ready. I always make a big meal even when it's just the two of us."

"Michael went to his in-laws?" asked John.

"Yeah," said Vince as he handed one glass to Mari and one to Sharon. "We had them this morning."

"Honestly, I'm happy about it. Three kids under seven on a Christmas high? It's a lot," said Sharon.

Vince handed John a glass and sat down with his. "Don't get us wrong, we love the grandkids. We just don't mind sharing their sugar rush with their other grandparents."

"Enough about kids. Let's drink this lovely wine," said Sharon. She held up her glass. "Merry Christmas." Everyone raised their glasses and took sips of their wine. "So tell us, John. How did you two meet?"

"Here it comes," he thought. "Mari was my student a long time ago."

"You weren't...you know...together back then?"

John spotted Mari's shock. "Of course not," he replied. "We reconnected recently."

"It must have been very recent." Vince coughed trying to signal Sharon, obviously to no avail.

John looked to Mari for guidance on how much to reveal. She shrugged her shoulders and smiled.

"Go ahead."

There was no point in being evasive. Sharon would get it out of him. "It was the day of the storm. We'd both gone into Gran's. We talked for a while but they were closing early. Mari's car wouldn't start. So I gave her a lift."

"He was very gallant," said Mari.

"So he gave you a lift." Sharon caught the glance between them. "What?"

"Mari lives on the other side of Route six, behind her business. Route six is a parking lot on a good day."

"So you..."

"Mari owns Kelly's, the landscaping place," said Vince.

"Oh? That big nursery?"

"Yes, it was my family business. It's just me now."

"We love that place. It always such a big selection."

"I'm happy to hear that. I told Vince to ask for me the next time you stop in. I'll make sure you get the friends and family discount."

"That's very nice, thank you," said Sharon. "So you got together only three days ago?"

Vince set down his glass. "For God's sake, Sharon. When did you turn in to such a prude? You and I were going at it like rabbits after our first date."

"Vince!" Sharon set down her glass and then started to laugh. "He's right. I knew the moment I laid eyes on the big goof that he was the one."

"That was thirty years ago," said Vince. He leaned over and gave his wife a kiss. "She still gets my motor running."

"Down boy. I have a dinner to serve."

"What can I do to help?" asked Mari.

"Thanks. You could help me dish things out."

Mari smiled as she followed Sharon into the kitchen. John looked at Vince. "Is she going to play nice or should I referee?"

"Nah, Sharon's okay. She was just a bit concerned. We've been friends a long time and you've never brought a woman to church with you. We knew it had to be serious."

John smiled and took a sip of his wine. "It is."

"Really?"

"Really. I'm in love with her."

"How does she feel?"

"She said she's in love with me too."

"Wow," said Vince. "I'm happy for you, buddy."

John took a sip of wine and smiled. "I'm happy for me too."

Mari pasted on a smile in hopes of covering her nerves. "What can I do?"

"You could dish out the mashed potatoes."

She grabbed a spoon and an empty bowl from the table and started transferring the potatoes.

"So, you and John."

"Me and John."

"We've known John since he moved in next door. He's a good man."

Mari smiled. "The best."

"Did you have a crush on him when you were a student?"

"I wouldn't call it a crush. He was so brilliant he made difficult concepts easier to

understand. I greatly admired him."

"And he's pretty easy on the eyes."

Mari knew Sharon was goading her but she couldn't help her blushing response.

"Yes, he is."

"I'm sure he had all those co-eds throwing themselves at him."

She turned to Sharon smiled. "I'm sure he still does. He's very handsome."

"You never...you know...back then."

Mari set the potatoes on the table and took the bowl of stuffing from Sharon. "No, I never flirted with him."

"Why not?"

"I was never that type of girl."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, you know. I didn't date much. I was always working at the nursery."

"But you're so pretty."

Mari stopped in her tracks. "Thank you. That's very sweet."

"John obviously thinks so."

"Well...yeah he says so." Mari blush intensified as she set a basket of rolls on the table.

"You're in love with him."

She looked up at Sharon and smiled. "So much."

"He's obviously in love with you. I've never seen him smile so much." Sharon approached Mari and put her hand on her shoulder. "I'm not being a nosey bitch. John is Vince's best friend. We love him and we're very protective of him."

"I understand. I'm glad John has such loyal friends. I hope we'll be friends too."

John and Vince came into the dining room. John put his arm around Mari's shoulder and kissed her cheek.

"Hey, I'm starving," said Vince.

"Mr. Romance speaks," said Sharon. "Why can't you be more like John?"

Vince put his arm around Sharon's shoulder and kissed her cheek. "Sharon, darling," he whispered. "I'm starving."

John watched as Mari dozed on the couch with Tiro. The puppy had shown a definite preference for her and nipped at her heels until she picked him up. He loved how she giggled when she played with Tiro, like a little kid. They'd had a nice dinner with Vince and Sharon, once Sharon decided to lay off the Spanish Inquisition. They'd even agreed to look after Cicero and Tiro when they went to Texas. Cicero curled around his legs and meowed for attention.

"Come here, old man." The cat jumped in his lap and head butted him. "Life sure has changed, hasn't it, buddy?" Cicero curled up in his lap and purred. John smiled. He knew just how he felt.

Mari and John moved through her bedroom packing her things in boxes. "I don't have that much in the way of clothes. I worked mostly in jeans and T shirts. There are a few pictures I'll want but that's all." She stopped and looked around the room. "Maybe I'll rent it out. Or maybe I'll let an employee stay here." She stopped and looked at a picture of parents on her bureau.

"Are you okay with this?" asked John.

She smiled. "I'm fine with it. I have great memories here but I've been rattling around in this house by myself for twenty five years." She turned to him and slipped her arms around his waist. "I'm not doing this because I don't want to be alone. I never minded living alone. I'm moving in with you because I love you."

He gave her a quick kiss. "I know that, sweetheart."

She pulled a suitcase out of her closet. "Am I going to need to bring a dress to Houston?"

"No. We keep it casual. If we go out it's to a kid friendly place. Caroline can be a little fussy but she's a good mom."

Mari stood still. "Define fussy."

"Caroline comes from money. Her family wasn't too pleased she married my brother. He was a government employee. They had bigger plans for their only daughter."

"He's a NASA engineer. He put's people in space. How much bigger can you get than space?"

"She felt the same way so she defied her parents and married him anyway. She'd never had to do anything for herself and that all changed when she married Quince. Turned out she's a genius chef. She created a pasta sauce that took off, Caro's Marinara."

"Your sister in law is Caro? I love her sauces."

"So does half the country. Now she's twice as wealthy as her parents ever were."

"Okay, so your sister in law did well in business. So did I. Where does fussy come in?"

"She can be a bit...full of herself."

"Dandy," said Mari as she went into the back of her closet. She came back out with a dress and a couple of blouses and slacks.

"What are you doing?"

"I've learned, you need the right tools for the job."

John took the clothes from her and pulled her into a hug. "Sweetheart, you don't have to impress anyone. It's just family. They'll love you as much as I do."

She patted John's cheek. "You're so sweet. Deluded, but sweet."

Mari smiled as she watched John sleeping having stretched out in his airline seat. Their flight wasn't crowded so he'd been able to extend his seat all the way back. It had taken him a while to convince her it was okay to leave Tiro with Vince and Sharon. She loved having a puppy for the first time in her life and she hated leaving him behind. She stifled a snicker as John let out a snore. One of the many things she discovered was the man slept like a stone. She reached into her bag and pulled the leather notebook.

"What is this quest?" asked the princess.

"A quest for great adventure," said Sir John.

"He has no idea," said Cicero. Princess Marigold stared at the creature at Sir John's feet. It looked like a cat. It stared at her and tilted its head.

"What are you?" she asked.

"I am a cat," replied Cicero.

"How do you speak?"

"I rescued the favored creature of a witch. She enchanted me to converse with her. One day she faded into the mist so I was left to wander. That's when I happened upon this human. He was in need of my services so I decided to stay with him."

"In need of your services?" John asked. "You had wandered into a dragon's layer and you begged me to save you." He looked at the princess. "Which I did."

Cicero glanced up. "Oh please, human. You'd be lost without me." He looked back at the princess. "Literally. Can't navigate his way to his arse with both hands."

"I beg your pardon!"

"You're arguing with a cat."

"He started it."

"Well, if you are determined to wander my wood, I should accompany you."

"Excuse me?"

Princess Marigold gave Cicero an indulgent look. "Is he always this difficult?"

Cicero rolled his eye. "Human, you have no idea."

"What happened to your other eye? I assume you had two at one time."

"I did. I fought a valiant battle against a fearsome creature. Tis my battle scar."

"Valiant battle!" Sir John shouted. "You got into my wine then got into an argument

with a squirrel. The squirrel won!"

"It was a very big squirrel."

Princess Marigold smiled and stroked his black fur. "I'm sure it was. It sounds like a fearsome battle was waged."

"Oh it was, you Highness." Cicero purred under her hand.

Sir John threw his hands in the air and cried out to the deity. "Why have I been saddled with such a beast?"

Cicero glanced back at the red faced knight. "I have often asked myself the same thing." Sir John picked up a stone and looked ready to fling it at him. Princess Marigold scooped up the cat and held him close.

"Don't you dare!" she shouted.

Sir John couldn't be sure but he thought the beast stuck his tongue out at him. "Oh bother," he said as he flung the stone deep into the wood. "I must be going. My quest awaits."

"I will accompany you to see you stay out of trouble," said the princess. Before Sir John could protest the princess let out a piercing whistle. A small dog bounded toward the out of the thicket. The dog had long ears with brown and black spots and white on his chest and legs.

Cicero looked down at the dog and shook his head. "What is that?"

"That is my companion, Tiro."

Cicero leapt to the ground and circled the dog. "Could you not decide what color to be?" In response the dog gave him a sloppy lick to the head. "Oh bollocks! Must you?"

"Enough!" cried Sir John. "I must go. My quest awaits."

Princess Marigold looked at Sir John's supplies. "You don't have the right things for a quest. We will go to the castle and get what we need."

"What do you know about quests?"

"I know this is my wood and you will not continue without me." She turned and walked along a well worn path. "Follow me."

Sir John fell in behind a pushy princess, a misery of a cat and a strange colored dog, wondering how his journey went so far off course.

John stirred in his seat and glanced at his watch. He'd been asleep for nearly three hours. Quincy would meet them at the airport and it would give him some time to get to know Mari before having to deal with Caroline. He knew she was worried about his family. Chloe and Quincy would be fine. Even the kids would love her. But Caroline was a tough nut to crack. She loved his brother and made him happy. That was most important to John. It had taken him at least a year to get her to warm up to him. Hopefully Caroline would at least manage for some holiday civility for the woman he loved.

He was happy she'd managed to doze off. Maybe it would help her relax before meeting his family. He spotted the leather notebook in which they'd been writing on her lap and reached for it. He slipped it off her lap and opened it. He discovered she'd written the next chapter and began to read.

He smiled as he read. She was good, really good. The story was light and fun. She turned Cicero into a terrific character. When he read the last paragraph he laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" asked Mari. He looked and she was rubbing her eyes.

"Oh, I'm sorry, sweetheart. I didn't mean to wake you."

"That's okay."

"I was reading your last chapter. I really love it. I think Cicero would too." He leaned in and gave her a kiss. "You really are a wonderful writer."

"Thank you, I'm glad you liked it. I was trying to make her strong without being abrasive."

"Never apologize for writing a strong woman." He took her hand and kissed it. "Or for being one."

John looked down the concourse and spotted his brother waiting just beyond the gate. His heart sank when he saw Caroline standing next to him. He could see the strained smile on her face. Well, if she thought she would give Mari a hard time...he just wouldn't have it.

"John, over here!" called Quincy.

John threw his arms around his brother and held him tight. He felt the same way every time he saw his brother. It was one of the things he effected him the most about

living so far from his family. The almost primal need to see someone who looked like he did. "It's good to see you, Quincy."

Quincy gave him a firm pat on the back. "Good to see you too, brother."

John pulled out of his brother's embrace and gave Caroline a quick hug and a peck on the cheek. "Good to see you, Caroline. I didn't think you'd be able to meet us."

"Hello John. Chloe arrived so she's with the kids." She gave Mari an appraising look. "Introduce us to your friend."

"Friend?" he thought. He gritted his teeth and forced a smile. "Quincy, Caroline, this is Mari Kelly." John recognized Mari's smile was as forced as his. She extended her hand to Caroline.

"It's very nice to meet you. John has told me so much about you."

"Has he now? He's told us so little about you."

John and Quincy both shot her a glance. Quincy reached for Mari's hand and then pulled her into a hug. "Mari, we are delighted to meet you."

"Thank you, Quincy. I really appreciate that."

They headed toward the baggage claim and waited at the carousel for their luggage. John leaned in and whispered to his brother. "She better behave herself."

"It's serious?"

"I'm in love with her."

"Wow," Quincy smiled and threw an arm around his brother. "I'm happy for you."

"There's our luggage," said Mari pointing to her tiger print bag.

"My, that's an eye catcher," said Caroline.

"It's supposed to be," said Mari. "Most luggage is black or dark blue. This way you don't have to look through a lot of luggage that isn't yours." John smiled when Caroline looked taken aback.

"Oh, that's...clever."

John pulled their luggage off the carousel and shot Mari a smile and a wink.

John and Mari settled into the back seat of the SUV for the forty five minute ride to Clear Lake. He reached over and threaded his fingers through Mari's.

"How are the kids?" asked John.

"They're great. Peter is beside himself waiting for you."

"He's such a good kid." He turned to Mari. "All the kids are really smart but Peter is off the charts."

"So tell us about yourself, Mary. John has told us so little."

John's face colored. Sometimes Caroline could be a real bitch. "It's Mari."

"My apologies, Mari," she said with a forced pronunciation.

John gave Mari's hand a squeeze.

"I own a landscape and nursery business in Davenport. It was a family business."

"It must be difficult to get away during the holidays. Christmas shoppers and all."

"Normally, yes but I've taken a year off. I hired a general manager to take over the day to day for me."

"How can you let someone else run your business?"

John could feel Mari tense. If it weren't for the kids he'd happily pitch Caroline out of the moving car. Damn it.

"I still make any major decisions but I've hired and trained good people who know what their doing. And, I thought after working for thirty five years, I'd earned some down time."

"Thirty five years? How old are you?"

"Caro!" shouted John and Quincy in unison.

"What? It's a valid question."

"It's fine. I'm forty seven. I've been working at the nursery since I was twelve."

"Isn't that awfully young to be working?"

"I'd been bugging my family since I was nine. They finally let me work for a few hours after school when I was twelve. Mostly weeding and sweeping up but it was how I learned the business."

"Huh," said Caroline as she looked out at the highway.

John could tell Caroline was impressed. He gave Mari a smile.

"Uncle John!" Peter ran toward John and he scooped him up in his arms.

"How are you doing, buddy?"

"I'm good, Uncle John. I missed you."

"I missed you too," he said as he kissed the boy's cheek.

The rest of his nieces and nephews gathered in the front entryway. Hugs and kisses were exchanged as the kids all took a look at Mari. John slipped his arm around Mari's waist. "Okay let's make the introductions. The fine young man who looks some much like his father is Michael. The lovely lady next to him is his twin sister, Mary. They're eleven."

"Twelve." said Mary

"Not until next month," said a young boy in an Iron Man shirt.

"The informative fellow is Jason. He's nine." John tousled Peter's hair. "This is Peter."

"I'm eight," he said proudly.

John pointed to a pretty little girl who was hiding behind her sister. "The shy little one is Sadie June. She's five. Everyone, this is Mari."

"Are you Uncle John's girlfriend?" asked Peter.

"Peter Matthew!" said Caroline.

John smiled. "It's okay, Caroline. Yes, Peter. Mari is my girlfriend." He watched as Sadie worked her way toward Mari and tugged on her jeans. She squatted down to the child's height.

"Yes Miss Sadie?"

"Your hair is really pretty."

"Why thank you," Mari said with a big smile.

"Hey, can I get in on this?" John's sister, Chloe, walked toward him and gave him a big hug. She was much shorter than her twin coming up barely to John's shoulder. Her black hair was cut in a short style. Her blue eyes and her smile were as bright as her brothers.

"Hey, Alli."

"Hey, squirt."

"Alli?" asked Mari.

"Chloe likes to irritate me with the persistent use of my middle name."

"Alistair has always been a bit of a stick in the mud." Chloe poked her brother in the side.

"Be careful or I'll start using yours, Adams."

Chloe put her hands up in the air. "Ugh, I give."

"Adams?" asked Mari. "Oh wait," she smiled. "Your father was a history professor." She pointed at each sibling. "John, Quincy, Adams."

John laughed. "Our father was a fan."

"Apparently."

They walked into the living room and took seats. "You don't have the corner on unusual names," said Mari.

John sat down next to Mari on the couch. He scooted over to give Peter enough room as the boy pushed in next to him. "Mari's name has us all the beat."

"It can't be all that bad," said Chloe.

"My full name is Marigold Sunshine Kelly."

The room became quiet, then Chloe burst out laughing. "Oh you win."

"My parents were hippies."

"What's a hippie?" asked Jason.

"Someone who was young in the 1960's. They were pacifists and marched against the Vietnam War."

Mari looked at Peter and then John. He smiled and shrugged. "That's right, Peter," said John.

Sadie had worked her way back over to Mari. "I think your name is pretty. I like flowers."

"Thank you. I think Sadie June is a beautiful name."

"Mommy says it's a proper lady's name."

Mari glanced at Caroline. "Your Mommy's right. It makes me think of a Southern lady in a beautiful dress and a pretty flowered hat."

Caroline's smile disappeared when her shy baby girl climbed into Mari's lap.

"Let's get set up for lunch," said Caroline. "Quincy why don't you light the grill?"

"Hey, Michael. Why don't help me with the luggage? I think we may have brought some gifts with us, didn't we Mari?" asked John.

"I think we did."

Caroline showed Mari to their room. It wasn't just a bedroom, it was a guest suite.

"There are fresh towels in the bathroom. I hope you and John will be comfortable. Please let me know if there is anything you need."

Mari walked around the room, admiring the light wood furniture and moss green fabrics. "Oh Caroline, this is lovely. Your decorator is brilliant."

"There's no decorator. It's just me."

"Really? Oh, if you ever change careers you could be a decorator. Your home is really a showpiece."

Caroline blushed a bit and smiled. "Thank you." John walked into the bedroom with Michael following behind carrying their bags. "I'll let you two get settled."

"Thank you, Caroline," said Mari.

John took the bags from Michael and set them down. "Thanks, buddy. We'll be out in a few minutes." As soon as he closed the door Mari flopped down on the bed and stared at the ceiling.

"She hates me."

"Caroline?" he asked. "She was smiling just now."

"That's because I told her that her decorator was brilliant."

He sat down on the bed next to her. "I told you how she made Quincy crazy decorating this place."

She turned her head and smiled. "Yeah, you did."

He smiled and gave her a quick kiss. "Clever girl."

"Thanks. She still hates me. Did you see how she looked at me when Sadie climbed up in my lap?"

"Yeah, I caught that. She was surprised. Sadie is normally so quiet."

"She's such a sweet little thing."

He pushed her hair aside. "Okay, can we not talk about Caroline for a few minutes. He leaned in and gave her another kiss.

Mari bolted up. "I should help her with lunch."

"Will you relax?"

"I just don't know what to do. I don't want her to hate me."

"Okay, we're going to put an end to this right now. I do not now, nor will I ever, give a damn about Caroline's opinion of you. I will admit, she's a tough nut. It takes her a while to warm up to people. Quincy and Chloe will be easier. If I'm happy, they're happy." He paused and gave her a soft kiss. "And I am very happy. Sweetheart, I am madly in love with you."

Mari felt her muscles relax and she smiled. "That's all that matters. That's all that will ever matter." She kissed him. "And for the record, I'm madly in love with you too."

As much as John wanted to stay locked in their room, he pried himself away from Mari and pushed the suitcase with the gifts into the living room.

"Presents!" shouted Jason.

"After lunch," said Caroline.

"Yeah, like that'll happen," said Quincy.

Caroline managed a smile and a shrug. "Fine."

John unzipped the case and began pulling out boxes. "Michael, this is for you." The boy smiled and took the box. He tore at the paper and shouted. "Cool!"

"Michael, indoor voice."

"Sorry, Mom." Michael displayed the watch John had chosen. It wasn't a child's watch. It was a man's watch, classic and dignified.

"You're so grown up now, you should have a watch that suits you."

"Look, isn't it cool?" asked Michael, showing it to his parents.

"Very cool," said Quincy.

"It's very handsome. No wearing it on the beach."

"Yes, Ma'am. Thanks, Uncle John."

"You're welcome. Mary, your next. Mari help me with this."

Mary opened a velvet box to find a sterling necklace with a small amethyst pendant. "Oh, Mom, look."

"Oh John, isn't that a bit extravagant?"

"It's silver, not gold and amethyst is her birthstone."

"I thought it would look nice on a young lady, like Mary. John showed me her picture," said Mari.

Caroline smiled and stroked her daughter's long blonde hair. "She is a young lady now." She looked at Mari and smiled. "Thank you, it's lovely."

"Here you are, Jason." He ripped into his box and squealed at a treasure trove of superhero t shirts, trading cards and comic books.

"Awesome! Thanks, Uncle John."

"Peter, you're next." John handed him his gift and hoped he'd like it. Peter was a lot like he was at that age. He opened his gift and smiled.

"Wow," he whispered.

"It's just a book," said Jason.

"Jason!" said Quincy. "Mind your manners."

"It's a real book," said Peter as he rubbed his hand over the leather binding. "Just like in your library, Uncle John." He turned the book over and read the gold leaf. "Treasure Island."

"It was one of my favorites when I was a kid. It's part of a set. The rest will be here in a few days."

"There's more?" asked Peter. His eyes were as wide as his smile.

"Yes, buddy. There are a total of ten."

Peter launched himself at John. "Thank you."

He patted the boy's back and smiled. "You're welcome, buddy." Peter grabbed his book and ran toward the hall.

"Where are you going?" asked Caroline.

"To see where I'm going to put them in my room."

Caroline rolled her eyes and waved her hand toward the back of her son as she watched him disappear down the hall. "That boy."

John spotted Sadie trying to peak a glance in the suitcase. "Don't worry, sweet pea, we didn't forget you. Mari and I picked this out for you." John handed Sadie a long box. "Mommy might need to help you." Sadie grabbed the box and put it in Caroline's lap. She helped her unwrap it and took off the lid. Inside was a doll with long dark hair and a pretty

flowered dress. She was wearing a flowered hat.

"Oh Mommy. Pretty."

"Yes, Sadie. She's very pretty." She looked at Mari, knowing she was the one who'd selected the doll. "It was very nice of you."

"I'm glad you like it. John had showed me pictures and told me so much about all of you. I loved the one picture at Easter where everyone was so dressed up. You and Sadie look so much alike. When I saw this doll it reminded me of the picture."

John smiled knowing Mari was cracking Caroline's veneer faster than anyone ever had. Caroline pulled the doll out the box and handed it to Sadie. She gave the doll a kiss and held it tight. She ran over to show her father and Aunt Chloe.

"What's her name, princess?" asked Quincy

"Mommy"

"Her name is Mommy?" asked Chloe.

"Yes. She's pretty and she looks like Mommy looks."

Caroline beamed and John thought "Score!"

"Okay, enough with the kids. Where's mine?" asked Chloe.

"Patience, squirt." John reached into the bag and pulled out a bag with Chloe's favorite chocolate covered cookies. She'd discovered them on a trip to Davenport at a local chocolate company.

"Oh come to Mama!" She held out her hands and tore into her gift with more gusto than the kids. "Oh yes!" Quincy tried to steal one and Chloe slapped his hand. "Back off. These are all mine."

John snickered at the twins. They'd been bickering like this their whole lives but they would defend each other to the end. "Enough. Quincy, here's yours."

Quincy smiled and opened the box. He took a deep breath. "Ahh. So good." Every year John gave Quincy a box of cigars.

"You smoke those outside," said Caroline.

"Yes, Ma'am."

John shook his head. Every year Caroline said the same thing. He pulled the last box out of his case and handed it to Mari. She had packed it carefully that morning.

"Caroline I thought you might like this. Careful when you open it." Caroline opened

it and pulled out a plant with long flat leaves. "It's culantro. John told me you like to experiment with recipes and I thought you might like to try it. I grow it for a few restaurants in Philadelphia and New York. It's a little tricky to grow but I'll show you what I do to keep them going."

Caroline pinch the edge of a leaf and chewed it. "Wow, this is terrific. Thank you, Mari."

"You're very welcome."

"Not to be dense but isn't cilantro pretty common," asked Quincy.

"That's not what this is," said Caroline. "It's culantro is a much stronger cousin. It's used in spicy food. It's very popular in the Caribbean.

Quincy looked at Mari and nodded. "Nice."

"Should we give it some water? It's been packed away."

"No but some light would be best."

"Come show me the best place to set it."

"Sure." Mari got up and followed Caroline into the kitchen as the kids wandered off to their rooms.

Quincy stared at the women as they left the room then turned to his brother and smiled. "Wow. I've never seen Caroline warm up so fast. I love my wife like crazy but even I know she can be a little difficult with strangers." Chloe covered her smile with a very loud cough. Quincy pushed against his sister's shoulder. "Stuff it, squirt." He looked back at John. "Mari is amazing."

John looked toward the kitchen and smiled. "Isn't she just."

Caroline and Mari returned to the living room smiling. "We have something for you too." Caroline handed a box to John and one to Mari.

"Oh my. I didn't expect anything."

"Nonsense," said Caroline. "It's Christmas."

John opened his gift and smiled. It was first edition of "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. "Oh, wow. This is amazing. Thank you."

He leaned over to show Mari. "This is how I got interested in mysteries."

"I'm sure the name was a draw," Mari smiled.

"That it was. Let's see what you have." Mari opened her gift and gasped. "What is

it?"

She pulled the book from the box and set it on her lap reverently touching the cover. "De L'instruction de Jardins by Jean de La Quintinye. He was the chief gardener of Versailles." She looked at John with a look of awe. "This is the bible of French gardening"

"I thought, given your profession, you might like it," said Caroline.

"Like it?" Mari sat down next to Caroline and pulled her into a hug. "I love it. Thank you."

"You're very welcome."

"How do you know I didn't pick it out?" asked Quincy with a smile. Both women looked at him and laughed.

Lunch was a relaxed affair, despite the presence of five children. Mari sat back and watched the siblings reconnect. She could imagine the three of them as kids. Being nine years older made John the mature big brother. She could just imagine how he'd looked out for the twins when they were young. Despite teasing each other like mad she could tell they still looked up to their big brother.

The children had finished their meals and were getting twitchy so Quincy gave them permission to leave the table. He and Caroline stood to clear the table. Mari stood and picked up her dishes. "Quincy, I'll do this. You sit and visit."

Mari followed Caroline into the kitchen and set the dishes in the dishwasher.

"You don't need to help. I can manage," said Caroline.

"I have no doubt but I thought John would like some time with Quincy and Chloe." While she helped Caroline with the dishes she admired her state of the art kitchen. "Do you create all your recipes here?"

"Yes, it keeps me home with the kids and I have built taste testers."

Mari laughed. "I bet."

"Jason is useless since he's a bottomless pit. The boy will eat anything. Peter has a very discerning palate. He's helped me with my last two sauces."

"Like mother like son," Mari smiled.

Michael joined them in the kitchen. "Mari your phone keeps ringing. I thought it might be important."

Glancing at the phone, Mari saw multiple calls from Karen, her general manager. "Thank you, Michael. She wouldn't be calling if it wasn't important. I'm sorry, Caroline."

"Of course, I understand."

Mari hit the redial button and Karen picked up right away. "Karen, what's up?"

"Oh, Mari I'm so sorry for calling but I'm really at my wits end."

"What's going on?"

"It's Gino Martelli."

"Oh God." Gino Martelli was one of the biggest real estate developers in the three states. He had dozens of properties that her teams maintained. He was also a giant pain in the ass. "What's he done now?"

"He's refusing to make his final payment for the contract so I put a halt on all work on his properties. So he has thirty properties buried under two to three feet of snow."

"That was the right thing to do. What is his excuse for not paying?"

"He said he'd paid more than enough for a work any teenager could do."

"Oh did he now?"

"He's demanding we clean all the properties immediately. I told him not a chance until he paid up."

"Good. You called his bluff. Don't do the work until he pays. But you wouldn't be calling me for just for that. What else is there?" Karen hesitated. "Tell me."

"He showed up here trying to convince me to send the crews. When I refused he..."

"Did he get violent?"

"Worse. He got friendly. He thinks he's God's gift to women. He made me want to vomit. He tried to touch me and I slapped his hand. He just laughed. Honestly I don't know what to do about him."

"Do you feel threatened?"

"No, just creeped out."

"Okay. You did the right thing. I'm going to handle this."

"Do you need his number?"

"No, believe me. I have Gino's number. I'll get back to you." Mari disconnected and sighed.

"Problem?" asked Caroline.

"A client who's always been a giant pain in the ass." She looked up Gino's number and hit the call button.

"Mari, sweetheart," said the overly sweet voice.

"Hello Gino. I understand you're having a problem paying your bill. I had know I did you'd fallen on hard times. I'm so sorry."

Gino's sweet voice turned harsh. "I have not fallen on hard times. My company is doing just fine."

"I'm so glad to hear that. So you will have a check for fifty thousand messengered over to Karen so we can start the snow removal you need."

"Mari, be reasonable. I've paid you two hundred thousand dollars this year. That's more than adequate compensation for the work your people do. Now be a love and send the crews."

"Okay, let me be clear. You will pay or you will have to find a way to clear the driveways and parking lots of thirty properties. You could wait for spring for the three feet of snow to melt but I doubt your tenants would be pleased. You could try shoveling yourself, but I doubt you're up to it. You could try hiring another company but you and I know no one in three states will work with you because you're such a giant pain in the ass. Now send the check. Also, when you get the contract for next year for three hundred thousand you will sign."

"Three hundred thousand. That's insane!"

Mari held the phone away from her ear for a moment while Gino ranted. "Gino, Gino, calm down. I will be more than happy to tear up next year's contract but that puts you right back where your are now, up to your ass in snow. Don't think for a minute that I'll miss your business. I have a waiting list of companies who would be delighted to take your place on my schedule." Mari smiled as Gino became quiet. "One more thing, Gino. If you ever make a move on any of my employees again, I will do worse than cancel your contract."

"What could you do to me? You're just an overpaid gardener."

"I'll call Angela."

"You wouldn't dare!"

"Don't test me."

"Mari, sweetheart, you're killing me. What do you want from me? "

"I want to hear you say 'Yes, Ma'am'"

She smiled when she heard Gino sigh. "Yes, Ma'am."

"There you go. Was that so hard? Once Karen has a check from you for fifty thousand, the crews will be at your properties. Goodbye, Gino." Mari disconnected the call and saw Carolyn watching her. "I'm sorry about that."

"I understand. It's business."

"I have to call Karen back." she pressed Karen's contact picture and she picked up right away.

"Hi. How'd it go?"

"As soon as you have the check you can send out the crews. When you send out the contracts next week make it for three hundred thousand."

"What?"

"I know it's forty more than we discussed. Call it his jackass penalty."

Karen laughed. "You're the best. Thanks, Mari."

"You're welcome." She hung up the phone and set it down. She looked up and saw Caroline watching her. "Now you know why I took a year off."

"Would you like a glass of wine?"

"God, yes, but only if you'll join me."

Caroline poured them each a glass of white and joined her at the kitchen table.

"Would you have dropped him?"

"Yeah. I really do have other companies wanting our services but I don't have the staff to cover it properly."

"You could hire more people."

"It's harder than you'd think to find people capable of this type of work. I'd rather stay smaller and do quality work." Mari took a sip of the wine and smiled. "Oh, this is delicious."

"Thank you. I know what you mean. I've had a few buyout offers for Caro's but I don't want to let go of the quality."

Mari smiled and tapped Caroline's glass. "Here's to keeping the quality." Caroline smiled and returned the toast.

John and Quincy came into the kitchen. "What are you two up to?" asked Quincy.
"Oh, you know," said Caroline. "Girl talk." Mari and Caroline looked at each other and smiled.

John and Quincy look at each other thoroughly confused. Neither could believe that Mari and Caroline were sitting in the kitchen together, drinking wine and laughing.

"Where's Chloe?" asked Caroline.

"She got a call from her agent."

"It's too quiet. Where are the kids?"

"Michael and Jason are playing video games in the den, Mary is texting Jenny."

"When is she not?"

"Peter is reading his new book and Sadie is introducing her Mommy doll to her Teddy bear."

"John and I were going to play a little ball."

"Fine," said Caroline. "Go be boys."

John put his hand on Mari's shoulder. "Sweetheart?"

She smiled and waved her hand. "Go, have fun."

John and Quincy hit the court at their local club. The holiday season made it a bit more quiet than the average Friday afternoon. Of course the Holmes brothers didn't play racquetball. They were old school. Basketball all the way but Quincy was puffing life a steam engine.

"Damn, Quincy I've got six years on you. You should be beating the crap out of me."

"Dude, I've got five kids and I'm married to Caro. The fact that I can stand upright is a testament to my iron will."

John laughed. "Fine. Let's take a break." They sat on the bleachers and wiped towels over their sweat drenched faces. John reached in his bag and handed his brother a bottle of water. "Here, old man."

"Thanks." Quincy took a deep swig and smiled. "So you and Mari. She seems nice."

John smiled. "She is."

"When did you meet her?"

"She was my student twenty five years ago."

"John, you didn't."

"Of course not. Why does everyone ask that? She was my student." John grabbed the water bottle and took a swig. "She was a great student. So focused on the work. She was one of the only A's in the class that semester."

"You remember her grade?"

John thought back all those years and smiled. "I remember everything about her."

"Like what?"

"She was so beautiful and different, she stood out."

"How?"

"It was the nineties. It still all about big hair and jewelry and she wasn't like that. She always had on levis and a t-shirt and sometime a plaid work jacket."

"So she dressed like a guy?"

"No, not at all. I didn't know it then but she must have been coming from work at the greenhouse. Sometimes she had grass stains or dirt on the knees of her jeans."

"The other students must have given her a hard time about it."

"I don't think so. She usually kept to herself."

"So you were attracted to dirty jeans?"

John smacked him in the shoulder. "She was so different, so natural. Never any makeup. And that hair. Mari is a natural beauty." He saw his brother was smiling at him. "What?"

"You remember all that after twenty five years and you didn't pursue her?"

"No," He took another drink of water. "Of course not."

"But you wanted to."

"Yeah, I wanted to but after the semester was over she disappeared. I found out she dropped out."

"Why?"

"Her parents were killed in a car crash. She had to take over the family business. But I didn't know that at the time. All I knew was she was gone."

"Wow."

"Wow what?"

"You've been carrying a torch for her all these years."

"Yeah, I guess I have."

"When did you start seeing her?"

John took a breath. He knew what was coming next. "I ran into her in the local coffee shop...the day of the big storm."

"The storm. Wasn't that just..."

"Last week."

"Holy crap, John. And you're already introducing her to the family? She must be special." Quincy took the bottle from John and took a sip.

"We're living together."

Quincy spit out his water. "Excuse me?"

"You might as well know it all. I knew I was in love with her right away. She feels the same way. I asked her to move in with me on Christmas. Quincy, I've been alone long enough. I'm fifty eight years old. I'm not going to waste any more time."

Quincy smiled and patted his brother's back. "Well, I guess when you think about

it, you have known each other a long time. I just want you to be happy."

"I am, brother. For the first time in thirty years."

"I'm happy for you." Quincy sighed. "But I'm beat. Let's hit the bar and grab a beer."

John smiled. "Sounds like a plan."

"Yeah, I think I need a drink before you tell anymore revelations."

"We got a dog."

Quincy shook his head and laughed. "Make that two beers."

John had a good time with his brother. They'd both had a couple of beers and caught up on the last few months. They had talked on the phone but there was nothing like sitting face to face with someone who looked like you. When he went too long without seeing his siblings he felt a tangible ache for them.

When they walked back into Quincy's house, they heard laughter coming from the kitchen. Female laughter. They looked in and saw Mari, Chloe and Mari sitting around the kitchen table with glasses of wine and a near empty bottle.

Quincy leaned in and whispered. "Okay, this is weird."

"The best I'd hoped for was for Caroline to be civil. I never expected this," John whispered back.

"Hey, that's my wife you're talking about."

John smiled at his brother and rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, who am I kidding? Caro could have ripped her to shreds without getting blood on the carpet."

"Look what the cat dragged in," said Chloe. John kissed Mari as Quincy kissed Caroline. "Hey!" said Chloe. "I'm feeling left out over here." The brothers each kissed the top of their sister's head. "Better," she smiled.

"I'm going to grab a shower," said John. He leaned and whispered, "You good?"

"Fine," said Mari as she gave him another kiss. "Someone's had a few beers."

John smiled. "Looks like someone's helped polish off that bottle of wine."

"What makes you think that's the first one?" she smiled.

Mari watched as John walked down the hall to their bedroom.

"Earth to Mari," said Chloe.

"What?"

"You were ravaging my brother with your eyes."

Mari flushed bright red. "Oh no, I..." She chuckled. "Yeah I was. He's just so hot."

"John?" said Chloe and Caroline in unison.

Mari smiled and looked back toward the bedroom. "You have know idea."

"Okay, we need to change the subject," said Chloe. "Caro, how's the new sauce?"

"I think it's going to be good. Let's check." She stood opened a pot on the stove and the scent filled the room.

"Oh, it smells great," said Mari.

Caroline dished out some sauce into a small bowl and put it on the table. She broke up some pieces of soft Italian bread. Each took a piece of bread and dipped it in the sauce.

Mari rolled her eyes. "Oh my God, this is amazing."

Mari finished her second glass of wine and enjoyed the company of Caroline and Chloe. They had a surprising amount in common. They were all independent business women, even Chloe. As singer, she had to be very aware of contracts and residuals. She smiled as the women laughed and shared stories of besting male business associates. She lost the train of conversation as John and Quincy joined them in the kitchen. John's hair was still damp from his shower. He was wearing a pair of blue jeans and a powder blue sweater that made his eyes shine.

"Hey is that the new sauce?" asked Quincy as he reached for a piece of bread. Caroline pushed his hand from the bowl.

"Not now. You can have it at dinner."

"You're so mean," he smiled. "Good thing you're so adorable," he said as he gave his wife a kiss.

"Still running on beer, are we?"

Quincy pulled her to her feet and gave her a tight hug. "Nope. I just love my wife."

Mari smiled as Caroline's face softened and she gave him a quick kiss.

Caroline whispered, "Silly boy."

Mari stood and took John's hand. "John, do you have Sharon's number? I want to call and check on Tiro and Cicero."

John looked confused. "Yeah, my phone's in the other room."

Mari smiled and led him down the hall.

Caroline looked at Chloe. "Didn't she check on them already?"

Chloe laughed. "An hour ago."

Quincy look confused. "Then what...?"

"Sex, Quince. Mari is about to jump our brother's bones."

"I need another beer."

John walked into the bedroom and grabbed his phone. "You said you had the number. I know you were nervous about leaving Tiro but they..." Mari stopped him with a fiery kiss.

"They're fine. I've already called."

He smiled. "Then you did this to get me alone."

"No, I did this to get you naked."

John tried not to laugh too loud. "Sweetheart, my entire family is on the other side of that door."

She slipped her hands under his sweater and up his chest. She nipped at his neck. "It's a solid door." She looked at him and smiled. "And I'll try to be quiet."

Chloe looked out the window to the deck and saw Mari and John. He was standing behind her with his arms wrapped around her waist. She was leaning back against him as she watched the waters of Trinity Bay washed up on the beach. He kissed her neck and pulled her close. Chloe had never seen her brother so happy. She'd worry about him being all alone. He always said he was fine but she never believed it. You can be surrounded by people and still be alone. She knew that all too well.

"Well, look who came up for air." she said as she walked out on the deck.

"What are you up to, squirt?" asked John.

"Certainly not what you're up too," she said with a smile.

"When's Sebastian arriving?"

"He's not."

"What?"

"We broke up last week."

John walked to his sister and put his hands on her shoulders. "What happened?"

"Well, seems I was too demanding. I demanded he not sleep with his assistant and he didn't like that."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Is it going to be awkward with him being your manager?"

Chloe smiled. "Yeah that's where he made a big mistake. He forgot I don't work for him. He works for me. So I fired him."

John pulled her close. "Good for you."

"Miss Mari will you play with me?"

They turned to see Sadie had wandered out on to the deck. "Why are you all by yourself, angel?" asked Mari. "Where are your brothers and your sister?"

"They don't like playing with me. They say I'm too little."

"Oh I think you're just the right size for a Miss Sadie." Sadie giggled and held her arms up. Mari picked the girl up and smiled. "How about you show me your room. Do you have other dolls?"

"Lot's," Sadie smiled.

Mari looked over at John. "I'll be back."

Chloe and John watched as Mari carried Sadie back into the house. "Wow," she said. "Your girl sure has a way with people."

"Doesn't she though? Sadie is completely smitten." His smile faded a bit. "I wonder how that's going to play with Caroline?"

"I don't think Caro will be a problem."

"I hope not."

Mari loved playing with Sadie. They set up her considerable collection of dolls around a play table. They set up a tea party to introduce Mommy doll to the others. Sadie provided the voice for Mommy doll while Mari did her best to voice the others. She picked up a pretty blonde doll with a powder blue dress with a white apron. "This looks like Alice in Wonderland."

"She is," said Sadie. "My grandma gave her to me."

"I suppose she needs a proper introduction." Mari turned the doll to face her. "Hello Miss Alice. My name is Marigold." She smiled when Sadie giggled at her use of her full name. "I would like to introduce you to Mommy. She's new to the neighborhood and I hope you'll look out for her." Mari then faked an English accent. "But of course. It's a pleasure to meet you Mommy. I hope you will enjoy our family."

"It's very nice to meet you Miss Alice. Let's have tea," said Sadie.

They played and drank tea and giggled until Caroline came to Sadie's bedroom door. "There you are, Sadie."

"Mommy, Miss Mari and I are having a tea party."

"That's nice but I need you to get washed up for dinner."

"We could eat here," said Sadie.

"Sadie June..."

Sadie's shoulders slumped, knowing she couldn't win up. "Miss Mari, can we play again after dinner?"

"Sadie, you can't take up all of Mari's time."

Mari's heart broke when Sadie's little chin quivered. "I tell you what, how about I read you a bedtime story?"

"Okay." Sadie favored her with a bright smile just before she went off the bathroom to wash up. Mari watched as she left the room.

"Is everything alright? Did Sadie upset you?" asked Caroline.

"Oh God, no." Mari took a breath and saw Caroline seemed concerned. "Sometimes, when I meet a child as wonderful as Sadie I wonder what might have been."

Caroline put her hand on Mari's shoulder as they started walking down the hallway.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Oh, it's alright. I don't regret my choices. My life has been pretty good." She smiled when she saw John on the couch. "And it's only getting better."

Mari never noticed Caroline watching her walk down the hall.

Dinner was a loud and friendly gathering. The children had returned from their friends houses and Sadie insisted on sitting next to Mari.

“You seemed to have a new friend in my niece,” said John.

“She’s such a sweet child.”

Caroline walked in from the kitchen and put a large pot of pasta on the table. “This is the new sauce. I want you all to try it.” She dished a very small amount on Sadie’s plate.

“Mommy, that’s not very much.”

“It might be a little spicy so I don’t want you to eat too much.” The dish was passed around along with a basket of breads. Each person took a taste and looked up at Caroline. “Well?” she asked.

“This is great, Mom. Can I have some more,” said Jason.

“He’s right Mom. This is your best one yet,” said Peter. Everyone was smiling and reaching for more.

“Honestly, this is your best one yet,” said Chloe.

“This has got a real kick to it. What did you put in it?” asked Quincy.

“Culantro,” she smiled.

Mari looked up her plate and smiled. “Really?”

“I dried it in the oven and I only need a little. It’s really strong.”

“I’m glad it worked for you. If you’re going to mass produce this you’re going to need more than a few plants. I could set up something in my greenhouse.”

“Would this be in conflict with the restaurants you grow this for?”

“No. Not at all. It’s not like I’m selling their recipes. We can sit down after dinner and discuss how much you’d need.”

“That’s sound great.”

“Do you have a name for this one?” asked Quincy

Caroline smiled. “I do. I’m going to call it ‘Mari’s Gold Sauce’.”

“What?” gasped Mari.

“I wouldn’t have come up with it without your Christmas gift.”

“Caroline, I’m so flattered,” said Mari. “Thank you.”

She gave Mari a broad smile. “You’re very welcome. And call me Caro. Everybody

does.” She pushed away from the table. “I forgot the wine.” She walked into the kitchen as John and Quincy stared at each other, dumbfounded.

“I’ll help with the wine,” said John as he stood.

“So will I,” said Quincy as they followed her to the kitchen.

“Okay, spill,” said Quincy.

“Yeah, what’s going on, Caroline?” asked John.

“What do you mean?” she said as she reached for bottle of red wine. She handed it to Quincy. “Here. Make yourself useful and open this.”

“I mean you and Mari. Don’t get me wrong I’m delighted that you’re getting along but you’re not exactly...I mean..” John looked at Quincy. “How do I say this without getting in trouble with her for the rest of my life.”

Caroline smiled. “Don’t worry, John. I know what I am. I’m a pain in the ass control freak.” She touched Quincy’s cheek. “It’s why I love your brother so much. He sees who I am. He doesn’t try to change me and he loves me anyway. Mari doesn’t seem to have any expectations of how a person should be. I like that in a person. She’s also a killer business woman. You should have heard her on the phone with one of her clients. Ripped him to shreds with a smile on her face. If I didn’t know better I’d swear she was southern.” Caroline smiled. “And she really likes my children. So why shouldn’t I like her?”

“That’s great,” said John “But, Caro? Even I don’t get to call you Caro.”

Caroline gave him a kiss on the cheek. “Maybe it’s time you did.” She pointed to the counter. “Now why don’t you bring in those wine glasses?”

Quincy and John stood in the kitchen staring at each other. “What just happened?” asked Quincy.

“You tell me. She’s your wife.”

“Anytime now, gentleman. The adults are thirsty,” called Caroline...Caro.

John sat on the living room sofa with his arm around Mari. It felt like the most natural thing to do. The family was laughing and telling Mari the most embarrassing stories they could about John's childhood. Mari could see his discomfort and he was grateful when she changed the subject.

"Chloe, did you start singing in school?"

"I was singing as far back as I remember," she said.

"All the time," said John.

"Day and night," said Quincy. Chloe smiled at her brothers' teasing.

"Did you sing, John?" asked Mari.

"God no," he smiled.

"Are you going to tour anywhere in the North East? I'd love to see a live performance. I've only ever heard your albums."

"Oh Lord," said John.

"What?" asked Mari

"You've just given her the perfect excuse."

"I like Aunt Chloe's voice."

Everyone glanced over at the usually quiet Mary. "What? I do. I listen to it a lot."

"You do?" asked Chloe. "I'm so glad you like it." She said down at the piano and patted the spot next to her. "Come on, join me."

"Oh no, I don't sing."

"Oh come on, it's just us here. No critics."

Mary glanced at her mother who gave her the warmest of smiles.

"Go on angel, we'd love to hear you." The boys started to snicker and Caro shot them a death glare. John admired the power of that woman. He'd bet she could get warring nations to agree to peace over one of her pasta dinners. Mary sat down next to Chloe on the piano bench.

"What song do you like?" she asked.

"I like Summertime."

"Okay, I'll start you jump in whenever you want." Chloe started with her quietly with her warm, contralto voice.

*Summertime and the livin is easy
Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high*

They all got the surprise of their lives when Mary joined in. She had a beautiful voice, almost as rich as her famous aunt's voice.

*Oh your daddy's rich and your ma is good lookin'
So hush little baby, don't you cry
One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singing
And you'll spread your wings and take to the sky.*

Mary smiled, as if she had just realized she really could sing. She closed her eyes and dove into the song. Now there was no stopping her.

*But till that morning that morning there ain't nothing can harm you
With daddy and mammy standin' by*

*One of these mornings you're gonna rise up singing
And you'll spread your wings and take to the sky.
But till that morning that morning there ain't nothing can harm you
With daddy and mammy standin' by*

*Summertime and the livin is easy
Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high
Oh your daddy's rich and your ma is good lookin'
So hush little baby, don't you cry.*

Caro and Mary finished the song and everyone was paused for a moment before they broke into thunderous applause. Mary flushed bright red through her smile. Quincy and Caro approached their daughter and gave her a big hug.

“Baby, that was terrific,” said Quincy fighting tears. “Why didn’t you ever tell us?”

“Oh, I’m not like Aunt Chloe.”

Chloe reached for her niece’s hand. “No, you’re not me. You’re you and you’re terrific. I mean it.”

“Really?” she whispered.

“Really. Let’s do another one,”

“Okay,” she smiled.

John was blown away. His little niece was so grown up. He didn’t know why he should be so surprised. Michael was just like his father and excelled in the sciences. Peter was a budding academic like him. Sadie was so much like her mother. He glanced over at Jason who appeared to be, well, bored. John didn’t quite know what Jason favored yet. Maybe he’d turn out to be a jock with a decent hook shot. God knows his father never got the hang of it.

Mary and Chloe sang a few songs from her albums. They had no problem singing together as Mary seemed to remember the songs arrangements note for note. John whispered in Mari’s ear, “Are you having a good time?”

“A wonderful time,” she smiled. He gave her a quick kiss.

Mary and Chloe finished “Just the Way You Are” to another round of enthusiastic applause, even from Michael and Jason. Mary leaned into Chloe and whispered. Chloe looked at John and smiled. He’d seen that look on her face when she was a mischievous little girl. “Oh God,” he thought. “She’s up to something.”

“Mary requested a special song for John and Mari. I couldn’t agree more.”

At last

My love has come along

My lonely days are over

And life is like a song

At last

The skies above are blue

My heart was wrapped up in clover

The night I looked at you

*I found a dream, that I could speak to
A dream that I can call my own
I found a thrill to press my cheek to
A thrill that I have never known
You smiled, you smiled
Oh and then the spell was cast
And here we are in heaven
for you are mine
At Last*

“Oh John,” Mari whispered. “That was so beautiful.”

“Yeah it was.” He stood and pulled his sister into a hug.

“You mad?” she whispered.

“No, it was beautiful, squirt.”

She whispered in his ear. “I’ll sing it at your wedding.”

He pulled back looked at his sister’s grin. He glanced at Mari and smiled. He pulled Chloe back into a tight hug. “Yeah, squirt. Maybe you will.”

Sadie was drifting off and Caro took her by the hand. "Come on, angel. It's time for you to go to bed."

"I'm not tired."

"Yes you are."

"Miss Mari said she'd read to me."

"I tell you what," said Mari. "Once you get all settled, Uncle John and I will come in and read to you."

"We will?" he asked.

"Hush," she whispered. "We'll be in soon, sweetie," she said to Sadie. She waited for Sadie and Caro to leave the room. "I thought we could read our story to her."

"Our story? It's not finished."

"No, but I'd like to see what she thinks. She's a very clever girl. Lot's of imagination."

John walked into his niece's room with Mari and their storybook. Dolls and stuff animals lined the walls. The bedding was pink and white and there were more ruffles per square inch than a unicorn's dream.

Mari sat on the edge of the bed and John sat in the small chair next to the bed. "We brought you a special story," said Mari. "It's one Uncle John and I are writing together. It's not finished yet but we thought you might like it."

"Yes, please but I need my Sugar Bear. Mommy put him up on the shelf."

John smiled. He'd brought her this bear the last time he'd come to visit. "Why did you call him Sugar Bear?"

"You said you got him at the candy store so I thought it was a good name."

John looked at Mari and smiled. "That's very clever, sweetheart." He tucked Sugar Bear in with Sadie and sat back in the chair. Mari began reading her section of the story. Sadie giggled at the mention of Sir John and Davenport and Princess Marigold. She laughed at Cicero and Tiro. She was still smiling as she started to drift off.

"We're going to let you get some sleep, Sadie," said John.

"Okay," she whispered. "I like the story."

"I'm sorry it's not finished yet," said Mari.

Sadie smiled and pulled Sugar Bear close and closed her eyes. “I know how it ends.”

“You do?”

“Uh huh. They live happily ever after. Everybody knows that.”

John and Mari stared at each other Sadie as she drifted off to sleep.

John sat in the wing chair next to their bed. Mari was curled up and sound asleep. He didn't blame her, it had been a busy day. He smiled when he thought of how busy they'd been an hour ago. He opened their story notebook and looked at his sleeping princess.

Sir John sat up against a large oak and wondered how long this adventure would last. He looked at the princess, asleep in the soft moss, and thought he might not be so anxious for the adventure to end.

The princess sighed and smiled as if she was having a pleasant dream. Her long chestnut hair provided a soft bed for his traitorous cat. Her companion dog slept in the folds of her gown. Lucky dog. Tiro's long ears covered his eyes but did not block his snoring.

"Good grief. Must we endure that beast?" muttered Cicero. "I'm trying to sleep."

"What would you have me do?" whispered Sir John.

"There is a stream near."

"The princess would disembowel us both."

"How am I supposed to sleep while that beast makes such a dreadful racket?"

"I was just about to say the same thing," said the princess as she stirred.

"I beg your mercy, your highness," said Cicero. "The human insists on chattering like an angry field mouse."

"Field mouse!" cried Sir John.

"Hush, you two. You'll wake Tiro."

"How do I remain silent when my honor has been insulted?"

"How are you insulted?" ask the princess. "I think a field mouse is a lovely creature." She smiled at Sir John. "They have lovely fur and soft whiskers."

Sir John smiled. "Are you familiar with many field mice?"

"Of course," she smiled.

"Really?" ask Cicero. "Perhaps you could ask them to join us." His one eye gleamed as he licked his lips."

"Mind yourself, creature," warned the princess. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a seed cake. She broke off a piece and held it out to Cicero. "Eat this. It will fill

your belly and you will cease complaining.”

“How can you be so certain? Complaining is his greatest skill,” said Sir John.

Cicero looked up from the surprisingly delicious cake. “Tis true, I am a superior commentator on the failings of humanity.”

“He will stop complaining because the cake is delicious,”

Cicero looked at Sir John. “Tis true, human.”

The princess smiled. “And if that fails, Tiro will eat him.”

Cicero choked on his seed cake. Sir John smiled.

“Must I? He looks rather stringy.”

Cicero and Sir John stared at Tiro. “It speaks?” asked Sir John.

Tiro raised his head. “Of course I speak.”

“Why did you not speak before?” asked Cicero.

“I had nothing to say.”

Princess Marigold stroked Tiro’s head. “He is a truly wise creature.”

Cicero couldn’t resist a snort of derision to which Tiro responded with a fearsome growl. Cicero darted to Sir John and scampered up his arm to hide on his shoulder.

“Ow, mind the claws, beast.”

“Protect me and I will be your boon companion.”

“You said that the last time.”

“This time I mean it.”

Sir John tried to hide his smile as he pet Cicero’s head. “Very well. I will defend you from the fearsome multi-colored beast.” Sir John looked at Princess Marigold as Tiro was now curled in her lap, eating the rest of Cicero’s seed cake. Yes, he was not ready for this adventure to end.

Mari sat on the deck and watched the sunrise. She sipped her coffee as she started flipping pages in the story notebook. She'd seen it out on the dresser when she got up and realized John had written another chapter. It was a good thing she was where no one could hear her because her laughter would have woken the house. Now it was her turn.

Princess Marigold wondered if this silly man would ever find his adventure. They'd been walking for days but thanks to the supplies she'd obtained at the castle they wanted for nothing, save a purpose.

They'd come to a tranquil stream of crystal water. She was finishing refilling their canteens, a useful task to be sure. Cicero and Tiro had each drank their fill and were currently napping a few steps from each other. She was grateful for the grudging truce they'd established. She didn't believe it would last forever but she was pleased for the lack of growling and hissing.

Marigold finished packing their supplies while the silly man bathed in the stream. She'd never know a male so conscience of his appearance. They were trekking through the woods, not sitting high tea with her mother, the Queen.

She looked through the trees to see if Sir John were finished. She stood transfixed by a vision. He was waist deep in water facing away from the bank. His back reminded her of the great carved doors of the castle. She did not realize he was so formed. She turned quickly away when he dove under the water, revealing parts to her to which she should not be acquainted.

"You are bound to him," said Tiro

"What?" she whispered.

"Tis true. He is meant for you, Princess."

"How do you know this?"

"Humans. They get a look in the eye. Some are only bound for a moment. But you have the forever look."

"Don't be foolish, Tiro. I barely know him."

"That is of no consequence. It is written."

“Written,” she huffed. “Written where?”

“The beast speaks truth,” said Cicero. “It is what brought forth our peace. We see that we shall travel together forever. We decided that peace was preferable to devouring each other.”

“I decided that, you one-eyed lout! I will not spend the rest of my days arguing with you. And you benefit from the fact that our princess would be displeased if I ate you.”

Marigold gave the beasts a small smile. “This is true enough.”

Tiro wandered back toward camp with Cicero following at his heels. “I can’t believe I will have to endure such an ignorant creature to the end of days.”

“You! You need to endure!” snapped Cicero. “It is I who am suffering...”

Marigold watched to two argue as they trekked back up the hill.

“Are you ready, your Highness?”

She gasped and turned at the startle of his deep voice. She lost her footing on the bank but he stopped her fall by taking her by the arms. How did he get to her so quickly? Maybe he was a warlock and he would cast a spell upon her. Had she not noticed before how his eyes sparkled blue as the stream? She fought to retrieve her senses. “What did you say?”

“I said, are you ready, your Highness?”

She favored him with a smile. “Yes, I believe I am.”

John was not surprised to find Mari not in bed when he woke up. It was barely past seven but Mari was used to her farmer's hours. He pulled on a t-shirt, in deference to whatever child would encounter. He found her sitting on the deck drinking coffee and watching the water.

"Good morning," he said as he gave her a quick kiss. "Mmmm. Coffee."

"I made a pot. I'll get you some."

"No, sit. I'll manage."

John found Caro in the kitchen getting breakfast started. "Good morning, Caro."

"Morning, John."

He poured himself a mug of coffee and added two sugars. "Can I give you a hand?"

"No, I've got this." She turned to him and smiled. "Go sit with Mari."

He looked at his sister in law and smiled. "You really like her."

"Yeah, I do. She's perfect for you, John. Don't let her get away."

He looked toward the deck and smiled. "I won't." He rejoined Mari on the deck and took the chaise next to hers. "It's a beautiful morning."

"It is. I can't believe it's New Year's Eve and it's nearly seventy degrees."

"Beats the hell out of the two feet of snow we left behind."

"God yes."

He smiled when he spotted the storybook. "Did you write a new chapter?" He was surprised when she pulled it close.

"I don't know if it's ready for you to see."

"Mari, you know I love your work. Please."

"Well, okay. But remember, it's just a story."

John took the book and sat back. He took a sip of his coffee and paged to the latest section of the story. He loved what she'd done with Cicero and Tiro. And then she... forever look? He glanced over at Mari to find her tugging nervously at her hoodie. He finished the story and set the book down. He moved over and sat on the edge of her chair. "It's a wonderful story."

She laughed nervously. "I think Cicero and Tiro are taking over."

"I wasn't talking about them."

"Sir John and the Princess..."

“Our story. Our story is wonderful story. Two people who find each other again after all these years.” He gave her a soft kiss. “Mari, are you?”

“Am I what?”

He leaned in and whispered, “Are you ready for forever?”

Mari blushed and looked down. It was all he needed to know. “Mari, I’m ready for forever.”

“What?” she gasped.

“I love you, Mari. Marry me.”

Chloe padded into the kitchen and saw Caro preparing a meal, but when wasn’t she? “Morning.”

“Coffee’s ready.”

“Praise God,” she said as she found a mug and poured herself a fresh cup.

“Not God, Mari. She made it.”

“Well the affirmations of gratitude are out there.” She sat at the table and watched as Caro started chopping peppers for omelets. “What’s on the agenda for today?”

“Not much. They’re shooting fireworks off at the clubhouse at midnight. Other than that hanging out with the family.”

Chloe warmed her hands on her mug. “Sounds good.” Why couldn’t she get warm? She felt off. It wasn’t Sebastian, God knows. Ass decides to sleep around he gets bounced to the curb. It was a no brainer. Truth be told it had been over with Sebastian for a long time. It had been convenient. They’d spent so much time together it was a habit more than a love affair. The question was now what? No manager, only a few bookings booked for the next year. She was okay financially, so that wasn’t a problem. Maybe a few days with the tribe would help her sort it out.

Jason padded into the kitchen still in his pajamas. “Is breakfast ready?”

“Soon. Go tell your brother and sisters to get dressed and tell Uncle John and Mari that breakfast is in fifteen minutes.”

“Eww, no thanks,” said Jason.

“Excuse me?” said Caro in a very Caro tone.

“I tried to get to the deck because I left my sneakers out there but Uncle John and

Mari out there and they're making out. Eww." He added a shudder for emphasis.

Caro and Chloe looked at each other, both fighting smiles. "Never mind. Just go tell the others to get dressed," said Caro. "And find your father," she said to Jason's retreating form. Caro and Chloe peeked out to the deck. John and Mari were kissing, interspersed with smiles and whispers.

"I thought he'd never get over Abby," said Chloe

"She's good for him," said Caro.

"I think so. She seems to understand him. Not everyone does."

"It's great to see him like this."

"We joked yesterday that I'd sing at his wedding. Maybe it wasn't a joke after all."

Lakeview Country Club was the place to be if you lived in Clear Lake. Quincy and Caro liked it because it was the one place they could have a date night. They'd paid extra for Dana to babysit their kids on New Years Eve. The boys pretended to protest but Dana was a sixteen year old blonde cheerleader.

John pulled Chloe aside as Quincy got the rest of their party seated. "Chloe, are you okay? You've been awfully quiet today?"

She gave him that little sister smile that always melted his heart. "Yeah, I'm good."

"Are you sure? New Years Eve, the whole couples thing?"

"No, really. To be honest, I'll have more fun without him. If he thought if he couldn't make a business connection it wasn't worth his time."

John pulled her into a hug and kissed the top of her head. If he had that bastard here he'd deck him. How could anyone cheat on his baby sister? She was beautiful and talented and deserved a hell of a lot better. "Tell me what I can do?"

"Just be your best, pain in the ass, big brother self. That's all I need."

"Okay, let's get hammered," he smiled.

"Sounds like a plan."

John took his seat next to Mari. He reached for her hand under the table. He knew he was behaving like a moonstruck teenager but he didn't care. She said yes. He needed to get a ring. When he'd proposed to Abby he was a poor student. Now he could afford a nice ring for his girl. That's were Caro came in. He looked up at his sister in law and she smiled at him. As difficult as she could be, he never doubted she loved the family. Caro asked Chloe to keep Mari busy while she drove John into town. She'd tasked Quincy with looking after the children. She didn't have to ask why he wanted her with him, she knew.

"John, why don't you take Mari down to the dock. You really should see the view before it gets mobbed for the fireworks," said Caro.

"Good idea," he smiled. He took Mari's hand, walked outside and led her down the ramp to dock.

"I understand why your family loves it here. It's really beautiful."

He pulled her close and gave her a kiss. "So are you," he whispered. "Sweetheart, today we talked about the future. I want to make it official." Mari gasped when he reached

into his pocket and pulled out a ring box then went down on one knee. “Marigold Sunshine Kelly, will you marry me?”

He smiled as tears ran down her cheeks. “Oh my God, John. It’s so beautiful.”

“Ah, sweetheart, I’m kneeling on wooden planks here. An answer would be appreciated.”

“Yes, Yes, I’ll marry you.”

He stood and slipped the ring in her finger. “I love you, Mari.”

“I love you too,” she whispered.

“We’re going to be great,” he said.

“We already are,” she said as she drew him into a deep kiss.

Quincy glanced toward the dock. “Wait...what the...”

Caro glanced down from her menu and looked toward the dock. She smiled nodded toward Chloe. “Looks like you’re going to be singing soon.”

“What are you talking about?”

Caro put a calming hand on her husband’s. “A wedding, dear. Your brother just got engaged.”

“I need a beer.”

They walked back up to the table through a gauntlet of applause. Apparently everyone had watched John’s proposal. He could see Mari flame bright red and hide on his shoulder. She wasn’t used to being the center of attention. His family was standing when they returned. He accepted kisses and hugs from Caro and Chloe. Quincy looked a bit shell shocked but pulled him into a tight hug.

“Congratulations, brother. I better be your best man.”

“You always have been,” he smiled.

The women gathered close to look at Mari’s ring. The simple ring was a band of leaves with a half carat round solitaire diamond. “It’s gorgeous, John,” said Chloe. “Good job.”

“I have to be honest. Caro helped.”

“You did?” asked Mari.

“Oh, not that much. He picked it out. I just told him he was right. You should have seen the look on the jeweler’s face when John told him what he wanted engraved in the band.”

“In the band?”

“Now that we’re inside you should be able to see it,” he said.

Mari slipped off the ring and looked inside. She turned the band until she could read the small letters. Tears welled in her eyes.

“Tell us!” said Chloe with a broad smile.

“It says,” Mari said softly, “Happily ever after.”

Chloe enjoyed the dinner with the family but she needed a break. She pushed herself away from the table and stood. "I'm going to go stretch my legs."

"You good, squirt?" asked Quincy.

"I'm fine. I just ate too much."

She walked down the dock and down the steps to the sand. She pulled off her flats and started walking down the beach. It was a clear night and it would be at least a hour before the beach was full for the fireworks.

The silence was refreshing. She loved her family but a week with them was non-stop noise. She needed some peace. It was the only way she could feel the music. When her brain was too cluttered with the world around her she couldn't do justice to the notes. She's been feeling out of sync for months, long before she and Sebastian imploded. As she walked along the shore line the sounds of the club faded behind her.

She was based in LA, but she didn't want to go back. She'd only lived there for convenience sake, for Sebastian's sake. Truth was she could live anywhere she wanted and still record, still travel to gigs. She looked out to the water and sighed. "What do I do now?"

"What do you want to do?"

Chloe gasped and whirled around, nearly tripping over a man sitting on the sand she hadn't noticed in the dim light. She glanced back at the club and knew she wasn't so far away that she couldn't scream for help.

"Don't worry. I'm not a bad guy," he said.

"Oh, I didn't think..."

"Sure you did. Strange man you trip over on the beach. Who wouldn't think I was a bad guy?"

"I didn't trip over you."

"Just about." He stood and brushed the sand off his jeans. He extended his hand, "I'm Peter."

Even in the dim light she could see a warm smile and twinkling eyes. She slipped her hand in his. "Chloe."

"It's very nice to meet you. You didn't answer the question."

“What question?”

“What do you want to do?”

“Oh, that’s a long story.”

“I have time.”

“Oh, no, I...I should get back. My family is waiting for me.”

“Okay.” She turned to leave and he put a hand on her shoulder. “There’s a difference, you know.”

“A difference about what?”

“A difference between what you should do and what you want to do.” He moved close enough that she could smell the salt water of the bay mixed with hard work. He smiled. “What do you want to do?”

Her heart raced at the sight of the bluest eyes she’d ever seen. “I have to go,” she whispered. Then she did the most impulsive thing she’d ever done. She gave him a quick kiss. “Happy New Year.” She turned and ran down the beach, smiling.

“Did you have a good walk?” asked John.

“Yes. Yes, I did,” she smiled.

“Chloe, try the cheesecake. It’s excellent. I got you a slice,” said Caro.

Chloe took a taste. “Oh, that is good.” She glanced up at her future sister in law and realized she was studying her.

“You good?” asked Mari quietly.

“Yeah, I’m good,” she smiled.

John caught the exchange of concern and gave Mari a quick kiss on the cheek. He’d really found the right person for him. After all those years alone, he deserved this.

“Excuse me, Ms. Holmes.” The club manager, Mark Brown, was standing nervously behind her. “I’m sorry to disturb you, Ms. Holmes but people have recognized you and, we’ve had many requests. Would you mind joining the band for one number?”

Chloe smiled. For the first time in a while, she actually felt like singing. “Sure.”

The man’s face lit up. “Oh, thank you, Ms. Holmes.”

She stood and followed the man to the stage. While she introduced herself to the

musicians the manager introduced her to the crowd.

“Tonight we are very fortunate to have one of the most popular singers in the country with us. After I rudely interrupted her dinner,” he turned and smiled, “On the house, by the way,” He waited for the snickers to die down. Even Chloe knew the manager was a notorious cheapskate. “She has granted my request to sing for us. Ladies and Gentleman, Chloe Holmes.” Brown left the stage and took up a spot at the side door.

“Well done, Brown,” said Peter as he slipped the one hundred dollar bill in his hand.

“Thank you, Mr. Blake,” he said as he turned away, leaving Peter with an unobstructed view of the stage.

Chloe looked out the audience and saw her family smiling at her. “Thank you,” she said, acknowledging the applause. “Today was a great day for my family. My brother John has found himself a wonderful woman and today they’ve become engaged.” Everyone applauded again, most having seen the proposal on the dock. John smiled and gave Mari a kiss to which she flushed a bright pink.

“This is one of my very favorite songs. This is for John and Mari.”

At last

My love has come along

My lonely days are over

And life is like a song

At last

The skies above are blue

My heart was wrapped up in clover

The night I looked at you

She looked into the crowd and there he was, watching. Peter. The crowd faded and all she saw was him. She closed her eyes as she felt every note.

I found a dream, that I could speak to

A dream that I can call my own

I found a thrill to press my cheek to

*A thrill that I have never known
You smiled, you smiled
Oh and then the spell was cast
And here we are in heaven
for you are mine
At Last*

She held the last note longer than she'd ever done before. She'd sung this song a hundred times but she knew, she'd never been better. She opened her eyes to the thunderous applause. "Thank you," she said though no one could hear her. She walked off the stage as the band leader took the mike.

"Everyone get ready," he said. "Thirty seconds."

She tried to make her way through the crowd but was slowed by the congratulations.

"You were wonderful," said a familiar voice.

She turned and saw Peter standing behind her. "You like to sneak up on me."

"I stand still. You keep finding me."

"Huh, I guess I do."

"Three, two, one, Happy New Year," shouted the crowd.

"Happy New Year, Chloe."

"Happy New Year, Peter."

Caro gave Quincy a kiss. "Happy New Year."

"Happy New Year, sweetheart," he replied with a warm but quick kiss. He looked at his brother who was kissing Mari. He looked out into the crowd for his sister and stopped. "Caro, is my sister kissing Peter Blake?"

"I do believe she is," Caro smiled.

"Huh. I wonder when that happened?" He looked back at his brother who was smiling and holding Mari hand. "Looks like it's going to be an interesting year," he said.

"For us too," said Caro with a smile. "You've done it again, silly boy."

“Wait, what?” he asked.

She smiled and nodded. “Looks like we weren’t finished after Sadie.”

Quincy broke out into a wide smile and gave a loud whoop before kissing his wife more passionately than should be done in public. Quincy Holmes loved many things, his wife, his siblings, his work. But he loved being a father more than anything else in the world.

John sat in the wing chair next to their bed. Their bed. That sounded wonderful. He watched the moonlight reflect off Mari's skin as she moved under the light blanket. She hadn't yet gotten used to staying up late, but he couldn't sleep. His whole life had changed in a matter of ten days. He smiled at his love as he reached for their storybook.

"Must we push through the tangle? Is there no way around?" asked Cicero.

"Must you whine about everything?" asked Tiro.

"Hush, both of you," said Sir John. "Our journey is through there."

"How can you be certain?" asked the Princess.

"I just am," he said.

The Princess shrugged. "Very well. Then that must be the way."

"That's it? That must be the way?" asked Cicero. "This human has taken us on a perilous and pointless journey and now he wants me to climb through this tangle. Well, I won't."

"Fine. Then stay here," said Sir John as he pushed aside the growth. He made a wide enough passage that the Princess could climb through with a minimum of greenery getting caught in the hair.

"Oh my," she said. "This is lovely."

"Wait for me," cried Cicero as he pushed his way through. Before the group was a well turned out castle, smaller than that of the King and Queen, but serviceable. "Bollocks!" he cried as he climbed up Sir John's body and stared in his human's face. "This was your adventure? This?"

"What vexes you, cat?" asked Tiro.

"This is HIS castle! He has taken us the longest way round only to return to the beginning!"

Sir John was nervous, afraid the Princess would be disappointed. "Your Highness," he started but the Princess looked at him and smiled.

"This is obviously our destination and a pleasant one at that."

"Would you like to see my castle?" he asked.

"I would," she smiled and took his hand. Sir John gasped at his good fortune. "Do you have any mulled wine?" she asked. "I do enjoy mulled wine."

"I do, your Highness. I may have some tins of gingerbread as well."

"Such bounty," she smiled.

As he reached for the door he stopped and faced her. "Your Highness, when I bring you into my home I intend to keep you." The Princess gave him a smile he would remember all his days.

"I should hope so," she said. "It's not often you find a Princess in a tree. You should not let such a prize escape you."

"Your wish is my command, your Highness," he said as he leaned close.

"Marigold. You may call me Marigold," she whispered as they met for a kiss.

"At least tonight I will have a warm fire and my own bed," said Cicero as he walked between the humans.

"You have a bed of your own?" asked Tiro as he darted past him.

"Oh no you don't you beast," cried Cicero.

John and Marigold smiled as they heard hissing and barking beyond. "We should tend to them before they bring my home down around our ears."

"Indeed," she smiled as she walked the long hall toward the troublesome beasts.

John looked for a moment to the heavens and smiled. This was the greatest adventure of all.

...And they lived happily ever after.