

*The Annual Live Nativity Event
Becomes a Backdrop for
Four Modern Romances*



CHRISTMAS

Comes to

Bethlehem,
Maine



Lorraine Beatty, Elizabeth Ludwig,
Sandra Robbins & Virginia Vaughan

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THE CHRISTMAS GIFT

By Virginia Vaughan

Chapter 1

This December, journey to Bethlehem to experience for yourself the true meaning of Christmas. Think the trip's too far? Not so. The city of Bethlehem, Maine, presents its first annual live nativity. Join Mary, Joseph, and a host of other biblical figures as they reenact the events leading up to the birth of Christ. This event takes place from six thirty to nine o'clock every Friday and Saturday night from Thanksgiving until Christmas. Bethlehem—it's closer than you think."

Kate Walters caught her breath as the commercial announcing the town's live nativity played for the first time on the radio. A thrill rushed through her. The live nativity had been her idea, and she'd been the one to push the project through. Now, it was Thanksgiving week and the premiere was only days away. Her hands shook with a mixture of excitement and nervousness. This project would likely be the defining mark of her first term as town manager of Bethlehem.

Her office door opened, and Lisa, her assistant, burst in, clapping and smiling. "I heard it! I heard the commercial!"

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Kate pushed back from her desk. “I heard it, too. Isn’t it exciting?”

The phone on her desk rang at the same moment her cell phone buzzed. Lisa answered the office phone while Kate checked her cell. It was her husband. She considered letting it go to voice mail as Lisa accepted congratulations and people began to meander in to comment on the commercial, but she couldn’t ignore the nagging feeling that she would be doing something wrong. She stepped away from the emerging group and answered her phone.

“I just heard the spot on the radio.” David’s voice was upbeat, full of encouragement and support. “I wanted to be the first one to congratulate you.”

Kate turned to look at the crowd gathering in her doorway. “It’s amazing. I can’t believe this is really going to happen.”

“Of course it’s going to happen, and it’s going to be great. You’ve poured your heart and soul into this project, and we both know that when you give something one hundred percent, it can’t fail.”

Despite the excitement buzzing in the room, Kate felt a sting at David’s comment. What did he mean by that one hundred percent remark? Did he think she’d neglected her family?

She shook her head. She was overreacting. David was only trying to pay her a compliment. She had a crowd gathering and she needed to get off the phone and back to business. “Well, there’s still so much left to do, and we only have three days left

to do it. I have a group in my office waiting to see me, so I'd better let you go."

His resigned sigh spoke volumes that his words didn't. "I'll see you at home later. I love you, Kate."

"Bye, David." Kate ended the call and joined the others in celebrating this exciting milestone of her first major event in office.



David Walters snapped his phone shut, resisting the urge to toss it across the car. He wouldn't take out his frustrations on an innocent cell phone, especially one that he paid for. He'd heard the radio spot and felt compelled to call to congratulate Kate. The live nativity was a big event for the city, and she was getting the credit she deserved for its conception. His wife had vision and the determination to make her visions reality. It was one of the things he loved about her. Plus, she'd answered his call. He supposed that was a good sign, but he couldn't shake the feeling that even while she was speaking to him, she'd been itching to get him off the phone.

He drove past her office but couldn't catch a glimpse of her through her office window. Across the street, Bethlehem Green was being transformed for the nativity.

David parked the car, hiked up his coat collar, and went to check out the progress on the construction. The area was blocked off with city barriers to keep unauthorized people out, but he had signed up as a volunteer on the set-building committee. They left the big work, the set design and construction, to the professionals, but David was handy with a hammer and nails.

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His and Kate's sons, twenty-one-year-old John and eighteen-year-old Keith, were also signed up to help with the set. David had urged the boys to volunteer, although he hadn't had to do much arm twisting. John had worried that he wouldn't be available enough while he was away at college, but David had signed him up to work during his vacation breaks.

It was important to him that they all participated in this project. . .and not just because it was their mother's brainchild. The nativity was good for the city and good for Christmas. It celebrated the true reason for the season—the birth of Christ—while also promoting the city of Bethlehem. It was a good idea all around, and as he watched it come to life around him, he could hardly believe that no one had thought of it before his wife came to office.

“Hey, David, are you here to work or just to stand around and look pretty?”

David glanced up to find Bill Mitchell, the head of the set-building committee, staring down from the roof of the structure that was to be the inn from which Joseph and Mary were turned away. “I was looking at the progress.”

“Well, grab a hammer and join in.”

David had only left the office for lunch, but he was in no rush to get back. He stared down at his clothes. He wasn't exactly dressed to work, but his khakis and polo shirt could be cleaned. He wanted to do his part, and he had signed up to work.

Besides, it might feel good to work out his frustrations for a while.



In the months leading up to the nativity, Kate had had weekly meetings with the different committee chairs for status reports and updates. Now, with three days left until opening night, she'd scheduled a meeting for them all to meet together to make certain everything was covered.

She started the meeting by thanking those in attendance for helping her bring the project to life. "As most of you know, this project has been my dream for a long while. Now it's come to fruition. I'm anxious and excited all at once. As town manager of Bethlehem, I'm proud that our community has the courage to step out and make such a bold statement of faith. I'm also very proud of the way this town has rallied to put this event together. There are so many jobs to do, and there has been no lack of willingness to do them. Such unity makes me very proud to be a part of Bethlehem."

She slipped on her reading glasses and turned to page one of her agenda worksheet. "Now then, let's get down to the business of this meeting. The first performance is three nights away. We need to go over the status of all areas. Let's start with costumes." She turned to Janet Burgess, who headed up the sewing committee.

After hearing from Mrs. Burgess, Kate listened to updates about maintenance and parking issues, care and feeding of the live animals, and the response so far to the promotions the city had been producing.

After the meeting was adjourned, Kate returned to her office

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and fell into her chair. The meeting had taken more out of her than she'd expected.

Lisa brought her a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin. "You look like you could use this," she said at Kate's questioning look.

"Do I look *that* bad?"

"Of course not. You just look tired. It seems like you've been extra tired recently."

"Well, this project has taken a lot out of me. Plus, with the holidays. . ."

"Are you sure that's all it is? You've seemed out of sorts the last few weeks—moody, irritable, unusually tired. Plus, you've stopped downing coffee, your all-time favorite drink."

Kate realized Lisa was right. Recently, the smell of coffee made her stomach turn.

"Please don't fire me." Kate noticed the mischievous grin on Lisa's face as she handed Kate a paper bag.

"What's this?" Kate took it and pulled out a pregnancy test. This was what Lisa thought was wrong with her? "No," she said, pushing it back into the bag. "I am not pregnant."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure." She jumped from her chair and stacked her papers nervously. The idea that Lisa thought she was pregnant was outrageous. "Obviously I'm too old to be pregnant."

"My mother was forty-six years old when she had me."

A nervous twitter lit through Kate as she thought back on the past few weeks. She had felt out of sorts recently. No! She stopped herself before she allowed her thoughts to go down that

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road. She was already the mother of two nearly grown boys. She was not pregnant. She couldn't be. While she appreciated Lisa's concern for her, it was a ridiculous notion to even consider. God would never do that to her. She was just too busy to be pregnant.

But, as Lisa left the office, that plain brown bag on her desk began to mock her. She picked it up and stuffed it into her briefcase.

Chapter 2

The morning alarm sounded.

Kate reached to turn it off but didn't get out of bed right away. She considered staying put and taking a sick day, but that thought came and went in a flash.

She pushed back the covers and willed her feet to the floor. Mothers didn't get a sick day and neither did town managers, especially now that Thanksgiving had come and gone and the nativity premiere was only hours away. There was still much to do. Kate had status meetings planned for the morning and a television interview to promote the project on the noon report. As she stumbled toward the bathroom, she faced the facts—if she wanted a sick day, she would have to cough up a lung or something major like that.

She stared at her reflection in the mirror, noticing the bags beneath her eyes, and realized she probably could pull off being sick. She looked as tired as she felt. Sure, it was the busy time of year. Sure, she was overworked and overstressed. But all that was nothing new to her. Overworked and overstressed was her life. She usually thrived on it.

Kate remembered Lisa's comments earlier that week. Had she been so cranky that everyone around her had noticed? Had David noticed? She certainly didn't need him to know how worn out she was. He already believed she took on more responsibility than she could handle.

What would she do if she had to take on the responsibility of a baby as well?

The pregnancy test was right where she'd tossed it, hidden beneath the sink under a stack of towels in the very back of the cabinet, sure to never be found. Kate had not been able to bring herself to throw the thing in the trash once and for all. And as the days had passed and she'd had more and more time to dwell on the notion, she decided the idea might not be as impossible as she'd first decided.

She fell to her hands and knees and dug through the contents of the cabinet until she found it. She held it in her hands, fearful of the results this test might hold and the changes those results might have for her life. How would a baby affect her career? Could she manage being the town manager and the mother of an infant? Her boys had been teenagers by the time she'd reentered the workforce.

And what about David? Could their marriage survive another baby? Kate knew how much he loved their boys, but she also knew he was looking forward to the day when they were both out of the house. David wanted to have the freedom to travel, and he was already making plans for the day when Keith left for college. Kate had yet to ask him how her job

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would fit into those plans, but a baby would definitely ruin them.

She decided to take the test and stop worrying about things she couldn't control. Good or bad, it was done now. Either she was or she wasn't pregnant.

After the appropriate time, she checked the test. Hot tears burned her eyes when she saw the results.



The music playing on David's headphones matched the thump of his feet against the pavement as he finished his morning run. He slowed to a walk a few houses down from his own in order to cool down. He admired the houses as he walked.

This was a nice family neighborhood, but he and Kate were about to be without a family to inhabit it. Keith had received his college acceptance letter only this week. His future was planned, and he was ready to get started on it. John was already away at college, and it was like pulling teeth most times to even get him to come home. Not that David was complaining. He was glad his boys were independent enough to want to live their own lives. It meant that he and Kate could soon have the freedom they had earned without so many restrictions. He could sell his business and Kate could step down from her job as town manager. They would finally be able to get away together and reconnect.

As he reached his yard, he stopped to pick up trash that had somehow been tossed on the lawn. He stopped and took a good long look at the house, wondering if they shouldn't think about selling it. It would soon need a paint job, and this would be the

last spring he would have Keith around to help with the yard upkeep. They would have little need for so much space once both boys were out of the house. And since he and Kate hoped to travel, they didn't need a big yard and a lot of maintenance issues to tie them down. He would call and talk to a Realtor about their options after the holidays.

He entered the house through the patio off the master bedroom. The bed was empty and the bathroom door closed, indicating that Kate was already up. This was her big day, and he imagined she was anxious to make an early start. He grabbed his clothes and decided to shower and change in the hall bathroom.

By the time David finished dressing, the boys were up and making breakfast. When he entered the kitchen, he saw John, who was home for the Thanksgiving break, digging into a plate of toasted waffles while Keith poured himself a bowl of cold cereal. "What are you boys doing up so early?"

"We promised to help Mr. Mitchell finish up the set construction," John said.

"Yeah, everything has to be perfect," Keith chimed in. "This is Mom's big day. We want everything to go off without a hitch."

John smacked his brother on the shoulder. "This isn't just about Mom, you dope. This nativity reflects on the whole town of Bethlehem."

"Maybe so, but who gets the blame if it doesn't go well? Mom."

"That's enough, both of you," David said, putting an end to the bickering.

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They were both right, but their argument was moot. The nativity would do well. Everything Kate touched succeeded. She was a winner. She always had been. Plus, this time she had the entire backing of the community behind her. This project didn't belong to only her anymore. Though Keith was right—if it didn't go well, she would be the one to bear the blame.

As his boys often did, they quickly moved on to another subject. Keith unfolded a piece of paper and mounted it to the freezer door with magnets like a child displaying art he made at school.

“What's that?” David asked.

“He's been mooning over that thing for two days,” John said.

Keith grinned from ear to ear. “It's my letter from UMF. I thought I'd showcase it here for everyone to see.”

David patted his shoulder, as proud of Keith for his acceptance into the University of Maine at Farmington as Keith was. “I think that's a good idea, Son. Now why don't you two finish up your breakfast? You don't want to keep Mr. Mitchell waiting.”

John turned back to his waffles, but Keith took a moment to straighten his letter before returning to the table.

David poured himself a cup of coffee then opened the morning paper. It was full of listings, but he wasn't interested in buying more things to fill up the house. In fact, his mind was already on the idea of downsizing. He turned to the real estate section and began looking through the ads for condominiums for sale. He wanted to have a good idea of what they were looking at before he presented the topic to Kate.

“Mom, have you been crying?”

Keith’s question brought David’s attention back to his current home. Kate was standing in the doorway of the kitchen. Her eyes were swollen and her face held an ashen look to it like she had, indeed, been crying, despite her obvious attempts to hide it with makeup.

“No, I’m fine,” she said. Her assurances, however, did not prevent any of them from getting to their feet to make certain.

David touched her arm. “Kate, are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” She opened the refrigerator, an obvious attempt to escape their gawking stares.

“This is because of my letter, isn’t it?” Keith was now standing on the other side of the opened refrigerator door, eye to eye with the UMF acceptance letter he’d mounted only minutes before.

Kate closed the refrigerator. “What?”

“Of course this is because of your letter,” John told him. “You’re the baby, Keith. Once you’re gone, what will she have left?”

John had a way of speaking as if he knew the answer to every question in the world, and for some reason that David had yet to figure out, Keith believed every word he said.

“I’ll only be two hours away.” Keith looked back at his mother. “Don’t you want me to go away to college?”

Kate had that deer-in-the-headlights look in her eyes. It was obvious Keith was about to pull her into a conversation she was unprepared to discuss. He had to intercede.

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“Whoa, hold on there now,” David said. He put his arm around Kate’s shoulders in order to present a united front in this matter. “Keith, your mother and I are both thrilled that you got into the school you wanted. Honestly, we couldn’t be happier for you.”

“Then why is Mom so upset?”

David pulled her tighter against him, a little curious that she was allowing it. Where was her spitfire? Where was her grit? Something must have her really rattled this morning. “Cut your mother some slack. She’s under a lot of stress with this nativity project plus the pressure of running an entire city and this household. Weren’t we just talking about how important today was? Sometimes people just need to let off a little stress. Okay?”

John nodded. “Sure. We’re sorry, Mom. Everything’s going to be great today.”

Keith was a little more hesitant, but he finally came around. He gave her a hug. “Tonight’s going to be awesome, Mom. Don’t worry.”

Once both boys had returned to their breakfasts, David turned to Kate. Was that gratitude he saw in those red, puffy eyes? How long had it been since she’d been grateful to him for anything? “You want some coffee?” he asked her.

“No, just juice.” She poured herself a glass from the carton she’d taken from the refrigerator.

Since when did she not drink coffee in the morning? “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, David, I’m fine. Just butterflies, I think. Like you said, it’s a big day.”

Spurred on by the gratitude he’d seen in her eyes, he decided to take a leap. “Why don’t we have lunch today?”

The way she almost choked on her juice at his invitation spoke a thousand things she never would. “I have project meetings most of the day and a television interview at noon to promote the nativity.”

“You have to eat.”

“I’ll probably just send out for something and eat at my desk. Once the nativity begins—”

“You’ll be knee-deep in issues stemming from it. Face it, Kate, after today, I probably won’t see you again until New Year’s.”

Her phone on the counter buzzed. David dared her with his eyes to pick it up. She must have seen his challenge, because she let it go unanswered.

“What do you want me to say, David? This project was my idea. I put it together. I know it’s a lot of work and sacrifice, but it is important to me.”

“Tell me something, Kate.” He leaned across the counter toward her so they were almost eye to eye and lowered his voice so the boys couldn’t overhear. “When exactly did I stop being important to you?” He picked up his briefcase and keys, waiting for her to respond.

She didn’t.

The phone buzzed again as David turned to leave. “You’d better get that,” he told her. “It might be someone important.”

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He walked out the door leading into the garage and leaned against it as it closed behind him.

Lord, when did I stop being important to her, and how can I get it back?



Kate watched the door close.

That wasn't fair. David had to know he was important to her. But his request for lunch caught her off guard and she'd had to scramble to come up with a quick excuse. It's not like she could tell him she was going to the doctor during lunch to confirm the pregnancy of their midlife child. No, she wouldn't tell him about being pregnant until a doctor confirmed it.

Her phoned buzzed again. Kate checked the caller ID then groaned. "Myles."

She'd tasked Myles Sandford from her staff to handle the production part of the nativity, and while she thought he was doing a great job, he was also driving her crazy with every little detail.

"What does he want this early?"

Keith pushed back from the table. "He probably wants to give you a heads-up about Kaylee Martin. She broke her arm skiing yesterday."

"How do you know that?"

"She posted it last night."

The phoned stopped buzzing then immediately began again.

"Why would he be calling me about a teenager with a broken arm?"

“Kaylee was supposed to be Mary in the nativity tonight. Remember?”

Of course she should have remembered that. Kate’s heart leaped at this first snag in their production schedule. Thank goodness they had backups. She picked up her phone and greeted Myles as she moved into the living room.

“I have bad news about Kaylee Martin,” he said.

“I’ve already heard. Who do we have to replace her?”

“Well, that’s what I need to talk with you about. I need you to do it.”

“Me? Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m not, Kate. I’ve already started phoning our backups and, well, with the holiday weekend, there’s no one else who can do it.”

“Myles, I’m too old to play that part.”

“Ah, but you look so young, Kate.”

She groaned at his flattery. She knew better. Mary had been a teenager of fourteen or fifteen when she gave birth to Jesus. The role was traditionally played by a teenaged girl. There was no way Kate looked young enough to play that part.

Her hesitation must have gone on for long enough to convince Myles that his flattery wasn’t working, because he changed his tactic. “Kate, this project is your baby. The town needs you.”

She groaned again, this time because Myles knew how to push just the right buttons to get her to agree. “Fine, I’ll do it.”

Kate closed her phone and turned to her sons. “Do you believe this? He expects me to be Mary.”

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“Mom, you can’t be Mary. You’re too old.”

John punched his brother in the arm. “Way to go, Keith. If she wasn’t crying before, she will be now that you’ve called her an old woman.”

Although Keith’s comment echoed her own, hearing it aloud did sting. “I’m only forty-four.”

“Sorry, Mom. I didn’t mean *you* were old. I only meant. . .well, Mary was a teenager and. . .well, you’re not.” His voice trailed off as if he realized his words were not helping. He looked to his brother for affirmation, but John shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“How do you survive here without me?” he asked.

“It’s not easy.”

The boys put their dishes in the sink then gathered their coats and headed out the door.

Kate retouched her makeup to make certain no one else would know she had been crying. She didn’t want a scene at work like the one she’d had at home. . .especially since she didn’t have David there to lean on.

She remembered the hurt expression on his face when he’d left. Was a simple lunch with his wife really too much to ask? She pulled out her day planner, scanned the scheduled project meetings, and suddenly felt overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of her day. Meetings with the maintenance staff, costumers, food service providers, budget planners, the sheriff, and the police chief. Plus the television interview. Kate closed her day planner. She was already exhausted and her day had hardly begun.

As she left the house, she made a decision—the idea of her playing Mary was utterly ridiculous. She didn't have the time to devote to one more thing. Young girls played the role of Mary because young girls had babies. She was an old married woman with one son in college and another son about to graduate from high school.

Once she reached her office, she would put any and all available personnel on finding someone else to fill that role. No one in their right minds would believe she was young enough to have a baby.

Chapter 3

David spread travel brochures across his desk. He had the world at his fingertips. He had only to choose the destination.

In August, Keith would leave for college. However, he planned on working as a counselor at a sports camp for the summer, so he would essentially be gone from the house once he graduated in May. For David and Kate, that opened up a world of opportunities, and David was looking forward to enjoying the freedom that came from being empty nesters.

The back door opened and shut. He gathered the brochures and put them away as his friend and business partner, Mike Purvis, entered. He and Mike had started in the insurance business together and had opened their own agency nearly eighteen years ago. “How did it look?” David asked.

The office was usually closed the day after Thanksgiving in order for the staff to spend time with their families, but Mike had taken a call from a policyholder who had experienced a kitchen fire while cooking her Thanksgiving meal. “It looks like the Martin family ate their Thanksgiving dinner out this year.”

Mike grinned as he deposited a file on David's desk then planted himself on the sofa. "I cut Mrs. Martin a check. She's probably out purchasing a new stove as we speak."

David scanned the paperwork then pushed it away. He had another matter he wanted to discuss. "Look, Mike, since we've got the office to ourselves, I thought this might be a good time to mention something to you."

"Sounds serious."

"It is. I was thinking of letting you buy me out of my share of the agency."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm serious. Keith is graduating in a few months, and Kate and I want to do some traveling once he's gone. I won't be around as much." When Mike didn't respond right away, David urged him on. "Well? What do you think?"

Mike shook his head. "I don't think I can do that, David."

"What? Why not?"

"Tina's pregnant." He stared up at David. "We're going to have another baby. We got the news on Monday."

David leaned back in his seat as the weight of his friend's news hit him. Mike and Tina were younger than he and Kate, but they already had three school-aged children. "I don't know what to say."

"Well, you can at least pretend to be happy for me."

"Do you mean to say that you're happy about this?"

"Yes, I'm thrilled that I'm going to be a father again. Tina and I are both thrilled that God has chosen to bless us this way."

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“What about your plans to retire early? With a new baby, that won’t be possible.”

“I guess that’s true, but it’s a small price to pay.”

“You say that now, but you’ll be wishing you’d done things differently when you’re my age and retirement seems a lifetime away.”

“Maybe you’re right. It will be a struggle financially—that’s nothing new for us—but it does mean I won’t have the money to buy you out of your share of the business. Even if I did, with a new baby coming, I can’t operate this place by myself and still give my family the attention they deserve.” He stood to leave but stopped at the doorway and turned back. “Maybe this isn’t what we had planned for our lives, David, but I suppose God had other plans, and I know His plans are always good.”

David watched his friend leave. He hated the way that conversation had gone. He didn’t want Mike thinking he didn’t love being a father. He loved John and Keith and had a thousand memories of their childhood that he would cherish. And he wasn’t naïve enough to believe that because the boys were away at college that his responsibility as a parent had ended. But his role in their lives had changed, and that could not be denied or ignored.

Some parents couldn’t handle that change. Some had nothing in their lives except their children, and when that role change occurred, they were left with nothing but empty shells as lives. Not he and Kate. They had plans. They saw this time in their lives for what it was—an opportunity.

Or at least it was supposed to be. After this morning's breakdown, it was obvious to David that Kate was not going to handle Keith's impending departure well. He couldn't understand it. She wasn't usually so emotional. If she was already crying in December, what would she be like come May? It wasn't like her. It wasn't his Kate.

He searched through the brochures again and pulled out one for a tropical destination that he'd had his eye on. White beaches, blue sky, and two weeks of soaking up the rays—enough fun in the sun to put a smile on anyone's face.

He put away the rest of the brochures. He'd made his choice. And he couldn't help but be thankful that God had chosen to bless Mike and Tina instead of him and Kate.



Bethlehem Green had indeed been transformed into the ancient marketplace through which Joseph and Mary would have traveled. Kate felt the excitement in the air at the anticipation of the premiere as volunteers rushed to complete final preparations. Beginning tonight, visitors would travel through the streets of the ancient city and get a firsthand view of what the young couple saw on their journey, all the while listening to the Christmas story over the mounted speakers.

She approached the pavilion, now transformed into a barn. Hay was scattered across the floor, and the cradle for the baby Jesus was already positioned. Above her, on the roof, an electrician worked, no doubt running electricity to the star that pointed the way to the Christ child.

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Kate sat on Mary's stool and examined the scene. This was the place where she used to bring her boys to play when they were little. Her mind drifted back to the days when they ran and romped and tackled one another. She touched the cradle where the baby Jesus would be placed and thought back on the days when her own children were small enough to fit in such a space. Her eyes welled up. That seemed so long ago.

"Kate!"

She looked up to see Myles heading toward her.

"I'm glad I found you. We need to have your final fitting for your costume."

She wiped away a trickle of a tear on her cheek, kicking herself for getting overly emotional in public. What if Myles saw her crying?

She got up as he approached. She was always more commanding when she stood. "Myles, I need to speak to you about that. I don't think I'm a good choice to fill this role. Surely there's someone else who can—"

"Kate, there is no one else. The nativity is in nine hours. You're the only one who's been to all the rehearsals. You're the only one who knows what to do on such late notice."

"I'm too old to play Mary. Mary was a child. I mean, Matt Parker is playing Joseph, and he's only twenty-three. I'm old enough to be his mother."

"I've already taken care of that. Matt is going to switch roles with David. Matt will be a shepherd and David will play Joseph. Problem solved."

Kate sank back onto the stool. "I don't think I'm up for this."

"Playing sick won't help you. Face it, Kate, you're out of excuses. This town needs you. This production needs you."

Kate leaned into her elbows as her head began to spin.

Myles bent down beside her, concern suddenly touching his voice. "On second thought, you do look pale. Maybe you should go to your office and lie down for a while."

"I can't. I have an interview at Channel Four in a half hour."

"You'd better let me handle that."

Normally, Kate would never agree to hand off her responsibilities, but this was not a normal moment. If she looked as poorly as she felt, she wouldn't represent the project well. Letting Myles step in and do the interview was the better alternative. "I think that would be best." She allowed Myles to help her to her feet.

"I'll walk you to your office." His phone buzzed at his hip. He glanced at the message then at Kate.

"I'm fine, Myles. You go ahead."

He looked around. "I'll get someone to walk with you."

"I said I'm fine." She stood straight and tall just to prove her point.

Myles's phone buzzed again. He glanced at the message on the screen. "There's a problem at the shepherd's pen. Excuse me, Kate. I have to go." He headed off.

Kate fell to the stool again. Putting on an act for Myles's sake had taken all the energy she had. But she couldn't sit here all day, either. What would the selectmen think if they saw the

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town manager just sitting around? Besides, how long could she sit looking sick and pale before it got around to her husband and sons and they came asking questions of her? She didn't want that.

She pulled herself up and headed toward her office. This pregnancy was going to be harder on her than the others had been. She was already feeling more physical effects than she had with either John or Keith.

As she reached her office, she realized she was already accepting this pregnancy as if it were fact even though she hadn't yet had the blood test. She also realized the blood test didn't matter. She knew the results. She felt it in her soul.

She closed her door, shutting herself away from the prying eyes and questions of her staff. She couldn't deal with them right now. She fell onto the couch and stared at the photograph of David on her desk. What would she tell him? He'd started making plans for the day when the boys were out of the house. A baby would obliterate those plans. This news would crush him.

So many questions poured through her, but one pressed its way to the forefront—why now? Why had God chosen this time in her life to give her another child? Why not ten years ago when her boys were younger, when she was younger and less established in her career? How on earth would she handle dealing with a teenager when she was in her sixties? And what if the child had problems? She was over forty, and that automatically put the baby at risk for complications.

She hadn't asked for this. She'd always been content with

what God had given her. Sure, at one time she'd thought she'd wanted a daughter, but she'd given up on that dream long ago.

How could God do this to her? What about her plans? She had a life, a career. Who would possibly take her seriously now?

She was too old to be a mother again. Her boys were grown. She had friends who were becoming grandparents, and she was about to become a parent again? It was outrageous.

Kate closed her eyes and tried to breathe as the reality of her situation sank in.

Chapter 4

Is this a surprise for your wife?" The travel agent, named Marcia, according to the plaque on her desk, had a glint in her eye as she took the information about the trip David wanted to book for him and Kate.

"Yes, it's a Christmas present."

"Oh, isn't that romantic. I know you two will have a wonderful time." She turned to her computer and began typing in the information from the questionnaire he'd completed. She stopped typing after a moment. "Kate Walters? Is this Kate Walters, the town manager from Bethlehem?"

"That's right. We don't have a travel agency in Bethlehem."

"Why, you're the ones putting on that live nativity tonight. I saw your wife on Channel Six just the other night talking about it."

"Yes, that was her. In fact, she'll be on Channel Four today at noon."

Marcia looked at the clock then leaped to her feet. "Allison, Allison, turn the TV to Channel Four. That lady from Bethlehem we like is going to be on again promoting the nativity."

David followed Marcia toward the sound of a TV changing channels.

“How do you know?” called Allison.

“That’s her husband,” Marcia stated as they entered the room, pointing to David.

Allison glanced at him then shook her head. “It’s not fair. She gets the great hair *and* the good-looking husband.”

“Mm-hm. And he’s surprising her with a cruise, too.”

“Some girls get all the luck.”

David pretended to ignore their exchange, but he couldn’t deny it bolstered his ego. Maybe he should let these women explain to Kate just how lucky she was to be married to him.

The news came back on and the anchor began to discuss the nativity. However, it wasn’t Kate sitting across from him promoting the project. It was Myles.

“Hey, that’s not your wife,” Marcia stated.

As if he didn’t know. David pulled out his cell phone. He’d turned it off earlier when he decided to come to the travel agency. He hadn’t wanted anyone deterring him from his mission of booking this trip, but apparently he’d missed quite a bit. Something serious must have happened for Kate to step aside and allow Myles to take a television interview.

He turned on his phone. He had six missed calls and three voice mail messages. “Can we finish booking the trip another time? Apparently I’m needed at home.”

Marcia rushed back toward her desk. “Sure. I’ll go ahead and make all the arrangements then call you when they’re done.”

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“That sounds fine. I wrote down my cell phone number.”

She gave him a reassuring nod. “I’ll take care of everything, Mr. Walters. Don’t worry. And hey, maybe we’ll see you tonight. I told my husband we should go.”

“I’m sure you’ll enjoy it. Thanks for your help.”

David hit his voice mail key as he walked to his car. The first was from Myles, letting him know that there had been changes made to the program. Kate was now playing the role of Mary, and because of that, David had been changed to the role of Joseph. A second message from Myles asked David to meet him an hour earlier than planned to make certain both he and Kate knew their roles. The third call was a hang up.

David got in and started the car. His sense of urgency had been tickled. He needed to get back to Bethlehem. Something was going on. Kate would never voluntarily hand over a TV spot to Myles. And how had he talked her into taking on the role of Mary? Something was going on with her, and he was pretty sure he knew what it was.

He faced the facts. This thing with Keith was hitting her harder than she wanted to admit. It was the only explanation. She was having trouble dealing with him leaving home. And the fact that Myles could convince her to play the role of Mary was enough to assure David that she shouldn’t take on the role.

Playing Mary would require her to hold a baby. In her already emotional state, how would that affect her? David worried it might only upset her more, causing her to dwell on the days when John and Keith were babies.