

Christmas Story

By Joanna Hartwell

Chapter 1

The reception had wound down the way the best celebrations often did—slowly, almost reluctantly. Guests lingered over the last slivers of cake, paused to finish conversations they'd already had twice, and found one more cousin or friend to hug before finally pulling on coats and stepping out into the December evening.

Outside, snow had settled into a gentle, steady rhythm, covering the fields, the fence posts, and the long gravel lane leading to Rachel and Nathan's farmhouse. By the time the last buggy disappeared from sight, the world beyond the windows had softened beneath a blanket of white, as though even the countryside had decided the day deserved to end quietly.

Inside, lanterns glowed warmly in the windows, chasing away the winter darkness. The farmhouse hummed with the comfortable sounds of family. Younger children darted through the living room in stocking feet, their laughter echoing off the walls while the older adults pretended not to notice. A sleepy toddler had claimed the oversized armchair, a paper napkin still clutched in one tiny fist, his curls flattened against the cushion as he surrendered to exhaustion before anyone could carry him upstairs.

Suzanne paused in the doorway for just a moment, taking it all in.

This.

This was what she'd missed for so many years.

Not the wedding. Not even the celebration.

The simple comfort of people who belonged to one another.

She smiled to herself before quietly slipping into the kitchen. The large blue coolers from the reception had already been carried inside, waiting to be unpacked. Without thinking twice, she lifted the lid on the first one and began transferring containers of leftover chicken, vegetables, and salads onto the counter.

She had just set a container of roasted chicken beside the sink when Rachel appeared in the doorway, a dish towel draped over one shoulder and an expression that landed somewhere between amusement and surrender.

"Suzanne."

Suzanne looked up, trying—and failing—to hide the smile tugging at her lips.

"It's your wedding day," Rachel said, folding her arms. "You don't get to help clean up."

"I know."

Rachel glanced pointedly at the chicken already sitting on the counter.

"And yet..."

Suzanne laughed softly.

"And yet," she admitted, reaching back into the cooler for another container.

Across the kitchen, Kate looked up from removing lids and arranging leftovers into serving bowls for supper. She let out an amused little snort before setting a glass bowl onto the counter with a gentle clink.

"Some things," she said, shaking her head with the fond affection reserved for people you'd loved long enough to stop trying to change them, "never change."

Warm laughter rippled through the kitchen.

Someone handed Suzanne a container of creamed celery anyway, apparently deciding that if they couldn't stop her, they might as well put her to work.

She accepted it with an innocent smile.

"I appreciate everyone's support," she said dryly.

Rachel laughed, gave up entirely, and reached for the stack of serving spoons.

The kitchen settled into its own easy rhythm—containers opening, dishes passing from hand to hand, quiet conversation filling the spaces between laughter. No one hurried. No one minded the work.

For Suzanne, it didn't feel like cleaning up after a wedding.
It felt like coming home.

* * *

Daisy moved quietly around the kitchen, gathering things into a well-worn picnic basket with the gentle confidence of someone who had packed dozens over the years. There was nothing hurried about her movements. Each item seemed to earn its place, tucked carefully inside as though she were arranging far more than a simple evening meal.

A loaf of fresh bread, still fragrant from the day's baking.

Pieces of roasted chicken wrapped snugly in a clean linen cloth to keep them warm.

A generous slice of pie nestled into one corner.

Then, after the briefest pause, Daisy reached for a small dish of blackberry cobbler. A smile touched her lips as she settled it carefully into the basket before laying a folded napkin over the top, protecting it as though it were the most important part of the meal.

Finally, she filled a thermos with hot chocolate. Steam curled into the air for just a moment before she tightened the lid, sealing the warmth inside against the winter evening.

Across the kitchen, Suzanne found herself watching without quite realizing she had stopped what she was doing.

Her gaze lingered on the basket, following Daisy's careful hands as one thoughtful item after another disappeared beneath the checked cloth.

It wasn't an ordinary meal.

There was too much intention behind it.

She tilted her head ever so slightly, curiosity beginning to stir. Where in the world were they planning to take a picnic on a snowy December evening?

Laura noticed first.

She followed Suzanne's line of sight before catching Rachel's eye across the room.

Rachel looked from Suzanne...to the basket...then back again.

Understanding flashed between the women without a single word being spoken.

Just as Suzanne opened her mouth, Rachel crossed the kitchen with an easy smile.

"Suzanne," she said warmly, lifting Grace from her highchair, "would you mind keeping an eye on Grace for a little while? I think she's getting sleepy. She could use a quiet cuddle."

Suzanne's expression softened instantly.

"Oh, of course."

She gladly accepted the little girl into her arms. Grace gave a tiny yawn as Suzanne settled her against her shoulder, one small hand curling sleepily around the fabric of her dress.

"I think someone has had a very exciting day," Suzanne whispered, brushing a kiss across the top of Grace's head.

The little girl answered with a contented sigh, already nestling closer.

Suzanne smiled, gently patting her back as she carried her into the living room, humming softly beneath her breath.

The moment Suzanne disappeared around the corner, the kitchen fell into perfect silence. For the briefest moment, everyone simply looked at one another, each waiting to see who would be the first to break. Laura covered her mouth, her eyes already sparkling with laughter, while Kate bit her lip so hard her shoulders began to shake. Rachel held out the longest, but not by much. A tiny giggle escaped before she could stop it, and the room

surrendered all at once. Warm laughter bubbled quietly around the kitchen as the women leaned together over the picnic basket, sharing the kind of conspiratorial joy that only comes from planning a surprise for someone you dearly love.

"Quick," Daisy whispered, though she was laughing too.

Hands moved with renewed purpose. The thermos was shifted to make a little more room. Another napkin was tucked into the basket. Someone added two forks at the last second.

Every few moments, one of them glanced toward the living room doorway, listening for Suzanne's footsteps.

Not yet.

Just a few more seconds.

The surprise had waited this long.

It could wait just a little longer.

* * *

Outside, evening had settled over the farm in shades of blue and silver, the cold deepening with each passing minute. Every breath drifted into the air in soft white clouds before disappearing into the darkness, and the snow beneath the men's boots answered each step with a crisp, familiar crunch.

Nathan, Tyler, Eli, and the others moved about the yard with quiet purpose, hitching the horses to the sleigh. Their voices stayed low, conversations wandering from one subject to another before giving way to comfortable silence again. No one seemed in any hurry.

The sleigh itself was beautiful.

Its deep lacquered wood gleamed beneath the lantern light, rich enough to catch every flicker of amber that danced across its polished surface. Delicate scrollwork curled gracefully along the runners and the sides; each carved detail lovingly preserved despite years of winter journeys. Someone had cared for it faithfully, and it showed.

The horses shifted impatiently, stamping against the frozen ground as wisps of steam curled from their nostrils. Leather traces creaked softly while buckles were fastened and harnesses checked one final time.

Nearby, one of the women had already spread thick handmade quilts across the seat, their colorful stitching adding a welcome splash of warmth against the white snow. A pair of lanterns hung from iron hooks on either side of the sleigh, their flames dancing gently in the still evening air, casting a golden glow that shimmered across the polished wood and made the falling snow sparkle like scattered stars.

For a few moments, no one spoke.

The quiet felt...right.

Then Caleb cleared his throat.

He stepped back from the sleigh and folded his arms.

"I almost forgot what you looked like smiling."

Eli chuckled.

"Hasn't been that long."

Caleb looked toward Nathan.

"Has it been that long?"

Nathan didn't even hesitate.

"Yep."

That earned a round of laughter from the men, the easy kind shared among friends who had weathered many seasons together.

Tyler found himself smiling along with the others.

He hadn't known Eli nearly as long as the rest of them, but he'd seen enough over the past months to understand what lay beneath the teasing. No one was making fun of him.

Quite the opposite.

This was relief.

Nathan stepped beside Eli and gave his shoulder a single firm clap.

"Bout time," he said simply.

Eli looked from one familiar face to another.

Men who had prayed for him.

Worked beside him.

Sat with him through lonely holidays and ordinary Tuesdays alike.

He thought of Suzanne waiting inside the farmhouse...his wife.

The word still felt wonderfully unreal.

A slow grin spread across his face, impossible to hide.

He didn't bother trying.

* * *

Together, the women finished setting out the leftovers, passing bowls and platters from one pair of hands to another until every available space on the table and sideboard was filled. Roasted chicken, buttered noodles, vegetables, fresh bread, slices of pie, and the blackberry cobbler all found their places among the serving dishes, the familiar scents of supper mingling with cinnamon and the sweetness that still lingered from the wedding desserts.

Someone lit another oil lamp, and its warm amber glow stretched gently into the corners of the room, softening the evening shadows. Beyond the frosted windows, snow continued to drift silently across the fields, but inside the farmhouse, everything felt wrapped in warmth.

Rachel glanced toward the living room.

Suzanne sat on the braided rug with Grace nestled peacefully against her shoulder, a well-loved Christmas storybook open across her lap. The little girl had surrendered completely to sleep, one tiny fist curled against Suzanne's sleeve, but the other children had gathered around as though drawn there by an invisible thread.

Suzanne wasn't simply reading.

She brought the story to life.

Every character had a voice of its own. She whispered when the story called for whispers, widened her eyes at just the right moments, and paused every so often to trace an illustration with one finger so the youngest children could study every tiny detail before she turned the page.

Not one of them wanted her to hurry.

The smallest children leaned so close their knees nearly brushed the book, following every word with solemn concentration. Even the older ones, who had settled themselves a respectable distance away in an effort to appear much too grown-up for story time, hadn't wandered far. Though they pretended otherwise, Rachel noticed every one of them glance up whenever Suzanne turned a page.

A smile tugged at Rachel's lips.

For just a moment, the women stood quietly watching the scene unfold.

The room felt peaceful.

Whole.

As though Suzanne had always belonged there.

* * *

The back door swung open, and winter came rushing inside.

A sharp burst of cold swept through the farmhouse, carrying with it the clean scent of snow and the deep stillness that settles over the countryside after dusk. Tiny flakes drifted through the open doorway in slow, wandering spirals before melting almost as quickly as they touched the warmth of the room, leaving the threshold sparkling for the briefest moment.

The children looked up from the story.

Conversation paused.

Then the men began filing inside.

Boots thudded heavily against the mat as they stamped away the snow, brushing white flakes from broad shoulders and the brims of their hats. Their cheeks were red from the cold, their breath still clinging to the frosty air that followed them in.

Every one of them was smiling.

Not ordinary smiles.

The kind that gave away absolutely nothing while somehow promising everything.

Suzanne frowned ever so slightly.

Something was going on.

Nathan crossed the room without a word, his gaze finding Rachel immediately. He gently cradled her face between his chilled hands and brushed a kiss against her forehead.

"Everything's ready," he murmured.

Rachel's eyes softened.

The quiet anticipation she'd carried all evening seemed to melt away, replaced by a smile she made no effort to hide.

She crossed to Suzanne.

"I'll take Grace now."

Suzanne carefully transferred the sleeping little girl into Rachel's waiting arms, taking a moment to tuck the tiny blanket more securely around her before letting go.

"She never even made it to the end of the story," Suzanne whispered with a fond smile.

Rachel glanced down at her daughter.

"No," she said softly. "I don't suppose she did."

She turned toward Nathan, still smiling to herself.

Across the room, Eli had never taken his eyes off Suzanne.

From the moment he'd stepped through the doorway, she'd been the only person he'd truly seen.

He crossed the room with that same quiet steadiness that seemed to belong to everything he did. There was no urgency in his steps, no grand flourish to announce himself. Just the calm confidence of a man who knew exactly where he wanted to be.

Stopping in front of her, he held out his hand.

Open.

Steady.

Waiting.

Suzanne looked from his face to his hand, amusement dancing in her eyes.

"What are you up to?"

The corners of Eli's mouth lifted just a little.

"Come with me."

She searched his expression, hoping for some clue, but found only that wonderfully unreadable smile.

Curiosity finally won.

She slipped her hand into his.

His fingers were cold from the winter air.

"Where are we going?" she asked as he gently helped her to her feet.

"To supper."

She laughed, glancing toward the dining room where the table already stood beautifully set, candles glowing softly among the serving dishes.

"I think you're a little late," she teased. "Supper's already waiting."

Eli's eyes twinkled.

He gave her hand the gentlest squeeze.

"Not ours."

Chapter 2

As Suzanne and Eli made their way toward the front door, the comfortable murmur of conversation behind them had quieted, replaced by a stillness that seemed to settle gently over the room.

Before they reached the entryway, Kate stepped out from the hallway.

She carried Suzanne's long charcoal winter coat draped carefully across both arms, not tossed over one shoulder or hurriedly gathered up, but cradled with quiet purpose.

"Mom."

Suzanne stopped and turned.

"What?"

Kate smiled, but there was something fragile beneath it. Her eyes shimmered in the warm lamplight, and for just a moment she pressed her lips together, as though steadying herself before speaking.

"I think you'll need this."

Suzanne looked at the coat.

Then back at Kate.

A tiny crease formed between her brows.

"Need it...for what?"

Kate only smiled.

She didn't answer.

Confused now, Suzanne's gaze drifted slowly around the room, searching one familiar face after another.

Rachel.

Laura.

Daisy.

Alexa.

Even the children had grown unusually quiet, watching with solemn curiosity.

Everywhere she looked she found the same thing.

Gentle smiles.

Bright eyes.

Expressions filled with affection...and anticipation.

No one seemed willing to explain.

The silence wasn't awkward.

It felt almost...reverent.

As though everyone had silently agreed that whatever came next shouldn't be hurried.

Laura was the first to move.

She stepped beside Kate, accepting the coat with a warm smile before holding it open.

Instinctively, Suzanne slipped one arm through, then the other.

Laura worked slowly, fastening each button with calm, practiced fingers. When she reached the top, she smoothed the front of the coat almost absentmindedly, brushing away an invisible wrinkle before resting her hand lightly against Suzanne's shoulder.

It was such a small gesture.

So ordinary.

Yet something about it caught Suzanne unexpectedly.

For a fleeting moment, she wasn't standing in Rachel's farmhouse.

She was simply a woman being quietly cared for.

The feeling settled somewhere deep inside her chest.

Before she had time to understand why it mattered so much, Daisy stepped forward carrying one of Rachel's handmade scarves.

The thick wool was a rich Christmas red, soft from years of wear. Daisy lifted it gently around Suzanne's neck, wrapping it once...then twice...tucking the ends neatly beneath the collar of her coat.

"There," she whispered, more to herself than anyone else.

"Nice and warm."

Suzanne's fingers rose instinctively to touch the scarf.

It still held the faint scent of cedar and fresh linen.

Before she could gather her thoughts, Alexa appeared with a pair of knitted mittens cupped in both hands.

"I thought these might help," she said softly.

Suzanne accepted them almost automatically.

"Thank you."

The words felt strangely inadequate.

She looked down at the mittens resting in her palms, then slowly lifted her eyes once more.

No one had moved.

No one seemed impatient.

They were simply...

waiting.

Her heart gave a slow, uncertain squeeze.

She searched their faces again, this time more carefully.

Rachel's smile trembled ever so slightly.

Laura blinked several times before looking toward the fireplace.

Kate suddenly found the pattern in the braided rug fascinating.

Even Daisy seemed suspiciously interested in straightening the dish towel she was holding.

It dawned on Suzanne that every person in the room was trying very hard not to cry.

A nervous little laugh escaped before she could stop it.

She looked from one beloved face to the next, completely bewildered.

"Would somebody please tell me what's going on?"

The room remained wonderfully, frustratingly silent.

Rachel finally crossed the space between them.

She didn't speak.

She simply reached up and rested both hands gently against Suzanne's cheeks.

For a long moment she just looked at her, her eyes overflowing with love and gratitude.

Then she leaned forward and kissed her softly on the cheek.

When she pulled back, her voice was barely above a whisper.

"Just trust us."

* * *

Nathan lifted the picnic basket from the table and carried it across the room before placing it into Eli's waiting hands. The woven wicker was still warm from resting near the fireplace all evening, and the quiet exchange seemed to mean something to everyone except Suzanne.

Almost instantly, the room stirred.

It was as though someone had given permission for the evening to begin winding itself gently to a close.

The children came first.

One after another, they hurried toward Suzanne and Eli until the two of them disappeared beneath a happy tangle of little arms, sleepy smiles, and hurried embraces. One hug barely had time to end before another child stepped forward, determined to have one more squeeze...one more "I love you"...one more goodnight before they left.

Suzanne laughed as tiny hands tugged at her coat sleeves and wrapped around her waist.

"Oh, my goodness," she said, laughing as another little body collided happily against her. "How many hugs am I supposed to get?"

Everyone laughed softly.

Suzanne knelt just enough to hug the youngest ones properly, smoothing a little girl's hair behind her ear before kissing the top of her head.

One of the boys threw his arms around Eli's leg with such enthusiasm that Eli nearly lost hold of the picnic basket. Laughing, he caught the basket with one hand while steadying the little boy with the other, drawing another ripple of quiet laughter from around the room. Suzanne found herself smiling as she watched them, wishing she could somehow gather up the sound of that laughter and tuck it away to keep forever.

As the room gradually settled, the goodnights began to make their way from person to person.

"Goodnight, sweetheart."

"Sleep well."

"We'll see you tomorrow."

"Don't stay up talking all night."

Soft laughter followed the playful warning, and Suzanne listened with a smile, realizing after a moment that something was missing.

The longer Suzanne looked, the more certain she became that everyone was waiting for something.

Or perhaps...

Waiting for her.

A bewildered smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"We're... leaving?"

No one answered.

Instead, Eli stepped quietly to her side. Without a word, he slipped his fingers between hers, his hand still cool from the winter air, and lifted hers slowly to his lips. His kiss was gentle, familiar, and so completely Eli that it settled some of the fluttering uncertainty inside her even as it deepened her curiosity.

"For tonight," he said softly.

Suzanne searched his face, hoping for the smallest hint of an explanation, but all she found was that quiet smile she was beginning to know so well. Whatever everyone was planning, her husband was thoroughly enjoying keeping her in suspense.

* * *

Eli reached for the door and pulled it open.

Winter greeted them immediately.

A rush of crisp air slipped into the farmhouse. Beyond the porch, snow continued to drift lazily from the sky, each flake seeming in no particular hurry to reach the ground. Moonlight stretched across the fresh blanket of white until the entire yard shimmered beneath it, so beautiful that for a moment Suzanne wondered if she'd somehow stepped into one of the Christmas cards she'd tucked away in boxes over the years.

She took a slow step onto the porch.

Then another.

The cold barely registered.
Her eyes had found something else.
Waiting at the foot of the walk stood a sleigh.
She stopped so suddenly Eli nearly walked past her.

It wasn't elaborate or decorated with ribbons and bows. It didn't need to be. Like so many things the Amish built, its beauty came from quiet craftsmanship rather than ornament. The dark wood gleamed softly beneath the lantern light, every curve smooth and purposeful, while a thick blanket had been folded neatly across the seat as though someone had taken care to think about her comfort long before she'd ever stepped outside.

Two broad-shouldered horses waited patiently in their harnesses, their breath rising in slow white clouds that disappeared into the winter night. Tiny brass bells hung from the leather traces, giving the faintest musical whisper whenever one of the horses shifted its weight, and the lanterns mounted beside the sleigh cast pools of warm amber light across the snow.

For one suspended moment, Suzanne simply stood there taking it all in.

The snow.

The horses.

The lantern light dancing across the polished runners.

The little bells.

The blanket waiting on the seat.

It was beautiful.

Not in a grand or extravagant way.

In a thoughtful way.

In a way that felt unmistakably...Eli.

Slowly, she turned to look at him.

He was watching her instead of the sleigh, his quiet smile saying everything his words hadn't yet spoken. There was no impatience in his expression, no eagerness for praise. He seemed perfectly content simply to watch her discover the gift one piece at a time.

"I thought..." he said quietly, "...we might spend our first evening together somewhere peaceful."

Suzanne looked back at the sleigh, then at him again.

"You planned this?"

A soft chuckle escaped him as he shook his head.

"No."

His eyes drifted toward the farmhouse.

"Our family did."

The words drew Suzanne's attention back to the house.

She turned slowly.

Every window glowed with warm lamplight, and filling the open doorway was the family she had come to love.

Rachel stood beside Nathan with Grace asleep against his shoulder.

Laura had one arm around Kate.

Daisy and Alexa stood shoulder to shoulder.

The children crowded wherever they could find room, waving so enthusiastically that a few nearly bumped into one another in the process.

Every face was turned toward her.

Every face was smiling.

Several were wiping away tears they clearly hadn't intended anyone to notice.

Suzanne pressed her fingertips lightly against her lips, laughter and tears arriving together.

Suzanne looked back at the sleigh.

Then at Eli.

Tears shimmered in her eyes as a smile spread slowly across her face.

"I love you," she whispered.

* * *

Eli offered Suzanne his hand as she stepped up into the sleigh, his grip warm and steady despite the winter air. She settled onto the cushioned bench beside him, drawing a slow breath as she looked around. The sleigh carried the comforting scent of polished leather, seasoned wood, and woodsmoke, mingled with something faintly sweet she couldn't quite place.

Before either of them had a chance to say a word, Nathan lifted the picnic basket and settled it carefully behind them. It landed with a cheerful clink from somewhere inside, making Suzanne smile.

"I think somebody packed enough food for a week," she teased.

Nathan gave the basket a firm, satisfied pat.

Caleb came over to the sleigh carrying another heavy quilt. With complete seriousness, he shook it open before draping it carefully across Suzanne's lap, tucking one side around her legs and then the other with such determined concentration that she couldn't help laughing.

"Caleb..."

"I'm almost done."

He smoothed one corner.

Then another.

Leaned back to inspect his work.

Reached forward to adjust it one more time.

Eli finally raised an eyebrow.

"I believe she's covered."

Caleb glanced up, grinned without the least bit of apology, and gave the edge of the quilt one final pat.

"Now she is."

That earned another ripple of laughter from everyone gathered on the porch.

Rachel leaned against the porch railing while the rest of the family crowded around them beneath the warm glow spilling from the open doorway.

She cupped her hands around her mouth.

"Don't you dare come back before morning..." she called.

The yard fell suspiciously quiet.

Rachel's grin widened.

"...and I mean it!"

The laughter that followed rolled across the snowy yard, bright and wholehearted enough to startle a few birds from the nearby trees.

Eli felt the warmth climb straight into his face.

He ducked his head just enough to hide a smile, though he suspected the effort was completely useless.

Beside him, Suzanne leaned gently against his shoulder, laughing so hard tears shimmered in her eyes.

Still smiling, he gathered the reins into his hands.

With the lightest touch, the horses leaned into their harnesses.

The sleigh eased forward almost silently, the polished runners gliding across the fresh snow with a soft whisper as they pulled away from the farmhouse. The little brass bells chimed brightly at first, their music mingling with the family's final waves and laughter, then gradually

softened as the distance grew, fading into the peaceful hush of the winter night until only the quiet rhythm of the horses and the steady swish of the runners remained.

Behind them, the farmhouse windows glowed like welcoming lanterns against the darkness.

Chapter 3

The sleigh followed the snow-covered lane at an easy pace, the runners whispering over the packed snow while the horses settled into an unhurried rhythm that seemed perfectly suited to the quiet of the winter night. For several minutes neither of them spoke. The soft jingle of the harness bells, the steady sound of the horses' breathing, and the crisp air filling their lungs said enough.

Suzanne tucked the quilt a little closer beneath her chin and leaned comfortably against Eli's shoulder, content simply to watch the moonlight drift across the fields.

Then, through the dark pines ahead, she caught the faintest flicker of light.

At first it was little more than a warm glow weaving between the tree trunks. She smiled to herself, assuming another farmhouse must sit somewhere beyond the woods, but as the horses rounded a gentle bend in the lane, the lights grew brighter instead of disappearing.

A cabin slowly emerged from the darkness.

Suzanne sat up.

"Oh..."

Nestled among the towering pines stood an old log cabin, its weathered timbers glowing softly beneath the lantern light. It looked as though it had belonged there forever, as though the forest had simply grown up around it over the years rather than making room for it. Lazy ribbons of woodsmoke drifted from the stone chimney, disappearing into the moonlit sky, while lanterns lined the path leading to the porch, their warm amber light spilling gently across the untouched snow.

The entire place seemed to glow against the darkness.

As the sleigh drew closer, Suzanne's eyes wandered from the lanterns to the porch...and then stopped altogether.

Poinsettias.

Dozens of them.

Large terracotta pots lined the porch steps, their deep crimson blooms rich against the white snow. More rested beneath every window, and a pair of especially large plants stood proudly on either side of the front door. Evergreen garland wound its way along the porch railing, dotted with glossy holly and tiny white lights that twinkled so softly they seemed less like decorations and more like stars that had settled there for the evening.

A laugh slipped from Suzanne's lips.

"They're my poinsettias."

She turned toward Eli, her eyes wide with delighted surprise.

"From the wedding."

His smile answered before he did.

"Yes, ma'am."

She looked back at the porch, then slowly shook her head in amazement.

"You moved all of these?"

"I carried two."

She looked at him again.

"Two?"

A quiet chuckle rumbled in his chest.

"Nathan finally told me I was getting in everybody's way."

Suzanne laughed, the sound floating out across the snowy clearing.

"I believe that."

"So I let the people who actually knew what they were doing finish."

She reached over and rested her hand lightly on his arm, still looking at the cabin glowing beneath the lanterns.

"It's absolutely beautiful."

Suzanne felt tears gather once again.

She didn't try to blink them away.

Instead, she looked from the poinsettias to the lanterns...to the smoke curling lazily from the chimney...to the warm light shining through the cabin windows.

"They did all this..."

Her voice caught.

"...for us."

Eli covered her hand with his own and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"They've been planning it for weeks."

He said it so naturally that Suzanne realized something all over again.

Love wasn't measured by grand speeches.

It was measured in quilts tucked around cold legs...

Picnic baskets packed too full...

Poinsettias carefully carried across snowy yards...

And weeks spent preparing a place for two people beginning a life together.

Chapter 4

The sleigh eased to a gentle stop in front of the cabin.

For a heartbeat neither of them moved.

The horses stood quietly in their harnesses, their breath drifting into the cold night air while the little brass bells settled into silence. Snow continued to fall around them, soft and slow, until Eli finally climbed down from the sleigh, his boots sinking into the snow with a familiar crunch.

He turned immediately and reached both hands up toward her.

Suzanne smiled as she placed her gloved hands into his.

His grip was warm despite the cold.

Steady.

Safe.

She stepped carefully onto the runner, gathering her skirts with one hand as she climbed down beside him. For just a moment neither of them seemed in any hurry to let go. They simply stood there beneath the falling snow, her hands resting in his while the quiet of the evening settled gently around them.

Only then did Suzanne lift her eyes to the cabin.

She had admired it from the sleigh, but standing before it was something altogether different.

Suzanne climbed the porch steps. At the top she stopped, her gaze wandering slowly from the lantern beside the door to the evergreen garland, then to the poinsettias glowing crimson against the snow.

Her fingertips drifted to her lips.

She couldn't seem to find a single word that felt big enough.

Behind her, Eli watched quietly.

He didn't interrupt the moment.

He simply smiled to himself before crossing the porch in two easy strides.

Without warning, he slipped one arm beneath her knees and the other around her back.

She gave a startled laugh as the ground disappeared beneath her.

"Eli!"

"I only get to carry my wife across the threshold once," he said, his eyes dancing.

She laughed harder, instinctively catching hold of his coat as he nudged the front door open with his shoulder.

Warmth rushed out to meet them.

The scent of cedar mingled with woodsmoke, and beneath it lingered something sweet and familiar. Suzanne drew a slow breath, searching for it.

"Dried herbs," she murmured.

"Hmm?"

She smiled.

"Someone hung herbs up to dry."

He looked toward the ceiling and nodded.

"I believe you're right."

He carried her across the threshold with the same quiet confidence he seemed to bring to everything he did before gently setting her on her feet.

For just a moment they stood smiling at one another.

Then Eli leaned down and brushed a kiss across her forehead.

"I'll be right back."

Before she could answer, he disappeared into the snowy night.

Suzanne wandered farther into the cabin, taking it all in. The fire crackled softly in the stone fireplace, filling the single room with a comforting warmth that chased away the last of the winter chill. Firelight flickered across the polished wood floors and the hand-hewn beams overhead, making the little cabin feel as though it had wrapped itself around them.

A bed tucked into the far left corner was covered with a beautiful red Christmas quilt, its deep crimson and cream pattern bright against the warm wood walls. Someone had folded an extra blanket across the foot, and two plump pillows rested against the simple wooden headboard. Beneath the front window, a few poinsettias had been arranged along the sill, their red leaves catching the glow of the lanterns placed around the room. The window looked out onto the small covered porch and the dark woods beyond, where snow still clung to the branches.

A small loveseat sat in front of the fireplace, angled toward the flames, with a thick cream-colored throw draped over one arm. It looked just large enough for two people to sit close together, and Suzanne smiled at the thought that whoever had prepared the cabin had clearly understood the assignment.

On the opposite side of the room stood a small wooden table with two chairs, dressed for the occasion with a simple cream-colored cloth and a sprig of evergreen tucked into a little glass jar at its center. A pair of lanterns provided most of the light beyond the fireplace, their golden glow softening the corners of the room. There was nothing elaborate about the place. The cabin was small and plainly furnished, the sort of place that probably sat empty more often than it was used, but someone had taken care to make it beautiful for them.

And somehow, that made it even more perfect.

Their first night as husband and wife didn't need anything grand.

She drifted toward the front window just as Eli returned, balancing the wicker picnic basket beneath one arm while carrying the overnight bag and a small wrapped package with the other.

Setting everything carefully beside the table, he brushed a few lingering snowflakes from his coat.

A small crease formed between her brows.

"The horses," she said, glancing at him. "Eli...someone needs to take care of them."

His smile came easily.

"The children will be along shortly."

He set the basket on the table before looking back at her.

"Nathan made certain everything was arranged."

Of course he had.

The worry slipped away almost as quickly as it had appeared.

Suzanne laughed softly, shaking her head as she looked back toward the dark lane.

"I should have known."

There was something wonderfully reassuring about Nathan.

If he said everything had been taken care of, it had.

She turned away from the window with a contented sigh.

While Eli stepped back outside to bring in fresh water for the basin, Suzanne untied the basket and began unpacking the wedding supper.

One parcel after another emerged from beneath the neatly folded towels.

Slices of chicken.

Mashed potatoes.

Creamed celery.

She spread a cloth across the table before arranging everything where it belonged, straightening a fork here, centering a plate there almost without thinking. The firelight caught the edge of the crockery, turning the simple dishes the color of warm honey.

She smiled to herself.

After a day filled with tears, laughter, vows, embraces, and more love than she had known what to do with, there was something unexpectedly comforting about setting a table beside her husband.

And perhaps that was the greatest gift of all.

She had nearly finished when her hand brushed against something.

She paused.

A small package rested there, wrapped neatly in brown paper and tied with a bright red ribbon.

Her name was written across the front in Eli's careful, deliberate hand.

Lifting it gently, she turned it over in her hands before looking across the room.

Eli had just finished drying his hands at the basin.

Their eyes met.

She smiled.

"What have you done now?"

Eli crossed the room and came to stand beside her.

He simply nodded toward it, his smile quiet and a little uncertain, as though this part made him far more nervous than walking down the aisle ever had.

"It's for you."

Suzanne slipped one finger beneath the red ribbon and loosened the knot, taking care not to tear the brown paper as she folded it neatly back.

Inside rested a small wooden box.

She lifted it carefully into her hands.

It wasn't fancy.

It wasn't polished to a mirror shine or decorated with carved flowers or intricate scrollwork.

It was simply...beautiful.

The honey-colored oak had been sanded until it felt almost silky beneath her fingertips, every edge smooth, every corner gently rounded by careful hands that had taken their time.

"I was hoping you'd like it."

"I love it."

She lifted the lid.

Along the inside, carved neatly into the wood, were her new initials.

Her fingertips drifted slowly across the letters.

There was nothing elaborate about them.

No decoration.

No flourish.

Just three initials carved deeply enough that they would remain there for years to come.

For the first time since the ceremony, seeing them there made everything feel undeniably real.

She belonged.

Because of the man standing quietly beside her.

Nestled inside the box lay a single folded sheet of paper.

She looked at Eli.

He gave the smallest nod.

Slowly, she unfolded it.

Suzanne,

I have thanked God for bringing you into my life more times than I can count.

You reminded me that joy can return after sorrow.

My prayer is that one day this little box will be too full to close, because every year we've added another memory God has given us together.

With all my heart,

Eli

By the time she reached the end, the words had begun to blur.

She blinked once, then again, but the tears came anyway.

Carefully, she folded the letter along its original creases and laid it back inside the box before closing the lid with both hands resting gently on top.

For a long moment she couldn't speak.

There simply weren't words big enough.

Finally she turned toward him.

Without hesitation, she slipped both arms around his waist and rested her cheek against his chest.

His heartbeat was slow and steady beneath her ear.

So was the gentle rise and fall of his breathing.

Home.

She hadn't expected to find it there.

Eli wrapped his arms around her without saying a word, holding her close as the fire crackled softly behind them.

"It's perfect," she whispered at last.

She leaned back just enough to look up at him, tears shining in her eyes but her smile brighter than ever.

"Absolutely perfect."

Her fingers found his hand.

"Thank you, Eli."

Chapter 5

By the time they finally sat down to supper, snow had begun falling again.

It drifted past the cabin windows in soft white curtains while the fire crackled steadily behind them, wrapping the little room in a warmth that made the rest of the world feel wonderfully far away.

The meal was simple.

They passed the dishes back and forth without ceremony, smiling now and then as they reached for the same thing at the same time. More than once their hands brushed, each accidental touch drawing another quiet smile before they returned to their plates.

For a while neither of them said very much.

Not because there was nothing to say.

Quite the opposite.

After months of porch conversations, shared hopes, and careful dreams about a future they weren't entirely sure would ever become reality, they suddenly found themselves sitting across from one another as husband and wife.

The reality of it seemed almost too precious to disturb.

Suzanne finally looked up from her plate.

"We've spent months talking," she said softly, "and now neither of us knows what to say."

Eli looked up so quickly she wondered if he'd been thinking exactly the same thing.

"I was hoping you hadn't noticed."

She laughed.

"Oh, I noticed."

He laid his fork beside his plate and let out the smallest breath.

"I've been trying to think of something clever for the last five minutes."

"And?"

He smiled sheepishly.

"I've got nothing."

The confession dissolved the last of the awkwardness between them.

The silence had never really been uncomfortable.

It had simply been two hearts adjusting to the miracle they had spent so long praying for.

Conversation found them again, one story led easily to another, just as it always had.

After they cleared the table together, they carried their mugs to the fireplace and settled onto the loveseat with one of the sleigh blankets draped across both their laps.

Outside, the snowfall had grown heavier, softening the woods beyond the windows until the trees seemed to melt into the night.

Inside, the fire painted everything in warm shades of gold.

They talked about tomorrow.

About where Suzanne's books might fit best.

About whether the reading chair should sit beside the front window or nearer the fireplace.

About hanging a few shelves and other household matters.

After a while, Eli reached for her hands.

He gathered both of them into his own, his thumbs brushing gently across her knuckles before he looked up to meet her eyes.

"May I pray for us?"

Suzanne nodded.

She couldn't have spoken if she'd tried.

Together they bowed their heads.

Eli's voice was quiet, almost conversational, the way it always was when he prayed. He wasn't trying to impress anyone or find beautiful words. He was simply talking to the Father he had trusted all his life.

He didn't thank God for the wedding.

Or the cabin.

Or even for the clear skies that had carried them safely through the ceremony and the long sleigh ride beneath the pines.

He thanked Him for Suzanne.

For second chances.

For the mercy of bringing together two people who had each learned the shape of loneliness and gently teaching them its opposite.

He thanked God for taking empty rooms and filling them with laughter again.

For quiet suppers that no longer had to be eaten alone.

For healing the ache that lingered when a hand reached across the bed and found only emptiness.

Then his voice grew even softer.

"And Father..."

He paused for just a moment.

"Thank You for giving me someone to love again."

Suzanne's eyes filled before she realized she was crying.

She didn't brush the tears away.

She simply listened.

"And help me love her well."

His fingers closed ever so slightly around hers.

"Not only on days like today..."

"...but in all the ordinary days You'll give us."

When he finally whispered, "Amen," the room settled into a gentle silence.

Neither of them moved.

The fire had burned low, the dancing flames giving way to glowing orange coals that cast long, steady shadows across the log walls. Somewhere outside, snow whispered against the windows, the only sound in a world that suddenly felt as though it had stopped turning.

Suzanne sat quietly, letting his prayer settle into the deepest places of her heart.

No one had ever prayed for her like that.

Not for what she could do.

Not for who she had once been.

Simply...

...for her.

She lifted her eyes to him.

The firelight danced across his face, softening every familiar line she had already come to love.

Without a word, she leaned forward and kissed him gently.

When she drew back, her forehead rested against his.

"Amen," she whispered.

Chapter 6

Christmas Morning

Suzanne woke before dawn, suspended in that quiet place between sleeping and waking where the heart is awake before the mind has quite caught up.

She lay still beneath the quilt and listened.

The fire had burned low during the night, but it hadn't gone out. Every so often a log settled with a soft crack, followed by the gentle sigh of glowing embers shifting in the hearth. The little cabin was wrapped in darkness, yet it felt warm in every sense of the word.

She turned her head.

Eli was asleep beside her, one arm resting loosely across the quilt, his breathing slow and even.

A smile found her lips before she even knew why.

For one peaceful moment she simply looked at him.

Then she remembered.

They were married.

It was Christmas morning.

Her husband.

The thought settled over her heart with the same quiet warmth as the fire across the room.

"Merry Christmas," she whispered.

Her voice was scarcely louder than a breath.

He looked at her with the calm, contented expression of a man who had been awake just long enough to enjoy the moment.

She laughed softly.

"You weren't asleep."

"Not entirely."

His smile deepened.

He reached over and gently brushed a loose strand of hair from her eyes.

His hand found hers beneath the quilt, their fingers fitting together as naturally as they always had.

"I was hoping," he said quietly, "you'd be the first thing I saw this Christmas morning."

She snuggled into him and let out a contented sigh.

Eli coaxed the fire back to life while Suzanne wrapped one of Rachel's quilts around her shoulders, drawing it close like a shawl. The fabric had been washed so many times that it no longer felt like cloth so much as comfort itself, every stitch softened by years of use and generations of hands that had mended, folded, and loved it.

The familiar aroma of fresh coffee drifted through the cabin.

A moment later came the gentler fragrance of the tea Eli always made for her.

Without needing to ask, he handed her the steaming mug before lifting his own.

"Ready?"

She nodded.

Together they stepped out onto the porch.

The cold greeted them at once, crisp enough to sting her cheeks and fill her lungs with air so clean it seemed to wash away every lingering thought.

Snow covered everything.

The yard.

The split-rail fence.

The porch steps.

Even the long bare branches of the old oak standing watch at the edge of the property wore a thick white blanket.

And still it fell.

Not hurriedly.

Not driven by wind.

Just one quiet flake after another, drifting lazily toward the earth as though time itself had decided to slow down for Christmas morning.

Suzanne wrapped both hands around her mug, grateful for its warmth as she stood beside Eli without speaking.

There was nothing that needed saying.

The silence wasn't empty.

It was full.

Full of peace.

Full of gratitude.

Full of the quiet certainty that somehow, after all the years she had spent wondering if this kind of life belonged only to other people...

She was finally living it.

"This feels like a dream," she said softly.

For a long moment Eli simply watched the snow.

Then his fingers found hers.

Even through the cold, his hand was warm.

"The best kind," he said.

Suzanne leaned gently against his shoulder, and together they stood watching the snow a little longer.

Then, faintly in the distance, came the sound of sleigh bells.

Suzanne lifted her head.

The jingling drifted across the snowy fields, growing a little clearer with every passing moment until it was joined by the steady rhythm of horses' hooves and the familiar creak of wooden runners gliding over packed snow.

A smile spread across her face.

"They're coming."

Eli chuckled.

A moment later two sleighs appeared between the trees.

Nathan guided the first with the same quiet confidence he seemed to bring to everything, Tyler sitting beside him with his coat collar turned high against the morning cold. Caleb and the older boys rode behind them, already grinning before the sleigh had even come to a stop.

The second sleigh looked as though it might be carrying nothing but winter coats.

Scarves.

Knitted hats.

Mittens.

Then one small face peeked out from the middle of the bundle, followed by another, and suddenly laughter burst across the snowy morning.

The instant the sleighs stopped, children tumbled into the snow in every direction, their excited voices chasing away the quiet that had settled over the cabin only moments before.

Adults climbed down more slowly, calling greetings back and forth while everyone seemed to speak at once.

Suzanne laughed.

The silence hadn't disappeared.

It had simply changed into another kind of joy.

Then, from somewhere in the middle of the cheerful commotion, a familiar voice called above the rest.

"Breakfast's getting cold!"

Chapter 7

The moment they stepped inside, warmth washed over them.

Not just the warmth of the fire.

The warmth of people.

Chaos greeted them from every direction—wonderful, noisy, unapologetic chaos that seemed to fill every corner of the farmhouse with life.

Someone near the front door was collecting coats, the pile in their arms already so high they could scarcely see over it. Children darted fearlessly between skirts and suspenders, laughing as they chased one another through a maze of grown-up legs without colliding with a single person. Three conversations competed happily with one another while laughter rose from somewhere in the middle, only to be answered from the kitchen a heartbeat later.

The smells were enough to make Suzanne smile before she even reached the dining room.

Warm cinnamon rolls.

Bacon sizzling somewhere just out of sight.

Sausage.

Fresh bread.

Eggs.

And coffee.

The rich aroma seemed to drift through every room of the house, mingling with the scent of evergreen boughs and woodsmoke until the entire place smelled like Christmas itself.

Daisy stood in the middle of it all, directing traffic with the calm confidence of someone who had been orchestrating Christmas mornings for longer than anyone could remember.

Rachel stood near the fireplace with Grace, gently patting the baby's back while whispering something that made the little girl sigh contentedly.

Danny hovered near the kitchen doorway, reaching toward a basket of fresh bread with an expression that suggested he was being tremendously helpful.

Without even turning around, Daisy swatted his hand away.

Her husband looked genuinely surprised.

Suzanne couldn't help laughing.

Apparently some things never changed.

She stopped just inside the doorway.

The morning simply continued around them.

Strangely...

Suzanne loved that.

She wasn't standing outside the family looking in.

She was standing quietly inside it, watching it breathe.

She found herself taking in everything at once—not just the decorations or the Christmas traditions, but the easy rhythm of people who loved one another enough to move through the same crowded room without ceremony or self-consciousness. No one seemed to wonder whether they belonged there.

They simply did.

And standing beside Eli, listening to laughter echo through the old farmhouse, Suzanne realized no one here questioned whether she belonged either.

Suzanne became aware of Kate's presence before she actually looked over. A familiar hand slipped quietly through the crook of her arm, warm and reassuring, and when she turned she found her daughter standing beside her with the same peaceful expression she had worn all morning.

Kate wasn't watching Suzanne.

She was watching the room.

She didn't ask whether everything was all right or try to fill the silence with conversation. She simply stood beside her, content to let the moment unfold exactly as it was, and somehow that simple gesture touched Suzanne more deeply than any words could have.

Together they watched the morning swirl around them.

Children darted between chairs while Daisy called instructions from the kitchen without ever seeming to lose track of who needed what. Rachel gently bounced Grace against her shoulder as she laughed at something Nathan had said, and someone across the room had apparently decided breakfast couldn't possibly begin without another basket of cinnamon rolls.

Nothing about it felt rehearsed.

No one seemed concerned with appearances or careful conversation.

Suzanne realized she wasn't admiring their Christmas traditions nearly as much as she was admiring the ease of them.

This was what family looked like when everyone knew they belonged.

She felt Kate give her arm the gentlest squeeze, almost as though she understood exactly where her mother's thoughts had wandered, and Suzanne covered her daughter's hand with her own for just a moment before lifting her eyes across the room.

She found Eli almost immediately.

Or perhaps he had already found her.

Even through the constant movement of children and conversation, she saw the instant his attention shifted. Whatever someone had been saying to him faded as his eyes settled on hers, and after offering a quiet apology to those around him, he made his way toward her with that same confidence that always made her feel as though there was nowhere else in the world he would rather be.

When he reached them, Kate smiled to herself.

"I think my job here is finished."

She gave her mother's arm one last affectionate squeeze before slipping back into the cheerful confusion of the family, disappearing almost effortlessly among cousins, grandchildren, and sisters.

Eli stepped into the place she'd left beside Suzanne.

"Everything all right?" he asked quietly.

Suzanne nodded, though it took her a moment to find the words.

"I've never had this."

He followed her gaze around the room, taking in the children weaving beneath the table, Daisy directing breakfast with loving efficiency, Rachel laughing as Grace reached for someone's spectacles, and Danny pretending he hadn't just stolen a piece of bacon.

"My family?" he asked.

Suzanne shook her head.

"No."

Her hand lifted almost unconsciously, as though she wished she could somehow gather the whole room into a single gesture.

"This."

The laughter.

The clutter.

People talking over one another because they knew they would all be heard eventually.

Children who belonged to everyone.

The quiet confidence that no one had to earn a place at the table because it had already been waiting for them.

When she finally looked back at Eli, she realized he hadn't been watching any of those things.

He had been watching her.
A slow smile spread across his face.
"It's our family."

The words settled gently into her heart, and with them came a peace she hadn't known she was still searching for.

Without thinking, she leaned into him, listening to the familiar sounds of laughter, dishes, and happy conversation all around them.

For years she had searched for home as though it were a place waiting somewhere beyond the next decision or the next season of life.

Standing there in the middle of that wonderfully ordinary Christmas morning, she finally understood.

Home had never been waiting in a house.

It had been waiting in the people God had been preparing all along.

Chapter 8

Getting everyone settled for breakfast turned out to be an event in itself.

The two long tables had been pushed together until there wasn't an inch left between them, yet they still weren't quite long enough to hold everyone. No one seemed the least bit concerned.

Children squeezed shoulder to shoulder along wooden benches, balancing their plates on their laps while elbows bumped and little giggles broke out every few minutes. One of the older boys claimed the third step of the staircase as though it were the best seat in the house, happily eating his breakfast while carrying on a conversation with the people at the end of the table. Someone unearthed an extra stool from somewhere, another person leaned comfortably against the wall with a plate in one hand and a warm roll in the other, and before long Suzanne realized there wasn't a single proper seat left in the room.

Yet somehow...

Everyone had a place.

There wasn't a perfect arrangement to be found anywhere in the farmhouse, but there was room enough for everyone because making room seemed to come as naturally to this family as breathing.

Eventually the conversations softened just enough for Nathan to rise.

The room didn't become perfectly quiet.

The baby cooed, someone hurriedly whispered, "Shh," to a child who hadn't quite noticed everyone else had stopped talking, and a chair scraped gently across the floor before stillness finally settled over the room.

Nathan bowed his head.

His prayer was much like the man himself—uncomplicated, sincere, and offered without the slightest desire to sound impressive. He thanked God for the food before them, for Christmas morning, for safe travels, and for the blessing of sharing another year together around the same table.

When he finished with a quiet "Amen," every child in the room echoed it back.

"Amen!"

The word burst from a dozen little voices with enough enthusiasm to shake the rafters.

For one glorious second there was complete silence.

Then laughter rolled around the table.

Even Daisy fought it.

She pressed her lips together and looked determinedly toward the ceiling as though she might somehow regain her composure, but the corners of her mouth betrayed her first. A heartbeat later she was laughing as hard as everyone else.

Suzanne looked around the room, her own smile lingering long after the laughter had faded.

When breakfast was finally over and the last of the plates had been carried away, an entirely different kind of excitement began to ripple through the room.

The children knew what came next.

Trying to keep them seated while the gifts were gathered required far more patience than any sermon Suzanne had ever witnessed. Little feet swung beneath benches, whispered guesses flew from one child to another, and more than one eager face stretched hopefully toward the stack of neatly wrapped packages waiting nearby.

The gifts themselves were beautifully simple.

Brown paper.

Twine.

Bits of ribbon.

A few wrapped in carefully folded cloth instead of paper altogether.

Nothing about them spoke of expense.

Everything about them spoke of love.

Suzanne watched as one child carefully unwrapped a carved wooden horse, tracing the smooth curves with tiny fingertips before looking up with a smile so bright it needed no words. Painted wooden blocks, hand-knit mittens in favorite colors, little treasures chosen with such care that each child seemed to recognize, almost instinctively, that this gift had been meant for them and no one else.

It wasn't the presents that moved Suzanne.

It was the thought behind them.

Every package quietly said the same thing.

I know you.

I thought about you.

You are loved.

And somehow she suspected those were the greatest gifts anyone could receive.

Suzanne watched one of her new granddaughters gather a handmade doll into her arms as though she had been given the greatest treasure in the world. The little girl hugged it tightly against her chest, her eyes drifting closed for the briefest moment before she opened them again to admire every tiny stitch.

Suzanne smiled.

"They're happier with one handmade doll," she said quietly to Eli, "than children I've known who got an entire room full of presents."

Eli watched the little girl for a moment before answering.

"They know they're loved."

There wasn't a trace of judgment in his voice.

Only simple certainty.

Suzanne found herself looking around the room again.

None of the children were comparing gifts or asking what someone else had received. They wandered happily from one person to the next, eager to show off a carved horse, a pair of mittens, a doll, or a handful of painted blocks, each one delighted with what had been chosen especially for them. Every smile seemed to be answered by another, every excitement shared as though one child's joy somehow belonged to the whole family.

Before Suzanne could linger on the thought, Rachel disappeared into another room and returned carrying two small packages Suzanne hadn't noticed before.

"I almost forgot these."

Emma and Libby looked at one another before hurrying over, accepting the gifts with wide-eyed curiosity while the room seemed to grow just a little quieter around them. Adults smiled over steaming cups of coffee, conversations paused for a moment, and even the younger children seemed content to watch.

The paper came away quickly.

A tiny Amish dress slipped into Emma's lap.

A matching one landed in Libby's.

Prayer caps followed, tumbling after them in soft folds of white.

For one heartbeat the girls simply stared.

Then delighted squeals filled the room.

Before anyone could say a word, they were racing toward the staircase, dresses clutched against their chests as the older girls gathered them in with knowing smiles and hurried them upstairs, already discussing hems, aprons, and ribbons with the confidence of girls who understood that a new dress simply had to be tried on immediately.

Laughter followed them all the way to the second floor.

Suzanne looked over at Rachel, unable to hide her surprise.

"You bought those?"

Rachel smiled and gave the smallest shrug.

"They belonged to my Abigail."

She glanced toward the staircase where excited voices and muffled laughter drifted down from above.

"She has outgrown them."

Before Suzanne could answer, footsteps thundered across the second floor.

A heartbeat later Emma and Libby appeared at the top of the stairs.

The room grew quiet all over again.

The little girls paused for the briefest moment, hands clasped together, each wearing a tiny Amish dress with a crisp white apron and matching prayer cap perched proudly on her head. They looked at one another, dissolved into giggles, and carefully made their way down the stairs while everyone watched.

Emma reached the bottom first and did a slow little twirl, making the skirt fan gently around her knees.

"Look!" she announced.

Libby wasn't about to be outdone.

She spun too, one hand flying instinctively to her prayer cap to keep it from slipping while laughter rippled through the room.

"They look just like little Amish girls," Daisy said, smiling.

"They are beautiful," Alexa agreed.

The older girls beamed with unmistakable satisfaction, pleased with the results of their work upstairs.

Suzanne felt something tighten gently in her chest as she watched Libby smooth the front of her apron with both hands before looking up at her.

"Do I look pretty?"

She crossed the room, knelt in front of Libby, and gently straightened the edge of her little prayer cap.

"You look absolutely beautiful."

Libby threw her arms around Suzanne's neck without another word.

Over Libby's shoulder, Suzanne caught Rachel's eye.

Rachel smiled softly.

In that moment, the dresses were no longer hand-me-downs.

They had become part of another little girl's Christmas memory.

Chapter 9

The campaign to get everyone outside began almost as soon as the last of the presents had been admired.

The children seemed to reach the same conclusion at exactly the same moment, though no one appeared to have organized them. One by one they gathered their sleds, tugged on mittens that had somehow already gone missing once that morning, and began making increasingly persuasive arguments that Christmas simply could not continue until everyone had gone sledding.

Suzanne remained unconvinced.

She stood at the top of the hill with her arms folded securely across her chest, looking every bit as determined as the children surrounding her.

"I don't sled," she announced to anyone willing to listen. "I've never sledded, and I'm certainly not starting today."

The declaration was met with expressions of complete disbelief.

Children ranging from toddlers to nearly-grown teenagers looked at her as though she had just confessed she'd never tasted pie.

One sled was pulled in front of her.

Another child explained why it was perfectly safe.

Someone promised Eli would ride with her.

Several pairs of hopeful eyes joined the discussion, each apparently convinced that no reasonable adult could possibly refuse such overwhelming enthusiasm.

Suzanne held her ground.

For nearly five minutes.

Then someone took her hand.

Someone else placed a sled behind her.

Before she had entirely figured out how the negotiations had shifted so dramatically in the children's favor, she found herself sitting at the top of the hill with half a dozen encouraging voices reminding her to lean back and hold on.

"Oh, this is a terrible idea," she muttered.

A second later the sled lurched forward.

Cold air rushed past her face as the hill disappeared beneath her, laughter erupting around her almost before she realized the sound belonged to her.

By the time she reached the bottom, she was breathless, pink-cheeked, and laughing so hard she could scarcely stand.

Eli reached down to help her to her feet.

"Well?" he asked, unable to hide his smile.

She brushed snow from her face with as much dignity as she could manage.

"I think..." she said, trying unsuccessfully to stop laughing, "...we're going again."

The children erupted into cheers.

The afternoon unfolded one joyful run after another.

Eli carried little Grace down the hill tucked safely against him, bundled so completely beneath her tiny coat and blankets that only her enormous blue eyes peeked out from the layers. She never cried once, only blinked in wide-eyed wonder as the world rushed past before breaking into delighted little squeals that made everyone nearby laugh.

Nathan, on the other hand, approached sledding with considerably more confidence than wisdom.

After announcing that he had discovered the fastest sled on the property, he launched himself down the hill with enough speed to concern every adult watching.

For several glorious seconds it appeared his confidence might actually be justified.

Then the sled struck a hidden bump.

Nathan disappeared into an explosion of powdery snow spectacular enough to send children scrambling closer for a better look.

Silence settled over the hill.

One heartbeat.

Two.

Then a single gloved hand emerged from the drift and waved lazily in the air.

"I'm okay!"

The children dissolved into helpless laughter.

Even Nathan couldn't keep a straight face as he climbed out.

By the time the winter sun began slipping behind the trees, cheeks were rosy, mittens were damp, and every child declared they could happily sled for another three hours.

The adults quietly decided otherwise.

They drifted back toward the farmhouse in little groups, brushing snow from coats, carrying sleepy children on shoulders and hips, the laughter growing softer with every step toward the warm light spilling from the windows.

Inside, the house settled into an altogether different kind of happiness.

Children who had been incapable of standing still only an hour before now slept wherever exhaustion had finally claimed them—curled beneath quilts on the sofa, stretched across parents' laps, or tucked together near the fireplace with boots kicked off and coats serving as blankets.

From the kitchen came the familiar sounds of dishes being washed, warm water running into the sink, and stacks of plates finding their places in the cupboards once again.

Daisy hummed a Christmas hymn while she worked.

Just softly enough that it seemed to belong with the crackle of the fire and the quiet breathing of sleeping children.

Suzanne leaned back in her chair and let the peaceful sounds settle around her.

The house had been full of laughter all day.

Now it was full of contentment.

She wasn't sure which she loved more.

Suzanne wandered to the doorway between the kitchen and the sitting room and simply stood there for a while.

She let her eyes move slowly from one corner of the room to the next, not searching for anything in particular, only taking it all in while it was still happening.

Nathan had somehow managed to fall asleep in the armchair with a quilt draped crookedly across his shoulders and an empty coffee cup still resting loosely in one hand, as though he'd only intended to close his eyes for a minute.

Outside, the last of the daylight was slowly fading beyond the frosted windows, leaving the snow-covered fields wrapped in the soft blue-gray light that belonged only to winter evenings.

She hadn't realized until that moment how deeply she wanted to remember every ordinary detail.

Without taking her eyes from the room, she reached for Eli's hand.

She found it immediately.

His fingers slipped around hers with the easy familiarity of a man who seemed always to know when she was reaching for him.

"I didn't think Christmas could ever be this happy," she whispered.

For a long moment he didn't answer.

She felt him gently tighten his hand around hers before he turned toward her, brushed a strand of hair away from her face, and pressed a slow, lingering kiss against her forehead.

She leaned against him, letting out a long, slow breath, and it felt as though it carried away the last small pieces of a life she no longer needed to carry.

Together they stood in the doorway without another word.

Outside, the snow continued to fall with quiet patience, covering fields, fences, and sled tracks beneath another layer of white.

Inside, the fire glowed softly, the hymn drifted through the kitchen once more, and the house settled gently around the people who filled it.

For just a little while longer, Suzanne stood perfectly still, grateful that some of life's holiest moments looked almost ordinary.

And she knew she would remember this Christmas for the rest of her life.

Chapter 10

By early evening, the farmhouse had found its noise again.

For a few seconds, the noise of Christmas disappeared.

Several of the children were awake again, their laughter carrying faintly through the walls along with the clatter of dishes and the rise and fall of more than a dozen voices crowded into too small a kitchen. But outside, the sounds softened beneath the steady fall of snow.

Rachel slipped out onto the porch and eased the back door shut behind her. She drew the cold air deep into her lungs.

It helped.

A little.

She rested both hands against the porch railing and stared across the white fields beyond the house. Snow had collected along the fence posts and bare branches, turning everything quiet and clean.

Christmas had been good.

Better than good.

Her father was happy.

That alone had made the crowded house, the cooking, the children running beneath everyone's feet, and the endless dishes worth every bit of exhaustion. Rachel had watched Dat with Suzanne all day, catching the little things she might once have missed. The way his hand rested against Suzanne's back when he moved behind her in the kitchen. The way Suzanne looked toward him whenever she laughed.

Rachel had not seen her father this happy in years.

There had been a time when she wondered whether she ever would again. He had gone on living after Mamm died because that was what he did. He worked. He prayed. He took care of the people around him. But there had always been something missing from him.

Suzanne had not replaced what he lost.

She had given him something new.

Rachel loved her for that.

Her hand moved instinctively to her stomach.

Barely anything had changed yet. No one looking at her would know. She and Nathan had agreed to wait before telling the family, though keeping the secret through Christmas had proven more difficult than Rachel expected.

A wave of weariness moved through her.

She tightened her fingers around the railing.

It was only pregnancy.

She knew pregnancy.

She had done this four times before.

There was comfort in reminding herself of that. She was not a frightened young mother experiencing every unfamiliar sensation for the first time. She knew what exhaustion felt like. She knew that one pregnancy could feel entirely different from another.

Still, lately she seemed to be reminding herself of those things more often than she should need to.

Behind her, the door opened.

Rachel quickly lowered her hand from her stomach.

Suzanne stepped outside and pulled the door closed again, rubbing her hands along her arms as the cold reached her.

"You disappeared."

"I needed some air."

Suzanne came to stand beside her. "I understand that. I love all of them, but there are approximately fourteen conversations happening in that kitchen."

Rachel laughed softly. "Only fourteen?"

"At least two of the children are having separate conversations with themselves, so possibly sixteen."

The laugh came more easily this time.

For a while, neither woman spoke.

Snow drifted down over the yard in thick, lazy flakes. Rachel could feel Suzanne beside her without needing to fill the silence between them. Rachel had known her for such a short time, but somehow Suzanne felt like a mother to her.

The realization still surprised her sometimes.

It was not because Suzanne reminded her of Mamm. She didn't. But Suzanne had somehow stepped into the empty places around Rachel without trying to claim them. She listened. She noticed. She cared without making Rachel feel as though she owed something in return.

Rachel had stopped wondering when it happened.

She was simply grateful that it had.

Then Suzanne spoke.

"So."

Something in her voice made Rachel turn.

Suzanne's mouth twitched.

"When's the baby due?"

Rachel stared at her.

"What?"

"The baby."

For one stunned second, Rachel could do nothing but look at her.

Then heat rushed into her face.

"How did you know?"

Suzanne pressed her lips together as though trying not to look entirely too pleased with herself. "I've been watching you all day."

Rachel's hand moved toward her stomach before she caught herself.

Suzanne's grin widened.

"Your hand keeps finding its way to your stomach. You disappeared for almost an hour after lunch, which I assume means you went upstairs to lie down. And every time someone handed you anything heavier than a napkin, Nathan was already reaching for it."

Rachel let out a breath that became a helpless laugh. "I didn't even notice he was doing that."

She should have. Nathan had been hovering for weeks, quietly taking things from her hands and watching her whenever he thought she wasn't looking. She had teased him about it more than once, but beneath the teasing was gratitude—and something else she did not want to examine too closely.

Because Nathan worried when Rachel worried.

And she had not yet decided whether she had anything worth worrying about.

Suzanne's expression softened. "So when?"

The secret had been sitting inside Rachel for weeks.

She had imagined this moment so many times. Telling someone. Watching their face brighten. Finally letting the happiness exist somewhere outside the quiet space between her and Nathan.

Suddenly she couldn't hold it another second.

"August."

Suzanne's whole face brightened.

"Rachel."

The joy in her voice hit Rachel harder than she expected.

Before Rachel knew what she was doing, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around her.

Suzanne hugged her back immediately.

"I've been absolutely dying to tell somebody," Rachel whispered.

The admission loosened something in her. She had carried the news quietly for weeks, protecting it, savoring it, and at the same time feeling the weight of keeping something so important contained between herself and Nathan. Saying it aloud made the baby feel more real somehow, no longer only a secret tucked beneath her heart.

"Does your father know?"

"Not yet."

"We wanted to wait until after Christmas. We didn't want to steal the spotlight from you and Dat."

For a few precious seconds, there was nothing beneath the happiness. Rachel let herself think only about the baby, about another child at their table and another little life folded into the family. She wanted to stay inside that joy without examining anything else too closely.

"A summer baby," Suzanne said.

Rachel nodded. "If everything goes well."

The words slipped out before she could stop them, and the moment they did, something inside her tightened. She had not meant to say it that way. There was nothing unusual about the words themselves, but she knew they had not come from nowhere.

Suzanne's smile remained, but something in her expression changed. "It will."

Rachel looked toward the snow. She wanted to believe that. She did believe it. Mostly.

That small hesitation bothered her more than she wanted to admit. She had no reason to expect anything except another healthy pregnancy. Nothing had happened. No one had told her anything was wrong. Yet some quiet uneasiness kept slipping beneath the happiness before she could shut it out.

The back door suddenly swung open, spilling warmth and voices onto the porch.

"Mamm!"

Levi stood in the doorway with his hair sticking up in the back and one sock missing.

Rachel turned quickly, grateful for the interruption. "What happened to your sock?"

He looked down as though the loss had only just occurred to him. "I don't know."

Suzanne covered a laugh.

"Abigail says we can have pie now."

"Abigail is not in charge of when you have pie."

"Dat said we could."

"Then why are you asking me?"

Levi considered this, apparently decided he had no answer, and disappeared back inside.

Suzanne laughed openly now, and Rachel shook her head. "There are days I wonder how he survives."

The ordinary silliness of him helped. Children lost socks. They argued over pie. They made noise and messes and interrupted conversations at exactly the wrong moment. This was normal life, and Rachel wanted badly to let that normalcy settle her.

Suzanne squeezed her hand. "I won't say anything."

Rachel looked at her. "Thank you."

"Whenever you're ready."

Rachel nodded and followed Suzanne back inside.

The End