

A CHRISTMAS HOMECOMING

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A Christmas Homecoming

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Chapter One

Sonia Pettit pressed her hand against her chest in a vain attempt to ease the gnawing, endless ache in her heart. In a few short days, she'd mark the seventh Christmas since her daughter's frightful disappearance. A sudden, unannounced, and, worst of all, voluntary disappearance with no explanation, no sense, and no forwarding address. A disappearance that had incinerated Sonia's soul and left it a cold heap of ashes.

Outside the living room window, autumn had long since passed, leaving behind bare branches, scrawny bushes, and gray-white skies. A soft snow fell, dusting the yellowed lawn of the 1920s Victorian home she and Rick had purchased as newlyweds twenty-nine years earlier. The home in which they'd raised their children.

But those early happy times had turned into a nightmare.

She leaned her forehead against the windowpane, her eyes searching far into the distance. More times than she could count, she'd riveted her gaze on the sidewalk leading up to the house, hoping against hope that her daughter would suddenly appear. But each time, Jody's imaginary figure would evaporate into nothingness.

Sonia blinked back the stinging tears. Truth be told, some days worry clawed at her, tearing her heart to shreds. But there were other days, just as wrenching, when rage gripped her to the point she never wanted to see her daughter again. Like a scorching iron, raw pain seared the edges of her memory, leaving only blame to vent the hurt.

After all she'd done for her child. To have Jody leave without warning, without saying good-bye, without so much as an "I'll be in touch, Mom." Nothing. Just cold, heartless rejection fueled by arrogance and ingratitude that bordered on the cruel. A vicious slap in the face to a mother who'd given her life for her children.

Sonia turned at the hissing sound coming from the kitchen. She rushed to the stove where her homemade chicken soup had boiled over. She reached the pot just in time to remove a rattling lid from its precarious perch. A small puddle of soup covered the gas burner.

She turned off the gas and moved the bubbling mixture to a back burner. Then she took the dishcloth hanging on the faucet and carefully wiped up the mess just as Ben walked into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Ben. I'm making your favorite homemade chicken soup for lunch later."

"Morning, Mom." Ben scratched his disheveled head in a valiant attempt to jerk himself to wakefulness.

"Got any coffee?"

Sonia pushed down her anger and forced a smile at her lanky twenty-two-year-old son. The secondborn of her womb. The son with the tender heart gone awry. "Just made a fresh pot. I'll pour you some."

"Thanks." He yawned. "I'm not awake enough to pour it myself."

She took a large blue mug from the cupboard and held it in her left hand while she poured coffee into it with her right. She handed the mug of steaming brew to Ben. In a few months, he'd be graduating from college and moving right into a job with a local accounting firm. His father would have been proud of at least one of their two children.

Sonia squelched the painful memories. Christmas was coming, and she needed to put on a smile for Ben, if not for herself. "So how's my favorite son this morning?"

Ben sat down at the kitchen table and stretched out his long legs. "Come on, Mom. You know I'm your only son. So why call me your favorite?"

She sat down in the chair next to him. "Because you are. You don't have to be my only son to be my favorite one."

He grinned. "But what if you had had another son, would I still be your favorite?"

"Of course, you would. It has nothing to do with numbers. No matter how many children I had, each one would be my favorite—you and Jody hold an equal place in my heart."

His eyes narrowed. "How can you say that after what she did to our family?"

Sonia shifted in her chair, her thumb outlining the handle on her coffee mug. "Yes." Her breath caught on a snag of hesitation. "Yes, Ben." She looked him in the eye. "I can still say that."

He slammed his coffee mug on the table, splattering the hot liquid all over the green vinyl tablecloth.

"She ups and leaves without telling anyone where she's going. Just a stupid note that says, 'I've gone. Don't come looking for me. I need my space.' Her space? Sounds more like her own selfish way to me." He raked his fingers through his hair. "Seven years! How many private investigators and how much money have you spent on finding her?" He stood. "You should have listened to Dad. Let her go. Don't try to find her. He never forgave her, you know."

"What makes you think Dad didn't forgive her?"

"How could he? Look at the hole she left in his heart—a hole that devoured him and sent him to an early grave." He looked beyond her, peering out the window. "A hole that would swallow me up if I let it." He shook his head. "But I won't. My anger against her is all I have to keep me from falling in."

"Withholding forgiveness is never the answer, Ben."

He towered over her, fire in his eyes. "Who are you to talk? You haven't forgiven her either. You just pretend you have."

Sonia lowered her voice, tamping down the anger threatening to spew forth. "Forgiveness is a decision, not a feeling."

Ben's glare cut deep. "Spiritual platitudes. That's all you're handing me. I'll never forgive her for what she's done."

The sword of truth pierced Sonia's heart as she watched Ben storm out of the room. If she were honest with herself, he was right. She hadn't truly forgiven Jody either. As much as she loved her daughter, Sonia wanted Jody to suffer as much as she herself had suffered. As much as Rick and Ben had suffered. She wanted Jody to pay for all the pain she'd caused.

By walking out on her family, Jody had left a wake of anger, confusion, and shame that had rocked their world, leaving them bruised, shaken, and shattered. Worst of all, Rick had taken his daughter's disappearance so hard that Sonia was sure it had caused his death. How could she ever forgive Jody for that?

She rose and turned her attention back to the soup pot. She lifted it from the back burner, replaced it on the front one, and then turned the gas to low heat. Chicken soup made a good lunch on a cold day.

But on this cold day, Sonia no longer had an appetite.

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