

Christmas in Chestnut Crossing



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Everything Beautiful in Its Time

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“He has made everything beautiful in its time.
He has also set eternity in the human heart;
yet no one can fathom what God has
done from beginning to end.”

—Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV)



CHAPTER ONE

Deborah Morris's seven decades on God's earth had taught her many lessons, but never one so certain as this: everything can be improved with a cup of peppermint hot cocoa.

Deborah walked past the gazebo in downtown Chestnut Crossing, Wisconsin, and waved to a couple of the men from town who strung lights along the gazebo's perimeter. She inhaled deep, the cold tingling her nose, the anticipation of the season teasing her senses.

With the loss of her beloved husband last January, much of the year had been akin to swimming upward to catch a single breath. But with the news that all her children and grandchildren would be in Chestnut Crossing for Christmas, a fresh infusion of energy and hope surged through Deborah's bones.

She was not done living. There was still so much joy to be had, especially this time of year. Especially with her precious family. And especially with her favorite holiday tradition—the Holly Jolly Market—upon them.

Deborah pushed open the door of Cocoa Café and loosened her scarf as the welcoming scents of hazelnut and caramel wafted

over her. Behind the bakery glass lay neat rows of muffins, cinnamon breads, scones, and Christmas cookies, courtesy of Sugarplum Bakery.

“Good morning, Deborah!” Clara Jordan, owner of the café, called out from behind the counter. The stout, redheaded woman wore a chipper attitude as well as she made a phenomenal cup of hot chocolate. “Can I get you your usual?”

“Yes, one peppermint hot chocolate. And maybe a slice of that cinnamon bread while we’re at it.”

“Oh, it’s so good. You’ll love it!”

Deborah scrunched up her nose. “Calories don’t count during Christmas, right?”

“Girl, you know that’s the rule.” Clara giggled as she tapped the screen in front of her. “Will that be all?”

“Unless you’re willing to give up the secret for how you make the thickest, richest cocoa this side of Lake Michigan, I think I’m all set.”

Clara wagged her finger. “Now, you *know* I love you like a mother, Deborah, but not even you can wrangle that one out of me.”

Deborah laughed. “I know, I know. I also wanted to ask if I should mark you for a booth at the Holly Jolly Market?”

“Absolutely. It’s the highlight of my year.”

“Mine too. And the good Lord knows I could use a little extra joy this Christmas.”

The corners of Clara's mouth turned down. "I miss seeing Ben in here. How are you holding up?" Clara reached for Deborah's hand and squeezed.

To Deborah's horror, a lump of emotion started up her throat. She sniffed it away and slipped her hand from Clara's. "I'm okay. Forgive me for bringing it up. There's so much to celebrate. All three kids and all five of the grandchildren will be in Chestnut Crossing this Christmas. I'm so grateful."

Clara bit her lip. "You know if you ever need a listening ear..." Her words trailed off at the sight of Deborah waving a dismissive hand through the air. Clara cleared her throat. "It will be lovely to see your family. The grandkids must be getting big."

"Darren's graduating high school this year. Seems impossible." Deborah peered behind her. "Oops. I'm holding up the line. Thank you, Clara. Hope you can attend the market meeting next Monday."

"I wouldn't miss it."

Deborah waited for her hot chocolate and cinnamon bread, then bustled from the café. She walked toward the center of town, taking small bites of the moist bread. It melted in her mouth, all sugar and spices and pure comfort.

Thoughts of her conversation with Clara poked at the fringes of her mind. Deborah didn't make a habit of showing vulnerability, especially in public. The slip of weakness had

been just that—a slip. Besides, she *was* fine. And now, with the market upon them, she would once again put her expertise as a former event planner to use. She would create beauty and delight for the entire town.

And her grown kids would see that she was getting along perfectly well by herself.

Deborah finished her bread before slipping into Tinsel Tree Trimmings to speak to Adeline Kensington. While the shop always featured the most exquisite Christmas decorations this time of year, Adeline had outdone herself. Deborah gasped at the twinkling lights and shimmering decorations.

“Hello, Deborah.”

“This place is looking festively beautiful, Adeline.”

The sixty-three-year-old owner, her hair the color of tinsel, came out from around the counter. “It’s my favorite time of year. Did you need something in particular?”

“Not today. I’m visiting all the local businesses to see if they want to reserve a booth for this year’s Holly Jolly Market.”

“Well, of course I do.”

“Wonderful. I’ll put you in your usual place.”

“Right next to Sugarplum Bakery? I’ll be certain to have plenty of traffic there.”

“You certainly will. We have a meeting Monday night if you’re able to attend.”

“I’ll be there.” Adeline shifted her gaze to a display of angel figurines before bringing it back to Deborah. “How are you holding up? I know this is your first Christmas without—”

Deborah would be an expert at the dismissive hand wave by the end of the year. “I’m good, I’m good. The entire family will be in Chestnut Crossing for Christmas. I’m looking forward to it.”

“Oh, how lovely.” To her credit, Adeline seemed to get the hint. “Nothing like the presence of grandchildren to bring some joy.”

Deborah grinned, already pushing through the door of the shop. “I’ll say. Thank you, Adeline. See you Monday.”

Deborah walked down the quaint sidewalk to the next shop, taking in the decorated lampposts and newly strung lights. Greenery and red bows adorned the store fronts, along with glittering Christmas trees, life-size Nutcrackers, and festive window decorations.

No one did Christmas quite like Chestnut Crossing. Deborah visited Sugarplum Bakery, Candlelight Books, Snowflake Ice Skating Rink, and Joy Makers Emporium to ensure each owner wished to be included in the Holly Jolly Market as well as to talk up two new ideas for this year’s market—a Magical Market Train Ride and a Live Nativity Scavenger Hunt. Both were ideas she would need help with if she wished to make them a reality.

Lastly, she stopped by Feast & Fixin's, where Everett Pierce allowed her to keep a donation box for market raffles in his restaurant. After loading her car with the donations, Deborah drove the short way to Wintergreen Tree Farm. Nick O'Hare and his son Ryan sold plenty of their trees at the town's annual market, and Deborah wanted to propose a new corner booth for the family farm.

Sure, she could send emails or make phone calls, but years as an event planner told her most people enjoyed the personal touch of a friendly visit every now and then. And truth be told, now that she was forcing herself out of the house, so did she.

After making her rounds, she pulled her small SUV up the driveway to her home at the top of Chestnut Crossing's largest hill and unloaded the donations from her car.

On days like these, when she found herself momentarily forgetting about the new reality of widowhood, she still called a greeting to Ben, expecting to see him in his recliner taking an afternoon nap or reading the paper. When no jolly greeting returned to her and the empty recliner filled her vision, Deborah allowed herself only a moment of fresh grief before starting water for tea.

The donations wouldn't sort themselves, after all.

Deborah unpacked the random bags and boxes, her heart warming at the vintage ornaments, no doubt from Adeline. The handmade wooden toys held Jack Hillbrook's signature

style—the owner of Joy Makers Emporium made old-fashioned, well-loved Christmas treasures. Most of the businesses had dropped off gift cards for the raffle. Sadie Wingate, owner of the Stargazer Inn, had donated a two-night stay at the quaint bed-and-breakfast. That alone would be certain to get attention for the raffle table.

Deborah picked up a basket of books, a soft smile curving her mouth. Ella Hart from Candlelight Books had carefully selected some Christmas favorites. *A Christmas Carol*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, and a collector's edition of *The Gift of the Magi*.

Deborah picked up the latter, running her fingertips tenderly over the red-and-gold binding. She remembered her fourth Christmas with Ben. Her husband had very much wanted to take a job that would relocate their young family to Boston. Though she had struggled with the idea of leaving Chestnut Crossing, Deborah knew how much the job meant to Ben. To show him her support, she planned an elaborate celebration, a going-away party for her husband. At the end of the party, Ben had given a heartfelt speech expressing his sincere love and appreciation for her and for all those in attendance—and announcing that he couldn't bear to take her and the kids away from their beloved community.

For the rest of their marriage, they had referred to it as their own *Gift of the Magi* Christmas.

Deborah thumbed through the book, taking in the full pictures and boxed text. An envelope fluttered to the ground, loosened through her flipping, and she placed the book on her dining room table to pick up the yellowed envelope.

In neat handwriting lay a single name. *Noelle*.

Deborah's pulse picked up speed at the thought of what could be in the unsealed envelope. She slid out a lined paper, a small gasp escaping her at the date on the top right of the page.

December 24, 1969

Her eyes skimmed the first lines, compelling her to read the entirety of the letter.

Dear Noelle,

I'm writing this letter with a whole lot of hesitation. Maybe I shouldn't even send it to you and make a fool of myself. I don't deserve your attention, your goodness.

But I can't go off to war without making my thoughts plain. You see, Noelle, you changed me. Your kindness changed me. When my family barely scraped by when I was young, you left cinnamon bread or an apple or even a pencil on my desk at school. You saw me when no one else did. And you allowed me to keep my dignity by never mentioning the gifts—gifts that kept me going, in body and spirit.

I'm ashamed I haven't thanked you until now. But I want you to know I am thankful. What's more, after all these years, I've grown to love you.

I hope you don't think I'm selfish. Or foolish. I don't come from money, and I know we are worlds apart, but as I prepare to ship out and make something of myself in this war, I want to return a man you could be proud of. Maybe when I get home, I'll even work up the courage to ask you to go to the movies or take a drive around town.

What I'm trying to ask is this—can I write to you while I'm away? Please pray for me. My Christmas wish is that I might come home one day soon. That maybe

Deborah came to the end of the letter and flipped it over, eager for more lines, for a name, for anything that might clue her in to the author of this story.

But to her dismay, she found nothing. She peered into the envelope and shook the pages of the book, all to no avail.

Had the letter writer stopped writing or been interrupted, or had the pages been separated?

She lowered herself into a chair and read the letter once more, desperate for additional information or clues she had missed the first time. But if there were answers, they lay outside the letter.

Had the young man ever mailed it to Noelle? Had Noelle tucked it in a favorite book? Had the two started up a passionate correspondence that ended in his return home? To a date at the movies or a ride around town? To a marriage with children and many years together?

Had the soldier's Christmas wish come to fruition?

Deborah glanced at her table filled with donations and thought of the many items on her Holly Jolly Market to-do list. This would indeed be the best market yet.

But what might make this Christmas even more special was finding out if the decades-old Christmas wish of a certain soldier had come true.