



Home for Christmas

By Carol Cox

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CHAPTER ONE

Crista strolled into J&R Machining, her nose wrinkling at the acrid smell of machine oil. The harried receptionist took a moment between calls to point out Brad's door at the end of the corridor.

Crista took her time, noting the flurry of activity with both approval and concern. The business obviously had potential, but it needed a firm grip on the reins to keep it headed in the right direction.

She paused before knocking on the open door took in the scene before her. Brad, shirtsleeves rolled up over muscular forearms, cradled the phone between his chin and shoulder and scabbled frantically through the mound of papers scattered across his desk.

"Uh-huh, uh-huh." He tugged a paper from the bottom of a stack, then tossed it aside and renewed his search. "I'm sure we can beat that price. Just let me pull our spec sheet and get the particulars for you." His confident tone belied the increasingly desperate way he rummaged through the disorganized heap.

Crista leaned against the doorjamb, fascinated.

Brad's elbow dislodged a jumbled pile of papers, which slid to the floor despite his frenzied attempt to catch them. He vanished behind the desk for a moment, then reappeared holding a stapled packet aloft with an expression of triumph. "I have it right here," he announced in a matter-of-fact tone that made Crista bite her lip to keep from laughing out loud. "I'll fax it to you within the next few minutes."

He ended the call and glanced, up his eyes widening when he saw Crista. "How long have you been here?"

"Long enough to know you didn't sign up for my class a moment too soon," Crista handed him the books she carried.

Brad reached for them at the moment the phone rang. A haunted look crossed his face, and he walked past Crista to lean out of the doorway. "Bea!" he called to the receptionist. "would you hold my calls for the next few minutes, please?"

He turned back to Crista and nodded at the books in his hand. "Thanks for taking the time to drop these off. Sorry about the interruptions. So what do these cover?"

"Some time management basics-setting goals and priorities, delegation. . ." Her gaze shifted to his desk. "Handling paperwork."

Brad followed her glance and winced. "My uncle Jess could lay his hands on anything he needed at a moment's notice, and the desk didn't look any better when he was here." He caught Crista's amused look. "Okay, a little better. But not much. I really am trying, but I just don't seem to be able to get a handle on everything the way he did."

His bleak look caught at Crista's heart. "There's hope," she promised. "And those books can point you in the right direction. At least you'll be making a start. Once you can put these things into practice-"

"Got a second, Brad? Oh, sorry." The stocky man who entered the office looked more irritated than remorseful.

"If you could give me just a few minutes, Nick." Brad's fingers raked a path through his hair.

"That's all right," Crista put in. "I'm just on my way out." She smiled and lifted her hand in a quick good-bye, then started toward the exit. She had passed the receptionist's desk when Brad's voice echoed down the hall.

"Where do I start with these books?" he called. "Which one do I need the most?"

Crista glanced around. Bea spoke into the phone while two incoming lines rang insistently. Behind Brad, Nick drummed his fingers on the doorjamb. She gave Brad a gentle smile. "All of them."

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The airliner banked left over Lake Erie. The runways and terminal building of Cleveland Hopkins International Airport slid into the distance, and the city itself dwindled into a miniature landscape. Crista settled more comfortably into her seat with a satisfied sigh. The workshop had gone well, she thought, remembering the invitation she'd received to return for a more in-depth seminar in the spring.

Her gaze shifted out the window, and she leaned forward, watching the rolling farmland of Ohio pass by thousands of feet below. Ohio, the state of her birth. She stared intently, searching the depths of her being for some sense of connection or any spark of recognition. Nothing stirred within her.

She sighed, whether from regret or resignation, she wasn't sure. Somewhere down there lay Hillsboro, where she'd lived after becoming a part of the McDaniel family at age five, before their move to Arizona.

With practiced determination, Crista stifled the pang of longing that shot through her. No point in worrying about the dead past or birth parents who hadn't wanted her. The McDaniels had treated her arrival as their daughter as a highlight of their lives and had let her know every moment of the past twenty-four years how much they treasured her.

Fleeting questions danced through her mind, questions she thought she'd put to rest years before. What made her birth family give her up? Why hadn't she been good enough for them?

Pictures from her earliest days as Crista McDaniel showed a winsome child with long curls and huge hazel eyes. As often as she pored over the snapshots as a child, Crista couldn't see anything that would have made her parents not want her. The one remarkable thing about the photos had been the hint of sadness in those wide hazel eyes, and Crista was at a loss to pinpoint its source.

She turned away from the window, pulling a magazine from her briefcase. Better to leave such questions safely buried where they could cause her no heartache. She found immense satisfaction in her career and she loved her family with a fierce devotion. Life was good. Organized. Under control. No need to stir up doubts that would only lead to pain.

Thumbing through her magazine, she spotted an article titled "Twenty Ways to Streamline Your Work Space." Her thoughts flew to Brad Morgan, and she wondered how his weekend had gone. Crista leaned back against the headrest and closed her eyes, smiling at the memory of Brad's attempts to make light of the chaotic state of his office. She hoped he'd taken her seriously and

had spent the past couple of days immersed in those books. If ever anyone needed to learn how to manage his time, Brad Morgan fit the bill.

Crista's smile broadened. What a challenge it would be to take him in hand and get him and his business organized!

Her lips parted and her eyes flew open. Where had that thought come from? She had her seminars and her college class to keep her busy. Besides, she had a policy of keeping her relationship with her students confined to the classroom.

Then why had she broken that policy and gone out of her way to loan books to this particular student? The question accused her like a pointing finger. Because his was an extreme case, and his business was in danger of falling apart without immediate help, she told herself, bristling at the feeling that she had to be on the defensive. She had offered to drop off the books without a second thought, in the same way she would stop to render aid if she witnessed an accident.

Thus mollified, she reopened her magazine with a snap, determined to read every word between its covers on the way home.

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