

The background of the page is decorated with a light gray pattern of snowflakes and Christmas ornaments. Two prominent ornaments are at the top: a solid gray one on the left and a white one with a gray swirl pattern on the right. The text is centered in a black, stylized, serif font.

CHAPTER 1

A FAMILIAR TUGGING

I wasn't in the market for a dog on that cold yet sunny Midwestern day in 2005. It was the first week of December, and already my Christmas to-do list was a mile long—no time to mess with a stray mutt. Driving home from town in our packed Honda Civic with groceries and gifts stacked everywhere, I was on autopilot, trying not to think of all the chores still left to be done.

Cookies and pies needed to be baked for a family gathering at my mother's, not to mention the recently purchased gifts that needed wrapping. A few decorations were up around the house, but no tree yet. And Christmas cards? I hadn't even bought them.

My list of things to do was long, but I was determined to keep my joy and not let the stress of the season get to me. One thing that helped was listening to Christmas carols. I kept the radio tuned to the 24/7 Christmas station, which played a lot of old favorites, making today's half-hour trek home from town seem to pass quicker. Staying stressed is difficult while singing along with Bing's smooth voice to, "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

And just that morning my husband, Chuck, and I had awakened to the first light snowfall of the season. I was thrilled, but Chuck—not so much. He had almost an hour drive to work. “Everyone’s gonna crawl at a snail’s pace, scared of a little snow,” he said, hoping to be on time. A native of Denver, Chuck learned to drive in the snow-covered mountains.

“Yeah, it’s always this way with the first snowfall,” I added.

I waited until later that morning, after the snow on the roads had melted, before leaving for the mall. What did that initial dusting of snow do to people’s minds that made the stores get packed with holiday shoppers, including me?

Yes, the Christmas music and the first snowfall certainly helped keep me in the Christmas spirit. Knowing our children, Chase and Chelsea, would be home from college for Christmas break put me over the top. Having my ducks under the same roof again, along with all things Christmas, made this momma more than happy.

Funny, though. For years, I longed for peace and quiet, with no interruptions so I could write for hours. Now I longed for the kids to be home again. Not to live with us permanently, mind you, but for extended visits full of laughter and chatter. How I missed that!

As excited as I was to see them again, this Christmas already had a hint of melancholy, of unstoppable change. This Christmas would be the last for just the four of us together. Chase was our oldest and engaged, planning a summer wedding to Elizabeth. And Chelsea increasingly spoke of moving to Florida to study and work with sea life.

We already loved Elizabeth like a daughter and happily welcomed her into our brood, but having a child get married changes the dynamics of the family. Not only does the event mark the end of a chapter, but it also marks the end of a stage of life for child and parent. I eagerly

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looked forward to new chapters (especially those containing weddings and future grandbabies), yet this one held a bit of sadness. I knew things would be different now. Change is part of God's plan for us, but it can also leave fresh empty nesters feeling a little sentimental.

Oh my, already a son to be married and a daughter moving out of state. The time has flown by ...

Driving past pine trees sprinkled with fresh snow, I was determined to stay upbeat, choosing not to dwell on the future. I joined Mr. Crosby and dreamed of a white Christmas much like the ones we used to celebrate together.

CHRISTMAS LONG AGO

I smiled at the thought of my own childhood, giggling with four siblings on Christmas Eve after sneaking flashlights to our bedrooms. In the middle of the night, we tiptoed out of our rooms when we were certain Santa had come and gone and dropped our jaws at the sea of gifts in our family room. Remembering to whisper was hard while excitedly playing detective and deciphering who had the most and largest presents.

I anxiously searched for a package with my name matching the size of the Thumbelina doll I so longed to cuddle. My older brother, Tim, wanted a new bike, but would Santa leave a bike in our living room? And would younger brother Gary get new GI Joe figures? Sue, my oldest sister, was crazy about the Beatles. Would Santa have a new album for her? And the youngest, Danny (nicknamed Pip), not yet old enough to know how all this worked and that he could make personal requests to Santa for whatever he wanted, would be happy playing with simple toys such as Play-Doh. Of course, we didn't get everything we wanted, but why not ask?

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Yes, those were fond memories. We could barely contain ourselves, taking turns hushing each other in the middle of the night so we wouldn't get discovered. Forget going back to sleep. With only two bedrooms to house five kids, we'd be fortunate to sneak in a catnap before time to get out of bed.

Our gifts under the tree on Christmas mornings looked a little different from our friends' more elaborate piles of goodies. My father worked as a pressman at the local newspaper and brought home the butt ends from the large rolls. All our gifts were wrapped in off-white paper.

"Why waste money on Christmas paper?" Dad would ask. "Why not use the extra paper from work that would be pitched in the dumpster?"

The off-white color of paper didn't bother us in the least; our gifts could've been wrapped in brown bags or printed newspaper for all we cared. The things that mattered most were how many gifts we got and what was inside them. "Giddy" doesn't begin to express our excitement back then.

I took one hand off the steering wheel for a moment to dig in my purse for my sunglasses, keeping an eye on the hilly country road. The bright sun shining on the snow crystals on the branches seemed to turn them into millions of dazzling diamonds.

My daydreams turned to more recent Christmas memories that now included my own kids. They too would grab flashlights and sneak into our living room in the middle of the night, comparing the size and number of gifts they each had under the tree. To help appease their excitement (or whet it), we allowed them to snatch their filled stockings and take them back to their bedrooms.

There were a few wonderful Christmas mornings when my fun-loving, ornery stepson, Conan, and his sweet older sister, Lori, joined us. How our younger children loved having their big brother and sister around! And what joy they added to the celebration.

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From the mixing of cookie dough to the baking of cookies (what was left after we all snuck some dough), to the painting of ornaments and hanging them on the tree; to sewing their stockings from felt, sequins, and beads, and then stuffing those decorated stockings on Christmas Eve with tiny treasures; to playing Christmas carols and attending Christmas Eve services together; to the best part—Christmas day! All were parts of the celebration of the birth of our Savior. The arrival of King Jesus on earth is worthy of celebration.

AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE UNKNOWN

Bing continued to croon about glistening treetops when—

Caught up in the nostalgia of the holiday, I suddenly had to slam on my brakes. At the edge of the woods and coming straight toward me was a large white beast! His massive size quickly forced me back to the present and even caused me to gasp out loud, “Oh, my gosh! What *is* that?”

With ears laid back, the animal looked like a cross between a polar bear and a huge canine—he was that big! I stared and blinked hard. A closer look confirmed he was, in fact, a yellow lab, the biggest I’d ever seen. Thankfully, I was close to a stop sign at an intersection of country roads, so I was already slowing down when he appeared. Aside from not wanting to hurt the mutt, the damage to our car would have been extensive if we had collided. The lab’s stature was truly huge, resembling a small heifer more than your average canine.

Strange-sounding, I know, but as I look back on that day, I remember having a strong feeling this dog had been waiting for me to appear—and at precisely that moment. He walked toward the car and the closer he came the more I sensed a distinct air about him. He acted like he



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expected me to stop, open the car door, and let him in. It was as if he were asking, “Where have you been, and what took you so long?” Or even, “I choose you, you lucky human, to be my owner. Scoot over.”

But our car was full of groceries and I was on my way home, anxious to get the food put away and dinner started. There certainly wasn’t time to mess with a dog even if I’d wanted to, and I definitely didn’t want to. It was still way too soon ...