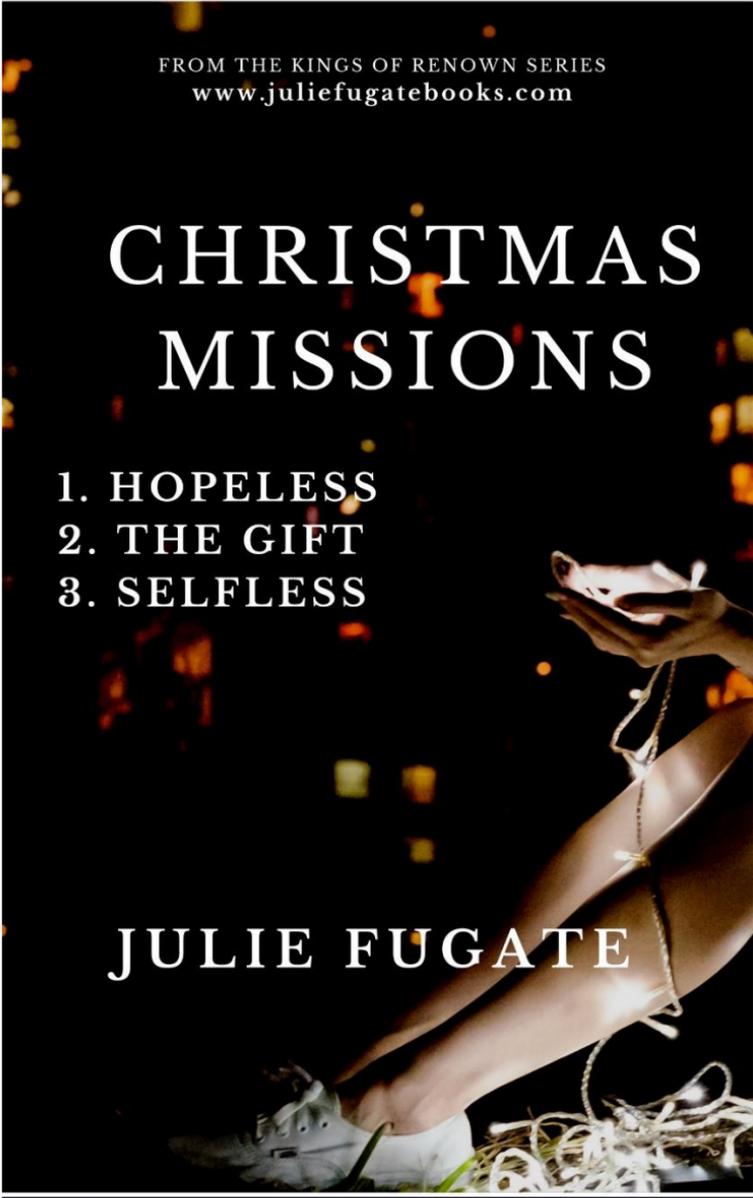


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# CHRISTMAS MISSIONS

1. HOPELESS
2. THE GIFT
3. SELFLESS

JULIE FUGATE

A woman's legs in high heels and stockings, holding a smartphone, against a background of bokeh lights.

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*Ephesians 6:12 (NKJV)*

*For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood,  
but against principalities, against powers, against the  
rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of  
wickedness in the heavenly places.*

# Hopeless



*Christmas Eve, 11:00 pm, Naples, Florida*

Tara Cox began her transformation from a grungy teen. She pulled off her high school hoodie with the teeth-baring shark on the front, revealing a black sequined dress. She ran her hand over her flat-ironed hair, a thick, glossy mass of darkness that couldn't be messed up thanks to a ton of product. Next, she switched her tennis shoes for designer stilettos, adding four inches to her height.

*Viola!*—high-class party girl.

The clothes with their high price tags weren't her style, but Zach insisted she needed to look the part. Since he came from money, she conceded to his judgment and bit back her objections when he bought them. Everything else she'd borrowed from her half-sister, Inara: heavy dangling earrings already made her earlobes smart, a much too delicate tennis bracelet graced her wrist, and a small metal clutch of red and green that hinted at the season—her favorite.

“You sure you want to do this? I mean we can still volunteer at the soup kitchen.” Zach cocked his head as he leaned against the top of another one of his dad's vintage cars. The gesture normally would have made his hair fall over one eye like a pirate, but the fine, blonde strands were pulled back into a small, neat man bun.

“This is what I want to do.” How could she explain that anyone could help out the hungry? For once she wanted to use her unique gift to make a difference.

She glanced up at the tall, brick building across the street. A Christmas tree sparkled through one of the large

windows. An angel in a velvet dress graced the top, spreading her huge, white wings double the size of her body.

Tara would have to ask their angel friend, Calder, what he thought of all these depictions of his race as women. Being immortal, they didn't have little angels running around, so they didn't define themselves as male or female. Their differences were based on race and rank.

Calder was a Seraph with six wings—one behind each ankle, two attached on his lower back, and two near his shoulder blades. He could use them like an extra pair of hands, or transform the downy softness into knife-like weapons.

A shadow moved between the tree and the window.

*Game time.*

Tara's ability to see the worst of the fallen moving among them wasn't something she chose. She would find a way to use it for good... or go crazy.

Zach came around the car, his big, strong hand snagging her own. "Remember to let me do the talking."

She squeezed his fingers, glad for his presence. His soap and cologne scent ensconced her as she drifted closer to his side. Part of her wanted to forget her plan, to go home... be normal teenagers... snuggle on the couch....

A stronger internal drive wouldn't allow her to stop.

They slipped across the street. As they approached the front door, she glanced sideways.

Zach took a deep breath.

Going back into his old world couldn't be easy. She hadn't known him before he sobered up. Her football-playing boyfriend with the baby-blue eyes and an easygoing smile used to be a drunken jerk. Hard to imagine.

A guy with a tribal neck tattoo leaned on the brick wall and glared in their direction. His appearance was a sharp contrast to the squeaky clean look of Zach, who didn't

sport body jewelry or tats. At least she had multiple piercings in her lobes.

Tribal guy stopped them.

Of course.

Tara peered up, a dwarf among giants even with her heels.

Zach and the man stared at each other like toothpick chewing cowboys about to draw.

“You sure you’re in the right place, pretty boy?” Tribal guy’s gaze flicked down to her.

Her temper flared. Her boyfriend *was* a pretty boy. Prettier than her.

“We’re here to party with Scottzee.” Zach’s casual tone never changed. “Maybe you wanna to ask him like a good little errand boy?”

Tribal guy’s eyes shot out arrows of death. “That’s a big name you’re throwing out.”

“Go big or get out of our way.” Zach now sounded amused.

*Way to be tough.* Tara readied herself to stomp and punch her way out if this didn’t work.

The guy stepped aside with a chuckle. “Nice to see you too, Zach.”

Tara blew out a breath. They knew each other? She’d never understand guys.

Zach and Tara entered a large hallway, echoing with loud music and graced with art. Stairs led up to a second floor while other hallways shot off in two other directions. The door slammed behind them, and she jumped.

“A prize behind every door,” Zach whisper-shouted in a game show host voice. “Which one will you choose?”

Tara glared at him.

Zach looked sheepish. “I think God gets my humor.”

“Maybe.” She squinted at him. “You mentioned a sure party, but who is Scottzee?”

“The host of this soirée and an old acquaintance. He always throws a big bash on Christmas Eve.”

Tara squeezed his arm. “You know. Now that you got me in the door—”

“Don’t even.” Zach’s hard gaze meant business.

“Fine.”

Zach softened his tone. “Calder is going to kill us for this.”

“Or he’ll be impressed.”

“Look at you being positive,” Zach teased.

Tara smirked, despite Calder’s warning to her and all her friends about going all vigilante. Yet, she’d been on the wrong side of things for too long. She wasn’t going to stay on the sidelines forever. “I don’t see any shadows right now, so that always improves my mood.”

“Well, let’s go change that.” Zach leaned toward her until their foreheads touched. “Who has your heart?” he whispered.

“God,” she responded in as soft a tone.

“Who has your soul?”

“God.”

“Who leads our lives no matter what happens on this mission?”

“God.”

“My girl.” He nodded toward some stairs. “This way. I’m sure we’ll find you a stinky, sinful soul.”

She couldn’t help the smile that jerked across her face.

The music grew louder as they ascended. A narrower hallway spread out before them. More paintings. Chandeliers. While the long corridor blazed with light, the dark rooms emitted colorful light shows like mini dance clubs. The formless shadows flitted in and out of doorways.

A chill skittered down her spine. She clenched her jaw.

She needed this.

It was a way to release all the tension that had built up since her gift kicked in—an unwanted gift, which allowed her to see the fallen as they milled around humans. They doled evil into thoughts and fed off a person’s own brand of pain.

The first room they passed, Zach squeezed her shoulder. “We should pay our respects to my old friend.”

She peered into a crowd of people standing in small enough packs to walk through. Zach took her hand, excusing them as they bumped into partiers on their way to the back wall. Teens lounged on couches, eating and drinking, while others nearby tried to dance in their standing room only space. Zach exchanged greetings with a glazed-eyed guy, his arm around a busty woman with bright purple eyeshadow.

Tara painted a smile on her face but kept an eye on the shadows mixing with the crowd.

*Watch*, a voice commanded in her head.

One whisked past her through the crowd and down the hall. Other bodiless forms trailed along.

*Follow*.

Those around her laughed. She tugged on Zach’s arm. He squeezed her hand. A few seconds later, he led her back out.

Once they entered the hallway, Tara breathed out, “Something’s up.” She pulled away and sauntered toward another doorway where several shadows congregated. Pausing, she gave Zach a nod.

They’d talked about this. She had to do this on her own.

Inside, a girl with a long ponytail sat alone in the dark, her face turned toward the window on the opposite wall. An unlit building faced them, abandoned and burned from an earlier fire.

“Not much of a view.” Tara squeaked, her throat dry.

The girl looked frozen in some memory. She wore a similar dress to hers with her long, slender, cocoa legs crossed. Two groupings of shadows, blacker than the dim gray lighting, hovered near the girl. One shadow reached out as if it caressed her. More closed in, circling like feral dogs to an injured animal.

Tara's gut clenched as she opened her clutch to finger the knife she'd put inside. These weren't physical beings. The only weapon lethal enough to drive them away would be Him. She pulled out the small Bible lying against the hard steel. *The sword of the spirit is the word of God.* "Why are you in here all alone?"

"Because I want to be. Get out."

The girl's nasty tone would have spurred Tara to respond with her own sarcastic remark in the past. But not tonight.

*Truth.*

Tara licked her lips. "Whatever you're feeling right now, it's a lie."

"What are you talking about?" The girl's voice dripped with annoyance.

"The hopelessness that you feel." Tara stepped forward. The blackness around her wavered as she opened the Bible.

A pinched face twisted around, tears streaming down her face. "You don't know me and I don't know you. Leave... me... alone."

One shadow leaned closer to the girl's head.

Tara didn't have to imagine how it made her feel. Hopeless. Worthless. It amplified the girl's pain. She turned to one of the passages she'd marked.

The room quivered.

Her voice took on more confidence with every word. She got out an entire verse before pain exploded in her jaw. She staggered back and fell on her butt.

A dark void covered the girl's head, making her look like the headless horseman. The girl's foot made contact with Tara's gut, squelching her scream.

Zach appeared by her side, pushing the girl back. He knelt beside Tara as his voice boomed out in a melody. "You shall worship the Lord... only Him will you serve... every word of God is a shield."

With his last long note, the shadows vibrated. Tara imagined their screams as one by one, they dissipated into thin air.

Once again, a complete girl stood before them. "I-I don't know what came over me." Her voice had lost its bite. "I've never hit anyone before. I just wanted... wanted..."

Zach lifted Tara up off the floor. "I have a message for you, Shayna. Go home. Go back to church. These people aren't your friends. Call your family. They will forgive you. God will forgive you."

Shayna's doe-like eyes widened as she nodded.

Zach walked out with Tara in his arms.

"You knew her?" Tara mumbled.

"No." Zach shook his head. "Letting you walk in that room alone wasn't easy for me. But I took a moment to ask some girl in the hall about her. Shayna ran away from home. Been living with her drug-dealing boyfriend who dumped her tonight. On Christmas Eve. Not hard to connect the dots."

"We should go back—"

"She attacked you, Tara." Zach shook his head. "You did what you came to do. I could feel the weight leave the room. Leave her. You did it. You helped someone tonight."

Tara sighed. *Did I?* Zach didn't point out she'd broken one simple rule—always be aware of your surroundings. "Not by myself, like I wanted."

"Your welcome."

She kicked her legs. “You can put me down now. Someone will notice.”

His strong arms flexed into steel. “No one will think twice.”

Tara objected slightly before she relaxed into his shoulder.

“Nice to know you have a weakness. Glass jaw and all.”

“I don't know what that means, but let's keep that between us.”

Zach's chest rumbled as she closed her eyes.

When they reached the car, Zach tucked her into the passenger seat. He settled on the driver's side and smoothed her hair off her face. “Guess what? It's after midnight. Merry Christmas.”

She opened one eye.

“I couldn't wait. It's our first Christmas together.”

“First Christmas and first mission. Together.” Tara tried to steady her fast beating heart. Her first Christmas knowing its true meaning—Jesus as her Lord and Savior. “Too bad we won't know how much we helped Shayna.”

“Nothing says we can't stick around a bit.”

Zach turned on the radio to some Christmas music as they waited.

An hour later, Zach shook her arm. “There she is.”

Tara sat up.

Shayna stood outside, arms crossed tight over her torso. Minutes ticked by before a sedan pulled up. An older, dark-skinned couple jumped out. The woman rushed over to cup Shayna's cheek while the man hung back. They hugged, and then he engulfed them both. The woman and Shayna got in the back seat.

“I think that answers your question?” Zach chuckled. Definitely a success. Best Christmas ever.

# The Gift



*Christmas Morning, 9:00 a.m., Naples Florida*

**F**or Leo Price, the world glinted. There were Christmas lights, God's angels moving among them, and diamonds in the case before him. Even though the holidays meant his mother left him alone to volunteer for all the overtime she could at the restaurant, his blessings outweighed the strife in his life.

The Masons had accepted him as family years ago. Mr. Mason treated him like a son. He planned to marry Inara Mason, his girlfriend, one day.

“Don't tell me you're going to propose?” Calder, now visible to everyone, wore board shorts and a white muscle shirt. His sandy hair had grown long like Leo's until he could cinch it at the nape of his neck. Leo's personal mini-me.

“I knew you were spying on me,” Leo growled. “You've been glinting ever since I walked into the mall. Angels don't marry, so what's it to you?”

Calder leaned back against the glass case that housed several sparkling engagement rings. “I know women, and Inara is not ready to be tied down. You're both still in high school. You haven't even gone out on your first date yet.”

“I want our first Christmas together to be perfect. And, I've known her for years—”

“Not like this.”

“I'm not going to propose.” Leo relaxed the raised corner of his lip. He also lowered his voice as a few curious faces focused on him and his angelic friend. A promise ring would even be too soon. “Not that it's any of your business.”

“Then what?” Calder cocked his head and crossed his arms. “What are you getting her?”

Leo had nothing and the mall would close in a few hours. Only a handful of stores even remained open on Christmas day.

“I... could... help.” Calder gave him a superior look.

“The thing is... I don't want your help.” Leo couldn't forget that Inara had a short attraction to Calder before she knew he was an angel.

“I get it. It slips out I picked out the perfect gift for your girlfriend... well...”

Leo shook his head. “So you're just here to annoy me?”

“Yeah, but I could take you *somewhere* where you could find the perfect gift.”

Interesting. “Where?”

Calder leaned in close enough so no one could overhear. “Think about it, Leo. Where could an angel take you?”

Leo hesitated. With Calder's dimensional way of moving through the universe, he could go to any country. Any planet. Anywhere. Yet, he didn't want to go too crazy, or Inara would know Calder helped. “I've been looking for a jewelry box for weeks. She threw her old one away because the lid finally broke. The musical ballerina hadn't rotated for years anyway. I'd like to get another. Something more...”

“Grown up?” Calder quirked an eyebrow.

“And meaningful.”

“Have you ever seen Olive Wood?”

Leo shrugged. “Heard of it.”

“Olive wood is gorgeous. I know a place in Israel we could go.”

After everything, he still needed a moment to wrap his head around the suggestion before he grinned. “Let's go.”

They found an exit that the public didn't use, and once they were alone, Calder grabbed his arm at the same time Leo closed his eyes.

A moment later, a roar of chatter startled him as if someone turned up the surround sound too quick. Leo opened his eyes to find himself in a similar hallway. He might have thought they hadn't even left the mall yet, except the sign to the right of the elevator straight ahead was written in hieroglyphics.

Leo stepped forward to gaze out a window. Palm trees. Clean streets. They could have still been in Florida. A bus drove by. People, as American looking as anyone back home, walked along the sidewalks with shopping bags and drinks. "What time is it here?"

"Four in the afternoon. This way." Calder passed the elevator, moved into a more open area with potted plants, and out the door.

A man on a bicycle zoomed past on the sidewalk, paying them no mind. A woman across the street walked a Labrador. Three glints of light congregated near a fountain. The biggest difference—he couldn't smell the ocean, but the Mediterranean Sea would be nearby. "Where are we? Exactly?"

"Tel Aviv," Calder replied.

It made sense that he'd see more of God's angels in God's land—one of his gifts. If he stared hard enough he could begin to make out features, but soon he'd see spots and get a headache. Yet, he could sense something else. The history. The land where Jesus was born, lived, and traveled.

Calder directed him toward a store with a red and white striped awning.

Inside, a buzzing noise permeated the air, as if there were a thousand invisible bees.

Calder didn't hesitate to go behind the counter and through a curtain.

Leo followed.

A man carved into a marbled piece of wood with a small powered grinder.

Calder spoke to the sculptor in his native language.

The sculptor pulled the tool away from the wood at the same time his face jerked up. A wide grin split his weathered skin as he removed his safety glasses. They conversed in their foreign tongue, and when the sculptor nodded toward Leo, Calder laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

“He asked if the American had come to join the Israeli Military. I couldn’t help but imagine how you’d dwarf a lot of their soldiers.”

“Tell him if I could... I’d be honored.” Leo tilted his head in the sculptor’s direction as Calder translated for him.

The two of them were off talking again before they disappeared behind a different curtain.

A moment later, a glint entered the room. Something Leo had grown used to, only this time, the glint stood before him.

Did this angel know he could see it? A confrontation? Not their usual style.

The angel dialed its light back and solidified into a man. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Common Israeli features except maybe a little too perfect. No wrinkles, scars, or pores. His skin was like a sheet of glass.

“You should leave.” The angel’s voice, thick like honey, sounded sweet even as he gave a standard Guardian Angel warning. He must be looking out for the sculptor.

“Not here to bother anyone. We’ll be gone soon.”

“Not soon enough. You will encounter some men.”

Leo furrowed his brow. “I told you. We don’t want any trouble.”

“These are troubling times. Don’t allow Calder to harm them.” The angel’s expression remained blank.

“I don’t have any control over Calder. He’s your kind, so maybe you should talk to him,” Leo pointed out.

“Don't let him forget his place. He can't engage. Even if he wants to protect *you* from harm.” The angel blinked away with his last word.

Protect Leo? Calder didn't even like him that much. His conscious piqued up. *Okay, I don't like Calder much. With good reason*, he argued back, but something born of jealousy wasn't a fair assessment.

The sculptor returned with a tall box full of dark curls shellacked to shine, ornate brass fixtures, and breathtaking swirls of light and dark. Lilies graced the top and the artist worked along those same swirls to match the curve of the flowers to frame the engraving.

Calder read the foreign letters etched into the flowers. *“I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine... Song of Solomon 6:3.”*

Short. Sweet. Perfect.

Yet, Leo had to get them out of there. “I've changed my mind. We should go.”

Calder shook his head. “What are you talking about? This is perfect.”

“Tell, him I'm sorry. Let's go.”

“You're making a mistake, Leo.”

This wasn't working. Leo nodded at the sculptor. “Ask him how much so we can get out of here.”

Calder frowned at him before spoke to the sculptor in short, quick clips.

Leo tapped his foot, trying to curb his impatience.

The sculptor and Calder's voice rose.

“What is he saying? Is there a problem?”

“It's a gift,” Calder responded. “I'm insisting we pay a fair price. Kind of a backward haggling.”

Leo agreed that he didn't want to take advantage of the guy, but they needed to hurry. Leo held up three C-notes. The sculptor's eyes grew wide and Leo pushed them into his

hands. Even if he overpaid, maybe it would make up for bringing danger so close.

Calder smirked. “I think that more than makes up for the exchange fee.”

An air-raid siren went off, wailing out a shrill warning. Was he too late? “Is that a hurricane warning?”

“You mean bomb. No.” Calder laid a hand on his arm. “Calm down. This is commonplace for them.”

Calder and the sculptor exchanged a few more words less intense than before. “Let’s go.”

The sculptor hollered after them.

“What is he saying?” Leo asked while rushing for the door.

“Warning us not to leave the store until the sirens end.”

Just as they reached the exit, five Israeli men filed into the store—all thin, lean, and in a hurry. One crossed his arms and stood in front of the door. The others faced them with menacing looks. The leader addressed Calder in a demanding tone.

“You know these guys?” Leo kept his tone quiet, calm, and light, as if trying to not rile up a wild animal.

Calder didn’t take his eyes off the leader as he responded.

The leader rocked side to side, his tone rising.

“What’s happening?”

“I’m haggling,” Calder clipped out before reverting back to their foreign tongue.

The leader revealed a jeweled handled knife. The blade, long and slender, came to a point, yet the metal had been painted to look like a feather—a lifelike feather.

Leo cinched the box under his arm a little tighter as Calder did something Leo had never seen him do.

The wings on Calder’s ankles unraveled. His shirt rippled. Then, all six of his wings burst out, tearing the fabric

and blowing a huge wind through the store making less stable items fall. The edges of his wings were knives, not unlike the dagger he stared at.

The men rushed in, Leo jumped in front of Calder who yelled, “No!”

Leo had fought multiple opponents before, but this didn't compare to an organized test for his black belt. He landed a front kick to one man's gut as he elbowed another in the face. The leader sliced Leo's arm with the jeweled knife. The cut burned.

A burst of light filled the room as a hand gripped his arm. He felt the pull and then blackness.

Leo blinked. When he moved there was something crunchy underneath his back. Spots danced before his eyes as the sun beat down on him. He sat up. “Where are we?”

Calder's soft voice whispered, “Back home.”

“Those guys okay?”

“Thanks to you.”

“The box?”

“I got it.” Calder's voice came from right beside him. “You've been out for a few minutes so take it easy. Your eyesight will return in a moment.”

“My arm...” Leo went to touch the wound but dressing had already been applied.

“It will fade.”

“Was I poisoned? I know that knife wasn't... normal.”

“The knife their leader wielded. Not really fashioned by human hands.”

An angelic knife?

Calder helped him stand. “The diversion you made, was enough for me to get us out.”

“Want to explain to me what happened back there?”

“Some Israelis know more than most. They don't question the supernatural. They don't stand for the fallen on their soil—”

“You're not fallen,” Leo spit out.

“I'm nothing they'd understand. Those men are part of a sect that watches for the fallen. I'm sure that group consisted of whoever could come on short notice, which is why we got lucky they weren't heavier in number or weapons. I can't blame them, tell them the truth, or hurt them—”

“Bringing out the big wings didn't seem like a diplomatic approach.”

Calder shrugged. “I was going for scary.”

“What were you talking about... before they attacked.”

“When I couldn't convince them they were wrong, I congratulated them on their diligence in protecting their people from the fallen. I guess they thought I was being sarcastic,” Calder sighed. “At least you got the perfect Christmas present for Inara.”

He pushed the box into Leo's hands.

Leo pursed his lips as he nodded in agreement. “Thank you.”

His association with Calder and the angels would forever be complicated and fraught with danger.

“Thank you, Leo, for jumping in front of me,” Calder cocked his head, “for thinking about me.”

Leo could have admitted he'd had a heads-up from one of his fellow angels who also cared about Calder's place in eternity. Instead, he patted the angel on the back, which was like slapping a brick wall. “Let's go celebrate the reason we have a shot at eternity.”

# Selfless



*Christmas, 5:00 p.m., Naples, Florida*

**C**rash!  
Inara Mason's heart pounded at the sound of shattering glass. She peered around the corner to see a bus boy already trying to gather the broken pieces.

*Now or never.*

She shuffled through the "Employees Only" swinging doors into a nearby office and began scanning the area for a work schedule. Papers covered the desk with a single computer, but her gaze rose to a large dry-erase board hanging on the wall.

*Bingo.*

It didn't take long to find the name she wanted and the hours listed. She knew it! Leo's mother had a huge gap between shifts today.

"What are you doing in here?"

A robust man with sweaty pit stains stood in the doorway blocking her exit.

"I wanted a clean bathroom." Inara flipped her long blond hair. "I think someone might have gotten sick in the one out there."

The man groaned as he ushered her out. "I'll get someone on that. Please, wait out front."

Distaste coated her mouth from the lie. Doing the right thing wasn't easy when God reminded her at every step His way was best. That meant no lies. Hard when you're on a mission.

She'd been stalking her childhood-friend-turned-boyfriend's mother for weeks now. Eating the mediocre food at the restaurant where she worked. Making sure she sat at

one of the tables Miss Price waited on so they could chat. Still, Leo's mom wouldn't agree to come spend Christmas with them.

Inara found a table, folded her hands, and waited.

A few minutes later, Miss Price approached her. "You again," she huffed. Her face was flushed and her eyes narrowed. The only attribute her tall, muscular boyfriend had in common with his mother's gaunt features and petite frame might be the wavy, tawny hair. "Don't you have things to do today?"

"I do. I thought this was important."

"I told you, Sweetie. I have to work."

"I realize eating the same food over and over again from this place might be what you want on Christmas. But, you can walk to our house. Eat turkey. Is a homemade meal in between your shifts such a bad deal?"

Miss Price brushed flakes of dried food from her uniform. "I'm a mess."

"I don't care. Neither will your son. He... *we* love you."

Miss Price chewed on her bottom, chapped lip. "Are you going to order?"

Inara stood up. "Not today. Come by. I've always been told Christmas can be a time for new beginnings. In many ways."

She left, her final attempt to bring mother and son together. They hadn't spent a holiday under the same roof in ages.

As she walked home, a cool breeze wafted over her. How did she not know Leo's mom worked at one of the restaurants close to her home?

For most of her life, the holiday consisted only of herself, her dad, and Leo. They showered her with gifts and conceded to all her whims. At sixteen, for the first time, she didn't want Christmas to revolve around her.

As she approached her house, her angel friend, Calder, stood staring at the front door. His surfer body was clad in designer jeans, new tennis shoes, and an open, loose red plaid shirt.

“Why are you standing outside?” He could pop into any part of the house.

“I’m an invited guest. Shouldn’t I act like one?” He winked.

Inara shook her head as he followed her in. “What, no gifts?” she teased.

“Already under the tree,” he chuckled.

Inara glanced at the artificial tree with more lights and candy canes than ornaments. A nice little pyramid of equally sized, decorative, rectangle boxes, lay underneath. Her head spun with possibilities. What would a wealthy, immortal angel give a human as a present?

Over the next hour, almost everyone arrived. Zach in a sheik man-bun mooned over her half-sister, Tara, who kept touching the ornaments on the tree. Miranda, Tara’s best friend who at one time had been Inara’s enemy, yammered to them about... everything. Miranda had pulled her bleach-blonde hair off her heart-shaped face with a sparkly headband and painted her lips red, which complemented Tara’s red satin shirt.

With her nauseating, flirty parents in the kitchen, that left Leo.

When the doorbell rang, Inara forced herself outside on the crowded stoop. Grabbing Leo’s bright red tie, she pulled him toward her to give him a proper kiss. At the end, he pushed a large wrapped gift into her hands.

“Thank you. For whatever this is.” She admired his long-sleeved green shirt. “How did it go with your mom this morning?”

“Fine.”

Inara pressed her lips tight. Miss Price was a hard woman. And stubborn. Maybe she'd hoped for too much.

Twenty minutes later, everyone held hands around the table.

Mr. Mason prayed. “Thank you, Lord, for your apparent blessings before us and in those around us. You've protected us. Given us hope, your wisdom, your grace, and mercy despite our shortcomings. Thank you for sending your son, Jesus, whom we honor this Christmas day, granting us access to your continual forgiveness. In Jesus name, we pray. Amen.”

Everyone repeated, “Amen.”

Calder rose with his glass and offered his ginger ale up in a toast. “Holy, Holy, Holy is our God.”

More drinks were proffered up in agreement. No one limited himself, either with the epic food or Mom's cheesecake—an old family recipe. Inara would make sure they had that desert every year from now on. Even Calder, who brooded more and more over the last few months, joined in with the banter and laughter.

When they retired to the living room, Tara, Miranda, and Zach squished onto the loveseat. Dad and Mom sat in matching chairs. Calder watched from the corner, and Inara sat on Leo's lap, despite the disapproving frown on her father's face.

Gifts were handed out all at once. Tara got a necklace from Zach—an expensive necklace and she wasn't jealous in the least. Miranda giggled over the friendship bracelet Inara helped Tara make for her.

When Inara opened Leo's present to her, she gasped. Inside, sat an exquisite, wooden jewelry box with veins of dark swirls. The top was etched with lilies and script. She ran her fingers over the engraving, unable to make out the letters.

Leo twined his fingers with her free hand and whispered. "*I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine....*"

She raised the lid, and inside he'd placed a chipped and worn ballerina figurine—the one from her old jewelry box.

"I fished it out of the trash. Thought you might want to keep it." He gave her a peck on the cheek.

If her dad glared, she didn't care.

"Your turn." She slid to the floor and shoved a big box in front of him.

"I hope you didn't spend too much money."

"Leo, stop worrying about someone spending money on you for once and open it." Inara bounced up and down.

His eyes widened at the thin leather jacket with the white stripes down the sleeves. It cost her most of her savings, but he'd never had a proper coat to wear on chilly nights.

The boys gave their angelic guest, Calder, a video game released this December. She knew Calder rarely played them—too easy with his reflexes.

"Zach and I get to come over and play that with you at your place," Leo insisted.

Inara had heard about Calder's underground cave that looked like Aladdin's cave of treasures. She would make sure they took her along with them.

She went in with the girls to give Calder a frame that read "My Family," filled with pictures of all of them. They even found a snapshot of Calder standing around the Mason's pool table beside Leo and Zach. Granted, he appeared a little washed out compared to the other boys. Maybe his angelic light couldn't totally be turned off, but you could tell it was him.

When her parents went to take a walk, Inara glanced out the front window. The sun shone. The wind rustled the

palm leaves. Perfect day to be out, yet Miss Price hadn't shown.

Her gaze moved to Calder's frozen features as he stared at his picture frame. "Are you okay?"

Calder lifted his chin. "My first Christmas present... from humans." His face brightened, making the light in the room seem dull. "We angels celebrate the sacrifice Jesus made when He became a man in order to pay the required price, but not this way. I'm enjoying it more than I thought."

Inara's whole body warmed.

Calder motioned for everyone to gather around his little pyramid of boxes left under the tree. He handed one to each person.

Zach began a countdown. "Three. Two. One."

They all opened the tops.

Inside lie a decorative white card dipped in gold. Inara turned hers over read the few short, neatly written words. "IOU—One Trip." Blinking, she read it three more times. "Are you kidding me?"

Miranda had her hand over her mouth.

Zach nudged Leo like they'd just won the lottery.

Leo glared at Calder, for some reason.

Tara stared into her box, looking shell-shocked.

"You can use them separately or do something as a group. Redeemable anytime." Calder clipped out in true teacher form.

"Anywhere?" Inara clarified.

Calder cocked his head, his slicked hair now curling and falling to one side. "Within reason. I won't put anyone in any danger."

Inara didn't care that he demanded reasonable. The possibilities were endless.

The doorbell rang.

Inara rushed over and slung the door open.

A slender woman with tawny hair and pinched lips, stared out at the street. She reluctantly twisted her uniformed body back to face her.

Leo's mother.

Squealing in delight, Inara pulled Miss Price's stiff demeanor into a hug. "You came," she whispered in her ear.

"You made some good arguments," Miss Price spit back stilted words.

"Mom?" Leo slouched like a lost puppy, standing with his friends.

Inara walked Miss Price toward him. "We are so glad you could make it. Aren't we Leo?" She slapped his arm with a laugh as he nodded along like a mime. "You have to try the cheesecake," she added, giving Miss Price her best smile.

A few more seconds ticked by before Leo sprang into action. He took his mom's purse and jacket as he ushered her into the kitchen. Not before he looked back and blew her a kiss.

"You did that?" Tara squinted.

Inara shrugged.

"All those trips alone to the mall... weren't really to the mall." Tara punched her shoulder in an unladylike manner. "Good job."

Inara heard Leo's laughter mingle with his mom's from the kitchen. All those lost shopping days *were* worth it. This might be her favorite Christmas yet.

THE END

LOVE, PRAYERS and MERRY CHRISTMAS!