

A Christmas Carol

Gabriella Renee Jones laughed at the jovial-looking person reflected back at her from the full length mirror. The green elf suit fit her better than she'd thought it would, although the pants were a little short on her long legs. Obviously they hadn't planned on a six-foot elf. She pulled her curly brown hair back in a ponytail and attached the pointed ears. Now she was ready to help entertain children and hand out presents at Shane's annual toy giveaway.

She always enjoyed the party, in part because it meant there was only a week until her birthday. After thirty-two years she'd gotten used to sharing it with Jesus. After all, he had been born long before her. When Gabby was little, she used to pretend she was the daughter of Mary – the Virgin Mary that is. She wasn't born in a manger, but she was discovered in a barn the day after Christmas. And according to her adoptive mom, a star had been twinkling bright in the sky when she'd trudged through the snow to the barn in the early morning hours to feed the animals.

Gabby smiled thinking of all the times her mom had told the story of tripping over the baby and falling in love. Bessie Jones had also admitted, somewhat guiltily, that she'd been happy when no relatives came forward to claim the baby girl with the tufts of blond hair and café au lait skin, which hinted at her mixed heritage. She and her husband readily opened their hearts and home for Gabriella, as they named her.

She still missed them, but the love they'd showered her with was strong in her heart. There hadn't been a lot of money when she was coming up, but she and her brothers had never wanted for the important things. She crossed the room and picked up the photo she kept by her bedside. "Thank you," she whispered, and kissed her parent's images. "I know you're up there looking out for me." She replaced the photo as her cell phone buzzed. Gabby smiled when she noticed the caller's name. "House of elves, how can I serve you?"

"You can give me a ride, for one. I can't believe I let you talk me into being Mrs. Clause," Jacqueline Stevens grumbled. "You know I don't do dresses."

She suppressed a laugh. "Hold on, I think I have my violin around here somewhere. Or better yet, do you want some cheese to go with that wine?" Gabby taunted. She had met Jackie four months ago at a GLBT bookstore. While arguing over the merits of a book, they'd struck up a friendship. Gabby had wanted their relationship to turn into something more, but once she realized Jackie didn't feel the same way, she was satisfied to have Jackie be just a friend.

"No. I want to pound you. Now can you give me a ride? This outfit so does not match my ride."

"I'd be delighted. Do I get to run my hand up your dress?"

Jackie roared with laughter. "Only if you want your fingers broken, you sick freak."

"I guess that's a big no. I'm about ready to go. See you in fifteen, okay?"

“You got it.”

Gabby bit back a laugh when she caught sight of Jackie’s costume. She couldn’t however keep her large hazel eyes from showing her mirth. The other woman had on a long red dress, with ample stuffing around her chest and stomach.

“Not a word,” Jackie barked as she hung up her long coat. She tilted her head to get a good look at her friend. “Not that you can talk in that ridiculous elf outfit. They would have done better to make you the jolly green giant.”

“As if you’re not as tall as I am. You’re just jealous cause I have pointy ears. Nice wig, by the way.” Gabby reached out to touch the silver-haired wig covering her friend’s blond hair. “Who knew you would look so sexy gray.”

Jackie’s violet eyes turned to slits as she stood toe to toe with her friend. “Keep it up, Gabriella.”

“You know you love me.” Gabby tweaked Jackie’s nose. “Now, practice smiling, the kids will be here soon.”

Jackie pouted playfully. “Bah Humbug. Why did I agree to do this?”

Gabby smiled to cover the yearning in her heart. Jackie in a playful mood was almost too much for her heart to take. She studied the lean face, with the piercing eyes that she found so attractive. Jackie had the boyish looks she liked, but she had something much more. Underneath her bluster, she had a good heart. It was too bad it wasn’t for her to hold. “You’re here because you’re a sucker for a sob story.”

“Oh...yeah.” She smiled, showing even white teeth, unaware of the effect her smile had on her friend. “Let’s go find my husband.” She reached for Gabby’s hand.

The next three hours passed in a blur of activity. Gabby didn’t slow down as she worked with the other volunteers to ensure everything was perfect for the kids. Although she was run off her feet, she had a great time mingling with the children during lunch, and later watching their eyes light up as they opened the presents picked especially for them. She blinked back tears as she watched a little boy in a wheel chair order Mrs. Clause to bend over so he could give her a kiss.

Gabby hugged herself. This was what the Christmas season was all about – sharing. It was a lesson she learned from her parents at an early age. She smiled when she smelled a familiar perfume as an arm snaked around her waist.

“Another successful year,” Shane said, her voice reflecting the satisfaction of a job well done. “I couldn’t do this without you, you know?”

She looked down into Shane's dark brown face. "You give me too much credit. You're the glue who holds this together." She looked around the room, grinning when spied Santa pulling Jackie onto his lap. "And Michael. He's the best Santa ever."

Shane nodded her head, giving a satisfied grin. "Yeah. I did good when I weeded him from the pack. So, have you made any progress with Jackie?" As Gabby's best friend, she was privy to her secret yearning.

She shook her head. "You know I'm resigned to just being good friends. Jackie's into petite, bitchy blondes. I know I can't make that cut."

"Don't give up hope, Gabby. She might surprise you one day. I mean...she's here, and in a ridiculous costume no less."

Gabby laughed. "And she's already given me grief about it. I had to go pick her up because the dress clashes with her Range Rover."

"She sounds like fun. You should bring her over when the house isn't filled with children."

"You mean when we can actually have a conversation?" Gabby asked before hurrying across the room to break up an altercation between two tykes.

"That was a blast," Jackie admitted as she climbed into the passenger seat of Gabby's old van. She took off the wig and ran her fingers through her short hair. "I never knew volunteering could be so much fun. Sign me up for next year."

Gabby rubbed her hands gleefully and snickered. "Another suck... uh, volunteer." She turned the key in the ignition. "You were a great Mrs. Clause. I told you the kids would love you."

"Thanks, but I saw quite a few following you around like baby ducklings," Jackie teased with a smile. "And I can't believe how incredibly organized you guys were."

"After five years of doing this, we should be." She looked over her shoulder and backed the car out of Shane's long driveway. "I'm glad you had a good time."

Jackie turned, so she was facing Gabby. "Tell me again how you got into this?"

"Shane." She smiled, remembering the lunch during which Shane broached the idea of Gabby helping her do something for needy physically challenged youngsters. As usual, her best friend wouldn't take no for an answer, and before she knew it, Gabby was signed up. "Like you, I'm a sucker for a sob story. But I have an excuse."

Jackie quirked a blond eyebrow. "Yeah?"

“I was born on Christmas Day.”

“You poor thing. I bet you got gypped on presents.”

A tender smile curved her lips. “No. Not with my parents. When I was growing up they would set aside an hour that was just for my birthday.”

“They sound like great parents.”

“They were.”

“I’m sorry.” Jackie put a gloved hand on Gabby’s thigh and squeezed gently. “That must be rough.”

“Thanks.” She blinked rapidly against the stinging in the back of her eyes. “But I still have them in my heart and in my memories.” Gabby cleared her throat. “Hey, how did we get so serious anyway?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Jackie shot back playfully. “You’re the one who made me wear this hideous dress.”

“I’ll concede that point.” She turned on her blinker and made a left turn into Jackie’s gated condo complex. After using Jackie’s access card, she drove through the gate and pulled up in front of her door. “Thanks again for helping out.”

“It was nothing. I had a great time.”

“Good.” She watched as Jackie undid her seatbelt. “Do you want to have dinner one day this week?”

Jackie nodded. “I’ll give you a call to set up a day. I might be spending a lot more time with Stephanie, if things go as well as I expect they will tonight.” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. “But I’ll still make time for you.”

Gabby smiled through the pain. Jackie was bound to fall in love eventually. She just hoped she was strong enough to keep the friendship. “Good luck.” She bit her lip as she watched Jackie unlock the door and whispered, “If only I could mean that.”

The following week passed quickly, and before Gabby knew it, it was Christmas Eve. She spent the day getting her house ready for the invasion of her three older brothers and their families. With the death of their parents, the siblings took turns hosting the Christmas dinner. If Gabby had her way, she would host it every year, as it was something she loved to do.

At ten p.m., she sat down on the living room floor and looked at the lighted tree, surrounded with presents. As much as she enjoyed Christmas Day, the night before was even more special. She liked to sit and look at the unopened presents under the tree, enjoying the calm before the storm. One year she hoped to have someone special to spend the evening with. For now, she settled for music, eggnog, and anticipating the joy the next day would bring. Gabby looked forward to the home made gifts her nieces and nephews would shower her with. But her favorite was the batch of goodies her brother Gordon would bring. Her stomach rumbled at the thought of the ginger bread women he made especially for her.

Yes, her life was good. She raised a toast to the deity who had been responsible for her placement in the Jones's barn. *Although...* She smiled. Maybe, just maybe her birth mother had left her there, knowing what a loving and caring family they were. "Thank you." Gabby took a sip of the eggnog, liberally laced with rum, and almost spit it out when the doorbell rang. Placing the glass on the coffee table, she made her way to the front door, surprised but delighted to see Jackie through the peephole. She unlocked the door and threw it open. "Hey, come on in."

Jackie hesitated. "I hope I'm not intruding?"

"Get in here." Gabby grabbed her arm and pulled her inside. "I was enjoying a glass of eggnog and Christmas music." She closed and locked the door since it looked like Jackie was ready to escape.

"I'm not sure why I'm here," Jackie admitted, looking lost.

"Let me take your coat and we can go into the living room and find out," she said gently and held out her hand. "Everything will seem better after a glass of eggnog." After hanging up the coat, Gabby led Jackie to the living room.

"Wow. You really go all out." Jackie looked around the small gaily decorated room in awe. "I love the tree," she said, and gave into the pull of the beautiful tree. "I almost put one up this year."

Gabby's heart reacted to the sorrow she heard in her friend's voice. "Christmas was always a big deal in my family. What about yours?"

"There were plenty of gifts to open," Jackie replied, her eyes still on the tree. "And we always had a decorator come in and arrange everything. But in my family, the holidays were more about demonstrating how well off we were. Tastefully of course," she added dryly. "My parents come from old money. I like to call it cold money in their case. You might have guessed we aren't very close."

"I'm sorry to hear that." Gabby crossed the room and put a hand on Jackie's arm. "Christmas Day should be about sharing time with family. A magical time really, when anything can happen."

Jackie smiled and placed a hand on top of Gabby's. "Last week was pretty magical. Seeing the excitement in those kid's eyes was powerful. I've always donated money, but actually being able to see the results was much more satisfying. I think I'll take you up on that eggnog now."

"Coming right up. Would you like the Jones special?"

"What's that?"

"Rum." She laughed at Jackie's enthusiastic nod and headed for the kitchen.

Jackie took the opportunity to study the tree closer. She smiled when she noticed the number of ornaments that had obviously been made by children, and reached out to touch one. Her mother would never have allowed them in the house, let alone on the tree. Maybe she had known subconsciously that coming to see Gabby was the right thing to do.

"Don't scrutinize it too closely, you'll see the flaws," Gabby joked as she entered the room. "I made that one when I was eight."

"Actually, I was hoping for some of the magic to rub off on me," she replied seriously. Steeping away from the tree, Jackie accepted the glass of eggnog. "The home made ornaments make the tree special."

"I think so." After Gabby sank to the floor, she propped her back against the sofa. "So, are you ready to talk about why you're here and not at the party with Stephanie?"

Jackie placed her drink on the coffee table and slid down next to Gabby. "Funny that," she said with no hint of humor. "To my surprise, being at that party was too much like the nightmare of Christmas parties past. I might as well have been at my parent's house. And Stephanie..." She blew out a sharp breath, and ran her fingers through her hair. "Once I made that discovery that she and her so called friends would fit right in with my parent's crowd, I left. I was driving around trying to make sense of it all, and somehow ended up here."

Hearing about Stephanie's downfall, Gabby tried and failed to stop the flow of relief that swept through her body. She was only human after all. But the wan expression of Jackie's face caused her to speak up. "In Stephanie's defense, maybe she was acting like her parents expect her to act."

"No." Jackie gave a snort of disgust. "She finally stopped acting for my benefit. Shit. To think...I was starting to more than like her. I feel like such a fool." She covered her face with her hands. "I can never get it right. I always end up with the same woman, different name."

I know. Biting her cheek, Gabby rubbed Jackie's arm. *If only she could see me.* "I'm sorry."

Jackie nodded, but didn't reply. She reached for her cup and kept her gaze on the tree. There was something almost hypnotic about it, combined with the Christmas music...and Gabby. Maybe Gabby more than the tree and the music. Jackie felt herself relax for the first time since

leaving the horrible party. “I’m sorry I barged into your peaceful evening with my bull,” she said after a protracted silence.

Gabby, who was happy to have her friend’s company for any reason, nudged her shoulder playfully. “That’s what friends are for, Jack. And I don’t mind company for the savoring.”

“Savoring?” She sniffed the air around her friend. “Funny, you don’t smell like a drunk.”

“Ha. Ha. I was talking about savoring the anticipation. The older I get, the more I enjoy anticipating all the happiness tomorrow will bring.”

“The older I get, the less I expect,” Jackie said quietly. “It’s become just another day.”

Gabby’s need to comfort was an instinctive reaction to the sorrow in her friend’s voice. “We’re going to change that tomorrow,” she declared, reaching for Jackie’s hand. “I expect you here by ten, ready to work and have fun.”

“Ten? But I always sleep late on Christmas.”

“Don’t you try that cute puppy dog look on me, young lady.” She gave a mock scowl to hide the melting of her heart. It was hard not to cover those pouting lips with her own. Maybe inviting Jackie was a mistake. Would she fall even harder having her around on that special of special days? What was done was done. “I’m cutting you a break, Stevens. I could have asked you to be here at seven.”

Jackie’s smirk challenged her to try. “Ten...ish.”

Jackie arrived home in a good mood. But that was usually the case after she’d spent time with Gabby. There was something about her friend that was so refreshing and honest – especially compared to the crowd Jackie hung out with. *And what does that say about me?* Frowning, she sat on the ultra modern sofa which fit her ultra modern condo, and looked around the room. After the warmth of Gabby’s house, she might as well have been in a morgue. *When did I become dissatisfied with this place, with my life?* Before she could pursue the thought further, the intercom buzzed letting her know she had a visitor at the front gate. She was considering ignoring the summons, when the buzzer sounded several times in a row. With a sniff of impatience, she crossed the room. “What?”

“Hey, it’s me. I...I wanted to talk. Please?”

The frown intensified at hearing Stephanie’s voice. “Okay,” she said with a loud sigh, and hit the release button. Squaring her shoulders, Jackie walked to the front door to wait on her unwanted visitor. When the doorbell rang, she forced the semblance of a smile. “Come in.” She stepped back quickly to avoid the kiss. “I’m surprised to hear from you after our earlier discussion.”

Stephanie looked hurt. “Can I sit down?”

Jackie motioned with her hand. By the time she locked the door, Stephanie had made herself comfortable on the sofa. *If she thinks she’s staying long, she has another thought coming.* She couldn’t help comparing the other woman with Gabby. Stephanie was short and fashionably thin. Her shoulder length blond hair, framed a heart shape face. It was her beauty that had drawn Jackie’s initial interest. It was finding out that her beauty was barely skin deep that killed the interest. “What did you want to talk about?” She took a seat across from Stephanie and crossed her arms.

“I...I’m sorry I said what I said about your little friend.”

Jackie closed her eyes and counted to ten. This discussion was clearly going to be a waste of her time. “Little? She’s six inches taller than you.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Unfortunately I do, Stephanie,” she retorted through clenched teeth. “Does being non-white and non-rich make her a non-person?”

“That is not what I meant.” Stephanie blinked her blue eyes rapidly and sniffed. “What’s wrong with you today? I can’t seem to say anything right.”

Jackie snorted in disgust. “Here’s a news flash. It’s not me, it’s you. I think you need to leave. We have nothing else to say to each other.”

“Why won’t you listen? I’m trying to apologize. You can’t tell me you’ve never said something you later regretted.” Stephanie’s eyes glistened with tears. “Please. Give me another chance.”

“I think not.” She was unmoved by the fake tears. “You made the mistake of letting me see the real you tonight.” Jackie grimaced, shaking her head as if trying to get rid of the memory. “It wasn’t a pleasant experience.”

“You sanctimonious, bitch!” Stephanie stood and stormed to the door. “You won’t find yourself welcomed by my crowd once I’m finished with you.”

“Do you promise?” She smirked at the shocked look on Stephanie’s face. The poor fool didn’t realize how empty her threat was. “After what I heard at the party, I don’t give a damn. Maybe *now* you’ll leave.”

“You *will* regret this.”

“Will I?” She laughed as the door was slammed shut by one pissed off blonde. Feeling exhilarated, she crossed the room to lock the door and set the alarm. “Maybe she was one of

those Spirits that visited Scrooge the night before Christmas.” Jackie smiled at the silly notion. The Spirits hadn’t come until after the old geezer was asleep.

Gabby took one last look at the tree before turning off the lights for the night. She walked to the window, pushed the curtain aside and smiled when she noticed the slow fall of snow flakes. It wasn’t supposed to accumulate, but a nice dusting on the lawns would make the day even more special for kids. Gabby laughed. Kids? Who was she trying to fool? Snow, no matter how little, would make the day more special for her.

Letting the curtain fall back in place, she crossed the room, grabbed her coat, and headed outside. Gabby raised her face to the sky and grinned as the big flakes melt on her round cheeks, then twirled around with her arms held wide open. It was almost as if she had the world to herself. At a little after midnight, her neighborhood was fairly quiet. The only noise was an occasional bark from the dog a couple of houses down. She turned to go back into the house when she heard the mewling sound of an animal. Fearing her neighbor’s half-wild cat had delivered kittens yet again, she made her way cautiously to the side of the house. Her heart almost stopped when she parted the bushes.

“Oh my God!” Gabby quickly bent and picked up the basket. Judging from the size of the baby, she figured it couldn’t be very old. She looked around, but the only other thing in sight was a large diaper bag. “Let’s get you inside out of the cold, sweetie.” Entering the house, she gave silent thanks the snow had driven her outside. There was no way the baby would have survived the night in the freezing temperatures.

She placed the basket on the living room floor and restarted the fire. “Okay, let’s have a look at you,” she cooed, removing the baby from the basket. Gabby was glad to discover the child was dressed warmly underneath the thick pink blanket. She pulled off the tiny pink knit cap and laughed at the tufts of blonde hair. “What a little sweetheart.” When the baby looked at her with beseeching hazel eyes, so like her own, Gabby’s heart was a goner. Here was a chance for her to repay the kindness that had been shown to her.

“What am I thinking?” If she had any sense, she would call the police. It was the lawful thing to do. But was it the right thing to do? No. There had to be a reason the baby was left at her house. Something deep inside of her told Gabby she needed to figure out the reason before she turned the little girl over to strangers. Besides, the thought of the baby having to spend Christmas in some lonely place almost broke her heart. “I’ll call them later.” She kissed a soft cheek. “Today, you’ll get to enjoy the rest of my family.”

The baby’s eyes fluttered as if she understood what was being said. She stretched her tiny body and smacked her lips. But it wasn’t until she started rooting around on Gabby’s chest, that Gabby figured out what the baby was searching for. “Oh.” Her eyes grew wide and she reached for the bag, praying she’d find the necessary supplies. “Bingo.” Carefully returning the fretting baby to the basket, she moved to the kitchen. While the bottle was being warmed, she tried her best to sooth the crying child with a song.

Gabby continued to sing softly as the baby sucked the bottle dry. She threw a dish towel over her shoulder and burped the baby, surprised at the loud sound coming from one so small. Switching the little girl back to her arm, she watched the tiny eyelids start to close. “Hey, sweetheart, I bet I need to change your diaper.” They returned to the living room, where Gabby spread out the blanket and deftly changed the baby’s diaper. “Thank goodness I have plenty of experience, huh?” She bent and gave the drowsy child another kiss. “I wonder what your name is.”

“The bag!” She hurried to the kitchen, grabbed the bag, and returned to find the baby had fallen asleep. Gabby opened the bag and searched for a note. In a side pocket, she found a legal-sized envelope with the name, Angel Renee Jones, written on it. *We have something in common*, she thought, stroking the baby’s leg. Here was proof the baby belonged with her. “My own Christmas Angel.” She smiled and her heart swelled. “How fitting.”

Gabby was determined to keep Angel with her at all costs. They belonged together. With that decided, she pulled the piece of paper out of the envelope and was surprised to find it was a copy of an application for a birth certificate. Gabby almost choked when she saw her name listed as the birth mother. What was going on? Her eye brows rose on noting that Angel had been born a week before around the time Gabby had been picking up Jackie for the party.

She rubbed her chin. Was Jackie involved in this somehow? And did it really matter? Gabby shook her head. What was important was that she had a daughter to watch over. Somehow someone had known their little girl would find a good home with Gabby, and she would live up to that expectation – much like her parents had done. Like them, she didn’t have a lot of money, but like them, she had a lot of love to share.

To her surprise, Jackie awoke early Christmas morning. An eagerness she hadn’t felt in a long time filled her senses. She found herself whistling as she showered, something unheard of for her. “Damn. I feel like the new Scrooge.” She peered in the mirror as she towel dried her hair, but she looked the same as always. But maybe, just maybe, there was a twinkle in her eyes that hadn’t been there before. Whatever it was, she liked the feeling.

It was only seven o’clock when she turned on the coffeemaker – another unheard of occurrence. Jackie laughed, wondering if she’d slept through the visits of the other Christmas spirits. “Or maybe it was sharing the anticipation with Gabby.” A thoughtful expression came over her face. The time she’d spent with her friend the night before, had helped make up for some of the disappointing Christmases she’d experienced growing up. And obviously her expectations had risen, or else she would still be in bed.

Jackie fixed herself a cup of coffee, then drank it while contemplating her surroundings. She was struck again by the lack of warmth. There wasn’t much in her condo that she would regret the loss of. Her only possessions of sentimental value, was a set of well worn children’s books she’d gotten as birthday presents from a beloved nanny. *How pathetic*. She closed her eyes and

took a deep breath. She didn't have to live like this. "I can change that. No. I *will* change that." The first step would be finding a new place to live. Maybe a house with a couple of dogs to chase after.

She looked at the clock on the stove, and decided it wasn't too early to show up at Gabby's. Her friend would be the perfect person to share her new found insights with, and to help her chart a way. Not questioning her sudden eagerness to see Gabby, she cleaned up the kitchen, grabbed the gifts she'd painstakingly picked out, and headed for the warmth and comfort she'd knew she'd find in Gabby.

Gabby woke up the minute she heard the baby stirring. The sight of the tiny girl, sucking on her fist, caused her heart to constrict. She pushed back the covers and swung her legs over the edge of the bed. "Hey, sweetie, you ready to eat again?" After removing the baby from the basket she'd slept in, Gabby gave her a kiss, and placed her on the bed. "We need to change your diaper first, little girl," she cooed. "Then after you eat, mama needs to start cooking for the Christmas feast, okay?" Saying mama sounded so natural.

Once again, Gabby sang to the fretting child while she warmed the formula. As she fed Angel, she allowed herself to wonder what it would be like to breast feed. It would certainly cut down on the prep time. "No matter," she said, and kissed Angle's forehead. "Together, we'll make this work. Won't we, my little sweet pea?" She burped the drowsy baby, returned her to the basket, and placed her near the Christmas tree. Tomorrow, she would go to the thrift store and look for something more suitable.

When the doorbell rang an hour later, Gabby was up to her elbows in flour. She'd just finished kneading the bread dough. After wiping off her hands, she hurried to the door. Since it was too early for her scheduled visitors, she worried that it was Angel's mother, come to take her back. "Think of what's best for the baby." Exhaling, she opened the door. "Jackie!" Her heart raced first from relief, then from the sight of her friend. "Come on in, Ms. I Don't Do Early."

Jackie shrugged, looking adorable in her Santa hat. "For you, I made an exception. Merry Christmas and Happy Birthday, Gabby." She thrust the bag filled with gifts at her friend, then wiped her feet on the mat before entering the house and taking off her long leather coat. "Can you believe it, a white Christmas?"

"Thanks, Merry Christmas, and yes I believe in white Christmases." Gabby shifted the bag to one arm and threw the other around Jackie's waist. "Thank you for making an exception." She rested her head on Jackie's shoulder for a moment, breathing in the familiar scent that was all Jackie. The temptation to touch her lips to the soft exposed neck was almost overwhelming. "What really brings you out so early?"

"The pleasure of your company." Jackie dropped a kiss on her forehead. "And the fact that my house seemed sterile after the warmth of yours."

“Good answer.” Gabby patted Jackie’s flat stomach before removing her arm. “Have you eaten? I was thinking of making some French toast.”

“I wouldn’t turn it down, but I thought you were going to put me to work.”

“If I feed you first, you’ll be able to work longer.”

Jackie’s shout of laughter was filled with joy. This was where she needed to be. “I didn’t realize you were a slave driver. I guess I’d better take you up on your offer.” She draped her coat on the old wooden coat hanger. “Lead on, McDuff.”

Gabby handed her the bag of gifts. “Your first task is to artfully place these under the tree. And no peeking for gifts with your name on them.”

“Yes, mom.” Jackie accepted the bag and made her way to the living room. She was brought up short by the basket in front of the tree. On her tip toes, she approached the sleeping child. *Lucy, you got some splainin to do.* She smiled, taking in the baby who looked remarkably like her friend. She quietly placed the gifts under the tree, then hurried to the kitchen.

Jackie leaned against the door jamb, and studied Gabby as she deftly mixed ingredients. Yeah, the baby in the living room looked remarkably like the woman in her sights. And they were both adorable. *Where did that come from?* She cleared her throat. “You forgot to tell me you had a hotline to the stork.”

Gabby looked up with a hesitant smile. She was unsure how Jackie would react to her bizarre tale. “I didn’t realize I had one until early this morning. I went out to get a closer look at the snow and discovered a special delivery.” She dropped a pat of butter in the hot skillet, and watched as it melted. “Look at the piece of paper on the table,” she said, motioning with her head. Gabby busied herself with dipping a slice of bread in the batter, then listened to it sizzle once she dropped it in the skillet. She worried what her friend must be thinking. Would Jackie be able to suspend belief and accept Angel for the wonderful gift that she was?

“This is incredible.” Jackie came to stand next to Gabby. Her expression was a reflection of her amazement. “She was born at the exact moment you showed up at my place. That must mean something.”

“Five minute after,” Gabby corrected, dipping another slice of bread. “I rang the bell at eight.”

Jackie smiled. “But I’m sure you arrived five minutes early and waited. You always arrive five minutes early.”

She bent her head as she felt the telltale sign of a blush. “I didn’t realize you noticed that.”

“Of course I did. It’s one of things I really like about you.” Jackie placed a hand on Gabby’s shoulder. “It makes me feel special that you care enough to ensure you’ll be on time. Most of the other people I know don’t do that.”

Gabby raised her head, but was unable to meet Jackie's eyes. "I'm glad you think so," she said, her voice husky. She swallowed. "How many pieces of toast do you want?"

"I'll take four. All of a sudden, I'm starving." Jackie squeezed her shoulder, surprised by the warm feeling that suffused her body. "Should I set the table?"

"That would be great." Gabby released a quiet sigh of relief when Jackie stepped away. She had been in danger of losing her composure. "The plates are in the cabinet next to the refrigerator."

"I remember." She smiled, thinking of the last time Gabby had made dinner for her. "I remember the lasagna you served me, too. It was the best I ever had."

"You don't have to suck up, I'm going to feed you anyway," Gabby teased, pleased by the compliment.

Five minutes later, they were sitting down to eat. Gabby smiled as Jackie cleaned her plate with relish. "Would you like some more?"

Jackie shook her head, pushing her plate away. "I'm good. Any more would be gluttony."

"It's Christmas, you're allowed."

"Thanks, but no thanks. I want to have room for the feast I'm going to be helping you prepare." She took a quick glance at the birth certificate. "What are you going to do about the baby?"

Gabby startled, taken off guard by the question. Surely Jackie already knew the answer. "Raise her like my parents raised me, of course. I couldn't do anything less." She took a sip of coffee. "Do you believe in miracles, Jackie?"

"I believe in you," she replied quietly. "And I believe in the Angel sleeping in the other room."

"Thank you." Gabby covered Jackie's hand with her own. "That means a lot to me."

Jackie smiled. "Surprisingly, it means a lot to me, too. Listen, uh...I know you don't like to talk about money, but...well...I've got so much." She looked at Gabby expectantly. "And I can help in other ways, too. I haven't been around babies before, but I'm a quick learner."

Gabby squeezed the hand under hers. "I can use all the help I can get." She knew she'd said the right thing when a brilliant smile lit Jackie's face. "You can be part of the village."

"Be careful what you say. You may never get rid of me now."

"I'm willing to take my chances."

“You can put her down now,” Gabby said, smiling indulgently at Jackie and Angel. “I think she’s good and asleep.”

“Five more minutes,” Jackie pleaded, and kissed the baby’s forehead. “Between all your relatives, I hardly got a turn to hold her.”

Gabby snorted at that blatant untruth. “They had to use a jackhammer to get her from you. And don’t try that cute begging face on me.”

“Why? Doesn’t it work?”

“You know it does.”

“Good,” was the smug reply. “You only have yourself to blame. I did warn you about not being able to get rid of me.”

If only that were true. “That’s what the futon is for,” Gabby declared, and stood up. She stretched out the kinks from the busy day. “I’ll go get you some sheets, if you’re serious about spending the night.”

Jackie nodded. “I thought we could take turns feeding her. You’d get more sleep that way.”

“Have I told you how wonderful you are?” She ruffled Jackie’s hair.

“Feel free to tell me anytime.”

“You’re wonderful. I’ll be right back.”

While Gabby was gone, Jackie placed the baby in the basket, then pulled out the futon.

“You didn’t have to do that,” Gabby said, entering the room with sheets in her hand. “I know you wanted a minute more with Angel.”

“I have to convince you I can be helpful, or you’ll put me out.” Jackie was halfway serious.

Gabby shook her head. “After all you did today?” She dropped the bedding on the futon and put an arm around Jackie’s waist. “Today wouldn’t have been near as special, without you here spending it with me. If Angel could talk, I know she’d agree with me.” She exhaled when Jackie’s arm surrounded her, pulling her close. “For someone who didn’t know how to celebrate Christmas, or deal with babies, you did a bang up job.”

Jackie sighed in contentment. She was enjoying all the touching and hugging they’d done throughout the day. “I had the best teacher.” She kissed Gabby’s temple. “Thank you. I can honestly say this *was* the best day of my life. And you’ve now been officially dethroned as the

number one fan of Christmas. I can't wait for next year. Do you think Angel will be too young for a pony?"

"Don't even think it." Gabby tried to sound stern, but ruined the effort by giggling. "No ponies until she's ten." She cringed, realizing she sounded like she was asking for a long term commitment. The last thing she wanted to do was scare her friend away.

"Ten, huh? I can do that." Jackie looked at Gabby, grinning. "Does that mean I can get her a car when she's sixteen?"

"Why don't we concentrate on formula and diapers for now?"

"Oh, no, sweetie. That's your job. I'm the impractical one in this partnership."

"Partnership, huh? I like the sound of that. Even if I do have to be the heavy." Gabby rubbed her cheek against Jackie's shoulder. It wasn't a declaration of love, but it was a start. She had sixteen years to win Jackie's heart.

The End