

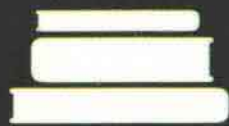
HEARTWARMING

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Love Inspired™
®

A Daughter for Christmas

Margaret Daley



Helping Hands
Homeschooling

"What happened to you?"

"While I was in the army overseas, my wife divorced me," Max said. "There was one thing she neglected to tell me." He pulled in a deep breath, held it for a long moment, then released it slowly. "She'd been pregnant with my child."

Rachel's heart twisted like a bundle of barbed wire. "She raised your child without your knowledge?" Who had his child now?

"Not exactly. She put our daughter up for adoption without my knowledge." He backed away, leaning against the counter, his hands gripping its edge.

Suddenly staring into his bleak expression, she knew the answer. Her child. Thirteen years ago. A girl. Could it be? No, that wasn't possible. "Where is she?"

"Here." His gaze clouded as though the sun glittering on the grass had suddenly disappeared.

Her world fell away, the room spinning out of control.

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MARGARET DALEY

feels she has been blessed. She has been married more than thirty years to her husband, Mike, whom she met in college. He is a terrific support and her best friend. They have one son, Shaun. Margaret has been writing for many years and loves to tell a story. When she was a little girl, she would play with her dolls and make up stories about their lives. Now she writes these stories down. She especially enjoys weaving stories about families and how faith in God can sustain a person when things get tough. When she isn't writing, she is fortunate to be a teacher for students with special needs. Margaret has taught for more than twenty years and loves working with her students. She has also been a Special Olympics coach and has participated in many sports with her students.

A Daughter for Christmas

Margaret Daley



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A DAUGHTER FOR CHRISTMAS

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To Emily Rodmell, my Steeple Hill editor—
thank you for all your hard work.

The Lord is good, a stronghold in the day of
trouble: and he knoweth them that trust in him.

—*Nahum* 1:7



Chapter One



On his second day in Tallgrass, Oklahoma, Dr. Max Connors opened his front door to discover the one woman he wasn't quite ready to meet. Rachel Howard. Mother of his child.

Although she didn't know that. Yet.

Prim, proper Rachel, with her reddish-brown hair pulled back in a twist, held up a plate full of fudge. "Welcome to the neighborhood."

The smile that graced her full lips transformed her plain features into radiance and needled his conscience. His reason for being in Tallgrass would totally shatter her world.

When he didn't say anything right away, she added in a cultured voice, "I'm part of the welcoming committee for Ranch Acres Estates."

"There's such a thing as a welcoming committee?" In New York City he couldn't have envisioned anything like that. Certainly not in his apartment building where he'd hardly known his neighbors. But then he'd worked long hours at the hospital as an emergency room doctor.

"Yes, especially for the doctor who's going into prac-

tice with Dr. Reynolds. I promised Kevin I would give you a proper welcome.”

“You know Kevin Reynolds?” He knew she did, that her deceased husband had been Kevin Reynolds’s partner, but he couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“He’s a good friend.” She bent a little closer, as though she were imparting a secret. “In case you haven’t figured it out, Kevin is very excited you’ve decided to move to Tallgrass. And wants to make sure you stay around.”

A whiff of lavender teased Max’s nostrils. “Come in.” He quickly stepped back to put some space between them. He hadn’t been prepared to meet her in person yet, and her close proximity only reinforced that. “Please excuse the mess.” He waved his hand toward the boxes stacked around his living and dining areas. “I’ve got some of the kitchen put together. Let’s go back there.”

When Rachel entered the kitchen, she stopped a few feet inside. “You’ve been here a day, and you’ve already got this in order. I’m amazed. When I moved into my house, it took me a week to do that.”

“I figure if I don’t tackle the kitchen this weekend I won’t get it done and I love to cook.”

“You do? You sound like my granny and my sister, Jordan.”

He gestured toward a chair at his round glass table. “You don’t like to cook?”

“I do it because I have a family to feed, but I’m not passionate about it like Jordan is.” She sank onto the seat and placed her housewarming gift of fudge on the table, her movements precise, graceful.

And for a few seconds they captured his attention. He mentally shook his head and finally asked, “What are you passionate about?” Again, he knew the answer before she said it because he’d made a point to find

out as much as he could about the woman raising his daughter.

“Quilting.”

“Why?” He took the chair across from her, still needing the distance to keep his perspective. Her photo didn’t really do her justice. It’d captured her features but hadn’t conveyed the warmth radiating from her, the twinkle in her blue eyes, which reminded him of the color of a lagoon he’d swum in on a rare vacation to Tahiti a couple of years ago between working in the Middle East and New York.

“I love telling a story through a quilt. At church a group of us are working on one that tells the story of Christ. It’ll go on the wall in the rec hall, hopefully by Thanksgiving.” Her voice conveyed her excitement. About quilting or Jesus? Or both? He knew she was strong in her faith. She attended Tallgrass Community Church, or at least that was what the private detective’s report had said.

He forced himself to relax back in his chair, but his gut tightened as though he were preparing for a punch. What was he doing here? Doubts began to assail him about his plan—one that might not have been thought out as well as it should have. What he’d come up with in the safe confines of his apartment in New York City mocked him now. His actions would affect a lot of people. “This fudge looks delicious.” He touched the piece closest to him, needing to do something to take his mind off his doubts.

“It’s a secret family recipe handed down through the daughters. The first few times I made it I messed it up bad. It was a soft blob of chocolate. It tasted fine, but it didn’t set up. Granny had to come to the rescue. A Masterson has to be able to make this fudge, according

to her. It's a family tradition. I've been trying to teach my daughter, but she doesn't want to have anything to do with cooking."

Tension whipped down his length. He clamped his jaws together for a few seconds, drew in a deep breath to ease his stiff muscles and said, "How many children do you have?"

"Three. Taylor, my daughter, is thirteen. And I have two boys, twins, who are four."

"That sounds like you've got your hands full."

The gleam in her eyes dimmed. "It isn't easy being a single mom, but I have family here which helps."

"Ah, that would help. Who's giving you problems? The thirteen-year-old or the twins?"

Her chuckles sprinkled the air like powdered sugar. "It's obvious you haven't dealt with a teenager."

He nodded, stamping down his anger simmering beneath the surface. Rachel Howard wasn't at fault, but she could be hurt by his presence in Tallgrass. "Guilty as charged. I haven't had the pleasure other than as a doctor." His deceased ex-wife hadn't given him a chance to find that out. Leaning slightly forward in his chair, he snatched a piece of fudge. "But I have it on good authority they can be a challenge to raise."

"Your source is correct."

"I'll tell my brother he isn't alone in dealing with his teenager."

"Does he live here?"

"No, back in New York—upstate."

"What made you come out here to..." She pressed her hand over her mouth. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"That's okay. I needed a change." Which was true but not the main reason he'd moved to Tallgrass. A prickling

of unease in the back of his mind caused him to shift in his chair.

“Well, I know that Kevin is ecstatic no matter what made you decide to take him up on his offer.”

Max struggled to keep his expression from showing any hint of his main motive for moving to Tallgrass. To cover the sudden awkward silence, he took a bite of the morsel he held. The chocolate melted in his mouth, offering a burst of sweetness to tempt his palate. “This is delicious. Is there any chance I could get the recipe? I don’t normally make desserts, but for this I would make an exception.”

Rachel shook her head. “Sorry. My granny would have my head if I passed it on to anyone outside the family.” When she smiled, her whole face glowed. “And I’m not brave enough to get on the wrong side of my grandmother.”

He laughed. “I’ve got to meet this woman. Maybe I could persuade her to reveal it.”

A serious expression descended but only for a second before the corners of her mouth tilted up again. “This I’ve got to see. It won’t work, but I can’t deny you a chance to try.”

He finished the rest of the piece of fudge and sucked the last taste off the tip of his finger. “I love a good challenge, and it sounds like your grandmother is one.”

“Since you live on the same block and your house is next door to her—beau, as she calls Doug Bateman—you’ll probably get your chance.”

He couldn’t resist picking up another chocolate delight and eating part of it. “This neighborhood is getting more interesting by the minute.”

“Tallgrass may be smaller than New York, but we have our own unique characters.”

"You'll have to tell me all about my neighbors."

Rachel checked her watch and rose. "I wish I had the time, but I have to pick up my boys from their playtime at the church. But you'll have to come to dinner one evening. I'll have the rest of my family down and introduce you to part of the neighborhood." She started for the foyer, her glance straying to all the boxes stacked along the walls and some even in the middle of the living room. "And it should be soon."

"You don't have to do that." He hadn't gone to a neighbor's house for dinner since he was a child.

She fluttered her hand while saying, "Nonsense," then grasped the handle and opened the door. "That's what neighbors are for. To help out when you need it." Pinning him with an expression that dared him to disagree, she added, "You don't need to spend your time cooking when you have all this to do. How about tomorrow evening? I'll see if Kevin can come, too. We'll consider it your welcome to Tallgrass party."

As she stepped out on to the porch, he clutched the edge of the door. "I can't have you go to all that trouble." *Especially since you don't know why I'm here.*

"You didn't. I volunteered." The blue sparkle in her eyes intensified. "I love giving parties. Just wait until the holidays start next month. I have six weeks of fun."

Was he ready for this? The tapping of his heartbeat increased. "What time tomorrow night?"

"Six." She turned and pointed to the house across the street and down one. "That's where I live."

Yes, I know. "Beautiful place. Your flowers are gorgeous."

"Mums and pansies. I planted them a few weeks ago."

Moving out on to the porch, he surveyed his yard,

the grass almost completely brown now. The few scrubs in front looked pitiful compared to everyone else's on the block. "It's obvious the previous owner wasn't into gardening."

"They weren't, but as long as you don't have junk piled up in the yard and multiple old cars rusting and parked around everywhere, you'll be okay."

"Good. I was getting kind of worried."

"You'll be fine at least until the holiday season. Then it's all-out war to see who has the best decorated lawn."

He dropped his jaw. "Really?" He didn't even put up a Christmas tree. Usually he worked Christmas Eve and Day so others could stay home with their families. He'd wanted a family at one time, but had given up the dream. Now he had a second chance.

She grinned. "No, just kidding." She descended the steps and spun around at the bottom. "Sort of." Then she sauntered down the sidewalk and crossed the street.

He clasped the white railing on his porch and watched her disappear into her house. Nothing had prepared him to meet the woman who'd adopted his child. A child he'd only recently learned about. At first he'd wanted to storm to Tallgrass, demand his daughter back from the family that had her for thirteen years and seek custody of his only child, even if his chances of winning a custody battle weren't good.

Not one word of the detective's report had drawn an accurate picture of Rachel Howard. She was no longer a two-dimensional person on a sheet of paper, but a real-life woman who brought a room to life when she entered. Who exuded graciousness.

All the plans he'd made back in New York City contin-

ued to taunt him. He wanted to get to know his daughter, to be a part of her life, but at what cost?

Shoving himself away from the railing, Max swung around and strode into his house. He withdrew his cell from his jeans pocket and punched in his brother's number.

"I'm here." Max's fingers clenched the small plastic phone.

"How's it going? Have you seen her?" Brendan Connors asked, apprehension and a certain edge of excitement in his voice.

"Not Taylor. But I've met Rachel Howard."

"You went over there? I thought you were going to wait and observe them for a while before you made your move. Figure out how best to approach your daughter."

"Rachel came over to welcome me to the neighborhood. Right now I feel like a heel. Do you know what this could do to the woman, to her whole family?"

"Taylor is yours, and she was taken away from you through no fault of yours. You have a right to be her father now that you know about her. The lawyer said you had a case of fraud possibly. It could help you get custody of Taylor."

"The optimal word is *possibly*, and the Howards weren't involved in the fraud. Only my ex-wife. I want to be a part of Taylor's life. I just didn't realize until now how many others will be involved." Max sank on to the couch, weariness enveloping him after a two-day road trip to Tallgrass and what unpacking he'd done so far. He needed some kind of order. He felt as though his life were exploding into hundreds of pieces of shrapnel. In the war, he'd struggled to repair the damage bombs had done to soldiers, sometimes failing. He couldn't fail now.

"Look, if you have to blame anyone for this current

situation, blame your ex-wife. She had your child and gave her up for adoption while you were overseas.”

Max could still remember how his wife had told him she didn’t want children, especially with him gone all the time. She’d informed him she wasn’t ready to be a mother, and maybe he hadn’t been because he’d had to work long hours. But that fact hadn’t deterred him from wanting a family when he’d married Alicia.

“She divorced you and never told you she was even pregnant, all because she didn’t like the fact you had to pay the army back for funding your medical training by working for them. You couldn’t help that a good part of that was overseas where she didn’t want to go.”

Anger infused his brother’s voice, reminding Max of his own after he discovered Alicia’s deception and betrayal. Brendan had been there to listen. Max would never have known about Taylor if Alicia’s younger sister hadn’t found the papers about the adoption in Alicia’s belongings after she died.

Max hung his head and kneaded the taut cords of his neck. “I can’t rush into anything. That much I know. I’ll get to know Taylor and the Howard family first.”

“That could be dangerous.”

“How so?”

“You could begin to care about them and not want to disrupt their lives. Your end goal is trying to get custody of Taylor if at all possible.”

He didn’t think he had the ability to care deeply for others. It was too painful. He’d lost too many people in his life to risk that again. And yet he wanted to get to know his daughter, be a part of her life. There had been a time in his life when he’d desperately wanted to be a father. He’d given up on that dream—too many tours of

duty in hot zones around the world. The things he'd seen had left their mark on his soul.

But Taylor was his daughter—a part of him.

Max straightened, glancing out the window at Rachel's house. "I'll come up with something." His hand ached from holding the cell so tightly. "I need to go. I wanted to let you know I arrived."

"Keep me posted."

"Will do."

Max clicked off his cell and stuffed it back in his pocket. After scrubbing his hands down his face, he massaged his fingertips into his temple. Tomorrow night he would meet his daughter for the first time. A tight band about his chest threatened to squeeze the breath from him. He forced oxygen-rich air into his lungs. The realization that months of searching and planning had finally come to an end unnerved him more than patching up a soldier under enemy fire.

Pausing in the doorway of the den later that day, Rachel watched her two sons playing with their Legos. After several years of trying to have a child, she and Lawrence had ended up adopting Taylor. When their daughter was five, they started talking about adopting another child. They both wanted more children. They had begun the adoption process again when she'd become pregnant with twins.

Sam was her creative child, diving right in and coming up with things as he went, while Will had to figure out everything before he started. They approached life from opposite ends, and yet they were so close. Their father's unexpected death two and a half years ago hadn't affected them. They had been too young to realize what had really happened to their dad.