

* M E R R Y *
*M*ysteries

ANGELS AMONG US

ELLEN HARRIS

Guideposts

New York

* Chapter One

The aroma of baking cookies and mingled spices wafted toward Abby Stanton as she entered the house she shared with her sister. The fragrance was so strong it felt like it might lift her right off her feet and carry her along like a cartoon character following her nose. She shed her damp jacket and spread it out on two pegs of the coatrack so it could dry and went into the kitchen.

“What in the world!” she exclaimed as she stopped short in the doorway. Every surface was covered with baking trays, cooling racks, and freezer containers.

Her sister Mary doled out a spoonful of dough onto the last empty space on a cookie sheet. “Hey there, how was your day?” she asked distractedly. Then without waiting for an answer, she turned her wheelchair and picked up the cookie sheet. “Finnegan, oven,” she said.

Mary’s devoted service dog, always on the alert and eager to please, looked at her as she pointed toward the oven door. “Open,” she said.

Finnegan grabbed hold of the leather strap dangling from the oven handle with his teeth and backed away until the door started to tilt. He continued pulling until his nose was on the floor and the door was all the way open. Mary pulled out one cookie sheet and set it on the stovetop. She slipped another one in and closed the door.

“When did you teach him to open the oven?” Abby asked. “I didn’t know he could do that.”

“It’s new,” Mary said. “We’ve been working on it for a couple of weeks. It really helps when I have my hands full.”

“So now he’s your service dog *and* your baking assistant,” Abby said. “And it looks like you need all the help you can get,” she added, surveying the kitchen again. “Mary, what *is* all this?”

“Christmas baking, Abby,” Mary said. “I told you this morning it was time for us to get going on it. Isn’t that why you’re home early?”

“Well, yes,” Abby said hesitantly. “But I thought you had in mind a couple of batches of cookies and maybe a few loaves of banana bread.”

“Oh no, no,” Mary said, shaking her head. “I mean, yes, those too. But that’s just for openers. I wanted to bake gifts for the neighbors, and we can make some things ahead for Christmas dinner at Stanton Farm with Mom and Dad. And I’d like to freeze a few things for just-in-case gifts. You know, for people I might have accidentally forgotten who show up with a gift in their hands. That’s happened to me a couple of times, and I’ve been just mortified.” She put her hand to

her forehead and then rushed on. “And for the bake sale at church and for all the get-togethers.”

“Okay, okay,” Abby said, laughing and throwing up her hands. She pulled an apron from the hook inside the pantry and pushed up the sleeves of her sweater. “That explains this extravaganza.”

“Are you kidding?” Mary asked. “I haven’t even started. This is just for my craft group tomorrow. We’re meeting here and I wanted to have a variety of desserts to serve.” Mary picked up the timer from the kitchen counter and gave the dial a spin. “Could you stir that fudge on the back burner?” she asked as she wheeled back around toward the table. “I’ve got the cinnamon-apple bread done, oatmeal-raisin cookies in the oven, that batch of fudge, and tea cookies already stored in those containers. Next I want to do a couple of batches of divinity fudge.”

“Like Mom used to make?” Abby asked, smiling as she remembered the white fluffy confection. If she closed her eyes, she could almost taste it melting on her tongue. As far as she could remember, their mother never made that treat except at Christmastime so it was inextricably linked to the season—a sweet taste that evoked sweet memories.

“*Just* like Mom used to make,” Mary said. “At least I hope it’ll turn out as good as hers; it’s her recipe.” Mary pointed back to the stovetop. “That fudge ought to be about ready. Would you check the temperature on the candy thermometer?”

Abby did as instructed, and as she bent over the pan the smell of the rich chocolate made her feel light-headed. “It’s

ready,” she confirmed. “But I’ve got to tell you, I need to get something to eat before we go on with this. I skipped lunch today so I could take off early, and all these goodies are making my stomach rumble.”

“I have cold-cut sandwiches made for us,” Mary said, sliding three cookies off the sheet and into a freezer container with quick strokes of the spatula. “And a nice salad. Help me get the fudge spread in these trays and we’ll take a dinner break.”

Abby managed to get through the task without succumbing to the temptation to do more than lick the spoon. While she cleared off one end of the table, Mary brought out their supper and fiddled with the table setting. Even in the midst of this chaos, Mary took the trouble to set a nice table.

Ordinarily, Abby appreciated these finer domestic touches, but she was so hungry she would have reverted to her old ways if Mary weren’t around. When she’d been a research scientist back at Cornell, she’d often returned from a workday with barely the energy left to heat up a can of soup, which she’d usually eaten standing up at the kitchen counter.

“Would you look at that?” Mary said after grace was said and they’d begun eating. She pointed to the wall calendar with her fork, then speared a bite of greens.

Abby looked at the color-coded month of December and laughed. “I don’t think we’re going to be able to fit many more things on there, though I’ll point out there’s a lot more of your red than my green.”

“That’s your own fault Abby. You’ve had just as many invitations as I have.”

“Yes, I know,” Abby said. “And part of me would love to go to every single event, but I’m not like you Mary. I need some alone time to stay on an even keel. And with the holiday open house at the museum less than a week away now, I want to make sure I’m not overcommitting. It wouldn’t do for the associate curator to be too tired to mingle with all our guests, now would it?”

Abby loved her job at the Sparrow Island Nature Museum. When she’d moved back to Sparrow Island, she thought she might miss her job as a researcher at Cornell University’s Lab of Ornithology, but it turned out that being Sparrow Island’s “Bird Lady” was perfect for her.

Mary reached over to pat Abby’s hand. “You’ll be the life of the party, Abby.”

“Well, I don’t know about the life of the party,” Abby said with a grin. “You’re the social butterfly in the family. But I do have that new dress I’m looking forward to wearing. And I would like to be at my best, so I need to pace myself.”

Mary smiled, but then gave a heavy sigh, moving her salad around in the bowl with her fork as if searching for something. “I’ll tell you the truth Abby. I think I’m eager to fill up my calendar so I don’t have time to dwell on the kids not being here for the holidays.”

“I know, Mary,” Abby said, her voice soft. “But you know they’d come if they could.”

“Oh yes,” Mary said. “I understand perfectly, really I do. I know Nancy and Benjamin have to watch their finances.

After all, they have two children to bring up. And I know it's very expensive for them to fly out here all the way from Florida. And now they have their own Christmas traditions to observe. And Zack can't just pick up and come out here in the middle of an engagement. He'll only have a few days off. His jazz band's booked all through the holidays in a club in Chicago..." Her voice trailed off.

"But understanding the situation doesn't mean you can't be disappointed about not seeing them, does it?" Abby said.

"No, no it doesn't," Mary answered. She lifted her teacup, but didn't drink. "I imagine Zack will have Christmas dinner with Lily's family and I'm happy about that."

"Well, I would think you would be. Everyone knows you're hoping they'll fall in love—or realize they already have—and get married. That's no secret."

"Okay," Mary said. "I confess; you've got me. Is that so awful? Yes, I love Lily. For lots of reasons, not the least of which is that she brought Finnegan to me," she said, glancing over at the beautiful yellow Labrador, golden retriever mix. "If it hadn't been for her patience and understanding I don't know if I'd have come to realize what a gift a service dog could be to my life. Especially this special dog, right, Finnegan?"

The dog looked up at Mary and panted, which gave him an expression so closely resembling a human smile, it made Abby and Mary both giggle.

"And," Mary continued, "as you say, I can see that Zack is already in love with Lily, and I think she feels the same

way. But it's going to take more time together for them to finally tell one another. And his vagabond musician's life is not exactly relationship-friendly."

"True," Abby said as she got up to fetch more hot water for tea.

"And Lily can't be expected to stay in limbo, forever waiting for him to make a commitment. That's just not fair," Mary continued.

"Kind of like Henry must feel," Abby murmured under her breath as she picked up the teakettle.

Mary's beau, Sergeant Henry Cobb of the San Juan Sheriff's Department, had been patiently waiting for quite some time for Mary to admit how much she cared for him.

"What was that?" Mary asked.

"Oh, nothing," Abby answered brightly. "I was just saying, you're absolutely right. It's not fair to keep a person waiting for an unreasonable time."

Mary narrowed her eyes. Abby could feel her gaze boring in on her, but she poured more hot water into each of their cups and tried her best to look nonchalant.

Mary didn't press the issue. "Anyway," she said, steering the conversation back into more comfortable territory, "I think Zack may actually be about ready to make some changes in his life. He tells me one of the guys in the quartet has been hinting that he may want to leave the group soon. He's married now and would like to start a family, and the touring just isn't compatible with the kind of family life he wants."

“Oh?” Abby asked. “That’s the first I’ve heard that. But couldn’t they just replace him? I mean, there are a lot of talented musicians out there.”

“Well, yes, I suppose they could,” Mary said. “But to tell the truth I don’t think he’s the only one getting tired of the road. Zack seems to have lost a little of his enthusiasm for it too. Not for the music, certainly, but for the constant travel. It was exciting at first, seeing all the new places, but I think it’s getting old.”

“I can understand that,” Abby said. “I used to love to travel. I was always thrilled when my boss back at Cornell chose me for far-off research projects. I’m glad I’ve had a chance to see so much of the world. But, I tell you, as I get older I’m becoming a real homebody. Especially since I’ve moved back here to Sparrow Island.”

“Well, as you know, I’ve always been that way,” Mary said. “It’s just the way I am. I like my routine and I love being in familiar surroundings. That’s one reason I didn’t accept Nancy’s invitation to go to Tampa to spend Christmas with them. First of all, I didn’t want to disrupt their Christmas activities. And frankly, I just couldn’t bear the thought of being away from home. I’d love to have them all here, but since they can’t be, that’s all the more reason to keep busy and enjoy all the holiday festivities here on the island. Then I won’t have time to miss them.”

“Well, I’d say you’re giving it a valiant try,” Abby said, pointing to the calendar. “It looks like you’ve got something every day and half the nights from now until Christmas.”

“Yes,” Mary agreed, looking at the calendar. “Between that and helping Candace get all the Christmas orders out at Island Blooms, I’m going to be a busy camper.”

Mary’s florist shop always seemed swamped with orders, which was great for business. Her manager, Candace Grover, did a great job running the store, allowing Mary to focus on designing her stunning flower arrangements.

Finnegan lifted his head from the floor where he was resting and gave a little whine.

“You, too, Finnegan,” Mary said to him. “We’re going to have a Merry Christmas—and a very *busy* one, right?”

The dog gave one sharp bark and twitched his tail before putting his head back down and gazing adoringly at Mary.



“Could you get the eggs out of the fridge and start separating them?” Mary asked after they’d finished eating and done the few dinner dishes. “We need to get the divinity going next.”

Abby reached for the refrigerator door, but just then the doorbell rang. “Were you expecting someone?” she asked.

“No,” Mary said, pulling a recipe card from the wooden box that held all the family recipes. “It could be someone dropping off things for the craft fair. I told several people they could bring things here and we’d take a load to Little Flock Church tomorrow in my van.”

Abby went to the door. She looked though the small window in the doorframe and saw a tall, slender young man

waiting on the front steps. The light over the door caught his blond, curly hair and turned it into a nebula around his head. Abby had never seen him before.

“Hello,” she said when she’d opened the door, making it more of a question than a greeting.

“Hi,” the young man said. “I’m here on a mission from Terza Choi at the Bird Nest. I’m a guest there and I volunteered to bring these over for her. She says I’m to give them to Mary Reynolds.” He held up a couple of bulging plastic bags. “Are you Mrs. Reynolds?”

“No, I’m Abby, Abby Stanton, Mary’s sister.”

“Tony Malachy,” the young man said. He hefted the plastic bags again to show he had no free hand to offer.

“Please, come in,” Abby said, opening the door wide. “Mary’s in the kitchen right through here.” Abby showed him in, thinking it rather odd that her friend Terza was using a guest to do her errands. She introduced him to Mary and told her why he was there.

“Nice to meet you,” Tony said with a nod. “I see you two are as busy as Terza,” he said. “She and Martin are cooking up a storm. That’s why she finally agreed to let me do this errand for her,” he said, gesturing again with the bags. “She says these are the lanterns your craft group’s going to paint for the craft fair at your church, Mrs. Reynolds. Where would you like me to put them?”

“It’s Mary, please,” she told him. “Just hand them to Abby and she’ll put them in my craft room. Thank you so much for bringing them over.”

Abby took the bags from him and carried them into Mary's overflowing craft room. Apparently, a few people had already taken Mary up on her offer to transport their donations to the church. Abby took a few minutes to rearrange the bags and boxes lining the walls to make sure nothing was obstructing Mary's wheelchair path. Then she walked back into the kitchen expecting to say good-bye to the young man and see him out.

But when she got there, she found him spreading his wet jacket over the back of a chair by the heat vent.

Mary had the teakettle going. "Tony's soaked," she said to Abby. "I've insisted he have a cup of tea and warm up a few minutes before he sets out again."

"Definitely," Abby said, getting a cup from the cupboard and setting the tea chest in front of Tony. "There's a nice selection here. Pick something that appeals to you."

Abby still thought it rather odd that Terza had allowed a guest to do errands for her, but it was a hectic time of the season and maybe the young man had wanted to be helpful. He seemed very amiable. Abby set about doing a friendly inquest.

She learned that Tony was here on a little vacation, as a gift from "someone special" in his life.

"A sort of holiday holiday," he joked. "I've heard about this place all my life and always wanted to visit, but I've never had the chance until now."

"And so far, what do you think of our little island?" Mary asked.

“Well, I only arrived yesterday. But so far, it’s everything I’ve always thought it would be,” Tony said. “Everyone here is so friendly and it’s beautiful. Especially all decked out for Christmas.”

“Every season here has its charms,” Abby said.

“Say, is that divinity you’re making?” he asked, as he watched Abby assemble ingredients.

“Why yes,” Abby said. “Our mother’s recipe. It’s a special Christmas treat for us.”

“Me too,” Tony said, his eyes widening in surprise. “My grandmother used to make it, but only at...”

“...Christmastime,” Abby and Mary both finished in unison.

“Yes, only then,” Tony said. “Would it be okay if I helped?” he asked. “This brings back such good memories.”

“Sure,” Abby said, giving Mary a glance and getting a nod. “The more the merrier.”

The three set about the preparations for making the divinity.

“I hope I’ll have a chance to experience the island in the other seasons,” Tony said, after he’d donned the apron Abby got for him. He handed over the bowl of egg whites he’d separated to Mary.

She snapped the beaters into the mixer. “Every season has something special about it,” she said.

“Well, if what I’ve seen so far is any indication...,” he said smiling. “I gave myself a walking tour of the town yesterday. And first thing in the morning I’m going exploring farther

out. You'll have to tell me all about the island so I won't miss anything."

The three spent the rest of the evening making not two but four batches of divinity and a batch of ginger cookies to boot. All the while they talked easily about one thing or another.

Tony finally said his good nights when the last cookie was packed up and the myriad bowls, pots, and cookie sheets had each been washed and put away. Abby walked him to the door and stood on the front porch, her heavy cardigan sweater pulled around her against the chill of the evening.

Tony put the bag of goodies that Mary had insisted he take into the basket of the bicycle Terza and Martin kept for guests and zipped his jacket up to his chin. The rain had completely stopped, and the cloud cover had moved out, making for a rare moonlit winter's night. Wet branches and leaves glistened, and the puddles in the driveway looked like a series of shimmering mirages stretching out to the street.

"Thanks for a great evening and thanks for these," Tony said, gesturing toward the bag as he straddled the bike. "I'm sure I'll find someone to share them with."

He pedaled off into the night, the pale light of the moon catching on his hair. As Abby watched, she felt like she'd just said good-bye to an old friend instead of someone she'd only known for a few hours.

"What a nice young man," Mary said when Abby came back into the kitchen.

“Yes, yes, he is that,” Abby said, smiling. “And I have to say, it was nice to have him here. He was very pleasant and a great help too. But there was something else about him—I can’t quite put words to it—he just seems...”

“Charming?” Mary said, raising her eyebrows and putting both hands out toward Abby, palms up.

Abby laughed. “Yes, charming will do. It still seems rather odd to me, though, that Terza would have a guest out running errands for her. Doesn’t that seem strange to you?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Mary said. “I hadn’t really thought about it. I know Terza has her hands full right now. And you saw how eager he is to help. She probably accepted his help for the same reason we did.”

“Yes, you’re right,” Abby said. “That’s probably it. In any case, I don’t know if it was him or making the divinity, but I have to say, I’m feeling more in the Christmas spirit now.”

“Me too,” Mary said, a broad smile lighting up her face. “It’s going to be a very special Christmas here on Sparrow Island. I just know it.”

Finnegan got up from where he was resting on the kitchen floor and walked to Mary’s chair. He made a show of turning himself around and sat down next to her as if in solidarity. He gave Abby an expectant stare.

“Yes,” Abby told him. “A Merry Christmas for all, dogs included.”