

Simple Gifts: Four Heartwarming Christmas Stories (Holiday Classics)

By Judith McNaught, Jude Deveraux

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Editorial Review

About the Author
Judith McNaught is the *New York Times* bestselling author who first soared to stardom with her stunning bestseller *Whitney, My Love*, and went on to win the hearts of millions of readers with *Once and Always*, *Something Wonderful*, *A Kingdom of Dreams*, *Almost Heaven*, *Paradise*, *Perfect*, *Until You*, *Remember When*, *Someone to Watch Over Me*, the #1 bestseller *Night Whispers*, and other novels. There are more than thirty million copies of her books in print. She lives in Houston.

Jude Deveraux is the author of more than forty *New York Times* bestsellers, including *Moonlight in the Morning*, *The Scent of Jasmine*, *Scarlet Nights*, *Days of Gold*, *Lavender Morning*, *Return to Summerhouse*, and *Secrets*. To date, there are more than sixty million copies of her books in print worldwide. To learn more, visit JudeDeveraux.com.

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Chapter One

"I don't believe in miracles," Karen said, looking at her sister-in-law with her lips pressed tightly together. Sunlight shone on Karen's shiny-clean face, making her look like the "before" photo of a model without makeup. But lack of makeup only revealed perfect skin, high cheekbones, and eyes like dark emeralds.

"I never said a word about miracles," Ann replied, her voice showing her exasperation. She was as dark as Karen was fair, half a foot shorter, and voluptuous. "All I said was that you should go to the Christmas dance at the club. What's so miraculous about that?"

"You said that I might meet someone wonderful and get married again," Karen answered, refusing to remember the car wreck that had taken her beloved husband from her.

"Okay, so shoot me, I apologize." Squinting her eyes at her once-beautiful sister-in-law, Ann found it difficult to believe that she used to be eaten up with jealousy over Karen's looks. Now Karen's hair hung lank and lifeless about her shoulders, with split ends up to her ears. She hadn't a trace of makeup on and with her pale coloring, Karen looked like a teenager without it. Instead of the elegant clothes she used to wear, she now had on an old sweat suit that Ann knew had belonged to Karen's deceased husband, Ray.

"You used to be the most gorgeous girl at the country club," Ann said wistfully. "I remember seeing you and Ray dance at Christmas. Remember that red dress you had, slit so high your tonsils were visible? But how you and Ray looked when you danced together was worth it! Those legs of yours had every man in the room drooling. Every man in Denver was drooling! Except my Charlie, of course, he never looked."

Over her teacup, Karen gave a faint smile. "Key words in that are 'girl' and 'Ray.' Neither of which I am or have any longer."

"Give me a break!" Ann wailed. "You sound as though you're ninety-two years old and should be choosing your coffin. You turned thirty, that's all. I hit thirty-five this year and age hasn't stopped me." At that Ann got up, her hand at her back, and waddled over to the sink to get another cup of herbal tea. She was so hugely pregnant she could hardly reach the kettle.

"Point made," Karen said. "But no matter how young or old I am, that doesn't bring Ray back." When she said the name, there was reverence in her voice, as though she were speaking the name of a deity.

Ann gave a great sigh, for they'd had this conversation many times. "Ray was my brother and I loved him very much, but, Karen, Ray is dead. And he's been dead for two years. It's time you started living again."

"You don't understand about Ray and me. We were..."

Ann's face was full of sympathy, and reaching across the table, she clasped Karen's wrist and squeezed. "I know he was everything to you, but you have a lot to offer some man. A man who is alive."

"No!" Karen said sharply. "No man on earth could fill Ray's shoes, and I'd never allow anyone to try." Abruptly, she got up from the table and walked to the window. "No one understands. Ray and I were more than just married, we were partners. We were equals; we shared everything. Ray asked my opinion about everything, from the business to the color of his socks. He made me feel useful. Can you understand that? Every man I've met before or since Ray seems to want a woman to sit still and look pretty. The minute you start telling him your opinions, he asks the waiter to give him the check."

There was nothing that Ann could say to contradict Karen, for Ann had seen firsthand what a good marriage they'd had. But now Ann was sick with seeing her beloved sister-in-law hide herself away from the world, so she wasn't about to tell Karen that she'd never find anyone who was half the man Ray was.

"All right," Ann said, "I'll stop. If you are bound and determined to commit suttee for Ray, so be it." Hesitantly, she gave her sister-in-law's back a hard look. "Tell me about that job of yours." Her tone of voice told what she thought of Karen's job.

Turning away from the window, Karen laughed. "Ann, no one could ever doubt your opinions on anything. First you don't like that I love my husband and second you don't approve of my job."

"So sue me. I think you're worth more than eternal widowhood and death-by-typing."

Karen could never bear her sister-in-law any animosity because Ann truly did think Karen was the best there was, and it had nothing to do with their being related by marriage. "My job is fine," she said, sitting back down at the table. "Everyone is well and everything is going fine."

"That boring, huh?"

Karen laughed. "Not horribly boring, just a little bit boring."

"So why don't you quit?" Before Karen could answer, Ann held up her hand. "I apologize. It's none of my business if you, with all your brains, want to bury yourself in some typing pool." Ann's eyes lit up. "So anyway, tell me about your divine, gorgeous boss. How is that beautiful man?"

Karen smiled -- and ignored the reference to her boss. "The other women in the pool gave me a birthday party last week." At that she lifted her eyebrows in challenge, for Ann was always saying snide things about the six women Karen worked with.

"Oh? And what did they give you? A hand-crocheted shawl, or maybe a rocking chair and a couple of cats?"

"Support hose," she said, then laughed. "No, no, I'm kidding. Just the usual things. Actually, they chipped in together and got me a very nice gift."

"And what was that?"

Karen took a drink of her tea. "Aneyeglassesholder."

"A what?"

Karen's eyes twinkled. "A holder for my eyeglasses. You know, one of those string things that goes around your neck. It's a very nice one, eighteen-karat gold. With little, ah, cats on the clasp."

Ann didn't smile. "Karen, you have to get out of there. The combined age of those women must be three hundred years. And didn't they notice that you don't wear glasses?"

"Three hundred and seventy-seven." When Ann looked at her in question, Karen said, "Their ages total three hundred and seventy-seven years. I added it up one day. And they said they knew I didn't wear glasses, but that as a woman who had just turned thirty I would soon need to."

"For an ancient like you, support hose are just around the corner."

"Actually, Miss Johnson gave me a pair last Christmas. She's seventy-one and swears by them."

At that Ann did laugh. "Oh, Karen, this is serious. You have to get out of there."

"Mmmmm," Karen said, looking down at her cup. "My job has its uses."

"What are you up to?" Ann snapped.

Karen gave her sister-in-law a look of innocence. "I have no idea what you mean."

For a moment Ann leaned back against the bench and studied her sister-in-law. "At last I am beginning to understand. You are much too clever to throw away everything. So help me, Karen Lawrence, if you don't tell me everything and tell me now, I'll think of some dreadfully way to punish you. Like maybe not allowing you to see my baby until she's three years old."

When Karen's face turned white, Ann knew she had her. "Tell!"

"It's a nice job and the people I work with are -- "

Suddenly, Ann's face lit up. "Don't you play the martyr to me. I've known you since you were eight years old, remember? You take extra work from those old biddies so you'll know everything that's going on. I'll bet you know more about what's going on in that company that Taggert does." Ann smiled at her own cleverness. "And you let your looks go so you don't intimidate anyone. If that dragon Miss Gresham saw you as you looked a couple of years ago, she'd find some reason to fire you."

Karen's blush was enough to tell her that she was right.

"Pardon my stupidity," Ann said, "but why don't you get a job that pays a little more than being a secretary?"

"I tried!" Karen said vehemently. "I applied at dozens of companies, but they wouldn't consider me because I don't have a university degree. Eight years of managing a hardware store means nothing to a personnel director."

"You only quadrupled that store's profits."

"Whatever. That doesn't matter. Only that piece of paper saying I sat through years of boring classes means anything."

"So why don't you go back to school and get that piece of paper?"

"I am going to school!" Karen took a drink of her tea to calm herself.

"Look, Ann, I know you mean well, but I know what I'm doing. I know I'll never find another man like Ray who I can work with, so maybe I can learn enough to open a shop of my own. I have the money from the sale of Ray's half of the hardware store, and I'm managing to save most of what I earn from this job. Meanwhile, I am learning everything about running a company the size of Taggert's."

Karen smiled. "I'm not really an idiot about my little old ladies. They think they use me to do their work, but truthfully, I'm very selective about what I agree to do. Everything in that office, from every department, goes across my desk. And since I always make myself available for all weekends and holidays, I always see what's most urgent."

"And what do you plan to do with all this knowledge?"

"Open a business somewhere. Retail. It's what I know, although without Ray there to do the selling, I don't know how I'll cope."

"You should get married again!" Ann said forcefully.

"But I don't want to get married!" Karen nearly shouted. "I'm just going to get pregnant!" After she'd said it, Karen looked at her friend in horror. "Please forget that I said that," she whispered. "Look, I better go. I have things -- "

"Move from that seat and you're dead," Ann said levelly.

With a great sigh, Karen collapsed back against the upholstered banquette in Ann's sunny kitchen. "Don't do this to me. Please, Ann."

"Do what?" she asked innocently.

"Pry and snoop and generally interfere in something that is none of your business."

"I can't imagine what you could be referring to. I've never done anything like that in my life. Now tell me everything."

Karen tried to change the subject. "An...

Users Review

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