

# Northern Stars

The background of the cover is a deep blue night sky filled with numerous small white stars. A prominent, bright comet streak with a long tail is visible, moving from the upper right towards the center. The bottom portion of the image shows a log cabin with warm interior lights glowing through its windows and doors. The cabin is surrounded by dark, silhouetted trees, and the overall scene is peaceful and evocative of a winter night in the north.

Diane VanLanen

**Northern  
Stars**

**A novel**

**Diane Van Lanen**

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First Edition

## DEDICATION

To my husband Al, who encouraged and supported me from the beginning, and who showed me that it's never too late to follow your dreams.



## CHAPTER ONE

Kate Preston took one final look around the spotlessly clean kitchen, smiling to herself in contentment. The gentle breeze fluttered the delicate leaves of the Spanish ivory plant perched on the windowsill, softly billowing the lacey ivory curtains, the crisp summer air floating in. She inhaled the mouth-watering aroma from the roasters on the counter that mingled with the smell of rose bushes drifting through the open window.

The matching stove, refrigerator and dishwasher sparkled in the room like polished black onyx, so shiny Kate could see her reflection as clear as a blue sparkling pond on a mid-summer day. Ever since Sam and Kate had purchased the house years ago, they had wanted to update the drab kitchen with its boring white appliances, scratched mahogany cupboards with mismatched handles and faded orange flowered linoleum that Kate was sure had been bought at the long-ago demolished Bargain City Flooring.

But with both their busy work schedules and raising four active children, other priorities had always seemed to get in the way, and year after year the kitchen remodeling had been pushed to the “someday” category.

Until four years ago when Kate had arrived home from a parent-teacher conference and stepped into the kitchen, only to stop, mouth agape, as she pivoted slowly around, staring at the large yellow handmade FOR SALE signs hanging on all three appliances with masking tape. She stood in confusion, her brows knit, not getting it for a moment. At the sound of footsteps behind her, she turned to find Sam, a silly grin on his handsome face, a paper check flapping back and forth in his hand.

“Let’s go get us a new kitchen!” he declared giddily, swinging Kate up in his muscular arms and whirling her around the room as she laughed, catching his excitement in the air.

He had just received a huge promotion at work, and along with it had come a healthy bonus. It was plenty to use for the kitchen, and that’s exactly what they had done with it, picking out

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the beautiful black appliances Kate had always dreamed about having.

The cupboards, refinished the following year and boasting a soft oak color with bronze-coated handles, looked like new, where in reality they were 16 years old - as old as the house. Sam had done the work himself after checking out various cabinetmakers, appalled at how expensive new ones would be. They had turned out absolutely stunning, after which Sam had been in high demand to refinish their neighbors' and friends' cupboards.

The drop-crystal chandelier with teardrop diamonds glittering above the table resembled a billion stars sparkling in the vast universe. Kate had fallen in love with it the day she had spotted it at the downtown lamp and shade store, the blue-ice sparkles in the window beckoning to her. But after entering the store and stealing a quick glance at the price tag, she had inhaled sharply, whistled softly between her teeth and walked away, fully aware it was way over their budget, bonus or not.

The next evening Sam had taken her out for a romantic candlelight dinner, the soft orange flame inside the miniature hurricane lantern flickering as they gazed across the table at each other, sipping their after dinner liqueur.

When they returned home Sam took her by the hand as he led her toward the kitchen. "Close your eyes, and no peeking!"

When he whispered softly in her ear "Ok, sweetheart" she opened them in amazement to the brilliance of diamonds flashing in the darkened kitchen. Kate gasped and turned to Sam, flinging her arms around him.

"Oh, Sam it's so beautiful!" she exclaimed as she kissed him, her body fitting snugly against his. Sam kissed her back, the kiss deepening as he murmured huskily against her neck, "Not as beautiful as you, my darling," and, still kissing, he backed her out of the kitchen, slowly making their way upstairs.

Kate smiled now at the memory as she ran her hand lovingly across the top of the dining table. The six-chair dinette set with its crème-colored padded seats beneath the chandelier had been completely overhauled too by Sam. It had been a gift from Kate's

parents twelve years ago, not knowing at the time they would fill all six chairs with their beautiful family.

Completing the modernized kitchen was the tan-and-black ceramic tile floor with its tiny diamond pattern that blended perfectly with the appliances and gleamed brilliantly now from the rays of sunshine pouring through the sliding glass doors.

Kate eyed the brown and black swirled marble countertop now, silently approving the glassware she had picked out and lined on it: the cut-crystal punchbowl with matching dainty cups used only for special occasions, the deep-burgundy-colored wine goblets they had received as a Christmas gift, and lastly the short, round peacock glasses intended for her three uncles, because, of course, as they insisted, "You can't throw a party without a good brandy old-fashioned!"

Sniffing the air now, Kate inhaled the tantalizing smells of roast turkey and barbecued venison emitting from the oversized roasters. She had at first opted to serve just the venison sandwiches, but after deliberating had decided to offer two kinds of meat, thinking some of the guests might not care for venison. She was glad she had now as she lifted the heavy covers of both to check them. They smelled so delicious she herself couldn't decide which one to have.

"Guess I'll have to have one of each!" she chuckled to herself as she added a little water to the meat, then set the covers back on. She checked the temperature and turned them on warm for now; she could always turn them higher later if need be.

Kate nodded her approval after taking a quick peek in the refrigerator. It was brimming to full capacity with mouth-watering dishes that she had spent hours preparing yesterday, all just waiting to be set out when the party began, which, glancing at the clock on the wall, would be soon.

Kate loved cooking for big groups - a trait she knew she had inherited from her mother Caroline. She would prepare one dish after another all day long - sometimes for 12 straight hours. So engrossed would she be in the cooking, radio blaring to her favorite oldies, she would forget to stop and eat. Sam thought it was funny how she could make all those appetizing dishes and not



even snitch at them throughout the day. He'd tease her and say, "Now if it was *me* doing the cooking, those platters would be a little on the smaller size!"

The refrigerator would fill up and Sam would plug in the old spare one they had moved out to the garage. By the end of the day both units would be full of salads, jello, hors d'oeuvres and desserts. More times than she could remember Kate's friends and family had wistfully suggested that she go into the restaurant business, but she'd laugh and brush it off. She was fully aware once you turned a hobby you loved into a business, chances are it became more of a chore, and she didn't want that. So she reserved her love of cooking for family and friends, and enjoyed every moment of it.

Kate knew without checking that the rest of the house also was immaculate. She had spent the last few weeks preparing and planning every detail; she was an extremely organized person, which resulted in everything usually turning out pretty darn perfect. Sam would tease her and call her his "Little Miss Martha Stewart" when she got into the party mode, but she knew he was proud of the way she handled it all by the compliments he showered on her.

This past week had been spent doing all the heavy-duty cleaning, a task Kate usually reserved for twice a year, or in this case, a special event. Everyone had pitched in for a change, which Kate had been extremely grateful for. The whole family was looking forward to this party as much as she was, and she couldn't help but be proud of the way they had all helped out. She wanted Sarah's graduation party to be so special for her – a lasting memory she would carry with her.

Taking a moment to relax on the softly-padded kitchen chair, she thought again for the umpteenth time of Sarah, their beautiful, 21-year-old daughter, graduating from the University of Arizona in just three short years with a major in physics and a minor in music. Sarah had worked hard all through high school and managed to win some scholarships to help with her tuition. She had been in the top five percent of her class, another inherited trait, Kate mused, and valedictorian at her graduation.

It seems like only yesterday, Kate thought, feeling something tug deep inside her, that she was holding Sarah in her arms as an infant – their firstborn. She was so tiny and precious, their fragile little miracle. Kate remembered gently stroking her soft baby cheek and murmuring words of love to her as she experienced a profound sense of joy, knowing at that moment that motherhood was what Kate had been waiting for to complete her happy life.

And happy they had been, their little family of three. Kate had bent over the ivory wicker bassinet with the soft, pink crocheted blanket and matching pillow – another heirloom from her parents – and had whispered in awe “What a precious gift you are!”

Afraid at first of the prospect of parenthood, Kate had found it had come naturally for both Sam and herself. Her mother had been a godsend in those early first months, with Kate calling Caroline sometimes several times a day with questions. Caroline would answer patiently, remembering her own misgivings when she herself had been a new mother. Slowly Kate’s calls dwindled until Caroline would find herself calling Kate to see if there was anything she needed. Kate would chirp, “No, everything’s fine, mom!” And Caroline would hang up and sigh, wistfully missing the years when her own children were young.

The kitchen door suddenly burst open, pulling Kate back to the present.

“Hi Mom! I’m starved! When are we eating?” demanded not one but two voices at once, as Jessie and Justin barged into the room, both making a beeline for the refrigerator. They jostled and punched each other playfully as they wrestled to be the first for the handle. Kate watched them and smiled, knowing it would be useless to tell them to wait for the party.

Fifteen-year-old twins, it seemed to Kate that they had bottomless pits for stomachs, seemingly eating every waking hour of the day. They were tall for their age – both only a couple inches shorter than Sam – and athletically built, taking after their father again. They had dark brown hair, which Justin wore in a close cut, while Jessie preferred his longer, hanging shaggily over his back collar. If not for the hair difference, they were almost impossible to tell apart.

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Both energetic and full of life, their days were actively filled with school, sports, part-time jobs and tons of friends. Kate sometimes thought about telling them to slow down a bit, maybe give up a sport or two, but that's as far as she ever got. As long as their grades were kept up – they were both on the honor role - and they fulfilled their job duties – both worked 12 hours a week at the local supermarket – she let them lead their lives as they chose.

Kate and Sam had been numb at first when the doctor had announced they were expecting twins. There were no twins on either side, even going way back on the family tree. But after the initial shock wore out, the joy and excitement took over, and they were ecstatic over the news.

The doctor had put Kate on bed rest the last few weeks as a routine precaution, for which Kate had been grateful. Toward the end she had been enormous, and her feet and hands had swollen painfully due to water retention. Just walking a few steps to the bathroom would have her panting and holding her belly, and she couldn't wait to ease back on the comfortable bed.

They didn't know what sex the babies were; back then it was just starting to become a fad to know, but Kate and Sam had wanted to be surprised. They had painted the nursery a neutral color – pale green with little yellow ducks bordering the ceiling.

So when the first baby had emerged, the doctor had exclaimed, "You have a son!" Sam's eyes had welled; he had been secretly hoping for at least one of the babies to be a boy, yet he would have loved two little girls just as much. A minute later the second baby made his entrance, and the doctor had smiled broadly and said, "Congratulations – you have two sons!"

Sam and Kate had been overjoyed with two sons and one daughter, not knowing at that time that Lindsey would come along later to even out their happy family.

Kate watched the boys now as they eyed the tempting dishes in the refrigerator for the party. She narrowed her eyes. "Don't even think about it!"

Justin grabbed three oranges from the fruit tray, juggling them back and forth to his twin as they tried to outdo the other in competition.

"Boys, you've got 30 minutes to get showered and changed before the party starts, so better get moving," warned Kate, this time using her mother tone.

"Ok," grinned Jessie, grabbing all three oranges and making a mad dash for the door.

"Hey, give me one!" laughed Justin, following on his heels, the door slamming behind him.

Kate shook her head, sighing. Glancing at the clock again, she opened the covers of the roasters to check the meat, snitching a healthy forkful out of each. "Mmm," she murmured, as her stomach lightly growled, "let's get this party started - I'm hungry too!"

A high-pitched shriek suddenly pierced the air as Kate hastily set the covers back on and headed out of the kitchen.

"Mom! I can't find my pink tights!" came the whiney voice in desperation.

Kate smiled to herself as she entered the foyer and glanced up the carpeted stairs to see Lindsey standing at the top, swishing her crimson-colored skirt back and forth and pointing to her little bare legs.

"What should I do, Mom?" she wailed. "I can't wear this skirt without my pink tights! I looked everywhere for them - they're gone!" Lindsey hopped from one leg to another in anguish.

Kate smiled up at her youngest daughter. "I washed them yesterday, honey, remember? You hung them in your closet right next to the blouse you're wearing. You said that way you wouldn't forget where they were." Kate raised her eyebrows at the statement.

"Oh yea - I forgot! Thanks Mom!" exclaimed Lindsey, twirling around quickly to dash to her room to finish dressing.

Kate turned around slowly, chuckling softly. Sweet little Lindsey, an array of golden curls framing a delicate, heart-shaped face, was the apple of her daddy's eye. Eight years old, she had come as an unexpected surprise to Kate, who, at 38, had thought her childbearing years were over. Her own mother had gone through the "change" at age 40, so when Kate had started to

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become irregular with her cycle, she had guessed she was following in her mother's footsteps.

After not feeling quite up to par for a few weeks, Kate had made a doctor appointment for a check-up, assuming it was a flu bug. When Dr. Phillips announced the news, her emotions flew from disbelief to amazement to elation. Another little miracle! She could hardly wait to tell Sam, who she knew would be just as thrilled as she was. And he had been, from that day to the moment Lindsey was placed in his arms. His eyes brimming with tears, he had gently kissed her and proclaimed her his little princess. She was all that, and more.

Lost in thought, Kate didn't hear the front door open, but at the sound of footsteps she turned, her eyes lighting up as Sam swept her up in his strong but gentle arms. Melting against him, she clung to him, her heart thumping against his chest. Sam raised her face up, his fingertips gently caressing her cheek, as he lowered his mouth to Kate's, softly at first, his mouth sampling and savoring hers. Her lips yielded to his with a gentle surrender, until his mouth became less gentle, less patient, turning to urgency neither could deny. Kate's breath caught in her throat as the kiss deepened, her knees going weak. Sam gripped her tighter, the need for her alive and pulsating, until Kate, groaning, pulled slowly apart.

"Oh, Sam! I've missed you so much!" she whispered.

"And I've missed you, my darling!" moaned Sam as he reluctantly released her. He had been gone on a business trip for the past three days, a part of his job he was beginning to like less and less. "I tried to bribe the pilot to fly the plane faster, but to no avail!" he added as he pulled off his jacket and loosened his tie.

Kate laughed, looking up at him in adoration, the man she loved, the only man she would ever love.

"I was so worried you wouldn't be here in time," she said, hanging his jacket in the closet, then turning to wrap her arms around him again.

"Aw, Katie, you know I wouldn't miss it for the world. But I should go on business trips more often if I can come back to this!" he leered, as he reached for her, greedily devouring her lips again.

Kate let her lose herself for a few glorious seconds, her hips pressed tight to his, her heart racing, until this time Sam pulled breathlessly apart. "Hey baby," he whispered in her ear, "how 'bout we ditch this joint and go make our own private party?"

Heart still pounding, Kate laughed, "I'll have to take a rain check!" Brushing away his hands, she smiled. "Hurry now - get ready! They'll be here soon!" Reaching up for one more quick kiss, she added, "I love you, Sam."

"Ditto," replied Sam, in his famous Patrick Swayze imitation from their favorite movie before turning and heading toward the stairs.

Watching Sam bound up the steps two at a time, she shook her head, marveling at his agility. Turning 48 a few months ago hadn't slowed him down in the least. Though he was beginning to gray a little around the sides, Kate thought it made him look that much more handsome and distinguished.

And handsome he was. At six foot two and not an inch of fat on him, he was every woman's ideal man. With dark, thick hair worn always a bit too long; it hadn't thinned at all over the years. Kate loved to tangle her fingers through it, delighting in the luxurious softness of it. She teased him, asking him if he'd still love her when she was old and had lost all her hair and he still had his full head. He'd laugh and say, "Guess I'll have to buy you a Dolly Parton wig!"

It was his eyes, though, that had captured her heart that long ago day, when Kate had seen him for the first time. She had been 17, a junior in high school. Kate had been chosen as a cheerleader, and the 12 excited girls were out on the football field practicing kicks and shaking their orange and black pom-poms. Kate hadn't been too enthused about trying out, had much preferred to sit in the stands and watch the games, but she had been talked into it by her close group of girlfriends. "Come on," they had insisted, "you'll love it!"

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Shrugging her shoulders and muttering, she had sighed in defeat. Feeling self-conscious in the short skirt and tight top, she half-heartedly pranced about, fully intending to quit after this first practice. Just as their coach called the end of practice for them, out of the tunnel barreled a stream of big, burley football players, all suited up for their own practice. As the varsity team streamed past, the giggling girls went into flirtation mode, swinging their hips and batting their eyelashes. The boys let out whistles and catcalls, with both sides all in good humor.

Suddenly Kate's pom-pom was jerked out of her hand from the rush of bodies passing by. As she turned quickly and bent down to retrieve it, a large, masculine hand snatched it up off the ground. Kate straightened up and found herself face-to-face with a helmet, so close it was almost touching her face. From behind the steel mask, dazzling blue eyes, the color of sapphires, stared into her own startled ones. For a fraction of a moment, the age-old "time stood still" applied to both of them as Kate felt her heart thud against her chest. Then he smiled, handing her the pom-pom. "Here you go."

"Thank you," Kate murmured, smiling shyly back at him. She watched him amble toward the rest of the team; then he stopped and turned to look at her again. She was still in the exact spot, transfixed. Smiling again, he waved and turned back. And Kate knew she was in love.

Shaking her thoughts back to the present, Kate smiled to herself as she straightened the decorative pillows on the couch one more time. Almost 30 years had gone by since that 'love at first sight' day, as they both liked to call it. Their union had been a fairy-tale marriage made in heaven - soul mates, best friends. They were as much in love now as they were when they had recited their vows in front of their family and friends that long ago fall day.

It was hard to believe where the years had gone, Kate thought to herself. It seemed like only yesterday that they had met, married and begun their family. Yet in a few short months they would be celebrating their silver anniversary, an event Kate was looking forward to. In today's modern world 25 years was a milestone, as divorce had become so easy and popular. She had been so blessed

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all these years, and fully intended to not only celebrate their silver anniversary together, but also their golden one years from now.

“But let’s get through this party first!” she chuckled to herself, as she heard the doorbell ring, announcing the first guests.



## CHAPTER TWO

The music was blasting out of the rectangular oversized speakers that Sam had arranged around the perimeter of the back yard. Large multi-colored balloons filled with helium were waving about in the air, long slinky-curved colored ribbon fastened securely to the fence posts. A 10-foot rectangular neon orange paper banner was strung across the veranda that read "Congratulations Sarah," the letters slightly crooked as the boys had insisted on doing it freehand.

A dozen or so friends of Sarah's were out doing a rowdy version of line dancing to the song Achy Breaky Heart, while others stood watching and cheering them on. Even some of the older guests got in on the fun, laughing as they tried imitating the steps of the younger generation.

On the far side of the yard a fast-paced volleyball game was in progress, with players on both sides of the net in fierce competition. It had started out with boys against the girls, but had changed quickly when the girls saw they were no match for the muscled college boys. They had split up and now the score was tied at 16.

The large green oval swimming pool Sam had installed when the boys were 8 was filled with laughter as several of the friends played water basketball, while a pair of boys played chicken with bikini-clad girls perched on each of their shoulders. Alongside the shed in the corner of the yard a half dozen boys were flinging round colored water balloons from a giant slingshot that Sam had stretched across the back of his trailer. The balloons soared high into the air and across the field, hoping to drench the volleyball players - occasional shrieks of laughter letting the boys know they had hit their targets.

Still others were simply enjoying the festive atmosphere, never straying too far from the plentiful snacks and scrumptious hors d'oeuvres laid out on the tables. Kate knew from the age group of the guests that anything and everything would be devoured - even the healthy snacks she had prepared were rapidly disappearing.

Kate had set aside a few platters of food for any latecomers. Her golden rule was never to run out of food - it was always better to have too much than not enough. From her years of throwing parties she very rarely, if ever, had run out of food for her guests.

Glancing around, Kate let out a satisfied sigh. Everything had turned out better than she had expected. She had been relieved the weather had cooperated; the skies had been a dull gray with a hint of rain this morning but by noon the clouds had cleared away to a beautiful, warm sunny afternoon.

Kate could see all the guests were heartily enjoying themselves, and her eyes darted back and forth until she spotted Sarah in the middle of the volleyball game. She was laughing and high-fiving her teammates when she scored a point, then happened to catch Kate's eye, giving her the thumbs up. Kate grinned and returned the gesture.

Uncle Dan's old-fashioneds had been a hit as usual, though Kate had made sure they were off limits to the younger crowd. She kept them in the corner of the deck for the parents, with Uncle Dan bartending. She knew too many parents who shrugged indifferently and let liquor become the base to a graduation party, then protested loudly when accidents happened and "it wasn't their fault". Kate had always believed that a mother's job was to protect her children, and she had spent the last 21 years doing that, knowing she would continue to do so even as they became adults. She smiled to herself, knowing that again she had followed in her mother's footsteps.

"I hope that smile means you're thinking about me," greeted Sam, coming up behind Kate and wrapping his arm around her waist, pulling her close against him.

Kate leaned into him, every part of her wanting, needing and loving the touch of this man she so adored. She grinned up at Sam. "Well, if you really want to know, I was watching that hunk of a blonde over there diving for the ball and wishing I were 25 years younger..."

Sam laughed, bending in to whisper in her ear. "But I've got 25 years more experience than that boy, so follow me, baby, and I'll show you my moves!"

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Kate laughed out loud, never tiring of flirting with him. Sex with Sam was still just as exciting and satisfying for both of them as it had been from the beginning. Sam had been her first and only. Her college roommates had tried to persuade her to have a few encounters with others before settling down to one guy, but Kate had stayed loyal to Sam and had never regretted it for a moment. They loved each other passionately and fervently since the day they had met. He was all she needed; all she would ever want in her lifetime.

“Ok you lovebirds – get a room!” came a teasing voice from behind them.

Sam and Kate turned and grinned at the petite, dark-haired woman standing there, hands on her hips. She was dressed in cut-off jeans and a Wisconsin Badgers T-shirt, the bright sun bouncing golden rays off her thick auburn hair that she had pulled back into a ponytail, showing off her long loop silver earrings. She looked young enough to be Sarah’s friend, when actually she was her aunt.

Six years younger, Kate’s sister, Megan, not only looked like her older sister but also walked, talked and acted like her. Kate would tease Sam, saying maybe he would like a younger version of herself, and Sam would grab her and growl into her neck “I like older women!”

Growing up with two brothers, Kate was thrilled when her parents had brought baby Megan home from the hospital, and immediately claimed her as ‘my’ baby. They were inseparable as children, the six-year age difference not mattering. Obviously in high school and college they traveled in different circles, but as they became adults their bond again deepened and it had never strayed.

At five feet three, with emerald green eyes and a body made for drooling over, Megan was a dazzling beauty. She had been the most popular girl in high school, reigning as queen for both junior prom and senior ball, and voted the girl most likely to succeed. She was liked by all - girls, guys and faculty.

Unlike Kate, who had tended to be somewhat shy in school, Megan had joined every possible club, sport and committee she

could. In college she had graduated in the top ten of her class and had all the boys scrambling to date her. Laughingly taking it all in stride, she enjoyed life to the fullest and never let it go to her head. She was the perfect daughter, an ideal little sister and everyone's best friend.

But life had thrown her a fastball years back, and Megan had never fully recovered from it. Fresh out of graduate school, she had been working as an assistant manager at a large insurance firm. She had gotten her degree in business management, and had been hired for this position at an impressive starting salary. Dating a little here and there with no serious relationships, she was beginning to wonder if she would ever find "Mr. Right." Kate had been with Sam since she was 17, and here Megan was at the ripe old age of 26, with no one yet looking to capture her heart.

Until she met Paul. When he entered the office one rainy morning, newly hired, all the female heads in the room had turned. With his longish windblown blonde hair, blue-as-the-ocean eyes, beach-boy body and Norwegian accent, he was every woman's centerfold. Megan was immediately taken with him, and she set out working her charms on him. She had been thrilled when he asked her out; running over to Kate's to ransack her closet for the perfect outfit. They were only going to go out for a stroll in the park, but Megan would have strolled to the moon with him.

Within two months they were madly in love, and when he proposed she joyfully accepted, her heart bursting. They flew to Vegas on a whim and were married, then returned home to tell her stunned family and friends. Kate had been hurt at first that Megan hadn't confided in her, but after seeing how blissfully happy she was, Kate had wished her the best and welcomed Paul into the family.

Megan's marriage had been a happy one too. Because Paul was five years older than Megan and both wanted a "houseful of rug rats" as Paul liked to say, they had decided to begin trying for a family immediately. Every month Megan waited in anticipation, already browsing the infant departments and subscribing to motherhood magazines. She knew she should hold off but she couldn't help herself – she wanted so badly to have Paul's baby

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and to be a stay-at-home mom like Kate had done. Kate, her inspiration, who had raised her children and reveled in every moment of their lives, a decision she had never regretted.

Kate had laughed when she had found Megan standing sideways in front of the mirror with a pillow stuck under her shirt, dreamily patting her belly. Kate knew Megan would be a wonderful mother also, and she couldn't wait to be godmother to the baby, an honor Megan had already promised to her.

But that promise was not to be, as one fateful night Megan's perfect world was shattered.

It had been their two-year anniversary and she had planned a romantic candlelight dinner with Paul. Finally receiving the joyous news yesterday that she was pregnant, she could hardly wait to surprise Paul with the glorious announcement that night. She had the steaks simmering and the wine - non-alcoholic - chilling when the doorbell rang. She smiled, thinking Paul had forgotten his keys again as she walked toward the foyer, absently rubbing her tummy.

Two uniformed policemen stood there as she swung open the door, awkwardly slipping off their hats as she smiled at them. Megan could see their vehicle at the curb as she glanced over their shoulder, then brought her questioning gaze back to them. The taller officer cleared his throat as he began to speak.

"I'm sorry Ma'am but there's been an accident..." was all Megan remembered before she slowly sank to the floor, succumbing to the darkness.

Tragically she not only lost Paul that night but also her unborn child, the shock causing her to miscarry. For months after the accident she sank into a deep level of depression, not caring about anything or anyone, not wanting to go on. She barely ate anything, losing almost 20 pounds as her face became gaunt and drawn, her body weak and thin. She slept little yet stayed in bed all day, sometimes only getting up to go to the bathroom before returning and crawling back to the safe haven of her empty bed, pulling the covers up to her neck.

She tried taking pills to help her sleep and booze to help her forget, but Kate had found her stash and had thrown it all out.

Feeling as if she had no reason to live, Megan was ready to give up. And she may have done just that if not for the dogged determination of her sister.

Not for a single moment did Kate leave her side - comforting her, nourishing her, being her life support. She cried when Megan cried, she remained silent when Megan yelled at her, and she talked softly to her when Megan wouldn't speak. When Megan refused to eat, Kate would pull out the phone and threaten to call the doctor to set her up with intravenous feeding, fully aware that Megan hated needles. Megan would grumpily open her mouth and eat some of what Kate had prepared.

She would bring along Sarah, who was 6, and they would sit while Sarah would chatter about her day at school. Megan, ever the kind heart, would muster a smile and a gentle hug for Sarah. Kate had just found out she was pregnant, not knowing yet that it was twins, but she had kept it to herself, feeling Megan would not be ready for the news. When Sarah had blurted out that mommy was having a new baby, Kate had turned to Megan with concern, feeling guilty.

Megan had gazed at Kate for a moment, then as tears blurred both their visions, Megan had nodded, and smiled broadly. "We're having a baby!"

Slowly Megan felt herself being pulled back to the land of the living; from the world of hopelessness to the ray of hope, until finally one day with her eyes clear of despair, she had taken Kate's hand and whispered from her heart, "Thank you."

Seeing Megan standing there now smiling, both Kate and Sam grinned and pulled her into their embrace. After a warm hug, Sam excused himself, saying he'd best go check on the food supply, making straight for the dessert table. Turning, he winked at Kate, "About that room...!"

Laughing, Kate turned back to look at Megan. The years had been good to her; still beautiful and lively despite the pain she had endured. She had never remarried, dating a little here and there but nothing serious; instead remaining loyal to Paul's memory. After her miscarriage and her recovery from the depression, Megan

had learned she would never be able to conceive again. It had been a shocking blow, and Kate had been devastated for her, and worried it would push her right back to the hell she had suffered through.

But Megan had remained strong, and instead of wallowing in self-pity she had embraced her nieces and nephews with all her love and affection, which they had returned wholeheartedly. When she learned Kate was carrying twins, she said it was a blessing from God – that He was telling Megan that Kate would need her help with the twins. And she had been there from the beginning – sharing the miracle of the birth with Kate and Sam, to which Megan had cried tears of joy to be part of such a joyous event. She loved them like her own children, and they all adored their favorite aunt.

Four years ago the small, well-kept bungalow next to Kate and Sam’s had become available, and Kate had begged her to take a look at it. In two days, the offer was signed, sealed and delivered, and in five short weeks Megan became their new neighbor. The kids spent almost as much time at Megan’s as they did their own house. Life was good for all of them.

“Well, you did it again, sis,” beamed Megan, her eyes taking in all the activity going on. “Another fantastic party!”

“Thanks, but you know I couldn’t have done it without you!” Kate reminded her, giving her a thankful squeeze. Megan had been Kate’s right arm in planning every detail: designing the cute invitations, picking out the not-too-overkill decorations, and helping plan the assorted menu. She had jumped right in there with the cleaning too, complaining goodheartedly of the lack of maid service nowadays.

As she looked around the yard, Kate’s eyes welled up with tears. She was so blessed; her home, her family, her life...all her dreams had come true; and more.

Next to her, Kate felt Megan nudge her. “Ok,” she said. “Now that this party is history, when do we start on the BIG one?” Megan asked, rubbing her hands together in anticipation.

Kate groaned. “Geez girl, let me catch my breath here, huh?”

Kate, aware she was stalling, knew exactly what party Megan was referring to.

In September was Sam and Kate's silver anniversary, and Megan wanted them to have a huge, lavish affair. Kate was always planning big parties for everyone else's special events, and Megan felt it was about time they did something for themselves. Sam and Kate had discussed it, and both had decided on something a little different.

For years they had been putting away a little here and there in their nest egg, saving for what they both wanted in their retirement years. Sam had done well financially over the years, allowing Kate to be a stay-at-home mom when the children were little, for which she would always be thankful. She knew there were many moms out there who worked to help make ends meet; some really wanted to work while others were forced to.

Sam and Kate had discussed it in great lengths and both shared the same dream when Sam retired. And that dream was a place up north ... somewhere to escape the hustle and bustle of everyday life. The peace and tranquility along with the beauty of the woods beckoned them.

They had started camping early on in their marriage, staying at Jellystone Parks when the kids were little, then at more remote campsites as they grew older. They had started with a tent, which quickly escalated to a hardtop camper. Kate, not being a fan of spiders, would sit up half the night crouched with a flashlight in her hand watching for the dreaded eight-legged creatures.

From there they had bought a nice Coleman pop-up that slept eight, with portable bathroom, stove and refrigerator. It had an awning with screened-in sides, which was nice to sit in when evening fell and pesky mosquitoes arrived in throngs. This served them well for many years, until it was time to look for their own place. They had started actively looking a few years back, and two years ago had found their dreamland.

Forty acres nestled a half mile in from the blacktop road, it was exactly what they had been looking for. Towering evergreens as far as the eye could see with oaks and maples scattered about added to the stunning scenery. There were rugged trails



throughout the property, wide enough for an ATV they hoped to get someday. A small creek bordered the west side, not deep enough to fish in but certainly enough to wade in on a hot summer afternoon.

There was private property on both sides of their land, which the seller had mentioned belonged to occasional summer weekend dwellers. To the back of the 40 was 320 acres of county land open to the public, but because the easement to get to it ran through the 40 acres, no one could access it. The seller had chuckled and said, "It's like you're really getting 360 acres for the price of 40."

As Sam and Kate walked the land with the seller, they had seen three deer - two of them with fawns - a couple of partridges, a flock of scurrying turkeys and a beautiful redheaded woodpecker. They watched him peck at the top of a tree trunk, his pointed beak tapping a loud echoing sound in the quiet woods. Sam had turned to Kate, his eyes shining. "This is it," she read his thoughts, and she had felt the same.

They had bought it that day, and had spent almost every weekend there the past two years. Backbreaking hours had been spent clearing and burning brush, ridding the land of dead, unwanted timber, clearing the way for new growth to sprout. The first year had been hard but rewarding as they worked together as a team, the kids going along to help. They turned the work into fun, having roaring bonfires nightly with s'mores and Sam's famous ghost stories. When the kids would begin to glance around the dark shadows of the woods and inch their chairs closer to the fire, Kate would say, "Ok Sam, that's enough." But the next night they'd be right back, begging him for another story.

When the land was done to their satisfaction, they had been ready to begin the next phase ... building a cabin. That had been a year ago, and now their little house in the woods was almost finished.

It was small but cozy - just 920 square feet - with two bedrooms, an open-concept living-dining area, a small but adequate bathroom, and a utility room that housed the water heater, a stackable washer and dryer set, and a propane furnace. There was no basement, which pleased them both, as their house in

town had two levels, and both were getting tired of the grueling steps they had to make every day. They planned on building a garage someday for Sam and a sunroom for Kate when they could afford it, but there was no rush.

Sam and the boys had done all the work themselves, with the exception of the cement slab and the electrical and plumbing. Sam had always been a handyman, not afraid to take on any project. If there were something that stumped him he'd jump onto the Internet and research it until he understood how to do it. The cabin was simple but homey, just the way both of them had wanted.

All that was left now was the front porch, which Sam had started last month. When they had designed their blueprints Kate had put her trust in Sam, fully aware he knew far more than she did when it came to building houses. But her one request – and this she stood firm on – was a front porch. She had taken his hand that day they had decided where to build and had looked deep into his eyes, her own glistening with tears.

“I want to sit on the front porch in our rockers and gaze up at the brilliance of the stars,” she had whispered, her heart bursting with joy. “I want to reminisce on our happy years together – the memories we built along the way. I want to spend our golden years together here.”

And this, Kate sighed to herself now, was where they wanted to spend their anniversary. Just the two of them, at the place both of them loved, their home away from home ... their little piece of heaven.

Slipping her arm through her sisters', Kate took a deep breath, then turned to Megan and smiled. “Sis, there's something I need to tell you...”