

Dear St. Nick, here is my suggestion...umm, *plea*
for what to leave me under the Christmas tree.

One straight male specimen, healthy and tall,
who actually follows through when he says he'll call.

He doesn't have to be rich, and he doesn't have to be pretty.
But he must be kind, and faithful and witty.

Make him intelligent and sympathetic to others.
And as a gift to my sisters, let him have brothers.

So, St. Nick, I'm whispering this plea into your ear
in hope that you'll grant my wish this year.

---The Book of Counted Joys---

Chapter One

“You don’t remember me, do you?” asked a sweet, southern-accented voice. Jack Cain was surrounded by at least six curvaceous beauties but Joyce Hart elbowed her way into the inner circle. The women let her pass either out of respect because she was an older woman, or out of fear that they’d get more than a sharp elbow in the side if they didn’t. Jack inclined his head in Joyce’s direction, his light brown eyes squinting. He was near-sighted. On stage, he had to wear either glasses or contacts.

She was attractive, from his mother’s generation, petite, and plump. Her cafe au lait skin was practically unlined, and the number of crinkles around her eyes were few.

He had missed the beauty of African-American women. Especially those from South Carolina. His father, John, Senior, used to say that South Carolina had more beautiful black women than anyplace else on earth. Jack suspected that was his father’s opinion because his wife, and Jack’s mother, Dahlia, came from South Carolina.

Joyce laughed and cocked her head, her brown eyes twinkling.

“Darlin’, you were only seven years old the last time I saw you.” She placed a soft hand atop his. “You and your parents attended my wedding and then, the following week, you were off to Germany.”

Jack smiled down at her. The wedding was a big clue to her identity. She had to be none other than Joyce Hart. How could he forget a wedding during which the bride had fallen into a pond? Over the years his mother had regaled him with the story on many occasions. “Mrs. Hart?” Jack said, with a note of incredulity in his deep voice.

Joyce beamed her pleasure. “It’s gone from Hart, and then to Campbell after my Clarence died, and I married again. Big mistake! Husband number two took me on a fast

ride to nowhere! I was so glad to get rid of him, I'm not looking for anybody else!"

Jack laughed with her. "Well, you look as lovely as the last time I saw you."

"You're a charming liar," Joyce said, taking him by the arm and leading him away from the other women who were clamoring for his attention. "But at my age, a lie is better than no compliment at all." Joyce was on a mission. Those other women, all of whom were young and glamorous, were trying to make time with a world-famous concert pianist who was the guest of honor at this shindig. She would let them at him as soon as she'd had her say.

"I will always regret losing touch with your mother," she said as they walked toward French doors that led to a private balcony. "Dahlia and I were best friends from first grade, when my family moved here from Augusta, Georgia. And I was so sad when I heard about the plane crash, and how you'd lost both of your parents. You were only nineteen. Lord, that must have been hard on you. So young, and no relatives to lean on. I wrote several letters to the U.S. Army asking about your welfare. The last letter I received from Dahlia came from somewhere in France. I tried the address she'd given me first, but I never heard anything, then out of desperation I wrote to the army. They told me that you were a student at the Sorbonne, and that you were well. I didn't try anymore after that. You were well, and that was good enough for me."

Jack didn't know what to say. Here was a link to his past, the very reason he'd returned to Charleston, South Carolina: To find his roots. All his life, he'd gone from one country to another, never really feeling at home anywhere. Both of his parents had been born here. *He* had been born here. There were no relatives left to speak of, a distant cousin, perhaps, but no one he had had contact with in years.

He couldn't resist asking, "What was she like as a child?"

They were outside now, standing on the balcony. The October night was cool and the sky, pitch black with a smattering of stars. Joyce wrapped her arms around herself. Jack removed his suit jacket. "Here, put this on."

She did, and thanked him for his kindness. She gazed wistfully at the sky. "Dahlia was such a little lady. She was quiet and soft-spoken. She wore dresses to school every day with Buster Browns and ankle socks with lace around the edges." She smiled up at him. "You inherited her talent for the piano. Oh, she played *beautifully*. By ear, mostly. She never had lessons. Mrs. Gaylord, her foster mother, would not pay for lessons. But Dahlia didn't let that stop her. She could hear a song once, and pick it out on the piano. My daughter, Callista, was born with that ability, too. You've got to meet her. Every time Callista would be practicing her lessons, I'd think of Dahlia." She sighed heavily. "When your mother was sixteen she won the statewide talent competition for high school students. Did she ever tell you about that?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"She was the first black student to ever win. Oh, we were so *proud* of her! She got to play for the governor. She was awarded a trophy and her picture was in the papers."

She laughed suddenly. "Funny thing is, if she hadn't won, she might never have met your father because during her performance at the governor's mansion, she was accompanied by the army band, and your father played the trumpet in the band.

I guess you inherited your musical talent from *both* your parents. Anyway, she and John wrote letters to each other for five years before they finally got married. By that time, he was already an officer. Your father worked hard to achieve rank in the

army. Especially since he didn't come from a privileged background like some of those other officers. He was an orphan. Like your mother. I suppose that was one of the things that attracted them to each other. They both knew the loneliness of not having relatives." She looked up at him with such compassion, then, that Jack knew she was thinking he was in the same boat: He was also an orphan, of sorts.

But she brightened and said, "You must come to my house and let me make you a meal while you're here, John, Junior."

"Oh, my friends call me Jack," he told her. "John Cain feels more like a stage name than anything else."

Joyce gave him a stern look. "John Cain was your father's name, and it's a mighty fine name, too! I'm going to call you, John, Junior. You're the spitting image of John. He was a handsome devil!"

Jack couldn't help smiling at this tiny woman whom he'd only met fifteen minutes ago and who already felt comfortable enough to chastise him. "John, Junior, it is, Mrs. Hart."

"Then, that's settled," Joyce said, sounding satisfied. "Now, look, John, Junior, I didn't come out here among all these *fancy-dressed* folks tonight just to make your re-acquaintance. No, I came because I wanted to recruit you for a special project."

Jack listened intently.

"I was a social worker for thirty years," Joyce told him. "I'm retired now. My mission these days is to make the community a better place to live, and to keep the young folks who're about something, those who know the value of hard work, on the right track. The youth center where I volunteer my time puts on a Christmas Festival every year. It

serves to showcase the talents of our young people, and to raise money for scholarships for those who're getting ready to graduate from high school. I thought it would be nice if you would come and give us a concert. Nothing taxing. I read in the paper about your being on holiday, and how you're resting up until you have to do a series of concerts over there in Europe in the New Year. So, two or three songs with a holiday theme would be sufficient. Plus, Callista will perform as well. She performs every year. The kids love her because she plays their kind of music, hip-hop, rhythm and blues, jazz, you name it, that child can play it. But I thought it would be wonderful if they could be exposed to a little classical music. There is one child, Randall, who I believe could one day become a classical pianist. The other kids call him a wimp because he likes that kind of music. But you, John, Junior, are living proof that a man can play classical music and still be masculine. I don't know where these kids get their ideas. Anything they don't understand, they make fun of!" She took a deep breath after that long monologue. "So, think about it. You don't have to give me your answer this minute. I'll give you my phone number and you can call me after you've decided."

Jack didn't have to think about it. "It would be my pleasure to perform for the kids, Mrs. Hart," he said.

Joyce threw her arms around his waist and hugged him tightly. Jack's chin came to the top of her head. She smelled like orange blossoms. "Thank you, Darlin'," she said happily. She peered up at him. "Well, I've monopolized you enough for one evening. I'm going so those young ladies can have a crack at you. I'm sure they'll be *thrilled* to see me go!"

They stepped back inside of the grand ballroom of one of Charleston's finest hotels.

Jack glanced up at the banner that read, WELCOME HOME, JOHN CAIN, OUR NATIVE SON.

Joyce removed his jacket and handed it to him. Afterward, they took the time to exchange business cards. “Don’t be shy about phoning me if you want to talk, John, Junior. I was serious about that meal, too. Cooking is my best talent. I don’t dance, and I won’t sing if you ask me. But put me in the kitchen, and watch me work my magic!”

“I’ll be calling about that meal,” Jack promised.

Joyce looked him straight in the eyes. “No jive?”

Jack smiled. He hadn’t heard that expression in a long time. “None whatsoever.”

Joyce smiled up at him. “All right, then. I’ll be expecting it.”

She turned and walked swiftly toward the exit. Jack had never seen such a tiny woman move so fast. She must really feel uncomfortable among all of these *fancy-dressed* people, as she’d referred to them. She’d only come among them to talk to him. Truth was, she was the most interesting person he’d met since his arrival two weeks ago.

Sandra Gerrard, lead news anchor for the local ABC affiliate, saw her chance when Joyce Hart walked past her. She knew Joyce from a story she’d done on Children and Families, the governmental agency Joyce used to work for. Joyce had been an unflinching children’s advocate. The agency had come under fire for ‘losing’ children in the system, and Joyce had given Sandra an interview in which she had not minced words about the many weaknesses in the system, and how the agency could go about improving it. The problem was, she said, the caseworkers were given too many children to watch over. And there weren’t enough checks and balances in the system to insure that the welfare and safety of each child was effectively guarded. Sandra had learned,

later, that Joyce had nearly gotten fired for her outspokenness.

“Mrs. Hart! Hello!” Sandra said.

Joyce turned and regarded her with warmth. “Sandra! Honey, you’re a sight for sore eyes. Are you covering John, Junior’s big return?” She grasped Sandra’s hand.

Sandra laughed. “Well, I’m hoping to if I can get the chance to talk to him.”

Joyce glanced back at the spot where she’d left Jack. He was once again surrounded by predatory women. “Then, you’d better get over there before there’s none of him left!”

Sandra followed Joyce’s line of sight. “I’d sure better!”

Joyce fondly squeezed her hand. “Good to see you again, honey. Good-night.”

“Good-night, Mrs. Hart.”

They parted, and Joyce continued toward the exit. “Lord, I hope my feet hold up until I make it to the car,” she said under her breath. Her new shoes were pinching her toes. Sure enough, once she reached her Ford Taurus and got behind the wheel, she removed the offending shoes and drove home barefoot.

Inside, the party was a long way from winding down.

Jack fielded questions on every subject from his training, to his opinion on European women versus American women. He told them he thought all women were wonderful, which earned him appreciative looks rife with speculation, and several phone numbers slipped, covertly, into his coat pocket.

When Sandra joined them, some of the other women voluntarily gave up their positions out of awe. Most of them had come here tonight to celebrity watch, and Sandra Gerrard was one of Charleston’s most beloved news anchors. Everyone knew her.

“Good evening, ladies,” she said sweetly. “Don’t you all look lovely tonight.”

A flash of white teeth, expertly applied lipstick, and a smile that could melt the coldest of hearts. They were all her trademarks. She used them as weapons tonight. The other women didn’t know what hit them. Sandra had cleared the field in less than five minutes with a compliment here, a keen observation there, and sharp repartee. When she saw that her efforts needed that something extra, she cooed, “Isn’t that Donnell ‘Quicksilver’ Robinson over there by the entrance?”

Donnell Robinson was the quarterback for the Carolina Panthers, neighboring North Carolina’s professional football team. He’d been born and raised in Charleston, though.

The remaining hangers-on gave Jack a final once-over. He was rich, handsome, and talented, but *Donnell* had just negotiated a multi-million-dollar contract! They made their apologies and abandoned poor Jack without so much as a backward glance.

“You’re good!” Jack complimented Sandra when they were alone.

Sandra gave him a bright smile. Her dark brown eyes swept over him. “You have no idea!” She laughed because she didn’t know *where* that comment had come from.

The surprised look on Jack’s face was priceless. Brows knitted in a frown, he took a step backward as if he didn’t know what to make of her.

Sandra laughed harder. Then, she held her wedding rings under his nose. “My name is Sandra Gerrard, Mr. Cain, and all I’m after is an exclusive interview. I saw all the other media types bombarding you tonight. I simply wanted to make my pitch to you in private. We’re the ABC affiliate. We can get you on *Good Morning, America*, if that’s what you want, or we can keep it intimate and for our local viewers only. It’s your choice.”

“Yes, but wouldn’t it be more advantageous for you if we went national?” Jack asked with skepticism. Journalists had burned him in the past.

Sandra smiled. “Yes, it would be. But, you see I’m not interested in going to New York. I’ve already done that. I moved back to Charleston because I wanted to get married and have kids. I’ve done both, and I’m happy here. So, I’m not out to ride your coattails to fame and fortune. All I want is to sit down with you and let you tell the people of Charleston what brings you back here after a thirty-year absence. That, to me, Mr. Cain, is a good human-interest story.”

“Give her the interview, Jack. It’s good publicity,” said a male voice from behind them. Jack turned and found his former agent, Morris Findlay, standing there. Jack had not been expecting Morris, especially not after their last phone conversation during which Jack had fired him.

Jack narrowed his eyes at the shorter, older man.

Morris strolled up to them as if his welcome was assured. He smiled at Sandra.

“I saw you on the six-o’clock news tonight. You’re quite good. I could have you back in New York in no time.”

Sandra cocked a knowing eye at Jack. “I take it he’s your agent?”

“Not anymore,” Jack said pointedly.

Sandra gave him her card. “Please phone me, Mr. Cain. I’ll do right by you.”

Jack smiled down into her upturned face. He liked her. “I’ll give it some serious thought, Ms. Gerrard.”

Sandra left them.

Jack grimaced, and said, “What did you do, bribe somebody who works for Doris?”

Doris Gamble was his new agent, a sister from the Bronx who was sharp, aggressive, and tenacious on behalf of her clients but who genuinely cared about their welfare.

“Yes,” Morris freely admitted, not ashamed of the lengths to which he’d go to get what he wanted. “And I’d do it again.”

Jack might have told him to go to hell, but when he looked up and saw the women who’d abandoned him in favor of a jock a few minutes ago heading back his way after learning they’d been hoodwinked, he beat a hasty retreat with a rapidly-talking Morris dogging his steps.

“You were unfair to me, Jack. After ten years of making you the most sought-after concert pianist in the world, you dropped me when all I wanted to do was secure your future.”

“You mean, secure *your* future,” Jack said through clenched teeth. “You wanted to book me well into 2007. You wanted to work me like a slave: 50 weeks out of 52. I’m tired, Morris. I have been living out of a suitcase for nearly all my life. I’m getting too old for that crap! From now on, I play when I want to play. And when I don’t want to, I don’t.”

“Lucky for you, you have the luxury of being able to do that, and I’m happy for you,” Morris said. “But that’s not why I’m here. I’m here because I’ve been approached by a publisher about you writing your memoirs.”

Jack paused in his steps, and scowled at his former agent. “Are you on something?”

“I kicked that habit eight years ago, and you know it!”

Jack narrowed his eyes further.

“I swear I’m not using,” said Morris hastily. “This is a legitimate offer.”

Jack stood there looking into Morris's watery brown eyes for a full minute, wondering why he'd ever hired him in the first place. Of course, they'd both been a decade younger when Morris had approached him about representing him. And, to be honest, in the beginning, Morris's take-no-prisoners attitude had been just what he'd needed in the cutthroat world of classical music. It was such an exclusive world, and in many ways those who were not born to money and privilege were barred from it.

Over the years, as his star had risen, so had Morris's greed. Jack's main focus had always been his music. He'd hired an agent in order to free him up so that he no longer had to worry about the business end of his career. This proved to be a mistake because he found himself playing more venues every year, and enjoying it less.

Morris asked for a higher percentage of his earnings, to which Jack agreed. He had his lawyer go over the agreement and found it was fair. Unbeknownst to him, however, Morris was negotiating one amount for his appearances, telling him another amount, and pocketing the difference. That went on, to Jack's estimation, for approximately five years out of the ten Morris had represented him. When Jack found out about it, quite by accident when he changed accounting firms, he fired Morris.

"You cheated me, Morris. You're lucky I didn't have you prosecuted and thrown into prison for what you did."

"I know that," Morris said regretfully. "I'm trying to make it up to you. They want to offer you an amount in the high six-figures, Jack."

"Don't use agent-speak with me," Jack said. "Tell me the amount in round numbers."

They had gone out of a side door and were now standing in a small garden. Jack thrust a hand in his coat pocket, looking for an imaginary pack of cigarettes. He'd quit

more than a year ago but sometimes, when he got upset, he still reached for them.

“Nine-hundred-thousand,” Morris said. “But I think I can get them up to 1.2 million if you take me back.”

Jack laughed shortly. “As I understand it, to legally keep an advance the writer has to actually deliver a publishable product by a certain date.”

Morris looked puzzled. “Yes, that’s how it works.”

“You’ve forgotten one salient point, Morris.”

“What’s that?” Morris asked, his eyes wide with confusion.

“I can’t write worth a damn!” Jack shouted.

“Oh, that,” Morris said, dismissing Jack’s concerns. “We can get you a ghostwriter. Pamela Anderson used one, and her book made the New York Times Bestsellers list.”

Jack sighed. “I have no desire to write my life’s story, Morris. I’m not finished living it yet. I’m only thirty-six, for God’s sake! Maybe I’ll dictate it to a ghostwriter when I’ve got one foot in the grave, but not now.”

“The cardinal rule that anyone in entertainment lives by is, *strike while the iron is hot*,” Morris told him. “You’ve just come off of a tour that anyone who’s anybody is still talking about! You’ve got how many more good years left? Perhaps ten or twenty if you take good care of yourself. Even your idol, Andre Watts, has accepted a position at a university. Age catches up with all of us.” He was almost poignant in his delivery.

Jack was luckily fully aware of his former agent’s persuasive powers. “No dice, Morris.”

“But I’ve changed!” Morris said, pleading. “I’ll work for you at five-percent less than the amount of the last fee we negotiated.”

“No,” Jack said, implacable.

“I’ll suspend my fee for a year!” Morris offered.

“No!”

“I’ll prove to you that I’ve changed!” Morris said, suddenly full of indignation.

Jack simply shook his head sadly as he turned away. “You do that,” he said softly, with no anger.

“I know you’re disappointed in me,” Morris said to his retreating back. “But I’ll find a way to make up for what I’ve done!”

Jack kept walking. If he hurried, he could arrive home in time to catch three consecutive reruns of *The X-Files* on TNT. Besides, if he left Winslow at home by himself for too long he tended to get destructive and ‘home’ for them nowadays was a rental house on the outskirts of Charleston. Jack could imagine the fat deposit he’d had to pay going down the drain due to damage done by an overly energetic one-year-old golden retriever.