

Rocky Mountain Christmas Eve

The year Donald left, Debbie broke all ten of the Commandments.

She smoothed another piece of Scotch tape down over snowflake-patterned paper. This wrapped box held Barbie's silver Corvette. She eyed the Mousetrap board game and cut more snowflake paper to fit.

No, Debbie corrected herself, not all ten. She hadn't murdered anyone yet, unless God counted the list in her diary of ways she wanted to kill Donald.

Wriggling her bare toes deeper into the red shag carpet, she began wrapping the box.

Bearing false witness hadn't been easy for Debbie, but it all started with coveting her neighbor's husband. And committing adultery was surprisingly simple. She knew Linda was in Ohio for her sister's new baby, so she'd taken her girls to her (ex-) mother-in-law's for the night and invited Bob over for cheesecake and Irish coffees. Linda never fed him dessert.

Debbie stroked the black Naugahyde of her settee. That had been a memorable evening. She set her eggnog on the smoked-glass end table, where Mary and Joseph kneeled on either side of the manger. Debbie seized Joseph and tossed him behind the Christmas tree.

She gathered up stuffed Care Bears and cut more wrapping paper.

She hadn't gone to confession after that night. She'd forgotten to pray her Rosary all summer. She'd consulted Peggy's Ouija board, and it reminded her "Thou shalt not steal."

She thought God might not mind her stealing the nail polish or the box of chocolates, but she was sure He had noticed when she walked right out of the Montgomery Ward dressing room

wearing that long, warm coat with the faux-fur lining. It was hanging in the hall closet now, nicer than anything Donald had ever bought her. God should think twice about that.

By November she had stopped taking the girls to chapel before school. They wouldn't be continuing at St. Colette's anyway, unless Donald gave her the tuition soon. But when they'd begun rehearsals for the children's Christmas choir, she had worried over how she would give her girls a decent Christmas this year.

Debbie slid her scissors up the ribbon to curl the ends, set that package under the tree, and opened a new roll of paper printed with prancing reindeer and holly leaves. Folding the matching candy-striped pajama sets neatly, she laid them on the wrapping paper.

It hadn't taken her long to come up with a plan. Regretfully, the plan required bending the truth past its breaking point.

First she went to Catholic Community Services and told them that since Donald had emptied their bank accounts and run off with the babysitter, she might need some help with Christmas this year. The CCS ladies were dabbing tears away when she left.

Next she let the Salvation Army bell-ringer know that these were her last few pennies, but even though they wouldn't have any Christmas gifts themselves this year, she and her fatherless little girls knew it was better to give than to receive. Bless that man's heart, he had put them at the top of his Christmas list.

And she'd written the girls' names on Angel Tree tags at three different shopping malls. Maybe that last wasn't quite lying.

Regardless, bearing false witness had resulted in a fabulous amount of holiday treasure. She'd already tied ribbons on the two banana-seat bikes waiting on the back porch, and it seemed like she'd been wrapping dolls and toys for hours now.

There was a turkey in the fridge and another in the deep freeze, three pies on the counter, and three cans of jellied cranberry sauce in the cupboard. There was a carton of eggnog, nearly gone already. Salvation Army had even sent a Hickory Farms cheeseball.

The needle hissed softly as the record ended. Debbie lifted the arm and put her John Denver album back in its sleeve. Midnight Mass would be starting soon, but she wasn't going this year.

On the third stair up she paused to check everything was in place. Crocheted stockings hanging from the newel post, lumpy with My Little Pony hooves. Bubble lights glowing above the biggest pile of gifts this house had ever held. Santa's cookie crumbs and empty milk glass on the coffee table. The Virgin Mother and her Child in the manger. Maybe in January she'd pray for forgiveness. Tonight, Debbie didn't feel guilty. She had made Christmas happen by herself, and she was certain it would be the one Christmas her daughters would always remember.