Marci parted the ice-blue drapes and looked through the clean picture window to the street below. The apartment she shared with Bethany Wolcott and Keithley Ashbrooke was ideally situated, she thought again, as she had done so many other times since deciding to move into the city and be near her work. The park, with its myriad lights at night, was less than a stone's throw away, making it an easily accessible area for taking her daily early
morning walk before leaving for work, while the first floor of the apartment complex was given over to a sort of mini-mall indoor arcade kind of thing, with a fine restaurant, an excellent drugstore, a shoe and clothing store and many other small shops.

She looked down at the now deserted park and sighed contentedly. The park benches, blanketed heavily with snow, looked like tired old men huddled deep into the warmth of their coats and the snugness of pulled -- down ear lappers. Lights from the tall pine tree in the center of the park played with the shadows and made a rainbow of -- bright colors on the newly -- fallen snow. Everything -- for the present, at least -- looked as though it was bathed in beauty and immersed deeply in total peace and utter serenity.

Marci cast a quick glance at her watch, then turned away from the window and the lovely winter scene outside. Derek said he would be at the apartment by six o'clock to take her she didn't know where. It was to be a surprise.

She took her coat off its hanger inside the closet then stationed herself in front of the window. She would meet him downstairs, she decided discreetly. Keithley would laugh at her if she knew, but little matter. Better a thousand times to use discretion than to have an ugly tale started by allowing Derek to come up to the apartment, she reasoned sensibly.

At thought of Derek Masters, Marci’s heart seemed to skip a beat. He was the youngest son of her employer, and the most handsome, too. She was flattered that he had asked to take her out. And on New Year's Eve at that!

A sudden wave of apprehension washed over her. What if he was going to take her to a New Year's Eve party, then what? She should have asked him before she accepted, she thought with sudden fear. But surely -- surely -- he wouldn't do that to her!

She saw his shiny royal blue sports car pull up along the curb and for a brief moment she was tempted to flee from the apartment down the hallway to where old Mrs. Herkimer lived. Then she decided that would be cowardly. Quickly she slipped into her coat then hurried toward the elevator, stepping out of it on the first floor just as Derek was ready to step into it.
"Hey, what is this?" Derek asked. "Didn't you know the male species is to get his girl at her door?"

Marci laughed. "This is a matter of discretion, Derek."

For a moment, the young man stared with unbelieving eyes and ears at Marci. Then he said, "You must be kidding. You must be! Who thinks about such things these days?"

"I do," Marci declared sweetly-emphatically.

"Well you'd better forget about it; these are no longer the days of the puritans. . . ."

"I admire them; they had courage and . . . and. . . ."

"And God, I suppose you meant to say."

"That's right. They were wonderful people."

Derek studied Marci for a long time, then taking her arm, he ushered her to the door and out to the waiting car.

Marci was thankful for the warmth of the car. Not until she stepped outside did she realize how cold it actually was. She snuggled her chin into the warmth of her coat collar and stared ahead, wondering where Derek was going to take her.

"A penny for your thoughts, Marci."

"Maybe they're worth more than a penny," she quipped provocatively, smiling.

"Hey, what's wrong; you cold?" Derek asked, seeing the upturned collar.

"I'm thawing out," she teased. "Honestly Derek, I hadn't realized it was so bitter cold; not until I stepped outside. That wind's raw; it goes right through one's clothing."
"It's to plunge us to the minus twenty mark tonight. But I like it; it's a perfect night for greeting the New Year and for watching the old one bow out. At least the old year's going out with dignity and beauty this year. Last year was nothing less than a sloppy mess, what with all that rain. It put a damper on the parties I went to."

Marci stole a covert glance at her companion, then she ventured to ask the question that had been bothering her. "You . . . you're not . . . I mean, well, we're not going to any New Year's party tonight, are we, Derek?"

Wearing a smug smile and staring ahead at the road, he quipped, "It would be fun, wouldn't it?"

Panic churned inside Marci's chest. Why didn't she find out where he would be taking her before she accepted this date? she wondered again.

"Have you ever been to a New Year's party, Marci? I mean a real New Year's party?" he asked quickly and intensely.

"N . . . No. Not the kind you mean."

"Pretty much a sheltered girl, huh?"

"Very much so. And proud of it, Derek."

"Like the Puritans, huh?"

"Like the Puritans, yes. Now please, if you planned on taking me. . . ."

A loud peal of laughter cut her sentence short. "Relax. Relax," Derek said quickly. "Dad told me you weren't the partying sort; so tonight it's a dinner date. How's that for trying to please?"

"Thanks. I appreciate it," and Marci settled back against the velvet of the cushioned seat and relaxed.

Snow had begun to fall by the time Derek turned into the Hidden Valley Restaurant and parked the car. It was hidden indeed, Marci noted. Snuggled cozily and picturesquely into the side of the mountain and surrounded on all
sides by acres of pine and spruce, it looked like a picture card, she decided, a winter picture postcard.

She gasped at its beauty then turned to Derek, who had been studying her face with apparent pleasure and delight. "You like it," he commented simply.

"It . . . it's the most beautiful place I've ever seen, I do believe. I doubt that the Swiss Alps could excel this beauty."

"It's nicknamed Swiss Country by the old timers, my father included. But come, let's go inside; you must be famished."

"Not famished; hungry."

"Good, then you'll do justice to the delicious food they serve here," Derek said, escorting her into the restaurant.

Seated comfortably at the small round table, Marci felt as though she had been catapulted suddenly back into time at least a hundred years. Everywhere she looked she saw antiques and more antiques, objects once dear and much-treasured during the period of her great grandmother's life. Her eyes were wide with amazement and all she could do was gasp in delightful pleasure. It seemed unreal. She, who had always loved the smaller pieces of antique furniture and all the dishes, was now surrounded by these treasured objects. Literally surrounded by them!

Her eyes feasted on the pieces in the carefully furnished and meticulously-kept dining room and not until Derek called her name was she aware of anything he was doing.

"I asked you a question, Marci," he said. "In fact it's the second time I've asked it. What will you have to drink?"

"Tomato juice will be fine," she replied sweetly. Derek clicked his tongue in an annoyed way. "I didn't mean that! he chided. "I brought two different kinds of something better than tomato juice along. After all, this is New Year's Eve. . . ."
His trailing sentence and the inflection of his voice when he uttered the last statement sent a bell of warning off somewhere inside Marci. "You . . . you can't mean that you . . .?"

"That I drink?"

"Y . . . yes." The simple reply came out in little more than an exasperated whisper of unbelief.

"Oh, I'm no alcoholic, if this is what you mean. But I do drink on special occasions, like tonight. Now, what will you have?"

"Neither!"

Derek leaned across the table. "You're kidding!" he exclaimed emphatically.

"I am not," Marci declared softly. "I've never known the taste of any kind of alcoholic beverage, nor of cigarettes either. Furthermore, I don't intend to start; not now or ever."

"I can't believe my ears! You really are a square, Marci. Why don't you begin to live?"

Marci bowed her head. Tears stung her eyes. "I one time knew what real living was all about, Derek. Yes, I knew." Her voice came out sad and small sounding.

"How's that? What happened to change things?" Raising her head, Marci said, "I was never so happy in all my life as when I was a Christian and knew the Lord."

"So-o-o!". Derek exclaimed. "That's the hang-up; a religious fanatic; no drinking, no smoking; no this, no that."

"Wrong," Marci corrected quickly. "All wrong. I was not a religious fanatic although that is what the worldly-wise masses of human beings like to tag a Christian. Christians are sinners saved by God's grace through Jesus' precious blood. They. . . ."
"Cut the sermon; I'm in no mood to listen," Derek demanded curtly, interrupting Marci's words. "So you won't drink! Well, I will. Right here and now! I'll bow the old year out with a toast to its almost-departed hoar head by downing some of the best I could buy."

"Don't do it, Derek. Please! You must take me home, remember? I don't care to travel with a drinking driver."

"I've done it many times, little girl. Many times! And I always made it home safely."

"But there's always a first time, Derek. Besides, the roads will be slick and icy. Please don't!"

Derek's face reddened in anger. Then, shoving the bottles back into the bag and stashing them deep into his topcoat pocket, he answered heatedly, "Okay. Okay. Out of respect to you and your old fashioned beliefs, I won't drink. But what a dull night! And on New Year's Eve, too!"

"I . . . I should not have accepted your invitation, Derek. I knew better. I'm sorry; forgive me, please. I see it plainly now; the backslider in heart is a very unhappy person. I . . . I feel all out of place around sinners who do things like . . . like you were just going to do. I'm not at ease around Christian people either. Oh, it's a dreadful feeling, a sort of where-do-I-belong feeling. You see, there is no in-between with God," Marci added sadly. "One is either a born again Christian on his joyous way to heaven, or he is a wicked sinner on the broad road to hell. There is nothing in between; no other place and no other way. I . . . I wish I . . ."

"Let's get out of here!" Derek almost bellowed. "You're a bore. A perfect bore. I'm not sitting and listening to a religious fanatic all night. I want to have fun; lots of fun. This is New Year's Eve; I'm going to celebrate. Now come," he ordered, storming away.

Marci slipped into the soft folds of her coat and followed Derek to the car. She hadn't meant to sound preachy. All the while she was talking, she was speaking mostly to her own heart, yet this sudden turn of events gave her a feeling of rightness. She felt a sudden wave of relief steal quietly into her heart.
Derek said nothing on the way home. His eyes stared straight ahead on the glittery-white pavement of snow and his jaw was set in a tight, determined way. Glancing surreptitiously at him from the corner of the seat, Marci shuddered. How dreadful to have him for one's husband, she thought, seeing with clearer perspective now than when she had been so starry-eyed waiting for him inside the apartment such a short while ago.

Her thoughts were changed quickly by the sudden screeching of Derek's brakes and the frightening sound of metal against metal. Marci screamed and covered her face with her hands as the car from a hidden sideroad and Derek's came to an abrupt halt.

"You fool!" Derek shouted, trying to get his door open and jump out. "Why don't you look where you're going?" he bellowed to the driver of the other car.

Marci opened her eyes. By the light of the cars' headlights, she saw a young man stagger out of the car. In a flash, she was out of Derek's car and running toward the red sports car. "Lee. Lee!" she called, "Oh why did you drink? You're going to kill your dear mother by your waywardness. Here, let me bandage your arm; you're bleeding heavily," and taking her soft silk neck scarf she used it to make a tourniquet. "Derek,' she called, "go for help. Please. Lee's hurt badly."

"Serves him right!" Derek exclaimed, sliding out of the car on Marci's side. "My car's a mess. . . ."

"Forget about the car," Marci said authoritatively. "Lee's hurt. We must get him to the hospital. This is what drinking does," she added. "This could have been an even different story had you drunk that toast. A seriously-fatal story. For all of us. There's a house down the road; I see the light. We must get help."

"No need for that," Derek said. "I see a car coming. Someone will stop and help. If not out of courtesy, out of necessity; we're blocking the road."

In a little while, the oncoming car pulled along the side of the road. It was a police car. Marci heaved a sigh of relief when she saw the police officer. "Please, we need an ambulance," she pleaded, seeing Lee turn an ashen-white.
Immediately the message was relayed into the nearest police station and an ambulance was sent out to the site of the accident. "Drinking!" the officer exclaimed in disgust. "Let me smell your breath," he demanded angrily of Derek after the ambulance had disappeared down the highway. "Were you drinking too?" he asked suddenly.

"N... no Sir," Derek answered shakily and a bit unsteadily.

Without another word, the officer began a search of Derek's car. "It's a good thing I didn't find any drinks in there," he said. "I'd have locked you in jail for the night. We're cracking down on drinking drivers. Yes, cracking down on them." And he began searching through the red sports car, his face framed in a deep frown as he discovered far more evidence than he ever dreamed of finding... the back floor was loaded with booze. "On his way to a party, no doubt," the officer said aloud.

Derek fingered the bag inside his ample topcoat pocket, his mind in a whirl. If he was caught with it on his person... in his possession... well, what then? Walking quickly back to his car, he slid the bag and its contents out of his pocket and dropped it into a bush. Then, sliding into the car, he turned the key in the ignition. The motor started easily. At least the car could still run, he mused, waiting for the police officer to finalize his report.

The flashing yellow lights of a wrecker appeared and in a little while Lee's sports car was being towed into town. Derek followed, mumbling about the damage done to his car. Marci, her back snuggled tight against the velvet upholstered car seat, was deep in thought. When the brightly-lighted apartment complex came into view she was overjoyed. "Thanks, Derek," she said, hurrying from the car. "Thanks, and goodnight. When I'm back on praying ground again I'll be praying for you."

Gunning the motor, Derek raced away into the night.

Marci let herself into the apartment and hung her coat inside the closet. Then she dropped on her knees and prayed. Oh, how utterly desolate and void and meaningless life without Jesus was! But she would change, yes she would. She would repent like the prodigal, and tonight she, too, would return. She would make a fresh start; only this time it would be a total and utter
yieldedness for time and for all eternity . . . a born again experience and a
genuinely, wholly-sanctified heart.

Tonight, while the bells were ringing the old year out and the new year
in, the prodigal-backslider would have returned to "Father's House." She
would have peace in her soul and rest in her heart. And once again she
would feel at ease . . . a oneness . . . with God's people, the real Christians!