The patterns of light in the kitchen fluttered and flared, causing Trudy to glance up at the skylights and smile as she remembered her childhood name for them, “cloud windows.” Indeed, the “cloud windows” were showcasing quite a production with wind-roiled clouds whipping across the sky, gilded by the rays of the setting sun. Shrubs played a tattoo against the cottage as the wind engaged them in a primal dance. The walls of the old cottage creaked, as the curtains at the tightly closed windows billowed and swayed by turns.

As the potatoes simmered, Trudy checked the roast, then got out a supply of candles and her colonial candlesticks. Inserting a candle in each candlestick, she lifted them by their handles and set them on the counter, near the ever present, plugged-in flashlight. Taking the matches with her, Trudy moved into the den-cum-library, her favorite room, all fruitwood and leather, and bent to light the ready-laid fire. On a whim she decided to get a jump on the storm and lit the two hurricane lamps she had inherited from her grandmother.

Tuning the radio to a classical station, Trudy accelerated her supper preparations in hopes of beating any power outages that might be in the offing. “Wind gusts to 80 mph,” the weatherman had reported. That usually meant no lights on the island at some point.

Returning to the den, Trudy pulled forward the drop-leaf table. Clothing it in a cover the color of old gold, she went to the breakfront and selected two place settings from her collection of antique stoneware. Adding crystal goblets, old monogrammed silver and pewter candlesticks with long golden tapers—Trudy stepped back to admire the ambience she had created. Sighing happily, she decided that it was the perfect setting for an evening of such significance. The muted light of the fire and lamps gave the furnishings a subtle luster and imparted a sparkle and flash to the crystal and silver.

“I hope tonight will prove to be one of those framed and fretted occasions that give birth to lifetime memories,” she thought as she returned to the kitchen. “I’m glad Ray’s classes end early today. He’ll be able to get back to the Island before the bridge is closed. Our fifth wedding anniversary is no time for him to be marooned on the mainland.”

As Trudy went on about her celebratory preparations, Ray was, indeed, across the bridge and safely on the Island, heading not for home, but for Blakely Phillip’s farm down on the north shore. He had spoken to
Blakely almost two months ago to arrange for this very special anniversary gift for Trudy. After all, it was their fifth anniversary and the gift needed to reflect the growing magnitude of his love for her and his happiness in their marriage. He knew that, in the years since their wedding, she had missed the dogs she grew up with, but they had never been in a position to own one—until now. With his position at the community college assured and Trudy’s inheritance of her grandparent’s cottage, complete with a large fenced yard, an orchard and a vegetable patch, there was room for a dog and the money to purchase one.

Turning into the narrow, shadowed lane of willows leading to Blakely’s farm house, Ray felt like his car was swaying with the trees as the wind whipped their boughs around. As he pulled up to the front stoop, Blakely appeared and motioned for him to drive around back to the barnyard. Stopping a second time, Ray emerged into the swirling wind and followed Blakely into the barn.

“How was the drive from the mainland,” Blakely inquired as he led the way to a stall at the rear of the barn.

“Hair raising in places. I’m glad this storm will be gone by the time the weekend is over.”

Blakely opened the stall door and motioned Ray to accompany him inside. “How are you, Sheila? And how are those rambunctious pups of yours? I’ve brought your friend Ray to see them, and if it’s alright with you, he is going to take one home with him.” Raising her head as the two men entered, the sleek, shining Golden Retriever looked searchingly at them, then rose from the hay, shaking off pups as she moved. After being patted and petted as was her due, she calmly leaned against Blakely’s legs as Ray inspected her litter.

“You said you wanted pick of the litter, so I haven’t notified any of my other buyers yet. Have you decided whether you want a male or a female?”

“Thank you for waiting. I know you’ve postponed the sale of these pups by two weeks to enable me to get here and select one. I’m not sure what I want. I really don’t know much about dogs, just that Trudy loves them, and I want to give her one.” Sitting down on the hay, Ray observed the pups as they played. Suddenly, as often happens when selecting a puppy, one of the litter left the gambol, walked to Ray, and climbed into his lap. Putting its baby paws on Ray’s chest and rising on its stubby little hind legs, the roly-poly pup met penetrating gray-green eyes with large, limpid brown ones. Concluding its examination, the pup settled down in Ray’s lap, content to have her silken ears scratched by this stranger. Completely captivated, Ray looked up at Blakely and Sheila. “I guess it will be this one. Is it a girl or a boy?”
“It’s a female,” Blakely answered. “Bring it with you into the house and we’ll take care of the paper work. You should send her registration into the kennel club as soon as you and Trudy have selected a name for her.” Patting Sheila on the head Blakely led the way out of the stall and across to the house. “Did you stop and pick up the traveling crate I recommended? It will serve as a cozy home for the pup when you don’t want it running loose.”

“Yes, I got it. But it seems cruel to shut her up in it.”

“That’s foolish. The crate will allow her to travel in safety and have a place of her own. They come to enjoy that, having a place of their own they can retreat to.”

Holding the eight-week-old pup on his lap, Ray wrote out a check for the agreed upon purchase price and graciously accepted Blakely’s gift of collar and leash, as well as the papers he must complete. “Thank you again, Blakely. Each year Trudy and I have a little competition to see which of us will select the gift that best speaks our heart. I think it will be my turn to win this year. I had better be going. I don’t want to be late for the special supper I know Trudy has prepared.”

“Congratulations again.” Blakely said as they shook hands. “I’ll be seeing you soon and I’ll look forward to hearing if you won that competition.”

Placing the puppy in the travelling crate with a bit of carpet that Blakely had provided, Ray got into his car. Starting it up, he completed the circuit of the barnyard, and headed for the glow of love and warmth that he knew would be emanating from every pore of the little cottage he now called home.

The sky was darkening as he pulled into the driveway, and as the wind roared, the lights in the cottage began to flicker, all except the mellow, muted light pouring forth from the windows of the den. Quickly removing the puppy, complete with traveling crate from the car, Ray headed for the rear porch and set it in under the overhang. Hurrying back to the front door, he swung it open just as Trudy came down the stairs, looking like a photo plate in a long tweed skirt and her special occasion cashmere sweater. As they met in the hall, sharing a long embrace, the power at last failed, and the little cottage was plunged into duskiness, except for the rectangular glow from the den doorway.

“Come,” Trudy said, leading him into the den. “Supper is ready as soon as you’ve had a glass of sherry.”

“Aren’t you joining me?” Ray asked as he took his glass and seated himself in the overstuffed leather chair.

“Not right now. I was able to procure a split of a decent champagne for our after dinner toast, and I don’t want to mix my drinks.” As she
finished speaking, Trudy seated herself in Ray's lap and curled up in his arms. Talking quietly about their day, they remained entwined as he slowly sipped the sherry. Rising at last, Ray went to add a log to the fire and Trudy went to the kitchen to place their supper on the serving cart. Rolling it into the den, she was again enveloped in a warm and loving embrace. Finally, side by side at the little table in the den, among the glowing lamp and firelight, they dined as they enjoyed each other's company and conversation.

As they finished their meal, Ray set his plan to deliver his anniversary gift in motion. "Why don't you curl back up in the chair. I'll take out the dishes and bring back the champagne for our toast. I promise I won't break anything, and I know you don't want to have to clear up before we have begun to fully enjoy our evening." Standing and stretching, he began to clear the table onto the serving cart. Whistling as he worked, he moved the champagne glasses and the pewter candlesticks to a small coffee table in front of the fire, then he wheeled the cart into the kitchen. As was their custom to avoid overflow, he took the champagne onto the rear porch to open it. Quietly taking the sleepy puppy from its crate, he placed it inside his shirt, then picked up the champagne and returned to the den, where somewhat to his consternation, he found that Trudy had dozed off. Touching her shoulder, he gently roused her. "What's up, sleepy head, spend too much time on your preparations today?"

Coming fully awake, Trudy smiled. "Sorry," she said, "guess I expended more energy than I thought."

As Ray poured the champagne, somewhat hampered by trying to hide the bulge in his shirt, Trudy reached behind her for a small, gaily decorated package, which she placed on the table between the candlesticks. "Who gets to give their present first?"

Handing her a filled champagne flute, Ray said, "First our toast, then the presents, and its my turn to be the first to bestow a gift." Raising his glass he continued, "To Trudy, whom I love with more breadth and depth every moment of my life. I love you. Will you marry me?" Quietly the glasses clinked and they sipped a bit of champagne.

"To Ray," Trudy crooned, "whom I cherish for all the kind and thoughtful little things he does and whom I love more than words can express." Again the quiet clink, the sip of champagne, and then as if on cue, a muffled 'ruff.' "What was that?" Trudy exclaimed.

With an engaging grin, sitting on the arm of the chair, Ray reached into his shirt and set the suddenly squirmy ball of golden fluff into his wife's lap. "For you, my love, with my love."

"Ruff, ruff."

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Looking at the vibrant, warm, big-eyed bit of life in her lap, Trudy began both to laugh and to cry. Joining her husband in stroking the silky ears of the pup, she learned all about its history and the duty they had to register and name it and care for it—for life. Finally, when Ray lapsed into silence, she handed him the little wrapped box.

“What is it?” Ray asked as he shook it carefully. “It’s so small. What momentous gift could you have found this year that fit into so small a box?”

“Open it, darling, instead of trying to psychically communicate with it,” Trudy laughed. “I think you’ll be pleased, and that you’ll agree with me that, though your gift is magnificent in my eyes, mine, this time, is the best, the greatest gift.”

Ray opened the little box and removed its contents. Examining the gift carefully, he sat as if stunned—his eyes unfocused and his mouth somewhat open. Leaning from his position on the arm of the chair, with tears in his eyes, he hugged his wife and whispered, “yes, you win, yours is the greatest gift, this time.”

Later, as they rose and went hand in hand, to take the little golden puppy for a windswept constitutional before bedtime, they left behind them on the small table a pair of even smaller booties, made of the softest wool, white as snow, glowing softly in the lamp light.