

It's Christmas Eve, and the end of a year in which everything she loves has been lost. Everything but her determination to survive and her little girl. Will it be a night of sadness, or of love and miracles?

A Romance for Christmas

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"Mommy?"

Christine's young voice broke in on Dara's thoughts. She put down her one and only Romance book; the favorite she'd had since she was sixteen, and the only one she'd decided not to put out at the yard sale the previous week. "What is it, sweetie?"

"Why we don't gots a real tree for Chribmas?"

She set the tattered old book aside. "Come sit by me." She patted the couch and tucked her chenille robe closer around her.

One an arm around Matilda, her cloth doll, Christine climbed up beside her and cuddled up closer.

Poor Matilda's going to need stuffing before long. Her head flopped forward, face against her flat chest. *When did the lace on her dress get so ragged?*

Dara put an arm around her daughter. "Remember when Daddy went home to heaven before Christmas last year?"

Christine knuckled her eyes and yawned. "I 'member."

"And then Mommy got hurt in the car accident and couldn't go to work?"

"Uh huh."

Dara took a deep breath. "Well, it meant that there was no money for a real tree this year. But I'm sure Santa will still bring you presents." Gifts Dara bought by selling her entire collection of romance novels at a yard sale at her friend Sherilyn's house. "And we drew a tree, right?" She pointed at the crayon-bright drawing taped to the wall. Construction paper ornaments decorated each branch.

"But it doesn't smell like a Christmas tree."

Dara hugged her. "I know, baby. I know."

"How will Santa leave his presents?" Christine pulled away and got on her knees. "How he's gonna put them under the tree? He always leaved them under the tree before, Mommy."

"Oh, honey!" She ruffled her daughter's hair, swallowing the lump in her throat. "Santa always finds a way." She leaned forward and kissed her little girl. "We should get you in bed so he can come. He can't leave any presents while you're still awake."

She followed her daughter into her room, got her tucked into bed and sat beside her, stroking her golden hair. Christine gazed up at her from under thick dark lashes. Her deep-blue eyes never failed to remind Dara of her late husband.

Jack had been her high school sweetheart. Tonight marked 375 days since the accident that claimed his death. Neither she nor Jack had family other than each other. His coworkers knew, and they'd helped that first year, bless them. Christmas had been only ten days after his senseless death. The end of the year had been filled with tears and anger. Tears of loneliness, of fear for the future, of raising her daughter without Jack at her side. Anger at everything and everyone. At his company for making him go on the trip that caused his death. At Jack for

insisting on going away right before Christmas and not coming back until Christmas Eve. They'd argued and he'd slammed the door when he left.

But then he'd stopped the car halfway down the drive and had come back inside to kiss her and tell her he regretted having to go, but he had to, and that he'd be back soon. They'd shared a long, cherishing kiss and she'd waved until he was out of sight. Six hours later, his plane went down over the Gulf of Mexico in a freak storm. All on board were lost.

Guilt and doubt set in with the New Year. Things she should have said, should have done. Why had she let him go? Why had God allowed her child to grow up without a father?

Her friend Sherilyn had walked through it all at her side, helping her get a job, watching Christine, being there when all Dara needed was to cry. This year, the company had forgotten Jack and the family he left behind. So much for "The Company with Families at Heart." Jack's insurance had paid off the house, and there was enough money to survive for a few months. While she was looking for a job, she'd sold furniture, her good silver, and pawned all her jewelry, except her wedding ring.

Dara rubbed her face with both hands, willing herself to hold on for her daughter's sake. To be strong. To be both mother and father. Women had done it for centuries. They'd survived. So would she.

"Mommy?" Christine rubbed Dara's arm. "Read me the story about the mouse who's quiet."

"That's a great story. My mother used to read it to me when I was little." Dara snuggled beside her, and opened her daughter's favorite Christmas book. At least she'd been able to give her the gift of reading. When Jack had been alive, he'd always made sure there was money for books. She would miss her own collection, but at least Christine would have something from Santa. "'Twas the night before Christmas ..."

Christine drifted off to sleep at last. Dara pushed off the bed. She was gaining strength daily, and would finish therapy the first week of January and return to work. Disability paid for the basics - lights, phone, water, trash collection, and she'd never bought anything on credit, refusing to dig herself into a hole she'd never escape once it got started. How great would it be to have a full income again! If only it could have come in time for Christmas.

She went to the closet and pulled down a box with a ball, crayons, two coloring books and three books to read. Sherilyn had brought over a few things as well. This wasn't the grand Christmas that Dara had wanted Christine to experience, but even selling all her books hadn't brought enough money for more. She'd already sold off all her other valuables, but that wedding ring was staying. She'd removed it as part of saying good-bye to Jack.

Sherilyn had said it would help, and it had. Sort of. But not that much.

Dara sank into one of the kitchen chairs and put her face in her hands.

When the doorbell rang, she choked off tears, grabbed a paper towel and dried her eyes. The clock over the stove said nine o'clock. Who would be calling at this hour on Christmas Eve? She stuffed the wet towel in her robe pocket on the way to the door.

The peephole showed a policeman in crisp black uniform, with one of those Smokey Bear hats on his head. It took her back to the night Jack had died. She unlatched the door and opened it an inch, dread tightening her chest. "Oh, my God. Is something wrong, Officer?"

"No, ma'am." He removed his hat. His smile showed sparkling white teeth and a shock of bright blond hair that fell over his brow. "I'm Scott Gregori. My daughter Susan and your Christine are in the same preschool class. I don't suppose you remember me. I was at your husband's funeral last year."

Unlike Jack, he had brown eyes. Her heart fluttered in a way it hadn't since... Instantly

ashamed of herself for such a visceral reaction, she clutched her robe against her throat. "Oh, yes. Yes, I do." She remembered him perfectly. He had come to pay his respects, and shared with her that his wife had died only a month before, of cancer. "Please, won't you come in?" She opened the door wider.

"I brought you and Christine something." He bent down and picked up an oversized box before stepping inside. "This morning, I heard about your accident, and I thought-- Well, that maybe you could use some help with Christmas presents for your daughter." He added, "If you wouldn't mind."

Dara shut the door behind him. "It'll make Christine happy, and that's what counts. You're so kind to do this!"

He waved off her thanks with a quick gesture and set down the box. "All of us at the station chipped in and I went shopping. We figured money was tight so we wanted you to have this." He handed her a fat envelope.

She opened it, gasped and covered her mouth. A pile of twenties, tens, fives and ones filled it. "Oh. Oh, my-- my goodness."

He was smiling. "We all have families, and we help each other when things--" He swallowed. "Anyway, we wanted you to have that. And don't try to refuse." He set a hand over hers. "All of us have been there. You put that in your purse and use it however you need to."

Shaking, she refolded the envelope with extreme care. Words wouldn't come. She slid it into the pocket of her robe. "Thank you," she whispered, tears blurring her vision.

"The cop who filed the police report on your accident is my cousin, which was how I heard about your accident. I saw the papers on it when he filed the final report today and recognized your name. He finally caught the guy who hit you and ran."

She clasped her hands together. "He caught him?"

"Sure did." He reached into the box. "He was insured, so you'll probably end up getting a good-sized settlement." He held up a stuffed dog as big as her daughter. "Where would you like me to put these toys?"

"Oh!" Dara grabbed the wet paper towel from her pocket and wiped her eyes. Happy tears this time. Unable to speak, she gestured toward the paper Christmas tree.

Officer Gregori unloaded the biggest pile of toys she'd ever seen. Christmas morning was going to be so much fun, watching Christine realize "Santa" had indeed found a way. That would make Dara's entire day.

When he finished, he smiled at her, hat in hand. "There's one more thing in this box. I know you're going to think I'm some kind of sap, but--"

She laid a hand on his arm. "I think no such thing! I think you're the most wonderful Santa I've ever seen." Dara blushed at the blurted confession, and they both shared an embarrassed laugh.

"I'm more like an elf, actually. Santa sent me to help you, that's all."

Dara couldn't help but chuckle at that. "Please. Show me what's in the box."

"Well, my wife used to read a lot, and I never had the heart to give her books away. I stopped by my house and picked some up. I thought maybe you'd like to have them." He tipped the box on its edge and showed her.

All of them were romance novels.

When she started crying, he helped her to a chair. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to make you sad."

"Not sad," she squeaked. "Happy! Romance is-- it's my favorite." She grabbed another paper towel and wiped her eyes and nose. "This is the nicest Christmas I've ever had."

He sat in the chair nearest her. "I'm glad I could help."

She wiped her eyes again. "Could you maybe-- Could you stay for some coffee, Officer Gregori?"

"Please, call me Scott." He set his hat on the table. "I'm off work and Susan's all tucked in at my mother's. We've spent Christmas Eve there since Susan was born. I can stay for a little while."

She got up and put on the kettle as Scott stretched his long legs, dark eyes flashing. He smiled, the chocolate brown of his eyes fringed by thick lashes. Her heart made another little flutter and took wing.

She pulled down two mugs with candy canes decorating them. *Don't be silly, Dara! Ten minutes ago you were crying over Jack. It's Christmas, that's all. Don't go reading things into people's gestures of kindness.*

She turned back to Scott. "I don't have decaf, and it's so late. I have a couple of herbal tea bags left. Would you prefer those? I don't want to keep you awake all night."

Scott licked his lips and then smiled, as if thinking of some private joke. "I'll probably need that caffeine. I bought Susan a three-wheeled cycle and I still have to put it together, and Mom always needs help getting the turkey into the oven. She starts it at midnight. Says if it cooks slow overnight it's so moist it--" He sat up straight. "Say, what are your plans for Christmas dinner?"

"What?" She turned so quickly she dropped a spoon and stooped to pick it up, her face going hot when she realized it exposed her bare legs. Rising carefully, she wrapped her robe tighter and tied the belt in a double knot before getting out a clean spoon.

"Come out and have dinner with my family. We'd love to have you."

"Thank you, Scott, but I'm sure your mother wouldn't appreciate two extra guests at the table unannounced."

He dismissed the argument with a wave of his hand. "Mom will be thrilled. I won't take no for an answer. She'll enjoy meeting Christine. She keeps Susan while I work and having Christine over will keep both girls busy. Besides, I promise, Mom makes the best turkey you've ever had." He leaned closer as if sharing a secret. "And my dad will bless you for saving him from eating it for the next solid week." He winked.

She giggled at that, and covered her mouth. "Are you sure?"

Scott tapped his badge. "On my honor. I'll pick you up at noon. Dinner's always promptly at three, and this way the girls can spend some time together and we adults can have some coffee, or my mom's spiced tea, and talk."

She ducked her head, nodding. Her heart pounded. "Ok. We'll be ready." The big stuffed dog caught her attention as it fell over. "Oh, dear."

"I'll fix it." Scott got up and crossed the room, stooping to right the dog and prop him against the wall.

Dara swallowed tightly at the sight of the tight buns and hard legs inside that uniform. The only sex she'd had in over a year was the fantasy type, and here, right in her kitchen, was a hunk come to life. She fanned her face and turned back to the coffee. *What would Jack think of me lusting after another man?* She took a deep breath, and remembered her friend Sherilyn's words. *Jack's gone, Dara. He'd want you to be happy. He'd want you to go on. Your happiness was always what he wanted.*

She poured hot water over the coffee crystals and stirred each cup. "It's ready." She carried the cups to the table and set one in front of Scott. "How do you like it?"

Their gazes met and held. He gave her that mischievous smile of his that made her wonder what he was thinking. "Black's fine." He sipped the coffee. "This is good."

"I'm sorry I don't have anything more than instant."

"It's what I use at home. Never could get the hang of all those filters and timer settings and the fancy espresso attachment thingy. My mom has to have everything just so, and so did my wife." He shrugged, broad shoulders filling out that uniform in a way that made Dara's mouth go dry. "To me, coffee is coffee. This is my brand. I hate that slop at the station. Always tastes like someone strained it through gym socks." He grimaced. "Now this," he held up the cup. "This is coffee worth drinking."

"Th-thank you." She reached behind her for the other chair and sank into it, fearing her legs would give out any minute. *I haven't been this close to a man since Jack...* Refusing to continue along that line, she cleared her throat and sat up straighter, hands folded before her on the table, trying to think of something intelligent to say. "Um, what department are you in, Scott?"

He finished his sip of coffee. "It's a new one. We're trialing an old-fashioned way of patrolling downtown."

"New, but it's old?"

His grin could melt butter. It sure warmed her, the heat settling between her thighs. As she pulled the chenille robe tighter, it brushed across her erect nipples like a lover's touch. *Focus, Dara.* She measured her breaths, trying to listen to his words and not be affected by his physical appeal.

"There are six of us who walk a downtown beat. It was strictly on a volunteer basis. So

six of us on the station track team went for it. It builds up muscle and has really given us an advantage when we compete regionally."

Dara laughed. "A leg up, huh?"

Scott chuckled, nodding his head at the intentional pun. "You got it."

"I used to run track in high school. Haven't been running in years. My leg is good enough for me to walk normally, but maybe running -- a little -- would help me." She rubbed her mouth, considering the cost of running shoes. "After I'm working awhile I might start running again on weekends."

Scott finished his coffee. "Call me and I'll go with you. There's a great park on the other side of town that's built for runners." He pulled a card out of his pocket and wrote on the back. "There are mile markers and workout equipment. Places to stop and stretch, and good fountains so you won't dehydrate. Here." He handed her the card.

A policeman's official card, it showed contact info and email, an abuse hotline number and the seal of the city. Dara turned it over. In bold print, he'd written "cell" followed by his number.

When she met his gaze, the intensity in his eyes sent a flush of heat over her. She mumbled her thanks, too tongue-tied by his smile to form full words.

"Thanks for the coffee. It's been great to sit down and talk like this. I haven't had a chance to--" He blushed. "Since my wife--" He cleared his throat. "I'd like to do this again sometime. Maybe Susan and Christine would like to go for ice cream and we could talk again."

"Oh, I'd love that, and so would Christine." Dara pressed a hand against her chest.

"Good, then." He picked up his hat, brushing lint from it carefully, not meeting her gaze right away. "Maybe a couple of days after Christmas?"

Dara nodded. "I'd love it."

Scott stood. "Thank you, Dara."

"No, thank *you*." Dara got to her feet, wrapping the top of her robe around her. "I can't tell you what all this means to Christine and me." She held her robe closed with both hands, afraid she'd give in to her impulse to hug him. When he held out his hand, she slid hers into it, suddenly aware of her peeling pink nail-polish. She hadn't even noticed. Had he? Her cheeks felt warm.

Scott clasped her hand in both of his and simply held it, leaning down as if he was going to kiss her.

Her breathing stopped, her entire being held captive by this man's strong jaw, intense eyes and thick dark lashes.

"Dara." He smiled, patting her hand. "I know this has been a hard year for you, because it's been hell for me without my wife. I just want you to know--" He stood straighter. "It's going to be all right. We have iron-clad evidence against the guy who hit you, and tomorrow's going to be a great Christmas." He lifted her hand and kissed it. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She sucked in a deep breath, unable to speak.

Scott opened the door and paused to look back. "Make sure you lock this." He patted the door, popped on his hat and smiled that devastating smile of his. "Good night."

Dara walked woodenly to the door and put one eye up to the peephole. Scott was standing there as if waiting for something. With a grin, Dara flipped the locks. Scott nodded with satisfaction and almost danced down the front steps, whistling as he walked to his car.

Turning, she leaned back against the door. Joy filled her. Had Christmas ever felt so good? The season when magic happened. She clasped a hand over her mouth so she wouldn't laugh out loud and wake Christine.

She hurried to the phone to call Sherilyn. When she answered, Dara didn't even let her say hello. "Sheri! Did you know there's a six foot tall, blond elf on the police force? Oh, my God, wait till I tell you what's happened!"

Scott whistled all the way to his mom's house, grabbed his overnight case out of the trunk, and hauled it behind him up the steps to the front porch. At this hour, all was as still as that classic Christmas tale about the quiet mouse that Susan loved so much.

His mom opened the door before he could get out his key. Leaning down, he accepted her kiss on his cheek and gave her a squeeze. "Susan asleep?"

"Yes, finally. I had to read that story three times before she conked out." She shut the door behind him and took his case in hand. "I'll put this in your room. Why don't you go check on her? You won't sleep a wink until you do." She patted his cheek. "I know you too well."

He kissed her cheek and headed down the hall. The moment he opened Susan's door, she turned over, snapped on the small lamp, and held out her hands. "Daddy!"

"Hey, punkin'." He sat on the edge of the bed and gathered her into his arms. "I thought you'd be asleep so Santa could come."

She pushed back her long golden curls and tilted her head like a princess surveying an errant knight. "You know, Gramma tries, but she doesn't read the story like you do. She doesn't do the voices at all." Saying that, she leaned back in his arms, and he held onto her while she reached over for the book on the nightstand. "You read it, Daddy. Then I can go to sleep and Santa will come."

"You got it." He pulled back the covers on the double bed. "You get snuggled in really

good. Where's your doll? We don't want Marylou to miss the story."

Susan felt around the bed and pulled out the floppy cloth doll, propping her up beside her. "There, now she can see the pictures and everything."

"All right, are you ladies ready?" He opened the book.

"Ready." Susan bobbed the doll's head for her.

"T'was the night before Christmas..." Susan was asleep before he got half-way through the book, but Marylou still sat at attention. He finished the story, playing the part of Santa with a gruff Ho, ho, ho, and being the squeaky mouse snoring as he slept in his mouse-house. "And to all, a good-night."

Scott leaned over and kissed Susan's cheek, then picked up Marylou, gave her a peck on the head, and snuggled her up against Susan. After tucking the covers around them both, he turned off the light and tiptoed to the door, shutting it quietly.

In his old room, Scott stripped out of his uniform and put on sweatpants and slippers. There on his bed was a loose T-shirt with a blond-haired elf on the front. His mom had given it him the year before. The elf was shirtless, wearing red boxer shorts with holly on them, and he was licking a candy cane while dangling a round ornament on one finger of his other hand. "Mom! I can't wear this," he'd protested. "I'll look-- uh..."

His cousin had started singing "Don we now our *gay* apparel, fa la la--" but had broken off at Scott's murderous look. That didn't stop the family from insisting he wear it, and to stop the arguing, he'd given in. He hadn't expected to see it again, but here it was, clearly meant for him to wear. With a roll of his eyes, Scott slipped it on over his head and headed for the kitchen.

Scott leaned against the door jamb, enjoying the sight. His mother was chopping things for the stuffing and adding them to her biggest bowl. Dad sat at the end of the counter, reading a

Popular Science magazine. Neither paid attention to the other, but while his mother was cooking, Dad always stayed nearby, keeping her company. She'd crochet in a wooden rocker in the garage while he worked on the boat he was building. As if they couldn't bear to be parted from one another, even though they didn't talk much. Maybe they didn't need words.

He and Janet had shared a different lifestyle and saw each other only in passing. He'd worked nights, and she'd worked days downtown as an architect for government housing. Time spent outdoors had given her a great tan, but exposed her to hazardous toxins no one had known were in the buildings being demolished. Like two co-workers, she'd become sick and lost weight. After she fainted at work, the company sent all three in for a check up. The project had been shut down immediately, but skin and lung cancer had taken a quick toll on all of them. One died within a few months, the second not long after. Janet lasted six months before she'd passed away in her sleep.

Now Scott had a four-year old daughter and a job that took him into danger every day. He'd shifted to the downtown beat and day shift because it seemed safer, and he could still do what he loved doing. Helping people.

"Well," his father said, not looking up from his magazine, "Are you going to help your mother or just stand there in that dumb elf shirt?"

His mother braced both hands on the counter. "That shirt cost more money than any three pairs of your pants. It was custom-made. I wanted it to look like Scott and they did a wonderful job."

Scott pulled the shirt away from his body. *This is supposed to be me?* He met his dad's bemused gaze and they both gave that short, man-to-man shake of the head that meant "women".

His dad gave a snort and went back to reading. His mother continued chopping.

"Mom, I'm ready to work. Just tell me what to do."

She dried her hands on her apron and patted his cheek. "Such a good boy you turned out to be."

"Man," his father interrupted, not looking up.

"Whatever. Scott knows what I mean. He's out here helping and it's-- my heavens, look at the time. Did you have to work late?"

He pulled up a stool and told them about Dara and Christine and how they'd met, what the guys at the station had helped him do, leaving out only the part about the romance novels.

His father put down the magazine and listened. With a glimmer of tears in his eyes, he patted Scott's arm. "You're mother's right. You are a good man."

He bumped his shoulder against his dad's. "Thanks, Pop."

"I hope you invited her and her little girl to dinner." His mom started chopping again. "If not, I'm going over there in the morning and bring them here myself. Doesn't she have family, poor thing?"

"Oh, I invited her. I knew you'd insist once you heard. According to her paperwork, she has no living relatives and neither did her husband. Her Christmas tree was green paper, taped to the wall. Made me not take all we have for granted, you know?" Their tree, a seven foot pine loaded with lights and ornaments, filled one corner of the front room. "You want me to add an extra leaf to the table?"

"Yes, and we'll have to get out two more of the good plates. Oh, and that big platter on top of the hutch. You know, the one with holly on it."

His dad snickered. "Like those boxers on your elf."

"Now, Charles," his mother set both hands on her hips. "You leave him alone. That's a designer T-shirt. There's not another one like it in the world."

Small blessing. With a grin, Scott set off to do her bidding.

Christmas morning, Scott lay on the floor and savored the joy on little Susan's face as she opened gifts. Every aunt, uncle, and cousin across the country on both sides of his parents' family had lavished his folks' only grandchild with toys and clothes, which she took great pride in modeling. After a leisurely breakfast, his mom and dad cleaned up the kitchen, and Scott took Susan outside to ride her new trike. Neighborhood kids were out in force, skating, flying past on bikes, and whizzing by on scooters. All too soon, his little girl would be out there with them. No one in the area had a girl or boy Susan's age.

He slapped his forehead. "Christine." His wristwatch read 11:48 AM. "Holy cow. Come on, Susan, we need to go inside."

"But, Daddy, I--"

"I have a surprise for you, sweetheart. Come inside."

He ushered her into the house and up to his mom. "I have to pick up you-know-who in about ten minutes. Can you keep an eye on the punkin' here while I pick up her surprise?"

"Sure." His mom kissed him on the cheek. "Better fly."

Grabbing keys, Scott ran to his car, hopped in and started it. It took a few minutes before enough kids on new bicycles got out of the way for him to back up. He rolled slowly, refusing to squeal tires in his haste; setting a good example for the neighborhood kids. Once he reached the freeway though, almost deserted on Christmas day, he floored it. He pulled into Dara's driveway right on time -- exactly noon.

He skipped up the steps and knocked on the door. Jingling keys in his pocket, he whistled

while he waited.

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Dara peeped through the hole but it took a moment to recognize Scott without his uniform. She opened the door wider to let him in. "Christine!" she called over her shoulder. "Susan's daddy's here to take us over to their house for Christmas dinner." She flashed Scott a grin. "Thanks for doing this. Are you sure your mom won't mind?"

"Mind? She said if I hadn't invited you she'd have come over here and brought you home herself."

Dara smiled over her shoulder at him while she retrieved their coats from the closet. "Sounds like a determined lady."

"You have no idea."

Christine stood still as Dara helped her put on her coat and zipped it shut. Once done, the little girl launched herself at Scott and he stooped to pick her up in his arms.

"Hi, Mr. Susan's Daddy. I 'member you bringed cookies to school for Susan's birthday. I ate a pink one."

He chuckled. "Was it good?"

"Uh huh." She patted his face. "Your face feels like my Daddy's."

Scott blinked, glancing at Dara.

"Jack didn't shave on weekends until after lunch sometimes."

"Ah." Scott grinned at her daughter. "Did he do this, too?" He rubbed his nose against hers, making her giggle.

"No!" Still giggling, she put both hands on his cheeks and leaned back to look at

him. "That tickles."

"Susan likes it when I do that." He winked at her. "Were you good? What did Santa bring you?"

"Oh, he brought me lots of toys and some books and a dog this big!" She spread her arms.

Scott shared a grin with her mother. "Do you need help carrying anything, Dara?"

"No, I think we're good." She pulled on her coat, Scott helping with one hand while he held her daughter. "I'll just grab my purse."

"You know what, Christine?" Scott adjusted her against his hip. "Susan got a Barbie doll for Christmas. Did you get one, too?"

"Oh, yes!" She bobbed her head. "And her clothes and shoes, and a suitcase for her and everything!"

He set her down. "Why don't you go get yours so you and Susan can play Barbie together."

That endearing blue-eyed gaze lifted to Dara's face. "Mommy, can I?"

"May I, and yes, you may."

Christine bolted for her room.

Dara laid a hand on Scott's arm. "Thank you so much for doing this."

He pressed his hand over hers, his touch sending warm tingles over her skin. *How long has it been since a man touched me, other than to shake hands?* He smelled like clean soap, a hint of leather, and a deeper, masculine scent that was his alone. She leaned in closer to the tantalizing scent.

Scott spread a hand over his chest and grimaced, his cheeks a dark peach.

"What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, I-- I thought you were staring at my shirt."

"Your shirt?"

"Uh, I... Um..."

Dara couldn't help but laugh at his expression.

The dimple in his chin showed, and he grimaced again.

"It can't be that bad." She gestured. "Let me see."

He rolled his eyes but moved his hand.

A bare-chested hunky blond elf licking a candy cane and wearing red boxer shorts covered his chest. "I love it!" Dara started laughing, unable to stop herself. She cleared her throat. "Sorry," she squeaked, and then coughed again, gaining control. A giggle broke out that she couldn't hold inside. "Sorry! But he-- He kind of looks like you."

"Oh, God." Scott covered his eyes.

"Let me guess." She laid her hand against his chest. "Your mom gave it to you."

He turned his chocolate brown gaze on her, tilting his head. "How did you--"

"Know?" She grinned. "It's the kind of thing only a mother or a sibling who loves to tease you would give. Not that I don't think he's a cute elf, and I'd wear him in a heartbeat."

"No shit? Er, I mean, no kidding? You like this thing?"

She nodded. "It's adorable."

"You can have it. I'll wash it myself and deliver it tomorrow." He zipped up his jacket. "I just hope the guys at the station don't see me in this. They'd tease me forever."

"I'm ready," Christine interrupted. "I gots Shanika. See?" She held up the Barbie. "I sit by Shanika at school and she be's nice to me. Can-- I mean, may we go now?" She reached up and took Scott's hand.

Scott smiled down at the little girl. "Sure thing. I'm ready for some fun. How about you?"

He walked them down to the car and buckled Christine into a booster seat. "This is where Susan sits. She can see the road from here. Do you have a seat like this?"

"Uh huh. I'm a big girl now."

Dara couldn't help but smile.

Scott opened the door for her. That dimple in his chin showed, and his eyes twinkled. "Need any help?"

She chuckled. "Oh, no. I'm a big girl, too." She grinned back at him, making him laugh. The sound reached down into her soul and lingered like a warm hug.

Scott got in on the driver's side and fastened up, then twisted to look at Christine over his shoulder. "I was going to take us home by way of the North Pole, but Santa's elves are all busy cleaning the sleigh, so there's not much to see." He winked at her, and Christine laughed. "Hold on. Next stop, the Gregori house, six blocks away. With all these kids flying down the road on new bikes it might take us a couple of days." He winked back at Christine. "Did you bring any food for your Barbie? We wouldn't want her to starve."

Christine laughed hard. "Oh, you are so silly, Mr. Susan's Daddy."

Dara leaned back in the seat, her heart at rest knowing Christine would spend the day with a friend, in a warm home, having Christmas dinner with a family. If only every Christmas could be this good.

The blocks of houses rolled by, filled with front yards full of kids playing with new bikes and trikes, and adults tossing footballs and kicking soccer balls with their sons and daughters. Jack would've been out there, pushing Christine on a new bike, or teaching her to throw sticks for the new puppy they'd discussed getting.

"Here we are." Scott pulled into a long, circular driveway with a ranch-style house

at the end. Trees shaded the property. A shed was beside the garage on the right. "I grew up here. Christine, you see that swing set over there?" He pointed as he pulled the car in under the carport.

"Uh huh? Can I play on it?"

"You and Susan can come out together and I'll push you on the swings right before dinner." While Christine clapped her hands and made happy sounds, Scott smiled over at Dara. "It's the same one I grew up on." He came around to open doors for them, Dara first. "Janet, who was my girlfriend back then, used to come over to do homework, and we'd sit on the swings afterward and talk. My mom used to leave the kitchen light on so we could 'see what we were doing'." He laughed as he helped Christine out of the car. "Might as well have been a spotlight."

The shared admission made Dara laugh. "My parents left the porch light on and Jack's Mom had a string of white lights in the back yard for parties. None of them were too subtle, were they?"

He chuckled. "Shoot, no. Janet's dad had a big bulldog he'd let outside and I swear that thing would sit right in front of us and stare. Every time I'd try to put my arm around Janet, he'd curl his lip and snarl. Janet joked once that I only married her to get rid of Pester. That dog was well named, tell you what."

The front door opened and two grey-haired people came out, a woman in a Christmasy apron-covered blue dress and a man in a red flannel shirt with a white dishcloth over his shoulder. His resemblance to Scott showed in his strong jaw and mouth, a bit of the blond hair still showing through the grey; his mother had bestowed the brown eyes and quick smile. Introductions and welcomes ensued, and Susan came bouncing out and hugged Christine, said

a quick hello to Dara and grabbed Christine's hand, giggling and exclaiming about tea sets, Barbies, and stuffed ponies. The adults followed the girls inside.

A massive, live tree filled one corner of the room, hung with bright glass ornaments and strung with garland. The scent of the tree filled the room, and Dara drew it in, closing her eyes at the wonderful and familiar smell. "Your tree is beautiful. It's absolutely perfect."

"Dad and I go every year to this tree farm over in Hillsdale and cut one down ourselves. We couldn't pass this one up. We found a bird's nest inside when we got it home."

"Supposed to be a sign of good luck." Scott's mom Frances was hanging Dara and Christine's coats in the hall closet. She came back and invited Dara to sit on the couch. "Would you like some tea, dear? I have a really good pumpkin spice that you just have to try."

"Thank you." Dara smiled at him as Scott sat beside her. "Is there anything I can do to help you in the kitchen?"

"Everything's fine for now, but I'll be glad to take you up on the offer about twenty minutes before we serve. The table's all set, pies are done, the turkey's on its last round of basting, and all the sides are warming in the bottom oven. Last things to do are biscuits and gravy, and we'll be ready to eat."

Scott touched Dara's arm. "Mom has a double oven. She loves to bake."

His dad Charles rubbed the front of his rounded belly. "Can't tell that by looking at me, can you?" Smiling, he eased into the recliner and began rocking. "What kind of work do you do, Dara?"

"I bill insurance for a hospital. It's a tough, thankless job, but it saves our patients so much hassle. Now that I've been a patient there, I'm doubly glad for the staff in that department. They were wonderful. What do you do?"

"I'm retired, but I was a carpenter for more than 30 years. Built most of the furniture in this house." He swept a hand around the room. Hutch in the dining room, table and chairs, counters and cupboards in the kitchen. All the beds."

"He even did the floors. He's so talented with his hands." Scott's mother winked at her husband as she set a tray on the small table. A lovely china tea set filled it, morning glories almost glowing from every surface. "Here we are. Scott, why don't you pour?" She sat in the other recliner, near her husband.

"This is beautiful!" Dara caressed the handle of the pot. "I've never seen a teapot with such vibrant color."

"Thank you. It was my mother's. It was handmade in England when she and my dad were stationed there. A little out-of-the-way tea shop right below their flat. Dad was an officer in the Army, and my mother helped in the tea shop a few days every week. They couldn't pay her much, but the owner made her that set as a gift before my folks came back to the states. I cherish it." Her smile turned down a bit. "They're both gone now. I bring it out every holiday."

Dara accepted the brimming tea cup Scott handed her. "What a lovely way to honor them." The pumpkin spice tea held its own sweetness, the heat perfect. She took a long sniff of the rich fragrance, then a small sip. "Mmm. This is delicious. Thank you so much. It's such a pleasure to be here today."

The four adults spoke about various things, pausing now and again to check on the girls, who were having their own tea party with pretend tea, their Barbies guests at a small table. Each of the girls had put on hats and gloves, the fingertips a bit too long, and each had a feather boa around her neck. It did Dara's heart good to see her daughter obviously having such sweet fun. How would she ever get her to leave when it was time?

Scott and his dad took the girls outside to the swings while Dara helped Frances put together the last bits of the dinner. Working beside her in the big warm kitchen felt so-- perfect. They moved around one another as if they'd cooked together every day. Frances talked about Scott as a boy, and Dara hung on every word. He'd been a track all-star, varsity basketball player, and a good student. His mom teared-up suddenly, and then shook her head.

"He's a good man, my Scott. These last two years have been so hard on him. First Janet being so sick, and then when she--" She took off her apron, and then as if on impulse, gripped Dara's hands, staring deeply into her eyes. "I'm so glad he invited you here today. I haven't seen him this happy in a long time."

Before Dara could answer, the men came back inside with the girls, laughing and telling the women about the fun they'd had, and in the flurry of coats being hung up and hands being washed, the chance to talk more was lost.

The dinner passed all too quickly. The food was heavenly, and the turkey every bit as amazing as Scott had sworn. Near the end, both girls started dozing in their chairs.

"Looks like I need to take a little one home and put her in bed." Dara smiled over at Scott.

"No, don't go home yet." Scott stood and pushed in his chair. "We can put them on Susan's bed, and then after we get a chance to talk a little, I'll help you wrap her up in a blanket and take you both home. Ok?"

She swallowed tightly, fighting joyful tears at not having to leave this warm, loving haven. Dara nodded, and got up to help him.

The two parents carried them into Susan's room and put them on the double bed, then stood side by side a moment, watching them sleep.

Scott leaned one hand against the head of the bed. "They look so much alike. Have you noticed that? Blonde hair, big smiles, and they get along like sisters."

"I was amazed at how well they played together. There wasn't a bit of arguing all day."

Scott faced her. "Did you have a sister?"

She shook her head. "Only child and raised in foster care. My parents were killed in a car accident when I was ten. When Jack died, I was terrified of something happening to me, and Christine ending up the same way. I spent so many nights, swinging from anger to terror and never getting a handle on either one."

He nodded, and held out his hand. "It's been a beautiful day. No snow. What do you say we bundle up and go sit on the swings and talk?"

She almost chuckled, thinking of his parents leaving the kitchen porch and kitchen window lights on so she and Scott would be able to "see." It was only five p.m., so it was just getting dark. She nodded. "I'd like that."

Wrapped in warm parkas and with a woolen plaid blanket to share, they headed out to the swings. On one end, a short, two-seater swing had been hung for Scott's parents. That way they could be outside with Susan, but not need to stand the entire time.

Scott settled into the seat and rested his arm across the back, inviting Dara to join him. Once she did, he tossed the blanket across her legs and his. The small swing meant their bodies touched, from hips to thighs to calves, all the way down to the ground.

Dara held her breath for a moment, but as Scott began to swing them, gently, one booted toe on the ground, she relaxed. When she shivered, he put his arm around her and tucked her up close against him, settling more of the blanket over her.

"Comfy?" He pressed his lips against the top of her head.

She hadn't been this comfy in years and years. "Oh, yes," she sighed the words, and put her head against Scott's shoulder. "Thank you. This is nice."

The light from the porch bathed the yard, and the kitchen window light framed their seat.

"I should probably have helped your mother clean up." But Dara didn't move, too warm and snug in Scott's arms to budge.

He leaned a cheek against her temple. "Dad always helps her do the dishes. Now, if she's cooking, he'll sit there and read, but he likes the sudsy water. When I was first engaged to Janet, he had me come help him in the kitchen and told Mom to go relax with her soon to be daughter-in-law. You know what he told me?"

She tilted back her head. His dark eyes weren't visible in the changing twilight, but his bright smile shone. "What?"

He gave a soft laugh, and pressed his mouth against her ear, speaking softly. "That the best sex always begins in the kitchen."

Dara giggled, covering her mouth. "What did he mean?"

"He said if a man takes the same responsibility as his wife does in dealing with cleaning up the kitchen, getting the kid in bed -- that was me -- then she'd know he respected her. She'd feel loved." He nodded toward the window. "See?"

His father was leaning over to give his mother a peck on the cheek, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

She sighed. "Oh, that's so sweet!"

"Used to embarrass the heck out of me when my friends came over, till I found out they all wished their folks were like mine."

The light in the kitchen window winked out, startling both Dara and Scott. The yard fell

into darkness except for a band of light on the porch. A moment later, it went out, too.

Neither moved. They cuddled together on the swing, hanging on to the moment, savoring the privacy.

"Wow," Scott said, after a moment. "That's never happened before."

"Maybe they don't know we're out here." Dara didn't move. "Do you have a key?"

"Mmm hmm." He rested his head against hers, holding her in his arms.

Dara could not recall a time she'd ever felt safer. The stars overhead shone in all their splendor, as brilliant as diamonds. The sound of a television came on, playing the opening music from *It's a Wonderful Life*. Soft sounds of nature, the *birdy-birdy-birdy* call of a cardinal sounded in the distance. A few leaves fell from the trees, a gentle wind tumbling them past Scott and Dara's feet.

He gave a little snicker.

"What?" She didn't move.

"Maybe," Scott wrapped her tighter, "they're trying to tell us something."

"Your parents, you mean? What? To come in out of the cold?" They were so close she could hear as well as feel Scott's laugh against her body.

"No, maybe they know something we don't know."

"What?" She sat back and turned so she could see his face.

He turned toward her, grinning. "Maybe they think we belong together."

His mom's words came back to her. "*I haven't seen him this happy in a long time.*" Her heart pounded, beating so hard she could see her blouse moving. He could probably even hear it. A combination of fear, hope, and confusion poured over her. "What are you saying? We just met yesterday. Technically."

"Yes," he replied, his voice as calm as deep lake. "And I'm not saying we should rush into anything. I think we should take it slow, help each other get over our mutual losses, let our daughters get to know each other, and then... then..." He swept a hand through his hair. "I don't know. But when I'm with you, I feel this sense of euphoria. Like I've found this precious jewel that I've been looking for all my life and didn't even know it until now."

She said nothing, too awed by his words. Her mouth and throat felt so dry she couldn't speak. Dara took the lapel of his coat in hand and pulled it aside so the elf showed. "A cop who wears a shirt like this to please his mom, spends the day playing with kids and helping a nervous woman get over her jitters and help her get to feel at home with his parents--" She raised her gaze to meet his hopeful one. "I could really enjoy getting to know a man like that."

Scott laughed out loud, tossing back his head. When he grinned at her, it shot little tingles down her spine. "Tell you what, Dara. Let's agree to get to know each other, and then next year on Christmas day we'll sit right here talk about where we want to take our relationship." He rested his brow against hers. "Sound good?"

Her heart had stopped pounding from nerves and now was pounding from excitement. "Oh, Scott! Yes." She nodded. "I think that's a wonderful idea." Suddenly, she giggled.

"What is it?" He bent his head to meet her gaze. "What's funny?"

"One of my favorite novels is called *A Romance for Christmas*. Maybe it was written for you and me."

"I like having a Christmas romance, Dara, but I want to go one step further."

"To...?"

He wrapped his hands around her face, cradling her like a delicate doll. He kissed her as

if he'd never let her go, his mouth warm, gentle, but firm and sure. When he pulled back, he gave her a smile as naughty as the elf's on his T-shirt. "I want a real life romance. One that lasts."
Holding back nothing, Dara threw herself into his arms.

Merry Christmas!
Kayelle Allen
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