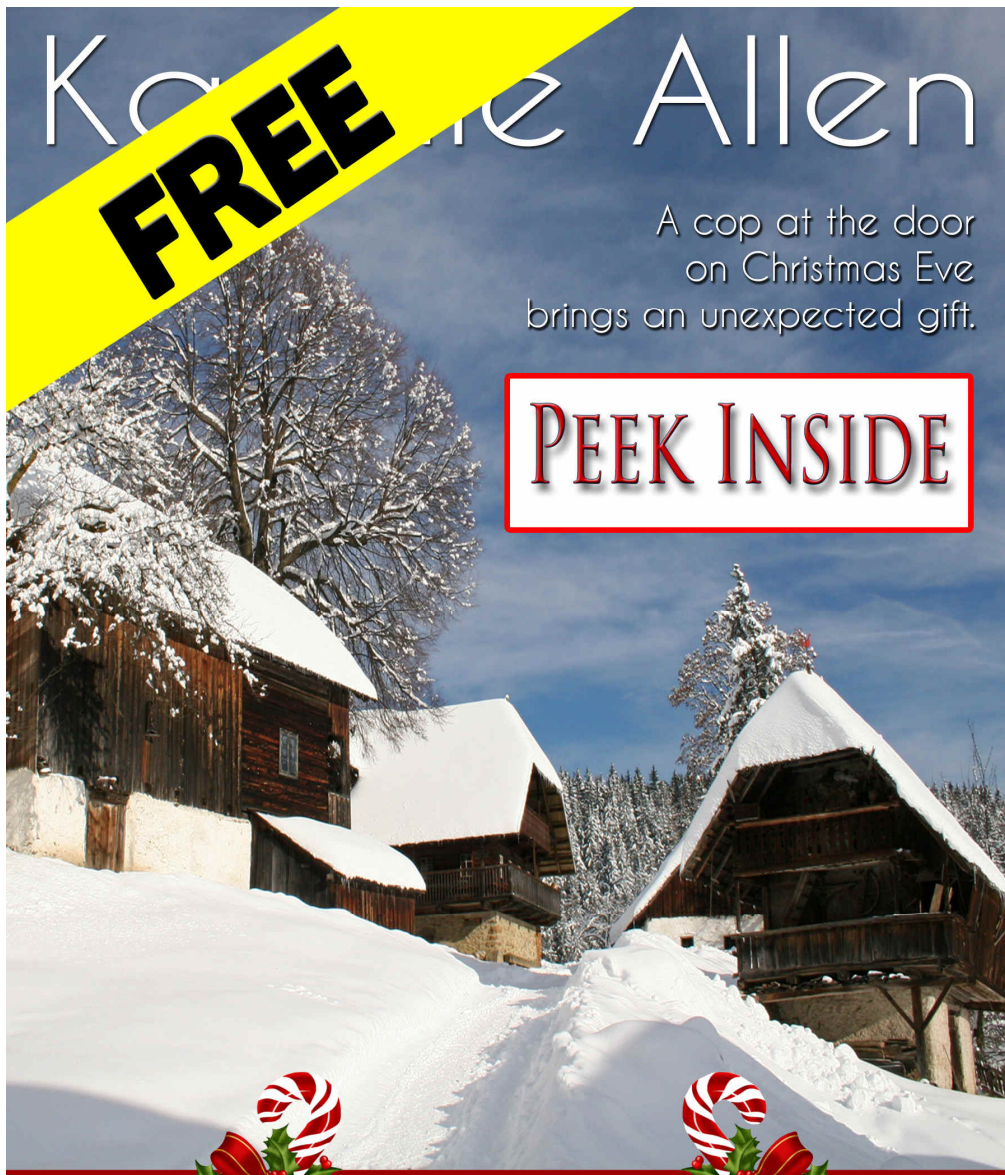


Kathleen Allen

FREE

A cop at the door
on Christmas Eve
brings an unexpected gift.

PEEK INSIDE



A
Romance
for *Christmas*

Peek Inside: A Romance for Christmas

A cop at the door on Christmas Eve brings an unexpected gift.

A sweet holiday story about love and loss.

Behind the Scenes of A Romance for Christmas

A cop at the door on Christmas Eve brings an unexpected gift.

This sweet holiday romance will remind you what the spirit of giving is all about. It's Christmas Eve, and the end of a year in which everything Dara loves has been lost. Everything but her little girl and a fierce determination to survive. When a cop brings Christmas to her door, he also brings a gift she never expected to get.

In 2004, I wrote this story as a thank you to my critique partners for their untiring support. They loved it. I put the story away and now and then, would come across it and think I should rewrite and update it. Fast forward to 2014. One of those original critique partners is now my business partner at The Author's Secret. We were talking about Christmas plans, holiday books, and what we might like to do for the winter season. I thought of this book.

In September, I dusted off the box it was in, retyped it, and sent it chapter by chapter to my new critique group. The original one was all online -- this one meets weekly at a Starbucks. They loved it as well. One wrote "A sure winner -- this is so sweet!"

I've dedicated the book to my sister Cherry in memory of Bill. They had many wonderful years together. A special thank you goes out to all my critique partners -- their encouragement means everything.

A word about the names in this book... When I wrote it, I decided to use the first names of favorite authors and their characters. I'm sure you can guess at least one of them with no difficulty (it's unusual), but can you guess them all? Characters not named this way include Frances, Charles, Francie (all family names), and the names of the girls' dolls. Now, how about another peek inside?

* * * *

In the opening of the book, we meet the heroine and her daughter.

"Mommy?" Christine's young voice broke in on her thoughts.

Dara put down the romance she'd been re-reading, the favorite she'd had since she was sixteen. She'd sold all her others at a yard sale the previous week. "What is it, sweetie?"

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

"Why don't we 'have'," she corrected. "Come sit by me." Dara patted the couch and tucked her chenille robe closer around her.

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

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 smoothed the doll's dress. "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 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. "He can't put them under the tree, Mommy."

"Oh, honey!" She ruffled her daughter's hair, swallowing the lump in her throat. "Santa will find a way." She leaned forward and kissed her little girl. "We should get you in bed so he can come. He can't leave presents while you're 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 Dara's high school sweetheart. Tonight marked a year and nine days since the accident that had 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. His senseless death happened right before Christmas. What if something happened to her too? As an orphan herself, Dara experienced fear and anxiety for her daughter. Tears of loneliness, terror of the future, of raising her daughter without Jack at her side. Anger at everything and everyone. At his company for sending him on the trip. At Jack for going. Guilt for feeling angry at her.

The night Jack had left, they'd argued over it and he'd slammed the door when he left. But then he'd stopped the car halfway down the drive, gotten out, and had come back inside to kiss her and tell her he regretted having to go, but that he had to. He promised he'd be back before Christmas. 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.

More 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 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 that'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. "'T'was the night before Christmas..."

After Christine drifted off to sleep, 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.

It'll be great to have a full income again! I wish it could have come in time for Christmas.

She went to the closet and pulled down a box with a ball, crayons, paper, and three books. Sherilyn had brought over a few things as well. This wasn't the grand Christmas that Dara had wanted for Christine, but Dara had already sold her other valuables. There was nothing left but her wedding ring.

She didn't wear it. Removing it had been part of saying good-bye to Jack.

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

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

Sometime later, when the doorbell rang, she 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.

* * * *

In this scene, we meet the hero.

In his old room, Scott stripped out of his uniform and put on sweatpants and slippers. On his bed was the loose T-shirt with a blond-haired elf on the front that his mother had given 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.

Upon seeing the shirt when Scott unwrapped it, a cousin had started singing, "*Don we now our gay apparel...*" and had broken into riotous laughter. That didn't stop the family from insisting he wear it. He was sure he'd asked Mary to give it to Goodwill, so how it had shown up again this year he couldn't explain. Yet, there it was. It could only have come from one person.

"The things we do for our mothers." Scott slipped it on over his head and headed for the kitchen.

He leaned against the door jamb, enjoying the sight. His mother was chopping things for the stuffing and adding them to her biggest bowl. His dad sat at the end of the counter, reading a *Popular Science* magazine. Neither seemed to pay attention to the other, but while his mother was cooking, Dad always kept 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.

Scott had thought he and his wife would be the same, but he and Mary had shared a different lifestyle. Both were often busy, and sometimes saw each other only in passing. He'd worked nights, and she'd worked days. She'd had a downtown office, working 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 old

buildings being demolished. When she fainted at work, the company sent her in for a check up. After the diagnosis, the project had been shut down immediately, but cancer took a quick toll. Mary was gone in six months. A government investigation into the cause was still ongoing.

Scott now had sole custody of 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 dad said, not looking up from his magazine, "Are you going to help your mother or 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."

"Did not. I paid a pretty penny for these pants."

"Pants were cheaper back in 1982."

He snorted, and went back to his reading.

His mother gave a satisfied nod. "That shirt was custom-made. I wanted it to look like Scott and they did a wonderful job."

Scott drew 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 shrug that meant "women."

His dad went back to reading. His mother continued chopping.

"Mom, I'm ready to work. 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 dad interrupted, not looking up.

"Whatever. Scott knows what I mean. His help is a blessing, and it's-- my heavens, look at the time. Did you have to work late?"

He pulled up a stool and told them how he'd met Dara, reminded them about Christine being in Susan's class, and what the guys at the station had helped him do.



He left out a few parts, but explained he'd invited Dara and her daughter to dinner.

His dad put down the magazine and listened, a glimmer of tears in his eyes. "Your mother's right. You are a good man."

"Thanks, Dad."

"I'm glad you invited them." His mom got out more vegetables to dice and chop. "I'll look her up in the phone book and call her in the morning. I want her to know she's welcome."

"Phone book?" His dad snapped open his magazine. "Do they still have such things? I thought these days you had to look people up in Tweeter or Facepad."

"Uh, Dad." Scott pulled out his phone. "It's Twitter and Facebook, and I already have her phone number. Here, Mom. Write this down." He handed it to her. "And yes, there are still phone books for people who want them."

His mother recorded it. "I'll call her about ten or so. In case she sleeps in."

"I think that'd be okay, although her daughter's Susan's age. I doubt she does any more sleeping than I do. Especially Christmas morning."

"Here, son." His mother gave back the phone. "Does she have any family?"

"From what we could tell at the precinct, no living relatives. Husband didn't either. Her Christmas tree was green paper, taped to the wall. Made me not take things for granted, you know?" Their tree, a seven foot fir loaded with lights and ornaments, filled one corner of the front room. "You want me to add an extra leaf to the table?"

"Yes, please, and get out two more of the good plates, and silverware to go with them. Oh, and the platter on top of the hutch. I can't reach it. You know, the one with holly on it."

"If you need help finding it"-- His dad added -- "it looks like the green plant on those boxers your elf is wearing."

Scott sent him a droll stare. "Ha ha."

"Now, Charles." His mother set both hands on her hips. "Stop teasing him. That T-shirt could be a collector's item. There's not another one like it in the world." She resumed her work.

Scott and his dad shared that bemused look again, and Scott set off to do her bidding.

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