

The Elf's Christmas Gift

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THE ELF'S CHRISTMAS GIFT

“Ouch! It’s too tight.” Deanna Rice sucked in her gut then let out her breath slowly.

“That’s what *she* said.” Jan Carter, Deanna’s cubicle mate, stared at the elf costume Deanna was struggling to squeeze into. “Look, I’m sorry I can’t do it this year. But my mom was able to get me a last minute plane ticket and I’m so looking forward to spending Christmas with my family.”

Deanna couldn’t blame her for that. She’d always spent Christmas with her parents and her older brother. But now Jared was married and spending the holidays with his wife’s family, and Mom and Dad had opted for a Christmas cruise to the Bahamas. And since Deanna was the only one in the office who didn’t have plans for Christmas Eve, she’d been guilted into taking Jan’s place this year as Santa’s elf, helping their boss distribute Christmas presents at an orphanage on Long Island. She shrugged out of the boob-flattening pixie dress. “Is it too late to buy another costume?”

“Oh, forget that, sister. It was too late the day before Thanksgiving.” Deanna’s petite-framed colleague, six inches shorter at five feet nothing, studied the seams of the costume. “We could let out a few stitches at the waist.”

“Won’t that leave holes?”

“If it does, that wide belt will hide them.”

“But it’ll still be too short.” The fur hem barely cleared her butt. “And super snug here.” She cupped her breasts.

“It was a little short even on me. The red leggings will take care of that problem.” Jan winked. “And so what if the bodice is a little form-fitting? Nobody said an elf had to be unisex.”

“You have an answer for everything,” Deanna said grudgingly.

Jan folded her arms. “Maybe you should wear a Scrooge costume instead.”

Deanna winced. She hadn’t realized she was being that whiny. It was just that it wouldn’t seem like Christmas without the colorful wrapped presents around her parents’ huge Christmas fir tree, the enticing smell of roasted turkey from the oven, and the whole family sitting by the fireplace watching *It’s a Wonderful Life* on TV.

“It’ll be fun, I promise. And Mr. Howard is not doing his Santa thing without a helper.”

The Fern Children’s Home in Great Neck, Long Island was their boss’s special charity. Every year he stuffed pillows inside his oversized Santa costume and ho-ho-hoed huge satchels of toys to the orphanage near his home. Deanna’s apartment was in the city but Mr. Howard would drive her to the train station after the Christmas Eve party so she could get home by midnight.

So she could drink egg nog alone in an empty apartment. Her three roommates all had plans for the evening, either sharing festivities with their families or clubbing in Manhattan with their significant others.

After Jan had ripped part of the seams, Deanna tried on the costume again. Since her stomach was flatter than Jan’s, the leggings stretched to fit her longer legs. The red and white striped shirt, supposedly long-sleeved, just cleared her elbows, but nobody was going to notice or care about that. The dress was still too short, but at least she could breathe in it. “The hat and booties fit,” she said, forcing a cheeriness she didn’t yet feel.

“You look great.” Jan propelled her toward the large bathroom mirror.

Deanna bounced her chestnut curls spilling out of the green and white nightcap. “I do look kind of cute.” She watched the elf’s face in the mirror light up into a smile. Maybe she could get into the Christmas spirit this year.

“Nobody’s going to put this elf on a shelf.” Jan opened the door of the Ladies restroom. “Let’s go show Mr. Howard.”

* * *

Glancing into the rear-view mirror of Mr. Howard’s Jeep, Deanna could barely see the road behind them over the pillowcases and trash bags stuffed with toys and children’s clothes. As they got farther from the city crowded apartment buildings gave way to neighborhoods of homes, then houses farther apart, and finally, trees. “It’s pretty out here.” Deanna cracked open her window to sniff the scent of cedar. The last rays of the sun filtered through the trees, enveloping them in a forest of anticipation. It was Christmas Eve, and if she listened with the ears of a child, she could almost hear the clatter of reindeer hooves above the treetops.

“I’m glad you were able to do this,” Mr. Howard said. “I know you were kind of pressured into it, but I think you’ll enjoy the experience. These are great kids and they look forward to the Christmas Eve party every year.”

Deanna wasn’t much of a kid person. As the youngest, she’d never had to deal with people smaller than herself. But she could use the practice. Jared and his wife Bella were seriously trying to get pregnant.

When they arrived at the orphanage, Mr. Howard parked behind the building and rapped quietly on the back door. It was opened by a woman in her late forties or early fifties, stout but not overly obese, wearing a starched apron over a red velour dress. Deanna tried not to gape. If she weren’t all grown up and beyond believing, she could have sworn she was looking at Mrs. Claus.

“Sam!” Beaming like a hundred watt bulb, the woman checked behind her, then welcomed Santa and his helper into the kitchen. “It’s so good to see you again.” She hugged Mr. Howard, who introduced Mrs. Claus as Velma Green, the resident ‘mother’ of the home. Deanna held out her hand but the woman offered her a warm hug too. “Welcome to Fern Children’s Home, Deanna.”

“Nice to meet you, Mrs. Green.”

“Call me Miss Velma. All the children do. And this is Sheryl.” Miss Velma nodded at a younger woman tending an industrial sized oven from which enticing smells emanated. Pulling the doors leading from the kitchen to the rest of the home shut, Miss Velma whispered, “The children are still in their rooms waiting on dinner. I told them that Santa might not be able to come this year so they wouldn’t be too disappointed if you weren’t able to make it.”

“Why would I ever not make it?” Mr. Howard looked offended at the suggestion.

“You haven’t heard about the storm warnings? It’s supposed to drop six inches of snow before morning. The children were all excited about having a white Christmas but I had to warn them that it might make it tough for the reindeer to land.”

Meaning it might have been difficult for an earthly vehicle, even Mr. Howard’s Jeep, to navigate country roads in a snowstorm. Flying reindeer, on the other hand, would have had no trouble landing on their magical hooves. Deanna tried to remember how old she’d been when she’d stopped believing in Santa and his reindeer. Five? Seven? Jared had broken the sad news before she was ready to hear it, but she’d kept up the pretense of believing for her parents’ sake for a year or so after that. “How old are the children?” she asked when Mr. Howard went out to the Jeep for the sacks of toys.

“All ages. But mostly from five to twelve. The infants and toddlers get adopted or put up in foster homes, but the more ‘troubled’ kids get sent back here.”

How troubled? Deanna imagined little monsters wielding kitchen knives and razor blades. *Ages five to twelve, Deanna.* She reminded herself that these kids, so much more than over-privileged suburbanites, needed and deserved a visit from Santa.

“We have a wonderful social worker on staff here,” Miss Velma added as if she’d read Deanna’s mind. “Nate Jackson. The kids adore him and follow him around like the Pied Piper.” She turned to Mr. Howard. “Are you ready to make your entrance?”

He adjusted his fake white beard. “Deanna? Showtime?”

“Sure.” She pasted on a smile. She would rather be in the Bahamas or anyplace with a warm, white sand beach, but for the children’s sake, she would make the best of it.

While Miss Velma summoned the children, Mr. Howard pushed open the doors leading into a large living area, dominated on one wall by a large fireplace. On the wall opposite was an immense Christmas tree, its fir branches reaching almost to the ceiling. It was decorated with strings of popcorn and multi-colored paper chains, but the floor around it was sadly devoid of gifts.

They dragged the sacks of toys to the fireplace hearth. Mr. Howard settled larger-and-jollier-than-usual self in the oversized rocking chair near the fireplace, and Deanna sat cross-legged on the floor beside him.

From the other side of a doorway between tree and fireplace, a chorus of high pitched voices rose from excited titters to a deafening crescendo. “Ho ho ho!” Mr. Howard bellowed over the din as a dozen or more children charged into the assembly like an invading horde.

“What was that?” A tall, lean man emerged from the center of the pack. “Could it be....?”

“It’s Santa!” Deanna and her boss were rushed by a sea of small bodies. “And his elf!”

Deanna struggled to her feet, momentarily fearing she’d be crushed by the stampede. A hand reached out to her. Clinging to it as if it were a life raft, she hauled herself up above the fray, using her other hand to smooth down the skirt of her costume, which kept trying to curl up toward her waist. She was probably giving this guy an eyeful of legging-covered butt, but if he noticed, he didn’t remark on it.

“Easy kids, let Santa and his helper breathe.” The man’s voice had a calming effect, not only on the children, but on Deanna as well. “I’m Nate,” he said as she’d already guessed. “I’m kind of in charge here. Kind of being the operating phrase.”

Deanna’s pasted smile cracked, replaced by a genuine one. “Deanna Rice. Christmas elf.”

Nate’s smile, seemingly genuine as well, broadened his thin face. He wasn’t movie star handsome but he wasn’t bad looking either. His brown hair tumbled in waves over his ears and collar, going its own way despite whatever comb may or may not have been applied to it. He wore jeans and a flannel shirt, appropriately hued in red and green plaid, and fur-lined boots. His face was kind, his brown eyes bright but serious.

“Who wants hot chocolate?” Velma Green appeared holding a coffee cup.

“Me! Me!” A dozen or so voices rang out.

Miss Velma handed the cup to Mr. Howard and he took a cautious sip. From the grin he exuded, Deanna guessed that the cup held neither coffee nor hot chocolate, but something stronger and toastier.

He set the cup on the floor beside him as a little girl about three years old climbed into his lap. “Santa did your reindeer land okay?”

“Of course. Reindeer can land anywhere.” Mr. Howard smoothed his red suit jacket over his stomach. “Did I ever tell you kids about the time we were flying home to the North Pole and Dancer stubbed her hoof on an Eskimo igloo?” He launched into an involved story that had the children absorbed in every word.

Miss Velma beckoned to Nate and Deanna to follow her to the kitchen.

“He’s a natural,” Nate said, as they helped Sheryl and Miss Velma pour hot chocolate into Styrofoam cups. “They look forward to Santa’s visit all year.”

“This is a side of Mr. Howard I’ve never seen,” Deanna admitted. “I’m used to him as a benevolent dictator in a business suit.”

“He’s your boss?” When she nodded Nate asked “So what do you do at Greenlight Enterprises?”

“I’m a business analyst.” The title sounded boring even to Deanna.

“What kinds of things do you analyze?” Behind the serious demeanor his voice teased.

“Stock forecasts, trade agreements, anything that might affect the financial horizon.” She plopped a couple of mini-marshmallows into a steaming cup of cocoa. “Stop yawning, I know it sounds tedious but it’s important work.”

Nate shrugged. “I’m sure it is. As long as you enjoy what you do,”

Was there a challenge in that statement? “Do you enjoy what you do?”

“Oh yeah.” His eyes burned with a quiet fervor. “I wouldn’t want to do anything else.”

“It takes all kinds,” Deanna admitted. “I’m not a people person. I can’t imagine how you can be around so many...energetic kids all day.”

“Oh, I’m used to it.”

“You come from a big family?”

Nate nodded. “About sixteen kids.”

Wow. “About?” she asked incredulously. “There were so many couldn’t count them?”

“Well, the number of brothers and sisters varied over time.” His brown eyes twinkled at her confusion. “I grew up here. In this orphanage,”

Deanna swallowed her next question.

“We’d better get out there with these drinks before Santa runs out of stories.” Nate set half a dozen cups on a tray. Deanna picked up the tray of cups Sheryl had arranged and followed Nate out to the main room.

She knelt on the floor and handed a cup and a napkin to each child in the area, praying the red leggings wouldn’t run or tear from the stretch. The children barely looked at her, staring in rapt attention at Santa as Mr. Howard launched into yet another Christmas story.

“Well, I must be going now,” Santa Howard said finally. “Lots more children to visit tonight.” He reached to the floor for a last sip of his ‘coca’ and then pulled himself to his feet, one arm under his stomach to support the pillow stuffed inside. His belt caught on the rocking chair arm and he sat back down with a plop.

The children tittered. Deanna winced, wondering how much cheer her boss had imbibed from that coffee cup, but when she went to his side to help him up from the chair, his private wink assured her this was all part of the play.

“Good thing Santa’s got a plump rump,” he said to more giggles, and started toward the door, then stopped dramatically. “But wait. I think I’m forgetting something?” He made a show of looking around, noticing the stuffed bags at his feet.

“Presents!” the children yelled. “You brought presents.”

“Oh, so I did.”

Nate stepped forward and tapped two boys on the shoulder. “Chuck. Gary. Why don’t you help Santa’s elf bring the presents to the tree.”

This was what Deanna had come for, to hand out gifts. Hauling one bag over her shoulder, she carried it to the Christmas tree. The two boys made quick work emptying it and displaying the gaily decorated packages Deanna and her office mates had wrapped last week.

“This one’s Anna’s!” Chuck exclaimed as he set down a doll-shaped package. The boy looked to be about six years old and seemed proud of his ability to read the names. “And this one’s for Eliot.”

“Can we open them now, Miss Velma?” The children surrounded Mrs. Green, as she entered the room. “Please, please, pretty please?”

“Let’s save these presents for the morning,” Miss Velma said. “I think Santa may have some other things for you tonight.”

All eyes returned to the bag that still sat at Santa’s feet. Deanna sat on the hearth beside it. Extracting the first present randomly, she handed it up to her boss.

“Mary Ann!” The little girl who’d sat in Santa’s lap earlier jumped to her feet and ran to him. “An LOL doll!” she exclaimed. She snuggled into Mr. Howard’s lap and hugged him. “It’s just what I wanted!”

“Of course it is.” Mr. Howard winked at Deanna as if she’d personally picked out the gifts. “Santa read your letter and Miss Elf here made it just for you.”

“Thank you, Santa. Thank you, Miss Elf.” Mary Ann slid off Mr. Howard’s lap and nearly knocked Deanna over as she embraced her waist in an exuberant hug.

“You’re so welcome.” When Deanna bent down to return the hug, warm tingles coursed through her. She imagined herself hugging her niece or nephew-to-be. Maybe her family’s Christmas traditions weren’t over quite yet.

She handed up the next present. “A Captain America shield!” a boy yelled as he opened his gift in Santa’s lap. “You did get my letter.”

Mr. Howard spoke close to the boy’s ear. “I’m sorry I couldn’t bring the pony you wanted but there were so many children wanting one this year they just wouldn’t have all fit in the sleigh.”

“Maybe next year,” the boy said with mature acceptance uncharacteristic for his age and slid off Santa’s lap.

As Deanna distributed the rest of the presents and watched each child’s delighted face, she almost began to believe she was doing Santa’s work, bringing Christmas joy to children who probably ordinarily didn’t have much to be joyful about. She stole a glance at Nate. He was beaming as if each child’s gift was his own present.

“Did you decide what they each get?” Deanna asked the social worker as the children played on the floor with their new toys and Mr. Howard chatted with Miss Velma. Her boss had bought the presents but he couldn’t have been that psychic to guess what every child wanted.

Nate edged his long, lean body onto a two-seater sofa and motioned for Deanna to sit beside him. “Velma and I reviewed the children’s wish lists to Santa. After deleting all the ponies and trips to Disneyland, we chose two things from each list that the kids seemed excited about.”

“Seems like they’re happy with what they got.” She asked gingerly, “Did they have this tradition when you were growing up here?”

Nate shook his head. “If we were lucky, we got to pick one thing from a stocking stuffer grab bag.”

She wondered what it would have been like to grow up without a host of Christmas presents under the family tree. Without a family at all.

“Hey, that’s mine!” one boy complained as an older one grabbed a shiny truck out of his hand.

“Not unless you can catch me.” The bigger boy ran around the tree, then around the room, upsetting children and toys as the younger child tried to follow him, joined in pursuit by several others. A few older kids got up and ran defense, guarding the thief from being overtaken.

Nate stood. “Knock knock,” he said loudly.

A knock knock joke? This was his answer to the unraveling situation?

“Who’s there?” a couple of children responded mechanically.

“Banana,” Nate replied.

“Banana who?” the same children said.

“Banana banana. Knock knock,”

A few more children responded this time with “Who’s there?”

“Banana banana banana.” Nate kept going until more and more of the children gave up the chase and joined into the joke. When he’d gotten to the seventh banana, the child who’d grabbed the truck rammed right into the social worker. Neither flinching nor missing a beat, Nate grabbed the truck and held it over his head out of the boy’s reach as he said again, “Knock knock.”

“Hey, gimme that back.”

Nate eyed the boy calmly. “I said knock knock.”

The boy shrugged his shoulders resignedly, “Who’s there?” he asked dully.

Nate returned the toy to the boy it belonged to, hovered over the group with a suspenseful look, “Orange,” he said dramatically, then pointed to the would-be thief.

“Orange who?” he grunted.

Nate smiled and held his hand out to the group like a conductor cueing an orchestra. They all shouted in decibels that shook the room. “Orange you glad I didn’t say another banana?”

“Dinner in twenty minutes.” Mrs. Green rang one of those little silver bells straight out of a movie from the Forties. “Everybody wash up.”

The children dashed off to get ready for the meal.

Deanna turned to Nate. “Something tells me they’ve heard that joke before,”

He grinned, the light in his eyes turning his face ten degrees closer to handsome, “I know, it’s super-corny, but it always works.”

“You are the King of Corn.” She curtsied. “I bow before you.”

He rolled his eyes. “Did I mention that it always works?”

She liked that he wasn’t intimidated by her sarcasm. That he stood by his methods, apparently tried and tested over years of experience. And she had to admit, the corny joke had worked. In less than a minute Nate had settled the children down from a state of anarchy into calm, cheerful mini-adults.

“Can Santa stay for dinner?” Two of the youngest children tugged on Mr. Howard’s sleeves. “Please, please, pretty please?”

“I’d love to, but Santa’s got lots more presents to deliver before he can have his dinner.” Deanna knew his wife and kids were expecting him at home as soon as this ‘delivery’ was over. Mr. Howard bent to embrace the children. “How about I read a story before I go?”

“*The Night before Christmas*,” one of the boys yelled out and the rest of the kids concurred. One ran to get the book and they all settled in at Santa’s feet.

“T’was the night before Christmas,” Mr. Howard began and some of the children recited most of the story along with them. Deanna guessed they read this every year.

“How about you?” Nate spoke quietly next to Deanna’s ear. “Can you stay for dinner?”

The simple, probably-spoken-only-to-be-polite offer nevertheless made Deanna’s heart skip a beat. Something about that corny knock-knock joke had drawn her in as much as it had the children. “Sorry.” She nodded toward Mr. Howard and whispered, “He’s my ride to the train station. Gotta get home before midnight or I’ll turn into a pumpkin.” She giggled. “An elf pumpkin.”

Nate glanced at his watch, a Mickey Mouse timepiece with paws on the analog face. He drew Deanna by the elbow into the hallway and out of earshot of the children. “It’s only six now. I’ll be glad to drive you to the train station later.”

It wasn’t like she had anything to rush home to. Dinner was likely to be a microwave meal or takeout from whatever restaurant near the train station was still open. “I wouldn’t want to impose...” It must be difficult enough to prepare food for so many people without adding another mouth to feed.

“Are you kidding? The kids would love having an elf to Christmas Eve dinner.”

“Just the kids?” Was she flirting? She was so out of practice she wasn’t even sure.

His wink ratcheted his face all the way up to ten on the Handsome meter. “I’d enjoy it as well.”

Santa Claus was just turning the last page of the book. “Merry Christmas to all,” he read, and to all a--”

“Goodnight!” The children yelled and got to their feet.

Mr. Howard shook every child’s hand, then Nate’s, then Sheryl’s and the rest of the staff, reserving a warm hug for Mrs. Green. “See you all next year. Come, Miss Elf.” With a cheery wave, he headed out of the room toward the kitchen.

“Um. Santa.” Stopping at the back door, Deanna cupped her hand beside her mouth and whispered into his ear the change of plans. Mr. Howard looked from her to Nate Jackson and smiled broadly.

“On second thought,” Santa said loudly, “Miss Elf has been extra good this year and has worked very hard, so I’m giving her the rest of the night off.” He winked just like the picture of the jolly old man in the children’s story and slipped out the back door.

“Miss Elf is going to join us for dinner,” Nate added.

The children cheered. A little blip danced around Deanna’s thawing heart. After wishing her boss a Merry Christmas, she took the arm Nate proffered and walked with him into the dining room, her pulse clipping along at a faster rate than usual.

Not that the meal was anything like romantic. She sat beside Nate at one end of a long table, joined by Mrs. Green and fourteen loud, rambunctious children. Holding back only long enough to say grace, they stuffed food into their mouths as if they hadn’t eaten in weeks.

But maybe they hadn’t. She looked at Nate. “I guess this is a special meal.”

“Of course. We don’t have ham and turkey and dressing and pies every day. But,” he added as if reading the question in her mind, “we do have three squares all the other days of the year. Protein, grains, fruits and vegetables. Nobody goes hungry here.”

“I’m sorry,” She winced. “I didn’t mean--”

“Sure you did. But it’s okay. Most people would assume the same thing. Orphaned kids may not get designer jeans and brand name athletic shoes but they always have clean clothes and healthy meals. And exercise. We play outdoors here except when the weather’s really cold.”

“Instead of sitting inside watching TV or playing on their phones or tablets.” Deanna glanced around the large table. None of the children appeared to be malnourished but just as importantly, none were obese either. “Do they have chores to do?”

“Hell yeah. Everybody has a job. Helps prepare them for the real world.” As if to prove his point, he held up an empty serving bowl that had held mashed potatoes. “Who’s on KP today?”

A boy about nine years old rose from his place, took the bowl, and carried it to the kitchen to refill it.

“You do good work here,” Deanna reached for a second helping of green bean casserole. “Mrs. Green said a lot of these kids are ‘troubled.’”

“Some are.” Nate grinned. “I was a real terror when I lived here.”

She tried to imagine Nate as a rebellious preteen and came up empty. He seemed so confident, so comfortable in his own skin. “You don’t live here now?”

“Nope, I have a place up the road. Nobody stays here full time except Velma and two dorm monitors.”

Deanna remembered seeing among the children a young man and girl in their late teens or early twenties, but they weren’t at the table now.

At meal’s end, a girl of about eleven and the boy who’d refilled the mashed potatoes earlier cleared the table. While the children loaded the dishwasher, Sheryl put the leftovers away and then took off her apron and shrugged into her coat.

Nate made no move to leave. He didn’t mention taking Deanna to the train station and she didn’t remind him.

One of the younger boys peeled back the dining room curtains and peered out the window. “It’s snowing!”

All the children rushed to the window with cries of glee.

“A perfect time to sing Christmas carols,” Nate said, shepherding them away from the window and into the main living area. He added another log to the fireplace, then reached behind the small sofa and took out a guitar.

When the kids flopped down on the floor in front of him, he strummed and sang an upbeat *Jingle Bells*, the kids joining in on the chorus. Deanna settled in among them, her arms nestled around two of the children. Nate followed up with *Frosty the Snowman* and *Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer*. As the fireplace flames flickered lower, and a few small heads started nodding, he slowed the entertainment down with more traditional Christmas carols.

Nate had a melodious voice. Like the rest of his personality, it was calming and soothing. Extricating a little girl from her lap, Deanna stood and sat on the loveseat-sized sofa beside him, offering up a harmony on *Silent Night*. With the scent of crackling logs issuing from the fireplace and the vision of snowflakes dusting the windows, she enjoyed a sense of peace and contentment she hadn’t felt since moving to the Big Apple. Her lashes tinged with moisture. The children, all silent now, gazed wide-eyed as the final notes of the carol faded in the word ‘peace.’

Setting down the guitar, Nate turned to look at her and squeezed her hand.

* * *

She was dressed as an elf but sang like an angel.

Nate’s heart swelled with a sense of fullness, but it only served to remind him how empty his life was. He loved these kids and safeguarding and caring for them took up his days and most of his evenings. But as he lay alone at night, that little blob of emptiness permanently residing in his chest made him realize he was needier than any of these ‘troubled’ kids he professed to help, that he got from them a lot more than he was giving.

He set down the guitar, and without thinking, squeezed Deanna's hand.

She smiled up at him. "That was nice. We blend well together."

"It was ethereal. You have an amazing voice. Have I seen you on Broadway—or at the Met?"

Her light laugh was a mixture of a giggle and a beaming smile. "No, but I do a little A Cappella. My group sings at clubs a few times a year."

"Awesome. I'd love to see you perform sometime."

She laughed again, as if he were just saying that to be polite and didn't really mean it. And he was being polite. But, he realized with the budding light of a slow dawn, he did mean it.

"Shall we do another?" Her brown eyes sparkled.

"Sure. What do you know?"

She knew a lot of songs, not just Christmas carols, but the *Grandma Got Run over by a Reindeer* kind of silliness that had the kids clapping and laughing. Nate could sense them warming to her. When she'd first arrived, she'd seemed almost afraid of them. Whether because she assumed terrible things about orphans or whether she just wasn't comfortable around kids, he couldn't tell. But she seemed more relaxed now. The tail of her elf stocking hat brushed Nate's shoulder as she leaned into the music—and into him. It was not an unpleasant sensation.

He was so enjoying the singing and the company that he almost didn't notice Velma Green appear at the hall door, flanked by Hallie and David, the dorm monitors.

"One last song," he promised the kids. "Then it's bedtime."

A chorus of disappointed *Aw*s and stronger interjections filled the room.

"Or you can go to bed right now."

The room immediately silenced.

"How about we ask Miss Elf to sing the final song," he suggested, hoping Deanna wouldn't be angered by his presumptuousness. "Anything you like," he whispered to her.

With him accompanying on the guitar, she sang *Oh Shenandoah*. He'd never thought of that old pioneer song as a lullaby but it seemed to put the children in a sleepy mood. When Deanna finished, she stood and announced, "Well, it's time for me to get back to the North Pole and start working on next year's toys." She hugged the youngest children sitting on the floor in front of them, and shook hands with several of the older ones, then headed to the kitchen to retrieve her coat.

As the kids trooped off to the bedrooms, twelve-year-old Brent lingered behind. "So, you and the elf," he said with a knowing smirk.

"Yes, we do sing well together, don't we?" Nate answered innocently. He checked his watch. Nearly ten o'clock. The past few hours had flown by like an engrossing movie. But there was still plenty of time for Deanna to make her train and get home by midnight.

He grabbed his jacket and joined her on the back porch, where she stood watching the snow come down in solid flakes. "It's so peaceful out here," she said. "White and clean. In the city, it seems that as soon as the snow falls it turns brown or yellow."

"Have you always lived in New York City?"

"No, I'm from Texas originally. Abilene. It's a nice town but I wanted to be someplace where there was a lot more living."

"And how has that worked out for you?"

"Career-wise, okay I guess. And there's a lot more to do after work." She rubbed her hands up and down the sleeves of her coat. "But after a while it all runs kind of...flat. Being busy doesn't necessarily mean being fulfilled."

So it was possible to feel lonely even in the midst of crowds. But he could be reading her comment the wrong way. Maybe she had scores of friends. As well as a boyfriend.

Whom she was probably meeting at midnight.

His truck was only about twenty paces from the porch but they had to slog through icy snowdrifts to get there. With those thin felt boots she wore, Deanna's toes were probably freezing.

He ran the heater while he waited for the engine to warm up and the back window to de-ice, but Deanna still shivered, wrapping her arms around herself. Something in Nate wanted to lean toward her, pull her to his chest, and warm her with his body heat. But she'd given no sign that she would have welcomed that, so he kept his body facing forward, his eyes studying the road curving away from the house.

What he could see of the road. Instead of a shimmering ribbon in his headlights, he saw only a white sheet of ice.

He backed up into a snowdrift. The engine whined. He rocked the truck forward and backward, but the wheels spun with no traction. He'd meant to put on the snow tires last week but the weather had been unusually warm for December. The radio had said there might be snow flurries tonight but he hadn't expected two or three inches before midnight.

Deanna sat silently, concern in her eyes.

At last he was able to plow backward out of the snowdrift, but the truck didn't get more than a few feet before the engine stalled out. "Damn." He laid his head on the steering wheel. "Battery's dead." Damn, this was so embarrassing.

She narrowed her eyes. "You can't charge it?"

"I can, but it'll take a while. And by then--"

"I'll have missed the last train." She sighed. "Is the station walking distance?"

"Not in that footwear." It was at least a mile, and if she didn't slip and fall in those thin-heeled felt booties, she'd have frostbite before she got halfway there. "Unless you want me to carry you." Despite the seriousness of the situation, Nate got a little turned on by the thought of slipping his arms under that short dress, his elbows hugging her butt.

"I'll pass." She folded her arms across her chest. "So we're stranded here."

"Looks that way." He met her accusing stare. "Look, I didn't plan this. I seriously lost track of time. And I had no idea it was going to snow this much."

"I did." She sighed. "Mrs. Green told us when we got here that it was supposed to dump six inches of snow by morning. I guess I should have left with Mr. Howard but...I was having a good time. The music, and the roaring fire...it felt like Christmas."

"It is Christmas." Nate pushed back his jacket sleeve and checked his watch. "In a few hours." He opened the door of the cab and jumped down, then went around to help Deanna out. She slid into his arms and as her feet touched the ground, he noticed that the top of her head was even with his eyes, and her mouth exhaled cold air against his neck. If he were to dip his head just a little...

Stop that. He'd failed to transport her safely to her train as promised, the last thing she would appreciate was some lowlife country guy trying to take advantage of her predicament.

Their predicament. He wouldn't be able to get home either. He'd stayed overnight at the Home before, usually in one of the kids rooms if somebody was out visiting a potential foster home. But all the children were present and accounted for tonight.

“You go on inside and get warm while I get the battery charger on.” And figured out what he was going to tell her about sleeping arrangements. Velma and the rest of the staff were probably tucked away in their rooms by now. There were no beds available.

There was that two-seater sofa, but Deanna’s legs would probably hang over the edge of that. Looked like the two of them would have to spend the night on the floor of the main living room. Together.

* * *

The floor was not nearly as cold as Deanna would have thought, not with the warm pallet Nate had made of blankets and comforters. And the long flannel nightgown he’d scavenged from somewhere in the house—she didn’t want to ask who it belonged to--was so much more comfortable than those tight leggings and tighter jumper. And drier. The cold wet snow had soaked through her leggings, the elf-green jumper, even the red and white striped shirt.

Nate had changed out of his clothes into a sweatshirt and flannel pajama bottoms, his feet clad in fuzzy red socks that matched the ones he’d given her. Did he keep those on hand or had he planned to stay here tonight? He hadn’t said if he lived with anyone but maybe he didn’t want to go home to an empty house either.

They sat now in front of the fireplace, Deanna’s elf clothes drying on the hearth. The image took her back to a Christmas of her childhood, and she giggled.

“What’s funny?” Firelight flickered in Nate’s eyes.

“I was just thinking of one Christmas morning, I must have been about four, I woke up to find this red and white robe—just like Santa’s--in the fireplace. My brother told me Santa Claus must have lost it going back up our chimney and that he was flying around on his sleigh buck naked.”

Nate laughed. “So if we leave this costume here overnight, the kids will wake up and think that Miss Elf scurried up the chimney too fast, leaving her clothes behind.” His face widened into a grin, then reddened.

Deanna narrowed her eyes. “You’re picturing me naked, aren’t you?”

“Trying not to,” he admitted sheepishly, then got quickly to his feet. “The cocoa must be ready by now.” He darted off to the kitchen.

He came back carrying a silver tray laden with two steaming cups of cocoa and a bowl of mixed nuts and placed the tray between them. Deanna reached her hand into the bowl just as he did, their fingers touching as she picked out the cashews.

Nate looked at his Mickey Mouse watch. “I’m sorry you’re missing your date.”

“What date?”

His brow arched. “You said you had to be home by midnight.”

“Oh, that.” She reached for another handful of nuts. “I was just trying to be cute. You know, Cinderella turns into a pumpkin at midnight, the elf turns into...I don’t know.”

“So, no date.”

“Not tonight.” She didn’t want him to think her a dateless loser. “Actually, I would have gone home to an empty apartment. All my roommates went out tonight.” Damn, now she *did* sound like a loser. “Usually I spend Christmas with my family, but my parents are on a cruise and my brother is newly married, and...” Wow, now she sounded like a *total* loser.

“So spending Christmas Eve spreading cheer to a houseful of orphans wasn’t exactly your first choice.”

“I didn’t mean it like that.” *How did you mean it, Deanna?* “My cubicle mate, Jan, usually does this but she had to drop out at the last minute, so I...” *Stop talking.* He already thought this was the last place she wanted to be tonight, and earlier, that had been true. But now...

“Jan is the short girl, right?” Nate grinned. “I thought that costume seemed a little tight on you.”

She took the opportunity to put *him* on the defensive. “Are you saying I’m fat?”

“Fat? No way.” His brown eyes twinkled. “But not flat either.”

He undoubtedly meant that as a compliment, but its crude honesty sent a flush to her cheeks. “Look, can we stop talking about my body?”

His grin flattened into a frown, “I’m sorry, I thought we were flirting. I’m not very good at it, am I?”

“It’s not your strong suit.” She giggled. “But you don’t need that in your repertoire. You have better qualities.”

He cocked his head. “You’re not imagining me naked now, are you?”

“No. I wasn’t.” But now she couldn’t help wondering what qualities he was responding to. “I meant that you have a very strong presence. You never raised your voice with those kids, but they obviously respect you totally. And you seem to have everything under control. Nothing ruffles you. Being with you makes me feel like...everything’s right in the world.”

He leaned closer, agonizingly slow, and Deanna thought he was going to kiss her. Instead he said, “Thank you. That means a lot.”

The fire had diminished to a few flames and a lot of glowing embers. Nate grabbed the one blanket that remained folded and got to his feet. “It’s late. The kids will be clambering in here in a few hours. We should try to get some sleep.” He walked to the other side of the room and unrolled the blanket near the Christmas tree.

“You’re going to sleep there?” she asked. “Won’t you be cold?”

“I’m fine. Goodnight, Deanna. I’m sorry I messed up your evening.”

“Goodnight, Nate,” She pushed the silver tray aside and stretched out with her back to the fireplace, watching him arrange the blanket and roll himself up in it. “And you didn’t mess up my evening. In fact I had a really nice time.”

He didn’t answer. Was he already asleep? Fluffing the pillow he’d brought in for her, Deanna turned to face the fireplace. The dying embers crackled and spit, and eventually went dark. But she didn’t miss the light as much as she did the warmth. And the warmth had left her side ten minutes ago.

Dragging the blankets behind her like the train of a wedding dress, she crawled across the wooden floor to the opposite end of the room.

Nate slept like a child, arms splayed at odd angles, a face of contented innocence. As if he had no cares in the world. Or at least didn’t allow them to dim his optimism. Deanna squelched the urge to push back a lock of hair that had draped over his forehead.

She should probably go back to her corner. What if the children woke up early—as children most certainly would on Christmas morning—and found them here together?

Well, what if? It occurred to Deanna that her life was a series of too many *what ifs* and not enough *why nots*. Cocooning herself against Nate’s back, she wrapped the covers around both of them. He didn’t move or acknowledge her presence. But when she curled her arm around his waist, he clasped her hand and squeezed.

* * *

“Hey, look at the two big presents Santa left under the tree.”

The voice jarred Deanna awake. She shook herself out of the blankets and entangled her legs from Nate's body. He sat up and held his arm in front of her, as if ready to protect her from attack.

"Good morning, Brent," he said. "Are the rest of the kids up yet?"

The boy, who looked to be about twelve, answered with the impish grin. "Nope. I'm the first."

"Then you didn't see any of this." Nate got to his feet. "Not that anything happened here. Just go out and come back again in ten minutes."

Amazingly, the boy complied.

Deanna folded the blankets. "What's going to happen in ten minutes?"

"Not much, apparently."

She giggled.

"I just wanted to give you time to...put yourself together." He glanced toward the hearth. "Do you want to get back into that costume?"

"Not really. But I don't have a lot of clothing options." She grabbed the pieces of her costume and changed in the bathroom. After folding the borrowed nightgown and inserting it and the red slipper socks between two of the blankets, she found Nate in the kitchen. He'd changed out of his pajama bottoms back into his jeans and was heating oil in a skillet.

"Doesn't Sheryl do the cooking?"

"Sheryl's off today. And even if she wasn't, I doubt she could make it in this morning on these roads."

Deanna peered out the back window. "The snow's melting. At least a little."

"And my truck battery should be charged now. I'll take you to the train station after breakfast."

She stood behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist as she had last night. "You in a hurry to get rid of me?"

He put down his spatula and turned to face her. "What do you think?"

He looked like he might kiss her. But then, she'd thought that before. Last night, he'd stopped himself. This morning they were interrupted by the same annoying boy who had woken them.

"Miss Velma said she'd be down in a minute to fix breakfast."

"Tell her to take the morning to sleep in," Nate told the boy. "I've got this."

"We've got this." Deanna reached for the carton of eggs Nate had placed on the counter and began cracking them into a bowl.

"You ever cooked for nineteen people before?" Nate challenged.

"Nope. But you're not going to tell me you can't use the help."

"You're a damned elf, can't you just wave a wand or something?"

She grinned.

Working together, they had breakfast on the table in forty minutes. Just in time for the kids to charge in from the living room after unwrapping the rest of their presents, looking like a Christmas postcard in their flannel pajamas and fluffy robes.

Deanna and Nate ate at the kitchen counter, watching icicles drip from the roof of the back porch. Deanna ate slowly, stretching the meal out as long as possible, well after all the kids and the staff members had left the table and returned to the main room and their new toys.

After breakfast, Nate would drive her to the train station. And she'd go back to her apartment. And in a few days she'd return to work and everything would be back to normal and

soon her time as an elf and the amazing man she'd met and begun to care for would just be a memory, a story she could relate next Christmas to whomever might care. "Can we take our coffee outside?" That would buy a few more minutes.

Nate stood, "You want your jacket?"

"No." She wanted to feel the cold, savor the sensation of this Christmas day and the warmth she felt standing next to him.

They carried their cups of coffee to the porch and set them on a small round table between two Adirondack chairs. But before he could sit, Deanna grasped the edges of Nate's sweatshirt and slipped her hands inside, palming his bare back. Standing on her toes, she pressed her lips to his.

It took him a second to respond. Then he moved into the kiss, his mouth warm and firm, his arms strong and reassuring as they wrapped around her, Deanna closed her eyes, inhaling the scent of winter chill and Nate.

"Wow," he said as he slowly backed away. "What was that?"

"A Christmas present. Did you like it?" she teased shyly.

"Very much," His eyes glittered. "But I didn't get you anything."

"There's still time."

He moved back into her arms, this time taking her mouth as if he owned it, teasing her lips apart, opening her with his tongue. He tasted sweet and salty, satisfying a thirst she didn't know she had. He gripped her bottom, his hands sliding under the short skirt of the elf dress, pressing her against the hunger she hadn't known he had. Gasping for breath, Deanna dug her fingers into his shoulders, melting into his warm strength.

It wasn't until they pulled apart that she heard the cheers and applause,

Under the scrutiny of fourteen pairs of eyes, Nate's face turned beet red. "Okay, show's over." He herded the children back inside. "Everybody say goodbye to Miss Elf. She's got to go back to the North Pole and start working on next year's toys."

"Don't elves get a vacation?" little Mary Ann asked as Deanna knelt on the floor and embraced her.

"Just Christmas day. I wish I didn't have to leave so soon," Deanna said, initially for the child's benefit, then realized how much she meant that. It wasn't just Nate she was reluctant to say goodbye to. Spending Christmas Eve and Christmas morning with these kids had brought back the holiday magic she thought she'd missed. She stood and shook Brent's hand. "But it's a long way home and Nate is going to take me to the nearest reindeer station."

"Time to get dressed and brush your teeth," Nate announced, handing the kids off to the staff members. "Merry Christmas and I'll see you all tomorrow morning."

He grabbed his jacket and Deanna slipped on her coat. Apparently elves aren't the only ones who didn't get much time off for the holiday.

They stomped through the snow to Nate's truck. "Thanks for driving me," she said awkwardly, not knowing how else to say goodbye. *Thanks for turning my lonely evening into a wonderful, special night?*

"It's the least I can do." His voice was polite, casual, if he were some stranger who'd volunteered to do a good deed instead of a man who'd literally taken her breath away minutes earlier.

The truck engine started up right away. "Actually," he said letting it purr before putting it into gear, "if it's okay with you, I'd like to drive you home." He reached for her hand. "Maybe

you could show me that huge tree in Rockefeller Center that makes the one in the Home look like a miniature.”

She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed it, her heart swelling with hope. “How can I refuse? Didn’t you know that if you ask something of an elf on Christmas, the favor must be granted?”

Nate grinned. “I did not know that. But I’ll keep that in mind for next Christmas.”

* * *

“I can’t believe you’re not tired,” Deanna panted as they trekked through the neighborhoods of lower Manhattan. The usually bustling sidewalks were almost deserted, the few tourists braving the twenty degree temperatures vying for the cabs cruising Canal Street like a yellow stream.

“Hey, I’m just getting started.” Nate grabbed her by her coat sleeves and waltzed her around the pavement. “The only way to see this city is on foot.”

“You’re acting like a kid,” she grumbled for effect, but she really had no problem with that. Nate had a child’s sense of wonder and enthusiasm. Being with him made her feel alive. And hopeful about the future.

She wrapped her scarf a second twirl around her neck. With the temperature still hovering around the freezing point, she’d changed out of her elf costume this morning into a thick pair of pants, a double layer of sweaters, scarf, gloves and hat. But her nose was as red as Rudolph’s.

She’d been halfway dreading, half looking forward to introducing Nate to her roommates. But they’d found the apartment dark and quiet. Jan had left him standing awkwardly in the kitchen as she headed to her bedroom, worrying what he’d think of last night’s takeout containers still on the table, the mess of boots and coats strewn across the living room floor.

The bed next to hers was empty, made up as if nobody had slept in it, because nobody had. No telling what time Julie would drag in today. Across the hall, April and Olivia snored in two different keys. After discarding the elf costume for comfort clothes, Deanna straightened her linens and bedspread, just in case he wandered in here or wanted to see the room.

Coming out, she met Julie in the hallway.

“Have a nice time?” Deanna asked generically.

“Great.” Julie winked. “Apparently you did as well.” She cocked her head toward the kitchen. “I met your guy. He seems really nice.”

“Thanks. But he’s not my--” She pondered the sound of that. *My guy. This is my guy, Nate Jackson.* It had been a long time since she’d introduced a man that way. But it sounded right.

She returned to find the kitchen a lot tidier than it had been before, the takeout containers gone, the table clear and wiped. “Did Julie clean up? Or...?”

“Guilty.” Nate shrugged. “I didn’t have anything else to do, so I thought I’d make myself useful.”

Useful. Such an apt word to describe Nate. In the short time she’d know him he always seemed to be ready and available to do whatever needed to be done, and he did it competently. Useful was definitely something Deanna needed in her life. But she hadn’t expected it would be such a turn-on.

“Is that dreamy expression on your face about me or are your cheeks frozen?”

Deanna returned to the here and now, finding a solicitous expression on the useful, sexy man’s face.

“I just...”

“Your nose looks like Frosty’s.” He leaned over and kissed the tip of it, bringing back the memory of how those warm lips had felt on her mouth. “Let’s get you inside and warm you up.”

After lunch in a restaurant in Chinatown, where the hot and sour soup warmed Deanna's stomach and a roaring fireplace unfroze her toes, they visited the 9-11 Memorial, standing beside a few hardy tourists who had come to pay their respects to the victims of unmitigated terrorism. Even jovial Nate was silent and serious, brushing away what might have been a tear or just a bit of moisture from the light snow that had begun descending around them.

She linked her arm through his. "Ready to go back to my place? We can make popcorn and watch old black and white movies."

"Not yet." He caught a falling snowflake on his tongue. "We haven't seen the big tree yet."

Rockefeller Center. All the way back to midtown. "On one condition. We're taking a taxi."

"You've got it."

The sun was setting as they arrived at the immense plaza, with the gloriously lit Christmas tree flanked by Art deco skyscrapers and an ice skating rink dominated by a golden statue of Prometheus.

"Wow." Nate gazed up at the twinkling lights. "It's just how I imagined."

"You haven't been here before?" Deanna tucked her hand into his coat pocket.

"Not at Christmas. Not at all in a long time." He stared at the tree with an expression like longing, then turned to her and smiled. "Really beautiful."

"The tree?"

He grinned. "That too."

She wrapped her arms around his jacket, feeling his body warmth beyond the clothes. "Shall we go ice skating?"

His face lit up, then sobered. "You're tired. I've dragged you around enough today. I should let you get home and soak your feet."

Deanna appreciated his thoughtfulness, but the childlike glow in his eyes had warmed her soul and given her tired legs new life. If she *were* an elf, she would have gladly granted every one of his wishes. From nearby speakers, the strains of *Winter Wonderland* filled the air. "Christmas only comes once a year."

Though he claimed he'd never ice skated, Nate took to it readily. And skillfully. Before long, he literally skated circles around her. Christmas music resonated through the arena as they glided arm in arm around the rink, glittering stars filling the sky above them. One particularly bright that seemed to be smiling down on them. "I feel like we should make a wish on that," Deanna said.

"Should we close our eyes?" Nate challenged.

"Probably not a good idea." She could picture both of them tumbling to the ice and being trampled by oncoming skaters.

"One at a time then." He slowed their pace, then tucked his arm tightly in Deanna's and closed his eyes. She held on for dear life but managed to keep him upright for a few seconds until he opened his eyes again. "Your turn."

This was crazy. She had enough trouble staying the course with her eyes wide open. "I don't think--"

"Trust me. I won't let you fall."

Trust me. How many times had she heard that meaningless phrase? But this time the words pulsed with meaning. And Deanna believed them. Closing her eyes briefly, she made her wish.

"What did you wish for?" Nate asked when they'd resumed their speed.

"If I tell you, it might not come true."

He grinned. "Fair enough."

They skated to Ella Fitzgerald's *What are You Doing New Year's Eve?* The words *maybe it's much too early in the game* spoke to a place deep in Deanna's chest. She pretended to be unaffected, but when Nate joined the singer with *Maybe I'm crazy to suppose I'd ever be the one you chose* she added her voice to his and they finished the song together.

"We do harmonize well," he said softly, as the last chords faded away.

"Yes we do."

Leading her by the hand, Nate guided her toward the overhanging sprig of mistletoe they'd so far managed to avoid skating under. "So," he said casually, "what *are* you doing New Year's Eve?"

Deanna met his totally un-casual gaze. "Spending it with you. I hope."

His face softened. "That's what I wished for too." He drew her in for a kiss, and under the mistletoe, enveloped by a sky of sparkling stars, Deanna began to believe that not only her wish, but all of her Christmas dreams, would come true.

* * *

Love holiday stories? Love the romantic excitement of first meetings? Read Jan's story, *Broken Resolutions*, about the guy she meets on New Year's Eve.

Here's an excerpt:

"So we're resolved?" Licking a snowflake off her upper lip, Jan Carter huddled with her roommates outside Chancellor's bar. "No hook-ups. This year we drink responsibly, watch the ball drop at Times Square, and then go home to cocoa, popcorn and *It's a Wonderful Life*."

"Agreed." Fiona tucked her red curls into her woolen cap. "Last New Year's Eve I drank my weight in tequila and went home with a dude who looked more like an English sheep dog than his English sheep dog. *Not* doing that again."

"I'm in too." Marcy stamped the snow off her feet. "My New Year's resolution is to be pickier about the men I date. Might as well start tonight."

Jan nodded. Her last New Year's nightmare was waking up next to a man who had tattoos over every inch of his body. She winced. *Every* inch. "What are the chances of meeting a decent man on New Year's Eve anyway? Any guy dateless tonight is either a lust dog or a loser."

"Amen, sister. We have more respect for ourselves than to hit one of those." Fiona pulled off a glove and held up her hand. "No hook-ups tonight. Pinky swear."

Continue reading *Broken Resolutions* <http://www.lindasteinberg.com/brokenresolution.html>

MEET LINDA

Writing has been a passion for as long as Linda Steinberg can remember. She started writing her first novel when she was living in Lagos, Nigeria, in longhand on school tablets, the only available writing paper, and hasn't stopped since. She writes contemporary romance, romantic suspense, and women's fiction featuring strong heroines with real problems and heroes who sizzle their way into readers' hearts. A retired accountant, Linda now lives in a suburb of Dallas, Texas, with her second time around sweetheart and enjoys reading, travel, family and friends.

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