

A Christmas Wish

“How did you manage to be the only pessimist in our family?” My sister chuckled as she dried another glass and placed it in the cabinet. I continued to wash the neverending pile of dishes my family managed to go through.

“It’s hard, believe me. My question is, how do you manage to continue to see blue skies and sunshine all the time?”

“Life is too short to complain about it.” She paused to find a clean, dry dish towel before she continued on her task.

My dad poked his head in the doorway of the kitchen. “Are you ladies about done? It’s getting close to that time.”

Lucy grinned at me then looked at Dad. “Kelly’s trying to get out of it by washing the dishes slow.”

He advanced into the room and eyed the stack of glasses and dishes, then me, elbow deep in the sudsy water. “We really should get a dishwasher, I guess, but Mother really likes doing them at night.”

I shook my head, “And you all think I’m nuts.”

Dad circled my shoulder with a sweater-clad arm and hugged. “Nah, honey. We just think your half full glass is cracked.”

“Har har. I’ve got to finish these. You all go ahead.” I turned back to the dishes only to poke myself with a submerged fork when he replied, “Okay, but we’ll save the last one for you.”

At that warning, I popped open the drain and wiped my hands before hustling into my parents’ living room.

The house I'd grown up in was old fashioned and warm, especially this time of the year. Mom and Dad had decorated the house from roof line to the remodeled basement room I was relegated to this weekend. Santas and elves were the theme in the basement, with twinkling eyes making me sleepless until I found the outlets and unplugged them the night before.

The living room had the requisite candles and holly branches spread around, but the most prominent feature of the room was the tree. Easily seven feet tall, the freshly cut spruce had been set by my male relatives in their yearly bonding. My dad, brother and brother in law trooped to the Christmas tree lot, cut the tree down with old fashioned saws and then set it up in the four generation-old tree stand. Every year, they shared just enough beer to make the experience hilarious, at least for them. The women of the family, along with my niece and nephews, looked on and provided encouragement, eggnog, and calorie laden food, hence the dishes I'd been working on.

The tree was bare of ornaments, but Dad had the star in his hands. The star, like so many of the other items we used at Christmas, was an heirloom. In this case, my maternal grandfather had made the wooden star for his then fiance and the oldest daughter in the family had received the star on her wedding day. Until me.

"Ready, Mama?" Dad extended the star to my mom. She advanced and took the star then look expectantly at him. At a foot shorter than my runner dad, she used him shamelessly as a stepping stool, or elevator anyway. Dad held her by the waist and Mom braced herself with a hand on his shoulder. Then Dad lifted her so she could place the star on the topmost branch of the tree. As I watched, I realized why I still made an effort to come home, a six hour drive, this time every year, at Christmas. My parents' love, my whole family's, was something to behold.

“Remember the first time I came with you to the Decorating?” Bruce circled Lucy’s waist with his arm and hugged her. “I thought you all had it backwards, putting the star on first.”

“Then you got to put the last ornament on.” She smiled up at him, her face bright with that elusive thing I’d never experienced.

“Yeah, and I got my wish.”

Suzanne chuckled from the sofa, where she cuddled my sleepy two year old nephew. “To think I’d doubted the last ornament wish.”

“Well, it isn’t every family that has its own miracle.” Mom opened the big box of ornaments. Mixed in were paper covered and boxed glass globe ornaments, homemade paper and glitter ornaments that we kids had made over the years, and the painted glass birds my mother cherished. Each year, we gathered as a family two days before Christmas and decorated the tree. Each member of the family took turns putting the decorations on the tree until only one was left. That one ornament was the blessed one, the one that granted the silent wish of the person who finished the job of decorating the tree. And the bane of my existence.

“Is Grampa and Gran coming?” I thought I’d put the process of longer, if possible.

“They’re on their way. Gramp is stopping to pick up something.”

“What? We don’t need more candy, eggnog, or sandwich stuff.”

Dad shrugged, “You know Gramp. He’s decided something is missing and won’t stop til he gets whatever it is. Anyway, they should be here in five minutes or so. Gran called from the car.”

I sighed and leaned back against the chair cushion. There it was, then. I had to go through the ordeal of trying to avoid being the last one to get an ornament. And the wish.

I'd been the last one to get the ornament only once in my life. When I was in college, I'd made a wish, full of hope and trust that the family legend of the Christmas wish would bless me as well. After all, every other member of the family who'd made a wish swore that their dreams came true before the end of Christmas. So, I had high hopes.

That year was the birth of my being a pessimist, I guess. I'd naively wished to find true love. Hokey, I know, but I was still young enough to think everyone got to find the one. But it didn't happen. I'd waited, hoped and then mourned the fact that I was the first Young to break the blessing cycle. I'd not been able to find that elusive, true love, and now, at thirty four, I had major doubts I'd be able to find love at all.

The grand parents did make it, by the fourth cycle of ornaments. Grampa didn't bring anything in, but I didn't question him, either. After all, his arrival with Gran added two more to the mix and decreased my chances even more. But Robby, my brother couldn't bear it and asked Gramp what he'd been picking up on the way.

"Ah, I decided to let it go." Gramp didn't look anyone in the eye as he selected an ornament, a sure sign he was hiding something.

"Gramp." Mom prompted him and Gramp looked up and grinned.

"Let's get this tree decorated, okay?" He grunted a little as he stood from the squat he'd been in at the ornament box and approached the tree with a slight limp. As he put the ornament on, I eased out of my chair and went into the kitchen. I fumbled around for a few minutes then heated some spiced tea. As I carried a pitcher of the drink into the living room I found I'd achieved my goal. Grampa sat in my old chair with Gran nestled next to him. He didn't admit it, but his knees were getting bad. A runner from way back, he'd finally resorted to race walking at the age of seventy eight, not willingly.

I settled on the floor with my back against the sofa arm, acknowledging my mom's pat on my shoulder with a smile. She knew me too well and she was the only one in the family who knew I'd made a rotten wish all those years ago. And true to Mom's nature, she'd kept it to herself, only encouraging me to try again. And every year, I suspected she tried to manipulate the process, with little success. Now, I was sure of it. She'd made sure where I sat when we started the process and I realized as the ornament box emptied I was going to be the one.

The last round started and my niece, four and proud of her ability to count, realized she wouldn't get the wish ornament. "Mommy! I wanted to wish for a puppy."

"Sorry, honey. You know the rules," Lucy smiled and held her arms out for Molly who bounced into them after pushing her ornament on the tree. Last year she'd been had the wish ornament and made a production of the process of hanging it. We still had the video of it, with her prancing up, eyeing the full tree for several minutes before holding the decoration to a bough, changing her mind four times and finally, midst our laughter, putting the tiny globe on the tree and squinting her eyes shut to make her wish. She'd gotten the baby brother she wished for and he lay sleeping in the basinet tonight.

Everyone's eyes were on me as I stood and brushed off my jeans. I sighed and reached into the box. At the bottom, in the mish mash of leftover ornament hangers and glitter, lay a small angel, her halo slightly off kilter. On any other occasion, my brother would have made a snide remark about the angel and me. You know something like opposites and all. But now, all of them knew the importance, or tragedy, of me holding the wish ornament.

I approached the tree slowly, sending a prayer out that I'd come up with a wish. Since I managed every year to avoid the wish ornament, I'd not bothered to think of anything. Now, I watched my hand lift and place the angel on a top bough of the tree and stood silently.

Behind me, the room creaked and rustled as the family shifted. No one spoke, not even Molly, who talked as soon as her eyes opened in the morning. Part of me wanted to make a joke but the other part, the young, naive girl who'd stood in this spot fifteen years earlier, found I wasn't as pessimistic as I'd thought. My next thought was I wanted to find true love.

My groan alerted everyone that I'd made the wish. "What, did you wish for a pink caddy?" Lucy broke the ice with a laugh.

"I wish," I muttered and turned with a shrug then headed to the table where food waited. As I poured a cup of tea and grabbed a sausage puff, I hoped when the wish bombed, I wouldn't spoil the blessing for the rest of the family.

I hadn't intended to stop by the Youngs tonight. As a sheriff in a small town, I was one half of the police force and the holiday season was busy with drunk drivers, the odd family spat and occasional accident. Having a few free hours tonight, I'd planned on watching some mindless movie and drinking a beer. Or three. Instead, I stood outside the door of the one woman I'd wanted for years and hadn't pursued.

Kelly Young was that girl that every smart guy in school wanted to date but didn't approach. When I graduated, she'd entered high school and I watched the skinny, shy and studious girl drift through school, making the grade and dating the class brainiac throughout. After she went off to college, I'd found myself asking about her more and more, thinking of her soft smile and smart ass remarks as she and her dad ran with me occasionally. I'd promised myself I'd ask her out, but never did. Who knows why. Then tonight, George Young ran the one red light in Redstone.

I made myself ring the doorbell and waited for George or his son, Robert to open the door. Instead, she was there. Kelly, dressed in blue jeans that hugged her hips and a red sweater stood in the opened door and smiled a bit cautiously.

“Hi, Jeff. You here on official business?”

The way she tilted her hip when she spoke made me hesitate before answering her. Okay, the little bit of skin that showed at her waist when she put her hand on her hip might have made me lose my train of thought. But I recovered enough to show her the carton of beers I held.

“I was invited by your granddad.”

“Come on in. We have tons of food.” She backed up and held the door open wider. As I walked in I glanced around. I started to set down the beer when I realized I’d been set up.

The family were spread around the living room, eating and drinking holiday stuff and looking at me. The tree, always a big item in the Young house, had a place of honor in the middle of the room, with a skirt of what looked like flannel squares arranged around the trunk. Suddenly I really wanted that beer and the tv.

“Do you want some food?” Kelly led me to the table in the corner of the room. It was a miracle the thing hadn’t given way under the sausage balls, chips and dip, and desserts it held. I must have looked shell shocked because she just chuckled and grabbed a plate. As she filled it I watched her. She hadn’t changed much. Her hair, blonde and shoulder length, had more shape to it now. I’d imagined she hid behind that hair in school. Now, it just highlighted her face, the clear skin and sky blue eyes. I wondered why she didn’t have someone in her life.

“How have you been, Kelly?”

She shrugged and smiled as she handed me the plate, laden with food. “Fine. You?”

“I’m good. Better now that I’ve seen you.” I grinned and accepted the opened beer then tossed back a drink.

When her eyes widened I grinned, heartened. “You look surprised.”

“I guess I am.”

“Why? We’ve been friends for years.”

“Yeah, we are friends.” She said it slowly and I realized I’d screwed up, so I tried to set it up differently.

“And I’ve always wanted to be more than friends.”

I hadn’t thought her eyes could get any wider but they did and she blushed then stared at her own drink, some sort of spicy stuff that women like. After a couple of seconds’ silence I decided to jump in farther. “You ever think about it?”

“About what?”

“Being more than just friends. About maybe going out with me tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow night?” She actually squeaked.

“Yeah. Dinner, maybe a movie in front of the tv.”

“Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. I can’t.” She really looked disappointed.

“Sh-. I forgot.”

Just then, a tug on my pants, just below my knee interrupted me. “Shewiff Boyd? Can I have a cookie?”

I think Kelly and I realized where we were at the same time. The whole freaking family was sitting there, watching us like we were the entertainment. I snagged a cookie from Kelly’s plate and handed it to the munchkin then cupped Kelly’s elbow and looked for some place that wasn’t a public venue. She tilted her head toward an open doorway then led the way into a

formal dining room, empty of any people. To make it more private, I kept going until we were on the other side of the room, near what I figured was the kitchen door.

“So tomorrow’s off. Christmas day is off, too, I guess. I have timing like crap.”

She laughed and laid her plate on a table along the wall then leaned against it and folded her arms over her chest. “What made you decide to ask me out now? After how many years of knowing me?”

It was my turn to lose the plate. Who wanted to eat when she was there, her mouth in that smile? I leaned forward, put the plate on the table, and stayed there, my hand on the table beside her hip. She was about a foot away, about twelve inches too far.

“I figured if I didn’t ask tonight, I’d lose my chance. So, if tomorrow’s out, and Christmas day is out, what about tonight?”

She straightened, eliminating about ten inches in the process. I eyed her mouth again and she blushed, knowing what I was thinking. “I’m not sure I can get away tonight.”

“You can. We’ll take care of the dishes and everything.” A voice filtered through the doorway and we both laughed before I leaned in the last inch.

“You going to chicken out or you going to grab the chance?”

She looked at me for a minute then made the move I’d never expect. She tiptoed up and laid a kiss on me. It was too short, so I gave it back to her, in spades.

I’d figured she’d taste like heaven but she blew my mind. You know the way books and movies describe kisses? Hers was way better. Then and there, I knew, she was going to be my wife by the next Christmas.

I guess I'll have to change my outlook from pessimism to incurable optimist. My glass has been repaired and filled to the brim. Jeff Boyd has turned out to be the personification of my wish ornament. We went out that night and spent the rest of the holiday together. When he had time off he was at Mom's and Dad's or I was at his house. When he was on duty, he'd call at odd times, and he spent the last hour of Christmas holding me, staring at the lit tree. I'm looking forward to next Christmas now, and the last wish ornament.