

One Christmas

by

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The snow fell.

Large soft flakes; slowly drifting down from the clouded, white, late afternoon sky; blocking the view of the far side of the lake; now covered with the accumulation of previous snowfalls.

Silence. Outside sounds muffled by the snow and the remoteness of the cabin, and inside, nothing moved save for the man's soft breathing and the occasional crackling of the fire.

He sat alone; resting easy in an old, cloth covered, wing-back chair that had seen many years of use, but still held true to its quality.

Christmas eve; a time for families; for friends; for good cheer.

But not here.

Here lay only silence; remorse; and sad thoughts; no family; no friends.

He took a slow sip from his glass; the whiskey flowing smoothly down his throat; warming; not burning or harsh, and he thought.

Memories of his son and family; lost over fourteen years ago now; the sorrow long gone, but the memories as vivid as ever. Memories of his friends who had died;

some long ago; some more recent.

He felt old; older than his eighty-five years; much older; and tired; tired of fighting the loneliness; tired of fighting the frailty of his body; tired of fighting the cancer.

But that would soon end.

He had always enjoyed this cabin; the calm serenity of the summer evenings; the peaceful quiet of the winter days; the memories of family and friends laughing and enjoying themselves; the cabin he had built with his own hands; and had maintained caringly over the years; the one place left on earth where he felt comfortable; the only place he wanted to be at the end of his life.

Later; after the sun had set; after the comforting darkness had fallen and only the light and warmth of the fireplace filled the cabin; then; and only then; he would drink the special mixture he had brought. But for now, he would sit and enjoy the silence and the quiet, and think of happier times.

The snowfall lightened, and he could almost make out the mountain across the lake. A pale image of the sun perched on the peaks, slowly moving down.

His thoughts drifted back to happier days; days when June, his wife, and he would sit on the bench outside and watch the summer sunsets; lingering and talking quietly until even the sounds of the frogs and crickets had fallen silent, and only the deep night forest sounds could be heard.

He was yanked from his reverie by the front door slamming open and a cold blast of air.

“What the?” he muttered as he looked to the entrance.

Someone in a bright red parka and green pants was quickly closing the door.

“What are you doing here?” he said firmly, both out of curiosity and as a statement that the person was not welcome.

“I am so glad I found this place,” said a young, female voice from behind the parka. She turned and pulled the hood down, revealing a blond haired, twenty to thirtyish face.

“If I hadn’t seen the smoke, I’m sure I would have died. This is a real life-saver!”

He slowly got up from the chair, his body fighting the effects of the whiskey and age.

“Who are you and why are you here?” he demanded as he slowly stood upright.

"I was out snowshoeing," she replied as she looked around the cabin. "My friends, the Richards from down at the end of the lake, let me use their cabin. When the snow got bad, I kind of lost my way, and that was scary. I don't know what I would have done if I hadn't found you."

He watched in silence as she removed the parka and hung it on the peg near the door.

"The Richards have been very kind to me," she continued, "and getting away was just what I need, I'm going through a pretty rough time right now and needed to get away to clear my head."

"I'm sorry," he said brusquely, taking advantage of the break in her monologue, "but you can't stay."

She turned, staring at him with a "I don't understand" look on her face.

"I won't stay for long," she said finally. "Just long enough to warm up a little and then I'll head back, now that I know where to go. That'll be okay, won't it?"

He wanted to yell at her "Go home! Leave me alone!", but too many years of forced politeness stopped him. It took a few moments for him to control the anger that had erupted within him. He took a slow, controlled breath before speaking.

"Half an hour. No more."

She looked relieved at his statement, and took a quick glance toward the sink counter. Before he could say anything else, she strode quickly to it.

"Whiskey," she said admiringly, "and good stuff too!"

She grabbed a tumbler and poured herself a generous portion.

"You don't mind, do you?" she said, looking back at him, just before she downed it in one quick gulp.

He stood, dumbfounded by what he had just seen, unable to move or articulate his disbelief.

She poured herself another drink, and turned to look at him.

"It is okay, isn't it?"

He felt the anger rise again and this time he did not fight it.

"A little late now. Hell, just help yourself to the whole bottle!"

"Whoa! I didn't mean to offend."

She put the drink on the counter and moved to where she had hung her parka.

“Look, I'm sorry I offended you. I'll go now,”

She got the parka down and was starting to put it on when he held up his hand.

“No,” he said softly “Please, don't go.”

The words were out of his mouth before he realized what he had said; stunning him with the content and softness; completely at odds with the anger that was still dominating his body.

“Okay,” she said, returning the parka to the peg. “But I won't stay long. Really, I don't want to impose.”

He didn't know what to say or what to do. He stood there, silent and not moving.

“Are you okay?” she asked.

“No!” he yelled to himself. “I am not okay! I am dying and I want to kill myself! I want to make my last act on this Earth be my choice; my decision; my action! Not dictated by the whims of God or nature or someone else!”

“No,” he said quietly. “I'm not okay at all.”

Before she could say anything more, he returned to his chair and stared out the window.

The sun had set; the last embers of light fading quickly; replaced by a deepening darkness that quickly restricted his world; bringing his focus completely to within the cabin.

Unnoticed by him, the woman had brought a chair from the dining table to sit beside him in a position where she could see him without obstructing his view out the window.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

Jarred back to the present, he looked at her for a long while before answering.

“I think I do.”

She said nothing, patiently waiting for him to continue.

“I'm dying,” he said. “Cancer. They say that, with the chemo, I might last another year.”

"But I can't beat it."

He was silent for a long while, and she waited patiently for him to continue, before she spoke.

"So what are you going to do? What does your family say?"

"My family is all gone. My friends are gone. I have nothing to live for."

"Surely there must be someone; something; some reason to fight on for even a year; a month; a day. Don't you think your life is precious? Don't you think you should live as long as you possibly can?"

He continued staring out the window, watching the flakes gently accumulate on the sill, cradling his drink in both hands. A wave of tiredness flowed over him. He'd heard this before; from the doctors; from nurses; from caregivers; and even from strangers. None of them had ever been in his position. None truly understood what he was feeling.

"No," he said softly.

He paused again, and but she said nothing.

"I decided to end it on my own terms; at a place I love; by my own hand."

He downed the last of his drink, placed the glass on the table, turned and looked at her.

"Is that wrong?" he asked softly.

"No," she replied slowly, "not at all. It shows courage."

He got up from the chair, made his way to the kitchen counter, and started to pour another drink, but stopped. Still holding the bottle, he turned to face her.

"I came here to kill myself; to end the pain; to end the frustration; to end it all.

"I wanted to do it at sunset, just after the sun dropped down past the mountains. But you being here wrecked that."

She started to say something, but he put up his hand, stopping her.

"It's okay though. I'll just do it after you're gone; whenever; there's no rush to leave.

"In fact, I kind of like you here. You have something about you that feels comforting."

"But you're still going to do it?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "Yes I will."

He looked to see what her reaction would be.

She smiled.

"It's okay Bill. You did what you wanted."

He frowned, put the bottle down, and moved to her, anger rising within him.

"How do you know my name?" he yelled. "Who sent you here?"

She smiled and slowly stood up, forcing him back.

"Bill, look at me. Look at me closely."

He stopped, took a step back, and closely examined her face.

"No! It can't be!"

He spun around and strode to the window.

"It can't be. You're dead. You've been dead for twenty years! You can't be here!"

"I am dear, I am."

He turned to face her again.

"How? How can you be here?"

"Because the day ended exactly as you'd planned."

"But it didn't! You came in before I could take the drink!"

"No, my love. I didn't."

He looked at her, not totally comprehending what she had just said, then he slowly turned to look at his chair; afraid of what he'd see and fearful of not seeing anything.

He saw himself there, his right hand hanging over the arm of the chair; glass on the floor; bottle of the special mixture sitting, opened, on the table beside the chair.

He turned back to her; to his wife lost so many years ago.

"June?" he said.

“Yes, Bill. It's me.”

“But how?”

She smiled at him.

“No one ever crosses over on their own. Always, loved ones are present, as I'm here for you.”

He looked around, not sure of what to do.

“What happens now?”

“You move on,” she said, moving closer to him, linking his arm in hers, and turning him towards the cabin entrance.

He looked to the door, but all he could see was a very bright light.

“It's okay, Bill. It's okay.”

She gently guided him forward. He didn't resist. Somehow he knew it was where he really wanted to go. He felt calm, relaxed, and that this was right.

He took one last look at the window, and, as it should, as it always did, as was right - the snow fell.