

Letter from Christine

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The longest night of the year would be even longer this year, Stella thought, now that Christine was gone. She peered out the front window, at the snow churning in the yellow light over the front porch. Ghosts of pink, ice-caked mittens and miniature snow-angels littered the yard with all the other dreams of her baby's childhood, and she turned her head, evading the memory. A shadow passed before her eyes. Wiping the condensation off the window pane with her palm, she pressed her nose to the cold, ammonia-scented glass that she'd scrubbed just moments ago in another frenzied attempt to cleanse her mind of useless thoughts.

A man was walking up the frozen lane from the neighboring farm. He leaned into the wind, holding his cap to his head with one hand and his coat close to his neck with the other. He looked up, catching the outer reaches of the porch light in his face, and Stella jerked back from the window.

"Will," she said, "a man's coming."

Her husband pushed to his feet. He was as tired as she was of the fatigue the past month had brought to their home. "Who is it?"

"A soldier."

Straightening his spine, Will waited until the sound of the man's boots hobbled up the three steps before pulling open the door. The storm had plastered ice pellets down the man's right side, from his ears to his boots, and Will caught him scraping them from his shoulders, stomping them from his boots.

"What can I do for you, soldier?" he asked.

The man pulled his beret from his head and wriggled a backpack from his shoulders. "Mr. Peyton?" He waited for Will's nod before continuing. "Forgive my intrusion, but I've come about your daughter."

The outside air was cold, that frigid dampness that only a nighttime snow can bring. It rushed into the house and struck Stella on her exposed arms and legs. She could even taste the clean bite of it

on her tongue.

“Christine died,” Will said.

The soldier’s eyes dulled for a moment. “I know, sir.” He hesitated. “I was with her.”

“Then you’d better come in.”

Busying herself with taking the soldier’s coat and offering him a cup of something hot to drink, Stella didn’t notice her grandson’s presence until he spoke, breaking the awkward conversation.

“Cool! You’re Army. A Ranger, right? A captain?” Sammy’s voice held the squeaky excitement of youth. But then he was only five years old. Even so, he’d recognized the man’s uniform and the significance of his accomplishments from the colorful bars and shining medals fixed in neat rows to his jacket. Now he hopped from one foot to the other, his little body not even trying to contain all that energy.

The man dropped to his haunches, a flurry of emotions crossing his face: wonder, recognition, finally pain. But he blinked it away and said, “I’m a major, but you got the Ranger part right, buddy.”

Sammy giggled. “My name’s not Buddy.”

“It’s not?” The major put his fist to his chin and pretended to be in deep thought. “Then I’ll bet it’s Sammy.”

“How’d you know?” Sammy’s eyes went owl wide.

“Your mom told me about you, talked about you just about every minute of every day.”

It took a minute for Sammy to digest the thought, then he grinned, and for a moment Stella thought the man would cry.

“You smile just like her,” he murmured.

That caught Stella’s attention. It caught Will’s as well, and he cleared his throat, as subtle as a bull. “Let’s have a seat. You said you’ve come about our Christine. What’s your name, Major, and how did you know her?”

“Parker. My name is James Parker.” Stella handed him a mug of coffee, and he settled into the cushioned armchair by the TV that Christine had picked out at Sears, took a breath, then a sip. “I met Chrissy, Christine, when I ended up in the field hospital after an operation near Fallujah. She was my nurse.”

Scooting himself across the rug until he was kneeling by the major’s chair, Sammy said, “Hey, I know who you are! Major James Parker, leader of the Wild Bunch. Grandpa and I saw all about you on the military channel, except he was mostly sleeping. You and your guys are awesome.”

It took a moment for Major Parker to answer the little boy, and he shot a quick glance to her and Will before speaking. “I love what I do, Sammy, but a soldier’s life is not always fun.”

Sammy nodded, his forehead scrunched in concentration.

“But it makes me feel really good to hear nice things like you just said. So thank you.” He smiled and ruffled Sammy’s hair, his fingers lingering for a moment on the short, golden curls, so like Christine’s. “Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to talk to your grandparents about your mom. I have some things for them.”

“Please.” Stella pressed her fist to her mouth and inhaled to stop the tears that still, to this day, a full month after the Army officers had shown up in their pressed uniforms, threatened instant eruption.

The major reached for his backpack and pulled out a bag that had been carefully wrapped to protect it from the elements. He tore away the tape and unwound about a yard of plastic. Inside were miscellaneous items: several family photos – Christine and a newborn Sammy, another of Sammy taken right before Christine had deployed, a group shot taken at the latest family reunion; a pouch of make-up; pieces of jewelry; a silk scarf.

Stella glanced to Will, then to the major, this man who had obviously been close to her daughter. He was young, no more than thirty, with black hair and hazel eyes. Not heartthrob gorgeous,

but handsome in that classic, strong way, and he had the kind of steady demeanor that let a woman know he could be counted on.

She took the items from him, traced her fingers along the faces in the photos and held the scarf to her face to breathe in her daughter's scent of lemon verbena. "Thank you, Major. This was very kind of you. You said you were Christine's patient?" Her emotions under control for the moment, she eyed him, leaving unspoken all the questions of her heart.

"Yes, ma'am." There was a strain in his voice now, but he hurried on. "After the operation we struck up a friendship, spent our free time together. We grew close." His words chopped off, as if his throat had closed.

Stella pulled a pillow into her lap and picked at the fringe, waited for the rest of the story. Sammy hung on the major's every word. She should take him into another room, but Lord how she wanted to hear it all. "What happened?" she heard herself ask. "You said you were with her?"

The major's shoulders sagged for a moment, and he glanced to Sammy, concerned that the little boy would pick up on the violence. "Things were quiet that day. Chrissy was going on one of the community outreach missions to bring medical care to the locals. Many of the women will only treat with another woman. I had some down time and went with her." He brought his hand to his forehead and shaded his eyes. It was a moment before he continued.

"We were walking down a road that was supposed to have been cleared, and Chrissy stepped to the side to talk to one of the women she'd cared for a week or so earlier. A truck drove by; an undetected IED was detonated. She was caught in the middle." Sensing Stella's next question, he added quickly, "She didn't know."

"Oh, good." It was all Stella could force from her mouth, but Sammy pressed on for details.

"Were you hurt too?" he asked.

Shrugging, the major gave a reluctant nod. "I took some shrapnel in the leg, but I'm fine now."

“Where are you from, Major?” Stella asked to change the subject. “I assume you’re headed home for Christmas. I can hardly believe it’s only a few days away.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m from Pennsylvania. Scranton.”

“Is your family there?”

The side of his mouth curled in a half smile that might have looked bitter if it weren’t for the melancholy in his eyes. “Cousins. My parents are gone. Most of the people I’d call family these days are back in Iraq right now, but Scranton’s where I grew up. I have a flight out of Des Moines later this evening.”

“And you walked from town in this mess?” Will asked. “I’ll take you back to the airport.”

“Thank you, sir, but a cab will be fine.”

“But do you have time to stay for dinner?” Stella asked it quickly, not yet ready to say goodbye to this good friend of Christine’s.

He turned his wrist to check his watch, hesitating.

“Please, Major. Just for a bit.”

“Yes, ma’am, I’d love to.”

She’d made a pan of lasagna with garlic bread and salad, one of Christine’s favorite meals, and she sat the major next to Will, across from Sammy who peppered the poor man with question after question about life in the Army and Ranger training. The major was patient, though, and didn’t seem to mind the questions at all. In fact, it seemed the two were becoming fast friends.

Even Sammy ran out of questions eventually though, and when the conversation lulled, the major reached into his jacket. “There’s something else—”

“Uncle Dan wanted to marry my mom,” Sammy said, interrupting and making them all freeze, forks in mid-air, mouths in mid-chew.

Stella forced a laugh and turned to the major to explain. “He’s talking about Dan Gunther. He

grew up on the farm next door, and for awhile there they were close. But marriage, I don't think so, honey." She said the last to Sammy. In truth, the two had had an *understanding* before Christine's reserve unit had been called to active duty. But that was two years ago, and the romance had cooled on Christine's last visit home. At least on Christine's end. Dan still carried the torch though, right to the end.

"Uncle Dan told me he bought a ring and he was going to give it to Mommy. Last summer he was showing me how to throw a fastball, and when the weather's warmer, he's going to help me with my batting." Sammy made the announcement with all the righteous fury of a five-year-old who'd been crossed. "He said he can't be my dad now that Mommy's gone, but he can still be my friend."

Stella pulled him onto her lap. He was sweating, his eyes tearing up, and he smelled like baby shampoo and little boy. She brushed his hair from his forehead. "It's okay, honey. I didn't mean anything by it. Of course he's your friend."

The major neither moved nor spoke during this exchange. Instead he waited until dessert, chocolate cake with chocolate frosting, had been served with coffee, and when the last bite and the last drop had passed his lips, he laid his napkin on the plate and turned to her. "Thank you for your hospitality, Mrs. Peyton, but I need to be going."

"So soon?"

Nodding, he reached into his inside jacket pocket and pulled out an envelope. It was white, legal sized, crumpled and smeared on one end in red. "This is for you." His hand was trembling by the time he passed it to her, and as she took it she realized what the stain was.

"Chrissy had planned to mail that to you the day she.... I'll leave you in peace now to read it."

Stella knew that Will went with him then to call him a cab, knew that Sammy had gone to wait with them in the living room, but she could hardly see through the tears that started falling when her fingers touched the dried blood that had spilled from her baby onto the white paper half a world away.

Her fingers shook while she eased the flap open, trying to preserve every scrap of the envelope. She pulled the sheets out to read. There was a smaller envelope inside addressed to Sammy, along with some photos. As she pulled one of the photos free, she inhaled sharply and brought her hand to her mouth.

James insisted on waiting for the cab outside. It was easier once he'd said goodbye to the family Chrissy had so often described, in the living room that felt like home the minute he'd stepped into it. He slipped his hands in his gloves, turned up the coat collar, and hunched his shoulders against the wind that was screaming from left to right across the porch. The cold didn't bother him so much anymore; he'd been numb too long.

Besides, he knew what they were reading. He'd been with Chrissy when she wrote the letter in her looping, girly script, when she licked the envelope closed and turned to give him a kiss tasting of peppermint gum. He still remembered what it said:

Dear Mom and Dad: I hope you're sitting, 'cuz I have news. (I'm writing an actual letter so Sammy has something to open from me. Besides, e-mail can be so cold, don't you think?) Anyway, I met a man, and I knew he was "the one" right away, just like you said I would, Mom. We've known each other about six months and were married this morning by the base chaplain. Now, don't go scolding me that it's too soon. When it's right, it's right, as Dad always says. We had a beautiful ceremony except that you weren't there with me. (I'll stick some pics inside.) Don't worry, we'll do a big party when we come home.

He's handsome and so brave and has two Purple Hearts. Daddy, I know you and Sammy will love hearing his stories, although you might have to coax them out of him. He doesn't like talking much about it. Of course I told him all about Sammy, and he can't wait to be his daddy. I know Sammy will love him as much as

I do. I tried to explain everything in my letter to him, but I'll be home soon to talk to him in person - only sixty-eight days 'til my tour's over.

I know Dan was hoping we'd marry, but it wouldn't work between us, and to paraphrase Dad, if it's not right, it's not right - a hard lesson I learned from my time with Sammy's father. I'll write Dan and hope that over time he'll come to see that I'm right.

Well, have to run now. I'm helping out today with one of the medical operations in the nearby town. It's really important work and I'm so glad I can help.

Love you all...oh! I almost forgot. My husband's name (isn't husband a beautiful word?) is James Parker. He's a Ranger, and his tour is almost over. I can't wait for you to meet him.

Lots of love - give my big boy a hug and kiss for me, Christine

The cab pulled up and the driver honked, and James stepped into the cold. As he was sliding into the back of the cab, the driver pointed to the house. "Hey, buddy, I think they're trying to get your attention."

James looked back. The Peytons had crowded at the door, Chrissy's mom at front. She'd thrown a dark blue blanket over the simple cotton housedress and was waving the letter, gesturing for him to come back in. Then Mr. Peyton came running down the steps. He hadn't taken the time to put on a coat. The snow had eased, but the wind was still kicking up, whipping at his thinning white hair, snapping at the plaid button-down shirt and gray trousers.

He leaned into the cab. "Are your cousins expecting you?"

"No, sir," he had to admit.

"Then come on back in, spend Christmas with us."

It took James a moment to decide what to say, and even then he had to take a deep breath before he could talk. "Thank you for that, sir. I'd love to, but I need to be with my family."

Mr. Peyton nodded, seemed to accept his decision. "Will you keep in touch? Send us your contact information?"

"I will, sir."

"Then Merry Christmas to you. Enjoy your family."

"Thank you, sir." He shook hands with Chrissy's dad, waved to her mom, and saluted her little boy.

The cab pulled away, and the driver asked, "Where to, soldier?"

James stared back at the white farmhouse. The clouds had lifted, and the moon was throwing an eerie gloom over the landscape. Drifts had crawled halfway up a tired brown barn in the back, and tiny snow tornadoes swirled across the empty acres behind it.

He turned back toward the road. "Home."