

A dandelion seed head, heavily laden with snow, stands on a thin, dark stem. The background is a dark, textured expanse of falling snow, with a bright, out-of-focus light source in the upper right corner creating a soft glow.

# *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, and evaded the ghosts of pink, ice-caked mittens and miniature snow-angels that littered the yard with all the other dreams of her baby's childhood. A shadow passed before her eyes, and she wiped the condensation off the window pane with her palm, pressed her nose to the cold, ammonia-scented glass that she'd scrubbed just that afternoon in another frenzied attempt to cleanse her mind of useless thoughts, and searched the darkness.

A man was walking up the frozen lane from the Gunthers' 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, as tired as she was of the fatigue the past month had brought to their home. He sighed. "Who is it?"

"A soldier."

Straightening his spine, Will waited until the sound of the man's boots hobbled up the three steps before swinging open the door. He caught the man dusting the snow from his shoulders, stomping it from his boots, surprising him.

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

The soldier 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."

Will pushed the door wider. The outside air was cold, that frigid dampness that only a nighttime snow can bring, and it rushed into the house, struck Stella on her exposed arms and legs.

"Christine died," Will said.

The soldier's eyes dulled for a moment. "I know, sir. I was with her."

"Then you'd better come in."

Busying herself with taking the soldier's coat, offering him a cup of something hot to drink, Stella didn't notice her son's presence until he spoke.

"Cool! You're Army. A Ranger, right, a major?" Todd's voice held the excitement

of youth. But then he was only fourteen years old. Even so, he'd recognized the man's rank and the significance of his accomplishments from the colorful bars and shining medals fixed in neat rows to his jacket.

"That's right." The major offered his hand to Todd, narrowed his eyes in thought. Then he smiled. He had a nice smile, kind eyes, and that pure straight-backed, squared-shouldered military bearing. "And you're Todd I'll bet. Chrissy told me all about you."

"Did she tell you about me too?" Lucy piped up from where she'd been hiding behind Todd's legs. Swishing from side to side in that ever-female gesture of flirtation, she grinned around the thumb she'd stuck in her mouth. Even at four years of age she was a sucker for a man in uniform.

The major dropped to his haunches, a flurry of emotions crossing his face: wonder, recognition, then pain. But he blinked it away and said, "If you're Lucy, then she sure did. She told me all about you, talked about you just about every minute of every day."

Lucy inched forward and giggled, and for a moment Stella thought the man would cry.

"You look just like your mama," he murmured, brushing a tentative hand along the golden curls spilling over Lucy's shoulders.

Will cleared his throat, likely to get their attention. The man was 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 helped her pick out at Sears, took a breath, then a sip. "I met Chrissy when I ended up in the field hospital after an operation near Fallujah, Iraq. She was my nurse."

Plopping down on the couch next to Stella, Todd leaned forward, still animated about the appearance of the highly decorated warrior. "Hey, I know who you are! Major James Parker, leader of the Wild Bunch. I read all about your unit in one of the military blogs. You and your guys are awesome."

Major Parker tilted his head in a gesture of humility. "I appreciate that, but If you don't mind, I'd like to talk to your mom and dad about Chrissy. I have some of her

belongings.”

“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 at their door, 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 Lucy, another of Lucy 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?” What she left unsaid was, *How did you come to be in possession of these very personal items?*

“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. Todd hung on the major’s every word while Lucy played at her feet with a Barbie. She should take her 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 Lucy, concerned as she was that the little girl would pick up on the violence. “Things were quiet that day. We had some down time and Chrissy had signed up to go along with one of the Civil-military Medical Operations. Many of the women would only treat with another woman. I went with her.” He brought his hand to his forehead, shaded his eyes, and 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 treated a week or so earlier. As 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 Todd pressed on for details.

"You were injured too, right?" he asked. "I noticed you were limping."

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

The conversation lulled, and the major reached for his jacket. "There's something else –"

The doorbell rang in that instant, interrupting his thought, and seconds later Will ushered their neighbor into the living room.

"Major Parker," he said, "this is Dan Gunther, an old friend of Christine's. We'd asked him to dinner."

The major offered his hand, and the two sized each other up for an awkward moment until Todd started in about the major's unit and their escapades in Iraq. Seems Christine had written him as well.

"Where are you from, Major?" she 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."

"Your family still 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-country right now, but it'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, afraid he'd leave before telling her what the "something else" was he'd mentioned before Dan's arrival.

He turned his wrist to check his watch, then sighed. Whether it was the time or

the company she didn't know, but it was clear that he wasn't sure he should stay.

"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 Todd who peppered the poor man with question after question about life in the Army and Ranger training. Finally Dan broke in with a comment about the upcoming year's crop rotation, at which point the conversation turned to the very important topic of the importance of farming to America.

Stella sat, barely eating but wondering if she should've added more garlic to the sauce, more butter to the bread. And then she wondered if she had the nerve to come right out and ask the major what he'd been about to tell them earlier. That's when little Lucy made her presence known.

"Uncle Dan wanted to marry Mommy," she said, making them all freeze, forks in mid-air, mouths in mid-chew.

Stella forced a laugh. "Well, Mommy and Uncle Dan *were* good friends, but marriage is a big step, honey." 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 seemed to have cooled on Christine's last visit home. At least on Christine's end. Dan still carried the torch though, right to the end.

He proved it then by telling them he'd purchased a ring to present to Christine her next trip home. They all nodded in sympathy, except for the major who 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 on the paper was.

“Chrissy had planned to mail that to you the day she died. I’ll leave you in peace now to read it.”

She knew that Will stood with him then to call him a cab, knew that Todd had gone out 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.

“Lucy honey, go with Grandpa. I need to be by myself for a minute.” She looked to Dan then, pleaded with him silently for the same thing. She never saw him leave, but suddenly she was alone, and she eased the envelope open, trying to preserve every scrap, and pulled the sheets out to read, saw the photos inside, and her hand flew to her mouth.

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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 he knew it 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, feminine script, when she licked the envelope closed and turned to give him a kiss. He still remembered what it said:

*Dear Mom, Dad and Todd: I hope you’re sitting, ‘cuz I have news. 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 photos 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 and Todd, I know you’ll 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 Lucy, and he can't wait to be her daddy. I know she'll love him as much as I do, and I'll explain everything to her when I come home – only sixty-eight days 'til my tour's over.*

*I know Dan will be disappointed, and I'll send him a letter and try to explain. We're not right for each other, and I just hope he'll understand that in time.*

*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'm a part of it.*

*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 over shortly after mine. More later!*

*Love and kisses – give my bunny Lucy a big hug and kiss for me,  
Christine*

The cab pulled up and honked a horn, and James stepped down the porch into the blowing snow. As he was sliding into the back of the cab, he saw Dan the neighbor slip by, his head tucked against the wind. Then the driver pointed to the house. "I think they're trying to get your attention."

James looked back. The whole family had crowded at the door, Chrissy's mom at front. She was waving the letter, gesturing for him to come back in. Chrissy's dad ran down the steps then, wearing no coat. He leaned into the cab.

"Are your cousins expecting you?"

He shook his head. "No, sir."

"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 toward the road. “Home.”

~ The End ~