

## Christmas Eve Nightmare

We were set to have a big family Christmas this year, the first one I imagined my son would be able to remember when he grew up. Mom and Dad had gone all out for the first time since my brothers were little, decorating every room of the big house where we'd all grown up in holiday colors. Mistletoe hung from every doorway, and all three of the wood-burning fireplaces had big logs waiting to be burned and lush evergreen swags adorning their mantels.

Drew and I were staying with them for the whole holiday season since it was just the two of us now, even though I had my own apartment closer to downtown Cincinnati, on the Ohio side of the river. My oldest brother Joe and his family had just arrived yesterday from Dayton, and Mom and Dad had left his wife and me chopping up ingredients for the turkey dressing while they went to the airport to pick up Ray and Roy, my youngest brothers who'd just started college this fall.

My boyfriend Brett would drive out from the city early in the morning. I'd been shy about asking him, but I was glad now that I had. He'd done a lot toward getting me over being afraid of every man except my dad and brothers.

Yes, it would be good to celebrate Christmas at the big, rambling home where I'd grown up. Good for me, and good for my little boy.

We'd spent Drew's first Christmas in Belgium, his second one at my small apartment. This year Drew was almost three years old, and he was on pins and needles worrying about Santa Claus and the toys he'd be bringing down Nana's chimney tonight. He could hardly wait for that, or for the arrival of my eighteen year old brothers who'd stepped in as twin father figures for him after I split up with Hans. Meanwhile, Drew loved having his six year old cousin Christy to play

with, even if she was “just a big old girl.” They were playing in Dad’s fenced yard right now, their cheeks rosy this clear, cold day in northern Kentucky.

I looked up from the onions I was chopping up for dressing when Christy bounded into the kitchen, letting the cold air in behind her through the open door.

She tugged at Carolyn, my brother’s wife. “Mommy, a guy just got out of a red sports car and grabbed Drew.”

A red sports car? Hans had a red sports car, unless he’d traded it for something even flashier.

God, no. Dropping the knife, I ran to the door and looked outside. No red sports car and no Drew.

“Drew. Come here, baby,” I screamed, but I knew in my heart he couldn’t hear me. I also knew instinctively that it was his no-good excuse for a father who’d snatched him.

When I got back inside, Carolyn had already called 911.

The deputy who answered the call didn’t hold out much hope, either that he could get Drew back right away or that the state could do anything to my ex since he had been granted visitation privileges which, when I looked at the papers, I found to my horror included Christmas Eve and Christmas Day this year.

He read the court order I handed him and shook his head. “Looks like the man’s got the law on his side, ma’am. Not to say he had any business snatching your boy out of your folks’s yard without a by-your-leave.”

“But . . .” I stammered. “I know he won’t bring Drew back. He goes back to his home in Belgium every Christmas, and I’ll bet he’s planning to take Drew with him.” I snatched back the

divorce papers. “Look,” I told him when I found the page I was looking for. “The judge said he couldn’t take our son out of the country.”

“What makes you think he will?”

Fighting hysteria now, I explained again how Hans went home every Christmas to sweet-talk his family there into giving him more money— money I never had been able to figure out what he did with, besides paying for that fancy car of his. I swallowed my pride and admitted how he’d beaten me and kept me from reporting it for months by threatening to take my son away where I’d never see him again.

Why? Why had I ever gotten involved with slick-talking, slimy Hans Schmidt? What had I seen in this guy who drove a fifty thousand dollar sports car and dressed like a millionaire on a bellboy’s pay?

Why had I let Mom and Dad spend thousands on our wedding, even more on helping me get the divorce papers that seemed now to be worthless when it came to protecting my little boy? It would have been cheaper to have hired a hit man. More effective, too.

The deputy looked up from the divorce order and cleared his throat. “I’ll call airport security and then get on over there. I think we can stop him from taking your boy out of the country, if it’s a direct flight he’s planning to take.”

“But the airport’s in Ohio,” Carolyn said.

“No, it’s in Kentucky.” I was glad she was wrong. Otherwise the deputy wouldn’t have jurisdiction.

I couldn’t help hoping we could get to Drew in time. Hans was headed straight for the Cincinnati airport. I knew it, as much as I would have if he’d told me so. There was only one

reason he'd come get Drew now when he hadn't bothered to make even one of the visitations he'd fought for so hard during our divorce.

He'd snatched Drew to take him to his mother in Brussels. I always suspected she'd been behind Hans making the kind of fight he did to maintain control over our son after we separated. Besides, it had been almost a year since our divorce was final, and never once until today had Hans made any effort to see his son.

The threat he'd made every time I had started to tell the police or my parents about his beating me nearly every day we lived together haunted me. I'd been such a wimp for so long until I finally got the courage to call the police and press charges on him.

\_\_\_\_\_ But the sound of his voice, icy cold and full of hate, still rang in my ears.

Go ahead and call the cops. Call your dad and all three of your precious brothers. Call anyone you can think of and tell them what a bastard I am. Do it. If you do, I'll take Drew home to Belgium and you'll never see him again.

That was what Hans was up to, now. But I wasn't afraid of him anymore. I'd kill him before I'd let him take away my little boy. And I knew my brothers would tear him limb from limb. Dad should have let them do it, that night when I'd finally gotten scared enough to call for help after Hans had thrown a Frybaby full of hot oil at me and Drew.

It had been lucky for Hans, I thought, that the police had dragged him off to jail by the time Ray and Roy sneaked away from home and got over to her apartment. But I was determined his luck wasn't going to hold out now.

"I'm going to the airport."

The deputy shook his head. "We'll take care of it, ma'am. You stay here, where we can

get in touch with you.”

No way. I’d trusted the cops once, and the assistant prosecutor who had the case had let Hans sweet-talk his way out of the jail sentence he should have gotten for beating me up in the parking lot of the apartment complex where we’d lived. “Diversion” was the name of the program he’d wheedled his way into, to avoid conviction and the probable loss of his precious green card. And his lawyer had discredited the word of the security guard who’d rescued me, the second time around.

I wasn’t about to let that happen again. I watched the squad car leave, its siren wailing, before snatching my coat and gloves out of Mom’s hall closet.

“Lynn, what can I do?” Carolyn asked.

She’d stood, speechless, while I spilled my guts out to the deputy. Now she sank into a kitchen chair and took Christy up on her lap. Her big brown eyes looked almost black, and shock showed on her pale, drawn face.

“Just listen for the phone. And lock the doors, just in case. You don’t want to face Hans when he’s in a fury.”

“But the policeman said for you to stay here,” she protested.

“I can’t.” With that, I went outside and cranked up my beat-up sedan.

I cursed the heavy Christmas Eve traffic that kept me from making much progress along the beltline highway, and the flurries of snow that started just as I started making some time. Funny, just an hour earlier I’d told Carolyn how I hoped it would snow so the kids could enjoy a real white Christmas.

Was Drew afraid?

It had been almost a year since he'd seen Hans. Would he even have recognized the man who'd been more sperm donor than father, even before we separated?

I doubted it. Drew never mentioned his father any more. Instead, he talked incessantly about Ray and Roy and begged each week for me to take him to play with my dad, his Grandpa Mike. He was slow to warm up to strange men, but I'd thought the other day that he was finally coming to like Brett, the man I'd been dating for the past couple of months. That was good, because Brett loved both of us. I could tell.

A horn honked behind me. I hit the gas, moved onto the off ramp to the airport. Signs with airline and car rental company names and confusing directional arrows made me search my memory. When the tires spun on a patch of ice, I realized it was snowing in earnest now.

United. KDS. Air Canada. American. Delta. We'd taken KDS, United, and Delta to Belgium at one time or another during our short marriage— though the Delta flight had landed in Amsterdam and we'd taken a smaller plane to Brussels.

Where would Hans be?

Oh, God, he could be taking any airline. He could even be flying somewhere in the States, planning to get a flight from there to some European city.

My heart broke when I pictured Drew, scared and cold, without his favorite blanket and the Blues Clues pillow he always had to have before he could go to sleep.

For what seemed like forever, I couldn't breathe. I turned in to the Delta arrivals area, figuring that I'd find Mom and Dad, and the twins if their plane had landed already. They'd all help me look for my baby. Let them tow my car, I thought as I stopped it in a no parking zone and shut the motor off.

All I cared about was finding Drew. I'd worry about killing Hans after I had my baby in my arms.

"Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." That was Garth Brooks crooning over the PA system, I thought as I stumbled around last-minute travelers and their luggage.

On the concourse now, I strained my eyes. I'd never see Drew in the crush of bodies. Only five-nine, Hans wouldn't be easy to spot either, among the sea of six footers.

But I did recognize two identical dark heads that stood out above the rest. Roy and Ray. They didn't hear her when I called to them, so I shoved my way through the crowd until I was close enough to grab them both by the backs of their down jackets.

"Merry Christmas, Sis. I thought Mom and Dad were gonna meet us at the luggage carousel," Ray said, catching me in a rough bear hug. "Where's my buddy?"

"Hans snatched him out of the yard. I think he's going to try to—."

Roy swore succinctly. "I'll kill him."

"You'll have to wait in line," Ray snarled.

I watched both my brothers shift their gazes. Surely searching through this sea of people would be useless.

"Over there, Ray. See that blond head?"

"Yeah. I think it's him."

My heart nearly stopped. "Can you see Drew?"

Ray's arm went around my waist. "No. But I'm gonna go grab that SOB before he gets away."

Five minutes later in a gate area that had just emptied out when an outgoing plane

finished boarding, I faced Hans for the first time since we'd met in court nearly a year earlier.

"Where's Drew? What have you done with him?" I asked.

He smirked. "I imagine that right now he's boarding a KLM plane on Concourse B with his mother."

He'd soon find out it wasn't so easy to intimidate me when my brother had him secured so he couldn't hit me. "Quit lying, Hans. I'm right here, and Drew's passport's safely locked up in Mom and Dad's bank vault. Where is my baby?"

"It is no lie. Do you realize how easy it is for a husband and father to get duplicate passports? Think about it, Katya and you look enough alike to pass for sisters."

Ray tightened the choke hold he had on Hans's neck at the mention of the Estonian woman Hans had moved in with the same day I'd thrown him out.

"Which gate?" Roy asked.

"B18," Hans croaked.

"Ray. Roy. Do something," I cried. Then I saw an airport security guard running our way, his pistol drawn.

Fighting down hysteria, I spilled out my story again. The guard holstered his gun and got on his cell phone. "What names are your son and this Katya person using?"

"Mine and Drew's. Lynn and Andrew Schmidt. He somehow got duplicates of our passports." I pointed a finger at Hans, whose face kept getting redder as he struggled to free himself from Ray and Roy.

The guard relayed that information, then hung up and clipped the phone to his belt. "They'll bring the passengers off the plane and hold them until we can sort this out. Let Mr.



Schmidt go, boys,” he told my brothers as he pulled a pair of handcuffs out of his pocket and secured Hans’s wrists behind his back.

Hans sputtered threats my way as we made our way to Concourse B, but they didn’t faze me. As I’d first noticed when I watched the local police drag him out of our apartment in cuffs after he attacked the apartment security guard who’d come to my aid the last time he beat me, handcuffs took a lot of the threat out of the bully.

Roy walked along with me while Ray stopped at a bank of pay phones to call Mom and Dad and let them know what was going on. Somebody walked by me whistling “Silver Bells” as we approached the Concourse B security office.

“Mommy!”

I’d have recognized Will’s voice anywhere. My baby was safe.

“Shut up, child. I am your mother,” said the tall blond woman in an accented, guttural voice. Katya held Will’s hand firmly, apparently intent to play out the wicked game she and Hans had begun until the last possible moment. Two burly deputies flanked the pair.

“No.”

“Will, baby. Mommy’s here.” I went down on my knees and gathered my precious little body close to my heart. When I pressed kisses all over his tear-stained cheeks, I wanted to strangle Hans and Katya for having made him cry. God, how I loved him.

“Wanna go to Nana’s house. Want Santa Claus.”

Hans was standing with Katya now, and the two were yelling at each other in some foreign language. It wasn’t Flemish, though. God knows I’d heard enough of Hans’s relatives talking Flemish that I’d recognize the language. They’d deliberately spoken it whenever I was

with them so I couldn't understand what they were talking about. And I'd seen a lot of them while Hans and I were married, because we went to Belgium twice, and it seemed as though one or the other of his relatives had come over here nearly every month.

Will looked at Hans and the woman, his eyes wide with fear. When his little body started shaking, I hugged him close. Didn't Hans care that the sound of him screaming traumatized his child?

Why should he care now? He hadn't, when we still lived together.

I wanted to get my baby out of here and get him home where he'd feel safe and loved. But I didn't dare do it. Not yet. As the deputy who'd come to Mom's house told me, Hans had the legal right to be with Will today and tomorrow. I wasn't absolutely certain I could ignore the judge's order, even though Hans would have a hard time proving he hadn't violated the other order when he'd tried to sneak my son out of the country.

Ray and Roy stood by me, looking as if they'd like nothing better than to tear into Hans like a pair of junkyard dogs. We traded questioning looks when two swarthy men strode into the room, flashing badges that didn't look like the one the sheriff's deputies had on. I couldn't help noticing the bulge under one of them's gray pinstriped jacket when he set his overcoat and hat on an empty chair.

These men looked like they were up to serious business.

The way they grilled the deputy and airport security manager, you'd think they'd hit onto something big. Seeing their fierce expressions gave me the willies.

Good thing it was Hans and Katya they seemed interested in, not us. I watched as they searched Hans none too gently. When one man pulled his shirt out of the tight jeans he'd always

avored, the other pulled out what looked to me like nothing but an envelope full of paper.

They wouldn't catch Hans doing anything illegal. I knew. Just as he'd been slick enough to talk his way out of a conviction for domestic violence, he was too slick to get caught doing whatever illegal activities everyone believed he was up to his neck in.

I knew they wouldn't catch him because Mom and Dad had the best detectives money could buy tailing him twenty-four, seven, after he'd insisted during the divorce proceedings that he had no income except from the minimum wage job he held at a downtown Cincinnati hotel. I knew he was getting big money he couldn't account for with his job as a hotel bellboy, and that money had to have come from somewhere. But the private investigators tailed him for months during our separation, and they came up with a lot of questions, but no real answers.

If they had, Hans wouldn't have been here now, because I'd have used that proof to get the INS to revoke his green card. The detectives hadn't even gotten enough evidence so I could force him to pay child support based on his real income, not the false information he gave the IRS and the judge.

"Well, we'll be taking Mr. Schmidt off your hands," the man who seemed to be in charge told the deputy and the chief of airport security who'd been guarding Hans. "Ms. Sljusarovna, I'm afraid, will be taking a different trip than she'd planned."

Katya stamped her foot. "You cannot keep me here. I want to go home."

"Calm down, Miss. You're going home all right, but you'll be doing it at the expense of the American taxpayers. Right now you're going to spend awhile in a detention center, also at taxpayer expense. We don't take kindly to illegal aliens trying to leave the country using a stolen American passport."

Illegal? Katya had been in Cincinnati most of the time since we'd separated and Hans had moved in with her. Didn't she have a green card?

I perked up my ears, trying to get more from the low-pitched talk on the other side of the room— until Drew started to cry again. He'd gone through more than any toddler should have to endure, any day, but especially on Christmas Eve.

"Please. Can we take Drew home?" I asked, afraid to speak up but determined to get my baby away from this scene that was obviously terrifying him.

One of the officers approached us, his smile obviously intended to reassure me when he flashed an CIA investigator's badge in front of my face. "You can go. Before you do, would you mind searching the little guy for me?"

The way he said it, I knew I didn't have a choice.

What was he looking for?

"Here. You look through his pockets." I handed him Drew's coat to check out while I loosened his sweater and slid a hand under the layers of his clothes. A small packet that had been wedged between his shirt and sweater slid onto the floor.

"It's okay, sweetie," I said, but it was hard to stay calm when I was finding God knew what hidden on my innocent little boy's body. In his diaper I found another packet and handed it over to the investigator. "That's all."

"What's in those envelopes?" Roy asked.

"Falsified documents." The G-man glanced back at me and shook his head. "Go on now, take your son home."

I had to be certain. "Christmas is my ex-husband's holiday, according to our divorce

papers. I don't have to honor the judge's order now, do I?"

The man's eyes took on a steely expression as he handed over Drew's hooded coat. "I wouldn't think so, ma'am. A federal lockup cell's no place for a little guy, and that's where your former husband will be spending the foreseeable future until his trial."

My car had been towed, but Dad said he'd take care of getting it back for me. I wouldn't need it today, anyhow, because I wasn't about to let Drew out of my sight, and Drew wanted to romp with Roy and Ray in the snow. By the time we got outside, it had covered the ground in a soft blanket of white. It was still drifting down as we drove along the Interstate, catching on the windshield wipers of Dad's SUV.

"I feel so dumb, Mom," I admitted when we got home and she called me into the kitchen for a cup of her special spiced tea. "What did I ever see in Hans?"

"A man who put forth a pretty good face, honey. Don't feel bad. Dad and I were taken in by him, too. And he can't be all bad. After all, he gave us little Drew. And we were never able to prove he was into anything seriously illegal."

Mom could be a master at understatement when she was trying to make her kids feel better, and that obviously was her intention now. Procuring drugs and prostitutes for customers hadn't been enough to get Hans deported, but the investigators' tapes proving that he did that in conjunction with his job had convinced Mom beyond doubt that Hans was beyond redemption. Finding out her son-in-law had dirtied his hands in business like that had nearly run Mom's blood pressure off the roof.

I had to tell her what we'd learned today. Then, God willing, I'd put Hans out of my mind as though he'd never existed and get on with making a life for Drew and me. A life that didn't

include Drew's biological father, period.

Briefly, I explained what the CIA man had told Roy, Ray and me while he walked us to Dad's car. It seemed Hans had been up to his neck all of the five years he'd been in this country, promising foreign women husbands and jobs in America, bringing them into the United States illegally, and selling them as prostitutes and slave laborers. Most of the women, like Katya who apparently had shown some aptitude at recruiting victims and thus avoided becoming a victim herself, came from the war-torn and dirt-poor countries of eastern Europe. Though he hadn't come out and told me, the agent had hinted that Hans's parents, brother, and sister were also involved in the illegal scheme that apparently had made them filthy rich off the suffering of others.

"I was lucky, Mom. I got out. And thanks to yours and Dad's help, I kept Drew away from Hans. He's a monster."

The doorbell rang. Mom smiled, then wiped her hands on the ruffled red apron she had on. "Surprise," she called out as she followed Brett into the kitchen.

His arms were full of packages or I'd have hugged him for knowing how much I needed him today. Instead, I gave him a watery smile.

"Your mom told me your ex tried to kidnap Drew. I thought you might need some TLC—and that now might be a good time to earn points with the kid."

"Are all those for him?" I asked, wondering if I'd ever be able to fit all Drew's loot into my car to take it home— if, that is, Dad managed to get it released from the airport impound lot.

Brett set them on the table and gave her a gentle kiss. "One or two might be for you, greedy one. Now where can I find Drew?"

I opened the door and pointed to the corner of the yard where Joe, Roy, and Ray were building a snowman while Drew and Christy supervised the project. “Wanna go help?”

“Yeah.”

For a long time I watched them through the window while Mom put the final touches on the dishes she always served for our Christmas Eve buffet. It looked as though Brett might finally be winning Drew over when he tossed my little guy high in the air and caught him mid-air.

“He’s not flashy like Hans, but he’s a good man,” Mom said when she noticed me watching Brett.

“I know.”

“Life goes on, you know. Just because one apple’s rotten, doesn’t mean the whole barrel’s got to go.”

Mom was right. Late that night, after we’d eaten the cookies and drunk the lukewarm hot chocolate Drew and Christy had set out for Santa and everybody but Brett and I had gone up to their bedrooms, he led me under the mistletoe and gave me a sweet, gentle kiss.

Then he led me to the sofa by the fireplace and pulled me onto his lap.

“I’d like to give you your present now, Lynn.”

His hazel eyes reflected the dark green in his flannel shirt. Soft, loving eyes, nothing at all like Hans’s icy blue gaze I’d always associate with pain and anger. I looked at the man who’d given me the time I needed to heal and knew I’d come to love him.

He reached into his jeans pocket and drew out a tiny box. “It’s nothing compared with this,” he said, lifting the diamond pendant I’d had made from the stones in the rings Hans had given me. “But it comes with all my love, and my promise to take care of you and Drew as long

as I draw breath. My promise never to hurt you goes without saying.”

“I love it. I love you.” Tears streamed down my cheeks as he slipped the modest solitaire onto my finger. “I’m sorry it took me so long to realize it.”

After he kissed me again, I slipped the chain that held that pendant over my head and dropped it onto the table. I’d save it for Drew to give his bride someday, because I didn’t need it. I had Brett. My love, and an ideal daddy for my little boy.

“Merry Christmas, love,” I whispered. Then I dragged him to the mistletoe for another kiss. I could hardly wait to get on with my life, put the past behind me where it belonged.

For the first time that Christmas Eve night, I didn’t wake up screaming, thinking Hans had come back and was hitting me again. I guess Brett had finally shoved the creep completely out of my life and mind— with a little help from Hans himself and the CIA, and a lot of assistance from my loving family.