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A Present
for Christmas
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Holiday eBook Freebie

A Present for Christmas
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She wasn't coming.

David resisted the urge to check at his watch. He doubted three minutes had passed since the last time he looked. He didn't need to watch the second hand of his Rolex tick away the few precious seconds he had left before he had to board his plane.

Come with me, Cris.

David...I'm sorry, I can't.

He'd been replaying their talk from Sunday over and over. Hell, for the past three days, that brief exchange had pretty much dominated his thoughts. He shouldn't have rushed. Shouldn't have pushed. He shouldn't have sprung it on her like that.

It wasn't like he couldn't have flown back here a few times a month, spent the weekends with her...maybe invited her to come visit his home for the holiday, instead of asking her to move to Ohio to be with him.

I can think of another thing you shouldn't do—keep standing here and brooding. It's over. It's done. She isn't coming.

That was the voice of common sense, of reason.

But there was another voice in his head that wouldn't shut up, a voice that kept whispering, *The one thing you shouldn't do is get on that plane.*

"I don't have a choice." The consulting job in Anchorage had been temporary, and he'd only agreed to do it as a favor to his dad. He had a life in Cincinnati and he needed to get back to it.

Yeah, and that life is going to be a lot of fun without Cris.

Shit. A life without Cris—he didn't even want to think about it.

He swore and turned away, pinching the bridge of his nose. He'd pushed too hard and when she'd pulled back, he had panicked. Not very well done of him, but now he didn't know how to undo it.

A voice came over the intercom. His flight—time to board. He looked at his boarding pass and then lifted his gaze once more to study the terminal. She wasn't here.

She wasn't coming.

*

Have a holly, jolly Christmas

It's the best time of the year

Cris could have happily grabbed the radio off the shelf and stomped on it until it was nothing but busted plastic and useless wires. Holly. Jolly. Ho, ho, frickin' ho. But it wasn't her radio. It belonged to her best friend and sooner or later, Beth would want it back and Cris wasn't about to explain the radio's destruction.

So instead of smashing it, she turned it off and plunged her hands back into the sink, washing cup after cup. Glass after glass. Plate after plate. Even though there was a dishwasher not two feet away, she planned on washing the entire load of dishes by hand, because it kept her mind occupied.

Unless she turned around, she couldn't see the clock.

Right now, not seeing the clock was good.

She didn't want to watch the seconds between now and 11:15 tick away. At 11:15, David would be on a plane, heading back down to the Lower Forty-Eight, back to his life.

Away from Alaska.

Away from her.

Come with me, Cris.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to think about the past Sunday. If she thought about it too much, she'd change her mind. Call him—tell him that she'd come with him.

And she wasn't going to do that. This was home. Even as much as she loved him, leaving here felt wrong. Even the thought of it was enough to make her recoil.

"You're thinking about it again," she muttered, shaking her head. The mundane task of washing all the dishes left over from last night's 'little' get-together had yet to prove as mind-numbing as she'd hoped.

She finished in a hurry. The dishes that wouldn't fit in the rack by the sink, she went ahead and loaded them into the dishwasher. This wasn't keeping her distracted enough, so she had to do something else. Something to keep her mind occupied for the next day or two. On Saturday, her brother and his family were flying in from Fairbanks and once they were here, she'd have enough going on to keep her from thinking about the huge gaping hole in her heart. So she just had to hold out until then.

But not here.

She couldn't walk through the apartment without finding vivid reminders of David in every fricking room.

The kitchen table—she remembered how they'd been setting it for the Thanksgiving dinner she'd cooked, just for the two of them, and as she'd leaned over the table to fiddle with the centerpiece, he'd leaned over her, slid a hand up her skirt, toying with her black cotton thong.

In the living room, she found herself thinking about how they'd spent an entire weekend watching B movies, eating pizza, munching on popcorn. Every time something scary had happened on the screen, Cris had squealed and buried her face against his chest.

Then there was her bathroom—they'd gone skiing a few weeks earlier and after they'd gotten home, she'd taken a hot shower to warm up and he'd slipped in behind her. The floor had ended up almost as wet as they were by the time they were done.

And her bedroom—damn it.

Considering they'd only known each other for five months, he'd sure as hell made an impact on her life. Setting her jaw, she strode into her bedroom and grabbed a small suitcase from the closet. She wasn't staying here for the next two days.

She grabbed the phone and punched in a number. Beth Sanders, her best friend, answered, her voice bright and so damned happy, it made Cris wince. "Hey, Cris...did you change your mind about coming over?"

"No."

Beth sighed. Cris could picture her, running a hand through short, spiked hair, her bright blue eyes darkening with concern. "Honey, you don't want to spend the day alone. I mean...it's Christmas. And it's your birthday..."

Cris rolled her eyes. "I know what day it is, Beth. And no, I don't really want to spend it alone—" *I want to spend it with David*—"but trust me, I'm not up to dealing with your family for the day either."

Then she winced, realizing how it sounded. "Crap. That sounds terrible, it's just..."

"I understand," Beth said gently.

Cris had no doubt her friend did understand. She huffed out a breath. "I'm sorry."

"Hell, so am I. That jerk—I should have known he was too good to be true."

"He isn't a jerk," Cris said.

She meant it. If David had been a jerk, it would have been so much easier. If he'd made demands, given her an ultimatum...anything other than being as perfect as he always was, this would be so much easier. She could have spent last night getting drunk with her friends and complaining about men.

Instead, she'd let Beth talk her into that last minute get-together that had ended up consisting of upwards of thirty people, lasting until one in the morning. Cris had spent most of the time playing hostess and trying not to notice how so many of her friends had ended up in pairs. Most of them weren't going to be spending the day alone. Even those that weren't married had made plans, some with lovers, some with friends, and some with family.

Christmas was one damn lousy time to be alone.

Silence stretched out between them. Normally, the two of them always had plenty to talk about, but Cris wasn't in the mood to talk. She wasn't in the mood to do anything but sit and brood. Or think about the ticket and the business card that was tucked inside her desk.

"It's an open-ended ticket. If you change your mind..."

"I won't." At least, she didn't plan on changing her mind, and she didn't plan on letting herself follow through even if she did.

Cris would be miserable away from here, so completely miserable...

Kind of like you are now? a sarcastic voice demanded inside her head.

Ignoring the voice, she said to Beth, "I was wondering if I could use the cabin for a few days."

Beth and her brothers had a fishing cabin an hour north of Anchorage. Their parents had given it to them after they'd decided they wanted to travel after they'd retired. Complete with a Jacuzzi tub, satellite TV, a fully-stocked bar and enough food to last her through a blizzard, it was the perfect place to spend the next few days. Far away from any reminders of David, and far enough away that she'd have time to talk sense into herself if she even tried to change her mind about the ticket tucked inside her desk.

"Of course you can use it. But are you sure that's how you want to spend Christmas? What about us going out shopping and for dinner on Friday?"

"We can do it next week," Cris said. "And yes, I'm sure. I'm already packing."

*

"This is insane," David muttered.

He shoved a hand through his hair and flicked another glance at his watch. Already past one—the woman had said she'd meet him here at 12:45 at the latest. Of course, they normally didn't do business on Christmas Eve...

The sound of a powerful engine had him looking up. The bright red pick-up slowed to a halt and David made himself quit pacing.

*

It was nearly five by the time Cris made it to the cabin. She'd stopped at Carr's to pick up some comfort food. The cabin had plenty of staples, but when she was depressed, she needed ice cream, French fries and buffalo wings and she wasn't taking a chance on those things not being there.

Fat, fluffy flakes were gently falling as she parked in front of the cabin. Her phone rang as she made her way up to the porch, but she didn't bother answering. It was Beth again—God love her, but the woman was going to drive Cris nuts if she didn't stop hovering.

Her best friend had called four times since she'd asked about borrowing the cabin and the last time only thirty minutes earlier. Beth had 'a great idea'—after the kids opened their presents, maybe they could all come up to the cabin on Christmas. In the afternoon.

"Taking off for a few days to be alone doesn't do much good if I can't *be* alone," Cris had said pointedly.

She thought that Beth had finally decided to stop worrying and just listen.

But no such luck. Instead of answering, Cris sent a text message. *Got to the cabin fine. I'll see you when I get home—think I'm going to lie down for a while and get some sleep.*

When Beth responded less than three minutes later with a reply, Cris didn't bother reading the message. She could read it later.

After she gorged on buffalo wings and fries and a glass or two of her favorite wine. Or maybe the whole bottle. If she ended up with a hangover, she could just sleep it off tomorrow. Not like she had anywhere to go. Anybody to see.

David—

His image flashed through her mind. Her heart clenched.

No. No place to go. Nobody to see.

*

David glanced at the GPS and then back at the road, squinting to see through the snow. Seven o'clock on Christmas Eve, and the road was pretty much empty. He'd left Highway 1 behind nearly forty-five minutes earlier and he was driving along at a crawl. The snow had started out with just a few flakes earlier in the afternoon, but in the past hour, it had gotten heavier and he didn't do enough driving in snow to trust himself. The last damn thing he needed was send his rented Hummer flying off the road when he lost control.

Conquer the road—he snorted. He didn't want to conquer the road. He just wanted to make it to the cabin before midnight—and in one piece.

He wondered if Beth had lost patience yet and called Cris, letting her know he was coming. After he'd gone to Cris and used the key he had conveniently forgotten to return, he'd figured out real quick she wasn't home—nor was she going to be for a day or two. The mess in her bedroom had clued him into that idea and when he went look for her overnight suitcase, it had been missing.

Beth had confirmed his suspicions—grudgingly, at first. She'd wanted to know why he was asking. And she wasn't going to tell him until he gave her something—

I just realized I couldn't leave, Beth. I...I...love her. But he hadn't told Beth that. Cris should hear it first.

I need her.

Need as in for a while?

Need as in forever. If she'll have me.

She'd given in then, grinning the entire time.

So here he was, after rushing around and doing the best he could in the few short hours he had before everything shut down for Christmas. It had taken him a lot longer than he'd liked, but since he hadn't gotten to Beth's until three, he'd done well enough.

Next to him, he had a picnic basket, and damn, *that* hadn't been easy to find in December, especially on Christmas Eve. It was filled with a gourmet meal that was probably cold now despite the chef's assurances that it would stay warm enough for the next few hours. A couple bottles of wine. Roses. And a couple of presents.

One of them, he'd bought weeks ago and had planned on giving to Cris when she met him at the airport—he'd been so sure she'd change her mind...

She hadn't. And she wouldn't. That was fine.

He could change his mind.

His hands were sweating. Damn it, what if...what if she'd said no because she just wasn't that interested? What if he was rearranging—

The GPS chirped out, "*Turn left in five hundred feet.*"

Swearing, David slowed the big SUV down even more and peered through the darkness. His headlights reflected off the snow back at him and he squinted. There...

*

Half-way through her bottle of wine and already down to the dregs of her Moosetracks ice cream, Cris heard the rumble of an engine before it was even half way down the road.

Swearing, she shoved to her feet and went into the kitchen, grabbing her phone from the counter. She flipped it open.

You have five unread messages.

You have five missed calls.

All from her dearest friend—who couldn't listen worth jack.

"Damn it, Beth..."

She gritted her teeth and started to tidy up the kitchen, dumping the ice cream in the trash, pouring her unfinished wine down the sink. Beth wouldn't have driven this far, this late, on Christmas Eve without her family.

Which meant whether Cris liked it or not, she wasn't going to be spending Christmas, her birthday, alone and wallowing in her misery.

Within a few minutes, Cris had finished cleaning up the small mess she'd made, but she didn't have time to go change when she heard the engine cut off in front of the cabin. Instead of messing with it, she grabbed a hoodie off the hook hanging by the front door and tugged it on before opening the door.

"Beth, girl, you really need to learn..."

The words froze in her throat as sea-green eyes met hers.

"David?"

*

She looked dazed. David took advantage of her surprise by dropping the stuff he held and grabbing her. Hauling her against him, he slanted his mouth over her. She opened for him and he groaned into her mouth. Her taste flooded him, her arms twined around his neck and her sleek, soft curves molded to his body—a perfect fit.

Tearing his mouth away, he stared down at her, watching as tears welled in her eyes. "David, what are you doing here?"

He brushed a tear away from her cheek and smiled, trying not to let her see how damned nervous he was. All the what-ifs and maybes that had danced through his mind, he was about to find out the answers.

Either she'd been letting him down gently when she refused to come with him to Cincinnati, or she'd felt the same way he had when he realized she wasn't coming—like his heart had been ripped out.

"I'm here because you're here," he murmured.

She shivered in his arms as a wind kicked up. Even under the covered porch, the snow was piling up. He nudged her inside and then bent down, collecting the stuff he'd dropped.

She closed the door behind him and leaned back against it, watching him as he put the picnic basket down, the roses, the tote that held wine, wineglasses and a corkscrew. He had tucked her presents inside his coat pocket when he'd gotten out of the SUV.

Nervous, he slid a hand inside his pocket, touching the two small boxes.

What if...

No. Not thinking about what-ifs. At least not *those* what-ifs.

Five feet away, Cris watched him with unreadable eyes. "What do you mean, you're here because I'm here?"

"When you didn't show up at the airport, I figured something out." He'd been reading the paper, trying to keep his mind occupied while the rest of the passengers boarded the flight. The picture of the house he just leased just outside Chugiak State Park had leaped out at him—sunlight sparkling on windows, gleaming wooden planks. Beautiful—

She licked her lips and asked, "What was it?"

"I can work anywhere." He crossed the small foyer and braced his hands on the wall by her shoulders. "It would be just as easy to do consulting from here as it is from Cincinnati."

"It is?"

Something flashed through her eyes—quick and bright, but gone so fast, he wasn't sure he'd read it right. Dipping his head, he kissed her neck. "Yes. It is."

"So...ah...what, you think you're going to stay a few more months?"

"No." That wasn't his plan at all. A few months wouldn't work. She wouldn't leave Alaska—or maybe she couldn't. Whichever one it was, it didn't matter. She wouldn't leave, and he realized he wasn't going to leave without her. This was her home, and his home was going to be with her.

"No, you're not going to stay a few more months?"

"Uh-huh," he murmured, reaching between them and tugging on the zipper of her fleece hoodie. It parted down the middle, revealing a plain white cotton tank top that glowed against golden skin. "Few months isn't going to work."

She gasped as he cupped her breast through her shirt. Her eyes glazed over as he gently pinched her nipple. "Ahh...uh, why won't a few months work?"

He sank to his knees in front of her and pushed her shirt up, baring her belly and her breasts. He started at her navel, licking it and then moving upward, tracing his tongue along the slope of her breast, then around her nipple before taking the erect flesh into his mouth, sucking on it, using the edge of his teeth just so. She cried out and braced her hands on his shoulders. He cupped her hips in his hands and eased her down until she straddled his lap.

"A few months won't work because you're not going to change your mind in a few days, a few weeks, a few months...are you?" He lifted his head and smoothed her shirt down, staring into her eyes.

A soft flush rose to her cheeks, turned them a dusky pink. She pushed lightly against his shoulders. It damn near killed him, but he let her go, watched as she rose and started to pace, watching him from under her lashes.

"David, I...I can't. This is..."

"Home," he finished as her voice trailed off. "It's your home. Which means I'm going to have to find a way to make it mine, too. That's why a few months won't work, Cris."

That look—it was back in her eyes, and this time he realized what it was. Hope. Wonder. Need. She blinked and caught her lower lip between her teeth. "You mean...you mean, you want to stay here?"

"If you're here, I'm here," he said quietly.

She launched herself at him, her mouth coming down on his, her giddy laugh muffled against his lips as he kissed her.

"You mean it?"

"I mean it."

Hands flew. Clothing was tugged, jerked and thrown away—David thought he even heard something rip. He didn't care. It didn't matter. Ripped clothes, a gourmet dinner going cold, the near-blizzard that was going on just outside, none of it mattered as he wrestled with Cris' pajama pants, stripping them down her legs and settling between her slender thighs.

He paused only long enough to snag his jeans and dig a condom out of his pocket. Foil tore and he fumbled the latex down over his length then he was on her—in her—losing himself...

"David," she moaned as he filled her.

"Cris..." he buried his face in her hair and lost himself.

Sweat gleamed on flesh. Moans rose and fell in the air. Her hands slid down his back and cupped his ass, her torso arching as she rubbed herself against him. She tightened around, hot, so hot, burning him through the thin barrier of the condom. Sweet and sleek, soft and hot, she melted around him.

The desperate need, the hunger, the love that had haunted him over the past few days took over. Gentleness didn't exist. He raked his teeth over her neck. Her nails dug into his flesh. "Harder," she pleaded.

"Come for me," he ordered, working a hand between them and circling his thumb around her clit.

"Fuck me harder," she begged.

"Come for me," he rasped, biting her lower lip.

She came. He swore and slammed into her, harder, harder, loving the way she went so tight as she climaxed, loving the way her voice broke as she cried out his name, loving the way her nipples stabbed into his chest and the way his heart clenched as she said his name again, softer...on a sigh.

Loving her...

Lost in her...

He buried his face against her neck as his own climax swept up and took him. His cock jerked, pulsed, inside the snug sheath of her sex. Her arms came up, twining around his neck, one hand cupping the back of his neck while the other stroked his shoulder.

"I love you, Cris," he muttered, finally giving voice to something he'd known for weeks.

Longer.

She was quiet.

Summoning up strength from somewhere, he managed to push up onto his elbows and stare down at her.

She stared at him, her face flushed and damp, her eyes wide and stunned.

A smile curled her lips. "Really?"

Dipping his head, he kissed her chin. "Really."

She shoved against his chest, squirming around until he lifted up again. She licked her hips and said it again. "Really?"

The look on her face...it did more to soothe all those worries and what-ifs that still danced through his head than anything else could. "I was sitting on the plane. They were getting ready to close the doors. And I got up, got off the plane. I couldn't leave...because you weren't with me. Yes...really."

She sniffled. Tears escaped. So did laughter. She threw her arms around him and squeezed. "Oh, God. David, I love you, too."

*

The food in the picnic basket was cold by the time they got around to eating it.

But they didn't care.

Sitting in front of the fire place, wearing nothing but his shirt, Cris chowed down on the best cold lasagna she'd ever had in her life. David wore just his jeans, although he had his coat nearby. "You cold?" she asked as she popped one more bite of lasagna into her mouth—she was starving.

"No."

She glanced at his coat. "Then why is your coat over here?"

He smiled.

As he grabbed the jacket, she took a sip of wine. Damn good wine—better than she usually had, because the shit cost about fifty bucks a bottle up here.

She choked on her next drink though as David pulled something out of the coat pocket.

"You want your Christmas present first, or your birthday present?"

Cris blinked at him and then stared at the two velvet boxes he held. "Ahhh...which one will I like the most?"

He shrugged. "I don't know. I'm kind of hoping you'll like your birthday present the most. It's kind of last minute, but..."

"I'll take the Christmas present first."

The firelight danced off the diamond earrings as she opened the box. "Oh, wow." Sparkly stuff...man, she loved sparkly stuff. "You sure this is the Christmas present?"

"Yeah. I...well, I've had them for a few weeks. After Sunday, I kept debating about whether to bring them by, or maybe mail them, although I kept hoping I'd see you at the airport, could give them to you then."

She lowered the box. "I..."

"Don't apologize," he said, leaning in and kissing her, quick and hard. "Don't. I'm not sorry you didn't show up. I'm just sorry it took me that long to figure out what I needed to do. What I wanted to do."

Her hands shook as she took the earrings out of the box and put them on. "I'm almost afraid to see the other present." With a forced playfulness, she asked gestured towards the other box. Another small, velvet box. Wrapped with a bow. "What is that one...a ring?"

He tucked it into her hands. "No. Not yet...maybe for Valentine's Day."

Tearing the box off, she opened the box. Firelight glinted off metal. She lifted her eyes and stared at him. "It's a key."

"I signed a lease today on a house."

"A lease?"

"Yeah. I want you to have a copy regardless, but I was wondering...ahh...well, I don't want to rush this or anything. But...well, I dunno...maybe you could move in with me." He studied the fire like it had him mesmerized.

But then he glanced at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Ooomph." His breath gusted out of him as she dove for him. She held the key clutched in her hand, hardly able to believe this was happening. "Really?"

"Yeah, Cris...really."

She lowered her mouth to his. As their lips touched, the old grandfather clock began to toll. Midnight.

Christmas.

And her birthday.

Lifting her head, she smiled at him. "Merry Christmas," she murmured.

"Happy Birthday, Christmas," he whispered back.

She grinned at him. "It is now."

Author Biography

Shiloh Walker has been writing since she was a kid. She fell in love with vampires with the book Bunnacula and has worked her way up to the more...ah...serious vampire stories. She loves reading and writing anything paranormal, anything fantasy, and nearly every kind of romance. Once upon a time she worked as a nurse, but now she writes full time and lives with her family in the Midwest.

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