

Another bedtime story from Silver Publishing

25 Days of Christmas



THE
BACKPACK
SUE BROWN



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The Grinch – Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P.

White Christmas – written by Irving Berlin

DEDICATION

To Renae Love,
who gave me the inspiration for this story.
Thank you so much.

THE BACKPACK

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For the young guy, it was probably nothing, a cell number scribbled on a scrap of paper, as you chatted over a latte, in an over-crowded coffee shop full of harassed Christmas shoppers. For you though... for you, it was the first time in years that someone had given you something other than pity. As you walked out of the coffee shop, you knew that scrap of paper given by the boy with hazel eyes was your most treasured possession.

* * * *

"I'm sorry, dear, but all the rooms have just been taken."

"The vacancy? Oh, we filled that this morning. Thank you for asking."

But the signs don't get removed from the window. The flicker of the eyes as they lie to you.

Why can't they just be honest? "You're a bum, with no job, no history, and we don't want you here."

Crawling in behind the flattened cardboard boxes in the mall, you hide here during the day to get out of the

weather. It's blessedly warm here, and for once, you aren't hacking up a lung and maybe a rib or two. If you're allowed to sleep here for long enough, maybe you can make the meds last a little bit longer, and you won't need to endure their questions and their pity as they poke and prod your thin body.

Please God —not that He exists— let it be George on duty today. He'll turn a blind eye while you get some sleep, and there might even be a cup of coffee waiting when you wake up. George is like that.

Bing Crosby croons you to sleep, sending you into an uneasy rest with his futile dreams of a white Christmas. You don't, dream of a white Christmas that is. You dream of warm summer evenings and lazy grass, your momma's hugs, and large hazel eyes.

Your fingers check. It's still there. The scrap of paper that he gave you. You fall asleep dreaming of him and the unexpected kindness of a stranger.

* * * *

Patrick hates Christmas. He hates the cold that eats into his bones and the constant tickly feeling in his lungs that turns to asthma so very easily in the damp. He pretends he's happy for his daughter's sake, joins in with her laughter

and speculation about whether this year Santa will bring her a pony, but inside, inside it eats away at him. Patrick takes a deep breath and tries to get himself together. It's not fair to Karen to be such a Grinch.

His fingers curl around a takeout cup of black 'strong as you can make it' brewed coffee. His partner, Paul, and Karen made him come down to the mall for their traditional family outing, but he was so cranky, they dumped him at the coffee bar and told him to wait until they came back. His fingers tighten on the cup, and hot coffee sloshes over his hands. Cursing, he puts it down hastily and sucks on his scalded fingers.

"Hey."

Patrick looks up, and his face breaks into a smile. "Hey you," he says, reaching out to touch, to be near.

"How are you doing?"

That voice, so concerned, brings unwanted tears to his eyes, and he quickly knuckles them away, not wanting Karen to see him upset. Any hope of hiding it though is quickly ruined when he is enveloped in warmth and loving, his nose smushed into a padded jacket.

"What's wrong with Dad, Pops?" Nine years old and he's only Daddy now when she's tired or sick.

"Nothing, sweetheart. He just saw an ad that made him cry." His voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. "You

know how sappy he is."

"I know," and a small hand sneaks into one of his.

Patrick groans because they're right. No matter how much he laughs at Paul for crying at posters for lost puppies, put Patrick in front of Bambi, and he's crying right along with Paul and Karen when Bambi's mother dies.

Of course, he denies it, every time.

* * * *

"Hey."

You drag open your eyes. George is there, his grizzled face smiling down at you and heavens be praised —although you don't believe in that— he's holding out a cup of coffee.

"Time to go. Sorry, son, but the mall's closing up for Christmas. You've got to leave now. The shelter at St. Margaret's on Fourth Street is open for meals."

You nod and get up without protesting, wincing a little as your sore joints creak and protest. George has his job to do, and he's put his job on the line letting you sleep all day. You take the coffee with a grateful thank you, even though it's too milky and too sweet. It doesn't matter, and the sugar gives you an unexpected energy boost.

"How was your day, Mr. Allan?" You always call

him that. Never George. You can see he appreciates the little respect you give him. It isn't something he encounters a lot in his job.

"Not too bad, son. Just lost kids and crying moms. Normal fare for Christmas."

You bid him goodnight, and as you part, he says, "Merry Christmas," as he holds out his hand. There's a battered ten-dollar bill in his hand. You try to protest, but he's insistent, and it goes into your pocket next to your only other treasured possession.

"I'll save it for a rainy day," you tell him, and you hold out your hand, not sure if he will take it.

He hesitates, but then he does, shaking your grimy hand firmly. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Allan."

"Have a good one, son."

It won't be, but you appreciate the sentiment.

You shuffle through the doors of the almost deserted mall, sucking in a deep breath as the ice-cold air of Christmas Eve night hits your lungs. Maybe you will try the shelter.

* * * *

Karen proudly shows him the glittery reindeer she made with Pops. They go back and make one every year,

even though Paul doesn't work at the craft stall any more. Once, Patrick asked them why they still did it. The twin expressions of *Duh!* were enough to make him realize he'd said something really stupid.

Now Patrick doesn't ask. He just praises her for the way the red nose lights up the reindeer. He looks up to get Paul's approving smile only to discover he's disappeared. He's a few feet away, kneeling down to a small child. The kid is pointing and snuffling all at the same time.

Karen starts to go over, but Patrick stops her, not wanting to frighten the little girl with too many people. Paul doesn't make any attempt to touch the child. He just listens intently and then points to a security guard walking towards them. Paul stands up, and Patrick smiles as a little gloved hand slips into his huge one.

They reach the security guard, and Paul explains the situation, calmly and quietly. Patrick is so busy watching the girl's face, full of wonder at this huge grownup helping her, that he pays little attention to the security guard until Paul says, "I'll wait with you while you call it in. Thanks," Paul peers forward to look at the security guard's name badge, "Mr. Allan."

Patrick doesn't realize he's dropped his coffee until Karen starts tugging on his coat. "God, Dad, you're so embarrassing!" she scolds as they get down on the floor

and start to mop up the mess up with tissues.

"Can't take me anywhere," Patrick jokes, but his attention is on George Allan. He's older, more grizzled, but definitely the same man. He'd seen the way the guard had stood just that little bit straighter when Paul had called him Mister Allan.

Patrick's stomach is churning. What if George looks over, what if he recognizes him? His world, his carefully constructed perfect world, could shatter around his ears. What if Paul finds out who he was? Fuck and damn and all the other words Patrick wasn't allowed to say in front of his daughter.

Paul looks over to them, his attention caught by the sight of Patrick and Karen on the floor. He chuckles at Patrick, hands full of sopping wet tissues, and both the lost little girl and George look over to see what's so funny.

The little girl smiles through her tears, but George, he just sighs and looks at Patrick who holds his breath, stomach churning in fear.

"I think you'll need a fresh one," he says and waves at the barista behind the coffee bar. "Lydia? Another coffee for the gentleman. Make it extra hot. It's a cold night out there."

"Thank you so much," Patrick stutters, nerves getting the better of his voice.

"It's not a problem," George says and looks him right in the eye. "It's always a privilege to help someone in need, especially at Christmas. Now let's see if we can find your mommy, sweetheart."

He turns to the little girl, and Patrick lets out his breath, trying hard not let his stomach go at the same time. George knows him. He never forgets, but today it is someone else's turn.

* * * *

You're so cold. Just the short walk to St. Margaret's has sucked whatever heat you've managed to hoard in the mall. You shiver and wrap your thin jacket around you, conserving whatever meager warmth you have left. Your hands are stuck in your pockets, one of them wrapped around your most precious possessions; the ten-dollar bill that George has given you and the scrap of paper from the gorgeous boy with his number on it. You smooth your thumb over the paper. It's not that you're ever going to call it; it's just that it is there. It's yours; he gave it to you.

As you struggle through the impatient crowds finishing their last minute shopping, you think about the kindness of strangers again. You think about him and the kindness of a security guard who spends his day restoring

lost kids to their frantic parents.

It's easy to be kind to lost children, and you remember that little boy many Christmases ago who needed your kindness to help him find his mom. It was the same mall where you found him, alone and scared behind a trashcan, and you helped him to find his mama. You trace your cold lips, chill fingers feeling your warm breath as you remember his loud, wet kisses, impulsively pressed against your cheek and lips as he left, safe and sound with his mama.

You were ten, life was simple; boys were cool, girls had cooties. Only, a little six-year-old boy declaring that he would marry you made the first of many ripples before you came to discover that you might not get over the cootie problem with girls as your momma said you would.

You smile, blinking hard against the tears which threaten to fall and freeze on your cheeks as you remember telling your momma that you thought you might be gay. You can remember the silence, the tick-tock of that stupid clock in the kitchen, and then her arms wrapped around you and kisses pressed into your hair and you knew, no matter what, that your place in your family was secure.

And you were loved. For another three years. Until a woman, fueled by hard liquor and pain meds, got behind the wheel of her car and fell asleep, right into the path of

your family car, leaving you fighting for life and the sole survivor.

Wasn't it then that you realized that God must have punished your family for your sins? Isn't that what your aunt used to tell you as she slapped down a plate of food in front of you, bitter and resentful to be looking after that boy with his abnormal ways?

You stumble into the shelter as you stumbled out of her life, never thinking that four years later you would be reduced to this; homeless and always looking for the next meal. Never believing that the boy from the coffee shop would be there either, his huge smile not dimmed as he realizes that you're a bum, not a volunteer.

You're hearing him tell you it doesn't matter what you are, he likes you and then, "You want to come back to my place and watch *White Christmas* with me tonight? It's tradition, and I won't have anyone for company if you say no."

He turns to you with that smile that's more warming than a blanket.

"Merry Christmas."

It may be. Just not normally for you.

* * * *

They pile into the house, tripping over dogs and parcels. Too loud, too happy, and the *thump thump* of the headache behind Patrick's eyes is starting to wear him down. But he can't stop now because Karen will be gone in a couple of hours, back to her mom's for Christmas.

"Sit down before you fall down, love."

Paul presses him down in a comfy sofa with a kiss to the top of his head and a promise of a few minutes peace and some Tylenol.

"Come on, squirt. Let's leave your old dad to recover from his shopping trip, and we'll make hot chocolate.

Karen squeals in delight and then looks guiltily at Patrick. He cranks open one eye, pretends to glare at her, and she giggles, knowing she's not in trouble. Paul chases her into the kitchen, pretending to be the Tickle Monster, and Patrick closes his eyes again, knowing that he has at least ten minutes to get himself back together. He smiles as Karen shrieks loudly at Paul to stop tickling her and making her disturb Dad. She's a good kid. He's a lucky man to have two such special people in his life.

He wakes up to find that his head is on Paul's chest, and his daughter is snuggled up on the other side, all of them under the red fleecy blanket that lives on the back of the sofa. The other two seem to be wearing matching hot

chocolate and cream mustaches and are laughing loudly as Tim Allen gets fatter and fatter in *The Santa Clause*.

Patrick blinks and snuffles a little, taking pleasure in being surrounded by his family.

"Hey, you back with us?" Paul strokes his hair and presses a brief kiss to the top of his head.

"Ummm."

"It is time for presents now, Pops? Can I get it?" Karen is almost vibrating in anticipation.

Paul grins at her. "Certainly can, squirt. It's in the closet in our room."

She rushes out of the living room, and they can hear her rustling around in the bedroom. It's a tradition that they open their presents on Christmas Eve before Karen goes back to her Mom. Since Paul moved in with them, it feels more like a family Christmas and a little less like a prelude to an empty house for Patrick.

She comes back with a red felt sack with a large fuzzy felt Rudolph on the outside, his red nose starting to peel off. He and Karen made it at a craft stall when she was tiny, and despite its shabbiness, she refuses to get rid of it. Patrick supposes it is like the card making— a family tradition.

"Right, present time!" Paul carefully shifts Patrick so that he can lean forward, moving the empty mugs from

the table so that Karen can dump the sack in front of them.

"I think I missed out on the hot chocolate," says Patrick as he sits up, pushing the blanket to one side.

"It's waiting in the kitchen, love," Paul informs him as he nuzzles his neck, "I'll get it in a few minutes."

Patrick smiles gratefully as he says, "You spoil me." He looks at his daughter, impatiently waiting for permission to leap into the sack. "Come on then, give them out."

Then it's a mess of paper and ribbon, oohs and ahs and an overjoyed girl with an iPod in one hand and a large, cuddly teddy with a huge lilac ribbon in the other. Paul's parents, her adopted grandparents, give her money to spend on new clothes and a promise to take her shopping next time she visits them. Patrick is shocked at how much they've spent on a child they've only known for three years.

"Make sure you call them to say thank you," Patrick orders.

"I will, I promise. Open yours up, Pops."

Obediently, Paul opens his present from Karen, a DVD of the latest Pixar release. He kisses her on the cheek and agrees that he won't open it until they can watch it together. He then opens his present from Patrick, the small, shop-wrapped gift proving tricky to undo.

Patrick can feel his stomach churning as Paul peels

back the paper, and there's a moment where his heart sinks as Paul just stares at the contents of the box, saying nothing. He shouldn't have let Karen talk him into doing it now, shouldn't have presumed Paul wanted this. He should have given it to Paul when they were on their own and then Paul wouldn't feel any pressure, could have said no gracefully, could have...

"Yes."

The word drops into the silence that's stretching out painfully.

"Yes, I'll marry you."

"*Awesome!*" Karen's shout breaks the stasis, and Patrick hauls Paul forward for a kiss. Paul wraps a large hand around his head and makes this kiss into a marriage proposal all on his own.

They break to draw oxygen into their lungs, and Paul's whispering, "Thank you, love, for being brave."

Patrick leans gratefully into Paul's warmth and tries not to shiver. Paul is wrong. Patrick isn't brave at all. He's scared all the time. Scared that this happiness will be snatched away from him, just like all the other times Patrick has been happy.

The rest of the present opening is completed to the accompaniment of Karen's excitement, and she's still bubbling over when her mom comes to pick her up. Patrick

feels the familiar lump in his throat as she drives away, waving frantically as she goes. Her kiss is still on his lips, and the feel of her hug etched in his mind. He steps back and is enfolded in Paul. They watch as the car turns the corner, and then Paul leads him inside to watch *White Christmas* and have more hot chocolate.

It's tradition.

* * * *

You hover in the doorway, not sure whether you should follow him in or not.

He pops his head round the kitchen door. "Come in, I'll get the hot chocolate started."

You obey before nerves get the better of you.

"Take a seat. I'll be out in a minute. Put the DVD on if you want."

You don't, just in case.

He reappears with two mugs of chocolate, topped with whipped cream and chocolate sprinkles. Your stomach churns slightly at the sight. It's been a long time since you had anything so rich and sickly.

"I'm not a hooker!" You blush as he raises his eyebrow, but you feel better for making it clear you may be down but you sure as hell aren't turning tricks for a hot

drink and a soft place to sit.

"Never thought you were," he says quietly and hands you the drink.

The blush doesn't really subside until you are both sitting down, sipping at the rich confection. It slides down so easily, but you know the chance of it staying down is slim to none.

"I never thought you were a hooker, Patrick," he says earnestly. "I didn't ask you back for... well... that. I just wanted some company. It's Christmas, and I'm on my own."

You've discovered from his chattering that he's eighteen, a freshman at college, and normally, he'd be at home with his parents but they'd gone on vacation, and Paul had decided not to join them. He'd volunteered at the shelter before and thought it would stop him being on his own all Christmas. You wonder how many other college kids would give up their Christmas to look after the homeless.

It's as easy as you remember from the coffee shop. He puts in the DVD, and you sit for a couple of hours, watching the movie from your childhood, his large body a warm length down your side, but he doesn't make a move to touch you. Why would he? You're not in his league.

You're not used to being this warm, this

comfortable, and before long, you're dozing, only waking up when he moves. The warm and comfortable pillow that you're resting against is his broad chest. The dismay startles you awake, and you sit bolt upright.

He looks at you with an apologetic smile. "Sorry, I was trying to reach the remote."

Brushing aside your stuttering apologies for falling asleep on him, he tucks you back into his side, and you sit watching Christmas Eve TV, wondering when he is going to come to his senses and kick you to the curb.

At the end of the evening, you hunt for your battered sneakers, wondering if the sheltered spot at the back of the mall will be taken. It's too late to go back to the shelter.

"Where are you going?" The uncertain tone makes you stop and look at him.

"I need to find somewhere to sleep."

"I thought... I want... you to stay here... with me. Please, Patrick."

"But..."

He steers you to a bedroom and flicks a switch. It's a guest room, tastefully decorated in pale green. It's a little bland without any of the personal touches of an occupied bedroom.

"There's a shower that you can use. There's

shampoo and shower gel in there. Go on, this place has unlimited hot water. Here's a towel."

You stand, clutching the towel to your chest, wondering if you're really understanding him.

"Go on. I'll find you some pajamas."

And then there's steam and water, hot hot water, and you're standing in the stream of water with soapsuds and no one yelling at you for using public amenities.

You don't take too long, not wanting to impose on his hot water, but when you get out, there's a fresh toothbrush by the sink and a pair of pajamas waiting on the bed. The faded pants are too big, but the drawstring makes them wearable. You climb into the bed, and the soft smell of detergent brings tears to your eyes. It's the same smell that you used to go to sleep to when you were a child, the same detergent.

He looks around the door and smiles when he sees you in bed.

"Hey, you okay? Can I get you anything?"

Shaking your head, you slide farther under the covers, and he comes and tucks you in, just as if he were your mom.

"Goodnight, Patrick." He bends over and kisses your head. "Sleep well. I'll see you in the morning. Promise me you'll be here?"

Promises...

Made to be broken. You make a non-committal noise. But he's obviously fluent in grunt.

"Promise me that you'll be here when I wake up, Patrick."

"I promise."

You can't break a promise to him. Just before you fall asleep you check where the contents of your pocket had ended up. He's promised to wash your clothes. You fall asleep with your hand wrapped around the scrap of paper and the ten dollars.

* * * *

Paul is reading his latest script when Patrick gets off the phone with Karen. She called to let him know she arrived home safely and stayed on the line, telling him about her best friend who is either awesome or stupid, depending on the mood of the hour. It was a month before Patrick realized the best friend's name wasn't That Doofus. Patrick isn't sure how he feels about her best friend being a boy.

"Is it a good one?" he asks, nodding to the typed pages in Paul's hand.

Paul grins, real excitement showing in his face. "I

think this is a real good one, love." He pulls Patrick down beside him. "It's about a married man who has an accident and turns into an empath. His family thinks he's going mad as he can't get away from the emotions of everyone else. But he ends up working for the police and solving cases because he can tell if people are lying."

"Sounds like a laugh a minute," drawls Patrick sarcastically as he leans forward for his beer. As he sits back, he sees the hurt on Paul's face. "I'm sorry," he says, cupping Paul's jaw with his hand. "I didn't mean to be cruel. I can see why you're excited about it."

"It's not Shakespeare, but if it's picked up, it'll be regular work and regular pay. I need that now. I need to pull my weight in our family. I don't want you to feel you have to support me."

His acting career was spasmodic at best, but Paul was always careful. When he did get paid, he made sure the majority of the money was put aside for living expenses. In the time they had been together, he had never asked Patrick for a cent. When he wasn't acting, he would take any work available, which is why he had been manning the arts and craft stall when Patrick and Karen had met him.

Patrick often thought his lover was wasted in acting. His real skill was in handling all the little kids and parents that flocked to the tables, showing them how to make the

crafts. He wished Paul would go back to college and train to be a teacher, but Paul had a dream, and God knows Patrick didn't want to squash that ambition.

One of them had to have something to aspire to.

* * * *

Your dreams? To sleep in a bed, to eat a hot meal every day, and to be paid for a day's work.

Aspirations, ambition? Those are a waste of time when no one will give you that break, that single gesture that will make a difference.

No one, that is, except him.

You don't leave on Christmas Day or even the day after. Every evening, he makes you promise to stay just one more day until New Year's Eve when, as he opens his mouth, you beg him not to ask again. Thank you, but it's time to leave. He begs, he pleads, but you are firm. His family will be returning, and you don't belong here.

He's been invited to a party to welcome in the New Year. He invites you to go, but you aren't good in crowded places, and fireworks frighten you — a legacy of sleeping on the streets. Instead, you spend the New Year's Eve huddled together in his bed, watching the TV and drinking a little beer. Eleven fifty-nine slides into midnight under his

covers as he enters you for the first time; his and yours. Sweet kisses guide you both into sleep, wrapped in each other for the only time.

You leave his house on New Year's Day, dressed in his old clothes and with a paper bearing an address. You kiss him goodbye, make no promises to return, and he doesn't ask again.

She has a nice house, a little shabby but clean and tidy. The room is small, but it's more than enough for you; your own bed and shared facilities. She was his teacher; now she rents rooms. You can't understand why she's giving you that chance when you have no job, no history.

"Because he trusts you," she says.

And he's paid the rent for two months.

The room gives you an address; the address gives you that job at the bookstore. You repay the loan within six months, asking your landlady to give him back the money. She wonders why you refuse to give him the money personally.

How can you explain something that you don't fully understand yourself? You just know that you're broken, damaged. He's too young to be tarnished by you. She says she'll do as you ask but you're wrong, on all counts.

You don't dare to listen.

* * * *

Patrick rolls over in bed. He's chilly and seeks the warmth of his lover, but the space beside him is cold and empty. The clock says three a.m. Paul likes his early starts, but this is ridiculous.

Padding downstairs, he finds Paul in the kitchen, hands wrapped around a mug of coffee. The expression on his face makes Patrick pause in the doorway, and a cold knot of fear lodges itself under his breastbone.

It eases a little when Paul looks up and sees him there, a warming smile spreading across his face.

"Hey, love, did I wake you up? I'm sorry."

"I was cold. My heater wasn't in bed with me."

Paul laughs softly at Patrick's words. He produces heat like a furnace. Patrick is normally hanging out of the bed, trying to cool down. He's never gotten used to being overly warm.

"I couldn't sleep."

"Well, that won't help you." Patrick points to the cup of coffee, half empty in Paul's hands.

Paul looks down at it. "I know. I just couldn't face another hot chocolate."

Patrick sits down opposite him. "Something on your mind, Paul?" It's then he notices the small round object on

the table. His heart sinks as he realizes what it is. The light glints off the matte platinum surface of the ring he had given Paul earlier. Paul has taken it off.

"Something you want to tell me, Paul?"

Paul sighs, and his hands come out to enclose Patrick's hands, trapping Patrick in place. He keeps a hold on Patrick while he reaches down and pulls out a backpack that had been hidden under the table.

Patrick feels his breathing change; the panic that he keeps subdued overwhelming him. He can't hear what Paul is saying; all the words are jumbling into meaningless noise. He's frozen into place, wanting to run, wanting to hide, but trapped by his traitorous body.

"Patrick? Pat, listen to me."

A sharp pain on his cheek.

Paul has slapped him. God, Paul has hit him!

He looks at him, bewildered by the assault. Paul catches his expression, and his face crumples. Patrick is pulled into Paul's arms.

"I'm sorry, baby, so sorry, so sorry. You were out of it. I didn't know what to do."

On and on he apologizes, his heartbeat thudding hard and fast under Patrick's ear. Eventually, Patrick pushes him away and pulls his chair back a little. He can't think so close to Paul, and God knows, he's got to process this.

Paul sits back down and looks at him carefully.

"Are you ready to talk?"

Yes, no, never.

"What do you want to talk about?" Patrick asks, although he's finding it difficult to shape each word, let alone a coherent sentence.

"How about I talk first then you?"

Patrick nods, fear holding him mute in its clutches. It is only a few seconds until Paul starts talking, but for Patrick, it feels like a lifetime.

"I've been sitting here for an hour, trying to make a decision."

Oh God!

The shock must have communicated itself to Paul because he leans over and grabs Patrick's hand. "Not about us, Pat. Never about us. We're right and always will be."

"Then what?" Patrick's voice is weak, and he despises himself for his weakness.

"I realized I hadn't been honest with you, and I can't marry you knowing there are secrets between us."

The concept of Paul having a bigger secret than Patrick strikes him as somewhat ludicrous, but he keeps quiet and waits for Paul to continue.

"How long have you known me, Patrick?"

The question throws him. "Three years. We met

three years ago. You know that; we just celebrated our anniversary."

"We first met twenty-five years ago when I got lost in the mall and you found me. Do you remember? I kissed you and told you I was going to marry you."

Paul smiles at him fondly as he says, "My mama laughed at me then, but she loves you as much as she loves me. You're the only man I've brought home whom she didn't hate on sight. Of course, it helped knowing that I've loved you my entire life. I gave you my number at the coffee shop hoping you'd call. And then when you walked into the shelter, I knew it was meant to be. Did you not think I'd know *you*, Pat, the boy I gave my virginity to? After that Christmas I told her that I'd fallen in love with the man I wanted to spend the rest of my life with."

Patrick's world crashes around him, the foundations of his new existence crumbling like the sandcastle of dreams at high tide.

"Why are you so scared all the time, love?"

"Because I am nothing, I am worthless." The mantra repeats inside his head over and over. The only time it stops is when he is with Karen or with Paul, safe in their world. Their world, never his.

"Is that what your aunt told you?"

Patrick smiles cynically. "Among other things. I

was an aberration, and that my family died for my sins was another favorite of hers."

"You aren't worthless. You never were." Paul got up and knelt in front of Patrick, his hands resting on Patrick's pajama-clad thighs. "Do you remember what you told me when I offered you hot chocolate?"

"I'm not a hooker."

"That's right. I didn't think you were one then, and I don't think you are one now. You were homeless through no fault of your own. It doesn't make you less of a man, and you don't have to keep hiding it from me." Paul's fingers are digging painfully into Patrick's thigh muscles, but Patrick welcomes the sting. It's keeping him anchored in place.

He stares down into Paul's large eyes. "How long have you known it was me?"

"The day you and Karen walked up to the craft tables, and yes, I knew you were the same boy who helped me when I was lost in the mall at Christmas."

Shocked again to the core, Patrick just stares at him. "You've never said anything."

"I wanted to, but you seemed so determined not to talk about your past. I didn't want you to walk away from me again, but when I found the backpack, I knew I had to say something before we got married. Why do you have a

backpack full of clothes and money in the back of the closet?"

"So if I have to walk out, I'll never be homeless again. It's been packed since the day I got my first paycheck at that bookstore." Patrick figures his first landlady would have passed that information back, and by the way Paul was nodding, he was right.

Paul sits back on his haunches. "You know, when I told my mama about you, she couldn't understand how you hadn't inherited any money from your parents' estate."

Shrugging, Patrick says, "My aunt said the money went to pay for their funerals and feeding my worthless ass. By the time I thought she might be lying, I didn't have any money to find out."

Paul pulls a letter out of his sweatpants pocket and hands it to Patrick, who takes it curiously. Unfolding it, he discovers it's from the law firm his dad used to deal with. He scans the contents and then stops, goes back, and rereads it properly.

"All the money. It's in trust?"

Paul nods, smiling at him now. "She wasn't able to touch a penny. She couldn't prove you were dead either. It just needs you to contact them to handle the arrangements, and the money is yours. Karen's college money, your new bookshop."

"I... don't know what to say." Patrick is beyond thought.

"Thank my mama. She did the digging. This is her Christmas present to you so you can stop hiding." Paul leans forward and kisses Patrick softly on the lips. "I want one more Christmas present from you before I give you yours."

Patrick frowns. They had already exchanged gifts. "What do you want?"

"A promise that you'll empty that backpack."

"I'm... I don't think..." It is his safety net, his protection. He can't give that up.

"You have me. You've always had me. Let it go."

Patrick's hands flutter over Paul's chest, wanting to hold onto his lifeline, but he's scared to let go of his control. Paul draws one more thing out of his pocket and presses it into Patrick's hand.

"What's this?"

"Open it up."

It's a yellowing scrap of paper with a faded number and inside a battered ten-dollar bill. Patrick stares at it.

"You kept it all these years?" He'd left it behind when he walked out of Paul's to a new future.

"It was my only link to you. I kept hoping you'd come back for it."

"I wanted to." Oh God, how he'd wanted to see Paul, be with Paul, make love to him again. He never dreamed for an instant that they would be together over a decade later.

Paul kisses him again, his warm hands sliding up under Patrick's t-shirt. "I understand, but I hoped. I was going to marry you. I told you that on our first meeting."

Patrick smiles, the knot of fear and despair dissolving a little inside him. It would take more than this to stop him from being so damn scared all the time of losing everything, but it was a start. He concentrates on his lover, the comfort and security of Paul's body pressed close to his.

"Merry Christmas, Patrick."

It will be.

He hopes.

The End

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sue Brown is owned by her dog and two children. When she isn't following their orders, she can be found at university listening to lecturers discuss long-dead theologians. In her head, however, she's plotting how to get her cowboys into bed together; she just hopes the lecturer doesn't ask her any questions.

Sue discovered M/M erotica at the time she woke up to find two men kissing on a television series. The series was boring; the kissing was not. She may be late to the party, but she's made up for it since, writing fan fiction until she was brave enough to venture out into the world of original fiction.

Come over and talk to Sue at suebrownstories@livejournal.com or contact her at suebrown.stories@gmail.com. Her website can be found at <http://www.suebrownstories.co.uk/>

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