



*Under the
Mistletoe*

A CHRISTMAS SHORT STORY

J. PARKER

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Behind Closed Doors

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Book cover photo by Marilyn Barbone

*For Bonny, Chris, and Gaye,
my soon-to-be podcast partners.
Thanks for championing godly sex in marriage
and for being wonderful friends.*

Grace's Tree

Standing back, I surveyed the Christmas tree with a satisfied grin. “You have outdone yourself, Grace.”

No one else stood in the living room where we’d open our presents the following morning, so it was a private moment of pride. But I breathed in the forest scent of the seven-foot Scotch pine, admired the symmetry of colored lights and red ornaments decorating its branches, and felt a personal *attagirl* at the collection of neatly wrapped presents spilling out over the tree skirt.

Even better, though, were the giggles of our three children in the adjoining room as they watched “The Grinch Who Stole Christmas” for about the eleventh time. Probably the scene with the dog Max trying to drag the sleigh up an impossible hill.

Speaking of impossible, I glanced back at the clock on the wall. A pinch of worry creased my stomach. Todd still wasn’t home. I’d had to manage the kids all by myself at our church’s early Christmas Eve service and explain to others that he was working late instead of being with the family. But where was he?

Glancing back at the tree, I moved forward and dug through the stack of gifts. Todd had a tendency to tuck presents into the pile when I wasn’t looking.

I finished my first run-through and sat back on my heels. Nothing. Not a single gift labeled *To Grace, From Todd*. Or as he’d put it some years: *To My Beloved, From Luckiest Man Alive*.

Although it had been a while since romantic words like that had come from his hand or his lips. Finding time to utter any words to each other these days was a challenge, much less mushy words. Work and overtime, kids and their activities, church events, household maintenance, and a million other demands tugged at us constantly.

The noises in the adjacent room turned whining, then argumentative. Of course. I squeezed my eyes shut and braced myself. With eleven, eight, and six-year-olds in the

house, how much peace on earth had I expected?

Two steps into the living room, I took charge with two fingers in my mouth and a piercing whistle. Eyes wide, they turned to see their mom giving her own Grinch expression. “Pizza in the oven’s almost ready, but I’m not serving any to contentious children.”

Beau looked up with his six-year-old, Basset-hound eyes. “What’s *con-den-tus*?”

Bryce, the oldest, nudged Beau with his shoulder. “She means we need to stop fighting if we want to eat.”

“Oh.”

“Where’s Dad?” asked Brendan, our middle child.

The oven buzzer rang. “Good question.” It wasn’t an answer, more like a murmur to myself. I sighed and walked to the kitchen.

Within minutes, the boys sat at our kitchen table chomping on pizza and stretching out melted cheese as far as possible.

When the back door opened, I felt the automatic sense of relief I always felt when Todd returned home. Like a missing piece was added back into the puzzle.

“Dad!” yelled all three boys.

Todd smiled at each, ruffled their hair, and complimented Bryce’s proud welcoming burp.

I rolled my eyes, but didn’t say anything. I was losing that battle, and maybe I didn’t need to die on the hill of proper belching etiquette. At least not on Christmas Eve.

When Todd reached me, he leaned down and kissed my cheek. “Sorry, hon. Work went long.”

“They couldn’t let up just a little early?”

“Project due right after Christmas. You know how it’s been.” His gruff voice was lined with exhaustion.

I wanted to be compassionate. Really I did. But I was getting sick of his long hours and our lack of time together. Not to mention that I’d like a break now and then.

Between my full-time job and raising three high-strung boys, I'd forgotten what it felt like to be anything but a constant worker or caretaker.

The slump of my shoulders and flinch away from his touch showed my annoyance. But I forced perkiness into my voice. "Well, we're ready for Christmas." I dug out a rusty smile and polished it up before lifting my head. "That is, once you've added your gifts."

He leaned back on the counter and furrowed his brow. "What gifts?"

"You know." I switched off the frustration I'd felt moments before, remembering that I was about to get presents. I might not be as eager as my boys, but I still adored the anticipation of Christmas morning. "I've already got my presents for you under the tree. But I didn't see any from you to me. Did you hide them somewhere?"

He shook his head. "No."

The boys were still digging into the pizza like it was a Food-Network-worthy meal. Making me wonder why I bothered cooking when the freezer section and drive-throughs held their favorites.

I gestured toward the garage with a tilt of my head. "Did you go shopping today? Are the gifts in the car?"

Again, Todd shook his head. Keeping his expression flat and unconcerned. "Sorry, Grace, but I don't have anything to put under the tree."

My stomach started its free fall. As he pushed off the counter and walked toward our bedroom, my tummy finished with a thud. As if it hit the floor.

Beau covered my hand with his, jolting my attention to him. "I made you a card, Mommy. It's under the tree."

Blood rushed back to my cheeks, and I smiled past the tears glossing my eyes. "I can't wait to see it. I'm sure it's perfect."

"It's his handprint," mumbled Brendan. "Made into a Christmas tree."

Beau stuck his tongue out at his brother, which made the trio simply fall into laughter. Their open mouths displayed mangled pizza pieces, and I tried not to cringe.

My heart twisted inside my chest, but I made myself stay put and enjoy these moments with my sons. Whether I got any presents didn't matter. Did it? Christmas was about the kids.

And hadn't we always said that this holiday was really about the gift of Jesus? Whether Todd gave me anything, that hadn't changed.

Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given ...

Todd's Surprise

As I walked away from Grace, guilt gnawed at my gut. Was it really fair to mislead her like that? Even if it was for a good cause?

Whipping off my necktie and unbuttoning my shirt, I tried to let my anxiety fall away with my clothes. Not only my minor deception with Grace, but all the work concerns I'd finally left behind. If we could just get this project out the door on time, early January, I figured I'd keep my job through the next round of layoffs. My company had already been through two rounds, and not only did I like the work I did, I needed this job and the benefits to care for my family.

The image of Grace popped back into my mind. The way she worked so hard, the way she kept our house running, the way she took care of our boys ... the way I'd planted such disappointment on her face. Even if she tried to hide it.

Truth was, I hadn't been much fun to be around for a while. Or much help around the house. And certainly not a romantic hero. Now I'd even made her think I cared so little that I hadn't bothered to buy her a Christmas gift.

But it couldn't be helped. Not if I wanted to pull off the surprise.

I changed quickly, into blue jeans, a brushed flannel shirt, and western boots—the look Grace said she liked. *My personal cowboy*. A smile tickled the corners of my mouth, accompanied with a thump in my heart.

No one else I'd rather have riding with me through life.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out of my pocket to read the confirmation text. My plan was in progress. Just minutes to go.

I quickly grabbed my blazer, pulled the pre-packed overnight bags from my closet, and sneaked back into the living room. One glance into the kitchen confirmed that Grace was out of sight—cleaning pizza plates at the sink—but our boys were now on the couch watching the Grinch's heart grow three sizes.

Silently, furtively, I tucked our bags under the side table, then came around to the other side. Scooching the boys this way and that, I planted myself in the middle of Bryce and Brendan, and Beau climbed onto my lap.

From the kitchen, Grace sang “Silent Night” to herself. But her bell-like voice carried and competed for my attention.

Stress still clung to me like dog hair to duct tape, but I made an effort to settle in and treasure this moment. It wouldn’t last forever.

When our doorbell rang, I was the only one not startled.

“Someone’s at the door!” Beau yelled.

“Todd, are you there?” Grace called. “Can you get it?”

I *could*. But that would damper the surprise. “I’m a little busy,” I called back. “Can you answer the door?”

Grace gave a frustrated huff. So much for her cheerful caroling.

Brendan and Beau turned around and peered over the couch to see who had arrived, while Bryce kept his eyes glued to the TV. Even though he’d seen this show more times than his brothers.

When the door opened, I kept my eyes on the screen but my ears on hyper-alert.

“Mom?” Grace’s shock was evident in her tone. “What are you doing here?”

“A mother can’t visit her daughter on Christmas Eve?”

I smiled at Patti’s no-nonsense response. Sweeter than honey, she also came across like a bumblebee at times—difficult to challenge.

“Granny!” shouted all three boys. They scrambled over me and the couch, their father and the Grinch forgotten by the arrival of their grandmother.

I followed the threesome into the entryway to find Granny Patti doling out hugs and Christmas cookies and Grace standing aside with a puzzled expression.

“Thanks for coming, Patti.” I smiled my gratitude.

She smiled back and winked. “No problem.”

Grace shifted from confused to suspicious. “What’s going on?”

Peering out the front window, I saw the next part of my plan pulling up to the curb. “You should get dressed,” I answered. “Maybe that red dress.”

She seemed to suddenly see me. “What are *you* wearing?”

“My finer duds to take out my finest lady.”

“What on earth are you—”

Patti interrupted Grace. “Sweetheart, I’ve got this covered. But you need to get a move on because the limo driver is walking up your sidewalk.”

The color left Grace’s face, leaving her white as a shaken snow globe.

“I’ll get our bags.” I traipsed back into the living room to grab the gear. Leaving Grace to recover. Her mom to explain. The driver to knock on the door.

None of which went according to plan.

When I returned to the entryway, Patti was pleading with her daughter, Grace was glaring at me, and the limo driver was standing slack-jawed at our open door with one fist lifted to knock that he had yet to lower.

Glancing at me, the driver raised his eyebrows. “Am I in the right place? Y’all ordered the limousine?”

I gave an apologetic nod, trying to let him know if he could ignore the chaos for a moment, I’d get everything worked out.

“Grace.” Gently pulling my wife away from her mother, I led her back to our bedroom.

She went about as willingly as I expected. Meaning her bewilderment gave me enough of an opening to get her there without too much resistance.

Once there, she yanked her arm away. “What is happening, Todd?”

“We’re going out.” I scanned her tight posture, her snarled expression, her narrowed eyes, then gave an easy grin in hopes of tipping the scales back. “I called your mother to watch the boys.”

“And ordered a limousine?” Her voice screeched up at the end, like I’d done something wrong.

My smile disappeared, and I suddenly realized there were eggshells underneath us. Though I didn't understand why. "Um...you said you'd never ridden in a limo. So I thought ..."

"You thought we'd take a joy ride on Christmas Eve?" *Crack*. One eggshell down.

I swallowed, sending the lump in my throat to my gut. Which felt no better. "I have an entire night planned."

She flared her arms out. "So do I!"

"No, I mean ... an entire night. Like you and me ... the whole night. Overnight, at a hotel and everything."

Her eyes widened. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out.

"We're taking the limo to a restaurant, then on a tour of Christmas lights, and finally to the hotel. Your mom's staying with the boys."

Mouth still open, she shook her head back and forth, back and forth. Finally, she muttered. "How could you?"

The imaginary eggshells shattered.

I was about to speak, to ask why she was angry, but before I could, she spun on her heels and stomped away.

Leaving me standing in our bedroom with my breath caught in my chest and wondering what I was going to do with an unwanted limo driver, a sleeping-over mother-in-law, and an angry wife on Christmas Eve.

And if Grace didn't accept this present—*I'd told the truth*—I had nothing to put under the tree for her.

Grace's Gift

I buried my head in my hands as I walked from the bedroom, shaking with exasperation. I couldn't leave on Christmas Eve. It was practically in the parenting manual that mothers set out cookies and milk for Santa Claus with their kids, tucked them into bed with kisses on their foreheads and promises that the reindeer would pull up any minute, and then awakened early in the morning to set out the big presents, fill the stockings, and make Christmas morning breakfast.

At least *good* mothers did.

Why couldn't Todd just buy me something and stick it under the tree like a normal husband? Was that so much to ask?

Bypassing the entryway, where the limo driver still stood with hat in hand, I headed straight for the kitchen and some eggnog. Not the real kind, of course, the milk section kind you can share with children.

The boys were back on the couch cueing up "A Charlie Brown Christmas." Granny's favorite. My favorite. Which I should be watching with them.

My mother appeared in the doorway, hand on hip and glare on face.

"What?" The word snapped out of my mouth.

"I know you had certain expectations about this evening, but maybe you need to let go of some stress and enjoy what your husband is trying to do here."

"Stress? This has nothing to do with stress." I slammed the refrigerator door, pretty much negating my claim of *no stress*.

She walked further into the kitchen, making it a just-us-two conversation. "I'll take care of everyone here. You'll be back in the morning before these boys are up. And even if they did wake up early, I am a master of diversion and can keep them from the living room until you return."

I shook my head and dug in the pantry for chocolate. *There was some here yesterday.*

Moving canned vegetables and cereal boxes and chip bags this way and that, I still couldn't find any chocolate. I swiped my hand toward the shelves. "Who ate all the chocolate?"

Suddenly, my mother's hands were on my shoulders. "Grace." She slowly spun me toward her, and her expression softened. "You and Todd have had a lot going on lately, and I know how tough it is to find time together when your kids are young. This is your chance."

My heavy sigh didn't relieve the twist in my chest, or my craving for chocolate. "I can't abandon the boys."

"Abandon? It's not abandoning your children to get away for one night with their father."

"It's Christmas Eve, Mom." My voice had lowered, my tone tightened. "Christmas Eve."

"Which means he had to go to extra lengths to make this happen. He had to pay more to get that limo driver out there, who is probably expecting a good tip so that he can pay for his own family's Christmas gifts. And it couldn't have been cheap to book a five-star hotel room during the holidays."

Shutting my eyes, I took a deep breath and tried to see things from a different perspective. Todd had, after all, gone to some trouble. But ... I kept coming back to everything I needed to do, and he'd just assumed I could ride away scot-free as long as Granny was here to hold the reins.

"Are you trying to guilt me into going to a hotel with my husband? Do you understand how weird that is for my mother to push me into ... into ..."

Mom raised one brow, a trick I'd never learned. "A night of unbridled passion with your lover?"

I winced. "Mom!"

She nudged me with her elbow. "He's buying you dinner first."

"I can't believe you're talking like that." I backed away from her. And the pantry, no

longer feeling hungry for chocolate ... or anything.

Mom snorted. “What, like I don’t know how I got three handsome grandsons?”

I rolled my eyes, channeling the teenager I used to be. “Look, I couldn’t possibly relax anyway. I have a thousand things to do.”

“No, you don’t.”

“Of course I do.”

“No, you don’t.”

Annoyance pulsed in my veins. “I think I know what I have to do.”

“No, you don’t.” Her dismissive tone made me want to throw an even bigger teenage fit. Maybe grab the car keys, run out of the house, and not return until five minutes after curfew.

Good heavens, how quickly I could regress.

A creak behind me made me turn around. Todd leaned against the doorframe and folded his arms across his chest. “Your mom and I discussed all the particulars, and we’ll be reachable at all times. But you need this, Grace.”

I glanced back and forth between my mother and me. Inside, a back-and-forth motion was happening too, a pendulum swing of wanting and needing. Sure, I *wanted* to go out on the town, but I *needed* to stay at home and keep the household going. It was my job—my full-time, no-vacations, no-quitting job.

“I don’t need this,” I whispered. “I needed a gift under the tree.”

“You need—” my mother started.

Todd held up his hand, oddly cutting her off more effectively than I ever had. But he smiled at her before looking at me. “You do need this. You work all the time here, you have taken up my slack lately, and you never let up on yourself. Of all the gifts I considered, this was what I most wanted to give you—a night away and just enjoying us.”

I felt my face contorting, different feelings warring in my features, various thoughts spilling out in my expression. “On Christmas Eve?”

That had to be the reason for my feet-dragging. What good mother took off on Christmas Eve? Right?

Todd crossed the room and scooped me into his arms. “Let me show you a good evening. Let me remind you how much I love you, how much I want you, how much I want to—”

“And I’m out,” my mother chirped. “You two need your privacy.” She walked from the room, leaving me and Todd alone.

He pulled me closer, right up against his body. I tensed, but didn’t pull away. He lowered his head and his voice. “Tonight, I want to give you every pleasure I can possibly think of.”

My breath caught as I grasped the full meaning of his words.

“Mistletoe’s already in the limo.” He waggled his eyebrows. “But once we get to the hotel room, you can hold it anywhere above your body you want, and I will faithfully comply.”

I gave a half-huff, half-laugh. “You’re doing all this to get sex?”

“Nope.” A jolly-as-Christmas grin overtook his face. “Hey, if you want to head to our hotel room and just dance the two-step till morning, that’s what we’ll do. It’s your night, Grace. But please, let me be your date.”

My lungs released some tension, and my muscles relaxed just a bit. A smile edged up the corners of my mouth. “You’re asking me out on a date?”

“I already got your parent’s permission. I just need yours.”

I sorted through his offer, then weighed it against the worry that I needed to stay. “Is the limo driver still in the entryway?”

“I told him I was hopeful.” He tilted his head toward the front of our house. “I think he’s playing Santa-themed solitaire on his phone while he waits.”

Furrowing my brow, I let go and walked to the living room. The boys were huddled against Granny explaining all their favorite parts of the Peanuts Gang version of Christmas. I glanced over at the TV to see Charlie Brown, and suddenly wondered if I’d

made my husband feel like that—like he'd been trying his best, and it wasn't enough for me.

But it was.

He was.

Had we let one another know that lately? No. But maybe tonight we could get back on track.

“Can you pause?” I announced.

Bryce, being the oldest, held the remote control like a king's scepter and clicked the button to pause the screen.

They all looked up at me—Bryce, Brendan, Beau, and my mother, who was rooting for me to get lucky tonight. I quickly pushed that last thought out of my head.

“How would you guys feel about Dad and I going out and not being back until morning?”

Their stares made my heart sink again. What was I thinking? I couldn't leave them. Just couldn't.

Beau lifted his chin. “Is Granny staying?”

I bit my lip. “Well, *if* we go, then yes, Granny would stay, and—”

I couldn't even finish. Their whoops and hollers tuned me out. They literally fell over my mother in their excitement, burying her in a pile of PJs and hugs.

Mom laughed and started tickling. And before I knew it, I was completely ignored. I couldn't compete with Charlie Brown and Granny. Not to mention Santa Claus.

An arm swept around my waist, followed by another, and then Todd's breath warmed my ear. “The boys love you best. She's just a special treat.”

“Hmmm.” His explanation was likely right.

“And you are my special treat. My gift from God.” His lips pressed against my neck, right behind my ear, where he knew I loved to be kissed.

Actually, if I went out with my husband, and ended up at that hotel room, he might trail the kisses down my neck, across my shoulders, and to some other places that hadn't

been sufficiently kissed in a long while.

I twitched my head back toward him. “You think they’ll be okay?”

“I think they’ll be better for us being okay.” Turning me around toward him, he looked me eye-to-eye. “After the project’s done in January, I’m going to cut down on my hours. I miss our boys, and you. Our lives are busy, but we’ve got to prioritize us. You and me. Our marriage.”

Standing on my tiptoes, I planted a lingering kiss right on his mouth.

Behind us, Bryce muttered, “Ooh, gross.” But he said it with was amusement in his voice. Maybe even a bit of approval.

When I pulled away, I whispered, “I need to get ready.”

“You just need to get dressed. I have everything else you need.”

I stroked my hand down his chest, stopping at his belt buckle with an audience nearby. “Just tell the limo driver I’ll be out in a minute.”

He grinned. “I’ll meet you under the mistletoe.”

“There’s really mistletoe in the limo?”

“Yep. I asked for the holiday special.”

I smiled and started toward the bedroom, calling back in a sing-song voice, “Well, Merry Christmas to me!”

About the Author



J. Parker writes at [Hot, Holy & Humorous](http://HotHolyHumorous.com), where she uses a biblical perspective and a blunt sense of humor to foster Christian sexuality in marriage.

When she isn't writing about godly sex or doing "research" with her husband, J writes teen fiction; hugs, disciplines, or cracks jokes with her kids (whichever is needed in the moment); and daydreams about having a personal chef and an on-call massage therapist.

Check out J's blog at www.hotholyhumorous.com or follow her on Twitter at [@hotholyhumorous](https://twitter.com/hotholyhumorous), Facebook at [HotHolyHumorous](https://www.facebook.com/HotHolyHumorous), or Pinterest at [hotholyhumorous](https://www.pinterest.com/hotholyhumorous).

Author's Note

If you enjoyed this story, you might also enjoy [*Behind Closed Doors: Five Marriage Stories*](#), a collection of five inspirational short stories addressing marriage and sexual intimacy.

