

Home for the Holidays

by Jennifer L. Lopez

I'll be home for Christmas. Sweeter than the strains of *Ave Maria* floating through the speakers, Trent's voice echoed through my head like a Christmas carol sung just for me. As I placed a silver ball on the tree, the shiny surface reflected my smile back to me.

Of course, it was almost Valentine's Day. The original plan was for Trent to come home on leave for Christmas, but that didn't happen. Instead, he promised to be my Valentine, and I promised him we'd have Christmas in February.

My neighbor Janine stuck a bow on my head.

"You will be the only present he wants, I'm sure," she said. "I think you should gift-wrap yourself."

I was going to. Sort of. Trent had been deployed to Afghanistan for more than half of our two-year marriage. When he called Wednesday morning with the news that he would definitely be home for Christmas-Valentine's, I headed straight for my favorite lingerie boutique. The thought of the sexy little velvet number in the closet perked up the corners of my mouth a little more.

Janine and her husband Robert hung the last of the ornaments on the tree. They'd done most of the work. I was still in a daze and daydreaming about my husband's homecoming. The first Christmas without him was hard, and when I learned he'd be gone for a second, I didn't bother with anything remotely festive. Not until he was home. Janine and Rob showed up this morning with a beautiful Douglas fir in the back of their pickup and helped me find my belated Christmas spirit.

I surveyed the finished product. The tree was only about six feet tall, wide with dense branches. It overwhelmed the room a bit, but it fit the occasion. Like me, it was full to bursting with happiness. Besides, I wasn't even sure where they managed to find a Christmas tree in February so I wasn't going to complain. There's no shortage of tree farms here in rural Pennsylvania; I suppose they have evergreens year-round.

"When's his flight?" Rob asked.

I checked my watch. The second hand counted down the hours, the minutes, sending surge after tingling surge of anticipation through my body.

"He lands in Georgia early tomorrow morning and he'll be there a few hours before his flight to Baltimore." I was tempted to jump in my car and drive the twelve hours down to Atlanta to get him instead of waiting for him to get to Baltimore tomorrow afternoon. The only thing stopping me was the three inches of new snow we'd gotten in the past few hours and the forecast for more overnight. Too bad he wasn't able to fly into Harrisburg, only twenty minutes away. Two hours to Baltimore would be challenging enough. It amazed me how people forget everything they ever knew about driving once a snowflake hits pavement.

"Hopefully the snow won't cause any trouble," he said.

From his mouth to the Snow Miser's ears.

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I was too anxious to sleep later that night, so I slipped into a hot shower around midnight, hoping the steam would relax me. The snow had me worried. I tried to calm myself with the thought that if Trent's flight to Baltimore was delayed or canceled, he had all day

Sunday and Monday to try to get another one. We'd never placed much importance on Valentine's Day, but this year was different. If he didn't make it home in time, it just wouldn't be the same.

I massaged strawberry-scented shampoo into my hair until my scalp tingled. It reminded me of my husband. He never complained about the girly scent because he knew how much I liked to smell it in his hair when we snuggled in bed at night.

As the suds dripped down my neck, I helped them along with my hands, spreading the silky lather down over my breasts.

Before he left for Afghanistan, we talked about having babies with his strawberry-blond hair and washing them with strawberry shampoo and being a strawberry-scented family. But we couldn't do that while he was away. He refused to leave me alone and pregnant, and I refused to bring a child into this world until its daddy could be there to see it born.

I rubbed the shampoo bubbles into my belly. No baby yet. Soon, hopefully. Trent and I would get lots of practice in during his leave, that's for sure. My hands wandered low on my abdomen. My fingers teased at the top of my mound.

I had an idea.

Trent had asked me, once, but I was never brave enough. I would be brave now, to give him a spectacular combined Christmas and Valentine's gift.

I grabbed my razor, shaving cream, and a hand mirror, and got to work.

Half an hour later, I stood naked in the bedroom, pampering my skin with shea butter lotion. I was smooth and silky from head to toe. Gently I massaged a bit of lotion on my inner thighs and over my newly shaved vulva. It wasn't as scary as I thought it would be. Trent was going to love it.

I made sure to moisturize every inch. The skin there was even more sensitive now that it was bare. The slightest touch triggered the pleasure center of my brain. My nipples hardened. My knees trembled. I wanted to collapse onto the bed and tease my waiting clit into submission. But I didn't. I wanted to wait for my husband.

* * *

The next morning I awoke to a nightmare. Three more inches of snow had fallen.

No sooner had I looked out the window when the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Damn, baby, it's so good to hear your voice."

Trent's gravelly baritone made me shudder with girlish anticipation. It was good to hear his voice, too.

"Please tell me your flight's on time," I said. His sigh was answer enough.

"Delayed. Gotta wait to see if it clears a little up that way first."

Tears stung my eyes. I'd waited long enough, damn it. I wanted him home with me today. Not tomorrow. Not a minute later than scheduled.

"You there, babe?"

"Yeah." I took a shaky breath. "I'm here."

"Don't worry. I'll be home soon. I gotta go for now, but I'll call you as soon as I know when I'm leaving."

"Okay. I love you. And I miss you."

"Love you baby."

As the hours passed, the forecast grew more dismal. The snow continued to fall steadily, from northern Virginia all the way up to the New England states. All flights to and from Newark and JFK were halted by two o'clock. BWI had limited air traffic, but they were expected to shut down any moment as well.

Rob and Janine braved the weather to come sit with me and watch the news.

The phone call came just after six. Trent's flight had been cancelled, and all flights going anywhere near us were also cancelled due to the weather. I couldn't hold back the tears this time.

"It's already Saturday night. Are you going to make it here by Monday?" I asked.

"I don't know. It depends on if it keeps snowing or not. But I'll make it eventually."

"What about our holiday? Valentine's Day is Monday. You have to be here." Tucking the phone between my ear and shoulder, I snatched a twig of fake mistletoe off the doorjamb, then unplugged the Christmas tree. If Trent wasn't going to be here, I wasn't going

to celebrate. Janine grabbed my hand as I went to start pulling ornaments off the tree.

"It doesn't matter what day I get there. You're the only thing I need for Christmas or any holiday."

"It does matter." I wanted this to be special. I wanted us to celebrate like normal people do — as normal celebrating Christmas in February could be, at least.

"I'll get there, okay? I'll find a bus, or the first plane out of here, or something. It'll be okay."

Overwhelmed with my tears, I passed the phone to Rob to say hello. He took the phone into the other room and Janine put her arms around me. She didn't say anything. I doubt she could've said anything to make me feel any better, anyway. She just hugged me and rubbed my back until the tears stopped.

"Thanks," I said, rubbing my face.

"No thanks necessary." She looked around. "I'll go see what Rob's up to."

She disappeared toward the kitchen and left me staring at a Christmas tree I desperately wanted to tear down. It reminded me of what I was missing. If I didn't look at the tree, I'd have to look out the window at the snow piling up. That wasn't a welcome sight, either. Instead I went in search of Janine and Rob.

I heard Janine's voice as I came into the kitchen.

"...are you really going to drive that whole way? How long is that?"

"Who's going where?" I asked.

Janine looked to Rob, who held up his cell phone.

"Just got a call from one of my clients," he said. "His mare is in labor and having a hard time."

Rob was an equine veterinarian and was always making house calls for pregnant or injured horses.

"It's a ways out, though. I'll probably be gone all night."

Janine grinned at me. "Slumber party?"

Anything to take my mind off Trent not coming home.

* * *

Unfortunately for Janine, her company did little to improve my mood. As we'd figured would happen, BWI and just about every nearby airport shut down by eight o'clock. Janine and I drank plenty of wine and crashed on the couch that night.

Sunday morning didn't bring any better news. The snow had slowed, but didn't show any signs of stopping for at least six more hours. We were supposed to get another six to ten inches on top of the six that had fallen in the past day and a half. The street in front of the house hadn't been plowed in twelve hours or more. I had no idea what the main roads or highways were like.

Rob checked in with Janine a few times to say he'd made it safely and the mare had given birth to a healthy foal in the middle of the night. The family had given him a bed for the night and offered to let him stay again if the roads weren't clear before dark. So both Janine and I would be husbandless another night.

I sat in a chair beside the Christmas tree and picked at the needles.

"He's been gone so long, I didn't think a few more days would matter," I said as Janine came in with two mugs of hot chocolate.

"Hon, that's exactly why it matters." She balanced on the arm of my chair. "Here, liquid chocolate cures all."

I smiled and inhaled the sugary steam rising from the cup. What made the situation even harder to bear was that Trent and I loved the snow, as long as we were snowed in together. We engaged the neighborhood kids in snowball fights and competitions to build the biggest snowman. Trent liked to take pictures from the front porch to track the different levels of snowfall and melt. He was a real kid when it came to frozen precipitation. He should've been here with me to enjoy the only major snowstorm we'd had all winter.

"I know it's selfish," I said, looking up at Janine, "but I can't wait until he's done with the military. I'm so proud that he's protecting everything I love, but I love him too and I just want my husband back."

"If it's selfish to want your man by your side, then I'm the most selfish bitch there is." She laughs and nudges me to make me smile with her. "I can hardly stand Rob being gone for a couple days, much less months and months. I think you're my hero for keeping it together."

I'd kept it together for a long time. It's not like I didn't know what I was getting into when we got married. It was a fact of life, whether I liked it or not. But the longing was chipping away at my resolve, and I didn't know if I could keep it together much longer.

I managed to keep it together for about eight hours. After that, I found myself flinging candy canes across the living room, yanking ornaments off the tree, unsure of how I'd gotten to that point. A few cups of Irish coffee — heavy on the Irish, light on the coffee — may have had something to do with my breakdown.

"Is it too goddamn much to ask for my husband to be here for just one significant day?" My voice was strangled by tears and an octave higher than usual. "He's missed two Thanksgivings, Christmases and New Years'. Two Valentine's Days. Two of my birthdays and one of his. How is that fair?"

Janine dodged the projectiles and lunged for me, wrapping me in her arms in an attempt to curb my tantrum.

"I know it's not fair. I know. Hey, stop." I struggled against her, but she was stronger than I thought. "You spent a lot of time putting this stuff up, just stop."

I quit fighting her and cried instead.

"This sucks for you, I know. But he'll be here."

"Not tonight, or tomorrow, and maybe not even Tuesday. Everyone else has their Valentine but me."

"It doesn't matter what day he gets here, it just matters that he's coming home to you."

"It matters to me!" I pull away from her.

"Okay, you're right. I'm sorry. I just hate to see you down like this."

I take a deep breath, trying to compose myself.

“Sorry I yelled at you. I'm just so pissed at all of this.”

“I know. We'll just have to hope for a Christmas miracle.”

“The day before Valentine's?”

“Sure. You have the tree, the gifts, the stockings. And you have a wish. No reason not to ask Santa to deliver the goods.”

I laughed, despite the tears that threatened to spill again. She might say I'm her hero, but Janine is mine. I wouldn't have survived Trent's deployment without her constant optimism and friendship.

“Why don't you go take a nice hot shower, or soak in the tub,” she said. “I'll clean this up.”

“You sure?” I hated to leave her with the remnants of my meltdown.

“Of course. You deserve to relax.”

A good long soak did wonders for my mood — that, and the alcohol wearing off. After toweling off and combing my hair, I slipped into the red velvet nightgown I'd purchased for Trent's homecoming and looked myself over in the mirror. There was a soft knock on the bedroom door.

“You decent?” Janine asked.

“Yeah, come in.”

She whistled low and long when she saw the lingerie.

“You know that won't be on long once he sees it, right?”

"That was the plan." According to the original schedule, Trent would have been here by now and I would be wearing exactly this. Or it may have even come off already.

"I got a fire going downstairs. Want to paint each other's nails and gossip about bitches and boys?"

"Yeah, sounds good. Let me put on something more practical."

Janine turned to leave when a thought struck me.

"On second thought, I won't change." I grabbed a black satin robe and slipped my arms in, knotting the belt around my waist. "Still time for a Christmas miracle, right?"

She grinned. "That's the spirit."

An hour later, my finger- and toenails had been painted a pale shade of pink called Seashell, and Janine was sporting Rum Raisin, a deep purple-red.

"Thanks for staying with me. If Trent couldn't be here, I'm glad you are."

"You know I'd be your Valentine any day."

"Give it a few more hours and you will be." I looked at my watch. Almost ten. "I guess Rob's holed up at that farm for another night?"

As if I'd said some magic word, a car horn began to honk and headlights shone through the living room window.

"Nope!" Janine sprung up from her seat and ran to the front door.

Well, at least one of us wouldn't have to sleep alone tonight. The horn continued its frantic blare, even after Janine stepped onto the porch. Then the headlights flashed once, twice, three times. What on earth was going on out there?

I got up and followed the frigid air to the still-open front door. Hardly dressed for the weather, I stood in the threshold and shielded my eyes against the glare of the headlights against all that snow.

Rob waded through the knee-deep snow on the sidewalk toward the porch.

But if that was Rob, and Janine was standing on the porch, who was still in the truck, honking the horn and flashing the lights?

The approaching figure became clearer through the curtain of falling snow (light snow tapering off after dark, my ass!) and my heart dropped to the soles of my feet. I stepped onto the porch hesitantly — halfway because I was barefoot and halfway because I had never put much faith in miracles.

As soon as I stepped forward, Rob killed the truck's engine and hopped out. It was Rob in the truck after all.

He was at the bottom of the steps now. Not Rob, but the other man, the one I still didn't believe was really there.

"I would've stopped and bought you a rose on the way, but nothing was open."

He had the sexy voice of an old-time country singer, slightly husky, with a timbre that resonated deep in the belly. I couldn't see him because my vision was blurred with tears, but that voice belonged to Trent.

I rushed forward and met him on the second step. He dropped one of his bags in the snow when I flung my arms around him and buried my face in his unshaven neck.

“What are you—I mean how did you...”

“Rob drove down there and picked me up.”

I looked from Rob to Janine and back again.

“There was no mare, was there?”

Rob picked up Trent's bag and smiled. “Merry Christmas.”

“Happy Valentine's Day,” Janine said as she took Trent's other bag and followed Rob into the house.

The only gift I needed stood before me, waiting for me to kiss him.

I didn't care that he had at least three days' worth of stubble and it scratched my chin. I didn't care that the wind whipped at the short hem of my robe, or bits of snow fell from his boots onto my legs and feet.

I only cared that he was home, with his arms around me and his lips pressed hard against mine.

