

****Disclaimer**** Scarecrow and Mrs. King is copyrighted to Warner Brothers and Shoot the Moon Production Company. The story, however, is copyrighted to the author. This story is for entertainment purposes only and cannot be redistributed without the permission of the author.

Title: Another Christmas Eve

Author: Mary

Date Written: December, 2002

Rating: PG

Author's notes: This story fits into the 'With Or Without You' universe in between 'Where the Road Goes' and 'Rites of Passage'. And special holiday kudos go out to my great beta team, specifically Vikki, Jean, Pam and Ann. Thanks, guys -- you're the best!

~|~

~~~~~  
"I t's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year . . ."  
~~~~~

"What are you still doing here?" Amanda King Stetson exclaimed in surprise as she popped into her husband's office. "I thought you'd be halfway to Baltimore by now!"

"The damn debriefing's been postponed," Lee grumbled, barely looking up from the files that were spread out across his desk. "The CI A is relocating Ratliffe again. I swear, that man is more elusive than . . ."

"Santa Claus?" his wife supplied as she closed the door tightly behind her. "Eight tiny reindeer? Super secret agents?"

He glanced up, squirming at the look of determination in her expressive brown eyes. "Oh, Amanda," he groaned in exasperation, throwing his pen down on the desk. "You aren't going to start in about this Christmas stuff again, are you? You know better than anyone what my workload is like."

"Billy Melrose always managed to find time to enjoy the holidays when he was section chief," she reminded him with a reproachful shake of her head. "In fact, he made a point of it. He always said we work too hard not to take some time for ourselves at Christmas."

"Well, he didn't have to deal with this Ratliffe business. The man's been under deep cover for ten years. Now he's finally surfaced, and every agency in this town is vying to get a crack at him."

"Lee-ee," she countered, her hands poised on her hips as she drew out his name. "You just finished telling me the Ratliffe debriefing is on hold."

He shifted again in his chair. When his wife managed to turn his name into two syllables it definitely spelled trouble. "Seriously, Amanda," he tried again, "Ratliffe notwithstanding, I'm up to my ears here. I've got three agents out with that Asian flu that's going around, things are just starting to boil with the East German affair and now the Kreshenkov brothers . . ."

"None of that is urgent."

"Where national security is concerned, everything is urgent."

"National security?"

He groaned inwardly; one carefully sculptured eyebrow had risen dramatically. "Yes, well, isn't that what we deal with at the Agency?" he argued, beginning to sweat. "Matters of national security?"

"I fail to see how one defecting opera singer and a few stray lion tamers constitute a clear and present danger, Scarecrow," she glowered, her arms folded ominously across her chest.

"In this business, even the most innocuous cases can take on a life of their own," he stated imperiously before burying his head in his files once again. "You know that as well as I do."

He heard his wife's tinkling laugh. "Yes," she replied dryly, "especially at this time of the year."

He felt a smile tugging at his lips. After almost four years of marriage, it was getting harder and harder to run his usual holiday avoidance patterns. She knew them all far too well.

"Sorry," he mumbled, meeting her eyes with a sheepish grin. "I guess the holidays still make me a little twitchy."

"I know they do," she commiserated. "But I'm working full-time again and, twitchy or not, I need some help."

"Look, Amanda," he said, pushing out of his chair to begin a restless circuit of the room. "I'm always happy to help out at home, you know that. I just don't do this Christmas thing very well."

"Lee-ee-ee . . ."

Three syllables now -- she was definitely turning up the heat. "You know what this time of year means as well as I do," he began, running a hand through his hair.

Her lips curved up in a tiny smile. "Peace on earth and good will towards men?"

"Overflowing in-boxes and agents who want time off," he muttered darkly.

"Cards and letters from people who are far away," Amanda returned, her hands on her hips.

"Three page commentaries regaling the exploits of super-children and tiny little stars that spill out all over the floor," he grumbled, folding his arms across his chest.

"Family and friends," she responded, her voice taking on a stronger tone.

"Our Christmas curse," he countered, pausing for emphasis.

"Christmas curse?" she repeated, her eyes widening.

He nodded solemnly. "Another Christmas Eve, Amanda."

"Oh, Lee," she sighed, letting out an exasperated breath. "Honestly!"

"Just look at the facts," he implored, restlessly walking the room's circumference again. "The evidence is incontrovertible. Take our very first holiday together -- stuck in that cabin with the brothers Karimotzov with World War III about to break out all around us. And then we manage to get sucked into a wind tunnel of intrigue at a damn toy company! I'm telling you," he moaned, his voice rising to keep up with his pacing. "It's always the same. Bullets, conspiracies, a run on the Agency,

the Chameleon and his homemade bomb . . . and let's not forget that mess with Joe in Santarilla." Drawing in a quick breath, he added soberly, "You spent that particular holiday in bed, flat on your back, if you recall."

"Very well, thank you. I **was** the one who was pregnant, after all."

He cringed slightly at her tone; neither of them liked to recall the long, hard months before little Matthew's difficult birth. "I'm sorry," he said, the slightly haunted look in her eyes instantly filling him with remorse. Quickly crossing the room, he slid his hands over her arms with a gently soothing motion. "I didn't mean to stomp all over your holiday cheer."

"I know," she said in a small voice.

Leaning in, he gave her a reassuring kiss on the forehead. "You have to admit, though, our track record is less than stellar."

She let out a deep sigh. "But that doesn't mean history is doomed to repeat itself, Lee. Did you ever think **this** might be our year for a Christmas miracle?"

"I'll believe it when I see it," he answered with a disparaging laugh. Releasing her, he headed for his desk, sinking down disconsolately into his chair.

Amanda stood silently watching him. "Okay, Ebenezer," she said at last, her lips curving into a slow smile. "Just how badly do you want that debriefing with Ratliffe?"

"Pretty damn badly, you know that. The man has information that could shed light on half a dozen pending cases. Why?"

Coming around his desk, she perched predatorily on the edge closest to his chair. "Badly enough to make a little wager?"

Looking up, he encountered his wife's brown eyes. Their teasing sparkle had returned. In fact, they were fairly dripping with anticipatory delight, much the way she eyed their Christmas goose before he carved it. "What kind of a little wager?" he asked nervously.

"Well," she began, "if **I** manage to tie up this Ratliffe business for you today in a neat little Christmas bow, then **you** pitch in wherever requested in any and all seasonal festivities."

"Define 'seasonal festivities,'" he demanded, eyeing her suspiciously. She looked entirely too pleased with herself.

"Oh, the usual. Tree trimming, holiday decorating, Santa Claus . . . "

His eyebrows shot up. "Santa Claus?"

"Yes," she returned with what he could only describe as an absolutely evil grin. "Santa Claus."

Lee repressed an involuntary shudder as visions of overweight elves and crowded shopping malls danced in his head.

"Of course," Amanda challenged with a taunting smile, "that's presuming *I* win."

"That's true," he returned, catching her playful tone. Rising slowly, he leaned his hands on the desk, bringing his face a few scant inches from hers. "So if *you* get anything you want in relation to the aforementioned festivities, just what do *I* get if *I* win?"

Amanda sensuously traced his lips with her finger. "If *you* win," she told him in her sultriest voice, "then *you* get anything *you* want."

"Anything?" Lee echoed, his tongue following the path her finger had just taken.

"Uh-huh," she answered with a breathy sigh. "Any time or any place you want it."

His smile widened into a full-fledged grin. "The CIA has clamped a pretty tight lid on Ratliffe, you know. Even Cartwright, with all his clout as head of this Agency, hasn't been able to pry it loose."

She slowly straightened his tie. "I guess it should be a pretty safe bet then, huh?" she said, tapping the knot softly for emphasis.

"It should at that," he told her with a light laugh as he extended his hand. "Okay, Mrs. Stetson, you've got yourself a wager."

"Well, okay then, Mr. Stetson," she answered with a wink as she slipped her hand into his. "I think you're on."

Despite the bright florescent glow of the office lights, she suddenly looked amazingly appealing. Thankful he'd had the foresight to close the office blinds after lunch, he lowered his mouth to hers.

"Uh-uh, Scarecrow," she teased, avoiding his eager lips as she hopped off the desk. "I wouldn't go making out my Christmas list just yet. The day's still young, you know."

"Not young enough to crack Ratliffe," he informed her with a superior smile.

Chuckling softly to herself, she headed toward the door. "I hope you've been practicing your Christmas carols," she admonished over one very sexy shoulder.

Grinning broadly, Lee settled himself back in his chair. "And I hope you don't find the vault too drafty."

~| |~

~~~~~  
"I t's Beginning to Look a Lot like Christmas . . ."  
~~~~~

"Wow!" Amanda exclaimed as they bobbed and weaved their way through the throng of holiday shoppers. "The stores have really outdone themselves this year. The decorations are so festive, don't you think?"

"I think they've taken a pretty festive chunk out of my wallet," Lee grumbled, holding the two extra-large shopping bags he was carrying at arm's length.

"Honestly, Lee," Amanda told him with an exasperated sigh. "Would it kill you to show just a little holiday spirit?"

"Holiday spirit wasn't part of our deal, Amanda." He shot her a furtive glance out of the corner of his eye. "You know, you still haven't told me how you managed to crack the CIA's very formidable net."

"Oh, I have my ways," she responded with a wicked chuckle.

Lee eyed her suspiciously. His wife had a **very** satisfied look on her face, like the proverbial cat who kept swallowing that poor, unfortunate canary. And he had no doubt she intended to digest him with agonizing slowness.

Letting out a happy little sigh, Amanda slipped her arm through his. "Oh, come on, Scrooge," she said, slowing their enforced march to a more leisurely pace as they traversed the large shopping mall. "This isn't so bad, is it? We haven't had much of a chance to be alone together since our weekend at Pine Top last month."

"Shopping has a few redeeming features," he admitted as he looked down into his wife's deep brown eyes. "But I'd hardly call clawing our way through a pack of bargain-crazed maniacs being **alone**, Amanda. Now, if **I** had won our little bet . . ."

"We'd all be eating half-cooked goose again for Christmas Eve dinner," she finished with a wry grin.

"Maybe," he returned with a deep laugh, "but you'd be eating it with a smile on your face."

Amanda rolled her eyes. "Well, perhaps if you're a very good boy until Christmas, Santa will bring you an extra-special surprise."

"I'm counting on it," he replied with a grin. "So are we almost finished with this little excursion? I must have a pile of work accumulating on my desk."

"I just want to get something for Francine's little girl, then we're all through. At least for this trip, anyway."

He let out a small groan. "I was afraid you were going to say that."

"Lee, you can't buy everything in one fell swoop. People appreciate it when you take the time to pick out something special. Think how amazed everyone will be to get your gifts this year."

"What was wrong with last year's gifts?" he demanded, affronted. "I'll have you know I didn't buy a single scarf."

"I know," she laughed. "You bought wallets. Pre-wrapped, no less."

"A wallet **always** comes in handy."

"Yeah," she stated wryly. "Mrs. Marsten really appreciated hers. Come on," she urged, quickening her step. "The little boutique I'm looking for is just around the corner. It has some really special things."

"For special people?" he teased.

"Exactly. I think you're finally getting the hang of this, Scarecrow."

"Yeah, well, where Francine is concerned, *special* has always been the operative word. What on earth do you get for the baby who has everything? Francine and Jonathan are the most doting parents I've ever seen."

Her eyes widened. "Oh, really?"

His face broke out in a sheepish grin. "Okay, I'll admit that full set of electric trains for Matthew's first birthday might have been a touch over the top. But, Amanda, it was an exact replica of the Canadian-Pacific. What little boy wouldn't love it?"

"You and Phillip and Jamie certainly had hours of fun with it," she said, elbowing him in the ribs.

Lee laughed. "Okay, since you're the resident expert, let's see what you can come up with for Francine's daughter. I'm pretty sure Dior doesn't design in her size."

Pausing, Amanda searched the store windows, her eyes lighting up as she spotted a particularly festive display. "Well, how about that?" she suggested, dragging him over to the little shop.

He frowned slightly. "That's a doll, Amanda."

"I know, Lee. Little girls love dolls."

"This from the woman who mocked my electric trains," he teased. "Should I remind you that little Jackie Stone isn't even a year old yet?"

"You don't play with those dolls, Lee," she informed him with a long-suffering sigh. "They're collectibles." She pointed to a ballerina-clad figure in the corner. "Oh, isn't that one adorable?"

"Oh, yeah, it's adorable, all right." Taking note of the look of rapt wonder on his wife's face, he added in amazement, "You really like all this little girl stuff, don't you?"

She shrugged lightly. "Oh, you know, it's kind of fun to shop for something besides footballs and trucks for a change."

"Is that regret I hear in your voice, Mrs. Stetson?" he inquired softly.

She cast a wistful glance in his direction. "It would have been nice to have a daughter. Don't you ever think so?"

"Amanda," he reminded her gently, "you know what the doctors said after Matthew was born."

She nodded soberly. "I know the odds aren't in our favor."

"More than that. It could be dangerous."

"It's just that sometimes . . ." She sighed, surreptitiously wiping away a stray tear. "I don't know what's gotten into me," she said, her voice suddenly choked with emotion. "I'm not usually like this."

He gave her shoulder a playful nudge. "Maybe you've overdosed on holiday cheer. We oughtta get out of here before it's fatal," he warned her in a conspiratorial whisper.

"Very funny," she retorted, a slight quaver lingering in her tone.

Shifting his bags to one arm, he reached for her hand. "Yes, a daughter would have been nice," he told her in a gravelly whisper. "Especially if she'd turned out to be as beautiful as her mother. But Amanda," he added, tightening his grip on her slender fingers. "To tell the truth, just thinking about it scares the hell out of me. I, um . . . well . . . I just don't want to lose you, that's all," he finished quickly.

Leaning into him, she gave him a brief kiss. "You're not going to lose me. I'm perfectly content with my men. Now come on," she said, reassuring him with her sudden smile. "We're on a mission, Scarecrow. We've got to secure that doll, then get back to the Agency."

"You're not fooling me for one minute," he declared, thankful for the return of her jovial mood. "You just can't wait to start dreaming up the next round of holiday torture."

With an evil chuckle, she pulled him into the store. "I'm going to enjoy having you at my disposal for the next two weeks."

"Just remember," he told her, his voice low and inviting. "I come complete with a full range of special holiday services."

~III~

~~~~~  
"Deck the Halls with Boughs of Holly . . ."  
~~~~~

Jamie King looked down at his stepfather, squinting slightly behind his thick glasses. "Hey, Lee," he called, his voice slightly muffled by the wind. "Is this one of those 'special holiday services' Mom keeps talking about?"

Pulling up his collar against the unseasonably cold December air, Lee let out a deep sigh. "Unfortunately, yes."

"So if *you* were the one who lost that bet with her, how come *I'm* the one stuck up here on this ladder?"

Lee glanced up from the jumbled mass of Christmas lights strewn haphazardly around the yard. "Because *you're* the one who accidentally dumped his box of contacts down the toilet," he replied with a satisfied grin, "and *I'm* the one who's going to write you a check to replace them."

Jamie gave him a rueful smile. "I'm all yours, boss," he teased, dangling a string of tiny white lights in front of his stepfather's nose. "Where do you want these to go?"

"Your mother said all across the house. Front and back," he added with a small groan.

Jamie seemed to take it in stride. "Yeah, that's where she usually wants 'em," he said, beginning to attach the tiny clips to the edge of the gutters with methodical precision. The boy had Amanda's hands, Lee realized suddenly, and that same look of single-minded concentration she applied to every job she tackled. Ratliffe and those guys over at Langley had never stood a chance once she had them in her sights. For that matter, neither had he.

Jamie's voice interrupted his wool gathering. "Hand me up another one, will ya?" his stepson shouted to make himself heard over the wind.

Nodding, Lee eyed the pile of lights suspiciously. He could have sworn the blasted things had multiplied while his back was turned. "You guys usually hang all these strings?" he asked skeptically.

"Yup," Jamie assured him, solemnly nodding his head. "It takes twice as many for this house as it did for the old place on Maplewood. Mom said it's a really big job."

"Yeah, I can imagine," he grumbled as he bent to sort through the strands again. "I can't believe she does this every year."

"How did you think it all got done?" Jamie asked, one eyebrow raised in a perfect imitation of his mother.

"I guess I never really gave it much thought."

"Yeah," Jamie snickered. "You're usually in kind of a Christmas fog."

"Very funny." Grabbing the nearest strand, he passed it up to Jamie. "Start hanging, hotshot," he teased, "or that cute little Tricia Neville is gonna be lookin' at you in those glasses on New Year's Eve."

"Yes, sir," Jamie quipped. As he shook out the strands of lights, his grin slowly melted into a studied frown.

"What now?" Lee asked, matching his stepson's look.

Jamie tossed the lights back at him. "Lee," he said in the patient, resigned tone usually reserved for his little brother. "You've got to untwist 'em before I can hang 'em."

"Oh, yeah, right," he mumbled. "I knew that." Squatting down on the ground, he pulled gingerly at two hopelessly entangled strands, cursing softly to himself as he worked. He'd never finish Amanda's latest Christmas chore in time to catch the football game. And he could almost taste that special bowl of guacamole he'd stashed in the back of the refrigerator, too.

A slightly taunting voice drifted over him. "Need some help, Lee?"

"No, thanks," he grunted, struggling to disentangle himself from the wires that had somehow wound themselves around his ankles. "I've got it covered."

"Yeah," the boy replied with his mother's teasing laugh. "I can see that."

Lee bit back the retort that sprang to his lips. Jamie was only a kid, he reminded himself; and *his* kid, at that. "Who left these things in such a mess, anyway?" he griped, giving his right leg a vigorous shake.

"That would be Phillip. It was his turn to take them down last year."

"Well, he did a damn lousy job. Someone should have supervised him."

"Oh, somebody did," Jamie informed him smugly. "Remember that day he was just dying to go to the movies with Tina Townsend?"

"Was she the little red-headed cheerleader?" he asked, trying to recall last year's parade of girls. Phillip seemed to change his girlfriends as often as he changed his socks.

"No," Jamie said with a grin. "She was the one with the really big . . ."

"Oh, yeah," Lee said with a silly smile. "*That* one. I never could remember her name."

Jamie laughed. "Anyway, Phillip kept going on and on about how good ole Tina would never go out with him again if she missed the movie previews, so you finally told him just to toss the lights in a bag instead of replacing them in the boxes like Mom said."

"I did?"

"Yeah," his stepson smirked, "you did."

Lee cleared his throat. "Whatever happened to that girl, anyway?"

Jamie snorted. "Oh, Phillip dumped her that night right after the movie."

"I should have known," he muttered with an exasperated sigh as he returned to his task. Balancing precariously on one foot, he bent to remove the constricting wires from the other. "Your brother is slipperier than the proverbial eel," he added, "especially where work is concerned."

"That's funny," Jamie grinned. "Mom said exactly the same thing about you."

"Ha, ha," he began just as a particularly strong gust of wind hit. "I'll have you know . . ." The rest of his sentence was lost in a small maelstrom of howling wind and blowing leaves, and Lee suddenly found himself sitting ignominiously on the cold, hard ground.

He heard his stepson's chortle as he clamored down off the ladder. "So, Lee," the boy teased as he knelt beside him, "you weren't kidding us about being this really big spy, were you?"

"I'm beginning to wonder," he said, giving the string of lights another vicious tug. "Shit!" he cried in aggravation as his bonds instead grew hopelessly tighter. "Give me a hand, will you?"

"Don't let Mom hear you say that," Jamie warned, inclining his head toward house.

Twisting, Lee followed his gaze. He could see his wife's remonstrative eyes staring back at him from the picture window, little Matthew tucked snugly in her arms. "Dad-dee," he faintly heard his son call, two chubby little hands pounding on the windowpane.

"Oh, great," he moaned. "Just what we need -- an audience."

"Yeah," Jamie agreed as Phillip joined the tableau at the window. Craning his neck, he peered more closely at his older brother. "Hey, Lee," he said suspiciously. "Isn't that your guacamole?"

Lee turned again in time to see Phillip salute them both with a large tortilla chip. "It sure is," he grimaced as Phillip swiped the chip through the bowl of guacamole with an exaggerated flourish. Pausing just long enough to toast them once more, he crammed the loaded chip into his mouth.

Lee glanced longingly at the warm house, where Phillip was undoubtedly watching the football game, then down at the balled-up strands of lights still littering the ground. "Christmas," he muttered darkly as he caught his stepson's eye. "Bah, humbug."

~IV~

~~~~~  
"Oh, Christmas Tree, Oh, Christmas Tree . . ."  
~~~~~

"I think it needs to move a little to the left."

"Amanda," Lee grouched from beneath the towering pine branches, "make up your mind. "You just told me to move it to the right."

"I said to move it a 'smidge' to the right," she replied testily. "Not halfway around like that."

The pin-like needles raked his face as Lee struggled to adjust the tree's overly large trunk in the too-small stand. "And just how the hell am I supposed to know what a 'smidge' is," he grumbled, giving the screws an extra-hard twist.

"A 'smidge' is . . . well, a 'smidge' is a 'smidge'," Amanda shot back. "Everyone knows that."

Lee bit back the pointed remark about feminine logic that immediately sprang to mind. The seas had finally started to calm after last night's fiasco, and he had no desire to wade into stormy waters again.

"Okay," he sighed, pushing the branches out of his eyes as he scooted out from beneath the tree. "How's that?"

Amanda walked slowly from side to side, studying his handiwork from every angle. "It still lists a little," she pronounced at last with a frustrated sigh.

"Where?" he said, moving over to stand beside her.

"There," she replied, pointing to the branches on the left side of the tree.

Tilting his head, Lee frowned. "Looks okay to me. Are you sure it's not an optical illusion?"

"I have twenty-twenty vision, Lee," she snapped, "even if *you* don't."

Lee shot a glance at his wife. The expression on her face would have made Frosty the Snowman shiver. "I told you I was sorry, Amanda," he began, letting out a long breath. "We aren't going to hash this out all over again, are we?"

Folding her arms across her chest, she turned to him with a stern frown.

Evidently they *were* going to hash this out again, he sighed. This situation definitely called for drastic counter measures. Planting a smile on his face, he took a step toward her.

His wife took a step backwards.

"What I still don't understand," she griped, her voice growing as prickly as those damned pine branches, "is how one of the top operatives in this country could fail to notice that a six foot tree was missing from the top of the car!"

"It was snowing pretty hard outside," he explained, circling cautiously around behind her. "And I was more concerned with the front tire on the Jeep. It looked a little flat."

Her muscles tensed as he rested his hands tentatively on her shoulders. "Don't think those magic fingers of yours are going to help you worm your way out of this one, Pal," she warned, twisting slightly.

Altering his attack, he let one finger barely graze the back of her neck in a way guaranteed to make her shiver. "I should have checked the top of the car," he murmured in an especially soothing tone, "but I was in a hurry to get home."

"Oh, so *that's* why you stopped off at Nedlinger's," she stated, her voice still quivering with anger even as her body responded subtly to his touch.

"Hey, I was just following your instructions," he told her, increasing the pressure as his fingers began to work their way down her shoulders.

"My instructions?" Her reproach dissolved into a whimper of delight as he hit a particularly sensitive spot.

"Sharing a little holiday cheer with my colleagues," he whispered softly in her left ear.

He felt her suddenly stiffen again. "Colleagues who just happened to steal our Christmas tree!"

"Oh, Amanda," he sighed. "It was just a harmless little holiday prank. You know those 'dirty tricks' boys in 'Scenarios and Ciphers' tend to get a little over zealous sometimes. Remember the year they swiped all of Billy's fruitcakes?"

"I'm sure Jeannie appreciated their humor as much as I do." She let out a deep moan, finally relaxing as she leaned back into him. "It's just that Matty was so excited yesterday, waiting for you to come home with our tree. I hated to see him disappointed."

"He wasn't disappointed," Lee murmured, his lips in her hair. "He had a great time going back to the lot last night with us to pick this one out. And he's going to have an even better time helping to decorate it."

She laughed lightly. "Helping to pull apart the ornaments, you mean."

"Yeah, our son is kind of single minded. Just like his mother," he added in a throaty whisper.

"Just like his father," she countered, reaching around to squeeze the outside of his thighs.

Her teasing touch felt wonderful. "Your muscles really are tight," he told her, his voice taking on a slightly deeper edge. "I might be able to do a more thorough job with this massage upstairs."

"I'm not feeling *that* mellow yet, Stetson," she quipped, slipping out of his grasp. "Besides, Matty will be up from his nap soon."

He thought he caught a small hint of longing in her tone. "Jamie could watch him," he said, flashing her his most inviting smile.

She shook her head. "Mother drove Jamie to pick up his new contacts, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. Then maybe Phillip . . ."

"Phillip has twenty-twenty vision, just like his mother," she laughed. "You won't be able to con him into helping you the way you did with Jamie."

"I have no intentions of conning him," Lee grinned. "Bribery now, that's another matter."

"Bribery?" Amanda slapped him playfully in the ribs. "It doesn't matter anyway. I think he's coming down with that twenty-four hour flu bug that's going around, and I don't want Matty to catch it."

"Damn," he mumbled. "Is there a conspiracy around here?"

"Yeah," she grinned. "A Christmas conspiracy, Stetson. Courtesy of one friendly little wager."

He gazed ruefully into his wife's teasing eyes. "When will I learn not to play in the big leagues?"

"You play, you pay," she intoned solemnly.

Lee gazed at the slightly crooked tree. "Tell me about it," he grumbled as he crawled back underneath the prickly branches once more.

~V~

~~~~~  
"Come, They Told Me . . ."  
~~~~~

"Dotty," Lee called, waving as he spotted his mother-in-law searching the crowded shopping mall. "Over here."

Squealing with delight, little Matthew barreled toward him. "Daddy, Daddy!" he cried, hurtling himself full-tilt at his father.

"Whoa, there, little pal," Lee said, squatting to corral the speeding torpedo that was his son. "Hey, what are you doing here?"

The little boy jumped up and down excitedly. "See Santa!" he exclaimed, his hazel eyes sparkling.

Lee felt something tug at his heart. Little Matthew was brimming over with enthusiasm, and he marveled that anyone could feel such pure holiday joy.

"Oh, Matty," Dotty gasped breathlessly as she caught up to them. "Don't let go of Grandma's hand when we're in the mall, sweetheart."

Matthew pointed to his father with a grin. "Daddy," he said, as if he'd somehow discovered a wonderful secret.

Dotty shook her head. "I swear, Lee, that child has more energy than Phillip and Jamie combined. Or maybe *I* just have less this time around," she finished wryly.

"Matthew," Lee whispered with a teasing grin as he rose. "You'd better take it easy on your grandmother. She can only dance half the night away these days."

Dotty regarded him with a droll smile. "Very funny."

"Funny, funny," Matthew repeated, tugging sharply on his father's pant legs.

"So, Dotty, what's this Christmas emergency of yours?" he asked, bending to scoop his small son into his arms. "I came as soon as you called."

"I know you did, dear, and I was really sorry to bother you, but I didn't know what else to do because Amanda had promised, you see, and I had these plans . . . and well, I hope I didn't pull you away from something . . ." Pausing dramatically, she cast a nervous glance around the crowded mall. "Something classified," she murmured with wide eyes.

Lee leaned closer. "Like a secret meeting? Sorry to disappoint you, Dotty, but my trench coat's at the dry cleaners today, so I was just catching up on my paperwork."

"Paperwork? Now that doesn't seem very mysterious." Her grin drooped just a bit as she added, "You and Amanda always try to make what you do seem so . . . well, ordinary."

"In many ways, it *is* ordinary," Lee laughed.

"Hmmm . . . if you say so, darling. But I have to tell you, I've never once seen James Bond fill out a form."

Lee rolled his eyes. "James Bond didn't have to worry about the Congressional Oversight Committee. So, what about this crisis of yours?" he prompted, anxious to get his mother-in-law back on track. Dotty West could veer off on a tangent quicker than anyone he'd ever known. Well, almost anyone, he thought with a small grin.

"Well, Matty and I were just about to leave for 'Santa Land'," Dotty began, "when Amanda knocked on my door. She's not working today, you know . . ."

Lee nodded, rubbing Matthew's back soothingly as the little boy squirmed in his arms. "She was doing something for the boys' school, I think she said."

"Yes, she was supposed to volunteer at the gift wrapping station for the Rockville High Booster Club." Dotty nodded in the direction of the festive booth set up in front of Martindale's Department store.

Lee felt an anxious gnawing in the pit of his stomach. "Was?" he asked quickly. "What happened?"

Dotty made a face. "Well, poor Amanda must be coming down with that flu Phillip had, because Lee, dear, when she walked into the coach house, she looked absolutely green!"

He sighed. "She *was* feeling kinda tired this morning, but she thought it was because she was up and down with Matthew last night. He's been having a hard time sleeping."

"He's just like Amanda was at that age," Dotty told him with an indulgent smile as she patted the little boy's blonde head. "She used to get so excited at Christmastime. She and her daddy had this little tradition -- they always went together to pick out the Christmas tree -- and Carl used to tell her that the salesman was a personal friend of Santa Claus. Children," Dotty sighed, her voice losing its dreamy quality as she narrowed her eyes. "They really will believe anything."

"Yeah," Lee replied with a smile. "I guess so."

"Anyway," Dotty went on, "one look at my daughter, and I knew she was definitely in no condition to stand on her feet wrapping Christmas presents all afternoon."

Lee nodded his agreement. "She really does need to take it easier on her day off."

"I'm glad you agree, dear, because she suggested I give you a call." She eyed Matthew fondly. "He's been so excited about seeing Santa. It's practically all he's been chattering about all morning."

"It's no problem, Dotty," he assured her. "I'll be happy to take Matthew to see Santa. Right, Pal?"

"Santa," the boy echoed, his hair flopping as he vigorously nodded his head.

"Well, I suppose you could," Dotty put in doubtfully, "if you wanted to have tea with Edna Gilstrap and her granddaughters."

Lee curled his lip. "Edna Gilstrap?"

"Yes -- one of our neighbors from Arlington; a nice woman, but a bit of a busybody. Still, we do always get together at this time of the year. In fact, we're all supposed to meet at Santa Land just about. . . ." She quickly consulted her watch, pronouncing with a flourish, ". . . now."

"I don't understand," he said as Dotty extricated the wiggling child from his grasp. "If you don't need me to watch to watch Matthew, then what . . ."

His words caught in his throat as he followed her gaze to the gift-wrap booth. A rather buxom woman in a red and green Christmas sweater smiled and waved. "Now wait a minute, Dotty," he protested. "You don't mean that you and Amanda want me to . . . to . . ."

"Wrap presents," she informed him sweetly. "And it wasn't **my** idea, it was Amanda's." Dotty's lips curved up in a wry smile. "She said infiltrating a simple little Christmas wrapping concession would be no problem at all for one of the top agents in this country."

His eyes narrowed. "I'll just bet she did."

"Why, that's exactly the word she used."

"What word?" Lee asked with a puzzled frown.

Dotty smiled. "**Bet**."

Lee let out a loud groan. "Just how long was her shift?" he demanded, eyes wide. The big-chested blonde had abandoned her booth and even now was heading toward him.

"Oh, not too long," Dotty snickered, beginning to inch away. "You should be home, ah, sometime after dinner."

Lee's eyebrows shot up. "After dinner? Dotty . . ."

"Oh, yoo-hoo, Lee-ee," the blonde hummed, lengthening her stride as she zeroed in on him.

Dotty grinned as she caught Lee's eye. "Now, don't worry, dear, Mrs. Townsend is a **very** friendly woman. You must remember her daughter, Tina? Phillip dated her last year."

"Yeah," Lee choked out as his eyes drifted from Mrs. Townsend's face to settle a bit lower. "I see the resemblance."

"Come on, Matty," Dotty chuckled. "Let's say goodbye to Daddy so we can go see Santa."

Matthew's faint 'bye-bye' was lost in Mrs. Townsend's enthusiastic greeting. "It's just so wonderful of you to do this," she cooed, slipping her arm through his as she ushered him to the small gift-wrap booth. "We don't get many fathers volunteering, you know." Her big blue eyes raked over him, seemingly taking in every nuance of his form. Moistening her red lips, she murmured, "Amanda is a **very** lucky girl."

"Uh, thank you, Mrs. Townsend," he stammered, running a hand through his hair. Flu or no flu, his wife was definitely going to pay for this one.

Mrs. Townsend smiled widely, revealing two rows of perfect teeth. "Now, Lee," she crooned, crowding in next to him. "Since we're going to be working so closely together here, you can just call me Tami . . . "

~VI~

~~~~~  
"Santa, Baby . . ."  
~~~~~

"No, Amanda."

Leaning back against the window of his office, she shot him a cajoling smile. "Lee, it's Christmas Eve."

"No," he reiterated, shaking his head firmly. "Absolutely not!"

As she continued to fix him in her gaze, he let out a deep moan. "Come on, honey," he tried, grasping for the nearest straw. "I think I've been a pretty good sport about all this Christmas stuff, don't you?"

As Amanda remained stubbornly silent, he continued, "I've hung lights, trimmed trees, braved the shopping mall two -- no, make that **three** -- times. I even managed to survive six grueling hours with that barracuda Tami Townsend. But this! Amanda, **this** is where I absolutely, positively draw the line!"

Folding her arms, she took a small step forward, tapping her foot on the carpet. "Billy used to do it."

"Once, Amanda. Billy did it once, and only then because he lost a . . . a . . ."

She regarded him with an arch smile. "Exactly."

Looking down ruefully at his red, fur-clad form, he shook his bearded face. "I feel ridiculous."

"Oh, I don't know," she said, the corners of her mouth turning up mischievously. Moving across to him, she ran her hands across his well-padded belly. "Did I ever tell you about my little Santa fantasy?"

"Since when do big fat guys with red noses turn you on?" he demanded suspiciously.

"Since you slipped into this suit," she told him, smiling as her eyes took him in from head to toe. "You're looking pretty sexy this year, Santa," she whispered suggestively.

"Hmm. Then maybe I should hang onto this get-up for while." Grinning, he leaned in to kiss her.

Scrunching up her face, she abruptly turned away.

"Amanda?" he asked, puzzled.

"A-choo, a-chooo," she cried helplessly, doubling over as sneeze after sneeze overtook her. "Aa-choooo . . ."

"Are you okay?" he inquired, quickly moving to her side. "You're starting to look green again."

"I'm starting to . . . a-choo . . . feel green again."

"You're still not over that flu," Lee sighed. "Maybe you should go see Doc Kelford."

She held up her hand as he stepped closer. "I don't need to . . . a-choo . . . see Dr. Kelford. It's just your . . . a-a-choo . . . your . . . your beard!" she exclaimed, sneezing yet again. "It has a really weird smell, and it's making me . . . a-chooo!"

Bringing the false whiskers to his nose, he took a few tentative sniffs. "Seems okay to me," he told her, tilting his head to one side. "Maybe the flu did something odd to your sense of smell."

"That's ridiculous. There's nothing wrong with my sense of smell," she snapped, putting the length of the office between them. "See, it's stopped now."

He took a step toward her. "Amanda . . ."

She shook her head, slowly backing away. "Besides," she assured him, "it's a common fact that a woman has a much more finely tuned sense of smell than a man. Who found that little gas leak last month after you kept insisting you couldn't smell a thing?"

They were interrupted by a lively knock. "Hey, you two," Francine questioned as she popped her head in the door. "What's the hold up in here? The natives are getting restless."

"We're almost ready," Amanda replied, giving Lee a look. "We just had a few last minute costume adjustments."

Francine stepped all the way into the office, her expression dissolving into an impish grin. "Why, Santa," she crooned in decidedly affected tones. "You look absolutely fabulous, darling!" Sidling over to him, she gave both his cheeks a little pinch.

Lee glowered ominously. "Can it, Francine."

Ignoring his look, she patted his broad belly. "But I think someone's been overdoing the holiday goodies. Maybe Mrs. Claus here should put you on a diet."

"Nobody's going to put anyone on anything," he growled, glaring at her from beneath a pair of bushy white eyebrows. "Unless it's night duty for the next month."

"My, my, aren't we testy," Francine laughed, turning to Amanda in mock horror. "He wouldn't be trying to weasel his way out of this, would he?"

"Oh, he would never even consider welching on a bet," Amanda assured her with a knowing grin. "Not one he lost fair and square." Cocking her head, she caught his eye. "Would you, Scarecrow?"

Lee tightened his big black belt around his considerable padding. "Let's get this over with," he groaned as he plodded toward them.

Francine sniggered. "After you, Agent Claus," she retorted, holding the door open.

"At least this damned holiday is almost over," he mumbled, shooting her a look as he strode into the bullpen. Drawing in a deep breath, he shouted out a loud, "Ho, ho . . ."

The last 'ho' was lost in an avalanche of cheers and applause, punctuated with a few raucous cat-calls. Taking in the overflowing bullpen, his eyes widened. Turning accusingly to Francine, he grumbled, "This little party was just supposed to be for Field Section. There are guys from Overseas Ops, Fabrication, and . . . wait just a minute," he stated darkly. "What the hell is the steno pool doing here?"

Francine smiled up at him, her big blue eyes rounded with studied innocence. "Gee, Santa," she informed him sweetly. "You know how quickly rumors make the rounds here at the Agency. Once everyone heard you were going to be making an appearance, they were all suddenly just dying to take part in the holiday festivities."

"Francine . . ."

"After all, it *is* Christmas Eve," she added with a teasing laugh. "You wouldn't want to disappoint all those good little girls and boys now, would you?"

"Just you wait," he called ominously as Francine disappeared into a crowd of merry-makers. Shaking his head, he turned a sharp eye on his wife.

"I didn't know anything about the steno pool, Lee, I swear," she put in quickly, shooting a murderous look in Francine's direction.

"Don't worry," he murmured, leaning in close to her ear. "What goes around, comes around. As soon as Beaman starts hitting the punch, I'm gonna give him her new unlisted number. Jonathan will have a fit."

"That will . . . a-choo . . . serve her right. A-choooo! Oh, Lee," she moaned. "That beard has definitely got to go!"

"I couldn't agree more," he said, turning back to his office. "I've put in my official appearance. It's time for a strategic retreat."

A deep belly laugh stopped him in his tracks. "Not so fast, Santa," a booming voice called from over his left shoulder. "This party is just starting. You can't cut out now, and that's a Christmas order!"

"Billy," Lee exclaimed, while Amanda's eyes widened. "I thought you weren't getting in until tonight."

"I took an earlier flight from New York," he explained, still laughing as he grasped Lee's hand. "And now I'm really glad I did. That outfit is priceless, Scarecrow."

Lee gave his boss a rueful grin. "Thanks."

"And I hear congratulations are in order on this Ratliffe business. You, too, Amanda," he said, including her in the praise.

"Oh, it was nothing," she said a little too quickly, pulling Lee toward the office door.

"On the contrary," Billy replied. "Lee, this partner of yours is still too modest for her own good."

Stopping short, he looked at his wife. "And just what does she have to be modest about this time, Billy?" he inquired, rocking back on his heels as Amanda picked some imaginary lint from her red sweater.

"It was nothing, really," she murmured, refusing to meet Lee's eye. "Don't you want to get out of this suit?" Tugging on his arm, she drew him toward his office once more.

"I wouldn't call it nothing, Amanda," Billy put in, blocking their path. "When I called that morning to tip you off that the CIA's inter-agency blackout was about to be lifted on Ratliffe, why, you jumped right on it!" Billy placed a hand on both their shoulders. "Even out of the field, you two still make a pretty efficient team."

Lee's eyes narrowed. "'Efficient' isn't exactly the word I'd use at the moment. Fair and square, huh?" he muttered, turning to his wife. "What do have to say for yourself, partner?"

Coughing slightly, she stepped strategically around Billy, placing him solidly between them. "You know, I think you might be right after all, Lee," she said, rubbing a hand lightly over her throat. "Maybe I *will* stop in to see Dr. Kelford. In fact, I don't think it should wait another minute."

"Amanda . . ."

She gave him a wry smile as she backed toward the double doors. "You can never be too careful about your health, you know."

~VI I~

~~~~~  
"Merry Christmas, Darling . . ."  
~~~~~

"Well, it looks like we did it," Lee grinned as he pulled Amanda down beside him on the sofa. "We made it through another Christmas Eve."

"I know technically it's after midnight, but we **are** still up," Amanda told him with a sarcastic little laugh. "Aren't you afraid some unseen bogey man might jump out of the closet?"

"Very funny," Lee responded with a roll of his eyes. "Matthew is tucked away upstairs in bed, your mother and the boys went to the late church services with Joe and Carrie, and I'm fairly confident even the Agency is buttoned up soundly for the night. I think we're safe."

"You're beginning to sound remarkably like an optimist, Stetson," she told him with a grin as she teasingly felt his forehead. "You haven't fallen prey to some exotic holiday fever, have you?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Not unless you conned the chemical warfare boys into slipping something into my eggnog."

Amanda turned to him with a chagrined look. "I said I was sorry, Lee."

"Sorry for tricking me or sorry for getting caught?"

"Yeah," she smiled sweetly. "Besides, I didn't **technically** cheat, you know. I only bet you that I could wrap up the Ratliffe debriefing. **How** I intended to do it is completely irrelevant."

"A minor point. You knew I'd assume . . ."

She chuckled softly. "You know what they say about people who assume."

"That they deserve what they get?" Lee asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Something like that," she snickered, swinging her legs across his lap. "So, Stetson," she whispered, snuggling closer, "tell me the truth. Is Christmas really **so** bad?"

"I guess it's had its moments," he grinned looking down into his wife's sparkling brown eyes. "I mean, here we are on Christmas Eve, sitting on our own couch, in our own family room, without having faced one life-threatening crisis all day."

She laughed lightly. "Well, there **was** that one moment this morning in the bullpen when I thought I might be a goner."

"I guess it **was** kinda touch and go for a minute there," he grinned, clasping his hands behind her back as he pulled her closer. "Good thing you beat such a hasty retreat, agent King."

"Impeccable timing," she laughed, leaning forward to give him a quick kiss. "I learned it from my partner."

"Hmm, this partner of yours must be a pretty exceptional guy."

She gave him a sly look. "Oh, he has his moments, too."

"I'm glad you think so," he laughed. "Remember, Amanda . . . two weeks . . . anything I want . . . anytime I want it."

"A promise is a promise," she sighed in mock consternation. "I guess I'll just have to tough it out."

"I'll try to make it as palatable as possible." Lowering his mouth, he captured her lips in a long, slow kiss. Drawing back slightly, he asked, "How's that?"

"Palatable," she answered with a growing smile. "So, does this mean I'm forgiven for all the holiday torture I put you through?"

"I'm working on it," he teased, touching his lips to hers again.

"Maybe there's something I can do to help," she muttered softly against his mouth.

Leaning back, he raised his eyebrows. "What exactly did you have in mind?"

Opening the top buttons of his shirt, she bent to place a kiss in the hollow of his throat. "What exactly would you like?" she answered, her voice reverberating softly against his skin.

Lee shifted on the couch. "How long until your mother and the boys get back?"

Pulling away slightly, she checked her watch. "That depends on whether Joe lets Phillip or Jamie drive home."

"Damn," he sighed. "I guess we'll have to put this on hold. Phillip always beats Jamie to the driver's seat."

"Anything you want, Mr. Stetson," she teased. "That **was** our arrangement".

Lee cast a quick glance over her shoulder. "Hmm. Well, then, maybe you could go give the fire a stir. I wouldn't want it too get too chilly in here," he added with a teasing grin. "For later."

Letting out a soft, lilting hum, she made her way over to the fireplace. "You know, since we do have at least a few minutes alone, maybe this would be a good time to give you your present," she said, her voice growing strangely quiet.

"I thought we were discussing my present," he replied with a short laugh.

Bending gracefully, she retrieved the poker, aimlessly stirring the fire's dying embers. "This one is special," she said, her voice cracking slightly.

From his perch on the couch, Lee watched his wife. There was something different about her tonight, something he couldn't quite put a name to. The fire had lent her cheeks an especially rosy glow, and as his eyes took in the barely discernable curves hidden beneath the folds of her skirt, he felt a deep stirring in his chest. Not from desire, though he clearly wanted her, but from the aching perfection of the moment. *His* wife, standing by *his* fire, in *his* house.

Unable to stay still, he rose from the couch. "Hey, Mrs. Stetson," he whispered hoarsely as he moved to wrap his arms around her from behind. "Forget about this stupid bet. I already got my present this year -- one I'm very thankful for."

"What present was that?" she sighed, leaning back into his embrace.

He chuckled softly against her cheek. "You forced me take the time to stop and count the Christmas ornaments."

"Is that something like smelling the roses?" she laughed.

"Even better. I guess I never realized just how much you do around here to make the holidays special. I promise you won't have to prod me into helping from now on."

"That's quite a turnaround for our resident Scrooge," she told him with a little laugh. "There must be Christmas miracles after all."

"I don't know. It's just when I look at how excited Matthew is about the holidays, I . . . well, I don't want to miss out on all this stuff any more." He shrugged lightly. "I can't explain it any better than that."

"You don't have to. I understand perfectly. Children and Christmas," she added with a small sigh. "It's magic."

Stepping back, he took her by the shoulders, slowly turning her. "You gave that back to me, Amanda," he murmured, tenderly catching her eye. "Thank you."

Lifting her hand, she let her fingers trail lightly across his cheek "Lee, there's something I have to tell you," she began in a breathless rush. "Ever since this afternoon, I've been trying to find just the right words, but I guess there really aren't any *right* words, so I should just, well, say it."

"Say what, Amanda?" he asked, his forehead furrowing into a puzzled frown.

"I mean, I didn't really think it could be true," she continued, oblivious to his confusion. "But when I saw Dr. Kelford today, he said, well, maybe it *was* possible after all. But then I still didn't think, because, you know, the doctors were so sure . . ."

"Amanda," he interrupted, more forcefully this time. "Stop. You're making me dizzy. I have no idea what you're talking about."

She drew in a deep breath. "I'm pregnant."

"You're what?" he asked, one lip curling up in disbelief.

"Pregnant," she said, her eyes misting over as she gazed up at him. "It's true, Lee," she affirmed as he began to back slowly in the direction of the couch. "We're going to have another baby."

He looked at her incredulously. "How on earth did that happen?"

"The usual way," she informed him dryly. "I guess maybe we should have actually done some skiing at Pine Top, huh?"

"But I thought . . . I mean . . . I, um . . ." Running a hand through his hair, he lowered himself stiffly down into the waiting cushions.

Moving to sit beside him, she took his hand. "I know what you're feeling," she sighed. "I've been in a fog myself ever since Dr. Kelford told me. But it's true. I called my O.B. after I saw him, and she fit me into her schedule this afternoon. Remember when I asked Francine to cover for me?"

"I thought you were just avoiding me over this silly bet business," he said in a low voice.

Amanda laughed. "Well, *that*, too. Anyway, Elaine did an ultrasound, and, well . . ." Catching his eye, she bit her lip.

"When?" he asked simply.

"The end of August. I'm not very far along."

Raising a finger, he slowly traced the curve of her cheek. "Amanda," he croaked. "I don't know what to say."

"Say that you're happy," she said, her voice trembling as she tightened her grip on his hand. "I am."

"I am happy," he began in halting voice. "I mean, I guess I'm happy. I don't know what to feel."

Her fingers tightened around his. "Nothing's going to happen, Lee," she said, her voice growing stronger. "To me or to this baby. Really, it's going to be okay."

He looked at her sharply. "Did the doctor say that?"

"I don't need Elaine to say it," she said, avoiding his eye. "It's just something I know, that's all."

"Amanda," he said, trying to banish the horror of those long hours in the hospital after Matthew's birth from his mind. "Are you sure . . ."

Reaching up, she cupped his cheek. "You're just going to have to trust me on this, okay?"

Lee nodded. "I . . . I'm sorry," he said at last, his voice little more than a gasp. "I know I'm not reacting very well. It's just . . . I love you," he finished weakly.

"I love you, too," she said, fitting herself into the curve of his arm. "Please don't worry about me."

He let out a long sigh into her hair. "I'll try."

"Good. Because that's the best way to help me, you know?"

Nodding numbly, he leaned back into the couch, pulling her solidly against his chest. Damn that Christmas curse of theirs, he thought gloomily as he watched the yellow flames leisurely lick the logs in the fireplace. It had struck yet another Christmas Eve, this time with particularly cruel cunning. Bombs and bullets he could deal with; but this tiny threat couched in such joy was another matter entirely.

Resting his chin on his wife's head, he listened to the old clock on the mantle silently tick off the seconds. He knew she wouldn't break their silence; she had lived with him far too long for that. Instead, she'd simply let him hold her, matching her breathing to his until the cold, hard knot in his stomach started to loosen.

He felt the beginnings of a smile tug gently at his lips. Another baby . . . it wasn't something he'd even let himself think about after Matthew. Maybe . . . just maybe . . . Amanda was right. After all, if his wife could believe so firmly that everything would be fine this time, then maybe so could he.

The slamming of car doors jolted him out of his reverie, and they both looked up, Amanda smoothing her hair. "It sounds like the troops are home," he said, giving her knee a gentle squeeze. "Do you want to tell them our news?"

She smiled softly. "Tomorrow. Tonight I kind of want to keep this just between us."

He looked at her with a growing smile. "Our own special Christmas miracle, huh? Maybe this time we'll get that little girl you want so badly."

"Now that *would* be a miracle," she said, her grin matching his. Leaning in to kiss him, she added a soft, "Merry Christmas, Daddy."

"Yeah," he answered, pulling her to him once again. "Merry Christmas."

~~~~~  
~~~~~