



Christmas Surprise

a short story

by

Ginger Hanson

dear Santa,
I hope you will
come to see
I left you
cook

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Published by Saderra Publishing

Digital Edition 1.0

This PDF edition is

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CHRISTMAS SURPRISE

“I wish Daddy could be here for Christmas morning,” Alicia said. “He makes Christmas last longer.”

Julie Tabor smoothed the comforter covering her ten-year-old daughter. “How does Daddy make Christmas last longer?”

“He takes a long time to open his presents and that makes it last longer. You open presents too fast, just like me.”

Julie grinned. “It’s a girl thing. I got it from my mother, you got it from me. We like to rip open our gifts. No dilly dallying involved.”

Alicia hugged her tattered, but well-loved bear. “Yeah, I could never go as slow as Daddy.” Dark blue eyes so like her father’s peeped up at Julie. “I don’t wanna go to bed.”

“Remember our deal? You could stay up as long as you stayed awake. You’re the one who fell asleep on the couch.”

“But what if Daddy calls? It’s already Christmas morning in Afghanistan. Will you wake me if he does?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll wake you up. Now, it’s time to get some sleep.” Julia kissed her daughter’s cheek, enjoying the clean little girl smell. “Sweet dreams, pumpkin.” She paused to crack the bedroom door slightly ajar before she stepped into the hallway. Tampa padded behind her, deciding to play affectionate cat and coil himself around her ankles as she walked.

For a few moments, only the rumbling purr of the large cat broke the silence. Then a scrabbling sound cut into the comforting purr. Julie froze, fear prickling the hairs on her nape. Tampa’s ears pricked up, he uncurled his smokey gray body from her feet, and stalked to the center of the hall.

Scratch. Scratch.

Tampa tensed into a crouch with his tail swinging to and fro and his brilliant green eyes fixed on the ceiling. Trusting the cat’s ability to pinpoint sounds, Julie followed his gaze. A burglar in the ceiling? She imagined a dozen scenarios as she waited for the noise to be repeated.

The distinct scrabble of tiny feet made Tampa’s ears swivel as he avidly followed the sound.

“Mice!” Julie relaxed. “That figures. If it’s not water spewing from the washing machine or a flat tire on the car, it’s mice.” She glared at the ceiling’s invisible but noisy occupant. Sleep, already elusive, would be impossible now.

She might as well check the locks. At the end of the hall, she stopped at the front door. Like an automaton, her fingers slid over the dead bolt. Still locked. The inner garage door was next. Resisting the temptation to switch on the flood lights, she contented herself with trying the door. She hated to go into the garage after dark, even though Keith had installed locks on all the outer doors before he left. Next came the sliding door in the den. She pushed aside

the vertical blinds at the bottom of the door, her fingers cooled by the air seeping in around the door. A quick tug reassured her the security bar rested firmly in the tracks.

It would keep an intruder from opening the door, but not breaking the glass to gain entry.

It was the weakest point in her defenses, but they lived in a quiet neighborhood she reminded herself. There had yet to be a burglary in the subdivision. She refused to let her worst case scenario queen put her heart into overdrive at the unlikely possibility of an intruder.

Her ritual complete, she walked into a cheery kitchen redolent with the scents of Christmas baking. She may as well have a cup of tea. She certainly couldn't sleep with rodents crawling over her head, not that she had slept much in the five months since Keith left.

She put the kettle on a burner and dropped a tea bag into Keith's favorite mug. The Army attack helicopter hovered with the aviation school logo *Above the Best* centered over its cockpit. A tear fell onto the tea bag. She blinked her eyes, stemming the tide of self-pity. How she hated the long nights.

The kettle whistled, demanding her attention. She poured water over the damp tea bag. Keith's last letter lay in the clutter of the kitchen counter. She reached for the comfort of his neat, familiar handwriting. The greatest benefit of his tour in Afghanistan were his letters. She had a box full of memories because he'd gotten hooked on letter writing after she and Alicia sent him letters.

Phone calls, email, and texting was a great way to communicate, but they couldn't replace tangible things, like pictures hand drawn by your daughter or

cookies baked by your wife, or “I love you” written in your husband’s own hand.

Letter in one hand, hot mug in the other, she threaded her way across a living room made smaller by the Christmas tree shimmering in the corner. Its limbs were loaded with ornaments collected during a twelve year marriage, but this year, like their family, part of the collection was missing. A box of carefully selected ornaments had been shipped to Afghanistan months ago to brighten a small tree in a strange land.

She curled into the plush armchair, kicked off her slippers, and tucked her feet beneath her robe. The sense of anticipation that accompanies every Christmas had been heightened by the expectation of a phone call from Keith. But he was in a war zone and his military duties came first.

The duty of a military spouse was acceptance that the job often came before the family. That her husband’s days were spent flying dangerous missions that might take his life.

No. She would not, could not let her mind go there.

The startling ring of the doorbell broke the late night stillness. Once again, Julie froze. Who on earth could be ringing her doorbell this late at night?

She tiptoed to the door, wishing she hadn’t left so many lights blazing in the house.

“Julie? Open the door, sweetheart. It’s me.”

“Keith!” Julie’s fingers fumbled with the locks, joy making the simple complicated, but she got the door open. “It’s you!”

Her husband swept her into a hug, his familiar scent tinged with crisp cold air. His mouth found hers and as they kissed, all the petty annoyances of their

separation melted away. She fitted herself against him, feeling her world settle around her.

Keith grinned down at her. “Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

“You’re the best Christmas present ever!” And Julie couldn’t wait to tear off the wrappings.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I won my first writing contest with a short story about my puppy when I was 12 years old. Encouraged by winning a pen set, I decided to become a writer. Over the years I've written everything from novels to aviation handbooks.

In 2003, Kensington published my first two historical romances. Three more novels followed. When I realized I was doing all the promotion, I decided to start my own micro publishing company. Saderra Publishing was born.

If you enjoyed "Christmas Surprise" you may enjoy my other works. I've published historical and contemporary romance novels, novellas, and short stories, I also have a book of humorous essays and two writing skills books on dialogue.

Visit my website at www.gingerhanson.com, or like me at [Facebook](#), or check out the scoop on Tassanoxie at [Miss Mabel Talks Tassanoxie](#) If you're a writer, you might find my blog [Just Ginger](#) an aid on this journey we call writing.

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Published by Saderra Publishing,