

THE CHRISTMAS PORTRAIT

AN ASPEN GOLD BONUS SHORT STORY

LIZZIE STARR

CHAPTER ONE

Christmas Eve Morning

Bright December sunrise streamed through the wide, curtainless windows to spill across the foot of the expansive bed. Jakob Spencer watched the light crawl over his quilt-covered feet and grinned. He hadn't been convinced moving the bed to face the window would be a good idea, but his new wife had been right.

He and Willa had recently celebrated their first anniversary, yet he still felt like a young bridegroom. Perhaps not so young, but Willa made his life perfect. Even the inevitable downs of any relationship were now tempered with joy and love.

Easing one arm from under the covers, he reached for his love. Her side of the bed was empty, the pillow cool. Jakob shook his head. His Willa had always been an early riser and today's plans certainly had drawn her from his side even earlier than usual.

Today was Christmas eve and they still had much to do before the extended family and friends arrived for the late

afternoon festivities. No time to laze in bed, he had best get started, too.

Hanging his other hand over the edge of the mattress, he snapped his fingers. No cold nose pressed against his palm in response. He chuckled. The traitor dog had followed Willa from the room. Max loved her as much as Jakob did, and like Jakob, would do anything she asked.

Willa had asked Jakob to finish wrapping the smaller gifts, so he'd start there, adding a few surprise packages of his own.

Dressed casually in worn jeans and a flannel shirt, he discovered a small thermal pot of coffee on a tray next to the desk in his study. He bypassed the strong, slightly bitter scent and stepped directly to the window. There, near where the old bandshell had once stood, Willa stood still as the large borzoi bounded through the snow. She must have sensed him watching—she always did—because she turned, shaded her eyes, then waved.

The distance hid her expression, but Jakob felt her smile. He returned the wave, wiped the fog of his breath from the window with his forearm then reached for the coffee.

A healthy sip warmed him. Ah, a blessed way to start the morning.

The small pile of presents and wrapping paper on a portable table didn't thrill him as much. He seldom admitted to failings, but he sucked at wrapping gifts. Handing over a card with a check was so much easier. This year, though, Willa insisted on actual presents for everyone who planned to attend. Along with a few extras just in case someone showed up unexpectedly.

When Willa challenged him to come up with ideas for the friends of the family, he'd been in his element, using his vast network of resources to search their backgrounds and interests. He'd learned some interesting tidbits—most of which he'd forget and never expose.

He had loved the challenge and came up with some clever gifts. If he did say so himself.

Upping his next personal challenge to make a large dent in the wrapping before Willa returned, he sat his coffee mug on the floor beside his chair, took a deep breath, and studied the jumbled pile of presents, wondering just where to begin.

His lack of skill would show more on the larger boxes, so he started there while he felt fresh and not discouraged. He had a feeling that by the time he reached the bottom of the stack, he'd be tired and frustrated. His disinterest might not be as evident on the smaller packages.

Jakob's mind wandered while he wrapped. Willa had been working on something she refused to tell him about. He'd reigned in his curiosity, but it'd been damn difficult. Until the past year so much of their lives had been shrouded in secrets and regrets. He'd wanted nothing to ever stand between them again. A holiday surprise was a different creature. Wasn't it?

Besides, he'd planned a few secret surprises of his own. But if Willa didn't come clean soon, it was his duty to push the issue. He grinned. Pushing Willa often led to interesting situations. God, he loved the woman.

The soft scrabbling of Max's claws sounded through the thick door. After a quick glance at his completed work, Jakob widened his grin. The gift wrapping was nearly completed, and the colorful packages looked pretty good. He just hoped no one looked too closely at the over-abundance of tape or the mismatched paper covering the ends of a couple boxes.

The door opened and he stood. The tape dispenser toppled from the table. He glanced down to where a length of tape stuck to his shirt sleeve. Lower, the roll turned, the weight of the dispenser slowly releasing a long sticky strip in its fall to the floor.

Willa stepped across the threshold and burst into laughter.

"It's not funny," Jakob complained as he tugged the tape from his clothing and wadded the escaping length in his hand. He rolled his gaze to the ceiling. "Okay, it is. But look, sweetheart, I've almost finished."

Once she'd admired and complimented his work, Willa rose to her toes and kissed his cheek.

With a low, playful growl, Jakob wrapped his arms around her waist and lifted her higher for a proper good morning kiss. Once he'd lowered her to the floor, Willa took a short step back.

"And good morning to you. It's gorgeous outside. A perfect day for our family to be here to celebrate with us," she said.

Her cheeks were still reddened from the morning chill and her eyes sparkled with joy. She'd never been more beautiful. Just how many times a day did he think that exact thought? How many moments were there in a day? "I love you, Willa."

"And I love you, Mr. Spencer. It's going to be a busy day. Are you ready?"

"I've been ready. Will you help me finish up the last of these packages? Then I'm yours to command."

She tapped her cheek in a thoughtful manner. "Sounds like a plan. Do you want to divide and conquer so we have time to rest before the party?"

As much as he ached to spend every minute of every day with her, Jakob nodded. "Good idea. Where's your list?"

She tugged a folded paper from the pocket of her skirt and sat at the portable table to flatten the crinkled page. Using the pen he'd written the gift tags with, she tapped the list. "Since I'm going to help you finish up this wrapping, I'll go ahead and cross it off the list.

He peered over her shoulder and sighed. The list was longer than he'd expected. He needed more fortification than his cup of coffee offered. "Have you had breakfast?"

“I asked chef Wilson to send something up when I came in. Should be here soon. Now, pull up another chair and finish your job while I sort through this list.”

Knowing the chef’s breakfast would be far more elaborate than the coffee and toast he’d planned to make in the suite kitchen, Jakob couldn’t fault Willa for wanting a substantial meal with the busy day before them. So, he did as she requested, straightening out the tape situation before starting on the last few packages.

A chime sounded from the vestibule, and Willa rose to direct the server to the study. Once the breakfast cart was positioned and the young woman sent away with Christmas wishes, Willa brought their plates to the table. The hollandaise covering the thick eggs benedict made Jakob’s mouth water. “Are you sure this is on my diet?”

“A little splurge now and then won’t hurt.”

“I have a feeling there’s going to be more than a few splurges the next couple of days. Even though I said it wasn’t necessary, Cookie is determined to bring cupcakes. And you know Wilson’s not holding back for the buffet.”

Willa shrugged, a casual gesture he loved. “After the holidays will be soon enough to get back into a normal routine. Now, eat while it’s hot.” She scooped a tiny bit of sauce onto her fork and watching him, licked the utensil clean.

“You’re a cruel woman, my darling Willa.”

After her grin he turned his attention to the delicious meal, washing down the richness with his favorite dark roast coffee.

Tossing his folded napkin across the empty plate, he sighed with satisfaction. “So, what’s next?”



A few busy hours later, Jakob molded Willa to his side and drew a thick, cable-knit afghan over their laps. He stared into

the crackling flame in the fireplace before pressing a kiss to her temple. "That wasn't as bad as I thought."

"Team work. Of course, having a loyal staff who stuck around to help finish up the decorations didn't hurt."

"I thought about closing the lodge over the holiday."

"I know. It would have been nice to allow all the employees to spend the time with their families. At least the majority of our guests are family and don't expect all the extras. I think almost everyone who's staying here has checked in."

Tempted to call the front desk to find out, Jakob took Willa's hand. "I can't wait to see everyone. And watch them open their gifts. I feel like a kid. A kid waiting for Santa."

"Are you sure you don't want to wear that old Santa suit we found in the attic?"

He shuddered. The wool monstrosity had smelled of moth balls and age. And he was fairly certain the dark spots weren't soot. "Nope, we'll leave Santa up to the parents. They might need the ploy to get their kids to sleep tonight."

"Speaking of sleep... I need a quick cat nap before we go down to welcome everyone."

"I'll close my eyes, too, sweetheart. Can't promise I'll sleep, but I'll rest. Want to stay here by the fire?"

She curled her feet to the side and covered her bare toes with the afghan. "Here is perfect, love."

It was perfect. He cushioned her head against his chest and listened as her breathing softened in sleep. Then he closed his eyes and mentally ran through the list of family and friends joining them later. As successful as counting sheep, his thoughts slowed and he relaxed in the warmth of the room and his woman's love.

"Jakob?"

The soft voice broke through his pleasant dream of dancing with Willa under a full moon. He grumbled softly.

"Jakob, it's time to wake up. Almost party time."

Soft breath flowed past his ear. Keeping his eyes closed, he grinned. She must be kneeling beside the couch. He angled his face toward her. "Wake me with a kiss, sweetheart."

A large, wet tongue slurped across his cheek. He bolted upright, swiping at the wetness. "Max."

The doggie smile greeting him chased away any irritation. Jakob shook his head and held out his hand. Max pressed against Jakob's palm and he obliged with a good scratch behind the hound's ears.

Willa's laughter drew Jakob's attention to where she sat on the arm of the couch watching him. He gave her a mock scowl. "Not the kiss I wanted, woman."

"I know. But Max was quicker." She chuckled again. "Hurry up now. We've got to head downstairs in about twenty minutes."

Jakob covered a yawn with his palm. "How long have you been awake?"

She'd dressed in a long, green and red plaid skirt with a ruffy white blouse. A small top hat decorated with holly and ribbons sat at a flirtatious angle on her soft gray hair. What was it she'd called the thing? Yeah, a fascinator. She certainly fascinated him. "You look beautiful and festive, sweetheart."

"And it's time for you to dress to match."

He nodded, rose and after brushing his lips over hers, moved toward the bedroom.

"Everything's laid out for you," Willa called after him.

"Like I can't dress myself," he grumbled. As long as she hadn't messed with what he'd agreed to wear, there'd be no issue.

Less than ten minutes later, he drew a comb through his hair. He'd drawn the line at a top hat to match Willa's fascinator, compromising with a fat bow tie printed with holly leaves. He cast a quick glance at the full-length mirror and brushed a bit of lint from his slacks. The green was so dark

as to appear almost black. His white button-down shirt was crisp and his plaid waistcoat matched Willa's skirt. Thank goodness he didn't look like he was wearing a costume.

Willa smiled, but didn't say anything as she adjusted the tie, then took his hand and dragged him toward the elevator. "Let's go. Deke just called up. Everyone's here."



CHAPTER TWO

Christmas Eve: The Party

The low rumble of conversation accented now and again with laughter and the calls of children made Jakob smile. Hand in hand, he and Willa stood outside the open doors to the small ballroom, watching the crowd. Willa looked up at him, her violet eyes sparkling. “We did it. Almost everyone is here.”

He nodded. “A better percentage than I’d hoped for.”

“Percentage? That’s a fine way to think about your family, dear.”

Chuckling, Jakob lifted Willa’s hand to his lips. “Guess you’ll never be able to take the business out of this old man.”

“Shall we go in?”

“We shall.”

They slipped in without anyone noticing and moved toward the tall Christmas tree filling one corner of the room. Despite the piles of packages distributed artfully across the tree skirt, the display hadn’t drawn the interest of his guests. Jakob ducked his head to hide his grin. Everyone must think

the gifts were only props. They obviously hadn't looked at the unprofessional way some of them had been wrapped.

Standing beside the tree, he and Willa waited until they were noticed and the room quieted. He cleared his throat. "Welcome, everyone. Willa and I are pleased you've chosen to spend part of your holiday with us. Please, talk, eat, have fun and we'll open gifts in..." Jakob made a show of checking his watch. "... in one hour. Merry Christmas!"

Willa waited until the return calls of 'Merry Christmas' faded. "You may have noticed the tent across the room. When the elves are ready, this space is for the young, and young at heart. Games, activities, and special treats will keep you entertained."

"Will Santa be there?" a young voice called.

Willa gave a dramatic sigh. "No, I'm afraid not. You know how busy Santa is tonight. But he did send a few elves to help out."

At the cue, the tent flap drew to one side with a wide red ribbon. A pair of Santa's helpers gestured broadly. "Come in, come in," they called.

An immediate stream of children rushed toward the tent.

Jakob grinned. His secretary, Andi, and her husband, Mark, never failed to amaze him. He was pretty sure the lodge would fall apart without the Paulsons. He scanned the room, his gaze landing on his head of security. Or Deke. The lodge, and Jakob, were lucky to have such loyal and giving employees. No, not just mere employees. They were family, too.

He grabbed Willa's hand. "Come on, let's go."

Willa chuckled. "Slow down, old man. You're as bad as the kids."

"I should hope so. It's Christmas. Look around at our family and friends. I want to talk to everyone."

"Maybe we should have had your reception line."

"Nope, woman. This is better."

Overly dramatic, she rested her free hand against her chest. “What? Where is my husband? What have you done with him?”

“Not what I’ve done, love, but what you’ve done. For me. For my family. For us. Now, come on.” He kissed her cheek and tugged her toward the closest cluster of guests.

They moved around the room in a slow circle, chatting with each person and spending extra time with their great-grandbabies. Jakob even joined in a game of holiday bingo with the younger folks in the tent. Thankfully, no one had been impatient when he finally noticed it was well past his declared present opening time.

It took Deke’s stern, good natured command to encourage everyone to fill their plates at the buffet, then find a place for the gifting. The Paulson elves graciously handed out the packages, and the gifts were opened one at a time. Rather than experiencing a mass opening, Jakob wanted to witness each person’s reaction. Especially those guests—the friends of family members—who probably didn’t expect anything.

He could barely keep his seat.

The head elf consulted a long strip of parchment, then directed the distribution of gifts, starting with those few who needed to leave early. Like Jakob’s sister.

After unwrapping her gift, Naomi, assisted by her grandson, Dusty Cavanaugh, paused by Jakob’s chair, but directed her words to Willa. “Thank you for the scarf. It’s lovely. Hand-dyed, isn’t it?”

Willa nodded. “One of the artists at the Old Stone Church. You should stop by to check out his weaving. He’s a master of fiber art.”

“I’ll do that. Jakob, I wish we could stay longer. This afternoon has been delightful. I’ve so enjoyed visiting with everyone. Next year, though, you and Liz must coordinate so these big family gatherings aren’t on the same day. Dusty and I

have stayed longer than we should have. You know how Liz frets over her celebration.”

Jakob chuckled. “She’s been hosting your family Christmas eve for years. I should have remembered when we started our planning.”

“It’s okay this year, brother mine. You’re not accustomed to having to consider the plans of so many at one time. I’d like to tell you it gets easier, but as families grow and spread out, coming together is a challenge.”

His sister had the right of it. He was trying, but if it weren’t for Willa, he would have given up—or turned everything over to the lodge event planner. Who was currently at the Cavanaugh gathering. “As I’m learning. Our families have more moving parts all going in their own directions than any business I’ve ever considered.”

With a soft chuckle, Naomi kissed his cheek. “Let’s get together in a couple weeks. I’ll catch you up on all the Cavanaugh happenings.” She focused her bright green gaze on Willa. “Thank you again. For everything.”

A look passed between the women and Jakob understood he was the subject of their unspoken communication and tacit approval.

Willa gestured and Deke appeared at her side. “There’s a crate filled with gifts for the Cavaughns in the coat room. Would you mind helping load it into their vehicle?”

“Willa, you shouldn’t have,” Naomi protested. “But I’ll make sure to add them to the pile. I swear, I don’t know why Liz even put up a tree. You can hardly see the decorations with all the packages. Merry Christmas.”

Jakob watched Deke escort his sister from the ballroom, then turned his attention back to the fun. Next on the gift list were the tiniest members of the family. While their parents unwrapped the infants’ gifts, Willa assured him, again, the crib toys were both fun and educational.

Andi gathered the older children and teens around her

and distributed the wealth of gifts. The toys Jakob understood and had enjoyed helping Willa choose something for each child. But he still wasn't convinced about the collectables Willa had insisted the teens would love. He saw no purpose for the vinyl, large-headed figures in their square, see-through boxes.

The exclamations of delight proved Willa correct once again. She elbowed his side. "Told you so."

Offering her a long-suffering sigh, he acknowledged her wisdom. "So you did. I concede to your prowess in gifting, my love."

With the young folks gathered in a corner examining their treasures, the elves moved on to the adults' presents. While Jakob thought these packages might not be as thrilling, the energy and excitement remained high as all eyes watched each unwrapping. Laughter, cheers, and occasional sighs of delight rounded the room. Perhaps he wasn't as terrible at choosing gifts as he was at wrapping them.

As though sensing his thoughts, Willa touched his arm. "If you simply listen to people, you can often discover what makes a perfect gift."

"My listening skills are fine, sweetheart. One doesn't become successful in the business world without being able to hear the layers of meaning beneath the spoken words. Business and life aren't all that different."

"I suppose not. Oh, hold on. I want to see this young woman's reaction."

Jakob followed Willa's gaze to where a group of Stick Pony employees gathered not far from Jackson and Ryder. Jakob nodded to himself. Anyone who wanted to work for the camp or equine hospital had been vetted, both by Jackson and Ryder, and to a certain extent, by Jakob. Not that he was interfering with his grandsons' business, but old habits were sometimes good habits.

This young woman had a secret that, if used maliciously,

would cause pain and heartache. Or with care and understanding, she could bring joy and new beginnings. If she didn't come clean soon, he'd need to have a talk with Bonita Zhang. And he really wanted to avoid that kind of meddling.

When handed a package, the dark-haired woman's expression showed disbelief and caution. But after she carefully unwrapped the lumpy gift to discover a set of matching dog harnesses designed to fit her miniature dachshunds, she turned a beatific smile to the red-haired man next to her.

A relative newcomer to Spencer, the Olde Town shop owner had also recently taken on the duties of the local blacksmith. Relieved he didn't have to transport the lodge horses a great distance for shoeing, Jakob remained curious about Konnor MacDhuibh. He hadn't been able to discover much about the farrier, other than he was the grandson of a successful event planner in Nebraska. And an excellent silver smith as well. Jakob patted the small package tucked into his pocket. Willa would love the necklace's intricate knot pattern. His last gift of the day for his lovely wife.

"What's that? Repeat please." Mark Paulson's voice rose over the low murmur of conversations. He stood in the center of the room with one finger pressed against his ear and nodded. "Understood."

He spread his arms. "Ladies and gentlemen, I've just received an alert from the North Pole. A message is being patched through our system from New Zealand." He held up a remote and a huge screen lowered to one side of the Christmas tree.

"Did you know about this?" Jakob asked Willa.

Another click of the remote brought a picture of a clear azure sky with an expansive vista of mountains and bright blue water. After a moment Cora and Murphy Webster stepped into the frame and waved. "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from Queenstown, New Zealand," Cora said.

Grinning, Murphy continued, "It's about one o'clock on Christmas afternoon here. We wish we could be there with everyone today. Just know our love and good wishes are winging their way around the globe to you."

The couple waved again. "Merry Christmas!"

The screen went blank.

"I had no idea," Willa whispered. "I don't think Shannan and Trinity did either."

Jakob found his niece, Shannan, and her daughter with their arms around each other, Shannan dabbing at her eyes with the hem of her sleeve. She waved off Mark's concern and mouthed 'thank you' to Jakob. Wishing he could claim credit for the thoughtful gesture, he shrugged and her eyebrows arched. Then she matched his shrug and delight filled her expression.

The weight of sadness surrounded his heart. Shannan's smile was the image of his brother's. But even if David had known about Cora's pregnancy, he would still have lost his life attempting to save others. The strange hand of fate had brought Cora and her daughter together, and filled an empty space Jakob had long tried to ignore. Not exactly a Christmas miracle, but a family miracle all the same.

Andi moved to her husband's side and the Christmas elves waved to the crowd. "Time for us to return to the North Pole," Andi said. "Have a Merry Christmas everyone!"

Exiting to applause, cheers and 'thank yous', the couple paused by Jakob and Willa. Mark handed her a heavy square package. "Deke's," he said.

Willa turned to Jakob, a concerned expression dulling the sparkle in her eyes. "I wonder what's keeping Deke. It shouldn't have taken that long to load up one box of gifts. One big box. But still."

"I hope there's not a problem somewhere on the property," Jakob said. "Maybe I should—"

A slight commotion at the doorway drew his attention.

After the Paulsons passed through, Deke entered, turned back and gestured. He repeated the movement with more command, then stepped to the side. A young woman entered, followed by a tall man with stone-gray hair.

The woman took two slow, halting steps forward while the man moved to the side, leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. Jakob studied him a moment, sensing something odd, something different he couldn't put his finger on. Then the blacksmith greeted the man like an old friend. Interesting. The prospect of more investigation filled Jakob with anticipation. He was up to the challenge.

A sharp gasp jerked his attention to the tables where the Burnham side of his family had gathered. His niece Muffy stood with her hands covering her mouth, staring at the new arrival. "Isabeau?" she whispered.

Muffy's parner pushed past her with one hand extended. "Isabeau." She rushed toward the woman, Muffy close behind. The two paused only a moment before engulfing their daughter in a tear-filled hug.

So, despite ignoring his invitation, the prodigal daughter had returned at Christmas. The perfect holiday miracle.

While the family reunited and the rise of renewed conversation filled the ballroom, Jakob sat to relish and absorb the family moments. He glanced at his twin grandsons, Hunter and Heath, and their sister, Miranda. Each of them had been a prodigal as well, only recently coming to call Spencer home. Ryder had been gone for five years before returning home. While Jakob hadn't been able to claim Jackson at the time, he'd been delighted when his grandson had returned to take over the animal clinic.

Jakob made a silent Christmas wish that Isabeau's return would make their family group just as happy.

It wasn't long until their guests gathered their gifts and stopped to say good night and merry Christmas. Willa chuckled. "This is almost like a reverse reception line."

He and Willa followed their guests from the ballroom and out onto the wide portico, waving as the last vehicles disappeared into the clear night. Stars twinkled and the moon brightened the snow-covered land. Shadowed drifts hovered beneath the distant trees. If a deer would happen to wander onto the property, the scene would be holiday card perfect.

The party had been a success. The whole day so much more than he'd expected or hoped for. He wrapped his arm around Willa and tugged her close. "Best Christmas ever."



CHAPTER THREE

Christmas Day Brunch

Once chef Wilson personally delivered the simple yet lavish meal and Willa shooed him away with an envelope containing an extra bonus for working on the holiday—even though he'd insisted, Jakob joined her in the family dining room. She fussed over the place settings around the crowded table and stood back. "It won't be long and we won't be able to fit everyone in here. As it is, we're going to be bumping elbows."

"Not a problem. I'm going to enjoy that." There hadn't been a full family gathering in this room since his daughters were teenagers, and now he had great grandchildren who were only a few years from their teens. "It's long overdue, sweetheart. My heart's heavy for all the years we've missed days like this."

Willa moved closer and wrapped her arms around his waist, resting her cheek against his chest. "I wish your youngest daughter was here. I know Elyse never liked me, but there's an emptiness without her."

"I'd be happy simply to know she's doing well. But even

with his resources, Heath hasn't been able to find out where she's at. Or," he paused and took a deep breath, dreading the possibility. "Or if she's even alive."

"All we can do is send wishes for her health and happiness out into the universe. Maybe that will bring her home." Willa stepped back and gave him a grin. "Hopefully someday you'll have a moment like Janelle and Muffy did last night."

The joy and hope evidenced of his nieces' reunion with their daughter after so many years relaxed Jakob's shoulders, but he couldn't shake the reality of his daughter's decisions. "I won't hold my breath. I won't give up hope either."

A chime rang, indicating the private elevator was on the way. He took Willa's hand. "Let's go greet our guests. Any guesses who will be the first to arrive?"

"Greet our guests, huh? Still missing that reception line you didn't have yesterday?"

"You know me well, woman. Perhaps I'm turning over a new leaf for the future."

"I'll believe that when it happens. I'm guessing it'll be Zoe and Chet. I asked her to help me finish setting up the meal."

Standing beside an elaborately decorated tree nearly filling the vestibule, they waited for the elevator doors to silently slide open.

"Merry Christmas!" Zoe called. Carrying a large, bulging bag, Chet followed. Behind them, Ryder and Vianna smiled and waved.

"Come in, come in." Jakob eyed Chet's burden and asked, "More presents?"

With a long-suffering sigh, Chet nodded but winked. "You should know how difficult it is to stop Zoe once she gets started gifting. I swear she has a little Santa in her DNA. Where do you want me to put these?"

Jakob thought a moment, then turned to Willa. "There's no space in the dining room. The study?"

Willa's half-smile and arched eyebrow brought a rise of

suspicion. She was up to something. He appreciated the surprises she continually brought to his life, so he'd let her have her moment.

"No," she said. "I have a better idea. Zoe, will you double check the place settings? Chet, follow me." Willa patted Jakob's chest. "And you escort our guests to the dining room. Vianna looks ready to collapse."

"Oh, no. I'm fine," Vianna protested.

As the others followed Willa, Jakob studied how his grandson's very pregnant wife absently rubbed her belly. "You can't fool me, young woman. You overdid yesterday. You and those triplets you're carrying. Today, you rest and let us take care of you."

"That's what I've been saying all morning, Granddad," Ryder said. He widened his eyes. "All morning."

Jakob offered Vianna his arm. "Come along, Vianna. Ryder, the elevator's on the move again. Will you greet our family and send them to the dining room? I'll get Vianna settled."

Jakob remembered how he'd felt when his first wife had been pregnant with Zoe. Now her son had three babies to worry about. Relief relaxed the tension in Ryder's face. "Thanks, Granddad. Maybe she'll listen to you."

Vianna chuckled. "For now. I really need to kick off these tight shoes. I should have worn tennis shoes, no matter what fashion says. Of course, Ryder would have had to tie them for me. I can't even see my feet, let alone reach them."

Within fifteen minutes everyone had arrived and gathered in the crowded dining room. Hunter's, Miranda's and Jackson's babies shared a portable crib in one corner. Nearby, a small table had been set less formally for the older kids. Sadly, Jakob stared at the table. Two more places should have been set there. Matt had brought his boys to the party yesterday, but had declined the family invitation. Even when Jakob's granddaughter, Nikki had

been alive, the proud man had never felt he belonged in the family.

The boys were his great-grandsons and now that most of his family had returned to the Spencer area, Jakob would do whatever he could to help Zach and Stevie, and their father, feel welcomed. He just needed to be given the opportunity.

Jakob moved around the room much as he had the day before, joining in conversations for a short while before moving on. He perched on a low chair to listen to the tale Madison wove about her colt, her story capturing both his and Alex's attention. When he sensed Willa standing at the head of the table, he lifted his palm to her until his granddaughter finished. Then he rose and joined his wife.

"Welcome everyone, on this blessed Christmas day." Jakob reached for a goblet filled with a bright mimosa. "A toast to our family. Even though some are missing from this table. To those in heaven, may their memory be a comfort to our hearts. To Elyse, wherever she may be, I wish happiness and peace. And to each of you here, Merry Christmas."

Lifted glasses and a solemn 'Merry Christmas' was followed by a more cheerful greeting and applause when Zoe returned to the table carrying a large white platter displaying an impressive crown of roast pork surrounded by a *mélange* of roasted vegetables and herbs. Jakob moved his plate to allow her to set the platter in front of him. He held the gold-plated carving knife in his hand for a long moment. He'd hoped for this day for years, longed for a day filled with his family.

"Who wants the first slice?"

"Me," Alex shouted from the kids' table. Then the boy ducked his head and mumbled an apology.

Jakob made the first cut through the juicy meat, making sure he had a good portion with the bone attached. "No need to apologize for being hungry, my boy. Bring your plate. Maddie, bring yours and I'll give you the second slice."

Once his great-grandchildren were settled at their table with full plates, Jakob served the adults. They passed plates around the table and for a brief moment, he felt like the reformed Grinch at the Whoville feast.

The conversation slowed as his family enjoyed the meal. He stored away the varied compliments on every dish to pass on to the chef—along with another bonus. The meal was outstanding, the sides of veggies, potatoes and salads every bit as tasty as the succulent roast.

Even better was the company. He wished they could be together like this every year, but also realized that each of the small families had their own lives, their own traditions to build and enjoy. The thought made him both happy and a bit melancholy. Ah, but wasn't that life?

Willa squeezed his hand under the table. Her soft smile told him she sensed the dichotomy of his thoughts and reminded him their family ties were growing stronger each day.

Experience had taught him hard lessons, and Jakob took nothing for granted. He supposed that contributed to his success—and to the failures of his past. For the billionth time he wished he'd known his son as he was growing up. That he'd made more effort to heal the breach once Sean had discovered Jakob was his father.

He glanced down the table at Jackson. There had been anger, a wealth of anger in the young man as well, but his coming to accept Jakob as his grandfather had been far easier than Jakob expected. Or deserved.

Another squeeze to his fingers brought Jakob back to the moment. He leaned toward Willa. "Thank you, sweetheart."

"For what?" Her smile said she knew, but wanted him to say the words.

"For keeping me focused. For understanding. For loving me and my family."

The soft, musical clink of silver against crystal drew his

attention. The table quieted and everyone focused on Jackson. The tips of his ears reddened. Interesting. Jakob leaned forward.

Jack cleared his throat. "I just wanted to say... well, I..."

Kate leaned into her husband's side. "You can do this."

He glanced at her and his tense expression eased to a smile. "Thanks, I know. I just needed the reminder." He rose and focused on Jakob and Willa. "A little over a year ago, my life changed. What I thought I knew about my family wasn't the truth. That truth was... difficult."

Amazed that his grandson's thoughts seemed to mirror his own, Jakob gave a single nod of encouragement.

"But we, as a family, worked through it. And by family, I mean everyone here. My best friend was really my cousin."

Ryder scooted back his chair, rose, and bowed low.

"Sit down, fool," Jack admonished with a grin. "I played with Heath and Hunter when we were kids. And to be honest, I always pretended we were family. I wanted brothers." He grinned at Mandy. "Oh, and maybe a sister, too. Now, unbelievable as it still feels sometimes, you *are* my family. It's been an amazing year. I'm honored to be a Spencer. Thank you for accepting me."

After a moment of silence, everyone began speaking at once, the rise of welcomes and acceptance relaxed a tiny knot of tension Jakob hadn't realized he'd been holding on to. Bringing a grandson into the fold, especially one who took the Spencer name, might have caused problems with the others. He was a lucky man.

Willa stood and immediately the buzz around the table ceased. For the millionth time, Jakob wished he had that power at his board meetings. She grinned mischievously, yet some worry tightened her smile. With the rest of the family, he waited, anticipation rising with each second she remained silent.

Finally, she spoke. "There are more gifts."

"You've given so much already," Heath said. "We don't need more."

Willa shrugged and pushed a tendril of soft, gray hair back from her forehead. "Oh, these aren't from Jakob or me. For the most part. Santa stopped by earlier and dropped off a fully stuffed bag."

Alex and Madison squeezed behind the adults' chairs to stand at Willa's side. "More?" Alex asked.

"Alex," Cassie admonished.

The boy sighed dramatically. "I'm sorry for sounding greedy, Gram."

Willa ruffled his already messy hair. "Apology accepted. We'll get to those presents in a few minutes. First, I've been working on something and I want to show it to everyone."

The worry in her eyes deepened and Jakob narrowed his gaze. He'd known she was keeping something from him. After all, it was the season for surprises. Perhaps he should have paid more attention.

Then her smile relaxed and his concern faded. Curiosity filled the space. "Don't leave us hanging in suspense, woman."

Laughing, she waved her arm toward the door. "Follow me."

Once she'd led the way toward the back of the suite, and the family crowded the hallway behind her, Willa motioned Jakob to her side. "I don't know if everyone knew, but even though this suite has been redecorated a number of times since Marguerite's death, her personal office remained untouched. Until recently."

Tension tightened the back of Jakob's neck. He'd never liked the cold, unwelcoming space that reeked of his first wife's heavy perfume, and avoided the space for years. Well, ever since she'd gone into the hospital the final time. The only saving grace the room could offer was the portraits she'd had done of them and their daughters when each of the girls had turned thirteen. He'd thought about relocating the

paintings, except then he'd have to look at Marguerite's glower every day.

Willa continued, "I've been working in here for months and now, hopefully, the room is usable again. The gifts are under a tree in there. However, before we start the carnage of unwrapping, I have a gift for Jakob. Well, for others, too. I..."

Always so sure of herself, the fading words lifted Jakob's concern. He attempted a light tone but wasn't sure he hid his emotions. "Just making this space part of our home once again is enough, sweetheart."

With a frustrated huff, Willa shook herself. "You're all curious. Jakob first, then the rest of you can crowd in."

She reached behind her and turned the doorknob, then shoved open the door. Backing into the room, she motioned for him to follow. Jakob took a deep breath and stepped over a threshold he'd seldom had reason to cross willingly.

He froze in the doorway.

His first wife's room had been paneled in dark wood. She'd filled heavy bookcases of the same dark wood with expensive art pieces. Heavy velvet draperies covered the tall windows and were seldom opened. The family portraits had been hung against the dark paneling, making the thick frames nearly disappear. The only furniture had been her ebony desk and a small grouping of uncomfortable chairs. Even nearly empty, the large room had seemed closed in and oppressive.

Now the bright winter sun shone through sparkling windows edged with flowing gold drapes. The walls were plastered and while the chair rail remained, the strip of wood and the lower walls were painted a soft white. Above the rail his Willa had painted clouds in grayed pastels, so subtle that they appeared merely washes of color. How had she done all this right under his nose?

A Christmas tree decorated with twinkling lights and

gold ornaments stood surrounded by presents. Comfortable couches and chairs, primarily in a deep blue, created a trio of conversation areas.

But the item that caught his attention was a sheet-covered easel.

“Keep going, Granddad. We want to see, too,” Ryder called from the rear of the clustered family.

Willa took Jakob’s hand and drew him closer to the easel, remaining silent until the family’s astonishment faded and everyone waited expectantly. None so expectant as he.

“I’ve reframed the family portraits and hung them on the wall behind you,” Willa said to the group.

They turned as one and Jakob chuckled at how easily Willa commanded a room. Then he looked at the portraits. Framed now in deep blue, even Marguerite’s dour expression failed to sully the beautiful paintings of his younger self and his daughters. He could live with this.

He tilted his head to one side. Except that the paintings had been hung in an odd arrangement. Zoe’s portrait hung alone with a large empty space between hers and the portraits of Deidre and Elyse.

“Yes, I know the placement of the painting is off -ilter,” Willa said. “I’m hoping it will be acceptable to fill the space with this.”

Her words drew everyone’s attention back to her as she pointed to the covered easel. “Jakob, I painted this for you. For us.”

As though fearful of his reaction, she drew the sheet slowly from the painting. Soft gasps filled the silence.

Jakob had no words.

Before him was a painting with three people posed in the same manner as the paintings with his daughters. But this canvas held him, a younger Willa, and their teenaged son, Sean.

Jackson moved next to Jakob. “That’s my dad.”

Willa nodded. "The photo I used was taken at his thirteenth birthday."

The weight of everyone's gaze on him shook Jakob from his frozen astonishment. He rushed to Willa, gathered her in his arms and kissed her soundly. Then he stood back and swallowed the emotion clogging his throat. "It's beautiful, Willa. Perfect."

"I don't know about perfect," she mumbled.

"You always see your perceived imperfections, sweetheart, but the overall portrait is... astounding. A wonderful gift for this special day. Can we hang it with the others?"

"Now?" Willa glanced at the family behind him as though still fearing rejection of her gift.

Jakob turned them both to face his daughters and their families. Nothing but smiles, encouragement and a few damp eyes greeted him. Willa's talent had touched each of them.

Madison took a step forward and squinted at the portrait. "That's my grandfather?"

Jackson squeezed his daughter's shoulder. "Yep. He would have been about three years older than you are now, sweetie." He lifted his gaze to Willa. "Grandma, it's amazing. I've seen the pictures of Dad when he was a teenager, but this... you've brought him to life."

"I painted with love guiding my strokes," Willa said.

"As you always do, my love." Jakob wrapped his arm around her shoulder and snugged her close to his side. If his other children didn't want this picture to hang with theirs, he'd find another place of honor for his son's portrait.

Hunter crossed the room and after peering closely at the portrait, drew Jakob into a hug. Surprised by the show of affection by his normally stoic grandson, Jakob felt the burn of tears. Hunter drew back with a wry grin and the shrug of one shoulder. He'd been surprised by his actions as well. After Hunter kissed Willa's cheek and murmured words

Jakob couldn't catch, the rest of the family lined up to closely study the painting.

After a long hug from Kate, Willa nudged Jakob's side. "Well. Looks like you got your reception line after all."

Her dry comment made him laugh and those who still stood nearby joined him. "You didn't consider that, did you, my love?"

Willa cast her gaze around the room and gave a contented sigh. "No. I'm just so happy everyone seems to accept Sean's, and my, presence in their lives."

At the end of the impromptu reception line, his middle daughter leaned on Sal's arm while she studied the painting. Jakob held his breath. He'd known Zoe would have no issues with visually adding Sean, but although Deidre had changed since her stroke, Jakob wasn't sure how she'd react.

Then she took a step forward and wrapped her arms around his waist. "It's beautiful. And about time, Papa."

The burning returned to his eyes and the dampness of a tear trailed down Jakob's cheek. "You haven't called me papa since you were little, Dee."

She leaned back to look up into his face. Tears shimmered in her eyes. "And you stopped calling me Dee a long time ago, too. It's about time that changed as well, isn't it?"

He drew her back into a tight hug. "It is, Dee. It is."

"I love you, Papa."

He'd never thought to hear those words again from her. He fought past the tightening of his throat. "And I love you, my darling daughter."

Willa's soft touch on his arm and Sal's easing Deirdre away did nothing to diminish the joy threatening to burst from him. Despite the long years of avoidance and misunderstandings, the secrets and control his dead wife had held over him and his actions, and the powerless lack of hope he'd carried, his family had come together in love and acceptance.

With the true love of his heart beside him, he could have

faced rejection and anger from this family. Thank God he didn't have to. The love overflowing the room filled him and all but one last empty space buried deep in his soul faded. He glanced at the portrait of his youngest daughter. If only Elyse had come home.

Zoe appeared at his side and after a quick kiss to her sister's cheek turned to him and said, "It's not just the kids eyeing the gifts under the tree. Let's hang Sean's portrait in his proper place and let the unwrapping begin."

"The hook is already in place," Willa said. "Jackson, will you come here, please?"

After handing his infant son to Kate, Jackson joined them. "Yes, Grandma?"

"You should have the honor of hanging the portrait of your father."

He glanced a question at Jakob who nodded. Carefully, Jack pushed the sheet from the last corner and with a wide grin, lifted the painting and turned toward the gallery wall. "It is my honor. Thank you."

Aware the activity around the tree had stopped and silent expectation filled the room, Jakob took Willa's hand and followed his grandson. With deliberate care, Jackson placed the hanging wire over the nearly invisible hook. He rested the painting against the wall and stepped back, only to return to nudge one corner, perfectly aligning the painting.

Someone began clapping, and soon the room filled with audible acceptance. Bright smiles greeted Jakob when he turned to face his family. His *family*. This time, when his vision blurred, he did nothing to stem the unaccustomed tears. He cleared his throat but found no words to adequately express his emotions.

Willa, his darling Willa, saved him once again. "Who's ready for more gifts? Chet, since you helped Santa out this morning, how about you start passing them out?"

At his nod, the focus of the room turned toward the tree.

Jakob allowed his shoulders to relax and was about to join the noisy crowd, when Vianna shook off Ryder's restraining hand and waddled over to join them. Jakob chuckled at his grandson's resigned expression. Vianna was good for the boy.

She stood before him, gnawing on her lower lip. A flare of odd hope burned in Jakob's chest.

She leaned close to speak softly. "He's here. Sean."

Jakob understood and waited silently for whatever the spirit of his son wanted him to know.

Vianna's eyes sparkled. "He understands how you were forced into the choices you made and forgave you long ago. He was waiting for you to forgive yourself." She glanced toward Willa with a soft chuckle. "Although he wishes you would have painted him at a less awkward age."

Jakob's deep laugh drew the attention of his family. He waved toward the tree. "Happy Christmas, everyone."

Then he drew Willa into his arms. "You surprised me."

"I was worried. Both about the painting, and surprising you. That's not easy to do. You're not one who easily accepts when anything is out of your control. I'm delighted you're pleased. I love you, Jakob."

"Pleased? I am beyond pleased. Keep on surprising me, Willa, and loving me." After she nodded, he pressed a kiss filled with promise to her soft lips.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart."



