

Christmas with the Grinch

The last thing I remember before driving headlong into a ten-foot snow embankment was singing, “Jingle Bells” — a bit off-key. My head smacked the steering wheel, and a moan escaped my lips just before the airbag exploded.

I opened my eyes to a world of white. Heaven? A pleasant thought since Christmas arrived in two days. But the cold settling in my fingers told me I was stuck in the middle of nowhere. I lifted my head to examine the damage to my car and me. A throbbing head and a bloody nose greeted me like coals in a Christmas stocking. I touched my nose. Thank goodness, it wasn't broken. It's a little long, and the idea of a crooked appendage wouldn't have improved my self-image.

I tried to start my car, but the snow-packed engine didn't sputter. Neither did my phone have a signal. Mom and Dad had no idea I'd driven from Houston to the Panhandle two days early. What a holiday surprise—a frozen daughter for Christmas.

Gathering my shoulder bag and tightening my scarf, I released the seatbelt and attempted to open the door. Wouldn't budge. I scooted over the console to the passenger side. Nothing. My little Corvette had created its own snow garage.

Maybe I *would* be in heaven for Christmas.

I rattled my brain cell for escape ideas. A nap might sweep out the snowdrifts.

Banging on my window jolted me. Through the blur, a snow-covered face greeted me—a man or a polar bear—stood outside. Somehow, he'd shoveled through the snow. He pulled the door open.

“Thank you. Oh, thank you.” I burst into tears and tumbled out of my car.

He picked me up just as I kissed snow. “You all right?” His voice rumbled low and rough. He righted me and stepped back. Ice blue eyes met me, decidedly cold.

"I think so. My nose doesn't appear to be broken."

"Nah, just bruised."

"I'm Noel."

His eyes narrowed. "Sure you didn't bump your head?"

A smile lifted. "No, sir. My birthday is Christmas Day. You are?"

"Jack."

I shivered. "How did you find me?"

"I was checking traps."

I nodded as if I understood what that meant. "I'm glad you did. Where's your shovel?"

"Used a tree branch."

I blinked. "That must have been hard. Does your phone have service?"

"Maybe. It's at the cabin."

"You don't carry it with you for emergencies?"

"Miss Noel, I only carry what I need. Nothing out here I can't handle."

I peered at this rather eccentric man. Was he a recluse? "May I use the phone at your cabin?"

He shrugged. "You can try. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't."

"How far?"

"Five miles give or take." He pointed to my ankle boots. "You're going to ruin those."

"Beats freezing to death."

A hint of a smile met me, and he nodded at my little car. "Anything you might need for a couple of days? With the storm, nobody's gettin' in or out."

A sharp pang of fear twisted in my stomach. Was I better off alone? This man could be a serial killer. "Do you live alone?"

"Is there any other way?"

I couldn't argue with his response since I lived alone too."

I believe in exercise, and four miles on a flat surface is a solid workout. But not five miles through snowdrifts, whipping wind, falling temperatures, and snowflakes the size of my hand. Well, maybe a little smaller than that. I struggled to keep pace behind Jack. His large strides made it difficult to dig my frozen feet into his footsteps, and I fell—a lot.

Dear Jesus, I'm cold, scared, and exhausted. Maybe that's how Mary felt when she rode a donkey to Bethlehem. I must be delirious.

The image of a cabin appeared through the swirling snow. The picturesque structure looked like a Christmas card—a front porch with snow-dusted rocking chairs seemed to invite me inside. No smoke curled from the chimney, but it had a promise to be warmer inside.

“Are . . . Are we here?” I gasped, noting my chest ached.

He swung around just when my knees buckled. My last memory was Jack tossing me over his shoulders. Like a sack of feed.

The sound of a crackling fire roused me from sleep. I snuggled under the incredible warmth of a quilt tucked around me. I lay on a leather sofa with a pillow tucked beneath my head. How did I get there? The scent of burning logs reminded me of Mom and Dad’s farmhouse. Where I should be now. My eyes seemed glued shut, but I needed to take in the surroundings. Through narrow slits, a gray stone fireplace rose from the floor to the ceiling. Ah, the fire created warmth and a comforting aroma.

Jack must have put me here.

Glancing around the cabin, the wow factor took over. Beautifully crafted oak wood floors, wooden walls, and a vaulted ceiling with wooden beams. Lots of light and spacious. A winding staircase led to an open second floor, showcased by a massive antler chandelier. A floor to ceiling glass window framed in oak opened to a panoramic view from a wooden deck. Behind me a huge kitchen, all in the same oak cabinetry and a ten-foot-long counter with hand-carved stools.

“You’re awake,” Jack said from the kitchen. “Slept about fourteen hours.”

I studied him. Above average height, and he no longer looked like a polar bear. Typical red plaid shirt, jeans, scruffy dark brown beard, and those ice-blue eyes. “Your home is incredible,” I said. “Like it stepped off a magazine cover. Did you build it?”

“Renovated it. Been here about five years.”

My stomach growled at the smell of biscuits and bacon.

I slowly peeled back the quilt and felt my aching head. A bandage covered a spot I’d bumped on the steering wheel.

“Leave that alone,” Jack said in an unmistakable Grinch voice.

“Okay. When did you do this?”

“After you passed out. No stitches necessary.”

“Not sure I wanted him to take a needle to my head. “Thank you. Breakfast smells wonderful.”

“Plenty here. Help yourself. Uh, first let me look at you.”

I trembled. Before I could protest, he peered into my eyes. “Your head will pound for a while. Tylenol on the table.”

“Coffee too?”

“Yeah. Will help some of the headache pain.”

“Sounds like living remotely takes different skills.”

He grunted.

I slowly stood. A little dizzy, so I inhaled a few times and looked around. “You don’t have a Christmas tree.”

“Why bother? Just another day.”

“I have one and it’s only me.”

He frowned, and I stared into the face of a man who had the potential of being quite good-looking. “And I could sing ‘Jingle-bells’ and watch ‘It’s a Wonderful Life’ on TV,” he said.

“Or ‘How the Grinch Stole Christmas.’”

“My favorite.”

Oh, the sarcasm that swirled around us. Eating breakfast took priority, and nothing disappointed me—coffee, biscuits, crisp bacon, and two Tylenol. I studied the cabin, absolutely stunning. A glimpse of relaxed living glistened everywhere.

Jack grabbed his coat and headed for the door.

“Where are you going?”

“To check on my livestock, milk the cows, and see if I can get a phone signal.”

A whiff of optimism met me. “Great. What kind of livestock?”

“Four cows, a bull, two goats, three pigs, seven chickens, a horse, and a few cats to keep the rodents away.”

“Would you like help?”

“No and don’t follow me.” He pointed to a room on his right. “Bathroom’s there. Last I checked, still had hot water. Don’t go snooping around, and if a door’s locked, it’s for a reason.”

He closed the door hard, but still wind and snow blew in. After a hot shower in a bathroom that resembled a ski resort, I made more coffee, then slept on the couch. Jack had placed my boots by the fire to dry out. Thoughtful, but he had a terrible attitude.

And no Christmas spirit.

I woke to Jack entering the cabin. Of course he said nothing.

Mid-afternoon of continuing silence while Jack busied himself outside brought on extreme restlessness, even with a jackhammer headache. When he flung open the door, bringing in another onslaught of wind and snow, I took a deep breath and braved forward.

“Any phone signal?”

“Nope.”

“Any roads clear?”

“Nope.”

“Do you have makings for cookies?”

He squinted. "Like butter, sugar, vanilla, and flour?"

"Yes."

Mr. Jack Hermit Grinch obviously had done a little baking beyond the flakey biscuits. "Can I made sugar cookies?"

"If you want. Don't have any fancy sugar sprinkles or frosting stuff."

"Just want to be busy."

He opened a door that displayed a fully stocked pantry. "Butter's in fridge."

"The real thing?"

He glanced at me like I'd asked the most stupid question on the planet. "I have cows. That means milk, cream, and butter."

"Wow. These will be amazing."

"My grandmother's cookbook's in the pantry."

The cookbook took me back in time when I helped my grandmother cook and bake. Jack's grandmother had penciled in substitutions and comments on yellowed pages. A priceless book. I found a recipe for sugar cookies, a well-loved recipe from the smudges on the page.

I softened the butter in the oven and beat in sugar, eggs, vanilla, and the rest of the ingredients. "You grandmother made drop cookies, is that okay?"

"Just so they taste good. Don't want you wastin' good food."

Soon the tantalizing smell of freshly baked cookies filled the cabin. I brought Jack a warm one.

He took a bite and nodded. "Not bad in a pinch."

Looks like I'll be spending Christmas with the Grinch.

That evening, when Jack announced he planned to feed his animals, I asked to join him. "My boots are dry, and I have a bad case of cabin fever."

He sighed like I'd be a bother. "You could still be in your sports car in a snowbank. Or you could have gotten pneumonia."

“But I’m fine.”

“Suit yourself.”

I tugged on my boots and shrugged into my coat, gloves, and scarf. “Ready.” I smiled except he didn’t respond.

The sun sinking into the west in an amber glow against the white snow stole my breath. All around me snow-covered branches, stillness, and the profound beauty of nature.

Inside a barn, the animals appeared to be waiting for him. The horse stuck its head through a stable top door, and the chickens gathered around his feet. “Only have three cows to milk,” he said. “Won’t take long, then I’ll slice up some ham and fry potatoes.”

“I’ll help.”

“No thanks.”

“Can I feed the chickens? My parents have them.”

“Have you ever fed chickens?”

“Yes.”

He nodded at the corner door. “Feed’s in there.”

I found the bag labeled “chicken feed” and scattered it around the chickens. One plump lady limped a bit, so I picked her up, petted soft head, and sat her in the midst of the food.

I heard an unfamiliar sound and whirled around to see Jack laughing as he squirted milk into a bucket. I grinned. Couldn’t believe he had a humorous side. Definitely a complicated man.

With more time to spare, I visited the goats, who only wanted attention and their dinner. The pigs needed corn, and I obliged. The horse captured my heart, a beautiful chestnut mare with a star on her head. “Can I brush her?”

“Sure. She weighs too much for you to pick her up. Tack box is beside the feed room.”

Ah, a teasing side of him too. Three cats eyed me curiously when I flipped open the tack box and pulled out a brush. A black and white one rubbed against my jean leg, and the other two tabbies inched closer.

“I’ll give you attention as soon as I’m finished with this big girl. Hey, Jack, what’s the horse’s name?”

“Ethel. I’ll feed her. She has a mix according to the day.”

“Okay.” Odd name for a sleek mare. I brushed her for the next several minutes, while she stood patiently.

“What about the cats?”

“They don’t have names. I’ll give them a little milk when I’m done. More here than I’ll ever use.”

I finished brushing Ethel and sensed him watching me. Felt sorta creepy. But curiosity is my middle name, so I stared back.

“You have a way with animals.” He leaned against the stall door. “Ethel never stands still for a brushing.” He pointed to the cats at my feet. “They run when I come close. Goats took to you too.”

“I just like animals, and they seem to know it.”

“Good to know. I’m gonna put the milk in the pasteurizer, then done. You hungry?”

“Always. Please, I’d like to help with dinner.”

“Peel potatoes?”

The worse job imaginable, but I’d asked.

“In the morning, I’m leaving out early to see if the road’s been plowed. Not sure when I’ll get back.” He hesitated. “If my phone decides to work, what’s your parent’s number so I can let them know you aren’t frozen to death.”

Hope filled me. The Grinch had his finer moments.

The following day hit me with incredible loneliness. I ventured to the barn and busied myself with the animals. When I froze up, I hurried back to the fire. Jack arrived shortly after lunch.

“The wind keeps blowing, and the snow keeps piling.” He frowned. “No phone service.”

We ate leftover ham and potatoes for lunch. He slipped into his quiet mode, and I read a book I'd brought in my suitcase. The afternoon crept by, and I napped. The headache had its moments. After feeding the animals and feasting on stew, we settled in front of the fire.

Pounding on the door startled me. Jack flung it open to a man holding a huge flashlight.

"Doc Jack, Missy's been in labor since early afternoon. The baby just won't come. You said there might be problems."

Jack flipped on the light and gestured for him to enter. "Anyone with her?"

"Just the dog." He looked to be in his early thirties, clean-shaven, and his eyes riveted of fear.

"Okay, Les." Jack nodded. "It will be okay. Let me get my things."

Doctor? "Can I go?"

"It's a two mile walk." Jack shoved his arms into his coat sleeves. "Not a good idea. We'll walk fast."

I grabbed my boots. "Please. I might be of help."

Jack scowled. "Stay put. You'll be in the way."

I lifted my chin. "I'm going."

"Suit yourself, but I warned you."

The man peered at me. "Ma'am, those boots won't do you much good."

I smiled up at him. "I've heard that before." I grabbed my coat, scarf, and gloves from the wooden peg by the door.

Jack unlocked the room that was hands-off. He gripped a duffle-like bag and a flashlight. Outside in the night, the snow had stopped, but the wind howled like a wolf.

Keeping pace with Les and Jack kept me breathless and stumbling. But I braced myself against the weather. The poor woman struggling through labor tugged at my heart strings. I knew nothing about birthing babies, but I could hold her hand. What kind of problems were Les and Jack referring to? A glance into the clear, dark sky offered a half-moon and myriad stars.

Christmas Eve. I'd nearly forgotten. The men didn't have much to say. Mostly likely Les was sick with worry over his wife, and Jack . . .

I still had to wrap my mind around him as a doctor. What brought a man with medical gifts to live like a hermit and act like a grinch?

The lights from Les and Missy's cabin, a little bigger than Jack's, showed we'd arrived. Les rushed up the steps with Jack right behind him. I trailed after them.

"Pay no attention to the dog," Les said over his shoulder.

A bear-like animal leaped from the open door and knocked me on my back. I prepared myself to be eaten, but this huge tongue licked my face—wet and warm.

"Buster, leave her alone," Les called. "She didn't come to play."

Who would want to play with a part bear, part dog? Buster lavished his tongue over my mouth . . . Never had I experienced a dog-kiss.

"Buster!" Les shouted.

I stood from the porch and hurried inside with this mass of brown fur on my heels. Jack had disappeared into a side room where a faint light cast a shadow. "What can I do besides pray."

He shrugged off his coat and gloves and drew in a sob. "God knows how much I love Missy. And I'm scared."

Missy cried out, and Les rushed in after his wife with Buster behind him.

I glanced around me to a kitchen. A coffee maker caught my attention. Soon the aroma of freshly brewed coffee filled the cabin. Jack drank his black, but I had no idea about Les. I made my way to the dimly lit room where Missy lay.

"I made coffee."

"Thanks," Jack said. "Add a shot of whiskey to Les's cup."

"Doc, are you sure about this?" Les's voice trembled.

Buster lifted his massive head from the doorway.

Jack removed the stethoscope from around his neck and stared into Missy's face. The truth must not be good. "The good news is the baby's heartbeat is strong. You need a C-section or

neither one of you will live. The umbilical cord is wrapped around the baby's neck. I brought what I need."

"Just save my baby," Missy said. A young woman about my age with long dark hair and huge brown eyes.

Les ran his hands through his hair. "I'll do whatever you need."

"Me too," I said. "Just point me in the right direction."

"Squeamish?" His rough tone dropped in.

"No."

Jack bent to Missy's face. "I will do everything within my power to save you and your baby. I have morphine to help with the pain. Missy, this will hurt, and we run the danger of infection and uncontrolled bleeding. This won't be easy."

"Nothing in life is," she said.

He pressed his lips together. "Les, I need lots of boiled water and clean towels or whatever you have. Noel, wash up to your elbows in the hottest water you can handle. Everything has to be sterile. Do you have a brighter lamp?"

"No, Doc," Les said. "That's it, and the electricity has been sporadic."

"Missy," I whispered. "I'm Noel, and I'll do exactly what Jack says. You can do this."

"Get going, both of you," Jack said. "Time's wasting. My instruments need to be in boiling water ASAP."

Les and I hurried from the room. At the sink, I turned on the hot water and reached for soap. "I had no idea he was a doctor," I whispered.

"His gruff ways are a mask. He once led a group of surgeons at big hospital in Dallas. He lost a child on the operating table and walked away. Ended up here. Jack's a good man. Just hurting." He swiped beneath his eye. "If anyone can save Missy, it's God and Doc Jack."

I dried my hands on a clean towel and entered the bedroom. Jack had positioned the lamp closer to Missy's stomach. He poured alcohol over his hands, slipped on nitrile gloves, and

used cotton balls from his bag to sterilize Missy's stomach, then lidocaine. "Hurry up with the water."

"I'm boiling in different pans so it's ready faster," Les called.

"Good."

Minutes ticked by before Les brought in a pan. Jack dropped a scalpel and a few other instruments into the hot water."

"I'm praying." I grasped Missy's hand. "Father, we come before you to guide Jack's hands in delivering this baby. Protect Missy and her little one. Give Les and Jack peace. In Jesus' name. Amen."

"Thank you," Missy said. "Jack, I'm ready."

"Help me, God," came his barely audible whisper.

He laid out his instruments on a clean cloth. I recognized scissors, a clamp, needle, and suture material. His hands were steady, but I saw a nervous twitch under his left eye. With one deep breath he pressed the scalpel into her abdomen. Missy cried out. Les took her other hand. Layer by layer, muscle gave way until the uterus showed pale and taut. Blood ran freely.

I blinked back dizziness and touched my other hand to Missy's cheek. Forcing a smile, I blew her a kiss. "You are the bravest woman I've ever known." Her face paled, and she bit into her lip.

Jack reached into her womb and wrapped his fingers around tiny shoulders. Lifting the slippery, fragile gift of life, he cleared the baby's airways. A girl.

I counted to five. *Breathe, sweet baby.*

The baby's cries sounded like sweet music.

Jack laughed. "Missy, Les, you have a daughter with a fine pair of lungs." He clamped and tied off the umbilical cord before laying her into Missy's arms.

With artful hands, he sutured her incision and wiped up the blood.

"Thank you." Missy glanced up at Les who touched his daughter's arm.

"And thank You, God." Les kissed his daughter's forehead.

“Tell you what,” Jack said. “As soon as the road clears or we get a signal, I’ll phone for life flight.”

Exhaustion settled on all of us, gratitude too.

“I have a name,” Missy said. “I had to see her first.”

“Go ahead. sweetheart,” Les said.

“Jacqueline Noel, after the two angels who brought her safely to us on Christmas Day.”

Jack sucked in a breath. “Your baby will never stop hearing from us about her delivery. Noel, you were a soldier. Couldn’t have done it without everyone’s help.” He perked and gave me a huge smile. “Today is your birthday! Just like this beautiful baby girl.”

I laughed, filled with more joy than I could remember. “And what a magnificent Christmas and birthday it is.”

Jack and Les curled up in chairs at Missy’s bedside, and I took a chair by the fire. Buster laid his head on my lap. Peace and contentment flooded through me, and I closed my eyes.

I opened my eyes to Jack staring at me. A smile lifted the corner of his lips. Christmas sunlight cast a sweet blessing across the wooden floor.

“You’re beautiful when you sleep.” He bent and caressed my cheek, his eyes soft and warm. “I noticed that the first night at the cabin.”

“You did?”

He nodded. “Missy, Les, and the baby are sleeping peacefully. I’ll feel better when a hospital checks them out.”

“You were magnificent.”

He sat beside me. “I’ve been rude and disgusting. Forgive me.”

“Of course.”

He reached for my hand, and I let it slip into his. “Soon we’ll go our separate ways. I want you to know I’ll never forget what you did for all of us tonight.”

“Maybe we can keep in touch?”

“Hope so. I could pick up a satellite phone for those times the weather doesn’t cooperate.”

"I . . . I don't want to lose the past couple of days." I inhaled the gift of Christmas joy. "Once the phones are working, I need to call my parents."

"I'm sure they're worried."

"Probably so. Would you go with me to visit them? Providing Missy and the baby are at a hospital."

"I'd be honored."

"I don't know your last name."

"Jack Richards." He frowned, and I waited. "Doctor. I never told you my profession. I . . . I want to tell your folks they have an amazing, beautiful, stubborn daughter who's good with animals and not a bad hand in the operating room." He leaned over and kissed me lightly.

"Happy birthday, Merry Christmas, Noel."

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