

## MAKING CHRISTMAS MEMORIES

Christmas Eve, well technically Christmas morning since it was well after 1:00 am, Deacon Black stood behind the bar at the Country Time Bar and Grill and frowned into the shot glass he was polishing with a rag.

He knew he had absolutely no reason to frown. The day had been great. They hadn't been exactly sure what kind of traffic they'd get on Christmas Eve since Murphy Lanes, the bowling alley next door, was throwing a huge party. But it turned out that people had been coming in and out all night.

Now that they were getting near closing time, things were finally winding down. Mary Alice and June had already gone home. Mat and Josie had shut down the kitchen an hour ago. And Hannah was back in her office waiting for him. Once they could kick out the rest of the customers and lock the doors, Deacon would take her back to their apartment so they could spend the holiday in bed just loving each other.

No, he had nothing at all to frown about. Hannah was his greatest gift. And now she was carrying a second gift to be delivered sometime next August--their baby, Peanut.

His frown deepened.

"That shot glass done something to you, boy?" an elderly male voice asked from the other side of the bar.

Deacon turned his scowl on Albert Cromwell as the old man slid onto the barstool across from him. Albert grinned in response, showing off healthy pink gums.

"What are you still doing here?" Deacon asked. "I thought you guys were heading out." Old Albert was there with two of his friends, Joe Horton and Martin Scanner. Harry Newman, Sr., the last member of their little gang, had taken off a while ago so he could spend the rest of Christmas Eve with his wife and grandson.

Albert cackled. "We're leaving in a minute. I just thought I'd let Martin finish flirting with Mathilda first. Not that he'll get anywhere, but he sure is trying."

Deacon raised his eyebrows at that. Albert himself had dated Mathilda Gregory, the town's elderly librarian, off and on for years until the two of them finally called it quits a few weeks ago.

"And you don't mind that he's moving in on her?" It seemed like a weird situation to him.

Albert shrugged. "We're free agents, boy. I ain't got no room to get worked up about it anyway, even if I wanted to."

Well, Deacon guessed that was true. After all, Old Albert and Ms. Gregory had officially broken up now, and it seemed like this time it was for good. And Albert hadn't exactly been a saint over the years. Deacon well remembered how, not even three months ago and before the couple had split, a tour bus had broken down at the Country Time and Albert had worked his charm on two of the passengers, twin sisters. Although, to be honest, Deacon wasn't entirely sure how far things had gotten between the threesome. And he had absolutely no intention of asking.

*Jesus.* Talk about images you didn't want in your head.

"You haven't been drinking, have you?" he asked. Old Albert was the designated driver for his friends tonight, and he was enough of a hazard on the road without the alcohol.

"Course not," Albert reassured him good-naturedly, folding his hands on the bar. "Now stop stalling and tell me what's got you so worked up."

"Nothing." Deacon went to cash out a group of customers. They were strangers from out of town, and one or two of them hadn't liked it very much when he'd refused to serve them unless they had a designated driver. The crap tip they gave him wasn't much of a surprise.

"Merry Christmas to you, too," he muttered to the backs of the group when they left without acknowledging him more than absolutely necessary. Trying to shake off the encounter, he made his way back to Albert.

"All right?" the old man asked, his blue eyes sharp.

People tended to underestimate Albert. Deacon could acknowledge that sometimes he did, too. It was easy to draw conclusions when the old man was dancing the Chicken Dance at a town function, or not wearing his dentures because they hurt, or cackling about getting some "twin action."

But underestimating Albert was a mistake. Old Albert might indeed be old, he might act demented sometimes, but he saw everything.

"Just people," Deacon grumbled, and drew a beer for another customer. This time he got a smile and a "thank you" in return.

"Too bad that other group didn't decide to do their drinking at the bowling alley," Albert commented when Deacon returned.

"Yeah, it's always the ones you wish would leave that keep showing up." The renovation of the restaurant and bar at Murphy Lanes had really put a dent in their business, which was why it had been nice to be busy that night. They sure needed it.

"And I notice that you still haven't answered me," Albert said. "What's up, boy?"

*Yeah, you shouldn't underestimate Old Albert.*

Maybe it was the fatherly tone of voice, something Deacon never got from his own father, or maybe he was just desperate for a second opinion, but he leaned his forearms on the bar and settled in.

“I gave Hannah an engagement ring a few days ago,” he said.

“Yeah? Tell me something I don’t know. She and June have been showing off their rocks to anyone who stays still long enough to look.”

Deacon smiled, unutterably happy despite his current dilemma. He’d asked Hannah to marry him last week, and she’d said yes. Calvin Hardy had asked June on the same day. She’d said yes. Deacon and Calvin had immediately headed out together to a fancy jeweler in Scranton, and both of them had bought rings to seal the deal.

With Christmas right around the corner, Deacon should have been set with a romantic Christmas present, right? It should have been like a Hallmark movie. Christmas morning. Him going down on one knee in front of the tree. That sort of thing.

Too bad that neither Deacon nor Calvin had been able to wait. They’d both jumped the gun and given their women the rings early.

Deacon didn’t exactly regret it. He had wanted to get his ring on Hannah’s finger as soon as possible. Period, end of discussion. One of the best nights so far in his life had been the night he’d slid his ring on Hannah’s hand. It wasn’t huge or anything, but seeing her wear it, seeing her happiness, had meant everything to him. He supposed Calvin felt the same way with June.

But now he had a problem, and he didn’t know what to do.

“Okay, so, here’s the deal,” he said to Albert, leaning closer. He kept his voice low because there were way too many gossips in this town, and he really didn’t want everyone knowing his business. “I gave Hannah the engagement ring, but now I’m screwed because I don’t have anything to give her for Christmas. And if I spend any money for a present, she’s going to jump down my throat and probably return it. Kind of defeats the point of giving her something in the first place. But this our first Christmas together as a couple, and it’s pretty new. I just want to give her everything, you know?”

Hannah had been adamant that neither of them should spend any more money on Christmas.

“Oh.” Albert grinned. “You feel stuck because you couldn’t buy her something fancy.”

Deacon shrugged. “She’s worth it. I’d give it all to her, but she won’t let me.”

Albert laughed. “Yeah, she’s a stubborn one.”

“Exactly.”

“My Mabel was stubborn, too,” Albert said. There was a faraway look in his eyes. Deacon was surprised. Old Albert rarely talked about the woman he had loved with all his heart and lost to breast

cancer almost twenty-five years ago. “Yeah, my Mabel was a lot like your Hannah. She had certain opinions about things, and once she had them it was hard to get her to budge.”

“Tell me about it,” Deacon grumbled. He was pretty sure Hannah’s photo was in the dictionary next to the word, “stubborn.”

“I remember, there at the end we were having money issues,” Albert continued, and Deacon could tell he was back in that time. “There were so many medical bills starting to come in, and the farm... Well, I couldn’t be in two places at once, could I? So if I was with Mabel at the hospital or the chemo center, I couldn’t be working.”

Ultimately, Albert had been forced to give up on his farm, even though he’d taken a job at night at the hardware store after Mabel passed to try to keep things going.

“My Mabel, the last Christmas she was with us, she said, ‘Don’t you dare spend money on me for Christmas, Albert Cromwell, and don’t you dare let the girls spend money either. The doctor says I’m going to be gone in a few months, and I don’t want to spend those last months mad at you for wasting something you all need.’”

Albert sniffed and fished a tissue from his pants pocket. He wiped his eyes and blew his nose.

“She was looking at it practically, of course, because my Mabel was nothing if not practical. But she didn’t seem to understand that sometimes being able to give something to someone creates a memory that’s worth more than whatever money you spend. We knew she’d be leaving us soon, we knew we couldn’t stop her from going, and we all, me and my daughters, we wanted to have that memory for this last time. But we also knew she really would be angry at us, and even weighing 80 pounds, that woman was a force of nature.”

Deacon was embarrassed when he realized that he’d forgotten about Albert’s three daughters. He didn’t see them much, because they lived out of town and didn’t come into the Country Time very often. Plus, Albert didn’t talk about his family much.

It just underscored how intensely private Albert really was. Probably not with the three men who made up his posse, but with everyone else. Most of the time he played the role of the happy-go-lucky guy who dated every woman who’d have him, but there was a part of him he hardly ever talked about.

Which meant this conversation was a special thing.

“Did you get her anything?” Deacon asked, glad that the bar was quiet at the moment so he could give the old man all of his attention.

“Well, my Mabel wasn’t the only stubborn one in the family.” Albert’s smile was nostalgic. “But it did create a problem. We sure wanted to honor her wishes.”

“I get that.” That was exactly Deacon’s problem, too. He wanted to make Hannah happy, but he also wanted to shower her with gifts to show her what she meant to him. “What did you do? Did you buy her stuff anyway?”

“Well, like I said, it was a problem. I really did want to do what Mabel was asking, but I also wanted all of us, especially the girls, to have the memory of that Christmas. My youngest was 18 then and getting ready to go to college the next year. The other two were already there. They all needed good memories with their mother.”

“So did you.”

Albert nodded. “So did I. We knew what was coming and how soon it was probably going to be happening. We talked about it a lot. Argued. The girls wanted to just buy her everything and the hell with the expense. We were already in so much debt, they were in so much debt for their education, what did it matter? But my Mabel would never have forgiven me if I’d let them spend their money on her. They needed all they could get. I told them there were some things that were more important and meant more than any crap they would pick up at a store.”

Deacon noticed customers standing at the cash register trying to get his attention, so he held up a hand to stop Albert and went to ring them out. Once they’d all gone, only Albert, his friends, Ms. Gregory, and a few other stragglers were left in the taproom.

“Okay, what happened?” he asked Albert when he returned.

“My girls were not what you would call homebodies,” Albert told him. “Couldn’t cook worth a damn. Michaela, my youngest, couldn’t even boil water without burning the pan. None of them had an artistic bone in their bodies, even though my Mabel loved to paint and draw and all that stuff. So I told them they should make us Christmas breakfast from scratch. No cheating. And they needed to make their mother a gift. Draw something, paint something. Hell, I didn’t care if they painted a pinecone red and green. They just needed to make her something.”

Deacon raised his eyebrows. “Why bother? You said they couldn’t do any of that.”

“And they sure as hell couldn’t. Worst meal I’ve ever had in my life, and I’ve let Harry Newman’s wife cook for me once or twice. But they had a hell of a good time, and their mother had a good time teasing them. We all laughed more than we had in weeks. Months. Then when they showed her the gifts they’d made, we laughed some more.” Albert paused and grabbed a paper napkin off the bar to wipe his

eyes again. “Best damned day ever. Because they all, we all, just gave to Mabel without money getting in the way.”

Deacon frowned as he considered what the old man was saying. “So, I should cook Hannah breakfast? Make her a card? Run out quick to buy some crayons?”

Albert grinned at him and pushed away from the bar. “I’ll tell you to give yourself to her, and don’t worry about spending money. All she wants is you anyway.”

The old man patted Deacon’s forearm and went off to round up his friends.

Deacon considered what Albert had said as he kicked out the last of the customers and closed the place down. Once he’d locked the doors and finished his final checks of the taproom and the kitchen, he went in search of Hannah in her office. He half expected to find her asleep in her chair, but instead she was glaring at the computer screen.

“Merry Christmas, baby,” he said as he walked around her desk and kissed her on the cheek.

She turned to scowl at him. “There’s a lot of people contributing to that investor fund thing Josie set up.”

“I know.”

“Mary Alice and Johnny contributed to it.”

“You told me that before.” Mary Alice was intensely loyal. Now that she and her boyfriend had contributed to the investor fund Josie had set up to try to provide some working capital for the County Time, they sometimes needed to remind her—gently—that she didn’t actually own the place.

“Yeah, well they just added some more money,” Hannah said.

“Really?” Deacon leaned over her shoulder so he could see the computer screen, too. He looked where her finger was pointing, and his eyes widened. “Jesus.”

“I know. Just how much money do they have, anyway?” Hannah sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. Since he was still crowding her, her head bumped against his chin. He didn’t move away, just nuzzled his face into her hair, seeking her unique scent and breathing her in.

“And look at what Ms. Gregory donated,” she added.

“I know,” he murmured into her ear, and then tugged on her cute little lobe with his teeth.

“And Albert, and Joe, and Martin, and even Harry and his wife.”

Trying to distract her, he sucked on the lobe and was gratified to hear her breath catch. Otherwise, he’d think he was losing his touch.

“Shut up, Hannah,” he told her, and spun her around to kiss her on the mouth.

The last thing he wanted was for her to spend Christmas, one of the few days they actually didn't work, obsessing about money. Especially since it was a sore subject for him, too. So far she still wouldn't let him contribute to the investor fund. He was abiding by her wishes for now, but it pissed him off that she still didn't believe he knew his own mind.

*Not now*, he warned himself, breaking the kiss to move his mouth over her cheekbone. Hannah wasn't the only one who could ruin Christmas by obsessing and fighting about money.

He wouldn't let this old argument get in the way of their new beginning, and their first Christmas together.

"Let's get out of here," he said, and pulled Hannah to her feet, then reached around her to power off the computer.

"But—"

"It will still be there, Hannah," he told her. "Just shut it all down for a day." He kissed her again and was glad to see her hazel eyes looked a little blurry when he leaned away. "Come on, honey."

She let him usher her out of the office and, turning lights off as they went, all the way out of the old brick building into the parking lot. He put his hand on her back and walked with her over to his Jeep, then held the passenger door open for her.

Hannah hesitated before getting in, looking back at the Country Time, dark and silent now except for the parking lot lights.

"It might not be worth it," she said. "Maybe I should give back all the money and just give up."

"You aren't made that way," he told her and grinned. "You're way too stubborn."

She frowned at him. "Hey."

He kissed her pout away. "My kind of stubborn," he assured her. "But until we're here back at work, this place does not exist in our world. We both need a break."

"Okay," she agreed reluctantly. Hannah really did hate letting things go. But since that included him, he could work with it.

Back at their apartment, he turned on the lights of the little Christmas tree they had set on a table, stripped both of them of their clothes, and then made love to Hannah on the rug. His most precious Christmas present.

When she was boneless and satisfied, he picked up her lax, naked body and carried her to bedroom, carefully tucking her into bed.

"Aren't you coming?" she yawned, reaching up to run her hands over his face.

"I just need to clean up the living room," he told her.

“K.” Hannah yawned again, she curled on her side and burrowed under the covers.

Deacon sat and watched her sleep for a few minutes before getting up to pull on a t-shirt and sweats, then headed back to the living room. First, he cleaned up the clothes and shoes they’d basically thrown all over the place and straightened things up. He made sure he’d remembered to lock the door, because most of the time he wasn’t thinking with his brain when Hannah was around. He was lucky he’d remembered to draw the blinds on the big windows in the living area before getting her naked.

Once all of that was finally done, he got some blank paper out of the printer, hunted around until he found a couple of pens, and sat down at the kitchen table to work on the only idea he’d come up with after he’d talked to Albert. He’d be damned if he’d draw her a picture or anything like that, but he thought she’d like what he had in mind.

It was a lot harder than he’d thought it would be, and when he was finally finished the sun had come up and the trash can was full of crumpled paper.

“Who knew writing a freaking letter would be this hard?” he muttered to himself as he read over what he’d written for the countless time.

It seemed like a stupid idea now, and his penmanship looked like a child’s because he’d been trying to make sure she could actually read it. He frowned at the paper and debated just tearing it up and forgetting about the whole thing. Hannah hadn’t wanted him to get her a present, so she wouldn’t be expecting anything anyway.

But that didn’t sit right with him either. He wanted to do something to show her how much she meant to him. And he wanted those memories that Albert had talked about.

It would have been a hell of a lot easier to just go to the mall and buy her something. This was way too personal. Which he guessed was the point.

Drawing in a deep breath, Deacon carefully folded the pages he’d labored over and slid them into an envelope. He wrote Hannah’s name on the front, sealed it, and tucked it under the tree before he gave into the temptation to just throw it away. Then he turned off the lights and headed to bed, curling his body around Hannah’s as he buried his face in her neck.

Christmas morning was damned near perfect, as far as Deacon was concerned. He and Hannah made love slowly and sweetly, taking their time with each other and enjoying that for once they didn’t have to rush off. They took a shower together, which was a little complicated considering the size of the stall, but Deacon had worked in logistics for years in the army and afterward, so he’d long ago figured out how to make it work.



Clean and satisfied, they pulled on clothes and went into the kitchen, where Deacon cooked them both breakfast. Well, lunch at this point. He didn't normally cook, because he didn't enjoy it, but Hannah sitting at the table heckling him, them laughing together as the winter sun shone through the big windows, made it the best thing ever.

As they were eating and talking, he decided that he'd been an idiot to write Hannah a letter, and he was just going to embarrass himself for no good reason. He'd get it and toss it before she saw it. They were already creating memories he'd hold onto forever.

But there wasn't a good time to go get the envelope without Hannah asking what he was doing, so he forgot about it as they cleaned up. Then as he was drying and putting away the last of the dishes, Hannah wandered over to the Christmas tree to put on the lights because they'd forgotten to do it earlier.

"What's this?"

Deacon turned to find her holding the envelope he'd put under the tree a few hours ago, frowning down at her name scrawled on the front.

"Nothing." He quickly went to her and tried to get the envelope away from her. "Just something stupid. You don't need to bother with it."

"No!" Hannah twisted to keep the envelope away from him. "This is mine. It says so on the front. Why are you worried? Did you buy me a house?"

"Uh, that would be a big no." He tried to grab it again and cursed himself for doing this in the first place.

"Stop acting weird." Hannah turned around until her back was to him and ripped open the envelope. Deacon could have wrestled it away from her, of course, but he didn't. Drawing in a deep breath, he stepped back and watched as she pulled out the three pages he'd worked on for hours. She looked down, then spun back around to face him.

"Deacon?" she whispered.

Deacon shoved his hands in the pockets of his sweatpants and hunched his shoulders.

"I guess you might as well read it," he grumbled. A little pointlessly, since she already was.

*Hannah, the letter said. I'm not that good with words, but you know that already. And I probably should have typed this so you could read it better, but my fingers don't work on the keyboard and I thought something like this should be handwritten anyway. Sorry that my printing sucks.*

*I just wanted to tell you that I love you. That I've loved you from the moment I met you, way back in high school. The best day of my life was the day you said you loved me, too, and the second best day was the day I put my ring on your finger and you told me you were pregnant with my child.*

*I love the way you light up the room when you walk into it. I love how much you care about everybody you know. I love how protective you are, and how I know that you are going to be the best mother ever. I love that you never give up.*

*I love that you've never given up on me.*

And it went on from there. It was kind of mortifying to remember how flowery he'd gotten as he went on. After numerous false starts, he'd gotten in the groove, calling on his nearly non-existent experience with love letters from the movies. For sure his parents had never written them to each other.

Now, watching Hannah read what he'd written, he felt like a total jackass.

He'd compared her to sunshine and flowers, and he wasn't a guy who compared people to stuff like that. He'd talked about how much he loved making love to her, which was more his speed but still felt really, really strange to put into words on paper

Hell, everything in that letter was way, way, way outside of his comfort zone.

And Hannah was still reading and not saying anything, and it was freaking him out.

"I, uh, thought first about writing you a poem," he said, talking just to fill the silence. "Because that's what people do, right? Yeah, that didn't work. At all. And there was no way I was going to draw you a card or something like that. I can do diagrams or stick figures, but that's about it. I guess if I'd thought about it earlier, I could have made you something out of metal or wood or whatever, but I didn't. So this seemed like the best thing." He winced. "But sorry that it's stupid."

He waited. Hannah continued to read. It looked like she was on her third time through.

"Can you just say something?" he demanded when he couldn't stand it any longer.

She carefully folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. Then she looked at him, and her beautiful hazel eyes were drenched with tears.

"Deacon," she whispered. Lurching forward, she threw herself at him, wrapped her arms around his waist, and, to his horror, started sobbing into his chest.

"Hannah, honey." He pulled her closer. "It's okay. I'm sorry. I should have just bought you earrings or something. I'm so not good at stuff like this."

“You’re perfect at stuff like this,” she sobbed and pulled back to look at him, her nose and cheeks red. “This is perfect. The best thing ever. I can’t believe you wrote me a love letter. I’m going to keep it always.”

“Then why the hell are you crying?” he demanded.

“Because I love that letter so much, and I love you, and I love that we’re together forever now, and I love baby Peanut and I love Christmas,” she wept.

“Okay.” It was slowly dawning on him that she really liked what he’d given her, and it was a relief.

More, he finally got what Albert had been trying to tell him. This memory of their first Christmas together was what would stick with both of them for the rest of their lives. It would have been nice to buy her expensive earrings or whatever, but it wasn’t everything.

“I don’t have anything for you because I didn’t even think of doing something like this, but now I’m going to write you a letter, too,” she told him earnestly. “And I might make you a card.”

“You’re so competitive,” he teased, then tugged her closer and laid his face in her hair while she snuggled into his chest. “I love you Hannah,” he whispered. “You and baby Peanut are everything I could have ever wanted. Thank you.”

Hannah pulled back enough to wrap her arms around his neck.

“I love you, Deacon,” she whispered and then lifted to kiss him.

He tasted her love in that kiss, sweet and strong. It was the best Christmas present he could have ever received.