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The Christmas Spirit



SPHERE

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To
Linda Nichols
Author, knitter, and, best of all,
a precious friend

PROLOGUE



"Nana, Nana, we're here," eight-year-old Lance shouted, as he raced into the house ahead of his six-year-old sister. He launched himself into her open arms, as if it had been weeks since they'd last spent time together. Lance and Lily visited often, and their Nana treasured each and every minute with her precious grandchildren.

"Are we baking cookies again?" Lance asked, the instant she released him. He eyed the kitchen for signs of his favorite activity.

"I don't want to bake cookies," Lily said with a pout, following her warm hug. "I want Nana to tell us another story. Nana's stories are the best. Besides, Mom says Lance eats too many cookies."

"That he does," Nana agreed, ruffling her grandson's

hair. "It's late and Nana is tired, so let's settle down with hot chocolate and a story." She'd had a long, hard day, distributing food baskets to families in need, in addition to a lengthy practice with the church choir as they prepared for the Christmas Eve service. A smile came over her as she recalled another Christmas program many years ago, one that would likely never be forgotten.

Lance cocked his head as if giving the idea consideration. "A story's okay, as long as there's no kissing."

"I like kissing," Lily argued, looking up at her nana as if to assure her that any story she told, kissing or not, was fine by her.

After making cocoa, including marshmallows, they moved into the living room and sat on the big sofa in front of the fireplace, mugs in hand. A gentle fire flickered, warming the room. Several red stockings with white fluffy cuffs were strung across the mantel, where a crèche was placed. The bright paint on the figures had faded to pastel colors over the years. Still, it remained a family treasure, handed down from one generation to the next.

After taking sips of their drinks, both children snuggled up against her side. Nana placed her arm around her granddaughter's shoulders as Lily leaned against her grandmother. Lance pressed his head against her arm as they settled in for an engaging tale.

"Nana, can I start?" Lily asked. "The beginning is my favorite part. Once upon a time . . ."

"Once upon a time," Lance echoed, clearly not enthused. "Not again, please, Nana, make this a real story."

"All right, I will," Nana said.

"It won't be a once-upon-a-time story?" Lily asked, with a sad face.

"No, this story is even better."

"How can it be better?" Lily asked. "Fairy tales always start that way."

"Remember, Sweet Pea, this isn't a fairy tale. This is a real story." Nana kissed the top of Lily's head. "But it's a good one. I promise. Probably one of the best stories I've ever shared."

"But if it doesn't start with *once upon a time,* then how does it start?"

Before she could answer, Lance asked, "Is there kissing?"

Nana hesitated, not wanting to mislead her grandson. "Some."

"Goodie." Lily clapped her hands.

Bending her head close to Lance, Nana whispered, "You can cover your ears when I get to that part if you want."

Lance released a deep sigh. "Okay, but let me know ahead of time."

"I will," she promised.

Because he was still unsure, Lance asked again, "You're sure this isn't one of those silly fairy tales?"

"I'm sure," Nana said. "This story starts out *in the beginning*."

"Oh, I like it already," Lily said, snuggling all the closer.

Nana paused to regard her grandson. "Is that better?" she asked him.

Lance's wary look suggested he remained skeptical.

"Go on, Nana," Lily urged, "tell us more."

Nana relaxed her back against the cushioned sofa and closed her eyes as the memories rolled through her mind. A slow smile came over her as she started the story.

"In the beginning there were two rough-and-tough friends named—"

"Can I name them?" Lily interrupted to ask. "You let me name the people in once-upon-a-time stories."

"All right, Lily you can name one, and Lance can name the other."

Lily didn't pause. "Since this is an in-the-beginning story, I want to name him after Uncle Peter."

Nana smiled. "That's thoughtful of you, Sweet Pea, and that is the perfect name. What about you, Lance? Do you have a name in mind?"

"Hank," Lance said automatically. "After Grandpa Hank."

Nana approved. "You couldn't have chosen better."

"Is this story about the two of them because they're good friends?"

"You'll have to wait and see."

Lily and Lance smiled at each other. Naming the characters was one of the fun aspects of Nana's stories, which was why she let them do it.

"Okay, back to the story," she said. "The two men named Peter and Hank had been friends nearly their entire lives. They grew up together, attended the same schools, both played football, and both ran track. Peter was the star quarterback, and Hank was the fastest runner on the cross-country team."

"That's what I'm talking about." Lance's face brightened as he pumped his fist in the air.

"Did they fall in love and marry their sweethearts?" Lily asked.

"Nana, please, don't ruin the story." Lance closed his eyes and bounced against the back of the sofa, dismayed already.

Nana ignored them both. "After graduating from high school, Peter went away to college, and Hank took over the tavern from his father after he retired." She paused and saw that Lance was already involved in the tale, and Lily was patiently waiting for the romance. "But like in the fairy tales, this all took place long ago, before there were cell phones and social media."

"That long ago?" Lance cried. "Did they live in caves?"

Nana smiled. "No, not caves. They lived in houses. They had phones, but the phones stayed inside, and most

were attached to the wall. The ones that weren't on the wall were much too big to carry."

Both children regarded her with wide eyes.

"Now back to the story," Nana said. "Peter and Hank were the very best of friends, even after they left school."

"My best friend is Everett," Lance said. "We're gonna be friends like that even when we're old and out of school."

"I bet you will," Nana said. "Even after Peter graduated from college, he routinely spent time with Hank, and that's where the story really begins."

CHAPTER ONE



1977

"Hey, man, sorry I'm late," Hank said, as he slid into the red upholstered booth at Mom's Place across from his best friend. He was running on less than five hours' sleep, and his day was only getting started. "Did I keep you waiting long?"

"No, I was late myself." Pete had always been the responsible, prompt one. It surprised Hank to learn his pastor friend could be late for anything.

The waitress came with a coffeepot, and both men turned over the beige mugs to be filled. Pete smiled at her as she handed them menus and then swiftly left. Hank noticed how Pete's gaze lingered over the waitress

as she returned to the counter and refilled another customer's cup.

"I'm telling you, these long hours are killing me," Hank said, as he wiped a hand down his face. His eyes burned, and he couldn't remember the last time he'd had a decent meal. As different as they were, they had continued a friendship after Pete had graduated from seminary and returned to Bridgeport. Pete looked every bit the pastor with his clean-cut looks, while Hank was often mistaken for a hippie, with his long hair and the casual way he dressed. Scruffy jeans and a T-shirt were his standard uniform, whereas he suspected his friend hadn't worn blue jeans since his college days.

Hank was the owner, manager, bartender, and chief bottle washer for the tavern The Last Call. Mom's Place, where they routinely met for lunch every month or so, was halfway between their two towns, Pete in Bridgeport and Hank in Kettle Springs. "I didn't get away from the tavern until after two this morning. Some days I swear I get less than three or four hours' sleep a night. This job's a killer."

Pete glanced up from the menu. "I thought you loved the tavern."

"I do. I always knew I'd be taking Dad's place one day. I looked forward to it. The regulars are great and keep me in the black, but I have no life. I haven't been on a date in six months."

"I'd think you'd meet women left and right," Pete said, before taking a sip of his coffee.

"I do. Lots of great women. I thought I'd be married and have a couple kids by the time I hit thirty."

"Why aren't you?" Pete asked.

Clearly, Hank's lifelong friend had no understanding of what managing a tavern entailed. "There's a big difference between meeting lots of women and having time to actually date. I work fourteen hours a day and sometimes longer."

Pete frowned. "Hire someone."

Hank snorted. Pete made it sound easy. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to find good help these days? I tried taking on a part-time bartender, and he drank all my profits. It's a slim enough profit margin as it is. At the rate he was drinking, I was about to go out of business. The thing is, if I need to be there to keep an eye on the staff, I might as well do without."

After a brief hesitation, Pete acknowledged Hank's dilemma: "Gotcha."

"Having my own business takes every spare minute I have. If I'm not at the bar serving drinks, then I'm in the office doing paperwork. Keeping up on the orders or dealing with the taxes. I swear it's one headache after another. Do you have any idea how much effort goes into the accounting aspect of being a business owner?"

"Well, yes . . ."

"Oh, come on." Hank gave a short laugh. "You're a pastor. The church doesn't pay taxes or struggle with money hassles."

Pete nearly spewed the coffee out of his mouth. "You have no idea! Pastoring a church is no walk in the park."

"Are you joking?" Hank was about to say more when they were interrupted by the waitress. He swallowed his argument and turned his attention back to deciding what he wanted for lunch.

Pad in hand, the young woman asked, "What can I get you gentlemen?"

Without looking up from the plastic-coated menu, Hank said, "I'll take the soup-and-sandwich special. On wheat, hold the tomato."

The waitress wrote it down, and he handed her the menu. Next, she looked to Pete.

"I'd like the chef salad," he said, "with Thousand Island dressing."

"I'll get that order in right away," she said, as she turned toward the kitchen.

"She's cute," Pete said, watching the young woman in the pink uniform with the white apron.

Hank frowned, his thoughts still on all he was missing in life. He caught his friend's interest in the young waitress, though, and played along. "Who's cute?"

"The waitress. It isn't any wonder you don't date. You

aren't paying attention. That woman is beautiful, and I noticed there wasn't a ring on her finger, either."

Pete was paying attention. Still, Hank let the comment pass. Pete should be the one married by now. He lived the good life and had none of the worries that hounded Hank from day to day. Hank envied him in that way.

Before Hank could encourage him to ask the waitress for a date, Pete said, "You should know my life isn't anything like you assume."

"Are you kidding me? Come on, Pete. You work your own hours . . ."

"That's not exactly true."

Hank dismissed his objection with a wave of his hand. "You get a steady paycheck every month."

"Yes, but . . ."

Hank wasn't listening. "Plus, the church provides you with your own house. No mortgage payments, no worries about making ends meet. And to top it off, you only need to make an appearance once a week. You're living the life, man."

Pete simply shook his head. It looked as if he was about to argue when the waitress returned with their lunch.

Again, Hank noticed the way his friend watched the young woman. It left him to wonder aloud, "Why is it you've never married?"

"Me?" Pete asked, as he mixed the salad and the dressing together.

"Yeah, you. Seeing how you made such a big deal about how easy it is for me to meet women, what about you?"

Pete looked like a deer in the headlights and then like a fish out of water, his mouth opening and closing several times.

"Not so easy to find the right one, is it?" Hank said, understanding all too well. "Church has gotta be full of upright, single, Christian women. You could have your pick of any one of them."

"I suppose," Pete reluctantly agreed. "The truth is, I don't know why I'm still single. I've had plenty of opportunity to date, but I've yet to find that special someone."

"I bet Gracie has something to say about that," Hank commented. Hank and Pete's sister had been at odds for years, always rubbing each other the wrong way. God save him from opinionated women. She was a spitfire, that's for sure. Frankly, Hank couldn't imagine how Pete worked with Gracie as his church secretary. She didn't have the personality for it, as far as he could figure.

"Gracie is Gracie," Pete said. "She's as righteous as ever. Stubborn as a mule and loyal as a dog."

"That sounds about right," Hank said with a snort. He smiled just thinking about her. She had her nose in the

air and a holier-than-thou attitude. It was no surprise she hadn't married, either. Pete was nothing like his sister. His personality was perfect for his life's work. He was a caring, thoughtful man. Wise. Full of faith. Not that Hank lacked faith. He was square with God. But being a Christian didn't require him to show up for church every Sunday.

"You should know my job isn't all that wonderful, Hank. I have my own set of problems," Pete said.

"Sure you do," he said offhandedly. He didn't mean to sound condescending, but Pete had no concept of the demands on Hank's time and finances.

"It's Christmas in less than a week," Pete continued. "I'm running ragged getting everything organized. You, on the other hand . . ."

"What about me?"

"You party every night—"

"It's not a party," Hank interrupted. "I work hard to create a fun atmosphere but trust me it isn't always a party."

"So you say. You may work a lot of hours, which I don't discount, but you can sleep in each morning."

"Dream on," Hank said and rolled his eyes.

"And while you claim you don't have any time to date, which I have trouble believing, you have a chance every night to meet women."

"You have no idea what being a tavern owner means!"

"And you have no idea what the life of a pastor is like."

Hank laughed. "You couldn't do my job for a week."

Pete snickered. "You couldn't do *my* job for a week."

"Give me a break. You're living the easy life."

Pete set his fork down and leaned forward, his eyes intense. "You ready to find out?"

"What do you mean?"

"Fine, since you think I've got it so easy, let's trade places. I'll work at the bar and you fill in for me at the church."

Hank didn't hesitate. This was like taking candy from a baby. "You're on." He thrust his hand across the table. Pete extended his own hand and the two shook.

"Starting when?" Hank asked.

Pete's smile was wide. "No time like the present."

Oh, this was going to be good, Hank mused. Monday night. He was going to put his feet up and watch *Monday Night Football,* and for the first time in longer than he could remember. Better yet, he'd be able to pay attention to what was happening on the field.

Life didn't get any sweeter than this, and his friend was about to learn the biggest lesson of his life.