

A Gift After Christmas

Reagan National Airport, Washington, DC, Late Saturday Morning...

Roland zipped up his jacket against the cold late December wind as he walked out of the terminal. He watched his breath float off in a cloud, furiously punctured by small flakes of dry snow. For a moment, he turned his head and looked up at the control tower, jutting into a grey sky above the arched canopy. Then, he looked south, down Aviation Circle. He saw her little Honda Civic dart between buses as it lurched towards the inner lane. In a few seconds, she stopped at the curb, hazard lights flashing. Clutching his lone bag to his body, he hastily descended into the passenger seat. Her incredible face was waiting and smiling eagerly.

‘Hello, beautiful,’ he said sheepishly.

‘Hello, handsome,’ she answered. ‘I brought you a Starbucks. And an Uber, with that kiss.’ While pointing to the capped cup with a green stir stick, she leaned over and planted one

on him, long and deep. She tasted like Strawberries. Winter ceased and the world halted for a moment as they indulged fresh new love. It would have continued but for an angry honking from behind.

Withdrawing, she glanced in the mirror. 'Alright, jerk. We're moving. So, how was your flight?'

'I almost missed the connection in Charlotte. They have all these rocking chairs, and it was so early, so tired, I almost fell asleep in one. My eyes were closing when they gate-called. But, otherwise, everything was fine. Hope you didn't have to wait long.'

'No,' she said, as she eased them into traffic. 'Been here about forty-five minutes. The cell lot is under construction or something, so I just snuck here and there around short term. Checked some emails. Got a heavy one from Father A. I had breakfast with him earlier this morning and he said he'd send me, send us something. And boy, did he. We'll look at it at your place. He gave me - hang on.'

She started the tortuous process of merging onto the George Washington Parkway. Roland looked at her while he sipped his coffee. Then, he spoke softly and thoughtfully: 'I love you, Maryanna. I love you.' He smiled and sighed. 'It feels even better saying it in person.'

She laughed as she accelerated into the travel lane, making eye contact with him for a split second. 'I love you, Roland. Hmm. It does feel better like this.'

They both chuckled. He took off his glove and lightly brushed his hand down her long hair. 'I don't want to distract you, but I really, really am glad to see you again.'

'Really, really?' she asked with a laugh. 'You're the sweetest. How did we meet again?'

'If you remember, you kept calling about legislation,' he answered with a smirk. 'What's the Senator thinking? When can I interview him? How much opposition is there? Do you have leadership support? Have you spoken with the White House?'

‘Yeah, I was happy to get through the gatekeepers to you. I didn’t know you were so cute.’

‘Ha! I knew about you - in a good way. After your twentieth call in two days, we - Senator Few and I - looked you up. He said, “Look at her! Boy, you better call that one back. You do it, or I’m going to have to.” Jesus knows I’m glad I did.’ He stopped talking but kept staring at her. Then, he leaned over and kissed her cheek.

‘You! I want... Ah, heck. Hang on!’ she said with sudden, ardent determination. With a move that surprised both of them, she pulled hard right and they careened off the freeway and into Gravelly Point. In a minute, they were parked and frantically making out the way high schoolers used to when America was happier. After maybe an hour, after the ninth or tenth inbound jet rumbled directly overhead, they slowed. She cuddled into his arms, smelling his cologne and rubbing his shoulder. His arms were tight around her. Without coordination, their joint gaze wandered over the Potomac and to the golf course

on the other side. His eyes held the view while hers closed. She inhaled and purred.

‘How are your parents? The rest of the family?’ she finally asked, still lost in the placid embrace.

He lowered his head onto hers, nuzzling and smelling her hair. ‘They’re all great. Everyone had a wonderful time. I think they’re as in love with you as I am. Glad one of us finally has a real, decent romantic interest. Mom framed your picture and put it in the hall with the other family. Won’t stop talking about you and us. How’re your folks and Corby?’

‘They’re good. Very good. Corby had a great Christmas. He’s feeling better. Mom and dad seemed a little preoccupied with something that they wouldn’t talk about. But otherwise, we all had a great time. Like the old times when I lived at home. It was so nice. The only thing missing was you. Of course, you were all they, all of them wanted to talk about.’

‘Did you get any questions about work?’ he asked.

‘A few. But, I think they know not to pry too much, even if they don’t know why. You?’

‘Yeah. A couple of times. I’ve found the best way to divert away is to get into the arcane details. Bore them with policy.’ He almost laughed about it.

‘Yeah. I have the old editorial process and MLA style to bore them into submission. But, they kind of understand things have gotten - you know. Without knowing.’ She was looking up at his clean-shaven face.

‘I wish we didn’t know, sometimes. I wish that a lot actually,’ he said.

‘But, we do,’ she answered as she leaned back into her seat. ‘At least we have a few friends to confide in. A few allies. That reminds me. Open the glove box.’

Roland looked inside and removed an envelope and a small white box. Turning to Maryanna, he asked, ‘Do you know what’s in the box?’

‘I do,’ she said. ‘Read the card.’

She waited while he slowly read the missive from Father Alojzy, a kindly-worded

message of Christmas joy, laced with encouraging remarks. Finished, he remarked, 'He's a true man of God. Wonderful. Why do I feel like I've always known him?'

'I know, right?' she said with a smile. 'Meeting him - and it does feel like reconnecting with an old friend - was the most pleasant thing, after meeting you, that is. I think he was sent to us. Or us to him.'

'When should I see his email?' Roland asked.

'At home, not here. Not just yet. I don't want to darken our mood,' she answered.

'Is it that bad?' he asked.

'No. Not... Well, yes, this is all bad. But, he did get some information. He heard back from his friend, I guess, in Rome, from the AIE.'

'Hard to believe they're real, now, isn't it?' Roland interrupted.

'I know. But, they sent him a wealth of research on both the movement and those behind it. Ancient stuff. And - this is where it gets even heavier - our giant new friend sent some confirming material along with a few plans of

action. He's fully analyzed everything off of the poor nurse's phone, and much more. He sent it all encrypted to Father A. Like in a spy novel or something.'

'Hard to believe he's real too. What do you think we should even call him?' Roland interrupted again.

'If I understand Father's hints correctly, then the big guy is about to start putting a little pressure on *them*. Directly and in the way one might guess he's really good at - even against *their kind*. I think the nickname is appropriate. I looked it up. It's a Tolkien character, the mightiest of the Valar sent to battle Melkor in a time of desperate need. Kind of fitting it seems to me. Or, we could just keep calling him a friend. God knows we need one like him.' She was staring out at the water again.

He took her chin gently in his hand, diverting her attention into his face as he pressed in close to hers. 'We need them and we need us. I thought about this the whole flight. The whole vacation. God sent us to be together. And, I think we were chosen to do this, this work. We need all

the help, but we also have each other.’ He rested his forehead on hers.

Caressing his head, she sighed, ‘A reward. Strength. Whatever you are. What we are. I’ll take it. And the friends, yes. Father had some stern words for me – his own and from Big T. Neither are still all that happy about my little West Coast getaway.’

‘Yeah. That kind of surprised everyone, you little sneak,’ He softly whispered. ‘But hey, I’m not so sure that you weren’t meant to have that experience, however, uh, silly it might have looked. Or, how dangerous it really was.’

‘You mean to say *how foolish*, not silly, I think,’ she said sorrowfully, distantly.

‘No. Whatever it was, it wasn’t foolish,’ he kindly reassured. ‘You survived and you helped us better understand things. Maybe you even put *them* on the defensive for once. Call it the Holy Spirit working through you.’

She held his face in her warm hands and gifted him one small kiss. ‘Thank you. They both kind of concluded the same thing, if reluctantly. Your kindness– Oh! Would you believe that the

Hell's Angels called me on Christmas day to check in?! Martha and Rick and all the boys wanted to wish me a happy holiday! I have friends in very high places!'

'You'd make friends anywhere with anyone,' he said as he stroked her hair. 'Someone's plan in action. I think they were purposefully in the right place at the right time. Tattooed protection!'

'And! Speaking of that - open the box, boyfriend!'

'Boyfriend?! We're moving a little fast, now, aren't we?'

'You're stuck with the title until we can bump it up a notch,' she rejoined with a devilish grin.

'Is this a ring or something?' he asked.

'Open it, dork.'

Roland opened the box and removed from it a slender silver Crucifix on a silver chain. He held it up and examined it thoroughly. 'It's -'

'He gave me an identical model,' she said as she lowered her turtleneck and pointed to the glimmering necklace.

‘Pretty. Very pretty on you. Is this one of the legends that turn out to be true?’ he asked.

‘Yes, it is. Pretty or not, you need to wear yours. Father Blessed them both in front of me, for us and especially against, you know- He said to put it on and to never take it off.’