



Erin Stevenson

A  
New  
Hope  
For  
Christmas

# A New Hope for Christmas

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*Dedication*

To Ellie Mae

# 1

“Sunny!” Sam hugged his arms around his torso, bent his head against the frigid wind, and raised his voice. “Sunny! Get in here!” He *really* didn’t want to tug on his boots and coat and go all the way down the hill to the far corner of the backyard. He knew exactly where Sunny was.

Sam stamped his slippered feet on the mat and peered beyond his back deck into the darkness. He tipped his head back and stared into the night sky, searching for a speck of light, anything to penetrate the blackness that cloaked his soul. But it was completely cloud-covered. Not even one lonely star or dot of light to give him hope.

Approaching barking and galloping steps snapped Sam out of his reverie, and seconds later, sixty pounds of Golden Retriever slammed against his body. Make that *wet, muddy* Golden Retriever.

Sam grabbed the towel he kept by the door and wiped Sunny’s paws. “You’re such a beast,” he teased. Sunny lunged up to lick his face. She was full-grown but still had the energy and personality of a puppy. “What am I going to do with you?” he muttered as he dragged the dog into the house.

Sunny went straight for her water bowl.

Sam closed and locked the sliding door,

suppressing another shiver. He crossed to the sink, washed his hands, picked up his mug, checked the coffeepot and grimaced. Only about two inches left, and it would be bitter and sludgy. He carried the pot and mug to the sink, dumped and rinsed them both. He didn't need any more caffeine, anyway.

When he shuffled into the family room, Sunny met him with her favorite stuffed rabbit hanging out of her mouth. Sam ruffled the soft fur on the top of her head, wrestled the ratty toy away, and then threw it to the other end of the room. Sunny galloped away.

He sank into the buttery soft leather couch and rubbed his hands over his face. Sunny appeared in front of him with the toy but didn't move. Sam's shoulders sagged, and he let out a loud sigh. "I know, girl," he murmured. Sunny dropped the rabbit and laid her head on his knee. Her soulful brown eyes nearly did him in. Sam stroked her head. "I miss her, too."

Sam gazed around the large family room with high, open ceilings and dark wood beams. His stomach bubbled. Would he even be able to keep the house? They'd bought it just six months ago when they were dreaming big. Before everything changed in one heart-stopping instant.

*That money is still there just gathering interest.* As soon as the thought flew into Sam's head, he pushed it away. Just a year ago, Jennifer's grandmother had died, leaving her a moderate but generous bequest. Jennifer was adamant that it would be used for something special to honor her cherished grandmother's memory. She had just begun formulating some ideas when her own life was cut short. Sam pressed his lips together. It would be a sacrilege to dip into that money. As far as he was

concerned, it didn't exist.

What was left of the day's fire simmered on the hearth, but there were no beautiful holiday decorations gracing the mantel. It was the first Christmas in this house, and he couldn't even bring himself to put up a tree.

Sunny clambered up next to him and put her head in his lap. Sam supposed he should go upstairs, but he didn't have the energy. And, truthfully, he slept better anywhere but in his own bed these days. He stretched out on the couch and pulled an afghan over himself, and Sunny settled in around his legs. Her soft warmth gave Sam a small measure of comfort.

But it was many hours before sleep claimed him.

## 2

Tendrils of morning light teased the edges of Laura's consciousness, and she sighed and snuggled under the covers. A smile tugged at her lips. Patrick would bring her morning coffee soon.

"Mommy?"

Laura jolted awake as reality slammed into her bones. The nightmare was back. Despair washed over her, filling all the cracks of her brokenness.

She stared into her daughter's deep blue eyes, mirrors of her own, drenched with pain. Laura opened her arms, and Kerrie burrowed into her. "Good morning, my baby," she whispered. Grief flooded her soul to the point where she could hardly breathe.

"Good morning, my mommy," Kerrie yawned.

Laura stroked Kerrie's silky blonde hair and breathed in her scent. "I'm so thankful for you, Kerrie-girl."

Kerrie began to shake. "I—still—miss them—so much," she hiccupped.

Laura kissed her daughter's forehead and swallowed around the lump that nearly closed her throat. "So do I," she whispered. Tears spilled down her cheeks.

It was December first. Of all the painful months of the past year, this was the one Laura dreaded most.

She glanced at the clock. They had plenty of time



before they needed to get ready for church. She and Kerrie lay there for another few minutes, and then Laura sat up and piled all the extra pillows behind them. She reached for a handful of tissues on the nightstand and handed some to Kerrie, leaned back against the pillows, and stretched out her arm.

Kerrie snuggled into her side, holding her favorite teddy bear close.

Laura cleared her throat. "Pastor Jacobs told us to try to begin each day saying one thing we're thankful for and one thing we can do today to help someone else." She felt Kerrie nod.

"I'm thankful for Blue Bear," her daughter said in a tiny voice. She squeezed the bear even tighter.

Laura smiled sadly. Patrick had spent money they didn't have on the silky-soft stuffed animal. Laura protested that a four-month-old wouldn't even know if she didn't get a gift, but Patrick insisted his baby girl needed this bear on her first Christmas, almost eight years ago.

Laura pulled Kerrie a little closer. No child should have to endure this much pain. Patrick's image swam before her and Laura bit down on her lip. She was running out of things to be thankful for. Kerrie. Their warm, cozy home. Her job. That her body was healing, even if her heart was not. She sucked in a breath and tried to insert some levity into her voice. "I'm thankful for chocolate chip waffles!" she exclaimed.

Kerrie giggled. "You're silly, Mommy."

A tiny bit of the ever-present weight that pressed on Laura's heart lifted. "All right. Who are you helping today?"

Kerrie pondered for a moment. "Did it snow last night?"

“Probably.” It was winter, and it was Colorado. Laura didn’t concern herself much with the weather.

She drank in the determined look on her daughter’s face. “After church, I’ll go over to Mrs. Tucker’s and shovel her walk and sweep her steps.”

Laura squeezed Kerrie and kissed the top of her head. “You’re an amazing girl, Kerrie Christine. I love you.” She rubbed the area of her outer thigh where it was starting to ache.

“I love you, too, Mommy. Who are you helping today?”

Laura thought for a moment. “I don’t know. Maybe God will bring someone to me.” But for now, she needed caffeine, and no one would be bringing her coffee.

“Come on. Let’s go make those waffles.”

### 3

Sam sat down at the computer and took a sip of his coffee. He had hoped to have the first draft of his article done before Oliver woke up, but his mind kept wandering. His gaze drifted to the window where the bare trees danced in the wind against a depressing, white-gray backdrop. It did nothing for his mood.

The sound of pattering footsteps lifted his heart. He turned and caught a precious ball of energy in cartoon pajamas. Sam pulled his son onto his lap and kissed his head. "Hey, buddy."

Oliver nestled into his arms and nodded. His little son wasn't talking much these days. Sam pulled the soft fleece blanket around Ollie and sighed. "Give him time," the doctor had said.

Sam fingered one of the ties bordering the blanket. Jennifer had made it for Ollie for his birthday. She claimed she didn't have a crafty bone in her body and was so proud that she completed a blanket that didn't require any sewing.

The day yawned before them, as empty as the past hundred-plus days. Sam closed his eyes and tightened his hold on Oliver. It was December now, Christmas was coming, and it would be as bleak and lonely as Thanksgiving had been. Both his and Jennifer's families were fifteen hundred miles away, and Sam's dad was having health issues, so his parents couldn't

come to Colorado. Jennifer's large family didn't have the means to travel and always stayed home over the holidays. Sam wished he could bring her parents out for Christmas, but his own financial situation was precarious right now.

He took a gulp of his coffee, which was barely lukewarm now, but it didn't matter.

There'd been plenty of Thanksgiving dinner invitations from well-meaning church folks and two of Sam's colleagues, and he anticipated similar ones for Christmas. But he simply couldn't face being with people, seeing their sympathetic looks and hearing their empty words of pity. They had no idea what he was going through, and he didn't have the strength to put on a front.

"Hey, bud, let's get some breakfast."

Oliver's response was a decisive shake of his head.

Sam pulled back and ruffled his straight, dark hair. "I can make pancakes. We'll decorate them like snowmen."

Oliver shook his head and popped his thumb in his mouth. Another reversion. He'd been completely over that. "Give him time," the doctor had said, again. The doctor seemed to think everything could be solved by the passage of time.

Sam begged to differ.

He picked up Oliver and headed into the kitchen, Sunny on their heels. Her nails clacked on the tile floor, a reminder that he needed to get her to the groomer.

Sam tried to get his son involved in making breakfast, but Oliver just wanted to sit at the counter and watch. With a lot of persuasion, he put the chocolate chips on for eyes. Sam did the rest of the decorating with tiny marshmallows.

Oliver ate three bites and was done. Sam's stomach clenched. The boy had no appetite and was wasting away before his eyes. Sam dumped the plates in the sink with the pan. He'd wash up later.

Oliver looked up at Sam, his gray-blue eyes mirrors of Jennifer's. He pulled his thumb out of his mouth. "Church day?"

Sam's mouth tightened into a thin line. "No, not today." Jennifer was the one who had taken responsibility for Oliver's spiritual training, making sure he went to his little class every week. Sam joined them for the worship service about half the time because that was important to Jennifer.

But he hadn't set foot in a church since her death.

He picked up Oliver and carried him into the dining room where a large bouquet of hardy flowers sat on the table. Three purple balloons floated up from it. Her favorite color.

Oliver's eyes lit up. "Go see Mommy?"

Sam fought back tears and kissed his son's cheek. "Yes, we'll go see Mommy."

## 4

Laura pulled on her gloves and turned to Kerrie. "Ready?" They had decided not to go to church after all. Some days Laura just couldn't face it. Sometimes communion with God was more deeply experienced under a pristine Colorado sky, among the aspen trees in the shadow of the mountains, His majestic creation.

"Ready." She exited the car, and Kerrie joined her at the back. The wind was bracing, but a bit of sun was peeking through the clouds. Laura clicked the key fob and the hatchback glided up to reveal a crate holding two floral arrangements, one in Christmas colors and one in bright colors with a balloon bouquet.

Isabella had always loved balloons.

Laura blinked her eyes rapidly to ward off the tears that gathered.

She grabbed one end of the crate and Kerrie the other. When they had cleared the car, she clicked the key fob to close it. Holding firmly to her cane, they began to walk.

Kerrie instinctively matched her slow pace. They moved in tandem up a small rise and made their way to the two graves with matching tombstones that held half of Laura's heart.

*Patrick Michael Preston, beloved son, husband, and father.*

*Isabella Noelle Preston, beloved daughter, sister, and*

*granddaughter.*

They sat the crate down, and Laura leaned on her cane, resisting the urge to rub her throbbing leg.

Kerrie glanced up at her. "I'll get them out, Mommy." Her daughter always seemed to know when she was hurting.

Laura's heart swelled with love as Kerrie gently set the arrangements down and fussed with them to get them just so.

When she was finished, she rose and moved to her mother's side. Laura wrapped her arm around Kerrie and laid her chin on her head. Kerrie's long pale hair swirled around in the breeze. Laura's heart broke for her daughter. She shifted as a cramp shot down her leg.

Kerrie looked up, her eyes filled with concern. "Do we need to go?"

Laura nodded, and they began the trek back to the car, Kerrie holding securely onto her arm.

A child's scream tore through the air. "No, noooooooooo!"

~\*~

The very instant the balloon broke free from the others, Sam dropped Sunny's leash and lunged for it, but the brisk wind ripped it away. Up, up it went, quickly becoming a purple dot in the cloudy sky.

Oliver began screaming.

Sam gathered him in his arms. "Shh, buddy. It's OK," he crooned. Oliver just screamed louder, which made Sunny bark louder. "Ollie, it's OK. We still have two."

Oliver sobbed. "But—those two are ours. That

one—was—Mommy’s.”

Sam would never understand a five-year-old’s logic, why that particular balloon—identical to the other two—had to be Mommy’s.

He kissed Oliver’s cheek and held him close. “We can get another one.” He felt Oliver’s head shaking violently against his chest.

No, they couldn’t get another one.

Footsteps sounded behind them.

“Is everything OK?” a woman asked. She was arm-in-arm with a girl, both blonde and blue-eyed. Clearly mother and daughter. Taller than average, the woman walked with a cane and limped slightly as they approached.

“Oh, um, yes, I’m—it will be fine. One of his balloons got loose.”

“I’m sorry,” she murmured.

“Your flowers are pretty. I love purple. My name is Kerrie,” the girl said.

Sunny strained at her leash, eager to check out the newcomers.

Sam held fast to her and managed a weak smile.

“I’m Sam and this is Oliver.”

Sunny barked.

“And Sunny,” Sam added.

“Hi, Oliver,” Kerrie said.

Oliver just sucked his thumb.

“May I pet Sunny?”

“Sure,” Sam responded. He was impressed at the girl’s manners.

“Um, I’m Laura,” the woman said.

Kerrie knelt next to the dog and stroked her fur. “You’re such a pretty girl.” She stood and threw up her hands. “I’ll be right back!” she exclaimed and raced



away, leaving the others standing in puzzled silence.

Laura shrugged. "I'm—I'm not sure what she's doing."

Kerrie appeared with another purple balloon, which she held out. "Here, you can have this," she said with a smile. A small dimple appeared in her left cheek.

Oliver's little face lit up, but he didn't say anything.

Sam was touched by the girl's kindness. He reached for the purple ribbon and held tight. "Thank you."

"We brought a whole bunch for my sister," Kerrie said.

Sister? Sadness pierced Sam's heart. He tied the balloon to the others, pulled on the ribbon to make sure it was secure before he let go, and breathed a sigh of relief when it held. "Thank you again. That was very kind of you."

The four of them stood for a moment in silence.

"Well—" Laura began.

"Look!" Kerrie exclaimed. She pointed to a pond in the near distance. "Ducks! Mommy, can I have a quarter to buy food?" She looked at Sam and Oliver. "I feed them whenever we come. Oliver, do you want to come with me?"

Oliver looked up at Sam, his thumb in his mouth.

Sam glanced at Laura. "It's fine with me if you want to go, Oliver."

The boy nodded vigorously but didn't let go of his thumb.

Laura patted her jacket pocket. "Um, I don't have a quarter, Kerrie. There should be one in the car."

Sam fished in his pocket. "I have some." He

handed one to the girl and held out one to Oliver, who shook his head, so Sam gave it to Kerrie.

“Thanks. Can Sunny come with us?”

Sam managed a small chuckle. “I think it’s better for the ducks if she stays with me.”

“OK.” Kerrie reached out and grabbed Oliver’s hand. “Come on. Let’s go!”

Sam and Laura watched them leave. He stuck his hands in his pockets. “She’s a very sweet girl.”

Laura swallowed. “Yes, she is. Thank you.”

Sam thought she looked uncomfortable. “There’s a bench near the water. We could go and sit there.”

Laura nodded. “OK.”

Sam held Sunny’s leash and matched Laura’s halting pace. He wondered if he should offer his arm but decided against it and kept a close watch in case she stumbled.

When they reached the bench, they settled in and watched the children. The wind died down a bit and the sun took over from the clouds.

Then Sam heard something he hadn’t heard in months.

## 5

Laura glanced over at Sam as she heard his breath catch. His mouth was slightly open, and his green eyes were wide as he stared at Kerrie and Oliver.

He shook his head and made eye contact with her. "I—I haven't heard him laugh in a long time." He swallowed and wiped a tear away.

Laura was so proud of her daughter. Silent seconds ticked by, but there was no awkwardness; it felt comfortable. Peaceful.

Sam stared out toward the pond, his dark, shaggy hair waving in the breeze. "My wife—she was one of the nurses in the ER shooting last August."

Laura's heart skipped a beat. Such a tragic story. The ex-husband of one of the ER nurses stormed her workplace and killed her, a patient, and two others.

Laura wouldn't utter the universal, timeworn "I'm so sorry for your loss." She met Sam's gaze and nodded sadly. "A truck ran a red light last December 29 and hit us. My husband was killed instantly. My younger daughter lived for two more days." Even now, the words sounded surreal.

Sam's lips drew together in a tight line, and he shook his head. He looked at her, his eyes filled with pain. "So much evil and pain in this world."

Laura stared off toward the lake. "I was still unconscious when Isabella died. I never got to say

good-bye to either of them." A tear escaped and rolled down her cheek.

Sam reached over, squeezed her hand, and then let go. He cleared his throat. "Yes, that was the worst part. Not getting to say good-bye."

The wind began to kick up again.

Laura twisted her long hair, tucked it in her jacket, and then mopped her eyes with a tissue.

"Does it ever get any easier?" Sam asked. His dark eyebrows knit together. "Ollie's doctor seems to think time is the answer to everything."

Laura let out a stream of air. "Yes. And no." She met his gaze. "It's always there, but sometimes the pain dulls. Then some days, without warning, it roars back like knives stabbing. I can hardly breathe."

Sam nodded. "Days like...?"

"His birthday, Father's Day, our anniversary, her birthday. The first Thanksgiving."

"And the first Christmas."

"Yes."

Sam absently kneaded the soft fur between Sunny's ears. "I know I should put up a Christmas tree, but I'm not sure I can do it."

Laura gave him a sad look. "We always go—I mean—went together as a family the day after Thanksgiving and cut down a fresh one. I couldn't face that this year, so we—well, Kerrie and I—decided to do something different. We made arrangements with the tree farm and paid for two families to get a tree and ornaments from them. You know, someone who couldn't have done it on their own."

Sam's eyebrows raised. "Wow. That's, well, that's really nice."

"Our pastor has been encouraging us to do acts of

kindness for others to help our own healing process.”

A flash of something crossed Sam’s face. Annoyance? Bitterness? He paused. “Is it helping?”

Laura considered his question. “Overall, yes. Some days are better than others. We’ll have to learn to make new memories, to move forward, and to keep the ones we can handle. We’ll go to my in-laws’ on Christmas Eve, decorate their tree, and then spend the night. So Kerrie will get something, at least.” Her voice trailed off.

Sunny sat up, padded over to Laura, and laid her head on her knee.

Tears came to Laura’s eyes, and she rubbed the dog’s head. “Well, aren’t you the sweetest thing?”

Sam smiled. “She’s very intuitive.”

“How long have you had her?”

“Ah, I got Sunny the day I married Jennifer. They were a package deal. Seven and a half years ago now.”

“Isabella was allergic.” Laura had always thought it puzzling that one daughter was severely allergic to dogs while the other had no symptoms whatsoever. The longer she stroked Sunny’s fur, the more comforted Laura felt. Kerrie had asked recently if they could get a dog, but Laura could barely manage life for the two of them and had said no. Maybe she needed to rethink that.

Sam studied her, his emerald eyes serious. “You don’t seem angry. You’ve been at this longer than me. Have you reached the acceptance phase?”

Laura blew out a breath. “Oh, I don’t know about that. I have my moments, believe me.”

“I’m still in the angry stage. I don’t think I’ll ever get past that.”

“We all have to work through the stages of grief at