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A Tangled
Christmas

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Dedication

To Kerry, whose infectious laugh and wild imagination were so helpful to this author and this story. May God richly bless you with His love and the romance above all romances.

1

NOVEMBER
CRYSTAL FALLS, MONTANA

"Mommy, can I help?" Tabitha asked Shelby from the back seat as they drove to church after picking up her daughter from school.

Tabitha was the only blessing that had come of her short marriage. Blondish-brown unruly waves framed the cherubic face and melted Shelby's heart every time.

"Of course, you can, Tabby-cat."

"*Meow*. Will I get a kitten for Christmas?" Tabitha asked.

Shelby shook her head. "I doubt it. Pets are an expense we can't afford right now. I'm sorry, sweetheart."

The little girl pouted. "I get to help with the toys, right?"

"Yes. You do. We have someone coming to give us a hand too."

Little eyes grew big. "We do? Cool."

"Yes. It is...cool." Shelby pulled into the parking lot at church and parked.

Tabitha got out and they walked up to the building with Shelby rushing behind her.

A tall, handsome man with dark hair and

penetrating blue eyes was waiting outside.

“Can I help you?” Shelby asked.

Tabitha hid behind Shelby the moment she noticed the stranger.

“I’m Lucas Spanning. We spoke on the phone earlier. I’m here to help with the toy drive and all that jazz.”

“Of course, you are,” she whispered. “I’m sorry if I’m late. Sometimes traffic...”

Mr. Spanning waved a hand and shook his head. “Not a problem. I’m in real estate. I’m often waiting for people. Part of the job.” He stepped aside so she could unlock the door to the church.

He was in real estate? Alarm bells went off, and her guard went up too late. *Lord, protect us.* Shelby hated her overactive paranoia about men. She took a deep breath and peace washed over her. God didn’t guarantee that she’d never face pain or that others wouldn’t hurt her...but for this moment she sensed she was—safe. That was the most important thing.

He held the door open and stepped back as they entered.

Shelby fingered her purse. Always better to be cautious, right? Her ex had been charming as well. Too bad pepper spray was illegal in Montana. Not that she’d have the courage to use it. She did have a little hair spray though which could be enough to help her escape. But Tabitha, would she be as quick to leave? She should have purchased a gun. She hadn’t the guts, or the money, to do that either. That anxiety and hyper-vigilance returned way too quickly.

Lord, protect us.

Shelby walked down the hallway to the large room where items had been dropped off by people from the congregation and the community.

“Wow. This is quite a project,” Lucas said as he stood in the doorway.

He didn’t invade her space, and in fact, seemed to hang back. As if he was aware of how intimidating it could be for a woman to meet with a stranger. Interesting. Shelby nodded. “Now you know why we need help. I can’t do this by myself with my other duties.”

“You won’t be helping me?”

“I will, we need to catalogue everything so that packages can be labeled appropriately after they are wrapped.”

“Wrapped?”

“The toys all get wrapped in Christmas wrapping paper.” She wanted to add a, *duh*, to that but it would lack the professionalism that should characterize a church secretary.

“So where do we start?” He smiled as his gaze took in the pile of toys.

Shelby felt the tension leave her body. “Probably by organizing items by age range on the various tables. After that we can divide them into boy, girl, or either. We’ll likely have more coming in as well, so this is only the start. Once Thanksgiving has passed, people will be thinking more about Christmas.”

Lucas turned to Tabitha. “I wasn’t introduced to this cherub.”

Shelby swallowed. "This is my daughter, Tabitha."

Tabitha peeked out from behind her mother. "Hi," she squeaked out in her soft voice.

"How are you, Tabitha?" His voice softened as he smiled again. "Are you helping us?"

The girl stepped out from behind Shelby and nodded, her wild curls bopping around.

"So, what does Tabitha want Santa Claus to bring her for Christmas?" Lucas asked.

Tabitha frowned and stepped forward. "Santa doesn't bring gifts. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. James 1:17."

"Well, I guess I've been schooled," Lucas joked as he rose to his full height. "You haven't told her about Santa?"

"She understands Santa as she does any cartoon character. We've talked about the historical St. Nicholas and the wonderful things he did. She understands that while it's fun to pretend about Santa, he doesn't exist."

"Well, that's tragic."

"Is it? Why? If she gets less at Christmas than her friends, does that mean she was bad or that Santa loves her less? When I talk about Jesus will she lump him together with a benevolent, omniscient man with a red suit and beard? I want her to believe me, that I speak the truth to her about Jesus. If I lied to her about Santa Claus, how could she trust me about Christ?"

He crossed his arms. "Hmmm. I think you're

making too big an issue of it. It's part of the fun of Christmas. The magic and wonder."

"Why would you need that? Isn't there enough wonder that God came down as an infant, becoming man while not losing his deity, in order to save us from our wretchedness?"

Lucas shrugged. "I guess on this we'll have to agree to disagree."

"That's fine, as long as you realize you're wrong." Shelby walked over to the pile of clothing and changed the subject. "Here are the various winter coats. These we want available as soon as possible. They need to be sorted by size. There is a pile of hangers here and a portable coatrack to hang them on. The paper there is for you to record the size of the various coats. Sort, record, and hang in order of size. Gender can be noted when appropriate, but they don't need to be separated."

"It looks as though there are some coats here for adults as well?"

"Yes, some. Some teens are bigger and wear adult sizes and sometimes we find adults who have a need as well. We hope to meet the needs of anyone in the community. It is sad when we can't."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes we don't have a coat the right size and they might not find one at the thrift shops. Sometimes the needs are more urgent: gas for their car, or a repair, or food, or maybe even rent. We have a compassion fund, but we can't meet every need and have to be discerning lest people take advantage of

us.”

“They would do that? But of course, they would. That has to be a difficult position for you to be in.”

“I’m headed back to the office.” Shelby nodded towards the hall. “If you have any questions that is where you’ll find me.”

“Wait, I’m working alone? I thought this was a team effort.”

“I will be helping at times, but right now I have some work I need to finish.” Shelby walked out of the room with Tabitha trailing behind.

“Bye, mister!” the little girl called.

At least Tabitha had overcome her shyness. She ruffled her daughter’s hair proud that Scripture had been the girl’s answer to the over-confident man. He likely didn’t have any kids, so how would he know what was best? Besides, she had instructed Tabitha to not tell her classmates that Santa didn’t exist. It did put the little girl in a difficult position, but they’d talked about it at length and being an only child, Tabitha seemed to grasp the nuances of the discussion. It didn’t matter what others, or Lucas Spanning, thought.

Shelby settled at her desk.

Tabitha sat in a chair by a small table in the corner and worked on practicing her cursive writing.

Shelby took a deep breath, sighed, and struggled to focus. Memories of the man who’d come to help today assailed her. Why did Mr. Lucas Spanning need to be so attractive?

2

Lucas set to his task, but his thoughts tangled in his mind. His spirit had longed for something for a while. He'd finally figured out that Sandy, his wife, had moved to a place in his heart where she would be forever loved, but his days weren't tainted by crippling grief. That had to be God's hand in his soul. The dream in which Sandy had appeared and told him...no, she'd ordered him to live life and create a family, seemed as real as his daily routine. She'd been wearing a gold cross around her neck in the dream. The next morning, he'd found the necklace while sorting things on his dresser. He was not certain if it had always been there...or if God and Sandy were trying to tell him something. Either way, peace filled in his soul. And to say he was surprised by the protective feelings that had emerged upon meeting the young woman and her daughter would be an understatement.

Shelby was cute and her daughter was adorable. Apparently not married. That didn't matter. He admired single moms. They had a tough job. He wondered what happened to Tabitha's father. Maybe he was involved. He couldn't imagine abandoning a cutie-pie like that. And quoting Scripture to him? Amazing, really. He struggled to memorize Scripture.

If he was honest, he had a difficult time even finding time to read it. Parsing through contracts? No problem. Reading the Bible? Different story altogether. The little girl challenged him in more than one way.

And quoting from James 1? If he recalled, wasn't that the chapter that talked about trials? He opened up the Bible app his phone. *Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.* What parent has their daughter memorizing from that part of Scripture?

He'd never known anyone who intentionally denied a kid the wonder of Santa Claus. He glanced at the pile of toys. Some kids wouldn't get much of anything at Christmas. Shelby had a point. What kind of Santa gives one kid an expensive electronic toy, and then another kid gets a pack of playing cards or something small and inexpensive? Life wasn't about being fair though, and kids needed to learn that lesson too—didn't they?

Tabitha was correct though that Jesus was the best giver of gifts. Maybe Shelby wasn't such a bad mom after all. Perhaps he'd been too quick to judge the woman.

He was irritated that he was left alone to work. Wasn't part of volunteering getting to develop relationships with other people? It was early days yet. Maybe others would join in after Thanksgiving. Not that it really mattered. There was a job to be done and

the Christian music coming over the speakers into the room was a pleasant break from the quietness of his usual office. He picked up a coat, documented it on the form Shelby had left and proceeded to hang it up.

After over an hour of work, the jackets that had been donated thus far had been recorded, hung, and sorted. It saddened him that so many kids would have this kind of need. He rolled two filled racks of coats up against the wall and attached post-it notes above to designate sizes. He was about to get to work on the adult coats when Shelby entered the room again with her cute little shadow.

~*~

Shelby stopped and stared. One large pile of kids' coats was gone. Her gaze swept the room to the racks neatly organized. "Nice work, Lucas. I'm impressed."

Lucas grabbed the legal pad with the information on it. "They're not in order of size on here but they are all recorded."

She held it and noticed his strong penmanship. "Well done. I can get these into a database and then sort them. Easier than trying to have you do it with the physical items. It's around five now, I'm leaving for the night."

Lucas nodded and grabbed his own coat. "When would be a good time for me to return?"

"We are typically open from eight to around five. Sometimes I lock up if I'm running to get Tabitha if no one else is around. This week is Thanksgiving though.

We will be closed from Wednesday to Sunday morning.”

“That would only give me tomorrow. You said more would be coming in after Thanksgiving, right?”

Shelby nodded.

“Well, maybe I’ll take off work tomorrow and hang out here for a few hours. See how much I can get sorted and organized. If you want, I could bring a laptop. If you have that database, I could put it on there and enter everything directly into the database. Save you and me both some time and reduce any duplication of effort.”

“Oh, um. I guess that would be fine. I’ll just need you to give me the updated file when you leave in case someone else works here. Then we can keep it all synchronized.”

“Who else would work here if the office is closed?”

Shelby’s face grew warm. With this much work, she’d likely be here through the holiday. “I’m not sure. I might be doing some work if I get the Christmas decorations up after Thursday.”

“What’s the rush?”

“It’s not so much a rush. I really love decorating for Christmas.” Shelby didn’t add that they wouldn’t be able to do any of that at home, so this was her only place to really enjoy the trappings of the holiday.

“I can help with that if you’d like.”

“I’m sure you have family to visit and enjoy time with. I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.”

“It’s no inconvenience. My mom and stepfather

are in Greece. My one sister in in Texas.

I have a few friends, but generally speaking I'm unattached and would welcome the opportunity to escape my abode to assist you."

"Abode?" Tabitha asked.

Lucas dropped to one knee to her eye level. "Abode is another word for home. A place to live."

"Oh, is it time to go to our abode, Momma?"

Shelby giggled. "Yes, dear, it is. I need to make supper."

"I'm hungry." Tabitha told Lucas.

"Well, then I should escort you ladies safely to your vehicle." He stood again. "Where is your coat, Tabitha?"

"Back in the office. Come. I'll show you!" Tabitha skipped ahead.

Lucas grabbed his own jacket, gave a lopsided grin, and strode after the little girl.

Shelby looked over the room again, grateful she wouldn't need to return tonight to get everything more organized. If the intriguing man really did choose to help the rest of this week, it would ease a huge burden from her shoulders. She turned off the lights and shut the door to the room.

She came in as Lucas was helping Tabitha with her coat.

Something cracked in Shelby's heart. Oh, to have someone who could show her daughter that there are godly men in the world. Ah, but she'd also thought Paul one of them. It had taken time, but he'd proven false. While Mr. Spanning seemed genuinely nice, she

had no clue as to his character. Sometimes the devil dressed in angel's clothes to trick and deceive. He was also in real estate. Not everyone was like her ex, but still...how could she be sure?

They exited the church and she locked up. Lucas walked beside her and Tabitha to the car. Once Shelby had Tabitha inside and buckled in her booster seat, she shut the door and turned to find the handsome man standing nearby. "Thank you for coming today."

"I'm glad to help. Have a lovely evening." He turned to walk to his car.

She got into hers and started it. The car hesitated twice before finally turning over. *Lord, please let this vehicle last.*

Lucas gave a jaunty wave as she pulled past his vehicle and then he backed out and followed her out of the driveway.

He wasn't trailing her, was he? Shoulders tensed, she made her way to their apartment.

He turned off blocks before she got there.

Relax. You're safe.

Once they were inside their cozy home, she took a deep breath, held it, and released it. Tabitha went to play as Shelby hung up the coats and proceeded to make dinner. Mac and cheese from the food pantry at another church. It was humbling to go there, but she didn't have much money and she needed to save for a better vehicle and any other emergencies that might come up.

While the water boiled, she leafed through the mail.

A letter had arrived from her mother. She had collected it from her a post office box before getting Tabitha from school. The note was originally mailed to her attorney, and then forwarded. Another level of safety. She ripped it open.

Dear Shelby,

I hope this finds you well. Your father and I are managing. I wanted to let you know that Paul is looking for you. His last girlfriend left him from what I hear. (Not that I gossip). Has he paid you any child support? I've enclosed a check that I hope will help with Christmas. We long to see you but understand why we can't.

Please send us photos of Tabitha. She must be getting so big already. It's been what, two years now? Know that we love you and pray for you daily, often several times a day.

Will you be moving back here after the trial? We hope so. We long to have you closer.

I need to go prepare dinner for your father. He'll be home from work soon.

We love you. Give hugs and kisses to Tabitha from us.

Mom

Shelby dumped the noodles in the water that had come to a boil. She adored her mom. Mom had loved Paul initially, and she was thrilled with having a granddaughter. She'd been slow to understand just why Shelby divorced him after only a few years of marriage.

Her mother was unaware of the arrangement she had with the FBI. She'd refused to go into full witness protection, but they had relocated her to be safe until Paul was no longer a threat. She glanced at the check.

A generous amount would help tremendously. She'd mail it to a bank in another state to deposit. Another level of security.

All the secrecy and hiding was exhausting. The trial was coming up in two and a half weeks. She wasn't even sure just how that would happen. She didn't want to testify in person.

"Mommy, this is yummy. Thanks for adding the hot dogs. My favorite. We had baked chicken for lunch today. That was yummy. I'm reading better too. Miss Widhouse said so."

"That's wonderful, Tabbi-cat."

Once her daughter was in bed on her side of the mattress, Shelby returned to the living room and sank into her favorite chair, a blessed find at a local thrift shop. She opened her journal to re-read the portion of Psalm nine she'd written there during her morning devotional time.

*The Lord is a refuge for the oppressed,
a stronghold in times of trouble.*

*Those who know your name trust in you,
for you, Lord, have never forsaken those who seek you.*

These verses and others like them were her lifeline. She recited the verse and prayed it as a way to calm her soul. Sleep had been harder to find as they drew closer to trial. Her mother's letter didn't help matters either. Paul was once again looking for her. That meant he'd visited her parents and probably threatened them. She hoped her mother had informed the feds. Shelby would write a letter to her mother tomorrow and send it to her attorney.

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Finally setting her journal aside she sought her bed, praying sleep would come.

3

Lucas arrived at work with a skip in his step. He couldn't stop grinning. "Good morning, Carol," he said as he stepped into his office. His work at the church had been fulfilling. His Christmas had direction now. And Shelby and her adorable little girl had brightened his afternoon yesterday.

"Good morning, Lucas. Here you go." She handed him the mail and his pile of messages. He headed into his personal office, shutting the door behind him. He paged through the piles and frowned at one message. Someone wanted him to call, but didn't indicate what it was about. Lucas punched the numbers into his cell and hit dial.

"Special Agent Fritz Gustafson speaking."

"Hi, this is Lucas Spanning of Spanning Realty. You called?"

"You popped up on our radar yesterday. Are you acquainted in any way with a Paul Fantner?"

Fantner? Lucas frowned. "Was he with Midwest Real Estate Brokers?" Lucas pulled out a file from his drawer with that name on it. He opened it up to read his notes. "It was two years ago when he tried to solicit us to be part of his enterprise. We decided against it."

"If he contacts you for any reason, please call to let

me know immediately.”

“What’s going on?”

“I’m not at liberty to say as it is an ongoing investigation. Please don’t discuss this with anyone.”

“OK...”

“Have a good day.” The agent hung up.

Lucas sat back in his chair. What was going on? He opened his laptop and began searching for Paul Fantner. The phone rang before he found any tangible information. Then a couple of his other agents begged for his time. Paul Fantner was forgotten.

~*~

Shelby dropped Tabitha off at school and drove to Scenic View Church. Tuesdays were busy days. After the staff meeting ended, she ate lunch at her desk, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. She took a few minutes to use the computer to look up Lucas Spanning. She found several photos of him in suit and tie. He dressed well and exuded confidence. Reading about his successes added another dimension to his personality. But did that make him trustworthy? Her heart was confused. She’d dreamt of him last night. *Lord, I would love for Tabitha to have a godly man as a father. Wouldn’t be horrible to have one as a husband as well. I get tired of carrying this burden alone.*

Filing for divorce had been the scariest thing she’d ever done in her life. Once the papers had been delivered to Paul, she realized just how terrifying life could be. She reached over to touch her ribs on the