

A romantic Christmas scene set in a snowy town square. In the foreground, a man wearing a red and white Santa hat and a white zip-up hoodie looks towards a woman in the distance. The woman is wearing a beige winter coat, a white knit hat, and white gloves, and she has her hands clasped near her face. The background features a building with a sign that reads "OLD TOWN" and a doorway decorated with a Christmas wreath. The scene is illuminated by warm yellow lights and decorated with hanging icicle lights. Snow is falling gently around the couple.

TONI SHERIDAN

*Drummer
Boy*

A CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

Drummer Boy

Toni Sheridan

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Drummer Boy

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Dedication

For Chris, my husband and love. I never thought marriages could work out, yet here we are after all these years, still going strong. I'm so grateful to God, and to you, for showing me I was wrong.

Prologue

Slowing her pace, Jane inhaled frosty air until it felt as if her lungs would burst. She released the breath in a gusty sigh.

“Gorgeous,” she whispered, looking beyond the dark, lonely parking lot to the eternal sky above. It sparkled with stars that looked as big as her fist, as if God had spilled a purse of diamonds across a swath of black velvet. She shook her head at her silly self. *Diamonds. Velvet.* Good thing she was at the end of her rotation, not the beginning. She didn’t need a lot of shuteye to get by, but between doing her own shifts and covering for Monica, she actually felt a little sleep deprived. The tiredness was making her fanciful. Not her normal state. Not at all.

Jogging on the spot in front of her car, she stretched her arms over her head.

“You went running after a twelve-hour shift? I can’t believe you,” said someone behind her.

Jane recognized the voice—Margaret from Maternity—and turned, smiling. “I can’t help it. I’ve always been energetic. It’s a curse.”

“A curse I wish you’d share,” Margaret grumbled. “I’ve heard of exercising after work. I’ve just never seen anyone do it. I’m dead on my feet. But enough complaining.” Her tone brightened. “It’s Christmas, and I’ll be able to sleep for a few hours before the kids

roar into my room with their stockings. I've got seven days off now. Merry Christmas, Jane!"

"Back at you, and drive safe. It's icing up."

Margaret blew on her hands. "I don't have to go running around the streets to know that. Brrr."

Jane started her car, but let it idle until the windows fully defrosted. Yes, she was more than ready to be home now, but there was no point rushing and risking an accident. Better late in this world than early in the next as her sister Candy would say.

Margaret was long gone when Jane pulled out of the parking lot, and the streets were fairly quiet, though Jane was always surprised by how many people were out late at night—or early, early in the morning.

She smiled as she shoulder-checked and moved through the last big intersection between her and home. Maybe Candy had left her a plate of goodies. She probably had. She was a great sister that way. Jane was trying to think of a special way to say thank you when she saw the headlights. A red pickup fishtailed around a corner and seemed to be coming straight at her.

She blinked, but it was no optical illusion. The truck was solidly over the yellow, totally taking up her lane. Another vehicle, also traveling toward her—in its correct lane—made it impossible for her to move over. There was nowhere to go.

She hit her brakes and lay on the horn. Her vehicle skidded to a stop, but it wasn't enough.

Her last conscious thought through the noise of crumpling steel and the shriek of metal on metal was that the man driving still hadn't seen her. His face through the windshield, freakishly clear to her, was

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confused and dopey-eyed, expressing the “What?” of someone just waking up.

1

The room was filled with the gloomy, gray light of tentative day, and the rustle of bedside curtains and rattling clank of the kitchen cart were familiar but confusing. Breakfast trays were being handed out to patients throughout the ward, but why was Jane there for it? They had kitchen staff for that.

Another nurse—it sounded like her friend Clarissa, actually—was describing injuries to a family member: broken ribs, punctured lung, broken wrist, possible damage to her spleen...

Tears pricked at the back of Jane's eyes, and she tuned out whatever else Clarissa was saying and said a silent prayer for the victim. Whoever it was had a long, painful recovery ahead of them.

Jane reached out to take the cover off the plate and show it to her patient. It was so weird that she couldn't see the patient's face. And it was extra weird that she was back to kitchen duty. She hadn't delivered food to patients since she was a teenaged volunteer.

Her hand wouldn't move. She couldn't lift the cover. Her other hand was being held? She shook her head a little. Heard a small croak-throated groan. Was that *her*?

One of her hands seemed to be tied down. Blankets heavy as concrete sheets weighted her to the bed. Everything hurt. Everything. And she couldn't move. She still couldn't move! Jane's heart pounded,

and itchy panic crawled over her skin.

Two glaring headlights popped into her memory. A grinding scream of metal on metal replayed in her head.

"That *is* kind of ironic," she heard her sister Candy mutter.

"What is?" Jane rasped and then swallowed hard. The action felt like a knife sliding down her throat, but at least her voice worked again, sort of. "And why am I tied up?"

"Jane!" Candy turned quickly. "You're awake!"

Cold, heavy dread settled in Jane's stomach, and she broke into a sweat. It really was her. In a hospital bed. Injured. She couldn't bear the concern in Candy's reddened eyes. Everything flooded back, including pain, pain, pain. What had they given her, morphine or oxycodone? Either way, the meds were wearing off. She needed more.

She forced energy she didn't feel into her words. "Merry Christmas, eh?"

Candy's smile trembled, perhaps closer to tears than cheer. "Well, it's getting better all the time."

Jane was saved from having to utter anything else when the doctor on call appeared. Henricksen. Not her first choice, but not a complete numbskull. She tried to focus on what he was saying and hoped Candy was doing a better job than she was.

Giving medical information was completely different than receiving it.

Jane's emotions kept her from processing the terms he bandied about so casually. Her brain stuttered and stalled over the details, at what they meant for her *personally*. She could hardly breathe, but now it didn't feel like a side effect from the medication.

Her lung and ribs would heal. The blood they'd found elsewhere in her abdomen—she'd had blood in her abdomen? Apparently, yes—and they'd keep an eye on it? Well, thanks so much, she wanted to say scornfully, but he was rushing on.

His concern was her arm.

She must've held it out in front of her, perhaps in an unconscious, futile attempt to block the impact when the driver of the oncoming vehicle crossed the centerline. The exploding airbag snapped her hand back, compressing it against the car's roof. Three fingers and several bones in her hand were crushed. Her wrist was broken in two places and bone fragments had pierced through her skin. Her ulna and radius were also fractured. The swelling was so bad that the full extent of damage was hard to examine.

They were trying to get a surgeon in early, but if unsuccessful, they had Jane booked for surgery the next day.

The doctor discussed the use of interior and exterior pins, screws, plates and rods to hold bone fragments in place.

Jane stared at Candy, willing her to understand because she couldn't.

"Did you follow most of that, Jane?" Henricksen asked.

She nodded but couldn't speak.

"You're bound to be a bit fuzzy. Your sister can bring you up to speed if there's something you don't recall, and, of course, we'll talk more later. Get Candy or a nurse to write down any questions you may have."

Jane turned her face away as the doctor started to talk recovery. The dead weight under the blanket? The

limp, log-like thing lying over her ribcage, crushing her like a restraining bar? That was her arm.

Henricksen finished blathering and squeezed Jane's foot lightly. "I know it probably doesn't seem like it right now, but you're lucky. They had to cut you out of your car with the Jaws of Life. To sustain only non-life threatening injuries..."

Jane's sinuses burned again. Irrationally, she hated the kindness in his voice. "Yeah, lucky," she said, her gaze on the gray, socked-in world just outside the window—as flat and void of hope and interest as her near future now seemed.

Candy seemed relieved, almost giddy. "So she'll pull through just fine? Well, that's the important part," she said. She hadn't gotten it at all, but Jane had.

Jane was all too aware of what she faced. Her arm would never be the same. It might never regain its full strength. And it would be ugly to boot.

"Jane," Candy said. "*Jane?*"

But Jane, as much as she wanted to say something comforting or make some joke to ease the worry in Candy's voice, couldn't come up with a word. She feigned sleep.

"I'm going to call the kids and let them know what's up," Candy whispered. "I'll be right back."

Jane listened to Candy tiptoe to the door and then croaked, "I'm going to look like a horror show, pins sticking out all over my hand."

Candy turned back. "Nah, you'll pull it off, make it hip or something."

Jane tried to imagine that. Couldn't.

Candy's eyes brightened with moisture. "Don't do that to me again. I can't lose you. It would be too much."

Jane knew how hard this must be for Candy, visiting her here, worried she was near death, reliving, no doubt, awful memories of their mother's last hours after *her* car accident. Tears leaked out of the corners of Jane's eyes. Great. Now she was turning into a crybaby. "Yeah, ditto," she whispered. "Now, go call. Tell them I love them and say Merry Christmas for me."

"I will and wait. I brought you something." Candy fetched her purse and rummaged through it. "Close your eyes."

Jane obeyed.

Candy slipped something onto the small table by the bed and then placed a second item onto Jane's head.

Jane opened her eyes. "What's this?"

"You know the tradition."

"My Santy hat?"

"Yep."

Jane cautiously reached her good hand up to touch the soft felt cap she'd received in her stocking when she was eight and had worn every Christmas Day since. Then she glanced down at her bedside table. A miniature ceramic stable glowed in the dim lighting, its tiny Mary and Joseph and Baby Jesus the picture of peace amidst trials.

"You brought my favorite ornament, too." She leaned back against her pillows, exhausted by even this small exchange.

The sweep of Candy's hair tickled Jane's cheek, as Candy kissed her forehead. "Of course. And guess what? As an extra treat this year, you'll get to wear that corny old thing twice. We're going to celebrate this Christmas, take two, once you're home safe and

sound.”

Candy disappeared into the hall for real this time but left the door open. Jane caught sight of a cute guy in a navy t-shirt, carrying a massive bouquet of yellow roses into the room across from her.

For some reason it filled her with self-pity. Twenty-four years old and who did she have to come to her side? An older sister with a caretaker complex, and a whack of younger siblings. No parents. No husband—not even a man she was seriously dating.

“Ugh, get over yourself,” she growled and started to shake her head, but the action hurt so much she stopped.

2

The huge evergreens framing the parking lot looked black against the blue-purple sky, and the snow dusting their tips was ridiculously pretty. The fresh, on-the-verge-of-snow scent was such a welcome change after weeks of stuffy, recycled hospital air that Jane wanted to spend a minute or two just breathing. She leaned heavily on her solitary crutch, breathed in, breathed out—

“Jane!” Candy’s voice was alarm clock shrill, almost a parody of concern.

Irritation buzzed in the back of Jane’s teeth and down her back.

“Are you all right? Are you about to faint? Are you in pain? What can I do?”

Oh, no, heaven help them all. Candy was in caretaker hyper-mode. They’d only made it as far as from the hospital room to here and already Jane was wishing the car crash had killed her.

OK, no, that was going too far even for a joke in her own head. She didn’t wish that at all and prayed a quick inner apology. She was one hundred percent grateful to be alive and not injured more seriously, and she’d resolved to take Henricksen’s comment as advice and to try to look on the bright side. But Candy, sheesh...

“I’m fine,” Jane said through gritted teeth. “I was just enjoying the fresh air.”

“Oh, oh, of course,” Candy said, but Jane could tell by the way Candy stared at the ground as if it were covered with writhing snakes that her sister had already moved onto a new worry. “There’s a lot of ice. *A lot...* Do you want to wait here? You rest. I’ll get the car.” Candy flexed and un-flexed her fingers as if physically trying to keep from picking Jane up and carrying her. “Or will you be cold?”

They’d already argued about this.

Candy wanted to butcher Jane’s new winter jacket, so it would fit her arm. Jane was adamant she’d be fine in her tank top and zip hoody with the slit sleeve. And she was fine. Hadn’t even done it up all the way. Her thermostat was always set at high it seemed.

Jane stared out over the parking lot, or what she knew was parking lot, under the layers of lumpy, despite being scraped and ploughed, ice and snow. What she wanted was to go for a run. “I’ll wait here,” she said. Then she added, “Thanks.”

“Good and I’ll leave these to load when I bring the car around.” Candy placed the box of floral arrangements from Jane’s room on the ground and then touched Jane’s good hand. Jane forced herself to not jerk away.

She’s just being nice. She’s just being nice. She’s just being nice, Jane chanted silently as Candy made her way to her car. Finally, Jane gave up and muttered, “She’s going to kill me with kindness.” The grouchy admission cheered her immensely.

Candy’s headlights turned on at the far end of the lot, and then she popped out of the vehicle again, window scraper in hand.

Jane breathed in, breathed out.

Candy would calm down once she realized Jane

was really all right. Home wouldn't be so bad.

A youngish guy jumped out of a truck and grinned at her on his way toward the emergency doors.

"Nice rack," he said, checking out her chest.

"You have no idea," Jane said and raised her damaged arm in a mock salute though it was agony to do so.

The creep stared at the grid of nail-like pins that protruded from her swollen-to-triple-its-usual-size arm, not even trying to hide his revulsion.

Jane smiled with mock sweetness. "I know, right? *Hot*. And by the way, it's extremely inappropriate to comment on a stranger's body."

At least he had the decency to turn red before he hurried away.

She lowered her arm, sweat springing to her forehead, and gritted her teeth against the pain. But it was so worth it.

"Nicely played," said a low, rumbling voice behind her.

It made Jane think, of all the strange things, of water rushing over rocks. She turned. It was the man with the flowers she'd seen across the hallway the week before. Like her, he was jacketless against the cold, wearing another navy t-shirt. The front of his shirt sported a white cross—a cross, she suddenly noticed, formed by the silhouettes of two drumsticks. She wondered if he liked drumming or if it was just something comfortable to wear. No flowers this time, but a stack of CDs.

He followed her gaze and shook the discs lightly. "Yeah, they still have CD players in the place, if you can believe it."

"Sheesh, the nerve. How very last decade of them."

The guy laughed, and Jane shifted her weight, settling more firmly on one hip. He had warm, kind eyes the color of gingerbread—sort of a honeyed-brown—and she liked that they were about the same height. He didn't tower above her.

"You have a lot of flowers," he said. "Someone sure loves you."

Jane looked at the box at her feet, glad this stranger couldn't see the small cards of pretty much identical, generic well-wishes from various guys she'd dated a few times—the one where her name was misspelled as "Jan" was particularly heartwarming.

A horn blipped lightly behind them.

Jane sighed.

"Your ride?"

She nodded.

"Do you need a hand?"

"No, I still have one—two, actually. Thanks, though."

The guy smiled again. "Right. Good one."

Jane tried to crane her head in a subtle way to watch him leave. Too bad she hadn't gotten his name.

Candy buzzed around the side of the car, whipped opened the passenger door, and appeared at Jane's side, arms out, ready to steady Jane if she showed any sign of slipping.

"I wish you weren't always so efficient." Jane turned so her backside faced the car and lowered herself into the seat. "If you'd taken like five minutes longer—"

"Only you would think of flirting at a time like this."

"A time like *what?*" Jane eased her legs into the car and grinned. "And no, no, I'm definitely not the only one."

As they pulled up to the house, Jane chuckled. Their little sister Kaylie and their twin brothers Matthew and Michael had their faces pressed up against the glass. And wait, there was another little familiar face. Dean's daughter, Isobel, was there, too.

Jane looked pointedly at Dean's vintage Mustang in the driveway and turned to Candy with raised eyebrows. "Now, Candy, how can you even think of flirting at a time like this?"

Candy blushed bright pink. "I don't know what you're talking about," she muttered. "He's just been helping while you were out of commission."

Jane tsk-tsked. "Shocking is all I can say, sister-dear, *shocking.*"

Jane had barely inched through the door, when Kaylie almost bowled her over in an excited hug. "Candy says we can do another Christmas dinner now that you're home."

Jane leaned a little heavier on her crutches and pulled a face. "It's January. Can't we skip it and have a 'welcome home, cripple' dinner instead?"

"Jane!" Candy hissed.

"What?" She caught the look on Kaylie's face. "Ah, I'm sorry Kaylie-baylie. I'm just grouchy and out of sorts. A second Christmas dinner...sounds great."

Kaylie rolled her eyes. "You will actually have fun. I promise, and look what else."

"Well, as long as *you* promise." Jane took the

elaborate welcome home card Kaylie handed her—a combination of collage and little cartoon figures of each member of the family, cheering.

“Aw, doodle. It’s the greatest. Thank you.”

Kaylie smiled modestly, and, wonder of wonders, didn’t even scold Jane about using the nickname she hated. “And check this out.” She held up a sheet of poster board so big she looked like a huge piece of green paper with legs and a head.

“Boy, you’ve been busy with projects galore, hey?”

The poster appeared to be some type of calendar. Jane did a double take. “Kaylie, is that a countdown to next Christmas? That’s a whole year away.”

“Yes, isn’t it great?”

Great wouldn’t have been Jane’s first description, not even close. Kaylie was a sweetheart, but she was showing signs of developing Candy’s manic love of all things structured and planned. And if Jane had to go through a countdown ritual every day for the next year, she would go...crazier.

“Hey, what are you doing this weekend?” her twin brothers Michael and Matt asked in unison, appearing around the corner.

“Working” was on the tip of her tongue. But no, of course, she wouldn’t be. She was on disability leave for...well, at this point, the timeframe was totally up in the air. She shrugged wordlessly.

“Well, do you care if Matt and I go out?”

“No, of course not—” Behind the boys, Candy was making a cutting motion with her hand, shaking her head, and mouthing *No*. “Um, unless we already have plans to do something?”

The twins looked crushed.

Candy nodded, pleased.