



# *The Gift*

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The fall leaves crunched beneath her feet as Erica made her way down the long driveway to her mailbox. The slightly crisp air held a promise of joy and hope for the coming holidays. But inside, Erica felt anything but joyful.

The kids, now grown and chasing dreams of their own, weren't dreaming of coming home for the holidays. Mandy had been teaching in the Scottish Highlands for the past year. Sean, the older of the two, and an engineer, was busy in Brazil designing water treatment plants for their major cities. And since she and Tom, her hubby of 31 years, were now empty nesters, she knew that staying busy would be the best for both of them.

"After all, Tom, aren't these the days we have been looking forward to? You know, the kids all gone, fit in some travelling here and there," said Erica.

"Yes, I suppose you are right." Tom folded his newspaper over his lap as he sat up in his easy chair. "And we have lots of friends. Why don't we just have a big, early Christmas party up at the cabin and invite them over for a few days?"

Erica grinned. "You are on to something. That's a wonderful idea. I'll start making preparations now. It'll be fun to have everybody together. I could pack up a few decorations. We'll plan a scrumptious dinner, and well, it will just be delightful!" she exclaimed.

“Good, I’ll go get the truck, and the toy hauler ready, and pack up a few extra things we might need. You know how the winters are in the Rockies, we can pray for good weather but we need to be ready,” Tom added. “And by the way,” Tom hollered down the hallway, “don’t pack everything in the house, Erica. We won’t have room, just something simple. Did you hear me…” his voice trailed off into empty space. Tom could only shake his head.

Erica’s heart was all light and fluttery now as she put together a short list and made a few phone calls to let everybody know. Known for her elaborate parties, complete with all the fine details, Erica would have this Christmas event put together in no time. She would make sure all her guests were more than comfortable.

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At the cabin, Erica moved swiftly to set out all the decorations she brought from home. “I think I’ll make up a small batch of those Christmas cookies I made the last year the kids were home, then I’ll put on some Christmas music while we decorate,” Erica told Tom.

“That’s fine. I’ll be out back getting an area ready for Farloft. You did say he was coming, right?” Tom replied.

“Yes, and make sure he has his own tray of chocolates, Tom. You know how that dragon loves them,” Erica said. “By the way, have you seen those three small boxes of Christmas decorations we left up here several years ago? I can’t finish decorating the place without them,” she added.

“Oh, don’t tell me you lost them, Erica. You spent a lot of money on those,” Tom stated. “No, I haven’t seen them. I’ll have a look up in the attic when I’m finished out back.”

Tom left to finish his chores. “Pleased don’t forget to lay me out whatever you want me to wear when they all get here,” he said, calling out as he left through the back sliding glass door. He expected it would be that Christmas sweater the women of the family had given him a couple of years ago as a gag gift. He smiled as he headed toward the garden shed for a rake. He would wear it in good humor even if it could win him a medal in the ugly-Christmas-sweater competition.

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Jessie made a right turn off the highway onto the winding dirt road leading to Tom and Erica’s cabin. A gorgeous day had favored them on their long drive from the city. The peaking colors of fall were breathtaking and made the trip all the more pleasant. Jessie hadn’t planned to leave Blue Cove so close to the

holidays, but her grandmother, Sadie, had pleaded with her to come to Erica's Christmas party. Of course, she couldn't refuse Grams. Jessie chuckled to herself. Sadie knew how to tempt her.

Jessie replayed her grandmother's words in her mind. "I can promise you, you won't be bored, Jessie. Erica told me she has a special guest coming this year. You know how people love her Christmas gatherings. There's an extra big surprise in store." She could swear Sadie had mumbled something about a Farloft, which made no sense to her. Jessie had to admit she was intrigued. The reporter in her wanted to see Erica's surprise. Jessie loved a good mystery, and she was hooked.

She glanced at her grandmother sitting quietly beside her. Grams could get her to do anything including spending a few days away from the man she loved.

She maneuvered the car to miss a rock in the middle of the road. Whew, that was close, she'd better pay attention. The last time she had seen Tom and Erica was at Mandy's college graduation party. How many years ago was it? Several! Mandy was in Scotland now, and Jessie's own life had gone through some dynamic changes when she moved to Blue Cove.

"Grams, are you excited to see Tom and Erica?"

“I am, dear. It’s too bad your father and mother couldn’t get away this year. I think they would have enjoyed themselves.” Sadie turned to look at her.

“I wish Mandy could be here, but with her, in Scotland, it’s not possible,” Jessie sighed.

“Oh, I don’t know Jessie girl, stranger things have happened. You never know what a day may bring.”

“You’re talking to the queen of the strange. I can no longer count on two hands the weird things I’ve seen.” Jessie rubbed her eyes and frowned. “Speaking of strange, Grams, did you see that?” She pointed in the direction where the huge green thing had crossed her line of vision. Nothing was there.

“What, dear?” Sadie squinted looking out the window. “I don’t see anything, but clear blue sky with a few white clouds mixed in.” Sadie’s eyes twinkled.

Jessie glanced at her smiling grandmother. What was she up to? “Never mind, I think I’m tired of driving. I’m glad we’re almost there.”

Jessica shook her head. She could hardly believe her eyes. She pulled her car to a quick stop just as she rounded the curve. Grams statement that it would be an

interesting party was not an exaggeration. A dragon, a Big Green Dragon, had just landed in front of the cabin. And who was on its back?

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Farloft landed in front of Erica and Tom's cabin in the woods. He tucked his wings to his sides so his friends, Jake, Arr and Cody could slide off his back. He put Kay-o down on the ground, but kept his large dragon paw firmly attached to the Dardolf's harness.

Jake was the first to dismount. "You packed the Red Raspberry Goo Chews?" he asked Arr, as he reached up for the bundle his partner was holding.

"Don't leave home without them," Arr laughed and tossed down an additional bag.

"Well, see that everyone gets a handful to put in their pocket so the big lug considers them friendly," Jake said, as he slipped a handful of the sickeningly sweet confection to the Dardolf.

Kay-o was an important member of the Star Traveler Team, but he could be rough around the edges. The beast was the size of a bear and had the temperament to go along with it, but Red Raspberry Goo Chews were his downfall. It was lucky none of the enemy knew the way to Kay-o's heart.



Kay-o gobbled down the treats and licked Jake's hand for more.

Arr vaulted off of Farloft's back and Cody followed.

"Oh, you're just in time!" Tom exclaimed as he came out the door of the cabin. "I was heading out to get the tree. You guys want to help?"

"Sure," Jake said, as he clandestinely slipped some Goo Chews into Tom's pocket. "We're game."

"Kay-o and I will hunt up one and give you a call." Cody, the shape-shift, shifted into his impressive wolf form and barked at Kay-o to follow him.

Farloft released the Dardolf and the two shot out toward the woods at the edge of the clearing.

"Let's put your stuff inside while we wait," Tom suggested. He picked up the sack of Goo Chews and opened the door for his company. "We made accommodations for you Farloft, around back," He thumbed the direction with his free hand.

"Right!" Farloft said, though he leaned in toward the open front door. "Are those brownies I smell cooking?" He licked his lips with a long pink tongue.

"It is," Tom replied with a smile. "Something special for our dragon-chocoholic friend," he chuckled. "Head 'round back, they're almost done."

The house was splendid - all decked out in its Christmas finery. “Just set the packages down in the hall. We’ll move them under the tree once we get it set up and decorated.”

They all heard the call of a wolf joined by the boom of a Dardolf’s howl off in the distance.

“That didn’t take long,” Arr grinned and turned back toward the door.

“Honey, are you all coming in for a snack?” Erica called from the kitchen. She poked her head around the door. “Oh, Jake...Arr... It’s so good to see you. I’d give you a hug, but I’m covered in flour.”

“We’ll be back in a little bit,” Tom answered for them all. “Cody and Kay-o found a tree. The guys are going to help me cut it and bring it up to the house.”

“I’ll keep the kettle on. Best take Farloft with you or there won’t be any brownies left by the time you get back. He’s already devoured two pansful,” Erica chuckled.

“Come on Farloft!” Jake called out the backdoor. “You get to carry the tree.”

There was the rustle of wings and the dragon appeared around the corner of the cabin, telltale chocolate still smeared on his muzzle.

“Did you save any for us?” Arr asked with an indulgent smile. You didn’t deny a dragon his treats, but Farloft was a friendly dragon who always tried to remember to share.

“I did,” the big green beast replied. “A whole panful.” He dipped down in front of the three men and extended a wing. “It will be faster, and we can get back to the goodies sooner, if you all climbed aboard.”

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“Push!” Jake hollered.

“It’s too big...” Arr said in a defeated tone.

“It didn’t look this big before we cut it down,” Cody said, now in his human form.

“Why don’t I just remove this part of the roof,” Farloft offered, grabbing the gable with one large green paw.

“NO!” Tom shouted. “Ummm... I mean, I think we can make this work.” He tried to stay calm with a dragon, two spacemen mercenaries, a wolf shape-shifter and Kay-o who seemed to have an overactive interest in his pocket, as helpers on this Christmas assignment from Erica. “Farloft, can you just break the

tree in half? I think it will fit then.” Tom pushed at the Dardolf as gently as possible with his free hand.

“Done.” The dragon pulled the tree out of the entrance and snapped the trunk in half as if it were a twig or a toothpick. “Properly pruned,” he said with satisfaction.

With that problem solved, the guys successfully installed the tree in the living room.

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An hour or so later, hearing a car door slam, Erica went to the front to see what was going on. “Oh, Tom, would you look who’s arrived? It’s Duke and Kohana. It looks like he’s brought the twins and Sara with them, too,” Erica said.

Tom stepped out of the front door to see the boys running up to them. “Well, looky who’s here? You boys have grown so much,” Tom said as he knelt down on one knee. “Tell me, you boys been good or bad?” Tom asked with a sly wink.

“I’ve been good,” Jackson said, smiling and hugging Tom.

“I have too,” Cooper added through missing teeth.

Tom stood to his feet and pulled his wallet from his back pocket. “Well, alright, here’s you each a \$10.00 spot. You boys will have to hold on to that until you get home because there are no stores close by,” Tom stated. “How ya doin’ Duke, Kohana. Come on in,” he added. “And, Sara, you are just as lovely. How was the trip, my dear?”

“Oh, it was long, but oh, so wonderful. It’s so kind of you and Erica to invite us all up here. It’s going to be a wonderful time,” Sara said looking out over the mountains. “It’s really beautiful up here. I’ve never been to Colorado before,” she continued.

“Aw, Sara, you made it.” Erica reached out to hug her old neighbor. “It’s so good to see you,” she said, as the boys ran past them and made their way indoors.

“Come on in and I’ll show you to your rooms,” Erica continued. Reaching for some of their luggage, they followed Erica inside and turned left down the west wing. “Your rooms will be down this hall,” she added.

“Oh, look, there is my box of decorations; I’ve been looking for them all day. The bathroom is just one door up on your right.” Erica finished as she grabbed the box and headed back to the grande hall with guests in tow.

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Intent on putting the last touches to a tray of chocolate truffles, Erica suddenly paused. She shot Tom a puzzled look.

“Something wrong?” he asked, looking up from rinsing the baking utensils.

“It’s awfully quiet outside. Have you seen Farloft?”

He chuckled. “Not since he performed surgery on the Christmas tree.”

Wiping chocolate covered fingers on her apron, Erica frowned. “That was hours ago. I wonder where he is?”

“Want me to check outback – see if he’s okay?” asked Tom.

“If you wouldn’t mind. He ate so many chocolates earlier I’d hate to think he’s hiding away, not feeling well.”

Tom put the last of the bowls on the draining tray and hurried outside.

“He’s not here,” he said, minutes later, frowning and raking a hand through his hair as he walked back into the kitchen with Jake, Arr and Cody at his heels.

“Said he had business to attend to,” Arr mumbled through a mouthful of brownies.

Erica frowned. "I hope he's alright," she said, a little hurt at Farloft taking off without letting them know and wondering what was so important he would do so.

At that there was a whoomph whoomph of wings overhead. As one they rushed to the front door, stumbled outside to see Farloft preparing to land.

Cody peered at the dragon circling overhead. "Oh wow, he's carrying passengers!"

"Head's up!" Jake shouted. "Look out!"

In a mad scatter the five friends leapt out of Farloft's way, the dragon pulling up inches short of the cabin. A huge Yule log shot off his back and thumped against the cabin wall.

"Oh! My goodness, Tom! Look who's with him!"

"Mom, Mom," Mandy called, hauling a holly wreath off Farloft's horn as she slid off his back, Sean right behind her.

After excited hugs all round, eyes misty with tears, Erica planted a kiss on Farloft's muzzle. "Farloft, we can never thank you enough for bringing our kids home," she said, a wobble to her voice.

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Erica opened the sliding glass door to the porch outback. “Farloft, could you do us the honor of lighting the Yule Log?”

The dragon carefully leaned in and puffed a burst of dragon fire at the logs that lay in the fireplace. It crackled to life.

“I’ll get the hot chocolate and brownies, and then we can decorate the tree,” Erica said with a smile.

“And maybe some popcorn and cranberries to string for Kay-o and my tree,” Farloft suggested, as he gazed at the lower half of the tree he placed in the back garden. Kay-o had curled up in a ball below it in the lightly falling snow. “And perhaps some Red Raspberry Goo Chews.”

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Everyone was gathered in the livingroom. Tom sat in the large leather chair with Erica perched on its arm next to him.

Cody was sitting on the floor with Kay-o by his side. The twins were feeding the huge Dar-dolf Goo Chews one at a time. Jackson balanced a candy on the critters’ muzzle. Cooper kept using the handsignal Arr taught them to make Kay-o sit still, then signaling for him to ‘Go’ so the beast would toss the Chew up in the air before catching it and swallowing it whole.



Sara, Jessica and Sadie were all curled up on the big couch facing the fireplace with throws draped over their laps.

Sean and Mandy stood in the doorway. Sean had his arm draped over his sister's shoulder, as they took in the gathered group. It was good to be home.

Duke and Kohana sat like bookends on either end of the raised fireplace hearth sipping eggnog.

“Isn't this wonderful?” Erica sipped her hot chocolate. “Before we sit down to the table, I just want to share a little something with you. As you know by now, this would have been the first year the kids would not have been home for the holidays. You can imagine my surprise when Tom suggested we spend this Christmas up here in the cabin. It has been several years since we made it up here; the kids have always been so busy even through the holidays. Well, I guess what I am trying to say is that, as we prepare to eat and exchange our gifts, you have allowed me to open the most precious gift of all and that is the gift of your friendship. I can't imagine a better way to take a break from the buzz of holiday commercialism and truly celebrate what Christmas is all about. To me, that is giving through love. What each of you gave to Tom and I this year, just your being here with us, we can't put into words, but we'll never forget this moment and

we'll never forget any of you," Erica explained, wiping a small tear from her cheek.

Tom raised his mug. "Hear! Hear!"

The group all raised their mugs. "Merry Christmas," they said all round.

"Let's all go into dinner," Erica offered.

Jake who was standing with Arr by the patio door, spoke up. "On your way to the table, Farloft, Arr and I, made a surprise for you all. If you will all step this way to the door."

There was a hint of excitement in the air as everyone rose to see what awaited them outside.

It was quite a sight. From the light of the bonfire Farloft had burning in the fire pit everyone could see the snow-angel the dragon had created in the garden's pristine blanket of white. He had swept out all of his and Kay-o's prints and the only ones that remained were the one's from Jake and Arr's spacer boots where they had spelled out 'Merry Christmas' above the dragon snow-angel.

"Merry Christmas!" Farloft roared. "And here is to many, many more!"

"Merry Christmas," everyone echoed. "Merry Christmas!"