



The Light of Christmas

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Light danced off the crimson ornament as Allyson nested the hook between the needles of a branch just above her head. The last mellow notes of *Away in a Manger* faded, and the first chord to *Deck the Halls* rolled through the room.

Mom opened the next box of ornaments, the one that stayed on the top shelf of the closet. As she spread layers of gauzy tissue paper, ornaments peaked out. The special ones. The ones they had made together over the years since she was little.

She held up a lumpy Santa. "Allyson, do you remember this one?"

How could she forget? She held out a hand and peered down her nose at it like a museum artifact. "Oh yes, from my paper mache phase. Quite the relic that one, isn't it?"

Dad, with the tree reflected in his glasses, put a finger on his chin. "The house barely survived your paper mache phase."

She nudged his shoulder. "It isn't my fault that the penguin decided to glue himself to the cabinet door. I still don't know how that one happened."

Mom walked to the tree with Santa. She held him in front of several branches before choosing a spot next to the glass ornament from Allyson's first Christmas.

The shrill ring of the phone cut through the piano chorus.

Mom reached to answer it. "Hold on just a second." She put her hand over the mouthpiece. "Paul, it's for you. It's Neil from church."

Dad took the receiver. "How are you doing, Neil?" Tension crept back to Dad's eyes as he held the phone to his ear. "Oh, I see. Well, I hate to hear that. Sure we can come. Absolutely, we'll be there in about fifteen minutes." He turned his left wrist so the watch faced up. "Alright, we'll see ya." He pushed the button, and the phone beeped as he passed it back to Mom.

Allyson stood on her tiptoes to fluff the branches around the star. “Everything ok, Dad?”

“Not really. Neil said that two of the ladies who were running the coat giveaway have come down with the flu, and they won’t be able to make it for their shift. He asked if we could come in, and I told him of course.”

Her stomach sank. This was their tradition, the way that they started the 12 days of Christmas. No matter how busy they were, they made time to get together and decorate the tree. “How long is the shift?”

“Just a couple hours.”

It was a little after two o’clock now. That meant they wouldn’t be home until early evening. Then they’d need to cook supper, and it would be late when they finished trimming the tree. They always sat around it after they finished and drank hot chocolate and played board games for the afternoon.

Mom eased the tissue paper in tidy layers back over the ornaments. “I guess we’re needing to leave now, then?”

“Yep, yeah they need us now.” Dad put his hands on his knees and pushed up from the sofa.

“Let me go get changed.” Allyson trudged down the hallway to her bedroom. She shouldn’t be upset. The coat giveaway was a good thing the church did. Usually they helped, but this year there’d been enough volunteers already. Now the afternoon’s tradition was gone.

She tugged open her dresser drawer, and the handle clanged as it fell back against the brass plate. It wouldn’t really matter what she wore. A long sleeved T-shirt and jeans should do. Of course the coat giveaway was a good thing, and of course the people needed help. But all

these people who weren't even able to buy a coat, how did it happen? Were times really that bad?

A lot of the people from years before weren't working, and everybody in the community knew it. There'd been that one family where the mom came in and brought three little bitty kids and none of them had coats. If it hadn't been for the generosity of the church, they wouldn't have had one that winter. Unless someone else helped them. But it was a chance to show God's love, and that's what she was gonna do.

She twisted her hair up in a bun. With all the moving around, it didn't need to be swinging in her face.



Stacks of coats and clothes lay sorted across the back several pews of the church building. Two families milled through, lifting up pieces of clothing, checking tags, and putting some back down.

Dried chunks of mud littered the carpet. There wasn't a speck of anything else on it from where Miss Edith vacuumed two days ago. But now it would have to be done again after the last shift before church tomorrow.

Dad walked up to the man next to the woman and young boy. He held out a hand and clapped his other on the man's shoulder. "We're glad you're here. I'm Paul. What can we do for you?"

The man looked down and held out a hand. "I'm Mitch. This is my wife Lashonda and our son Terrell. We sure do appreciate you folks having this giveaway. Little man's got a coat from last year, but it's getting mighty small. He'll sure be glad to have a bigger one."

“Well, I’m sure we can find one to fit him. ‘Bout what size do you wear, son?”

Allyson headed back out to the foyer. One boy, and one coat to buy. That was it. And they hadn’t been able to do it.

A swirl of freezing air curled around her ankles as the door opened. A girl walked into the foyer, except it was more like a glide. “Excuse me, could you please direct me to a coat for approximately an eight year old girl?”

“Sure. Try this section.” Allyson led her to the left side of the foyer. “You should be able to find something here.”

The girl held out her right hand, but it was almost palm down.

Allyson met it, and the girl turned hers more upright.

“I’m Renna. And you are?”

“I’m Allyson Scott.” There was a strange pull to curtsy, but she didn’t do it. “Are you looking for something for your sister?”

The girl shook her head, her copper curls bouncing. They looked enough alike to be cousins, at least. “Father sent me to get a coat for someone. It’s a good work you’re doing. Don’t ever lose track of what’s important.” She pulled a cream wool coat from the rack. “This will do nicely.”

“I’m glad you found something. Is there anything else we can do for you?”

“Hold on to the person you’re becoming. Merry Christmas.” She smiled, and glided out the door.

Allyson's feet wouldn't work. What an interesting person. Wonder where she was from? She hurried to the window to see which way Renna would drive, but the girl was nowhere in sight. Wow, she must have been in a hurry.

Shrugging, she turned toward the auditorium. One of the pews looked like it had been turned on its head and then everything flung back onto it. She picked a sweater up off the floor, shook the wrinkles out, and folded the sleeves back in the air. That sweater belonged to Lenny, the preacher's daughter. She'd worn it last year. Matter of fact, it looked really good on her. Wonder why she'd brought it here? Of course Lenny wouldn't give away something that had a fault.

As she straightened the coats next to it, a navy sleeve poked out from the pile. She'd brought that coat last year. Why was it still here?

A shoe squeaked behind her. She finished straightening the coat, gave it a pat, and looked up sideways. "Can I help you?"

A girl about her age, maybe a year or two older, with her hair pulled straight back in a ponytail, lifted one corner of her mouth. "I was hoping to see if you have something about my size."

"You're in the right place." Her voice squeaked. She'd tried too hard.

"Oh, these are so pretty." She brushed a finger across the collar of a black jacket that had a bleach spot near the hem. The girl leaned forward, and golden brown hair spilled over her shoulder.

She looked about the same size as Allyson. "What's your name?"

"Paige."

“I’m Allyson.” The faded area glared at her. “What about this one? I think it would fit you. And it looks really warm.” She lifted the top two coats off the stack. Her old navy pea coat’s oversized buttons marched in perfect rows down its front.

Paige held it up between her fingertips by the very edge of the shoulder seams. “I’ve always wanted a coat like this.”

“Why don’t you try it on? That color would look really pretty with your hair, I bet.”

She slid her arms into the coat, and it wrapped gracefully around her just like it had around Allyson. Sure enough, it showcased the natural highlights in her hair.

With a smile, Allyson reached a hand to her shoulder. “It was made for you. You have to take it.” Turning away, she pointed to the pile of clothes the same size. “Now let’s find an outfit to go with it.”

Paige’s eyebrow raised as though she just saw someone take off in a jetpack headed for the moon.

“There’s really not a limit on what you can take. We just ask you only take what you need.” She’d said that so many times it sounded stale, like bread left out overnight. “Do you like sweaters? There’s a pretty gray one over here.”

A child belly laughed from the foyer. Mom ducked around a corner, then stuck her head back around and wiggled her hands at a little girl. An elderly woman bounced the toddler on her hip as she scooted hangers across a small portable rack of children’s clothes.

Paige chuckled, the sweater she held dangling in the air. “It’s been a really hard year, and I appreciate this.”

“Don’t thank me. Only a couple things here were mine. So what’s your story?” She moved on to the next stack and started straightening. Hope that didn’t sound rude. “You know, where are you from, what do you like to do...”

“I never was good at those games in school. We moved here from Tennessee a couple months ago. Between Dad losing his job, moving, and the car breaking down, I’m hoping I can start college back next fall.”

“It sounds like you all have had a tough year.” The past few months at the little mountain college a couple towns over had been great. Once she didn’t get lost every day. It would have been terrible to not be able to go back.

Paige held up a pair of dark jeans. “I think these would fit.”

If she’d just moved, Paige probably didn’t know anybody here. Living in a new place with no friends at Christmastime sounded kind of miserable. “Do you have plans tomorrow?”

She shook her head.

“Then why don’t you come to church with us? We’re having our Christmas potluck after, and we’re going to play games for a while. It’s always fun.” She wiped a hand on her leg. Why did she always get nervous when she invited people to church?

Folding the clothes together in a neat stack, Paige nodded. “Maybe I will.”



Vanilla from the taper candles in their hurricane globes filled the long basement classroom. The kids had scattered pine cones and needles down the long red table runner. Paper wreaths made of handprint cut outs fluttered on the doors.

Allyson took a bite of pecan pie. Miss Polly had gotten the nutty sweetness perfect, as always.

Lenny, to Allyson's right, leaned forward. "We'd love for you to come caroling with us next weekend, Paige."

She put her plastic cup down. "We might. It sounds like fun."

A miniature version of Paige, with lighter hair in braided pig tails, pulled at her sleeve. "Come on, please? It'll be just like in the movies!" Rebecca, her little sister, had come to church too, proud in a blue puffy coat. With sparkles, which she'd pointed out to Allyson as soon as they met.

Paige looked between Lenny and Allyson. "Are you sure it would be alright? We've just started coming."

Allyson wiped sticky pie filling from the side of a finger. "That makes it even better." And it would. Isn't that what Christmas was, after all? Sharing the light with everyone?

"Alright, time for charades!" Neil stood near the head of one of the tables. "Any takers on going first? Don't be shy." When nobody volunteered, he wiped a hand across his forehead. "You asked for it."

He held up one finger, then marched around a table. When he made a full circle, he held up two fingers and marched again. He did the same thing a third time.

"Oh, I know!" Rebecca held up a hand and squirmed in her chair. "We learned about that today. It's the battle at that one place! The weird word that starts with a J." She pressed her palms to the sides of her head and ran her feet in the air. "Jenkins. Jerome. Jericho!"

Neil clapped. "Awesome, Rebecca! Your turn."

Rebecca scrunched up her face and drummed her fingers on her chin. Grinning, she took her and her sister's coats from the backs of their chairs. Then she put them on one of the tables on the side of the room.

Standing on her tiptoes and walking as though she wore heels, she walked away from them. When she turned, she opened her mouth and widened her eyes. She held up one finger and bounced it up and down. Then she put a hand on her chin and walked over to the coats. She motioned picking something up, shook her head, and put it back down. With the navy coat in her hand, she tiptoed back to Paige and handed it to her with a hug.

"Coat?" Lenny asked.

Rebecca shook her head and swung her arms.

"Coat giveaway?" Allyson tried.

That wasn't it either. People suggested present, help, friend, and gift.

Her smile growing bigger by the minute, she drew a tree in the air with her fingers.

"Christmas?" Paige guessed.

"The best Christmas ever!" Rebecca went down the rows and hugged every single person.

At the adult table, Mom and Dad held hands. Mom blinked and rubbed an eye. They both looked over at Allyson and smiled.

Maybe this year hadn't been exactly like all the others. But it didn't seem to matter. Yes, it was turning out to be a pretty good Christmas.