

SILENT NIGHT

A Christmas Novella

by

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CHAPTER 1

Danny could hardly believe it; Laura was coming home.

He shoved his cell in his pocket and sprinted up the hardwood stairs. “Mom! He almost stumbled over cartons stacked outside the attic door. Inside, he found his mother hunkered down in the back corner, rummaging through more boxes. “I just got off the phone with Laura. She’ll be here for Christmas!”

As Mom glanced over her shoulder, Danny could see her dark eyes brighten. A cautious smile crept onto her face as she stood up and walked toward him.

“Are you sure you aren’t turning her maybe into—”

“She’s already taken time off from work. And Paul’s got a break from classes so they’re driving over.”

“Both of them?” She stopped a few feet away, swept her hair behind her shoulders.

“That’s wonderful, Danny. You’re a miracle worker.”

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Something in her expression didn't match her words. "You don't think there'll be a problem," he ventured. "With Dad, I mean." Dad had said some horrible things the night Laura told him she and Paul were getting married. And that had been before she'd announced they'd be moving to Seattle.

"Whatever happens, you and I will see to it Paul feels welcome." She brushed a lock of hair off his forehead, laughed as it fell right back. "I never could do anything with that curly mop of yours. Why don't you take these boxes downstairs. I'll get out the rest. We'll put up every decoration we have in honor of their visit. And maybe some new ones, too."

"Sounds great!" Danny knew he was smiling ear-to-ear. And his cheeks felt warm. Hot, almost. It was ridiculous, how he still got so excited about Christmas. He was almost seventeen years old; when was he going to start acting like it?

Soon. Right after this Christmas. He'd make it his New Year's resolution.

Mom began humming *Silent Night* as she returned to the attic.

Danny hoisted the largest carton over his shoulder and carried it downstairs. The plant stand and all its leafy green in front of the bay window would have to be moved. The lamp and Dad's chair, too. He rearranged the necessary furniture, then dragged the box across the living room and began unpacking.

He'd never told Mom he thought she was overdoing the ecology thing by using a fake tree, especially considering there were hundreds of real ones scattered all over the ranch. He pulled out the metal rods that served as the trunk and fit them together. At least these were brown. The old ones had been green. Mom had told him to pretend it was moss. He dropped the end into the stand, tightened the screws.

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A lot of his mother's ideas were connected with her Crow heritage. Personally, he'd never figured out why she felt so strongly about her roots. It was probably a woman thing; Laura seemed to understand it a lot better than he did.

The front door opened. Dad came in, carrying a pile of wood. "Starting things early this year, I see," he said.

"It's the tenth."

"Is it?" He crossed to the fireplace centered on the wall to Danny's right. "I'll be damned." He stacked the wood on the rack beside the tile hearth. "Next thing you know, grass'll be poking through the snow."

"Yep." Danny picked up two of the largest branches and stood watching his dad arrange kindling for the fire. He really should wait a few days before spilling the news, give Dad a chance to get into the holiday spirit. "Laura's coming for Christmas!"

Dad glanced over his shoulder. The corner of his mouth twitched. "Well, that's interesting news." He straightened up, brushed the wood chips off his plaid jacket. "When did you hear this? Did she send a card?"

"I called her last week and asked if she'd come. When I checked back this morning, she said she'd be here."

Dad looked surprised, maybe a little confused, but definitely not angry. "She was able to get some time off from the cat place this year then." He took off his jacket, tossed it over the back of the recliner. "Well, that's good. It'll be nice to . . ." He straightened his sweater vest, picked off a piece of lint. "Your mother must be excited."

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“She is. She says we’re going to use every decoration we have, do it up right. I think I’ll go into Billings this weekend, pick up some more outdoor lights. The big ones. Then they’ll be able to see the house from the turn out.”

“*They?*”

Oops. Danny sorted through the pile, found another branch with black paint on the end of the wire, stuck it in place. “Well, sure. Paul’s coming with her. You wouldn’t expect them to spend Christmas five hundred miles apart.”

Danny didn’t turn around, but he could envision Dad doing his erupting volcano impression. Not that any actual lava would actually spew out. Why anyone fell for Dad’s fire-breathing act remained a mystery to Danny. Dad was a little rough around the edges, but no more than anyone else who’d been living off the land for thirty years. How many cattlemen in Montana wore white shirts and doused their cheeks with aftershave?

Still, Dad’s being Italian helped support the hothead image. Moving here from the East Coast, with a name like Calino . . .

“Daniel,” Dad’s crisp voice echoed through the room.

Danny straightened his shoulders, turned.

Dad stood a few feet away, scowling as if he’d been kicked by a bull. “Don’t you think we should have talked about this before you made those phone calls?”

As Danny met his father’s gaze, he thought of Laura. Having her home for Christmas was easily worth a few days of Dad’s wrath. “Come on, Dad. We both know what you’d have said.”

His father’s dark eyes narrowed. Maybe he did look a little like Pacino in *Godfather II*.

“It’s been over two years since you’ve seen your daughter, Tony,” Mom’s steady voice intervened. “It’s time to accept Paul is a part of her life.”

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She was standing at the base of the stairs, and, for all Danny knew, might have been for the entire conversation. She had the strangest way of being able to conceal her presence until she was ready to be noticed.

Dad stepped back, shifted his gaze to Mom, then back to Danny. “So you decided to gang up on me this year.”

“We’re looking forward to seeing Laura. And so are you.”

“I told that bum never to set foot in this house again.”

“We all say things we don’t mean when we’re angry.”

“Sure, Dad,” Danny said, forcing a smile. “Paul’s probably forgotten it by now.”

Dad snorted. “I expect he’d like to.”

Mom picked up the box at her feet, carried it over to the couch, sat down, and began unpacking it. “Nobody says you have to embrace him when he walks through the door, Tony. Just step back and let him in.”

Dad glared at the door as if envisioning Paul on the other side.

“It’s still two weeks away,” Mom went on. “That’s plenty of time to get used to the idea.”

Her eyes sparkled as she unwrapped her treasures, and Danny’s heart warmed. True to the rancher’s lifestyle, Mom wasn’t much for fancy clothes or expensive knickknacks, but how she loved to display her collection of ornaments every year. He wondered if Laura would top the set of satin birds she’d sent last year. Even Dad had been impressed.

“Maybe you’re right, Lynn,” Dad finally said. “It’s possible the leech will come to his senses and just stay home.”

Smiling gently, Mom set the little gold violin on the coffee table. “Everything will happen as it’s meant to be.”

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Dad grunted something under his breath and crossed to the stairs.

Danny sat on the couch. "I just know it's going to be okay," he whispered.

Mom glanced up. She was holding a silver teapot now.

"With Laura, I mean," he went on. "She's lived with Paul for two and a half years. He's a quiet, easy-going guy. She's probably mellowed out by now, don't you think?"

Mom reached out, touched his cheek. "I think this is going to be a very special Christmas." She patted his hand, smiled and stood up. "Now what do you say we get that skeleton over there put together so I can get my beautiful ornaments hung?"

CHAPTER 2

“God, will you look at all that snow.” Paul tapped the brakes; the little Ford skidded to a stop on the icy pavement. “Makes you wonder how we put up with it all those years.”

Laura wiped her hand over the window and looked below. She’d forgotten how white Montana’s winters were, including the cloudy sky as dusk settled in. Smoke rose from the chimney of the house, so Dad had probably finished with his chores for the day; Mom wasn’t all that keen on using the fireplace.

Her breath caught as a flash of color lit up the roof line. “Danny,” she whispered, then felt a burst of energy warm her. She’d always found her brother’s enthusiasm contagious this time of year. Maybe it would be enough to get her through the next couple of hours.

“Ready?” Paul asked.

She drew a deep breath, nodded slowly. “As I’ll ever be.” She paused. “And you?” He should be as nervous as she was. More so.

He shrugged. “It’s been a long time. I really think you’re making too much of it.”

“I hope you’re right.” And what were the odds of that? A few million to one? When Dad had said he never wanted to see Paul set foot in his house again, he’d meant it.

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She stared out the steamy window as Paul eased the car down the winding road. She could recall the last conversation she'd had with her father nearly word for word. Probably because she'd gone over it in her mind a hundred times.

"This was his idea, wasn't it?" Dad had said when she told him of her plans to transfer from the local college to the university in Washington State.

"There isn't a veterinary school any closer, Dad. What difference does it make if I move now or a year from now?"

"How do you plan to support yourself? Where are you going to live?"

"We'll get part-time jobs. We won't need much to get by."

"Expenses will be triple what they are here."

He'd been right, of course. Triple, and then some. Her job at the cat clinic covered only basic necessities. Paul's dental scholarship paid for a few extras the first year, but he'd needed a lot of expensive medical books and a new computer the next year. And he still had a year and a half left. Worse, if he didn't bring his grades up by the end of next term, he'd lose his financial aid, and she'd have to find additional work in order to meet expenses.

"You can report back to Paul I'm willing to pay your tuition, but they'll be building ski resorts at Disneyland before I give him a stinking dime. Let me know if he's still so intent on getting married."

"We don't want your money, Dad. We certainly don't need it."

She'd stomped out of the house, vowing never to speak to him again. The very idea that Paul was interested in her only for her father's money. He'd been wrong. They'd still gotten married, been together going on two years. Of course Dad hadn't admitted his mistake, let alone apologized for it.

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“Bet this gravel’s murder on the paint.” Paul grinned. “Good thing it’s a rental.”

Laura straightened in the seat, stared at the blurry dots of color growing larger and brighter as they neared the house. Light snow dusted the windshield. Paul turned on the wipers. They flapped back and forth, lending uneven rhythm to the Mozart CD playing through the speakers.

Twenty-eight months. Not one card or letter from her father. They hadn’t even said hello over the phone. It was always Danny who called, or Mom. What would she say to Dad now, after all this time?

“End of the line,” Paul said, turning into the driveway. “Guess I’ll pull up behind your dad’s . . . whoa!”

Laura grabbed the door handle as they skidded off the drive. Fortunately there wasn’t far to go with a four foot snow bank on either side. The engine died. Paul restarted it, inched backwards, straightened out, and parked behind Dad’s truck.

She stared at the closed garage door. The Jeep must be inside, with Mom’s wagon and Danny’s pickup.

But what if they weren’t? What if Dad answered the door?

Her heart pounded as she got out of the car, walked with Paul toward the house. It looked larger than she remembered.

The temperature was in the low teens, but she didn’t button her coat; the wind felt good, biting at her cheeks, rippling through her sweater. There was a wild, fresh smell to the snow, like the streams it replenished every spring.

“Be careful, the wood’s slippery,” Paul warned, taking hold of her arm as they climbed the steps to the deck.

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Before they could reach the door it flew open, and there stood Danny, looking exactly as she'd known he would, buoyant smile and all. Mom's tears were a surprise, but they vanished beneath her hearty laugh as she pulled Laura into her arms.

"Oh, baby."

Laura returned her mother's tight squeeze, then moved into her brother's waiting arms. It wasn't until after she'd ruffled his wiry hair that she spotted her father standing in front of the fireplace across the room.

Their gazes met for half an instant; Laura couldn't say who looked away first. She focused on his sweater, the magazine in his hand, the fire crackling behind him. He was probably staring at her hair, the collar of her coat, the trim on the pockets. It was such a long-standing tradition, she wondered if either of them knew what the other really looked like anymore.

"Hi, Dad." She could tell from the tightness around her mouth that she was still smiling a little, but her voice had come out even more distant than she'd expected.

"Laura." There was no tone to his voice, distant or otherwise.

The grandfather clock by the stairs seemed unusually loud as it chimed four times.

"How the heck's it going, Paul?"

Little brother to the rescue, bless his heart. How would she ever have survived growing up in this house without him?

Paul shook her brother's outstretched hand. "Not bad. How's life on the range these days?"

Danny laughed. "Pretty darn cold."

Paul smiled. "Yeah, I can imagine." He turned to Mom, shifted his weight from right to left, flexed his fingers. "And how are you, Mrs. Calino?"

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“Wonderful.” She reached out, embraced him gently. “We’re so glad you could come.”

A thump sounded across the room.

Dad picked up the log from the hearth and threw it into the fire. “Getting pretty low on wood,” he said to Mom. “I better go out to the barn, get some more.”

“We’ll be sitting down to dinner in half an hour, Tony.”

Dad mumbled something under his breath and walked to the kitchen.

By the time he returned, they’d be sitting at the kitchen table in the midst of conversation, the time for greetings long past. It was really quite well thought out.

Dad hadn’t changed a bit.

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“I thought it went pretty smoothly,” Paul said later that night as he stood at her closet, hanging up his shirts.

It seemed strange his being here in her old room, as it would with anyone, no doubt. This had always been her haven. The one place she could go where the pressure to measure up to Dad’s standards didn’t follow. It looked exactly as it had when she’d left: knotty pine furniture, soft lavender walls, woven rugs scattered over the hardwood floor, the earth tone quilt that covered her bed.

“Laura?”

She glanced up, nodded. “I guess.”

Amazingly, Paul didn’t seem to have a clue how far apart she and Dad were. Their gazes hadn’t met once all evening. Either Paul hadn’t noticed or wanted to pretend he hadn’t.

“Everything’ll work out, Hon. Don’t worry.”

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Patience. Paul's approach to everything. "Don't you ever get tired of waiting for things to happen?" she asked.

He moved his shirts to the end of the rack and began hanging up his slacks. Next would come the ties. Then he'd unpack his travel bag and arrange all of his toiletries on the bathroom counter in two neat rows.

"What good would it do? Never changes anything."

He had a point, at least where she was concerned. She crossed to the dresser and stood in front of the mirror, brushing her hair. "Do you realize I'll be pushing thirty by the time I'm licensed to practice?"

He turned, met her gaze through the mirror. "What?"

"And that's providing they accept me."

His frown faded slowly. "Oh, the vet school. Well of course they'll accept you. You were pulling a 3.8 at Montana."

Were was right. Two and a half years was a long time. And it wasn't only her studies that were getting rusty. All the hands-on knowledge she'd gained tending to the cattle and horses on the ranch would be considered ancient history if she didn't get her application in soon.

"I know it's hard to wait, Hon. But at least you're gaining some valuable experience at the clinic in the meantime."

"Yeah. I'm an expert at filling out forms and cleaning kennels."

Paul turned back to the closet. "It's only one more year, Laura. Once I get my office set up, you'll be able to concentrate on your career. And we won't have to live like paupers."

She dropped the brush on the dresser, crossed to the window and closed the blinds. She didn't bother raising the question of where the cash would come from to get his practice rolling,

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nor point out that the equipment alone would run into tens of thousands. He knew. The fact it didn't seem to bother him was what disturbed her.

“I wish you were back in class, too. Then you'd get your bachelor's degree when I graduate and we could look at relocating near Pullman right away. It would probably help your chances of getting accepted if you had some in-state credits. But we agreed there's just no way both of us can go to school full time unless—”

A rap sounded at the door, which was fortunate for Paul. He hadn't raised the idea of asking her father for money in over a year. And now, tonight of all nights. Laura unclenched her fists, forced away the glare she'd readied to turn on him, and went to open the door.

Her brother's smiling face relaxed the rest of her anger.

“I'm riding up to the point. Thought you might like to come.”

“Why are you whispering?”

“Mom said I shouldn't bug you anymore tonight, that you'd be tired from the trip.” He fumbled with the collar of his jacket, nodded over his shoulder at their parents' room. “I thought she'd never go to bed.”

Laura laughed. “Sounds great. Just give me a minute to change.”

“You're welcome to join us, Paul,” Danny added.

“Hmm? Oh. Thanks, but I've had enough riding for a while. You guys go ahead. I'm planning on a hot bath and a good night's sleep.”