

Happy Holidays!

The holidays are times for family, love, and hope. To me it means snowmen and ice skating and chestnuts roasting over bonfires— scenes I seldom see, since I've lived for most of my adult life in Florida.

I hope you enjoy this little short story I wrote a year or so ago, which to me seems especially appropriate for the season, although it's all about emotions and not a whole lot about the physical side of love.

Happy reading,

_____ *Ann Jacobs*

THE BEST GIFT

by Ann Jacobs

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The village pond, Redmond, New Hampshire, December 15, 1865

Home. Until he'd spent three winters down South fighting Rebs, Giles Redmond had never properly appreciated winter in his New England home. Satisfied with the arrangements he'd made to get on with life now that he was finally home, he inhaled crisp, cold air fragrant with the smell of wood smoke and evergreens and watched the day's first fat snowflakes land on the other end of the downed log where he sat at the edge of the ice. Kathryn would do well with Laura, he thought as he visually followed the progress of his daughter and the woman he would soon marry around the glassy expanse of frozen pond.

He would no longer have to worry what would happen to his only child should his wounds prove fatal despite all the doctors' assurances to the contrary. In return for that peace of mind, he would give Laura the security of his name, assets, and protection- no insignificant prize for the tomboyish woman who was of an age with him, past her prime in the marriage market. Still, Giles chastised himself, for while he had assured his fiancée she need not share his bed if his scars repulsed her, he'd lacked the fortitude to spell out the extent of his injuries.

He shifted on his makeshift chair, hoped the snow would let up. If it did not, Laura would learn before their wedding, without him telling her, that he'd lost a good part of his left leg. Walking on dry land challenged him on the best of days. Giles imagined maneuvering across a blanket of snow with only a cane to help him keep his balance would be nigh onto impossible.

But he wouldn't anticipate trouble. The partnership he'd forged last month with his childhood pal, Albert Harper, was working well. Bert handled the legwork while Giles took care of all the duties of a banker that could be done from behind a desk. The marriage arrangement he'd made with Laura Wakefield, another lifelong friend, would work out equally well.

From across the icy pond, Laura glanced past snowflakes and a sea of villagers' swirling dark cloaks and silver skate blades toward the man she'd agreed just yesterday to marry. The man she'd loved from afar since they were classmates at the one-room schoolhouse across from her father's general store. Giles's daughter Kathryn squeezed her hand, reminded Laura of the reason for the upcoming nuptials.

The marriage would be one of convenience, not the love match she'd dreamed of for years on cold winter nights. She'd dreamed of dancing on the ice with Giles at the first skating party of the season. Watching snow fall while cuddling with him beneath a fur lap robe in a one-horse sleigh. Listening to the tinkling of sleigh bells, the strong beat of his heart. She grieved silently for silly girlish fantasies that would never come true even though she would be his wife.

Laura shook off her sense of melancholy. This was a time to celebrate, the first winter in four years that the villagers could look forward to celebrating the upcoming holidays without the specter of worry for sons and husbands off fighting Rebels on faraway battlefields. A time to give thanks for the soldiers God had spared to return to their loved ones.

Giles had been one of the last to come home, and before his arrival last month, Laura had heard whispers that he'd suffered terrible wounds, wounds that had come close to killing him. When he had come to her yesterday with his proposal, she'd been elated first, then shocked. Yes, she had always loved him, but she was certain she had never let a soul in Redmond know. After all, everyone would have thought Laura crazy if they'd known she, the daughter of a shopkeeper, aspired to wed the only son of Redmond's first family.

Still, she hadn't been able to turn him down. Not loving him the way she did. Even when he'd made it clear that securing his daughter's welfare was the only reason he wanted to take her as his wife, Laura hadn't had the will to refuse.

The ruby and diamond ring Giles had slipped on her finger to seal their arrangement felt cold under her woolen mitten. As she and Kathryn skated toward him, Laura tried to squelch a chill that penetrated through her woolen garments. A chill that had little to do with a northerly wind that whipped snowflakes through the air and much to do with the fear within her heart. The fear that no matter how much she loved Giles Redmond, she would never be able to chase the grief and melancholia from his soul.

REDMOND HOUSE, DECEMBER 21

On the morning of his wedding, Giles felt anything but festive. His leg throbbed, hammers pounded in his head, and he kicked himself for having thought marriage would be the best way to ensure his daughter's security.

The staff had turned his house upside down, draping holly garlands on every hearth, hanging mistletoe in each doorway, and preparing enough food to feed half of Boston's poor. He paused at the parlor entry, leaned on his cane, and stared at the ten foot tall Christmas tree Kathryn had chosen yesterday when she and Laura took a stroll through the woods.

In an hour's time, he would pledge to love, honor, and cherish a woman who knew even less about him than he did of her. He leaned on his cane, then turned and made his way slowly up the stairs. Hearing childish laughter from behind the door to Kathryn's room

reminded him why this marriage would be taking place, and the happy sounds lifted his spirits.

Giles looked out his bedroom window at a procession of saddle horses, ponies pulling carts, even a few brave souls on foot this clear, cold day. He'd best hurry and dress, lest the guests arrive without him downstairs to bid them welcome. Turning away, he limped into the dressing alcove. Wearing other than the mourning clothes or cavalry uniforms that had comprised his wardrobe for the past three years felt peculiar, he thought as he donned a gray silk waistcoat discreetly embroidered with burgundy and forest green. The bright colors reminded him of the festive holiday season— and the reasons why he felt everything but festive.

Downstairs, the decorations suggested a sense of gaiety and hope Giles couldn't allow himself to feel, but one he feigned for the good people of Redmond as he waited for his bride.

Then he saw her. Her chestnut hair arranged atop her head beneath a veil of wispy lace, Laura wore a high-waisted dress the color of elephant tusks. Its close-fitting lines accentuated her fine figure, and its low, square neckline revealed the upper swell of full, creamy breasts. The green ribbon on a branch of holly that she carried brought out the color of her eyes. For the first time, Giles found himself hoping more than fearing she would choose to look past his shortcomings and become his wife in truth as well as in name.

Laura met her groom's gaze as she took his hand before a makeshift altar. Was it wishful thinking, or did he seem less solemn today? His palm felt warm against her fingers, and his lips curved upward in an almost-smile that lit his handsome face. He repeated his vows in the strong, deep voice she found hypnotic, and after she whispered hers to him, he bent and kissed her gently on the lips.

Then Kathryn joined them. Already Laura loved the little girl. As she greeted guests with her new family, warmth spread through her. Warmth that had been missing from her life before. In the blazing fire in the parlor hearth, in gaslights twinkling in their sconces, in the smiling eyes of friends and neighbors, Laura saw cause for celebration. Here, with the man she had just married, she would celebrate the end of war, the beginning of a new life.

In a few days they would celebrate the Christ Child's birth. Laura watched Kathryn peer at the star on top of the huge evergreen in the corner. Hundreds of candles twinkled among its branches. They'd made ropes of popcorn and cranberries yesterday, and hung them along with dozens of exquisite blown glass balls Kathryn's nanny had told them Giles's mother brought back from her wedding trip to Paris.

"You've been caught under the mistletoe, Mrs. Redmond," Giles said later when she came downstairs from helping Nanny tuck Kathryn into bed.

He tasted of hot rum punch and wedding cake, and the kiss, while short, sent her senses reeling. Whatever fears her husband had about baring himself to her, she would put to rest tonight. "I would be your wife in truth," she whispered in his ear, and her heart pounded.

He nodded, but his expression implied he wasn't quite ready to take her at her word. No matter. If she had to, she would throw herself at him. Forcing a smile, she turned her attention to their guests.

It seemed the stragglers would never leave, but as the sun slipped down among the trees, Laura finally found herself alone with Giles. They stood in the open doorway, waving to the last of their guests and watching an occasional snowflake drift from the darkening sky. His hand rested at her waist, warm and solid, and the heat of his body chased the chill from hers. Smiling, she closed the door and turned into his arms.

"Kiss me."

Hands resting on her shoulders, he spoke softly, his breath causing her veil to flutter against her cheek. "Be very certain of what you want, Laura, because if we take this step, there will be no going back."

"I know. I want to be your wife."

He smiled, and when he kissed her this time, he took her breath away, for this was no playful peck, no sealing of solemn vows. This kiss was carnal, consuming, a melding of lips and tongues and bodies as he brought her flush against him, let her feel the strength of his desire.

When he broke away, he groaned. "Go. Make yourself ready. I will come to you." As if uncertain whether to say more, he paused. "Remember, Laura, this choice is yours. You may well find the sight of me repulsive, for as I've warned you, I am no longer whole."

In his dressing room, Giles peeled off his wedding garments. As usual, he tried not to glance at the scars that marred his body- or the artificial limb whose maker had assured him would let him keep the loss of his lower left leg a secret from all but the most astute observers.

He should have come right out and told Laura, he thought as he sat down and loosened the straps that held the appliance securely to the stump below his knee. The sight sickened him. It would repulse anyone, especially a gentle woman unused to experiencing firsthand

the horrors of war. Why had he given in, set himself up for the mortification he knew he'd feel when she rejected him?

He knew why. Lust. Need born of long nights alone, fed by the sight of his bride, lithe and lush in her grandmother's old-fashioned wedding gown. Giles cursed himself and damned the Reb who'd shot him for not doing the job right and finishing him off.

All he could do now was carry this through. Laura's look of horror would squelch the white-hot desire that smoldered in his belly. Giles shrugged into a dark blue robe and nearly toppled over as he tied the belt.

"Damn it to hell." He snatched up a pair of crutches and clomped down the hall. Laura could take him or leave him. He'd be damned if he'd try any longer to conceal the cripple he'd become.

She'd brushed her hair until it crackled, put on and discarded the lacy wrapper that matched her white lawn nightgown, paced the broad expanse of Oriental rug, and counted each repeat of the fruit and flowers along its borders. Laura looked out the window at gently falling snow and yearned for the man who had awakened her senses not long ago. Her husband.

Would he come to her as he'd promised? Or had she disgusted him with her bold invitation? A muted thumping sound made her turn toward the bed. It became louder, then stopped, replaced by a short rapping on the door.

Giles stood in the open doorway, his dark hair mussed as though combed through with strong, careless fingers. His dark eyes reflected the dim light from the oil lamp beside the bed, and Laura read hope and fear, passion and despair in his expression. Heat pooled in her belly.

How could he think she'd find anything about him repulsive? Laura crossed the room, raised her hands to his shoulders, felt his strength beneath the soft fabric of his robe. "Come in." Breathing in the mingled scents of brandy and clean male flesh, she brushed her lips across his hard-muscled neck.

He sounded hoarse, as though words came hard. "Go sit on the bed.."

Puzzled but willing, Laura obeyed. When she'd piled four fat goose down pillows against the ornately carved headboard, she turned back the covers and sat down. Nervous, she patted the spot beside her.

Then she noticed. He was using crutches instead of his ebony cane- and only one foot rested on the polished hardwood floor. When she met his gaze, he smiled the saddest smile Laura had ever seen. Then he made his way across the room and sat beside her, clutching his crutches as if to facilitate a quick retreat.

"I warned you I was not whole. I should have revealed this before- "

"Hush." Laura brushed aside the hem of his robe and bared a twisted stump of scarred flesh just below his left knee. "It must pain you terribly." Determined to show him she found that part of him no less pleasing than the rest, she reached out and stroked an especially angry-looking welt.

"I stood and walked too much today."

"How- "

"A Reb shell."

Laura put a finger to his lips. "I mean, how do you get around so well? I never would have guessed . . ."

He took her hand, told her about the months of healing and therapy and his search for an artificial limb that would allow him to move about and appear whole to casual observers. "I want no pity. God knows, I have enough of that for myself without bearing the sympathetic stares of others," he said as he wiped the tear she'd felt making its way down her cheek. "Or my bride's tears."

She rested one hand on his smoothly shaven cheek, the other against his muscled chest. "I feel no pity, Giles. Only love."

As though searching for truth, he met her gaze, held it for a long, silent moment. "Love?"

Her heart pounding in her chest, she nodded. Then she stood and lifted her nightgown over her head.

How could he ever have thought her plain? His throat dry, Giles looked his fill, then shrugged out of his robe. When she came into his arms, the last of his fear subsided.

For so long he'd starved. Now she offered him a sensual feast, and he reined in the need to gorge himself. If this were a dream, he'd not wake up until he'd drowned in the sweet honey of her mouth, breathed in her smell of roses and desire, explored every inch of her luscious body with his hands and tongue. He would glory in her every sigh, taste her cries

of fulfillment and muffle his own triumphant shout against satiny skin damp and salty with exertion from their carnal dance.

How could his callused hands stroke so gently, brand her his yet make her feel she was the victor? Laura had dreamed of her wedding night, but the dreams paled in comparison with the reality of Giles's skillful seduction. Her skin tingled where he touched her, reminded her how snowflakes felt against bare skin as shards of fire pooled low in her belly.

He seduced her, and she him, as a fire crackled in the grate and snow fell gently from a moonlit sky. In the distance, a church bell tolled the hour as he knelt between her legs and made them one. After the flames inside them peaked and ebbed, they lay, limbs entwined, their slow, steady heartbeats the only sounds in the silence of the night.

Giles awakened at first light, gazed out at a wintry sky over a tousled chestnut-haired head that rested on his shoulder. She lay against him, spoon fashion, and when she snuggled closer, his sex stirred. He blinked. This was no dream, for Laura was very real. She'd loved him well, held nothing back.

She slept, apparently oblivious that she cradled his mangled leg between her soft, smooth thighs. Giles waited for the shooting phantom pain that had greeted him each morning since he'd come out from a morphine haze to find his leg was gone. Nothing. Nothing but the warm, arousing feel of Laura. His wife.

He'd hoped for a tolerable arrangement and a mother for his child, found heaven instead. As Giles stroked Laura's silky hair, he thanked God for the unexpected blessing of her love. For the first time since he'd left Redmond for the army, running from his grief, Giles looked forward to the new day and a new life filled with hope he'd thought lost to him forever. As he woke his wife with a tender kiss, Giles realized it was time for him to let her know he loved her, too.

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I HOPE GILES AND KATHRYN HAVE WARMED YOUR HEART THE WAY THEY WARMED MINE WHEN I CREATED THIS SHORT STORY TO SPOTLIGHT A HISTORICAL CHRISTMAS IN NEW ENGLAND.

MAY YOU AND YOURS ENJOY ALL THE GOOD THINGS THIS HOLIDAY SEASON AND THROUGHOUT THE NEW YEAR— PEACE, HAPPINESS, AND ABOVE ALL, LOVE.

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