

Holiday Hearts

Traci Sanders

My feet shuffle through the pastry section, probably annoying every shopper behind me as always. I reach toward a fresh batch of glazed doughnuts—Harry’s favorite. A jolt of pain surges through my heart and I pull my hand back at a languid pace. It’s been ten years and there are still moments when I imagine he’s alive, waiting at home for those doughnuts. I regret not letting him have them more often.

All those years of making sure he ate healthy, took his vitamins, exercised and visited the doctor regularly. Wasted years. Wasted time. Futile life-sustaining efforts that couldn’t compete with the transfer truck that took him from me on his way to work that fateful day.

The store is infused with a piney-cinnamon scent for the holidays. Another year. Another Christmas alone. Sure, the kids and grandkids will come by on Christmas Eve to open presents. My heart will skip a beat as they tear into their treasures. Family members will take turns in the oversized, brown recliner to my left as they sit to eat, then get up to mingle. But it will never again cradle the body of the one it once belonged to—my Harry.

I take in my reflection as I pass the freezer doors. My hair shows much more salt than pepper now. And my once bright blue eyes have darkened to the hue of a midnight sky. Sure, I slap on a smile when my friends and family visit, but Harry took a piece of my soul with him that day. *He* was the light in my eyes.

I shuffle to the meat section and bend to check the price on *one New York strip steak*. A voice from behind me interrupts my calculations.

“Sarah? Is that you?”

I turn to meet with soft, blue eyes and a smile that stretches from ear to ear on a broad-shouldered man sporting a full head of silver hair. He’s wearing a white apron and plastic gloves, holding a rump roast in his hands. I recall that smile right away. It’s the same one that used to greet me right before a kiss, following every Friday night football game in high school. We were inseparable for three years, but decided to start seeing other people in our senior year.

“Bill Martin. How’ve you been?”

“I’m doing okay, I guess. The holidays are always the hardest, you know?”

An empathetic smile paints my face. “I understand. I heard about Martha passing a few years back. I’m sorry I didn’t call.” Now a veil of shame replaces *my* smile.

“I reckon I could say the same. I was sorry to hear about Harry. He was a good man.”

My voice cracks as I reply, “Yes, he was. Thank you.”

“Listen, if you don’t have plans for Christmas Day, you’re welcome to join me at the coffee shop on Fourteenth and Franklin Street. It’s the only place open that day. They don’t serve all the traditional holiday food, but they make a heck of a pecan pie.”

“You spend Christmas Day in a café? What about your family?”

“Well, Martha and I didn’t have children, or siblings. It was just the two of us.” His head lowers.

“Oh, Bill, I didn’t realize.” I pause then continue, “I guess life goes on ... until we have time to stop and think about it, whether we want to or not, right? Listen, I appreciate the invite, but I’m not sure I’m ready for...”

“Come on, Sarah. It’s just coffee and pie. Don’t you deserve a little Christmas joy?”

Tears spill from my eyes as I stand there frozen.

“I’m sorry, Sarah. I didn’t mean to upset you. It’s just so good to see you after all these years. I’d love to catch up on everything, for old times’ sake.”

I can’t speak. Butterflies are dancing a ballet in my stomach. I haven’t been overwhelmed by these magical creatures in a long time.

Bill pulls a business card from his pocket and hands it to me. “Just think about it, okay.”

I take the card, nod my head and smile. Before I turn to walk away, he says, “If I don’t see you again, Merry Christmas, Sarah. Just remember, as hard as it is to accept, and as much as it hurts to miss them, *we’re* still here.”

He returns to his meat counter and I maneuver my cart of twelve items toward the check-out counter. I always use the “fifteen or less” aisle. It’s all that’s needed when shopping for one.

Bill’s words reverberate in my ears as the days pass, and the kids and grandkids come and go for Christmas. The festivities are over far too quickly. My holiday music plays in the background and candles illuminate the living room—an attempt to fill the space no longer occupied by those I love.

I walk to my bedroom and shuffle through the closet. On the far left in the back, I spot a red dress with rhinestone buttons down the front. It has sat waiting for a special occasion, and it’s high time it gets one!

I throw some hot curlers in my hair, touch up my makeup, and slip into the dress. The long sleeves will keep me warm on this cold day in Vermont. I stick with my flats, not wanting to break my neck trying to walk in heels. Those days are over, but Bill was right, *I’m still here*.

I blow out the candles and kill the music. The house is still and quiet again. I gaze around the room and then lock the door behind me. As I sit in my car, waiting for it to warm up, my GPS system springs to life. “Where would you like to go today, Sarah?”

I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and let out a long fog as I smile. My reply is simple but significant.

“Fourteenth and Franklin Street, please.”