**UNEXPECTED GIFTS**

“Are you sure, Mum? We can have Christmas at our place, or we could just let it go this year.”

 “No, no,” I said, wringing my hands and swallowing back the tears. “That’s not what Jack would have wanted. You knew your father. If ever there was a favourite time of year, Christmas was his. He won’t rest easy if we cancel it now.”

That brought the tears on again and Jessica had to comfort me. Jack had been knocked off his bike on the way to work barely a week before Christmas. I still felt raw. Everything made me cry. Silly things, like his favourite tea mug in the cupboard, or finding a button from his shirt. Jack was still young. He hadn’t retired. We had had plans for the future.

I forced myself to cook the turkey, steam the pudding, and be happy for the grandchildren. Jessica and Martin and their families helped all they could but I ached for the missing person. Jack’s chair sat empty beside the fire.

“There’s one present left, Nana,” said three-year-old Chloe, rocking the decorations on the tree as she bent her chubby legs to retrieve it.

“Is there?” I frowned. “Bring it here then, darling, and let’s see who it’s for.”

She carried it, cupped in both hands like a precious ornament.

“Who’s it for, Mum?” Martin looked over.

“Me,” I said with a lump in my throat, staring at the neat cursive writing on the gift tag. “It’s from your Dad.”

“Oh, he must have put it there before …” Jessica’s voice trailed off. “Open it then, Mum.”

It was perfume. My favourite, and just as my old bottle was nearing the end. Typical of Jack. He was always thoughtful about his gifts. I hugged the bottle to myself and dabbed a little on my wrists. There was a pricking at the back of my eyes and I dug around in my pocket for a tissue.

Winter morphed into spring and the days became longer. I missed Jack. It wasn’t easy. I had to fill my time, but looking after the grandchildren helped, and gradually I got used to doing things on my own. I was fit. I could drive. I still had a life, even without Jack.

The following Christmas the family came as usual and it was a happier occasion. Chloe had a little brother and Martin’s boys, Sam and Simon were as lively as ever. Christmas Day produced a forest of wrapping paper, and a symphony of toots and whistles from battery operated toys. I reflected on how lucky I was as I watched the children decimate the pile of presents.

Eventually Chloe passed her new Barbie to Jessica to dress in a tricky evening gown, and stretched out under the tree.

“Nana!” she cried. “There’s still a present under here.”

“Really?” I thought everything had been handed out. “Pass it to me then, love.”

She carried it over. I looked at the tag and almost dropped it. The familiar writing leapt out and my hand flew to my mouth to stifle a gasp. The family stared at me as I felt the blood drain from my face and a fluttery feeling gripped my stomach.

“Mum, what is it?” Jessica asked.

I held the gift out. “Di … did … either of you …?” But as I said it I realised they couldn’t have done. It was Jack’s writing. Neither of them could have written as he did.

*To my darling, Mona, Merry Christmas, missing you.*

There was quiet. Even the children clutched their toys for a minute and watched the adults stare at each other. No one knew quite what to say.

“Well open it then, Nana,” Chloe said, after a long silence.

I ripped the paper. My fingers were stiff and uncooperative. Inside was a silk scarf in blue and aquamarine. My colours exactly and it was the perfect replacement for the one I’d lost the previous week. I gave a small smile and nodded my head. I couldn’t trust my words. It was just what I’d have chosen myself.

Would it get easier? I missed Jack, but I suppose the second year without him wasn’t as difficult as the first. Christmas came round again and as usual the family came to visit and I had a real tree in the window alcove. I made certain there were no unexpected parcels under it as the tree was put up. I checked it several times, including just before lunch as Jessica was stirring the gravy. Yet, when the family was gathered to hand out gifts the last thing Chloe pulled out was a present for me.

It wasn’t such a surprise, but it still made my heart beat faster when I saw the writing on the gift tag. Inside was a book, a Booker nominee and one I’d intended to read for a while. It was so like Jack to know what I wanted. I smiled, and ignored Jessica and Martin’s worried looks.

The following year Jack left me tickets for the theatre. I took Maureen from next door. She had been having chemo. It was good to hear her laugh as the actors tore across the stage, chasing each other. I would like to think Jack knew, and anticipated her need as much as mine.

In the spring Maureen’s cancer returned. I spent a lot of time at hospital with her. I spent time with her husband Albert as well. When she died, I helped him clear her stuff. I made meals and sorted out things like her library membership for him. I knew what it was like when Jack died. You work on autopilot with nothing making much sense for a while. Albert was lost without her. We started going for long afternoon walks to help fill his days.

Jack continued to leave me thoughtful presents under the tree. My grandchildren squealed with delight when they found them. It was no longer always Chloe. Simon and Sam fought for gift-giving rights too.

One year a new trowel for the garden puzzled me.

“But I don’t need it,” I said. “My trowel has given good service for years. I don’t want to change it.” I put the new one away in the shed and forgot about it until spring and I was digging over the flowerbeds. The handle split from my old trowel. It sent a shiver down me like an electric shock. How did Jack know I would need it? Was it a considered guess or do trowels have a shelf life that he knew about?

I shook myself and tried not to think about it. I had the uneasy feeling that Jack watched everything I did. My skin crawled and my chest tightened. If he knew about my trowel, what else did he know? Then I scolded myself for being ridiculous. Jack had been dead for nine years.

Soon after Albert suggested we go on a holiday together.

“Just as friends,” he said. “Two lonely people.”

We booked a hotel in Spain in the autumn after the heat of the summer had died away. We stayed in separate rooms and visited ruined castles and walked in the hills, staying away from the crowded coasts.

Albert was invited for Christmas Day. The children knew him and he was on his own otherwise. He proved to have endless patience with reading instructions and putting toys together as everyone else relaxed with drinks.

I’d forgotten. I was so busy making sure everyone had enough to eat and drink and was having a good time and that Albert was not left out, I’d actually forgotten.

Chloe had hit adolescence early and was having a hissy fit over something Jessica had said, so I was thinking about that when Sam handed me the present. There was a familiar lurch in my stomach as I recognised the writing. Albert watched me, slightly amused. I hadn’t told him about the surprise gifts.

“Open it, Nana,” Simon called. I slipped the bow off the paper and turned it over. It was heavy. The paper unravelled quickly and a heavy Swiss army knife tumbled out on to the floor.

“Oh, a knife!” said Sam, snatching it up. “I’ve always wanted one of these.”

He started trying to open the blades, the knife wedged against his stomach.

“No, don’t! Not like that.” Albert moved forward to stop him, but Sam wasn’t giving up his find. Everyone looked up.

Albert lurched forward, his hand out to take the knife just as Sam unfolded the large blade. Albert staggered slightly on the carpet and fell towards Sam. His back was towards me, and I couldn’t see but I heard Sam scream. Martin leapt up as Albert slumped to the floor with the knife trapped under him. Something dark and damp began spread across the carpet from beneath him. Sam stood staring at his hands, which were crimson and slick with blood.

Albert died in the ambulance on the way to hospital.

The coroner recorded a verdict of accidental death. He didn’t like not knowing where the knife had come from.

Neither did I. And I hate the thought of someone looking over my shoulder all the time. So Christmas has been cancelled. Indefinitely.