

Christmas morning.

I sighed as I rolled on my back and looked at the ceiling. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. That's not to say I was ungrateful to have family to spend the holidays with...I just missed her.

I was lying in bed in the guest room of my brother's apartment and later in the day I'd be joining him at his mother-in-law's house. It really wasn't how I'd hoped to spend my Christmas, but see as Michelle still refused to speak to me... well I'd pretty much given up hope of things working out with us.

"Hunter, wake up!" Blake called from the living room.

I sighed and rolled out of bed. I pulled on a t-shirt and joined Blake and Tori in the living room.

"Good morning sleepy head." Tori teased as I sat down on the sofa adjacent from where they sat on the loveseat.

"Mornin'" I mumbled.

"Merry Christmas bro, cheer up." Blake said, throwing a pillow at me.

I forced a smile, "You're right. I'm sorry. Merry Christmas."

"I know you miss her but there isn't anything else you can do. She made her decision. Try to forget about her and have a nice day with your family."

"You mean your family."

"I'm your family Hunter."

Tori nodded, "So am I and my mom and sister consider you family as well."

I sighed, "You're right, I'm sorry. I'm being an ass."

"At least you realize it. Now, can we commence with the opening of the gifts?" Blake asked.

"Of course. I'm ready if Tori is."

Tori smiled and handed me a gift, "Let's begin. I think the perfect one to start is Mr. Scrooge."

I took the gift and looked at the tag, "'To: Hunter, From: Tori'. Thanks Tor, you didn't have to..."

"Yes I did. I've always wanted a big brother and now I finally have one."

I smiled as I unwrapped the box. It was the full band set of 'Beatles: Rock Band'. "Oh my god, Tori, you really shouldn't have."

"Yes I should. You like it?"

"I love it. I've been wanting this. Thank you so, so much." I said hugging her.

"You're welcome." Tori said.

"Your turn." I said as I handed Tori a gift from me.

Tori took the gift and opened it. It was a blue iPod. "Oh wow, thanks Hunter! How did you know?"

"Blake mentioned your old one ended up in the ninja pond, something about Dustin and an earth/water combo move he couldn't master or something."

Tori laughed, "Yeah. I just about killed him for that. Thank you Hunter."

"You're welcome. Ok, Blake, your turn." I said as I handed him the gift from me.

Blake unwrapped it and found a copy of 'Moto GP' for the Wii. "Oh, yes! Thank you Hunter."

"I figured you could use the practice." I teased.

Blake balled up the wrapping paper and threw it at me, "Seriously, thanks."

"No worries." I smiled.

After that Blake gave me a gift from him, which was a Rock Band guitar controller modeled after John Lennon's guitar. It was awesome. Next Blake and Tori exchanged gifts. He got her a dirt bike so she could learn to ride better (she still liked to ride when she missed him and Dustin was getting more and more hesitant about letting her borrow his). She got him a new PSP and some games for it so he could play games on the road more easily. All in all it was a pretty sweet Christmas...still, in the back of my mind I was thinking of her.

Michelle

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Christmas Eve was quite a night. For some reason I couldn't sleep to save my life. Rocky passed right out and I didn't

want to wake him so I tried to be quiet. I watched DVDs of my cousins' 'semi-reality' show (which in truth was more reality than 'PH' could ever dream of being) to pass time. Yeah, I had twin cousins on my mom's side that had their own show in the mid-90s. It started the year after 'PH' was cancelled and lasted 4 seasons. Anyway, I digress; I'll tell you more about my cousins some other time. Anyway, I finished the DVDs and then played Guitar Hero, very quietly. Around 3:30 I accidentally woke up Rocky.

"What are you doing?" Rocky asked.

"Sorry, couldn't sleep. Didn't mean to wake you." I said.

"It's 3:30."

"I know. Go back to sleep." I said as I turned the game off. Rocky rolled over and went back to sleep. I sat up in bed and read for awhile. Finally around 4 am I turned the lamp off and tried to sleep again. This time I finally dozed off. I woke up at 6 because I heard Mom and Dean downstairs.

I sat straight up in bed, "MERRY CHRISTMAS!"

Rocky darted up and laughed, "Merry Christmas."

I grabbed my robe and threw Rocky a t-shirt then I ran downstairs. Mom, Dean, and Charlie were in the living room. I made a face at Charlie then turned my focus to my parents.

"Merry Christmas!" I cried as I hugged each of them.

"Merry Christmas." Rocky echoed as he came downstairs.

"Merry Christmas." Mom said.

"Gift time?" I asked.

Mom laughed, "Coffee time first, then gift time."

Mom got her coffee then I started handing out gifts. I'll spare you the list of what everyone got. I got 'Band Hero' and a new video camera from Mom and Dean and a bottle of my favorite perfume from Rocky. I got Rocky a new watch.

He's broken his in training. All in all it was a great Christmas...if I ignored the fact Charlie was there, which I was still less than thrilled about, but it meant a lot to Dean so I let it go.

"Mich, are Mina and Adam joining us for Christmas dinner?" Mom asked, snapping me from my own thoughts.

"Huh? Oh, yeah, they are. They're going to meet us at the theater." I said.

"OK then. So is Zack. Go get ready."

I nodded. We were all going to see a movie before we had Christmas dinner. I went upstairs and got in the shower. As the warm water hit my face my mind drifted to Christmases past when I had been with Hunter. Those were some of the best holidays of my life. It just wasn't the same without him...but too much had happened and it could never be the same *with* him again.

Hunter

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After we were all dressed and ready to go we headed over to Tori's Mom's house. We walked in and found Ms. Hanson and Tori's sister Emily in the kitchen.

"Merry Christmas." Tori said as she hugged each of them.

"Merry Christmas." Ms. Hanson said as she hugged Tori, then Blake.

"Merry Christmas." Blake echoed.

"Hunter, I'm so glad you could join us."

I smiled, "Thank you for having me Ms. Hanson."

"Oh please, call me April...and we're family. You're always welcomed here."

"Thank you." I said with a nod.

"Mom, it looks like you're cooking for an army. Isn't it just the five of us?" Tori asked.

April laughed, "Not really. I was talking to Britney and we decided it was terribly silly to have two small Christmas dinners and with Becky being in Australia it's kind of a sad day for Britney and Dustin anyway so we're having their family over too."

"So seven of us?"

"Actually, nine."

"Nine?"

April nodded, "Yes, Britney's brother and nephew will be joining us as well."

I didn't connect this at the time...but it would certainly hit me later what exactly this meant.

"Anything we can do to help?" I asked.

"No, I think we got it for now. I do have gifts for each of you in the living room. Go open your gifts then turn on a Christmas movie or something." April said.

"You didn't have to get me anything." I said.

"Nonsense, you're family. Now go."

We all went into the living room, Emily included, and opened gifts. April had gotten me a really nice dress shirt. It would come in handy as I didn't have hardly any dress clothes. I thanked April then rejoined the others.

"I bet that will look great on you." Emily said as she moved closer to me.

"Yeah, maybe." I said as I folded it and put it back in the box.

"So I heard you and Jessica broke up."

"We were never really dating, but yeah, we're not seeing each other anymore."

"So you're single?"

"Yeah."

Emily smiled, "Shame."

I looked at her oddly, "Um, yeah...I think I'm going to get some fresh air."

I went outside and sat on the porch. I wanted to call Michelle SO badly, but I knew that was a bad idea. She would hang up on me and it would probably ruin her Christmas. I knew Mich and Christmas was her favorite day of the year. I hated not being with her.

I was pulled from my thoughts when I saw a car pull up. I figured it was Dustin and family. I went inside to join the others. I didn't want to seem like an outsider...even if I did kind of feel like one. I sat on the sofa and was promptly joined by Emily. A few seconds later the front door opened.

"Knock, knock." Ms. Brooks...Britney said.

"Come on it Brit." April called as she joined everyone in the living room.

"Thanks for having us, this is my brother Walden and his son..."

"...RJ..." I finished for Britney.

"You two know...ohhh, right. I forgot." Britney said.

"I tried to warn you but no one ever listens to me." Dustin sighed.

"I should go." I said as I reached for my coat.

"No you don't. Hunter, you're family...so is RJ. You're both staying. I know you both have a sorted history with the same girl, but you can put your differences aside for one day, right boys?" April asked.

"Yes ma'am." I said softly.

"Yeah, sure." RJ echoed.

"Thank you. Now, RJ, it's nice to see you again. Walden, it's nice to meet you. I'm April and that's my daughter Emily, her sister Tori, and Tori's husband Blake." April said.

RJ waved, "Hey. Haven't seen you guys since that summer I spent here."

"Yeah, how have you been?" Emily asked.

"Pretty good. Been a touch year but I'm getting through it."

"Yeah, whose fault is that?" I mumbled.

"Yours." RJ said pointedly.

I took a deep breath, "I'm going to go see if anything in the kitchen needs stirring." I went to the kitchen before I kicked his ass. It was going to be a LONG day.

Michelle

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After the movie we went back to the house and Mom started dinner. While she cooked she sent the rest of us into the living room to play 'Band Hero'. I connected everything up.

"OK, I call vocals." I said.

"I want guitar." Mina echoed.

"Fine, I call bass." Zack said.

"Adam, you can take drums. I think I'm better off watching." Rocky said.

Adam laughed and picked up the drum sticks, "OK."

"I'd like to play next." Charlie said.

I scoffed, "Go play Warcraft or something."

"Michelle Pauline Morris!" Mom called from the kitchen.

I sighed, "Fine, you can play later."

We each created an avatar to play with and then we started playing. Mina and I kicked butt...although Zack did pretty damn good too and I admit I was surprised by how good Adam was on the drums. After a few songs Zack let Charlie play bass. I wasn't thrilled with it but I didn't want to anger Mom.

"I love you avatar." I told Mina.

"Thanks. I like yours too. Have you considered letting them use your likeness in a game?" Mina asked.

"Yeah, if they asked me I'd be totally into the idea. I would love to be immortalized in a video game. I already have a Barbie in my likeness." I laughed.

"The joys of merchandising."

"Gotta love it."

"So when are you going to tell me what's bothering you?"

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

"Mich, this is me you're talking to. I can see it your eyes."

"Hmm, Zack, wanna take vocals, Rocky, take guitar. Mina and I are going outside."

Mina and I handed off our controllers and went and sat on the curb outside.

"OK, so spill, what is it? Let me guess? Hunter?" Mina asked.

"Well, sort of. I mean, I've been thinking about him today, sure...but it's not just him. It's everything...this whole year. RJ...Aubrey...the tabloids...the collapse of my career. All of it." I said.

"I'm really sorry about RJ and especially Aubrey...but what's done is done...and as far as your career...you're releasing a new album next year. Your career always has highs and lows. You'll get it back. Don't fret about it."

"On top of everything else, Jon has been ignoring my calls ever since his son's trip to the hospital."

Mina sighed, "Mich, honey, you need to let that go. Jon is married and not to you. He's never been good for you and you're so much better off without him."

"I'm going on tour with him."

"You're what?!"

"You heard me."

"Oh Mich, please, please don't."

"It's been decided...I think...assuming he starts speaking to me again."

"You can't be serious. Do you not remember how it goes when you spend any real length of time with him?"

"It'll be fine."

"You're vulnerable and lost...it will not be fine...not with him as your primary influence."

"I'm a big girl, I can take care of myself."

Mina sighed, "I don't wanna fight with you again. I really don't...but I'm worried about you Michelle. I truly am."

Hunter

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When dinner was ready we all gathered at the table...RJ and I on opposite sides.

"This is great Mom." Tori said as she started to eat.

"It is, thank you so much for having RJ and I." Walden said.

"Well, Christmas is about family and friends." April said.

"And enemies evidently." I mumbled.

"Hunter, don't." Blake warned.

"Whoa, no...back up dude, what's your problem with me? You're the one that caused all of this." RJ said.

"You're the idiot that broke her heart." I said.

"I did the right thing. She deserves someone to love her in a way I couldn't."

"Well you're right about that, she deserves better than you. Why did you stay married and pretend to make it work? You just hurt her."

"Because I do love her, just not in that way. Wait, why am I even explaining myself to you? You've hurt her more than I

ever could.”

“Guys, cut it out.” Dustin said.

“No, this ass thinks he’s better than me...he’s just an air-headed brat that realized he wasn’t man enough to be with someone like Michelle. She needs a real man, like me.” I said

“Yeah, I notice she’s at your side.” RJ countered.

“Because you broke her heart! You drove her right back into Jon’s arms!”

“You know, I’d rather see her with a creep like Jon than a murderer like you.”

“I’m sorry about Aubrey ok?! I never meant for that to happen! I got Michelle to the hospital as fast as I could!” I cried.

“She wouldn’t have had to go to the hospital if you had left her alone in the first place!”

“I made a mistake, I’m going to live with that for the rest of my life...but I didn’t murder Aubrey!”

“I’m not able to spend this Christmas or any other with my daughter because of you...because you killed her...you are a murderer!”

I glared.

“Speechless? Because you know it’s the truth!”

I stood up and threw my chair at the table and stormed out of the house.

I sat on the porch and started to cry. I was feeling so many things...sorrow, sadness, guilt, anger, fury, loss...among others. I didn’t know how to channel all the different emotions so I cried. I felt a hand touch my shoulder then someone sat next to me. I looked over and saw Dustin.

“What do you want?” I asked.

“Dude, I’m your friend. I want to check on you.” Dustin replied.

“Why? So you can start in where your cousin left off?”

“No, of course not. RJ was way, way out of line. You’re not a murderer. I know it was an accident. You’d never hurt anyone on purpose...especially Mich.”

“Try telling Mich that. She thinks I’m a murderer too.”

“She’s hurt...like RJ is. They lost a child...that has to be a lot to take. It cost them their marriage and...it’s a mess. I know that. I do think you need to accept that it’s over with her. I know you love her but she’s not coming back to you. You really need to deal with that and move on. There is no going back.”

I nodded, “I know. I’m just not sure I can let her go.”

“You have to.”

Michelle

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After dinner I decided I really, really needed a break from Charlie. His very presence was driving me insane. I went up to my room and sat on my bed. A few minutes later my door opened.

“Can I come in?” Charlie asked.

I sighed, “Fine. What do you want?”

“What’s your deal?”

“You’re an ass. That’s my deal.”

“What have I ever done to you?”

“It’s not what you’ve done to me. It’s what you’ve done to Dean. You have the world’s best father...he even accepted a stuck up, ungrateful brat like me as his daughter and helped me turn my life around. He’s a wonderful man and you are so completely horrible to him then you get all pissy when he doesn’t bail you out of your latest mess.”

“I know I have a good dad. I’m just bitter about the past I guess.”

“Oh boo hoo...get the fuck over it. I don’t know what happened in the past that has made you so bitter and frankly I don’t care. Whatever it is, it’s in the past and you need to be grateful your father is Dean Cagle and not Derek Morris.

Charlie, you are completely irresponsible, flat broke, unable to manage what money you do have, take zero responsibility for your actions, you’re untrustworthy, and you’ve been to jail as a result of all of this. My mom and Dean offered to help you once upon a time and you refused them then you get all pissy when they don’t help you on your terms. You need to grow the fuck up and dig your way out of your own messes.”

“You’re one to talk. You’ve been a mess for most of your life.” Charlie countered.

“Fuck you. At least I take responsibility for my mistakes and I don’t go running back to my parents for help when I fuck up.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

“Getting my life together on my terms...which is more than can be said for you...now get the fuck out of my room.”

“You’re such a bitch.”

“Better than a certified asshole.” I said as Charlie left.

A few minutes later Rocky, Adam, and Mina came in.

“Are you ok? Charlie came downstairs in a huff.” Rocky said.

I sighed, “I’m fine. I just finally told him what I think of him.”

“Oh...god...” Mina said.

“He’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, but are you?” Adam asked.

I smiled, “I have my three best friends. Of course I am.”

“So it wasn’t a horrible Christmas?” Rocky asked.

I laughed, “Nah, it was just fine.”

Hunter

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After Dustin went in I thought about what he said. I did need to do something and sitting around and brooding was getting me nowhere. I pulled out my cell and dialed the ever familiar number. It rang three times before it was answered.

“Hello?” a familiar voice said.

“Cam? It’s Hunter. Meet me at the beach in 30.”