

Best of All Gifts by Sheila M Cronin

CHAPTER 1

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Venice, California

The sound of the kitchen wall phone brought her romantic daydream to a halt. Jonquil Bloom sighed audibly and closed the dishwasher before she picked up the receiver. Hearing her friend Annie's voice, however, made her whoop for joy.

"You're back. Wah-hoo! Let's do lunch."

"Let's eat at your place. Gal, I've got a surprise for you, and it's rather bulky."

They'd met ten years ago. Jonquil, a new mother, had moved from her tiny West Los Angeles accommodations to a spacious, two-bedroom apartment in the same building where Annie Berghoff lived in Venice Beach. The two women hit it off immediately. Annie used to run early each morning in the mist down the boardwalk. Then she'd jog back to the apartment building, see Jonquil's lights on, and cool down in the kitchen while Jonquil nursed her son, Billy. She'd make herself a fresh pot of coffee, and hours would pass as the women chatted.

Over time, they became more like sisters than friends. Jonquil confided to her how she came to be raised by her grandmother in Seattle. Annie described her more conventional upbringing in Bakersfield. Annie had never been married while Jonquil was a widow. After her husband's tragic death in a house fire in Seattle, Jonquil had relocated to Southern California. Annie had helped her dry many tears, and, in the process, became Billy's favorite babysitter.

When her friend moved to a condo in Westwood two years ago, Jonquil had felt the loss keenly. By then Annie had begun to travel frequently on cruise ships and to posh resorts or spas as artist in residence; her specialty was portraiture. Nowadays her schedule made it harder for

them to get together. Annie had been away since Thanksgiving, so they were long overdue for a good chat.

An hour later, Annie arrived in a Lakers tank top, cutoffs, and sandals that showed off her spectacular tan. Her hazel eyes sparkled behind gold-rimmed glasses. Her glossy brown hair was gathered in a ponytail that set off her round Germanic features. She lugged in a narrow package, roughly three square feet in diameter, wrapped in twine and brown butcher paper. It dwarfed the gaily wrapped box from Clyde's that Jonquil had waiting on the coffee table for her.

"God's teeth!" Jonquil exclaimed in the mock classical vernacular they teased each other with. Annie leaned the package against the sofa cushions before they hugged. "What's this? A piece of your artwork, I hope?"

"Happy Christmas, JB." Annie grinned from ear to ear. "Come on, open it."

Jonquil turned to grab a pair of scissors, but Annie neatly pulled off the twine with two tugs. The paper sprung loose, and together they removed the contents.

Staring back at Jonquil was a most exquisite portrait of her ten-year-old son. She recognized the pose from his recent school photo, the best he'd ever taken. Sketched on pale blue paper, Annie's spare use of color and skillful, bold light and dark contrasts had brought a flat photograph to life. The drawing, under glass, was double matted and framed in stained blond wood.

Jonquil couldn't take her eyes off of the rendering. Remarkably, it reminded her of her missing father, John Bloom. She felt close to tears.

"Oh, Annie," she murmured

"Sure you like it? You sound upset."

"I've never noticed before how much Billy looks like my dad. It's in the eyes." Jonquil gazed at the drawing with a mix of wonder, love for her son, and old resentment toward the father who had abandoned her in childhood.

She straightened up. "Let's find a spot to hang it."

"First, let's eat. Never thought I'd say this again after three back-to-back cruises, but I'm famished."

Just as they were about to have lunch, Billy ran in with Blackie, the newest member of the Bloom household, who greeted Annie with non-stop yaps. Annie offered the cocker spaniel her hand to sniff. He reciprocated with excited licks. She gathered him in her arms and placed him on her lap like they were long lost buddies.

“His name’s Blackie, Aunt Annie,” Billy gabbed in a rush. “And Mom was on television ’cause of her new job at Clyde’s, and I ran away, but then Claude and Mom found me and we had a real cool party on Christmas—”

“Slow down, buster,” cut in Annie who’d sliced through Billy’s tidbits for the morsel she found most enticing. “Who’s Claude?”

“Claude Chappel,” Billy replied impatiently as though anyone in the civilized world would recognize the name of his mom’s new boyfriend. “He works on the building across the street. He helped me pass my fractions test. Then he took Mom on a date.” He wagged his eyebrows at her.

“A date?” Annie’s gaze shifted from Billy to Jonquil, who immediately found something to dry with a dishcloth.

Billy gathered up Blackie, snapped on his leash, and made a dash for the door. “I’m taking Blackie with me to Ramon’s house.”

“Aren’t you hungry, sweetie?” Jonquil called. “Remember, we’re taking down the tree later.”

He turned to answer her and nearly tumbled into his portrait, still leaning against the sofa. “Wow!”

“Annie made a portrait of you,” Jonquil said. Blackie barked until Billy firmly hushed him.

He studied the drawing intently. “It’s perfect,” he said. “Gee, Aunt Annie, you’re the best artist I know, even better than Miss Emmanuel at school.” Without informing his mom on the status of his appetite, he ran outside with the puppy and let the screen door bang shut.

Annie swung around in her chair to face Jonquil. “Okay, the first cruise was rough going all the way to Hawaii. On the second cruise, I fell for the saxophone player, but the ‘sax’ was off key. It rained buckets in Sydney, Fiji was glorious, and I don’t remember the flight back from Hawaii ’because I slept the whole way. That’s my story in a nutshell. Now, start talking and don’t stop until I say you can.”