

All I Have to Give

A Christmas Love Story

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"Do you think Michael's experiencing a midlife crisis?" Anna mused as she dipped a serving bowl into the sudsy water. She and her younger sister Meredith were cleaning up after a Thanksgiving dinner that Anna had hosted for her extended family. It was the first time she'd entertained this many people at one time, but the meal had gone relatively well, especially considering twelve people had crowded into their rather small dining room. The food had been reasonably palatable, and the table, which was actually a piece of plywood secured to a pair of sawhorses and hidden beneath a tablecloth Anna had sewn, had been elegantly set. Although Anna was now rethinking her choice to use Great-Grandma Olivia's Meissen china. She hadn't considered that, thanks to the elegant gold-leaf trim, all twelve place settings and the numerous serving dishes would need to be hand washed.

"I think your hubby is too young for a midlife crisis," Meredith said with her typical skepticism. "I mean, what is he . . . like, thirty-seven?"

"Thirty-eight in January."

"Even so, that seems pretty young for a midlife crisis."

“Maybe he’s mature for his age.”

Meredith laughed as she carefully dried a platter. “Okay, what’s really going on here, Anna? Trouble in paradise?”

Anna sighed as she scrubbed some stubborn gravy from a dinner plate. “No, we’re okay. It’s just that Michael has seemed sort of distant lately . . . but then he’s been putting a lot of overtime into this new business, and, oh, I don’t know—I guess I’m probably just obsessing.”

“Meri?” Todd called from where the guys were huddled in the nearby family room, cozily gathered around the TV in their usual holiday ritual. “I hear the baby crying.”

Meredith rolled her eyes at Anna as she hurried to dry her hands. “Todd hears Jackson crying, but he can’t get off his duff and go pick up his own son?”

“And I’m guessing the womenfolk can’t hear him.”

“Not over the roar of that ball game.” Meredith tossed the towel aside. “Sorry to bail on you, sis, but it is Jackson’s feeding time.”

“No problem.” Anna ran some hot water into the sink, preparing for the next go-round. “I’ll be fine.”

“Want me to send Celeste in to take my place?” Meredith’s tone was teasing now.

“That’s okay,” Anna said quickly. “I can handle it.”

Meredith chuckled. “You just don’t want to hear our sister-in-law going on again about how ‘our big new house will be oh so perfect for a great big ol’ Thanksgiving dinner.’” Meri even had the southern accent down just right.

Anna smiled at her sister, then nodded. She didn’t add that she was also getting tired of hearing her sister-in-law complain about how none of her size-two clothes fit her anymore. “I can’t believe I’m only three months pregnant and I’m going to have to go out and get maternity clothes,” she had whined when she’d seen the pumpkin and apple

pies Anna had made for dessert. What Anna wouldn't give for that kind of wardrobe challenge! It seemed such a small price to pay in exchange for a baby. But Anna didn't want to go there today. She also didn't want any more help in the kitchen. It was barely large enough for two people anyway.

She held the clean plate up to the window now, allowing the afternoon light to come through the china's translucent surface. "You can tell it's fine china when you can see daylight through it," Great-Grandma Olivia had told her more than thirty years ago, back when Anna was a little girl and had admired the lovely set. With pink rosebuds and gold-leaf trim, Anna couldn't imagine anything more beautiful. Of course, her tastes had changed somewhat as an adult, but she still felt honored that her great-grandmother had chosen Anna, as the oldest granddaughter, to bestow this treasure upon. "Glad it's you and not me," Meredith had admitted ten years ago when Anna had gotten engaged to Michael and received the china as a pre-wedding gift. "I'm sure not into pink rosebuds." Anna had appreciated the china even more when Great-Gran passed on shortly before her wedding. The sweet old woman had been ninety-six and still living in her own little house when she'd died in her sleep. Although saddened that Great-Gran had missed her wedding, Anna had thought it was a lovely way to go.

"I'll bet you could use a hand," Donna said as she came into the kitchen. Donna was Anna's stepmother, but she'd been in their lives for so long that Anna and her siblings had pretty much accepted her in the role of mom, although Anna still called her by her first name. "I didn't realize that Meredith wasn't in here still."

"She's feeding the baby. But you can dry if you want." Anna rinsed the last plate and set it in the drainer. "I'm going to start getting things ready for dessert now."

"It was a lovely dinner," Donna said as she picked up a fresh dish towel.

"Albeit a little crowded in my tiny house?"

Donna smiled. "You'll have to excuse Celeste. She's so excited about their new house and everything."

"Well, she can host Thanksgiving at her big ol' house next year."

Donna laughed. "Yes, I can just imagine Celeste dressed in silk and pearls as she stirs the gravy and balances her six-month-old baby on her hip."

"Meaning that David won't be much help?"

Donna frowned slightly. "I do wish he was a little more excited about becoming a daddy."

"I know . . ." Anna shook her head as she remembered her brother's negative reaction when Michael had toasted him and his wife on their impending parenthood. "I couldn't believe what he said during dinner."

"Oh, I don't think he really meant it." Donna reached for another plate. "It's just that David wanted to be married for at least five years before starting a family."

"I think he should just be thankful," Anna said a bit too sharply. "After all, it is Thanksgiving," she added to take the sting out of her words. Then she changed the subject, telling Donna about the Thanksgiving party that one of her room mothers had put together for her second grade class. "It was totally over the top," Anna admitted, as she went into detail to describe the fancy decorations and foods that had probably been very expensive. "But the kids actually seemed to like it."

"Where does this china go?" Donna asked as she set the last plate with the others on the countertop.

"Back into its crates."

Michael poked his head in the doorway from the dining room. "Need any help in here?"

"Sure." Anna turned the flame up under the teakettle. "You can help me get the crates and pack up these dishes and get them out of here."

"Nice dinner, Anna," Michael said as they walked back to the spare bedroom.

"Thanks."

Michael picked up a plastic crate, then paused to glance around the guest room. "You know, I've been thinking about converting this room into a home office."

"But where would we put company?"

"Well, I thought maybe the, uh, the *other* room . . ."

Anna bit her lip but didn't say anything.

"It has really nice light in there," he added.

Anna felt her throat tighten. "That's true, it does."

"And I thought if I had a home office, maybe I could work at home more. You know it's been hard starting up the new business, but if I could get set up at home, I could spend more time here. And I thought maybe I could repaint this room, like a dark blue or green or burgundy, sort of like a den or library, with some bookshelves. Maybe you'd want to use it too, for lesson plans or grading or whatever."

Anna brightened a bit. "That does sound nice, and dark paint would look good with the woodwork and crown molding."

"So maybe we should store your china set in the, uh, other room for now," Michael said as they carried the empty crates back to the kitchen. "It'll be one less thing to move out when I start to paint in there."

"I guess so . . ." Even as she said this, Anna knew she lacked enthusiasm. Still, she tried to process Michael's suggestions as she walked back to the kitchen.

"Want me to make coffee now?" Donna held up the empty carafe.

“Sure.” Anna unzipped one of the many quilted containers, slipped in a china plate, and topped it with a circular pad to protect it from the next plate—just the way Great-Gran had shown her.

“Goodness.” Donna paused from measuring coffee and watched Anna and Michael carefully putting the delicate pieces away. “I didn’t realize that china was so much trouble.”

“It’s just that I don’t have a proper place to keep it.”

“You need a china cabinet, Anna.”

“That would be nice.”

“I don’t know why you didn’t just use your regular set of dishes,” Donna continued. “They’re pretty enough.”

“Because this china is special,” Anna said. “And I thought the family, especially Grandma Lily, would enjoy seeing it out again.”

Donna examined a teacup. “I suppose so . . . but it’s certainly a lot of work.”

“I don’t mind.” Anna picked up a full crate and carried it back toward the spare bedroom.

“Let’s put it in the other room,” Michael said from behind her. “Remember?”

“Oh, yeah . . .” She paused, actually holding her breath as he balanced the crate on one side and reached for the doorknob. She hadn’t seen this room for a while. Probably not since last summer when she’d retrieved a diaper bag that she knew Meredith could use, since her other one had split at the seams. And she knew Meredith had put Jackson down for a nap in here today, but Anna had been busy in the kitchen at the time . . . and now they were probably out in the living room with the grandmas.

Anna cautiously walked into the room, feeling almost surprised to see that it was just as cheerful as ever. The walls were still a warm buttery yellow, and the creamy white

nursery furnishings—the changing table, crib, dresser, and rocking chair—were still in their places, although Meri had left a red and blue baby quilt behind. Anna had long since stowed the pretty pastel bedding and stuffed plush animals. It had been too difficult to see those cheerful baby items placed around the room . . . so expectant and waiting.

Michael set his crate down against the wall, then slowly removed the one that Anna was still holding. “I know this isn’t easy, honey, but I’ve been thinking we should clear this room out,” he said quietly.

She nodded, a hard lump forming in her throat. “I’m sure you’re right.”

“Maybe we could give the furniture to David and Celeste. I mean, despite how she goes on about how great they’re doing, your brother admitted to me that he wasn’t financially ready for this baby yet, what with recently getting that new house and all.”

“Yes, that’s a nice idea, Michael.” She tried to feign enthusiasm as she ran her hand over the smooth surface of the crib’s headboard, then picked up Jackson’s bright quilt and folded it neatly, placing it under her arm. She remembered how she had carefully researched this line of infant furniture online, looking for the safest manufacturers available. Making sure that it was nontoxic paint, and that the railing posts weren’t too far apart, and that there were no fancy knobs or things for a baby’s clothing to get caught on. No, she would have no concerns over the safety of her brother’s baby with this well-made line of furniture. Still, it was so hard to let it go—such a final good-bye to old dreams. And what about the possibility of adoption? Yet that seemed unlikely since their savings account was gone, plus they’d incurred a small mountain of debt when they’d “invested” in every imaginable fertility treatment available.

Anna was blinking back tears now, staring down at the ugly tan plastic crates that were now cluttering what she had once considered something of a sanctuary. “Do we really need to store the china in here?”

Michael reached over and put his arm around her shoulders. “I know it’s hard . . . but we need to move on, Anna.”

“I know, but I just don’t like seeing the crates in here.”

“Well, like I said, I want to paint that other room . . . and, as you know, we’re a little short on storage in our little house, and I—”

“Fine!” She turned and glared at him. She knew she was being unreasonable, but suddenly she felt angry. Really angry. “Your old MG—a car that doesn’t even run—takes up our entire garage, Michael. And whether it’s raining or snowing or sleeting, I have to park my car on the street. But do I complain about that? Do I?”

“But, Anna, that’s because it’s—”

“It’s just *fine*, Michael. You come and you go. You do as you please. You’ll get your home office and you’ll ruin this little room—this nursery that I—I love. Well, fine, it’s just perfectly fine. Don’t worry about me. Just as long as you’re happy. *I’ll be just fine!*”

Michael blinked and stepped back. “But, Anna, that’s not what I want—”

“Excuse me, Michael, I need to go serve dessert now!”

As she turned and stomped back to the kitchen, she knew that she was acting totally crazy, not to mention completely out of character. She knew that she was being irrational, and if any members of her family had overheard her little tantrum, they would wonder what on earth had come over her. This was so unlike her. But for a change, Anna didn’t really care what anyone thought. Let them wonder. Let them speculate. Maybe it was time she acted up.