

*Here's a little Christmas greeting from Signal Bend.
Wishing you a wonderful holiday and a most happy new year,
from the Lunden house to yours.*

*xoxo,
Susan*

*Note: This story was first published on the FCP blog in December 2013. It takes place five months after the last scene of Behold the Stars and well into the narrative arc of Into the Storm (Signal Bend Book Three), which will be released in January. There are SPOILERS here for Behold the Stars, but **not** for Into the Storm, since that book has different lead characters.*

Primo Natale (First Christmas)

Isaac zipped up Gia's new little red footie pajamas. 'Footie pajamas.' Jesus. He had developed a whole new vocabulary in the past five months. In addition to "footie pajamas," he now knew and regularly used words like 'onesie,' 'binkie,' and 'ouchie,' among probably a dozen others.

These footie pajamas were fleece and had a reindeer face on the butt, complete with puffy red nose. A gift from Beth at the B&B. Every woman in the county seemed to have found the most ridiculous Christmas clothes available and given them to his daughter. Lilli was determined that she wear each and every outfit. With a few days left before Christmas, there was still a stack of red, green, and white velvet, fleece, and corduroy on Gia's dresser. Such a fashionista his little girl was.

"Come on, Squirt. Let's go see Mamma." He picked her up off the changing table, tucking his nose against her soft little neck to take in her freshly-bathed baby smell, and then carried her downstairs.

Lilli was in the kitchen, where she'd been practically every spare second for most of the month. She was turning into an Earth Mother type. She'd always been a nurturer, full of empathy and insight, but being a mom had shifted all that into overdrive.

Well, it was more than that, Isaac thought. Shortly after she'd gotten pregnant with Gia, and after all the horror with Ellis was over, Lilli had quit her badass government job and become a more or less normal citizen. No more soldier girl, no more special ops undercover secret agent or whatever. Just Lilli Lunden—his old lady, Gia's mother, owner of a bed and breakfast. Since she'd hired a very capable manager at the B&B, that wasn't taking up her time. Lilli didn't do well without a project.

She really, really didn't. Isaac wouldn't say it made her crazy, because he would never say that—too much of a trigger for her. And it wasn't accurate, anyway. But it made her... a challenge to be around. He'd never met anyone who needed to stay busy like she did.

Gia was five months old and already exhibiting a fairly challenging personality herself. When she had a complaint, she wanted it addressed about five minutes before it had become a problem. And she was a screamer. Not like she'd been at first, when all she'd done was sleep, eat, and scream, but it was clear that she was going to keep her parents on their toes. So she took up a lot of Lilli's time.

What wasn't taken up by Gia, Lilli devoted to him and the house. She'd painted and decorated. She'd organized. She'd rearranged. When the weather was warm, she'd gardened. And she cooked. Nearly every night she made a fairly elaborate meal, usually for only the two of them. He took the leftovers to the clubhouse the next day. He certainly wasn't complaining, and neither were the guys, though Marie had pouted some, missing his years-long daily custom at the diner.

A couple of weeks earlier, Lilli, noting that it was Gia's first Christmas, started baking and decorating like a fiend. When Isaac pointed out that it was only *technically* Gia's first Christmas, that since she was too young to know what was going on, next year would be a bigger deal, Lilli had just waved him off. She wanted to get the traditions started now.

He knew that look she'd had in her eyes. So he stayed out of her way.

She was making some kind of deep-fried dough balls tonight. There were boxes of cookies stacked at one end of the long kitchen table; she'd been giving them out around town, and what was left was intended for the Horde Christmas party. She'd made gingerbread cookies earlier in the day. Isaac loved gingerbread, and the house was still redolent with the aroma. He'd made sure she left plenty back for him.

As soon as Gia saw her mom, she leaned out from Isaac's arms, reaching, until they were close enough to touch Lilli's back. Lilli looked over her shoulder, smiling. She had a light sweep of flour on her cheek. She leaned back and kissed Gia's nose.

"Hey, sweet thing. Did Daddy give you a bath?"

Isaac shifted Gia in his arms, sitting her up in a better hold, and she yelled to protest being pulled away from her mom.

"Hey—can you distract her for a few minutes? I'm almost done here, and I've got this hot oil. I don't like her so close to it."

"Sure, Sport. But she's looking for the feedbag, so we'll be at DEFCON 1 in about five minutes."

"That's why you're going to distract her, love. I'll be there in a couple of minutes."

He brushed the flour from her cheek and kissed the spot. "Smells good."

Gia yelled louder and squirmed emphatically when he turned and walked into the living room, but he held her snugly and withstood the shrieking in his ear. "Come on, Squirt. Let's see the pretty."

There was a Christmas tree in the house for the first time in thirty years—since Isaac's grandparents had been alive, the last time the Lundens had kept Christmas at all. It wasn't the kind of tree he'd have picked. In fact, when Lilli had declared that it was the one, he'd been appalled. A Silvertip. It was tall and scrawny, with a skinny trunk, a huge, wide base and a spindly top. Lots of space between branches. Damn thing looked bald. He liked the Scotch pines, fluffy and triangular, the way Christmas trees were supposed to look. But she'd been adamant, and she cared more than he did.

Once the tree was decorated, he had to admit she'd been right. She had several boxes of ornaments from her childhood. The empty boxes, filled with old-fashioned packing straw, were still stacked in the dining room. They'd been full of gorgeous old glass and ceramic baubles, hand-painted and delicate. They wouldn't be putting these on the tree for the next few years, once Gia was on her feet. But this year, they were safe. They were all different sizes, some of them long and thin, and they dangled perfectly on the widely-spaced branches. With the small multicolored lights they'd gotten at Walmart, and the stained glass star that had been in one of those boxes, the tree was gorgeous. It made him feel calm to look at it.

And the smell—it was hard not to feel good when your house smelled like Christmas tree and gingerbread. A house full of his family. His wife and his child. It made his heart hurt to marvel at the place he'd gotten to in his life. He had everything.

The only lights on in the living room were the tree lights, and the glow of the fire, when Isaac walked to the tree with his baby girl. Gia quieted and settled right away, transfixed by the light and glimmer. She made a little cooing sound.

"I know, right? Mamma made a pretty."

She reached for a blown-glass icicle, iridescent in the lights, and Isaac pulled her hand back. Gia grunted angrily. He took a little wooden nutcracker off its branch instead and dangled it in front of her. She wasn't interested. She wanted the glass one. He took a step back, getting her out of touching range.

"No, Gia. Just to look at." Her little brow furrowed, and her little lower lip trembled. Damn, that got to him. For half a second, he actually considered letting her hold a blown-glass ornament that could hurt her if she broke it, just so her lip would stop. It wasn't even because that lip meant a screaming fit was brewing. He just hated to make her sad.

"Okay. Hand her over. Good work on the distraction, by the way." Lilli was standing in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room.

Saved by the boob. Isaac handed Gia over. She'd forgotten about the crushing disappointment she'd felt at not being able to eat the glass ornament and was now focused on the coming delights of her mother's chest.

"You want that pillow thing?" Lilli had a weird pillow that was shaped like a 'C.' She wore it around her waist sometimes when she nursed, like a lap desk for a baby.

"I'd rather have you."

He grinned. "You bet." It made him horny as fuck, and Lilli was rarely in the mood after she nursed, but he loved it anyway. He sat down on the big leather couch he'd recently built, stretching one leg along the back of the seat, and patted the cushion between his legs. "Get in here."

Lilli sat on the couch between his legs and pulled her shirt up. She got Gia settled and latched on, then rested against Isaac's chest. Damn, he loved this. He brushed her ponytail to the side and laid his hand on her shoulder, rubbing his thumb over his ink on the back of her neck.

She took a deep breath and hummed. He could feel her contentment in the vibration against his palm.

"What's that stuff you're making called again?"

"Struffoli. I used to make it with my Nonnie. Haven't made it since she died. I never made it on my own before, but it's not too hard." When Lilli was nursing Gia, she got a cadence to her speech so that every word was like a lullaby. Isaac thought it soothed him almost as much as it did Gia.

"It smells pretty great. Not gingerbread great, but great."

"That's just the deep-fried dough. When she's done eating, I'll make the honey syrup, and then...you'll renounce gingerbread."

"Not a chance. But I'm sure the struff-things are awesome." He kissed the side of her head. "You're so into this Christmas. Was it always a big thing for you?" She knew it wasn't a big thing for him. They'd had that talk when they were deciding to get a tree.

She sighed. Looking over her shoulder, Isaac watched Gia nurse, her eyes—his eyes, fresh and innocent in her beautiful little face—staring up at her mother, her chubby little hand

curled quietly on Lilli's breast. Every now and then, the steady, focused rhythm of her cheeks would stop, and she'd make a tiny, happy whimper, then get back to work.

His life—how had he earned this life? How had he deserved it? He hadn't. He didn't. He knew he didn't. But he wanted to. He wanted to be worthy. And he would never let it go. It was everything.

"Nonnie loved Christmas. My mom did, too, though from what I remember, she was never as focused and organized as Nonnie. My mom would stop in the middle of baking cookies and take me off for a few hours, and we'd come back to a house full of smoke and little briquettes fused to the cookie sheet. Never a fire, though, that I remember. One year, she put up a tree but never decorated it. That was a bad year. I was seven. I ended up spending Christmas at the neighbors' house because my dad had to take my mom to the hospital. Nobody ever told me exactly what happened, but I think she tried to kill herself somehow."

Even while she spoke such sadness, Lilli's voice kept that soft, soothing lilt as she watched their daughter feed. "Anyway. When Nonnie came to live with us, Christmas got great. She brought all those ornaments with her—some of them were *her nonna's*—and she baked and baked. She started to teach me right away, too.

"Nonnie looked exactly like you'd expect an Italian grandmother to look." She turned her head a little and looked over her shoulder at him. "You know *The Exorcist*? The movie, not the book."

He nodded.

"She looked a lot—a *lot*—like Father Karras's mother. I mean, that lady was Greek, but you know—short, a little round, soft white hair rolled back in a bun, always in a plain dress. Like it had never stopped being 1954. But she wore these elaborately embroidered aprons, the kind that go over the chest and shoulders, almost like backless dresses. Except for church and sleep, that was Nonnie—dark dress, sensible shoes, fancy apron. For Christmas, those aprons got downright spangly. When I was twelve, one of my Christmas presents was a box of spangly aprons. She must have worked on those things for months. That was her way of saying she was proud of the woman I was becoming."

"I'm trying to imagine you in a fancy apron. The image isn't coming." Lilli wore a plain white kitchen apron, and even that look had taken an adjustment.

She laughed quietly. "Yeah. They weren't really me then. They're definitely not me now. But that was still my favorite Christmas present that year."

Gia unlatched with a *pop*, and Lilli covered that breast and set her on her shoulder. Isaac reached behind to grab a cloth diaper off the end table and lay it between Gia and Lilli. This was the scary part of sitting with them like this. Gia didn't spit up often, but when she did, she made it count.

He sat calmly while Lilli patted and rubbed on Gia's back. His little girl was fixed on him, her eyes on his even as her head bounced gently with Lilli's movements. She burped a little, then smiled—a wide, joyful grin. He chuckled. "Proud of yourself, huh?"

She always wanted both breasts at the last feed of the night. That burp had made some room; she was already sucking on Lilli's shoulder. When Gia was settled at the other breast, Lilli tucked herself more snugly against Isaac's chest.

"She wouldn't let us eat on Christmas Eve. At all. We'd be in the kitchen all day, but we couldn't eat until after Midnight Mass. We'd get home from church around one-thirty—in the morning—just *starving*, and she'd put out sandwiches and a bunch of stuff, and we'd eat before bed. Just the three of us. It was usually just the three of us. I know that made her sad. My dad had

two older brothers, but they both died in Vietnam. And my grandfather was dead. And my mom. So it was just us. But we cooked for the kind of family she missed, like all those people were with us. My dad said that she used to put out place settings for my uncles, but that was before she lived with us.

“Anyway, I’d get one present after Mass, and then we’d eat and clean up and go to bed. I never had Santa, but I had to wait until morning, and then there’d be a bunch of presents that hadn’t been there the night before. We’d open presents and then spend the rest of the day eating. After dinner, no matter what, we took a walk and looked at the lights.”

She looked over her shoulder again. “That was Christmas. I liked it. All of it. Even church. But then she died, and I went off to college, and my dad and I just sort of decided, without ever talking about it, that Christmas was done for us. And then he died, and all family stuff was done for me. I was out of family. But not anymore. I have you and Gia. And the Horde, even. I want Gia to have good memories like I have. I don’t care about the religious stuff—that was always about making Nonnie happy—but I want the family stuff for her. The traditions that... I don’t know. They *mean* family. Define it. Getting out Nonnie’s ornaments, making struffoli and the other stuff we made together, I feel like she’s here with me. I remember how much she loved us and how taking care of us made her so happy she’d break out into song. I want Gia to have touchstones like that.”

Listening to Lilli talk, always keeping that lullaby tone, had made Isaac feel melancholy. He didn’t have such touchstones. He didn’t have memories like that to harken back to. His family was made of stern stock, even those who weren’t abusive assholes. When there had been Christmas, it hadn’t been what one might call merry, as such. There wasn’t enough love for merriment. His mother had loved him, but she’d been weak and timorous, always fearful of incurring Big Ike’s fisted wrath. Any gestures of affection from her had been furtive, a quick peck on the cheek after she’d made sure Big Ike wasn’t looking. His old man hadn’t wanted his boy soft, and he’d been of the mind that love turned a man into a woman. Martha, Isaac’s sister, had it slightly better, because she was a girl and already a lost cause. The only person in his family who’d ever shown Isaac love with any kind of substance had been his Grandma Lunden. But she was a severe country woman, who’d just as likely finish a bear hug with cuff on the ear as with a kiss.

“I want that for Gia, too. I gotta tell ya, Sport—I’m a little jealous. I don’t have memories like that. No traditions to speak of. I feel like a shit, though, for being jealous. You lost a lot.”

Gia was sound asleep, off the breast and lolled back with her mouth open. Every now and then, her lips would go in a vague impression of sucking. Lilli covered herself and settled Gia on her chest. “I had something to lose. I guess that’s as good as it is bad. I wouldn’t change anything about my life, even to save pain.”

That shocked the hell out of him, and he didn’t believe it. “Come on, Lilli—”

She turned and tipped her head on his shoulder so she could meet his eyes. “Not one thing, Isaac. Not one thing. Not even that. It all—*all*—got us here, and it’s the best my life has ever been. I think I’m the mother I am because of what I went through. I look at Gia, and I’m still stunned that she’s actually here. And I think about the world differently now. I wouldn’t ever want to live through it again, but I wouldn’t change it if I could. I know how amazing what we have is. We fought hard to get it. I know you did things that still keep you up at night sometimes. But we can’t regret any of it. We have to make it mean something.”

Isaac looked into his old lady’s eyes, the lights from their first Christmas tree flickering bright color against their grey depths. He lifted his hand and traced the scar in her eyebrow—the

impression from the edge of the stock of an M16, etched into her face. It made her more beautiful to him. The scar of a warrior. “You amaze me. I love you, Sport. God, I love you.”

She smiled and stretched up toward him; he met her for a kiss. He kept it light—he was already painfully erect, his blood thrumming all through him, but their little girl was sleeping on Lilli’s chest, and he did not want to do anything that would end this moment of completeness.

“I love you, Isaac. Happy anniversary.”

“Happy anniversary, baby.”

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