

~ Anna's Christmas ~

by By KG MacGregor

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Disclaimers: Don't get hunkered down for this one. It's just a vignette, a chance to peek in on Anna, Lily & Andy and see how their holiday is going. This one will take you about five minutes; but if you haven't read [Shaken](#), [Stirred](#) & [Strained](#), you probably won't understand what's going on here.

I'd like to also take this opportunity to let you know that *Shaken* (a consolidated version of the trilogy) will be published by Cavalier Press in the spring of 2004.

Thanks to my friends who gave this a read, and to my Sweetcakes. Please feel free to share your thoughts at kgmacgregor@yahoo.com.

Andy Kaklis burst through the side door of his family's Brentwood home and made a beeline for the living room, where a majestic ten-foot Christmas tree twinkled in the otherwise darkened house.

"He didn't come!"

"I tried to tell you, pal. Santa doesn't come until after everyone falls asleep tonight." Anna stopped in the doorway to watch her five-year-old's reaction to the realization that you just couldn't fool St. Nick by stepping out on Christmas Eve.

But the news didn't deter him at all, and he raced immediately into the dining room and kitchen just to be sure. By this time, Chester was hot on his heels, barking with enthusiasm at the rare running game inside the house.

"I don't think our plan worked," Lily sighed as she slipped an arm around her partner. They had stayed at George and Martine's well after their holiday dinner, hoping that a long evening of playing with his three-year-old cousin Jonah would wear Andy out. Instead, it had had the opposite effect on both boys, who grew more rambunctious as the evening progressed. It was now nearly two hours past Andy's usual bedtime, and he seemed to be gathering steam for a fresh round of mayhem.

"At least it worked for Alice," Anna observed. Kim and Hal's youngest had left the party already asleep on her daddy's shoulder. "I'd say it worked for you too."

"Yeah, I'm beat."

"Why don't we go upstairs so you can lie down? I'll come back down here and help Santa after I get Andy to bed," the tall woman whispered.

"No Santa in there either," Andy announced as he returned to the living room, dropping to his knees to count the presents under the tree. "One...two.... This big one's mine!"

Lily had gotten him a set of adventure books and the DVDs for a couple of movies that he liked. Anna got him a few posters of cars for his room. Those gifts were wrapped and under the tree already. But Santa's stuff was well hidden.

"Andy, you need to settle down now. It's time to get ready for bed." Lily could hear him starting to wheeze, the first indication that an asthma attack was on the way. It was a shame that they always had to keep his excitement in check for fear of him getting sick. Lily knew the feeling all too well, having grown up with asthma too. Hopefully, Andy would outgrow it soon; or at least, its effects would lessen as he got older, as they had for her. "I can handle him, I think. He had a bath before we went, so he just needs his pajamas and a story."

"You sure?" Anna was dubious. Lily looked absolutely exhausted.

"No, but I'll at least give it a shot."

"Call me if you need any help." The brunette planted a small kiss on her lover's forehead and turned to their son. "Okay, pal. You heard your mama. Bedtime."

"I have to do the milk and cookies!"

"Okay, let's do it then." Anna led him into the kitchen while Lily waited patiently at the bottom of the stairs. Once the milk and cookies were in place-along with carrots for the reindeer-she scuttled him up to bed. "Now off you go." Anna watched as Andy bounded up the stairs, his weary mother trudging behind.

"Come on, Chester. You too!" the blonde woman called.

The basset hound paused as if contemplating his options. Realizing that he didn't really have any, he scurried up the steps to claim his space at the foot of Andy's bed.

Anna waited quietly at the bottom of the stairs until she heard the boy's bedroom door close. That was her cue.

This was Andy's second Christmas with them, and both mothers were determined not to repeat the chaos of last year when they'd been kept up until dawn by those three dreaded words: *Some assembly required*.

This time around, she'd taken an afternoon off with her dad to put things together while Andy was in school. All she had to do tonight was bring the presents in from the pool shed, where they'd been hidden for almost a month.

Quietly, she slid the bolt at the top of the French doors and walked out onto the patio. It was a

chilly night in LA, even for December, and she shivered as she followed the pool deck to the shed behind the garage. Hoses, nets, extension rods-all the things their service used to keep the pool and hot tub sparkling-were kept inside the shed. The child-proof lock protected Andy and any other children who visited from getting access to the dangerous chemicals...and quite conveniently, from discovering Santa's hiding place. Most of the tools and supplies had been moved to one side to create space for the Christmas stash.

The gleaming blue bicycle sat close to the door, and she hefted it onto her hip to carry it into the house. The BMX had been at the top of Andy's wish list since he started kindergarten in August and heard all about it from his new best friend Jeremy. Lily had suggested a bike with more features-a basket, a bell, streamers for the handlebars-but Anna was adamant that the Mach 1 Jr. was a better mechanical design, and that the extras would be distracting for a five-year-old learning to ride for the first time. That was her way of avoiding the implication that such additions were...well, sissy...and after all, the creed for the car business was "Image is everything."

Once she got the bike situated so that it would grab the boy's eye the instant he entered the room, she went out for a second load. The art set-an easel, with paper, paints, markers, and brushes-was next. Anna laughed to herself as she hauled the kit into the house, thinking that Lily had chosen this gift as much for herself as for Andy. More than once, the car dealer had come home from work to find the floor in the kitchen covered with newspaper, and her family covered with finger paint or water colors. Andy enjoyed drawing cars, and had in fact shown a gift for it. One wall of Anna's office was papered with his renditions of BMW models.

A third trip to the shed yielded a few pool toys, a soccer ball, and a new backpack, made especially for hiking. Andy was used to carrying a book bag, but that was just for his school supplies. This pack came with two water bottles, sunglasses, a compass, binoculars, and a disposable camera. The sight of the hiking equipment sent her thoughts again to Lily. How long had it been since she ventured onto her beloved trails?

One more trip should do it, she thought. They'd been very careful not to overdo it like they had last year. The last load was more small cars for Andy's already massive collection, and a few new buildings and signs to go with the construction set he used to build roads for his cars to travel.

When things were finally in place, Anna treated herself to the small glass of milk and the peanut butter cookie they had picked up at the coffee shop. Andy thought it was pretty amazing that Santa liked the same cookies as his mom. She was sure to leave a few crumbs on the plate, and just a drop in the bottom of the glass. She left the leafy ends of the carrots and returned the other portion to the refrigerator, careful to mingle them with the others in the bag.

Proud of her work, she stood back to eye the display. They'd videotaped the scene last year when Andy came downstairs, but agreed that it took away from their enjoyment to be worrying about the angles and the lighting. This year, they'd take a few stills after the presents were opened. It would be a special year-a very special year-for all three of them.

"Anna?" Lily's voice called from the top of the stairs.

"Yeah?"

"Could you come up and sit with Andy? He's having trouble breathing and I think he needs to rock for a little while."

"Sure. Let me close up down here." Hurriedly, she locked the back door and turned off the lights in the kitchen and the living room, looking over her shoulder one last time as she headed up the steps. *Yep, Andy's going to love it!*

Lily met her on the landing. "Did you finish?" she whispered.

"Yeah." Anna planted a kiss on her temple. "It's perfect."

"I wish I could go see it, but I don't want to have to do these steps again."

"You should go get ready for bed." *Lily shouldn't feel guilty about the things she isn't able to do.* "Is there anything you need?"

"Maybe some juice...I meant to get some before I came up."

"I'll get it. Go on to bed, sweetheart." Anna poked her head in Andy's room to find him sitting in the rocking chair. "Hey, pal. I need to get your mama some juice. Then I'll be in to sit with you. You okay?"

The little boy nodded and coughed. "Mama doesn't feel good."

"She's just really tired. It'll be okay. I'll be right back."

Anna hurried back downstairs to the kitchen for a glass of cranberry juice. On her way back up, she peeked one more time into the living room and smiled.

"Here you go." She set the glass on the bedside table.

"Thank you." Lily came out of the bathroom in a pink flannel nightgown. She'd been getting cold in the night. Dr. Ostrov had said that was probably from reduced circulation. "Come here."

Anna walked into her lover's waiting arms, savoring the feel of the warm hug.

"In case I've forgotten to tell you lately, I really appreciate how you've been taking care of everything. I don't think Andy's even missed a beat, thanks to you."

"He's worried about you tonight."

"Tell him I'm fine. He needs to be dreaming of sugar plum fairies and such."

"I think he's probably going to lie awake and wonder what Santa's sleigh has under the hood."

"You're probably right."

Anna helped her into bed and pulled the covers up. "I'll join you in a little while, but you don't have to wait up. Go on to sleep if you want."

"Mmmm...I'm not sure I have a choice, Amazon."

The dark-haired woman leaned forward and kissed her forehead. "Sweet dreams then."

Almost as soon as her head hit the pillow, Lily closed her eyes and grew still. She would likely be sound asleep in less than a minute.

Anna went into the bathroom and changed into her pajamas as well, not wanting to make any noise when she came back. Then she returned to the room across the hall to find her son still sitting, and still coughing. Without a word, she reached down and took the five-year-old into her arms, settling him onto her hip and guiding his head to her shoulder. He was small for his age; but still, she wouldn't be able to do this much longer. Before too long, Andy would probably decide that only babies were carried around like this, and he wouldn't want to do that. She needed to enjoy this feeling while she could.

"See the lights, Andy?" She had walked to the window that faced the front of the house, where they could see the Christmas lights that lined the sidewalk. "Santa won't have any trouble at all finding this house."

"And he'll come down the chimney?"

"That's right. All we have to do now is go to sleep."

The little boy coughed again, his breath coming in shallow puffs that gurgled and wheezed. "I can't. I'm coughing too much." Suddenly he had a frightening thought. "What if I can't go to sleep? He won't come!"

"Shhh. It'll be okay, pal. Santa will find a way to sneak in and bring the toys. You don't have to worry about that." Gently, she shifted him around as she sat down in the rocker. It was easier for him to breathe if he leaned back against her chest. "Are you comfortable?"

As if in answer, he leaned forward and coughed again, then settled back.

Pushing gently with one foot, she began to rock. The rhythm was soothing and helped Andy get his mind off his struggle to breathe. Soon, his bronchial tubes would relax and his lungs would open up.

"Mom? Do you think Santa will come here before he goes to Jonah's house?"

"I don't know, Andy. But I'm sure he'll come to both houses, so I guess it doesn't really matter which one he goes to first."

"But Jonah said he might run out of toys."

Anna rolled her eyes and shook her head. *That nephew of mine can be such a troublemaker.* "Shhh. Santa always has enough toys. If he runs out, he just sends his elves back to the North Pole to get more. You need to quit worrying, okay? I want you to think about being still and getting sleepy."

Anna hated that the little boy had trouble with his asthma, especially since it always seemed to interfere with times that should be happy and carefree. But she had to admit that she relished this opportunity to hold him in her lap, to feel his small body snuggling into hers for comfort. She liked that he depended on her for this, and it made her heart soar at such a stark reminder of how much she loved him, and how lucky she and Lily were to have him in their family.

Andy had been her son officially now for almost a year, the adoption finalized in mid-January. He had taken her name, and soon after, Lily had followed suit. It was just amazing when she thought about it all...they were the Kaklis family.

It had been a big year for Andy, starting off with a trip to Germany to see where "the best cars on the road" were manufactured. They'd all gotten a tour of the factory, and he and Lily had visited the snow-covered countryside while Anna attended seminars all day.

In May, the three of them had gone camping for a week at Silverwood Lake. That was a trip Anna Kaklis could never have imagined for herself five years ago, but neither could she have imagined a life with another woman-the sweetest woman on earth, if anyone was keeping score-and an adopted son that she loved as much as she could love any of her own.

And in August, Andy had started school. Lily had done the proverbial first-day-of-school-drop-off-and-cry thing, but Anna had been there to pick him up at the end of the day. Andy loved the new challenges, his grades were good, and his teachers were pleased with his general attitude. The mothers were more than a little relieved that his rough start in life hadn't resulted in any emotional or behavioral problems.

With Andy in school, it was harder to find the time during the week for him to come to the dealership, but the car dealer had taken him with her a few times on Saturdays for awhile. But with things now running more smoothly at all of the Premier dealerships, Anna had decided that it was time to grant herself the permanent luxury of weekends off. It was wonderful having two whole days together to slip out of town, to work on a project at home, or just to laze around by the pool with her family.

Such an incredible year.

It was almost a half hour before the coughing and wheezing stopped. Andy had finally drifted

off; now if she could just get him into bed without-

"Did Santa come yet?"

"I don't think so, pal. But he will."

That seemed to satisfy him, and he closed his eyes again, giving in to the Sandman for good as Anna laid him on his bed. Chester raised his head sleepily and shifted a little to the side, snorting out a breath as he stretched out.

Tucking the covers around Andy's chin, the mother couldn't resist a final touch, and she brushed her hand through the curly hair on his forehead. "I love you, pal."

Anna pulled the door almost closed, leaving only a sliver of light across his bed. Very quietly, she entered her own bedroom, chuckling that a small person like Lily could produce such a deep, throaty snore...which she vehemently denied. Anna slipped into bed, settling on her side to watch the sleeping profile. Despite her care not to wake her lover, Lily shifted, reaching out a hand to join hers under the covers.

"Did you get him to sleep?"

"Yeah, and he stopped wheezing. Sorry I woke you."

"That's okay. I wasn't asleep."

You were snoring like a freight train, sweetie. Anna had figured out back in July that it was not a good idea to point out the times her partner actually fell asleep. Lily was cranky enough without the reminders that she had little control over her body these days.

"How do you feel?"

"I'm okay. My back hurts a little."

"Why don't you roll over and I'll rub it for you."

"Easier said than done." Struggling with discomfort, she shifted bit by bit until she was on her side. "Can you get the pillow for my knees?"

Anna did so and scooted up close, pressing the heel of her hand into her lover's lower back. "It won't be long now, sweetheart."

"I'd say that all depends on how you define long."

Oops! Anna had inadvertently said the wrong thing. *Again.* "I meant till Santa comes."

Lily chuckled. "Sure you did." She was well aware that her disposition of late was forcing her

partner to always walk on eggshells. "How long would it be if you had to pee every nine minutes?"

"You just have to last another week, sweetheart. We've got clearance sales on all four lots until New Year's."

"I wouldn't mind having a little year-end clearance of my own," she mumbled in reply.

Anna smiled softly and snuggled close, brushing her lips against her partner's ear. "Merry Christmas, Lily."

"Merry Christmas to you too, Amazon." With that final whisper, she drifted off to restful sleep.

Anna's Christmas came three days later, when-nine days before her due date-Lily went into labor.

January 30th

"Hi there, pretty girl. What are you looking at?" Anna leaned against the headboard of the bed, her knees bent to support the precious bundle. Tiny Eleanor Stuart Kaklis stared wide-eyed at her mom's blue eyes and giant smile. "Is that a smile?"

The baby responded by flailing her feet, landing a few light kicks on Anna's belly.

"Lily, she's kicking me," Anna whined playfully. "Now I know how you must have felt."

"Nice try, Amazon. Not even close." Lily sat in the rocking chair next to their bed. "You ready to trade?"

"Did you hear that, pretty girl? It's dinner time." Anna stood up and tucked the baby into her right side. With her left arm, she reached out to receive Eleanor's brother and a towel for her shoulder. She and Lily had gotten very good at this exchange, she thought as she deposited her daughter onto her partner's lap.

Lily had undergone an amazing transformation last year when her nephew had joined their family. Long certain that she had no biological urge for motherhood, she was surprised to discover that, in fact, she did. And Anna, who had gone back and forth on the idea for herself, had come to realize that the experience of giving birth wasn't something she craved after all.

Dr. Beth Ostrov's proposal for them had been perfect, and last April, they'd planted four fertilized eggs-two of Lily's and two of Anna's, all with the same anonymous donor father-in-Lily's uterus. The possibility had always been there for quadruplets, but Beth had explained that

the typical ratio for in vitro fertilization was three or four to one. The discovery of twins had been both delightful and overwhelming.

Eleanor was undoubtedly Anna's biological daughter. Her father had presented them with proof positive in the form of Anna's baby pictures, in which she looked just like the tiny baby now at Lily's breast.

Little George Christian Kaklis-named for his grandfather and grandmother Christia Kaklis-took after his biological mom, Lily. Even if his nose and chin hadn't given away his parentage, they'd have deduced it from his voracious appetite.

"What did you and Andy do this afternoon?" Anna asked. Martine dropped the kindergartner off from school every Monday and Wednesday and stayed an hour or two with the twins while Lily gave the older boy her undivided attention. Tuesday and Thursday were Anna's days, his chance to spend a couple of hours at the dealership. Friday belonged to George; he always took the afternoon off and picked up Andy and Jonah for the usual grandfatherly mischief.

"We took a walk with Chester. Then we read a little while and watched some TV. Nothing fancy, but we had a good time together."

"He seems to be handling things better, now that we've gotten the routine down." Andy's initial reaction to his new brother and sister had been excitement, but in no time at all, he noticed that he wasn't getting as much attention from his mama. He responded by acting out, throwing a few uncharacteristic temper tantrums, and even once working himself up into an asthma attack. Given his background, both of his mothers were sensitive to the potential for him to feel insecure, and they'd devised the weekly schedule to assure him that he wasn't being pushed aside.

George burped loudly in response to the gentle pats on his back.

"That's my boy!" Anna leaned him back a little to wipe his chin. "Got any more of that, fella?"

"You know, you'll have to stop praising that behavior when he turns two."

"Hopefully, we'll be busy praising other things by then," the tall woman joked.

Moments later, he burped again and she settled him against her chest to go to sleep. He would be down for the count in about three minutes.

Eleanor gave the signal that she'd had all she wanted, and Lily hoisted her to her shoulder and stood. This one preferred jostling to pats on the back, but just like her brother, she burped and dozed off.

"What's your guess, Pygmy?" Anna folded back the covers on the bed as her partner laid the little girl in the crib next to her brother's.

"I'll say...4:10." It was already after eleven, and their nights of blessed sleep had been getting

progressively longer, but only by a smidgen.

"Okay, I'm going to go with 4:09."

"Think we've been pressing our luck, eh?"

"Maybe a little." Compared to Kim and Hal, whose two-year-old still didn't sleep through the night, they were incredibly lucky.

"I better not catch you poking one of them at four o'clock."

"Hey, that's Mom's trick, not mine." They were almost sure that Martine coaxed the babies awake from their naps just to have an excuse to pick them up.

"*Can I help it if I suddenly have to cough?*" she'd answered innocently.

"God, what would we do without Martine?"

What would they do without all of their family? Anna thought. How blessed she was to have a supportive mother and father, and a wonderful sister and brother-in-law. But her greatest blessings were under this roof tonight. These precious babies, that adorable little boy down the hall, and her cherished Lily.

Oh, and Chester. Thoughts of the basset hound reminded her of Lily's mom, who would be so proud of their family. And then there was her own mother, whom she barely remembered. Before drifting off, Anna wrapped a long arm around her partner and pulled her close, saying a silent prayer that they would see all three of these children through their happiest moments in life.

The End.

Thanks as always for reading. Drop me a note if you like at kgmacgregor@yahoo.com.

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