

Christmas, Present

by Jacquelyn Mitchard

Chapter One Excerpt

For weeks, he'd pestered himself over the fact that he couldn't remember whether this anniversary was the fourteenth or fifteenth. He would later regret the silliness, the mulling. He might have spent more time with the girls, taken the week off from work, made enormous resolutions and gestures of consummate intimacy.

Still, even in hindsight, a fourteenth anniversary sounded routine, neither a rung on the ladder midway toward a golden sunset nor an observation blushing fresh and new.

A fourteenth anniversary, like, perhaps, a forty-second birthday, didn't seem to demand so much commemoration.

But one more year would be a landmark! Somehow, to have survived in relative peace and periodic delight for a decade and a half -- through the arid, sandy-eyed numbness of sleep deprivation after the girls' births, the unexpected and brutal death of his mother, the long, anxious week waiting for the results of the withdrawal of a microscopic bite of tissue from Laura's breast, Annie's meningitis (ten days during which neither of them finished a single meal, together or separately) -- seemed to confer a certain status on this marriage. A marriage of substance, which few of their friends could boast. Fifteen years of marriage in full would cry out for a slam-bang celebration. A high school reunion equivalent, a renewal of vows with Laura at the Wee Kirk o' the Heather in Las Vegas, Prada boots, costing half a week's pay, or a (very brief) cruise to the West Indies.

He thought, by using a ruse, he might question his mother-in-law, Miranda, inventing some twaddle about checking Laura's sizes (men being universally forgiven, even coddled, for ignorance in such matters). But he could not frame a question that would elicit the date from Laura's cool and sharp-eyed mother. She was a busy realtor, a woman of few words except where they concerned post-and-beam construction or Carrera marble in the master bath. She would not burble forth, "And that was the last time Helen and David went anywhere together as husband and wife ... " or "I'd just bought that silver Volvo ... " or "Do you remember how adorable Laurie's sister Angela looked; she was only a junior ... " -- remarks that could be checked against a family timeline.

Their wedding album had been no help.

It was inscribed with their names, the month and day -- but, at Laura's behest, not the year. For the same reason, the photos all were in black-and-white. "Color makes pictures look dated. I want this to be always new," she'd said.

They were married December 23, and all the women, including Laura, wore red

velvet, the men gray morning clothes, with top hats -- even without the help of color film, he could remember the splash they all made, like bright cardinals and sparrows against the snow. The photographer spread huge sheets of clear plastic beneath an evergreen bower for outdoor shots. Laura peeked from under the hood of a wool merino cape trimmed with rabbit fur, like a character from *Little Women*.

The photos were timeless; not even a single car with an identifiable grille or body shape was visible.

He might have asked his own mother outright, and she would have felt no impulse to chide him. She would have been moved by his diligence.

He had missed his mother, more or less constantly, for two years, with the persistence of a low-grade fever that spiked in spring or at moments of acute need or tenderness. Laura resembled his mother in no way; she had different habits, preferences, and talents. But his wife still somehow recalled Amy, in common sense, in pure spirit. Laura still teased him about their first date: He had confessed he might never marry at all, never find a woman the equal of his mother. Amy had died of ovarian cancer, hadn't even lived to hear Amelia, the daughter they had named for her, say her grandmother's name.

Ironically, in just two years' time, if the Amelia of today was not talking, she was sleeping. Honoring his mother, he still sometimes called Amelia "Amy," especially when he was the one putting her into her bed.

Elliott's mother was the one who, by offhand example, had instructed him in the custom that husbands, not wives, were responsible for the construction of the wedding anniversary.

This seemed only fair.

He knew that Laura assumed a titan's share of the engineering of all the other holidays, getting up at four A.M. to wash and baste great birds -- one year jollying her brother, Stephen, late, when the girls were tiny and fuddled with sleep, into appearing at the doorway to their room in red-padded plush and white rabbit fur. Even Annie, the eldest at thirteen, still remained convinced she'd once glimpsed the real Santa.

Celebrating their anniversary was often deferred until New Year's Eve -- with school concerts, shopping, and the arrival of Laura's three siblings, Elliott's father, and sometimes his sister all crowding the week before the holiday. Her sisters and brother stayed with Miranda in the capacious Georgian brownstone she'd occupied alone since their father's death, when Laura was only three. But Laura insisted everyone squeeze into her and Elliott's tiny saltbox for a Christmas Eve feast of seafood and pasta. Laura made everything, from the pasta to the *Buche de Noel*, by hand, and her labors left her so drained, she could barely nibble at the elaborate annual brunch Miranda had had catered by the Palatial Palate on the following day. Elliott had a dozen photos of Laura, asleep on the couch at Christmas dinner. One year sometime soon, he often thought, he would protest; but he could not bear to interfere with the whispered traditions and sly confidences of the MacDermotts at

Christmastime, when even the slightly chilly elder sister, Suzanne, and her precocious little boy seemed to loosen up ...