

The Precious Present
From "Little Girl Lost"
by Brit

An ant farm.

My incredibly foolish, psychotic, moronic, childish partner bought me an *ant farm* for Christmas. My incredibly wonderful, thoughtful, sentimental, childlike partner.

An ant farm.

It's a struggle *not* to show how absolutely floored I am by the gift. But he knows. He always does. And not because of what it is, but because he remembered. Because he cared.

Wait 'til he sees what I got for him. He's not the only sentimental fool giving gifts this year.

You see, it all started right after Thanksgiving when we were shopping for Lisa Graham's birthday present. No, that's not right. It really started back in September with my old friend Jack Mitchell's death. That seems to have been the latest catalyst for the downward spiral of my attitude. Not that I was looking forward to the holidays. I haven't in years. But when we busted Eugene Pruitt for killing those showgirls, as well as splattering his mother all over the inside of their car, well...the underlying anger that typically rears its ugly head during the holidays came rolling in a bit earlier than usual.

Then there was Gillian.

There in the midst of my mourning Jack, she came like a ray of sunlight. Brought beauty and poetry back into my life. Stirred my heart the way only a new love can. I'm not sure Starsky ever trusted her completely, but he knew that she was good for me, at least at first. He saw how being with her drew me out of myself. And I loved her. I was planning to ask her to marry me. Just like that, I was going to pop the question on New Year's Eve.

But then she was gone.

Since their deaths, I've found myself constantly on edge. The following months seemed to be a constant nightmare of human degradation and greed and twisted truths: Artie Solkin's vendetta against me and his use of warped Tommy Marlowe, little Lisa Graham's rape, Captain Mike Ferguson's whole twisted operation. Usually, with

Starsky's help, I can pull myself out of the deep blue funk these types of cases throw me into. But not this time.

So when the holidays approached, the anger and bitterness I'm usually able to suppress to some degree came boiling over. And onto my partner. But one thing about Starsky, you can't keep him down for long, and if he's got his mind set on something, there's nothing on God's green earth that'll keep him from it. That's one heck of a comfort when you're in a jam and you're counting on him, trust me.

So no matter how grouchy I was, or how much I belittled him for his juvenile enjoyment of the season, Starsky always bounced right back at me with some obscure holiday trivia or warped rendition of a carol. Annoying, yes, but in the back of my mind (or is it my heart?) I'm forever grateful that he doesn't give up on me.

It's just with all the garbage I've been through this year—*we've* been through this year—Christmas is especially hard. You see, last month—November 27th—was the twentieth anniversary of my grandfather's death.

Now I realize it may seem a bit morbid that after twenty years I'm still not enjoying the holidays because I lost my grandfather during that season, but there're some things you need to understand about the man, and about my family. And that's not the only reason the holidays are so difficult, I just think his death was simply the beginning of it all.

You see, Grandpa Withers was probably the kindest man you'd ever meet. He had these bright blue eyes that would light up every time he saw you, as if you were a present to be unwrapped—something special. He was a patient man, always willing to slow his pace to match the inquisitive nature of his eight-year-old grandson. And he had a deep, deep love for the God he served and a faith that could move mountains.

And so Christmas was always a special time at Grandpa's house. Even after my grandmother died, Grandpa carried on the family traditions of cutting his own Christmas tree, baking the cookies and all the holiday treats, and planning the family gatherings. Grandpa's farmhouse was decorated with years of my childish trimmings—holiday art projects from grade school—unlike my own family's house where the tree was themed with designer ornamentation. I remember a manger I had made in my first grade Sunday School class, complete with a tiny Baby Jesus lying in a manger with pipe-cleaner straw. I can see now why my mother hesitated at placing it anywhere visible in our home, it *was* pretty awful. The camels looked like leprous goats and Joseph appeared to have indigestion. But Grandpa claimed it as his own and displayed it on his worn coffee table for all to see. My memories of Christmas with him are like a treasured heirloom that I keep hidden within the depths of my heart.

Summers were spent on Grandpa's farm and what better place for the energetic boy that I was to learn and grow. He was a wealth of information, teaching me all the hidden secrets of the meadows and pastures, the woods older than the three generations of

Withers that had lived there, and the creek that ran through that Minnesota farmland like a comet's trail. Grandpa's old Collie, Al, became my second best friend and a swayback mare that had long since passed her prime taught me how to ride bareback.

Grandpa was a giant of a man and was everything I someday hoped to be. He loved me and accepted me just the way I was, and never tried to mold me into the young man of position my father expected me to be, even at the tender age of eight. Twenty years ago, I can remember being so excited about Christmas. Mother and Father had promised that I could spend my school vacation with Grandpa to help him prepare for the holidays. It was going to be the best Christmas ever, even if my parents refused to get me the one gift I really wanted that year. That disappointment soon faded with the idea of spending two glorious weeks on the farm.

Thanksgiving had passed by contentedly that year, with Grandpa spending the day at our house, whiling away the hours before dinner playing checkers and other board games with Katherine and me. I remember coming home the following Monday, loaded down with homework before the longer Christmas break, to find my mother in tears. Grandpa Withers had had a massive heart attack that morning while finishing his chores. The mailman had found him later that day, lying near the barn, old Al standing guard beside him.

The days that followed were a blur of disbelief and loss for me. I even bargained with God in my childish way to bring Grandpa back, hoping to make the last few days a bad dream that I would soon wake up from.

But Grandpa was gone.

I was destroyed. I think every kid is devastated at their first loss of someone they love, having to come to terms with mortality. But this was something more--this was the one person I felt valued me just the way I was. I turned to my parents for consolation, but Father was never one for emotional displays, and gave me an abrupt lecture that was equivalent to "there're two things in life that are inevitable—death and taxes." Mother simply buried her grief and immersed herself in the false euphoria of the season and all its glitz and trappings. It was business as usual in the Hutchinson home. There were holiday parties for the sake of appearances, social positioning dictating our lives and overriding our grief.

I hated every minute of it.

The beloved farm was quickly sold, the animals given away to caring neighbors who offered to take them in, though Al the Collie ran away one night and never came back. I begged for an opportunity to go through the house before it was cleaned out and decades of memories given away to charity or thrown away. Mother allowed me one memento and I managed to claim my Grandpa's pocket watch to keep. But as I watched the movers pack away our treasured history like so much garbage, I was astonished when they

unearthed Christmas packages carefully wrapped months prior by those kind and callused hands.

The movers took pity on my pleas and gave me the square gift box with the handmade tag addressed to “Kenny.” Tears streaming down my face, I ran from the house to the now empty barn to open my belated gift away from pitying eyes.

And there it was, the gift I had begged my parents for.

The ant farm.

My parents had thought it was a ridiculous and trivial gift, and even my attempts to convince them that this was an ‘educational’ toy had failed to sway them. But Grandpa had seen my fascination with not only insects, but with all creatures, and had indulged my desire for the miniature city.

Somehow, whether during the movers’ activities or during the initial purchase, the Plexiglas that encased the farm had cracked, allowing the sand to leak out into the containing box. I don’t know how long I sat in that empty barn, crying for the loss of my Grandfather in a way that I hadn’t been allowed to at home.

Christmas was never the same again. The glitz and glare of the season never held the same beauty or wonder, and became as gaudy as the makeup on the aging prostitutes down on 32nd Street. The *true* meaning of the holidays was lost amongst the painted smiles of my mother, and the posturing and positioning of my father. I grew up and forgot what the season was all about. The Christmases that were once about the bonds of family and the gift of love were all buried outside a lonely Minnesota church.

I’ve never told anyone this story, not even my partner. A few months back, he and I were shopping at a toy store in our district, looking for a birthday present for Lisa Graham. As we perused the aisles, looking for just the right gift, an ant farm caught my eye. I couldn’t believe they even made them anymore.

The next thing I knew I was standing in the aisle with an ant farm in my hands, flooded by memories. Starsky made it clear into the next aisle before he realized I was no longer with him and backtracked to find me, thinking I’d come across something for Lisa. While our tastes rarely agree on anything except women and beer, he knew I wasn’t considering the ant farm as a present for Lisa. There must have been something my partner read in my face or saw in my eyes, because he paused for a moment before speaking.

“Whatcha got?”

How do I explain this? “Uh, nothing—just an ant farm.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I, uh, wanted one of these as a kid.”

“Really?” He looked at me, then back at the ant farm. “How the heck do you farm ants?”

Fortunately, he dropped the conversation and we went on to find a doll that had ‘Lisa’ written all over it.

But he remembered. He always does.

As much as I’m touched by such a sentimental gift, it’s not the greatest thing he’s given me this year. No, it’s much, much more than that—the precious present.

You see, I have a tendency to brood—live in the past. Nobody has to tell me that, I know I do. I take it all in, grief, anger, guilt—deserved or not—and I let things get to me, eating away at me until I feel like I’m going to explode or collapse. Starsky can sense it as surely as if it was his own pain, and somehow I think he takes it upon himself as if he could share my burden. A few weeks ago, I felt as though I was drowning in a sea of human garbage and was unable to do a thing about it. It’s my nature to try and help people—save people. But it seemed that there were few people who *wanted* to be saved anymore.

Somewhere along the way—a fight, I think—I accidentally scratched the glass face of Grandpa Wither’s pocket watch. Turning the antique piece over in my hands reminded me he’s been gone twenty years. *Twenty years*. My missing him made it feel as though it were only yesterday. And all the while, my insane partner was gearing up for the holidays—reindeer and holly adorning the Torino right along with the Star of David on the dashboard—driving us both nuts as he tried to guess what I’d gotten him for Christmas. The truth of the matter is that I really *hadn’t* gotten him anything, I wasn’t just yanking his chain. I love the man closer than a brother, but I just couldn’t get past my bitterness—not this time.

And then there was Molly.

I felt bad for her, I truly did, but I didn’t think we’d ever have the chance to get through to her. She was rough and headstrong, and had an attitude a mile long. I guess living on the streets will do that to a kid. And then in one weird instance—one skip of my heart—I saw in her the child my partner once was.

The realization happened right after we got the call that there was trouble, that her father was hurt. All the fierceness that dominated her every expression was gone in a heartbeat and was replaced by honest vulnerability, desperation and fear. As we made our way into the alley, I took it all in an instant: the ten year old child on her knees lifting up the sheet

to reveal the death mask of her murdered father; a sea of blue uniforms milling about the litter-strewn alley; the fallen baseball glove lying in the street filth, like a childhood trampled under life's harsh realities.

For one weird moment, the dirty colors of the scene before me became a sepia-tone flashback of someone else's memories: a busy New York City street, strewn with litter; blue uniforms milling uneasily about the body of a slain brother officer, his blood pooling beneath him; a tousled-curl'd boy of eight weeping over his murdered father's corpse, his horrified face pressed tightly against his father's chest, listening desperately for the heartbeat that was no longer there.

Like the explosion of a photographer's flash, I was again standing beside my partner in a dirty LA alley, the image gone. But the pain remained. My heart wrenched for the child my partner once was. *Still is.*

I would have given anything to know him then—be the friend he needed at that moment to hold and comfort him, listen to him when he cried, take the blows of rage when he lashed out. I couldn't change the past that tore away his father, but I could do something about the here and now for another child of the ravaging streets.

When I think back to our first encounters with her, it's not hard to see the similarities between Molly, or Pete as she sometimes prefers, and Starsky. Both are this odd paradox of street toughness and childlike wonder, though Molly has the excuse of her age. For Starsky there's *no excuse*, but I wouldn't change him for all the world, though I'd never admit it to his face.

So here I was with two salami-eating, baseball card-swapping lefties with deplorable taste in clothing and an impossible situation.

When I offered to take Molly in, I don't know which of the three of us was more surprised—her, me, or Starsky. Well, I could probably eliminate him. He gives me a lot more credit than I give myself sometimes. I was struck by another similarity between Molly and Starsky when I was showing her around my apartment that first night. She seemed confused by my taking her in, almost as if any show of kindness should be looked upon with suspicion. I got that same reaction from Starsky when we met at the Academy. He accepted my companionship readily enough, but the first time I offered him a shoulder to lean on, there was a hesitancy and a hidden hurt that darkened his eyes for a moment.

When Molly asked me, "*How come you did it?*" I simply told her that Juvie was a pretty crummy place to have to stay. And it would have been. But I also remember a drunken partner opening up to me a few years ago, revealing how difficult it had been that first Hanukah and Christmas after his father's death. He had been sent away from his home in New York to relatives here in California just a few months before the holidays, and while they were good people, all David Starsky wanted that year was his dad and his old life back. Molly also asked me, "*Why do you care? You don't even know me.*" I couldn't

think of anything more to say than, “*I don’t know, it’s Christmas. Seemed like a good idea at the time.*”

The words left my mouth before I realized what I had said. I hoped the fierce knot in my chest didn’t show on my face as I walked away from her. The last time I’d heard those words—“*seemed like a good idea at the time*”—was on a darkened rooftop, Bellamy dead at my feet, my partner dying before my eyes. That night, Starsky gave up what we thought was the only chance of finding the serum for the poison that was eating his life away second by second. Without thought he gave up his life for mine.

It was later that night as I sat staring into the darkness, when I first heard her sobs. The tough little kid lay in my bed without a friend in the world to hold her as she mourned—mourned the loss of her father, the loss of her home, the loss of innocence. I couldn’t help wonder where Starsky had gone to cry during those lonely nights in California.

During Lisa Graham’s rape trial he also told me a few more things about his childhood in New York. Like how he used to have a place in a nearby park, one of the few in Brooklyn, where he could go to hide and be alone. In this small refuge, there was a maple tree that somehow managed to withstand the urban blight and frigid New York winters. It was this tree a young David Starsky would scramble up and sit in for hours, whiling away the time and daydreaming. Now, you’ve got to know my partner. This is a man who hates any outdoor activity that isn’t played on a field or court, and couldn’t find his way out of the woods even if a talking bear took him by the hand and rode him out on a bicycle. But here in this sturdy maple, away from the demands placed on him by family, school and the harsh realities of the city streets, the boy could find solace and solitude, and even dream a bit. Shielded from prying eyes, David Starsky could escape from dirty gray streets and crowded brownstones into the panorama of his imaginary world.

Under different circumstances, hearing about the imaginary land of “Doodle Town” would have been fodder for a decade of ammunition against the curly-haired wonder, but with his gentle spirit my partner found a way to reach a traumatized girl. The part of Starsky that refused to grow up reached out to Lisa and helped her past the pain and terror to the realization that the hurts we face can’t hold us back if we refuse to let them.

And that same perseverance has been chipping away at my bitterness for years. He brought a Christmas tree, fully decorated, over to my apartment, claiming it was just the thing to put presents under. This was certainly a leap above the beribboned toilet left for the captain to unwrap—*Euphoric Sentimentalism* at its grossest.

Finally the day before Christmas Eve was upon us. I commented to Molly that ‘*tomorrow would have been a special day for you,*’ thinking that it would have been a memorable day to spend with her father. And do you know what she said? She told me that I’d been more of a father to her than he ever was. To say I was blown away would be an understatement.

And again, it made me think of Starsky. ‘*You’re more of a brother to me...*’ Well, Nicholas Marvin Starsky is certainly nobody’s prize, but it was the highest compliment I could ever have been paid.

Christmas Eve. Molly was asleep in the other room and I’d just hung up with Starsk. We’d been invited to Kiko’s house for Christmas Day, and Molly was going to receive the incredible gift of a new family. A new family...

This got me thinking about my *own* family, their faults and their strengths. The things I love about them and the hurts I needed to let go of. Of my grandfather and how much he taught me over the years. I think he would have liked the man that I’ve become—some of whom is thanks to a certain curly-headed elf that won’t give up on me.

My partner, my brother. The survivor who’s shown me that the past can be sorted through so that we can keep what’s worth holding on to and throw away the rest. The man who’s shown me that love sometimes means letting go, sometimes holding on. The optimist who’s shown me that there’s so much good still left in the world and in people, if we’d only choose to find it.

So here we sit on the Ramos’ couch, passing out presents, and the nut gives me *an ant farm*. I realize several things all within a heartbeat: first, that he hoped somehow, some way, this crazy ant farm would heal a little something inside of me; secondly, that he got me a present knowing full well the likelihood that I *hadn’t* bought him one; and finally, that even if I hadn’t, he’d still get me one again next year.

What he doesn’t realize though, is that the best gift he’s given me finally made its way into my heart, last night as I sat looking out my window at one of the rare truly clear nights over the City of Angels. As I mentioned before, this has been a hard year for the two of us, and my typical reaction would be to brood—let the bitterness and anger fester like a wound that refuses to heal. But little by little, the hardness around my heart that’s been blinding me has fallen away and I’m seeing things a bit more clearly. I know now that the times with my grandfather are to be cherished, but I can’t compare every Christmas I face from here on out to those with him, or to the disillusioned ones after his death. And even if the rest of the world forgets what Christmas is *really* all about, I don’t have to fall into the trap. Christmas is about *love* and about those who stand by your side all year ‘round.

Looking back, I finally realized that Christmas hadn’t changed—I *had*. All the joy and love of the season I had found with Grandpa was still there, I just had to claim it as my own. All the little boy excitement and spirit I thought I had been missing was wrapped up like a present in one wonderful and wondrous friend. What I thought was stolen from a grieving child, eluded a cynical teenager, and out and out hid from the bitter man I was becoming, seemed to take up residence in my heart again. The spirit of Christmas was patiently waiting for me to leave the past behind and open the gift of the precious present.

Yeah, I could count the times that we've faced death just in the last six months alone, and I could let it eat away at me. But instead, I'm realizing I have to live every moment I have—every moment *we* have. I can't stay in the past any longer, because it's just that—the past. That doesn't mean I lose touch with the memories I treasure, but I can't keep holding on to things that threaten to destroy me, or change who I am, or the man I want to be. I have to live in the here and now—*the precious present*.

And you know, it's not so bad in the 'here and now.' Not when I've got my incredibly foolish, psychotic, moronic, childish partner to watch out for. My incredibly wonderful, thoughtful, sentimental, *childlike* partner who keeps life interesting and fresh, something to be discovered and treasured.

The precious present.

And if my ever-resilient friend finds himself overwhelmed by what we face day in and day out—or by his occasionally cynical partner—and needs a place to hide away, there's a maple tree planted in Westside Park with his name on it, waiting to shield him from an often ugly world.

And I'll climb up right beside him.

12/17/00