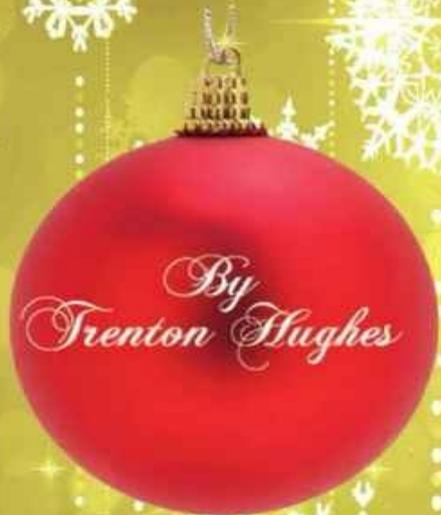


The Christmas Note



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By Trenton Hughes

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A novel by Trenton Hughes

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Memories are the basis of our lives. Experiences are the basis of memories. An experience does not need to be personal; it simply needs to be experienced. This journey is a story of Christmas. This is not a traditional Christmas story that most are used to. This is an experience that would never be forgotten, and thus becomes a memory. Hopefully this can help to inspire lives, but most importantly, Christmas spirit.

Chapter 1

Claire and Ayden drove down the rain-filled streets. The Thanksgiving dinner and night with Claire's parents left them with happiness and full stomachs. They had about an hour's drive ahead of them as they neared the freeway, as they headed back home to Campbell, Washington.

Claire looked up at Ayden with a grin. She adored the way he looked in knit sweaters that seemed to only come out during the holidays. The gray sweater he had on now was, of course one she had got him last year as a present. He preferred the nice computer she had given him, but he still loved the little things like the sweater. And she loved picking them out, picturing how he would look in them. Usually Ayden didn't even attempt to pick out clothes for Claire as everything he had ever tried to get her to wear was kindly exchanged for something more her style. Ayden looked over to her and smiled as rain hit against the windshield in a subtle pattern. He continued down the freeway as he took his right hand off the wheel and grabbed hers. Their hands rested against the center console of the Silver Volvo S60. With her free hand, Claire adjusted the heat to warm the car against the cold night and rain just outside. She moved her hand up to turn on the local Christmas music station. "O Holy Night" came on and both Claire and Ayden stared forward, hand in hand, truly happy.

Claire and Ayden had been married for just over three years now and were just as in love as ever, if not more so. They met when some mutual friends introduced them about five years ago. Both had been new to town as each was starting a new job. Campbell is a town of about fifty-thousand people; not huge, but still with many businesses and a really strong sense of community. Although there are a decent number of people, the town feels close-knit and has a strong sense of togetherness. Ayden had moved from California to pursue financial advising with a good firm in Campbell. He had moved from Irvine, where he had been born and raised and graduated with a Masters in Finance from UC Irvine. His parents had both passed away from heart attacks a year apart from each other by the time he was twenty. Nevertheless, over the years he had tried to move on and develop his life while trying not to dwell on it. He was twenty-nine now and liked his job and was able to live comfortably from it.

Claire was from the town her parents still lived in, Kentsboro, Washington. She had gone to the University of Washington in Seattle and finished with a Bachelor's degree in advertising. She moved back to Kentsboro a couple of years after working for an advertising agency in Seattle. Soon after, not finding work in her field, she moved to Campbell for a good job at an agency there. It wasn't too far from her hometown and she loved Campbell's feeling. Everyone was neighborly and the town was gorgeous. There was greenery and tall trees everywhere. It had a beautiful central park that neared the downtown that truly felt like the town's center. She absolutely loved Campbell. Now she was twenty-seven.

Each moved to Campbell within a few months of each other. Many people their age in Campbell knew each other. There was a group of about fifteen friends that hung out regularly; some married, some dating, some single. Each had a friend from this group at their office. Their friends brought Claire and Ayden around when they would get together either for food, a party, a show or another activity. Claire had hung out with the group about five times by the time Ayden was introduced. Most of the group was in their mid to late twenties. Claire had a lot of fun with them and regularly hung out with some, including her new best friend in Campbell, Myla.

It was December 11th, and Ayden had moved to town only a couple of weeks earlier. His new friend at work, Ben, had invited him to an event that the town had during the Christmas season, Christmas in the Park. At the beautiful central park of the city, Campbell put on a Christmas event where the entire park was lit with lights. In the center of the park was a giant Christmas tree that had to be forty feet tall. Santa would sit there at night for children to tell him their Christmas wishes. There were walkways to see through the decorations and trees. There was free hot chocolate to accompany the chilly winter nights. People would come from miles around to go to Christmas in the Park. There would be choirs singing Christmas songs and a live nativity scene as well. People would walk around when it was lit at night, listen to music, drink cocoa, and watch Santa or the nativity. Everyone loved the joy it brought to the season.

Ben was going to meet up with his group of friends that evening to go to the event, and Ayden, not knowing anyone or the town, decided it could be fun to go along. They drove together to the park. Ayden's eyes lit up as he saw the hundreds of people in the park surrounded by thousands of endless twinkling lights. The huge tree in the middle was spectacular. It was decorated with ornaments all the way to its top. Children lined up to sit on Santa's lap. A choir was singing. To Ayden, the scene was like something out of a movie. He smiled as they got out and headed into the park. A kind teenager handed them each a cup of cocoa. The night air was crisp and cool so each wore jeans and a couple layers. Ayden wore a red and green sweater, trying to stay warm.

"They're right over there, man, follow me," Ben said as they walked through the crowd sipping their rich, hot cocoa.

Ayden looked over to see a group of twenty something's mingling amongst themselves. There were six guys and eight girls. Each was dressed in winter clothes that added to the Christmas feel.

"Hey guys!" Ben called to them as they approached. Everyone shouted back their own greetings. "This is Ayden. I work with him and he just moved to town."

Everyone focused their attention on Ayden. People said their hellos and everyone approached. After a few people introduced themselves, he noticed her.

His gaze couldn't leave as she looked right back at him, smiling. He was mesmerized by the average-height brunette woman smiling with welcoming light brown eyes and bangs stretched across her face. She wore a touch of makeup but her thin face was naturally beautiful. She wore jeans with a nice black pea coat and red scarf. She was gorgeous. Finally he looked away and back to the others. He made his rounds and introduced himself.

A few more of the friendly people and then she was next. Of course there were other attractive women in the group, but none caught his attention like she did.

"Hi," she said, catching him off guard. She smiled a shy smile, looking up at him as their eyes met. He couldn't help but grin.

"Hi, I'm Ayden," he replied, trying to regain his composure. He held out his hand for her to grab. She did, with a soft hand that when it touched him, he swore sent an electric wave rushing through his body.

"I caught that from Ben. I'm Claire," she answered back, still smiling.

"Nice to meet you Claire," Ayden responded still grinning. She captivated him and he didn't quite know why.

The night went on and Ayden met the entire group. They talked and he truly enjoyed himself as they walked, observing all the lights and decorations. There was a true Christmas spirit in the air.

and he loved it. He loved hearing the choir sing Christmas songs in the background and watching children excited to see Santa. He was getting to know his new friends and they all made him feel included. For some reason, he couldn't stop glancing over at Claire. She seemed to talk mostly to one of the other girls, Myla. Of course Ayden had checked her ring finger and found nothing, to his delight. He didn't normally approach women, so even though she captivated him, he felt he probably would never do anything about it. They continued on having a jolly time.

A few minutes passed and Ayden found himself at the back of the group walking alone. He wasn't lonely or sad; in fact he was content and happy. He was just looking around enjoying the Christmas spirit he hadn't felt in years. He'd glanced forward to look at Claire quickly when she looked back at the same instant and caught him looking. Sheepishly he looked away, trying to play off as a mistake. She stopped for a second to wait for him.

"Hey," Claire said to him as she stood at his side, then they walked together following the group just in front still mingling.

"Hey! How are you liking Christmas in the Park?" he asked, trying to strike up conversation. He felt a little nervous talking to her and he didn't know why, as usually he was a pretty confident guy.

"I love it. How about you?" she asked, smiling in an almost teasing tone.

"I do too. So how long have you lived in Campbell?" Ayden asked curiously, wanting to know more about her.

"Just a little over a month. Moved here for work. I heard Ben say you were new, but where did you move from?" Claire asked as they strolled side by side.

Before he could answer, the entire group turned around to look at them. He froze, surprised by all the attention.

Everyone smiled and a few giggled.

"Look above you," one of the girls said as Ayden froze next to Claire.

Each looked up simultaneously. The group started talking and laughing. "Kiss!" someone called.

Above them was mistletoe. Ayden didn't know that mistletoe was a real thing and certainly didn't know what to do. His thoughts raced a million miles a second. Everyone stared as his nerves took over. He looked down at Claire who was looking right up at him. She smiled with that shy, cute smile and he couldn't help but admire her beauty.

"Kiss! Kiss! Kiss!" the group of friends started chanting. Ayden didn't know what to do. She was smiling but would she want to kiss him? He had just met her for goodness sake! He knew he wanted to, but nerves were in full force.

Suddenly she stepped in. They stared into each other's eyes. All at once he leaned in as she did the same and their eyes closed. Their lips met and it was like magic. All of his nerves melted away at the touch of her lips. He felt so alive as they kissed. It was like nothing else mattered and it was just him and her. The feeling was incredible; he never wanted it to end.

Slowly they pulled away from the kiss and each looked at each other. She grinned as if having just done the most incredible thing in her entire life. He couldn't help but grin as well.

The group cheered and chanted as it ended. "Whew!" someone called.

Slowly they turned back around and started walking again. Ayden didn't know what to do now. ~~He still smiled as his mind and nerves raced. Instinctively, he took a step forward to follow the group, then so did she; each still smiling.~~

After a few moments, he felt something. She'd slipped her hand into his and they continued on through the Christmas in the Park that was filled with glistening lights and beautiful Christmas carols.

Five years had passed since then and they were still truly in love. The car continued forward through the rain down the freeway, and Claire and Ayden were hand in hand, peaceful with carols still playing on the radio.

"So, babe," Claire said as Ayden glanced over at her quickly with a smile. "What time should we start Black Friday shopping? Two? Three?"

Ayden grinned. "I was thinking maybe I would skip it this year. We're going to be so tired by the time we get home," he replied as his eyes stayed on the wet, dark freeway.

"No, no, no! We have done it every year since we've been married and it's a tradition! Plus we will be home in like half an hour so that's bologna!" she answered sharply giving him an "I'm in charge" sort of look.

He laughed. "It was worth a try. Well let's at least get a couple hours of sleep then go. How about three?" He replied playfully, squeezing her hand.

"Ha, you are too funny," she replied sarcastically. "Three it is!" She continued. He smiled as "Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire" came on the radio. Claire leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. The Volvo continued down the freeway through the wintry weather.

Chapter 2

Beep Beep Beep Beep. Came an annoying noise in the dark, weary hour of two a.m. Slowly Claire and Ayden woke up after only a couple hours of sleep. Nonetheless, it was a tradition and once they were out, they always enjoyed it. Ayden groaned as Claire leaned in and kissed him. Groggily he kissed her back. They got up and ready in what seemed to be dozens of layers as the weather in the beginning of winter in Washington at three in the morning was anything but above freezing.

The Volvo pulled into Campbell's outdoor shopping center. Normally the shopping center was busy, but never like this. Who would have thought that three in the morning would be the busiest the shopping center would ever be? The car maneuvered down aisles as finally they found a spot at the end.

People were lined up outside Target for what felt like miles. Everyone had on wintery clothes against the weather that was sure to provide frostbite to anyone not fully clothed. Although it was early, dark and cold, everyone was excited and full of life and ready to go into the warm store to see what deals it held as they would buy gifts for their loved ones. The Christmas season was kicking off.

Claire and Ayden loved the feeling Black Friday provided to start off the season with a bang. They made it a tradition to make every Christmas season magical. They stood in the line, each smiling while thinking they would never get to enter the store with the size of the line ahead of them.

Claire snuggled up to Ayden trying to stay warm in the winter air. He wrapped his arm around her lovingly. Soon after, the line started moving. People became excited as they finally began to move and their Christmas shopping endeavors could begin.

Once they entered the store, Claire leaned in to Ayden and kissed him softly. They each smiled. "You know the rules," Claire said to him in the chaos of the store. "No spying on each other and we will meet back at the front in one hour." She scooted off through the madness of people and he began to do the same.

Ayden was suddenly struck by a sharp pain in his back. He bent over for a moment to regain his composure as the sensation felt like needles poking into his back. He had felt this pain a couple other times recently, but each time he didn't think much of it. He shrugged it off as if it was no big deal, stood up, and continued through the store.

The deals must have been incredible with the amount of people in the store rushing around like it was the end of the world. Traditionally, Claire and Ayden each shopped for each other on Black Friday. She shopped for her parents, and they each would shop for some of their mutual friends from the group. The list of people wasn't long as they didn't have children yet, or brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews. They had talked about children and wanted them. They planned to wait five years after getting married till they were completely financially stable enough to do so. They had talked about it a lot lately as they already were stable, but they still had two years to go. Each felt that day would most likely come any day rather than that five-year mark. Nonetheless, it hadn't happened yet.

Claire found many items for prices that would have easily been double normally. She was sure he would love some of the electronics she found.

Ayden always had a tough time finding the right gifts for her. He knew she liked clothes, jewelry, perfume, music, and workout things, but other than that she was tough. They always went to Target, then followed that by Macy's. Macy's would be where he would find most of her items but for now he scanned the deals to find some workout gear, a sweater, some cd's and DVD's. He found many deals on things for his friends. Some of it was similar to the stuff he found for her-but nonetheless they would like them.

Each continued shopping for an hour and met at the entrance of the store at the deadline. They hid their bags from each other, grinning. They might try to peek in the next few days but each had managed to find hiding spots over the years that the other couldn't seem to find.

"How'd you do, babe?" Ayden asked grinning playfully while he stared at her six bags she tried to hide.

"No looking! And fine, how about you?" she replied matter-of-factly.

"Good, actually, there were some deals I was lucky to get as I almost got into a fist fighting bidding war, mugging, name calling match and a few others. Some people really get into the spirit huh?" he finished sarcastically. People continued to swarm the store in massive amounts for four o'clock in the morning.

"Let's go to Macy's! They open at five!" Claire announced excitedly as they walked out into the dark, cold winter air once again. Christmas music played in the store and the feeling of Christmas was in full swing.

They arrived at Macy's a half hour later to find themselves in another enormous line. It really felt like the Christmas season with the huge amount of people waiting in lines to shop for gifts for their loved ones. The feeling present was the reason Claire and Ayden made it a tradition. They simply loved how much it added to the season. They also didn't mind the great deals they managed to find on Black Friday.

Again Claire snuggled into Ayden as they waited in the anxious crowd of hundreds. They held each other to keep warm, neither wanting to let go.

Eventually the line moved again. Everyone entered the mall and Macy's in their winter clothes, scarves, beanies and mittens. As they entered, the warm air felt decadent in comparison to the biting air just outside. They held hands as they walked into the store.

Again Claire stopped and kissed him softly. She smiled, "see you in an hour sweetie," she said playfully and skipped off into the store. He smiled at her cuteness and entered another store in chaos. People were everywhere. Ayden always felt a bit awkward shopping in the women's section but on Black Friday it didn't seem to matter as everyone was just fighting for the deals.

Each searched for gifts, but this time just for their spouse. Claire would probably find a new sweater or jacket, a nice shirt, possibly shoes if she could find some he liked and a nice cologne watch. Usually Ayden preferred the watch.

Like always, it was hard to please Claire with her taste in fashion. If he could he would buy some sort of outerwear like a jacket or sweater. He would find the perfume he preferred best, as a win-win for both of them. Then he would always find some sort of jewelry. He began his hunt alongside hundreds of others.

The Christmas music hummed in the background barely noticeable over the noise of the enormous crowd in the store. Claire and Ayden met again at the front of the store with bags, each hiding from the other. "I see you found a thing or two?" she said smiling her cute, weary smile. He

could tell she was sleep-deprived and so was he.

He playfully grabbed at her bag, but she shuffled away. "I was just reaching for your hand, honey," he said grinning. She gave him a sarcastic growl then each strolled out of the store, hand in hand.

Chapter 3

Claire and Ayden slept past noon as each was completely drained after Black Friday shopping. It was Friday now and the weather had cleared from the night before. It was still cold, but no rain or snow yet. Claire came downstairs to the smell of eggs and sausage.

When she saw it, she smiled. Ayden had prepared breakfast, well, a lunch breakfast, all for her. On the table sat a plate of eggs, sausage, toast and orange juice. It looked and smelled delicious. Normally each grabbed a quick bagel or protein bar on their way to work, but being a day off for the day after Thanksgiving, Ayden had time to make breakfast.

“Baby, you shouldn’t have!” Claire exclaimed and went in to kiss him on the cheek. He read the paper as he finished his plate of food. She sat next to him and grabbed the paper out of his hands. “Thanks,” she continued jokingly.

“You’re welcome. It sure felt nice to sleep in after the Black Friday madness,” he replied looking at her begin her breakfast hungrily. “The weather is going to be nice today. I was thinking we could put up lights?”

She looked up excitedly from her breakfast. “That sounds like fun. And remember tonight the group is all going to practice for the Christmas Choir at church,” she answered happily.

The group of friends certainly was not all the same religion, nor did everyone love to sing, even have good voices. They just did it to have fun with each other and enjoy the Christmas spirit all season. “Oh yeah! I forgot about that. Sounds good, baby. I’m going to shower then let’s put up lights,” Ayden replied as he got up from the table. He kissed Claire on the top of her brunette hair. She smiled and continued her breakfast as he made his way upstairs.

Claire came out to the garage wearing a red wintery sweater and jeans that Ayden loved to see her in, as they showed off her figure. Ayden sat on the driveway finishing preparing the boxes up boxes of lights. Claire admired his figure, too, as he wore a tight-fitted shirt and jeans that showed him nicely in her opinion.

“Looking good, hon,” she called as she approached him. He winked back at her.

“Same to you,” he said admiringly. “Ready?”

“Almost!” She ran back into the garage to turn on Christmas music. Every year they made a tradition of listening to Christmas music as they put up lights. She put up the lights she could reach around trees and bushes and the first story of their house. They had a modern-styled townhouse. Ayden always did the second story windows and roof.

They began to hang the lights and chat while Christmas music hummed in the background. They always had fun just doing these simple Christmas chores. Their house was always nicely lit, but not over the top. They lived in a community where all the houses were part of a subdivision in which all the homes looked similar. Most houses on the street had some sort of decorations. Some had none, but some residents went absolutely all out. Claire and Ayden’s house was very decorated and nice.

when it was done, but some houses were ones that the entire town would driveby to see. Because those houses were on their same street, the pressure was on for the rest of the neighbors, including Claire and Ayden, to have good decorating. Claire and Ayden's house had icicle lights across the roof, colored lights around the windows, and a mix around bushes and trees. They had many lawn ornaments as well, like fake light trees, snowmen and reindeer all lit up. Both continued to decorate the winter air.

Claire and Ayden drove down the road in her silver '08 Ford Explorer. They headed to the church to meet their friends for the Christmas Choir practice. Every year since they had moved to Campbell, they and all their friends sang in the Christmas Choir at the local church. A couple of their friends were members of the church, but most were not. It was just a great way for them all to feel the Christmas spirit and have a good time together.

They drove the car into the parking lot with dozens of other cars also parked outside the church. They quickly recognized many of their friends' cars. After parking the car, Ayden quickly rounded it to open the door for Claire.

"What a gentlemen," Claire replied and grabbed his hand. They entered the church to find about fifty people up in the stands, waiting to start rehearsal. They saw some of their friends in the corner waving to them. Each waved back smiling. Eight were there already and eight were still on their way. Over the last couple years the group lost some and gained others. Each were still great friends. Everyone wore wintery clothing like winter sweaters, scarves and jackets. Each looked ready for Christmas; hence being in the Christmas Choir.

"Hey guys!" Myla called over to them from the corner. She looked really happy and cozy in her red scarf, gray sweater and jeans.

"Hey, Myla!" each called back. Claire took the seat next to her friend and Ayden sat next to Claire. A moment later, Ben jogged in. He looked cheerful in his winter-wear.

"Hey everyone!" he called, smiling. He shook hands with the guys and hugged all the girls before sitting next to Ayden. "Hey, man."

"Hey, haven't seen you in a few days. How you doing?" Ayden said.

"I know, I know. Good, really good. Went down to the family's place for Thanksgiving. How was your Thanksgiving?" Ben asked.

"It was really good. We went to Claire's parents and then did the Black Friday thing. So where is Shannon?" Ayden responded noticing he was alone.

"Yeah. Uh things didn't work out with her. It's okay, I am single and ready to mingle. Again," he replied grimly.

"I'm sorry, man. You know I'm still not sure why you and Myla haven't got together yet," Ayden said quietly as she was sitting just two seats away.

Ben got a bit nervous. "Shush man! I don't know about that. But we are here to sing, not worry about that." Ben looked over at Myla who was obviously beautiful. They had flirted a lot over the years but never done anything else. She was a mix of African American and French with stunning wavy hair and piercing eyes. She was drop dead gorgeous. He was a well-trimmed man, with a bit longer hair than most and a scruffy face that looked good on him. Most women found him attractive. For some reason, they had never yet moved past that flirtiness. Nonetheless, they both sat talking

their friends and not each other at the moment.

Moments later the conductor of the choir came to the stage. He said his greetings and welcomed them over when they'd be singing this year as well as what they'd be signing. Everyone was happy and cheerful. The group of friends in the corner made jokes and laughed. After exchanging pleasantries they began to practice.

They would practice every Friday till the Eve of Christmas. Each always had a blast doing so. They sang a list of songs that they each knew and enjoyed singing; some with better voices than others. They went through "Silent Night," "Christmas Cannon," "I Heard the Bells," "O Come All Ye Faithful," "Drummer Boy," "A Mighty Wave," and finished with "O Holy Night." The Christmas spirit could really be felt as they joyfully sang together.

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