

The Quinns' Christmas

by Nora Roberts

He'd never had Christmas before. Not a real one with a tree and lights, with presents. Not with family. He'd never had one in a house filled with music and the smell of fresh cookies and decorations hanging everywhere.

Of course, he wasn't a kid or anything. Sheesh, he was in sixth grade. It wasn't like he believed some fat guy in a red suit was going to pop down the chimney. Get real.

He was just getting into the whole business because everybody else was making such a production of it. All that whispering and talking in code and giggling. Well, the guys didn't giggle, Seth corrected, but the women had let out a few. And little Aubrey was practically insane waiting for tomorrow morning.

But she was just a baby. Christmas was supposed to be special for kids.

For himself it was cool to be out of school and to figure a few presents were going to be tossed his way. He wasn't a maniac about it.

He was only sneaking downstairs to scarf up some cookies. How

wasa guy supposed to sleep when there were a million cookies in thehouse?

Carrying the sketch he'd framed in one hand, Seth tiptoed in the dark, a boy of slight build with straw colored hair and cautious blue eyes. To the dog following him he issued a stern warning to keep it downor they'd get busted.

There was music playing. He stopped at the top of the stairs, listeningcarefully to be sure it was the radio and not Phillip at the piano. After dinner, his brothers -- he really like that phrase: his brother. After dinner, they'd all played music until Aubrey had finally passedout on Grace's lap. Then they'd kicked Seth upstairs to bed. And that was a gyp because it had barely been 10 and it wasn't a schoolnight or anything.

Camhad made all those lame Santa remarks, razzing him.

Remembering it, Seth tried to sneer, but it came out as a wide, delightedgrin.

As he crept downstairs, Seth saw they'd left the tree on. He'd never seenanything like it. Anna had wanted a real one, and in Seth's opinion, Anna ruled. So they'd hauled in this big pine, and the guys hadgrumbled about stringing lights. But Seth knew they'd liked it.

Now it was loaded with what seemed like a thousand ornaments, and presents with big bows and miles of ribbon were stacked under it.

Some of them had his name on them.

Probably dopey stuff like underwear and socks, he told himself, struggling against the sheer thrill of seeing those brightly wrapped boxes sparkle under the lights. Like they belonged there.

Like he belonged there.

He started to walk over, just to shake one, but spotted Anna sleeping on the couch.

Seth cursed under his breath, whipped what he had in his hands behind his back. He flushed at the idea of getting caught doing a baby thing like poking at boxes that would be unwrapped in a matter of hours anyway.

He stood indecisive, but the excuse of wanting cookies had become reality. He grabbed the dog's collar before Foolish could live up to his name and dash over to stick his wet nose in Anna's face. Seth hissed at the dog to sit. Then, because Anna had kicked off the throw, he crept over to pull the cover back over her.

She'd been square with him, Seth thought. No, more than square.

She'd been everything good, everything decent he'd stopped expecting. She and Grace and the Quinns had given him hope when he'd come to believe hope was just one more fist in the face.

And Seth wished there was something he could do to pay her back. He hoped she liked the scarf he'd gotten her. It was really red, and Anna liked wearing red things. But he wished it was, like diamonds or something.

"Yeah, right." He thought to himself.

He backed away from the couch, then snuck like a thief into the kitchen with Foolish trailing behind him. He had a smug grin on his face and his hand in the cookie jar when the back door swung open. Yelping, he whipped the frame behind his back.

Cam cursed and blocked the door. "Seth." He said it loud enough to warn his brothers to hide the bike they'd spent the last two hours assembling. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"Looks like petty thievery to me." Cam heard his brothers' swearing whispers, the commotion of getting the bike back down from the

porch, then stepped inside. "I thought you were cut off from the cookiesupply."

"That was yesterday." Needing to brazen it out, Seth plucked one out, bit it. "It's aftermidnight , so it's today."

"Good point."

Ethan strolled in, his big dog behind him, took one look at the situationand shrugged out of his jacket. "Where's the coffee?"

"Brandy," Phillip corrected, and closed the back door. "That wind bites. Why aren't you in bed dreaming of sugar plums?"

Since Anna was asleep, Seth's answer was short and crude. He startedto slide away, butCam was quicker and dropped a heavy handon his shoulder. "What's behind your back?"

"Nothing."

"You've been at the presents."

Seth snorted, eyed the distance to the doorway. "No. Shaking boxes isfor girls and babies." Because he'd been caught doing it twice this week, he shrugged. "I only did it before because Aubrey gets a band outof it."

"Uh-huh. So what's behind your back?"

"Nothing." Seth started to make his move, but Ethan ambled to the stove, cutting off that route, then Philip strolled over to get a brandy snifter out of a cupboard. Boxed in, Seth hunched his shoulders. "It's nothing. It's no big deal."

"Give it over, kid." Cam crooked a finger, then grunted when Seth shoved the wooden picture frame into Cam's belly. As Cam's eyes narrowed, promising retribution, Seth tossed up his chin. "Ever been hung by your toes over a Yule log?"

"We don't have a Yule log."

"I can get one."

"Look at that," Ethan murmured, sliding a hand over Seth's hair as the boy bristled. "It's a picture of the house."

"Looks good," Phillip angled it to get a better view of the clever pencil sketch of the two-story house on the bay.

"Really good."

"It's no big deal."

"I decidewhat's a big deal around here ,"Cam kept a hand on Seth's shoulderas he studied the sketch. Yes, it was clever. The boy had talent. But more, it meant home.To all of them.

"And this qualifies. This is a very big deal. Who's it for?"

Seth shrugged. He felt warm in the belly. Not creepy, he realized, but good. Good and warm. The three men weren't blocking him in. They werestanding with him.As they'd stood with him before.

"Just us.I was going to maybe leave it under the tree or something.

You can hang it someplace if you feel like it."

"Anna's going to cry when she sees it."

Seth looked up now. NothingCam could have said would have pleasedhim more."Yeah?"

"Oh yeah.Then she'll give you all kinds of sloppy kisses and, if you playyour cards right, enough cookies to keep you in a sugar coma tillNew Year's."

"Pretty good deal."

"Yeah."Camrubbed a hand over Seth's shoulder, then propped the

sketchon the counter. "It's a pretty good deal all together."

"It's snowing." Ethan said in his quiet voice. Seth bolted for the door.

Phillip managed to snag him by the collar before the boy yanked open the door, dashed out, and tripped over his own Christmas present.

"No playing outside at..." He looked at his watch, groaned. "Man, three in the morning."

"I just want to see."

"It's white stuff," Phillip explained. "It falls out of the sky and makes the roads hazardous and ruins suede shoes."

"It's Christmas snow," Seth said frantically, and then immediately felt stupid.

"We'll check it out from the front porch."

"Better," Cam dug into the cookie jar himself. "Let's wake everybody up and get this party started."

Seth's eyes widened, and even his own yelp of delight didn't embarrass him. "Really? Now? Right now?"

"Sure. Santa's come by now. He'd want to avoid the snow." Cam sent a sneer towards Phillip. "I hear he wears suede boots."

"Anna's on the couch. I'll wake her up." Seth started out, skidded to a halt and looked back. His face was bright as a young boy's should be on Christmas morning. "This is really cool."

As he raced toward the living room, Seth laughed about Cam's Santa in suede boots. He had something a lot better than Santa Claus and a bunch of elves.

He had family.