

The Gift Relay
By Susan Page Davis

"Hi, Gina!" Jennifer Larson was surprised to hear her sister-in-law's voice. Gina and Harvey kept in touch sporadically, but usually by text or e-mail.

"Harvey's not home, is he?" Gina asked.

"I'm sorry, he's at the police station. But you could call him on his cell."

"No, it's you I want to talk to."

Even more surprised, Jennifer took a big breath. Gina was almost twenty years older than her. While they got along fine, they'd met only a few times, and Gina had never bypassed her brother to get in touch with Jennifer.

"Okay." Jennifer tried to put a bright note into her voice. "What's up?"

"I just sent a little something for Harvey for Christmas. I know it's last-minute, but I overnighted it. It should land on your doorstep tomorrow. Can you watch for it?"

"Sure." Jennifer's mind clicked through her calendar. She grimaced when she recalled that her son had an appointment with the pediatrician the next morning. Before she could say anything, Gina spoke again.

"It's not much, but ... well, it's special. I'd like for it to be a surprise."

"Okay. I will definitely keep an eye out for the package." Her younger brother, Travis, was living with her and Harvey while he attended classes at the University of Southern Maine. Maybe Trav would be home tomorrow and could collect Gina's parcel.

"Great. Thanks so much. Talk to you later."

Gina was gone, and Connor, her twenty-month-old son, was tugging on her pantleg. Jennifer hung up the kitchen wall phone and scooped him up into her arms.

"Hey, buddy. Are you hungry?"

His eyes solemn, the same vivid blue as his father's, Connor nodded. He had Jennifer's blond hair, but his baby pictures could have been interchanged with Harvey's and few people would be able to tell the difference.

She gave him a squeeze. "Okay, let's see what's in the fridge. Leftovers okay? How about some macaroni and cheese?"

Connor's grin broke free. "Yes!" He hugged her fiercely. Yep, someday he was going to have girls following him around.

That evening, Travis came home from the campus an hour before she expected Harvey.

"Hey, Trav, will you be around tomorrow? I have to take Connor to the doctor, but I'm expecting a package to be delivered."

Her brother frowned. "I had my last exam this afternoon, and I was going to head out early."

"No problem." She was glad he wanted to get home to their parents' house in Skowhegan, an hour away. "I'll figure something out."

She didn't even know what time the parcel would be delivered. Chances were, she and Connor would be home before the truck ever showed up on Van Cleeve Lane. She'd heard about a few incidents of porch thieves in the city, but not on their street. She almost asked Harvey if it was a problem but decided not to bring it up. After all, Gina wanted her gift to be a surprise. No sense involving the Portland Police Department's Priority Unit of detectives in such a mundane matter.

Instead, she called her sister-in-law, Beth, who lived next door.

“Will you be home tomorrow?” Jennifer asked. “I’m expecting a package, but I’ve got to take Connor to the doc at ten o’clock.”

“We can watch for it.”

Jennifer smiled, noting that Beth had committed herself and Jennifer’s brother, Jeff.

“Great. Thanks.”

The next morning, she and Connor waited restlessly in the small waiting room at the doctor’s office. At ten thirty, the receptionist hung up her desk phone and gave her an apologetic smile.

“I’m so sorry. Dr. Turner had an emergency this morning. He just told me he’s leaving the hospital now. It will be about fifteen minutes, if you can wait that much longer.”

Jennifer shrugged. “It’s better than rescheduling.” She rummaged in her diaper bag for a small container of Cheerios. “Come here, Connor. Want a snack?”

As he toddled gleefully toward her, she remembered the package. She let Connor grab a fistful of cereal and took out her phone. Her brother answered.

“Jeff? It’s Jennifer. I’m held up at the doctor’s office. Beth said you guys could check and see if a package was delivered to my house. It’s a secret for Harvey, so I don’t want him finding it.”

“Oh, okay.” Jeff always sounded lazy or half asleep, but she knew he was anything but. He’d recently received an award as one of the top EMTs in Portland. “I’ve been called in early, so I’m heading out now for the fire station, but I’ll check your house first.”

“Thanks. They usually leave packages in the breezeway.”

“Got it.”

He signed off, and Jennifer took the board book Connor was trying to shove into her hands. “Oh, that looks like a good one. Come up here.” She pulled him onto her lap.

Jeff started out the driveway in his pickup truck. A brown delivery van was pulling away from Jennifer and Harvey’s house next door. He hit the brake, threw the transmission into park, and ran across the lawn. Sure enough, a small box lay in the breezeway, between the Larsons’ garage and their house. He snatched it up and hurried back to his truck.

At the station, his partner, Mark Johnson, was restocking the supplies in the back of their unit. He shut the cabinet and jumped down to the floor.

“Good, you’re here. We just got a call on Preble Street. You good to go?”

“Yeah.” Jeff climbed into the passenger seat and realized he was holding his lunch and Jennifer’s package. He should have left his lunch at the station and the package in his truck. He shook his head and stuck both in a compartment behind the seat.

Mark drove out of the station, heading toward the scene of their call. Jeff forgot all about Jennifer’s commission until three hours later, when he and Mark were back from their second call. His cell rang as they were scarfing down their lunch.

“Hi, it’s me,” Jennifer said. “Sorry to call you at work.”

“It’s okay at the moment.”

“Did you get my package? It wasn’t here when I got home.”

“Yeah, they’d just left it when I came out of the house.”

“Whew. Thanks, Jeff. I owe you one.”

"You owe me about a million, little sister." Jeff laughed and tossed his sandwich wrapper in the trash. Mark was rising. They had to go over the ambulance and make sure they were ready for the next call. They never had to wait long for another call, especially in the holiday season. "Gotta go."

Jeff headed for the supply room to replenish the items they'd used earlier. Mark already had an extra box of gauze and a container of epi pens.

"Beth?" Mark asked.

"No, that was Jennifer." Mark knew his whole family, as well as Jeff knew Mark's after nearly two years of riding together. "Don't let me forget, I picked up a package for her. It's in the bus. It's some secret Christmas present for Harvey."

Mark handed him the supplies and locked the door just as a call came over the intercom. Traffic accident on Congress Street. They both ran for their unit.

They managed to catch a couple of hours' worth of sleep in the early morning. Their shift ended officially at 6 a.m., and they both clocked out.

"See ya!" Jeff zipped his jacket and ambled out toward his pickup. Mark paused for a moment to speak to the two EMTs taking over their unit for the next shift.

"Is that your package?" one of them asked.

"Huh?" Mark stuck his head inside and saw the small brown box behind the seat. "Oh, no, that's Jeff's." He grabbed it and hurried toward the parking lot, but Jeff's truck was gone.

Mark sighed. He supposed he could run it over to Jeff's house. He glanced at the address. Jennifer Larson lived right next door to Jeff. He could take the package to her and not bother Jeff.

He gathered his things and went to his car. He was just about to open the door when a familiar car drove in and he smiled.

"Well, hey." He walked over to Sarah Benoit's Accord. He and Sarah had been dating for more than a year. He was trying to convince her that their hectic schedules could work. Jeff and Beth's marriage was nearly two years old and going strong. But then, Beth had given up her job as a kindergarten teacher.

"Hi." Sarah leaned in for a brief kiss.

"Why are you out and about so early?" Mark asked.

"Harvey said I could put in a couple extra hours each day and get Christmas afternoon off. Just thought I'd stop in and say hi."

"Sweet. I'm just getting off duty. I'd ask if you're free for breakfast, but I'm guessing not."

"Nope."

"I'll still be off tonight. Can we get together?"

Sarah nodded slowly. "Barring an emergency, yeah."

Mark grinned. "Dinner?"

"Sure. Pick me up around seven." She glanced at the parcel in his hands. "What are you doing with a package addressed to Jennifer Larson?"

"Oh, Jeff had it. He went off and forgot it was here. I was going to drive over there with it."

"I can take it and give it to the boss."

"Uh, no, don't do that." Mark frowned, trying to remember what Jeff had said. "I think it's a surprise for him."

"Okay." Sarah shrugged. "I can give it to Eddie, and he can get it to Jennifer."

“Yeah, that might work.” Sarah and Eddie were both detectives in the Priority Unit, over which Harvey Larson presided. Not only had Eddie bought a house on the same street as the Larsons, but he’d married Jennifer’s sister Leeanne. “Just make sure Harvey doesn’t see it.”

Sarah took the box, and Mark stole another kiss. He headed home, marveling at the blessings of large families and anticipating his dinner date.

Sarah met her work partner, Jimmy Cook, on her way up the stairs to the third-floor Priority Unit office.

“Hey,” Jimmy called at the sight of her. “We need to get over to an office building on Congress Street. Shots fired.” He handed her a bulletproof vest.

“Oh, no.”

“Oh, yes. Put that on. A dozen patrolmen are responding, but the captain said for us to go. It’s not far from some stores.”

“Okay, but ...” Sarah hesitated and held up the small package. “I need to give this to Eddie.”

“What is it?”

“Something for Jennifer, but Harvey can’t know about it. It’s a secret.”

“Eddie’s not coming in for two hours. He’s got court today.”

Sarah frowned. “Well, I can’t give it to the captain.”

Jimmy snatched it from her hand. “I’ll give it to Tony. He can give it to Eddie as soon as he gets here. You go get us ready to roll.”

“Okay, but tell him to keep it out of sight and not let Harvey see it!” Sarah sighed as Jimmy retreated up the stairs. Eddie’s partner Tony was smart, but he wasn’t always discreet. She turned and started for the police parking garage.

Tony Winfield checked the time in exasperation. Almost six. He stabbed savagely at his cell phone.

“Yo, Thibodeau! Where are you, man?”

“Uh, Cumberland Avenue and Chestnut,” Eddie said.

“Are you coming back to the station?”

“Probably not.”

“Man, we’ve been playing tag all day.”

“I was there this afternoon.” Eddie’s voice rose in self-defense.

“Yeah, but I was out interviewing witnesses.” Tony sighed. “Okay, listen, I’ve gotta get going. Lanie and I are going out tonight. I’ve got this—” He heard the radio crackle in Eddie’s car.

“Gotta run. See ya tomorrow,” Eddie said.

Tony stared at his phone. “Unbelievable.” He and Eddie worked together every day. He couldn’t remember a workday when they’d both been on duty and hadn’t seen each other once.

He went to his apartment, showered, changed, and drove to Lanie’s building.

“Hi,” she said with a big smile as she opened her apartment door.

“Hi.” Tony kissed her.

“Long day?” Lanie asked.

“The longest. Can you believe Eddie and I both worked all day, but we never crossed paths? Not once!”

“That’s weird.”

“I’ll say.” He held Lanie’s coat and she shrugged into it.

"Where are we going?" she asked as they walked down to the parking lot and toward Tony's Mustang.

"There's a new restaurant on Forest Avenue."

"Ooh, I heard about it, but it sounded really expensive."

He shrugged. "No prob." Tony was never short of cash, though his income as a detective was modest. Not only were his parents well-heeled, but his Uncle Bill was governor of the State of Maine. He'd never had to worry about expenses, and he enjoyed taking Lanie places she wouldn't be able to afford on her own.

He opened the car door for her and shut her in. When he slid into the driver's seat, she was reaching for the small package on the dashboard.

"What's this?"

"Oh, it's something I was supposed to give to Eddie, but I never caught up to him."

Lanie frowned at the label. "It's addressed to Mrs. Larson."

"Yeah. It's a surprise gift for the captain."

"Oh." Lanie worked in the chief's office, and besides, she was a woman. She seemed to understand about such things without being given the details.

"You have to take it to Jennifer," Lanie said.

"Think so?"

She nodded. "You told Eddie you'd do it."

"Actually, I told Sarah I'd give it to Eddie, and he'd do it, but ..." Tony shook his head.

"Do you have a reservation at the restaurant?"

"Yeah, but it's for eight. I guess we have time." He decided not to tell her he'd only thought to make a reservation yesterday. They'd told him they were booked solid, until he told them about his connection to the governor. But Lanie wouldn't like it that he'd used his family's clout to get them into fancy places, so that was his little secret.

"Let's drive over to the Larsons' and see if we can slip it to Jennifer," Lanie said. "The captain might not even be home."

Ten minutes later, Tony spotted the Larsons' house and kept driving. "Harvey's home."

Lanie squinted at the house as they passed. The garage doors were shut, but the boss's SUV sat in the driveway, as if Harvey planned to go out again that evening.

"So now what?" she asked.

"Never fear." Tony drove past a few more houses and put on his turn signal. He pulled into a driveway and shut off the engine.

"Who lives here?" Lanie asked.

"Eddie and Leanne."

"You're kidding."

"Nope. I'll be right back." Tony hopped out and was surprised when Lanie got out too.

"I want in on the fun," she said.

Tony chuckled and grabbed her hand. He punched the doorbell, and a moment later, Leanne Thibodeau opened the door.

"Well, hey, Tony." Her puzzled look changed to pleasure when she noticed his companion. "Lanie! Hi. Great to see you. Come on in."

They both went into the entry. "Is Eddie here?" Tony asked. "I was supposed to give him this." He held out the package.

"He's in the shower. Do you want to wait?"

"Well, we've got a reservation—"

"At that fancy, schmancy new place on Forest Avenue," Lanie blurted.

"Ooh, nice." Leeanne's eyes sparkled. "I can take that."

"Thanks." Tony handed over the box.

Leeanne's gaze narrowed as she zoomed in on the label. "It's for Jennifer."

"Yeah. Well, no, actually, it's for the boss, but it's a surprise. So make sure Harvey doesn't know about it when you guys give it to Jennifer."

She nodded slowly. "I see."

"Thanks," Tony said. "Well, we'd better get going. Tell Eddie if I don't see him tomorrow, I'll clobber him."

Leeanne's eyebrows shot up. "And how will you do that if you don't see him?"

Tony just shook his head and turned away, taking Lanie's arm and propelling her down the steps.

Ten minutes after Tony and Lanie left, Eddie came out of the bathroom looking good enough to eat.

"Hey," Leeanne said with the silly grin that sometimes caught her unaware when she saw her husband being—well, just being Eddie. Portland's Heartbreaker Hero, and he was all hers.

Eddie pulled her into his arms. "So ... want to watch a movie tonight?"

"Not so fast. Tony was just here, and he left us this package. We're supposed to take it to Jennifer, but it's a spy mission. We can't let Harvey know what we're doing."

Eddie threw back his head and laughed. "Right. Some ultra-secret Christmas present she ordered."

"No, I don't think she ordered it. The return address is from Harvey's sister, Gina."

Eddie took the package and studied the label. "Huh. Okay, what do we do? Go over and pretend we just dropped by hoping for cookies or something?"

"I thought I'd call Jennifer and see how she wants to handle it."

"Yeah, that sounds good. You do that." Eddie flopped down on the couch and reached for the remote.

Leeanne shook her head and took out her phone. Jennifer answered almost immediately.

"Hi, sis. I've got a package addressed to you, and—"

Jennifer squealed. "I was frantic. I had Jeff pick it up yesterday so the porch pirates wouldn't get it, and he left it in the ambulance, and then—well, anyway, how did *you* get it?"

"Tony Winfield and his girlfriend brought it here a few minutes ago."

"Tony?" Jennifer paused. "God works in mysterious ways."

"Yes, He does." So did Tony Winfield, but Leeanne wasn't sure he was on good terms with the Almighty. "So, do you want me to bring it over?"

"Not right now. Tell you what. Will you be home in the morning?"

"Yeah, I'll be working away on my manuscript."

"I'll come get it after Harvey goes to work."

"Sounds good."

"And if he comes over there for any reason," Jennifer added, "keep it out of sight."

On Christmas Eve, the Larsons' extended family gathered at their home to exchange gifts. This included Jennifer's parents, her five siblings and assorted spouses and children. The highlight of the

evening was watching Connor and his cousin Anna, Jeff and Beth's little girl, tear the wrapping paper from their presents.

"I think they like the paper better than the toys," Beth said.

Jennifer's dad fetched a couple of trash bags and directed her two youngest brothers, Travis and Randy, to gather up all the used wrap, ribbon, and discarded packaging.

"There's one more gift." Jennifer stepped over to the mantel and slid a small package from behind her and Harvey's wedding picture.

"I wondered what happened to that," Jeff said.

"I'll just bet you did." Jennifer walked over to Harvey and presented it with a flourish. "From Gina, with a lot of help."

"What do you mean?" Harvey glanced at the small box wrapped in blue and silver paper then back at Jennifer.

"As nearly as I've been able to figure it out, you have Jeff, Mark, Sarah, Jimmy, Tony, Lanie, and Leeanne to thank for making sure this present got to you. And maybe a few others I don't know about."

"Hey, what about me?" Eddie cried.

Leeanne gave him a playful punch. "You didn't do anything."

Eddie gave a snort and rubbed his arm.

"Sounds like we missed out on something," Abby, the middle Wainthrop sister, said to her husband.

Peter nodded. "We'll have to get the whole story from you later, Jennifer."

Harvey had the wrapping off by then, all in one reusable piece, and he opened the box with careful, precise movements. "It looks like an ornament."

He took a gleaming metal piece from the box and held it up.

"It's a nativity scene," Jennifer said, gazing at the lovely, etched figures on pewter.

Gary Hobart, Abby's eleven-year-old stepson, move in and squinted at the reverse side. "What's it say on the back?"

Harvey turned it over and studied the back of the ornament, then smiled. He handed it to Jennifer.

She read aloud the year's date, and then, "My brother told me about Christ, and I listened. Love, Gina."

Harvey let out a big sigh. "Perfect."

Jennifer slid one arm around his neck and hugged him. "Certainly worth all the kerfuffle."

The end