**A Cold Christmas**

**by Nora Crowley**

It wasn’t an impossible request, really—all she wanted was to be at home with her family for the holidays. It shouldn’t have been as difficult as it was turning out to be. It was something most people wanted. The difference for Christine was her health.

 It seemed like she spent half of her life in the hospital. She was getting to the point where she wanted them to save her a bed so there would be something comforting when she inevitably returned. The number of times she’d had blood drawn was so great she was surprised her arms didn’t resemble a heroin addict. The rooms all looked the same but each one was a different kind of cold, uncomfortable, and unfamiliar. Now, once again, she was in a strange hospital room just in time for Christmas.

As she waited for her daily visit from one of her many doctors, Christine looked at the IV needle in her hand. It made her mad that it was necessary. She was young. Her body should be able to get nutrients without an IV and have clean blood without dialysis treatments. She had taken care of herself as a child, had eaten all her vegetables and drank a lot of milk, but that didn’t matter. Her disease had always been out of her control.

When her doctor finally showed up he brought good news: “You can go home tomorrow if nothing happens to aggravate your condition. If everything looks good you’ll be home in time for Christmas.” Finally, after days of poking and prodding and pricking, of medicine that she didn’t know what it did and tests she couldn’t understand what they were for, she was going home.

The day passed uneventfully; Christine was bored and impatient. It was a common feeling for hospital stays but today there was also optimism. Things looked good enough for her to go home. As she tried to sleep that night in the cold room, she smiled at the thought of seeing her brothers and sisters again. She hadn’t seen them in a long time because she was away and at school, but now they’d be together.

The next morning she knew something was wrong. She was too warm and her brain felt foggy. It was the beginning of a cold. Christine knew that colds, although relatively harmless to most people, could be dangerous to her immunosuppressed body. She knew what her doctor was going to say before he opened the door.

It was only two days until Christmas and she had managed to get, of all things, a potentially fatal cold. She spent the day sulking. Her mother called but Christine didn’t feel like talking. She never felt like doing much when she was sick.

The next day didn’t pass much differently. She felt better but the doctor said she wasn’t allowed to leave yet. “We can’t risk the weather aggravating your condition further,” he said. “I know you want to go home. No one wants to be sick at Christmas. We’re doing what we can.” Even though he said it, Christine wasn’t sure he really meant it. There isn’t much you can do for a cold and hospitals are the worst places to be when you’re sick.

Christmas Eve came and still she sat in the cold room, looking out the window at the snow falling from the sky. It twinkled in the light from the street lamps and she wished she was one of the children who ran through it, catching snowflakes on her tongue, making snow angels, and sledding down hills. It was nearly Christmas and she was at the point of hoping for a miracle.

The next morning she woke late. Her cold had gotten worse and her fever kept her groggy. Opening her eyes to the harsh light of the room she saw people. At first she couldn’t see them clearly and assumed they were nurses. When her eyes focused, however, she recognized her mother, father, brothers and sisters.

“Merry Christmas, Christine!” Her mother said with a smile. She took a horrible headband with fabric-coated reindeer antlers and jingle bells out of a bag and put it on Christine’s head. “There, now you can be in the proper Christmas spirit.” Her youngest sister snapped a picture. The flash filled Christine’s vision with bright red stars and she had to blink quite a few times before they went away.

“It’s great to see you guys,” she said earnestly. “I’ve missed you.” Her mother smiled, pointing to the little Christmas tree the nurses had put in the room a few days before. Underneath were neatly wrapped presents, the metallic paper glinting under the bright hospital lights. Although she hadn’t recovered in time to go home for Christmas, Christine realized, it didn’t matter. Her family made Christine forget about the needle in her hand, the cold room, and the virus wreaking havoc on her immune system. For once, everything seemed normal.