

# Christmas Package

## Bonus Scene



Brianna

Fifteen Years Later

We stood outside the two-story brick building while a gentle snow fell all around us. Mist puffed from a hundred faces, all of which were smiling widely.

Thomas held a giant pair of scissors in both of his hands. “By cutting this ribbon, I formally announce the opening of Scherzer’s Toy Store!”

Everyone cheered as the scissors cut through the ribbon. In addition to our group and the fifteen employees, there were dozens of customers standing around waiting for the opening. *The marketing went well*, I noted.

The store wasn’t named after me. Thomas was no longer Thomas Prescott: he was Thomas Scherzer. In fact, all three of my men had changed their names to mine. Gabe Scherzer, Victor Scherzer,

Thomas Scherzer.

One name for one family.

“Come on in!” Thomas said. “We’re open for business!”

We all shuffled into the store happily. The building was huge. Two stories of every manner of toy, video game, and book a child could ever imagine. Everything was arranged and stacked perfectly on the shelves and aisle displays, and the room smelled like cinnamon thanks to the cookies that had just come out of the oven in the back.

“Mom, there’s a train!” one little boy shouted next to me. He pointed up at the ceiling, where a track was suspended from the rafters. The locomotive *whirred* as it ran across the tracks across the store.

That part had been the most fun to set up.

Thomas wrapped his arm around me as we watched customers stream into the store. “A successful opening.”

“Don’t jinx it,” I warned. “We’ve only been open sixty seconds. We still need people to *buy* the toys.”

Thomas turned to face me. He was still as handsome as ever, although with some grey hair at his temples and a few wrinkles around his eyes. If anything, the aging signs helped accentuate just how gorgeous he still was at the ripe age of fifty-six.

“Brianna, this opening is a tremendous success even if we do not sell a single toy. And I have you to thank for it.”

I shrugged. “You always wanted your own store. It was worth investing our savings. *And*, I think it’s a solid investment all on its own merit, too.”

He kissed me on the forehead, something he did when he wanted me to know just how much he loved me. “I would be lost without you, you know.”

“You’d still be living on the eighth floor of Fulton’s, that’s for sure.”

Gabe appeared next to us. He had a tablet attached to his hand

and was tapping on the screen furiously. “Remind me why we had to open on Black Friday?”

“It is the largest shopping day of the year,” Thomas said. “And Brianna’s marketing firm determined it would be the ideal launching point.”

Gabe scowled at his screen. He was so sexy when he was frustrated with a technical issue, which was most of the time. “The Amazon Web Services is lagging today. Probably because of all of the extra web traffic. It’s slowing down our point-of-sale machines.”

I glanced at the front of the store. There was already a line of customers waiting to purchase toys. One of the cashiers scanned an item, waited four seconds, and then bagged it for the customer.

“Just how much are they slowed?” I asked skeptically.

“Typical latency on the point-of-sale devices is twenty milliseconds. Our latency right now is two hundred times that!”

“Which means it’s... four seconds?”

“Right.”

I cupped Gabe’s cheek and kissed him. “The world won’t end if there’s a four second delay for each transaction. We’ll just pretend it’s twenty-nineteen again.”

Gabe grudgingly put down his tablet. “That *was* a good year,” he admitted.

“And Black Friday that year was especially noteworthy. It’s the day I was dumped and first slept in the department store.”

“I would like to note that there is *no* camping display in Scherzer’s Toy Store,” Thomas said. “There will be no overnight stays allowed.”

Gabe laughed. “I should be the one warning both of you of that fact! You’re the one that got away with it for a decade and a half.” He hefted his tablet. “But even if there was a camping display, my security system would detect squatters. We’ve got infrared motion detection, and RFID sensors to keep track of all merchandise

movement...”

Thomas and I exchanged a look as he droned on about the technical specs.

Victor came walking through the front door. “Kids are here.”

“They’re late,” Thomas grumbled.

“You know how Mike is. Ever since he got his Learner’s Permit he takes the longest route...”

Victor gave me a peck on the cheek in passing. “I’m going to go get ready. See you in a little while, kid.”

“I’ll meet you back there,” I promised.

I went out front, where a minivan was double-parking in front of the store. Mike was driving, while Max sat in the passenger seat. Max had been in a terrible mood since failing his driving test, especially since his brother had passed...

I frowned. Max seemed happier than I had seen him all week. Unless...

Mike hopped out of the driver’s seat and rounded the van. “Hey mom! Got everyone here safely.”

I eyed him for a moment, and then his twin as he got out of the passenger side. The guilty way he glanced down at his feet and tried not to smile told me everything.

I snatched the keys from his hand. “Nice try, *Max*.”

His jaw dropped. “How did you *know*?”

“Your father has the same guilty expression when he tries to hide something from me. I learned how to recognize it long before you were born.”

“Oh, come *on*,” Max whined. “I want to drive! I’m sixteen!”

“Then you should’ve studied harder for your driving test, like your brother.”

“Exactly,” Mike said. He tried to slip by me into the store, but

I grabbed him by the arm.

“You’re just as guilty, mister. You helped him try to pull one over on me.”

“Aww, I didn’t mean to...”

“Don’t punish him! It was my idea, mom!”

The twins stuck up for each other when it came to everything. It was tough to stay mad at them. But being a good parent meant enforcing the rules and discipline even when you were in a good mood.

“We’ll talk about this later,” I said, pushing the button to open the side door of the van.

It was like opening the gate at a kennel. The rest of my children came pouring out of the van as quickly as they could.

First was Mary, the twelve-year-old with Thomas’s crystal blue eyes and cool demeanor. She rolled her eyes at her brothers’ shenanigans and walked past us into the store.

Next was their brother Matthew. He gave me a big hug and a kiss on the cheek. He was ten years old, which meant he was still a momma’s boy. But I knew his angsty teen years were right around the corner.

After them came Gabe’s three children. Kerry was only eight, and I could already tell she was going to be the most beautiful girl in our New Jersey town. She already knew it, too—she tossed her silky black hair as she hopped out of the van and walked inside like she owned the place. Victor said he was already looking forward to intimidating her future boyfriends.

Finally came the youngest two, Eliza who was five and Patrick who was four. Both of them had Gabe’s defined jaw and easy smile, and they tackled me with hugs, each of them clutching a leg.

“Where’s daddy?” Patrick demanded. “I want to see *daddy*.”

“Your father is inside, but he’s working. You can play with the toys, though.”

“I want to play with the toys *with* daddy,” Eliza said bluntly. “He promised...”

“He will play with you when he’s done fixing the network.”

I sighed as they sprinted inside the store. Our huge family could be exhausting at times... But it was the most satisfying thing in the world.

I handed the van keys back to Max. “If you had parked the car in the lot, rather than double-parking up front, I probably wouldn’t have noticed it was you who was driving. Go move it to the parking lot now, please.”

His eyes widened. “You’re letting me drive it?”

“Just a hundred feet. And don’t tell your father.”

Max hopped behind the wheel and carefully drove it across the parking lot.

When we went back inside, Thomas gave the twins matching uniforms and told them to go change in the back. When they came out they looked like spitting images of their English father: tall, slender, and darkly handsome.

“This is your first job, so I want you to take it very seriously,” he explained to them. “You need to be as friendly as possible. Always try to give the customer what they want, even if they are being unreasonable. Never talk back to anyone...”

“Dad, we *know*,” Max whined.

“We’re not twelve,” Mike added.

Somewhere by the cash register, Mary yelped. “I heard that!”

Max stuck out his tongue at her.

The twins stood by the front door and greeted guests. Once they actually put some effort into it, they were perfect little gentlemen. Thomas beamed at them, which in turn filled me with happiness.

My other five children spread out through the store, playing with the toy displays and giving the entire place a welcoming

atmosphere. That encouraged the children of customers to sit down and play too, which meant customers would stay in the store longer, instead of browsing for a few minutes and then leaving. My marketing firm's research showed that there was a direct correlation between store visit length and the likelihood of purchasing something.

Gabe walked up and sighed, but this time it was with satisfaction. "The network is fully operational now. No latency issues, and the firewall is in place. No Russian hackers are getting into this system."

"Right, because hackers would be interested in a toy store," I said sarcastically.

Gabe smirked at me. "You'd be surprised."

We had a lot of sales, I could already see. Our big VR game display was already out of boxes, so I went to the back room to restock them so customers would know we weren't out.

In the back room, Victor was half-dressed in his Santa costume. He was pulling the fat suit over his head which gave him the large Santa belly, but without Santa's coat it just made him look pregnant.

"There's nothing sexier than a man in uniform," I said lustily. I squeezed his fat suit with both hands and said, "I love a man who is *thick*."

Victor grabbed a handful of my hair and hungrily pulled my lips to his. I sighed as our tongues danced together, but only for a few seconds before he pulled my head away.

"Never knew you had that kind of fetish, kid."

"Oh baby. Nothing gets me hotter than a man in a fat suit." I ran my fingers across the front of his red-and-white pants. He made a noise deep in his throat.

"Don't tease me, or I'll bend you over this crate."

I grinned. I still had an amazing love life with my three men, but especially with Victor. Even though we had been together for so long, I was as attracted to him as the day we had met.

And he was a natural father. It was wonderful that we all made a big, happy family together. Even though Victor couldn't *genetically* father any children, he was as much a dad to the children as Thomas or Gabe. Maybe even more so since he appreciated it so much.

I helped him finish getting dressed, and then he busted through the doors into the store.

"MERRY CHRISTMAS!" he boomed in the same Santa Claus voice he'd used all those years ago at Fulton's.

All the children in the store cheered, including mine. Well, all except Max and Mike. They rolled their eyes now that they were old enough to know Santa wasn't real. Mary frowned thoughtfully—I could tell she was close to figuring it out too.

But the rest were happily engrossed as Victor marched through the store greeting child and parent alike.

"Your marketing seems to have worked marvelously," Thomas commented. "The store is packed."

"My firm knows how to promote a business," I said. "It helps that it's a strong business, but I have good people working for me."

Thomas rubbed my back. "Glad we hired the best marketing firm in New York, then."

I grinned. "Glad you did."

The day flew by. It was a non-stop flurry of customers, toys, and sales. At five o'clock Thomas agreed to turn matters over to our *actual* employees, and we piled into two cars and drive home. That was the downside to having a family of eleven—we couldn't fit in one single vehicle.

We'd purchased the house outside Bedminster, New Jersey six years ago while I was pregnant with Eliza. It was just close enough to New York City that I could commute into the office when I was needed, but far enough away that we could buy some land. We had twenty-two acres on the property, with ten bedrooms and seven bathrooms. It seemed like too much at the time, but now I realized just

how badly we had needed the space. A family of eleven took up a *lot* of room—far more than my family did back on the farm in Illinois.

It was the perfect size, at least until the twins went off to college. But I wasn't ready to start thinking about that.

We pulled into the driveway and piled out of the two vehicles. "Who's truck is that?" Patrick asked.

Kerry gasped. "That's grandpa's truck!"

"Grandpa and grandma?" Eliza asked. "You said they weren't coming until Christmas!"

I pretended like I was shocked. "Wow, I don't know! They must have stopped by on their way down from my sister's Thanksgiving..."

The kids poured inside, and a stream of excited noises drifted through the door. I found my parents in the kitchen, alternating hugs with each of the grandkids.

"I just figured there was a houseful of people here who need some of my chicken mac and cheese!" my mom told the kids. "Can you think of anyone who fits that description?"

"Me! Me!" Patrick shouted.

"I smell cookies," Mary said suspiciously.

"I'm about to pull some out of the oven now," my dad replied.

All of my children gasped. "You *bake*, grandpa?"

"I'm doin' my best!" dad said with a laugh. He crouched down by the oven with Patrick. "Do you think they're done?"

Patrick squinted. "I think so. I had better taste one. Just to be sure."

"Good idea."

"Where are grandma and grandpa sleeping?" Kerry asked.

"I am *not* giving up my room," Mary said stubbornly.

"Mary, that's not very nice," Victor scolded. That succeeded in making Mary blush.

“Sorry, dad.”

“They’re sleeping in Eliza’s room,” I explained. “Eliza, you and Patrick can share.”

“Aww, I don’t want to! Patrick *farts* in his sleep!”

“I do not!”

“It’s only for a few nights,” Gabe said reassuringly. He grinned at me. “Alternatively, grandma and grandpa can sleep in your mother’s room, and she can camp in a tent outside.”

“Oh, I know how much you enjoy that,” my dad said with a smile.

I stuck out my tongue at them. All these years later and it was *still* a running joke at my expense.

But it was a good joke. One that made us all happy. Without that experience at Fulton’s, my life would be entirely different. I never would’ve gone to the *Sunset Bayou* and hooked up with Victor. I wouldn’t have been wandering around Fulton’s at lunch to kill time, which is how I eventually ended up in the toy department rubbing dirt of Thomas’s butt. And I never would have caught the eye of a young security guard at night.

It was funny how my entire life was changed for the better thanks to a bad breakup and a manipulative ex.

*Thanks for the amazing life, Carl,* I thought to myself.

“Mommy, can I have a cookie?” Patrick asked.

“Not until you’ve eaten dinner,” I said.

“But grandpa said...”

I glared at my dad, who had half a sugar cookie in his mouth. “What?” he said.

“Dad, the kids can’t have cookies before dinner.”

“That doesn’t mean I can’t!” he protested.

All of us—me, my parents, my three amazing men, and our

seven children—all laughed together in our warm house, full of love.