



*You Make It  
Feel like  
Christmas*

**TONI SHILOH**

Books by Toni Shiloh

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*You Make It Feel like Christmas*



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TONI SHILOH



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To the Author and Finisher of my faith

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THANKSGIVING DAY  
WASHINGTON, DC

**S**tarr Lewis hated to return home a failure, but at least she had the cover of the holiday season to hide her embarrassment.

The wind whipped through her as she stepped off the train. She shuddered and drew her coat closed at the neck, then followed her fellow passengers up the escalator to the main building. The man in front of her held the door open, and she trailed in behind him. Warmth caressed her face in a greeting, chasing the chill away.

She sighed and took a moment to admire the arched ceiling over Union Station. People hurried around her as she made her way toward the front doors. Her brother Gabe was picking her up, which meant she'd have thirty minutes to kill until he showed up. Gabe was always late. *Always.*

Starr tightened her grip on the handle of her fuchsia carry-on and headed for Jamba Juice. A mix of passion fruit, mango, and strawberry would be just the thing to freeze out the hot shame of returning home jobless.

Who cared if she'd had a smoothie before leaving New York

City? One could never have too many. Besides, she needed the liquid goodness to chase away reminders of being laid off and forced to live in her childhood bedroom for who knew how long. Out of the five Lewis children, Starr was the only one who no longer held an illustrious career.

*Shake it off. You're not a failure. This is just a setback.*

Of epic proportions. Not only did she have to move back home, but her demise lined up perfectly with her sister Angel's Christmas Eve wedding. To Starr's ex-boyfriend. *Ugh. God, please help me. I'm not sure how I'll make it through the wedding without wanting to gag.*

The hits just kept on coming. She'd better order a large smoothie.

Kelly Clarkson's rendition of "I'll Be Home for Christmas" crooned through the speakers. Starr shook her head at the unnecessary reminder and slowed as she got in line at Jamba Juice. Her cell buzzed in her coat pocket. She moved off to the side, pulling out the pink-encased iPhone and checking the caller ID. "Where are you?"

"Calm down. I'm on Union Station Drive with all the taxis and tourists. Should I park around back, or can you come out front?"

Her bottom lip poked out as dreams of smoothie bliss evaporated. "I'll be out front in a sec."

"Don't sound so enthused."

"I'm just a little hungry."

"You mean hangry? Well, grab some food then. But keep in mind I'm taking up space, and security might be giving me the side-eye—"

"All right, I get it," she snapped. The moment Gabe had said he was at the front entrance, she'd started walking that way.

Starr exited through the double doors and searched the cars lined up in front of her. "Are you in your car?"

“Dad’s. My car died last week.”

She sighed in relief when she spotted the familiar black Mercedes. “I see you.” She headed his way, dragging her carry-on behind her.

“I see you too.” Gabe popped out of the driver’s door and came around the passenger side as he pocketed his phone. “Sis!” He picked her up, twirling her around.

She chuckled at his exuberance. “Put me down.” Her head spun, but she soon caught her bearings. As she peered into Gabe’s familiar features a pang twinged in her chest. Gabe was probably her favorite sibling. Her older brother also had the smoothest skin she’d ever seen. Probably beat out women who held a daily regimen of wrinkle-free cream and exfoliation. He definitely fit into the pretty-boy category.

“Did you miss me?” He wagged his eyebrows, then grabbed her suitcase.

“Maybe.” Her lips twitched.

“Yeah, you did.” He winked at her and closed the trunk. “Don’t stand there all day. Mom and Dad are holding Thanksgiving dinner just for you.”

Thank goodness. She was starved. She slid onto the passenger seat and buckled her seat belt. “That explains why I didn’t have to wait too long.”

“Ha.” He shrugged. “What can I say? Life is meant to be enjoyed, not hurried.”

“No one says you have to rush for everything. Just be on time for what’s important.”

“Like picking up my little sister?” He tossed an amused expression her way before turning to look at the road.

“Exactly.” She slid her frozen hands under her thighs. “It’s so cold here. It wasn’t even this cold in New York.”

“Oh, look at me,” Gabe said in a high-pitched voice. “I just came from New York, and like”—he flipped his imaginary

long hair— “I’m such a cosmopolitan now. DC is beneath me and all that I know.”

She smacked his arm. “I’m just making a weather observation.”

“For now.”

*Same ol’ Gabe.* She rolled her eyes. “How’s everyone?”

“The same. Noel is going to work himself into an early grave. Eve is following in his footsteps, and Angel is Angel.” He shrugged as he navigated through DC traffic.

Wreaths hung about the city streetlights as they had every Christmas since Starr could remember. She couldn’t help the smile that tilted her lips. “It’s good everything’s the same.”

“Is it?”

“Sure.” Well, maybe the physical things. She didn’t want to walk in the house and have everyone treat her like the baby just because she was the youngest Lewis sibling. She wanted to be taken seriously, but losing her job wouldn’t add points in that direction.

“I’m surprised your boss gave you such a long break. Mom said you don’t have to go back until the day after New Year’s. Is that right?”

“Yep. Nice, huh?” Though it wasn’t a vacation but her being handed a severance package and two letters of recommendation.

But that tidbit was her secret.

Starr had packed her household goods into a storage unit before leaving the city and returning to DC. If she was smart with her money, she could pay for the unit for four months. Obviously, she’d have to come clean to her parents well before then. If she was still here in the springtime, there was no way her folks would believe she’d been given that long of a vacation. Then again, maybe telling them she was working remotely would help her save face.

*That's lying.*

She tensed. Hopefully by the end of the month, she'd find another job, and they'd be none the wiser.

"Suspiciously nice."

Starr looked at Gabe, hoping she was projecting a calm demeanor that belied the fast beating of her heart. "The company values their employees."

Only she hadn't been one of them. Layoffs had to happen, and someone had to go. Why not the hardworking PR associate who saved more butts than the others? She'd only worked for the company for two years, which meant she was the easiest to say good-bye to.

Story of her life.

Her ex, Ashton, had had no trouble saying good-bye after taking one long look at Angel.

"I see." Gabe met her gaze, raising an eyebrow in skepticism. "You know you can talk to your big brother, right? Tell me your worries. Your *secrets*."

"I don't have any." She faced straight ahead, looking out the windshield, then gasped and leaned forward. "Is it snowing?"

"Just a few flakes. They didn't even salt the roads, so it's nothing."

"Or we'll get a bigger snowfall than expected and be trapped at home." She did *not* want to be trapped at home with all her siblings to poke their noses in her business.

"Works for me. I don't want to go to work tomorrow anyway."

Starr snorted. "Working for your parents is *so* difficult."

"Don't be jealous. You know Dad would give you a job if you wanted."

"I do *not* want to work in finance." She hated math. Had *always* hated math and had the grades to reflect that. Too bad everyone else in the family was a math genius.

Even Angel.

*Lord, I pray that I hold up seeing Angel again. After all, she didn't intentionally steal my boyfriend. She's just . . . Angel.*

A selfish, manipulative—

No, no. She really didn't think Angel was aware of how Starr truly felt. After all, Starr hadn't called her names or threatened bodily harm. After introducing her boyfriend to her sister, Starr had later listened incredulously as Angel described her meeting with Ashton as fate in some star-crossed-lover-type drama. Apparently, Ashton felt the same way. He dumped Starr so he could ask Angel out and live happily ever after.

Starr sighed.

"What's going on in that head of yours?"

"I was just wondering what the holidays will be like." She offered a stiff smile. "You know how Mom is."

Gabe grimaced. "Unfortunately. My prediction is full-on Christmas drama with an extra helping of wedding chaos thrown in."

Just what she feared. "Great."

"Hey, you wanted to come back. You didn't seem to mind missing the last couple of Christmases." Gabe glanced at her. "Why break the streak now?"

"Angel's getting married." As much as she had hurt Starr, Angel was still her sister.

"True, but you could've come down the day before and left after Christmas Day. No need to torture yourself the whole holiday season."

Except now Starr had nowhere else to go. Her severance package wouldn't have lasted long in New York. Staying with her parents would give her time to plan her next steps. Only, she couldn't let anyone know that.

She pushed aside her feelings and pasted on a smile. "I missed you guys."

Gabe snorted. “You mean your friends.”

“What?” She gasped. “I love all of you guys.”

“You never hung around us growing up.”

“Well, it’s not my fault Noel and Eve were so much older. They’ve always had their own friends.” Sometimes being born last was the pits. Starr had been lonely until she took matters into her own hands.

“True. But you didn’t hang with me and Angel either.”

“That’s because you had your twin superpowers activated and didn’t let anyone else in the club.”

Gabe took advantage of the red light to give Starr a long look, confusion written all over his face. “Is that really how you felt?”

“It’s the truth.”

“Starr . . .” He sighed and hit the gas. The car lurched forward. “We never meant to exclude you.”

“I get it. I’m the fifth and last kid. Everyone had already paired off by the time I could talk and play. I had to make my own friends in order to have some, not because I didn’t love my family.”

“I’m sorry, Starr.”

She shrugged and looked out the passenger window. The Lewis family liked to portray themselves as close-knit, but she’d always been on the outside looking in. She didn’t expect the holidays to change that. And Angel’s wedding definitely wouldn’t.

Maybe she’d be able to reconnect with some of her friends who still lived in the area. Anything to occupy her days and keep the melancholy at bay.

“I’ll make it up to you, ’kay?”

“How?” She peeked at Gabe.

“You can hang out with me and my friends.”

“Really, Gabe? I’m a little too old for the ‘kid sister tagging along with the older brother’ bit.”

“You’ll like them.”

*We’ll see.* “I’m sure.”

He grinned, his straight teeth a testament to the years he’d worn braces. “Then it’s settled.”

“First, let’s get through dinner.”

Gabe turned down their street, and Starr’s pulse picked up speed. The neighbors always joined forces to decorate for the Christmas season. She knew this week had been spent decorating the exteriors of the multimillion-dollar homes. Every house glowed with white lights. Starr sank into her seat as their whitewashed brick home came into view. Navy shutters surrounded the candlelit windows, and a silver wreath decorated the matching front door.

“The inside is decked out, isn’t it?”

“From top to bottom. Mom decorated all yesterday.”

Starr chuckled. Their mom was a little too enthusiastic about Christmas. It’s why they all had Christmas names, even though Gabe and Angel were the only ones born in December. Every year, the day before Thanksgiving, her mom would pull out the decorations and play her Christmas music for “atmospheric purposes.”

Gabe pulled into the garage, and Starr was out of the car before the garage door could close again.

“I’ll grab your bag.”

“Thanks, Gabe.”

“Mom’s probably in the kitchen.”

Starr entered the house and headed straight to the kitchen. Her jaw dropped. Gone were the black cabinets and red backsplash. The room seemed bigger with white cabinetry and black fixtures. The sapphire-blue backsplash went with the silver and blue Christmas decorations her mother was fond of.

“Baby girl!” Her mom threw open her arms as she came

around the island and swept Starr into a hug. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Happy Thanksgiving, Mom.”

“I’m so glad you’re home. Now all my babies are home.” She grinned at Starr and folded Gabe into a group hug.

After a few seconds, she stepped back.

“Gabe said dinner was on hold. I didn’t mean to make you guys wait,” Starr said.

“Gabe.” Her mother’s black brows dipped in consternation. “Dinner won’t be ready for another thirty minutes.” She shook her head. “He’s just making trouble.”

“Me?” He pointed to his chest in mock horror. “I’m the angel, unlike your middle-born daughter.”

“Ha. Go take your sister’s suitcase to her room.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Gabe strolled out of the kitchen with a parting wink to Starr.

“You changed it.” Starr gestured around the kitchen. “It looks good, by the way.”

“Thank you. Angel brought my ideas to life.”

*Of course Angel redesigned it.*

“But don’t worry,” her mom continued, “your room is the same as you left it.”

Starr paused, her hand in midair with the meatball she’d swiped from the appetizer tray. “You mean, *exactly* the same?”

“Of course. The cleaning staff go in to dust once a month and don’t touch anything else.”

“But I haven’t lived here since college.” She’d graduated five years ago and moved to New York shortly after. This was really the first time she’d been back home apart from a visit here and there while staying at hotels—because she could afford to.

“You’ll always have a room here, baby. You know that.” Her mom dipped her head and shook it at the same time.

Now would be a good time to inform Mom about her unemployed state, but that news could wait. Maybe after the wedding, when everyone returned to their regular schedules. “Is everyone coming to dinner?”

“Of course. Noel will be here straight from work. He said he invited a friend.”

“A girlfriend?”

Her mother rolled her eyes. “I wish. He’s in his thirties, for goodness’ sake. How much longer is he going to make me wait for grandchildren?”

“He’s married to his work.”

“Don’t I know it. But ledgers don’t produce living, breathing babies.” Her mother turned a burner off as she checked on another pot. “Eve is already here. Her condo got flooded from an upstairs neighbor, so she’s staying in her old room until the repairs are done.”

“That’s awful.” *Guess I’m not the only one dealing with stuff.*

“It was just *terrible*. She lost everything.”

*Poor Eve.* Starr straightened, then put on her calm façade. “And Angel?”

“Angel and Ashton will be joining us too.”

Her stomach dropped. “He—they will?”

“Of course.” Her mom gave her an odd look. “Wedding preparations are in full swing, and those two are never out of each other’s sight.”

*Disgusting.* What had she subjected herself to? Maybe she should’ve looked harder for a job in the city. Anything to avoid seeing her ex and sister fall all over each other.

Her mother stilled, her brow furrowing. “You aren’t jealous . . . are you?”

“Of course not.” Starr put her practiced *as if* expression on. She’d perfected the look in the Amtrak bathroom because she knew someone would ask at some point. “We’re old history.”