A Christmas Tale
A Heartwarming Holiday Jigsaw Puzzle

Read the short Christmas story. Then assemble the jigsaw puzzle to reveal all the special gifts.

Story by Alan Robbins
Based on an original story by Paula Hopper
It was the day before Christmas. The glow from the fireplace seemed to warm the entire house. Julie Hardersen was in the kitchen waiting for the bell to signal that the gingerbread cookies were done. Her husband Rick was in the living room struggling, just as he did every year, with the twisted wire of the Christmas tree lights. Their son Robert was in his room looking like a seven-year-old mad scientist as he wrapped a present for his older sister Casey who was, as always, on the phone. And the little ones, Kathleen and Beth, were stringing popcorn, carefully eating every third kernel.

Everything was in its place for the holiday. Almost. One thing was missing. Julie had spent the entire day trying not to think about it. She had succeeded too, by keeping busy and not stopping for a minute. But when the bell for the gingerbread rang, she couldn’t avoid the issue any longer. The instant the bell sounded, she automatically reached down to pat the warm head she knew would be there. But there was nothing to touch.

Suddenly the house felt empty. The sounds of the rest of the family seemed far away. Even the rich smell coming from the oven did nothing to soothe Julie. Alone in that moment, unable to concentrate on anything else, she thought only of what was missing this Christmas.

For fourteen seasons she had baked her gingerbread cookies — and each time the bell sounded, she would reach down and feel the tender head of Rags, the Hardersen’s dog. And when she tested her gingerbread, Rags was sure to sit up and wait with bright eyes for a taste too. If she sat down, Rags would plop her head onto Julie’s foot, lingering there for a rub.

But Rags was gone now. No more sounds of her nails clicking on the wooden floor, or the grunt when she got up to lap at the water dish, or the swat of her tail against the table leg. It was all so familiar that Julie could not remember a time without the dog. It seemed that there was no Christmas before Rags. Perhaps there would not be one now.

Not wanting to upset the others, Julie got busy with more chores. She made a list of last minute purchases and got ready to drive into town. And then, not wanting to be alone, she quickly bundled up Kathleen to take with her, before the little girl could resist.

Downtown was ready for Christmas too. The familiar sights and sounds of the season called up other memories. Dancing dolls in the store windows. Wisps of snow that tickled the ankles. The blaring horns of a Salvation Army trio. The corner of a box poking out from a brown shopping bag. The smell of pine and chestnuts and car exhaust. All these things that never changed.

When her shopping was completed, Julie led the way back to the car. That wasn’t easy. She had to navigate through the crowds while also balancing packages and holding on to Kathleen’s hand. Suddenly, she was yanked sideways. At first she thought Kathleen had bumped into somebody. In fact, the little girl had simply stopped dead in her tracks. Julie tried to pull her forward but couldn’t. Kathleen was frozen on the spot.

“Kathleen, what’s the matter with you? Let’s go!” she said, trying not to lose her grip on everything.

“Look,” Kathleen said and pointed to a figure in a shadowy doorway.

In the changing colors of a nearby traffic light, the shadow soon became a shape and then an object. It took a few seconds before Julie could clearly see that it was a small dog, shivering in the
chilly wind. It was grungy and caked with mud. But large sweet eyes met hers as she squinted to see it.

"Oh Mommy, Mommy, can we take it? Can we, can we, can we?"

"It must belong to somebody," Julie answered, not quite sure if it was Kathleen who had asked the question, or another little girl inside Julie herself.

She thought of all the preparations that awaited — the dinner and the presents and the phone calls. And she thought of the Christmas crowds and the traffic and what lousy timing is was to find the dog at that particular moment. But before she could explain everything to Kathleen, the girl had rushed over to the dog and hugged it.

"No!" Julie shouted. "It may be danger . . ."

But the dog was already returning the hug and licking Kathleen’s face, putting a filthy paw on her white leggings.

"All right, let’s see what we’ve got here," Julie said, giving in to the situation and bending down to scratch a soft but dirty head.

Around the dog’s neck was a collar with a tag. The tag had the name Cinnamon printed on it and an address from a house in the hills, twenty miles outside of the city. The temperature was dropping, the snow falling faster, and the traffic getting worse. Still, knowing she had to help find the dog’s home, Julie tied a ribbon from one of the packages through its collar and led it, and Kathleen, to a nearby phone booth.

"Are you trying to return that dog?" asked a woman standing next to the phone. "I saw it over there before. You should just leave it there. It’s filthy."

"Ridiculous," Julie said, picking up the phone, "Can’t just leave the dog out in the cold."

"I already called the pound. They'll be here soon to take it," the woman said.

"Ridiculous," Kathleen echoed and hugged the dog tighter around the neck.

The phone call was no easy matter either. Julie had to dial information twice, then got a wrong number, dialed back, dropped the quarter, got a busy signal, called back. When she finally got through and a woman answered, she was in no mood for small talk.

"Did you lose a dog named Cinnamon?" Julie asked.

There was no response for a few seconds, then a gasp, like the sound of a blowout on the highway.

"They found her!" the woman shouted. "Do you have her? Is she all right?"

Julie was about to say yes, but the word never made it out of her mouth. A truck had suddenly screeched up to the curb. A man in a blue jacket jumped out. He was wearing thick gloves that covered his forearms, and heavy black boots. Not a friendly type at all.

Kathleen knew exactly who he was and what he wanted. He was from the city pound and was going to take the dog. "No!" she shouted and grabbed the ribbon from her mother’s hand.

Julie, with other matters on her mind, was slower to react. Trying not to drop the packages and the phone all at once, she let go of the ribbon first. The man from the pound jumped forward and tried to nab the dog by the collar. But Kathleen shouted and dropped the ribbon, whereupon Cinnamon raced down the street to freedom.
“She’s run off again,” Julie explained into the phone. “I’m sorry. But she’s still around here on Main Street. I’ll try to get her back. Come quickly. Please.”

By the time the dog’s owners arrived, Cinnamon was nowhere to be found. Strangers agreed to help look for the dog. Even the man from the pound, who was actually a good man wearing bad clothes, helped for a while. But it was no use.

“I know how you must feel,” Julie told the owners. “We just lost our dog this year. She was quite old. It’s very difficult. I’m sorry. I wish I could stay.”

“We’ll keep looking,” the woman said. “You’ve done all you can. We appreciate your help. Cinnamon had a litter of pups a few months ago and she’s still taking care of them. She’ll come back to us. I know she will!”

“Come to bed,” Rick said softly later that night. Julie was sitting by the phone calling Cinnamon’s owners every ten minutes. But there was still no answer. “They’re just not back yet.”

“It isn’t that dog so much,” Julie said. “It’s . . .”

“I know what it is. We’re all thinking of Rags today. I had a hard time decorating the tree without her. She used to try and eat the tinsel, remember?”

“I can’t forget. No matter how hard I try.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

There was no sleeping that night for Julie. No dark place to hide from all those memories. Her thoughts came in fragments, never settling into a dream. Bits and pieces only: the flop of Rags’ ear over the plastic bowl; the gentle sound of her snoring in the night; hot breath on the hand during a tug of war; the graceful arc of her fur as she leapt into the air to catch a ball — that red ball, the one with the bell inside, silent now for all time.

When the excitement of Christmas morning was too great to ignore, Julie gave in and got out of bed. She wrestled with the red robe, as always, and forced herself downstairs. The rest of the family was already there. Rick was sitting in his chair making funny faces at little Beth, who found them fascinating. Casey was practicing cartwheels near the couch. Robert was sitting cross-legged near the fireplace, bouncing with glee. And Kathleen, always in charge, was serving the gingerbread.

The tree seemed to float on a cushion of gifts. Holiday carols were playing on the stereo, a muffled tinkling sound in the background. The world outside the window was dusted with white powder. It was undeniable — another Christmas, full of joy. Julie put the sadness from her mind and made a space for new hopes, new delights.

Yet when all the presents were opened, there was still one left. One large, loosely wrapped gift was not accounted for. Julie knew it wasn’t one of hers.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing to it.

All eyes went to the package, as though it had just appeared there a moment before.

“Not mine,” Rick said casually. But his eyes hinted that he knew more than he was saying.

“Not mine either,” Casey added quickly.

Robert and Kathleen shook their heads too. Then Beth, the two-year old, broke into a wide grin.
“Mine!” she announced.
Julie thought about it for a moment, then realized Beth was just repeating what she had heard, not solving the mystery.
“Then where did it come from?” Julie finally asked.
“Why don’t you read the card and find out?” Rick suggested, a bit too innocently.
She did. And then she opened the wrapping. Inside was something quite unexpected. Can you guess what it was?
How many other presents can you guess while piecing the jigsaw puzzle together?

Solution

Dear Julie,

Have you ever been lost and not known the way home? I was only a teenager. I took a wrong turn somewhere. When I woke up, I was in a room I didn’t recognize. Everything was out of place.

But I was lucky. Someone kind helped me. She took me to her home. She took time out from her busy life to help me in mine. She took the time to care. That someone was you.

There is a secret all dogs know. Humans know it too. It’s sometimes they forget. And when they do, it’s our job to remind them. The secret is this: everyone has gifts. You can give yours. You don’t have to know who will find the gift you gave. As you read this, I am looking for you. I am asking people to look for you. I am asking you to look for me.

A Christmas tree will be decorated. Someone will place a wreath on the door. But I know she will give me a warm welcome. She will know by the love in my eyes. As you read this, I am asking you to pay attention to the love I have for you. And when you find me, I will allow you to know who I am. As you read this, I am asking people to help me find you.

You can give to a Christmas tree. Everyone knows it’s a gift. But I can also give back. It’s not just what I give, it’s why I give. It’s not just what I give, it’s why I give. It’s not just what I give, it’s why I give.

May Christmas be a time of joy and love. May the love of Christmas warm your heart. May the love of Christmas warm your soul. May the love of Christmas warm your life.

Wish it for whatever else Christmas may mean. It is still in the heart of the celebration of love.

Merry Christmas!

Cinnamon