



The Last Noel (Import HB)

By Heather Graham

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It's Christmas Eve, and all is neither calm nor bright

With a storm paralyzing New England, the O'Boyle household becomes prey to a pair of brutal escaped killers desperate to find refuge.

Skyler O'Boyle is convinced the only way they can live through the night is by playing a daring psychological game to throw the convicts off their guard. Threatened by a pair of Smith & Wessons, she has to pray that the rest of her family will play along, buying them time. Her one hope for rescue is that the men are unaware that her daughter, Kat, has escaped into the blizzard. But as the wind and snow continue to rage with all the vehemence of a maddened banshee, her prayers that Kat can somehow find help seem fragile indeed.

When Kat stumbles on a third felon, half-frozen and delirious, her shock deepens, because she recognizes Craig Devon immediately. What is the onetime love of her life doing back in town-and in such company? With the threat of death hanging over the O'Boyles, Craig is desperate to unload a vital secret that could change their destiny. But can he trust Kat with the truth? Because one false move and everything he's sacrificed will shatter-and this could be everyone's final Christmas alive.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

In veteran novelist Graham's satisfying holiday latest, three jewelry store thieves stall out in a snowbank and have a disagreement that leaves only two of them standing. Meanwhile, the O'Boyle family is spending Christmas at their rural Massachusetts home, snowed in and bickering, until the doorbell rings. Brandishing guns, the two thieves threaten to kill Skyler, the family matriarch, who hopes that Kat, her college-aged daughter who has remained hidden upstairs, will figure something out. As the O'Boyles struggle to survive their horrific ordeal, they soon discover the strength of their family bonds in the face of despair. (Nov.)

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About the Author

New York Times and USA Today bestselling author Heather Graham has written more than one hundred novels, many of which have been featured by the Doubleday Book Club and the Literary Guild. An avid scuba diver, ballroom dancer and mother of five, she still enjoys her south Florida home, but loves to travel as well, from locations such as Cairo, Egypt, to her own backyard, the Florida Keys. Reading, however, is the pastime she still loves best, and she is a member of many writing groups. She's currently the vice president of the Horror Writers' Association, and she's also an active member of International Thriller Writers. She is very proud to be a Killerette in the Killer Thriller Band, along with many fellow novelists she greatly admires.

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The stereo was on, playing songs of Christmas cheer. Skyler O'Boyle took a moment to listen to a woman with a high, clear voice who was singing, "Sleigh bells ring, are you lis'nin'..."

Then, even over the music and from her place in the kitchen, she heard the yelling.

"I said hold it. Hold the tree!"

Skyler winced.

Christmas. Home for the holidays, merry, merry, ho, ho, ho, family love, world peace.

In her family? Yeah, right.

The expected answer came, and the voice was just as loud. "I am holding it," her eldest son insisted.

"Straight, dammit, Frazier. Hold it straight," her husband, David, snapped irritably.

In her mind's eye, Skyler could see them, David on the floor, trying to wedge the tree into the stand, and Frazier, standing, trying to hold the tree straight. That was what happened when you decided "home for the holidays" meant everyone gathering in the old family house out in the country. It meant throwing everything together at the last possible moment, because everyone had to juggle their school and work schedules with their holiday vacation.

"The frigging needles are poking my eyes. This is the best I can do," Frazier complained in what sounded suspiciously like a growl.

His tone was sure to aggravate his father, she thought.

Some people got Christmas cheer; she got David and Frazier fighting over the tree.

Where the hell had the spirit of the season gone, at least in her family? Actually, if she wanted to get philosophical, where had the spirit of the season gone in a large part of the known world? There were no real Norman Rockwell paintings. People walked by the Salvation Army volunteers without a glance; it seemed as if the only reason anyone put money in the kettle was that they were burdened by so much change that it was actually too heavy for comfort. Then they beat each other up over the latest electronic toy to hit the market.

"It's nowhere near straight," David roared.

"Put up your own fucking tree, then," Frazier shouted.

"Son of a bitch..." David swore.

"...walkin' in a winter wonderland."

Please, God, Skyler prayed silently, don't let my husband and my son come to blows on Christmas Eve.

"Hey, Kat, you there?"

Great, Skyler thought. Now David was getting their daughter involved.

"Yeah, Dad, I'm here. But I can't hold that tree any straighter. And I hope Brenda didn't hear you two yelling," Kat said.

Skyler headed out toward the living room, ready to head off a major family disaster, and paused just out of sight in the hall.

Had she been wrong? Should she have told her son he shouldn't bring Brenda home for the holidays? He'd turned twenty-two. He could have told her that he wasn't coming home, in that case, and was going to spend the holidays with Brenda's family. And then she would have been without her first-born child. Of course, that was going to happen somewhere along the line anyway; that was life. With the kids getting older, it was already hard to get the entire family together.

"Oh, so now I have to worry—in my own house— about offending the girl who came here to sleep with my son?" David complained.

David wasn't a bad man, Skyler thought. He wasn't even a bad father. But he had different ideas about what was proper and what wasn't. They had been children themselves, really, when they had gotten married. She had been eighteen, and he had been nineteen. But even as desperately in love as they had been, there was no way either of them could have told their parents that they were going to live together.

Current mores might be much wiser, she reflected. Most of her generation seemed to be divorced.

"What century are you living in, Dad?" Frazier demanded. Apparently his train of thought was running alongside hers. "There's nothing wrong with Brenda staying in my room. It's not as if we don't sleep together back at school. You should trust my judgment. And don't go getting all 'I'm so respectable, this girl better be

golden.' We're not exactly royalty, Dad. We own a bar," he finished dryly.

"We own a pub, a fine family place," David snapped back irritably. "And what's that supposed to mean, anyway? That pub is paying for college for both you and your sister."

"I'm just saying that some people wouldn't consider owning a bar the height of morality."

"Morality?" David exploded. "We've never once been cited for underage drinking, and we're known across the country for bringing the best in Celtic music to the States."

"Dad, it's all right," Kat said soothingly. "And you...shut the hell up," she said, and elbowed her brother in the ribs. "Both of you—play nice."

Skyler held her breath as Frazier walked away and headed upstairs, probably to make sure his girlfriend hadn't heard her name evoked in the family fight.

It was probably best. Her husband and son were always at each other's throats, it seemed, while Kat was the family peacemaker, who could ease the toughest situation. She'd gone through her own period of teenage rebellion on the way to becoming an adult, and getting along with her had been hell for a while. But that was over, and now Kat was like Skyler's miracle of optimism, beautiful and sweet. A dove of peace.

She wanted to think that she was a dove of peace herself, but she wasn't and she knew it.

She was just a chicken. A chicken who hated harsh tones and the sounds of disagreement. Sometimes she was even a lying chicken, for the sake of keeping the peace.

But this was Christmas. She had to say something to David. He really shouldn't be using that tone—not here, not now and not with Frazier.

Frazier just... He just wasn't a child anymore. He didn't always act like an adult, but that didn't make him a child. David was far too quick to judge and to judge harshly, while she was too quick to let anything go, all for the sake of peace. There had been hundreds of times through the years when she should have stepped in, put her foot down. She'd failed. So how could she blame others now for doing what she'd always allowed them to do?

At last she stepped out of the shadows of the hallway and looked at the tree. "It's lovely," she said.

"It's crooked," David told her, his mouth set in a hard line.

"It's fine," she insisted softly.

"That's what I say, Mom," Kat said. She was twenty-two, as well, their second-born child and Frazier's twin. She walked over to Skyler and set an arm around her mother's shoulders. "I'll get going on the lights."

"I'll get the lights up," David said. "You can take it from there."

Skyler looked at her daughter. Kat could still show her temper on occasion, but she could stand against her father with less friction than Frazier. Maybe the problem with David and Frazier was a testosterone thing, like in a pride of lions. There was only room for one alpha male.

But this was Christmas. Couldn't they all get along? At least on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day? Other people counted their blessings; shouldn't they do the same? They had three beautiful, healthy children: Jamie, their youngest son, was sixteen, and then there were the twins. None of them had ever been in serious trouble—just that one prank of Jamie's, and that should be enough for anyone, shouldn't it?

"Mom," Kat said, "I'll decorate. Anyone who wants to can just pitch in."

David was already struggling with the lights, but he paused to look at Skyler for a moment. He still had the powerful look of a young man. His hair was thick and dark, with just a few strands of what she privately felt were a very dignified gray. She had been the one to pass on the rich red hair to her children, but the emerald-gold eyes that were so bewitching on Kat had come from her father.

Where have the years gone? she wondered, looking at him. He was still a good-looking and interesting man, but it was easy to forget that sometimes. And sometimes it was easy to wonder if being married wasn't more a habit than a commitment of the heart.

Skyler winced. She loved her family. Desperately. Too desperately?

David cursed beneath his breath, then exploded. "They can put a man on the moon, but they can't invent Christmas lights that don't tangle and make you check every freaking bulb."

"Dad, they do make lights where the whole string doesn't go if one bulb is blown. Our lights are just old," Kat explained patiently.

Skyler looked at her daughter, feeling a rush of emotion that threatened to become tears. She loved her children equally, but at this moment Kat seemed exceptionally precious. She was stunning, of course, with her long auburn hair. Tall and slim—though, like many young women, she was convinced she needed to take off ten pounds. Those eyes like gold-flecked emeralds. And she had an amazing head on her shoulders.

"Yeah, well...if we stayed in Boston and prepared for Christmas..." David muttered.

Not fair, she thought. He was the one who had found this place years ago and he'd fallen in love with it first. Once upon a time, they had come here often. The kids had loved to leave the city and drive the two hours out to the country. They never left the state, but they went from the sea to the mountains. And everyone loved it.

She realized why she had wanted to come here so badly. It was a way to keep her family around her. It was a way to make sure that if her son and his father got into a fight over the Christmas turkey, Frazier couldn't just get up and drive off to a friend's house. Was it wrong to cling so desperately to her children and her dream of family?

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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