



The Twilight Before Christmas: A Novel (Sea Haven: Drake Sisters Book 2)

By Christine Feehan

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Seven sisters...and a legacy of magical secrets.

Bestselling novelist Kate Drake is one of seven sisters gifted with amazing powers of witchcraft. Returning home in time for her northern California town's annual Christmas pageant, Kate catches the spirit of the season and decides to open a bookstore in a charming but run-down historic mill. Decorated former U.S. Army Ranger Matt Granite, now a local contractor, doesn't mind working in the undeniably eerie house -- not if it means getting closer to Kate. There's something about the quiet, sensual woman that powerfully attracts him.

When an earthquake cracks the mill's foundation and reveals a burial crypt, Kate senses that a centuries-old evil has been unleashed and that it's coming after her. Though Matt vows to guard her from dusk till dawn, Kate knows she will have to summon all of her and her sisters' powers to battle the darkness threatening to destroy both Christmas and the gift of soul-searing passion her hometown hero wants her to keep forever....

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Set in a homey American small town, where the annual community Christmas pageant is the highlight of the year, *The Twilight Before Christmas* treads ground that may feel unfamiliar at first to fans of Christine Feehan's gothic Dark series (*Dark Melody*, etc.). But things are not always what they appear. In the hands of this imaginative author, something as harmless as a spell of bad weather—specifically, fog in a village that never has fog—rapidly develops into an evil entity that uses Christmas decorations as deadly weapons to prevent said pageant. It's up to Kate Drake and her six sisters (witches all) to save the festivities and the town, with the help of ex-Army Ranger Matt Granite and a few other heroic hunks. As is typical of Feehan's novels, dark suspense and sensual romance co-exist here in unlikely but perfect harmony.

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About the Author

Christine Feehan is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of thirty novels, including the Carpathians, the Ghostwalkers, the Leopard People, and the Drake Sisters series. Her books have been published in multiple languages and in many formats including palm pilot, audiobook, and ebook. She has been featured in *Time* magazine and *Newsweek*, and lives in Cobb, California.

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Chapter One

'Twas the twilight before Christmas and all through the lands

Not a thing has occurred that was not of my hand

"Don't say it. Don't say it. Don't say it," Danny Granite muttered the mantra under his breath as he sat in the truck watching his older brother carefully selecting hydro-organic tomatoes from Old Man Mars's fruit stand. Danny glanced at the keys, assuring himself the truck was running and all that his brother had to do was leap in and gun it. He leaned out the window, gave a halfhearted wave to the elderly man, and scowled at his brother. "Get a move on, Matt. I'm starving here."

Matt grimaced at him, then smiled with smooth charm at the old man. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Mars," he said cheerfully as he handed over several bills and lifted the bag of tomatoes. "Less than two weeks before Christmas. I'm looking forward to the pageant this year."

Danny groaned. A black scowl settled over Old Man Mars's face. His craggy brows drew together in a straight, thick line. He grunted in disgust and spat on the ground.

The smile on Matt's face widened into a boyish grin as he hurried around the bed of the pickup truck to yank open the driver-side door. Almost before settling into his seat, he cranked up the radio so that "Jingle Bells" blared loudly from the speakers.

"You'd better move it, Matt," Dan muttered nervously, looking out the window, back toward the fruit stand. "He's arming himself. You just had to wish him a Merry Christmas, didn't you? You know he hates that pageant. And you know very well playing that music is adding insult to injury!"

The first tomato came hurtling toward the back window of the truck as Matt hit the gas and the truck leaped forward, fishtailing, tires throwing dirt into the air. The tomato landed with deadly accuracy, splattering juice, seed, and pulp across the back window. Several more missiles hit the tailgate as the truck tore out of the parking lot and raced down the street.

Danny scowled at his brother. "You just had to wish him Merry Christmas. Everyone knows he hates Christmas. He kicked the shepherd last year during the midnight pageant. Now he'll be more ornery than ever. If you'd just avoided the word, we might have gone unscathed this year, but now he'll have to retaliate."

Matt's massive shoulders shook as he laughed. "As I recall you played the shepherd last year. He didn't hurt you that bad, Danny boy. A little kick on the shin is good for you. It builds character."

"You only think it's funny because it wasn't your shin." Danny rubbed his leg as if it still hurt nearly a year later.

"You need to toughen up," Matt pointed out. He took the highway, a thin ribbon of a road, twisting and turning along the cliffs above the ocean. It was impossible to go fast on the switchbacks although Matt knew the road well. He maneuvered around a sharp curve, setting up for the next sharp turn. It ran uphill and nearly doubled back. The mountain swelled on his right, a high bank grown over with emerald green grasses and breathtaking colors from the explosion of wildflowers. On his left, a narrow ribbon of a trail meandered along the cliffs to drop away to the wide expanse of blue ocean with its whitecaps and booming waves.

"Oh, my God! That's Kate Drake," Danny said gleefully, pointing to a woman on a horse, riding along the narrow trail on the side of the road.

"That can't be her." Matt hastily rolled down his window and craned his neck, gawking unashamedly. He could only see the back of the rider, who was dressed all in white and had thick chestnut hair that flamed red in the sunshine. His heart pounded. His mouth went dry. Only Kate Drake could get away with wearing white and riding a horse so close to the side of the road. It had to be her. He slowed the truck to get a better look as he went by, turning down the radio at the same time.

"Matt! Watch where you're going," Danny yelled, bracing himself as the truck flew off the road and rolled straight into the grass-covered bank. It halted abruptly. Both men were slammed back in their seats and held prisoner by their seat belts.

"Damn!" Matt roared. He turned to his brother. "Are you all right?"

"No, I'm not all right, you big lug, you ran us off the road gawking at Kate Drake again. I hurt everywhere. I need a neck brace, and I think I might have broken my little finger." Danny held up his hand, gripping his wrist and emitting groans loudly.

"Oh shut up," Matt said rudely.

"Matthew Granite. Good heavens, are you hurt? I have a cell phone and can go out to the bluff and call for help."

Kate's voice was everything he remembered. Soft. Melodic. Meant for long nights and satin sheets. Matt turned his head to look at her. To drink her in. It had been four long years since he'd last spoken with her. She stood beside his truck, reins looped in her hand, her large green eyes anxious. He couldn't help but notice

she had the most beautiful skin. Flawless. Perfect. It looked so soft, he wanted to stroke his finger down her cheek just to see if she was real.

"I'm fine, Kate." It was a miracle he found his voice. His tongue seemed to stick to the roof of his mouth. "I must have tried to take the turn a little too fast."

A snort of derision came from Danny's side of the truck. "You were driving like a turtle. You just weren't looking where you were going."

The toe of Matt's boot landed solidly against his brother's shin, and Danny let out a hair-raising yowl.

"No wonder Old Man Mars wanted to kick you last year," Matt muttered under his breath.

"Daniel? Are you hurt?" Kate sounded anxious, but her fascinating lower lip quivered as if close to laughter.

Determined to get her away from his brother, Matt hastily shoved the door open with more force than necessary. The door thumped soundly against Kate's legs. She jumped back, the horse half reared, and Danny, damn him, laughed like the hyena he was.

Matt groaned. It never failed. He was a decorated U.S. Army Ranger, had been in the service for years, running covert missions where his life depended on his physical skills and his cool demeanor, yet he always managed to feel clumsy and rough in front of Kate. He unfolded his large frame, towering over her, feeling like a giant. Kate was always perfect. Poised. Articulate. Graceful. There she was, looking beautiful dressed all in white with her hair attractively windblown. She was the only person in the world who could make him lose his cool and raise his temperature at the same time just by smiling.

"Is Danny really hurt?" Kate asked, turning her head slightly while she tried to calm the nervous horse.

It gave Matt a great view of her figure. He drank her in, his hungry gaze drifting over her soft curves. He'd always loved watching her walk away from him. Nobody moved in the same sexy way she did. She looked so proper, yet she had that come-on walk and the bedroom eyes and glorious hair a man would want to feel sliding over his skin all night long. He just managed to stifle a groan. How had he not known, sensed that Kate was back in town. His radar must be failing him.

"Danny's fine, Kate," Matt assured her.

She sent him a quick smile over her shoulder, her eyes sparkling at him. "Just how many accidents have you been in, Matt? It seems that on the rare occasions I've seen you, over the last few years, your poor vehicle has been crunched."

It was true, but it was her fault. Kate Drake acted as some sort of catalyst for strange behavior. He was good at everything. *Everything*. Unless Kate was around -- then he could barely manage to speak properly.

The horse moved restlessly, demanding Kate's immediate attention, giving Matt time to realize his jeans and blue chambray work shirt were streaked with dirt, sawdust, and a powdery cement mixture in complete contrast to her immaculate white attire. He took the opportunity to slap the dust from his clothing, sending up a gray cloud that enveloped Kate as she turned back toward him. She coughed delicately, fluttering her long feathery lashes to keep the dust from stinging her eyes. Another derisive hoot came from Danny's direction.

Matt sent his brother a look that promised instant death before turning back to Kate. "I had no idea you were in town. The town gossips let me down." Inez at the grocery store had mentioned Sarah was in town, as well as Hannah and Abigail, three of her six sisters, but Inez hadn't said a word about Kate.

"Sarah came back for a visit, and you know how my family is, we get together as often as possible." She shrugged, a simple enough gesture, but on her it was damned sexy. "I've been in London doing research for my latest thriller." She laughed softly. The sound played right down his spine and did interesting things to his body. "London fog is always so perfect for a scary setting. Before that it was Borneo." Kate traveled the world, researching and writing her bestselling novels and murder mysteries. She was so beautiful it hurt to look at her, so sophisticated he felt primitive in her presence. She was so sexy he always had the desire to turn caveman and toss her over his shoulder and carry her off to his private lair. "Sarah's engaged to Damon Wilder." She tilted her head slightly and patted the horse's neck again. "Have you met him?"

"No, but everyone is talking about it. No one expected Sarah to get married."

Matt watched the way the sunlight kissed her hair, turning the silky strands into a blazing mass of temptation. His gaze followed her hand stroking the horse's neck, and he noted the absence of a ring with relief.

Danny cleared his throat. He leaned out the driver's side. "You're drooling, bro." He whispered it in an overloud voice.

Without missing a beat, Matt kicked the door closed. "Are you going to be staying very long this visit?" He held his breath waiting for her answer. To make matters worse, Danny snickered. Matt sent up a silent vow that their parents would have one less child to fuss over before the...

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