



A Very Gothic Christmas (Holiday Classics)

By Christine Feehan, Melanie George

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A Very Gothic Christmas (Holiday Classics) By Christine Feehan, Melanie George Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #1664780 in Books
- Published on: 2002-11-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.75" h x 1.50" w x 4.19" l, .44 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 432 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"A magnificent storyteller!"--Romantic Times

About the Author

Christine Feehan is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of more than forty novels, including her popular series featuring the Carpathians, the Ghostwalkers, the Leopard People, and the Drake Sisters. She lives in Cobb, California.

Before she discovered romantic fiction, Melanie George was the CEO of an executive-search consulting firm. Her most important job, however, has always been that of mother, to both a much-adored son and two precious dogs. When she is not writing, she is trying to restore her hundred-year-old house and has come to the conclusion that paint speckles will more than likely be a permanent part of her person.

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Chapter One

Jessica Fitzpatrick woke up screaming, her heart pounding out a rhythm of terror. Fear was a living, breathing entity in the darkness of her room. The weight of it crushed her, held her helpless; she was unable to move. She could taste it in her mouth, and feel it coursing through her bloodstream. Around her, the air seemed so thick that her lungs burned for oxygen. She knew something monstrous was stirring deep in the bowels of the earth. For a moment she lay frozen, her ears straining to hear the murmur of voices rising and falling, chanting words in an ancient tongue that should never be spoken. Red, glowing eyes searched through the darkness, summoning her, beckoning her closer. She felt the power of those eyes as they neared, focused on her, and came ever closer. Her own eyes flew open, the need to flee was paramount in her mind.

The entire room lurched, flinging her from the narrow bunk to the floor. At once the cold air brought her out of her nightmare and into the realization that they were not safe in their beds at home, but in the cabin of a wildly pitching boat in the middle of a ferocious storm. The craft, tossed from wave to powerful wave, was taking a pounding.

Jessica scrambled to her feet, gripping the edge of the bunk as she dragged herself toward the two children, Tara and Trevor Wentworth, who clung together, their faces pale and frightened. Tara screamed, her terrified gaze locked on Jessica. Jessica managed to make it halfway to the twins before the next wild bucking sent her to floor again.

"Trevor, get your life jacket back on this minute!" She reached them by crawling on her hands and knees, and then curled a supporting arm around each of them. "Don't be afraid, we'll be fine."

The boat rose on a wave, teetered and slid fast, tossing the three of them in all directions. Salt water poured in a torrent onto the deck and raced down the steps into the cabin, covering the floor with an inch of ice-cold water. Tara screamed, and clutched at her brother's arm, desperately trying to help him buckle his life jacket. "It's him. He's doing this, he's trying to kill us."

Jessica gasped, horrified. "Tara! Nobody controls the weather. It's a storm. Plain and simple, just a storm."

Captain Long will get us safely to the island."

"He's hideous. A monster. And I don't want to go." Tara covered her face with her hands and sobbed. "I want to go home. Please take me home, Jessie."

Jessica tested Trevor's life jacket to make certain he was safe. "Don't talk that way, Tara. Trev, stay here with Tara while I go see what I can do to help." She had to shout to make herself heard in the howling wind and booming sea.

Tara flung herself into Jessica's arms. "Don't leave me -- we'll die. I just know it -- we're all going to die just like Mama Rita did."

Trevor wrapped his arms around his twin sister. "No, we're not, sis, don't cry. Captain Long has been in terrible storms before, lots of them," he assured. He looked up at Jessica with his piercing blue eyes. "Right, Jessie?"

"You're exactly right, Trevor," she agreed. Jessica had a firm hold on the banister and began to make her way up the stairs to the deck.

Rain fell in sheets; black clouds churned and boiled in the sky. The wind rose to an eerie shriek. Jessica held her breath, watched as Long struggled to navigate the boat through the heavier waves, taking them ever closer to the island. It seemed the age-old struggle between man and nature. Slowly, through the sheets of rain, the solid mass of the island began to take shape. Salt water sprayed and foamed off the rocks but the sea was calmer as they approached the shore. She knew it was only the captain's knowledge of the region and his expertise that allowed him to guide the craft to the dock in the terrible storm.

The rain was pouring from the sky. The clouds were so black and heavy overhead that the night seemed unrelentingly dark. Yet Jessica caught glimpses of the moon, an eerie sight with the swirling black of the clouds veiling its light.

"Let's go, Jessie," Captain Long yelled. "Bring up the kids and your luggage. I want you off this boat now." The words were nearly lost in the ferocity of the storm, but his frantic beckoning was plain.

She hurried, tossing Trevor most of the packs while she helped Tara up the stairs and across the slippery deck. Captain Long lifted Tara to the dock before aiding Trevor to shore. He caught Jessica's arm in a tight grip and pulled her close so he could be heard. "I don't like this -- Jess, I hope he's expecting you. Once I leave you, you're stuck. You know he isn't the most pleasant man."

"Don't worry," she patted his arm, her stomach churning. "I'll call if we need you. Are you certain you don't want to stay overnight?"

"I'll feel safer out there," he gestured toward the water.

Jessica waved him off and turned to look up at the island while she waited to get her land legs back. It had been seven years since she'd last been to the island. Her memories of it were the things of nightmares. Looking up toward the ridge, she half expected to see a fiery inferno, with red and orange flames towering to the skies, but there was only the black night and the rain. The house that once had sat at the top of the cliff overlooking the ocean was long gone, reduced to a pile of ashes.

In the dark, the vegetation was daunting, a foreboding sight. The weak rays of light from the cloud-covered moon were mottled as they fell across the ground, creating a strange, unnatural pattern. The island was wild with heavy timber and thick with brush; the wind set the trees and bushes dancing in a macabre fashion. Naked branches bowed and scraped together with a grating sound. Heavy evergreens whirled madly, sending sharp needles flying through the air.

Resolutely, Jessica took a deep breath and picked up her pack, handing Trevor a flashlight to lead the way. "Come on, kids, let's go see your father."

The rain slashed down at them, drenching them, drops piercing like sharp icicles right through their clothes to their skin. Heads down, they began to trudge their way up the steep stone steps leading away from the sea toward the interior of the island where Dillon Wentworth hid from the world.

Returning to the island brought back a flood of memories of the good times -- her mother, Rita Fitzpatrick, landing the job as housekeeper and nanny to the famous Dillon Wentworth. Jessica had been so thrilled. She had been nearly thirteen, already old enough to appreciate the rising star, a musician who would take his place among the greatest recording legends. Dillon spent a great deal of his time on the road, touring, or in the studio, recording, but when he was home, he was usually with his children or hanging out in the kitchen with Rita and Jessica. She had known Dillon in the good times, during five years of incredible magic.

"Jessie?" Trevor's young voice interrupted her reflection. "Does he know we're coming?"

Jessica met the boy's steady gaze. At thirteen, Trevor had to be well aware that if they had been expected, they wouldn't be walking by themselves in the dead of night in the middle of a storm. Someone would have met them by car on the road at the boathouse.

"He's your father, Trevor, and it's coming up on Christmas. He spends far too much time alone." Jessica slicked back her rain-wet hair and squared her shoulders. "It isn't good for him." And Dillon Wentworth had a responsibility to his children. He needed to look after them, to protect them.

The twins didn't remember their father the way she did. He had been so alive. So handsome. So everything. His life had been magical. His good looks, his talent, his ready laugh and famous blue eyes. Everyone had wanted him. Dillon had lived his life in the spotlight, a white-hot glare of tabloids and television. Of stadiums and clubs. The energy, the power of Dillon Wentworth were astonishing, indescribable, when he was performing. He burned hot and bright on stage, a man with a poet's heart and a devil's talent when he played his guitar and sang with his edgy, smoky voice.

But at home...Jessica also remembered Vivian Wentworth with her brittle laugh and red, talon-tipped fingers. The glaze in her eyes when she was cloudy with drugs, when she was staggering under the effects of alcohol, when she flew into a rage and smashed glass and ripped pictures out of frames. The slow, terrible descent into the madness of drugs and the occult. Jessica would never forget Vivian's friends who visited when Dillon wasn't there. The candles, the orgies, the chanting, always the chanting. And men. Lots of men in the Wentworth bed.

Without warning, Tara screamed, turning to fling herself at Jessica, nearly knocking her off the stairs. Jessica caught her firmly, wrapping her arms around the girl and holding her close. They were both so cold they were shivering uncontrollably. "What is it, honey?" Jessica whispered into the child's ear, soothing her, rocking her, there on the steep stairs with the wind slashing them to ribbons.

"I saw something, eyes glowing, staring at us. They were red eyes, Jess. Red, like a monster...or a devil." The girl shuddered and gripped Jessica harder.

"Where, Tara?" Jessica sounded calm even though her stomach was knotted with tension. Red eyes. She had seen those eyes.

"There," Tara pointed without looking, keeping her face hidden against Jessica. "Through the trees, something was staring at us."

"There are animals on the island, honey," Jessica soothed, but she was straining to see into the darkness. Trevor valiantly tried to shine the small circle of light toward the spot his twin had indicated, but the light couldn't penetrate the pouring rain.

"It wasn't a dog, it wasn't, Jessie, it was some kind of demon. Please take me home, I don't want to be here. I'm so afraid of him. He's so hideous."

Jessica took a deep breath and let it out slowly, hoping to stay calm when she suddenly wanted to turn and run herself. There were too many memories here, crowding in, reaching for her with greedy claws. "He was scarred terribly in a fire, Tara, you know that." It took effort to keep her voice steady.

"I know he hates us. He hates us so much he doesn't ever want to see us. And I don't want to see him. He *murdered* people." Tara flung the bitter accusation at Jessica. The howling wind caught the words and took them out over the island, spreading them like a disease.

Jessica tightened her grip on Tara, gave her a short, impatient shake. "I *never* want to hear you say such a terrible thing again, not ever, do you understand me? Do you know why your father went into the house that night? Tara, you're too intelligent to listen to gossip and anonymous phone callers."

"I saw the papers. It was in all the papers!" Tara wailed.

Jessica was furious. *Furious*. Why would someone suddenly, after seven years, send old newspapers and tabloids to the twins? Tara had innocently opened the package wrapped in a plain brown paper. The tabloids had been brutal, filled with accusations of drugs, jealousy, and the occult. The speculation that Dillon had caught his wife in bed with another man, that there had been an orgy of sex, drugs, devil worship, and murder, had been far too titillating for the scandal sheets not to play it up long before the actual facts could come out. Jessica had found Tara sobbing pitifully in her room. Whoever had seen fit to enlighten the twins about their father's past had called the house repeatedly whispering horrible things to Trevor and Tara, insisting their father had murdered several people including their mother.

"Your father went into a burning house to save you kids. He thought you were both inside. Everyone who had gotten out tried to stop him, but he fought them, got away, and went into a burning inferno for you. That isn't hate, Tara. That's love. I remember that day, every detail." She pressed her fingers to her pounding temples. "I can't ever forget it no matter how much I try."

And she had tried. She had tried desperately to drown out the sounds of chanting. The vision of the black lights and candles. The scent of the incense. She remembered the shouting, the raised voices, the sound of the gun. And the flames. The terrible greedy flames. The blanket of smoke, so thick one couldn't see. And the smells never went away. Sometimes she still woke up to the smell of burning flesh.

Trevor put his arm around her. "Don't cry, Jessica. We're already here, we're all freezing, let's just go. Let's have Christmas with Dad, make a new beginning, try to get along with him this time."

Jessica smiled at him through the rain and the tears. Trevor. So much like his father and he didn't even realize it. "We're going to have a wonderful Christmas, Tara, you wait and see."

They continued up the stairs until the ground leveled out and Jessica found the familiar path winding through the thick timber to the estate. As islands went, in the surrounding sea between Washington and Canada, it was small and remote, no ferry even traveled to it. That was the way Dillon had preferred it, wanting privacy for his family on his own personal island. In the old days, there had been guards and dogs. Now there were shadows and haunting memories that tore at her soul.

In the old days the island had been alive with people, bustling with activities; now it was silent, only a caretaker lived somewhere on the island in one of the smaller houses. Jessica's mother had told her that Dillon tolerated only one older man on his island on a regular basis. Even in the wind and rain, Jessica couldn't help noticing the boathouse was ill-kept and the road leading around and up toward the house was overgrown, showing little use. Where there had always been several boats docked at the pier, none were in sight, although Dillon must still have had one in the boathouse.

The path led through the thick trees. The wind was whipping branches so that overhead the canopy of trees swayed precariously. The rain had a much more difficult time penetrating through the treetops to reach them, but drops hitting the pathway plopped loudly. Small animals rustled in the bushes as they passed.

"I don't think we're in Kansas anymore," Trevor quipped, with a shaky smile.

Jessica immediately hugged him to her. "Lions and tigers and bears, oh, my," she quoted just to watch the grin spread across his face.

"I can't believe he lives here." Tara sniffed.

"It's beautiful during the day," Jessica insisted, "give it a chance. It's such a wonderful place. The island's small, but it has everything."

They followed a bend, stumbling a little over the uneven ground. Trevor's flashlight cast a meager circle of light on the ground in front of them, which only served to make the forest darker and more frightening as it surrounded them. "Are you certain you know the way, Jess? You haven't been here in years," he asked.

"I know this path with my eyes closed," Jessica assured him. Which wasn't exactly the truth. In the old days, the path had been well manicured and had veered off toward the cliff. This one was overgrown and led through the thick part of the forest toward the interior of the island, rising steadily uphill. "If you listen, you can hear the water rushing off to our left. The stream is large right now, but in the summer it isn't so strong or deep. There are ferns all along the bank." She wanted to keep talking, hoping it would keep fear at bay.

All three of them were breathing hard from the climb, and they paused to catch their breath under a particularly large tree that helped to shelter them from the driving rain. Trevor shined the light up the massive tree trunk and into the canopy, making light patterns to amuse Tara. As he whirled the light back down the trunk, the small circle illuminated the ground a few feet beyond where they were standing.

Jessica stiffened, jammed a fist in her mouth to keep from screaming, and yanked the flashlight from Trevor

to shine it back to the spot he had accidentally lit up. For one terrible moment she could hardly breathe. She was certain she had seen someone staring at them. Someone in a heavily hooded long black cloak that swirled around the shadowy figure as if he were a vampire from one of the movies the twins were always watching. Whoever it was had been staring malevolently at them. He had been holding something in his hands that glinted in the flash of light.

Her hand was shaking badly but she managed to find the place where he had been with the flashlight's small circle of light. It was empty. There was nothing, no humans, no vampires in hooded cloaks. She continued to search through the trees, but there was nothing.

Trevor reached out and caught her wrist, pulling her hand gently to him, taking the flashlight. "What did you see, Jess?" He sounded very calm.

She looked at them then, ashamed of showing such naked fear, ashamed the island could reduce to her to that terrified teenager she once had been. She had hoped for so much: to bring them all together, to find a way to bring Dillon back to the world. But instead she was hallucinating. That shadowy figure belonged in her nightmares, not in the middle of a terrible rainstorm.

The twins were staring up at her for direction. Jessica shook her head. "I don't know, a shadow maybe. Let's just get to the house." She pushed them ahead of her, trying to guard their backs, trying to see in front of them, on both sides.

With every step she took, she was more convinced she hadn't seen a shadow. She hadn't been hallucinating. She was certain something, *someone* had been watching them. "Hurry, Trevor, I'm cold," she urged.

As they topped the rise, the sight of the house took her breath away. It was huge, rambling, several stories high with round turrets and great chimneys. The original house had been completely destroyed in the fire and here, at the top of the rise, surrounded by timber, Dillon had built the house of his boyhood dreams. He had loved the Gothic architecture, the lines and carvings, the vaulted ceilings, and intricate passageways. She remembered him talking with such enthusiasm, spreading pictures on the counter in the kitchen for her and her mother to admire. Jessica had teased him unmercifully about being a frustrated architect and he had always laughed and replied he belonged in a castle or a palace, or that he was a Renaissance man. He would chase her around with an imaginary sword and talk of terrible traps in secret passageways.

Rita Fitzpatrick had cried over this house, telling Jessica how Dillon had clung to his dreams of music and how he had claimed that having the house built was symbolic of his rise from the ashes. But at some point during Dillon's months at the hospital, after he'd endured the pain and agony of such terrible burns and after he realized that his life would never return to normal, the house had become for him, and all who knew him, a symbol of the darkness that had crept into his soul. Looking at it, Jessica felt fear welling inside her, a foreboding that Dillon was a very changed man.

They stared at the great hulk, half expecting to see a ghost push open one of the shutters and warn them off. The house was dark with the exception of two windows on the third story facing them, giving the effect of two eyes staring back at them. Winged creatures seemed to be swarming up its sides. The mottled light from the moon lent the stone carvings a certain animation.

"I don't want to go in there," Tara said, backing away. "It looks..." she trailed off, slipping her hand into her brother's.

"Evil," Trevor supplied. "It does, Jess, like one of those haunted houses in the old movies. It looks like it's staring at us."

Jessica bit at her lower lip, glancing behind them, her gaze searching, wary. "You two have seen too many scary movies. No more for either of you." The house looked far worse than anything she had ever seen in a movie. It looked like a brooding hulk, waiting silently for unsuspecting prey. Gargoyles crouched in the eaves, staring with blank eyes at them. She shook her head to clear the image. "No more movies, you're making me see it that way." She forced a small, uneasy laugh. "Mass hallucination."

"We're a small mass, but it works for me," there was a trace of humor in Trevor's voice. "I'm freezing; we may as well go inside."

No one moved. They continued to stare up at the house in silence, at the strange animating effect of the wind and the moon on the carvings. Only the sound of the relentless rain filled the night. Jessica could feel her heart slamming hard in her chest. They couldn't go back. There was something in the woods. There was no boat to go back to, only the wind and piercing rain. But the house seemed to stare at them with that same malevolence as the figure in the woods.

Dillon had no inkling they were near. She thought it would be a relief to reach him, that she would feel safe, but instead, she was frightened of his anger. Frightened of what he would say in front of the twins. He wouldn't be pleased that she hadn't warned him of their arrival, but if she had called, he would have told her not to come. He always told her not to come. Although she tried to console herself with the fact that his last few letters had been more cheerful and more interested in the twins, she couldn't deceive herself into believing he would welcome them.

Trevor was the first to move, patting Jessica on the back in reassurance as he took a step around her toward the house. Tara followed him, and Jessica brought up the rear. At some point the area around the house had been landscaped, the bushes shaped, and beds of flowers planted, but it looked as though it hadn't been tended in quite a while. A large sculpture of leaping dolphins rose up out of a pond on the far side of the front yard. There were statues of fierce jungle cats strewn about the wild edges of the yard, peering out of the heavier brush.

Tara moved closer to Jessica, a small sound of alarm escaping her as they gained the slate walkway. All of them were violently shivering, their teeth were chattering, and Jessica told herself it was the rain and cold. They made it to within yards of the wraparound porch with its long thick columns when they heard it. A low, fierce growl welled up. It came out of the wind and rain, impossible to pinpoint but swelling in volume.

Tara's fingers dug into Jessica's arms. "What do we do?" she whimpered. Jessica could feel the child shivering convulsively. "We keep walking. Trevor, have your flashlight handy -- you may need it to hit the thing over the head if it attacks us." She continued walking toward the house, taking the twins with her, moving slowly but steadily, not wanting to trigger a guard dog's aggressive behavior by running.

The growl rose to a roar of warning. Lights unexpectedly flooded the lawn and porch, revealing the large German shepherd, head down, teeth bared, snarling at them. He stood in the thick brush just off the porch, his gaze focused on them as they gained the steps. The dog took a step toward them just as the front door was flung open.

Tara burst into tears. Jessica couldn't tell if they were tears of relief or fear. She embraced the girl protectively.

"What the hell?" A slender man with shaggy blond hair greeted them from the doorway. "Shut up, Toby," he commanded the dog.

"Get them the hell off my property," another voice roared from inside the house.

Jessica stared at the man in the doorway. "Paul?" There was utter relief in her voice. Her shoulders sagged and suddenly tears burned in her own eyes. "Thank God you're here! I need to get the kids into a hot shower and warm them up immediately. We're freezing."

Paul Ritter, a former band member and long-time friend of Dillon Wentworth, gaped at her and the twins. "My God, Jess, it's you, all grown up. And these are Dillon's children?" He hastily stepped back to allow them entrance. "Dillon, we have more company. We need heat, hot showers, and hot chocolate!" As wet as she was, Paul gathered Jessica in his arms. "I can't believe you three are here. It's so good to see you. Dillon didn't say a word to me that you were coming. I would have met you at the dock." He shut the door on the wind and rain. The sudden stillness silenced him.

Jessica stared up at the shadowy figure on the staircase. For a moment she stopped breathing. Dillon always had that effect on her. He lounged against the wall, looking elegant and lazy, classic Dillon. The light spilled across his face, his angel's face. Thick blue-black hair fell in waves to his shoulders, as shiny as a raven's wing. His sculptured face, masculine and strong, had that hint of five o'clock shadow along his jaw. His mouth was so sensual, his teeth amazingly white. But it was his eyes, vivid blue, stunningly blue, burning with intensity that always mesmerized everyone, including Jessica.

Jessica felt Tara stir beside her, staring up in awe at her father. Trevor made a soft sound, almost of distress. The blue eyes stared down at the three of them. She saw joy, a welcoming expression of surprise dawning on Dillon's face. He stepped forward and gripped the banister with both hands, a heart-stopping grin on his face. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt and his bare hands and arms were starkly revealed as if the spotlight had picked up and magnified every detail. Webs of scarred flesh covered his arms, wrists, and hands. His fingers were also scarred and misshapen. The contrast between his face and his body was so great it was shocking. That angel's face and the twisted, ridged arms and hands.

Tara shuddered visibly and flung herself into Jessica's arms. At once Dillon slipped back into the shadows, the welcoming smile fading as if it had never been. The burning blue eyes had gone from joyful to ice-cold instantly. His gaze raked Jessica's upturned face, slid over the twins, and came back to her. His sensual mouth tightened ominously. "They're freezing, Paul; explanations can wait. Please show them to the bathrooms so they can get out of those wet clothes. You'll need to prepare a couple more bedrooms." He started up the darkened stairway, taking care to stay well in the shadows. "And send Jess up to me the minute she's warm enough." His voice was still that perfect blend of smoke and edginess, a lethal combination that could brush over her skin like the touch of fingers.

Her heart beating in her throat, Jessica stared after him. She turned to look at Paul. "Why didn't you tell me? He can't play, can he? My God, he can't play his music." She knew what music meant to Dillon. It was his life. His soul. "I didn't know. My mother never brought me back. She came the one time with the twins, but I was ill. When I tried to see him on my own, he refused."

"I'm sorry." Tara was crying again. "I didn't mean to do that. I couldn't stop looking at his hands. They didn't look human. It was *repulsive*. I didn't mean to do that, I didn't. I'm sorry Jessie."

Jessica knew the child needed comfort badly. Tara felt guilty and was tired, frightened, and very cold.

Shaken by what she had discovered, Jessica had to fight back her own tears. "It's all right, honey, we'll find a way to fix this. You need a hot shower and a bed. Everything will be better in the morning." She looked at Trevor. He was staring up the stairway after his father as if mesmerized. "Trev? You okay?"

He nodded, clearing his throat. "I'm fine, but I don't think he is."

"That's why we're here," she pointed out. Jessica looked at Paul over Tara's bent head. She didn't believe for a minute that they'd find a way to fix the damage Tara had done, and looking at Paul's face, she guessed, neither did he. She forced a smile. "Tara, you might not remember him, you were just a little girl, but this is Paul Ritter. He was one of the original members of the *HereAfter* band, right from the very beginning. He's a very good friend of your family."

Paul grinned at the girl. "The last time I saw you, you were five years old with a mop of curly black hair." He held out his hand to Trevor. "You had the same mop and the same curls."

"Still do," Trevor said, grinning back.

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Edward Yung:

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(Holiday Classics), you can enjoy both. It is great combination right, you still would like to miss it? What kind of hang type is it? Oh can occur its mind hangout folks. What? Still don't buy it, oh come on its identified as reading friends.

John Mendoza:

As we know that book is very important thing to add our knowledge for everything. By a reserve we can know everything we want. A book is a pair of written, printed, illustrated or even blank sheet. Every year seemed to be exactly added. This e-book A Very Gothic Christmas (Holiday Classics) was filled in relation to science. Spend your spare time to add your knowledge about your research competence. Some people has different feel when they reading some sort of book. If you know how big good thing about a book, you can really feel enjoy to read a book. In the modern era like currently, many ways to get book that you simply wanted.

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