

A  
*Christmas*  
W O N D E R

AN ISLAND CHRISTMAS SERIES • BOOK 2



HAYLEY  
SUMMERS

# A Christmas Wonder

An Island Christmas Series

Book Two

Hayley Summers



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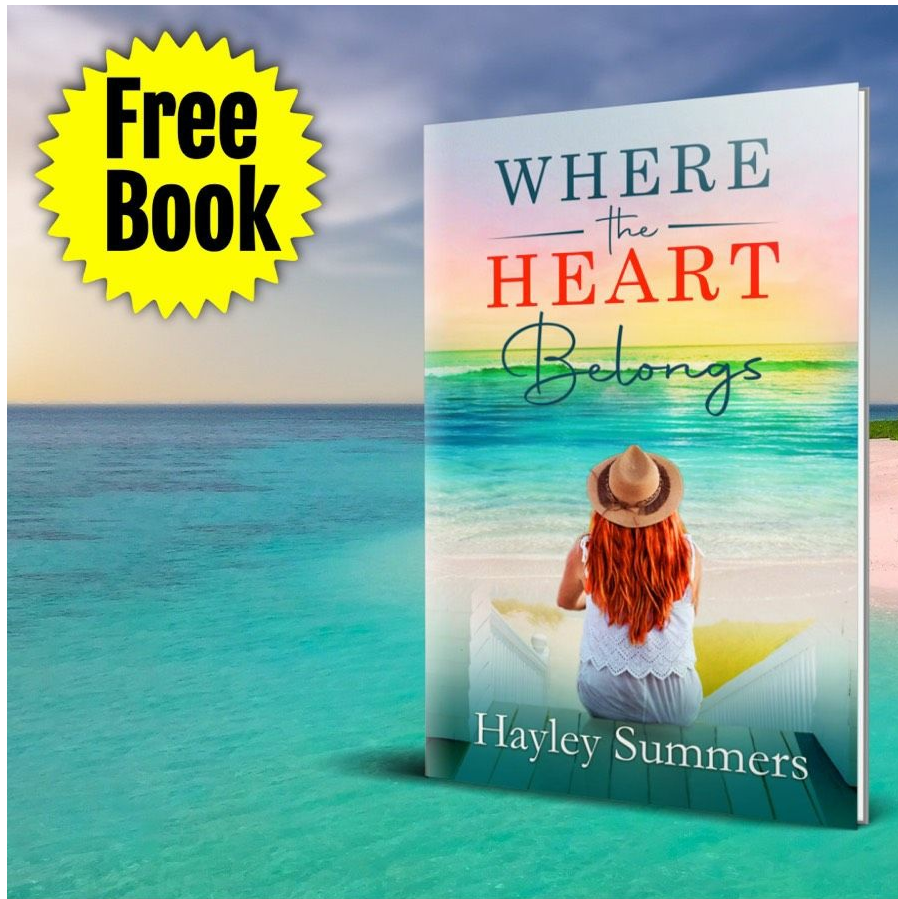
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# Chapter 1



“Get back!” Chris Carols yelled as his eyes trained on the sharp blade of the vicious ax. Deep inside Chris knew he wasn't much of a fighter. As a matter of fact, he was a very gentle man, and violence was not in his nature. In college, he hit the gym a few times and even took a few boxing lessons, but...well...he just didn't possess the hunger to hurt another man. It seemed better to Chris to spread love and peace. “Get back!”

The crazy man holding the sharp ax leaned his head back and burst out laughing. “Boy, if I was a real killer, you'd be minced meat by now!”

Chris glanced at Candy. Candy was standing in front of Betty in a protective position. Candy remained tense and was prepared to run. “Who are you?” Chris demanded.

“My name is Peppermint Tolsky, but my friends just call me Peppermint.” He answered with an accent that sounded a bit southern. He lowered the ax he was holding, stopped laughing and grinned. Boy did he love a good prank. “You should have seen your faces. I needed a good laugh this morning. You bet.”

Candy took in Peppermint's appearance. The man looked to be about fifty years old with a grayish brown beard, grayish brown hair that needed a trim, a face that kind of looked like Dennis Quaid, deep green eyes, and dressed like a lumberjack, wearing a brown winter hat. “What are you doing here?” she asked.

“I was chopping wood, but then I stopped because I needed to drink some Pepto-Bismol. I put pepper on my eggs this morning and should have known better. Gives me gas.” Peppermint patted his stomach. “I sure love my peppers, though.”

“No...what I mean...what are you doing on this island? This is a private island and this is a private residence,” Candy clarified without relaxing her voice. She wanted answers. Unfortunately, she wasn't a forceful woman.

“I've been living on this island for years. I'm the groundskeeper,” Peppermint explained and then rolled his eyes. He leaned down on his ax in a curious way. “I take it my old boss man didn't tell you folks about me. I kind of figured he didn't when I scared you the way I did. I did have a good laugh, though.”

Chris relaxed a little. “Scaring these women wasn't funny, sir—”

“Name is Peppermint.”

“Well...Peppermint...a prank has its limits,” Chris tried to scold him. He failed miserably. Why? Because Peppermint had scared a hundred years out of everyone. A good laugh was needed. “Well, I guess it was funny...on your part. Not on our part. You could have been a crazed killer for all we knew.”

“I am crazy.” Peppermint grinned. “I work here, don't I? And speaking of work, I still need a job and the news owners...” Peppermint nodded at Candy and Betty, “still need a groundskeeper. Even if you don't need a groundskeeper, I'm still under contract for the next ten years. I'm not going anywhere, and a raise would be nice.”

“A raise? After you scared us the way you did?” Betty stepped forward. “I should throw you off this island!”

“In ten years you can,” Peppermint spoke in an easy voice. “I signed a twenty-year contract when I was forty. I'm fifty now. A bit older, but I can still chop wood with the best of them.”

“Look,” Chris held up his right hand, “let's not let our tempers get the best of us.”

“I don't have a temper,” Peppermint pointed out. “I'm as easygoing as a fish swimming in the ocean. She has a temper, though.” Peppermint nodded at Betty and then grinned. “I guess I did scare her pretty good. Guess she has the right to be sour at me.”

“You could have given me a heart attack!” Betty plowed into Peppermint. “I'm sixty-eight years old. My heart isn't as strong as it used to be! You should be ashamed of yourself!”

“You're still kicking.” Peppermint kept up his grin.

Candy could tell Peppermint was an easygoing man who simply liked a good laugh. He saw three stooges, who he could scare, and took advantage of the situation. No harm. No foul. “Mr.—”

“Call me Peppermint.”

“Peppermint, do you have any family?” Candy asked.

“Wife died when I was thirty-seven. We were married for seventeen years,” Peppermint answered without showing too much emotion concerning the subject. “My wife died of cancer. We tried to have children but couldn't. Wasn't God's plan, I guess.”

“I'm...sorry. I didn't mean to—” Candy began to apologize.

“Don't be sorry. Life on this earth is short. My wife is waiting for me in Heaven. In the meantime,” Peppermint stopped leaning on his ax, “I'm not going to Heaven until God says it's time. That means I've got to keep living...which means I need a job.” Peppermint looked around. “For the next ten years, my job is to take care of the grounds on this little island, and I intend to do just that...but not for free. My old boss paid me every Friday. I expect the same from you.”

“How much did my cousin pay you?”

Peppermint frowned. “My old boss was rich but cheap. Because I'm allowed to have a room upstairs, he deducted what he called my *living expenses* from my pay. I was hired on at two grand a week. I ended up being paid seven hundred dollars a week, but all of my expenses, such as food and housing, were paid for. Guess I shouldn't complain.”

“Well...two thousand a week—” Candy began.

“One hundred and four thousand dollars a year...” Betty cut in. She grabbed Candy's hand and pulled her back a few feet. “Should we pay that prankster so much money or make him leave?”

Candy glanced over her shoulder. Peppermint leaned back down on his ax. “He has a contract—”

“Pooh. My attorney can destroy any contract he has,” Betty fussed.

Candy sensed something...good...in Peppermint. Something in the man's eyes told her he belonged on the island. How did Candy know? Somehow, she...just did. Sometimes angels whispered in mysterious ways. “Betty, let's not make a fuss. You can call your cousin and inquire about Peppermint, but I believe he's telling us the truth.”

“I'll do that.” Betty returned to Chris. “Walk with me to the kitchen. I'm



going to make a phone call. You,” Betty pointed at Peppermint, “remain right here with Candy.” Betty took Chris' hand and hurried off.

“She's feisty.” Peppermint laughed.

“Well...yes, at times.” Candy tried to relax. “Betty is going to check your story.”

“Fine with me.” Peppermint studied Candy. “Was that fella your husband?”

“No.”

“Shame. You two look like a real nice couple.” Peppermint dropped his eyes down onto his ax. “I loved one woman...and I'll only love one woman. My old boss tried to tell me that remaining single was foolish. He couldn't understand that my heart is already in Heaven with my wife.”

“What was your wife's name?”

Peppermint slowly raised his eyes. He saw compassion and care glowing in Candy's eyes. “Ophelia.”

“Ophelia is a beautiful name.”

“Yeah...it is.” Peppermint drew in a deep breath. “My wife loved to laugh...she was a prankster. When we first met, I was the serious type. Over time, my wife taught me how to laugh and be silly. Why not? Life is short, and laughter is precious.”

“Yes, laughter is precious,” Candy wholeheartedly agreed.

Peppermint managed to smile again. “My wife would've liked you.”

“Well...I look forward to meeting Ophelia in Heaven someday.” Candy could tell she was going to like Peppermint. “I think this is the beginning of a wonderful friendship.”

“With a raise?” Peppermint teased. “I was told you won the biggest lottery there ever was.”

“All of my money is going to be put into this island. Betty and I are going to—”

“Make a Christmas island. Yeah, my old boss told me all about your plans. I like it,” Peppermint told Candy. “I love Christmas.”

Candy smiled. “Well...maybe for Christmas, a raise wouldn't hurt—”

“Oh, I was just kidding about the raise. I'm a single fella,” Peppermint cut Candy off in a gentle voice. “I just didn't like my old boss taking so much of my pay away. It doesn't cost me thirteen hundred dollars a month to live in a bedroom and eat some food. I always felt like I was being cheated.”

“Well, you won't have a single penny deducted from your pay from this

point forward. You will live in this castle for free...and that goes for the food and everything else. How does that sound?" Candy asked.

"Now that's a raise." Peppermint smiled. "I don't mind paying my way, but when a fella feels like he's being cheated...well, that's not good." Peppermint motioned around. "This castle is massive. If you deduct the price for the little room I call home, the bit of electricity I use, the hot water I use, the food I eat, and I don't eat much, I'd say the cost comes to about seven hundred dollars a month and not a penny more."

"Well, you won't pay another penny, Peppermint. There's no need to. Money isn't an issue. What is an issue is turning our island into a Christmas island."

Candy spoke in a way that put Peppermint at ease. It was like hearing an angel talking, at least to Peppermint. "Well, let me tell you, this island stays snowed over for a good many months. The winds get mighty rough at times...but other than that...this island isn't such a bad place to call home. As a matter of fact, I like it here. My old boss...he got sick of workers coming and going because of the cold. He only hired me after I agreed to sign a twenty-year contract. I thought he was insane for demanding such a thing, but he was an eccentric type, I'll say that much."

"Where are you from?" Candy asked. "I'm asking because—"

"You want to know how I ended up on a little island in the middle of a mighty big lake, right?" Peppermint asked. Candy nodded. "I'm from Cleveland, Georgia...Cleveland is in White County. That's in the northern part of the state. I was born and raised in a little town in North Carolina until I was ten. My folks then moved to Georgia after my dad's brother died and left him some land. Met my wife during our high school years."

"After Ophelia died, you followed the wind?"

"Yep." Peppermint looked about for a few seconds. "My mother is still living. She's seventy-two and still on the land my dad left her. My brother and his family lives with her. Ophelia and I had a house on the land...a mighty nice house. After God called her home, I turned over what I owned to my brother and, as you said, followed the wind. I got hired on with a lumber company, but when we were traveling through this area, I saw an ad in the local newspaper for a groundskeeper. The lumber company I was working for had some real rough guys in it. There were lots of fights. I decided it was time to take a new road. I interviewed for the job, signed the contract my old boss had drawn up, and ten years later...here I am."

“Ten years is a long time.”

“It's been a good ten years...a quiet ten years,” Peppermint told Candy. “No one but my old boss and his wife were ever around. Sometimes, they entertained, but not much, and during the winter months, they were gone. It was only during the last two or so years that my old boss started to show his face more and more. Didn't matter to me. This castle is big, and so are the grounds. I could go weeks without seeing my old boss.”

“In other words, you like being alone, right?”

“I like peace,” Peppermint emphasized, “but I also like people...good people. I like being alone, sure, but I also like fellowship and friends. For the last ten years...let's just say I've had all the alone time I needed. God healed a broken spirit.”

Before Candy could speak, Betty came marching back onto the scene with Chris trailing behind her. “Okay, you check out,” she fussed. “I let my cousin know how displeased I was with him that he didn't tell me about you. He said you were to be a *surprise*.”

“Well, maybe that old crab acquired a sense of humor after all.” Peppermint grinned. “I mean, he did take all the furniture and left me with only the furniture in my room, but there are more rooms that he has left untouched, and you'll find that out shortly, I guess.”

Betty rolled her eyes. “You can remain here...same salary—”

“Peppermint and I already discussed the details, Betty,” Candy quickly spoke up. “Peppermint agreed to the same salary and I agree that he doesn't need to pay anything to live here...or pay for his food, electricity or hot water.”

Betty studied Peppermint's rough face. “Well, I guess my cousin was overcharging you...and there isn't any sense in charging you to stay here. Money isn't the issue, anyway. Candy and I are on a mission.” Betty lightened up some. “Come see me or Candy every Friday to get your paycheck. I'm sure you'll earn every penny.”

“Well, during the winter months, all I do is keep the snow cleared. I was told by my old boss to let the snow sit there for a few days. Who knows, maybe he did acquire a sense of humor. At times, we would kid with each other when I saw him. I didn't see him much.” Peppermint turned to Candy. It was time to talk about another important matter. “I have a pet wolf. I hope that's okay.”

“A pet wolf...” Betty almost fainted again.

Peppermint grinned and then called out, "Blizzard...come!"

Seconds later, what sounded like a freight train began tearing down the main staircase. Candy grabbed Betty's hand and stepped close to Chris. A large, majestic, beautiful white wolf tore down the staircase and ran to Peppermint. Candy had never seen a wolf so big in all of her life. The wolf eyed Candy and then sat down beside Peppermint's right leg. "My goodness..."

"He's a big boy," Peppermint agreed. "I found Blizzard when he was a pup...nearly frozen and dead. I nursed him back to health. My old boss didn't like the idea of having a wolf around, and his wife flat-out said no. I think he allowed me to have Blizzard just to annoy her. Anyway, Blizzard and I are the best of friends. He's a part of me, and I'm a part of him."

"Is he dangerous?" Chris dared to ask.

"Nope." Peppermint shook his head. "Blizzard is a gentle giant." Peppermint nodded at Candy. "Go say hello." Blizzard stood up, gently walked to Candy, sniffed the air, and then licked her hand. "See."

"My, you are beautiful..." Candy bent down and began petting Blizzard. She could have sworn that a tender, loving smile appeared in the wolf's eyes. "You're going to make a beautiful addition to Christmas Toy Island, Blizzard...oh, just wait and see."

# Chapter 2



**E**ven though the former owner of the castle—a rich, selfish banker who was now hoping his *goodwill toward men* gesture might rub off years of bad living—had removed all of his personal furnishings, the library had been left untouched. But there was more. The previous owner had turned the library into a giant present for Candy—a present that he never took credit for. Some gifts were meant to remain...unspoken.

When Candy entered the library, she gasped in shock. Never before in all of her life had she seen such a library—one that had been transformed into a Christmas wonderland. It was an unspoken gift. Antique bookshelves that stretched through three floors were lined with glowing Christmas lights, candy canes, wreaths, and silver and gold garlands. It was as if each bookshelf section had been transformed into a doorway that led directly into the very heart of Christmas. The giant cobblestone fireplace had a fire burning in it, and its hardwood mantle, which had been imported from Germany, held priceless Christmas music boxes that were waiting to be opened. The green and red Christmas rug that seemed to have been taken from the home of Santa Claus was laid out across the library floor. White, green, and red chairs decorated with candy canes, presents, gingerbread men, and Christmas lights were placed in different areas. A mahogany wooden spiral staircase that led up to the second and third floor had been painted to resemble a Christmas candy cane, and the lush banister was lined with

Christmas lights. Giant Christmas trees were situated in the four corners of the library—as well as on the second and third floors. Christmas trains ran under the Christmas trees, weaving through cozy little Christmas villages. Truly the library had been transformed into...Christmas.

“Oh my...” Candy covered her mouth with tender hands.

“Wow.” Chris whistled.

“Is this...a mistake?” Betty gasped.

Peppermint smiled. “Well, maybe this library was the only room my old boss didn't leave empty. Maybe he kind of hired a few people who spent night and day in this library for about a week straight. I'm not allowed to say any more than that.”

Candy could barely believe her eyes. She took a tentative step forward. “It's so...beautiful.”

“I'll say...and everything...the Christmas lights...the decorations...the furniture...all from my era,” Betty told Candy. “All antique. Priceless.”

“You couldn't find any of this stuff online, that's for sure,” Peppermint agreed.

“Amazing.” Chris roamed the library with his eyes and then looked up. “Hey, look at the ceiling.”

Candy quickly raised her eyes. The ceiling had been painted to look like Santa's toy shop. Vintage toys were hanging from the ceiling. “Oh, how beautiful!” Candy placed her arms together and squeezed her shoulders. “This is like walking into a dream.”

“I hung the toys.” Peppermint smiled and then laughed some. “I guess my old boss didn't tell you about me because maybe he was afraid I'd spoil his gift? Or maybe he just wanted me to be a gift, too? I could never tell with him. He was a hard man to read, but I guess that doesn't matter now.”

“No, it doesn't,” Betty agreed. “Today starts a new chapter in all of our lives.” Betty's tone softened. “You did well hanging the toys. They are wonderful.”

“Yeah...I love toys.” Peppermint folded his arms together. He loved the library just as much as anyone else. “When my old boss would leave me alone on the island, I would spend hours and hours in here. He never limited what part of the castle I could be in except for his bedroom. I'd spend hours in here reading and drinking coffee.”

“This library is just as much yours as it is ours,” Candy promised Peppermint. “This castle is your home.” Candy slowly began to explore the



library, walking further away from Peppermint as she talked. “My goodness...it's so beautiful.”

Peppermint unfolded his arms. It was time to get to work. “I'll go bring the coffee and donuts and then get the snow cleared.”

“We'll want to see the other outside buildings.” Betty nodded.

“I have a powerful snowblower that can clear snow before you can blink. I call the snowblower *Avalanche*. Why? Because she growls like an avalanche!”

Betty rolled her eyes. “No matter how old a man gets, he still turns into a boy who likes to play with his toys when it comes to a silly machine.”

“Silly? *Avalanche* is a powerhouse!” Peppermint looked at Chris. “We're talking some serious horsepower. *Avalanche* can cut through a three-foot snowbank in three seconds!”

Chris wanted to share in Peppermint's enthusiasm but couldn't. He wasn't a man who drooled over power tools and high-powered snow blowers. Chris wrote books, designed buildings and houses, and enjoyed playing the piano and building wooden toys. Sure, he liked to fish and go camping, but he didn't care for monster trucks and hunting innocent deer. “The snow blower sounds impressive.”

“Oh, *Avalanche* is more than impressive!” Peppermint dropped into a *man zone* and went into a tirade about how powerful his snow blower was. Chris had no choice but to listen.

As Peppermint filled Chris' ear, Candy wandered further into the library. She felt like she was walking through a doorway that led into an eternal Christmas day that would never end—into a world filled with jolly snowmen, bright Christmas trees, merry presents, joyful songs, soft snow, baking cookies and cakes, happy reindeer, sleigh bells, cozy gingerbread houses, delicious candy canes...oh, a world that whispered to Candy's heart in a way that could not be explained. Before Candy knew it, she began to hum *Frosty the Snowman*.

The north wall was the first section of the library Candy explored. She dreamily approached the wall and stopped. It was filled with cherry wood bookshelves that stretched from the bottom floor all the way up to the third floor. Countless books danced on the bookshelves like sugar plums dancing with little gingerbread men. Candy studied the books with excited eyes. To her shock, she spotted *A Christmas Carol*. The book appeared very old—very, very old. Chance? Coincidence? Design? Fate? Candy wasn't sure why

the book appeared before her eyes. But there it was. “My favorite book in the world.” Candy carefully pulled the book from its resting spot...like asking a jolly old dancer for a spin around the Christmas tree.

“That book is very rare,” Betty's voice appeared from behind Candy. “That is one of the first published copies.” Betty made her way to Candy's side and stopped. “This library is full of rare books.”

“This book is my—”

“Favorite. Yes, I know, dear.” Betty smiled. “I have a feeling you will be spending a good deal of time inside this library.”

“This library is a dream...three stories worth of...dreams,” Candy spoke in a way that couldn't put justice to how she was feeling deep inside of her heart. “Betty, why didn't your cousin take all of these books?”

“I'm not sure. Maybe he's looking for absolution?” Betty shrugged her shoulders. “All I know is that now we own every book inside this library. There must be over—”

“A million.”

“Well, not a million.” Betty laughed.

“Seven hundred and ninety-four thousand,” Peppermint called out. “I counted. Took me a full week and a lot of paper, but I counted every last book in this library.”

“Wow,” Candy whispered. “Imagine all the stories waiting to be read.”

Peppermint walked over to Candy and Betty. Chris followed. “Most of the books, believe it or not, are Christmas-themed. Not sure why. My old boss always came across as an old Scrooge to me.” Peppermint scanned the bookshelf Candy was standing in front of with steady eyes—the eyes of a man who *knew* the ways of the heart more than he knew his own snow blower. “I guess deep down, the guy was searching for something he could never find...peace.”

Betty had to admit that Peppermint had a way of talking that was wise and inviting. “I suppose you could be right,” she told him.

Peppermint turned his focus back to Chris. “There are tons of mystery books. All these books are from the years 1940 and earlier. Some of the books date back to the late eighteenth century. A good majority of them come from the 1920s and 1930s. But you've been here before...you know the layout.”

“I've been here before, sure...but...I don't ever remember the library being like this,” Chris admitted.

Peppermint studied Chris' eyes. He needed to see something—and he did. Chris was a man who could be trusted. That's all Peppermint needed to see. “Well, I'll go get the coffee and donuts and then get out to the snow. If you will all excuse me.”

Candy turned and watched Peppermint leave the library. “I like him,” she told Betty and Chris.

“Me, too.” Chris nodded. “He's a decent sort.”

“I suppose you two are right.” Betty reluctantly joined in and gave her approval. “My cousin was always a good judge of character...except for his wife. But I won't gossip or speak badly of anyone. All I will say is that life is too short and too beautiful to live bitterly and hatefully.”

Candy agreed and then opened the book she was holding. The pages of the book were held inside a green leather book cover, and they seemed to be made of old parchment paper. The ink appeared like black gold that had been refined over and over again. Candy felt like she was holding...yes...a dream. “We'll keep the library just the way it is. The children will love it.”

“I knew you were going to say that!” Betty forced energy back into her voice. It was time to get to work. The cozy atmosphere of the library was trying to force Betty into a sleepy, relaxed mood. “Now listen, after we have some coffee and donuts, we'll go explore some more and then go investigate the outside buildings. We also have to start calling people and setting up interviews. We have lots of work to do.”

“Yes, we do.” Candy closed the book in her hands like she was carefully tucking a sleepy child under a warm blanket. She put the book back to bed and then looked straight up. “All these books...this library is a dream. I can't believe your cousin left all these books.”

“There's a reason for everything,” Chris told Candy. Chris wasn't sure why a wealthy man who hungered to selfishly protect every penny he earned would leave a fortune of books behind. Absolution? Maybe. Maybe the man believed doing a good deed—contributing to Christmas Toy Island, a place that would become a home to toys and the hearts of countless children—would somehow benefit his chances of reaching Heaven. “Let's walk around some more before Peppermint gets back.”

Candy happily agreed. She took Betty's hand and explored the bottom floor of the library, which took plenty of time. “It would be impossible to explore this library in one day with all these books.”

“I agree.” Betty hugged Candy's arm and walked her back to the main

fireplace just as Peppermint showed up carrying a large wooden tray holding four cups of coffee and a plate of delicious donuts. “Ah, refreshments.”

Peppermint put the wooden tray down onto the reading table sitting close to the fireplace. “I poisoned the coffee and put nails in the donuts,” he teased.

“Very funny.” Betty rolled her eyes. “Where is that wolf of yours?”

“Blizzard is upstairs napping.” Peppermint shook his head. “I swear, after he gets through eating his share of donuts, he goes straight to sleep.”

Candy examined the plate of donuts. She expected to see Christmas tree and snowman-shaped donuts. Instead, the plate held plain, chocolate, and white powdered donuts—the variety kind sold at a local supermarket. Oh well. All donuts tasted good. “Peppermint, you were chopping wood before we arrived. I’m assuming you were chopping wood for your room and this library, right?”

Peppermint handed Candy a coffee cup. “I always keep a fire going in here even though my old boss had central heating and air conditioning installed. I like a fire going, but that fireplace gobbles up wood like you’ve never seen.”

“I believe it,” Chris spoke up as Peppermint put a coffee cup in his hand.

“The fireplace in my room is normal-sized. I like to keep a fire going in it for Blizzard.” Peppermint handed Betty a cup of coffee and then took the last cup for himself. There was no need to question if the man had tampered with the coffee. Peppermint was a man who could be trusted. That fact was clear to everyone. “Why do you ask?”

“I’m wondering where you get the wood from,” Candy explained.

“Wood is delivered on the back of a logging truck,” Peppermint replied. “There are entire trees that I cut up with my chainsaw and then chop up with my ax. We’ve got enough wood outside to last through...oh...about three good winters. When the wood starts to run low, I call Michael and put in an order for more trees.”

“Michael?” Betty asked.

“The fella who sends me the trees,” Peppermint explained. He took a sip of delicious hot coffee. “Ah, nothing like Folgers in your cup.”

“I love Folgers coffee.” Chris smiled.

“Me, too,” Peppermint confirmed. He took another sip of coffee and then focused on telling everyone about how the castle was set up. “We get power from the mainland, but if the power ever goes out, we have some mighty big generators that kick in. The outside buildings also have generators. The

generators run on fuel, which we got plenty of...collecting dust, by the way. Out of all of my years living here, the power has never gone off once...not even during the winter storms, and there've been some bad ones, let me tell you.”

Candy listened to Peppermint talk more and more about the castle as she drank her coffee. The coffee tasted delicious. Fresh and hot. Candy was reminded of a Christmas morning she experienced as a child. She woke up to the smell of coffee making...Folgers coffee. In her heart, there wasn't a better way to open up the door to Christmas Toy Island than with a cup of Folgers coffee in her hand. “I think we're in really good shape to officially start building Christmas Toy Island, everyone...and may God bless our efforts in order to make this island a blessing to children and our toys.”

# Chapter 3



Candy hated to leave the island. Oh, how she hated to leave the island. But, she had to get home to Snowball—and also to pack! Candy had decided to move to the island full-time. Yes. She was going to lock up her home and live on the island year-round. Snowball, of course, would have to come with her. Would Blizzard the Wolf like Snowball? Candy sure prayed that he did. Blizzard was a gentle giant, and Snowball was a friendly little guy (Candy just hoped Blizzard wouldn't see Snowball as a yummy appetizer). “You're going to love the island, Snowball,” Candy nearly sang as she sat at the warm kitchen table eating a sandwich. Snowball was sitting next to Candy on the floor, eating his own sandwich. “The island was more than I could have ever dreamed.”

“Well, don't get dreamy yet,” Betty fussed. The older woman was holding a sheet of lined paper covered with numerous names. “So far, everyone I've called to set up an interview with has hit a dead end. Joe from Minnesota sounded drunk, and Lisa from Milwaukee seemed more drunk than Joe from Minnesota.”

Candy grinned. Betty was in a fussy mood. “Well, maybe we're looking in the wrong place.”

“What do you mean?” Betty asked. She tossed down the paper and pencil she was holding and went for a warm sandwich of her own. Candy's kitchen was delightful, safe, and very cozy. The perfect atmosphere to eat a delicious



sandwich in. Of course, Candy was wearing a very *loud* purple sweater that wasn't so good for the digestion...but that was life. At least Betty was wearing a simple sweater that complemented a darker brown dress. Candy told Betty she looked like a tree—Betty told Candy she looked like a deranged grape. They both laughed.

“Well, maybe we should ask Peppermint if he knows anyone,” Candy suggested.

Betty took a bite of her sandwich, thought for a minute, and then nodded. “That's a good idea. That man has grown on me.”

“And Chris has certainly taken a liking to Peppermint,” Candy pointed out.

“Chris is now living on the island full-time...bless his sweet soul.” Betty reached for a glass of milk. “That nephew of mine has been through some tough times. Not as hard as some...but still...” Betty drank some milk and then looked into Candy's eyes. “Is it me, or does Chris remind you of Santa Claus?”

Candy heard a little giggle slip from her mouth. “I thought I was the only one who noticed that.”

Betty shook her head. “Even Peppermint made a remark about how Chris reminds him of Santa Claus. And did you see the way that wolf took to Chris? Peppermint said he's never seen anything like it.”

“Animals sense things.”

“Exactly!” Betty drank some more milk. “Animals do sense things, and that wolf senses that my nephew has a heart of gold...hint...hint.”

Candy tensed up some. “Betty, I'm not interested in romance.”

“Well, why not? Chris is handsome and single...you're beautiful and single...you two are a match made in Heaven!” Betty fussed up a storm.

“Because I want to focus all of my time and attention on the island. We have tons of work ahead of us, Betty. We have to build a toy factory and then establish the island as a—”

“Tourist attraction?” Betty moaned.

“Well...for the children.” Candy understood Betty's moan. Tagging the island as a *tourist attraction* seemed to restrict and demote the truth and beauty of what the Christmas Toy Island was going to become in time. “All I know, Betty, is that God worked so many miracles for us to be where we are right now, and God will continue to work all the miracles we need to get us where we need to be.”

“I suppose you're right,” Betty agreed. “I love your positive attitude.”

“Well, my positive attitude is based on the fact that God allowed me to win the lottery for a reason. What were the chances?” Candy asked.

“None,” Betty answered.

“Exactly.” Candy picked up her coffee cup. “I think we should cast all our worries aside and just focus on building the toy factory. One step at a time. After the toy factory is built and all the outside buildings are turned into Christmas buildings, we can start work on the island itself.”

“Well, the airplane hangar is in pretty good condition. A few walls are all we really need to build. The other outside buildings will be used as storage and supply buildings.” Betty again focused on her sandwich. “Turning the inside of the castle into a Christmas land is going to be a real chore. I forgot how big the castle was on the inside.”

“I know,” Candy exclaimed. “Now I understand how a person can get lost inside the castle. There are so many rooms and hallways...I got lost twice.”

“Me, too,” Betty had to confess. “I—”

Candy's phone came to life before Betty could finish speaking. A strange number showed up on the phone. “I don't recognize the area code,” Candy told Betty as she checked the call.

“Answer the call, honey. It could be someone who is looking for a job.” Betty groaned.

Candy prepared herself and then answered the call. “Hello?”

“Like, is this Candy Baker?” a girl with a serious southern California *Valley Girl* dialect asked.

“Yes, this is Candy Baker,” Candy confirmed.

“Like, totally!” Sandy Winchell exclaimed. “I'm like, you know, calling about the job I saw online!”

“I...several jobs were posted—”

“I want to be the secretary,” Sandy told Candy. “I just got my associate's degree and all that. I'm totally ready for the real world...and like, I really need a job because my parents are throwing me out of the house. It's a real bummer and all, but hey, I won't, like, be hanging around the wrong crowd, right? You bet.”

Candy wasn't sure what to think or say. “How old are you?”

“I just turned twenty-one. Totally,” Sandy answered. “I work part-time at a surfboard place, but the place is taking a serious nosedive. I need, like, a real job.”

“But why are you applying for a job on a remote island? I'm sure there are plenty of jobs where you live.”

“Like, for sure there is...I mean, are,” Sandy exclaimed. “But like, well, I need a change of scenery, you know. All the people I run with are...well, let's just say, not so good for me.”

Candy heard desperation enter Sandy's voice. “I...well, what is your name?”

“Sandy Winchell.”

“Okay, Sandy, if you have the time, we can conduct a phone interview—”

“Totally!” Sandy cried out. “I'm totally ready! Hit me with your best shot and all that.”

Candy rolled her eyes a little. Was she speaking with a real woman or a 1980s Valley Girl? “Okay, Sandy, how many words can you type in a minute?”

“Like, ten to twenty. I'm totally rad when it comes to typing!” Sandy answered in a proud voice. “Next question.”

Candy cringed. “Uh, what do you know about shorthand?”

“Like, my left hand is a quarter inch shorter than my right hand! Next question!” Sandy urged without showing the slightest clue that she was botching the interview.

“Uh...Sandy, how do you plan to get to New York?”

“I'm going to hitchhike! I've got two hundred dollars in my savings that I will, like, use for food and all. Next question!” Sandy pressed in an excited voice. “Totally!”

Candy looked at Betty with a painful expression and then closed her eyes. She needed to think. Sandy was a twenty-one-year-old young woman who was being thrown out of her home. She needed a job...was willing to stick out her thumb to reach New York...had two hundred dollars to her name...and couldn't type. Boy, oh boy. “Sandy...tell me something about yourself.”

“Like, I grew up in the Valley...big fan of the 80s...got my associate's degree...and now I'm ready for the real world. I mean, like, I even have two hundred dollars saved up! How rad is that? Sandy answered in a proud tone.

Candy drew in a deep breath. Something in Sandy's voice reached deep into her heart. “Well, Sandy, the ad you saw online didn't mention any specific jobs.”

“Like, a toy factory will need a secretary.”

“Yes, but I can handle that part myself. What I need...and the job I think

that would fit you...would be that of a teddy bear maker,” Candy explained.

“A teddy bear maker?”

“Sure.” Candy took a quick sip of coffee. “The job is fun and pays well...and free room and meals come with the position along with health insurance...and college money.” Betty made a funny face. Candy held up her right hand. “Would you be interested?”

“What would I be doing?”

“You would be bringing teddy bears to life.” Candy smiled.

“Well...I mean, like, that does sound really rad and all...sure, why not!” Sandy announced in an excited voice. “Like, when do I start? I will, like, need time to hitchhike from California to New York.”

“Uh, I would rather send you a plane ticket, Sandy. The sooner you arrive, the better.” Candy started to feel a strange urgency in her heart. Why? She wasn't sure. All she knew was that all of a sudden, she felt that she had to get Sandy away from Los Angeles and to New York as soon as possible. “When can you leave?”

“Like, today if you want. Totally!” Sandy couldn't believe her ears. “Are you, like, really going to fly me to New York?”

“First class,” Candy promised. “I'll call the airport in Los Angeles and buy the ticket for you and then call you back. You need to pack—”

“Well, like...I said my parents are going to throw me out of the house...they, like, well...kind of already did. I'm living, like, on the beach. My bags are already packed. No one here at the surfboard place knows that, though.”

“Oh...well, then...is there a Western Union nearby?” Candy asked.

“Totally...there's one just down the street.”

Candy grabbed the paper and pencil Betty had been holding. “I need the name and address of the store. I'm going to send you money. Take a cab straight to the airport.”

Sandy almost fainted. “Like, are you for real?”

“I'm for real,” Candy promised in a stern tone. “Sandy, give me the address of the store.”

“Like...sure...” Sandy felt a strange—scary—feeling enter her heart. Suddenly, she felt like she had to get out of Los Angeles as soon as possible. And what was even stranger...even though she was only hearing Candy's voice—the voice of a strange woman—she felt as if she somehow knew Candy. “Uh, like, I'm starting to feel really scared and all.”

“Just get your bags and go to the store. When you get the money I'm going to send, I want you to take a cab directly to the airport. Your plane ticket will be waiting.” The feeling of getting Sandy out of Los Angeles started to become more intense. It was like...hearing a pack of wild dogs in the distance and seeing an innocent bunny rabbit trapped in a shallow hole.

“Like, sure...uh, let me tell you what you need to know.” Sandy hurried and told Candy the address of the store. “Like...uh, I have red hair...I'm a little short...I'm wearing a blue shirt and a gray beach dress...just in case something happens to me because...like...suddenly I'm starting to feel really scared.”

“When you get the money, call me. I want you to stay on the phone with me until you board your flight. Is that clear? As a matter of fact, don't hang up. I'm going to leave my home right now and transfer the money.”

“Like, okay...”

“I'll go!” Betty shot to her feet. Something in Candy's eyes and voice told Betty that the girl she was speaking to was in danger. “I'll send the money.”

“Send a thousand dollars.” Candy handed Betty the piece of paper she had written Sandy's information on. “I'll pay you back.”

“Don't worry about the money!” Betty went for her coat and then hurried out the back door into the cold snow.

“Okay, my friend is on her way, Sandy.”

“And I'm, like, out of here...” Sandy grabbed her book bag and yelled out, “I'm out of here, Dave, see you around!”

Candy heard a man yell, “But you're shift ain't over! Get back here!”

“Whatever!” Sandy tore out of the beach store and hurried down the crowded sidewalk. Minutes later, she rushed into the mini grocery store and hurried up to the quiet front counter. “Like, I'm at the Western Union where I can pick up the transfer.” As she did, a man burst into the surfboard place Sandy had just left. The man in question was searching for Sandy. When he found Sandy was missing, he ran outside holding a weapon, bumped into a pair of cops who were on foot patrol, and was tackled down to the ground and arrested. Sandy had escaped by a mere few minutes.

Another miracle? Candy knew the answer to the question was yes. “Just stay where you are, Sandy.”

“Like, totally...and hey, like...I'm Sandy and you're Candy...our names, like, rhyme. That has to be a sign from God, too, right?”

Candy heard Sandy's voice start to shake. “I think so, yes, honey. Now,

let's talk about your flight. The sooner you get to me the better!”



# Chapter 4



Ralphie Rossi wasn't, by any standard, the sharpest tool in the shed. He called himself the *Calzone* and worked at a pizza parlor in Brooklyn, New York. He was thinner than a broomstick, had shaggy black hair, and dressed like a mafia character from the 1970s. However, in Ralphie's mind, he was a strikingly handsome, successful twenty-five-year-old who was going to take the world by surprise! How...well, Ralphie was working on his first book. Yep. *The Calzone* was going to be the next great thing in the literary world someday.

The problem was Ralphie was sick of Brooklyn. He needed some real peace and quiet in order to work on his book. Ralphie considered moving to Tybee Island where a friend of his uncle lived...but he wasn't much for the beach scene. Ralphie liked the snow and cold. Yo, which was the way of the *Calzone*. Too much heat ruined a good pizza.

So on one fateful, snowy morning, Ralphie called Candy Baker and inquired about an ad he had seen online. People were needed to work on something called the *Christmas Toy Island*. The name was a little lame, but Ralphie didn't care. "So, I'm calling about the job I saw on the big screen," Ralphie told Candy as he plopped down onto a red and white chair in the quiet pizza parlor. "All the ad said was that people were needed to work on some island. Ayo, what's the deal? I'm available if you play your cards right."

Candy was barely awake, and she was still wearing her warm, pink

bathrobe. She had been up late. Sandy's flight had landed in Buffalo, and from there she took a bus to Pine Snow. The young woman was now asleep in the guest room in Candy's little cottage home. Boy, what a night Candy had. Sandy had arrived so wired up on coffee that Candy was certain the girl was going to electrocute someone. She wasn't in the mood to deal with a smart-mouth guy from Brooklyn who sounded like he belonged in a mafia movie. "What's your name?"

"Hey, call me the *Calzone*," Ralphie answered. "I'm sitting here in a pizza parlor in Brooklyn. The joint ain't open yet, and it wouldn't matter if the joint was open. I need a change of scenery. I've got a book to write. *The Calzone* is going to be the next great author. I'm writing about a guy who has to go back in time to redeem himself and save a pretty face. Brilliant? Ayo, I'm too modest to say."

Candy nearly banged her head against the kitchen table in her kitchen. "Well, Mr. Calzone—"

"Just call me the *Calzone*!"

Oh, the characters were crawling out of the pages, and that much was for certain. First, Peppermint had pretended to be a crazed killer, and then a *Valley Girl* from California was nearly killed...and now some wannabe mafia kid from Brooklyn was on the line. "I need a few people to work in a toy factory making toys. Can you do that?"

"Ayo, I'm good with the kiddos."

"Yes...but can you make toys?" Candy asked, hoping to push Ralphie into a corner and end the call.

"Ayo, I make pizza, but making toys can't be much different. I make the dough and add the ingredients. When you make a teddy bear, you add the stuffing and the ingredients. Botta-bing, it's done," Ralphie explained and then added, "I'll take the job. When can I start?"

"Wait...uh, how old are you?"

"Ayo, that's personal," Ralphie objected to the question.

"I need to know for legal purposes."

Ralphie frowned. "So I'm twenty-five and still living with my granny. Ayo so what? My granny just sits around watching the big screen all day and then gets online to tend to her dumb farm."

"So I take it you're not married?"

"Ayo, what are you, the fuzz?"

Candy squeezed her eyes closed. "Give me strength," she whispered and

then continued. "Are you married?"

"A-yo, I liked a girl in school, but she ran off to one of them fancy colleges, and now she's married to an ambulance chaser. Let's just say romance ain't in the bag for me right now."

"Do you have a criminal history?"

"A-yo, what's with the questions? I'm being hired to make toys, not guard a bank!" Ralphie fussed.

"I need to know for legal purposes. Please answer my question."

Ralphie rolled his eyes. "So, maybe I got arrested when I was sixteen for driving a stolen car. Maybe my cousins set me up to have a good laugh. I was driving the car to pick up some food when the fuzz pulled me over. My granny beat my cousins black and blue and made them spill the beans to the fuzz after I was arrested. Too bad she can't remember who I am anymore. Botta-bing...I said what I said."

"Any other...uh...criminal activity?" Candy dared to ask.

"So, maybe I got kicked out of my first day at college for telling some teacher he looked dumber than my granny trying to peel a potato with her fingernail clippers. Let's just say I ain't welcome in any colleges in my local area."

Candy rolled her eyes. "Anything else?"

"So, maybe the FBI asked me a few questions about a bank robbery. One of my cousins decided to help some guys rob a bank. I had nothing to do with it. I—"

"Said what I said...yes, I know." Candy rubbed the bridge of her nose with a tired hand. "I think—"

"Look, the deal is I'm sick of Brooklyn. I started going to church and...I started to pray and all that. Well, a few days ago when I was praying, I thought I heard God tell me to leave Brooklyn. I wasn't sure if I had lost my marbles or what. Then I came across your ad online...so, here I am. I need a job...I ain't dangerous...I ain't crazy...I just need to get away from all the bad."

Something in Ralphie's voice caused Candy to stop rubbing the bridge of her nose. She heard...or maybe sensed...desperation in Ralphie's voice. Then, before Candy could speak, she began to feel a strange feeling in her heart rather than her gut. It was as if an angel was telling her to hire the strange mafia guy from Brooklyn. The feeling appeared like a sudden wave washing up on a beach. "Well, it's wonderful to hear that you are praying. I...well, sometimes God convinces a person to leave one location and go to another

—”

“Ayo, like Moses leaving Egypt, right?” Ralphie asked.

“Well, yes, in a way.” The feeling in Candy's heart became more intense. Was God telling her to help Ralphie? Possibly. No. Not possibly. Ralphie needed help. That much was clear. “I think maybe God wants you to come to Christmas Toy Island. When can you arrive?”

Ralphie nearly dropped his cellphone. “Ayo, does this mean I got the job?”

“You'll make teddy bears and do other jobs like taking care of the supply and storage buildings and helping the groundskeeper.”

“Ayo, I can do that!” Excitement flooded into Ralphie's voice.

Candy felt a tender smile touch her lips. Whoever Ralphie was, he was certainly going to be an interesting addition to the island. “The job pays well. You'll live on the island. Lodging and food will be provided. You'll get health insurance and college assistance as well.”

“Ayo, health insurance I can take...college...I tried to take that road. No thanks.”

“Well, the offer will always be on the table.” Candy checked the time. “When can you arrive in Pine Snow?”

“I'll have to take a bus. I can leave today.” Ralphie glanced around the rundown pizza parlor he worked in. The sooner he left, the better. “I get paid today from my boss. The pay ain't much, but it'll cover my bus ticket.”

“Is there a Western Union close by?” Candy asked. “I'll send you the bus money you need along with traveling money. I...uh, it's my responsibility to cover traveling expenses.” Candy knew she wasn't responsible to pay anyone's way to Pine Snow, but it was clear Ralphie didn't have a lot of money.

“Ayo, there's one right down the street,” Ralphie announced. Excitement shot through his veins. “How much are you going to send me?”

“How does a thousand dollars sound?” Candy asked. “That should cover your bus ticket and food.”

Ralphie froze. A grand? A whole grand? Wow. “Does that dough come out of my paycheck?”

“No...it's like I just mentioned, it's my duty to cover traveling expenses,” Candy answered.

“Ayo, what if I don't spend the whole grand? Do I give you back what's left over?”

“Uh...no, you keep the money you don't spend,” Candy assured Ralphie. A wave of pity touched her heart. It was clear Ralphie wasn't used to being treated with a tender hand. The young man was suspicious of everything and everyone.

“There's got to be a catch.”

“No catch,” Candy promised. “As a matter of fact, I just paid for a young lady to fly to Pine Snow from California. I paid for her plane ticket and sent her one thousand dollars. I'll do the same for anyone I hire.” Candy had a feeling she was going to pay for anyone God put in her path to travel to Pine Snow. “When you reach Pine Snow, I'll meet you and drive you to the island.”

“Well...” Ralphie couldn't deny he felt excited. But he had felt excited in the past. Before he could try to squash the good feeling in his heart, he felt the touch of a warm wind touch his face. He froze. Where did the wind come from? The front door was closed and locked. The wind felt pure and loving...like the wind a pair of angel wings might create when passing by.

“Are you still there?” Candy asked.

“I'm here...I...sure, I'll take the deal,” Ralphie spoke in a quick voice.

“Good.” Candy smiled. “I'll need some information.” Candy found a pencil and piece of paper and had Ralphie give her the name and address of the Western Union. “I'll send the money within the hour. When you get the money, call me.”

Something in Candy's voice began to change. Candy no longer sounded like an annoyed interviewer. The woman began to sound like a mother, a loving, concerned mother. Ralphie never had a real mother. “Ayo, I can do that.”

“Good.” Candy checked the time again. She needed to get dressed. “Ralphie, when we end this call, bow your head and pray. Ask God for guidance and truth, okay. I'll do the same.”

“I'll...pray,” Ralphie promised. “Bye.”

“Bye.” Candy ended the call, bowed her head, and began to pray.

Snowball let out a little bark. Candy looked down. Her little friend was at her feet. “You better get dressed, too, Snowball. I have a feeling we're going to have a very long day ahead of us.” Snowball barked again. Candy picked up the little guy, hugged and kissed him, and then called Betty. “We have a new employee.”

“Oh no. Your voice tells me we're getting another orange instead of an

apple,” Betty groaned. “Let me have my coffee before you tell me.”

Candy laughed. “The young man I just spoke to is from Brooklyn. He sounds like a silly mafia character from a 1970s movie, but I felt God impress on my heart to hire him...and help him. I heard the same desperation in his voice that I heard in Sandy's. And speaking of Sandy, Betty, she's going to make a great addition to the island. I can't explain it, but I feel such a love for her...the love I felt for her touched my heart when I saw her arrive in Pine Snow.”

“I know what you mean, honey. I feel the same love,” Betty spoke in a tender voice. “If there was ever a lost soul, Sandy is that soul. She's going to need tons of love and care. She is like a broken teddy bear hungry to be loved.”

“Exactly.” Candy checked the time. “I have to get dressed and go send our new employee his...traveling money.”

“Be careful. It's snowing bad outside.”

“I will,” Candy promised. “I know we were going to take Sandy to the island today, but I think we need to wait until our new employee arrives.”

“That's fine, dear. I'm a bit worn out today. Besides, Peppermint called me. The road out to the island is closed. A few trees toppled over on the road and it needs to be cleared,” Betty explained. “I was just about to call you and explain the delay.”

“I think that's God's way of making sure we pick up our new employee.” Candy smiled.

“Maybe...well, not maybe,” Betty corrected herself. “I'm starting to realize that God is at work in this story, dear. I've never seen anything like it in all of my years.”

“Me neither,” Candy told Betty. “I'll call you in a bit. I love you. Bye.” Candy ended the call and then hurried to get dressed. She decided on a simple blue sweater that had a smiling Christmas teddy bear on the front. “Betty will tell me I look like a blueberry. Oh well. Right, Snowball?” Snowball barked out a yes. Candy laughed. “Let's go back to the kitchen.”

Sandy was in the kitchen when Candy arrived. “Like, good morning...I like, made myself a bowl of cereal. Is that okay?”

“Sure.” Candy smiled. “Can you watch Snowball while I run to the store real quick?”

“You're going to leave me alone in your house?” Sandy asked in a shocked voice.

“Honey, if you're going to rob me blind, then do it.” Candy walked over to Sandy and squeezed her hand. “I trust you.” With those words, Candy threw on a warm, white coat and hurried out into the cold snow.

Sandy looked down at Snowball, and he sat down and wagged his tail. “Like, this is all a dream, right, pooch? No one is this loving...right?” Sandy wasn't sure. When Snowball barked, it seemed as if an angel were answering through the dog. “Well...like, maybe this will be rad? We'll see. In the meantime, this cereal, like, isn't so bad...and neither is the bathrobe Candy gave me to wear. Maybe, I'll like, come to like it here in the snow.”

Out in the cold snow, Candy hurried to bring another misfit to Christmas Toy Island.

# Chapter 5



**M**arty Blevins hated being sixty-eight years old. Why? Because the doomed *seventy* was only two short years away. Where had Marty's youth wandered off to? How did he get so old? Being old stunk eggs. Marty preferred to be young and active. He swam twenty laps every day, walked three miles, stayed active, and ate healthy, yet age was taking its toll. Fatigue struck often. Bones and muscles ached. Naps were needed. Aspirin became a good friend. Yes. Marty wasn't a strapping twenty-one-year-old marathon runner anymore. He was a tired sixty-eight-year-old man who dreaded shoveling snow. A warm fireplace and a soft recliner were far better friends than an old snow shovel. But, Marty was determined to stay active and keep his driveway cleared of snow.

“Blasted snow...always snowing...” Marty mumbled as he scooped a pile of snow onto the snow shovel. Marty wasn't known as the...uh...nicest man on his street. The kids called him *Mr. Scrooge*. Marty hated that name, but he had to admit he was a bit on the grumpy side. After the death of his wife ten years earlier, Marty had resigned himself to hating life. Sure, he fought to stay healthy and active to fight his age, but dying wasn't an option, and death scared Marty. Yet, Marty longed for the day when he would see his beloved wife again. In the meantime, he was just plain angry, grumpy, and ill. Nothing in life pleased him anymore. He had stopped going to church and even praying.



“Blasted snow,” Marty continued to grumble.

A phone sitting in the right coat pocket of his heavy coat came to life. Marty glanced down at his coat pocket. Who would be calling so early in the morning? Probably some irritating telemarketer. Marty walked back to the cold front porch he had recently painted blue (his wife's favorite color), wandered up the five wooden steps covered with ice salt, and found his way to an icy rocking chair. He sat down and checked the call. Peppermint was calling. Peppermint was the only man in the world who could make Marty smile. “Hello, Peppermint,” Marty answered the call with a pleased voice.

“Hello, you old fart!”

“You're not a young pup yourself anymore. You're fifty years old,” Marty pointed out as a blast of icy wind thundered down a street lined with fancy middle-class homes. The street was covered with snow, and all the homes were silent and white. No one was out shoveling their driveways.

“Yeah, but you'll be wearing diapers before me.” Peppermint laughed.

“Very funny,” Marty fussed.

“Still grumpy, I see.” Peppermint was the only man on earth who dared to embrace Marty's ill-temper.

“Yes, I'm still grumpy...what do you want?”

Peppermint laughed. “I want to offer you a job, you old grouch.”

“A job...are you out of your mind? I've been retired for the last three years, and I'm not coming out of retirement. No sir. I'm through being a high school principal. My years of being tormented are over. I went five years longer in the system than I should have.”

“You're bored and miserable. You need something to do.”

“Oh, do I?” Marty rolled his eyes. “Do tell, Mr. Peppermint, what do you have in mind for this miserable soul you are speaking to.”

Peppermint was sitting in a lush kitchen that was large enough to house a family of elephants. The kitchen was warm and smelled of coffee and fried bacon. Marty, Peppermint guessed, was outside in the cold, fussing with a snow shovel. Inside Peppermint's mind, he saw a gray-headed old fart who was scrawny, grumpy, and needed to shave his ear and nose hair. Marty always reminded Peppermint of Jason Robards. Peppermint was sure the younger generation had no idea who Jason Robards was—that was one of the downfalls of getting older. “I need you to come live on the island I call home. Two sweet ladies are going to turn the island into some sort of Christmas Toyland. I'm all for it. But we need folks to come and help us...a supervisor

in particular.”

“Have you been drinking?”

Peppermint laughed again. “No, I haven't been drinking, you old mule. I'm serious.” Peppermint took a sip of coffee. “Listen, you heard that a woman in New York won the lottery, right?”

“Yeah...I heard,” Marty grumbled. “I bought twenty tickets and barely got any numbers. What a waste.”

“Well, that woman is one of the women who is going to turn the island I call home into the North Pole,” Peppermint explained. “The other woman is Betty Vance.”

“Betty Vance...isn't she the wife of the man who just died?”

“Yep,” Peppermint confirmed. “Betty Vance was the wife of a man who owned the rights to some very special toys. She's going to open a toy factory here on the island.”

Peppermint's tone told Marty he was serious. “Well, what do you need me for?”

“I talked to Betty and Candy...Candy is the woman—”

“Candy Baker, yes, I know the name of the woman who won the lottery...just get to the point,” Marty fussed.

“Betty and Candy agreed to hire you as a supervisor if I could talk you into moving to the island. I stuck my neck out for you and put in a good word.” Peppermint reached for a chocolate donut sitting on a red and white plate. Blizzard was sitting next to Peppermint. The wolf made a grunting sound. “I know...I know...here.” Peppermint fed Blizzard a donut and then took one for himself.

“Are you feeding that wolf of yours?” Marty asked.

“Yep.”

“A man who owns a wolf...insane.” Marty rolled his eyes. “If you weren't the cousin of the woman I married, I would disown you.”

“You can never disown me, old man.” Peppermint laughed. “Now listen, stop being so fussy and take the job. It's no good for you to be living way up there in northern Maine by yourself. You're not even from Maine. You're from Georgia.”

“I've been living in Maine for the last thirty years.”

“You still sound like a Georgia man,” Peppermint pointed out.

“So what? No one in Bangor ever talks down to me...they know better.”

“That's because you are a mean wild cat.” Peppermint took a bite of his

donut. "Listen, Marty, enough kidding around. Take the job. You'll like living on the island...and it'll be good to see you again. I've been missing you."

Marty looked down at the floor of the front porch. "I...I've missed you, too, Peppermint. You were always a good friend...a man I always respected. Freda was always very fond of you. You two were always very close."

When Marty used the word *always* numerous times in one sitting, that meant the man was very sad in his heart. "I loved Freda like she was my own sister, Marty. When the cancer took her away, I knew a piece of you died with her...a piece of me died with her."

"Your own wife—"

"Ophelia and Freda are waiting for us in Heaven," Peppermint cut Marty off. "If they were here...well, we both know they would want us to keep on living. Ophelia made me promise to laugh and live for her. Freda made you make the same promise."

"I hate living, but I hate getting old even more." Marty raised his eyes, scanned the front street, and then sighed. "It's cold...snowy...miserable. Life feels gray. I try to swim my laps at the heated indoor pool...walk my three miles a day...eat my greens...but I'm starting to wonder what for? Maybe I should just let age take its toll and get it over with?"

"Maybe you should stop talking like that and accept my offer," Peppermint insisted. "Betty and Candy will pay you well."

"I don't need money."

"No, you need to be around people who care about you," Peppermint cut Marty off in a tone that turned stern. "Marty, God brought me out of the grave I dived into after Ophelia died. You're still in your grave. It's time to come out into the light."

"What light?" Marty asked. "Peppermint...I quit going to church...and I haven't prayed in a while. I...don't believe in hope anymore."

"Then maybe it's time you start." Peppermint stood up. "Marty, you either accept the job, or I'm driving to Maine and will drag you to New York myself. I mean it. You know I mean it."

Oh yes. Marty had no doubt that Peppermint would leave his island and drive to Maine. "Peppermint, I'm an old man...just leave me alone."

"Nope." Peppermint shook his head. "You either accept the job, or I'll be kicking in your front door by nightfall. I mean it."

"I'll call the cops on you."

“You won't have the time. I'll have you cow-tied before you can blink an eye,” Peppermint warned. “Now stop being so ornery and accept the job. What do you have to lose?”

“Well...how long is the job for?” Marty snapped. “I can't work another twenty years. I'm nearly seventy years old!”

“Just work until you can't, you old fuss.” A tender grin touched Peppermint's eyes. He was wearing Marty down. “Look, you'll love the job, and you'll love living here on the island. You'll have a room right in the castle, next to me and Blizzard...and everything is paid for. Betty and Candy are real nice ladies. They love God and show it with their actions. You'll like them. Also, a fella by the name of Chris is living on the island now. He's a real nice fella...the kind of fella who you immediately respect.”

Marty listened to Peppermint talk and then sighed again. He was miserable...and lonely. What would it hurt if he took on a new adventure for a while? His home wasn't going anywhere...the snow and cold weren't going anywhere...his snow shovel would be waiting for him when he got home. “Well...tell me more about the job.”

“You'll supervise the toy factory. It's that simple.”

“Supervise what?” Marty demanded.

“Toys being made, what else,” Peppermint answered through a pleased smile. “You'll make sure all the toys are made right...shipped to where they need to go...ensure all the supplies needed to make the toys are ordered...stuff like that. Betty will be helping you.”

“Helping me?”

“Well, Betty was the one who asked for help. She said she can't supervise the new toy factory that's going to be built all alone.”

“What about her friend Candy Baker?” Marty asked.

“Candy is going to be busy with Chris. Turning this Christmas island into the North Pole is going to take tons of work,” Peppermint explained.

Marty drew silent for a minute. What would it hurt if he accepted Peppermint's offer? He had nothing to lose. “Well...I'll think on it—”

“You'll accept the offer,” Peppermint cut Marty off and then laughed. “Get packed and hit the road.”

“Just like that...just get packed and hit the road?” Marty asked. “I have to close up my home and find someone to check on it. I can't let the pipes freeze, and I'll need to know when to order oil to heat the house. Also, I have groceries...I have milk and cheese.”

“So bring the food with you!”

“Bring the food with me? If you were standing here, I'd hit you with my snow shovel.” Marty shook his head. “Give me one week.”

“Three days.”

Marty gritted his teeth. “Fine, three days.” Boy, Peppermint sure could be pushy. That was okay with Marty, though. Marty was the type who, when grounded in a mundane routine, had to be pulled out of the mud with forceful hands. After all, he had been a high school principal. Day in and day out, he walked the same hallways of the same school, sat in the same office, and ate in the same cafeteria...etc...etc...etc. The job had been rewarding, of course, but it didn't take long before a concrete routine was established. At least walking the hallways kept Marty in shape.

“Good. Blizzard and I will look for you to arrive in three days.”

“That wolf of yours better not try and eat me,” Marty warned. He stood up, studied the snowy driveway, and then sighed. “I better get back to shoveling the driveway, Peppermint. I need to run a couple of errands today.”

Peppermint took a quick sip of coffee. He didn't want to end the call feeling as if Marty were still caught in a depressed spiderweb. “Hey, Marty, I know life has been tough on all of us. I want you to take this job because, first, I want to see you...and second...the job will be good for you. You'll like the island and the people. Wait and see.”

“Sure, Peppermint.” Marty wasn't so sure if he was in the mood to make new friends. He was content in being *Mr. Scrooge*. “Maybe I'll go swim a few laps today just to warm up to the idea. I'll call you when I'm prepared to leave. Bye.”

“Bye, Marty.” Peppermint ended the call with a heavy heart. In his mind, he saw Marty sadly go back to shoveling his snow-covered driveway. “I better call Candy, Blizzard.” Peppermint had put Candy's phone number onto his cellphone. He hurried and called her. Candy was inside of the quiet grocery store. “Hey, Candy, sorry to be calling so early. I was on the horn with Marty, my old friend I told you about. He accepted the job offer.”

“That's great, Peppermint. I'm sending a money transfer at Western Union right now. I hired a young man from Brooklyn who calls himself the *Calzone*.”

Peppermint laughed. “The Calzone?” Candy assured Peppermint that Ralphie sounded like a mafia character from the 1970s. Peppermint rolled his eyes. “First you hire a *Valley Girl*, as Betty pointed out, and now a mafia

wannabe. Candy, I have to say that you sure know how to hire the strangest people.”

Candy winced some. Peppermint was speaking the truth. “Well...I felt God...nudge me some, Peppermint. I know the *Valley Girl* and the *Calzone* aren't exactly...desirable hires, but I sense that God brought them to me for a reason.”

“Well, if that's the case, then expect my full support and cooperation. I'll treat those kids with a tender hand,” Peppermint promised. “Marty, on the other hand, may need some tough grease to get his wheels turning.”

Candy sighed as Brenda Wilkins, the old woman who ran the customer service counter at the grocery store, worked to send the important money transfer to the *Calzone*. Not only was Candy now very rich, but she was also very kooky, at least in Brenda's view. Oh well. That was life in Pine Snow.

# Chapter 6



“**T**his place isn't so bad.” Ralphie dropped the black suitcase he was holding onto the floor in the silent foyer. The suitcase caused a *bam* sound to erupt through the long halls of the castle.

“Like, quit saying *Ayo*,” Sandy fussed at Ralphie.

“*Ayo*, you talk like a beach girl,” Ralphie snapped. “All you say is *like* and *totally*. Learn some new words.”

“Alright you two,” Candy pleaded as she closed the front door of the castle, “let's be kind to each other.”

“Kind? These two have been at each other's throat for hours,” Betty fussed. She rubbed her eyes and then shook her head. “I need a cup of coffee. Peppermint...Chris...where are you?” she yelled.

A giant white wolf walked into the foyer instead of two men. Blizzard eyed Sandy and Ralphie and then growled a little. “*Ayo*, that...whoa!” Ralphie ducked behind Sandy. “That thing is gonna eat us!”

“Ms. Baker...uh, like...is that the wolf you told me about?” Sandy began shaking in her boots.

Candy heard some snickering. “Very funny, you two!” she called out and then walked over to Blizzard. “And you...taking part in some silly prank.” Blizzard quit growling, ducked his head down, and quickly covered his face with a pair of giant white paws. “That's more like it.”

“I wasn't scared...I was just...checking the door...” Ralphie crawled out

from behind Sandy.

“Scaredy cat.” Sandy pushed Ralphie away from her.

“Ayo, watch the threads. This leather jacket cost me ten bucks. I found it on sale in a thrift store. The owner told me this jacket belonged to a guy who knew a guy who knew Bob Ross.”

“The painter?” Betty asked.

“The one and only. Bob Ross rocks Brooklyn. I said what I said.” Ralphie flipped up the collar on the black leather jacket he was wearing.

Sandy shoved her hands into the pink coat Candy had bought her as two men appeared. Candy didn't like strange men. However, when she saw Chris and Peppermint walk into the foyer, snickering to themselves, she relaxed. “Hey, like, that guy really does look like Santa Claus,” she pointed at Chris. “And the other one looks like...Paul Bunyan.”

“He looks like that guy on television...Dennis Quaid. I saw him act in a movie about some Christian singer. He did okay playing the part. I said what I said.”

“Moron.” Sandy rolled her eyes.

“Sandy, be nice,” Candy pleaded.

Chris could clearly see that Candy had her hands full. “So, where is Snowball? I thought you were bringing him along.”

“Here.” Candy unzipped her heavy white coat, and Snowball stuck his head out. Blizzard immediately locked his eyes on the little guy. “You be nice,” Candy ordered Blizzard. Blizzard eased forward, sniffed the air...and then wagged his tail. Candy carefully put Snowball down on the foyer floor. Snowball sniffed Blizzard's nose, and he licked Snowball's face. Snowball let out a happy bark. Blizzard followed through with a happy sound of his own and then rolled over onto his back. Snowball began licking him all over his face.

“Will you look at that?” Peppermint asked. “Blizzard just made a new friend.” Peppermint was right on target. From that morning forward Snowball and Blizzard became the best of friends. As a matter of fact, Blizzard became so protective over Snowball that he didn't let a single stranger near the dog.

“How, like, totally cute.”

“Ayo, quit saying *totally* before I lose it—”

“Like, okay lose it then,” Sandy cut Ralphie off and then added, “Ralphie!”

“Ms. Baker, she's making fun of my name again!” Ralphie yelled.



“Sandy...Ralphie—”

“Like, what kind of name is Ralphie anyway?” Sandy continued to tease. “You're, like, from Brooklyn. Shouldn't your name be *Paulie* or, like, maybe *Joey* or *Vinnie*? I, like, don't think the name *Ralphie* is too threatening. Maybe for a pizza delivery guy, but like, not for a mafia guy.”

“Ayo, so maybe my old lady didn't have good sense. At least I'm not named after something I walk on when I go to the beach! I said what I said!”

“Moron!”

“Dimwit!” Ralphie fired back.

Chris and Peppermint grinned. “Uh...the coffee and donuts are waiting,” Peppermint quickly announced. “Maybe we should go to the kitchen before a war starts, huh?”

“You got any of them donuts with the sprinkles on top? I like those kinds. I said what I said.”

“Peppermint, will you show these two to their rooms?” Betty groaned. “I need some aspirin.”

“In the kitchen, second shelf above the coffee maker.” Peppermint grinned again. Betty nodded her head and wandered off. Chris smiled and followed after his aunt.

“Come on, you two.” Peppermint laughed. “Let's get you settled in, and then we'll have some coffee and donuts.”

“I'll be in the kitchen if you need me,” Candy told Sandy and Ralphie.

“Don't eat all the donuts!” Ralphie picked up his black suitcase.

Sandy picked up a blue suitcase and her backpack. She would eventually need more clothes and other items, but for the time being, she had enough to get by on, and so did Ralphie. “Is your name really Peppermint...like that comic book girl...Peppermint Patty?” Sandy asked him.

“Yep...only I'm not named after Peppermint Patty. However, Peppermint Patty is a great pitcher.” Peppermint tipped Sandy and Ralphie a wink. “Come on, guys, let's go upstairs. Blizzard, you better come to.”

Blizzard and Snowball both hurried off after Peppermint. Sandy and Ralphie followed. Sandy shot Candy a quick eye. “It's okay, honey. Go see your room, get settled in, and then come down for some coffee and donuts,” Candy urged in a gentle voice. Sandy nodded and left the foyer. Candy whispered a prayer for Sandy and Ralphie and then journeyed to the kitchen.

“I found the aspirin,” Betty told Candy.

Chris laughed. “Sandy and Ralphie are certainly...colorful,” he had to

admit.

Candy watched Chris fold his arms over his sweater that had a snowman on the front of it. Chris truly did resemble a young and handsome Santa Claus. The man's eyes glowed with love and kindness. "Yes, Sandy and Ralphie are colorful," Candy admitted as she removed her coat. A wooden coat rack was perched next to the kitchen's back door. Candy hung her coat up, brushed at a lovely pink sweater that made her look jolly and cheerful, and then took a seat at the lovely kitchen table covered with donuts. "Peppermint really loves donuts."

"He fries up a mean breakfast, but yeah, I think Peppermint would refuse to get out of bed if the world ran out of donuts." Chris poured Candy a cup of coffee. "Hot..."

Candy gratefully accepted her coffee with a tender smile that Betty took notice of. "Where is my coffee?" she asked.

"Coming up, Aunt Betty." Chris hurried and prepared Betty a cup of coffee. "I figured you wanted to wash your aspirin down with water before you had any coffee."

Betty removed her coat. "Hang up my coat, honey," she told Chris. Chris sat a coffee cup full of hot coffee down in front of her and then went to hang up her coat. Betty glanced down at the sweater that she had bought many years before. The sweater always seemed to push bad days away. "So...when Peppermint's friend arrives, we'll be all set...for the time being. I think between the six of us, we'll be able to start work. In time, we'll need to hire more people."

"Everything at the toy factory back in town is going great," Candy pointed out. She took a sip of coffee and then continued. "Fran is going to be just fine. Everyone loves and respects her. That's a huge plus."

"It is," Betty agreed. "Because everyone who works at the toy factory loves Fran, they'll work hard for her. Not that working at the toy factory is hard work...the work is joyful...but still, work is work." Betty went for her coffee. "Chris, did you manage to start on any designs yet?"

Chris sat down across from Candy and Betty. "Not yet, Aunt Betty. I've been taking walks around the island with Peppermint. I wanted to create a solid layout in my mind."

Something in Chris' voice caught Betty's attention. "And?" she asked.

Chris reached for a coffee donut. "I think, Aunt Betty, we should put an outdoor Carousel in front of the airplane hangar that we're going to turn into

the toy factory. I also think we should build whatever supply and storage buildings will be needed in another area I'll mention in a second and turn the two buildings that stand in front of the airplane hangar into a Christmas village for the children. We can build a few more buildings and attach each building to indoor walkways. Kind of like..." Chris put down his donut and made a circular loop in the air with his right hand. "We can design a Christmas village that forms a smile connected to the toy factory. The toy factory will be the face, the Carousel will be the nose, and all the play buildings...the Christmas buildings...will form the smiley face."

"A smiley face?" Betty wasn't so certain she liked the idea.

"We'll paint the face of Santa Claus on the front of the toy factory...the Carousel will be one big reindeer...Rudolph, of course...the buildings will be designed as gingerbread houses, toy shops, bakeries...delightful dreams," Chris explained. "I'm better at drawing than explaining, but I think you get the idea."

"The toy factory will be what gives the Christmas village heart, right?" Candy asked Chris.

"Yes, exactly." Chris beamed. "Children will be able to explore the toy factory in controlled tours, of course...and then go play in the Christmas village. They'll be able to make their own toys, read books, ride on the Carousel, and play in the snow...everything a child can dream of. And it'll be safe because the only way in and out of the Christmas village is through the toy factory. That'll prevent the possibility of a child wandering off and getting lost."

Candy loved Chris' idea. "I think your idea is wonderful. Betty?"

"Well...Chris, your idea certainly holds merit." Betty nodded. "But we don't need a small Christmas village."

"Of course not, Aunt Betty. We can extend the smile and make the Christmas village as big as we need. As a matter of fact, I think it would be smart if we just tore down the east and west walls of the airplane hangar and built the storage supply buildings we need directly on instead of building the buildings in the back of the hangar. I wasn't sure if you would like that idea, but we can make each building look like hands holding a gift, and that would allow for more room, too." Chris bit down on his lip. "Once I draw everything out, you'll see what I mean. I'm not too great at explaining what I see in my mind."

"I think your idea is wonderful," Candy promised Chris. "I'm not saying

that to be nice, either. The main part of the island we're on sits on high, but very rocky ground. There's room to work, but the ground isn't level in many places. The land that sits in front of the castle is flat and strong, and I think it would be smart if we concentrated our attention on just this one area of the island. We can put Christmas decorations up all over the island, of course, but as far as a Christmas village goes—”

“Right in front of the castle. I agree.” Betty cut Candy off in a quick but supportive voice. Candy was a very smart woman who Betty loved and trusted. “Candy, you work with Chris on the Christmas village, and I'll work with everyone else and get the toy factory operational. Chris, before I do, I'm going to need your designs. I have a contractor in mind who has built many theme parks.”

“Oh...well, Aunt Betty, I have someone in mind, too...if that's okay.”

“Who?” Betty asked.

“Well...Peppermint and...me,” Chris answered and then took a quick sip of coffee.

“You two...by yourself?” Betty frowned.

“It'll take time, but Peppermint and I have been talking. Peppermint knows his way around a hammer, and what I don't know, he can teach me. I...well, Aunt Betty, I just feel that if we build everything with our own hands instead of bringing in an outsider, the Christmas village will be...special.” Chris took another quick sip of coffee and waited for Betty to shoot down his idea.

Betty studied her nephew's eyes. She saw a glow that she refused to put out. “Two men working without a team will take time...but alright, dear. I have to trust in what you say. But if you and Peppermint start to feel overwhelmed, you must let me know.”

“Our goal is to be open by next Christmas. If we start to fall behind, we'll raise a red flag. I promise,” Chris assured Betty. “Besides, we won't be working alone. We'll have Candy, Ralphie, Sandy, and Marty.”

Candy loved the idea of being invited to actually build a dreamy Christmas village with her own hands instead of hiring an outsider. “Count me in.” She beamed.

“Ayo...” Ralphie hurried into the kitchen as if he were running from something. Relief touched his eyes when he saw Candy, Betty, and Chris. “I...kind of got lost. This castle is bigger than it looks.”

Relief filled Ralphie's eyes, yes...but before the relief arrived, Candy saw

something in Ralphie's eyes that broke her heart. He was scared by a deep fear that had peeked its ugly head out of a dark closet. “I thought you were upstairs, honey?”

“I was...but then I heard a donut calling my name.” The truth was Ralphie had been shown to his room—a large, spacious room that felt very lonely and empty even though a bed and new furnishings had been ordered for each assigned room. Suddenly Ralphie felt lost and confused...and scared. He ran out of his room and hurried back downstairs.

“There's plenty of donuts.” Chris patted the kitchen table as he studied Ralphie's eyes. He noticed the same concern Candy had noticed. “Sit down —”

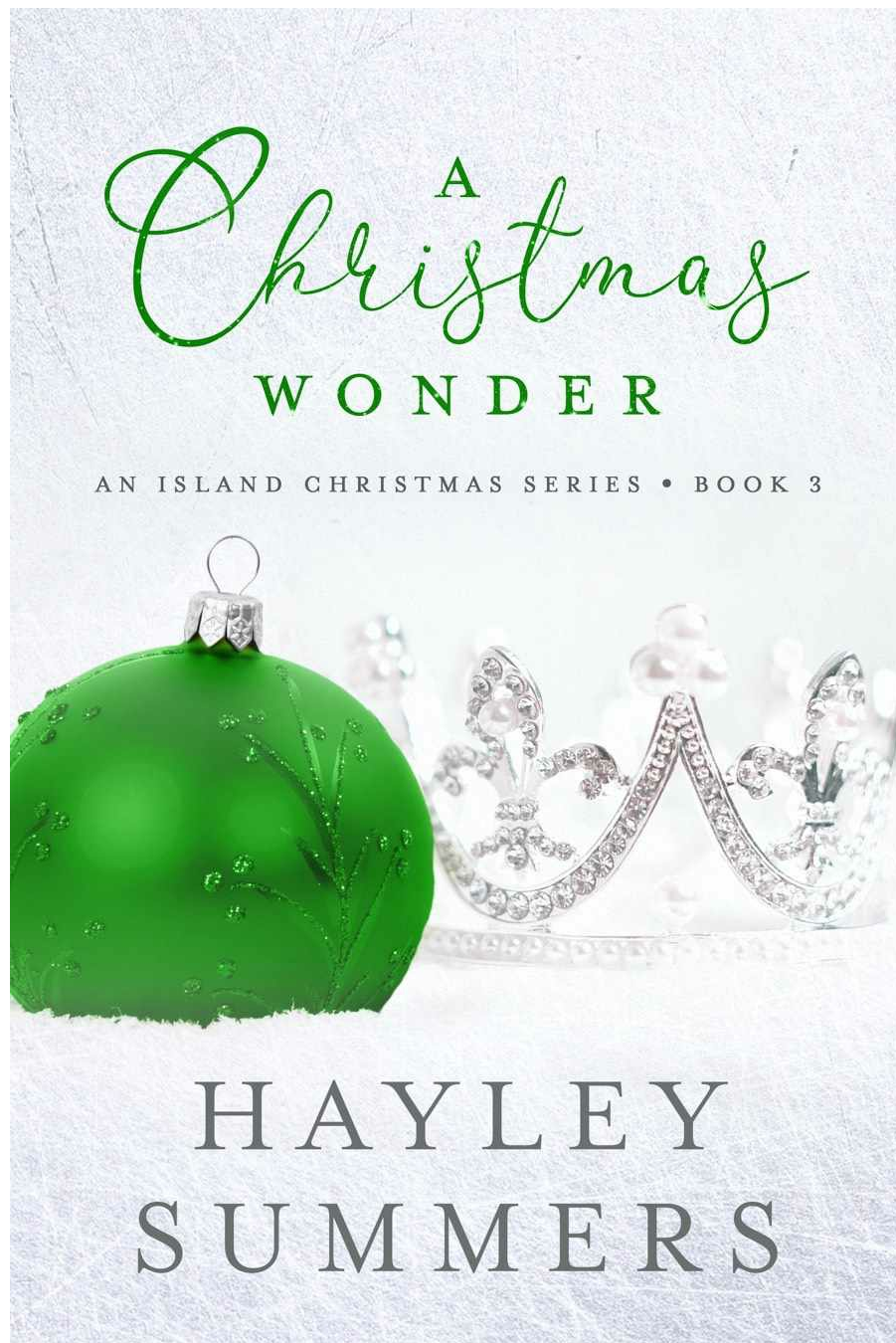
Before Chris could finish speaking, Sandy came running into the kitchen with a frightened look on her face. “The eyes...the eyes on the painting in the upstairs hallway...they moved...someone is behind the painting and it's not Peppermint!”

Peppermint appeared behind Sandy. Blizzard and Snowball hurried into the kitchen behind him. “I—” Peppermint began to speak, but stopped when the electricity went off.

Sandy screamed as a blanket of darkness covered the kitchen. She fainted on the spot. Someone was upstairs hiding in a secret hallway.

Christmas Island, Sandy thought before she fainted...was hiding a dark, dark mystery...that might be filled with a deadly surprise.

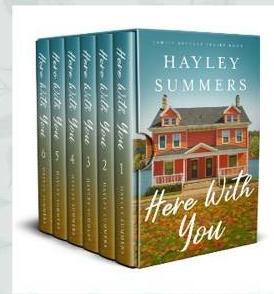
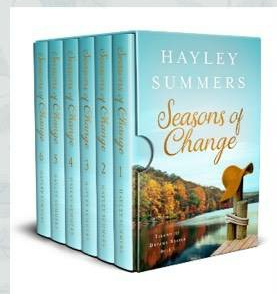
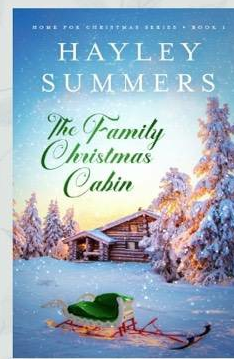
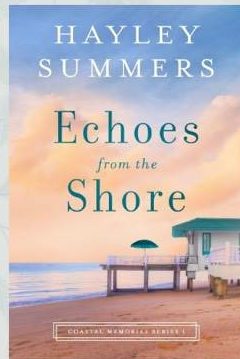
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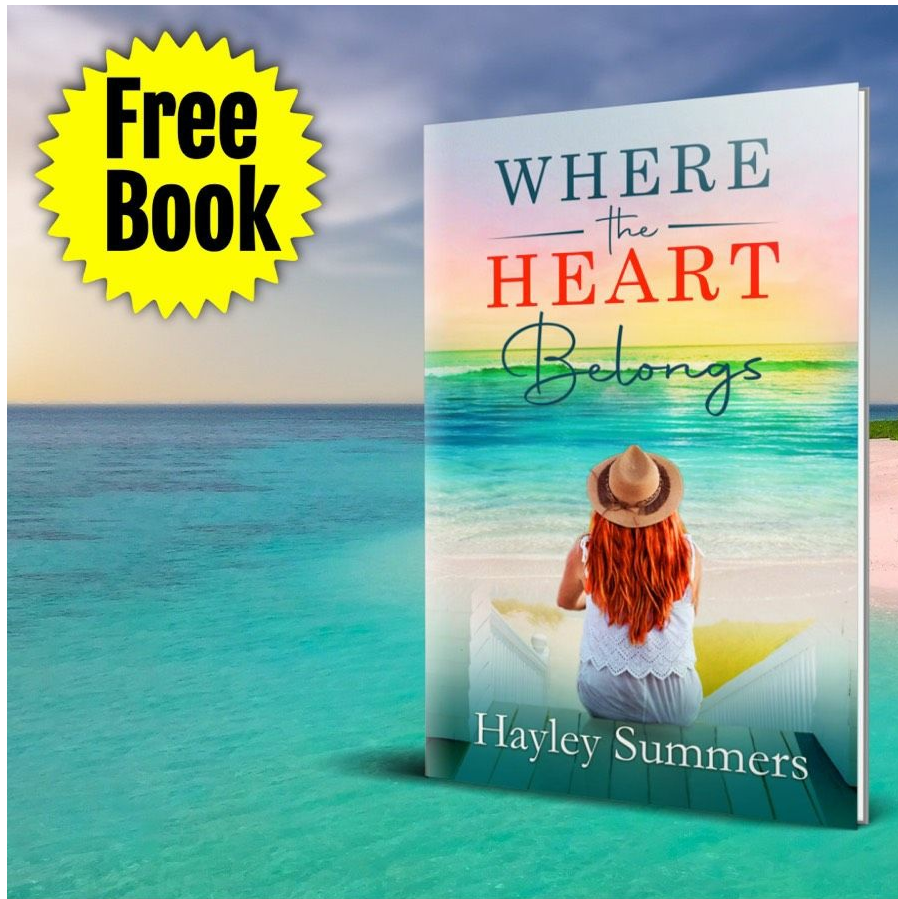
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