



*the santa
clause*

CLAUS FOR
CHRISTMAS

ANNEE JONES

The Santa Claus



ANNEE JONES

THE SANTA CLAUSE
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“Why do you say that?” My best friend Wendy’s voice crackled over the Bluetooth audio system. “You won the sweepstakes, fair and square, and frankly, you deserve some self-care after what you’ve been through. Unlike most people who go on holiday vacations, you have *Sweet Crunchies* cereal to thank for getting you to finally take a little time for yourself.”

“I really do love that cereal,” I admitted. In fact, I’d probably been indulging in my favorite snack a little too much lately judging by the way my pants had tightened in the month since my long-time boyfriend Tad had announced he’d fallen for his hygienist—the one with more fake parts than the plastic Christmas tree in his dental office—and called off our engagement.

“I’m just impressed that you actually took the time to collect all those box tops and mail them in along with your sweepstakes entry. I never think it’s worth it to enter those things. I honestly didn’t think anyone ever won those contests. I always figured they were just marketing ploys by the food manufacturers to get people to buy more of their brand.”

“Well, I guess the *Sweet Crunchies* promotion was legit,” I frowned as I noticed sleet starting to mix with the rain.

The wipers squeaked as they swished across the windshield. I suppose I should have gotten them fixed before winter, but with all the studying and assistant teaching I’d been doing to obtain my certification as a middle school English teacher, I hadn’t had a minute to spare.

“By the way...You could have spent Christmas with Roger and me if you hadn’t won the all-inclusive vacation to the North Pole,” Wendy advised. “We would have loved to have you.”

I loved my best friend like the sister I always wanted, but she couldn’t have bribed me with a whole truckload of *Sweet Crunchies* to spend the holiday with her and her on-again, off-again rock-star wannabe boyfriend. Now that we had all passed the big 3-0, Roger’s refusal to get a real job seemed more immature than ever. It must be nice to have rich parents who continued to foot the bill for his lifestyle of leisure, but his lack of responsibility had become even more of a point of contention in his and Wendy’s already shaky relationship.

“Thanks,” I said with a sigh, deciding to change the subject before I said something I’d regret. “I can’t believe I’ve never been to the North Pole, by the way. It’s only forty miles from Boulder, where I’ve lived nearly my entire life. What’s it like at the village?”

Wendy whistled. “You are in for a treat that’s for sure! My parents used to take my brother and me there to spend the holidays when we were little. I

begged Roger to go with me this year, but this is the band's busiest season with all the gigs they've got booked to play at parties and events around town. The North Pole is what you always imagined as a child come to life...definitely a place dreams are made of. I'd love to get married there someday. It just screams romance! Oops, sorry. It screams self-care, too. Peace and joy, all that sort of thing. You'll see."

"If you say so," I said drily. If there was one thing about Wendy that I truly envied, it was the fact she had such a close-knit family. Given that my parents divorced when I was nine and both of them remarried soon afterward and started second families with their new spouses, I spent my childhood being volleyed and back and forth so much that I ended up feeling not only like a ping-pong ball, but like I never really belonged anywhere. After meeting Tad our freshman year at college, as soon as our relationship became serious, I began flying back to his hometown of Boston with him every year to spend our winter break with his family. I wasn't sure either of my parents even noticed I was gone, or if they had, they hadn't seemed to care.

Hence, as serendipity would have it, I now found myself on my way for the first time to a luxury mountain resort village I'd always dreamed of visiting. Except of course, I'd never planned to go by myself. I glanced at the red tote bag on the floor of the passenger seat which I'd filled with all the books that had been sitting on my bookshelf collecting dust. They were books I kept telling myself I'd read one day. Well, that day had come. It would be *Moby Dick* and me for Christmas. If I didn't slow down on my *Sweet Crunchies* habit, *Moby Dick* wouldn't be the only whale emerging from my hotel room by the time the holidays were over.

"Wendy, it's starting to snow out here, so I'd better concentrate on the road."

"Yeah, I saw on the news that there's a huge winter storm coming, so our connection might get broken anyway. Drive safe okay? Don't forget to visit Christmas Village while you're there. The shops are so cute!"

"I will," I promised. "Have a merry Christmas with Roger and your family!"

"Merry Christmas, sweetie. Love you!"

"Love you, too," I said before a click signaled that Wendy had ended the call.

I punched the button to turn on the radio, figuring some music would help me stay alert. It was a little after 6 pm and I was getting tired.

Tad had come to clear out the rest of his things from our apartment earlier in the day, and I was drained both physically and emotionally. I'd been half-inclined to kick him in the teeth when I saw him, especially since he looked as frustratingly handsome as ever with his all-American wavy blonde hair and chiseled cheekbones. But, since it was the season of goodwill, I figured kicking him wouldn't be good for my karma and instead busied myself by emailing out job applications to several school districts around the state. That was taking a few steps forward, right? At least I'd managed to pass my final exams despite everything going on in my life. Our lease would be up in a couple of months, but I hadn't had the heart to begin looking for a new place to live yet. I figured I'd sign up to substitute teach until I received a full-time job offer, so maybe I could work out a deal with my landlord to go month-to-month. That would be something else to tackle once I got back after Christmas. For the next two weeks though, I was determined to put my worries aside and relax. Maybe I'd even enjoy myself. I sighed.

Bing Crosby's light baritone drifted from the loudspeakers, crooning the lyrics to "I'll Be Home for Christmas."

Visibility was worsening as darkness fell and I exhaled in frustration as I gripped the leather steering wheel tighter. The windshield wipers were already on high-speed, slinging the rain off the glass like two tired sailors dumping water from a sinking ship. What had begun an hour ago as a drizzle had quickly turned into a downpour, and from the looks of it now, the precipitation was turning into snow. I'd expected the temperatures to drop as I traveled further north, and I looked forward to reaching the North Pole and finding the hotel where I'd be staying as quickly as possible.

I took a deep breath and tried to keep calm as I tapped on the brakes to stay a safe distance behind the blurred red brake lights of the vehicle in front of me.

The notes of the song faded, and a live female DJ began to speak. "Hello, listeners. Thank you for joining us tonight here at CRIS radio. I'm your host this evening...Stella Dreamtime. We're in the middle of our annual 24-hour Countdown to Christmas and I hope you enjoyed the classic I just played. Wherever you are, listener...Are you home for Christmas? Perhaps you're sitting by a crackling fire right now, drinking cups of cocoa and making merry with your loved ones. I hope so. But if not, you'd better hurry because there's a big snowstorm on the way. Be safe out there, everyone. Now, how about this favorite from Ole' Blue Eyes?"

The opening notes of Sinatra's "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas"

began to play at the same time a gust of wind shook the car.

Thankfully, the next highway sign indicated that the exit to the North Pole was only another quarter mile away. From there, it would only be a short distance to the village itself and the hotel where I'd be staying—Evergreen Lodge.

It seemed to take forever, but finally I spotted the off-ramp and steered in the direction. I slowly maneuvered my car down the long winding road and came to a four-way stop. Since there were no other vehicles behind me, I took the time to punch on my nav system and waited for the digitally engineered female voice to guide me the rest of the way. Luckily, the map I'd looked at before I left was correct and a couple of turns later, I found myself gazing at a winter wonderland the likes of which I'd only seen in the movies. The little town nestled in a valley at the bottom of the Colorado Rockies had been designed to resemble a traditional Bavarian village. Twinkling fairy lights hung like icicles from the eaves of the Alpine-style buildings that were located along the cobblestone streets forming the town square. At the center was an expansive park where a huge Christmas tree stood in the middle of the green, decorated with colorful ornaments, silver tinsel, and strands of multi-colored lights. Streetlamps tied with fat red ribbons cast orbs of cheery golden light onto the sidewalks, where pink-cheeked people bundled in colorful winterwear strolled in and out of eateries and shops open late. A row of spangled horse-drawn sleighs stood along the cobblestone pavement of one of the streets, and I noticed a uniformed driver assisting a family with three small laughing children into the one at the front.

I grinned as I inched past the charming scene. Even though the streets had been salted plentifully so that my tires now hugged the street as tightly as if it had been July, I wanted more time to take it all in. But I reminded myself that I'd have plenty of time over the next two weeks to explore. Right now, I needed to get to the lodge and check-in, then maybe I'd take a hot bath and relax with my book before bed. Maybe I'd ask for directions to a local bookstore to see if I could find something a little cheerier than Moby. Perhaps a romcom.

The voice over the loudspeaker suddenly announced that my destination was coming up on the right. I pulled into the circular drive of Evergreen Lodge and my mouth dropped open at the sight of the inn up close. The cereal company clearly hadn't spared any expense for my grand prize winning. The building's entrance was marked by a pair of gigantic oak double doors adorned with holly berry wreaths. White twinkling lights outlined the edifice, and snow-covered evergreens dotted the yard. A gigantic snowman smiled widely from an

upper floor-to-ceiling window surrounded by a pile of electrically lit gifts in all colors of the rainbow.

Two men stood on either side of the entrance doors. They were dressed like toy soldiers, in red suits with shiny gold buttons and tall black boots. Atop their heads were black fur hats secured by straps beneath their chins.

I pulled my SUV to a stop. The soldiers—er, bell men, marched stiffly towards me. One of them opened my door and gave me a slight bow.

“Happy Holidays and welcome to Evergreen Lodge!”

“Thank you,” I said, happily dropping my keys into his outstretched gloved hand. The other bell man lifted my suitcase from the trunk.

“Go on inside and get warm, Miss. I’ll bring this up to your room,” he assured me kindly.

I hurried through the doors and entered the lobby. Several overstuffed couches and chairs were placed around a crackling fireplace in the seating area just ahead, and a gigantic Christmas tree covered in ornaments, tinsel, and bows glittered in the corner. A gold star twinkled at the top of the tree mere inches below the ceiling. Curling red ribbons festooned the reception counter where clerks wearing Santa hats stood behind computers, their fingers quietly tapping the keys. One of them, a woman with short silver hair and wire-rimmed glasses, reached towards one of the candy-filled crystal dishes sitting at either end of the counter and popped a bright green gumdrop into her mouth. She beckoned me to her station.

“Welcome to Evergreen Lodge,” she said as I approached. The nametag pinned to her fuzzy sweater read “Lovern.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m really excited to be here!”

“I take it this is your first time visiting the North Pole, then?” she asked, peering at me over the rims of her glasses.

“Yes,” I nodded. “Your town is so beautiful! It’s just like a life-sized gingerbread village. I was surprised to see so many people outside despite the snow.”

“Honey, New York City has nothing on us,” she said, waving her hand in the air dismissively. “You don’t even need a car here! In fact, we discourage them. Did you see the horses and sleighs on your way in? They’re really the best way to get around if you don’t feel like walking. I’ll give you the number to text the manager, Dash, whenever you need one. He’ll make sure you’re taken care of. The city pays for the service, so it’s completely free of charge.”

“That would be great,” I said, then giggled. “Too bad you don’t have any reindeer here, though.”

“Oh, but we do!” Lovern sounded surprised. “They don’t drive sleighs for people though, dear. They have an exclusive contract with Santa.”

“I see,” I said, going along with the fun.

“You can still meet them if you want. A couple of them agree to come in from the reindeer farm each year to do a Meet-&-Greet and pose for pictures with Mr. Claus at Christmas Village. It’s good publicity.”

“Hm,” I murmured, wondering whether Lovern actually believed everything she was telling me. If so, she might be a cookie or two short of a full jar.

“Now, are you checking in, dear?” she continued, adjusting her spectacles.

“Yes,” I nodded. “My name is Merri Bianchi.”

“Oh!” she said with a start. “You’re the young lady who won the *Sweet Crunchies* sweepstakes, right?”

“That’s right,” I replied.

“In that case, wait here just a moment please.”

She turned and hustled through a side door. I drummed my fingers on the counter impatiently. Those gumdrops did look tasty. I took a yellow one and bit into the sugary confection. The flavor lemon burst onto my tongue. Yep, delicious.

The door swung open again and Lovern reappeared carrying a bag.

“What’s this?” I asked as she handed it to me.

“Your uniform,” she replied nonchalantly.

I blinked. “Uniform? I don’t understand. I won a vacation in the cereal contest.”

“Hm, let me check my records,” said Lovern, her brow furrowing. She reached under the counter and pulled out a giant binder, then licked her finger and began to riffle through the pages.

“Yep,” she said nodding, “I was correct. You’ve been assigned to be Elf #27 at Santa’s Toyshop from Dec. 15-24.”

I shook my head. “Sorry, I still think there must be some sort of misunderstanding. I won this trip.”

“Yes, I know honey, but didn’t you read the fine print?” Lovern heaved

the binder onto the counter and tapped her finger on a line in miniscule print about half-way down the page.

“It says right here in your contract...Section 33, Part Q, line item #147. We call it ‘*The Santa Clause*’ FYI—*by accepting the offer, winners are expected to work part-time at Christmas Village during their stay.*”

“What? Sorry, no thanks,” I said as I hitched my purse higher on my shoulder and imagined Wendy telling me, “I told you so.”

“I’m too tired to drive home now, so I guess I’ll have to stay the night,” I admitted, hearing the disappointment in my voice. “How much do you charge?”

“Not so fast, Twinkle-toes, there’s a raging storm coming in. You won’t be able to get out of the North Pole for days. You may as well make the best of it. What could be better than working at Santa’s Toyshop anyway? Now here, go put this on in the ladies’ room and let’s see if I got the right size. I anticipated you’d be what.. a 24, 26?”

“I’m a size 6, thank you,” I replied darkly, taking the proffered bag and following her towards the ladies’.

Inside, I undressed quickly and drew the garments from the small tote. Oh. My. God. I’m not sure what I was expecting the said uniform to look like but I definitely hadn’t expected it would be an elf costume. Grimacing, I pulled the red-and-white striped stockings over my legs, slipped on the green dress, and buckled the wide red belt around my waist. Everything fit perfectly, which I found very unfortunate. I took out the remaining accessories and groaned. Fine, just fine. A long elf hat with a white poof ball on the end and a pair of oversize green shoes with toes that curled up, tipped by small bells.

“Well?” called Lovern from outside the door. “Are you ready? Let me see you.”

Slowly, I opened the door and stepped out into the hallway in front of a floor-to-ceiling mirror.

Lovern burst out laughing as I stared at my image reflected in the glass. With the freckles dotting over my nose and cheeks and my new post break-up pixie haircut, I was the spitting image of an elf.

“This the best thing I’ve seen all day!” Lovern took off her glasses and swiped the back of her hand across her eyes.

So much for an all-expenses paid vacation. If things kept going the way they had been, this was bound to be the worst Christmas ever.

Chapter Two



Mismatched Sizes

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I couldn't believe it...I'd been so excited to welcome her to come live with me in the North Pole, but I hadn't expected that my enthusiasm wouldn't be returned. Not even in the slightest. My former happy little princess with the blonde curls who loved to dance and sing and play with dolls had suddenly morphed into a gangly, sullen pre-teen whose beautiful face was marred by a seemingly perpetual frown and who wanted nothing to do with me. I couldn't understand it. When the heck had this change occurred? And when had Lila allowed our daughter to get her ears pierced and dye her hair? I was miffed that I hadn't been consulted and frankly couldn't believe that my ex-wife, the former pageant queen, had approved of Sophia's choice of hair color in particular—a shocking shade of blue. And she wore entirely too much makeup. Why did she need all that black around her eyes? Of course, the first thing I did when she got off the plane was put my foot directly into my mouth by asking her that question. I was still kicking myself. Hopefully, the dinner I'd prepared for us tonight would get me back in Sophia's good graces. Lasagna had always been her favorite dish.

“Dinner's almost ready, honey,” I said, rapping my knuckle on her door.

I had no idea what was so enticing about those video games she loved to play, or how she could be friends with other kids she'd never actually met in person. I shook my head, glad I didn't need a lot of technology for the work I did as a general contractor. A set of tools and some good old-fashioned blueprints were good enough for me. The oven timer dinged as if on cue, and I hurried back to the kitchen. Grabbing a towel, I wrapped it over my hand and opened the oven door. A rush of heat hit my face and the savory aromas of basil and oregano met my nose. My stomach growled in response. The sauce bubbled as I pulled the dish from the oven and set it on the countertop. I sprinkled some fresh parmesan cheese over the top, and then slid the tray of soft garlic bread sticks into the oven to heat. I was retrieving the bowl of green salad I'd prepared earlier from the refrigerator when I heard the door of Sophia's room open.

“What's for dinner, Dad?” she asked, shuffling into the kitchen. I stared at my daughter's outfit with a mix of wonder. She was wearing flannel pajama pants, a pair of bear claw slippers, and a fitted lace off-the-shoulder top. A necklace that I strongly suspected was in fact a dog collar circled her throat. I gulped and willed myself to keep my face expressionless.

“Lasagna!” I said proudly, pointing to the steaming dish. “I made it from scratch, just the way you like it.”

Sophia raised an eyebrow. “With meat?”

“Yep, beef and sausage,” I nodded. “And plenty of cheese.”

She made a gagging noise. “Seriously? Gross! Didn’t Mom tell you I’m a vegetarian now?”

“No,” I said slowly. “As a matter of fact, she didn’t. When did this happen?”

She shrugged and crossed her arms over her thin chest.

“So, in other words, you’re not going to eat the meal I’ve spent my entire Saturday making?” I asked incredulously.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Sorry, Dad.”

I sighed and turned to take the tray of breadsticks from the oven before they burned.

“Will you at least eat the salad and bread?”

“Okay,” she replied. “As there’s no meat. Being vegetarian is better for the earth, you know, not to mention the animals whose lives are cut short by people like you who eat them. I mean, honestly, Dad, I really thought you were a lot smarter than this.”

Holy crap. I couldn’t seem to do anything right.

“You raise some good points, Sophia,” I nodded. “How about if we both have salad and bread tonight? Perhaps I can take the lasagna to work tomorrow.”

“All right,” she said, going to the cupboard and pulling out a glass. “Do you have any almond milk?”

“Any what?” I busied myself putting the hot breadsticks onto a serving tray, vaguely wondering if I might starve.

“Almond milk, Dad,” she said impatiently, pulling open the door of the refrigerator. “Don’t you remember I asked you to pick some up?”

“I’m sorry sweetie, I must have forgotten,” I said with a chuckle. “I’m not used to all these fancy foods. I didn’t even know you could make milk from a nut, anyway. I’ve got a carton of the real stuff in there.”

Sophia rolled her eyes and grabbed the carton of milk with pursed lips.

We took our seats at the table, and I passed her the bowl of salad to help herself.

“So,” I said, racking my brain for a topic of conversation. “I’m really glad you wanted to come try living with me here in the North Pole. It’s a great little town, and my business has done very well here. I hope you know how much I

didn't want to leave Springfield, but unfortunately the job opportunities just weren't there."

She shrugged again as she bit off a chunk of breadstick and chewed. I waited while she washed it down with a drink of milk.

"I guess. Coming here was more appealing than staying back in Small Town, America where nothing ever happens. And watching Mom swoon all over Rex." She made the gag face again.

"You don't like Lila's new boyfriend?" I asked.

I knew Lila had begun seeing someone, and she'd mentioned on the phone that she thought it might be serious. I was happy for her and knew she'd never be with someone who wasn't a genuinely good person, but I couldn't help but feel a twinge of concern.

"Rex is okay," she replied, spearing a slice of avocado with her fork. "But he tries too hard to get me to like him, and the cologne he wears stinks."

"Hm," I responded. "Well, I'm sure your mom misses you already, but I'm glad she agreed to let you try middle school here and see how you like it."

"Yeah," she said. "But it's school, right? So I automatically won't like it."

"Well, as you get older, there might be more classes you find that you're interested in. I thought you were excited about signing up for drama?"

She nodded. "That was definitely the best option for an elective. Much better than Home Ec. Ew."

I laughed. "Well, maybe you'll discover a new passion."

She raised her eyebrows, clearly not convinced.

"Christmas is coming up, sweetie," I said, stating the obvious. I glanced towards the tree in the corner I'd brought in from the Christmas tree farm. I wasn't the best at decorating, but I did know how to select a good tree.

"How about if I take you over to Christmas Village tomorrow so that you can pick out a gift for your mom, and maybe one for Rex, too? I think it would be a nice thing for you to do."

"That would be okay I guess," she said. "I like shopping."

"Wonderful!" Finally, I'd said something right. Not to mention, I still had to find a gift for Sophia. I'd planned to get her a special edition keepsake Barbie but had a strong feeling that would not go over well after all. Hence, I needed to come up with a Plan B, stat. Maybe I could find a nice female employee at one of the shops to ask for advice about what a 12-year-old girl might want for

Christmas, since I was clearly out of my wheelhouse.

I was helping myself to another serving of salad when the loud chime of a ringtone startled me. My fork dropped from my fingertips and clattered across the tile.

“Sorry, Dad, that’s me,” said Sophia, whipping her phone out of the pocket of her pants and glancing at the screen before she answered the call. “Hi Claire! Yeah, I’m free now. I was just finishing dinner. Are you ready to get back to Immortal Slayers?”

By the time I’d retrieved my fork from halfway across the room and returned to the table, Sophia had dropped her plate in the sink, and I watched as she hurried back to her room, the phone pressed to her ear.

I didn’t even bother to scoop more salad from the serving bowl but instead pulled the whole thing in front of me and dug in.

Chapter Three



Tangled Tinsel

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The bright overhead lights of the retail store were matched in intensity by the myriad light-up toys and flashing electronic Christmas decorations everywhere I looked. Children scampered about, darting in and out of aisles, while dazed parents stared blankly at shelves filled with buzzing robotics, talking dolls, squeaking stuffed animals, *Lego* sets, and the latest and greatest electronic gadgets and gizmos. Not to mention, the whirring and hammering coming from the electrician, Joe, who was working with his assortment of power tools on a ladder behind me while installing a wiring panel for the new security system. The store manager, Nick Bright, had informed me the old wiring that controlled the operating system for the security equipment throughout Christmas Village had shorted out earlier in the month, and the electric company was working as fast as they could to outfit all of the stores in the retail village with the updated system. Santa's Toyshop happened to be next in the queue. Just my luck. I rubbed my temples and wondered when my co-elf, Piper, would be back with our coffee order.

"Here," said the harried mother in front of me, shoving a credit card across the counter.

The woman's hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun which was quickly coming undone as an infant wailed in her arms and pulled at the loose strands with tiny fists.

"Shh," the mother cooed, offering the child a purple pacifier. "Pacie?" she coaxed with a smile.

The baby opened its adorable rosebud mouth and the mother popped the object into it. The child narrowed its eyes, promptly spit the pacifier out and began wailing again. The woman rolled her eyes heavenward and sighed.

I murmured sympathetically and proceeded to ring up the light sabers she wished to purchase.

"I should have left the baby at home with the sitter too, but figured she'd have her hands full with the older boys," she said with a weak laugh. "But I think I'm the one with the harder job this afternoon trying to get my holiday shopping done with this little one in tow."

I shoved the toys into a large bag and stepped from behind the register to help loop it over the mother's free shoulder. Then I knelt, retrieved the discarded pacifier, and tucked it into the bag as well.

"Thanks," the woman murmured.

Or at least that's what I thought she said since the baby chose that

moment to emit an ear-piercing shriek.

“He’s adorable.” I hoped the woman could read my lips. “Have a Merry Christmas,” I added.

She gave me an apologetic smile, waved, and hurried out of the store.

I resumed my position behind the register.

“Good job,” said Piper, whose bell-tipped shoes jingled as she returned from her mid-morning break carrying two giant coffee cups.

“Here you go, grande mocha with extra whipped cream, right?”

“You’re a lifesaver,” I sighed, accepting the cup gratefully. I took a sip, delighted to find the barista hadn’t skimped on either the sugar or the chocolate.

Piper laughed. “I totally understand how you feel. This is our busiest time of year, of course, and so we appreciate all the temporary workers like you who help out.”

“Thanks,” I said ruefully. “I’m not sure I had much choice, but I am glad I’m here.” I hoped what I said didn’t sound as unconvincing to her as it did to me.

“Mm,” Piper moaned, taking a sip of her own beverage.

“What coffee concoction did you get?” I asked, trying to be friendly.

My co-worker was probably somewhere around my own age, and I liked her immediately. She was very small in height, only coming up to my shoulder, and pleasantly plump, with long blonde hair tied back in a long braid, A red velvet bow was clipped to the end. I thought she looked darling dressed up as an elf but wasn’t sure she’d take my saying so as a compliment, so I chose to keep the sentiment to myself.

Piper giggled. “Everyone thinks I’m crazy, but my favorite kind of coffee is a mocha too, except I always ask for six shots of mint and extra chocolate shavings to be added. It makes it taste just like a liquid Girl Scout cookie,”

I laughed, “That’s awesome. Nothing wrong with getting it just the way you like.”

“Don’t look now,” she whispered as a customer approached her register. “But the guy over in aisle 3 might be even hotter than our coffee.”

A little boy dressed in a Robin Hood costume with a brown cape and black mask over his eyes leaped off a bean bag chair, obscuring my view of the tall, dark-haired gentleman behind him.

“Freddie!” called the electrician from his ladder. “Watch where you’re

going, son. I'm going to be wrapping up here in a few minutes, so how about we grab some burgers for lunch as soon as I'm done?"

"Woo-hoo!" the boy shouted, jumping into the air. "I want mine with double cheese and lots of ketchup! Superheroes need extra food, so they have enough energy to save the world!"

The electrician chuckled and went back to finagling with the wires.

Luckily, Freddie moved out of the way and the man behind him came into full view. I gasped. Piper was right...he was handsome, but not in the same GQ type of way as Tad. This guy was probably a few inches taller, with equally broad shoulders and narrow hips, but his dark features were rougher and less refined. His wavy brown hair was streaked with the tiniest amount of silver, and his full lips curved into an easy smile as a teenage girl came to his side. I grinned. She reminded me of her at that age—wanting so much to be seen as a grown-up but not quite sure what that meant besides wearing far too much makeup. The resemblance between her and the man was unmistakable, and it was clear they must be father and daughter.

The girl pointed to a small group of other girls about her age standing a few feet away and said something to her dad. He nodded happily, looking pleased, and I suspected his daughter had just discovered a new set of friends.

I turned my attention back to the customers now forming a line in front of me and began to ring up orders as quickly as I could. All of a sudden, an alarm rang from the store's entrance. I saw the manager, Nick, run to the front, his tie flapping. I tried to keep processing transactions, but soon I heard what sounded like an argument.

"It wasn't me, I swear!" screamed a female voice.

Everyone in the store turned. I saw the teenage girl standing in front of her dad and Nick, with a backpack on the ground between them. I hurried over to find out what was going on, maybe I could help resolve whatever the problem was.

Nick held a box in his hand that contained the most expensive tablet our store carried, the digital security key fob still attached to it. "Then how do you explain this?" he asked, holding the item up.

"What's going on?" I asked.

The manager turned to me. "The sound you heard was the alarm system detecting that someone was trying to leave the store with an item they hadn't paid for. As you know, part of our protocol when ringing up purchases is that

we remove the key fobs attached to our costliest merchandise only after payment goes through successfully. Since the key fob was still attached to this tablet, it tripped the alarm. I discovered it in the girl's backpack."

The manager pointed to the open blue knapsack on the floor.

"I don't know how it got there," the girl said, her hazel eyes filling with tears.

"Are you sure, Sophia?" The man who was obviously her father asked. Worry lines creased his forehead. "Maybe you just put it inside by mistake or something?"

"No! I didn't, I promise!"

"You must be lying," said Nick. "Otherwise, explain how this got into your backpack?"

"I can't." The girl spoke in a small voice.

She seemed more child-like all of a sudden, and I wanted desperately to believe what she said was true.

"Look, sir," her dad started, running one hand through his hair. "If my daughter says she's innocent, then I believe her. You have the device now anyway, what more do you want?"

The manager glared at him. "That's not the point," he snapped. "The point is that your daughter is a thief. She tried to steal one of my toys! What else is she going to steal next? I'm sorry, but I have to turn her in to the authorities." He pulled a phone from the inside pocket of his jacket.

The girl, Sophia, gasped, and burst into tears.

I stepped forward. "Mr. Bright, perhaps I can help here."

Nick paused with the phone halfway to his ear and looked at me expectantly.

Sophia's father turned to me and peered at my name tag. "Merri," he read. "That's cute. Look, I don't know what your real name is, but there's no need for you to get involved. I can handle it." He reached for his wallet and took out a wad of bills. "How much do you want, Mister? I'm happy to pay for the tablet if that will take care of this mess."

"I don't want your money," said Nick, shaking his head. He jabbed his index finger at Sophia. "I want to teach your daughter a lesson about stealing."

"Mr. Bright," I interjected again. "Let's assume this girl is telling the truth. That means someone else may have tried to get away with stealing the electronic

device. Perhaps they were about to get caught and shoved it in her backpack to throw blame on someone else?”

“Hm,” Nick said, rubbing his chin. “I suppose that could be a plausible explanation. But that means someone else may have attempted to rob the store. Either way, we have a thief on our hands, and I want to know who it was. I’ll make a deal with you. Find the real culprit and I won’t turn this girl into the police. If you don’t, I will file a report against her, and Merri, since you’ve insisted on sticking your nose where it doesn’t belong, I will personally see to it that you are escorted out of the North Pole and prohibited from returning to our village again.”

With that, the manager stomped off in the direction of his private office at the back of the store.

Sophia’s dad groaned. “I am so sorry,” he said to me.

“Don’t worry, it’s not your fault,” I replied. “I did this to myself.”

“Is your name really Merri?” asked Sophia, blinking back tears.

“Yes,” I nodded.

“Oops,” said Sophia’s father. “Jeez, I stuck my foot in my mouth again, didn’t I?”

“Yeah.” A small smile appeared on Sophia’s face.

“That’s okay,” I assured them. “My real name is Merri Bianchi. I’m working here part-time over the holidays.”

“I’m Kane Carpenter.” The man held out his hand to shake. “And this is my daughter, Sophia.”

“It’s nice to meet you both.” I slid my hand into Kane’s grip. My pulse quickened as his fingers curled around mine.

“How about we exchange numbers and meet tomorrow for lunch to figure out a plan to get out of this mess?”

“You’ve got a deal,” I agreed.

A few minutes later, I waved goodbye to Kane and his daughter, and returned to my register. Piper cocked her eyebrow.

“Hun, next time if you want to be introduced to a cute guy, ask me first. I’m sure it would be a lot less trouble.”

I nodded meekly. Yep, I was sure, too.

Chapter Four



The Pudding Thickens

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I knew Merri would be coming straight from the toy shop after completing her shift, and sure enough, she was still wearing her elf costume. The pom-pom ball at the end of her stocking cap flapped against her back as she walked. I couldn't help but chuckle even as I found myself wondering what she might look like in everyday clothes—or possibly even a short dress. Even in her costume, her hourglass shape was obvious. Plus, she had extraordinary skin, bringing the term “peaches and cream” to mind.

Ever since Lila and I divorced, and I moved to the North Pole, I'd been so busy getting my contracting business off the ground, I hadn't had time to date. Or maybe that's what I told myself. The thought suddenly occurred that perhaps I'd thrown myself into work as a way of coping with the loss of my family unit as I knew it. Even though the split was the right decision, and both Lila and I knew it, that didn't mean it was any less difficult. Unfortunately, it seemed Sophia bore the brunt of it despite all our efforts to keep that from happening. At least, that's what it felt like to me since she'd refused to come visit me for the past two years. Now that she was not only willing to come visit, but to live here, I had to make things right between us. But so far, I'd only managed to push my daughter further away. Christmas was coming. I wanted to make this holiday the best ever for her, but how?

“Hi Kane,” said Merri, smiling shyly. I stood and pulled out a chair for her.

“Hi,” I responded, wondering how it would feel to run my hands through her short, sandy curls. I'll bet they were even softer than they looked, peeking out from beneath the elf cap. “How was your morning?”

“Busy,” she answered with a laugh. “I would have thought all the toys in stock would be gone by now with the number of purchases we're ringing up each day, but somehow more keep appearing.”

“Santa and his elves are busy,” I chuckled.

“You got that right,” Merri agreed, picking up her menu. “What do you recommend?”

I ran my eyes over the selections. Just about everything the café offered was delicious, so she couldn't really go wrong.

“Personally, I love the soup and sandwich combination—The French onion soup here is amazing.”

She nodded. “That sounds good to me too.”

At that moment, a server approached, a pencil tucked behind her ear.

“What can I get you kids?” she asked loudly so as to be heard over the holiday music playing in the background. If I wasn’t mistaken, the tune was “A Holly Jolly Christmas.”

The smile lines around the woman’s eyes crinkled as she spoke. Her sweater featured smiling kittens wearing Santa hats playing with balls of string. I was tempted to say how much I liked her ugly Christmas sweater, but on second thought, chose to keep my mouth shut.

“Merri?” I asked.

“I’ll have the French onion soup with a grilled cheese, please,” she said politely.

“And I’ll have the same,” I told the waitress.

“Very good,” she replied, reaching for our menus. “Your order will be out shortly.”

“Were you able to review the footage from the security cameras?” I asked Merri once we were alone again.

She shook her head. “I asked Mr. Bright, but he said that there was still some sort of problem with them, and we didn’t get any video feed from yesterday.”

“Shoot, that’s a shame,” I said.

“I know,” she said with a sigh. “That really would have helped; maybe we’d even have been able to identify who took the tablet.”

“And how it got into Sophia’s backpack,” I added.

“Exactly.” Merri nodded before lifting her water glass and taking a sip. “How old is your daughter?”

“She’s twelve,” I replied. “As a matter of fact, she only arrived in town a week ago. It’s the first time she’s ever been to the North Pole.”

“Really?” Merri asked, her eyebrows shooting up.

“Yes,” I said, figuring I might as well tell her the truth right off the bat. “Her mom and I divorced two years ago, and Sophia took it really hard. I think she blamed me because I was the one who left.”

“I get that,” said Merri. “I’m a child of divorce myself, so I think I can understand where she’s coming from. Even when it’s nobody’s fault, a child especially wants someone to blame. Having someone to direct their anger at helps them to make sense of what is happening. Somehow...simpler for them to understand. Even as adults it’s normal to want to find a scapegoat. Processing

all those complicated feelings is hard. Relationships are never simple.”

“I’d say you hit the proverbial nail on the head there.” I was shocked at how well she understood my situation. “Lila and I married young...too young, as we both eventually realized. After we had Sophia, we simply grew apart. Even though we both still respected each other as friends and co-parents, we just wanted very different things for our lives. Finally, we agreed it would be best if we split. The last thing we wanted for our daughter was to be examples of an unhealthy relationship. I still think we made the right decision by going through with the divorce. I’m a lot happier here, and I know Lila is happier now too. Especially since she’s met someone who seems to be a much better fit for her than I ever was.”

“That’s great,” said Merri. “How does Sophia like the North Pole so far? How long will she be staying with you?”

I smiled. “Actually, she met some girls her own age yesterday when we were wandering through Santa’s Toyshop. I was actually trying to figure out what she might like for Christmas, but as it turned out, she was more interested in chatting with the other teenagers than pointing things out to dear old dad. Mostly she just rolled her eyes and told me everything there was too babyish for her anyway.”

Merri laughed. “Yep, she’s definitely twelve going on sixteen.”

“Exactly,” I agreed, laughing along with her. “And she’s here for good... or at least for the time being. I don’t think she’s thrilled at the prospect of having a new stepdad, but Lila is hoping a bit of a break will help Sophia adjust.”

“I agree,” Merri said. “Shifts in family dynamics take time.”

“How about you?” I asked. “I haven’t seen you here before, and you mentioned you’re working the toyshop temporarily. How did that come about? What brought you here?”

A pink hue morphed over her cheeks. “Actually, I won a sweepstakes on the back of a cereal box.”

“No way!” I exclaimed as the server returned with our meals. We waited for her to set our plates in front of us before continuing the conversation.

“Which cereal?” I asked after our server left.

“Sweet Crunchies,” Merri replied sheepishly, picking up half of her grilled cheese sandwich. Goopy orange cheese spilled out and she took her fork and twirled the melted strands around the tines like spaghetti.

“That’s awesome,” I replied. “I loved that cereal as a kid but haven’t had it in years.”

“What can I say? Guess I’m a kid at heart.” Merri popped the fork of melted cheese into her mouth. “Mmm.”

I lifted my spoon, scooped some bread, cheese, and soup into it, and put the whole thing in my mouth at once. It was hotter than I anticipated, and I immediately reached for my water.

“Hot?” she asked, watching me.

“Yep,” I spluttered after swallowing. “So, did you just decide to pitch in at Christmas Village for lack of something better to do on your time off? Didn’t the company offer you two tickets? I’ve never heard of a grand prize package being only one ticket to a luxury vacation.”

“You’re right, I did win two tickets, but my fiancé called off our engagement last month,” Merri said slowly, her sandwich halfway to her mouth. “I’ve realized in hindsight that he was right. We’d been arguing about stupid stuff for months, and I think neither of us were ready to admit that our relationship just wasn’t working. He’s a dentist and apparently, he ended up falling for one his hygienists.”

“Oh, man,” I cringed. “That must have been rough to hear. I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. “I’m not. It was bound to happen at some point, so I can’t say I was too upset. Surprised was more like it, and maybe even a little bit relieved if I’m being honest. The fact that he took it on himself to break our engagement meant I didn’t have to.”

I nodded. “Believe me, I understand.”

We dug into our meals and several minutes of silence ensued.

“So, what do you think our next steps should be? I tried my best to keep my cool with your manager yesterday, but if he turns Sophia in to the police, we’re going to have a problem. If she says she didn’t steal that tablet, then I believe her.”

“I do too,” Merri agreed. “I saw the look in her eyes and it wasn’t one of disappointment, like someone being caught in the act of doing something wrong. She seemed truly flabbergasted and shocked when she the device was found in her backpack.”

“I wonder if there have been any thefts from the other shops in Christmas Village,” I mused.

“Yeah, that thought occurred to me too.”

“How about you let me pay for lunch, and then we visit some of them and ask the managers?” I suggested, as the server returned with the bill. “It’s the least I can do for getting you into this mess.”

“That’s sweet of you,” Merri smiled. “Thank you...And honestly, I want to help.”

“I appreciate that,” I said throwing some bills on the table and standing up. “So, where to first?”

“How about there?” Merri pointed to a store on our right with displays of candles in gorgeous candelabras surrounded by vases of flowers in the windows. The sign read, “The Candle Cottage.”

“I’ve actually been meaning to stop in there,” Merri admitted. “I love scented candles and potpourri. I think they make a home feel warmer and homier.”

“I’ve never really thought about it,” I admitted. “I’m a general contractor, so I can build the bones of the house itself but I’m clueless when it comes to decorating.”

“Oh, I love to decorate,” Merri informed as we entered the store. I was immediately hit by the scents of pine and cinnamon.

“Smells like the holidays,” I commented, watching as Merri lifted a red candle tied with a gingham bow to her nose and smelled the fragrance.

“Yummy,” she whispered. “Apples and cinnamon.”

“What do you do for work when you’re not on elf duty?” I asked while we continued to meander through the store.

“I’m a teacher. Or more accurately...I’m a substitute teacher...At least for the time being. I was an English major in college, but apparently that degree by itself didn’t qualify me for much more than being a glorified secretary, as I discovered after I graduated. I knew I wanted to do more with my life than just pushing papers around a desk, and I’ve always loved kids, so I thought what would be a better fit than becoming a teacher? It really seems almost like a no-brainer now, but I guess it’s better late than never. Anyway, I just wrapped up my student teaching last semester and passed my certification exam. I figured I could substitute teach while I’m waiting for a full-time position to open up.”

“Wow, that’s wonderful. Kudos to you for figuring out what you really wanted to do and going for it,” I complimented.

“Every moment is a new beginning, as they say,” Merri advised.

A woman emerged from the back room carrying a basket filled with bags

of red and green potpourri tied with curling strands of silver ribbon.

“Excuse me,” I asked, “Can you please tell us who the manager is here?”

“That’s me,” she replied. “I’m Jasmine Rose, and I’m the owner. How can I help you?”

“We’re wondering if you’ve had any thefts from the store recently?”

“As a matter of fact, I have! Two days ago, I discovered three of my marshmallow-scented candles were missing. They’d been in the display window. Unfortunately, our security system was down and I didn’t realize they were gone until I came into the work the next morning and noticed the empty spot where they had been. How did you know?”

“We didn’t,” said Merri. “But it seems someone may have attempted to steal one of the more expensive items from Santa’s Toyshop, and we wondered whether other shops in Christmas Village have noticed things going missing.”

“Oh no, a thief on our hands at the North Pole!” exclaimed Jasmine.

“I think you mean a Grinch,” I said, exchanging a look with Merri.

“Let’s just hope we catch them before they ruin someone’s Christmas,” she said solemnly.

Chapter Five



Slipping and Sliding

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He cocked an eyebrow and pointed to the two Lego sets on the counter. Impatience was written all over his face.

“Oops, sorry,” I apologized, shifting into gear and swiping my hand-held scanner over the bar codes. After I finished ringing up the transaction I glanced at the clock, relieved to see that my shift was over.

“I’m on my way out,” I told Piper, who was tidying up her workstation during a lull in customers. “Do you need anything before I go?”

“Only to know what, or rather who, has had your head in the clouds all morning,” she grinned. “Although I’ll bet I can guess.”

I giggled. “Oh no...Is it that obvious?”

“Yep,” she nodded. “How are things going with Hot Single Dad and your investigation?”

“Kane is a really nice guy,” I confessed. “He and his daughter have been somewhat estranged since he and her mom divorced, and he’s so excited to have her here at the North Pole. It’s heartwarming to listen to him talk about his child.”

“Aw, that’s nice,” said Piper. “But to be honest, I don’t really see how his daughter *didn’t* take that tablet. I mean, it was right there in her backpack.”

A niggles of doubt scurried along my spine. “I know. I realize that as much as Kane and I want to believe that Sophia is innocent, the truth may be that she really did try to steal the tablet.”

“I just don’t think there could be any other logical explanation,” Piper argued, running her rag over the register. “Have you and Kane come up with any other possibilities?”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “Yesterday, we stopped into The Candle Cottage and learned that several of their candles went missing a couple of days ago. This morning before my shift, I paid a visit to Starla’s Stationery to pick up a box of Christmas cards and learned from the manager that several stationery sets were stolen from there earlier this week.”

“Hm,” Piper mused. “Did either place catch any footage of the incidents?”

“No, that’s what is so strange...It seems whoever the thief is, they know exactly when to strike while the security systems are down for each retailer.”

“Interesting,” murmured Piper. “What are your plans for this afternoon? Any more sleuthing? Or perhaps a date with Kane?”

I laughed, feeling heat rising in my cheeks. “No to both,” I said somewhat despondently. “Kane and I agreed to meet up for dinner tomorrow night while Sophia is at a sleepover. In the meantime, I think I’ll go back to my room at Evergreen Lodge and do some reading. Maybe take a nap.”

“Okay,” Piper acknowledged. “Enjoy your day. Hopefully, there will be some mistletoe wherever you’re meeting Kane tomorrow night so you can duck beneath it.” She wiggled her eyebrows suggestively.

As I turned to retrieve my purse, I couldn’t help but cross my fingers.



I strolled slowly down the wide sidewalk of Frost Street, breathing in the crisp air of mid-afternoon. It was clear but cold out, and I was grateful for the heavy wool fabric of my elf costume, which was enough to keep me warm against the chill.

The snowy peaks of the mountain range loomed in the distance, and someone had a fireplace going—the smell of burnt wood was drifting my way on the wind. A big yellow golden retriever loped past me, followed by a trio of laughing boys. An elderly couple holding hands stopped in front of the window of a quilting shop. The woman pointed to something in the display and her husband smiled.

Tears sprang to my eyes as I surveyed the scene around me. It was beautiful in a way I almost couldn’t describe. I’d visited beautiful places before on vacation—ski trips with Tad and his family during the winter months and beach destinations during the summers. However, the North Pole was different. Life moved at a slower pace here. People seemed more connected with each other, and everyone was friendly. No wonder Kane had wanted to make the town his permanent home. My heartstrings tugged with sudden longing. What would it be like for me to actually live here? Could it be possible? I shook my head, trying physically to clear those thoughts from my mind. The chances of a job opening up at the middle or high school in the district must be slim to none. I couldn’t imagine that any of the teachers would want to leave, and there was likely a long waiting list of applicants already.

I turned the corner onto Pine Street and noticed an advertisement outside a large outdoor-indoor nursery reading ‘Get Your Photo Taken with Santa!’ Families with young children were streaming in and out through the sliding doors of the entrance. Why not go inside and have a look around? I didn’t have anything better to do.

I followed the line of people inside and stepped into a boutique filled with colorful wreaths, dazzling ornaments, and the most gorgeous hand-stitched stockings I'd ever seen. To the left, a row of children stood open-mouthed next to a display where a working toy train wove in and out through a miniature village.

I continued onward through the store, taking my time to savor the beautiful holiday goods in every aisle. Finally, I spotted a giant red sleigh where Santa Claus was sitting. A little boy with a missing front tooth perched on his knee, grinning from ear to ear as a photographer snapped photos.

"Look who we have here!" called a man from a side entrance, holding the reins of two actual reindeer. I felt my eyes widen—I'd never seen a live reindeer before. They were every bit as adorable as in picture books—small with gentle eyes and long, delicate antlers.

"Would you like to pet one, miss?" the handler asked a girl of about nine or ten standing a few feet away.

"Really?" she squeaked, looking to her mother for approval. At the woman's nod of assent, she reached out and began to stroke the light-brown fur of one of the reindeer.

All of a sudden, the other reindeer emitted a loud neigh, bucked, and took off at a gallop. The handler dropped the reins with a gasp. Patrons scurried out of the animal's path and crowded together along the walls of the store.

The reindeer was running directly towards me and I leaped instinctively out of its way. Before I had time to think through the pros and cons, I started to run after it. "I'll get him!" I yelled behind me as I raced after the wayward creature.

The nursery's glass doors slid open, and the reindeer and I sailed through. I sent up a silent prayer of gratitude for the town's discouragement of vehicles as we rushed down Pine Street.

Pedestrians on either side of the road made way. Several of them cheered me on with shouts of, "You go, girl!" "That's the spirit!" "Get 'im, lady!"

The reindeer veered around a corner and I noticed the road opened up onto a grassy expanse. A copse of evergreens surrounded a small lake that had been turned into an outdoor ice-skating rink. People were skating back and forth, gliding serenely over the ice, their brightly-colored scarves trailing behind them.

The animal slid to an abrupt halt at the edge of the small embankment.

But I was running too fast and couldn't stop...I'm pretty sure the reindeer threw me a look of concern as I slipped, slid down the hill, and fell hand-over-curly-toed-elf shoe onto the ice. The velocity pushed me forward into the legs of one of the ice-skaters, who tripped over me. We slid together, our arms and legs entwining, until we bumped into the embankment on the opposite side of the rink.

"Merri?" asked Kane, getting to his feet.

"Kane?" I said, looking up into the man's gorgeous brown eyes. My face was probably the color of a tomato judging from the degree of my embarrassment.

He offered me a hand as Sophia skated up to us.

"Hi, Merri," she said, waving a pink-mittened hand. "That was pretty funny. Dad," she said, turning to Kane. "Becca and Katie are here! Can I go hang out with them? I've got my phone," she added, patting her coat pocket.

"But we just got here!" Kane replied, his expression flabbergasted. "You mean you don't want to spend time with me this afternoon like we planned?"

"Sorry," she said, shaking her head. "Please?"

He ran one hand through his dark hair, his shoulders slumping in defeat. "All right, honey. Why don't I take Merri for a hot cocoa at Chocolate Chums, and you can meet us there in an hour? Do you know where that is? Just go back down Pine two blocks, and then make a left onto Cranberry. It's on the corner."

Sophia gave him a thumbs-up. "Thanks, Dad!"

On the other side of the rink, the reindeer handler was looping the reins of the now-calm animal around his wrist.

"Thanks, Ma'am!" he shouted, giving me a wave.

I smiled sheepishly. Kane chuckled, then wrapped his arm around my waist and helped me shuffle to the nearest hill. I waited while he took off his skates and exchanged them for his boots, which he'd left a few feet away.

"Ready?" he asked.

I nodded.

A few minutes later, we were inside the cozy chocolate shop, our hands wrapped around mugs of steaming hot cocoa topped with whipped cream resembling small puffs of cloud.

"I'm sorry again for bumping into you back there," I apologized.

Kane leaned back in his chair and unzipped his coat. "No problem. I'm

tough as nails. Are you sure you're okay, though? You convinced me that you didn't break any bones, but I imagine you may have some nasty bruises when you wake up tomorrow."

"I'll live," I answered. "That is, if I don't die of embarrassment first."

Kane laughed. "Good one," he said. "Actually, I thought it was pretty cute that you tried to catch that reindeer."

"I don't know what came over me," I admitted.

"You saw a problem and wanted to help. I'm beginning to think that's one of your many talents," he grinned.

"Aw, that's sweet," I said, not sure if the rush of heat I felt was due to my hot chocolate or the compliment.

"Speaking of sweet, how's your cocoa?" he asked.

"Delicious," I replied, spooning some of the warm liquid and whipped cream up and placing it in my mouth.

"Good," he said. A moment later, however, his face fell.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Are you worried about Mr. Bright reporting Sophia to the authorities?"

"There's that," he said. "But also, I just don't know how to connect with my daughter anymore. When she was little, I could read to her, or play catch, or work on jigsaw puzzles. But now...I just don't know what to do when we're together. It seems all I do is annoy her, to be honest."

"Oh, no." I reached over and patted his arm. "You may not want to hear this, but what is happening with you two is normal."

"It is?" he asked, a look of confusion spreading over his features.

"Yep," I nodded. "She's twelve...on the verge of becoming a teenager...puberty...a difficult time in her life and for those who are close."

Kane groaned. "Please tell me this is not happening."

"It is," I said firmly. "I have an idea, though. I'll bet she enjoys shopping. Why don't I bring her to Christmas Village tomorrow to pick out a gift for you? Maybe I can talk with her a little bit then, too."

"That's kind of you to offer," said Kane. "Let me text her and see what she says."

He pulled a phone out of his jacket pocket and tapped on the screen. A minute later he looked back at me. "She said yes. Are we still on for dinner tomorrow night by the way...La Dolce Vita? It's located right on the square."

Why don't I meet you at Santa's Toyshop with Sophia at 4 pm and give you a couple of hours to shop? Then I can pick up Sophia, get her squared away at her friend's house, and meet you at the restaurant at 7 pm. I'll be happy to take you back to your hotel afterward."

"That sounds perfect," I agreed.

We finished our hot cocoa and Kane explained more about the history of the architecture of the North Pole. It was fascinating to learn about old Bavarian customs and traditions. I shared that we'd called my maternal grandmother 'Oma,' which meant Grandmother in German, and that she'd taught me her special recipe for Spitzbuben, which was still to this day my favorite kind of Christmas cookie.

"They're made with jelly in the middle, right?"

"Exactly," I smiled. "They're also known as Linzer cookies."

"Would either of you care for more cocoa or maybe a slice of chocolate cake?" asked a portly store employee with a round, shiny face who reminded me of the Pillsbury dough boy.

"Not for me," I answered.

"No, thanks," said Kane. "By the way," he added just as the server was turning away, "have you guys had any recent thefts here lately?"

"Why, yes," the man responded, turning back toward us. His plump lips curved downward into a frown. "Unfortunately, we had five boxes of chocolate-chip cookies stolen just yesterday. We called the police, but there wasn't anything they could do since our security cameras were down."

"That's a shame," sympathized Kane. "Sorry to hear you weren't able to catch the thief."

"I work at Santa's Toyshop, as you can probably tell," I said, gesturing to my costume. "We think someone has been taking things from a lot of the stores in Christmas Village."

"Oh gosh!" The man twisted his fingers together worriedly. "I really hope you find out who it is. They'll be on Santa's naughty list this year for sure."

"You can say that again," Kane agreed somewhat dejectedly.

Chapter Six



Mistletoe Musings

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“Thank you,” she replied, fingering the strand of pearls lying against the porcelain skin of her throat.

She’d mentioned getting her hair cut on a whim after her ex called off their engagement, and now regretting it, but I honestly loved it. Her short locks set off her heart-shaped face, accenting her high cheekbones and calling attention to her stunningly clear blue eyes.

Tonight, she was wearing a royal blue dress that hugged her curves and she had matched it with a pair of high-heeled black boots. When she removed her coat at the entrance to give it to the hostess to hang, I suddenly felt as gangly and awkward standing next to a pretty girl as I had when I was Sophia’s age.

The hostess led us to a table by the window and I pulled out a chair for Merri.

“Thank you,” she said, taking a seat.

I sat down across from her as we were handed menus and informed our server would be right over to take our drink orders. A moment later, a thin young man approached with a silver pitcher of water and filled our glasses. Ice crystals bobbed up and down in the liquid, catching the light of the flickering votive in the center of the table.

“Good evening,” the server greeted. “My name is Ricco, and I am happy to be your server tonight. May I get you anything to drink, madam?” he asked, turning to Merri.

“Pinot Noir, thanks,” she replied.

“Bring us the bottle,” I directed.

“Very good sir,” Ricco nodded. “I’ll give you both a few minutes to look over the menu.”

After he walked away, I read over the menu. I’d never been here before, but always wanted to try it. I’d just never had anyone to bring until now.

“What looks good to you?” I asked.

“It all looks amazing,” Merri replied as she perused the restaurant’s offerings. “I’m having trouble deciding, but I’m leaning towards the creamy lemon chicken piccata. How about you?”

“I can never resist lasagna,” I admitted, closing the menu and gazing around the room.

The focal point of the establishment was an old-fashioned wood-burning

fireplace in the middle of the dining area. Orange flames licked up from the crackling logs as the fire's warmth emanated throughout the cozy space. The lighting was soft, adding to the romantic ambience. It was the perfect place for dinner on a chilly winter night. With someone special, that is. And that someone was sitting directly across from me.

"This is lovely," Merri said.

"Agreed," I answered, unable to tear my eyes away from hers.

Our server returned with the bottle of wine and filled our glasses.

"Let's toast," I said after he'd left.

"What are we toasting to?" she asked.

"How about to new beginnings?" I suggested.

"I love it," said Merri, picking up her glass.

We clinked our goblets together and drank.

"So, tell me about today?" I asked after setting my glass down. "How was your afternoon with Sophia? She said you guys had a good time."

"We did," Merri nodded. "Sophia is wonderful...bright, kind, with a huge heart."

I smiled. "That's my baby. She's always been so compassionate around other kids as well as animals."

"Kane, you asked me what I thought you should do to find a way to connect with her," Merri continued.

"That I did."

She reached around the table and squeezed my fingers. I turned my hand palm up and wrapped her hand in mine, enjoying the soft feel of her skin.

"I think you don't need to try so hard. She loves you, she really does. She just wants you to see her as the teen she is now, not the little girl she used to be."

"But that's just the problem," I groaned. "I don't know how to do that."

Merri smiled. "Just relax. Be a safe landing place and let her come to you. She will, I promise."

I took a deep breath. "Man, it's hard to let my kid grow up."

"I'm pretty sure all parents say that," Merri laughed softly.

"How about you?" I asked, suddenly curious. "I know you love children, would you want any of your own someday?"

Her expression grew wistful. “I would love to become a mother, but there are many ways of ‘mothering.’ If I can be a good role model and do something to put a smile on a child’s face, even if they aren’t biologically my own, then that’s enough for me.”

“You are an amazing woman,” I said. “Your ex was a fool to let you go.”

The smile that crossed her face made my heart flip-flop in my chest.

At that moment, our server returned to the table. “Would you like to hear about the specials of the day?” he asked.

“Yes, please,” I nodded.

After listening to the descriptions of the elegant dishes he’d committed to memory, I changed my mind about my selection.

“I was considering the lasagna,” I admitted. “But I think I’ll go with the veal osso buco with gremolata and risotto alla Milanese per your recommendation.”

“Excellent choice, sir. And what will you be having this evening, madam?” Ricco asked Merri.

“Everything sounds delicious,” she replied. “But I think I’ll go with the lemon chicken piccata.”

“Very good.” The server claimed our menus and bowed. “Enjoy your evening.”

“Look,” I said, drawing Merri’s attention to the view out the window. It was dusk, and the first twinkling stars were beginning to appear, dotting the night sky. “Is that the North Star?”

“I believe it is,” she said. “Should we make a wish?”

“You mean, like the rhyme? How does it go? Starlight, starbright, first star I see tonight...?”

“Wish I may, wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight,” Merri finished.

“Okay,” I said. “On the count of three. One...two...three.” I squeezed my eyes shut and made a silent wish. Actually, more than one.

“What did you wish for?” I asked.

“I’m not supposed to tell you that, silly,” Merri laughed.

“Oh, we’re supposed to keep our wishes secret?”

“That’s right,” she nodded.

The server returned with a platter containing our meals.

“Here we are.” He placed Merri’s steaming lemon chicken piccata in front of her, and the veal and risotto special before me. Lastly, he placed a covered breadbasket in the middle of the table along with sides of butter and herb-infused olive oil for dipping.

“Is there anything else I can get for you?” he inquired.

“No, thank you,” Merri replied. “This looks delicious.”

“Very good, madam,” said Ricco “I hope it tastes as good as it looks.”

“I’m sure it will,” she replied.

“Buon appetito! Enjoy your meal.” The man bowed again and left us to ourselves.

I took a bite of my veal. “This is probably the best osso buco I’ve ever had. What do you think of your chicken?”

Merri lifted a piece of the tender meat to her mouth with her fork.

“Oh my goodness,” she said after swallowing the morsel. “I don’t think I’ve ever eaten anything this delicious.”

“Wonderful.” I swirled the wine in my cup.

We stopped talking for several minutes while we ate.

“By the way, Sophia told me about a holiday dance at the youth center that her friends are going to. She was nervous about asking you if she could go, too.”

“Really, why?” I was surprised.

“Because it’s a dance.” Merri said pointedly.

“Oh,” I said, full recognition dawning. “In other words, my daughter might get asked to dance by a teenage boy full of raging hormones that I’ll want to punch if he dares to lay a finger on her?”

“That’s it,” Merri said, pointing her fork at me.

I sighed. “I’m going to have to say yes, aren’t I?”

“I think it would be in your best interest,” she replied, a smile playing about her soft lips.

“This is going to kill me,” I moaned.

Merri laughed outright. “The event is called the Jingle Ball Jamboree, and it’s this Saturday evening.”

“You mean Christmas Eve?”

“Yes,” she confirmed. “Is that all right? I could come over and help her

get ready if you like?”

“I’m not sure about Sophia, but I know I’ll need all the help I can get,” I said, picking up my glass of wine and draining it.

“Then it’s a plan,” said Merri. “In fact, I saw a sign at my hotel asking for volunteers to help wrap items that were donated as gifts to be delivered to children from needy families. The community center is hosting the wrapping session Christmas Eve. We can go there to help out while Sophia is at her dance if you’d like.”

“Good idea,” I replied. “I’ve seen those donation bins around town. I like the idea of volunteering that night.”

We finished our meals, both of us too full for dessert.

After our plates were cleared, I handed Ricco my credit card and took my phone out of my jacket pocket.

“Are you texting Sophia to make sure she’s okay?” Merri asked.

“No, but that’s a good idea. I’ll do that next. Right now, I’m texting the sleigh company to call us up a ride back to your hotel.”

“Wow,” she said. “That will be fun.”

I grinned.

After signing the check, I walked around and led her through the room, my hand lightly touching the small of her back. I was glad she didn’t shy away from my touch.

I helped her into her coat and we walked outside onto the sidewalk. The temperature had dropped since we’d arrived, and it was decidedly chilly. A horse clipped-clopped towards us, pulling a sleigh driven by a driver in top hat and coat.

“Mr. Carpenter?” he asked, pulling back on the reins.

“That’s me,” I responded, turning to Merri.

Her eyes were shining as I helped her into the sleigh and took a seat beside her. Next to me was a fur-lined blanket. I pulled it over our knees and wrapped my arm around Merri’s shoulders. She snuggled against me.

“Thank you for coming tonight,” I said.

“Thank you for inviting me,” she replied, turning her face to mine.

I couldn’t help it, I had to do it. Lowering my lips to hers, I kissed her softly. She returned my kiss, and I hugged her closer.

“This is nice,” I whispered, nuzzling her ear.

“It sure is,” she agreed. “I’m having the time of my life in the North Pole.”

“Me, too,” I said, unable to remember the last time I’d been so happy.

Behind me, Sophia walked as though she were a bride on her wedding day, slowly, with her head held high and beaming from ear to ear.

Kane gasped and covered his mouth with his hand. Tears sprang to his eyes when he saw his daughter.

“Do you like it, Dad?” Sophia asked, twirling in a circle.

She’d wanted a brand-new look for the Jingle Ball Jamboree, so we’d spent the last two hours in the bathroom, washing the remainder of the blue dye out of her hair. Then, I helped her blow-dry and curl it into long ringlets. We’d done her makeup in neutral tones, but to add a little holiday flair I’d dusted her cheekbones and the tops of her shoulders with gold sparkle powder. Sophia had chosen a red velvet dress with a satin balloon skirt. After carefully helping her into it, I’d tied the sequined velvet sash into a bow, and she stepped into low-heeled black suede pumps to complete the outfit. A squirt of my perfume and we agreed she was ready for the night’s festivities.

“Oh, honey, you look as beautiful as a princess,” Kane declared, rising from the leather sofa and wrapping his daughter in a bear hug.

“Careful, Dad, you’ll ruin my hair!” She cried laughing, reaching up to touch the crystal hair clip that held back her bangs.

“I can’t believe it’s you,” he continued. “I mean, I can, but wow, when did you become so grown-up and gorgeous?”

Sophia grinned and shrugged. “These things happen.”

I laughed along with Kane. “She really does look spectacular tonight, doesn’t she?”

“Thanks, Merri,” said Sophia. “I couldn’t have pulled this off without you.”

“My pleasure, honey,” I replied. “It was a fun afternoon.”

She nodded and glanced at the clock on the mantle. “Dad, we need to go. I don’t want to be late! I’m supposed to meet Becca, Meredith, and Katie at 7 pm.”

“You’re right, sweetie,” said Kane. “Did you get enough to eat for dinner? There’s more pizza left in the kitchen.”

“No, I already had two slices,” said Sophia, heading to the foyer. “I think they’re going to have dessert at the youth center, too.”

“Okay, how about you Merri?” Kane asked, turning to me. “Need anything before we walk Sophia over there and then head on to the community

center next door?”

“Just my coat,” I replied cheerfully.

After bundling into our outerwear, the three of us left Kane’s house. A light snow was falling, and snowflakes drifted lazily through the air.

“It’s a pretty night,” commented Sophia, sticking out her tongue in an attempt to catch a snowflake.

“I agree,” said Kane. “I’m a lucky man since I get to walk with the two prettiest ladies in the North Pole, too.”

“Aw, you’re silly,” said Sophia, punching him in the arm playfully. “Actually, I think it’s nice of both of you for going to help with wrapping gifts for needy children while I’m at the dance.”

“Me, too,” said Kane. “Merri was actually the one who suggested it. It will give us something productive to do this evening.”

“I can’t think of a better way to spend Christmas Eve,” I remarked.

“That’s sweet,” said Sophia.

The youth center was only three blocks away, and we were joined by several other parents bringing their teenagers to the event as we approached.

“Katie!” yelled Sophia, waving at a petite girl with a long blue skirt peeking out from underneath her white fur coat.

“Hi!” The girl rushed up and embraced Sophia excitedly. The girls held hands and squealed. Kane and I, along with the red-haired man who was accompanying Katie, chuckled.

“I’m Bruce, Katie’s dad,” he said, extending his hand to Kane for a shake.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Kane, Sophia’s father and this is my friend, Merri.”

“Pleased to meet you both,” said Bruce. “I’m not sure I’m ready for my little girl to be going to a middle-school dance to be honest. I told my wife I wanted to come check it out for myself.”

“Believe me, I’m right there with you, man,” moaned Kane.

“Come on!” said Katie. “Let’s go in!”

Bruce grabbed the door and held it open. Inside, a large woman with gray hair piled on her head in a beehive, wearing a ruffled dress and dangly earrings, met us at the reception desk.

“Welcome and Merry Christmas!” she greeted, clapping her hands. She

pushed a clipboard toward us with a sign-in sheet on top. “We’re requiring all parents to check their children in and out of the event. Please make sure to note down your emergency contact information. The dance is being held in the gymnasium just ahead. We have a buffet table with sparkling fruit punch and a variety of Christmas cookies and cupcakes. All the food is labeled with their ingredients, so your children will be able to avoid any potential allergens.”

“Thank you,” said Kane, nodding. He elbowed Bruce with a grin. “I think this looks legit.”

Bruce laughed. “Yeah, what can I say, I’m just a tad overprotective.”

“Believe me, I understand,” said the receptionist. “I have four children and thirteen grandchildren, most of whom are here tonight in fact.”

“Fantastic,” said Kane.

After hugging Sophia goodbye, we headed next door to the community center. Volunteers were gathered in the cafeteria around long tables where a variety of wrapping supplies had been placed. The bins of donations were in the center of the room, and staff were busy going through them, passing out the items to volunteers as they wrapped.

Kane and I sat down at the end of one table. I pulled a box with a pink plastic pony inside towards me, while he reached for an Etch-a-Sketch, and we set to work.

“Hey,” he said, glancing up after a few minutes. “Isn’t that tablet over there another like the one we found in Sophia’s backpack?”

I glanced down the table toward where he was pointing. “Yes,” I said, surveying the donated items more closely. “Wait a minute...there are the three candles from The Candle Cottage.”

“Hm, hang on a sec.” Kane stood up and crossed to another table. When he returned, he was holding a packet of stationery in one hand, and a box of chocolate chip cookies in the other. “Aren’t these more of the items that were stolen from the shops at Christmas Village?”

“We don’t have a Grinch in the North Pole after all. We have a Robin Hood. Oh!” I gasped, suddenly realizing who the culprit was.

“Kane, I know exactly who took the merchandise. Let me make a few calls.”



A half hour later, we rang the doorbell at the Feeney residence. Joe, the

electrician, opened the door and welcomed us inside.

“Please, come in,” he said. “My wife, Virginia, is in the kitchen. Let me call Freddie and we can go to the dining room.”

A few minutes later, we took our seats around a large oak table adorned with an embroidered holiday runner featuring reindeer and boughs of holly. Silver-tipped pinecones had been laid on top, along with two pillar candles.

The door to the kitchen swung open, and Virginia Feeney, a plump woman with long blonde hair, carried in a platter of Christmas cookies.

“May I get you all something to drink? Tea or cocoa for you good folks?” she asked.

“A cup of tea sounds wonderful, thanks,” I accepted.

“Just water for me,” said Kane.

“Yum!” Freddie grinned as entered the room and reached for a cookie.

“Not yet, young man,” said Joe, slapping his hand away sternly. “We have guests who are here to speak to you first.”

“Me?” Freddie asked before becoming aware of our presence. “Oh. Is this because of the stuff I took?”

“Frederick Fulton Feeney,” said Joe, as Virginia returned with two mugs. She handed one to me, and carried the other around the table where she took a seat next to her husband.

“Son,” continued Joe. “We have taught you better than that.”

“Stealing is wrong,” said Virginia.

The tips of Freddie’s ears turned pink. He shuffled in his chair uncomfortably. “I know, but I want to be a superhero when I grow up. I want to help people and be like Batman and Robin Hood. I saw the bins around town to help the poor kids have things to open on Christmas morning. One of the girls in my class is homeless. Her name is Amy. She and her mom live in a car. I was thinking about how sad she must be and wanted her to have some presents to open. And other kids like her. So, when you took me with you to Christmas Village, Dad, I just grabbed whatever I could that I thought they might like.”

“Oh dear,” Virginia cried, blinking back tears.

Joe passed a hand in front of his face. “Son, your intentions were good.”

“Absolutely,” said Kane, glancing at me. “Your heart was in the right place.”

“But what you did was still wrong,” Virginia chastized. “I wish you’d

come to us and told us about Amy and wanting to help.”

“How did the tablet from Santa’s Toyshop end up in my daughter’s backpack?” asked Kane, scratching his chin.

“Oh, that was the girl I got my backpack mixed up with,” said Freddie. “We have the same one, and I accidentally put it in hers instead of mine.”

“Ah. That makes sense,” said Kane.

“Gosh, I don’t think we can afford to buy all the things you took, but I’d really like to help the cause,” said Joe.

I smiled. “I think this is where I come in,” I said. “I’ve already been in touch with the other merchants, and all of them are willing to donate the merchandise themselves.”

“Yay!” Freddie squealed, jumping up from his chair. He ran around the table and threw his arms around my neck. “Thank you! Thank you!”

I hugged him back. “Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

Joe stopped us on the porch when we took our leave a short while later. “I can’t tell you both how grateful I am for what you’ve done to see that no one presses charges against my boy. Virginia and I will be sure to have many long talks with him after tonight to help him use better judgment in the future.”

“Everyone makes mistakes,” I assured him. “It’s how we learn.”

“We all deserve second chances,” added Kane.

“Thanks again, and a Merry Christmas to you both.”

As we stepped back onto the sidewalk, Kane reached for my hand, and we walked hand-in-hand with smiles on our faces the whole way back to the community center.

Epilogue



Miracle Moments

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“I actually love to cook on my time off,” said Kane. “You’re staying for Christmas dinner, right? The turkey’s already in the oven.”

I smiled. “I’d love to.”

“Yay,” said Sophia, still in her flannel pj’s.

The lights of the Christmas tree twinkled in the corner, and a fire was crackling in the fireplace.

“Shall we open gifts?” I asked, wiggling my eyebrows, since I knew what both of them had gotten for each other.

“Sure,” said Kane.

Sophia passed around the gift-wrapped packages. “Dad, why don’t you open your present from me first?”

“Okay,” he said, lifting a rectangular box wrapped in green paper with a bright bow on top onto his lap. He lifted the tape and drew out the object. When he saw what it was, his eyes welled with tears. I smiled.

He held up the silver picture frame engraved with the words “Me and My Dad.” Inside was a picture of Kane holding Sophia when she was about the age of two or three. She was kissing him on the cheek as he grinned from ear to ear.

“I love it,” he said, getting up and giving her a hug.

“Merri helped me get it engraved,” Sophia explained.

“Thank you, Merri,” said Kane, coming closer and lightly kissing me on the cheek.

“You’re very welcome,” I replied. “Now why don’t I give you both my gift? It’s for the two of you.”

“Okay,” Sophia answered excitedly.

“You can open it, honey,” said Kane.

Sophia reached for a bag with dancing snowmen and removed some tissue paper. She lifted the object out and her eyes opened wide.

“A star for the Christmas tree!”

“Oh wow,” Kane said, and we exchanged a look. I was glad to see he remembered the reference from our dinner together at La Dolce Vita.

“It’s a reminder that wishes can come true,” I added.

Kane smiled.

“Let me put it on the tree now,” Kane offered.

He pulled a chair up to the tree and affixed the star. We gazed at the delicate keepsake in silence for a few minutes.

“Sophia, I think it’s your turn next,” said Kane.

“But there aren’t any other presents here other than Merri’s.” Sophia was puzzled.

“That’s because I have to go and get yours,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

“Do you know what it is, Merri?” Sophia asked after her dad left the room. We heard the front door open and shut.

“Maybe,” I winked.

A minute later, the door opened again, and we heard a lot of rustling. Suddenly, a golden retriever puppy with a red bow around its neck scampered into the room.

“What?” Sophia cried, leaping to her feet and bursting into tears. The dog raced towards her, and she picked it up, crying and kissing the wiggly animal.

“Daddy, did you get me a puppy for Christmas?”

“I did,” said Kane, tears now streaming down his own face. He wiped them away with the back of his hand. “Are you happy?”

“This is the best Christmas ever!” shouted Sophia. “I’ve always wanted a puppy!”

“What will you name him?” I asked.

“Um…” she thought for several seconds and then her eyes lit upon the star ornament. “Star! His name will be Star!”

Kane and I laughed. “That’s absolutely perfect,” he said. “Now, Merri, that just leaves you.”

“What?” I was genuinely surprised. “You didn’t have to get me anything.”

“We didn’t have to, but we wanted to…Right, Sophia?” he asked, exchanging a glance with his daughter who nodded happily.

“Go on,” he continued, pointing at the bag next to me. “Open it.”

Curious, I reached inside and pulled out an envelope. My name was printed on the outside. I lifted the flap and unfolded the piece of paper inside. When I read the contents, the paper fluttered to the floor as I buried my face in my hands and began to sob.

Both Kane and Sophia came over and threw their arms around me.

“Is this true? How?” I asked, lifting my tear-streaked face in wonder.

“Yes it is true. You have a job as a full-time English teacher at the North Pole Middle School. That is, if you want it,” Kane said.

“I think she does,” Sophia answered hopefully. “Don’t you?”

“Of course!” I laughed hysterically, putting my arms around each of them.

“Let’s just say that the principal is a good friend of mine,” Kane winked. “Who do you think was in charge of building the new school annex?”

“Sophia was right...this is the best Christmas ever!” I cried.

“Merry Christmas!” All of us said at once, followed by many rounds of hugs, kisses, and happy puppy licks from Star.

A Note from Annee



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About the Author



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