

SANTINA SERIES - BOOK 1

D.THRUSH



THE  
DAUGHTER  
CLAUS

# *The Daughter Claus*

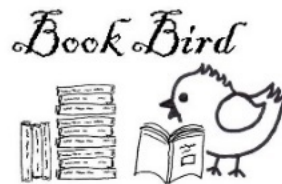


*A Novel By*

*D. Thrush*

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## **Praise for *The Daughter Claus!***

**\*\*\* Wishing Shelf Award Finalist \*\*\***

**\*\*\* Readers' Favorite Finalist \*\*\***

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*"My new favorite Christmas book. This is not the type of book I normally read. That being said, I LOVE this book." Amazon Customer*

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*"A unique spin on Santa Claus that follows the life of his daughter, The Daughter Claus is a delightful read with charming characters and full of heart... captivating and stunning, a fun coming of age story about the Claus family and the fight to follow your dreams." Liz Konkel for Readers' Favorite*

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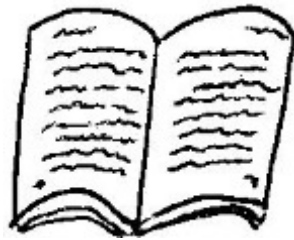
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## ***1 \*Just a Toy Company\****

Santina had daddy issues. Her earliest memory was of a dark, cold night. She was frantically running through the rooms in her red and green flannel pajamas, barefoot on the cool wood of the floor.

“Daddy! Daddy!”

A feeling of panic welled within her as her little feet carried her across the kitchen toward the back door where she sensed he was leaving. Her mother dashed behind her imploring her to stop before she hurt herself.

“Daddy!” she screamed as she reached the door and pulled it open with her small hands.

A freezing gust of wind threw her back into her mother’s arms. She could hear the stamping of hooves and the snorting of the huge animals out in the darkness. She watched, shivering with cold, as the tremendous sleigh began to glide over the packed snow. Slowly it slid swiftly gaining momentum, the great animals thundering across the frozen landscape. Suddenly, there was quiet when it lifted. A shadow sped across the ground while it rose into the blackness of the crisp night sky. They watched until the silhouette passed across the brightness of the moon. The snow glistened in the moonlight below.

“Daddy,” she sniffled. Her mother rocked her trembling little body in her protective embrace.

Then she heard her father’s voice echo in the night. She’d never forget it.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” He so loved his work.

\*\*\*

“Can I help you?” the school counselor asked.

She was slim and seemed rather young, not much older than Santina. The sun pouring through the window behind her picked up the reddish highlights in her shoulder length hair. She was as disheveled as the clutter on her desk, and she glanced at it.

“So sorry. I’m a little disorganized at the moment.” She frowned at her desk, mumbled something, and looked up at Santina again. “Come in. What

can I do for you?”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t make an appointment. I’m not really sure if you can help. My brother suggested I talk to you. It’s my first year away at school, and I’m feeling...” Her voice trailed off.

She played absentmindedly with her long, white hair, and her ice blue eyes looked at the counselor. She wore a short-sleeved pink sweater and jeans.

“Come in. Come in,” the woman gestured for her to sit. “I’m new here myself.” She stared for a moment. “I’m sorry. I’ve never seen hair that color on such a young woman. It’s quite striking.”

“Thanks. It’s because we didn’t get much sun where I grew up.” Santina perched uncomfortably on the edge of the chair. “Maybe I should come back if you’re busy. I can come back.” Maybe this hadn’t been such a good idea.

“No, no, don’t be silly. Let me just clear my desk a bit.” She stacked one pile on top of another. “I’m just trying to clean out this desk. I’m not sure what all these forms are for.” She picked one up and squinted at it intently for a moment. “Hmm.”

She looked back at Santina. “Anyway, what can I help you with?”

“Well, I’m feeling kind of overwhelmed and lost. I’ve never been away from home before, and everything is so different. I went to a community college, so I lived at home and now...”

“Yes, that’s very common with new students. Are you having any trouble with your classes? Let me get your name.” She picked up a pen.

“Oh, is this going on my record? I don’t want this to jeopardize my career in the future. I don’t know how all this works.” Santina absentmindedly twirled her hair.

The counselor put down her pen. “How about if I don’t take any notes, and we’ll just talk, okay?” She paused. “Let’s keep this informal. I’m Lisa.”

“Okay, that sounds good. I’m Sa... Tina. I’m Tina.” She relaxed back into the chair. “I love my classes. It’s not about that.”

“Well, then it can’t be that bad.” Lisa waved her hand dismissively.

Suddenly the phone on her desk rang shrilly. It startled both of them. Lisa glared at the caller ID on the display.

“Him. If he thinks he can just call whenever...” She stopped herself and cleared her throat. “Is this about a guy? Is some guy distracting you?”

Because sometimes they can affect your confidence.” Her voice was rising. “I felt great this morning until ...”

“No, it’s not that,” Tina interrupted quickly. “Well, unless you count my father. He...” She wasn’t quite sure what to say.

“Go on,” Lisa prompted.

“He was just very busy with his work. It’s... uh, a business that’s been in our family for generations, and it’s very demanding.” She stopped to gather her thoughts.

“What kind of business is it?” Lisa asked.

“It’s... uh, just a toy company. It’s seasonal, but he works most of the year.” She paused as her emotions began to surface. “I just always felt that all the children of the world were more important than me.”

This brought tears to her eyes as the pain of long-ago abandonment welled up. The sight of her father flying off had frightened her.

Lisa nodded. “I’m sure you realize that that’s an exaggeration. All the children of the world wouldn’t be more important to your father than you. Now that you’re grown up, you can see that he was just focused on his work.” She smiled. “And, hey, it must’ve been fun growing up around all those toys.”

Tina returned her smile. “Sometimes. I remember running through the toy shop and helping the employees. They were always very nice to me.”

“And what about your mother?”

Tina’s face lit up. “My mother’s great. She’s the best. She was always there reassuring me and baking cookies. My father loves cookies, although he’s had to cut back a bit.” She patted her tummy.

Lisa grinned. “She sounds wonderful. You mentioned a brother. Any other brothers or sisters?”

Tina shook her head. “I just have a younger brother. I think my father wanted a boy when I was born to carry on the family business and then Nick was born.”

“Well, then it all worked out.”

“Yes, except Nick doesn’t want to be involved in the business. He’s a musician.”

“That’s too bad,” Lisa said. “But let’s bring this back to you. Let’s talk about what’s bothering you now.”

“I don’t know what triggered all these feelings. I guess I never felt appreciated by my father. He doesn’t pay any attention to me. It’s all about Nick.” She thought a moment. “I don’t know what anybody can do about it. I just have to deal with it.”

“Do you and your brother get along?”

“Yes. Nick is just Nick. He doesn’t let anything bother him,” Tina answered. “I wish I could be like that.”

“Have you ever tried talking to your father? He might not realize you feel this way,” Lisa suggested.

“It’s hard to talk to my father. He’s always so distracted by work, but you’re right.” Tina sighed.

“What about your mother? Have you ever talked to her about how you feel?” Lisa queried.

“She just says you know how your father is. She tries to reassure me,” Tina told her. “Maybe when I go home for the holidays, I can try to talk to him.”

“Good,” Lisa stated. “Why don’t you let me know how it goes?”

“Okay.” Tina stood up. She wasn’t feeling very confident, but she didn’t want to take up any more of Lisa’s time. “I’ll let you know.”

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The basement room was dark and the music was deafening as it bounced off the walls. A young man with white, spiky hair and black eyeliner stood at the microphone bobbing his head. He was dressed all in black as were his fellow musicians.

“Yeaaaaaaah,” he screamed into the mic. Then he held up his hand as a look of confusion crossed his face. “Hold it! Hold it!” he yelled above the screeching guitar and pounding drums. “What’s the lyric here?” He pointed to a sheet on the music stand before him. “Is it ‘death in my heart’ or ‘death in my head’?” He stared at it. “Man, who wrote this? It’s illegible.”

“You did, Nick,” answered the bass guitarist. “I think you said it was ‘death in your head’ because the bureaucracy has stifled your creativity.”

“Yeah, that’s right.” Nick nodded. “That’s exactly what happened. I’m stifled. That’s exactly right.” He stared at the paper mouthing some words.

“Hold it. What’s that sound? It sounds like a bell. Good sound effect. I like it. Who’s on it?”

“I think it’s your phone, man,” said the drummer. He pushed his dreadlocks from his face and grabbed his water bottle. “It’s hot in here. I’m taking a break.”

“Okay, cool. Take five, everyone,” Nick called out. He pulled his cell phone from his pocket. “Who the hell is interrupting our rehearsal?” He looked at the phone and then put it to his ear. “Tina? What’s up?”

“Hi Nick,” Tina said into the mouthpiece for her earbuds while she held her phone.

She was strolling outside in the sunny courtyard on the school campus. There was a large, circular fountain that students milled around or sat on the edge talking or eating lunch. “Can you hear me?”

“Yeah. You’re totally audible. How’s school?” Nick asked her.

“It’s fine.”

“I don’t know how you can subject yourself to that kind of brainwashing. It’s mind control.”

Tina rolled her eyes. He was always going on about crazy stuff. “How’s the band doing?”

“Stellar. We’ve got a gig coming up, so we’ve been rehearsing and I wrote some new songs,” he told her. “One’s called ‘Frost in My Head’ and the other is called ‘Black Snow.’”

“I can’t wait to hear them.”

“It’s great,” he enthused. “I’m really getting in touch with my inner darkness.”

“That’s good,” she humored him. “I was wondering when you’re going home for the holidays.”

“Don’t know if I can. We’ve got this gig coming up.”

“Nick! You have to! We always have the holidays together, and you know I can’t deal with Mom and Dad alone. At least not Dad.”

“I know. It’s intense,” he acknowledged. “Don’t let Dad freak you. He’s just obsessed with work. Let it roll off.”

“You make it sound easy,” she said. “I’ll try but please promise me you’ll think about coming home.”

“I might make it for Thanksgiving, but I’m over the holiday thing. I’m not into commercial, materialistic gratification. We’re not little kids



anymore, and I'm past it. I don't even want to acknowledge it. You know, the whole judgment thing. Naughty or nice. It's repressive. I mean, I should write a song about it. The repression of expression. Kids can't be free to be themselves because they'll be judged. Let kids be kids, man! Let kids be free!"

Tina sighed. "Okay, Nick. Hope the gig is great."

"Thanks. I've got to find some paper."

"Okay. Talk soon."

"I can't find a pen."

Tina sat down on the edge of the fountain and watched the water cascade down into the pool below. The sun's reflection rippled on the surface from the gentle breeze that played with her long, straight white hair.

She wished she could be more like Nick. He was following his dreams and never worried about anyone's expectations.

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Clara had short, white hair and wore green, baggy pants and a red tank top. She looked at the TV and slowly breathed in and out before attempting the Downward Dog pose that was being demonstrated. She was more flexible from when she'd begun doing yoga, and she was pleased that the Tree pose had improved her balance. This was important as she aged. She was determined that she and her husband stay healthy. Her yoga routine ended with the Child's pose. It was her favorite because it stretched out her lower back and felt good as she relaxed into it.

Ding! The timer went off in the kitchen. She pulled herself up and went to check on the scones. They were lightly browned and looked perfect. She took them from the oven and placed the cookie sheet on a cooling rack leaning over to savor the aroma.

"Mmmm."

She turned to the blender to finish making her smoothie adding a scoop of super green powder to the almond milk and banana and switched it on. Then she returned to the TV with a smoothie in hand and a green mustache adorning her upper lip.

"Yum."

Clara removed the DVD and turned off the TV. She pulled a red and green flannel shirt over her tank top before settling on the floor into the Lotus pose. With legs crossed and eyes closed, she waited for the scones to cool.

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“Walter, how long have we worked together?” Santa asked.

He leaned back in his chair behind the big mahogany desk. His white hair was tousled and he stroked his long, white beard and mustache. His red and green checked flannel shirt matched Clara’s and he wore baggy jeans.

“Damn! I wish I could shave. This beard drives me crazy sometimes.” He leaned forward. “The point is, we’re heading for a crisis. You’ve been with me a long time, Walter. We’ve always worked well together, but Clara is talking about retiring, and Nick isn’t ready to take over. He’s still going through that stupid music phase. It’d be unheard of to go outside the family. This business has been in my family, well, since the beginning.”

Walter nodded patiently. He’d heard it all before. He was seated in one of the chairs on the opposite side of the desk. His short elf legs dangled above the floor. His dark hair matched his solemn eyes. He knew Santa well enough to let him vent while he simply nodded silently. Every few months, he talked about retiring, but Walter knew Santa loved it too much to retire, despite his frequent grumbling and complaining.

Santa looked over at the framed family photos on his desk and on the bookshelves. The children were so cute when they were little. Where had he failed?

“I always hoped Nick would come around,” he said sadly. “What will happen to all the children if I retire? No presents?” He raised his voice. “No Christmas? I’ll never let that happen.”

Walter nodded again. “Why don’t you ask Nick again this year? Maybe he’s realized that a music career is harder than he thought and he’s gotten it out of his system. Maybe he’s matured enough to realize...”

Santa waved his hand. “I always assumed I’d pass the business on to my son. Generations of men in my family have passed it on and kept it going. It’s tradition. It’s an honor. It’s part of being a Claus. I never thought twice about it. It’s not too much to ask, is it?”

Walter bobbed his head. "I know." He wondered if the time was right. "I hate to bring this up but, as the foreman, we do need to discuss a few things."

"What?" Santa exclaimed. "I thought the union was happy with our last contract."

"Yes, we are. There are just a few things." He put his thumb and index finger close together. "Not much really. I've hired more elves as we agreed, but I hired bigger elves in order ..."

"Bigger elves?" Santa bellowed. "What are you talking about?"

"I have a few bigger elves starting orientation today. You know, like your size. I think it's good to have some diversity, and the bigger elves have a different set of skills than our other elves. It's practical and the union is behind it," Walter explained.

"The union," Santa repeated with disdain. "What else? Just keep ruining my mood, Walter."

"Well, the United North Pole Workers have been interested in updating things for a while, as you know."

"You're talking about automating the line again, aren't you?" Santa accused. "You know how I feel about that. Everything must be made by hand. I know it's more work, but quality is the most important thing. We can't cut corners."

"Yes, I agree," Walter acknowledged. "Quality is essential, but every year we have more and more children to make toys for and it's getting increasingly difficult to keep up. If we could just automate some of the steps, it would really..."

"Out of the question!" Santa said emphatically. "We've been doing it this way for generations and I will not compromise the quality of the toys. Hire more elves if you must."

"I did. They're starting today," Walter said evenly. "But, eventually, we're going to run out of room, and I don't see how we can keep up with demand..."

"Don't be so negative," Santa replied. "So, we have a few million more kids every year. What's the problem?"

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## 2 *\*Giant Elves\**

Clara entered Santa's office carrying a tray. "Time for a break," she announced. She placed the tray on Santa's desk.

"What's this?" he demanded. "Where's my milk and cookies?"

"You know what the doctor said, dear. We have to watch your weight and cholesterol and blood sugar. I made organic blueberry scones sweetened with agave and a delicious green smoothie. Go ahead, try it," she coaxed.

"I'm not going to eat that and how on earth do you expect me to drink something green?" he cried stubbornly.

"Walter?" Clara pleasantly held out the tray.

Walter reached for a scone. "Thank you, Clara. I love scones. They smell delicious." He took a bite. "Oh, this is good. Did you say blueberry?"

"Yes. Now try the smoothie. It's really yummy," she encouraged. "I'm telling you it'll keep you going through the afternoon."

"Thank you," Walter said politely. He took a tentative sip. "It tastes wonderful. Did you put a banana in it? I'm tasting banana."

"I did and I used almond milk. It has such a nice flavor, don't you think? Sometimes I add strawberries or blueberries when I can get them, but the banana gives it a nice thickness..."

"Don't you have an orientation to go to, Walter?" Santa asked abruptly.

"You just take that with you," Clara told Walter. "Let me know if you want more. You know where to find me."

Walter smiled and left with a scone in one hand and a glass filled with thick green liquid in the other.

Clara turned to Santa. "We should get healthier food in the cafeteria. I'll go down and talk to them."

Santa shook his head and sighed heavily.

"It will increase productivity and decrease sick time. Remember a few years ago when everyone got the flu? It went through the workshop like wild fire. That was a tough season. We had to work the line with the kids." She sat down. "I'm glad Walter hired more elves. We just can't keep up."

"He hired giant elves," Santa told her. "Imagine that. It's never been done. It's breaking tradition."

“Well, I think it’s good,” Clara said. “It’s progress.”

Santa shook his head again. “We can’t forget the old ways. Tried and true. Never failed us. We have to stick to doing things the traditional way. I don’t have a good feeling about this. And what’s with this?” He waved his hand at her. “What’s with all this weird food? You’ve lost too much weight and now you dress funny and you’re doing this yogi stuff.”

“Yoga,” Clara corrected. “I like it. I feel good. My flexibility and balance are better and I have more energy. You should try it.”

Santa snorted. “I get enough exercise running this place.”

“It also helps with stress.”

“Stress? I don’t have any stress!” he yelled. “If everyone would just listen to me, everything would be fine.”

Clara leaned back in her chair. “What is it? What’s wrong now?”

Santa leaned forward speaking in a lower tone. “You have to help me figure out how to get Nick involved in the business.”

“He doesn’t seem interested in the business, dear. He has his band, and he likes his music,” she reminded him.

“Clara,” he implored. “We can’t retire until someone takes over. Nick is our only son.”

“You have a point. What about your brother’s son?” she suggested.

“Kris?” he exclaimed. “My brother, Kris Kringle, has been jealous of me our whole lives. You know that. He’d love to get his hands on the business.” He pounded his fist on the desk. “You know he’d make a mess of it. He’d probably come in here and automate everything and fire all the elves and use robotic reindeer. He’d use the cheapest materials he could find and quality would go out the window.” Santa put his head in his hands and groaned. “He’d ruin everything.”

“But what about his son, Kris Junior?” Clara asked.

“He’s totally incompetent.” Santa frowned. “Little Kris couldn’t manage his way out of a paper bag on his own. My brother would be in charge of everything. It’d be a disaster. Our only answer is Nick.”

Clara nodded. “Okay. I’ll talk to him again when he comes home for Thanksgiving and see what he says, but we can’t make him do it if he doesn’t want to.”

Santa looked up. “Maybe he’s gotten this stupid music idea out of his system. He’ll listen to you. You’re better with the kids. He’s got to

understand that it's an obligation to this family." He thought a moment. "Then we'll talk about retiring to the condo in Florida. I wouldn't mind playing golf every day."

"I'd enjoy retirement, but I don't know if you can give it all up. You enjoy it too much," Clara told him. "You know I worry about you. The doctor said you have to learn to manage your stress..."

"I don't have a problem with stress," Santa insisted loudly. "Why do you keep saying that? Just talk to Nick."

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The water of the fountain spilled down into the pool behind her as Tina sat on the stone wall encircling it and stared across the street. Every year the holiday decorations seemed to go up earlier and earlier. A giant green wreath with a red bow was being attached to a lamp post. She just couldn't escape it. She was tired of the colors red and green. As soon as she'd moved to campus, she'd gone shopping and bought new clothing in pastel colors, which looked so pretty and unique to her. She loved pink and lilac and baby blue and yellow. White reminded her too much of the frozen landscape back home.

She'd chosen to live in the dorm instead of her parents' condo when she'd moved to Florida to attend college. She'd gotten good grades at North Pole Community College, and now she wanted to come out from the shadow of her family and their looming legacy. There was more pressure on Nick to fulfill his obligations, but he was right to follow his dreams. She'd decided to major in business hoping to one day work for a huge international corporation based in a warm climate. She longed to escape toys and icicles, snow people and reindeer, though she did miss it a bit, especially the elves, but that would pass once she got on with her life. Besides, she could visit home whenever she wanted.

She watched the city workers affix a giant red and white striped candy cane to another street lamp. These wintry decorations seemed an affront to the warm, sunny weather here. Florida was like perpetual summer while the North Pole was perpetual winter. Flannel pajamas, hot chocolate, a fire crackling in the fireplace warming the room. She shook her head at herself.

Cold and dark, drafty hallways, layers of clothing just to keep from shivering...

The counselor suddenly strode past her angrily mumbling to herself.

“Lisa,” she called out impulsively.

Lisa stopped in her tracks looking around for the source of the voice that had called her.

“Do you believe this?” Tina indicated the decorations. “It’s only October. I can’t get a break from this.” She was glad someone had come within earshot so she could vent her frustration.

Lisa stood and stared at her for a moment and then looked where she’d indicated. “Oh, yeah,” she said. She looked back at the phone in her hand and cursed under her breath.

Now that Tina had a chance to see her in the sunlight, Lisa didn’t look much older than herself.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Oh, this stupid guy... I mean, nothing.” She frowned. “Do you know where the cafeteria is? I found it yesterday. This campus is too big, and I keep getting turned around,” she said with too much emotion. “I don’t know anybody yet...”

The phone rang in her hand, and she impetuously threw it into the fountain. Her eyes widened.

“Oh, no. My phone!”

She rushed over and stuck her hand into the water. Perching on the edge, she fished around until she found it. They both stared at the dripping phone.

“Do you think it still works?” Lisa asked.

“I don’t know,” Tina said.

It emitted a gurgled ringing sound.

“I think I drowned it,” Lisa said.

They looked at each other and burst out laughing.

“Do you want to go get something to eat?” Tina asked. “I haven’t eaten yet, and I don’t really know anybody here either.”

She didn’t mention to Lisa that she was reluctant to make friends because she didn’t want anyone to know who her father was. She was surprised no one had figured it out yet due to her conspicuous white hair and her last name, though she spelled it Klaus. It was the alias her family



used away from the North Pole, though she'd always felt it was too obvious.

They strolled a few blocks past the giant decorations, to Tina's chagrin, until they came upon a small pizza place. The smell drew them in and they bought a few slices and seated themselves at a small table next to the window. The red and white checkered plastic tablecloth had a small rip that distracted Tina. She frowned at it until she heard a sniff come from Lisa.

"I'm sorry I'm so emotional," Lisa said. "I just moved here, and this guy is the only one I know. Well, okay, I moved here because of him, but now he's being a jerk. Guess I shouldn't be telling you all this since I'm your counselor."

"Have you done this before?" Tina asked.

"What? Cried?" Lisa asked wiping away a tear with her napkin.

"No, I mean have you worked as a counselor before?"

"Oh." She gave a little laugh. "Yes, of course. I worked at the last school for a while until... well, I had a personal issue." She leaned over the table nearly spilling her water. "I didn't know he was a student. I thought he was a teaching assistant."

Tina gasped. "This guy is a student?"

"He's an adult," Lisa said indignantly. "It wasn't like I was his teacher. I can't believe they fired me for that. It was blown way out of proportion. I mean we're only a few years apart. Or five or six?" She furrowed her brow.

"I think you should just forget about him. You don't need him. You're fantastic. You're smart. You have a great career. What do you need some jerk for?" Tina said encouragingly.

"Thanks. That's nice of you to say." Lisa smiled. "But what about you? You have a horrible father."

"Oh, no." Tina shook her head. "He's really not horrible. He's just grumpy and ignores me and anything not having to do with his job."

"I still think you should talk to him about it."

"You're right."

Though Lisa didn't know her father. He wasn't very approachable. In fact, he was downright cantankerous and a workaholic to boot. Certainly not the merry old elf of his beloved image. Tina glanced at the time on her phone.

“Oh, my gosh! I can’t believe I almost forgot. I have a computer lab to go to. My father hates computers and anything having to do with progress.”

“That’s pretty typical of his generation,” Lisa pointed out.

“I guess.” Tina fumbled with her purse.

“Don’t worry. This is my treat,” Lisa said.

“Thanks. It was nice having lunch with you.” She put on her sunglasses and grabbed the remainder of her slice of pizza to go.

“Sure. Thanks for giving me a pep talk.” Lisa smiled. “See you around campus.”

Tina rushed out into the sunshine. She was turned around. Which way was her class? She heard a tap on the window and saw Lisa pointing. Tina speed-walked along the sidewalk past the ridiculous giant candy cane and oversized wreath to the other side of the quad. She scarfed down her slice of pizza along the way and slid into her seat just in time. But it was worth it. Maybe she’d finally made a friend.

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Walter stood at the front of the room surveying the new bigger elf recruits. They were a diverse group, and they all looked pretty uncomfortable and gangly sitting at the small desks as they reviewed the manual the union had provided.

He cleared his throat. “We’ve covered the available shifts and the dress code. If you don’t wear your uniform, remember to wear red, green or white or any combination of those colors. We’ve gone over benefits and overtime compensation.” He paced before the blackboard attempting to assess the new crew. “It’s important to keep in mind that we’re looking for employees who are a good fit.” He stopped and smiled awkwardly. “No pun intended.” He cleared his throat again. “This is the first year we’ve hired bigger elves, and there may be some things we haven’t anticipated. As the foreman of the United North Pole Workers union, I’d like to encourage you to come to me with any concerns or questions you might have. My door is always open. If there are no more questions, I’d like to take you on a tour of the facilities now.”

He waited as they struggled to extricate themselves from the small desks.

“Uh, sorry about the desks.”

The diverse group straggled behind him down the drafty hallway and into the enormous warehouse. As they huddled around him, Walter explained how the toys were assembled and organized.

“This is one of our newer sections for electronic toys,” he pointed. “Things have sure changed since I started.”

One of the recruits raised her hand and waved it energetically until he noticed.

“Yes, in the back. Do you have a question?”

She lowered her hand. “I’ve worked in customer service, and I was wondering how you handle returns.”

“Returns?” Walter repeated puzzled. “We never have any returns.”

“You never have any returns?” she asked skeptically. “People always return things.”

“Nobody ever returns things to Santa,” Walter assured her. “Now let’s move on. It gets cold in the warehouse.”

They continued the tour. Walter showed them the cafeteria, the break room, and the restrooms.

“We’ll have to add a few bigger size restrooms,” he mused. Then he stopped and indicated down the hallway. “His office is over there.”

The recruits looked in that direction wide-eyed.

“Are we going to meet him?” one of them asked in a hushed voice.

“You will eventually. He wanders down to each department from time to time.”

Walter thought they would meet Santa sooner rather than later if they messed up. He had a habit of ranting and pacing impatiently around the workshop the closer it got to Christmas as he became more stressed. This happened every year. Walter tried to keep him out of the workshop when he was like that. It made the elves edgy when he peered impatiently over their shoulders barking at them to work faster.

The new elves became wide-eyed again when they walked into the gigantic workshop for the first time. It seemed as cavernous as an airplane hangar. Rows of conveyor belts snaked around the room while shelves of parts lined the walls.

“Wow,” a young Asian man said in awe. “Every kid in the world dreams about this place. I can’t believe I’m at the North Pole.” He began to

tear up and wiped his eyes on his sleeve. "I'm going to meet Santa."

The others nodded with understanding and patted him reassuringly on the back.

Walter walked them along the assembly lines that were quietly humming with elves sitting at the stations. They were steadily gearing up for the season. He noted that all the equipment had been built for elf size workers.

"We'll have to do a little restructuring of the workspaces," Walter observed. "For now, we'll do our best to accommodate you and try to make it work."

"It looks like most of this is done by hand. How much is automated?" a young man with glasses asked.

"Shhh," Walter hissed sharply. "Don't ever mention that word to Santa. He's adamant about everything being handmade. He believes the quality is better."

"It'd be much more efficient if some areas were..." he continued.

"Shhh," Walter hissed again. "Please don't say that word. And remember you each signed an agreement that forbids you to talk about your work here. All this is proprietary."

They exited through the other side of the workshop and went down an elevator to the basement level. They stepped out of the elevator into a spacious room stacked with mail. Elves sat at stations ripping open envelopes and reading the letters. As they stood watching, a river of mail flowed down a chute and into a large bin on wheels.

"This is where all the letters to Santa come from the boys and girls all over the world," Walter explained.

A young black woman raised her hand and Walter nodded at her.

"Do all the kids get what they ask for?" she wondered.

"That depends on whether they're on the Naughty or Nice list," he answered. "We crosscheck it, and if they've been Nice, then they usually get what they've asked for, although there are all kinds of criteria. You'll learn about it if you work in this department."

"Who maintains the Naughty or Nice list?" the young man with glasses asked.

"There's another department for that," Walter told them. "You'll be able to request which department you'd prefer to work in, and we'll try to

place you according to your interest.”

“Can we see the reindeer?” a short young man with long hair asked enthusiastically.

“Okay,” Walter said hesitantly. “I’ll show you the barns, but we can’t get too close. The reindeer are very sensitive to visitors.”

More like arrogant and nasty, he thought. They loved to mock, tease, and occasionally taunt. They knew their size made them intimidating.

The group stepped outside.

“It gets extremely cold here, especially at night and in the middle of winter.” Walter looked around at the snow. “Actually, it’s always winter here. Just be sure to bundle up when you go out. We’ll just stay outside a few minutes.”

They trudged along a path through the deep snow closer to the cluster of barns. There were a few reindeer standing outside in a group. They raised their huge heads to look at the visitors.

“They’re magnificent,” someone gushed.

“Have you ever thought about charging for tours?” the young man with glasses asked. “You could make quite a bit of money doing tours. It must be costly to run this operation.”

Walter sighed. “Let’s head back inside. It’s too cold and we don’t want to disturb the reindeer.” He led them back into the warmth of the building.

“I heard they were going to hire giant elves,” Blitzen remarked.

“I thought it was just a rumor,” Comet said.

“I’m really not in the mood for this today. I’m glad they’re going back inside,” Donner snorted.

“Is somebody here?” a voice called from inside the barn.

“It’s just the new elves,” Blitzen called back. “They’re already gone, Rudolph.”

“Good thing or we’d have to watch him prance around and show off,” Donner commented.

“He’s such a diva,” Cupid added.

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### 3 *\*Tofurkey Day\**

“Hey, my sister’s here tonight,” Nick yelled from the stage pointing at Tina and Lisa at a table near the front. Tina was always embarrassed when Nick did that.

“He’s cute,” Lisa leaned in and said to her.

Tina shook her head at Lisa’s interest, and Lisa frowned and shrugged.

They were seated at a small round table off to one side of the stage. Drinks sat on napkins before them. Tina missed the specialty drinks at the Snowed Inn & Pub back home, but it was fun to be out for a change instead of back at the dorm studying all the time. It was nice to have a friend.

“We’re *Black Ice* and we’re going to do some of our new songs for you now,” Nick said into the mic. “This one is called ‘Icicle in My Heart.’ Let’s rock till we drop!”

“He’s so intense,” Lisa whispered.

“Can I have another drink?” Tina asked a passing waitress.

The song began with a loud bash of the drums that made them jump. The song continued with persistent pounding while Nick screamed incoherent lyrics into the microphone. Tina wished she’d remembered her earplugs. Nick was surely going to ruin her hearing, although she admired his passion and always came to his gigs when she could. She and Lisa cheered and clapped loudly after each song. She would soon be hoarse and her ears would ring for days.

She watched Nick jump down from the stage at the break and talk to someone waiting for him.

“Have you talked to that guy?” she asked Lisa.

“What guy?” Lisa was watching Nick.

“You know, the guy who you followed here...”

“Oh, him. I looked at his records, and he transferred to another college. Good riddance, I say.”

“That’s good.” Tina sipped her fresh drink. “You’re rid of all that drama. Now you can focus on yourself...”

“Hi. I’m Lisa,” she said effusively to Nick when he approached the table. “Sit down. You were great.”

“Thanks.” He pulled a chair from another table and sat down. He gave Tina a look to prompt her.

“I like the new songs,” she said dutifully.

“Thanks. I’ve been writing a lot lately,” he told them. “I just wrote a song yesterday called ‘Aftermath of the Snow.’”

“Wow,” Lisa said with awe.

“Yeah. As it gets closer to ...” he looked at Tina, and she nodded with understanding. “Winter inspires me.” He turned to Lisa.

“Why is that?” she asked.

“It’s because of where we grew up. It was bitter cold all the time. I guess it taps into my...” he groped for a word. “... pain.”

“Pain?” Lisa repeated with surprise. “Did you have a horrible childhood?”

“Lisa, I told you about it,” Tina reminded her. “We had a workaholic father.”

Nick smirked. “I guess you could say that.” He leaned toward Lisa with earnestness. “Tina and I have different issues with him. I was his favorite but only because he wants me to go into the family business. He puts all this pressure on me, you know? Tina’s lucky that he ignores her.” He sat back in his chair. “But I’m into my music. I’ve got to follow my muse, you know? It’s like my destiny.”

Lisa nodded and sipped her drink.

“Are you going home for Thanksgiving?” Tina asked.

“Yeah, but I won’t be able to go home for... you know. We have a gig.”

“Okay, good. I’m glad you’ll be there for Thanksgiving,” Tina said with relief.

“Yeah, the family thing can be a drag.” Nick grabbed Tina’s glass and took a swig. “I’ve got to go talk to the band about our next set.” He jumped up from his chair. “See you later. Nice to meet you, Linda,” he said over his shoulder.

“Lisa,” she called after him. She turned to Tina. “You never told me your brother was so...” She sighed.

“So?” Tina said.

“So talented and deep.” Lisa sighed again as Tina shook her head.



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Santa pounded his fist on the table. “What do you mean we’re not having turkey,” he demanded.

“Just try it,” Clara insisted firmly. “It’s much healthier. You know what the doctor said about losing weight and eating healthier.”

“Stop telling me what the doctor said,” he railed.

“Go on. Try it,” Clara said unperturbed.

Santa stared at his plate suspiciously. “But what is it?” he asked gruffly.

“It’s Tofurkey. It’s very good.”

“To... what?”

“I like it, Mom,” Tina offered.

“This is pretty good,” Nick added. “I can’t even tell it’s not turkey.”

“Thanks, kids,” Clara said. “Now dear, we have mashed potatoes and gravy and stuffing and cranberry sauce and everything else you love to eat, so quit complaining and eat your Tofurkey.”

Santa grumbled as he took a bite. “Is this how we have to eat now?”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Clara said. “You know it’s delicious.”

The four of them sat around the small dining room table in the apartment located in the big building at the North Pole. Frost clung to the outside edges of the window but it was toasty warm inside due to the heat from the oven and fire crackling in the fireplace.

“What about dessert?” Santa whined.

“I made a pie with whole wheat flour and organic apples and cinnamon and then I used maple syrup to sweeten it,” she shared enthusiastically.

“What kind of pie is that?” Santa groaned.

“Do you know how hard it is to get organic apples here?” Clara asked with irritation.

“It smells wonderful,” Tina said.

Santa shook his head and turned to Nick. “Well, how’s the music thing coming along?”

“You mean the band?” Nick asked. “Dad, you don’t even know the name of the band, do you?”

“Of course he does,” Clara jumped in. “He knows it’s *Black Ice*. Remember we were talking about the name yesterday?” she prompted

Santa.

“Uh.” He looked at Nick. “Yeah, great name. I’m glad that you have something to do in the off-season.”

“Dad,” Nick said in a warning tone. “Don’t start. I’m not going to...”

“Nick,” Tina interrupted. “Just finish eating...”

“Tina.” Nick gave her an exasperated look.

“Clara.” Santa looked at her for support.

Clara shook her head. “Not during dinner.”

“Nick,” Santa said again.

“Mom,” Nick prevailed.

“Dad,” Tina said quickly. “Maybe I could help out this year.”

“That’s so sweet of you, Tina,” Clara told her.

“Nick,” Santa repeated.

“Mom,” Nick beseeched her.

“Not at dinner, dear,” Clara warned Santa.

“Nick!” Santa pounded his fist on the table. “When will you accept your responsibility to this family?”

“Dad, I can help out this year,” Tina said again.

“Not to mention the children of the world,” Santa emphasized.

“Don’t lay your guilt trip on me, Dad,” Nick said. “Besides Tina said she’d help out.”

“Tina always helps out,” Santa said. “I need someone to take over when I’m ready to retire. I need a successor.”

“Don’t look at me,” Nick advised.

Santa sighed heavily. “You’re the only one, Nick. I can’t trust anyone else.”

Nick glanced over at Tina. She smiled weakly.

“What about cousin Kris?” she asked.

“Great idea,” Nick said eagerly.

“That incompetent clown?” Santa groused.

Nick nodded. “I get that.”

“Uncle Kris?” Tina suggested.

Santa shook his head. “My brother is as greedy as they come. He doesn’t care about the kids or the quality of the toys we deliver.”

“Don’t get too worked up, dear.” Clara patted his arm.

“Your uncle would run this business into the ground his first season.” Santa patted his forehead with his napkin. “Do we really need that blasted fireplace going? It’s hot in here.”

“It’s not hot in here,” Nick said.

“Well, I’m hot!” Santa shouted.

“We’ll let the logs die down.” Clara patted his arm again.

“It’s all this darned facial hair.” Santa pulled at his thick white beard. “What was I saying? Oh, the business. It’s been in our family for generations. It’s part of tradition. I’m not going to let it stop here. Not on my watch.”

Tina and Nick looked at each other.

“No more business talk tonight,” Clara said decisively. “Don’t you kids worry. We’ll figure something out.” She shot Santa a warning look.

He took a bite of Tofurkey. “Yummy.”

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Santa was snoring in his recliner chair with his hands folded across his rounded stomach. Clara was in the kitchen wrapping up the remainder of the leftovers. Tina had helped her load the dishwasher until Clara had shooed her away. Nick sat upon on the couch staring into the fire. Tina was beside him looking at the stockings hung by the chimney with care. She could feel a draft wafting in from somewhere.

“I feel bad,” she said to Nick.

“I’m not going to let him guilt me into it,” Nick told her.

“I know. You shouldn’t give up your music.”

“Mom gets it,” he said. “It’s not our problem.”

They stared into the fire until Clara came in. She stood over Santa with her hands on her hips.

“He does this almost every night,” she told them. “He’s exhausted.”

“It’s that time of year.” Nick shrugged.

“Help me get him up,” she said to Nick. They each grabbed one of his arms. “Come on, dear. Time for bed.”

Santa staggered to his feet and sleepily leaned on Clara as she led him toward the bedroom.

Nick sat back down next to Tina. “Another happy family holiday,” he said with mock cheerfulness.

“I wish we had a normal family.” Tina sighed.

“Come on. Let’s get out of here,” he suggested.

\*\*\*

Tina and Nick sat at the bar at the Snowed Inn & Pub. It was the only bar in town. Huge candy canes decorated the entrance and the interior was red and green. It had become a bit shabby since Tina had seen it last. She glanced over at the separate cold room for snowmen and women to see if Abominable had shown up. He was nasty when he drank too much and usually got into a tussle with Frosty the Snowman about who was more famous. It was a sight to see with their slow movements and snow flying everywhere. Long icicles hung from the ceiling interior of the cold room, and the glass door was too foggy to see much beyond it.

A small stage was located off to the side of the dimly lit bar. Rudolph stood before a microphone singing karaoke in his squeaky voice while a booth full of reindeer eagerly heckled him.

“Give it up, Rudy,” Comet yelled. “You sound like the sleigh on a tin roof.”

They bellowed with laughter and stamped their hooves shaking the floor.

Nick chugged a Frosty Ale from a beer mug. “Nice stage. It’d be cool to do a gig here,” he mused. “But can’t do it. Then the guys would know who I am.”

“You haven’t told your band?” Tina asked sipping her Peppermintini.

“Nah, can’t tell the bandmates. I don’t want them to think of me that way, as a Claus. I don’t tell anyone,” he said. “Do you?”

She shook her head. “It was bad enough that everyone knew when we were growing up. You never knew if someone was your friend because of Dad,” she said. “But we’re not supposed to tell anyone outside of the North Pole anyway. Mom and Dad don’t tell anyone when they go to the condo in Florida. It’s nice when people don’t know and we can just be normal.”

“Normal? This family will never be normal.” Nick chuckled.

She smiled. “I guess that’s true.”

“Being a Claus will always be a burden.”

“I don’t think so. It’s pretty special. We had a great childhood.”

“Maybe for you. You were underneath Dad’s radar. He was always on my case about my obligation to be the next Santa. Generation after generation... blah blah blah.” He signaled for another Frosty Ale.

“Well, someone has to take over,” Tina said.

“As long as it’s not me. Who cares anyway? Kids don’t believe in Santa anymore. Let the parents take over.”

“Nick, how can you say that when you know he’s real?” Tina asked aghast. “What about all the letters we get? The kids need him. I still believe in what we do, what our name stands for. I care.”

Nick shrugged. “Too bad you weren’t born a boy. That would solve all this.”

“And too bad you weren’t born a girl. Then you could do whatever you wanted,” Tina said.

“I will anyway.”

“True.”

“Do you remember when he put me on the Naughty list one year?” Nick laughed. “I got coal in my stocking. That was classic.”

Tina laughed at the memory. “I can’t remember what you did.”

“I think I was in the workshop playing with the toys.”

“I did that all the time and he never put me on the Naughty list.”

“Well, he was always harder on me.” Nick sipped his ale. “Probably because I’m supposed to inherit his title and dedicate my life to Christmas like he did.”

Tina nodded and turned to watch Rudolph. “There has to be an answer, Nick.”

The door to the bar opened letting in an icy gust of wind. Walter stood brushing off his jacket. He saw them and waved. He made his way over and stepped on the hydraulic pedal at the base of the bar stool next to Tina’s. The seat lowered down and he slid onto it before pressing the pedal with his foot to rise it up to the bar.

“Frosty Ale,” he told the bartender.

“Hi, Walter,” Tina said.

“Oh, I heard those Peppermintinis are good,” he said to her noticing her drink. “I’ve never tried one.”

“It is good.” She took another sip. “How are you? How are things going this year?”

“Is Dad getting grumpier or is it me?” Nick asked.

Walter took a long sip from his beer mug. He looked tired.

“It’s getting harder the older we get and the more kids we have to make gifts for. And the toys are more complicated. Remember when we used to hand paint wooden cars and doll faces?” He shook his head. “It’s not the same.”

“I hear you,” Nick said raising his mug.

“My divorce was final a few months ago.” Walter sighed.

“I’m sorry, Walter,” Tina said sympathetically. “How are the kids?”

“My kids are working in the mailroom now. They said the volume has been incredible.”

“I saw it yesterday,” Tina told him. “It’s nice that they added the chutes that automatically separate the Naughty or Nice letters.”

Walter took another swig. “Don’t tell your father. You know he doesn’t like anything automated.”

“But that’s unreasonable,” Tina protested. “How can you possibly keep up?”

“Well, you can tell him that,” Walter said. “I agree with you. One of the new hires is programming a Naughty or Nice spreadsheet. It works great and automatically updates. Remember when we used to get the list over the ticker machine?”

“I remember that,” Nick said. “It sounded like a clock and was always going. Man, that was annoying.”

“Dad has to realize that with this kind of volume, the only answer is to start automating as much as possible,” Tina stated. “I’m a business major, and all my professors emphasize that successful companies have to learn the most efficient way to produce their products in order to maximize profits.”

Nick and Walter looked up at her.

“This is a little different, Tina,” Nick said.

“Nick is right,” Walter agreed. “Profits aren’t the goal with this business, but we have to be as efficient as possible because the volume increases at an astounding rate every year.”

They each took a sip of their drinks.

“Hey, Nick,” Rudolph called from the stage. “Come on up and do a song with me.”

Nick shook his head. “I’m sick of all those old songs.”

“They’re traditional,” Rudolph argued. “Come on.”

“Get off the stage, Rudy,” Comet yelled. “Give someone else a turn.”

Rudolph ignored him and began singing “Jingle Bells.” He tapped his hoof. “Join in everyone!”

## 4 *\*Frazzled Walter\**

Clara stood behind Santa massaging his neck and shoulders while he sat at his desk. “We’ll get through this season,” she said with encouragement. “We do every year.”

“I’m getting too old for this,” Santa moaned. “And now you won’t even let me have my milk and cookies.”

“I know,” she said soothingly. “But just think, you’ll have more energy when you lose some weight.”

Santa groaned. “I’m going to the pub.”

“Don’t do that,” she said. “You know it intimidates everyone when you show up there this time of year.”

“Darn it! I can’t do anything I want.”

She changed the subject. “How are the new elves doing?”

“I haven’t seen them much,” Santa told her. “But Walter says they’re doing very well.”

“That’s great. We needed the extra help.”

“We’re going to have to restructure some of the workstations and other areas for their bigger sizes. I think there’s room in the budget,” he said. “Otherwise, it’s going smoothly.”

“That’s wonderful,” Clara said happily. “Walter does such a great job training and managing the staff.”

“Yes, he does,” Santa acknowledged. “Now if he could only get the union off my back.”

“What’s the problem now?”

“It’s always the reindeer making demands. You know how they are. They’re not happy unless they’re causing a fuss.”

“Maybe I can talk to Blitzen,” Clara offered, though she dreaded it.

“I don’t know if that would do any good,” he told her. “We’d better let Walter deal with them. He always manages to smooth things over and he’s always fair.”

“You’re right. What would we do without Walter?”

Santa glanced at a picture of Tina and Nick on his desk. “Nick is still as difficult as ever. I never could get through to him. Why doesn’t he understand the importance of all this?”



Clara picked up the picture. "Tina was always easier. She always listened and helped out. Nick just had his own mind from the beginning."

"I don't understand where he gets his stubbornness from," Santa grouched.

Clara smiled. "Me neither."

\*\*\*

Walter lowered his barstool and approached the reindeer's booth gripping a mug in his hand. The floor was tilting more than usual. They should fix that.

"Hey, Blitzen," he slurred.

"I'm not talking business tonight, Walter," Blitzen warned.

"Look." Walter set down his mug and leaned on the table. "We're under a lot of pressure. You know darn well we can't shorten the work day any more than we already have. You have to be reasonable."

"Do you have any idea what we go through?" Dasher blurted. "When we're not lugging presents all over the world, we have to play Pony Express. Do you know how many letters Santa gets?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Walter responded. "Who do you think is in charge of running the mailroom and the warehouse and the inventory and the toy shop? Don't complain to me about a long work day." He tried to take a sip out of his mug, but it was empty. He set it back down on the table with a thud.

"Those sleighs are heavy," Dancer stated as she dabbed her mouth with a napkin.

"Yeah," Prancer agreed. "You're supposed to be representing us, not him."

"I'm in the middle," Walter moaned. "It's hard to make everyone happy."

"You're the foreman. That's your job," Donner said coldly.

"Listen, Walter," Blitzen leaned toward him. "We'll discuss it tomorrow at work. We're trying to relax here."

Walter looked back towards the bar. He squinted. "Where did Tina and Nick go?"

Blitzen shook his head. "That was days ago, Walter. They left the day before yesterday. You've been in here every night after work."

Walter stared at the bar. "Are you sure?" He took a few unsteady steps in that direction. "The floor is tilted. Do they know about this? They have to fix it. Somebody could get hurt."

"Go home and get some sleep, Walter," Blitzen urged.

"Have you seen my kids? I thought they'd be off by now," Walter said.

"Aren't they working second shift in the mailroom?" Donner asked.

Walter scratched his chin. "They are?"

"I'm sorry about your divorce," Dancer said. "That's tough. You know what they say."

"Who?" Walter furrowed his brow.

"They. What they say," she repeated.

"Who?"

"Walter, just remember there are more fish in the sea," she said.

"Fish? Did they get a fish tank?" He glanced around.

Blitzen shook his huge head. "Rudy," he called. "Get down off that stage and take Walter home."

"But I have another song," Rudolph objected.

"Oh, I'd say you're done," Blitzen told him. "Now Walter, Rudy is going to take you home, and I don't want to see you in here tomorrow night or I'll take you home myself. Got it?"

"Huh?" Walter could hardly keep his eyes open.

\*\*\*

"How was your Thanksgiving?" Lisa asked as they sat on the edge of the fountain in the warmth of the sun.

"It was fine. Just the usual tense family stuff," Tina answered. "How was yours?"

"Boring," Lisa said. "What kind of tense family stuff?"

"My father wants Nick to take over the family business," Tina explained. "But, of course, Nick is into his music and doesn't want to do it."

"You're a business major. Why don't you do it?" Lisa suggested.

"Oh, no." Tina laughed. "This isn't the type of business I could run. It's... complicated. It just wouldn't work. No, my father is set on Nick

taking over. He's very old-fashioned." She regretted mentioning it.

"I could help you," Lisa offered. "Didn't you tell me it's a toy company? It sounds fun."

"It's not as much fun as it sounds. Besides, I want to finish school and get my business degree and you have a good job here. Don't you like it?"

Lisa scrunched her nose. "It's okay. I just don't know if I'm any good at it. Running a toy company sounds like a lot more fun."

"Trust me. It's not," Tina told her. "You have to manage the warehouse and inventory. You have to handle production. You have an enormous mailroom. You have to deal with the union. You have an extremely busy season. I grew up with it, and it's not as much fun as it sounds."

Now that she thought about it, it was an overwhelming job. She couldn't blame Nick for not wanting the responsibility. He didn't have the dedication required for it.

Someday, she'd dedicate her life to a company. But not one making toys. Just as she eschewed the colors green and red, she wanted to avoid the toy business in the future and experience something entirely new. She dreamed of computer chips or electric cars or vitamin supplements. Her mother would like that now that she was pursuing a healthy lifestyle. Yes, the possibilities were endless.

"What do you want to do, Lisa? What have you always dreamed of doing?" Tina asked.

Lisa shrugged. "You're more ambitious than me. I just want to work in a job I enjoy, but I haven't found it yet. I mean, counseling is okay, but I don't love it."

Tina nodded. "Well, I hope we each find what we want."

"Me too."

\*\*\*

Tina was studying at the desk in her dorm room when her mother called. The lamp cast a bright glow onto the textbook pages. She was taking notes in a spiral notebook littered with her scrawls. A plate scattered with crumbs sat on the edge of the desk. Her phone startled her when it buzzed as the call came in.

"Tina, promise me you'll talk to Nick," Clara implored on the phone.

“Mom,” she sighed. She seemed to be doing a lot of sighing lately. “You know Nick is into his music and has no interest in taking over the business. I don’t know what you expect me to do.”

“You’re right,” Clara conceded. “I just don’t know what to tell your father anymore. He’s so stressed out about it. And poor Walter. He has to hear about it every day.”

“Walter looked really frazzled. Is he okay?” Tina asked with concern.

“I certainly hope so. He’s been with us for so many years. We couldn’t manage without him but, you know, he’s just been through a rough divorce, and it’s been hard on him,” Clara said. “Maybe I’ll make him some scones.”

“That’s a good idea, Mom.”

Tina looked out her dorm room window at the excessive holiday decorations. They seemed overwhelmingly garish and gaudy. A brief sharp pain twitched in her stomach.

“Do you think he’d prefer maple nut scones or orange chocolate chip?” Clara asked. “I think I have some chocolate chips. It’s so hard to get fresh fruit here. Otherwise, I’d make strawberry. That’s my favorite.”

“Mom, I have a lot of studying to do. Finals are coming up. You know I’ll be home to help as soon as I can just like I do every year.”

“I know, honey. I appreciate it. This will be one of the hardest seasons in a long time,” Clara said. “But once we get through it, we’ll head to Florida. I don’t know why you don’t want to stay at the condo while you’re there.”

“I like staying in the dorm,” Tina told her. “It’s right on campus and it’s closer to my classes. It’s just more convenient right now.”

“Okay, well, good luck with your exams and let me know how they go. We’ll see you soon. Talk to your brother if you get a chance,” her mother said.

“I will.”

But what could she say to Nick? His aversion to Christmas ran deep and his mind was made up. She had no idea who could take over when Santa retired. It was a real dilemma and she’d ponder it later, but, for now, her priority was studying.

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Tina's stomach was bothering her again on the plane as it flew north. Finals were over and she was sure she'd done well. She let herself sink into her favorite fantasy of a future as the CEO of an international corporation. She could imagine flying all over the world in a corporate jet negotiating business contracts and facilitating partnerships and acquisitions. The world of business would be challenging and exciting.

She hoped her parents could figure out a solution for the family business so they could retire in a few years. She and Nick needed to move on with their lives and leave the toys behind.

It was nice to be back home for the big holiday. She liked snuggling up in her own bed with the thick double comforter. Her mother let her sleep in on her first day home. She was exhausted from the late nights studying and the long flight. But she was there to work. She didn't mind it. She enjoyed seeing the elves again. Working in the toyshop brought back warm memories, and she was delighted to see that the workshop was now diversified with larger elves. Walter had discreetly hired outside the North Pole to increase staffing and it seemed to be working out, despite some sizing issues.

She was pleasantly surprised to find some automation in place this year in spite of her father's opposition. It had been furtive and borne out of necessity, Walter confided. The new chutes in the mailroom were impressive. The mail was sorted twice as fast, and they could process more letters than ever before.

Walter kept her up to speed and recommended that she spend some time with Ken, a bigger elf, who had designed the new Naughty or Nice spreadsheet. Ken had written code that automatically updated the stats every hour. She was impressed with his results. This would make things much easier for her parents if they learned to use it. Walter hoped to persuade them to do so.

Tina spent some time chatting with Walter in his office about more changes that were needed and his frustration with Santa's resistance. Tina could sympathize, but they both knew Santa would stay rooted in the old ways of doing things just as his father and his father before him had. But they could dream. Walter had so many great ideas, it was a shame Santa wasn't open to them. At least, Walter could vent to Tina.

The pressure and frenzy accelerated as the delivery date neared. Tina helped out wherever she could, picking up the slack in any department that needed it. They worked long hours into the cold night and early hours of the morning. Clara was her typical, cheery self as she distributed scones and encouragement to all the elves. Tina's father was surly and ill-tempered as usual. Even more so as Christmas Eve drew closer. Everyone tried to stay out of his way and let Clara deal with him. She and Walter were the only ones who could.

Finally, all the work was finished and the big night arrived. Tina marvelled that they had pulled it off once again. She bundled up and joined Clara and Walter outside to witness Santa pull on his gloves and climb into the bulging sleigh. He gave his usual whistle to signal that he was ready.

The massive reindeer responded and the sleigh creaked and budged. Slowly at first and then faster and faster they galloped over the packed snow and slick ice. Tina held her breath until they quickly ascended into the cold, clear winter sky. She let her breath out in a cloudy mist.

Somehow, all the tension and disagreements melted away. Tina never tired of this magical moment. She'd seen it many, many times, yet it always took her breath away and brought a tear to her eye. Maybe this was why she wanted to help out every year, to experience this one extraordinary moment over and over.

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” Santa's voice echoed over the vast landscape.

Clara and Walter hurried inside to escape the cold, but Tina stood watching until Santa and the sleigh disappeared from sight with a sparkly pop. Magic had whisked them away and she wondered what that felt like.

This moment was when she could truly appreciate her father's work. Even though it had taken him away from her for much of her childhood, she could admire his dedication to this tradition of the Claus cause. Unfortunately, the rest of the time he could be a real grouch.

Had Nick ever appreciated the magic of this amazing night? Perhaps he was immune to it, but she envied him for the opportunity to experience it. Perhaps music was where he found his magic.

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Tina slept on the plane on the way back to Florida. All the anxiety of the season was gone. She couldn't wait until all the decorations were down. She was glad she didn't have to hear any more holiday songs or see any more holiday-themed commercials on TV for a while. What a relief that it was all over with. Better to leave all that stuff at the North Pole. In Florida she could relax and focus on her classes.

In a few months, her parents would close up the business for the season and head to their condo for a much needed vacation. Her father had taken up golf, and her mother enjoyed catching up with their neighbors. It'd be nice to have them close by for a time. She had to admit she sometimes felt a little homesick. It was especially nice to hang out with her mother who always took an interest in her life and pampered her a bit.

Lisa picked her up at the curb by the airport. Tina was glad they had become friends. Lisa was a little quirky but she was a good friend.

"How was your visit?" Lisa asked as Tina got into the car. She wore oversized sunglasses and her hair in a ponytail.

"It was a lot of work. This is the busy season for the business." Tina donned her sunglasses.

"I bet. Toys at Christmas." Lisa pulled out into traffic. "How's your brother?"

"He wasn't there. He had a gig, so he didn't come home this year," Tina told her. "I'm wiped out. I just want to sleep for a few days."

"I hear you," Lisa answered. "I had to endure my dysfunctional family. I don't have to tell you. Did you get a chance to talk to your father?"

"No. We were too busy."

"The holidays are always too busy and stressful, and then you have to see relatives you don't want to see. I'd just as soon forget the holidays and take a vacation instead. You know?" Lisa navigated around a truck. "Next year we should just go to Hawaii for a few weeks. Doesn't that sound so much better?"

"It sounds tempting," Tina agreed.

"You're too pale," Lisa noticed. "You need some sun. You probably get easily sunburned, don't you?"

"Yes. I have to be careful in the sun," Tina said. "But Hawaii sure sounds nice. We should do it."

"Are you serious?"

“Sure. Why not? I’ve never been to Hawaii.”

Tina settled back in her seat and pictured beaches and palm trees. Coconuts and mangos. Seashells and blue waves. It sounded like paradise. Why shouldn’t she take a vacation away from her family? She was an adult now and it was time she lived her own life instead of constantly revolving around her family.

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Nick’s band was setting up on the small stage. He stood by the round table off to the side where Tina and Lisa sat and ran his hand through his spiky white hair. It bounced back up defying gravity.

“How are Mom and Dad?” he asked Tina.

“They’re okay. We got through another season. The new employees are doing great.” She glanced at Lisa.

“Hi, Nick.” Lisa beamed at him.

“Hey, Linda,” he answered.

“He remembers me,” she whispered to Tina.

“It’s Lisa, Nick,” Tina corrected him.

“Oh, yeah, right.” He looked over at the stage. “George, where’s the sheet music?”

George was wrestling with a microphone stand. He stopped and looked up brushing his long dark hair out of his face.

“Which ones?”

“For the new songs.”

“You had those,” George reminded him.

“Right,” Nick answered. He turned back to Tina and Lisa. “Are you staying for the whole set? I wrote some new songs last week. One is called ‘Death of the Pines.’ Christmas destroys innocent trees. I’m rejecting the mindset that glorifies destruction and materialism.”

“That’s so woke.” Lisa nodded.

“It’s not that bad, Nick,” Tina said. “You know they have the best intentions. Think of all the happy children.”

“Don’t let them brainwash you,” he said with alarm. “Keep your head, Tina. Don’t get sucked into the machine.” He thought for a moment. “Sucked into the machine. That’s a good song title.”



“I like it,” Lisa offered.

“I’ve got to go write that down,” he muttered. “Stay for the whole set. I’ll talk to you during the break.”

Lisa stared after him. “Does he have a girlfriend?”

Tina shook her head in frustration. That’s all she needed – to lose her new friend to her clueless brother.

“Nick is younger than me, you know. You should find someone your own age, someone more stable,” she advised. “Nick is.... well, he’s focused on his music now.”

Lisa leaned toward her. “There’s something so mysterious about him like he has a deep, dark secret. Am I right?”

“No, no, no,” Tina answered quickly. “We just had trouble knowing who to trust when we were growing up because of who our father is. I mean, it was about the toy company. Kids wanted to be friends with us because of the toy company.”

Lisa nodded. “Yeah. I can understand that.”

“Test,” Nick said into the microphone. “My sister’s here tonight.” He grinned at her from the stage.

“Sing ‘Jingle Bells,’” someone called from the bar.

Nick stiffened. Tina sat up straight.

He peered into the crowd at the bar. “Hey, dude! It’s over!” he yelled.

“Come on! I’m still in the holiday spirit,” the voice insisted.

“You’ve been brainwashed by commercialism!” Nick shouted with agitation. “Move on!”

“Do ‘Frost in My Head,’” Tina called out.

“Yeah, do ‘Frost in My Head,’” Lisa echoed.

Nick turned to them. “We have a request. We’re *Black Ice* and this song is ‘Frost in My Head.’”

He let out a scream that amplified through the mic and the band launched into the song. Tina had forgotten her earplugs again. Someday she’d be deaf thanks to Nick. But she let herself get into the music and bobbed her head with Lisa to the indistinguishable lyrics. It was too loud for further conversation.

That was close, Tina thought. Nick was usually pretty mellow, but the request for a Christmas song had touched a sore spot. Their entire childhoods had perpetually revolved around that one day and, between

holiday decorations and the maddening repetition of classic Christmas music, they couldn't seem to escape it.

It was nice that the season was over and they were no longer surrounded by icicles and toys. It was nice to be somewhere warm and sunny and see other colors besides green and red. The world was different away from the North Pole. She could understand Nick's resistance to the family business. She'd never had to endure the pressure from their parents that he had. She'd escaped the burden of expectations. But she could see it still weighed on Nick.

## 5 \*Grumpy Santa\*

Clara was glad that Santa was getting some much needed sleep on the plane. She looked over at him as he snored. He looked exhausted and he was starting to look old. This job had aged him. She worried about his health. Although she constantly reassured him, she privately fretted about finding a replacement. The sooner, the better. He wasn't good at handling the stress and every season seemed to exacerbate it. If he would only eat better and meditate or do yoga, it would make such a difference for his health and anxiety level.

She'd known when she married him that the plan was to take over the business eventually from her father-in-law. But she'd never imagined how soon it would happen, how many years of their lives it would engulf, and how all-consuming it would be. Maybe it hadn't been fair to the kids. They'd always assumed that the kids would *want* to be involved in the business as adults. After all, who wouldn't jump at the opportunity to be a part of tradition and history? Who wouldn't be proud of this family heritage?

Santa was deeply disappointed that Nick wanted no part of it and took it as a personal rejection. He didn't understand his son's desire to distance himself from the family legacy. Santa had assumed the role from his father without question. It had never occurred to him to turn it down. He couldn't accept that Nick wanted to follow his own dreams.

The flight attendant came over and smiled. "You know, your husband looks just like..."

"I know. He gets that all the time." Clara smiled back.

"But he wouldn't be on a plane, would he? He has the sleigh and reindeer, right?" The flight attendant laughed and walked along the aisle checking on the other passengers. If she only knew.

Clara dozed on and off during the long flight. She awoke with a start when the pilot announced that they were coming in for a landing. She yawned and roused Santa, who was still in a deep sleep.

"We're almost there," she said cheerfully. "It'll be wonderful to see the kids. I think we should make it a point to see Nick's band. He'll really like that. What do you say?"

“I don’t like that kind of music,” Santa grumbled. “I just want to play golf.”

“You’ll have plenty of time to do that,” she assured him. “We’ll get some sun and fresh air and take it easy. I think I’m going to have a drink at dinner.” This whole situation was taxing for her too.

“Did you give Walter the number for the landline at the condo?” he asked. “I always have trouble with my cell here.”

“Walter has the number, but I don’t want you to even think about work,” she admonished. “There’s lots of time before we have to start thinking about next season. This is our vacation.”

They disembarked and followed the flow of passengers to the escalator to descend to the baggage claim area. Tina was waiting for them and waved enthusiastically.

“Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!” she called.

Clara hurried over and hugged her and Santa threw her a tight smile. He retrieved a baseball hat from his suitcase and pulled it over his white hair.

“Where’s Nick?” her mother asked.

“He had a band rehearsal,” Tina lied. The truth was that Nick hadn’t wanted to come. “Did you check any luggage?”

“We just have our carry-ons,” Clara said. “We have plenty of clothes at the condo.”

Tina drove them to the condo, so they could drop off their suitcases. Santa ducked into the restroom.

“Mom,” Tina said in a low voice. “I know I just saw him last month, but Dad doesn’t look good. Is he okay? Has he lost any weight yet?”

“A little.” Clara sighed. “Not enough. He doesn’t want to give up his favorite foods. He doesn’t want to exercise. I just don’t know what to do with him.”

“I think it’ll help being away from work for a while,” Tina said with encouragement. But she was worried.

Santa came out of the restroom. He’d changed into shorts and a Hawaiian shirt.

“What’s the name of that restaurant I like? You know, the Italian one. I’ve been dreaming about their garlic bread. We can’t get that kind of food

at the Pole. And I can't wait to have a beer. I haven't had a drink all season."

"That sounds good," Clara agreed removing her sweater.

"I'm going to get rid of this beard and mustache in the morning." Santa stroked his hairy face. "People don't recognize me without it, and it'll grow back in time for the new season."

"Sofia's." Tina remembered. "The name of the restaurant is Sofia's."

"Let's go. I'm famished," Santa said.

They piled back into the car and Tina drove through the twilight to the restaurant a few miles away. Tall palm trees lined the streets, and the orange sky was deepening in color as the sun sank below the horizon.

"What a pretty sunset," Clara observed.

"I always forget how bad the traffic is," Santa commented.

Mouthwatering aromas greeted them as they entered the crowded restaurant. They were seated at a small table in the middle of the bustling room. Santa wore his baseball hat pulled low over his face. He ordered a beer, and Clara ordered a glass of wine.

"Nothing for me. I'm driving," Tina told the waiter.

"What did we get the last time that was so good?" Clara asked looking at the menu.

"I think it was the pasta with marinara sauce," Tina remembered. "You liked the sauce."

"Yes!" Santa said emphatically. "That's what I want. Spaghetti and marinara sauce." He relayed his order to the waiter when he returned with their drinks. "And extra garlic bread."

Clara frowned at him before turning to the waiter. "Do you have whole wheat pasta?"

"I'll check," he answered.

"Okay, if you have it, I want the whole wheat pasta with marinara sauce," she told him.

"I'll have the angel hair pasta with marinara," Tina said.

"We can't eat like this every night," Clara cautioned Santa.

He ignored her and dove into the garlic bread as soon as a basket was placed on their table. Crumbs fell into his beard.

Clara picked up a buttery slice. "This is white bread," she complained. "Oh, well. I guess it's okay for one night."

“Mmmm.” Tina’s mouth was full. “Garlic is good for you, Mom.”

“Yes, it is,” she acknowledged.

The waiter came over. “I’m sorry,” he told Clara. “We don’t have whole wheat pasta.”

“Darn it,” she said. “Okay, I’ll have the angel hair.” She waited for the waiter to walk away. “We’re going to have to find some healthier restaurants around here. Maybe there’s a vegetarian place. Have you seen any?” she asked Tina.

“Not that I can think of.”

“Well, at least we can get a lot of fruit here. I sure miss fresh fruit.” Clara took a sip of her wine. “Oh, that’s so good.”

“Did you say you gave Walter the number to the condo?” Santa asked her.

She glared at him. “I don’t want to hear a word about work,” she said firmly. “Walter can reach us if he has to, but he’s on vacation too, so we’d better not hear from him. He needs to relax, too. The divorce was hard on him. He’s had a rough year.” She shook her head. “What would we do without Walter?”

Santa downed his beer. “Where’s the waiter?” He looked around.

“Go easy on that,” Clara warned.

“I’m thirsty,” he said defensively.

“Well, then drink some water.” She looked at Tina. “How are your classes going?”

“They’re good,” Tina answered perking up. “I’m starting to learn a lot of interesting things like inventory management and marketing, just all facets of business. There are so many amazing computer programs and new business models I’m learning about. Things are evolving so fast.”

Clara nodded. “I bet. I’m sure it wouldn’t hurt for us to update some things.”

Santa scowled at Clara. “Waiter,” he called. “Another beer.”

She held up her empty wine glass. “I need another, too.”

A busboy took their empty glasses and stared at Santa for a moment. “You look so familiar,” he said puzzled.

“That’s because I’ve been here before,” Santa said avoiding his eyes.

“No, it’s not that.” He thought for a moment. “You know you look like...”

“Yeah, people say that all the time. Thanks.” Santa turned away, and the busboy slowly walked away.

Tina felt that she needed to make conversation with her father, but she didn’t know what to say to him. He never seemed very interested in her. Things were much easier with her mother.

“Dad?” she said.

The waiter swooped in with their meals and set the plates of pasta laden with pungent sauce in front of them.

“I’ll get your drinks. Is there anything else?” he asked.

“We’re good for now. Thank you,” Clara said.

“Thank you,” Tina echoed. She looked at her father who already had sauce on his beard. “Dad?”

He glanced at her. “What is it? I’m eating.”

“Well, I was thinking, with all the new stuff I’m learning now, that some of it might be useful for the business,” she submitted twirling her angel hair pasta on her fork.

Santa stopped mid-bite and looked at her. He finished chewing.

“Are you crazy?” he demanded. “You know the business is built on tradition. Why does everyone want to change everything? My father and his father and his father and on and on built this business. It would dishonor them to change a thing. They perfected it and it works. Why fix something that’s not broken?” He shook his head as if she’d said the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard.

Clara patted his arm. “It’s okay, dear. She’s just trying to help.”

Tina felt angry at his dismissal. “You’re expecting too much of the elves. You don’t know how hard it is because you sit in your office. Things get worse every year because there are more kids. Changes will have to be made or you’ll fall behind and never catch up.”

“We will never fall behind,” Santa said resolutely. “Never. I won’t allow it. Besides, what do you know? You’ve never run a business. Sitting in a classroom is not the real world.”

Tina was fuming and looked down at her plate. Fine, she thought. Why should she care if he refused to face reality? It wasn’t her responsibility. It was better to be ignored than belittled. Nick had the right idea to stay out of it and follow his own dreams.

“Nicholas,” Clara said sternly. She only used his real name when she was incensed, which seldom happened. “Do not talk to our daughter that way. She can certainly voice her opinion, and she has the best intentions.”

“Sorry, Mom,” Tina said meekly. “You said no business talk at dinner.”

“That’s okay, Tina.” Clara patted her arm. “I’m glad you’re getting so much out of your classes. You know your father is stubborn and stuck in his ways.” She shot him a look. “But no more talk about business. We’re on vacation, and it’s the last thing I want to think about.”

Tina wondered if there was anything she could do that would earn the respect of her father and make him proud of her. But he only seemed concerned about Nick, and Nick was indifferent. What a dysfunctional family they were.

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Walter reclined in a woven lounge chair on the secluded beach with a large drink in his hand. He moved the little umbrella to one side to take a sip and peered out of his sunglasses at the clear blue water that stretched to the cloudless horizon. The sun shone brilliantly in the pale blue sky, and the water lapped lazily at the white sand. Palm trees rustled in the gentle breeze. He wore a straw hat to shade his eyes. He couldn’t stop staring at the ocean. It was incredibly soothing.

Every season was harder than the last. At least they’d hired more elves. That had certainly helped. He was thinking of hiring an assistant next season. His workload had become untenable, Santa was becoming grouchier every year, and the reindeer were growing more difficult to pacify. They were arrogant and unreasonable. Blitzen was the worst. He’d get the others all wound up and was never willing to compromise. Walter had become more of a diplomat than a foreman.

Sometimes he dreamed of retiring. He kept telling himself he’d work one more season, but since the divorce, he wasn’t sure he wanted to retire anymore. It made him feel a little lost. He hadn’t planned on retiring alone. At least the divorce was over with and his kids hadn’t taken sides. It had been nice to have them working temporarily in the mailroom close to him.

What would Santa would do if he left? He couldn’t think of anyone who could step into his shoes. No one was qualified to manage the staff or



had the patience, tact, and stamina it took to mediate. He often felt like the glue that held everything together and worried that things would fall apart without him.

He'd also become Santa's confidant. Santa didn't voice all of his concerns to Clara. Walter knew he counted on him in many ways to keep things running smoothly. He'd invested most of his life in this business and still cared about it deeply. He wished he could take over for Santa. What a simple solution that would be, if it were only possible. He tried to imagine what it'd be like to ride the sleigh. Every year, he watched it lift off with awe. It must be the most fantastic feeling.

Walter started to calculate in his head how much he'd need to retire and what it would cost to buy one of the little cottages on the beach that he rented every year. Yet he knew that after these few months of relaxation, he'd look forward to getting back to work. For the most part, he enjoyed his job. It had its aggravations, just like any job, but he always looked forward to the growing hum of activity emanating from the workshop at the fresh start of each new season. The activity would continue to buzz until the big push in the days leading up to the delivery date. It was actually an adrenaline rush that he secretly relished.

He never tired of that one remarkable night. The huge reindeer hooves would thunder upon the ground as the heavy sleigh slid along the icy snow. In a wondrous moment, it would rise into the crisp night air. Then Santa's voice would echo through the lone night. It never failed to give Walter goose bumps. He knew he'd miss it.

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## 6 *\*Parental Overload\**

Tina waved her parents over to the small round table where she sat with Lisa. She introduced them and looked over at the stage to see if Nick was around. Her father didn't look happy, and she was sure her mother had dragged him there to see Nick's band. Santa had shaved and was no longer recognizable, which was a big relief. He still wore his baseball hat and glowered down at the table. They ordered drinks and sat awkwardly in silence.

"What classes are you taking, Lisa?" Clara asked.

"I'm not a student," Lisa answered. "I'm a school counselor."

"Oh," Clara said confused. "I see."

"I hear you have a toy company," Lisa said to her. "That sounds fun."

Clara looked at Tina. "Yes, we're in the toy business. It's a family business. It's not as much fun as it sounds."

"That's what Tina says," Lisa told her.

Nick came over smiling broadly. "Hey, Mom." He hugged her. "Hey, Dad." He nodded to Tina and Lisa. "Hey, Linda."

Lisa beamed. "Hi, Nick."

"I thought her name was Lisa," Clara said to Tina.

"It is," Tina answered.

"What?" Nick looked at Lisa. "I thought it was Linda."

"No problem." Lisa shrugged.

"I wrote a new song," Nick said to Tina. "It's called 'Parental Overload.' I'm going to do it tonight for the first time."

"Great," Tina said reluctantly.

It didn't sound like the ideal song to play for their parents, but at least they wouldn't be able to hear the lyrics.

"I'll talk to you guys at the break." Nick turned back toward the stage.

Clara frowned at Tina.

"He's working through his issues, Mom. I told you that you probably wouldn't like his music."

"Music is good therapy," Lisa said helpfully.

"How long do we have to stay?" Santa asked Clara.

“We’re here to support Nick,” she answered testily. “This is the first time we’ve come to hear his band, so please be nice.”

“Hey, everyone,” Nick said into the microphone to the expanding crowd. “My family’s here tonight.” He swept his hand toward their table in the front. “We’re *Black Ice* and this is a new song called ‘Parental Overload.’”

He screamed into the microphone as the unbearably loud music backed him. Tina was relieved they couldn’t decipher the lyrics. She looked at her parents who seemed uncomfortable. Clara was watching Nick, and Santa stared at his beer. Lisa moved to the beat and even appeared to be mouthing the lyrics. How could she understand them? Tina wondered.

She glanced around and realized that the band’s popularity was growing. People bobbed their heads to the beat and clapped raucously after each song. Nick might actually be achieving his dream of a successful career in music. He was moving on from their childhood and working out his issues in his songs. She wished she could do so as easily.

For the first time, she considered what would happen if Nick became famous. Would people find out he was the son of Santa? How ironic that would be after her parents’ lifelong efforts to hide their identities and Nick’s attempt at distancing himself. He’d always be a Claus and so would she.

The set ended and Nick came bounding off the stage. He was happy and animated. Lisa had saved a seat for him, and he plopped down next to her.

“You were great,” she gushed.

“Thanks,” he said appreciatively. “The band has more fans now because of the college.”

“That’s wonderful,” Clara said. “Do you play at other places, too?”

“We get other gigs sometimes, but we’re the regular band here,” he explained. He looked at Santa. “So, what did you think, Dad?”

“It’s loud,” he grumbled.

“What was the name of that last song?” Clara asked. “I had trouble understanding the words.”

“That was ‘Death of the Pines,’” Nick answered. “It’s about killing all those innocent trees for one day and what a waste it is.”

“I see,” Clara said uneasily.

“Waste?” Santa bellowed. “It’s part of the tradition.”

“I know you don’t get the message, Dad,” Nick responded unperturbed. “That’s okay. You’re into your thing. I get it.”

Clara placed a hand on Santa’s arm and looked at her son. “We’re here to support you, Nick. We’re very proud of you. You were always musical and liked to sing.” She prodded Santa. “Remember how he always sang along with the music in the shop? It was so cute.”

“I thought it was a phase,” Santa muttered.

“How are things at the condo?” Tina asked to change the subject.

“I really wish you’d stay there when we go home,” Clara said to her. “It gets so dusty and I’d feel better with someone there. At least our neighbors, Myra and Marty, keep an eye on it.”

“I’ll think about it,” Tina assured her. “How are Myra and Marty?”

“I’m playing golf with Marty tomorrow morning,” Santa said. “I need to practice. My game is rusty.”

Clara smiled. “Myra and I have so much catching up to do. Remember the new hospital they were building last year? It’s finally finished. I’m so glad because the traffic was awful with the construction. Oh, and I saw a new fitness club in town. We’re going to check it out. I want to find some yoga classes.”

“There’s a new smoothie place on campus,” Lisa offered. “It’s really good.”

Clara perked up. “I’ll have to check that out. I wonder if they have wheatgrass shots.”

“You look great since you lost weight, Mom,” Nick said.

“Thank you, Nick.” She nudged Santa. “Now we just have to get your father in better shape.”

Everyone looked at Santa.

“I’m going golfing tomorrow,” he said defensively.

Nick jumped up to return to the stage and they began their second set. Santa and Clara rose from their seats after the first song.

“Tell Nick we had to go. Your father’s tired. We still have jet lag.” Clara leaned in and said in Tina’s ear.

Tina nodded in response.

“Your family’s interesting,” Lisa said during the next break when they could hear each other again.

“You could say that,” Tina mumbled.

“I can see tension between Nick and your father,” Lisa went on. “But Nick doesn’t let it faze him. That’s good.”

“Yeah, Nick doesn’t let things get to him,” Tina agreed. “I wish I could be like that.”

“I think I can see the family dynamics,” Lisa continued. “Your father is stubborn, but he just wants respect. He wants to feel that all of you appreciate and recognize the hard work he does for your family.”

“The business has been his life,” Tina acknowledged. “Maybe he feels we don’t appreciate it, but he has to understand that we need his attention too. We all have our own lives and it’s not all about him.”

Lisa nodded slowly. “Your mother is great. She knows how to handle him and keep it all together. She’s like the referee. Everybody defers to her and she makes it all work.”

“That’s true.” Tina was impressed with Lisa’s instant insight.

“Your parents are kind of cute together,” Lisa told her.

“Really?”

Nick sauntered over and sat down. “Did they leave?”

“Jet lag,” Tina said.

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Spring break was approaching and the weather was balmy and beautiful. It was a bit muggy but not too hot yet. Tina’s parents had been there for a few months and were enjoying their time off. Her father was usually out on the golf course and her mother had found a yoga class.

It was increasingly difficult to spend time with her father, but Tina sometimes had lunch with her mother. She was relieved that Clara never brought up the business, though they’d had a few tense family dinners. Otherwise, Nick hadn’t seen them much. He always said the band was rehearsing or playing a gig. Lisa had become a regular at the club where the band played close to campus. She gazed dreamily at Nick from her seat in the darkness. Sometimes Tina joined her when she didn’t have to study.

Tina was trying to decide what to do during summer break. She could register for classes or take the summer off. She didn’t want to go home. Her parents would be heading back soon. Walter was probably already there

getting things ready for the season. Production would be ramping up and the humming along by the time her parents arrived.

Lisa had again suggested vacationing in Hawaii. It was the off season but would still be expensive. She knew she should probably take classes over the summer but she needed a break. A nice long vacation on an island far away sounded appealing.

Tina sat at the desk in her dorm room squinting at the textbook in the dim light of the lamp trying not to fall asleep. She was glad her roommate was out. She still had much studying to do. She was determined to remain at the top of her class.

Dreams of Hawaii could wait until tomorrow. She'd ask Lisa to figure an estimate of the cost of their trip. It was tempting but she had to be realistic. She couldn't expect her parents to pay all of her tuition. The money she'd saved up really should go toward college expenses. Maybe it would be wise to take her mother's suggestion to move into the condo and save money on the dorm.

Her phone suddenly rang and jarred her awake. She grabbed it.

"Hello?"

She could hear loud music in the background.

"Tina! Are you there?" Lisa yelled into the phone.

"Yes. I'm studying," Tina answered loudly.

"Take a break," Lisa urged. "Nick's band is playing. He wanted me to call you."

"I can't." Tina yawned. "I'm really tired. I need to get some sleep."

"Come on. You'll wake up," Lisa coaxed. "Have some fun."

"I can't. I have an early class."

Tina looked at the clock on the wall. It was after nine. She vacillated for a moment.

"Okay," Lisa said. "I'll be here if you change your mind."

Maybe she should go out and have some fun, Tina reasoned after she'd hung up. An hour wouldn't hurt. She'd been spending a great deal of time studying lately as it was crucial to do well on her exams. Her future career depended on it. Let her parents worry about the family business. She had to focus on her own life as Nick had done.

She'd been keeping to herself other than spending time with her roommate or Lisa. She still felt that same wariness she'd experienced

growing up, wondering if people liked her for herself or for who her family was. She knew she was probably giving off vibes to stay away. A few young men had flirted with her in her classes, but she wasn't good at that game, and there didn't seem to be much time for a social life, anyway.

The phone rang again. She smiled. Lisa was persistent. Maybe she would go out for a little while. She'd noticed George in her brother's band. He was quiet and cute and friendly and not as intense as Nick. She thought she'd seen him around campus. She determined to work up the courage to say hi to him.

"Hello?" she said into her phone.

"Tina, I'm so glad you answered," her mother said frantically. "We're at the hospital. You know, the new one."

"Mom." Tina felt panic quickly flooding her. "What happened?"

"It's your father," Clara said urgently. "I think he had a heart attack."

"Oh, no," she gasped. "Is he okay?"

"I'm not sure yet."

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

Tina grabbed her keys and ran out the door. Then she ran back in and turned off the light. Then she switched the light back on and slipped on her flip flops. Then she ran out slamming the door behind her.

Her thoughts were racing and her heart was pounding as she drove as fast as she could to the new hospital. What if something happened to her father? What would her mother do? Not only the family but the business was in jeopardy. Who would take over? Walter would have to handle it in the interim with her mother but then what? Only Santa could deliver the presents. If something happened to her father, Christmas was at stake.

She followed the signs to the emergency entrance. Rushing in, she stood at the counter wondering what name they'd used. They usually used Klaus, pronounced 'Klouse.' It was the name she'd used to register for college, but sometimes her parents used other aliases. Her father liked to make up silly names like Norton North or Colin Kane or Simon Snow.

"I'm looking for Nicholas... Klaus," she said hopefully. "He had a heart attack. I'm his daughter."

"Yes, he's here," the receptionist said to her relief and gave her directions to his room.



The hospital was enormous. Tina ran down the shiny new floors in the quiet, empty hallways until she came to the elevator. She caught her breath as she pressed the button and impatiently waited for it to descend.

She thought about calling Nick but knew he wouldn't hear his phone. She'd wait to see how serious it was first. This was not good. Her mother would be devastated if anything ever happened to her father. But she couldn't think about that now. Her father would be fine. He was tough and too ornery to stay down for long.

The elevator crawled up to the seventh floor, and she burst out into the hallway that opened to a waiting area. She spotted her mother pacing.

"How is he?" Tina blurted.

"Tina." Her mother hugged her. "I'm so glad you're here. I think he's okay. They think it was just indigestion."

"Indigestion?" Tina's heart was still pounding. She sank down into one of the vinyl seats. "Oh, my gosh. What a scare."

"Did you call Nick?" Clara asked.

Tina shook her head. "They're playing tonight. He wouldn't have heard his phone."

Clara sat down beside her. "I hope some good will come of this. Maybe it will scare your father enough so he'll watch his diet like I keep telling him."

"I hope so," Tina said with growing annoyance. "I don't know how you put up with him, Mom. He's so stubborn and grouchy and selfish."

Clara stared at her for a moment. "Your father has sacrificed his whole life for the Claus family," she said sternly. "He may seem stubborn because he knows what has to be done, and he only knows one way to do it. He may seem grouchy because he's given up so much with little recognition. He may seem selfish because he cares so much about this business that means so much to so many."

Tina sat silently looking at her hands in her lap. She knew her mother must be pretty upset to be lecturing her.

"He's sacrificed his own dreams and time with his children to do what fell into his lap and became his responsibility whether he wanted it or not," Clara continued. "But he accepted it and has done the best he can."

"I'm sorry," Tina said meekly.

“You know, your grandfather died young. He wasn’t healthy to begin with, but I think the stress of this business was the final straw. I’ve always worried that the same thing would happen to your father,” her mother confessed. “Your father was the oldest son and his brother, Kris, never had the same devotion. He never had the Gift.”

“Gift?” Tina repeated.

“Yes. How do you think he does it in one night? It’s the Gift. We’re not even sure if Nick has it. He doesn’t have that pure desire like your father.”

“What does the Gift do?” Tina asked.

“I don’t know exactly how it works,” Clara admitted. “I’m not sure if it makes him super fast or slows down time or if he goes into a time warp. I can’t explain it. I used to think it had to do with the sleigh and reindeer, but it could be a combination of things.”

“It’s magic,” Tina said thinking of the moment the sleigh lifted off the ground.

“Yes, it is.” Clara smiled at her. “Now I’ll go see when they’re going to release your grumpy, old father.”

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## 7 *\*Secret Gift\**

Clara was on the phone when Tina and Nick arrived at the condo. She waved them in and they saw Santa sitting in a recliner chair with a bowl of soup sitting on a tray in front of him.

“He’s okay, Walter,” Clara said into the phone. “He just needs to see the doctor for some tests.”

“I don’t need any tests,” Santa grumbled. He slurped his soup. “Don’t I even get any crackers?”

“Hi, Dad,” Tina said cheerfully. “You look like you’re feeling better.”

“Hey, Dad,” Nick added.

“I’m fine,” he told them stubbornly. “Your mother is overreacting.”

“I’ll see if there are crackers in the kitchen,” Tina said helpfully. She found whole-wheat crackers in one of the cabinets and brought them out to the living room. “Here you go.” She handed the box to Santa.

“I’m sick of soup,” he complained. “It’s hot out. I don’t want soup.”

“I like soup,” Nick said. “I like the vegetable soup and grilled cheese sandwiches at that sandwich place down the street.”

“Okay, Walter. I have to go. The kids are here. We’ll be home soon. I don’t know what we’d do without you.” Clara hung up and sat next to Nick on the couch. “No grilled cheese. No fried foods. No cholesterol. Low salt.”

“Look.” Santa held up the box. “I’m eating whole-wheat crackers.”

“That’s good.” She smiled. “I know you’re sick of soup, but you don’t drink enough water. It’s important to stay hydrated. I’ll make a nice big salad tonight for dinner.”

Santa groaned. “I want a hamburger or spaghetti or a pastrami sandwich or pizza. I want real food.”

Clara sighed. “Well, I can make a stir-fry.”

“That sounds a little better,” he said reluctantly.

“I’ll make brown rice and chop up some veggies and stir fry in a little tofu. That will be more filling and still healthy.”

“That sounds good, Mom,” Tina said.

“Tofu? Can’t you put in a little chicken?” Santa protested.

“I like tofu,” Nick said. “You should marinate it first.”

“You like tofu?” Tina asked with surprise.

“What do you marinate it in?” Clara wondered.

“Let’s see what you have in the kitchen.” Nick got up from the couch. “You might like tempeh, too. It’s fermented tofu and is good for digestion.”

“Really?” Clara said.

“How do you know that?” Tina asked him.

“George is a vegetarian and he’s into cooking. He makes dinner for the band sometimes when we’re rehearsing.”

“Who’s George?” Santa asked confused.

“George is in Nick’s band,” Tina answered and let her thoughts drift to him.

“I don’t care what George eats. I want to eat what I want to eat,” Santa said adamantly.

“I don’t think he eats any dairy,” Nick said thoughtfully. “He buys this sick coconut ice cream.”

“Ice cream?” Santa perked up.

“Yeah, it’s made from coconuts and it’s creamy and tastes like real ice cream.”

“That might be too much fat,” Clara said as they went into the kitchen.

“I want ice cream,” Santa called after them.

Tina looked at the TV. There was a golf game on with the sound turned down.

“I’m glad you’re feeling better, Dad.”

“Your mother overreacted.” He crumbled a few crackers into his soup. “Now she won’t let me do anything or eat anything.”

“She’s just worried about you.” She sat awkwardly not knowing what else to say. “I was talking to Mom about how hard you work. I guess I never thought much about it, but what you do is a great thing. It makes a lot of people happy.”

He stared at the TV.

“A lot of people depend on me.”

“I know,” she acknowledged. “I wish I could do more to help you.”

“You do your share,” he said still looking at the TV.

“I don’t know how you manage to do it every year.”

“It gets done.”

“Is there a way to figure out if Nick has the Gif...”

His head whipped around. “Don’t mention that,” he ordered. “Did your mother tell you? She shouldn’t have brought it up. Don’t say a word to Nick. Do you hear me?”

Tina was taken aback and nodded quickly.

Santa leaned forward in his chair and spoke in a low voice. “He has to have it. He’s my son. There’s no one else.” He leaned back and returned his gaze to the TV.

Tina sat stunned by his reaction to the mere mention of it. Why wouldn’t he want to know with certainty if Nick had the Gift instead of potentially wasting his time harassing him about the business? Possibly, it was too scary for him to consider the fact that Nick might *not* have it. Was there a way to tell? Her mother had said that Santa’s younger brother didn’t possess the Gift. Was it automatically bestowed upon the firstborn son? She’d never noticed anything different about Nick, but perhaps the real test was on that one special night in the sleigh. Or was it something Nick had to develop or awaken within himself somehow? At any rate, it didn’t matter because Nick wanted no part of it. She considered how disappointing that must be for their father and she felt sympathy for him.

Clara and Nick came back into the living room and sat down on the couch.

“After a few hours all that flavor will soak into the tofu and it will taste awesome,” Nick was saying.

“I’ll have to talk to your friend George. It sounds like he’s a good cook. Maybe he can tell me how to make some healthy desserts.” She looked over at Santa. “Doesn’t that sound good?”

“That sounds like a contradiction,” Santa replied.

This struck Tina as funny and she laughed out loud. Everyone looked at her. Thankfully, her phone rang.

“Hello?”

“Tina, where are you?” Lisa asked urgently.

“I’m at my parents’ condo. Why? What’s going on?”

“I need to talk to you. It’s important. Can you meet me by the fountain?”

“Probably in an hour or so. I can call you when I leave here.”

“Okay. Don’t tell Nick I called if he’s there.”

Tina looked at Nick. What did this have to do with him? Why was everything about him? He looked at her and she shrugged.

“Just a friend,” she said.

“Oh, let me show you some pictures I took.” Clara got up from the couch. “We played miniature golf a few weeks ago with Myra and Marty. I’m not good at golf like your father, but I like miniature golf. I also have a few pictures from the beach. Let me find them.”

She dug around in her large multi-colored beach bag by the front door.

“Here’s my tablet. This thing is great. Did I show it to you yet? I put all my pictures on it and downloaded a few books for the plane trip home. It’s such a long flight.”

Clara squeezed on the couch between Tina and Nick and turned on the tablet. Nick texted on his phone while Tina stared at the TV thinking about George. She’d learned something new about him. He liked to cook.

“Oh, here we go,” Clara said holding the tablet for her to see. “Here’s your father taking a nap on the beach. I had to wake him up before he sunburned. Oh, look. This is when I got a hole in one at miniature golf. See Myra in the hat? She said she hardly recognized me because I lost so much weight.”

“You do look good, Mom,” Tina affirmed.

“Thank you, honey. Now let’s see what else I have on here. Oh, here’s Marty and your father. See how they’re using their golf clubs like they’re fighting with swords?” She held it towards Nick. “See, Nick? Isn’t that funny?”

Nick glanced at it. “Hilarious, Mom.”

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“What happened?” Tina asked Lisa when she found her by the fountain. She sat on the stone wall beside her that had been warmed by the sun. “Are you okay?”

“I need your help,” Lisa said solemnly.

A young man sat in the grass playing guitar. For a moment, Tina thought it was George and her heart jumped. But it wasn’t. A few bikes zipped by.

Tina turned her attention back to Lisa. “What’s wrong?”

“You have to find out if Nick likes me.”

“That’s it? I thought this was something important,” Tina said with frustration. “Why is everything always about Nick?”

“Please.” Lisa grabbed her arm. “I know this sounds silly, but I really like him. I have to know if I’m wasting my time.”

“Nick’s first love is music,” Tina told her. “He doesn’t care about family obligations. He doesn’t care about the business. He only cares about his band.”

“He’s an artist,” Lisa said dreamily. “I’m a sucker for artists. Please just ask him what he thinks of me. I watch him up on the stage, and it’s like I’m hypnotized. Sometimes I think he’s looking right at me, but I can’t tell.”

“Does he talk to you on the breaks?” Tina asked.

“Only if I talk to him first. I try to make conversation, but it’s hard to get his attention. He talks to a lot of people during the breaks. But sometimes George talks to me.”

“George?” Tina repeated. She hoped George wasn’t flirting with Lisa. “Does he have a girlfriend?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. Anyway, please try to find out what Nick thinks of me,” she pleaded.

“If I can,” Tina said with reluctance.

“How’s your father?”

“He’s okay. He’s still upset that Nick isn’t interested in the business, but there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“I don’t know why you don’t just take it over. It’s what you want to do,” she reasoned. “That would solve everything.”

“I can’t. It has to be... I mean, I can’t,” Tina stammered. “I mean, my father wants it to be Nick. And, besides, I don’t want to run a toy company.”

“Too bad,” Lisa said. “Why don’t they just sell the business? It’s probably worth a lot of money.”

“My father wants to keep it in the family, and he wants Nick to run it. He’s pretty stubborn about it.”

“I don’t think he’s going to get what he wants,” Lisa said.

“I know,” Tina agreed.

Nick seemed to be the only one unfazed by the whole situation. Tina was sure he couldn’t handle it anyway. He had no clue how to run the



business. He'd never paid any attention to Santa's futile attempts at mentoring. Tina had tagged along fascinated by the functions of each department and how they integrated. That was when her interest in business had sparked. It seemed exhilarating to manage a large company and she was sure one day she would.

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Clara wasn't the only one worried about Santa, Walter thought. This had been a close call. What would they do if Santa keeled over as his father had done? It was scary when he got angry and banged his fist on the desk. His face would get redder and redder and he'd look like he was about to pop. It couldn't be good for his blood pressure.

Walter hadn't been back from vacation for long and already he felt the pressure. There were numerous decisions to be made that he dared not make. Or at least not let Santa know about. Santa could be such a control freak.

He stared at the blue water sweeping up onto white sand with a cluster of palm trees framing one side of the picture he'd put on his desktop. It calmed him. Someday, he vowed. He knew how much the Claus family relied on him. He could only hope for a miracle and that Nick would step up to the responsibility he was born to bear, however unlikely.

Ken interrupted his thoughts with a tap on his office door. Walter waved him in and he sat on one of the larger chairs in the office, which made him loom over Walter sitting at his lowered desk.

"I've been working on the Naughty or Nice spreadsheet. Now that it auto updates, I wanted to get it to cross reference with the letters we receive." He pushed his glasses up on his nose. "That way we know what the Nice kids have requested and can send that information directly to the Orders Department."

Walter was almost speechless. This was the sort of efficiency they desperately needed.

"Can we do that?" he asked incredulously.

"I think we have it working, sir."

"Ken, that's incredible. Did you do all this yourself?"

“Actually, no,” Ken admitted. “The IT team collaborated with writing the code, and, so far, it seems to be working.”

“We have an IT team?” Walter asked with astonishment.

“Well, that’s what we call ourselves,” Ken said humbly. “It’s not official.”

“Oh, I see.”

Walter was impressed but Santa wouldn’t be happy if he approved forming an IT team in his absence. Yet there was no way he’d discourage this sort of essential initiative. What an enormous amount of time it would save. Time that could be spent reading letters or making toys or stacking boxes in the warehouse or baking gingerbread houses.

“Good job. Keep working on programs that will make things run more efficiently with our unofficial IT team. I’ll run it by Santa when he gets back and see if we can make it official.”

Santa would never go for it.

Ken beamed. “Thank you, sir. I was hoping you’d say that.”

“Of course. And please call me Walter.”

Walter turned back to his computer but Ken lingered.

“Is there anything else?” He glanced back at Ken.

“I was wondering... Would it be possible... Do you think... I can meet him?”

Ken gazed at him with such hope in his eyes that Walter couldn’t bear to disappoint him.

“Santa tries to meet all the new elves every season, and I’m sorry that didn’t happen when you were hired, but I’ll see what I can do,” he promised.

“Oh, thank you, sir. Thank you.” Ken bowed his head.

“I have to say I’m very impressed with the work you and your team have done.” Walter glanced at the time on his computer. “I’ve got a meeting right now. Let’s meet again in a few days.”

After he’d bundled up, Walter trudged out to the cluster of barns. The reindeer never ventured into the big buildings. They always made him come to them. No matter what time of year, the ground was covered with crusty snow and ice that crunched under his boots. He stepped into the big main barn and stamped the snow off before heading into the next room where music was blaring and they sat playing cards.

“Hey, Walter,” Blitzen greeted him. “Take your shoes off in here.”

Walter looked down at the muddy floor.

“Just kidding,” Blitzen said and the reindeer guffawed.

Walter didn’t like dealing with them, especially Blitzen. They were perverse, belligerent, and obstinate. They used their size to intimidate.

“How’s the game going?” he asked trying to make conversation.

“Rudy’s cheating,” they said in unison.

“Am not!” Rudy objected.

They laughed raucously pounding their hooves on the packed dirt floor. It felt like an earthquake.

Blitzen looked over at Walter. “All right then. Let’s go to my office.”

Walter followed him into a spacious stall that was freezing and smelled of wet hay. Shivering, he settled himself on a one of the bales.

“He seems to be doing better since his health incident,” Walter told him. “It wasn’t too serious. This time.”

“I’m surprised he hasn’t tipped over by now like his father,” Blitzen said. “Guess the old guy is tough.”

“Yeah, but you’re right. His health isn’t the best, so I’m hoping that we can try to keep his stress level to a minimum,” Walter proposed.

“What do you mean?” Blitzen raised his eyebrows.

Walter sighed. “Come on, Blitzen. You know what I mean.”

“Are you asking for my help, Walter?”

Walter sighed and his breath came out in a little cloud. He should have known Blitzen wouldn’t be cooperative.

“Yes, I need your help. There’s no reason for things to be difficult. Can’t we just agree to work together as a team? You know his health is fragile. It won’t do us any good if something happens to him, so let’s not argue over trivial...”

“Trivial?” Blitzen repeated loudly. “Our grievances are not trivial.”

“Sorry,” Walter said quickly. “I know they’re not trivial. I didn’t mean to imply...”

“But that’s what you said, Walter.”

“Look, I just don’t want to waste time and energy nitpicking...”

“Nitpicking? You’re supposed to be the foreman of the union that represents us. How can you do that if you think we’re nitpicking?” Blitzen

asked loudly. “How do you expect me to listen to you when you can’t take our concerns seriously?”

“Sorry,” Walter repeated.

“You know how important we are. This doesn’t happen without us. The whole thing depends on our swiftness on delivery night.” Blitzen stepped closer and Walter could feel the warmth of his breath. “It’s not me, Walter. I have to do right by the other reindeer. They have to feel appreciated. It takes a lot out of us to fly all over the world. We’re the cream of the crop here.”

“Yes, and you know I’ve always been fair. You know you can trust me,” Walter said. “I just need you to keep the other reindeer happy right now. We have to work together to keep Santa as stress free as possible. Can I count on you, Blitzen?”

Walter waited for his response. He’d always bent over backward to satisfy the reindeer within reason. They constantly picked apart the union contract and manufactured grievances to satisfy their egos. It was one of the most irritating aspects of his job.

“Okay, Walter,” Blitzen relented. “Because I trust you, and I care about the old guy and this whole operation, I’ll keep them in line.”

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## 8 *\*By George\**

It was a chilly evening, and Tina was glad she'd put on a sweater before going out. She walked up the worn wooden steps and across the front porch of the large house. Nick and his bandmates had rented it together to have a place to rehearse. She pressed the doorbell and waited.

This was the first time she was visiting Nick here. She'd promised her mother she'd talk to him. This would be her feeble attempt, and she hoped to be able to persuade him to give it a go.

He pulled the door open. "Hey, Tina. Come on in."

To her surprise, a delicious aroma wafted through the room.

"Something smells good," she said as she stepped inside.

"George has a veggie loaf in the oven."

"It smells really good," she commented realizing how hungry she was all of a sudden.

Someone was strumming a guitar somewhere in the house.

"I just wanted to talk to you about a few things."

"Right."

He led her into the cluttered living room. He moved a guitar so she could sit on the couch and yawned.

"I was taking a nap. We were up pretty late last night. People kept requesting songs, and we just kept playing until the bar closed."

He sat in an easy chair opposite her. His tousled hair stuck out on one side.

"You guys have gotten really popular," Tina said with awe.

"Yeah, it's exhausting." He yawned again. "I'll feel better when I eat." He ran his fingers through his hair.

Tina's thoughts weighed on her. She felt uncomfortable bringing it up and couldn't think of any way to do so without sounding like their parents. She wasn't even sure she agreed with them, though she couldn't think of a solution and she was worried about her father.

"Nick, do you think there's any way that you could... maybe, fill in for Dad just this season? I'll be there to help you. We could do it together and still have our own lives. It wouldn't be so bad. I'm just so worried about him. He needs to take it easy," she rambled quickly letting the words tumble

out. “We have Walter, and if we all work together, we can pull it off. What do you think? Let’s try it.”

Nick was lounging in the cushioned chair. “Oh, wow. That’s a big responsibility. You’re more into this than I am. He just had indigestion. Just chill. He’s fine. You’re letting yourself overreact like Mom.”

She leaned back into the couch. “He might be fine for now, but, eventually, someone has to take over. I just don’t know what to do.”

“You don’t have to do anything. They’ll figure it out. I’m not giving up the band for their dream,” he said.

There was no point in pushing this further. In a way, he was right. They should be able to pursue their own dreams and live their own lives. But he didn’t seem to feel any responsibility toward the family or an inkling of guilt in breaking generations of tradition. It certainly wasn’t on her shoulders, yet she incessantly worried about it. She wished she could come up with the perfect resolution.

She looked at him. “Don’t you worry about them? They want to retire.”

He waved his hand at her. “Are you kidding? They love it. Dad thrives on it.”

Maybe he was right. She sighed and leaned forward remembering her second obligation.

“What do you think of Lisa?”

“Your friend? She’s a good fan.”

Something began beeping loudly.

Tina looked around. “What is that? Is it the smoke alarm?”

“It’s the timer on the oven,” Nick said.

“I got it,” George called from upstairs.

“So, do you talk to Lisa when I’m not there?” Tina asked. “You know, do you like talking with her?”

“Sometimes.”

Ugh! Why couldn’t he give her something she could repeat to Lisa?

“Do you ever, you know, date any of the... any of your fans?” Tina hoped he’d get the hint but wasn’t so sure. “You know, like Lisa?”

Nick looked at her blankly.

“Dinner’s ready.” George descended the stairs. “I hope you can stay, Tina.”

“Oh. Thanks. I’d love to,” she responded feeling herself blush.

It was just the three of them seated around the kitchen table for dinner. Nick talked about his songs and creative process while Tina and George listened politely. She wanted to talk with George, but Nick kept going on, and she wasn’t sure what to say anyway. They stole furtive glances at each other and she found herself smiling.

“This is delicious,” she managed to say.

“Thanks,” George responded.

Again, they fell into an awkward silence buffered by Nick’s rambling. She was relieved when their drummer, Milo, came in and Nick went to talk to him. The sounds of a guitar drifted in, and she knew they’d be alone for a while.

Tina looked up and their eyes met. She asked him about cooking, the only thing that came quickly to mind. From there, the words flowed. It was a little uncomfortable at first, yet they ended up having a great conversation that took off on many tangents. The more she learned about him, the more enamored she became. He was comfortable with himself, curious and open-minded. He smiled often as he spoke in his New England accent and was genuinely interested in her thoughts. He had a calming voice that drew her.

She helped him clear the table and they cleaned up together while they continued their conversation. George’s long hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and he rolled up his sleeves to wash the dishes. She watched him as he spoke above the sound of the running water. His dark eyes flickered with light and his dark brows rose and fell. She could’ve listened to him all night, but then her eyes fell on the clock on the stove. It was getting late and she had to go.

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“Oh, my gosh. George made the best veggie casserole,” Tina gushed to Lisa. “No, it was a loaf. A veggie loaf. I don’t know what was in it, but it was so tasty.”

She followed Lisa to a square table at the coffee shop after getting their drinks. The smell of coffee was soothing though Tina preferred flavored teas. She blew gently on the steaming liquid in the mug. She must



find out which George preferred. There was so much she didn't know about him.

"What did he say?" Lisa asked as soon as they sat down.

"These maple muffins are scrumptious. Have you tried them?" Tina asked holding up her muffin. "Want to try it?"

"No thanks. Why are you so obsessed with food all of a sudden?" Lisa asked with irritation. "What did he say?"

"Who?" Tina blew on her tea again. "Oh! Nick. We talked about the family business. He just doesn't get it. Or maybe I don't get it. I liked hanging out at the house. Someone's always playing a guitar. It's really laid back."

"Are you going to tell me or what?" Lisa demanded. "Oh, no! He doesn't like me and you don't want to tell me. What is it? My hair?"

"I didn't say that," Tina assured her. "Don't be silly. You have great hair."

"Then why doesn't he like me?" Lisa slumped crestfallen.

Tina sipped her tea. "Nick is super focused on his music. He likes you. They all like you. You're one of their biggest fans."

"He only sees me as a fan," Lisa said morosely.

"Well, I hinted that you like him," she said with encouragement. "Although, he can be pretty oblivious sometimes."

"Is he gay?" Lisa asked. "He and George live together and they don't have girlfriends. They could be gay."

"I don't think so. Nick would tell me. He doesn't care what anyone thinks. Besides, the whole band lives there," she reasoned. "No, I think he's just into the success of the band right now."

"He's so talented." Lisa sighed. "I wish I could understand all the lyrics. I like the ones I can make out."

"I don't think you should pin your hopes on Nick," Tina advised. "All he cares about is his music."

"Why do I torment myself with these creative guys?" Lisa lamented.

Tina took a big bite of the muffin. She let her thoughts meander back to George.

"You seem distracted," Lisa observed. "You like George, don't you?"

"I had a great conversation with him," Tina enthused as she chewed. "He's such an fascinating guy. He said he's taking some classes just because

he wants to, not for a degree or anything.”

“Really? He’ll earn credits anyway. What’s he taking?”

“He likes philosophy and history mostly.”

“Interesting.”

“I wonder if he likes me?” Tina mused.

“Now we’re in the same boat.” Lisa sipped her latte. Reaching across the table, she broke off a piece of Tina’s muffin and popped it into her mouth. “You’re right. This is good.”

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“Now isn’t this nice?” Clara asked as the family sat around the dining room table at the condo. She had prepared a casserole containing brown rice, vegetables, and black beans. There was also a colorful salad in a large bamboo bowl and warm whole-wheat rolls in a wicker basket lined with a checkered cloth napkin. “I made fruit salad for dessert. There’s lots of fresh fruit available here. It’s so hard to get fruit at home.”

“Looks good, Mom,” Tina said. “I had a veggie loaf that George made at Nick’s house the other night. I think you’d really like it.”

“Oh?” She looked at Nick. “Ask him to email me the recipe.”

“Right.” Nick helped himself to the casserole.

“How are you feeling, Dad?” Tina asked him.

“I’m fine,” he said impatiently. “I just had a little indigestion.”

“That’s right. It’s probably all the extra fiber in our diets now,” Clara said. “But we don’t want it to be serious next time. I know you and Marty sneak down to that fast-food place on the corner.”

“Who told you that?”

“Myra found a wrapper in the trash,” Clara told him. “You know that stuff is full of salt and fat.”

“That’s Marty’s problem,” Santa retorted. “That has nothing to do with me.”

Clara gave him a look. “I saw you, dear.”

“What are you, spying on me?”

“I was on my way home from my yoga class,” Clara said.

“Do you need a ride to the airport?” Tina changed the subject.

Clara turned to her. “No, Myra and Marty are going to take us. I know you have to study for your finals before summer break.”

“Okay. Just let me know if you need a ride or Nick could take you,” Tina offered. “Too bad you have to go back. It seems like you just got here.”

“We’ve already been here too long. We should have gone back weeks ago, but your father needed to de-stress.” Clara smiled. “But it’s so nice to see you kids. I hope you can both help out a little this season. Just whatever works with your schedules.”

Tina glanced at Nick, who didn’t seem to be paying attention and continued to clean his plate.

“Have you talked to Walter? How are things going so far?” she asked her mother.

“I talked to him this morning. Everything is on track for now. I know I say this all the time, but I don’t know what we’d do without him,” she replied.

“Nick,” Santa broached. “I’m hoping you’ll work with us this season, so I can show you a few more things.”

“I know how things run, Dad,” he answered.

“Well, it’d make me very happy if you’d spend some time with us this season,” Santa persisted. “I’ve been thinking about this quite a bit. I hope that you’re proud of our family name. This family has an honorable and humble tradition and I’d like to continue it into the future. I hope you’ll give it a good deal of thought.”

“It’s not really my thing, Dad,” Nick said.

Clara and Tina tensed up as Santa’s face began to redden. Clara patted his arm while Tina nudged Nick. He shrugged and reached for another roll.

“Dad?” he said.

“Yes?” Santa looked up hopefully.

“Can you pass the butter?”

“Butter?” Santa sputtered.

“Here you go.” Clara handed the container across the table.

“I wish Lisa were here,” Tina said. “She’s a counselor.”

“We don’t need counseling,” Santa asserted loudly.

Nick turned to Tina. “Seriously?”

Tina nodded. “She’s the school counselor. That’s how I met her. Didn’t I tell you?”

“She told us that when we went to see the band,” Clara commented.

“Why did you go to see the school counselor?” Nick asked.

“You know,” she said to Nick. “You’re the one who suggested it in the first place.”

“When did I do that?” Nick looked perplexed.

“When we were on the phone one time. I’m glad I did. I like her. You should like her too.”

“Who said I don’t like her?”

Clara put her hand on Santa’s arm. “We’re going to have to think of another plan. Nick isn’t interested.”

“He’ll get this music thing out of his system,” Santa said to her. “He just needs a little more time.”

“Music thing?” Nick repeated. “It’s not a phase. It’s my dream. It’s my passion. Don’t you get that?”

Clara nodded. “Yes, we do. We both gave up our dreams. But we’re not going to ask you to do that, Nick.”

“What dreams?” Tina wondered.

“Why are you in therapy?” Clara asked. “I don’t understand you kids. You had a wonderful childhood.”

“I’m not in therapy,” Tina protested. “I went to the school counselor once. I’m fine.”

“Everybody’s fine.” Clara threw up her hands.

“What dreams, Mom?”

Tina had never heard them speak of any dreams that had gone unfulfilled. Had they sacrificed their youthful plans to family tradition? It tinged her own dreams with a feeling of guilt.

“Well.” Clara looked at Santa. “Your father was on the Olympic bobsled team, but he had to drop out before he could compete in the Olympics.”

“Bummer,” Nick said. “You must’ve been in hella good shape.”

“That’s impressive, Dad. I’m sorry you didn’t get to compete.” Tina thought how sad it was to get so close and have to quit.

“That’s in the past.” Santa waved it off.

“What about you, Mom?” Tina asked.

“Your mother was a very good figure skater,” Santa said.

Clara smiled. “That’s how we met. In the Olympic Village. But I was past my prime as a skater so I was there as a coach.”

“You won some national titles,” Santa reminded her.

She nodded. “Yes. I was pretty good.”

“Then Grandpa died,” Tina figured.

“And I got pregnant,” Clara added.

“That’s all in the past,” Santa said again. “It doesn’t matter now. We did what we had to do. We made the right choices. Sometimes you have to make sacrifices.”

Everyone turned to Nick, who looked up.

“What? Don’t look at me. Tina’s the business major.”

Why were their family dinners always so tense? Nick left for rehearsal as soon as they finished, but Tina lingered to help Clara clean up while Santa retired to his recliner and switched on the TV.

Tina had never known the story of how her parents had met. As she filled the dishwasher and Clara wrapped the leftovers, she told Tina that she and Myra had had the same skating coach from the time they were little girls. Myra and Marty had introduced her to Santa after they’d won a Bronze Medal for pairs figure skating and they were celebrating in the Olympic Village. Tina had always believed that nobody outside the North Pole knew who they were. But Myra and Marty did.

Clara got an old album out of the closet and showed Tina many photos she’d never seen before. There were pictures of Santa posing with the bobsled team and Clara in her sequined skating outfit holding a trophy. And there they were at their wedding. It turned out that Myra and Marty had been maid of honor and best man. Her parents looked joyfully happy. Tina stared at the photo. She never saw her father smile like that now. Was he forever sad at their lost dreams?

Her stern grandparents glowered in a black and white photo, and she saw that Santa resembled his father. Maybe it was the beard. Then she viewed a picture that profoundly touched her. Santa was reading to her and Nick. His beard was short and neat, and he looked young and trim. He had an arm around each of them as they snuggled next to him. Tina’s little hands held the cover open. Had they really been a happy family at one time? Memories of her father spending time with them were elusive.

She recalled trimming gingerbread houses with her mother and scurrying through the toyshop with Nick while Clara attempted to corral them. She remembered Clara tucking her into bed at night but being terrified because one of the elves had told her that Abominable liked to eat children for dinner. She'd across the hall into Nick's room at night and, despite being younger, the story hadn't scared him. But now she knew Abominable and, though his size was intimidating, she didn't fear him. She knew he mostly ate icicles.

Her memories were filled with Clara and Nick and the elves. Santa had probably been tucked away in his office fretting over production and deadlines and work. He'd spent hours with Nick giving him the little attention that remained, but he'd been absent for her.

Tina stared mournfully at the photo of them reading. She felt sad at the loss of their happy little family and her parents' dreams. She could finally appreciate all they'd sacrificed to preserve the Claus tradition and could imagine her mother's great efforts at trying to keep everyone happy and connected as a family. She asked Clara if she could have the photo, and she slipped it out of the album and handed it to Tina.

Nick's indifference to their family legacy was troubling. She was glad that he was following his passion, but she wished there was some way he'd be willing to accept his birthright. Was he being selfish or was he right to chase his dreams? Did her parents hold regrets for the loss of the goals they'd pursued so diligently? Would Nick look back one day with remorse at his missed opportunity to continue the legend of the Claus family? She looked at the photo in her hand and wondered all these things.

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Lisa walked up and sat next to Tina by the fountain. It was a bright sunny afternoon and Tina was deep in thought.

"What's wrong? Let's go get lunch," Lisa said.

"Okay. Look what my mother gave me." Tina handed the picture to her while they walked across the street to the coffee shop.

"Is that you and Nick?" Lisa asked as they seated themselves at one of the outside tables.

Tina nodded and smiled wistfully.

“Your childhood wasn’t as bad as you remember,” Lisa observed.

“He was still a workaholic and I hardly remember spending time with him, but I had a good conversation with my mother and I understand...”

“What can I get you?” the waitress asked.

They ordered sandwiches and then Tina struggled to get back to her train of thought.

“Anyway, I’m wondering where it all went wrong.”

“Family dynamics can be very complicated,” Lisa said sounding like a therapist. “You have four different people with four different personalities and four different sets of expectations and assumptions. Things are bound to clash.”

“But how do you...”

“I hate your brother,” Lisa suddenly announced.

Tina gasped. “Why? What happened?”

“You know, musicians are so full of themselves,” she said with vehemence. “I don’t know why I didn’t see it before. All that ego strutting around on stage craving constant attention.”

“I thought you liked the band,” Tina said with confusion.

“They’re okay if you like loud music,” she answered petulantly.

“Now you sound like my father,” Tina said. “What did Nick do? Did something happen?”

Lisa put up her hand. “I can’t talk about it. He’s your brother. You’re just going to defend him.”

“No, I won’t. I know Nick can be clueless. Tell me what he did,” Tina urged.

“He’s just a big, fat jerk. Okay?”

“Okay.” Tina sighed. “What did the big jerk do?”

“Do you know how many nights I’ve gone over there and cheered and clapped for the band? Do you know how much money I’ve spent on drinks? Do you know how many guys I danced with hoping to make him jealous?” she ranted.

“And he hasn’t noticed,” Tina assumed.

“I finally got him to have dinner with me one night. Of course, it was my idea, and I had to pay for my own meal.” She shook her head.

“And what happened?”

“He talked about himself and his songs all night. I don’t think he asked me one question about myself,” Lisa continued. “But still, I was infatuated. He has a certain intensity and the way he smiles is irresistible.” She smiled weakly.

“So, he’s a typical guy,” Tina stated.

“That’s true,” Lisa agreed. “But then his phone rings and then he leaves because he has to go meet someone named Robin.” She paused with renewed anger. “And then he called me Linda.”

“Robin?” Tina shook her head. “Nick can be selfish. And oblivious.”

Who was Robin and why hadn’t she heard about her before? She and Nick had no secrets. He would’ve told her if he was seeing someone.

“You’re telling me,” Lisa said. “I know he’s your brother but…”

“Say no more.” Tina held up her hand. “Nick doesn’t think about other people. He’s always been that way.”

“I want you to know,” Lisa said solemnly. “That I’m still your friend, and this won’t affect our friendship.”

“Thanks.” Tina smiled. She was glad to have a good friend. “You didn’t see him paying attention to a girl hanging around the band when you went to see them?”

“Nope.”

“He hasn’t said anything to me. I’ll ask him about her. I did warn you about Nick, though.”

“Yeah. I know. I probably should’ve listened to you.”

“I hate to bring this up, but my last exam was this morning, and I wanted to go out to see the band. I really want to see George.” Tina bit her lip.

Lisa groaned. “Now you want to go out. Where were you all those nights I wanted you to go out with me?”

Tina shrugged. “Studying.”

“Why do you have to be so responsible?” Lisa complained.

“Are they playing tonight?”

“No. I think they’re playing tomorrow night though. Are your parents coming again? Your father didn’t seem to like it.”

“No, he didn’t. It’s not his type of music,” Tina said. “They’re leaving in the morning, anyway.”

“Are you taking them to the airport?” Lisa asked.



“No. I don’t have to. Their friends are taking them.”

Tina smiled. Tomorrow night she’d see George. She was finding it increasingly difficult to think of anything else.

## 9 *\*Mystical Dreams Interrupted\**

Tina and Lisa didn't want to be the first ones there, but it was essential to be early to get a table close to the stage. It was a delicate balance of time management. They debated over what time was best to show up. Tina finally deferred to Lisa since she had the most recent experience in club attendance. They managed to coordinate their arrival perfectly.

They snagged a table to the left of the stage because George stood on that side. He was talking to the dreadlocked drummer and waved when he noticed them. Lisa scowled when she saw Nick. George said something to him, and he looked up. He jumped nimbly off the stage and approached the table.

"You haven't been here for a while," Nick said to Tina.

"I had to finish finals," she explained. "What a relief that's over with. Now I have the whole summer off."

"All right! Time to party!" He raised his fist.

Tina laughed as Lisa continued to glare at him.

He indicated the table at the other side of the stage.

"That's the girlfriend table. You can sit with them if you want. We usually save them a table."

Tina and Lisa looked over to see two attractive young women speaking to the waitress. They exchanged looks. Whose girlfriends? Was one of them Robin? Was one of them George's girlfriend? He walked to that side of the stage and squatted to talk to the girlfriends. Had he just been friendly to Tina because she was Nick's sister?

Nick pulled out a chair and sat down. He was grinning and leaned toward them.

"I'm glad you're here because I have some great news. I want you to meet someone. We just made it official."

Tina looked at Lisa who had a panicked expression on her face. Was he serious about someone? Was it Robin? Why had he never mentioned her? Tina felt confused as she watched George smiling at the young women and attempted to determine which one was his girlfriend. She felt deflated and wanted to leave but she had to stay now that Nick had seen her. She would sit through two sets and then say she was tired. She wished she'd

paid more attention to the band and noticed George sooner when he might've still been available.

"You want me to meet Robin?" Tina asked.

Nick looked surprised. "How do you know about Robin?"

"Lisa told me you left the other night to meet Robin," she explained looking at Lisa who wouldn't look at Nick and probably wanted to leave too.

"Right," Nick said enthusiastically. "So, like you know the band has been bringing people in when we play here, and we got some good publicity on the student radio station, and that helped bring in more people."

"That's great." Tina nodded.

"Anyway, you know how the Beatles paid their dues in all these dive little clubs and then, boom, one day Brian Epstein walks into the club and changes their lives."

"The Beatles?" Tina repeated wondering what that had to do with anything.

"Right," he affirmed with excitement. "It's synchronicity. They had four band members, and we have four band members. They had a guitarist named John and a lead guitarist named George and so do we."

Tina looked longingly at George, who was fiddling with some equipment on the stage.

"They wrote their own music and we write our own music," Nick continued. "Some of them were vegetarian and George is vegetarian. See? It's synchronicity."

Tina nodded again not quite sure where Nick was going with this. Then she noticed a clean-cut older man approaching them. He looked out of place but strode confidently with a wide smile.

"Nick." He patted Nick's shoulder.

Nick stood up. "Hey," he said. "I want you to meet my sister, Tina, and this is her friend, Lin... Lisa." Nick was beaming. "This is our new manager, Robin."

They stared at Robin in a stunned stupor. Tina recovered and shook his extended hand. Robin, their new manager.

"Nice to meet you."

"How exciting," Lisa commented numbly and shook his hand as well.

“He’s our Brian Epstein,” Nick told them with elation. “He discovered us. He wants us to go on tour.”

“Go on tour?” Tina asked.

“It’s good exposure to get them out there so people will know who they are in other places. Not just here,” Robin explained. “They can open for more well known bands initially.”

“We’re going on the road!” Nick exclaimed.

“Wow,” Tina said flabbergasted. “When will all this happen?”

“Not for a while,” Robin answered. “We’ve only just started reaching out to bands that need openers. We’ve got to work out a healthy concert schedule, but I’d like to get them out there as soon as possible.”

“Congratulations, Nick,” Lisa said wistfully.

“Thanks.” Nick stood smiling beside Robin.

“*Black Ice* has a lot of raw talent and great energy,” Robin said. “There’s a lot of potential for success here.”

Tina was truly overwhelmed with joy for her brother. She stood and hugged him.

“Congratulations, Nick. I can’t believe it. It’s fantastic. You’re doing it. Living your dream.”

“Thanks, Tina,” he said as he hugged her back. “I’ll talk to you during the break.”

“Okay.”

“I have an idea for a sick T-shirt design,” he said to Robin as they walked away.

“Incredible,” Tina said with astonishment.

“Unbelievable,” Lisa added. “No offense, but there are a lot of bands out there that are just as good.”

“I’m sure,” Tina said. “Nick’s luck amazes me.”

“Oh, no,” Lisa groaned. “They’re coming over.”

The two young women from the girlfriend table were walking toward them. They were young and stylish and pretty.

“Hey,” one of them said. “Can we sit with you? We know the band too.”

They seated themselves without waiting for a response setting their drinks on the table.

“Uh, okay,” Lisa said.

One of them had long, blonde, silky hair and the other had long straight dark hair.

“I’m Tiffany. I’m Milo’s girlfriend,” said the blonde. Milo was the drummer with dreadlocks.

“I’m Courtney, John’s girlfriend,” said the brunette. “You’re Nick’s sister, aren’t you?”

“That’s right,” Tina acknowledged. “I’m Tina and this is Lisa.”

She and Lisa exchanged looks of relief that they weren’t the girlfriends of George and Nick.

“It’s so awesome to meet you,” Courtney said. “Isn’t it sick that they have a manager now?”

“It’s totally sick. They’re going to be, like, so famous,” Tiffany added.

“It’s great,” Tina agreed.

She was about to ask them when all this had happened when Nick did his signature scream into the microphone to open their set. It made her jump. Again, she’d forgotten her earplugs.

Thoughts swam rapidly in her head. Nick was continually progressing on the path to his musical dreams. It staggered her mind that he seemed to be achieving his goals. How ironic it would be if he became famous like their father. He would revel in the attention. He seemed to love the spotlight while she shied from it. Nick was so opposite from her.

She’d have to deal with two different types of celebrity. The celebrity of the legend that was her father and her family name and the rock star celebrity of her brother. Was the need to make a mark in their blood? She searched inside herself for that yearning, but she only found a need to remain anonymous. Was it a lack of confidence?

She stared at George. He appeared unassuming which contradicted his presence on a stage. She was glad that he didn’t seem to be involved with anyone. Would she ever get to see him if they went out on tour? She felt so socially inept. She just wasn’t sure how to let him know that she was interested in him. Actually, he fascinated her. There was something about him that drew her.

The music was too loud. She knew her ears would be ringing in the morning. Nick liked loud, pounding, heavy rock. It was probably cathartic. She was relieved when they broke after the second set. The club was buzzing with conversations at this point in the evening and it was difficult

to hear. Tiffany and Courtney chatted amiably with them but she couldn't decipher half of what they said. Lisa sat sulking and was no help.

To her surprise, George jumped off the stage and made his way right over to her. He leaned down to talk in her ear so she could hear him.

"Are you staying?" he asked her.

She nodded. "Maybe for another set."

"I'm opening the next set with a song I wrote," he said in her ear. "I hope you stay to hear it."

"Okay," she answered and smiled at him.

Robin was talking to the other band members by the stage and he jogged over to join them.

"What did he say?" Lisa asked her.

Courtney and Tiffany looked at her with interest.

"He wrote the first song in the next set," she answered.

"He likes you," Lisa whispered to her.

Tina hoped she was right.

"You and Nick have hella cool hair," Tiffany commented. "Do you color it?"

"No, it's natural," Tina told her.

"It's, like, ageless," she said. "For someone young to have white hair. I like it."

George got up on stage after the break and set a bar stool before the microphone. He picked up an acoustic guitar and sat resting the instrument on his knee. A single spotlight lit him. His long, dark hair almost obscured his face as he leaned toward the microphone.

"This song is a little different than what we usually play," he said. "It's one of my own, and I'm playing it for the first time tonight. I hope you like it. It's called 'Mystical Dreams.'"

Tina leaned forward in her chair. She wanted very much to hear the lyrics. The title sounded as intriguing as he was. He seemed introspective and sensitive. He began to sing in a soft voice. It was more of a ballad than a rock song. She was surprised that it was included in their repertoire of music, especially with this raucous crowd.

"... See your radiant face... Skips a beat... You... Unrequited heat... paths... Unexpected way... Was lost... You may..." he sang in an impassioned way.

She was frustrated that she could only hear some of the words accompanied by the haunting melody. She wished she could hear all of it, but she was able to understand the chorus.

*“Come to me and share  
Many secret midnight schemes  
Come to me and share  
Many magical, mystical dreams.”*

She waited holding her breath for the next lines. But again, she could only hear some of the words.

“... Rain and snow... Sunny days... Let us share... Navigate... Please tell me this is true... Are the same... So we can begin... Play some silly game.” He sang with his eyes closed as if he were alone and it was mesmerizing. It was a heartfelt, touching song. He sang the chorus twice again and then stopped. The song was over.

Lisa turned toward her. “I think that was for you.”

Tina shook her head at her. “I doubt it.” But she wondered with hope.

There was scattered applause. She and Lisa clapped loudly. This wasn't the venue for this type of song. Everyone was expecting their signature loud rock. People wanted to party and be rowdy. The rest of the band returned to the stage and the applause became more fervent. They were ready to rock again.

Nick stepped in front of the mic and she braced herself for his loud scream.

“That was a beautiful song by George,” he said. “Now we'll get back to rocking. We're going to do a request, ‘Sucked into the Machine.’” His voice grew louder. “We've got to fight the man. Fight the expectation to become drones of the materialistic machine.”

People cheered and a steady drumbeat became more insistent. With a scream, he launched into the song.

Wow, Tina thought. He's good. She was beginning to see the allure, how he incited the crowd, how he drew them in and took them along on a ride. She could see why Lisa was enamored. If only she could understand the lyrics, she was sure the impact would be more profound.

She watched George playing his guitar with his head bowed moving to the beat as if in his own world. He didn't seem to be an attention hog like her brother. He was a true artist needing to express himself and was there for the love of the music. How different they were.

"I'm going to the restroom," Lisa told her after the set had finished. "Want to go?"

"Yes, let me talk to George first. Save me a place in line."

She wanted to tell him how much she loved his song. Her eyes searched the throng of people swarming by the stage. She saw Nick talking to John and Robin. Milo was chatting with Tiffany and Courtney. Maybe George had gone to the restroom. She approached the stage still scanning the crowd. No luck.

She turned dejectedly to go to the restroom and noticed him hovering by their table. Was he looking for her? She pushed her way back.

"Hi, George," she called to him.

He smiled when he saw her, and they both sat.

"This place is a madhouse tonight," he commented.

"You guys have some loyal fans," she noted. "I wanted to tell you how much I liked your song."

"Yeah?" His face brightened. "I know this isn't the right crowd, but I wanted to play it for you."

"Me?" she asked with disbelief. "I had a little trouble hearing all the words."

George reached into his back pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

"Here it is if you want to read it." He handed it to her. "Hope you can read my writing."

She took the paper and slowly unfolded it. Words were scrawled on lined notebook paper. Some were crossed out and there were changes and corrections but she was able to make out the lyrics.

### "Mystical Dreams

*When I see your radiant face*

*My heart skips a beat*

*Do I detect in you a trace*



*Of unrequited heat*

*Our paths have chanced to cross  
In an unexpected way  
Little did I know that I was lost  
And that rescue me you may*

*(Chorus)*

*Come to me and share  
Many secret midnight schemes  
Come to me and share  
Many magical, mystical dreams*

*Let us share the rain and snow  
Let us share the sunny days  
Let us share the things we know  
And navigate the maze*

*Please tell me this is true  
And our wishes are the same  
So we can begin what is new  
And we don't have to play some silly game*

*Chorus”*

“It’s beautiful,” she said in a daze.

She folded the paper and handed it back to him. Had Lisa been right? Her head was swimming.

“I wrote it that night you came over for dinner,” he shared. “I had this melody in my head and I was up until two in the morning writing the words to go with it. I’m glad you like it.”

“I think it’s great,” she said effusively.

She didn’t know what else to say. Had he written it for her? Was this how he felt about her? She didn’t want to assume and look like a fool.

“It always helps to have inspiration,” he said. “It helps to have a muse.”

“A muse?” Was he saying she was his muse?

Tiffany and Courtney returned to the table.

George squeezed her hand and rose to his feet.

“Got to go back to work.”

“Ladies room,” she said to Courtney and Tiffany when they sat down.

She rushed into the restroom as Lisa was washing her hands.

“There you are,” Lisa said,

“I think you were right,” Tina said breathlessly. “I just talked to George and he wrote it after I had dinner over there that night.”

“I knew it,” Lisa said drying her hands.

“He let me read the words. I can’t believe it,” she said excitedly. “Oh, I have to go. I’ll see you back at the table.”

She hurried into a stall. Muffled music drifted in while she washed her hands. The restroom was empty. She quickly dried her hands and absentmindedly pulled her phone out of her pocket. She had three missed calls. She impatiently listened to her messages. She was anxious to get back out and watch George on stage.

“Tina.” She heard her mother’s voice fraught with worry. “Your father’s in the hospital again. Call me as soon as you get this.”

Oh, no! Which hospital? Was he at North Pole General Hospital? Had something happened during their flight? Did they have to land in another city?

She listened to the second message hoping for better news. Her mother’s voice still sounded anxious.

“Tina? Call me right away.”

She hoped the third message would tell her that it had been a false alarm again.

“Tina, where are you? Nick isn’t answering his phone either.” Her mother’s voice sounded tired. “Please come over to the hospital when you get this message.”

They were still here? Apparently, Nick hadn’t checked his phone either. She flew out of the restroom and back to the table.

“I have to go,” she hastily yelled to Lisa. “My father’s in the hospital again.”

“I thought they left today,” Lisa shouted back.

“They were supposed to. Something must’ve happened. I had three messages on my phone from my mother. She tried calling Nick too.”

She looked at Nick on the stage. He was singing into the microphone alongside George. She gazed wistfully at George. They looked like they were having so much fun up there doing what they loved.

“I’ll go with you,” Lisa offered.

“No. I need you to tell Nick to come to the hospital when the set’s over.”

She was glad she hadn’t had much to drink. She looked at the stage again.

“Just go.” Lisa shouted her into action.

Tina ran out to her car fumbling for her keys. She was glad she’d driven tonight. How would Lisa get home? Someone would have to give her a ride. She’d call her later from the hospital once she knew what was going on to make sure she could get home.

Her mind was evading the dreaded thought that a serious health incident had happened to her father. Or worse. His father had died young. What if he didn’t make it? The thought was too horrifying. Her poor mother. The business would fall apart. What would they do? Would she have to quit college and go home to help her mother? She had to stop these thoughts. They were making her hyperventilate. She tried to take long even breaths. She had to stay calm for her mother. Maybe it was something minor again. Yes, it had to be.

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## 10 *\*Family Emergency\**

Tina dashed into the hospital. This time, she knew where to go. She breathlessly asked the nurse at the nurse's station which room her father was in. Her heart was pounding and her legs felt shaky, but fear propelled her. Her mother stepped out of a room down the hall.

"Mom!" she called frantically.

Clara's expression was grave but she gave a weak smile at the sight of her daughter.

"Is he okay?" Tina asked urgently. "Can I see him?"

"The nurse is in there." Clara hugged her tightly. "Why didn't you call me? Where have you been all night?"

"I went to see Nick's band," Tina told her. "I didn't hear my phone. I thought you'd be home by now."

"Me, too. We were about to get on the plane when your father told me he felt funny," she relayed. "At first, I thought it was indigestion again. He and Marty kept going to that fast-food place on the corner." She shook her head.

"Is he okay?" Tina asked again.

Clara looked at her. "He had a heart attack."

Tina gasped and put her hand to her mouth.

"He's okay. It could've been worse." Clara began to walk slowly down the hallway and Tina walked with her. "They admitted him this time. He never went for those tests. I kept telling him to go, but you know your father. He just wouldn't listen."

They came to a waiting area and sat down on the brown vinyl seats. Scattered buildings were illuminated amidst the inky black sky outside the large plate glass windows. It was a lovely view.

Tina realized that her mother had tears in her eyes. She didn't know what to say to comfort her. She took her mother's hand.

"Do they know how bad it is yet?"

Clara shook her head. "They don't think there's any permanent damage, but they have to figure out how bad the blockage is and they may have to do an angioplasty."

"What's that?"

“They insert a balloon thing in the artery and inflate it to open up the blockage.”

Tina made a face. That sounded awful.

“Right now, they have him on oxygen and hooked up to monitors.”

They sat quietly for a while. Tina felt tired all of a sudden. Her adrenaline had dissipated and left her feeling drained and weary. She stared out at the night sky and her thoughts wandered back to George. What would happen now? This family emergency had disrupted a potentially romantic evening. Pangs of guilt tore at her musings. Her father’s health was much more important than her silly fantasies.

The ding of the elevator drew their attention. Nick, Lisa, and George spilled out.

“There they are,” Lisa proclaimed and they rushed over.

Nick hugged Clara. Lisa hugged Tina. Nick hugged Tina. Lisa hugged Clara. Tina looked at George with surprise at his appearance as he stood awkwardly.

“Nick and I carpooled tonight and Lisa didn’t have her car,” he said taking her hand. “Are you okay?”

Tina nodded. “Thanks for coming.”

They all sat down as Clara filled them in. George continued holding her hand. It was very distracting. They sat silently for a while. Lisa stared out the window and yawned.

“I’ll go see what’s going on.” Clara got up.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Tina leaned forward to get up.

Clara shook her head. “I’ll be right back.”

Tina was aware of the warmth of George’s hand. Her mind raced with a million thoughts. She was worried about her father. She was worried about her mother. She wondered about the future of the business. Would he be able to continue running it? No one could expect Nick to give up his career just as it was beginning to take off. But her father desperately needed to retire. The stress was becoming too much for him and he needed to focus on his health.

She glanced at Lisa and Nick sitting opposite each other. Would they ever have a relationship? That’d be weird. And what about her and George? Was he holding her hand out of sympathy and support or did he really like

her as she hoped? She thought about the words of the song he'd sung tonight. Or was it tomorrow now? What time was it?

Clara slowly headed back. She was apparently exhausted.

"You kids go home. I'm going to sleep in his room tonight."

Tina let go of George's hand and jumped up. "How is he, Mom? Is he okay?"

"He's stable right now," Clara answered. "They have to see how bad the blockage is and decide what to do."

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Tina couldn't sleep. She tossed and turned while her mind churned with worry and speculation. She could hear her roommate snoring softly in the dorm room. She hoped her father would recover quickly, her parents could fly home as planned, and everything would return to normal. Maybe now he'd finally listen to her mother. Clara had managed to lose weight and become healthier. She could help Santa do the same.

She rose early, showered, and dressed quietly so as not to wake her roommate. She sat outside on a bench in the cool morning air and early sunlight watching the birds in the trees. She couldn't stop yawning or worrying. Nick would be picking her up soon and they'd head over to the hospital after breakfast.

She didn't have much of an appetite and munched on a piece of toast while Nick chowed down a large breakfast.

"How can you eat?" she asked him.

"I'm hungry."

"We should order something to go for Mom." She looked at the menu board. "I don't think they have anything here that she'd like."

"We can get her something at the coffee place. A muffin." He yawned. "I need a latte."

Tina and Nick stopped to get lattes and bought chai tea and a bran muffin for their mother. Tina usually drank tea, but she felt she needed the extra jolt of caffeine. Her stomach was churning with anxiety the closer they got to the hospital. It loomed ominously along the skyline.

Clara looked tired and disheveled. She gladly accepted the tea and muffin. The three of them stood in the hospital room looking at Santa while

he slept. There was an oxygen tube in his nose and an IV in his arm. A monitor stood beside the bed making small beeping sounds. His beard and mustache had begun to grow back. It scared Tina to see him looking so weak and vulnerable.

“He has a few really bad blockages,” Clara spoke quietly. “We were hoping they’d only have to do an angioplasty or a stent.”

“What are they going to do?” Nick asked sipping his latte.

He had sunglasses on and his white hair stuck up at all angles. He looked like a rock star, Tina thought.

“They want to do bypass surgery,” Clara informed them.

A smiling nurse walked briskly into the room. “Are these your kids? I can see the resemblance,” she said cheerfully with a slight Southern accent.

“Yes. This is my daughter, Tina, and this is my son, Nick,” Clara answered.

“Don’t you worry. We’re taking good care of your father,” she said as she efficiently changed the IV bag.

“Come with me,” Clara said to them.

Tina and Nick followed her out of the room and to the waiting area. She walked over to the window away from some other people sitting on the vinyl seats.

The day looked deceptively cheery. The sun shone brightly in the pastel blue of the sky and reflected radiantly off the glass of the other buildings. Tina thought how carefree this day should be. Her parents were supposed to be back home getting ready for the next season. Her brother was supposed to be planning a rock tour and she was supposed to be taking a break from classes.

“Mom, is Dad going to be okay?” Tina asked looking for reassurance. “It sounds pretty serious if they have to do surgery.”

“It is serious but he’ll be okay,” Clara said. “He’ll be weak for a while. He’ll need time to recuperate.”

Nick sipped his latte. “Dad’s tough. He’ll be fine.”

Clara looked somber. She pressed her lips together. Tina had never seen her with this look on her face. Clara took a deep breath.

“Santina. Nicholas Junior,” she said solemnly. “I’ve been thinking about this all night, and there’s just no way around it. I can’t leave your



father, so I need one of you to go home and oversee things until he recovers.”

Tina and Nick glanced at each other.

“What about Walter? He’s there,” Tina said.

“It’s not his responsibility and it’s too much to ask,” Clara said. “Someone from the family has to be there.”

Tina didn’t feel competent to take over for her father. She wasn’t even exactly sure what he did in his office. She’d only filled in, done grunt work, though she had a pretty good idea of how each department functioned.

Besides, she and Lisa had been talking about taking a vacation, perhaps driving up the coast, and she was looking forward to it. She deserved it. She’d studied hard and done well in her classes.

But it was also unfair to ask Nick to drop his plans at this point, just when things were taking off for the band. The momentum shouldn’t be stopped. It may never pick up again. It was a sacrifice for either of them to put their lives on hold.

Still, she was the one who went home every year and helped out. It was definitely Nick’s turn. There was no doubt. It was only fair. She had to stand firm. Nick could talk to Robin and delay their tour. Surely, he’d understand.

“Santina. Nicholas Junior,” Clara repeated sternly. “I need one of you to do this. The doctors say he should be recovered within a few months at the most. One of you will have to go home right away. It will only be for a few months.”

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## 11 *\*Snow Time\**

Tina had a window seat on the plane. She looked out at the puffy white clouds below them. Darn Nick. She'd probably be there all summer. She'd made it clear that she had to be back in time for fall quarter. Lisa had even volunteered to go with her but she'd had to decline that tempting offer. Lisa thought it sounded fun running a toy company, but she still had no idea who Tina's family really was. At least she wouldn't have to hang around the hospital with her mother. Hospitals made her nervous. That would be Nick's job, as long as he was in town.

Her father had always appeared so strong to her. It had been a shock to see him in a hospital bed connected to various tubes. As long as the procedure went well, she had full confidence that he'd recover quickly and things would return to normal. He was too feisty to be bedridden for long.

She felt nervous about this responsibility that had been thrust upon her. She knew Walter would help but she had no idea how Santa ran the business. Nick should be doing this. He was the one who was supposed to take over. He should be learning the business for that eventuality. Deep down, everyone still believed that this music thing would fizzle out and he'd come around to step into Santa's boots one day. Probably later rather than sooner. But what if his band achieved huge success and he never assumed his legacy? What then?

Santa's office had always been intimidating. Clara had kept the kids away and they weren't allowed in there. She'd never set foot inside the door. The most she'd done was timidly poke her head in if she'd needed to relay a message from her mother or Walter. So, it was very strange indeed to open the door and walk in for the first time. It felt like she was doing something wrong.

She switched on the desk lamp and tentatively pulled out the big chair and sat down at the wide mahogany desk. The cushions were molded to Santa's body. It was odd to think that this was where her father spent a good deal of his time.

She slowly swiveled looking around the office. From this vantage point, she noticed something surprising. There was a framed photo on the desk of two small children. She and Nick were smiling broadly and there

was a gap where her front teeth were missing. She noticed two more framed photos angled towards the desk on a bookshelf. One was of Clara with them and the other was a photo taken when they were teenagers. Her father had never seemed sentimental about their family.

She smiled as she recalled chasing Nick through the workshop. The elves had always been so kind putting up with the ruckus they'd caused. She remembered spending time in Walter's office sitting on the floor coloring and the elves patiently letting her and Nick "help" them on the line or in the mailroom. They must've been such a disruption, but no one had ever seemed to mind.

She took a deep breath and turned on her father's computer. Her mother had given her the password. And there on his desktop was another photo of her and Nick. They were making a sand castle on the beach with her mother. It must've been when they'd first bought the condo. Her father had always been so aloof with them, but these pictures told another story. It was touching but she couldn't linger long on reminiscences.

She opened up his email. There were over 300. She quickly scanned the subject lines to determine if they were all business related. She sighed. She had no idea. She noticed the red message light blinking on the green landline phone on the desk. Oh, no. Voicemails as well.

"How are you doing in here?" Walter suddenly appeared in the doorway. She jumped when he broke her concentration. "Oh, sorry," he said quickly.

"That's okay, Walter. You weren't in your office when I came in." She smiled at him. "I'm really glad to see you. There's a ton of emails and I have no idea how to deal with them. It looks like there are some messages on the phone too. I don't know what to do."

He came over and looked over her shoulder at the computer. "I can probably answer most of these," he said. "I can also check the phone messages."

"But I'm here to help *you*," she protested.

"Don't worry," he assured her. "I'll get you up to speed. There are a lot of decisions I don't have the authority to make, but you can make them on your father's behalf. We'll do this together."

"Thank you," she said with great relief.

And so it began. Every morning they met and tackled the day. Tina took extensive notes and searched the documents on her father's computer finding a wealth of information and resources that she studied determined to comprehend them. She and Walter reviewed and answered the emails together familiarizing her with how to respond to them. It was overwhelming, but she vowed to have things caught up for her father's return. It would be beneficial for her to be a reliable back-up in any case.

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"How's Dad?" she asked her mother on the phone.

"The surgery went very well," Clara told her. "The blockages were pretty bad. He's lucky that the heart attack wasn't worse."

"How's his recovery?" She was anxious to hear good news.

"He's doing okay. I'm sure the nurses can't wait until he's discharged. You know how grumpy he is when he's sick."

"Are you still staying at the hospital with him?"

"No. I'm back at the condo but I visit every day. Myra and Marty go to the hospital with me sometimes. Nick's been there almost every day too."

"Good." Tina was happy to hear that Nick was keeping his end of the bargain, though his was much easier.

Clara gave a little laugh. "One of the nurses told your father he looks like Santa Claus."

Tina laughed. That happened all the time. "His beard and mustache usually give him away."

"Yes. He hasn't been able to shave and they're really growing in," Clara said.

"How are you, Mom?"

"Me? Oh, I'm fine." She sighed. "I'm just worried about your father. I'm going to have to get much tougher on him about his diet. I think Marty feels bad that they've been sneaking fast food. Myra let him have it about it. I don't think that will happen anymore."

"Maybe this scared Dad enough to do something about it."

"Well, if this doesn't do it, I don't know what will."

Tina glanced at the computer. There were fifty-nine emails she still had to address. She lifted the mug of tea Walter had brought her. She could feel

a draft from the window behind her. Dressing in layers was crucial at the North Pole. She was also wearing her big thick socks.

“How are things going there?” Clara asked with concern.

“I guess I never knew how complicated everything is,” Tina admitted. “I can see why Dad spent so much time in his office. It’s hard to keep up, but Walter’s helping me. We’re still catching up on emails and phone messages. And I’m learning all about the business.”

“Good. Your father will be happy to hear that,” Clara said. “You’ll be a big help to Nick someday.”

“Yes. I’ll be able to fill in whenever I’m needed.”

“I’ll let Nick know when I talk to him again,” Clara said. “I don’t see any reason why he can’t take over the business and do his music thing around it. It will all work out.”

“Sure, Mom.”

Darn Nick! Tina couldn’t help thinking. He hadn’t lifted a finger yet and he’d probably end up getting all the credit. What would it take to get a little praise around here? It was always about Nick.

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Tina held a short meeting in the cafeteria in the basement to address the staff and inform them of her father’s condition. She looked around the overflowing room as the tall and small elves murmured and waited for her to speak. She saw many familiar faces, elves she’d known since childhood, and many new faces, some of them second or third generation elves. Walter stood off to the side. She cleared her throat.

“Most of you know me,” she began. “I’m Santina, Santa’s daughter.”

The room erupted into encouraging applause. She smiled at the welcome reception and waited before continuing.

“My father had a heart attack on vacation and has had bypass surgery. The surgery went well and he’s recovering.”

There was more murmuring.

“I’ll be here on his behalf until he’s fully recovered. I hope that you’ll be patient with me while I’m learning the business.”

There was scattered applause and the sound of many anxious voices.

“I’d also like to say.” Tina waited for their attention. “I just want you to know how much the family appreciates all your hard work and dedication. I know from experience that there is no easy job here, and it takes every one of you to pull this off every year. The Claus family appreciates it and the children appreciate it. You should all be very proud of the work you do.”

She smiled and paused as more applause welled up. She recognized how important it was to acknowledge hard work and she wasn’t sure if her father ever said these things to them. They deserved to hear it. She loved the elves. They felt like one big family to her. Maybe more so than her own sometimes. Today the company was hers, and she would do whatever was required to stay on schedule and keep morale high.

“Please feel free,” Tina said above the din. “To let me know about any concerns or suggestions you have. Or let Walter know. I’m excited to begin this new season with you.”

The meeting had gone well. She’d reassured them that her father was okay and she’d praised their commitment to their objectives. In return, they’d accepted her and welcomed her as the interim Santa.

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“Hi, Nick,” Tina said when he answered his phone. “How is everything there?”

Her cell couldn’t get a strong signal so she was using the green landline on her father’s desk. Just the kind of old technology her father preferred.

“Oh wow, Tina,” Nick said at the sound of her voice.

“How’s Dad?” she asked hopefully.

“He’s totally grouchy, more than usual. He had a reaction to one of his medications and he was hallucinating and everything.” He laughed. “He thought there were giant candy canes in his room. He was freaking out. It was hilarious.”

“Really? How crazy,” she responded. Nick had a definite lack of empathy. “Is he recovering okay?”

“Yeah. They’re moving him to rehab soon.”

“That’s a good sign.” It was progress.

“How are things up there at the Pole?”

She could hear him eating something as he crunched in her ear.

“Not bad. It’s very interesting,” she confessed. “Walter’s getting me up to speed.”

“Business is your thing,” he reminded her.

“This business is different, and there’s so much to learn, but I think I’m good at it,” she acknowledged.

“Mom’s still trying to get me up there. I say no way.”

She couldn’t imagine Nick hunkering down and studying operations. He was easily distracted and had no interest in it. He was better at creative endeavors. But where did that leave them? Walter seemed the obvious choice. He knew the business backwards and forwards. But he wasn’t a Claus.

Tina sighed. “How’s the band?”

“We’re going out on tour at the end of next month,” Nick said with excitement.

“Really?”

It surprised her that these plans were coming to fruition so quickly. What would this mean for the band? And what about George? She hesitated wanting to ask about him but not quite sure how to casually bring him up. That was the worst thing about her being away.

“Yeah. Robin set it up. We’re opening for a sick female band. They’re pretty hot now.”

“Female band? Have you heard them play? Are they any good?”

“Yeah. We went to their rehearsal yesterday. They can really rock,” he related with admiration.

Tina was still amazed that Nick had somehow stumbled upon this seemingly easy path to success. Now they’d be touring with a hot female band and get lots of exposure. She felt a little jealous that George would be hanging out with these cool rock goddesses. How could she compete with that? But there was nothing she could do. She was stuck here in the frozen north fulfilling Nick’s obligations.

“Tell everyone I said hi,” she told Nick forlornly before they hung up.

Lisa would know what was going on. She quickly called her.

“Lisa, it’s me,” she said into the phone receiver.



“Tina!” Lisa cried. “It’s so good to hear your voice. I don’t have your phone number up there. I tried to call your cell, but it wouldn’t go through.”

“We’re pretty far north,” Tina stated.

The sound of Lisa’s voice made her appreciate how much she missed her friend.

“Is it fun running the company?” Lisa asked her. “It’s totally boring here.”

“It’s a lot of work and there’s so much to learn. I can hardly keep up.”

“When will you be back?” Lisa asked impatiently.

“It depends on how fast my father heals from his bypass surgery,” Tina responded. “My mother wants to make sure he’s fully recovered before he goes back to work.”

“Yes. Of course. How’s he doing?”

“He’s okay. They’re moving him to rehab soon.”

“That’s a good sign.”

“Yes. I just talked to Nick. Have you been going to see the band?” Tina tried not to sound too anxious.

“Not much. He hardly talks to me, so there’s no point. I hate your brother,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Lisa, you haven’t even told him how you feel about him,” she said.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m so over him.”

Tina shook her head. There was no way she could keep up.

“Have you seen George by any chance?”

“Not really.”

“When I talked to Nick on the phone, he told me they’re going out on tour. They’re going to open for some hot female band,” she relayed hoping Lisa had more information.

“Yeah, I heard.” Lisa sounded annoyed.

“You know, it kind of bothers me that while I’m up here freezing, George will be sweating it onstage with some hot rock goddesses,” Tina confessed. “Do you know which band it is?”

“They’re called *Rock Goddess*. Ironic, huh?” Lisa gave a little snort. “They’re very popular right now. I can’t believe it.”

Tina shook her head. So much for George. It was over before it had even had a chance to begin. He’d be out on the road meeting all kinds of

intriguing women. She could imagine female fans draped all over him while she shivered at her desk.

In the meantime, Nick had inadvertently managed to hit the motherlode while shirking his responsibilities. How did he do it?

## 12 *\*Changes\**

Tina focused on the family business at the North Pole. She met with the elves in each department and listened to their suggestions and concerns. She delved into how and where each section functioned within the scope of the company. She identified areas of weakness and encouraged input to improve efficiency. She knew that those doing the actual work were in a better position to see how best to improve. She listened.

She met with Ken and the IT team and listened eagerly to their ideas. Ken pushed his glasses up on his nose and sneezed. His red hat went askew. She handed him a tissue box.

“I’m not used to the cold,” he said. “I’m from California.”

“I’m surprised you came all the way up here to work,” Tina said.

“How could I pass up this opportunity? Every kid in the world wants to work here,” he said sincerely and blew his nose. “It’s been my dream since I was little.”

Tina pondered his words. Her appreciation of their work was increasing with every day. What they did was special. It brightened children’s lives all over the world. She’d grown up with it but others vied for the opportunity. How many jobs gave so much to the world? How many jobs would bring so much satisfaction?

The IT team shared their spreadsheets with her. They demonstrated how quickly they auto updated and how the info could be shared on a central site allowing access to everyone who needed it. Tina was impressed beyond words.

“Great work,” she commended them. “This will save a lot of time. Now we just have to figure out how to implement a few more changes that will streamline the process. And some of that old machinery and equipment has to go. Either that or we have to update them.”

A young woman tentatively raised her hand. “I’m a mechanical engineer.”

Tina stared at her with astonishment.

She shrugged. “It’s hard to find a job right out of college. Besides, I knew I’d enjoy working here.”

“Do you think it’s possible to design changes to what we have to make it more efficient?” Tina asked excitedly. “Also, one of my goals is to increase productivity by automating some of the repetitive steps the elves are doing now.”

The young woman nodded with thoughtfully. “Absolutely. The machinery we’re using now is outdated. I think I can design a few modifications to improve efficiency.” She paused. “I may have some other ideas once I study production.”

Tina was ecstatic. “That’s fantastic! What’s your name?” She peered at her employee ID badge. “Jamie? You’re our new engineer!”

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Tina resolved not to let the reindeer intimidate her. Everyone was a little fearful of them because of their sizes and attitudes. Blitzen, especially, took delight in being belligerent and frightening people. Even Santa didn’t like dealing with them. He always made Walter do it. But Tina didn’t want to hide behind Walter. It was her job and she was going to do it.

She knew that Blitzen was their self-appointed leader. His arrogance was part of the problem. She wanted to address all of them and treat them as the team that they were. She knew they liked to use the union to haggle over inconsequential details. She hoped to appeal to their sympathy and shared goals.

Tina bundled up in her coat and scarf and hat and gloves to walk the short distance to the barns. Her boots crunched the snow with each step, and her breath misted in the frigid air. A dark, gray sky loomed above her. She missed the sun. But then she noticed the vast landscape layered with a smooth white blanket. She stopped for a moment admiring the breathtaking view.

“Oi, you’re going to freeze out there,” Donner called to her from the doorway in his Cockney accent.

The reindeer had originally come from all over the world, though they usually dwelled in cold regions. The best of the best had been chosen long ago. The magic of the North Pole had increased their size and strength and lifespans. They lived for hundreds of years.

Tina trudged the rest of the way to the large wooden barn. She stepped inside and stamped the snow off her boots. There was a small fire in the wood stove in the corner. The reindeer usually preferred it on the cold side, and the fire did little to warm the enormous barn. Some of them were playing cards while music drifted in from another room.

“I haven’t been out here for a while,” Tina said cheerfully. “Do you mind if we have a quick meeting?”

“We’re in the middle of a game,” Blitzen said testily.

“This is our free time,” Donner stated stubbornly.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Tina said humbly.

Several reindeer emerged from the other room. They were chatting and chuckling.

“Tina,” Vixen said fluttering her eyelashes. “We thought we heard someone come in. How nice to see you, honey. How’s your poor father?”

“He’s recovering. Hopefully, he’ll be back soon.”

“Tina! You have to come to the Snowed Inn & Pub,” Rudolph cried. “I need someone to cheer for me when I do karaoke.”

“I’d love to, Rudy,” Tina said. “Maybe when things are more under control.”

“Where’s Walter?” Blitzen grumbled.

“I wanted to meet with you myself. I’m in charge temporarily and I’m here to ask for your help.”

“What kind of help?” he asked suspiciously.

“I’m counting on everyone to work together,” Tina said. “I’ve been going around to each department to see what we need to do to make things more efficient.”

“The big guy isn’t going to like it if you start changing things,” he warned.

“My job is to make things run smoothly until he returns,” she said. “I’m going to make whatever changes are necessary to do that.”

“We’re behind you, honey,” Vixen said.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” Tina turned to Blitzen. “What can we do to make things better for all of you this season?”

“Well,” Blitzen began.

“Within reason,” Tina said firmly.

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Tina's meeting with the reindeer had gone better than expected. She'd stood up to Blitzen even though her knees had been shaking as she'd done so. The other reindeer had seemed impressed and become quite reasonable. Blitzen had reluctantly acquiesced once he'd realized he no longer had support for his arbitrary demands. She was glad she hadn't met with him alone.

Walter was incredulous at her apparent success. He always dreaded meeting with Blitzen and was relieved Tina had done it. Santa usually made him deal with Blitzen, which he supposed was fair considering he was the foreman of the union, but maybe Tina had finally broken the endless cycle of pettiness.

Tina was feeling more confident and in control. They'd caught up on her father's emails and messages, she'd rolled out the use of the spreadsheets, and Jamie was industriously working on modifications to their archaic machinery. Tina met daily with Walter in his office referring to her notes and going over the suggestions and requests that had inundated her. The elves found her approachable and she welcomed their input but was glad Walter could help her sort through the deluge. He apprised her of her father's position on each of these ideas and she began to see a pattern. Her father was resistant to any and all changes. She knew he preferred the "traditional" way of doing things, but this was ridiculous.

"Why is he so stubborn about changing anything?" she asked Walter.

He shrugged. "You know him better than I do."

Sadly, she wasn't sure that was true. She didn't feel she knew her father very well at all. He'd spent much more time working and hanging out with Walter.

"I don't know," Walter was saying. "The machinery is almost obsolete but we've always done things one way. The same way that his father and his father and on and on have always done it."

Tina nodded contemplating this. Maybe her father was reluctant to retire because he'd lose his sense of purpose and his status in the world. He was the beloved Santa. Who would he be without that role? Perhaps he was afraid of becoming obsolete himself.

“I’ve always wondered what would happen when Nick took over,” Walter shared. “I wondered if it would upset your father when he made changes because he’d have to.”

Tina felt dejected. It hadn’t initially occurred to her that making the process more efficient wouldn’t please him. It suddenly hit her that her mother simply wanted her to keep things going. Her parents fully expected to return shortly and find things as they’d left them. But Tina believed that the progress she’d made was beneficial. They’d handed the reins to her in desperation. They’d asked for her help. She felt obliged to do the best job that she could. It was a family business and she was part of this family. She was in charge now and she was going to run things her way. Surely, her father would appreciate returning to a more efficient and more cooperative environment. If not, then they could do whatever they wanted. Just let them try to get Nick involved. Good luck with that!

She smiled at Walter with assurance. “I was given this responsibility and I’m going to make the decisions that I feel are best. I’m in charge now,” she said resolutely.

Walter looked at her with disbelief. Then he grinned. “I’m with you 100%.”

He felt energized with a renewed sense of excitement for his job. Finally, they were going to make some necessary changes to production. Morale was high as well. Everyone loved Santa, but they recognized him as the stubborn codger that he was. He was a legend and an icon and no one dared question his decisions. Even when they were sure he was wrong.

Who knew little Santina would sweep in like a whirlwind of change? He remembered her running around the workshop with her white ponytail swishing behind her. She’d been such a cute little girl, all smiles and giggles. She used to come in his office and color in her coloring books. He always had candy canes on his desk for the kids. Nick would come in, grab one and take off like a shot, but Tina would stay and quietly color. Sometimes he’d forget she was there until she started humming to herself or asked him to sharpen a crayon for her. And now here she was asserting her authority, making decisions contrary to her father’s. He felt immensely proud of her. But this could very well give Santa another heart attack.

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Tina thought it was best to broach the subject with her mother on the phone and gauge her reaction. Perhaps her parents would be more amenable to the changes she was making than she assumed.

“Hi, Mom. How’s Dad?” Tina’s voice had a businesslike tone. She was squeezing this call in between meetings.

“Tina! How are you?” Clara asked.

“Fine,” Tina answered automatically. “How is he?”

“Actually,” her mother answered slowly. “Not too well. He had an infection that I think is fairly common, but it will prolong his recovery.”

“Uh, huh.” Tina was looking for a file on her computer.

“We just don’t know, at this point, how long it will take.”

“What?” Tina stopped as the words sunk in. “I enrolled in fall quarter. I have to return for my classes. You knew I couldn’t stay past September.”

“I know. I know we’ve asked a lot of you, and I can’t tell you how much it means to us,” her mother said. “We’ll just have to wait and see how it goes.”

“Well, I’m going back to school in the fall. If Dad’s not better, it will be Nick’s turn,” Tina told her decisively. “I’ve already given up my summer.”

“I understand. I’ll talk to Nick next time he calls. They’re out on tour.”

“Mom!” she moaned.

“Don’t worry. We’ll work it out one way or another,” Clara promised. “How’s it going there? Is everyone cooperating with you? I hope the reindeer aren’t giving you a hard time.”

“Everything’s fine.” Tina hesitated. “I wanted to mention that I’ve made a few changes.”

“Changes?” Clara repeated uneasily. “Nothing too drastic, I hope. You know your father. We don’t want to upset him now.”

“Well,” Tina said. “Production was so antiquated. Right away I could see the need to update things. I know Dad is resistant but I think he’ll be happy with the results.”

“Oh no, Tina. What have you done?” her mother asked with dread.

“Nothing that costs a lot. Just some necessary updates.”

“As in?”



“As in I’ve made some improvements to the production line in the toyshop. Our engineer designed a few time-saving modifications for the existing machinery and the IT team created a couple of spreadsheets that will auto update and are shared on a server...”

“What engineer? What IT team?” her mother interrupted. “It’s not in the budget.”

“It’s already done, Mom, and it’s more cost efficient. That machinery was barely operational and the line had too many repetitious movements that were easily automated and the new spreadsheets work amazingly well,” Tina said defensively. “And, anyway, why is Dad so resistant to improvements?”

“He’s not going to like this.” Clara groaned. “I’m just not going to tell him. He’ll get too wound up. Just undo what you can and don’t make any more drastic changes.”

“Mom,” Tina said firmly. “You trusted me to do this job, so I’m going to make the decisions that I think are best as long as I’m here. I can’t believe Dad wouldn’t want things to be more efficient. That doesn’t make sense. Besides, Nick is the one who’s supposed to be here. I gave up my summer and, if I have to be here, I’m going to do what I think is best. I can’t just sit here and watch things fall apart.”

“I know,” her mother answered wearily. “Just try not to make too many changes that your father will have to deal with. He doesn’t do well with change.”

“These are good changes. Necessary changes,” Tina insisted.

“I’m sure they are.” Her mother sighed. “You know I’ve always appreciated how much you’ve been willing to help out. I just hope your father will be able to keep an open mind.”

Tina glanced at the time on the computer. “I have to go, Mom. I’ll talk to you soon. Say hi to Dad.”

“Okay. No more changes.”

Tina felt a little discouraged after the conversation with her mother, even though it was no secret how her father felt. She’d hoped her mother would be happy that she’d embraced her responsibility so wholeheartedly and back her up. How could they not see the business was being dragged down by the weight of the past? But she’d already decided that as long as

they'd entrusted it to her, she was going to do things her way. She had to. She couldn't help herself.

The start of every day brought a feeling of exhilaration. She was in her element and was happy to know that she'd chosen the perfect major. Too bad she couldn't put this on a resume. It was valuable work experience, and she enjoyed being at the helm of a business that was typical of many large corporations. Manufacturing, inventory, and distribution. There was a synergistic flow to it that she found thrilling.

She'd had a meeting with the Finance Department, that turned out to be enlightening, where she'd learned about the royalties and generous benefactors that kept things going. She'd had no idea. As she dug deeper, she discovered more and more about the occupation that had so consumed her father. She began to comprehend the appeal and obsessive attention it required. It could be quite addicting. She couldn't wait to finish school and be able to put all her education and experience to use working for a large international corporation. It was something exciting to look forward to. Her future. It couldn't come soon enough.

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## 13 *\*Rock Goddess\**

“Hello, San Diego!” Nick shouted into the microphone.

His voice was beginning to grow hoarse after all the cities they’d played, but this was his dream and he wasn’t about to complain.

“Get ready to rock!” he yelled and the audience roared.

It was an adrenaline high every night they played on a stage. There was nothing better than connecting with the raw energy of a zealous crowd. The dim lighting, the glaring spotlights, the wave of enthusiasm that rolled up onto the stage, the pounding of Milo’s steady drum beat that vibrated up through his feet, the hum of the amps, the slight echo of his own voice, the sweat that soaked his shirts.

He was wearing more black makeup around his eyes. It was a startling contrast to his white hair and added to the theatricality of the show. George had begun wearing a broad-brimmed hat on stage and his long hair obscured his face. He was happy to remain in the background and give Nick the spotlight. Milo’s dreadlocks had grown longer and John had picked up a snazzy red guitar in San Francisco and gotten a tattoo in New York on his upper arm that said “*Black Ice*.” They were all completely invested in the success of the band and blatantly enjoying this newfound bit of celebrity.

*Rock Goddess* had a huge following of devoted fans and this tour had given *Black Ice* great exposure. They’d even gotten some good reviews in the local newspapers. Nick kept one in his wallet and Milo had posted it on the band’s website.

*“Rock Goddess has finally descended upon our fair city with its beguiling mix of soulful ballads and danceable rock. Leave it to these hip goddesses to bring with them a surprisingly good opening band. Simply said: Black Ice can rock. Their lead singer sports striking white hair and belts out original hard rock that darkly comments on social issues with a cold undercurrent of truth. Their raw energy gets the crowd primed for the slow seduction of Rock Goddess. You will not be disappointed, though they will leave you wanting more.”*

Nick couldn't be happier. Having a manager had made all the difference and Robin had big plans for them. He said it was important that they put out a CD immediately after the tour. They'd already recorded most of it. Robin had wanted it to be available while they were on tour, but there hadn't been enough time. The opportunity to tour with *Rock Goddess* had been too good to pass up. Nick was still working on some songs that he wanted on their first CD. George's song "Mystical Dreams" was included and John and Milo had written one together in which they each did a musical solo. Nick knew this first CD was vital to their future success and they needed a good mix of songs representing their range.

The members of *Rock Goddess* wrote their own songs as well. He was in awe of them. They really knew how to put on a show. Their attire was flowing and theatrical and their songs wove a spell around their fans. Isabella was the lead singer. One minute she was sweetly warbling to a lilting melody and the next she was purring and growling out the words to a thumping beat that was impossible to resist. Being on the road with them was an education.

"How's your sister?" George asked him in the dressing room after the show.

Nick was dripping sweat. He was amazed that his body could produce this much.

"Huh?"

"Didn't you say your sister had to take care of the family business while your father was recovering?" George said as he gently placed his guitar in its case.

"Right. I haven't talked to her for a while. Too much going on."

Nick was still a little out of breath. He drank more water. He couldn't seem to keep hydrated these days.

"She told me that you're the one who's supposed to take over the family business someday."

George removed his hat and combed his damp hair with his fingers.

"When did she say that?" Nick asked with surprise.

"That night she came over for dinner."

"Don't stress. It's never going to happen. She's the business major. It's her thing. She's into it," he assured George.

“So, we don’t have to worry about you leaving the band?” George asked.

“No way,” Nick answered vehemently.

“What kind of business is it, anyway?”

“It’s just a toy company. No big deal,” Nick said flippantly.

“Is she going to stay there or is she coming back to finish school?” George wanted to know.

Nick looked at him. “Hey, do you have a thing for my sister?”

“I like her,” George confessed. “I like talking with her. Does it bother you?”

Nick shrugged.

“Can I get her number?”

Nick frowned. “I don’t think her cell works up there. I can give you the office number.”

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Tina’s stomach growled. She yawned and thought about getting something to eat for dinner. She’d crammed too many meetings into one day but there was so much to learn. All the departments were like giant puzzle pieces and it was her job to figure out how they fit together and worked best. She glanced at her scattered notes. She wondered if she had the energy to dictate them into the computer tonight or if she should wait until tomorrow morning when she was fresh. She’d purchased a dictation app that saved time and was considering getting a mini recorder to carry around with her. It’d be easier than fumbling for her notepad and pen.

The phone jangled and startled her. She considered letting it go to voicemail, but it was better to handle it now than have to deal with one more thing in the morning. She picked it up.

“This is Santina.”

“Tina?” a male voice asked.

“Yes?”

“I didn’t recognize your voice. This is George,” he said. “I wasn’t sure what you said when you answered.”

George!

“It’s me,” she assured him suddenly feeling flustered.

“We’re on the road. I just wanted to call and say hi.”

“I’m glad you called. How’s the tour?” She had been sure he’d forgotten all about her by now.

“It’s going great,” he told her. “We’ve played at venues all over the country and we’re getting some good press. Nick posted some reviews on our website.”

“That’s fantastic,” she enthused. “I’ll have to look at it.”

“Yeah, but it’s exhausting,” he admitted. “I don’t know how much longer Nick’s voice will hold out either.”

“Oh, no. He does tend to push it.”

“He gives it everything, and that’s awesome, but his voice is starting to pay for it,” George said. “We have to go back into the studio and finish the CD when the tour is over. I hope he still has a voice.”

Studio? CD? This was news to her.

“So, you’re almost done with a CD?” Tina asked.

“I think Nick has a few more songs he wants to lay down and that’ll be it,” he told her. “‘Mystical Dreams’ will be on it, and I have a few more songs I’m working on, but I don’t think they’ll make it onto this CD. Maybe the next one.”

“I really love your song,” she told him. “I can’t wait to hear more of your music.”

“Thanks. You were the inspiration for that one. My song writing doesn’t flow as easily as Nick’s. He’s always writing.”

“Nick has a lot of angst in his songs. Yours are more heartfelt,” she stated. “Anyway, that’s how it feels to me.”

“Interesting perspective,” George noted.

There was a short pause in which Tina tried to think of something to say.

“How are things going with your parents’ business?” George asked

“Well, I’m majoring in business, so it’s been a good learning experience, but it’s a lot harder and more complicated than I thought it would be.”

“Where are you exactly?” he asked.

Uh oh.

“Way up north. It’s very cold and there’s snow on the ground,” she answered vaguely. “Where are you?”

“San Diego.” He laughed. “Here we are where it’s warm and sunny and you’re freezing in the snow. Polar opposites, huh?”

Tina laughed uneasily. “Yeah, funny.”

“I should let you get back to work,” George said. “I just wanted to hear your voice again. I never got a chance to tell you how much I enjoyed our conversation that night you came over for dinner.”

“I really enjoyed it, too,” Tina said sincerely. “I’m so glad you called, George. Hopefully, I’ll be back soon. I’m enrolled in fall quarter.”

“Great. It’ll be nice to see you and hang out again,” he said before they hung up. “I’ll see you soon, Tina.”

She sighed. Lisa had been right. George really did like her. Tonight, she could go to sleep with visions of George dancing in her head.

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Tina called Lisa at lunchtime the next day. She had to take into account the time difference. She’d already had her morning meeting with Walter, and he seemed delighted with the direction she was taking the business. She had a feeling of doom at the reaction her father would have, but she tried to quell it and not let it affect her decisions.

“Lisa!” she cried at the sound of her voice. “It’s Tina.”

“Hi, Tina,” Lisa said sleepily.

“Were you still sleeping?”

“I was up late last night watching a movie. I think I’m stuck in this night owl thing.” She yawned loudly.

“I just wanted to call you and tell you that you were right,” Tina told her eagerly.

“I was? About what?”

“George. He called me. I think he really does like me,” Tina said barely able to contain her excitement.

“I knew it,” Lisa said. “What did he say?”

“Nothing much. We just talked,” Tina said thinking back to their conversation. “Oh! He told me I was the inspiration for his song.”

“I told you. What else did he say?”

“He said he wanted to hang out again,” Tina remembered.



“Well, so do I. When are you coming back? It’s so boring here. I can’t stand it. The band is out on tour and I have nobody to hang out with,” Lisa complained.

“I don’t know yet. My father had some complications, but I’ll definitely be back by fall quarter. I’m already enrolled.”

“I hope he’s okay.”

“I think he’s just had some setbacks,” Tina told her. “But I’m more worried about what’s going to happen when he comes back to work. I made some changes that I think are more efficient, but he’s always been very resistant to change. I don’t think he’s going to be happy with me.”

“I’m sure whatever you did will make the company run more smoothly. Who wouldn’t be happy with that?” Lisa asked cheerfully.

“My father. He’s pretty stuck in his ways but I don’t know how he manages. This job is so much more involved than I thought it would be. He doesn’t even have an assistant. I don’t know how he does it,” Tina marveled.

“An assistant?” Lisa repeated.

“Well, Walter helps a lot. He’s the foreman of the union. He’s been with us forever. I couldn’t do this without him.”

“Walter?”

“Yes. He’s great. He supports the changes I’ve been implementing. He’s so easy to work with.”

“Is he single?” Lisa asked with interest.

“He’s not your type, Lisa,” Tina laughed. “He’s just gone through a divorce and he’s older than us. He has grown kids.”

“I don’t have a type, Tina,” Lisa said indignantly. “Don’t be so narrow-minded.”

Tina shook her head with a smile. Even though she was enjoying running the family business, she couldn’t wait to get back to Florida. She missed Lisa and was looking forward to seeing George again. Life would be easier once she got back into the routine of going to classes and focusing on her own goals. And she wouldn’t have anybody’s unreasonable expectations weighing on her shoulders.

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“How’s your voice, Nick?” Milo asked in their dressing room.

“It’s fine,” Nick assured him in a raspy voice. “Isabella gave me some tips. Water with lemon and zinc throat spray and lozenges.”

“It doesn’t sound fine,” Milo stated. “Man, this touring thing is rough.”

Nick nodded. “She gave me the name of a vocal coach. Told me it would help.”

“I hope so. We’ve got to finish recording the CD,” John reminded them.

“I was afraid you’d wreck your voice.” Milo shook his head. “My arms are sore from drumming.”

“I have blisters on my fingers from my new guitar,” John added.

“We’re almost finished with the tour,” George said with encouragement. “We’re just not used to it. Next time around, we’ll be more prepared.”

“Welcome to rock ‘n’ roll.”

Isabella had appeared in the doorway. Her dark hair cascaded down her back almost reaching her waist. She wore a flowing skirt and peasant top.

“It’s pretty grueling, isn’t it?”

She sauntered into their dressing room with another member of the band trailing behind her. Lilliana had long, red hair that curled around her face and over her shoulders. She held up her hands to show the calluses from playing lead guitar.

“You get used to it.”

The guys were awestruck. They hadn’t had much interaction with *Rock Goddess* yet and they had a striking presence. They drew enormous crowds and their fans were ferociously dedicated and passionate. It was a wild ride that had swept them along.

Lilliana sat on the couch in their dressing room and curled up her legs beneath her. She was dressed like Isabella in a colorful long skirt and peasant top. They looked like hip gypsies.

“There’s nothing like it,” she said with understatement.

Isabella stood by the makeup table surveying the black eyeliner and eyeshadow Nick used around his eyes.

“I like the effect,” she remarked studying him. “But I know a better brand with more natural ingredients. It won’t irritate your skin.”

“Cool,” he responded in a rasp.

“I like your band,” she commented. “We had our doubts at first because nobody knew who you were and our styles are so different.”

“We have to have an opening band that our fans will like,” Lilliana explained. “Even though your music is very different than ours, you have good energy.”

“Yeah,” Isabella agreed. “I like the messages in your songs. The hard music kind of conveys the urgency of it.”

“Right. That’s what I was going for,” Nick whispered.

“Then you go and break the tension with some slower songs like ‘Mystical Dreams,’” Lilliana added and looked at George. “That was yours, right?”

“I’m glad you like it,” he said pleased with the recognition.

“The vocal coach will help with your voice,” Isabella told Nick. “I used to get hoarse all the time.”

Nick felt relieved to hear that. “Thanks.”

“How often do you go out on tour?” Milo asked.

“At least every time we have to promote a new CD, but we try to keep ourselves out there as much as we can. It keeps us connected with our fans,” Isabella answered. “Great drumming, by the way. I love your solo. It’s transporting.”

“Thanks,” he beamed.

“Fans can be fickle,” Lilliana said. “You have to keep giving them more but make them keep wanting it.”

“You get addicted to the adrenaline. You get addicted to a live audience,” Isabella continued. “It’s the highest high.”

“When I’m on stage in the middle of a spontaneous guitar solo, and I feel that love washing over me…” Lilliana smiled. “It’s the best feeling in the world.”

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## 14 *\*Peppermintinis\**

Walter sat at his desk staring at his computer screen lost in thought. He felt very optimistic after his morning meeting with Tina. She was like a breath of fresh air around here. He'd felt so beaten down before her arrival. It had been frustrating to attempt to squeeze one more season out of their old, obsolete equipment. He'd grown tired of dealing with the reindeer's constant demands and worn down by Santa's moods. He'd felt beyond exhausted. His relaxing vacation had inspired him to contemplate turning in his resignation and retiring, but now he felt renewed enthusiasm for the job he'd dedicated decades of his life to.

Things had changed. He had to hand it to Tina. She knew how her father felt and was willing to face his disapproval. He wasn't looking forward to her departure and hoped Santa would embrace the positive changes that Tina had accomplished in this short amount of time. He knew she had to go back to classes and her own life. The North Pole was no place for a young person with dreams.

His phone rang, and he snatched it up. "This is Walter."

"Walter. It's Clara."

"Hello, Clara. How's the big guy?"

"He's recovering slower than expected. You know how ornery he is. He's not a very cooperative patient." She sighed with exhaustion.

He'd never heard her voice so filled with stress.

"How are you doing, Clara? This must be very hard on you," he said sympathetically.

"You have no idea," she responded. "But the reason I called is I want to know how Tina's doing."

"You'd be very proud of her, Clara. She's doing a fantastic job."

He wasn't about to mention all the changes she'd made.

"I talked to her the other day," Clara told him. "And she made me very nervous. She was talking about updating equipment and something about spreadsheets and efficiency and all kinds of crazy ideas."

Walter hated being put in the middle like this but he decided to be honest. He had nothing to lose at this point and Tina needed his support.

“Frankly, I think she’s done an incredible job and I agree with all her decisions. This stuff was long overdue.”

“Walter, you know how he feels,” Clara said patiently. “His health is fragile right now. What’s going to happen when he comes back and everything’s different?”

“I think Tina has made improvements that were necessary. I’m telling you, things are running more smoothly. Morale is high. Even the reindeer aren’t complaining.”

“The reindeer aren’t complaining?” Clara asked with amazement. She cleared her throat. “Sorry to say this, Walter, but we need to make sure that things are just as they were when he left.”

“I can’t do that, Clara. I wouldn’t even know how to undo everything. And I wouldn’t want to. Tina’s done a great job and, if anything, you should thank her.”

“Walter,” Clara said patiently. “You’ve been invaluable to us all these years. I honestly don’t know what we’d do without you, but you are an employee, and I’m asking you to fix things.”

He thought for a moment. She had a point. But who was his boss now?

“I’m sorry, Clara. I’m not going against Tina.”

“Once we retire, it won’t matter,” she said. “Nick can make whatever changes he wants and it will be none of our concern. But I know that Santa will not be able to adjust to any drastic changes right now. We have to think of his health.”

“Isn’t Nick on tour?” Walter asked. “It doesn’t sound like he’s going to take over anytime soon, and I don’t think these changes could’ve waited.”

“Walter…”

“It would just crush Tina if we tried to undo the things she worked so hard to accomplish.”

“She doesn’t realize this isn’t a typical business and you can’t treat it that way. I’m sure she was eager to try out all the ideas that were percolating in her head during classes but you’re right. We can’t slap her down after all her efforts,” Clara agreed. “I wish I knew when Nick would be able to take over. But that might never happen. Now his band is putting out an album. I guess they put out CDs these days.”

“That’s great,” Walter said. “I didn’t realize they were becoming so successful. You should be very proud of both of them, Clara.”

“I am. But now what do we do?”

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Lisa woke up on the couch. She’d fallen asleep watching another movie. She was so bored she didn’t know what to do. She’d watched all the latest movies and read three books. She’d joined the local gym hoping to meet someone, anyone to hang out with. She hadn’t planned on spending summer break without Tina. They were supposed to be driving along the coast and having fun adventures. Now there were leisurely days at the beach and the mall where she’d bought a new fall wardrobe. But there was still over a month until school started.

She wished the band was back in town. It was something to do, even though she was still mad at Nick. Not that he’d noticed. Or cared. There was no doubt that he was appealing, but he was totally wrapped up in himself. She was over him, anyway.

She’d gone online perusing some of the singles sites. There were tons of good-looking guys in the area, but none of the ads really grabbed her. They all seemed pretty much the same. Blah blah blah. Their pictures probably weren’t real, anyway. Besides, she couldn’t seem to write an interesting bio about herself. It sounded just as tedious as all the other profiles. Did people really meet this way? Maybe this was how all the uninteresting people paired off. Where were all the guys that were different? Not the same old same old. She wanted to meet someone spontaneously who she felt chemistry with and could flirt with. Like Tina and George. Now that was fun.

It had been nice hearing Tina’s voice. It sure sounded like she was overwhelmed. She wished Tina were closer. At least then they could hang out a little and she could help her out. It was awful that her family had ruined their summer plans. What a bummer.

And then she got an idea, a brilliant idea. What were friends for if not to commiserate and support each other? Tina would appreciate it. It would solve both of their dilemmas. She just had to convince Nick. That shouldn’t be hard.

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“Seriously?” Tina put her head in her hands and groaned leaning her elbows on her desk.

She had been feeling so good about all she’d done in this short time.

“I told your mother I was behind you,” Walter said. “I think she understands.”

“I’m so sorry you’re in the middle,” Tina said to him. “I appreciate your support on this.”

“Of course. You just did what needed to be done for a long time,” he assured her. “I commend you for it.”

“Do you think we have to undo everything before my father comes back? Do you really think he won’t be able to handle it?” Tina asked.

Walter frowned. “No and yes. I don’t think we should change anything back, and he’s absolutely not going to like it.”

“Why did my father let things get this way? I mean, all the equipment was so old and everything was so disorganized.”

Walter furrowed his brow. “I think it just happened gradually. Maybe we were too close to it and it took somebody new to be objective.”

Tina nodded thoughtfully.

“I didn’t realize it either until you started changing things,” he said.

“But Dad will never see it like that.”

“I doubt it.”

“They should’ve never put me in charge,” Tina moaned.

“I think they put the right person in charge,” he asserted.

“It would’ve been better if Nick had come here instead of me.”

Walter shook his head. “I don’t think so. Nick would’ve kept things going just like they were. He wouldn’t have made all these great improvements.”

“Probably not.”

“Nick’s creative,” Walter was saying. “You have more of a business mind. You each have different strengths. You were the right person for the job.”

Tina nodded. “I don’t think he has a head for business. Except for show business.”



Tina tried to picture Nick sitting here at their father's desk. She couldn't imagine him meeting with the elves or reindeer. She couldn't see him making decisions and tackling emails. He didn't seem qualified to run the family business, but her parents seemed to believe he could. Perhaps his skills were innate and he'd surprise them. After all, he was the son and the one with the Gift that would allow him to deliver the presents on Christmas Eve. Because that was how it worked and had always worked.

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Lisa looked out the window of the plane, and all she could see was white. Was she looking at the clouds or the ground? She couldn't tell. A blinding field of white stretched in every direction as far as the eye could see, but then she began to make out miniature buildings scattered on the ground. No apartment buildings here. This place was more remote than she'd imagined.

She smiled as she thought about surprising Tina. She'd never anticipated Tina's true identity and where she'd be traveling. This trip was more thrilling than she'd expected. It felt surreal to be flying to the North Pole.

At first, Nick hadn't been forthcoming on the phone. She'd had to pretend that Tina had already told her where she was. It wasn't difficult to pull a fast one on Nick. He was a bit scattered at times. She'd discerned this about him months ago.

"Oh, yeah. Tina tells me everything," she'd lied. "I know where she is. I'm just not sure which airport to fly into. Don't tell her. I'm going to surprise her. It sounds like she needs help. You know how busy she is and I'm not doing anything this summer anyway."

He'd bought it and spilled the information. At first, she hadn't believed him. She thought he was messing with her, but she couldn't tell by his tone. Confused, she'd gone to her office and gotten on her computer to check Tina's records. And there it was. Tina had graduated from North Pole Community College.

That's when it all fell into place. The white hair, the last name Klaus, the evasiveness about where she was, the importance of the "business." The

more Lisa pondered it, the more sense it made. She had no trouble believing that Santa Claus was real. She'd met him!

Things had just gotten more interesting. No more falling asleep in front of the TV. Here she was about to land at North Pole International Airport. She couldn't wait to see the elves and the toyshop and the reindeer. And she couldn't wait to see her friend, Tina, daughter of Santa Claus. This was not only going to be the adventure of a lifetime, it was going to be the most fun ever!

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Tina didn't look up when someone tapped on her office door. She was squinting at a spreadsheet trying to reconcile some numbers that didn't quite look correct.

"Yes?" she said absentmindedly and glanced in the direction of the doorway causing her to do a double take.

"Surprise!" Lisa cried.

It took a moment for it to register.

"Oh, my gosh! Lisa! What are you doing here? How did you get here?"

Tina's mind spun with questions. She jumped up from her chair, and they met in the middle of the office and hugged.

"You said you needed an assistant, and I'm here to assist you," Lisa announced.

Tina was speechless. She'd temporarily lost the ability to form words. How was it possible that Lisa was here? Was she imagining it? Had she been working too hard? She rubbed her eyes.

"I wish you could've seen your face." Lisa laughed and turned to scan the office. "Wow. So this is where it all happens. Why didn't you tell me who you were? I can't believe you didn't tell me."

Tina was still flabbergasted but was able to speak again.

"No one's supposed to know. How did you find out?"

"Nick. I told him I already knew where you were, and I just needed to know which airport to fly into. It was easy." Lisa shrugged.

Of course. Nick. He should've known Tina would never tell anyone, but it was actually a bit of a relief that her friend knew. Now she could

finally be herself with someone.

“I need a break. I’ve been staring at spreadsheets for hours. We can go over to the Snowed Inn & Pub. I just need to let Walter know,” Tina said.

She picked up the phone and dialed his extension.

“Walter, I’m going over to the pub for a little while.” She looked at Lisa. “I have a visitor. I’ll introduce you later.”

They went down to the basement and took one of the snowmobiles to the pub. Luckily, it wasn’t far because the wind was biting cold. Lisa had never felt cold like that. She watched the landscape rush by in a white blur as she clung to Tina. Her eyes teared and she finally tucked her head behind Tina’s until they came to a skidding stop.

Happy Hour hadn’t started yet and there weren’t many patrons. Tina ordered two Peppermintinis and carried them to a booth. She never drank in the middle of the workday, but she certainly needed a drink at the moment.

Lisa’s eyes were wide as she took everything in. Two elves sat talking at a lowered section of the bar, and a lone reindeer sat in an oversized booth at the back by the small stage. Mini candy canes garnished their drinks.

“I can’t get over it,” Lisa said leaning over the table. “This is incredible. I never knew this place existed.”

“It’s really not that exciting here. I’ve just been working,” Tina told her.

“Are you kidding me? I can’t believe I’m here. Every kid in the world wants to see the North Pole,” Lisa gushed.

The door creaked open letting in an icy draft. A huge snowman ambled toward the glassed-in cold room leaving a watery trail behind him.

“Frosty ale,” he called to the bartender. “Hi there, Santana,” he said as he passed them.

“Hi, Frosty,” Tina responded.

Lisa stared with her mouth open until the glass door closed behind him. The glass was foggy and she couldn’t see in.

“Was that..? Oh my gosh! That was him!”

Tina had to smile at Lisa’s stunned reaction as she took a sip of her drink. This would surely liven things up around here.

“I can take you for a tour later.”

“That’d be fantastic! Can I see the sleigh and reindeer?” Lisa asked eagerly.

“The sleigh is stored in the back barn and you can see the reindeer from a distance. They don’t like visitors. They can be grouchy,” Tina explained.

“How can anybody be grouchy here?” Lisa asked with excitement. “Is there really a big pole? Can I see it? Does it have red and white stripes like the pictures?”

Tina had forgotten about the pole. It was leaning haphazardly to one side and had to be reinforced. She wasn’t sure who was responsible for fixing it. Probably the town. She pulled out her mini-recorder.

“Ask Walter about the pole,” Tina spoke into it. “It has to be fixed,” she explained to Lisa.

Lisa nodded. “Tell me how you ended up having to be here. What’s the situation with your father and Nick?” She took a long sip of her drink. “Mmmm. This is good.”

Tina sighed. Maybe an outsider could be objective and come up with a solution. After all, Lisa was a trained counselor.

“Well,” Tina began. “Obviously, you’ve figured out who my father is.”

Lisa nodded happily and giggled.

“The family tradition is that the firstborn son inherits the title of Santa and the business. My father took it over from my grandfather and he took it over from his father and so on.”

“Nick is supposed to become Santa and he doesn’t want to do it,” Lisa guessed.

“In a nutshell,” Tina said. “Then, of course, my father has a heart attack and someone has to fill in, so I’m here temporarily. Eventually, Nick is supposed to do it. That’s the plan. That’s the way it’s always been done.”

Lisa nodded thoughtfully. “That explains a lot of Nick’s songs. He’s working out his issues. It’s cathartic.” She looked at Tina. “But he doesn’t want to do it.”

Tina nodded. “That’s the problem.”

“You’re the business major but you’re not his son,” Lisa stated. “What a predicament.”

“Exactly.”

They each took a sip of their drinks.

“My father is a workaholic,” Tina added. “I don’t know. Maybe he had to be. Maybe there wasn’t enough time in the day or maybe he just enjoys

it. I can see that.”

“You like it,” Lisa noticed. “You like running the family business.”

Tina couldn’t help smiling. “I do like it but I think my father is going to be very upset with me. He’s very traditional and I’ve made a lot of changes since I’ve been here. Things needed to be updated and improved and I couldn’t help myself.”

“He might be happy you took all that on,” Lisa suggested. “Maybe he just couldn’t deal with it.”

Tina shook her head and frowned. “He’s very stubborn.”

“So, talk to him about it.”

“He’s not the easiest person to talk to. I’ve never been able to talk to him. He was always so engrossed in his work and so focused on Nick taking over and so concerned with all the children of the world.”

“Except for you.”

“Except for me,” Tina said wistfully.

It felt good to vent to Lisa. She seemed to grasp the situation. But the truth made her feel sad.

“Now I understand your problems with your father,” Lisa said thoughtfully.

They both took another long sip of their drinks.

“Am I the only one who knows who you are outside of this place?” Lisa asked her.

Tina considered for a moment. “Myra and Marty know. They’re my parents’ friends in Florida. They’ve known them forever. Otherwise, just you now.”

The door swung open again letting in a cold gust of air. Three elves entered and approached a low booth by the stage.

“Do they have live music here at night?” Lisa tried not to stare at the elves.

“Just karaoke.” Tina noticed the time on her phone. “Maybe we should order something to eat.”

“You know,” Lisa said. “I really am here to help. I can be your assistant. It’ll be fun. I can’t wait.”

The door opened again and Rudolph headed straight over to the bar. Two more reindeer bounded through the door and over to a booth.

“Make that a pitcher,” Rudolph called to the bartender.

“This is blowing my mind,” Lisa told Tina.

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Lisa clutched Tina as they carefully rode back on the snowmobile. They fell over each other laughing as they stumbled toward the big building through the new powdery snow.

“We probably should’ve eaten *before* we had those drinks,” Tina mused.

“I think I’m dreaming,” Lisa blurted and burst out laughing again.

“Stop it,” Tina begged. “You’re making my stomach hurt from laughing.”

“My face hurts.” Tears blurred Lisa’s vision. “My face is going to freeze.”

She stopped for a moment and wiped her eyes. She stood and surveyed the darkened pure white landscape. The surface of the snow had a sparkly sheen to it.

“It’s beautiful,” she breathed, and her breath billowed out in a mist.

The warmth of the building greeted them like a thick blanket when they opened the door. They took off their coats and boots and scarves and gloves. Lisa had worn some of Tina’s attire. She hadn’t been prepared for the bitter cold.

“That was like being inside a freezer,” Lisa marveled.

“Let’s see if Walter’s in his office and I’ll introduce you,” Tina said with a slight slur.

They staggered down the hallway with some effort. Tina could see that the light was on in Walter’s office. It was important to introduce them so he wouldn’t wonder who this stranger was lurking around.

“Walter,” she said a little too loudly in his doorway. “I want you to meet my friend from school, Lisa.”

Lisa tripped behind her and pushed her into the door which banged against the wall.

“Oh, hi,” she said giggling.

Walter was taken aback to see Tina this way. He’d never seen her tipsy, but maybe it was good for her to have a little fun. He stood up.

“Nice to meet you, Lisa.”

He smiled but he was unsure about this. No one from the outside ever visited. What was Tina doing? She knew better.

“She’s going to be helping out,” Tina announced in an attempt at seriousness.

“I’m going to be her assistant,” Lisa said proudly.

They looked at each other and dissolved into a fit of giggling.

“Okay,” Walter said slowly. “Why don’t you call it a day and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Good idea,” Tina said attempting a straight face.

She and Lisa quickly turned and scurried to the steps at the end of the hallway which led up to the Claus apartment.

Walter shook his head and sat back down at his desk. What was Tina thinking? He’d been so optimistic with her at the helm but this made no sense. Were things falling apart and he’d been too distracted to see it? Was he on a sinking ship?

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“So that’s Walter. He’s cute.”

Lisa sprawled on the couch in the apartment at the corner of the top floor of the main building. She had a fleece blanket wrapped around her and could feel the warmth of the fire.

“You think everybody’s cute,” Tina retorted.

“Nah, uh,” she protested. “That dark hair and those dark eyebrows and that thick beard and those sexy dimples.”

“He just got divorced and he’s old enough...”

“No, I don’t think so. I’m older than you,” Lisa reminded her.

“*Almost* old enough to be your father,” Tina amended. “He has kids that aren’t much younger than me.”

Tina sat on the end of the couch by Lisa’s feet and stared at the fire in the gas fireplace. Her body felt heavy and she was tired. Had she been too silly in front of Walter? How humiliating.

“I know he’s shorter than me but I don’t care,” Lisa said. “He’s a good-looking guy.”

“I guess.” Tina sighed.

She hoped Lisa wouldn’t flirt with Walter and embarrass her.

“Remember this is where I work and I’m the boss. We have to be professional.”

“Fine,” Lisa snorted and started laughing.

“I mean it, Lisa,” Tina tried to say sternly but began laughing as well.

They got each other going again and finally exhausted themselves. Then they stared silently into the fire for a few minutes.

“I think I’m going to fall asleep,” Lisa said groggily. “That was a long flight.”

“Yes. I hate that flight. It takes forever.”

“Where do you want me to sleep?”

“You can sleep right here on the couch.” Tina patted the couch. “Or you can sleep in Nick’s room.”

“I could sleep in Nick’s bed?” Lisa perked up.



## 15 *\*A Little Snag\**

“Clara?” Santa reached his hand out from his bed in the nursing facility.

“Yes? I’m here, dear.”

She’d been dozing in the chair beside his bed and leaned over to take his hand.

“Are you thirsty? Do you need something? Should I call the nurse?”

“We need to talk.”

“You’re going to be fine,” she reassured him automatically.

“This hit me hard,” he confessed.

“I know, dear. We’ll get through this. I’m here with you,” she said wearily.

“Who’s minding the business?” he asked weakly.

“I told you that Tina went up there,” she reminded him. “Nick’s touring with his band.”

“When is Nick going up?”

“I don’t know. They’re going to be recording an album when they get back,” she explained.

“An album?”

“I should say CD. They don’t do albums anymore,” she remembered.

“Are they that successful? People want to buy their music?” he asked with wonder.

“Apparently so.”

She held onto his hand and he was quiet for a moment.

“Tina’s up there? How’s she doing?”

Clara was afraid he would ask that.

“Things are going well. She’s a business major. She knows what she’s doing. She made a few tiny changes that she thinks will make things more efficient. That’s all.”

She braced herself.

“Changes? What kind of changes?” he demanded with urgency.

“Oh, you know. Just updating some of the old machinery,” she said feigning nonchalance.

“That’s for Nick to do when he takes over. He can update whatever he wants.” He grumbled a bit.

“Tina’s just helping out like she always does.”

“You tell Walter not to let her change too much,” he instructed her.

“I’ve already spoken to Walter,” she assured him. “And Tina.”

“Good.” He breathed heavily. “The band is successful. Who knew?”

“They’ve had some good reviews in the papers,” she told him.

“They have?”

“Yes, they have some fans. Nick is happy. He’s doing what he loves.”

Santa fidgeted in the bed and Clara squeezed his hand reassuringly as she’d been doing for weeks.

“Well, that’s too bad,” he said suddenly. “I didn’t get to do what I wanted and you didn’t get to do what you wanted either.”

He lay grumbling and struggled to sit up more. Clara adjusted a pillow behind him.

“But, dear, don’t you want our kids to be able to live their dreams?” she asked.

“I’m not going to work myself to death like my father did,” he said raising his voice. “Is that what Nick wants?”

“Of course not, dear. But this is such an important time for his career...”

Santa’s face got red. “I just want to go back...”

She shook her head. “Don’t say it here.”

“To the condo,” he yelled. “I want to go back to the condo!”

She was surprised he’d said that. She’d expected him to say he wanted to go back to the North Pole.

A nurse peeked in the room. “Are you okay, Mr. Klaus? Do you want something to relax you?”

“That’s a good idea,” Clara said.

“You’re not going to drug me up again,” Santa shouted. “Get away from me.”

“Let me see what’s in his chart,” the nurse said calmly to Clara.

Santa yanked on Clara’s hand.

“No. I don’t want any drugs. Those hallucinations were a nightmare. Look. I’m calm now.”

Clara nodded. “Okay. No drugs.”

“Let me know if you change your mind,” the nurse said before exiting the room.

Santa looked into Clara’s eyes. “I don’t think I can do it anymore, Clara. I don’t want to do it anymore. It’s taking too much out of me. I don’t want to go back to the Pole.”

She stared at him. He’d never said that to her before. What would this mean for all of them? How would she convince Nick to leave the band? And what about Walter? Would he stay and work with Nick or decide to retire as well? Her mind spun.

“We’ll figure something out.” Clara squeezed Santa’s hand.

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Nick was surprised that Tina had told Linda who they were. It didn’t make sense because they never revealed their identity to anyone. Then it occurred to him that she could’ve been bluffing. That sneak! If that were the case, he hoped Tina wouldn’t be angry at him. As it was, Linda - no, it was Lisa - seemed mad at him. He couldn’t understand why. He’d always been nice to her. They’d even had dinner once. Whatever.

He was glad the tour was over. His voice needed a rest. Robin wanted them to get back into the studio as soon as possible, but he knew they needed a few days to recover. Everyone was wiped out, yet excited, about this next step up the ladder of success. It was really happening and he wouldn’t let anything disrupt their upward momentum.

His phone rang in his pocket and he fumbled for it with irritation. He was trying not to use his voice. Who would be calling him? Robin? Isabella? His heart jumped. He was smitten with her and hoped it was her. He looked at the caller ID. It was his mother. She’d want him to visit his father. He’d go in a few days. That’s what he’d tell her.

“Hey, Mom,” he answered the phone.

“What’s wrong with your voice?” she asked.

“I got hoarse on tour. I’m not supposed to be talking at all. I have to rest my voice before we go into the studio to finish the CD,” he explained.

“Oh. Okay. I’ll try not to keep you on the phone too long,” she promised.

“How’s Dad? Is he still in the nursing home?” he asked.

“Yes, he’s still there. He’s all right. But he told me something interesting.”

“What’s that?”

“He told me that he’s ready to retire. Isn’t that great news?” She waited for his response.

“Cool. Now you don’t have to go back.”

“Nick,” she said impatiently. “Don’t you know what this means? You have to be ready to take over. Can you be up there by next month? Tina has to get back to school. She’s been there all summer.”

“Me? I’m not going up there,” he objected. “I told you I’m not taking over for Dad. I have the band.”

“Maybe there’s a way you can do both,” she suggested in desperation. “Why don’t you go up there as soon as you’re finished in the studio? You can end the season and then we’ll figure it all out.”

“No way. Tina’s the business person. Just let her stay up there. She likes it,” he insisted. His throat was feeling scratchy. “Mom, I can’t talk anymore. My throat hurts. Talk to Tina. She won’t mind. She’s into it.”

“But she’s supposed to go back to college next month,” Clara protested.

“Got to go, Mom.” He disconnected the call.

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Tina gave Lisa a complete tour in the morning explaining how each department worked. They both felt a little fatigued. The only meeting scheduled that day was with the IT team. They stopped at the large alcove the group had taken over as their own. Each of the larger elves were hunched over a laptop.

Ken looked up and smiled. He pushed his glasses up on his nose.

“Hi, Santana,” he said. “Did you want to move our meeting up?”

“I’m going to have to reschedule it,” she told him. “Why don’t we do it tomorrow at the same time? I’m showing my new assistant around. This is Lisa.”

“Tomorrow’s fine. Nice to meet you, Lisa,” he said.

They meandered back to Tina’s office as she tried to get Lisa up to speed, but she didn’t seem to be paying much attention.

“I love this place!” she enthused. “I can’t believe I’m here.”

They reached Tina’s office and she shut the door after they entered.

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into another Peppermintini. You’re such a bad influence,” Tina said. “I have no energy today and I have work to do.”

“That Ken guy is cute,” Lisa said.

Tina groaned.

“Really, Tina. Don’t you open your eyes?” Lisa asked.

“I have no idea how you’re going to help me,” Tina said turning on her computer.

“What does everyone keep calling you? Is that some kind of royal title?” Lisa asked.

“Santina? That’s my real name,” she told her. “Tina is short for Santina. I was named after my father.”

“Oh.” She sat in the chair opposite Tina’s desk. “How long are we going to stay up here?”

Tina looked at the calendar on her computer. “About three weeks. That will give me a week to prepare for classes when I get back. When do you have to go back?”

Lisa shrugged. “That works for me.”

“I’m sending a requisition to Ken so he can set you up with a laptop. You can use that side table as your desk,” Tina told her. “I’ll also send an email to the leads of each department to let them know who you are and to tell them to go through you to communicate with me once we get you set up.”

“Sounds good.” Lisa swung her foot. “What do you want me to do?”

“I was thinking about that,” Tina said. “It’d be great if you could walk around every day and see how the departments are doing. Ask the leads to email you if there are any major issues so we can have documentation. You can also schedule my meetings and take the minutes during the meetings. I’m sure I’ll think of more stuff as we go along.”

“Yes, boss,” Lisa said with enthusiasm. “I’m sure going to get my exercise walking around this place if I don’t get lost.”

“It’s not too complicated. This building is just a big rectangle with three floors.”

“Okay. I’m here to help. I’ll just assist you whenever you need it,” Lisa said. “This is going to be so much fun.”

Tina sighed. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

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“Nick!” Santa’s face lit up when he saw him enter his room. “I’m happy to see you.”

“What’s up, Dad?”

Clara got up so Nick could sit next to the bed but Nick stood by the window holding a latte.

“I feel a lot better. They said I could go home tomorrow,” Santa relayed.

“Cool. You look better. Some of the redness is gone from your face and you look less stressed out,” Nick noted.

“I bet I lost some weight. The food here is awful.” Santa chuckled.

Nick looked at his mother. On the other hand, she looked more frazzled.

“You look tired, Mom,” he observed.

“That’s because it’s boring in here,” Santa complained.

“How’s the album going? I mean, the CD,” Clara asked Nick.

“We finished recording and now the sound engineers have to do their thing. Luckily, my voice held up and I wrote some new songs for the CD. It’s going to be sick,” he said earnestly. “I’m working with a voice coach, so I won’t get so hoarse next time.”

“That’s wonderful, Nick,” Clara said warmly. “Congratulations on the CD.”

“Good for you, Nick,” Santa said. “That’s out of the way in time for Tina to get back to school. Well done.”

“When are you going back?” Nick asked taking a sip of his latte.

Clara fidgeted. “Nick, I told you on the phone that we’d like to retire now. We’re not going back.”

“How are you going to retire if Tina comes back here to go to college?” Nick wondered.

Santa looked at Clara. “I thought you talked to him.”

“I did,” she said. “But there’s a little snag.”

“Snag?” Santa’s face started to redden.

“You don’t look too good, Dad,” Nick said. “Your face is getting red again.”

“Now, dear,” Clara said. “Don’t get worked up. We’ll figure it out.”

“Snag?” he bellowed.

A nurse appeared in the doorway. “Is there a problem, Mr. Klaus? Would you like something to help you relax?”

“It’s okay. Thank you,” Clara assured her.

“You’re doing so well. Remember you’re going home tomorrow. Try to manage your stress level,” she cautioned. “Call me if you need anything.” She turned and left.

“Wow. You still expect me to go up there,” Nick realized. “Mom, didn’t you tell Dad that Tina’s up there and everything’s cool? She likes it. She’s into business.”

“Nick,” Santa said patiently. “The business is handed down from father to son. You’re my son.”

“I thought it was the firstborn.”

“Firstborn *son*,” Santa emphasized.

“Right.” Nick nodded. “I see what you’re saying, but what happens when the son can’t do it?”

“The son always does it.”

“Yeah, but what if he can’t?” he persisted. “What if something happened to him or he had an accident and he couldn’t...”

“You mean like if his father killed him?” Santa yelled.

“Dear.” Clara got up and took Santa’s hand. “I’ll talk to Tina. Maybe she can delay going back to school until we figure this out.”

“The only thing we need to figure out is how we ended up with such a dimwit son,” Santa muttered.

“You don’t look good, Dad,” Nick stated. “You shouldn’t get so stressed out about stuff.”

“You’re not helping, Nick,” Clara said to him.

Santa tried again. “Nick, this is a privilege. It’s an honor, a tradition...”

“What is?” Nick asked.

Santa looked at Clara. “Did you drop him on his head when he was a baby?”

She sighed. “Nick, please promise me you’ll go up there before Tina has to go back to school even if it’s temporary. Just help us out until the end of the season. Can you do that?”

“No can do. That’s a bummer on so many levels.”

“I don’t care about your levels,” Santa shouted.

“Just consider it,” Clara pleaded.

“I don’t get you guys. Tina’s already there.”

Nick took another sip from his paper cup.

“She can’t do the delivery,” Clara explained. “Can you at least do that?”

“You know I can’t feed the materialistic machine that you’re perpetuating with your yearly greed fest. I can’t support it.” He shook his head vehemently.

“What did he just say?” Santa asked suspiciously. “Come here, Nick. I’ll support you all right.”

Clara patted his arm. “It’s okay. We’ll find another solution.”

She sank onto the edge of the bed in defeat. How could she ask their daughter to sacrifice more of her time? Tina had certainly come through for the family as usual. She didn’t want to take advantage of her willingness to help out by making her miss fall semester. She dreaded their next conversation.



## 16 *\*Bummer Summer\**

Walter entered Tina's office to see her sitting behind the large mahogany desk. Her long white hair was pulled back into a ponytail making her look a bit like the little girl he remembered. Lisa sat with a pad of paper in her lap. Her reddish, brown hair was also pulled back into a ponytail and she wore black rimmed eyeglasses. She was sitting up very straight.

He wasn't looking forward to this meeting. It was time to renegotiate the union contract and he didn't want to be too hard on Tina. He and Santa always debated and bargained, eventually finding the reasonable compromise that they both expected. They knew each other so well after all these years that there was never a surprise. But how could he play the same game with Tina? She had no experience with this.

"Hi, Walter." Tina looked up and smiled.

There was nothing to worry about. She wouldn't want to upset the delicate balance that had been so carefully cultivated over the years between the employees and management. He'd guide her through this process and they'd agree on the cost of living raise that was reasonable. He wouldn't press any other issues too hard.

"Good morning, ladies." He sat down in a shorter chair off to the side by the wall that was elf size.

"Good morning, Walter," Lisa said smiling warmly.

"Okay."

Tina took a deep breath and looked at Lisa, who picked up her pad and held a pen poised to write.

"This meeting is to extend the contract for the United North Pole Workers. Typically, a cost-of-living increase is agreed upon and any issues that need resolution or renegotiation are discussed."

She paused and looked at Lisa, who was writing.

"Got that?"

Lisa nodded.

Tina got up and walked around her desk rolling her chair behind her so they could sit closer together.

"This is much less formal," she said as she sat down. "Okay, Walter. I've read through the contract. What issues do we need to address?"

He cleared his throat. "I think you're aware that the reindeer are upset that they're expected to pick up the mail all year round."

"Isn't that what we've always done?" Tina asked.

"Not all year," Walter answered. "We used to have mail service from the post office for about six months out of the year but your father changed that last season. Since the reindeer are here all year, he thought that we could save delivery fees by having them do it."

"Okay. I understand it saves us postal delivery fees, but they should have the same time off as everyone else. They're part of the union so they should have the same benefits," Tina reasoned. "I noticed they're at a higher pay level due to the nature of their jobs, and I think the pay differential is fair, but benefits should be equal. I think they should pick up the mail from the post office during the season when everyone else is working. That seems fair."

"I'll relay that to them," Walter told her knowing that they wouldn't be happy with the compromise. But then, when were they ever happy?

"Okay, what else?" Tina asked.

"I've had questions from some of the elves about internal promotions. They're looking for ways to move up."

"That's a tough one, Walter. Most of the elves never leave so we only have entry level positions available and almost everyone is already at the top of the pay scale. We can take another look at the levels for each position, but I think they're pretty accurate," Tina responded. "Let's review that in another meeting after I have a chance to study it."

Walter nodded. "There was a suggestion to put another bulletin board in the lunchroom where we could post open positions. We've had some restructuring, such as the new IT team, and the elves would like to be aware of new opportunities."

He glanced over at Lisa, who was writing furiously.

"We can do that," Tina agreed. "Absolutely."

He hesitated. Now they were going to get into the sticky issues.

He took a deep breath. "Retirement benefits."

Tina got up and grabbed the contract from her desk. She sat back down and paged through the thick document. She read silently a moment.

"Hmm. It looks very generous to me."

"We're asking for a one percent raise."

He waited for her agreement. It was a minuscule increment.

She frowned and shook her head. "Can't do it."

He leaned forward in his chair. "Cost of living has increased more than we anticipated."

"I hear you, but our staff has increased since this was negotiated and we have a tight budget. We just can't do it now. We may be able to address it next time. I have to take it off the table," she said steadfastly.

Walter was taken aback by Tina's hard line approach. He hadn't expected this from her. When had she become so savvy at business?

"Okay," he said slowly. "How about cost-of-living increases?"

She certainly couldn't argue with that.

"According to the contract," she said peering down at it. "We're at 3% a year right now."

"We'd like to increase it to 3.5% a year," he told her with confidence.

"I'm not going to agree to that and I'll tell you why," she said decisively. "The upgrade of the machinery was costly and has decreased the workload by 18%, but we increased the number of elves. So, they're now doing less work for the same pay. If anything, I could justify layoffs or decreasing hours."

Walter stared at her blankly.

"But I'm not going to do that," she assured him. "I don't want to overwork anybody. I value every one of our employees. I know they give us 100%. The machinery upgrades took a chunk out of the budget, but they were essential. Given the facts, I should probably freeze wages, but I don't want to do that either. I've gone over the calculations, and we're able to offer a 2.5% cost-of-living raise this year. I want to be as generous as possible, and we'll make it work. Next year we can adjust up for production increases due to population."

Walter was trying to wrap his head around this.

"What about population this year? The number of children always goes up."

"Nominal," Tina said closing the contract on her lap. "The more efficient machinery will make up for it."

Walter didn't know what to say.

"You know, Walter," Tina said. "We're not here because of the money. What we do is very special. We do it for the children. We do it because we

love the children. We're all here because we *want* to be here and we *believe* in what we do. We're so lucky to have this opportunity. We're more than coworkers. We're really a family working for a cause."

"That's so true," Lisa agreed. "I'm not even being paid. I'm volunteering because I'm just glad to be here."

"I think we covered everything," Tina said with finality. "Let's just agree on everything we discussed and we're done. We've always been fair with the union, and we've always treated the elves well. We care about them and we want everyone to be happy here."

"One big family," Lisa added smiling.

Tina stood up and extended her hand.

"Thanks, Walter. You've always been more of a father to me than he has."

Walter stood up in a daze and took her hand. Should he have argued with her as he did with Santa? Tina seemed so certain of everything she'd said and had controlled the meeting from the time he'd sat down. It was actually quite impressive. He'd let it go because she was new, but he wasn't looking forward to the next meeting with the union members.

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Santa was sitting in his recliner chair watching TV. He was relieved to be back at the condo. The incision in his chest was healing nicely and he was starting to get his strength back.

"Oh, my goodness!" Clara exclaimed. She was sitting at the table checking her email on her laptop. "I don't believe it!"

Santa impatiently pushed buttons on the remote.

"Why can't it find what I want to watch? Stupid thing."

Clara turned to him. "Did you drink your green smoothie yet?"

"I don't want to drink it," he said stubbornly. "It's green."

"If you try it, you'll see that it tastes good," she urged. "I put in a banana and some cacao powder. It tastes like a chocolate banana milkshake. Try it right now while I'm watching you."

He scowled and picked up the glass on the tray next to him. He took a small sip.

“There. Are you happy?” He looked at it. “Wait a minute. That tastes good. Are you sure it’s healthy?” He took a big gulp.

“I have some news,” she told him looking back at her laptop. “Tina met with Walter to negotiate the union contract.”

“Oh, no. I forgot that was coming up. How bad is it?” He grimaced.

“She sent me an email and said that she gave them a 2.5% cost-of-living increase,” Clara read.

“2.5%? The contract says 3%. That can’t be right.”

“She said she got him to agree to it because the upgrades to the machinery save 18% labor,” she explained hoping this would ease his fear of change.

“I didn’t approve any upgrades. It must’ve cost a fortune to modify everything. What’s she doing? Did you know about this?” he huffed. “Hold on. Did you say 18%? That’s significant. That can’t be right.”

“They did everything in house to keep the costs down,” Clara said. “She also stood firm on retirement. No increase.”

“What do you mean no increase? She must’ve given them something,” he reasoned.

“She says she agreed to give the reindeer the same time off as everyone else,” she related scanning the email.

“Hmm. I can live with that.”

Clara smiled broadly. “Our little girl did a good job. She really does have a flair for business. Aren’t you proud of her?”

“I guess she did all right,” Santa acknowledged.

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Tina was engrossed in checking airfares on the internet at her desk while Lisa typed the minutes from their meeting on her laptop at the table by the door to the office. She stopped and stretched.

“I’m getting some coffee. Do you want tea?”

“That sounds good,” Tina said.

She was trying to decide which day to book their flight back to Florida. She was using the company credit card and wanted to cover Lisa’s ticket in lieu of pay. She’d sent her mother an email asking when they were going to return so they could coordinate their plans but she hadn’t heard

back yet. She was getting impatient to book their tickets. She didn't want to cut it too close to the first day of classes. It'd take at least a few days to recover from jet lag and get ready for school again.

She couldn't wait to return to sunny Florida and her pastel wardrobe. She longed to see palm trees instead of a vast landscape that was forever covered in a thick cloak of white. She wanted to be able to sit outside and feel the warmth of the sun on her skin. And she couldn't wait to see George again. She smiled at the thought.

Yet she had to admit she'd enjoyed running the company. It hadn't been the burden she'd envisioned. It had actually been an exciting challenge to take the company to a higher level of efficiency and organization. It was exhilarating to negotiate and make decisions and lead a staff toward cohesion and teamwork. Unfortunately, she wasn't entirely free of her parents' expectations. They'd simply wanted her to let things slog on, and it had held her back to a degree. She couldn't help but wonder what was possible if she could build the highly productive company of her dreams.

Nick didn't appreciate how lucky he was to be handed this opportunity. He'd never savor it as she had. He'd found his bliss in music. But it was the sacrifice he was obligated to make for the family as the firstborn son. It was his birthright and his burden.

And she would move on. After college, she'd find some small struggling company that she could shape and mold or, perhaps, some large international corporation where she could find her niche. She'd thrive in the thrilling world of business either way. This had been a valuable experience and it had cemented her desire to have a career in the challenging world of business.

"Aren't you going to answer your phone?" Lisa asked setting a mug of tea on her desk.

Tina shook herself out of her reverie. The caller ID announced that it was her mother. Finally.

"Hi, Mom. How's Dad?" she asked as she pulled up her screen again to look at the airline schedule.

"Hi, honey. He's doing great. He's happy to be back here at the condo. His incision is healing and he's getting his energy back."

"I'm glad to hear that," she said with relief. "I'm looking at flights. When are you coming back? I need to book mine."

“Your father can’t wait to get back on the golf course. Marty was just over here telling him about some new one that just opened up. I think it’s over by that park that’s close to the shopping center. You know the one with the big playground for the kids?” Clara rambled.

“Playground?” Tina repeated. “I don’t know. I guess. Anyway, I thought I’d fly back in about two weeks. Will that work for you?”

“Oh, Tina. Your father said a funny thing the other day.” Clara laughed weakly. “He told me he wants to retire. I never thought I’d hear him say that.”

“Me neither. Maybe next season...”

“Now. He wants to retire now. He doesn’t want to go back,” Clara reiterated.

“Did Nick agree to come up here?”

“Nick isn’t quite ready to take over. Honestly, I don’t know if he’ll ever be ready,” Clara admitted.

“Mom!” Tina cried. “I’m enrolled in classes. I can’t stay up here.”

“I know this disrupts your plans, but I think it’s important for your father’s health.”

“I’ve been here all summer. I’ve already done my share,” Tina said.

“I know you have,” her mother said soothingly. “You’ve done an amazing job. We’re very proud of you.”

“Mom, I have a life. I have friends I want to see again. You can’t make me stay here,” Tina said desperately. “What about my classes?”

“You’re right. We can’t make you,” Clara agreed. “But I’m asking you to stay for now. Maybe your father can manage the delivery. I guess we’ll have to play it by ear.”

“But...”

I know we can count on you, Tina. You’ve never let us down. We’ll talk again soon.”

Tina hung up and covered her face with her hands. Would she ever see George again? He wasn’t going to wait forever. How depressing. Why had she ever agreed to come up here in the first place? She’d always done the right thing but no one cared about *her*. Her parents expected her to give up her life while Nick blithely did his own thing without a second thought. She reached for her tea and took a sip.

“What kind of tea is this? It’s good.”

“Vanilla chai.” Lisa stood watching her. “It sounds like we’re not going back anytime soon.”

Tina looked at her with tears of frustration in her eyes.

“My father wants to retire. He doesn’t want to come back. I’m stuck here.”

“We’re stuck here. I’m not going to desert you,” Lisa said.

“What about your job at the college?”

Lisa shrugged. “I guess you’ll have to pay me like a real employee now.”

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Tina sat wrapped in a blanket on the couch staring at the fire in the gas fireplace. She could hear the wind rattling the windows. She was filled with despair. It felt like she was being punished for doing the right thing and helping out. It was so unfair.

“Do you want more tea?” Lisa asked.

Tina shook her head.

“Do you want to go to the pub? I’ll drive the snowmobile. Can I?”

Tina shook her head again. “I don’t want to go anywhere.”

Lisa sat on the couch with her pulling a blanket around herself. She also stared into the fire as she held her coffee mug in both hands.

“I don’t understand how this happened,” Tina said forlornly. “I mean, I specifically said I had to be back by September. How does Nick always get what he wants and what I want doesn’t matter?”

“Nick,” Lisa repeated with contempt.

“It’s true,” Tina insisted. “Ever since we were little, Nick always got his way. I was the good one but he was the one who got all the attention because he was considered the *future* of the business.”

“They sure misjudged that,” Lisa commented. “He’s just a selfish attention hog.”

“Now what am I supposed to do? This will set me back. It’ll take me longer to graduate. It’s so unfair.”

“You could take online classes,” Lisa suggested.

“Can I do that?” Tina asked hopefully.

“Why not? They offer online classes.”



“They do? But I’m already enrolled. Can I switch to online classes?”  
Tina asked her.

“I’ll look into it. I still technically work there. I can probably pull some strings.” Lisa sipped her coffee. “Good thing I bought a one-way ticket.”

## 17 *\*Snow Opera\**

Production was in full swing. Since this responsibility had been thrust upon her, Tina had decided to transform the business into her own modern vision. She'd even begun researching robotics after she'd read that some businesses were using them in manufacturing. It promised huge cost savings in the long run. She was also trying to determine how to use a natural source of energy to power the workshop and other buildings. Solar didn't seem feasible and geothermal was costly in a cold climate, but she hoped to harness the energy of the powerful gusts of wind that swept through the barren landscape creating huge snow drifts.

She'd come to rely on Lisa more and more. Lisa had become her eyes and ears in the company. She was also functioning as Walter's assistant whenever he needed her.

Often, Tina would close her office door to focus on her online classes. It required quiet concentration and consumed much of her time. She'd also subscribed to a few online business and technical publications to help her keep up with the latest innovations. She was intent on utilizing the very latest technology and green options that were currently available.

Lisa poked her head in the door. "Do you have time to talk to Walter?"

"Okay. I need to get up and stretch my legs. I'll come to his office."

Walter sat behind his desk looking uncharacteristically solemn.

"Hi, Walter," Tina said as she entered his office.

"Tina." He nodded. "Lisa and I were just talking and I'm a little worried."

"I know I'm spending a lot of time on my classes but I'm still on top of things," she assured him. "You don't have to worry."

"It's not that," he said. "I'm glad you're able to continue your classes. I'm just a little worried about the direction of the company."

"What direction?" Tina asked puzzled.

"I think the alternative energy idea is a good one." He leaned forward and clasped his hands on his desk. "I'm a little worried about another issue. You're not..."

He leaned back again and stroked his beard.

"What is it, Walter?"

Tina glanced at Lisa, who nodded at Walter.

He leaned forward again. "Are you planning to replace the elves with robots? I know that it's the latest thing in manufacturing, but I'm sure you can understand why I can't support it."

"Robotics is something I've been reading about," Tina confessed. "It's the future of manufacturing. Robots are able to do a lot of the repetitious or dangerous steps in production. It's something to keep in mind for the future."

He stared at her for a moment in disbelief.

"How could you possibly think of replacing the elves with a bunch of machines? I represent the employees. I can't possibly agree with this."

"My job is to make this business as efficient and competitive as possible. I have to explore every option," Tina said.

"We don't have to be competitive, Tina. Efficient, yes. Competitive, no. We're not a typical company. But where does this stop? Will you have robotic reindeer as well?" he demanded obviously upset.

Tina had never seen him so wound up.

"Walter, calm down," Lisa said.

He took a deep breath. "Tina, think about the quality. Think about what *you'd* prefer. Would you rather have something handmade or made by a machine? We've always embraced the personal touch. We still make as much as possible by hand. Things that are carefully crafted by hand hold the love that's put into them. These are your father's words and his wishes. I hope you can see his point and I agree with him."

Tina sat down. Walter had championed her efforts from the start, so his opposition surprised her.

"Is that why my father was always against automating?" she asked.

Walter sighed. "Your father wanted to keep the business as true to the original vision as possible. It was admirable but unrealistic. The population has grown enormously since the first Santa. It's become increasingly difficult to keep up."

Tina nodded slowly. "I thought you were behind the changes I've made."

"I am," he emphasized. "Updating our existing machinery and making production and workflow more efficient and using computer technology has been extremely helpful. All that has been long overdue."

“You’ve done an amazing job,” Lisa said with encouragement.

“But...” Tina waited for Walter to complete the sentence.

“But let’s not go too far,” he advised. “Let’s honor the original vision. We have to find a balance between the old and the new.”

Tina wandered back to her office and contemplated Walter’s words. He was right that this wasn’t a typical company. It was more of a tradition. A dynasty. A non-profit. How to categorize it? It didn’t matter what you called it. It just mattered that it endured.

“Are you okay?” Lisa came into her office. “We’re all on the same side, you know.”

“I feel like I’ve just been spinning my wheels,” Tina told her. “I’ve spent so much time trying to figure out how to implement the latest technology to increase efficiency.”

“I guess there are other factors to consider in this company.”

“I didn’t think about it putting people out of work,” Tina said. “That’s the last thing I want to do.”

Lisa shook her head. “Some of the rules just don’t apply here. That’s the fun of it.”

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“When’s your sister coming back?” George asked Nick. “I thought she’d be back by now.”

He was tuning his guitar in the living room while Nick folded his laundry on the couch.

“My father decided to retire so she’s staying up there,” Nick responded.

“She is?” George stopped tuning his guitar. “For how long?”

“I don’t know. She’ll probably be back to visit after the beginning of the year.”

“Visit? You mean she’s staying there for good?”

He absentmindedly twisted a tuning peg and one of the strings snapped with a twang. He reached in the guitar case for another one.

“Right. Linda... I mean, Lisa went up to visit.” Nick frowned at one of his shirts. “What’s this stain? This is my favorite shirt to wear onstage.”

Milo came into the room carrying a large cardboard box. Tiffany was behind him holding a lamp.

“I think I got everything.”

“Cool,” Nick said to him. “Let us know when you have your first party in the new house.”

“Definitely. See you at rehearsal,” Milo said as they left.

“I should buy a house too,” Nick said thoughtfully. “It’s a good investment.”

George wasn’t thinking about real estate. He was thinking about Tina. He’d been looking forward to seeing her. He’d written two more songs with her in mind and had been waiting to play them for her. There was something about her that drew him. She and Nick had that striking white hair that was hard not to notice. But there was something more. She seemed genuine and sincere. He found it easy to talk to her. She was smart and observant. He felt comfortable with her in a way that he hadn’t felt with anyone else. He wanted to see her again.

“What’s the name of your parents’ company?” George asked Nick thinking he could look it up online.

“Why?”

“Just curious.” George shrugged. “I thought I’d check out the website.”

“It’s just a family business. There’s no website.”

“No website? Where is it?” he persisted.

“Up north,” Nick said vaguely.

He picked up his laundry basket and headed upstairs. George got up and followed him.

“Where up north?”

“Why all the questions, dude?” Nick asked defensively.

George followed Nick into his room and watched as he placed his socks in a drawer.

“I get the feeling that there’s something you’re not telling me.”

“There’s nothing to tell,” Nick said with his back to George.

“Listen, Nick. We’re bandmates. We started *Black Ice* together. We’re like brothers. You know you can trust me,” George implored.

Nick turned and George noticed the conflicted look on his face. What was he hiding? What was the big family secret that Nick was withholding?

It couldn't be that bad, could it?

"You can trust me. Come on," George coaxed. "What is it you're not telling me?"

Nick considered. George was his best friend in the world. They'd known each other a long time and they'd bonded over music. They were like musical brothers. If you couldn't trust your musical brother, who could you trust? Besides, what difference did it make? George wouldn't judge him over his family's sins. As long as it didn't get out to their fans, which would totally detract from the band.

"You can't tell anybody who we are," Nick warned. "If people know, it'll ruin the band."

He sat on the edge of the bed.

"It's like a curse. A crazy curse that curses us."

"Tell me," George insisted.

He couldn't imagine what horrible thing it could be.

"It's a toy company." Nick's look was dire.

"You already told me that." George laughed. "What's the big mystery?"

"At the North Pole."

"But that's where..."

"Swear you won't tell a soul who we are."

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"Vanilla chai. Your favorite."

Lisa set Tina's mug on the desk. Steam wafted up from the mug.

"I thought we were out of tea."

"Walter and I took the snowmobile into town to get supplies," Lisa said. "It was fun."

Tina smiled. Lisa thought everything was fun. Lisa seated herself at the small table holding her own mug.

"How's the studying going?"

Tina removed her glasses.

"I thought these would help but my eyes hurt."

"You're on that computer too long. Give your eyes a rest," Lisa advised.

“You’re spending a lot of time with Walter.”

“I wanted to give you space to study,” Lisa said sipping her coffee. “Anyway, I like him. He’s funny and sweet.”

“But he’s...”

“I don’t care if I’m too tall for him,” Lisa interrupted her.

“I was going to say that he’s older than you.”

Lisa shrugged. “I don’t care. Besides, we’re just friends. And coworkers.” She thought a moment. “Is it against the rules to date a coworker?”

“No, we don’t have any rules against it,” Tina answered. “Some of the elves are related or married or probably involved. We have entire families working here. It’s never been a problem.”

“Good. Because Ken asked me out.”

“Ken? When did that happen?” Tina asked with surprise.

“Yesterday. We started talking in the cafeteria. I thought he liked Jamie, the engineer, but then he told me that she has a partner named Amy who works in the mailroom.”

“I didn’t know that,” Tina responded.

“Does Walter’s ex work here?”

Tina took a sip of her tea. “She used to. She met some guy in town and they moved to Boulder, Colorado.”

“This place is like a soap opera,” Lisa remarked. “Maybe I should say snow opera.” She giggled.

“I wonder if I’m ever going to see George again,” Tina mused despondently. “I think that’s the worst thing about being stuck up here.”

“Why don’t you call him?” Lisa suggested.

“What’s the point? I’m stuck here through the season and he’s got the band. Our lives are in two separate places.”

The phone next to her computer rang.

“Maybe that’s him,” Lisa said hopefully.

“This is Tina,” she said into the phone.

“Santina? This is your father,” Santa said.

“Dad? How are you?”

“I’m doing much better. I’m starting to get my energy back. I played golf with Marty today.”

“That’s great. I’m happy to hear that.”

“The reason I called,” he began. “Is, first, I heard you’re doing a good job. Your mother and I appreciate what you’re doing, stepping in like that for the family.”

“Thanks, Dad.” She waited for him to go on while a feeling of dread crept over her.

“I also heard you made some changes,” he continued. “Now I understand that some of the equipment had to be updated. I was neglectful in that respect.”

“I just...”

He cleared his throat. “Walter said that production has increased because of some of your newfangled changes.”

“You spoke to Walter?” Tina asked.

“We just got off the phone right before I called you. It sounds like you were a tough negotiator.” He chuckled.

“I guess so.” Tina laughed nervously.

“But I have to make myself very clear,” Santa said sternly. “None of the elves are to be laid off. I don’t want anybody replaced by some space age robot. Quality is the most important thing. We’ve always done things by hand.”

“Yes, Walter and I talked about that. I understand the importance of some of the steps being done by hand,” Tina assured him. “Sometime handmade is better than machine made.”

“I hope you *do* understand. Our reputation is on the line. I will not tolerate any more automation. Remember that you’re only in charge until Nick gets there,” Santa said. “Don’t get carried away trying to modernize production. Don’t try to fix what’s not broken. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, I do,” Tina assured him. “But Dad, I don’t think Nick is interested...”

“I’ll talk to Nick,” Santa asserted. “It’s time he accepted his responsibility to this family.”

“Uh. Okay.”

“Well, that’s all I have to say,” he said abruptly. “Your mother says hello.”

“Tell her I said hi.”

They hung up.

“What did he say?” Lisa asked.



“He’s never called me before,” Tina marveled. “He just talked to Walter and I think he wanted to make sure that I’m not going to replace everyone with robots.”

“That’d be weird like some science fiction movie.”

“He still insists that Nick is going to take over.” She shook her head.

“Has he ever met Nick?” Lisa asked sarcastically.

“Nick has to be honest with my father. I’m going to call him right now and warn him,” Tina said with resolve.

She picked up the phone and dialed Nick’s cell.

“Hey, Tina,” he answered cheerfully.

“Hi, Nick. I just got off the phone with Dad.”

“I saw him last week. He seems pretty much recovered. Hey, do you think I should buy a house?”

“What?” The question threw her off.

“Milo just bought a house. It’d be a good investment, right? Robin thinks the CD is going to hit it when it’s released and the college radio station is getting lots of requests for our songs.”

“That’s awesome. I’ll have to get your CD. What’s it called?”

“It’s called ‘Watch Out for Black Ice.’ It has a chill cover. It shows these giant black icicles dripping on us. I came up with the concept,” he said with pride.

“That’s incredible news, Nick. I’m really happy for you. I just wish I wasn’t stuck here. I have a life too,” Tina complained.

“I’m completely bummed about it. I wish you were here so you could see the band. We’ve gotten better since the tour. I miss you.”

“I miss you too,” she responded truthfully.

It was so hard to stay mad at Nick.

“Can you do me a favor? Please talk to Dad and tell him that you don’t plan on ever taking over for him.”

“I already told Mom and Dad.”

“Well, he’s not getting the message for some reason,” Tina said. “Maybe you need to call him and tell him again. I think he wants me to stay up here until you get here.”

“That’s crazy. It’s not my fault they’re into denial,” Nick said. “Anyway, it’s *your* thing. They know you’re into it and you’re good at it.”

“I enjoy running a business, but that’s not the point. I can’t be up here forever. I want to come back to Florida. I have a life there and I have to finish my classes.”

Why was she always being put on the defensive?

“Hey, George just came in. He was asking about you yesterday. Talk to him.”

Nick handed his phone to George. “It’s Tina.”

“Tina! It’s good to hear your voice,” George said into the phone.

“Hi, George,” she said timidly.

“Nick told me that Lisa’s up there helping you out.”

“Yes. She came up and decided to stay when I realized I’d be here for a while,” Tina explained. “I thought I was going to get back in time for fall quarter, but it’s not going to happen.”

“When do you think you’ll be back here?”

“I don’t know,” Tina said sadly. “It could be a while. I’m trying to work it out.”

“I admire your loyalty to your family,” George told her. “I know you put your life on hold to step in for your parents.”

“Thanks. One of us had to.”

“I’m sorry I haven’t called. I thought you’d be back by now,” George said.

“Me too,” Tina said wistfully. “I’m glad the tour went so well and congratulations on the CD coming out.”

“Yeah. It’s kind of overwhelming. Everything is happening so fast,” he said. “I have to go because we have a meeting with Robin, but I want to keep in touch. Okay?”

“Yes. That’d be nice,” she said.

Tina wondered when she’d get a chance to see him again. If it took too long, he could meet some flirty fan or fall for a rock goddess and forget all about her. She hoped Nick would call their father as she’d requested. But what difference would it make? Nick wasn’t going to take over the business as long as she was there. It had worked out very nicely for him and not so much for her.

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## 18 \*Mistletoe Surprise\*

“What’s this room for?” Lisa asked Tina with awe.

They’d entered the top floor of the main building opposite from the family apartment. The door had been closed keeping the spacious room chilly. Huge windows lined the room on two sides. Round tables and chairs were spaced throughout with comfortable couches and loveseats covered with sheets along one wall. A large circular fireplace stood in the middle of the room.

“This is the viewing room that my parents built for the yearly festival,” Tina explained. “It’s always fun for the elves and we usually have the food catered and an open bar.”

“Now this is a party room.”

Lisa’s eyes were wide as she scanned the room.

“What kind of festival is it?”

She stood looking out one of the tall windows. The reindeer roamed by the barns and she could see the pub in the distance and the dim lights of the town a bit further. The pristine landscape stretched into the distance. The view was breathtaking.

“The Northern Lights Festival,” Tina answered with a smile. “The Aurora Borealis.”

Lisa gasped. “What? When? I’ve heard it’s spectacular.”

“It is. And the festival is fun. You’ll love it, but I need help arranging it for next month. I’ve never done it before. My mother always handled it.”

“Oh, my gosh! This is going to be so fun!” Lisa squealed.

“Everyone looks forward to it. I think the pub has been catering it. I’ll email my mother and check with her. We need to clean up the room and decorate it and print up some flyers to post. Lots to do.”

“Wouldn’t it be great if we could get *Black Ice* to play?” Lisa enthused.

“I’d love to see George but the band doesn’t know who we are. Besides, Nick would never come up here to play,” Tina said. “He avoids this place as much as possible.”

“I don’t know why he hates it here. I love this place. This is the coolest place on the planet.”

“Literally.” Tina laughed.

“I’m going to start planning this as soon as I get back to my desk,” Lisa said eagerly. “This is going to be the best party ever. I can’t wait.”

They made their way back down the narrow stairs and hurried back to Tina’s office where it was warmer.

“How was your date with Ken?” Tina asked.

“Oh.” Lisa smiled coyly. “He’s smart and funny. I don’t think he means to be funny, but he makes me laugh.”

“Sounds like you had a good time.”

“I did. But he’s clueless about women.” Lisa frowned.

“Aren’t most men?” Tina asked with a smile.

Lisa giggled. “That’s true. We’re probably clueless about each other. We have different expectations.”

“I wish I knew what George really wanted,” Tina said longingly. “He might just want to be friends. I wish I knew what he was thinking.”

“Creative types are very passionate. Brainy guys seem to lack social skills,” Lisa said. “Ken was talking about his work and a lot of it went over my head. I just don’t get most of that technical computer stuff.”

“I’m pretty analytical and George is creative. Do you think opposites attract?” Tina asked her.

Lisa seemed to have more dating experience in addition to her training as a counselor.

“Sometimes that’s what draws you to someone. They have traits that you admire because those are your weaknesses. I don’t know if that makes you more complete together or if those differences will lead to misunderstandings. I guess it can go either way.” Lisa thought a moment. “I’m for sure no expert on relationships.”

Walter stuck his head in the doorway.

“Hi, ladies. I’ll be down in the cafeteria for lunch if you need me.”

“Okay,” Tina responded. “I just showed Lisa the big room upstairs and she’s going to start working on arranging the festival.”

“Fantastic.” He looked at Lisa. “It’s a lot of fun. You’re going to love it.”

He turned and they heard his footsteps echoing down the hallway.

“And then there’s Walter.” Lisa sighed. “Did you see those dimples?”

“I thought you liked Ken,” Tina said.

“I like both of them. Walter is much more mature. I feel like I can really talk to him,” Lisa said. “I wish I could clone myself.”

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Lisa had done an incredible job of decorating the big room for the Northern Lights Festival. Silver streamers hung from the wood beams spanning the high ceiling, and tiny white lights were strung along the walls. Red and green checkered tablecloths adorned the tables along with multi-colored poinsettia centerpieces and candles that gave off a warm glow. Mistletoe hung tantalizingly in each corner above them. Tina smiled at that touch. That was so Lisa.

“I have a surprise for you,” Lisa said with a mysterious smile.

“What is it?” Tina asked with curiosity.

“You’ll find out later.”

Lisa wore a red satin outfit adorned with twinkling white snowflakes and Tina was wearing a black velvet pants set that Lisa had picked out for her online. The top sported lines of glittery silver that sparkled as she moved.

“You look stunning in that outfit with your white hair,” Lisa commented.

“Thanks. You look great too.”

Tina looked around the room as it began to fill up with guests. There was a long buffet table near the entrance and a bar at the other end of the room. Employees from the pub stood ready. The room had been wired for sound when it was built and holiday music played softly.

“You did an amazing job,” Tina told Lisa. “If you keep this up, I’ll have to give you a raise or a bonus.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” Lisa said. “I have to ask Walter if I’m supposed to join the union. Where is he?”

“No. You don’t need to join the union.” Tina shook her head. “I don’t even know why we have a union. We’ve always treated the elves and reindeer very well and...”

“There he is,” Lisa cried. “I’ll go ask him.”

Tina sighed as she surveyed the room. The tables and couches were filling up. The huge circular fireplace warmed the space and cast flickering

light along the walls. She began mingling. She'd known most of the elves her entire life. They felt like family to her. They'd been so indulgent and patient with her and her brother when they were little. Her best childhood memories were of playing in the workshop with them. She remembered crawling under long tables and running around workstations shrieking happily while someone playfully chased her. Then her mother would come in and collect them so the elves could work. She smiled to herself at the memory. It hadn't been a bad place to grow up. If only her father had been the jolly big elf he was portrayed to be. But he'd been a grumpy workaholic with no time for his family.

Tina made her way to the huge windows. Muted colors had undulated in the sky for days. Now vibrant colors streaked a rainbow across the sky. Nature was the most magnificent painter of all.

She looked down to see lights emanating from the main barn. She knew the reindeer were having their own crazy party. They never came into the main building, which was too warm for them. It was just as well. Everyone found them too intimidating.

She could see Lisa approaching from behind her in the reflection of the glass. Then she noticed someone accompanying her and gasped. It couldn't be! She whirled around. It was George!

"Surprise!" Lisa shouted beaming. "Are you surprised? I knew you'd be. It was the last thing you expected. You should've seen the look on your face. I think you're in shock. Are you okay?"

Tina slowly nodded staring at George. Her knees felt weak and her heart was pounding.

"You look beautiful," George said with a bashful grin.

He was dressed in black as well with a red scarf draped loosely around his neck. His dark hair was pulled back into a short ponytail. Tina had never seen anyone look so good.

"I can't believe you're here," she managed to say.

"You need a drink," Lisa stated. "Go over to the bar. They made a specialty drink for tonight. I'll see you later." She wandered off.

"I can't believe you're here," Tina repeated. "How did this happen? I didn't tell you where I was when we talked on the phone."

"I got the truth out of Nick," he said. "After the last time we talked on the phone, I called Lisa because I knew she could tell me how to get up

here. She thought it'd be fun to surprise you."

"Nick told you?" Tina asked. "He told you who we are?"

"He didn't give it up easily," he assured her. "And I didn't believe him at first, but it explains a lot."

"I think I do need a drink," Tina said.

They turned and wove their way through the elves toward the crowded bar.

"Now I get why you're here," George said. "And how important it is."

"I've been so busy," she said as they stood waiting to order their drinks. "Did Nick tell you that he's the one who's supposed to be here, that he's supposed to take over the business?"

"Yeah. He told me your father's been pressuring him his whole life but that the band is his priority," he said. "So, you had to come up here when your father went into the hospital."

"Yes. I was supposed to come back after the summer but now my father wants to retire. Somehow, I got stuck here."

"That's why I wanted to visit you," George said.

"I'm so glad you're here."

Their eyes met and it made Tina breathless.

"What can I get you, Santina?" the bartender from the pub asked. "I know you like Peppermintinis but we have a great specialty drink tonight called Borealis Blizzard. I think you'll like it. Want to try it?"

"I'll try it," George said.

"Two," she told the bartender.

They took a sip of their tall drinks garnished with cherries and candy canes and smiled at each other. Tina led the way to a round table. They set their drinks down and went to stand in line for the buffet. Tina was glad there were plenty of vegetarian options for George and decided to go meatless for the evening as well. She noticed Ken in line with Jamie and her partner, Amy. She looked around for Lisa and saw her sitting at table with Walter.

"Nick told me it was cold here, but there isn't a word to describe how cold it is," George said as they ate.

"I know, especially if you're not used to it." She took a bite. "What's happening with the band?"



“They want to release the CD in time for Christmas.” Then he grinned. “I guess you have a Christmas deadline too.”

She laughed. “Yes. We just have to get someone up here to do the delivery on Christmas Eve.”

He frowned. “You can’t do it?”

Tina shook her head. “Santa is traditionally a man.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“That’s the biggest problem right now. I can do everything else, but the actual delivery is supposed to be done by my father or my brother. But I don’t want to think about it now. I just want to enjoy the party.”

“Me, too.” He touched his glass to hers with a clink. “To us,” he said.

Tina took a sip of her drink and savored this moment. Hope for the future filled her. She still couldn’t believe that George had traveled all this way just to see her. Was her drink making her feel light-headed or was he?

After a leisurely dinner, the tables were pushed to one side and dance music pumped through the speakers. The floor was filling up quickly. The elves could be a fun bunch.

“Come on!” Lisa appeared and pulled Tina onto the floor.

The four of them found a spot and moved to the thumping beat. Tina felt so much more relaxed after finishing her drink and let the music flow into her movements and happiness light her face.

The round fireplace, dozens of candles, and the strings of tiny bulbs sent twinkling light through the throng of merriment. Tina looked over the heads of the crowd and saw that the party was a huge success. This was just what everyone needed before they had to hunker down once again to finish out the season. It would be long hours until the end of the year.

“Look at that,” George leaned in and said into her ear.

He took her hand and led her over to the windows in the corner. His hand was warm yet sent shivers through her.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” he marveled.

The vivid Northern Lights flared out into the darkened sky. It looked like a dramatic watercolor painting reflecting on the glistening snow. Radiant colors shimmered and rippled outside the windows.

“Isn’t it gorgeous?” Lisa asked beside them. “I’m so out of breath. I haven’t danced in a while.”

She smiled and pointed upward before disappearing back into the sea of dancers. They looked up to see mistletoe dangling above them.

“It’s a tradition,” George said to her.

“Some traditions are good,” Tina answered.

And that’s when they kissed. He gripped her around the waist pulling her against him. Her arms went around his neck brushing his soft ponytail. The room seemed to spin around her and it suddenly felt very warm while a thousand butterflies jumped in her stomach. She never wanted this moment to end.

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“That was the best party I’ve ever been to.” Lisa sighed as they sat on the couch in their pajamas too excited to go to sleep.

“That was the best surprise I’ve ever had,” Tina told her. “How did you do that without me knowing?”

“You’ve been so busy with your classes and researching stuff online.” Lisa waved her hand. “It was easy.”

“You did a fabulous job decorating and arranging everything for the party. I know I didn’t help as much as I should’ve,” Tina acknowledged.

“Walter helped a lot. He’s been so sweet. He offered to let George stay at his place,” Lisa said. “Too bad he has to leave so soon for their gig.”

“Even though I wish he could stay, it’s probably better that he doesn’t. I’d be too distracted with him around. I wouldn’t get anything done.”

“I think this is serious.” Lisa smiled.

Tina blushed. “That mistletoe was dangerous.”

“I think a lot of people got together tonight.” Lisa giggled.

“Those Borealis Blizzards were lethal. They were too delicious.”

“And pretty strong,” Lisa added. “It’s probably a good thing they only make them once a year.”

“I don’t know if I feel dizzy because of them or because of George,” Tina confessed.

“I think I know.” Lisa grinned.

“What about you and Walter? What’s going on there?” Lisa changed the subject before she began blushing again. “You two seemed pretty friendly tonight. Or is it yesterday?”

“I have no idea what day it is,” Lisa said. “It must be after midnight, so I don’t think it’s yesterday. It must be tomorrow. Is that right?”

They both started giddily giggling and couldn’t stop until they’d fully exhausted themselves. Then they sat silently in their memories.

“I’m sure glad we don’t have to work tomorrow,” Lisa said.

“It’s nice to have a little break,” Tina agreed.

“Everyone needed it.”

“You never answered my question about Walter.”

“Walter…” Lisa tilted her head. “I went to ask him about the union and we started talking. I like him. I mean, as a person, you know?”

“Walter’s great.”

“Yes. Walter is great. So is George.”

Tina couldn’t stop smiling. “I think we should get some sleep.”

“Don’t wake me up tomorrow. I might sleep all day.” Lisa yawned.

“You can’t. We’re having brunch with the guys. I can’t wait to spend the day with George.”

The thought sent a little zing of exhilaration through Tina. She hoped she could fall asleep. She happily dragged herself to bed and cuddled up thinking of George and remembering the romantic moment he’d kissed her under the mistletoe.

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Walter lived right outside of town. It was a quick commute to work on the snowmobile. The house was small but seemed much larger since his ex and the kids had moved out. It felt strange to have someone else in the house, especially a larger person. George kept bumping into things.

“I feel so clumsy,” he told Walter.

“It’s not your fault,” Walter assured him. “This is an elf sized house. You’re not used to it. I hope the bed wasn’t too uncomfortable last night.”

“It was a little small but it was okay,” George said.

He perched on the couch. It was better not to move around too much. “I thought all of this was a myth. I had no idea this place was real.”

Walter sat in his recliner chair. “Yeah, somehow we’ve managed to keep it a secret. Of course, the children know, but cynicism comes with age and it wipes away certain bits of memory.”

“That’s kind of sad,” George said pondering it.

“I know. But can you imagine what it’d be like if everyone knew about us? They’d start building big hotels. People would vacation here,” Walter speculated. “The place would be filled with tourists. They’d want to see the reindeer, and they don’t do well with strangers.”

“The reindeer,” George repeated. “I hope I get to see them.”

“Everyone loves the reindeer,” Walter muttered shaking his head.

George shrugged. “I want to see the workshop too.”

“Exactly. People would want tours of the workshop and our work would be disrupted,” Walter said. “We’re on a pretty tight schedule once the festival ends. That’s when we really have to get to work. We’d never get anything done with tourists all over the place.”

“I see your point.” George nodded. “I’ll only be here a few days.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” Walter said quickly. “I didn’t mean you. I’m glad you’re here. Tina works hard, not to mention her online classes. She needed some fun.”

“Thanks, Walter. I appreciate that.”

“Her job is extremely stressful. That’s why her father had a heart attack. He didn’t know how to manage his stress or eat right.” Walter shook his head.

George leaned forward. “What’s going to happen if Nick or their father can’t do the delivery on Christmas Eve?”

“That’s a tough one. I don’t know. It’s never happened before.”

“Tina told me she can’t do it. I don’t understand. Why can’t she just do it?”

“Well, the thing is Santa’s always been a man, a Claus,” Walter said. “It has to do with some sort of energy that the Claus men have so they can accomplish the delivery. It has to defy time and space, if you think about it.”

“I guess it would.” George sat back on the couch crossing his leg and kicking a lamp that teetered but didn’t fall over. “Oh, sorry.”

“No problem.”

“It sounds like all the pressure is on Tina,” George said with concern. “I wish there was something I could do to help her.”

“You’re helping by being here,” Walter affirmed. “Besides, Lisa has been a big help to her taking over a lot of stuff so she can do her online

classes.”

“That’s good.” That makes me feel better.”

“And I’m here. I know how this place inside out.”

“I’m glad of that, Walter.”

“Tina’s been a joy to work with. Her father is so set in his ways. This place needed someone to come in and change a few things.” Walter smiled. “Of course, Santa isn’t entirely happy about it.”

“What’s that name everybody calls Tina?” George asked. “Santa Tina?”

“Santina,” Walter corrected. “It’s her real name.”

“Santina,” George repeated.

“You know, I’ve known Tina and Nick their whole lives. They used to run around the toy shop while we worked. They were cute little kids.” Walter chuckled.

“It must’ve been fun for them growing up here,” George said. “It’s a kid’s dream.”

“For the most part,” Walter said. “Their father was wrapped up in his work, so they didn’t get a lot of his attention.”

“I saw him,” George suddenly realized with awe. “I saw Santa when he came to see the band. I saw Santa Claus.”

## 19 *\*Stuck at the North Pole\**

Tina sat cross-legged on the rug in front of the fireplace in her flannel pajamas. Lisa knelt behind her as she French-braided her hair. Tina's thoughts kept returning to that special moment under the mistletoe.

"You have the most beautiful hair," Lisa said. "Seriously, it feels silky."

"Thanks," Tina answered. "I still can't believe it. I can't believe George came all this way just to see me."

"He literally traveled to the ends of the earth for you."

"That's true," Tina exclaimed. "Oh. I feel so wiped out. I haven't had that much fun in a long time. It was the perfect night."

"That was my evil plan." Lisa giggled.

"Are you going to join the union? You don't have to, you know. We don't even know how long we're going to be here," Tina said.

"True."

"What did Walter say about it?"

"He said it's up to me," Lisa said.

"Okay. What are you going to do then?"

"Well, that depends on two things," Lisa said. "All done. Your hair looks beautiful this way."

"Thanks." Tina turned to face her. "What two things?"

"First of all, are you going to stay? I'm not staying here without you. It wouldn't be any fun."

"And what's the other thing?"

Lisa gazed into the fire for a moment. "Walter. I really like him."

"But he's..."

Lisa held up her hand to stop her. "I know he's older than me, but I don't care."

"I was going to say he's shorter," Tina said.

"That too," Lisa admitted. "He's older. He's shorter. He's used to the cold, and I like warm weather. We're totally opposite, and I don't even know how he feels about me."

"I guess we can't choose who we feel attracted to," Tina acknowledged. "I'm sure he likes you."

“Everybody likes me,” Lisa said. “But does he *like* me?”

“Maybe you should just ask him,” Tina suggested.

“I can’t do that. Can’t you find out for me?” Lisa implored. “Ask him if he likes me.”

“Oh, not this again.” Tina groaned.

“Please. Please. Please,” Lisa begged.

“Okay. If I get a chance,” Tina relented. She looked at the clock on the mantle. “We’d better get dressed. We have to meet the guys soon.”

“So anyway, what are you going to do? Are you staying here to run the business or going back to Florida?” Lisa asked.

Tina stood up and stretched. “How can I stay? I’ll never see George if I stay here.”

“Long distance relationships are hard,” Lisa agreed.

“So, there you go.”

“But you like it,” Lisa said. “You like your job here.”

“I enjoy it, but I’m not meant to be here. I can’t do the delivery, so it doesn’t matter.”

“But why can’t you do the delivery?”

“Santa is a man. Duh,” Tina said with sarcasm.

“So what? Women can do anything now. Maybe it’s time to break this barrier too,” Lisa asserted.

“But this is different,” Tina protested. “I don’t even know if I have the Gift.”

“What Gift?”

“I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but the true Santa in each generation has the Gift. It allows them to do the delivery on Christmas Eve,” Tina explained. “I’m not sure how it works, but Nick has to have it. He’s the son. It’s always been the son.”

“That’s a patriarchal attitude. Who decided it had to be a man, anyway?” Lisa huffed.

“I don’t know. Somewhere way back in our family history, I guess.”

“Probably a man,” Lisa muttered.

“But I don’t think Nick’s going to do it. Gift or no Gift. For the first time in Claus family history, someone is refusing to do it,” Tina fretted. “I don’t know what we’re going to do.”

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Tina sat with George in a booth at the Kringle Café. She could see Lisa and Walter at another booth talking intently. It was late morning, and many of the tables were occupied. The room was filled with the chatter of many conversations.

“Does your family own this place?” George asked.

“No. It’s owned by my uncle, Kris Kringle, my father’s younger brother.”

“Why doesn’t he manage the family business if your father wants to retire?” he reasoned.

“He’d love to get his hands on it, but my father doesn’t trust him,” she said. “Or his son.”

“Family drama,” he commented. “Just like any family.”

The waitress approached with a smile. They ordered their meals, and Tina glanced over at Lisa and Walter again. He was saying something, and Lisa was leaning toward him listening attentively. She hoped everything was okay.

“Walter and I were talking,” George said. “It sounds like you’re stuck here for now. When do you think you can come back to Florida? I hope it’s soon.”

Tina looked into his eyes and felt miserable. “I hope so, too. I just don’t know what’s going to happen. Someone has to do the delivery. At least, I’ll be able to leave right after Christmas at the latest.”

“Tina!”

A young man approached them. He wore a gray coat down to his knees and a deep green scarf around his neck. He had long, blond hair and striking blue eyes.

“When did you get back? Is Nick here, too? I thought you were in Florida.”

Tina stared at him wide-eyed for a moment before recovering.

“Kai, this is George.”

“George.” Kai shook his hand.

“My parents decided to retire, so I’m filling in for now,” she told Kai. “Nick is still in Florida.”



“I never thought your father would retire. I guess it was inevitable. I’m just here from Geneva visiting my parents.”

“How are they?” she asked as her heart pounded.

“They’re fine. Just getting older.” Kai shrugged. “Geneva is great, though. I have to go. Tell Nick I said hello. We will have to catch up another time. You look fantastic, Tina. It’s nice to see you.”

“You too, Kai. Tell your parents I said hi,” she called after him.

Kai looked amazing as usual. He’d always made her heart beat faster and her face flush.

“Did you go to school with him?” George guessed.

“Actually, we dated,” Tina confessed. “For a few years in high school until we graduated.”

“Oh.” George nodded. “He lives in Geneva?”

“He goes to college there now.” She didn’t want to spend their time talking about Kai. “Anyway, I’ll be back in Florida after Christmas.”

“I can’t believe you grew up here,” George said looking around. “This place is a blast. This is every kid’s dream life.”

“It wasn’t all tinsel and candy canes,” she said. “My father was a workaholic. I don’t remember spending much time with him at all. He always paid more attention to Nick because he wanted him to take over.”

“Yet you’re the one who’s here. That’s ironic.”

“Tell me about it. My mother’s great, though, and the elves used to play with us.”

“Did you go for rides up in the sleigh?” he wondered.

“Oh, no. We weren’t allowed near the sleigh. Anyway, the reindeer are pretty grouchy.”

“You’ve never been up in the sleigh?”

“He took us up once when we were little,” she remembered. “It was windy and cold, and I looked down and could see our buildings and the town. My mother had us all bundled up, and the sleigh was bouncing around, but I was so happy to be up there.”

“Santina.” Ken stopped by their booth. “I’m sorry to interrupt. I just wanted to let you know that the party was great. I really had a good time.”

“I’m glad to hear that, Ken,” she said with a smile. “This is George.”

George extended his hand, and they shook hands. Ken stared at him a moment and gasped in disbelief.

“You’re in Nicholas Junior’s band *Black Ice*,” he said with astonishment. “You toured with *Rock Goddess*. I can’t believe it. I pre-ordered your CD online.”

“How do you know about all that?” Tina asked.

“I read a lot of stuff online. Everybody knows about your brother’s band. They got great reviews on tour.” He turned to George. “I love the band. You’re so lucky you got to tour with *Rock Goddess*. They’re phenomenal, and *Black Ice* rocks.”

“Yeah, thanks. So glad you like our music. Thanks a lot,” George said with delight.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt,” Ken said. “But *Black Ice*. I can’t believe it. You’re all the way up here.”

“Just visiting,” George said.

“I hope you guys play up here sometime. That’d be awesome.”

George shrugged. “It’s up to Nick. This is his hometown.”

Ken stood nodding his head.

“I’ll see you at the meeting on Tuesday,” Tina said.

“Oh, sorry. Yes, the meeting on Tuesday.” Ken said. “It was nice to meet you, George.”

“You too.”

George beamed as Ken wandered away. How incredible to be recognized in this remote place.

“I didn’t realize the band was so popular,” Tina admitted. “You have fans. There’ll be more tours and more CDs.”

“I hope so,” George said. “That’s the whole point.”

It made Tina wonder about the future. She’d advised Lisa to come right out and ask Walter how he felt. Maybe she should do the same with George. Was he a curious tourist or had he come all this way just to see her? Was he really that interested in her? How would she ever know for sure? All the kids in school had either teased her or tried to be her friend so they could meet Santa. How could you ever know anyone’s true intentions?

“What’s wrong?” George asked.

But then there was that kiss. If he truly liked her too, what would they do now? The jobs they loved could keep them apart.

“Things are so complicated.” Tina gave him a weak smile.

“I know.” George took her hand. “Don’t worry. We’ll sort it out.”

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Tina and George strolled through the buildings hand in hand as she led him on a tour of the facilities. It was Sunday and no one was around. The facilities seemed so cold and still and vast.

“So, this is where it all happens,” George said with amazement.

“Yup.”

Tina looked up to the big windows lining the walls. The sky was still a shifting prism of color. It lent a feeling of enchantment to their time together. She hoped it wouldn't be their last. Anything could happen in the next few months.

“This place is huge.” George's voice echoed. “There are so many different departments. I can see it takes a lot to make this happen. It's a lot of responsibility.”

“It sure is. I couldn't do it without Walter. He's been with us forever. I don't know what we'll do when he decides to retire.”

“What would your family do without *you*?” he questioned. “You wouldn't have to twist my arm if I were Nick.”

“He was never into this,” Tina said. “He's into the band. That's what he loves. I don't blame him for choosing his music.”

She gently tugged his hand to keep walking. The building was chilly, and she'd never liked it when it was empty. It was much warmer in the offices.

“But where does that leave you?” George asked. “Where does it leave us?”

“Us?” Tina repeated stopping.

“I hope you can come to our gig on New Year's Eve,” George said. “I'd really like you to be there. I have some new songs I want you to hear, and I really want to kiss you at midnight.”

“That sounds wonderful,” she said. “My father usually slept for about a week after delivery night. It took a lot out of him. I don't know who's going to do it this year, but I should be able to get out of here in time.”

“I hope so.”

What was she thinking? Of course she'd be there. No matter what, she was going to there to see in the new year with him. She couldn't think of

anyplace she'd rather be.

"I'll be there, George. I'd love to spend New Year's Eve with you."

"Good." His breath came out in a mist.

"It's cold in here. Let's go up to my office," she said.

They hurried up the back stairwell and into her warm office. He walked around the small office looking at everything and noticed the framed photos.

"Is that you and Nick? I recognize your mother. She's lost weight."

"She did. She lost a lot of weight. She started exercising and eating healthier. She could never get my father to cooperate."

"You and Nick were cute little kids," he observed. "Your front teeth are missing." He picked up another frame. "Here you are as teenagers. You look almost the same as you do now."

"Nick always had that rocker look," Tina commented.

"Born to be a rock star." He carefully set the frames back down.

"Yes. Nick always knew what he wanted to do."

"So, tell me about Kai," he said casually.

Tina turned away from him because she felt herself blush. Kai had always had that affect on her. Did everyone feel that way about their first love?

"Well, there's not much to tell. We had kind of a serious thing for a few years, as serious as teenagers get, and it just didn't work out. We were young."

George put his arms around her from behind, and Tina leaned her head back onto his shoulder. He felt solid and comforting. It felt good. It felt right.

"Lucky for me," he said in her ear.

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"Nick, how nice to see you." Clara opened the door to the condo. "We haven't seen you for a while."

Nick stepped inside and closed the door. There was a savory aroma drifting out from the kitchen.

"Dinner smells awesome, Mom."

“I’m sure you’ll like it. It’s one of George’s recipes. I’d better check on it. Go talk to your father.” She went off into the kitchen.

“Hey, Dad,” Nick said as he sat on the couch.

Santa was in his favorite recliner watching TV. He glanced over at Nick.

“They don’t make any good TV shows anymore. What happened to quality? What happened to clever dialogue? The only shows worth watching are the old ones.” He pointed the remote at the TV and turned it off. “So, what have you been up to, Nick?”

“Oh, wow.” Nick took a deep breath. “We got fantastic reviews on tour, and we finished the CD, and it’s going to be released before Christmas.”

“I heard,” Santa said. “Well done. You must be very happy about all that.”

“Right. Robin wants us to go out on tour again pretty soon to keep the momentum going.”

“Who’s Robin?” Santa asked.

“He’s our manager. He arranged our first tour and got us into the studio. He’s making it all happen for us,” Nick expounded.

“Good. That’s good.” Santa nodded.

He seemed calm and rested. He was clean shaven and his bushy white hair was neatly combed.

“You look like you’ve lost weight,” Nick noticed.

“Yes, I’ve lost 30 pounds,” he shared. “I’ve been golfing, and your mother and I take walks, and the food isn’t terrible.”

“Cool.”

“Doesn’t your father look so much better?” Clara came out of the kitchen and sat next to Nick on the couch.

“His skin even looks better,” Nick noted. “It’s not red and blotchy like before.”

“Did I look that bad?” Santa grumbled.

“You didn’t look healthy, dear,” Clara said. “So, what’s next for the band, Nick?”

“I’m just working on some new songs until we go back out on tour to promote the CD.”

“Are you playing anywhere?” she asked.

“Not until George gets back from visiting Tina,” he answered.

Clara looked at Santa and then back at Nick. “Did you just say that he went to visit Tina?”

“Right. He went up for the festival. I think Lisa arranged it because I didn’t tell him how to get up there, but he...”

“Nick!” Clara blurted suddenly. “Are you telling me that your friends George and Lisa know about us? Did you tell them? How could you do this? You know that nobody’s supposed to know.”

“Well?” Santa demanded. “Answer your mother. Did you tell them?”

“It’s not my fault,” Nick said defensively. “Lisa told me she knew, so Tina must’ve told her, unless she was lying. I wonder if she...”

“Nick!” Clara said.

“She said she wanted to surprise Tina. I think she works there now. The only reason I told George was because he’s like my brother. I couldn’t keep a secret from him. It’s not a big deal. Just chill.”

“Not a big deal?” Santa bellowed. “We’ve managed to keep this a secret for generations and now you’ve blown it. How could you do this?”

“Nick,” Clara said calmly. “Do you realize what would happen if people knew? We’d have no privacy. People would want to see the North Pole. It’d be pandemonium.”

“Pandemonium,” Nick mused. “That would make a good song title.”

“Listen to your mother,” Santa barked.

“Your friends know.” Nick reasoned. “Myra and Marty know who we are.”

“That’s because we knew them before we took over the business,” Clara said patiently. She took a deep breath. “Okay, let’s calm down. The damage is done. We just have to emphasize to your friends that they can’t ever tell anyone. It’s a hard secret to keep, but let’s hope we can trust them.”

The oven timer began to beep. Clara got up from the couch.

“Dinner’s done. Come to the table. Let’s eat.”

“Tell your friends not to tell anyone,” Santa ordered.

“I know, Dad. I got it.”

Nick and Santa got up and sat at the dining room table opposite each other. Clara set the steaming casserole in the middle of the table.

“Help yourselves.” She sat at the head of the table. “Now, Nick, promise me you won’t tell anybody else unless you ask us first. Is that a deal?”

“Right. Got it.”

Nick spooned a chunk of casserole onto his plate.

“It smells really good, Mom. Just like George’s.”

Clara looked pointedly at Santa, who cleared his throat.

“Let’s get this over with.” He directed his attention toward Nick. “I don’t want any argument. We need you to do the delivery this year. Tina has done everything else. All you have to do is show up and do the delivery. Walter will help you. It’s time for you to do your part. You have no choice in the matter. Understood?”

“Just try it out this year,” Clara encouraged. “We’re not asking you to give up your band...”

“Yes, we are,” Santa said.

She patted his arm. “Nick, all we need you to do is the delivery. Okay? Then we’ll...”

“Wow. I can’t believe you’re laying this on me,” Nick responded. “We have gigs lined up. I told you before that I’m not doing it. I have a band. I don’t know how, anyway.”

“It’ll come naturally. You’re my son. This is your destiny. There’s no one else,” Santa said vehemently. “Don’t you see that? If I could ask someone else, I would, but it’s all up to you.”

“Give it a chance,” Clara suggested gently. “See how it goes. Maybe you can do the delivery every season and your music thing the rest of the year. You can do both. It could work. We’ll figure it all out so it works for everybody. How does that sound?”

“If it’s so important, why don’t *you* do it this year?” Nick asked Santa. “You’re all better now. If you can go golfing, you can do the delivery.”

“I don’t want your father to do it. It takes too much out of him. He’s finally getting healthy, and I don’t want him to relapse,” Clara said firmly.

“Tina’s already up there. She can do it,” Nick said chewing.

“You know she can’t do it. You’re the one with the Gift.” Clara clapped her hand over her mouth.

“What Gift?” Nick blinked at her.

“I’ll give you a gift,” Santa grumbled.

“We’ve been more than patient, Nicholas, but now it’s time for you to come through for the family,” Clara stated. “You’re a part of this family whether you like it or not. I won’t take no for an answer.”

“Can I bring some home if there are leftovers?” Nick pointed to the casserole.

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## 20 *\*Guilt Trips\**

George was gone and now it was time to focus on business. Tina still felt that glow that warmed her insides and kept a smile on her face whenever she was around him. He'd promised to call or email often and keep in touch. She'd warned him that she was going to be very busy the rest of the year, but it hadn't seemed to deter him. He really was too good to be true.

"Tina!" Walter called to her urgently when she passed his office.

She backtracked. What work or union emergency could be happening now? She was in too good a mood to deal with anything negative at the moment.

"What's wrong?" she asked him.

"Where's Lisa?" He peered behind her.

"I don't know. Why? Do you want me to get her?" she asked with confusion.

"No," he said quickly. "Close the door."

She closed it behind her and sat down on the larger chair in his office.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

He looked bewildered. "You have to be honest with me, Tina. I don't know what to think."

"About what?" she asked.

"Your friend. Lisa is a nice, young woman, and I very much enjoy spending time with her." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I think she likes me. She seems to be flirting with me all the time. I'm not sure what she wants. Am I misreading this? I don't know how to handle it. You know her. What do you think? What should I do?"

Tina smiled. Is that all it was?

"You're not misreading it. She really likes you, Walter."

"Are you sure about this? We have to work together, and it could be awkward. It's probably not a good idea. I haven't been single for a long time, and I don't know how to play these games."

He smiled faintly at her, and she felt sympathy for him. He wasn't used to someone like Lisa.

"I know that she really likes you," Tina said.

She knew how traumatic the divorce had been for Walter. Maybe he wasn't ready to get involved with someone yet. He was such a wonderful, kind, sensitive man. He deserved someone he could count on. He deserved loyalty.

Tina leaned forward in her chair. "Walter, Lisa is my best friend, and you're like family to me. I'd be thrilled to see the two of you together."

"But? Is there a but?"

He looked so vulnerable and had never seemed so unsure of himself. She didn't want him to get his heart broken again.

"But I don't know how capable she is of a long-term relationship," she reluctantly said. "I know she's sincere, but it seems to me that sometimes she gets a crush and moves on quickly. I don't know. Maybe this is different. I just don't want to see you get hurt. I don't want anybody to get hurt. Just be careful."

"I appreciate your honesty," he said sincerely.

He leaned back in his desk chair and furrowed his brow tapping his fingertips together.

"She's pretty persistent. I have to say it's flattering, but I can't imagine she'd stick with me. She's young. She's attractive. Maybe it's just the novelty of being here."

"I hope I'm wrong and this is different," Tina said.

She felt a bit disloyal to Lisa, but she couldn't bear to see Walter hurt. It had been the right thing to warn him.

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"I take it your visit with George went well?" Lisa asked as she braided Tina's hair into two braids this time. "I find it so relaxing to braid hair. Isn't that funny?"

Tina was sitting on the couch in her flannel pajamas. She could hear the popcorn in the microwave.

"This is like a slumber party every night," she remarked. "Yes, it was so great to see him. I like him more every time I see him. Thanks for arranging it."

"Hey, what are friends for? We've got to help each other out whenever we can. Right?"

“Yes,” Tina said feeling guilt-ridden. “It seems like you’re over Nick.”

“Nick? He totally blew me off. That was never going to happen.” Lisa sighed. “Walter is different. He’s stable and mature. He’s someone you can depend on.”

“What happened when you were talking in the café? It looked pretty serious.”

“Oh!” Lisa said suddenly. “Who was that gorgeous blond guy who stopped by your table?”

Tina’s face reddened. “That was Kai.”

“Who is this mysterious Kai?” Lisa teased.

“I was so in love with Kai.” She sighed. “Or at least I thought I was. We dated for all through high school.”

“So? What happened?” Lisa prompted.

“All the girls liked him,” Tina remembered. “Then he went off to Geneva to go to college.”

“As one does,” Lisa said haughtily.

“They have good schools there.”

“That’s it? There has to be more. I insist that you tell me every detail,” Lisa demanded.

“Unfortunately, there’s not much to tell. I used to fantasize about him coming back and sweeping me off my feet,” she confessed. “But now I like George. Kai is in the past.”

“Not anymore,” Lisa pointed out.

“Tell me what happened with Walter.” Tina quickly changed the subject. “It looked like you were having an intense conversation in the café.” She just wasn’t ready to talk about Kai.

“I don’t know what to do about him,” Lisa said. “He keeps trying to discourage me. I can tell he likes me. I don’t know what the problem is.”

“It’s probably because he’s not sure if you’re going to be here much longer,” Tina suggested. “Then there’s the age difference. That could be a big deal to him.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Lisa said. “I don’t care about any of our differences. They’re not important. What’s important is how you feel about someone and how they make you feel. I like the way I feel when I’m with him.”

“You have to remember he just went through a rough divorce. He’s probably not ready to get involved again.”

“I know that.”

“How does he know you’re going to stick around?”

“Why do you keep saying that?” Lisa asked irritably. “Of course, I’d stick around if we got involved.”

She finished braiding Tina’s hair and went to get the popcorn.

“Have you told him that?” Tina called after her.

Lisa came back holding the bowl of popcorn. “I told him that and more. He doesn’t seem to trust me.”

“You don’t have the best track record.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you know, you move on pretty quickly. You’re a little fickle,” Tina said and immediately regretted using that word.

“Fickle? Is that what you think?” Lisa asked aghast.

Tina glanced at Lisa as she attempted to respond in an honest way.

“I don’t want to see Walter get hurt. I’ve known him my whole life. He’s a wonderful guy and he’s been through enough.”

“I know that. I know how wonderful he is. That’s why I’d be a fool to blow it.” Lisa sat on the couch with the bowl in her lap. “The thing with Nick. You blamed me. You think I’m the one who hurts people and takes off without a care. That’s not me. I’m not a bad person. I’m not like that.”

“I know. I don’t think you do it intentionally. You’re just... your attention span is short. You get distracted by the next person before you give things a chance with someone,” Tina said. “I’m not saying you’re a bad person or anything.”

“I move on when something isn’t working,” Lisa said evenly. “What’s wrong with that? I don’t waste time with the wrong person.”

“Okay. That’s makes sense,” Tina said to pacify her.

“I get hurt, too, you know. I have feelings too.”

“Of course you do.” Tina had trouble meeting her eyes.

“You talked to Walter, didn’t you? What did you say to him?”

Tina squirmed. “He asked me. He called me into his office and asked me what I thought.”

“And you told him I can’t be trusted?” Lisa demanded.

“I didn’t say that. I told him you were sincere.”

“And?”

“And I wasn’t sure if you were ready for a long-term relationship. I can’t remember exactly what I said,” Tina stammered.

“What else did you say?”

She shrugged. “It was a brief conversation. I told him I’d be thrilled if you two got together.”

“Did you really say that?” Lisa asked doubtfully. “You’ve been trying to talk me out of this all along.”

“I did say it, and I meant it. But I had to be honest,” Tina said sincerely. “I was caught off guard. I didn’t know what to say.”

Lisa glared at her.

“Please don’t be mad at me,” Tina pleaded. “You’re my best friend.”

“Don’t you ever say mean things about me again, or I won’t be,” Lisa warned. She handed the bowl to Tina. “Have some popcorn.”

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“Welcome back,” Nick said to George.

“Thanks.” He sank into the sofa. “What a long trip. I’m exhausted. And it’s freezing up there.”

“Now you get why I’m not there.” Nick laughed.

“Have you ever seen the Northern Lights?” George asked. “I’ve never seen anything so amazing.”

“Every year of my life,” Nick groaned. “They’re okay.”

“What a great place to grow up,” George enthused. “You don’t know how lucky you are.”

“It’s not as great as you think. It wasn’t all fun and games. I had these expectations hanging over my head every day of my life. It was a heavy trip.”

“Tina told me.”

“My parents still expect me to go up there. They don’t get that I’ve got to follow my own destiny. They’re still playing these mind games with me. It’s a total drag.” Nick shook his head.

“The whole situation is a bummer.”

“So, how is my big sister?”

“Your sister is great. We had a fantastic time together,” George told him. “I really like her.”

“Right, so you had your field trip and got that out of your system. Now we can get back to band business,” Nick commented.

“What do you mean out of my system? I said I really like Tina,” George insisted.

“Tina’s a grown-up. You don’t have to justify anything to me,” Nick assured him. “I trust you. I know you won’t be a jerk.”

“I’m not like that. I can’t be casual with my feelings.”

“Right.”

“Hey, I met Kai at the Kringle Café. Tina said they used to date,” George mentioned hoping for some information.

“You met Kai?” Nick chuckled softly. “They were a hot thing for a few years. All the girls drooled over that guy.”

“How serious was it?”

This was what George wanted to know. Kai was still up there, and he’d noticed Tina blushing. Kai had also said something to her about catching up on old times. That worried him a little. He felt sure that his connection with Tina had grown stronger over his visit, but then he’d seen her reaction to Kai.

Nick frowned. “I don’t know if it was ever serious. She really liked him for a while. Then he left. Maybe she never got him out of her system.”

That wasn’t very comforting.

“Do you know Ken?” he asked Nick.

He shook his head. “Who’s that?”

“He works up there. Anyway, he recognized me from the band. He said he pre-ordered the CD online.”

George knew Nick would be thrilled with this bit of news.

“You met a fan all the way up north? That’s sick!” Nick exclaimed. “Wow! My mind is blown.”

“I couldn’t believe it either,” George said. “And the company is huge. I was impressed that Tina’s got it all under control. She’s really on top of it. Lisa’s helping her, and I think she counts on Walter a lot. In fact, it looked like Lisa and Walter were pretty tight.”

“Lisa and Walter? Are you kidding? He must be old enough to be her father. What’s going on up there?” Nick asked shaking his head.

“I don’t know. They looked like they were having a good time though. It’s cool.” George shrugged.

“Whatever. I’m glad you’re back. We’ve got some gigs coming up.”

“When are you going up there?”

“What for? My parents are here so we’ll do Thanksgiving at the condo. Is Tina flying down for Thanksgiving?”

“I don’t think so. She seems pretty busy,” George said. “I wasn’t talking about Thanksgiving. I was talking about the delivery. She said she couldn’t do it, and you’re supposed to be the one...”

“What’s she talking about? She knows I’m not going up there,” Nick interrupted. “I already told my parents I’m not doing it. Does she still think I’m doing the delivery?”

“I don’t know. I thought you were supposed to do it. Isn’t it a family tradition or something?” George asked.

“I’m not into it like the rest of the family. The band comes first,” Nick said. “They can try to lay their guilt trip on me, but it’s not going to work.”

“What about Tina?” George asked. “She’s stuck up there with no one to do it.”

“That’s not my fault. I’m not into it. The band is my priority.”

“I hear you, but can’t you go up there and help her out? The band will survive. Tina needs you.”

“You sound like my mother,” Nick accused. “Don’t worry about it. My sister will figure it out. She can handle it.”

George didn’t feel comfortable with Nick’s attitude. He could see how unfair it was to Tina. He knew that Nick had been honest with his family, but it still meant that this tremendous responsibility had been dumped on Tina.

“Nick,” he said groping for words. “This isn’t cool.”

## 21 *\*Kai Temptations\**

“Don’t worry, Mom,” Tina assured Clara over the phone. “I didn’t know anything about it, but Lisa and George won’t tell anyone. I trust them.”

“I hope you’re right.” Clara sighed. “Your father is so upset, I can’t even tell you. Why would Nick do this?”

“He doesn’t think sometimes, but it’s okay. He ended up doing me a favor. Lisa’s been a big help to me, and it was so nice to see George. I really like him.”

“He seems like a nice young man,” Clara agreed. “I guess I always pictured you and Nick with someone from up there, but then you both moved away.”

“Listen, Mom, I don’t think I’ll be down for Thanksgiving. There’s too much to do, and it’s too expensive for just a few days,” she reasoned.

“I don’t want you to be alone, honey,” Clara said. “Don’t worry about the expense. We’ll take it out of the budget.”

“That’s okay. I won’t be alone. Lisa’s here. I’d rather stay here and keep working,” Tina said. “I just need to know how we’re going to do the delivery. Have you talked to Nick about it?”

“Uh,” Clara hesitated. “We tried...”

“Oh, my gosh!” Tina cried. “He’s not going to do it, is he? I knew it!”

“Now, Tina, don’t worry. We’ll keep working on him,” Clara assured her.

“Forget it, Mom. You know he’ll never change his mind. We can’t count on him.” She thought a moment. “Is there anyone else? There has to be someone else.”

“I suppose your father can do it if worse comes to worse, but I worry about him. I’d never forgive myself if...”

“No, Mom. I don’t want Dad to have to come all the way up here to do the delivery. He needs to take it easy. Let’s just think about it. I’ll talk to you next week.” Tina hung up the phone and groaned.

“Hi, beautiful. It can’t be that bad, can it?”

Tina heard his faint accent from the doorway. Those familiar butterflies began to flutter in her stomach at the sound of his voice just like



they always had. She looked up into his clear blue eyes.

“Kai,” she whispered.

She’d imagined many times what she’d say to him when she saw him again, but now her mind was a total blank. She watched him saunter in and unbutton his long coat as he sat down.

“Was that your boyfriend I met at the café? What was his name? Joe?”

Tina wasn’t sure how to answer that question yet.

“George,” she said.

“Are you being coy by not answering my question?” Kai asked with a grin.

She smiled. “And what about you? Do you have a girlfriend?”

“I’m social,” he answered succinctly.

Kai’s stare made her feel uncomfortable. She looked down at her desk.

“I forget how beautiful you are.”

Tina felt herself blushing. She hoped he didn’t notice.

He leaned forward. “I was going to write to you after I left.”

“And what were you going to say?” she asked hoping for some clarity.

Kai leaned back in the chair and gazed at her. It made her uneasy.

“What can I say? We were both too young. We must be free to experience life at our age and discover what we want.”

“That’s true.”

Tina could see the logic. But it had always felt unresolved between them.

He smiled. “Always so sensible. And now you’re holding down the fort.”

“Somebody has to.”

“Beautiful Tina.” His eyes held her. “Don’t let yourself be a prisoner of expectations.”

“What do you mean?”

“The expectations of other people,” Kai answered. “I don’t let it stop me from what I want to do.”

“I feel a sense of responsibility to help out the family when I can.”

Kai nodded with a slight smile. “Always the dependable one.”

That didn’t sound like a compliment. But where was that precarious balance between what you wanted and your obligations to others? She frowned thinking about this. Nick certainly hadn’t let anyone’s expectations

intrude upon his dreams. And now she realized that Kai had done the same. He'd left for Geneva on a whim right after they'd graduated. Or maybe it had been his way of breaking up with her.

"You look too serious. Let's go have a drink at the pub and catch up," Kai proposed.

"Okay," she decided impulsively and got up from her desk.

Tina wondered what his intentions were. Was he trying to rekindle the past or just catching up with an old friend? She had to admit she was curious. Would his charm still work on her?

George was pursuing her, and Kai had run away. But he had a point. She shouldn't be a prisoner of expectations. She should be free to follow her own dreams. How had she managed to step into Nick's responsibilities? She'd been so focused on what everyone else wanted and needed that she wasn't even sure what she wanted anymore. Maybe time with Kai would help her figure it out.

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Everyone knew and liked Kai, and women were drawn to him. It has always been that way. Tina had felt so special when they'd been a couple. And now everyone greeted him jovially when they entered the pub. She could tell people were surprised to see them together.

"Two Polar Coladas," Kai told the waitress, who eagerly appeared as they seated themselves in a booth.

Kai hadn't asked Tina what she wanted, but she let it pass.

He turned his attention to her. "I miss this place, and I miss you." He took her hand and kissed it.

"Does that mean you're staying?" she asked.

He laughed. "Not a chance! This place stunted my growth." Two elves passed by their table. "No offense," he called after them. Then he laughed again.

Tina shook her head. "Kai!"

"Are *you* staying?" he asked her. "Will you be here whenever I visit?"

"I wasn't planning on it," she responded. "But what are your plans, Kai? Are there things you want to say to me? What's this about?"

He let go of her hand when their drinks arrived.

“Can’t I see an old friend? Why must everything be so serious all the time? Let’s just have a little fun. You used to like fun.”

“Of course, I like to have fun.” She sipped her drink. It tasted like a tropical dream dipped in frosty snow. “Yum. This is good.”

“I miss these drinks. I can’t get this in Geneva.” He took a long sip from his straw.

“Why Geneva? Why did you go to Geneva?” she wondered.

“We have family there.” He was staring across the room. “Isn’t that Walter? Who’s with him?” He stood up and waved them over.

Tina watched as Walter and Lisa tentatively approached holding their drinks. Things had been a little awkward between her and Lisa since their conversation about what she’d said to Walter, but she was glad to see them together.

“Hey, Walter,” Kai greeted him gregariously. “Come and join us. Who’s your lovely lady?”

“This is my friend, Lisa,” Tina said quickly. “She came up here to help out.”

“Your friend?” Kai raised his eyebrows. Then he turned to Lisa, who had slid into the booth beside him with Walter next to her. “So nice to meet you, Lisa. How lucky are we to be surrounded by lovely ladies, Walter?”

Walter nodded and stirred his drink with the straw. He glanced at Tina and she knew he must be wondering what she was doing with Kai.

“Are you back for good, Kai?”

“I’m back for fun!” He laughed loudly. “It looks like you have the same drinks. Aren’t they delicious?”

“It reminds me of my vacation,” Walter answered and shot Tina a questioning look.

She felt a twinge of guilt. It didn’t look right for her to be here with Kai right after George had left. What was she thinking? She glanced at Lisa. She hoped she and Walter had worked things out. Why were things so complicated? She looked over at Kai. He didn’t seem to get tangled up in complications.

Kai signaled the waitress. “Make sure to keep these drinks coming. I’m buying.” He held up his glass for a toast, and they clinked glasses. “To friends and fun,” he declared merrily.

The rest of the evening was a blur.

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“I thought you liked George,” Lisa remarked when they stumbled in the door to the apartment.

“I *do* like George,” Tina insisted as she took off her coat and hung it up in the closet.

It slipped off the hanger onto the floor, but she was already crossing the room to flip the switch on the gas fireplace. She fell back onto the couch.

“Those drinks were too good.”

“I can see why you like Kai. He’s a charmer. I would’ve been holding his hand, too, if Walter hadn’t been right there,” Lisa said.

“Were we holding hands?” Tina asked with surprise. “Oh, well. No big deal. He’s just an old friend.”

“Really?” Lisa raised her eyebrows and sat on the couch next to Tina. “You looked like more than friends when you were slow dancing together.”

“Were we slow dancing?”

Tina searched her fuzzy memories of the evening. There was a vague recollection of dancing close with Kai as he whispered in her ear making her blush and giggle, swaying to the music while he held her close. It was just like she used to feel with him. Just like old times.

“You’re turning red right now,” Lisa accused.

“Oh, my gosh!” Tina covered her face with her hands. “What happened tonight? Kai kept ordering drinks, and they were so good. And he...”

“And you call *me* fickle!” Lisa cried.

“What’s wrong with me?” Tina wailed. “I really do like George. I don’t know what happened. Kai has a way of making me forget everything else.”

“I could see that,” Lisa said. “You’re the one who’s fickle. Fickle! Fickle!”

She stood with her hands on her hips shaking her head. She hadn’t had as much to drink as Tina and she’d been dismayed at her wanton behavior. Look who had called the kettle black.

“You’re right. How could I do that to George?” Tina whined. “I’m a horrible, terrible person.”

“Come on. That’s not true. You had a little lapse in judgment. It happens to everybody.”

“I’m a bad person,” Tina moaned. “I’m just a bad person.”

Lisa sighed heavily. “Stop it. You’re not a bad person. You were just a little bad tonight. That doesn’t make you a bad person. Don’t be so hard on yourself. What happens at the North Pole, stays at the North Pole.”

Tina sat sulking.

“Fine,” Lisa said. “We’ll take you off the Nice list and put you on the Naughty list. Does that make you feel any better?”

Tina frowned at her. Then her eyes widened, and she gasped. She hoped she’d remember this incoherent idea in the morning.

“What is it?” Lisa asked with alarm.

“That’s brilliant!” Tina said eagerly. “You’re totally right. I need to rethink those lists.”

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Tina had a headache in the morning, but she hadn’t forgotten her thoughts about the Naughty or Nice lists. Why hadn’t she thought of this before? She hurried into her office and turned on the computer. The Naughty or Nice spreadsheet was on her desktop and she opened it. How could she remedy this?

Walter attempted to slip by Tina’s office with a mug of coffee in his hands. But Tina heard his footsteps and spotted him.

“Uh, morning Tina,” he said uneasily.

“Walter,” she called. “Please come in.”

He stood in the doorway blowing on his steaming coffee.

“Tell me the truth. Was I that bad last night?” Tina asked him. “My memory is a little foggy.”

He appeared uncomfortable. “We all drank more than we should’ve.”

“I haven’t seen Kai in a long time,” she said. “I guess I fell back into old habits, but I want you to know that I really do like George, and I guess things got a little crazy. I didn’t mean for that to happen.”

Walter gave her a sympathetic look. “I think we all had a little too much fun, but maybe we needed to let loose. We’ve been working so hard, especially you.”

“I feel awful,” she moaned. “In more ways than one.”

“No harm done.” He shrugged and sipped his coffee. “Nobody can be good all the time.”

“Exactly!” Tina exclaimed, giving Walter a little start.

“Okay, then.” He looked puzzled.

“I’ll explain in a minute,” she promised staring at her computer.

Lisa strolled into the office holding two mugs. She looked at Walter and smiled warmly as she set one down on Tina’s desk.

“I thought you’d want some tea.”

“I’ll see you later,” Walter said ducking out the door.

“Thank you,” Tina said to Lisa. “I feel so guilty about last night. I’m glad Kai is leaving today.”

“He’s trouble.” Lisa sipped her coffee. “Don’t feel bad. You didn’t do anything that wrong, except enjoy yourself and blow off a little steam.”

“With an old boyfriend.”

“Stop,” Lisa said firmly.

“Okay. Okay.” Tina looked back at the computer screen. “Can you see if Ken is in yet? I need to talk to him.”

Lisa picked up the phone on Tina’s desk and pushed three numbers.

“Hi. This is Lisa. Is Ken there yet? ... Okay. Send him up to Tina’s office. Thanks.” She hung up.

“I guess I could’ve done that,” Tina murmured.

“I’m going back down to the cafeteria to get something to eat,” Lisa announced. “Do you want anything?”

“Yes. Bring me back a muffin or something. Thanks.” She picked up the phone. “Walter, can you come into my office? Ken from IT is coming up. I have an idea, and I want your opinion on it.”

Ken arrived and she motioned to him to have a seat as she studied her computer screen. Walter walked in a few seconds later and leaned against the bookcase holding his mug.

Tina looked up at them. “Something occurred to me last night. It’s about the Naughty or Nice list. And, by the way, Ken, you did a great job on the spreadsheet.”

“Thanks,” he said.

“Anyway, I realized that we’ve been going about this all wrong.”

“What’s wrong? Do I need to tweak the spreadsheet?” Ken asked anxiously.

“No.” Tina shook her head with a smile. “I realized that there really are no *naughty* children. There are children who sometimes do naughty things just like there are adults who sometimes do bad things.” She glanced at Walter as she stood up and began to pace behind the desk.

“Good point,” Walter said.

“But it’s different with children,” Tina continued. “They’re innocent and they react to their environment. Maybe their home life is difficult or maybe they don’t get enough attention. Kids will act out when something is wrong. They don’t always understand or know how to communicate their feelings.” She stopped pacing and looked at each of them. “There are *no* bad children. Every child deserves a present.”

“Tina,” Walter said. “That’s a beautiful sentiment. I never thought of it that way, but I think you’re right.”

“But what about the spreadsheet?” Ken asked.

“I’ve been thinking about that. We still need the spreadsheet.” She rubbed her throbbing temples. “Sorry. I have a headache.”

“Go on,” Walter urged.

“What I’d like to do is write a letter to every child on the Naughty list. Then we have to let the mailroom know that we’re going to start producing the toys these kids have asked for.”

“I can start printing envelopes from the list,” Ken offered.

“Thanks, Ken.” She thought a moment. “Why don’t we do postcards? The postage is less expensive. Go ahead and print labels and see if you can find a picture to put on the front, probably one of my father in his red suit. I still have to write something to the kids.”

“Got it.” Ken jumped up and hurried out

Tina felt exhilarated and beamed at Walter.

“It’s an excellent idea, and I agree with you, but I don’t know if your father will,” Walter said.

“I’m in charge and I’m making the decisions,” Tina said adamantly.

He grinned. “I’ll go talk to the staff in the mailroom.”

“What’d I miss?” Lisa passed Walter in the doorway. “I got you a poppy seed muffin.” She placed it gently on a napkin on the desk. “Do you realize that all the napkins have Christmas themes on them? It’s Christmas all the time here.”

“Of course it is. We’re at the North Pole.”

“I’m aware of that. I’m just saying it’s fun here.”

Tina sat back down at her desk deep in thought. She swiveled and rubbed her temples.

“Can you go down and talk to the cafeteria staff about Thanksgiving dinner for everyone who will be here?”

“I just came back up,” Lisa protested.

“Are you staying for Thanksgiving?”

“I’m not going to desert you now. I’m with you all the way.”

“You’re a good friend,” Tina said with gratitude. “The best.”

“Fine. I’ll go back down,” Lisa said with resignation and sauntered out.

Tina took a long sip of tea. What could she say to these troubled children that would make a difference? Which words would give them the fortitude to overcome their difficulties? How could she convey to them that they were not forgotten and that somebody cared? She put down her mug and began to type.

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

*I’m writing to you from the North Pole. I’m concerned because I saw your name on the Naughty list, but I know that deep down all children are good. Sometimes we do bad things, but that doesn’t mean we’re bad people. If someone is mean to you, please tell your parents or your teacher or a grown-up that you trust. If someone treats you badly, it doesn’t mean it’s okay to treat someone else badly. Remember how it makes you feel. Sometimes it’s hard to be good, but it’s important to try. I want you to remember that I love you and you deserve all your happy wishes. Please try to believe in me as long as you can because I will always believe in you.*

Love,  
Santa

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Tina had never spent Thanksgiving with the staff before. Most of the elves lived in the area and went home for Thanksgiving, but there was a small group who had remained behind. Walter's kids had gone to visit his ex and Tina was glad he wasn't alone and that none of them were alone.

Having dinner with her argumentative family was something she didn't mind missing this year. Yet she was truly thankful for them and this remarkable legacy that had disrupted her life. She couldn't change who she was and she couldn't change her imperfect family, and for that, she was thankful as well. The cafeteria staff had provided good food and wine, and she knew she was right where she belonged.

The postcards had been mailed out to the children. She was hopeful that it would make a difference in some of their lives and was curious to see if any of their names dropped off the Naughty list next year. Either way, she knew she'd done the right thing. She was grateful for all that had happened and how everything seemed to be falling into place, except for one last detail. The delivery. There didn't seem to be a solution.

George emailed her nearly every day, and she enjoyed reading his accounts of life in the band. The CD had been released and was selling better than expected. This was good news for the band and she was happy for them. It was impossible to keep up with her replies, but he understood the pressures of her deadline. She missed him more each day and couldn't wait to see him on New Year's Eve. Nothing would stop her from getting on a plane in time for their date.

The end of the season was drawing near. They were on track to complete all the orders and have them ready to go. She felt a great sense of accomplishment, but she also had new respect for her father. Now she understood what it took to do this job. Now she understood his tenacity and dedication to this cause. Because it felt like a cause more than a job. Maybe he'd gotten burned out. Maybe anyone would. What a disappointment for him that his son couldn't appreciate the significance of this honor and had rejected it.

But she appreciated it. With all her heart. And then she suddenly knew what she wanted to do and was meant to do. It was the only answer. Why hadn't she considered it before?

“Walter,” Tina turned to him at the long table. “I’m going to do the delivery this year.”

He had just taken a sip of wine and coughed.

“That’s a fantastic idea!” Lisa shouted. “I love it!”

She could always count on Lisa’s enthusiasm and Walter’s support.

“I’m doing the delivery,” Tina reiterated.

She rose from her chair and announced to all at the table, “I’ll be the one doing the delivery this year.”

The elves burst into applause.

“We’re with you, Santina!”

“Here! Here!”

“To Santina,” an older elf stood and lifted his wine glass toward her.

“To Santina!” Everyone followed suit pushing back their chairs and standing to toast her.

She smiled and clasped her hands to her chest basking in the moment before returning to practical matters.

“Is there anyone here who can sew? I don’t think Dad’s suit will fit me. We’ll have to take it in. Who can sew?” She looked around the table.

Walter coughed again and cleared his throat. “I have a sewing machine. I have to alter my clothes sometimes. Even elf sizes don’t fit me right.”

Lisa tilted her head. “I didn’t know you could sew.”

“That’s great, Walter,” Tina said. “Now we just have to find the suit. I think it’s in the storage closet.”

“Are you sure about this?” he asked.

“Who else is there?” Tina shrugged.

She felt confident about her decision. It was the only answer, and the more she thought about it, the more enticing it became. If anyone deserved to sit in that sleigh, it was her.

“But,” Walter lowered his voice. “What about the Gift?”

Tina frowned. “That’s the only problem, but I’m a Claus. I hope the Gift doesn’t fail me. I guess we’re going to find out.”

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## 22 *\*Magical Nights\**

“Tina, I miss you. I wanted to hear your voice,” George said over the phone.

“I miss you, too,” Tina answered. “I’m sorry I haven’t replied to all your emails. The closer we get to delivery day, the busier it gets.”

“I know,” he said. “How’s it going?”

“Everything is going really well. I know I can’t count on Nick to do the delivery and that’s fine. It’s not his thing. I don’t need his help. I think I’ve got it figured out,” she said. “How are things there?”

“Great. The CD is still selling and we’ve been playing some local gigs. Life is good,” he said. “Except for one thing. You’re not here.”

“And you’re not here either.”

“I wouldn’t mind being up there again, but I’d probably just be in the way right now as busy as you are.”

“It’s crazy right now,” she agreed. “But tell me about the CD. Is it really selling?”

“Better than anyone thought. Robin’s been working on marketing, and he says the CD is doing well for a new band, but he thinks it’s probably because of the tour we did,” George said. “Anyway, I’m glad you found a solution up there. That’s good news.”

“Yes,” Tina said.

But there was something that was bothering her. The unbearable burden of guilt. She had to come clean.

“George,” she said softly.

Her chair was turned to the window. Frost clung to the outside corners, and she watched the reindeer kick a ball around by the main barn.

“What’s wrong?”

“I... I have to be honest with you.”

“Okay,” he said slowly.

“I went out with Kai one night. To the pub. Lisa and Walter were there. We drank a lot and danced a lot and I don’t remember much.” She blurted a quick confession and waited for his reaction.

“Did you have fun?” he asked.

“I think we had fun but...”

“Okay, I guess I could be jealous,” he mused. “It’d be easy to be jealous of Kai. You two have a history together, but I’m glad that you’re friends.”

“You are?”

“Sure. There’s nothing wrong with staying friends with an ex. Listen, Tina. You’re free to spend time with anyone you want. I just hope I get to share some of it with you too.”

“What? Are you perfect or something?” Tina wondered.

“Apparently, I’m just a guy standing in line,” he joked.

“You’re at the front of the line, silly.” She giggled.

“Whew! I’m glad to hear that.”

Tina sighed. “I can’t wait to see you, George.”

She hadn’t had to fret about his reaction. He’d made light of it, and it made her like him all the more. How had she gotten so lucky?

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There was another conversation Tina wasn’t looking forward to. She called her mother and confidently stated her intention to do the delivery. All she heard in response was the slight buzz on the phone that was always in the background.

“Mom, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m here. I’m not sure I heard you. Did you say you’re going to do the delivery?”

“That’s right. What do you think?”

“I appreciate your offer, but I don’t know if you can,” Clara said.

“You don’t think I have the Gift?”

“Not everyone has the Gift,” Clara said. “We assume that Nick has it but you never know.”

“But doesn’t the first son always have it?”

“I think so, but your brother... Well, he doesn’t have the dedication required...”

“I have the dedication. Maybe I have it.”

“But it’s usually the Claus men who have it.”

“Maybe all Clauses have it,” Tina suggested hopefully.

“Well, now I don’t think that’s right.”

“Why not?”

“Because... I don’t know. Because Santa is a man. We all know that.”

“Maybe it’s the reindeer who have the Gift and whoever sits in the sleigh...”

“I don’t think it’s that easy,” Clara said doubtfully.

“But there’s no one else, Mom,” Tina pointed out.

Clara sighed heavily. “I kept hoping Nick would come through.”

“Me too.”

“It’s not too late for your father to get on a plane and come up there.”

“It’s too dangerous to fly up here this time of year,” Tina reasoned. “Except on the sleigh, of course.”

“I don’t know what choice we have.”

“Me. I’m the choice, Mom. I have to have the Gift. I’m a Claus.”

“I know, honey, but there’s never been a female Santa. It just isn’t possible,” Clara said. “We really should’ve planned this better. I thought if we waited long enough, Nick would...”

“That was never going to happen,” Tina said. “Nick’s been telling us all along that he wasn’t going to do it.”

Clara sighed again. “I’ll talk to your father when he gets home from golfing. I’ll check the flights and he can...”

“No!” Tina declared. “I’m going to do it, Mom.”

“But I don’t think you can.”

“I don’t know why, but I think I can do the delivery. It feels like the right thing to me,” Tina tried to articulate. “The whole time I’ve been here has felt right. Like I belong here.”

“Well, you grew up there. It’s your home,” Clara said.

“That’s not it. I just feel like I can do this. I feel like it’s meant to be. I think I have the Gift.”

“Okay,” Clara relented. “I just hope you’re right.”

“I am,” Tina said with more confidence than she felt.

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Walter had taken in Santa’s suit. Tina asked him not to cut any of the fabric so someone else could potentially wear it in upcoming seasons. She wasn’t sure what the future would bring. And she was still worried about

the Gift. What would she do if the sleigh didn't take off? She was staking Christmas on a feeling of optimism.

Tina donned the suit and viewed herself in the full-length mirror in her bedroom. It felt a little bunched with the extra fabric, but it was soft and comfortable. She pulled on her black boots and buckled Lisa's wide black belt around her waist. Then she set the red hat with white faux fur trim atop her head. Her white hair was pulled back into a long braid down her back.

"What was I thinking?" she asked Lisa, who sat on the bed behind her. "How am I going to be able to do this? I don't know how it's done. I don't know if I have the Gift or where to go or what to do. All the kids will be waiting for their presents. I'm going to ruin Christmas."

"You look the part. Do you feel anything yet?" Lisa asked expectantly. "I thought maybe it was a magic suit or something."

"I don't feel anything except freaked out," Tina said with panic.

"Don't worry," Lisa assured her. "It's in your blood and the reindeer know where to go."

"There's no way I can do this. My mother was right. It's impossible," Tina said with dread. "Why didn't I let my father come up and do the delivery?"

"Too late. You can't wimp out now," Lisa said.

"Why did you let me think I could do this?" Tina stared at herself in the mirror. It looked like she was playing dress-up in her father's clothing. "I look ridiculous."

"You look awesome. Let's go see what Walter thinks. Come on."

Lisa led the way into the living room where Walter was waiting on the couch. His face lit up.

"It looks like it fits. You look official, Tina. Turn around."

"Walter," she said nervously as she turned. "I can't do this. I don't know how. I'm going to ruin everything."

He got down off the couch and came over to her.

"Of course, you can do this. You're the most qualified Claus I've seen since your father."

"But what about the Gift?" Tina protested. "What if I don't have the Gift?"

"My theory is that every Claus has the Gift," he responded thoughtfully.

“That’s not what my mother said. She said Nick might not even have the Gift. She said he doesn’t have the dedication.”

Walter furrowed his brow. “That could be true, but I think every Claus has the Gift whether they use it or not.”

“What does it do?” Lisa asked.

“From what I’ve witnessed, I believe it allows Santa to speed up while time slows down,” Walter said.

Tina stood twisting her black gloves in her hands on the verge of full-blown panic.

He turned to her. “I know you have it, Tina. Every Claus with the sincere desire in their heart has it.”

“That explains why Nick wouldn’t have it,” Lisa remarked.

“But I don’t know where to go,” Tina told Walter.

“The reindeer know the way.”

“But there are more kids this year than last year,” she said nervously.

“Get a grip,” Lisa ordered. “There’s no turning back now.”

“Tina, look at me.” Walter took her by the arms. “You can do this. I know you can.”

“Do you want to put on the beard?” Lisa asked holding up the fluffy, white beard she’d purchased online. “It’ll keep your face warm and, if anyone sees you, they’ll think you’re him.”

Tina shook her head and took a deep breath. Then another. Then another. She could do this. She *would* do this.

“I don’t need a beard. I am Santina Claus, and I’ll be doing the delivery tonight.”

Lisa and Walter looked at each other. This was it. This was what they’d all been working so hard for all these months. It was a momentous event in the history of the Claus family and the traditions they’d cultivated and preserved through generations. With a twist.

They descended the stairs down to the big kitchen filled with the scent of cinnamon and gingerbread. Tina approached the back door. This was where she’d viewed her father stepping outside almost two decades ago. She’s cried for him to stay and her mother had held her firmly in her arms as they’d watched him. That night was ingrained in her memory. She’d watched her father fly off into the cold night sky. Now here she was ready to do the same.



She stepped out into the frosty night. The giant sleigh was tightly packed with presents, and the reindeer snorted and stamped their hooves impatiently. Tina could see her breath swirl in the frigid air. She stood for a moment looking up into the dark moonlit sky. The magic that twinkled in the night lightly dusted her and a warm blanket of calm settled over her.

She strode down the line of tethered reindeer stroking each of them. Blitzen looked at her and nodded his approval and encouragement. They were going to do this. She climbed into the huge sleigh bulging with gifts as she'd seen her father do so many times before and strapped herself in. It was surreal.

Lisa stood shivering with cold and anticipation next to Walter. She couldn't believe that she was lucky enough to witness this. They raptly watched Tina pick up the heavy reins and turn to give them a little wave.

The reindeer's hooves crunched the icy snow, and the sleigh slowly began to glide along the frozen ground. They expertly broke into a gallop gathering speed. Lisa gasped when they lifted up with ease. She and Walter watched while the sleigh ascended higher and higher into the cloudless sky.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" Tina's voice echoed back to them.

Lisa jumped up and down with excitement.

The sleigh streaked across the sky leaving a faint blue trail in its wake. After a few moments, it disappeared with a tiny burst of blue light.

"She did it!" Lisa shrieked.

"I knew she could," Walter said wiping a tear from his eye. He was so proud of her.

They embraced each other with joy and hurried back into the warmth of the building. Lisa took one last look upward but the sleigh was gone.

Tina felt as if she were in a vacuum. She could hear the air rushing by and the pounding of her own heart. The air sparkled and shimmered around her. Her movements seemed to blur as an energy bubbled within her making it difficult to sit still. It was an experience like no other that few would ever know. It was the most perfect moment of her life.

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Tina's body felt thick and heavy. Her mouth was dry and her eyelids didn't want to open. Her mind spun with confusion. She tried to lift her

head.

“Tina?” She heard Lisa’s voice.

She managed to open her eyes. The room was blurry and a figure hovered by the bed.

“Lisa? Where am I?”

“You’re in your bed.” Lisa slowly came into focus. “Are you okay? You’ve been sleeping for two days. Walter said this is normal. How do you feel?”

“I’m okay.”

Her body felt stiff. She stretched and yawned. Had she dreamt it? Had it all been a fantastical dream?

“Do you want something to eat? Are you thirsty?” Lisa asked with concern.

“Can I have some water?”

Tina pulled herself up with effort. Lisa handed her a glass that she gulped right down. She felt thirsty and hungry and weak.

“I feel a little dizzy.”

“Don’t get up yet,” Lisa advised.

“Did I do it?” Tina asked groggily. “Did it really happen?”

“Yes! You did it!” Lisa cried with excitement. “I can’t believe it. It was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. You took off into the sky, and then poof, you were gone. What was it like?”

Tina tried to sort her fuzzy thoughts. “I don’t know how to describe it. It was an incredible feeling. I had so much energy, you know, like a little kid bouncing off the walls. The air even felt different. It was light and soft. Like you imagine a cloud would be.”

“Everyone’s been calling and I told them that the delivery was completed and that you’re okay.”

“You told my parents?”

Lisa nodded exuberantly. “I told your parents and Nick and George. Your mother said to let you sleep and that you’d be wiped out and thirsty and hungry when you woke up.”

“Well, she’s right. And I feel lightheaded.”

“All that is normal.”

“You told George?”

Lisa nodded again. “He said he can’t wait to see you.”

“I did it, Lisa,” Tina whispered. “I actually did it.”

“You did it. You rock!”

Lisa hugged her and Tina’s eyes filled with tears. And they laughed and cried together.

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Tina slept on the plane beside Lisa. Her energy was still depleted, but she was determined to be back in Florida for New Year’s Eve. She couldn’t believe she’d done the delivery. All the worry about Nick or her father being able to deliver the presents had been for naught. She had had the Gift all along. And it had been the most magical extraordinary night of her life. She still felt like she was going to wake up from the most wonderful dream.

Everything now felt different as if her reality had been slightly altered along with Santa’s suit. She understood more than ever her father’s stubborn devotion to his work and his fervent insistence on preserving and continuing the tradition that had been entrusted to her family generations ago.

She and her father now shared a unique experience and special privilege. She could appreciate all he had sacrificed. She was exhausted, yet grateful, and happiness lit her up inside. She felt proud to be a Claus.

Her mother grabbed her into a tight embrace as soon as they entered the condo.

“We’re so proud of you,” Clara said with tears in her eyes. “Our little girl did it.” She turned to Lisa. “Thank you so much for everything you’ve done.” She threw her arms around Lisa too.

“Thanks, Mrs. Claus.” Lisa sniffed and rubbed her eyes.

Santa got out of his recliner chair and ambled over. He’d lost weight and he looked healthy and relaxed. Except for some stubble, he was clean shaven. Tina wasn’t quite sure what he would say to her. She hadn’t respected his wishes and had done things her own way. She’d automated and updated and involved outsiders in the family business that had been unchanged for generations. And then she’d broken the most honored tradition of all and done the delivery herself instead of the firstborn son. She faced him with apprehension.

“Santina,” he said in a stern voice, and she braced herself. “You made changes without my approval. You made decisions without consulting me. You disregarded my explicit wishes.”

“I know, Dad,” she said softly. She had no energy to defend herself.

Then she noticed the tear in the corner of his eye. His expression softened more so than she could remember. The corners of his mouth turned up slightly. Was that a smile? He actually looked pleased!

“You’ve done a great job. Well done.” He put his arms around her and squeezed her for a few moments. “I’m proud of you, Santina. I guess times have changed.”

Tina couldn’t help it. Tears spilled from her eyes.

“Thanks, Dad.”

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“... Five, four, three, two, one! Happy New Year!” Nick yelled into the microphone.

George jumped off the stage and Tina rushed to meet him in the middle of the dance floor. They wrapped their arms around each other and pressed their lips together.

Confetti fluttered down from the ceiling sprinkling their hair and tickling her face as she got lost in his kiss. She opened her blue eyes to gaze into his brown ones and saw all that she felt reflected back. It was going to be a great year.

As they stood with their arms around each other, she searched for Lisa and Walter. She spotted them still sitting at the table and they were kissing! She was happy for Lisa and she was happy for Walter. He had flown to Florida after closing up the workshop just in time to celebrate with them. She was glad that Lisa had persuaded him to join them. They were so cute together. It warmed her heart.

Was it serious? Who knew? Right now, it didn’t matter. They were all together and that’s what counted in the first moments of this new year.

Tina looked up at the stage to see Isabella and her brother sipping champagne with arms linked. They laughed as their drinks sloshed onto the stage. She’d have to catch up with Nick later. She was still tired from her Christmas Eve ride, but nothing would’ve stopped her from being here

tonight. So many wonderful things were happening. She was so joyful in the moment that she thought she'd burst. Things had fallen into place better than she could've imagined.

She was Santina Claus, and she'd discovered her calling. It wasn't the future she'd planned, but it had been right in front of her all along. Nick hadn't been the next Santa as everyone had presumed. It had been her. Now she could finally embrace who she truly was. It would be exciting to make all the changes she'd envisioned for the company but had been afraid to implement. Lisa would be right there with her and so would Walter. She couldn't do it without them.

There were still some complications. A long distance relationship would be heart wrenching. She'd be at the North Pole for much of her time, and George would be in Florida or on the road. It would be tough, but not impossible. They'd make it work somehow. Their time together would become more precious, and she looked forward to all they would share.

"Happy New Year," George whispered in her ear. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Me, too," Tina whispered back.

It was a new year and it would be filled with love and friendship, fun and family, issues and obstacles, and many more magical nights. Life would happen between the perfect moments. And that was as it should be and would make them much sweeter. And Tina couldn't wait.

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## *From the Author*



I hope you enjoyed *The Daughter Claus*! Years ago, my mother told me to write a story about Santa's daughter. I resisted the idea but it played in my imagination. By the time I finished it, my mother had Alzheimer's and never got to fully enjoy the book. Mrs. Claus is named Clara after my mother. Thanks, Mom! It's the first in a series. I had such fun with the characters, I had to continue their stories.

If you enjoyed this book, please post a short review on Amazon and/or Goodreads. I appreciate every one and it helps readers decide whether to read this book. Thank you! Here's the link for Amazon:

<http://www.amazon.com/review/create-review?&asin=+ B00GSGND04>

Find out what happens next in *The Claus Cause*! The description and first chapter are on the following pages.

Each of my novels explores family and friendship, love and romance, relationships and life, and finding your power! I can't tell you how much it means to me to share what I write.

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## *The Claus Cause (Book 2)*

*Genres: Holiday Humor, Chick Lit*





There's a new Santa in town and not everyone is happy about it!

Tina Claus has been running the family business at the North Pole since Santa retired. She's finally found her niche and loves it. But Santa suspects his brother, Kris Kringle, will attempt to take over the family business and install his incompetent son as the new Santa. Because Santa is supposed to be a man, right?

In the meantime, Tina's brother, Nick, is enjoying success with his band, *Black Ice*, but has his own problems. His new guitarist is challenging his leadership of the band and flirting with his *Rock Goddess* crush, Isabella. He's also coming between Tina's best friend and her elf boyfriend. And Tina's first love shows up again to threaten her long-distance relationship with her brother's bandmate, George.

As Tina fights to maintain control of the North Pole and resist her irresistible ex-boyfriend, she's surprised to discover the true history of the Claus family. And it changes everything! Who knew?

More Christmas magic, love triangles, and girl power continue this fun series!

*“This was the perfect series to read in the days leading up to Christmas!”  
Teacher*

*“Once again, very enjoyable. Well worth reading if you like light-hearted,  
quirky, and romantic stories.” John New*

*“Great continuation to the series... more character development... will be  
finishing the last two books.” Kayla Merta*

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B017WE2Z7M>

Enjoy the first chapter next!

## 1 *\*A Warning\**

Santina Claus was still exhausted from delivering the presents on Christmas Eve. She couldn't imagine how her father had done it all these years. Santa sat across the oval dining room table from her in her parents' condo. He looked much healthier since his retirement last year. And now it was a new year. There were many good things ahead, and she was excited about the future. That is, until her father's warning.

He caught her eye and discreetly motioned for her to follow him. He pushed his chair back and disappeared into the kitchen. Tina glanced around the table at her family and friends. Her mother was raving to her boyfriend, George, about the veggie casserole her he'd brought over. Her brother, Nicholas Junior, was on his cell phone. And her best friend, Lisa, seemed to be having an intense discussion with her boyfriend, Walter, who was the foreman of the United North Pole Workers union. She'd have to ask Lisa about it later.

"What is it, Dad?" she asked him in the kitchen.

It was disconcerting to see him without his beard. He preferred to shave when he was in Florida. No one would recognize him that way.

"Tina, we have to talk," he said in a brusque voice. "I want you to be prepared."

"Everything went fine," she assured him. She brushed her long white hair back behind her shoulder. "I completed the delivery on Christmas Eve without any problems. I'm still tired, but everyone says that's normal."

"Yes. You did, and I'm very proud of you. You know, I always expected your brother to take over at the North Pole." He shook his head. "I thought this music thing would pass."

"I know. But I'm glad Nick is doing what he loves. Who knew that his band *Black Ice* would become so popular?"

She still couldn't believe it. She hoped they wouldn't go on tour too often. Otherwise she'd never get to see George, who played lead guitar. It was going to be difficult enough once she returned to the North Pole and he remained in Florida. Butterflies fluttered in her stomach with the memory of their kiss at midnight on the cusp of the New Year.

“Tina.” Her father’s gruff voice stilled the butterflies. “I’m afraid there are going to be problems with you running the family business at the North Pole. I didn’t want to mention this before. You stepped in at the last minute because of my health issues, and I appreciate it, but now we have to deal with this.”

“Deal with what?” She wasn’t quite sure what he was getting at. “Is it because Santa is supposed to be a man? I know it’s been that way for generations of men in our family, but I was the only one willing...”

“I know.” He nodded. “You’re more than qualified, other than being a girl.” He held up his hand to stop her objections. “Since it’s always been the tradition for Santa Claus to be a man, I had my doubts about you at first. But I don’t think Nick would’ve done as well at running the business. He’s... well, he’s not as focused, so I’m happy to hand it over to you. I have full confidence in you.”

“Thanks, Dad.” Tina waited for her father to continue.

“But I’m afraid my brother will object.”

“Uncle Kris?”

Kris Kringle was her father’s younger brother, and he was itching to control the North Pole. Her father had always griped about it.

“You know my brother has been jealous of me since we were kids,” Santa said. “Once he finds out that Nick isn’t interested in taking over for me, I’m sure he’ll push for his son to be the next Santa.”

“Cousin Kris?”

“Kris Junior is an incompetent idiot, and my brother is greedy. He’d cut corners and the quality will go down. He’d take the heart out of the business, and his son would run it into the ground.” He shook his head. “We can’t let that happen.”

“They can’t do that, can they? They don’t have any rights to the family business, do they?” Tina asked anxiously.

“I’d be surprised if they don’t go after it. I think they’ll try to get control on the grounds that each successor has always been male.”

“But that’s discrimination,” she said with indignation.

Santa shrugged. “Call it what you want, but there’s never been a female Santa before.”

“Until me.” Tina sighed.

“Can you bring the pie in?” Clara called to her husband.

“Your mother baked a pie with whole wheat crust and organic apples,” Santa said. “But it still tastes good.”

“Mom just wants you to be healthy,” Tina reminded him. “She worries about you especially since your heart attack.”

He grumbled as he picked up the pie and brought it out to the table.

“There you are,” Clara said.

George smiled at Tina as she sat back down across the table from him. The butterflies danced happily in her stomach. It made her feel warm all over when he smiled at her.

Nick was seated next to her and seemed to be brooding about something. She nudged him.

“What?” His spiky white hair matched her own color.

“What’s wrong? Who was on the phone?” she asked.

“Robin called to tell me that we might not be able to go back out on tour with *Rock Goddess* unless sales of the CD pick up.”

Robin was the manager of Nick’s band, *Black Ice*, and Tina knew that Nick had a serious crush on Isabella, the lead singer of the popular band, *Rock Goddess*.

“But I thought Christmas sales were good,” Tina protested.

“Sales were great, but he said we didn’t hit certain numbers,” Nick grumbled almost sounding like their father when he was grumpy. “It’s just like I said. Materialism is the curse of humanity. I mean, music is art. We shouldn’t have to hit some arbitrary sales number. I’m an artist just expressing myself artistically. You can’t put a dollar sign on art. The system is whacked.”

“I saw Isabella on stage with you at midnight last night. You two were toasting with champagne,” Tina recalled.

“Right. It was cool of her to come out and sing some songs with us for New Year’s Eve, but if they go out on the road without us…” He looked across the table at George. “We need to get back out there and perform for the masses. We need the energy of our fans. It feeds my creativity.”

“Robin said the sales numbers aren’t good?” George asked.

“I guess that’s something we don’t have to worry about.” Lisa leaned across the table to say to Tina.

What a crazy season it had been with Tina having to step in after her father’s heart attack. She’d gone up to the North Pole during summer

vacation from college in Florida where she'd been majoring in business. Walter, the elf foreman of the union, had helped her get up to speed. To her dismay, she'd begun to enjoy it. Then, somehow, her friend, Lisa had discovered her true identity and shown up to help. What a good friend.

"That's true," Walter said. As foreman of the United North Pole Workers, he was also the lead elf and in charge of the reindeer. "We don't have to worry about sales numbers. We just have to worry about keeping up with demand."

That was for sure. It had been crazy busy. And every year the population increased.

Tina thought she could sense some tension between Lisa and Walter. It concerned her. She hadn't been entirely supportive of their relationship at first. Lisa could be flighty and impulsive, and Walter had just gone through a divorce. She didn't want to see him get hurt again. He was such a sweet guy. With the age and height difference, Tina just wasn't sure it could work between them. But their romance had blossomed while they'd all worked together at the North Pole, and now they were so cute together.

"I bet we get a lot of sales this month," George said. "January is always a good sales month, Nick."

He was unfailingly optimistic. It was one of the things Tina liked about him.

"When would you have to go on tour again?" Clara asked.

"This pie is good," Santa spoke with his mouth full.

"Not for a few months," George answered. "Don't worry, Nick. We have time to work on some new songs, and if it's meant to be, it will happen. And in the meantime..." He smiled at Tina, and the butterflies jumped.

Lisa stood up and began clearing the table. Clara started to get up, but Tina stopped her.

"Mom, let us do it. You and George did all the cooking."

Tina quickly followed Lisa into the kitchen. "Is everything okay with you and Walter?"

"I don't know." Lisa sighed. "I'm so glad he came all the way to Florida to spend New Year's with me but, at the same time, it's freaking me out."

"Why?"

“I don’t know. I guess I’m not used to a guy who doesn’t run the other way when things get... you know.”

“Are things serious?”

“Don’t say that word!” Lisa looked horrified. “It hasn’t even been that long. I mean, I know I really like him. He’s so wonderful and I can count on him. It’s just starting to freak me out a little.”

“Then just take it slow,” Tina suggested.

“Yeah. But he wants me to go to Costa Rica with him. He goes on vacation every year, and he loves it there. I don’t know what to do. It sounds great and everything, but I’m freaking out. Am I just crazy or something?” Lisa looked at her with confusion.

Tina had to laugh at her expression. “Probably.”

Lisa giggled. She loaded the dishwasher while Tina put away the leftovers. She was so tired that everything was starting to seem funny. Lisa always made her laugh, anyway.

George entered the kitchen carrying the remnants of the pie.

“I think your father had three pieces,” he said. “Your mother wanted me to get it out of his sight.”

“I’ll put that away.” Tina took it from him.

“Hurry before your father comes in here.” Lisa started giggling again.

“Stop it,” Tina demanded. “I don’t have the energy to laugh.”

George took her hand. “Come with me.”

Santa had settled into his usual recliner chair in the living room and was watching TV. Clara was seated with Walter on the couch engrossed in a discussion while Nick stifled a yawn beside Walter.

George pulled Tina out the front door of the condo and into the cool air of early evening.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

“I just wanted you to myself for a while.”

She smiled at his words.

They strolled along the sidewalk of the residential neighborhood. The main street was a few blocks away, and they came upon a local playground that was empty. Dusk was settling around them as they sat on a bench and watched the sun sink slowly in the sky. Tina rested her head on his shoulder. If only they could hang onto the peaceful feeling of this moment.

But then she started thinking about Lisa and Walter. She didn't want to see either one of them get hurt. Were they all wrong for each other? What would happen if their relationship fell apart? They had to work together at the North Pole. Things could be awkward.

And what was going to happen to *Black Ice*? The band was Nick's dream. He'd be crushed if it crashed. What would he do? She couldn't imagine it. She wondered if Isabella was really interested in him or if he was just in awe of her. He sure seemed infatuated. She'd never seen him this way before. She sincerely hoped for the band's success even though she hated to think of George on the road with *Rock Goddess* again. Despite her trust in him, it was a bit distressing to know her boyfriend was hanging out with some cool rock chicks.

And then her thoughts returned to her father's warning. She'd had no aspiration to become the first female Santa. The responsibility had fallen into her lap while she was a college student. She'd reluctantly left college in Florida and returned to her childhood home to fill in for her ill father. She'd assumed it was temporary, but then her mother had convinced Santa to retire. She couldn't blame her. His health had been at risk. He'd been far too stressed and overworked and unhealthy. Retirement had been good for him.

So far, all Tina's business classes had paid off. She was able to continue her classes online, and Walter had helped and supported her. She'd never wanted or intended to return home and work in the family business. Her dream had been to find employment with a large international company that had nothing to do with toys and jet set all over the world.

Then, to her surprise, she discovered that she enjoyed the family business. Not only had she enjoyed it, but she was good at it. She knew it inside out and had a flair for it, and when it finally came down to it, she'd donned her father's red suit and climbed onto the enormous sleigh. She hadn't intended to do it but there was no one else and she'd had no choice.

What a magical night it had been! She found she had the Claus Gift that allowed her to accomplish the impossible. Her father had done the delivery on this night every year that she could remember. And now she had experienced the twinkle in the air, the rush of energy, the slowing down of time that was only possible on this one special night once a year to those who possessed the Gift.



And now she wasn't about to give it all up. Uncle Kris wasn't going to be able to wrest her destiny from her. She wasn't going to let down her father and the generations before her. She wasn't going to let down the children who counted the days until Christmas. She wasn't about to give up the North Pole without a fight.

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