

Who is Nicolas Cluse



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Chapter One

Scrape scratch scrape scratch

Tanner's bleary eyes popped open, and she grabbed for her Glock, tucked safely away but with easy access, in her nightstand. In precisely two seconds, she registered several things. One, Juliet was not lying next to her in their bed, and two, a strange, possibly dangerous noise came from the living room.

Juliet. The woman she loved with all her heart was in danger again.

Tanner carefully rolled out of bed with her gun held by her side. There wasn't time to put on clothes, and she didn't give two shits what the burglar, or whatever nasty character was out there, thought of her in her birthday suit. She would put a bullet in their head if one single hair on Juliet's head was harmed.

She crept over the carpeted floor, cognizant of the squeaky part of the wood covering the flooring just outside the bedroom. Tilting her head to listen for the menacing sound, she finally heard the telltale signs and straightened her body to her full five-foot-nine-inch frame. She stalked into the living room.

"Jesus Christ, Juliet." Tanner slammed the gun on the table and stood naked before her singing fiancé. "I almost shot you."

Juliet stopped singing Let It Snow and looked up at Tanner. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor with a string of lights over her lap. Next to her were three boxes, perfectly lined up, with typed labels on the outside: Christmas Tree Lights, Christmas Tree Balls, and Special Christmas Tree Decorations.

"Oh, good morning, honey. Did I wake you up? Um, your headlights are showing. Do you want me to make a fire to warm the place since you insist

on parading around in your birthday suit? Not that I mind or anything. I'm definitely enjoying the view."

"Funny. What are you doing? It's like 6 a.m.," Tanner grumbled as she crossed her arms over her chest.

"As soon as the stores open, we have to go out and find replacement bulbs."

Tanner narrowed her eyes and spied the small Christmas bowl on the coffee table with at least ten bulbs inside.

"What are those for?"

"We're out of green ones."

"So. Use one of the red, yellow, or blue lights."

"We can't have two of the same color next to each other." Juliet looked at her with a horrified expression.

"Oh no, we certainly cannot have that because that would surely end Christmas."

Juliet's hurt expression had Tanner quickly apologizing.

"I'm sorry. I'll make coffee." Over the last several months, Tanner had learned which teasing comments were okay and which made Juliet feel bad. Unfortunately, she didn't always guess correctly. Christmas was a bit of a sore subject and one to tread on lightly. She hoped her peace offering of coffee would help dig her out of the hole she'd gotten into. It was barely 6 a.m. Not a good way to start the day.

Over the loud noise the grinder made, Tanner heard Juliet say something. She shut off the grinder.

"What was that, honey?"

"I forgot. We can't go until later this afternoon."

"Why?"

"I told Margie we would watch little Harold this morning while she does her open house."

"Great, a perfectly good morning, and we'll be up to our eyeballs in baby poop and milky spit wads." Tanner groaned. She walked back into the living room. "Why'd you have to go agree to that? You know how ill-prepared I am to deal with a tiny human."

"You're not fooling me, big bad-ass cop. I saw you playing peekaboo with him the other day."

"You spied on me," Tanner replied incredulously.

"Well, duh, you know that's what I do."

"To others, you can snoop on others, but not me. I thought we'd clarified that. Do I need to tie you up again?"

"Hmmm, that could be fun?"

"I'm not suggesting some, you know...oh hell, why do I bother?"

"You can't change the spots on a leopard." Juliet grinned.

"I know, but Cisco keeps ribbing me, and I've got nothing to get him to stop. Why don't you turn your focus on him and give me something I can use?"

"I love your soft, sensitive side. You don't often let her come out and play."

"Wait, you didn't tell him about that brief moment of insanity, did you?"
Tanner panicked.

Juliet looked away.

"We might have been talking about, um, whether we had talked about having kids, and I suppose I might have let it slip when I said you'd make a splendid mother, a lot better than my own. He laughed. I had to provide evidence to back up my claim."

"Shit, Juliet. I don't mind you knowing about that, but Cisco? I'll never hear the end of it."

"Do you want me to talk to him? Ask him to go easy on you."

"Hell no, that'll just make it worse. Cisco will think I can't fight my own battles. So, when is the little rug rat coming over?" Tanner let a tiny smile appear on her face.

"In another couple of hours. So, can you help me with this so little Harold doesn't start putting things in his mouth that don't belong?" Juliet shuddered. "Every time I see that, it makes my skin crawl. Do you know how many germs attach themselves to the things that babies put in their mouths? Besides, they have sharp edges."

"You wipe everything down. Incessantly, with those bleach thingies."

"It doesn't kill all the germs. Nothing does."

"Then why bother at all?"

Juliet gave Tanner the look. She shut her mouth and escaped to the kitchen to finish making coffee.

"I'll just finish making the coffee before I start in on the other chore you have for me," she called out from a safe distance.

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Juliet quickly surveyed the room when she heard the doorbell. She was serious about removing anything that could be harmful to little Harold. She knew how fascinated he was with her set of keys, but she'd safely tucked them away on a hook he could not reach.

She frowned at how sterile the room looked. Everything was in its place, and that was a good thing, but babies needed stimuli. Damn. She didn't want to turn into her crazy mother. Maybe Margie had brought a toy bag with her again, and she could force herself to let him play with the items without freaking out about their lack of sanitation. When Tanner was there, she always helped. A gentle touch on her wrist before she did something irrational was a friendly reminder to put things into perspective. Oh well, it was right to put away the boxes, separate from the germs, because if Harold swallowed a tiny light, that would surely be harmful.

Juliet swung open the door and delighted in taking Harold from Margie. He was such a happy baby. When Harold was in her arms, she forgot about all the messiness attached to babies. He could spit up on her, and that never sent her into a tailspin. She was getting better. Her new counselor said she'd made amazing progress. She tended to fall back on old habits when she was alone or faced with everyday rituals, like cleaning or putting away groceries.

Taking care of Harold allowed her to relax and develop new habits. Harold was a form of therapy that was very, very good for her.

"Hello, handsome. Ah, if only you were thirty years older, oh, and I was straight." Juliet chuckled.

"No way. I'm not letting my little guy go up against Tanner. She scares the crap out of us most of the time. Although, she has softened with your influence. Nice job, Juliet."

"It's all show," Juliet whispered. "The other day, I caught her..."

"Do not finish that sentence if you value your life, Juliet," Tanner warned. She walked into the room and glared.

"Grab his bag, honey."

"Thanks for watching him. I've got a potential buyer for that big white elephant I've been trying to offload. He's a quirky old man. Oh, and get this,

his name is Nicolas Claus, and damned if he doesn't look like old Saint Nick."

"Get out," Juliet squealed.

"No, honest. Between you and me, it's seriously freaky. I don't think the rest of the townsfolk would mind if you checked Nicolas out. That is, if he buys the place. We need to ensure I haven't sold the place to some kiddie pornographer. Had enough of that for a lifetime."

"A license to snoop. Did you hear that, honey?"

"I'd prefer we do this the old-fashioned way. How about I run a background check on him?"

"Oh, would you, Tanner? Is that legal?"

"As long as we aren't doing it for nefarious reasons or personal gain." Tanner shrugged. "There is nothing illegal about a police officer running a background check when there is probable cause to be concerned."

Margie leaned in and kissed Harold's forehead. "You be good for Juliet and Tanner."

Harold giggled and clapped his hands.

Juliet snuck a look at Tanner, who had a smile on her face as she looked at the laughing baby.

The door shut, and Juliet held out Harold for Tanner.

"Tanner, can you please take Harold while I get the organic snacks I prepared for him?"

Harold's chubby legs kicked out as he squirmed.

"I can get them," Tanner offered.

"No, you root around and mess up my carefully organized pantry. Harold is not going to bite, you know, or at least not very hard. He's teething now, and it's natural for him to gnaw on things. That's why I have healthy treats for him."

"Oh, all right, give me the little chubby human." Tanner accepted Harold and immediately raised him high, bringing him down and pushing him to the sky again while he giggled.

"Stop that. He'll spit up on you, and don't call Harold chubby."

"He likes it. I give the little rug rat his own personal amusement park ride."

Juliet shook her head, but she was smiling. Tanner would make a wonderful mother. Now if only she could muster enough nerve to have a

serious conversation about having children and get some assurances from her therapist. Juliet wouldn't want to thoroughly screw things up with one of the most essential jobs on earth. At least she'd let slip, on purpose, the conversation with Cisco. Now all Juliet had to do was follow-up on that. She would wait until Tanner was panting and vulnerable. She knew just when to get her to agree to anything.

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"And the beautiful maiden tried to help the dashing knight, even though the knight had warned her to stay put." Tanner tickled Harold, and he laughed. "I know that wasn't very smart of the maiden. Unfortunately, the knight had no choice but to go after the big bad dragon after one of the dragon's nasty offspring had hurt the beautiful maiden..." Harold sat on the rug, clapping his hands as Tanner continued her story, "...so the dashing knight snuck into the dragon's lair and quish." Tanner put her hands on her throat. "She choked the life out of his punk ass."

"Tanner! Don't swear, and don't tell Harold those kinds of stories. Why can't you read him a fairytale?"

"What? Like they're any better. Have you read the fairytales? There's stuff like ripping hearts out, poison apples, cooking children in ovens, and turning someone into sea foam. Geez, that shit is far scarier than what I make up?"

"When he gets older, he's going to repeat your stories, and then what'll you do when people put two and two together? No more extra-curricular activities for you, Ms. Knight in Shining Armor." Juliet rolled her eyes. Tanner thought Juliet might have a point. The fairytale did closely resemble how she'd eliminated Miguel, the piece of shit who'd made the grave error of sending a hit man after Juliet, thinking Juliet had stumbled on their child pornography ring.

Ding Dong

"Saved by the glorious bell." Tanner jumped up and grinned.

Juliet sat on the floor next to Harold and began playing patty cake with him.

Tanner answered the door, and Margie made a beeline for Harold and Juliet.

"How's my little guy? Were you good for Auntie Juliet and Auntie Tanner?"

Tanner mouthed Auntie Tanner and scowled. Juliet laughed.

"What? What did I miss?" Margie asked.

"Nothing. Tanner is being her grumpy self."

"You know, little Harold lights up when he comes to visit. I think he has a big crush on Tanner. When he's old enough, I'm going to have to explain to him that she doesn't bat on his team. It's going to break his little heart." Margie started howling with laughter and picked up baby Harold.

"Fine. You two yuck it up. Hey, how did it go with St. Nick? Did you get a driver's license or any other information so I can run the check?"

Margie stopped laughing and frowned. "No, he doesn't have a driver's license. Nicolas is buying the house with cash, and I mean cash. He gave me a red bag filled with hundred-dollar bills. I'm not kidding. What could I do? He had the asking price and the money? The title company made him prove he got the funds legitimately. He had the proof. I did ask him why he wanted to live in S'Ville. You know what he said?"

"No, what?" Tanner sat down on the couch and leaned in.

"He has a special case here that requires his personal attention."

"Did he mention where he's from?"

"All he said was somewhere up north. He's a nice old man. Very polite. Ya know, Nicolas is just odd, I guess, with the name and no driver's license. He said he didn't need one for his preferred mode of transportation."

"Well, he has to have an ID or something. You can't travel or basically do anything if you don't have a picture ID or license. So he must have shown that to the title company or his bank. Can you get a copy of that, and I'll see what I can find out?"

"Well, you know they aren't supposed to do that," Margie hedged.

"Pfft, I know what S'Ville is like. You all never follow the rules. There are a lot more people getting into everyone's business in this town besides my lovely fiancé. Don't worry. I don't follow all the rules either." Tanner winked.

Juliet had been methodically packing Harold's toy bag. Then, while Tanner played on the floor with Harold, she'd snuck a few items into the washing machine and disinfected the others. Tanner chuckled as she

thought about how she'd let Juliet believe it had all been done inconspicuously.

Juliet grabbed the handle of the neatly packed bag that had also made it into the washing machine and followed Margie to the door. "I've got the bag right here. I'll walk you out."

"You washed everything, didn't you?"

"Um, there was a purple stain."

"Grape juice, Juliet, it won't kill him. Besides, I read that our current fascination with disinfectants is actually harming our children. They need to develop immunities. Otherwise, when the really nasty germs hit, they won't be able to fight them."

"Oh. I didn't know that. I'm sorry."

"Hey, don't worry. Little Harold gets exposure to plenty of germs in my house. A domestic goddess, I am not. Harold is a lot cleaner than I am."

"He is?" Tanner piped up.

"Yeah, ever since I, you know, made that poor decision to, uh, well, he cleaned up real nice, and now he's like Mr. Persnickety with himself and the house. But when he's out of town, Little Harold gets to build up his immunity."

"When does Harold go out of town?"

"There are conferences for morgue people. It is a profession, you know," Margie snipped.

"Sorry, sorry. I didn't mean to suggest otherwise," Tanner amended.

Tanner was happy to hear Margie defend her husband. Even though she had an aversion to people who cheat on their spouses, nobody was perfect. As a paranoid, ruthless vigilante herself, she wasn't about to throw stones as she sat in her glass house. Harold forgave Margie, and frankly, he was the only one who counted in this scenario. She didn't think she could ever forgive Juliet, but she didn't have to worry about that because Juliet would never let someone else's spit mix with hers. Somehow, it was okay when she let Tanner make love with her. True love did that. It allowed a person to grow. She'd like to think she'd played a small part in Juliet's growth, and she knew for certain that Juliet had helped her grow into someone who cared about others and let it show. Damn, she loved that woman, every single facet of her, including her adorable quirks. If they did have a child, she wanted it to be a mini Juliet.

Chapter Two

Juliet was holding Tanner's hand, smiling and waving at the town folk with her free hand as they strolled down the main drag of Riverville. S'Ville didn't have any stores, so they had to go to the big town to shop for extra bulbs. Maybe the pharmacy would have some. She didn't want to drive all the way to Vicksburg for replacement lights. Tanner would certainly grumble if they had to do that. A one-way forty-five-minute drive on a Saturday was not her idea of a good time.

"Let's see if Garrison's has what we need."

"You mean what you need. All I need today is you naked, squirming underneath me while I find that elusive A-spot. Or would you rather I pay attention to your U-spot? A tiny brush against your opening or deep penetration. What's your preference today?"

Juliet flushed and felt the moisture down below. With anyone else, she'd make a beeline into the first bathroom she could find and pull out the wet ones, but she felt deliciously naughty, leaving the damp spot on her panties for Tanner to later discover. Tanner had that impact on her. No one else in her life had come close.

"Stop that, or I'm dropping you off at the station and searching for the bulbs on my own while you do that background check thing for Margie." She smacked Tanner across the chest.

"Maybe you want me to stimulate your G-spot?" Tanner had an unrepentant grin on her face. Juliet suspected Tanner knew precisely what she was doing and relished the impact of her teasing.

"That's it. Go play cop, and I'll meet you at the station. I'll either walk there or catch a ride."

"It's too cold to walk all the way to the station. I'll send Paul to bring you over."

"Isn't that an abuse of power?"

"Nah, the kid is so happy to have something to do. It breaks the monotony of the day, and he gets all moony-eyed whenever you're around. The poor kid has a crush on you even though he knows I'll kick his ass if he ever gets too close. Oh, and you are definitely not into his man parts. Of course, he knows that, but at least he gets to circle your orbit and look at you. I'm magnanimous enough to let that happen."

"Oh, look at you, magnanimous. Did you learn that in your latest crossword puzzle?"

"Funny. I'm not just some dumb cop, you know. I read a lot."

Juliet grinned. "Oh, I know, and I reap the benefits. It's how you learned about the A-spot and U-spot. I swear, I'd never even heard of those two places before."

Tanner used her hand to buff her nails against her chest. "I read every single thing I could on those places until I was sure I could find them, and boy did I. When you screamed my name in ecstasy, I knew I'd hit pay dirt."

Juliet pushed Tanner. "Go. Get the contraband from Margie and do that background check."

"Contraband. I hardly think a copy of some old dude's ID is contraband."

"Whatever, just get out of my hair for a little bit while I find what I need."

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Tanner sat in the leather office chair and swiveled back and forth. Patience wasn't a strong suit for her. She'd called Margie to see if she'd had luck obtaining the ID. Margie told her that after she fed little Harold, she would bring it by.

"Hey, Tanner. How come you're here on your day off?" Paul strolled into the station.

Tanner's initial reaction was to tell him, "none of your fucking business," but he was a nice kid. Juliet kept telling her she needed to be nicer to him because he worshipped the ground she walked on and followed her around like a little puppy.

She thought it might be time to introduce him to the gray areas in police work without taking it too far. Besides, they were perfectly within their legal right to conduct the search. She didn't think the kid had it in him to follow in her footsteps, or Cisco's. Both of them tended to push the envelope. There wasn't anything gray about becoming a low-life's judge, jury, and executioner. That was all black, a dark horror, and very few were privy to that secret. Cisco, her brother in blue, had finally managed to introduce her to the sanctioned group of law enforcement officers who outright broke the rules, and she'd fit right in.

"Margie's worried about a new resident of our fine town, who is frankly a bit suspicious. So I'm going to run a background check on him. We don't need a pedophile in our nice little town, now do we?"

"But...but...don't we need a court order or his permission to do that?"

"No. We aren't doing it for personal reasons. We're doing it because a concerned citizen brought odd behavior to our attention. Didn't that rinky-dink academy you went to teach you anything?"

"I could wait for Margie and run it for you?" Paul offered.

"Nah, I have a job for you. I think you'll like. Juliet is at the pharmacy looking for Christmas lights or something, and she needs a ride to the station. I'll stay back and wait for Margie while you pick her up and bring her back here."

Paul bounced on his toes and smiled. "I can do that for you, Tanner."

Tanner mockingly scowled at Paul. "I better not hear that you were flirting with her."

"Aw, Tanner, she doesn't even know anyone but you exists. At least, not in that way. Sure, I know she pays attention to everyone in town...she's like the most observant person besides you...aw...you know what I mean."

"Relax, I'm just teasing you." Tanner chuckled. "Juliet is a hard person to ignore, even when she's trying to be in stealth mode."

"I'm really excited about the wedding. You guys are good together. Besides, she makes you be nice to me."

"Nobody makes me do anything I don't want to do," Tanner huffed.

"Okay, maybe she has a little bit of influence, but that's not the same thing."

"I'll just go pick her up right now, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, go ahead."

Tanner leaned her head back on the chair and was about to take a quick nap when she heard the happy gurgling sounds of baby Harold.

Margie bounced him on her hip as she placed a piece of paper on Tanner's desk.

"Here's a copy of his ID. I'm really hoping you don't find anything on him. He seemed like such a nice old man, but then my inner radar on people is not very good." She shuddered. "I can't believe I let that snake Aiden lay a hand on me. It still makes me nauseous to think what he did to those poor girls."

"Karma always has a way of taking care of things. Unfortunately, when you associate with vipers, you have to expect to be bitten by one."

"Well, I'd say a bullet to the head is an awfully dramatic bite."

"Maybe, but he deserved it."

"Oh, I'm not disputing that one bit. I say let all the rapists, pedophiles, murderers, and drug dealers duke it out with one another and save the taxpayers a boatload of money."

"But then I'd be out of a job." Tanner thought to herself that, if only Margie knew, she was personally saving the taxpayers by taking that special interest in the scum of the earth and scrubbing them out. Juliet would like that analogy. Of course, she'd have to remember to share that with her later.

Little Harold started fussing, and Margie's efforts to settle him were for naught. "I better put him down for his nap. Call me after you've run the background check. I'm dying to know if he has a record. I'd feel bad for selling him the place and subjecting everyone to another rotten apple."

"Don't worry. I can be persuasive when I want. If Nicola is trouble, we'll encourage him to move or find other ways to ensure he doesn't present a danger to anyone."

Margie pushed open the door and waved at Tanner as little Harold made his feelings known. The wailing child had Tanner reconsidering whether talking about having children was really a good idea or not. Everyone always said it was different when they were their own. But she wasn't convinced of that.

Tanner moved close to the monitor and stared at the screen in disbelief. Holy shit, this guy moves around a lot. Too much.

Nicolas Claus had moved to a new city every December for the last thirty-odd years. At least, that's how far back the record went. He didn't have any criminal convictions or arrests, but his frequent moves concerned Tanner. He wasn't in the military, so that would not explain this out-of-the-norm background. She wondered what he might have to hide. Perhaps he was some kind of con man who frequently moved before someone caught on to his scam.

She needed more information, and Tanner wanted to dig into the oddity of paying cash for a home. Maybe he was some kind of counterfeiter, but surely the banks would have caught that. Follow the money. It always told the story.

Juliet wouldn't like it, but replacing the light bulbs would have to wait. Perhaps she could appeal to Juliet's innate curiosity. She did tend to stick her nose where it didn't belong. A con man was on the safe end of the continuum. Juliet would readily agree to have a conversation with the new resident of S'Ville. A friendly neighborly chat.

Tanner pressed a button to log off and shut down the screen. She almost grabbed a cup of the swill that Paul had made this morning but thought better of it. They could swing by the coffee shop before heading to the old house. With the search complete, she didn't have anything to occupy her time. She decided to pull out her cell phone and razz Cisco while she waited for Juliet.

Grinning, she pushed the button and waited for Cisco to answer.

"What. I'm busy."

"One of your girlfriends came to see me. Musta had a hole in that condom of yours cause she's preggo, buddy. Merry Christmas, you're gonna be a daddy. Juliet thinks you'll be great. I sure hope the kid looks like her mother, though."

"Shut the fuck up. I am not, am I?" There was a note of hesitation in his voice.

"Yeah, really. Better stock up on diapers." Tanner laughed.

"That was not funny. If I did father a child, it would be a perfect specimen. But, hey, I can give you two my sperm. Juliet says you were

playing peekaboo with some kid the other day. I wish she'd thought to video it."

"Keep yucking it up, and I'll break into your house and poke holes in all your condoms, and then it won't just be me punking you. Seriously, dude, you know you shouldn't just rely on condoms. Biggest advantage to being a lesbian is no unplanned pregnancies."

"Whatever. Why are you calling me? Bored or something? Where's Juliet?"

"I'm waiting for her. She's getting some replacement lights for the Christmas tree."

"Why didn't you go with?"

"I needed to do a background check on this new resident of S'Ville. Speaking of that. What would you think about a guy who has moved every December for the last thirty-plus years? And the dude's name is Nicolas Claus."

"You're punking me again, aren't you?"

"No, I swear, this one is on the up and up."

"Hmm, either he's a nutball or con man."

"Yeah, I thought con man, but I can't figure out his angle yet. He paid cash, and I mean cash, for the house, not a check."

"Weird. I'd say counterfeit, but that doesn't add up because he'd have to clear things through a bank. So, it makes no sense."

"I know, right?"

"You're gonna talk to the guy, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I'm on it as soon as Juliet comes to the station."

"You got Paulie Boy to get her, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"Man, that's cold. Poor guy has such a crush. I don't blame him. She's a catch, you lucky dog."

"Yeah, she is. Hey, gotta run. They just pulled up."

Juliet pushed open the door and grinned, holding up a bag.

"See, they had them. I'm not the only one who is particular about which colors can shine next to each other. The new clerk assured me I was not the only person to ask about the replacement lights."

"That's nice, honey." Tanner stood and gave Juliet a quick kiss. "Hey, are you up for a little research for your book?"

"Really?" Juliet asked excitedly. "Who are we going to spy on?"

"Not spy. We're going to pay the new guy a visit. Ask a few questions, that's all."

"Hey, how come you're not asking me to come with you?" Paul asked.

"Because you'll be too busy keeping the streets of S'Ville safe."

"Aw, come on, Tanner. I never get to do the fun stuff."

"Nope, you don't. Sorry, Paul, but life isn't fair, and anyone who says it is, well, they're a fucking liar."

"Tanner," Juliet chastised. "Be nice. Paul, we'll let you know everything. It really is good to know that you'll be patrolling the streets today. You never know when you'll be needed, and we wouldn't want to take you away from the people who need you to serve and protect them."

"Okay." Paul blushed. "I guess I should go back out then." He had an extra strut in his walk when he left the station.

"I think I got it all off." Tanner brushed her index finger over Juliet's nose.

"What? What's on my nose?" She started to dig through her bag.

"Oh, just some brown stuff, you big brown-noser."

Juliet looked up and glared. "Not funny. Come on, don't we have an old guy to interrogate?"

"We are not interrogating him. We're just gonna ask a few questions. By the way, do you know which house Margie sold to the guy? I wasn't really paying attention earlier when she started jabbering about unloading some white elephant."

Juliet rolled her eyes. "The house where Aiden met his untimely demise with a little assistance from you."

"Oh, that one. I wonder if they ever got all the blood off the floor. I felt kinda bad about that."

Juliet shook her head. "You would choose to feel bad about that."

Chapter Three

Tanner pressed on the latch, opening the gate on the tidy white picket fence. Juliet noted how nicely the owners had cleaned up the place. After the murder, they'd done everything in their power to make the house attractive to prospective owners, but no one was interested in buying a home where a dead guy had been found with a bullet in his head.

They cleaned the path to the house of snow. There was a string of lights around the perimeter of the roof and all along the evergreens surrounding the small A-frame. Juliet thought that when it got dark, the place would look very festive. She had talked with Tanner about buying the place since it was bigger than Juliet's house, but they never got around to making an offer. Juliet had focused most of her energies on the wedding plans, and the place was probably outside their budget. Tanner would just as soon have gone to Las Vegas and had some fake Elvis marry them, but Juliet wanted everything perfect with a proper ceremony and honeymoon. They scheduled the wedding far in advance, and Tanner had left all the plans up to Juliet.

Tanner rapped authoritatively on the door of the house. Juliet got all tingly when Tanner adopted that take-charge persona.

The man who answered the door was not what Juliet expected. His age was hard to pinpoint, but he had to be at least in his sixties with his silver mane and matching beard. His cheeks were rosy, and damned if his blue eyes didn't twinkle in amusement. If anyone in town wanted this guy to play Santa Claus, he'd be a shoo-in without any stuffing or alterations to his face.

"Hello." He waved his hand, gesturing for Juliet and Tanner to enter. "Please come in out of the cold, and we can discuss whatever you beautiful ladies wish to discuss. It'll give me an excuse to serve milk and cookies and steal a few for myself. What Mrs. Claus doesn't know won't hurt her." He

winked and started laughing. Juliet couldn't believe it when his belly shook, and it did look like a bowl full of Jell-O.

"How come Mrs. Claus isn't here with you?"

"Oh, she had to resolve a minor issue at the workshop. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to join me this year. It will be the first time she hasn't been able to help in many years. She can sometimes get through to people when I can't."

Tanner raised her eyebrow but stepped inside. Juliet followed. She had to admit to taking an instant shining to the man. There was no way he could be anything but a harmless old man.

The inside of the house was cozy. The previous owners had done a fabulous job of removing any evidence of the crime that had occurred in this very room. Beautiful new hardwood floors had replaced the stained carpet. A tasteful rug sat underneath the coffee table and provided even more warmth to the room.

Juliet felt the toasty heat emanating from the fireplace and noticed the soft glow. The place was immaculate, with not a speck of dust anywhere. Juliet would know. She moved her keen eyes around the room, looking for dirt. She didn't find any and was content to sit on the loveseat the old man gestured to.

"This place is lovely and so clean," Juliet remarked.

"Cleanliness is important, Juliet." The old man laughed again.

Tanner narrowed her eyes and sat next to Juliet. "How'd you know her name?"

"I make it a point to learn the names of all the special people I plan to bring joy to, Tanner." He winked.

Juliet thought she heard a teasing emphasis on Tanner's name and noticed the twitch in her clenched jaw.

"Well, we seem to be at a disadvantage. You know our names..." Tanner let the comment dangle.

He laughed again. "Oh, you know my name, all right, and every single place I've lived for the past thirty-three years. I'm afraid that records don't go back any further than that, but I'm happy to fill in the blanks for you, Tanner. You will be my greatest challenge. So wary and skeptical of the world, yet you are sitting next to someone so different from yourself. Juliet, you will help me, my dear, won't you?"

"Fine, I don't know how you found out. Too many gossips in the damned town, I suppose. But why don't you enlighten me on why I shouldn't run a strange little man like you out of town? It seems to me that a person who moves to a new place every year has something very big to hide."

"Today, you won't believe the truth, so I'll just say my motives are anything but nefarious. I only bring comfort and joy to special people during the holiday season. I have the means, so why not?"

"I generally look at both means and motive when unraveling a crime. Let's say I believe that you have the means. What is your motive?"

Juliet felt like she was watching a tennis match. The man was odd, but she didn't sense any ill intent.

"Same as yours, Tanner. To make the world a better place to live in. We have very different approaches, and I hold no judgment regarding yours. I only hope you will afford me the same courtesy. Now let's eat. I never met a cookie I didn't fall in love with." He reached for the plate of chocolate chip cookies and selected the largest one, taking a big bite. "Oh, forgive my manners. Would you like something other than milk?" he mumbled as he was chewing.

"Milk is good for me. I love milk and cookies," Juliet enthused.

"Are you being purposely obtuse, Mr. Claus?" Tanner narrowed her eyes. "What the hell is that supposed to mean, 'to make the world a better place to live in?' I hope there wasn't some underlying threat to your comment about not holding judgment about me. Just what approaches are you referring to?"

"Oh, Tanner, you misunderstand. I would not think about threatening anyone. That would be more in line with your tactics. I neither condone nor find fault with your methods. I am in the business of adding joy, and you are in the business of removing evil. Both have their place in this world."

"Let's ignore your insinuation that you know anything about me, my methods, or my motives. Instead, I'm concerned about the fact that you continue to evade my questions. I'm waiting for a clear rationale for why you've chosen to move here and spread your joy," Tanner said with derision.

"Hmmm, I was told of your paranoia. You'll be a tough nut to crack. I'll look forward to the challenge. So, Juliet, tell me. Do you wish to have a boy or a girl?"

"Pardon me?" Juliet choked on the milk she'd just swallowed.

"Oh my, I've jumped the gun again. You haven't talked yet with Tanner." Mr. Claus put his index finger on his mouth. "Well, no time like the present, don't you think?"

"Um, I don't even know if I want children. I can't imagine bringing an innocent being into my special brand of crazy would be very wise." Juliet could feel Tanner stiffen next to her.

"Oh, nonsense. I have it on good authority that you have so much to offer. Your love will shine through. No parent is perfect. Take Tanner here. She won't be perfect, but she'll do a fine job of raising your little bundle of joy."

"I did tell her that. I think she would make a wonderful mother."

"Juliet!" Tanner exclaimed.

"What?"

"Can we get back to my question? No more bullshit. Why did you move here?"

"Fine, but I warned you. Skeptics never believe me." Mr. Claus sighed. "I have chosen you two as this year's recipients for the Christmas wish program. What I'm about to share is classified. Can I trust you?"

"I'm a snoop, not a gossip. Your secrets are safe with me. I won't put you in my book, even with an alias name, so you're not recognized." Juliet looked at Tanner, who had her arms crossed over her chest. Juliet's curiosity was off the charts. She had to know what this odd little man would say next. She leaned forward.

"If you're about to reveal something illegal, I'm afraid I can't hold that in confidence as an officer of the law."

Mr. Claus laughed. "Oh my, I do find that amusing, given your choice of tactics, but you have no worries there. Nothing I am about to reveal is illegal or immoral."

"I'm waiting, Mr. Claus." Tanner's posture remained openly hostile.

"You can call me Nick, or rather Saint Nick. You can also call me Santa Claus, but I don't hold onto any ridiculous formalities except from children. I do believe it is important to teach respect to youngsters. I think we've gotten away from that, don't you agree?"

"Oh, I agree," Juliet interjected. "You know my mother was a bit nuts, but she taught me manners. You can go a long way with please and thank

you."

"Are you out of your cotton-picking mind, Juliet? Do not reinforce this crazy old man's fantasies. He is no more Santa Claus than I am the Easter Bunny."

"Oh, but you played an adorable Easter Bunny. The kids loved you."

"I heard about that. It was one of the things that tipped the scales in your favor. So when you convinced Tanner to do that for the egg hunt, I knew you were a worthy couple."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you knew when and how she'd managed to do that. I don't suppose telling you that she'd gotten me to agree when her head was between my—"

"Tanner!"

"What? If he's all-knowing, surely he'd have known when you were being naughty, or would that be considered especially nice?" Tanner grinned.

"I think that is squarely in the naughty category. Good thing we don't monitor people's bedroom activities. That is strictly forbidden."

"Okay, which mental institution did you check yourself out of? Or did Cisco put you up to this? That son of a bitch. I knew he was up to something. Well, you know what? I'm going to rile that wily bastard up by going along with every little thing. The mystery of the holiday season and all. I'm going to convince him I believe in Christmas magic, and he's just jealous that Santa Claus didn't pick him to bestow a Christmas wish on. So, what are you supposed to give us?"

"A baby, of course," Mr. Claus said.

"Figures. He probably dreamt this whole prank up when you told him about me playing peekaboo with little Harold. See what you've started now?" Tanner glanced at Juliet. "Well, if Cisco wants a prank war, he's got one. I'm going to deliver an Oscar-winning performance. He'll think I'm as batshit crazy as old Nick here when I'm finished. You're going to help with this, Juliet. It's only fair since you started this whole thing."

"I don't think Cisco is behind this."

"Riiight. What did he tell you to convince you to play along?"

"Um, I'm serious."

The deep belly laugh permeated the small room, and Juliet noticed the jolly old man's incredible mirth. He was good if, as Tanner suggested, Cisco

hired him for a prank. She had to admit, she almost believed he was telling the truth.

"As long as I reach my primary objective this year, it makes no difference to me how we proceed," Mr. Claus added.

"Come on, honey, phase two of the Christmas wish prank is about to begin." Tanner pulled Juliet to her feet. "Thanks, Santa. I'd say it's been fun, but I think the entertainment is just around the corner." She started whistling Joy to the World, and they exited the tidy A-frame.

Chapter Four

Tanner had to admit, Cisco's little prank was both festive and inventive. She couldn't wait to get back home and call him.

Juliet attempted to insist she wasn't part of the gag on the ride home. She finally settled back into the seat and shrugged.

"Fine, whatever. You two knock yourselves out." Then Juliet mumbled under her breath, "I already have two kids. Why would I want another?"

"I heard that, and Cisco started it."

"Oh, brother. If I'd just eaten a bowl of alphabet soup, I could shit out a better retort." Juliet grinned.

"How long have you been saving that one?" Tanner asked.

"It's a good one, isn't it?" Juliet chuckled. "I read it on one of those memes that go around on social media about a month ago. I changed it slightly. I think it said argument instead of retort."

"What do you do, write them down and wait for the perfect opportunity to pounce?"

"Maybe. There's nothing wrong with being organized."

"Oh my God, you have a file, don't you?" Tanner laughed. "God, I love you. Don't change one bit, Juliet. We are going to have a lifetime of laughter."

"I love you, too, but honestly, I'm not in on this little prank. Although, I do think it would be worthy of my contributions. I'm going to have to talk to Cisco and ask him why he didn't try to rope me in."

The car pulled up in front of Juliet's house. Tanner couldn't help herself. She'd moved in but didn't consider Juliet's place theirs. They hadn't yet found a home they could afford that met their unique requirements. Juliet wanted something she could keep in pristine condition, and Tanner preferred to buy a house close to the station with enough space to have an

office. She had her cabin with a makeshift office that allowed her to get away when she needed to, but Juliet refused to live in that 'disgusting rat hole.' She believed that no amount of scrubbing would erase the memory of almost being killed by not one but two psychos sent to eliminate her.

"Um, you don't need help with those lights, do you?"

"Yes, I do. You're not going to get away with leaving me to decorate the tree all by myself. We have to do it together. And it has to be done today."

"Why?"

"It's exactly fifteen days until Christmas."

"So?"

"Three times five, fifteen. Multiples of three."

"What's so special about five? Why not twelve? You know, three times four."

"Because Christmas is on the twenty-fifth." Juliet huffed as if it were obvious.

"Oh. Well, how long will it take to do the Christmas thingy?"

"Don't act so enthralled. Tanner, decorating the tree is an important tradition to me." Juliet pouted.

"Okay, sorry. I promise I'll be right there with you to untangle the lights."

"They don't need untangling. If you put them away properly, you don't have that problem. It's people like you who toss them in a box willy-nilly that have to spend hours untangling lights each year."

"I do not do anything willy-nilly," Tanner defended.

Juliet handed the bag with the lights to Tanner and then unlocked the door to the house. "You can set that on the floor next to the tree. I'll get the string of lights."

She left the room, and Tanner suspected she had put them back wherever she had them stored before bringing the decorations out. Tanner smiled as she envisioned the boxes in the corner of the closet with neat labels on the wall, indicating exactly where the boxes should be stored.

When Juliet returned to the living room carrying the large box with the lid, Tanner moved to the floor and waited patiently for Juliet to provide detailed instructions. She set the box next to the bag and carefully removed the top.

Someone neatly wrapped the string of lights around a thick piece of corrugated cardboard with small notches on two of the edges. Tanner had to admit it was an ingenious way to ensure the lights wouldn't tangle.

Juliet carefully pulled on one end and plugged the lights into the closest wall socket. Then, holding the cardboard, she unraveled the lights. Finally, after she had unrolled a few feet, she set the cardboard down and pulled off the offending light that wouldn't blink.

"Okay, can you find a blue bulb, please? It's in the plastic baggie inside the box."

Tanner peered inside and found the baggies with the various replacement bulbs, each separated by color. She opened the extra stash, plucked out a small blue bulb, and handed it to Juliet.

"Here."

"Thanks." Juliet pushed the new bulb into the tiny socket and frowned when it didn't light up. "How did this burnt-out light get into the plastic baggie? Did you do that? I told you I'm not part of the prank. So you didn't have to do that to me."

"I swear. I didn't. You must have been distracted last year when you put them away. I seem to recall..." Tanner wiggled her eyebrows.

"Whatever. Can you just give me another blue one? It's a good thing I bought extras. Grab one from the new ones I got."

Tanner grabbed the plastic bag from the pharmacy, pulled out the bag of lights, and tore open the package. She emptied the bulbs on the floor, picked out a blue one, and handed it to Juliet.

"Here, try this one. If it doesn't work, I think our trip to the store was for naught. You probably have a faulty set of lights. You know these aren't exactly made of gold. We should do what I always do, toss the old ones out and buy new ones yearly. It solves a whole mess of problems. There's no need to wrap them carefully, keep replacement bulbs all orderly, or buy new ones." Tanner dusted her hands together. "Problem solved."

Juliet pushed the bulb into the empty socket and grinned when it lit up.

"Yes, problem solved, now hand me a green one. Oh, and while you're sitting there twiddling your thumbs as I find other burnt-out lights, you can separate those colors and put them in the appropriate baggies. We can't have little Harold coming across one of the bulbs and choking on it."

Tanner smiled. "No, we certainly cannot have that."

"And when we have our own little one, I know you won't want them gnawing on anything they could choke to death on."

Tanner started coughing. "I'm choking to death right now."

†

Juliet had taken pity on Tanner after springing the baby comment on her. She knew it would elicit a dramatic response, but she hadn't really expected Tanner to literally choke on the teasing remark. She'd jumped up and grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator and a glass.

Tanner waved away the glass, and Juliet hadn't pushed it, even though you never knew what might grow on those bottles. Tanner grabbed the bottle, untwisted the cap, and took a large swallow.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make you choke."

Tanner lifted the bottle to her lips and gulped down more water. Then, when her coughing fit was under control, she pinned Juliet's eyes.

"You want a baby, don't you?"

Juliet pushed the lights aside and sat next to Tanner. "I know I shouldn't even consider bringing a child into my craziness, but yeah, I do. I can feel my biological clock ticking in my head, and you know what?"

"What?"

"It's got an uneven rhythm that's driving me nuts. I think the damn clock won't be satisfied until we at least have a serious conversation and decide once and for all what we're going to do."

"I do love your quirky thought processes." Tanner laughed. "Oh Juliet, you know I love you to pieces, and if it were in my power, I'd wave a magic wand, and you'd be pregnant. Fertility clinics and sperm banks, they're very costly. I don't have that kind of money, and neither do you. Forget the other potential issues we need to talk about. For the record, I think you'd make a wonderful mother. I'm the one you should be worried about. Look, I'm not saying no. I just think we shouldn't rush into things. I don't know if Cisco was serious, but he offered to, you know...." Tanner made an open fist and simulated beating off.

"Tanner!"

"Well, that's what he'd have to do, in a cup or something. I don't exactly know how it works. I guess they freeze the little guys. I wonder if we could

send him to a bathroom, shove a magazine in his face, and then put it in a turkey baster. Ew...then he'd know what we were doing after he finished with his part. You know I'd never hear the end of it."

"Okay, I guess we haven't gotten all the details worked out yet, but I do want to raise a family with you, Tanner. I want a little girl or boy to have the childhood I never had, and I want to prove I can break the cycle of crazy."

"You can. You have. I love you, and I guess the idea is sorta growing on me. I'll do some research while I'm bored at the station. Okay?" Tanner leaned in and brushed her lips against Juliet's. "You better start sterilizing the turkey baster. Hmm...that gives a whole new meaning to the word sex toy."

"We need to finish with these lights, or it'll take all day to get the Christmas tree just right."

"I suspect it'll take all day, no matter what." Tanner grinned. "Perfection takes time."

†

Tanner walked into the tiny room Juliet had cleared for her so she could have some privacy. That one small gesture had touched Tanner to the core. Juliet had recognized Tanner's need to escape to her office occasionally and make plans with Cisco, or on her own, to right a few wrongs that managed to escape the sensitive scales of justice. She suspected Juliet needed her own moments as well. Both of them had been living alone for a long time, and the small house created a forced togetherness that, for the most part, was just fine, but they each needed their own space on occasion.

Tanner had two reasons to contact Cisco, and now they'd miraculously merged. First, she would convince him she believed in Christmas miracles and had met St. Nick in the flesh. Then, since she was also a practical sort, she wanted to take him up on his offer to provide the other half of the DNA equation for their bundle of joy.

He'd probably have a heart attack with either piece of information, and she was very much looking forward to the conversation. She grinned as she picked up her phone and pressed the call button.

"What?" Cisco answered.

"Listen, don't laugh. I usually don't go for all the mystical stuff, but Juliet has been a good influence on me. Honestly, I think I just met St. Nick. The man isn't just a ringer for the old dude. There's something about him. You know that old movie, *Miracle on 34th Street*?"

"Did you get into the whiskey again?"

"No, really, I'm wondering if maybe it was based on some kind of, oh, I don't know, real-life facts. Maybe there is a certain kind of magic or fate or something. I mean, look at Juliet and me. Who'd have thought people like us could actually find their lid? My granny always used to say for every pot, there is a lid."

"Don't be talking that Hallmark horseshit. You don't believe in miracles. Give me a fucking break, Tanner."

"A person can change. You know I've changed a lot since I met Juliet. She's been good for me."

"Sure, she's softened your edges, but what the hell softened your head? Please don't tell me you got religion or something."

"No, not exactly religion. But don't you think it's possible there's something out there that's bigger than us? Ya know, bigger than our puny existence or insignificant problems?"

"No, I don't, and neither do you."

"Anyway, I'm also calling because...um...is that offer still good?"

"What the hell are you talking about now? What offer?"

"You know, the offer to be the baby daddy?"

"Seriously?"

"Yeah, you know I don't trust a soul more than I trust you. I'm getting teary-eyed just thinking about a little boy or girl with maybe your eyes or nose."

"What about my mouth or hair? I've got a nice mouth and a full head of hair."

"No, I'd rather the little tyke get Juliet's mouth, and you gotta admit, no one can top her beautiful hair. It's thick and luxurious."

"Fine, then I suppose I'll have to contribute my eyes or nose."

"On second thought, your nose is kinda big."

"Is not."

"Is too. Focus, Cisco. I just asked you a big question, and I haven't heard an answer yet."

"Well, if you're not yanking my chain, I'd love to be the baby daddy. You know you could do a whole lot worse. But can you steer the little rug rat away from law enforcement?"

"Yeah, I hear ya. I'd rather they choose a different occupation. Good idea."

"You really gonna do this?"

"Yeah, we are," Tanner answered honestly. "Juliet really wants this, and I love her. I'd do anything to make her happy. Besides, I told her the idea is growing on me, and I meant it."

"You're gonna be great parents, and I'll be the best whatever you need me to be, daddy, uncle, you name it." Tanner could hear the sincerity in his words. She almost felt terrible punking him on the other part, but she wasn't going to give up on the prank just yet. She'd only just begun.

†

Something wasn't quite right with the tree, and Juliet cocked her head to the right, trying to find the problem. There weren't any bald spots without lights or ornaments that she could see, so that wasn't the problem, but there was something. She could almost feel it, like a shiver up her spine. Her eyes traveled to the top. Bingo. The angel was just a tad bit too far to the left. It almost looked drunk, like it was leaning to the left or something. No, no, no that just won't do. A drunken angel.

"What are you doing?" Tanner asked.

"Would you go get the stepladder, please? The angel is crooked. She looks drunk."

"Well, it is the holiday season. So why can't angels imbibe like the rest of us? Let me get you a glass of wine, and you won't notice."

"Funny. Can you just get the ladder? You know I can't let it go? I'll think of it all night long, and then that thing you do with your fingers will be totally wasted on me."

"Fine."

Tanner walked to the hall closet, opened the door, and then removed the stepladder from the special place Juliet set aside for storage. After setting up the ladder next to the tree, she climbed the three steps.

"Okay, tell me when it's the way you want it. I'd say when it's straight, but I don't even want an angel to go straight." Tanner grinned. "Get it?"

"You're in a good mood."

"Phase one is done. The fish is on the hook. Cisco thinks I've gone all mystical on him. I plan to invite Mr. Claus to dinner on the same night Cisco plans to drive over." She moved the angel to the right. "How's that?"

"A little more to the right."

"Oh, and he agreed to be the baby daddy."

"Really, Tanner?" Juliet jumped up and down. "You're not punking me like you are Cisco? That would be really mean."

"No, hon, I'm not. We can start trying whenever you want. Our baby will be beautiful as long as she or he gets most of their DNA from you. Cisco is reasonably attractive and free."

Tanner stepped down and gathered Juliet in her arms, and kissed her.

"What role do you think we should have him play in our baby's life?"

"I don't know. Cisco said he would do whatever. Daddy, uncle. I think he was just as excited as you are."

"What about you?"

"Honestly, I'm a little scared, but yeah, I'm excited. Well, not excited about poopy diapers. That kinda grosses me out, and I'm frankly amazed you haven't fallen into a major tailspin whenever you change little Harold."

"I wear gloves. It's not a big deal. Once all the gross stuff is removed, I don't mind using my bare hands to rub lotion on him and toss some powder on those cute little butt cheeks. It's kinda fun. He gets all giggly, and it warms my heart. I love the little guy, and I know I'll feel the same when it's our baby."

Suddenly, Juliet looked worried.

"You and Cisco aren't going to have some kind of competition with our baby? God forbid the two of you tease him and begin to play your little tricks. Promise me you aren't going to punk our child?"

Tanner smirked.

"Tanner!"

"What? I played tricks on my siblings all the time, and they're fine. Besides, we only punk the ones we love."

"I had to fall in love with a cop," Juliet mumbled and shook her head.

Chapter Five

Tanner walked to the post office, pulling her police-issued jacket collar against her ears. There was an icy wind whipping around and landing squarely on her neck. She wanted to collect Juliet after her shift at work so they could go together to invite Nicolas Claus over for dinner. She hoped he didn't have plans the weekend before Christmas because that was the only time Cisco could get away. He'd agreed to spend Christmas with Tanner and Juliet because they were the closest thing to family that he had. Juliet's grandmother was going to Arizona with one of her gal pals. Tanner's family had asked her and Juliet to join them, but she didn't want to overwhelm Juliet with her loud and boisterous siblings, nieces, and nephews.

Tanner leaned against the wall and watched Juliet push back a lock of hair as she handed Clark his mail. She smiled at him, and he reveled in the attention. He still hadn't made an honest woman of Scartlett, but at least they were openly dating now.

Juliet was so beautiful, and Tanner loved to just watch her. She looked up, and that smile Juliet reserved for Tanner spread across her face.

"Hey. Are you already off?"

"Nah, I have another hour or so, but I thought I'd come by and pick you up. I want to stroll over to Mr. Claus's house and invite him to dinner next weekend."

Juliet frowned.

"We can take the cruiser if you think it's too cold out. The wind is very nippy," Tanner amended.

"I don't mind the cold or a brisk walk. I just don't think you should go through with your prank. Nicolas seemed like a nice old man, maybe a little nuts, but so am I, and for that matter, so are you. I don't enjoy involving him in your little game with Cisco."

"Hey, I'm not the one who started this, and that guy isn't nuts. He's playing a part."

"Tanner, I'm not so sure of that. I honestly think Cisco didn't put him up to it. You're sticking that nice old man in the middle of some make-believe war you think Cisco started."

"Oh, I don't think so. I know douchebag started it."

"Hey, that douchebag is going to be the father of our baby. Can't you be nice for once?"

"He's getting a free dinner out of this. That's as nice as I get." Tanner grinned.

"That's not true. You two always have each other's back and are constantly doing favors for one another. Although, I don't really understand the need to keep track of who owes whom. God, I hope our bundle of joy does not follow in either of your footsteps. Instead, let's encourage the sciences. Maybe a nurse or a doctor."

"Yeah, Cisco and I already talked about that. A cop is definitely out of the question. We've already made that decision."

Juliet arched her eyebrow. "Oh, you did, did you? Let me remind you that since I'll be having this baby, I retain over sixty percent of the influence on the little tyke. Besides, we might not like what they choose as a vocation, but we should support our child no matter what. Of course, that doesn't mean we can't exert subtle influence here and there." Juliet smiled.

"Fine. Now, can we go see Mr. Claus, or rather, Santa?" Tanner laughed.

"Whatever. I'm going to ignore your childish games and do my best to be hospitable to that nice old man. I'll be happy he has a place to go for the holidays. I know he talked about a Mrs. Claus, but she isn't here with him. Sometimes people can't accept it when their spouse dies. I wonder if she's passed away or they got divorced. He did say something odd about why she wasn't with him. The poor guy is probably very lonely, and maybe that's why he gets a little mixed up."

"Great. So, are you almost ready to go?"

"Yeah, let me get my coat, and we'll walk the short distance to the house."

Before Tanner and Juliet had reached the front door of the cozy house, Nicolas Claus had opened the door and was smiling broadly.

"Oh, this is wonderful. You've come back. Mrs. Claus will be so pleased." He winked. "She always thinks I can't do this without her. I assured her I'd be able to handle it on my own. Come in, come in. That wind is rather wicked, isn't it? I have milk, cookies, and some hot chocolate. On a windy, wintry day, that might be the perfect beverage. I thought that up myself, without my dear wife having to suggest it." He grinned.

Juliet couldn't help herself. His grin was infectious, almost as much as when he laughed. She found herself smiling back at him.

"I'd love some hot chocolate. Bonus points if you have the tiny marshmallows to go with it."

"Oh, we don't want to disturb Mr. Claus. We only wanted to invite him to dinner, right, hon?" Tanner had her fake smile plastered on her face.

"Nonsense. I'm sure you both have time for hot chocolate before dinner. I'd love the company. I don't suppose pizza goes very well with hot chocolate or milk and cookies, for that matter, but I've ordered one myself. To be honest, Mrs. Claus does all the cooking, and well, there isn't much to choose from. I don't think the townspeople have warmed to me yet, but the pizza delivery guy is a nice fellow. I've made note of that on my list. Perhaps you'd like to join me. I can certainly call in for a second pie."

He had already turned and begun walking through his front door.

Juliet shrugged and followed him as she grabbed Tanner's hand and pulled her inside. She liked the old guy and was tempted to accept his invitation, but she didn't think hot chocolate went well with pizza. Yet she didn't want to hurt his feelings.

Tanner rolled her eyes, which earned a backhand from Juliet, who mouthed, be nice.

"Thanks for the invitation, but we have dinner plans," Tanner answered.

"We do?"

"Yes, we do," Tanner insisted.

"Let me put on the kettle. It's so easy nowadays with those little packets. All I have to do is pour the hot water and stir." Mr. Claus waddled over to the kitchen.

"It is, isn't it," Juliet concurred.

"So, listen, we really can't stay long, ya know, dinner reservations and all, but would you like to come to dinner either on the twenty-third or Christmas Eve? A buddy of mine will be visiting then, and since you're all alone, we insist you join us along with the other orphan."

"Orphan?" Mr. Claus laughed, and his belly jiggled again.

"That's what we call people who don't have family near during the holidays. I decided last year to bring all the orphans together, and Tanner went along with it because she loves me. Cisco, her friend, won't admit it, but I think he really likes it when we invite him for holidays. He brushes it off because it's not manly to be touched by the invitation, but I can tell it touches his heart."

"Cisco is a good man and the key to your Christmas wish." He pointed to the loveseat and sat in the large wing-backed chair.

"Bingo, I told you the rotten bastard was behind this," Tanner leaned over and hissed in Juliet's ear.

"Shhhh," Juliet whispered back.

"Yes, I do believe I've chosen well. The skeptics are always a great deal of fun for me." Mr. Claus reached over and picked up a cookie. "I love these cookies. Will you serve cookies at dinner?"

"Sure, we'll have some Christmas cookies," Juliet answered.

"So, dinner?" Tanner brought them back to the original question. Juliet knew only too well how singularly focused Tanner could get when she was on a mission.

"Christmas Eve will be perfect. I'd love to come." The kettle whistled. "Oh, there's my cue to prepare the hot chocolate."

Tanner leaned back on the loveseat with a self-satisfied grin, and Juliet shook her head.

When they left, Juliet noticed how his cane, which was propped against the wall, had a perfectly carved reindeer's head at the top, and if she wasn't mistaken, it was probably supposed to be Rudolf. She giggled when she pointed to the red nose, and Tanner rolled her eyes again.

Chapter Six

In the week before Christmas, Tanner had arranged for an appointment at a fertility clinic. Juliet worried her endometriosis was severe enough to cause issues with getting pregnant, resulting in her womb refusing to be the vessel for a new life. The news had not been the best, but Juliet had taken it in stride. Or at least she tried to put on a brave front, but Tanner knew she was devastated.

The pregnancy rate, even with treatment, if they used Cisco's sperm, was a pitiful nine to fifteen percent. However, if they tried in vitro fertilization, the range was so broad that Juliet was justifiably discouraged. Although it might increase their chances to forty-two percent, they knew they couldn't afford to go that route.

Juliet sat in front of the tree, watching the blinking lights. Tanner kissed her forehead and sat down next to her.

"Cisco says he'll keep wanking off and driving over for periodic visits until you conceive. He told me he doesn't care if it feels sacrilegious to beat himself off on Christmas Eve. He'll slip into the bathroom and provide us with a sample to use. I told him he was demented."

"I know you're just trying to make me feel better."

"Who knows, maybe we all can make a Christmas wish, and it'll come true."

"You don't believe in that," Juliet said.

"No, I don't, but you do, and I'd do anything to make you happy. Besides, I bought like ten new Mosies that are all being sterilized as we speak in the dishwasher. They come already sterilized, but I knew that wouldn't fly with you. It can't hurt to be ultra-prepared."

"Mosies? What the heck is that?"

"I found it on the internet when I was searching for the best way to make love with a turkey baster. It's a doc-approved syringe for home insemination. The tip is rounded for more comfort. Kind of like a dildo with a purpose." Tanner wiggled her eyebrows.

"You just want an excuse to, you know..."

"Guilty, but I've been doing some research, and I think I've found some useful tricks to increase our odds and, coincidentally, add a whole new level of pleasure."

"Oh, really? This I gotta see. Show me the website."

"No way. Gotta hone my sexual prowess with a series of surprises—"

The doorbell rang, and Tanner stood to answer it after stroking down Juliet's arm.

When Tanner opened the door, Cisco began speaking without greeting Tanner.

"So, listen, I did some research, and my sperm's good for at least sixty minutes. After I, uh, you know...you have plenty of time to get down and dirty with your girl. I'll just hand you a cup of my best swimmers and make myself scarce."

"Hello, Cisco." Juliet laughed.

"Oh, hey, Juliet."

"Don't you two ever give each other proper greetings? It's like you enter conversations in the middle and completely skip the mandatory cordials."

"Waste of time. Yeah, I read that too, Cisco, plus I picked up a few new techniques. Google is my friend. I couldn't believe the detail on the various techniques." Tanner laughed.

"Oh, do tell, lesbian sex. Tell Uncle Cisco all about it."

"Don't be a perv." Tanner punched Cisco in the chest.

"So, where's Santa Claus?" Cisco asked.

"He should be here any minute." Tanner grinned.

Ding dong

"Ah, right on cue," Tanner added and rushed to the door.

"Hello, Tanner."

"Santa!" Tanner exclaimed and pulled him into a bear hug.

He laughed heartily.

"She's trying to punk me, isn't she?" Tanner heard Cisco mutter.

"I think she's trying to get you back because she thinks you set this all up. You know, you and the nice old guy she's crushing in an overly affectionate hug," Juliet whispered back.

"I really didn't arrange this."

†

Throughout dinner, Juliet watched while Tanner tried every trick to get Nicolas Claus or Cisco to fess up to the prank, but neither budged an inch. Juliet was amused by their antics but kept out of the melee.

Mr. Claus had waved away the offered apple or pumpkin pie and reached for one of the Christmas cookies sitting on a plate in the middle of the coffee table.

"Do you have any milk?" he mumbled as he chewed on the cookie.

Juliet jumped up and grabbed the jug of milk she'd bought specifically for Mr. Claus since she'd noticed he hadn't consumed the hot chocolate he'd made for them when they visited. The only beverage he seemed to drink was milk. She poured a large glass, grabbed a coaster, and set the coaster and milk on the table before him.

"So, Nick, busy night tonight, huh?" Cisco's eyebrow rose, but he continued to sip his coffee. He'd taken to calling him Nick earlier in the evening.

"Oh, yes, but I do have a lot of helpers, so it's not as difficult as it used to be. My reputation as a kind boss has spread, and I believe I lead the charts of the top one hundred employers, making it easy to hire dutiful assistants."

Cisco burst out laughing.

"Yes, I suppose working for Santa Claus would be amazing to add to one's resume," Tanner jumped in.

Mr. Claus grabbed one more cookie and stood. "I'm afraid I must be going now, but before I go, Juliet, may I place my hands on your belly? It is necessary to answer your Christmas wish."

Juliet wasn't sure who was punking whom, but a small part of her wanted to believe in miracles. Sometimes she was superstitious, so she thought, what the hell, why not?

She smiled at him and said, "Sure."

"Okay, that's it. You are not touching Juliet's body. This has gone far enough," Tanner yelled and jumped up.

The jolly old man touched Tanner's shoulder. "I promise my motives are pure. Please try to see the good in the sea of evil you usually focus on. Let your love for Juliet guide you."

"If there's even a chance..." Juliet lifted her eyes to Tanner and pleaded with her.

Tanner nodded but didn't take her eyes off Nicolas Claus. On his way to Juliet, he briefly touched Cisco, and Juliet thought she saw a tiny spark. Cisco didn't react other than with a quirk of his head.

Juliet sent a silent prayer to the universe as Mr. Claus gently laid a hand on her belly. The touch was so brief it barely registered with her, but the small amount of heat gave her a warm feeling inside.

"Merry Christmas to all and to all a good night." As Nicolas Claus left, he waved goodbye.

At that moment, Juliet believed he was Santa Claus, and her wish would come true. When Tanner made love to her that night using Cisco's sperm and the Mosie, she convinced herself that it was possible Santa had helped along the spark of a new life.

Chapter Seven

Tanner was worried. Juliet sat with her head on the table. She'd said she didn't feel so well and looked pale in the morning light. They were both up early because Margie was coming over. She said she had surprising news involving both of them but wouldn't reveal anything. Tanner had wracked her brain about what she would do for Valentine's Day because Juliet had been uncharacteristically introspective since Christmas. It was a little over a week away, and she didn't have a clue what to buy for the woman she loved.

"Here, I made you breakfast. Maybe that will help you feel better." Tanner had finished making the scrambled eggs and placed the toast on the plate.

Juliet lifted her head as Tanner set the breakfast in front of her. She took one look at the eggs, slapped her hand over her mouth, and went running into the bathroom.

"Juliet..." The doorbell interrupted Tanner. "Shit. Honey, I'll get the door, and then I'll be right in."

She answered the door. "Hey, Margie. I'll be right back. Juliet's sick. Make yourself at home."

Juliet was brushing her teeth and looked slightly better.

"You okay?"

Juliet nodded.

"Margie's here."

"I'll be right there. Why don't you offer Margie some coffee?" Juliet swished water into her mouth and then spit it out.

Tanner wondered why Juliet had staunchly refused coffee since Christmas, preferring tea.

Margie had a bag from the pharmacy and sat patiently in the living room in their recliner.

"What's that?" Tanner asked.

"It's for Juliet and all part of this whole strange...I don't even know how to describe it," Margie said.

"Describe what?" Juliet strolled into the room.

"I think you both should sit. I have precise instructions from Mr. Claus."

Margie pulled a set of keys from her pocket.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tanner sat on the couch, and Juliet sat next to her.

"Yesterday, an attorney representing Mr. Claus brought paperwork, keys, and instructions. He was unequivocal that I present the keys to his house and give you the pregnancy test today. Um...do you think it's possible you have morning sickness?"

"Maybe. I've been praying." Juliet blinked.

"No, it can't be. Can it?" Tanner asked. "Keys to his house?"

"Yes, it's all perfectly legal. The house is yours, well, yours and Juliet's. He said you would need the extra room for the little one."

Juliet grabbed the bag from the pharmacy.

"Oh, Tanner. I think I can squeeze out some pee for this." She ran out of the room.

"I'm afraid to hope for this," Tanner admitted.

"The world works in very mysterious ways. You two are going to be wonderful parents." Margie patted her hand.

The silence was deafening as they waited for Juliet, and then Tanner heard the sweetest declaration since Juliet had told Tanner she loved her.

"We're going to have a baby!"

Chapter Eight

Juliet and Tanner sat in front of a blinking tree. Not a single ornament was out of place as Tanner bounced a baby on her knee. She pointed to the top of the tree.

"See, Nicky, we replaced the angel with a star this year because that's what I wished upon one night, while your other mommy put her faith in a fat old man."

"Tanner! Don't listen to her." Juliet smacked Tanner.

The brisk knock on the door startled both of them. Tanner handed Nicky to Juliet and answered the door. Margie stood there with a beautifully wrapped package in one hand and held onto little Harold with her other hand.

"Oh, hey, Margie. You didn't have to get us a gift."

"I didn't. It was on your doorstep. I brought little Harold over for his play date with Nicky." Little Harold giggled.

"Come on in. It's cold out." Tanner scooped up little Harold and put him on her shoulder. "How's the view up there?" she asked as she turned her head up to the little boy.

"What's this about a package?" Juliet asked.

"It was on the doorstep," Tanner answered.

"Oh, goody. I love surprise gifts. Just like Nicky. He was our little Christmas surprise."

Tanner rolled her eyes. She still wasn't sure she believed in all that mumbo jumbo about Christmas magic and Santa Claus. She merely thought they were the recipients of some rich old guy's eccentricities. But, if he needed to believe he was Santa Claus, so be it. Juliet had insisted they name their little boy after him.

Juliet tore into the package and pulled out a baby mobile with eight tiny reindeer. The small card fluttered out.

For the little guy's first Christmas. Peace, Santa.

"It couldn't be, could it?" Tanner asked.

"Is it so bad for us to believe in Christmas magic or Santa Claus?" Juliet asked.

"I guess not, and if Santa Claus really did bring us little Nicky, I guess belief in the improbable is a small price to pay." Tanner looked up at the ceiling. "Thanks, Santa, wherever you are."

Note from the Author

The characters in this short story are from my novel, *Captivated*, available on Amazon, Barnes and Noble, Smashwords, Bella Books, and the Affinity Rainbow Publications website. If you enjoyed the story and/or the writing style, I hope you will check out my other books from Amazon. Here is a link to my Amazon page:

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