

Chapter One

December 21st—84:00 hours to Eve Launch

After twenty years of ‘wedded bliss’ to the original Bad Boy of the Northern Hemisphere, my life is not all Sugarplum Fairies and Joy to the World. I could fill pages about my life with Kris Kringle, but I wouldn’t want to destroy your childhood delusions about Santa Claus.

Don’t get me wrong. I love my wickedly charming husband. He’s a wonderful father. A steady provider, and still makes all the right moves in bed. Ohhh yah!

Yet, I wanted him to look at me and wet himself in fear.

I was that mad.

So what did Kris do that had me contemplating divorce with Eve Delivery just hours away?

Grab some coffee and have a seat. I need to vent and this is going to take a while.

~ * ~

The morning Change drove through the gates to my life and ran me over began like any other. Embraced by floor-to-ceiling mullion windows, my kitchen sparkled silver and gold despite the late December morning gloom. Fragrant cinnamon-apple oatmeal simmered on my polished copper stove. A cheery fire crackled in the stone hearth bathed with the spectral blue vapor of our resident kitchen ghost.

Softly in the background Andy Williams declared, “Let It Snow!”

Percolating on several cups of coffee, I buzzed around my breakfast table stabbing cherries into halved grapefruit. Every morning I set the table with heirloom china. Eating breakfast off gold-rimmed plates may sound eccentric to you, but my children are growing up and my parents are growing old. I want to celebrate every moment together for as long as God blesses.

“Have you seen your father?” I asked my fifteen-year-old. “He was gone when I woke up.”

Tiptoeing around the world’s homes on Christmas Eve is nothing compared to how quiet Kris can be when he wants to avoid me. I’d been up since five, unable to sleep. I’d dreamed I was filling Easter baskets with raw eggs, but every time I put an egg in my basket, BOOM! It exploded all over me.

Her auburn hair woven into two thick braids, Cookie placed cut melon on the table. “I didn’t see him, but I smelled peppermint on the stairs. I may have just missed him.”

Kris eats a couple pounds of peppermint a day and bathes with peppermint-scented soap. It’s like living with a human candy cane. It occurred to me right then that my feelings over family and work-related issues represented the eggs in my dream basket. Inside I felt raw and ready to explode.

Hearing the coffeemaker beep, like Pavlov’s dog I salivated. It had been fifteen minutes since my last cup.

“Edda?” Cookie lifted the carafe. “Refill?”

Seated with her back to the bleak winter light, our housekeeper’s dark-robed figure had the appearance of a large crow reading a newspaper. Her head buried somewhere in the *Hark Herald’s* Lifestyle section, Edda raised her cup. “Yah.”

“Me too,” I shouted. Concern flickered Cookie’s eyes. Maybe I’d had enough. I’d been ‘on coffee’ since October when bad news sank its teeth into me. I inhaled the fragrant nutty aroma with near-addict-like desperation. Nope. Never enough.

Cookie touched my hand. “Is this your second or third cup?”

My sixth, but the only way she’d take my coffee was to pry it from my cold dead hand. “Big day ahead.” I added vitamins to Kris’s place-setting.

“Why bother?” She gestured to the grapefruit. “If it isn’t sugarcoated, he’ll call it untraditional and refuse to eat it.”

I envisioned one of my dream eggs exploding. BOOM!

Kris breathes tradition, bleeds tradition. Uses tradition to avoid doing what I want him to do. After twenty years with the man I have his number and dial it frequently.

“If it’s not on the table he’ll have no choice.” I glanced at the clock. “Where’s your sister? It’s late.”

“And getting later by the second.” My seventeen-year-old son arrived dressed in a Safari bush jacket, Edwardian shirt, frontier canvas pants and mid-calf boots. A charismatic replica of his father, at six-foot-three with his wheat-blond hair tied back and the scratchy onset of facial hair, Cooper’s look screamed Steampunk Viking. “The left side of her hair is flipping up while the right is flipping down. Brace yourself, because any moment we’ll hear—” He cupped his hand to his ear.

“Mother!” My oldest daughter’s wail shot down the stairs and ricocheted off walls into my ears. Cooper kissed my cheek, stole my coffee and then telescoped his long-limbed body into a chair with his back to the windows for the best view of the drama about to enter the room.

“Look at me,” Candy wailed from the doorway, drawing everyone’s attention as was her wont since birth. She stamped her foot once. “I look like a Fashion *Don’t*. I can’t go out into public like this. I’m the reigning Miss Joyous Noël.”

I poured myself a fresh brew. “Sit and eat, Your Highness. I’ll fix it.”

At nineteen my beauty queen daughter’s demand for perfection—a genetic throwback to our SuperNatural ancestry—makes Martha Stewart seem like a slacker.

“I’m not a drama queen.” Candy lowered posture-perfect into her chair beside Cooper. “I’m under a *Tittle-Tattle* microscope. Today is important. The stress is unbelievable.”

The Hark Herald never prints scandal. *The Tittle-Tattle* however sensationalizes the smallest non-incident into a juicy feast for the scandal-hungry soul.

“Speaking of the *Tattle*.” Cooper snatched a stack of toast. “Did you read the latest? I’m having affairs with Christmas Carol *and* Miss Antarctica. Am I hot or what?”

Cookie tossed him the peanut butter. “You believe your own press clippings?”

I pulled Candy’s hair into a flirty topknot and inserted her tiara. “You knew you’d open yourself to additional scrutiny if you won the pageant. Still, I wouldn’t worry about tonight’s unveiling of your Miss Joyous Noël ice sculpture. You’ll be fabulous.” I kissed her brow. She smelled delicious. I kissed her again.

Candy spooned melon onto her plate. “I don’t have a choice. I have to be fabulous.” She sounded resentful. “I’m Brannoc’s date for today’s East Wing holiday luncheon.”

Shock swapped places with the caffeine pumping my heart. “Brannoc Twrgadarn?”

She diced her melon into teensy, chewable pieces. “There’s only one.”

“But...you’re dating Wilde Thorne.” My voice had the pathetic whine of parental cluelessness.

Candy did the suffering teen eye-roll thing. “Mother, he’s so history, he’s prehistoric.”

BOOM! Another dream egg exploded.

Brannoc Twrgadarn was Kringle Enterprise’s Assistant Production Manager. He was also an irresistibly handsome fairy exactly one hundred years Candy’s senior. The fact that elves and fairies age at a slower pace compared to humans meant nothing to my daughter. That Brannoc looked twenty-five and was tall, dark and devastating meant everything.

At the stove I fussed with the unfussy oatmeal. How had I missed this? As Mother Nature’s granddaughter I’d inherited certain abilities, among them enhanced human senses. I should have smelled Brannoc on my daughter. Then I realized I had. She smelled delicious. It was Brannoc’s otherworldliness I’d inhaled. Clearly I’d been so distracted by Kris and Dad’s shenanigans that I’d missed this important development. By the flush to Candy’s cheeks, I also realized she had deliberately kept her romance from me and that hurt most of all.

“People act nice because I’m Candy Kringle. Because I’m Miss Joyous Noël. But the moment they hear I’m Brannoc’s girlfriend they’ll say, ‘Look. She’s got huge thighs. Look. She’s got frizzy hair. Look. She’s got...’”

Cooper gestured with his toast. “A zit on her chin.”

As Candy fled for the bathroom, Cooper yelped and rubbed his leg.

Cookie’s kicks to her brother’s shins are legendary.

Candy returned with a sisterly sneer. “Mom, your meeting runs from nine to eleven, right? And Daddy will be with you the whole time? I don’t want him to see me with Brannoc before I’m ready to tell him we’re almost engaged.”

“Engaged!”

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

“You just started dating him.” Fear ricocheted through me like a crazy pinball. My stomach clenched miserly-tight. When panic kicked in I realized my empathic senses had picked up Candy’s mood. Empathy is

my strongest Naturesense. I can tune into the emotions of those closest to me. Comes in pretty handy when you're a parent. Or married to the World's Biggest Kid.

Fear? Panic? Was I such a scary mother to trigger such feelings in my daughter?

"Why does it matter that we've just started dating? You married Daddy the day after he proposed." She sounded accusatory.

Kris would pop an artery. I glanced at the clock. I didn't have time to tell him before the Ornamentation meeting. His freak-out would require forty minutes minimum.

I called up the kitchen stairs, "Kris, its quarter to—"

The backdoor opened and my father made his entrance as though he were the Great Barrymore giving a final curtain call. "What a magnificent morning," he bellowed vainglorious. "I've truly outdone myself."

He raised his arms. His grandchildren applauded. Despite the sub-zero temperature frosting his grizzled mustache, he wore a light spring jacket with a jaunty cranberry beret atop his thinning pate. A smidgen under six-feet, Dad's over-blown ego makes up for his lack of stature. Why the ego? My dad is Father Nature.

Big shocker, eh? Mother Nature has a penis.

Behind him my pocket-sized mother unzipped her scarlet parka. Mom comes from an illustrious heritage of strong, independent women addicted to the color red. Sadly, after fifty-one years of marriage, she has the fortitude of soggy cornflakes. Her weak shoulders and ashy complexion told me my arrogant, donkey-of-a-father had ruined her morning with either criticism or indifference. I felt a slow boil poach the remaining eggs in my dream basket.

"Morning, Mom," I said with forced cheeriness. She shrugged and sat beside Cookie. Their identical hair blended as they hugged.

"Morning, Mémé." Candy blew her kisses. Cooper poured her juice.

"Greetings Father Nature Junior." Dad roughed Cooper's hair as he commandeered Kris's chair. "Why are you dressed for a safari?"

"It's Steampunk fashion, Grands."

"At least you've stopped dressing like Dracula. What's for breakfast, Daughter? I'm in the mood for Scottish bangers with pecan waffles drenched with maple syrup. Michigan has the best syrup this year. Seriously, I've outdone myself."

Since my housekeeper was busy working the *Herald* crossword puzzle, I brought my father breakfast. "Oatmeal?" He scrunched his nose. "I have a busy day ahead of me. I'm creating a new chain of islands. I need sustenance, not silage. I'm not a fobbing caribou."

Mom's glass smacked the table. "Eat it, King. Oatmeal has significant nutritional value."

Dad glared down his aggressive nose. "So does sail rabbit LaRoux, but you won't see me chipping it off the road to make a sandwich."

"Eat it or go hungry," I told him. His eyes dared me to make him. I picked up his spoon. "I heard you wet the bed last night."

His jaw dropped. I force-fed him, his shock sweetening my sour mood.

"What is this?" He spit it out with Academy award-style drama. "Tastes like beaver barf. Where's the syrup?"

"No sir. No syrup."

"Gimme sugar. Gimme honey. Gimme thumbthing to kill dis thaste in ma mowf."

I handed him a banana. "You're off sugar. Doctor's orders."

He squeezed the fruit into pulp. "No one tells me what the fark to do. Spleeny, fen-sucked doctor. One first-class avalanche through his house and *bam!* He's history."

Cookie grabbed a coffee can jammed with IOUs. Grimm County's cuss words are Elizabethan in style and content. While the words offend few outsiders, in any society it's how people respond to a word which makes it vulgar. Throughout childhood I'd been fed a steady diet of Dad's creative profanity, but never took up the sport thanks to Mom's genteel influence. However, when Candy dropped the world-renown F-bomb for her first word, I launched the cuss can.

Dad patted his pockets. "Have only hundreds on me, Cookie-monster. Catch me next time I burn your mother's delicate ears."

Candy gestured with her fork. "Donate two bills. That'll cover half of your IOUs."

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

I returned to the stairs to again shout for Kris when he instead entered through the backdoor.

“Morning all.” He shook snow from his soaked parka onto my freshly mopped floor. “Beautiful day, Kingston. You outdid yourself.” He tossed his parka at the coat tree—missed—then kissed me with exaggerated passion, gave our children each a peck to their brows, and for a grand finale bent my mother backward over his arm for a theatrical smooch that left her giggling girlishly.

Let me clarify here, the image you have of Santa Claus describes Kris on Christmas Eve when he undergoes a magickal transformation. His hair whitens, his beard thickens and he gains a sixty pound belly. Pre-transformation he's a Viking stereotype: Wheat-blond hair shot with gray, a close-cropped beard the shade of toasted coconut; brawny-built, weight appropriate for six-foot-three. At fifty-five, Kris still turns heads, mine included.

And then there are days like today when my head keeps turning as though I'm being exorcised.

Today he wore the forest green turtleneck I'd given him for his last birthday. The very sweater he'd left in the closet up until this morning because he said the neck choked his throat. His grin looked too bright, his eyes twinkled a bit too merry. He wore a sweater he did not like, but had been a gift from me. Oh yah. He'd stepped in a deep pile of monkey business—but what?

“Got an early start with a brisk run through town, followed by a snowball fight with the boys in Woodworks,” he chattered like a sugared-up six-year-old. “That Oskar has a great arm. Remind me to recruit him for softball this spring.”

Kris pilfered melon from Candy and toast from Cooper before he spied Dad squatting toad-like in the head-of-the-family chair. I braced for a Jerry Springer-style brawl. Instead Kris exclaimed, “Let's all sing the Morning Song, shall we? Sunshine sparkling on the snow. Winter's here, we all know. It's morning time in the Kringle ho-ho-hoome.”

I pointed to the chair beside Cookie. “Sit. Eat. We meet with Ornamentation at nine.”

Kris gave a performance of thorough chewing. “Nothing like grapefruit in a warm mouth on a cold winter morning, especially if you have canker sores.”

Since he never eats grapefruit without a fight, I knew the answer to my monkey business question. “Let me smell your breath.” He gulped his juice, then stuck out his tongue. A power surge hit me. “You've been in Baked Goods, haven't you?”

“B-baked Goods?” He grinned a grin that would fool only a fool. “No. I went tobogganing.”

“Running,” Cooper whispered.

“Yah, running. Briskly. Then I ran into Oddvar.”

“Oskar,” Cookie reminded.

“Oh yah. He's a great skater.” Kris smiled his Santa smile, which gave his eyes that notorious twinkle Clement Clarke Moore wrote about in his poem, but I had children of my own and even they didn't get away with manipulative charm.

“You tell more stories than Nicholas Sparks.” My Naturesenses inhaled the sweet stench he'd tried to mask with peppermints. My dream basket exploded with the intensity of the Hindenburg. “You're powdered.”

He winced. “A little.”

I inhaled the details of his sugar bender. “Three chocolate tarts. An apple macaroon cake. Six cannolis covered with powdered sugar. Six?”

“They were good.”

“Of course they're good. They're Kringle-made. Yet, three nights ago you thought you were having a heart attack.” My children gasped. I groaned. I'd revealed what I had hoped to keep quiet until after the holidays. Then Dad *tsked* and it set me on fire.

“And you.” I whirled on him. “You had an actual heart attack five months ago, and yet you're whining about sausage and sugar in your oatmeal—everything you can't have.” My family bowed their heads. I glared at the guilty ones. “What will it take to convince you your health issues are serious? You both think you're invincible. Immortal. And all the pleading, nagging, *shouting* I've done falls on deaf ears.”

I looked at my elegant table, set with care to celebrate my family spending precious time together, and realized it was not appreciated. They gathered because I told them to, not because they wanted to start the day as a family. Didn't they understand time was slipping away? Despite his SuperNatural DNA, Dad's

undisciplined diet had given him heart disease. Mom looked ashen and old. The results from Kris's physical could reveal serious problems. Candy contemplated marriage. I teetered on the precipice of fifty, not ready to be a widow.

"I nag because I love you, you idiots. If you die because you abuse your bodies, that's your fault. But if I don't object, I have to live with myself after you're gone. Kris, the Ornamentation meeting starts at nine, with or without you."

Fighting tears, I grabbed my coat and left for work. Kris didn't get it. Time was running out, and all the Santa magick in the world couldn't stop it.

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Kris scowled. Holly Kringle suffered no fools and she had just let everyone know what she thought of him. His silent family underscored his guilt. Even Andy Williams stopped singing.

"Does this mean you're not going to your Ornament meeting?" Candy sounded worried.

Kingston smirked. "You really fell out of the Stupid Tree and hit every branch this time, Toy Boy."

LaRoux hurled Candy's diced melon at her husband. "Holly shouted at you too, *Monsieur* 'Gimme thumbthing to kill dis thaste in ma mowf.' Take a deep breath and smell the coffee. It's burning." She followed Holly's exit.

For a scary moment Kris expected his father-in-law to detonate all over the kitchen. Then Kingston noticed Candy's gaze on him and forced a chuckle. "Love shucks *le* peas from a man's *le* pod, Cooper. Be smart. Stay single. Avoid French women."

Cooper grinned. "So we're creating a new chain of islands? Where? South Pacific?"

"Hawaiian's. It's gotten rather cold over there on the Hot Spot."

Kris wanted to hurl more melon at the old troll, followed by the knife Candy used to dice it. Holly should have been Mother Nature when her Nanny Anian passed away, but instead Kingston inherited the power. Five months ago his heart attack forced him to realize he didn't have an heir trained. When Holly refused, Cooper—the Santa heir—became Kingston's choice.

Kris's alarm knew no boundaries. Batman had the Joker for his archenemy. Santa Claus had Father Nature.

Kingston flashed his ring, a prehistoric Monarch butterfly encased in Baltic amber. As an infant Cooper had sucked on the Förvandling, and coveted it throughout his seventeen years. Kris assumed the ring provided Kingston with power to orchestrate Nature. Their relationship didn't include cordial conversation beyond 'pass the salt.' "I want to experiment with lava," Kingston told his grandson. "I want it to burn lime green instead of red."

"You're gonna put volcanoes on your islands?" Cooper grinned. "Cool."

"No," said Kingston. "Hot."

Kris rolled his eyes.

"Lime lava is ludicrous," Candy said. "You're a showoff, Grands."

Flushing noticeably, Kingston shoved back his chair. "Let's go, Coop."

"Wait." Cookie produced her day-planner. "Mom's birthday and your anniversary are days away, Dad, but we haven't planned anything."

"I could create spring in the backyard," Kingston said. "It's Holly's favorite season."

"No." Kris gestured to the frosted windows. "It's winter."

"It's spring."

Candy ate a cherry. "You're both wrong. It's cinnamon."

Cookie pinged her glass. "What if you renewed your vows, and this time make it like a real wedding?"

Kris reared back. "Our wedding was real."

"You rushed Mom to the altar. She bought a dress off the rack. What was up with that?"

"I didn't want her to change her mind." That was his story and he was sticking to it.

"She didn't even get a real wedding cake," Kingston said. "You had fruitcake."

"She likes fruitcake."

"You *are* a fruitcake."

Cookie tugged her father's arm. "What do you think?"

"Great idea. The PolarPointe is overbooked this late, but maybe my Lodge is available."

Cookie's eyes twinkled. "We should reenact the ice festival, like the day you married."

Kris cringed. A reenactment of the Chill and Thrill Festival would surprise Holly, but not in a good way. “That’s a lot of work for Final Week Rush. FWR is hectic enough.” He racked his brain for an alternative. “Your mom wants to take a Hawaiian cruise someday. We could do a tropical theme. I know a guy who plays ukulele.”

Candy said, “In place of traditional wedding cake, we could have a pineapple birthday cake with marzipan Mom and Dad figures.”

Cooper suggested, “Instead of the Wedding March, we could sing Happy Birthday.”

Kingston pounded the table. “And I’ll arrange for the stars to spell out Happy Birthday.”

Kris rolled his eyes. *Blowhard.*

“We’ll need a photographer.” Cookie took notes. “What about food?”

Cooper raised his hand. “I’ll dig an Imu pit. We’ll roast a pig.”

“Pig? Mom will freak,” Candy said, and Cookie added, “*Rudy* will freak.”

“Baked fish, coconut shrimp.” Kris’s mouth watered. “Mai Tai’s, Chi Chi’s...”

“Guest photo ops.” Cooper grinned. “Put your head through cardboard hula girls.”

“Write down flower leis and palm trees,” Candy told Cookie.

“And I’ll create a beach with a full moon,” Kingston declared.

This time Candy rolled her eyes.

With their enthusiasm trumping reality of time frame and holiday demands, Cookie divided the tasks. “Mom will love this. It’ll make up for her regret that her wedding day wasn’t more special than spontaneous.”

Kris’s heart somersaulted. Had Holly known the real reason he had rushed her to the altar?

Kingston stood. “Let’s go, Coop. We’ve got a Pacific Plate to shift and molten basalt to spew.” He avoided Candy’s gaze. “Oahu hasn’t experienced volcanic fireworks for two million years. If I set off Waianae and Koolau at the same time, I could build a chain of islands that will have them talking for centuries.”

“If there’s anyone still alive to talk.” Candy turned to her father. “Daddy, you’re going to the Ornament meeting, remember? You’ll be there all morning.”

Kris snatched a piece of toast. “Yah. Rumor has it Bruna is again blowing steam over tinsel. Hey, Kingston. You should have Bruna Tannenbaum build your islands. Her eruptions around here are legendary.”

The backdoor slammed. Kris dropped the toast. He wasn’t hungry. Not for toast. What he wanted was the righteous old troll’s head on a silver platter. Kingston stole his son by using the boy’s immature hero worship against him. What seventeen-year-old wouldn’t want to control hurricanes, tsunamis and earthquakes? Outside of being a rock star, Father Nature Junior sounded macho, whereas the image of a white-bearded, jelly-bellied toymaker sounded childish.

Candy kissed his cheek. “Remember. Nine o’clock sharp. Ornament meeting.”

“What are you, my human day planner? Go sprinkle the world with beauty, Miss Joyous Noël. I’ll be there on time.”

“And you’ll stay there?” Her eyes narrowed.

As he said, “Yah yah,” he thought Candy’s gorgeous face, sunshiny hair and blueberry-blue eyes resembled her mother...except Holly had auburn hair and brown eyes, but even after twenty years together he still thought her the sexiest woman alive. And now their daughter was almost grown. Not quite. She was what, fifteen? He left the birthday facts and figures up to Holly. Seemed like only yesterday when three-year-old Candy sat on his lap and exclaimed how much Santa looked like her daddy.

“What are your plans today?” he asked. “Hair appointment? Clothes shopping? It’s not every day you’re sculpted in ice.”

Candy froze halfway into her pink faux bunny-fur coat. “Am I less than perfect?”

Kris noticed Cookie shook her head. “No, honey. You look great. Wasn’t I just saying, Cook, how spectacular Candy looks these days?”

Cookie nodded. “Extra special, ultra-spectacular.”

Candy buttoned her coat. “I hate to be touchy, but my crown demands me to adhere to a high standard. Malkorka says image is everything. I have to be perfect.” She didn’t sound happy.

“Why would you care what my crackpot secretary says?”

“As the first Miss Joyous Noël, Malkorka set the standard for future candidates. She composed the Miss Joyous Noël ideal criteria handbook.”

“She’s also responsible for the tradition where I have Yuley-the-goat knock his horns on Scandinavian doors so I can give gifts in exchange for porridge. Not only am I so sick of porridge that I have dry heaves when I fly over Sweden, but I still have goat stink in my nose hairs from last year. This year Yuley stays home.”

“And forget tradition?” his daughters asked in unison.

His heart lurched. Tradition! He loved tradition. He was steeped in tradition. He was no one without tradition. “Fine. Yuley can come. But I want a new tradition where Malkorka gives him a bath before I leave or she has to shave her head.”

Candy gasped. “Malkorka has beautiful hair. Brannoc thinks so.”

Cookie coughed and wheezed. Kris pounded her back. “Sorry, princess. Couldn’t hear you what with your sister coughing up a lung. What’d ya say?”

“Nothing, Daddy. Gotta run.”

Holly had mentioned he treated Candy like a pet. He listened to Cooper and Cookie because when they talked they made sense, but with Candy he daydreamed. He never understood what she was talking about. Holly suggested he take an interest in Candy’s world before it was too late and she became someone else’s best girl. Like that would ever happen. She would always be his best girl. She was his first born.

“You never talked about your day as Guest Hostess over at the granary. What’d ya do?” He set his expression to the one used when Holly insisted he attend finance meetings. He’d practiced in a mirror and knew it made him look interested. “Cut a ribbon? Give a speech? Serve cookies to the workers?”

Candy paled. “Just the same old *mumble mumble*.”

“Sorry, what?”

“Daddy, I have to go.”

“Okay. So what’s on today’s agenda?” Hand on the knob, she appeared confused. “You have your coat on. Where ya going?”

Candy glanced at Cookie writing in her planner. “I’m, uh...going outside.” She opened the door. “And once I’m there...” She stepped through. “I’ll close the door behind me.” And she did.

Kris scratched his beard. “Your mom suggested I make an effort to connect with your sister, but I don’t think there’s anyone, including your mother, who understands her.”

“I’ve been thinking.” Cookie put down her pen. “Since Grands recruited Cooper for Nature, you’re without a Santa heir.”

Kris shredded a muffin. “It’s not like I had a son to ensure a designated heir for the family business, but I didn’t have a choice. My dad told me I couldn’t be a cowboy when I was four years old. He didn’t ask if I wanted to be Santa.”

“If you fight Grands, aren’t you doing to Cooper what Grandpa Santa did to you?” Cookie touched his hand. “If you resent not having had a choice, give Cooper one. He’s excited about Nature. Yesterday I saw him reading about atmospheric structure and composition, and the book didn’t even have pictures.”

“I love being Santa. I thought Cooper would, too.” Cookie didn’t understand. Losing Cooper to Kingston was like Batman losing Robin to the Joker.

“It’ll be hard to find Cooper’s replacement,” Cookie said.

“I should post the job with Elfin Resources. Brannoc is to take over as Production Manager when Scotchie retires. Maybe he could be Santa instead.”

“But who would run Production?”

Unable to picture Brannoc’s six-pack abs inflating into a belly that shook like a bowl full of jelly, Kris shelved that idea. Besides, Brannoc had a wicked reputation. Couldn’t have him slip down chimneys to deliver toys and end up in bed with the mommies. “Got any suggestions?”

“Yes. Me.”

Kris laughed. “No way.”

“Why not?”

She wasn’t joking! He scrambled to explain. “The job traditionally goes to the eldest son, honey. And if not to a son, to another man, though that’s never happened.”

“So if Cooper becomes Father Nature, you’ll train an outsider... Because I’m a girl?”

“Right. No. Wait!” He watched her expression harden. “Santa’s are men. You know that.”

She slapped her planner shut. “I make straight A’s. I’ve skipped three grades. I take college law classes.

I'm fifteen."

"I'm not questioning your intel— You're *fifteen?*"

"I'm Class President." She stood. "I head a dozen school committees, yet at home I'm little Cookie-monster."

"Aw, honey. I hate to disappoint you."

"I've said my piece. You've said yours." She glanced at her watch. "You'd better leave. If you're late we'll have to scrap the party because Mom will have killed you."

He searched for words to soften her disappointment, but when none came she left him alone with his grapefruit and a nasty bowl of oatmeal. "Bah humbug." He had to change Cooper's mind. He didn't have a choice as a kid, so why should Coop? Okay, that was mean. But there had to be a way to convince Cooper to choose Santa over Nature.

Cooper wouldn't be happy as Father Nature. He loved to play, act silly. Make people happy. You needed to keep the child in you alive to be successful in the toy business. Cooper could do that hands down, whereas the Nature business was all about blowing things up or tearing things down. Oh sure, Nature grew spectacular things. At least it had when Holly's grandmother ran the biz. When Kingston took over, the world became a hotter, episodic nightmare with earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis and volcanoes wiping people off the planet. Unable to picture his son pushing up his sleeves to send a twenty-foot tidal wave into unsuspecting islands, or reviving two dead volcanoes to alleviate boredom, Kris knew he had to save his son from his grandfather.

The clatter of dishes jerked his attention to their housekeeper clearing the table. "Nothing like drama for breakfast, eh Edda?"

"I no tock a'choo," she said in broken English. Broken from what ethnic branch no one knew, but the family loved her accent, even if no one could understand her. "You make Meess Holly cry." She pointed a gnarled finger at him. "Grownups eat dar veggebles even if nobody makes them. It time you grow up now, Meester Krees."

Maybe Scrooge was right. Maybe keeping childish things into adulthood wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

The backdoor crashed open. "What has my poster child for immaturity done this time?" With her acres of silver hair windblown and wild, Malkorka's eyes flamed with fury. "You've upset the mother of Miss Joyous Noël. If Candy has the slightest puff under her eyes from stress, I will cause you such misery, you will pray for death to escape me."

He should have known. The Polartown grapevine was slicker than ice when it came to personal information about the Kringle family.

In the next issue of the *Tittle-Tattle* he expected to see his photo on the cover along with the caption:

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS, HIS FAMILY WEEPS.