

Second Star First Edition

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A Collection of Short Stories, Excerpts and Poems
Composed by Fiercely-Thankful
and Independent Authors

Grey Wolf
Lucy Winton
Mallory Bybee
Mavin Wright
Anna Bourassa
Dawn Brock
Miri Elliott
Carrissa H. Huston
Autumn I. Smith
Savanna Unruh
and
Alydia Rackham

December 2018

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“Uplifting Poems” by Grey Wolf

The Back Fields

Back where the horses and cows graze,
Where the sun is just about to set,
Where the grass is green and tall,
Where the crickets chirp and hum
We walk the borders of the old, barbed wire fence.
You pad along at my side, vigilant,
For rabbit, bird, or any creature that
Might give you a merry chase,
Tail wagging and puffing happily.
We pause at the tree stump, and listen,
As the leaves shiver in the honey-tree,
And watch as Venus shines in the blushing sky.
Faraway comes a voice that dinner is ready,
Back at the ranch-house. And so we run
With the wind in our ears, and hearts pounding,
Down the dusty lane and through the old
Wooden gate. Will you wait for me?
I’m so far away now. But someday we will walk those
Paths again. I would have no one else
At my side, as evening grows from the shadows.
We’ll walk the back fields again,
Together.

Small

A small hand waved to me today,
And a small face smiled in innocent greeting.
You have known much joy, and little sorrow.
I see your trusting spirit – knowing only the good.
Who are you, and where will you go?
What will your new eyes see, and will they grow old?
I wish you well, even though we may never meet
again,
And you and I may never remember that we met.
Still, I’m sorry that we have not made the world much
better,
But for you I will keep trying. Goodbye, little one.
May all your meetings be as joyful,
And all your leave-takings as peaceful.
Be well, and farewell. You will not always be
Small.

Stranger

I went to the rich man’s house, but he sent me away –
Said he didn’t have no place, for someone like me to
stay.
I went to the great man’s house, but he wasn’t at
home,
He’s off someplace fine, like Paris, or Rome.
And so I went from house to house, but the story was
the same,
No room, no food, no help for you, don’t care about
your name.
Then I stopped at the carpenter’s house, at the edge of
town,
The man there invited me right in, and said sit right
down.
I ate at his good table, sitting at his right hand,
And he talked to me like a son, I couldn’t understand.
He laughed and said to me, my son, he was a stranger
too,
But I want you to understand – he lived and died for
me and you.
So I welcome the stranger to my table, just as he would
do,
And love you, as he asked me, because his words are
true.
So go back out and find you, every stranger far and
near,
And bring them home, to our family right here.
You and I were strangers, now we are brothers every
one,
So love you the stranger, our Heavenly Father’s
daughters, and sons.

Seed

I saw some of them fly in the field by the road,
They grew up tall and strong with the grass.
They were watered every night, but then
The man cut them down with a lawnmower.
Some of them fell into the gutter, and were
Washed down the grate. Where they went,
I cannot say. Lost, we are lost they cried.
I fell into a crack in the cement. There was a
Little dirt, but not water. I have fallen here to die.
Grow where you are planted, said the master of the
garden.

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So I grew a little, and the rain came, and I
Grew a little more. People hurried by and stepped on
Me. But the master said grow, so I did.
I will never be anything, I thought. Why should I
grow?
Why was I planted here? But the master said blossom –
so I did.
Yellow petals small and bright, my face turned to the
hot sun.
The bee and the butterfly came to eat at my table,
The dog smelled my perfume and laughed as dogs do.
But then, I began to wither and wilt. I am dying.
But my children, want to fly. They want to be free.
Trust in me, said the master, so I let them go.
And the breeze took them, and I watched as each was
carefully
Planted by the master's hand. Each with a purpose and
a plan.
And he said to them: "Grow."

Matthew 13: 3-9 "Who hath ears to hear, let him hear."

Say

What can be said by voice so soft
A whisper is a roar from the mouth
Of an angry spirit that walks on pads
Of velvet tones that roam far from
The instrument they call home in
Chorus they sing in dry leaves that fall
From lofty seat in the crowns of trees
Gone to silver beneath a sky of steel
That turns to dark waters that lap at
The edge of a cold sickle moon that reaps
The stars that dance as no one watches...

What can be seen by eyes so bright the
Setting sun is the guttering blue light of
A candle soft with the scent of oil and the
Cloudy breath of evening where the crickets
Spin tales unheard chirping like birds
At dawn who sing in fields of diamond dew
Drops that fall from the eyes of stone
Angels that watch as our loved ones sleep
In mysteries that enfold their redes told
By strangers that knew your name...

When they ask if you were here
I will point to the misty snowflakes that fall
Swirling like grains in an hourglass and
I will say that you loved me
I will say I love you
I can say no more.

About the Author

James lives and works in a small town in Oregon, filling spare moments with writing, playing games, and catering to the whims of various cats. He is working on several projects, as most struggling writers are, including more poetry, various unfinished novels, and an RPG. No one is more surprised that he is to find that he has married the woman of his dreams, has five children and three grandchildren. Life is a story that you never could have imagined.

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An Extract from Chapter Two
of
Wild Rose

by
Lucy Winton

Daylight was halfway through fading when Carlene took advantage of the café's emptiness and asked what food was left. All the soup and sandwiches were gone, so Sami boiled some eggs that hadn't been set aside for cooking. Milly was still a little hungry after the egg and a slice of cake, but she didn't say anything. None of them did.

The door to the café remained unlocked, just in case somebody walked in.

"You'd better get going," Carlene said, pointing at the people walking past Layden's. All of them were going in the same direction. "They'll be here soon."

"Are you sure you're going to be OK?" Milly asked. "What if someone turns up wanting something to eat?"

"Go."

Once the four girls were outside, Avrel said: "Bye. I'll see you tomorrow, all right?"

"Where else would we be?" Frankie asked, grinning. Avrel smiled back, then ran down the street, pushing past everyone heading for the Complex.

"It'll be pretty awkward if we bump into our parents if they're going as well," Frankie said as the girls began walking.

"No, it won't," Sami replied smoothly. "They won't mind if we stay with each other."

Milly knew Frankie's mother well enough to say she would mind if her daughter sat with friends instead of her. She also knew Frankie well enough not to say that.

The streets slowly became broader as they neared the Complex. This did not allow the walkers to spread out, as more and more added to the throng from different roads. Milly was forced to realise they would have been even more crowded if the city was completely populated.

They turned the final corner to see the Complex looming ahead of them. Its white stones were darkened by the falling dusk, while the interior was lit with amber light that spilled out onto the street. Milly could just about see shadows flitting about inside. The main doors were thrown open, allowing the crowd to enter a large circular hallway carved out of white marble. Stairs on either side of the hallway spiralled up to balconies lying along the curves of the room; most of the crowd ignored the stairs and entered the hall itself.

The hall was the largest area in the Complex, but it wasn't all there was to it. The Complex was the largest building in Redcross, the second largest being the correction facility. It wasn't just the home of the Premier and his officials: it was also the place where they held all their meetings, made official announcements and housed important guests. The Complex was also rumoured to be the headquarters of the Watchmen.

Even though they were now inside the Complex, Frankie shivered and rubbed her hands together. "Wow, the wind's really howling out there."

"Frankie," Sami said slowly, "that's not the wind."

A chorus was floating on the air, slowly growing louder as it passed through the streets.

The girls looked at each other, then as one ran for the closest stairs, pushing their way through the people heading for the main part of the hall. When they got to the upper floor, Milly ran towards the nearest section so fast she nearly collided with the stone terrace and barely

stopped herself from going over the edge. The sections were divided by marble pillars; some of the sections already had two or three people inside, watching the hall below. Milly could hear the excitement in the conversations filling the area.

“Are they here yet?” Sami peered over the edge of the balcony.

“If you were a Wolf-Lord, wouldn’t you want to make the best entrance possible?” Frankie asked.

Slowly the crowd in the hall thickened until the only space of white floor left was a pathway leading up to a large table where Barton and the other officials were already seated. They watched the other end of the hall intently.

Only one seat was empty: the chair to Barton’s immediate left, where the head of security usually sat. Trevel must have already left.

Before long, nobody else came through the doors. The air became stifling and heavy with apprehension and unease.

Behind the girls was a pale blue door leading to the women’s suite; a dark red door was in the exact same place on the opposite balcony. Milly and the girls had never stepped inside the Red Suite, just as no man would dare go into the Blue Suite. Suites were a set of rooms set aside for rest and relaxation; before her husband’s death, Carlene persuaded him to set up the unused rooms in Layden’s into a Blue Suite. The rooms were furnished and kept tidy, but they had only been used three times in two years.

Barton rose from his seat and all conversation ceased, like a candle flame that had suddenly been extinguished. He walked around the table and stood before the small flight of steps leading up to it, his hands behind his back.

He nodded once.

For two minutes that felt like two hours, there was no sound at all. Then twenty figures strode in, each accompanied by a wolf walking at his or her side.

Every single human was wearing a black scarf.

This wasn’t real. This wasn’t happening.

Milly’s fingers gripped the balustrade as the Wolf-Lords walked further and further into the hall.

She noticed who was leading them. His wolf was an adult now, her black fur almost taking on a silvery tinge in the light. He walked as purposefully as she did; neither took their eyes off the Premier.

“Him?” Sami whispered. “*He’s* the leader now?”

Milly didn’t know his name. She’d never even thought to ask it.

There was a flurry of movement as Frankie ran from the balcony. None of the other watchers seemed to have even noticed she was gone. Milly heard the Blue Suite door bang open, but she didn’t turn around. She couldn’t.

“Good evening!” Premier Barton called, his voice echoing through the hall. “It’s an honour to welcome you here, Wolf-Lord Andras.”

The black-haired Wolf-Lord reached the bottom of the steps. Then he began to walk up them with slow, deliberate paces. The watching crowd drew in a shocked breath and Milly thought she saw the expression on Barton’s face flicker slightly. He stepped back a few paces and then Andras stood on the landing before him.

Andras nodded his head once in reply. “Thank you, Premier Barton. It’s an honour to be here.”

“May I offer my sincere condolences on the death of your predecessor?” Barton asked.

“Thank you,” Andras replied smoothly, “and we’re grateful for your hospitality.”

“Do you wish to make any changes to the terms?”

“If they’re still acceptable to you, there’s no need to change them.”

“Everyone,” Barton said loudly, “please join me in welcoming the Andras Wolf-Lords to Redcross!”

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The circular hall of the Complex erupted in cheers and claps. Milly looked at Sami, the icy fear coursing through her reflected in the other girl's eyes.

"Where's Frankie?" asked Sami, her voice a hoarse whisper. Barton was speaking again. Nobody was looking at the girls.

"She went through here." Milly headed towards the Blue Suite and pushed the door open. The walls of the Suite were cerulean, with cushions the colour of a spring sky positioned neatly on soft navy chairs. A painting of crashing waves hung on the wall next to a door that was painted a pure, clean white.

"Frankie? Are you all right?" Milly called, looking around to see if her friend was hiding anywhere.

There was the unmistakable sound of someone rinsing their mouth out and spitting in a sink. The white door opened and Frankie emerged, her face grey. She glanced wildly around before leaning in close and whispering: "What are we going to *do*?"

Milly said the first words that came into her head. "We stay calm," she said. "We stay calm and keep out of their way."

"It won't be easy avoiding a group of people in a city with a wall surrounding it!" Frankie cried.

"Shh!" Sami hissed, gesturing towards the door of the Blue Suite.

"Sorry. But seriously, how easy is it to walk down a couple of streets without bumping into a Watchman or someone on the security team? And do you really think the wolves aren't going to notice how scared we are?"

"They won't. Think about it. They are going to be surrounded by people who've probably never even *seen* a wolf before. Why would the wolves pick out our fear from the crowd? All we have to do is stay away from them as much as we can." Milly looked at both of her friends. "Someone told me not to be fearful around Wolf-Lords or their wolves. If we do, they're going to think we're prey."

Frankie nodded shakily. "Like I said, it's not going to be easy."

"I think we can do it," Sami said. "They won't be here forever."

Read the rest of the novel on Amazon!

https://www.amazon.co.uk/Wild-Rose-Roses-Book-1-ebook/dp/B07L4YVY4B/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1544466736&sr=8-1&keywords=lucy+winton

Lucy lives in a seaside town. When she was five, someone gave her a story notepad and she has never stopped writing since. She has loved books ever since she can remember.

One day, she decided to get serious and actually start writing a book.

You can find her at:

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<https://en-gb.facebook.com/lucywintonroses/>

Excerpt from
Galaxy Shadows

by
Anna Bourassa

Chapter 1

Starship *Emerald Flyer*

Somewhere in Deep Space

February 9, 2218

19 years ago. . .

“You must never tell anyone what you saw, Cori,” his mother said as she draped another blanket over him.

“But why?”

“It’s dangerous.”

He leaned back against the pillow and stuck his arms under the blankets with a shiver. Mother smoothed back his dark hair and gave a smile. Why did it look so strained? And why was she putting him to bed? He was nine years old now; not even his governess Tiana did that anymore. He wouldn’t complain, of course; not when these moments between the two of them became increasingly rare.

He’d noticed Mother and Father at odds yesterday. Was she sad because of Father’s sharp words, his justifying Ragnos Empire’s superiority to its ragged neighboring solar systems?

“Did you hear me, Cori?” Mother knelt beside the metal float-bed, her pale face only partially illuminated by the hallway light.

“Yes, Mother,” Corwyn answered. “But I still don’t understand.”

“One day, Cori. One day it will be clear. One day, the storms will pass.” She leaned down to kiss his forehead before standing, her lips turning up in a gentle smile as she looked him in the eye. “Goodnight.”

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First, the weird mist she called dangerous and, now, storms? “Wait!” He sat up as she moved to leave. “Don’t leave me here in the dark. I don’t like storms! I’ve seen lots of different kinds in my studies. Last week I watched forty-two visual recordings of wind storms and tornadoes found on five planets located—”

He stopped midsentence as she patted his arm. “You know you’ve nothing to fear.” Even as she said those words, she pressed a button atop the nightstand. A hidden drawer slid open and she removed the familiar golden candleholder—a tarnished antique from one of their ancestors—and the blue candlestick. She lit a match and a small flame illuminated her angelic face and raven hair. Corwyn took pride in resembling his mother; they shared the same narrow face, high cheekbones, and glittering blue eyes.

He looked around the familiar room. He’d spent the entirety of his existence here – as it had started out as a nursery, or so he was told. The dark grey walls looked blue in the starlight peering through his viewport window. The room bore few items: the float-bed, a metal chest, a small wall-hanging mirror, a coat stand by the door, and a three-by-three foot closet with an automatic sliding door.

Corwyn’s gaze fell on his mother. She looked at him with a saddened countenance. His heart beat rapidly, hammering against his ribs; seeing her like this made him uneasy. If she was sad, he was scared. Mother was his rock, the one person he could talk to about anything and never felt he needed to impress.

“Remember, Cori, even in the darkness, you are never alone. ‘I am come a light into the world, that whosoever believeth on me should not abide in darkness.’”

Corwyn nodded in agreement at the old Scripture. He knew the verse, but sometimes the darkness was so cold and lonely. Frightening, even.

Mother tucked the blanket up under his chin, took one last look at his face, and walked to the bedroom door, her long, sleeveless blue coat swaying with each stride.

“Oh,” she turned, “and if Tiana should come to check on you tonight. . .do as she instructs you.”

He lay there, wondering what was amiss. The unease had moved from his rapidly beating heart to his stomach, where it sat like spoiled food. He turned on his side and looked out the room’s viewport. It was the same sight every night: deep space stretching out in all directions and millions of shining, silver specks.

Each speck was a star, and a large percentage of those stars classified as suns due to their system of planets and moons. And a small but precious number of those solar systems supported life. Hundreds of civilizations, billions of souls, millions of kids like him.

Corwyn knew that his childhood was abnormal when compared to that of the average child. While other children in Ragnos Empire spent free time playing games, he preferred sitting at a computer station, studying the different civilizations and cultures he would one day see. Mother told him he was too serious for a nine-year old, but his ambitions made his father’s face glow with pride. Over the past year, other children had ridiculed him for talking “weird” and being boring. Father told him to be proud of his more sophisticated vocabulary and mature understanding of math and science. But sometimes, after so many hours in front of a screen, looking at images of planets and moons he had never seen in person, he would suddenly remember that he was on a ship in deep, cold, dark Space. The *Emerald Flyer* was a home fit for a prince. As son of the ship’s commander, he could march down the halls and right onto the bridge without being questioned by guards and officers. Yet there were times he wondered what

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it would be like to live not on a ship or at an asteroid base but on a planet, with regular sunlight and seasons and neighborhoods.

Listening to the quiet hum of the ship, Corwyn's mind wandered back to the mysterious green mist he'd seen from the bridge viewport just this morning. It wasn't nebula. So what was it?

*And why did Father sound so pleased upon seeing it?
Corwyn had thought it. . .beautifully intriguing.
It's dangerous,* his mother's warning echoed in his mind.

Three hours passed before Corwyn was awoken by a young, gentle voice calling his name. He blinked to see Tiana in the doorway, beckoning him.

"Master Corwyn," she whispered, "you must hurry."

Corwyn rubbed sleep from his eyes, raised his head from the pillow, and looked quizzically at her. "But. . .it's the middle of the night, according to Standard Space Time."

The disruption to his routine sleep both irritated him and tempted him to pout, but when she pushed the door open further, opening her mouth to urge him again, Corwyn heard sirens blaring at the front of the ship. Just as he'd suspected earlier: something *was* wrong.

Maybe the green mist caused an abnormality in Space and we're being sucked into a black hole! That thought got his heart racing again. *This could be the storm Mother spoke of!*

"Corwyn," his governess spoke harsher, yet pleading at the same time. "Your mother placed you in my charge. You must come with me *now*."

He flung the covers away and rushed to the doorway, where Tiana threw a thick coat over his pajamas, grabbed his hand, and pulled him out into the hall.

He squinted against the bright lights bouncing off the reflective floors and half-blinding him. He wanted to go back to bed but the distant siren warned him that would be a mistake. "Are we near a planetoid or asteroid belt? Did that phenomenon we encountered earlier today cause some sort of astronomical storm with geomagnetic complications due to our proximity—"

"Oh, *please*, Master Corwyn. Save it for a better time." Tiana dragged him down the left corridor. That in itself was odd, since it led to several storage closets and, ultimately, the aft hangar bay. "Now is not the time to impress me with your vast knowledge and immense education. I'm glad I don't have your brain packed to the brim with ridiculous fun facts."

He could tell she was serious, though he was offended that she thought him a show-off. He tried not to speak or trip. Tiana's strides were much longer, and her unruly carrot-colored hair kept slapping him in the face. She was wearing a baggy brown jumpsuit to match her freckled face and a wrist-watch that he could see was counting down to seconds.

Forty-eight. Forty-seven. Forty-six. . .

Still they ran.

"Why is everyone still awake?" Corwyn asked, noticing all the lights on and voices ahead in the corridor.

Tiana stopped short. And waited until the voices had faded. Her breathing stilled, as though she were afraid the guards or techs would hear.

"Governess," Corwyn whispered, looked up at her tight face, confusion beginning to make his stomach ache again. "Why do you not want to be caught?"

She didn't even glance at him, just pulled him ahead. Corwyn studied her watch again. *Nineteen. Eighteen. Seventeen. . .*

And then the ship rumbled as an ion-cannon blast was fired. Corwyn held tighter to Tiana's hand and tried not to whimper as they stood frozen in the brightly illuminated hall. He could feel the vibration of the shot in the metal floor. The siren that had been blaring at the front of the ship ceased. The silence was worse.

"W-w-what is happening?" his voice cracked and panic rose in his chest, threatening to paralyze him. "Are we—are we under attack? Do people hate us for becoming a great empire?"

She pulled him into an alcove just as an officer turned down the corridor. Tiana slapped a hand over Corwyn's mouth, an arm secure around his small frame. The blue-clad officer hurried past without seeing them.

She relaxed.

"Tiana." Corwyn didn't try to hide the worry and confusion in his voice, and at this point he didn't care if she mocked him for sounding scared. "You gotta tell me something."

She nodded her head quickly, her dull-green eyes looking down at the floor. "I will, Master Corwyn. But first I must obey my orders. Trust me a few more minutes and—"

Chirp.

Tiana gasped and looked at her wrist-watch. Then her eyes rose to Corwyn's. "We—we have to hurry. We're out of time!"

They passed the lifts and turned left for the staircase. Taking it one flight down, the two of them continued in the direction of the aft hangar bay. Corwyn didn't bother asking why they'd taken the long way. He knew why. Just not *why*.

A low rumble began to vibrate the hallway.

"The hangar door was just locked down." He looked up at Tiana, wondering if their lives were somehow in danger and wishing he'd stayed in bed and let this all happen without his partial knowledge of it. "So, now what?"

"You're leaving. We both are." She said it plainly. As though it wouldn't shake his world. As though his mind wouldn't be reeling. As though he wouldn't be afraid.

His mouth dropped open and he stared at the back of his governess as she hurried down the left corridor, pulling his arm the whole time. "Miss Tiana. . .what about Mother and Father? Are they all right? Are we under attack?"

"In a manner of speaking. . .the life crafts!" she cried above a whisper as they passed a wall map with a red blinking arrow pointing to the right. "We're almost there, Corwyn, and then everything will be explained—"

Corwyn ran into Tiana's lower back as she came to an abrupt stop. *Thanks a lot for the warning*, he wanted to say. Swiping her braided, tickling hair away from his face, he peered around her small frame, wondering what the problem was *now*.

And saw Thendor Venair standing before them, flanked by several masked soldiers. His stance was all-calm, but his eyes were arctic fire. Thendor wore his usual attire: light combat armor the color of midnight, a floor-length cape to match, and his bald head.

"Father?" Corwyn asked hesitantly.

"It's all right, son," Thendor gave him a faint nod. But his gray eyes were on Tiana. He raised his chin, his face stern. "Release my son."

Tiana gripped Corwyn's hand tighter; her breathing grew audibly rapid.

"Come here, Corwyn," Thendor spoke gently, beckoning Corwyn to his side. "Everything will be all right. Just come here."

Maybe his governess was crazy. He didn't think so; his mother had always trusted her. But he couldn't understand what was going on and why the ship had fired a single blast and why

his governess was dragging him to the small life crafts used for emergency evacuation. Her hand still clutching his had grown cold and sweaty, causing him to believe she was afraid. *Afraid of being caught. Afraid for herself.*

He glanced one last time at Tiana, tore his hand from her grasp, and hurried to the shadow of his father's side.

"Guards, take her to the detention center," Thendor ordered, his voice lined with anger and. . . was it sorrow?

Tiana's shoulders sagged, but Corwyn could tell she was trying to be strong. "You won't be able to stop us." Even as she said it, Corwyn saw her pale lips quivering.

"Thank you for the warning," Thendor replied, his voice low. "But I think I just did."

After the soldiers had left with his x-governess, Corwyn again tried for an explanation. "Father?"

Thendor finally looked him in the eyes. Yes, there was sorrow there. And anger. But when he spoke, his voice, with a slight Scottish lilt, came gentle and brittle. "Come with me, son. There's much to tell you."

Chapter 2

Earth

Los Angeles, California

February 16, 2237

With stealth and agility, the long figure, dressed all in white, scaled the west side of Evangate Residence and slipped through an open attic window. Inside, she pulled off her face and head covering and wiped perspiration from her forehead. She then ripped her white, fingerless gloves from her hands and tossed them in a pile at her feet.

A light could be seen through the door seams and quiet chatter was coming from the first floor. The family was awake at two in the morning? Hannah Evangate wondered at that, but dismissed the thought, more concerned with sneaking back to her bedroom.

So far, so good—

CLICK.

A flashlight beam illuminated her. Hannah sucked in a sharp breath.

"You're home," came a very familiar voice.

"Thomas," Hannah whispered his name as her posture relaxed. "It's just you."

He took a step forward, standing in the moonlight streaming through the skylight, and smiled. "*Just* your favorite brother?" He was wearing jeans, a turtleneck, and leather jacket. His brown hair was muffed as if he'd been banging his head to some rock music. Boyish brown eyes met hers.

She returned the smile and began removing her wrist gear.

"How'd my inventions work out?" he asked with eagerness.

"It all helped, except the jet-power." She handed him her gear and moved toward the door.

He looked down at the round wrist Pulsar he'd painted red in honor of the Crab Pulsar. He'd designed it nearly a year ago, long before he'd learned how to make his sister's gadgets less

bulky. Hannah watched as his gaze moved on to the electro-knife, his eyes and fingers searching for any possible sign of damage.

She rolled her eyes. “It doesn’t even work, Thomas. I clicked the *ON* button and no electricity shot from the handle. Not even a spark. I’d rather zap than stab, so a functioning electro-knife would be nice.”

“You just said everything worked,” he said, looking up from the inventions he held in his hands.

“Yeah, because I used it as a normal, old knife. And you still need to redesign the jet-power. I couldn’t fly to the next apartment rooftop. I had to *climb*. Again.” She could almost laugh but preferred to tease him with a straight face.

“What happened with them?” He sounded offended at his handy-work being belittled.

“Well,” Hannah reached down to unstrap the miniature jets, painted white, from the back of her shins. “They sputtered, smoked, and then did. . .nothing.”

She handed the two palm-sized jets to him and he arched an eyebrow.

“Better luck next time.” She patted his shoulder.

“What about my imitation of the Beta Boosters?” Thomas asked as she tiptoed to the door.

Hannah removed her white wrap and wadded it up. “The leg things—I mean—the *boosters* worked much better since you upgraded them. I was able to jump from the ground to the ridgeline of a storage shed. About eight feet. Once the jumping and the flying are combined, I’ll be twice as good when I have to fight.”

Just as she was about to crack the attic door open, Thomas stopped her with two words. “Risk’s here.”

Her hand hovered over the doorknob. Their brother-in-law? At this hour? A warning blared in the back of her mind. Something wasn’t right.

“Mother and Father down there with him?” She wasn’t sure what exactly to ask. It was so strange.

“He brought Charlotte. It seems he’s going away for a while. Military business.”

She should be happy to see her older sister, but if Risk was bringing her here to live with the family again, then something had to be wrong in Space.

“He’ll explain to you downstairs.” Thomas gave an encouraging nod towards the attic door.

He followed her out to the hallway and waited for her while she slipped into her room to hide the outdoor clothing. To look less conspicuous, she grabbed her long hand-woven casual sweater—made on China II—and slipped it over her white shirt and pants. A dose of perfume to hide the smell of perspiration didn’t hurt either.

She closed the bedroom door behind her and reached up to check that her hair was still securely pinned at the nape of her neck. “How do I look?”

Thomas gave her a quick up-and-down glance. “Like you’re out of breath from running across the rooftops of a metropolitan city.”

“Thanks.” She shoved him playfully.

“At least even your breathing.” He came alongside her as they headed downstairs. “Don’t *sound* like you’ve been hurrying.”

Brother and sister headed down the dark wood staircase, its blue risers matching the wall on their left. They cut through the formal dining, its crystal chandelier casting a regal light across

the open room. Rounding a corner into the breakfast nook, Hannah's gaze fell upon the familiar faces of her family.

"Little sister," Risk greeted her with a serious smile. He was dressed in his dark green uniform and standing behind Charlotte, who sat at the breakfast table with a hand around her protruding midsection.

Hannah gave him a smile, despite her concern. Mother sat opposite Charlotte, her hair braided over her shoulder and her pearl satin robe tied securely. In the corner of the nook stood Father, still dressed in his formal senator attire, probably from coming home late. He was stroking his dark goatee, a thoughtful look on his face.

Unsure of whether she should ask questions, Hannah only looked around the room, the disquiet growing in her mind. Evangate Residence, home to Senator Alexander Evangate's family, was a three story elegant stone structure. Mahogany wainscot—Adriatic painted walls—wine colored drapes—and black and white checkered flooring in the back of the house all worked together to give it a classy Victorian appearance. Hannah was at peace here. It had been a wonderful home in which to grow up; and it would forever hold golden memories in every corner.

The family remained quiet, with Father finally breaking the silence.

"How long, Risk?" he asked.

"There's no telling." Risk scratched the side of his face, and smoothed his brown whiskers. "We will assemble our best space pilots, first. Then we'll concentrate on our Flying Academies. And I have a project up my sleeve."

Charlotte looked up at him, cocking an elegant eyebrow at her husband. "Another project? Just how many Flying Academies are you going to open?"

Risk smiled down at her. "EARUS Force wants to open a type of academy that hasn't been around for a long time. We've created a large campus on an unsettled world; 'we' being myself and a handful of other trained military leaders. I'm just waiting for a final confirmation from President Helvendar."

Beside Hannah, Thomas brightened. "Are you talking about something like a Special Ops Task Force from Nova's day?"

"Huh?" Hannah asked.

Risk nodded. "SPOTAF may be making a comeback of sorts. I've collaborated with the Board of Directors and we're thinking of starting an improved version of SPOTAF. On Kablor."

Mother's mouth dropped open. "Risk, that's outside Trinity Galaxy."

"But it's still within the Virgo Supercluster," he smiled, a twinkle in his hazel eyes. "So, it's not *that* far away."

Charlotte gave him a lopsided grin. "You do like to try our patience, don't you? Just because you're in known Space doesn't mean you're close."

"What did SPOTAF teach?" Hannah interjected.

Risk's expression turned playful and he looked between the faces of his family. "Imagine you're surrounded. And you have a gun pointed at the back of your head. And another one on your right."

Thomas shrugged. "Okay. . ."

"And another one to your left."

Now Thomas laughed and Hannah looked on with wonder, anticipating the explanation.

Risk cocked an eyebrow. "How would you get out of it?"

"It's impossible!" Thomas said through a laugh.

Second Star First Edition

“No.” Risk shook his head. “There’s a way out. But you have three seconds to decide. Only three seconds.”

Thomas laughed again. “I’m not sure any of us believe you. But since you’re family, we’ll give you the benefit of the doubt.” Thomas gave Hannah a sideways look and then rolled his eyes. She stifled a giggle at her brothers’ frisky mockery and wondered at such training. What she wouldn’t give to learn from professional task force members.

“In all seriousness.” Risk looked to Father. “EARUS Force will deal with this new threat and do our *best* to prevent a full out war.” He paused, a hard look crossing his face. “And we won’t allow them near Earth.”

Hannah hesitated to ask. “Who. . .who’s ‘them’? Why are you talking about war?”

This time, Mother spoke. Her expression, though strong, betrayed her inner worry with its tightness. She tucked a strand of brilliant red hair behind her ear and answered in quiet words. “The Royal Space Patrol discovered them first, just over a year ago. They were said to be pirates, troublesome, but not a threat to be taken seriously. As the months passed, I guess it became much more serious. And now. . .”

Her voice trailed off as she looked at the faces in the room. “They’ve become known as Ghost Raiders among the space pilots.”

“They’re said to interrupt trade routes, battle for a short while, and then,” Thomas shrugged, “reinforcements just. . .appear. A little while later, the main task force takes their leave, and the reinforcements literally vanish.”

Creepy, she thought. Did stuff like that happen in Space? Could people disappear?

“So, what are they taking from the trade trains?” Hannah asked.

Thomas looked at Risk and muttered, “Some expensive mineral rocks and. . .”

Risk finished his sentence. “Mainly, arms ammunition.”

Hannah nodded slowly as understanding sunk in. So her brother-in-law would leave the family to try and stop these pirates. She didn’t know how EARUS Force would handle the issue. *Could a galactic war come of it?* That seemed a bit dramatic. Perhaps it was a simple mystery to be solved.

“Will EARUS declare war on a band of vanishing unknown men?” Hannah gave him a funny look as if to say he was absurd for thinking it.

He smiled and answered, “Possible, but unlikely. A few battles to end the threat won’t qualify for war. And I consider that a blessing. None of the effected worlds can start a civil war when the enemy mysteriously comes and goes. We simply have to prepare several task forces and send them out to distant trade routes suspected of being victimized. We’ll deal with these strange pirates and be done with it. Simple enough. . .I hope.”

“How do you expect EARUS to know where these raiders will strike next?” Thomas asked with a skeptical tone.

Risk pulled lightly on his short beard. “We have an excellent Intelligence organization.”

Hannah noticed Risk sounded almost negative and guessed he was attempting to make the problem sound less troubling than it was in reality. Bless him. With a nod, she said, “Well, thanks for coming to see us before you have to leave.”

Risk straightened. “I came for another important reason.”

“He came to get me.”

No! Hannah looked at her brother standing beside her, barely a year older than she was. They’d been like twins their whole lives, always walking in one another’s shadows. Inseparable. *He can’t leave! He can’t go to Space without me!*

Second Star First Edition

“He’s the finest pilot I know.” Risk smiled with pride. “I’ve offered him a position in the best Flying Academy in known space. It’s located on—”

“Beljock,” Hannah finished, her voice sounding weaker than she meant it to. “One of Kablor’s moons. Five days travel from here.”

The others seemed surprised that she knew that detail. They raised eyebrows and looked at each other with questioning faces. Thomas knew. He knew she had wanted to do more for others. Her nightly escapades to protect and defend were hindered by her inept abilities; she needed training. Thus, she’d researched all her options, unsure of where she belonged. And even more unsure of whether or not she would ever be brave enough to tell her parents—or even to leave them.

Charlotte had followed in their parents’ footsteps and was secretary to a member of the legislature. Thomas had started flying classes when he was eight and had spent the majority of the past thirteen years in a cockpit. And Hannah, well, she’d dabbled in both areas. And now she had her secret life. . .

“Don’t fret, Mother.” Thomas put a hand on her shoulder.

She gave him a weak smile, her eyes glassing over. “I’ll do my best. Now, go pack your bags.”

Hannah watched as Risk pulled his wife to her feet and guided her to the back patio overlooking the gardens. Charlotte rested her head against Risk’s muscular arm and whispered, “Where will you go first?”

“New York has a shuttle to the Space Station that leaves. . .” Risk’s voice faded as he exited the home.

Father released a heavy sigh and watched his son retreat from the kitchen to gather his belongings. Looking to his youngest child, he cocked his head and smiled. “Hannah, I guess that leaves you. There will probably be more positions opening in the senate.”

She shook her head. “Father, I’m just not a politician or a diplomat.” She looked toward the arched doorway leading out to the living room and staircase. “I’m more like Thomas.”

“Hmm.” He pulled gently on his goatee again, his eyes drifting to his wife.

Mother fastened her pale robes tighter and tapped a slipper on the shiny checkered floor. Her mind was elsewhere, Hannah knew. Most likely thinking about her middle child—his sometimes careless ways that placed him in harm’s way—like when he’d jumped off the playground tower as a child. Mother had become overprotective of her children after that.

Thomas can’t leave Earth. Leave the United States. Leave me. We’ve always been there for each other. She felt an instant pounding bombarding her head as she fought the urge to cry.

Twenty minutes later, the family was standing in the foyer, bidding the men goodbye. Charlotte’s eyes rested longer on Risk’s face and Hannah noticed her hand resting over her slightly rounded belly. Mother and Father remained strong as their only son marched away to join a prestigious academy, where he would follow his dream, his first love: flying.

Hannah watched as her brothers climbed into the hover car sitting in the driveway beside Father’s old fashioned car. Risk and Thomas were ready to save Trinity Galaxy from a mysterious group of apparent buccaneers.

Ghost Raiders, the name sent a shiver down her spine.

Second Star First Edition

Galaxy Shadows

Anna Bourassa

Hannah Evangate and her brothers begin the interstellar race to locate a portal's control tower before Ragnos Empire and the Ghost Raiders use it against Earth to devastating effect. Corwyn of Ragnos is destined to face Hannah on every galactic battlefield, but neither is able to eliminate the other due to their first mysterious meeting in New York.

Find me on Facebook when you search “Anna Bourassa Author”.

I post two updates a month concerning my science fiction trilogy, sometimes through brief videos and other times with character sketches.

I would love to have you join the community and share the titles of books, movies, and songs you love!



The Wonder of a Child
by Mavin Wright

When I forget the joy of Christmas
wrestling with the decorations
I look and see my child
eyes full of wonder
as strings of lights reflect

I take a breath and smile
it's not about perfect placement
it's about seeking the light
of Jesus our Savior

When I forget the meaning of Christmas
struggling in late night hours
I look and see my child
eyes closed and softly breathing
sleeping peacefully

I take a breath and smile
it's not about stressing plans
it's about the sleeping babe
swaddled in clothes long ago

When I forget the magic of Christmas
searching for perfect things
I look and see my child
laughing at seemingly nothing
smiles for all to see

I take a breath and smile
it's not about the presents
it's about the perfect gift
born to love us all

When I forget the meaning of Christmas
I turn to look at my child
eyes full of wonder and innocence
her heart full of love

I take a breath and smile
and remember we're celebrating
the birth of a child
the best gift of all

Mavin Wright's email address: mavindwright@gmail.com

The Runaway Princess

by

Mallory Bybee

Once long ago there was a good King who had 3 daughters, Olga, Brunhilda, and Anna. The King also had a sweet wife, who loved him very much and he loved her even more. One day the Queen fell ill and died. The years went by and the King grew old, as all kings do, and his daughters became lovely young ladies, as princesses do.

One day, while watching his daughters during their dance lesson, a thought occurred to the King “*Soon suitors will come for them and I will be left all alone.*”

So the King decided to remarry after nearly 15-years. He called for the Royal Ring-Keeper. The Royal Ring Keeper kept the Queens Ring until it was fitted upon the new queen; this tradition had been started long ago. As each king came of age to choose a queen all of the eligible women in the land were sent for. The ring would be placed on the girl’s right hand on their third finger, whoever’s finger held the ring in place would become the next queen.

“Only when the ring fits a woman of the Kingdom can you marry.” The Keeper reminded him handing over the ring, which was a very simple gold band the only thing of note was the etching of a small bird on the inside of the band.

“I understand.” I understand said the King, passing it over his fingers.

Letters went out, to the upper class first and then the common people, telling the people that all unmarried women were to come to the palace to try on the ring. They appeared in the thousands. Every inn was full, every bed in the royal city was taken by every single unmarried woman in the land.

As for the Kings two eldest daughters, Olga and Brunhilda, they did not like the idea of their father remarrying. Marriage meant that someone would now be in charge of the palace and that they would not be able to roam free as they had been doing since their mothers passing, but most importantly it meant less money for them. Anna, the youngest, didn’t see the harm in her father marring again. She couldn’t remember her mother and was entertained by the idea of making memories with a new one.

“We must not let this happen.” Brunhilda said one night as they glared down at the line of women.

“But why?” Asked Anna.

“As a girl of only 16 I hardly expect you to understand how horrid it would be if father were to marry.” Olga snapped at her.

“I know what we can do.” Said Brunhilda smiling like a cat.

“What?” Olga asked, she could not think of any way of preventing the marriage and she was the smart one; at least she thought she was.

“We try the ring on ourselves. If it fits one us father surely cannot marry.”

“But I don’t want to.” Opposed Anna.

Second Star First Edition

“You ninny, what makes you think that you’ll try it on?” Snapped Brunhilda. “Olga and I will go down and try it on.”

Not one to be left out Anna followed them, quietly, as they made their way to the palace hall.

The last of the women were leaving, each of them sad that the ring did not fit. The King was too busy looking out the window onto the procession of women leaving to take notice of his daughters walking up to the pedestal where the ring lay. The two eldest each took a turn and the ring, to their anger, did not fit either one of them. The King came out of his trance not realizing what had happened behind his back.

“Oh girls it’s good to see you. No Queen yet I’m afraid, but the search continues.”

“Are you sure you want to do this Papa? It has been three months already.” Olga said, handing him the ring.

“Yes it must be done until she who fits the ring is found.” The Royal Ring Keeper said, taking it back from Olga and handing it to the king.

“He is right once started it must continue until every unmarried women in the kingdom try’s it on.”

There was only one unmarried woman that had not tried on the ring and she was coming out from behind a chair in the royal reception hall.

“You’ll find her Papa, I know you will. If not then Olga and I will take care of you.” Brunhilda said, smiling like a cat.

Walking toward her father she bumped into the Royal Ring Keeper, who in turn let go of the wedding ring and made it sore into the air.

“I cannot lose the ring.” The Ring Keeper thought.

“I cannot lose the chance to find my new wife.” The King thought.

“We must lose the ring.” Thought the two princesses.

“I got it.” Yelled Princess Anna as she jumped into the air; the ring slid down her finger and settled at its base. “See, I told you I got it.” She beamed for a moment but no one else did. *Why aren’t they happy, I saved the ring?*

“No this must be wrong.” The King cried.

“The ring is never wrong.” The Ring Keeper said shocked as all of them.

“BUT SHE’S OUR SISTER!” Brunhilda and Olga yelled.

“I cannot marry my daughter.” The King said.

“You must, it is the law. Whoever fits the ring must marry the King.” The Royal Ring Keeper said coldly.

Marry? The King’s heart sank as he looked at his youngest daughter. How could he marry his own daughter? There must be something that he could do to stop the wedding from happening, but what? It was the law and not even the King was above the law? The word had shocked the young Princess.

She had not thought of that, but she knew the law as well as anyone else.

“I must wed.” She said softly.

The King looked at his daughter and simply repeated, “I must wed.”

Still shocked the young princess walked to her room silently as the church bells rang telling the Kingdom that a new queen had been found. What the bells could not say was that a father would marry a daughter or that a young princess would now take the place of her long dead mother. In her room she stayed alone all night.

The next morning her father, sisters and Royal Dress Maker came to her room.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

No sound came from inside.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

The soft sound of wings came from beyond the door, but nothing else.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Now soft falls of paws and feet on the ground.

Slowly the door opened.

“Yes.” Princess Anna said from inside.

“The Royal Dress Maker is here to start your wedding dress.” The King said solemnly.

“Your Highness I can make any dress you wish.” The Dress Maker Boasted.

“Make me a dress as pale as the moon, with slippers that twinkle like the stars on a summer’s night.” Princess Anna said.

The Dress Makers face went white as a sheet, “Your Majesty such a dress will take time.” He pleaded.

“You said you could make any dress I wished. I will not wed until I have a dress as pale as the moon with slippers that twinkle like the stars.”

“Yes your Majesty.” He said curtly and then thought, *Spoiled brat.*

The sister’s thought as the group walked away, *Why should she get a new dress and not us?*

“You Kingliness, a dress such as the one that she has requested has never been made nor the slippers.” The Dress Maker said frightened.

“Then you will be the first.” The King said and walked away.

The Royal Dress Maker worked harder than ever to make the dress perfect for the soon-to-be-Queen. Two full months went by and finally the dress was finished.

They again went to the princess room.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Nothing.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

This time instead of wings they heard claws scratching on the floor, very softly of course, so softly that they thought their ears must be mistaken.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

As before the princess opened the door slowly and spoke softly. “Yes.”

“The dress has been made and the slippers as well.” The Dress Maker Beamed wheeling it to the door and handing her the slippers.

“They are truly the work of a master and extremely beautiful, but now I must have another made. This dress must be as dark as the sky at midnight in fall with slippers that match the deepest blue of the ocean, for me to wear at the wedding feast.”

That poor Dress Maker, once again his face went white as a sheet. He tried once again to object to the princess but she shut the door and once again her room went silent. Then he tried to object to the King.

The King simply looked at him and said, “You will be the first to make such a dress.”

“Yes sir.” He said and once again the group walked away.

The Royal Dress maker worked harder on this dress than on the first. This dress of the midnight sky in fall took three months to make. In all total five months had passed since the first dress had been commissioned and in that time no one had seen the princess, the servants were too busy preparing for the wedding that they didn’t notice. Her sisters had never paid much attention to her in the first place. All but the King, he was worried about his youngest child that he was soon to wed, why had she hidden herself away?

Second Star First Edition

For the second time the group went to the princess' room with a dress and slippers that had no equal in the world.

"Daughter?" The King called.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

This time there came the scratch of claws and the soft flutter of wings, followed by the soft falls of paws and feet on the ground.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Then the princess came to the door.

"We have your second dress as you wished."

"Thank you. I have a dress for the procession and one of the banquet now I need one for the church. This one must be as bright as the sun with slippers that are red as the brightest fire."

"You shall have it." The Royal Dress Maker thought of objecting but knew that the King would only silence him.

"I know that we have asked much of you." The King told him, "No other dress maker will be remembered like you will be for your one of kind dresses. History will hold your name high my friend and I will not forget what you have done for us."

The Dress Maker did not know what to say, he bowed to the King and stammered out a thank you.

To the shock of everyone at court the Royal Dress Maker made it in only one month, he had learned much in the making the first two dresses.

As with the others they went to her room. Unlike the other times the princess opened the door before anyone knocked,

"Thank you." She said, "We will wed on the morrow." She pulled the dress into her room and shut the door slowly and silently.

"We wed on the morrow." The King said to himself, almost as quietly as his daughter he walked back to his chambers and shut his door.

The bells once more rang out the announcement of the wedding to happen the following day, but it would not happen.

Within the young princess chambers over the past six months all manner of creatures had been working endlessly on something furry, feathery, hairy and matted.

Princess Anna had no friends at court since her sisters kept her out of many things she would often spend many hours out in the forest and soon she became friends with many of the animals there.

On the day that she had put on the ring after she had gone into her room she climbed out her window and went into the forest and wept. There amongst her animal friends she told them what was to happen; the animals came up with a plan, a way to make it so the little princess would not have to marry her father.

"Keep them busy." Buzzed a little bee, "And we will make thee a disguizze to hide thee from themmm."

Now it was time for their plan to work.

The night she received the last dress the animals gave her their creation, a cloak of every fur and feather of every creature in the forest.

"Cover your face with this." Cooed a little turtle dove giving her a packet of brown mush.

"But what about my dresses, I cannot leave them here."

"Us-s-se t-t-t-this.." Stammered a small squirrel placing three acorns in her lap.

"They have been enchanted and will hold your dresses and lovely slippers!" Called a raven.

"Thank you my friends."

“You must hurry.” Cooed the dove, “If you are not far away by morning they will catch you.”

Anna gathered her dresses and stuffed each one, along with its slippers into the acorns. With the help of the birds she made her way to the edge of her fathers’ Kingdom and into a new life of uncertainty.

The next morning the King made is way to Princess Anna’s room and knocked on the door just as she had done before.

No sound came from inside this time, no scuffle of claws on the floor or the fluttering sound of wings, it was silent in the Princess’ room.

The King tried the door, but she had bolted it shut.

He called for the guards to break down the door. After three powerful hits of a battering ram the door gave way. Inside the room was empty except for feathers and furs that lay across the ground.

“She’s run away.” He whispered to himself with a half-smile.

If she had run away then there was no bride, if there was no bride then there was no marriage, and if there was no marriage then the King would not have to marry his daughter. This made the King, and the country, very happy, but the Royal Chancellor told the King that she would be found.

“She is only a child and doesn’t know the ways of the world. What will become of her?” The Chancellor asked.

The Chancellor was right, Princess Anna would be in danger. The King sent out his best huntsmen and dogs to track his lost child. If only they’d known that they would never find her scent. If only they’d known that the princess was no longer a princess, they could have been saved months of fruitless searching.

Months passed and in the neighboring Kingdom the prince of that land had discovered something unique in the kitchens of his father’s castle, a strange thing covered and fur and feathers, that smelled of doves and foxes, that looked as if it should walk on four legs but stood tall and proud on two.

The Prince had never before come into the kitchens, but for the past month he had been working with the cooks to prepare a surprise birthday for this father the King on his 50th birthday and 30th year on the throne.

“You there, thing!” He yelled at the fur creature. “Where is the cook? I must know that everything is going well for tonight’s celebration.”

“The cook is out gathering berries for your father’s cake. He felt it best done by himself.”

How could this be, the voice that came out was sweet like honey and cooler than a summer breeze.

The Prince looked around to see if anyone else was there but they were alone in the kitchen.

“Very well,” He said, his voice a little shaken. “Make sure to tell him I came here.”

“I will your highness.” She, it was a she by the sound of the voice, looked him in the eyes and bowed, all the while holding his gaze.

All he could do was walk out, no words would come to him now. That voice was so strange and wonderful, it made no logical sense but it was perfect; how could something so wonderful come out of that thing?

That night while the guest gathered and the Prince brought his father to them the female “Thing” was allowed to have the night off, to hide herself from the sensitive royalty, the cook never knew when the Queen would show off the royal kitchens or a lost guest might wonder in.

Second Star First Edition

She walked away from the palace to her home in the woods just beyond its back wall. A small shack served as her home, for the last five years that was what she called hers. A concoction of fallen braches for walls, stamped down earth for a floor and evergreen branches for a roof, made her small shack warm and cozy. In a corner a small circle of stones formed a hearth, the summers were easy and the winters harsh but in her fur she was always warm, always safe. Squirrels and birds came in and out as they pleased and brought her food from the forest.

“Hello my friends.”

“Hello.” Came a coo.

“Hi.” Chittered others.

“Tonight the Prince is giving a ball. It’s been so long since I’ve been to one, the dances must have changed and the dresses too. I wish I could go.”

Then one the littlest squirrels crawled inside her fur and brought out a small acorn.

“My dress? No little one I could never go. Fashions must have changed since this gown was made. You forget, as well, I was not invited.”

The little squirrel pressed the acorn into her palm, “You will have fun!”

Smiling happily Thing happily stood, she made her way to a small pot that sat next to the hearth. Cupping out water she washed away the brown mush from her face. Then she removed the cap of fur and winds, next the coat, she stood happily opening the acorn and gently removed the dress as pale as the moon, with slippers that twinkled like the stars on a summer’s night.

Her friends helped her dress and fixed her hair, a tawny rabbit came with fresh strawberries and made them into a paste.

“Place this on your lips and ever so lightly on your cheeks.” She chittered.

Princess Anna did as she was told and made her way to the river nearby. She gazed at her reflection in the water. So much of her had changed but still she looked the same. She was indeed Princess Anna, the girl that fled her fathers’ kingdom instead of staying and marrying him.

For a moment, standing by the water, she hesitated. How could she enjoy anything in life when she knew she had hurt her family? Could she enjoy anything in life from now on?

She shook off her hesitation. There was nothing she could do now, this life as the Thing in the kitchen was good for her and if she only had no one night and one party for the rest of her life what could be wrong with that?

As Anna made her way towards the palace gate she began to feel flushed but held her head high and remembered who she had been, as Princess Anna she had been taught since birth how to be graceful and poised.

Walking through the gates unnoticed she realized that this night would be truly perfect for her. Unlike everyone else here that wished to curry favor with the king or the prince she didn’t care. She could dance or be with anyone she wanted and not worry about the usual social problems she had before. She was free to be herself, just Anna.

She danced happily with many noblemen and laughed freely.

From across the ballroom, unbeknownst to her, the Prince was watching her the entire night. This unknown lady was completely different from everyone else in the room. She was confident, perky and unfazed by everyone in the room. Her gorgeous smile and dazzling moon pale dress completely stunned him from the moment she walked into the hall. He had to know who she was. He had to know where she was from, what she liked. He had to know everything about this woman that was just herself.

As he made his way around the hall to greet the guests he tried to subtly make inquiries into her identity, but no one seemed to know who she was or where she came from.

Before she knew it his feet were moving him across the room towards her.

Second Star First Edition

At the same time across the hall Anna was having a delightful conversation with an elderly Lord and Lady that she had noticed sitting and watching the dancers. Just as they began to tell her about how they had gotten engaged the lord suddenly stood up and bowed low to someone behind her.

Anna turned to find the prince standing so close to her that she nearly brushed against him. Then they just stood there for what for an entire lifetime looking at each other.

“Your Royal Highness. Thank you for a splendid evening.” The man said breaking them out of their trance.

Realizing that he needed to respond the prince shook his head and came back to himself. “You are most welcome and may I say thank you for coming my Lord William and Lady Prudence.” He made a quick bow to the both of them and then turned back to unknown lady.

Before he could say anything she quickly spoke up and said, “Thank you for lovely evening your Royal Highness. Lord William and Lady Prudence it was very nice to meet the two of you.”

She turned and made her way out of the hall. Her quick light footsteps seemed so graceful. Bowing quickly in farewell to the couple he rushed after her.

As he exited the hall he saw the back of her dress go around the corner towards the gates. *No! Please don't leave.* He thought hurrying after her.

Only moments ahead of him Anna was doing her best to stay calm and she made her way out of the palace and back into the forest. The only advantage she had on the prince was her years of living in the forest.

She made her way out of the gates and into the darkness of the trees just as the prince come out of the palace gates and stood gazing down the entrance way, completely dumbfounded. No carriages had come since dancing had statured and now starting down the long even pathway he saw none leaving.

How had she gotten away? Was she some ancient forest spirit that had come to walk among the mortals for one night? Would he ever see again?

Remembering himself and his duties as a prince, he had his way back into the ball room just as the cook was bringing forward his fathers' cake. It was a true work of genius, ten tiers tall and nearly five feet wide at the base each level was sculpted and pieced together beautifully.

The prince made his way to the center of the room where the cake had been placed and bowed to his father and mother that sat on their thrones happily watching the evening progress.

“My most royal father and king, I humble present you with this cake in celebration of your many years righteous stewardship over our land.” With that he cut a piece of cake and walked it to up to the king.

Happily his father took it from him and ate a forkful. Realization and surprise spread across the kings face the moment the cake touched his tongue. He hurriedly ate another bite and then another. Somewhere deep in his mind a memory stirred as looked pensively at his son.

“This cake?” The King questioned.

“Yes father, I know.” A sly smiled spread across the prince's face. Had the cook replicate the same cake that was served at the kings coronation many years before.

Happily the courtiers all ate the cake, those among them old enough to remember the original happily thought back onto that night and then on to the marriage that soon took place between the King and a young princess.

The Prince made his way to his mother and gave her some cake as well.

“Son,” She said softly. “Who was that young woman you followed out of the hall a few moments ago?”

“Sadly, mother I do not know. I wish I did.”

Second Star First Edition

“I do believe that you have fallen in love.” She whispered to him.

The Prince blushed at this. Could he have finally fallen in love?

“You must find her.”

“How mother? I don’t know her name let alone where she comes from.”

“My King and husband, please come here.”

Obediently the king turned and come to his wife and son. “What is it you wish my love and queen?”

“Do you remember that young woman whose dress you commented on and whose shoes I so admired?”

He nodded, not even needing a second to recall the young lady.

“She has left and taken with her the heart of our son. No one knows who she is or where she came from. I propose that in two days’ time we have another ball and invite all the people that came tonight to it, she is bound to return again. When she comes again, we will make sure that we learn all we can about her and broker a marriage as soon as possible.”

“As always my queen is the smartest person in the room. Son, do you agree to this?”

Feeling as if he would burst the prince nodded in agreement.

All was set into motion the next day.

A proclamation was sent that there would be another ball.

Alone in her shack Anna smiled happily to herself and became lost in memories of the night before as transformed herself back into Thing.

Like the night before she looked at herself in the water and smiled happily, no one would notice her like this and even if they did they would think this Thing before them way the beautiful girl from the ball.

Making her way into the kitchen she was shocked to see some many people hustling about. There were even some village children that were normally only brought up to help prepare for a party not to get everything put away from one.

She quickly asked one of the stewards what was happening. In a rather rude tone he informed her that the King and Queen had enjoyed their party so much that they wished to have another in two days.

Anna was struck dumb by this. *I can’t believe it another party!*

Not only would this mean a lot of hard work for her in the kitchens but it would also mean another chance to have fun at a party. This time would be different though, she wouldn’t run away. It wouldn’t matter if the Prince came up to her again he wouldn’t know it was her, the Thing and a beautiful girl could never be the same.

Throughout the day she worked hard and did everything asked of her, helped where she could and helped the village children around with their assignments.

When the day finally came to an end she began putting the clean pots and pans away when a chambermaid came running into the kitchens.

“Help! Please! Someone help!” She cried.

Anna was the only left in the kitchens and she ran over to the maid.

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh Thing!” She exclaimed, she had often seen Thing before and knew not to be afraid by her appearance. “It’s the prince! All day he’s been locked in his rooms putting on different costumes for the ball that they are going to have and now he won’t let anyone into his room! The butlers are demanding that we enter the rooms to clean but when we knock the prince yells at us.”

Men! How dare he! She composed herself and talked to the maid. “Don’t worry, I’ll help.”

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Relieved the maid showed her up to his chambers. Outside of his doors were a group of cowering maids and an angry butler, tapping his foot in annoyance.

When the butler saw Thing he nearly fainted from shock. "You brought *THING!*" He cried.

"I didn't know what else to do! We couldn't get in and neither could you."

"Sir, once I get the maids in I will go back to the kitchens." She said sweetly.

The butler had never heard her voice and was carried away on its soft melody. He nodded and allowed her to move forward.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

"I SAID GO AWAY!" The prince bellowed from inside.

Everyone shrank away in fear, everyone but Thing.

"Sire, I am here with the maids. I am sorry that you are distressed but it cannot be helped. They must be allowed to do their duties."

Silence, one minute passed and then another.

The soft click from the lock was all that was heard before the door opened.

"I apologize for my behavior. Your behavior was unacceptable. Please, ladies go about your duties." Looking at the ground like a child in trouble the prince came out of his chambers and held the door open.

Very quickly and efficiently they went to work and left as soon as they could.

Thing stood there ready to protect the poor maids from the evil prince, but when he had come out so gently and looked so much like an innocent boy she didn't know what to do. Even now as the last maid was finishing her duties the Prince stood there with his eyes cast down.

Looking at his soft features she smiled to herself.

This poor boy, she thought, he truly does have a kind heart.

Soon he felt someone's gaze on him and looked up to see Thing there. He didn't register who it was at first and was soon entranced by her eyes.

"Your highness." Was all she said then she felt her body bow and walk away from him.

Something felt familiar to him as he watched the mound of fur and feathers make its way down the hall the hall, he couldn't place his finger on it.

Soon the night of the ball came and Anna once again washed her face and had her animal friends help with her hair. She pulled out her second acorn and caressed the dark as the sky at midnight in fall dress with slippers that match the deepest blue of the ocean. She still could not believe that these dresses were hers.

Again she made her way to the palace gates. This time there was an attendant waiting by the gate. Would he check to see if she was meant to be there? She had no way to prove it!

Keeping her composure she walked to the gate. As she approached the attendant walked directly to her, passing multiple groups. She became slightly anxious, being unable to go into the ball tonight would make her sad; she had so much fun the night before.

"M'lady," He bowed to her. "Welcome to the royal palace. I have been instructed to bring you into the ball tonight by the Queen herself."

Unable to disagree she allowed him to lead her inside.

What does the Queen want with me?

Everyone seemed to know who the man was leading her because they all moved aside and bowed to her.

As they approached the throne the King and Queen stood to greet her, she in turn curtsied to them.

Second Star First Edition

The Queen held out a hand and led her up to a chair that had been set up next to her throne.

“I am so glad that you made it tonight my dear. I was impressed with you at the anniversary ball and was hoping that you would attend tonight.”

“Thank you your majesty. I did not know that I had made such an impression.”

“Not just on myself but on my son as well.” With a quick motion of her hand the prince, who had been standing across the room made his way towards them.

Anna couldn't help but notice that he looked different he kept fidgeting with his suit coat.

“Your Highness.” Anna greeted him.

“Hello, would you care to dance?”

She could only shake her head yes as he took her hand.

They made their way out to the floor.

A waltz began to play.

The Prince couldn't not bring himself to look at her.

“Is something wrong?”

“No, I apologize. You see the other night I feel like I may have offended you.”

“No, your majesty you didn't.”

“Thank goodness.” He heaved a sigh of relief.

Anna smiled happily at him, again her smile took his breath away.

“I may sound rather forward but there is something about you that I find completely magical.”

As they started into each other's eyes dancing to the music Anna began to feel a deep happiness rise from within her.

“I need to leave.” Anna said breaking the spell between them.

“Please don't. I may sound forward but I wish to spend every day of my life with you.”

I feel the same way! She cried inside.

“If you truly feel that way, meet me tomorrow evening in the palace gardens. If you know me when you see me there I will marry you.”

With that she left a stunned Prince standing in the middle of the floor as she left.

The Prince relayed the message to his parents, both were delighted. They knew love would guide him.

The next evening came and the Prince stood in the garden nervously, but happily, waiting for her.

In the darkness a form began to advance towards him, out of instinct he reached for his sword.

“Would you hurt someone for enjoying the flowers?” A soft voice asked.

As the form came into view the Prince realized it was Thing. “I apologize. I didn't mean anything by it.”

She said nothing as she approached. She only looked him straight in the eye. Her gaze was intense but kind, he couldn't look away.

Then her eyes became something more, they brought love to his heart.

Suddenly he knew whose eyes they were!

“YOU! It's you! Truly?”

“Yes.” Anna nearly cried from the joy she felt. She was worried that he was wouldn't try that he would only see her for her outward beauty, but here tonight while she was dressed as a Thing he knew her and still felt love for her.

Second Star First Edition

He placed one hand on her cheek and happily stared into her eyes, her beautiful, deep, wonderful eyes.

As all fairy tales this one ends with the marriage of the Prince to Princess Anna.

As many Princess she looked beautiful in her wedding dress, the color of sunshine.

They lived happily ever after, because they had a marriage built on love for who they were and a deep trust for each other.

Many happy years passed, many children were born and eventually Anna made her way home and was reunited with her family.

The End

Born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska writing and reading have always been a way for me to express myself. There is something magical about being able to create a world and share that with others and have them see your vision.

One of my favorite things to do when it comes to story telling is to take old world folk tales and re-vamp them for a modern audience. Many people say that stories by the Grimm brothers or by Hans Christen Andersen are too dark and no longer relevant, but I would disagree. Those same stories told over centuries are still around because they will always be relevant. They will always have something to teach us.

This particular story is a re-vamp of The Fur Princess, one of my favorite folk tales. This is a timeless tale because its teaches a simple lesson, love and trust. When you have both you can do anything,

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Reindeer Games

By Dawn Brock

I knew I would be one of the chosen to pull Santa's sleigh. When he called my name, I puffed up my chest and pranced over to where the others were. My mother cried, and my father stood taller than he ever had before. It was perfect.

Our first flight, however, wasn't perfect. The eight of us stood stamping our feet in the snow for hours before Santa graced us with his presence. Finally, he began to harness us to the sleigh, calling us over one by one.

"Vixen," he called, but I pretended not to hear him. Instead, I continued to pick at the hay some elves had left out for us.

I heard the crunch of his boots as he walked over to me. "Come on Vixen," he said placing his hand on the back of my neck and stroking softly. "We can't do this without you."

I ducked my head slightly before gently nuzzling Santa's shoulder with my chin. I would do anything for this man, so I allowed him to lead me back to the sleigh. He placed me in the middle of the pack, but I was sure in time I would be in the front where I belonged.

Once we were all harnessed to the sleigh, we took off. It was a disaster. We crashed before we made it ten feet into the air.



"Hey Rudolf," I said coming up behind him. "I heard you want to be part of Santa's flight crew."

"Oh boy would I! To be able to fly with you and help Sant—" Before he could finish, I had kicked one of his back legs out from beneath him, sending him face first into the snow.

"You know, if you can't even stand in place without falling over, you'll never make it in Santa's elite flight crew. He takes only the best," I said as I stood over him.

He looked up at me and said, "You're right. I'll definitely work on that. Thanks, Vixen."

As he stood up and shook the snow from his fur, I spotted Donner and Blitzen. "Hey, guys!" I called out. "Come meet the new guy, Rudolf."

"Hello," Blitzen said as the two trotted over. They both abruptly stopped when they spotted his shining red nose.

"So... your name is Rudolf?" Donner asked, shuffling his feet in the snow.

"It sure is," I said. "He's one of our *bright* new recruits."

Second Star First Edition

The two smiled at that comment while sharing a knowing glance. "I can see that," Blitzen said.

"I thought you might," I said a sly smile on my face. "The two of us have been having a fascinating conversation. It has truly been *illuminating*."

Donner and Blitzen chuckled while Rudolf looked between the three of us trying to figure out the joke. "I do hope to join you one day," he said.

"I'm sure you being there would really help *light up* the sleigh," I said trying and failing to contain my laughter.

"I'm sorry," Rudolf said looking confused. "I feel like I've missed the joke." This statement sent Donner and Blitzen over the edge, and they began laughing too.

"Oh Rudolf," I said shaking my head. "The joke is you thinking you could ever fly with us. With a nose like that, it's just impossible, but I'll be sure to let you know if Santa ever needs a flashlight." With that said I turned and walked away.



Why was he still here? That foggy winter's night had been years ago, yet he still flew with us. He even had his own stall in Santa's barn. Everyone else seemed to believe he belonged with us, but I knew better. He hadn't earned his spot. He was just lucky.

I stomped my feet in frustration as I noticed him approaching me. "Hey Vixen, I was just coming to find you," Rudolph said.

"Well you found me," I replied not bothering to turn and face him completely.

"Yeah I guess I did," he laughed nervously. "I was just wondering if you would go through some drills with me."

"Why don't you ask one of the others I'm sure they'd be more than willing to help you."

"I'm sure they would, but none of them have the same skill you do. Everyone knows you're the best flyer."

He wasn't wrong, but I didn't want him to think he could persuade me with flattery. I sighed and said, "Give me 50 wind sprints, and maybe I'll help you."

I watched as he dashed away eager to do my bidding. I can't believe this is the guy everyone calls a hero. I watched him for a moment before heading off to do my own drills.

It didn't take long before he was back. "Ok Vixen, I finished the wind sprints. What should I do now?" he asked.

"See that boulder? Push it from one end of the field and back 30 times," I said while I continued my own practice.

Second Star First Edition

Again, he took off, eager to do as I asked. This went on for hours. He kept interrupting my practice and asking for more things to do. Each time my responses got shorter and more difficult. And yet each time he returned as eager to please as the first.

“Okay, what now?” he asked.

I turned to face him abruptly. “How can you still be asking that? I have sent you on every possible drill to get you away from me. How can you still want more?”

“I just want to learn from the best. I know I became part of the crew because of my special talent,” Rudolf said sheepishly. “But if I want to stay on the crew, I need to become better. You work harder than any of the others, so I thought it would be best to learn from you.”

My jaw hung open slightly as I took in the young reindeer before me. Rudolf wasn’t trying to annoy or mock me. He really wanted to learn.

I looked at him sadly and said, “You can try to improve all you want, but once you’re placed in this crew you’ll never move from that spot. You’re lucky you get to be in the front. Just be happy with that.” Then I turned and walked away from him.



The next time we were scheduled to fly with Santa, I noticed Rudolf doing something weird. Normally we stood in attention in our designated spots, but this time Rudolf stood where I normally would. I walked up to him and said, “What do you think you’re doing?”

He replied, “I thought you might enjoy being up front for once.”

I felt tears begin to form and I blinked quickly to remove them. “I guess I could try it,” I said before moving to Rudolf’s designated spot.

When Santa came outside, he noticed Rudolf’s location. He tried to lead Rudolf back to the front but no matter what he did Rudolf refused to budge. Throwing his hands up in defeat he finally harnessed me to the front and Rudolf in the middle.

My whole body shook with anticipation. Finally, my dream was coming true. I was in the front. When I heard the familiar call “on Dasher, on Dancer, on Prancer, on Vixen, on Comet, on Cupid, on Donner, and Blitzen” I took off. It was a disaster. We barely made it 10 ft into the air.

Santa pulled himself from the crash and walked up to me. “Ah, Vixen,” he said, “I need you in the middle of the pack.” Then he unharnessed me from the sleigh.

My head hung in shame as I slowly walked back to where Rudolf stood. Santa undid his harness, and Rudolf and I switched places.

Second Star First Edition

The remainder of the practice went on without a hitch. Maybe, I didn't belong in the front.

When we made it back to the barn, I pulled Rudolph to the side. "Thank you for what you did today. I guess as much as I wanted it, I just don't belong in the front. I'm sorry I've always been so rude to you. I guess I was just jealous. It's not a great excuse, but it's all I have. I hope you can forgive me."

"Of course, I forgive you," Rudolph said as he rested his head on my shoulder for a moment. "I just wish I could do more to help."

I pulled away and looked at the ground ashamed. Rudolf slowly backed away leaving me to my own regrets.

I returned to my stall and munched on some hay. Then I sunk to the ground hoping to hide from my humiliation.

Before long a large shadow fell over me. I glanced up and saw Santa standing at my stall door. Before I could stand, he joined me on the floor and began gently petting my head.

"Vixen I know you don't understand, but I put everyone exactly where they need to be. I hope you can forgive me, but I need your dependability in the middle of the pack." With that said, he stood up and went back inside the house.

I stared at the door Santa had just left through. I still didn't quite understand, but as I lay my head back down, I finally felt peace.



Once upon a time, there was a little girl who loved to read. As she grew older, she realized that she loved telling stories as much as she loved reading them. This discovery inspired her to start blog in hopes of sharing her two great loves with the world. If you would like to read more written by Dawn check out her blog thisgirlwrites.com/ or you can find her on Facebook: [@thisgirlwrites](https://www.facebook.com/thisgirlwrites), Instagram: [@thisgirlwrites](https://www.instagram.com/thisgirlwrites), or Twitter: [@thisgirlwrites9](https://twitter.com/thisgirlwrites9).

Cookies With Boogies

by
Miri Elliott

“Just... don’t be weird, okay?” I squeezed Kyle’s hand as I pulled into my parents’ driveway.

“I know you’re nervous,” Kyle said, unbuckling. “Every girl is when they bring a boyfriend home to meet the parents for the first time.”

I put the Kia in park. “And you aren’t?”

He shrugged. “It doesn’t matter to me if they like me or not.”

I rolled my eyes. “It matters to *me*.”

He leaned towards me and brushed my lips with a kiss before getting out of the car and opening my door.

I stepped out with a smile, but my heart hammered and my stomach twisted in knots.

I get it. It’s normal to be nervous introducing the new boyfriend.... *especially* during Christmas dinner when *everyone* was going to be there. The house was crammed full with my parents, two older brothers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews.

But the thing is... Kyle isn’t a normal guy.

I first suspected he was different when he’d answer my questions before I asked them out loud. Then he asked me out, saying he was just as attracted to me as I was to him and I had *never* once told him he was attractive or cute or adorable or any of the things he so clearly is.

Then, a month into dating, we were snuggling on the couch, a box of greasy pizza in front of us and Netflix ready to go. As I flicked through the featured originals, he said, “Of course your breath smells, this pizza is covered in garlic.”

I had slowly turned my head to face him. “I literally did not say anything.”

He shrugged. “You were thinking it.”

“The thing is... I was. You keep doing that. It’s freaky.”

“You haven’t picked up that I’m telepathic?”

I laughed. “Is this the start of a pick-up line?”

His brown-eyed gaze was completely serious.

Unconvinced, I asked, “What color am I thinking about?”

“Red.”

“Okay, what animal?”

“Lion.”

“Movie?”

“Toy Story two... no, three.”

“Dang.”

And that’s how I discovered my boyfriend was an actual, in-the-flesh, no joke telepath.

Now, as we mounted the steps to my parent’s front porch, my insides clenched. What if they didn’t like him and he knew about it? What if he said something out loud that creeped everyone out?

Second Star First Edition

We faced the large Christmas wreath hanging on the door. Taking a deep breath, I pressed the doorbell.

The door opened, and commotion ensued.

Four-year-old Ellie tackled my legs. My dad wrapped me in a great bear hug. The dog barked. Mom fretted over removing our shoes before we walked through the door.

“Glad you made it, Nat,” Dad said. He and mom took a moment to face Kyle, who smiled charmingly by my side.

“You must be Kyle!” Mom said, going in for a hug.

To everyone’s surprise, Kyle stepped out of her way. “You don’t have to hug me if you don’t want to, Mrs. Peterson,” he said pleasantly.

Dad laughed. I groaned internally. It was true Mom wasn’t a hugger – she only did if she felt obligated. But now it was just awkward. Mom blinked several times. “Okay,” she said with an embarrassed giggle. She turned to me. “Everyone’s here except Ian and his girlfriend. They’ll be here shortly.”

“How was the drive?” Dad asked as he led us into the crowded living room.

“The usual during December – snowy,” I said. “But the roads were clear.”

Just about everyone was there. Grandma and Grandpa Peterson lounged back in recliners, my uncle Mickey cracked a joke, Aunt Mable tittered on to her sister Aunt Paula about the fall of the education system, and my brother Nick was wrestling one of his three kids to get his pants back on.

“Natalie!” Aunt Mable said as I entered the room with Kyle. “How is college?”

“Hard,” I said. “My art classes are intense.”

“And, yes -- Natalie *can* make a living from her degree,” Kyle said gently to Mable.

Mabel’s eyes widened. “I didn’t say she couldn’t,” she said.

Aunt Paula huffed. “That’s what you’re always telling me.”

Aunt Mable colored slightly. “I was only saying... you’re such a clever girl, Natalie, and I always thought you’d make a good teacher. I suppose you could always teach art...”

I was not about to have this conversation with my family. I grasped Kyle’s upper arm. “This is Kyle, everyone,” I said, introducing him to the room.

It echoed with a chorus of greetings. “We’ve got loads of embarrassing stories about Nat,” Uncle Mickey said with a wink.

Aunt Paula playfully hit him. “Be nice,” she warned.

Nick came over to give me a brotherly hug. “This guy treating my little sis right?” he asked, playfully punching Kyle in the arm.

I laughed. “Of course he is,” I said.

Nick grabbed a plate full of cookies from the coffee table. “Cookies? The kids and I made them this morning.”

I took a snowflake. “Looks delicious,” I said.

Nick offered the plate to Kyle. “Uh... no, thank you,” Kyle said politely. Nick shrugged and set the plate of cookies down before running after his youngest child, who had learned how to crawl in the past month.

I brought the sugar cookie to my mouth, but Kyle smacked it away.

“Hey!” I said in protest. “I’m not on a diet, you know.”

“His kid dropped a booger in the batter,” Kyle said.

I blinked. “How do you know that?”

Second Star First Edition

Kyle leaned in close, lowering his voice. “Natalie, your own brother just *knowingly* tried to serve you contaminated cookies.”

“Jerk,” I mumbled, discreetly putting the cookie back.

“Everyone take their places at the dinner table, please!” Mom called.

Kyle took my hand and squeezed it as every member of my family got to their feet and herded into the dining room.

Kyle and I chose seats nearest to the kitchen and watched as Dad placed a glazed ham in the center of the table. My mouth watered and my stomach growled at the sight of the mashed potatoes, gravy, brown butter carrots, green bean casserole, creamy corn pudding, and two baskets of fluffy rolls filled to the brim.

I looked at the two empty seats directly across from me. “What about Ian?” I asked.

The front door opened as soon as my words left my mouth, and Ian and a slim redhead wandered in, all smiles. “Better late than never!” my brother said. A few family members clapped and cheered. He and his girlfriend took their seats.

“Everybody remembers Kristen?” Ian asked.

I’d only met her once and had completely forgotten her name until he said it. “Hi, Kristen,” I said with a smile. “Ian, I finally dragged home a boyfriend,” I teased, wrapping Kyle’s arm in mine.

“Good for you,” Ian said with a laugh. He extended his hand to shake Kyle’s. “You know she has two brothers who hit the gym daily, right?”

Kyle nodded. “I hope it never proves fatal,” he said.

When everyone was settled, we bowed our heads and held hands to say grace.

The moment after the resounding “amen” echoed the room, hands were grabbing, scooping, cutting, and passing the food.

I filled my plate as high as I could before finally digging in. My family knew how to do Christmas dinner.

While the family gossiped and chatted, Kyle was silent, a crease forming between his brow. I placed a hand on his knee. “Are you alright?” I asked quietly.

“Yeah,” he said. “Just a lot of thoughts that aren’t my own in my head. No big deal.” He winked at me, and I nudged him playfully with my shoulder.

“So Kyle,” Dad said, “What are you studying?”

“Psychology,” he answered. “The abnormal kind.”

“Ooo, like serial killers?” Kristen giggled beside Ian.

Kyle shrugged. “They certainly are a popular topic.”

“I wish I could go back to college,” she said wistfully.

“I imagine it would be hard with a newborn,” Kyle said sincerely.

The chatter instantly died off. Kristen’s eyes widened. Ian growled under his breath. “What the hell, man?”

Mom was on high alert. “Is that true?” she asked. “Is Kristen expecting?”

Shoot. I felt the heat rise to my face. “No,” I quickly covered for them. I forced a laugh. “Kyle’s family plays weird pranks like that all the time. Don’t take him too seriously.” I winked at Kristen, who seemed to visibly relax.

But my insides were screaming.

Ian was going to be a *dad*?

Ian laughed along with me. “Oh, got it. Our family can be a little more uptight.”

“Speak for yourself,” Uncle Mickey said before stuffing his mouth with green beans.

Second Star First Edition

Crisis averted, I turned back to my food. But Kyle had stilled. I glanced at him. He was still flushed and pushed his food around on his plate. I squeezed his hand. “Hey,” I said. “It’s okay.”

He nodded but didn’t talk if he could help it through the rest of dinner.

After everyone had their fill, my aunts helped Mom clear the dishes while the rest of the family gathered at the piano to sing Christmas songs.

Kyle quietly slipped away, retreating out the back door. I followed him. He was making snowballs and throwing them over the backyard fence when I joined him.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s wrong?”

“I nearly blew your brother and his fiancé’s pregnancy announcement.”

I froze. “Fiancé?”

Kyle groaned in frustration, throwing a snowball extra hard. He sighed. “I’m sorry. I guess none of your family’s secrets are safe with me.”

I laughed. “You’re doing great,” I said. “Don’t worry about dinner. Everyone’s forgotten about it now.”

Kyle bit at his bottom lip before turning to me. “Are you... sure you want this?” he asked.

“What?”

He gestured to himself in frustration. “This. A freak boyfriend who can read people’s thoughts.”

I gently kissed him on the cheek. “Yes,” I said. “You’re unique. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but I like unique.”

Kyle couldn’t resist a smile.

“Come on,” I said, tugging on his arm. “It’s cold out here!”

Before I could open the door, Kyle stole another kiss from me. His grin was sly. “Your family thinks I’m some fiend coming after their daughter’s innocence,” he teased.

“Oh, brother. Are you?”

His face softened. “I don’t think they realize you’re not a little girl anymore.”

We returned inside the warmth of the house and joined in the caroling. Ian and Uncle Mickey rotated playing the piano.

Kyle’s mood lightened with the music and he heartily sang The Twelve Days of Christmas just as loudly and obnoxiously as the rest of us.

I saw Grandpa Peterson crunch into a Christmas cookie. I shuddered as I remembered what Kyle had said. I wondered if it was now my responsibility to be rid of the cookies with boogies to spare my ignorant family.

I looked at Kyle, who sang Little Drummer Boy with my brothers and father. How did he do it? How did he handle accidentally uncovering an unpleasant secret? I squeezed his hand, and he smiled at me. My heart warmed, and I leaned my head against his shoulder.

After a robust dessert, it was time to open presents.

Nick’s kids screamed with delight as they ripped off the colorful wrapping and tore through the boxes.

Mom handed me two presents, which I eagerly opened. One was a new set of brushes, another an adult coloring book. “Thanks.” I beamed at my parents.

“Aren’t you too old for coloring books?” Uncle Mickey teased.

I flipped through the pages for him to see. “Does this look like an *ordinary* coloring book to you?” I asked.

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Mom gave Kyle a present with a smile. “We weren’t sure what to get you, but Natalie said you’d like this,” she said.

“Thank you,” he told her before opening the gift. He stared at it for several seconds before raising his eyebrows at me. “Really?” he asked.

I burst out laughing. He held up Guess Who and groaned. “I won’t play this with you,” he said.

“I literally don’t have to say anything out loud,” I teased. “I can be silent the whole time and you’ll *still* guess who.”

He shook his head, a dimpled smile on his face. “You’re such a goof,” he said, ruffling my hair.

Dad had grabbed a cookie off the plate. I couldn’t resist it anymore. I swiped the cookie from Dad. “Pretty sure one of Nick’s kids drooled on these,” I told him.

He stuck his tongue out in disgust before laughing. “Thanks for the warning. Maybe I’ll just throw these out, then...”

Kyle grinned at me as I returned to my seat next to him. “Hard, isn’t it?”

“Knowing something and not telling others? Yeah.”

He snuck a quick peck on my cheek. “Merry Christmas,” he said.

About Miri Elliott

First of all, a warm thank you to my family, who believed in me and my writing from the very start. If not for your constant encouragement, I wouldn’t be where I am today. Thank you to my husband, who puts up with me locking myself in our room and being anti-social for weeks on end so I can write. And lastly, thanks to my friends old and new, near and far, for your support. It means the world to me! I love all of you.

I live in Nebraska with my husband and shiba inu. Hot chocolate or tea is my writing beverage of choice. I can’t keep up with new music releases because I’m stuck in the world of movie soundtracks. Travel is my most recent obsession.

After writing for most of my life, I’ve finally taken the leap and turned it into a career. If you find yourself in need of a fiction ghostwriter or editor, please check out my gigs on Fiverr! Just mention Second Star and I will give you a 15% discount on all services.

www.fiverr.com/elliedits

ALSO, my brother and I have just delved into the world of travel blogging! Follow our adventures, travels, and tips for earning money on the go here: www.worldwidecommuters.com or follow our Facebook page!

Look out for first-time book publications from me in 2019!

WHEN THE BALL DROPS

-Autumn J. Smith-

Tick. Tick. Tick.

If the clock took any longer to change hours, Liam was going to throw it from his thirty-seventh-floor window. Besides, who had to work on New Year's Eve anyway? It was completely ridiculous. He peeked over his cubicle to see who else was stuck in the office for the evening. From the looks of it, it was only him and three other unfortunate souls.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

He groaned and shoved his keyboard aside, staring up at the clock again. It felt like he was back in high school waiting for the last class of the day to get out. Just then, his phone rang and he sighed in relief. He answered quickly and the excited babble of a crowd met his ear before his girlfriend's voice overrode it.

"Liam! Hi!"

"Hey, baby! Man, am I glad you called. Work is so boring, as usual."

"I miss you, babe!"

"I miss you too. I wish I could be there tonight, but you know..."

"I know, your boring job. I just can't believe you're going to miss New Year's! It's our first year together and..." She trailed off and Liam's eyes wandered to the clock again.

"And what?" he asked, spinning a paperclip in circles with his finger.

"Well, you know, I've never had a New Year's kiss before and I really wanted you to be my first."

"Aww, baby, I'm sorry. I wish I could. How's the party?"

"It's great! You know what Lisa's parties are like. And of course, Molly threw up in the sink again. But babe, isn't there anything you can do to get out of work tonight? I really want to see you."

"I don't think so. You know I'd much rather be with you, but the boss is pushing hard for us to finish this project."

"Okay, at least promise me something."

"Anything, baby."

"I can see the New Year's ball from here if I go up on the roof. What if you take a break at midnight and call me? Then we can still kind of be together!"

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“Yeah, I bet I can make that work. Tell you what: you call me in case I actually get caught up in my work for once.”

She laughed. “Okay babe, I’ll call you when the ball drops.”

The hands on the clock finally ticked their way to the top of the hour and Liam stood up.

“Oh man, I think the boss is coming! Gotta go! Have fun at the party! I’ll talk to you later!” He hung up the phone before she could get another word in.

He gathered his papers, stuffing them into his briefcase and sliding into his coat. “See you guys later!” He called to his coworkers, rushing to the elevator. He pressed the button for down and waited, shifting his weight from side to side. It was nine o’clock. He had exactly three hours to run his errand and get home. Plenty of time.

Or at least, it would be if the elevator would ever arrive. He jabbed the button again and the elevator blared an alarm tone.

A janitor passing by nodded at him. “Elevator’s out, buddy.”

“Great.” Thirty-seven flights of stairs to walk down. “Guess I better get started.” He turned towards the stairs instead.

He was panting slightly by the time he reached the bottom. “I need to exercise more,” he said to the doorman, who only grunted and waved him out onto the street. New York truly was the city that never slept. The traffic was as atrocious now as it was during the day. Liam raised his hand, flagging down a passing taxi.

It pulled up alongside him, but just as he was about to slide in, a man in an expensive suit dove through the door. “Sorry chief. I need it more than you.” He barked his destination at the cabbie, who took off, leaving Liam standing alone in the cold.

“Are you kidding me?” he shouted, causing several passersby to stare.

It was fifteen minutes before another cab stopped. Liam was shivering as he clambered inside. He gave an address to the driver who caught his eye in the mirror.

“It’s gonna be a long ride if you wanna go there. Traffic is a nightmare tonight.”

Liam hesitated, then sighed. “Yeah, go ahead. I need to get flowers for my girl. I’m surprising her tonight so we can watch the ball drop together. She thinks I’m still at work.” The cabbie shrugged and drove off.

True to his word, the taxi driver had been right about the traffic. It took forever to go sixteen blocks. Liam paid quickly and jumped out when they arrived at the florist’s shop. To his dismay, the line for flowers led out the door and onto the street. He turned back to grab the car door, but the taxi had already driven away. He swore under his breath. Well, there was no point to leaving now. Grudgingly, he got in line to wait.

It wasn’t so bad, he decided, as the line slowly shuffled forward. True, it was twelve degrees out, he’d had to work all night, and some jerk had stolen his taxi, but he was guaranteed to have a great night later. And he still had plenty of time. He checked his phone. It was a little

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after ten fifteen. He had over an hour and a half before the ball dropped.

At ten thirty-three, he left with a bouquet of gorgeous purple and blue flowers, his girlfriend's favorite colors. After glancing at the streets full of honking cars and screeching tires, he opted instead to walk. His girlfriend's apartment wasn't that far, after all, and he *had* told the doorman he needed more exercise. He might as well start now.

Hands in his pockets to ward off the bitter cold and the flowers under his arm, Liam started down the streets of New York City. Everyone seemed excited, and he realized how close he was to Times Square. Happy shouting and shrieking sounded all around. He even thought he heard someone calling his own name.

"Liam!" A hand grasped his shoulder and spun him around.

"Whoa, what the-" Liam's confusion turned to delight and he shot his friend a grin. "Nick!" They clasped hands briefly. "What's up? What are you doing out here?"

"It's New Year's Eve! We're at the Red Bottle celebrating! Come have a drink with us!"

It was tempting. After the long day he'd had, Liam could really use one. But he waved his hand. "Nah, thanks, but I can't."

"What? Liam's too good to drink with us?" Another man came bounding out of the bar entrance, slurring his words. "I've never heard such a ridiculous thing in my life!"

"I see Dustin had enough drinks for all of us," Liam said, laughing.

"As usual," Nick groaned.

Dustin took Liam's shoulder. "C'mon bro, Alex, Mike, and Carter are inside!" He steered Liam into the bar.

"Alright, alright, *one* drink and then I really have to go!"

Nick waved the bartender over and Liam ordered a beer. "So what's so important?" he asked once Liam received his drink.

He took a gulp, wiping a bit of foam from his nose, then waved his bouquet at Nick. "I'm going to surprise Jess tonight."

Nick frowned. "Jess?"

"Yeah, you know, my girlfriend?"

"Right... But wait, I thought-"

Before Nick could say any more, Dustin stumbled over with Alex, Mike, and Carter in tow. "What up, my man?"

They took a few minutes to catch up before the group wandered off towards the pool tables. Liam pulled up a stool, offering one to Nick, who sat. "Man, it's been a bad day," Liam said. "Everything that could go wrong has gone wrong. I'm trying to go see Jess and the world seems to want to stop me."

"Maybe you should listen to it, then," Nick replied, shooting him a pointed look.

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Liam scoffed and waved a hand dismissively. “And what does the world know, anyways?”

Nick opened his mouth to speak again but his words were drowned out by a roar of rage at the pool tables. Dustin, it seemed, had helped himself to another man’s beer and it had not gone over well. Liam ducked as a pool ball went flying over his head. “Dustin!” He grabbed his friend’s shoulder, only to tumble backwards with his hands over his nose. They came away bloody. “What are you hitting *me* for?” he yelled at the irate man Dustin had offended.

Half an hour later, the police had arrived to sort out the brawl. “Do you want to press charges?” One of the officers asked Liam.

“No, no that won’t be necessary. I just want to get home to my girlfriend.”

“Not so fast. We’ll need you to remain on site until we sort out who did what. I’m sure you understand.”

Liam sighed. “Yes, officer.”

Finally, when he was cleared of any wrongdoing, Liam waved a hasty goodbye to his friends and booked it out the door. He had less than thirty minutes to reach his girlfriend. His flowers were a bit ruffled, but not a lost cause. He tried to reorganize them as he ran, and also made sure to wipe away the blood from his nose. Today had been an all-around terrible day. But he was almost there! At least one thing could go right tonight.

A few small flakes of snow were drifting from the sky by the time he reached the apartment building. He rang the buzzer of several other apartments, waiting for one to let him in. He was determined to surprise Jess. He had eight minutes before the ball dropped.

The door buzzed open and he dashed inside, forgoing the elevator in favor of the stairs, just in case. She was only on the sixth floor anyways. His chest heaving and clutching a stitch in his side, he was finally outside his girlfriend’s door with four minutes to spare. He knocked and heard footsteps inside the apartment.

The door swung open and Liam was greeted with Jess’s shocked face, which quickly turned to joy. She flung her arms around him. “Liam! I can’t believe it! I thought you had to work!”

“Hey baby, I got out at nine. I wanted to surprise you!”

“That is so sweet!”

Liam handed her the flowers from behind his back and her eyes filled with happy tears. “They’re beautiful! I’m so excited, I was sure I would be sitting here all alone with my cats and hot chocolate!”

Liam smiled and leaned in to kiss her, but Jess put her hand over his mouth. “Not until midnight!” she giggled and took his hand, dragging him over to the couch. The TV was already on, showing the massive celebration in Times Square. The New Year’s ball, glittering and bedazzled with light, sat on the pole, ready to drop in less than one minute. “Let’s count down!” Jess said, still holding Liam’s hand.

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“Five... four... three... two... one!”

Liam pulled Jess in at ‘one’ and pressed his lips to hers in a deep, passionate kiss.

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

His phone went off in his pocket and he fumbled around to make it stop. “Happy New Year,” he said when he and Jess broke apart.

“Starting my new year with you?” Jess said, kissing him again. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Buzz. Buzz. Buzz.

Liam’s phone vibrated again and he sighed. “It’s work,” he said. “You know how they are. I’ve got to take this.”

Jess groaned and flopped over onto the couch dramatically. “They’re always calling you. Can’t they at least leave you alone on New Year’s?”

Liam shrugged. “I guess not. I’ll take it out on the balcony. See you in a minute, baby. Love you.”

“I love you too.”

He went outside, sliding the door shut before answering the phone. “Baby, I’m so sorry! I was in a conference call and couldn’t make it.”

The sounds of a party filtered through his speakers. “I can’t believe you missed it. You promised you’d call me when the ball dropped!”

“I know, I know, but I swear I’ll make it up to you. Valentine’s Day is coming up. I promise, I’ll make sure we have the best day ever.”

“Well, okay babe. I love you.”

“Love you too.”

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A Winter in Rendalawo

A Meerkitten's Tale

By Carrissa A. Huston



Part one

December 12th

First Snow

Mozarita woke up slowly; the warmth from her three siblings snuggled around her made her in no hurry to get out of bed. She knew the day would be cold and dreary, just like every other winter day so far had been.

Finally, the little black and cream striped kitten stretched and rose to her paws. Despite her tiny size- she was barely bigger than a five-week-old kitten- she was four and a half moons, and had already proven herself in battle, something many creatures twice her age couldn't say. At the moment, however, she showed her youth by springing over her pile of siblings and skipping across the cold wood floor to the foggy window. She reached up and rubbed a spot clear and peeked out.

Her heart jumped.

With wide blue eyes, she stared outside, the cold forgotten. Instead of the pale, dead grass and brown leaves she normally saw on Rendalawo's lawn, there was a pure whiteness covering the ground like sugar. Tiny specks of more floated down from the sky, like leaves, but smaller and more delicate.

It was beautiful.

It *must* be the snow the adults had been saying would come soon. It *must* be. She had almost thought it was a joke, but here, right out her window, was the proof.

And suddenly she couldn't wait to run outside and jump into it.

She dashed over to her pile of siblings and flung herself at them. She heard several muffled groans, but none of them rose. So, Mozarita lowered her head and screeched at the top of her lungs;

"GET UP, GET UP, IT'S SNOWING! THERE'S SNOW!"

"Moooziiiiiee," grumbled her brother, Crispen. He was identical to her in every way except for size and personality. "What are you talking about?"

Mozarita jumped onto his side and was rewarded with a satisfying, "whoosh" as the air left his lungs. "There's snow, there's snow! It's really real, it's not just story the grown-ups made up!"

"Is it attacking us?" muttered Mozarita's other brother, Tristan, who lifted his tawny head halfway up from their bed.

Mozarita shrugged. "No, but it's beautiful!"

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“M’kay, take your word for it, Mozie,” he mumbled, pressing his face into one of their blankets.

Suddenly, Tristan jerked up and tumbled over. He gave a yelp as their sister, Dorthy, emerged from under him. She had the same yellow fur and black stripes as Tristan, but a completely opposite temperament.

“Jeeze, what’s a girl gotta do to get you slowpokes up?” Dorthy asked, grinning at Mozie.

Tristan sat up groggily and glared at her. “Apparently slam her face into our guts and throw us in the air.”

“Oooh, I should try that with Crispen!” said Mozarita, turning back to her other brother.

“I’m up, I’m up!” said Crispen, springing to his paws.

“Good, because I wanna get a closer look at that snow,” announced Mozie.

Once she and Dorthy managed to drag their brothers downstairs, Mozarita tried to dash to the front door of the Keep, but Tristan held out a paw and stopped her.

“Breakfast first, Mozie,” he said. She sighed and rolled her eyes, but reluctantly followed her siblings into the main hall, where the meals were served in Rendalawo.

Rendalawo was the great fortress that Mozarita and her siblings lived in. Its huge stone walls rose up around a patchwork of fields, houses and shops, in the center of which stood the Keep. In times of war, the creatures of the forest took shelter in Rendalawo, which is how Mozarita and her siblings had come to be there.

Mozarita scarfed down her hot oatmeal and bounced impatiently as she waited for her siblings to finish. Dorthy ate nearly as fast as Mozarita had, but Tristan and Crispen ate with exaggerated slowness.

“By the time you two are finished, the snow will have melted!” said Mozarita, finally.

“Oh come on, Mozie, you’re overreacting. I’m sure it’ll be there for hours,” said Tristan.

“Yeah, and besides, this is revenge for getting us up so early,” said Crispen cheerfully.

Mozarita rolled her eyes. “It’s *not* early, it’s got to be almost an hour after dawn!”

“Yeah, well barely anyone’s up yet, so it *must* be early. Besides, where’s the sun?” demanded Tristan.

Mozarita’s reply was interrupted by a cheerful voice. “Hello there kits! What are you so eager to do on this fine winter morning?”

Mozarita turned and saw Ribbony, a great gray tomcat and legendary warrior. Despite being a hero in her own right, Mozarita was still rather awestruck whenever Ribbony or his friends decided to talk to her and her siblings.

“Mozie and I want to see the snow!” said Dorthy. “But the boys are being slower than blind badgers!” she glared at her brothers.

Ribbony chuckled. “Ah yes, snow is quite a magical thing to behold the first time you see it. If you’re lucky you never get tired of it,” he sat down next to the kits and grinned. “But you can do some fantastic things with snow.”

“Like what?” asked Mozarita.

“Oh like make snowballs and snowcats and go ice skating on the river if it freezes. You can build forts and have snow wars where you chuck snowballs back and forth at each other. Sometimes even the old creatures like me join in those,” he winked.

Crispen had stopped eating and was staring at Ribbony with wide eyes. “Wait, you mean you can make weapons out of that white stuff?”

Ribbony laughed. “Of course you can! Oh don’t worry little one they don’t wound or

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maim,” he said when he saw Mozarita’s worried expression. “Snow, when packed in a ball, can be thrown, and it explodes against its target! Doesn’t hurt unless you pack it real tight or put ice in it, but I don’t expect any of you to try that,” he looked almost stern for a moment. “A snowball fight is the only wonderful kind of warfare. But you’ll never experience it if you don’t get yourselves outside!”

Crispen blinked, then shoved his bowl aside. “I’m done, c’mon Tristan.”

Tristan sighed. “Alright, alright. I suppose some of those things sound fun,” he grinned.

“Come on then!” squeaked Mozarita, leaping off the table bench and dashing towards the front door. “The snow awaits!”

Mozarita led her siblings out onto the front stoop of the Keep, and then...

She stopped.

She stared out at the vast sea of whiteness before her, eyes wide, heart pounding.

And cautiously, reverently, she stepped forward and placed a tiny paw on top of the snow.

She gasped. It was cold! She drew her paw back and saw a little imprint of it in front of her. She smiled, and started to step out again...

Something shoved her from behind. She gave a squeak and tumbled headfirst into the snow. She righted herself, and realized that it rose almost half a tail-length above her head. She huffed, gathered herself, and sprang into the air.

Mozarita landed on the edge of the stoop and saw Crispen and Dorthy howling with laughter and Tristan grinning. She lifted her head defiantly for a moment, then suddenly ran forward and slammed into Crispen’s side like a tiny juggernaut.

He yelped and rolled off into the snow, sinking down in it. She laughed as his head poked up, his whiskers, nose and ears covered in snow.

“You little!” he said, swiping at her.

“You started it!” she said, grinning and dancing back from his reach.

“You were taking too long!”

She stuck her tongue out at him, then stared out at the ocean of white again. Cautiously she stepped out onto it, preparing herself to sink down and have to fight her way through it...

But she didn’t sink. She trotted out onto the snow, her paws barely making a mark on it. She smirked.

“Come on out, guys, the snow’s great!” she called.

Tristan gave her a suspicious look, but Dorthy ran right out into the snow....

...And sank right down into it.

“What the?!” she squeaked, up to her belly in snow.

Tristan stepped cautiously out and was quickly engulfed as well. “Ah. Yes. Good then,” he muttered as he descended.

“Why are *you* immune, Mozie?” demanded Crispen, peeking above the snow.

Mozarita laughed and spun in a circle. “I’m too little!” she bounced. “I don’t sink!”

“Well that’s just not fair,” said Tristan, glaring.

“It is so! Finally being tiny is good for something!” Mozarita said, grinning.

“There has got to be a way to do this...” muttered Crispen as he floundered in the snow.

“Hey ho, kits!” said a familiar voice. “Enjoying the snow?”

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Mozarita turned and saw Ribbony striding through the snow. When he got closer, he was met with a glare and accusation from Crispen.

“You never said it wasn’t solid!” the tom-kitten squeaked.

Ribbony laughed. “Mozie here seems to have figured it out.”

“She said it’s because she’s little,” said Dorthy.

“Oh, no, you all could probably walk on top of it without too much trouble,” said Ribbony. “You just need to practice. And maybe find some shallower snow,” he grinned.

“And then can we have a snowball fight?” asked Crispen.

“Of course my boy! I shall gather others while you get your snow-legs! Tally-ho!”

The huge gray cat galloped off through the snow in a seemingly random direction, leaving the kittens to their winter wonderland.

“Crispen look out!”

“They’re coming in too fast, I don’t know how long we can hold them!”

“Hang on Tristan, I’m coming!”

Mozarita ducked and dodged around her siblings and scrambled up to the lookout post at the top of their fort. Spread out before her was a battlefield. Her little fort the only island in a sea of attackers. Her defenders were her loyal LFF Catlition (LFF stood for either Little Furry Fighters or Little Furious Fighters, it was intentionally vague). Crispen and Tristan were on the front lines, supported by Frankie, Shadow and Smokey (three kitten siblings commonly called FSS) just behind them. On top of the lookout post with Mozarita were several honorary members; three young squirrels armed and dangerous. One saluted her as she came up.

On the opposite side of the fort to Crispen and Tristan, Dorthy led a gang of young rabbits, raccoons, water rats and river otters. They were fierce and terrifying, and every once and a while a group would scramble over the fort wall and charge into the melee beyond, only to quickly retreat once they ran out of ammo.

“We’re in a tight bind, Mozarita,” said one of the squirrels, Remi. “If we don’t do something quick we’ll be overrun!”

Mozarita’s whiskers twitched. “Gather your forces and meet me below. It’s time to deploy our secret weapon.”

Remi grinned. “Excellent!” she scampered over to her sisters and chattered at them while Mozarita scrambled down to ground level again.

She was a step from the bottom when a snowball flew up and hit her in the face.

Mozarita squeaked in indignation and scrambled up from the snow, glaring in the general direction of the snowball. “Face shots aren’t allowed!” she shouted.

There was familiar laughter from the other side of the wall and Mozarita glared harder.

“You’ll regret that soon you old tomcat,” she muttered, before hurrying on.

“Dorthy! How are you holding up?” Mozarita called.

Dorthy turned to her and grinned. “Oh we’re doing just fine, sis. I like this lot. Very straightforward and no-nonsense.”

“Good, because we’re going to need them for a mission,” said Mozarita. “Pick your best and *quietest* of the crew.”

“Right-ho sis!” said Dorthy. “Marcus! Lela! Champ! Twilp!”

A water rat, two otters and a rabbit hurried over.

“Our mighty commander needs your assistance,” said Dorthy.

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The four young creatures turned to look at Mozarita. She grinned at them. “Right, you four, along with Remi and her sisters, will sneak up along the far side of Ribbony’s army. Hit them hard and quick, then get out of there. All we need is a good distraction.”

“What are we distractin’ ‘em from?” asked Lela the otter.

Mozarita lowered her voice. “Our secret weapon.”

“Ooooh!” chorused the young creatures excitedly.

Mozarita grinned. “Get going as soon as Remi and the others get here, I need to find Crispen!”

“C’mon kits, is this the best you’ve got?” shouted Ribbony as his troops gained on the little snow fortress.

“You shouldn’t antagonize them, brother, they’re clever youngsters,” said Dora.

“All the more reason *to* antagonize them!” said Ribbony, grinning.

Dora sighed. “You perplex me.”

“What else is new then, Dors?” laughed their brother, Explorer.

Dora rolled her eyes and turned to a she-cat standing on a snow-pile above them. “Rita, see anything?”

Rita, the mother of Mozarita and her siblings, shook her head. “Nothing yet.”

A snowball shot past Dora’s head. The fluffy brown she-cat did not flinch. “Keep a weather eye. Those youngsters could change tactics at any moment.”

At that moment there was a shout and Dora and Ribbony whipped around to see a gang of young creatures attacking their flank. They hit hard, knocking five or six creatures down, then dashing away. They were hotly pursued by Jako, who happened to be Mozarita’s father, and several other creatures.

Then, Dora’s ears twitched at an unexpected sound, just as Rita yelled, “Look out!”

Dora dove out of the way just as something *exploded* beside her. She lifted her head and looked up....

To see a *ridiculous* contraption flying through the sky. It wings, and what appeared to be a spinning top, which was twirling crazily at the moment. She turned and saw Ribbony bending down in the snow sniffing at the remains of the thing that had almost hit them.

“It’s a pumpkin!” said Ribbony, lifting his head and grinning. “Kit’s whiskers, they are clever youngsters!”

“Where did they get a flying machine?” demanded Dora.

“I think Crispen’s been working on it in his spare time since he came to Rendalawo,” called Rita.

“But there’s been a war on! When has the kit had *time*?” Dora said with a huff.

“There’s still a war on! Come along Dors, we must show these kits we don’t fear their flying creation!” said Ribbony, already hurrying off. “Redouble the attack on the fort!” he shouted to his troops. “My siblings and I will deal with Crispen’s contraption!”

Mozarita clung to the controls of Crispen’s flying machine, her back paws peddling madly to keep it airborne. It creaked and groaned, and she was pretty sure one of the wings was loose.

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But in spite of her precarious position, she was having fun. The cold wind blowing back her fur was refreshing, the view of the battlefield (and the rest of Rendalawo) was incredible.... And occasionally she got to launch squishy, melted pumpkins at some unlucky group of creatures.

And she had just sighted her next targets.

Her father Jako had gathered a group of adults and was attacking her hit-and-run team. It was vicious, with snowballs darting back and forth almost faster than her eyes could track. Peddling faster, she carefully angled the machine down and grasped the launching lever in her free paw.

She jerked it back...

A pumpkin flew out of the machine and flopped towards the attackers....

And hit Jako square in the face.

She cackled as zipped away, watching her father crumble to the ground covered in pumpkin goo, then leap to his paws. She could feel his glare even as she flew off to harass other targets.

“Ribbon if you hurt that kit Rita and Jako will come after you and I will do nothing to try and stop them.”

Ribbony glanced at his sister and raised an eyebrow. “I won’t hurt her. I’ll just even the battlefield a bit. Not fair that they have wings and we don’t!”

Ribbony and his brothers, Explorer and Creamy, stood up on Rendalawo’s wall, peeking through the parapets at the bothersome flying machine buzzing around. It had helped to turn the tide of the battle, and their troops were currently on the defensive. The three tomcats waited with great snowballs held in their paws, while Dora looked on disapprovingly.

“Come on little Mozarita, fly over here. Yes, yes- no, oh come on you little wisp of fluff!” Ribbony grumbled as the flying machine swept away again.

“You have to lure her over you great oaf,” said Dora. “She’ll never fly close enough otherwise.”

“Fantastic idea, Dors! Why don’t you hop up there then and-”

“Oh no, this is your hairbrained scheme, you get up there and get hit with a pumpkin,” said Dora.

Ribbony frowned at her, while Explorer and Creamy fought to hide their laughter. “Fine, Dors,” he said, finally. “Sacrificing your own brother, tsk tsk,” he shook his head.

“Oh save it, you tried to sacrifice me first. Now get up there before my fur turns grey too!”

Ribbony grinned and hopped up onto one of the parapets, making a great show of seeming to scope out the battlefield below.

“She’s seen you,” warned Explorer. “I think she’s upset you hit her with a snowball earlier, Ribbon.”

“Oh all’s fair in love and snowball fights,” said Ribbony, bracing himself. “Avenge me, boys.”

Mozarita flew the machine straight at him. He could see her intense expression, blue eyes focused only on him...

So she never saw Explorer and Creamy until they shot up and threw two enormous snowballs at her.

Second Star First Edition

There was a shriek, and for a moment Ribbony thought he was in the clear, and he let out a yowl of triumph...

...That was cut off when something mushy slammed into his face and his mouth was filled with pumpkin goo.

Mozarita tried to right the machine, but both wings had been hit, and she had heard an alarming crack from one of them. She started to angle down towards the ground, hoping to land before the machine collapsed around her when....

Creeaaaak, SNAP!

One of the wings broke clean off. Mozarita shrieked as the machine spiraled out of control, spinning and twirling through the air. She gripped the steering handles and yanked them to the side with all her might, sending the contraption hurtling down towards a snowbank.

WOOMF! BAM! CRASH! The machine hit the snowbank and shattered. Mozarita lay in the wreckage, winded. Her eyes refocused and she saw white above her. With an effort she rolled over and stumbled out of the remains of Crispen's invention.

"Mozarita!"

She turned and saw Ribbony and his siblings dashing towards her. He skidded to a stop in front of her and gave her a lopsided smile.

"All in one piece little one?" he asked. Pumpkin seeds and strings covered his face, dripping into eyes that seemed so genuinely concerned...

Mozarita stared for a moment, then burst out laughing.

Ribbony tilted his head. "What?"

"I got you!" she squeaked. "I got you, I got you!"

Ribbony grinned. "Well I got you too, you little rascal!"

"So, is it a draw then?" Mozarita asked when she got her laughter under control.

"I suppose so. You were a worthy opponent, little one," he said.

"As were you, good sir," she said, dipping her head.

"Come on then," said Ribbony. "Let's go tell the troops! Not bad for a first snowball fight, eh kit?"

Mozarita grinned. "Not bad at all."

Part Two *December 16th* *Decking the Halls*

Mozarita was trotting past the main hall one winter evening when she saw Catlition carrying a tree.

She stopped. Backtracked. Stood in front of the entrance to the main hall with her mouth hanging open as she watched Ribbony and the others carefully tugging a massive evergreen tree to the front of the hall. Dora stood there on her hind legs, directing the operation with a lot of waving of her paws.

Hesitantly, Mozarita walked into the hall and watched silently as Catlition maneuvered the tree into a standing position and lifted it into a stand. As it was lifted up she suddenly realized

it wasn't just Catlition who was helping, but at least two dozen other creatures who had been hidden by the branches before. Raccoons, foxes, possums, rabbits, an overly excited family of squirrels, and a few river otters and water rats were pushing the tree into place. As she watched, a group of birds fluttered down from the rafters and grabbed ropes that had been attached to the upper branches of the tree.

When the tree was settled it stood tall and proud there at the front of the hall, its tip nearly touching the vaulted ceiling. Their work done, the creatures cheered and laughed, congratulating each other. Mozarita just stared, mesmerized by the sight.

She was broken out of her trance when the creatures who had been helping turned and started out of the hall. Suddenly worried that she might not be supposed to be spying, she turned and darted under a table. Talking and laughing, the creatures left the hall and wandered out to their rooms. When the noise had faded away Mozarita climbed out from under the table and turned back to the evergreen.

"Magnificent, isn't it?"

Mozarita gave a squeak and whipped around to see Dora sitting on the other end of the table bench. The fluffy brown she-cat smiled at her.

"I remember the first winter I spent in Rendalawo," said Dora, quietly. "My brothers had already gone off on adventures, and I was rather lonely. Then one evening I came down here and found a great tree in the hall. I was rather shocked, and it took me a while to find someone to explain it. But the reason is as beautiful as the tree itself."

Mozarita jumped onto the bench and walked down to sit beside Dora. "Is it supposed to be a secret?"

Dora chuckled. "We could hardly keep such a big tree a secret, little one."

Mozarita's ears turned a little red. "I meant the reason for it."

"Ah. Well the tree is quite important. We couldn't just go and pluck out any old tree for the solstice celebration, oh no,"

"Solstice celebration?"

"Quiet, kit, I'll get to that. Now, where was I? Oh yes, the tree. It has to be an evergreen tree that is picked," said Dora. "Because an evergreen survives in the midst of winter when all other growing things seem to have died. Just like the creatures of the forest the evergreen tree keeps on living in the season of cold and death. It is here to give us hope. It is here to remind us that no matter how dark and cold the winter becomes it will always give way to spring and joy and warmth. And it reminds us that the hope of spring lives on in us, the creatures of the forest. So we come together every year on the solstice to celebrate that winter will end, and that we can survive it."

"Wow," said Mozarita, eyes wide. "That *is* beautiful."

"And it will be even more so when we decorate it!" said Dora, jumping off the bench.

It took Mozarita a moment to realize Dora meant the tree. Quickly, Mozarita dashed after her. "Decorate it?"

"Yes. Everyone will be involved with that tomorrow," said Dora. "We older creatures do try and set the tree up so that it will be there for the young ones to find in the morning... but there are always one or two who seem to catch us at it," she smiled good naturedly at Mozarita.

The little she-kitten ducked her head. "I won't tell."

"Good. Then when morning comes you'll enjoy the surprise on your siblings faces as much as I will."

“Woaaah! Look at that! Frankie wasn’t lying, they do have a tree inside!”

Mozarita grinned at Dorthy’s dinner-plate sized eyes and mouth hanging open. Crispen and Tristan’s faces held similar expressions.

“Can they *do* that?” whispered Tristan.

“Guess so,” muttered Crispen.

“Dora said they can,” said Mozarita.

“Dora- hey!” Crispen whipped around to stare at her. “Mozie, why aren’t you all wide-eyes and wonder over the tree?”

“I might have seen them setting it up last night,” said Mozarita, innocently.

“You lil- and you didn’t tell us?!” squeaked Dorthy.

Mozarita shrugged. “Dora said it was meant to be a secret.”

At that moment a little patch of bright orange fluff caught Mozarita’s eye. Latching onto the distraction, she dashed away from her siblings calling, “I’ll be back!” as they yelled indignantly after her.

Mozarita hurried forward until she came to the very base of the tree. There sat a tiny orange kitten, even smaller than Mozarita. She had paws as white as snow, and a splash of white over her nose.

“Good morning, Firesong!” said Mozarita.

The kit looked at her with serious blue eyes. “Hello Miss Mozarita,” said Firesong. “Why is there a big tree?”

Mozarita smiled and moved over to sit by her. Firesong was the runt of Tori’s newest litter of kittens, and she promised to be as much trouble as Frankie and his sisters ever were.

“The tree is for the solstice,” said Mozarita. “We get to decorate it today.”

Firesong’s eyes lit up. “Really?”

“Really,” grinned Mozarita.

“Wow,” whispered the kit staring up at the lowest branches. Then she turned quickly to Mozarita. “Will my siblings have to help too?”

“Well, everyone is allowed to help decorate the tree, so I hear,” she said.

Firesong sighed. “Okay. How will we reach it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe we get to climb it.”

“Climb it!” Firesong squeaked, grinning eagerly at Mozarita.

Mozarita suddenly had a feeling that she shouldn’t have given the kit that particular idea. Before she could say anything to amend the situation, however, Tori, Firesong’s mother, trotted over.

“There you are, kit!” said Tori. “I ought to give you a good smack around the ears for running off like that!” she reached down and grabbed Firesong by the scruff of her neck.

The kit wriggled indignantly. “I was just talking to Miss Mozarita!”

“You can call me Mozarita if you want, Firesong,” said the older kitten.

“Well she can call you that later,” said Tori, her voice muffled by her mouthful of kitten. “I ‘ave to round up this lil lot and get them clean.”

“Aw, mama!” protested Firesong.

“That’s enough. You’ll be back for the tree decorating. *I* wouldn’t miss it for the world.” And with that, Tori hurried off through the crowd, carrying her little bundle.

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“There are absolutely no ornaments on this section of the tree!”

“Wind that garland tight now!”

“No, don’t light the candles *now*! Do you *want* to burn down the Keep?!”

Decorating the Solstice Tree turned out to be more chaotic and fun than Mozarita could ever have imagined. Creatures dashed around hither and thither, climbing up and down the tree with ornaments and garland. Others worked on the walls of the keep, decking the halls with holly.

“Mozie! Catch!”

Mozarita stuck her head out of the branches of the tree just in time to nearly be knocked off it by an ornament almost as big as she was. She caught hold of its string as it flew by and gave a squeak as it dragged her down and sent her rolling off the tree branches.

A paw caught her. “Woah, easy there, kit!” Mozarita looked up and saw a squirrel, who quickly pulled her up.

“Thanks,” she said, a little breathlessly.

“Anytime,” said the squirrel, before scampering along the branch and darting up the trunk of the tree.

Mozarita shook her head and glared up at the tree. “Crispen you almost killed me!”

“Sorry Mozie!” Crispen sounded genuinely concerned as he peeked down at her.

“You should be,” said Mozarita, carefully hanging the ornament on the branch beside her.

“Mozarita, Crispen, Dorthy, Tristan! Come here and give me a paw with this!”

Mozarita looked down and saw her big brother, Mistypaw. He was a gray cat with white paws and a white nose, and he happened to only have three legs. At the moment, he was perched a few branches below her, a string of garland wrapped around him. Mozarita and her siblings scampered down to unwind it from him.

“Yes, alright now kits. This goes in the middle of the tree. I’ll start on a lower section, then Crispen and Tristan can wind it up a little higher, then Dorthy, and finally Mozarita up closer to the top.” Mistypaw said. “Now, come along, we need to get up a bit more.”

They scrambled up, Mistypaw leading the way before they reached his completely arbitrary starting point. Mozarita held the end of the garland in her mouth, and dutifully wound it up near the top of the tree. She was just finishing when she heard a tiny squeak. Frowning, she crept along her branch to the trunk of the tree. There, a branch below her, perched Firesong.

‘How did she even get up here?!?’ thought Mozarita. *‘She’s only three weeks old!’*

Quickly, Mozarita climbed down to Firesong. The kit was frowning, but she did not look nearly concerned enough considering where she was.

“Firesong! What are you doing up here?”

“Oh, hi Mozarita!” the kit turned and grinned at her. “I climbed the tree!”

“You... you did,” agreed Mozarita. “Does your mama know you’re up here?”

“Nope!” said Firesong, cheerfully.

“O-kay. Well, why don’t we go down to where my siblings are?”

“Oh, well, that’s my problem. I can’t get down.”

Mozarita stared at the kit. “You can’t get down.”

“Nope! But you can help me, right?”

Mozarita looked into Firesong’s bright eyes and sighed. “I can try.”

She stared down through the branches of the tree and suddenly realized just how high up they were. She turned to Firesong. “Okay, so here’s what we’re gonna do. We’re gonna hop down from branch to branch. You stay right behind me, okay?”

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Firesong nodded, eyes wide. "Okay."

Mozarita turned back and jumped down to the branch below her. She heard a squeak, and Firesong landed clumsily beside her. Mozarita shook her head, wondering again how Firesong had managed to get *up* the tree, then sprang to the next branch.

For a little while, this worked. They dodged carefully through chattering squirrels and birds busy making nests, and kittens and young raccoons trying to knock ornaments off. Firesong was unsteady, but Mozarita watched her closely, and the kit didn't fall...not until they were about a third of the way down the tree. The orange kitten sprang down and Mozarita knew instantly that Firesong had overshot. She lunged out to grab the kit, caught her...

...Realizing at the same moment that Firesong was almost the same size as her. Thrown off balance, Mozarita felt Firesong's weight drag her down, crashing through the pine needles.

'Oh no, oh no, no no no....' if they hit the ground from this height...

Suddenly, Mozarita slammed against something soft. She gasped, drawing in a breath and jumping to her paws at the same time. Firesong lay beside her, winded. They had fallen into a bird's nest!

"Well," said Mozarita. "That could've been worse."

"Let's do it again!" said Firesong, springing up.

Mozarita sighed, rolled her eyes and grinned.

Part Three *December 20th* *Silent Night*

It was the night before the solstice. The keep was quiet. Smells of pies and puddings wafted through the air, along with the faint scent of pine. The lights were dim, and outside the moon shown through the clouds. All the creatures, young and old, had gone to bed.

All but one.

Mozarita sat before the Solstice Tree, gazing up at it in wonder. It was covered in candles, now lit, that illuminated it with a warm glow. Ornaments, made by the creatures of Rendalawo, glittered faintly. And atop the tree sat a great, golden star with strands of silver woven through it, and ruby-red stones sparkling on its points.

It was the most beautiful thing Mozarita had ever seen.

She had tried to fall asleep, but the memory of the tree, the lighting of the candles on its branches, the magical quality of the star and ornaments...she had had to come back and see that it was truly real, and not just a wonderful dream.

"Hello, little one."

Mozarita startled, and turned her head. Her mouth dropped open, and her eyes widened. There, walking towards her, was a young white cat with dazzling blue eyes. On his head he wore a crown of holly, and a golden scarf was wrapped around his neck.

"Kristoren!" she said. "What are you doing here?"

"I like to see the Tree every year," said Kristoren, sitting down beside her. "These past few years it has not been such a grand affair. With enemies in the forest, the creatures of Rendalawo did not have much to celebrate. But this year it is truly wonderful again. You helped make it that way, little one."

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Mozarita ducked her head. “You did most of the work.”

“But you were willing. And that is all I ask for,” Kristoren looked down at her and smiled. “Would you like me to stay with you tonight?”

Mozarita looked up at him. “You’re *asking*? You won’t just disappear?”

“Not tonight,” he said. “Tonight I am enjoying the beauty of my world.”

Mozarita stared at him for a moment longer, then leaned over and snuggled up against him. She looked back up at the tree, watching the candles flicker and the ornaments sparkle. After a few moments, she felt Kristoren shift beside her, and found herself tucked between his paws.

She fell asleep with the lights of the tree still twinkling in her eyes, and Kristoren cocooning her in warmth and safety until dawn came over the forest.

Author’s Message

Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays!

I hope you have all enjoyed my short story. For those of you who don’t know, it is connected to a book series I’m working on. The first book, called “The Tale of Mozarita the Meerkitten”, is currently being sold on Amazon in paperback and as an eBook on Kindle. If you want to learn more about these characters and their adventures check out one of the links below! I am currently writing the second book in the series, and there will be four books altogether. You can follow my Facebook page to get updates on when the rest of the series will be released and learn more about my writing journey!

And thank you so much to everyone who has already followed and supported me. The response from all of you has been overwhelming in the best way and I am so grateful. I’m glad you all decided to come along and be a part of this adventure.

“The Tale of Mozarita the Meerkitten” on Amazon and Kindle;

https://www.amazon.com/Tale-Mozarita-Meerkitten-1/dp/1729596657/ref=tmm_pap_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=1543370031&sr=8-2

My Facebook page, “The Tales of Carrissa A. Huston” (@TalesofCarrissaAHuston);

<https://www.facebook.com/TalesofCarrissaAHuston/>

If you’ve already bought a book, please consider leaving a review of it on Amazon! It doesn’t need to be long or detailed, but it does allow more people to find the book.

Thank you again! Have a blessed New Year!

Just Come Home

by

Savanna Unruh

I found him not far from the house, crouched in a swirl of papery, fallen oak leaves. A cruel December wind had reduced him to miserable shivers. He stared up at me, and I almost couldn't stand the pain in his dark eyes. I knelt beside him. "Scotch, old fella." His feathery tail thumped the mud, just slightly. Then it lay still. I had forbidden him to go near my trap line, and he had understood me perfectly. Now he felt the sting of it.

So did I. But all the anger that had welled inside me as I was searching for him couldn't make it past the lump in my throat.

I buried my fingers in the red curls on his floppy ears and hated myself for what was threatening to choke me.

She'd called just this morning. A familiar voice made hoarse by a load too heavy for a nineteen-year-old to carry.

"Dad. I'm not coming home for Christmas."

"Why not?" The words exploded from me, harsher than I had intended.

"I have to stick around home and study. I--It hasn't been going so well lately."

"Well, surely it will get better." I always had hated how my words sounded so flat and useless when others most needed advice.

"Dad." The voice was cracking now. "It's been this way all along, really, I couldn't stand to tell you because you worked so hard to send me to college, but honestly, it's not going. I've flunked the last tests in almost everything. My teachers are worried. They..."

“And you’re not coming home, just so that you have more time to study? That’s the only reason?”

The line hadn’t gone dead, but her voice had. I waited.

“I—I can’t. Dad. I haven’t been trying hard enough, I guess. I wasn’t going to say anything. There’s nothing to say. I’ve deserved to fail. I’ll try harder, really, I will, from now on. But...”

“So you’re not coming home just because you’re having a bit of trouble?”

“Dad.”

I knew the look that was in her eyes right then. A look I couldn’t bear any more than I could bear Scotch’s remorseful gaze.

I wanted her anyway.

“Just come home, ok? It doesn’t matter. I promise. Bring your studying along, and I’ll do what I can to help you. It’s all right. Just come home to me.”

Prying the merciless teeth of the trap from my dog’s right hind leg, I tried to be gentle. Blood oozed up from the gouges of those horrible spikes. He whimpered and pressed closer to me.

“Easy, fella.” The iron sprang loose and I scooped up my little Cocker Spaniel and laid him on my shoulder. I’d make him a bed in the corner of the kitchen. His eyes, with their unbearable pain, would be there to greet me every morning. But in time, he would heal.

“It’s all right, fella. Come along with me. Just come home.”

Christmas Child

by Savanna Unruh

He found no shelter but the night
when light seemed only like a dream.

Dark was only absence,
only lack
until it covered Him, more gentle
than it had ever been.

That night was soft.

I was afraid
to walk alone in darkness
until a Child was brave enough
to lie, wrapped in its mantle.

The night that covered Him
shelters me.

I'm a teenager from Kansas, just east of McPherson. I've lived out in the country all my life until last August, when I moved to Montezuma, Kansas, to teach in a small private school here. My class of 2nd and 3rd graders is the best! It's a busy, awesome life, being a teacher!

I love nature, books, and poetry of course. I've been writing for four or five years now. I believe my words come from God. I write for Him, because I love Him more than anything.

-Savanna Unruh

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An Excerpt From the New Novel

The Last Scene

by
Alydia Rackham

“Okay, turn left here,” I pointed.

“Here?”

“Yes, the wooden sign, right there.”

“Anne, that sign doesn’t say anything.”

“It doesn’t have to, it points,” I answered.

“Okay, you know best,” Peter said, turning the car to the left, onto a road that wound away into the darkness, through a tunnel of ancient trees. The snow had been cleared away, and lay in tall drifts to either side. Peter slowed the car down.

“Okay, this is extremely spooky,” Peter said, leaning forward and glancing up at the bare, gnarled branches overhead. “Just waiting for the headless horseman to come out, say ‘Hey, kids, how about an exchange—my pumpkin for your brains, sound good?’”

“No, the headless horseman is on vacation,” I told him. “He goes south for the winter.”

“Oh, good, what a relief,” he muttered. “Guess I’ll just have to narrow my worries to the Hook Man.”

“The what?” I cried.

“The Hook Man,” he repeated. “Haven’t you heard that story?”

“Do I *want* to hear that story?” I muttered.

“The hook man crawls around looking for teenagers who park their cars out in the country in the dark,” he hissed, as if I hadn’t said anything. “He has a hook for a hand, and drags its sharpened point up and down the sides of their car like this: *Eeeerrrrrrrrrr!*” He made a ghastly motion with his hooked fingers. “And then he *breaks* the car window and shoves the hook through—”

“No, no, stop, stop,” I ordered, pushing his hand down. “Where did you hear *that* story?”

“In a book. Ghost Stories of Kansas,” he stated.

I laughed out loud.

“I think we’ll be okay, then,” I managed.

“If you say so,” he said, feigning nervousness.

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For a while, we just followed the winding road through the darkness. The snow had stopped, and no lights shone through the black until...

"There," I said, pointing again. "Turn left here, at this driveway."

"Ohhh, I see it," Peter murmured.

He turned the car left, into a slowly-sloping driveway, up a gentle hill.

In a wide clearing, open to the stars, stood a large white house. It had three stories, a huge wrap-around front porch with antebellum pillars, and two chimneys, one on each side. It had black shutters on the windows, and a red front door. Snow stood a foot deep on the roof, like frosting on a cake.

A carriage house with a rooster on the peak stood to the right of it. A large walled garden stood to the left of the house, with an iron-wrought gate. The house itself wore white Christmas lights from its eaves, and a large lit wreath on the front door—and the lights illuminated the whole house like a beacon on a hill.

"Oh, Annie..." Peter whispered, slowing the car, the twinkle of the lights reflecting in his eyes. "It looks like magic."

"Pull up in front of the carriage house," I told Peter quietly. "We can leave the presents in the car for now, and bring them in in the morning."

"Okay, sounds like a plan," he agreed, just as softly. He shut the headlights off and drew up in front of the carriage doors, and shut off the car. "I think my feet are fused to the floor."

"I think my spine is fused to the seat," I groaned. "And my head feels like cement."

"I'm glad we didn't crash," he muttered. "That would have put a damper on the evening." I snorted.

"Just a little."

Together, we stiffly climbed out of the car, shut the doors as quietly as possible, fished our luggage and Milo out of the back seat, and crept up the frosty walkway toward the porch.

"Careful, it might be slick," I warned, leading the way.

The next second, Peter's shoes skidded—

I whipped around to see him catch himself against the lamp post.

"Noted," he muttered.

"Be *careful*," I repeated, eyes wide. He wrinkled his nose at me.

"Yes, Mother."

We climbed up the stone steps onto the porch, crept close to the door, and I put down my suitcase, grabbed the brass knocker and quietly tapped out our family code.

A few moments later, the door swung open, and my mom stood there in her pink bathrobe, wearing her large reading glasses.

"Hello, honey!" she cried, with hushed excitement, and gave me a big hug.

"Hi, Mom! We're about dead from driving!"

"I bet you are!" she agreed. "Hello, Peter! Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas, Mrs. Maple," he grinned, stepping in to give her a hug, too.

"Come in, come in," Mom beckoned, stepping back and letting us cross the threshold, into the warmth.

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“Mmm. It smells good in here,” Peter said, taking a deep breath.

“We were baking all day,” Mom told him. “Here, let’s shut the door.”

It took a second for my eyes to adjust, and even then, I couldn’t see much. Not until my mom stepped out of the way...

“Wow...” Peter breathed.

And I saw what he saw.

The towering Christmas tree stood to the right of the fireplace, all aglow with big red and white lights, twinkling with a shower of tinsel, and crowded around with dozens of shining presents.

“Oh, Mom, the tree looks so pretty,” I whispered, suddenly on the verge of tears. I shook myself, knowing I was simply too tired—but it didn’t help.

“You can both look at it in the morning,” Mom insisted. “Go ahead and let Milo out.”

“Okay,” I breathed, setting the carrier down and opening the door. Milo cautiously crept out, smelling the air...

Then realized where he was, and trotted into the darkness, out of sight.

“Follow me, Peter,” Mom instructed. “We’ll go upstairs and find your room.”

So we hefted our bags, turned to the left and climbed the stairs, whose bannister was all wrapped around with garland. We passed darkened family portraits on the wall to our left, and stepped up onto a landing lit only by a teeny Christmas tree on an antique table. To the right of that table stood the door to my bedroom.

“Goodnight, Anne,” Mom called to me as she and Peter turned right, and started down the long, squeaky wooden hallway lined with more doors. I saw Peter turn around and give me a wave, and I waved back. Then, I quietly opened my creaky metal doorknob, pushed the door open, stepped inside and shut the door.

I reached out to my left in the darkness, knowing what I would find—

My hand met the glass of my bedside lamp, and I soon found the switch—it was like the key of an oil lamp. I twisted it, and turned on my light.

For just a moment, I glanced around my room.

I hadn’t been here for a long time now, but nothing had changed. My big, four-poster bed with white comforter and the quilt my great grandmother had made, and my antique porcelain doll named Charlotte adorning the pillows; the trunk at the foot of the bed, a large wardrobe my great-great grandpa had made in the far left corner, my vanity in the right hand corner, and a bank of windows right ahead of me, with lace curtains. Floral wallpaper, shelves with all my books and old dolls stacked on them.

Exactly the way I’d left it.

Mom wasn’t one of those parents who redecorates a kid’s room when they leave for college, turning it into a study or a lounge or something. She’d always told me: “This is your home. Always. You can always come here, no matter what, no matter when.”

And I knew that was one of the main reasons I’d had the courage to go all the way to the city and try this out. Because I knew that my room, with its smells and comfortable sensations and

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friendly doll faces and grandma's quilt, would remain like a sanctuary for me, secure and safe, no matter what happened.

After standing there and breathing in the scent of rose potpourri that I always kept on my vanity, I pulled off my coat, draped it over the vanity chair, put my suitcase on my bed, opened it, and pulled out my long flannel pajamas. I changed quickly, then opened the door, sneaked down the hall to the next door down and shut myself in the little bathroom, washed my face, brushed my teeth...

And finally felt like I was about to collapse.

I dragged myself back to my room, shut the door, and crawled under the covers. Without thinking, I took Charlotte into my arms and tucked her against my chest, and with my last ounce of strength, I shut off the light, and instantly fell asleep.



Tap, tap, tap.

I frowned, slowly rising to consciousness like I was coming out of a coma. I didn't open my eyes, but I could sense light pressing into my room from my windows. I lay on my stomach, half buried in my covers, facing my left. Extremely comfortable and wonderfully warm.

"What," I croaked.

"Can I come in?"

I frowned harder. That wasn't a voice I was used to in the morning.

I just grunted.

I heard the door creak open, and then soft footsteps pad onto my rug. A slight *thump* sounded on the floor by the side of my bed. Nobody said anything. But I could hear someone breathing.

I frowned again, shifting a little bit, and forced my eyes open...

To see Peter peeking at me over the edge of my mattress, like Kilroy. His eyebrows raised and his eyes bright.

I reached up and drowsily brushed at my face.

"What?" I muttered. "What time is it?"

"Ten thirty," he said, lifting his head just to say that, then ducking back down and pressing his nose against my bed.

"Okay," I yawned, stretching and tucking my hand under my cheek.

"Wendy," he said, now setting his chin on my mattress. "What are you doing in bed at 10:30 in the morning on Christmas Eve?"

I glared at him.

"I was *sleeping*."

"Sleeping?" he repeated. "Sleeping is for dead people."

"No, sleeping is for people who don't *want* to be dead yet," I retorted.

"You're not sleeping anymore," he noted.

“Gee, I wonder why,” I muttered.

“Get up or I’m going to have to bounce on your bed,” he threatened.

“You’re not going to do that,” I said.

“And why not?” he demanded, emphasizing the “t.”

“Because I know where you’re ticklish,” I said. “And I would attack you.”

He looked at me sideways, aghast.

“You would *never*.”

“Try me,” I said, working my hand out and reaching my index finger toward him.

“Okay, all right, all right,” he relented, backing up and holding up his hands. I lifted my head a little off the pillow.

“Are you dressed already?” I frowned.

“Yes, thank you for noticing,” he said smugly, turning around like a model—but still on his knees. He wore jeans and a fitted maroon fleece shirt, with a collared shirt underneath. No shoes, just yellow socks.

“I thought we were going to stay in our pajamas,” I pouted.

He put his hands on his hips and gave me a saucy turn of his head.

“Well, I *would*, but I don’t happen to have cute plaid pajamas like *you*,” he said in his southern accent. “Mine have holes in all *kinds* of places.”

“Oh, good grief,” I groaned. “Maybe I should have gotten *that* for you for Christmas.”

“The state of my pajamas is none of your concern,” he retorted loftily. “But at least I can get up at a decent time and dress myself, Miss Maple.”

I threw my other pillow at him. He ducked, but not in time. It hit him in the shoulder and the face.

“Oo-hoh-kay!” his eyes blazed, and he lunged at me, immediately poking my comforter and tweaking my side.

I screeched, lashing out at him and digging my fingers into his ribs. He yelped and recoiled, then picked up my fallen pillow and brought it *smack* down on my head.

“Oof!” I cried, then snatched at it and tried to yank it away from him—

“Peter, stop bothering Anne!” came my grandma’s shout up the stairwell. Peter immediately let go and stood up straight.

“Yes, ma’am!” he shouted back.

“Come down here, you’re supposed to be helping me with the eggs!”

“You’re in trouble,” I said, sing-song.

“You started it,” he pointed at me.

“Go help Grandma,” I ordered. “I’ll be down in a second.”

“You’d better be, or the attack shall come from another front,” he warned, with narrowed eyes. Then, he darted out of the room and shut the door, leaving me, my covers, my pillows and my hair in total disarray.



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I showered, dressed, put up my hair and added a little makeup as quickly as I could, and managed to make it downstairs by 10:45. I took my time coming down the stairs, taking deep breaths of the smell of sausage and eggs and cinnamon rolls coming from the kitchen. I descended into the sitting room, looking around at everything.

A fire blazed in the fireplace, and the mantle was covered with an antique manger scene. Above that hung a painting of a dark-haired young Edwardian woman in a lavender-colored dress, walking barefoot through a grassy field, carrying a basket of wildflowers. We'd always called her Liliias.

A leather couch covered with blankets stood with its back against the windows to my left, and other armchairs encircled the fireplace and the tree. Colorful presents spilled out from beneath the tree's lower branches, all covered in bows and ribbons. I stepped closer to the tree, smiling at the sight of all the familiar ornaments. The rich pine scent washed over me, and a pang of sadness passed through me. This was the first year I hadn't been home to decorate it.

"Maow."

I turned to see Milo curled up on the couch next to his mother, a black and white cat named Wicked Wanda. She had a white mask across her face that made her look just like a bandit, and huge yellow eyes.

"Hello, hello, you two," I grinned, coming up to rub both their faces. They both started to purr, and squinted their eyes shut in pleasure.

"Anne? Are you up?" Mom called through the other door.

"Yes, I'm up, I'm coming!" I called. I crossed the squeaky floor—every floor in this house squeaked—and passed through a little corridor into the kitchen.

I was immediately greeted by our dog Molly, a shiba inu mix with a coat the color of autumn, and dark brown eyes. Her pointed ears laid back, her curly tail wagged, and she hopped toward me, grinning. She was missing her right front leg due to a car accident when she was younger.

"Molly-wolly!" I cried, grabbing her head and shaking her ears, as she panted even more happily. I petted her all up and down, and she leaned against my knee.

"Good morning, sleepyhead!" my dad called to me from the breakfast room that made up the left-hand half of the kitchen area. He sat at the white, square table with coffee in front of him, and the newspaper—just like every single morning I could ever remember. He still wore his pajamas and a dark green robe and slippers. To his right stood the large windows that looked out over the garden, their panes all frosted—but I could see the snow-draped walls and flower beds.

"Hi, Dad!" I grinned, coming over to give him a side hug. "Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas," he answered, chuckling and wrapping his arm around my waist. "How come you didn't wear your pajamas?"

"I got cold," I answered truthfully. "I needed my sweater!"

"Lily and Janie aren't going to be happy," Dad warned under his breath.

"We're *not* happy!" Janie sniffed. I turned around to find everyone else in the kitchen, standing around the center island where all the food lay stacked. Both my sisters still wore their

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pajamas, slippers and robes, one green, one red. Even Mom wore her pink robe, and Grandma was in a very thick quilted dressing gown with a lace collar.

“You call yourself our sister,” Lily put her nose in the air. “We should shun you.”

“Oh, it’s all my fault,” Peter lamented, leaning his head back and shutting his eyes, shaking his head. “I’ve screwed up everything!”

“Yes, it is your fault,” Mom told him, pouring herself a cup of coffee. “Traditions are traditions around here!”

“Okay, good grief, I’ll go grab my robe and put it on,” I said, laughing. “Will that appease the pajama gods?”

Peter gave me a wince, and made a so-so gesture. Rolling my eyes, I dashed back upstairs, threw on my own pink robe, then hurried back down.

We all filled up our plates with eggs, sausage and toast, poured cups of coffee, then sat down at the breakfast table to eat. My parents asked about the drive, and we detailed our various encounters with icy roads, a deer—and Peter had to tell the story of the Hook Man, which made my sisters squeal.

After we washed the dishes and cleaned up, I gave Peter a tour of the house. I showed him the sitting room and told him about all the ornaments on the tree, and talked about Liliias, and that she’d come all the way from England on a ship. I took him back through the kitchen’s swinging door into the grand dining room, with the long oak table and the brass chandelier, and the towering china cabinet. We passed through the other door in the dining room to the lounge area, where we had a huge fireplace, a television, and several more couches, and a smaller tree. This room was all dark wood, and covered with shelves packed with books. Dad’s big desk sat in one corner, covered with neatly-stacked papers and a calculator.

I then took Peter upstairs and told him all about my room, and the names of each of my dolls and where I’d gotten them. I pointed out Lily and Janie’s rooms, but of course I didn’t show him inside because my sisters weren’t present. I did show them my parents’ room, because they were always so proud of it. Gorgeous antique furniture, a wardrobe for each of them, a floor-length mirror, and a beautiful view out the window. Next was my grandma’s room, which we peeked into—all done in sunny yellow, with lace curtains, and a neat little white, iron-wrought bed.

We then climbed the raucous stairs to the third story, and Peter pointed out the bedroom Mom had given him: the first one, done in light green, with old paintings of the forest and the Catskill mountains. He told me he had slept really well, and the radiator in here had kept him warm.

We passed down the hall and I showed him the other guest rooms, each decorated in a different color, with a different theme. He remarked that my parents should start a bed and breakfast. I had to agree—my house was cuter and more charming than many of the bed and breakfasts I’d been to.

By that time, my sisters were screaming up the stairwell at us to hurry up and get ready to go out into the snow. We grabbed our coats and hats from our rooms and clambered back downstairs to find Lily and Janie decked out in their snow gear. I pulled my snow pants out of the closet, and then threw my mom’s pair at Peter, declaring that my dad’s would be too long for him.

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He stuck his tongue out at me, but he didn't object otherwise, since they were dark blue and didn't look particularly girly. He did have to wear my dad's snowboots, though, since he didn't have any.

Mom, Dad and Grandma announced that they were going to drive into town to do some last-minute shopping and go have hot chocolate at the café, and warned us not to track snow inside, then drove off. Once my sisters, Peter and I were bundled up, we hurried out onto the front porch.

It was cold, the sun shone bright, and the snow on the meadow looked like a brilliant field of sugar stretched out in front of us. Peter stepped out onto the porch, drew a big breath of frosty air and let it out in a cloudy gust around his head, beaming like the sunshine.

"Let's go!" Janie cried, leaping off the porch and dashing toward the carriage house, her snow pants and coat swishing loudly. Lily raced after her, her long elf hat swinging behind her.

"Where are we going?" Peter asked me.

"The Big Hill," I answered, hopping down the stairs too, but remembering that icy patch. "Only the best sledding hill on the face of the planet."

"You're going to have to teach me this, Anne," Peter said, following me.

"You've never been sledding?" I asked. "Even at the hill in Central Park?"

He shrugged.

"Never had a sled."

"Well, come with me, then!" I said, grabbing his mittened hand in mine and tugging on him. Together, we found Janie and Lily in the carriage house, pulling out our sleds. The girls each had their own, I had one, and my parents had a pretty long one, so I handed that one to Peter. We hauled them outside, then let them drop onto the snow and tugged them behind us by their ropes, letting their rails make tracks in the snow.

We strode out across the virgin white of the meadow by the garden, heading for a gap in the huge trees. Peter and I soon started kicking the fluffy snow out in front of us in big clouds.

"This isn't any good for snowballs," he noted. "Look, it's like dust!"

"Yeah, we'll have to wait till later in the afternoon, maybe," I said. "Maybe it'll melt a little, we can make a snowman."

"Oop, we can't forget to bring the presents inside," Peter realized.

"Oh, gosh, you're right. Don't let me forget."

We all trundled down through the gap in the trees, and then slogged through the snow that came up to our knees. We then met a curve in a dirt road that was now covered in snow, but I noticed a pair of deep, narrow tracks already laid down.

"What are these?" Peter asked, pointing.

"Sleigh tracks!" Janie cried. "Our neighbors have a sleigh and white horses."

"Want to go on a sleigh ride sometime?" Lily asked him. "We can ask them! They have bells and everything!"

Peter grabbed my elbow.

"Those are *real*?" Peter gaped at Lily.

"Sure," she giggled.

"Pinch me, Anne," he gasped. "I'm dreaming or I'm dead."

"I can't pinch you, I have mittens on," I snickered.

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“Well, that’s it then,” Peter threw his hand up in the air, and my sisters both laughed.

We followed the dirt road, and soon found lots of footprints joining the sleigh tracks. A few minutes later, we heard the sounds of laughing and screaming. We rounded the bend...

And came upon the Big Hill. Probably twenty kids, ranging from five years old to college-age, lined the ridge, whooping at their friends and then taking the plunge down the long, swooping hill to the bottom, near the frozen river. Many parents stood by, cheering and helping. I immediately saw several people I knew, and we all went up to say hi, and I introduced Peter to them.

“Woah,” Peter murmured, watching one guy—about twenty years old—dive onto his sled and speed down the hill head-first. “Dunno if I can do that.”

“Well, why don’t you and me go down together first?” I asked.

“What do you mean?” he turned to me.

“Look, I’ll sit on the front and put my feet on the rudder here,” I explained, climbing onto my parents’ long sled. “And you sit behind me and hold onto me, and put your legs over mine and put your heels here...”

He sat behind me, scooting in close and placing his feet where I told him.

“I am suddenly terrified,” he muttered.

“Ha! This is scarier than performing in front of a total of four-hundred-twenty-*thousand* people?” I asked.

“Well, when you put it *that* way...” He shifted. “Maybe *this* is where I fall on my face.”

“Nobody’s going to fall on his face,” I assured him. “Are you all set?”

“Holding on for dear life.”

“Lily, can you come push us?” I called.

“Yeah, sure!” Lily hurried over, and leaned down to put her hands on Peter’s back. “Ready?”

“Ready,” I said.

Peter whimpered and pushed his face into the back of my head. I chuckled.

“One...two...three!” Lily cried, and pushed us hard.

We started forward, tipped over the edge...

And whooshed down the hill. Peter’s arms nearly crushed me.

“Yaaah!” I screamed—and then Peter did the same, right in my ear. The snow skidded by beneath us, and we whizzed down the incline, cold wind cutting our cheeks and noses.

Then, near the bottom of the hill, we hit a suddenly bumpy patch, the left rail caught an edge—

And we dumped onto the side and went rolling through the snow. I landed on my back, laughing hysterically. Peter’s arm thudded across my middle.

“Ow-w-w,” I grunted, still laughing.

“I think I bit a hole in your hood,” Peter panted. This started me giggling uncontrollably, and I rolled over and pushed him.

“Oh, no, don’t, all my ribs are broken,” he said, fending me off.

“They are *not*, you big weenie!” I slapped his puffy coat.

“I lost my hat!” he said, suddenly sitting up and looking around.

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“Ha, it’s all the way back there,” I pointed.

“Guess we’ll have to go all the way back up and...go down again?” Peter surmised innocently. I gave him a sideways look.

“You want to?”

He laboriously crawled to his feet, wincing dramatically...

Then flashed me a wide-eyed challenge.

“Race you.”

And dashed back toward the hill.

“Wait! Wait, I have to get the sled!” I screamed, bending down to snatch the rope and race after him—but he only cackled maniacally, and ran faster.



We sledded for probably two hours. Peter became very brave very quickly, got on his own sled, and my sisters and I raced him down the hill over and over. Often, we would all collapse at the bottom and lay there for a while in the snow, making snow angels until we could recover our breath and climb back up.

Eventually, Janie said she was cold because some snow had gone down her back and gotten in her boots.

“Why don’t you two head back to the house and start lunch?” I suggested. “I know Mom made some vegetable soup she just wanted us to warm up. And you could make grilled cheese sandwiches.”

“Where are *you* gonna go?” Lily asked.

“I want to show Peter something,” I said.

“Oooh, *I* know where she’s going,” Janie grinned.

“Okay...now I’m intrigued...” Peter said.

“Can you take our sleds?” I asked.

“No,” Lily shook her head. “You drag your own sled!”

“Goodness me,” Southern-Peter exclaimed.

“Fine!” I sniffed. “See if I put anything in your stocking.”

“Fine!” Lilly sniffed back. “I don’t care, I’m not dragging your silly sled.”

“Fine!” I retorted, laughing. And together, my sisters hiked back up the hill toward the house.

“Okay, what now?” Peter asked, dusting the snow out of his hair and putting his tweed cap back on.

“Follow me!” I said—and together we hauled our sleds further down the hill, toward a much smaller gap in the trees. We hiked down a short path, and over an arched stone bridge that was even older than my house. We followed a snow-drifted lane that curved toward the left, and then opened onto a road, equally unused. We rounded a copse of pines, and, out of breath, I finally slowed down, dropped the rope of my sled, and pointed.

“There,” I declared. Peter came up to stand next to me, and looked.

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A huge house stood close amidst ancient trees, many branches reaching over its slate roof. It was made of pale stone, in a simple late-Victorian style, with a prominent tower that had a pointed roof. Elegant stonework adorned the windows and corners of the house. Vines crawled up the left side of it, now catching all the snow. The windows had been boarded up, and a cap covered the chimney. A tall, black, iron-wrought fence guarded the vast yard, and a huge chain and padlock on the gate forbade anyone from entering. A multi-tiered stone fountain stood in the center of the yard, and the way the snow had fallen, it looked like a three-layered wedding cake.

I sighed dreamily, coming up to loop my forearms through the fence, just as I had all the time as a little girl.

“Looks like a haunted house,” Peter commented.

“No, no, no,” I sighed, smiling in through the bars. “Come up here and *look* at it.”

“I’m afraid I’ll fall through a trap door.”

“You’re afraid of a lot today, aren’t you?” I jabbed him, throwing a look over my shoulder.

“I have just been chastised,” he muttered, clasping his hands in front of him. I faced the house again.

“Come play with me for a second,” I said.

“Oh, we’re playing?” he said, immediately stepping up next to me.

“Yeah,” I grinned. “Imagine for a second—”

“Okay, hold on,” he said—and turned his cap around backward and set his mouth seriously. I laughed.

“Imagine...” I tilted my head, letting my eyes unfocus. “Imagine the summertime. Imagine this whole yard was green, mowed grass; and the trees over there are blooming pink, and the bees and butterflies are just everywhere. Imagine a whole row of daffodils right there in front of the porch, a big rose bush on the corner, and green ivy all up the side. Imagine the windows open, and you can see the lace curtains in the upstairs bedroom blowing in the breeze.” I closed my eyes. “Sitting on the porch, in rocking chairs, drinking lemonade, listening to the birds singing. Because they’ve made a nest right in the corner of the porch over there. The fountain’s going, and the water is all sparkly in the sunshine. The front door is hanging open, and you can smell the cherry pie baking in the oven. Little kids scream and run through the sprinkler in the front yard, and the dog just barks at them and jumps around but doesn’t want to come too close because he’ll get squirted in the face. There’s an old-fashioned radio out on the porch too, tuned into the first really good baseball game of the season. And you don’t have anywhere to be, nothing to do, nothing important to think about, except what kind of ice cream you want with your pie. Doesn’t that sound nice?” I opened my eyes, and glanced over at Peter.

He leaned against the fence too, gazing at the house...

And tears glittered in his eyes. He shot me a glance and smiled a little, then sniffed. He nodded.

“Aw, Peter,” I said, wrapping my arm around his and putting my head on his shoulder. He sniffed again, pulling me against him, setting his head against mine and grabbing my right hand.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry!” I said, nuzzling a little closer.

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“It’s okay,” he gave a watery chuckle. “You should see me when a Hallmark commercial comes on.”

“Me too.” I lifted my head and smiled at him, and he returned it.

“Want to go get some lunch?” I asked.

“Sure,” he nodded. So we grabbed our sleds and headed back the way we’d come, both of us giving lingering glances back to the silent old house several times before it fell out of our sight.

Mom

By the time we got back home, Lily and Janie had started warming up the soup and making sandwiches. Peter and I took off our wet snow things and hung and stacked them by the door, then hurried into the kitchen to help.

Everything was ready when Mom, Dad and Grandma came home. They very secretively hustled their new purchases into the bedrooms, so no one could see, then hung up their coats and came out to eat with us.

After lunch, Peter and I retrieved our own presents from the car and arranged them under the tree, whilst Grandma, Dad and Mom wrapped the presents they had bought, and marched them into the sitting room with much ceremony.

We all hung around in the sitting room, drinking the wassail Lily had made (my favorite Christmas drink), and talking about what we’d done that morning. Janie and Lily sat on the rug next to the fireplace, and the rest of us got the couch and chairs. Molly lay between my sisters, being petted to her heart’s content. Milo sat on the back of dad’s chair, and Wanda curled up in Mom’s lap.

“Ah, so Annie showed you the old Manchester house, huh?” Dad grinned at Peter, sitting back in his chair. “You’ve officially made her ‘best friends’ list.”

“Ha, really?” Peter grinned, taking a sip of his own wassail. He and I sat on the couch, in opposite corners. My legs stretched out on the couch, my feet resting against his hip. I smiled and ducked my head.

“Yep, I think every single close friend she’s had, since grade school, Anne has dragged down there to see that house,” Dad went on. “And that’s not a long list.”

Peter looked over at me, his smile turning a little shy. I wrinkled my nose and poked him with my toe.

“Stop it, I’m ticklish,” he warned quietly, lightly slapping my ankle.

“What did you think of going sledding, Peter?” Mom asked him, rocking in her own chair next to Dad’s.

“Terrifying,” Peter decided. “I’m officially addicted.”

My family laughed.

“We used to sled down that hill when I was a little girl,” Grandma said, as she knitted in her own rocking chair. “But only a few of us kids knew about it. And we’d have our pony pull us back up the hill!”

“Speaking of ponies,” Janie piped up. “You think we could call the Adamses and see if they could take us on a sleigh ride?”

“I don’t know, honey, they’re probably busy with Christmas stuff,” Dad said.

“What about after Christmas?” Lily asked.

“I’ll call them and see,” Mom said. I could practically feel Peter vibrate with suppressed excitement. I poked him with my toe again.

“Girl, stop it,” he giggled, grabbing my ankle this time. I grinned.

“I warned you,” Grandma shook her head. “If you went in there to wake her up this morning, she would eventually have her revenge!”

Anne’s whole life has been “by the script”...

Until fate calls her to improvise.

To play with the possibilities.

To go a little mad.

Anne studied to be a speech therapist, and she lives in a little apartment in New York, actively searching for a job in a non-scary school system. She has a steady, reliable boyfriend named Jim. She also has premonitions. She secretly calls them “Pictures,” and she’s never been able to stop even one from coming true.

Now, her dad has suggested she try out for a role in a play written by his old college friend—a play about a time-traveling, mad scientist.

And the last scene is always improvised.

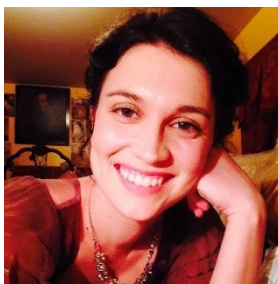
Battling her doubts and inexperience, Anne tries out, and is stunned when she gets the part of the female lead. As production begins, Anne is pulled into the orbit of a luminous, fiendishly-innocent young actor named Peter Wren, who teaches her how to fire her own imagination, and leads the show into mind-blowing popularity.

But what happens when Anne begins to care deeply for Peter and the show, at the expense of her relationship with Jim? And what does she do when she begins to have Pictures of Peter’s reckless drug abuse?

Now, Anne is caught between the fear that this venture may ruin all her plans for the future—and the knowledge that trying to save Peter Wren may be the role of a lifetime.

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I want to thank my family, and my faithful supporters—you mean the world to me, and you inspire me every day. My life's purpose is to share adventures with you, and I enjoy every moment of that. I hope our journeys continue for many years to come.

“And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God bless Us, Every One!”

Merry Christmas!

Ever,

Alydia

Alydia Rackham graduated from McPherson College with a bachelor's degree in English. She has published 75 fanfiction stories and 28 original novels. In addition, she is a singer (winning superior ratings at state competitions in both high school and college), an artist, a cover designer, an avid traveler, and has performed in 20 theatrical productions, 6 short films and one feature-length film to date (winning a Jester Award in high school for the role of Mrs. Higgins in *My Fair Lady*, and a gala award for Best Female Performer in a Musical for her role as Mary Poppins in Salina Community Theatre's Production of *Mary Poppins*.) She wrote the screenplay for the feature-film *Inkfinger*, which was featured in four film festivals, including the *Hollywood Dreamz International Film Festival and Writers Celebration* in Las Vegas, Nevada, where it was nominated for Best Cinematography. It also won the Award of Merit at the IndieFest Film Awards in La Jolla, California. It is now available on DVD on Amazon.

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-Alydia Rackham