

Chapter One

December 21st—84:00 hours to Eve Launch

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

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

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

I was that mad.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I envisioned one of my dream eggs exploding. BOOM!

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

BOOM! Another dream egg exploded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Engaged!”

BOOM. BOOM. BOOM.

“You just started dating him.” Fear ricocheted through me like a crazy pinball. My stomach clenched

miserly-tight. When panic kicked in I realized my empathic senses had picked up Candy's mood. Empathy is my strongest Naturesense. I can tune into the emotions of those closest to me. Comes in pretty handy when you're a parent. Or married to the World's Biggest Kid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Big shocker, eh? Mother Nature has a penis.

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

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

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

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

"It's Steampunk fashion, Grands."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No sir. No syrup."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"As you wish, Your Highness."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Running," Cooper whispered.

"Yah, running. Briskly. Then I ran into Oddvar."

"Oskar," Cookie reminded.

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

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

He winced. "A little."

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

"They were good."

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

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

I looked at my elegant table, set with care to celebrate my family spending precious time together, and realized it was not appreciated. They gathered because I told them to, not because they wanted to start the day

as a family. Didn't they understand time was slipping away? Despite his SuperNatural DNA, Dad's undisciplined diet had given him heart disease. Mom looked ashen and old. The results from Kris's physical could reveal serious problems. Candy contemplated marriage. I teetered on the precipice of fifty, not ready to be a widow.

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

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