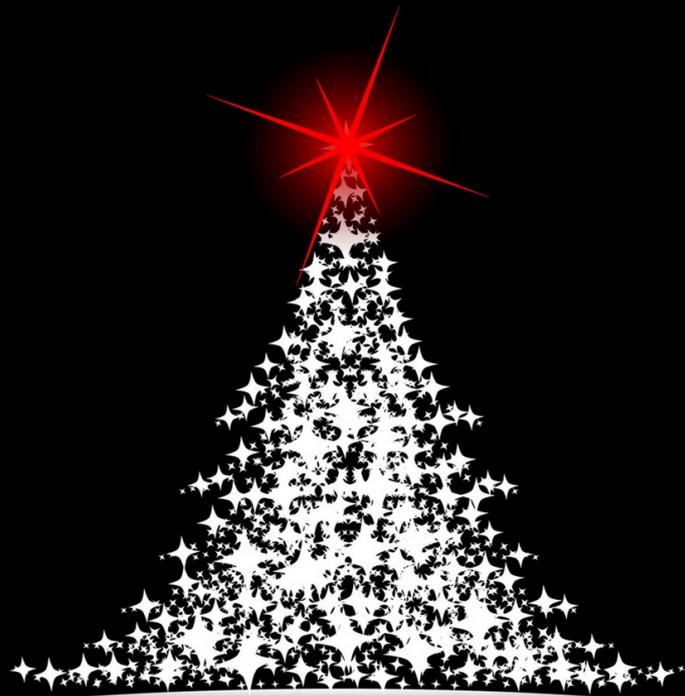


Christmas Wishes

A Westport Mystery



Beth Prentice

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Chapter One

We all have wishes, don't we? It's a part of being human. I mean of course some of our wishes are bigger and less specific than others. Like, I really wish for world peace. That's a big wish but I haven't been specific as to how it is to happen.

Most of my wishes are much smaller and much more specific. Like, right now, I wished that I hadn't worn this bloody G-string. I hated it, and the only reason I had worn it was because my washing pile was huge. That was another wish – that someone other than me would do my washing.

“Chloe, would you please hold your end higher?” Isaac complained. Isaac is my BFF, but not only that, he's also my next-door neighbor. He's very tall, very hairy, and at times, very annoying.

I held my end of the Christmas bunting as high as I could. Another wish – I wish I was nine inches taller. That would make me the same height as Isaac and would give me one thing in common with a super model.

“Sorry, that's as high as I can get it.” I heard his humph from a good three meters away.

We were presently preparing for our annual Price Lane Christmas Party. Price Lane is a small street in the town of Westport. Westport is on the east coast of Australia, and even though the temperatures don't usually go any higher than the low forties, the humidity is the killer. Today it was expected to reach thirty-eight degrees. At seven o'clock this morning it was already twenty-seven so I thought for once the weather bureau may just get it right.

I wiped the sweat from my upper lip and wondered if wishing for a white Christmas was just too much.

My boyfriend Brody sauntered across the grass park towards me. “Hey, let me do that,” he said, taking the bunting from me. Sometimes wishes come true. Brody is just over six foot tall. He has dark brown eyes that look like melted milk chocolate, long lashes and incredible biceps. Actually, every muscle he has is incredible. At times, I wonder what I ever did to be lucky enough to have him in my life.

“Thanks,” I answered, smiling. My arms had started to cramp from holding them up for so long. I really needed to go to the gym more often and tone a little bit more, but that was penciled in for another day.

“If you can, will you go and help Adam? He has to get the lights set up before he goes to work,” added Brody.

I nodded as I hopped off the plastic crate I’d been standing on.

Isaac looked up and squeaked, “What?” Adam was his partner, and judging by the pitch of Isaac’s tone, I would take a guess that he didn’t know Adam was going into work today.

“He just took a call when I was over there talking to him,” explained Brody.

“Someone called in sick so he has to do a Melbourne flight.” Adam used to be a pilot for a large commercial airline. Last month he accepted a job as a pilot for a private company with the idea that he would get more time at home with Isaac. So far it didn’t seem to be working out too well for him.

“But he promised that he’d be here tonight,” Isaac sulked, pushing his bottom lip out as far as it would go.

Brody shrugged. He knew better than to get in to a conversation with him when he was sulking.

“Why don’t you go and talk to him,” I suggested. “I’ll work with Brody and finish the bunting.”

“No, it’s okay, I’ll finish this first,” he replied, as Brody lifted his arms above his head, tacking the bunting to the makeshift post. I knew exactly why Isaac was staying. It was the same reason I’d offered. Brody’s abs were just too glorious not to stare at.

I gave Isaac a mock glare and then flashed him a smile. He blushed but didn’t look away.

We were holding the party in the small children’s playground slash park that was situated at the southern end of Price Lane. Isaac, and Mrs. White from number 41, were the coordinators. The idea was for everyone to bring a blanket, a plate of food, and a candle of their choice for Carols by Candlelight. So far, we had set up two tables for the food, had almost hung all the bunting, taped balloons to the swing set, and run an extension cord for the large television that Isaac had set up to screen tonight’s Carols’ in the Domain, televised on channel 7. Thankfully the weather forecast was for a clear night so his TV should make it unscathed.

I walked past Mrs. White who was sitting on a park bench watching us. She sat up straighter, her long neck extending until all her seventy-five-year-old skin was taut. I turned to see what had got her attention and noticed that Brody had reached up to tack a second flag, and the golden skin on his glorious stomach was glistening in the afternoon sun. I guess no matter your age, you can still appreciate a good-looking man when you see one. I smiled at her as I continued looking for Adam.

Thankfully we had quite a few helpers today. Mrs. White and Isaac had done a great job getting everyone involved. Price Lane wasn't the biggest street – the last house numbered 56, but it had an eclectic mix of residents. Some were older and retired, some were young, single and carefree, and some were families, cramming their small houses to the max. On one side of my house I had Isaac, on the other the house was presently empty. A short while ago, it had been tenanted but the previous residents had been involved in some very bad juju. They were now all spending time behind bars compliments of the state of Queensland. I'd heard that the house had sold, but to date no one had moved into it.

I walked up to my home, pulling the opened gate on my tiled courtyard closed, and peered up to the dormer window of my attic extension overlooking the street. My dog Theo was sitting on the window seat, looking down at me, obviously wondering why he wasn't allowed out. Well, Theo is only ten inches tall. He's white with big brown spots and he's extremely hairy. Even though he has a personality the size of The Rock, the reality is he's a Chihuahua. To let him out in the organized chaos in the park, I'd be worried he'd be trampled on.

I gave him a little wave. He didn't like staying at home alone, and when he could see all his favorite people in the street without him, I knew I was in for a night of the cold shoulder. I made a mental note to buy a new bag of treats before the night began.

Turning to continue down the footpath towards Adam, I bumped into a man I had never seen here before. He was a lot shorter than me (and I was only five foot three), he had dark, short hair which was greying at the temples, and ears that were just a little bit too big for him.

“Hey!” he snapped. “Watch where you're walking!”

“Oh, I'm so sorry,” I replied looking down at him. “I didn't see you there.” Was it politically correct to say that to a very short person?

“Why? Because I'm short? Is that what you're saying? Well let me tell you, I've got a kid you know. I'm as manly as any man you could name. Even that Thor guy in the movies. I'm just as manly as him.”

I thought of Thor as I looked at the guy in front of me, and I seriously doubted it. “N...no,” I stuttered. “I...umm...didn’t notice you were short.” Crap, I’d nearly dug myself out of the hole and I just put myself right back into it. “And I’m sure you do have a child,” I quickly added, before he could get upset. “And I can see that you’re ummm... as manly as umm...” I nearly couldn’t say the words. “Thor. You’re nearly as manly as Thor.”

“Nearly? *Nearly?*” he asked, obviously aggravated.

I sighed. All I wanted to do was find Adam and give him the help he needed.

“I’m sure you are as manly as Thor,” I said, keeping my fingers crossed and wishing that this man would just continue doing whatever he was doing and leave me alone.

He narrowed his eyes at me, huffed and pushed past me on the path. I gave a sigh of relief that he didn’t start an argument. It was Christmas Eve and I for one, wanted this day to be happy and magical.

I thought about the night as I continued up the road towards Adam. Tonight, I was meeting Brody’s dad for the first time. His mum had passed away a few years ago, and since then his dad had been travelling the country. This year he had promised to spend Christmas with Brody. Brody didn’t speak of his dad that much. I’d never even seen a photo of him. I had asked him a few questions - like what’s his name, what does he do for a living – that kind of thing. His response was that he did a bit of this and that, and his friends knew him as Major. Apparently, that name had nothing to do with the armed forces, it was just a nickname.

I was quite nervous about our meeting. I really hoped that Major liked me. I mean, he had no reason not to. I was okay looking. I have light blue eyes, a single dimple in my right cheek, and at the moment, my hair was a dark blonde. I was a bit of a pushover and I’m sure I had the word sucker tattooed on my forehead. I managed to get myself sucked into the worst situations. That’s how I had become Theo’s owner. Even though he wasn’t a bad thing. In fact, I would put him in the top two of the best things that had ever happened to me.

Spotting Adam hauling a box of lights out of the trunk of his car, I was about to call out to him, when my phone in my pocket started to ring. I retrieved it, looked at the caller ID and saw that it was my brother Robbie.

“Hey,” I sang answering it, checking the road for traffic before I crossed.

“Hey,” Robbie responded sounding down. Robbie was my older brother. He was married to Jodie, had a six-year-old son named Cooper, and had a premature beer gut causing his waistline to bulge. It was, however, unusual for him to sound down.

“What’s up?” I asked, concerned.

“It’s Grandpa. I’m at the nursing home, ready to pick him up for the Carol’s tonight, but they won’t let him out.” Robbie had drawn the short straw and had gotten the job of collecting Grandpa.

“Why?” I asked upset. Grandpa loved getting out for family visits, and to think he could miss tonight broke my heart just that little bit.

“Apparently, he’s with the doctor now.” I opened my mouth to speak, but Robbie cut me off. “Before you ask why, I don’t know. I have to wait and see, but I’ll keep you posted.”

“Alright, I’ll wait to hear from you.” I hung up the call, took a deep calming breath, and wished for Grandpa to be okay.

Chapter Two

I finished helping Adam and then kissed him bye. I knew that he wasn't happy about having to work over Christmas, but he said that he'd left a very special present for Isaac under the tree and asked if I would make sure he wasn't alone tonight. Isaac wasn't an easy man to live with, but somehow, despite all of that, Adam loved him unconditionally. I sighed and wished that Adam didn't have to work.

After I left him, I made my way to the corner shop. Well, it used to be the corner shop, but not long ago the previous owner Mr. Wilks, had been murdered. Only two weeks ago, a cupcake shop had opened inside its walls. What better way than to eradicate all the previous nastiness than with a cupcake shop? I for one, couldn't think of one.

The shop was called *All Things Nice*, and the owner, Tilly, was a few years younger than me. She had long dark brown hair and the smile only someone working with sugar could have. You know the one you get when your blood sugar level is much higher than it should be?

She'd promised that she would donate a couple of boxes of cupcakes for us all tonight.

"Hi Chloe," she said, smiling as the little bell above the door jingled and I entered.

"Hey Tilly. Busy today?" I moved across the porcelain tiled floor and stopped in front of the glass fronted cabinet filled with glorious sugar creations.

"Yeah, I sure am," she said, pushing her dark rimmed glasses up the bridge of her nose. "I'm overwhelmed with how people love my cupcakes. I've still got to have twelve dozen ready before I close at five." She looked a little bit frazzled.

"That's a lot of cupcakes. The people of Westport are going to have a very merry Christmas!" I knew I would be. Six of her glorious, Christmas themed cupcakes were for my own personal menu.

"If you can just give me a second, I'll go and get the boxes you need." The store looked about half of the size that it used to, but I figured that behind the scenes was a kitchen and somewhere to keep all the baked cakes. "Are you going to be able to manage on your own?" she asked, a crease between her eyebrows deepening.

“Sure. They’re not that heavy, are they?”

“Well, no. You may have to make a couple of trips though.”

I raised my eyebrows questioningly. “How many boxes are there?”

“Twenty.”

Twenty?

She saw my shocked look and her nose wrinkled with concern.

“Do you think that’s not enough?” She used the back of her hand to wipe her forehead, stress screaming from every pore. “Oh goodness. I knew I should have made more. I can bring down whatever I don’t sell in the shop today, and if I sell out I could whip up some more - if you don’t mind me coming down to the party late, that is!”

“How many are in a box?”

“A dozen.”

“So, we have a hundred and forty-four cupcakes?”

She nodded.

I swallowed my smile. “I think we may have enough.” I knew that the residents were also inviting some family, but that was still a whole lot of cupcakes!

After my last trip with the boxes of cakes, I made my way home to leave my own box in the fridge. I’d ordered Tilly’s specialty – raspberry truffle – with a mixture of red, white and gold decorations. They were all so pretty and would look amazing on the table tomorrow when I made lunch for Brody’s dad. I wasn’t much of a cook, so most of the food was pre-packaged, but it was what the table looked like that mattered, right? I sighed and wished that I was a female Jamie Oliver.

My stomach jumped thinking about Brody’s dad and how I really wanted to impress him, but I pushed the thought aside and opened my gate.

Theo heard the clunk of the door unlocking. By the time that I had it open, he was running down the stairs, his little tongue hanging happily, his eyes bright. Before I owned him, I thought all Chihuahuas were nasty, snappy little creatures sent to Earth by the devil. He’d proved me wrong. One of the things he loved the most was being amongst people. One of the other things he loved the most was his treats. He smelled the cupcakes and considered them enough of a treat. I was wondering if I should Google Dog Treat-a-holics and see what I could find. He definitely had a problem.

“Hey, dude. What’s happening?” I said to him.

He pulled at his leash that was hanging on the hook near the door. He wanted to join the party, that’s what was happening.

“No. It’s not time yet! You still get to sleep for another couple of hours.” I laughed, as a crashing from the back of my house made me jolt.

Theo dropped his leash and started to growl, running towards the kitchen.

My house was single story with an attic conversion that held my bedroom. The front of the house was my lounge room, then there was a bedroom, a small bathroom under the stairs, with the kitchen slash dining area at the back. I think when it had been built its purpose was a worker’s cottage. Whatever it was, it had been renovated before I’d purchased it and I loved every inch of it.

What I didn’t love was strange noises where they shouldn’t be. I picked up the umbrella from the stand near the door and followed Theo down the hallway.

Apprehension caused my heart beat to stutter, but as Theo had already made his way to the back door, his barking getting louder the longer it took me to reach him, I knew I had to see what had made the noise.

My back door was made of glass. This gave both Theo and I a perfect view of my small garden, and the short man lying on his back on my very long grass, part of the timber dividing fence on top of him. He didn’t look happy.

I placed the cupcake box on the counter top, dropped the umbrella, and picked Theo up, unlocking the door, shocked.

“What the ...” I said, unable to form the correct words.

The man looked winded. “H...h...help!” I heard him whisper.

Theo tucked under my arm, I raced down my two steps and stared down at him, unsure of what I should do.

“Are you okay? Can you move? Do you need an ambulance?” I asked, my words running into one another, my heart now pounding.

“J...just get it off me!” he snapped, his voice much stronger as he regained his breath.

I put Theo down and attempted to lift the timber panel off him. It was awkward, it was heavy, and I got more than one splinter. I’d just managed to lift it high enough for him to crawl out, when the timber cracked, split and fell, hitting the man on the head.

Crap.

I heard his curse, much worse than anything I could even think up. Well, at least I hadn’t killed him.

Once again, I lifted the timber, using my back to hold it. “Crawl out!” I hissed, as he rubbed his head. In defense of his cursing, even from here I could see a splinter the size of cricket bat. Okay, I exaggerated. It was more like the size of sledge hammer.

I listened to his moans and groans as he maneuvered his little body out.

“What were you doing?” I asked, once he’d staggered to his feet, slipping his brown loafer back on to his left foot. Theo had wandered into the neighboring yard, sniffing all the new smells that came his way.

“Just looking,” he replied, attempting to rub the grass stains from his shorts.

“At what?” Hang on a second! “You were snooping over the fence, weren’t you?”

He blushed, red starting at his ears and stopping only once his face was flushed. “I wouldn’t call it snooping as such.”

“What would you call it?”

“Mild curiosity.” He straightened his shoulders and did his best to look dignified. I gave him points for that. It wouldn’t have been easy to look dignified with grass stained shorts, a splintered nose, red from embarrassment, and something disgusting that Theo had left earlier, stuck to his shirt. I wrinkled my nose, wishing one: I’d cleaned up after Theo, and two: that the man would pull his shorts up just that little bit so I couldn’t see his plumpers crack.

“So how did you end up on my side of the fence with it on top of you?” I asked. “And what are you doing back here anyway?”

He noticed the gunk on his t-shirt and paled. “I just bought this house,” he said pointing to my neighboring home. “I was leaning over the fence and the thing broke, toppling me over the top of it. I thought that it looked like a hazard, and I was right!”

“So, you’re my new neighbor?” Not the best way to meet him, but at least it wasn’t me embarrassing myself this time.

“I’m Lee,” he said, extending his hand for me to shake. “It’s nice to meet you Chloe.”

I gingerly accepted it, feeling his firm grip. “Maybe you should go and have a shower or something. I don’t mean to be rude, but you kind of smell.”

“Well I guess I can thank the mutt for that!” he snarled.

I bristled. This wasn’t a good start to neighborly relations.

“That mutt has a name,” said Isaac, walking down the steps towards me. “It’s Theo.” I hadn’t heard Isaac behind me, but I was grateful for his support. “And for a man wearing doggy doo-doo you sure have a bad attitude,” he continued.

Lee pulled himself to his full height of approximately four foot five, and narrowed his eyes.

“Thanks for the support Isaac, but Theo’s not a mutt,” I said out of the side of my mouth.

“Really?” asked Isaac, spinning to look at me. “That’s what you want to say right now?”

“Sorry, I do appreciate your help, but next time could you clarify that he isn’t a mutt.”

I caught a glimpse of Theo out of the corner of my eye as he cocked his leg against Lee’s Azalea bush. Thankfully Lee hadn’t noticed.

“Next time I’ll leave you to stick up for yourself.” Isaac prickled.

Lee sighed and walked towards his back door ignoring us, but I distinctly heard the words “bickering like an old married couple”, as he went.

Isaac tutted as Lee slammed the door shut. “How rude!”

Theo noticed Isaac and ran towards him. Instantly he was engulfed in a bear hug. In fact, for a second I worried that he may not be able to breathe.

“Isaac, do we really bicker like an old married couple?” I asked as we made our way inside.

“Of course, we do. We’ve been best friends since high school. Did you expect anything different?”

It was only after we were back inside the house that I wondered how Lee knew my name when I’d never mentioned it.

I’d done everything that was on my list of things to do. I’d delivered the cupcakes, I’d helped Adam with the lights, the external speakers for the television were erected and working, and the large box of spare candles was sitting on the table waiting for anyone that needed them. The only thing I had forgotten was the photocopied booklets that Isaac had asked me to collect from his house. I made my way up the street for the thousandth time today and pulled my phone from my pocket, checking for any missed calls.

I hadn’t heard from Robbie for over an hour, and anxiety was snaking its way through every part of me. I couldn’t handle the wait any longer so I decided to call him. He picked up on the second ring.

“I’m just talking to the doctor now. Hang on,” he said to me.

He must have moved the phone away from his ear, but he didn’t end the call. Instead I could hear a female voice that I didn’t recognize speaking a lot of medical terms.

I got the gist of it. Grandpa was suspected to have encountered Foot and Mouth disease. I figured it to be different to the foot *in* mouth disease that I suffered from, and made a mental note to Google it as soon as I hung up the call.

I listened at the call as I stood outside Isaac's house, my butt firmly planted on his front garden wall. I needed the support as my knees seemed to be shaking worried about Grandpa. Foot and Mouth disease didn't sound that bad, but it could make him miss tonight.

I had a creepy feeling that I was being watched, and surveyed the street to see who was around. Mr. White was in his wheelchair looking out of his front bay window, but that was nothing unusual. Sixteen-year-old Sonny from the house next to Brody's had his headphones on, bopping away to whatever he was listening to as he made his way along the foot path heading home. Two cars crawled by, but other than that I was alone.

"Did you get that?" Robbie's voice was loud in my ear.

"Sort of," I replied. "How did that happen?"

"It seems that his mate Ernie got it from his granddaughter, who got it from a kid at her school."

"Will he make it tonight?" I made a silent wish that he would.

"They're trying to determine whether to quarantine him or not. He's not showing any signs of it, but they can't be too careful in a nursing facility. These things can spread like wildfire."

I sighed. "When will you know?"

"I'll keep you updated as soon as I know anything."

"Have you told Mum and Dad?" They were presently enjoying a river cruise through Germany with some friends of theirs.

"No. I thought I'd wait until I know for certain."

"Did the doctor say how Grandpa is holding up?"

"Yeah. He asked her if she would mind doing his check-up under the Mistletoe, so she figured that he was feeling pretty good."

I laughed. That sounded like Grandpa. He had a healthy respect for women, but he was a known flirt.

Hanging up the call, I jumped off the small wall and turned to see if Theo was once again on the window seat looking down at me. And that's when I noticed Lee, looking out from behind one of his upstairs bedroom curtains, peeking down at me. Seeing me looking up, he dropped the curtain and disappeared.

I pushed my phone into my pocket, and wished that house had remained empty.

Chapter Three

Everything was set. The decorations were hung, the television was tuned, and the lights were twinkling. We were almost on sunset, and the event was to start in the next half an hour. No point starting Carols by Candlelight in the middle of the day, right?

I was making my way home for a quick shower and a change of clothes - my new Christmas shirt was ironed and waiting.

“Sam!” I called, waving. My younger brother was walking down the street, his girlfriend Alex holding his hand. Alex was special. I’d known her for a while now, and she was the one girl that I always wanted to be with him. The fact that wish had come true was nothing short of a miracle.

“Hey,” said Sam, smiling as he approached me. Sam’s two years younger than me, the tallest member of my family, and according to my friends and now Alex, he’s gorgeous. “What’s happening?” he asked.

“Hi Alex,” I said, giving her the appropriate cheek kiss.

“Looking good Chloe. I love the color of your hair.” She smiled her radiant smile, her white blonde hair shimmering in the light of the sunset.

“Thanks.” I took a minute to bask in the glow of her compliment. “We’re all down in the park. Did you bring a blanket?” I asked.

Alex spun a beach bag on her shoulder, showing me the tassels of her navy-blue towel. “This is close enough,” she commented. “Sam forgot the candles though.”

“That’s okay. We’ve got spares. Why don’t you head down there now? I’m just ducking home to get Theo.”

“Oh yay!” said Alex. “I love Theodore. It’s been way too long since I last saw him.”

She last saw him three days ago, when I was working and delivered a parcel to her house. But I got her point. Three days without my little dude is way too long.

“Have you heard from Robbie?” Sam asked.

I shook my head, no.

“Me either,” he said. “I’ll give him another call and see how Grandpa’s going.”

“Thanks. I won’t be long. I’ve just got to clean up a bit and I’ll see you down there.”

By the time that I had showered and changed, the Carols were already underway and night had fallen. I skipped out into the evening air, Theo pulling impatiently against his leash, and slammed the front door behind me. Lee stepped out of his doing the same thing. He seemed embarrassed to see me, and pushed his arm behind his back holding whatever he was hiding from me

I gave him a small smile. "Hello again," I mumbled. My earlier encounter with him had left me feeling creeped out.

"Chloe," he muttered, stopping to face me over our adjoining rendered brick wall. "I wanted to apologize for the whole fence debacle earlier." He shuffled his feet uncomfortably as he spoke.

"That's okay. I'm sure the insurance will pay to have it fixed." Why I was letting him off easily I'll never know.

"Yeah, well, it was rotten anyway."

"Sure." We stood in an uneasy silence for a few moments, neither of us seemingly knowing what to say next. "So...are you going to the Carols?" I eventually asked.

"I've got a few things to do."

"It'll be fun. You can meet a lot of the street residents and sing. Singing's always fun."

"I hate singing," he snapped.

"Really?"

"Do you know what I hate even more?"

I guessed he was about to tell me.

"I hate it when people don't know the lyrics, so they make them up."

Ooops, I was guilty of that one.

"Does it matter?" I asked, wondering why he seemed so agitated about it.

"Yes, it matters. Someone put a lot of work into writing a song, the least we can do is get it right."

"Fair enough, I guess." I made movements to leave this conversation and stepped towards my gate. "Luckily we have booklets with all of the words for tonight's songs."

"Lyrics," he stressed impatiently, following me. "They're lyrics."

"Okay."

He blew out a sigh, striding ahead down his path and out of his gate. As he moved under the streetlight I caught a glimpse of what he was holding – a large bunch of Oriental Lilies. *Hmmm, I wonder who they are for?* The evening breeze caught them, blowing their

scent my way. I inhaled deeply and let out the stress that my meeting with Lee had caused. I made a wish that over time he would become much easier to talk to, and that as my new neighbor he wouldn't cause me as much trouble as the last ones.

Even though Theo was in a hurry to get to the park, he still cocked his leg against every wheel of every parked car along the way. And let me tell you – that was a lot. A two-minute walk turned into a ten-minute walk, until I'd had enough and picked him up, carrying him the remainder of the way. By the time that we reached the park we had to pick our way through the seated crowd to find Brody and Isaac. We found them near the back fence with Sam and Alex sitting beside them.

Moving in next to Brody, I placed Theo on my knee, and made myself comfortable.

I looked to Sam. "Did you speak to Robbie," I said loudly over Isaac's singing.

He shook his head. "He didn't answer his phone."

I sighed and wished that all would be okay.

"What time is your dad arriving?" I asked Brody, as Isaac sung the words to *Ding Dong Merrily on High*.

"I thought he would've been here by now," he replied, checking his watch. "He said he had a surprise for me, but wouldn't give me any clue as to what."

"Oh, that is so sweet," said Isaac, in between the verse and the chorus. "He must love Christmas. I wish Adam loved Christmas that much. He may have said no to that call if he did."

"He only just started the job. He had to take the call," I said, slightly frustrated with Isaac. "It had nothing to do with how much he loves Christmas. Or how much he loves you for that matter."

Isaac's eyes brimmed with tears. "Tomorrow is Christmas day! I'm going to wake up alone!"

"So is he. Only he's going to be in a hotel room somewhere, not in his own bed. Do you really believe he wouldn't rather be at home? With you," I added, before Isaac's tears could spill.

"Well, I hadn't thought of it like that," he replied quietly.

"Anyway, you won't be alone. You're sleeping in my spare bed tonight. I don't want you to wake up alone on Christmas."

Whilst Isaac and I had been talking, Brody had pulled his phone from his jeans pocket and had dialed his dad.

“Hey, where are you?” he said into his brand new, state of the art cell phone – an early present that he’d given himself. “Ahh...well we’re in the park. Carols has already started...no you don’t need to bring anything. There’s plenty of food here. Yeah, okay...I... love you too.” Brody finished the call with a sigh. I noted the hesitation when he said the words ‘I love you’. He said it to me all the time and never hesitated, so what was the story between him and his dad? “He’s worried because he didn’t bring anything to eat,” he explained.

“Aww, what a sweet man,” said Isaac.

“Yeah well don’t be fooled. I love the man, but he’s unique.”

“In what way?” I asked, curious and wanting a bid of advance warning about anything that I needed to know.

“You’ll find out,” he replied, looking slightly grim.

Apprehension flipped causing a momentary nausea. It passed as Isaac said, “We met the newest resident this afternoon. Unique was probably a good way to describe him too.”

“Oh, my goodness,” I said. “He’s psycho. And he broke my fence!” I quickly brought Brody up to date with Lee, including our conversation about lyrics.

“He’s got a bad attitude,” added Isaac. “I’m glad that he lives next to you Chloe and not me.”

“Oh cripes, there he is,” I whispered to Isaac, as I spotted Lee over the heads of the seated crowd. “Don’t make eye contact. Maybe he’ll sit near someone else.” I knew that it was Christmas Eve and that I should have nothing but love for everyone, but I really didn’t think I could handle an evening of Lee’s bad mood. Then again, The Stephens’ from number 12 were sitting in front of us. Maybe I could introduce him to them. They were always cranky so they’d probably have a lot in common. No, best not to take the risk.

I opened my photocopied Carol booklet and started to mumble the words to *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* keeping my eyes firmly on the page. Within the minute, I saw a pair of brown loafers come into my view.

I looked to Isaac and glared. “I told you not to make eye contact,” I hissed.

“I didn’t! It must have been Brody.”

Brody stood, towering over Lee by nearly two feet. He then bent his lean frame over and gave him a hug.

Now, don’t get me wrong, I was all for the Christmas spirit and all that, but hugging a man that I just told him was psycho was taking it all a bit too far.

“Hey dad,” he said.

What? I mustn't have heard him correctly. I thought he said 'hey dad'!

With confusion, I turned to look at Isaac, who was sitting with his mouth hanging appropriately open.

Brody smiled down at me. "Chloe, I'd like you to meet my dad, Shirley."

Shirley? The man had told me his name was Lee. Geez, no wonder he had manly issues.

Placing Theo on the blanket, I stood and smoothed my jeans, embarrassed. In my defense when I'd said that the guy was psycho I didn't know that he was Brody's father. I mean, who would? They looked nothing alike. Except, now that I looked closer I could see they had the same eyes. I made a silent wish that I could rewind time. I'd go back two minutes and tell Brody what a wonderful person my new neighbor was.

"We've met," snapped Shirley, his mood no better than it had been earlier.

"You have?" asked Brody.

"Yes, but I thought you said your name was Lee?" I croaked, noting the large Band-Aid stuck to his forehead. I hadn't noticed that earlier.

"As far as you're concerned – it is!" His complexion was going redder by the second. I thought he may have an anger management issue.

Brody sighed. "When did you meet?"

"When I picked my fence up off him," I explained.

Brody looked confused, but understanding dawned quickly and he recovered with another sigh. "I guess I'm fixing a fence tonight then," he said resignedly.

"It would be good. That way Theo can't get out."

"Yeah, keep him where he belongs," said Lee, shoving a large bunch of flowers towards me. They were the Oriental Lillie's I had previously seen him with.

I thought Lee may have been snide with his comment, but as I accepted the flowers, his expression softened. Maybe he had some Christmas Spirit after all.

"I am really sorry about the fence," he said quietly, kicking the grass under his feet with one brown loafer.

I accepted his gesture. "I know. You apologized before. And thank you for the flowers. Lillie's are my favorite."

"I know that. That's why I got them for you."

I thought Brody must have told him that piece of information, but Brody just shrugged like he knew nothing about it.

"So...ummm...do you want to sit with us?" I asked, feeling slightly uncomfortable.

“Of course, I want to sit with you. Do you think I went to all this trouble to sit on my own?”

Oh geez. I guess he hadn't caught the Christmas Spirit after all.

“So, Brody,” I said as he shuffled along the blanket to make room for Lee. “How come you didn't tell me that your dad was going to be our new neighbor?”

Brody paled in the light from the candles. This was obviously news to him.

“Great!” snapped Lee, sitting on the blanket between me and Isaac. “Talk about ruin a surprise!”

I jumped at his tone as the people behind us shushed him.

“You what?” asked Brody, quietly.

Lee glared at me, but his gaze softened as he looked at Brody. “I wanted it to be a Christmas surprise. I'm finished traipsing around and I want to put some roots down again. I thought what better way than to move in next to my son. And his girlfriend,” he added, glancing at me.

I wasn't sure if he was happy about that last bit. Brody was speechless. I was pretty sure I knew how happy he was about the news.

He opened his mouth to say something and then closed it again. After doing this three times, he picked up his can of Coke and took a very large swig. I was sure he was wishing there was something stronger in there.

Lee smiled for the first time since I'd met him. He had the same crooked front teeth that Brody had, but I thought that Brody must have looked like his mum because other than the eyes and the teeth, there was nothing remotely similar about these two men that I could see. Lee picked up his Carol booklet and opened the page.

Mrs. White's melodious voice floated on the wind towards us, filling our hearts with the Christmas spirit. The words to *A Grown-up Christmas List* caused a lump in my throat. As I thought of Grandpa, I knew what was on my grown-up Christmas list.

The tension now radiating from Brody was in opposition to the soft, relaxed dog sitting on my lap. I didn't know what to do to help Brody, so I picked Theo up and placed him in his arms. Whenever I was stressed, smoothing Theo's soft fur always helped me to calm down. Brody needed to tell me the full story about his dad and their relationship, but now wasn't the time.

Sam leaned across to me and tapped my arm. Looking up at him, he nodded across the park, his smile contagious.

Our nephew Cooper was bounding across blankets, jumping between people, and grinning from ear to ear, his reindeer antlers bobbing on his head as he ran. He was followed - at a much slower pace, I might add - by Robbie, Jodie and Grandpa.

Seeing Grandpa, tears pricked my eyelids. I hopped up and made my way towards them, Sam close on my heels.

“G’day girlie,” Grandpa sang over the crowd.

I pulled him in for a big hug. Grandpa’s real name is Bernard McDermott, and he’s my dad’s dad. Mum tells everybody she tolerates him but I know she loves him just as much as the rest of us.

“I’m so happy that you made it,” I said, squeezing him tight.

“Careful girl. You might break something,” he teased, squeezing me right back. I always joked that he loved me the most, because I was the only girl in the family (other than those who married in, of course).

“Where’s Cooper?” asked Jodie.

“Being engulfed in an Isaac hug,” I answered, hugging Jodie as I spoke. She laughed.

“We’ve got a chair for you to sit on, Grandpa,” said Sam, greeting him the same way I did.

“Chair? Well I hope that it’s next to that hottie over there,” said Grandpa, smiling and looking at Mrs. White. Sam shivered.

“Mrs. White has a Mr. White,” I replied.

“Humph. Is he old?” asked Grandpa.

“Mr. White? Yeah, I guess he’s about the same age she is. That’s him over there,” I said, indicating to Mr. White who was presently singing along to *Silent Night*.

Grandpa assessed him as we walked.

“What happened at the nursing facility?” Sam asked Robbie.

“They’ve gone into lock down.”

“But you got Grandpa out.”

“Yeah. He’s just not allowed back in until further notice.”

I looked to Robbie and Sam. “So, who’s he staying with?”

Robbie smiled. “We thought you. You have a spare room.”

“Yeah, but Isaac is in it tonight.”

“Then lucky Grandpa.” Robbie grinned like all his Christmases had come at once.

When everyone was seated, and fed, Theo curled up in my lap and settled in for a nap. My phone dinged with a message from Adam. I scanned it and looked to Isaac who was sitting with his arms propping him up, and looking at the sky.

“What a beautiful night,” he said. Little did he know, but it was about to get better. “Oh look, there’s a shooting star. Quick make a wish!”

I looked at the blankets around me, hoping everyone got to make their wish. Sam had his arm around Alex, kissing her gently above the ear, Lee was smiling as he looked at Brody, Grandpa held his candle high, waving it backwards and forwards as he sang, and Robbie pulled Jodie in close whilst Cooper sang loudly on her knee.

As Adam walked through the crowd beaming at Isaac, the tie on his uniform undone and loose around his neck, I closed my eyes tight, ready to make my wish.

Opening them, Brody interlinked his fingers with mine, I inhaled the warm night air and kissed Theo’s little head. I didn’t need a wish. I had everything I ever needed right here.