

Not Even A Mouse
A Rona Shively Holiday Short
By
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Chapter One

I don't ask for much. In fact, I don't ask for anything at all. The Christmas season is always a little stressful for me, but not for the reasons you might think. It's not the shopping, hell, I don't really shop. I just send everyone gift cards and let them figure it out. It's not the parties...I don't really go to those. Since I work for myself, there really isn't much need for a company sponsored event. It's not the jolly bell-ringers that stand outside of the grocery store begging for your spare change. They don't really bother me because I usually just ignore them. No, for me, the stress comes from an entirely other place. For me, the stress hits me at about the time when everyone else is starting to feel relief. It hits me as I'm putting away my little, fake Christmas tree and trying to figure out why I bothered to set the damned thing up in the first place. It's not like I have people over anymore. The people I used to spend Christmas with are either dead or out of my life for some other permanent reason. This year, I needed to keep busy. If I didn't, it might give me too much time to think about why I don't have a best friend to share the holidays with. It might be too much of a reminder that forty is right around the corner and I'm just now starting to grow up. I'll have to put that conversation on hold for a bit, though. Don't want to spill the beans.

I'm sitting in my office, looking at the ceiling as I do on many occasions. It hasn't changed. It's nothing fascinating, but it's a hell of a lot better than looking at the pile of bills on my desk and comparing it to the ever-withering balance in my checkbook. My phone started ringing and

I nearly fell out of my swivel chair. I had been deep into my “meditation” and the sudden shrillness of the phone’s ringer had startled me. I sat up and collected myself before reaching across the desk to answer.

“Shively,” I said.

“What are your hours today, ma’am?” a voice asked.

My hours are pretty much what I make them, I thought, but in an effort to sound halfway professional, I said, “9 to 4, what can I help you with?”

“I’m just down the street, I’d really like to speak to you in person if you don’t mind,” the voice said. I couldn’t really tell if this was a man or a woman. The voice was low and gravelly, but it could have been either had they smoked enough cigarettes in their day. They were definitely over forty. That I could tell. I’m not sure how, but I could tell.

Inwardly, I groaned. I really hated having people come into the office. I had only invested in the space to keep people from coming to my apartment. I wasn’t much of a hostess and truthfully, I preferred meeting my clients in public places. It was just one of those things. One less place they could track me down should they decide they want to shoot or otherwise injure me. “I guess that would be alright. I’m here for at least another hour,” I said reluctantly.

“Thank you very much, I’ll be around in a few minutes,” the voice said and they hung up.

“Okay,” I said to the dial tone.

I hung up and waited for the inevitable knock at the door. This visitor would be here whether I was ready or not. I sat back and put my hands behind my head. I really didn’t know how to prepare, so I figured I’d just sit for a moment and look stupid. It’s one of my strengths.

Fifteen minutes passed before I heard the knocking. I must have drifted off for a moment, because again, I was nearly startled out of my seat. I stood up, collected myself and walked the five steps across the office to my door. When I opened it, I didn’t see anyone. I stepped back and started to close the door when a tiny, old woman exclaimed, “Hey, wait a minute!”

I looked down and was shocked to see a woman, not more than three feet tall, standing in my doorway looking up at me. She was dressed in some kind of velvety, red wrap that made her look like a fancy bag lady. She was disheveled and her face sported a fresh bruise the size of a walnut just under her left cheekbone. Someone had roughed up this poor little, old lady. This immediately pissed me off.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “what happened to you?”

“Can I come in, please?” she said huffily. This woman was not happy. She pushed her way past me before I could invite her in and then plopped down in the small wooden chair beside my desk. She fussed and fidgeted around for several moments apparently trying to arrange her wrap so that it wasn’t bunching up underneath her. I could understand that, I hate bunching.

“Can I ask what happened to your cheek?” I asked her.

She ignored me, so I gave her a few minutes to get situated and then I walked back over to my own chair and sat down. I thought about offering her something to drink, but then decided to wait and see if she answered my question. She looked up then and eyed me suspiciously, as though I was the one who was forgetting something.

“Aren’t you going to offer me something to drink?” she asked, twisting her face up as she spoke.

This is why you should always trust your first instinct about a situation. “I’m sorry, would you like something to drink? I have coffee and bottled water. I might have a Coke in there.” I pointed to my mini-fridge as though it held the answers to the questions of the universe.

“No, thank you,” she replied curtly. Well, now, why the hell would you ask if you didn’t want anything? Any sympathy I had felt for this woman was quickly dissipating.

“Maybe you didn’t hear me, what happened to your face there?” I asked her again.

She looked up at the ceiling and then around at my office. It wasn't very impressive, so I braced myself for an unsolicited critique. "You should really get some plants in here, dear," she said, "this place is so dreary."

"Okay, yes, I know that, but what I don't know is why you are here," I said, getting impatient, "I hate to seem pushy, but you're avoiding my question." I'm not inclined to ignore signs of abuse, especially when little, old ladies are involved.

"Well, if you must know, I fell down the other day and one of my animals kicked me in the face," she said testily, "not that it's any of your business."

"Your animals?" I said.

"Yes, my animals," she said, not offering any additional information about the nature of the beast who had kicked her.

I was sure she was lying, but I decided not to press the issue. "Okay, then, what can I do for you, Ms.?"

"The name is Nellie, and I have a problem with my...employees," she said, "I think someone has been stealing from us."

This seemed straightforward enough. "What kind of business do you have?" I asked.

She hesitated for a moment and then put a finger up as she nodded her answer, "Manufacturing and distribution of toys, knick-knacks and other stuff, mostly."

"Mostly? What else is there?" I asked.

"Well, it's really hard to describe, but the part I'm most worried about has to do with our inventory," she said.

"How long has this been going on?" I asked, never failing to hear that stupid song in my head as I said the words.

"I think it's been a few months," she said, "I wanted to be sure, so I waited before coming to you."

"And what makes you sure?" I asked.

“Well, I started marking some of the items so that I could track which ones went missing,” she said, clearly impressed with her own ingenuity, “and for the last two weeks, there have been huge gaps in the merchandise that should be on the shelves.”

“Okay, then,” I said, “I guess I can look into this for you. What is the name of your business?” I pulled out a contract and prepared to write down the particulars.

“It’s Santac, Limited,” she said, finally smiling. Her spirits seemed to be lifting somewhat, but for no reason I could ascertain.

“Santac is spelled...?” I asked, writing down what I thought it should look like.

“S-a-n-t-a-c, limited,” she said.

“And are you’re the owner of the business?” I asked.

“Yes, part-owner, my husband and I own it together,” she said.

“Is he aware that you’ve contacted me?” I asked.

“Oh, heavens no,” she said nervously, “he wouldn’t understand all of this.”

I sat back for a moment to consider whether or not I should proceed. I didn’t like to handle family business cases where everyone wasn’t aware of what was going on. It made for a messier than normal investigation.

“Is he likely to give me any trouble if he sees me around your place?” I asked.

“Oh, no, he wouldn’t do that,” she said.

“Are you sure, because I don’t want to be hassled while I’m trying to do my job,” I said.

I hated giving the old lady a hard time, even if she had been a little rude. But, what I hated more was being bothered by people when I was trying to check shit out.

“He won’t even know you’re around, dear,” she said, “he’s usually not in the office.”

I nodded and we continued filling out the contract. I explained my fees and she pulled a checkbook out of somewhere within her frock. She wrote me a check for \$1,000 and handed it across the desk. I folded it and slipped it into my jacket pocket so that I could take it to the bank later. We talked about some possible scenarios for my checking out her warehouse and

decided that I should come through as some kind of salesperson. I didn't much care for the idea, but I figured it wouldn't matter much what I was as long as I got a look at some of her employees. She had it narrowed down to three of her stockers. She couldn't figure out which one was stealing, but she knew that it was one of the three. She wanted me to come in and look around as though I were assessing their needs for some kind of product that I sell. I hate using my imagination to this extent.

Before she left, she reached out to shake my hand. When her hand touched mine, I was surprised by its warmth. This crotchety gal seemed like the type whose hands would be cold and bony, but hers was warm and soft. I suddenly felt like I was standing there with an old friend. There was something strange about her. I wasn't prone to being naïve, but she reminded me of someone.

"Nah," I said to myself, shaking my head. I reached into my pocket to take out the check she had written. The name on the check said, Donella Clos. Not even close, I thought. It was a completely different spelling. Anyway, I didn't believe in stuff like that and if she was someone magical, why didn't she smell like cookies. Wasn't that the deal, all those elves and shit smelled like cookies or sugarplums or something Christmasy. "I must be losing my mind," I said to no one in particular.

I got out a deposit slip and one of those envelopes for the ATM machine and started to fill it all out. I'd drop this in the bank on my way home. There was really no need to sit here in the office all day. I had an answering machine and it actually worked, so I left.

Chapter Two

I collected my mail when I got to my apartment building and was surprised to see only a couple of bills in the pile. The rest were flyers and advertisements for products or services for which I had no use. I removed the two bills from the stack and chucked the rest in the trash can as soon as I got in the door. It was about three p.m. and somehow, I'd forgotten to eat lunch. The meeting with Nellie had left me feeling unsettled and I hadn't even thought about food until I reached my apartment. I was starving so as soon as I got in the door, I checked the refrigerator to see if anything had miraculously appeared in there since this morning when there was nothing to eat for breakfast.

Sadly, there was only about a half gallon of orange juice, two slices of American cheese, one pickle and what was left of a deluxe pizza that I had ordered three nights ago. Anyone who knows me knows that I have practically no culinary talents. There was really nothing I could do with two pieces of cheese and a pickle that would make me less hungry, so I picked up the phone and dialed Paco's. My old favorite, Micelli's had gone out of business a couple of weeks ago and Paco's had opened in their old location. I hadn't tried their pizza yet, so I decided on a large Italian sub. Since orange juice didn't go so well with Italian food, I also ordered a six pack of Coke. That accomplished, I plopped down on my couch with the two bills in my hand. Reluctantly, I opened the first one and pulled out its contents.

It was the bill for my renter's insurance and it looked like the premium had actually gone down from last month. At least that was something good. The next bill wasn't quite so wonderful. Last month I had to have some dental work done after an altercation with a rather surly individual I'd encountered as part of a case I was working. Some words were exchanged and before I knew what was happening, a couple of fists were flying. One of those fists had connected with my jaw and knocked out one of my teeth. In short, I still owed about \$475 for the time I'd spent in the dentist's chair. I tossed the bills aside and got up to go to the bathroom. I went down the hall and did what I needed to do. By the time I made my way back to my living

room area, there was a knock at the door. Thank God, I thought. I took a twenty from my pocket and opened the door. I handed the money to the delivery boy and took the bag and the six pack.

I was so frigging hungry. The sandwich smelled heavenly, if that's possible. I unwrapped it and took a bite. This was just what I needed. I opened one of the cans of Coke and put the rest of the six-pack in the refrigerator, still holding the sub in one hand. I wasn't about to put this sandwich down. Once I had settled down, I realized that my attachment to the sandwich was worrisome. I really needed to find a hobby. It's a sad thing when the most exciting event of the day is unwrapping an eight inch sub. Though it might have been more sad if it had only been the six inch.

After I had finished the sub, I opened up my laptop to do some research. If I was going to play the role of a salesperson, I needed to come up with something clever to "sell." It's not like you can go into a business and say, "Hi, I'm a salesperson, please let me come in and look around." After about an hour, I stumbled upon an idea that I thought might work. I couldn't find much in the way of products, but I figured that any business needs decent advertising. Since I hadn't been very effective in marketing my own services, I wasn't sure how I was going to come across in a sales presentation but hey, who really cares? All I needed was a business card and maybe a flyer or two and I could at least look like I knew what I was doing.

Though I'm not highly computer savvy, I opened up my Word program and started working on a template for a business card. I had recently taken one of those free classes at my local library where they taught me how to do some basic stuff with Word. I had liked the class so much that I had gone out and bought myself a couple of tutorial programs that I worked on in my spare time. After selecting a business card template from the menu, I filled in a fake name for myself, Jenny Herman. It was the first thing that came to me that didn't sound like something out of a cheap movie. From there, I added the fake P.O. Box number that I use for all of my undercover endeavors. After that, I decided that my "company" really needed a name. Like I

said, I'm not terribly good at this marketing stuff. I sat back in my chair for a moment and looked at the ceiling. Often, ideas came to me when I stared at the ceiling. I'm not sure what's up there, but it usually sparks some creativity. As I studied the grid of the suspended ceiling tiles, the name came to me. I typed in "Criss-Cross Advertising Solutions." After that, I pulled a graphic into the document to spiff it up a bit. I was pretty impressed with myself. Just a month ago, I couldn't have figured this shit out and now here I was making fake stuff like a pro. Cool.

I pulled out a sheet of business card paper that I had purchased for making my own cards and stuck it into my printer. I hit the print button and within five minutes, I had my very own set of cards for Criss-Cross Advertising. Now, all I had to do was come up with some pricing and services. To do this, I just looked online for some advertising companies and copied from them. Most of them offered the same types of things, but I stuck with the ones that looked like things I understood. Pricing was a little more difficult. For that, I had to make a couple of phone calls.

"Hello," I said as the receptionist for AAA Advertising picked up the phone.

"Can I help you?" she asked in a polished, professional tone.

"Yes, I am looking for a company that can do an advertising campaign for my business," I said, not really knowing what to ask for. "What kinds of services do you offer?"

She ran down a list of things and then said that she could connect me to a Marketing Specialist. Before I could object, she had put me on hold and transferred me over to Ted in Marketing.

"This is Ted, what can I do for you?" he said cheerily.

"I'm looking to do some advertising for my business, can you tell me how much an advertising campaign might cost?" I asked. That sounded really stupid.

"Were you looking for print, direct mail, tv, radio?" he asked and then added, "Or maybe online?"

"Well, I don't really know, what do you think works best?" I asked. I hoped he would be able to explain some of this stuff to me so that I could just repeat it all when asked later.

“What type of business do you have?” he asked.

“I make and sell stuff, all kinds of things like toys, knick-knacks, you know,” I said, remembering Donella Clos’s words.

“Okay, well, then you’re probably going to want a mix of all of these to reach the largest possible audience,” he said, “Where is your business located?”

“Here in Crystal Ridge,” I said.

“What kind of advertising do you use currently?” he asked.

“Currently?” I said, “Well, I really don’t have anything right now.”

“How long have you been in business?” he asked.

I didn’t know the answer to that one, “Five years,” I blurted out.

“You’ve managed to stay in business for five years with no advertising,” he asked, incredulous.

“Well, yeah, I mean, there’s word-of-mouth I guess,” I said, cringing.

“Sounds like you’re going to need a lot of help,” he said. I could hear him smiling like an idiot on the other end of the line. He was no doubt thinking that he had caught a live one with me. “Can we meet to discuss some of your options?”

I hesitated, “Well, right now, I’m really just calling around to get some idea of what an ad campaign would cost. Can’t you give me a ballpark figure over the phone?”

“It’d be better if we could talk in person,” he said, “But, I guess the type of campaign I’m thinking of might run you around \$15,000.”

I nearly fell off my chair, “\$15,000?” I said, “What would I be getting for that?”

“Well, of course there’s brand development and some really great market research that we could gather for you to help you target your customers more effectively...” he went on and on after this and I could feel my eyes glaze over. Finally, he finished up by saying, “I have some time available today if you’re free.”

“Uh, well, I’m going to need to get back to you on this,” I said, “I didn’t really plan to spend so much.”

“We can work with you on payments,” he said, “our goal is to get you results.”

We went back and forth a little before I was finally able to get him to hang up the phone. I had jotted some of what he said down as he spoke so that I could capture some of the key phrases. I looked at my paper; market research, brand promotion, print, direct mail...none of these meant anything to me. Maybe that’s why my P.I. business never really took off.

I spent a little more time putting together some materials for my performance and then picked the phone up to call Mrs. Clos. No one answered, so I left a message telling her that a “representative” from Criss Cross advertising would be stopping by tomorrow morning to talk with her about her recent inquiry. I hoped she would recognize my voice and that I wouldn’t take her by surprise when I showed up there.

Party animal that I am, I curled up on my couch at around 9 p.m. and fell asleep. I had strange dreams as I tossed and turned on the small sofa. Why I didn’t just get up and go to bed is beyond me. I just felt restless and I couldn’t get my mind off of how weird this little old lady had been. My dreams took me out into a snowy field where I saw a Santa Claus-like figure loading boxes into the back of an SUV. There were reindeer, I think, or maybe they were some other kind of animal. I’m not good with nature, so they could have been horses for all I know. Through the whole thing, I heard Christmas music playing in the background but couldn’t figure out where it was coming from. I floated through the field until I came to a house that was decorated up with all kinds of lights and other holiday junk in the yard. I walked up to the window and I could see my new client inside. She was baking cookies, but not just one tray of them. There were literally thousands of cookies coming out of the oven. I could actually smell them baking.

Chapter Three

This is what woke me from my slumber: The smell of cookies baking. I heard a knock at my door and sat up with a jolt. I shook my head and then looked across the room at my clock. It was midnight. Who the hell would be at my door at midnight and why did I smell cookies?

I got up and walked over to my door to look out the peephole. Rolling my eyes, I unlocked the door and opened it.

“Can I help you?” I said crossly.

“Hey, babe,” it was my friend, Trey. Well, to be exact, he was my ex-boyfriend from a while back.

“Trey, what are you doing here at this hour?” I asked, “Don’t you know that normal people sleep at night?” I had a lot of nerve putting myself in the same category as normal people.

He must have thought the same thing. “Who’s normal?” he said, “I hadn’t talked to you and I wanted to see what you were up to.”

“You’ve heard of the phone?” I asked.

“Aw, now, let me in,” he said, moving past me and walking into my kitchen.

“Come on in,” I said.

“I’m not interrupting anything, am I?” he said, looking around my apartment.

“You’re just weird, you know that?” I said.

“You never know,” he said. Then he grabbed me and planted a kiss on my cheek.

Instead of letting go of me, he attempted to pull me in closer for a real kiss but I put a hand up to stop him.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“What?” he said, “I can’t get a kiss from my favorite girl.”

“Oh, *now* I’m your favorite,” I said, “What happened to your girlfriend from the other day, what was her name, Tina?”

“Oh, that,” he said, “That’s over.”

I marveled at how quickly Trey jumped in and out of relationships. I had to admit, it almost made me jealous. I fancied myself somewhat of a contender in the area of romantic conquests, but he made me look like an amateur. The sad thing was that if I hadn't been so preoccupied with the thought of cookies, I might have kissed him back.

"What happened there?" I asked.

He shrugged, "Nothing, really, she just wasn't you." He grinned and I had to smile at him, the big dummy. He was so damned good-looking.

"Hey, do you smell cookies?" I asked him.

"Well, yeah, I thought, and I don't know why, but I thought you might have been making them," he said.

"What would ever make you think that?" I asked. "I was just having a really weird dream about cookies and then you knocked at the door."

"Was it a kinky cookie dream?" he said, still grinning.

For this, I slapped the top of his head. "No, ass," I said. "I was actually dreaming that I was watching someone make a bunch of cookies. It was really stupid."

"You probably just dreamed that because someone on this floor is making cookies somewhere," he said, "too bad you're not friends with your neighbors or you could get in on the cookie action."

"Yeah, yeah," I said, "Whatever."

We both sat down on the couch and Trey flipped through my channels. He stopped at an episode of the Rockford Files and we watched for a while without saying much. I only had to slap his hand away from my knee three times while we sat there together. After that, I got up to go to bed.

"Need some company?" he asked.

"Nope, need a blanket?" I replied.

“Yep,” he said. It was difficult to leave him on the couch, but I knew that we couldn’t keep having these little interludes if I was ever going to move on. We could be friends, but that was going to have to be it. Besides, I wasn’t going to make things that easy for him.

When I woke up the next morning, Trey had folded his blanket and left a note on my kitchen table. “Missed you out here last night, see you tonight.” Evidently, I’d see him later. I took a shower, got dressed and then grabbed the stuff from my desk that I’d put together for my fake presentation to Santac. I found a manila folder in my desk drawer and stuffed all of it inside to keep it from getting wrinkled. When I had finished my morning routine, I grabbed my purse and the folder and headed to the car. I was off to Santac for my meeting with Mrs. Clos.

When I got to the address that she had given me, I felt a sense of déjà vu. Instead of a manufacturing plant, as I had expected it to be, I drove up to a large house that was situated in the middle of a large lot. The building was surrounded on all sides by parking lots, but there wasn’t a car in sight. I checked my watch to make sure I hadn’t arrived too early. It was about 10:15 a.m., yet no one appeared to be here. I drove around to the back of the house and there, I saw a large, red Suburban parked at the rear of the house. There was also a row of what appeared to be large dog kennels lining one side of a fenced area along the back. This was just creepy. It was almost exactly the same as what I had seen in my dream last night. Except for the fact that there was no snow and that I hadn’t actually seen any animals.

I parked the Jeep and got out to look around. I quietly walked across the parking lot and took a peek inside one of the windows of the house. Another feeling of weirdness crept over me as I looked inside. There were about fifteen people inside, standing around a table and they appeared to be decorating cookies. “Wow!” I heard myself say. “What is up with all of the cookies?”

I heard a door open and I quickly jumped away from the window so that I looked less like I was spying and more like I was trying to find a way inside.

“Can I help you, Miss?” a woman asked. She was about four feet tall and she was wearing a bright, red velvet dress that was trimmed with fake white fur. This was suspicious.

“I’m here to meet with Mrs. Clos,” I said, digging in the manila folder to retrieve a card.

As I handed her the card, she looked at it carefully. “Do you have an appointment, Miss Herman?”

“Yes, she’s expecting me,” I said, crossing my fingers behind me.

“Right this way,” she said, leading me into the house. Christmas music was playing softly in the house. The same music I’d heard in my dream last night. I wanted to turn around and run back to the Jeep to get the hell out of this place, but I remained calm. Maybe I was just extremely intuitive, though that wasn’t something I’d been plagued by in the past. The woman disappeared into another room and when she came back, Mrs. Clos appeared behind her. She smiled at me and then walked over and extended her hand.

“Nice to meet you, Ms. Herman,” she said, “We can talk in here.” She pointed to a room off of the kitchen in the opposite direction of where she had just been. She didn’t say anything else until we were both sitting at the table together. She looked over at me and asked, “Would you like some hot chocolate, dear?”

“You do remember talking to me yesterday, right?” I asked.

“Oh, of course,” she said, “Will you need to look at our inventory today?” She winked.

I tried to think of why I would need to do that. I guessed that it might be helpful to get an idea of what kinds of products we would be pretending to promote. “Sure,” I said, “I guess that’s a good place to start.”

We didn’t get any hot chocolate. Instead, she led me out to another room in the house where I could see about a hundred different stations had been set up in a large open space. There were about ten tables set up and behind each of them were stackable crates full of parts and pieces that I guessed were used to make whatever it was that Santac manufactured. Mrs. Clos showed me the first station and indicated that this one was where dolls were made. She

pointed to the other side of the room where a large conveyor belt had been set up. "One of our stockers comes around and collects the things that have been made at each station and puts them on the belt so that they can be sent down to be packaged," she explained.

I nodded. "Okay," I said, "What is your most popular product?" I was hoping she knew that I was asking about the product that had been coming up missing.

She walked a couple of stations down to a larger station that had a variety of parts stacked along the wall behind it. The parts included all kinds of cogs and wheels and other things that I didn't quite recognize. "What is this?" I asked.

"This is our most popular product, the Move 'N Shaker," she said proudly.

"What's a Move 'N Shaker?" I asked. I admit, I have little to no knowledge of what kids are into these days.

"It's a video game that kids can play by using special virtual controllers," she said, "it's like they're in the game."

"Oh, really," I said, still trying to figure out why this would be so great.

"Come with me," she said. We walked out of the room and she took me into a smaller room where a large screen television had been set up. In front of it, there was a console that had all kinds of wires hooked to it. She flipped the television set on and then reached for a headset that was lying on top of the console. She put the headset on and then hit the switch on the console. The screen lit up and the television showed what appeared to be a large field covered with snow. This just kept getting more and more strange. She pulled another item from below the console and I could see that she now had a set of handlebars in front of her. They were tethered to the console and there were all kinds of different buttons on them.

"Watch," she said. I watched as the front end of a vehicle appeared on the screen. It was a snowmobile, but I was looking at it as though I was sitting on the thing. Mrs. Clos pushed some buttons on the handlebars and the snowmobile started moving across the screen. It was pretty cool actually. She "rode" the snowmobile around for a while and pointed out the changes

in scenery. This was the Move 'N Shaker. It was a virtual reality game console and evidently, it was the hot ticket this year.

She started putting things away and we headed out of the room and back towards where we had started out. When she had closed the door, I waited until we had gotten settled back in at the table to ask her any questions about the game. "So, about how many of these things can you make in a day?" I asked.

"We are supposed to produce at least three hundred each day here at this location," she said, "but our inventory has been coming in at about two hundred and sixty every day."

"Are you sure that three hundred are being made each day? I noticed that you don't have any cameras up or at least none that I can see," I said.

"Oh, we're sure," she said, "There are enough parts for three hundred consoles given to that workstation every day. Each shift is to make one hundred consoles during their eight hours here."

"Is anybody lagging behind or are all three shifts pretty much doing the same number?" I asked.

"First and third are doing fine, it's the second shift that seems to be having trouble," she said. "But I hate to think that she's doing anything wrong, she's been with us for years." She went on to explain that the assemblers work in tandem with the stockers to move the merchandise from the assembly line to the warehouse.

"I'm going to need the names of all of the workers associated with that station, can you get me that?" I asked.

She nodded and took a pad and pencil from her apron. That was odd; I hadn't noticed she was wearing an apron before. In any case, she wrote down five names and beside those, she wrote down which shift they worked. She handed me the slip of paper and said, "There are only two stockers who work twelve hours a day. Like I said, I don't think it's either of the two ladies who are working assembly. It's the other three I'm suspicious of."

Chapter Four

I studied the paper for a moment and then folded it and slipped it in my pocket. “So, there’s no problem if I come in and talk to each of them during their shifts?”

She brought her hand to her chin as she thought for a moment. “I don’t see any problem, but what reason can we give them?”

We both sat for a few minutes trying to come up with a ruse. “I’ve got it!” she said, nearly jumping out of her seat. “You can say you’re coming in to talk to them about their experience making the product, like it’s part of our new marketing campaign or something. How would that be?”

It made sense, so we decided that I would talk with the lady who worked first shift before I left this morning. Though I hadn’t seen any workers other than those gathered in the kitchen area, she assured me that they were all present. I would come back at around ten this evening to catch the second shift worker and then just wait around for third shift to come in. We got up from the table and she walked me back to the “workshop” as she called it. This time, instead of ten empty stations, there were at least twenty people bustling about. At each station there was someone who was putting something together. There were four people roaming around with carts, picking up completed items and then there were several people huddled in the middle of the room throwing papers about and speaking loudly amongst themselves. I wondered where all of them had been when we were in here earlier. This place was just bizarre.

Mrs. Clos approached the Move ‘N Shaker station and introduced me to a skinny woman in a green velvet smock. “Violet, this is Ms. Herman,” she said, “She needs to talk to you about your experience making the Move ‘N Shakers. She’s going to be helping us with our marketing.” She winked at Violet and patted her on the back before pushing me forward and walking away. I extended my hand to the lady.

“Hi, my name is Jenny Herman,” I said, thankful to have remembered who I was today, “I’m doing some market research for the company and I wanted to take a few minutes of your time to ask you about the Move ‘N Shakers. Is now a good time?”

The lady pursed her lips, but did not stop assembling her pieces to shake my hand. Instead, she nodded and finally broke into a smile before saying, “Pleased to meet you, ma’am.”

“Your name is Violet Tooney?” I asked.

She nodded again, still putting together one piece with another. I watched her, mesmerized by her efficiency. She didn’t fumble around with the pieces; she simply picked them up from the bins and put them exactly where they went. I admired people who could do things like this. I wasn’t the least bit handy.

“Can you tell me a little bit about the product and your experience making the Move ‘N Shakers?” I asked, thinking this sounded like the right thing to say.

To my surprise, Violet started talking up a storm. She told me all about the different pieces she was working with and how each one worked with another. Today, she was working on the consoles, but that could change from day to day. Some days, she worked on controllers. Some days, she worked on both. She had worked here for several years and had just been moved to the Move ‘N Shaker line about two years ago. This hadn’t been a popular item until earlier this year, so she hadn’t had so much to do until this Christmas season. Before, she had been able to work on both controllers and consoles at the same time. She told me that she enjoyed putting the machines together because there weren’t very many pieces and they usually all fit together without any problem.

“It’s a good job and I’m lucky to be here,” she said, “so many people out there right now don’t have anything.”

I nodded to show that I was listening. “I know, it’s rough.”

“My sister just lost her job and she’s got three babies to take care of,” she said, shaking her head. “I give her any extra money I make with my overtime.”

That was interesting. A sister that needed money might be willing to sell off some stolen consoles if things got bad enough.

“Does your sister live here in Nevada?” I asked, hoping she would think I was making conversation and not fishing for information.

“No, she lives in Baltimore,” she said. “We hardly see each other because we can’t afford airfare. We just talk on the phone a lot and I used to try to get out there at least once a year. The problem is that I don’t have a lot of vacation time and if I take off, I lose money, too. I haven’t been able to make the trip for two years now.”

“You don’t get vacation time?” I asked.

“Oh, I do, but I used a lot of it when I fell last January,” she said, “I was laid up for about three months with a busted knee.” She stopped working long enough to point to her left knee by way of explanation.

I nodded again. We talked for a few more minutes and then I told her that I thought I had enough information. She smiled politely and told me to come back if I thought of anything else. “You can pretty much find me here all of the time.” She stopped assembling again long enough to reach out and shake my hand. Then she smoothed the sides of her graying hair back away from her face and set back to work. I walked away feeling not one way or the other about her. She didn’t seem like the type of person who would be running a scam. I took the paper out of my pocket and unfolded it. Jordan Sinclair and Monte Bergman were the other two assembly workers I needed to see. Dirk Morris and Tony Albertson were the two stockers. I hadn’t seen Dirk when I was talking to Violet, but he’d probably be there later when I go back to talk to second shift. I couldn’t wait.

Chapter Five

I left Santac, still a little confused about the whole operation but slightly more enlightened than I had been before I went. My first inclination was to think that the thief had to be someone other than Violet Tooney. She seemed way too mild-mannered to steal from anyone. That and she didn't have two nickels to rub together. If she were making any money off of these consoles, she would be able to take more trips or at least take the one trip she usually planned on each year. I'd been wrong before, many times as a matter of fact, but I had a hunch that Violet wasn't the bad guy in this case.

I didn't have a good reason to stop in at the office today and I was in the mood for a burger so I drove through the In-N-Out Burger and picked up a couple of sandwiches on my way back to the apartment. I planned to do background checks on all three workers when I got home. This would at least give me some insight into the type of people I'd be running into later.

With sandwiches in hand, I trotted up the steps to my apartment and let myself in. I set the bag down on the counter and went over to my desk to turn on the laptop. As I waited for it to boot up, I went back over to the counter and pulled one of the sandwiches out of the bag. It was a double cheeseburger and it smelled damned good. I grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator and took the can and the sandwich back to the desk. I pulled the list of Santac employees names out of my pocket. As I unwrapped my sandwich with my left hand, I clicked on the icon for background checks with my right hand. I'm a multi-tasker. While the page loaded, I took a couple of bites of my sandwich and then opened my Coke and took a sip.

The page loaded and I quickly entered the names into the search engine. Violet Tooney brought no hits. She had no phone number listed and there was nothing substantial coming up under her name. I tried Jordan Sinclair next. I wasn't sure if Jordan was a man or a woman, so I looked at both names to see if anything connected. There was a male, age 39 who lived in Crystal Ridge just a couple of apartment buildings away from mine. He had no criminal record, but he had recently filed bankruptcy. There was no employer listed, so I couldn't be sure if this

was the right person. I tried the female Jordan Sinclair. She was 36 years old and lived just outside of Crystal Ridge in a town called Berger. Again, she had no criminal record and no employer was listed. She hadn't filed for bankruptcy and there was no other information about her that seemed to matter. She was married to a man named Roger, but he also had no criminal record. Feeling deflated, I finished my burger and sat there thinking for a moment.

After crumpling up the burger wrapper, I tossed it into the wastebasket. I typed in Monte Bergman's name and waited for the information to come up on the screen. When it did, I had to smile to myself. My third shift worker was a convicted felon. He had no known address and he, too had recently filed bankruptcy. His employer wasn't listed, but I figured there weren't many people around here named Monte Bergman so he had to be the right one.

I tried Dirk Morris and Tony Albertson but came up with little to nothing on both. Bergman seemed like the best candidate for my culprit, so I decided that I had seen enough for the day. It was coming up on six o'clock and I was tired. I closed the laptop and headed to the couch with my Coke. I'd save the other sandwich for later. Right now, all I wanted was a nap. I stretched out on the couch and stared at my ceiling. Boredom usually makes me so tired that I can fall asleep standing up if I so choose. Today, with the exception of the déjà vu stuff had been outstandingly boring so it didn't take long for me to fall asleep. As I drifted off, I began to dream again. I pretty much picked up where last night's dream had left off. This time, I was at the house in the snowy field again. I was standing outside watching the man in the SUV. I could make out now that the SUV was in fact, a red suburban. I chalked this up to my subconscious filling in the blanks with what I'd seen earlier.

I saw the man in the Santa costume again and this time, he had a bag full of something that he was putting in the back of the SUV. The last time, it had been boxes. In the distance, I could see the animals running around again. I still couldn't figure out what kind of animals they were. I looked in the window of the house again and saw several people standing around an oven. After a few moments, a bunch of cookies started rolling out on a conveyor belt. That was

odd. The conveyor belt hadn't been there last time, either. I watched for a few moments and then someone came up behind me. When I turned around, I was standing next to Trey. He put his finger to his lips telling me to stay quiet and then he kissed me. It was one of those long, slow dream kisses that you don't want to wake up from. Unfortunately, this was about the time that I was awakened by a knock at the door.

"Shit!" I said as I sat up. I looked at the clock. It was almost ten. I needed to get up and get moving if I was going to get to Santac on time to meet with the workers before they left for the day. I jumped up and ran over to the door to see who was knocking. I looked through the peephole and saw no one. Again, weird shit.

I hurried into the bathroom to straighten myself up and then grabbed my bag on my way out the door. I got into my Jeep and headed out toward Santac again. In spite of catching about ten red lights, I made it there in less than fifteen minutes. I got out and walked up to the front door this time. I opened the door and went inside. No one was there to greet me, so I made my way through the house until I reached the workshop. There were two people working; one was at the Move 'N Shaker station and the other was hovering around it with a cart waiting to pick up any finished consoles. I headed over to the table where a woman was putting together consoles. She was working hard to get the pieces to fit together, but she was obviously struggling. As I approached, she put one finished console up on the corner of her table for the young man with the cart. He snatched it up and quietly rolled it over to the conveyor belt. She picked up some more parts and started trying to put together her next console.

"Hello, are you Jordan Sinclair?" I asked her.

"Yes, I'm Jordan," she said, shakily. "What's wrong? Who are you?"

I put my hands up in front of me, "Oh, no, nothing is wrong. Didn't Mrs. Clos tell you? I'm here to talk with you about the Move 'N Shaker," I said.

"Mrs. Clos?" she asked, "No, she didn't say anything about anyone talking to me."

“Well, she must have forgotten,” I said, “I’m Jenny Herman, I’m working on some market research for Santac and I just need to talk with you for a few minutes about the Move ‘N Shaker.”

“What about it?” she asked, sneering.

“I just need to know a little bit about what your experience has been working on the Move ‘N Shaker?” I said, “That’s all.”

“My experience has been that it sucks,” she said, “I can never get the damned things to go together right.”

“Really?” I asked, “It looks like you’re doing fine with it.”

“Well, after a bunch of messing around with it, I eventually get it together,” she said. She looked tired and unhappy.

“So, it’s not been a good experience for you, I take it,” I said.

“No, it hasn’t Sherlock,” she said, “it’s a job, but it drives me up the wall.”

Sherlock, I thought. If she only knew.

“Okay, well, I really don’t need much more than that from you,” I said and I started to walk away. She reached out and grabbed my arm to keep me from leaving.

“You’re not going to tell Mrs. Clos what I said are you?” she asked. She had this desperate look on her face and for a moment, I almost felt sorry for her.

Chapter Six

I stood for a moment trying to think of a response. “No, I’m not going to tell her. If you hate your job, that’s your business,” I said.

“Listen, I’m sorry I sound so bitchy,” she said, “it’s been a very bad week and I just don’t feel like being here tonight, that’s all.”

“Believe me, I understand that,” I said, hoping I sounded like someone who gave a shit.

“I can’t lose this job, it’s all I’ve got,” she said. “Please, please don’t say anything.”

I really just wanted her to let go of my arm, so I shrugged a little to loosen her grip, “I won’t say a word,” I said. She seemed to calm down a little and finally, I was free to walk away from her. Geez, lady, take a pill or something.

I looked around for the guy with the cart. He had, once again, disappeared. Where the hell did these people go? The cart was still sitting in the middle of the room, but he was nowhere to be found. I ventured out into the hallway and headed in the direction of the kitchen. I was thinking maybe it was his break time. As I rounded the corner and looked inside, all I could see were three snack machines lining one wall beside the oven and a small table sitting in the middle of the room. On the table were two plates of cookies. One was full of gingerbread men; the other was full of sugar cookies in all kinds of Christmasy shapes. I thought about getting one, but then remembered that I wasn’t here to eat cookies. In the far corner of the room, I saw another table which held a three-foot tall Christmas tree that was decorated with all kinds of ornaments and ribbons. Nothing suspicious there, unless cute makes you nervous.

I walked back out of the kitchen and decided to look around for the Warehouse. Mrs. Clos hadn’t really told me where this was located. I thought that was strange since the problem actually wasn’t with the assembly line. She didn’t make much sense, but what the hell. It was a job. I walked back down the hall and past the assembly room. I tried not to be seen as I made my way past the door. All I needed was to be chased down by Ms. Paranoia. She worried me a little, but I didn’t think she was stealing anything. She’d crack under the pressure.

I continued walking and all the while I was thinking that this house did not look this big from the outside. There was no way there could be all of this space between the rooms. I passed the door of the room where Mrs. Clos had shown me the Move 'N Shaker demo. I took a moment to put my ear to the door just in case something might be happening in there. It was quiet, so I walked on. There was one more door at the end of the hallway. I reached for the knob and when I walked through, I found myself outside.

“What the hell!” I said. It was getting chilly and I hadn’t brought my jacket. Ordinarily, the chill didn’t bother me, but tonight I was feeling particularly sensitive to everything. I needed to finish this job as soon as possible. These people and this place were creeping me out.

I turned to try the door again and it was locked. “Shit!” I said. This meant I had to go all the way back around the house to get back inside. As I started trekking across the yard, I noticed a man standing about five yards from me. He was smoking a cigarette and leaning against what appeared to be the garage. I wasn’t sure, but it looked like he was laughing at me. I gave him a nod and then decided I should probably go talk to him. The only problem with this was that I didn’t have my gun nearby. I’d left it in the Jeep. Maybe, I’d wait.

I headed for the front of the house, looking back occasionally to make sure he wasn’t following me. He was still standing there, smoking. By the time I reached the front of the house, I decided to go ahead and go to the Jeep to get my gun. I opened the driver’s side door and reached under my seat to retrieve it. Panic shot through me as I realized that the gun was missing. It got worse when I shut the door and turned to find the smoking man standing right next to me.

“Jesus!” I said, “Where the hell did you come from?”

“I’m sorry, did I startle you?” he asked, sneering at me. His voice was squeaky and he looked greasy.

“Yes, you startled me. How did you get up here so fast?” I asked. Startled was an understatement, I’d probably have had a heart attack if there hadn’t been so many frigging Christmas lights illuminating the yard.

“What do you mean?” he asked, “Weren’t you looking for me?”

I looked at him and saw that he was the guy with the cart from inside. Smartass. “Well, yeah, I was looking for you.”

“What did you need?” he asked.

“I’m doing some market research for Santac and I needed to ask you about the Move ‘N Shaker,” I said, hoping I sounded like I knew what I was talking about.

“Are you sure?” he asked, “Patty didn’t put you up to this?”

“Patty?” I asked, now I was really confused.

“Patty, my ex-wife,” he said, “She didn’t send you to check up on me?”

“I don’t know any Patty,” I said, “I’m working for Mrs. Clos.”

He eyed me cautiously and then stepped back. “So, you aren’t here to see if I’m still working?”

This guy was thick. “No, I’m not here to see if you’re still working. You’re not the only one I’m talking to,” I said.

“Okay, then. What did you need to ask me?” he said.

“For starters, I wanted to ask where the warehouse is located,” I said, “I’d like to take a look at it.”

“What do you need to do that for?” he asked.

This guy was starting to get on my nerves. “It’s part of the study,” I said.

He took my word for it and then indicated that the large building beside the house was the warehouse. That probably should have been obvious to me from the beginning. We walked over and he let me in the door without saying a word. I had half expected to see row after row of toys and other items stacked from floor to ceiling. What I saw instead was a colorful, snow-

scaped showroom complete with a miniature train set that was running loops around stacks of merchandise that were situated in little piles throughout the building. It looked more like a department store Christmas display than a warehouse. "Wow!" I said.

"Pretty cool, huh?" he said.

"Really cool," I said, still looking around. I felt like a kid in a candy store. It was really something. Again, I heard the Christmas music playing in the background and as I looked around, I saw that the entire floor of the warehouse was covered with that fuzzy white stuff that looks like snow. The whole place looked like a big North Pole yard sale.

"I'm really proud of it," he said, smiling wide to reveal a mouth full of yellow teeth.

"You did this?" I asked. I could hardly believe that someone so skeezy-looking could create something so beautiful.

He nodded and then pointed to the little picket fences that encircled each pile of toys. "I built those fences, myself."

I was really impressed. That's saying something because I'm never impressed. I realized that I needed to get back to the matter at hand. Standing here gaping at the winter wonderland wasn't getting me the answers I needed. I hadn't even made sure that this was the guy I was supposed to be talking to. I turned to him and said, "You're Dirk Morris?"

"That's right, I'm him," he said. He had cheered up considerably since scaring the hell out of me at the Jeep.

"Okay, then," I said, taking out my notebook to jot some things down. "What can you tell me about your experience working with the Move 'N Shaker line?"

"My experience?" he asked. He scratched his head. "I've been working with this line for the last year. I guess that's pretty much my experience."

"No, I mean, have you enjoyed working with the product?" I asked him, realizing just how stupid that sounded out loud.

He looked at me like I was stupid, so I rephrased the question. "I mean, what's your favorite part of working on the Move 'N Shaker line?"

At this, he scratched his chin and said, "Well, I'd have to say that it's this part." He pointed to the warehouse. "I like bringing the stuff out here and making it look nice."

I wrote it down just to look like I was doing something significant. The whole time I was thinking, "This is the tough guy with the cigarette? Mr. Merry Maker?"

"Well, that's great," I said, "I think that's about all I'm going to need." He told me how to get back out to the house and I thanked him for his participation. I didn't think he had anything to do with any thievery. He could have used a makeover, but a lack of good personal hygiene didn't make him a suspect in my eyes.

I looked at my watch. It was eleven thirty; time for shift change. I headed back inside the house to see if I could find Monte Bergman. As I stepped inside, everything was still. I had a feeling I was about to find my thief.

Chapter Seven

I walked quietly back to the workshop area to see if I could find Bergman. I saw a squat, little man standing at the Move 'N Shaker table. He was wearing a faded blue work shirt, red velvet suspenders and a ratty, old cab driver hat. He held an unlit cigarette between his lips and his expression was just plain grumpy. He appeared to be squinting at the parts as he put them together. I walked up to him and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Hi, are you Monte Bergman?” I asked, smiling. It was so unnatural for me to do this. I rarely smile unless I’m flirting and I was sincerely hoping he didn’t think I was here to ask him out on a date.

“Eh, who’s asking?” he said.

“My name is Jenny Herman,” I said, “I’m doing some market research for Mrs. Clos.”

He put down the parts he was working on and bowed to me slightly as he took my hand. He placed a soft kiss on my hand and said, “Glad to meet you, Ms. Herman.”

I didn’t know how to respond to that. He looked scary, but he was actually an old-fashioned gentleman. “Good to meet you, Mr. Bergman. I’d like to ask you a couple of questions about working on the Move 'N Shaker line. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure I do, and you can call me Monte,” he said with a wink.

Well, this wasn’t what I had expected at all. I asked him a couple of questions and he responded much like the others had. He had days when he was stressed, but for the most part he enjoyed the work. It was a job and there weren’t many out there these days. There especially weren’t many out there for old ex-cons like him. After I finished talking with him, I felt terrible. I had hoped that he would be a bad person so that I could wrap this investigation up and go home. Just before I went to leave, I asked him about Tony Albertson. I hadn’t seen anyone working the cart the entire time we had been talking. He told me that Tony was a good man who regularly attended St. Mark’s church but that he had been sick for the past two days and was now in the hospital with pneumonia. I wondered why Mrs. Clos hadn’t mentioned this.

I headed home feeling like I had wasted a few hours badgering people who had no clue that they were being singled out as potential criminals. Most of them seemed okay in spite of their quirks. What didn't sit well with me was that the Move 'N Shakers were coming up missing, yet no one on the line seemed to be doing anything wrong. It was puzzling.

When I reached my apartment, I let myself in and went straight to the refrigerator. The sandwich from earlier was waiting there to be reheated. I removed it from its wrapper and stuck it on a plate so that I could microwave it back to edible. Within a minute, I had a burger and a Coke sitting in front of me and I was preparing to eat my high cholesterol, high fat midnight snack. Before I could get the first bite, there was a knock at my door.

"Who the hell?" I said, not completing my own sentence, but completely understanding what I meant.

I walked over to the door and looked out the peephole. It was Trey. I had forgotten that he was coming back by tonight. I opened the door and let him in.

"Hey, Toots," he said, smiling and winking.

"Toots?" I said, "Who wants to be called Toots?"

He grabbed me and kissed my cheek before chucking me under the chin. "I thought all women liked being called Toots."

"No wonder you're still single," I said. "I'm not a nice woman."

"Ouch," he said, "What's wrong with you tonight? Somebody piss in your Wheaties or something?"

"No, no, I'm just having a tough time figuring out this case I took yesterday," I said.

"Oh, yeah, what's it about?" he asked, "Maybe I can help."

He looked so cute standing there with his arms crossed. I couldn't even remember what the case was about when I looked at him. Damn, this was distracting.

"Uh, well, I think this lady thinks there's someone stealing from her company," I struggled to explain.

“Well, that’s part of the problem, are you even sure what you’re working on?” he laughed.

This snapped me out of my trance and I slapped him on the back of the head for that, “Yes, I’m sure.” I hated for someone to question my intelligence, even when it wasn’t obvious to them that I knew what I was doing.

“Okay, then, who does she think is stealing?” he asked, rubbing the back of his head.

“There were five people that she asked me to check into,” I said, “but they all come up fairly clean and after talking with four of the five, I’m pretty sure none of them are stealing.”

“So it has to be the fifth guy,” he said. “Case closed.”

“Nope, he’s in the hospital,” I said, “and, he’s an old guy who goes to church and all of that. I don’t think he would do it.”

“Okay,” he said, “maybe no one is stealing from her.”

I gave him a look that said, “Are you stupid?” He put his hands up and shrugged his shoulders, “Well?”

“Then why would she come and talk to me about it?” I asked.

“Maybe she’s pulling some kind of insurance fraud and wants it to look good, so she comes to you to investigate something that isn’t really happening?” he said, “It’s an old gag, but it works.”

I thought about this for a moment. Trey knew a lot about fraud; he’d done time in jail for it. And Mrs. Clos *was* a little screwy.

Chapter Eight

Trey and I talked about the possibilities for a while and I decided that I needed to give Mrs. Clos a call first thing in the morning. We went through our usual tug-of-war over my unwillingness to sleep with him and finally, Trey settled for a kiss and a blanket for the couch. I had to give him an “A” for effort.

I didn't sleep well at all. I kept dreaming about the house and the animals outside. Again, I saw the red Suburban and the man in the Santa suit. When my alarm clock finally woke me at seven-thirty, I sat up and shook my head to make sure that I was really awake. Before I even got out of bed, I picked up the phone and dialed Mrs. Clos's number. I listened as the phone just rang and rang. No answering machine picked up. I hung up the phone and sat down at my kitchen table. I was stuck, I was cranky, and on top of everything else, I was hungry.

I trotted down the hall to the bathroom and noticed that Trey was still asleep on the couch. Quietly, I shut the door and went about my business. I was trying to decide how I was going to approach Mrs. Clos with my findings. After talking with Trey last night, I was fairly convinced that none of Santac's employees were stealing from the company. I was even more convinced that Mrs. Clos might, in fact, be up to something. Thinking back to her visit to my office and the bruises she'd had on her face, I wondered if they might have been related to what was happening with the missing consoles. It didn't make sense, but stranger things had happened.

I got into the shower, ever watchful of the bathroom door. It didn't lock and I really didn't want to be ambushed by Trey in the midst of my lather-rinse-repeat cycle. I didn't think he would come in if he heard the shower running, but you never know about him. Sometimes, he catches me off guard. When I finished showering, I grabbed my towel and dried off and then wrapped the towel around me to go back to my bedroom. When I opened the door, Trey was sitting up on the couch. He turned and smiled at me, no doubt getting ready to say something stupid about the towel.

“Good morning,” I said.

“It’d be a better morning if you’d drop your towel,” he said, chuckling. See, I told you he couldn’t resist saying something stupid.

I smirked at him and then headed back down the hall to my room to get dressed. “I’m going out to get something to eat,” I yelled back to him, “wanna go?”

“Sure,” he said. I heard him walk across the living room and go into the bathroom. A few moments later, I heard the door open as the toilet was finishing a flush. The next thing I knew, Trey was standing in my doorway. I was still in my towel trying to find something comfortable to wear.

“Hey,” I said, “I’m trying to get dressed, here.”

“I know,” he said, “I almost missed it.” He moved closer to me and put his arms around me. Looking down at me, he brushed his lips over mine. He tasted like my toothpaste.

“Trey, I can’t,” I said.

He kissed me again. Obviously he hadn’t comprehended my previous statement. This time, his kiss was a little longer and just a little bit more involved.

“I can’t do this,” I said.

“Why not?” he asked.

This is where I made my mistake. I thought to myself as he was kissing me, “Why not, indeed?” The next thing I knew, the towel had hit the floor and I wasn’t thinking so much about breakfast anymore.

A half an hour later, I was headed back to the shower. This time, Trey promised that he would leave me alone so that we could get dressed and go get some breakfast. Times like these made me wonder why the two of us hadn’t stayed together. Though I knew the answer, I always came back to the fact that we had such good chemistry and the sex was just so good between us that it didn’t make sense to be with anyone else. I really didn’t need this confusion right now, but here it was again.

I got out of the shower and finished getting myself ready to go. When we were both ready to face the public, we went out to the Jeep and I drove us toward the IHOP. We went in, sat down and ordered our coffee.

“So, are you going out to that place, today?” he asked when the coffee had arrived.

I emptied a couple of packets of sugar into my cup and stirred it, “You mean, Santac?”

“Yeah, I guess,” he said, “Wherever you’ve been working?”

“I think so,” I said, “I can’t get her on the phone and to tell you the truth, I want to wrap this up.”

“I could go with you,” he said, “I don’t have anything planned today.”

Trey never had anything planned. He just kind of showed up here and there, waiting to make something happen. “I guess you could go,” I said.

We talked as we ate our breakfast and when we were finished, we paid the check and headed out to Santac. When we arrived, I saw that there were no lights on in the building and there were no cars in the parking lot. I told Trey to stay in the Jeep and I went inside to see what was going on.

No one was in the main lobby, so I headed towards Mrs. Clos’s office. She was sitting behind her desk with her hands behind her tiny head. She looked so tired that I almost hated to disturb her. I knocked softly on the door.

“Hello,” she said when she saw me there. “How are you today?”

Her voice was shaky and she seemed distraught.

“Hi, is something the matter?” I asked.

“Oh, well, yes,” she said, “one of our stockers has passed away. He was sick in the hospital and he died in the middle of the night last night.”

“You’re not talking about Tony Albertson, are you?” I asked.

She nodded, "That's the one." She sighed deeply and then said, "I'm sorry I forgot to tell you that he couldn't have been involved with the thefts, either. I've been so flustered by all of this that it completely slipped my mind that he'd been sick."

"That's alright," I said, "No problem. I just came by to see if you had a moment to talk."

"Well, yes, I guess I do," she said, "We shut down today out of respect for Tony. What is it that you need?"

"I wanted to let you know that I have talked with all of the employees and none of them seem to be the type that would steal from you," I told her. I swallowed hard before launching into my next statement, "I was wondering if you might have been somehow...mistaken about what was going on?"

She looked down at her desk and tapped a white, gloved finger on her blotter.

"Mistaken?" she asked, "How so?"

"Well, what I mean to say is, that...well, are you sure someone is stealing from you?" I said. That came out about as smooth as a gravel road.

"Of course, I'm sure," she said, "Why else would I pay someone to come in here and look around?" Her tone was even and she didn't seem angry. She seemed genuinely confused.

"Maybe I'm not being very clear," I said, "Okay; could there be some other reason why the consoles are coming up missing?"

She still didn't seem to know what I was getting at. "Not that I'm aware of, dear."

"Okay, well, I don't know how much more I can do on this case," I said, "I could come back later and see if I notice anything strange, but for now, I'll take a break."

"Makes sense to me," she said, "We'll be open again tomorrow."

I offered my sympathy for Mr. Albertson and we said our goodbyes. When I got back into the Jeep, Trey was sitting there staring in the direction of the warehouse.

"What's up?" I asked him.

“I saw something weird over there while you were inside,” he said, “We ought to take a look.”

“When you say weird, what do you mean?” I asked, realizing that weird was fairly normal in this place.

“Well, I don’t really want to say this, but I guess I have to,” he said, “I think I saw a reindeer running around over by that building.”

“A reindeer?” I asked, “Over there?” I pointed to the warehouse.

“Yep,” he said. “It was very strange.”

“I’m sure,” I said. We both got out of the Jeep and headed over to the building to see if we could find the animal. I looked down as we approached the warehouse and sure enough, there were some kind of hoof prints or something like that in the mud. I wasn’t sure why there was mud in this part of the yard, but I assumed there was a good reason.

“See,” Trey said, pointing to the ground. “This is where I saw it.”

I didn’t know what to make of this. There wasn’t an animal in sight and I knew what the warehouse looked like inside. It wasn’t a place where a reindeer could roam about freely without doing a lot of damage to the décor.

“I don’t see where it could be,” I told Trey. “The warehouse is full of stuff and I know it could not possibly fit in there.”

We went back to the Jeep and that’s when I remembered the kennels that were on the other side of the house. I punched Trey in the shoulder and told him to follow me. I headed across the parking lot and towards a row of short buildings that lined the opposite side of the yard. We walked up to them and I could hear something rustling around inside. I peeked through a crack in the building and saw a huge, hairy beast that I couldn’t readily identify. I asked Trey to take a look. He did so and then looked at me, “That’s what I saw!”

“That’s a reindeer?” I asked.

“Yep, that’s a reindeer,” he said.

“What the hell does a company like this need with reindeer?” I said.

Trey shrugged. I needed to think about this. We decided to head back to the Jeep and get the hell out of this place. I wanted to do some background checking on Mrs. Clos and her husband. That was the one thing I hadn't done and now, I was sure that it should have been the first thing on my list.

Chapter Nine

I dropped Trey off at the place he was calling home and then I headed over to my office. I needed to check on a couple of things and then I was going back to that house tonight to snoop around. The first place I was going to check was in Mrs. Clos's office. I had a feeling something there might lead me closer to the truth about this case. It was only around eleven-thirty so I had plenty of time to do my research. I had left a copy of the contract at the office, so I grabbed it and headed back towards my apartment.

When I got there, I turned on the laptop and waited for my background check site to come up. When it came up, I typed in Donella Clos and hit the search button. Within a few moments, some names came up on the screen. I looked for one that seemed to be close to her age. There was one that was seventy-three years old, another that was fifty-two and another that was ninety years old. I figured that my Mrs. Clos would be younger than ninety, but it was a toss-up between the other two. I checked the seventy-three year old first. She was listed as living at the same address as Santac, Ltd. That was too easy. Just for fun, I checked the fifty-two year old's record. She was also listed as living at the same address as Santac, Ltd. That was odd. Maybe they had the wrong information in there.

I switched back and forth between the two records and compared the information. Everything was exactly the same except for the year of birth. This made me wonder so I checked the ninety year old Donella Clos. I could not believe that I was seeing this. Her record was exactly the same as the other two except for the age. This made no sense. I scrolled through each record until I found the name of the spouse. It was listed as Sam T. Clos. Sam T. Clos? This was ridiculous.

None of the Donella Clos's listed had ever filed for bankruptcy and none of them were listed as employed. Santac, Ltd. was not listed anywhere except as their home address. None of them had ever worked anywhere and there were no children listed on any of the records. So much for thinking that these three could be mother, daughter, and grandmother. I had thought

maybe there could be some logical explanation for the three Donella Clos's and that the spouse listing had been a typo, but I was wrong.

Sam T. Clos wasn't listed in any database that I could get into so I pushed my chair away from the desk and closed the laptop. I checked my watch. It was about twelve-fifteen. It was still way too early to go snooping around. I was getting impatient and I didn't think I could wait the whole day to go back to Santac. This was frustrating. The only thing I could do was to wait and possibly get some lunch.

As I sat there looking around my apartment, I glanced across the room at my pitiful, little Christmas tree. I made the effort each year, but there was never anything under it for me or anyone else. I guessed I could go shopping and maybe find a nice gift for Trey. After all, we had been kind of close over the last couple of weeks. Okay, we'd been really close. That had to at least merit a shirt or something.

I grabbed my bag and headed out to my parking lot. I figured I'd go out to the mall and get one of those Philly Steak sandwiches and then look around for something suitable for Trey. The sandwich shop was literally right inside the door of the mall, so I stepped up to the counter and asked for a deluxe combo meal. I gave the lady behind the counter ten bucks and she gave me back a quarter. This sandwich had better be damned good for nine dollars. I sat down at one of the small tables in the restaurant and unwrapped my sandwich. It was smothered with onions and green peppers and smelled just about as good as it looked. What a good idea this had been, I thought.

For a few moments, I sat there enjoying my lunch and when I was finished, I carried my tray to the trash can, emptied it and then set the tray back on the counter. There appeared to be no other appropriate place to put it, so I left. I looked around the mall and tried to think of what to get for Trey without appearing too involved with the idea of us together. I didn't want him to think I was entertaining thoughts of a relationship. What we had was stressful enough.

I walked through the mall until I finally came to a specialty shop that seemed to fit Trey's personality. There were all kinds of funny T-Shirts and hats to look at, so I spent some time reading them. I had at least four more hours to kill, so I took my time. After I had read every shirt and hat in the place, I settled on the shirt with the Callahan logo from the movie, Tommy Boy on it. We had watched the movie about a million times together and I knew he would appreciate the reference. I picked up another shirt for myself. I just liked the whole "More Cowbell" thing and thought it appropriate for the week I was having.

Once I had purchased the shirts, I remembered that Mrs. Shuble was still down the hall from me in the apartment building and that I should probably try to find something for her while I was shopping. I stopped at a shop that looked like it was made for old ladies. There were a bunch of frilly things and porcelain teapots sitting around. Everything looked like something you would see at your grandmother's house. I found a nice porcelain clock that I thought would be great for her and then I hesitated. If I were really old, would a clock be a constant reminder that my time was limited? I put the clock back and opted for a collectible plate decorated with pretty roses. She liked roses, but she had often complained that she couldn't keep the real ones alive long enough. This would do.

By the time I finished shopping, I was about a hundred dollars lighter and two hours closer to being able to spy on Santac. I took my stuff back to my apartment and went ahead and wrapped everything with the wrapping paper I'd purchased. This killed another hour. Finally, I decided that now had to be good enough. I put the wrapped items under the tree, including the shirt I had wrapped up for myself. I figured I might as well have something under there. I grabbed a Coke from the refrigerator and headed back out the door.

While driving over to Santac, I got a call from Trey on my cell phone. He asked what I was doing and I told him I was just following up on some things. I didn't want to tell him where I was. He didn't need to come back to Santac with me. The reindeer had freaked him out earlier, so I didn't see the point in subjecting him to further weirdness. I approached the front lot of Santac

with caution. No one was there, or at least, it looked deserted. I pulled around to the back of the house and stopped short when I saw a big, red Suburban parked at the door of the warehouse. I put my Jeep in reverse and backed up so that I couldn't be seen. I quietly got out of the Jeep and crept over to the side of the house to get a closer look.

There, across the lot, was a man in a Santa suit loading items into the Suburban. He brought bag after bag out to the vehicle just as he had done in my dreams the last couple of nights. After a few moments, he disappeared inside the warehouse and I thought it would be a good time to sneak over there and see what he was loading into the vehicle. I hurried across the yard, wishing all the while that it was just two hours later so that I'd at least be hidden by darkness. Not that the light from the Christmas display wouldn't give me away. Just as I was getting ready to look inside the bags, I heard the door of the warehouse open. I ducked back behind the side of the Suburban. I hoped I was hidden from view as I watched the Santa approach with another bag in his hands.

Chapter Ten

Close-up, I could see that this man really looked like Santa Claus. He wasn't just wearing the suit; he had the curly, white hair, rosy cheeks, bright eyes and all. I sniffed and I could smell gingerbread. Did this man smell like gingerbread cookies? That wasn't possible. He'd been lugging bags back and forth for at least twenty minutes. There was no way he could still smell like this even if he had bathed in cookie batter. Well, I wasn't sure about that part, but it seemed unlikely.

He turned to go back inside and I hurried around the back to see if I could get a look while he was gone. I opened up one of the red, velvet bags and found exactly what I was hoping to find. There were five Move 'N Shaker consoles inside along with some other toys and knick-knacks. I checked another bag. The same thing. All of the bags held at least five Move 'N Shaker consoles. I looked at the license plate of the Suburban to see if I might be able to run it for information on the driver. It said, SANTAC 1. "Oh, shit!" I said. This was a company vehicle. That could only mean one thing.

"What are you doing out here?" I heard a voice say from behind me.

I turned to find the man in the Santa suit standing there with his hands on his hips. He had kind of a grumpy look on his face and he was waiting for me to answer.

"I-uh-I was just-uh, well, hello," I said, holding my hand out, "I'm Jenny Herman. I've been working for Mrs. Clos on a market research project. Is she here, by any chance?" I crossed my fingers behind my back and waited to see if he was going to shake my hand.

He made no move to do so, so I put my hand back down to avoid looking any more like an idiot.

"What kind of project?" he asked, "I don't know anything about any market research."

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name," I said, hoping he would play along.

"I'm Sam, I own the place," he said, "As you can see, we're closed. Donella's at home now. You'll have to catch her tomorrow."

“I see, I thought she might still be here, so I...” I started to say, but Sam interrupted me.

“Now, Miss, I don’t believe that’s the truth,” he said, “Whatever you’re doing here, you need to leave now. If you need to speak with my wife, come back tomorrow.”

“O-okay,” I said, surprised by his tone. “I’m sorry to have bothered you.”

I backed away from him and he finally said, “Look, I’m sorry for being so abrupt, but I’ve got a lot to do this evening and I’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention seeing me here tonight.”

“Oh, I, why would I mention it?” I asked, “I never saw you. Sure.”

Why would he care if I mentioned seeing him at his own shop? Something was really wrong with this picture.

I made my way back to the Jeep, trying to keep my eye on him as I backed across the lawn. He watched me until I reached the far side of the house and then he turned and went back inside the warehouse. I was almost to the Jeep when I caught a glimpse of something going on in the house. I had to get a closer look. I walked over and stood beside the window and peered inside. To my surprise, there were a bunch of cookies on the counter and a small conveyor belt set up near the oven in the wall. Cookies were coming out in droves and there, in the kitchen stood Mrs. Clos, sprinkling sugar on top of the cookies as they came out of the oven. I pinched myself to make sure that I wasn’t dreaming again.

Now wait a minute, I thought. If she’s in here and he’s out there, how can she not realize that he’s moving the Move ‘N Shakers out of the warehouse. I went around and tried the front door of the house. It opened. I walked inside and headed into the kitchen area where I had just seen Mrs. Clos and the cookies. No one was there and there were no cookies in the kitchen. This is where I freaked out. I turned and practically ran out the door. I didn’t stop to snoop; I just went outside and got in my Jeep. I was going to leave, but something kept telling me to go back inside and look around. After a few moments, I mustered up the courage to go back in the house. No one was inside, so I needed to just do what I had come to do and get out.

I headed for Mrs. Clos's office. No one appeared to be hiding in there, so I went around the desk and flipped through some of the papers. I came across a ledger, so I opened it. Here, all of the items manufactured by Santac were listed. I flipped through the pages until I got to the Move 'N Shakers. From what I could see, Sam was taking ten of the consoles with each shipment that he delivered to the toy stores. Mrs. Clos had written in the margin that Sam's deal with the local toy stores were that five of them would keep two consoles in their stores at all times. Well, then, why did he have at least twenty of them in the Suburban tonight?

I put the ledger back on the desk. I'd just have to come back tomorrow and talk to her. If she couldn't answer this, then I was done with the case. I made sure that everything looked just as it had when I'd come in and then I left. When I was behind the wheel of the Jeep, I heard the Suburban start up on the other side of the yard. I prayed that Santa...er, Sam would take the other driveway away from the warehouse instead of driving around back to get out. Thankfully, he did. I pulled away and drove in the direction he was going. Maybe I could follow him for a while to see where he went with the consoles.

I drove, keeping a safe distance between the Suburban and myself, until Sam pulled into a parking lot near the downtown area. I parked about a block away so that I could watch him. He got out and went around to the back where he reached inside. He took out one of the red bags and slung it over his shoulder. He headed for the entrance to the building next to the parking lot. It was St. Mary's Children's Hospital.

I got out and headed up to the door, myself. I probably didn't need to, but I wanted to be sure that my suspicions were correct. I could see the red bag bobbing up and down as he walked down the hallway. I followed as far behind him as I could. He entered the wing marked "Cancer Unit" and set the bag down at the nurse's station. I saw him talk to the nurse on duty and then he picked up the bag again and started going to the different rooms. He was delivering toys to these kids. There was nothing sinister going on here. I turned and went back out to my Jeep to wait until he came back out. When he did, he still carried the bag, but it was

considerably less full. He stopped for a moment as he got to his vehicle and I saw him run a hand over his face. He appeared to be crying, but in the distance it was hard to see.

I followed him for a couple of hours and he stopped at three more hospitals and finally at an orphanage. At the orphanage, he collected the remains of the bags he had been delivering to the hospitals and took it all inside. He came out empty handed and drove away. I needed to know what had happened in there, so I got out and went inside. In the entryway, there was a glass window with a little hole cut into it so that the person sitting behind it could speak to visitors.

“Can I help you, Miss?” the lady asked.

“Yes, actually, the man who was just here,” I started, “did he just deliver some toys?”

“Why, yes, he did,” she said, smiling, “he does it every year.”

“He does?” I asked, “Is he from Santac, Ltd.”

She looked puzzled, “Santac, Ltd.? What’s that?”

“It’s a...oh, well, never mind,” I said, “I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“No, he delivers toys to us after he’s been to the area hospitals. You know, he and his wife lost a child to cancer many years ago and he always makes it a point to take toys over to the cancer units at the children’s hospitals,” she explained.

Puzzled, I looked at her and said, “Really?”

“Oh, yes, I didn’t know this until the last couple of years, but I was curious so I asked him one year where he got all of the toys,” she started to explain. “How rude of me, would you like to come inside?”

“Sure, sure,” I said, still trying to process what she was saying.

She buzzed me through and said, “You don’t look like a criminal, so I guessed it was safe to let you in.”

“Thanks, that’s nice to know,” I said.

“Would you like some coffee?” she asked.

I nodded and she turned and grabbed a mug from the rack behind her and then poured a cup of coffee for me. She handed me the steaming cup and then indicated that we should walk. As we walked, she told me that Sam had come in every year for the last fifteen years to deliver toys. I looked around the place. It was decorated very nicely for an orphanage. Someone had tried very hard to make this place seem like a home. Marjorie, as she introduced herself to me, explained that one night a couple of years ago, Sam had come in and he was crying. He was a mess, so she had sat him down with a cup of coffee and they had talked. This is when she found out that his little boy had died a very tragic death some years ago. He'd had a rare form of cancer and they had tried treatment after treatment, but nothing had worked. Sam had been so distraught that he had been unable to find any joy in the holidays at all until he had started taking toys to the hospital.

"Have you met his wife?" I asked her.

"His wife?" she asked, the look on her face had shown that she was just as puzzled as I felt. "I didn't think she was still alive, either."

"Really, you're sure about this?" I was not prepared for that answer. Had he been going around doing nice things and then lying to people about his wife being dead? That seemed a strange way to do good deeds.

We talked for a little while longer and by the time I left, I was a mess. The story about Sam's son had made me terribly sad and I was confused about the whole thing with Mrs. Clos. I needed to talk to her as soon as possible.

Chapter Eleven

I tried to sleep, but my dreams were once again filled with visions of Santa and of Mrs. Clos. This time, there was a little boy in the dream, too. I attributed his presence to the discussion I'd had with Marjorie at the orphanage. I resolved to get to the bottom of this matter when I woke up the next morning. The first thing I would do would be to find Mrs. Clos and ask her what was going on between she and Mr. Clos. She might tell me it's none of my business, but I still wanted to ask the question.

I got up and got dressed, thinking for a fleeting moment that it was strange not to have heard from Trey last night. I'd find him later. Right now, I needed to get some answers. I drove out to Santac and marched inside. Mrs. Clos was standing in the kitchen, sprinkling sugar over a plate of cookies. Sure, now she's doing this. Where was she last night when I thought I saw this happening?

"I need to talk to you," I said to her, in a no bullshit tone.

"Well, good morning to you, dear," she said, "What's the problem?"

"Do you want to tell me anything about Mr. Clos's nighttime activities?" I asked.

"His nighttime activities?" she asked. "I don't know what he does at night, we hardly see each other."

"Is that why he's telling people you died?" I asked her, immediately regretting that I'd said it that way.

She stopped sprinkling sugar for a moment and then looked over at me sharply. "He's doing no such thing!"

"Yes, he is doing such a thing," I said, "he's delivering toys to hospitals and orphanages and all the while he's telling them you passed away. Why would he do that?"

"He's delivering toys to hospitals and orphanages?" she asked. She looked surprised.

"Yes, bags of them, including several of your Move 'N Shakers," I said. "Did you not know about this?"

“Well, no, I didn’t realize he was doing *that*,” she said, “I thought he just delivered to the toy stores.”

“Don’t the two of you talk?” I asked. “Ever?”

She came around the counter and took a seat at the small kitchen table. When she was seated, she put her hands on her face and let out a sigh. “I didn’t think he was still doing that.”

“Doing what?” I asked.

“Taking toys to the hospitals, it’s the cancer units isn’t it?” she asked.

I nodded.

“Years ago, he told me he was going to stop doing that because it hurt him so to go in there year after year and see those kids,” she said. “I told him it was good for him to give to others and that he should keep going. He assured me that it was too hard on him and that he was not going to do it anymore. I can’t believe he’s been doing it all these years.”

“You didn’t know?” I asked.

She was crying now. “No, I didn’t know. I stopped talking to him years ago after I thought he gave up on it. I had no idea he’d kept going with it. I held a grudge all those years and he’s been doing the right thing.”

“So he didn’t tell you about the extra consoles he’s been taking?” I asked.

She shook her head.

“And that’s why you thought someone had been stealing?” I asked.

She nodded.

This was the biggest case of marital miscommunication I’d ever seen. I knew some married couples didn’t talk, but this was ridiculous.

“Why would he say you’re dead?” I asked.

She looked down at her hands and said, “I told him that if he stopped taking the toys to the kids, he might as well consider himself a widower. He must have really taken that to heart.”

“Well, now, that’s just silly,” I said. “Isn’t that taking things a bit far? You two need to talk and you need to do it soon.”

I couldn’t believe I was giving relationship advice to anyone. I was the last person who knew anything about how to get along with men.

I told her that I was going to consider the case closed. She asked if she owed me anything else for my time. I told her to talk to her husband and that would be enough for me. Before I left, I asked her why I had seen her here last night baking cookies.

“I wasn’t here, dear, you must have seen the holograms,” she said.

“Holograms?” I asked.

“Yes, the windows are rigged to show holograms throughout the house of people doing Christmasy things like baking cookies and such,” she said, “It’s the latest thing in Christmas decorating.”

“Sure,” I said, “That explains it.” I left, feeling so much dumber than I had before.

No one had been stealing from anyone. Sam hadn’t actually been lying to people about Mrs. Clos; he was just relaying her words because the two of them needed some serious relationship counseling. There hadn’t been any wrongdoing at Santac, unless you count what husbands and wives put each other through when they stop talking to one another. It was sad, really. The two of them had gone through so much with the loss of their child so long ago and because they hadn’t talked to each other, their marriage had suffered even more. I hoped that they could fix whatever was wrong between them.

A couple of days later on Christmas Eve, I was sitting in my office when I received a phone call from Sam Clos. He told me that he appreciated whatever I had done to get his wife to finally talk to him. We had a nice conversation and by the time I hung up, I was feeling very happy. I picked up the phone again and called Trey. I invited him over to open his present.

“Present?” he had said, “but I didn’t get you anything.”

“Just bring yourself,” I said, “that’s present enough.”

When I got home, I walked Mrs. Shuble's present down to her apartment. She was so happy to see me that she gave me a big hug when I walked in the door. She gave me a plate full of cookies and sat down to open her gift. Her face lit up as she pulled the plate from the paper. "I love it, Rona," she had said. That made me feel pretty good, I guess.

I got back to my apartment at about the same time that Trey was getting there. He had a big box with a bright red bow on top.

"I thought you said you didn't get me anything," I said.

"I lied," he said, grinning.

We went inside and spent the evening eating cookies and opening our gifts. He loved his T-Shirt and I, well, I very much enjoyed his gift to me; a shiny, brass cowbell engraved with, "To My Favorite Girl, Love, Trey." Some girls might take offense to such a gift, but I thought it was hilarious. I placed the cowbell on my kitchen counter and we sat there and admired it until the wee hours of the night. After that, the rest is for me to know and for no one else to find out.

Merry Christmas, all!

THE END