

Sarafin Lee Phoenix

# Kissing Snow

Novel

## Prolog

December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2062

»» **A** special story?« the old woman asked, studying the two faces in front of her, one looking up at her hopefully while the other seemed rather weary. Mila nodded as vigorously as if she had to make up for her brother's lack of interest.

The grandmother smiled, overlooking the fact that only half of her audience showed interest. For a moment she hesitated, as if she were about to reveal a secret. Then she began to tell. »Very well, a special one it shall be. Many, many winters ago, long before you or your parents existed, when I was a young woman, there —«

»That must have been a very long time ago,« Laurin interrupted.

His grandmother's face became somber as she gave him a look that made the temperature in the room drop a good ten degrees. »You can go to bed without a story, Laurin.«

Mila swallowed. Reflexively, she hugged her stuffed bear tighter. »He didn't mean it, Grandma,« she assured, before turning to her brother. »Let Grandma tell her story,« she demanded with the kind of facial expression only little sisters can pull off, somewhere between a plea (»Please don't be mean!«) and a threat (»If you get in my way again, I'll tell Mom and Dad!«).

The silent exchange of looks lasted barely more than a blink of an eye, then Mila fixed her water-blue eyes on the storyteller again and put on a smile that Laurin knew all too well and that softened not only his parents but everything and everyone; after all, it made his sister look like a little angel. The devil in her only he seemed to know.

»Please,« Mila added.

With imploring eyes, the ten-year-old looked at the old woman who had made herself comfortable in the antique wing chair under the window. A fire crackled in the fireplace and bathed the children's room in cozy warmth. Snuggled in a fluffy blanket and with two pillows at her back, Mila eyed her grandmother. She loved her as she loved the room and everything about this place.

Every year around this time they would go to Silver Lake and spend the days until Christmas at her grandmother's hotel. For weeks Mila had been looking forward to visit the sleepy little town, which looked so enchanting, as if someone had used a storybook as a template and designed the town accordingly. When the time finally came and they left the airport for Silver Lake, she couldn't wait to see the big house on the lakeshore, much less for the car to stop in front of it and for her to rush up the stairs to be embraced by her grandmother.

This year, too, she had covered the icy steps at lightning speed, her mother's voice behind her, urging her to be careful. But Mila had not slowed down. With shining eyes, she hurried on and reached for the bell, although she suspected that her grandmother was already behind the door. Not even half a bell ring later, the door swung open and the scent of cookies, cinnamon and fresh pine branches greeted her. Comforting warmth whiffed from within as Mila came face to face with her grandmother. A smile was on the old woman's lips, as if she had waited all year for this moment, and was reflected on her granddaughter's features. The feeling of finally having come

home made Mila's face light up. The next moment she was immersed in her grandmother's embrace, and as always, all worries had fallen away from her, as if there were only good things in life and the world was a beautiful place that knew no sorrow.

Shortly after the greeting, Mila had left the aged lady to her parents and had run up the stairs, ignoring the antique elevator in which she had gotten stuck when she was four. Her hair flying, she passed the various floors and climbed the small, dizzyingly steep spiral staircase to the attic to make sure that the children's room and all its toys were still there. Breathlessly she reached the attic, fear and worry in her heart that the image from her memory might be replaced that day by a sober guest room.

»Please let it still be there,« Mila whispered, her hand on the handle, her cheeks red.

Heart pounding, she stepped into the room under the roof slope and looked around. A children's room welcomed her, one that would have been the envy not only of most of her peers, but probably of one or two adults as well. Three beds stood in the large room, grouped around a fireplace on which hung a pair of stuffed stockings with names embroidered on them, among which she made out hers. Two tall bookshelves flanked the door, and next to them were a closet and a dresser. Under the window, Mila spotted the chair her grandmother loved to sit in, and a few steps away, a festively decorated Christmas tree. But what caught her eyes were the toys. Everywhere you looked, toys were piled up.

Mila breathed a sigh of relief and closed the door behind her. As always, it was like stepping into the past and at the same time stepping into another world. There was something timeless about the room, and despite the fact that it was only inhabited for a few days, or at most two weeks a year, it felt homey. Mila almost loved it more than her own room. Satisfied, she noticed that everything was still the same and not a single toy was missing. Nevertheless, she let her gaze wander around the room once more, examining it. In all these years, her grandmother had hardly changed a thing. Except for new mattresses and bed covers and some tiny utensil, everything looked exactly as it had when her mother and her siblings had lived here. Only when they reached Laurin's age did they move into their own rooms one floor below. But Mila knew that in ten years she would still be sleeping up here. No other room was like this one, and you never get too old for toys.

Mila pulled the blanket up over her chin so that only her eyes and nose and Oscar, her bear, peeked out, and waited for the story to continue. The fireplace made shadows dance through the room, gliding across the wallpaper like ghostly creatures from strange worlds. A story lay dormant in every corner, and behind her grandmother's lips was a seemingly inexhaustible trove of them. Mila had heard dozens, but never the same one twice. Her grandmother always knew a new one to tell and never tired of taking her to magical worlds. But more than the fantastic adventures or the sometimes funny creatures they encountered, Mila was captivated by the true stories. Unlike others, her grandmother did not read to them from a book or simply make something up. No, the stories she told she had almost always experienced herself.

That evening, too, Mila had asked for a tale from the treasure trove of stories her grandmother had accumulated over the course of her life. »A special one,« she had added, looking at her with shining eyes. With an indulgent sigh, the old lady had relented and had just begun to tell a story when Laurin interrupted her, ending the spell so abruptly. Mila bit her lip with tension, waiting

for the magic with which her grandmother would weave the stories and which, as always, would make her forget everything around her. When her grandmother told stories, Mila felt as if she were sitting on a flying carpet, visiting all the places the old woman talked about. And almost always she had the feeling of slipping into one of the characters and having adventures in his place. Longingly she waited for the next words.

But her grandmother's lips remained closed. She was still giving her grandson that inscrutable look.

Laurin had been different since last year. Not only did he show little interest in the toys that filled the room, but he was far from enthusiastic about the idea of flying to Canada for Christmas to spend the holidays in a small town of just five thousand souls. He would rather have stayed in California or gone to the East Coast or Europe like others. What fascinated his sister about the Far North, especially the snow, he understood less and less. Of course, as a child, he too had spent hours building snowmen in the freezing cold and climbing up the hill to glide back down with his sled on a ten-second ride.

But that was a long time ago; after all, he was no longer a child.

Now he was almost a little embarrassed about the enthusiasm with which he had frolicked in the snow, as if the white mass were so special. Of course, there was no such thing at home – at least not when meteorologically everything was going right and there was no talk of an exceptional winter. But who wanted snow when you could have beaches and walk around in a T-shirt? For Laurin, snow and the winter were nothing worth trading the ocean for. It was colorless and cold, he knew that by now. And it would snow next year, too. So why all the excitement? A new computer game or the latest Star Trek movie seemed more appealing to him. Understandably, he had vehemently protested spending Christmas in Silver Lake this year, especially when he learned that his cousins would not be coming, leaving him alone with his sister.

His parents had cared abundantly little.

»Great! Then we'll just celebrate as immediate family this time!« was his father's reaction, beaming so much that Laurin seriously wondered what was in the cookies he had been eating. What did he think was so great about that thought?

»But why? It's much better here. And warm,« he objected.

»It's warm all year. A little cold brings variety.«

Laurin wasn't in the mood for that kind of variety. If his parents wanted variety, they could have flown to Europe. »What for? Grandmother isn't there anyway,« he countered, smiling victoriously as he played his trump card.

The face his mother displayed, however, showed nothing of the surprise Laurin had secretly hoped for. Still less did he find in it anything like defeat. »Of course she's there,« she said, looking at him as if he'd gone off his rocker. Or as if *he* had eaten the wrong cookies.

»But she always disappears on Christmas Eve,« he argued, but even to his ears it sounded like the piteous whining of a toddler who doesn't want to accept that he doesn't stand a chance against the decisions of adults.

His parents didn't say anything else about it either, just exchanged that look that adults love to give each other and think their kids won't notice.

»She'll be there until Christmas Eve. And after that, the four of us will continue celebrating,« his father said, and his tone alone had sounded so final that Laurin swallowed any further objection and marched off to his room. He didn't even bother to try to figure out where his grandmother disappeared to or why she did it. In all the years he had asked these questions often enough without ever getting any answer to them other than, »That's her business.« Once or twice as a child, he had tried to find out where his grandmother went, but never had he succeeded. It was like Santa Claus: ambushing him was futile. Still, it was strange that his grandmother disappeared without a trace on the evening of the twenty-fourth of all days. Was she Santa?

Laurin was past the age to continue believing in it, but still found it strange. This year, however, he was no longer interested in solving the mystery of his grandmother. Instead, it was to serve as a rationale for spending the holidays in Santa Monica at the beach or at a mall with his friends. In the half-hour discussion with his parents, he had even suggested celebrating with his other grandparents in Denver, even though he could barely stand their cheek-pinching and Christmas routine of singing, eating and more singing. But at least they lived in civilization and not in the deepest north, where only reindeer strayed and where the northern lights, Laurin suspected, only flitted across the sky because they were a warning that one had moved too far away from the equator and death by frostbite was imminent.

His parents didn't seem to care. They absolutely had to travel to the end of the world, »to where no man has ever been before,« as his father liked to joke.

Laurin thought the saying was pretty lame and didn't understand where his father got the right to abuse his Star Trek fondness for such trips. There was a huge difference between an expedition to the far reaches of the universe and a stay in freezing Canada, where apart from a few reindeer, bears and other winter-defying creatures there was nothing new to discover – and certainly no adventures. No matter how exciting his grandmother tried to make it, Laurin found everything about Silver Lake deadly boring and eye-rolling.

Only a series of threats had finally persuaded him to surrender to the wishes of his parents, who just didn't seem willing to spend Christmas anywhere other than Silver Lake, even though they, too, had come here less and less often in recent years and the original seven days they stayed had now shrunk to a scant four. His grandmother seemed to sense that he didn't want to be here, but had equally embraced him and given him that kind smile that only grandmothers can manage – bulky teenagers notwithstanding.

At the moment, though, there was none of that on her face. »What do you think, Laurin? May I continue the story, or are you going to bed?«

The threatening tone in her voice coupled with her look didn't miss its mark. Disgruntled, Laurin narrowed his eyes. He was still wavering between a snotty retort and an annoyed eye-roll when he caught his sister's anxious, pleading look. »Whatever,« he grumbled.

»It doesn't have to be, Laurin. If you'd rather do something else ...« The old woman deliberately left the sentence hanging in the air.

Laurin screwed up his face. What else could he do? His grandmother was still living in the Stone Age. Not even the technology of the 20th century was to be found in the old house, let alone the conveniences of the 21st. No television, no Internet, no nothing! Only books and stories. And his new phone had absolutely no network here and was as useless as all the other

stuff he had brought from the city. Only snowboarding provided a little variety, although he had imagined it would be easier. Most importantly, it only filled part of the day until darkness drove him back into the clutches of his family. So the evenings dragged on, with him either leafing through old photo albums in the family circle – yawn – or joining the guests in the library to play a round of chess – double yawn – and being told how much he looked like his father and grandmother and that he would surely take over the hotel someday. Laurin showed about as much interest in that as he did in extending their stay. He had no intention of moving his life up north. Mila could to run the hotel later. Or one of his cousins.

Since Laurin didn't want to hear his father's sentimental sayings or entertain the curious guests, there was only one option left: he holed up in the attic room and listened to one of Grandma's stories. The prospect of a fairy tale – Grandma's stories were nothing else in his eyes – sounded anything but tempting, but Laurin felt a story was still the better pastime, especially since he had no desire for strange questions from his parents, who constantly wanted to know everything instead of accepting that in a few years he would move out and lead his own life. A life in more southern regions and on his own terms. He would spend Christmas on an island and never go to Silver Lake again, he had sworn to himself seventeen times that day – every time he had landed with his face in the snow and his little sister had giggled at the bottom of the slope.

Laurin eyed the old woman sitting in her chair by the window, waiting for an answer. As much as he hated to admit it, storytelling was like a ritual that belonged to Christmas like decorating the tree for others. Although he was no longer a child and would have preferred to run away to California, part of him knew that Christmas wasn't Christmas unless Grandma told one of her stories.

»Never mind. Tell your story, Grandma,« he surrendered to his fate. »Please,« he added, as his sister gave that I'll-tell-it-to-mom-and-dad-if-you-say-something-wrong-now look. He knew exactly what awaited him then: Family program and 24-hour surveillance and they wouldn't leave him alone at all. The promised surfboard flashed in his mind's eye and he pushed a smile to his lips so as not to give his grandmother any reason to turn him in to his parents, who in the worst case could threaten to withhold his Christmas present.

His grandmother nodded thoughtfully, but there was a quiet triumph in the wise eyes that had already seen so much. Since time immemorial, her grandchildren had searched them like others search for treasure. They hung on her lips just as eagerly when she spoke of the past. Something mysterious surrounded the old lady, even if Laurin felt less and less of it.

»Tell me about it, Grandma. Please!« begged Mila when her grandmother was still silent. Going to bed without a story was almost as bad as skipping Christmas.

»Very well. Where was I ... Oh, yes. It happened many, many winters ago that a chain of unfortunate events – silly, yet far-reaching events – put the entire Christmas in jeopardy.« She smiled to herself, as if remembering something. »It was these events that almost led to Christmas being forgotten.«

»Forget Christmas?!« Mila sat there with such wide eyes, as if she had been told the stars would all fall from the sky and henceforth it would be pitch black at night.

»Yes, my dear,« said the grandmother deadly serious, although the corners of her mouth twitched at the expression on her granddaughter's face and Laurin thought he saw a mischievous

smile in her eyes. »There was a time when people stopped believing in Christmas ...« Mila gave Laurin a meaningful look, but he didn't do her the favor of responding. Meanwhile, they heard their grandmother say, »... and even Santa Claus wanted to hang up his job.«

»Santa Claus?« asked Laurin, a mocking twinkle in his eye. After all, he couldn't accept that silently. »But there is n-«

»Hush!« his grandmother barked at him, and her eyes were suddenly cold as ice. »One more word and the story will remain a secret known only to your sister.«

Laurin blinked distraughtly, but hurried to nod. He had never seen his grandmother so energetic.

His sister sat there confused. The steep crease on her forehead showed him very clearly that she still believed in Santa Claus and didn't seem to know quite what the exchange of looks between her brother and her grandmother meant.

Laurin sighed inwardly. Well, then Mila still believed in Santa. And so did his grandmother, apparently. He didn't care. A story would pass the time – even if it was one about Santa Claus, who didn't exist, of course. After all, it was soon only three agonizing days until they were back in Santa Monica. He forced himself to smile, but the attempt slid off his grandmother like the snowboard on the slope that morning.

»And then? What happened next?« asked Mila, suddenly remembering the list for Santa Claus that she had enclosed with the letter, which had to be on its way to the North Pole if it wasn't already in Santa's hands. What if he hung up his job this year? Just because it hadn't happened yet, didn't mean it couldn't still happen. Fear awoke in Mila. Had she wished for too much? She had to confess that she had never thought about it before, but maybe Santa Claus was overworked like her Aunt Meredith, who, according to what her father said at Thanksgiving, had a burn-up or something like that. Maybe she should have limited herself to one or two wishes. And maybe wishing for a koala bear was a bit much after all ... Was it perhaps her fault if Santa went on strike this year?

»As I said, there almost wasn't a Christmas and you wouldn't be sitting under a richly decorated tree tomorrow morning unwrapping presents,« her grandmother's voice intruded on her thoughts.

Mila pushed her worries to the back of her mind and hoped that Santa Claus didn't crash or even give up just because she had wished for so much. As she turned her attention back to her grandmother for more details of the story, she noticed that the old woman had paused in the telling and was looking out the window. A snowy winter landscape lay behind the ice crystals that pressed against the window pane as if they wanted to enter the warm room. The first stars glittered in the dark night, lit only by a few lights that stretched around the lake like a string of pearls. Half a moon adorned the velvet sky, which the old woman gazed at. Absorbed, she sat there, her eyes fixed on a past Mila could only speculate about.

As if she had forgotten the two children, the old woman's mind groped its way back to a time when she had been a bit like Laurin, who no longer wanted to believe in the magic of the world and thought Santa Claus was a fairy tale character. But it was also a time that had changed everything in her life. It was then that she had realized that there was more to life than what could be seen with the naked eye, and that a little magic could make hearts beat. Sometimes just one look was enough to change everything.

A sad smile flitted across the aged woman's face at the memory, causing small fans to form around her eyes. An old longing stirred within her and she felt a restlessness that always overcame her at this time of year. Groping, her eyes glided across the sky, as if searching for something that Mila could not tell what it was. Only after a few moments did she become aware of the eagerly waiting children, clear her throat, and continue her narrative.

»It all began in a place so hidden that few have found it to this day. But those who did ...« She smiled dreamily, and between the lines that time had carved into her skin, the face of a little girl she had been countless Christmases ago showed itself, »... never forgot it again. They say that only a virtuous soul can find this magical place. Only those who truly believe and whose hearts are pure can cross the Light Border. One of those fortunate ones was me.«



## Chapter I – Snow in the Sun

*December 1<sup>st</sup>, 2021*

» **I** hate Christmas!« Nick uttered, so fervently that not only his father, but even his brother gave him a frowning, but also looked a little startled. Nick bit his lip.

»What are you saying? You hate Christmas? That can't be, Nick.« His father's deep voice sounded like the growl of a talking grizzly bear as his gray-black hair flew from side to side in time with his head shaking, forgetting the coffee mug in his hand for a moment.

Before he could spill the contents of the strong brew, Neville was on the scene to take the cup from him, anxious as always to lend a helping hand to his superior and thwart any potential disasters. »I'll take that,« he said, balancing on his toes, his little imp nose red with exertion.

Niklaus DeFrost thanked him with a snort and snatched the cup from Neville's fingers. He was well aware that it was already the fourth and that Neville had only been looking for a reason to keep him from taking another sip, but Niklaus overlooked the reproachful look on the imp's face, who sometimes seemed to take the place of a wife with a raised forefinger and was only too happy to spoil his fun with remarks like »That's too dangerous« and »Remember your blood pressure, boss!«

»You can't hate Christmas,« Niklaus added, before greedily drinking from the black sin again.

Abashed, Nick lowered his head, while his brother Nils rolled his eyes and obviously disagreed. Still, he heard him say, »There you see why it's a good thing the future isn't in Nick's hands, Dad.« He sought his father's gaze for confirmation.

But Niklaus DeFrost continued to look at his youngest son in a way that was somewhere between surprise and quiet resignation. Nick also thought he saw wistfulness in his eyes, although he didn't understand why. He couldn't remember what had prompted him to say the thought out loud, after all, it wasn't the first time he had thought how much he hated Christmas and he was well aware that his father would be anything but pleased about such a confession. Why he had to come out with it today of all days, he himself understood least of all. It was probably because of the whole circus around him: the cheerful mood, the eternal smiles, the air heavy with the scent of cookies ... Sometimes he was just tired of it.

»You'll understand what it's all about,« his father said. »Someday, Nick, you'll realize what a gift this holiday is. A world without Christmas ...« He shook his head, as if the very idea were absurd.

»Exactly,« Nils automatically joined in. With a cocky grin in Nick's direction, he leaned against his father's work desk, which was piled high with papers, and paid no further attention to the mess he was making as he carelessly pushed the papers back to sit on the edge. Nick saw how Neville's chocolate brown eyes seemed to turn into burning embers and how much strength it took for his father's aide to keep his hands off Nils' throat. »Thank goodness he's not going to be your successor, Dad. Imagine what that would mean!«

Niklaus grumbled a few unintelligible words and nodded absently as he raised his coffee mug to his lips again. »Nevertheless, Nick will take a post in the company as well,« he reminded, taking a big gulp from the cup.

»But not the most important one,« Nils quickly interjected. »When you retire in a hundred years or so ...« Dreamily, he looked to the ceiling, as if he already saw a future with himself as head of the company.

»In a *hundred* years!« shouted Niklaus and a good part of the coffee spread over the floor.

Quick as a flash, Neville grabbed a rag and threw himself on his knees to clean the carpet.

Niklaus didn't even notice the imp crawling at his feet. »A hundred years?« he repeated, as if he had misheard.

Nils blinked and returned from his pipe dream to his father's study, whose walls looked like wrapping paper and were hung with all sorts of odds and ends. Although the room was not small, it was cramped. A decorated tree stood in each corner, two oversized nutcrackers guarded the fireplace, garlands of lights dangled from the ceiling, bathing everything in their soft light. Several small tables groaned under the weight of homemade cookies and sank deep into the red carpet, which swallowed every crumb – and absorbed a good portion of the coffee. The room looked cozy and inviting. The only thing that didn't fit in was the ultra-modern table Niklaus had purchased two years ago. »Ergonomic«, he had called it, beaming as Neville skeptically sneaked around the angular thing.

Slowly, Nils slid off the countertop, papers and documents sailing to the floor.

Neville sighed with self-pity and crawled under the table to collect them.

Nick sat silently in a corner, alternately wondering if he should help Neville or if it would be noticeable if he steeled himself away.

»No?« Nils ran his hand through his shaggy hair until it stood up in all directions. »Well, if you want to work longer, for me that's not a –«

»*Longer?*!« Niklaus' eyes nearly popped out of their sockets.

»Boss, you need to calm down,« Neville spoke up, standing on both feet again and thus directly in front of him. He had thrown his head back and was looking up at Niklaus with concern. »Your blood pressure ...«

Niklaus ignored his assistant. »Do you think I'm crazy?!« he snapped at his son. »I've been doing this for half an eternity! Damn it, that's –« He interrupted himself and smiled apologetically at Neville before turning back to Nils, the smile giving way to a thunderous expression. »This is the last Christmas I'm going to put up with this fuss! I want to do something different for a change!« Upset, he glared at his son, as if it was abundantly clear why he longed for retirement.

Nils looked puzzled for a moment, as if he didn't quite understand, but slowly he realized what his father had just said. »Tha-Tha-Tha- *This* Christmas is the last one?«

Nick had to admit that he had never seen his brother look so pale. Of course, with his ivory skin and blond hair, Nils was the fair type anyway, but right now a snowball in his face would have vanished without a trace. And Nick would have liked to shove one in his face – reasons had accumulated enough over the years.

»Yes, Nils. You'll be instructed this year and take over next year.«

»But Dad!« The triumphant smile finally slipped from Nils' face. Suddenly, the idea of being the successor seemed anything but enticing.

»How long did you think I was going to keep doing this? After all, I'm not the youngest anymore!«

»Well, I don't think you are old . . .« cajoled Nils in a vain attempt to convince his father that he could certainly run the business for a few more years.

»Out of the question. I've had enough. It's your turn.«

»But Dad! What about my post?«

»Nick can do it in the future.«

»Nick?!« Nils seemed to be taken by complete surprise.

»Yes,« Niklaus confirmed, and as if that said it all, he turned to Neville. »Do we have all the orders?«

»Dad, that – you can't do that . . .« protested Nils, although the surprise at his father's announcement still put a rope around his mind and made it hard for him to think clearly.

Abruptly, Niklaus turned to him. »Nils, you knew what to expect from the time you lit the top of the tree. You yourself remind us every single day how much you look forward to it. So?« Expectantly, he looked at him as if Nils would now have to dance around the house with excitement.

Nils didn't look like he was about to join in a dance of joy. »But I thought I had a few more years. You know, I was just perfecting my post.«

Neville exchanged a meaningful look with Nick. They both knew very well what Nils meant by *perfected*; after all, he had made a true icon out of Saint Nicholas. In recent years, he had even expanded his role to the point where presents were now also distributed on St. Nicholas Day – but only to the good guys. That he had less and less to do in a world increasingly dominated by selfishness and cold-heartedness, while still enjoying a certain popularity, was like a slap in the face for Neville and the followers of Santa Claus. While everyone else in the business had to work harder and harder each year to fulfill the utopian dreams of the children, Nils did less and less. Instead, he basked on the roof of the house and let the others do his chores.

»Fine. Then Nick can join right away, and you'll accompany me this year so you can get to know the new job.«

Nils gasped as if he were choking. »B-B-But –«

»It's a done deal. I want to go on vacation next year,« Niklaus announced.

»On vacation?« asked Neville and Nils simultaneously.

»Where to?« muttered Nick, looking questioningly at his father. Sometimes the old man was a mystery to him.

»Anywhere,« Niklaus replied vaguely. »Once around the world.«

»You already know it all,« Nils interjected.

»But not really. There's hardly any time. I'd like to be a tourist and take some pictures in peace . . .« Niklaus smiled as if he were watching himself do it. When his eyes fell on Nils, he returned to the here and now and his expression became iron. »It's about time, Nils. I'm tired of working this time every year. I want a little more leisure.«

»But the rest of the year –«

»That's not the same. And leisure I haven't had since – oh, I don't even remember. It's your turn, Nils. That's what you've always wanted, isn't it?«

Nils nodded, though it seemed more like a shake of the head.

»Exactly. That's settled.«

»What's settled?« asked a high voice. A young woman with a face framed by golden curls and a smile that felt like the kiss of the sun stood in the doorway. Curiously, she looked around, her cheeks bright red from the cold.

Neville sighed, entranced as always by the sight.

»Your brother will succeed me next year, and Nick will become Saint Nikolaus!« announced Nicholas, beaming at his daughter as if they had won the lottery.

»Then you're retiring?« asked Ivy-Rose, her eyes shining.

Niklaus nodded, whereupon Ivy-Rose clapped her hands enthusiastically. »That's just great! Then you can finally relax!«

»And do a little more sport,« Niklaus added, patting his stomach.

Nick and Nils followed the gesture with their eyes, but instead of the paunch that one would have expected to see, after all, it was captured on millions of posters, there was a six-pack that even his sons envied. Niklaus DeFrost deviated so much from the popular idea of Santa Claus that Nick sometimes wondered if it was really him. If Santa was known for being stout, Niklaus appeared to be well-toned and brimming with health – for years he had eaten only the fat-free cookies from the plates offered to him, and the stress on Christmas Eve kept him fit. As if he had to completely contradict the myth that Santa Claus was an old-fashioned fat man, he even did extra sports and dressed most of the year in the latest winter fashion, which he picked up on his excursions on the twenty-fourth and had tailored in detail in the workshop. And if you expected a white-haired man with a long beard who seemed good-natured but somewhat antiquated and unworldly, Niklaus presented a gray-haired but tanned charmer who meticulously trimmed his beard, including sideburns, and looked more like a heartbreaker than the version of Santa Claus to whom millions of children wrote letters. Nick did not doubt that more single women than children would write to him if mankind knew about his father's true appearance. Only the look from Niklaus' kind eyes and his disposition gave a glimpse of his real purpose.

While Ivy-Rose and Niklaus were rejoicing as if the Christmas business was already over and they could sit back with a glass of eggnog, Nils' expression grew more helpless by the minute until his eyes fell on Nick and anger took the place of exasperation.

»Have fun being Saint Nicholas,« he hissed. »You have no idea what you're in for.«

»I'm happy for you, too, Nils,« he heard Ivy-Rose, and the next moment she was enfolding her brother in a hug in which he hung helplessly. »You're going to be a wonderful Santa!« As always, everything about Ivy-Rose shone, but Nils continued to look grim. His sister had no idea what was in store for him! She, as the Christ Child, knew nothing of hard work; after all, she only gave presents to those children who received nothing – that is, only a fraction of the population.

»You see, Nils? Even your sister thinks it's a good idea,« Niklaus said, as if that were reason enough to finally celebrate.

»She thinks everything is great anyway,« Nils grumbled just quietly enough that no one heard him except Neville and Nick. Sometimes his sister really got on his nerves. For her, everything

was always *wonderful* and *great* and *heavenly*. How could anyone exaggerate like that?! The world was peppered with broken Christmas balls, but she only saw the good in everything.

Nils shook his head, wondering how he was going to wriggle out of this and convince his father to do another hundred years of work. It wasn't that he didn't want to be the boss, but having to give up his great post that promised him so much free time and recreation didn't sound very appealing. Besides, people had just begun to hold festivals in his honor that went far beyond the original custom.

Just as he was about to protest further, the door was yanked open and a gush of cold came in – along with a bearded man who looked as if he had lived in an ice desert for the last thirty years and had adapted to the surroundings not only in terms of clothing, but at some point also visually. Gloomy white hair framed the weather-beaten face like that of a snow lion. A long matted beard hung like icicles from the prominent chin, which was defiantly jutted out. Ice balls glittered on the shaggy coat that reached to the boots. The apparition was reminiscent of a figure carved in marble, modeled after Poseidon. But while ancient statues made their home in Mediterranean sites and had posed motionless for tourists' photos for ages, this specimen had set out to visit its descendants. Two gray eyes flashed from under bushy white eyebrows and riveted on Niklaus DeFrost, who, had anyone asked Nick, seemed to suddenly grow smaller.

»Father,« gasped Niklaus. »What are you doing here?«

The rigid ice face became sinister. »What am I doing here? This is, for Christ's sake, my house too, isn't it?«

Niklaus smiled apologetically. »Of course it is. It's just surprising, you know? You don't come around often . . .« *But when you do, it's at the most inopportune moments*, his face seemed to say.

Klaus DeFrost did not elaborate and also overlooked the somewhat pained expression his son was displaying. »The axe is shot,« he announced briefly and painlessly.

Niklaus nodded, not really comprehending, while his father still stood in the doorway, snowflakes swirling around him. When no one said anything and the old man saw the looks exchanged by his family members, the usual suspicion flashed in his eyes.

»What's going on here? You guys look like the Easter Bunny stole from us.« Questioningly, he looked from one to the other.

Uneasily, Niklaus stroked his beard. »Well, we were just discussing some business —«

»Yes, quite great news! Nils is going to be Santa Claus starting next year!«, Ivy-Rose blurted out, giving her grandfather a smile as if she had just carved him a new axe.

The old man didn't bat an eye. Expressionless, he looked at his son, then at Nils, then at his son again. »Already?« he finally said.

Nils breathed an inward sigh of relief. Perhaps he had just found an ally. »That was my objection, too . . .« he began.

»It's about time,« Niklaus cut him off.

»Nonsense. You still have a good hundred years ahead of you!« his father objected.

»Nevertheless, Nils can already take over.«

»But he shouldn't. He doesn't have a clue.«

Nils wanted to protest, but then changed his mind and kept silent.

»He will be trained this year,« Niklaus insisted.

Klaus frowned. »What for? You're not sick, are you?«

»No.«

»Then you can go on, can't you?«

»But I don't want to anymore,« Niklaus confessed after a few more excuses, looking past his father to avoid his reproachful eyes.

Disdainfully, Klaus clicked his tongue. »Nonsense. One of your imps put that in your head, huh? If you ask me, you give them too much free rein. Soon they'll be dancing on your nose. You'll have to rule them by force!«

»They're volunteers, Father!«

»Poppycock, they still need a strong hand.«

Niklaus sighed, while Neville seemed to recoil further with every word. Dimly, he recalled the horror stories about Klaus DeFrost he had heard as a child.

»Forget that silliness,« Klaus advised. »Nils and your successor. Don't make me laugh. He's still in dire need of the hundred years to prepare.«

»He's ready,« Niklaus asserted, wishing his father would return to his den and leave him alone. Why did the damn axe have to break today of all days?

Klaus eyed him thoughtfully for a moment, as if it had only now occurred to him that his son might be serious about this. »You can't just make a switch. It's stipulated that there's only one every three hundred years.«

»That's just a guideline.«

Klaus shook his head. »That's coming from that Caleb, isn't it? He's always been a troublemaker.«

»No, father.«

»Then who? That howling doctor? Is it him?«

»Virgil has nothing to do with it,« Niklaus assured him.

»The imps, then. I knew they were planning something. Watch out for them.«

Niklaus groaned again as Klaus continued to tell him about a secret Santa plot he had seen coming for decades.

»Keep pursuing this crazy idea and disaster will befall you,« he finished his prediction. »Trust me. Great disaster.« With an expression like Nostradamus himself, he looked at his son.

»Oh, father, you and your superstitions. Nothing will happen.«

»Tell yourself that. Great calamity awaits you. The axe was already the first sign.«

Niklaus had to pull himself together not to roll his eyes. »Of course.«

»Laugh all you want, but you'll remember what I said soon enough.« Again Klaus clicked his tongue. »Successor after two hundred years,« he grumbled to himself. »In my day, you lasted. I completed a full three hundred years before it was your turn.«

Niklaus said nothing in response, letting the silence grow like a mountain of snow between them.

Nils looked perplexedly at Neville, but the imp had long since caught Ivy Rose's eyes, who rewarded him with a smile.

Nick, meanwhile, mulled over his grandfather's words and wondered if there was a shred of truth in them. Of course, he did not share his superstitious views. Just last week, Klaus claimed that Vinilla and Vincenzo, their cooks, were responsible for melting the polar ice caps because they cooked too much and too hot. In their use of organically grown cinnamon he saw a pagan ritual, and if Neville hadn't given him other ideas – firewood was to be cut and no one could do it as well as he – he probably would have started an inquisition process.

No, Nick did not share his grandfather's misconception at all. According to Nils, the old man was even crazy. Nevertheless, it was impossible to ignore the fact that his father's plan was against the rules. A Santa Claus was supposed to do his job for three hundred years. Was it really a good idea for Niklaus to plan a handover ahead of time?

»What about the axe now? Does anyone have one?«, Klaus broke the awkward silence.

»In the workshop,« Neville muttered, pointing at a door, as if the former head of the company didn't know where it was.

Without another word, the old man trudged past them into the workshop, from which the first sounds of terror came shortly after.

Neville breathed an audible sigh of relief before turning to Niklaus. »Boss, you need to hurry,« he reminded. »The Lady in White will be here soon.«

»Really?« Delighted, Ivy-Rose clapped her hands.

Nils made a snide noise, but stopped himself just in time to comment on what he saw as inappropriate anticipation. With her birdbrain, his sister probably didn't even know what that meant. The Lady in White, as they called the stranger who came every year at this time, represented something like the tax inspection in a business. She didn't come to pay them a friendly visit, eat some cookies and drink some tea, but to see how things were going.

»Oh, it can wait,« Niklaus claimed, his mood suddenly below zero. Sluggishly, he reached for his coffee and sipped it.

»But we still have to get everything ready,« Neville remarked. Unlike Ivy-Rose, he seemed anything but taken with the visit, or even as composed as his employer.

»We do this every year, don't we, and every year we make it on time. Let Caleb know to take care of it. And tell Virgil he'll have to reschedule the physical.«

»Um, boss. Virgil is – how shall I put it – indisposed.«

»Indisposed? What's wrong with him now?!« thundered Niklaus, forgetting his anger at his father. With a scowl he looked down at Neville, who seemed to be getting smaller and smaller and almost fell over backwards because he had put his head so far back.

Helplessly, the little imp raised his shoulders, but found no explanation.

»He's sad, Dad,« Ivy-Rose revealed, putting on a concerned face as if she shared the doctor's sorrow. »You know how this time of year gets to him.«

»*This* time of year? Why, he's depressed all year!«

»But Dad!« placated Ivy-Rose.

»It's okay, I'll talk to him,« Niklaus relented.

Ivy-Rose smiled. A blink of an eye later, she had scurried off to the workshop to continue spreading cheer – and to cheer up the imps who had been frightened by Klaus.

Nils, by now with some color back in his face, slowly crept up to suggest to Santa once again to reconsider his plans.

Niklaus had other worries. Piercingly, he looked Nick. »Are you ready to follow in your brother's footsteps and be Saint Nicholas? Or do you hate Christmas too much to continue working in the family business?« He had sounded mocking, but also a little sad.

Nick swallowed. If there was one thing he didn't want, it was to work in the family business. He had always longed for a life away from the icy wasteland that surrounded him. Especially he had longed for the summer . . .

»I can hardly imagine he's ready, Dad,« Nils took the words out of his mouth. »You know Nick. He's a dreamer. And he thinks Christmas isn't what it should be, right?« Challengingly, he looked at Nick, a wicked glint in his eye.

»Is that true?« Niklaus wanted to know.

A hesitant nod was the answer. »I just don't think Christmas is what it used to be, you know?« explained Nick. *Everything about it*, he thought.

»Of course it isn't anymore. Kids today send their lists by email or WhatsApp. I haven't seen a handwritten one since 2007. And of course, the lists are getting longer and longer, too. Now there are even pre-printed ones where all you have to do is check off what you want!« Niklaus shook his head. »Do you think I'm okay with the fact that it's not letters the kids write anymore? Or that they want those stupid violent computer games and other crap? But that's the way it is. You have to move with the times.«

Nick didn't want to disagree with him, but that alone wasn't what bothered him. It wasn't just the children's wishes or the excessive consumerism and Christmas circus. Rather, he missed the feeling that Christmas had always promised. From year to year it had become less and less. At first, he had convinced himself that it was because he had grown up. But by now he knew that wasn't the only reason. The magic of Christmas had faded like a fragrance that could not be captured and that eventually lost its effect. This time of the year no longer exerted any magic on him. In addition, it annoyed him that the whole theater came to an abrupt end shortly after Christmas morning. How many trees were thrown out of the window the very next day, how quickly was everything pushed aside and Christmas forgotten? Yes, he had experienced too much Christmas all his life – what else could be expected when you grew up at the North Pole? But he didn't like this abrupt end. Christmas had nothing magical for him anymore, and all he wanted was a normal life in a normal town where no one suspected where he came from, and best of all, no one knew what Christmas was. A place where not for half a year there was no sun to be seen. A place that made him an ordinary young man who got to decide for himself what his future looked like.

»That's the very problem, Dad. Nick is old-fashioned,« Nils asserted. »That's why he can't take my job.« *Better I keep it*, he added in his mind.

Niklaus seemed to have heard the words as if he had spoken them aloud. »You'll be my successor, that's for sure, Nils,« he decided, »You're destined to be, after all.«

Nils swallowed and exchanged a look with Nick, but his brother remained silent. »Yes . . .« he began, remembering the night he and his brother had sneaked into the letter warehouse to look for Santa's magic crystal ball. They had made a mess, but they had not found the crystal ball.



Instead, the reindeer had suddenly disappeared and the letters had become snow-covered and illegible. Neville had almost had a heart attack and had taken ages to restore everything to its original state. Only the fact that the top of the Christmas tree was lit up had kept Niklaus from catapulting his sons to the South Pole. Proudly, he had looked at Nils, and Nils still remembered how good it had felt when everyone whispered his name in awe. But today, when he thought of that night, he no longer felt joy, but an uneasy feeling. That night held a secret he had never shared with anyone. Only his brother knew what had really happened.

Nils shooed away the spark of a guilty conscience that almost made him think that sometimes he was doing injustice to his brother, who had never betrayed him, and reflected on the present situation and the fact that he was losing his cherished post as Saint Nicholas. »But I —«

»Nothing but. You made the top of the Christmas tree light up. That's the sign that you're the next Santa. Period.«

Nils fell silent. Wordlessly, he nodded and followed Neville into the workshop, where everyone was in a twitter, bracing themselves for the arrival of the Lady in White. Wild shouting and cluttered elves and imps greeted him, along with an axe-wielding old man who found fault with everything and kept talking about some great calamity that was coming upon them. With a self-pitying look, Nils stood looking around, mentally preoccupied with how he was going to transfer the benefits of his old post to the new one.

»That's settled then,« Niklaus sighed with relief as the door closed. »And as for you, Nick: You just need a little practice. You'll get the hang of it. Trust me, you're going to have fun being Saint Nicholas.«

Nick opened his mouth, but Neville forestalled a reply as he stuck his head in the door. »Boss? You coming?«

»Later. I'm going for another round of snowboarding.«

Neville's look became almost as helpless as when Nils had accidentally knocked over the big Christmas tree in front of the house. Nick felt sorry for him, but he knew all too well that once a decision was made, his father couldn't be dissuaded. Even Nils had just experienced that firsthand.

»But boss ...« the imp tried.

»Later, Neville. You'll be fine. «

»And the Lady in White?«

»Can wait. I'll be back soon.« And with that, he disappeared out the door to pursue his latest hobby. Whooping with joy, he jumped on his snowmobile and chased off to the next hill.

Nick watched him go, wondering what to do. How was he going to explain to his father that he didn't want to live here anymore? It would break his heart after all he had done for him. But could he forget what he longed for? Could he let his dreams melt away like snow in the sun?

## Chapter 2 – The Lady in White

In a swirl of snowflakes, the Lady in White appeared. A gust of cold air moved through Northern Lights, making the Christmas lights dance and the imps, elves and Christmas helpers fall silent and move closer together. In awe, they all looked to the milky cloud from which a shape began to peel.

»There she is,« Jax remarked, shivering even though his translucent body didn't actually know such a thing as cold.

»Creepy,« Jenara breathed, joining her brother's trembling.

»Don't get carried away,« Sedrick said, putting another cookie into his mouth. »Looks the same as always.«

»Precisely,« whispered the two ice figures, their trembling putting a fine note in the air that seemed to float in the silence that had fallen.

Tensely, everyone stared at the woman who stepped out of the swirl of snow.

»A little skinny she is,« Sedrick observed.

»Unlike you, everyone is skinny,« Jenara countered.

Sedrick laughed that his *emergency rings*, as he liked to call them, were rocking. Not in the least offended, he turned his attention back to the plate of goodies Vinilla had brought.

»He's just right,« the cook said, smiling contentedly as Sedrick reached for a candy cane. »And at least he won't have to worry about breaking in half when she talks to him,« she added with a meaningful glance at Jax and Jenara before hurrying back into the kitchen.

The two ice figures snapped their eyes open and hugged each other in fear.

»D-Do you think s-she's right?« asked Jenara, biting her translucent lip.

»I-I h-hope not,« Jax replied, swallowing hard.

»W-We should hide.«

»G-Good idea.«

Before Sedrick could get another word past lips sticky with sugar, the brother and sister were gone. »Oh well,« was all he said, shoving another candy cane between his teeth, his gaze fixed on the woman in front of them as if he were sitting in the theater enjoying a good show.

Barely three steps away was Nils, shooing the imps around. A dozen or so hauled the heavy red carpet and rolled it to their guest's feet. Others held iced fruit in their hands and handed out delicacies Vinilla and her husband had been tinkering with for days. Again and again, Nils herded the onlookers back to the workshop and thus to work. But those who didn't need to be there stayed at the star-shaped square, trying to catch a glimpse of their visitor.

Perhaps one or the other also preferred the reception of the guest to a return to the workshop, because Klaus stood in front of the main door and frightened everyone. Once in Christmas Town, he seemed to have decided to organize some more equipment and take the opportunity to check on things. After terrorizing the workers, accusing them of producing cheap garbage instead of quality like it used to be, his anger began to unload on Yas. Yas, known to weep over every toy

to be given away – as well as all items he once laid eyes on – as if a dozen memories hung on them, sat howling in the snow, unwilling to let the old man have the saw.

»Let go, damn it!«, Nick heard his grandfather yell.

»No, no, no!« the little imp whimpered, ready to burst into tears at any moment. No matter how much Klaus raged and the others assured the little imp that he would be allowed to choose something else in return, Yas could not be persuaded to give up the saw, even though Neville said he already had three of them.

While the two argued, Nils acted as if the company would suddenly cease operations without him.

»He's already acting like the boss,« Vinn remarked.

»When just a few hours ago he had a problem with being the next Santa,« Micah added.

Nick remained silent, watching his brother march across the square with his head held high, throwing instructions around like snowballs.

While Nils tried to show all the world what an invaluable service he was performing, the Lady in White strode thoughtfully across the red carpet. If she had been a misty outline so far, Nick now already recognized the long fur coat, the gloved hands and the silver hair that reached far down her back. Slowly the figure approached them and the closer it came, the more Nick froze. It was not the first time he was witnessing this spectacle, but never before had it made him feel so uncomfortable. Something about this woman was *creepy*, as Jenara put it. And yet, everyone looked at her like a long-awaited messiah. Of course, she was the reason Northern Lights existed, and thus Christmas, but Nick wondered, not for the first time, why she of all people showed interest in the custom. Everything about her seemed cold and hard. Her features were flawless and even as if carved from ice, but Nick would not have called her beautiful. Not only her frosty look, which in anger could turn people to ice, as was rumored, but also the chilly pull of her lips, which seemed never to have laughed, made him doubt that she possessed a heart at all. Why had she brought the Christmas festival into being? How could something so good come from such a block of ice?

»Cold as Ice, right?« joked Vinn in reference to a song.

Nick remained motionless, unable to take his eyes off the unreal figure that was now only a good ten paces away from his brother.

»Where's Santa?« inquired Micah, looking at him questioningly.

»Snowboarding,« Nick replied.

»And he's not back yet?« Vinn twisted his face into a grin. »I wonder if she'll turn him to ice for this.«

There was a thieving glint in his friend's eyes, but Nick didn't respond. Instead, he watched his brother hurry toward the ice-cold lady and devotedly breathe a kiss on her glove, though you could tell how hard it was for him to bow to her. Raik, his right hand, was standing right next to him, holding out a tray with two glasses to them. Nick was too far away to understand what they were talking about, but judging by the expression on the woman's face, she seemed anything but pleased. Presumably his brother had just informed her that Niklaus had not yet returned. When Nick noticed the angry glint in her eyes, he even felt a little sorry for Nils – but only until his

brother almost knocked Sedrick to the ground to point the Lady in White in the direction of the workshop.

»Great Santa,« Vinn remarked. »The nicest one of all, huh?«

Nick didn't say anything to that either, which made Vinn furrow his brows and ask, »What's wrong with you?«

It took a few moments for Nick to emerge from his absent state, take his eyes off the Lady in White and Nils, and turn to Vinn. »N-Nothing.«

»Nothing? You've been quiet all day.«

»He's always quiet,« Micah interjected, smiling indulgently. Of his two friends, he had always been the more patient, the one who understood that his mind was elsewhere most of the day.

»But not *that* quiet,« Vinn objected. He narrowed his eyes and eyed Nick thoughtfully for a moment before asking, »Is this about the new post?«

Nick raised his shoulders meaninglessly.

»You don't seem too excited about it,« Micah added.

»No,« Nick admitted.

Vinn sighed and turned his back on the commotion to attend to his friend. For years, he had been annoyed by the way Nils treated his brother. But more than that, Nick's behavior infuriated him. Instead of giving Nils a piece of his mind and thinking of himself once in a while, he always took a step back when it came to Niklaus' eldest son. Vinn wondered if it was because Nils was destined to be Santa's successor, or if Nick was just generally passive and put up with everything.

*Doesn't matter, he decided. If he can't fight back, then I'll do it. That's what friends are for.*

»Have you talked to your dad again?« he asked.

Nick shook his head. There had been no opportunity as Niklaus had just jumped up and left.

But actually there were enough opportunities; he hadn't just been wrestling with his place in the company since today. For months he had been looking for the right moment to talk to his father about the future. Several times he had gone to his study, determined to lay his cards on the table. Each time, he took refuge in a trivial conversation at the last second. Whenever he looked into his father's eyes, he felt like a traitor. And if his eyes landed on Nils, he was overcome with a guilty conscience; after all, as his brother had reminded him only a few hours ago, Nils was giving up everything to take over as Santa Claus while he continued to enjoy his life. The job as Saint Niklaus was certainly not quite as easy and carefree as Nils made it out to be. On the contrary, for the last few years he had never missed an opportunity to let the world know how much responsibility he had to carry and what organizational skills one had to have to keep on top of things. But Nick knew that his brother was basically right. The tasks that awaited one as Santa Claus were so extensive that the very thought of them gave him a stomachache. He didn't envy Nils' fate.

Vinn sighed. »Should I —«

»No,« said Nick. He wouldn't let Vinn fight his battles, though he was tempted to.

»Then talk to him. — Or,« Vinn added, seeing Nick wrestling with himself, »maybe Nils' post isn't so bad.«

Nick smiled weakly.

»What else are you going to do? You knew you'd follow in Nils' footsteps eventually.«

»Yeah, but I was hoping that by then ...« Nick shook his head, not wanting to have to finish the thought. That he had hoped for someone else was, after all, utopian and would only cause Vinn to laugh.

Vinn seemed to guess what he was thinking, but at least he wasn't picking at the wound, and instead of bursting out laughing, just a smile flitted across his lips. »Nils has made something of the job. I'm sure you'll get used to it soon enough. And hey, look at it this way: you've always wanted to see the world beyond the border.«

»Yes ...« *But not in winter*, Nick thought. Sighing inwardly, he turned his head and looked around for his father. When he saw Neville hurrying by, he stopped him and inquired about Santa.

»No, no sign of him yet,« Neville gasped, and you could tell he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

Nick gave him a reassuring smile and added a »I'm sure he'll be here soon,« but Neville sighed with little conviction and hurried on.

»Look at Nils. What a fuss he's making about the Diwa,« Vinn remarked with a snide shake of his head. »That's hard to watch. «

»Don't keep calling her that,« Micah rebuked him.

»What, Diwa?«

Micah nodded.

»Why not?«

»Because that's not her name.«

»How would you know? Have you ever talked to her?«

»No, but ...«

»Exactly. And either that's her name or she doesn't have a name at all. And if that's the case, I'm sure she's glad I gave her one. Besides, it fits: Diwa = dragon in white arriving.«

Micah and Nick exchanged a look and decided not to say anything in response.

Just as Nick was about to turn his attention back to Nils, who was strutting across the red carpet toward the workshop with a smile as fake as artificial snow, herding a horde of imps and elves before him, the Lady in White at his side, he heard noise from behind one of the hills surrounding the square. There was a strange buzzing that rose and fell, and excited voices. Along with a good portion of those present, Nick turned toward the sounds. At first, he saw only pitch blackness beyond the sea of lights that illuminated the square. Then a tangle of imps appeared, creeping over the hill like a colorful little avalanche. Nick's eyebrows drew together questioningly, but in the very next moment he noticed his father's snowmobile crawling over the hill in jerky movements. Only at second glance did he recognize Fenris at the wheel, with Linus close by, the two imps, of all people, who didn't miss a second of the day to argue. That they were once again engaged in an argument was manifested by the serpentine lines in which they approached the Christmas Town.

»There's Santa!« shouted Nieva, laughing and jumping up and down as if it were her birthday. A sea of snowflakes sailed down on the town until Neville stopped her. Whenever Nieva was happy and laughing, it snowed – there was a reason the North Pole was so white.

»Enough now, Nieva!« shouted Neville. Grimly, he eyed the snow girl, who instantly blushed and breathed an »Excuse me.«

Nils and the Lady in White, meanwhile, had stopped and watched as the snowmobile pulled into the star-shaped square and lurched to a standstill.

Yas had stopped howling and was staring open-mouthed at the cot.

»Father!« shrieked Ivy-Rose. Barely two seconds later, she was at his side, eyeing the old man lying with a pained face on a makeshift cot that Nick, upon closer inspection, recognized to be a string of Christmas hats. »What happened?«

»Fell,« Niklaus brought out through clenched teeth. A gaggle of imps surrounded him, chattering eagerly at him or asking unnecessary questions. Elves scurried excitedly back and forth and would not calm down. One or two sobbed as if Santa were long gone.

»Silence!« shouted Neville, making his way through the crowd. »Move aside!« he demanded, shooing the others away. »Make way and let the medics through!«

At a wave, two burly elves marched up and helped Santa off the cot and onto a sled.

Nils was already intoning a placating speech, but the Lady in White ditched him ice-cold and marched over to Niklaus.

»What's going on here?« she demanded to know.

Instantly, everyone fell silent. Fearful and helpless, they looked at Santa, Neville a picture of misery.

Niklaus put on his best smile, but looked like a schoolboy who had played a prank that missed. »A little accident.«

»An accident?« The Lady in White looked at him searchingly. »What happened?«

»A precipitation, nothing more.«

Judging by her look, she thought Santa was a liar.

»I'm fine,« he assured her. As if to prove it, he braced himself and tried to walk on his own. A cry of pain made the two strong elves rush to his side again and grab his arms.

Klaus paused, his hand outstretched for the saw. Ever since he had criticized the Lady in White, quite some time ago, he had been at war with her and could not be induced to attend her welcoming committee. As luck would have it, he was in town that day, but he would be damned if he was going to approach the White Dragon. As little as he cared about the visitor, he was not oblivious to what had happened. Nick thought he heard him say »I told you disaster was coming,« but his words were lost in the sobs of Yas, who had forgotten the saw and was by now crying for Santa.

Suddenly the crowd dispersed and a tall, scrawny elf with a bent nose appeared. A knee-length gray cloak flapped around his body, which struggled to resist gravity. Something authoritarian clung to him, though his shoulders hung as if a Sedrick sat on each. Murmurs of voices followed him until he stopped in front of Santa. One look sufficed and he had made his judgment. »Broken.«

Niklaus's eyes went wide. »What?! How would you know?«

»I'm a doctor. I see things like that,« Virgil replied.

»But you didn't examine me at all!«

»Wouldn't make any difference. The leg is broken,« said Virgil dryly, the expression on his face about the same as if he had opened up that he had only three days to live.

»It can't be! What are you going to do?« Slowly, panic rose in Niklaus, and the smile on his lips had long since become nothing more than a grimace.

Virgil sighed as if his heart was heavy and the world a sad place. He almost looked as if *he* had broken his leg. »I'm going to correct the fraction and put a cast on it.«

»A cast?« Santa almost jumped up. In disbelief he stared at the elf doctor.

»Of course. The usual procedure.«

»But Virgil!« Niklaus shook his head pleadingly, but that didn't persuade his doctor to make a different judgment. »And how long? I mean, until the twenty-fourth . . .«

»Impossible. The next few weeks —«

»Weeks?!« Niklaus almost shrieked.

The elves and imps cried out in panic. Like crazy, they cluttered and wrung their hands. Half the town was in an uproar and even Nils had stopped his silly grin.

»Sorry, that's how it is,« Virgil informed them with an expressionless face. »Life is a sad debacle.« Sighing, he turned, »Take him to my office.« His head hanging, lamenting over life, he shuffled away.

Stunned, Niklaus watched him go. The elves and imps around him sobbed and wailed or asked about his pain. Neville helplessly raised his shoulders and looked as if the end of Christmas had come. Only after a while did it occur to Niklaus that the Lady in White was still there. Quickly he put up a brave front.

»It looks worse than it is,« he claimed.

»Oh does it?« said the Lady in White with her iceberg eyes. Santa's smile bounced off it like the Titanic.

»It'll be fine.«

»Apparently not, or did I misunderstand your doctor?« Her gaze chilled a few more degrees.

Santa put on one last attempt at a smile before letting it go. Concerned, he stared into the faces of his aides, who surrounded him with doleful expressions. In more than one, he saw a hopelessness he felt inside. Suddenly his face brightened, as if an idea had occurred to him.

»No problem,« he announced. »My successor will take over.«

»Your successor?« The Lady in White measured him with a look as if he had suffered a craniocerebral trauma in the precipitation and lost a good part of his mind.

»My successor,« Niklaus affirmed, beaming with pride. Searchingly, he looked around, »Where is he?«

Neville sighed, nonetheless pushing aside the curious elves and imps. »There.«

Santa's face was a single glow. »Meet my son. The successor.«

The Lady in White raised an eyebrow and looked Nils up and down in a way as if she had never seen him before. Silence reigned for anxious minutes and only the sound of the wind was heard howling across the square. Nils showed his brightest smile to break the ice, but Nick had the impression that it only froze tighter.

When the Lady in White had finished her inspection, she slowly turned around and set her eyes on Niklaus again. »When I came here, long ago, when this place knew nothing but snow and

silence, I brought a gift that I gave to the first Santa Claus: I enabled him to travel against the laws of physics, bestowing on him, as on all who came after him, near immortality, to give the world a custom that no one today can imagine doing without.« As she spoke, everyone fell into reverent silence, as if she were reading from a forbidden book millions of years old. »The trust I have placed in you has stood the test of time, generation after generation. Only once a year do I come to check up on you. But instead of finding eager workers and completed Christmas preparations and everything« – she made a vague hand gesture that included the town and its inhabitants, putting on a face as if she had bitten into a sugar-free cookie – »brightly polished, you lie before me with a broken leg, lagging behind your schedule, I notice, and now you open up to me that your son is taking over? You know that a new Santa Claus is only intended every three hundred years. If I remember correctly, you have been in this office for just two hundred years.«

»That could be it . . .,« Niklaus murmured, his brow furrowed as if he were doing some hard math.

»And now you want me to believe that *this* is your successor?« The look she gave Nils reflected so much disdain that even Nick's eyebrows drew together and he mentally sided with his brother.

»If you'll excuse me, I'm a good choice,« Nils interjected, but no one paid him any mind.

»Dear lady,« Niklaus raised his voice, »my son is a worthy successor.«

»Is he?« asked the Lady in White.

»By all means. He has made the top of the Christmas tree shine.«

Suspiciously, the Lady in White narrowed her eyes. »When?«

»Well . . . I think it was . . .« Perplexed, he looked at Nils.

»Twelve years ago,« Nils murmured, more meekly than ever.

A new expression appeared on the cold face before them. »Twelve years ago? Why am I only hearing about this now?«

»He was just a child then, dear lady. It was clear that he was not yet ready –«

»That doesn't matter. He should have been instructed immediately.«

»But he was a child, just –«

»Even children can do the job. You should have informed me without delay.« Disgruntled, the Lady in White pressed her lips together and gave Nils another look, this time different, before announcing, »Very well, a mistake that will be corrected immediately. Congratulations: you will be the new Santa Claus.« Not very happy and with a facial expression as if she had slipped on ice, she looked at Nils.

»Now?!« Nils' face lost all its color and seemed almost as translucent as Jenara and Jax's bodies.

»Yes,« the Lady in White said in a tone that brooked no argument.

Niklaus gave his son an apologetic smile. »I guess we'll have to make the transfer already this year.«

»But – You have – It will – I'm not ready yet. I-I don't even know what to do!« Helplessly, Nils looked from one to the other.

»It's in your blood. Once you're in the sled, you'll know what to do.«

»But Dad . . .«



»Well, that's settled then,« the Lady in White intervened. »There's another matter at hand. Something more pressing.«

»Something more pressing?« asked Niklaus and Nils with one voice.

»Yes,« she replied coolly. »Every hundred years, the spell needs to be refreshed.«

Niklaus turned deathly pale. Beside him, even Nils looked tanned. »W-What?«

»You heard me. The spell must be renewed.«

»This year?« Niklaus's voice was more like a croak.

»This year.«

»What is she talking about?« asked Nils, seeing the dismayed expression on his father's face.

Niklaus was unable to answer. Despondently, he shook his head.

»The magic of Christmas must be renewed every hundred years, as I said before,« explained the Lady in White, whose patience seemed almost exhausted.

»And how?«

»By finding the Christmas child.«

»The Christmas child?« Nils had never seen his brother so desperate and clueless.

»Am I talking too fast that I have to repeat everything?«

Like an idiot, Nils shook his head. He couldn't manage to say anything.

»Good, then that's settled. You search for this child immediately.«

»And then?«

The Lady in White almost rolled her eyes – or turned Nils into an ice figure. With the last shred of patience, she explained, »You find the child by Christmas Eve and make him or her believe in Christmas.«

»That's it?«

»Yes.«

»You got it,« Nils said, suddenly full of confidence again and with a smile. »How hard can it be?«

The Lady in White looked at him as if he had said something really stupid, but didn't elaborate, turning once again to Santa. »See you when the task is accomplished.« And with that, she disappeared in a cloud of snow.

Looking distressed, Niklaus gulped.

»All right: become Santa – look for child – save feast. No problem. I'll lie under the stars for a bit and leave next week.« Nils turned and headed for the roof terrace.

»Nils, you have to leave as soon as possible!«

Nils stopped, befuddled, and stared at his father. »What?«

»It's urgent. You only have until Christmas Eve to find this child.«

»How hard can that be?«

»Hard enough. It took me two weeks to find it. And then it was someone, of all people, who had lost everybody he'd grown to love over the course of his life at Christmas. Do you know how hard it is to convince someone like that of the magic of Christmas?«

»Well ...« Nils frowned and seemed to be thinking. »But surely it's easier today, isn't it?«

»Easier,« snorted Klaus, who by now had stepped closer. »And that wants to be your successor. I told you mischief awaits you.«

»Quiet, father. You're not helping anyone with your superstitious chatter.«

»Superstition? That's not what your leg looks like.«

Niklaus gritted his teeth and turned back to Nils. »We need to get you introduced right away, and then you should be on your way. Don't take it too lightly. This task is demanding.«

»Not for me. You know me: I can do anything,« Nils asserted.

»We're all doomed!« snapped Klaus.

»Father!«

»Doomed, I say,« Klaus repeated, before turning away and, grumbling to himself, marching off with the saw – dragging Yas, who was still clutching the handle tightly, behind him.

Niklaus said nothing more about it, but concern was written all over his face.

Nils had already turned his back on them when a thought occurred to him and he turned to his father once again. »What actually happens if I don't find this so-called Christmas child? Philosophically speaking, I mean.«

Niklaus turned a bit paler still. »Then the Lady in White dies, and Christmas with her.«

An outcry went through the crowd and all eyes turned to Nils.

The carefree smile on Nils' lips lost its sparkle, but he held on to it. »All right,« he said, feigning confidence, but Nick saw how hard he was swallowing. »Won't let you down.« He nodded to the crowd and marched off, Raik and a couple of imps behind him to help him get ready.

Four days later, they gathered again on the star-shaped square, where everything shone in festive splendor. Imp children danced around the big Christmas tree. Elves waved ribbons and flags as if Nils was awaiting his coronation. Music played and the mood was as exuberant as if a celebration was about to begin. Everyone had come to say goodbye to Nils, who had received a crash course the past few days. With his chin up, he strode through the ranks, an expression on his face as if he were a general facing a difficult battle. Instead of the red coat with the white trim, he wore a dark blue costume. A cotton beard, much shorter than required, hung around his neck and would serve its purpose only in an emergency. And he had dispensed with the cap altogether.

Nick didn't know what to say to that.

His brother marched gleefully to the sleigh, swung himself onto the coach box decorated with paintings, and rubbed his hands enterprisingly.

Reluctantly, the reindeer eyed him.

»Be careful with my darlings. And give them a break, Nils. You know they like to nibble a few carrots near St. Petersburg,« said Niklaus. Warmly wrapped and surrounded by a dozen imps, he sat on a sled and followed his son's departure.

»Yes, yes,« Nils said off-handedly, waving to the crowd as if he were a star. The past few days he had not missed a moment to make fun of human customs and at the same time be celebrated like a hero. His initial concern had turned into the usual arrogance, and Nick found it harder and harder to feel sorry for him.

»What a show-off,« Vinn groaned.

»I don't like him,« Kristoph confessed, hunching his shoulders and shaking himself.

»Nobody likes him.«

»Except Raik. And Niklaus,« Micah remarked.

»Niklaus must like him. And Raik ... I don't know. I'm sure he has his reasons,« Vinn surmised.

Yes, Nick thought. *He wants to be his friend.* With a twinge in his chest, he eyed Raik, with whom he had gotten along so well in the old days. Back then, they had been about to become something like friends – until Nils decided to make Raik his servant and cut off all contact between him and Nick. Raik joined Nils' side, eyes shining, assuming he would eventually be more than a sidekick. Nick doubted it would ever come to that. Nils wasn't one to pay too much attention to his fellow man – unless their help was needed.

»I don't like him,« Kristoph repeated, sneezing.

»You got a cold again?« asked Micah, eyeing the snowman beside him, who was wrapped in three coats and four scarves, but still freezing.

»This climate just isn't my thing,« Kristoph confessed, blowing his nose and pouring a whole gush of ice water into the tissue Micah had handed him.

»I thought global warming gave you hope.«

»Only for a short time. The few degrees hardly make things better. How can it be so cold all the time? I wish we were on a tropical island!«

»I don't know if that's such a good idea ...«

»I think it is,« Kristoph asserted, blowing his nose profusely once again. »Nils can stay here by himself. I'm fine without him.«

»Ditto,« Vinn joined in.

»All of our futures depend on him. I can hardly believe it,« sighed Neville, who had joined them and looked more than glum.

Nick would have liked to say something encouraging, but he too doubted that Nils would find the Christmas child. Knowing his brother, work was not part of his idea of Santa's role.

»... And no sugar for Donner. Don't forget to keep him away from the candy,« Niklaus instructed.

»Sure thing,« Nils assured, without really listening. In his mind, he was already on his way to his fans. Well, the Santa job came as a bit of a surprise and seemed to have fewer amenities than his old post. But he had managed to make a star out of Saint Niklaus. Santa was already one, and maybe he could turn him, too, into an icon that was celebrated without having to do much for it. After all, what were imps and elves and all the others for? Surely it was easy to find the Christmas child. And if not, he could always pass the work to others and he'd have a nice time.

More instructions followed, which Nils paid little attention to, and then it was time to say goodbye. Niklaus gave his son a few more words to go, which Nils heard as little as anything his father had said before, more preoccupied with feasting his eyes on the rapt looks of the Christmas assistants, who adored him as if he were a saint. Ivy-Rose pulled him into a hug and wished him good luck, while Nick kept to the sidelines, not feeling his brother was showing much interest in him. Klaus only had a grumpy »Mhm« for him and was already ranting something about »conspiracy« and »mischief« again.

A wave later, Nils let out a »See you at Christmas!« and clicked the reins. A jolt went through the sleigh and the reindeer started moving. A few moments later, they rose into the air.

The chattering of the imps fell silent. In awe, the gazes slid upward and »Oohs« and »Aaahs« pervaded the night. Then everyone began to clap.

Nils smiled with satisfaction. As if on a chariot, he stood on the sled and enjoyed the cheering shouts of the crowd below him. Several times he made a lap over the city, but soon he got bored with the triumphant procession. As always, it was not fast enough for him. Impatiently, he cracked the reins and the reindeer accelerated. The sleigh tilted to one side. Startled shouts were heard. A blink of an eye later, the vehicle shot along over their heads and disappeared into the night sky.

With mixed feelings, Nick looked after his brother.