

The Santa
SETUP

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To those who've experienced God's good gifts in unexpected places.

One



Julie Clarke massaged the phantom scalp itch. It would become real all too soon. Irritation temporarily relieved, she gathered her hair into a ponytail and shoved it into the skull cap. With her dark brown locks sufficiently covered, she snatched the curly, white wig from the mannequin head. She arranged it on her head, with practiced precision, until the permanently affixed red cap with its white lace trim was perfectly centered.

“All the candies are in the display case.” Abbie, the new teen hire, practically bounced into Julie’s small dressing room.

“Great job.” Julie grinned at the girl’s enthusiasm. “I’ll be out in a minute to open the door.”

The bells on the curled tips of Abbie’s green shoes jingled with each movement as the new elf skipped away. Julie smiled. She’d been just as enthusiastic when she landed her first job at sixteen as an elf. An experience she’d never regretted, thanks to the former Mrs. Claus.

Julie had been captivated watching her predecessor craft candies, and the older woman not only took notice but encouraged Julie’s interest. After apprenticing with Mrs. Claus for several years and completing candy and chocolate-making

courses, Julie was able to take on the mantle of Mrs. Claus for herself. The wig and title had belonged to her for four years now.

Julie tied a pristine white apron over the simple red felt dress she wore. Not only cute, it transformed her into character. But she preferred the apron covered in chocolate smears, sugar dust, and the occasional sprinkle waiting for her in the kitchen.

“It’s my sweet spot.” Julie giggled at her own joke, despite its truth.

While she enjoyed becoming Mrs. Claus for the families every Tuesday through Thursday afternoon and all-day Friday and Saturday, running Mrs. Claus’s Sweet Shoppe wasn’t what brought her the most satisfaction. Creating new sweets and experimenting with new flavors was where she shined.

Nick’s habit of hiring homeschool teens as elves was a big blessing. With more flexibility in their schooling, all the elves could come in at noon, even on weekdays. So, while Julie was the only Mrs. Claus at Christmas Wonderland, having her teenage elf in the shop gave her additional flexibility to be in the kitchen.

Plus, the park was completely closed on Mondays. Julie’s work weeks were as near perfection as one could get. Almost as if Santa Claus had plucked it from his sack and plopped it under the tree just for her. Working for her best friend was another bonus.

With one last glance in the mirror, Julie smoothed her apron and perched the fake wire-rimmed spectacles on her nose. It was show time. She closed the dressing room door and headed to the front of the candy store.

Abbie and Kyle, her elf helpers for the day, danced and waved at children passing by the shop window. Julie flipped the sign to open and unlocked the door.

“Oh, my.” Julie placed her hand on each porcelain cheek as she greeted the first family through the door. “Look at you two sweet little ones. I bet you’re on my husband’s nice list, aren’t you?”

Twin blonde heads bobbed.

“I can always tell.” She punctuated her words with a wink. “I’m almost as good as Santa at knowing who’s been naughty and who has been nice.”

Their eyes lit up as she pulled two peppermint sticks from her apron pocket. With a glance over their shoulders to get the approving nod from their parents, the girls accepted the treats with giggles.

“What do you tell Mrs. Claus?” Their mother prodded.

“Thank you,” they said in unison.

Julie leaned forward until eye level with them. “You are most welcome. And feel free to snoop around my shop.” She winked. “I’m sure you’ll find some sweets to your liking.” She nodded to the teen behind the counter. “Elf Abbie will help you with anything you need. I must be off to deliver cookies and milk to Santa. We wouldn’t want a skinny Santa this Christmas, would we?”

The girls giggled again and shook their heads. Julie kept her own chuckle quiet as she made her way from the store. If she didn’t get to Sugar and Sprinkles Bakery to pick up the first of the four-times daily plate of cookies and an old-fashioned glass bottle of milk, story time at Santa’s Castle wouldn’t begin on time—an infraction against Christmas magic Julie refused to be responsible for.



“I didn’t think you were going to make it today, Jules.” Nick chided as she waltzed through the staff entrance to Santa’s Castle.

Jules rolled her big blue eyes at him with a snort. “Miss Stories with Santa? When has Mrs. Claus ever been so derelict in her duties?”

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Nick clicked his tongue with a *tsk*. “You’re cutting it close today. What happened?”

“Close?” She screwed up her face in disdain. “I have a good five minutes before you even go out there. And then, I have another five before I interrupt you with the cookies. Plenty of time. Besides, you should have seen the twin girls who came in my store right as it opened. They were the cutest! Identical Christmas tree leggings, matching red shirts with Christmas trees applied on front, and jingle bell bows around their ponytails. Unless I miss my guess, they’ll be in the line for photos before much of the morning passes.”

Nick straightened his fake whiskers and plopped the long red hat on his head. “Of course, they will. Who can resist pictures with Santa? You, on the other hand, think every child who comes through is the cutest one ever.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Of all the nerve, Nicholas Eckert. Why I’ve put up with you and your attitude all these years is beyond me.”

Snickering from the hallway drew their attention. Nick clomped to the door in his heavy black Santa boots. The sound served as a warning. When he swung the door open, two of their highest-ranking teenage elves stood in the hallway with barely contained smirks.

He speared them both with a look. “And what, may I ask, is so funny out here?”

Both shook their heads. They were quickly losing the battle against their smiles and chuckles. Nick raised his chin, keeping eye contact with them as he did.

“I need an answer.” His voice was stern, but there was no bite to accompany his bark. Too bad his employees knew it as well as he did.

Jules’s hand on his arm drew him away from the door. “Now, Nick, I’m sure Jackson and Tonya weren’t doing anything wrong. I’m right. Aren’t I?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Their heads bobbed emphatically.

“Tonya, why don’t you run out front and see what kind of line we’re up against?”

She smiled innocently at the girl, who immediately took the opportunity to flee the scene. As soon as it was just the three of them, Jules turned her gentle smile on Jackson. The boy didn't see what was coming, but Nick had more than a sneaking suspicion. He'd seen his best friend in action enough times to know her methods.

"Jackson, you look like Santa caught in the beam of a child's flashlight." Julie laughed. "Come on in here and sit down. Have a cookie." She picked up the platter and held it out to him.

Hesitant movements toward the tray convinced Nick the boy didn't believe himself out of the woods just yet. Jackson's shoulders relaxed a bit, but he eyed them warily.

"Don't you mind Nick." Jules swatted her hand in his direction. "He doesn't understand the way of teenagers. All work and no play make for a boring day, doesn't it?"

Jackson nibbled from the cookie. "Yes, ma'am."

"And that's all it was, right? You and Tonya having a good time?"

His eyes lit up, and he started to smile. "Yep. Tonya just said something funny, is all."

"I can imagine." Jules grinned and shook her head. "Tonya has an uncanny ability to come up with the craziest stuff. What was this one? Something about Rudolph's tummy troubles after too many carrots from the kids? Or maybe the little boy who left Santa's suit a little soggy after his picture the other day?"

"No." Jackson took another bite from his cookie.

Completely relaxed. Poor kid. Didn't see it coming at all.

"It wasn't anything bad. She just said listening to you two bicker was like hearing her mom and dad. Wondered if you had a clue how much you sounded like an old married couple."

The smile Nick sported as Jules worked her magic froze. His gaze darted to her. Jackson might not notice the tightening of her lips or the forced sound of her chuckle. But Nick did. Romance with him was the furthest thing from her mind. How many times had he heard, "You're the best friend a

girl could have,” and similar sentiments? Her stiff reaction proved it.

Friends. Period.

“Nope.” She shrugged and shook her head. “Just best friends since we were about your age. Now, why don’t you go check on Tonya? I’m sure she could use help wrangling the kids.”

Jackson left the room. Awkwardness took his place. Nick glanced at Jules, who was suddenly very preoccupied with making sure the cookies on her tray were perfectly arranged. She’d heard it before. They both had. And every time, she acted like acknowledging it would make it true. Obviously, *not* an idea she wanted to entertain at all.

“I’d better get out there and greet the kids.” Nick strode from the room. “See you in a few.”

The unease between them would pass as soon as she carried out the platter of cookies. A little time between her and the suggestion. Time worked for him too. By then, his racing heart would calm. The elves had danced too close to the truth. With Jules’s distaste for even the idea of a relationship, the last thing he needed was someone guessing his secret.

Nick Eckert was in love with Julie Clarke.