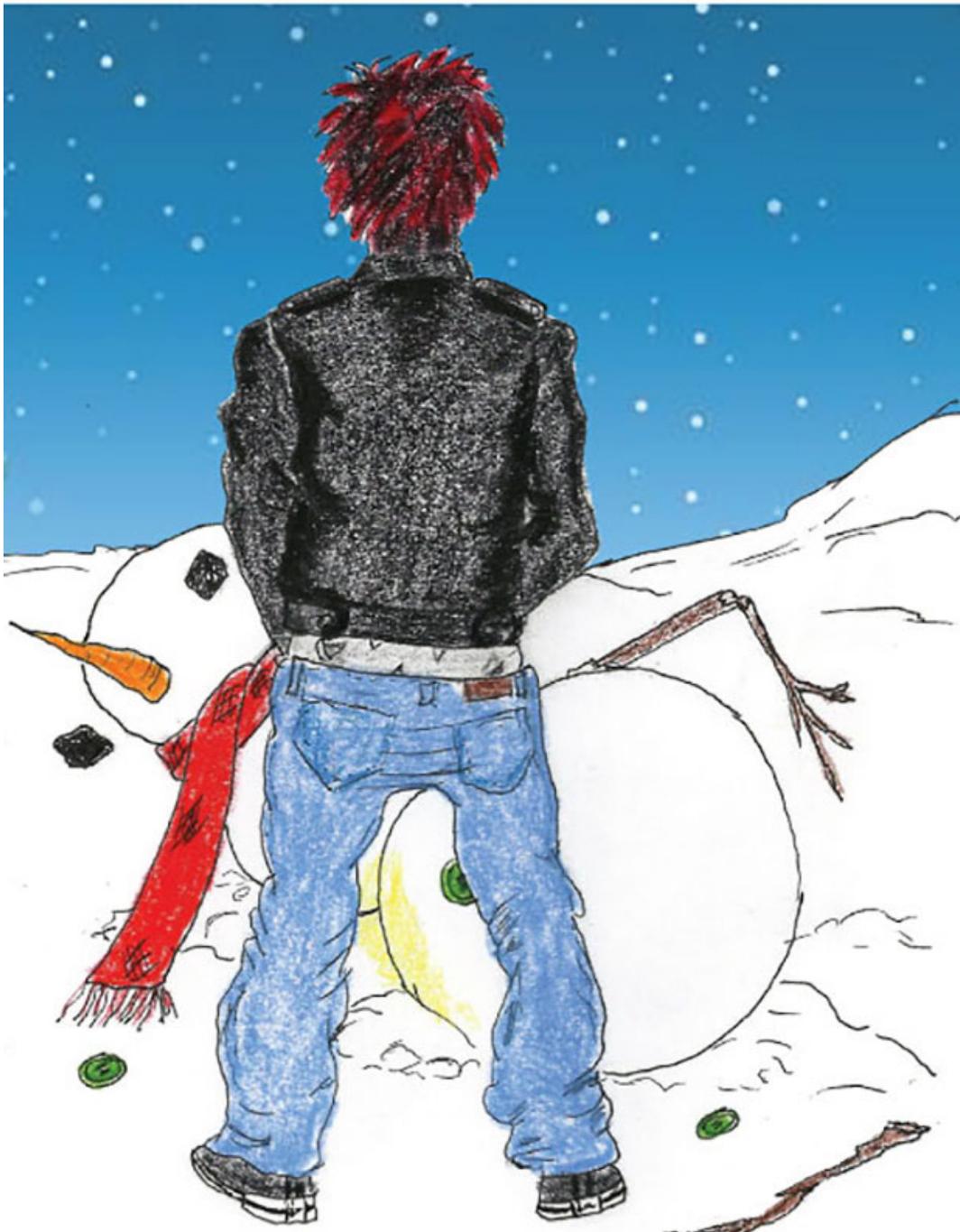


A Very Raven Christmas



JENNIFER BRASINGTON-CROWLEY

Title Page

A Very Raven Christmas

-a short story-

Jennifer Brasington-Crowley

Copyright

A Very Raven Christmas
Written by Jennifer Brasington-Crowley

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A Special Thank You

Thank you to the writing community and for my reader friends for encouraging me to write this short story. It has been an honor to get to know you all, and the support you give is insurmountable. For those of you who have been following Raven and his escapades, this story is dedicated to you.

I'll be Home for Christmas

“Are you nervous? You seem nervous.” Stanzie pulled the rental car into the driveway of her childhood home in Columbus, Ohio.

“Is it that obvious?” Raven wiped his palms on his gray corduroys and took a deep breath. “We haven’t seen your parents in over year, and now we’re spending two weeks them?”

“Come on, it’s their Christmas gift. They never get to spend time with the boys.” She looked into the backseat at the twins, each sleeping with his head against the window. After traveling nearly twelve hours from Mauritania, not to mention the time change, they were exhausted. She smiled at Raven. “They look just like you when they sleep.”

He smiled a weak smile and sighed. “It’s just, Jesus, your dad, I think he hates me.”

“My dad hates everyone.”

“Fuck.”

“Don’t talk like that in front of my parents.”

He groaned and popped a piece of nicotine gum out of its foil package and into his mouth. “And your mom. I don’t know what she thinks about me. It’s like she’s fucking June Cleaver on the surface, but she’s hiding something else.”

“Mommy Dearest?” she smirked. “I’m kidding. She’s chilled out a ton since I was a kid. Seriously, though, watch the cursing.” She stopped the car and turned off the engine. Taking Raven’s hand in hers, she gave it a reassuring squeeze. “It’ll be fine. It’ll be good. We’ll make it fun.” She kissed his mouth and flicked his eyebrow rings with her finger. “I love you so much. Thank you for doing this for me.”

“I’d do anything for you.” He leaned in for a longer kiss when one of the boys stirred.

“Are we there yet?” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes and looking out the window.

The other boy opened his eyes next. “Hey, we’re here,” he said, his eyes lighting up at the house in front of them. “Grandma’s!”

The front door opened and Stanzie’s parents, Stan and Ellen Butler, both dressed in tan chinos and variations on red holiday sweaters, strolled enthusiastically down the

walkway. Stan was tall with gray hair that used to be blonde, a fair complexion and light blue eyes. It was apparent where Stanzie inherited her height and athletic build. Ellen was tall, as well, and wore her silver hair in a long bob; she was lithe and graceful, and walked with an air that could be interpreted as superior.

Raven leaned back against the headrest and cursed.

Stanzie gave him a hard look. "Get all your fucks out now, because I'm serious. Don't talk like that in front of them."

He repeated under his breath, "Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck. I can't do this, baby. I'm sorry, I just, I gotta, you go in. I'll just drive to the gas station or something. I'll be right back. I just gotta..." he rubbed under his nose with the back of his hand.

She squeezed his thigh with her hand. "You've got this. You're Raven Xerces. You can handle a stadium full of twenty thousand screaming fans, you can handle a couple septuagenarians." She gave him a quick peck on the mouth.

Before Raven had a chance to unbuckle his seatbelt, Stanzie's mother flung open his door with a wide grin on her mouth and disdain in her eyes. "Raven, dear, so good of you to loosen the reigns on my little girl for once. And look at your hair." She pointed her finger in a little swirl at his newly dyed hair, a deep scarlet with nearly black roots. "Was that a bad bottle? Do you need me to call my girl at the salon to fix it?"

He suppressed the urge to roll his eyes and tell her to fuck off, and gave a grin that matched her own. "Nice to see you again, Ellen."

She ignored him and opened the back door. "Boys, it's Grammy! Do you remember your grandma?"

The boys scrambled out of the car and into her embrace.

"I've got cookies inside, and they're still warm," she said as she led the twins toward the house.

Raven sighed and looked over at Stanzie. "Loosen the reigns? Her girl at the salon, really?"

"She's passive-aggressive, you know that. I'll talk to her. And I love your red hair." She gave it a tussle.

"Are you going to help me with these bags or do big rock stars not handle luggage?" Stanzie's father called from the trunk.

“He fucking hates me,” Raven muttered while exiting the car. “Stan, Stan, let me get those,” he said. “Go give your daughter a hug.”

“It’s too late, I’ve already got my hands full,” said the elder Butler, taking two suitcases by the handles, although they were both the rolling kind. He pecked his daughter on the cheek and ushered her up the walk.

Raven was relieved to be alone. The nearly eight-hour flight from Africa to New York was bad enough, then a three-hour layover and another two-hour flight to Columbus had completely drained him. After several sessions of hypnotherapy, flying was less of an issue for him. Plus, the responsibilities of fatherhood had forced him to suppress his own fears and agitations to focus on caring for his kids. But now, the last thing he needed was the added stress of in-laws.

The air was cold; he could see his breath. He rubbed his hands together and blew into them for warmth. His black leather moto jacket was lined, but it did little to combat the twenty-five-degree Midwest winter temperature.

He had stuffed his pockets with airline liquor and sucked down two mini bottles of vodka before retrieving the other two suitcases. He tossed the empty bottles in the trunk and headed for the house. He could really use a cigarette. The nicotine gum did little to satisfy the craving to suck on a stick and feel the smoke fill his lungs. He had been mildly successful over the years, quitting the habit for a couple of months at a time before relapsing during a tour or recording session with the band.

It was a lot easier when they were tending the addax conservation corridor when his hands were busy all day. But in California, he had a tendency to revert back to his old habits. And now, with the gnawing in his belly that came from his crippling anxiety, the urge to smoke was crushing him. He feigned forgetting something from the trunk, lest someone was watching him from the house, and walked back to the car to drink a third mini vodka before finally getting the nerve to make it to the front door.

His wife greeted him in the foyer. He could see into the living room behind her, all decked out for the holidays with an enormous live tree, a wreath above the fireplace, knickknacks on the mantle, his boys playing with a model train on the floor with their grandpa. Yes, they had made the right decision coming here for Christmas.

“They set the boys up in the guest room in the basement, and you and I get my old room,” she said. “Come on.”

She led him up the stairs and down the hall to what had been Stanzie’s girlhood room. No longer home to the blue duvet with the sparrows on it nor the posters of Adam Ant and U2, it was now tastefully decorated like a Pottery Barn catalog, simple white coverlet and natural wood furnishings. She sat on the bed and beckoned him to her.

He obliged and straddled her legs, leaned over her until she lay back on the mattress. He rested his elbows on either side of her shoulders and kissed her. “Do we have to go back down?” he asked.

She shook her head. “I told them we’d be down for dinner, but that we are too exhausted from traveling and need to rest.”

He let out a relieved breath. “Thank you, Jesus!” he exclaimed, and collapsed on top of her, resting his head on her chest. And as much as he wanted to make love to his wife in the quiet privacy of her old bedroom, exhaustion took over and he fell into a deep sleep.

He awoke to a soft humming, and opened his eyes to see Stanzie in her undergarments with her hair wrapped in a towel. She stood in front of the dresser and worked a moisturizer into her face. Raven stretched and rubbed his eyes. “Hey, you showered without me,” he said sleepily.

She made eye contact in the mirror. “I did. I had to get that travel smell off of me.”

He stood from the bed and wrapped his hands around her bare waist, nuzzled his face into her neck, inhaling her scent. “You smell incredible.”

She turned and draped her arms over his shoulders. “We need to be downstairs for dinner at six.”

“What time is it?”

“You have ten minutes.”

“Fuck.”

“I thought you got all your fucks out in the car.”

“I had one left.”

There came a banging on the door, like hundreds of little paws tapping on the wood and a rattling from where the little paws were trying to open the locked door.

“Mommy!” came the voice to accompany the many paws. “Grandma says come down for dinner!”

Stanzie opened the door a crack, and the contents from the hallway spilled into the bedroom. The two little boys immediately ran and jumped on the bed, knocking over Raven.

Stanzie pulled one of them off and squeezed him. “Tell Grandma we’ll be down in five minutes.”

“You said ten,” said Raven.

“You have ten minutes,” she answered. “I only need five.” She turned to the boys. “Go, scoot. Let us get ready.”

“I don’t even have time to shower,” Raven grumbled.

“Sure you do. Five-minute shower, put on some deodorant and you’re done.” She pulled on a pair of yoga pants and a sweatshirt.

“Fuck,” he groaned.

“Seriously. Stop cussing.”

He groaned again and made his way to the hall bath. After a quick, hot shower, he pulled on a pair of blue jeans and slipped on an Iron Maiden t-shirt. He ran his fingers through his hair and with a hitch in his throat, descended the steps to make his way to the formal dining room where Ellen and Stan dined every night.

The great mahogany table was set with white china and silver, embroidered placemats, cloth napkins, silver candles and a holiday floral arrangement with poinsettias, holly and mistletoe in the center. The twins sat on either side of their grandmother at one head of the table, and Stan sat at the other. With Stanzie seated next to her father, it left the only empty chair on Stan’s other side. Raven’s heart pounded as he stepped onto the plush white carpet and to his seat.

Stan looked up with a hard look on his face. “Nice of you to come down, Raven. Just like a diva to make an entrance.”

“Dad,” Stanzie hissed at her father. “We just sat down. We haven’t been waiting.”

Raven scratched at the back of his head. “Sorry.”

“You don’t have to be sorry, sweetheart,” Ellen crooned. “I know it’s been a long day for you all. Come sit.”

“Uh, thanks.” He pulled out the chair and sat, ruffled the hair of his son sitting next to him, and smiled at Stanzie. She winked at him, then rubbed her stocking foot on his calf under the table. He reached under and brought her foot to his lap and squeezed her toes.

“Stan, remember when people used to dress for dinner?” Ellen mused. “I miss those days. That reminds me. Raven, I called my girl at the salon and she can see you Thursday to fix that...” she pointed at his red hair.

“Mom,” Stanzie interrupted. “Can you pass the salad?” She shot her mother a look and shook her head.

“It all smells delicious,” said Raven.

“Oh, you won’t find anything you like,” said Ellen. “It’s pot roast. If I remember, you don’t eat meat, correct?”

“Yeah, that’s right. But I always find something. The salad looks great.”

“Oh dear,” said Ellen. “I put almonds in the salad. You can’t eat nuts, right?”

“Just peanuts. Almonds are fine. Thanks.” His heart pounded in his chest. He could feel his cheeks turning red.

Stan snorted. “There’s something not right about a man who doesn’t eat meat. You need red meat for testosterone. You aren’t keeping meat from my grandsons, are you?”

“No sir,” he said quietly.

“Dad!” Stanzie exclaimed. “Stop it.” She stood from her chair. “Both of you! We came all the way here from flipping Africa to spend time with you, and I will not have you talking to my husband like that!”

“We’re just having a little fun, aren’t we Raven?” Stan laughed heartily.

He smiled weakly. “Yeah. It’s fine. Stanzie, hon, it’s fine.” He reassured her with a nod.

“Constance, darling,” said her mother, hugging one of the twins to her breast, “we are so delighted you found time to visit with us. We love you. We love Raven. We would never say anything to upset him.” She turned to Raven. “I didn’t upset you, did I dear? I want to be accommodating to all your little lifestyle choices.”

“I’m not upset,” he said with a fake smile. “It’s great. Thank you.”

“Mom, a peanut allergy isn’t a *little lifestyle choice!*”

“I meant the vegetarianism, dear.”

“Raven’s not upset,” said Stan. “Are you son?” He slapped him on the back. “Now let’s eat before it gets cold and we all have to eat salad like the vegetarian.”

After dinner, the boys collapsed in the guestroom after only four pages of *Casey the Utterly Impossible Horse*. Stanzie and Raven kissed them goodnight and retired to her old bedroom after snagging a bottle of red wine and two glasses from the bar.

Stanzie poured a glass and handed it to her husband. “I am so sorry about my parents,” she said, sipping from her own glass. She gestured to the bottle. “We’re going to need a lot more of those to make it through Christmas.”

Raven took off his gym shoes and lay on the bed. “I think I need to cry into your shoulder for a good hour.”

She hit him playfully with a pillow. “I had no idea they would act like that.”

“You had some idea. Don’t you remember the wedding?”

“Our wedding was beautiful.”

He held out the wine glass like giving a toast and imitated Stanzie’s father, saying, “I was thrilled when I found out my little girl had fallen in love with a musician. But never in my worst nightmares had I imagined it be for a rock and roll degenerate.”

She groaned. “I know. I’m sorry.”

“Hey, I of all people know you can’t control your parents.”

“Can you believe *they* aren’t the reason I tried to kill myself?”

He stopped smiling. “Don’t joke about that.”

“Honey, it’s only an issue if I can’t joke about it.”

“I know. It’s just...” He pulled her to him and kissed her hair. “I can’t think about anyone hurting you. It makes me sick to think that anyone could drive you to...” He sighed, brought her wrist up to his mouth and kissed her scars.

“And I can’t bear to think about anyone hurting you,” she said.

He knew she was talking about his back. And yes, it was always there, the prominent tattoo, the graphic reminder of the abuses from his childhood, forever etched in his epidermis, made even more prominent by the blood red ink permanently staining the scars.

“That’s nothing compared to my bruised ego,” he laughed.

She crawled under the bedcovers beside him and ran her fingers up under his shirt. "Come here," she whispered. "Let me help you forget all about my parents."

All I Want for Christmas

It took Raven no less than twenty minutes to find a parking space at the Towne Centre Mall. Stanzie had ushered him out of the house so she could help her mother with the Christmas cookie exchange, and knew he needed a break from the in-laws.

The mall was absolutely teeming with people finalizing their holiday shopping. He had to keep a hand on each boy at all times to keep from being separated. They navigated the entrance, and with no battle plan in mind, wandered from store front to store front. Raven stopped at a Starbucks and bought himself a coffee and each boy a hot cider. The barista did a doubletake when she saw him, saw the black star tattoo on his hand and the ring in his lip. But when she asked for a name and he told her Jay, she simply handed him his change.

They kept wandering until a large display of mannequins in holiday negligee caught Raven's attention. Stanzie wasn't much into lingerie, and he didn't care one way or the other, preferred her in her natural state, but the display caught his eye nonetheless.

"Look, Daddy, the Lego store!"

"Not now, Rabbit, we gotta find something for Mommy." Raven stared at the mannequins sporting sparkly thongs while the little boy pulled on his hand.

A second little hand tugged on his empty belt loop. "Mommy doesn't like underwear. She likes Legos."

He looked down at the little boy with shaggy brown hair and green eyes, his cheeks dusted with a splattering of freckles. "We aren't shopping for you two."

"No fair."

"We never get to go to the mall."

Raven sighed. The boys were right. Between their homes in Laguna Beach and Mauritania, there were not a lot of Lego stores. "Fine," he relented. "Maybe we can find a *Jaws* set for your mom."

After spending more money than he cared to admit on toys for the twins, but no Legos for Stanzie, they stepped into a clothing store that advertised modern clothing at modest prices. "Maybe we can find your mom a nice sweater or something," he mumbled.

"Daddy, look, they have your shirt." Rabbit held up a black cropped top with an Iron Maiden album cover on the front.

He shook his head and looked around the store. "Unbelievable. Fucking posers."

“Daddy,” scolded the boy.

A clerk wearing a Slayer hoodie walked by with a stack of jeans in her hands.

“Hey,” Raven said to her.

She turned and gave him a questioning look. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah.” He nodded at her sweatshirt. “What’s your favorite Slayer song?”

“Uh, it’s just a shirt.” She proceeded to organize the denim by size.

“No, it’s not just a shirt,” he continued. “Slayer’s an institution. Fucking legendary. Is that officially licensed merch?”

She furrowed her eyebrows. “Can I help you find a size? You look like a men’s small. Women’s medium.” She smirked.

He rolled his eyes. “All I’m saying is—”

“I know. You boomers all come in here with your Woodstock talk and blah blah blah,” she made a mouth with her hand, “but it’s just a shirt, okay? It’s a style.”

“I’m not a fucking baby boomer!”

“I know exactly who you are.” She smiled broadly. “Boomer.”

“Daddy!” interrupted his son. “Santa!” He pointed excitedly toward the hallway where the mall Santa was walking back from his break. “Can we see him?”

Raven glared at the salesclerk, then turned his attention to the boy. “Yes. Good idea. Where’s your brother? Skunk!” he called. “Let’s go. Get out of this poser chain store.”

Deck the Halls!

“Why don’t you let us keep the boys for the summer? Give you and Stanzie a break,” said Stan as he stood on a ladder in front of the garage. “Hand me that wreath.”

Raven held up the evergreen. “I don’t know. Summer’s a long time.”

“With you two globe trotters, we never spend time with our grandkids.” He hung the wreath on the nail over the garage. “It’ll be good for them. We’ll educate them about *real* music, not that rock-n-roll garbage.”

Raven scoffed. He got along well enough with his father-in-law, but the elder Butler had zero respect for Raven’s craft. As a formally trained classical musician and recently retired first chair violist in the Columbus Symphony, he considered Raven and his rock band nothing but noise.

“Help me with these lights, will you?”

A tangled mass of wires landed at Raven’s feet. He picked them up and looked for an end, pulling the strands this way and that.

“It would do them good to get prepared for the real world, don’t you think?”

“The real world?”

“Do they even have schools where you live?”

Raven rolled his eyes. The boys had a private tutor when they were abroad, not because of inferior education, but because their home was so far from the nearest school. In California, they attended an excellent private school, despite Raven’s earlier protests.

“Yes, the kids go to school. You know that.” He tried to keep his voice neutral.

“I just want my grandsons to have the best opportunities, that’s all. A well-rounded childhood is instrumental for development. After a summer here, they will have a firm foundation in the arts. Ellen is planning to teach them piano.”

Both boys had been playing piano under Raven’s instruction since they were four, but he knew saying so would make no difference. “The whole summer?”

“Why not? We’re both retired. It would be good for everyone. Keep the kids out of the jungle or the whiskey bars or wherever you take them.”

“I don’t take them to the bars. Hell, Stan, I don’t even go to the bars, do you know that?” He stopped fiddling with the lights and looked at the older man. “You know I’ve been clean for years, right?”

Stan stepped off the ladder and faced him squarely. “And you know I looked you up before you married my daughter, right?”

Raven scoffed. “Stan, come on.”

“Raven,” he said sternly. “I’m not naïve. I know all about what happens with you rock stars with your groupies and your parties. It’s disgusting, and nothing I want my daughter exposed to. I really don’t know how she can look passed all of that. I’ve read the news reports. I know your history, and it’s not a pretty one.”

“I’m not trying to hide my history,” he argued. “But I’m saying I am not my history, got it? I’m my present. Shit, Stan, I wasn’t even fucking using when I met your daughter, okay? I’ve been clean for fucking eight, ten years.”

“I know about the overdose, you know.”

“Goddammit! That was...that was...I can’t believe you’re bringing that up. I didn’t even know Stanzie then! I went to fucking rehab and everything. Did you read that in your fucking reports?”

“But you still drink.”

“*You* drink!”

“But not like you, I don’t. Listen, son. I just want what’s best for my daughter and my grandsons.”

“What, what, what are you saying?” he stammered. “You, you want to take my kids because I’m bad for them?”

“No, that’s not what I’m saying. I just want to spend time with them. Get to know them. Share some memories before I’m an old man and can’t take them fishing or to a ballgame.”

“Well, then say that. Don’t fucking insult me.”

“I hope you respect my daughter enough not to use language like that in front of her. Not to mention what you’re teaching those children. They’re only eight, for Pete’s sake.”

“You know, if you make certain words taboo, it just makes kids want to say them even more.”

“So, you do talk like that in front of them.”

“Fuck,” he muttered.

“My point exactly. Now, come on with those lights. It’ll be dark soon.”

He struggled some more with the strands until he found the plug and had more success straightening the mass. “You know I love them more than anything, right? Stanzie, and those kids, they’re the only reason I have to wake up in the morning. Your daughter is the fucking light of my life. I would do anything for her.”

“Anything?”

“We’re here, aren’t we?” he gestured to the house.

Stan chuckled. “And where would you prefer to spend Christmas, huh? On the beach? In the grasslands with a herd of antelope?”

He swallowed. Handed the untangled lights to his father-in-law. “I just want her to be happy.”

The older man smiled. “I know you do.” He took the lights and began winding them around the bushes. “But you have to remember that I want her to be happy, too. And if it weren’t you, there’d be some other schmuck I’d be grilling. No one would be good enough for my little girl.”

Parson Brown

“I don’t like all these degenerates knowing where we live,” Stanzie’s father grumbled as he handed a few envelopes to his daughter.

“They’re not degenerates, Dad. They’re friends.” She took the cards and flipped through them. “And I thought it’d be easier for them to send cards here than abroad.” She brought the letters into the kitchen where Raven sat at the table with a cup of coffee and the newspaper.

He looked over his reading glasses at her when she came in. “Anything good?” he asked.

“Mike and Sadie send their love,” she said, handing him a Christmas card from his friend and bandmate.

“They did one of those Christmas newsletters. What a douche.”

“Hate to break it to you, but we sent a Christmas newsletter.”

“You’re joking.”

She shook her head.

He put his head in his hands and groaned. “I have never been so embarrassed.”

“Never? Not even that time in Fort Lauderdale when you—”

He held up a hand. “Point made.”

“What’s it say? Sadie pregnant again?”

“Ha. I think five is enough. Or is it six?” He scanned the letter. “Six. I forgot about Olive. Everyone’s good, Sadie enjoys playing tennis with her club. Mike is debuting a new wine. God, who’d have ever thought.” He shook his head and continued reading. “Claire and Charlotte were in the Nutcracker, uh, Gracie is playing soccer, Ophelia made honor roll. Jesus Christ, Mike, what happened to you?” He laughed and handed the card to Stanzie.

She read through the letter and looked at the next envelope. “Look, a Christmas card from Pretzel!” she exclaimed, waving it in front of Raven’s face. It read *Greetings from Vanuatu* in red and green Sharpie.

“How’d she know we’d be here?”

“I told her we’d be spending the holidays with my family. She said it’d be good for you. She’s right, you know.” She put her arms on Raven’s shoulders and kissed him, lingering on his lips. “Mmm, I like the taste of nicotine-free Raven.”

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t remind me.”

She opened the envelope. “Aw, look, she sent a picture.” Pretzel, her hair snow white, shaved sides, teased in a wide mohawk, grinning at the camera with her face smushed against that of a man with wavy brown hair tinted with sunshine and green eyes not unlike Raven’s.

Stanzie screamed.

“What? What is it?”

She jumped up and down, squealing. “He proposed! Pretzel’s getting married!”

“Are you serious? Let me see that.” He took the card and read it. Sure enough, Pretzel, Gretel Freudenberg, Raven’s best friend and hairstylist for the past two decades, looked happier than ever on the other side of the globe. “God damn, I can’t believe it.”

“Right? I never pictured her settling down. Ever.”

He shook his head. “And with this joker of all people.”

“You know she’s always loved him. And I’m pretty sure the feeling was mutual.”

Raven sighed. “I hope you’re right. Because if he does anything to hurt her, I’ll break his fucking neck.”

“Um, he’s got six inches and at least thirty pounds on you. Better rethink your plan.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Ricin?”

“Better.”

He let out a laugh. “I’m going to give her a call.”

“She’s got cell service out there?”

He shrugged. “Guess I’ll find out.”

He slipped into the office and dialed Pretzel’s number. She picked up after the third ring. “What the fuck have you done?”

“Raven!” Her voice was staticky, but audible. “You got my card?”

“Damn right I got your card. What are you thinking?”

“What do you mean, what am I thinking? I’m thinking I’m going to marry the man I love, that’s what I’m thinking.”

He scoffed. “But, but, where are you going to live? There? On the other side of the fucking planet?”

“You’re one to talk, Mr. North Africa.”

She was right. He couldn’t argue with her. He had chosen to live half the year near the addax preserve for Stanzie’s work and the other half at their home in Laguna Beach. He had virtually abandoned Pretzel and she did not forgive him easily. He had only seen her tear up once before, but she cried outright the day he left for the first three-month stint.

He sighed. “I know, but.”

“But what? You know this is no different than what you did to me, right?”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes, I’m serious. Holy shit, Raven, he’s even saving animals, just like Stanzie.”

He was quiet for a minute. “Are you coming back?” His voice was soft and hesitant.

“Well, yeah, of course I’ll come visit.”

“No, I mean, like are you going to do it like me? Split it up?”

She paused. “I... I really don’t know yet.”

He sighed. Bit his lower lip to keep his eyes from running. “What am I going to do without you?”

“Uh, same thing I’ve been doing without you.”

“That’s not fair. I come back twice a year. For three months at a time!”

“Not if you’re touring, you don’t.”

“Pretzel, I—”

“—I thought you’d be happy for me, Raven. I finally have a chance to have what you and Stanzie have. I love him. He loves me. Be happy for me, please?”

He swallowed a lump that formed unexpectedly in his throat. He could not explain the feeling in his innards. He had always loved Pretzel like a sister, but now that she was going to be bound to another man, he suddenly felt more. Felt a pang of jealousy.

“If he breaks your heart, I’m going to break his fucking face,” he growled into the phone.

“He can’t wait to meet you, too,” she smirked.

Caroling Out in the Snow

The family room was ablaze with a wood burning fire. Raven sat on the sofa between the two boys, Stanzie on the floor in front of him, her hand wrapped around one of his calves. Stan sat on the leather recliner with a glass of scotch and Ellen sat opposite him, knitting something lavender. Jimmy Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life* played on the television.

“Don’t you just love this film?” Ellen asked no one in particular.

Raven leaned his head to his son, “What do you think, Skunk? You like it?”

“Stop calling those darling boys those dreadful names,” said Ellen. “Jason and David are very respectable names. Not this nonsense you’ve made up.”

The little boy protested, then whispered in an outside voice to his dad, “I wish we were watching Rudolph instead.”

“Me too,” he whispered back. “I like King Moonracer. All those misfits.”

The little boy nodded.

The movie was interrupted by the tune of Beethoven’s *Ode to Joy* as the doorbell chimed in the house.

“Who the fuck is that?” Raven grouched.

“Raven!” Stanzie’s mother gasped.

“Sorry. I mean, who the *hell* is that?”

She glared at him. “It’s perfectly acceptable to say simply *who is that?* No expletives necessary.”

“I’ll get it.” Stan went to the door. It was dark outside, close to 8pm. A moment later he called out, “Everyone, come see.”

Out on the snowy porch were a band of Christmas carolers, singing *Silent Night* in four-part-harmony. Raven slung his arm around Stanzie’s shoulder and squeezed her close, kissing her temple. It really was a magical season in the Midwest.

The church youth choir broke into the second verse. A young woman about seventeen, wearing a polar bear hat and matching gloves, stepped to the front of the group to begin her solo, and sang, “Silent night, holy...” her eyes widened when she saw Raven’s smile and she blurted out, “...SHIT, IT’S RAVEN XERCES!”

Raven could not suppress his laugh, and shook his head in embarrassment.

Stan threw up his hands in disgust. “There he goes again. Another family moment overshadowed by the rock star.”

The young girl was mortified. She covered her now red face with her hands and whimpered, “I’m so sorry. I’m sorry.”

Raven approached and put a hesitant hand on her back. “You sing beautifully,” he said to her.

She looked up slowly and her face turned red again. The other choir members snickered and muttered half apologies and half good-humored name-calling. As Stan mumbled something one could only imagine, Raven gathered the choir to finish strong. “Come on, guys. From the top.” He joined the group and flubbed the words to the Christmas carol he only vaguely knew, all the while watching his father-in-law’s disapproving face.

Ellen invited the kids in for cider and cocoa, but the group declined, having many other homes and a retirement facility to visit. To make up for interrupting their song, Raven offered his back up vocal services for the remainder of the tour. His offer was eagerly accepted.

“What are you doing?” Stanzie asked while he put on his coat and hat.

He shrugged. In reality, he craved the acceptance and adoration of the church choir after the time he had been enduring in the company of his judgmental in-laws, but instead he said, “The singing and the movie. I think it’s really getting me into the Christmas spirit. I’ll just finish out the block with them. Want to come?”

She shook her head. “Too cold for me.”

“What about the boys? Rabbit, Skunk, you in?”

Rabbit whispered loudly, “If I don’t have to watch that dumb movie, yeah.”

They bundled up the boys and Raven took them out into the snow, following the youth group to the next house.

When they returned an hour later, Ellen offered to give the boys a bath to warm up and put them to bed. Raven and Stanzie took a bottle of wine to their room and Raven changed out of his cold jeans and sweatshirt. He tried to read Stanzie’s face, but she was hiding it behind her glass.

He took the glass from her hand and set it on the nightstand. “What is it?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

He sat next to her on the bed and brushed aside her bangs to look into her brown eyes. “What’s that look? And don’t say nothing.”

She sighed and took a hold of his hand and stroked the black star tattoo. “Oh, I don’t know. I guess, well, it’s been a long time since I’ve been around the fans. Sometimes it’s hard. I guess I get a little jealous.”

He laughed a little. “Jealous? Of what? Not being able to order a Starbucks like a normal person?”

“Not that. I don’t want to say it. It makes me sound petty and immature. But, I guess it’s the girls.”

“The girls?” His eyebrows shot up. “Oh, shit. Come here.” He pulled her to him and kissed her mouth. “Those little girls are nothing but that. Little girls. They’re children.”

She sighed. “I’m not getting any younger.”

“Thank god.” He pulled the collar of her sweater to the side and kissed her shoulder and the slope of her neck. “I can’t even hold a conversation with anyone that young anymore.” He continued exploring her bare skin with his lips and teeth.

“You don’t need to hold a conversation with them to, you know.”

He let out a guffaw. “You want to know something? When you’re in your element, you’re speaking at a fundraiser or ordering those guys around at the preserve, I am terrified that one of those scientists is going to swoop you away.”

“You’re crazy.”

“I’m not. You’re amazing. And sometimes, I don’t know, all the time really, I know I’m not good enough for you. You’re so smart and you’re constantly surrounded by these other smart and sophisticated university types. And I see the way they look at you. I’m afraid you’re going to realize that someday and,” he sighed.

She laughed. “The way they look at me, are you kidding me? I hope they’re looking at me with respect and interest. But, and I can’t even believe I have to say this, but do you see the way the girls look at you? And they don’t just look. They grab for you, press their perky little breasts against you, they post naked drawings of you on the internet. Write these X-rated fan-fictions. One girl even posted that she was mad that you got your missing tooth fixed because she wanted to stick her tongue in the hole! What the hell?”

He raised his eyebrows.

“Do you know how many times I’ve heard a stranger say, *I want Raven Xerces to fuck me?* And not just strangers. Jamie’s told me at least a dozen times. You think that’s easy for me?” She couldn’t hold back a few tears that had formed in her eyes.

He took her hand and looked into her eyes. “Stanzie, I love you. I love you more than you can even imagine. There is nobody who can pull me away from you.”

At that, an incessant pounding came from the door. “Daddy! Daddy!”

He groaned. “Well, almost nobody.”

You Better Watch Out

“Did you color on Kitty with pink chalk?” Stanzie pointed to her parents’ black, white and now pink cat and scolded her son.

“No,” he said indignantly. “That was Rabbit. I used purple and it didn’t show up.”

She shook her head. “What am I going to do with you boys? It’s almost Christmas. You know Santa’s watching.”

It was just days before Christmas. They had already spent nearly a week in the close quarters of her parents’ house and the twins were really beginning to get cabin fever. They were accustomed to running loose near the nature preserve or, when they were in California, playing on the beach. The layout of the suburbs, not to mention the Butler’s museum quality home, just was not conducive to their energy levels.

“Santa’s nice,” said Skunk. “He gives everyone presents.”

“Not if you’re naughty, he doesn’t,” said Stanzie.

“But he loves us no matter what,” said the boy.

“Yeah, like Jesus,” said Rabbit.

“But Jesus does not give you presents,” said Stanzie. She groaned and looked to Raven for support.

He smiled a wicked smile and turned to the boys. “Krampus is watching,” he told them, his voice low and foreboding.

“Krampus?” the twins exchanged looks.

“Santa’s henchman,” he explained. “Half-demon, half-goat. He’s huge and hairy, with horns on his head, and a great, long tongue.” Raven lurched around the boys and snarled.

The children’s eyes grew huge.

“He follows Santa around, watching for children who disobey. When he finds one, he stuffs them in a basket and takes them away.”

One of the boys stuttered, “D-d-does he bring them back?”

“Keep this up and we’ll find out.”

Rabbit’s lip quivered and he sniffed.

“Raven!” Stanzie scolded.

“What? I’m trying to help.”

“Don’t scare them.”

He shook his head. “Here’s the thing, guys. If you start behaving now, Krampus won’t come.” He turned to his wife. “Better?”

She blew him a kiss and picked up the impressionistic cat to wash him off in the laundry room.

While she was gone, Raven turned back to the boys. “Listen up. I know you’re excited for Santa, and I know it’s hard being cooped up inside. What do you say we go visit Mommy’s old job, huh? See the lights?”

“Yes!” they screamed in unison.

“Stanzie,” he called. “Want to go to the zoo?”

She emerged from the laundry with a clean cat and a huge smile. “Yes!” She set Kitty down and wrapped her arms around Raven and squeezed. “Oh my god, yes.”

The Columbus Zoo was ablaze with their annual holiday lights display. They bought hot chocolate for the boys and a cotton candy for Raven, and walked hand in hand through the pathways, taking in the magnificent light displays all around them. They rode the Polar Express themed train and stood in line to meet the characters from Rudolph.

“No King Moonracer?” Raven remarked, disappointed.

“Looks like the only misfit around here is you,” said a deep voice.

“Shawn!” Stanzie cried. “What a nice surprise.”

“It’s a better surprise for me,” said her old coworker, not in his maintenance uniform, but dressed as a civilian, pushing a stroller.

“Is that your...?” Stanzie started, “That’s not...”

“My granddaughter,” Shawn said proudly.

“Congratulations. How exciting!”

“Yeah. It’s pretty awesome. You get all of the baby love, and when they cry you get to give them back.” He chuckled. “I recognized the pretty boy here,” he jabbed, “But are those yours?” he gestured to the boys.

“Yes. David and Jason. Boys, come here and meet Mr. Wardlow.”

“Twins?”

She smiled. “Just like you.”

“Now I’m really jealous,” Raven said after they parted ways.

“Oh, come on,” said Stanzie. “You can’t be jealous of Shawn.”

“Ex-boyfriends are always cause for concern.”

“Not him. He’s just a big teddy bear.”

“Exactly. Girls love teddy bears.”

Frozen

“Do you want to build a snowman?”

“Jesus Christ, if I hear that fucking song one more time—”

“Daddy, no cussing at Grandma’s!”

“Fuck,” Raven groaned.

“I heard that,” Stanzie whispered harshly as she zipped up her son’s coat.

“Really, Daddy,” said the boy. “Wanna help?”

“Yeah, sure, let me grab some gloves. Hey, Ellen,” he called, “You got any carrots?”

“Carrots?” asked his son.

“Yeah. Don’t you know the song? Frosty the snowman, was a jolly happy soul, with a corn cob pipe and a button nose...oh shit. Nix that Ellen, got any buttons?”

“I’ve got something even better,” said the older woman appearing from the study with a shopping bag. “Jason, David, look and see what Grammy got for you.”

The boys pulled a box from the bag. “What is it?”

“It’s a snowman kit,” explained Grandma. “All you do is add snow.”

Raven took the box and frowned. “You paid seventy-five bucks for plastic coal and a scarf?”

She dismissed his comment. “It’s a fun DIY for the boys. Don’t ruin it with your anti-commercialism or whatever you stand for these days.”

“Come on, kids, let’s build the biggest motherfucking snowman you’ve ever seen.”

“Daddy!”

Faithful Friends

“Stanzie is going to flip out!” Jamie exclaimed, tying an apron around his waist with the word *Portugal* embroidered in red floss.

“Thanks for helping out, man,” Raven replied. “I have no idea how to read a fucking recipe.”

“Daddy, no cussing.”

Raven looked down at his son and put a finger to his lips. “Don’t tell Grandma.”

The little boy put a finger to his own lips and shook his head in solidarity.

Jamie flicked the recipe card with a flourish. “Sally’s famous cannoli recipe,” he declared. “Stanzie has been telling me how she cannot wait to get back to L.A. for some first-rate Italian cooking. Lucky for you I once dated a world-renowned pastry chef. The things he could do with a piping bag.” He whistled between his teeth.

Raven held Skunk’s ears with his hands. “Not in front of the kids.”

Jamie let out a laugh. “I was only talking about baking, pervert. What he could do with a spatula is another story.”

Raven groaned.

“Really, though,” said Jamie, “what a fantastic idea, making this for her. You’ve really outdone yourself, Mr. Xerces.”

“I don’t know about that. Why are women so hard to buy for?”

“Stanzie is the easiest person I know.” He lined the countertop with ingredients and rooted through the cabinets and drawers looking for the correct baking implements. “And I know for a fact that all you would need to do is say Merry Christmas with a bow on your head and she’d go all gaga. I know I would.” He snorted. “In fact, I’m still a little gaga simply standing in the kitchen with you.”

Raven shook his head and laughed. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“And don’t you forget it.” He dusted the counter with flour and handed an egg to Rabbit to crack into a bowl. “Maybe if we saw more of you, I wouldn’t be so starstruck.”

“Not you, too. I’m sick of these fucking guilt trips from you Ohio people.”

“Daddy, no cussing.”

Jamie smiled dramatically. "I'm not guilt tripping you. That's not my style. I just tell it like it is, and I miss my friend." Raven started to protest, but Jamie cut him off. "Don't take it the wrong way. I know it was her idea to move to Africa, but then she spends the other half of the year in L.A., and, well, I miss her is all. I had her all to myself for the first thirty-five years of her life, so it's hard to let go."

Not having had friends like that growing up, Raven couldn't relate, but he could imagine. He thought about Pretzel moving to Vanuatu. Plus, he knew what it was like to lose someone you love, and he hated being responsible for anyone's unhappiness, regardless. "I guess we could spend more time here, maybe in the summer or something." Stan's words about the boys came back to him.

"I'm not trying to get you to do anything," said Jamie. "I'm just talking. Though you know I would love nothing more than to show you off all over town. A little arm candy goes a long way in my circle."

Raven laughed. "What about Stanzie?"

"What about her? She hates the club scene."

"*I* hate the club scene."

Jamie clucked his tongue. "What good is having access to my very own rock god if I can't parade him around?"

Sleigh Ride

“You look more excited than the boys,” Stanzie teased, mussing up Raven’s hair before he pulled on a wool stocking cap.

“Maybe you went sled riding every winter, but we didn’t get snow like this in Chattanooga. Sure you don’t want to come?”

She shook her head. “I’m still beat from going earlier. Walking up that hill is no joke. And besides, Mom and I are going to make Grandma’s heirloom hot chocolate recipe for when you get back.”

“With scotch?”

“If you behave yourself.”

He snatched her around the waist and nuzzled her neck, giving her skin a little tug with his teeth. “You love it when I misbehave,” he whispered in her ear, ground his pelvis against her and squeezed her bottom.

“Ew, Daddy, stop being gross.” A little hand tugged on the sleeve of the oversized winter coat Raven borrowed from Stanzie’s father.

“All right, come on, tiger. See ya.” He gave Stanzie another kiss before venturing out in the snow to take the boys sled riding down the hill at the end of the street.

When they returned over an hour later, wet mittens and socks stinging their skin, the boys gathered around the kitchen table with the grandparents while Raven and Stanzie sneaked up the stairs.

“I think we can steal a few minutes before they notice,” she said with a mischievous smile, pulling Raven’s t-shirt over his head. She pushed him down on the bed and straddled him, running her fingers down his inked chest, then began to unbutton her own shirt.

“What’s gotten into you?” he teased.

“Shut up and kiss me,” she demanded.

He smiled with his crooked teeth, pulled her on top of him and did just that. His fingers found her bra clasp and he undid it with a flick of the wrist.

“Your bottom is still cold,” she whispered as she tugged off his pants, then did the same with her own. She crawled up his body, lingering in places and kissing his naked skin.

They were interrupted by a knock on the door.

“Go away, I’m trying to fuck my wife,” Raven called.

“Raven!” Stanzie shushed him.

“Sorry. I mean go away, I’m trying to *make love* to my wife.”

“Don’t you dare defile my little girl,” came Stanzie’s father’s voice through the door.

Stanzie gasped. “Shit,” she whispered, gathering the duvet around her body and opening the door a crack. “He defiled me long ago, Dad. Thanks for keeping an eye on the boys.”

Her father grumbled, “I’ll never get used to that punk touching you.”

“That punk is the best thing that’s ever happened to me. And you know it.” She shut the door on him with a smile, then turned back to Raven. “He said take all the time we want.”

“Bullshit,” he laughed, and reached for her as she returned to the bed. “But I’m going to anyway.”

Oh, Christmas Tree

The citywide snow emergency had kept anyone from leaving the house for over thirty-six hours. The children were fighting, the grandparents had given up trying to appease the boys and let them run rampant, and Stanzie had locked herself in the bathroom for an hour-long bubble bath and some peace and quiet.

Raven fidgeted on the back porch, his nails chewed down to the nub. He'd chewed up all the Nicorette, plus the carrots and celery sticks Ellen kept in the crisper drawer. He'd been drinking since eleven, but had to stop once Stan caught him.

So here he stood, his frosty breath like clouds in the air, stuffing shredded leaves from the dried mistletoe arrangement into the snowman's corncob pipe. He packed them in tight and clamped the stem in his mouth.

Just as he struck the match and held it to the bowl, Stanzie stepped out of the back door in her slippers and robe. She saw the floral arrangement in pieces on the grill and gave Raven a sideways look.

"Are you trying to smoke the mistletoe?" She slapped the pipe to the ground and stomped on the burning embers, shook her head at him. "Are you insane?"

"Yes!" Raven exclaimed. "Yes, I am going fucking insane around here!"

"But mistletoe, Raven? Don't you know that's poisonous?"

He shrugged.

She sighed. "I didn't want to resort to this, because I know how hard you're trying, and how far you've come, but considering the circumstances, here." She stuck her hand under the grill and pulled out a box that she handed to him.

His eyes widened. "Are you serious? When did you do this?" He took the pack of cigarettes from her and immediately tried to light one, but the lighter she had hidden was frozen. He blew his hot breath into the end and flicked it a few more times before it finally lit, sighing a huge breath as he exhaled a cloud of smoke.

She waved her hand in front of her face. "I bought them at the airport. Hid them when we first got here."

"You mean to tell me there was a full pack of smokes out here for two fucking weeks and you're just now telling me?"

"They were for emergency use only. And they come with ground rules."

"Fuck."

“Rule number one. No more cussing. Period.”

“Ugh.”

“They may not say anything to you, but I sure get an earful. Rule number two. Do not let my parents catch you smoking.”

“Why not? They can’t hate me any more than they already do.”

“Oh no, you’ve got it all wrong. I don’t say that for your benefit. I say that for my own self-preservation. If my mom sends me one more pamphlet, one more email forwarded from the cancer society, I swear to god, *I’m* going to have to take up smoking just to deal with the stress.”

“She does that?”

“For years.”

He laughed, incredulous. “Talk about insane.”

“She just cares about you.”

“Putting fucking nuts in the salad? She’s trying to fucking kill me.”

“You already broke rule number one. Hand them over.” She held out her hand.

“No way. That was the last time. Promise.”

She shook her head. He knew she’d never believe that one.

“Rule number three. Don’t smoke in the house.”

“Obviously.” He rolled his eyes.

“All right. I’m freezing. I’m going in. Don’t stay out too long, you’ll get frostbite. It’s supposed to get down below zero later.” She kissed him on the nose and retreated to the warmth of the house.

He stayed outside chain-smoking until he could no longer feel his toes, slipped the cigarettes and lighter into his jacket pocket and snuck in the sliding door as quietly as he could. The house was quiet, his in-laws retired for the night, the children in the basement guestroom. He thought Stanzie would have waited up for him, but he was alone on the first floor. After washing the cigarette smell off of his hands and face, he walked into the living room to the wet bar and poured himself three fingers of scotch.

Just as he was sitting down in the recliner, he heard the soft pattering of slippers feet, and turned to find Skunk, holding a plush tiger in one hand, a small blanket in the other. He set his drink on the end table. "What's up, tiger?" he asked.

The little boy rubbed his eye. "I had a bad dream."

"Come here and tell me about it." He pulled the boy into the chair with him and stroked his chestnut hair.

"It was Krampus," Skunk said in a quivering voice.

Raven sighed. "Shit," he muttered. "I mean, shoot. Okay, listen buddy." He kissed the boy's head. "Krampus isn't real. He's pretend."

"You made him up?"

"No, no, I didn't make him up."

"Then he is real."

"No. I didn't make him up; someone else did. Like, uh, like Casey the horse. You know he's make-believe, right?"

A nod of the head.

"That's what Krampus is, too."

"A cartoon?"

"No, not a cartoon. Just a story."

"Like Jesus?"

"Yeah. No. I mean, I don't know. No. Like someone made up the story about Krampus for fun."

"It's not fun to me."

"I know. And I'm sorry, kiddo. I didn't want to give you nightmares. It's just, it's hard being away from home, right?"

Another nod.

"Yeah. Well, it's hard for Mommy and me, too. We love being here with you and Grandma and Grandpa, but we need you and Rabbit to be extra good, okay?"

“Okay Daddy. I’m sorry.”

His heart sank. “Oh, buddy, you don’t need to be sorry. Come here, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I scared you.” The little boy burrowed into the crook of his arm. Within minutes Skunk was sleeping, and so was Raven.

Two hours later, he awoke with a crick in his neck and the boy on his lap. He cradled his son in his arms and gently lifted him from the chair and tucked him back into bed. Although his intention was to put himself to bed, when he noticed the tumbler of scotch he had left untouched on the table, he changed his mind. A drink wouldn’t hurt. And neither would a smoke.

Taking the glass with him to the kitchen, he pulled on the sliding door and was greeted with a burst of arctic wind to the face that knocked the breath out of him. He closed the door and walked back to the living room, paced the floor, taking small sips of the liquor and chewing on his bottom lip. His eyes darted around the room and to the staircase where his in-laws and wife lay sleeping on the floor above him. Rule number three was fresh in his mind, but so was the near full pack of cigarettes burning a hole in his pocket.

He fished one out and set it between his lips, thinking perhaps the sensation alone would be enough to satiate him. It did not. He flicked the lighter a few times and looked about the room. After considering his options, he snuck around the back of the Christmas tree and unlatched the picture window that looked out to the darkened street. He opened it just a crack. Cigarette perched in his lips, scotch on the windowsill, he clicked the lighter to life and brought the flame to his mouth. He leaned down until his face was level with the opening of the window, closed his eyes and savored the taste of the tobacco as the smoke filled his lungs, then exhaled out the screen. He took another drag, and flicked the ash into the air vent on the floor below him, making a mental note to clean it up later.

Taking a long sip of the liquor, he stretched his back, keeping the lit cigarette near the open window. A strong gust of wind whistled through the screen and took with it a red-hot ember from the end of the cigarette. Raven watched in horror as the orange ash flew through the air and landed on the outstretched needles of the fir. When the ember did nothing but disappear when it made contact with the branch, he leaned over to exhale his held breath. He chuckled a little to himself then stood upright, but when he did so, he caught his foot on the underside of the velvet tree skirt and slipped, catching his balance with his outstretched hand on the tree limb. Unfortunately, it was the outstretched hand that held the burning cigarette.

There was a hollow whooshing sound as the tree alit, and Raven backed up against the window, sucking in his belly to keep from being consumed by fire.

“Shit, shit, shit,” he panicked, eyes darting around for something to smother the flames.

In an instant, the majestic tree was a ball of fury, and almost as instantly, Raven and the tree were soaked as the home fire sprinkler rained down on them, accompanied by a red blinking light and high-pitched alarm piercing the otherwise silent night.

He barely had time to register what had happened, when footsteps sounded from above and below, while ten separate feet clambered up and down the staircases and into the scene.

“What in sam hill?” came Stan’s booming voice.

Raven shrunk at the voice, crouched behind the tree.

“David? Jason?” Stanzie rushed to her children and looked each of them over. “You okay? Everything okay?”

The twins squealed and ran under the sprinkler, squelching their feet on the soaking carpet and catching the rain on their tongues.

“Where’s Daddy?”

“Raven? Raven!” Stanzie called out for him, a terror in her voice he had never heard before.

At that he had no choice but to come out from hiding. When she saw him, she didn’t give him a second to say anything, but hurled herself onto him, clutching at him, squeezing him until he couldn’t breathe. Her breath was shallow and shaky. “Oh, thank god,” she whispered. “Thank god you’re okay.”

“Okay?” bellowed her father. “Do you think this is okay?” The man’s face turned as red as a flame. “What in tarnation happened?”

Raven swallowed. “Um, the, uh,” he stammered. “The wind, and I slipped, and the cigarette—”

“—I knew it was his fault,” Stan exploded. “This, this degenerate, this hooligan. He’s nothing but trouble. He could have burned down the whole damned house!” He lunged at Raven who cowered behind Stanzie. “You could have killed us all! I should call the police, have you arrested for arson.”

“Dad!” Stanzie cried.

“I’m serious. Everywhere this boy goes, he just breeds disaster.”

At the sound of their grandfather’s stern tone, the children stopped playing in the water and ducked behind their grandma.

“Just look at this!” Stan threw his arms over his head in disgust. “Do you have any idea how much this is going to cost me?”

Raven stepped out from behind Stanzie. “No, no, no,” he protested. “It won’t cost you anything. I got it. Listen, I am so, so sorry. I can’t even begin to say how much.”

“Sorry?” Stan fumed. “You’re sorry? You can put your sorrys in a sack, mister. I want you out of my house, you got that? I want you out of my house, I want you out of my life, out of my daughter’s life—”

“—Sir, wait—”

“—Dad! No—”

“—I cannot stand to look at you, those metal things all in your face, that, that ridiculous hair! Lord help me, I’m going to have an aneurysm if I—”

“—Now Stan.” Ellen cut him off, grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him away.

“What?” he erupted at her.

She would have none of it. “Enough!” she huffed. “Let’s just be glad no one got hurt.”

“No one got hurt? My Schwibbogens, my Byers Carolers, my—”

“—Just stuff. All of it’s replaceable. Listen. Yes, there was a terrible accident. Yes, Raven did a stupid thing. But no one got hurt. The house is still standing. We’re all a little wet, but it’s just one room. Just things.”

“Stan, I’m sorry,” Raven started. “I’ll call the water people and get the carpets dried and—”

“—Don’t talk to me.”

“Stan,” said Ellen, “Raven is going to call Stanley Steemer and we’ll have everything spic and span in time for Christmas.”

“I’m on it.” Raven took the opportunity to slip out of the room to call the disaster restoration crew, but mainly to get away from his irate father-in-law.

Stanzie followed him. Her face was hard, a deep crease in the center of her eyebrows. “Smoking in the house? Really?”

He scrolled through his phone until he found the right number. “I’m sorry.”

“Hell yeah, you’re sorry! Give them here.” She held out her hand.

He sighed and took the crumpled pack of smokes out of his pocket and handed them to her. Held up a finger while he spoke to the emergency cleaner on-call, gave them the details and address. “They’ll be here in an hour,” he said when he hung up.

She shook her head at him. “I really don’t know what to say. I just can’t believe you.”

He looked to the floor. “You know what?” he said finally. “Maybe if I were still snorting coke, y’all would think this was nothing.”

“Don’t even think about it.”

Let it Snow

Stan was still not speaking to Raven the following day, the smell of smoldering wood hung in the air despite Ellen and Stanzie's attempts to fumigate with scented candles and sprays. The restoration crew had cleaned up, and the tree was disposed, save for the few ornaments that survived. Raven kept to the shadows and avoided everyone but his boys, who hadn't seen such excitement since the time Raven's drummer James showed up drunk on their doorstep and peed on the welcome mat.

With Stanzie's permission, he took the kids to the grocery to restock the Butler's wine cooler, and try to find something to help repair the damage he had done. He had already placed an order with the German Christmas store that Stan loved to replace his beloved ornaments, but he knew he wouldn't get off that easy. They browsed the floral department where he chose a new centerpiece to replace the one he dismantled. He ordered a lunch tray and picked out steaks by price, since he knew nothing of cuts of meat.

Each boy picked out some candy to fill the grandparents' stockings, and of course some for their own. With the cart full of apologies, he loaded the items on the belt and asked the cashier for a pack of cigarettes.

"No, Daddy," said Skunk, pulling on his sleeve, his eyes full of concern. "No smoking."

"Yeah. The tree," added Rabbit, whose eyes were not as forgiving.

He smiled sadly at the boys and told the cashier he changed his mind. He was not sure how he would get through without them, but the kids were right. He had to try.

As he wheeled the cart toward the car, he spied a couple of live trees, marked down to clearance, corralled in the parking lot. After loading the groceries, he paid the attendant for the best tree in the bunch, and after running back into the store to purchase some rope and scissors, he and the attendant clumsily tied the tree to the roof of the rental car.

Stanzie was in the middle of delivering cookie tins with her mom and dad when he phoned her, and he told her to stall them for a bit before coming home; he had a surprise. He and the boys managed to set up the new tree and decorate it with paper chains the twins made with construction paper and staples, and snowflakes Raven cut out from copy paper. They made a garland out of paper clips and raided Ellen's sewing kit to make another out of thread and buttons. Stanzie texted asking if it was safe to come home just as they were finishing up.

"Nice work, guys," he said to the kids. "Let's take a picture for Mommy." The three posed in front of the little tree and took a selfie. "Now just you two. Say 'Christmas sucks.' Just kidding, don't say that."

When they heard the door handle turn, the boys hid behind the tree, then jumped out with a “Surprise!” when they heard the commotion in the living room. Stanzie embraced the boys with tears in her eyes. “You guys did this all on your own?” Raven heard her saying as Ellen beamed at him.

The older woman winked at him and whispered, “You did good.” She pulled a pamphlet out of her purse and handed it to him before disappearing into the kitchen. *American Lung Association: Freedom from Smoking.*

Raven smirked, folded the pamphlet and stuck it in his back pocket and watched Stan, trying to read him. While the old man hugged the grandkids warmly and ruffed their hair and told them what good boys they were, he still hadn’t looked in the direction of his son-in-law.

“He’ll come around,” Stanzie said as she squeezed him and wiped the tears off of her cheeks with the back of her hand. She looked deep into his eyes until he could see his own reflection in them. “God, I love you,” she said softly.

“You’re not mad anymore?”

“Oh no, I’m still mad,” she smiled. “But I love you. You did such a nice job. I know he loves it, even if he’s not good at showing it.” She kissed him before turning back to her children and asking them to show her the decorations.

Stan walked by him without a glance and pulled two glasses from the wet bar and poured a shot of scotch in each.

Raven rubbed the back of his neck, watched his wife admiring the tree and paper decorations, and smiled despite himself. He never tired of watching his little family together. They were his everything. Just like he had told Stan, on the days when his anxiety and panic disorder threatened to overwhelm him, they were the only reason he had to wake up in the morning. He would do anything for them. His heart swelled into his eyes watching them. He felt a nudge on his elbow and turned to find Stan holding out a glass.

“Scotch?” he asked.

“Uh, yeah, thanks. Thank you.” He took the glass and let Stan clink them together.

“This your idea?” He gestured to the tree.

“Yeah.” He took a sip of the scotch. He hadn’t had the stomach to eat since the day before, and the drink burned in his empty cavity.

“I’ve had a lot of time to think, and it’s time we bury the hatchet,” said Stan, inspecting the needles of the new tree. He turned to Raven and looked him in the eye. “Stanzie, she loves you. I don’t know why, but she does.” He sighed. “It’s not that she tells me she loves you, but I see it. I can feel it. She was a sad child. She spent a lot of time alone. Her career has been great for her, the perfect job for someone as internal and intense as she is, but to be honest, I didn’t know if she would ever find someone to share her life. Someone who clicked with her. But then she met you. I’ve never seen her happier than when she’s with you, and that tells me all I need to know.”

Raven was dumfounded. He had no words to convey the rattlings in his mind.

“You don’t have to say anything,” continued the older man. “In fact, it’s probably best you not say anything. That mouth of yours…” he clicked his tongue.

Raven held his lips together in a thin line.

Stan finished his drink and clapped his hands together. “I’ve got an idea. Hey, Stanzie, boys, gather around. What do you say we do like the old days, and have a good old-fashioned snowball fight?”

Stanzie’s eyes lit up. She looked to Raven, who raised his eyebrows and smiled, his disbelief in his father-in-law’s new attitude written all over his face. She laughed. “Sure, Dad. Kids against grown-ups like we use to do?”

He thought it over. “I think my age is an unfair disadvantage. What do you say the boys and me here against you two millennials.”

“We aren’t millennials, Dad.”

“You sure act like it.”

Stanzie gasped. “Them’s fightin’ words.”

“That’s the point.” Her dad laughed.

They all dressed for the snow, even Ellen put on her parka and cashmere scarf and joined the family in the front yard, piled high with the snow that had been falling all week. They built walls from the snow and patted together dozens of packed snowballs.

“You cannot do that to my dad!” Stanzie exclaimed when she saw what Raven was planning.

“He’s been a total dick to me this whole week.”

“This is supposed to be a friendly snowball fight, not the Hatfields and the McCoys,” Stanzie said. “And don’t call my dad a dick.”

“Well, he is.”

“I thought you made peace. Buried the hatchet.”

“He challenged me to this, and I am up to the fu—freaking, challenge,” Raven said, a cup of water poised over the snowballs he stockpiled behind his snow fort.

“You are NOT throwing ice balls at a seventy-year-old man, and that’s final!”

Winter Wonderland

“How long do you think the kids will last at *The Nutcracker*?” Raven asked. He was seated on the ledge of the whirlpool bath in a fuzzy robe, testing the water temperature as he filled it.

“Doesn’t matter,” said Stanzie from the doorway of the bathroom, she herself clothed in a matching robe. “They said we’d have the house to ourselves until nine, so they’ll have to keep them occupied somehow. Besides, they love giving them a *cultural experience*,” she mocked her father’s voice.

Raven laughed. “What did you say to him, anyway, for the change of heart?”

“I don’t think it’s what I said. I think it’s because he won the snowball fight.”

“That fucker threw ice balls at me!”

She scowled. “Don’t call my dad a fucker.”

He smirked. “Sorry. Old habits.” He turned off the water and stood, taking a step toward her. “I’m sorry I’ve ruined your week. I know you were looking forward to being home again.”

She shook her head. “Oh, Raven, if only you knew how wrong you are.” She draped her wrists over his shoulders and played with the back of his hair. “You have brought so much chaos and destruction to this household, I couldn’t be happier.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, I love my parents, I do. But god, I do hold a grudge, you know that.”

“Oh, I know you and your grudges.”

She laughed. “I am so glad you burned down those fucking Schwibbogens.”

He snorted. “Watch your mouth.”

“My mouth? Ha. My mouth’s fine. What are we going to do with your mouth?”

“Why don’t I show you what we can do with my mouth.” He kissed her, pulling down the shoulders of her robe, letting it fall the floor, and kissed her neck, her chin and her lips. He let his own robe fall and pulled her to him, felt her naked flesh under his fingers.

He took her hand and led her to the tub and followed her into the bath. With his head against the porcelain, she lay against him, her back to his chest. He kissed her

shoulder and her neck, and slipped his hand down between her legs until she purred and gasped his name.

“I love you, Mrs. Mozart,” he whispered.

After the bath, Stanzie lit a fire in the fireplace and Raven opened a bottle of shiraz. He poured them each a glass and watched his wife stoke the fire.

“You’re really good at that,” he remarked.

“Five years keeping rhinos at bay will do that,” she smiled.

He shook his head. “You’re incredible, you know that?”

She shrugged and took the glass from him, clinked them together. “To some well-needed alone time.”

“I’ll drink to that.”

“You’ll drink to anything.” She smirked.

Raven sat on the floor in front of the hearth, and Stanzie lay down and nestled between his legs, the back of her head resting on the crook of his neck.

“I’m really proud of you,” she said.

“For what? Almost burning down your childhood home?”

“For being you. For trying so hard for my family. For our family.” She looked over her shoulder up into his eyes. They looked especially green in the glow of the firelight. “I know every day is a struggle for you, to keep sober. And we just keep asking you to give up more and more. *Cut down on the drinking, Raven, and no more cigarettes.* I know it’s a lot.” Her eyes began to water. “I don’t want you to change, baby. I just,” she sniffed, “I just don’t ever want to lose you. Ever.”

He kissed the top of her head. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Reaching up with her hand, she felt for his face, and ran her fingers down his jawline. “It took me so long to find you,” she said, her voice cracking.

He took her fingers in his hand and kissed them. “We’ve got our whole lives ahead of us,” he whispered.

She nodded. “I want to live forever, as long as it’s with you.”

“I’ll always be with you. Always.”

“Do you know when I first fell in love with you?” she asked.

“When I kissed you on the airplane?”

She snorted. “No. That was awful. I hated you for that.”

“I thought you hated me because you missed your flight.”

“That, too.” She took a sip of wine. “No, I fell in love with you when you came out of your house with those flashlights in a panic over—”

“—The turtles.” He smiled at the memory. “Really?”

“Yeah. There was so much passion in your eyes, in your voice and actions. I felt like I had finally found someone with a love for animals as deep as mine. I mean, I had been trying to get back to my hotel all night, and you kept sidetracking me with animals. First the cats, then the horse and that damn raven.”

He laughed. “Good old Blackjack Davy.”

“And every time I kept thinking I had to get back, I had to get a good night’s sleep, you had to pull some needy animal out of your hat, and my heart just caved. I knew then I had found my soulmate, even if he didn’t look anything like I’d imagined.”

“Oh yeah? What’d you imagine your soulmate looking like?”

She shrugged. “Definitely not like Raven Xerces.”

“Disappointed?”

She looked up at him and smiled. “On the contrary.”

He swept the hair from her shoulders and kissed her neck, running his tongue up the side until he reached the back of her ear and she giggled.

“It is so nice to be alone,” he said softly, slipping his hand between the lapel of her fuzzy robe until he felt skin.

“I thought you were finally beginning to like my parents,” she teased.

“I don’t want to talk about your parents right now,” he breathed heavily, continuing to caress her under the robe. “I’ve missed this.”

She hummed in agreement. “And I’ve missed this.” She turned around and opened Raven’s robe, running a finger down his sternum, down the middle of the black raven sprawled on his chest. She kept going, but replaced her finger with her mouth,

running down the length of his body, down to his navel, to the wispy hairs at the middle of his belly and below.

“Merry Christmas,” Raven groaned.

Silent Night

It was Christmas Eve and the pews of St. Andrew Presbyterian Church were packed shoulder to shoulder with families in their holiday best.

“Do we really have to do this in front of everyone?” Raven asked nervously from the narthex.

“Yes,” said Stanzie, fixing Skunk’s tie and smoothing Rabbit’s flyaway hairs. “It’s an honor to be the family who lights the Advent candles. Especially on Christmas Eve.”

He sighed. “Look at all those people.” He gestured to the sanctuary in front of them.

“Oh, come on, you sing in front of thousands.” She gave him a little kiss on the bridge of his nose.

“That’s different. What am I supposed to do? Say ‘*how the hell you doing, St. Andrew? Who’s ready to fu-freaking praise Jesus?*’ Slap a few hands?”

“You’re supposed to keep your yap shut and light the candles.” She kissed him again. “You look great, by the way.”

“I feel like a douche bag.” He looked down at the outfit Ellen bought for him: black cuffed trousers, a red oxford, and red and green tartan sweater vest.

“It matches your hair,” she remarked.

He snorted. “I think that’s why she picked it.”

“Oh, oh, we’re on. Come on.” She took the boys by the hands and the family walked down the center aisle and up the steps to the altar where the Advent wreath set awaiting their light.

While the pastor read from the book of Luke, Raven took the brass candle lighter and helped Rabbit light the hope candle and Skunk light the peace. With both boys’ hands, they lit the joy candle, and Raven beamed thinking of the joy those little children had brought him. He had to wipe the corner of his eye with his wrist before lighting the love candle himself. Bursting with love, he handed the lighter to Stanzie to light the final white Christ candle. Seeing the tears in his eyes, she squeezed his hand, her own nose turning pink with emotion.

Stan and Ellen welcomed them into the pew for the remainder of the service, and as the lights dimmed and the wax candles were lit, they held their flames and sang the verses of *Silent Night*, the angelic voices of the choir consuming the air around them.

Raven's heart was full. He looked to each of his family members, standing together in a church of all places. He never had much faith in God, but now, surrounded by so much hope, peace, joy and love, he couldn't help but feel blessed.

After the service, they drove home the long way to look at Christmas lights and the luminaries on Pinetree Avenue that had been a tradition since Stanzie's youth. Holiday music played on the radio and the twins snoozed in the back seat. When they pulled into the driveway, Stan was waiting for them on the walkway.

"Let me take one of those boys," he offered, picking up Skunk and holding him to his chest, the little brown head resting on his grandpa's shoulder.

Raven took Rabbit and together they tucked the children into the twin beds in the guestroom.

As they stood in the darkened doorway watching the boys sleep, Stan placed his hand on Raven's shoulder and gave him a squeeze. "I really don't give you enough credit, Raven," he said. "You're a good dad." He patted him once more and, before Raven had a chance to respond, he turned down the hall and up the stairs.

He watched the boys a minute longer until Stanzie padded down the steps to retrieve him. "We have to play Santa," she whispered.

Together they stuffed the stockings and piled wrapped gifts under the tree. They tried to spoil the boys with love, not toys, but it seemed they had both gotten carried away when they saw the finished product. "We'll go smaller next year," Raven said with a smile.

Stanzie stifled a yawn. "It's past my bedtime," she said. "You coming?"

"I'll be up in a few."

"Okay, not too late. We have an early morning." She gave him a kiss on the mouth. "Don't burn down the house."

He smirked.

With Stanzie in bed and the house to himself, he poured himself a glass of wine, sat on the sofa and watched the lights twinkle on the tree. Not ever having had a magical Christmas morning growing up, he wanted nothing but that for his children. For his wife. Maybe even for himself. Stan had added more decorations to the tree, the unscarred pieces he had managed to salvage from the smoke damage. The more he looked at the tree, the more Raven realized that perhaps his in-laws were not as bad as they seemed. Just like him, they only wanted what was best for their family. He wouldn't have been too quick to accept someone like himself into the family, either. He could not blame them.

My True Love Gave to Me

Raven awoke to voices coming down the stairs. He had fallen asleep on the sofa in his slacks, oxford and sweater vest, his stocking feet tucked up on the cushions. The grandparents were trying in vain to keep the children from rushing to the tree, but lost the battle and they came barreling into the living room, screaming, “Santa came! Santa came to Grandma’s!”

Stanzie approached the couch and looked down at him with soft eyes. “I missed you last night. What happened?”

He sat up and scratched his head, “Nothing. I just fell asleep.”

“Want some coffee?”

“Later. Sit. Watch the magic unfold,” he gestured to the children who tore at wrapping paper and squealed each time a gift was revealed.

When the room was littered with paper shreds and the twins had spread Legos all over the floor, Raven took the chance to brush his teeth, change his clothes and make a pot of coffee. Ellen surprised him when she came into the kitchen for tea.

“Merry Christmas,” she sang.

“Merry Christmas.”

“Isn’t this a delight?” she remarked. “Nothing is more joyous than watching children on Christmas morning. We didn’t overdo it, did we?”

He shook his head. “It’s your legal right as a grandparent, I think.” He never knew his grandparents, but he had seen enough *What Happens at Grandma’s, Stays at Grandma’s* and *Live Love Spoil* merchandize to get the gist.

“I may not have said it, but I’m glad you came. All of you,” she stressed.

Before he could stop himself, he rolled his eyes, a knee-jerk reaction.

“Don’t roll your eyes at me. I mean it.” The teakettle whistled and she poured the steaming water over the tea bag in her cup. “I love you, Raven.”

“You do?” He knitted his eyebrows.

She approached him and patted his cheek with her free hand. “You make my daughter happy. You make my grandsons happy. You are loved.”

He wasn't sure if it was the holiday speaking or not, but he stood still in the kitchen absorbing what had just happened long after she left. Were Stanzie's parents really coming around? After all these years, maybe all they needed was time to spend with him. Time they never spent together. It was unfair, when he thought about it. Unfair to the Butlers. Unfair to Stanzie and especially to Rabbit and Skunk.

The living room was a buzz with the children playing, grandparents and Stanzie chatting, a fire burning in the fireplace and music on the stereo. It was picture perfect. Raven stood in the entryway and soaked it all in, embedded it in his memory.

"Hey Stanzie, can I talk to you a sec?" he asked.

She gave him a worried look, but came anyway. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing. Come here." He led her to the study. "Are you having a good time? Like, has it been good being home?"

She beamed at him, her cheeks rosy from the fire or from joy, he didn't know for certain, but she glowed. "Yes. Yes, thank you for doing this. For spending time here for me. I know it's been awful for you, but it has meant so much to me."

"It hasn't been awful."

"Oh, come on."

"I mean, some of it's been trying, but it's good. I'm glad we came."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really." He pulled her into a hug and looked out the window. "See that house there?" he nodded up the street.

"The one for sale?"

"Mm-hmm. Want to put a bid on it?"

She pulled away and stared at him with enormous eyes. "For real?"

"Yeah." He nodded with a smile.

"Are you drunk?" She sniffed his breath.

He laughed. "No, I'm not drunk. I'm totally serious."

"You want to move to Columbus?"

He shrugged. “Not like the whole time. Not instead of the preserve. But maybe instead of L.A.”

“You can’t leave your band. And Pretzel.”

“Pretzel’s moving. She won’t even be around. And the guys, they’ll still be there. Maybe it’s time I retire. Raise my kids. Pleasure my wife.” He squeezed her bottom.

“This can’t be real.”

“Jamie misses you. Your parents miss you. Hell, we can’t keep your parents from watching their only grandchildren grow up. And the boys...I never had grandparents. I never had the chance at a normal childhood like that. They deserve it. They deserve some normalcy, a strong foundation like your dad says. What do you say?”

“I can’t believe you’re saying this.”

“Believe it.”

She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed the breath right out of him. Then she pulled him by the arm back into the living room and said loudly, “Mom, Dad, boys. Boys. Boys! Um...” she looked nervously at Raven. He smiled and nodded at her. “We have, um, we have a Christmas present for you.”

“Oh, honey, you already gave us those lovely linens and—”

“It’s something else. Um, Raven, do you want to tell them?”

“You’re having a baby!” Ellen screamed.

“Oh, hell no!” Stanzie held up her hands and waved her mom away.

“We’re going to put a bid on the house down the street,” Raven said.

Stan rose from his seat. “The Johnson’s place?” He pointed toward the street. Shook his head. “Needs a lot of updating. They had that Great Dane, remember—”

“—You’re moving?” Ellen interrupted him. “You’re moving here?”

“We’re moving?” asked Skunk excitedly. Both boys ran to the door and pulled back the curtains from the side windows and peered down the street. When they saw the sign in front of the home, they jumped up and down. “Look at our new house! Can we go now? Can we see our rooms?”

“Oh, my heavens!” Ellen exclaimed and she pulled Raven and Stanzie into as big a bear hug as she could muster with her spindly arms. Tears streamed down her face. “I never imagined. Oh, my word, I think I may faint.”

Stan took her arm. “That’s a mighty nice gesture, but—”

“—No buts, Dad. We’re going to do it.”

The elder gentleman tried holding back his delight, but it seeped out of his eyes and he had to wipe it away with the back of his hand before he thought anyone noticed. But they did. They all did.

Stanzie’s extended family arrived later for brunch, bringing more gifts for the boys. Jamie showed up with his partner, and they all feasted and sang carols while Ellen played the harp, Stan the viola, and they even allowed Raven to play the antique Steinway.

While the friends and relatives gathered around for a not-so-friendly game of poker, Raven pulled Stanzie up from the sofa by the hand and led her into the kitchen, away from the hubbub.

“I got you something,” he said quietly. He looked into her eyes, his green irises large and round like Christmas wreaths.

“Oh yeah?” she smiled.

He swallowed a nervous lump. “Do you know when I fell in love with you?”

“Tell me again.”

He pulled her to him, arm around her waist, and danced with her slowly on the kitchen tiles. He brought his mouth to her ear and whispered, “When I felt your breath on my neck when we first danced. I could feel your heart beating and it was like it left your body and entered mine, and there it stayed.” He lifted her chin with his finger. “I love you, Mrs. Mozart.” He kissed her.

“Sal and Sally’s Italian Bistro. I’ll never forget the first time you took me there. It was like a little slice of Heaven in the middle of a crazy city.” She sighed. “I miss it. I miss them. It was like you were introducing me to your parents on our first date.”

He chuckled. “I guess I sorta was. I knew you were special, and I knew they would love you. I just hoped that they would get you to forgive me. To give me a chance. See I wasn’t such a bad guy.”

“It worked.” She smiled. “And that cannoli sure didn’t hurt.” She kissed him slow and long on the mouth, and when she opened her eyes again, he held out a small white box, tied with a simple white ribbon.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Just open it.”

She set the box on the kitchen island and pulled the string. He watched with a nervous smile as she carefully lifted the lid and peeked inside. A gasp escaped her lips. She stared a Raven, her mouth agape. The corners of her eyes sparkled with moisture as the tears collected and when she blinked, three of them escaped down her cheeks. “Cannoli? Is this from—”

“I made it.” He smiled. “Sally’s recipe.”

“You baked?”

He shrugged. “Jamie helped. A lot. Okay, Jamie made them,” he admitted with a guilty smile. “But I watched.”

She reached for a pastry, but Raven stopped her. “You have to wait for dessert,” he said.

“Really?”

“Yeah. I gotta take you to dinner first.” He reached into his back pocket and held out two plane tickets. “I know this great little Italian place.”

The End

Thank you so much for reading! Can’t get enough of Raven? Full length Raven Xerces novels *Raven Song* and *BirdSong* available on Amazon either paperback or ebooks.

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About the Author

Jennifer Brasington-Crowley is an author, illustrator and Slytherin. She is a little obsessive about things like music and animals, and can't help but sneak miniature biology lessons into all of her books.

She currently lives in Cincinnati, Ohio, with her husband and children, dog and three cats.

Author of the *Lyndsay and Lainey Lion* children's book series (www.sunnyvillezoo.com), as well as contemporary fiction *The Woman Who Fell to Earth*, *Dolphin Song*, *Dolphin Magic*, *Raven Song* and *BirdSong* available from Amazon.com.

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