

12 Quilts of Christmas

A HARRIET TRUMAN/LOOSE THREADS MYSTERY



Arlene Sachitano

***Harriet backed out of the
office and opened the door to
the basement.***

“Wait here,” she told Luke and started slowly down the stairs. She stopped to listen, and Luke bumped into her back. “I told you to wait up there,” she whispered, glancing up at the landing.

Luke’s eyes were wide, but he had a determined look on his face.

“If you’re going down, I’m going down.”

“Millie?” Harriet descended two more steps.

The muffled response was louder here. This time, it sounded like Millie saying . “Down here.”

Harriet hurried down the last few steps, Luke on her heels. The scene they stumbled into was terrifying.

Millie sat in a chair facing the foot of the stairs, her hands and feet bound tightly, shiny gray duct tape wrapped several times around her head, covering her mouth. William lay motionless on the dirt floor a few feet to her right; blood seeped from a nasty indentation that started on his forehead and continued into his gray hair. More blood pooled around his head.

Harriet started toward William.

“Take another step, and it will be your last,” an electronically altered voice said.

She froze.

“Now, turn around,” the voice said. “Slowly.”

Also By Arlene Sachitano

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Quilter's Knot
Quilt As You Go
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Double Wedding Death
Quilts Make A Family

The Harley Spring Mysteries

Chip and Die
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THE 12 QUILTS OF CHRISTMAS

**A Harriet Truman/Loose Threads
Mystery**



ARLENE SACHITANO



ZUMAYA ENIGMA

2019

AUSTIN TX

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THE 12 QUILTS OF CHRISTMAS

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ISBN 978-1-61271-405-9

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Sachitano, Arlene, 1951- author.

Title: The 12 quilts of Christmas / Arlene Sachitano.

Other titles: Twelve quilts of Christmas

Description: Austin, TX : Zumaya Enigma, 2019. | Series: A Harriet Truman

loose threads mystery

Identifiers: LCCN 2019008582 | ISBN 9781612714059 (trade paperback : alk.

paper) | ISBN 9781612714066 (Kindle) | ISBN 9781612714073 (epub)

Subjects: | GSAFD: Mystery fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3619.A277 A617 2019 | DDC 813/.6--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2019008582>

IN MEMORY OF

Marcella, Skip, Mary, Fred, and Lou

You are missed

Chapter 1

Harriet Truman shivered and cupped her hands around her mug of tea. “If it has to be this cold, I wish it would just go ahead and snow.”

Her aunt, Beth Carlson, sat down beside her.

“You could wear a sweater instead of a sweatshirt. Wool is much warmer.”

Marjorie Swain, the owner of Pins and Needles Quilt Shop, wheeled a portable radiator-shaped oil heater into the corner of the room and plugged it in.

“I’m sorry the meeting rooms are so chilly. The building’s heat pump is on its last legs, and the back zone up and quit this morning. The guy from Ben’s Heating came out a couple days ago to pronounce it nearing death and order a new unit.” She sighed and fiddled with the dials. “It’ll be another few days before it gets here from Seattle. I was hoping the old one would hang on until then.”

“We’ll be fine,” Beth assured her.

Mavis Willis arrived and set a large project bag in the chair on Harriet’s other side.

“I’m sewing the binding on my quilt today. If you sit by me, you can have part of my quilt over your lap.”

Lauren Sawyer pulled her quilt from a new-looking canvas-and-leather bag.

“One of the perks of making a quilt for the outdoor store,” she said when she noticed Harriet eyeing the bag. “And you’re probably cold because you spent last week in Arizona.”

Harriet laughed.

"You say that like we were at a resort. Working and living at the Indian reservation at Big Mountain for Thanksgiving week wasn't exactly luxurious. And the weather is about like it is here, minus the rain. Oh, did I mention we slept in a tent?"

Lauren put a teabag in her mug and added hot water from the carafe on the table.

"And why, exactly, were you doing this? I mean, the elders need help in the summer, too."

"James and I are trying to be good foster parents. We asked Luke what he wanted to do for Thanksgiving, and he said he wanted to do something that was a little less commercial. The first Thanksgiving after Steve died, I went with a group of people to help out at the reservation. I mentioned it as one possibility, and Luke jumped on it."

Mavis threaded her needle with green thread and began sewing her binding.

"You and James are doing a fine job with that boy. I almost didn't recognize him when I ran into him at the store last week. He's filled out so much in the three months since you've had him."

"He looks like he's grown an inch, too." Beth added.

Harriet smiled.

"We're trying. And with James in the house, he'll never go hungry."

"Did we miss anything?" Robin McLeod asked as she flipped her wool cape off her shoulders and set her purse and bag next to a chair. DeAnn Gault followed Robin in and shrugged out of her down jacket.

"Brrr.... It's cold out there."

Harriet picked up two mugs.

"Coffee or tea?"

They both chose coffee, and Harriet poured, adding sugar to DeAnn's and powdered stevia to Robin's before delivering them.

Carla Salter and Jenny Logan came in from the store, where they had been shopping for fabric.

"Sarah is buying binding fabric for whatever she's working on," Jenny said in a quiet voice. "I think she might be coming to our meeting."

"Good for her," Beth said. "It's time for her to get back in circulation."

Further discussion ended when Sarah Ness came into the meeting room.

"Is it okay if I join you?" she asked.

Connie Escorcia followed her carrying a plate of brownies.

"Of course you can," she said. "You're a part of this group whether you attend every meeting or not."

Sarah gave her a grateful smile and sat down.

Robin pulled a wool appliqué square from her tote bag and set it on the table in front of her.

“Before we get started, can we see the Christmas quilts?”

Several of the group had been asked by the Downtown Business Association to create Christmas-themed quilts for the shop windows. Another quilt group in town, The Small Stitches, was also making quilts for the display.

Harriet pulled a folded quilt top from her bag and opened it as she stood up. She had done an all-over pattern made up of various sizes of blocks using a variety of geometric shapes.

“As you can see, I still need to throw it on the machine and quilt it.”

“I like the traditional block variations,” Carla said.

Lauren sipped tea and set her mug on the table.

“Cutting it a little close, aren’t you?”

Harriet smiled.

“I’m on the ‘stress for success’ plan. I’ve got time, though. Today’s Tuesday, and they’re due Saturday. And they don’t need show-level quilting.”

Lauren shook her head.

“If you say so.” She pulled her own quilt from her new bag. It was a forest design with simple tree shapes in various shades of green. At the bottom of the quilt she’d appliquéd a scene depicting a clearing with a single decorated tree surrounded by woodland creatures.

“Oh, honey,” Connie gasped. “That is *beautiful*. Is it your own design?”

“Why, yes, it is,” Lauren said with a grin.

Robin sipped her coffee.

“You’ve outdone yourself.”

Carla clutched her quilt to her chest. Her cheeks flamed.

“I don’t want to show mine.”

Mavis patted her arm.

“Your quilt is very nice. It’s a perfect choice for the Sandwich Board window.”

Lauren stuffed her quilt back in her bag.

“Let’s see it, then.”

Carla reluctantly stood and held her quilt up. Jenny stood up and took one corner, stepping to the side so the group could see the whole design. Carla had done traditional blocks using 1930s reproduction fabrics in Christmas colors.

“That is fabulous,” Jenny said. “I agree with Mavis, it’s a good choice for a sandwich shop.”

Connie got up and, with Lauren’s help, showed her quilt. Her design consisted of cupcake images decorated in red and green.

Mavis had just stood to show her quilt when Marjorie rapped on the door frame.

“Someone here to see you guys.”

She stepped aside to let Glynnis Wilson enter. Glynnis came to the table and plopped down in the nearest vacant seat. Connie fixed a cup of tea and handed it to her.

Glynnis’s normally tidy hairdo was flat on one side, with a strand hanging loose over her left eye, and her signature pink lipstick was missing.

“Honey, what’s wrong?” Mavis asked.

Glynnis let out a big sigh and slumped. “Everything.”

The Threads waited while she sipped her tea and visibly tried to pull herself together.

“Can we do something to help?” Beth prompted.

“The Small Stitches aren’t going to have their quilts done,” she finally announced.

“None of them?” Harriet blurted.

Aunt Beth glared at her.

“I mean, I’m sorry. How can we help?” she amended.

Robin folded her napkin and set her teacup on it.

“Is everyone okay?”

Mavis took a brownie from the plate and handed it to Glynnis on a napkin.

“Thank you,” Glynnis said as she accepted it, then continued. “Everyone will be okay eventually, but right now, things are a bit of a mess. Frieda slipped and fell on the ice we had last week and broke her right leg and chipped a bone in her left elbow. I was going to do her quilt along with mine, but I just got word my daughter’s toxemia has worsened, and they’re going to have to induce the baby tonight, which will be six weeks early. I’m leaving for Seattle when I’m done here.”

Harriet twirled her spoon in her fingers.

“We can finish two quilts, can’t we?” she asked.

“I wish it were that simple,” Glynnis said before anyone could answer. “Beryl got the shingles, and they go down her backside and thigh all the way to her ankle. She’s spending her time in bed laying on her side. Mary has double pneumonia, so she’s in the hospital. Betty called me this morning and said her studio caught on fire last night.”

“Are she and her family okay?” Mavis interrupted.

“Her studio was in a separate building behind the house, and she and her husband were out to dinner when it happened. The firemen think her space heater caused it. Anyway, it’s a total loss.” Glynnis sighed and picked up her mug, taking a sip before continuing. “Kathy had knee-replacement

surgery a couple of weeks ago and is staying at her daughter's, and since Carol and LaRayne weren't signed up to make Christmas quilts, they went on a cruise and won't be home until a few days before Christmas."

Lauren drew in a breath.

"That *is* a mess."

Robin pulled her ever-present legal tablet and pen from her oversized purse.

"Okay, right now, Harriet, Lauren, Beth, Mavis, Connie, and Carla are making quilts for the Christmas in Foggy Point celebration." She wrote their names in a column on the left side of a page.

"And we lost Kathy, Betty, Mary, Beryl, Frieda, and myself," Glynnis said, and Robin wrote the names down on the right side of the page.

Harriet sipped her tea.

"That leaves Robin, DeAnn, Jenny..." She paused and looked across at Sarah, who nodded slowly.

"I could do a quilt if it's not too hard."

"Sarah," Harriet finished. "How many is that?" She counted on her fingers, "Four."

"We could ask Darcy," Mavis suggested.

"Beryl was making a quilt for my window," Marjorie said from the door. "She told me she has the pieces cut already. I could finish that one. I know everyone didn't want me to have to make one, since that's my business, but I don't mind."

A look of relief washed across Glynnis's face.

"That would be so wonderful. We Small Stitches want to do our share, but the sky just fell in on us."

Connie reached over and patted her hand.

"We don't mind helping at all. We quilters need to stick together."

Robin wrote her own name along with Darcy's, Marjorie's and the three available Loose Threads in a column in the center of her page. She drew a connecting line between Beryl's name and Marjorie's.

"Okay, we just need to pair up the rest of us." She looked at Glynnis. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"Betty's quilt is a total loss, so someone will need to start from scratch on that one. Kathy has the blocks done for hers. I think she thought she was going to be able to sit at her sewing machine after her knee surgery to sew them together and do the sashing and borders, but things aren't healing that fast."

Sarah raised her hand. Connie smiled at her.

"Yes, sweetie."

"Maybe I could finish that one."

Robin drew a line between Sarah and Kathy.

“Okay, two down,” she said.

Jenny wiped her mouth on a napkin after taking a bite of brownie.

“I can do Betty’s quilt. I’m done with my Christmas shopping, and I’ve finished all my holiday sewing projects. I might miss the deadline by a day or two, but no more than that.”

“I’m sure everyone will understand,” Marjorie said. “They’re lucky they’re getting quilts at all.”

Glynnis leaned back in her chair, looking thoughtful.

“I’m pretty sure Frieda was mostly done with her top before she broke her leg. I think she wasn’t happy with her border color and wanted to try something else, but otherwise the top is finished.”

“That might be good for Darcy,” Harriet suggested. “Since we’re volunteering her when she’s not here.”

Lauren pulled out her smartphone and tapped out a text message.

“I’ll ask her if she’s in,” she explained.

Her phone chimed before she could get it back in her pocket. She glanced down at the small screen. Robin drew a connecting line between Frieda’s and Darcy’s names.

“I think Mary only got hers cut out before she got sick,” Glynnis continued.

“Mary lives in my neighborhood,” DeAnn said. “Why don’t I do hers? I should go check on her anyway.”

Robin smiled at Glynnis.

“I guess that leaves you and me.”

Glynnis smiled back at her.

“You’re going to wish I’d done something else.”

Robin raised her eyebrows.

“Explain?”

“I thought it would be fun to do a Christmas-themed crazy quilt.”

Robin groaned.

“I swore I’d never do another crazy quilt after we had that workshop here.”

The rest of the group made similar comments.

“I’ve got all the background squares done,” Glynnis offered.

Beth tapped her spoon on the table. The group stopped talking.

“Since the six of us who are already making quilts are either done or mostly done, maybe we can each take a square or two and do the embellishments so Robin can concentrate on the final assembly.”

Harriet looked at Lauren. “I can do one if you can.”

Lauren grinned. “You’re on sister.”

“Do you have the blocks in your car?” Robin asked Glynnis.

“I do, and I have Kathy’s blocks, also.”

“I’ll walk out with you when you’re ready,” Robin told her. “If you’re leaving right away for Seattle, you should finish your tea and have another brownie first.”

Chapter 2

Mavis turned her quilt ninety degrees and began sewing on the long edge.

“I’d make us a spreadsheet of all this, but my computer’s in the shop having an upgrade. That boy Chris said when he’s done sprucing everything up I should get another couple of years out of the old girl.”

“Whatever,” Lauren muttered. “I can make you a spreadsheet complete with deadlines, gating items and color-coded quilter names.”

Mavis smiled.

“That would be very nice.”

“As long as it doesn’t keep you from getting your quilting done,” Beth cautioned.

“Oh, please,” Lauren shook her head. “I’ll probably be done with it before you get home today.”

Harriet folded her arms across her chest and thought for a moment, staring at the pile of quilt pieces Glynnis had brought in before she left.

“Do we know which stores these quilts are intended for?”

Conversation around the table stopped as the quilters looked at each other, hoping someone knew the answer.

“I’ll take that as a no,” Harriet said when no one spoke up.

Robin folded the page of her notebook to the back and wrote “Main Street Stores” at the top of the new one.

“Okay, starting at the far end of the street from here, name the shops.”

The others called out names, and she wrote them down in order, adding the name of the quilter beside the businesses they were known to be stitching for and leaving blank the ones they didn’t know yet.

Lauren pulled her phone from her pocket.

"I'll call the first three and see who they think is sewing for them."

Harriet looked at the list.

"I can do the last three, but there seems to be a problem. I see four more names."

"I can tell you about that," Marjorie called from across the hall, where she was filling a kettle in the small kitchen. "Serena Howard, who owns Kitchen Couture, wanted to make a bunch of quilted tablecloths in Christmas fabrics to sell this season. She wants to donate the profits to the Fallen Badge Foundation, so she asked the business association if she could put one of those in her window. Since it benefits the police and all, they decided it was okay."

"Her husband is on the Foggy Point police force, isn't he?" Mavis asked.

"I think Jorge said he recently transferred from the state police to our local force," Beth verified. "I've been working with her on the one for the window."

Lauren set her phone down.

"Okay. Jenny, you're making a quilt for Ruby's Jewelry Store. Sarah—Steen's Insurance."

Harriet tapped her phone off and slid it back into her pocket.

"Robin, your crazy quilt goes to the Print and Copy Shop, and, DeAnn, you'll finish Mary's quilt for The Melnyk Gallery. Darcy's is for B & B Clothing Boutique.

"That's it, then," Robin said. "As we already know, the sixth quilt was for Pins and Needles, and Marjorie is taking care of that."

Mavis folded her project and put it back into her bag. She stretched her hand across the table toward Robin.

"Let's have a look at the foundation squares for the crazy quilt."

Robin pulled a handful of twelve-inch squares from the pile of fabric and spread them out on the table. Glynnis had used the same irregular five-sided shape placed slightly to the right for the center block. She had then cut random shapes unique to each block from seven other fabrics to fill out the background. The centers were either pink or white satin, while the rest of the pieces ranged from wine-colored crushed velvet to pale-green cotton.

"She's certainly given us a lot to work with," Harriet said, and selected a block with a pink center. "Do we want to worry about using elements that are similar to tie things together?"

Connie chose a block and stood up.

"Marjorie has some beads that might work well on our blocks. Let me go get one or two colors, and we can all take some of them to use. That should be matchy enough, don't you think?"

The others agreed, and Connie left, returning a few minutes later with tubes of pink and green glass beads and a handful of small zipper bags provided by Marjorie.

Harriet scooped a dozen of each color into her bag and sealed it.

"I'll walk down to Blood Moon and see how Jade wants to hang my quilt, so I can decide whether to put a sleeve on it or something else."

Lauren collected her beads and tucked them into a pocket in her new bag.

"I'll walk with you if we can stop at the outdoor store on the way back."

Mavis, Beth, and Connie made a similar plan, and the group said their goodbyes, packed their quilts, and went out into the cold, damp afternoon.



Bells chimed as Harriet opened the glass-paned door to Blood Moon Soap and Candles and she and Lauren entered the cozy shop. The scents of lavender and evergreen assaulted their noses. Neat rows of candles lined the dark wood shelves on one side of the shop, while bars of soap were arranged on top of a glass display case on the opposite side. Essential oils and diffusers were inside the case. A work counter stretched the width of the store at the back of the room. Scales, measuring spoons, and scoops littered the top, and Jade Meyers, proprietor, sat behind a row of plastic bottles filled with white lotion measuring drops of essential oil into each one.

"Hey," Harriet said.

Jade finished squirting two drops into the bottle in front of her and looked up.

"Oh, hi. I was concentrating so hard on my new blend I didn't even hear the bells."

Harriet walked to the back of the shop.

"No problem. It smells great. Is that pine and lavender?"

"Close, it's Douglas fir and lavender. I found a new supplier of fir-based essential oils. I thought they would be good for the Christmas season."

Harriet leaned toward the open bottles and inhaled.

"That one is a winner."

Jade capped each bottle, wiping it with a soft cloth before picking up the next one.

"How can I help you today?"

"I'm finishing the quilt for your front window this week and wanted to talk about how you want to hang it."

Jade came around the counter.

"Let's look in the window and see what our options are."

Lauren was in the window display area using a measuring tape from her messenger bag, stretching it from one side of the space to the other then repeating the process from the window platform to the ceiling above it.

"You might need to get a little creative," she said as Harriet and Jade joined her. She stretched out fifteen inches of tape and used it as a pointer, indicating the ceiling over the window's display shelf. "Notice how the ceiling is shaped, tapering on each end?"

Harriet looked and saw the problem.

"My quilt is wider than the tallest area of the display window ceiling," she explained to Jade. "Normally, we add a sleeve that runs the width of the quilt then put a dowel through it that's a few inches longer than the sleeve. We attach a wire or string to the dowel ends and run them up to the ceiling. If we do that here, though, the quilt will hang too low. Part of it will puddle on the floor."

"Can you turn it sideways?" Jade asked.

Lauren laughed.

"If you want the design to run sideways?"

Jade's face sagged, and tears filled her eyes. Harriet put a hand on her arm.

"Hey, don't worry, we have other options." Harriet glanced over Jade's head at Lauren. Jade's reaction was way out of proportion to the minor problem of hanging the quilt. "I can put triangle-shaped pockets on the corners, and we'll cut a dowel that's just long enough its ends tuck into the pockets. Most of the dowel will be exposed, so we just attach the hanging wires from the tallest part of the ceiling down to the dowel. It will be fine and is easier than doing a full-length sleeve."

Jade dabbed at her eyes with a crumpled tissue.

"I'm sorry, I've been under a lot of stress, and I'm not dealing with it very well."

The phone rang. Jade returned to the back counter and answered it. Harriet watched as Jade's eyes grew wide and the color drained from her face. She sank into her chair.

"That doesn't look good," Lauren whispered.

They strolled to the back of the store. The person on the other end of the line was still doing all the talking.

Finally, Jade said "I understand" in a quiet voice and hung up. She folded her arms on the counter and laid her head on them, her long dark hair covering her face. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed.

Harriet stepped around the counter and rubbed her on the back. Lauren went to a water dispenser in the back on the candle side of the store, drew a cup of water, and brought it back.

"Here, drink this," she said and held it out. When Jade looked up to take the cup, Harriet handed her a tissue from a box on the shelf behind the counter.

"I'm sorry," Jade blubbered. "It's just..."

"Take your time," Harriet said.

Jade snuffled and wiped her nose again.

"I'm sorry," she said again and stood up. "Do you need anything else from me?" She tried to smile; but her lip began to quiver, and tears slipped down her cheeks again. She sat down.

"Don't worry about the quilt," Harriet told her. "Is there anything we can do for you?"

Jade looked up at her.

"You want to buy a horse?"

Harriet raised her eyebrows.

"A horse?"

Jade sighed.

"If I don't have the best month my store has ever had, I'm going to lose the place. If I lose the place, I can't pay my stable fees; and if that happens, I can't keep my horse." She began crying again.

"Do you have family who can help you?"

"My parents are in South America with a vision team doing eye surgeries. They're in a remote area and can't be reached. They wouldn't bail out my store in any case, but they *would* pay for Becky if they knew."

"Have you told the stable?" Lauren asked.

Jade dabbed at her nose and shook her head.

"They have a waiting list. And they've raised prices three times since Becky moved there. New people pay the new prices, old people get the old rates. They'd love to kick her out so they can make more money."

"What sort of horse is Becky?" Harriet asked.

Lauren rolled her eyes.

"Don't tell me you're thinking about it."

Harriet glared at her and turned back to Jade.

"Tell me about Becky."

"She's really sweet. She's a Swedish Warmblood."

"Nice," Harriet said with a smile. "Do you ride dressage?"

"I'm learning. Becky's learning, too. Her original owner was going to use her as a broodmare because their daughter didn't ride, but they figured when she decided to start, she could use Becky to learn and, in the meantime, they could get a colt or two. They got into money trouble and gave me a good deal."

Harriet stared at the floor and paced a few steps away.

"Do you think you'll be able to have that good month you need here?" she asked without looking up.

Jade thought a moment.

"If we don't have any weird weather or anything else that keeps shoppers away, I'd give it a fifty-fifty chance."

"And how much is a month's-worth of stable rent?"

"We pay four hundred-fifty a month."

Harriet strode to the far side of the room and gestured for Lauren to join her.

"It's the Christmas season, right?" she said in a quiet tone.

Lauren shook her head.

"If we go halves, it would be two-twenty-five apiece, and we could be paid back in soap and candles," Harriet continued.

"I can't believe I'm even considering this," Lauren said. "But it *is* Christmas next month."

They went back to the counter where Jade sat watching.

"Lauren and I were thinking perhaps we could pay Becky's rent for a month, and you could pay us back in soap and candles after the new year."

Jade looked from one of them to the other and back again.

"You would do that?" she asked in a shocked tone.

Lauren shrugged.

"'Tis the season."

"I promise to pay you back every cent plus interest."

Jade went to her desk at the end of the counter and picked up a tablet and pen. She wrote on the pad, ripped the sheet off, crumpled it, and threw it in the wastebasket then started writing again. She crumpled this one, too.

"What's wrong?" Lauren asked.

Jade leaned back in her chair.

"Everything. If my parents are delayed getting back to the city, we're back where we started. And if I don't make enough money this month and have to shut down, Becky is all I have besides my inventory. If I lose her anyway to pay off my debts, it's all for nothing." Fresh tears began to fall.

Harriet thought for a moment.

"How about this. Sell me Becky."

Jade stopped crying.

"How would that help anything. I mean, I know you'd take good care of her and I'd be able to pay my debts, but my horse would still be gone."

Harriet smiled.

"I don't want to take your horse away from you. But hear me out. Sell her to me for a modest price, and I'll pay her stable rent this month. That

separates your horse from your business. I'm assuming your business isn't a corporation, or you wouldn't be worried about losing your horse in the first place. At the end of the month, after your business situation is sorted, I'll sell her back to you or your parents, depending on which way things go."

"You would do that?" Jade asked, incredulous.

"She's a pushover," Lauren said.

"I spent a Christmas in Sweden one year, and the only comfort I had was the horse that was assigned to me that year. So, yes, I'm a sucker for a horse story."

The door bells jingled, and a woman with a small child holding her hand came into the shop. Jade swiped at her eyes, swept her hair off her face, and put on an Oscar-worthy smile.

"Hi, Jenna, I have your soap all ready." She turned and went through a doorway into the back room. She returned holding a square package wrapped in silver paper and tied with a blue ribbon.

Harriet stepped toward the counter and leaned close so only Jade would hear.

"Let me run this past our attorney friend, and if you still want to do it, I can have her write up a contract."

"Thank you," Jade said and turned to ring up her customer's order.

Lauren shook her head and the pair went out the door and into the cold.

Chapter 3

Have you lost your mind?" Lauren asked as soon as the shop door had closed behind them. "I get it that you want to help Jade keep her horse, and I'm fine with donating funds that we may or may not get back in future soap and candles, but to buy her horse? That's a whole other story."

"Hear me out."

"This better be good."

They started down the block.

"Jade said Becky is a Swedish Warmblood."

"Whatever that means."

"A Swedish Warmblood is not just any old horse. If that's truly what Becky is, and even if she's completely untrained, she's still worth somewhere in the neighborhood of fifteen thousand dollars. I'm guessing the fact Jade's parents have been willing to pay for the mare but not for the soap-and-candles business means the horse is worth that or more. I'd hate to see her fall into the hands of Jade's creditors, whoever they are. Unless they know horses, they could end up selling her for pennies just to get what they're owed."

"Why doesn't Jade just sell her? She obviously knows how much she's worth."

"Given her parent's absence, I suspect the horse is her family. Jade would probably live on the streets if that meant she could keep Becky."

Lauren stopped and turned to face Harriet.

"On a related topic, I'm surprised Jade isn't doing better financially. I mean, there are always customers in her shop when I go there. And she's been teaching classes in all kinds of stuff—soapmaking, candlemaking, some-

thing to do with essential oils. Aroma therapy, maybe. I know she opened an online store, too.”

“Now that you mention it, I am, too. Even if she’s paying all the expenses for her horse. I know she used to donate money to pay for holiday meals for the people in the homeless camp.”

Lauren started walking again.

“Like I said, I don’t mind donating money to pay the stable rent for a month, but you’re nuts getting any more involved than that. Especially without knowing more.”

Harriet blew out a breath.

“I’ll talk it over with James and see what he thinks.”

“And Robin?”

“Yeah, her, too.”

Chapter 4

Is your quilt ready to hang?" Harriet asked when they reached the Outdoor Store, two doors down in the next block.

"That will depend on what they have in mind. I put a sleeve on it, but I guess we'll see." Lauren pulled the door open and entered the shop.

A fit-looking man with thinning dark brown hair met them in the center of the room.

"Hey, Lauren. Are you ready to hang our quilt?"

"That's the plan. You know my friend Harriet, right?"

"Sure, she's a regular customer these days." He turned to Harriet. "How did your young man do with his new boots?"

"They're great, Vern. He really enjoyed working on the reservation, and I think his clothes all worked fine."

Vern rubbed his hands together, and Harriet noticed the shop was a bit chilly.

"I'm not sure how you want to hang it," Vern said, "but I suspended a shower-curtain rod from the ceiling using climbing rope."

He led the way around a display table sparsely filled with aluminum water bottles of various sizes to the front window.

"If the rod isn't too thick, it should work fine." Lauren set her tote bag on the floor and pulled the quilt out. She located the side with the sleeve and held it up while Vern lowered the shower rod using a pulley system he'd rigged up.

Harriet browsed while they worked on threading the rod into the sleeve. She'd expected to see new inventory since she'd last been in before Thanks-

giving, but that wasn't the case. It was surprising, given that Christmas was only a few weeks away, but maybe Vern had a big order coming that hadn't arrived.

Lauren stood at one end of the quilt holding a piece of climbing rope, while Vern held the rope on the other side.

"Harriet, can you go outside and let us know when the quilt is as high as it can go and still be visible from the sidewalk?" she called.

"Sure." Harriet went outside, directing them with hand signals until the quilt was in place. "It looks great," she said when she came in.

Lauren and Vern went outside to check for themselves, returning quickly.

"It's perfect," Vern said. "It's so nice of you ladies to do this for the business community. I wish there was something we could do for you-all."

"It's our pleasure," Harriet said. She was interrupted by her cell phone playing her aunt's ringtone. "Excuse me," she said and stepped away to answer. Vern was explaining the pros and cons of frameless backpacks to Lauren when she rejoined them.

"I'll leave you two ladies to your business. If you need anything, holler. And, Lauren, thanks again for the beautiful quilt."

He returned to the back of the store, where he began rearranging water shoes, spreading the remaining pairs over the shelf space.

"That was Aunt Beth," Harriet said. "She wanted to know if we could meet for coffee at the Steaming Cup. I told her I could, and you probably could."

Lauren shivered.

"Sounds good to me. I'm freezing."



Beth, Mavis, and Robin were seated around the large table in the middle of the coffee shop when Lauren and Harriet arrived. Harriet carried her mug of hot cocoa to the table and slid out of her jacket.

"Just who we wanted to see," she said to Robin.

Robin smiled at her. "That sounds a bit ominous."

Aunt Beth held her tea mug in both hands and peered over the edge as she took a sip.

"Are you in legal trouble?"

Lauren slid into the chair next to Harriet, piling her tote bag, messenger bag, and coat onto the chair on her other side.

"Oh, it's much worse than that."

Mavis raised her left eyebrow but said nothing.

Harriet shivered and took a sip of her cocoa.

“Well, don’t keep us in suspense,” Robin prompted.

Harriet explained their encounter at Blood Moon. The table was silent when she stopped speaking.

Robin leaned back in her chair and blew out a breath. “I understand your desire to help, especially this being the holiday season and all, but...”

Lauren looked at Harriet and laughed.

“There’s always a *but*...”

Beth scowled at her.

“Let Robin finish.”

“Before you get too involved,” Robin continued, “I think you need to check out her story. Make sure there really are parents off in South America who could reasonably be expected to return and take over financial responsibility for the horse.”

Harriet opened her mouth, but Robin held a hand up.

“While you’re investigating her story, if you and Lauren don’t mind losing whatever amount you’re willing to give her, there’s no harm paying a month’s stable rent, especially with this being Christmas and all.”

Beth set her mug down.

“But you don’t think she should get involved so far as to buy the horse?”

“I don’t. If Jade’s parents really are financially solvent, they should be the ones to step in and buy the horse. And with such a valuable personal asset, she should have her business set up as a corporation so no one could come after it.”

Harriet twirled her spoon in her cocoa.

“As long as Becky doesn’t end up being sold for dog food, I’m good.”

The group was quiet while a barista brought Lauren her gingerbread latte. She took a sip and set the cup down.

“Harriet and I were just saying how fast Blood Moon seems to have gone from a thriving business that was donating funds to every charity project in town to barely hanging on by its toenails, teetering on the brink of financial disaster.”

Harriet wiped her mouth with her napkin.

“You know, speaking of teetering on the brink, the Outdoor Store doesn’t seem to be doing all that well, either. We were barely able to find what we needed for our Thanksgiving trip, and when we were just there hanging Lauren’s quilt, I noticed they haven’t brought in anything new since then.”

“I’m surprised,” Beth said. “Vern’s always been an astute businessman. And he’s been successful for something like twenty-five years. Now that you mention it, though, he *hasn’t* been making donations to the various charities like he used to. He used to be a named sponsor for the community

Thanksgiving dinner. This year he served meals, but I don't believe he donated any food."

"You never know," Mavis commented. "Things change. Maybe he developed a gambling problem."

Beth looked incredulous. "Vern Jenkins? I don't believe it."

"What don't you believe?" Connie asked as she came to the table with a cup of tea and an oatmeal raisin cookie.

Beth and Mavis quickly brought her up to speed as she sat down opposite Harriet and Lauren.

"I stopped by Sunshine Bakery to check out the window, and I have to say, Sunny and her crew had baked goods on every level surface and in all stages of completion." She paused a moment, thinking. "But you know, there was a weird frenetic energy to it all. I can't quite put my finger on it, but it wasn't the normal, cozy atmosphere it usually has."

"Honey, get me one of those raisin cookies, would you please?" Beth asked Harriet.

Harriet stood up.

"Anyone else?"

Mavis raised her hand and started to dig her coin purse out of her bag, but Harriet waved her off. She returned a few minutes later and handed out the cookies, including one each for herself and Lauren.

Beth nibbled hers.

"Everything seemed normal at Kitchen Kouture," she said. "Their shelves are bursting with merchandise, they had plenty of shoppers, and Serena's taking back orders on her holiday tablecloths."

Robin finished her drink and set her empty mug on the table in front of her.

"I better go. I need to stop by Print and Copy and see their space and then take Glynnis's crazy quilt pieces home and see what I can do with them. Do you want me to write up a loan agreement for you for the stable rent?"

Harriet chuckled.

"No, there's no need. She's either going to pay it back or not. If she doesn't, I'm not going to try to squeeze blood from a turnip."

"Still," Robin cautioned. "If something were to happen to her, it would be good to have something on paper to show her estate."

"There's a happy holiday thought," Lauren said dryly.

"Hey, it's the business I'm in. And you never can be too careful." She looked from Harriet to Lauren and back again. "I'll write something up tonight and email it to both of you. Print it out and have her sign it before you hand over the cash."

Lauren saluted as Robin stood up.

“Yes, ma’am.”



Robin was barely gone when DeAnn arrived, bringing a blast of cold air with her. She ordered her coffee and joined the group at the big table.

“I’m ready for this cold snap to end,” she said and sat down.

“How did it go at the art gallery?” Mavis asked when she was settled.

“A client came in wanting to buy a print, so I have to go back in thirty minutes.”

Lauren set the remains of her cookie down on a napkin.

“Has Valery told you which window you’ll be hanging your quilt in?”

“He hasn’t said, but I’m expecting it to be to the right of the entrance. He’s been working on a display in the bigger window, and I don’t think he’d be doing that if the quilt was going to go there.”

Beth shook her head.

“That’s too bad. Your quilt is going to attract attention wherever it is, but the bigger window would show it off better. If I were him, I would have made it the centerpiece of a display of all his Russian ornaments.”

“That’s sort of what I was thinking when I used the nesting doll images on my quilt blocks,” DeAnn agreed. “People come from as far as Seattle to buy those Russian ornaments. It seems like he does pretty well with them, but I did overhear him telling someone on the phone that the ornaments didn’t have a very high profit margin.”

“So, what’s he putting in the big window?” Harriet asked. “I heard he has a collection of icons that are pretty pricey.”

Lauren scoffed.

“It’s hard to imagine there’d be much of a market for Russian icons in Foggy Point, Washington.”

“Like DeAnn was saying, people come from Seattle for the ornaments, so they probably would come for icons, too.”

“I guess,” Harriet said and picked up her cup again.

Connie ate the last bite of her cookie and rubbed her hands together, brushing off the crumbs.

“Is everyone going to the opening event next Friday night?”

“I’ve seen the poster talking about the tree lighting on Friday, but is there more to it than that?” Harriet asked.

“The high school choir is going to sing Christmas carols, and Sunny told me we were supposed to each be in the shop where our quilt is hanging. They’re doing up some sort of passport people will take to each shop,

and when they answer a question about the quilt, they get a stamp. When they get all the stamps, their passport is put in a drawing for a prize basket."

"Sounds fun," Beth said.

"I wonder when anyone was going to tell *us*?" Lauren commented.

"I think each business was supposed to tell their quilter," Connie said.

Harriet crumpled her napkin and put it in her empty mug.

"Do you need any help?" she asked DeAnn.

"I'm just looking at the space at this point," DeAnn said. "But I'd be happy to have the company."

Chapter 5

Ah, DeAnn, thank you for waiting,” Valery Melnyk said in slightly accented English when she, Harriet, and Lauren came into the art gallery. He wore an immaculate white dress shirt open halfway to the waist no matter how cold it was outside. Harriet imagined a closet in his house with nothing but carefully pressed white shirts.

“These are my friends Harriet Truman and Lauren Sawyer,” DeAnn told him. “They’re here to help me figure out what I’m doing with the quilt I’m finishing for Mary.”

“Very good, very good,” he said, joining his hands together behind his back. “Glynnis told me Mary has pneumonia. I hope she will be okay.”

“I think she has to spend a few days in the hospital, but Glynnis said that was more of a precaution because of her other health issues.”

Melnyk pulled his phone from a pocket and made a note.

“I must send her flowers to thank her for the work she’s done.”

He was a stout man with a round head and dark hair and eyes. Strictly speaking, he looked more Ukrainian than Russian to Harriet, but the two ethnic groups had probably been intermarrying for many generations before the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

As expected, Valery directed them to the smaller of the two display windows. He looked embarrassed.

“I’m sure you were hoping to be hanging your quilt in the larger window, but things are a little tight this holiday season, and I need to put as many pieces as I am able in the big space to bring more customers in.”

“We understand,” DeAnn said and set her tote on the floor in front of her. “It’s not a problem.”

Harriet reached into the bag and pulled out a handful of blocks, handing several to Lauren and looking at the others herself.

“As long as you’re displaying the quilt however the business association wants, it should be fine.”

DeAnn took a carpenter’s tape measure from her purse and handed one end of it to Harriet, stretching it the width of the window opening and making a note on a card she’d also pulled from her bag. Valery brought a small stepladder over and steadied it while DeAnn climbed up and stretched the end of the tape to the top of the display area. Harriet pressed it to the bottom edge of the window.

“Looks like it’s exactly six feet,” she said.

DeAnn stepped off the ladder and noted the measurement.

“Given the size of the window, I may leave off one of the borders Mary had planned.”

The door chime rang, and a slender woman in an ankle-length wool coat came into the gallery. Valery turned toward her with a smile.

“Mrs. Whittier, have you made a decision?” He glanced back at DeAnn. “Let me know if you need anything else,” he said and led his customer to the back of the store.

Harriet watched until he was out of earshot. She held up one of the quilt blocks, barely suppressing a grin.

“Has anyone else noticed the striking resemblance between the faces on the blocks and Mr. Melnyk?”

Lauren laughed as she looked at the blocks in her hand.

“Now that you mention it.”

“Mary, Mary, Mary, what were you playing at.”

“Maybe they’re friends,” DeAnn suggested.

Harriet handed the blocks to her.

“Let’s hope so. Or at least hope he has a good sense of humor.”

DeAnn took Lauren’s blocks and stuffed them into her tote bag.

“In any case, I don’t have time to redo them.”

Harriet shook her head.

“Maybe he won’t think it looks like him. People often don’t see themselves the way others do.”

“Thanks for your help,” DeAnn said. She held up the tote. “I’d better get home and start working on this.”

“See you at the next Threads meeting, if not before,” Harriet said as she went out the door and headed for her car.



Harriet and Luke were sitting at the kitchen table when James came in from the garage, a baguette sticking out of a paper bag under his arm. He set the bread on the table and went to the slow cooker on the counter, lifting the lid and inhaling the aroma it emitted.

"Ahhh," he finally said. "Smells just right."

"I hope so," Luke said with a grin. "It's been killing us."

"Sorry. We've got people coming in for Christmas tea already. I had to stay and help prep for tomorrow. I don't want my people to burn out this early in the season."

Harriet had bowls sitting next to the cooker, and James began ladling out beef barley stew. Luke carried them to the table. Neither spoke until they'd eaten their first bowlful.

"Help yourself to more," James told Luke.

Harriet waited until Luke was back at the table with his seconds.

"Okay, guys, since this is going to be our first Christmas together as a family, we need to decide how we want to celebrate."

Luke put his spoon down.

"I got to choose what we did for Thanksgiving, so someone else should have a turn. What do you guys usually do?"

Harriet's face flushed, and she looked away. Luke's smile vanished.

"Did I say something wrong?"

James reached across the table and took Harriet's hand.

"No, you're fine. We haven't been together for a Christmas yet, so we don't have a tradition."

Luke relaxed.

"I keep forgetting. You guys seem like you've been together forever."

Harriet gave him a rueful smile.

"It does seem like that sometimes, doesn't it?"

James let her hand go and took a piece of bread.

"Back to the question. What *do* we want to do?"

"Luke," Harriet said, "I know your experience at the foster home wasn't ideal, but did they do anything for the holidays you'd like to keep going?"

He laughed out loud, then put his hand over his mouth.

"I'm sorry. They tried, in their own way. Linda had this ratty artificial tree she'd gotten at Goodwill...and Paul liked that stringy foil stuff."

"Tinsel?" James guessed.

"Yeah, that. Lots and lots of it. It was..." Luke grappled for a word.

"Hideous?" Harriet suggested.

"Hideous," Luke confirmed.

Harriet fetched a notepad and pencil from the kitchen island.

"Real tree," she said as she wrote the words on the pad. "Okay, that's a start."

James broke off another piece of bread from the baguette and popped it into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

“Well, we need one of those ‘first Christmas’ ornaments.”

Luke and Harriet both turned to stare at him.

“Come on,” he said. “I know we can’t do ‘baby’s first Christmas’ but we could do ‘Luke’s first Christmas’ and the date, or ‘family’s first Christmas’.”

“Or maybe ‘Our first Christmas Together,’” Harriet suggested. “And the date, of course.” She added *First Christmas ornament* to the list.

“I do have a collection of ornaments,” she said. “I got one in each of the countries I spent Christmas in when I was growing up.”

Luke finished his second bowl of stew.

“That sounds cool.”

“Back to the tree,” Harriet said. “Tree lot, U-cut, or wild capture.”

“What’s wild capture?” Luke asked.

“You get a permit from the forest service, and they give you a map of where they need trees thinned.” James explained.

“And then you hike all over and find the perfect imperfect tree,” Harriet finished.

Luke smiled.

“You two really are like an old married couple—finishing each other’s sentences and everything.”

“When my uncle was still alive, I got to come here one year, and we went up into the woods to get a tree,” Harriet said.

“My family always got wild trees until my sister and I were in college,” James added. “But given the quilting Harriet has to do for the business association as well as the extra events they’re having, maybe we should save the wild hunt for next year.”

Harriet picked up the pencil again and wrote *U-cut*.

“Good enough compromise?” she asked.

Luke and James both nodded. James leaned back in his chair.

“My parents will probably expect us to come to their house on Christmas Eve. They like to go to my sister’s and spend time with the grandkids on Christmas day.”

“My aunt and I usually have breakfast and open presents, and then she does a dinner and invites people over on Christmas day.”

“Sounds like that’ll work, then.”

Harriet made a note of the two expected invites.

“All right, our plan is coming together. Anything else?”

Harriet tried not to smile as Luke leaned back in his chair in unconscious imitation of James. He picked at his lip then, when he realized what he was doing, put his hand on his thigh.

“Is there something else, Luke?”

He struggled for a moment before speaking.

“Do you think I could get presents for my half-sister and brother. The ones I know, anyway?”

“Do you know where they are?” Harriet asked.

“Not really. I think they’re somewhere in the county. My brother went to live with his bio-mom, but I’m not sure if he’s still there. That was four years ago.”

“Children’s Services should know where they are,” James said. “I can check with your social worker.”

“Do you want to see them?” Harriet asked carefully.

Luke sighed.

“I don’t know. I mean, I’d like to see that they’re okay, but I’m not sure I want to talk to them or anything. We never got anything for Christmas, and if they still don’t get anything, I thought it might be nice to give them something. It’s probably a dumb idea.”

“Sweetie, it’s a nice idea. And very thoughtful of you. We don’t have to figure it out tonight. Let’s find them and see what their circumstances are, and then go from there.”

James stood up.

“Who wants ice cream?”

“I’ll take the dogs out while you dish,” Luke said.

James carried the three empty dishes to the sink.



“I have one more thing to add to the Christmas activities list,” James said when Luke was back inside and they were back at the table, dishes of ice cream in front of them.

“What’s that?” Harriet asked and reached for the list.

“We need a picture with Santa. I mean, we need a picture of Luke with Santa, but if we need to have it be a family Santa picture, I guess that’s okay.”

“Seriously?” Harriet said.

“Don’t tell me you don’t have a picture with Santa from your childhood,” he said.

“I do. But I was in middle school, and my friends and I were at the Christmas market in Annaberg-Bucholz, Germany.”

“But still, a Santa picture. And even though you weren’t a baby, I’m betting you still have your Santa picture.”

“What do you think, Luke?” she asked.

He shook his head.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know what to think.”

The smile left Harriet’s face.

“Are we being too pushy?”

“No, not at all. I just have no idea what’s normal.”

James patted him on the back.

“How about let’s not worry about what’s normal and just think about what feels right to you. If you want a family picture of all of us with Santa, we’ll do it. But if you don’t we’ll skip it.”

“While you guys are pondering that, let me tell you about the horse I almost bought today.” Harriet said.

“What?” James said.

“For real?” Luke said at the same time.

She laughed.

“Let me explain,” she said and proceeded to tell them about her visit to Blood Moon.

If you enjoyed the sample, you need not stop there!

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