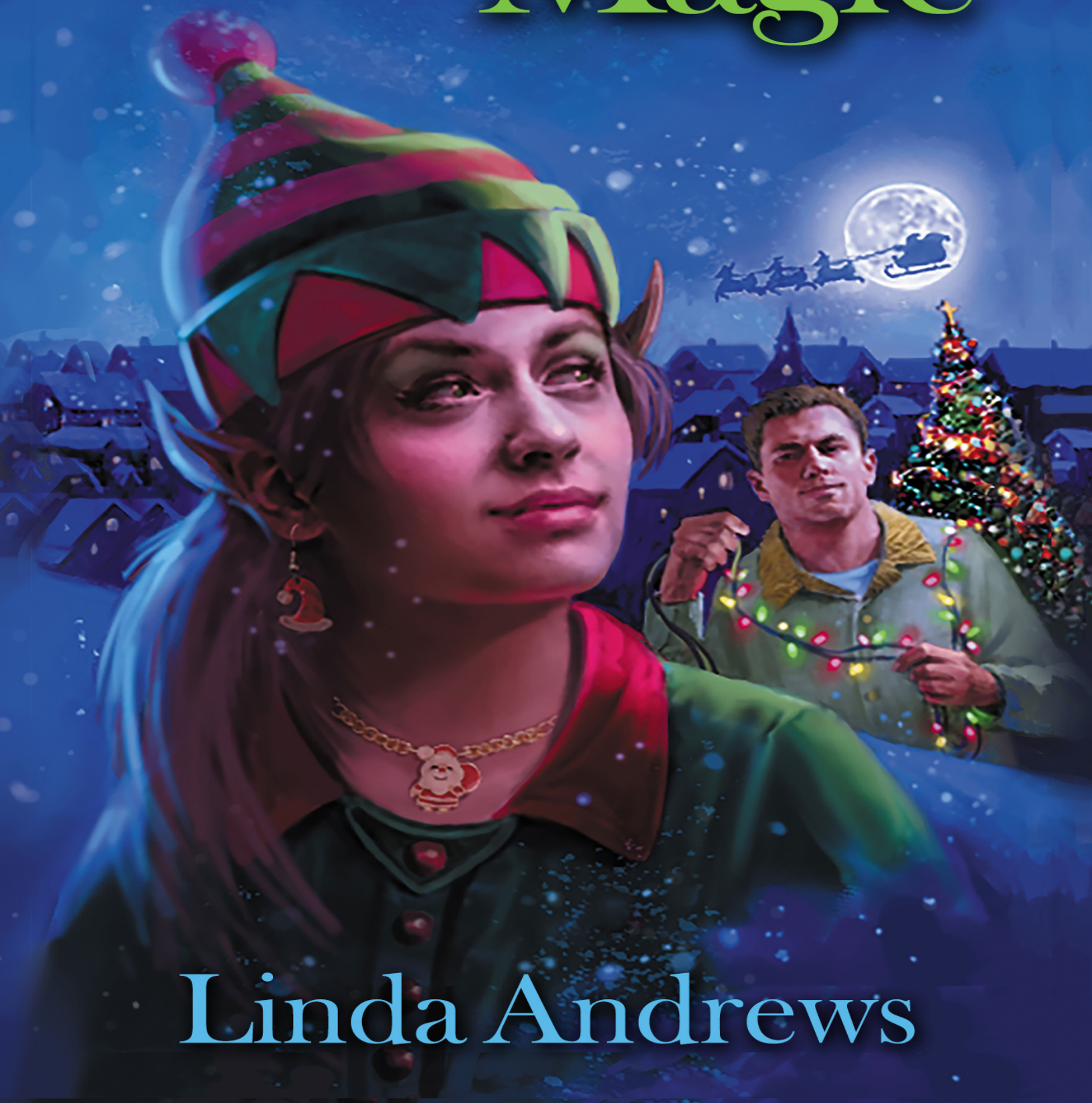


Strange Magic



Linda Andrews

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)

[DEDICATION](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[About the Author](#)

[About the Artist](#)

[Rights Information](#)



Strange Magic



by

Linda Andrews



ZUNAYA EMBRACES

AUSTIN TX

2022

DEDICATION

To my husband...

Who makes every day special.

CHAPTER 1

Dazzler Spitfire's elven senses tingled, and her pointed ears twitched. Had her magic performed as asked? Standing on shaky legs, she slitted her eyes to peer at her surroundings. For a moment, sunlight sparked off the glitter in her lashes, blinding her, and then she saw it.

Across the two-lane road, boughs of holly climbed the sign welcoming visitors to town. Waxy green leaves and white berries complemented the cranberry script flowing across the walnut marquee: *Welcome to Holly, the Most Enchanted Town in the West*.

Yes. She'd accomplished the first step in her mission. She fist-pumped. A soft autumn breeze brushed her cheeks.

Gold, tangerine, and scarlet leaves swirled into a gourd-shape before lengthening into a mass resembling an eggplant on the ground in front of her. Two legs and two arms emerged from the torso. Moss knitted together, making a green uniform, and wild mushrooms added buttons and fleecy trim. Leaves wrapped an oval head before the newly formed scarecrow rolled onto his belly.

"Where are we this time?"

"Holly." The name sweetened Dazzler's tongue. Candy-cane lines of magic formed a ragged net around the village and blanketed the white church steeple rising above the pines. All this, and it wasn't even the official holiday season for three more days. How strong would the magic grow after Thanksgiving?

She inhaled the scent, reveled in the cinnamon-and-vanilla aroma of human magic. So imperfect, yet she was so thankful humans took

the time to create it.

This place felt like home. Why had she never visited before? Why had Todd always insisted they meet in Flagstaff?

“Holly?” Stick fingers dug into the ground as Cheddar levered up. His acorn eyes blinked twice before he raked red leaves into a pile and shaped them into a Santa Claus hat. “Why did you bring us to a magical town?” Screwing the cap down on his head, he adjusted his pinecone ears to hold it up. “I thought we’re supposed to be investigating why your magic always goes wrong.”

Skipping to his side, Dazzler offered her friend a hand. “We are. Santa recommended I start where my magic works best.”

Which was around Todd Dugan, a resident of Holly—a hub of human Christmas magic. Like elven magic, only different.

More forgiving.

And meant to be shared by all.

Cheddar’s three fingers closed around her wrist. The digits were soft despite being made from twigs. Leaves rustled as he rose to his feet.

“The North Pole is full of Christmas magic. Human and elf. Your magic doesn’t work very well there. Why would it work here?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out.”

And Dazzler hoped Todd would help her. Surely, as her friend, he wouldn’t refuse otherwise she could be stripped of her magic.

She chewed on her bottom lip. Hopefully, Todd didn’t hate magic so much he’d allow the North Pole Review Board to take away her powers.

Releasing Cheddar’s hand, Dazzler traipsed through the dappled sunlight beneath the cottonwoods and pines lining the road. Between the evergreen boughs, she spied the snowy trunks of sycamores, aspen, and poplars. Red flashed as cardinals darted in the forest. The jingle of the bells at the tips of her pointed shoes echoed through the silent woods.

“It smells funny.” Straightening, the scarecrow plucked stray leaves off his velvet vest then tucked them inside.

“It smells wonderful.” Opening her arms, she spun in a circle. “The peppermint scent of elven magic is too...” She mentally fumbled for

the right words. "Too harsh. This is warm. Welcoming."

Antlers gleamed in the dim forest. An ear twitched, and innocent brown eyes scanned the woods. Figgy pudding! She'd forgotten the reindeer.

Dazzler leapt behind a thick pine trunk and held her breath. Her senses strained. Had they seen her? The whole herd were notorious gossips. Tarnished tinsel! The daily reindeer report accounted for more than half the names switching from the Nice list to the Naughty one.

Cheddar's acorn eyes narrowed. "Why are you hiding?"

She flattened her hands on the trunk. Bark crackled and broke under her touch. She peered around the pine. No red glow of reindeer noses illuminated the shadowy forest. She was safe. For now. But she had to be careful. Sighing, she dusted her hands on her velvet pants.

"Dazzler?"

"Hmm?" She glared at the bells on her shoes. If she wanted to avoid the gossipy reindeer, she'd better ditch the shoes. She closed her eyes and summoned her magic. Her soles tingled, then her toes. Her heart quickened. *Please, work. Please...*

"Dazzler." Cheddar grumbled in a voice sounding like two stones rubbing together.

She lost focus. Magic drained down her legs and filtered out of her toes. She shivered at the loss.

Planting his hands on his hips, Cheddar stared up at her. "Did your magic cause letters to disappear again?"

"No." She clucked her tongue. Just because one sack of mail went astray, everyone blamed her.

She bent over and plucked the bells off her shoes. The breeze caught the green thread and whisked it away.

"Good, because there aren't any departments left for you to join if you knot ribbons in the mailroom."

Dragging her heel across the dark loam, she dropped the bells inside the furrow and buried them. Rich soil sucked at her fingers as she changed the bells into truffles. The peppermint scent stung her

nose, and she waved it away. The reindeer couldn't know her location.

Straightening, she smoothed her red vest. "I didn't screw up sorting letters in the mailroom."

The job was practically Dazzler-proof. Everyone said so. It wasn't her fault that not all the letters were sealed. Or that some wish lists fell out of their envelopes.

The scarecrow pursed his lips. "But your magic did mess something up, didn't it?"

Tucking her fingers inside her vest pockets, she crossed them. A little white lie shouldn't land her on the Naughty List.

"Not technically."

Except this time the Review Board planned an in-depth investigation into her off-Pole activities. She boxed up the thoughts, added gift wrap and a ribbon for good measure. It was almost the Christmas season. No time for negativity.

Cheddar grimaced. Sometimes the scarecrow took his role as her conscience a little too seriously. He opened and closed his mouth then huffed a breath. Two leaves flaked off his cheek and drifted to the ground.

"Are we really on a mission for Santa?"

Santa? Well, technically... Dazzler shrugged.

His eyes widened. "Does he even know we're here?"

She tweaked the pom-pom on his hat. "Not here, precisely. I mean, he ordered me to pull myself together, or I'll lose my magic once the Board's inquiry is complete."

Using both hands to count the days, Cheddar shuffled forward.

"So, we have three days to fix a problem you've had for nearly twenty years?"

More than half her thirty-six. She nodded. "We could have longer than three days."

They could have the whole season, if the reindeer spies didn't tell the Board where to find her. She was certain Todd Dugan would help. They weren't just ex-family but friends. She'd been told friends helped friends in times of trouble. And she was in trouble. By Kringle, he had to help.

Leaves swept toward Cheddar, stuffing and lengthening his limbs until he brushed shoulders with her.

“Why do you think Todd will help? The man hates magic. Doesn’t want anything to do with it.”

“I helped him with his daughter.” Candance was half-elf. Dazzler frowned. Of course, her help with the teenager had been more about normal-girl-growing-up stuff than her burgeoning powers. Dazzler shrugged and gift-wrapped the doubts to hide them from herself.

“I don’t know.” Cheddar chewed on the end of a twig. “You do remember he’s in charge of Holly’s Christmas display this year, right?”

“All the more reason for me to be here.” She flapped a hand, dismissing his concerns. “I can help him with the lights, make this the best year yet, and free him up to tend the reindeer.”

Since the town of Holly was one of the way stations for Santa’s midnight ride, its herd needed to be in tiptop shape. She could stop Todd from splitting his focus. The town might depend on the lights, but the world depended on Santa.

Skipping ahead, Cheddar pivoted. He walked backward, facing her.

“If you’re here in hiding, the reindeer can’t be allowed to see you. Just one report, and news of your location will spread among the elves before first cocoa is finished.”

She opened her mouth then shut it. She knew firsthand how much elves loved gossip.

“Don’t worry, I won’t let the reindeer see me.”

A white tail flashed in the woods. So, how was she to prevent it?

“Good.” Cheddar nodded then turned his body but not his head. “I was afraid you’d want to help him. The last thing we need is a repeat of last Christmas Eve.”

Heat flamed in Dazzler’s cheeks. “I didn’t know the magic corn had turned bad.”

“Santa nearly passed out from the fumes.” Cheddar faced front. “As it was, he had to backtrack to Boise because his eyes teared up, putting him behind schedule.”

And elves loved their schedules.

And order.

And discipline.

And rules.

“That wasn’t my fault.” Despite the cool breeze, sweat beaded Dazzler’s forehead. Would she ever escape her reputation? Glancing down, she glared at the cranberry tunic and tights. Not in this uniform.

She zigged to the side of the road and pushed aside the drooping branches of a willow. Brown grass crunched underfoot as she leapt a drainage ditch. Planting her feet on a carpet of leaves, pine needles, and bark, she closed her eyes and inhaled.

A dollop of magic would fix her clothes.

She tapped into the leylines running underfoot. Leaves rustled. Grass whispered. Peppermint scented the air. A soft breeze picked up the forest offerings and swirled them around her. Her soles tingled; then the sensation climbed her legs, hit her torso, and radiated out her arms and head. The debris knit together, flattened, then stretched. Bark-brown pants wrapped her legs. Sleigh-red and pumpkin-orange colored her new sweater. The lemon-yellow collar of her undershirt hugged her neck.

Cheddar’s nose crinkled. “No jacket?”

Dazzler shrugged. Northern Arizona was warm compared to Santa’s place. “You know elves are quite at home in subzero temperatures. Why do you think Santa picked the North Pole?”

Cheddar scratched his chin. “You do seem to be able to control your magic here. Perhaps, we can solve the mystery after all.”

“I dress myself every day.” Dazzler tapped her toes as her shoes changed into sturdy boots. Changing clothes required minimal energy. Her unique magic traces were practically invisible in Holly’s fabric. She tilted Cheddar’s hat rakishly over his acorn eye. “Come on. Let’s go to town.”

Grumbling, he pushed back the hat.

She reached the side of the road and stomped her boots. Spare leaves and twigs dropped to the asphalt. The church spire rose above the pines.

“The town is this way.”

"I can't believe Santa would approve of you coming into the human realm to solve your magic problem." Cheddar's attention snapped to her so fast two leaves fluttered off his neck. "Your ex-cousin-in-law has a daughter who is the same age as you were when your magic started acting up."

She nodded. "Except she's just now coming into her magic. And I've had mine since birth."

Dazzler had been a master weaver at five. At seventeen, her spells had started to go awry. Hope fluttered inside her. Santa's insights wouldn't fail her.

Cheddar pushed the pompom on his hat to the back of his head. "You know Todd may not want to see you. He split with his wife at this time of year sixteen years ago. Despite your holidays together, he always makes sure to spend this time alone with his daughter and his family."

She rubbed the heart birthmark on her wrist. Time didn't matter when someone lost the love of their life.

"All the more reason for him to be supported by his friends and family."

Cheddar glanced up at her. His uniform quickly morphed into a flannel shirt and black jeans.

"Have you ever been in love?"

"No." But she knew what it was like to feel as if something was missing inside, of being incomplete.

She shook off the thought. There was nothing wrong with her.

Nothing.

Tilting his head, the scarecrow pursed his lips. "And if he asks us to leave?"

Todd wouldn't. He couldn't. She needed help.

"Then I'll take my investigation elsewhere." Stuffing her hands in her pockets, she hid her crossed fingers again. In Todd and Candance, Dazzler was certain she'd find the key to her malfunctioning magic.

They rounded the bend. On the right, a white farmhouse roosted in a meadow. Horses lipped at the yellowing grass. Pine boughs and red ribbons festooned the line of carriages parked along the

driveway. On the left, pumpkins huddled in a patch where wooden cutouts of the Kringles, Santa's sleigh, and his flying reindeer encroached on the symbols of fall.

A reindeer leapt over a hedge trimmed in twinkle lights.

"Ready or not, here I come."

Antlers twinkled under the forest canopy. The reindeer loved their games.

Dazzler increased her pace. The forest gave way to bungalow suburbs. Wicker snowmen congregated on the right, taking shelter under two leafless apple trees. Lights outlined sloping eaves and spiraled down porch pillars. Oversized candy canes and ribbon candies lined walkways. The road forked near a butter-yellow Victorian offering homemade ornaments. Arrows pointed to the left, directing traffic.

"You lost?"

Standing near a compost box, an old man leaned on the rake in his hands. Leaves formed a pile by his scuffed boots. The rolled-up sleeves of his faded blue thermal shirt revealed a faded anchor tattoo on his forearm. Age pleated ruddy features trimmed by the white hair sticking out from his moth-eaten cap.

"No. Not at all." Her stomach cramped. She would be welcomed here. She *would*.

He squinted at her for a moment; then his attention shifted to Cheddar. Leaves from his pile formed orderly lines and slipped under the scarecrow's pants, fattening him.

"The both of you are more suited to Pumpkin and their celebration of all things Halloween than Christmas." The old man stabbed his rake tines into the leaves, stopping their exodus.

Gasping, Cheddar shifted behind her and set his hand against her back. His shudder of fear transmitted through his twig fingers to her.

Dazzler straightened. No one would harm her friend. "I'm Dazzler Spitfire, and this is Cheddar."

"Ole Henderson." The old man rubbed his cold-kissed nose and cheeks. "I knew you was magic, but you're an elf."

"Of course." She tucked a black curl behind her pointed ear. Not many magical creatures had ears like hers, even in Halloween

towns.

“If you’re one of Santa’s helpers, how come you have a scarecrow with you?”

“Cheddar is my friend.” She raised her chin.

The old man grunted. “You ain’t got a real friend, so you had to make one? I thought everyone was friendly at the North Pole. What kind of elf doesn’t have friends at the North Pole?”

Black trimmed her vision as his words hit too close. She forced herself to breathe.

“Cheddar was a gift. We don’t return gifts at the North Pole.”

Especially after the great cookie fire a decade ago. Not that she’d tell the old man that. Humans needed to believe Santa’s place was perfect and magical.

Ole gathered the remaining leaves before resting the rake against the compost bin. “Thought you elves were supposed to be all white and silvery, like winter? You’re more like bark and leaves. You’d kinda stand out and all, up in the frozen north.”

Dazzler stumbled back a step. Her vision shimmered. “I’m a perfectly good elf.”

Most of the time.

Ole rubbed his chin. “I ain’t saying you’re not, just saying it would be easy for folks to see you from up high. Thought you’d be silver and white to blend in with the snow.”

Cheddar set his chin on her shoulder, stopping her retreat.

“Santa only works with Sylvan elves. *Sylvan* means *woods*.” He pointed a knobby twig finger toward the bare trees overhead. “Do you expect that tree to be like all the others? No. You want some trees for shade, others for fruit, and the evergreens for Christmas.”

Ole Henderson’s snowy hair twitched under his knit cap, and he raised his hands in surrender. “Just so long as you can do magic, you’re welcome.”

“Magic?” She blinked. “Holly has the strongest kind of magic outside of Santa’s realm.”

“You obviously have to be filled in about the town.” He removed his fleece-lined jacket from a bent nail on the compost bin and shrugged into it.

"I know all about Holly. The town was founded during the Gold Rush but didn't really begin to attract a lot of settlers until after the wars that followed." Dazzler smiled. She was good at research and remembered every bit of the history she'd looked into eighteen years ago. "After the First World War, Santa's reindeer were exhausted by the time they hit the western US. He feared he wouldn't keep Christmas for those in the newer states, but thankfully the settlers had a magical background and helped him corral enough elk to fill the team. The way station was created, and the townsfolk started raising reindeer."

Ole shook his head. "I'm not talking about the town's history. I'm talking about the man in charge."

"Todd Dugan?" He was about as perfect as a human could be. Dazzler raised her chin. No one would besmirch her friend.

Ole set his hand on the small of her back and guided her down the lane.

"Guess I should have trusted the mayor to have a backup plan."

Backup plan? Why would they need one? Dazzler blocked the old man's view as Cheddar dove into the compost bin. The scarecrow muttered and hummed to the rotting vegetation, offering comfort.

"I know Todd Dugan."

"Of course you do. He married one of your kind."

The houses lining the lane grew closer together, then morphed into portly Victorians with white picket fences holding up garland bunting.

Dazzler mentally recited her favorite types of cookies in alphabetical order to cool her temper. At sugar cookies, she found her tongue.

"Todd has been nothing but kind. Why would the mayor need a backup plan?"

"Because of the curse."

"What curse?"

"Todd is the only Dugan to divorce his mate. Ever." Ole nodded slowly as if weighed down by the importance of the revelation.

She shrugged. "I have met many humans. Divorce is common in families." And a little magic went a long way to healing their broken

hearts.

Ole tugged his hat off his head and wrung the knit material between his arthritic hands.

“Do you know why we teach science in high school and not magic?”

Dazzler squirmed. This had to be some kind of test. “Magic can’t be taught. It’s felt—in here.” She tapped her chest.

“Exactly.” Ole beamed as if she were a slow student who’d finally understood the lesson.

Except she didn’t understand. Not even a little. Still, she nodded as they turned down Main Street.

Garland arched overhead. Ribbons perched atop globe streetlamps. A man in a white apron scratched an advertisement for pumpkin pies and muffins off the bakery windows. A sandwich board in front of a red-brick diner counted the days remaining of pumpkin spice until the arrival of everything peppermint. A woman fiddled with a display of Santas at the souvenir shop but stopped to stare at them.

Dazzler waved at her, then at the man hanging wreaths on the signposts.

Carolers in street clothes paused at their marks on the corners and went over their playlist. On the marquee above the Art Deco theater, black letters listed the times classic holiday movies would play and boasted free popcorn.

Ole huffed. “You don’t see the problem at all. When a Dugan meets his match, the lights go out in Holly. Once a Dugan wins the love of his mate, his heart overflows, causing every light in town to blaze. What if Todd can’t hold enough magic in his broken heart, and the town stays dark? A lot of folks’s holiday will be ruined. Heavens to Betsy, some might stop believing and dim the fat man’s power. We don’t even know if evicting Todd from town would fix the problem.”

Dazzler caught her breath. Evict Todd, tear him away from his family and friends at the holidays? Surely, no one would be so cruel. She glanced at her human companion. From the set of his jaw, that’s exactly what Ole would do.

Well, not on her watch.

She cracked her knuckles. She'd protect Todd. "Everything will go off without a hitch. You'll see."

Ole pursed then flattened his lips. "But..."

"Todd's heart is here in Holly. His family lives here. His daughter lives here. Everything he loves is here."

Ole harrumphed.

Voices swelled from the town's center. Men, women, and children poured out of the businesses lining the square. Ribbons of lights wrapped the lampposts. Clusters of red and green bulbs streamed from the pines lining the walk to the Greek revival courthouse in the center. A marching band practiced Christmas carols in the snow-white gazebo on the right. Around it, wrought iron cafe tables and chairs waited to be filled.

Dazzler floated on a cloud of vanilla and cinnamon. Inhaling deeply, she filled her lungs. Warmth radiated from her center and infused her fingers and toes. Such strong magic. It was wonderful. Amazing. She spun in a circle taking it all in.

"Not bad, eh?" Ole rubbed his hands together. "For those that don't believe, there's a logical reason for everything. But for those who do, it's pure magic."

A lump formed in her throat. Her feet left the ground, and sugar plums circled her, tickling as they twirled.

"I love it."

A crowd gathered in the square. Steam danced above mugs of coffee, hot cocoa, and tea. A few reindeer gathered near a grass patch behind the gazebo. Returning to earth, Dazzler shifted into the center of the crowd, glad she was short enough to hide from the four-legged snitches.

The mayor bounded into the gazebo. The crowd quieted. He straightened his suit jacket, pushed up his wire-rim glasses, grinned, and then addressed the crowd.

"I'll save my speech for Thanksgiving and the few polite citizens who'll pretend it's not the same one I give every year."

Dazzler chuckled along with everyone else. This camaraderie was nice.

“And now for the man to help us usher in the season for ourselves and so many of our town’s visitors.” Mayor Browning pointed to a dark-haired man at the front of the crowd. “Please welcome Todd Dugan.”

The crowd clapped. A few cheered.

Todd climbed the steps two at a time. Cold brushed color on his high cheekbones and crooked nose. His cobalt eyes crackled with energy and enthusiasm. Rolling his broad shoulders, he tugged a tablet from his fawn-colored jacket.

“As we all know, the spirit of Christmas is strongest in the heart of a child.”

He beamed. She smiled back. Joy was so infectious.

Shifting to the edge of the gazebo, he turned the tablet toward a little girl drowsing in her mother’s arms.

“Can you tap that button here?” He pointed to a green box on the screen.

The girl nodded and sucked her thumb. The crowd twittered in sympathy.

But Dazzler sniffed acrid notes of unease. Everyone knew the importance of the Christmas spirit in Santa’s magic. She muttered a little calming spell—everything would be perfect.

The mother removed her daughter’s thumb from her mouth with a pop and pressed it against the box. Magic filled the nooks and crannies of the square. Lights twinkled in trees and on eaves. Pixie-dust trails wrote welcoming messages above the courthouse. An animated Santa and workshop elves danced and hummed as they worked on toys for good boys and girls.

Wonderful. Amazing. Dazzler clapped until her palms hurt. Why had everyone been worried? Todd Dugan could do anything.

Todd straightened. His gaze fell on her, and his eyes widened with shock.

Then he smiled.

Her joy increased. Everything was always better when it was shared.

His lips parted as if he were about to speak.

A voice rang across the square. “It certainly says Christmas.”

Dazzler froze. No. No, this couldn't be happening. Her cousin Willa couldn't be here. Then she spied it. The sparkle of glitter on snow-white hair. Elven hair.

Todd tore his attention from Dazzler and pinned his ex-wife with a stare.

“Willa.”

And the lights went dark.

CHAPTER 2

“The lights are out.”

Ignoring the mayor, Todd Dugan ground his back molars. The legend of the connection of the lights and the Dugans was magic. Just like the two elves in the audience. He’d learned long ago magic didn’t apply to him.

“I know the lights are out.”

He’d been there before when everything had gone sideways. So had most of the town.

The crowd’s murmurs lapped at the gazebo. He knew someone wanted him kicked out of town before too much damage was done. A baby cried. On the lawn behind him, the high school marching band hit a discordant note.

Todd’s skin prickled from the accusation in their eyes. This wasn’t his fault. It was a glitch, pure and simple. He turned the tablet in his hands, and his fingers flew over the keyboard. But where was the glitch?

He’d checked and double-checked every connection with the lights. This really shouldn’t be happening. This couldn’t be happening. He checked the signal from his device to the receiver that controlled the lights in the town square. Five bars. Sour eggnog!

In front of him, the townspeople shifted.

Old man Henderson muttered under his breath, “The boy is a disaster with magic.”

The prim librarian nodded. The baseball coach crossed his arms, pecs rippling under his sweatshirt.

“If you’ll bear with us.” Stepping forward, Mayor Browning raised his hands, a silent plea for calm. “I’m sure everything will be under control soon.”

Todd grunted. Nice to know one of them was sure. But even in high school, Paul Browning had always been the confident one.

Browning nudged Todd and lowered his voice. “I guess now isn’t the time to tell you I invited your ex-wife to emcee the festivities.”

Todd blinked. He’d known there had to be a reason for his ex to show up. Still...

His fingers hovered over the screen. “Is this about the bet?”

Ducking his head, Browning hid his grin from the restless crowd. “Magic, one; technology, zero. And I get your sleigh all winter.”

“You have coal for brains. And keep your mittens off my ride.” Todd didn’t need magic. Not at all. He just had to get his technology working. He ran a diagnostic and tapped his foot as the progress bar started to glow. Any second now. Any second...

Someone cleared her throat. The crowd parted, opening an aisle between the silvery elf and the gazebo. Todd didn’t bother glancing up. He knew that sound. His stomach clenched, waiting for the lecture on what he was doing wrong.

“I think I have an explanation.” Willa Sparkles nodded to people in greeting as she glided forward. Sunlight glinted off her snowy hair. Her alabaster skin glowed, revealing iceberg-blue veins at her temples. Sooty lashes framed her pale-blue eyes.

A little girl stroked a chubby finger down the crisp white velvet of Willa’s jacket. Rainbow sparks took wing at the contact. The townsfolk oohed and ahhed. Santa’s elves had that effect on most people.

Thankfully, Todd wasn’t most people. He’d tired of such perfection a decade and a half ago. He preferred a warm soul, not an ice queen.

His tablet finished its diagnostics with a chime of bells. No error found. *That can’t be right.* Digging his finger into the power button, he rebooted the tablet. As the wheel spun down, he scanned the crowd.

Brown eyes caught his. His ex-cousin-in-law Dazzler Spitfire smiled from behind the burly baker. With a twinkle in her eye, she flashed him a thumbs-up.

Todd's chest constricted. Why was she here? No doubt his daughter had invited her. And Dazzler, being Dazzler, was always willing to help. He hoped she wouldn't use her magic to assist him. He could handle a little glitch. Just as soon as he figured out where his tech had gone wrong.

"Pardon me, but perhaps I should have said who is responsible." Willa's voice was a cold splash of water.

Mayor Browning stiffened, and his gaze cut to Todd. "Who is responsible?"

Todd shifted his attention to his ex-wife, and he clamped his lips together. Naturally, she'd blame him. She'd never liked his technology.

She arched an eyebrow. "My cousin Disaster, er, Dazzler."

Todd gripped the tablet until it shook in his hands. He refused to look in Dazzler's direction—his ex would notice.

"Mom." Candance tugged on Willa's sleeve. Their seventeen-year-old daughter's chestnut hair was streaked with white. Her green eyes shimmered into blue. Sparkles faded her summer tan. Soon, his baby would resemble one of Santa's elves and head off to her job at the North Pole.

And he would be left alone. He forced a smile.

Candance picked at the dry skin on her fingers, a nervous habit from when she was five. "That's not a nice thing to say."

Browning whistled low under his breath. "I can't believe she's your ex-wife," he muttered to Todd.

Obviously, the mayor saw the initial appeal of the elf. Heck, from the number of open mouths in the crowd, most of the town did, too. Even old man Henderson had nearly lost his dentures.

"I'd marry her, lights or no lights." The ex-quarterback muscled aside the librarian. A few of the men nodded; two women glared.

The librarian, Mrs. Martin, dug a bony elbow into the quarterback's side, stopping his progress. "The matter of the lights is

not a joke. Where is this Disaster woman? Let's ask her if she's responsible for them going out."

"Her name isn't 'Disaster'. It's Dazzler." Light flickered over Todd as his tablet started up. "And she isn't a woman."

Mayor Browning cocked a brown eyebrow.

"She's an elf. Like Willa." *But warm, and kind, and always smiling.* Todd's skin heated.

His ex-wife squinted at him.

Deer droppings! He was glad she couldn't hear his thoughts.

Ducking his head, he entered his passcode and reconnected with the computer coordinating the light display. He waited for the app to open and peeked toward Dazzler. Her spot was empty.

"And she isn't here. She's also not responsible for the lights."

"So, it *is* you!" Old man Henderson jabbed a gnarled digit at Todd.

He tamped down the feeling of abandonment. His ex-cousin had been there during his divorce, the insanity of raising his daughter, and helping Candance transition from human teen to newly empowered elf. He exhaled slowly as the tablet reported it couldn't connect with the control panel. Relief bowed his shoulders.

"It's just a technical glitch." He flashed the screen with its scarlet bars at the crowd.

Mrs. Martin tugged her readers out of her flame-red hair and perched them on her nose. "I hope you can fix it, young man. We can't have Christmas ruined on a technicality."

Hashmarks appeared on his ex-wife's alabaster forehead. "I won't allow Christmas to be ruined. I—"

A little girl squealed then clapped. Candance pointed to the columns of the Greek Revival courthouse plopped in the center of the town square.

"Some of the lights are back on."

"Maybe it was a short." Returning her glasses to her hair, Mrs. Martin pursed her lips as if the admission tasted tart.

Todd's nose twitched with the scent of peppermint. One bar turned green. It wasn't a short. His tech was starting to work again, just like he'd known it would.

Old man Henderson snorted. "There's a more likely explanation."

A reindeer galloped across the flat roof of the courthouse, a string of lights tangled around his antlers. He took to the air with another reindeer hard on his hooves. Two more played tug-of-war with a strand of red bulbs near the fountain.

Todd eyed the first reindeer. He knew his family herd; none had markings like that. And was that a maple leaf tail? Where had that creature come from? There could be only one place—the North Pole. Willa must have ridden it down.

Old man Henderson scratched the ring of white hair circling his pink scalp. “When are you going to corral them reindeer? You know how they love their games.”

The crowd peeled away in threes and fours. Youngsters chased the strings of lights the reindeer had trailed across the ground. Teens scrambled up bare trees and retrieved snowmen, elves, and reindeer lawn ornaments. Adults collected bouquets of glowing candy canes and lollipops before drilling them into the ground to light the sidewalks.

His ex-wife stomped her foot. Bells jingled at the tips of her boots. “I’m telling you this isn’t the work of playful reindeer.”

Todd shook his head. Willa could never admit to a mistake. Well, none besides the mistake of marrying him.

Old man Henderson hunched over, blew on the plug of the lights outlining the gazebo, then plugged it into an outlet. Todd held his breath. The lights had to work. The curse couldn’t be responsible. It just couldn’t.

After a moment, red lights trimmed the white woodwork. Old man Henderson grunted at the success then shuffled off to the next outlet. Across the cobblestone street, the lights on the barber shop, drugstore, hardware store, and candy store glowed brightly in the afternoon sunshine. Half the town was lit.

Todd switched off the power on his tablet. He’d best help gather the lights.

Mayor Browning clamped a hand on Todd’s shoulder. Willa planted two ivory boots on the bottom step of the gazebo. The jingle bells glinted at their pointed tips.

“I’m telling you, it’s not a short. This has Disas—Dazzler’s magic written all over it.”

“Why don’t you tell us about it?” With his free hand, Browning gestured toward the wooden benches lining the gazebo before taking a seat in the back.

Todd shrugged off his friend’s grip. The man was determined to win the bet. There wasn’t enough icing in Holly for that to happen. Dropping to a bench, he tucked the tablet inside his jacket and turned the collar up against the arctic breeze his ex always brought with her.

Like a fluffy white cloud fleeing a winter gale, Willa sailed into the gazebo. She ignored him and focused on the mayor.

“My cousin Disaster—”

“Mom.” Candance flopped onto the bench beside Todd. She smiled at him before dipping her hand in his pocket to hold his. Todd squeezed her fingers like he had when she was younger, except now they didn’t need warming up. Her elven nature was making her immune to the cold.

Willa rolled her eyes. “*Dazzler’s...*” She stressed the name. “... magic always goes awry. Things happen. Bad things. Like the lights going out for your important season.”

“Auntie D means well, Mom.” Candance rested her head against Todd’s shoulder. Removing his hand from his pocket, he looped an arm around her shoulders. No matter how she changed, she’d always be his daughter.

Willa’s mouth firmed; a heartbeat later, she shook herself. “Dazzler always *means* well. Unfortunately, she doesn’t *do* well. She’s been kicked out of one department after another at the North Pole. And let’s not forget last Christmas, when she nearly messed up Santa’s midnight ride.”

Browning arched an eyebrow, then stared at Todd.

Todd shrugged. He had no idea what event Willa spoke about. Heck, there hadn’t even been a rumor about last Christmas. Then again, elves were notoriously close-lipped and clannish. He might never have found out about Willa’s affair if humans hadn’t also worked in Santa’s workshop.

“Dazzler has been nothing but kind to our daughter. She was always here for Candance’s plays and sporting events. Even when she delivered her first reindeer calf, and lost her first tooth.”

Of course, he’d asked her to stop visiting him once he’d moved out of Flagstaff and back to Holly. Yet, she was here. He shook off his doubts. Dazzler knew his thoughts on magic. She wouldn’t use it around him.

Willa’s nostrils flared, and her jaw clenched. “I have a very important job at the North Pole, Todd. I can’t just leave willy-nilly. Despite what people think, we work twelve months a year just like everyone else.”

Mayor Browning cleared his throat, interrupting the brewing squabble. “The lights went out due to the reindeer games. And I’m certain someone would have noticed another elf like you in town.”

“Dazzler isn’t like me.” Willa sniffed. “She’s dark, like the woods outside in winter. All browns and greens. You might not recognize her because she can change her appearance like the Earth does from one season to the next.”

“Auntie D resembles the Sylvan elves before they followed Santa north.” Candance sat up straight. “Now, almost all of them use winter magic exclusively.”

“Disas—Dazzler’s coloring allows her to tap into all the seasons’ magic. A magic she cannot control.” With a toss of her head, Willa flicked a lock of white hair over her shoulder while glancing around the town square. “At least at home we can contain her damage. But she insists on wandering around, violating the Starlight Treaty, and causing problems everywhere.”

Starlight Treaty? The words niggled Todd’s memory. If he remembered right, the agreement had nothing to do with magic, but with humans and elves mingling outside of Santa’s realm. He shut down the thought. Time to get his ex-wife to leave.

“Either way, Dazzler’s not here. It’s just a loose bulb.”

Willa’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, she’s here. After her last outing, I had no choice but to call an inquiry by the Review Board. This time, they’ll take her magic. They’ll have no choice.”

“Mom. Auntie D helped that family.” Candance pushed to her feet, her fists curled at her sides.

“She broke the rules, Candance.” Willa raised a finger; snowflakes swirled from the tip. “Those rules protect all of us. Do you know what would happen to us if people found out we really existed? They would hurt you.”

Candance clamped her lips together. The resemblance to her mother caused Todd’s stomach to clench. He shook off the moment of unease. Candance was still his daughter; he’d protected her his entire life. So had Dazzler. As usual, his ex was overreacting to get her way.

“While this is interesting, it doesn’t alter the facts.” Mayor Browning checked his watch before rising to his feet. “This Dazzler isn’t here, and we have a lot of reindeer damage to undo.”

Willa crossed her arms over her chest. “Then I guess I’ll just stay and emcee the festivities as you asked me, Mr. Mayor.”

Browning slanted Todd a glance. A winning glint shone in his eye. “That sounds fine to me. Todd?”

Todd forced a smile. If his friend thought that would roast his chestnuts, he was in for a surprise.

“Candance, why don’t you take your mom to Patience and Charity’s Bed and Breakfast. I’m sure they’ll make room for our honored guest.”

Candance opened and closed her mouth. “Alright.”

“We’ll need two rooms.” Willa hooked her arm through her daughter’s and glided down the steps. “Sterling Frost will be joining me.”

Todd sagged on the bench. Sterling Frost. If he never heard that name, he could have died a happy man.

Applause washed over him as the bakery, hair salon, and clothing store lit up.

Browning kicked Todd’s boot. “Do you think this Sterling elf will be as good-looking as your ex?”

“Sterling Frost is not an elf.” If he had been, Todd would have punched him in the nose for sleeping with Willa. “Sterling is a descendant of the original Jack Frost.”

And his heart was twice as cold.

“Too bad, for you.” Browning paused on the top step of the gazebo. “Of course, if there were two elves in town, and the lights went out again, proving the curse extends to you, then you could have your choice of elves to marry.”

Todd shook his head. “It was a technical glitch. Nothing more. Magic doesn’t apply to me.”

“We shall see.” Browning rubbed his hands together. “I think I’ll ask Santa for a new set of gloves. Ones thick enough to handle sleigh reins.”

Todd rubbed his eye with his middle finger.

Clomping down the stairs, Browning chuckled. “I look forward to seeing you win your ex-wife back.”

The mayor wouldn’t live long enough to see that day. No one would. Todd would prove to them all that technology performed just as well as magic. As for Dazzler...

He sighed as another item joined his to-do list. A simple warning that others were looking for her should convince her to leave town. He didn’t need another distraction.

And Dazzler was always distracting.

CHAPTER 3

Dazzler ducked down a side street. Victorian homes rose gracefully from lawns, decked in Christmas decorations. Spiral turrets and gothic towers were painted in Jordan almond colors and trimmed with crisp white and gray. Along the white picket fences lining the streets hung garland and gold ribbons. Laughter emanated from the village green one street over.

Flying above her head, a handful of reindeer chased a maple leaf-tailed one with a candy cane ornament in his mouth. The lead reindeer tossed the decoration to the one closing in on his left and the herd veered after the new quarry.

Maybe she had overdone it by inciting the reindeer to play. She checked over her shoulder. No one followed. Her cousin Willa only *thought* Dazzler was here, she didn't *know* it. Dazzler's stomach clenched. She smoothed the flannel covering her belly.

How could Willa have shown up in Holly?

Her cousin must know how much her presence affected Todd. He didn't need his ex-wife reminding him of his failed love life, not when the Holly festivities depended on his undivided attention. Just look how the townspeople had turned on him when the lights fell dark.

He was doing the best he could. That should count for something, shouldn't it?

Fisting her hands, she squared her shoulders. She would find a way to stay and help him.

The maple leaf-tailed reindeer circled the herd before diving low and buzzing the street. Autumn leaves trembled on the trees and

skittered along the cobblestone road in his wake. He spun and collided with a sycamore tree.

Leaves showered down. They condensed into a ball and eventually transformed him from a reindeer to a scarecrow. Cheddar stuffed leaves into a pair of jeans. Wiggling four stick fingers, he held them up for her to see.

"I always like it when I get improvements." His smile crinkled his acorn eyes. As he walked, leaves solidified into boots. "It's a shame to be leaving so soon."

"Leave?" Dazzler blinked. Was the human magic affecting him? He'd never had problems remembering after so short a time between stuffings. "Why would we leave?"

"Because your cousin is here and is looking for us. With her lapdog Sterling in tow. They won't allow you to finish your investigation."

"We have to stay and protect Todd. Now more than ever." Dazzler turned right onto Yule Street. "Didn't you see his face when Willa appeared?"

She was sure his heart had broken, just a little. She scratched at the birthmark on her wrist.

Cheddar shrugged. Leaves fell out of his shirt and tumbled down the street. "I wasn't paying much attention."

Youngsters of all ages played tag on brown grass in front of a lavender Victorian. A woman rocked on the violet-trimmed wraparound porch. With an excited yip, a spotted dog joined in the children's fun.

Dazzler's footsteps slowed. Should she go to another street? From the corner of her eye, she watched the kids and their babysitter. No one paid attention to her. For once, she was thankful for her coloring. Here, she could blend in.

Her attention cut back to Cheddar. "Todd was horrified and devastated to see his ex."

Her chest tightened at the memory. She had to find a way to mitigate that.

Cheddar tapped a stick finger against his stitched mouth. "If you really want to help, why not present yourself to your cousin, and the

both of you return to the North Pole? She'd leave Todd alone then."

"Don't be ridiculous," Dazzler snapped. Sometimes his stuffing got in the way of logical thought. "If I turn myself in, and Willa takes me to the North Pole, then who will make certain the festivities go off without a hitch and Todd gets to spend the holidays with his family? No one, that's who. And that would ruin Christmas for everyone. It is our duty as Santa's elves to do all we can to promote the spirit of Christmas."

Cheddar's fingers ticked against wooden slats as he ran them along the picket fence. "What if Todd turns you in?"

Her breath hitched in her throat. She coughed to clear it. "He had a chance back at the square and didn't."

"Maybe he didn't see you."

"I'm not invisible, Cheddar. He *pretended* not to see me." She was familiar with the technique. Most elves adopted it when she entered their department at the North Pole. She didn't mind. Much. Besides, Todd had done it out of kindness, not because of her reputation.

Children screamed with delight as a new person was dubbed "it" in their game of tag.

Keeping her head turned away, Dazzler studied the homes on her side of the street. A buttercream-yellow Queen Anne, the third one from the end, drew her eye. Her skin itched at the neatly trimmed hedges, the even pile of the carpet of brown grass, and a tamed rosebush on the right. Just a little magic would free the vegetation. Flowers would cover the rose trellis and the bushes could reach the railing of the wraparound porch. Planting beds could break up the grass, giving homes to all sorts of woodland creatures.

Cheddar stopped trailing his fingers along the fence. "What about that old man, Ole Henderson? He could turn you in."

"He could, but he didn't." Her steps slowed in front of the house.

"That house is sad. There are no Christmas decorations, like the others."

There was that. Her fingers curled into fists at her side. She daren't do magic, fix the house and make it happy, not with Willa nearby.

“We need someplace to stay out of sight. The town has a bed-and-breakfast. Perhaps we should check in and consider the best way to help Todd over a cup of hot chocolate.”

“Chocolate solves a lot of problems.” Cheddar wrapped his fingers around the pickets in the gate. “But we can’t go to Charity and Patience’s bed-and-breakfast.”

“We can’t?”

“No, Willa said she was going there.” Cheddar lifted the latch and pushed the gate open. “Since this place looks deserted, we should hide here.” He shuffled down the flagstone path.

“Cheddar!” Dazzler hissed. Figgy pudding! He was going to get them caught.

The scarecrow increased his pace.

A house door slammed across the street. The skin between Dazzler’s shoulder blades tingled. They’d been spotted.

Slipping into the yard, she shut the gate behind her. Her heart thudded in her ears. If they were caught...

Cheddar ignored the porch and veered right onto the path leading to the backyard. Her legs trembled with the need to run and hide. She shouldn’t do anything to give herself away.

“Martha! Martha Dugan!” a woman called out.

Dazzler bit her lip. Martha was Todd’s mother. Was this her house? Would they take her in? Should she embroil them in her mess? She couldn’t.

“Cheddar.”

He opened the wrought iron gate and strolled into the backyard.

“Mrs. Crumbie,” another woman answered. “How are the children this morning?”

“They’re fine, but your reindeer are not. They’ve completely destroyed the light display and—”

Dazzler winced. Stuffed stockings! Had she solved the problem of the lighting glitch by causing another problem for Todd? She latched the gate behind her, shutting out their conversation.

After a short walk along the side of the clapboard house, the yard unrolled before her. An oak tree spread branches over the neatly trimmed lawn. Lemon-yellow and pumpkin-orange leaves clung to

the black limbs. Fifty feet away, Cheddar plucked a few red ones from the ground and stuffed them into his shirt.

Her heart thudded at the pools of vegetation—isolated bushes and segregated annuals rooted in puddles of red bark mulch shivered in the autumn breeze. Knees trembling, she resisted the urge to drop to the ground, dig her fingers into the soil, and use magic to fill in the empty spaces.

As she tore her attention away, her gaze stuttered on the pristine swing set. Sleigh-red poles formed the A-frame and supports. For a moment, she pictured dark-haired girls and pointy-eared boys filling the marshmallow seats of the swings and air glider. She shook the nonsense from her head. When she dared to let herself dream of her forever home, she saw lush gardens bustling with wildlife.

Stick fingers raised, Cheddar raced after a falling leaf.

Dazzler turned and scanned the porch. She smiled at the rocking chair near the two-seater porch swing. That was a step in the right direction. She skimmed the Dutch back door; her breath caught in her throat. There it was. Right out of her dreams—an evergreen hammock. Two candy cane pillows topped the head and a fluffy throw blanket at the foot was perfect for snuggling and relaxing. She stumbled over the even grass. Would the chains squeak or be well-oiled?

Cheddar nibbled on the leaf he'd caught, watching her. Her boots were silent as she climbed the five steps to the porch. She trailed her fingers along the glossy white railing.

Leaves rustled behind her. Cheddar scaled the railing and flung a leg over to land on the porch.

"Well, that's a relief. We can sleep out here under the stars."

Nodding, she reached out. Her hand shook before she touched the gold braid running down the side of the hammock. By Kringle, she hadn't imagined it. As she shifted her hand, her fingers dug into the white blanket.

Cheddar flopped into the hammock. The chains jangled softly as they adjusted to his weight. He patted the fabric beside him.

"This is comfortable. Not practical for the North Pole, but quite right here in the warmer climates."

“Perfect.” Dazzler removed the blanket and raised the cable knit to her nose. Cedar and sunshine tickled her senses. It smelled like Todd. But how could she have picked his house out of everyone’s in town?

“Cheddar, did you happen to see whose name is on the mailbox?”

Cheddar shrugged. “I don’t recall.”

Cradling the throw against her chest, Dazzler crossed to the nearest window and pressed her nose against the pane. Dried-up sticks were all that remained in the pots on the windowsill. Cherry cabinets hung on the walls, and sparkling appliances gleamed on the cream granite countertops. Faces smiled at her from the photographs stuck to the stainless steel fridge. Cool air filled her mouth. *Beauty and the Beast’s* Belle took center stage between her, Todd, and Candance.

“This is Todd’s house.”

“It is?” Cheddar clasped his fingers behind his head and crossed his feet at the ankles. “Then he won’t mind if we take a little nap. Reforming myself multiple times takes a lot of energy.”

He snuggled deeper into the pillow, and his eyes drifted closed.

“I don’t think Todd would mind if we rested here for a minute or two.” At least, she hoped not.

She yawned. It had been a long day, but they were safe. Placing her hand on the hammock, she steadied it before lowering her bottom. That hadn’t been so bad. Raising her legs, she swung them up. The hammock tilted left then right, nearly dumping her on the ground. She hung on.

Cheddar snored, but his chest squeaked and a fuzzy nose and twitching whiskers poked out of his shirt. The squirrel chattered and shook his finger at her before leaping to the ground.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you.” She relaxed her hold as the hammock steadied. “I promise you that you are safe.”

Tail twitching in annoyance, the squirrel thundered across the porch then raced across the yard.

Dazzler spread the blanket across them and sank into the candy cane pillow. Her eyes flickered close. Only a moment. Just a short nap.

#

Her eyes flew open. The sun was lower on the western horizon than it had been a moment ago. Hours ago, she mentally corrected herself. She'd slept for hours. Her senses reached out, picked up the squirrel inspecting his new home in the tree. A cardinal perched on a branch. Her muscles relaxed, and she inhaled a calming breath. This was Todd's house. She should be safe here.

Cheddar sat up. His pinecone ears twitched. "Somebody's coming."

Her breath caught in her throat. Who would be coming? And why would they be coming into the back yard? She scanned the area. No hiding place in the well-tended space. And if she used magic, Willa would find her. Tarnished tinsel!

Rolling off the hammock, she landed on the porch with a thud.

"Cheddar," she whispered, scrambling under the hammock. Her nails dug into the painted slats.

The scarecrow landed beside her in a flutter of leaves. Fabric rustled as he took up space beside her. "I don't think this is a very good hiding spot."

The latch on the gate clicked. They were in the side yard.

"Shhh." Her ears pricked in the silence. Who was it? It had better not be Willa. Her cousin needed to stay far away from Todd.

Cheddar rolled on top of her and dissolved in a heap. She blew a leaf out of her eyes.

"I understand, Nonna." Candance's voice filtered into the backyard. "I just had my headphones in while listening to my music. I'll keep them out in the future."

Footsteps crunched on the dying blades of grass. Not Willa's, someone heavier, bigger. Afternoon sunshine glinted on a head of brown hair. Her heart raced. Todd.

“Dazzler?” he whispered. “Are you here?”

“Da-ad.” Candance’s singsong voice rose at the end. “You told Mom Auntie D isn’t here.”

“She wasn’t at the time I answered your mother,” he shot back.

Sloughing off her blanket of leaves, Dazzler rolled out from under the hammock. “I’m here.”

“Auntie D! You came!” Candance squealed and rushed forward. Peppermint and sunshine preceded the seventeen-year-old. A smile lit her heart-shaped face as her thin arms wrapped around Dazzler. “I missed you. I wanted to visit you once I got up north, but Mom said it was best if I didn’t.”

Candace rested her chin on Dazzler’s shoulder. Dazzler ruffled the girl’s hair, enjoying the silky feel of the white highlights.

“Your Mom was right.” She closed her eyes and tamped down the pain as the admission shredded her throat. Willa never acknowledged their relationship unless pushed. “We’ll make plans while I’m here, and you can sneak away so we can enjoy cocoa and cookies.”

“We better.” Leaning back, Candance shook her finger at Dazzler. “I think you got me in trouble with Nonna. She said I ignored her when I was sneaking in the backyard.”

“She didn’t call out.” Dazzler offered in her defense. After planting a quick kiss on Candance’s cheek, she tucked a white lock behind the girl’s ears. The little girl was growing up—her ears were starting to gather into points at the top. “And I’m sorry I got you in trouble. Cookies and cocoa are never to be used to make amends. They are to be enjoyed whenever you are with those you love.”

Candance squinted. Her cobalt-blue eyes shifted to silver. “Even when you’re mad at that someone?”

Dazzler nodded. Friends and family were to be cherished, always. “Even then.”

“Then my stomach will soon be as big a bowl of jelly as Saint Nick’s, because everyone has been very welcoming at the North Pole.” Candance beamed. “I have so many cousins.”

Forcing a smile, Dazzler tucked her hands in her pockets. “Everyone at the North Pole is related.”

Todd cleared his throat. "Candance, honey, why don't you get the grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup cooking while I talk to Dazzler for a minute."

Dazzler's stomach clenched. He sounded so serious. Was he upset at her arrival? Did he blame her for the failing lights?

"Sure, Dad." Candance hugged Dazzler quickly before skipping into the house. "I'm glad you're going to spend the holidays with us. It was something I've dreamed of since forever."

Dazzler glanced down at her boots.

Twig fingers raked the leaves into a pile and slid back under the hammock. Too bad she couldn't hide like Cheddar. Still, if Todd was going to ask her to leave, she'd best get it over with. She could be in Flagstaff before the hospital closed. Nurse Paula was bound to still be working. And the kids always welcomed her visits. She glanced up.

Todd raked his fingers through his dark-brown hair. "I wish you'd told me you were coming."

Knees trembling, Dazzler rested her hand on his forearm. Was he going to turn her away? "I'm sorry. It was kind of a last-minute thing."

Covering her hand, Todd tugged her down onto the top step. A moment passed. Then two. He stared at his back yard; his thumb swept back and forth across her knuckles. "Since you're here, I won't turn you away. But I have one condition. No magic."

"No magic?" Dazzler's insides did a funny dance. Hunger was getting to her. She studied his profile, the jutting of his chin, the firming of his lips. Had he heard the rumors? Did he believe them? "Why?"

"With Candance coming into *her* magic, I'm losing her to your world." He shifted so his thigh pressed against hers.

"My world." She rubbed her sternum with her free hand. He didn't consider her part of his world. Did that mean he didn't consider them to be friends?

"I need Candance to see that human Christmases are great even without magic. That it's the loved ones you surround yourself with that matter, not the ability to create something from thin air or have pointed ears."

Scooting closer, she forced a smile. "But don't you see, love *is* magic? It's—"

"My house, my rules." His eyes glinted with determination. "Besides, you don't want to disappoint Candance. Actually, your being here might work to my advantage. She'll see elves don't need magic to be happy."

Not need magic?

"I see." On one hand, Dazzler would be wanted, needed. Just not her magic, a magic she'd come here to save. Still, she could be with Candance, observe the teenager, and maybe find the root of her own magical mishaps in the process. Maybe even perform a little magic when no one was looking. "What do you want me to do?"

"Do? You can't do anything. I don't even think you'll be able to leave the house." Todd shook his head, shifting away from her. "Willa and Frost are looking for you. If they find you, then Candance's Christmas will be ruined, and everything will be for nothing."

"Not leave the house?" Dazzler groaned. There had to be a way around that caveat.

Todd glanced at her ears. "People will notice two elves in town."

Cheddar slid out from under the hammock and stared at Todd with unblinking acorn eyes. "Dazzler is a Sylvan elf. She gets her power from the woods. If you keep her locked up inside, she could get sick. Do you want that?"

"No. Of course not. I..." Color flushed Todd's cheeks, and he dropped her hand. "This was a bad idea. I should have stuck with my original plan. You'll have to leave. Elves and humans shouldn't mix."

"I have it!" The heart-shaped birthmark on her arm tingled. "Since everyone has already seen Willa and are expecting to see her, I'll change my appearance to look like her. Problem solved! It's brilliant!"

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