

CHAPTER 1

*I'm an Elf*

MONDAY, DECEMBER 22ND

Clara Parker only knew one thing as the plane began its final descent toward the tiny Nebraska airfield. She hated Christmas with a fiery passion, and, more than anything, she wanted to be back in New York, where at least everything in her life was predictable. Sure, maybe some days were a bit mundane, but she could deal with that because it was manageable. Unpredictable chaos made her stomach twist into knots, kind of like this flight was doing now.

“Are you all right?”

Clara turned toward the passenger in the window seat next to hers, an older woman around sixty whose animated chatter about getting to see her grandbabies had filled the last

thirty minutes with rapid-fire commentary that had made her gnash her teeth. Clara realized she was clawing the armrest that was the only barrier between their seats. She imagined that the woman's excitement would be infectious to most people, but it reminded Clara of how nauseating family could be...especially at this time of year. Her family was even worse. It was nauseating times ten, no maybe twenty. Why didn't she stay in New York? She could have had a nice quiet holiday, ordered Chinese food, and binge-watched Hallmark movies. Clara turned her attention to the woman sitting next to her, who looked concerned.

"I'm fine. Thanks," Clara said, managing a polite smile, the expected norm in situations of forced proximity.

"So, what are your plans for the holiday?"

Survive. Get through the family gift exchange and get out of town before I bump into a man who used to make me crazy.

She looked away as she formulated a more appropriate response than the one on the tip of her tongue. "Just the usual—egg nog, gift-giving, and dinner with my family."

"Oh, that sounds wonderful. Do you have a big family?"

Entirely too big.

But she couldn't very well say that to a grandmother who obviously hadn't seen her family in quite some time and was looking forward to spending Christmas with them.

"There's my parents, I have a sister, and I've got more cousins than I can count. They still live here, but I moved away for college."

And to escape.

"I'm sure they'll love having everyone together again. Don't you just love this time of year? I only get to see my grandbabies around Christmas, and sometimes I come out around Easter too. If they're not visiting with her in-laws..."

"Egg hunts in snow," she muttered.

Nebraska was known for the occasional springtime snow. The woman laughed. Clara clutched the armrest just a little tighter when the plane jolted as the landing gear was released right beneath her seat. She bit back what she really wanted to say, which was that she'd prefer a dentist's chair to suffering through a dinner sitting across from her oh-so-perfect sister. Lacy did everything right—high school sweetheart, college, marriage; hell, about the only thing that wasn't in the cards for Lacy was

kids. That gave her mother ammunition to question Clara about her career choice and her love life (or lack thereof) almost every chance she got. At least one of Leanna Parker's daughters had better give her grandbabies, and who better to blame than the one who had no interest in a domestic life whatsoever. She liked the life she'd made for herself in New York. Sure, her apartment was a shoebox, but her independence meant more to her than being tied down. Clara knew what her life would have been like if she had stayed, and she wanted more than what small-town life had to offer. She could never picture herself becoming a townie.

"Well, it was nice to meet you. Have a happy holiday," Clara said, hoping that would cut off the conversation.

"It was nice to meet you too. Have a safe trip and enjoy the egg nog."

Clara nodded.

The plane taxied around to the jet-way, and the 'Fasten Seatbelt' sign dimmed. She unclicked her belt and was one of the first passengers standing in the aisle trying to escape the stale, recirculated air. If she had to sit next to that cheerful woman one more minute, she was

sure she'd fly off with something quite cynical and Grinch-like.

The line of bodies filling the aisle began to edge toward the blast of cold air that swept through the open plane door, trudging with their carry-on bags and purses past a flight attendant who wished them all a happy holiday. Her tired smile reflected how Clara already felt, and she hadn't even been home yet.

She waited at the baggage claim for her suitcase for what seemed like an eternity. The only ones left standing around the conveyor belt were a man wearing a blue dress shirt and Clara. There was something strange about the man. He smelled like either evergreen, tea tree oil, or maybe Irish Spring soap. What was that sound? It sounded like jingle bells. She hated airport music, but the holiday season was a special kind of torture. Every year it seemed like they broke out the Christmas music earlier and earlier.

Clara sighed but smiled at the man waiting for his bag.

"It's lovely this time of year," he said.

By now, her patience had worn rather thin. The dotting grandmother talking non-stop on the plane had shredded her last nerve. In fact, it

was like a shoestring that had just snapped. She turned toward the handsome man in the blue button-down, and instead of acknowledging him with customary politeness, she let him have the truth of how she really felt about being home for the holidays and in no uncertain terms.

“Actually, no, it’s not a lovely time of year. Not everyone loves Christmas and caroling and family and presents and commercialism and, and...I don’t like ‘Jingle Bells’ either. I just want my suitcase. And I want to get through it. Okay? Is that all right with you?”

Now, most reasonable people would’ve been taken back. They’d look at you like you were crazy, turn to find their suitcase, and leave you the hell alone. At least that’s what Clara had hoped her little outburst would accomplish, but instead, the man had a genuinely puzzled look on his face. He seemed completely confused by her outburst.

He gave her a gentle smile. “Did it ever occur to you that you might enjoy it?”

Clara snorted in derision. “Right, I’ll believe that when Santa shows up in a sleigh and plops what I’ve always wanted underneath the tree wrapped in a big red bow.”

She flinched inwardly almost as soon as she heard the words fall out of her mouth. Clara didn't mean to sound quite so sarcastic or mean, but the man smiled again. His caramel eyes were crinkling. Under different circumstances, Clara would have been just as cordial as she always was. She was hungry and cranky from the flight. So her tolerance to deal with a charming man who probably had a wife and kids to get home to had melted hours ago. Clara also hated flying, but it wasn't just her fear of flying that made her miserable. Only the going up and coming down part really bothered her. Maybe it was because she hadn't been home in forever. Or perhaps it was her BWB, or 'boss with benefits,' arrangement that was getting complicated. Their argument right before she left had her so worked up. Deep down, Clara knew this guy didn't deserve it, and she felt a little bad about lashing out.

The man's smile grew wider. "It doesn't work like that."

"Work like what?"

"Some gifts don't come wrapped in shiny paper, tucked under your tree. They're much more obvious, but only if you're paying attention and you're willing to sacrifice for them."

Clara coughed.

Oh, Lordy.

She'd found herself a bible thumper who was about to start spouting off nonsense about miracles and baby Jesus. Just her luck to be stuck waiting for her suitcase with a fanatic. It was time to tamp down her impatience—nod and smile before he quoted scripture at her or something. Clara didn't need saving, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd been to church. Maybe Aunt Tilly's funeral? That sounded about right.

"You're absolutely right. I'm sorry. Can we just agree to disagree on this one? I'll be happy this year to get another scarf and go back to the city." Clara tried to change the subject.

Her response didn't seem to faze the man, who kept on smiling. She wished she had an ounce of his enthusiasm.

"This time of year is filled with endless possibilities, Clara."

Clara couldn't help smiling even though she still thought his enthusiasm was completely over the top. He could've just been excited to get home to his family. "You really like Christmas?"



Wait. He called me Clara. Did I tell him my name?

Her smile faltered.

“It’s my job. I’m an elf.”

Crazy alert.

“Then you must live at the North Pole,” Clara said with an arched eyebrow.

The man in the blue dress shirt laughed. “Not during the off-season.”

Okay, so maybe he’s not crazy. He’s just trying to cheer me up. But still...

She didn’t remember telling him her name, but she was so tired after the week she had that maybe she had forgotten that part of the conversation. And she was half-tempted to ask him why he didn’t have pointy ears. Cripes, Orlando Bloom as Legolas Greenleaf was the hottest freaking elf she’d ever seen. This guy came pretty darn close, but not quite.

Clara laughed too. “You must take your job very seriously.”

“I couldn’t imagine a better job in the whole world than giving people something to believe in,” he said fervently.

Finally, Clara’s bag crept along the conveyor belt. She regretted snapping at such a nice guy, but she hadn’t had anything to believe

in for a really long time. She pushed the joyless thought aside and moved toward her bag.

“If you had one wish this Christmas, Clara, what would it be?”

“Only one?” Clara scoffed.

“Okay, I’ll give you four.”

She gave him a distracted look as she hoisted her bag off the belt. Clara couldn’t remember the last time she’d thought about her hopes and dreams. As an agent at Mills & Parker Literary Agency she was always helping others live their dreams.

Be happy. Do what I’ve always wanted.

It filtered through her thoughts, if only for a fraction of a second. Then something clanked onto the tile floor as she shifted her weight to one hip and propped the wheeled suitcase on an angle to take off.

“My family together for the holidays is enough for me. Have a good one,” Clara said as she began to make a beeline for the bathroom before her bladder burst.

“Wait, Clara, you dropped this.”

A green leather book had fallen onto the tiles. It must have been under her suitcase on the conveyor belt, but it certainly wasn’t hers.

“Sorry, it’s not mine.”

“But it was with your bag,” the man insisted.

Rather than stand there and debate with him, Clara smiled, took the book, and then turned away.

“Have a happy holiday, Clara. I hope it gives you the chance to do what you’ve always wanted and that it’s everything you’ve always dreamed...”

Clara stopped in her tracks. Strange that the man had said pretty much what she’d been thinking only moments ago. She spun around. The baggage claim was empty except for a woman hugging a man much farther down by a set of glass doors and a man behind a rental car counter who looked half asleep.

Where did he go?

It was like he’d vanished into thin air. Clara blinked. Obviously, she’d been hallucinating, or maybe he had to take a piss nearly as bad as she did, and he’d made a mad dash for the men’s room.

Either way, Clara was much too tired to think about holiday elves and their lack of pointy ears. Instead, she made her way to the bathroom, washed her hands, and smoothed back her hair, which had loosened from its

ponytail during the flight. Chalk it up to working long hours, exhaustion, and dreading the long drive to Overlook, but Clara didn't believe in much of anything unless it involved getting out of her uncomfortable dress shoes. Just as Clara started for the rental car counter, her worst nightmare bounced across the tile floor in the form of springy curls and brown eyes that resembled her own.

Great. Her parents had sent Lacy to pick her up. Clara's loving, wonderful, and utterly perfect sister was squealing as she bounded across the airport, getting ready to tackle her.