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The Christmas Lamp

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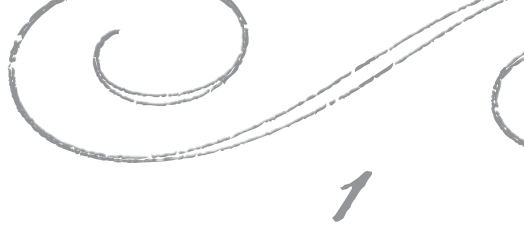
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Roni walked to the break room refrigerator and took out a piece of cheese and a handful of grapes. Bumping the door closed with her hip, she heard it; the telltale sound of a crash, and then lights and ornaments hitting the pavement.

Judy sprang from her chair. “Good grief! This is a record even for Nativity.”

Moving to the window, the women peered out. Roni heaved a sigh of disbelief when she spotted a silver Acura SUV buried in spruce. Tinsel dangled from the headlights.

A man peered out the driver’s side window. Moments later the tall, well-dressed man wearing corduroy slacks and a sports shirt unwound his frame from the driver’s seat and got out of the vehicle.

Closing her eyes, Roni drew a deep breath and announced. “The new consultant is here.”

The two women reached the door simultaneously. Bounding toward the accident, Roni quickly assessed the

situation. The city crew seemed untouched. One or two looked slightly dazed, but the consultant's expression was more "what hit me" than angry. "Is everybody okay?" Roni called as she approached the chaotic scene.

"I'm fine," the newcomer said. He glanced at the workers. "Anyone hurt?"

The men shook their heads, eyes scanning the mess. Roni extended a hand. "You must be the new consultant."

He took the outstretched hand. "Jake Brisco."

"Roni Elliot. I manage the City Administration Office." Her gaze assessed the dark-haired consultant, and then moved to the third finger of his right hand. Empty. Her eyes snapped back. "I am so sorry. Someone should have warned you about the tree."

Jake brushed spruce needles off his slacks. "Does it always sit in the middle of the intersection?"

"Always," Roni assured with a smile.

And it always got hit. Nativity wouldn't be itself without their holiday decorations. And the tree was always first to go up, and the first to come down. Literally. It was hit at least twice every Christmas, and sometimes more.

"Well." Jake studied his vehicle, hands on his trim hips. "I guess there's no real harm done."

"Come inside while they clean the mess off," Roni invited. "We have fresh coffee."

“No thanks.” He set to work picking tinsel out of the bumper. “I’m going to check into my hotel room. I’ll be in first thing tomorrow morning.”

Roni glanced at Judy, who was busy assessing the new boss. She glanced at Roni and gave her a thumbs-up.

Was she kidding? The man couldn’t drive! Roni turned back to Brisco, who was now crouched on his hands and knees parting the spruce. “You’re Mary Parson’s grandson?”

“That would be me.” He tossed a handful of boughs aside, grumbling under his breath.

“We heard you were coming.” For the past few weeks that had been the town buzz. The new consultant is coming. Mary Parson’s hotshot grandson. Everything is going to be different. The town will be saved. She assessed the good-looking Superman. Right. He couldn’t miss a twelve-foot spruce sitting in the middle of the intersection.

This man was going to save Nativity from going under?



That evening, Roni locked the office, relieved to have the hectic day behind her. Jake Brisco wasn’t exactly friendly, but then having a spruce hit your fancy car, as Mom used to say, “would sour a body’s disposition.”

The new consultant had appeared to have a sense of humor. Once they separated his car from the tree, he calmly picked spruce needles out of his grill and noted that his decorating was done for the year. Roni was grateful he wasn't coming into work until morning. There'd be a little breathing space between the incident and getting down to business.

"Merry Christmas!"

Roni turned to see Dusty Bitterman, who owned the insurance office two doors away, striding toward her. The affable grandfatherly figure flipped her a piece of peppermint candy.

She caught it with both hands. "Thanks, Dusty. You're my first holiday greeting of the season."

"It's the best time of the year. You doing okay this fine day?"

"Never better."

"I'm on my way to see Mary. I understand her grandson blew through town earlier."

Blew through was correct. Mary Parson lived on the outskirts of Nativity, a woman who rarely joined community activities anymore even though she'd been a founding area resident. Folks said that until she had her first heart attack she'd been involved with everything, but once her husband passed away she'd turned into a recluse. Everyone knew of Mary but most knew little about her. Dusty

visited her weekly to see if she needed anything, but even he admitted that she rarely did, and that she preferred her solitude.

Sobering, Dusty bent forward. "You know the plan if this thing gets out of hand."

Ronnie nodded. "Ten-four."

Tipping his hat, he walked on as Roni turned toward home. Dusty worked hard to keep the season. He'd lost a nine-year-old son fourteen years ago about this time of the year, so the holiday held even more significant meaning to him. The boy had chased a baseball into a line of traffic. Though Roni was a distracted teenager at the time, she could still remember the sight of Dusty sitting in the middle of a busy highway, all traffic stopped as they watched the grieving father cradle his son's lifeless form, rocking the child gently back and forth.

After that tragic day, Dusty was determined to keep Pete's legacy alive. The boy loved Christmas and all that went with it.

Turning up the collar of her light jacket, she started toward home. The house was a short walk from the office, so she didn't need to invent an excuse to exercise. Her aging blue Volkswagen convertible remained in the garage until Saturdays, when she did her shopping.

A smile touched the corners of her mouth as she thought of the new consultant's arrival. Residents expected

the town tree to be knocked over. It wouldn't be a Nativity Christmas if it sat untouched for the next five weeks, but the incident had to be disconcerting to the newcomer.

Drawing a deep breath of fresh air, she dismissed the worry. The annual tree lighting would take place this Saturday night and then holiday activities would be in full swing.

“Roni! Merry Christmas!”

She spotted a familiar face. “Merry Christmas, Wilma. How's Lowell today?”

“I took him to the doctor this morning. He's doing fine. Just a case of indigestion.”

“Good—It's nice to see you.” By now Steil's Hardware was coming up. Usually Roni breezed right past the store. Hammers and screwdrivers didn't interest her, though she was handy with both tools. Aaron Steil stood in the window setting up a Christmas display.

And then she saw it. The lamp. A gaudy, black-net stocking leg with a fringed shade, an exact replica of the one featured in the movie *A Christmas Story*.

Her gaze riveted on the object. The sight brought back rich memories of the hours she'd spent watching the classic movie with her mom and dad. Images of Ralphie, the kid who longed for a Red Ryder, carbine-action, two-hundred-shot, Range Model air rifle for Christmas raced through her mind. The renowned line rang in her head. *You can't have a BB gun, kid! You'll shoot your eye out!*

Aaron waved and Roni lifted a finger, pointing to the price tag.

He frowned, and she motioned to the white ticket dangling on the cord. Tracing her gaze, he brightened and glanced at the price then mouthed, one ninety-nine.

A hundred and ninety-nine? Dollars? He had to be kidding. He held the lamp closer to the window, brows lifted expectantly.

She shook her head. No. Too much. She couldn't.

Smiling, he set the lamp on a round table and pulled the chain. Soft light pooled over the sidewalk where Roni stood. The effect brought a lump to her throat. Mom. Christmas! The smell of fresh pine in every room, cookies baking in the oven. When Mom was alive she had insisted on a fresh cut tree every season, and Roni still observed the tradition. It wasn't Christmas until a huge tree filled the parlor corner, decorated with childhood ornaments and family keepsakes.

It was silly to continue family traditions with no one to share them with, but she did—and most likely she always would, but she needed to start her own customs.

She'd turned into a creature of habit. Her biological clock wasn't exactly running out, but her dream of filling the house with children had started to look less likely. She'd be thirty in January, and there was not a marriageable

prospect in sight. Nativity had only a few single men, and she didn't get to Springfield or Branson that often.

Life was passing her by, but she had no inclination to stop it. She was content, even happy, with small-town life. She made sure that she was involved with community work, and the town was her family.

Darkness closed in as she continued to stare at the funky lamp until the wind picked up. Dry leaves skipped across the street and landed in yards already piled high with dying vegetation.

Snuggling deeper into her jacket, she took a final look at the lamp, and then walked home to her empty house.