

Gnomebody But You

A WHIMSICAL CHRISTMAS ROMANCE

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BAGANZ



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Dedication

To my daughter: Remember, Youngest Hobbit, while you might be small, you are mighty when you cling to God. "Wisdom's instruction is to fear the Lord, and humility comes before honor." ~Proverbs 15:33

CHAPTER 1

New town. New job. New apartment. New friends.

As Tali Shadowgrace organized the day's schedule, she wondered if she would ever be able to put the past behind her. She'd lived her entire life in her hometown, but now she was starting fresh in Wisconsin, over three hundred miles away. At two weeks and counting, she hoped this could be a place she would stay, although she still had boxes to un—

The front door's cheery jingle startled her. When would that ever stop? Hyper-vigilance was exhausting.

Tali pasted on a smile to greet the first of the truckers who worked for the company.

"Good morning, Siben," she called out cheerily. She locked away her fears for the moment.

"Hey, sweetheart, can you please give me an easier route today?" Mr. Siben Dapplepatch asked.

"Sorry to disappoint you. Your journey today has you unloading at a remote site."

He groaned. "Aw, come on, do a guy a favor. What do I need to do to sweeten you up? Flowers? Cookies? You name it, and I'll do it." He gave her a cheeky grin and a wink. He was at least twenty years older than her. A friendly flirt.

Handing him the paperwork she shook her head. "I'll not be bribed. You're one of the best we got for managing these more difficult locations, for not only driving in there but unloading safely."

Siben's chest puffed out. "One of the best? Not *the* best?" He wiggled his eyebrows.

"I haven't been here long enough to make that determination. Prove yourself, and I'll consider it." She could return his tease without fear engulfing her. That was good, wasn't it?

He took the papers from her hand and glanced at them. Eyebrows crinkled and then cleared as he nodded. "OK. If you insist, pretty little lady, I will."

"Stay safe out there, Siben," she called as he headed for the door.

"You know I will. I have one of the cleanest records of anyone here."

The door closed as he left but quickly opened as another trucker entered.

"Miss Shadowgrace, you didn't give him the best jobs did you?" Mr. Mervyn Rupparasin asked. He was the oldest of all the truckers, and she was surprised at how spry he was. He could outwork the younger men.

She handed him his paperwork. "I gave him a hard job. You got a little easier one today. There are several deliveries closer to home, so you'll be back and forth here loading and unloading. Do you think you can handle it?" She'd learned quickly that sometimes the way a job was presented made all the difference.

Mervyn snorted. "Do I think I can handle it? Just watch me. Later, my lovely." With a jaunty wave, he

was out the door.

Tali shook her head. The men had accepted her quickly which surprised her. The former dispatcher and manager of the orders was a crusty old guy who'd retired. He'd trained her in one day. Maybe he threatened the men to be nice to her, she wasn't sure. Still, they were a friendly bunch.

As long as they didn't become too friendly.

Quincia wandered in from her office down the hall, where she managed the books. "Good morning, Tali. You got in early today."

Tali checked the clock. "Or you got in late. I've already sent out a few of our truckers."

"Yeah, sorry about that. I'm a little scatterbrained in the morning. Puck was always the more punctual one. You'd think as twins we'd share a lot of characteristics, but he's stable, and I'm a flibbertigibbet."

"So, I should nickname you Flibber?" Tali asked with a grin.

Quincia laughed. "It would be appropriate." She hustled back into her office.

The girl had a tendency to be late; however, if she came in late fifteen minutes she either worked through part of her lunch break or stayed after hours to make up for it.

Tali made her notations for the drivers already leaving the yard. One still hadn't shown up yet.

A jingle at the door indicated his arrival. She rose to greet him.

"Heya, darlin', you're looking bright-eyed and

bushy-tailed this mornin’,” Dorrick Bronzestone shuffled to the counter.

“Better than being bushy-eyed and bright-tailed, I’d say,” she riposted. That earned her a chuckle from the tall, skinny man.

“Here you go.” She handed him his paperwork, and he glanced at it quickly.

“At least the weather is nice for all of this.” He fanned the pages. “How do you keep this all straight?”

“It’s a gift, I guess. Have a wonderful day and stay safe out there.”

With a tip of his trucker cap, he swiveled on his heel and left.

Between online orders that would need to be scheduled, and the phone ringing to deal with customers and reschedules, the day flew by.

Just the way she liked it.

~*~

Puck popped a frozen meal into the microwave. While he waited for it to ding, he set a glass of water on the side table. Soon he was settled in his chair to watch TV. When his phone rang, he muted the television and picked up.

“Hi, Mom, what’s shaking?” he asked before taking another bite of his food.

“Quincia told me about this sweet young woman who is working for Truespark Trucking. She went to church with her. Why don’t you ask her out?”

“Mom, Demetrius and Oberon are married, why

don't you nag them for grandchildren instead of insisting I need a wife to be happy?"

"Puck, I don't like that you're alone. Work and no play will make you a dull gnome."

"I'm not a gnome and you gnome it."

"When I viewed the photos from Bingle's wedding, the two of you together could have been on an advertisement for gnome figurines."

"Gnomes in tuxedos? I'm sure those would sell out well at the local sporting goods store," he grinned at his own joke.

"Stop playing around. A wife isn't going to drop into your arms and say, 'Marry me.' You need to take the initiative."

"It's Monday night, and I endured a long day at work. I'm finishing up my dinner and headed to bed. Let me work at saving my money, so I possess something more of value to offer than just myself."

"Yourself will be more than enough for the right woman."

"Thank you, Mom. Are you harassing Quincia, as well?"

"I worry about her working with all those truckers. Most of them are married."

"She's not stupid. She a bookkeeper, and is not available for them to flirt with." He fought a yawn. "I really need to let you go. I'll call you later in the week to get the family gossip. OK?"

She huffed. "Fine. You are stubborn just like your father. It took him forever to ask me to marry him. Don't be as daft as he was."

"It worked out well for the both of you, so stop complaining. I love you, Mom. Give my love to Pops. Good night."

"Night, son. I love you, too."

The call disconnected, and he set down the phone. He finished his meal and turned off the TV. After putting away his dishes, he went to brush his teeth, and head to bed. Tomorrow would be busy. He was grateful for the work that kept him from experiencing too much loneliness.

CHAPTER 2

The week passed quickly. Tali stopped at the grocery store on Friday night to pick up a few things. Her roommate, Nyci, joined her. This was their first time living together as roomies, so negotiating meals and chores had been a challenge. They were working through it.

Rounding the fourth aisle Tali almost ran her cart into someone who resembled her coworker, Quincia.

"Hey, Tali Shadowgrace, right?" he asked.

She smiled. "I'm afraid I'm at a disadvantage. I suspect you're related to Quincia? I'd like you to meet my roommate, Nyci Silverbell."

He extended his hand, to shake Nyci's. "Pleasure to meet you. I am Quincia's twin brother, Puck. I caught a glimpse of you with her on Sunday."

Nyci turned to Tali, "I'll take the cart and get some more items on the list." Nyci moved away, leaving Tali alone with Puck.

It's a public place. You are safe here. Taking a deep breath calmed Tali. She already missed the security of hiding behind the shopping cart.

"How are you settling into town and the job?" Puck asked.

"Two weeks in, and I'm finding my way. I enjoy

the people I work with, and I've figured out the details of the position, so I'm getting into my groove."

"Have you explored the town at all?" Puck asked.

"Not much, yet. To be honest, I'm a homebody."

"I understand. Often, by the time I'm done with work, I'm dirty and exhausted and just want to crash. Tonight's the first night I've clocked out at my normal time."

"Lots of overtime?" she asked.

He nodded.

"Nice for the bank account but hard on a social life."

"Yes, so my mother and my sister remind me."

"Nagging you to get a wife and settled down?" Tali asked.

"That would be one way of putting it."

She chuckled. "I could think of others, but I can sometimes be snarky, so I'll keep my mouth shut."

"No, please, share. I'm guessing you've had a similar experience."

"Hmmm. Yup. 'You're going to expire sitting on the shelf', that's one. As if I'm outdated milk. 'Marry before you lose your looks,' that one is ominous, and surprising, since my mother is still quite attractive. And how about, 'All the good men will be gone if you don't snatch one up now.' Should I continue?"

He chuckled, and the sound filled her with warmth. "I get the picture. Why can't people let us find a mate on our own? As if God doesn't play a role in that process."

"My thoughts exactly. I'm not searching for a man

at the moment. I don't want to date if I'm not ready for a possible marriage."

"Practical, as well as pretty," Puck stated as his cheeks turned pink. He averted his gaze. "Guess we both better get our shopping done. Your roommate is waiting impatiently at the end of the aisle."

"Thank you for the compliment. Enjoy your weekend, Puck Bellpepper," Tali said before she strode toward her friend.

A curious sensation tickled her insides after his unexpected compliment, and the shyness that accompanied it. Maybe Puck was an OK guy. Maybe he'd even be a friend at some point. That was about all she was willing to consider.

For now.

Nyci grinned as Tali approached. "He seems like a much better choice than Albar ever was. He's kind of cute in a gnomey kind of way."

"Gnomey?" Tali asked.

"Short, solid, beard, calloused hands, ruddy cheeks. Add some suspenders, a floppy hat, and a rifle and he'd be perfect in any garden."

"You're ridiculous." Tali glanced back at Puck, trying to imagine him in that kind of getup. Nyci was correct; he'd make a great garden gnome. The thought tickled her insides even more.

~*~

Puck allowed his gaze to follow Tali as she walked to her friend. If Quincia was correct, Tali was a sweet,

solid, faith-filled woman. He'd wanted to cover his face after he let that compliment slip. He didn't want her to think he was flirting. He was being honest. She intrigued him. There was a playfulness that she hid under that put-together exterior.

He finished his shopping and headed home to put things away and start a load of laundry. Friday night wasn't a date night for him, and he was sure his sister would avoid calling to chide him on this only because he'd toss it back at her. Maybe he should invite her over for a card game.

He texted her. *Cards in one hour? My place.*

She responded. *Nothing better to do. This is what my life has come to.*

~*~

Tali finished putting away the groceries as Nyci began boiling water for spaghetti noodles while the hamburger browned.

"Why don't you go out with Puck? He seems nice," Nyci asked.

"A couple of reasons—"

"Wait. Let me guess. You're still not over Albar," Nyci mocked.

Sighing, Tali worked at breaking the hamburger into smaller bits, chopping perhaps a little harder than required.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I despise saying his name. I didn't intend to upset you. I wish you could get past him. Maybe Puck is just the man to help you forget what a

jerk the other guy was.”

“I still worry he’ll find me.”

“You got a restraining order. The police here are aware of it. You’ve taken all the precautions short of going into witness protection. New state, new city, new job, new church, new apartment. How much more ‘new’ can you take?”

“Not much, that’s for sure.”

“Not even a new boyfriend?”

“Nyci—” Tali’s voice held a warning. She poured in the sauce, stirred the meat and sauce together, and put the lid on the pan for it to simmer.

“Fine. I’ll leave it alone. Why would I want you to get a boyfriend anyway? You might marry him and leave me to pay the rent all by myself.” Nyci winked. She put an arm around Tali.

The comfort didn’t reach the deep-seated anxieties that emerged merely at the mention of Tali’s ex-boyfriend’s name.

All through dinner and the evening while they watched a movie, Tali wrestled with her fear, thoughts her ex, and the odd attraction she’d experienced with Puck. Could one man help erase the pain caused by another? Was it even fair to expect that of someone? It was an awfully heavy burden to put on any new relationship.

No. She’d seek professional help. She’d already read some self-help books and understood that triggers could come at any time. She’d be aware and honest if it happened. It amazed her that none of the truckers, or even her grouchy boss, who rarely made an

appearance in the office, triggered any kind of fear or anxiety within her. Puck didn't either.

Maybe she wasn't as hopeless as she'd feared.

CHAPTER 3

The crispness of fall cooled the air. At least that was Tali's excuse for pulling out one of her flannel shirts and layering it over a T-shirt. At work, she turned on the thermostat to kick in the furnace. Within an hour, it stopped running and a burning aroma permeated the air.

Quincia came to her desk. "I think we need to evacuate the building."

"Why?"

"I'm smelling something funky. I think maybe something's wonky with the furnace."

"Hmm. Show me where it is," Tali said.

Quincia put on her fall coat and grabbed her purse. "It's back through those doors, but I'm worried about carbon monoxide poisoning. Something's wrong. We should leave."

Tali sighed. Her coworker was right. What did she know about furnaces? "Fine, we'll call the owner but vacate for now." She grabbed her own coat, quickly backed up her computer, and closed the laptop. Then she pulled her purse from the drawer, set it on the laptop and grabbed it all to leave. She dialed Mr. Truespark once they were outside.

"What is it?" he asked in a gruff voice.

"I turned on the furnace today, but it shut off and there's a noxious odor. Quincia is concerned about carbon monoxide, so we left the building."

"Smart. I forgot to get that serviced. Call the power company so they can come and assess it. I'll head over."

Soon the power company arrived and investigated.

One of the power company men exited and approached Mr. Truespark, who had just gotten out of his car and stood by Tali.

"It's a good thing you called. The furnace needs a new air filter, but worse than that, it was sabotaged. I've contacted the police."

"What do you mean sabotaged?" Mr. Truespark asked.

"The threat has been eliminated for now, but we've left it all as we found it."

"Tell me what it was," Tali's boss insisted.

"A crude bomb that failed to detonate."

Tali's eyes grew wide. Could this be about her? Had her ex found her? She glanced at Quincia and leaned against the car to keep from fainting. She fought the urge to cry with willpower she'd forgotten she possessed.

"We opened some windows to air the place out, but there was no carbon monoxide to worry about," the energy employee stated.

Mr. Truespark turned to Tali. "Can you manage from the warehouse? The Wi-Fi reaches there and while it is a bit crude and noisy, that might be best

until we get this sorted out."

Tali nodded.

"I'll need to grab my paperwork and laptop. Do you need anything else from inside, Tali?" Quincia asked.

"I have everything I need," Tali said, still biting back tears.

"Quincia, you can go home. Just return tomorrow," Mr. Truespark said.

"I don't mind working," Quincia stated.

"I'm not docking your pay, making you take a personal day, or vacation time. You can go. I need Tali here."

Quincia nodded. "May I recommend my brother to inspect the furnace? He's in HVAC and won't charge and arm and a leg."

The boss nodded. "Text me and Tali his phone number so we can call him. Thanks."

Quincia strode towards her car and left.

Tali headed to the warehouse.

She entered the building to find a few of the men at work. Zanben Rebbblezebble approached on his forklift, parked, and strode over to her.

"What's going on at the office?" he asked.

"Problem with the furnace. They are waiting for the police to investigate."

"We didn't turn ours on yet...maybe the power company should take a peek here, too?"

"Good idea."

She placed her laptop and paperwork on a table by the big door and headed back outside to ask the power

company to do a check there as well. Once back at her new makeshift desk, she settled in, and dug into her coat pocket for the fingerless gloves she'd used that morning. They'd be needed now in this colder room.

It was harder to concentrate with the men going in and out and stopping to ask what was happening. In some ways she didn't mind as she kept wondering: could it have been something aimed at harming her?

The warehouse furnace showed no signs of tampering.

Per her boss's orders, she called and left a voicemail for Puck Bellpepper. "Hi, Puck, it's me Tali. Your sister gave us your number. We experienced a problem with our furnace in the office, and Mr. Truespark would like you to check the warehouse one as well while you're at it. That one hasn't been turned on yet. You can reach me at this number. For now, I'm working in the warehouse, and your sister was sent home. There was no carbon monoxide detected. Everyone is safe. Let us know when you could come to check this out. Thanks."

She disconnected the call and got back to work.

~*~

Puck noticed the voice mail from Truespark Trucking as he was about to punch out at the factory. Before calling the office, he phoned his sister.

"Hey, Quincia, what happened at work?" he asked.

She told him about the morning's activities.

"A bomb?" he shook his head. Perhaps he misunderstood.

"Yes. Tali grew pale when the energy employee mentioned it. I thought she was going to pass out. I wanted to stay, but am glad I don't need to work in that drafty warehouse."

"The police were called?"

"Yup. If you head over there now, they will probably be done, and you can take good care of your sister by fixing that thing."

"I'll give Tali a call."

The phone disconnected, and he dialed Truespark Trucking.

"Hello, Truespark Trucking, how can I help you?" Tali answered.

"It's Puck returning your call. I spoke with my sister. I'm willing to head over there and give both furnaces an inspection. I just finished work. I'll run home to get my van. I should be there in about twenty minutes. Will that be acceptable?"

"That will be fine. If you need to work past five either Mr. Truespark or I will be here."

"See you soon." He hung up. She never mentioned the bomb or that the police had been called, but maybe she figured Quincia had told him. He hoped any remnant of that was removed already so it would be safe to work. Who would do a thing like that?

He rushed home and changed out of his factory clothing, put a puff vest over his flannel shirt, and picked the van keys off the rack.

Upon arriving at Truespark Trucking Company,