

A woman with long brown hair is wearing a red and white Santa hat, a dark blue t-shirt, a brown leather jacket, and jeans. She is wrapped in a string of green Christmas lights. In the background, there is a decorated Christmas tree with red and white ornaments and a white gift box with a red ribbon.

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BAGANZ

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ALMOST
Perfect
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Pixie's Almost Perfect Christmas
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1

"It looks like we'll be having a white Christmas, Mom!" Excitement thrummed through Pixie as if she were ten again. Since the forecast was done, she turned from the radio and began to play the Christmas classics her mom loved. A wave of nostalgia washed over her. Oh, how she'd missed this.

"I think it's time for my pain medication, dear," Mrs. Mackowiak whispered from her recliner.

"I'll get them, Mom. I'll be right back." Pixie bounced out of the room and returned with a tall glass of water and the prescribed medication.

"Thank you, sweetheart." Mom swallowed the pill.

"Not a problem. I'm glad I can help you out as you recover from your surgery. I'm glad to be here at home over the holidays. I hope I can do it all justice and make Christmas just as special as you did for us as we were growing up." She'd missed the last few Christmases as weather and work kept her on the west coast. Not anymore. She was back in Wisconsin, possibly to stay. She anticipated the fun of snow, a real tree, and all the regular food that had been part of her growing up here in Sunshine, Wisconsin.

"Make it your own, honey. No one said you needed to make everything just like I did. Matter of fact, I'm not sure every year was the same."

"Some things are always the same. I'm sure it will

be perfect." Pixie would do her best to make it so. Her mother had almost died from the cancer surgery. Christmas had to be flawless.

"Just as long as our home is filled with the people we love, that's all I could ask for. I'm so glad you came home to care for me."

Pixie took a deep breath. "About that, Mom..."

Mrs. Mackowiak yawned. "Later, dear. Oh, these pills make me so drowsy." Her eyes drooped, and before Pixie could say anything more, her mother was in a doze.

Pixie positioned the lap blanket up a little higher on her mother. Sighing, Pixie placed the glass on the end-table. Well, maybe later she'd be able to share her news. In the meantime, she had a Christmas to prepare for, and the house was nowhere near ready. She had already compiled the grocery list.

The door opened with a *whoosh* of crisp cold air as her father brought in a load of firewood for the wood stove. While they used a propane furnace, her father believed that the wood stove made their north woods home economical. Pixie closed the door as her father dropped the wood into the pile near the stove.

"Dad, do you mind if I take your truck to town to grocery shop?"

He turned toward her as he pulled off his gloves. "Sure. Key is in the truck. Do you need help?"

"No. I'm good. Mom just took her pill, so she'll be resting for a while."

"I'm grateful for your help. I realize it was a sacrifice to return home." Her father took off his jacket and hung it on a hook near the door.

Pixie grabbed her own coat and shrugged it on and grabbed her mittens. "It wasn't a problem, Dad."

"Is there something you've not told us?" A frown marred his face.

She paused and considered her father. Strong and always supportive of everything any of his children had done, he would understand, but she couldn't put it into words. "Perhaps, but I want to get home before it gets dark, which is earlier and earlier each day it seems. I don't want to risk hitting a deer." She shrugged on her coat, grabbed her purse and opened the door.

"But at some point, I want to hear the story." The words caught her ears as the door closed behind her.

Four-wheel drive was a boon when this far north given the uncertain weather this time of year. Why her parents had chosen to live here year-round perplexed her. Probably why she'd moved to sunny Southern California as soon as she could escape this small town. As she drove past the nearest house, she noticed the lights were on. A moving truck and some other vehicles were in the driveway. The Kaczkas were really here! A thrill of excitement shivered through her body at the thought of meeting Klaus in person again after so long.

She'd wondered about Klaus and Genna and how they were doing. It had been a few years since she'd seen them. Genna was older and too busy to play with the younger and smaller Pixie, but Klaus had been her brother's adventure buddy and the stuff of her teenage dreams— always unattainable. In the past year or more she'd connected with him electronically. It was safer that way. In person, she'd likely be tongue-tied. Would he still attract her the way he used to? Would their recent dialogue through messaging add to that attraction or take away from it now that there was a

friendship there?

Pixie's dating life had never benefited as much as her tan had when she moved to California. She frowned. Much good that all did her now. She carefully maneuvered the truck down the road, grateful for the grip of those large tires. The vehicle overwhelmed her in size but was so much more effective than her small car that didn't even have all-wheel drive.

She pulled into the parking lot of the small local grocer. No mega-store in the north woods. She would be forced to make things from scratch, something she'd not needed to do for years, with the convenience of take-out and pre-made foods where she used to live. She hoped she could do her mother's recipes justice. She'd already discovered that caring for her mother was stretching her time. She needed to decorate and get in the holiday mood. The thought of that put a little skip in her step as she climbed down from the pickup and made her way to the grocery store.

She stocked up on essentials, grateful that the freezer at her parent's home at least possessed a good supply of meat so she didn't need to purchase that. Her dad was a hunter. Venison and turkey were from his own forays into the woods, and the pork and beef were from a local farm down the road.

As she turned a corner, her cart ran into another one. She gazed up into the dark gaze of a tall man from her past who often appeared in her dreams. Klaus. Her heart did double time and her face grew warm.

"Oh, sorry." His eyes widened. "Pixie? Pixie Mackowiak? You came! Your last message said you couldn't."

That deep voice sent a wave of tingles from head

to toe. "How wonderful to see you, Klaus. Yes. I'm home for now. It was an unexpected decision. I tried to contact you but you must not have received that. Internet can be spotty here." Boy did he look delicious. She'd never seen him all bundled up in winter clothing. His family only ever spent summers in Sunshine.

"I didn't get the message, but my cell phone has been having issues. I need to get it replaced but have put it off with settling my parent's estate. Wow. It's been years since I've seen you in person. You look great. Your online photos don't do you justice. We're up here clearing out my parent's house to sell it."

"Yeah, that's the last I heard from you. I'm so sorry for your loss. I can't imagine what you're going through. I liked your parents. They were cool." Insecurity gripped her, and her palms began to sweat. The object of all her childhood fantasies stood before her in the flesh, and he looked so much better than his online photos as well. She felt like a giggly schoolgirl again. She wiped her palms down the side of jeans. She needed to get a grip. She was a grown woman now, after all, and Klaus was just a man...a— . She struggled to get her breathing under control.

"Thanks. How are your parents? They still live here year-round?"

"Yes, they do. Mom just had cancer surgery. I'm home to help for now." She straightened her spine as if doing so would add considerably to her diminutive height.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Maybe Genna and I will stop by one of these days. The project is taking longer than we'd anticipated. So many memories..." His dark eyes glistened with unshed tears. She longed to reach

up and wipe away that moisture.

"I can't even imagine what you're going through. Stop by anytime." *I'd love to spend time with you.* "We'd love to see you both. I'd better get my shopping done. Not fond of driving after dark." Her speech had become rapid, anxiety telling her to duck and run before he realized she was his childhood shadow.

He grinned. "I completely understand. No streetlights out in the woods...and the temperature's been dropping."

"Right."

"Well, good to see you again, Pixie. We'll be in touch."

"Great."

His cart pushed past hers, and she paused to watch him walk away. Not even one of the surfers in California compared to Klaus. Seemed that while she'd added a few years, but no inches to her height, her crush on him was still as strong as ever. She shook her head and tried to focus on her list. Ah, ice cream. That's right. She needed ice cream. This was the dairy state after all. She pushed her cart forward and tried to forget her heart which seemed to have departed her body to follow the tall man now wandering down aisle seven.

She checked out without seeing Klaus again. After putting the groceries in the cab of the pickup, she climbed in herself, strapped on the seatbelt, and headed for home just as the sun dropped beneath the horizon. She scanned the road for deer. While this truck would likely win a battle with one without much damage, it was something she'd rather avoid. Her dad was the hunter, not her.

Once home in the driveway, her father emerged to

help her with the groceries.

"Guess who I ran into at the store?"

"You know I don't like guessing games, Pixie." He placed the groceries on the kitchen table.

"Klaus Kaczka. He and his sister are at their parent's home getting it ready to sell."

"I heard Mr. and Mrs. Kaczka passed away. How terrible for their children. I hope you invited Klaus and Genna over."

Pixie hung up her coat and removed her boots. "I did. They said they would stop by to visit us. I told them they are welcome anytime."

"Good. Scripture says we are to entertain strangers. Not that the Kaczkas are strangers, but we would want to be good neighbors. It must be hard on them losing both parents. They've owned that house as long as we've been here. We enjoyed a lifetime of friendship with them even if they only did come here when the weather grew warmer. Your mother and I wanted to attend the funeral, but her surgery was scheduled for the next day, and we had to travel to the hospital the night before. We just couldn't make it. Your mom sent a card and flowers."

"I can't imagine facing this Christmas without either of you being around to enjoy it with us." A wave of guilt washed over her at that thought, and she shivered.

Her dad wrapped an arm around her. "Well, thankfully God chose for now to give us a reprieve from that expiration date. Every day is precious, Pixie. We can't take others for granted. We don't want to live with regrets when the time comes and someone we love is gone."

Guilt stabbed at Pixie's heart. She'd wasted how

many years in California instead of being here to spend time with the two people who loved her most in the world? What kind of daughter was she? She finished putting away the rest of the food and pulled out a casserole to heat up for dinner, a gift brought by from a family at the local church. At least she wouldn't be figuring out that whole cooking from scratch thing tonight.

2

Klaus returned to the home where he'd spent all his summers as a child and teenager. Pixie had definitely grown up. She'd matured into a lovely woman. The effect was more powerful than online photos could ever convey. He'd always stopped short at phone calls but had gotten in the habit of connecting several times a week with her. It had become an anchor, a touchpoint in his week. Other than his relationship with God, he felt closer to Pixie than any other human. He'd missed their electronic communications during the past week since he'd been at the cabin.

He parked the car and brought the groceries into the house. "Genna, I'm back."

"Great. Did you get the oranges?" His sister waddled to the door, her large belly making an entrance before she could.

"Yes, as many as I could find, it's a small store." Klaus stepped into the kitchen and placed the bag of navel oranges on the kitchen table. "There you go, enjoy." He started to put things away.

His sister sat and quickly started peeling an orange, pulling apart the sections and eating them. "Oh, this is exactly what I've been craving."

"Guess who I ran into at the store?"

Genna finished her first orange and began peeling

another. "I have no clue. I haven't been up here for a few years. I'm surprised at how many things our parents kept in this place. It's not going to be as easy as I thought to clear it out. Who'd you meet?"

"Remember Pixie?"

"The neighbor girl who used to follow you and Alan around during the summer?"

"Yes, that's her."

"I forgot that her family lived up here year-round."

"It seems so long ago now, doesn't it? I connected with Pixie online about a year ago. We should stop over to visit before we head back to Green Bay."

"Did she ever grow any taller?"

"Not really, but she has matured if her features are any indication."

"Features?" Genna raised an eyebrow.

"Her face. It lost that round look. She has cheekbones now. I couldn't tell anything else since she was bundled up in a winter coat and scarf."

"She piqued your interest, did she?"

Klaus shook his head and went back to the attic to bring down more boxes. Did Pixie intrigue him? Of course. Anyone would be curious after many summers playing, exploring, swimming, and bike-riding together. He needed to reconcile the childhood Pixie with the young woman he'd connected with online and now the real life, flesh and blood person he'd seen today. He wondered if her brother would be coming home for the holidays. It had been years since he had communicated with his childhood summer friend.

He hauled a few more boxes down to the main room. Christmas decorations? Why would his parents have those here? He didn't recall seeing any at the

house farther south when they'd cleared it out.

"Did you want anything for dinner, Klaus? I'm happy with the oranges."

Klaus returned to the kitchen to find a pile of orange peels and only two oranges left from the bag he'd bought. "Wow. You weren't kidding. I hope you aren't craving more of those. I'd need to travel at least an hour to get some."

"Aww, you're the best brother. You'd do it too, I'm sure."

"I don't want to face my brother-in-law in case you told him I'd neglected you."

"Terrence would never hurt you."

"If you were hurt, I suspect you might be wrong."

"I hope he gets leave. With all the unrest in the world, it's hard to know where he is at any time."

"You spoke to him a few days ago, right?"

"Yes, and he still wasn't sure. He was worried about me coming up here."

"What worried him? I could get you to a hospital if the need arose. He'll owe me big time though if that happens."

"You'd love to hold that over him, too. I don't think we have anything to worry about. The doctor said I have at least four more weeks to go before this baby is ready."

"You said they expect him to be really big. You're set on having a c-section?"

"Yeah. I can pretty much decide his birthday, which is fun." Genna rubbed a hand over her large abdomen.

"I guess that's cool. As for dinner, don't worry. I bought a frozen meal in anticipation of this kind of event."

"Thanks for understanding."

"Hey, I found a box of Christmas decorations. Not sure why they are here. We should go through them and select what we might want to keep."

"Oh! That sounds wonderful." Genna scooped the peelings into the garbage can. "Wonder why they are here? Did they ever come here in the winter?"

"I didn't think so, but I was away for a year, so how would I know?"

The microwave beeped, indicating the meal was done. Klaus pulled it out, peeled back the plastic and stirred it up. He took it to the living room with a potholder underneath so he could watch his sister unpack.

The first box opened up and contained garland. "This looks like it's seen better days, don'tcha think?" Genna lifted it out, and sparkly strands fell on the floor around her.

"Yeah. Toss it."

The garland was set in a pile. "The nativity set! Oh, remember this? We used to play with the animals and pretend we were visiting baby Jesus."

"I remember. If you want to keep it, I'm OK with that."

Genna caressed the figurine of the baby. "Just to think, soon I'll have my own child to hold."

"You're going to be a great mom, Genna."

"Thanks, little brother." She placed the nativity on a nearby coffee table and began to pull out ornaments one by one.

~*~

"Here you go, Pixie-girl," her father said as he

placed the last of the large plastic bins in the living room. "You get those lights tested and tomorrow Aaron and Alan will be here to help me cut down the perfect tree for you."

"Thanks, Dad." Pixie opened the first box and began to place decorations around the house. Her mom always infused Christmas into every room, but this year it was Pixie's turn to find the perfect spots for everything. One item at a time, she ran through the rooms of the house to sprinkle the magic of the holiday. Soon the bin was filled with the items that had to be removed to make room for the Christmas decorations.

"Pixie. Are you enjoying yourself?" a soft voice inquired.

"Yes, Mom. I am. I know you always loved to do this, and while I'm sad you can't this year, I'm honored that you would entrust it to me."

"With me recovering from surgery, it only makes sense that you do the decorating around here this year. Besides"—Mom's voice dropped to a whisper—"you have a better eye for this kind of thing."

"Aw, thanks, Mom."

"Can you help me get to bed? I think you've done enough for tonight."

"Sure. I'll work on the lights in the morning." Pixie helped her mom stand and supported her as they navigated to the bedroom. Once Mom was settled into bed, Pixie peeked in on her father who was watching television in the den. "Night, Dad. Love you!"

"Love you, too, Pixie-girl. Sleep well."

"I will." Pixie turned off lights as she made her way through the house. She entered her bedroom and shut the door. Would she be able to sleep with the

deep quiet that permeated this part of the world? She sure hoped so. It had taken her a long time to sleep with the constant hum of noise that characterized the bigger city she'd lived and worked in. Snuggling under the warm quilt on the bed, she said a quick prayer for her mother. "And Lord, be with Klaus and Genna, too. I cannot imagine losing both my parents at once. Comfort them."

With a deep sigh, she closed her eyes and forced her body to relax. It had been strange seeing Klaus today. He looked better than ever. It wasn't fair that he'd grown more swoon-worthy. More than that, he'd been a comfort, a friend even over the last year. He probably had no clue what a lifeline he'd been. She hugged her pillow tight. What if all those childhood dreams of being his girl really could come true? Did she dare pray for that? *God? Could you? Please?* She snuggled in deeper, and sleep came easily.

3

Pixie rose with the sun, quickly dressed, throwing on a soft fleece sweater and ambled to the kitchen to start the coffee. She pulled out the ingredients for pancakes and went to work making breakfast. Soon her father entered and put wood in the stove to help warm the main living quarters up.

"Mornin', sweetheart," he said.

"Good morning, Dad. Your pancakes are ready." She slid them onto a plate and placed it on the table. He filled his coffee mug and sat down. As she poured more batter into the pan, her father bent his head for a moment of quiet prayer before digging in. "Oh, Pixie, these are good."

"Thanks. I'm glad you like them. Looks like it will be a great day for finding the tree." Pixie said.

"I'm sorry you can't join us. Your mother doesn't feel comfortable with the boys helping her with certain things."

"I am sure I can trust you men to find an ideal evergreen just for us."

"I've been doing that for longer than you've been alive, my dear. I'm sure we'll manage. You just need to make sure the lights are untangled and working."

Pixie headed to the table with her own stack of pancakes and poured on the maple syrup. "Oh, don't worry. Those lights will be ready." She bowed her

head for a moment of thanks to God for the blessings of family, a warm home, and food to eat.

“Don’t be too optimistic. I suspect it’s been a while since you’ve done that job. It always annoyed your mother no end to do it. But those are the newer LED lights, so hopefully there will be fewer ones burnt out. While I attempted to store them neatly last year, I believe they have a party in storage with the way they wrap around each other.”

“Well, if your only job is to work for a few weeks a year, I suppose months of rest could lead to a need for entertainment. I’ll try to have a talk with them about responsible intermingling.”

Her dad let out a bark of laughter. “You go right on and do that. If, however, they give you any lip, you just send them to me.”

“That’ll scare them for sure.” Pixie grinned at the silly banter. She’d always loved these quiet mornings with her father, as her mom tended to sleep in. As a night owl, Mom often stayed up later, but today, it was probably the pain medications resulting in the extra rest. Healing took time.

Soon the meal was done, and the dishes were soaking in the sink. Pixie went to the living room and began her fight with the lights.

~*~

Klaus hauled the burnable garbage to a barrel in the backyard. The wind was low so now was a great time to burn all the unwanted Christmas decorations. As he placed them in the barrel and set them ablaze, he couldn’t help but think of all the wonderful moments his family had together during the holidays. This year

it would be just him and Genna. How would that work? Perhaps her husband, Terrance, would return home from his deployment somewhere in the Middle East, but if not, would Genna want to celebrate without him? Klaus frowned. He sighed and waited for the fire to die out and then took himself back inside. There was still much work to be done. His parents had already downsized considerably before they sold the family home in town moved to a condo down south as they retired to become "snowbirds."

He took off his coat and kicked his boots onto the mat by the door. He'd cranked up the furnace. It amazed him how cold it could be up here, but then, maybe the house wasn't as well insulated? Typically, they drained the pipes and turned off the heat during the winter to save money. He opened up the closet surprised to find so many clothes there, but since his parents had lived here several summer months out of the year up until their death, it would make sense. No need to take it all south.

He began to take shirts off the hangers and fold them into piles. Then the pants and shorts. He boxed it all and then picked up shoes and put them in another box. Tackling the dresser was next. Underwear, socks. Hmm, donate or burn? He placed them on a separate pile. Genna would help with that decision. He found a little book at the bottom of the drawer.

Hmmm. Brown leather, pages yellowed with age. He flipped it open. His father had written down things...like the crazy things him and Genna used to say or do. His eyes caught a name: Pixie. He stopped to read.

Our next-door neighbor's daughter, Pixie only has eyes