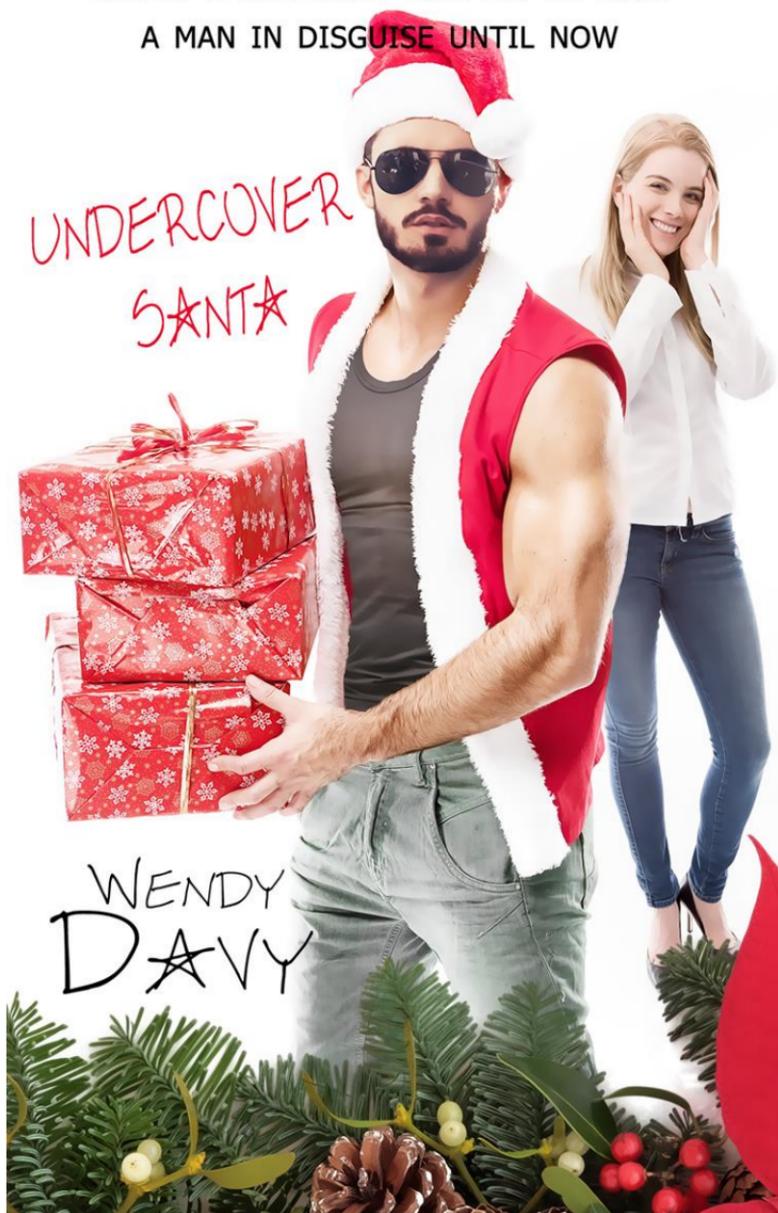


SHE'D NEVER BEEN TEMPTED TO KISS  
A MAN IN DISGUISE UNTIL NOW

UNDERCOVER  
SANTA



WENDY  
DAVY

# Undercover Santa

Wendy Davy

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## *Dedication*

For Samantha, Emily, Amara and Kayleigh.  
My inspiring, talented, artistic, fun-loving, dancing,  
fabulous ninja elves.

## *What People are Saying*

"A native of the Shenandoah Valley, Reed never imagined this Christmas he would have a special prayer to deliver to God from a child he didn't even know. A story of God moving in ways that brings love to a child who's only wish this Christmas was one that didn't involve toys."

~ Sharon Dean (on A Dad for Christmas)



# 1

*“Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” ~ Psalm 37:4*

Kaylea Breslin kissed Santa on his rough, impassive lips and then patted his round belly. “Welcome to Sweet Harmony, big guy.”

She stepped back to admire her candy store’s new Christmas window display. The life-sized plastic Santa had arrived as ordered—with a hat, gloves, a wetsuit and water skis. Santa was the perfect addition to her lakefront shop’s holiday décor. With St. Nick’s help, she might even win Silver Lake’s Annual Christmas Spirit Contest. The grand prize—a brand new pontoon boat. She had a name in mind already; Sweet Harmony 2 would be a floating candy café. During summer, Kaylea could sell goodies to boaters on the lake and double, if not triple, her customer base.

But first, she needed to focus on winning the contest. The contest’s rules stated each competing business’s décor had to be authentic, creative, and uplifting.

She had a plan for all three.

Kaylea’s niece, Sam, and her three best friends would be here shortly to transform Sweet Harmony’s boring back wall into a detailed, hand-painted masterpiece. The talented artists had agreed to paint

the mural in exchange for all the candy they could eat. With the amount of sugar involved, Kaylea suspected the wall would be as colorful as the girls' personalities.

Finished with decorating, Kaylea slid into a seat behind the checkout counter and took a moment to appreciate Sweet Harmony's tantalizing aromas. In addition to the ever present chocolate, the scents transitioned with the seasons, from strawberries and tart apples in the spring, to coconut, lime and blue raspberries in the summer. Autumn brought butterscotch and pumpkin pie spice; and now, her winter candy permeated the store with irresistible peppermint, hot cocoa, and apple cider scents.

She had spent the day replacing her fall treats with a combination of classic holiday candies and handmade creations from all over the world. Including Switzerland's snowflake shaped waffle cone ornament coated with creamy white chocolate. She'd sampled plenty, but a few made it onto the store's Christmas tree. Maybe she should've named her shop Sweet Temptations—she needed to be careful not to devour her entire supply before she sold it.

Kaylea had ordered over fifty kinds of specialized Christmas delicacies. Well, she didn't consider the neon-colored, sour gummy reindeer poop a delicacy. But the kids liked it. It was her number one bestseller for customers under the age of five. No telling how many Sam and her friends would eat this evening. Although they were all either eighteen or nineteen years old, Kaylea expected her supply to dwindle tonight. The gummy nuggets were that irresistible.

Someone knocked and Kaylea called, "Come on in."

Sam swept inside with Emma, Avery, and Kat,

bringing a blast of cold air, excited chatter, and loads of art supplies along with them.

Sam sprinted over and enveloped Kaylea in a hug. "This is going to be so much fun, Aunt Lea Lea. Do we really get to eat all the candy we want?"

Kaylea laughed, glimpsing the little girl Sam used to be before she'd matured into a beautiful young adult.

"All the candy you want," Kaylea confirmed.

The teenagers deposited coats and bags on the banquet table Kaylea had set up for them and then unloaded art supplies.

"Do you have everything you need?" Kaylea glanced at the array of tools, measuring tapes, acrylic paints, and brushes.

"We've got it covered." Avery plucked a paintbrush from her bag. "Thanks for this chance to help you win the contest, Miss Kaylea."

"Yeah, thanks," Kat agreed as she lined up permanent markers and pencils. "This is also an opportunity for redemption."

"How so?" Kaylea's interest piqued.

"Last year at Silver Lake High, our teacher gave us an assignment to paint a mural on the gym's weight room wall. We wanted it to be our legacy."

"The mutated painting we ended up with was not what we had in mind." Sam shook her head. "I'm still mad about that."

"It wasn't our fault Ms. Jingleberry let D.J. hijack our art project and ruin it with his over-inflated ego."

Kat pulled her long, dark blonde hair into a ponytail. "That's a pleasant way to put it."

Avery nodded. "Yeah, all he did was destroy our design and leave us with the cleanup. Then he had the

nerve to criticize the finished product.”

“As if we give two jelly beans what D.J. thinks.” Emma danced around the room, scoping out the sweets as she moved to some music that existed only in her head. She made her way to a corner bin, sliding to a stop just before slamming into it. “Chocolate covered peanut butter and jelly Christmas trees. Best candy ever.” She ripped into one, took a bite, and continued dancing.

Kaylea grinned at Emma’s free-spirited nature. The girl knew how to have fun.

Avery helped herself to a jawbreaker and shoved it into her cheek. One more on the other side and she’d look like a chipmunk. “What do you want us to paint on the wall, Miss Kaylea?”

“It’s up to you. You have my blessing to paint anything, as long as it is authentic, creative, and uplifting.”

“No problem.” Emma rejoined the group with a flourish, waving her signature jazz hands. “I’m so pumped.”

“And the candy is free? For real?” Kat asked.

“For real,” Kaylea confirmed. “And since you will probably be here late, I’ve stocked the fridge with a fruit tray, pizza, and chicken nuggets. I also made a fresh batch of homemade brownies, with extra chocolate chips on top.”

“Sounds great. Thanks, Miss Kaylea.” Avery glanced toward the storeroom and kitchen area. “Can I have one now?”

“You’re welcome, and yes, help yourself.” Kaylea winked at her. “Is there anything I can get for you before I head home?”

“We’re good.” Sam patted her jeans pockets. “I

still have a key. I'll lock up when we leave. Oh, I almost forgot to tell you. There's a pickup truck outside with a creepy, hairy dude just sitting in it. I think he watched us walk in." Sam took a breath. "But I'm not sure. We were about fifty feet away from him. Kat saw him, too. We thought it was weird that he parked out there when all the stores in the area are closed."

Kat nodded. "We couldn't see much of him because it's dark, and it didn't seem right to shine a light in his face. But it looked like he might've been watching us."

Kaylea's muscles tensed. "Trust your instincts. If you think something is off about the guy, then there probably is."

"Yeah, Kat. Trust your instincts." Avery plucked a solid chocolate snowman out of a bin, smacked Kat with it and then ripped open the wrapper and bit off his head.

"What d'you hit me for?" Kat speared Avery with narrowed, angry eyes.

"You should've said something to me right away. I could've put my exemplary ninja skills to good use."

"You are not a ninja, and you don't always tell me everything right away, either," Kat pointed out. "Remember when you saw Jeremy kiss Amber underneath the bleachers and it was over a month before—"

"Oh puh-leeze. You're going to bring that up now?" Avery bit another chunk off the snowman.

"Yes." Kat crossed her arms. "Yes, I am."

"You are so extra," Avery said as she chewed.

"It's better than being basic," Kat wrinkled her nose.

Emma piped up. "You two are bickering like an old married couple."

Avery scratched her head. "I don't think old people even know what extra and basic mean. Do they Kaylea?"

"What? So, I'm old now?" Kaylea gasped. "I'm only twenty-nine."

"But do you know what extra and basic mean?" Avery asked.

"Extra means more than enough. And basic means fundamental."

"That confirms it, you are old." Avery nodded. "When we call someone extra, it means they're dramatic; and basic means stereotypical."

"I don't even know what to say." Kaylea's brain hurt.

"I believe the proper terminology is, 'I got nothin'," Emma explained.

Kaylea clasped her forehead. "I'm getting dizzy."

"Another sign of the aging process. Come on, Sam." Emma grabbed her by the hand. "Let's check this guy out."

"Wait. What?" Sam blinked.

"Creepy guy in the parking lot? Remember?"

"Right." Sam nodded. "Creepy guy. Parked outside. Sorry, I zoned out for a minute."

"No worries. We're all used to it." Emma tugged Sam toward the windows.

"Wait for me." Avery rushed to follow as she stuffed the remaining snowman into her mouth.

Kat took a handful of individually wrapped peppermint bark candies on the way to the window.

Kaylea followed the group. She had momma-bear tendencies for her niece and her friends, and her claws

itched to come out. No guy—hairy or not—should be out there lurking in the shadows, watching her girls.

## 2

Fueled by a sugar rush and an unsolved mystery, the girls huddled together at the same window. They were as excited as game show contestants anxious to see what was behind curtain number one. When they all couldn't see at the same time through the same pane, they spread out to curtains two and three.

"It's too dark out there," Emma complained.

"We should cut off the store's lights," Sam suggested.

"I've got them." Kaylea flipped the switches, and the room grew dark, except for the few strings of Christmas lights hanging here and there.

"That's better." Avery's pretty eyes widened beneath her round rimmed glasses. "Wow. He is hairy."

"That's the same guy. Same truck. He's still parked in the same spot." Kat looked at Sam. "It doesn't look like he's moved to me. Does it to you?"

"I can't tell from this angle." Sam repositioned to another vantage point. "Mmm...his tires are aligned the exact same way, about an inch over the line on the passenger side."

"How did you even notice that in the first place?" Emma asked.

"What can I say?" Sam shrugged. "It's a gift."

Kaylea knew where Sam got it. "OCD runs in the

family," she said as she edged around the gumball machine filled with gumballs that she'd layered by color and in groups of fifty. "Some people consider obsessive-compulsive behavior a disorder. But in some ways, it's an advantage." She would never have to guess what color gumball would pop out next.

"An advantage, like when Sam notices things that don't line up with what's expected? Like the creepy guy in the truck?" Kat asked.

"Exactly." Kaylea should've noticed the truck, too. Although she considered Silver Lake safe, the occasional crime did take place. She was generally aware of her surroundings, but she had been so focused on turning over the inventory, carrying boxes, loading, unloading, reorganizing and packaging the leftover candy for donation that she hadn't been paying attention.

"Why would he just sit there?" Emma flipped her shoulder-length blonde hair from her eyes.

"There's always a reason. It may not be a good reason, but he's not there by accident." Sam looked at Kaylea. "Could it be your evil ex-boyfriend? Did he get out on bail?"

Kaylea shuddered at the reminder. "Jonathan's not evil. He was just...a terrible boyfriend."

"And a thief," Sam added.

"Yes, and a thief. I doubt he made bail after mouthing off to the judge."

"I never liked Jonathan," Kat admitted. "He's shady, like the guy Avery has a crush on."

"What? You asking for a fight?" Avery snatched up a foot long stick of hard rock candy, widened her stance and held it out like a sword. "En garde!"

"Game on." Kat armed herself with a six inch long

marshmallow reindeer. The cellophane wrapper crinkled as she waved it around.

"You're no match for my martial arts skills," Avery challenged.

"Oh, yeah?" Kat raised her brows and widened her stance. "Try me."

"I want in." Sam grabbed a rock candy stick of her own and entered the makeshift sword fight.

Emma abandoned her post at the window, snatched a gingerbread man, held him up and danced around. "Hey, guys. Run, run as fast as you can. You can't catch me—" She yelped and darted away, belly laughing as Kat and Avery joined forces with Sam in hot pursuit.

Kaylea looked forward to seeing the mural take shape. With the vivid imaginations of these four, the artwork would be unforgettable. If they ever got around to it.

For now, Kaylea turned to check out the unwelcome visitor. She drew the curtain aside. An older model pickup sat about thirty yards away, lurking in shadows like mold on a two-year-old fruitcake.

The parking lot's sparse lights were there more for aesthetics than function. All she could distinguish were shadowy outlines of a man's wide shoulders, a grizzly beard, and chunks of thick wavy hair sticking out beneath a knit cap.

He could be waiting to meet someone. But that made little sense. Silver Lake Plaza had two levels of tourist shops, along with a full-service marina, but the stores had closed over two hours ago. Nobody else was around. So why was this guy camped in front of her store?

### 3

"Time out," Kaylea called.

The sword challenge ended as abruptly as it had begun. The girls trickled to the front of the store, giggling and catching their breaths.

"I'd like to go home, but I don't want to leave you here with him out there." Kaylea leaned against the window as she considered options. After being on her feet all day, she wanted to grab a bite to eat, read a little, and crawl into bed.

The girls gathered around the window again, holding curtains aside and looking out.

"We need more intel on this dude," Sam whispered as if he could hear her. "Then we can decide what to do."

"We should take a picture of him." Avery held up her cell phone against the window and snapped a photo. The flash went off, bounced against the glass, and blinded them all.

Avery squeaked. "Oops."

"Thanks for that, Avie," Kat admonished as she blinked.

Emma gasped. "Now he knows we're onto him. He's going to come after us, stuff us into his truck, and bury us in the woods."

"Well, in that case, I don't have to worry about getting cavities." Kat plopped the rock candy stick into

her mouth.

"Nobody's going to die tonight." Sam locked the deadbolt on the front door. "Did the picture turn out at all, Avery?"

Avery checked. "What do you know? It did. Picture's a little fuzzy, though." She brought the phone closer to her eyes. "Oh, wow. He sort of looks like that guy on the FBI's most wanted list."

"How do you know who the FBI wants?" Kat propped a hand on a hip, tapping her foot as she waited for a response.

"I have an app for that."

"You have an app for everything. What's he wanted for?" Emma leaned in to look at the picture.

"Who cares?" Avery answered. "If he's on the list, there's at least a hundred grand reward out for his capture."

"That's a lot of money." Sam stood to her full five-foot nine height. "We could take him."

Avery made a karate chopping motion with her free hand. "Finally. A worthy opponent."

Kat snickered.

Kaylea resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Before you get too excited over the prospect of kung fu-ing the man and earning a reward"—she turned to Avery and leaned in close to her phone screen—"we need to figure out who this guy might be. We don't know what he's capable of." The photo revealed no more than she'd already seen—shadows lined the truck's interior, making it difficult to discern details.

"I doubt he's one of the FBI's most wanted." Kat reasoned. "What would a famous fugitive be doing in a small town in rural Virginia, anyway?"

"That's a good point." Sam tapped a finger over

her lips. "Tourist season is over. If he tried to hide from the authorities in Silver Lake, he'd stick out like a lumberjack at a kitten festival."

Emma giggled. "That's a helpful analogy."

"What would really be helpful is if we could read the truck's license plate," Kaylea noted. "But we can't do that without getting closer. It's just too dark."

"Maybe we can go out the back, circle the building and sneak up behind him," Avery suggested.

Sam pointed to the lake. "You'd have to swim in freezing water to get behind the truck. He's parked against the curb, just inches from the shoreline."

Avery's shoulders slumped.

"Just sayin'." Sam shrugged.

"Well we can't sit here staring at the guy all night. Oh, wait..." Kaylea stilled when a car drove into the lot and made a U-turn. The headlights arched and skimmed over mystery man's features as it turned.

Avery gasped. "He looks like a Sasquatch. He's gotta be at least twelve feet tall. So hairy you can't even see his face, except for his beady little eyes."

Sam shifted closer. "No, you've got it wrong. That there creature would be a Blue Ridge Mountains Bigfoot. Sasquatches have fangs and live up in the North Woods."

Emma shook her head. "Only vampires have fangs. Bigfoots have sharp claws and monkey faces. And they hunt small animals. You know, like little dogs."

"Yeah Kat, your Pomeranian, Pearl, would make a great appetizer for a Bigfoot," Avery teased.

Kat crossed her arms and narrowed her eyes. "Then it's a good thing Bigfoots don't exist."

"Tell that to the guy sitting out there in the truck,"

Avery said. "I heard they sometimes travel in pairs. What if there's another one close by? What if there are two Bigfoots out there?"

"Wouldn't multiple Bigfoots be called Bigfeet?" Sam surmised. "You know, like goose and geese?"

"No." Kat shook her head. "It doesn't work like that."

This was headed way in the wrong direction. Kaylea broke into the conversation. "Sasquatches and Bigfoots are the same thing. And neither is real."

"Oh, yeah? Tell that to the hundreds of people who have seen them in person," Avery said as she looked at her phone, tapping keys. "Here's a picture of a white one. These kinds are called Yetis. They sneak down from their mountain snow caves to scavenge for food. Says here they like honey and maple syrup."

"Yeti's are vegetarians?" Emma asked.

The room went silent.

Moments passed.

"Guess if he's a Yeti, then my little dog is safe," Kat said.

## 4

Kaylea corralled the girls into a circle, made eye contact with each of them. "So let me get this straight. You want me to call Sheriff Talan and tell him there's a twelve foot tall Yeti sitting in a truck outside my store, and he came down from his mountain snow cave, because he has a sudden craving for honey and maple syrup?"

"Well, you do carry Bit-O-Honey candy bars, don't you?" Emma snickered.

Kaylea narrowed her eyes. "Really?"

"OK. Maybe that theory does sound farfetched." Holding up her hands, Emma conceded. "The sheriff might think you'd eaten one too many chocolate covered peanuts if you call him with that story."

"I agree," Avery noted. "I'd definitely go with the Bigfoot version. They would be more likely to live in the Blue Ridge Mountains region of Virginia than Yetis."

"Before you call the cops, we should take some better photos of him and post them on our social media pages, you know, just in case," Emma suggested. "Bigfoot driving a truck would go viral in like eight seconds."

Kaylea closed her eyes and covered her face with her hands. "You don't need any more photographs of this guy."