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Sons of Santa: Chosen v. Born
Sherry Amor

Once
every Christmas,
magic occurs,
Bringing joy, laughter,
and music in the winters.
Serene, safe, and full of fun,
This magic is in all, and all in one.
Up in the North Pole, there's magic abounding,
With the people of the cold, living and thriving.
They have no need of coats, but wear them for style,
As they all prepare for that Night, where
magic
stays
for a while...

Prologue

The snow continued to fall, now picking up with the wind. Kris finally breathed, a puff of white air trailing out.

“They...don’t want me.” He said, voice barely a whisper. His friends all looked at each other, then at him.

Bark hopped into the front seat of the sleigh and put his arms around Kris.

“M’ sorry, man...”

Minty followed, squeezing tight. “I’m so sorry, Kris....”

Patty and Nick joined in, and the kids all huddled together on the sleigh. Kris felt like he should’ve cried. But no tears came. Maybe because he had already been crying for the last three weeks.

“Dad,” Nick called. The kids looked up at the reappearing Santa.

“Kris...” Santa looked at the boy.

Kris sniffed. He didn’t say anything.

Santa didn’t say anything either. Instead, he put a tentative hand on Kris’ shoulder and sighed.

“You’ll be staying with us from now on, okay?”

Kris wringed his hands nervously but then stopped. He wiped his eyes again before looking up at his guardian.

“...Okay...thank you, Mr. C.”

Chapter 1

Assistant to Santa

15 Years Later...

Kris steadily balanced a stack of papers in his arms as he trudged into his office. The scent of cinnamon, peppermint, and evergreen wafted as it always did in the small room. The large windows were frosted, seeing out into a snowy landscape. Kris dropped the papers onto his desk and sat down. It was the morning of December 26th, and the people of the North were still roaring out in celebration at another successful Route where Santa Claus traveled the world to deliver gifts. The cheers echoed in Kris' ears as he rummaged through the new updated lists of kids considered naughty or nice for the next year.

“Oh, boy...” Kris rubbed his face as he started to sort through his work. As the assistant to Santa Claus, Kris oversaw reviewing the List one more time before his Boss did the final two checks. Kris also had to approve the Route that took Santa around the world, make sure the reindeer were healthy, and supervise the heads of the Departments that made treats, toys, and music. It was almost as if he were basically Santa, but...no. Kris was only an assistant, more than happy to help. Growing up in the North Pole, he had always enjoyed helping others and giving them advice as to what to do. He went out of his way to make sure everyone had a problem solved. And he could always fix the problems. He didn't meddle in anyone's business, and he had a reputation of staying out of trouble. In fact, he stayed out of trouble so much as a kid he

was called teacher's pet often in school. But it was better than being a constant disappointment, which he never wanted to be.

Ever since he'd gotten the position seven years ago, Kris' friends and coworkers would hint at him being the next Santa Claus. It wasn't unheard of for the Assistant to take up the title, especially if Santa didn't have kids. But *this* Santa had a son—Junior, who was Kris' age. So, it was more than likely that despite Kris' role, and despite the praise he got, that the heir would be considered sooner than later. And Kris wouldn't mind—he just enjoyed serving the people of the North, in any way that he could. It really didn't bother him.

As Kris continued with the List, a knock rattled on his door.

"Please come in," the young man called. The door opened, and a tall, heavy-built man with an ice white beard and striking red suit entered. His eyes were dark but twinkled, and his cheeks were full and rosy. Santa Claus.

Immediately, Kris stood and adjusted his jacket.

"Yeah, Boss?"

Santa was holding his hat in his hands and walked until he could sit on the corner of Kris' desk. He motioned for his young mentee to sit.

"Kris, I just wanted to give my personal thanks to you for another successful Route this year."

"Oh, no problem. You know it's my pleasure." Kris said honestly.

"I still need you to know that you're appreciated. You've been a big help ever since you started working." Santa said.

Kris smiled. He always felt a bit of pride when he could help Santa. Over the years, the older man had become sort of a father figure to him. For most of Kris' life he often tried to impress him. Not because he wanted the recognition only, but because he wanted to feel that he was needed. Santa Claus never pushed him, though. In fact, sometimes Kris felt that he was doing *too* much in the name of helping, but Santa never complained. He was always supportive of Kris no matter what, and the younger man was grateful for that.

Kris looked down when he realized he was fiddling with his hands. He didn't know why he was acting nervous. It was usual for Santa to come and thank him, because that was who Santa was. But for some reason Kris felt that this conversation was going to be different...

"I have something else I want to tell you," Santa suddenly stood. "I plan on this upcoming year to be my last Route, and I want you to succeed me as Santa Claus the year after that."

Kris blinked at him. There was a long silence as he stared at his mentor. Santa stared back, his eyes crinkling as he smiled from amusement. After another minute of silence, Kris began to stutter.

"W—wha, what? Really? H—how—what, what do you, mean?"

The bigger man chuckled. "Now, Kris, I know you've seen this coming—"

Kris blushed. "I mean, I've thought about it sometimes. But I, I'm not—what about Junior?"

"Junior has. . .potential, but I'm not so sure he would be fit for such a role. I fear he doesn't have the heart for it. He's barely been here as of late." Santa admitted.

This was true. Santa's only son hadn't been seen consistently for the last seven years in anything for the North Pole. He just stayed in their home and only came out for the Route

celebration. He wasn't even ostracized; he just chose to be on his own. He talked to his father, and Kris, when necessary, but other than that, Junior preferred to be by himself. And he never said he *didn't* want to be the next Santa. He's just never actually applied himself either.

Kris cleared his throat. "Well Boss, I'm...honored that you've considered me to replace you. I've often wondered what it would be like to be in your shoes, and, well, I hope I can live up to your expectations. This is a great opportunity and I'm happy to follow your footsteps," he said honestly.

"Well, now, that settles it! Congratulations, Santa!" Santa took Kris' hand in a firm handshake. "You'll do more than live up to the expectations, I'm sure."

"Yes sir, I'll try...I guess nothing will really change *this* year except—"

"I'll be keeping you a little closer to me—ha! If that's even possible with the way you do your job!" Santa put an arm around Kris, and they started towards the office door.

"Now, you have the Five Basics down already, so it's just a matter of more hands-on. You'll need to start flying the sled a little more in the practice runs," Santa started, "And you'll need to start conducting more meetings with the Department heads on your own...and you'll have to find a new assistant for yourself...maybe Bark or Patty..."

As he rattled on, Kris' face hurt from smiling so much. He still couldn't believe this was happening. He was content with being an assistant, but now was his chance. He was going to do everything in his power to be just as good as his Boss.

"Also, Kris," Santa shook his shoulder. "This is a rather personal choice...I don't know if, you have any, er, romantic interests... but if so, I recommend you start your search for a Mrs. Claus."

Kris cleared his throat. “Uh...yeah... I, just always assumed that a Mrs. Claus would come later down the line, not before.”

“Well, it’s not good to be alone for too long. Especially when you’re starting a new chapter. You kids...aren’t kids anymore. You’re almost thirty. Not that there’s any rush, but it’s always reassuring knowing that you have someone reliable in your corner....and when I say reliable, I mean true. Find yourself a true wife, Kris. One who will compliment you, and support you, and tell you when you’re making mistakes. That’s very important. She *must* be willing to tell you the truth, and you must be willing to listen. Find the one you would respect if you were only friends. And one who you would protect with your life. The title of Mrs. Claus isn’t just a title. She’s a part of you, and you’re a part of her. You need each other always.” Santa gave a heavy sigh as he slowed down.

“Mr. Claus is nothing without Mrs. Claus.” He said in a soft voice. Kris nodded but didn’t say anything. Mrs. Claus had died seven years ago, and it was a wonder her widow could even get out of bed, let alone continue the Route. The two had been inseparable their whole lives, so there were still moments when Santa must’ve missed her. In fact, recently Kris had seen a literal decline of Santa’s demeanor physically, mentally, and emotionally. He didn’t know how much longer the older man could take.

As they continued walking, Santa said, “I’m going to help get the reindeer settled in, and then I’m going to lie down. I believe I deserve to after a whole night of travel, eh?” He stretched.

“Sure, Boss. I’ll go back and finish the List—” Kris started, but his Boss waved his hand.

“Don’t worry about those now. I’ll review them while I rest. Go on and celebrate with the rest of the North.”

“Okay, thanks!” Kris grabbed his coat and scarf. He left Santa in the hallway and headed down the stairs. He bounded down the familiar stairs, smiling from excitement. After getting that advice about Mrs. Claus, he knew exactly who he wanted to talk to.

Chapter 2

The Peppermint Queen

As he left Santa’s Home, Kris entered the beautiful snow-covered land of the North. The village—where most people lived— were just past the Department buildings. The buildings that housed the Departments were positioned in such a way that they circled the open field of snow that was in front of Santa’s home. The center of the North was called North Square, and at its center was a giant Christmas tree. The star on the tree wasn’t a star at all, but a portal to the Other World where Santa delivered the gifts. All of the buildings were decorated in holly, snow, and ribbons.

People were still out celebrating, but most were out to start cleaning. The roadway that welcomed Santa’s sleigh was being buried in snow by shovelers. The platform stage where Santa stood to give his completion speech was starting to be broken down and stored away for next

year. Some kids were out having a snowball fight, which was helping the shovelers with the snow. A few women and men were handing out hot chocolate and coffee to the workers. They all had smiles on their faces as they talked about the success of last night. The post celebrations were always filled with joy and rest. It was a whole week off and a collective sigh of relief for everyone before the cycle started over again in the new year. Kris trudged through the snow happily. He waved at some friends as he made his way to the Sweets and Treats Department.

The Sweets and Treats Department was for all treats that went into a Christmas stocking or gift basket. There were four divisions: Candy and Chocolates, Cookies, Cakes, and Fruits and Nuts. The Department building was painted white, red, pink, and brown, and had six stories. On the outside it didn't look like much, but inside it was a beautiful design of swirls, machines, and polished, shining wood. The levels were open, allowing for a wide range of scents of chocolates and mints and spices to waft throughout the building. There were stairs as well as elevators on either side of the building for transport. There were also giant vertical cables that carried bins and bins of food to different levels. The workers—like in other Departments— were a mix of humans and elves, and they were already working on next year's projects. Everyone was bustling about, mixing and cutting and chopping and pouring, while they all cheerfully gabbed on about their work. Kris hastily headed to the elevators to go to the highest level, which housed the Candy Division. And in the Candy Quarter, was the Peppermint Division. When Kris got there, he immediately ran into Patty Pepper.

“Kris! Congrats on another Route!” Patty was Kris' age, with thick black hair in a ponytail and green eyes. She wore a red and white long-sleeved shirtdress, with white pants and white boots that were always smudged with soot. She and her brother, Bark, were both engineers for

the machines in their respective departments and were childhood friends of Kris. Patty was also the assistant to the Head of the Candy Quarter, who Kris was on his way to see.

“Thanks, Patty, couldn’t have done it without you obviously,” Kris told her.

“Here you go again. I swear, with the way you’re always kissing up to people, you’re a shoe in for Santa!” Patty half joked but genuinely meant the compliment.

“If you say so,” Kris chuckled nervously.

“Yeah, yeah, nice. Look here, Peppermint Queen is up in her office. I gotta go replenish the screws in the fruitcake flopper...see ya later!” Patty was in the elevator and gone before Kris could say anything else. Kris shook his head as he made his way up the stairs and to the office, which was also open and served as a laboratory for experiments. Kris was only a few steps into the space when he saw out of the corner of his eye the head of a young woman with holly in her hair. Immediately, his heart quickened, and warmth filled his chest.

“Minty,” he greeted her. She looked up from her clipboard and smiled at him.

“Kris, hi!” Minty Cane wore light brown ankle-length overalls with a red corset and white sleeves. Her boots were black with red and white décor, and she wore small candy cane earrings. Her curly brown hair was in a ponytail, and her soft brown eyes matched her soft brown skin. Kris’ breath hitched. Since they were in school, he could never find the words to express how beautiful she was to him. And even now he could barely manage to keep from stuttering as he asked, “H—How are you?”

“Just fine. Here, I need to show you my newest inventions; I’ve been working since morning, and I know for sure Boss will like them.” Minty took his hand and brought him over to her main workstation, a silver table covered in crushed peppermints, vanilla, and random spices.

On the edge of the table, was a basket of candy canes. The canes were significantly thicker than usual, about two inches. Minty took one and handed it to Kris.

“Take a bite and tell me what you think.”

Kris obeyed. His eyes widened when a burst of hot chocolate greeted him.

“Mhm! Hot chocolate in a candy cane, never would’ve thought of that.”

“Right! I wanted to combine the top two favorite treats of the people of the North, aside from the chocolate chip cookies, of course.”

“Of course,” Kris nodded, genuinely enjoying his treat as Minty continued.

“I thought this would be an easier way to enjoy both. Candy canes are portable, but you gotta be extremely careful with hot cocoa. And this way, you can have a treat and a warm drink whenever you like. Do you think Boss would endorse this?”

“I think so. I’ll let him know you have something that’s worth looking into when it’s time for presentations.”

“Great, thanks. Also, congratulations on another successful Route! Boss has a great assistant in you.” Minty reached with her handkerchief to wipe his chin.

“Thanks, I couldn’t have done it without you though...the smoothie you made gave me the energy I needed to stay awake the whole night,” Kris told her.

Minty smiled again, her cheeks reddening. “Well, that *is* your favorite, though I can’t understand why. And I’d want you to be at your best when working.” She took the handkerchief back and Kris sauntered around the office.

“I appreciate it. I’m always at my best with you.” Kris said, smiling when Minty blushed deeper, pulling at her sleeves.

“Kris, stop. I just make candy—”

“Yes, and *just* became the head of her department two years ago, and is *just* one of the few Department Heads that Boss respects without a second thought...” As he was speaking, he watched Minty as she continued to work. She was bustling around, measuring liquids, cutting pieces, and mixing. She would be in one place and then quickly move to another, eyes focused and intense. Kris smiled at the way she would brush her bangs out of her face, only for them to fall back again.

“...And everybody adores you. They all think of you as a perfect leader and good friend,” he said, moving when she reached past him. Her head was a few inches from him and Kris’s face heated.

“I guess so, but it really takes a village. You on the other hand, have the support of the elves and the other assistants and Santa. So, I know I’m not the *only* person who is a big help for you to do your job.” Minty handed him a small tenderizer.

“You’re being modest. You’re very important to me and how I perform my job. Even before I became assistant, I was depending on you. I want you to know that Minty. You’ve always been my motivation...” Kris twirled the tool in his hand.

“What do you want me to do with—”

“Here,” Minty handed him a bag of marshmallows. “See how flat you can get those.”

“Alright.” Kris smashed the little hammer onto the bag until he had a flat white square in his hands.

“How’s this?”

“Perfect. Thank you.” Minty removed the plastic from the square and placed it on a small contraption that began to fold the marshmallow into smaller squares. After every fold, another small trinket poured cinnamon, peppermint, and vanilla into the white substance. It folded repeatedly until there was a log of white, sprinkled with brown and red. Minty then took that and started to pull and push the substance like a taffy. She then put the candy back on the table and cut it into large squares. She turned and placed the squares in a freezing container. There was a blast of white smoke, and Minty opened the container to take out the marshmallow pieces, which were now hard.

Kris moved so he could look over her shoulder. “Marshmallow peppermint bark. Nice.”

“Thanks,” Minty laughed. “And to what you were saying, yes, I know how important I am to you. You never fail to tell me when we’re together. Though we’re barely together...”

Kris stayed put and looked at her. “I know. The last time we hung out was about...six months ago? But I want to change that today. Maybe, if you’re interested, we could...spend *more* time together, tomorrow night. For...a date?” He felt his pulse race as she regarded him. Minty considered it for a moment, pulling on her sleeves nervously.

“Well, Kris...I would absolutely be interested in that.”

Kris almost jumped for joy but chose to lean on the table to hide it. “Really?”

Minty laughed. “Really. We’ve been so busy with work the last few years we never got to...well, nevermind,” she blushed. “But tonight is perfect. How did you get some free time?”

“Well, uh...” Kris was hesitant to tell her the truth. Until Santa made the announcement, Kris didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up at him taking the position. Especially since he wasn’t entirely sure about Junior’s whereabouts.

He said, “Boss gave me some time off, so I figured now would be as good time as any to spend more time with my friends... and people I care about.” Kris said the last part with emphasis, hoping that Minty would understand what he was trying to say. From the way she smiled and pulled on her sleeves even more, he was confident she had.

“That’s good,” she said, “And it’ll help once you become Santa.”

Kris chuckled. “And what makes you think Boss would make me Santa?”

“Oh, c’mon, Kris, you’re more than qualified. You’ve helped people your entire life, and you’ve been assistant to Boss for years. You’re smart, responsible, kind, compassionate, and you have a great sense of humor—”

“Minty if I didn’t know any better, I’d say you were fond of me,” Kris put an arm around her.

Minty waved her hand dismissively. “I can recognize charming qualities like the next person.”

“So...now I’m charming?” Kris arched a brow at her, and she laughed.

“What do you have in mind for us spending more time together, *Santa*?”

A small feeling of joy erupted in Kris when Minty called him that. But Kris ignored it and shrugged.

“Oh, I don’t know...evening strolls around the village, a carriage ride in the snow, traveling to the edge of the Pole and seeing the Aurora...” As he spoke, Kris felt more confident.

Especially with the way Minty was giving him that gorgeous smile and leaning into his frame.

“That sounds romantic. And here I thought you weren’t the type.” She broke away briefly to grab more peppermints.

Kris grabbed her hand in his. Squeezing tightly, he responded, “Only with the right person.”

Minty squeezed his hand back. They stared at each other before a whistle went off.

“Last call for the melting tub! Last call for the melting tub!” Patty echoed into a bullhorn from below.

Minty quickly grabbed more peppermints and vanilla, dropping them into her wheelbarrow. Kris helped her carry it down the stairs and towards the elevator.

“I’ve got to go. Thanks for helping me.”

“What time should I pick you up tomorrow?” Kris asked as they shuffled in.

“Seven is good. Hopefully between now and then you’ll have news of a promotion, hmm?”
Minty squeezed his arm.

Kris smiled bashfully but kept quiet.

Chapter 3

Son of Santa

Santa's Home was a three-story house with a library, dining room, and kitchen on the first floor, offices on the second floor, and the personal bedrooms on the third floor. A young man with tanned skin and silver hair left his room. He was wearing a black and red long-sleeved shirt with dark grey pants and black boots. Junior, the son of Santa, took the stairs two at a time until he reached Kris's office. He walked through the open door and saw his father sitting at the desk.

"Dad? Where's Kris?"

Santa moved some papers. "I've given him the rest of the week off. Knowing him though, he'll be back any minute. Where were you, son? You left the celebration so early yesterday."

"I wasn't feeling too good," Junior sat down and rested his feet on the desk.

Santa cut a look to him. "Junior, this is the second year you've missed the celebrations after a Route. And you've missed other major events as well. I mean, since you were a kid, you've always been a little distant, but it's become almost intentional these last few years! It's like you're...not interested in anything anymore. Even before your mother—"

"Look, Dad, I wanted to talk to you about that. I was wondering if you'd let me inherit Santa Claus." Junior interrupted, placing his hands behind his head.

Santa blinked. "What? Just like that? Why should you inherit the title when you've been nearly absent for almost seven years? For goodness' sake, Junior, you've ignored all of the work that it takes to be Santa! You'd have difficulty learning, although you'd learn fast..."

Junior shrugged, his blue eyes twinkling. "You're right, I would learn fast. Since I naturally have magic, I can learn all the 'five things'—"

"Five *Basics*."

“—Whatever. I just need some sharpening. Have me take over some duties, like Kris does, so you can see how I handle things on my own.”

Santa regarded him and gave a sigh.

“You shouldn’t be surprised that I’ve already promised the title to Kris.”

“Not really, and Kris deserves it, I won’t lie. But I’ve been hiding long enough, and since Mom’s gone...”

“Junior,” Santa sighed again, this time adjusting in the seat. “You don’t have to. I know you’re sensitive about your mother.”

“But, Dad, this is the best way to get through it. I think you need to take time to truly mourn...you didn’t really get a chance since she passed a whole *three days* before the Route. And even though I haven’t been present, I *have* been watching. I’m still here. Pit me against Kris to train for next year, and then you can choose before the Route. Sound good?”

“Now wait a minute,” Santa put his hand up. “Kris *wants* this position. He’s done nothing but put others before himself all these years. You can’t just assume that because you’re my son I’m going to give you a chance after—”

“I’m not just *your* son though, am I? I’m my mother’s son. And she often said she wanted to see me put on your hat.” Junior argued, motioning to the red cap that was resting on the desk. He then leaned further; his face was serious.

“I just want a chance to try to do what mom dreamed for me, Dad.” As he said this, Junior’s eyes welled with tears, and he looked away.

Santa frowned. He looked from his son to the hat.

“I’m not sure you truly understand what it means to be Santa,” he started. “Your mother would’ve been proud of you whatever you did. Sometimes I think you’re...meant to do something else. And besides, do you really want to serve the people, or just have the title?”

“Is it so wrong if I want both? To work for the people who raised me, and to continue the legacy of us Northerns so that the holiday can be enjoyed for all generations? And what else could I do *besides* Santa Claus?” Junior leaned further. “This is only possible if I have your support. Please, let me prove myself. Let me compete with Kris, and you decide next year.” Junior begged.

Santa shook his head. “I don’t want Kris to think he’s being pushed to the side. He seemed excited to—”

Just then, Kris walked in the door. “Hey Boss, I— oh, Junior.” He stopped.

“Kris, hey! I was just looking for you actually,” Junior stood and went to him.

Kris folded his arms. “Oh yeah? Let me guess...you want to be Santa Claus.”

“Ah, you’ve always known me better than I know myself,” Junior smiled sarcastically. “And actually...yes. I mean, it only makes sense right? I *am* his son, after all.” Junior put an arm around Kris and turned them away from Santa.

In a low voice, he said, “But I was telling Dad that I think you’d be a perfect Santa, even better than me. I just...wanted to give it a try.”

“Give it a try?” Kris chuckled. “I’m so glad you think this is just a little hobby—”

“Not what I meant. I just want to apply myself since I’ve been solo for too long. I mean, with you following in dad’s footsteps I didn’t need to try as hard...just had to mind my manners and appear at the Route celebrations. If anything, you’ve made it easier for me to fully observe

the inner workings without *actually* being involved. And now, I want to play my part as Santa's son, as a leader of the North Pole—"

As Junior was speaking, Kris felt a surge of unfamiliar energy float around him. His head became heavier, his vision blurred slightly, and he heard the echo of voices floating over his head. Kris took a deep breath and focused on repelling the energy. His mind immediately went to Minty, his friends, and his job. Just as quickly as it had started, the energy floated away, and Kris cut a look to Junior, who didn't seem phased at all.

Junior looked at him. "You understand, right? This is my destiny."

Kris said, "And you figure it out right after your dad already told me that *I'm* inheriting his title? Of course you would pull something like this." He brushed Junior's hand off and turned to Santa, who had been looking at them both.

"Boys? What's the issue?"

Kris said, "Boss, I told you I would follow your footsteps. I can be Santa, but I won't come before your son. If you have any bit of faith in him, then... you should give him a chance. I'm more than happy to be assistant to Santa regardless." Kris hated what he was saying. Every part of him wanted to scream out and demand he be given the title. But that wasn't his character. He kept himself composed despite his annoyance. Besides, a part of Kris really wanted to believe that Junior could pull himself together. He had been so distant the last couple of years that Kris had started to miss him. Sure, he had been more cold, curt, and rude than he usually was, but he wasn't malicious. So, wouldn't he deserve a chance?

Santa rubbed his face. "You boys haven't changed from when you were kids. Junior, are you really trying to learn to be Santa fully? You can't just quit it if you don't like it."

“I don’t intend to *quit*, Dad. I know I’ve been gone...and I’m sorry. But being called the next Santa since I could walk? That’s a lot of pressure. I stayed to myself because I wanted to find myself. And now, I want to *prove* myself. I really do.” Junior advocated. Kris kept quiet and waited. Even though a part of him believed in Junior, he could tell the other man was lying.

Santa huffed suddenly, like he had gotten an idea. “You know what? If you really want to prove yourself, then I have just the thing. I’ll have you shadow Kris and myself so you can get your training. That way, *both* of you can become Santas!”

“...What!?” Both Kris and Junior looked at the man confused.

Santa put his hands up. “Hear me out. There are many Santas, but only one Santa *Claus*. The two of you grew up together, practically brothers, and have wonderful talents. Only one of you can have the title, Santa Claus. But *both* of you can be a Santa. If one of you is unable to take the mantle, the other can take his place. That’s what I was referring to earlier, Junior.”

Kris thought to himself. He had never heard of this. Not in school, not in training, not anywhere. Since when was there an option to have *two* Santas? Was Assistant not enough? And did that mean Kris could’ve been a Santa this whole time?

“Dad, you’re not making any sense!” Junior rushed out, “Why is everything always a riddle with you?”

Santa shrugged. “I’m sorry, Junior, but it’s the only way I can explain it. It’s a rare thing, but it happens every several generations or so. When there are two qualifying persons, who both share the same traits and abilities—like yourselves— then it’s possible. And it’s a big help too, since you both know Santa Claus needs all the help he can get. Like I said, both of you are Santas, but only one can be Santa *Claus*.”

Kris looked at his mentor as he spoke. He sensed that the older man wasn't explaining fully, but Kris decided not to push it. He was still annoyed at the whole situation.

"What... 'same traits and abilities' do we share?" He asked tentatively.

"Almost all of them," Santa started, "You both have magic, you can tell when people are lying...you're both very talented at toy-making... those are basic skillsets any Santa would need."

"At that point anyone in the North could be Santa," Junior scoffed. He was kind of right. The people of the North could tell when people were lying, but only a small percentage had magical abilities such as reading the List and flying the sleigh. It made sense that even a smaller amount of people could be Santa Claus.

"That's the point, son. Santa Claus isn't about the single man delivering presents. Santa Claus is about community working together to benefit the following generations through their skills and abilities and talents...just what the North Pole is doing. It just so happens that one man represents it all. But if there's *two* of you as Santa, then it wouldn't all be on one person."

"Okay, fine, whatever," Junior snapped, "So the other 'basic skillsets'...it's the languages and talking to the deer, right?"

"There are *Five Basics* in total for someone to be considered Santa *Claus*. If you meet three of the five, then you'll just be a Santa."

"Wait, Boss," Kris put his hand up. "Where did all of this come from? We've never heard of it...like, is it in a book, or what?"

"It was in a book that is long gone now. It must've gotten thrown out or something. I'm just giving you the summary." Santa leaned on his desk. The young men stepped closer.

“Now, the Five. The first, is being able to interpret the List of Naughty or Nice. The second, being able to communicate with *and* control the reindeer and sleigh. The third, is being able to gather the Department Heads and command their respect as a leader. The fourth—to get honest responses from the kids at the mall visits. You have to learn when they’re lying or telling the truth. That leaves toy making...you manage to make majority of the different types of toys, or you fix something that’s been broken...you’re good. Those are the basics. There are other traits too, but these five are what make a Santa Claus complete.”

Kris and Junior shared a look before Junior spoke.

“Dad, I didn’t say I’ll train side by side...I said I’d *compete*. Even if we did become the ‘two Santas’, I don’t need Kris’ help. I’m more than capable of being Santa Claus—” He started.

“Boss... you told me you wanted *me* to be the next Santa Claus. With all due respect, I’d rather not babysit my competition while planning for the Route also,” Kris said curtly.

Junior looked at him, offended. “Babysitting? That’s how you think of me?”

“You don’t even know the reindeer’s names, Junior,” Kris rolled his eyes again.

“I’ll learn them!” Junior whined.

Santa stood. “Kris, I know it seems unfair. But I must be willing to give my son a chance. You said if I had any faith in him to do so. And Junior, you said you needed a little sharpening. No better sharpener than Kris himself.”

“But *dad*—”

“*Boss*—”

Santa put his hand up, and both men went quiet.

“That’ll be enough of that. Kris, train my son where he is weak. Son, learn from Kris. And the both of you try your best. Whoever succeeds at three or more of the tasks will be the next Santa Claus. Good? Good. I’m going to go lie down again. Finish sorting the List and take it to the elves for first review. Afternoon, boys.” The big man shuffled past them both and exited the room.

Kris stood frozen. He couldn’t wrap his head around what had just happened. In all his years of knowing him, Kris had never known the older man to change his mind about something so vital, so important, within the span of a day. Santa was usually unmoving in his decisions, even when it came to his family. It wasn’t right, and Kris felt a part of him itching to figure out what was wrong. All that talk about wanting him to take after Santa and being appreciative of all of his hard work, seemed like just. . . talk. And as much as Kris was angry, there was a part of him that genuinely felt that something else had happened. Something...evil. His mind ventured back to the energy that he had felt when Junior was speaking. It was as if a switch had suddenly gone off in Santa’s head to do this. Maybe that ‘lost book’ would have some answers. And Kris had a feeling it wasn’t so lost.

Junior scoffed again. “Well, that’s rich. I wanted to try my hand at my *natural* talent, and what do I get? An order to follow the teacher’s pet like a puppy until I can get what’s rightfully mine!”

Kris glared at him. “You know, I want to help you, but something’s off. You suddenly show up and want to take the title and do what’s right? After years of being absent? I know you, Junior. You’re up to something. And don’t call me teacher’s pet!”

Junior chuckled. “You really want to accuse *Santa’s son* of trying to ruin traditions? And what about my mom? You’re gonna doubt her son too? She trusted you with her life, you know.”

At that, Kris shoved Junior. “Don’t bring up your dead mother as a shield you coward. You didn’t even go to her funeral, remember? Care to explain that?”

A shadow fell over Junior’s face and his eyes turned grey. “She was *my* mother. I don’t have to explain anything to you. And I’m *not* a coward.” He told him, his voice hard.

Kris squared his shoulders as he tried to ignore the comment. “I just don’t trust you.” He managed.

“Oh boo-hoo. Dad didn’t ask you to *trust* me, he told you to *train* me. Anyways, I’m going to do my best to be Santa. We’re officially in competition. The North deserves it...our people, deserve it.” Junior said in a sarcastic tone.

Kris scowled. “You’re so full of it.” He watched as Junior gave a coy smile, eyes turning blue again.

“Think what you want, you can’t prove anything. But since you want me to have an evil motive *so* badly let’s see...uh, I...don’t want you to be Santa because I want to take over and destroy Christmas, how about that?”

“Ugh!” Kris threw his hands up. Even with the weird energy from before, he didn’t believe that Junior would want to disrupt the very thing that kept the people of the North alive. He figured it wouldn’t be as horrible as it seemed—he would still be Santa...or a second Santa...so nothing would really change. He just couldn’t shake the feeling that Junior was doing something else. Kris had to figure it out.

“Fine, come over here.” He led his new mentee to the desk and pointed at the papers.

“Sort the rest of the naughty or nice list. Then come find me and the elves.” Kris returned to the door, reaching for his jacket.

“Wait, what? How can I tell whose naughty or nice?” Junior called after him.

“Use your *natural* talent.” Kris said over his shoulder. He left Junior growling in frustration and angrily sorting through the papers.

Chapter 4

The List and the Elves

The top supervisor elves in charge of Santa’s List were a duo: Pointy and Holly. Officially, they were called Advisors to Santa. They rewrote the List of Naughty and Nice every day with the help of one hundred other elves below them. They all were situated in an office on the second floor of Santa’s Home, surrounded by large rolls of paper connected to various machines to allow for smooth rolling through the desks. Since the List was updated every fifteen seconds, it was constantly printing out new versions. The elves always had feathered pens on their persons and plenty of ink that never ran out. The room had windows everywhere to allow for natural light. It was a cozy enough room, but the machines made the walking area small for normal sized people. So, when Kris opened the door, he automatically ducked his head to avoid a low roll of paper that was always hanging in the entry.

“Hello? Elves?” He called into the empty room.

“Kris, over here!” A small hand popped up from behind one of the scrolls. Kris jogged over and found a female elf with brown skin, freckles, and violet eyes. She wore green overalls, a green and gold hat, and gold pointy shoes with white trim.

“Hi, Holly. Where is everyone?”

“We gave them some time off for the celebrations. I’m checking a misspelling before another copy comes out. Pointy is—”

“Right here.” Kris looked behind him. A male elf with blondish hair and blue eyes looked up at his friend.

“Hiya Kris.”

“Hiya Pointy.”

“Kris, what brings you back?” A voice called out from above. Climbing down a ladder, was a third elf with tanned skin, fiery red hair, and brown eyes. Tinsel was head of the Toy Department but was close friends with Holly and Pointy, so he was almost always in Santa’s Home.

“Tinsel, be careful! The other elves polished that ladder before they left!” Holly warned.

“Eh? Oh! Whoa!” Tinsel suddenly slipped and fell off.

“Tin!”

“Aaaghhh!” The elf dropped in the air and into Kris’ arms.

“You alright?”

“Ah! My heart! I’ve seen my life flash! What time is it? Who are you? Where am I? Oh, the horror!” Tinsel cried out in anguish, flailing in Kris’ arms. Kris shook his head smiling while he put his friend down.

“You’re always so dramatic.”

“I’m small, Kris, I have a longer fall! It could all end just like that, *just like that!*” The young elf clutched his chest and rested for a moment. Holly and Pointy just looked at him with bored gazes.

“Are you done?” Holly asked, hands on hip. Tinsel stopped breathing heavily to glare at her.

“My life was almost *lost*, Holly!”

“But it wasn’t. Stop all the theatrics and get it together.” Pointy shoved him. Tinsel gave another yelp and stumbled back.

“Hey watch it! Your pushes could cause serious injuries with your size!”

“We’re the *same size*—” Pointy growled.

“Elves! I need to talk to the three of you and I need to make it quick. Please?” Kris interrupted.

“Sorry, Kris.”

“What brings you back? Was there another error in the list?” The elves led him over to the only regular sized chair in the office, and he sat.

“No errors that I could see. But, uh, Junior may find some...” Kris said.

Holly picked up her small writing pad. “Junior? What does he have to do with anything?”

“It seems, that Junior wants to...become Santa Claus.” Kris explained.

“WHAT?!” The elves all paused to look at him.

Kris put his hands up. “I know, I know. He started to talk about how he wants to start helping, and how Mrs. C would’ve wanted him to have the title, and...yeah. So, Santa’s entrusted me with training him to see if he can make the cut. We’re gonna train/compete for it.

And if one of us meets three of the Five Basics, then one of us will be Santa Claus, and the other will be just...Santa.” It still sounded so confusing when Kris said it aloud.

Holly blinked, shaking his head. “Wait, *just* Santa? Two Santas? I’ve never heard of that.”

Pointy spoke, “Yeah, and I always assumed that you’d inherit the title, Kris. You’ve been an assistant for seven years, and you’re practically Boss’ own son—”

“I’m not sure why Junior is suddenly interested, but Santa wants to give him a chance and...I can’t really argue with that. So, I agreed to train him to help ‘sharpen’ his skills, which means you’ll be seeing more of him with me. If he does, then...he’ll be the new Boss. If he doesn’t, then I’ll be Santa Claus.”

“Wait, wait, Kris. Did...Santa already offer the job to you?” Tinsel asked.

Kris kept silent but nodded. All at once, the elves let out a shout of congratulations and smiles.

But it was soon somber again when Pointy said, “But Junior just, asked for it?”

Kris nodded again.

Tinsel scoffed, folding his arms. “I call snowbull! Everyone knows that you’ve been destined to be Santa Claus since your first year as his assistant. Heck, even before you graduated school it was obvious. It’s not fair! I won’t help him do a thing. Where has he been this whole time? Hiding up in his room, only coming out to celebrate for work he didn’t do, and why? Because he’s *Santa’s son*...what, he thinks he can just mosey on in an inherit a job that provides for billions of children? This is preposterous!” The elf’s pointed ears started to turn pink, and his eyes squinted in anger.

“Calm down,” Pointy went to him.

“Whoa, Tin, it’s okay. Really,” Kris reassured. “I’m alright with just being an assistant.”

“But it’s been seven years, Kris. I’m not saying that Santa needs to step down, but, if he’s had any thoughts about making you the next Claus then he should’ve made up his mind by now,” Holly defended.

Kris took a deep breath.

“I know it’s not fair that Junior can just ask and get what takes years to study and experience. But Santa has faith in him, and...I kind of do too. Now, I admit it’s very small faith, but faith, nonetheless. We have to think positive on this. If it doesn’t go well, I’ll still get to be Santa. We’ll both be training; I’ll just be catching him up on seven years’ worth of work that he probably doesn’t know about.”

“*Snowbull*,” Tinsel repeated. “You deserve that promotion more than that little brat! I still remember when he held me up and dangled me as a plaything for the reindeer!”

“Well, you did call him an ‘annoying plum-headed stinker,’” Holly reminded him.

“I was in a mood!” Tinsel argued.

“You tripped on your own feet while walking in the snow,” Pointy deadpanned.

“Well, he didn’t have to laugh!” Tinsel whined.

“We *all* laughed. Me, Holly, Kris, Minty—”

“Oh, Kris! Did you tell Minty about your promotion? She could be your Mrs. Claus if you become Santa!” Holly clapped her hands excitedly.

Kris’ face went red, and he cleared his throat, sitting back in the chair. “Ah, well, not exactly. But we’re going out tonight. I was thinking about telling her—”

“Nice, your first date in...hmm, it’s been a while, eh? Hey, could you imagine? Kris and Minty, Mr. and Mrs. Claus!” Pointy moved his hands as if he were presenting the names in the air. Kris’ face heated.

“It’s got a nice ring to it!” Tinsel nudged his blushing friend.

“And the two of you work so well together on projects. You’re so in sync! Just like Boss and the late Mrs. Oh, it just *has* to be Minty, Kris!” Holly squealed.

Kris felt his heart racing again. “Slow down, goodness! I’ve barely told her how I feel about her.”

Tinsel snorted. “Everyone knows how you feel about her...and how she feels about *you*.” He sang the last part, smiling when Kris ducked his head.

“It’s been such a long time since we last dated. You think she...might...?”

“Kris, it’s so obvious. She’s always making extra treats for you when you’re working late...” Pointy led on.

“And she asks your opinion on her inventions more so than Patty, her best friend...” Tinsel continued.

“And she goes out of her way for *you* to be happy. You think she would go through the trouble of making a special energy smoothie for just anybody during the Route? And to make one for you *every year*? She hates smoothies!” Holly punched his shoulder.

“She’s just doing her job—”

“She *hates* smoothies.” The elves repeated to him.

Kris laughed. “Okay, you got me there. But we haven’t officially said how we feel about each other in a very long time. I want to make sure we’re on the same page before I tell her that I might be Santa.”

“It wouldn’t change how she feels about you,” Holly told him.

“I know. But we could at least enjoy each other without the titles for a little while. Kris and Minty could be completely different from... Mr. and Mrs. Claus.” He smiled again at the way that phrase sounded.

Pointy walked over to his desk and grabbed his paperwork. “It’s still exciting. Don’t take her for granted, Kris. You two have something real special. Ever since you were kids, you both had promising futures. I remember you said you never got time to really be together because of work. Who knows? Now might just be the perfect time!”

“Thanks. I guess we’ll see how it goes tonight—”

Just then, Junior rushed into the room, barely missing the low rolls of paper.

“Whoa! That was close!” He paused at the machine.

“Not close enough,” Tinsel grumbled. Holly elbowed him and smiled at Junior.

“Junior. How may we help you?”

“I’m here to ask Kris a question,” Junior turned to him and Kris stood.

“What? I left you for ten minutes.” Kris started.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever. Look, I, I really don’t know how to sort through these lists. I can’t tell whose naughty or nice! They’re just names on a paper.” Junior shoved the papers at him.

Kris shook his head. “The List changes every 15 seconds. And it only changes because people change. Even kids on Christmas Eve,” he looked at the paper, and immediately certain names glowed green, while others glowed dark red. Kris asked for a pen, and Pointy handed him one. Bringing it back to the page, Kris skillfully marked each name that was nice and naughty in under a minute. After that first page, he handed it back to Junior.

“There.”

Junior looked at him, jaw agape. “But how, how did you *know*?”

“It flashes a certain color. Green for nice, red for naughty. What do you see when you look at it?”

“Black.” Junior said blandly.

Kris shrugged. “Well, I can’t fix your eyes.” The elves snickered but backed away when Junior glared at them.

“Kris, c’mon! Obviously, I don’t have the color changing thing!”

Kris smirked. One point to him.

“Alright, alright, here.” Kris went to the next page and motioned for Junior to follow him to one of the desks. Turning on the small lamp, Kris held the paper above it.

“Look, if you hold it like this, and trace the names backwards without stopping, it’ll show you whether that name is naughty or nice.” He did so, and the words ‘naughty’ and ‘nice’ started to appear next to the names. Junior looked on in amazement.

“That’s...that’s an actual skill? I thought you only had to have the power...”

“You do now. But hundreds of years ago the Santa Claus hadn’t evolved into seeing the results without the light. Now, the lights are in us. This method is in case a Santa *can’t* see.”

Kris shoved the papers back to Junior. “Now do the rest of those and bring them back later.”

“But that’ll take all day!” Junior whined.

Kris shrugged. “Santa would do it easy... and without complaining.”

Junior mumbled something that Kris could assume was inappropriate before he made his way out of the office. When he was gone, the elves turned to their taller friend.

“Kris, I can’t believe you told him that!” Pointy scolded.

“It’s actually kind of sad that he doesn’t have the gift; it makes going through the List much more efficient.” Holly said.

“He’ll be fine. And it shouldn’t bother him really. He’s used to being alone for months on end.” Tinsel cackled at his joke while his friends went on with their work. Kris checked his watch as he headed to the door.

“Elves, I’ll see you later. Please, be on your best behavior with Junior, for me?”

“Yeah, sure, whatever. Now get outta here and get ready for your date,” The elves rushed him towards the door.

“Get her some flowers!” Holly clapped excitedly.

“And get a shave!” Tinsel called after the young man as he jogged out of the room.

“His shadow is just fine,” Pointy told his coworker.

Tinsel shook his head. “He’s not Santa yet; there’s no rush to start growing out his beard.”

