



THE CASE OF THE MISSING REINDEER

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Book Cover by Jen Dodrill

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Five days before Christmas



“Today is a new day, the first day of the rest of my life. Winning is where it’s at. To have a friend, you must be a friend. Beauty is as beauty does.” I stare into the bathroom mirror and repeat these clichés over and over.

The grooves between my eyes sit deeper with each passing day. I stretch the skin on my face, but it droops and settles into wrinkles. I open my eyes wide. No, not helping. I lean closer. I could reshape my eyebrows—the little bit that’s left of them.

How can I pull myself out of this funk? It’s almost Christmas. My job is to be jolly, and I can do it. I pat my jiggly tummy. I’ve got the build right here. I am the perfect Mrs. Claus.

Okay then, I’ve officially lost my mind. I turn away from the mirror, position my white wig to cover my gray-streaked auburn curls, shove my round wire-framed glasses up my nose, take a deep breath, and open the bathroom door into the busy world of Elf Land.

“Mrs. Claus, over here.” A tall elf—yes, I’m aware that’s an oxymoron—with deep purple eyes, a perky, upturned nose, and green-framed glasses waves to me.

I ignore him and keep walking.

“Um, Mrs. Claus, I need your signature for this order of jingle bells.” A short elf, his red stocking cap pulled down so far his pointy ears stick out, shoves a piece of paper in my face and hands me a pen.

I scribble my name, Sally Claus.

“Mrs. Claus, I have a question.” The new reindeer keeper grabs my arm. She’s the single most annoying woman I have ever met. Her blonde hair cascades over her shoulders, catching every light bulb ray and shimmering like spun sugar. There’s not a single blackhead, pore, or wrinkle in sight. She doesn’t have to tweeze, pluck, or shape her eyebrows.

I peel her fingers off my arm and keep going.

A young voice says, “Mrs. Claus, do you like this wooden horse?”

That stops me in my tracks. No one ever asks me about toys. No, my job— my whole reason for being—is to stand by Santa’s side. And smile. That’s it.

I can’t remember the last time someone asked me about wooden horses.

I turn to the little elf. Excitement glows in her dark brown eyes. Her pixie cut shows off her tiny, pointed ears. Something twists in my chest, and I hold out my hand.

“May I see it?” The toy is handcrafted from light wood and includes a dark brown mane, tail, and shiny black eyes. “Well made and sturdy. Great job.” I bend over so we’re eye to eye. “What’s your name?”

“Trudy.” She swallows and stares at her feet. Her small shoes glitter.

“I like your shoes, Trudy.”

She knocks the heels together, setting off another round of twinkling. “Thank you. I put extra glitter on them.”

I can tell. Colorful dust floats in the air and leaves a fine coating on everything. I kind of like it.

She slips her hand in mine and whispers, “Don’t tell my mom, but when I grow up, I wanna be a toymaker.”

“Why would that be a problem?” It’s Elf Land. Everyone wants to make toys.

She sighs the saddest sigh and points. “Cause that’s my mom.”

I turn, and the reindeer lady stands five feet away, arms crossed over her well-proportioned bosom, her eyes blazing. The only way I can tell she’s glaring at me is the slight cock of an eyebrow and a stern expression in her eyes. Nothing else on her face moves.

“Oh, yes, that is a problem,” I say out of the corner of my mouth.

Ms. Reindeer approaches. “Mrs. Claus, I have to talk to you.” She taps her foot.

“Oh?” What do I say? Let your kid pick her own career. How can you deny this little elf? What kind of mother are you? Why doesn’t your lipstick ever fade?

Wait. Focus, Sally.

“Yes, I need help. One of the reindeer”—she pauses and her shoulders droop—“it’s missing.” Her words end in a whisper.

“Missing?” Trudy hollers, her mouth and eyes perfect circles. “No, Mom, that can’t be true. Which one?”

Heads whip our way. Elf ears are pointed for a reason. The better to hear you with and all.

Trudy’s mother chews on her lower lip. “Uh, um, I don’t ... I’m not sure of its name.”

“Mom! I told you who they are. Remember? Dasher’s the one with the dot on his forehead, Donner’s rear hooves are all black, Vixen has long eyelashes”—she flutters her eyelashes—“Dancer can’t dance but Prancer can, Comet’s breath is terrible, Blitzen is the shortest, and Cupid has that cute pointy nose.” Disgust is written all over her face. “And you have to know Ruth.” She leans over, hands above her eyes, and pretends to search for something.

Reindeer lady sighs. “She’s the one I can’t find.”

“What?” Trudy screeches.

I have to get these two out of this room. The elves are getting restless. And way too curious. I shuffle them into the bathroom I just exited.

“All right,” I say, locking the door and leaning against it. Ugh, I’m going to have to ask reindeer lady her name, which is embarrassing because Santa remembers who everyone is, and I always draw a blank. “Remind me of your name, please.”

Her eyebrow twitches a tiny bit. “Galenia. We went to school together? You called me Gale.”

I don’t remember. “Oh?”

“Chemistry?” She shakes her head. “You don’t remember me? We exploded reindeer food, and the fire alarm went off. Chow flew everywhere!”

I wrack my brain. I have no memory of that. “I’m sorry. I’ve been busy, and ...” I wave my hand.

Trudy stomps her little foot, and glitter flutters around us. “Excuse me! Ruth is lost, remember? Mom, how? What happened?”

“That’s the problem. I entered the barn, settled them for the evening, and the lights went out. When I flipped them back on, she had disappeared.”

A tiny tear trickles down Trudy’s cheek. “Not Ruthie. I love that old girl,” she whispers. She wraps her arms around Gale’s waist, burying her face into her flat belly.

That’s when the lights come on. In my brain, that is. “Hang on. Why did you wait until this evening to tell me she’s missing?” I check my watch. “It’s been almost twenty-four hours.”

Four days before Christmas



Early the following day, Galenia and her daughter meet me at the barn. Galenia is determined to explain why she delayed the news about Ruth. My breath blows frosty in the air. The forecast shows snow every day this week, with a blizzard due on Christmas Eve. The elves are in a frenzy to catch up on orders, and there is talk of Santa leaving early to avoid the storm.

Trudy gives each reindeer a treat, rubs their necks, and calls them by name. She makes sure they have fresh hay and water.

Gale lingers by the barn door and shakes her head. “This is my first Christmas with the reindeer. What will I tell Santa? He’ll be so upset.” Her brows draw together. I think. The skin on her forehead moves the slightest bit. Her bottom lip trembles and tears sparkle in her eyes.

Santa’s having a tough enough year. I make him lasagna and brownies every day, but his suit is still loose. The senior elves staged a strike last month. They don’t want to make baby dolls anymore—something about changing times, equal rights, blah, blah, blah.

I do not understand elf politics. If Santa hears about Ruth, it might be the final straw. Losing her famous brother years ago was almost the end of him.

“Gale, we need to locate Ruthie,” I begin.

“Yeah, Mom,” Trudy chimes in.

“Have you checked all the stalls?” I snap my fingers. “What about reindeer games? Don’t Dasher and Dancer always play a round before the big day?”

Trudy crosses her arms. “Why can’t anyone keep these guys straight? Prancer wanted to have a dance-off, but since Dasher and Dancer can’t dance ...” She throws her hands in the air. “Ugh!”

I step toward the empty stall. “We can check in here. We might find a clue.” I open the half door to Ruth’s stall and survey the area. Nothing is out of place. Her water bowl is full, and her chow is all gone. I glimpse a faint outline of where she slept in the hay.

“Do you think she ran away?” Gale asks.

“Why would she?” Trudy stomps her foot. “Ruthie wouldn’t do that.”

The other reindeer pop their heads out of their stalls, watching us. They must wonder where their friend went and why we’re here. They might know what happened, but unlike what television shows portray, reindeer can’t talk.

“Gale, I think we need to tell Santa,” I say. I can’t mention the possibility of him flying out early. Something that’s never been done in the history of Christmas.

Her shoulders slump, and she walks off, dragging her feet and leaving marks on the dirt floor.

I turn to Trudy. “If Ruth didn’t run away, do you have any idea what might’ve happened?”

She’s young but seems in touch with the animals. Each one watches her with their dark brown eyes. I see Dancer’s spot and Vixen’s long eyelashes, except now they’re not fluttering.

“I saw an elf in here the other day. I guess I startled him. He ran out right after,” she says.

“What was he doing?”

"I don't know." Trudy plops down on Ruthie's hay with a shrug.

"Can you describe him?"

Her mouth pulls up on one side, and she raises her eyebrows. "He's an elf. Pointy ears, pointy shoes."

I suppress a sigh. Sarcasm isn't helpful. I reach out my hand. "Let's find your mom. Maybe she can tell us who he is."

When we reach Santa's office, Gale stands in front of the door with her fist raised. "I'm afraid to knock. He's going to be so disappointed in me."

"Trudy saw an elf in the barn the other day."

She gets the same expression on her face as her daughter. "This is Elf Land. So ... elves."

Like daughter, like mother.

I tap on the door and turn the knob, entering the room. Santa sits at a large table, his white head bent over some papers, a red ink pen clutched in his hand. He hears us and glances up with a smile.

"Oh, Dear," he says to me. "I'm so glad you're here." He stands and kisses my cheek. "And Gale and Trudy, how are you two?"

He waves us to chairs and sits beside me on the loveseat. "What can I do for you today? I just read over the naughty list. Glad to see you weren't on it." He winks at Trudy and gives his famous "Ho ho ho."

"This is serious," Trudy says. "There's no time to laugh. It's important." Her little face wrinkles with worry.

He reaches forward and pats her on the head. "We can always make time to laugh!" He chuckles, holding his belly.

Gale whimpers. "Santa, I'm so sorry." She clasps her hands against her chest. "I searched everywhere for her. I have no idea what happened."

"What do you mean? Who did you look for?" Confusion fills his eyes.

“She’s missing.” Gale’s voice trembles.

“Who is?” Santa never gets mad. Not even when I forget to separate the wash, and all of his clothes end up with a pink tinge from his red suit. Not even when I make blueberry pancakes and burn each one.

“Ruth,” I whisper.

Santa blinks once and then a second time before he stands. He puts his hands on his hips and chuckles again. “Ho ho ho, that’s a good one.”

Trudy tugs on his fingers. “Ruthie is gone. They’re not kidding.”

He flops into his chair, running his hand through his hair. “But Christmas is only three days away.” We exchange glances, and I know he’s thinking about the blizzard too.

“We’ll find her in time, Santa,” Trudy says. “I’ll get to work now. She’ll be back in time,” she repeats before rushing out of the room.

“That girl is feisty,” he says, affection in his eyes.

Gale shakes her head. “I can’t keep up with her. Santa, I’m sorry. Ruthie never does anything like this. She’s the responsible one. Not like Blitzen. Now that one is pure mischief.”

She stops at his raised eyebrow.

“We’ll find her,” I say in a positive tone.

We have to. Christmas is almost here, and Ruth is the only one who can take Santa everywhere he needs to go, especially if he has to make it through a blizzard.

Three days before Christmas



Trudy searches for Ruth while Gale and I discuss what could have happened. We scrunch our legs under an elf-sized table and pretend to assemble more wooden horses, leaning close so no one overhears us. If any elves question our presence, they don't ask.

"Who benefits from Ruthie's absence?" I attach a blond mane with a tiny hammer to the back of a horse.

"Dasher, I suppose. But why would he do anything? All the reindeer love Ruth."

"Besides the reindeer, I mean. What about that elf? He might have reindeer-napped her."

Her neck and cheeks turn pink. Hmm, I think I've hit on something. "Gale? Is there something you need to tell me?" I try to catch her eye.

She scrunches up her nose. "It's, he's, nothing to worry about. I promise."

The lady doth protest too much.

"Is he why you didn't tell me until Ruthie had been missing a whole day?"

She nods, her eyes still downcast.

I add a tail to the horse and set it to the side. All around us, elves tap, glue, and assemble toys. Santa has a hard and fast rule about no

electronics. “Children must use their imaginations,” he insists. The topic arises every year at the annual post-Christmas round table.

I pass more horse pieces to Gale. “So, we took Chemistry together?”

“I can’t believe you don’t remember. Well, actually, I can. We were not in the same ... group.” Her mouth purses, and I catch sight of a couple of wrinkles.

My delight at the proof she’s also aging fades when her words penetrate my brain. “What do you mean?”

She wiggles in her seat.

“Galania.” My voice is firm.

“You were snooty. And popular. And I ... I wasn’t. I had dishwater blonde hair and round, clunky glasses and braces. I broke out in pimples all around my nose.” She covers her face.

I sit back, combing my memories. “Were you skinny?”

She nods.

“Did I call you Beanpole?” My heart sinks. I remember her now. The sadness on her face tells me it’s true, and shame fills me.

“I’m sorry.” My apology comes out in a whisper, barely audible. It’s hard to admit, but I was a silly, insecure girl who used to make fun of others to hide my own pain. I kneel beside her chair and take her hands. “Please, forgive me. I was more than unkind to you. I’m so sorry.”

She inhales, and I think of everything she can—and probably should—say to me. I cringe, waiting for her words.

“Thank you.” A smile plays on her lips. “It took me years to embrace myself for who I am, not for my appearance. I dyed my hair and fixed my face before the truth dawned on me.” She releases my hands and runs her fingers through her long locks, a newfound confidence in her eyes. “I kind of love the hair now.”

This woman, the bane of my existence two days ago, is teaching me. Schooling me, if I’m being honest.

I sit in my chair and study her. “How did you, you know, figure it out?”

“What do you mean?”

Ugh. I will have to let it all out. The jiggly tummy, the fake smiles, how old I feel, how I never remember anyone’s name. I list all of my faults and blemishes.

Her lips twitch, and she grins. A giggle bursts out. I lean back. I bared my heart and soul to her, and she’s laughing. Tears sting the backs of my eyes. I fist my hands so hard my nails bite into my palms.

Gale wipes her eyes, another chuckle escapes, and she shakes her head. “Sorry, I’m sorry. I never imagined *you* felt like that.” Another lip twitch, and I regret my openness. She holds up a hand. “I’m done, I promise. Whew. Can you imagine if all of us women told other women what we felt like? That would be amazing.” She sighs.

She has a point. I feel lighter now. Less rigid and stuck. “I’m hard on myself,” I confess.

“It’s a habit, Sally. You can turn it around. It’s not easy, and sometimes it hurts to realize how much you put yourself down. If you call yourself fat or jiggly, try saying you’re a bigger girl. Don’t criticize what size you wear. Just wear it. If you have gray in your hair, or white”—she nods at my wig—“own it. Call them grace glitters. If my daughter can have glittery shoes, why can’t you have glittery hair?”

A habit. She makes it sound easy, but it’s not. She’s given me a lot to think about though.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. If you ever need encouragement, call me.”

“I will,” I say. “Now, I suppose we better locate Ruth. We need her back ASAP.”

“We have a couple of days. I’m sure we can figure it out. Or Trudy will find her.” She picks up two horse pieces and secures them together.

Gale is so casual about this. Christmas is only three days from now, and today’s forecast is worse than yesterday’s. The blizzard is reported to be unlike any we’ve ever had. Should I tell her? Can I trust my new friend?

I open my mouth to speak, but Trudy rushes into the room. What she holds stops me.

“Mom, Mrs. Claus, I found Ruth’s collar. But I didn’t spot her anywhere.” She forgets to whisper, and every elf in the room gasps. Her eyes widen. “Oops.”

I stand and hold out my hands. “Everything is fine. Ruth got a bit lost in the snow, that’s all. We could use some help looking for her.” Why hadn’t I thought of this before? The elves can hunt for the missing reindeer, and Gale and I can stay back and determine if something more sinister is happening. I pray they believe me, considering Ruth’s unique abilities.

We arrange four search teams, pass out water bottles, and give one whistle per team. If anyone spots her, the whistle will alert us all.

They leave, and the room is quiet. I have to broach the mysterious elf one more time.

“You’re positive that the elf Trudy noticed was your friend?”

She nods. “I will tell Trudy about him when she gets back. I heard you telling one of the elves that Santa needs Ruth back today.” She tips her head, a question in her eyes.

“We have the weather forecast—one just for Santa, me, and the head elf. Christmas Eve is supposed to be bad. Like, history-setting bad.”

She squares her shoulders. “Shouldn’t I be aware of that too? Considering I’m in charge of the reindeer.” Her tone is frostier than ever.

“Fair point. I will discuss that with Santa. As soon as we get back this missing reindeer.”

Two days before Christmas



Galenia and I batted around two ideas. Ruthie got lost—pretty much inconceivable—or an elf reindeer-napped her. Neither of us could picture any of the elves doing it though. The search group reported back. They found no signs of our missing reindeer, not even a stray hoof print. We sent them all home, and Gale and I made plans to meet again this morning at the barn. I brought a thermos of hot cocoa, and she set out frosted goodies on a worktable.

I pull two high stools up to the table and grab a star-shaped cookie. “I think cookies are my favorite part of Christmas.”

“No,” she mumbles around a handful of reindeer chow. The sweet, crunchy kind, not their actual food. “It’s the trees. I love to decorate.”

“That’s obvious.” I gesture to the barn. Every wall and stall door holds a wreath and blinking lights. Greenery and candles decorate our table, and an eight-foot pine holds more ornaments than I knew existed.

Lights. Something about lights tickles my memory. I set down my snack. “Gale, tell me again what happened when you realized Ruth was gone?”

She sips her coffee. “Hmm, did I mention it was their bedtime?”

I remember that part, but something else happened. “The lights? Did they go out?”

“Yes! They blinked out, and she was missing when they came back on.” She reaches out and grabs my hand. “Do you think that’s when she left or was taken?”

“It has to be. Why did the lights go out? How long were they off?”

She screws up her mouth, a thoughtful look on her face. “Two minutes? At the most. It wasn’t storming, so I didn’t know what caused it. I was buttoning my jacket to go check the electric box when they came back on.”

“You didn’t flip the light switch?”

She shakes her head.

I stand. “We need to investigate. I suspect someone turned them off and used that time to take her.”

She leads me out the barn door, and we crunch through the snow to the back of the building. A small wooden box covers the electric panel. The padlock on it is broken. With my gloved hand, I remove the lock and open the box. Inside is a confusing jumble of fuses with labels written on blue painter’s tape. I tap the fuse for the “main light barn,” which is now in the on position.

I check the snow at our feet, wishing I’d thought to do it before we tromped in the area.

“Are there other footprints besides ours?” I ask.

Gale studies the ground, then leans over and points. “Yes. Those are ours. We both have the same tread on our snow boots. But see that one?”

In several places, a footprint appears. It’s larger than ours and narrows to a point. It could be a man’s or a woman’s with long feet. Either way, it is an elf shoeprint.

She straightens up. “I don’t understand.”

What doesn't she get? It was an elf, and we both know an elf has been hanging around. "Out with it, Gale. Who did Trudy see, and why was he here? Would he have taken Ruth?"

I never thought she, of all people, would be involved in stealing a reindeer. After all, her sole job was to care for them. She doesn't answer, and I clear my throat. "Nothing? You have nothing to say for yourself?"

She meets my gaze, fire in her eyes, and spits out, "He is my tutor."

"Your what?"

"Tutor. Are you happy now?"

No, I'm confused. Still. "Let me get this straight. You have an elf coming to teach you, and you're embarrassed by that?" I picture her learning to waltz or how to speak a foreign language. Maybe she's a spy, and he's teaching her how to take over Elf Land.

She stomps away and then turns. "If I'd wanted you to know, I would've told you. But I can tell you think I'm caught up in this reindeer-napping. To prove I'm not, come with me." She holds out her hand.

Panic fills me. "Galenia, we're in a time crunch here. If Ruthie isn't home by tonight, Santa won't make it out before the storm." I wish I could make her understand. The forecast worsened every day.

She wiggles her fingers. "Trust me. Come on."

I'm not feeling good about this. I reach out and grab her hand.

It takes an hour to walk where we're going. My nose is dripping from the wind, my fingers are cramping, and I haven't been able to feel my toes for the last thirty minutes. I spot a building up ahead, and as we draw nearer, I realize it's more of a shack. The wood is weathered gray, and light seeps out through several cracks. I reach for the doorknob, but Gale stops me.

“When we get in there, you’ll see my elf friend. Be kind. He’s ... different.”

I snort. Of course, I’ll be kind. I’m Mrs. Claus. But I don’t say that because Gale probably thinks about how I was in high school. “I will. I promise.”

I open the door.

Two days before Christmas, midday



Two things shock me inside the shack. First, the decorations outnumber the ones in the barn. There is not an empty space on the walls. Blinking lights and nutcrackers of all sizes stand on every surface. Second is the elf himself.

I've been around elves all my life. This one is taller than any I've met. He's so skinny I worry he'll blow out through a crack in the walls. His nose is beyond pointy, but when I peer at his feet—let's not forget we're hunting a reindeer thief—I see he has the tiniest, widest shoes in all of Elf Land. They're almost round. And they do not match the tracks in the snow by the barn.

"Hello," I say, sticking out my hand.

Gale steps in front of me and touches her friend on his shoulder. I'm not sure how she reaches it. "Henry, this is my friend, Sally Claus. We need your help."

Henry reaches out a short, stubby hand. It's like he was made with all the leftover elf parts. Nothing matches.

We shake, and he holds on. "We are friends."

I think he means him and Gale. "Yes, she told me." What could he be tutoring her in? The shack tells me nothing. I turn to Gale with a questioning gaze.

She wraps her hand around his arm. "Henry is teaching me to be kind and how to work with the reindeer."

Huh. I didn't know you had to learn how to be kind. I narrow my eyes. "Can you explain that?"

"Which part?"

I raise my eyebrows. "Both."

She launches into a long explanation about Henry, how he is different but always kind, and how they've become friends. As far as the reindeer, her predecessor didn't leave directions on how to bond with the animals, and Gale explains her struggles.

"Okay, that makes sense." It does, but this does not lead us any closer to discovering Ruthie. "Can he help with our investigation?"

She turns toward her friend, and they whisper for several minutes. She looks at me. "He has an idea of what's going on."

Thank goodness. It's already after lunchtime, and Santa must leave tonight to miss the blizzard. We only have a few hours to find Ruth and return her to the herd.

Henry leads us outside, shuts the shack's door, and trudges down the path. We reach a tiny gate nestled in a row of shrubs. He turns, gesturing for us to follow. I have no idea where we're going. We follow a snow-covered road until it dead ends. Henry lifts his hand and points.

"There."

I follow his finger and gasp. It's Ruth. How did she get here, and who took her? I'm thrilled to see her, but I'm frustrated too. I approach, softly calling her name. I think she smiles at me.

"Hey, big girl, we sure have missed you." She rubs her antlers against my outstretched hand. "Santa needs you, sweetie."

At my words, her head pops up.

Gale approaches. "Ruth, you look great!"

She grins. She has quite an expressive face.

Henry joins us. Ruthie leans into him as he scratches her head and neck. I see another elf heading our way. I turn, holding up my hand.

“Stop!”

He stutters to a halt, his eyebrows scrunched together. “Who are you, and why are you here?” he demands.

“Who am I? I’m Mrs. Claus. Sally Claus.” I notice his pointy shoes and the footprints he’s left in the fresh snow. “It’s him, Gale. He took Ruthie.”

The elf scoffs. “Took her? She’s here for her annual navigation assessment. I couldn’t get into the barn. Sorry about the broken padlock.”

I turn to Gale. “Annual what?”

She shrugs. “I told you the previous keeper didn’t leave me any information, but Ruth is the best at navigation.”

“Is she ready?” I ask the elf.

“To leave? Sure! We’ve had a great time, haven’t we, girl?”

The reindeer nods.

“Next time, can we do this without all the mystery?” I ask.

He winks and sets up a meeting with Gale to go over more reindeer guidelines.

“Let’s go then. We only have a couple of hours,” I say. Ruth, Henry, and the elf stare at me as I explain the incoming snowstorm.

The elf gets Ruth’s things, and we hurry back to the herd. Santa has the other reindeer already hooked up to his toy-stuffed sleigh. We buckle her at the front. Trudy rushes to her, throwing her arms around the reindeer’s neck.

“I’m so glad you’re back in time! Are you ready to lead?”

We wave as Santa takes off. In the distance, snow clouds rush in, but I spot Ruth at the front of the team. She’ll get them where they need to go, blizzard or no blizzard.

“Merry Christmas to all,” I say.

And to all, a bright night.