THE BIGGEST CHRISTMAS SECRET EVER

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Orion

ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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For Roscoe
a new story for
a new baby

One

There aren't many people who can burp to the tune of *Jingle Bells*, but my brother somehow managed it. He even took a bow when he got to the end.

Me and Mum stared at him, our expressions somewhere between horrified and impressed. 'So . . . that's what you learnt instead of your GCSE French verbs,' Mum said after a moment.

'Time well spent, I think,' said Will, patting his chest as he folded his lanky teenage self into a chair. 'I'm going to show Nick when he gets home.'

‘I’m sure he’ll be very entertained,’ Mum said, sipping her coffee. She looked back at her pile of case notes. She’d only been back at work full time for a couple of months, and already it was as though she’d never left. Endless emails about cats who’d got into fights with bigger cats, hamsters who wouldn’t eat and fish that seemed to do nothing but poop pinged on to her tablet constantly – and the pages of notes she brought home in her rucksack never seemed to get any smaller. Mum always said how much she loved her job, but it was hard work being a vet. I’d already made up my mind not to be one.

But even with her busy workload, Mum had found time to dive completely into her usual enthusiasm for decorating the house for Christmas. Every year she dug out handmade baubles, toilet-roll angels and scrunched-up paper snowflakes from years gone by. Our boring living room was transformed in the space of a few hours into a grotto of fairy lights, glow-in-the-dark reindeer and a

seven-foot-tall Christmas tree that dominated one corner of the already cramped space. The picture frames on the windowsill were buried beneath glittery fluff that smelled of dust but was sparklingly festive. Christmas in our house was always the *best* time of year.

'Harper, are you sitting on my wool?' Will asked. 'I've told you not to mess with my stuff.'.

'I wouldn't dream of messing with your stuff,' I said, rolling my eyes. 'Don't get your needles in a twist. I stuck it in this carrier bag, because it was in the way. Again.'

'Like your laundry,' Mum added, muttering something about lost socks under her breath.

Will ignored us both, and grabbed the bag to put it out of my reach. He wasn't as grumpy as he pretended to be. He'd taught himself to knit a few months ago after watching a video on YouTube, and now could make lumpy shapeless bags that he claimed were hats, or mittens or socks. His big project was a Christmas jumper that

he'd started knitting in summer but still hadn't finished. With December now underway, it looked as though it would have to be a Christmas hanky.

Outside, a car's headlights approached, and Mum glanced up expectantly and then back at her work when the lights passed by. We were all *waiting*, trying to find something to do without leaving the living room. The TV was on silent, the subtitles scrolling along the bottom of the screen as a chef made caramelised vegetables, so sugar-coated they rolled about in the oven tray like lumps of seaside rock.

'He's late,' I said.

'He'll be here,' Mum said. 'He always is, in the end.'

It was true, he always was.

As if on cue, there was another flash of headlights in the front window, and then a vehicle pulled on to the drive. Will darted over and yanked across the net curtain enough for me to see a red pick-up truck. 'He's here!'

‘I told you so,’ Mum smiled, taking her reading glasses off and fluffing out her blonde hair.

There was the sound of keys in the back door, a heavy thud of boots on the kitchen mat, a clunk of a suitcase and then a booming cry of: ‘I’m ho-ho-hoooome!’

I darted around the sofa and through the door, grinning my head off.

Nick stood in the kitchen, hands on his hips, a scarf around his neck and shoulders, a big smile on his bearded face. He was wearing dark blue jeans and heavy black boots as he always did, his white and grey beard was trim and neat compared to the flyaway hair on his head that had been haphazardly pulled back into a bun, and the buttons on his red coat were straining to remain fastened over his barrelled torso. ‘Harper!’ he said delightedly, as soon as he saw me.

‘Nick!’ I went over for a hug, and he lifted me clean off the ground.

‘I think you’ve grown again these past two weeks,’ he said after a moment, planting me back on the floor. ‘You’re always doing that.’

‘Not as much as Will,’ I said, looking at my fifteen-year-old brother who was creeping into the kitchen, pretending not to be bothered about Nick’s arrival but failing to hide a smile.

‘Hey, Nick,’ he managed to drawl.

‘Hey, Will.’ The two of them bumped fists, and I hid a smirk behind my hand. It would take Will another hour or two to forget about trying to be an adult.

Finally, Mum came in, smiling and with her arms stretched out. She and Nick had a big cuddle and a disgusting kiss. ‘You’re late,’ she chided as they broke apart.

‘You should have seen the traffic,’ Nick said. ‘It was fine until we got over the North Sea . . . and then you wouldn’t believe the flocks of migrating birds! The girls

had to dodge left and right. Mind you, they were glad to stretch their legs.'

'Did you get them all tucked away?' Mum asked.

'Oh yes. Eight reindeer all safe and sound at the farm park,' Nick chuckled. 'They were settling down for sleep when I left. The quick flight from Finland was enough to give them a reminder of what's to come in a few weeks.'

'I still can't believe we can just talk about all this now,' I said happily. 'After you two keeping it a secret for so long.'

'Well, can you blame us?' Mum scoffed, as Nick laughed. 'Imagine if I had told you I was dating Father Christmas the first time you'd met Nick – you never would have believed me! You would have thought I was trying to be funny.'

'But he *is* Father Christmas!' I cried happily.

And it was true. He had the beard, the strength, the

reindeer, the sleigh *and the magic*. Nick didn't just look like Santa Claus – he *was* Santa Claus. The real one. The one and only. And it was the biggest secret ever . . .

It had all started the Christmas before last. I'd had my suspicions about Nick straight away, because there were plenty of clues – the snowfall that only seemed to land in our garden, and the morning we found a reindeer on the roof! But it was only through some cunning detective work, a few broken promises, and a night I'll never forget that the truth finally came out. We didn't just have a sort-of-stepdad. We had Stepfather Christmas!

Things had gotten interesting after that. Last Christmas, the first one with the secret out in the family, it had been funny rather than mysterious: how there were endless boxes of post for Nick, and how he knew what was inside every wrapped present. I'd hoped for a magical Christmas Eve flight in the sleigh again, helping to deliver a few presents . . . but that night there had been torrential rain

so it was too wet for me and Will to join Nick and his reindeer.

But then, in the new year, we all got a surprise . . .

There was a sudden wail from a chunky white walkie-talkie on the kitchen counter. The wail quietened off, and then turned into a sort of nonsense babble.

'Oh, she's awake,' Mum said.

'I'll go,' Nick said, easing past her and heading up the stairs.

Me and Will exchanged looks. A lot had changed this past year. Some of it had been small, some of it had been big – and one bit was absolutely spectacular.

'Here she is!' Nick said, coming back into the kitchen. There was a baby on his hip, clinging to his coat with her fierce little hands, looking around at us sleepily. Nick kissed her on the head. 'I missed you, Yula Hall.'

Two

Oh yeah, we have a baby sister!

I don't mean to brag, but Yula is, without a doubt, the cutest and best baby sister there has ever been in the entire universe. She's round and squishy and has blonde wispy hair that sticks up in all directions like she's a cartoon scientist. Yula's voice has a good range – she makes little sing-song noises and can also bellow louder than a foghorn. She can crawl and pull herself upright on the furniture, and everything she set eyes on goes into

her mouth. She's not quite eleven months old, but nevertheless she completely rules our house.

Nick covered Yula in kisses, until she decided she'd had enough of his whiskers brushing against her cheek and grabbed a fistful of his beard. He went very still as she clung on with a vice-like grip. 'Ouch.'

Yula beamed and yanked harder. Nick's eyes started to water.

'She does that with my hair, too,' I said, wincing in sympathy.

Yula finally decided to let go, and gave a happy squeal, kicking her legs enthusiastically. She wasn't ready for walking quite yet, but she was doing plenty of leg exercises in preparation. Mum was busy baby-proofing the house from top to bottom. Will already had a lock on his door.

'Come and sit down, Nick, you've had a long flight,' Mum said, leading the way into the glittering living room.

I decided to put the kettle on to give Nick and Mum

a moment with Yula by themselves. The problem with Nick's job was that sometimes he had to go back to the North Pole for a few weeks at a time. The official story for anyone who asked was that Nick spent time in Finland for work. Which was actually true, we just didn't mention the Father Christmas part. And we had learnt that there were all sorts of Christmassy things Nick had to be a part of before December: like toy manufacturing and delivery, sleigh improvements, caring for reindeer calves, dealing with emergencies at T.I.N.S.E.L. (The International NorthPole Sorting Envelopes Logistics division, which handled the redirection of all the letters) . . . being Father Christmas was a job all year, not just on Christmas Eve. But even though it was tricky to organise sometimes, Nick made sure to come back to the UK at least once every two weeks to be with us. He'd promised he would and, so far, he was making good on it.

Mum had taken time off when Yula was first born,

but now that she was back to work full time, she was as busy as ever. Plus, Yula had be picked up from nursery before Mum's old finishing time, so now all of Mum's forms and veterinary notes came home with her to complete in the evenings. And she had to fit those around looking after Yula. Our lives had changed a lot, but it was a good kind of busy – the sort where there's always something to look forward to.

Will brought his knitting bag in from the lounge and started sorting out his needles. The half-a-jumper he was working on dangled between them. 'Maybe this jumper can be for Yula,' he said, holding it up and looking at the size of it.

'Or a hamster,' I suggested, pouring water into the teapot. I piled digestive biscuits on to a plate and put it on the tea tray. 'Why don't you stick to making hats? The hats are great.' The hats were *not* great, but they were very warm, despite looking like misshapen puddings. We

all had one now, even Yula – though hers was miles too big for her.

'I just wanted to try to do something a bit more complicated . . .' Will started counting stitches. 'Knitting is meant to be good for your brain, so I thought it would help me with my Puzzle Cubing. I didn't realise it was going to consume my entire life.' He accepted his tea with a smile and frowned down at his project. I left him to it. The patterns looked more complicated than the coding lessons we had at school.

In the living room, Nick and Mum were watching Yula speed-crawl from one end of the room to the other. Everything looked very cosy. The Christmas tree was illuminated and twinkling with colourful fairy lights that seemed more sparkly than ever, making the framed pictures on the windowsill glow brightly. There were photos of me, Will, Mum and Nick at Lapland; Yula, five minutes after she'd been born when she still looked

like an angry turnip; Mum and Nick at the seaside; me and Will dressed up in a lot of padded gear to play Laser Tag; and me on my twelfth birthday going to see the Rainbow Catz at the East Midlands Arena.

'How were things at the North Pole, Nick?' I asked, putting the tea tray down.

Nick gave a resigned sort of groan. 'Busy. The sleigh is still over there – the tech team at HQ want to make some anti-drone modifications. People keep inventing new technology that I have to try and avoid . . .'

I wanted to laugh – it was funny to think of Father Christmas trying to avoid being spotted by a drone, swerving around the skies. With all the satellites and cameras around, it was a wonder he managed to get away without being detected at all. 'Don't you *ever* get seen?' I asked.

'Occasionally. It's not *always* a problem. It depends who I'm seen by,' he said, reaching for one of the biscuits

that had silently transformed into Christmas-tree shapes the moment I brought them into the room. 'Children see me flying past? No problem. Someone films me on their phone? Huge incident.'

'What happens then?' I asked, imagining alarms and flashing lights and elves in jumpsuits running towards helicopters.

'The communications team usually make sure it's dismissed as a hoax,' Nick said, dipping his biscuit. 'They have elves posing as human video experts who claim the footage has been altered. It's a bit of a fib, but necessary . . . if everyone figured out who and where I am, Christmas could be ruined.'

'*I* figured it out,' I said, a bit smugly.

'Yes, but you're smart,' Nick said. 'And I *was* living in your house, which gave you a little advantage.'

'But what if someone else figures it out?' I asked. 'Like, a stranger?'

Nick lifted Yula on to his lap, and she promptly stole the last half of his biscuit. 'I don't even like to think about it,' he said. 'That could mean the end of Christmas as we know it.'