



# Snowflakes, Mistletoe, & Candy Cane Rocket Launchers

By Cassie Laelyn

Concealed machines puffed fake snow into the air while Mariah Carey trilled from the mall speakers. Usually, I'd hum along with the tunes or maybe even belt out lyrics between kids. But tonight, the never-ending line had stretched passed the main entrance to Winter Wonderland, around the corner and down the center of the mall for as far as I could see. I'd lost count of the number of kids who'd sat on Santa's knee and the amount of candy I'd given out.

And dumbass North hadn't even shown for his shift on our busiest night.

Not only had I picked up the slack, taking a record number of payments and smiling like my mortgage depended on it, but he'd left me dateless for the annual light show. Trust me to fall for the hot, Christmas-loving colleague with commitment issues.

Did I mention it was Christmas Eve? And I was still at work?

My feet had their own heartbeat as they throbbed and ached while I motioned for the kid at the front of the line to hurry and move forward. Seven more kids. Seven more requests for ridiculous presents with outrageous price tags after which, I'd kick off the pointy, green elf shoes currently squishing my toes.

"I want a pony," the little girl squeaked with excitement.

I snorted, much to the disgust of her father standing beside me.

*Oh, for frost's sake.*

What hope did the world have if kids these days only demanded ponies and Xbox's? What happened to Christmas spirit and the joy of giving? Gone. *Poof*. Add to the mix annoying, good-looking guys who didn't show for their date, and suddenly humanity was a lost cause.

Said Christmas spirit had well and truly vacated this gal's body tonight.

Eleven minutes and three kids remained.

A commotion outside Winter Wonderland turned heads, but I couldn't see from my vantage point beside Santa. Honestly, I had no desire to even look. Whatever it was, could wait until after my twelve-hour shift. After which, I'd shut the doors and binge eat candy for good measure.

"Last one!" I clapped my hands a little too gleefully, before snapping my fingers in front of the stocky toddler.

The little boy stomped his way to Santa with his hands on his hips while his mother glared at the exchange. Like mother, like son.

While the boy gave Santa his list of demands, I hurried to the entrance and flipped the sign to closed. Closed until next year. If the pay wasn't so high, I'd throw out my elf shoes with the stragglers.

Holding open the door, I tossed the kid a candy cane as he and his mother walked out, followed by...Santa, otherwise known as Saint.

Still wearing his costume, Saint flashed me a smile. “You good to close, Holly? I’m taking my guy to see the light show.”

Of course, he was. Did everyone in this town have a date for the show? Everyone except me? Next year, I’d step more outside my dreary nine-to-five existence and experience adventure for once. Really live.

“Fine,” I grumbled, practically slamming the door on his oversized red pants as he sauntered out.

A flash of red caught my attention, zipping between the Christmas tree display at the entrance to the mall. I paused long enough to squint then thought better of involving myself in anything that detracted from getting these shoes off.

Back at the register, I kicked off the foot torture devices and ran the end of day takings.

A loud bang made me jump. Spinning, I found North yanking on the locked door. He wore our standard work uniform of an unflattering green top and shorts, with red and white striped long sleeve tee and tights underneath. Well, unflattering for me. North could wear a tin can and still look drool-worthy.

“Snowflake! Let me in.”

Snowflake. I rolled my eyes. He’d called me that ever since he gave me a glittery snowflake brooch when we’d started working together this December. Which I stupidly still wore, despite his no-show.

Glaring at him, I gave my traitorous heart a mental slap to stop flipping around in my chest.

“Go away,” I snapped, before turning my back on him to empty the leftover candy

canes in a takeout container to binge eat later tonight. Could I make a cocktail with them?

North banged on the door again. “Holly, open up! We need to get out of here.”

As I turned to give him a piece of my mind, my breath stalled. At the far end of the mall, three, no, *four*, guys bolted down the escalators toward North, wearing black military style...elf costumes. Despite their festive hats, they looked anything but friendly.

Clearly, I’d hit my head at some point today if I considered saving North.

I sighed. Just because the guy stood me up, and no showed for his shift, didn’t mean I wanted a bunch of weirdos to beat him up. His face was too gorgeous for that.

Before I convinced myself otherwise, I opened the door enough for North to slip inside, then bolted it shut again.

“POLE found me,” he grumbled, grabbing my hand to drag me around the snow machine toward the back of the store. “I need to warn Santa.”

“Pole?”

He tugged my hand. “A group of paranoid, oppressing, lunatic elves.”

“Have you been drinking?”

Also, since when did he smell so good? Like winter snow and candy and warm cinnamon by the fire all stirred into one delicious scent.

“You didn’t show for your shift.” *I thought you stood me up...*

Without slowing his stride, he squeezed my hand. “Been trying to outrun these idiots all day. I thought we’d be safe here until after Christmas.”

We? Safe? In a mall at Christmastime? The guy was delusional.

Still holding my hand, he threw the cover sheet off an ornamental sleigh beside where Saint had sat on a big red chair pretending to be Santa.

Was it me, or did the sleigh start to...hum with energy? As though North had unearthed an ancient treasure.

Had I been drinking?

Shouts beyond the closed glass doors snagged my attention, and I glanced over my shoulder to find the scary elves closing in. Two of them lugged what looked like red and white striped rocket launchers.

“Holy fruitcake,” I murmured, frozen to the spot.

North yanked me into the sleigh. As soon as my ass hit the cushiony bench seat, he jumped in beside me. Like, *right* beside.

“Closer, snowflake.” With his hand on my outer thigh, he shuffled me flush against him. “This is going to be hard and fast, but I promise I’ll explain everything afterward.”

Was I having a stroke? Dreaming? At least that explained the sudden rush of heat between my thighs.

As if in slow motion, North leaned in, his enchanting eyes muddling my senses and sprouting goosebumps along my flesh. I should be angry, confused, heck, any emotion right now other than the inappropriate one flaming my insides. Instead, I swayed toward the strange current crackling between us, luring me even closer to him. I couldn’t ignore it. I mean, I could, but something told me it wouldn’t disappear in a hurry.

His cool fingers smoothed along my jaw, tunnelling into my hair as his mouth hovered a breath away from mine. My heart fluttered to life. His gaze dipped to my lips, and I tilted my chin up before I thought better of it. Right before he kissed me, his free hand unclipped the snowflake brooch from the collar of my shirt.

“I stole this,” he whispered, his gravelly voice sweeping over me in a feverish caress.

“Stole?” I snapped free of the lust-daze and recoiled. “What? You stole a brooch and then gave it to me?” I scrambled back in the seat to clear my head. “I’ve been wearing stolen property this entire month?”

A stupid smirk lifted the corner of his mouth. I refused to find it attractive. Not one

bit.

“More borrowed. Technically, Santa loaned it to me so POLE couldn’t ruin Christmas. But…” He motioned to more scary elves now converging on the glass doors.

“You see how that panned out.”

Santa? I threw my head back and laughed. “You think you’re a real elf?”

An explosion outside the store snapped my gaze to the glass doors.

Beyond the entrance, four elves raised candy cane rocket launchers and took aim. I screamed, dropping my knees to the hard floor of the sleigh. Several *tinks* sounded, followed by the telltale sign of glass splintering.

Undeterred by the threat, North inserted the brooch, my *stolen* brooch, into a hidden notch in the sleigh and it rumbled to life.

He looked down at me, bright blue eyes sparkling with excitement. “What’ll it be? The North Pole or stay here?”

“Wait? Are you serious?”

“I promise to show you a world way more magical than a small-town light show.”

I screwed up my face. “That’s the cheesiest line I’ve ever heard.”

He winked. Winked!

He was serious. North, the guy I’d met a month ago while working as an elf in Winter Wonderland, wanted to whisk me away to the North Pole, to warn the real Santa.

I peeked over the front of the sleigh as the bad elves fired miniature candy canes at the doors from the rocket launchers, slowly cracking the glass.

The lock would break with a strong shoulder charge, but I kept that knowledge to myself.

North’s fingers curled around mine, as he helped me back into the seat. “Take a chance, snowflake. It’s Christmas Eve.”

My gaze darted to the elves then back to North.

*Oh, comet.*

Hadn't I vowed earlier to live more, to experience beyond the hustle of my dreary existence? But with a guy I'd known for less than a month? In a sleigh that was no longer ornamental, fleeing from elves dressed like a festive SWAT team?

*Yes.*

My heart answered long before my mind had caught up.

“If the brooch was so important, why did you give it to me?” I asked, as though his answer would make my decision. Plus, what if I'd lost it? What if I'd tossed it out with my shoes?

His previous smirk transformed into a soft, devastating smile. “Because I knew I would never leave without you.”

I peered into those strangely familiar bright eyes. Had I lost my mind? *Maybe.* But I'd also never felt so alive. So...excited for the future.

With a nod, the electrical current sparking between us somehow anchored and locked into place.

North raised his arm and the second he wiggled his fingers, a sprig of mistletoe zipped across the store into his waiting hand. He pocketed it with a smug grin. “I'm saving that for later.”

I laughed as he tucked me under his arm.

When the glass doors finally smashed, and the bad elves charged in, North pressed the big button shaped like a present on the control panel. My ears whooshed as the sleigh vanished from inside the store and reappeared in the parking lot, a second before it took off into the clear night sky.

*The End!*

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