



The  
Christmas  
Angel

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## The Christmas Angel

A familiar tug on his pant leg drew Colin's attention from the Douglas fir.

"Daddy?" His three-year-old son's voice held a note of awe. "Is that a Christmas angel?"

Colin followed the line of his son's pointing finger to a young woman dressed in a creamy white, full-length wool coat. A long, red scarf dangled down each side with sparkling red and white fringe. Curly brown hair hung to her waist. She turned to examine another tree, and his breath hitched. A heart-shaped face with a porcelain complexion and high cheekbones brought immediate thoughts of faeries, elves, or yes, even heavenly hosts.

"She sure looks like an angel, doesn't she?" he whispered in answer. Colin couldn't stop himself from staring. Dark, fine eyebrows arched in a delicate curve over large, beautiful eyes, the color indistinguishable at this distance. Rosy cheeks gave testament to the chill in the air. Full pink lips glistened with shiny gloss or lipstick. She bit her lower lip and spun to consider another tree.

Colin had the insane desire to nibble on that lip himself. He shook his head. Not in the two years since his wife died had a woman drawn his attention. Sure, he'd checked them out, even gone on a few dates. But none had truly sparked his interest.

Philip's fascinated visage changed with the machinations of his young mind. "She's too big to fit on the tree."

A laugh shook him. "Yeah, I suppose she is."

"I want to talk to her." With that declaration, Philip darted toward the young woman. Colin followed but couldn't catch him before the boy yanked the

coat of the heavenly vision. He followed his son and prayed the lady liked children.

The woman looked down. Surprise flitted across her lovely features, but a brilliant smile replaced it in less than a heartbeat. "Hello."

"Can we take you home with us?"

Accustomed to his son's frank, inquisitive nature, Colin sucked in a quick breath as Philip managed to surprise even him. He stopped short and gaped at the back of his son's head. How was he supposed to handle this? Would she understand how unpredictable kids can be?

Colin looked up to find the young woman staring at him, her eyes round with astonishment—green eyes, almost the color of the trees surrounding them. He held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I'm sorry," Colin said. "He thinks you're a Christmas angel."

Her gaze lowered to Philip. The beautiful smile returned, and she kneeled to give her full attention to the boy. "Well, you are just about the cutest little elf I've ever seen."

His son laughed. "I'm not an elf."

"You're not? I don't believe it. Let me see those ears." She pushed away his hair and touched an ear. "Hmm. They're not pointy. Maybe you're not an elf."

Philip shook his head. "No, I'm just a boy. So can we take you home?"

Colin sighed. He thought the young woman had done a fine job of changing the subject, but this time, Philip wouldn't be distracted.

She grinned. "Your mommy might be upset if you brought me home, don't you think?"

"It's okay. I don't have a mommy."

The lady sucked in a startled breath and looked up at Colin for an explanation. He jammed his hands into his pockets. "My wife died a couple of years ago. He doesn't remember her."

Distress and sorrow fled across her face, but she quickly schooled her expression. "Oh, well, then. How about if you come home with me?"

*Smart woman*, Colin thought. Children this age would never agree to leave their parents.

"Can Daddy come, too?"

The woman glanced at Colin. "Oh, no, I'm sorry. I just have a little apartment. I only have room for you."

Colin smiled. She'd handled that very well.

Philip's lips turned down for an instant, but he would not be deterred. "My house is big. There's enough room for all of us."

She laughed and looked up at Colin. "Maybe I should try another tactic." She stood and crossed her arms. "I don't know. Do you have lots of hot chocolate at your house?"

Philip nodded his head. "Uh-huh. I love hot chocolate. And we have wittle marshmawows, too."

"What about candy canes?"

He scrunched his face up in concern and turned to Colin. "Can we buy candy canes, Daddy?"

Colin smiled. He really should say "no," but he just couldn't bring himself to do it. "I thought we'd get some to hang on the tree, and you can have one every day until Christmas."

Philip's face brightened. "We're gonna buy some candy canes. Can we take you home now?"

She laughed, a soft tinkling sound. "Chocolate and peppermint. You certainly know how to tempt a woman."

"Mandy!" A young man rushed toward them. "Three alarms on 4<sup>th</sup> and Chestnut. Office building. Gotta go." He shoved some money into her hand. "Get a cab. I'll call you later." He spun around.

"Wait! What about my tree?" she called after him.

He glanced over his shoulder. "Tomorrow!"

She sighed, and a puff of vapor filled the chilly air. Disappointment erased the smile she'd worn only moments ago.

Colin shared her regret, but for different reasons. "Your husband?"

"Hmm?" Her brows drew together. "Oh." She shook her head. "Brother. He's a fireman, and even when he's off duty, he's on call. Budget cuts. Never enough help, you know?"

He wasn't quite certain what she'd said after the word "brother." Nothing else mattered. If she needed her brother to help her bring home a Christmas tree, maybe she didn't have a husband or boyfriend. "Yeah." Colin cleared his throat wishing he were as bold and frank as Philip.

Philip's voice cut into Colin's self-condemnation for his lack of confidence when it came to women. "Is your brother an angel, too?"

Another heavenly smile lit her face. "He might qualify as a fallen angel." She glanced back at the tree she'd been admiring. "I guess I won't be getting a tree this afternoon." The smile disappeared, and a frown marred her doll-like features.

"Why not?" Philip looked at the tree. "Don't you like any?"

Her full, glossy lips puckered in a pout. Colin couldn't take his eyes off her mouth. Thoughts of sweet kisses clouded his mind. He struggled to listen to her

next words. "I don't have a way to get it home now. My brother was supposed to help me with his truck. My car is too small to carry a tree."

The offer floundered on Colin's tongue, but he shouldn't have worried. His son voiced his thoughts without reserve. Philip bounced up and down. "My daddy has a big car! We can help you with the twee."

She looked up at him. "Oh, no, I couldn't ask you to do that."

"You didn't." Colin grinned. "But the offer stands. My SUV has a rack on top, and it'll hold two trees. I don't mind."

"Are you sure? I mean, you don't even know me." She bit her lip again and looked down at Philip.

Colin chuckled. "What kind of man would I be if I refused to help a Christmas angel?"

Her lilting laughter filled the air. "All right then. If you're sure you don't mind. I just live about a mile or so away from here at Oak Terrace Apartments. Do you know where that is?"

Colin kept a straight face. "Is that the new apartment complex on Oak Terrace?"

She blushed and shook her head. "I guess that was a silly question. I'm new around here. I finished graduate school, but couldn't find a good job back in Kansas. My brother told me about this great research clinic here in Nashville. I applied, got the job, and moved here a couple of months ago. I'm still learning my way around. Oh!" She held out her gloved hand. "I'm Amanda Sanders, by the way. My friends call me Mandy."

Colin closed his fingers around her hand. A jolt of warmth and desire resonated through him. "I'm—" He had to stop and clear his throat to cover the husky tone his voice had suddenly taken. "I'm Colin Murphy." Colin forced himself to let go of her hand.

She stared at him, a look of curiosity and wonder in her Christmas-green eyes. Had she felt it too? Her voice held a softer, warmer quality as she spoke again. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Colin."

His son yanked on her coat. "I'm Philip."

Her dazzling smile reappeared, and she grasped his hand and shook it. "It's nice to meet you, Philip."

Philip pointed at the tree behind her. "Is that the twee you want?"

She nodded. "Yep. That's the one."

He pointed to another a few feet away. "And I want that one, Daddy."

Within minutes, the attendants had netted both trees and loaded them on top of Colin's SUV. He checked the ties one last time and opened the door to the back seat. With an exaggerated groan, he hoisted Philip into his booster seat. "Did you grow again? You keep getting heavier and heavier."

Philip giggled. "Uh huh. I was gwowing while we looked at the twees."

Mandy waited near the rear of the vehicle with a smile. Colin opened the passenger door and gestured for her climb in. "Your carriage, my lady."

She bit her lip, the hesitation obvious.

He smiled. "I was wondering when you'd realize that you had agreed to get in a car with a stranger."

Her gaze moved to Philip in the back seat. "An elf didn't seem quite so intimidating."

Colin chuckled. "As a rule, I only get this reaction from people when I'm wearing my white coat."

"White coat?"

"I'm a doctor. A pediatrician. Usually it's just the kids that are afraid of me, not the grown-ups." He smiled at her. "I promise I won't order any shots or vaccinations on the one mile trip to your apartment."

Mandy laughed and glanced at Philip again. He sat patiently, watching her. She sighed and stepped forward. "Well, as long as there are no shots."

As she moved to get in, she brushed against him inadvertently. A soft gasp spread a fog on the cold glass of the window. Her lashes lifted to meet his gaze. That wondrous look had returned, and it no doubt matched the emotion in his own eyes. Mandy's closeness sent a wave of need through him and awakened thoughts and desires long buried. He swallowed hard and resisted the urge to pull her into his arms and taste those sweet, glossy lips. They'd only just met. She'd probably slap him. Wouldn't that be a scene? And how would he explain to Philip?

Her chin rose, and her lips curved in purely feminine smile.

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Mandy searched Colin's chocolate brown eyes, certain he'd felt the chemistry between them just as she had. Thick ash blond hair curled around his ears and the nape of his neck. Mandy wanted to yank off her gloves and bury her fingers in it—if she could reach it. The handsome man stood head and shoulders above her, and she was no petite miss. At five-eight, few men made her feel so small as she did while standing next to Colin.

Her senses jerked in response to his nearness. The scent of pine from the trees mixed with his spicy cologne, and her stomach fluttered. Wasn't this the way her mom had always said it would be? "When you meet the right one, you'll know." Mandy had never understood. Until now.

She smiled before she climbed into the car. Out of habit, she reached for the seatbelt and pulled it across her. Glancing over her shoulder, she discovered



Philip watching her. The adorable little boy had blond hair a few shades lighter than his father's, but his eyes were like a carbon copy. Mandy spoke to the toddler as Colin climbed into the car. "Thank you for helping with my tree."

He smiled. "You're welcome."

The engine roared to life. Colin put the car in gear and drove toward the exit.

Philip pointed. "There, Daddy! They have candy canes!"

Colin stopped at the corner. "Do you mind the detour?"

Mandy shook her head. "We need candy canes."

His gaze held hers for a moment before it fell to her lips. Her heart skipped a beat. He wanted to kiss her. And she'd let him if he tried. It didn't matter that they'd met less than thirty minutes ago. There was something about this man that seemed right. What should she do to let him know she was interested, too?

His breath hissed as he returned his attention to the traffic. He pulled into the retail store lot and searched for a parking place. With the holiday shopping season in full swing, the only slots available were near the far end. They climbed out of the car and began the long walk across the lot, Philip between them holding each of their hands.

Inside the store, they found candy canes on the front display along with stockings and stuffed holiday toys. They paid for their purchases in the self-checkout aisle to avoid the long lines and exited the store. A man in a Santa suit rang a hand bell next to a collection bucket and wished shoppers a "Merry Christmas" as they passed.

Philip tugged on their hands to stop them. "Daddy?"

Colin smiled and reached in his pocket. He drew out a handful of coins and gave them to Philip. The boy beamed and raced to the canister where he dumped the coins into the hole at the top. The Santa smiled and thanked him. Philip motioned to the man, asking him to lean down. The man complied, and the little boy held his hand up to his ear and whispered to him.

The Santa looked up at Colin and her. He studied them for a moment before speaking to Philip again. The little boy shook his head and whispered again. Santa nodded and spoke quietly as he ruffled the boy's hair.

The child bounced up and down. "Yay!" He raced back to Colin and hugged him around his leg.

Colin shrugged and took Philip's hand. Once back in the car, Colin questioned his son. "So what did you say to Santa?"

Philip giggled. "I told him what I wanted for Chrithmas."

The SUV joined the parade of cars on the main road heading toward her apartment. Colin asked Philip, "What did you tell him you wanted?"

The boy hands coved his mouth, and he giggled. "It's a secret."

"Ooooh," Colin drawled. "Do you think I can guess?"

"Try!"

"Did you ask for a scooter?" Colin speculated.

"No." Philip smiled.

"A train?"

"Nuh-uh." He shook his head.

Colin watched his son in the rearview mirror. "A tricycle?"

The boy laughed again. "Nope."

Mandy pointed to the street behind the apartments. "It's easier if you turn here and go in the back entrance."

Colin nodded and flipped the blinker. "Did you ask for a fire engine?"

"No." Philip shook his head.

Mandy interrupted again. "My apartment is over there. Number 119."

They parked in front of her door. She unbuckled her belt and grabbed her bag of candy canes. "I'll get Philip while you untie the tree."

He winked at her. "Good plan."

Mandy opened the back door and released the safety restraint on Philip's chair. He climbed out of it and into her arms. She smiled and hugged him. "So what did you ask Santa for?" she whispered in his ear.

He grinned. "It's a secret."

She carried him to the door and set him down while she took off her gloves and fished the keys out of her coat pocket. "And you can't even tell *me*?"

Philip shook his head as she slipped the key into the lock and opened the door. The little boy walked into the room and unzipped his coat. He shrugged out of it on the way to her couch, leaving it on the floor.

She reached down and picked it up. "You shouldn't leave this on the floor. Your daddy might trip over it and hurt himself."

He cocked his head to one side. "Oh."

"I tell him not to leave things in the floor all the time." Colin stood in the doorway, the tree propped against the frame.

Philip defended himself. "But you didn't tell me you might get hurt, Daddy."

Colin sighed and asked her, "So where do you want this thing?"

Mandy pulled a small table away from the front window. "Here."

He picked up the tree and carried it to the spot she'd indicated while she moved around him and closed the door. After slipping off her coat, she opened the closet next to the front door and hung it up.

"Do you have a tree stand? I'll help you get it set up before we leave."

"Oh, yes! Thank you." She retrieved the stand from the closet.

She held the stand while Colin slid the trunk between the screws. Once he had the tree seated, Colin kneeled next to her. Warmth radiated from him along with that spicy cologne. With little success, Mandy tried to ignore the attraction **as** they tightened the long bolts that held the tree in place. They each finished with a screw and reached for another. Their hands touched. Her breath caught, and she met his dark gaze.

His big hand covered hers, and he rubbed his thumb across her palm. The action sent a jolt of awareness through her. It skimmed across her skin and shot straight to her heart. An unsteady but rapid pulse echoed in her ears.

He looked back at his son and pulled his hand away. "You get that one. I'll get the other." His husky voice caused butterflies in her stomach.

Within minutes they had the tree in the stand, but Philip wasn't satisfied. He stood on the couch. "It's crooked."

Mandy and Colin moved back and looked at their handiwork. She laughed. "He's right."

Colin agreed. "You stand over there and tell me when it's straight." He kneeled again.

His jeans hugged his lean hips and muscled thighs. Mandy's thoughts strayed in dangerous directions. Every minute she spent with him the attraction grew stronger.

“Better?”

She jerked her gaze to his face. His wicked grin told her she’d been caught admiring his backside.

Mandy sucked in a breath to answer, but Philip spoke first. “That’s better, Daddy. Right there.”

Thankful for the diversion, she changed the subject. “I’ll bet I can guess what you asked Santa for.”

Philip smiled, his brown eyes sparkling with mischief. “I don’t think so.” The tone in his singsong voice challenged her to try.

She settled her hands on her hips. “Did you ask him for Legos?”

He shook his head. “Not Legos.”

Colin finished his task and stood, moving behind her. Her heartbeat raced again at his nearness. She focused on the adorable little boy and thought about what might be on his Christmas list.

Colin whispered in her ear. “I’ve got to get it out of him soon, or he’ll be disappointed if he doesn’t find it under the tree.” His heated breath sent goose bumps down her arms and scattered her thoughts.

Philip giggled. “Even if you put it under the twee, it won’t stay there.”

Mandy pushed aside notions of heated kisses with the child’s father and considered the clue she’d just been given. She smiled and snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it! You asked for a puppy, didn’t you?”

The little boy’s eyes grew round, but he shook his head. “Daddy said I can have a puppy for my birthday next year, but I have to take care of it.”

She’d thought surely she’d guessed it. Was it some other kind of pet?

Colin stepped around her. He grasped Philip around the waist and flipped him upside down. The boy squealed in delight. His father turned toward her. "Okay, I've got him. You tickle him until he spills the beans."

Mandy paused only a second to consider the intimate, family game she'd been asked to play. Caution and reserve lost out to the joy promised by the gleaming mischief in the matching sets of brown eyes. She grinned and advanced on Philip, her hands spread wide.

He wiggled and squirmed. "No!"

Mandy found his little ribs and gave them a squeeze. Philip giggled and squealed. Colin laughed and encouraged her to continue. She slipped her fingers under his arms and tickled him there.

The child laughed and panted between fits of giggles. Finally he'd had enough. "Okay, okay! I'll tell you."

Colin flipped him over and held still while Philip caught his breath.

Mandy couldn't wait to hear what the boy had requested. "Well?"

He looked at his father first, a sudden shyness coming over him. "I asked him for a mommy."

Colin's face betrayed his shock. He sucked in a deep breath. "Son—"

Mandy stopped him. "And what did Santa say?"

His little smile brightened the room. "He said he already sent me one." He leaned toward her, arms outstretched.

She took him from Colin and settled him on her hip, her eyes misty with unshed tears. "He did, did he?"

Philip nodded and laid his head on her shoulder. "I told Santa you were my Chrithmas angel, but he said all mommies are angels."

Mandy searched Colin's gaze. He stared at her, warmth and desire glowing in the depths of his eyes. She drew in a shaky breath, knowing the child was right. *This* was right. She recognized it the first moment she'd touched Colin. But did he know it? "What do you think, Colin?"

He looked at his son and back at her. He stepped closer, and his arms came up to encircle her and Philip. Colin grinned and winked at her as he lowered his head to kiss her. "I think we must have been very good boys this year."