



Don't Toy With Me

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: When Ciara relocates to a quaint North Carolina mountain town shortly before Christmas and takes a job in a classic toy shop, the last thing she expects is to end up investigating a robbery. But when someone steals the rent her attractive boss Nick owes to the landlord, the two are determined to work together to bring the culprit to justice. Can they solve the crime, or will only Santa know whos stolen the money and ended up on his naughty list?

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CHAPTER 1

Help Wanted

Resumes in hand and comfortable walking shoes on my feet, I trotted down the front steps of the charming wood-frame house I'd leased the preceding week. The place was small, only six-hundred square feet divided among two bedrooms, a tiny bath, a basic but functional kitchen, and a cozy living room. But it was plenty of space for me and my three gray tabby cats. Miss Marple, Sherlock, and Nancy Drew were named after my favorite fictional crime solvers. The furry trio gazed out the front window from the perches of their carpet-covered cat tree, watching me as I turned to head down the sidewalk.

At the risk of having my new neighbors deem me a "crazy cat lady," I stopped to give my pets a wave and blow them a kiss. I could see myself in the reflection of the glass, my dark high-volume hair wrangled into a pony tail to keep it out of my face, my trench coat and oversized green cable-knit sweater that did nothing for my figure but kept me nice and warm. In my book, comfort trumps fashion, especially on a brisk day like today.

My lungs took in the crisp autumn air as my feet carried me down the sidewalk and my eyes admired the breathtakingly beautiful oranges, golds, and reds of the fall foliage. It took me only a minute or two to reach the old-fashioned Main Street. The little North Carolina town of Berwick Valley sat just east of the Tennessee border and boasted a mere 3,000 full-time residents, but many more people were part-timers with vacation homes in the surrounding mountains. Nobody could agree on whether the tree-covered peaks were officially part of the Great Smokies or the Blue Ridge

Mountains, but everyone who lived here agreed they were gorgeous. Tourists did, too. That's why so many of them ventured up to the town for a relaxing getaway.

Until recently, I'd been one of those occasional weekend visitors. But the gift shop I'd managed in Charlotte had been unable to compete with online retailers that offered a wider selection and free shipping directly to the shopper's door, and had permanently closed its doors a few weeks ago. Finding myself out of work and unable to afford my pricey downtown apartment, I'd decided what the heck. Why not spend a year or two in the mountains to regroup and reassess? After all, I had nothing keeping me in Charlotte. No job, no house, and no husband or even a boyfriend. I saw my friends only on rare weekends as it was, many of them having married and begun the process of reproduction. At thirty-three, I was beginning to feel a bit like an old maid. They'd warned me against moving to the small town, told me there'd be few romantic prospects, and they might very well be right. But I figured that if I matched up with a good prospect from Charlotte on a dating app, I could always make the two-hour drive back to the city for dinner or a movie, and spend the night in a friend's guestroom or on their couch. If a guy proved to be a keeper, I'd move back to the city.

The irresistible scent of blueberry scones and fresh-brewed coffee lured me to my first stop on Main Street, Peak Perk. After ordering a quick breakfast at the front counter, I inquired whether they might be hiring.

"Sorry." The woman handed the warm cardboard cup of coffee to me. "We're fully staffed right now. But I saw a 'help wanted' sign in the window of the new toy shop down the block."

A toy store? That could be fun. Happy, smiling children looking for the perfect item to spark their imagination. Parents and grandparents picking up a special surprise for their kids or grandkids. Spoiled brats throwing a noisy temper tantrum when they didn't get what they wanted. Hey, how did that negative thought sneak in? I'd been

doing my best to stay optimistic and positive. With little going my way lately, it wasn't always easy.

I thanked the woman and took a seat at a table, where I quickly ate my scone and chased it with the delicious hazelnut-flavored coffee. Fully caffeinated now, I was ready to land that job. I exited the coffee shop and headed down the block, keeping an eye out for a toy store. I passed an art gallery filled with paintings of wildlife and wood carvings of bear, deer, and eagles. I walked by a bustling diner. An elderly couple opened the door to enter, releasing the enticing smells of hash browns and fresh-baked biscuits, along with the chatter of conversation and the clinks of silverware. At the corner, I glanced across the street to see a real estate office with a sign at the curb in front that read RESERVED PARKING FOR D. DICKSON. A late model, high-end Mercedes sedan was parked in the spot. I continued scanning that side of the street, my gaze moving to the next block. There it is.

I crossed the street and made my way to the shop. The sign over the wide front window featured the shop's name, Timeless Toys, as well as its logo, the face of a clock with no hands to tell time. Judging from the classic playthings in the window, Timeless Toys was the perfect moniker. There were rag dolls and teddy bears, wooden train sets and stick horses, along with basic wood blocks painted with alphabet letters. I saw kid-sized musical instruments, too, including ukuleles, xylophones, drums, and easy-to-master wooden recorders. The sign on the door was turned to CLOSED. The posted hours were noon to 8:00 pm. I glanced over at the clocktower in front of the post office two doors down. That clock, which thankfully had hands, indicated it was only half past nine. Darn.

I thought I'd have to come back later, but then movement inside caught my eye. Through the glass, I could see someone working in the storeroom at the back of the shop. I raised my hand and used a knuckle to rap gently on the glass. Rap-rap-rap.

A moment later, a man in his thirties appeared in the doorway of the storeroom. His

broad shoulders filled the frame. He had hair the color of maple syrup, and sported a full but neatly trimmed beard. He wore a red and black buffalo plaid flannel shirt, blue jeans, and black boots. He looked like a young, modern, sexy Santa. Ho, ho, hunk!

I stood there, staring at him, quite likely gaping. He stared back for a moment, then smiled and called, “We open at noon!” He pointed to the store hours posted in the window.

I cupped my hands around my mouth and called back to him. “I’m not here to shop! I’m here about the job!” I pointed at the other sign in his window, the one that read **HELP WANTED**.

Acknowledging my response with a nod, he came to door, unlocked it, and opened it wide, holding out an arm to invite me inside. “Come right in.”

I glanced around as I stepped inside, noting the handmade wooden toy chests and ornate Victorian dollhouses, all artfully crafted. Seven-year-old me would have been in absolute heaven in this shop. Even at my age, I wanted to play with the dusty rose dollhouse with the ivory shutters and trim.

He held out his hand. “Hi. I’m Nick Klaus.”

As I took his hand to shake, I thought he’s got to be kidding, right?

My thoughts must have been written on my face because he said, “I know, I know. My name sounds like Santa Claus. But, trust me, I’m no saint. I curse a blue streak every time I hit my thumb with the hammer.” A mischievous glint danced in his eyes.

I released his hand and gestured around. “You made these toys?”

“Not the dolls or stuffed animals or board games,” he said. “I order those wholesale. But I make the wooden train sets, the blocks, the toy chests, and the dollhouses.” He hiked a thumb over his shoulder to indicate the rear room from which he’d emerged. “My workshop is in the back.”

I stepped over to admire one of the dollhouses more closely. The attention to detail was amazing. Each shingle had been perfectly placed on the roof, and the front door even had a tiny knocker I suspected might have been a repurposed nose ring. Clever. “You’re very talented.”

“Thanks. And you are ...?”

“I’m talented, too. Just with business, not crafts.”

“No. I mean, your name ?”

I slapped a palm to my forehead. Sheesh. I’d totally forgotten to introduce myself. “Ciara Doubrava.” For a woman who’d been given a movie-star name, I was actually very down to earth. Turning from the toys to the matter at hand, I said, “I have over fifteen years of retail experience. I managed a gift shop in Charlotte for years.”

He cocked his head. “Why are you no longer there?”

“The store went out of business.”

He arched a brow. “That fact doesn’t exactly recommend you.”

“You’re right. It doesn’t. But we didn’t go down without a valiant fight. I tried lots of different things to try to make the place more profitable, but the shopping malls of yesteryear simply don’t get the foot traffic they used to.” I circled a finger in the air. “But quaint tourist towns like this? You’ve got a lot of profit potential.”

“I hope so,” he said. “I opened three days ago and haven’t had many customers.”

It was Thursday, meaning that so far his shop had only been open during the week. “That’s to be expected. Weekdays are always much slower than weekends. What did you do for your grand opening?”

He shrugged. “I unlocked the door and turned the sign around.”

“That’s all?” I gave him a pointed look. “It’s not enough to simply exist. You need to do some marketing, get some attention for the shop.”

“You know how to do that?”

“Do I know how to do that?” I issued a pshaw and waved a dismissive hand. “Of course. I studied business in college.” While I hadn’t earned a four-year degree from a major university, I had achieved a two-year associates degree in business from a community college, and had been a straight-A student.

I sensed Nick was gaining interest. He pulled a couple of stools from behind the counter. He took a seat on one and held out a hand, inviting me to take the other. “Tell me some of your ideas.”

I perched on the stool and looked around, considering. “First, you should throw a little party for the locals. Serve some pastries or appetizers from the coffee shop or diner down the street. One hand scratches the other in small towns like this. Offer a ten-percent discount certificate to everyone who comes to the grand opening, but give the coupon a one-month expiration date. You could hold a stick horse race, or see who can stack the most blocks without them falling, and offer gift cards as prizes. Put a decorative snowman out front, at least until there’s enough snow to build a real one. It would be cute and grab people’s attention.”

His head bobbed as he took in my suggestions, and the gleam in his eyes told me he liked them.

I'd barely scratched the surface. "You could use the alphabet blocks to spell out things in the window. Maybe even short jokes."

He cocked his head. "Such as?"

"Such as – What do you call a train with a mouthful of bubble gum? A chew-chew train."

He snorted. "That's awfully corny."

"People like corny," I insisted. "I've got another one. Did you hear about the horror movie in which a man smashes toys? It's a real blockbuster."

He groaned, alone, but afterward we shared a laugh.

I acquiesced. "Maybe the blocks could just spell out 'Come in and play.' You could have one train set and a dollhouse display that you allow children to play with. Their moms and dads will see how much fun they are having and, once the kids try the toys, they'll beg their parents for them." I came up with some other suggestions, such as customizing toy chests with a child's name for an extra fee, offering gift wrap for a small additional charge, and extending his hours so that the shop opened at eleven in the morning rather than noon. "That way, you'll catch the early lunch crowd. You could even host birthday parties here where kids can assemble and paint their own toy, like a balsawood airplane or a tea set or a caboose."

"Wow," he said. "You're full of good ideas."

I gave him a cocky smile. "That's why you should hire me right now, before someone

else snaps me up.” I raised my hand and snapped my fingers for emphasis.

His eyes narrowed. “Not so fast. I’ll need to check your references.”

I handed him a copy of my resume, and pointed to the bottom. “The name and phone number for the owner of the gift shop are right there.”

He pulled a cell phone from the back pocket of his jeans and dialed my former boss. After identifying himself and telling her why he was calling, he asked, “Would you recommend I hire her?” He eyed me as he listened for a minute or two, then he thanked her and returned the phone to his pocket.

“Well?” I asked.

“Sorry.” He shook his head. “She told me you were a lousy employee. Rude. Always late. Lazy.”

“What?!”

A grin played about his lips. “Just kidding. She sang your praises. My only worry now is that I can’t pay you what you’re worth. I’d only planned to hire a sales clerk, not an assistant manager.”

“What wage are you offering?”

When he told me, I scoffed. “You’re right. I’m worth much more than that.” I tapped the tip of my index finger on my chin while I mulled things over. “Tell you what. Pay me a five-percent commission on top of the hourly rate. That way, you only have to pay me if the shop profits, and you know I’ll work hard because I’ll have skin in the game.”

“It’s a deal.” He extended his hand once more and we shook on it. “How soon can you start?”

I unwrapped the scarf from my neck and slid out of my coat. “How about now?”

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CHAPTER 2

Electricity

N ick led me to the storeroom. There was a rear door and three windows along the back wall that looked out onto an alley and provided abundant natural light. Shelves along the front wall held inventory of the smaller manufactured items, such as slide whistles, kazoos, and kaleidoscopes. Three long worktables stood in a row in the center of the room. Each held toys in various stages of production. Freshly sanded blocks awaiting paint. Framed dollhouses in need of walls and roofs. Wooden trains waiting for wheels.

I followed him to the small office. It was windowless, yet brightly lit with an overhead fixture as well as a floor lamp with a colorful tiffany shade. He gestured to the safe that stood in the corner. “You can store your purse in the safe. The combination is one-nine-four-three.”

“Do those numbers mean something?” I’d have a better chance of committing the code to memory if I could associate it with its origin.

“Nineteen forty-three was the year the Slinky was invented.”

“Ah. Good to know.” Even if I forgot the number, I could look up the date online. After I stashed my purse in the safe, I gestured to the outlet on the wall perpendicular to it. “Okay if I plug in my cell phone? I thought it was charging overnight, but my cats must have knocked it off the table while I was asleep. I found it unplugged on the rug this morning.” I rolled my eyes. “Little brats.” Oh, who am I fooling? I loved my

trio of furry troublemakers.

“Be my guest,” Nick said.

I inserted the plug into the outlet and stuck the connecting end into my phone, but I heard no ping to indicate that the device was receiving electricity. I checked the connection at both the phone and the wall. There didn’t appear to be a problem with either. Hmm. “Is something wrong with the outlet?”

Nick frowned. “The bottom one must work or the lamp wouldn’t be able to light up.” He bent down and unplugged my USB charger, then moved the lamp’s plug into the top socket. The lamp wouldn’t light up now. “Looks like the top outlet doesn’t work.” He proceeded to move the desk over a few inches so that I could access another outlet in the wall beside it. “Try this one over here.”

I plugged in my phone and it immediately lit up, the lightning bolt and ping assuring me it was receiving juice. “All good. Should my first task as your assistant be to contact your landlord and ask them to have the outlet fixed?”

“No need for a repair,” Nick said. “There are enough other outlets in here, or I could put in a power strip if necessary. I would like my landlord to know about it, though. I wasn’t aware of it when I moved in or I would have noted it on my move-in condition form.” He opened the desk drawer, retrieved a business card, and handed it to me. “Here’s his contact information.”

I looked down at the card. It read Dale Dickson, CEO – Dickson Brothers Properties, Ltd. and contained a phone number and e-mail address. I surmised that Dale Dickson must be the one with the reserved parking spot down the block that I’d noticed earlier. I plopped down in the desk chair, logged into the toy shop’s general e-mail account, and sent Dickson a message that noted our discovery. No need to fix the outlet, I wrote. Just wanted to make you aware of it.

I spent the next hour in training. Nick showed me how to ring up purchases and run a daily total on the register. He also showed me where he kept the bags under the counter, along with a roll of craft paper to wrap breakable items.

I knew he'd hired me to handle the business end of things, but I'd always been crafty. I offered him my manufacturing services, as well. "When the shop is slow, I could help with some of the easier production tasks, like painting the blocks and dollhouses."

"That's an excellent idea," he said. "I prefer the woodworking part anyway." He told me he'd worked as a carpenter for years, and had built dollhouses, train sets, and playhouses on the side for extra money. "I finally realized that my heart was in toymaking, not cabinetry. I like the creative aspects. Making toys is also much easier on my back than heavier carpentry work. So, I decided to give it a go."

I had no doubt his shop would be a success, especially with my assistance. "Have you considered offering do-it-yourself dollhouse kits online? You could ship the finished walls and chimneys flat, with instructions on how to put it all together."

"That's another great idea."

I beamed and raised my palms. "Told ya I was talented when it comes to business."

The rest of my first day was spent helping the handful of customers who came into the store, rearranging the toys to use the display space more efficiently, and setting up a designated play area in the front corner near the window. Meanwhile, Nick made a cute freestanding picket fence with safe, rounded tops. We placed the fencing around the play area so that it would be clear which toys were display models to be handled and tested, and which were not. I also made plans for a simple grand-opening celebration to take place the following Wednesday evening. I sent e-mail invitations to local businesses, and designed a flyer that I posted in the front window.

All in all, it was a great first day on the job and, even though none of toys used batteries or had plugs, I sensed some electricity flowing between my new boss and me. Maybe I'll get more than a paycheck out of this new gig. Maybe I'll get a new boy toy.

Over the next two weeks, I settled into my new role as assistant manager of Timeless Toys. The grand opening party was a huge success. Many of the locals used their special discount certificates that very night, taking home enough trains to fill a trainyard and enough fancy dollhouses to form a miniature neighborhood. I became quite proficient in painting the wood blocks and dollhouses, and attaching wheels and hook-and-eye connectors to the train cars.

A few days later, it was the final day of October. As I arrived for work, I came across Nick in the office, counting out twenty-dollar bills atop the desk.

I knelt down to stash my purse in the safe. "What are you doing with all that cash?"

"Preparing the shop's rent payment."

"You pay rent in cash?" I knew from my accounting courses that cash transactions were a bad idea. They left no paper trail.

"My landlord insists on cash," Nick said. "He says too many of the tenants' rent checks have bounced." He slid the stack of bills into a manila envelope, fastened the flap, and wrote Timeless Toys in permanent marker on the front.

I pointed to the envelope. "How much is in there, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Two grand."

"That's a lot of cash." Though I could understand the landlord's dilemma, there were

far better solutions than cash. “Why he doesn’t accept payments via PayPal or Venmo, instead? Or a direct bank-to-bank transfer? He’d be assured the funds were good, and the tenants would have proof of payment.”

Nick shrugged. “It’s a small town. Things are less formal here than what you’re used to. Besides, he issues a handwritten receipt when he picks up the rent. I retain the receipts and I scan them into my computer files, too, just in case something happens to the physical copy.”

Nick was smart to cover his bases in case of a tax audit.

In the early afternoon, Nick stepped out to grab a quick sandwich. I was alone in the store, replenishing the stock of jacks and marbles, when the front door of the shop opened. In walked a fit sixtyish man in loafers, gray pants, and a white button-down shirt under a tweed sport coat. His pewter-colored hair was shorn short, and his face was clean shaven. “Welcome to Timeless Toys. May I help you find something, sir?”

“No, thanks. I’m not here to shop for toys.” He offered me both a smile and his hand. “I’m Dale Dickson, the shop’s landlord. I don’t believe we’ve met.”

“I just started here.” I introduced myself. “Nick said you’d be coming by. I’ll run and get the rent payment.”

While Mr. Dickson waited at the front counter, I scurried back to the office, used the code I now knew by heart to open the safe, and retrieved the rent envelope. I carried it back to the counter. Mr. Dickson reached into his sport coat and pulled out an old-fashioned receipt book and pen from the inside pocket. He lay them on the counter, counted the money in the envelope, and then wrote out a receipt, signing it with a flourish. He separated the duplicate slips and handed the top slip of paper to me. “It was wonderful to meet you, Ciara. By the way, my brother Chip will be by in a bit.”

“ Chip? Your parents named you Chip and Dale ?” I couldn’t decide if that was humorous or cruel. Maybe both?

“Chip is a nickname for Charles. I handle the financial matters for our real estate business, and he handles the maintenance and repair work. My brother’s a whiz with mechanical matters, but I’m utterly useless with tools.” He issued a self-deprecating chuckle. “Chip will be installing Christmas lights out front today. Time to get Main Street ready for the holidays. We’re expecting big crowds again this year. Take care, now.” With that, he gave me a nod and left the store.

Nick returned a few minutes later with his lunch. He’d bought a sandwich for me, too, a fancy hummus, tomato, and avocado on artisan bread, my favorite. He’s been paying attention.

I took the sandwich from him. “Thanks, Boss. What a nice perk.”

“It’s the least I could do,” he said. “You’re working your fingers to the bone here.”

I shrugged. “I happen to like bony fingers.”

We took our sandwiches to a table in the back room, and engaged in casual conversation over our lunch. I learned that Nick had grown up in Winston-Salem, and had fallen in love with the mountains when his parents had brought him and his siblings up to the mountains one winter to play in the snow. “We had so much fun that they decided to make it an annual event. It was something we looked forward to all year.”

I shared that my first memory of the mountains was also a family vacation. “We rode a train from Bryson City through the Nantahala Gorge. The scenery was so pretty. We saw lots of deer and even a mama bear and her three cubs.” I’d been so excited.

We'd just finished eating our meal when we heard noises coming from out in front of the store. The clunk of a toolbox being set down on the sidewalk. The scrape of a metal ladder on concrete. The clink-clink of a string of icicle lights against the front window as Chip carried them up the ladder. While Nick went back to work on a custom dollhouse, I slid into my coat and stepped outside to introduce myself to the other half of Dickson Brothers Properties. I put a hand to my brow to shield my eyes from the afternoon sun as I looked up at the man. He was a portly, slightly unkempt version of Dale, with hair in need of a trim and at least two days' worth of stubble on his cheeks. He wore a heavy nylon jacket over his coveralls, as well as a flannel hat with flaps on the sides to keep his ears warm.

"Hi, there." My warm breath created a fog in the air. I offered my name and a hand. "You must be Chip."

"Sure am." He offered a smile in return, and reached down to give my hand a shake. "I heard you're new to town. How are you enjoying life here? I suppose it's a bit quieter and slower paced than the city life you're used to."

"That's true," I said, "and I absolutely love it here." I wasn't exaggerating. My little rent house already felt like home, and my neighbors were friendly. The lady next door had brought me at least three pies since I'd moved in. I'd reciprocated with a potted yellow mum.

"Glad to hear you're enjoying life in our little hamlet." He circled his hammer, gesturing to the store. "You got anything needs fixing while I'm here?"

"No," I said. "Other than the outlet in the office, everything's in working order."

His brows drew inward. "You got a broken outlet? I'd be happy to replace it." He pointed his hammer at a white van parked at the curb. Lettering along the side read DICKSON brOTHERS PROPERTIES, LTD., same as his brother's business card.

“I’ve got parts in my van. Wouldn’t take but a few minutes.”

“No need. It’s really not a problem at all.”

“All righty,” he said. “If you change your mind, just let me know.”

He proceeded to hang the lights and I followed a customer into the store, where I proceeded to sell her three dollhouses, one for each of her granddaughters who’d be coming up from Atlanta for Thanksgiving. Sparing no expense, she purchased dolls and full sets of furniture for each house, too. All in all, she spent over fifteen-hundred dollars in the shop. I’d be getting quite a commission in my next paycheck. Ch-ching!

I went into the back room to inform Nick of the big sale I’d made.

“That’s wonderful!” An instant later, his smile faded and he put his hands to his head. “But at the rate the inventory is going out the door, I don’t see how I can keep up with production.”

It was a good problem to have. “I’d be happy to put in some overtime and help.”

“You would? Thanks, Ciara. You’re a lifesaver.” He grabbed me in a spontaneous hug that was warm and wonderful and which would have been totally inappropriate and possibly actionable in a court of law had I not been enjoying it so immensely.

As if he’d realized he’d inadvertently gone too far, he released me and stepped back, a blush bringing color to the skin on his cheeks above his beard. “Sorry about that. I didn’t mean to cross a line. Boss and employee, and all that. I just really appreciate all you do for the shop.”

I reached out a hand and gave him a pat on the shoulder. “No worries, Nick. We both

know who's really in charge here.” With that, I gave him a wink. His expression shifted, now relieved and a bit intrigued. I should have probably been ashamed of myself, but it was darn fun to toy with him.

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CHAPTER 3

The Rent That Went

The Thanksgiving weekend brought us so many customers they could barely squeeze past each other in the shop. Surely, we were violating the fire code. Nick and I found ourselves repeatedly rushing to the stockroom to replenish inventory.

Once it was all over on Sunday, he closed the front door and locked the deadbolt. I ran a register tape. Reviewing the bottom line, I squealed in glee. I held up the long strip of paper. “Come take a look.”

Nick walked over and took the tape from me. His eyes popped wide. “I can hardly believe it!”

The shop had brought in over sixteen-thousand dollars. Woohoo! Though the money was great, of course, the thought that we’d bring joy to so many children was inspiring, too.

As I did every night, I left two-hundred dollars in start-up cash in the till for the following morning, counted out the rest, and wrapped a rubber band around the bills and the register printout verifying the cash sales. The cash intake normally didn’t amount to much, maybe a few hundred dollars at the most. Other than young children who brought in bills and coins they’d saved in their piggy banks—which we also sold—most people paid for their purchases with debit cards or credit cards these days. I slid the cash into a zippered vinyl bank bag and secured it in the office safe. Usually, every few days, Nick took the cash over to the bank for deposit. However, I

noticed that, as the end of the month approached, he'd been retaining the cash so that he'd have enough on hand to pay the next month's rent to Dale Dickson when he came around to collect on the first.

Knowing the next few weekends before Christmas would continue to bring more people to the mountains, Nick and I stayed late every night for several days in a row. On the last day of November, just after we'd closed the store for the night, Nick counted out cash for the December rent, slid it into an envelope, and secured the envelope inside the zippered bag in the safe. We worked on into the evening, listening to Christmas carols playing on the local radio station. Nick was a little tone deaf and I was entirely off key, but that didn't stop us from singing along. We'd become quite comfortable with each other rather quickly, and I enjoyed his companionship.

It was nearing midnight when I sprinkled silver glitter over miniature pine trees to resemble snowflakes. The trees would be perfect decorations to accompany the train sets. When I went to screw the lid back on, the jar slipped from my hands and fell to the floor, bouncing and sending up a spray of silvery flakes in every direction. Exhausted, I put my face in my hands and groaned.

Nick looked down at the mess, then back up at my bloodshot eyes. "It's late. Let's call it a day and clean up the mess in the morning."

I concurred. I could barely keep my eyes open as it was. The last thing I wanted to do was sweep the storeroom.

I rounded up my purse from the safe and, after we'd stepped outside, Nick turned back around to lock up the shop. He drove me back to my house and walked me to my door to ensure I got safely inside. It was a sweet gesture, though totally unnecessary. There was virtually no crime in town, and especially not violent crime. It was one of the small town's many charms. Still, I can't say I minded one bit. In

fact, I hoped one day he might ask to come inside. The two of us got along very well on a professional level, and I believed we would on a personal level, too.

As I stepped inside, my three cats dashed over to perform figure eights around my ankles. I might have tripped had I not grown accustomed to their practice over the years. Whoever thinks cats aren't affectionate has never seen these three. I turned back and said, "Goodnight, Nick."

He gave me a soft smile. "Goodnight, Ciara."

After the door closed, I could have sworn I heard a sigh from outside. Maybe I'm not the only one who's been having romantic thoughts.

I arrived at the shop a little before Nick the following morning, which was December first. To my surprise, I noticed that silver glitter had been tracked from the storeroom into the office. Although I'd gone into the office to retrieve my purse last night before Nick took me home, we'd both been careful to avoid the spill. A few flakes of glitter had landed atop my shoes when the jar fell, but I'd brushed them off. Hmm.

After stashing my purse in the safe atop the bank bag, I exited the office, grabbed a broom and dustpan, and walked over to the worktable. The pile of silver glitter on the floor had spread even more, as if someone had tramped through it. It couldn't have been Nick or me. Could the shop have rats? I quickly dismissed the idea. We had nothing edible on site to entice them to take up residence, nor had I seen any droppings to indicate an infestation. Shrugging, I chalked it up to the heating system. After all, glitter was lightweight and the warm air flowing from the vents might be enough to blow the mess around.

I swept up as much glitter as I could, and followed up by thoroughly vacuuming the area. Each time I thought I'd finished, the overhead lights would reflect off yet another errant silver flake. Ugh! I finally threw up my hands and abandoned the

impossible task. A few flakes of glitter never killed anyone as far as I knew, and I had more important things to do.

I set to work painting a set of blocks for the window display. I planned to rotate funny and festive holiday messages that would also promote our wares:

TOYS TO THE WORLD

TOYS WITHOUT BATTERIES GIVE YOU A SILENT NIGHT

PA RUM PA PUM-PUM, BUY A TOY DRUM

Okay, so the last two were a bit contradictory, but so be it.

Nick arrived a few minutes later. After greeting me with a “good morning,” he went into the office. I heard the sound of him opening the safe followed by a zzzip as he opened the bank bag. There was silence for a moment, then he called, “Ciara? Where’s the rent money? And yesterday’s cash intake?”

What?! My heart spun like one of his wooden dreidels as I walked into the office. “What do you mean? The money’s not in the bag?”

When I’d put my purse in the safe earlier, I’d assumed the cash receipts and the rent envelope were still inside the bank bag where we’d put them last night.

Nick shook his head, his eyes flashing in alarm. “The money was here when we left last night, but now it’s gone.”

“How can that be?” My heart rate ratcheted up even further. Had someone broken into the store overnight?

“I don’t know,” Nick said, “but I’d better call the police.”

As he placed the call, I glanced around. Other than the glitter that had been spread about earlier, I saw no other signs of an intruder having been in the shop.

In minutes, an officer arrived, a fortyish guy with dark skin and a stocky build. The name badge on his chest read GIBBS.

Nick filled Officer Gibbs in. “Two grand in cash for the shop’s rent is missing, as well as three-hundred and eighty-nine dollars in cash receipts from yesterday. It was in the safe when we left around midnight last night.”

“Two grand?” The cop whistled. “That’s a large chunk of change.” He glanced around at the ceiling. “Got any security cameras?”

“No,” Nick said. “I didn’t see the need for them. I wouldn’t expect there to be much of a black market for classic toys and, other than the end of the month when the rent is due, we keep very little cash on hand.”

I chimed in with what I knew, which was precious little. “When I arrived for work this morning, I noticed that the glitter I’d spilled next to the worktable last night was all over the floor. I didn’t realize the money was missing, and I assumed the air coming through the vents had blown the glitter around, so I cleaned up the mess.” I showed both of them the contents of the vacuum cleaner bag. The glitter flashed from among the dirt and sawdust the vacuum had also picked up. The broom likewise contained a few pieces of glitter among the straw, and three or four glitter flakes were stuck to the dustpan, as well. The shiny stuff spread like the flu virus and was impossible to get rid of.

After taking a careful look around inside, the police officer examined the exterior windows and doors, all of which were intact and undamaged. “I don’t see any signs

of forced entry. Who has keys to the shop?"

Nick said, "Just me, Ciara, and my landlord."

"Your landlord?" The cop cocked his head. "That's the Dickson brothers, right? They own most of Main Street."

"That's right," Nick said. "Dale comes by to pick the rent up on the first of each month. That's why I had it in the safe."

"I see," Gibbs said. "Who else knows you pay your rent in cash?"

Nick gestured to me. "Ciara, of course. The other tenants who rent their space from Dickson Brothers would be aware since they pay their rent in cash, too."

Gibb's head bobbed slowly as he took in the information. "I assume the safe had already been installed when you leased the space? A safe come standard with most retail spaces."

"That's correct," Nick replied.

"Did you reprogram the safe with a new passcode when you took over the store space?"

"I sure did." Nick punctuated his words with an emphatic dip of his chin.

Gibbs cocked his head. "Does your landlord have an override code?"

"No," Nick said. "I verified that fact with Dale Dickson when I leased the shop. I even contacted the manufacturer of the safe to double check. I didn't want to worry that someone would be able to circumvent my new combination if they somehow got

wind of the override code. The only person I've shared the combination with is Ciara."

The cop turned my way. His pointed gaze locked on mine, his brows arched in suspicion. "Judges go easier on thieves who confess and return the stolen funds. A first offender is likely to get off with just probation."

As insulted as I was, I could understand why he'd consider me the most likely suspect, so I tried not to get too defensive. "I didn't take the money."

Nick reached out a hand and put it on my shoulder. His gaze locked on mine, just as the officer's had a moment before. But while the officer's had been accusatory, Nick's was reassuring. "I know you didn't, Ciara."

The cop looked far less convinced. "If there was no forced entry, your landlord doesn't have an override code, and only the two of you know the combination ..." He let the insinuation hang in the air.

Nick looked the officer directly in the eye. "It wasn't Ciara. I know that."

Gibbs spoke as if I wasn't there. "How long has she worked for you?"

"A few weeks."

"That's not long," Gibbs pointed out, the implication being that Nick might not know me as well as he thought he did.

Nick repeated, "It wasn't Ciara."

"All righty, then." The policeman tried a different tack. "You're sure you remembered to put the money in the safe? You didn't accidentally take it home with

you or get distracted and stash it in a file cabinet or on one of these shelves somewhere?" He gestured around the stockroom.

Nick shook his head. "It wasn't misplaced. I'm one-hundred percent certain I put it in the safe."

"I saw Nick do it," I said. I fought the urge to tell Gibbs that if I'd truly been guilty, I would have jumped on the maybe-Nick-accidentally-misplaced-the-money bandwagon to deflect suspicion from myself. I thought better of it, though. The officer was only doing his job and, heck, I'd be asking the exact same questions if I were in his steel-toed tactical shoes rather than my favorite mock-suede ankle boots.

The man didn't argue further with Nick and me. He simply said, "I'll dust for prints. See if anything comes up."

Nick nodded. "Please do."

The officer retrieved a fingerprinting kit from his patrol car and proceeded to dust graphite over the safe's keypad and handle. When he finished, he used clear tape to lift the prints. "I'll need prints from you two so that I can identify any that might be yours. You've both touched the safe, I assume?"

"Yes," Nick and I said in unison.

Gibbs took our prints the old-fashioned way, by having us press our fingers on an ink pad and roll them on a card. When he finished, he said, "I'll let you know if anything turns up. It won't be quick. We're a small force and we don't have our own crime lab. We use the state's regional lab over in Edneyville. Christmas is a high-crime period, what with porch pirates, and burglaries, and people driving home drunk from holiday parties, so it'll likely be a week or two before we get the results."

“Understood,” Nick said.

Before Officer Gibbs left, he said, “I’ll check with the officers who worked the night shift. See if they noticed anyone about.”

Nick thanked him, and the man left the shop. I turned to Nick. The deep lines between his brows told me he was upset. Like me, he was likely experiencing a competing set of emotions. Anger. Confusion. Anxiety. Outrage.

He exhaled sharply. “Two grand is a big hit. I invested everything I have in this shop. I put a lot of time and materials into these toys, but I keep the markup low so people can afford them. This is really going to set me back.”

“I’m so sorry, Nick. Maybe we’ll get lucky and the lab will be able to identify the burglar’s fingerprints.” Even as I said it, I knew the probability was slim. A burglar who knew his prints were on file would have likely worn gloves to avoid leaving prints. Heck, we hadn’t even been able to figure out how anyone had gotten into the shop without busting a lock or a window. Could they have come through an HVAC vent? Crawled through the ductwork like they do in the movies? A glance at the unfinished ceiling in the storeroom told me that there was no way anyone could fit inside the small vents. They were only six inches or so in diameter. Besides, they were made of flimsy, flexible material that wouldn’t support much weight and, as far as I could see, the entire system was contained within our shop space. Even if the ducts had been large and sturdy enough to accommodate a human being—which they weren’t—the only place a person would get by moving through the ducts was somewhere else within the store.

Who had taken the money and how had they gotten inside?

CHAPTER 4

Sparkling a Clue

While Nick headed off to the bank to withdraw funds to replace the stolen rent money, I locked up the store and headed off down the block in the other direction. A cup of spiced apple cider might cheer him up. I'd seen the drink noted as the day's special on the chalkboard outside the coffee shop when I'd passed by earlier. I placed the order with the barista, and stepped aside to wait.

The manager, who I'd come to know from my many visits to the coffee shop, greeted me. "Hey, Ciara. How's it going?"

"Not so well." I told her about the burglary. "We have no idea how anyone could have gotten into the building or how they would know the combination to the safe."

She frowned. "That's odd. We had a similar situation here back in August. The rent payment disappeared from our safe. Only three of us knew the combination—my two assistant managers and me. There were no signs of a break-in, so I figured it had to be an inside job. Neither of them confessed, and I simply couldn't imagine either was guilty, but it seemed that one of them had to be."

"So, what did you do?"

"I let them both go. What choice did I have? It was an impossible situation. Our profit margin isn't big. I couldn't afford for something like that to happen again. The same thing happened at the art gallery last spring. I know the owner. She told me about it."

“Did she fire any of her staff over it?”

“No. She figured she might have failed to fully close the safe door, and they’d had a lot of people in and out for a showing the evening before, so she gave her employees the benefit of the doubt. She changed the combination to the safe, and it hasn’t happened again.”

I supposed I was lucky that Nick hadn’t fired me on the spot. After all, only he and I knew the safe’s code, so the toy shop burglary appeared to be an inside job, too. The thought that he trusted me warmed my heart, but the thought that someone had somehow accessed the shop made my blood run cold.

The coffee shop’s manager pointed up at two cameras, one at either end of the counter. “After the money went missing, I installed those security cameras, as well as one in the office. If anyone ever tries to pull a stunt like that again, they’ll be caught on video. I had an alarm system put in, as well. Cost a small fortune.”

The barista slid the cider I’d ordered onto the counter. “Here you go.”

I thanked him and picked up the cup. As the spices mulled in the cup of cider in my hand, I mulled things over in my mind. “May I see your safe?” I asked the manager. “I realize it’s an odd request, but I’m just trying to figure out if there’s some clue I’m missing. It sounds like whoever stole your rent money might have also stolen ours.”

The manager hesitated a moment, then seemed to realize there was no risk of showing the shop’s office to me. After all, with an alarm system and cameras securing the place, I’d never be able to break in and steal from her. She waved for me to follow her back to her office.

Once we were there, I eyed her safe. It was the same model we had in the toy store. “Did you install the safe?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “It was already here when we leased the place from the Dickson brothers. But I changed the combination the day I signed the lease.”

Hmm. I glanced around, wishing her walls could talk. It was then I noticed that nothing was plugged into the top outlet of the electrical socket on the wall perpendicular to her safe. I glanced at the other outlets. Between lamps, a computer, a printer, an internet router, a paper shredder, and a phone charger, all of the other outlets were in use. In fact, a power strip had been plugged into the nearest outlet to allow more devices to be plugged in. “I see you’ve got a power strip.” I pointed to the empty socket. “Why isn’t anything plugged in there?”

She flung a hand. “That socket hasn’t worked since the day we took over the space. It seemed like a small thing, so I didn’t bug Chip Dickson about fixing it. I’m sure he’s got more important things to do and we can make do with the power strip.”

It was essentially the same thing Nick had said when we’d discovered the nonfunctioning outlet in our office. Is it just a fluke that the coffee shop and the toy store both have broken sockets, or is there more to it? I wasn’t sure what to think. It seemed like an odd coincidence, but how could an electrical outlet have anything to do with a burglary?

I thanked the woman and returned to the toy store. Nick had beat me back and was helping a customer decide between a rag doll and a stuffed bunny for her daughter.

I gave the customer a smile. “The eenie-meanie method is always an option.”

She laughed but proceeded to take my advice. After reciting the silly chant and pointing alternately between the doll and bunny, she ended up buying the bunny for her little girl.

Once she’d exited the shop, I handed Nick his cider. “I thought a warm drink might

lift your spirits.”

He took a long draw on the cider and issued a satisfied sigh after swallowing. “You were right.”

I told him what I’d learned at the coffee shop. “Doesn’t it seem strange? That someone stole money from their safe and that their office outlet is broken, too?”

“It does,” Nick agreed. “But what would an electrical outlet have to do with anything?”

I shrugged, then decided to do what the sleuths in my favorite mystery series would do. Investigate. “Let’s take a look and see if we can find out.”

We walked into the office and knelt down on the floor to take a closer look at the socket. Neither of us noticed anything unusual about it.

Nick stood. “Unplug the floor lamp. I’ll get a screwdriver and we’ll take the cover off.”

As Nick went to the workroom to round up the tool, I did as I’d been told. A few seconds later, he was back beside me on the floor. He unscrewed the outlet cover. As we leaned in to take a closer look, our heads were only inches apart. Several strands of my wild hair had pulled loose from my pony tail. Nick blew them out of his face, sliding me a smile.

He activated the flashlight app on his phone and shined the beam into the holes on the outlet. He pointed to the semicircle-shaped hole in the upper outlet. “Is it my imagination, or does it look like there’s a small piece of glass in there?”

I squinted as I peered into the hole. I could see the flashlight’s beam reflecting off a

tiny circle of glass the approximate size of a pencil eraser. A lightbulb switched on in my mind. I'd read enough spy novels and watched enough James Bond movies to know that gadgets could sometimes be something other than what they seemed. "Could that glass be a camera lens?"

Nick frowned and glanced from the outlet to the safe, just a few feet away. "If it is, it could explain things. The camera could have picked up video of us entering the code on the safe."

"But who could have installed the camera?"

My question hung in the air for a moment before we simultaneously responded with, "Chip Dickson!"

CHAPTER 5

A Couple of Tools

It made perfect sense that Chip had been the one to burglarize the toy shop. The guy handled maintenance and repairs for the properties he and his brother owned. He could have easily installed the spy device. He also had keys to both the toy store and the coffee shop, and could access the spaces without having to break in through a window or door.

Fury welled up in me. Thanks to him, two coffee shop employees had lost their jobs and I'd come under suspicion by the local police. My hands fisted of their own accord. "Let's see what he has to say for himself."

Nick pulled his cell phone from the pocket of his jeans. "I've got his number in my contacts." He placed a call to Chip, and held the phone to his ear for several seconds. He frowned and turned the phone away from his lips to speak to me. "It's going to voicemail." He was quiet for a few more seconds while he listened to the outgoing message. Once it was over, he left a message of his own. "Hi, Chip. Nick Klaus here from Timeless Toys. We've got a bit of a situation. Call me back A.S.A.P." He returned the phone to his pocket.

I felt antsy. I wanted answers and I wanted them now .

Nick clearly felt the same way. He drummed his fingers on the checkout counter. "He could be avoiding me. Let's go see if he's at the real estate office."

Nick posted a note on the front door that read: Back soon! Once he'd locked up, we marched down the sidewalk to the headquarters for Dickson Brothers Properties. The reserved parking spot for Dale Dickson's Mercedes sat empty. He must be out collecting rent. Chip's van was nowhere in sight, either, but he could have parked in the back alleyway.

Nick held the door for me and I stepped into a lavishly appointed foyer decorated with a dozen potted poinsettias. Off to the side sat plastic tubs filled with colorful string lights and three stacks of faux-holly wreaths that stood nearly as tall as me. A sixtyish woman with a sleek blond bob sat at the reception desk. She wore a long-sleeved black sheath dress with high-heeled black boots and a red scarf, the epitome of chic. A nameplate on her desk identified her as Dawna Dickson, Office Manager. In light of her last name, I figured she must be married to Dale or Chip. Judging from her attire and office position, my money was on Dale.

A nameplate on the door behind her read CEO DALE DICKSON. The door was ajar. Through the crack I could see an enormous oak desk. An oversized flat-screen computer monitor sat atop the desk, and a cushy high-backed rolling desk chair sat behind it.

The woman looked up from her computer. "Hi, folks. Something I can do for you?"

Nick took the lead. "We need to speak to Chip right away."

Her brows formed a concerned V. "Are you having a maintenance emergency?"

"Not exactly," Nick said. "It's not about a water leak or anything like that. But it's very important."

She gazed at Nick for a moment, as if waiting for clarification, but when he offered none she didn't push. I was glad. Although all signs pointed to Chip, the last thing

Nick or I would want to do was unjustly accuse someone.

“Let me see if I can get him for you.” Dawna lifted the receiver of her desk phone and dialed Chip’s number. She listened for a few seconds, then put her hand over the mouthpiece to say, “It’s going to voicemail.”

Nick muttered a light curse under his breath.

The woman left a voicemail for Chip. “Hi, Chip. It’s Dawna. The tenants from Timeless Toys need to speak with you. It’s urgent. Please get in touch with us right away. Thanks.” With that, she hung up the phone and returned her attention to us. “He’s good about returning calls. I’m sure we’ll hear back from him soon.”

We thanked her and returned to the toy shop. As we reopened the store, I recalled Chip’s reaction when he’d come by to hang the Christmas lights and I’d mentioned that a socket was out of order. “He seemed genuinely surprised,” I said.

“How could he have been?” Nick replied. “One of the first things you did when you started working at the toy store was send an email to the real estate company to let them know about the outlet. He must have been faking.”

I fingered an angel hanging from the Christmas tree we’d put up in the store, and continued to play devil’s advocate. “He offered to fix the broken outlet. He said he had the necessary parts in his van and could do it right away.”

Nick released a long huff of air. “I don’t know what to make of that. Could be he offered to make the repair and brought the parts with him in the hope that he could replace the outlet and remove the evidence that he’d been spying on us.”

“Good point.” It seemed suspicious that he’d installed the holiday lights in front of our store the very day we’d discovered the shop had been burglarized overnight.

Nick immediately placed a call to Officer Gibbs and gave him an update.

In minutes Gibbs was back at the store, staring into the socket. “You could be on to something here.” He looked up. “By the way, I spoke with the officers who worked the night shift. They saw your car here at the toy shop, of course. They said a couple of the diner staff stayed late cleaning up the kitchen and mopping the floors, but that’s routine. They were gone by ten-thirty or so, before y’all left. That’s it as far as it goes for vehicles parked downtown last night. They didn’t notice anyone on foot. Of course, someone could have driven through quickly, gotten in and out fast while they were patrolling elsewhere.”

“What now?” I asked.

Gibbs said, “I’ll go to the coffee shop and art gallery and take a look at their outlets, see if they have cameras in them, too. I’ll notify the other officers to be on the lookout for Chip’s van. If he’s somewhere around town working on a property, one of us will spot him eventually.”

If ... I wondered if Chip had seen Nick and me through the hidden camera. He might have realized we were on to him and his spy device. He could have left town, either permanently or at least until he could come up with a viable explanation.

Gibbs used his radio to put out an alert to the department, then departed the store, heading off to the coffee shop.

Three hours later, Dale Dickson came into the shop to collect the rent. After Nick handed the replacement rent envelope over the counter, he said, “We’ve been trying to get in touch with Chip, but he’s not returning our calls. Any idea where your brother might be?”

Dale’s expression turned grave. “I haven’t heard from Chip since this morning. I’ve

been trying to reach him myself about finishing the Christmas decorations on the south part of Main Street. It's very odd. He seems to have disappeared. Maybe he's had trouble with his van somewhere and has a dead phone battery."

Or maybe he's running away with Nick's money ...

Dale promised to have Chip get in touch as soon as he surfaced, and left the shop.

With firm answers—and Chip—seeming to elude us, we decided the best thing we could do for the time being was get back to the business of building and selling toys.

Despite the distractions, Nick and I put in a hard day's work. Before we knew it, dinnertime had arrived.

My stomach growled. "How about I run down to the diner and get us some supper to go? Today's special is the vegetable plate with cornbread." The diner's cornbread was irresistible, sweet with a crunchy crust and melt-in-your-mouth center.

"That sounds delicious," Nick said. "My treat." He reached into his pocket, pulled out his wallet, and handed me a credit card.

My heart warmed at the thought that he so thoroughly trusted me. I took the card and gave him a smile in return. "I'll be back in a flash."

Little did I know how true my words would be.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:30 pm

After bundling myself into my coat, hat, and scarf, I headed out into the dark, frigid evening and down the street to the diner. The outdoor icicle lights Chip Dickson had installed lighted my approach. I only wished they could illuminate me as to whether he was, in fact, the guilty party. It sure seemed that way.

Mouth-watering aromas lured me as I approached the diner. I stepped inside to find the place decorated to the rafters in holiday décor. An artificial tree stood near the door, the colored lights strung around it flashing along to holiday tunes playing through a speaker. Paper snowflakes adorned the walls and hung from the ceiling. A humorous nativity scene featured three plastic wise men bringing their gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the baby Jesus, alongside a doll in a waitress uniform bearing a milkshake glass and a plate piled high with a burger and fries. Cute and kitschy.

I placed my order at the counter, which was outlined with a long, festive garland, and sat down on a stool to wait for the food. Rather than stare at the diner's employees as they scurried about behind the counter, preparing the meals and drinks, I swiveled the stool to face the booths along the side wall.

Dale and Dawna Dickson sat in the nearest booth. Dawna sat on the side facing me, while Dale had his back to me. All I could see of him was the back of his head and shoulders sticking up above the top of the vinyl cushion and his left foot, which was cocked up at the heel and resting against the base of the booth. A woman sat next to Dawna, her face pinched with worry. I presumed she was Chip's wife, wondering what in the world had happened to her husband. Poor lady.

I debated going over to say something, maybe offer some words of consolation. But,

in light of the fact that Chip had gone AWOL after we discovered the hidden camera, I feared anything I said would seem insincere. When I realized I'd been watching the trio too long, I went to swivel back to face the counter. But before I could turn around, the woman caught my eye. She sent me a look of equal parts anger and anxiety. Though I'd done nothing wrong, I couldn't help but feel guilty. After all, if I hadn't put together the clue about the outlets, Chip would never have been a suspect. Reflexively, I lowered my eyes. And that's when I saw it.

The lights on the Christmas tree flashed, and something flashed, too, on the bottom of Dale's left shoe. Oh, holy night! It's flakes of silver glitter!

There was no doubt in my mind now. Dale Dickson was the one who'd stolen our rent money, not his brother. Earlier, I'd earlier the glitter was a nuisance, but the stubborn stuff had just identified the thief. Maybe it wasn't so bad, after all.

I leapt from my stool, pointing my finger at the man like the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come pointed things out to Ebenezer Scrooge. But, unlike that ghost, I didn't remain silent. "It was you!" I cried.

Dale rose from the booth. "I have no idea what you're talking about." His actions belied his words. He began to edge toward the door, as if preparing to make an escape.

Before I could have another conscious thought, my body sprang into action on its own accord. I yanked the garland from the counter and dashed toward him. As Dale turned to run, I threw a loop of garland over his head and shoulders, lassoing him like I was Wonder Woman. I ran in circles around him, wrapping the strand tight around his body, immobilizing his arms and legs in a cocoon of Christmas greenery. His only hope for escaping now would be to drop on his side and try to roll away, but he'd never fit sideways through the diner's door.

As her husband struggled to free himself, Dawna gaped up at me from the booth.

“What in the world are you doing?!”

I didn’t answer her. Rather, I whipped out my phone and dialed the number Officer Gibbs had given me. When I heard a cell phone ring, I turned to see Officer Gibbs walking in the door.

I pointed to Dale, who wriggled wildly in a vain attempt to loosen the garland. “It’s him! He’s the one who stole our rent!”

I expected the lawman to ask me for an explanation, but he’d already pulled his handcuffs from his belt. As Dawna continued to gape and the other women stammered, flustered, Gibbs turned to me. “Good job, Ciara.” He jerked his head. “Go get your boss and bring him back here.”

“Yes, sir!” I bolted out of the diner and sprinted down the block to get Nick. I grabbed his arm. “Come with me! We caught the thief!”

Nick locked the door to the shop once again, and we ran down the block and into the diner. All heads were turned toward Dale Dickson, who stood next to the booth where his wife and sister-in-law still sat in stunned silence. The garland had been removed and lay atop the table, a pair of handcuffs now keeping Dale restrained.

Gibbs was reciting the Miranda rights to Dale. “You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law.” When he finished his recitation, he said, “We found your brother.”

Chip’s wife reflexively attempted to rise to her feet, but was impeded by the table and fell back to her seat. “Where is he? Is he okay?”

“He will be, eventually,” Gibbs said. “He’s being checked out in the emergency room.”

She put a hand to her chest and shrieked, “The emergency room?!”

Gibbs nodded. “I searched the county property records for real estate owned by Dickson Brothers. I saw that one of the properties was a vacation cabin in the woods. At that point I thought Chip was the thief, and I figured a remote location like that would be a good place for a criminal to hide out, or at least to stash the stolen money. I drove out and took a look around. There was no car in the driveway and the cabin looked empty but, when I peeked through a window in the shed out back, I saw Chip’s van hidden inside. I heard groaning so I forced the window open and climbed through it. Chip was lying on the floor in a pool of blood. He had multiple injuries on his head, a half dozen goose eggs. He'd just come around. He had no idea how long he'd been lying there. He said Dale attacked him with his hammer. He had no idea why.”

On hearing these details, Chip’s wife shoved Dawna off the seat. The bewildered woman landed on the tile floor with an indecorous thud . Chip’s wife slid out of the booth and got in Dale’s face. “You tried to convince me that Chip had robbed a tenant and fled, when in fact you were the real thief and had left Chip for dead?” She pulled her arm back, bladed her hand, and delivered his face a solid slap that could probably be heard on the other side of the mountains. No doubt he’d have a nice purple handprint on his cheek once the bruise had time to form.

Before she could deliver any more of the injuries Dale deserved, Nick stepped in, grabbing the woman’s arm and gently lowering it to her side. “He deserves every slap you want to give him and more, but it’s best you get over to the hospital and check on your husband.”

She shook her head, as if shaking herself back to her senses, and grabbed the back of the booth to steady herself.

I looked up at Nick. “She’s too upset. She’s in no condition to get behind the wheel.”

Nick motioned for her to follow him. “Come on. I’ll drive you there.”

I said, “I’ll cover the store.”

Nick reached out, took my hand in his, and gave it an appreciative—and dare I hope affectionate?—squeeze. My heart lit up like Christmas lights in my chest as I returned the gesture.

Chip’s wife looked from one of us to the other. “Thank you!” She grabbed her purse off the booth seat. “Let’s go!”

Details came to light over the next few days as the police investigated and Dale sat in jail, awaiting his arraignment on burglary and attempted murder charges. Dale had purchased the spy outlets online. He’d learned how to install them by watching videos on YouTube. The secret camera devices contained motion sensors that would alert Dale to movement in the offices where he’d placed them. He’d receive a text message on his cell phone and could log in to watch the feed live. He could also review the footage later on his large computer monitor, where he could better see the details. He’d watched the owners and employees of the art gallery and the coffee shop open their safes, as well as Nick and me accessing the safe in the toy shop. He’d thus obtained the combinations to the safes. As landlord, he had keys to each of the properties and could get inside without having to break and enter. He knew which properties had alarm systems, and had avoided those tenants. He’d apparently intercepted my e-mail about the non-working outlet and deleted it so Chip wouldn’t come across it. He’d neglected to empty the e-mail system’s trash folder, however, and the police found the message there.

Chip recovered, though he’d have permanent scars on his scalp and forehead from where his brother had bludgeoned him with the hammer. Dawna and Chip renamed the business Charles Dickson & Associates Real Estate. They no longer required that rent be paid in cash.

Dale's wife Dawna had no idea her husband had been ripping off his tenants. She promptly filed for divorce. Just as promptly, she took over Dale's role as the financial manager of the real estate firm. She came by to tell us. "I was always the brains behind the business anyway. Dale had the title of CEO, but other than showing properties to prospective tenants and collecting rent, he did precious little. I handled the financing, leases, and insurance. We'll do just fine without him."

Shortly before Christmas, the bells on the front door of the toy shop jingled, and Nick and I looked up to see Chip's wife enter. She carried a round tin in her hands. She held it up. "Brought you two some cookies to thank you for all you did. If you hadn't been so persistent, Chip might have bled to death in that shed before the police found him."

I took the tin from her and removed the lid. Inside were a dozen gingerbread cookies frosted to look like Nick and me. I picked one out and took a bite of gingerbread Nick's boot. I moaned in bliss. Mmmm. "Thank you so much! These cookies are delicious."

Nick sampled one, biting off my gingerbread hand. He nodded his head, issuing an mm-hm to let her know he concurred with my assessment.

Her gift of gratitude delivered, she wished us a good day and left the store.

As we closed up shop that night. Nick handed me the cash to put into the safe. I bent down, retrieved the bank bag, and unzipped it to find a sprig of mistletoe festooned with a red bow. I turned to find him eyeing me, a grin tugging at his lips. He cocked his head in question and wagged his brows.

A grin claimed my lips, too. "Don't toy with me, toymaker," I teased. I stood, stepped forward, and pressed my lips to his for a warm, gingerbread-flavored kiss.