

# CHAPTER 1

FIFTH AVENUE was as magical as any Christmas movie would have you believe. Snow decorated the sidewalks with a sparkling carpet and holiday glitter adorned many of the storefront windows.

If only Noelle could keep her footing! These slippery-sole shoes were all wrong for Manhattan sidewalks in December.

Yesterday at home in Vermont, she had decided that the heavy treads on her hiking boots would look too unstylish and that these lighter shoes were a good combination of comfort and looks. A week ago, when the sidewalks were bare, they would have been fine for NYC. But today, these shoes had her skidding around like a sled on an icy hill. Her only other choices were a pair of flats or the pair of heels she'd brought to go with her dress on Christmas Day. It was going to be a long week.

Their progress was slow, but they were still making better time than they would have in a taxi.

"Nonny! Stop grabbing my coat!" Kelsey came to a full stop in front of a pizza place, her pale little face set in a determined frown and her eyes the color of an ocean just before a storm.

Kelsey was only four years old, but she knew how to stake out her turf. She wanted to stop at every doorway and look it over.

"Stay close to me, Kenneth," Noelle said to the little girl's older brother. "Let's let Kelsey be the leader for a while."

Long after she had had her fill of elves, reindeer, and Santa figurines, her grandchildren were still entranced by the window displays. Noelle's mind was on auto-pilot, and she almost missed the Nutcracker Ballet poster, dozens of copies of it plastered up on a construction hoarding. "Oh, kids, this would be fun!"

"What is it?" Kenneth was suspicious, staring at the photograph of a gloriously glittery Sugar Plum Fairy.

"It's a very famous ballet that dancers in cities all over the world perform every year. It has fairies, and a prince, and a battle, and beautiful music."

"Dancing?" He was only six, but Kenneth knew how to roll his eyes.

This was going sideways. "It's like Princess Anna and Princess Elsa have a play date with a soldier. On Christmas Eve. A toy comes to life, and there's a magician. And a giant Christmas tree!"

Kelsey came to a full stop and the river of walkers that filled the entire sidewalk parted to go around this tiny obstacle. "A tree! We have to get our tree."

Somehow, Noelle doubted that decorating a tree was in her daughter and son-in-law's plan for the week. Georgia and Kyle seemed to be buried in work. "Well, there are Christmas trees everywhere, aren't there? There is a really big one, back in the hotel lobby, and there's a huge one at Rockefeller Center that I'll take you to see tomorrow."

"Today! Today!" The little ones chanted.

“But today, Santa is waiting for us over at the department store!” Noelle said. “At the North Pole, at his workshop!”

That settled it. Now, they were a team of three, all rowing toward the store.

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Noelle guided the two kiddies onto the department store escalator, and as they rose to the second floor, past eight-foot-long hanging cardboard snowflakes, she felt her own excitement growing. The toy department on the Saturday afternoon before Christmas was a hive of very industrious bees, all crawling in and out of tiny, crowded spaces, trying to gather the necessary supplies and bring them home to the queen.

Maybe it was the wrong place to take the grandkids, but Kyle and Georgia had left it up to her and this was what would thrill Kenneth and Kelsey. Besides, Noelle still needed to find those mini-GPT3 robot things that the little ones wanted from Santa.

She stared at the wonderland of lights decorating the North Pole and engulfing trees of a dozen different sizes. Brightly wrapped packages surrounded the trees and cascaded from the shelves.

And so much movement! Toy trains raced around tracks, spacecraft and drones whizzed by overhead, and knee-high robots cruised among the shoppers. At the end of a magnificent boulevard set up between the superheroes and the board games, Santa’s throne awaited the jolly gentleman’s butt. A huge red sack filled with packages lay beside the chair, ready to stoke the imagination of the child who hadn’t yet grasped the concept.

The latest toys were on display on pedestals, ready to give ideas to any children who were still adding to their wish lists.

Children in a frenzy of anticipation cruised the aisles while their parents tried to keep track of the things that caught their attention.

Noelle’s attention was seized by a tall man who seemed to stand off to one side, assessing the scene. It wasn’t any one thing about him; it was the way he carried himself, with an air of confidence and command.

Maybe he was the store detective, watching out for shoplifters? Or maybe some famous actor she should recognize, out at a store, incognito. Maybe he was watching the Santa Claus action, picking up details for his next role?

She was getting silly, and letting her mind wander in a way she really shouldn’t, while she had the kiddies with her.

Kelsey spotted a display of garish Christmas sweaters, sized from toddlers to Triple X. “Look, Nonny! Let’s get those!” She tugged at Noelle’s hand.

Kenneth was already in fourth gear, heading for the toy cars display. “Hold on there, Speedy,” Noelle said. “Let’s just stop here for a minute.”

Noelle let Kelsey make a choice, then picked up a matching one for herself. Kenneth nodded when she showed him one with a tough-looking reindeer landing on a snowy mountaintop, and she guided them over to the cash register desk to pay.

Her credit cards were starting to groan under the weight of her Christmas spending so far but she still had miles to go: ballet tickets, tips for the hotel staff, dinner out to thank Georgia and Kyle for hosting her. And one more gift for each of the grandkids: the elusive mini-GPT3.

The outsized dollar sign on the notice beside the cash register caught her attention. “Last day to enter! Guess Santa’s middle name and win \$5000. And a mini-GPT3! (IF we can find one).”

“Now, wouldn’t that help with balancing the checkbook at this time of year.” A tall man in a classic camelhair top coat who was in front of her in the line turned to smile into her eyes. He was looking at her as if he knew her.

It made Noelle uncomfortable—she couldn’t say whether it was in a good way. Besides, what business was it of his, how much or how little she had to spend?

He looked vaguely familiar, too. Oh, wait a minute! She had it! He was the boss-type man she’d noticed earlier, the one who looked like he might be picking up research, as an actor. Or casing the joint, for a robbery?

Really, her imagination was out of control.

She ignored him, but he persisted. “Santa’s middle name, huh? I’m very sure he doesn’t have one, but it’s a clever concept. My guess is there’s no ‘right’ answer. They’ll just give the prize to whoever comes up with something really entertaining.”

Noelle tightened her cheeks in a blank half-smile and let the strains of “Jingle Bells” on the store’s festive playlist drift through her mind. She wanted to try to stay in the Christmas mood. Plus, she didn’t want this man to know that she was yearning for an extra few thousand dollars.

Noelle finished her ugly sweaters transaction and turned her back as decisively as she could.

But he wasn’t giving up or going away. “Ma’am? Do you mind—”

Ma’am! Cremees in a cone, she hated being called that. Especially by a guy who was at least as old as she was. Maybe even ten years older.

“Ma’am, they’re motioning for you to move aside. I think they’re trying to keep this area clear.”

What was he talking about?

Kenneth pulled at her hand, also demanding her attention. “Nonny! Santa’s coming!”

“Your grandson has it right, ma’am. This is the direction Santa Claus comes from when he’s ready to sit over there on his throne and meet with all the children who’ve lined up to see him.” He spoke as if he knew what he was talking about. “Or perhaps not your grandson? Your son?”

She turned to give him a good look. Well. Drop-dead gorgeous. A silver fox, as Sherry would say. Broad shoulders, eyes that almost matched his dark-blue tie, hands of a piano player.

“And why would you happen to know about Santa’s route through the toy department?”

“Special security, ma’am.”

A-ha. Now she got it.

“Do you think you could stop calling me ‘ma’am’?”

He grinned boyishly and she had a nano-second of believing that he was calling her that just to get a rise out of her. As it happened, it worked. She grinned back: ten points for you, buddy. Game on.

Noelle tucked herself and the two kiddies in between the glass counter and six-foot-tall Christmas tree, just off the candy-cane-red carpet that led to the Santa’s Workshop command chair.

"You know what I think?" He'd followed them over to their spot.

"About what?" she asked.

"Santa's middle name."

Noelle hadn't meant to get into a conversation with this man, but . . . here she was. "All right, Mr. Santa Expert. What do you think?"

"I think it's Clarence."

"Well, maybe George Bailey," Noelle said, before she realized he was kneeling down to talk to her grandson.

Kenneth grinned. "Clarence. I like that."

"Maybe Michael," Noelle said. If it was angel-movies, she could keep up.

The man kept his head down near Kenneth's. "Maybe it's Hee-haws."

This put the little guy into giggles. "Santa Hee-haws Claus, that's good."

"Or Paws."

Kelsey was not about to be left out. "Santa Paws Claus!"

The man had a couple of the entry forms in his hand. "Santa Paws Claus!" he said to Kelsey as he filled in his name. "And for you, Santa Hee-haws Claus." Noelle watched as he finished adding to the lines on the form.

Matt Kezanski.

A growing buzz to their right drew everyone's gaze down the red carpet toward what Noelle guessed was the storage area. Two swinging doors burst open, the volume of the Christmas carols on the overhead speakers cranked way up, and a large, pot-bellied, white-whiskered man in a high-quality Santa suit walked slowly through the crowd of kids and parents, shaking hands, patting heads, and beaming at his fans.

It only took about twenty seconds for him to reach his chair, but Noelle estimated he talked to thirty kids before he got there. A lineup of forty more waited in line to sit on his knee and make their pitch for a new doll or video game.

Or a mini-GPT3. Maybe Santa was the one who had cornered the market?

She looked down at Kelsey, whose little face was glowing.

"So, what's your best guess for his middle name?"

His voice was above her right ear, rather than down near her knee this time. "I'd like it to be Santa 'Bringer of mini-GPT3 toys' Claus."

"Ah. Are you looking everywhere for one of those, too?"

"Three of them. One for my other grandson, Frost. One for this one. And Kelsey wants one, too." Noelle looked down at the little girl beside her.

Who was this?

"Kenneth, where's Kelsey?" Her head swung back and forth as she looked over every one of the little girls standing nearby. Kenneth either didn't hear her or was so mesmerized by the sight of Santa that her words didn't register.

It was time to shout.

"Kelsey!" She looked around for something to step up on, some way to make herself taller and get her head up higher than the crowd. This couldn't be happening! Noelle called three more times, her voice rising even louder than the excited buzz around Santa's arrival.

A woman standing in the center of a group of four other little girls picked up on the vibe.

“What’s wrong? What is it?”

“My granddaughter is missing!”

Noelle looked frantically around the crowd, searching for Kelsey’s red hair and blue coat. She felt like throwing up.