
12 NAUGHTY DAYS OF CHRISTMAS 2020

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Clearwater Christmas

12 NAUGHTY DAYS OF CHRISTMAS 2020
- BOOK 1

MEGAN MCCOY

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Chapter 1

“**Y**ou don’t look like Santa Claus to me.” Ellie Thompson looked him up and down: tall, probably a few inches over six feet tall; dark hair, blue eyes and not fat; didn’t look like he’d say ho ho ho; early 40s maybe? She wasn’t a good guesser, but he looked too young to be Santa. Then he smiled and she almost melted. *Hey, with that smile, he could be anything he wanted to be. But not Santa in my parade,* she told herself and frowned.

“I’ve been Santa for the last five years in a row,” he informed her, his initial smile starting to fade.

“You have not!” Ellie said. *Seriously? Who was he fooling and why?* She’d been to the Christmas parade almost every year since she was a kid here in Clearwater. Santa looked like Santa: white beard, white hair, glasses, red suit, stocky build. This guy was none of those things.

“Are you implying I’m lying?” He looked at her levelly, and she shivered just a little, feeling smaller than her stature of five foot two usually made her feel.

Okay, then. Reminder not to imply he is lying ever again! “I don’t

know. It's just that I've seen the parade and you don't look like Santa." As an up and coming realtor, Ellie had offered to take over the parade organization from Lydia who had done it for years and wanted to retire. It would be a good way to give back to the community and to get her name out there a little.

Thankfully, Lydia was hanging around and helping her this year before she moved to Arizona to retire. Who knew there was so much to learn about how people marched down the streets? Roads had to be closed and blocked, bands had to be booked. So many sign-up sheets and RSVPs to be sorted through. Parking to be figured out. Rules to be followed. Volunteers to be recruited. Porta potties to be scheduled. Insurance couldn't be missed. And now, this tall, dark, and handsome older-than-her-but-not-old-enough-to-be-Santa man was telling her that he was Santa. Yeah, and she was Humpty Dumpty. Santa always ended the Christmas parade in a big sleigh pulled by twin horses, with Mrs. Claus seated next to him, and elves marching alongside throwing candy. She knew what Santa looked like and he did not look like Mike Murphy.

"That is why costumes were created. Amazing things can be done with wigs, fake beards, and padding." He smiled at her again and she decided she liked that a lot better than the frowning face.

"Okay," she said doubtfully. "I need to see you all dressed up though, before I commit."

"I will give you pictures of me from the last 5 years instead." He said it very calmly as if he knew she wouldn't argue with him.

She opened her mouth to reply, but then shut it. Why wouldn't that work? Of course it would. Sighing, Ellie shoved her short dark hair away from her eyes. "That is acceptable." She smiled at him. "Five years, huh? How did you get started being Santa?"

"My dad did it for years," he said. "And he looked more like

Santa than I do. He was sick that first year, so I stepped in at the last minute, and found out why he enjoyed it so much.”

“How is your dad now?” she asked.

“Sadly, he passed that following year. I think of him every year when I do it. Besides, it’s fun.”

“Nice way to honor his memory.” Instinctively Ellie reached over and patted his arm consolingly. Solid muscle. *What did the man do for a living? Lift weights?* Resisting the temptation to run her hand up his arm, she folded her hands in front of her like a good girl. See how self-controlled she could be? He glanced over at her and didn’t frown, so that was a good thing. She’d known him five minutes and already knew she didn’t like that frown in her direction.

“Well, it was good to meet you, and I will look forward to seeing those pictures.” Dare she? Yes, she dared. Reaching her hand out to shake his, she liked the feel of his hand swallowing hers. Santa had a good grip.

“I’ll drop by your office tomorrow and show you,” he said. “What time is good for you?”

Anytime he wanted to get here? Yeah. “I’m here all morning,” she said.

“Will see you about eleven then.” He turned to go.

“Sounds good,” she agreed.

“Tell Lydia I said hi when you see her.” He walked out the door and she rolled her eyes.

Yeah, she could have just called Lydia and confirmed Santa was who he said he was. Or that Mike was really who he said he was? Oh well, she would get to see him tomorrow, so there was that.

Get to see him tomorrow? What was she, twelve? He could be married for all she knew. A handsome man like that, she’d be surprised if he wasn’t. Or at least spoken for.

Shaking her head, she looked over her lists of things to do. Her realty career was doing very well right now. A lot of it was

because of the community involvement that she had thrown herself into the past year. Making a network of friends and joining several community activities had brought her many new listings and sales. Plus, she found it was something she really enjoyed and was good at doing. People seemed to enjoy being around her and she adored being a social butterfly.

Now, this parade thing, well, she might have bitten off a little more than she'd expected. Who would have thought that a Christmas parade would involve so many people and so many moving parts? Not her. Lydia made it look easy. Well, in a few years, she'd make it look easy too. At least she hoped so. There was a learning curve to everything. She remembered the first couple houses she'd sold. It was bad and so frustrating she had ended up in tears. Now, she could maybe do the paperwork with her eyes shut. Well, maybe not, but it was much easier.

Her issue now was that she was doing both her job and the parade organization, plus her involvement in a few groups around town and they were all doing something for Christmas, a party, food drive or charity event, like the tree decorating one coming up in a few days. She was a judge for that one. She needed to find judges for her floats, come to think of it, and added it to her list. A little stretched thin described her perfectly right now.

Plus, you know, it was the holiday season! That always meant extra things to do with her friends: parties and casual get-togethers. Of course, the big thing in town was the parade. Once again, she felt so glad that Lydia would be around to help her transition. How had she done it for so many years? Just seeing her lists of hand-written notes overwhelmed her. Well, once she'd scanned it all into the computer and printed it off, it wouldn't seem like as much, she felt pretty sure. She hoped so, at least.

Sitting down at her desk, Ellie opened the side drawer and pulled out the box of white chocolates she loved so much. Everyone needed a vice and hers was minor compared to some

others. Selecting two pieces, then one more, she settled back for a short break, popping one creamy luscious bite into her mouth. Now, this Mike... No. She wasn't thinking of him, but instead, she focused on her job and the parade.

Picking up the phone, she started to dial her brother and then realized he was still at work. She could talk to Hank later this afternoon. He knew a lot of people in town and might know Mike. Just for a reference, she assured herself. What if four other people wanted to be Santa? He needed references! She shivered thinking of telling that frown no, though. Could she? Would she? Nah. Probably not. In fact, she looked forward to his Santa transformation. Was there a Mrs. Claus? Someone who regularly played her? She put that on her list to ask Lydia. Who had Santa's sleigh? She remembered it from when she was a kid, and last year. Was that really Mike waving at her - at the crowd - from the sleigh? Her brain still didn't wrap around that. However, he did look vaguely familiar. She had probably seen him around town a time or two. Clearwater wasn't a huge town, but of course there were many people she didn't know but recognized from somewhere. She'd run into the lady from the post office at her hair dressers a while back and had the hardest time putting her face to her place. One thing she had to work on more, face recognition. People liked when you noticed and remembered them.

Ellie felt entirely too focused on the man who had left her office not half an hour ago. She needed to do some work. Picking up the phone again, she started going down the list of high school band directors, who hadn't RSVP'd yet to the written invitation, to see who planned to bring their group of kids and come play in the parade this year and who didn't.

Mike Murphy smiled as he left the cute little realtor's office. He'd noticed her at the small diner the other day and had been intrigued by her smile, her laugh, and her obviously outgoing personality. She'd been surrounded by a group of girlfriends, he assumed, and they were all having a very good time over sweet tea and lemonade. He didn't think she noticed him, but to him, once she came in his line of sight, he could barely take his eyes off her. Right before he left, he quietly paid for their lunch bill and was gone before they knew. Kristen had told her that her name was Ellie and she was single, a local realtor and taking over the parade from Lydia. Kristen as the diner's co-owner knew everything there was to know in town.

Sure, he could have called Ellie on the phone to assure his spot as Santa, or even waited for her to call him, but he wanted to see her again. Get to know her and this was a perfect reason. He'd not been in a relationship for a few years now, since his last one went south. He'd casually dated, of course, and perhaps that was all little Ellie would be, but who knew? Neither of them yet.

He went after what he wanted. He always had. Right now, he wanted a date with Ellie. Lunch tomorrow would be first. Of course, she didn't know that she was going to lunch with him, but he'd show up right before lunch time and ask her to join him. Life was for the strong and the swift and he was both, and proud of it.

He walked back into the office and noticed the ditzzy woman his partner had hired last week was late coming back from lunch again. She needed a good spanking and a long lecture, but he didn't think he was the one to give her either. Max had hired her, Max could deal with her, whatever way he thought fit. Wouldn't be as effective as his way, more than likely, but that was Max's problem.

Mike walked into his office and shut the door, then sat back and opened his side desk drawer. Pulling out a bag of butter-

scotch candies, he opened one and popped it in his mouth. Butterscotch was his vice. Well, one of them. His first visit with Ellie had gone well and he would do a little more research about her before they met tomorrow. She seemed like a go-getter, and someone who worked hard to achieve her goals. He could tell she was trying to make a name for herself in town. Good for her, but he also knew that sometimes the hardest-working women needed a place to just let things go. He was very good at bringing out their release from the stress of their lives, which also released the stress of his. It was a win/win, in his opinion and mostly, in theirs. Sometimes not in the moment of course, as he recalled a lot of protests and tears, but once it was over, and they cuddled up in his lap sobbing and hugging him, well, yeah. That was the result they both wanted and he was ready for that to happen again.

But not with the ditzy female who was supposed to be working the front desk. She was only annoying and not in a way that pleased him at all.

He hit dial on his phone. “Max! Where is she this time and why isn’t she here? I have to work and can’t be answering the phone all afternoon.”

“Dentist appointment,” Max said calmly. “Chill. I’m here if you need a phone answerer before she gets back.”

“Like you don’t have anything better to do today,” Mike complained.

“So, Santa, how did the meeting go?”

As if he wouldn’t realize Max had changed the subject from Ditzzy Girl. “I have no clue what you are talking about.” He tried not to smile, but failed. Max knew him too well. They had very few secrets and some of their secrets were big. He and Max had been best friends since junior high, roomed together in college and started their own business when they graduated. The one thing they disagreed about was Max’ penchant for hiring what Mike politely termed ditzy blondes. They went through so many

assistants - and he knew Max went through them too. One day he would grow up.

Was that what he was doing with Ellie? Growing up finally? Well, he'd have lunch with her first before he decided anything beyond that.

He settled down to work and a few hours later Max knocked on his door. "Mike, you have to come see this," he said with a weird look on his face.

Water leak was his first concern. The pipes in the bathroom had leaked the first month they bought the place. That had been fun, but they got new floors out of it, so not all bad. It was nothing he wanted to deal with right now, though. He got up and followed Max past the bathroom to the front office. Ditzzy Girl was out in the parking lot, struggling with a huge evergreen tree. Did she plan to bring that in here? "What is she doing?" he asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine, but I think one of us should go help her." Max had a weird look on his face, as if he thought it was amusing. Mike shrugged and went back to his office and shut the door. She was not his problem. Nor was that tree that was going to drop needles all over his new floors. What was wrong with those nice artificial ones you just unfolded and had the lights already on them? He'd gotten one a few years ago and it worked out just fine.

Despite being Santa, he didn't do a lot for Christmas now that his dad had passed. It was just him now. Max always went to see his family for the holidays and seemed to enjoy them. Mike knew he was welcome if he wanted to go, and occasionally he did, but mostly he ignored the holidays, other than dressing up and riding the float in the parade. That was more to honor his dad, though, than because he was filled with the holiday spirit.

Was that why Ellie was taking over the parade? he wondered. Well, he knew why. She was making a name for herself like the up and comer she was. He lifted his head as he heard a loud bout of

laughter from Max. *What was he thinking?* It didn't matter. He seemed to think Ditzzy Girl - Lucy, he reminded himself - was the cutest thing ever, no matter what she did. Strange. She only annoyed him. But then, as he'd been told, he annoyed easily. His mind drifted back to the dark-haired pixie and wondered how soon she'd annoy him. "Work, Mike," he said out loud and bent back to his computer.