

CHAPTER FOUR
NOEL AND THE
TANGLED WEB OF
CHRISTMAS GIFTS

When Noel awoke the next morning, she peered out the bedroom window to see if the town looked as spectacular as it had the night before. A fresh blanket of snow covered the ground, which made it sparkle and glow as if it were a scene in a snow globe.

This is going to be a fun day! All the thoughts of the strange little man from yesterday disappeared, and Noel forgot to ask about him at breakfast.

After the meal, Noel discovered everyone wanted her attention. Charley and Davy asked if she could go sledding with them. Ralph wanted to take her to the house where Mr. Goforth was remodeling the parlor. Angelina suggested she come with her to the milliner's shop where she was getting a new hat made.

Gentle Hope said, "I could teach you to embroider if you like."

Mrs. Goforth took charge. "We need to make sure Noel has enough dresses for her visit." The two of them went into the sewing room to see if they could make over some of Angelina's dresses for everyday use, and one for Sunday.

Noel had never seen such beautiful clothing like the women and girls of Christmas Village wore. She was thrilled at

AMY PUETZ FOX



the idea of having more dresses than just the blue one she was wearing.

Once Mrs. Goforth closed the door, she assumed an air of mystery. “The dresses will fit you, but I had to find some excuse to talk to you and ask for your help. Christmas is almost here, and I still have some gifts to buy without the children knowing what they are getting. Charley and Davy are always underfoot.”

Noel wanted to help in any way she could. “What would you like me to do?”

“I need to go to Mr. Gabriel’s toy shop without the boys knowing it, but the hill where they like to sled is near there, and they might see me. Could you get them to show you their fort in the woods? It should take about fifteen minutes for them to go there and back.”

“I would be glad to do that.”

“Do you think you can keep them out of mischief for fifteen minutes?” Mrs. Goforth wondered. She knew the boys could get into trouble faster than two foxes in a hen house. There were times when even she couldn’t keep up with them and she felt uncertain about asking Noel to help. “I could make the boys stay at home with Hope, but they would have a perfect view of the toy shop from the parlor too, and they would know I’m getting something for them.”

Noel assured Mrs. Goforth of her willingness. “I’m sure they will behave, and I would love to see their fort.”

Mrs. Goforth sighed with relief and led Noel out of the sewing room to tell the boys she would allow them to take Noel to their fort before they went sledding. Both boys responded with a loud, “Hooray!” and hurried Noel out the door.

CHRISTMAS AT CAROL TOWN VILLAGE



Once beyond the view of the village, Noel asked the boys, “Could we slow down? You’re going too fast.” She wanted to make sure Mrs. Goforth had plenty of time.

The group came to a small clearing, and Charley sat on a stump and motioned for Noel and Davy to come closer. “Noel,” he began with all the authority of an executive conducting a business meeting, “you seem to be a trustworthy person. Davy and I have decided that you can help us get a gift for Mother.”

“What did you have in mind?” Noel thought it might be easier to keep them busy if they were plotting some excitement of their own.

“Davy and I want to get Mother a package of chocolates from the candy shop. We’ve been saving our money and have just the right amount. But each time we try to go, Mother stops us. She wonders what we are up to. We can’t sneak away, not with Hope always sitting by the front window. She would see us. If we go through the woods, we can reach the candy store from the other side and go in through the side door.”

Davy’s eyes gleamed, sensing an adventure was about to take place. “Let’s do it now!”

Noel looked around the forest, hoping to get some inspiration to change the boys’ minds. She sought to buy time while she tried to think of a plan. “You mean instead of going to the fort?”

“Yes.” answered both boys.

“R-r-right now?” Noel stammered.

Davy pulled her arm. “Yes, let’s do it now.”

“Would we go past the toy shop?” Noel asked, trying to keep from being dragged along.

AMY PUETZ FOX



“Yes, we would see the back side of it. Why?” Charley asked.

“Oh, no reason. I saw it yesterday and wondered how far it was from the candy store.” Her brain reeled. *How can I keep the boys in the forest?*

“They are pretty close,” Charley said. “Please! Won’t you help us? Christmas is almost here. We can’t wait much longer or the peppermint chocolate that Mother likes will be gone.”

Noel didn’t have a watch, and she pondered how much more time Mrs. Goforth would need. Then she thought of a solution. “Could you show me the fort first? Then afterward we can go to the candy shop. I do so want to see the fort. Your mother said it is in a tree.”

Charley was not to be put off. “Please, Noel, won’t you come with us? We can stay in the woods, and you can go into the store. Then no one will suspect that we are buying it.”

“I’d be happy to help. I think it’s a wonderful idea, but I do want to see your fort first,” Noel pleaded.

“Mr. Candytop makes the peppermint chocolates first thing in the morning. They often sell out within an hour,” Charley told her.

“Especially at Christmas time,” Davy added as he continued pulling her toward the shop.

Noel’s heart raced, and her brain felt fuzzy from thinking. *How could I help Mrs. Goforth keep her Christmas gifts a secret and help the boys as well?*

At last she consented, and the three of them hurried off. Noel was not a clumsy girl, but she kept falling in the snow as if she were tripping over sticks. She had a vague idea of how far

CHRISTMAS AT CAROL TOWN VILLAGE



it was to reach the toy shop, and she tried to stall their progress as much as possible.

All of a sudden she stopped. “Did you hear that?”

“What?” Davy asked.

“I didn’t hear anything,” Charley replied as he leaned over to Davy. “Is she trying to slow us down?”

Davy shrugged. “It seems like she is.”

“Over there.” Noel ignored their comments and pointed away from the town, deep into the forest. “I thought I heard men marching. Maybe it is an enemy approaching the town.”

“We haven’t had a war since my grandfather was a young man,” Charley told her.

“I’m sure I heard something,” Noel said and walked toward the noise.

She really did hear something, and although it might be an animal or Joe’s regiment, she still wanted to know what it was. It would also give Mrs. Goforth a little more time.

The boys had no choice but to follow her. They could have left her, but they were not mean boys who would abandon a girl in the woods when she didn’t know her way. After a few minutes, they reached the noise. It was a group of people cutting down Christmas trees.

Charley pulled Noel behind a tree just as they came into view of the group. “Don’t let them see us,” he cautioned. “We will have to explain what we are doing. There is Parson Brown, and he will send us home sure as not.”

“How are we going to get away?” Noel asked under her breath, for the group was coming closer to them. *This should*

AMY PUETZ FOX



keep us busy for a while, Noel thought as she tried to calculate how much more time Mrs. Goforth needed.

Davy motioned Noel to squat down near the ground like he and Charley were. She complied and held her breath, thinking how embarrassing and amusing it would be to explain to the minister if he should walk around the tree.

Charley took a cautious look at the group and decided, “I think we can make it to that clump of bushes if we wait until their backs are turned. Davy, you go first. I’ll keep an eye on them and give you the signal.”

Davy nodded in agreement.

“We have to be very quiet,” Charley said to Noel, “and not fall.”

Noel smiled and nodded. Inside she laughed. She would not trip unless she tried, but he didn’t know that.

Charley gave Davy the signal. The boy raced from behind the tree to the bushes without being seen. “You go next, Noel.”

In a few minutes, the group became preoccupied with an enormous tree. Noel heard the minister say it would be perfect for the church. Noel bolted, and so did Charley.

A small girl said, “Look, Mother, there is Charley Goforth.”

Davy growled under his breath. “Shucks! That snitch, Sheba Busybody, saw you.”

“Who is that?” Noel demanded.

“It’s the lawyer’s daughter. She’s such a tattletale and never lets a fellow alone.” Charley clenched his fists in memory. “She’s squealed lots of time when we boys were just trying to have some innocent fun.”



AMY PUETZ FOX



All three held their breaths and waited for their hiding place to be discovered. Instead, they heard Sheba's mother say, "Oh, Sheba, you are always making up such wild stories. Go back to the sleigh and get your hat. I told you it would be chilly this morning, and I don't want you to catch a cold right before Christmas."

Charley's eyes twinkled with mischief. "Let's hurry before they get any closer. If we stay low I think we can make it over the hill, and then we will be out of view."

Noel followed the boys, who seemed well-versed in sneaking around. They made it safely over the hill, and from there they could see the town again. Noel panicked, but a quick glance satisfied her that Mrs. Goforth was already home or still in the toy shop because she was not to be seen.

"How long do you think we have been gone?" Noel asked with as much indifference as she could muster. "Will your mother be wondering where we are?"

"It's been about fifteen minutes," Charley informed her. "Mother won't worry about us for a while. She knows we won't get lost in the woods."

Noel relaxed thinking that Mrs. Goforth had made it home by now. She no longer tried to hinder the boys' progress, and they soon reached the candy shop. The boys instructed Noel about what kind of chocolate to purchase, and they gave her the money.

Noel slipped from the woods to the side door. The same smell of delight greeted her as it had the day before. Quickly, she found the shelf with the chocolates and picked up the

CHRISTMAS AT CAROL TOWN VILLAGE



last red and green bag marked *peppermint*. After making the purchase, she returned to the boys in the woods.

Davy patted her on the back and exclaimed, “You’re first rate!”

The children hurried back toward the fort and then home. The boys seemed a little anxious about being gone so long. “I hope Mother won’t suspect the real reason that we were gone so long,” Charley mused.

Mrs. Goforth was full of her own little secrets and didn’t notice the boys’ excitement.

Noel was relieved that both parties were content with the morning’s adventures. She retreated to the parlor to rest, where Hope sat embroidering and talking to her new bird.

SAMUEL
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