

Sarah Sues Santa – P.J. Leonard

# Sarah Sues Santa

P.J. Leonard

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## Chapter One: The Night Before

It was the smell of the turkey. Yes, that was the reason why she couldn't sleep. For some reason Sarah could never understand, her parents always started cooking Christmas dinner a whole day before Christmas.

"It's a big ol' bird!" her Dad had told her in the supermarket when she'd asked, "It takes a while to heat up."

"But it don't look any bigger than a chicken!" Sarah had said, peering at the lumpy packaging stacked in the shopping trolley.

Dad had looked uncomfortable when she'd said that for some reason, rubbing his head and looking a little lost as he stared at the cheese section. Was it something I said?

Sarah pulled her duvet tighter over her head, and she felt a cold chill shoot up her legs as the warm cover slid off of her feet. She pulled in her legs and shivered – not with cold, but with excitement. Tomorrow is Christmas Day! Finally!

She twisted and turned, trying every position possible to force herself to sleep, but the smell of turkey seeped through the covers and tickled her nose. At last, with a long sigh, she peeled back the duvet. Weak moonlight danced on her curtains. I can't sleep. It's impossible. She drummed her fingers on her pillow, then with a flick of a switch on her bedpost a lightbulb came on. She winced, then as her eyes adjusted to the light she sat up and pulled a little diary from under her pillow. Every single page was yellow and crinkly. It felt strange that she'd never have to use this diary again. She had used it every single day since last New Year, after all. Just one more read...maybe that will help me relax...

She flicked through the pages, reading her notes scrawled on every single page since January 1st. Cleaned the windows...helped Mum with shopping...pulled out all the weeds in the garden...cooked when Mum and Dad were both ill...on and on the list of chores went, every page packed full of her good deeds big and small. She stopped and smiled on May 8th, which had only one sentence but it was written in big blue letters: SOLD 103 COOKIES FOR CHARITY! That had been a really good one.

Yes, this year, she'd been a good girl. That had been her mission all year. Sarah would be the first to admit that last year had been very mixed. Some good stuff, sure, but there were still too many tantrums and yelling. Christmas last year had been pretty disappointing as a result. All she'd wanted was the Uberwoman action figure. She'd got a bunch of other toys that year and it had been a lot of fun, but still...no Uberwoman.

And that's when it had struck her, as they were sitting down for Christmas dinner and that old Christmas song played from the radio:

He's making a list, he's checking it twice, he's gonna find out who's naughty or nice...

She'd nearly dropped her fork. So that's why. Of course. Santa had thought Sarah hadn't been good enough to get an Uberwoman. The thought had made Sarah so angry she nearly crushed a cracker in her own hands, but before she could shout at her parents and complain about how unfair Santa was, she stopped herself. How would that help? Santa might be building a report up for next year already.

And that was the last time she'd come close to getting angry. The silly childish Sarah was gone, and this year she'd become a proper grown up who didn't sulk like a baby. True, there had been a couple of tricky moments here and there – not getting her pocket money when Dad didn't get the pay he'd expected one month was tough, and there was the time Sarah did had go a whole month with a ripped shoe because they couldn't afford a new pair – but she'd done it. Even her parents were suspicious, wondering what on earth had come over their little Sarah this year. But she knew

better than to tell: it was between her and the big man in red.

And when she'd finally written up her wishlist for Christmas this year, she knew she'd been so good that she deserved something special: an Uberwoman Deluxe Edition! With 5 changeable costume sets and glow in the dark hair! Sarah had almost laughed at the look on her parent's face when they saw her list – they went nearly as white as the snow piling up against the windows! – but she'd held herself back from laughing. That would've been rude. Being rude was something that naughty kids did, not nice ones.

She read on. Did second best in the class on the maths test...cleaned all the autumn leaves off of the driveway...helped set up the Christmas tree...Sarah yawned happily as the completed chores swam by. Yes, she was sure she'd done enough this year. She'd been as angelic as those angels in that other old Christmas song. And angels always got what they wanted.

With one last look around her bedroom to check it was all neat and tidy, she flicked off the light, pulled her duvet over her eyes and drifted happily off to sleep.

## Chapter Two: Christmas Day

The second she awoke Sarah nearly burst out of her bed with excitement, but then curled back under the covers with the duvet wrapped tight around her. It was a cold morning, but more importantly, Christmas morning! She could barely contain herself. All year, even in the summer when she was sweating away in the garden and cutting herself on those thorn bushes trying to clear out the weeds, she would grit her teeth and remind herself...December 25th... and now, here it was. Santa had been to the house in the middle of the night. He must have stood on the roof of this very house and checked the name Sarah Pebbleton off of his 'nice kids' list...

She couldn't wait any longer. She leapt out of bed and, gasping as the cold wooden floorboards chilled her feet, she scrambled out of her pyjamas and into warmer clothes. She opened her bedroom door a little and peeked out to see if her parents were awake yet. The smell of Christmas dinner wafted over her, and her stomach grumbled. It was the only sound she heard. They're not awake yet. Why don't Mum and Dad ever get up early on Christmas Day? Aren't they excited too? She paced around her room, thinking. It was tradition in her family that they all went downstairs into the living room together on Christmas morning to open the presents. It was a little annoying but Sarah liked that tradition, and besides, it would be horrible if she stopped being good right now, wouldn't it? For all she knew, the presents could be magic and they might change if she did something wrong. Maybe...maybe she was doing something wrong right now, by waking up too early! Oh no!

Sarah sat herself on the edge of the bed and took a deep breath. Don't be silly, she told herself, Santa's not that strict. Relax. She stood up and went to the window, the ledge just wide enough for her to sit on. She rubbed the condensation away from a window pane and looked out on the street below. A thick blanket of snow lay over everything, making the normally grey tarmac look clean and bright. Even now the snow was falling, a flurry of flakes spinning and whirling past the window and piling up below. It was silent out there right now, with only a few footprints here and there. Maybe she'd go out there sometime today, to build a snowman or get into a snowball fight with the other kids on the street? It all depended how much fun she'd be having with her Deluxe Uberwoman!

Her bedroom door creaked open, and Mum stood there in her dressing gown.

"I knew you'd be up," she said with a smile, "Ready to open your presents?"

Sarah leapt from the window ledge. "YES!"

Dad opened the living room door. Inside it was dark, the Christmas Tree standing in the corner like a shadow. When he flicked on the switch, though, the tree sparkled with green, red and gold. Sarah's heart pounded at the sight of the stack of presents under the tree. He's been! He's really been!

Mum and Dad said something, but Sarah could barely hear them: she nearly dived at the presents and began unwrapping them as slowly and politely as her shaking fingers would let her.

She started small. I want to build up to the main event. She unwrapped fun little presents first, some selection packs of sweets and some new books. Then they got bigger: soft toys, board games and even an full size Uberwoman cape that she could wear herself. Then she turned back to the tree to open her main present...but it wasn't there. Only their cat Tinder lay curled under the glow of the fairy lights.

Sarah felt as though something cold was tightening around her chest. She turned to her Mum and Dad...and in marched Dad, holding in front of him a present that was just the right size and shape. The ice in her chest dissolved as a wild fire spread through her right to her toes. Dad laid the present

before her, and Sarah licked her dry lips. This is it! At last!

She pulled at the ribbon and peeled the wrapping paper like the skin of an orange, savouring each and every moment. Finally, the red corner of the box peeked into view and she couldn't hold on any longer: she tore away the wrapping to look at her Deluxe Uberwoman.

Except...it wasn't a Deluxe Uberwoman. Not exactly. It was...the original one. The one that she'd asked for last year.

"You've got it, darling!" Mum smiled, "Looks like you've been a properly good girl this year!"

Sarah stared at the figure through the see-through plastic, Uberwoman's face staring back. Her heart sank slowly. She wasn't quite sure how she felt. But she could feel her parent's eyes fixed on her, and she quickly pulled what she hoped was a great big grin and said "Y-Yeah! This is great! I'd better get all of this up to my room, I've got a lot of playing to do!"

Sarah couldn't escape the living room fast enough. Uberwoman box in her hand, she closed her bedroom door behind her and slid down it, throwing the action figure onto her bed as she felt hot tears well in her eyes.

For the rest of Christmas morning, Sarah's mood was very up and down. Sometimes she'd look at her stack of presents and be very happy and grateful – it was a very good collection of gifts, and definitely better than last year – but then she'd look at her diary of chores and her fists would clench. After all the work she'd done this year, she couldn't help but feel...disappointed.

She was sat in the window ledge again, Uberwoman figure in her hands and looking down at the street. Some of the kids were outside now, building snowmen and pushing sledges around. Why had Santa given her the old version of Uberwoman? Sure, it was basically the same thing: the figure itself was exactly the same. The only difference were those extra costumes and the glow-in-the-dark hair. But after spending all year being as nice as possible, why couldn't Santa give her the one thing she'd asked for? Loads of the other kids had gotten this old Uberwoman last year, so it wasn't exactly special anymore: Sarah had seen this old version of Uberwoman in a lot of half-price sales this year.

She sighed, and steam shot across the glass.

"Sarah!" her Dad called from downstairs, "Dinner's ready!"

Sarah peeled herself away from the window, and tossed the Uberwoman onto her bed. At the door, though, she stopped herself: come on. Cheer up! A lot of kids out there would love to get even one present for Christmas. You're very lucky! Mum and Dad have put a lot of effort into dinner too: go and put on your best smile for them.

And so Sarah put on a smile as she opened the door and went down the stairs.

## Chapter Three: One More Letter

As always, the food was wonderful and Sarah had a lot of fun pulling crackers with her Mum and Dad, but Sarah couldn't help noticing that something was a little...off. Mum and Dad always laid out enough food to feed a small army at Christmas time, and while there was certainly plenty of the potatoes, pigs in blankets, Yorkshire puddings and vegetables to go around, it was the first year that Sarah could see gaps on the table. And the turkey they'd bought definitely seemed smaller than last year. Mum and Dad seemed to be acting a bit weird too: they seemed to laugh a little bit too hard at the bad jokes inside the crackers.

"Right, time to start clearing up!" Mum declared so suddenly that Sarah nearly dropped the last chunk of potato down her front.

"I'll help," said Sarah through her mouthful, stacking the empty plates.

"Oh, don't be silly, dear," said Mum, taking the plates from her, "You should go and play, you've got all of your new toys. And I think I can hear your friends playing outside too. Go and enjoy yourself!"

Sarah stood with her arms still outstretched as Mum and Dad gathered the crockery and headed for the kitchen sink. Sarah couldn't remember a time when they had ever refused her help – and she should know, she'd offered it a lot this year! Not helping now felt...weird. What was going on?

Without a word she stepped out of the kitchen and was halfway up the stairs when she heard a strange noise.

Crying.

Sarah tiptoed up to the top step and peeked through the banisters and into the kitchen. Mum was sat on a chair, with Dad kneeling next to her and holding her hands.

"It's just...she's been so good this year," Mum sobbed, "And she couldn't get what she wanted. She...she must hate this Christmas..."

Dad held Mum in a hug, and Sarah crept up the last step and slipped into her bedroom. Her face felt hot and her heart was beating fast. Why? Why did her parents feel bad? It wasn't their fault she got an old Uberwoman for Christmas, that was Santa!

In fact, now she came to think of it, what did her parents get for Christmas? Sarah remembered that they got some nice little gifts last year – Dad got a watch and Mum got a necklace – but this year she hadn't seen any presents under the tree for them. And how about Christmas dinner? It was definitely smaller than last year had been. Sarah wasn't silly, though, she knew that things had been tough for Mum and Dad at work, and money was really tight this year, but that made Sarah even more suspicious. Mum and Dad have worked as hard as I have! Why couldn't Santa give any of us a good year? What did we all do so wrong to deserve this?

Sarah frowned, and she stomped over to her small desk and pulled out a piece of paper and a pen. Her hand shook because she was so angry, but she knew exactly what she wanted to write:

Dear Santa,

I hope you are enjoying your nice rest after all of your hard work delivering presents to all of the SO-CALLED good boys and girls.

I am just writing to you again to let you know that I, Sarah Pebbleton Aged 7, will be soooing suing suing you for not doing your job properly and ruining our family's Christmas. Me, my Mum and my Dad have all worked so hard this year and you have just made us all feel really REALLY bad.

I will start doing all of the legal important things tomorrow, and I will be coming to the North Pole in person to come and speak to you. Actually, I will start going to the North Pole TOMORROW so you had better be ready, Mr. Claus! And no, I won't bring you any cookies and milk!

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From  
Sarah Pebbleton Aged 7

She folded the letter up and was just about to put it into a pink envelope when she stopped herself. No, this was a serious letter. It couldn't go in a pink envelope! All of the professional and grown-up envelopes were downstairs in the unit under the TV. If she went down to get one now she might be asked what she was doing, and that would lead to all kinds of awkward questions. No, she didn't want to stress out her parents any more than they already were: this was her personal fight. She was going to sue Santa Claus. And she would wait until tonight, when the time was right.



## Chapter Four: Early Post

The second Sarah's alarm woke her up, she slammed a hand on it and it fell silent. 3:00am. She was so sleepy and it was so cold outside of her bed that she almost fell back asleep, but then the memory of her Mum crying swept over her, and she was wide awake. Shuddering as she slipped into her ice-cold clothes, she picked up her letter and crept down the stairs, wincing every time a step gave a loud creak.

She peered into the living room. Sometimes Mum and Dad would fall asleep in here or would watch a movie late at night, but tonight it was pitch black inside. She pushed the door open, and walked over to the TV. Pulling a drawer open, she dug through the pile of old batteries, wires and bits of paper until she found a clean white envelope.

Something moved in the corner of her eye, and she gasped as she swung around. Tinder the cat sat on the sofa, swishing her tail and eyeing her with narrow yellow eyes.

"Stupid cat," Sarah muttered as she slipped her letter to Santa into the envelope and licked it shut. She pulled a pen out of the drawer – then another, and another until she found one that worked – and wrote To Santa, North Pole in her best writing on the front. Does this need a stamp? No, it should be fine: I've sent letters to Santa without stamps before. Besides, I don't want to pay any money to send letters to him!

She slipped out into the hallway and headed for the front door. Now for the tricky bit. The wind howled outside and snow still fell past the door's window. She slid into her wellington boots and pulled on her warmest jacket, gloves and woolly hat. Even with her gloves on she could feel the cold door handle making her fingers cold. She took a deep breath, and pulled the door open.

The wind roared and snowflakes blew into the hallway. Sarah stepped out into the night and closed the door as quickly yet quietly as possible. For a moment, she held an ear to the door to check if her parents would wake up, but she couldn't hear anything. She turned and faced the snowstorm.

Even with all of her thickest clothes on, Sarah had never felt so cold. Snow whirled all around her. It was so thick on the ground that every step came up to the top of her boots. Luckily, the nearest postbox wasn't far: she headed up the driveway and towards the end of the street.

Maybe it was just her imagination, or maybe all of the snow made it look that way, but the street seemed even longer than usual. Sarah felt as though she'd been trampling through the snow for an hour by the time she reached the postbox. She wiped the snow off of the letterbox, and checked the timetable bolted to the front. It was difficult to read it in the dim yellow streetlight, but she could just make out the next pickup time: 5:00am. She pulled the envelope from her pocket and, before she could think twice about it, pushed the letter into the postbox. There. Done. Let's see what you say to that, Mr. Claus!

She turned – and nearly leapt on top of the postbox in shock. A postman stood over her, his dark uniform so perfect that not a single flake of snow dared to land on it. He had no gloves, no scarf, but but he wasn't shivering. A brown sack was swung over his shoulder.

"Good morning, young lady," he said, tipping his hat. He didn't shout over the howling wind, but Sarah heard him perfectly clearly. "What are you doing out at this hour?"

"I...I was going to ask you the same thing!" Sarah asked, crossing her arms and trying to look brave, "It's a bit early to be picking up this post, isn't it?"

"Normally, yes," said the Postman, "But I've been told to come here because of some very important mail."

Sarah's mouth fell open, then she immediately regretted it as cold snow flew in and stuck to the back of her throat. "You...you know about my letter?"

The Postman nodded with a grin.

“But...how?” Sarah scratched her woolly hat, “I only just posted it!”

The Postman laughed so loud that Sarah thought that half the street would wake up. “Oh, my dear! I’m not here to collect your letter. No, that’s been done already! I am here to give you your reply. Now let me see...”

The Postman swung the bag off of his shoulder and began to rummage through the pile of letters inside, while Sarah shivered with cold and fear. Santa had replied already? But...how? She knew the old story of how Santa could see all the children in the world in one night, but this...seeing it for herself was something else. Suddenly, she didn’t feel so sure about this whole idea of suing Santa. He didn’t sound like the kind of guy Sarah wanted to get on the wrong side of. What if she wrote him a quick apology right now? Maybe that would get to him just as fast...

“Ah, here it is!” the Postman pulled out a red envelope, and with a bright smile handed it over to Sarah. To Sarah Pebbleton, it said on the front in big loopy writing. Hands shaking, she tore it open and read the golden letter inside:

Dear Sarah,

Thank you for your kind message. It looks like we have a lot to talk about. Please come to my workshop in the North Pole right away. Here are some special tickets. They will get you to where you need to go.

The only thing I ask is that you please visit three houses on the way here. You will understand why soon.

I look forward to meeting you.

Yours,

Santa Claus

The letter shook in Sarah’s hands so much that she nearly forgot about the strange Postman standing in front of her. She read at it two more times before she finally said anything:

“What...what does it mean, special tickets?” she stammered. She looked up, and the Postman had suddenly disappeared without a trace. She looked down at the letter again - except it wasn’t a letter anymore, but four golden tickets.

Sarah felt a warm glow on her back. She turned, and saw a golden light spilling out of the letterbox, as though there was a bright and sunny day inside. She tried to peek inside, but the light blinded her. Then she spotted the door handle on the postbox. She looked up and down the street one more time. Empty. Was she dreaming? But she couldn't be: this cold felt very real, nipping at her nose and making it runny.

For some reason she knew what to do. She took one ticket and slid it into the postbox. Instantly the little door swung open, but instead of a pile of letters pouring out, that warm light washed over her. It was just like a nice warm bath. Without thinking, she pocketed the other three tickets and stepped forward into the light.

## Chapter Five: The Mountain Of Presents

As soon as the light surrounded her, it went out, like someone had flicked a switch. Sarah reached out, and found something soft and squashy. It felt...familiar somehow. Was it a curtain? She grabbed it and pulled.

Her bed duvet fell aside. She was back in bed, in her pyjamas. Morning light pushed through her window.

"What..." She whispered to herself. "How...how did I..."

Had it all been a dream? It had felt so real. She looked over to her writing desk. The letter was gone. Then she looked at her clock - and leapt out of bed so fast she nearly hit the ceiling. The little date on the clock read December 25th.

Sarah looked from the clock to the window. It's Christmas Day again? Had all of that been a dream too?

"Sarah!" Her mother called from downstairs, "Are you up?"

"Y...Yes?" Sarah replied.

"This is very unlike you, dear," her Mum called again, "You're usually up before the sun is. Come on downstairs, we're waiting."

Sarah slipped into her clothes, her mind spinning. Then she opened her door.

And instantly shut it again. What on earth was that? She opened her door again slowly. On the other side was...not her house. Her bedroom door should've been right next to the stairs. Not now. Now it was at the end of a long corridor of fancy wooden doors and a thick red carpet.

She slammed the door again, and looked around her bedroom. She nearly jumped out of her skin.

Her bedroom had changed, too. But...it had been her real bedroom a moment ago! Had it switched behind her back? This new bedroom was huge: the bed was a big, old-fashioned bed, far too big for a 7-year-old, and her little writing desk had been replaced by a fancy looking table with gold handles on the drawers. And...was that a walk-in closet at the back? She walked across her vast bedroom and swung the closet open. The rows of clothes and stacks of shoeboxes stretched further than that corridor she'd just seen.

Sarah nodded to herself. Suddenly she knew what must have happened. She must have collapsed on the street from the cold, and someone must've picked her up and took her in for the night. Some rich but forgetful person whose clock was a day behind. That's why she could hear her Mum's voice and thought she could see the rooms changing around her: she was still a little bit sick from being out in the cold. Yes, that was it!

"Sarah!" Mum yelled, "We haven't got all day!"

"Coming!" She called. At least it all makes sense now. She walked out of her bedroom and down the corridor towards the stairs. Her parents must be worried sick. She'd have to come up with a really good apology, and a thank you for whoever rescued her.

The stairs were wide and did that really fancy thing where they split into two sets of stairs halfway down then met up again on the way down. A Greek-looking statue was in the gap in the middle. Where was she? She didn't know there was house this big or fancy in the city. What was the owner of this house doing on her street in the first place, let alone rescuing kids in the snow?

At the bottom of the stairs was an entry room nearly as big as Sarah's whole house. Sarah counted at least six doors lining the walls, and she felt the sudden urge to explore.

"There she is!" Her Mum said, "Finally!"

Sarah spun around. An open door led into a huge living room, with a TV as big as the wall and lots of big leather sofas. A Christmas tree at least five times taller than Sarah stood in the corner, decked from top to toe in baubles as big as Sarah's head and tinsel so fine it looked like it was woven from

silk.

And there, sat in the biggest sofa of them all next to a roaring log fire, were her parents. Both of them had laptops perched on their knees and phones placed on the armrests.

"Mum! Dad! What are you guys doing here?" said Sarah, pointing at them.

"It's rude to point dear," Mum said, not looking up from her screen as she typed away, "Go on, open your presents from Santa."

"But..." Sarah searched around for the right words, "But this isn't our house. Those aren't my presents under the tree."

"What are you talking about?" said Dad, checking his phone, "Of course they are. The names on the presents are addressed to you."

Sarah looked to the mountain of presents under the tree, then back to her parents, and around the whole house. An idea came over her.

"Just a sec," she said, and she ran from the living room, back into the entrance hall and to the front door. It was big and heavy, and she broke into a sweat trying to pull it open. When she did, she shielded her eyes from the snowflakes tumbling in and landing on the marble floor, and looked at the number on the door. Twelve. The same number as their house. And underneath was a sign that said, in swirly silver writing: The Pebbleton Residence.

Despite the blizzard, Sarah felt a hot wave rush over her. So...this really is home...but how? How could it possibly...?

Dazed, she closed the door and walked slowly back to the living room. Everything seemed bright and colourful, as though it had all been painted. Then she eyed the mountain of presents, and excitement rippled through her. If these really are mine...

A huge grin spread across her face, and she leapt at the presents like it was a swimming pool. She ripped through enough wrapping paper to make a pile as big as the Christmas tree, and every present she opened made her gasp with shock. Santa had bought her a new computer, the latest phone, a stack of new movies and music, huge soft toys as big as her, enough clothes to refill that huge closet two times over...by the time she opened her tenth box of chocolates, her hands ached from opening so many boxes. And I'm only half way through! She pushed aside two boxes as big as sheds to see her parents, still sat on their laptops, typing away. Have they moved at all?

"Erm..." She called, "Can I get breakfast? I think I'm gonna need more fuel to open all of this."

"Of course, dear," her Mum said to the laptop screen, "Breakfast is in the kitchen, help yourself."

## Chapter Six: Email to Santa

Sarah sat at the vast dining table surrounded by ten boxes of cereal, fresh orange juice and a bowl of mixed fruit, her head spinning. As she munched on fancy muesli, she thought to herself: this house, these presents, all this food...how did her parents become so rich so quickly? It was like a dream come true...

Sarah dropped her spoon into her bowl, and milk splashed across the table. The words of Santa's reply to her came back to her:

The only thing I ask is that you please visit three houses on the way here.

Of course! Santa had brought her here! Only he would be able to make magic like this happen! Sarah ran the words of that letter through her head and again. So the other houses he wanted to show her weren't different houses really, just their same family house but if their life was different. This must be if her family was really rich or something. I wonder what will the other houses be like...

And yet, Sarah still rubbed her chin. Why was Santa doing this? Maybe he got scared when he read her letter, and granted all of her and her parents' wishes? If that was true, then she didn't really need to go to the North Pole. Everything was just perfect here! I should write him another letter, telling him I don't want to leave. Yes, that's what I'll do.

She finished her breakfast and returned to the living room. Her parents still hadn't moved.

"What are you doing?" Sarah asked.

"Hmm?"

"You've been on those computers all morning. Why?"

"It's the busiest time for work, Sarah, "this is when all the best business opportunities are. We can't risk missing out."

"Oh."

Silence. Sarah looked at the log fire, the flames now burning low. Then she looked at the half-opened pile of presents.

"I need to write a letter," Sarah blurted out suddenly, "To Santa."

Dad looked up at her for the first time. Sarah took a step back.

"Letters?" Dad frowned, "You are so cute, darling. Nobody sends letters anymore. We send emails."

"Well, can I send an email to Santa then?"

Mum snapped her laptop shut.

"I cannot concentrate here," she said, "I'll be in the study."

Mum strode out of the room. Dad laid his laptop aside and knelt next to Sarah.

"Why don't you go and be a good girl and play with all your shiny new toys?" said Dad, eyes still glued to the screen, "Look, you've got a new computer. Why don't you get that set up and then you can send that email yourself, eh? Give me a call later, and I'll help you sent up the Wi-Fi."

And with that, Dad picked up his own laptop and left too. The log fire's last flame flickered out, and a thin trail of smoke curled up the chimney. Sarah scratched her head. The rich versions of her parents were a bit unfriendly, but maybe she could work on that. They're the same people after all, right?

Sarah lifted the heavy computer, and after five steps dropped it onto the carpet. This is way too heavy to carry! She pushed it out into the entryway, and to the edge of the stairs. From down here, the stairs looked as high as a hill. There was no way she could lift the computer up there. Maybe she could ask her Mum or Dad for help?

She looked at the many doors spread around the walls. Which one did they go into? She didn't see

where they went. Only one thing for it: she picked a door and headed through it. She'd find them eventually. How big could this house be?

Very, very big, was the answer. She'd walked through a maze of rooms and corridors: some rooms were bigger than their assembly hall at school, and some rooms were small and covered in pictures of nice art. At one point, Sarah came to the kitchen and she thought she'd walked around in a huge circle, but then she saw that the sink was in a different place. This is a second kitchen! Why does anyone need two kitchens?

She came to the end of a long corridor. Her feet ached from all the walking. Please be behind this one...she opened the door and found herself back in the entry room. The computer still lay at the foot of the stairs. Sarah stamped her foot, the sound echoing around her. Fine! She thought, I'll do it myself! She rolled up her sleeves, and step by step she dragged the heavy box up the stairs. Despite it being a cold winter's day, Sarah was sweating by the time she reached her bedroom.

Her stomach growled. She checked her watch. It was already 12:30pm. She'd spent so long opening presents, getting lost in the house and dragging this computer around that it was nearly time for Christmas dinner already! Sarah puffed out her cheeks. Maybe this isn't so perfect after all.

When Mum made the call for dinner, Sarah had her new computer set up by her desk. It was huge and made a lot of noise when she switched it on, but she had no idea what to do next. I'll ask Dad.

She headed downstairs and back into the kitchen – the first kitchen – and for a moment all of her worries disappeared. The huge dining table was stacked high with the most beautiful feast Sarah had ever seen. Tall candles glowed on plates that looked like new, and the turkey in the centre of the table looked bigger than her. Her parents were already seated, and to Sarah's relief they weren't on a laptop now: they were pouring themselves glasses of a deep red drink from a glass bottle.

Sarah took a seat and dug in. It tasted as good as it looked: the meat was soft and juicy, and the vegetables were crisp and fresh. She even managed to have a fun talk with her parents over the luxury crackers, and for a moment everything seemed right again, until –

Ding dong. The doorbell rang through the house. Mum picked up her phone and pranced out of the dining room.

"Who's that?" Sarah asked.

"The Mayor, probably," said Dad, picking up his phone as well and tapping away on it.

"The Mayor!" Sarah wheeled around to look out of the door towards the entryway, "What's she doing here on Christmas Day?"

Dad raised an eyebrow. "Have you forgotten already, Sarah? We're having a dinner party with all of the important people in the city tonight."

"On Christmas Day?" Sarah frowned, "Why? Aren't they going to be with their families on Christmas Day, too?"

"It's a great chance for business opportunities, Sarah. You never know what the New Year might bring."

"You guys sure like your...bizness octopuses don't you?"

"It puts this food on the table."

Sarah looked over the table. There was still so much of it. Was this going to be for the dinner party? Sarah doubted it: she just knew that Mum and Dad would have a fresh new feast ready and waiting in another room somewhere.

"I'm not hungry anymore," she said, "Can I go?"

Dad waved his hand without another word, eyes fixed on his phone. Fighting the urge to shout at him, Sarah jumped down from her chair and headed through the living room, stopping at the Christmas tree on the way. Someone had cleared away all of the finished wrapping paper, the

remaining stack of presents still piled high. But one of the boxes stood out to her: she recognized that size and shape anywhere. She picked it up and tore off the wrapping.

It wasn't an Uberwoman Deluxe. No, wait, this was far nicer. This was a special limited edition, with a golden cape and the creator's signature on the box. If Sarah had opened this box in her real house, she would've leapt through the ceiling with sheer joy. But here, in this huge house with rich parents, endless rooms and a mountain of presents, she didn't even smile. She just sighed.

## Chapter Seven: Tears Again

She sat in her window ledge again, looking out of her bedroom window, Uberwoman in her hands. Instead of the narrow street she normally looked out on, though, she could only see a wide field covered in snow, rolling hills as far as the eye could see and not a single other house in sight. No other kid played outside. She wasn't even sure how far away the nearest child her age would be. She looked around her room. What was the point of all of these toys if she had nobody to play them with? In her real house with her real Uberwoman she could at least play games, but here in this huge house, the special edition Uberwoman was just a bunch of plastic.

She walked around her room. Despite all of her toys, she felt really bored. She stepped out of her bedroom again and headed down the stairs. The entry room was packed full of adults dressed in suits and dresses, carrying silver plates of tiny finger foods and pretending to laugh and smile at each other. She heard a piano playing somewhere: she'd seen at least three pianos when she'd walked through the house.

"Excuse me, pardon me, coming through," said Sarah as politely as she could. People stared at her as she nudged her way through the crowd. "Has anyone seen my Mum or Dad?"

She made her way slowly back into the living room. Finally, she found her Dad, chatting to somebody with bright white hair and glasses with gold frames. Whoever this was, he sure looked important. Sarah shrugged, and tugged at the edge of Dad's jacket.

"Dad?" She said, "Can you set up the Wi-Fi?"

At first, Dad ignored her, and kept talking to the important-looking man about something called 'stocks'. Sarah continued to tug at his jacket until the important man started staring at her too. At last, Dad sighed, and glared at her.

"What?" He snapped.

"You promised me you'd set up the Wi-Fi," she said, crossing her arms.

"You want that now?" said Dad, "Can't you see I'm busy right now, dear? I'm talking with the Mayor. I'll do it later."

"But I really need it for something now."

"Go back to your room, Sarah," said Dad, turning back to the Mayor, "this is not a party of kids."

Sarah couldn't help it. She felt a hot anger rising in her like steam from a kettle. It rose in her chest, and it burst from her in a loud, long scream.

All of the adults backed away as though she were a bomb. Still she kept screaming. Then a strong arm wrapped itself around her waist and her Dad lifted her up and carried her like a fireman out of the room, Mum following closely behind.

Dad nearly threw Sarah onto her bed, and she bounced across it like a bouncy castle. Finally her screaming stopped.

"Do you have any idea how embarrassing you are, young lady?" Her mother said. Through her perfect make up, she looked furious. "Do you know how many good business opportunities you've ruined with that little stunt of yours?"

"I DON'T CARE!" Sarah yelled, "I don't care about your stupid bizness octopuses!"

"They're the reason why you're have everything, Sarah," said Dad, "You cannot imagine how life would be without them."

"Oh yes I can!" said Sarah, her voice sore from all of the yelling, "This isn't my real house! You aren't my real parents!"

Mum staggered backwards as though Sarah had hit her. They stared at each other for a moment, and



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Sarah watched in horror as Mum's eyes became shiny with tears. Uh oh.

Mum turned away, and Dad laid an arm over her shoulder, whispering softly in her ear. Then he turned to stare at Sarah, his face twisted with rage.

"You see what you've done?" He growled, "Well, I hope you're happy now you made your Mum cry. It's time you learned a lesson!"

Dad reached up to the edge of the doorframe and took a key.

"You will stay in this room until the dinner party is over," he said, inserting the key into the door,

"You will learn to appreciate what you have."

Dad slammed the door shut, and with a click locked her in the bedroom. Sarah listened, frozen to the edge of the bed, as she listened to her Mum's sobs disappear down the corridor.

Sarah was alone in her bedroom. And just like before, it had ended with her Mum in tears.

## Chapter Eight: Clothes Line

The party went on into the late night. Sarah yawned. She'd lined up her new soft toys on the bed, so she had someone to talk to.

"I can't stay here," she said to the big teddy bear, "This isn't home."

She looked at the toy bunny rabbit. "What did you say? Yes, I know they're my parents, but...they're kind of not, do you know what I mean?"

The teddy and the bunny said nothing. She slumped back on the bed. She had to get out of here. But how? How could she get back to her real Mum and Dad? She couldn't send a letter or an email to Santa for help. Maybe I'll have to stay here forever...

Sarah shivered, and put her hands in her pockets. She felt some pieces of paper in her hands, and pulled them out. It was the golden tickets. Of course! She completely forgot! She remembered what Santa's letter had said: these will get you to where you need to go.

Sarah sat bolt upright, clutching the three tickets in her hands. This was it. This would be how she escaped. She jumped up to look out of the window, and peered out into the dark night.

The snow had stopped, and the light from the house's windows stretched over the field like torchlight on a white blanket. And sure enough, even though the street was gone, the same postbox stood in the same place. A bright yellow light glowed in the letter slot.

Sarah bolted for her closet and began pulling all of the clothes from their hangers. She'd need as many as she could get: it was a long way down. Tying the legs and sleeves of her clothes together in the tightest knots she could think of, she made a long rope out her clothes and carried the pile to window ledge. She grabbed one end, tied it to one of the legs of the bed, and then threw open the window as wide as she could.

Sarah gasped as the freezing night air hit her. Rushing back to her closet and throwing on the warmest clothes she could find that she hadn't used for the rope, she returned to the window. She looked down: her bedroom window was right above one of the windows below. She'd be spotted easily. She took a deep breath. I'll have to be very quick then.

She picked up the pile of clothes and threw them out of the window. It rolled out into a long rope, the last few sweaters hitting the snow below with a soft flump.

Sarah climbed up and sat on the edge of the window, her boots dangling into thin air. Her heart drummed in her chest as she wrapped her hands around the rope. She gave it a tug. The knots held, and the big heavy bed didn't budge.

"Here we go," she muttered to herself, "I'm going to climb down now. In three two -"

A knock at the door.

"Sarah?" Dad called, "Are you ready to talk now?"

Sarah swung herself out of the window just as she heard the key turning in the lock. She scrambled down as fast as she could, heart pounding as she heard a yell from her room. A shadow fell over her, and she looked up. Dad's silhouette looked down at her.

"What are you doing!" He roared, "Get back here!"

He grabbed the rope and pulled. Sarah started rising back up towards the bedroom. Cold sweat dripped down Sarah's spine as she climbed faster and faster down the rope, but Dad pulled quicker too. Then she came to the end of the rope.

"Gotcha!" said Dad, "Just you wait until I get my hands on you!"

Sarah closed her eyes and let go. Dad screamed as Sarah fell through the air. Wind whirled around her for what felt like a whole minute, then – flump – cold, soft snow surrounded her. Kicking her feet out, she stood up and brushed herself off. Had she broken anything? She moved her arms and legs and climbed to her feet. No. Everything's still working.

"Don't you dare move!" Dad yelled from her bedroom window, and he disappeared from sight. Through the nearby window, all of the adults all stared at her. She turned and ran.

The snow was soft and fresh, and she kept tripping up, but the red postbox in the distance was getting closer and closer. Please work, she thought, clutching the tickets tight in her fist, please, please work...

Sarah heard the roar of an engine behind her. She peeked over her shoulder and saw two angry-looking headlights of what looked like an off-road car racing towards her. She forced herself to keep running. Come on! Almost there!

The lights from the car blazed brightly on the postbox as she threw herself at it, as though giving it a hug. The car swerved to the side, and out stepped Dad. Sarah could barely see him through the blazing car lights.

"Sarah!" He called, "What on earth are you playing at? Get in the car!"

"Sorry Dad," said Sarah, taking one of the tickets and inserting it into the letterbox, "But I don't belong here. And Santa says I need to see two more houses!"

The postbox opened, and that same warm golden light spilled out. Sarah stepped inside, and once again everything went dark.

## Chapter Nine: Second, Third, Forth Hand

The only thing Sarah could hear was her breath. It was fast, but it was getting slower. In the dark, she had time to think about what had happened. That house...my parents were so rich there...but were they happy? Sarah certainly hadn't been. What did Santa want her to go to that house for? Was she supposed to have done something? Seen something? Learned something? Well, the only thing that she learned from that was that Santa gave a lot of presents to rich people. Why? What did they do to deserve all of those gifts? Her rich-version parents had not been nice people. The whole experience just made Sarah even surer that Santa was being unfair. I'm still going to sue you, no matter what happens. Just you wait, Mr. Claus!

Sarah reached out and felt her soft duvet again. Curious, she touched her chest. Sure enough, all of those warm winter clothes were gone, replaced by her usual pyjamas. Taking a deep breath, she grabbed a handful of her duvet and pulled it aside.

Once again, she was in her bedroom. Her real bedroom. Morning light streamed in through the window, flakes of snow floating past. She checked her clock. 7:30am, 25th of December. Christmas morning again...Sarah sat up and rubbed her forehead. Another Christmas? She loved Christmas but she wasn't sure how much more present opening and slices of turkey she could take. She'd always liked that song that talked about it wishing it was Christmas every day, but now she didn't agree.

Slowly, she stepped out of her bed and tip toed to the door. She placed a shaking hand on the handle and pulled.

There was no long corridor outside. In fact, there was barely any landing at all. Only two plain white doors were up here along with Sarah's own bedroom door. The bottom of the doors were covered in scratches, and the floor didn't have a carpet, only bare floorboards. Just like my real house! But this was slightly different. In Sarah's real house, Mum and Dad had spent weeks cleaning and polishing the floorboards to get them looking nice. In this house, though, the wood looked rough and was covered in splashes of old paint: it just looked as though they'd forgotten to lay a carpet.

Slowly, Sarah turned to face her bedroom. It had changed again. It was as different from the bedroom in the rich house as it could get. It was tiny, barely big enough for her to lie down in. An old mattress and bedsheet were squeezed into one side. The closet was gone, replaced by an old chest of drawers that looked like it wasn't even secondhand, but possibly third or fourth hand. It creaked when Sarah opened it. Inside, the clothes looked plain and simple, and Sarah instantly spotted holes in two different shirts.

"Sarah!" Her Mum called, "You awake dear?"

"Y-Yes!" Sarah stammered.

"Come on down quickly, dear!" She said in a cheerful sing-song sort of voice, "I want to see you open your presents!"

Sarah slipped into a pair of jeans, shirt and jumper. The jeans were a little long and the jumper was just a little bit too big, but they were comfortable. She headed out of her tiny bedroom and down the stairs. Every single step creaked and one step was even broken, covered in tiny splinters of wood. She looked up at the wall. There weren't pictures in frames like in her real house, but plain photos stuck to the wall with sticky tape. She was a little bit scared of what she'd see in the living room: part of her longed to dash back to her bedroom or to run straight out of the door and for the postbox. Come on, she told herself, be brave. You have to see this, just like Santa told you.

She reached the bottom of the stairs and nearly jumped right back up them when something dark and fuzzy dashed out from the pile of smelly shoes in the corner. "Tinder!" Sarah gasped. It was the same cat, but he seemed thinner, his fur more wild and clumpy.

"Don't worry, I've already fed him," said Dad, stepping out of the living room. Sarah stared at him. It was definitely her Dad, but Sarah barely recognized him with that beard. Big, dark bags hung under his eyes, as though he'd been awake all night. His pyjamas weren't really pyjamas at all but just clothes that looked like they'd gotten too ruined to be proper clothes anymore. He smiled at Sarah as he took a big mouthful from his cracked coffee mug.

Dad laughed. "You feeling alright?" He said, "You look like a goldfish with your mouth hanging open like that. Come on, your Mum's been waiting all morning!"

Sarah followed Dad into the living room. Like her bedroom, it was far too small: it could barely fit the three chairs, old TV and Christmas tree inside. The walls were a bare brownish color, with small patches of other colours where Mum and Dad had tried and failed to paint it a different color. The chairs looked like they'd been pulled out of a field somewhere, with great big chunks of them ripped out and the sponge inside showing. And the Christmas tree! Sarah had never seen a Christmas tree that was shorter than her until now. But even though it was small and the branches were thin, it was covered in all sorts of weird and wonderful decorations, and even a few more photos of Mum and Dad all smiling. Sarah couldn't describe it, but the tree seemed...cheerful.

"She's doing it again!" Dad laughed, "You sure you don't need glasses, Sarah? It's not too late to ask Santa..."

"Oh, stop teasing her!" Mum gave Dad a playful slap on the arm, smiling as well. "It's Christmas! Are you excited, dear? You've been a really good girl this year, so it looks like Santa bough you something special.

Sarah looked under the tree and knew straightaway that there was no Uberwoman of any type. Three small presents were spread under the tree. For some reason, though, she didn't feel disappointed. After only one minute of ripping open gift wrapping, she had five chocolate bars, two new books and a cute soft toy dog.

"Do you like it?" Mum said, beaming at her, "Santa knows it's not much, darling. So he's given me a bit of money so we can pick up some extra things when January sales start. How does that sound?"

Sarah didn't know why, but even though this was the smallest collection of presents she'd ever got, she was strangely...happy. Why is that? Is it because of Mum and Dad's smiles?

She smiled back. "That sounds, great, Mum."

Mum and Dad gave her a big hug. "Merry Christmas!" Dad said in his best Santa-like voice.

## Chapter Ten: Aunt Tilly and Uncle Foster

"Oh, that reminds me," said Mum, glancing at the clock on the wall, "I've invited Uncle Foster, Aunt Tilly and their families around for Christmas dinner. They should be here in about an hour. Best start getting ready."

Sarah's heart leapt. Uncle Foster? Aunt Tilly? She hadn't seen them in ages! Uncle Foster was always so funny, and Aunt Tilly always gave her extra sweets when Mum and Dad weren't looking. Did that mean cousin Lisa was coming too? Lisa was like a sister to Sarah. She hadn't seen her since last Christmas!

"Go and play, dear!" Said Dad, tapping her on the head, "We're gonna start cooking."

Sarah skipped up the stairs, her presents in her hands and feeling as though a balloon were inflating in her chest. She threw herself into her old mattress and immediately opened the first book: 'The Adventures of Uberwoman: the Mystical Woods.' She'd been so focused on getting the Uberwoman figure all year that she completely forgot about the new books. Hugging her new toy dog and munching on chocolate, she disappeared into the pages of the book as Uberwoman made her way through the strange woods towards the secret Tribe of the Seven Colours.

Before she knew it, there was a loud knock on the door, and the loud booming voice of Uncle Foster and the high-pitched laughter of Aunt Tilly made its way to her ears. She pulled herself out of the book - and I was just getting to a really good part! - and stood atop the stairs.

Uncle Foster and Aunt Tilly were covered in snow, and Sarah shivered from the cold they carried in with them. As they brushed themselves off, Sarah saw that they too weren't quite as she remembered them: Aunt Tilly, who normally wore really nice clothes, was wearing a brown sweater that looked really itchy. Uncle Foster wore a cheesy Christmas sweater with knitted reindeer and snowflakes on it. He looked up at Sarah through his big thick glasses.

"Well now, would you look at that!" She grinned, "Little Sarah ain't so little anymore! Come and give your Uncle a hug."

Sarah ran down the stairs and jumped into his arms.

"Whoops!" He staggered backwards, crashed into Aunt Tilly and they all toppled to the floor in a big heap.

"Careful, Foster!" Dad laughed, "You're going to scratch the door. Again."

"She's gotten big, ain't she?" said Uncle Foster, "What have you been feeding her? Spanners and hammers?"

"She's growing up to be a fine young lady," said Tilly, holding her hands and looking over her as though she were a doctor checking a patient. She let go, Sarah felt the crinkle of a sweet wrapper in her hand. Aunt Tilly winked at her.

"And she's not the only one," said Mum, eyes wide, hand over her mouth, "Is that Lisa?"

Sarah spun around so fast that she nearly fell over again. Sure enough, there was Lisa, her fine blonde hair floating around her face even though there was no breeze.

"Hi Aunt Pebbleton!" she said cheerfully, then she eyed Sarah mischievously.

"You ready for a snowball fight?"

Sarah grinned back.

Sarah stepped out into the cold Christmas morning, clicking the door of number 12 shut behind her. The real street she lived in wasn't anything special, with lines of semi-detached houses on a road lined with cars parked on the pavements. But this street was really narrow, and the houses were two long rows of terraced housing on either side. With the snow on top, they looked like two long straight Christmas puddings. Lots of other kids from the street were out playing in the snow as well.

Smack! Something wet and cold hit her in the cheek, and she heard Lisa laughing.

"Caught you daydreaming!" Lisa laughed, "Come and get me!"

Lisa charged away, kicking up snow behind her.

"You're in trouble now!" Sarah said, grabbing two big handfuls of snow and squashing them together to make a snowball the size of a football. She ran after Sarah, roaring like a monster and Lisa screaming in pretend terror. Sarah backed Lisa into a corner between a car and a pile of shoveled snow.

"Got you now!" Sarah declared. She raised the snowball over her head - and slipped, falling headfirst in the snow, her own snowball hitting her in the back.

Lisa laughed so much she was nearly crying. Sarah pulled herself up to her feet, and was about to gather more snow for another try when - smack! - a snowball flew over her shoulder and hit Lisa straight in the face, stopping her laughter straight away.

Sarah spun around. Adam, the boy who lived two doors down, had his arms raised to the air in victory.

"Gotcha!" He said.

Sarah and Lisa looked at each other. Then they chased after Adam. Soon, every kid on the street was in a huge snowball fight, and the air was thick with balls of white flying through the air and exploding on faces, jackets, walls and windows. By the time Mum called them for dinner, Sarah was wet, cold and very, very happy. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had so much fun. Saying goodbye to the other kids who were now teaming up to make a giant snowman, Sarah and Lisa headed back into number 12.

Inside, the house was warm and full of the smell of cooking meat and vegetables. Mum, Dad, Uncle Foster and Aunt Tilly were bustling about the little house carrying trays, pots and pans.

"You two look like ice lollies!" Said Aunt Tilly, peering at them from the living room, "Sarah, go ask your Mum if you can have a quick bath before dinner. There's a bit of time left before the food is ready.

There wasn't enough time for the boiler to heat up, so Mum boiled a couple of kettles of water and poured them into the bath. The bath was tiny, barely big enough for one person. But Sarah and Lisa were still quite small, so to save time they squeezed into the bath together, and continued their snowball fight by splashing water at each other, then making waves that sloshed over the edges of the bath and made the mat underneath all wet. Sarah couldn't stop giggling the whole time.

Mum knocked on the door. "Dinner will be ready in five minutes," she said, "You two should get dried off now."

It was difficult to get out of the warm bath, but the smell of the food downstairs somehow made its way through the door and to Sarah's nose. She and Lisa stood up, shivering in the cold air, wrapped towels around themselves and ran to Sarah's room to get changed. Sarah's cheeks still hurt from laughing and smiling so much.

"Oh, you got the Uberwoman books," said Lisa, picking up the still-open book from Sarah's mattress, "That's cool! I have some other books in the series. Do you want to swap for a while when you're finished?"

"Sure!" said Sarah, and they talked about how great Uberwoman was and how they couldn't wait to see what would happen next on the episode as they pulled on warm and dry clothes. Lisa hadn't brought a change of clothes but Sarah happily let her borrow some of her own. Just like her, the clothes fit Lisa really badly, but it didn't matter.

They headed down the stairs, skipping over the broken step and tiptoeing around the sleeping Tinder. The house didn't have a dining room, so Dad had brought in the plastic table from the garden and squeezed it in the kitchen. The table groaned under the weight of all of the food on it.

## Sarah Sues Santa – P.J. Leonard

None of the food was that fancy: there were crisps and sweets next to the boiled potatoes and baby carrots, and although they had no turkey Uncle Foster had brought a couple of chickens with him, and Aunt Tilly had also brought a roasted ham. “Saved up for ages for it,” she said proudly, “It’s from France and everything!”

Uncle Foster had tuned the radio to find some Christmas music, and although it was crackling and hard to hear Sarah thought it added to the Christmassy atmosphere.

Mum lit a match and lit the candles. They were only small tea candles dotted around the table, but Sarah thought that they looked nice, glowing like fairies sitting on the table.

“That should do it,” said Mum, taking a seat, “Okay everyone, what are we waiting for? Dig in!”



## Chapter Eleven: Christmas Jokes

Sarah and Lisa grabbed a knife and fork and started filling their plate. At first, she went straight for the sweets, but with a look from Mum she added a couple of spoonfuls of vegetables to her plate as well.

If Sarah was completely honest, the food wasn't that great. Of course, she didn't say that: Mum had a small kitchen with a cooker that always kept breaking, and she knew that everyone had really tried their best to make Christmas dinner look good. In fact, as she chewed on chicken and drank a mouthful of orange squash from one of the really fancy cups that they only used for special occasions, Sarah actually appreciated it even more than the Christmas dinner from the rich house. And anyway, the food didn't really matter that much: there was lots of talking and joking, and after a couple of glasses of whatever it was Uncle Foster was drinking, his face was as red as the tablecloth, and he started telling some of his best jokes.

"There's a reason why we don't have a turkey this year, do you why?" he said. "Well, the turkey is in a band. He has the drumsticks."

Sarah and Lisa laughed so much that their stomachs hurt, and Sarah was nearly begging him to stop. Dad kept rolling his eyes, and Aunt Tilly playfully hit Uncle Foster on the arm.

"Stop telling those stupid jokes, you're embarrassing me," she said.

"Oh, don't be so rude," said Uncle Foster, taking another sip of his drink, "You're like that reindeer. What's his name? Oh yeah...Rude-oph."

When all of their plates were clear and Sarah had stuffed her pockets with the leftover sweets, they all worked together to clear the table and tidy up the kitchen. Sarah took the job of drying up all of the washed plates and cutlery, while Lisa grabbed the broom and swept the floor of all of the crumbs before Tinder started eating them.

When everything was nice and tidy, Mum turned to the fridge, and from it pulled out a huge Christmas cake. Sarah stared at it as Mum carried it carefully to the table and Dad laid out clean plates and spoons.

"We should thank Sarah for this," said Mum, smiling at her.

"Me?" said Sarah, "What did I do?"

"You you remember Mrs. Fennick, the old lady on the corner of Brindle Lane? You cleaned her front garden last month."

Sarah nodded slowly. She really had done that in the real world, as part of her mission to be as good as possible this year. So that happened here, in this world too? Funny, my parents in the rich house didn't mention it at all.

"Well, she used to own a bakery. And she was so grateful for your help that she made this Christmas cake, just for you."

"I can't eat all of that!" Sarah pointed at the cake, "It's bigger than my head!"

Everyone laughed.

"Well, in that case we'll help you eat it," said Lisa, grabbing a spoon.

Dad sliced up the cake and passed the slices around. It was extremely fruity and very tasty.

"This is fantastic," said Uncle Foster, "Sarah, are you planning on cleaning up any more gardens? Because Mr. Cobbs is a car mechanic and I could really do with someone checking my car..."

"You are ridiculous, Foster!" said Aunt Tilly, even though it looked like she was avoiding the urge to laugh as well.

With the clock coming up to 4pm, everyone piled into the living room to watch the Christmas special of that soap opera that Mum and Aunt Tilly seemed to really like. Dad and Uncle Foster talked about more grown-up stuff that Sarah couldn't quite understand – something to do with

computers, it sounded. Sarah found it all a little bit boring, so she and Lisa sat in the corner of the room reading books and playing with Lisa's new card game. After the soap opera, everyone turned to watch that really funny comedy that everyone liked. There were lots of famous special guests and singing of Christmas songs, and by the time it finished it was dark outside.

The adults started playing a game which Sarah had never heard of before, but looked fun so she decided to join in: everyone had a sticky note of a celebrity on their forehead which they couldn't see, but they could ask questions about and try to guess who it was. Sarah wasn't sure how it worked at first, but the more she played, the more she liked it. Sarah had put the word 'Uberwoman' on Uncle Foster's forehead, and she and Lisa laughed as he asked lots of questions and scratched his head, wondering who it could possibly be.

When Uncle Foster's face was as red as a beetroot and looked like he was about to fall out of his chair and Lisa was yawning twice a minute, Aunt Tilly stood up.

"I think it's about time we left you alone," she said. Uncle Foster stood up too, swaying on the spot.

"But I don't wanna go!" Lisa said though another yawn.

"Neither do I, dear," said Aunt Tilly, "But we'll be back soon so you can play again with Sarah. We promise."

All the adults exchanged hugs as they headed towards the door. Uncle Foster, Aunt Tilly and Lisa put on their coats, and so did Sarah.

"I'll see you out to the car," she said, and Sarah followed them out into the night. The streetlights glowed yellow, shining down on the snow and turning it to the color of butter. Uncle Foster, Aunt Tilly and Lisa all climbed into the car, with Aunt Tilly at the steering wheel.

"Thanks for the lovely day," said Aunt Tilly as she turned on the engine, "We'll see you all again soon."

The car steered away through the thick snow, and Lisa waved at her through the back window. Sarah waved back, and kept waving until the car turned the corner and disappeared. Sarah put her hands into her pockets and let out a long sigh. Steam floated out of her mouth, and she shivered, even though inside she felt all warm and cozy. What an amazing Christmas Day! Even though this version of her family were poorer than her real family and much, much poorer than the rich family, she'd had a much better time here than she could have ever dreamed of. Maybe...maybe I could stay here?

She turned, and was about to head back into the house when she spotted something that made her heart sink as low as her stomach. Through the iced window of number 12, Sarah could just about make out Mum and Dad in the living room. Dad had her arm around Mum, and Mum was leaning forward, head in her hands. Like she was crying.

## Chapter Twelve: Tears Yet Again

Sarah crept towards the house, wondering what on earth she could be crying about. Today's been perfect! How could they not be happy?

Opening the front door as quietly as he could, she stepped inside and listened from the narrow hallway.

"She deserves better than this," Mum sobbed, "We couldn't even give her a proper present this year."

"You're being too hard on yourself," said Dad, "Didn't you see her playing with Lisa? She's perfectly happy with what she got."

Sarah longed to run into the living and give Mum and Dad a big hug and tell them that she was fine, that she'd had the best Christmas ever, but Dad was talking again.

"Anyway, she's gonna get a few more things in the January sales, isn't she?"

But Mum cried even more. "Didn't you read that notice? If we don't pay that bill before the end of January they're going to kick us out of the house. We can't afford to spend any more money on presents."

Sarah swallowed. For a fleeting moment, she felt a wave of anger pass through her. But Santa gave that money so I could get more presents! Why is it going to be used to pay a bill? But then she heard Mum crying again, and her anger melted away.

"I don't think I can tell her," said Mum, "It's so unfair on her. She really deserves more than this for Christmas."

"We'll think of something," said Dad, "Come on, I'll make us some tea. Is Sarah still outside?"

Sarah heard Dad stand up, and Sarah looked around, panicking. If they came out into the hallway she'd be spotted, and they'd know she'd been listening to them talk. There was no way she could make it up the noisy stairs. She laid a hand on the cold handle of the front door and silently stepped outside again.

Sarah stood there for a while in the cold night, back against the door and watching the last few snowflakes flutter down. She held the two remaining tickets in her hand.

Why did Santa bring her here? What was the reason? Well, if Santa thought that this was supposed to make her feel better, that this was supposed to teach her some kind of lesson, then Santa was making a big mistake.

True, this poor version of her family had been a lot of fun, despite having only three tiny presents. But all of the fun had nothing to do with what Santa had brought her. Actually, Santa was even more mean and unfair than she had ever imagined! This family needed his help more than ever, and his answer was to give them less than ever! These house visits are just making me more and more angry at you, Mr. Claus. When I see you I am going to give you such a talking to!

She had half a mind to stay with this version of her parents a little bit longer - it made her feel bad to leave when they were feeling so sad - but Sarah had to get moving. One more house to go after this, and the sooner I get through that the sooner I can meet Santa.

She walked up the driveway and peered up to the far end of the street. As always, there was the postbox, gleaming an orangey color under the streetlight. Taking big steps through the thick snow, she made her way towards it. Bright light spilled out of the slot.

Her hand shook as she held a ticket to the letterbox. What was next? She'd seen her family if they were rich, and now her family if they were really poor. What else did Santa want to show her?

"Let's get this over with," she muttered to herself, and she slotted the ticket into the postbox.

The postbox door swung open, and Sarah climbed inside. The door clicked shut behind her, and the light went out.



## Chapter Thirteen: The Saddest Christmas Tree

More than ever before, Sarah felt cold. She reached out and felt the duvet. But this duvet felt...different, somehow. It was thin, and not very warm at all. She pulled the thin sheet around her, shivering. The wind howled somewhere nearby, shaking the window. She didn't want to get up. She didn't want to see what was beyond this bed. This place...it seems scary.

Creak. The bed moved slightly. Someone else was in the room with her. She leapt out of her bed - and smacked her head against something hard. "Ouch!"

Rubbing her forehead and stars popping in her eyes, she looked up. The ceiling was low, low enough to reach out and touch. Wait, no, it's not a ceiling...I'm in a bunk bed, and there's another bed above me.

The bed above creaked. Sarah scrambled into the corner of her bed as a girl's head popped out from the ceiling above, her hair falling like a curtain around her face.

"What are you doing?" said the girl.

"I...I was just..." Sarah felt as though her tongue had been stolen.

"Keep it down, you two!" someone called from across the room. Sarah looked out across her bedroom, and knew straightaway that this wasn't her bedroom at all. Instead of just her bed, there five other bunk beds against the walls. Each bed had a girl sleeping in it. There was a table and chairs in the middle, a sink in the corner and a door in the corner marked 'Toilet'. What is this place?

The girl above Sarah looked across the room. "Sorry, Becky," she said, "Sarah just made me jump, that's all."

The girl called Becky slumped back into her bed, muttering something about being 'too early'. Sarah leaned forward and looked out of the window. Like all the other days, weak sunlight pushed through the snow and window, which didn't have any curtains. Was this Christmas Day too? She looked around but couldn't see a clock or calendar. Now that she came to think about it, where were all of her belongings? She couldn't see any wardrobe, chest of drawers or closet. She looked down at herself, and noticed that she was in an old nightgown that had a big stain down the front of it. Cold horror washed over her. Each day she'd put them on, the remaining tickets were safely in her jeans pocket. But her jeans, always right next to her bed every morning, were now gone. If I can't find those jeans, then I cannot leave. I'll be stuck here forever!

Sarah stood up quickly, careful not to headbutt the top bed again.

"Where are you going?" The girl in the top bunk whispered.

"Err, toilet," Sarah blurted out, staggering across the room and nearly bumping into the table on the way. She walked into the toilet, locked the door and sat down. She took a deep breath. One thing was for sure: this was not her house. Or was it? Maybe in this version my parents just have a lot of kids? She shook her head. Don't be silly. All those other girls are my age as well! She rubbed her head. What was this place, then? She thought hard. If she'd seen what her family would be like if they were really rich, then really poor, then what else could there be? I have to go and investigate... She poked her head out of the toilet door. The girls in the room were all fast asleep again. Spotting the other door on the opposite side of the room, she crept across the thin and scratchy carpet to the door and left the bedroom.

The corridor was cold and bare, with a concrete floor and pipes running along the ceiling like the strings of a giant spider web. The windows on the left-side wall were big and thin, letting in a lot of the cold as well as the morning light. Sarah saw her own breath rise in front of her like a little cloud.

She passed a door marked 'Boy's Room'. Looking back, she saw that the door she had walked out

of was marked 'Girl's Room.' She also passed what looked like a meeting room and a small interview room with a single desk and three chairs: two big, one small.

Aside from the snow outside, nothing in this place gave a clue that it was Christmas: no decorations, no smell of food, not even a calendar. Is it really Christmas? Nobody is awake and excited. It's not that early, is it?

She came to a crossroads of corridors. At one far end, she spotted what looked like the main entrance: two big, heavy-looking doors that had a giant lock bolting them shut. This place...it was a lot like a school, only even less happy. Slowly, it was dawning on her just what this place was, like a something creeping up her spine. It couldn't be...there was no way...

She came to what looked like a playroom, though Sarah struggled to call it that. Broken toys and ripped teddy bears lay scattered across the floor. Old tables and chairs covered in scratches and with the occasional leg missing were in the corners of the room, each with a case of crayons that looked as though they had half the crayons missing. Picking up one of the coloring books from a table, Sarah flicked through the pages. Every last page had been scribbled on, with barely any white space left to colour. Shuddering, she put the book back down. She looked up to see a clock and calendar on the wall: 7:30am, December 25th.

In the middle of the room, there was a Christmas tree. The saddest Christmas tree Sarah had ever seen. It wasn't small, but in this big room it looked tiny and lonely. It had no decorations, except for a single star at the top which looked like it had been gold once but had lost all of its colour years ago, and now it was just a dull grey. No presents were under the tree. A big hand lay on Sarah's shoulder, and she nearly leapt out of her skin. She turned, and a tall pale man in a black suit with short hair stared down at her.

"What are you doing out of bed?" He said quickly.

"I, er, I'm lost," she blurted out. She winced. Why did I say that?

"Lost?" The man raised an eyebrow, "You're not supposed to be out of your bedroom until eight. How did you get lost between your bed and the bedroom?"

Sarah stuttered and stammered, trying to think of a good answer and failing. The man gave Sarah an ice cold stare, and then he seemed to melt like snow in a hot pan. He rubbed his forehead. "Well, it was going to happen, I guess," he said, sounding extremely tired, "I should've known you kids would be excited on Christmas. Even if...well..."

"So it is Christmas?" Said Sarah, suddenly feeling curious. She pointed at the bare Christmas tree, "So why didn't Santa bring any presents?"

The man looked at the tree and let out a long sigh.

"Nobody brings presents to orphans," he said, "Not even Santa."

Sarah felt as though the floor had opened up beneath her. An orphan? Am...am I an orphan too?

The man's expression was hard again. He steered her out of the playroom and back into the cold corridors. But they didn't go back to the bedroom: they went a different way this time.

"This way, Miss Pebbleton," said the man, "Seeing as you are up so early, you might as well help the cooks with breakfast."

## Chapter Fourteen: The Orphanage

The man's name was Noel Vekil. The cooks started talking the moment he left Sarah with them. Sarah longed to follow him - she had so many questions - but the cooks immediately set her to work stirring a big pot of tomato soup. It didn't look like a good soup, though: it looked as thin as water, and smelled like used socks.

As the steam licked around her face, her mind raced. An orphanage? So where were her parents? Maybe she didn't want to know the answer to that question, but she kept telling herself that this wasn't real, that this was all just Santa's magic. But this all felt so real that she couldn't help but feel sad.

"You okay, darling?" said one of the cooks, her friendly wrinkled face peering from the other side of the pot, "You look as though you're about to burst about crying."

"Just...thinking."

"About what? Anything I can help with?"

"I doubt it."

The old cook watched her stirring silently for a while, then she walked around the pot to stand next to Sarah. She stood next to Sarah for a while, not saying a word. It made Sarah feel very uncomfortable. Finally, she spoke.

"You're new here, aren't you?" She croaked.

Sarah didn't look at her. Was she new? She wasn't sure.

But the old cook nodded anyway. "I thought so." She nodded at the door that Noel Vekil had walked out of. "Don't ever call him Noel," she said, "He hates it. Just call him Mr. Vekil. Even the other adults here have to call him that. We don't like him very much."

The old cook gave a crooked grin and raised a finger to her lips. Sarah grinned, and they both looked up. Through the steam, Sarah looked over the dining hall. It was a long and narrow room with plastic chairs and tables, a serving hatch next to the kitchen, and nothing else. It was dark, and even though she was stirring a pot of hot liquid Sarah couldn't help but shiver.

"No wonder you're cold," said the old cook, "You're still in your pyjamas."

Soon, the other kids filed into the kitchen. Some were older than Sarah, maybe even as old as fourteen. Some were younger than her, barely taller than the tables they tried to sit at.

The old lady took the ladle from Sarah. "That should do it, dear," she croaked, "Now run along, go and sit by your friends."

Who are my friends here? Do I have any friends at all? Sarah's mind raced as she walked out of the kitchens, took a deep breath at the door of the dining hall, and pushed her way through the doors.

Already the hall was bustling with movement as kids lined up to collect their breakfast. As Sarah joined the back of the queue, three of the older kids pushed in front her, staring at her as though daring her to say something. As Sarah looked away she spotted the girl from the top bunk further up the queue, looking straight at her.

"Sarah! Come here!" She called, "I have something to show you!"

Not daring to look at the scowling older kids, Sarah jumped up the queue to where the girl from the top bunk waited. The other girl called Becky was there as well.

"What is it?" Sarah said quietly.

"Huh?"

"The thing you wanted to show me."

"Oh that!" said the girl from the top bunk, "It's not important now. Come on, stand next to us."

"You're very brave, Anna," said Becky, looking over her shoulder, "You're going to make the big kids angry if you keep doing stuff like that."

"They don't scare me," said Anna brightly, "They think they're tough, but all they do is pick on the new kid." Anna patted Sarah on the shoulder, "They should try picking on someone their own size. Anyway, I quite like you Sarah. You seem nice."

Sarah managed a small smile.

"Be careful about being too nice, though," said Becky, rolling her eyes, "Otherwise you'll end up getting adopted."

Adopted...the word made Sarah's stomach churn.

Anna and Becky chatted away as the queue moved towards the hatch where breakfast was served. Not once did Sarah hear them mention Christmas. Finally, they collected their plates and took a seat in the corner of the room, away from the crowd.

Sarah looked down at her breakfast. There was the thin soup that she had stirred, a bowl of oatmeal and a paper cup of orange squash. Sarah wouldn't even call this a nice breakfast on a normal day, let alone Christmas.

"It hasn't always been like this," said Becky, noticing how Sarah stared at her meal, "Not if you believe what Margaret says, anyway."

"Who?"

Becky and Anna pointed across the room to where the old cook stood, ladling the soup into bowls, always smiling toothlessly.

"Margaret keeps saying that this place actually used to be quite nice," Becky went on, whispering even though nobody else was nearby, "I mean, she says that the orphanage has never had that much money, but at least it used to be fun here."

"What happened?"

Anna and Becky exchanged dark looks. They looked around them to make absolutely sure nobody was listening.

"Mr. Vekil," Anna hissed, "He took over the orphanage about five years ago. Nobody had heard about him before he turned up, and even now nobody really knows anything about him."

"There's lots of rumors, though," said Becky, lowering her voice even more so Sarah had to lean in, "Like him being an old gangster who is hiding from his angry boss."

"Or under the control of giant lizard aliens!" Anna added excitedly.

Becky rolled her eyes. "The only thing that's for sure is that Mr. Vekil turned this place into what it is now: miserable, cold and not fun at all."

"Or Christmassy."

Becky and Anna exchanged dark looks again.

"What is it?" said Sarah, looking from one to the other.

Becky and Anna seemed to be having a silent conversation with each other, as though they weren't sure how much they could say. With one more look over their shoulder to make absolutely sure nobody could hear, Becky spoke.

"It's just another rumor, but this one makes a lot of sense," said Becky, "They say that Mr. Vekil hates Christmas, but his family loves it. That's why his parents named him Noel. When he was a kid, his family would basically celebrate Christmas all year."

Sarah thought of how she was now on her fourth Christmas Day in a row. "I can see how that could get annoying."

"So Mr. Vekil escaped to run this orphanage. It was a clever move, really, because he knows that orphanages don't get a lot of money. He could live in the orphanage with all the kids, and his family couldn't tell him to celebrate Christmas, because that would mean spending money on decorations and presents when it should be spent on food and heating."



“I don't think he even does that,” said Sarah, looking down at her watery soup, “I mean, if it was so nice before, why would he make it so bad?”

Anna shrugged. “You can ask him if you want.”

Becky gave a short laugh. “Ha! As if! Nobody speaks to Mr. Vekil.”

“I did.” said Sarah.

Becky and Anna stared at her. “You...what? When?”

“This morning. He saw me walking around.”

“YOU'RE JOKING!” Anna leapt out of her seat as though she was given an electric shock and nearly knocking over her breakfast tray. Several of the nearby kids looked in their direction.

“Sit down,” Becky muttered through gritted teeth, “People are watching.”

“S-sorry,” said Anna, lowering herself back onto the plastic seat, “But still...wow! I don't think I've met any other kid that's actually spoken to Mr. Vekil.”

“He didn't seem that bad, really,” said Sarah, sipping on her soup.

“That's just because you don't know him yet,” said Becky, “It sounds like you were lucky. If he is not so bad, Sarah, then how come he turned this orphanage into this?” she waved an arm around the dark dining hall, all of the kids huddled over their steaming bowls for warmth on this chilly Christmas morning.

## Chapter Fifteen: The Secret Room

As Sarah queued to hand in her tray, she noticed that the other kids started to clean the dining room, grabbing cloths and wiping down chairs and tables while others grabbed brooms and mops from a big cupboard at the back of the room and started to clean.

“What’s going on?” said Sarah as she handed her tray to Margaret.

“Chores,” she said, “Everyone has a place they need to clean.”

“Oh,” said Sarah, “Erm...where do I –”

But Margaret waved her hand. “You already did your chores this morning,” she said with a kind smile, “You go and relax, dearie.”

“Oh, lucky you!” said Becky and Anna.

Sarah headed out of the dining hall. Children were scattered everywhere, brushing the floor and wiping the windows. She wandered around, not really sure where to go or what to do. Her mind was too full of what Becky and Anna had told her. Was what they said true? Was Mr. Vekil really a bad man? As Sarah watched two little boys on their knees scrubbing a grimy floor with old socks, Sarah had to agree. What kind of person makes kids do cleaning on Christmas Day?

Sarah rounded a corner, and snapped out of her daydreaming. Looking around, she noticed that she was far away from any of the other children and their cleaning. This corridor looked a little brighter than the other ones she’d seen: big windows on one side looked over a courtyard covered in snow. And on the other wall was a long line of lockers, each with a number. Is one of these mine? Maybe...but what number would my locker be? Straightaway, she knew the answer. Number 12, her house number. She went to locker 12, and there was a turn-dial with all of the letters of the alphabet on it. She rubbed her chin. Her password...what could it be? It could be any word...

She spun the dial around and spelled the word SANTA. The locker didn’t open. Maybe her surname? PEBBLETON. Nope, that didn’t work either. Think, Sarah...a word that is important to me, something I will never forget...

Sarah smiled. Of course. How could it be anything else? UBERWOMAN. The locker clicked, and she pulled it open. Inside were her clothes. She immediately pulled out her jeans and dug a hand into her pocket. Her fingers closed around a scrunched up piece of paper. The ticket. She still had it. She could finally escape.

She looked around. Nobody else was here. It would be easy to just open one of these windows, climb out, use one of the drainpipes to climb up onto the roof and escape this horrible place. She slid open the window latch, and laid a hand on the glass. No, she didn’t want to leave just yet. Something about this orphanage and Noel Vekil...it was like a mystery that hadn’t been solved. And Uberwoman never left mysteries unsolved! Besides, Santa had sent her here for a reason. Maybe this was it?

She slid the latch shut and locked the window again. No. Not yet.

Sarah walked around the maze of corridors and up the stairs to the second floor. This place is huge! Far bigger than an orphanage needs to be. Many of the rooms were empty, or stacked with old tables and chairs. But then she came to a door that was locked and bolted. Every door she’d seen had been wide open...except this one. That just makes me want to see inside. She rattled the handle, then immediately stopped, wincing as the sound echoed down the corridors. She tried to peek through the crack under the door, but it was too narrow. She stood on tiptoe and tried to see through the dusty windows on the door. At first, she nearly jumped away in fright – were those ghosts inside? – but when she looked closer, she saw that that it was a huge white sheet stretched over something big, so big it filled the whole room. What is that?

“You are very good at ending up in places where you’re not supposed to be, Miss Pebbleton.”

Sarah nearly leapt out of her skin. She spun around so fast she nearly fell over. Mr. Vekil stood over her, his perfect suit looking very out of place in these dusty corridors, although his stare was just as cold.

“I – I was just...” Sarah scrambled for words, but Mr. Vekil held up a hand.

“Don’t make excuses,” he snapped, “I don’t want to hear them. Just get out of here and never, ever come back here. Do you I make myself clear?”

“Yes!”

“What should you never do?”

“Come back here!”

“Good. Now go. GO!”

Sarah ran as fast as she could, not daring to look back.

Sarah sat in the playroom, flicking through an old picture book without really looking at it. Try as she may, she couldn’t take her mind off of that room. What was Mr. Vekil hiding?

Sarah looked glumly around the room. Not many kids were here: most had gone back to their rooms. Sarah didn’t blame them; there wasn’t much to play with in the playroom. They didn’t even have a pen and some sticky notes to play that game she’d learned from her poor family. They weren’t allowed outside either, and Sarah didn’t dare wander around the orphanage again in case she met Mr. Vekil.

Sarah was so bored that by the time the bell rang for the evening meal, she was almost glad to have something to do, even if she already knew that the food would be terrible. And sure enough, it was: vegetables so boiled that they had no flavor left in them and cold, dry slices of chicken that had no gravy.

“It kind of looks like a Christmas dinner,” said Anna, “I mean, if you think really, really hard.”

Becky snorted. “Thinking doesn’t make it taste better, though.”

“You okay, Sarah?” said Anna, “You look like you’re thinking a little bit too hard.”

Sarah had been pushing the last few peas around her plate, deep in thought. At Anna’s words, she snapped her head up. “Oh! Yeah, I’m great!”

What if I tell them about the secret room? Maybe they will go with me? It won’t be so scary if we go in a group...

Sarah looked up to ask them a question, but the girls were staring wide-eyed over her shoulder. Before she could turn around, she felt something pull on her pocket, and a hand snatched her last two tickets away. Sarah looked up to see the older kids from before, sneering down at her.

“Well, well! What’s this?” he said, The tallest one looked over the tickets.

It was the big kids from before, the ones she met in the queue at breakfast.

"Give them back!" Said Sarah, reaching up to grab it. The big kid just held it higher.

"That's not yours, Michael," said Anna, her face stern, "You're stealing Sarah's stuff."

The boy called Michael shrugged. "Hey, I just want to look!"

"If you wanted to look at it, you could've just asked," said Sarah hotly, "Now give it here!"

But Michael just pushed Sarah in the forehead with a single finger, and she stumbled backwards into her chair. The other big kids laughed, and Sarah felt her face flush a deep red.

Michael unfolded the tickets and looked over it.

"Tickets?" He frowned, "Tickets to where?"

"None of your business."

"Now now, no need to be rude," said Michael, waving the ticket in front of Sarah's face, "I'm just helping Mr. Vekil to make sure all the kids here follow the rules."

"That's rich coming from you!" Anna snapped, but Michael ignored her. He kept staring at Sarah, as

though he suddenly found her very interesting. Lots of the other kids in the dining hall were turning to watch too.

"Are you planning to go somewhere, little girl?" He sneered, "You think you can just leave on your own? You realise that all of the doors out of this place are locked and we're forbidden from going outside? Buying a train ticket doesn't automatically give you permission to leave."

"They're not train tickets." Sarah growled.

"Oh? Then tell me what it is."

Silence. Michael and Sarah stared at each other. The whole dining room was quiet now, leaning in to watch. Finally, Michael stood up straight and stuffed the tickets in his pocket.

"Fine," he said, "If you won't talk to me, then you'll have to talk to Mr. Vekil. I'm sure he'll be really interested to hear about this."

Sarah felt her stomach plunge into a bucket of ice. Before she could leap at Michael, he bolted out of the dining room, his friends and following him.

## Chapter Sixteen: Vekil's Office

"Get back here!" Sarah yelled, chasing after them. She pushed through the dining room doors with her shoulder, and watched as she saw them disappear around a corner. As she ran after them, she heard footsteps behind her. Becky and Anna ran just behind her, with a whole crowd of other kids running behind them, apparently wanting to see the drama unfold.

"Turn left!" Said Becky, "It's a shortcut to Vekil's office!"

Sarah swerved left at the corner. With Becky yelling directions from behind her, she ran upstairs, through empty rooms and down stairs again until they came to a clean wooden door with peeling gold letters saying 'Mr. Vekil.' And Michael and his friends were already standing there. Too late! Michael shot her a twisted grin, and knocked on the door three times.

Hands on her knees as she caught her breath, she heard the sound of a hundred footsteps from both ends of the corridor as what looked like every child in the orphanage gathered around to watch, surrounding her, Becky, Anna and Michael.

The door rattled with the sound of a latch being unlocked. The crowd backed away by a step. The door opened, and out stepped Mr. Vekil. He took one look around the gathered orphans.

"What is the meaning of this?" He boomed. Immediately half of the kids ran, their feet echoing through the corridors like heavy rain. Even Michael looked a little bit scared.

"Sarah had this, Sir," he said, holding out the tickets. Mr. Vekil snatched them out of Michael's hand and looked over them for what felt like five whole minutes. Sarah could only hear the blood pumping in her ears. Finally, he looked up.

"I see," he said, then he met Sarah's eye. "Miss Pebbleton. In my office. Now. The rest of you, get out of my sight. Don't you have evening chores to be getting on with?"

Reluctantly the crowd broke up. Michael stayed where he was.

"That includes you, Mr Andrews," said Mr. Vekil, "And I suggest you wipe that smug look off of your face. It doesn't suit you."

Michael's face fell. Despite her own fear, Sarah felt a twinge of satisfaction as Michael turned and walked away. They gave each other their best scowls as he passed by.

"Don't keep me waiting, Miss Pebbleton," said Mr. Vekil, stepping back into his office and leaving the door open for her. Sarah turned and nodded bravely at Becky and Anna, though she felt anything but brave. They looked like they were about to cry. They waved sadly at her as though she was never going to see them again. Sarah took a deep breath and walked through the door.

"Close the door behind you, please."

Sarah clicked the door shut. The office was...well, the first word that came to her mind was warm. For the first time since arriving she couldn't see her own breath steam in front of her. Instead of big empty corridors and concrete walls there was a lot of dark, varnished wood. A bookshelf packed with leather books lined the wall, and the desk was empty except for two chairs, one on each side. Mr. Vekil sat in the large, fancy chair while he indicated for Sarah to sit in the smaller, plastic chair opposite. Sarah lowered herself into her chair as Mr. Vekil inspected the tickets.

For a while, neither of them spoke. Mr. Vekil didn't even look at Sarah: he just turned the tickets over and over in his hands, as though they were a fine pieces of art. Sarah didn't dare move. What will he do? Will Mr. Vekil punish me? Maybe he'll kick me out of the orphanage. That wouldn't be so bad. I can look for the postbox and get out of here.

But what if Mr. Vekil didn't return the tickets to her? What if he just tore them up into tiny little pieces? She'd be stuck here! How long would it be before she could get a pen and paper to write a letter to Santa, hide it so bullies like Michael never found it, and get to the postbox, wherever it was? Weeks, months...maybe never?

Mr. Vekil smiled. "I see," he said. He held out the tickets to Sarah.

Sarah shrank back in her seat as though Mr. Vekil was holding a fist up at her. Was it a trick? A test?

Mr. Vekil frowned. "Do you want these tickets or not?"

Slowly, as though she was being handed a bomb, she carefully took the tickets back. She stared at Mr. Vekil, then at the ticket - yes, they were the real ones - and back to Mr. Vekil.

"But...but..."

"But what?" Mr Vekil leaned forward, "Do you think I'm trying to trick you? Because I am Mr. Vekil, and I am supposed to be mean and terrible?"

Sarah was so lost for words that she could only make a faint squeaking sound. Mr. Vekil snorted.

"You children. You believe things so easily."

"I...don't understand," Sarah finally managed to say, "What's going on here?"

"What do you mean?" Mr Vekil leaned back in his chair. Now he was a bit further away, Sarah found it a little easier to speak.

"I...well, you don't seem like a bad person..."

Mr. Vekil shook her head, "Oh, but Miss Pebbleton, you are quite wrong. Some of the rumors about me are true: Your friends have told you that I made the orphanage a bad place. yes? Well, that's true."

"But why? Why have you done this?" Now that Sarah had found her voice again, it grew louder and louder until she was almost shouting at Mr. Vekil, "This place is just...it's a nightmare. And to kids! On Christmas Day! I've changed my mind. No, you're not a bad person, you're evil."

Mr. Vekil stroked his short beard, and he looked tired and sad. "That's almost exactly what my parents said to me when they abandoned me."

Sarah felt all of the rage disappear from her faster than a click of the fingers. This man...I just know what to think. One second I hate him, the next I feel sorry for him.

Without thinking, she asked him a question. "Who are you?"

Mr. Vekil looked at the ceiling. Then he sat up straight again, as though he were in an interview. He looked over Sarah carefully, as though considering her for an important new job.

"Come with me," he said, "I will show you."

Without waiting for an answer, he stood up and pulled a book from the shelf. He opened it, and inside was a key. He grabbed the key and walked out of his office without even waiting for her. Sarah twisted around in her chair, half expecting him to come walking back in and telling her that it was all just a test. But he didn't. Sarah jumped out of the chair and chased after him.

## Chapter Seventeen: The Magic of Christmas

After only a few turns through the freezing corridors they arrived at the locked door that they'd met at the last time. Sarah's heart gave a jolt. Was he really going to...

He inserted the key into the door, and with a loud click he unlocked it and stepped inside. Sarah followed.

The thing covered in the white sheet looked even bigger from the inside. It didn't have any clear shape: bits stuck out here and there, and there was a big dip in the middle.

It wasn't just this thing either. Looking around the room, she noticed that pictures hung to the wall, except they were covered in white cloth too. It would've made the whole room look bright and clean if the sheets weren't so dusty and dirty.

Mr. Vekil circled around the big thing in the middle, as though walking around a sleeping monster. His hands shook. Is he scared? But then he gathered up a fist of cloth and gave a great pull. The cloth flew aside and Sarah covered her eyes as dust billowed around her. Blinking, she looked at what lay beneath.

It was a pile of furniture. Sarah had seen lots of rooms full of stacked tables and chairs, and for just a tiny moment she felt her heart sink in dismay. But then she looked closer. This was not just any furniture. It all looked...Christmassy. The biggest thing in the middle was a wooden four-poster bed with velvety red bedsheets sewn with a snow pattern. There was also a chest of drawers with handles shaped like pine trees, a writing desk where legs were painted like candy canes, and a wooden chair with a pair of fake reindeer antlers on the back. But what really made up most of the pile were the toys. There were toys heaped everywhere: wooden blocks, board games, teddy bears of all shapes and sizes...but while the furniture looked like it was still in good condition, many of the toys looked utterly destroyed. Soft toys with arms ripped off, board games without boxes, books with pages hanging loose in their covers.

Sarah looked at Mr. Vekil, and a lightbulb went off in her head.

"This...this stuff is yours." She said quietly.

"Was," Mr. Vekil added, "When you join an orphanage you don't have your own belongings anymore. Everything gets shared. Anything you don't want to share gets bullied out of you eventually. You already know that."

"You were an orphan too?" Sarah scratched her head, "But I heard that you have a family."

Mr. Vekil frowned, "I do. And they are crazy about Christmas. And so was I, when I was your age. I believed in the magic of Christmas, in the Christmas spirit. In Santa."

Sarah frowned. What is he talking about?

"But then I grew up." He went on, walking slowly around the room, "And I didn't want to celebrate Christmas that much anymore. I didn't hate Christmas, I just felt like my parent's way of doing things was too much. All of the big feasts, the presents, the parties from November to January, it didn't seem to be the true meaning of Christmas.

"So when I tried to do things my own way, when I wanted to put away my decorations in January, my parents got angry. Really angry. They told me 'If you cannot celebrate Christmas like the rest of our family, then you are not part of this family.'

"One night, after the fifth day of parties in a row, we had a big argument. Lots of shouting and crying. Then I ran away. I was only ten years old, so it didn't last long. But when I came back, I wasn't greeted by my parents with open arms or even another argument. They sent me straight back out of the door. They had already packed up all of my things. The next day, I arrived at this orphanage. I never heard from my family ever again."

Sarah held her hands over her mouth. "That's terrible!"

Mr. Vekil began pulling the cloth off of the pictures on the wall. It was a young Mr. Vekil, living his life as an orphan, playing with toys and surrounded by other children. In none of the photos was he smiling. "This was my room. The orphanage was much bigger, then, and we all had our own rooms. That didn't stop the big kids from coming in and breaking all of my toys though. I didn't mind that much. The toys reminded me of my family. Nobody adopted me. Everyone knew about that weird Vekil family. When I turned sixteen, I was old enough to get my own job and leave."

"But you came back..." Sarah whispered, "You're the owner of this orphanage now."

Mr. Vekil nodded.

"Wait, hang on," Sarah rubbed her head, as though she was trying to massage all of the information into her brain, "If all of this is true -"

"It is."

"Then why have you made this place so horrible?" Sarah waved an arm down the empty concrete corridor, "You know how hard it is to be an orphan, so why are you making everyone's lives miserable? No toys, no going outside, all crammed into one bedroom, lots of chores, no..."

"No Christmas?" Mr. Vekil added with a sneer, "Christmas is a lie, Miss Pebbleton. Oh, I believed it was all real, for a while. All the things they say in those songs. Christmas spirit, peace on earth, goodwill to all men. My family were obsessed with Christmas, but they put their own son into an orphanage. Where's the Christmas spirit in that? Where was Santa when I needed him the most?"

Sarah held her tongue. What Mr. Vekil said sounded eerily similar to her own thoughts over the last few days, except his story was much worse than hers.

"You say that it is horrible here?" Mr. Vekil gave a short, sharp laugh, "This is real life, Miss Pebbleton. The children here will be ready for just how cruel the real world can be. They will never have to experience the pain of having their dreams shattered like I did."

"But...it's good to have dreams," said Sarah, "It's good to believe in something."

"Like Santa?" Mr. Vekil gave a twisted smile, "Even when he has disappointed you every single year, Miss Pebbleton?"

Sarah bit her lip. It was like Mr. Vekil could read her thoughts. She didn't want to agree with him, but a tiny bit of her did.

He stood up straight. "I'm sorry to hear what happened to you, Mr. Vekil," she said, "but you shouldn't make other kids sad just because you think it's right. It doesn't matter if it's Christmas or not. The real world isn't that bad."

"Oh really?" Mr. Vekil raised an eyebrow, "Well, Miss Pebbleton, you have your tickets. Go. Leave. You don't believe me? Go and see the real world for yourself. You won't like what you see. Trust me."

Sarah and Mr. Vekil stared at each other for a moment. Then Mr. Vekil put his hand into his pocket and pulled out another, bigger key.

"Here," he said, handing it to her, "It's the spare key to the front door. Keep it. You'll need it for when you come back."

Sarah clutched the key tight in her fist. She felt her cheeks burning, and without saying a single word she turned and left the room.



## Chapter Eighteen: Lost in the Forest

That man...he really is terrible. His words echoed through her head like her own footsteps through the corridors. Something about what he said made her feel...angry. Really angry. Why? Mr. Vekil hadn't shouted at her or hurt her. He'd even let her leave.

She shook her head. No. I don't need to think about him or this place any more. It's time to leave. To meet Santa at last. I have so many questions...

As she walked down the corridor, she passed the other kids as they were doing their evening chores. They stared at her as she passed, and she could feel their eyes burning on the back of her neck. Footsteps pattered behind her: a few at first, then more and more. Soon it sounded as if the whole orphanage were following her. As she passed the playroom, out stepped Becky and Anna.

"Sarah!" Said Anna, "You're OK! What happened? What's going - "

Sarah silently shook her head at them as she walked passed. Finally, she came to a stop at the door. The crowd behind her stopped too, staying back from her by about ten steps as if the door was some kind of dangerous animal. Whispers rippled down the corridor. Sarah ran a finger along the cold surface of the metal door. Tiny drops of condensation ran down it. It was a lot bigger up close. She took the key from her pocket, and a few of the orphans gave a gasp. She inserted the key into the lock and turned. The door clicked with a low booming sound like a faraway explosion, and Sarah pushed the door open.

Snow flew at her, as though it was running inside to escape the cold. She stepped out, and fresh snow crunched under her feet. She shielded her eyes as big flakes flew into her face. She turned around. She could barely make out the kids still standing in the dark corridor: for all she knew, they might have all run away at the sight of the outdoors. One thing was for sure; none of them were running out into the snow to play. Sarah sighed. Vekil really has made them scared of the outside world. I'll show him. I'll show him there is a Christmas spirit! She pulled at the door handles, slammed the door shut and with another turn of the key locked it again.

She looked around the courtyard. It was nearly impossible to see: everything had been covered in snow. All she could make out were the lampposts forming a line into the distance. A path...

The key was getting cold in her hand. She longed to throw the key into the snow, to prove Mr. Vekil wrong - I will never, ever come back here! - but at the sight of the snowstorm, she growled in frustration and stuffed the key in her pocket.

Sarah followed the line of lampposts through the courtyard and out of a rusting gate. A dark shadow swayed in the swirling snow in front of her. As she came closer she saw it was a thick forest of tall pine trees. The path of lampposts ended at the edge of the forest. The postbox was always to the right, at the far end of the street. She let out a long breath, steam rising in front of her, and she stepped into the forest.

The snow was much less here: the thick blanket of pine needles up above shielded her from most of it, and Sarah could finally look around without squinting. The forest was silent. The straight tree trunks stretched out in every direction around her, fading away into the darkness - even the trees behind her, where she'd come from. Wait...that is the direction I came from, right? Maybe it's that way, the trees in that direction looked thinner...

Sarah's heart raced. Was she lost already? No way: she was just a little confused, that's all. Anyway, this forest couldn't be that big. If she kept walking in this direction she'd come to the postbox eventually, she'd just have to...

On and on she went. And so did the forest: it started to make her feel a little bit dizzy. For all she knew, she could be walking in circles, because all of the trees looked the same. And was it her, or were the tree trunks slowly closing in on her? She felt suddenly short of breath.

A twig snapped behind her. She bolted away like a frightened rabbit, weaving through the trees, not daring to look back. She tripped over a tree root and landed face first into a pile of fallen pine needles.

"Ow!" Sitting up and wiping the needles away from her sore face, she looked around. Nobody or nothing else was there. Straightaway Sarah felt silly for running. This place...it's making me feel weird. Why did I come this way? I should've walked around the edge of the forest! Why would a postbox be in the middle of a forest anyway? Why...

She peered through the trees. In the distance was a patch of light. An opening. And there, in the middle of the opening, stood something tall, red and white.

Sarah froze on the spot. A cold chill swept through her, even though there was no wind between the trees.

"Santa?" She whispered, her breath rising in a stream of smoke.

The figure didn't move. Or did it? It was too far away to make out. She forced one foot in front of the other, as though her feet were made of ice. Gradually, she felt her limbs thaw, and without thinking about it she was running towards the opening. She burst out of the trees and into the blinding white light of the snow. She blinked, shielding her eyes with her hand.

"Santa?" She called. As her eyes adjusted to the light, she saw the figure again. Wait...that's not Santa. It was a tall red postbox. The top of it was covered in a thick cap of snow. Pulling a ticket out of her pocket, she stepped forward. At last. The final trip. Time to meet Santa Claus.

Nothing she'd seen over these four Christmas Days made sense. Rich people who got everything, poor people who got nothing, orphans who didn't even get a Christmas, and a boy who came from a family that loved Christmas but forced him out of the family. What Mr. Vekil had said about Christmas still echoed in her mind...Christmas is a lie...where was Santa when I needed him the most? For a moment her hand hovered over the slot. Did she want to even mee Santat? Was she ready? What if she didn't get the answer she wanted?

The key to the orphanage weighed heavily in her pocket, as though it were pulling her back. She took a deep, cold breath and slipped the ticket into the letterbox.

It was different this time. Instead of the light pouring out of the door, it streamed out of the letterbox like a golden smoke. It filled the opening with a bright, butter-yellow light. It was so bright that Sarah had to shut her eyes. She felt the earth under her feet move, but she didn't dare look: the light burned a hot pink though her eyelids. And then, quite suddenly, the light went out with a snap.

## Chapter Nineteen: Explorers

If she thought she'd been cold before, it was nothing compared to this. It sunk into the deepest parts of her, making her shiver to the core. She opened her eyes. The trees and postbox had disappeared. The snow remained, stretching as far as she could see in every direction under a pale blue sky. The sun hung low in the sky. Was it rising or setting? Sarah couldn't tell. Turning around, she saw what looked like a shed, shaped like someone had cut a giant barrel in half and laid it down flat in the snow. That looks warm.

Shivering furiously, she was about to make a dash for the shed when she saw something that made her stop dead. There, about twenty steps away, was a thin pole, about twice as tall as her, sticking out straight in the flat snow field. I know that pole...

Forgetting how cold she felt, she walked up to the pole. As she drew closer, she could make out the pattern: a swirling pattern of red, white and blue, with a silver ball on the top. The North Pole.

Sarah felt a strange tingle run through her. THE North Pole? The most northern point in the world? This...this was it? No, it couldn't be. She had to be imagining things. She pulled off a glove, reached out with a shaking hand and touched the pole. It was like she'd dipped her fingers into a bucket of ice, it was so cold, and she immediately pulled her fingers away before they stuck to the pole. That had felt real enough. And she couldn't think of anywhere else in the world where the snow and ice stretched out in every direction with nothing else to see but a pole and a barrel-shaped shed. This had to be it.

A blast of wind ran through her, and she gasped as the freezing air made her eyes sting. I need to get inside, get warm...

She ran for the shed, and pulled at the door. To her surprise, it opened straightaway. She stumbled backwards and slid across the ice as the door swung out, but she kept a hold of the handle. She pulled herself inside the shed and slammed the door shut. The noise echoed across the round metal ceiling, and she looked around.

It looked like some kind of explorer or a group of explorers used this place. Clothes hung from strings on the ceiling. A large metal table stood in the middle covered in rolls of paper and maps, surrounded by metal fold up chairs. A standing furnace was propped up nearby, a fire crackling away within. Sarah shuffled closer and held her hands over it, suddenly feeling very cold again. If this fire is here, then somebody is here.

"Hello?" She called. No answer. Maybe they were out? But then again, she hadn't seen anyone out there...

She looked around, walking towards the back of the big shed. If the metal table was the place where the explorers worked, then here was where they relaxed. A thick rug lay in the middle of some old but cozy sofas, another furnace burning away nearby. In the left corner were what looked like a line of sleeping bags, and the far right corner was the toilet: a hole in the ice surrounded by slabs of wood for temporary walls. Being an explorer must be hard, Sarah thought.

She turned and looked out of the window. The sun hadn't moved up or down: it just seemed to roll along the horizon like a ball. The North Pole cast a long shadow, stretching all the way to the shed.

Sarah felt a shiver run through her. Was she excited? Scared? A bit of both? This is it! I'm going to meet Santa at last! Despite everything he'd done, despite being furious at Mr. Claus for all of the bad things he'd done and all of the good people he'd ignored, Sarah couldn't help but feel excited. She'd never met a celebrity in real life before. Was he going to be shorter than she imagined? Maybe he wasn't as fat as all of the pictures and cartoons made him out to be?

Slowly, ever so slowly, the sun dipped below the horizon, and the sun flushed pink, then a darker blue. Sarah had read a lot of stories and seen a lot of movies about how to find Santa's Workshop,

all of them different. But all of them agreed on the same thing: it couldn't be seen normally. Something magical had to happen.

Night fell. Yes, it must be night too, I think. It's a more magical time. I can't imagine Santa's workshop appearing in the daytime, it just doesn't feel right.

The last rays of sunlight crept up the North Pole, illuminating the silver ball at the top. Sarah felt a thrill of excitement run through her. Yes! This is it! A shadow crept up the pole until the silver ball was the only bright thing. It shone like a star, lighting up the night. Sarah felt a mystical power ripple through her. She leaned forward, pressing her nose on the glass. Here we go...

The light passed over the ball, and everything went dark. Sarah waited. And waited. Then waited some more. Finally, when it was too dark to make out anything outside, she stood up. Was that it? No, it couldn't be, nothing had happened. Maybe it was something else that needed to happen instead, like the Northern Lights. Maybe it was a button she needed to press on the pole. Oh, but she had been so sure!

An idea struck her. Making her way over to the work desk, she looked over the explorer's maps. Whoever lived and worked here must know the place pretty well. Maybe they've discovered the secret.

The maps had tiny writing, and Sarah found them really difficult to read, but she soon found the map of the North Pole area with lots of notes scribbled on it. Aha! This must be it! She scanned carefully over the notes. But all it said was a lot of boring things about the thickness of the ice and the location of polar bears. Maybe...maybe that's the secret? She shook her head. No, of course not! Sliding the map aside, she read her way through the piles of other papers, taking a handful of them over to the sofa to sit by the warm fire. None of gave a hint that they had found so much as an elf, let alone an entire workshop. She threw the last map aside and slumped on the chair. She gazed into the low fire crackling in the furnace. A cold thought was creeping towards her, getting ever closer. Maybe...maybe there isn't...

"No!" she said aloud, leaping to her feet. So these explorers hadn't found Santa's Workshop yet. That might be the reason they were here! Maybe they were searching too! And maybe they hadn't found it yet because - Sarah clapped her hands together - only children could see it! Ah, of course, now that is an important rule. Zipping up her jacket and pulling on her hat and gloves, she stepped back outside.

## Chapter Twenty: Sarah and Santa

It was bitterly cold outside, as though she'd just walked into a giant freezer. Zipping her jacket right up to the top so it covered her nose, she walked slowly towards the North Pole. A thin slice of the moon was rising, illuminating everything with a ghostly blue light. She reached the pole, and looked up at it. It gleamed in the moonlight, sparkling with a thin layer of frost. It looked completely smooth. Maybe the button is hidden or something. She ran a gloved hand over the surface, rubbing away the frost. Nothing. She knocked on the pole three times as if she were knocking on someone's front door. Nothing. Feeling frustration boiling up in her, she yelled "LET ME IN!"

Nothing.

She punched the North Pole so hard that it shuddered. Sarah howled as pain throbbed in her hand, and she slumped to the ground. Why? Why was nothing working? Santa had bought her all of this way, through a rich house, a poor house, an orphanage and finally the North Pole. Why wasn't he here, waiting to greet her at the door of his workshop with a merry smile and a big mug of cocoa? But no. Here she was, out in the cold polar night, alone.

Why...why was Santa doing this? Every step of the way, the things he'd shown her had only made her even angrier at him. Her rich parents could afford to buy everything in the world, and yet Santa had given her more presents than ever. Her poor parents had been so nice and had tried really hard to make Christmas special, but Santa had given her almost nothing. And the orphanage...where did Sarah start? As much as she disliked Mr. Vekil, she felt sorry for him, his mean parents who claimed to love Christmas pushing their own son out of the family. And those kids at the orphanage, who needed some Christmas joy the most, got absolutely nothing.

Why? It almost like Santa was doing the opposite of what he was supposed to do. This went against everything Sarah had learned and believed about Christmas. And now, when Sarah was the most angry and confused she'd ever been, Santa wasn't even here to answer for himself.

Sarah felt a chill on her cheeks. Tears ran down her face and froze over on her chin. She wiped them away.

"I'm not going to cry for Santa Claus," she said aloud, "You hear me? If you can't show yourself, then what am I supposed to do?" Her voice grew louder, "If you won't speak to me, if you can't explain to me what is happening and why you are so mean, then...then...I DON'T BELIEVE IN YOU ANYMORE!"

The words burst out of her and echoed across the land, carried far and wide by a blast of wind.

As she listened to her own words of "I don't believe in you anymore" bounce back at her, something seemed to clear in her mind, as though a fog over her mind had lifted.

Santa...not real...could it be?

If...if Santa Claus was not real...then suddenly a lot of things made sense. It hadn't been Santa who had been giving out the presents and spreading the Christmas spirit all along. Her parents had been the ones who gave out presents. Yes, that made sense - after all, her rich parents had a lot of money, so they could buy her so much. Her poor parents had probably spent so much of their own money just to get her those few Christmas presents. And of course the orphans had nothing: those poor kids had nobody who would get them anything. Mr. Vekil sure wouldn't.

Sarah felt wide awake, as though she'd just woken up from a long dream...so, Santa Claus isn't real...she felt funny, as if she'd learned some deep secret. Strangely, she wasn't angry or sad. In fact, she felt...taller, as though she'd grown up just a little. But then, what had caused all of the magic?

The tickets, the postboxes that brought me here, the person who sent me that letter?  
Right on cue, a flash of light behind her made her spin around, and two postboxes stood there. Something magical was definitely making this happen, but what?  
She walked up to the postboxes, light streaming from them. Two? Looks like I have a choice...but I have only one ticket left...  
When she came closer, though, she saw that the doors of each postbox were slightly open. She opened one wide and looked inside. Flecks of snow floated out, and the looming grey bulk of the orphanage lay in the distance. She turned and looked inside the other postbox. Inside was dark and warm. Her bedroom. It was the real one this time, with her own bed and writing desk.  
Home at last.  
She yawned. Her bed had never looked so inviting. She was about to climb through, when she stopped. Wait. The key to the orphanage still weighed heavily in her pocket.  
If Santa was not real, then...  
She slammed the postbox door on her bedroom shut, pocketed the ticket, reopened the postbox to the orphanage and climbed through.

## Chapter Twenty-One: The Snowball Fight

Despite the howling wind and snow, it felt warm here compared to the North Pole. Boots crunching in the snow, she followed the lights back through the gate and up towards the big entrance door. As she came closer, the falling snow calmed down, and the wind stopped. By the time she came to the steps, the snow had stopped completely. She turned and looked back the way she came. The courtyard was filled with untouched snow except for her own line of footprints, but beyond that was the vast forest of pointed pine trees. The red postbox still stood there, next to the gate.

She took out the key and unlocked the door with a loud clunk. But she didn't go inside. She stood back, looking for the window to the playroom. There it was, off to the left. The dark shapes of children roamed about inside. She gathered handfuls of snow in her hands, smoothed it into a ball, and threw it at the window. It slammed into the glass, snow splattering out like a scoop of ice cream. Instantly the windows of the playroom filled with the faces of children, all staring at her. Sarah smiled and waved.

"Come and play!" She shouted. She threw a couple more snowballs at other windows, and soon the whole orphanage was staring down at her, noses and cheeks pressed against the glass.

Sarah rolled a ball of snow around the courtyard, the ball of snow getting bigger and bigger until she couldn't push it any longer.

"Come help me build a snowman!" She shouted, pointing at the big ball and gesturing in case they couldn't hear, "The door is open! Come on!"

None of the children budged, they just stared at her. Her smile fell for just a second, but she pulled it back immediately. No. I can't give up yet.

Sarah lay down in the snow and waved her arms and legs, making a snow angel. She stood up and looked over her handiwork. Not bad. She looked back at the windows of the orphanage. Still nobody moved. She turned away, and took a deep breath. This isn't working. Have I made a mistake? She clenched her fists. No! I must not give up!

She started to write her name in the snow with her footsteps. S...A...

"This is fun!" She yelled, "you should all try -"

Sarah slipped, the world spun and she landed face first in the cold snow. For a moment, she listened to the silence. Then, sitting up, she let out a long sigh. Why wasn't this working? She had been so sure, so -

A snowball splattered across her neck and cold ice dripped down her back. Gasping, she spun around. Becky and Anna stood there, holding snowballs, wearing thick jackets and cheeky smiles.

"Well, are we doing this or what?" Said Anna, tossing her snowball from one hand to the other.

Sarah grinned, scooped up some snow in her gloves and whipped it at Anna.

"Gotcha! You're it!" And she and Becky ran from Anna. She didn't get far though, because a few other kids had stepped out of the front door, blinking in the bright light. Slowly, as though they were touching snow for the first time, they scooped up snow in their own hands. Becky threw a snowball at them to get them going, and sure enough they pressed the snow in their hands into tight balls and threw them. Becky ducked, and so did Sarah, but she felt hard pellets of snow pound on her back like rain.

"Gotcha back!" Anna laughed.

It was as though a pipe that had been building up pressure had suddenly burst. More and more kids ran out into the courtyard, first in a trickle but then in a flood. Soon the air was filled with snowballs zipping back and forth, the air a whirl of snow, happy yells and smiles. A group of big boys including Michael built on Sarah's snowman, making it as tall as any of them, and the smaller kids simply leapt around in the snow, giggling uncontrollably. Sarah stood back, taking it all in.

And then she saw him. Mr. Vekil strode out of the door and stood on the top step, glaring around the courtyard. The children nearby froze at the sight of him, dropping the snowballs in their hand. It rippled out in seconds, until the whole courtyard was still and silent.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mr Vekil yelled, his voice booming around the courtyard, "I did not give you permission to come out here! Who did this? Who opened the door?"

The children shuffled their feet on the spot, passing sidelong glances at Sarah. Mr. Vekil met her eyes. Sarah stood up straight, not daring to look away.

"You..." Mr. Vekil's face flushed red, "Miss Pebbleton. Come closer."

Silently, Sarah weaved through the frozen children. She gave a small nod to Becky and Anna as she passed them, and they nodded back.

Up close, Mr. Vekil's eyes were bulging from his red face, and he was shivering - was it from the cold? Or being so angry?

"What do you...how could you..." He spluttered, so furious he could barely form words.

Sarah smiled. "Merry Christmas, Mr. Vekil," she said.

The whole courtyard gave a collective gasp, and Mr. Vekil took a step back. The red from his face drained away, leaving him as pale as the snow.

"What...what did you say?" he said, voice right as if someone was holding hands around his neck.

"You heard me. Merry Christmas!" Sarah repeated brightly.

"How dare you..." Mr Vekil, his voice soft and low, "After the talk we had. You know everything I went through..."

"And again, I'm sorry," said Sarah, "But you can't blame others for your problems."

"So you're saying this is my fault!" Mr. Vekil snapped, "My parents disowned me!"

"And you are repeating the cycle," said Sarah, "These children in front you, who do you think they're going to blame when they're older? Your parents? Or you?"

Mr. Vekil gazed over the courtyard. Sarah heard a flutter of whispers behind her.

"Bad stuff happens all the time, Mr. Vekil," she went on, "And some of it is unfair. Really, really unfair. Nice people get nothing, and bad people get too much. But we should stop laying the blame on others, even if they deserve it. The best thing we can do is show everyone what the right thing is. If we want Christmas spirit, we have to spread it ourselves."

Sarah picked up two handfuls of snow. A louder murmur spread through the courtyard now, and Sarah caught a few of the words:

"Is she going to do what I think she's going to do?"

"Uh oh..."

"This isn't going to go well..."

Sarah pressed the snow in her hands into a ball. He passed it gently to Mr. Vekil, who caught it in his hands.

"Merry Christmas, Noel Vekil," she said for the third time.

Another ripple from the crowd of children, small and scared at first but growing bigger until all of the kids shouted at Mr. Vekil: "MERRY CHRISTMAS!"



## Chapter Twenty-Two: One More Tear

Mr. Vekil dropped the snowball, and it broke at his feet. Silence fell. Sarah took a step back. Mr. Vekil stepped back.

"Oh, Miss Pebbleton, you have so much to learn," he grinned.

Sarah felt as though she was falling through the sky. She was about to turn and run for it, when she saw something. It was the tiniest of things on Mr. Vekil's face.

A tear.

"You think that's a snowball?" He said, leaning down and gathering up a mass of snow in his big hands, "Now THIS is a snowball."

He threw the ball into the air, and it came crashing down over his head, showering his head and suit in snow.

"I guess that means I'm it!" He yelled, "Run for your lives!"

Sarah squealed in delight as she ran, and Mr. Vekil leapt into the snowball fight. The air was full of flying snowballs again, and the laughing was twice as loud, Mr. Vekil's voice booming with cheer. At first, the kids were nervous around him, giving him a wide berth. But it only took a few brave older kids to throw snowballs at him and for Mr. Vekil to throw some back before he was right in the thick of it.

As Mr. Vekil helped to lift the head onto the top of a snowman's body, a glimmer of light near the gate caught Sarah's eye. Nobody else noticed. She circled around the edge of the courtyard. Near the gate stood a single postbox, the golden light within glowing from the postbox.

Time to go. She took one last look back at the orphanage. The laughter echoed beyond the walls and into the trees. The sun broke through the clouds. The grey concrete building looked less sad now, somehow. Mr. Vekil and the children had made a huge circle around the snowman, and were singing a christmas carol.

Sarah slipped her final ticket into the slot of the postbox. The door opened, and she climbed into the light. The light went out like a switch, and darkness surrounded her.

Is it over?

Something soft and warm pressed against her. Reaching out, she gathered a handful of the duvet in her hands and slowly peeled it away.

It was her bedroom. Her real bedroom. Morning sunlight streamed through the window. But wait...stepping out of bed, she went to her bedroom door and opened it. Sure enough, the real landing was outside. She looked back at her bedroom, and it had stayed as it should. Her bed, her writing desk, her wardrobe...they were all there. The clock by her bed said it was 7:20am, and the date: December 26th.

Sarah gave a little jump of joy. She was home at last. Did I ever leave? Had it all been one big dream?

She ran downstairs and into the kitchen. Mum and Dad were already there, drinking tea and eating toast.

"Morning dear," said Mum with a small smile, "Happy Boxing Day. Get a good sleep?"

Without a word, she grabbed Mom and Dad around their waists and gave them the biggest hug she had ever given them.

## Chapter Twenty-Three: Magic? Dream?

"Are you sure you want to do this, dear?" said Mum, "You don't have to, you know."

"I'm sure," said Sarah, "Really, really sure."

She placed the Uberwoman figure into a box along with a couple of her soft toys, clothes and some books.

"What's brought this on all of a sudden?" Said Dad, standing in the doorway of the bedroom.

"You...you liked your presents, right?"

Sarah spotted the look passed between Mum and Dad, and she stood up.

"They're the best," she said, "But yep, I'm sure."

She closed the box. Mum looked carefully at Sarah. "Well, if you're sure..." She pulled out a long strip of sticky tape and taped the box shut. Dad gathered the box under his arm and jingled the car keys in his hand.

"Well then, shall we get going?"

Dad drove them to the edge of town. The roads had been brushed clear of snow, and huge piles of white lay on each side of the road like small hills. In the distance, a large brick building loomed into distance between the fields. They pulled into the car park. It was a lot nicer looking than the orphanage she'd seen. Sarah's heart pounded. Why was she was nervous all of a sudden? All of that stuff with Mr. Vekil hadn't been real, and even if it had, this was a completely different place.

She stepped out of the car. Dad lifted the box out of the boot and they walked up to the front door.

Sarah lifted the brass door knocker and rapped three times on the door.

A lady with a round and friendly-looking face answered the door.

"Ah, you must be the Pebbletons," she said, "My name's Lucy, pleased to meet you both." She shook Sarah's and Dad's hands. "Come on in!"

Inside it was warm and cozy. Photos and kid's drawings hung from the walls, and the doors were labeled with things like 'Quiet Room' and 'Fun Room'. Lucy led them into a small room with a simple wooden table and some plastic chairs. Dad laid the box down on the table and they all sat down.

"So! I hear that Miss Pebbleton here wants to make a donation," said Lucy brightly, smiling at Sarah, "I heard that you wanted to donate some of your old toys, clothes and books. Is that right?"

"Well, some of it isn't that old," said Sarah, "I got my Uberwoman for Christmas yesterday."

"Oh, an Uberwoman!" Said Lucy, eyes wide, "I've heard of that. It's really popular right now. Well, if you don't mind me asking...why?"

"I just...I don't need them," Sarah shrugged, "I've got plenty of other things I can play with."

"This is very kind of you, Miss Pebbleton," said Lucy, pulling the box towards her, "I'm sure the children will appreciate it."

As Dad signed some papers, Sarah peeked outside of the door. It was completely quiet. Where was everyone? She half expected Becky, Anna, Michael or even Mr. Vekil to come around the corner any second now, striding towards her. But the orphanage was silent.

Dad and Lucy stood up and shook hands. Sarah stood up too, and after shaking Lucy's hand they headed out of the orphanage, back into the car park and into the car. It had all been so simple. For some reason, Sarah couldn't help but feel like she'd missed something, like a sign she hadn't noticed. As the car tyres crunched over the gravel, she scratched her head.

At the gate, they passed a postman heading into the orphanage, carrying a bunch of letters. Sarah's heart gave an extra hard thump. It's him! The same postman she'd met that night!

Sarah twisted around in the seat to watch the postman walk up to the orphanage. That had been the

Sarah Sues Santa – P.J. Leonard

same postman, hadn't it? He hadn't noticed her, though, and he didn't look so magical right now. He seemed...bored, actually.

"Everything alright?" Said Dad, "Should I go back?"

"N...no, it's OK..." said Sarah, and she sat down, her mind spinning faster than the car wheels all the way home.

When they got home, Sarah shot straight up the stairs and into her room. The letter she'd written to Santa was no longer on her writing desk. She'd definitely written it, hadn't she?

So what had really happened then? Had that all been real? Or had it all been one huge dream? That had definitely been the same postman. But that still didn't really explain it. Sarah could've seen that postman walking up and down her street a hundred times and not really noticed, but maybe her brain had remembered his face and locked it away, using it in her dream.

Maybe it was a bit of both - a dream, but some kind of magic had put it in her head. So...if that was true, then maybe Santa was real after all, and he'd planned the whole thing...

Sarah smiled and shook her head. It doesn't matter.

She stared out of the window at the gently falling flakes of snow. It really does not matter...

THE END

## About the Author

P.J. Leonard grew up in Worcester, UK. He attended Gorse Hill Primary School, followed by the Royal Grammar School Worcester.

His full name is Peter John Leonard, but the abbreviation of 'P.J.' is what he is usually known as among friends and family, also to avoid confusion with his father who has the exact same name. Technically he could call himself 'Peter J. Leonard the Fourth', but he isn't that deluded. Yet.

He first found a love for writing aged nine, when he took what was meant to be a one-page short story assignment and turned it into a 10-page epic, much to the chagrin of his teachers and he's been writing ever since.

At age 18 he moved to London to attend Roehampton University, where he studied Creative Writing and English Literature. After graduating in 2007, he treated himself to a solo trip to Japan and instantly fell in love with the place.

In 2010 he moved to Japan and lives there to this day, enjoying the hiking, Japanese culture, photography, and the traditional Japanese sport of tussling for the free seat on the train every morning at rush hour.

P.J. currently lives on the outskirts of Tokyo, working in the heart of the city by day and feverishly writing by night.

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