



***New Stories for the
Holiday Season***

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Butter Tart Besties

The smell was intoxicating. It was at that moment, with the delectable aroma of sugar, butter, and raisins flooding her nostrils that Kara clued into the idea that it wasn't just a theory. You can, in fact, smell when something is ready to come out of the oven. And her butter tarts were absolutely ready, baked to perfection.

She almost burned her hand on the oven rack as she was removing the pan, causing her to wonder why she still insisted on using a towel and hadn't just bought herself a pair of actual oven mitts. The pastry glowed like the suntans she used to get before the world was told it shouldn't be tanning. The sweet, buttery filling bubbled, a warning for her not to dive in right away as she so desperately wanted to. They had to cool.

Since she was a child, butter tarts had been Kara's favourite sweet treat during the holidays and she couldn't imagine living in a place where they didn't have them as part of the culinary landscape. She was so happy to be Canadian.

After a few minutes, Kara had to have a taste. "Mmmmm," she moaned as she took a bite and sighed. "I don't know how these can't win."

It was her first time entering any sort of baking contest and she thought she would start with a butter tart competition since that is what she was most proficient at. She wanted to give herself the best shot at victory. But to be victorious, she had to make sure she didn't eat all the tarts herself before they went in front of the judges, and that was going to be a challenge.

I have to pack these up right away so I'm not tempted, she thought. The last thing I'd need is to have to bake a whole new batch early in the morning. She layered the tarts in a festive container decorated with candy canes and set it beside the plates she was going to use for her display, coincidentally also bedecked with candy canes. She had already picked out her outfit for the contest. Not that it actually mattered, but she did like to dress thematically and chose a red satin shirt that she would top with a Santa hat. Why not? She was this close to adding a necklace of jingle bells but decided against it, not wanting to be too distracting with the noise it would no doubt create.

While Kara was putting the dirty dishes, covered with pastry dough and gooey goodness, into the dishwasher, 12-year old Gina opened the door and entered the house, steaming with the cold from outside. She took a deep sniff. "Mom, I can't even! Those smell so good! "

"That's because they *are* good, baby." Kara smiled. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw her daughter open the container and reach for a tart. "Do not even think about eating that tart! They're for the competition."

Gina put the tart back down and closed the lid. "Ah, man! But didn't you make extra?"

"I did make more than the dozen they asked for but that's in case something happens, like a tart shell breaks. They all have to be perfect. So, no eating anything until it's all over, you got it? Then you can go to town on them." She gave Gina a kiss on the forehead. "Patience is a virtue."

"The suckiest virtue." Gina pouted playfully before taking off her backpack and coat and setting them on a kitchen chair.

"Hashtag sorry not sorry." Kara replied with a flourish. "So, how was school?"

"Fine, I guess. They worked us hard in gym class but I got an A on my history essay."

Kara gave a loud clap. "That's my girl!"

Gina saw an opportunity and leaned in a little closer to her mother. "Sooooo, don't I deserve a tart for that?"

"Not until tomorrow." Kara repeated with a shake of her head, "And doing good work is supposed to be its own reward. You know that." She pointed to the front hall. "Now, put your stuff away. You're going to help me make dinner and I don't want your dirty backpack that's been sitting on a floor covered in God knows what in my kitchen."

As Gina hung up her coat and backpack in the front closet, Kara could still hear her voice from the kitchen. "So, do you really think you can win this contest?" Gina called out.

Kara had confidence in her baking abilities, but she knew nothing was guaranteed. "Well, everybody who's had my butter tarts says they are the best they've ever tasted. That's not a huge sample group but it's something."

If she won the contest, the five-thousand-dollar prize would help Kara start her own home bakery and, with the publicity it would provide, she might be able to eventually leave her clerical job at the dental office. Not that it was an awful place to be—everyone was nice enough, and it wasn't exactly grueling work—but it was never her dream job and was only meant to be temporary. A seven-year temporary position it turns out. And, being a single mom, she thought being able to work from home would help her be there more for Gina as she was becoming a teenager. Her job hadn't interfered with her raising her daughter over the past three years since her husband had passed, but she understood all of the feelings and hormones that came with that stage of life and how she might need a bit of extra attention.

Gina returned to the kitchen. "Not that my vote counts for anything but I think they should win 'cuz they are bussin. So, what are we making for dinner?"

Kara pulled out the big pot from the cupboard. "I was thinking a Moroccan stew."

"I'm down with that," Gina approved.

Kara was wide awake at 5 o'clock the next morning. She had been tossing and turning all night and eventually just couldn't manage to get back to sleep.

She drank her first cup of coffee as she sat at the kitchen table going over the plan for the day. It was just a baking contest, but she felt her future could be riding on it. If she didn't win the money, her only other option would be to take out a loan, which she would likely be too nervous to apply for, meaning, in her mind at least, that her dream would just have to go on the back burner. Either way, she was grateful that they weren't doing the baking live because she was so frazzled she was sure she would forget an ingredient in the recipe or mistake the sugar for salt, something she had seen many times before on baking competitions on TV. The judges were always understanding, of course, but bad baking was bad baking.

She had to be at the convention centre at 9 o'clock. Gina promised to join her for moral support. While there was a schedule for the day's proceedings, there was no telling exactly how long the competition would take, since there were competitions for other baked goods happening at the same time. A holiday-themed event, there were gingerbread, Bûche de Noël, tourtière, cookie, and chocolate categories as well, with contestants coming from all over the prairies to compete. Kara had a feeling she was going to come out with a lot of inspiration from the other bakers.

Kara and Gina arrived to find the venue joyfully decked out for the holidays with a large Christmas tree covered in big silver balls in the lobby and a wreath hanging from the railing on the second floor.

Sparkles' First Livestream

"Oh, why did I agree to do this?" Sparkles the Elf wondered aloud as she sat down in front of her laptop, her nerves making the bell on the top of her hat jingle.

"Because you're our head of Communications," Twinkles reminded her with a gentle nod as he adjusted the lighting. "And it was your idea to do a livestream in the first place."

Sparkles sighed. "It was? Okay, but what if we go offline? This is the North Pole. We don't have the strongest signal up here. Or what if I run out of things to say?"

Twinkles stood up and looked at her reassuringly, "Sparkles, you've been talking our pointed ears off all day long for over two hundred years. You have never run out of things to say and I'm pretty sure you never will."

"But it's *live*. It's one thing to be answering letters to Santa or posting the occasional video but anything can happen when you're *live*."

Cocoa brought a cup of hot chocolate with extra whipped cream and chocolate shavings to ease Sparkles' nerves. "Here you go," she said placing the mug on the desk beside the laptop. "This will make you feel better. You're going to be great." She patted Sparkles on the shoulder.

Sparkles was grateful for the beverage and the affirmation. "Thanks, Cocoa. Extra whipped cream, just like I like it." She took a sip. "Yummy!"

Twinkles stepped away from the laptop and took a seat on the other end of the table with his own computer so he could monitor the stream. "Okay, Sparkles. We're on in 30 seconds. Everything's working and I'll be right with you the whole time. And remember - people will be just so excited to see you, whatever happens. Are you ready to go?"

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess," Sparkles said with hesitation.

"Great! I'll count you down, click on the Go Live button, and then it's all you! Here we go, in 5 - 4 - 3 - 2 -"

As Twinkles pointed to her to begin, Sparkles froze and said nothing. She wished she hadn't noticed the number of viewers tuned in at the bottom of the screen. How many millions? Of course, it was the very first livestream from the North Pole at Santa's workshop so it would obviously be a big deal but it just made her more nervous.

She could hear Twinkles whispering, "Sparkles! Start talking!" and came back to the present,

"H-hello, everyone," she started, putting on a smile and trying to make sure she was looking at the camera. "I'm Sparkles, the head of Communications up here at Santa's workshop and w-welcome to our very first ever livestream!" She could hear other elves clapping and cheering behind her and suddenly didn't feel quite so alone. It gave her a bit more courage. "Now, before you ask, the big guy will not be joining us today. He's in a meeting with Jack Frost, the Easter Bunny, and the Tooth Fairy right now. But he does send his regards and perhaps he'll join us on the next livestream... if there *is* a next livestream. But today, I thought we would chat a bit about the goings on up here at the workshop and I'll answer some of your burning questions."

Sparkles was amazed at how quickly the comments were going by in the chat window and was glad Twinkles was there to sift through them and catch anything important. "Now, as you may know, here in the workshop is where all the toys and other presents are made." She

rolled her chair to the side to reveal long tables filled with balls, dolls, electronics, and games with countless elves diligently inflating, painting, and piecing things together. "We're what you might call a well-oiled machine and we have very strict quality control standards. Every elf is put on a specific task for months at a time, depending on his or her individual strengths, and we work very hard all year long to make sure everything is ready for the big day. Then we take off the day after Christmas to celebrate and relax and then we're right back at it."

Jangles, who was gently fixing the ruffles on a doll's dress skirt as she listened in, left her station and approached the camera. "But don't worry," she started to explain to the viewers, "We like it that way. We Christmas elves are designed to make Christmas happen and, if we weren't doing it, we wouldn't know what to do with ourselves."

"It's true," Sparkles agreed. "Even on our day off, I still usually end up searching online for more holiday inspiration. Thanks for that, Jangles."

"No problem." Jangles nodded and waved to the camera and went back to her station. Just then, an odd look appeared on Sparkles' face. She felt that all-too-familiar twitch. "Just one minute, please," she said, reaching into her front pocket and pulling out a candy cane. "You see," she continued as she removed the wrapping, "we elves need to eat a candy cane every hour on the hour or we get, as you might say, *hangry*." She took a lick and sighed. "Ah! That's better."

"You know, lots of people wonder why Santa's workshop is up here at the North Pole and how we all manage to stay warm since it's supposed to be really cold. Well, I can't tell you the exact reason why we're here—let's just say there is a certain resource that isn't found anywhere else—but I can tell you that there is a thing we call the 'Santa Glow'. Anybody who is up here at the village or in the presence of Santa just can't get cold."

Out of the corner of her eye, Sparkles saw Twinkles signaling that it was time to answer some questions from the audience.

She nodded in acknowledgement. "Now, let's get to some of your questions. My friend, Twinkles, who has been monitoring the chat, has passed some messages over to me and says they're coming in like hot cakes!" She licked her lips. "Syrup. Yum!"

She looked at the messages Twinkle had forwarded on the screen and started to read, "Here's one from Ricky and he asks, 'Have you had any other human babies crawl into Santa's bag who were then allowed to become honorary elves?'" Sparkles tried not to roll her eyes. "Well, Ricky, we get asked this question a lot when kids write to us. There are, in fact, no human elves up here at the North Pole and, in case you didn't know, the movie Elf is not actually a true story. We all love it - we watch it every year - but Buddy the Elf does not exist and I don't think any of us have even met Will Farrell so we can't arrange for you to meet him either. So, you can all stop sending that question in your letters as well, please and thank you."

Sparkles kept reading, "Jane here says, 'I received a bunch of white chocolate from Santa this year and I am lactose intolerant.' Oh dear. Well, we're very sorry about that, Jane. Perhaps your gift got mixed up with someone else who happens to have the same name. But thank you for letting us know. I will forward your concern to the Inappropriate Gifts Department and it will be rectified as soon as possible. In the meantime, I would not recommend eating the chocolate just because Santa gave it to you. No need to invite tummy trouble if you can avoid it. Perhaps there's someone else in your family who can digest dairy who you could give it to. And for anyone else out there who may have received something unexpected for Christmas, you can send us an e-mail at notmygift@santaclaus.com. That's not my gift all one word at santa claus dot com. There is the address on your screen. Thank you, Twinkles. Mistakes do happen from time to time. Santa may be perfect but we elves are not, and we appreciate your understanding."

One More Gnome

Danika loved Christmas markets. They were a bright spot during the cold winter months that warmed her with the holiday spirit. True, she often took the opportunity to buy more things for herself than for others on her gift list, but it was just so much fun to see what everyone was making and try to find unique items.

With her good friend, Stefania, by her side they could cover three, sometimes even four, craft shows in a day. But she had to choose her purchases carefully. Her eyes were always bigger than the budget she set for herself.

The two of them had decided years earlier that the Holiday Craft Show, the biggest one in town, signaled the official beginning of the festive season.

On a chilly but sunny Sunday in late November, as per tradition, they ascended the escalator to the upper floor of the convention centre, where the market was always held. The crowd spilled outside the exhibition hall, some visitors carrying bags filled with their purchases, other waiting to get in. As they stood in line with their tickets, Danika could feel her anticipation building.

"I *am* glad we started this tradition." she almost sighed with relief that the day had finally arrived.

"It wouldn't be Christmas without it, I don't think." Stefania agreed. "Lunch at Paddy's and then the market. It's what we do."

"I know, right?"

The attendant at the door scanned their tickets as they reached the front of the line and they stepped into the hall, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of Christmas. Over a hundred and fifty vendors had set up their booths, selling everything from jewellery to artwork to housewares to culinary delights, with apple cider and roasted nuts wafting through the air.

"Squeeee!" Stefania squealed, her hands curling into fists, making the tote bag hanging from her wrist sway back and forth. "We're here!"

Danika pointed to the left. "Shall we start that way?"

"Works for me."

The two friends browsed the aisles, appreciating the wares that were on offer. Most of the time, they did a round of the venue before committing to anything, taking mental note of any items they might want to buy. Before long, Stefania had her eye on a pair of turquoise earrings and a navy blue shawl she knew her mother would like. Danika was attracted to a painting of a mountain landscape and a ceramic bowl she envisioned sitting on her dining table, filled with fruit.

"You know, I love these things but it is kind of weird," she confessed as they perused a table of silver jewellery after getting some hot chocolate at the canteen. "It's one thing to be in a big store where the staff doesn't really care if you buy anything but, when you're looking the maker in the face, it's hard to say 'no'".

"Right?" Stefania agreed. "I was this close to buying one of those crocheted dinosaurs back there. Why would I need a crocheted dinosaur?"

"You wouldn't."

Stefania lifted a pair of hoop earrings up to her ear and looked at herself in a small mirror resting on the table. "But you know what I try to do?"

“What? I like those on you, by the way.”

“I know, right? If I know it’s not something I’m going to want and a vendor looks at me or starts to engage, I wait for someone else to come along as a distraction so I can just slip away.”

Danika took a sip of her drink and laughed. “Brilliant! I think I’ve actually seen you do that.”

Turning the corner to the third aisle, Stefania noticed a vendor a couple of booths down and rolled her eyes. “Oh, here we go.” she said, knowing full well what was coming next.

“What?” Danika asked. “Where are you looking? What are you seeing?”

Stefania gestured to a table filled with plush gnomes, eliciting a clap of delight from her friend. “Oooh! Yes! Yes! Yes!”

Danika was, to put it mildly, a gnome enthusiast. Her collection of gnomes to date was forty-nine, and that wasn’t including mugs, signs, pillows, blankets, earrings, and other paraphernalia that had pictures of gnomes on them. She had gnomes for all occasions—spring gnomes, Hallowe’en gnomes, fall gnomes, Valentine’s and St. Patrick’s Day gnomes, and, of course, several for the festive season—and she gave them all names that began with an n sound but were spelled with a g in front, like Gnancy or Gnorm, Gnorm being the first gnome she had ever brought home.

Danika almost ran to the booth. She could hardly contain her excitement. There were gnomes that could fit in the palm of your hand and gnomes that were over three feet tall decked out in different colours and styles of clothing—some representing special holidays and themes, dressed as witches or wearing hockey jerseys. There were gnomes with full beards, gnomes with their hair in braids, gnomes with hats that stood straight up or curled to the side. Danika knew she was going to be leaving with at least one.

Stefania, thinking herself a little more practical, tried to gently dissuade her friend from any rash purchase.

“Dani, don’t you have enough gnomes? I mean, you’re up to, what, fifty now?”

“Only forty-nine,” Danika said absentmindedly as she browsed the display. “There’s room for one more.”

And then she saw him. Two feet tall, with legs that dangled over a shelf or a table so he remained in a seated position, blue jacket with silver snowflakes embroidered on it, red hat with a bell jingling on top, a candy cane in his hand, and the fluffiest beard she had ever seen.

“Your name is Gnick.” Danika declared with a smile as she stroked his beard. “You’re coming home with me. Is that okay?” She knew the answer would be ‘yes’, but it would be impolite to not at least ask. “He’s just so... so sassy!” she remarked, “and even a little impish. I don’t know how. With the hat covering his eyes and the beard covering his mouth, it’s not like there’s any real facial expression, but he just looks like a good time.”

Stefania took in her friend’s reaction and immediate devotion and knew there was no point in arguing. “Okay,” she started with a sigh, “you two were clearly meant to be together. You have my blessing.”

Danika picked Gnick up off of the table and cradled him in her arms. “I was going to get him no matter what, but nice to know you approve.”

A very jovial woman appearing to be around sixty years of age, with long flowing salt and pepper hair and dressed in a forest green velvet dress, was manning the booth.

Danika placed Gnick on the table in front of her. “They’re all beautiful. Did you make them yourself?” she asked.