

JUNIPER'S CHRISTMAS



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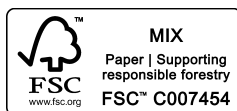
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PROLOGUE



I'm sure you know Santa's story. Everyone knows it, but since it's one of the greatest tragedies of all time I shall summarise here before we move on to the story of a girl from London who would track Santa Claus down when he hid himself away from the world.

It all started one Christmas past when young Nicholas Claus was getting a feel for his future job by working as a postman in North London. One lunchtime, Nicholas met a university student in Cedar Park who was volunteering at a local shelter and spoke so passionately about helping the homeless that Nicholas was utterly and immediately besotted. The young woman, Sarika, may not have been quite so quickly smitten, but she agreed to a first date, and then another, and then a third, by which time Sarika realised that she had found her true love.

And so Nicholas Claus confessed his family secret, and when

Sarika had finished her degree they moved to the North Pole. There they tied the knot under what all the wedding guests agreed was the most magnificent aurora borealis in years. Young Nicholas eventually inherited his father's magical work sack and took over the family business.

And they lived happily ever after.

Not exactly ever after.

But for a time.



Nicholas made a most excellent Santa. He was a list man by nature, was as strong as a horse, had a way with animals and liked cookies a little too much. He grew into the job with the support of his wife, Sarika. But the mantle of Father Christmas weighs heavily on a soul, and after forty years or so Nicholas found himself growing disheartened with his job. Even though Christmas Eve flashes by in a single night for most people, for Nicholas, inside a bubble of Santa Slow Time, it went on for more than a year. So that made forty years in all during which he did not see his beloved wife and put on several kilos thanks to a diet of mince pies and cookies. His frustration was only increased by elf reports showing that more and more North Pole presents were being dumped every season while still in their wrapping paper.

And then one year Sarika fell ill. Very ill, in fact, and there was nothing elfin doctors could do to save her with either tools or

magic. Santa could not bear to let his beloved wife go, and so he broke one of the rules of the North Pole and took his wife along on the Christmas Eve trip.

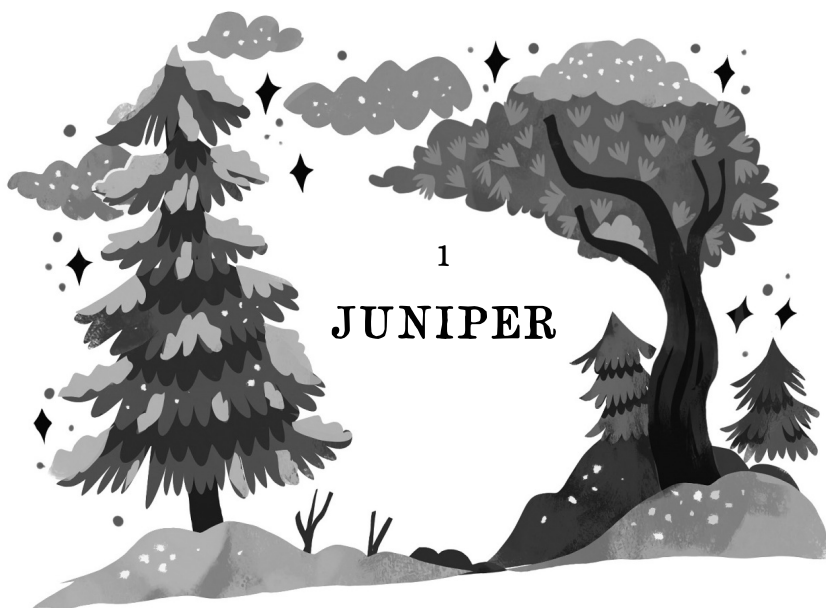
Sarika and Nicholas lived in Santa Slow Time for over a year, and that time changed Niko forever. He watched his wonderful wife struggle bravely with her illness, and with every present delivered he resented more and more the demands of children who took him from Sarika's side. Finally, when the last gift was tucked under the last tree, Niko realised that he was keeping Sarika with him for his own benefit, although she never complained and hardly ever let the pain show in her eyes.

He knew it was time to let her go.

And so, when Niko landed the sleigh at the North Pole, he wrapped Sarika up in her favourite blanket, and they watched the aurora borealis one last time. When Niko felt Sarika's spirit leave her body, he cried bitter tears, and he thought: *That's it for me, dearest. I have given enough to this job.*

Niko buried the love of his life in glacier ice and flew the sleigh out of the North Pole, resolving to honour his wife's nature by helping those who really needed his talents just as Sarika had always tried to do.

This all happened some years ago, and Santa Claus hasn't officially delivered any presents since then.



1 JUNIPER

When Juniper Lane's father died, one of the more thoughtless children in her class, a boy by the name of Rusty Johannes, commented that she was halfway to being an orphan. A remark that he'd felt certain would make eight-year-old Juniper cry in front of the other children in the playground. However, Juniper had fixed him with quite a piercing gaze and said: 'I think you must be very unhappy to say that, Rusty. Is everything all right at home?'

Her father had often said: 'Mean words are the fruit of a sad tree,' so Juniper couldn't help wondering what sad thing was making Rusty mean. After a few days' surveillance, Juniper deduced that the main reason for Rusty's meanness was that he didn't seem to have any lunch most days. And so Juniper asked

her mother for an extra sandwich in her own lunchbox that she slipped to Rusty in the cloakroom before assembly every morning. This secret sandwich drastically improved Rusty's mood and, because the sandwich was made with high-fibre bread, it improved his bathroom regularity too.

That little episode should tell you quite a lot about Juniper Lane and what a special person she was.

Before we get stuck into Juniper's adventures with Santa Claus, we should deal with the name Juniper Lane, which seems to refer to a place rather than a person. There's a simple explanation for this. Juniper's father, Briar Lane, had been the park keeper for London's Cedar Park and so, when Juniper was born one Christmas morning, it seemed only fitting that the Lanes should name their beautiful daughter for the *Juniperus virginiana* or red cedar Christmas trees after which the park was also named.

When the smitten parents brought baby Juniper back to their cottage in Cedar Mews on Boxing Day after only a single night in the Portland Hospital's maternity ward, it seemed as though all three would live happily ever after.

And they did.

Not exactly ever after.

But for a time.

Eight years and nine months to be exact.

Then Briar Lane died from an undiagnosed heart condition,
and Juniper cried every night for over two years.

Let's pick up the story from there.