

Christmas, Cookies, and Cleaning

A Bedtime Story

Alice Denning sat against the wall behind the sandbox in her kindergarten classroom, hugging her knees. It was getting dark outside, and she couldn't reach the light switch. Just like the past two nights, there would be no light at all once the sun set.

Would she ever get home? She looked up at the tick marks she had made on the bottom of the chalkboard. She could barely reach the board at all, so she had put them right at the bottom. She had been marking the days she'd been trapped inside the school. *Three gone, countless to go.*

Not to mention, the school got cold at night at Christmas.

She cried when she thought of Christmas. She was going to miss it! Tomorrow was Christmas Eve. She cried when she thought of the Christmas tree, of the pretty lights, of her stocking...

Would Santa even leave anything in her stocking? Would he leave her any presents at all? She had been so good this year! And now her family was going to have Christmas without her. Would they return all the stuff they bought? Or worse...would her older brother, Connor, get all her presents?

As the light waned, she got up and grabbed Oscar the bear and the purple striped blanket out of the nap time bin. She sniffed as she laid down on the carpet, her head cradled on Oscar's fluffy belly. She missed her teddy bear at home, Julie, with her pretty red-and-white polka-dotted bow, and she missed her mommy and daddy. She missed their rough-and-tumble golden retriever, Ollie, and Conner's goldfish, Scale. She turned over.

She missed Conner, too.

She was a big girl this year—in senior kindergarten. This was her second year in Mrs. Austin's class, so she knew a lot more than the baby "JK's." She knew where to get all the sand toys, she knew how to fold her blanket after nap time, and she knew that the markers were in the white bin, while the crayons were in the green bin. She had thought that being in senior kindergarten would mean that she was all grown up.

And yet...being in the big classroom all by herself was scary.

She wished her reading buddy, Sarah, was here. Then she could read her a bedtime story. Sarah was in grade six, which meant she knew everything. Alice bet that Sarah would know how to get out of the school, too.

Instead, all alone, Alice's lip began to tremble. She cried loudly then, as if Mommy and Daddy could hear all the way from home. Finally, she fell asleep, the wetness from her tears drying on her cheeks as she dreamt.

She dreamt of home, of Christmas, of the tree, and of Santa coming. She dreamt that Conner saw Santa, and that Santa gave him a big hug and left him lots of presents. Meanwhile, Santa told Alice to go back up to her bedroom.

She dreamt that Daddy made a fresh batch of peanut butter cookies for Christmas—Alice's favorite, and Santa's, too—and that everyone ate them with hot chocolate. Conner pulled out a giant superhero action figure from under the tree, while Mommy packed up the hamster Alice had wanted to bring him back to the store.

She dreamt that Santa was pouring coal into her stocking, and as he poured, Alice herself turned into a lump of coal and tumbled off the scoop into a fuzzy, red abyss.

She awoke. It was Christmas Eve.

She looked out the window. The sky was so bright, a pretty blue with puffy white clouds. The sun was shining, and there was a fresh layer of snow on the ground. She could see the kindergarten playground from the window in her classroom. She wanted to go outside so badly.

She looked up at the chalkboard again. Three tick marks. Suddenly, she was filled with a new determination. She did not want to see a fourth tick up there.

She had to get home. Santa was coming *tonight*. And she had to put out peanut butter cookies for him! Conner always put out the gingerbread men they decorated, but Alice knew better. Santa might never come back if she couldn't put out the right cookies!

There was one problem: she had tried every door at the school already, and they were all locked. They had been locked since Friday when school had closed for the Christmas holidays. The teachers were all on holiday, and Alice had not seen or heard a single person enter the school since. She had been playing hide and seek with her best friend, Rhonda, when she fell asleep in the greatest hiding spot ever: a secret crawlspace behind one of the storage areas in the gym. Students weren't supposed to go into the storage areas without a teacher—not to mention find secret crawlspaces behind them. When she had woken up, it was dark, she was hungry, and everyone was gone.

She stayed in the crawlspace all that first night. She she had cried, then, too. But she wasn't going to cry anymore. Not until she got home and put out Santa's cookies.

The very first thing she had to do, after using the kindergarten potty like a big girl, was to get some breakfast. Then she would try all the outside doors in the school again.

She had been surviving on granola bars and apple juice, which she'd found in the breakfast club room. She plugged her nose when she drank the juice—apple was her *least* favorite.

Her first morning there, after waking up for the second time inside the crawlspace, she had ventured to the breakfast club room to see if she could find something to eat. It was

too bad Miss Melissa, the breakfast club lady, wasn't there. Miss Melissa made toaster waffles on Wednesdays. Alice loved toaster waffles, though Mommy never bought them at home.

Unfortunately, when Alice had gotten to the breakfast club room, she'd realized that the freezer door was too high up for her to reach the waffles. She'd opened the fridge instead and found only ketchup, something green in a jar, and the apple juice boxes. Famished, she opened a juice box anyway and thus confirmed that it was still her least favorite.

She'd opened several more drawers and cupboards and found pots, dish soap, raw instant oatmeal packets, and wooden spoons. Finally, right at the back of the cupboard between the fridge and the sink, she hit the jackpot: a box of chocolate chip marshmallow granola bars and animal fruit snacks. She wished the granola bars were peanut butter chip, but this would do.

She was munching on a granola bar when she looked at the shelves above the counter. There on a high shelf above her sat a giant jar of peanut butter. Alice's eyes went wide. She had to get to it, but how?

She responsibly checked the big closet for a stool and found one that was one step high—just like the ones she'd seen underneath big girl sinks sometimes. She stood on her tippy toes on the stool and stepped one foot onto a drawer knob, and she just managed to push herself up onto the counter. She put her hands on her hips and looked around.

She stepped one foot onto the faucet handle of the sink and placed one hand on the fridge to get as high as she could. She reached and *reached* with all her might, and the very tip of her longest finger almost touched the jar. Then, her foot slipped, and her hand slipped, and she tumbled down onto the counter, her leg hitting the rim of the sink.

She burst into tears and wailed, one foot in the sink, one foot underneath her. When she was all cried out, she climbed down gingerly off the counter. Her leg hurt. She decided to have another granola bar and go back to Mrs. Austin's classroom.

Now, her leg felt all better, though she still tried didn't like to look at the sink when she opened the fridge or the cupboard. Chewing the last bite of a granola bar, she placed the wrapper in the garbage bin and stuffed a package of fruit snacks in her pocket. Then she set out to try the doors.

She tried the door at the far end of the kindergarten hall, first. Locked. She went down to the exit past the grade one and two classrooms, but it was locked, too. She tried the double doors by the middle grades' rooms to no avail. Finally, she found herself in front of the intermediate wing.

She had always been scared to go to the intermediate wing. She had only tried the door at the end of this hallway once since being locked up. Grade seven and eights were big. Even knowing that no one was there, she felt sure that a big kid was going to jump out and capture her.

And yet, somehow, with her tummy full of gummies and whole grains, she felt a little bit brave. She started down the hallway, and her footsteps echoed. She peeked in every classroom door to make sure nobody was there. Finally, she reached the massive door, and she pushed with all her might. *Locked.*

She turned around and saw how far she had had to come down the hallway. She sucked in her breath and ran as fast as she could, all the way back to the kindergarten wing.

Rounding the corner to her classroom, she was sad. She thought of Oscar sitting on the floor, waiting for her. She needed a snuggle. She had to think.

But when got inside, there was no Oscar. There was no blanket, either! She spun around to the chalkboard and felt her hair jump right off her head in fright. Her tick marks were gone! They were *gone!* She had no way of knowing how many days she had been there. And far, far worse, someone else was there, too!

She had to hide! Her heart pounded. She looked at the open classroom doorway. Dare she risk getting close to it?

She had to. She ran to the door and shut it, harder than she had meant to. It closed with a *bang*, not to mention the *dick-clack* of the handle going into the wall. She clasped her hand over her mouth to keep herself from yelping aloud.

She ducked underneath the teacher's desk at the back of the classroom. Her breath was frantic and shaky. She sat still for several minutes until she was finally convinced that no one was coming. Relief started to wash over her, when...

She heard something! She was sure it was coming from down the hall. *Plap, plap, plap.* Flat-footed footsteps sounded on the tiles. And something else...a squeaking. *Squeak-y, squeak-y, squeak-y* went the pattern. Both sounds were getting louder. *Plap, plap, squeak-y. Plap, plap, squeak-y.* Who could it be?

Then, right outside her door, the noises stopped. She heard the sound of a throat clear, and then a knock on the door. She hugged her knees tightly.

An uncertain male voice said, "*Hello?*"

Alice didn't say a word.

Then, the handle turned and released from the wall. *Click-dack.* The door creaked open slightly, and then it swung wide. A pair of feet poked in. The light flicked on for the first time since Friday.

She tried to keep her breathing from being heard. She was shaking. She followed the feet of the man as he came into the room. He was walking right towards her! He was going to capture her for sure!

The feet stopped right in front of Mrs. Austin's desk. Then, the feet were joined by a pair of knees as her captor knelt down! She wanted to scream. She wanted to run. But she could not outrun a kidnapper!

Suddenly, a friendly face appeared under the desk in front of her.

"I thought there must be someone in here," said Jeffrey, the school janitor.

Alice began to howl loudly.

"Hey, hey, it's okay, little girl. It's all right, Alice. It's only me."

Alice cried and flung herself onto him, hugging him tightly. She knew Jeffrey. Mrs. Austin had told them to always take care of their space, "just like Jeffrey takes care of us. He helps keep the school bright and clean." Alice always said hi to him in the hallways, and he always said hi back.

"I'm glad it's only you!" said Jeffrey. "I was pretty scared, there!"

Alice stopped crying for just a moment and sat back to look at him. "You were?" she hiccupped through a sob.

He smiled under his short, black beard. "Yeah. I thought you were a burglar or a bad guy!"

Alice laughed. "I'm not a bad guy!"

"I can see that," Jeffrey said, smiling.

Alice smiled, too.

"I'm glad I found you!" said Jeffrey. "The whole town's been looking for you since Friday. They've got police on it and everything. And you've been here the whole time." He tugged her into another hug. "You poor thing."

Alice sniffled. "They...they were?"

"Of course!" Jeffrey said. "You didn't think your Mommy and Daddy would want you to miss Christmas, did you?" Then he said, "But I thought they already checked the school..." He looked at her gently. "How did you get trapped in here, Miss Alice?"

Alice looked away, thinking of the storage room.

Suddenly, Jeffrey's face widened. "Have you had anything at all to eat?"

Alice didn't say anything at first. She didn't want to get in trouble for stealing, but she didn't want to lie, either. She nodded tentatively. "I found some granola bars in the breakfast room." She bit her lip. "And some juice. Please don't tell on me!" she pleaded. "I didn't mean to steal."

Then, fear suddenly washed over her. "Do you think Santa will think I'm bad? And then I won't get any presents at all?" Her eyes began to fill again. "I have to get home and put out the right cookies for him! He likes peanut butter, just like me! And Conner always wants to give him gingerbread. And...I went into the storage room. And I stole the granola bars! And I don't like apple juice! And...and Santa will never come back. And I'll never get any presents, ever again!"

She sobbed and tried to squirm back under the desk, but Jeffrey held her with strong hands. His voice was deep and reassuring. "Now, that just won't do," he said. "Not on Christmas Eve."

He stood and carried her out of the classroom. "How about we get you something more substantial to eat, and then we get you home to your parents in plenty of time for Santa?"

Alice swallowed another sob and nodded. "Uh...huh..." she said, her drying cheeks pinching.

Jeffrey's janitor cart was outside the classroom door, and he carried her down the hall, Alice noticed the big black wheels on the bottom of the cart. They must have been what had made the squeaking noise.

Suddenly, a thought occurred to her. She sat up in his arms and asked in alarm, "Did you take Oscar away?"

Jeffrey frowned. Then he smiled. "Is that the teddy bear? Yes, ma'am, I put him and his blanket safe and sound back with his friends. Right next to Mr. Rabbit, if I recall."

Alice rested her head again, the soft scruff of his beard scratching her ear. "You mean, Mr. Squiggles," she said, thinking of the long-eared rabbit stuffy. He was Rhonda's favorite. Then she asked, "How come you erased my tick marks?"

Jeffrey laughed aloud. "That's my job, my dear!"

When they entered the breakfast club room, Jeffrey turned on the light and set her on a stool. "You know," he said as he rummaged around the kitchen. "You're pretty smart to know what kind of cookies Santa likes." He opened the fridge and saw the juice, then closed the fridge again. "I'd even say you're one smart cookie." He chuckled.

He opened up the freezer. "Hey, they've got toaster waffles! Do you like toaster waffles?" Alice nodded emphatically. He pulled them out and then looked up. "Say! There's peanut butter, too!"

Hi, Earl? Sorry to bother you on Christmas Eve... No, no, not at all. Listen, I was doing today's cleaning, and I found Alice Denning. Yes, that's exactly right. Mrs. Austin's classroom.

Oh, absolutely. A Christmas Eve miracle. Well, would you look at that. That sounds great. We're just in the breakfast club room—yeah, I made sure. I just fixed her a couple of waffles, it's not much, but... Okay, that sounds great. I'll let her know. We'll see 'em soon, then. Thanks. Oh—me too. Merry Christmas to you, too.