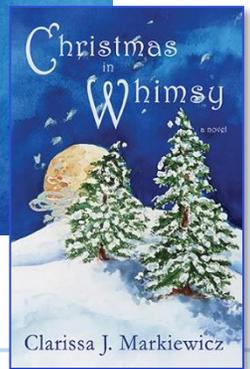




It's always the season for a little Whimsy

a selection from Christmas In Whimsy
a novel by Clarissa J. Markiewicz



Lexie Moore's interview with Santa had gone off the rails. If there was one reality she'd learned in her nine years since graduating J-school, it was that news stories were like kids: they could have a mind of their own. She sat across from the jolliest elf in front of Santa's Pavilion on the second floor of the Orange-Clove Marketplace, the unofficial "Official Mall of Whimsy, New York," as all the directories said. Amid the jeans and yoga pants dressing most people's Saturday morning, Lexie wore her own comfy weekend attire, of wide-legged trousers, a blouse and vest, and a blazer. The blazer, though, currently hung on the back of her chair, along with her coat and scarf. It had gotten pretty warm in here for Lexie. Sunshine gleamed through the mall's glass roof, and what she'd said to her boyfriend at breakfast had her sweating.

"Yes," she'd assured him for what was, by her count, the hundredth time, "I am looking forward to tonight." Since then, she'd tried to keep her mind on more pleasant, relaxing topics, like her job.

It seemed as though every child in Whimsy was out this morning. An interview with Santa? What kid in her right mind was going to miss that, especially with Christmas only three weeks out? Already, the kids had been springing up like popcorn from their spots on a huge vinyl mat in front of Santa and Lexie, but then Mrs. Claus had come around with warm chocolate chip cookies. The sugar boost sent the little ones into a frenzy, calling out their own questions. Lexie might have been annoyed by the hijacking of her interview if the hijackers weren't so darned cute.

So for a little while now, Lexie had sat back, listening and taking notes and trying to ignore the platter of those warm chocolate chip cookies. They were barely into December and Lexie's diet, admittedly not the healthiest anyway, had already given her the unwanted gift of extra pounds on her thighs and hips. In between taking notes, her fingers found their way to playing with the ends of her straight shoulder-length auburn hair. This was apt to happen whenever she was denied something she wanted. Then she jerked her hand down away from her hair, as was apt to happen whenever she caught herself doing it.

Finally, Lexie tried to take the interview reins once more. "Everyone," she said sweetly but firmly over the hullabaloo, "we don't want to keep Santa from his important duties, do we?"

"No," came the somewhat horrified response. Keeping Santa from his duties, dear God. That had to land you on the "Naughty" list, right up there with finger-painting with Mom's nail polish and sticking bubblegum in your sister's hair. No kid was going to mess with such things this close to Christmas.

Well, almost no kid.

A freckly redhead about seven years old jumped up. All the parents stood behind the mat, and this little boy's mom had come over to him three times already to calm him down. The mom sent Lexie an apologetic look, but it was Lexie who felt for the mother.

This little one had to be a handful, she guessed. At thirty-two, Lexie was no stranger to the biological pangs telling her it was time for motherhood, but one of her many worries about having children was having a child like him. She didn't know what scared her more: a pint-sized whirlwind, or that he'd stop spinning just long enough to look to her of all people for guidance.

She snuck a glimpse at her boyfriend, Theo, standing off to the side and chatting with his sister. Lexie's heart fluttered as it always did when she spotted his downy brown hair, glasses, and muscular build across a crowded room. In the three years they'd been together, she had never heard him express doubts about fatherhood or how their lives would change with a family. She'd never revealed her doubts to him either.

The little redheaded boy fairly wriggled with excitement, standing before the Big Man in Red. With a lisp that could've landed him a record deal singing, "All I Want for Christmas Is My Two Front Teeth," he spouted, "Thanta, could you tell uth the Legend of Whimthy?"