

The image features a Christmas tree that appears to be growing out of an open, antique-style book. The tree is densely decorated with various colorful ornaments, including red, green, blue, and gold spheres, as well as smaller lights. A large red and gold striped bow is tied around the top of the tree. At the base of the tree, within the pages of the book, is a small, detailed figure of Santa Claus. The background is a dark, textured blue, suggesting a night sky or a snowy surface. The overall composition is festive and whimsical.

The Christmas Book

Lisa Hendrickson

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CHAPTER ONE

Pat Winter slumped in the back seat of Ms. Strauss' sterling gray Taurus and stared at the back of her seat letting her lectures wash over him. Outside the car, sleet coated the street and everything else. It seemed dangerous driving to Pat. How could she bitch at him and still drive in this stuff? It was a mystery to him. Would he be able to do that as well when he got his license to drive a car? He hoped so, but he also hoped that he'd never have to find out. He glanced at the pompom on the top of her red knit hat, which was all he could see of her. Not that he could see much more than dark curls peeking out from under her hat. He was just glad that she wasn't turning to look at him, or even glaring at him in the rear view mirror.

The car slid to the right, Pat gripped the hand grip on the door, hanging on for dear life as the car fishtailed around a corner. Ms. Strauss drove like a maniac. That wasn't dry pavement out there. That wasn't rain falling down. That was sleet coming down out there. The road was icy and getting icier by the minute. The car slid to the left and, to Pat's relief, her lecture ended. The sleet outside was forcing her to pay closer attention to her driving and that suited Pat's need to think. If she had to yell at him some more, he'd rather she waited until they reached their destination. It would suck to die while someone was scolding you.

Without warning, they reached a stretch of straight road and his opportunity to think was over as she started in on him again.

"Don't understand you!" She was saying, this time. He tried to tune her out again, which was difficult given her shrill voice. It wasn't as though she would believe the truth anyway. No one ever did with Randy Kitchener involved. It wasn't fair that he should have to leave, even if Randy was the biological son of Pat's foster parents. Pat had had no choice but to belt Randy. Her voice broke through his thoughts again. "Randy's poor face! How could you have..." How could he not have? If they only knew what Randy had done. They would never find out though. Randy would make sure of that. Pat could never understand how Randy could make people believe him, even when he lied. Pat couldn't get people to believe him when he was telling the truth, much less when he was lying. Randy's poor face? What about poor Bobby? That was the real question.

"...Lucky they didn't have you arrested for assault..." He supposed that was lucky, if you could call it that.

He rubbed his bruised hand and gave a small, satisfied smile. The sound of his fist hitting Randy's jaw had been so cool. Randy had so deserved it. Pat hoped he'd broken Randy's jaw. Randy's parents had called Ms Strauss on the way to the hospital with their precious son. He'd been back at their house, packing his stuff under the watchful eye of the Kitchener's house help. They hadn't told him that he was moving on, but he'd been under no illusions that he was moving out of that foster home. He was well aware that they would take Randy's side in the conflict. Mayor Kitchener, especially was not interested in anything Pat had to say. She'd only been looking to improve her image for her political ambitions. She'd talked of nothing but the Governor's seat. He wasn't sure what his role was in her run for the governorship, but he wished her luck. He though he knew why shed taken him in. She'd thought that she'd get more votes if she demonstrated her generosity by taking in a foster kid. He'd only been a trophy for her. She didn't care about anything but herself and her son.

He hoped that Bobby would be OK. That was his only regret, his little foster brother, he'd left Bobby at the Kitchener home with no one to protect him. He could only hope that the kid would keep on Randy's good side, if that were at all possible.

"That's your problem!" Ms Strauss's voice intruded on him again. "You don't think..." Maybe she was right about that, but what was he supposed to do? He went back over the fight in his head. No, there'd been nothing else he could have, should have done. Randy had gone too far. Maybe Pat's presence had emboldened Bobby into a mistaken defiance. The kid was smart, though, and Pat thought he was, he'd give Randy no excuse to repeat his treatment.

It was a cinch Bobby wouldn't tell the adults the truth. He might be a little kid, but he had his head

screwed on right. The truth wouldn't do Bobby any good either, even if anyone believed it. Randy was good, Pat had to hand it to him. People believed Randy's version of events every time. His kind usually was.

"...Only hope the Malones will take you in, short term," Ms. Strauss said in a grim tone. At least her voice wasn't as shrill as it had been. That had to mean that she was calming down. The car slid around a curve in the road, or maybe it was a corner. Pat couldn't quite tell. "What a filthy night..." Pat sat up to look out the window. She had that right, it was nasty. It was cold, wet and slick. He was sorry to be the cause of her having to come out in this weather, but he'd not had the choice. Randy had chosen the time when he'd done what he did.

Depending on how far down the road the Malones lived, he'd be closer to school. It was hard to tell between the darkness and the sleet. The car swerved into the driveway of a two-storey house. It was too dark to make out many details, but Pat figured there was little point in that. He wouldn't be here that long anyway. Lately he'd been moving a lot. He had no idea why none of his foster homes seemed to keep him long.

OK, the Kitcheners got rid of him because he'd beaten their precious son to a pulp, but the Wheelers had been nice. He'd been happy with them. It was only because Mr. Wheeler had gotten that promotion and they were going to move to New York City, so they'd given up all their foster kids. It had gone down so fast, they'd not had the time to even consider adoption. It was too bad that they couldn't take any of their foster kids across state lines. He'd liked it there, even if the only friends he'd seem to have were the little kids. He didn't know why he seemed to attract little kids. Girls his own age never seemed to notice him, only the little ones. It was a depressing thought. He needed to think of something else. What else could he think about? He smiled. Oh yes, he had the perfect thought. Holly Greene at school, she was the most beautiful girl in school. She also wasn't the slightest bit attracted to Pat, but that didn't matter. She was dating Randy, anyway, or maybe they'd broken up. He didn't know if he'd heard that, or just hoped that they had. Holly Greene and her twin sister, Ivy, were the prettiest girls in school. He doubted she knew he even existed. The car slewed into a driveway, Pat gripped the door harder.

"...Out!" Ms. Strauss' voice brought him back to the realization that they were at their destination. She'd gone back to being shrill. How did she do that? He looked around, startled to realize the car stopped. Oh, they were there. He got out of the car, dragging his duffel bag of possessions behind him into the stinging sleet. Slinging his duffel bag over his shoulder, he picked up his school bag and paused to look at the house. Icy cold pellets burning his face made it hard to see the structure. All he could determine was that it was a two story house. Maybe it was brick, he couldn't be sure. It was just too hard to tell, the way the sleet was slapping him in the face. Christmas lights ran along the roof line and outlined the front windows. A Christmas tree rotated in the front window to the right of the front door. It would have been a beautiful sight, if it wasn't for the cold water dripping down his neck and down over his face.

"...Patrick Nicholas Winter! Get a move on! It's freezing out here! Come on!" Ms Strauss's voice yanked him back to his surroundings. He staggered a little as he followed her up to the front door of the house where a tall man waited for them. The wind was biting through him. She didn't have to yell, it wasn't as though he wanted to linger in the sleet. He wasn't a complete idiot. The light from the windows shone on the tall man's premature silver hair. That must be Mr. Malone. A tall man with prematurely white hair, he stood just inside the open door out of the worst of the sleet. So, he wasn't an idiot either.

"Thank you for taking him tonight," Ms Strauss was saying as Pat entered the foyer of the house. "I know it is short notice." Pat was glad to get inside the warm house, away from the wind. The door opened onto a hall with stairs immediately in front of him and doors to either side. He smelled a thin odor of smoke, as though wood was burning. It must be OK, though. Mr. Malone, if that was him, didn't seem concerned. It was faint enough that Pat wasn't sure that he if the smell was real or not. To dispel his nervousness, he looked around.

The hall ran alongside the staircase and led to the back of the house. The banister of the stairs was a warm rich wood, dark and smooth. He was sure that it would be smooth and satiny to the touch, it looked as though it was. He looked up the stairs at the upper floor, shrouded in darkness above them. That only made sense. Why would they keep the lights on upstairs when they were downstairs. He took note of the light switch in the wall at the foot of the stairs. He wondered if there was a matching one at the top of the stairs. It looked like a nice home. He found himself wishing that he was going to be there longer than a couple of days.

"Glad to do it," the man's voice was warm and friendly. That was a good sign, wasn't it? A warm,

friendly voice meant a warm friendly man, didn't it? Pat looked over at him. The man looked like a youthful old man. His silver hair was at odds with his youthful hazel eyes. He had a pleasant face, much more open than Mayor Kitchener's face. She looked narrow and mean. How did she get people to vote for her? Did she have any kind of chance at the governorship? Pat had no idea. Mr. Kitchener was more of a mouse. His wife ruled that marriage and her son ruled her. Pat felt sorry for the man, he didn't have a chance. Then again, he could speak up and defy his wife or son. He never did.

"I wouldn't have asked you to take Patrick if you had any children with you at present." Ms. Strauss said. "Although, he seems to collect the younger ones, they seem to love him." Why did that seem to surprise her? "But, he battered poor Randy Kitchener tonight without mercy. It was the last straw for Mayor Kitchener. She wanted him out of her house immediately. I couldn't blame her when I saw poor Randy's face." Everyone was always so sympathetic to Randy. How did he do that? He never deserved sympathy. Yet everyone always seem to fall over themselves to give it to him. "It was all so bruised and swollen. The swelling has completely closed his eye. They took him to the emergency room because they thought Pat had broken Randy's jaw might." Good, he hoped he had. It gave him great pleasure to think of Randy with his jaw wired shut. If nothing else, it would shut his arrogant mouth. He doubted that he'd broken Randy's jaw. He hadn't hit him that hard, had he? No, thinking about it, he was sure that he hadn't.

Pat waited with resigned patience beside his stuff in the hall for someone to tell him where he was going when Mr. Malone looked around at him. His expression was warm and welcoming, which made for a nice change. People almost always gave Pat harassed looks rather than friendly and open ones. He brushed his wet hair out of his face and tried a tentative smile, feeling stupid as he did so. He just wasn't that good at sucking up, which was, he supposed, why he had never managed to get adopted. It was too late now. He was just too old.

"Hello, Patrick," Mr. Malone said as he grasped Pat's hand in a warm firm grip. Pat rather liked him. He was not prepared for the hug that came next. He had no idea how to respond. "Or do you prefer Pat?"

"Pat's fine," Pat said. What was with the hug? None of his other foster parents had done that. Not since he'd been small, anyway. Still, there was nothing threatening about a hug. Lots of people hugged each other, didn't they? Most people didn't hug perfect strangers. Pat wondered if that was something that should concern him. Then he reconsidered. He wasn't going to be staying here that long anyway, so it wouldn't be a problem.

"Leave your things here for now and let's go into the living room and get acquainted," Mr. Malone ushered them to the left. Pat glanced down the long hallway beside the staircase as Andy shepherded him into the living room. Where did that go, he wondered. It seemed to lead towards the back of the house. He didn't suppose that he'd be here long enough to get too familiar with the house, but it might lead to the kitchen. He hoped so, he was hungry. He glanced back at his duffel and school bag on the floor by the stairs as he followed Mr. Malone through the door. "Mary!" he called. "Would you bring Pat a towel please. He was out there with no hat and his hair is dripping!"

The living room was large with a central stone fireplace and large windows that over looked the woods to the side of the house. Pat immediately liked it. The source of the wood smoke smell was a fire crackling in the fireplace, its smoky warmth taking away the chill of Pat's wet hair. He should have worn his hat. No one had cared enough to point that out before he'd left the Kitchener home. Their only concern was how fast they could get him out of there. Pat thought with wry amusement. They thought they'd gotten the monster out of their home. They didn't realize that the monster still lived there. He belonged there. In a way, Pat was glad he didn't live there anymore, unlike poor Bobby who was still there. He hoped the kid was OK. Living with Randy was not easy.

"Oh my, you're so big!" He turned to see a petite woman with graying brown hair and blue eyes with a small white towel in her hands. She gazed at him with an expression of almost fear in her eyes as she handed it to him. What did she imagine he was going to do? He wanted to tell her that he wasn't the monster she made it obvious that she thought he was. That monster was still back there at the Kitchener home. She made him feel humongous, a feeling that wasn't all that pleasant, especially since she seemed terrified of him. What had Ms. Strauss told her.

"We usually take in little ones," Mr. Malone explained. "Ten and under." That explained the hug. It was what he did with his young foster kids. Pat gave a little smile. Little kids were OK; he had no problem with

little kids. They always seemed to like him. He wished Holly Greene did. Unlike the little girls, girls his own age never seemed to realize that he was there. It was just as well, he wouldn't know what to say to a girl anyway. Ms Strauss prodded him.

"Hello," he said, feeling like a performing monkey. "Thank you for having me." It was the usual speech. He'd made it enough times to know how people received it. He didn't bother to dwell on it. He didn't think he'd be here that long. There was no point in trying to make himself too agreeable. They didn't want him, at least Mrs. Malone didn't. He couldn't decide about Mr. Malone.

Pat sat on the edge of the sofa, dabbing at his wet hair with the towel Mrs. Malone had given him and staring at the fire in the fireplace. The flames made him feel warm. He hadn't realized that the coldness had penetrated so far into his body. He shivered a little bit, the cold seemed to have gone straight through him. He looked around the room. The adults were still talking about him, but he didn't bother listening. They didn't want his input anyway. He was just the foster kid. The person they were trying to settle into a place. He didn't count. He set the towel on the sofa next to him and then picked it up again. It was wet, it shouldn't go on the sofa. Unsure what to do with it, he laid it across his knees and started rubbing his hand again, without noticing. He didn't spare a glance for the Christmas tree that stood rotating before the front window. It was pretty, but Christmas was nothing special to him. He'd get underwear again this year. Maybe he'd get a shirt or a pair of pants or something like that.

When he was little, he'd gotten toys. Once he'd hit his teens, it was usually underwear. He wasn't knocking underwear, it had its uses, but sometimes he still yearned for a toy or game. Something fun to call his own. Of course, last year, he'd gotten a laptop from someone claiming to be Santa Claus. Even his foster parents of the time hadn't known who had given him the laptop. The computer appeared under the tree sometime after Pat had gone to bed Christmas Eve. It had been there right before he'd gotten up Christmas morning. He didn't believe in Santa and wished he knew who his benefactor was so that he could thank him or her the way the donor deserved. His bruised hand hurt, so he stopped rubbing it.

"Good gracious!" Mr. Malone grabbed his arm and examined his bruised knuckles. "You hit that poor boy hard." There was nothing poor about Randy. Why did everyone keep saying Randy was poor? The mayor made decent money and Mr. Kitchener was a neurosurgeon for pity's sake. They were not poor people by any measure. Did he have everyone in town in his pocket? Pat swallowed his resentment. There was no point in saying anything. Randy was a spin master and Pat would only come off for the worse.

"What could he have done to make you so angry?" Mr. Malone said. Pat looked at him, amazed. He was the only one to ask that. How could he know that? Mr. Malone smiled. "Only anger could make a boy hurt himself on another boy's face like that." Pat smiled at his words. He had hurt himself on Randy's face. That was a good joke and he appreciated the attempt at humor. Ms Strauss had only yelled at him.

"It doesn't matter, now," Pat said. "It's over and there's nothing I can do to change what happened." Especially since he didn't want to. Unless it was to do more damage to Randy. That would have been quite satisfying. Of course, he was going to pay for it tomorrow at school. Randy was bound to gather his posse and make Pat's life hell, but it had been worth it.

"That's a healthy attitude," Mr. Malone said. He glanced at Ms. Strauss. "Take your time finding him another place, Ann. Maybe Pat just needs to stay in one place for awhile. Didn't you say he'd been moving around a lot lately?"

"Yes, he has and not always because of his tendency to pick fights," Ms Strauss said.

Pat was indignant at that, when had he ever picked fights? Randy started every one he'd been in since coming to Pike Falls. Before that, he'd only been in one fight and that was over a cupcake when he was seven. Even that wasn't much of a fight. It was more of squabble, why didn't she take that gap between so-called fights into consideration? Or was she misinterpreting the wrestling matches at the Wheelers' home? That had been play. No one got hurt and no one had intended to hurt anyone, not like the beating he'd given Randy. "I'll find him a new home. He won't be in your way long." Pat supposed she meant well. Most social workers did, but did she have to make him feel like a particularly large inconvenient package? He knew that most of his foster parents saw him as a duty to they had to perform. Some of them had liked him. He rather thought the Wheelers might have taken him to New York with them. If they could have done the paperwork in time, but he wasn't sure that wasn't just wishful thinking on his part. He would have loved that. Life just sucked sometimes. They had been great foster parents.

"Like I said," Mr. Malone said. "Take your time. I'd like to spend some time with Pat. I think we can help each other out." Pat looked at him. Help each other out with what? Oh, he knew that he needed a home, but what could someone like him do to help someone like Mr. Malone? What did he have in mind? Was the guy going to turn out to be creepy or was he just trying too hard to be friends with Pat. Did he just think that Pat was a messed up teen because he was a foster kid? Some people thought that, but in most cases, foster kids were no different than kids with a full set of parents. They were just experts at moving from home to home. Some kids with both parents were more messed up than your average orphan. That was the case with Randy.

Now there was a messed up future psychopath. Pat started rubbing his bruised knuckles, again. His hand hurt, but he was sure that was temporary.

"I'll show you out," Mrs. Malone said to Ms. Strauss. Pat watched the two women leave the room, it looked to him as though Mrs. Malone was rushing Ms. Strauss away. He tried to figure out why would she do that? He shrugged to himself. He had to be mistaken. He couldn't tell if they were friends or wary enemies. He couldn't shake his impression that Mrs. Malone almost seemed to be almost hurrying Ms. Strauss of the house. Was that impression real or his overactive imagination? After thinking about it a moment, he decided that it was imagination. "Andy, you show Patrick to his room." Pat followed Mr. Malone out into the hall. He bent to pick up his duffel bag and his school backpack. Slinging his backpack over his shoulder, he wobbled a little as he bent to grab the duffel. He shook his head to get his still wet hair out of his face. As he did so, minute drops flew from his hair. He daubed at his head with the towel he was still holding.

He slung the backpack from his right to his left shoulder and grasped the duffel bag in his right hand. He wobbled a little and a grinning Mr. Malone reached out to take the duffel from Pat. Startled, Pat let him take the duffel. Well, it wasn't as though the man was going to steal it. He was just helping Pat, something that didn't happen all that often.

"Here, let me give you a hand with that. Come on, Pat," Mr. Malone said. "Your room is upstairs."

"Thanks," Pat said, nonplussed. He'd never experienced anything like this before. He'd been through several foster homes in his life but never had he seen one like this.

"Not at all," said Mr. Malone. He led Pat up the stairs and down the hall to a room near the back of the house. He opened a door to the right. "Sorry about the decor."

Confused, Pat walked into the room and stood speechless. Cartoon airplanes covered the walls. Pat looked around the room, even the ceiling was blue with fluffy clouds painted on it. At least the bed was a normal sized twin bed. "We usually only take in the young ones, Mary teaches kindergarten. We can change it to something more suitable for someone your age." Pat tore his gaze from the smiling airplanes on the walls and looked at him, confused. Why was he talking like Pat was staying here, long term? Wasn't he only here for a couple of days?

"It's fine," he said, confused. He crossed to a small table and twirled the propeller on the airplane lamp sitting there. "I don't mind the planes." It was fine. It wasn't as though he was staying longer than a few days. He wondered where he was going next. Would he finish the school year here in Pike Falls or would he find himself back in Sharkton? Bouncing between school rivals was difficult at best. It could lead to physical harm if he wasn't careful. He would have to stay as neutral as possible with regard to sports. Which wasn't hard for him to do. Sports were not his thing.

"That's good," Mr. Malone said. "Because I don't think we can do much about it until the weekend. We do have a table and chair in the attic that would be more your size. We can get it down a little later. The bathroom is across the hall. There's a blow dryer there. You might want to use that to dry your hair. Let me take that towel." Pat handed him the towel.

"It's likely I'll be gone by the weekend, Sir," Pat decided that he liked Mr. Malone. He must have been trying too hard to be friends. It was too bad that Pat was not likely to spend much time here in this pleasant home. It looked like it was one of the nicer ones that he'd ever stayed in. It was a depressing thought. He almost wished he was the age this couple usually took in. Where had they been when he was six?

"Andy."

"Uh, 'Scuse me?" Who the heck was Andy? Pat looked at Mr. Malone, baffled.

"You don't have to call me sir. My name is Andy," Mr. Malone said. Oh right, Mrs. Malone had called him Andy. Unsure how to respond, Pat settled for a small smile. "Call me Andy. I've waited a long time to

have you here." Pat's smile faded, what did that mean?

"Uh, 'Scuse me?"

"Someone like you, I mean." Somehow, Pat couldn't quite believe that. Oh it was a good recover, but it seemed as though Andy was extraordinarily pleased to have Pat himself. It was almost as though he knew Pat. That wasn't possible, was it? "Go ahead and get settled. Have you eaten? Of course, you have. Come on down to the living room when you put your stuff away. We've planned to have a snack, popcorn or something." He left Pat to unpack. It was weird and not a little bit creepy. Andy was back in a few minutes. "Here's the blow dryer. I'll see you downstairs in a bit." Pat took the blow dryer, plugged it into the nearest outlet and began blowing his hair dry. He felt warmer with his hair only damp instead of sopping. He looked around, trying to figure out what to unpack first. He wasn't to unpack much, there was no point in unpacking everything. He'd only have to pack it all up again in a few days. He paused to stare at the airplane lamp. There had been a time when he'd been into airplanes liked this. This would have been a cool room to be in then. He smiled. Once, he would have loved this room. His smile faded. He couldn't remember ever having a room decorated like this, so the little kids the Malones usually took in, likely loved it. He was indifferent. It was a room. He wasn't likely going to stay long here anyway.

He stared around the room. Just what had Andy meant when he'd said that about waiting a long time for Pat to be there. How long had that been? Had he met Andy before? He frowned at his thoughts. He wasn't sure he liked where they were going.

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