


## *Somewhere Else*

 You might think you know about Father Christmas. And I'm sure you do know *some* things. You probably know about the Toy Workshop and the reindeer. You know what happens every Christmas Eve. Of course you do.

But the thing you probably don't know about is me.

I will start by telling you the things that are easy to believe.

My name is Amelia Wishart and I have a black cat called Captain Soot. I was born in London, and I lived there until I was eleven years old. And then I lived *somewhere else*.

It is the *somewhere else* that you might find a bit unlikely.

I suppose I could tell you that I moved to Finland, and you would have no problem believing that, because Finland is on a map. And it is, technically, true. I did move to Finland, in the far far *far* North,

beyond the bit of Finland known as Lapland. The *somewhere else* I lived was simply called the Far North and the town was Elfhelm. Now, Elfhelm isn't on any maps. Not human ones, anyway. And the reason for this is that *most people can't see it*. It's *invisible* to them. You see, Elfhelm is a magical place, and to see magical places you have to believe in magic. And the type of humans who draw all the maps are the people least likely to believe in magic.

But Elfhelm is an ordinary town in lots of ways. A small town. An oversized village, really. And there are normal things there, like shops and houses and a town hall. There are streets and trees and even a bank.

But the people who live there are *very* different to me. And *very* different to you too.

They aren't even people. Not *human* people anyway.

They are special. They are magic.

They are, well . . .

They are elves. But the thing is, if you are surrounded by elves, it isn't the elves that are the weird, unusual creatures.

No.

*It's you.*

## 7 Reindeer Road

**F**ather Christmas lived at 7 Reindeer Road, right next to Reindeer Field, on the edge of Elfhelm. His house, like many of the houses in Elfhelm, was made of reinforced gingerbread, and – unlike almost all other houses in Elfhelm – it had a front door so large you didn't have to bend forwards to walk through it.



It was full of fun things. There was a slide down from the first floor to the ground floor. The doorbell played a version of 'Jingle Bells'. There were toys everywhere. The kitchen had shelves full of the tastiest sweet things in jars – chocolate, gingerbread, cloudberry jam. There was a reindeer clock in the living room, which was like a cuckoo clock but instead of a cuckoo popping out it was a reindeer. Oh, and it didn't tell ordinary human time with boring things like 'six o'clock' and 'twenty past nine'. It told elf time, and elf hours were called things like Very Early Indeed and Way Past Bedtime.

Father Christmas had been living on his own but he quickly got Slumber, the elf bedmaker, to build two extra beds and 'the world's comfiest cat basket' for Captain Soot.

'Though tonight,' he said that first day, 'I'll sleep downstairs on the trampoline.' Father Christmas insisted that it was a very comfy trampoline.

The reason Father Christmas needed two extra beds was because of Mary Ethel Winters and myself.

Mary was the woman Father Christmas was in love with. He blushed every time he looked at her. And she loved him too.



Mary was the kindest and loveliest woman I had ever met. Her cheeks were as rosy as apples and her smile could warm a room. I had first known her when I was in London, when the very worst thing of all happened. My mother caught a horrible illness from cleaning chimneys. I did all I could to look after her, but in the end the illness was too powerful. I couldn't stop her dying. My father had left us when I was very little, so after that I was sent to Mr Jeremiah Creeper's workhouse. I was utterly miserable, but Mary – who worked

in the kitchens there – was always nice to me. She would secretly add a spoonful of honey to the watery gruel we had to eat. I'll never forget that.

She'd had a tough life. Before she had gone to the workhouse she had been homeless and slept on a bench next to Tower Bridge, surrounded by pigeons.

Anyway, when Captain Soot and I eventually escaped the workhouse, thanks to Father Christmas, Mary came with us. And, like me, she was very pleased to be here.

We arrived in Elfhelm on Christmas Day, when every human child in the world was opening their presents, and we ate the biggest Christmas dinner I had ever seen and listened to the most brilliant and happy music played by an elf band called the Sleigh Belles. We laughed and sang and spickle danced. Spickle dancing is a very complicated type of elf dancing which involves a lot of energetic leg work, a lot of twisting, and some floating magically in the air.

'I think you are going to like it here,' Father Christmas told me later, as we went ice skating on a frozen lake.

'Yes, I think I will,' I said.



And I did. I did like it there. Well for a while.  
Before I managed to smash my own happiness  
into a million pieces.

## *Hope Toffee*



To get anywhere in Elfhelm you had to walk along a big street called the Main Path. Elves weren't always very original with their names. For instance, there was another street with seven curves that they called the Street of Seven Curves.

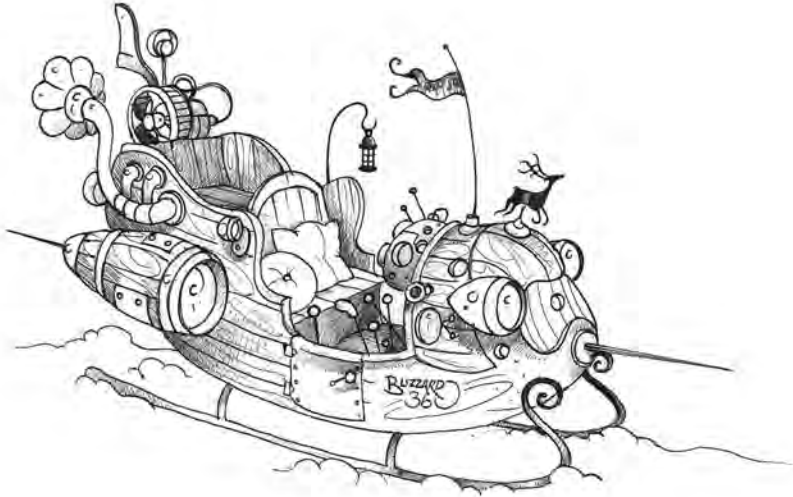
Anyway, as we walked along the Main Path the whole street was bustling with elves. There were clog shops, tunic shops, belt shops. There was something called the School of Sleighcraft on the Main Path too. All kinds of sleighs were there, though none looked as impressive as the one I had ridden on my journey to Elfhelm – the one Father Christmas kept parked in Reindeer Field.

Father Christmas waved at a tall (by elf standards), skinny elf who was polishing a small white sleigh. The sleigh gleamed and looked quite beautiful.

'Hello, Kip! Is that the new sleigh I've been hearing about?'



The elf smiled. It was a small smile. The kind of smile that was surprised to be there. ‘Yes, Father Christmas. The Blizzard 360.’



‘She looks a beauty. Single-reindeer?’

‘Yes, single-reindeer.’

And then Father Christmas started on a long and technical conversation about speedometers and harnesses and altitude gauges and compasses.

He finished their discussion with a question: ‘So you’ll be letting the children ride in it when the school term starts?’

Kip looked worried suddenly. ‘No,’ he said.

‘This isn’t a child’s sleigh. Look at the size of it. This is for bigger elves – grown-ups only.’

Then Mary joined in. ‘Well,’ she said, putting her arm around me, ‘the school is getting a new child this year. A child who is bigger than an elf child. A child who is actually taller than an elf grown-up.’

‘This is Amelia,’ added Father Christmas, ‘and believe me, she is a natural sleigh rider.’

Kip stared at me and turned as pale as snow. ‘Oh. I see. Um. Err. Right. Well.’

And that was it. He went back to polishing his sleigh and we carried on walking along the street.

‘Poor Kip,’ said Father Christmas softly. ‘He had a terrible childhood.’

Every other elf we saw was very friendly and talkative. Mother Breer the beltmaker fitted Father Christmas with a new belt. (‘Oh, Father Christmas, your belly has *grown*. We’re going to have to make an extra hole.’)

Then we went to the sweet shop and met Bonbon the sweetmaker, who let us taste some of the new things she had been working on. We tried the Purple Cloudberry Fudge and a strong-tasting aniseed-y sweet called Blitzen’s Revenge (named after Father Christmas’s

favourite reindeer) and then the Baby Soother.

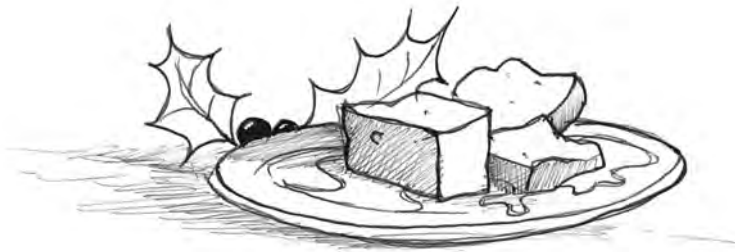
‘Why is it called the Baby Soother?’ I asked. And then she pointed to her baby – ‘little Suki’ – who had a cute face and pointed ears, and was sitting happily in a bouncy chair, sucking on a sweet.

‘It always works on her,’ said Bonbon.

The most incredible sweet of all, though, was the one called Hope Toffee.

‘Ooh, toffee,’ I said, clapping my hands. ‘I love toffee. What does this one taste of?’

Bonbon looked at me as if I had said something very stupid. ‘It is *Hope* Toffee. It tastes of whatever you hope it tastes like.’



So when I put it in my mouth I hoped very hard that it would taste like chocolate, and it did taste like chocolate, and then I hoped it

would taste like apple pie, and the sweet heated up in my mouth and became exactly like apple pie, and then I thought of the roasted chestnuts I used to eat every Christmas, before Mother had become poorly, and there they were, tender and warm and crumbling like a memory in my mouth. And this last taste, although delicious, also made me feel sad that I didn't have a mother any more, so I swallowed it and didn't ask for another one. I had some Giggle Candy instead, which tickled my tongue and made me laugh.

The shop doorbell tinkled and in walked a smartly dressed couple, both wearing red tunics. One of them had glasses and a bald head, and the other was as round as a globe.

'Ah, hello, Pi,' said Father Christmas to the one with glasses.

He then turned to me. 'Pi is your new mathematics teacher.'

'Hello,' Pi said, chewing on some liquorice. 'You're a human. I've heard about human mathematics. It sounds most ridiculous.'

I was confused. 'I thought mathematics was the same everywhere.'

Pi laughed. 'Quite the opposite! Quite the opposite!'

And then I was introduced to the other elf, who was called Columbus. ‘I’m a teacher too. I teach geography.’

‘Is elf geography like human geography?’ asked Mary.

But Father Christmas answered on Columbus’s behalf. ‘No. For one thing, in human geography, Elfhelm doesn’t even exist.’

And then we ate some more sweets and bought some to take home and said goodbye to Bonbon and Pi and Columbus and headed out into the street. We walked past a newspaper stand selling the *Daily Snow*.

‘Oh dear,’ said Father Christmas. ‘There’s no queue . . . No one wants to buy the *Daily Snow* any more.’

I knew a bit about the *Daily Snow*. It was the main elf newspaper. It had always been run by an elf called Father Vodol. Father Vodol was a Very Bad Elf. He’d always hated Father Christmas and, when Father Christmas had first arrived in Elfhelm as a boy, had locked him up in prison. You see, Father Vodol used to be the Leader of the Elf Council and had ruled Elfhelm and made everyone fear outsiders, such as humans. But then, when Father Christmas had become Leader, Father Vodol

kept running the *Daily Snow* for years – until last Christmas, when it became clear he'd helped the trolls attack Elfhelm. His punishment hadn't been prison (elves don't go to prison any more), it had been to lose the *Daily Snow* and to go and live in a small house on the quietest street in Elfhelm, which was called Very Quiet Street. It was seen as a punishment to have to live on Very Quiet Street because elves *hated* the quiet.

The only trouble with the *Daily Snow* was that since Noosh, the former Reindeer Correspondent, had taken over, two things had happened. First, the newspaper had got a lot better. Second, it had also stopped selling. It seemed that elves preferred it when Father Vodol made up stories and lied about everything.

I am telling you all this now, because it is important for what happens later. But at the time – stepping out of that sweet shop – I had a different worry in my mind.

'I have never been to a school before. They didn't teach you anything in the workhouse. All you did was work. And, besides, elf school sounds very strange. How will I fit in?'

'Oh, but you see,' said Father Christmas,

‘you underestimate yourself. You were good at riding a sleigh right from the start, weren’t you?’

‘But what if—’

‘Listen,’ said Father Christmas. ‘You don’t have to worry. This is *Elfhelm*. This is the place where anything can happen. It’s like that sweet you just ate. Whatever you hope to feel, you *will* feel.’

‘Is life really that simple, Nikolas?’ asked Mary, who called Father Christmas by his first name.

‘It can be,’ said Father Christmas.

And it was easy to feel as positive as him, right then, as we walked down the Main Path. Everything looked happy and bright.

Just then I noticed Father Christmas and Mary holding hands, and I thought it looked a very lovely thing. Maybe the loveliest thing I had ever seen. And I was so overwhelmed with the loveliness of it that I found myself saying what was in my mind, and what was in my mind was this: ‘You should get married.’

Both of them turned around to look at me on that happy, bustling, snow-lined street and looked shocked.

‘Sorry,’ I said, ‘I shouldn’t have said that.’

They looked at each other and burst out laughing.

And Mary said, 'What a good idea, Amelia!'

And Father Christmas said, 'The very best idea!'

And that is how Mary Ethel Winters came to marry Father Christmas.





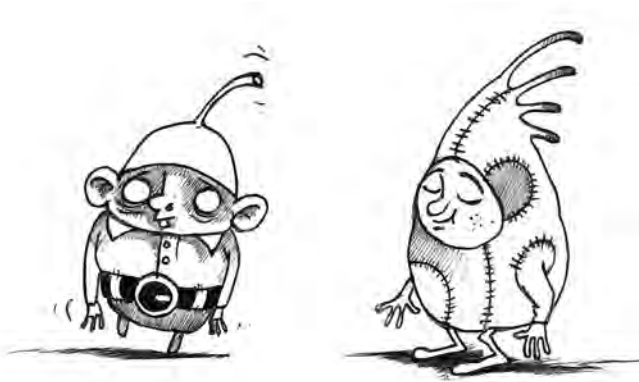
## *Mother Christmas*



The wedding took place on the last day of the winter holidays. The day before I was due to start at Elfhelm School. It had been nice to have the wedding to look forward to, as it had taken my mind off starting school.

Most of Elfhelm came to the Village Hall that day. Some pixies from the Wooded Hills even came. The Truth Pixie was there along with the Lie Pixie. The Lie Pixie said that he really liked my ears, which was a bit worrying. Father Christmas's reindeer were all there too. He had made Blitzen promise that he wouldn't go to the toilet on the floor during the service, and Blitzen stuck to that promise. There was also a Tomtegubb there. I had heard of pixies and elves, even when I had lived in London, but I had never heard of Tomtegubbs. There weren't many of them apparently, and they were only found to the east of Elfhelm. Tomtegubbs didn't have names and they were never male or female. They were always just

Tomtegubbs and they came in different colours. This one glowed a kind of yellow and was a short chubby thing, and it smiled and hummed to itself the whole time. And Captain Soot came along too, nibbling dropped cake crumbs from the floor.



Oh, and there was also an earthquake. Or what felt like an earthquake. But it turned out to be just a troll walking all the way from Troll Valley to the wedding. She was such a large troll she couldn't actually fit in the hall and had to sit on the snowy ground outside, but she peered inside the window. This was Urgula, the Supreme Troll Leader, who was larger even than all the untretrolls and übertrolls she was

in charge of. I didn't see the whole of her, but I saw her head with her hair as wild as a tree blowing in the wind.

Father Christmas opened the window at one point to talk to her. 'Hello, Urgula, lovely to see you here.'

Urgula smiled and showed her three teeth, each one the size of a rotten door. 'I be here to wish you and your love the biggest happiness from all we trolls.'

'That is very kind,' said Mary, standing by Father Christmas's side.

The Sleigh Belles played a song they had written for the occasion called 'You Look Beautiful To Me My Sweetheart (Even Though You Are A Human)'.

Father Topo, Father Christmas's best friend, led the service. Elfhelm weddings, I soon realised, were slightly different to human ones.

'Look into each other's eyes,' said Father Topo, 'and try not to laugh.'

They both managed that very well until Father Topo started telling some terrible jokes.

'What's the best Christmas present?'

'I don't know,' said Mary.

'A broken drum! You just can't beat it . . . Get it?'

‘Yes,’ said Father Christmas, ‘I told you that one!’

But Father Topo had more.

‘What says “oh oh oh”? You walking backwards . . . Get it? Because you normally say “ho ho ho”. Okay. Why couldn’t the skeleton go to the party? Because he had no body to go with. No body! See? What’s a human child’s favourite king? A *stocking* . . . ? And these terrible jokes went on for quite some time. Until eventually both Father Christmas and Mary were laughing – not because the jokes were so funny, but because they were so bad. And it was at that moment – that exact moment of laughing-at-the-same-time-ness – that Father Topo said, ‘I now pronounce you MARRIED!’ Because that is how people get married in Elfhelm. By laughing together at the same time in the middle of a wedding service.

Mary became Mother Christmas automatically because Father Christmas was the Leader of the Elf Council. And Mary became a member of the Elf Council, too. That was why some people were called Mother Something or Father Something. They were members of the Elf Council, which meant they could attend

meetings and help to decide things to do with Elfhelm and elf life. Anyone, in theory, could be a member of the Elf Council. It just so happened that a lot of elves never wanted to be, because meetings were known to be boring and to give them rashes. And very itchy rashes at that.

After the talking part of the wedding, there was the food part (a *lot* of food), and more music, and even more spickle dancing.

Towards the end of the party a grumpy-looking elf with a black beard appeared and wandered through the crowd, scowling at Father Christmas and Mary – or Mother Christmas – and at anyone who seemed to be happy. Which was absolutely everybody in the room apart from the Truth Pixie, who seemed to want Father Christmas to stay on his own (I knew this because I overheard her saying ‘I wish Father Christmas would stay on his own’), so this was a bit of a difficult day for her.

‘Are you having a good time?’ I asked the Truth Pixie innocently.

‘I am having the worst day of my life,’ she responded, before stuffing her face with wedding cake.



The scowling elf was Father Vodol. When Father Christmas raised his glass to make a toast at the end, I watched Father Vodol staring intently at Father Christmas's cup of cloudberry juice.

'Dear elves, pixies, humans, reindeer, troll – oh, and you Tomtegubb – thank you all for coming. Today has been very special for me. Like a million Christmas Days all at once. Because I have married the kindest, warmest and funniest person I have ever known – that's you, Mother Christmas – and I am surrounded by all of you. I would also like to mention someone else in the room.' That was when he

pointed at me. ‘That person there. Amelia Wishart. The girl who saved Christmas. She has taught me a lot. Mostly she has taught me the power of hope. As you know, hope is a kind of magic. And it is now my great hope and belief that Elfhelm will continue to welcome her – and my dear Mary – into our village, as you have done already. Like me, they may look a little different, but I assure you they will add much to life here in Elfhelm.’

‘Here, here,’ said Noosh, now standing next to her great-great-great-great-great-grandfather, Father Topo, and holding her son, Little Mim, in her arms.

‘Absolutely,’ said Father Topo. ‘Elfhelm is more fun if it welcomes everyone. A village full of only elves is as boring as a stocking filled with the same presents.’

‘Well, I am very happy to be here,’ said Mary. ‘And I know Amelia is too. Aren’t you, Amelia?’

The whole hall turned to look at me.

‘Oh yes,’ I said. ‘I am very happy. It certainly beats a workhouse, I can tell you.’

The elves smiled at me but there was a look of confusion or perhaps it was amusement in their faces. I guess it was because I was *different*. I was different even to Mary and Father

Christmas. There was no drimwickery inside me. Drimwickery is elf magic. A magic that had been used to save the life of Father Christmas when he was a boy, and which he in turn had used to save Mary's life last Christmas. I couldn't do the things that elves and Father Christmas and Mary – once she'd completed her drimwick classes – could do. But I didn't care. Not yet, anyway. I quite liked being different. All my life, in London, I had been invisible. Just another poor scruffy sooty-faced child. It was nice to be looked at. It made me feel a bit special, and I had never felt special before.

And Father Christmas helped me out by saying, 'So let's raise our glasses to happiness and friendship! It doesn't matter who anyone is, or where they have come from, they are here in Elfhelm and we will welcome them.'

Father Vodol, I realised, was still staring at the goblet in Father Christmas's hand. And, as he stared at it, I saw that goblet begin to tremble and shake, and Father Christmas seemed shocked as he tried to keep hold of it. But it was no good. The goblet whooshed across the room and landed with a loud clank near my feet. I looked down to see pink-orange cloudberry juice spill out.





No one realised it had been Father Vodol, because no one had been watching how intensely he had been staring at Father Christmas.

‘What happened there?’ Mary asked.

‘I have no idea,’ said Father Christmas.

‘It was him,’ I said and pointed to the black-bearded culprit.

The whole hall suddenly went very quiet. Everyone looked a bit worried, including Father Christmas. And then, I started to feel a little worried too. ‘It was Father V—’

But I couldn’t finish my sentence as my

mouth was jammed shut. My lips were forced together yet no one was touching them.

It was then I realised: *he* was doing it.

‘I have no idea what the human girl is talking about,’ said Father Vodol, with a smile. ‘She is clearly mistaken.’

I tried to speak but I couldn’t. I looked at Father Christmas’s and Mary’s troubled faces. I didn’t want to ruin their special day, so I just shrugged and gave a tight-lipped smile.

Father Christmas looked at his now empty hand and at the puddle on the floor beside my feet. He pushed out his bottom lip. ‘Well let’s not cry about spilled juice. We are here to celebrate.’ He clapped his hands. ‘Sleigh Belles, play us another tune.’

The music began again, and elves filled the dancefloor, and there was some rather competitive spickle dancing going on. And I danced too, in a rather unmagical human way, until Father Vodol came and stood right in front of me.

I was a little bit frightened but was determined not to show it. So I said, ‘Do you like dancing?’

And he said, ‘No, I don’t. You see, the trouble is you have to watch your step. And if you put a foot wrong there can be consequences.’

I laughed. 'I don't think dancing has to be so serious.'

But then I realised he wasn't talking about dancing, because he said, 'I'm not talking about dancing.'

'Oh.'

'I'm talking about you.'

'Why do I have to watch my step?'

'Because your feet are too big.'

'What? This is precisely how my feet are meant to be. I'm a human.'

'*Exactly.*' His eyes widened. He looked quite mad. 'You are a human. You do not belong here.'

'Father Christmas is a human. Mary is a human. Don't they belong here? All the other elves seem to think so.'

He leaned in closer, so he could speak quietly but still be heard above the music. 'Oh, you don't understand the mind of elves. You see, they are very changeable. You take one wrong step and they'll turn against you. You'll see. I'll make sure of it.'

'I'm not scared of you.'

'Yet,' he said. 'You're not scared of me *yet*. Just watch those big feet.'

And then he turned and left, and everyone was too busy to notice that the smile I had

been wearing was now gone, replaced with a look of worry. I was so concerned that I had just made an enemy of the nastiest elf in Elfhelm that, for the rest of the evening, I completely forgot I was due to start my new school the very next day.

