

TOMMY'S ANGEL

By Saffron Amatti

'Look,' said Lucas, glancing over his shoulder to make sure his less than flattering comments wouldn't be overheard. 'It's not that I mind Tommy being around -'

'That's not what you usually say, dear,' said Clara, hanging another bauble on the Christmas tree and standing back to admire her handiwork so far. It looked like an explosion in a tinsel factory with added glass nick-nacks. She spotted a two-inch gap and held her hand out for another decoration. 'What's changed?'

'Well, all right, maybe I'm not entirely thrilled he's here,' admitted Lucas, handing over a fragile pinecone on a length of wire. 'But it could be worse.'

'How so?'

'He could be *here* here right now,' said Lucas, which raised a wry smile from his fiancée. 'But my point is, Clara, that he's here. In your mother's house. With us. Do you see my problem?'

'No darling, I'm afraid I don't,' replied Clara airily, putting out her hand for another decoration. This time she received a gherkin-shaped thing that was apparently traditional somewhere or other. 'What exactly offends you about my mother inviting Tommy for Christmas?'

'Well, he's here,' said Lucas, rather losing his grip on the point he was trying to make. 'That's the problem. He's *here* rather than being somewhere else - his sister's, perhaps, or wherever he usually spends Christmas.'

'Lucas,' said Clara as patiently as she could manage, which wasn't very. 'You know Rose has gone to her in-law's this year...'

'Tommy could have gone too,' argued Lucas, supplying the latest requested trinket.

'Dennis' folks live in France,' said Clara. 'And I don't think they know about Tommy yet. It's all a bit delicate, you know that.'

'Then what does Tommy usually do at Christmas?' said Lucas.

'He normally claims to spend it with some girlfriend or other - or whatever passes for a girlfriend in Tommy's world,' replied Clara, frowning as she contemplated the latest addition to the tree. 'But last year he let slip that it was a particularly lonely time for him, and he typically hid in his room all day because he couldn't stand walking around seeing

everyone else having nice, happy Christmases when he had no one to share that sort of thing with.'

'Oh,' said Lucas, feeling a little guilty. He handed over a piece of tinsel.

'Oh indeed,' said Clara. 'So I rather think the least we can do is share our celebration with him this year, don't you?'

'I suppose,' said Lucas, feeling he'd perhaps been very uncharitable. 'It's just -' another glance over the shoulder '- he's so *enthusiastic* about everything. It's rather like having a, a puppy or something equally joyful around the place.'

Clara raised an unimpressed eyebrow at him. 'And that's a bad thing, is it? Isn't Christmas supposed to be about the childlike innocence of the season, or some such rot?'

'Well yes, I suppose so,' said Lucas unwillingly. 'It's just a little wearing after a while, that's all.'

Clara leant over and kissed him. 'You're just grumpy because you've got to go to that party tonight.'

'...No,' said Lucas, which was one of his less convincing lies.

Clara gave him another unimpressed look.

'Maybe,' he amended. 'I hate that kind of thing, and even worse, I promised mum I'd stay in the office tonight so I wouldn't wake her at whatever godawful hour I escape.'

'That is rough,' said Clara sympathetically. 'I remember how cold the Gazette office gets this time of year.'

'Exactly,' said Lucas with a deep sigh. 'So you can see why I'm not particularly keen.'

'Why don't you ask Tommy if he'd like to go?' suggested Clara. 'He'd love it, and I'm sure they won't mind another body at the party. Two sets of reports on the Charity Ball will make for an even better write-up.'

The look on Lucas' face said this was an even worse prospect than going to this party on his own.

'All right, all right,' said Clara quickly. 'Why don't I go with you instead, hmm? I've got a smart frock that'll do the trick. You can call them once we're finished here and let them know to expect one more guest.'

Lucas still didn't look very happy, but he did look slightly less mournful.

'And it'll give us a little time alone together,' she said, kissing him again. 'When we're walking up to the manor, at least. We won't get much of that over the next few days. All the family is coming over, as it's baby Ezra's first Christmas.'

'That's true,' said Lucas, kissing her back. 'But of course, we're alone now...'

After a few delightful moments together, the sound of footsteps stopped all that and left a rather rosy-cheeked Lucas and bright-eyed Clara hurriedly pretending they hadn't just been stealing a romantic moment together.

Much to Lucas' annoyance, the disturbance was of Tommy's making.

'Hullo,' said Tommy, sticking his head around the door of the living room. A smirk appeared on his boyishly handsome face. 'Not interrupting anything, am I?'

'Of course not,' said Clara, a little more breathlessly than usual. 'We're just putting the final touches to Mum's Christmas tree.'

'Ah, I see,' said Tommy, stepping into the cosy living room and admiring their decorating efforts. He shoved his hands in his trouser pockets and added, 'I suppose that's why your hair is all ruffled, is it? All that decorating can be quite strenuous, so I'm told.'

Lucas coughed in embarrassment and Clara's hand flew to smooth her usually sleek bob.

'Don't worry,' said Tommy, his eyes twinkling mischievously as he examined the tree. 'Your secret is safe with me, and I can't say I blame you for making the most of every moment alone.'

Lucas was about to make some sort of comment, but Clara silenced him with a look.

Not that Tommy noticed. The gaudy decorations reflected in his shining eyes as they took in each glass ball, pinecone, and - that couldn't really be a pickle, could it? There were handmade cardboard shapes hung on the bristly evergreen branches, paper chains, and thin strands of tinsel glittered in the flickering gas lights.

They'd never had anything like this at the orphanage, and though public decorations were spectacular, it was a rather ostentatious display that lacked the sentiment of this tree decorated with love and care, making the best of what they had to create something festive.

Tommy suspected some of the decorations were older than he was, likely passed from Clara's grandparents to her parents, and one day would end up on her own Christmas tree. Some of the handmade decorations had a charming, child-like quality, and on a couple he could clearly see "Clara" and "Lucas" written in unsteady block capitals, reminding Tommy of the long and sometimes tragic history his friends' families shared.

Not as tragic as his own family history, of course, but he wouldn't wish that on anyone. Least of all himself, of course, but certainly not on his friends either.

His eyes looked admiringly at every inch of the tree - except for the very top.

'You're missing the angel,' said Tommy, a little reproachfully.

'Well, of course we are,' said Clara. Her hand was now in Lucas', and she watched Tommy's examination of the tree with quiet, almost sisterly affection. Even Lucas had been softened by the man's obvious unacquaintance with such things. 'The angel goes on last,' she explained. 'It's traditional.'

'Yes,' said Lucas. 'And it's my turn to put it on this year.'

'Although,' said Clara, giving Lucas a Look. 'Perhaps you'd like to put it on for us, Tommy?'

'But,' started Lucas. 'Ow,' he finished, as Clara crushed his fingers.

'Yes,' said Lucas, scowling at her slightly as he tried again. 'Please Tommy, put the angel on the tree for us.'

Clara smiled at her fiancé approvingly before releasing his hand and stepping over to the box of decorations to find the final decoration.

The angel was five inches high, with delicate porcelain face and hands, beautifully painted golden blonde hair, and pale sapphire blue eyes made of glass. She wore a dress of stiff red silk trimmed with gold, and a glittering halo made of fine tinsel hovered an inch over the top of her head. It was held in place by a piece of stiff wire attached to a holder that would keep the decoration firmly in place throughout the festivities.

Tommy stared at it reverently as she held the small figure out to him. He reached a hand towards it hesitantly, as though afraid to touch such a precious family object - a family that had recently expanded to include him, but he didn't yet know his place in.

'Go on,' said Clara, smiling encouragingly at his reaction. 'It's your turn this year.'

He took the doll gently, and ran his thumb across the cool ceramic of her face.

A face that looked so much like that of his now barely remembered mother.

'What's her name?' whispered Tommy, unable to take his eyes off the angel.

'I don't think she's got one,' said Lucas quickly.

'Oh, I think it's -' started Clara, but Lucas shook his head at her and she realised what he was doing.

She smiled; he was marvellously thoughtful and sweet at times.

'No,' she said, turning back to Tommy. 'She's not got a name yet. Would you like to give her one?'

'Alice,' said Tommy quietly, still enraptured by the angel. 'Her name is Alice.'

'Well,' said Clara gently, trying hard not to tear up at the sound of his mother's name. 'Would you like to put Alice at the top of the tree, so she can watch us all have Christmas together?'

Tommy nodded mutely, his eyes a little damp. Slowly, carefully, he attached the newly named angel to the top of the tree, making sure to fix the holder hidden beneath the dress very firmly to the upright branch.

He stood for a few moments looking at the angel with a faint smile on his face.

Eventually, he remembered himself and turned back to his friends.

'Thank you,' he said, nodding at them. 'Um, I was supposed to tell you there's cocoa in the kitchen,' he added, brushing a finger across his cheekbone to remove the traces of emotion shimmering there.

'We'll tell Mum you'll be along in a minute,' said Clara, stretching up to lightly kiss his cheek.

Lucas clapped Tommy on the shoulder and nodded, before leaving him alone with his angel on top of the tree.

When he was sure he was alone, Tommy stepped back over to the tree, pressed two fingers to his lips and tenderly touched the angel's face once again.

'Merry Christmas, Mum,' he whispered, before turning the lights out and returning to the kitchen with the rest of the family.