

A woman with dark hair pulled back, wearing a long, elegant, emerald green dress with a pearl necklace and a ring, stands on a grand, ornate staircase. The staircase is decorated with a festive garland of red and white ornaments and greenery. The background features classical architectural details like columns and arches, all bathed in warm, golden light.

MELODY  
CARLSON

A Royal  
Christmas

A CHRISTMAS NOVELLA



# A Royal Christmas

A CHRISTMAS NOVELLA



**M E L O D Y  
C A R L S O N**



  
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## CHAPTER

# One

**A**fter more than eight years of crafting “clever” custom beverages at Common Grounds Coffee, Adelaide Smith was ready to call it quits. Instead, she smiled stiffly at the pair of teen girls stepping up to the counter. “What can I get you?”

“I’ll have a venti vanilla latte, nonfat milk, whipped cream, five Splendas with one Sugar In The Raw packet on the whipped cream,” the first girl said.

Adelaide’s brows arched. “Raw sugar on top?”

“You know, to make it crunchy.” The girl pulled a card from her wallet.

“Uh, right.” Adelaide maintained her poker face over the slightly schizophrenic order, then she turned to the second girl. “How about you?”

“I want a venti iced latte, with six ristretto shots, with breve, four pumps of vanilla, five pumps of caramel, and three Splenda. Poured not shaken.”

Adelaide blinked. Were these girls for real or was she being filmed by some YouTube jokester? Glancing around, she saw no phone aimed her way, and both girls seemed genuine as they

took turns running their cards with, of course, no tips. Then as she meticulously relayed the convoluted orders to her boss, Vicki, who broke into loud giggles, Adelaide noticed her best friend, Maya, frantically waving at her from outside the shop.

Was Maya behind this little gag? But Maya just pointed to her little electric car, parked in the fifteen-minute space, and then to her watch. The big clock behind the counter confirmed Adelaide's shift was indeed over. And knowing Maya would be eager for her coffee—the usual payment for Adelaide's ride home—and less eager to move her car or be ticketed, Adelaide started on Maya's usual venti mocha with skim milk. Now that was a sensible order.

“Can you believe this?” Vicki laughed as she sprinkled sugar on top of the whipped cream, then pointed to the five empty Splenda packets. “Go figure, huh?”

“I know.” Now, instead of making her usual end-of-shift latte with whole milk, Adelaide filled a cup with hot water, then plunked in a peppermint tea bag.

“What, quitting coffee, are we?” Vicki frowned as she slid the second complicated order on the counter and called out the girls' names.

“Not permanently.” Adelaide removed her apron. “But with only two days left here, I thought I should start weaning myself.”

Vicki shook her head. “I still can't believe you're really leaving us.”

“I should've done it sooner, Vicks. Not because of you and Lance. But you know I should be in my externship by now.” Adelaide reached for her parka. “Hopefully I'll secure something before January.”

“Well, you'll be missed around here.” Vicki sighed as she put a lid on the mocha. “Not to mention we'll be shorthanded during the holidays.”

“Sorry about that, but I warned Lance several weeks ago.”

She tugged on her gloves. “You know how your husband lives in denial.”

“Yeah, but you’ve given notice before without quitting. Good grief, Addie, you’ve been here longer than our espresso machine.”

Adelaide laughed as she picked up the to-go cups. “One more good reason it’s time for me to move on. See ya tomorrow, Vicks.”

Barely out the door, Adelaide was greeted by Maya. “I’ll take that.” Maya retrieved the mocha before they both piled into Maya’s pint-size car.

“Sorry to be so late.” Adelaide sniffed her tea, wishing she’d gotten her usual latte instead. “Guess I was distracted.” She explained about the last two crazy-making orders, and they both laughed. “I still can’t believe Monday will be my last day there.”

“We should do something to celebrate.”

“I guess.” Adelaide released a long sigh.

“Don’t tell me you’re sad about leaving.”

“A little. The owners have been like a second family to me. Especially after Mom died. It’s hard to let relationships like that go.”

“You’ll still be friends with Vicki and Lance.” Maya pulled out into the slow-moving traffic.

“I suppose, but it’s like the end of an era.”

“Who knows, maybe you’ll be representing them a year from now.”

Adelaide stared at her friend with wide eyes. “Legally? What do you mean? You think they’re getting sued?”

“No, of course not. But businesses need lawyers, don’t they?”

“Yes, but I’m not going into corporate law.” Adelaide sipped her tea, then grimaced. “Ugh.”

“Huh?”

“This tea. Don’t know what I was thinking.” Adelaide let down the window and tossed out the hot fluid, careful not to hit Maya’s car.

“That does it, Addie! I’m taking you out for dinner to celebrate the end of your coffee career. I’d suggest we wait for your last day, but I have PTA Monday night. Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t know. I don’t really feel like celebrating. Besides, it’s Saturday. Any place good will be full.”

Maya shook her head. “Why this Eeyore act? Is this about parting with Common Grounds or is something else going on? You’re not usually such a buzzkill.”

“I know. It’s probably this time of year.”

“Oh, yeah, I totally forgot your mom died in late November. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. It’s probably more than just that. Forgive my little pity party, but I’m feeling bummed over how long it’s taking to get through law school. I know younger attorneys with well-established practices, and here I am still slinging coffee and—”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. You got this far on your own. When you start practicing law, you can be super proud of your achievements. Nobody handed it to you on a silver platter.”

“And I can say the same about you. You put yourself through college too. But unlike me, your tuition is paid off. I still have a pile of college debt and—”

“Yeah, but it’s taken seven years, and I’ll never make as much as you. I’m only a teacher and—”

“*Only?* You know how important teachers are, Maya! Haven’t I told you how proud I am of you?”

Maya laughed. “Like a million times.”

While bantering over which was better—to be loved by little children and get paid less or earn the big bucks and be despised by many—they drove around looking for a good dinner spot that wasn’t overly packed until Maya finally admitted her car’s battery was running low.

Adelaide pulled out her phone. “There’s Robie’s Barbecue down the street. I’ll call in takeout and we can pig out on ribs in

privacy. They just put in a new charging station down the street from my house. We can eat there while your car juices up.”

“Now that sounds like a sensible plan.”

“Just promise not to criticize the housekeeping or”—Adelaide paused to place their order.

“I never criticize your housekeeping,” Maya said after Adelaide hung up. “I just criticize your house.”

“It’s not *my* house,” Adelaide defended herself. “Only the second floor. And Mrs. Crabtree could charge me twice as much if she liked. Probably three times.”

“Not once a potential tenant saw her seven cats. Or smelled them.”

“She’s down to six now,” Adelaide said. “Sweet Pea died last week.”

As they waited for their order, Maya continued to challenge Adelaide’s preference of a landlady who preferred felines to paying higher rent. But as they drove the short distance to the hundred-year-old home Adelaide shared with Mrs. Crabtree, she felt confident the jury would side with her persuasive argument. She’d never get a whole second floor somewhere else for what she paid each month. Besides, she’d been with the old woman ever since her mom died.

“I have to give it to you, Maya,” Adelaide said, “you’ve always been a good sport in our friendly debates. I guess you know how much I love a good argument.”

“I’ve always known you’d make a good lawyer.”

She smiled. “I think we’ve been agreeing to disagree ever since you told me *Finding Nemo* was better than *Shrek*,” Adelaide pointed out. “Remember how we almost came to fist-cuffs over it?”

“Yeah, in third grade.” Maya laughed as she plugged her car into the charging station. They carried the food into the house, and Adelaide noticed Maya’s nose wrinkle when she opened the door. Snatching her mail from the basket in the foyer, Adelaide

called out a warm greeting to Mrs. Crabtree, then hurried up the creaky stairs. Admittedly, the aroma was stronger than usual tonight. At the top landing, she grabbed her can of lavender air freshener and gave the stairs and hallway a liberal spray before rushing into the room she used as her study and closing the door behind them.

“Whew, that was bad.” Maya opened a bag of aromatic barbecued food and literally stuck her face into it, inhaling loudly.

“What a drama queen,” Adelaide teased.

Maya emerged from the bag with a furrowed brow. “I don’t see how you stand it, Addie. Seriously?”

“It doesn’t smell bad in here, does it?”

Maya sniffed, then shrugged. “Just that usual musty old book odor that you seem to thrive on. You remind me of my grandpa.”

“Maybe I should smoke a pipe too.”

“That might help.” While Maya unloaded dinner onto the wooden crate that served as a coffee table, Adelaide went to the cabinet she’d turned into her minikitchenette and got out two paper plates. Then, as Maya divvied out ribs, corn on the cob, mac and cheese, and coleslaw, she reminded Adelaide that she’d invited her to share her two-bedroom apartment more than once. “But you’d have to get rid of some of your junk.” She gestured toward an overflowing bookshelf.

“I’ve spent years collecting these books,” Adelaide said defensively as she sat down. “Not only are they a valuable investment but they’re also good resources.”

“Information I’m sure you could find online.”

“But these books make me happy.” Adelaide picked up a rib with one hand and used the other to thumb through her mail. She had several pieces of tree-wasting junk mail, as well as an odd-looking legal-size envelope. “Interesting.” She turned it over.

“What’s that?”

Adelaide studied the return address. “I’ve never seen anything like this. It says it’s from the Principality of Montovia.”

“Sounds made up. Probably a scam.” Maya reached for an ear of corn.

“A scam from Montovia?”

“Where on earth *is* Montovia?”

“Montovia is a European country. I think it’s near Austria or Hungary. But it’s tiny. Even smaller than Liechtenstein.”

“What’s Liechtenstein?”

Adelaide’s mouth dropped open. “Didn’t you take *any* geography in school?”

Maya made a face as she chomped into her corn.

Adelaide wiped her fingers on a napkin, then, using a clean plastic knife, slit open the sturdy envelope. “Who would write to me from Montovia?” She read the first line, then dropped the two-page letter to her lap. “You gotta be kidding!”

“What is it?” Maya leaned forward with interest.

“You were probably right, Maya. It *must* be a scam.” Even so, Adelaide picked up the letter. “Although it’s surprisingly well done for a scam.” She fingered the embossed paper as she held it out for Maya to see. “Official letterhead, good parchment, and it looks like it was typed on a real typewriter.”

“Read it out loud,” Maya insisted. “If it’s a scam, we’ll have a good laugh.”

Adelaide slowly read from the first page.

*Dear Miss Adelaide Katelyn Smith,*

*With the help of an American investigator, it has come to our attention that you are in all likelihood the direct descendant of Maximillian Konig V, reigning king of Montovia. The agency we employed discovered your identity through an international DNA registry. After consulting with several genetic experts, it has been determined that this match is indeed authentic.*

*We have also confirmed that your late mother, Susan Marie Smith, was engaged to Maximillian Konig V nearly thirty years ago, but the marriage was not approved by the king. According to the investigative report, the engagement was broken, and Ms. Smith returned to the United States. Approximately eight months later, she gave birth to a baby girl named Adelaide Katelyn Smith.*

*I am writing to inform you that we believe you to be the daughter of King Maximillian Konig V and, as a result, the true royal heir to the throne and—*

“Stop, stop, stop!” Maya yelled. “Read that last line again!”

With slightly trembling hands, Adelaide reread that startling sentence. “This *has* to be a scam.” She held the letter at arm’s length. “Whoever wrote this is seriously twisted.” She skimmed the second page of the letter, which detailed an extravagant invitation to Montovia, before she tossed both pages to the floor.

“No way is this real,” she declared as she stood. She paced across the small room and mostly ignored Maya, who’d scooped up the letter and was poring over the pages like they were the original draft of the Magna Carta. “This is either an elaborate scam that’ll be followed up with a demand for money or someone is playing a prank on me, because there’s no possible way this is for real. It’s just too weird.”

Maya set the pages on the table. “I don’t know . . . it seems kind of real to me.”

“No way. Things like this don’t happen in real life. Seriously, this feels like the plot of a Hallmark movie.”

Maya laughed. “Well then, it’s a pretty good fake. Maybe someone really is punking you.”

Adelaide suddenly remembered the teen girls’ weird coffee orders at the end of her shift. Those had been pretty bizarre. Even more over the top than usual . . . and yet Vicki had been quite amused. A light bulb flicked on in her head. Aha! These

strange incidents had to be the work of her bosses. Of course! Vicki and Lance were notorious practical jokers. April Fools' Day was their favorite holiday. Yes, they had definitely gotten her with this well-planned charade. Upset over her quitting right before the holidays, they probably wanted to get even and have a good laugh at the same time. Yes, that was the only logical explanation.