

CHAPTER ONE

There was one thing, and one thing only, that could coax me into striped red tights, a fur vest, and an elf cap: Jack Snjosson. Make that Jack Snjosson in a Santa suit. Our high-school paper's for-charity lunchtime food drive offered an up-close-and-personal with the old fellow in exchange for a nonperishable. Jack, as the paper's editor in chief, was the unanimous choice for the red suit. Never the look-at-me type, he resisted, digging in deep the heels of his old work boots until he devised a scheme requiring company in his misery. My current ensemble was the result. As the paper's fashion editor, I found playing elf more than a little embarrassing, but at least I got first crack at Kris Kringle.

“Uh, Santa,” I said, “aren’t you going to ask me what I want for Christmas?” I scooped my striped limbs into the velvety folds of his lap.

“Tell me, what is it you want from old Saint Nick?”

“Santa”—I buried my face into his beard and whispered into his ear—“all I want for Christmas is . . .”

I couldn’t help drawing out the moment. It was just too much fun and too surreal, even if my definition of *surreal* had all-new meaning since September. It was still hard to believe everything that had happened in just three short months. I really thought I was losing it when, shortly after the move from LA to Minnesota, I discovered that I was a Stork: a member of an ancient flock of soul deliverers. Things only got more complicated when I met Jack. Turned out he had a pretty nifty talent of his own. As a modern-day descendant of Jack Frost—uh-huh, *that* Jack Frost—he had the ability to control the weather. All the same, had you told me three months ago that I would ask Santa—and not even the real thing, instead my seventeen-year-old, bony-kneed, mahogany-haired, gem-eyed boyfriend—for what was possibly the only thing you couldn’t get at the Beverly Hills Neiman Marcus, I’d have said you were cracked.

“A white Christmas,” I said.

“And have you been good?” fake-Santa asked.

“Mostly.”

He groaned. Because of his special ancestry, heat was

Jack's kryptonite. The heavy costume was uncomfortable to him; my proximity made it worse. Not to mention he wasn't really the PDA type and there was a line of at least twenty can-donating do-gooders—all girls—waiting their turn.

"Thanks, Santa," I said, kissing him briefly on the cheek and springing from his lap.

His face went candy-apple red. It was, as always, our combustible combination that tested his abilities. He made it through the rest of the lunch hour without incident, while I, his elfin helper, handed candy canes to both the naughty and the nice. When his lap was finally girl-free, he stretched, peeled off the press-on whiskers, and headed in my direction.

"Were you trying to kill me?" A much younger Jack seized me by the shoulders.

"What?" I asked, all innocence. "I was your helper." I shook my satchel of goodies as proof.

"You were no help at all."

"Ungrateful," I said.

"Unthinking."

"Unworthy," I countered.

"Unbelievable," he said, though his tone had softened considerably.

"Ahem." I looked up to see Penny standing behind us. "I just wanted to thank you guys for all your help. We collected ten boxes of food."

“That’s great,” I said.

“Are you two still gonna help us load the van after school?” Penny asked.

“We’ll be there,” I answered for both of us. In the three months since our fateful Homecoming adventures, Jack and I had become a unit. Nothing like almost getting sucked through a portal to another dimension by an evil soul-snatching Raven to fast-track a relationship.

I watched Penny walk away with a Prancer-like lope. She deserved the bounce in her step. She’d worked hard to promote and organize the food drive. I was glad it had been successful and was happy to have assisted by printing up flyers and plastering signs throughout the school.

Jack took advantage of my diverted attention and coiled a thick swath of my hair around his fist. “And what’s this about wanting a white Christmas?”

“I do. Now that I’ve embraced living a stone’s throw from the North Pole, I actually do.”

“You? The California Girl? Not liking this mild winter?”

“It’s wimpy,” I said, laughing. It was true. Now that I lived in Minnesota, the recent start-of-winter warm temps and lack of snow seemed pathetic.

He arched his eyebrows. I loved the way it flared the blue of his eyes. “Wimpy, huh?”

CHAPTER TWO

The truck's radio crooned Bing Crosby's "White Christmas." The song worked on two levels: not only was it Christmas Eve, but the drive to Jack's family farm felt like going back in time. I always knew when we were close, because my watch began to spin counter-clockwise. The numerals even changed to Roman. At the road, stone pillars fronted the entrance with a carved wooden SNJOSSON FARMS sign strung between them. We pulled down a long gravel driveway. Apple trees dotted both sides of the narrow lane. They were barren, but I remembered them leafy and heavy with fruit. Even now, with their silvery bark set against the hard frosty ground, they were an impressive sight.

Jack parked in front of the house, and we got out. I filled my arms with wrapped packages, gifts for his family. I took a deep breath, lingering by the passenger side of the truck. I had been to his house many times and shared many meals with his parents. I had, however, never been for a holiday dinner. Reluctantly, my mom had agreed to a trade-off. I got to spend tonight at Jack's; in exchange, she got us both for Christmas dinner. A win-win, I'd thought, until, standing there, my nervous system lived up to its name.

Jack walked around to me and pulled my suddenly cement-bottomed feet toward the house. "Come on," he said.

I was mostly freaked about meeting Jack's grandmother, who was visiting for Christmas. The few things I knew about her hinted at an unusual woman. For starters, she had been the one to suspect and then advise Jack of my rightful membership in the Icelandic Stork Society. This, years before even I knew of my soul-delivery-service future. And she had recognized Jack's immunity to the cold as something extraordinary, even for one of the Veturfolk, the Winter People, a Norse race of arctic descent. Moreover, she had intuited our unique connection, the heightening of powers created by our predestined combination.

"We're here!" Jack called out.

"Finally." Jack's mom, Alda, met us in the small foyer,

wiping her hands on a dishcloth. She had Jack's sky-blue eyes and dark hair, though hers was streaked with gray.

We stamped our boots on the mat inside the front door. The house had old wooden floorboards throughout, even upstairs. They were scuffed and more warped than the Coen brothers, but I liked the colorful rag and braided rugs that cozied up each individual room and that no one was ever expected to remove their shoes. Besides, they kept the thermostat at, like, forty—below. Footwear, at its most basic design, was protection against the elements, one of which was cold. I'd come a long way from the girl who had once thought that shoes needed to match the outfit, not the season. You still wouldn't catch me sliding my polished toes into a pair of Birkenstocks, but I'd made serious progress. I was currently wearing the Timberland boots Jack had once broken in with a rock. With pink-and-brown argyle laces tied ankle-to-toe, they were both stylish and comfortable.

Jack's mom was joined by Jack's dad, Lars, a tall man with dull blond hair that thinned on top and was cropped neatly above his ears and through the sideburns. Alda hugged me and took the packages, while Lars, a man of few words, took my coat.

"Your *amma's* waiting to meet Kat," Alda said to Jack.

I swallowed what felt like a golf ball—with an accompanying divot of turf.

Jack took my hand and led me through the kitchen and into the family room. His grandmother was seated on a chair near the Christmas tree with a needle and thread in one hand and a large bowl of popcorn on her lap. As Jack and I crossed the room, she set her things on the floor and stood to greet us. She was small and thin and wiry. Her eyes darted quickly to me, and though she wasn't one of the Storks, she was definitely cut of the same homespun cloth. I immediately brushed my hair off my face and straightened my shoulders.

"Amma," Jack said, "this is Kat."

"I'd have known her for one of Olaf's clan," she said, approaching me with a shuffle.

I extended my right hand. "Pleased to meet you."

She took my hand but didn't shake. Instead she ran her right index finger along my palm and then, curiously, into the groove separating my thumb from my fingers. Seemingly confused with what she found, or didn't find, there, she released me. "The power of three," she said with surprise. She scrunched her face into an impressive network of worry lines and stared at me hard and long. Then she turned and headed for the kitchen. "I think I'll make some tea."

When she was gone, Jack pressed his fingers to his forehead. "Sorry about that. She's a little unpredictable."

I was still holding my hand out in front of me, staring at it, as if any sense could be made of what had

transpired. I'd heard of palm reading but didn't know the opposable thumb factored into the road map of one's life lines. "No worries." I shook it off. Hulda, our wise-woman leader of the Storks, had hacked a trail for me through what I would have once considered weird and wacky. "Does she drink the tea, or just read the leaves?"

"She may eat the leaves for all I know," Jack said. "And then the cup."

I relaxed. It was cool that we were able to show each other vulnerabilities, a synonym for *family* as far as I was concerned. Tomorrow was my turn. After Christmas morning apart at our respective home bases, we'd spend Christmas dinner with my pregnant mom, her boyfriend, Stanley, and my *afi*, my grandfather. And this without even my dad to factor in. He was still in California finalizing his plans to move to Norse Falls and open a wind turbine factory.

I sat back from the Snjossons' dining-room table, so stuffed even my ears were clogged. I had been wary of a forewarned menu of mutton stew with rutabaga. Mutton, insofar as I could tell, just meant old lamb. And as much as I appreciated my meal having had a full life before ending up on my plate, old meat meant tough. As for the rutabaga, anything that was classified as a tuber was not fit for consumption. The lamb, a term I definitely preferred to

mutton, hadn't been half bad, after all. Jack's mom had used parsnips instead of rutabaga, a kinder and gentler member of the underground veggie world. And, though I routinely avoided words with the confusing Icelandic *d* that sounded more like a *th*, the *laufabrauð*, the leaf bread, with its intricate design was almost too pretty to eat and as complicated to say as it probably was to make.

"Gifts now," Jack's grandmother said, clapping her hands with authority. Her economy of words hinted at her being biologically related to Jack's dad, as would the matching bristled eyebrows.

We gathered around the tinsel tree.

Alda handed out rectangular packages wrapped in hunter-green paper and tied with raffia. "Kat first," she said.

I slid the soft-sided gift from under its ribbon, gently tearing the wrapping. Inside lay a hand-knit sweater of crimson red with a motif of snowflakes trimming its yoke.

"Thank you. It's beautiful," I said, holding it to my chest. "Did you make it?"

"I did," Alda said. "It's been so many years since Jack would wear one of my creations." I looked at Jack. His holiday attire consisted of a white button-down and Levi's, only a slight upgrade from his usual—faded T-shirts and Lee jeans. Despite temperatures tumbling daily, I'd yet to see him in a jacket. A Nordic sweater clinging to his ropy shoulders? I just couldn't picture it.

“I’m very flattered,” I said. “It looks like a lot of work.”

“It will keep the *Jolakottur* away,” Jack’s grandmother said.

“I beg your pardon?” I asked, pushing my arms into the sleeves of the sweater.

“The *Jolakottur*, the Yule Cat,” Alda replied. “An old character from Icelandic folklore. I’m surprised you haven’t heard of it.”

Families didn’t get much more Icelandic than mine, so I was surprised, too. I could, of course, name all thirteen of the Yule Lads: Spoon Licker and Door Slammer tying as favorites, and Meat Hook had headlined as the bogey in a few of my childhood nightmares.

“The Yule Cat belongs to the child-eating ogress Grýla. At Christmas, everyone in the family must be gifted an article of clothing, or else the Yule Cat will attack,” Jack’s *amma* said, wagging her index finger.

“Attack?” I asked, poking my head through the neck and shrugging the sweater down over my torso. It was beginning to feel more like a warning than an old wives’ tale.

“In the olden days,” Alda said in a gentler tone than her mother-in-law, “people hurried to finish all autumn’s wool work before the holiday season. Children were pressed into service with stories of a gigantic black cat that made a Christmas Day meal of anyone without a new piece of clothing.”

Finally, a legend I could wrap my mind around. A vicious fashion-frenzied feline prowling the streets and tearing into the poorly attired.

The rest of the gifts were exchanged. I gave everyone, except Jack, a selection of California-themed items: Ghirardelli chocolates, La Brea Bakery granola, Napa Valley dipping oils, Palm Springs dates, Kern County pistachios, all of which my mom had thought of and assembled. In addition to the sweater, I received apple butter, an *All Apple All the Time* cookbook, and, from Jack's grandmother, a bag of rocks. Literally.

"They're moonstones," she said.

"They're very pretty." I shook a few from the small black velvet pouch onto my palm. They were of various colors from light browns to grays and engraved with symbols. I ran the tip of my finger atop one of the gold-painted engravings. It looked like a pitchfork.

"That one's *Mannaz*," Jack's grandmother said. "The rune symbol for man. The runes are the Norse pre-Christian alphabet."

"Oh. I get it." I didn't. I already had an alphabet. It was working fine; I didn't think I needed another, not an ancient one, anyway. Besides, language seemed the kind of thing that moved forward or progressed, like science or medicine, or synthetic and blended textiles. "Thank you," I said. "They're very interesting."

It became painfully obvious that Jack and I hadn't exchanged our gifts. Alda raised her eyebrows. "Is that it for gifts?"

"I think I'm going to take Kat on a little sleigh ride," Jack said, standing up. "Is that OK? The horses could use the exercise."

"Sure," Alda said. "Don't be too long, though. You still have to drive Kat home."

"Watch out for the Yule Cat," Jack's grandmother said.

"I'm not worried," I said, accepting Jack's hand as he led me out of the room.

While bundling up, I was grateful for the new sweater; it was beautifully crafted, warm, and another layer in my connection to Jack's family. Bring on the Yule Cat, the child-eating ogress, and all thirteen Yule Lads—Meat Hook included—I mused to myself. I had complete confidence in my companion. The buddy system: now that was something I believed in.

CHAPTER THREE

Jack drove the sleigh down a path that headed to the back of the property, one that had been frequented by trucks and tractors during harvest season. A few scant inches of white powder covered the ground, but, by all accounts, the winter was off to a slow start, with snowfall well below average. The weak light of the winter sun was no match for the advancing dusk. There was less than an hour left in the day. I noticed that Jack had packed several very large battery-operated lanterns.

If passing through the road-front gate felt like time travel, dashing through the snow in an open sleigh felt like waking up on the front of a Hallmark card. I was sure that *Season's Greetings* was scrawled at our feet in calligraphy.

Finally, Jack pulled up along the edge of a small creek that gurgled with brackish water.

“Are you warm enough?”

I was bundled in both of the thick lap blankets that Lars had swung over the seat. “Yep.”

He pulled me close to him. I tucked into the nook created by his outstretched arm. “Gifts now,” he said, clapping his hands as his grandmother had.

I laughed. “I went first last time. Your turn.” From inside my parka, I pulled a wrapped gift and placed it in Jack’s hands.

He turned it over several times, shook it, knocked on it, and even sniffed it.

“It’s a gift, not a melon,” I said.

He took his time, lifting the tape gingerly, folding the paper back carefully. I finally reached over, dug my nails in, and ripped.

“There’s always that way,” he said.

Inside was a folded navy-blue LA Dodgers cap. He shook it out. “What’s this?” he asked.

“A new hat.”

With a puzzled look, he held it up to the fading light, turning it one way and then another. OK, so maybe the Dodgers were an acquired taste. “I already have a hat, a lucky one,” he said teasingly.

The cap in question was, indeed, lucky, having once skittered and drawn me away from an out-of-control

truck. Still, it wasn't the most stylish of things. "It's always nice to have options," I said.

"So, am I supposed to wear this thing?" He dropped it on his lap.

"Let me show you," I said, cramming it over his shaggy bangs.

"It makes a statement, I suppose," he said.

"The statement being: I'm with Kat Leblanc, California Girl, Dodgers fan."

"You think I need a reminder?" he said, lifting my chin with his forefinger. "You're not exactly the kind of girl one forgets."

"I'm sure you say that to all the girls you've saved from being dragged into another realm." Hard to believe I could be so flip about that horrible night and Wade's evil plan. I supposed making light of it was a way to deal. Jack had almost died. I shivered to think of it.

"Only the ones with whom I've survived drowning incidents and bear encounters."

It was comforting to know that he, too, could joke about our brushes with death, especially as neither one of us thought our ordeals were behind us. He kissed my eyelid. It fluttered as if about to take flight.

"But about the cap," he said.

"What about it?"

"Does it come in another color?"

"Dodger blue, buddy. No other color."

He adjusted its fit. It was a definite improvement over the mesh John Deere cap.

“Your turn,” he said, pulling a small round-shaped package from under the sled’s front seat.

Unlike Jack, I knew how to open a gift properly. Within moments the shredded paper lay at my feet and I held a beautiful snow globe on a squat black base. The domed scene depicted a dark-haired boy and a blond girl in a red coat skating on a tree-lined rink.

“How did you . . . ?” I asked with a catch in my voice. It was so eerily reminiscent of our fateful encounter: the winter day, five years ago, when Jack and I miraculously survived a skating accident. Even the red coat with white trim was accurate. “Did you have this made?”

Jack shook his head no. “I found it in a box of my grandmother’s old Christmas decorations.”

“But . . . it looks so much like . . .”

“Turn it over,” he said.

I upended the glass. A stamp on the bottom read “*Gleðileg Jól* 1946.”

“Merry Christmas 1946,” I said.

“Yep.”

Before even our parents were born, our likenesses were entrapped in a snow globe.

“Weird. Isn’t it?” I asked.

“I don’t ask anymore. I just accept.”

He had the right attitude. Certain aspects of our lives

were almost too much to contemplate. I shook the globe. Snow fell, powdering the girl's hair and shoulders and dusting the pine trees. "I did ask for a white Christmas. It's perfect."

"That's just part one of your gift," he said, stretching out his arms.

A light snow began to fall.

"Hooray," I said, cupping flakes in my joined palms. "My white Christmas."

It began to snow a little harder.

I looked around, awestruck. "But how? Before, it only happened when you were mad, or jealous, or out of control in some way."

"I've been practicing," he said.

The flakes grew large and feathery. They clung to the horses' hides and tails, and my lap blanket was soon coated with a thick band of white.

"I can see that." I scooted in for a kiss, something we'd been practicing together. It struck me that, like the proverbial snowflake, no two kisses were ever the same. This one was all the more special, given the holiday setting. And it had a delicious contrast between the cold air and the heat we were generating. The tips of our noses were chilly, but our hot breath and lips were smoldering. I shrugged my hands out of my gloves and walked them under his shirt and up his ribs. For one of the Winter

People, his skin was always thermal. Nor would he ever have occasion to complain about my icy fingers. I sat on his lap. His groan, though not a complaint, was raw. Forget the Hallmark greeting card; we were now rifling through the pages of a Harlequin romance.

I pulled away and leaned my head back. The snow was falling like confetti now; giant crystalline flakes clung to my eyelashes and wet my face. I was startled to see Jack with a cap of white hair, as if the intensity of our kiss had prematurely aged him. Looking around at the cloaked landscape and night falling as fast as the snow, I knew it was time to bring things down a notch.

“Uh, Jack?”

“Yes.”

“This seems like an awful lot of snow.”

“Huh?”

“Maybe you should turn it off now.”

“Crap!”

“What?”

“I’m trying.”

“And?”

“It’s not working.”

I jumped off his lap. “Quit fooling around.”

“I’m not.” His voice was tight.

I could barely see my hand outstretched in front of my face. The wind howled like a wolf, hungry and irritable.

We'd jumped books to *Little House on the Prairie*: the blizzard scene where Pa had to tie a rope to his waist so as not to get lost between the house and the barn.

"We gotta go now," Jack said. "Before it gets worse."

"It's going to get worse?"

"It could," he said.

"How are we going to see our way back?"

Jack lightly switched the horses with the reins. "These girls know the way."

That didn't help. Our welfare was in the hands of a couple of nags: one called Moonbeam and the other called Bubbles. Neither name, if you asked me, inspired much confidence. I'd have preferred a Saint Bernard named Hero.

It was slow going. Even the horses shied their heads to the side with the winds whipping the snow every which way. Jack was quiet, which made me nervous. Every few minutes I could hear him muttering—cursing, technically—under his breath. And he was going to bust a lobe if he concentrated any harder on whatever it was he did to harness the weather.

My cell phone was at Jack's, in my purse, next to the front door, my "Stayin' Alive" ringtone probably not sounding so cute and retro anymore.

I could still see the outlines of trees on either side of the path, but barely. I wondered how the horses kept to the trail. As if sensing my concern, they came to an abrupt stop.

“Shit,” Jack said with a lash of the reins. “Giddyap.”

Nothing.

He tried again. Bubbles, or at least I think it was Bubbles, neighed in complaint. A headwind barreled into me. My face hurt from the cold, and I burrowed farther into my collar. Though I, better than anyone, knew of his resistance to cold, I still shuddered with sympathy for Jack.

“Hold the reins,” Jack finally said. “I’m going to have to guide them.”

He jumped down from the sled, carrying one lantern with him and leaving the other next to me on the seat.

The horses were in no mood and dug in their hooves obstinately. I could just make out Jack’s form through the squalling snow at first coaxing, and then pulling, until he was finally engaged in an all-out tug-of-war with the animals. He may have had determination, but they had brute strength and were not about to be led into an abyss through which they had no guideposts, no point of reference, nothing but a wall of swirling white. And then it came to me. They needed a corner. Not literally, of course, as that could put us into a ditch or thicket of trees. They needed what my mother had always given me when we did jigsaw puzzles together: a small, manageable start, an achievable goal.

As cold as I was, I shrugged out of my white parka and then hastily took off my new red sweater. How, of all days, had both Jack and I managed to dress in white?

And dang, it was cold. My teeth chattered uncontrollably. They formed words of their own volition. They even got a little mouthy and crass. Good thing Jack was out of hearing range. They cursed us both: me for coming up with the stupid idea, and him for listening.

Coat back on and lantern and sweater in hand, I scrambled out of the sled. Fighting the driving snow, I made my way to where Jack struggled with the horses. I held the lantern and red sweater mere inches in front of one horse and then the other. I noticed they both lifted their heads slightly. Jack caught on and urged them forward toward the wagging sweater that, inch by inch, I pulled away from them. It was working. Evolution moved quicker, but at least it was progress, and who knows, maybe by the time we got back I'd have adapted for frost-bite resistance, a mutation I supposed Jack already possessed. As things stood, I couldn't feel my toes or the tip of my nose. As if sensing our clearheadedness, even the snow and winds relaxed a little.

"It won't let up for long," Jack said. "But I think we can get back in the sleigh."

We settled back onto the wooden seat. I tucked a blanket around my frozen toes.

"Is it over?" I asked, lifting my mitted glove to catch flakes.

"Not even close," he said, switching Bubbles lightly. "We better hurry."

For Bob
With love and gratitude

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or, if real, are used fictitiously.

Copyright © 2011 by Wendy Delsol

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, transmitted, or stored in an information retrieval system in any form or by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, taping, and recording, without prior written permission from the publisher.

First paperback edition 2012

The Library of Congress has cataloged the hardcover edition as follows:

Delsol, Wendy.
Frost / Wendy Delsol. — 1st ed.
p. cm.
Sequel to: Stork.

Summary: After her boyfriend Jack conjures up a record-breaking snow storm, sixteen-year-old Kat Leblanc finds herself facing an unusual rival in the form of an environmental researcher from Greenland who is drawn to their small town of Norse Falls, Minnesota, by the storm.

ISBN 978-0-7636-5386-6 (hardcover)

- [1. Supernatural — Fiction. 2. Snow — Fiction.
3. Interpersonal relations — Fiction. 4. High schools — Fiction.
5. Schools — Fiction. 6. Arctic regions — Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.D3875Fr 2011
[Fic]—dc22 2010047656

ISBN 978-0-7636-6249-3 (paperback)

12 13 14 15 16 17 BVG 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in Berryville, VA, U.S.A.

This book was typeset in Granjon.

Candlewick Press
99 Dover Street
Somerville, Massachusetts 02144

visit us at www.candlewick.com