

Tree Farms & Trimmed Stars

By Holly Marciano

Chapter 1

“These are absolutely adorable, Haris!” Jenna said as she held up the wooden star that was a little bigger than her hand. The raw wood and slightly dented edges made the Christmas ornaments have that rustic flair that Haris was known for with her woodwork.

“I made enough for both of our Christmas trees in our apartments too.” Haris said as she and Jenna continued to decorate the Christmas tree in their store, Majacka Woodworks & Country Creations.

Their Grand Re-Opening of the newly renovated store was on Friday so after taking most of the chilly, November afternoon traversing the Duff Christmas Tree Farm in search of perfect Christmas trees, they had decided to go ahead and put one of the trees up in the store and decorate it so Majacka would be festive for opening day. The six-foot Frasier Fir held all homemade Christmas ornaments from Haris’ woodwork shop and other local artisans who sold their homemade goods in their country store.

Alice, who was known for her amazing quilts that were stocked piled in the store for the Christmas season, had made an assortment of Gingerbread cookie men and women out of burlap. They came complete with gumdrop applique buttons that made the ornaments extra colorful. Each one of them was trimmed with what looked like stipple quilting stiches and the material itself made them look like little dolls.

There was hand-blown glass, Christmas balls in any color imaginable, as well as homemade candy canes, metal animal ornaments, and polyresin ornaments that could be personalized. Haris stood back and looked at the tree as Jenna finished placing the remaining ornaments on the branches. It was so full; she was surprised the limbs would hold everything.

“Is that it?” Haris asked.

“That’s it.” Jenna told her. “Customers will be able to take the ornament of their choice right off the tree.” She said smiling as she put her hands on her hips. “I also ordered a variety of boxes and tissue paper to place them in, so they won’t get broken before they get home.”

“Great idea.” Haris said as she started gathering the crates that had held all of the ornaments. “What paper did you decide on for gift wrapping this year?”

“Plain, brown shipping paper. It just matches the theme of our store, ya know?” She said following Haris to the storage area. They made an effort to return all of the crates to their vendors each time they were emptied. This helped them save on cost, but it also kept their storage area free of empty boxes and crates that they didn’t need. Jenna had placed great emphasis on their ability to recycle instead of simply throwing everything out. For this reason, they had also decided to

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forego using plastic bags to place their customer's purchased items in and used sturdier, paper ones. "I ordered lots of different colors of wired ribbon too."

"That's going to be a nice touch." Haris said. "Think we should wrap up a few boxes in different sizes so customers can see how it will look?"

"That would be nice to do." Jenna said as she turned and walked back out into the storage room.

They had sat up a small area right beside the storage room door for giftwrapping. Customers could pay for them to wrap the items they purchased if they were Christmas gifts. They had decided only to offer wrapping if the items fit into one of the boxes on display. Large pieces of furniture, they weren't going to tackle. Haris had also purchased a rubber stamp so they could place an authentic Majacka Woodworks & Country Creations logo on the outside of each gift. The red ink from the stamp would look nice on the brown, shipping paper.

Haris brought over five different size boxes and she and Jenna started wrapping them, selecting a variety of colors and patterns of ribbon to tie them off. They included a small, wooden name tag that Haris had made to attach to the gift that was only available for items wrapped at Majacka. It was a cute touch. When they had finished wrapping, Haris held each box so Jenna could place their logo stamp on each one then they placed them on the wooden shelf above the wrapping station so customers could select which size they wanted. Little wooden boxes with the cost of each wrapping were placed by them so the customer would know up front how much the Christmas wrapping would be for their item.

Jenna walked the store looking around to be sure everything was ready. She and Haris had already done this many times, but it just felt right to do it again.

"Guess we're all ready now." She said.

"Just in time too." Haris said looking out their front window. "Hudson and Linc are back. They promised to take Mrs. Happle's Christmas tree up to her apartment." She pulled on her jacket and reached in her pocket for her gloves.

Mrs. Happle owned the bakery right across the street and lived above it with her granddaughter, Carrie. They had offered to grab her a real Christmas tree when they went out to the tree farm today so, now, they would take it to her. It just made Mrs. Happle so happy that it was one of the things she liked most about the holidays. Every year the same scenario took place. They would bring in the Christmas tree and Mrs. Happle would have hot chocolate with marshmallows and Christmas cookies waiting for them to enjoy while Hudson and Linc placed the tree in its stand and secured it, so it was ready to decorate.

"Pepper," Haris said calling her black Labrador out of a cozy slumber in the office, "you ready to go, boy?" She asked and smiled as he bolted over to her at the mention of 'go.' Pepper didn't care where they were going. He just wanted to be a part of everything. He sat down in front of Haris while she finished putting her gloves on, wagging his tail happily. His round eyes watched her every move and when she reached over and grabbed her backpack, he leapt into the air before following her to the door.

Haris walked out the door and over toward the truck. "Hi guys!" She said as she waited for Jenna to lock Majacka and join them.

Linc walked over and pulled Haris into a hug before dipping her to the side to kiss her. "Missed you." He said smiling when Pepper took advantage and licked Haris' cheek.

"You just left me two hours ago." Haris said laughing as he swung her back onto two sturdy feet.

Hudson leaned into the back of the truck and pulled the tree towards them lowering his eyebrows when Jenna reached in to help.

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“What?” She asked nodding. “I can help.”

“We’ve got it.” Linc said as he grabbed the trunk and pulled it the rest of the way stopping briefly so Hudson could grab the top. “Did you tell them?” Linc asked smiling like the instigator he was being.

“Tell us what?” Jenna asked as she leaned her arms on the bed of the truck.

“Nope.” Hudson said looking at his sister. He knew she was about to get all riled up. “Just remember, you get to calm her down now.” He said nodding toward Haris.

“What’s the mystery?” Haris asked as they made their way across the street to walk behind the bakery building. The apartment entrance was in the back and for a minute, Haris thought why on earth hadn’t they parked in the alley behind the bakery instead of walking this far with a tree.

“Want the good news first?” Hudson asked.

“Sure.” Haris told him narrowing her eyes dreading the bad news.

“The good news is that we get to visit the tree farm again.” He said as he helped Linc stand the tree up at the base of the stairs.

“We just bought four trees.” Jenna said. “What do we need to go back to the tree farm for?”

Hudson sighed. “When we went to grab a snack at the café, we mentioned that we would be bringing Mrs. Happle’s tree up today to Mrs. Andrews. You know, the owner of the café?”

“Sure, we know.” Jenna said. “She’s such a sweetie. Could anyone look more like what Mrs. Clause should look like than Mrs. Andrews?” She smiled.

“Well,” Hudson continued, “she asked if we would mind getting her and Mr. Andrews one for their apartment too. They had stopped putting one up in the café a few years ago and now just decorate with Christmas garland.”

“Right. I remember that.” Haris said but her hands were already being placed on her hips and the look on her face was all-telling.

“She said that Mr. Andrews just couldn’t handle getting a tree anymore for their apartment. This was going to be the first Christmas that they didn’t get a tree. He’s getting up there in age and she was worried about him falling with the tree.”

“Uh, huh.” Haris said. “And, I suppose their lazy, nephew, what? Couldn’t get off their couch to help them?”

“Haris.” Hudson said. “Now, is that nice?”

“Don’t Haris me.” She said tapping her toe. “That man has never helped them like he should. He’s a moocher! And off two of the sweetest people in Brumble!”

Linc reached over and placed his hand on her elbow. “That’s why we offered to go get a tree for them.” He said smiling at her. “We knew Rex Andrews wouldn’t do it.”

“There’s no way I’d let them go without a tree.” Hudson said. “Those two are pillars in this town. We can’t blame them for what their nephew turned out to be.”

Haris huffed. “I know. He just ruffles my feathers so much. Why they put up with that, is beyond me!” She said as she walked up the stairs before them so she could open the door.

“So, we might need to cut this visit just a bit short so we can get out to the tree farm and deliver the tree to the Andrews.” Hudson said grunting as they carried the tree up the stairs. “Why don’t they have a landing for these stairs?”

“And, why are they still using metal? This has to get slippery in the winter.” Linc said.

“Christmas tree delivery!” Jenna said as Carrie opened the door.

Carrie smiled and moved to the side so they could come in the apartment, Pepper dashed in first. “You all are amazing for doing this for us!” She said. “We’ve already got the space cleared

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out over here." She led them toward the front windows where she had placed plastic on the hardwood floor along with the tree-stand they used each year.

"Oh! It will be so lovely here!" Haris said. "People will be able to see it from Main Street. So festive!"

"That's what we thought. I know we don't put one up in the bakery, but at least we have one visible right above the bakery windows." Carrie said.

Hudson helped guide Linc so the bottom of the tree would slide into the tree-stand then held it in place while the three women determined if it were straight or not.

"For Pete's sake," Mrs. Happle said as she walked into the living room, "it's straight enough. You're going to wear those boys out with your pickiness!" She waved them off and motioned for them to come into the kitchen so they could get a treat. "Let them finish up setting the tree so they can have some goodies."

"Thanks so much, Mrs. Happle." Haris said as she plopped onto a bar stool at the counter. Jenna pulled one up right beside her and looked at the cookies like she had never had one before. Trying to choose which cookie really was a challenge as Haris knew she could eat most of them by herself if no one was around to stop her.

Jenna chose a reindeer, complete with brown icing for its fur and a red rose to identify it as Rudolph. She closed her eyes when she sank her teeth into it. "This is so good." She said.

Mrs. Happle laughed. "You choose a reindeer every year." She said pointing at Jenna.

"Do I really?" Jenna asked. "It's just that Rudolph has such happy memories for me growing up. My family and I would watch that every year around Christmas, even when I was an adult."

"Ah, memories." Mrs. Happle said reminiscing. "Seems like times used to be a lot easier."

"Do you have a favorite Christmas show, Mrs. Happle? One that you simply have to watch every year?" Haris asked as she bit into a snowman cookie. Mrs. Happle's homemade icing was the best she had ever eaten.

"Oh, yes!" Mrs. Happle said as she leaned on the counter. "I have watched *It's a Wonderful Life* for as long as I can remember. It's my favorite."

"So meaningful!" Haris agreed. "I watch it too. It really puts life into perspective for me."

"You should come over and watch it with us this year." Carrie said. "You are all welcome."

"I'm good." Hudson said. "Haris tortured me with Christmas movies our entire childhood. I can still recite most of the words to the ones we watched."

Mrs. Happle laughed. "Hudson Brooks, you should be thankful for those memories." She said pouring the hot chocolate for everyone. She started dropping in dried marshmallows and handing the mugs off as she finished. "One day, those memories might be all you have left."

"What about you, Linc?" Haris said as she watched him bite off the leg of the Santa Clause cookie. "What's your favorite holiday movie?"

He studied the cookie as if this was a really important question. "I have to agree with Mrs. Happle." He said. "I have watched *It's a Wonderful Life* every Christmas season since I was a kid. My parents used to make us watch it. Said there was a lesson to be learned from it. Of course, I never knew what the lesson was until I was into my thirties but now, I won't miss that movie each year."

Haris studied him. How had she never known that about him? Layers. There were quite a few layers to Deputy Lincoln Porter that she didn't know yet.

"Mrs. Happle," Hudson said taking a second cookie, "I hate to, but we've got to scoot a bit earlier this year. We told Mrs. Andrews we would get her and her husband a Christmas tree this year."

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Mrs. Happle looked curiously at him. "Really?"

"Yep. This was going to be the first year they didn't get one. Said she's afraid Mr. Andrews might hurt himself if he tried."

"And, I suppose that good-for-nothing nephew wouldn't offer to help them out at all." Mrs. Happle said shaking her head.

"See!" Haris said as she slapped the counter. "I'm not the only one who feels that way."

"Certainly not!" Mrs. Happle said. "Anyone who knows Rex Andrews and how he takes advantage of his aunt and uncle feels the same way. Why, if it were me, I'd throw him out on his forty-somethin' year-old butt." She said as she wiped her hands heartily on the kitchen towel. "Don't know how they put up with that. You don't work, you don't eat. That's a lesson I learned growing up."

"That's one we all learned." Jenna said as she snuck another cookie, this time a Christmas tree with bright green icing.

"Where was he before he moved to Brumble?" Linc asked curiously.

"Last I heard he was somewhere in Florida. Said he was going to live the surfing life. Surfing life. We all know what he was doing and that sure never involved working like an honest man does."

"How did he live then?" Haris asked.

"His parents died when he was in his early thirties. He had been working for an automobile manufacturing plant somewhere up north then. They left him some money. Soon as their life insurance paid out, he up and quit his job and decided to become a beach bum."

"That's kind of different for someone in their thirties."

"Upper thirties too." Mrs. Happle confirmed. "Well, he spent every dime of his money doing whatever it was he wanted to do and when he ran out, he moved here to mooch off his aunt and uncle. That's their only nephew so I guess he guilted them into helping him. It started off as him only staying here for a couple of months until he could find another job."

"It's been over six months now." Linc said.

"It has." Mrs. Happle confirmed. "And, from what I hear, he knows the bootleggers outside Brumble well enough. He's a troublemaker. That's what he is." She said shaking her head. "He's going to give Mrs. Andrews a nervous breakdown if he doesn't find a job soon."

"He does get into mischief." Linc confirmed knowing he already had been arrested twice for driving while under the influence of alcohol. He'd been on duty for one of those and Rex Andrews was a force to be reckoned with when he was intoxicated. It took him and the two arresting officers to get him into the jail cell.

"Let's hope he gets a job soon." Jenna said. "And, maybe, in a state or two away from here?"

"We'd better get going." Hudson said.

"Thank you for the hot chocolate and cookies." Haris said hopping off the stool.

"Yes, thank you." Jenna said as she looked at the cross cookie with yellow icing remaining on the plate.

Mrs. Happle smiled and pushed the plate toward her. "Take it for the road." She said handing her a napkin.

Jenna smiled. "Thanks so much!"

Haris walked over and hugged Mrs. Happle before turning toward the door. "Carrie, you going to be decorating that tree tonight?"

"I am." She said laughing.

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“I’m so glad.” Haris said stopping before she walked out after everyone. “I can’t wait to see it from my windows in my new apartment across the street. It’s going to be beautiful. Let’s go Pepper.”

Haris skipped down the stairs toward the truck with Pepper right behind her. This was her first Christmas in her new apartment. She had sold her great-grandparents farm a month or so ago so she could move into town. After buying the empty building next door to Majacka Woodworks and Country Creations, she and Jenna had renovated and made the store larger, and she had finished the apartment upstairs so she could live there. Her living room had four windows that were practically ceiling to floor and overlooked Main Street. The decorations on Main Street for Christmas were going to be something to behold this year. She couldn’t wait to see everything lit up!