

The Three Lost Kids
&
The Christmas Curse
by
Kimberly Kinrade

Chapter 1 - All I Want For Christmas Is... Everything!

Outside our living room window, snow fell steadily, as it had all day, creating fluffy white hills in our yard. The giant tree in our living room sparkled with hundreds of colorful Christmas lights that bounced off the ornaments and tinsel. Dozens of presents in red and green and purple and silver wrapping filled the space under the lowest branches, and I couldn't help but search for my name on the biggest ones. I saw Maddie's and Lexie's gifts, but so far, none had been marked for Bella.

My parents couldn't have forgotten me. I must have several presents stashed somewhere. My eyes darted around, going to the smaller ones, until I finally found my name scrawled on the smallest present in the bunch. It was the size of a jewelry box and said, "To Bella. Love, Mom and Dad."

I shook it and something clanked inside. *Hmmm... could be a new necklace. But I really wanted a new bunk bed, and that would not fit in this box. Unless they just put the picture in here, and the bed would be delivered later.*

"Girls, time for dinner!" Mom called to us from the kitchen, and I dropped my gift and ran to the table, claiming my seat before my sisters emerged from their rooms.

"Why can't we open our presents yet?" My voice did not sound as whiny as they said it did sometimes. I was sure of it.

"I told you, Bella, because we wanted to start a new tradition of enjoying the holiday as a family first, without presents to distract us. We'll open them tonight after we eat and go Christmas caroling."

Dad kissed Mom on her cheek and went back to carving the turkey.

Lexie, my little sister, walked in and sniffed the air. "My sniffinator is working overtime. I smell turkey and gravy and gluten-free rolls and pumpkin pie!"

Mom tweaked her nose. "Correct, as always. Take your seat and we'll eat in just a few minutes."

Maddie, the oldest of us, came in last and looked like she was dressed for the remake of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, with a black skull bracelet she'd gotten for her tenth birthday on Halloween.

My birthday wasn't until January, but I'd finally be nine. A few days later, Lexie would turn seven. Mom and Dad had agreed to let us have separate parties this year, thank goodness. I did *not* want to share my big day with a bunch of

first graders.

Dad placed a heaping plate of holiday yumminess in front of me, and I reached for my fork to dig in, but Mom shook her head.

"Please wait until everyone has been served."

I sighed and put the fork down. This was the most boring Christmas ever. If I were in charge, we'd have presents all day and eat whatever we wanted.

Lexie stared at the Santa Claus centerpiece Mom had made, then looked at the Christmas tree. "Is it time to open presents yet?"

Dad frowned. "Not yet. We've told all of you the plan several times. Please don't ask again. You got your Santa gift and stocking this morning, so it's not like you haven't had anything fun to play with. We want to save family gifts for later."

Maddie crossed her arms, but didn't say anything. I wished she had. She'd certainly been upset about it when we were playing in my room earlier.

We ate in silence, the food filling up the spaces around us so we didn't have to talk. I was too upset to talk, anyway. Even after eating we'd have to do lots of other stuff before we could get our presents.

As soon as I ate the last bite, I put my plate in the sink and ran to my room to wait for the next task on today's To-Do list. I pretended not to hear Mom when she asked me to wash my plate. I shouldn't have to do dishes on Christmas — it was *so* unfair.

Lexie joined me in our shared room and flopped on her bed. "Think we got good presents this year?"

I shrugged, even though she couldn't see me with my dresser dividing our room and giving us both some privacy. "Hope so. Especially if we have to wait so long."

"Yeah, hope so."

Mom's voice flew down the hall and into our room. "Time for Christmas caroling! Get your mittens and coats, girls."

"Right. Singing. How fun." Since I didn't want to get in trouble for complaining, I slumped and dragged my feet and scowled to make sure they knew I was *not* a happy camper.

Mom's smile died on her face when she saw the three of us. "Really? This is how you act on Christmas?"

She marched out the door and we followed her into the snow, with Dad at our heels. Maddie had TayTay on a leash, but we left our Chihuahua, River, and the two kittens at home. River would just bark at everyone and make this whole night worse, and we didn't have leashes for the kittens, though I kept asking for them.

At each house on our block, we stopped and sang. Our songs included *All I Want for Christmas*, *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, *Christmas is Coming*, *Frosty the Snowman*, *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town*, *We Need a Little Christmas*, *It's Beginning to Look a Lot like Christmas*, *When Christmas Comes to Town*, and *Joy to the World*.

Nine songs. At *each* house! With TayTay howling along for each and every one.

I could have sworn my parents invented torture. A few neighbors weren't home, thankfully, and one, Kathy, had lost her dog, so her kids said she was out searching. Mom still made us sing to the kids, claiming it would cheer them up. Maybe, but who would cheer *me* up?

When we got home at last, I could barely talk from a sore throat. It took *forever*, but we finally got down to the business of opening presents.

Lexie played the elf and passed them out. I had three: two from Mom and Dad, and my special Daddy Present that we got each year.

I tore off the thick silver wrapping paper of the first gift and found a box with a new dress. I held up the red sweater dress and smiled as Mom snapped pictures, then shoved it back into the box.

Next was the Daddy Gift. Papa, my mom's dad, had started this tradition by giving Mom a special gift just from him each year, so Dad did the same thing for us kids. This year I got a new jewelry box to put my necklaces in. I had one I wore all the time, the Dragon Scale that I got from Emerald, a Dragon I had befriended after my sisters and I discovered a magic portal to Bella World and saved the townspeople from an evil attack. But it was nice to have someplace to put all of my other stuff.

"Thanks, Dad, I love it." I hugged him, and Mom and him both smiled.

Next, I opened the small box. It contained a stone with red and silver swirls in it. "Oh wow, this is really cool. What is it?"

Mom looked up from a box Dad had given her – probably the new iPad he bought her that I wasn't supposed to know about. "It's a Christmas Wishing Stone. I bought it from Mrs. Claude, an elderly woman down the block who runs a small shop out of her garage. It's so funny. I just happened upon her one morning while walking the dogs, and I'd never even noticed her house before. She said that it grants one wish, but it only works on Christmas day."

I slipped it into my pocket and thanked them both.

Maddie and Lexie sat in the middle of a pile of gift wrapping, smiling at their new presents. They'd each gotten clothes, a special Daddy Gift, of course, and something else. Maddie had gotten art supplies and a new book, and Lexie had gotten books and a stuffed animal.

With all the neat presents they had, my stupid little rock no longer seemed that cool. It probably didn't even work. Not that I didn't believe in magic, given that I'd been to four magical worlds already. I knew perfectly well that magic existed. It just wasn't likely that this stone had any magic at all.

The three of us left our mess of wrapping paper in the living room, and went into Maddie's room to talk and play.

Lexie read a book on the couch – something about Magic Kittens or Magic Puppies or whatever, while Maddie doodled in her new art book. I sat and stared at my stone. It *was* pretty, but still useless.

Lexie looked up from her reading. "What are you going to wish for, Bella?"

"What's the point? It won't come true."

Maddie shrugged. "You won't know unless you try. What's the worst that could happen?"

That made sense. "What would *you* wish for?"

Maddie got a faraway look on her face as she thought about it. "I'd wish for an art studio and a horse."

I smiled. "Where would we even put a horse?"

She stuck her tongue out at me, and I turned to Lexie.

"I'd wish for a whole library of books, and that I could skip first grade."

Yes, my genius sister would graduate college by the time she was ten if she could get away with it.

I thought about my day, and what I really wanted. Then I had the perfect wish in mind. "I know! I wish that every day was Christmas and we got everything we ever wanted."

The purple and silver swirls glowed bright and the stone heated up. I sucked in my breath and waited to see what happened, but it died out and turned cold, leaving us all staring at it.

I went to bed disappointed and confused. Something *had* happened, but why hadn't my wish come true?

