

A BIG APPLE CHRISTMAS

“Moonlight & Mistletoe”

By Carrie Turansky

Chapter One

The wailing siren of an approaching ambulance penetrated the walls of Sarah Montgomery’s fourth floor Manhattan apartment. A shiver raced up her back. The sound grew louder and then stopped abruptly on the street below. Her stomach tensed, and she glanced out her window. Hopefully there wasn’t serious accident nearby.

She slipped on her black wool coat, and her mind shifted to her schedule for the day. Ten o’clock: meet with a new client, Harriet Hartman, to discuss organizing her cluttered Upper Eastside apartment. Twelve o’clock: lunch with Catherine Meyers to give her the bid for reorganizing her dental office. Two o’clock: return home to work on her website, answer email and phone calls, and schedule her appointments for next week. Though it was still early November, everything would get busier as the holidays approached. Five o’clock: work on the speech she’d be giving next Monday evening—*Ten Tips to Save Time and Streamline Your Life*.

Sarah glanced at her watch, picked up her briefcase and keys, and stepped out the door. She had a subway train to catch, and she couldn’t be late. After all, it wouldn’t make a very good impression if a professional organizer couldn’t get to an appointment on time.

Down the hall on the left, the elevator doors opened. Three people dressed in rescue squad uniforms stepped out, maneuvering a rolling gurney with them.

Sarah’s steps stalled as they hustled toward her.

A tall, silver-haired, paramedic strode ahead, checking apartment numbers. The other two guided the gurney from the side and back. The lead paramedic stopped in front of her neighbor's door and knocked. "This is the rescue squad. Can you come to the door?"

Lillian Latimer's little dog barked frantically inside the apartment. Fear twisted around Sarah's heart as she considered the possibilities.

The paramedic knocked again and exchanged an anxious glance with one of his partners. "We'll have to get the building manager up here."

"I have a key!" Sarah dropped her briefcase and dashed back to her apartment. Thankfully, Lillian had given her a spare key last month after she'd locked herself out. She snatched it out of the drawer and hurried back to the hallway.

Seconds later, the lead paramedic opened Lillian's door. "Mrs. Latimer?" He stopped just inside the apartment. Holding the dog back, he turned to his partners. "Leave the gurney. Let's find her first and see what we're dealing with."

They hustled into the apartment, leaving Sarah in the hall. She bit her lip and took a step closer, peeking around the door. Lillian's West Highland terrier rushed back into the living room and past Sarah dragging her red leather leash behind her.

"Molly, wait!" Sarah lunged for the handle-loop and snagged it just before it trailed out of reach. "Where do you think you're going?"

The white dog whined and then twirled in a circle, her little body quivering with emotion. She stopped and looked up at Sarah with a wide-eyed, worried expression.

Sarah bent down and gave the dog a reassuring pat on the head. Her fur was warm and strangely comforting. "It's okay, Molly. Everything's going to be all right."

The little dog tugged her toward the apartment door, and Sarah followed. As she stepped inside, surprise rippled through her. Her neighbor had lovely drapes and expensive furniture, but you could barely see them past all the clutter. Stacks of magazines and newspaper took up much of the floor space. Piles of mail and miscellaneous papers covered the couch and coffee table.

The silver-haired paramedic stepped into the living room. “Mrs. Latimer is worried about her dog. Would you take her to the bedroom and let her see she’s okay? That should help her calm down.” He glanced around the messy room. “It’s going to take a few minutes to clear a path and get the gurney in here.”

“What happened? Is she going to be all right?”

“She fell and hit her head pretty hard. She’ll need some x-rays. We’re taking her to emergency at St. Luke’s.”

Sarah nodded and made her way down the hall. Lillian’s injuries sounded painful, but at least they weren’t life threatening. Molly jerked on the leash and led the way to the back bedroom where Sarah found Lillian lying on her bed. Her curly white hair looked like a halo against the pink pillowcase. The woman’s faded blue eyes lit up when she saw Sarah with her dog. “Oh, thank goodness you have Molly. I was worried she’d run out the door.”

“No, she’s fine, just anxious to see you.” Sarah stood by Lillian’s side and watched one of the paramedics hold the stethoscope to Lillian’s arm as he pumped the blood pressure cuff and checked the reading.

“I’m so sorry you fell. Is there anything I can do to help you?”

Molly whined and stood on her hind feet clawing the side of the mattress.

“They say I have to go to the emergency room, but I shouldn’t be gone too long. Could you take care of Molly until I get back?” Lillian reached out and tenderly touched the dog’s head. “She’s not much trouble.”

Uneasiness prickled through Sarah. She’d never had a dog. Her parents wouldn’t allow it. But it couldn’t be that hard. She’d just give Molly a bowl of water and some doggie treats, and Lillian would be home in a few hours. Sarah smiled. “Of course. I’d be glad to watch her for you.”

“Thank you, dear.” Her neighbor closed her eyes, looking pale and weary.

Sarah bit her lip as she watched Lillian. She hated to think of her going to the E.R. with no one there to comfort her or bring her home. “Do you want me to call someone to meet you at the hospital?”

Lillian touched her forehead, looking confused. “Well, I suppose you should call my grandson, Justin. His number is on the refrigerator.”

Sarah nodded. “I’ll take care of it. Anyone else?”

“No. Justin will know what to do and who else to call.”

“All right. You just rest. I’ll call him and watch Molly. Don’t worry about a thing.”

Lillian grasped her hand tightly. “Thank you, Sarah. You’re an angel.”

“I’m glad I can help.” Sarah smiled and squeezed Lillian’s hand. “It’s no trouble at all.” She glanced down at Molly and swallowed, hoping that was the truth.

* * *

Later that afternoon Sarah sat at the desk in her apartment. She glanced at the calendar on her Blackberry, mentally calculating the time she'd need to leave for her first appointment tomorrow morning.

Molly whined and nudged Sarah's leg.

"You don't have to go outside again, do you?" She felt a little strange talking to a dog, but Molly seemed to understand. When she heard the word "outside" the dog's ears stood up, she barked once, and the expression on her face looked like a doggy smile.

Sarah laughed and picked up the leash. "Okay, come on." Molly dashed to the door, dancing with excitement. As Sarah clipped the leash on Molly's collar, the doorbell rang.

She looked through the peephole and saw the back of someone's head. They had shoulder length, light-brown wavy hair. With the distorted view, she couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. A ripple of apprehension traveled up her back.

She opened the door but left the chain lock in place. Better safe than sorry in this city.

The person turned around. Sarah immediately realized he was a man—a very good-looking man with a long straight nose, strong chin, and golden-brown eyes. He looked about thirty. She glanced at his clothes, and her eyebrows rose. He wore a dark-green baggy sweatshirt with a torn neck, worn black jeans, and slip-on leather loafers with no socks. She kept the chain in place and stood back a little.

He smiled, and a deep dimple creased his left cheek. "Hi. I'm Justin Latimer."

Surprise rippled through her. She'd pictured Lillian's grandson a little differently when they'd talked on the phone earlier.

He lifted his brows, reflecting her hesitant expression.

Heat radiated into her face. “Oh. . .yes. I’m sorry.” She unlatched the chain and opened the door wider. “I’m Sarah Montgomery.”

Molly lunged past her and leaped at Justin. Sarah hung on to the leash.

Laughing, he squatted to greet the dog. “Hey there, Miss Molly. What’ve you been up to? Giving this lady a hard time?” He scratched behind her raised ears and let her lick his cheek.

“How’s Lillian?” Sarah glanced down the hall toward her neighbor’s door.

He stood to face Sarah, and a serious expression replaced his smile. “She sprained her wrist, and they think she has a concussion.” He frowned and glanced away. “Her blood work came back with some strange results, so the doctor wants to run some more tests. They’re keeping her overnight.”

“I hope she’s not too upset. I know she thought she’d be coming home today.” Sarah glanced down at Molly. Keeping the dog for one day had been a challenge. She wasn’t sure how she’d manage working and watching her tomorrow.

Justin held his hand out for the leash. “Don’t worry. I’ll take Molly.”

Sarah dipped her chin, surprised he’d read her thoughts, but she didn’t release Molly to him.

“It’s okay.” Amusement shone in his eyes. “I stay with Molly whenever my grandmother goes out of town. That was part of the deal we made when I got Molly for her.”

“You bought Molly for Lillian?”

Grinning, he nodded. “Yes, I’m the guilty party.” He leaned down and ruffled the hair on the dog’s head, his expression growing pensive. “She was lonely after my grandfather died. I thought a dog would be a good companion for her.”

Sarah’s heart warmed as she watched him. “That was thoughtful.”

“Well, I’m glad it worked. Now Molly is one of the most pampered pooches in Manhattan.” He gazed at the dog with affection. “And my grandma has someone who needs her and a reason to get up in the morning.”

Sarah nodded and studied him. Even though he needed a good haircut and new wardrobe, a man who cared that much about his grandmother deserved a measure of trust. “Why don’t you come in, and I’ll collect Molly’s things.” She opened the door wider.

“Thanks.” He followed her into the apartment. His gaze traveled around the living room and dining room. “Wow, this is nice.” He hesitated and glanced at her. “Spacious and very. . .neat.”

She smiled. “You sound surprised.”

“It looks like the same floor plan as my grandmother’s apartment, but it’s a shocking contrast to her. . .housekeeping style.”

Sarah held back a chuckle. “Yes, I saw her apartment for the first time this morning.”

He lifted his hands. “She wasn’t always like this, but since my grandfather died, things have gotten out of hand. Hopefully, I can sort through some things and clean up while she’s at the hospital.”

Sarah tipped her head, considering the possibilities. “Maybe I could help you.”

His dark brows rose. “You want to help me clean out her apartment?”

“That’s what I do.”

“You’re a cleaning lady?”

She pulled in a deep breath and stifled her initial response. “No, I’m a professional organizer.” She reached in her suit jacket pocket and handed him a business card.

He took the card and read it, but his expression told Sarah he could use a little more explanation.

“I help my clients develop and implement plans to simplify and organize their lives, homes, and offices.”

He nodded, but still looked uncertain.

“I help them discover why they struggle with disorganization. Then I teach them how to overcome clutter, get organized, and realize their dreams.”

His eyes lit up. “That’s exactly what my grandma needs.” He rubbed his hands together. “When could you start?”

“I’m glad you’re interested, but Lillian would have to be the one to hire me. As I said, I’m not a cleaning service. I work with my clients and help them learn the skills they need to not only get organized, but stay organized.”

“I’ve tried to help my grandmother clean up several times, but we never get very far. She has a hard time making decisions, and she doesn’t want to throw anything away.”

Sarah nodded. “That’s a common problem, but it’s not impossible to overcome.” She sent him a confident smile. “I’m sure I could help her. I deal with people like that all the time.”

“It might be a lot easier to just go in there while she’s away, throw out all the extra stuff, and clean everything up. She might not like it at first, but she’d eventually forgive us and appreciate what we’d done.”

Sarah cringed. His sneak attack strategy was not the best way to handle this. She would only agree to that in the most desperate situations. If he wanted lasting results, he’d have to trust her, and let her do the job her way. “The first step is discussing this with Lillian. I need to understand her unique situation and then set objective and goals with her. And of course we’d have to agree on a time frame and fee for the job.”

“Of course.” He nodded.

“Your grandmother’s apartment needs a lot of work. I’ll have to bring in some other people to help with the initial phase. It could be costly.”

“Money is not an issue. My grandmother’s safety and peace of mind are what’s most important.”

Sarah nodded, impressed by his caring attitude and commitment to help his grandmother. For someone who dressed so casually he certainly was decisive. Of course he was offering to spend his grandmother’s money, not his own. Sarah recalled the beautiful furniture buried under the clutter in Lillian’s apartment. Her neighbor could obviously afford to hire a professional organizer, and she certainly needed one. Now, all they had to do was convince Lillian that Sarah was the one she could trust.