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NOT writing it here)

Age: 10 years, 3 months and 10 days
(at time of writing this)

Lives with: Mum, Dad, and my mischievous
Granny Jas

School: Birmingham South-West Aspire
Junior Middle High Academy School
(longest school name ever!)

Favourite Subject: Science

Best friend: Milo Moon

Ambitions: To meet a real life
astronaut

To invent a cure for meanness

To be the first kid in space



**Dedicated to A & R and all of our chaotic
Christmases, past, present and future!**

SERENA

For Davey G, as always

EMMA

Update

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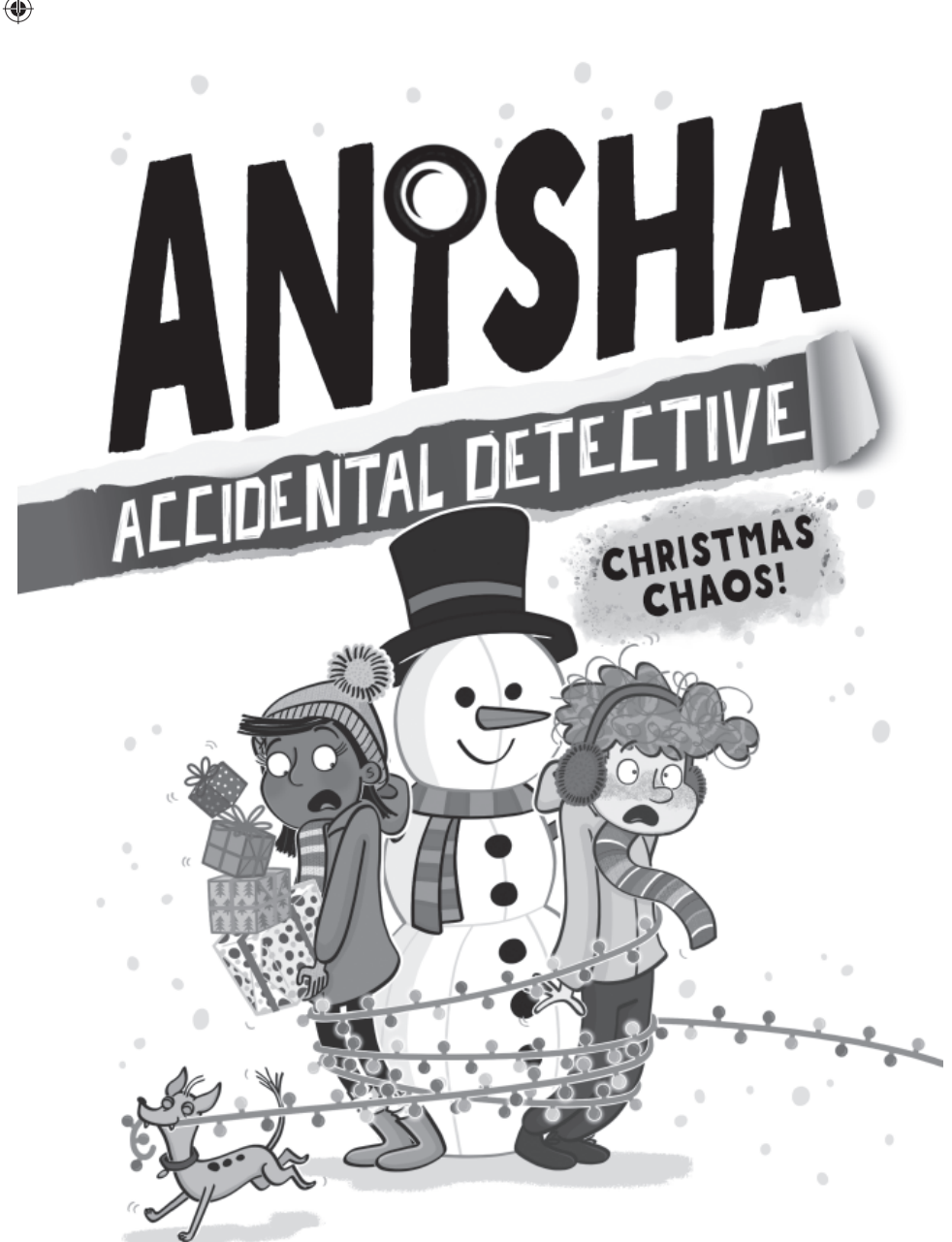
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SERENA PATEL
Illustrated by **Emma McCann**





CHAPTER ONE

THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS!

It's Christmas, hooray! My whole family **LOVES** Christmas, it's a really big deal in our house. Except, well, I don't know if I should even say this because I've never told anyone that... I'm not sure I actually *do* love it. I don't feel excited like everyone else does. It's all a bit much actually. I think I'm not so much excited, more like anxious. I don't *hate* Christmas – I like seeing all the twinkly lights, I quite like Christmas songs on the radio and I **LOVE** Christmas cookies and a hot chocolate on a cold day. It's just all the other stuff, the rushing around and the noise of Christmas. **It's a lot!**

Anyway, today, the first of December, is when it all starts in our house: the Mistrys' big countdown to Christmas. We've had a calendar counting down to



the first of December hanging on the kitchen wall since the beginning of November! A countdown for the Christmas countdown!

Ridiculous!

I expect Aunty Bindi to be hyped for any and every celebration, that's just who she is, and Uncle Tony kind of gets dragged along, but I can see even he's enjoying it this time. The other day they left my cousins, Mindy, Manny and baby Maya, at our house while they went shopping, and when they came back Aunty Bindi had like a hundred rolls of wrapping paper (I'm not even joking!) and Uncle

Tony had ordered the biggest Christmas tree ever – I think it might actually be coming from the North Pole!



It's our first Christmas with baby Maya so I sort of understand why they're all so excited. But Maya is little and I don't think she really understands Christmas. The other day she spent an hour lying on her playmat and making baby noises at the ceiling. I feel like babies appreciate simple things and I'm kind of with them on that.

So today is the first of many Mistry Christmas traditions. On this day, every year, Dad gets out the advent calendars and the fifty boxes of decorations

from the loft and the chaos starts. As the only child in the house today I've been given the role of Dad's helper. It's Friday but it's a teacher training day so I can't even escape to school! Dad grins at me as we pull down the loft ladder.

"Why are you smiling like that, Dad? It's weird," I say.

"I'm just excited." Dad beams. "And I got you a little something."

"Oh, yay, you shouldn't ha—" I say but the words get stuck in my throat as he hands me a green felt pointy hat with red fur trim and a bell on the top. It has two elf ears sticking out from the sides.

"Isn't it the best?" Dad chuckles. "I got one too!" And he places his on his head. "Come on, little elf, we've got a lot of boxes to bring down!"

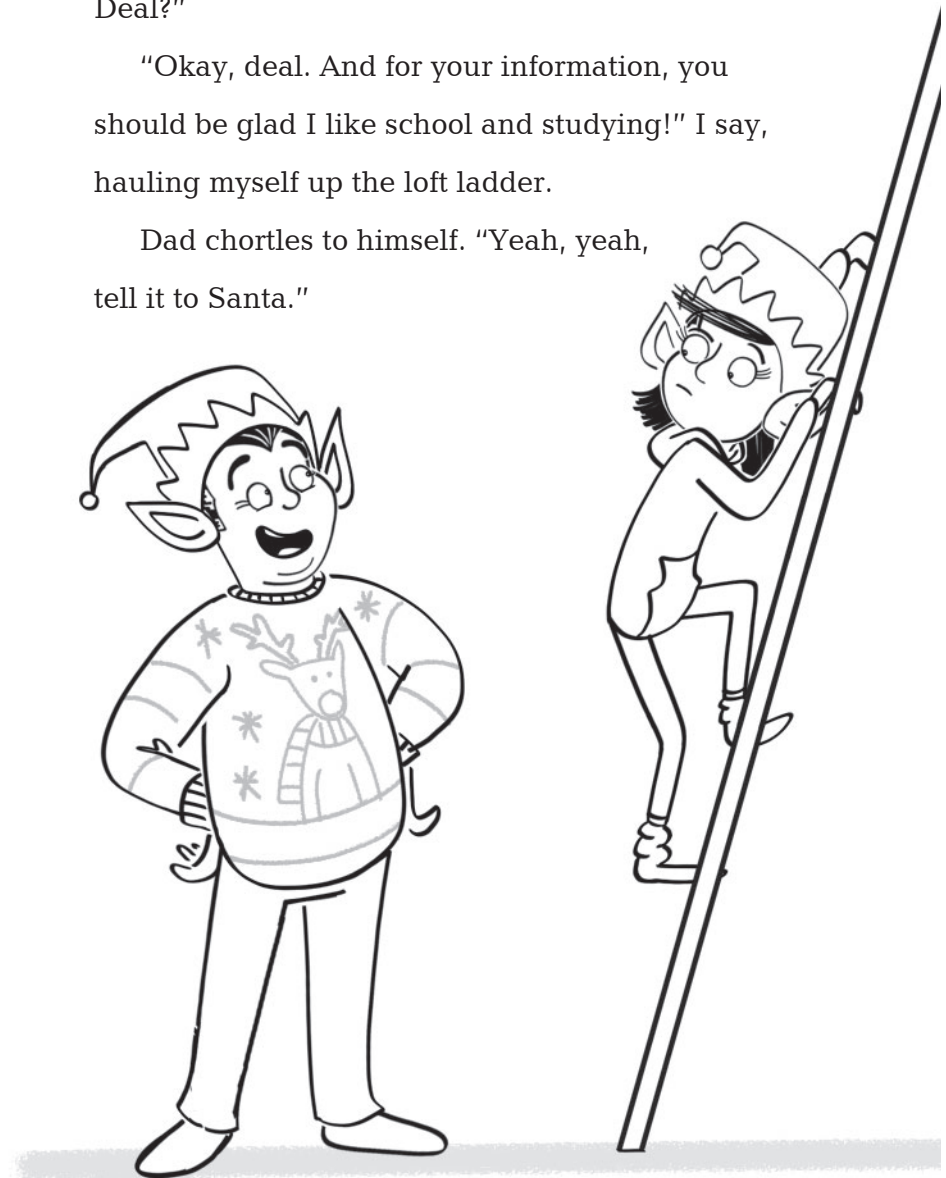
I groan, putting my elf hat on reluctantly. "Do we have to do it now? I've got homework!"

Dad shakes his head. "You'd rather do homework than get ready for the best holiday of the year?"

Where did we go wrong as parents? Look, help me get the big boxes and then I'll do the rest myself. Deal?"

"Okay, deal. And for your information, you should be glad I like school and studying!" I say, hauling myself up the loft ladder.

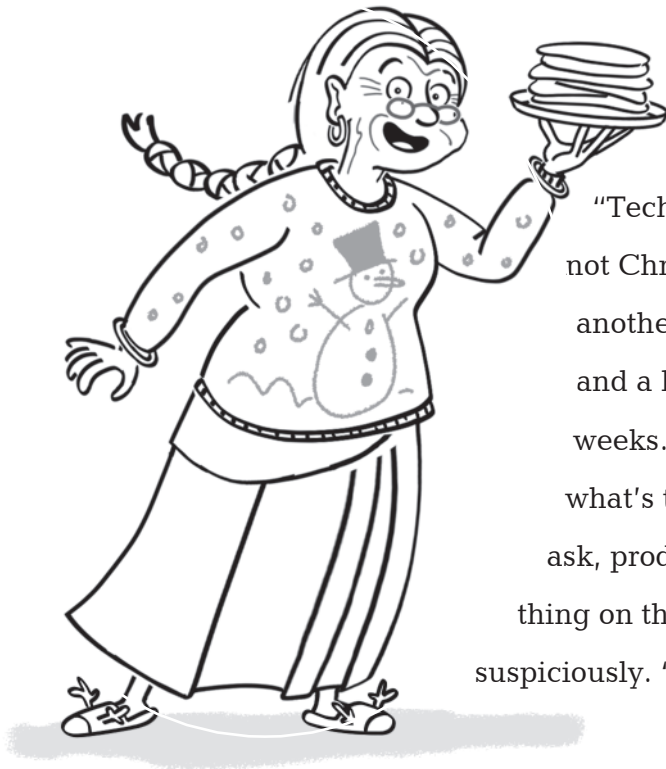
Dad chortles to himself. "Yeah, yeah, tell it to Santa."



Getting the boxes from the loft is hard work. For some reason, we have three Christmas trees and about a million baubles. I disturb several spiders as I'm moving boxes and bang my head on the low beams in the attic more than once, so by the time Granny Jas calls us for a snack, I'm super-grumpy.

"Are you okay, **beta**? It's a happy day today, Christmas is coming!" Granny says, pushing a plate

towards
me.



"Technically it's not Christmas for another three and a half weeks... Umm, what's this?" I ask, prodding the thing on the plate suspiciously. "It's a bit

lumpy." I love Granny's cooking but this time of year she makes a lot of weird stuff.

"It's gingerbread paratha. Indian-fusion style!" Granny grins.

"What? How do you even put those two things together?" I ask. "Actually I don't want to know. Can't I have something normal?"

"I'm offended," Granny huffs. "I worked hard on that."

Dad grabs the plate. "I'll eat it. I love gingerbread and I love paratha. What's not to like!"

"Exactly!" Granny beams, patting Dad's arm. I sigh. "I'll make myself a sandwich."

"I'll do it for you, **beta**, I have turkey and stuffing in the fridge! I got a good deal on five frozen turkeys so that should keep us going for the next couple of weeks!"

I groan. "I hate turkey! Isn't it enough that we eat it on Christmas Day? Do we have to eat it every day from now till then too?"

Granny Jas tuts. "Oh dear. No Grinches in this house please, **beta**. Christmas is full of joy and happiness."

"And turkey and mince pies!" Dad adds, picking up his ringing phone from the counter. "Ooh, I'd better get this!" he says as he leaves the room.

"I don't like mince pies. What are they even supposed to be? It's not mince and it's not a proper pie – I don't get it," I say.

"Mince! Ooh, that gives me an idea!" Granny says. "I could use actual lamb mince and make Keema mince pies! I need to write that down!"

Granny pulls out her recipe book where she



writes down all our favourite meals. It's overflowing with Post-it notes and scraps of paper. Granny turns to the jam-packed

Christmas section and scribbles down her idea. Then she flicks through the pages of the book.

"You don't like mince pies? Well, let's see what we can do about that. How about turmeric, ginger and chocolate-orange Swiss roll?"

I pull a face. That sounds disgusting. "Can't we have a normal chocolate log?"

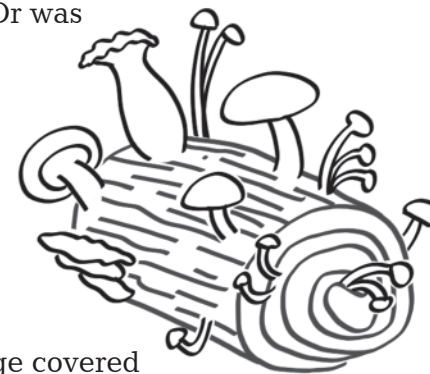
"Oh, yes, I saw a recipe online for a chocolate log with mushrooms in it! Or was

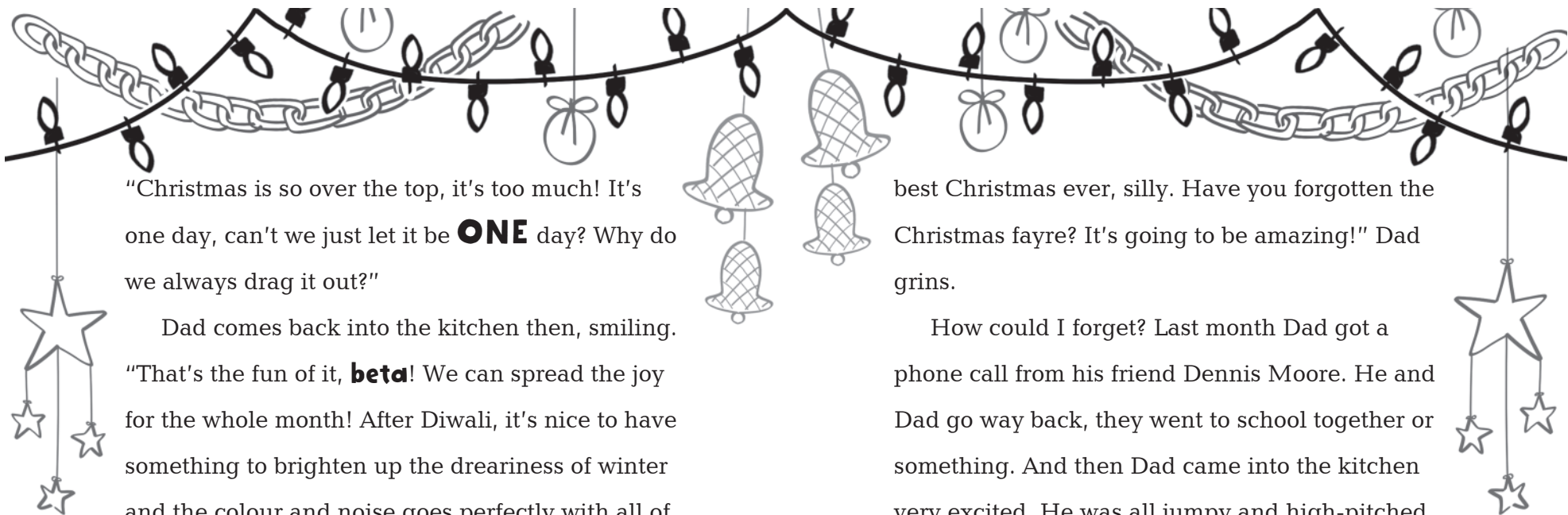
it mushroom-shaped meringue?" Granny wonders. "I'll have to check."

"Or we could have regular chocolate sponge covered in chocolate buttercream?" I suggest.

"Oh, no, that's boring. You have to experiment with these things! I thought you'd understand, with your love of science!" Granny replies.

"Some things are better simple," I say.





"Christmas is so over the top, it's too much! It's one day, can't we just let it be **ONE** day? Why do we always drag it out?"

Dad comes back into the kitchen then, smiling. "That's the fun of it, **beta**! We can spread the joy for the whole month! After Diwali, it's nice to have something to brighten up the dreariness of winter and the colour and noise goes perfectly with all of our Indian culture. Maybe that's why we love it so much! It will be brilliant, you'll see. This is going to be the best Christmas yet!"

"Because of baby Maya, I know," I say. "I am looking forward to sharing it with her, but do we really need three Christmas trees? She doesn't even know what one is yet!"

"Firstly, yes, we do need three trees, because one is for the living room, one for the kitchen and one for the landing upstairs! And secondly, baby Maya is not the only reason this is going to be the

best Christmas ever, silly. Have you forgotten the Christmas fayre? It's going to be amazing!" Dad grins.

How could I forget? Last month Dad got a phone call from his friend Dennis Moore. He and Dad go way back, they went to school together or something. And then Dad came into the kitchen very excited. He was all jumpy and high-pitched, which, if you know my dad, is not normal for him.

"What happened, **beta**?" Granny asked.

"Well, that was Dennis – you remember, he's the head of the community association," Dad replied.

"Isn't that those boring meetings you go to where they talk about bin collections?" I questioned.

"Not just bin collections. We talk about all sorts of important community issues," Dad replied defensively. "And we organize several big events

for the local neighbourhood – the biggest one of all is the Christmas fayre. We use the community centre as the main venue and we have festive stalls, twinkling lights, a grotto! It's brilliant!"

"I remember," I replied quietly, not liking where this was going.

"Well, normally Dennis leads on all the organizing, but he's got a lot on at his day job and he doesn't think he can fit it all in. So, he asked if I'd take the lead! And he's retiring this year, so if I do a good job, I could be the next head of the association! How exciting is that!"

Granny squealed **LOUDLY**. "So exciting, **beta**! My son, the community leader!"

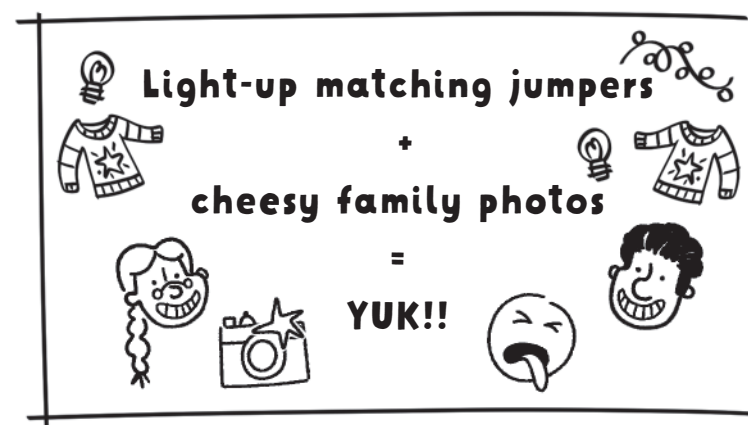
Dad squealed too. "I know! And I have so many ideas, Mum. I want to go big, do things the neighbourhood has never done. Remember how great the lights were when I was a kid? I want it to be even better than that," Dad insisted.

Granny Jas nodded. "Oh, and remember the

matching jumpers we had, **beta**? The ones with the Rudolph noses? I know,

I can make them again, for everyone! We could make them light-up jumpers! We can all be matching and take a lovely family photo!"

That sounded like my worst nightmare:





But then something occurred to me. I frowned thoughtfully. "So, you're going to be running the Christmas fayre? Like, fully in charge of it?" I asked my dad. "Yep." Dad grinned.

"And that's going to mean a lot of extra work, isn't it?" I asked carefully.

Dad nodded. "Yes, of course. A lot of the fayre planning is done months in advance so some things are arranged already. But there is plenty we can still add and it will need lots of hard work. You know, the community centre, it's more than just a building, Anni. It's a place people can go to be less alone if they don't live with family, a place for a hot cup of tea and a chat. And the Christmas fayre is a brilliant

fundraiser. All the money we make goes straight back into the community centre and helps us to run activities all year round, like health clinics, mother and baby classes, after-school clubs, family days. Without it, we wouldn't be able to do half of that."

I nodded – that did all sound very worthwhile, but I was still worried, "Okay, but the fayre is quite soon, right?"

"Yes, it launches in four weeks, on the 3rd of December," Dad replied.

"So how are you going to get everything ready in time?" I asked, even though I really didn't want to hear the answer.

Dad smiled brightly. "The association members will help, plus I have all of you! I already have jobs for everyone!"

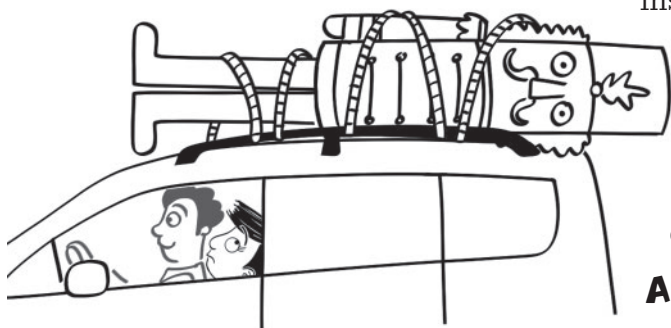
I think I groaned then for about the tenth time. "That was what I was worried about!"

Dad grabbed my hand. "This is going to be **so** much fun!"



And so, as usual, when my family decides we're doing something, **THAT** was **THAT**. Ever since that day, our house has been mission central for the biggest and best community Christmas fayre this side of Birmingham. Dad's got a massive whiteboard in the living room with all his plans and lists on it. Anyone would think he's organizing a celebrity event or something! The postman is making deliveries twice a day. Yesterday a giant nutcracker statue appeared on our doorstep! It was supposed to go straight to the community centre but got delivered to our house by accident. So then Dad

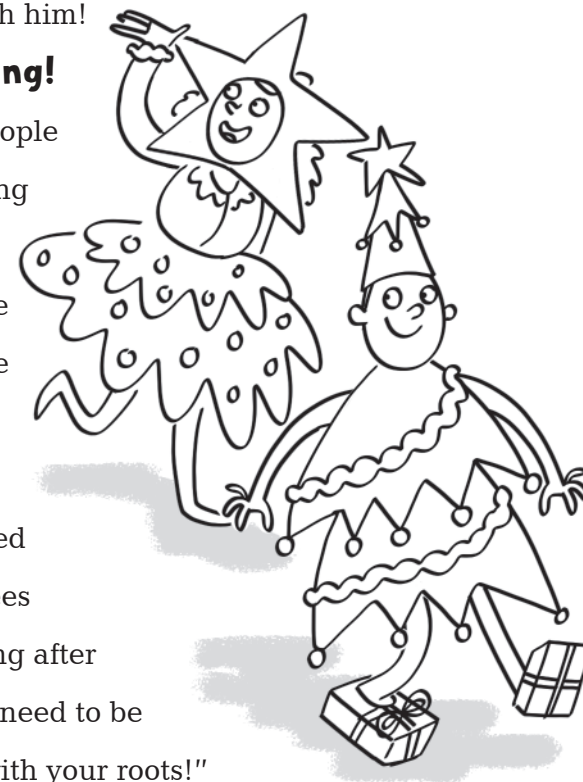
insisted we hoist it on top of our car and drive it over **AND** he



made me go with him!

So embarrassing!

There're also people coming and going from our house all the time – the other day I came home to find people leaving the house dressed as Christmas trees and Dad shouting after them, "You just need to be more in touch with your roots!"



Anyway, it's all been a bit overwhelming, but nobody else in my family seems to feel like I do, so I've kept it to myself mostly. But I think this could be our most chaotic Christmas yet and I'm not sure how I'm going to survive it!