

A Christmas Eve Surprise

Sophia and Pedro sat on the sofa together in Sophia's apartment, with Zelda Screech Cat nestling between them. It was Saturday morning, December 24th, and tonight was Sophia's Christmas Eve dinner with her "chosen" family. The dinner included roasted duck, wild rice and mushroom pilaf with a warm fruit compote, Brussels sprouts, and carrots in a butter sauce with dill and horseradish. Pedro, her best friend and fellow sleuth, was helping in the kitchen.

Pedro, whose parents worked as live-in servants for a wealthy family on Long Island, would join Sophia for Christmas Eve dinner. His parents would work at their employer's big Christmas Eve party for family and friends and wouldn't come home until late on Christmas Day. Mr. O'D, Sophia's guardian and a close friend of her late grandmother, was out collecting the forgotten wild rice and horseradish, while Sophia and Pedro took a break.

Other members of their chosen family included Henry, a retired FBI agent who now runs Henry's Famous Hot Dogs in Central Park Zoo, and his nephew, Lionel, a sergeant and a Neighborhood Community Officer on the Upper West Side. Last but not least were Sophia's animal friends, Wahoo the Raven and Zelda Screech Cat. Jack the Polar Bear, also part of their extended family, felt it necessary to remain in the Central Park Zoo after being abducted by the Russian mafia this summer.

The average parent might question the household's dinner menu for two eleven, almost twelve-year-old kids, but it was Sophia and Pedro's choice. The meals they cooked together were part of their unique family unit. While Pedro watched *CSI* and *Bones* reruns, Sophia was busy perusing Martha Stewart, Rachel Ray, and Jamie Oliver's cooking shows. Sophia figured that if Super Sleuths, Inc. went belly up, she and Pedro could get a cooking show on *Nickelodeon* or *NPR Kids*. The two cooked together a lot, and their choices often turned out to be quite cosmopolitan.

FULL DISCLOSURE: Not all of their dinners were that fancy. Once a week, on "Pretend We Know Nothing About Health and Eat Anything We Want Day," menus included kid-friendly options like grilled peanut butter, banana, and mayo sandwiches served with tomato soup and chocolate ice cream topped with crumbled Ruffles potato chips.

Mr. O'D used dried apricots soaked in brandy in his fruit cake and insisted that Sophia and Pedro include them in their warm fruit compote. Sophia and Pedro questioned Mr. O'D, but he assured them all the alcohol would evaporate after simmering all day. The apricots, cherries, and oranges were now bubbling away with cinnamon sticks and other spices until the fruit became soft and blended. The apartment smelled delicious.

Zelda Screech Cat had other thoughts but kept them to herself. Once, Mr. O'D added wine to his spaghetti sauce and accidentally knocked the pot to the floor. Zelda lapped it up. *Waste not,*

want not! It was tasty, but it severely affected her jumping skills. She ended up sliding down the side of the sofa and falling asleep, thus ending all her nefarious plans for the evening.

“I’m glad Henry is joining us for dinner,” said Sophia. “He loves our cooking. It’s too bad that neither your parents nor Lionel can be here. It’s unfair that anyone has to work on Christmas—except essential workers, of course.”

“Lionel is an essential worker, Sophia.”

“Okay, smarty pants, but others who are non-essential must work. Sal’s working with his sons in their restaurant tonight.”

“I bet the people who eat there every Christmas Eve would disagree with you. Besides, half of the customers are part of his family!”

“Mr. Woo’s kids are taking him to Vermont skiing. Can you see Mr. Woo on skis?” asked Sophia.

“With the way he skates around the Wash and Spin at warp speed, there’s no doubt he’ll get the hang of skiing in about five minutes. How did his kids talk him into that?”

“They didn’t. They’re ‘Woo-napping’ him by slipping a mickey into his lunch tea and whisking him off in their SUV. Presto-change-o—Ski Vermont in Progress!”

“I can’t see that,” said Pedro.

“Me neither, but his daughter Li told me he’s a party animal once you get him out of the laundromat. He’s up for trying anything within reason. He took the whole family skiing when they were our age because he won a free weekend in the Laundromat Owner’s Association lottery. Later, when they wanted to go skiing again, he was always too busy, and their mother wasn’t fond of traveling unless it was for a family event. This year, they took control.”

Mr. O’D walked through the front door bearing a recyclable grocery bag. The bag contained more than just the forgotten items.

“Okay, lad and lassie, I come bearing the rest of the day’s victuals. First, the rice and horseradish.” He placed the items on the kitchen table. “Next, one fruitcake soaked six weeks in my special apricot brandy for Henry’s and my dining pleasure, and one for you and Pedro, minus my special additions. I’ll make Nana’s special hard sauce for ours. And I picked up some whipped cream for yours.”

And what about an entrapped cat? Where are my Christmas cat treats? The ones with a crunchy fish outside and creamy inside? Zelda telepathed.

“My, I wonder what that cat’s trying to tell me. Hmm...” Mr. O’D pulled one last package out of his tote. “Here you go, Zelda. Blue Bursts for your special treat.”

So, say you! Ha! Zelda jumped onto the kitchen table in one leap and snatched the bag in her teeth before trying to jump down to hide under the sofa with the whole bag.

“Not so fast, Brat Cat!” Sophia caught her in mid-air on her way down and pulled the treat package from Zelda’s mouth. Of course, Zelda’s teeth shredded the top of the package, and a few dropped out. Zelda grabbed the treats and dared Sophia to take them from her. Sophia ignored the dare since she was not keen on being covered in Band-Aids for Christmas.

“Good catch!”

Pedro and Sophia high-fived after Zelda dashed for the sofa. Pedro placed the treats that were left on top of the refrigerator.

Zelda scoffed. They think that’ll stop me. If I can bust out our bathroom screen, cross the roof, and claw my way through Pedro’s bathroom screen, I don’t believe a refrigerator will keep me from my treats! Pleased with herself, Zelda crunched the treats underneath the sofa as her tail whipped back and forth. *I got everything I wanted.*

“Are we going to the Lessons and Carols Service at 4:00, or the Family Service at 5:30?” Sophia asked Mr. O’D.

“It doesn’t matter to me, but I like the Lessons and Carols. I find it very comforting. It’s sad around this time of year. Christmas was special for Nana and me, especially after you joined us.”

Sophia started fiddling with the serving dishes that were laid out on the kitchen table. A tear escaped her eye, but she would not let Pedro see it because it would just make him miss his parents more than he already did. He walked over to Sophia as she rearranged all the dishes, pretending to give her a hand.

“Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer” was much louder than the prior song. Pedro joined in, singing at the top of his lungs. Sophia jabbed him in the ribs. “Geez, Pedro, give it up! You can’t carry a tune at all.”

“That’s why it’s fun. I can annoy you and ignore your criticism at the same time!”

The two returned to their seats. “I like that melody because it’s funny. In Mexico, we sing some of your carols in Spanish, like ‘Deck the Halls’ and ‘Jingle Bells,’ but I miss the villancicos. That’s what we call Christmas carols in Mexico. My favorite is “El Burrito Sabanero.” It’s about a donkey going to Bethlehem with Joseph and Mary. Mamá and Papá are seldom off because the Prices love to give enormous parties between Christmas and New Year’s Day. They invite everybody over to celebrate that they have ever met or known.”

“Sometimes my parents have several days off around Three Kings Day, but not always. I miss having Christmas Eve in Mexico. The best year was when I was four. We sang songs with my cousins, aunts, and uncles, and had tamales. There were poinsettias everywhere. The kids took turns hitting a donkey piñata in the backyard. It’s way more fun than just opening presents.”

“I don’t want to interrupt you, Pedro, but we’d better get a move on,” said Mr. O’D. “We want to make sure we get good seats for the service at church.”

“Are we done with the food? Is the timer set for the duck?” asked Sophia.

“Duh, Pedro, what do you think? Does Sophia, chef extraordinaire, forget things like that?”

“What about when you forgot to turn the oven on to bake the turkey?”

“Shut up, Pedro! You promised never to mention that again!”

“Sorry—couldn’t resist.”

“You’ll regret that sometime soon when you least expect it,” said Sophia with a sly smile.

Ut oh, Brat Boy! You’re in trouble now. But you’re off the hook tonight since everything’s already well on the way. Zelda cleaned each of her toenails.

“Okay, kids. Henry just texted that he’ll meet us at the corner of Sixth Avenue and the downtown corner of 55th Street. Then we can all arrive together to get in line.”

Henry, Mr. O’D, and the kids greeted each other at the appointed place. Since the line was shorter than usual, they found a seat where the sound was exceptional. There was greenery, poinsettias, and candles all over the entire church. When the music started, it was magical. Everyone could feel those they loved nearby, even if they weren’t physically there.

After the service, they walked toward the bus stop to go home.

(No dirty subway for us after that!)

Henry stopped dead in his tracks. “Oh, Lord! I took the ribs out and left the stove on! I need to get home right now to turn it off. We don’t want a fire!” Henry sprinted up the street, waving down the first cab he saw.

Mr. O’D stifled a chuckle.

“What’s so funny about that?” Sophia didn’t appreciate having her dreamy mood broken.

“Nothing. Nothing at all.” Mr. O’D, being in a jolly mood, took Sophia and Pedro’s hands.

“What’s with the hand business? We’re not little kids anymore!” asked Sophia. However, she didn’t snatch her hand back. It didn’t seem to bother Pedro at all.

“Get over it, Sophia. It’s Christmas. People are supposed to be close.”

“Oh... all right. I guess that’s true.”

The bus took forever to come. “Geez! At this rate, Henry will get there before us and will have finished eating!”

“Definite possibility,” said Pedro with a groan.

“It has to work out. It’s Christmas.” As they waited for the bus, Mr. O’D and Pedro took up singing “Jingle Bells,” Mr. O’D with a lovely tenor voice and Pedro off-key.

“I’m going behind the bus shelter and pretend I don’t know you!”

The bus pulled up, and they rushed to pay their fares with their MetroCards.

They could smell the food coming up the stairs. “Smells like another Sophia and Pedro culinary extravaganza!” said Pedro.

“You got that right!” Sophia twisted the key in the lock and entered first. She stopped dead in her tracks, and Pedro, who was not paying attention, crashed into her.

“What on earth?”

“Surprise!” Mr. O’D and Henry shouted together. A donkey piñata affixed to a pole sat in the center of the floor. Poinsettias graced every available surface. Henry hit the play button on the TV, and a fire appeared. The first song on the playlist was the villancico “El Burrito Sabanero,” sung by a group of kids with guitars, maracas, and other instruments. Everyone joined in the chorus.

Pedro grabbed Sophia and hugged her close, burying his head in her shoulder. She could tell he had tears running down his face. Henry came forward and hugged Pedro, as did Mr. O’D.

“We thought since you couldn’t have your parents, we would bring a bit of home to you.”

Pedro kept crying tears of joy, saying, “Thank you, oh thank you.”

He hadn’t noticed that Sophia had gone toward the kitchen. When she returned, she carried a platter of steaming mini tamales. With a brilliant smile, she asked, “Would you care for a tamale? They’re not as good as your mother’s, but they’ll do.”

Everyone chimed in together. “Merry Christmas, Pedro!” Zelda joined in with several loud screeches.

Once they’re all busy doing huggy-kissy human stuff, I’ll help myself—even if tamales turn my stunning, white, furry pink mouth orange. It’s a price beautiful kitties have to pay!