

The Taste of Snow

*“I will honor Christmas in my heart,
and try to keep it all the year.”*

— CHARLES DICKENS



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by Stephen V. Masse



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THE TASTE OF SNOW
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*Dedicated to the fond memory of
Mary Ann Baldassarre Valenti,
who cherished life, people and good books.*



¶ 1 ¶

A Fine Place to Live

HIGH IN THE Alpine region of Austria is the small village of Gartendorf, nestled among snow-covered mountain peaks that seem to come alive when the snows of Advent begin to fall. Sometimes the snows approach suddenly from behind a mountain crest, blowing all around half of the village while the other half sits untouched in the gleaming sun. At other times the snows fall soft and silent over the whole village, covering fields and farms in a hushed blanket of white. At these times the sound of cowbells becomes distant and muffled, and the smell of snow hangs clear in the wintry air. After the snowfall, the Tyrolean peaks loom into the deepest blue sky, and as the sun

moves through the day, the shadows of clouds make it seem as if the mountains are moving.

It is a fine place to live, so close to the city where every day there is something new to see. Nicole Kinders always enjoyed the drive down to Innsbruck in the back of Mama's or Papa's car. She was eleven, with green eyes and long flowing hair the color of honey. She liked to see the city within the Alps, and especially liked the cathedral of Saint Jakob, the hotels and famous buildings where Papa played his trumpet in the Gartendorf Brass Band, and the rainbow colored houses that stood all in a row along the river. The only time she had not been happy to go was the first day of school a year ago, when she moved up from the elementary school in Gartendorf to the secondary school, or Hauptschule, in Innsbruck. It was a much bigger school, and it took a few days to grow accustomed to it. This year had been her sister Ashley's turn to be introduced to the new school, and she seemed to dance through the door on opening day, completely happy with the change.

Normally Nicole would be taking the tram with her sister, but today Papa was driving into the city for business, and the trip was much nicer by car. All the way into Innsbruck, Nicole could see signs of people dressing up their shops and houses for the winter festivities.

"Did you remember your lunch today?" Nicole asked.

Ashley held up her school sack with a big grin. She had lost a tooth two days ago, and there was a gap in her smile. “My hand warmer packet, too,” she said.

“What for?”

“For just in case. It is winter, you know.”

Papa drove twice around the Old Town block where the Zimt & Zucker bakery shop stood beckoning the early morning crowd. Nicole thought he forgot his way again, since he seemed to grow absent-minded sometimes when he was driving. But this time he stopped the car and turned to her. “They’re starting the Christmas baking now, can you smell the cinnamon?”

“And some chocolate, too,” she said.

“Can we buy a sweet?” Ashley begged with her hand outstretched over the back seat.

“Tell you what,” Papa said. “Take two euros and buy a sweet for each of you. Now hurry along, you still have to walk over the bridge.”

“Thank you, Papa,” Nicole said as both girls blew kisses to him, and waved as he drove away.

“I’m freezing already,” Ashley said. She was wearing her crazy ski hat with colored springs popping out all over, and she pulled it tight around her ears. She stopped walking and zipped her coat all the way to her chin. The wind whipped some leaves up off the ground and swirled them around in an icy gust. “Wow, Nicole — did you see that?”

The wind almost took Nicole’s breath away, and

she could feel her eyes tear. “It’s like a mini tornado,” she said. When she wiped her eyes she noticed that the tram carrying the students from Gartendorf had just passed by, and was about to cross over the bridge toward school. “Let’s not go in the bakery,” she said.

“But — why not?”

“Because.”

“That’s a dumb answer. I want to get a Linzer piggy.”

“Maybe after school,” Nicole said. “Come — let’s get going before we’re late.”



IT TOOK ALL their strength to cross the bridge in the cutting wind. The river was especially blue, and ice was collecting at the edges. On the far side of the bridge was a familiar wooden market stall, painted with festive colors like a carousel. Today the canvas flaps were tied tight against the wind. Boznik, the shopkeeper, was a pleasant fellow with a big, crooked smile and thick, wavy brown hair, and two earrings in each ear. He had a pointed chin beard and twinkling eyes that made him look very much like an elf. “Good morning!” he said. He did not seem to mind the cold at all, and his jacket was open at his neck. He held three perfect red apples, and began to juggle them. “An apple for school?”

“Good morning,” Nicole said, slowing down to watch. “No thanks — I have one. I’m not sure what I’d like.” She peeked through the flaps of the market stall.

Ashley grabbed Nicole’s arm and pulled. “I thought you said we have to hurry.”

“Today we have a special new selection,” Boznik said, putting the apples into a basket of assorted fruits. “Would you like to see?”

“We can’t,” Ashley said. “Maybe after school.”

Nicole shook her arm free, and her school sack dropped partway down her shoulder. She hoisted it back up, and looked at Boznik. “My sister is mad at me because I wouldn’t let her buy a Linzer pig at the bakery.”

“I would be mad at you, too. But don’t worry. Boznik the great confectioner can ease your woes!” He untied a flap of his stall and pulled it aside, and took out a cellophane packet. It was a Linzer pig, a cookie in the shape of a pig with a heart cutout and raspberry jam filling, dusted white with powdered sugar. “Is this what you had in mind?”

“How did you know?” Ashley said.

“Boznik knows his customers,” he said. “That will be one euro for you.”

“What about the new special selection?” asked Nicole. She looked at Boznik, and his eyes narrowed as he looked back at her. His face began to look

mysterious, and his chin beard ruffled in the wind. She could hear Ashley open the cellophane and take a crunchy bite of her cookie.

Boznik reached into his stall and rummaged around. His back was turned long enough that Nicole began to grow impatient. She could feel her heart beating, partly from anticipation and partly from the fear of being late. She was just about to tell Boznik it was time to leave when he suddenly spun forward and waved a candy cane in the air like a wand. "This, my dear girl, is a magic candy cane!"

Nicole studied him to see if he was trying to make a joke. Sometimes Papa would tease her with a serious face, but he usually gave it away when he broke into a smile. Boznik did not smile. He looked straight into Nicole's eyes. "A magic candy cane," he said again.

"Magic?" she said. "What can it do?"

"Alas, if I could begin to tell you it would take half the day," he said.

"Thanks, but we're going to be late," Nicole said.

"We need to go," Ashley said. She wrapped the remaining half of her cookie and tucked it into her school sack. She had powdered sugar on her lips and gloves.

Boznik held his hand up, and in the palm was a tattoo of the ancient Aztec sun. "You should have this candy cane," he said. "The magic will be revealed."

"Thanks, but I'll save my money for later," Nicole said.

Boznik held out the candy cane in front of her. “Please take it. If you like it, you can come back later and pay me. If you don’t like it, then you shall not have to pay me.”

Nicole looked at the candy cane. It did not look magic, or even special in any way. It looked like an ordinary candy cane, maybe a little brighter red on the stripes, maybe a more luminous white, but that could just be an illusion caused by the clear wrapping or the cold wind in her eyes. Very gingerly, she reached for the candy cane. “How much?”

“Half a euro, but pay me later,” Boznik said. “Now off to school with you!”

The school bell was ringing just as they arrived.