

JUDIT ÁGNES KISS



BABY FOX'S
CHRISTMAS

ILLUSTRATED BY MÓNICA EGRİ





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Hard Literary Agency

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ADVENT

Baby Fox loved holidays. And presents. What he loved most about holidays was that the whole family was together. And that no one had to rush off. They just played and talked and ate all kinds of sumptuous treats and sweets.

Of all the holidays, Christmas was his favorite. Mostly because it was the longest.

The Christmas holidays began on December first and lasted for almost a whole month. The period leading up to the big day when everyone exchanged presents was called Advent. Years ago, Mama Fox had made an Advent calendar: little cardboard boxes, twenty-four of them in total. They used it every year. Mama Fox said it had cost her so much work that she wasn't about to make another one. Each of the little boxes had a number from one to twenty-four. Baba Fox had used the boxes to learn the numbers. And he also used them to practice learning the letters, because Mama Fox had written the numbers out in letters on the boxes too. And she had even drawn little pictures on them: pine twigs, snowflakes, a giftbox with a ribbon on top, and a Christmas tree ornament. There was something to see on each of the six sides of each box.

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Baby Fox loved to play with them. He didn't really care much for the colored building blocks anymore. It didn't bother him at all that his little sister Amber was hoarding them. He was building a tower out of the cardboard boxes, or rather a staircase of sorts. He placed them carefully side by side in one long row. Then he made two rows, even rows with the same number of boxes in each. Then he made three rows. Then four. He tried to make five even rows, but the fifth row was one box short. He tried to make six, and that worked, with four boxes in each. Then he tried seven, but that didn't quite work, so he tried eight, and he got eight even rows with three boxes in each.

When he told his dad about his little game, he smiled and told him that he had been solving some pretty tricky math problems, and if he was already tackling challenges like that, he certainly wouldn't have any trouble when school started. Baby Fox felt relieved, because he always got a little nervous when his parents mentioned school.

But of course the best thing about the little cardboard boxes was the treats hidden inside! Because there was a surprise in each and every one. You opened one a day, going by number, from the first to the twenty-fourth. The first thing Baby Fox did every morning when he woke up was to look and see what was hidden inside the box for that day. Before he opened it, he would give it a little shake. Some of them gave a loud rattle. They had some toy or treat inside, a piece of chocolate, a walnut, or maybe a toy figurine. But the ones that just rustled a bit, they were the best! They had a little piece of paper

folded up inside them. On the outside, they said, 'An adventure!' On the inside, there was a promise: some exciting undertaking that they would do together as a family. Baby Fox loved these boxes best. On the days when he opened a box and didn't find anything other than a walnut inside, he was a little disappointed, but he always tried to give his mom a big smile. He didn't want Mama Fox to be sad, after all. But when he found one of the pieces of paper with the promise of some adventure inside, his heart always started racing with excitement. He would try to figure out what the letters spelled, going syllable by syllable, but if he couldn't quite read the words, he would ask his parents for help.

One of the little slips of paper said, 'Christmas lights, today or tomorrow!' That meant that after the sun had set, the family would go for a walk in the neighborhood, and they would look at all the colorful Christmas lights hanging from people's windows and decorating the trees in their yards. The 'today or tomorrow' part was just a little touch of caution on Mama Fox's part, because once or twice in the past, Baby Fox had stood in the doorway stomping and wailing and insisting that they go on a walk, since the Advent box for that day had contained the promise of a walk, but outside it had been pouring rain or sleet.

Another slip of paper said, 'we'll bake gingerbread cookies!' And they had baked the cookies that very afternoon. Baby Fox had kneaded and rolled the dough, and then he had cut little shapes



out of it, hearts, half-moons, stars, and bells. Mama Fox had used whipped eggs to draw little patterns on them. Baby Fox had given it a try, but it wasn't easy. Every time he tried to draw a line, the whipped egg foam got smeared, so after a while, he gave up and stuck to cutting out the shapes. His mom even gave his little sister Amber some of the dough, and Amber spent half the afternoon playing with it, kneading it and rolling it and even chewing on a bit of



it. By the time the sun had set, the whole house was full of the sweet smell of gingerbread cookies.

One evening, the family held a dance party. The next day, they played board games. One time, when dad had had to run out to get something, they had all made a present for him, taking care not to leave anything out, no clues or anything that might give it away. Then they had tucked it away in the drawer where many of the presents were kept hidden until Christmas day, because they all knew that no one was allowed to peak in the drawer, lest they ruin the surprise!

The family even had a pajama party. They wore their pajamas all day long. For lunch, they just had toasted cheese sandwiches, and they told stories in the afternoon and had a pillow fight in the evening. They made Christmas tree decorations using paper and popcorn. They even made some playdough out of salt, flour, and water, and they used it to make statues that they painted with watercolor paints. They just had to pay close attention to be sure little Amber didn't eat the playdough!

Mom was the one who came up with most of the ideas, and she was also the one who made sure that they had everything they needed to put the ideas into action, but when he wasn't working, dad came up with a few ideas of his own. They had a winter picnic in Baby Fox's playhouse in the yard. It was cold outside, so they dressed up nice and warm and took a bunch of blankets out too. Dad even got a space heater. The cord stretched all the way across the yard like

a long, slender black snake. Mama Fox brought out some hot cocoa and bread with butter and jam, and they picnicked until, in the end, they really did feel the churlish chiding of the winter wind.

The family had dinner by candlelight, using candles that they had made themselves the day before from sheets of beeswax. They munched on crispy slices of garlic toast and sipped hot mugs of linden tea. Baby Fox, who had been quite certain that he simply couldn't stand the taste of garlic, found himself rubbing a moist clove of it on his bread and happily munching away with her parents. Maybe it was the soothing flicker of the candles.



THE STUNTED PINE TREE

Baby Fox had heard many times about how in some houses and some lands angels brought the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve and hung all the decorations on it, but in his house, they did things a little differently. Mama Fox put pine branches in a big vase, because she didn't want to have a tree in the house that had been cut from its roots. Then, the family decorated the pine branches together on the afternoon of Christmas Eve. Mama Fox said that she enjoyed hanging the decorations, so she had talked the angels into letting her do it instead of them. Baby Fox agreed. He also enjoyed decorating the Christmas tree. One of his earliest memories was of sitting on the table and hanging the glittering balls and garlands on the prickly branches one by one.

But this year, for the first time, Mama Fox announced that she wanted a real tree.

'One of the ones they cut down?' Dad asked with puzzled look on his face.

'Certainly not!' Mama Fox replied. 'A tree in a pot, with its roots still intact. We finally have a big enough yard that when spring comes, I'll be able to find a good spot to plant it.'

'You do realize how big it will get, don't you?' Dad asked.

'I do!' Mama Fox replied. 'That's why I want it. The shady spot at the far end of the yard will be perfect for it. And I'll plant hydrangeas all around it. And we'll hang lights and decorations on it every year at Christmastime.'

'Until it grows so high we can't reach all the branches,' dad muttered, though in fact he thought it was a fine idea.

So when the morning of Christmas Eve rolled around, they all set out to get a nice sapling pine. Or rather they would have set out.



Little Amber was already strapped to dad's back when Mama Fox noticed an unpleasant odor.

'Oh dear,' she said. 'What's that smell?'

That smell, alas, was Amber. She had had a little accident. Or rather not so little. She didn't just need a new diaper, she needed a shower from head to paw and a whole new change of clothes.

'Gracious,' Mama Fox muttered as dad slipped Amber into a clean diaper, 'we might not make it to the Christmas tree market on time.'

'But then what are we going to do?' Baby Fox asked, his voice almost shaking with alarm. 'Now we won't have a Christmas tree just because of Amber?'

He cast an angry glance at his little sister. She had messed everything up again!

'When you were little, you always needed a diaper change right as we were getting ready to leave,' Mama Fox said, defending poor Amber from his brother's ire.

'Let's get moving,' Dad said in a calming voice.

And they set out at a brisk pace. Amber, who was all dressed up in her clean clothes, was giggling and wriggling her legs in the baby carrier as dad jogged along.

They arrived at the Christmas tree market just as it was about to close. The market was run by a beaver and a badger.





‘Welcome, I’m Cleaver the beaver,’ Cleaver the beaver said with a broad grin. Baby Fox’s mouth was agape with wonder. Never had he seen teeth as big as Cleaver’s.

‘And I’m Adger the badger,’ Adger the badger said, bowing politely.

‘Oh good, then we haven’t come too late?’ Mama Fox asked.

‘You’ve arrived just in time,’ Cleaver the beaver replied with a smile.

‘Just a minute or two before closing time,’ Adger the badger added. He was not smiling.

They set off towards the trees. There was a veritable forest of elegant pines, all planted in neat rows. Baby Fox had never seen so many pine trees in one place.

‘If you find one you like, just let me know and I’ll chew right through at the base of the trunk,’ Cleaver said. He seemed eager to help. ‘And if you brought a Christmas tree stand, I can nibble the bottom of the tree to make it fit perfectly.’

‘We’d like a live tree, please,’ Mama Fox said, ‘with its roots still intact.’

‘Oh dear,’ Cleaver said, clicking his teeth together as he thought. ‘We don’t have too many of them left. Everybody seems to want a live tree these days! You have to bite through the trunks of the bigger trees. The root beds are simply too big. The smaller trees are over here.’

He led them towards a narrow, half-hidden path.

Cleaver’s ‘not too many of them left’ turned out to be ‘not a single decent one left.’ At the end of the path, a stunted little sapling was



standing all on its own in the dirt. It was crooked, and its branches were gnarled on one side and short on the other.

‘Oh, poor little thing!’ dad sighed. ‘It must have been pressed against another tree, and it couldn’t grow properly.’

‘Perhaps we’ll have a Christmas tree made of branches again this year,’ Mama Fox said.

But Baby Fox suddenly took pity on the stunted little tree.

‘Let’s take this one home!’ he pleaded. ‘It will grow into a fine tree in our yard.’

‘This?’ Mama Fox asked. ‘For a Christmas tree? But it’s so ugly!’

‘But the poor tree can’t help it!’ Baby Fox said. He was determined to defend the little sapling. ‘Another tree half squashed it. But at our house, no one would bother it. And we’ll water it and give it fertilizer and everything it needs to grow,’ he added, because he could remember having seen Mama Fox water the plants in the house and give them all sorts of plant vitamin mixtures.

Mama Fox laughed.

‘Alright, we’ll take that one,’ she said to Cleaver, pointing at the stunted tree.

‘Shall I bite through the trunk for you?’ Cleaver asked.

‘No, no,’ Mama Fox replied, shaking her head, ‘we want it roots and all.’

‘One moment, I’ll get my colleague!’

Soon, Adger the badger appeared. He seemed eager to be getting home and, after giving an irritated huff, he let his claws out and a moment later, he had dug up the little tree. He put it in a pot, they paid for it, and the family set out for home. Mama Fox took Amber, and dad carried the tree, and all the way home, Baby Fox spoke to the little pine in a tender voice and gently caressed its gnarled branches.



CHRISTMAS

Mama Fox liked to keep the home neat and tidy. At least on the big day of one of the biggest holidays of the year. On Christmas day, she was always hustling and bustling about the house, baking and cooking and straightening up, and stopping from time to time to check her watch.

‘Oh dear, I won’t be finished on time! Christmas is here, and the house is a mess.’

‘Oh, don’t worry about it,’ dad said. He was playing with little Amber on the rug in the living room. ‘Christmas isn’t some big boss or inspector you have to answer to! You work hard getting the house all spic and span, and then you’re exhausted by the time we start celebrating. Tell you what! I don’t need an immaculate house or a yard all nice and tidy. I’d rather have you relaxed and in good spirits.’

‘You have a point,’ Mama Fox said with a weary smile. ‘But I do want to finish dinner. We can’t have toast for supper on Christmas Eve!’

She smiled at Baby Fox.

‘Thank heavens I don’t have to worry about getting the Christmas tree decorated!’



Baby Fox smiled back at her and then got back to hanging the ornaments on the tree. Little Amber helped at first, and Baby Fox let her hang some of the shiniest balls on the branches all by herself and then pass the others to her, but he didn't mind that, after

a while, Amber got bored and started kicking a glowing toy ball back and forth with dad. He rearranged a few of the ornaments that she had put up, because alas, little Amber didn't have much sense of just how to decorate a Christmas tree yet.

Mama Fox gave Baby Fox her broken necklaces and a few pairs of earrings, and soon, there were decorations made of real silver dangling from the branches of the modest tree. Baby Fox put a golden star at the tippy top of the tree, and he was just about to announce to the rest of the family that he had finished when Mama Fox's voice came echoing from the kitchen.

'I hope everyone's hungry! Dinner is ready!'

It was just a touch early for dinner, in fact, and a little too late for lunch, but they were all hungry, and the food was delicious.

After they had finished dinner and straightened up in the kitchen, everyone put their presents under the tree. The little sapling was so small that only a few of the presents actually fit under its lowest branches, but that didn't bother anyone. They lit the candles they had put on a few of its branches, Amber crawled up into dad's lap, Mama Fox got her guitar, and they started singing Christmas carols. Amber wasn't quite up to singing yet, but she very much enjoyed watching the candleflames dance. Dad paid close attention to make sure she didn't try to touch them.

When he had been a very little pup, Baby Fox had often gotten a bit impatient with the singing, since he had wanted to open his

presents, but now that he was a little older, he enjoyed the fact that he had learned so many songs, and he wanted to sing them all.

But soon they had sung all the songs they knew. Mama Fox put down her guitar and started telling the story of the first Christmas. Then she turned on the lights and clapped her hands together.

‘Time for presents!’ she said. ‘My little Baby Fox, you do the honors!’

That meant that Baby Fox would give the others the presents from under the tree one by one, and they would all wait and watch and open them together.

Baby Fox got a book of fairytales, the kind written in all big letters, because he could already read the capital letters. He also got a big bag of colorful marbles. He could hardly wait to play with them. Amber got a lot of presents too, but she seemed to love the colorful wrapping paper and the fancy gift bags more than anything else. Baby Fox remembered that when he had been very little, he had also loved to play with the wrapping paper, and he handed his little sister the glittering paper from his presents.

‘Here, Amber! Look at how it shimmers and shines!’

They all slept late the next morning. After everyone had had breakfast, Mama Fox was hustling and bustling about the house again.

‘My little Baby Fox, let’s get all the presents put away. We have guests coming!’



‘Oh no!’ Baby Fox spluttered.

They often had guests at Christmastime. They were called ‘relatives’ or ‘friends,’ but for the most part, they were strangers whom Baby Fox hardly knew, and he didn’t find their presence in the house something to be excited about. At least when they were at home, he could sneak off and play quietly while his parents chitchatted with the guests, but when they were invited somewhere else, he had to be polite and sit through the whole thing without looking too bored. And sometimes there wasn’t even any good food, just fancy adult stuff. Who were these guests anyway? But at least this time they didn’t have to go anywhere, and they’d have the yummy stuff Mama Fox had made to munch on.

‘Who’s coming?’ Baby Fox asked, though he knew the names would probably be entirely unfamiliar to him.

‘You’ll see,’ Mama Fox said with a smile.

Her reply didn’t make Baby Fox any more eager to help out. He put a few of the presents away, mostly just tucking them to the side, and then sat down to play with some playdough, rolling it into big soft balls. He even let Amber play with them.

‘See, Amber? We can pretend that these are scrumptious cupcakes,’ he said. ‘But don’t forget, it’s just pretend! Don’t put them in your mouth!’

Suddenly, the doorbell rang.

‘Mom, the guests are here,’ Baby Fox shouted.

‘Could you let them in,’ Mama Fox replied. ‘I’ve got my hands full in the kitchen.’

‘Dad, can you let the guests in?’ Baby Fox said. The last thing he wanted to do was to have to face a bunch of strangers at the door.

‘I’m in the shower!’ dad replied. ‘You’ll have to let them in.’

Baby Fox heaved a heavy sigh. He would have to open the front door and welcome a bunch of people whose names he didn’t even know.

The doorbell rang again. Baby Fox slumped towards the front door. He flung it open and then just stood there, mouth agape. Standing on the doorstep of their house was none other than Big Kitty and Little Kitty.

‘Surprise!’ Big Kitty said.

Baby Fox was speechless. He hadn’t seen his best friend in so long that he had almost forgotten how much he missed him. Before he could gather his thoughts, Mama Fox had come out from the kitchen and was standing behind him.

‘Shall we let them in?’ she asked.

Baby Fox stumbled back a few steps to let the guests in. Big Kitty nudged Little Kitty into the hallway. Little Kitty was holding a box wrapped in shiny, colorful ribbons. For a moment, he didn’t quite seem to know what to do with it, so he put it on the floor and then threw his arms around Baby Fox and gave him a big hug. His nose was cold, and he had a nice, soothing kitty-cat smell. Baby



Fox hadn't seen him for longer than he could remember. And now it seemed so perfectly natural that he was here, in his home, throwing his arms around him. As if they had never been separated! Little Kitty released him from his embrace, bent down, picked up the gift he had put on the floor, and presented it to him.

'MERRY
CHRISTMAS!'



he said in his familiarly sweet, singsong kitty-cat meow.



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