



Twelve Sleuths A-Searching



A Topsy Turvy Holiday Story of Belville
by Elle Hartford





One quick note: Red and her friends celebrate Yule, which is an ancient holiday that gave us some of the familiar Christmas traditions of today--things like "yuletide cheer," Yule logs, and mistletoe. It was a winter solstice celebration of the (eventual) return of summer. Like many winter holidays, at its core, Yule is a celebration of being with the people we love!

So, without further ado . . .



I flopped onto my sofa, my peppermint tea sloshing in its bright green mug. William gazed at me placidly from his spot on the window seat.

"I don't know why I sign myself up for these things," I announced.

"Because you can't live life secluded in your lab, that's why," said William, a dog-shaped familiar skilled in the art of always knowing better than everyone else. Especially me. "Jeez, Red, it's just hosting a Yule party. It's not scaling the mountain."

I glanced out the window. Through a flurry of snow, the mountains that surrounded Belville were barely visible. "If I did that, at least I could sled down afterward."

William sneezed, shaking floppy ears. "With your luck, you'd probably run into a tree."

I had to admit that snow and all its sports were fairly new to me, since I'd grown up in a hot desert. "I know I didn't exactly take to the snow last winter, but I'm doing better this year."

"What you're doing is procrastinating," William decided. "Unless you want to host your party outside in a snow fort, you better start planning."





"You don't have any idea what to do for this party, do you?" William continued, lounging royally on his windowseat.

I stretched my feet toward the fire crackling in my apartment's cozy hearth. "Maybe. Maybe not."

"This isn't a riddle." As William spoke, I could hear the eye roll. "You're making it too complicated."

"Holidays are always complicated." I said it to tease him, but it was kinda true. In the years I'd lived as a traveling alchemist, holidays were--well, just days with more people on the road. Or more people buying false gold or glitter powder or "reindeer food potion." (Despite having sold that last one for years, I still wasn't sure what it was or did.) My family was loving, but they lived far away. Holidays were . . . well, lonely.

Not that I'd tell William that.

But of course, he was on to me. He snorted. "Who's on the guest list?"

"Excuse me?"

"You know, who you're inviting. I invite Dusty."

"You're inviting *your* friend to *my* party?" I grinned. "I guess it's up to me to invite Officer Thorn."

She'd been my first friend in Belville; she deserved to top the list. Besides, she'd probably yell at me otherwise.

"I invite Sir Rowan," William said.

I laughed. "I better invite our neighbors. With Gloria, that's four people."

"And Sakura."

"Trent too, then."

"And I call Daisy."

"I thought she came automatically with Sir Rowan. How about Ryuko?"

William gave me a look.

"You think he won't come?"

"Nooo," said William. "I think you're forgetting someone."

"Forgetting?" I tugged at my ponytail, thinking. The list was already longer than expected.

William sneezed. And stared pointedly at the book on my side table. It was an enchanted memory album, a gift. In scrawling letters, the title read: *Red, William, Thorn, & Luca Visit Seaside.*

"Oh." My cheeks burned. "I just assumed he'd come."

This time, William's eye roll was so exaggerated I couldn't miss it. "You two might be joined at the hip these days, but the bookseller still counts as a separate person."

I threw a pillow at him--mostly so that he wouldn't see my goofy grin.

It was nice to have someone to count on for the holidays.





Over the sounds of the fire and my own laughter as William struggled with the pillow I'd thrown, a knock sounded at the door.

"Speak of the devil," William muttered. Bits of fluff floated around him like snow.

I knew better than to ask who had knocked. Instead, I got up and crossed the room--with butterflies in my stomach.

"Hi Red!" Luca beamed as he came in. "I hope I'm not interrupting?"

"Nope. I'll make cocoa," I said, returning his grin. "We were just talking about how under-prepared I am for this Yule party thing."

"Good! That's why I came," Luca replied, following me into my little kitchen. "I figured we might not've explained the Yule log. See, every year in Belville for centuries we've used a piece of last year's log to help start the fire on the new log. It's part of the ceremony of the feast on Yule night."

I paused in the middle of whisking up milk. "Ceremony? Feast?"

"Don't worry, that's just scholar-speak." Luca nudged me aside, taking over the hot chocolate-making. "Really it's just using an old piece of wood to start up the fire here in your hearth. Everything else you have planned is totally fine."

From across the room, William sneezed. "Assuming she has anything planned."

I glared at him before turning back to Luca (who was adding a dizzying array of things to our hot chocolate; I didn't even recognize some of the little bottles he'd pulled out). "Well, that's fine."

"You'll pencil it in to your schedule?" Luca winked at me. "Great. It's just a little gesture, but the Yule log itself is one of the most important decorations of the season. Symbolic, and all."



"Right." Watching him pour his concoction into two mugs, I wasn't sure if I felt trepidation about the party or the drink.

When he handed me a mug, however, I was surprised--it was delicious. As I relaxed and took a drink, Luca said, "So, um, I guess this means that I *didn't* already tell you this? Because I was kinda hoping that I'd already given you the old log. See, it's kept at the bookstore normally, and I . . . well, I kinda lost it."

Hot chocolate went flying in every direction, decorating the kitchen as I processed this latest surprise.





Despite the cocoa and merrily crackling fireplace, Luca's news--that he couldn't find last year's Yule log--pulled down the atmosphere in the studio apartment. I half expected my breath to start coming in puffs of icy condensation, or snow to land on my kitchen island.

"You're sure?" I asked him. "But--but wouldn't that mean the whole tradition of lighting the new fire won't work?"

"Ye-es." Luca spoke slowly, drawing out the word as he wiped hot cocoa off of my kitchen cabinets. "But don't worry, Red, I'm sure we'll find it. Maybe I just put it somewhere extra secret, for safe-keeping . . ."

"Or maybe the kids over at the spy school stole it," William said dryly from across the room.

"Don't even go there," I told him. Luca may not have been reassuring with his "secret safe-keeping," but William was making things even worse. Last year--our first Yule in Belville--we'd had a run-in with the students of the spy school (a local, but naturally very mysterious, institution). They'd swiped all my leftover Yuletide cookies. I didn't want to think about it.

William cocked an ear, like he thought he was being helpful. "Could be a new tradition."

"Theft isn't a tradition. It's a crime," I insisted, trying to ignore how much I sounded like Officer Thorn.



"But solving mysteries could become a tradition, right?" Luca asked brightly as he wrung cocoa out of a kitchen towel. "Like hunting for Ostara eggs or playing hide-and-seek!"

"Hide-and-seek with an old piece of wood, in a town surrounded by a literal forest," William observed.

I sighed. If Luca had faith in me, I decided, we might as well try. "The hunt for the missing Yule log is on."





Well, a thorough search of Luca's book store--including lots of inadvertent dusting and a few narrow misses with falling stacks of books--failed to turn up the missing Yule log. I proposed we visit the town Witch, who might be able to perform a spell to locate it. No one else had any better ideas, so like three wise men--or rather, like one optimistic bookseller, one anxious alchemist, and one skeptical talking dog--we trooped to the outskirts of Belville, where the Witch's Hut stood.

It sort of stood, anyway. The chimney was at an odd angle and the shutters had mostly fallen off, but Trent had done a lot to fix the place up. In fact, as we approached his home, the light from the windows was plentiful and cheery, and strains of "The Holly and the Ivy" drifted out over the hill.

Turned out, we'd caught Trent practicing.

As my friends and I gathered in the bare living room, Trent sat hunched over a strange stringed instrument. He clearly hadn't expected guests; the young Witch kept running his free hand through his long hair as he explained, "It's a mandola. Saki got it for me. I told her how I used to play one back at school, but, uh, it's been a long time since then . . . I'm still remembering how everything goes."

"Your girlfriend got you an overgrown ukelele?" William asked.

"It's not a ukelele," Trent said, drawing the mandola to his chest protectively. "And we aren't dating." He glanced at me and Luca. "Are *you* dating?"

"Are we?" asked Luca.

"What?" I said.

William snorted. "Nice try to deflect the conversation, Witch."

"Anyway," said Trent, "why are you here? Not that I'm not, you know, happy to see you or anything."

I finally managed to recover, and even to chuckle. "It's fine. Sorry to barge in on you. We need your help finding something. But also--would you play some of your songs for us at the Yule party?"

"That's if we still have a party," muttered William.

"Sure, if you think people wouldn't mind." Trent glanced at my pessimistic companion. "What's wrong with the Yule party?"

I glanced at Luca and nodded. Together, we did our best to explain.





I had hoped that Trent, Belville's official town Witch, would be able to do a spell that would show us exactly where the missing Yule log was hiding. But as an alchemist, I really don't know much about magic . . . and it turned out that Trent's spell was not exact at all.

"We've been out here in the forest for hours," William complained.



Seeing as only his fluffy head and black tail poked up out of the snow, I actually felt bad for him. "You can go home if you want."

Snowflakes went up into the air in a cloud as William snorted. "Leaving you out here with *them*?"

"Them' who?" asked Luca, trudging over to my side. "Trent thinks he's got it narrowed down this time, by the way!"

"It wasn't this meadow. It was the next one over. I'm pretty sure," Trent called, from the safety of a nearby fir.

"Pretty sure'?" William howled. He'd never been a fan of Witches, even when not cold and wet. "Well, I'm *pretty sure* your wild log chase is going to end up with us lost and frozen into abominable snow people!"

Trent was quiet, maybe thinking how to defend himself; and from the glance Luca and I exchanged, I could tell that he--like me--was trying to suppress giggles. In the silence, a new voice spoke.

"You're not lost yet," observed my neighbor, Gloria, with her usual lack of enthusiasm. "You're barely a minute from town."

The four of us turned as one. Gloria, standing proudly atop the drifts on snowshoes, watched us from the other side of the clearing. She added, "Why do you think you need to be covered in snow to be abominable, anyway?"

Covering my laugh behind one oversize mitten, I let Luca explain the search. Gloria listened quietly, and just when I thought she was so bored she was just going to snowshoe away, she said, "Why don't you get a new log?"

Luca seemed taken aback. "But the tradition says--"

"So start something new," Gloria said, tossing her hair.

I glanced around at my bedraggled companions and made a quick decision. "Good back up plan. We'll still keep an eye out for the old one, but in the meantime--Gloria, why don't you help us find a new one?"





Still short one traditional Yule log, but with an armful of new possibilities, we trooped up the stairs to my studio apartment. The place was soon awash with bright voices and melting snow.

"Sure is nice to be back inside, isn't it?" Trent declared, shedding his hat and gloves as he made his way to the sitting area.

"Stay away from my window seat!" William growled, bounding after him.

"I'll help you set those down," Luca said helpfully, taking the new Yule logs from me.

"I can't believe you conned me into this," Gloria muttered, settling one hip against my kitchen island.

"You didn't have to interrupt your walk for us." I moved into the little kitchen, gathering tea and popcorn.

"Whatever," Gloria sighed. "As long as you don't all start holding hands around the fire or making cutesy cookie houses. Or singing."

My gaze slid past her to Trent, sitting on the sofa--a safe distance from William. The Witch had just conjured up his guitar-like instrument from earlier. A mandola, he had called it. Well, I thought, whatever it was called, it was about to introduce cacophony into our midst.

"How about just instrumental music?" I asked Gloria, as Trent began tuning.

Gloria replied with a few very un-festive curses. Fortunately, the whistle of the kettle on the stove drowned her out.

"I gotta keep practicing if I'm going to play at this Yule party," Trent informed the room. "That means you all have to sing."

Gloria's glare could have cut ice.

Before I could say anything, Luca cleared his throat. Across the room, he'd arranged the logs into a neat pile and gotten the fire going. With a shy smile at me, he said, "Why don't we start with Let it Snow?"





Despite his insistence that he needed more practice, Trent was actually very good on his mandola. And despite her insistence on despising everything "cutesy," Gloria stuck around as the rest of us sang carols.

When we finally stopped for a break, the popcorn was gone, the tea was cold, and it was time to start preparing for the Yule party.

. . . A fact I realized (accompanied by a moment of sheer panic) as I heard a familiar shout in the snow outside.

"Ho! Ho! Ho!" A brassy voice called from the street.

I was on my feet in a flash. I ran down the stairs to throw open my front door and glare at Officer Thorn.

". . . *Home* for the holidays," she finished, with a wide grin. "Because during the holidays, we're all family, and your house is mine, right?"

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn't help grinning too. "Before you come in, you're going to have to explain why you showed up here on a sleigh. Couldn't you have just walked? It's what, two blocks to the police station?"

"Who walks in this weather?" Thorn hopped down from her wooden, bell-encrusted sleigh.

I refrained from admitting that my friends and I had recently been walking all over town in search of some charcoal. Instead, I said, "I didn't even know you had one. How does it run? Magic?"



"Of course," she replied, as if to say, *Get with the program, Red, all sleighs are magic.* "Anyway, I needed it to carry everything."

I pursed my lips at the series of bags Thorn was unloading. "Um . . . you know *I* was the one responsible for hosting the party, right?"

"Oh, Red." Officer Thorn tossed a bag over her broad shoulder and grinned. "You should know better than to think I'd let you go it alone."





After Officer Thorn arrived to whip us into shape, my apartment was awash with activity. I was in charge of food. After all, cooking is a lot like alchemy--but you get to eat all the ingredients!

By the time I'd slid the main course into the oven and set several cookie doughs into the icebox to rest, it was time for a break. Amid all the bustle of my friends' preparations, I swiped a cup of tea and snuck off to the couch by the fire.

Of course, I should have known better than to think I was being discreet. I'd barely had time for one peppermint sip before Officer Thorn joined me.

"Not bad work, eh?" she said, glancing proudly around the apartment.

I looked too, smiling. William and Gloria were busily rearranging furniture to fit everyone in my little dining nook. Trent had taken advantage of William's distraction, and sat folded up in the window seat practicing carols on his mandola. Across the room, Luca hummed along as he strung up holly, fir boughs, and sparkling fairy lights.

"I just brought up the final load," Thorn continued, nodding at a massive pile of gifts beside my fireplace.

My eyes widened. "Good thing it was the last one, or I don't think we'd have any room for the party. Those aren't all from you, are they?"

"Course not. I went around and collected them from everyone earlier. Can't have people trying to haul heavy presents on these icy sidewalks," Thorn said cheerfully.

Privately, I wondered if it really was a good thing that smalltown Belville had been so quiet this winter. If Officer Thorn was getting up to so much meddling, maybe she had too much free time . . .

She must have seen my smile, because she nudged me. "Not so worried about hosting the Yule party any more?"

"Not as much," I agreed, shaking peppermint tea off the apron I'd forgotten to remove.

"Just goes to show that the best gift of all is good friends," Thorn said, with satisfaction. "Second-best is getting to continue old traditions, if you ask me. Speaking of . . ."

She leaned over and plucked a present from the top of the pile. My jaw fell open as she handed me a charred bit of log topped with a bright red bow.





My surprise at finding the missing Yule log turned into reproach as I took the "present" from Officer Thorn. "You had this all along? Do you know how long we've been looking for it?"

"If you were looking for something, why wasn't your first stop the police station? You know I hold on to all the town's lost and found objects," Thorn returned with a chuckle.

I set the log aside and crossed my arms. "Are you saying Luca lost something as important to the town as last year's Yule log?"

Technically, Luca himself had said that--but it didn't sit well with me when someone else did.

"Stand down," Officer Thorn insisted. "I didn't say any such thing. I picked it up a few days ago when I was doing the rounds collecting presents. He must have just forgotten."

"Uh huh." Or she helped herself while he was busy, thinking she was being efficient, I thought. It was clear that I'd been right: Officer Thorn *had* had too much time on her hands lately.

But, the log was found, and the tradition could carry on. No big deal, right? I relaxed, and finally grinned at my friend. "Well, I guess we're lucky *you* didn't lose it among all your presents, then."

Officer Thorn made a pun about "presents of mind" which I did my best to erase from my memory, and the afternoon settled back into merry chaos. I managed to finish most of the cooking before the rest of our friends arrived, all bearing side dishes and desserts and, perhaps most importantly, spiced cider. We got Trent to stop practicing his mandola long enough to cast a magic spell over the apartment, and together we all squeezed comfortably around my dining table.





"To old traditions," Officer Thorn said, leading the toast by holding her glass high.

"To new ones, too," Luca added, smiling at me.

"To friendship," Gloria said, when Saki (with an angelic smile) elbowed her.

"To love," said Trent, smiling at Saki.

"To good health and clear thinking," William added. I knew he was making a comment about Trent's stricken state.

Laughing, I held my cider aloft and concluded, "May fortune smile on us all!"





Even with Trent's spell, which made my studio apartment feel a little more spacious--and therefore capable hosting all my friends for a Yule party--it wasn't long after the dinner dishes were cleared away that people were starting to step on each others' toes.

"There's nothing wrong with new traditions," Gloria glowered.

"There's nothing wrong with *old* traditions," Officer Thorn declared.

"There's something wrong with stealing Yule logs from bookstores," William muttered.

Metaphorical toes, of course. I blamed the copious amounts of cider which had disappeared . . . Though I had to admit, it was heartwarming to see William take Luca's part for once. Not that anyone but me noticed: the conversation had descended into holiday- and tradition-themed noise.

Luca caught me watching the boisterous group from my kitchen island. He set down the last pile of plates and reached around me for the icebox. Then, with a grin, he said, "Watch this."

He went back to the table and stood behind his empty chair, drawing himself up. "As Belville's resident scholar and historian, I know the perfect way to solve this," he announced.

The group fell silent. A bit suspiciously, Trent asked, "You do?"

"Of course." Luca nodded seriously. "There's only one time-honored test to decide which side of the argument is right . . ."

"We'll organize ourselves into groups and present well-reasoned arguments and then have a thoughtful debate?" Saki suggested.

"Close," said Luca. "First we organize ourselves into groups. Then we go outside . . . and have an Old versus New snowball fight. First to surrender has to concede their point!"

As he spoke, Luca reached out and stuck the ice cube he'd taken from the icebox down the back of Officer Thorn's collar. ❄️





Luca had started the most epic snowball fight in Belville history. Officer Thorn was determined to bury him in snow after the ice cube trick. Gloria was determined to get Thorn. I went to Luca's defense and William went to mine, but some of the couples present ended up fighting against each other--more for fun than anything else, I think.

By the time I flung myself to the safety of my apartment stairs, I was covered in icicles and snow, my breath coming as laughter. Luca had made it inside just before me.

"They heard me call truce, right?" he asked. Beyond the doorway, the war raged. "I thought we all agreed!"

"We did," I panted. "But then Thorn called William a 'dog,' and his response sent her, Dusty, Ryuko, *and* Daisy flying into a snowbank."

"Oh." Luca's eyes widened, and he burst out laughing. "In that case, I don't think we should wait for them."

"My thoughts exactly." I grinned up at him. "Let's get started on the cocoa. And presents, too, if they take too long getting revenge."

"Good plan." As I came up the stairs, though, Luca didn't move. Instead, more softly, he added, "Red, you know that this has been an amazing Yule party, right? The food, the decorations, the Yule log, even the snowball fight--it's all been perfect. *You* are perfect."



I stared at him until snowflakes dripping from my eyelashes made me rub one mittened hand over my face. "It's only perfect because you're here helping," I managed.

Luca took my free hand in his, smiling. "Well, speaking of me helping . . . I did put up some mistletoe earlier. Come on, let's get upstairs where it's warm."

I followed him up to the apartment, even though I'm sure I was blushing enough to heat up the whole building. *Mistletoe? When had he snuck that in??*

As if he could hear my thoughts, Luca turned and grinned as he pushed open the door. Everything was as we'd left it: cozy and festive . . . and crowded. Beside the fireplace, under a sprig of mistletoe, Trent and Sakura embraced.

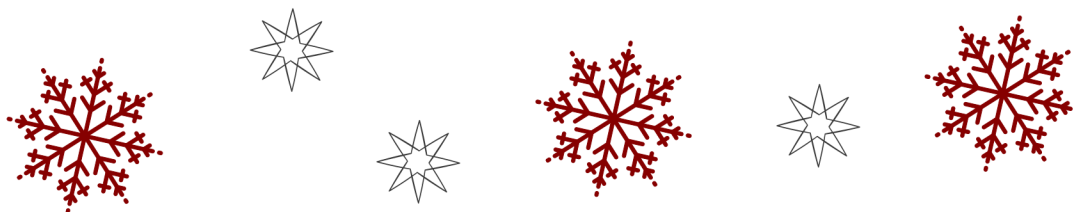
Apparently, Yule brought out the sneakiness in *all* my friends.

"So much for being alone," Luca whispered.

I chuckled. "Alone on a holiday in Belville? Not a chance."



Thanks for reading~
and may fortune smile on you this season!



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