

A NUTCRACKER CHRISTMAS

by Laurie Winter

EXCERPT

“Clara’s Christmas Shoppe is officially ready for business!” Aria flipped the sign on the front door from Closed to Open. She set her hands on her hips, filled with pride. No—hordes of shoppers weren’t storming up the porch stairs but they’d come. She had to believe all of the effort wasn’t for nothing.

Ginger clapped her hands. “This will be so much fun. Thanks for letting me come back and work for a few weeks. Feels good to see the store dressed for the holidays again.”

Aria slowly spun around, admiring the view. Every display burst with merchandise. The Christmas trees in the showrooms and entryway sparkled. Even the air smelled like the season—the blend of the burning pine and cranberry scented candles.

She gazed at the nutcracker she’d earlier set on the cashier’s counter then at Ginger. Maybe she didn’t need to wait until sundown for answers. “How much did Clara tell you about that nutcracker? And how long have you known Kort? Do you know if there’s a connection between the two?”

“Perhaps.” With a feather duster in hand, Ginger pranced around a table filled with a Christmas village display, cleaning off already dust-free pieces. “Didn’t your Aunt Clara leave you with the answers to those questions?”

“No, and now she’s gone.” Aria followed a few steps behind Ginger, careful to steer clear of her enthusiastic dusting. If only Aunt Clara had been more forthcoming in her letter about the nutcracker. Like—*My dearest Aria, the nutcracker I left for you is actually a cursed man who will come to life if you read the poem tucked inside its back.*

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