

DIARY OF A TOMB RAIDER WHEN SHE'S NOT TOMB RAIDERING - CHAPTER 24

** HOW TO BE A BABYSITTER (WELL, KIND OF...) * By A.C.R.*

Who would ever have thought that after spending so much time of my life climbing off cliffs, raiding undiscovered tombs, fighting off cults, witnessing tries at ending the world we know... taking a Christmas photo for a contest would be the toughest and maybe even the quirkiest task I'd ever dare to face.

Add that to the attempt at babysitting small Paul, Angela's youngest brother. She is one of my dearest friends and she's always travelling around the world due to work. Even at Christmas. So she had this wonderful idea of leaving Paul with me for some days, as their parents were also travelling all over the orb to give the Christmas presents to their relatives, each one living in different countries. They truly have what it takes to be adventurers for sure.

But, right, as if I had some experience at taking care of children...

Persistence is one of my mottos. But when it comes from a little child that is constantly asking, every hour, every day..., you finally have to give up and do his things. And here's me dressed as a reindeer, on all my fours trying to eat a carrot (if that's what reindeers eat...).

"Run, Lara! Run! Hahaha! Don't forget the carrot! Ho, ho, ho!"

"That's it! Keep going, you little naughty! Laugh as much as you can. I'll take my revenge after this. I'll show you Zip's madness room and you'll calm down. Ho, ho, ho!" I thought.

Close to midnight, the little monster finally went to bed. So I had some time for myself. A hot lemon tea with peppermint and some cinnamon cookies opened my mind to the wide range of possibilities I had at my disposal, so that I could take the best Christmas photo ever. The prize for the contest was a trip to Disneyland, not that bad really. And I wanted to win it for Angela, so that she could take her whole family, and I

mean all of them, and spend the time of their lives in that wondrous place. She deserves the best and I'll do the same with this picturesque matter.

Suddenly, I felt some staring eyes at my back. A familiar feeling. I turned around in a second and:

"But you're still there! And spying on me!" I said loudly to Paul.

"Hehehe, you look silly, Lara. What's so special in that tea that got your attention?"

"It's called 'thinking about how to win a contest'." I replied to him without thinking twice.

"Dressed like Saint Claus this time, perhaps? Hahaha! If your friend Adele and my sister saw you... Hahaha!" He went laughing out loud straight to bed (hopefully now).

"Laugh all you want, little guy! You'll see the fruits of my labour soon." I thought a little bit worried.

Because he was right. It was as if he were reading my mind. Being dressed as one of the most beloved people out there was a little bit of a risk. It was classic and probably every participant would try that outfit on their entries. I needed something else, something touchy-feely and a Kodak moment!

And it seems like Goddess Fortuna enlightened me, as Paul's six little kittens... (Saltarin, Caruso, Copito, Nevado, Padi and Leo - Nice! I got them right this time!) ...appeared in front of my eyes, marching perfectly in file like the most devoted army. Couldn't they sleep as well? Or were they just spying on me too like his owner? One never knows when stuff like this happens... The thing is that those little cuties would be perfect for the photo.

Since I honed my knitting skills with Zip's scarf, I decided to sew some lovely reindeer costumes for them. That would be just perfect! But still, something was missing.

When preparing dinner the following day, it came to my mind what I overlooked the day before: Paul's big plushie that his grandmother gave him last Christmas. He's always attached to it, so it was going to be quite a ride to try and convince him to lend it to me for some time.

It was time to get into real action:

"This is so yummy, Lara! And it's my favourite meal! How did you know it?" He asked so happily.

"A Tomb Raider knows everything (kind of). But this is not for free, I need something from you." I had to be honest about it.

"I knew it already, dear. You want my plushie, don't you?" He's so clever!

"My lovely Paul, you're the best! And with your kittens, I'll be the total winner of the contest." At this moment, I couldn't keep to myself my true intentions.

"But Saltarin and the rest will tear it apart and I love it so much!"

"Do not worry, sweetheart. Your small friends will behave nicely and I already have in my mind how I'm going to place them, so that your plushie will remain untouched." I tried to calm him. I know from the heart how much he loves that teddy bear.

"All right! I'll let you do it!" He finally agreed.

"Thanks so much, sweetie!" I kissed him on the right cheek and it seemed that everything would be as easy as pie.

Or that was what I thought at first. It was 6:30 in the morning, I couldn't sleep more since the idea of how to craft the perfect sled was running around in circles in my mind. But first things first: those costumes needed to be done ASAP!

Paul finally woke up and was stunned as soon as he saw the costumes for his feline friends. They were carefully knitted with shiny red cloth overall and white silk and cotton for the hat specially. The sound of tiny bells in the jacket was so relaxing, that we both had the conviction that the photo would be a total success.

After a full English breakfast, courtesy of my dear Winston, Paul and I worked together to build the sled. In the end, it was the best idea. I wanted him to collaborate in this project since, well, he really had a lot to say about it and it was the right thing to do. And besides, we really had a terrific time!

When you think about the idea of using sticks from ice lollies and an empty shoe box that was weirdly over there in the garage... to craft the sled, tricky, right?

But it came out so beautifully: shiny red, glorious green, gold and silver and glitter too and that wood varnish gave the whole thing an ultimate touch. If Zip had seen us... Probably he would have laughed a lot, because our faces resembled true happiness (and there were some, maybe, embarrassing expressions on them too). It was amazing! I realized that having Paul with me wasn't a terrible idea at all! He just wanted to help me. Clever and skilled boy!

The desired moment finally came! We were so nervous and focused at the same time. We treated every aspect and concept of the photo with extreme tact:

"Right! Paul, let's place your Saint Plushie Claus here and your kittens around him... Like this!" Simple instructions give less problems.

"Lara, I don't see it! They are really going to tear my toy!" Paul said worried.

"No, just trust me! Entertain them with yarn balls. I have some on the sofa. I'm taking the camera now, so it'll be a matter of a few minutes." I tried to calm him a little bit.

"Ok! But hurry up! I don't get along very well with them!"

Fortunately for us both, the camera was on Zip's desk in the tech room. A couple of seconds for some preparation and we were done! Perfectly conceived shots of beautiful handcrafted stuff and lovely pets in the middle! With big Saint Plushie Claus conducting the whole scene! A wonderful Christmassy postcard if you ask me. If I didn't win, I could just let all my loved ones have one to wish them Merry Christmas!

And it was sent to the contest right away!

We were so nervous the next morning, 24th of December, that Paul got the newspaper from the front gate of the manor without caring about the freezing temperatures we were having in Surrey. No warning from me would help! Hopping like the happiest boy in the world, he came in, covered in white snow and handed the newspaper to me:

"You get a cold and Angela will give me sweet coal as a present. And I don't like it!" I said to him severely.

"You'll get some nevertheless. Ho, ho, ho!" He said rushing to the bathroom for a hot bath.

Sometimes he puts on my nerves, but I know he's a good lad. I sat on the sofa, placed a wool blanket on my knees, had a sip of some hot cocoa and waited for some churros that Winston had learnt to cook from a Spanish friend. I started to flip the pages and I was about to spill the beverage all over the floor when I read the news:

"We won!!!" I loudly exclaimed with utter excitement and joy.

"What?!" Paul said running downstairs as if there were no tomorrow...

I showed him the page with our photograph. We were first! It was incredible! I mean, I trust my photo skills, but the rivals were difficult to surpass. There were really professional photographers out there in the competition. Paul was also very impatient to know the first prize:

"How about a full weekend in... Disneyland for all your family?!" I happily suggested it to him.

"No way! Don't joke me around, Lara!" He hates being mocked.

"Look at this!" I showed him the information about the prize and the ad.

It was a complete blast. I think I've never seen someone this exalted. But it was justified. Disneyland is a magical place and I know nobody who wouldn't like to go there to spend a fantastic time and meet Mickey or Donald. When I saw the little kid crying with emotion, I hugged him and tried to cheer him up. Winston also helped, as Paul has always considered him like a father. So have I. Just a couple of words of wisdom and Paul stopped crying and started smiling with a big grin on his face.

Once the living-room held a calmer mood, we decided to check the reviews and it was no surprise to us that the kittens and the plushie got all the praise: it was new, fresh and sensational.

With the lovely feeling of satisfaction floating in the air and in our hearts, we had one of the best Christmas Eves ever. I've always said that Winston is a terrific cook, I still have to learn a lot from him. But that night, he outdid himself: the dinner was so exquisite that I couldn't think of the last time I felt that delighted.

On the 25th, Angela came home. It was time for Paul to leave and enjoy a well-deserved vacation with his family.

Angela thanked me for all the time I spent with him. But honestly, I'd have done that once and once again. An absolutely splendid time, that sometimes it's hard to find since I'm mostly alone and when you feel your heart warm, it's an indescribable experience. One to be always remembered.

Not that bad for a first time at babysitting, huh?!

And now dear reader, if you've reached this paragraph, it means that you've taken your time to read these humble words once more! You do know that this diary is a rarity. I'm not used to stuff like this. But, when I found my mother's lost sewing box in the crypt..., since then, I've been reliving my childhood memories with her and I realise each day and more than ever, how much I truly miss her. And I felt very identified with what I lived with little Paul these days. That's why I wanted to share these deep emotions with you. I hope that, some day, if you find this manuscript, you will know more about me even after parting from this world to Paradise.

Merry Christmas, Paul! Merry Christmas to all of you! I wish you the best!

Lara Croft. -