

CHRISTMAS ISLAND



by Brenda Guiled

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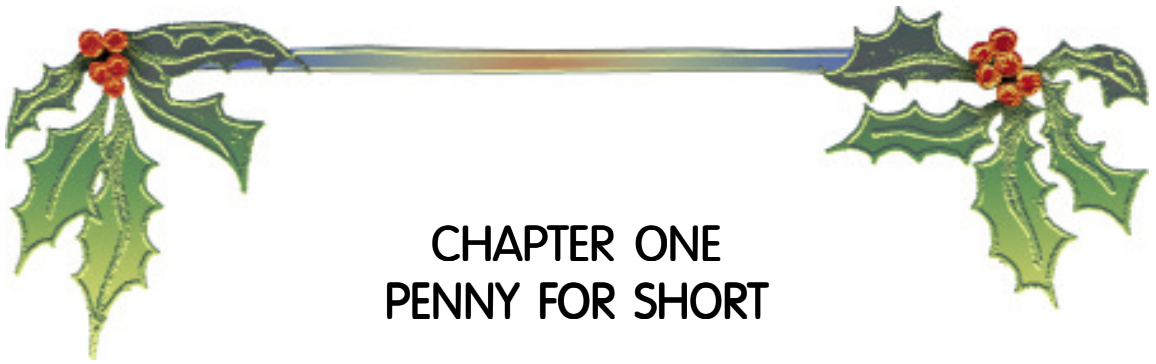
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CHAPTER ONE PENNY FOR SHORT

"Psssst, hey you!"

A sleepy little girl was lying on the sofa. She opened one eye. Who was that? There was no one in the living room with her. The house was very, very quiet. She closed her eye and tried again to sleep.

"Hey you, I said! Wake up!"

There was that voice again. She sat up and looked around the room. The Christmas tree stood in one corner. A clock said eleven at night. It was Christmas Eve, soon to be Christmas Day.



"Up here!"
the voice said.
"Near the top
of the tree."
And there he
was, a jolly
little elf sitting
on a branch.
His arm was
wrapped

around the trunk, to keep from falling off.

The girl burst into tears. "Oh no, now I'm seeing things, and Mom told me to ignore them, because they just get me all upset."

"Whatever do you mean?" the elf asked. "I'm not a *thing*."

The girl explained, "I mean, at Hallowe'en, when there are ghosts and goblins around, I see them everywhere. I see things in my closet and under my bed, and I can't sleep. Mom says they're just shadows, and Dad says I'm just being silly."

"Well, you are," the elf said. "That's Hallowe'en for you, full of silly tricks. This is Christmas, a happy, magical time."

"This is the worst Christmas ever, in the whole world!" the girl cried. "It's not happy at all. It's ruined! And I'm sadder than ... than anything or anyone."

"Oh, dear," said the elf. "I really did come to the right house, didn't I? My, my, I've got a job to do tonight. Perhaps you'd better explain all this to me. But tell me your name first. I'm Finn."

"I'm Penelope Long," the girl said. "Penny for short. Are you sure I should be talking to you? Emma told me to be quiet and try to sleep."

"Emma? Who's Emma?" Finn asked.

"My babysitter. She fell asleep at the kitchen table, her head right on top of her book. This is some Christmas Eve for her too. She can't go home until my uncle and Matt get back, and that might be never."

"Now, let me get this straight. You're here alone with Emma, who's snoring in the kitchen"

"She doesn't snore!" Penny said.



"Ah. Then it was you I heard," Finn said.

"No, it wasn't!" Penny said. "I'm a kid. I don't snore."

"Okay, okay. Let me make a note of that. Kids don't snore. Interesting, don't you think? Anyway, what was I saying? Oh yes, if you're waiting for your uncle and Mike to get back"

"That's Matt! M.A.T.T. Short for Matthew! You should listen more carefully to me.

"I am very carefully," Finn said, with a twinkle in his eye. "In fact, I'm all ears." With that, he pulled off his hat and out popped two big, floppy ears.



Penny She put her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. It's not funny to laugh at the way anyone looks, especially when they're born that way. Still, Finn had surprised her, and *he* was laughing. She scolded, "You shouldn't tease me. I'm in a bad, bad mood."

"And I'm in some bad, bad company," Finn said.

"We've got to fix that, or you'll ruin my Christmas too. First, we've got to get all the facts straight. From what you've said, it sounds like this is your uncle and Matt's home, or else you'd be waiting for someone else to arrive. Unless those other people are out too, not knowing you were sent here to visit, and you've been alone for two long weeks, and those other people aren't back yet"

"That's silly!" Penny interrupted. "This is my aunt and uncle's house, and I'm visiting from my own house far away, and my uncle just left today to get my cousin Matt from the airport."

"So how did you get here?" Finn asked.

"I flew," Penny said, getting annoyed.

"Ah, so you fly too. That's how I got here. I'd show you how I do it, but I'm not very good in small places. I'd bump into the walls and break ornaments, I'm sure. Not that I'm clumsy, do think that."

"I flew in an airplane, you silly, you ... you Dumbo!"

"Dumbo. What a nice thing to say. He's a friend of mine, you know. Oh, I wish I had his ears. Then I could fly in here. But back to the point, which is that you left your home, flew all alone in an airplane to get here"

"I didn't fly alone!" Penny said. "I came with a friend."

"An invisible friend?" Finn said.

"No, a grownup friend who lives someplace else."

"I see," Finn said. "So you're waiting for Matt's uncle to come from the airport."

"Matt and his dad. He's my uncle."

"So Matt was away, is that right? Or was he just visiting the airport?"

Penny said, "You're just soo tilly, I mean too silly. I'm going back to sleep." With that, she turned her back to Finn and snuggled down on the sofa again.

"Hey, psssst! Don't do that. WAKE UP!"

"Be quiet!" Penny said. "You'll wake Emma up, and she'll be very angry at you."

"HOW OLD IS SHE, PENELOPE?" Finn shouted.

Penny whispered, "Stop it, please! She's twenty or something."

Finn laughed as loudly as he could. "HAHAHAHA, THEN SHE CAN'T HEAR ME. SHE'S A GROWNUP, AND SHE'S DEAF AS A DUMB-BELL TO ME. HAHHAHAHA!"

Penny said, "Then you must be quiet, because you're making me very angry. You're not a jolly elf at all. You're just weird."

Finn said sadly, "This is terrible. You're the first kid I ever met who likes to feel miserable. And on Christmas Eve, no less. Such a pity. But, if you'd rather be all alone and feeling sorry for yourself and not find out what's keeping your uncle and cousin, then I'll be quiet. Very quiet. Zip my lip. Say no more. I'm done, Penny. That's it. Time out. I've stopped talking. Nothing left to say. We're finished, you and me. Not another word. My mouth is sealed. Shhhhhh. Peace and quiet. You want it, you've got it. End of story. Ta ta. Finished. Done for now. Over and out, Penny. Go to sleep. I'll be quiet as a mouse. Pretend I'm not here. No more from me"

"Oh, for Pete's sake!" Penny said. "Cut it out!"

"Hey, that's a good one. I'll add it to my list. Excellent, really. Got any more?"

"Shut up!" Penny said.

"Oh, now that's the best yet," Finn said, "but it's a bit rude, isn't it? Sort of like 'Shut your gob!' That's a nasty one, but boy, it really works. Or how about



'Enough, you twit! Knock it off!?' My, oh my, would I be in trouble if Santa's mom heard me say that."

Penny sat up and stared at Finn, then slowly asked, "Santa's mom? He has a mom?"

"Of course, he has a mom," Finn said.

Penny replied quickly, "Well anyway, she can't hear you."

"No, I guess she can't. I'm too far away from her, aren't I?"

Penny sighed. "She can't ever hear you, because she's an adult."

"Did I say that?" Finn asked. "No, I couldn't have, because she's a magical adult, you know, she can definitely hear me."

"Oh," Penny said. After a pause, she said, "Do you really know why Matt's so late getting home? Or are you just teasing me again?"

"Do you think I'd hang around on prickly Christmas trees on a lonely Christmas Eve with a rude little girl just for fun? Of course, I know something, or your name's not Penelope Long, Penny for short. And I'm not Finn, I'm just plain Finn-ished."

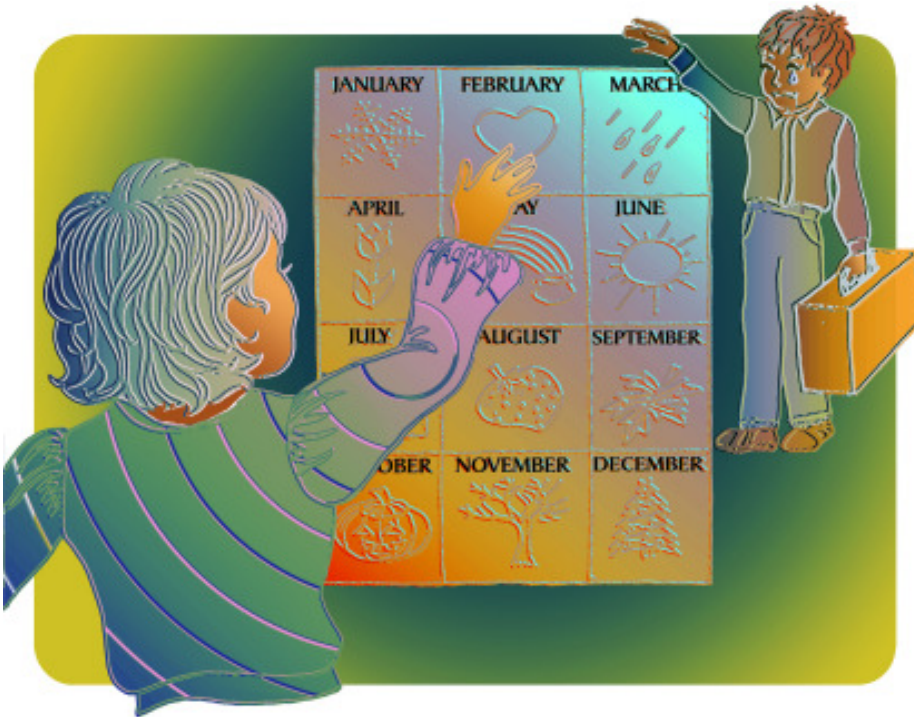
"I'm sorry," Penny said, and she meant it. She *had* been a rude girl, and she bet it *was* prickly up in that tree. "Maybe if you tell me what's happened to Matt, I won't be so grumpy. And what about Santa's mom? Do you really know her?"

"Yes, I do, and when I tell you what's keeping Matt, you'll learn about her too. But first, you'd better tell me why you're here, and not home for Christmas with your parents or whoever you live with."

Penny began, "Matt and I used to live near each other, and

we played together every day. He's my cousin, and he's my best friend too. His mom got sick though, and they had to move far away, to this place, so she could go to the special hospital here. She got so sick that he couldn't even talk to her. Everyone said she might die."

"Matt got sadder and sadder. To cheer him up, he went to stay with his granny and grandpa in Australia, because the world's upside down there, and it's summer there when it's winter here.



The sunshine helped him feel better, and his granny and grandpa sure were happy to see him, but he's been away for a whole year! I didn't expect that, and I miss him so much.

"His mom's been getting better, though she can't come home yet from the hospital, not even for Christmas. Matt's coming back

from Australia to see her and to live here again. I asked if I could come to see him for Christmas, because we don't know when he'll move back to his old home, near me. He was supposed to be here a few days ago, but he got lost. Lost! It was terrible! Nobody knew where he was, but then he got found, and he was supposed to be here this afternoon, and he's still not here, and I'm so worried.

"His dad went to get him from the airport hours and hours ago but the airplane's very, very late, and it's snowing, and that makes things worse. What if Matt got lost again?"

"Hmmm," Finn said, thinking hard. "Maybe he's good at getting lost. And that means he's probably good at getting found. I bet they'll be home soon."

"But even if they are, it won't be Christmas Eve anymore. It'll be after midnight, and Santa won't come, because he never comes to houses where the children are awake and ... ohhhh, it's just so terrible." Penny started to cry again.

Finn said, "Well, now I understand why I was sent to this house. I mean, I knew about Matt and all that, but I didn't know about you, waiting here for him. Now listen to me, okay? because I'm going to tell you a story. A true story. Are you ready? Or would you like some candies first? Fruit-juice candies ... mmmm!"

With that, Finn threw down a handful of candies to Penny. While Penny ate them, Finn told her all about Matt and Santa's mom.

