

# Propped Up

*by* Kristin Fouquet

Christmas Muzak was piped through to every store in the shopping mall. Giant red velvet bows adorned reproduction Victorian gaslights. Yards of glittered cotton pretended to be snow. A Santa rang a brass bell.

“If you ask me, it ain't natural,” Ted muttered.

Sunny was more optimistic. In her blissful eighteen years, she had not yet had an encounter with Father Cynicism. “It's like a miracle.”

Before he could counter her statement, she flicked on the vacuum cleaner and got to work on the big carpeted cubes.

Ted yelled, “Passive aggressive,” but nobody heard.

He adjusted his belt, then fogged the camera lens with his breath and wiped it.

When Sunny had finished with the prop cubes, she turned off the vacuum cleaner.

“Freakin' fertility drugs,” he called out too soon, proving he had been saving it until the din subsided.

“She sounded so happy on the phone that we could take their picture.” Sunny pulled down the snowy pastoral scene backdrop. “She said she called the mall and Santa couldn't accommodate all of them.”

Ted scoffed. “Can't blame Santa for that one.”

Sunny pouted. “She told me they were born premature, but she said

they're all healthy.”

“Healthy!” He adjusted his tripod. “How many she got again?”

Scooting the prop cubes closer together, she said, “Nine. It's like a Christmas miracle.”

“Freakin' litter, if you ask me.” Ted smoothed his left hand over his slicked back gray hair.

“Aw, Ted. Have a heart. She sounded so happy to be a mama. She said she finally felt complete.”

He shook his head and sighed. “Geez. It's hard enough takin' a picture of one baby without it cryin'. Nine!”

Through the crowded mall, one woman eagerly walked in the direction of the photography studio. She was rail thin with cropped hair under her Santa hat. Her red sweater had the words “Ho, Ho, Ho” embroidered on it. Over her right shoulder hung an enormous gold sack.

Upon seeing her, Ted raised a slow hand to his forehead. “Holy crap!”

“What?” Sunny asked.

“It's Mama Macy. I thought they locked her up.”

“Season's Greetings!” she announced.

Ted tinkered with his camera, avoiding eye contact.

“Can we help you?” Sunny asked.

“Yes, I’m Macy McDonald. I called earlier about having a Christmas portrait with my new babies.”

“Oh, yes. I’m Sunny; we spoke.” She asked, “Where are they?”

Macy took the sack off her shoulder. “Right here.”

As she propped up each Cabbage Patch doll on the carpeted cubes, she explained, “Well, I know they’re small. They were born a little early due to an unexpected frost in the Cabbage Patch, but if you look closely, they are perfectly formed.”

Ted hid behind the lens. It was his easiest job in a long time. He got it in one shot.

