

A Buzzy Christmas

Tizzie wrapped her toes around the leaf's prickly edge, grabbed hold inside the flower, and gave a mighty buzz. A tiny puff of golden grain burst from the blossom and sifted down onto her fuzzy body. She combed the gritty treasure into her baskets and prepared for flight.

"Amaz-z-z-ing job, Tizzie! You're really getting the hang of this!" Beatrice exclaimed. "C'mon! Let's take this load back to the nest and see if we can hit the Smiths' sunflower patch before it gets too late. I'll show you how to find it with your eyes closed!"

Tizzie was big for her age and towered over Bea, whose tiny, efficient body moved with quickness and precision. Tizzie perched on the edge of the leaf, which bent precariously under her weight, and it seemed unlikely that the yellow-and-black-striped zeppelin would be able to launch.

"Remember, Tizzie! You have to do this—" Bea lifted her wings and vibrated her shoulders while she crouched—"before you take off!" And she leapt into the air and buzzed around to watch Tizzie.

Tizzie bent her knees, lifted her gossamer wings, shuddered her flight muscles, and lurched into the air. Her big body sank slightly before gaining altitude, but then soon she and Bea zoomed side by side back to the colony's nest in the ground.

Tizzie cast a worried glance at the sky. Even she—summer baby, novice bee—noticed how low the sun's zenith was today, much lower than it was yesterday and just skimming the treetops. The days were getting shorter; the nights, crisper. Summer had been gloriously warm and bright, and the year's flower crops were magnificent. Each day she and Bea, her older sister, would fly and forage, bringing home basketful upon basketful of nectar and pollen. And there was always some sweet treasure to share while they were out and about.

Each day Beatrice taught Tizzie something of how to be a proper bumblebee, a soon-to-be queen humblebee, in fact. Tizzie learned to map her flight, read scent paths, recognize ripe blossoms, avoid already-harvested blooms, pack her pollen baskets, craft honey pots. She learned to keep her coat neat and clean to build a right strong static charge to attract the pollen. And, lately, Bea had been helping Tizzie master the art of buzz pollination, a bumblebee's specialty, or as Bea would say, "Spesh-ee-al-itee!"

She wished the languorous days of summer would never end. But there were whispers. Her other sisters murmured tidbits of tales they had heard of the fate that awaited them, this year's new queens. As the days shortened, Tizzie knew the worst day of her life loomed closer, the day she'd be forced to leave home. Forced to abandon her beloved Beatrice. Forced to separate from the rest of her family, and forbidden to have contact with any of her sister queens. Some fateful day in late autumn, with a pat on the thorax and a wish of good luck, she and the other queens-to-be would be shoved from the nest and aimed in different directions, strictly prohibited from

crossing paths with each other. She'd spend the winter all alone sleeping in a burrow underground and never would see Bea again.

The day dawned bright and sunny, but there was a nip in the air. Bea had helped Tizzie locate a scrumptious patch of violas in bloom. The two bees, one slight and one great, teetered on the petite plants and sipped a minute speck of nectar from every little blossom that smiled up at them.

"Well, Tizzie," Bea said, patting down her own full pollen baskets. "You get to do the rest of today on your own. Are you ready?"

Tizzie shook her whole body in protest, sending forth a sensational buzz. "No! Bea, I don't want you to go! Don't leave me. I don't want to be on my own today! Not today! Stay with me," Tizzie pleaded. "Let's go over to the Rovers' backyard and have a nap on the eggplant," she said to sweeten the deal. "You know how soft the leaves are, and the sun will bake us if we lay right up against a fruit. C'mon!"

Bea's antennas drooped. Her fuzzy little faced pinched. "Tizzie, come on now, you know you're not supposed to be sleeping out there. I can't come with you. I have to go check on Lizzie and Frizzie, and *you* have to learn to find your way around on your own because it won't be long now. Come back when your baskets are full, and be sure to eat lunch," she said with the authority of an older sister.

Bea hovered for a moment, dipped to brush her toes against Tizzie's folded wings as if to say "so long," and then disappeared into the sterling blue sky. Tizzie plunked her bottom down, her weight jamming her short stinger out to the side.

"No, I *won't* fill my baskets. And, no, I *won't* be sure to eat lunch," she grumbled. "I *will* go take a nap if I want." She launched and set off lazily in the direction of the Rovers' backyard but soon dropped down onto a leaf again.

"Hmmm," she hummed out loud. "Is the Rovers' this way? Or that way? I can't remember!" She circled round and buzzed to the south.

She zoomed past fence posts leaning, cattle grazing, and horses swishing, and then she came to a strange paved path. She had never seen this road before—there was no road to cross on the way to the Rovers'. Oh, she wished Bea was there to point the direction!

Tizzie hovered over the blacktop in indecision. Should she turn around and head home or should she see what was just up ahead?

Before she could decide, she was awash in turbulence and then slammed into a tight wedge of space between a slanted glass window and a prickly gray floor. What?!

She slowly righted herself only to come nose to nose with an emerald-eyed tomcat. His orange body stretched the length of the rear window ledge, soaking in the sunlight. His pink tongue was out, midlick, and his front paw poised over the triangle of his right ear, midwash. His eyes narrowed at this interruption of his bath and slowly his toes spread, revealing deadly sharp claws. They gleamed translucent in the sunshine and arced to fierce points. He reached his paw toward Tizzie, and then with lightning speed smashed it down on top of her.

She wiggled and buzzed furiously and managed to squirm free of the furry weight.

The kitty had rolled onto his back and was now looking at her upside down. His back legs flopped out and his round, cream-colored belly bulged up into the sunshine. He arched backward and reached his front paws toward her. Alarmed, she stood tall on all six feet, her antennas at attention, and fixed her eyes on his green slitted ones. He murmured something and pawed the air playfully, lazily.

“Clawd, what are you doing?” a friendly voice called from the front seat. “Are you warming your belly? I can see you in the rearview, you silly cat.”

The kitty collapsed onto his side and scooped up to sit on his haunches. Again, he reached a clawed paw slowly, slowly toward Tizzie.

She marched backward out of his reach but stumbled over something crusty and hard. She looked down and saw it was the desiccated body of a dead honeybee. Panicky, she hopped into the air, but the kitty’s paw slammed her back to the carpeted window ledge.

As he lifted his paw, a damp and dark nose wriggled toward her. Curious brown eyes studied her. A long, soft pink tongue curled out and walloped her in the side, knocking her off her feet. She nimbly dodged a second blow and managed to get her rear end pointed in the direction of the damp assault.

The dog quickly snapped her mouth shut when Tizzie’s warped little stinger made contact. The lab’s face exploded into a snarfling sneeze.

“Olive! *What* is going on back there? Lay down!” The voice was still friendly but sharp.

The dog’s shiny black head sank below the window ledge, her folded-over ears last to disappear from view. Only the kitty remained staring pointedly at Tizzie, and out came his paw again.

She stood her ground. He rested his smooth foot pads on her winged back, pressing a little, but she did not buckle, only stared him in the eyes. The narrow lines of his pupils dilated into deep, dark rounds. He pulled back his paw and folded and tucked both front feet under himself, settling into a cross-legged position. The triangle of pink nose twitched faintly, and his pale lips curved into a perma-grin. A low, soft buzzing emanated from his belly. Tizzie perked up her ears. What was he saying?

“Did you guys settle down?” The voice sifted back to them on the chilly breeze pouring in the car’s windows. “We’re almost to Grandma and Grandpa’s house. Boy, it’s getting colder and colder as we go up the mountain!” The voice, punctuated by little grunts as the girl cranked up the driver’s side window, chatted nonchalantly to her pets, seemingly unaware there was a new passenger among them.

Tizzie bent her knees and squatted on the back shelf, her little head whirring with questions. Bea had never told her what to do on a long car ride.

“We’re here! Come on, Olive! Let’s go, Clawd!” A blast of cold air rushed into the vehicle when the girl opened the door. The animals tumbled out into snow.

“Hi, sweetie!” A silver-haired woman clutched the girl by the shoulders, smiling into her face before enveloping her in a fierce hug. “We’re so glad you made it. How were the roads?” She put her arm around the younger woman and ushered her up a stone path. “Let Grandpa grab your stuff and let’s get inside before we freeze.”

Olive raced around in the snow, snuffling into drifts and flopping onto her back to wriggle. A sour look plastered Clawd's orange face. He lifted each paw deliberately, gave it a shake in annoyance, and placed it down in one of the dog's paw prints as he headed toward the farmhouse.

The fresh air perked Tizzie up. She crawled along the back ledge toward the open car door. The air was bracing. She'd never felt such cold before, not even when they had had to open the hive's main entrance at night to let in a late-coming drone. She zoomed from the warm vehicle out into the open air just before Grandpa slammed the door.

She buzzed past Clawd. His ears twitched and he tilted his head to follow her flight. His tail wagged from side to side. Olive stopped rolling momentarily to watch as the little bee disappeared upward into the bright sky.

Tizzie had to work hard to stay aloft. She beat her wings furiously. She didn't remember flying being this hard. And despite her exertions, she was freezing cold. Perhaps she was just tired. And hungry. She figured she'd better find something to eat.

She rocketed higher and higher, like Beatrice had taught her, to get a bird's-eye view of the landscape so she could spot flowers—but all she saw was blanketed in white. She dipped down here and there to examine a brown branch poking up from a drift or a seed head sticking out of the fluff. There seemed to be nothing around but shriveled leaves and chalky tree trunks. Certainly, there was no soft, welcoming velveteen leaf to curl up in for a nap. No black eggplants to warm her body against. No sunflowers to sip nectar from. Only a stark white landscape.

Somehow she had arrived in the Land of Winter. Her belly rumbled. Frost collected on her antennas. She flew for a long while, circling here and there, searching but finding nothing to eat, no place to rest. Soon, soft flakes sifted down from the sky and settled onto Tizzie's fur like faux grains of pollen. Out of habit, she combed them into her pollen baskets, but they melted right before her eyes and disappeared. Exhaustion made her wings heavy. Fatigue clouded her view. She wheeled back toward the last place she had felt warm.

When she hovered over the farmhouse and saw the girl's car parked in the driveway, she dove for it, determined to stretch her body along the back window ledge, Clawd-style, to absorb any sort of warmth that had collected there. After a little rest, she'd be better able to make a plan to get home.

She buzzed the little silver car, and then buzzed it again. A film of untouched snow dusted its surface; it was shut tight like an unripe bud. With effort, Tizzie lifted herself high once more to survey the landscape. Her feet were completely numb. She spotted Clawd perched on the porch railing chattering at chickadees and jays who fluttered and pecked up seed on the porch. She banked toward him.

As she neared him, an almost imperceptible but welcome wave of warmth rolled off his tiger-striped body, so she ventured even closer.

With his claws sheathed, he reached up and gently snatched her from the air and dropped her onto the wooden railing.

His orange coat was puffed out against the chill. So, she puffed out her gold and black stripes in like manner. His belly hummed with a soft purr, so she shivered into a low-level buzz to help ward off the cold. He dipped his head to sniff her. She reached up her antennas to sniff him. They touched noses.

"Clawd! Come on in! Time for dinner!" the friendly voice called. "Grandma made you some fresh tuna!"

The cat sprang to his feet and spun in the direction of the banging screen door. His pink tongue flicked out in anticipation. He was about to jump down from the railing when he hesitated and turned back to Tizzie. He carefully opened his jaws and closed his teeth around her barrel-shaped body.

Warmth engulfed her. She succumbed. If she were to die right now, well, at least she'd be warm. But the crushing crunch never came. She braced her two front legs against Clawd's fangs to steady herself as he galloped across the porch. The girl held the doors open for him, and he curled around the screen door and stepped lightly over the sill, his tail up and sinuously twisting side to side. His belly buzzed with a happy roaring purr, and he murmured to the girl as he twined around her feet. His lips drooped down like pink sheets over a bird cage as he clutched Tizzie in his mouth.

The girl let the screen door slam and then pressed the heavy wooden door closed behind Clawd. "Brrr!" She stepped around the kitty in slippared feet and led him down the hallway into the kitchen. "Come on, bud. Dinner's in here."

Olive was stretched on an oval rug in front of a snapping fire. Her ears twitched as the girl talked to the cat, but she didn't move. Grandpa sat in a rocking chair, newspaper unfurled in front of him, with his foot resting on the dog's rib cage; his stockinged toes caressed her sleek coat.

Clawd casually dropped Tizzie at the edge of the entry tile and then sauntered into the kitchen.

Suddenly, Tizzie could smell green. She looked up. Glossy emerald leaves reached gracefully from a smooth, slender, gray trunk. Her body lifted involuntarily as she was drawn to the vibrant little tree. Small buds hung pendulously from the ends of the flexible branches, exuding a sweet, spicy aroma. Her belly rumbled. But, though she checked each bud twice, quietly buzzing from one to the next, she found each sealed tight, offering no sustenance but only that enticing scent.

"Olive! Grandma has a pot for you to lick!" the friendly voice called from the kitchen.

The black dog sprang to her feet and clattered across the hardwood. Grandpa pulled in his outstretched leg and crossed his ankles, giving himself a push with his toes to keep rocking.

By now, Tizzie was fully warmed through—but even more famished. Once again she found herself in strangely unfamiliar territory. Back to the Land of Summer, to judge by the temperature. She was drawn to the warmth of the crackling fire in the front room and buzzed quietly toward the bright flames. But a subtle scent caught her attention and she veered off to investigate.

A spruce tree stood proudly before the bay window. All manner of sparkling baubles dangled from its branches. Bright, pretty, shiny things, but not alive, not edible. She smelled burlap and damp earth, and descended to follow the scent. Lined up on the deep windowsill and ganged around the balled-and-burlapped tree's trunk, amid stacks of fancy wrapped packages with bows and ribbons, were pots and pans of flowering plants. Amaryllis blossoms trumpeted candy cane cheer. Crowds of paperwhites nodded sedately, diffusing a bewitching scent. Tulips bulged elegantly atop spring-green stalks. The sweet, cheerful faces of golden daffodils smiled brightly. Tiny grape hyacinths peeked from among their grassy leaves. And Tizzie dove right into the pot of lily-of-the-valley, grasping each tender blossom and extracting a tantalizingly delicious drop of nectar. Finally, dinner was served.

It didn't take long for Tizzie to visit each flower bloom to sip up all the nectar. Bea would have been astonished at her efficiency and thoroughness. Tiny grains of pollen dusted her coat, so she sat on a spruce branch and methodically combed her fur.

“Are you sure you have to leave tomorrow?” Grandma asked. “Tomorrow’s Christmas Eve, for goodness sake! And you just got here.”

The girl looked down at her plate unhappily and said, “Yes, I’m scheduled to work on Christmas Day. But the good news is I don’t have to leave till later in the morning, so we can at least have Christmas Eve brunch together and open presents.”

Tizzie’s ears perked up. She had come up here with that girl; maybe she could get back home with that girl. It had something to do with the silver car out in the snowy driveway.

Dishes clattered as the people cleared dinner plates. A box on the mantel emitted a soothing sound, soft chords and pleasing vibrations.

Tizzie’s belly was full, her body was warmed, and she had a comfortable perch. She snuggled down into a crook of a branch and leaned against a shiny purple ball. It wasn’t the velvety bed and pillowy softness of an eggplant that she had had in mind earlier in the afternoon, but it would do for a nap.

Tomorrow she could figure how to slip into the car and hitch a ride home with the girl. Bea would be beside herself when Tizzie did not come home tonight, but Tizzie imagined how Bea’s face would light up when they saw each other again tomorrow and how she would glow with pride when Tizzie told of her overnight adventure into the Land of Christmas at the top of the mountain.

Soon soft z-z-z’s escaped Tizzie as she slumbered in a bed of silvery-blue needles.

Light crept into the front room the next morning. Tizzie was bright-eyed and ready to hit the road home. She crawled to the window-facing side of the spruce and was met with a sore sight. Heavy flakes settled on the growing drift in the driveway. The sky was a leaden gray, and frost splayed across the window panes in sprawling geometric patterns.

The fire crackled in the hearth and the girl said, “Wow! It’s really coming down out there!” as she entered the room. She carried a steaming mug, and she and Grandma settled together on the sofa to sip their coffee.

“Do you think you can play hooky?” Grandma asked with a grin. “We don’t want you to go so soon. We’ve hardly had a chance to visit! As a matter of fact, I just may not let you leave with the roads in this condition. It must have snowed ten or twelve inches already.”

The girl’s smile widened until her face was radiant. “Gram, you’re so bad! Always encouraging me to skip school or stay home from work. Even when I was little!” She took a loud slurp from her mug. “I would love to!” she admitted, almost conspiratorially. But then she straightened up and said firmly, “But this is a legitimate excuse. I am not driving in this. What a perfect Christmas we’ll have together!”

Tizzie’s antennas drooped. *Not driving in this*. Did that mean Tizzie wouldn’t be hitching a ride home today? She snuck quietly down the tree trunk toward the potted bulbs. She’d be able to think more clearly after she had something to eat, as Beatrice always said.

She edged her way up the pot of lily-of-the-valley and pulled a delicate white bell to her face. She stuck in her nose and lapped around for the miracle nectar, but found none. The blossom was empty. She crept farther up the teetering stalk and checked another bloom. Zilch. She launched and alit on a handsome black tulip. She dipped in

her tongue and—zero! She gripped the chunky petals and gave a mighty buzz, expecting to shake loose something to eat.

Olive was sprawled on the oval rug. Her ear raised up from the side of her head as she caught the sound coming from beneath the Christmas tree. Clawd's head swiveled around, too, and the girl and her grandma stopped talking.

"Did you hear that?" the girl asked.

"I hear something..." Grandma said, setting her cup down on the skirted end table.

Just then, the front door burst open and Grandpa stomped in, spewing snow in all directions. "Whew! We musta got eighteen inches overnight! The horses are up to their hocks!" he exclaimed. "I don't think you're going anywheres today, little miss." He grinned at the girl, and she beamed back. The weather had made their plans for them.

Tizzie peeped from the tulip. Her belly rumbled. Bea would be out of her mind with worry by now.

Tizzie spent the day in the crook of the spruce branch. Every so often she would creep to the tip and peer out at the scene. Most of the wrapped packages had been ripped open and shreds of crumpled, shiny paper lay scattered across the hardwood. At one point Clawd batted a ball of paper across the room, into the corner, under the tree, and then back out in front of the fire in a zany pattern that had him leaping over Olive's inert form. Her tail swooshed as she enjoyed her friend's freakout, making more paper fly, and Clawd pounced to attack it. The people laughed. They chatted almost nonstop, and the soft melody from the box on the mantel filled the room. Tizzie was downright mesmerized by the warmth and pleasant vibrations.

She roused herself late in the afternoon to go check the lemon tree in the foyer. The unopened blooms still dangled luxuriously from the branch tips. She touched them each softly with her antennas, soaking in the luscious scent, feeding her soul, but not her body. Then she returned to her branch, settled against the glass Christmas ball, and slept through her hunger.

The next day the girl practically bounded into the front room, too excited to contain herself. The snow had piled up against the house's foundation and spilled onto the porch through the railing slats. Grandpa came in from the barn and gave his report again: too deep to drive in and the plows had not gone by, it being a holiday and all. The girl would stay another night.

Tizzie, dizzy with hunger, snuck down the rough spruce bark and surveyed her little flower pot garden. In the middle of the night, starving hungry, she had buzzed down in the cover of darkness to see whether any nectar had been made, only to be disappointed again. Would the flowers have made any sustenance for her in the few short hours since her last hope-filled visit? She doubted it. But there was the lemon tree!

She gathered her strength, bent her knees, vibrated her flight muscles, and lurched into the air, making a beeline for the shiny leaves in the foyer. Hope and hunger roiled in her empty belly as she alit on a thin, dipping branch. She crawled upside down to one of the blossoms and found it still tightly closed but even more luscious smelling. Or maybe her hunger exaggerated the perfume. She paused a moment, unsure she had the strength to make it back to the spruce. But it was much warmer over there in the Christmas tree, and if she'd perish of hunger, at least she'd be warm in the front room.

She tried to buzz quietly back to her perch, but Clawd's ears swiveled to follow her flight path. He dashed across the room and clawed his way up the tree's trunk, shaking loose red and purple glass balls and shiny ornaments. Olive hopped onto her feet at the sound of glass shattering on the hardwood.

"Clawd!" The girl bellowed. "For goodness's sake! What are you doing?" She rushed toward the Christmas tree, with Grandma close on her heels.

Clawd clawed midway up the trunk just as Tizzie fainted midflight. He stuck out a soft paw, and she landed on his pillowy foot pads.

"Clawd! Clawd, you goof!" The girl was prying apart tree branches as the cat cradled little Tizzie. He transferred the bumble to his mouth and scrambled down.

He strode across the floor, with the girl and Grandma following him.

"What have you got there, you little monkey?" Grandma asked. She couldn't suppress a chuckle. The cat had such a zany personality. Olive stood watch from the oval rug, her flopped-over ears perked into upright triangles.

"What is it, bud?" the girl asked as she bent down.

Clawd unclenched his jaws and Tizzie tumbled out. She regained consciousness as she rolled onto the floor. She righted herself, and Clawd dipped his head to her, and she reached up her antenna to him. They touched noses.

"Oh, my! It's a bee! Clawd, you caught a bee!"

Grandpa came over and knelt next to the orange tabby. "Let's see what you got there, little fella. Did you get stung?" He gently slid Clawd away from Tizzie, and then exclaimed, "She's still alive! It's a bumble! She's a big one. It's a queen bee!"

Tizzie tried to stand her ground, as upright and regal on all six sets of toes as her sagging body could be. Before she could decide what to do—Bea had never advised her on how to deal with people—the man scooped her up and said, "I know where she belongs! C'mon, get your coats on."

Tizzie's stomach dropped. They were taking her outside into the frigid bleakness. Feeble with hunger, all hope of getting home to see Bea lost, she gave up. She allowed herself to be tumbled into a teacup, and then Grandpa, Grandma, the girl, the dog, and the cat all trudged out the door into winter. Grandpa put his hand over the cup so she couldn't escape. Tizzie expected to be tossed into a snow bank at any moment. But it never happened.

Grandpa set a quick pace and the little group filed past the shed filled with firewood, past snow-capped leaning fence posts, past snow-blanketed steaming horses. Clawd high-stepped unhappily in Olive's paw prints, straining to keep up with the longer-legged creatures. "Hold on, my dear," Grandpa whispered as he peered between his fingers into the teacup. "We're almost there."

Tizzie glimpsed frost-tipped tree branches and swiftly swirling, falling flakes. Her head swam. A door slammed and Grandpa set the teacup down. Tizzie was enveloped in warmth and humidity. She smelled green. She crawled weakly to the rim of the cup and peeked over.

Abundance! Masses of greenery spilled over mounded planting beds for as far as she could see. Dwarf fruit trees girded by mixed beds of leafy, blossoming plants stretched branches to the plastic sky. Lettuces and spinach sprawled next to the stout trunks of broccoli and cauliflower. Purple pom-pom-topped chives and the feathery umbrella of blossoming dill. Puckered, paleo-green dinosaur kale and frilly lime-green endive. Ruby-stemmed

chard splayed open next to leathery cabbage heads. Mats of white clover in flower and blooming violas and calendula filled open spaces. Buckwheat blossomed in a tantalizing patch. Tizzie's flight muscles began to quiver.

Right down the center of the greenhouse tomato vines soared up to the ceiling. Sunny yellow blossoms dotted the curtain of climbing plants. Glossy pepper plants studded with white bell-shaped flowers squatted at the base of the tomato vines, and then a flash a purple-black caught Tizzie's attention. Eggplants! She tried to rise up out of the teacup, drawn as if magnetized to the dusky, oak-leaved plants. Her feeble wings fluttered, but her body did not launch.

Clawd swished between the girl's shins and ambled over to the teacup, knowing exactly what to do. He sat down in front of Tizzie and reached out a paw to draw her up and out of her porcelain holding cell. Then he gently leaned down and clamped his teeth around her body. She braced herself against his fangs.

"Clawd! Be careful with her!" Grandpa admonished. "She's royalty."

Clawd, tail swishing, sauntered over to the fuzzy little plants and deposited Tizzie at the base of an eggplant.

She righted herself, and then, toehold by toehold, she crawled up the bristly stalk and wobbled out onto a velvety leaf. She grasped the edges of a periwinkle blossom, took hold of the yellow insides, and gave a mighty buzz.