

*We Wish You  
A Merry Grantmas*

OR,

*We Grant You  
A Merry Christmas*

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MORGAN MATSON

*And I can go anywhere I want  
Anywhere I want, just not home*

–TAYLOR SWIFT

*Merry Christmas, movie house!  
Merry Christmas, Emporium!  
Merry Christmas, you wonderful  
old Building & Loan!*

–GEORGE BAILEY,

*IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE*

THURSDAY,  
DECEMBER 23RD

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*Two Days Until Christmas*

CHAPTER 1  
*Or,  
Stanwich, We Have A Problem*

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*W*E HAVE A PROBLEM,” J.J. SAID.

At least, I was pretty sure that’s what he said. He was still over ten feet away from me and my brother Mike as we stepped out of the automatic glass doors of the Hartfield-Putnam Airport and started to walk to where J.J. was standing in front of Helsing, the ancient van he’d had since high school.

“Hi works too,” Mike said, shooting me a look as he finally reached J.J. and gave him a hug.

“Hi,” J.J. said, picking Mike up and spinning him around once, then setting him down and turning to me.

“No spinning,” I said, as J.J. gave me a bear hug that lifted my feet off the ground. “I’m still queasy from the flight.”

“Turbulence?” My middle brother was, as usual, dressed as though Christmas had thrown up all over him. He had on his red-and-green beanie, a red puffy coat, and underneath, a Christmas sweater that read

*Merry Christmas, Ya Filthy Animals*. J.J. started dressing this way the day after Halloween, which he also got far too into, as far as I – and other rational people, including his employer – were concerned.

“Yeah,” I said, shaking my head. “According to the pilot, we had ‘weather’ over Pennsylvania.”

“Which makes no sense,” Mike chimed in. “He should have at least said bad weather. There’s always weather. You just have to quantify what kind it is.”

I didn’t love to fly even in the best of circumstances, and when you add in holiday crowds, turbulence and bad weather – plus, having to deal with O’Hare, the World’s Worst Airport – it felt like it had already been a very long day, despite the fact it was only a little after noon.

One of the unexpected benefits of going to the same college – Northwestern – as my youngest brother meant that we could usually take this flight together, as we came home for holidays or vacations. I hadn’t realized how much it would help to look over and see Mike, not bothered at all by the turbulence, just sketching in his notebook or reading a book about some obscure political cartoonist.

And since I was now halfway through my sophomore year, I was getting used to it – and plus, it only was a few hours long. When I went to visit Danny, my oldest brother, on the West Coast, it was a much bigger deal, and one I usually had to spend a few days mentally preparing myself for.

“What’s the problem?” I asked. Mike and I had both had classes on the 22nd, so this morning’s flight was the earliest one we could get. But J.J., who was the in-house (in-clubhouse?) statistician for the New York Mets, was close enough that he could just drive to our dad’s house in Connecticut when everyone left for vacation, which meant he’d been back for the last two days.

“Well – ” J.J. started, just as a woman wearing a jacket that read *HPA Security* walked up.

“You have to move your vehicle,” she said, gesturing at van Helsing.

“Really?” Mike asked skeptically as he looked around. Hartfield-Putnam was a tiny airport, with just one terminal for the different airlines and a miniscule security line. There were some people either parked behind us or driving around, but it didn’t seem like anyone was waiting for the spot.

“Five minute limit. Have to keep things moving,” she said. She started to walk away, then did a double-take at J.J. “Jameison?”

He took a step closer and grinned. “Lacey! Hi! How are you?”

“I’m good,” she said. She cast a skeptical eye at Helsing. “I see you’ve still got this van, huh? You didn’t want to...buy another one? In the last ten years?”

“This is a classic,” J.J. said, thumping Helsing on the hood. Something inside rattled and clattered to the ground. “I’m sure it’s fine,” he said blithely.

“If you’re around, I heard some people are meeting up later at the Ginger Man,” she said, already starting to walk away.

“Lacey,” J.J. said, his voice serious. “I’m very flattered. But my heart is with another.”

“I wasn’t...” Lacey’s cheeks flushed. “I was just...”

“It is?” I asked, turning to my brother. “I thought you and the Home Shopping Network broke up.”

“We can be broken up and I can still not be ready to move on!” J.J. sputtered. “That would be unfair to Lacey!”

“I’m really not interested,” Lacey said firmly. “And you have to move the van. Maybe forget about the Ginger Man. See you J.J. It was...” but rather than finishing this sentence, she just trailed off, nodded once, then turned away.

“She wanted me,” J.J. said with a sigh as he gestured down to his *Home Alone* sweater. “They all want this bod.”

“Sorry about your breakup,” Mike said, giving him a punch on the shoulder.

“Don’t be,” J.J. said, shaking his head. “It’s just temporary.” But his

voice was falsely hearty and his smile looked strained. He turned to me. “Please don’t call her Home Shopping Network.”

“But her initials are QVC!” I protested. But then I saw my brother’s face and nodded. “Fine. But it’ll be hard.” J.J. and Quinn Van Camp had been dating for almost a year – they met right after he moved from Pittsburgh to New York. She was in grad school for journalism at Columbia, but right before Thanksgiving, they broke up, and J.J. had seemed crushed in a way I wasn’t used to from him. He was usually the king of rolling with the punches.

“So can we go?” Mike asked, stamping his feet. “It’s kind of cold to be standing around.”

“I thought you two were supposed to be so tough! Living next to Lake Michigan and all.”

“It’s cold,” I agreed, pulling my black puffy coat more firmly around me. “Let’s go to Dad’s.”

“I don’t know if we should go to Dad’s,” J.J. said, adjusting his hat. As he did I could see that there was a red white and green pom-pom on top of it. “It’s what I told you. There’s a problem.”

“J.J.!” we looked over to see Lacey staring at us. “Really, you need to move or I’ll give you a ticket.”

“She won’t give me a ticket,” J.J. said confidently, then frowned. “But maybe let’s just circle the airport and we can figure out the plan.”

We loaded our suitcases into the back and Mike gestured for me to get shotgun, and I sent him a grateful smile, knowing that he would not have done this a few years ago. It had been a surprise to both of us over the last two years, that we’d become...friends.

When we’d arrived on campus, we found that we’d been able to fall into a friendship. Away from home, without the competition between us that had always seemed present, we could just...be. And that was when I discovered not only that I liked my brother, but we had a ton in common. We liked a lot of the same music and TV shows, and we’d

recently started watching all the Marvel movies from the beginning, either together, or in our separate dorms, and texting through it. It was the last thing I'd expected, but somehow, when we were no longer at home, we found our way to being pals.

"Here we go," J.J. said as he started the engine, which groaned and sputtered.

"You need a new car," I said, shaking my head.

"Never!" J.J. declared and a second later, as if to prove his point, the engine rumbled to life. "All right," he said, as he started to pull the van out from the loading area. "The problem. Brace yourselves."

"I'm braced," Mike said from the first row of seats. "In many respects. You know there's no seatbelts back here, right?"

"That's why there's a ball of twine," J.J. said, gesturing to the floor, his tone indicating this should have been obvious. "You can just tie the broken part together. Anyway. Flat Santa is missing."

Mike and I both gasped. Flat Santa was...well, a flat Santa. It had once apparently been an actual stuffed Santa until an unfortunate incident with a visiting dog who'd come over for Christmas dinner one year. All of his stuffing had been pulled out, but my mother managed to sew him up again, and everyone decided they liked him better flat. This was before I was born, so I'd just grown up with him, a staple of every Christmas. He used to be draped over the bannisters and flopped on top of stockings. He'd become our Christmas mascot, and the holiday just didn't seem right until he had been unpacked.

My mother had even written about Flat Santa in *Grant Central Station*, the long-running comic strip she'd created about a fictionalized version of the family, and people used to show up to her events and signings with their own Flat Santas. But the thought of having Christmas without him...it just didn't make sense.

"I thought he was at dad's house," I said, exchanging a worried look with Mike.



“Me too,” J.J. said, as he steered the car into the Airport Return lane. “But I’ve looked *everywhere*. He’s not there.”

“I knew we were supposed to pick him up from dad last Christmas,” I said, wincing at the memory. “But...”

“Yeah,” Mike finished for me. Last Christmas had been an unmitigated disaster. Since our parents’ divorce, we were dividing the holidays up – which was made more complicated since my sister Linnie and her husband Rodney also had to alternate the holidays they spent with his family in Hawaii. So last year, it was supposed to be me, Mike, Danny, and J.J. celebrating with our mom in her apartment in New York City. But Danny had had a work crisis and ended up spending Christmas in Dubai, trying to save a deal (“I spent Christmas on the *flight* to Dubai,” he’d always correct me, looking forlorn. “It happened when I was in the air and totally missed it.”). And when Mike and I – and then our mom – had come down with a terrible stomach bug, J.J. decided just to stay in his apartment in Queens rather than catch it, leaving food with the doorman for us and sending sad selfies. So needless to say, finding Flat Santa had not been on the priority list last year.

But especially since last year had been such a wash, I was determined that this year would be a perfect Christmas – and that absolutely meant we needed Flat Santa.

“So if he’s not at Dad’s,” Mike said, frowning. “That means...”

“He has to be at mom’s,” J.J. finished. “So that’s what I was thinking. We don’t go to Dad’s. We go into the city to mom’s and bring Flat Santa back, so he can spread his Christmas cheer.”

When our parents divorced, my dad stayed in town, moving into a condo in Stanwich, in a cul-de-sac that was mostly populated by other fellow Stanwich College professors. My mom, though, moved into New York City. We’d asked if she wanted to re-do the Christmas schedule this year, since we’d barely celebrated it last year, but she was insistent

that we keep to the schedule. So she was going on a trip to the Galapagos that would span all of Christmas and New Year's. She'd left this morning for Ecuador, and promised to bring all of us (and specifically J.J., since he was the only one who asked) souvenirs.

"But how does that help us?" I asked, as J.J. made the loop again, waving cheerfully to Laney as he passed her. "Isn't mom halfway to Quito by now?"

"Quito?" Mike raised an impressed eyebrow.

"Capital of Ecuador," I said, trying for a *it's no big deal* tone.

"Impressive."

"Hey, I watch *Jeopardy!*."

"But is Dad going to be mad? That we immediately ditch him and go to Mom's?" Mike asked. We were all still getting used to the post-divorced landscape, figuring it out as we went.

"He's teaching until three," J.J. said, glancing back at Mike. "So we could probably make it in and back before he's even done."

"And Danny will be getting in around then too." My oldest brother had texted us all his itinerary, his flight info from California. But even though J.J. had offered, Danny insisted he'd rent a car at the airport and didn't need a ride. J.J. was convinced it was because he didn't want to be seen in Helsing, and frankly, if this was the case, I didn't blame Danny.

"What about Linnie and Rodney?" Mike asked.

"Later this afternoon," J.J. said, then frowned. "It might just be Linnie, though."

"What?" Mike asked, leaning as far forward as his twine seatbelt would let him go.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I don't know for sure," J.J. said slowly. "But it sounds like Rodney might not be able to come until later, maybe not even until Christmas Day. Apparently he's working some big case."

We all exchanged a silent, loaded look. None of us wanted to talk

shit about Rodney – we all loved him – but lately, the impulse had been there like never before.

When Rodney had graduated law school at the top of his class, he'd intended to go into environmental law – it was what he'd been working toward the whole time. But he'd been recruited by a fancy Boston law firm, and even though all of us – and Linnie – had been against it, he'd taken the job.

And ever since, we'd barely seen him. And when we did see him, he seemed strained and miserable. “Why are you working there?” I asked Rodney the last time I'd FaceTimed with him and Linnie and Waffles, their beagle. (Secretly, while I liked talking to my sister and brother-in-law, my regular FaceTimes with them were mostly about getting to see Waffles, and getting to ask him who was a woofer and if he was a good boy while he stared implacably back at me. He was the world's weirdest dog, and I missed him like crazy.) “You're stressed all the time and you're always working. Why are you doing this? Do you even like it?”

Linnie raised an eyebrow at me, and from that one gesture, I could tell that she felt the same way, and that this was an argument they'd had before.

“It's just for a few years,” Rodney said, running a hand over his face. “Just so I can save up some money for us. Then I can save the planet.”

He looked so exhausted I hadn't wanted to push the issue with him. But now, hearing that he was missing out on Christmas, I was regretting I hadn't yelled at him more.

“So we have a window,” J.J. said, glancing over at me. “It might be our only chance to get Flat Santa.”

“So we're really doing this? We're just going to...drive to New York?” I asked, trying to get my head around the turn today had taken.

“We can't do Christmas without him,” J.J. said gravely. “What if the fact we didn't have it out last year was the reason everything was such a disaster?”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Mike said, shaking his head and shooting me a look. “But we do need Flat Santa.”

“Absolutely,” I agreed. We were coming up to the fork between Airport Return and the road that led to I-95. I pointed left, toward the highway. “Let’s do it.”

CHAPTER 2  
*Or,  
The Building Next to the Dakota*

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**M**Y MOTHER LIVED AT MAYFAIR TOWERS, A HIGH-rise apartment building on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. It was tall and white, with balconies that looked over a courtyard. It was right on Central Park West, and getting to spend time exploring the park was one of my favorite things about staying with her. And it was right next to the Dakota, the famous old building where people like Nora Ephron and John Lennon had lived. It was J.J.'s favorite joke – when telling people where our mom had moved to, he'd say, "Well, you know the Dakota?" and then right as they started to be impressed, he'd add, "Yeah, not there. Right next door, though."

J.J. had managed to find parking on Columbus, which he declared a Christmas miracle, and we walked together to Mayfair Towers. The city was all dressed up for Christmas, with lights, window displays, and tree sellers on every corner, the smell of pine needles lingering in the air for just a moment as we passed them.

"So how's Riley?" J.J. asked Mike as we stopped on the corner of

West 72nd and Columbus, stamping his feet to keep warm as we waited for the light.

“Well...” Mike cleared his throat. “Um, which one?”

I shook my head at J.J., who threw up his hands. “You did it again?”

I nodded. “He did it again.”

Halfway through his freshman year, Mike announced to us that he was dating all genders now, not just people who identified as female. We were all supportive of him, and thrilled that he’d discovered this part of himself – but ever since then, he’d tended to date, almost exclusively, people with gender neutral names, and occasionally two people with the *same* name but different genders. This had happened with the Madisons of the previous spring, and the Blakes of last summer. I really liked both Rileys, but told Mike that he was probably going to have to pick one eventually. But Mike assured me that everyone was on the same page, and that nobody – including himself – wanted anything serious right now.

“It’s not my fault,” Mike said, as the light changed and we joined the group of bundled up New Yorkers streaming across the street, “that gender neutral names are incredibly popular in my age group.”

J.J. just shook his head. “I think you’re just doing this confuse us all.”

“In fairness,” I said as we reached the other side, “once you’ve met them, it is easier to know who Mike’s talking about.”

J.J. stopped walking, and a harassed-looking woman almost crashed into him. She went around, giving him a dirty look that he missed completely. “You’ve met them? Both the Rileys?” he sounded crushed, and laid his hand over his heart. “Michael. Why wasn’t I included?”

“You didn’t even know there was another Riley until five seconds ago,” I pointed out.

“It’s the principle of the thing.” He shook his head so hard the pom-pom whipped back and forth. “Have I not been around to talk? Have I been so caught up in the Quinn breakup I haven’t been here for you?”

“You’re fine,” Mike said, starting to look uncomfortable. “Why aren’t you bugging Charlie?”

J.J. waved this away. “I know all about Charlie’s relationship. Her boyfriend and I are friends. We have our own text chain and a standing Sunday night standing FaceTime.”

I nodded. “It’s true. They do.” I had been dating Bill Barnes since the summer. We’d met the spring of my senior year of high school, when he showed up to try and assist with Linnie and Rodney’s wedding. The wedding went disastrously off the rails, but it wasn’t Bill’s fault – Linnie often talked about how much worse things might have gone if he hadn’t been there, and then Rodney would shudder and go to take some Tums.

We’d kept in touch all that summer, and when I arrived on Northwestern’s campus in the fall – I was studying at Medill, the journalism school – Bill was nearby, just an hour away, going to the University of Chicago. But nothing had happened then – I’d been busy with getting settled in at school, he’d been taking a crazy course load, and we’d fallen into a comfortable friendship. I loved knowing that he was nearby, and we’d meet up when we could. Bill was all about different quests, especially food related, and it had been a great way to discover the city together – as we hunted for the best cupcake/ dim sum/ burger/ falafel.

But then this summer, he’d been back in Connecticut working for his uncle at his event planning business, and I’d been back at my dad’s, with a job working in the Stanwich College library. And while we’d started hanging out as friends, it didn’t take long for things to change, and the first time he kissed me, it felt both heart-stopping and inevitable, all at the same time. I’d been worried that maybe somehow our year of friendship would mean that I wouldn’t get my stomach-flip crush feelings around him, but that was definitely *not* the case. I found, to my shock, when you’ve been friends with someone for a year and then things take a romantic turn, it means that everything that comes after is deeper and more connected. He knew who I was – and I knew him –

and now we got to make out, too. It felt like when you get a double prize in a cracker jack –something that’s already good becoming even better.

“You guys are doing okay with the different schools thing, right?” J.J. asked, then frowned. “I guess it’s not really long distance if you’re just an hour away. What would you call it? A short-distance relationship?”

“It’s fine,” I said, giving him a nod. “We’re making it work.”

At the beginning of the year, I’d secretly applied for Medill’s study-abroad journalism program in Paris. But spots were limited, and competition was fierce – it was open to students from the Communication school as well – and I’d found out just after Thanksgiving that I hadn’t made the cut.

And while I was disappointed, I was also a tiny bit relieved. There just seemed to be a lot to keep track of. I had all my siblings and parents to visit and keep up with, plus a monthly visit with my best friend Siobhan, who was at University of Michigan, plus arranging my schedule with Bill’s so that we could see each other a few times a week. I wasn’t sure what would happen to any of that if I was suddenly spending an entire semester in Europe, across an ocean, with a seven hour time difference. Deep down, I was secretly relieved that the decision had been made for me.

We reached Mayfair Towers, and entered through the revolving door and stepped into the lobby. There was a huge, decorated Christmas tree in the corner, and a desk with serious-looking doormen with military-style uniforms behind it. (But uniforms from like wars in the 1820s, all gold braided shoulders and epaulets. “What exactly are they protecting you from?” Linnie had asked our mom one visit. “Oversized packages? Rogue delivery people?”)

There were two girls sitting on the couch in the lobby who looked around my age, maybe a little younger, one blonde, one brunette, laughing hysterically together. I saw the doorman closest to us frown in their direction before looking over at us. “Yes?” he asked. *Norman*, read his



nametag. His tone was not particularly welcoming – but then, the door-men in this building had never seemed to like us all that much. J.J. had spilled a smoothie all over the lobby on the first day our mom moved in, and nobody seemed to have forgotten it.

“Hello,” J.J. said, in what he clearly thought was a charming voice. “We’re Eleanor Grant’s kids. In 24B? We know she’s out of town,” J.J. said. Norman frowned. “But we were hoping we could just go up to her apartment for a quick second? I promise it won’t be long, I even have a key.” J.J. held it up as proof.

Norman started to say something – just as a man came into the lobby, laden down with shopping bags, with boxes stacked in his arms. “Norman?” he called plaintively as the top box started to wobble. “Jimmy? Anyone?”

“Go on up,” Norman said, hurrying around the side of the desk. “Just sign in on your way out.”

“Thanks a mil,” J.J. said cheerfully, as we headed to the elevator bank.

The hallway leading to my mother’s apartment was nice – with tables and mirrors and fancy sconces. But it always seemed strange to me, whenever I was here, that my mother could have spent so much time living in our big, drafty, three-story house in Connecticut and then change to living in an apartment building with so many people, just one door of many on the twenty-fourth floor. And now our house was owned by the Pearson family, with their loud kids and two cats who looked out implacably from the upper windows. I hadn’t been by the house very often – it hurt too much to see the unfamiliar cars in the driveway and the new plantings that my father never would have stood for. It seemed easiest just to ignore it.

J.J. started to put the key in the lock of 24B – but the door swung forward. We all looked at each other in alarm. “What the heck?” I asked.

“Has she been robbed?” Mike asked, his brow furrowing.

“Or maybe she’s currently *being* robbed,” J.J. whispered, his eyes wide. “Like right now!”

“How is that helping?” I asked. I nudged the door with my foot to push it farther open. We all stood on the threshold, silently listening – for what, I wasn’t sure.

“I think it’s probably fine,” Mike said in a voice that didn’t sound very sure. “Probably one of the doormen just dropped off a package or something and didn’t get the door fully closed. We can tell them it was open when we leave.”

He strode into the apartment, very bravely – it was certainly more than J.J. or I were willing to do, because we crept in behind him, looking around.

At first glance, it didn’t seem like there were burglars currently committing grand larceny. It just looked like my mom’s apartment. A mix of things she’d brought from our house in Stanwich, some new things she’d bought since moving in here. It was a two-bedroom with a big living room, and when we were all here together, my mom and I shared a room, J.J., Mike, and Danny shared the other, and Linnie and Rodney took the pullout couch in the living room. It was cramped, but it was fun. The first time we all converged, Danny rented an Airbnb nearby, but then ended up staying with us because he felt like he was missing everything.

“I think it’s okay –” Mike said, just as the kitchen door swung open and my mother stepped out.

“Aieeee!” she shrieked.

“*Oh* my god,” I yelled, just as J.J. said, cheerfully, “It’s mom!”

“What?” my mother asked, looking around at all of us, still breathing hard. She had her hand over her heart. “What...are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?” Mike asked, raising an eyebrow. “What happened to Ecuador?”

“Oh,” my mother said. She was still looking between the three of us like she was trying to make sure this was real, “there was a norovirus outbreak among the crew. They said the ship was being disinfected, and

we could still go, but I didn't want to take the chance."

I shuddered. "I don't blame you."

"What are you doing here?" she asked. "Also, hi!" she shook her head and gave us a smile. She definitely looked different from the mom I'd grown up with, who was always twisting her curly hair into a messy bun she'd secure with a pencil, who lived in what she called her "drawing clothes" – leggings and oversized sweaters. In the last year, she'd suddenly become more sleek – her hair cut into a bob, the leggings replaced with jeans and dresses. "It's New York," Linnie had said when I'd brought it up. "The Manhattan effect is real."

Ever since she'd ended *Grant Central Station*, she'd found that retirement did not suit her, and currently had a digital strip, *Serenity Falls*, all about the goings-on and hijinks of a group of older people at a retirement home in Florida. Though it had a slightly different tone, I really liked the new strip. And all of us – but especially Mike – were relieved that it was no longer a thinly veiled autobiography.

My mom smiled at me, and he pulled me into a hug, then Mike. Mike and my mom had found a good balance – their fight was the reason that he'd been estranged from the family for a year. They were still a little more careful and polite with each other, but we were all hoping that would eventually pass.

"What about me?" J.J. asked. My mother shook her head and gave him a hug too.

"I see you all the time, Jamieson," she reminded him. "I saw you three days ago. You live a subway ride away."

"It's still nice to be appreciated," he muttered.

"But seriously," my mother said, looking between us. "Why are you here? You heard I'm out of town and decided to throw a rager?"

"A rager?" I echoed. I shook my head. "Mom."

"Are you objecting to what I'm saying or the word choice?"

I thought about it for a second. "Both."

“We just came to try and find Flat Santa,” J.J. said, glancing around the living room. “I looked all over at Dad’s, and it’s not there. But we didn’t think you’d be here.”

“I didn’t think so either,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t think I have Flat Santa. Wouldn’t we have put it out last year if we did?”

“I think we were too sick to pay attention to stuff like decorations,” Mike pointed out, and my mom nodded.

“Yeah, you might be right. Let me check the closet.” She headed back toward the second bedroom, and J.J. motioned for me and Mike to huddle up.

“What?”

“Mom cannot stay here *alone* at Christmas.”

“But...” I looked at Mike. “It’s dad’s year, right? Would that be fair?”

“Dad was on his own last Christmas,” Mike pointed out. “It’s what they agreed on.”

“But he wasn’t alone,” J.J. said. “He went on that trip with Uncle Stu that he ended up having to pay for. Mom’s plans got upended and now she’s going to be sitting around this apartment alone while we’re hanging out together and watching *It’s A Wonderful Life* and *Die Hard* and eating Sir Harry’s Happy Christmas Gingerbread!”

I nodded gravely. “I mean, we better be. It’s *tradition*.” Sir Harry’s Happy Christmas Gingerbread had been a staple from before I’d been born, ever since my parents had been given it one Christmas as a gift. It was gingerbread from a U.K. company, packaged in a box that looked like a cozy house, and the house changed every year. Ever since, we’d made sure to always have one at the holidays—it was just a *part* of Christmas, inextricable from it, like watching Christmas movies all together, everyone getting to open one present on Christmas Eve, and my dad making pancakes for us Christmas morning after we’d opened all our presents.

My mom had gotten a Sir Harry’s gingerbread for us last year, but we

were all too sick to even look at it, let alone eat it.

"I'm just saying," J.J. said, "Christmas is about *family*. And how are we supposed to just have fun knowing Mom is here alone?"

"I don't think she'd agree to go to dad's, would she?" I asked, looking between my brothers. "I mean, they're trying to be so fair about everything." Maybe it was because there were no fights over property or custody, but my parents seemed to be having a much less contentious divorce than many of my friends' parents. If anything, they were a little overly careful with each other, neither wanting to take more time with us or overstep the 50/50 line they'd agreed upon.

"We'll have to trick her into it!" J.J. said, his face lighting up. I looked at Mike a little warily.

"I don't know," I said, shaking my head. I'd been witness to a lot of J.J.'s schemes over the years, and they only very rarely resulted in anything other than disaster and/or property damage.

"Leave it to me," he said with a grin. "It'll be like *The Parent Trap*."

"Which one?" Mike asked.

"Why does that matter?"

"It matters a lot," he insisted. "They have completely different vibes, totally different aesthetics..."

"And we're not trying to get mom and dad back together," I fixed J.J. with a look. "*Right?*" It had been hard to see at first, let alone admit – but my parents honestly did seem happier now that they were no longer married. I might have preferred that we always stay in our same house, but even I had to admit that the new lives both of them were leading seemed to make them a lot happier, and suit them better.

"No no," J.J. said, shaking his head again and setting his pom pom bobbing. "This is purely about the holiday." He snapped his fingers. "The Christmas Trap!"

"The what now?" my mom asked as she came back into the room. "Sorry," she said, as she shook her head. "I can't find him."

“What?” I asked, feeling my heart clench. I’d been so sure that Flat Santa would be here. It was like I hadn’t considered that there was another way that this could go. “Are you sure?”

My mom nodded. “One of the benefits of having so little storage is that it doesn’t take long for me to double check. Are you sure he’s not at your father’s?”

J.J. shook his head. “I looked everywhere.” He turned to me and Mike, looking as flummoxed as I felt.

“There’s no chance he got lost during the move, right?” Even as I asked it, I felt my stomach drop. “How are we supposed to have Christmas without Flat Santa?”

“Well,” my mother said, running a hand through her hair. When she spoke again, she was unusually hesitant, like she was weighing her words before speaking them. “I mean...at some point, I think we have to let go of the traditions we had, right? And...make way for new ones?”

I exchanged an incredulous look with my brothers. “No,” I said, like this should have been obvious. “The whole point of traditions is...that they don’t change.”

J.J. nodded. “Otherwise, they’d be called new fangleds.”

Mike frowned. “Would they, though?”

“I just think...” my mom said, just as someone stepped through the open door, knocking on it once.

“Eleanor?” a man came into the hallway. He looked around my mom’s age, with very neat gray hair and a sweatshirt that read *Reed It And Weep*, above a picture of a clarinet. He stopped short when he saw us. “Oh – sorry – the door was open.”

“Kids,” my mom said, looking at us. “This is New York. Can you not leave the door standing open?”

“It was open when we got here,” I pointed out.

“We thought you were being robbed.” J.J. said, then gasped. “What if burglars stole Flat Santa?”

Mike gave him a skeptical look. “But left all the electronics?”

J.J. just shrugged. “I don’t know how the criminal mind works.” I coughed and he glared at me.

“Sorry, Phil,” my mom said, and we all looked back at the guy in the doorway. “My – kids are here.” He nodded a few times and adjusted his round-framed glasses. “Kids, this is Phil Pena, my neighbor.”

“Nice to meet you,” J.J. said, crossing over and shaking his hand. Mike and I waved. “So did you need something?” he prompted after a moment.

“Oh!” Phil looked at my mom, then back at J.J. “Right. There was a . . . um . . . package for you downstairs, Eleanor.”

“Great,” Mike said. We all looked expectantly at Phil and all seemed to realize at the same time he was empty handed. “Did you . . . bring it?”

Phil flushed red. “Er . . . no. Just wanted to . . . keep you informed.”

“Well okay,” J.J. said, after another long pause. He took a step closer to Phil, starting to steer him out the door. “Thanks for the update. Much appreciated!”

Phil stepped out of the door and J.J. closed the door behind him, locking it this time. “Weird guy,” he said, coming back to join us.

“Oh, he’s okay,” my mom said, her eyes on the floor. “I’m just sorry you kids came all this way for nothing.”

“Well . . . maybe not,” I said, as I exchanged a look with my brothers. “Mom, why don’t you spend Christmas with us at dad’s?”

“Yes,” J.J. chimed in. “Which was my idea. We don’t think you should be alone just because cruise ships are basically floating petri dishes.”

“You should come,” Mike said quietly.

“You’re very sweet,” my mom said, shaking her head. “But that wouldn’t be right. I couldn’t do that to your father.”

“But –” J.J. started. My mom shook her head.

“It’s just not fair to him,” she said firmly. “But I’ll make you all a snack and we can catch up before you head back, okay?” She smiled at us and headed back into the kitchen.

Mike shrugged. “Well, I guess that’s that.”

I just shook my head. I recognized the look in J.J.’s eye all too well.

“Have you met our brother?”

“Charlie’s right for once.”

“For *once*?”

“We’ll have to figure out how to get our plan into place,” he said. His eyes were bright as he looked between me and Mike. “But then...it’s Operation Christmas Trap!”



## CHAPTER 3

*Or,  
Low-Fat Waffles*

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*W*HEN WE MADE IT BACK TO MY DAD'S, HELSING rattling down the driveway, the first thing I saw was my sister.

The second thing I saw was the dog.

It's not like I could have missed him, honestly. Linnie and Rodney had adopted Waffles almost two years ago – right after their wedding. They'd assumed he was older than a puppy – at least a little bit – and close to fully grown, so they thought they knew what they were getting.

It turned out they were wrong. Waffles was a beagle, but one of the biggest beagles I'd ever seen, and at the high end of the height and weight scale for his breed. Rodney was sure he was mixed with something – his legs were much longer than beagles' normally were, and he stood a lot taller. But apparently their vet had gotten concerned on their last visit, and put Waffles on a diet. I wasn't clear who was more unhappy about this – Linnie, having to reduce Waffles' food, or Waffles, who was not at all on board with this new arrangement. As I looked at him now, I tried to square the much smaller dog who'd been there

for Linnie's wedding weekend, the one who'd curled up next to me and tucked himself into the hollow of my knees, with this one, who jumped up when Helsing pulled into the driveway.

My dad had been in this new neighborhood for almost two years now, and though it would never be home like our old house was, it was starting to be familiar to me – certainly more so than my mom's apartment.

He lived in a cul-de-sac that had been developed when the university had been built. So all the houses on the street were craftsman cottages, originally intended for Stanwich College professors. Over the years, of course, other people had moved in – my dad's two-doors-down neighbor was an accountant – but most of the other people on his street taught at the college, and none of them hated us, like our former neighbor Don had, so that was one thing his new place had above the old one.

My dad's new house was a lot smaller than our old one had been – just one main story, with a basement. It was painted a weathered gray-green, with gray shutters. I smiled when I saw now that Christmas lights – though not on yet – had been hung up.

I jumped out of the van as soon as J.J. put it in park and hurried out to my sister. Waffles walked up to meet me – he didn't bark or dash forward, though, he just wagged his tail stoically a few times. But if you knew Waffles, you knew this meant he was absolutely thrilled to see you.

"Hi," I said, kneeling down next to him. He allowed me to rub his ears, and gave his tail one more wag, which I took to mean he'd missed me too. "Hi buddy," I said, smoothing back his fur. "Have you been a good boy?"

"No," Linnie said, sounding aggrieved.

I straightened up. "No?" I echoed.

"I looked away for one second on the train, and he'd stolen my lunch!

He ate my burger and all my fries before I got it away from him.”

“Not great, bud,” I said to Waffles, who sat and thumped his tail on the ground once. I then turned to my sister. “Hi,” I said. She smiled, but looked tired – there were dark circles under her eyes.

“Hi,” she said, and pulled me into a hug. I stood there for just a moment and hugged her back. She stepped back and cast a look at what I was wearing. “Is that my sweater?”

“Um, what?” I asked, hurriedly trying to close my coat.

“Linnea!” J.J. called, as he walked from the van, hauling my bag with him. Mike trailed behind him, carrying his own. “Why are you sitting out here? It’s cold!”

“I don’t have keys,” she called back to him. “I assumed someone would be here. Where’s dad?”

“Teaching until three,” Mike said, as he reached her, and greeted Waffles with an ear rub.

“And where were you guys?” she asked, hugging Mike.

“New York,” J.J. said.

“New York *City*?” Linnie asked, her jaw dropping open.

“The big apple,” I confirmed.

“The city so nice they named it twice,” Mike jumped in.

“City that never sleeps,” I added.

“New York, it’s a wonderful town,” Mike said, grinning at me.

“Yep. The Bronx is up and the Battery’s down.”

“I’ve got it,” Linnie said, holding up her hands.

“It’s still weird to see you guys getting along,” J.J. said, shaking his head. He dropped my suitcase in front of me with an exaggerated flourish. “I’m not a bellhop, Charlie.”

“You kind of look like one,” Mike said, tilting his head to the side. “Like the bellhop that Santa would have at the North Pole.”

“What!” J.J. sputtered.

“Not in a bad way,” Linnie assured him as she pulled him into a hug.

“But you may have gone a little overboard with the Christmas clothes this year.”

“No such thing,” J.J. declared. “You only get to dress like this for a limited amount of time, and you’d have me tone it down?”

“Yes,” Mike and I said in unison.

“Scoff,” J.J. said. He bent down and scratched Waffles on the head. “Waffles doesn’t mind, does he? Dog genius that he is.”

“Well,” Linnie said, shooting me a look like she was trying not to laugh. “You know dogs are colorblind, right?”

J.J. stood up, looking disgruntled. “Let’s go in. When Danny gets here, he’ll appreciate my sartorial choices.” J.J. unlocked the door and we all tramped inside. Just like my mom’s apartment, the stuff in my dad’s new place was a combination of some things he’d brought with him, and new stuff he’d bought since moving in. And of course, through the kitchen window, I could see his pride and joy – his garden. It was put to bed for the winter, but he was determined, in the next few years, to get it up to the same level as his prize-winning garden at our old house.

“Wait,” Linnie said, as she tossed down her bag and started taking out Waffles’ food and water dishes. “Why were you guys in New York?”

I heard J.J. and Mike starting to explain – and Linnie gasping in what I assume was her learning about missing Flat Santa – as I took my bag to guest room that I shared with Linnie when she came alone – when she was here with Rodney, they usually stayed on the pull-out couch in the basement. I set it down at the foot of one of the twin beds and looked around. This was the hardest thing – and the reason that I wanted a moment to process it alone. My friends at college hadn’t understood – all of them still had the bedrooms they’d grown up in. Even my friends whose parents were also divorced still had their same two familiar bedrooms. The fact that I didn’t really have a room of my own anymore just became hard to take in moments like this. I kept

some clothes here, and had a few pictures and mementos on the dresser. But it wasn't really my room, not really.

I turned to head back to the kitchen just as my phone dinged with a text.

**Bill**

Hey you. Get back to CT okay?

My mom is making me decorate 800 Christmas cookies send help

I smiled as I read the texts. Bill hadn't had classes this week, so he'd been at his mom's in Mystic all week. He was flying to his dad's in New Mexico on Christmas Eve – his parents split up the holidays rather than alternating years. We'd talked about trying to see each other in the small window we'd both be in Connecticut, but had ultimately decided that it was too complicated. It was just one more reason, I knew, that it was probably a good thing I hadn't made it into the study-abroad program. Mystic was less than an hour from Stanwich, and even that was too hard to coordinate. So I couldn't even imagine trying to do it from halfway around the world.

**Me**

Made it with no problems!

Well. We can't find Flat Santa, our Christmas mascot.

And my mom's actually in town??

**Bill**

??

What about Ecuador?

*Me*

I know

It's weird

I'll explain it all  
Can we talk later?

**Bill**

Yes! I'll call around 10?

Me  
Talk then ❤️

I put my phone in my pocket, tossed my coat on the bed, then headed back out to the kitchen.

Linnie was rooting around in the cabinets, J.J. was sitting on the kitchen counter, and Mike was at the kitchen table, frowning at Waffles, who was nudging his nose into his food bowl so hard that it banged against the wall.

"Does he need some food?" Mike asked Linnie, who looked over at him.

"No," she said sharply. "He's on a diet. Don't feed him. He's turned into a total beggar." Waffles lifted his head from his dish, shot her what truly seemed to be an offended look, then walked over to Mike and flopped down on his feet.

"What are you looking for?" I asked, leaning on the counter next to J.J.

"I'm looking for the Sir Harry's," Linnie said, shutting one cabinet and opening up another. "It wasn't out on the table."

"I'm sure it's somewhere," I said, even though I started to get a panicky feeling in my stomach. We couldn't do Christmas without Flat Santa *and* without gingerbread. At some point, it would totally cease to be Christmas at all. "Dad wouldn't have forgotten."

"It's not in the kitchen," Linnie said, closing the last cabinet and

shaking her head. “And despite what he always says, I know that Rodney...” she stopped suddenly, and bit her lip.

“J.J. said he had to work?” I asked, taking a step closer to my sister. I was trying to keep all judgement out of my voice, even though I was very much feeling some.

“Yeah,” she said with a sigh. “He’s going to try for tomorrow.”

“Try?” J.J. asked, sounding incredulous. “Lins – come on. It’s Christmas!”

“I’m aware of that, Jamieson!” And then, to my shock, Linnie burst into tears. My sister wasn’t a huge crier – she’d cry when things were really wrong, or bothering her. Was the Rodney thing worse than we realized? Were they having...actual problems? Aside from a very brief breakup in their early 20s, my sister and Rodney had been so steady, such a unit, that the thought of things not working out between them... it was like I couldn’t even imagine it. But then why was my sister weeping in the kitchen?

“Are you okay?” I asked, grabbing a box of tissues off the counter and hurrying over to her. I exchanged an alarmed look with my brothers as I went.

“Sorry,” she said, taking a tissue and wiping underneath her eyes. “I just keep crying lately, I think it’s just the stress of the holidays. Just ignore me.” Waffles got up from Mike’s feet and hurried over to Linnie, pressing his head into her leg.

“Well, we’re not going to do that,” Mike said, giving her a small, sardonic smile.

“Have you talked to Rodney?” J.J. asked, his voice uncharacteristically gentle. “Let him know how much this is upsetting you?”

“I’ve tried,” Linnie said, taking a shaky breath. It seemed like she was pulling herself together. “But he’s so stressed, and so busy. And he says he’s doing this for us, but...it’s just not worth it.” She shook her head. “I’m going to check under the tree for the gingerbread,” she said in an

upbeat voice that I knew wouldn't fool any of us. But it did seem like maybe she just needed a moment to try and pull herself together.

She left, tissue in hand, with Waffles padding after her.

"Yikes," Mike said, shaking his head.

"But she and Rodney are okay, right?" I looked between my brothers for reassurance. After my parents splitting up, I really didn't think I could take anything happening with Linnie and Rodney.

"It's probably just a tough phase," Mike said, but he didn't sound too certain. "I'm sure they'll be okay."

"I hope so," J.J. said slowly. "But also if Rodney leaves this job because Linnie wants him to, he might resent her for it. And then that stuff can build up and build up, and then your girlfriend breaks up with you at your favorite sushi place and now you can't eat yellowtail anymore."

Mike and I looked at each other. "That's... a really specific example, J.J."

"I mean, you know," J.J. said, his face turning red – it now matched his hat. "Whatever."

"Hello?" we looked over as my dad came into the kitchen, arms full of grocery bags. As usual, his glasses were perched on top of his head, and I wondered for just how many hours they'd been like that – I would have bet money it had been since this morning. "Are my children here? All of them?"

"Mostly," I said, as we all got up. J.J. took the bags from my dad's arms, and then I darted over to give him a hug. "Danny's not here yet."

"And Rodney might not be coming until tomorrow," Mike said, as I stepped back so he could hug dad too.

"But maybe don't mention it to Linnie," J.J. said as he pawed through the grocery bags. "Ix-nay on the Odney-Ray."

"How was the flight?" my dad asked me and Mike as he shucked off his coat.

"Well," I started, prepared to tell him all about the turbulence, when J.J. interrupted.



“You didn’t get any Sir Harry’s Happy Christmas Gingerbread,” he said, looking up from the grocery bags. “And Linnie couldn’t find it in the cupboards.”

“It might be under the tree,” I reminded him.

“Is it under the tree?” J.J. hollered at full volume in the direction of the family room, where my dad had told me he’d set the tree up.

“No,” Linnie said, wincing, as she came back into the kitchen. “And you don’t have to yell so loud, J.J. This house isn’t as big as our old place. Hi daddy.”

“Hi daughter,” my dad said, pulling Linnie in for a hug. Then he stepped back and frowned – her face was still blotchy and red. “Are you – ”

“Ix-nay!” J.J. yell-coughed, in a very unsubtle move.

“You do have the Sir Harry’s Happy Christmas Gingerbread here somewhere, right dad?” I asked. I was just praying that he would point to a cupboard we hadn’t looked in, and pull it out with a flourish.

My dad winced and shook his head. “I’ve been looking *everywhere*,” he said. “Even online shops in the U.K. There was a run on them this year for some reason.”

“We can’t not have the Gingerbread,” Mike insisted.

“Especially if we can’t find Flat Santa!” I added.

“Still no trace of him?” my dad asked J.J., who shook his head.

“I don’t know where he is then,” my dad said, looking around like Flat Santa might pop up in the kitchen.

“I’m going to check the basement,” Mike said, getting up.

“I already checked there,” J.J. yelled after him.

“But I don’t trust you did a good job!” Mike called back.

“Well that is just rude,” J.J. said, frowning, heading after him. “Michael!” he yelled.

“Never a dull moment,” my dad said, but he smiled and picked up some of the food J.J. had left strewn all over the counter and headed

over to the cupboard with it. “Is...the dog okay?” he asked, looking down at Waffles, who was nudging the bowl again.

“He’s just on a diet,” Linnie said, shaking her head. “He’s not happy about it.”

“I wouldn’t be either,” my dad said, bending down to pat his head.

“So...” I said, looking at Linnie, then back at my dad. I had a feeling it might actually be best if I floated this idea, not J.J. “We went into the city earlier – we were looking for Flat Santa at Mom’s.”

“Okay,” my dad said, as he put away a box of microwave popcorn.

“And it turned out Mom is still in town, because the crew of her cruise ship got norovirus –”

“Ugh,” my dad said with a shudder. “Sorry, that was involuntary. But ugh.”

“And we didn’t know about maybe her...spending Christmas with us?”

My dad closed the cabinet door and turned to face us, his eyebrows raised. “Did you mother say she wanted to spend Christmas here?”

“No,” I said, “she said that it wouldn’t be fair to you and that she’d just see us after the holiday.”

“Well, there you go.”

J.J. burst back into the room, looking between me and my dad. “What did Charlie do?” he asked. “Did she ask you about Mom? Let me start again.”

“I’m not sure it’s the best idea,” my dad said as he took an armful of groceries to the fridge.

“You want mom to be *alone* on Christmas?” J.J. asked, his tone indignant.

“J.J.,” Linnie said, her tone warning, “I think that Mom and Dad have made this schedule, and we shouldn’t be messing with it.”

“If your mother wants to come, of course she’s always welcome,” my dad said from the depths of the fridge. “But it doesn’t sound like that’s what she wants.”

“Maybe she doesn’t think it’s what she wants, but it actually is,” J.J. said, his tone wheedling. “I’m sure if you called and invited her...”

“No Flat Santa,” Mike said as he came back into the kitchen.

“Told you,” J.J. said. He looked triumphant for a moment, then his face fell. “Where could he be?”

“He has to be *somewhere*,” Linnie said. “An unstuffed Santa toy just didn’t completely disappear. Do you think Danny knows?”

My phone beeped with a text and I looked down at it. “Well, we can ask him,” I said with a smile. “He just arrived.”

CHAPTER 4  
*Or,*  
*Dead Face Rat Says Merry Christmas*

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**I**HURRIED DOWN THE DRIVEWAY JUST AS MY OLDEST brother was getting out of an SUV he'd parked on the street. I smiled, ready to greet him – and then he turned around and I took an involuntary step backward.

Danny, since the last time I'd seen or FaceTimed with him, had grown a beard.

Danny had never had a beard before, and as I looked at it now, I was pretty sure I realized why. This was...not a great beard. It was too full in some places and too patchy in others and made his face look...weirdly square? It was like Danny was putting on a bad disguise, one that wasn't going to fool anyone and was just going to make everyone around him vaguely uncomfortable.

Though, as I tried to attach a normal smile to my face, one that wasn't judgmental about facial hair choices, I figured that maybe I shouldn't have been surprised. Ever since he turned thirty this year, Danny – the brother who'd always been the most assured and most confident, had seemed to go through a crisis. (Thirds life crisis? He was a little too old

for a quarter-life crisis, unless we were being very optimistic about his eventual life span.)

His work as a venture capitalist, by all accounts, was still going well. But that seemed to be the only thing in his life that was. He sold his house in San Francisco, bounced around different rental properties for a while, tried a tiny house, tried living in an Airstream, but none of them had worked out (we all warned him he would hate the tiny house). He was currently living in a hotel, like he was the grown-up boy version of Eloise. He'd tried being vegan, doing keto, had gone to a silent retreat in Oslo, and had hiked to base camp of Mount Everest. None of this seemed to help with whatever was happening with him, though. And now here was the beard, which seemed maybe the worst sign of all.

"Hi," I called to him as I got closer.

He grinned and me and pulled me into a hug. "Chuck! So what do you think?"

"About?" I asked, stalling for time. I blinked at the car in front of me – it was a Porsche SUV. "Did you rent this?"

"Yeah," Danny said, opening up the back and pulling his suitcase from it.

"You can rent a Porsche? At the airport?"

"You can rent anything," he said blithely. He stroked his chin and smiled at me. "So what do you think of the beard?"

"It's so...there!" I said, smiling brightly at him. "On your face and everything!"

"Yeah, I felt like I needed a change," he said. He pressed a button and the back of the SUV lowered. "I might stick with it, though. It might be my new thing. Like maybe this is who I *am*, you know?"

"Oh," I said, feeling the blood drain from my face. I really wanted Danny to fall in love and have a family someday, and this seemed like it was going to be a giant impediment to that. "Well, maybe don't be so hasty. No need to make any firm decisions now..."

A car pulled up next to us and stopped. The passenger-side window rolled down, and I saw it was one of my dad's neighbors, one I recognized. I was pretty sure her name was something with an K. Kalinda maybe? She was tall, and pretty, and looked around Danny's age, maybe a little younger. My dad had said hi to her when we'd been on walks together, and told me she was a professor of sociology at the college, but I didn't think we'd ever spoken.

"Hi," I said, waving at her. She nodded at me, giving me a quick smile.

"Hi," she said. "You're Jeff's daughter, right?"

"I'm Charlie," I said. "And you're Kalinda?" she nodded. "Happy holidays."

"You too," she said. She glanced at Danny and her friendly expression faded. "You're in my spot."

Danny looked around, then back at her. "*Your* spot?" he asked, sounding confused. "I'm parked on the street."

"I know, but that's the spot I always park in," she explained, her voice patient. "You can unload your stuff, but then I need you to move, okay? Thanks!" she gave me a nod and then drove down the street.

Danny looked at where Kalinda's car had gone, then back to me. "You can't just claim spots if they're street parking."

"If she says she always parks there, maybe she does?" I asked. "If J.J. and Dad move their cars up, I bet you can fit in the driveway."

"It's the principle of the thing," Danny said, shaking his head. "Like you don't just get to declare something is yours. There's no manifest destiny for parking."

"I still think you should move it," I said with a shrug. "Like, it's Christmas, you know?"

"Exactly," Danny said, as he walked up the driveway and I followed behind. "It's my Christmas too. And my feelings matter just as much as other people's. I get to have a say in things too, you know!"

“Okay,” I said, feeling like maybe this was about more than just a parking spot. I held open the front door for Danny to step inside with his bag, and it hit me in that moment just how much had changed in the last year or so. I used to think Danny absolutely hung the moon – that he could do no wrong, and that he always made the perfect decisions. This was maybe understandable – he was twelve years older than me, and so for most of my life he’d been this dazzling, untouchable presence. He’d always made time for me, and we’d always been close – and, admittedly, I’d been pretty willfully blind to his flaws. But all of that had changed the spring of my senior year. When he brought his then-girlfriend Brooke to Linnie’s wedding, I’d been able to see that Danny wasn’t the perfect brother I always thought – he and Brooke broke up, and the way I’d treated her still bothered me, even though I’d apologized to her at the time and then later, over email.

But it had been the beginning of me seeing Danny as a real person, off the pedestal I’d put him on. It had been easier, ever since to be a little more clear-eyed about him.

And if I hadn’t been before now, the beard certainly would have done it.

“Merry Christmas, one and all!” Danny said, as he stepped into the kitchen. My dad’s eyes widened, Linnie looked nauseous, and Mike choked on the peppermint bark he was eating.

“Agh!” J.J. said, going into a defensive crouch. “Danny! There’s something attached to your face!”

“It’s a beard,” Danny said, looking annoyed as he started hugging everyone.

“No,” J.J. said, his expression horrified. “I think something crawled onto your face and died. You’ve got Dead Rat Face!”

“That’s not a thing,” Danny said, shaking his head. He went to hug J.J., who took two big steps back.

“I don’t want that thing near me,” he said, shaking his head. “No offense.”

“Um, offense,” Danny said, now looking irritated. “Just because *you* can’t grow a beard.”

“You think I can’t grow a beard?” J.J. snapped back.

“That’s literally what I just said.”

“Boys,” my dad said. “No fighting on Christmas.”

“It isn’t Christmas yet,” Mike pointed out.

“It’s Christmas Eve Eve,” Linnie confirmed.

“That’s not a thing,” Danny said.

“Don’t listen to Grizzly Adams,” J.J. said. “It’s totally a thing. And I could absolutely grow a beard if I wanted to, but if I’m going to look like a marsupial is taking a nap on my chin – like you – I really don’t want to!”

“Sounds like we need a bet,” Linnie said, grinning. She took a seat next to Mike at the kitchen table, and Mike slid over the dish of peppermint bark, and they settled in like they were watching a movie.

“What’s the bet?” J.J. asked. “Like, I don’t think I can grow a beard in two days.”

“Well, not with that attitude you won’t,” I pointed out.

“Yeah, we need to clarify this,” Mike said. “Is the bet that J.J. can’t grow a beard at all? Or that he can’t grow a beard by a specific time? Because otherwise this bet could just go on forever.”

“How about J.J. has to grow a beard by New Years?” my dad suggested, apparently deciding he was going to join in on this.

“And if I can, you have to shave that thing,” J.J. said, waving a hand in Danny’s direction.

Danny’s face fell. “You really don’t like it?”

“Was I not being clear?” J.J. asked, sounding genuinely bothered by this. “Sorry if I was being vague. I hate it so so so much.”

“Well, then, if you lose, which you will –”

“Which I won’t –”

“I get to keep my beard and you have to apologize and tell me how



good you think it looks.” Danny paused thoughtfully. “Maybe in verse. A haiku, perhaps.”

“Have we agreed on terms?” Mike asked. He held up his hand. “Witness.”

Linnie and I raised ours. “Seconded.”

Danny and J.J. shook just as Waffles came back into the kitchen, his nose to the ground, like he was trying to find any scrap of food that might have been dropped. Danny smiled when he saw him. “Hey bud!”

But Waffles’ ears went back and he started to growl, low in the back of his throat. Danny frowned. “What’s going on with Waffles? He’s never done that before.”

“I think it’s the beard,” Mike said, taking another bite of peppermint bark.

“It’s not the beard,” Danny said, sounding annoyed.

“It might be the beard,” Linnie said. “He hates our mail carrier too, and he has a beard. Try covering up the bottom part of your face.”

Danny rolled his eyes but placed his hands over the bottom of his face. Waffles immediately stopped growling and trotted over to Danny, wagging his tail exactly two times. “Oh, come on!” Danny said.

“If you shave it now, I’m willing to forfeit the bet,” J.J. said magnanimously.

“Never,” Danny said, looking around. “Where’s Rodney? He’ll back me up.”

There was a loaded silence, and then I said, trying to make my voice as cheerful and unbothered as possible, “He’s not coming until Christmas. Which is *fine!*” I widened my eyes at Danny, and then looked in Linnie’s direction significantly.

Danny nodded. “Gotcha. Well, he’ll back me up when he’s here. What else is going on?”

We raided the fridge for snacks and drinks while my dad went to his office to finish his pre-holiday grading and we caught Danny caught

up on mom, J.J.'s Christmas Trap idea, the missing Flat Santa, and the gingerbread scarcity.

"We have to do something," I said, grabbing a handful of chips Mike had shaken into a bowl and placed on the table when we'd all finished the peppermint bark. "We can't have a Christmas with no gingerbread, no Flat Santa..."

"And no Mom," J.J. said with a sigh.

"She wasn't supposed to be here," Linnie pointed out. "She was supposed to be in Ecuador, on a boat. So I'm not sure we can count that."

"It's just..." I said, shaking my head. I was trying to put into words what had been building all afternoon. "It's not going to feel like *Christmas*." I didn't want to say it, but had a feeling that all my siblings were thinking it too – that this wasn't Christmas, in this new house in a cul-de-sac. Christmas was supposed to be in our own house, with both of our parents, with Danny not looking like Ulysses S. Grant. "It already is different," I said, then added quickly, "which is fine! But then to not have the two things that made it a constant..."

"I know," Mike said, giving me a sympathetic smile. "But I don't know if there's anything we can do about it."

"We can put my Christmas Trap idea into play," J.J. said, shaking a truly massive handful of chips into his mouth.

"We can throw some money at the problem," Danny said, pulling out his phone. "I can get us the gingerbread, at least."

"What are you going to do, airlift it from the UK?" Linnie asked, sounding skeptical.

Danny grinned at her. "Great idea." He started typing on his phone, then looked up and frowned. "I keep thinking I know where Flat Santa is."

J.J. choked on his chips. "You *do*?" he sputtered.

Danny shook his head. "It's like it's in the back of my mind, like I can almost picture it..."

“But that’s something,” I said, grabbing onto this hope. “That means that it’s somewhere if Danny can picture it. It’s not totally lost forever.”

“Everyone else, try and think if you remember where Flat Santa could be,” Danny said, starting to head out of the kitchen, phone pressed to his ear. “In the meantime, I’m going to get us some Sir Harry’s Happy Christmas Gingerbread.”

Once he was gone, we all looked at each other. “So Danny’s hit rock bottom, huh?” Linnie asked, eyes wide.

“That beard is more than a cry for help,” Mike said with a shudder. “It’s like a detailed PowerPoint for help.”

“J.J., grow your beard fast,” I said. “So we don’t have to look at this anymore.”

“Agreed,” my dad said, coming back into the room. “I love my son but now I also hate his face, which is confusing for me. Now!” he said, clapping his hands together. “Let’s get dinner figured out.”

We all decided on pizza – of course – and then headed off to unpack and settle in. And it wasn’t until I was heading out to Captain Pizza to pick up our pies, J.J. riding shotgun and critiquing my music choices, that I realized Danny had never moved his car.

## CHAPTER 4

*Or,  
Rolling the Dice*

---

“**I** SWEAR YOU’RE CHEATING,” LINNIE SAID AS SHE yawned and tossed down her score sheet.

It was getting late – we’d all eaten our fill of pizza (I missed Captain Pizza desperately when I was at school. Chicago-style deep dish was good, but in my opinion, it wasn’t pizza. You shouldn’t need to eat pizza with a fork. Deep dish, in my opinion, was just lasagna going by a different name). Then we’d retreated into the TV room, and Danny and Mike had built a fire in the fireplace that had mostly burned out by now, but still had a few embers crackling. Waffles was snuffle-snoring in front of the fire, where he’d retreated with wounded dignity after everyone had refused to give him pizza, no matter how hard he’d stared at them.

The Christmas tree had been set up in the corner – my dad and J.J. had put the lights on and decorated it, but had kept aside some of our favorite ornaments for us to put on ourselves-- though not all of them. Like everything else, even the Christmas ornaments had been divided between our parents, and a few of them – the origami bird Linnie had

made in second grade, the plastic Grant Central Station ornament in which Mike's head looked squashed, the candy-cane reindeer – were at my mom's in New York.

After the tree was done, we planned to watch a movie. We had a very specific roster of holiday movies, and only rarely let in a new one. We had to watch *Home Alone* on Christmas Eve. *Die Hard* was reserved for Christmas Day, and we always had *It's A Wonderful Life* playing in the background, volume low, as we opened our presents on Christmas morning. But the movie on the 23rd was always a bit of a wild card. We had a long, heated debate (J.J. wanted *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, Mike wanted *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, Danny was pushing hard for *Elf*, Linnie wanted *Prancer* and I wanted *Little Women*—“it's not technically a Christmas movie but it feels like a Christmas movie”) but when we couldn't reach a consensus, we decided to play games instead.

We'd gone three rounds in Fishbowl, and now were playing Farkle, a dice game J.J. had taught us after he came back from his freshman year at M.I.T with tales about everyone in his dorm playing it between classes.

But even though I was worried it was going to be solely for genius math majors, we'd all taken to Farkle right away. It wasn't really about math, it was more about probability and weighing risk. Normally Linnie was really good at it – it was J.J. who was always willing to risk everything, only to have all his points taken away – but tonight she'd been playing very badly, to the point where we'd all started asking her if that was what she *really* wanted to do.

“I'm not cheating,” Mike said patiently, as he added up his own score. “I'm just not playing like a maniac.”

“Sorry guys,” Linnie said, rubbing a hand over her face. “It just feels like it's been a long day. Another round?”

I glanced at the clock above the fireplace and pushed myself up off the couch it was just a little bit before ten. “Bill's going to call soon,” I

said, heading out toward the room I shared with Linnie. “I’ll be back next round.”

I pulled out my phone as I walked back to the room, beyond glad that Bill knew my family as well as he did. I wouldn’t have to go into any long explanations – I could just catch him up on the day, knowing he was very familiar with the whole cast of characters. I just stepped inside the room when I saw Linnie’s phone was on the dresser, buzzing. I picked it up and saw RODNEY CALLING over a background photo of the two of them and Waffles, sitting on the front step of their house, Linnie and Rodney smiling, Waffles staring down the camera.

“Hi,” I said, answering it, putting my own phone back in my pocket. “It’s Charlie,” I added.

“I can tell,” my brother-in-law said through the phone. And even though he sounded tired, I could tell he was smiling. “I didn’t just get here, you know. Merry almost-Christmas! How are you? Is my dog behaving? Is my wife around?”

“Good, no, and yes,” I said, as I started walking back toward the TV room. “He is *not* happy about this diet.”

Rodney sighed. “You’re telling me. Last month, he found out where we keep his food and chewed a hole in the bag! Keep an eye on him, okay?”

“I’ll do my best,” I said, then stepped into the TV room and lowered the phone. “Linnie, Rodney –”

“I don’t want to talk about Rodney, okay?” Linnie asked with a deep sigh. “I don’t think there’s anything to be said. He won’t listen to me when I tell him how much I hate what this job is doing to him. He doesn’t seem to care about my feelings about it.”

“Linnie,” I shout-whispered to her, trying to stop this. “He’s –”

But she was carrying forward, undaunted. “He’s gone and sacrificed all his values, all the things he believed in, chasing after money –”

“Nothing wrong with that –” Danny interjected.

“And sometimes, it’s like I don’t even know him anymore.” She shook her head and sighed.

“...he’s on the phone,” I said, my stomach plunging as I held it out to her. *Sorry*, I mouthed to her, wishing I could do something to fix this.

Linnie’s eyes widened as she looked at the phone, then up at me in horror, clearly realizing that Rodney had heard everything she’d just said. She swallowed hard, then stood up and took the phone from me. “Hi,” she said, her voice quavery as she headed back toward our room. “Honey, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...” her voice faded out as she headed down the hall.

“Yeesh,” I said, sitting back down on the couch between Danny and J.J.

“Why are you answering Linnie’s phone?” J.J. asked.

“Because I wanted to talk to Rodney,” I protested. “This isn’t my fault.” All my brothers gave me a *really?* look. “It’s not *entirely* my fault.”

“What’s happening with your love life?” Danny asked Mike, and I shot him a grateful smile, relieved he’d changed the subject away from how I might have messed up my sister’s marriage. “How’s life of Rileys?”

Mike gave him a level look. “How long have you been waiting to make that joke?”

“Wait a minute,” J.J. said, sitting up straight and pointing at Danny. “You knew about the Rileys? While I’m just in Queens thinking there’s just a singular Riley?” he gave Mike a devastated look. “I think we need to talk more, Michael.”

“Look,” Mike said, starting to look uncomfortable, “I know how hard the Quinn breakup was, so I didn’t want to be telling you all about my relationships.”

“I can handle it,” J.J. said, his voice totally serious for once. “I want to know. You’re my brother.”

“Okay,” Mike said, giving him a smile, and J.J. grinned back at him.

“You’re doing the right thing, Mike,” Danny said, leaning back

against the couch. “Playing the field. Not focusing on one person. Just having fun. That’s the way to do it.” He gave Mike a nod.

“I guess,” Mike said, looking discomfited. “But...”

My phone buzzed in my pocket and I saw that BILL CALLING was flashing across the display. His contact picture – one I’d taken of him by the lake at the beginning of the school year – was on the screen. In it, Bill was smiling happily at the camera, not realizing that a seagull was in the process of snatching up his hot dog from his hand. “That’s Bill,” I said. I stood up and looked around. I couldn’t take the call in my room – Linnie was still in there, talking to Rodney. And this house was small enough I wasn’t sure there was anywhere I could go where a brother might not be able to overhear me. “I’m just gonna take this outside.”

“Take it in the Porsche,” Danny said. “It’s cold outside.”

“Oh, did you rent a Porsche?” J.J. asked in faux-surprise. “You haven’t mentioned it.” Danny threw a pillow at him that hit Mike instead.

“Hey!”

“Keys are under the visor,” Danny called after me as I nodded and headed out of the room just in time to see the pillow flying back at Danny.

“What are you, in a 70s action movie?” I heard J.J. ask skeptically as I slid my finger over the screen to answer the call.

“Hi,” I said. I grabbed my coat from the hook by the door and stepped outside. I pulled my coat around me as I drew in a breath. The air was cold, and heavy – like it could start snowing at any moment. The sky was clear, though – not a cloud in sight.

“Hi,” Bill’s voice came through the phone, and I could tell he was smiling. “You made it in okay? How was the turbulence?”

I smiled as I hurried down the driveway to Danny’s car. “It seems fine now that it’s no longer happening. But ask me when I have to fly back. How’s your mom?”

Bill filled me in as I opened the – unlocked! – door to Danny’s car



and sat down carefully on the leather seats. I was well aware that this was the nicest car I'd ever been in, and that furthermore, it wasn't even technically Danny's. I flipped down the visor, and sure enough, a set of keys came tumbling out. I shook my head as I pressed the button to turn the car on. Stanwich was pretty safe, but it didn't seem to me that there was any need to be leaving Porsches unlocked willy nilly.

I managed to turn on the heat and then the seat warmer, and slid the seat back so I could settle in for a talk with Bill. I told him about Flat Santa, and the gingerbread, and my mom suddenly being in New York and not on a cruise ship. "And there was this guy, Phil, we met. Her neighbor..."

"What about him?" Bill asked. His voice was low and he was talking a little more slowly, the way he did when he was tired. It was one of my favorite things, watching him in bed as he tried to insist he wasn't tired that he was listening, that he was totally with me, right up until the moment he fell asleep, like a switch getting flipped.

"I don't know," I said, trying to figure out what had seemed off about Phil's visit – it was like there was something else going on, but I had no idea what. "And then the thought of my mom spending Christmas alone...and that nothing is the way it's always been! It's just making this feel like...I don't know..." my voice trailed off.

"Like what?" he asked gently.

"Like," I said, finding the answer as I was speaking it, "remember that pierogi place we loved? The little one?"

"Of course," he said. "The one that was on Lawrence."

"Yes!" I said. It had been a great spot that we'd found on a dumpling quest. It had been tiny, a little hole-in-the-wall. It was always crowded and always a little overheated, and I been excited when Bill told me they were moving to a bigger location. We went after they'd been open a few months and it just...wasn't the same. There was enough space and shorter waits, but something was now missing that had been there before.

“Remember what the new place was like? How all the food was the same, but everything just felt...wrong? Like they were trying to carry something over and it didn’t work?”

“Yeah,” he said slowly. “I do.”

“This...kind of feels like that,” I said, then let out a long breath. “Like we’re trying to make it feel like old times, but...”

“Things have changed,” Bill filled in for me.

“Yeah,” I said, as I pulled my knees up and hugged them as I looked out on the quiet cul-de-sac, lit with a single streetlight.

“I mean maybe,” Bill said, “it means that it might be time to...find new traditions?”

“My mom said the same thing,” I said. “But...I don’t want to.”

Bill laughed at that, and I smiled. “I get it,” he said. “The first few Christmases after my parents’ divorce, we didn’t even try and do them at home. We’d go on trips, or to relatives’ houses...like we were trying to avoid exactly what you’re going through now.”

“So what happened?”

“Well,” he said, and suddenly I could see him, stretched out on his bed at his mom’s house, his pillow propped up behind his head, his bed with its striped comforter perfectly made. “Eventually we were able to find new things. We kept some of the old stuff, of course – but it turned out to be a moment where we got to choose what we wanted to do, not just doing it because we’d always done it.”

I nodded, even though I knew he couldn’t see me, and ran my hand over the leather steering wheel. “I mean, that makes sense.”

“Listen,” he said around a yawn, “I promise it’ll be okay. I mean, think of it this way – you don’t have to go to JFK on Christmas Eve!”

“Ugh, that’s right,” I said, wincing in sympathy. “So sorry about that.”

“It’s okay,” he said, his usual Bill cheerfulness returning. “I gain some hours because of the time difference, and then when my dad picks me up from the airport, we go pick up our Christmas tamales...”

“New tradition?” I asked, smiling.

“Exactly!” he said.

“Well, text me when you get on the plane, okay?” I asked. “And when you land.”

“Of course,” he said, and I knew that he was smiling. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “I love you.”

The second I’d said it, I clapped my hand over my mouth.

Bill and I had not said this to each other yet. I’d never said it to anyone who wasn’t a family member. I’d thought I’d been in love with Jesse Foster, Mike’s best friend from home, but I had been able to figure out eventually that hadn’t been love – it had been projection and imagination, but not love.

But Bill... I’d certainly found myself *thinking* it recently, like a thought floating across the transom of my mind. I would think it when watched him reading, the way his brow furrowed in concentration. How he was always five minutes early to everything. The way he was just the right height for me to rest my head on his shoulder. The way he relentlessly saw the bright side of things, no matter how dire the situation.

But I’d never said it to him. And if I’d vaguely thought about the fact that I might say it, possibly, at some point in the future, it certainly would not have been on the *phone*, while sitting in my brother’s rental car.

“Wait,” Bill said, no longer sounding sleepy. “Did you –”

“No,” I said quickly, wishing I could somehow go back and undo the last thirty seconds. “I...um. Never mind.”

“Never *mind?*”

“Just...I...” my brain churned frantically as I tried to figure out what to do. What if I said it to Bill again, and then he didn’t say it back? And it’s not like I could even see his face, to try and get a sense of what he was thinking! And then it was this awkward thing that hung over the

whole break and then things were so uncomfortable when we got back to Chicago that we just had to break up rather than face it.

“Charlie,” Bill said, sounding confused, “I think –”

“Oh, whoops, gotta go. There’s an, um, issue. With Waffles. The food, not the dog. But actually the dog too,” I babbled. I knew this was the cowardly way out but decided to take it anyway. “Um, I’ll talk to you soon have a good flight bye!” I hung up the phone and dropped it on the dashboard like it was hot.

What had I just done? Had I just wrecked everything?

A moment later, my phone started buzzing with texts.

Bill

Charlie, what’s going on?

I think we should talk about this.

I knew he was right – we *should* talk about it – but I didn’t want to, in case talking about it meant Bill telling me that he didn’t, in fact, love me back. Because then we’d have to break up, right? I had no idea how any of this worked. Why didn’t we learn anything *useful* in school?

I groaned, dropped my head onto the steering wheel and closed my eyes.

All I had wanted was a Christmas like we normally had. But instead, there was no Flat Santa, no gingerbread, my mom was alone in her apartment, I may have made things worse with Rodney and Linnie, and I’d just told my boyfriend I loved him and then had been too cowardly to have a conversation about it.

Someone knocked on the window and I jumped, my eyes flying open. I turned toward the window and I saw Kalinda, my dad’s neighbor, standing outside, holding a scruffy-looking terrier on a leash. I rolled down the window, trying to get my heart to stop beating a million miles an hour.

“Hi Charlie,” she said. “Sorry if I scared you.”

“No, it’s fine,” I said. “I’m so sorry my brother didn’t move his car before. I told him to...”

“Never trust a man with a beard,” she said with a smile and I laughed.

“Especially not *that* beard. Let me see if I can move it. I’m not on the rental agreement, but...” I looked around the car and saw to my distress, that it was a manual transmission, which I very much did not know how to drive. “I can’t drive stick. But I can go get him?”

“Don’t worry about it,” Kalinda said, shaking her head. “I mostly just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine,” I lied. I mean, I wasn’t fine, but I wasn’t sure I needed to burden my dad’s neighbor who I didn’t even know, about this. “It’s just...the holidays, you know?”

She smiled at me. “I do know.”

I raised the *just a second* finger and rolled the window up. Then I hit the button to turn the car off – the car I shared with Mike still had an actual key that you put in the ignition, so you never were confused about whether the car was on or not. But I waited a second, made sure it was off, then put the keys back where I’d gotten them, under the visor.

Then I got out of the car, pulling my coat tighter around me as I did. It felt like since I’d been in Danny’s car, wrecking my relationship, it had gotten ten degrees colder outside. “Sorry about that,” I said, giving her an apologetic smile. “I’ll talk to Danny about moving it, okay?”

“No, that’s okay,” she said, her voice thoughtful. She glanced back at the car for a second, then nodded. “I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“Um,” I said. “Okay.”

Her terrier started straining against his leash, then looked back at her, tail wagging, clearly wondering why their walk had stalled. “Howard’s getting antsy,” she said, giving me a smile. “I’ll see you around, Charlie.”

“Have a good night,” I called after her as she raised a mittened hand in a wave, then headed down the street, pulled by Howard the dog.

I trudged back into the house, hanging my coat up and leaving my

Uggs by the door. I headed back into the TV room to see that my brothers had departed, and Linnie was on the couch with Waffles, who was resting his head on her leg, his paws twitching occasionally as he dreamt.

The lights were off – the only light was coming from the embers of the fire and from the TV, which was playing *The Family Stone*, another of our Christmas movie standbys.

“What happened to *Prancer*?” I asked as I came down to sit on the couch next to Waffles and patted his leg. He raised his head and looked at me, then thumped his tail once before closing his eyes again.

“It’s not streaming,” Linnie said with a sigh. “And I couldn’t muster the energy to go track down the DVD, so here we are.”

“I’m really sorry about Rodney,” I said, after we watched the movie in silence for a few moments. The five Stone kids and their parents were sitting down to Christmas Eve dinner with assorted guests and I knew that things were about to get bad.

Linnie gave a sad smile without looking away from the TV. “It wasn’t your fault,” she said. “Clearly, I had some things I needed to say, and it’s better that he heard them, in the end.”

“Are you guys...” I stopped before saying it. It was like I didn’t even want to put this thought into the universe, because what if I got an answer I didn’t like? But I took a breath and made myself say it. “Are you guys okay?”

Linnie bit her lip and I saw a tear snake down her face. “I think so,” she said, as she wiped it away. “I’m just so tired lately, and Rodney’s so unhappy, and it’s just wearing on us. I’d always thought we could get through anything...” her voice trailed off and we both watched in silence for a moment, the story unfolding of the family celebrating Christmas in their childhood home, and I was suddenly incredibly jealous of them, even though I knew they were fictional characters. “At times like this – whenever there’s anything big happening in my life – I always want to go to mom. Like somehow if I can just be near her, and

see her, she can fix everything.” Linnie looked away from the TV. “Do you feel that way too?”

“Well,” I said, as I ran my hand over Waffles’ fur. “Not really?” Linnie nodded. “But here’s the thing,” I said. “I had you.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that I could always come to you with that stuff. You were kind of like...my second mom.”

“Also, less likely to ground you.”

“Much less likely, considering that you didn’t have jurisdiction to do that.”

Linnie gave me a quavery smile. “Thanks, Charlie.”

“And I know I’m not Mom – ”

“I am aware – ”

“But you can always talk to me. You know that, right?”

“I know.” She reached across Waffles and brushed my hair back, then cupped my cheeks. “Why is your face so cold?”

“I was talking to Bill in Danny’s car.”

“How is he?”

“Well.” I took a breath. “I just told Bill I loved him – ”

“Oh my god!”

“And then hung up before we could talk about it.”

“Oh.”

I looked over at my sister and burst out laughing. Linnie was clearly trying to look not-horrified, but wasn’t pulling it off. “I know it’s not good.”

“You do, though?” Linnie asked, stroking Waffles’ head. “You love him?”

I thought about it for a moment and realized that I did. I had blurted it out, yes, but it hadn’t come from nowhere. It was what I’d been feeling for the past few months, a drumbeat that had just gotten louder and louder until it had to be expressed. “I do.”

“Wow,” Linnie said, looking at me, her eyes bright. “Charlie!”

I shook my head as her lip started to quiver. “Lin, please don’t cry again. What is with you these days?”

“Sorry,” Linnie said, waving her hands in front of her face. “I just... you’re growing up, I guess.” She pushed herself up to standing, then leaned over and hugged me. “Love you,” she said, then gasped, looking comically shocked. “Wait, um, *never mind*,” she said, backing out the door. “Forget I said it!” she ran down the hall, arms flailing.

“You’re not being very nice!” I yelled after her, and I heard her laugh.

I yawned. I was getting tired, but the movie was just ramping up, and I wanted to see all the Christmas morning disasters unfold. I stretched out on the couch, and Waffles moved a few inches closer to me, which I counted as a huge victory. I tucked a pillow underneath my head, settling in to watch the movie.

But the next thing I knew, cool early light was streaming in through the windows, the Netflix home screen was suggesting things I might like, Waffles had taken over most of the couch, and it was Christmas Eve morning.



FRIDAY,  
DECEMBER 24TH

---

*One Day Until Christmas*

CHAPTER 5  
*Or,  
The Vince Lombardi Trio*

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“**M**ORNING,” MY DAD SAID AS I STUMBLED, yawning, into the kitchen. Mike was sitting at the kitchen table in his pajamas, looking half-asleep, and Danny was pacing around, talking on his phone, looking very much awake.

“Hi,” I said, rubbing my eyes. My neck had a crick in it from where I’d slept on the couch and I tried to stretch it out. I was blaming Waffles, who’d taken up practically the entire couch and had still been snoring in the TV room when I’d left it. I looked over at Danny who gave me a cheerful smile as he paced past.

“Morning, Chuck.”

“Isn’t he supposed to be three hours behind?” I asked, as I peered at the coffee maker hopefully. “Is there coffee?”

“Coming up,” Mike said around a gigantic yawn.

“Brewing,” my dad said as he hit the button on the machine. He frowned at me. “Isn’t that what you were wearing yesterday?”

“I fell asleep in the TV room,” I explained. “I’ll go shower after I have

some coffee." I looked around. "Should I go grab breakfast?"

"I can make breakfast you know," my dad said, sounding a little annoyed as he pulled down mugs from the cupboard.

"*Can* you?" Mike asked in an undertone that we all nonetheless heard.

"Excuse me, who makes Christmas pancakes every year?" my dad asked.

"He does," Danny said, before walking past us toward the front door. "No! What are you talking about, three percent? When did we say three percent?"

"Exactly," my dad said. "Don't antagonize the person who is making you Christmas breakfast."

"That's a good point," Mike conceded, then looked hopefully at the coffeemaker. "Can you do anything to make it brew faster?"

It was another Grant family tradition – every Christmas morning, after we'd opened our presents, my dad made a huge stack of pancakes, and would even make them look like Santa, with a whipped-cream beard, if you requested it. It was made even more special by the fact that he didn't cook all that often – it made it even more of an occasion. And it just wasn't Christmas without them.

"Coffee's coming," my dad assured him.

"So," I said, wondering where this left us, food-wise, "you're cooking? You don't need me to pick something up?"

"J.J.'s getting bagels," my dad conceded, sounding grumpy. "But I don't want you thinking I never cook, because I do."

"I believe you," I assured him as my stomach rumbled. "So did J.J. just leave, or...?"

"A little while ago," my dad said. "Probably too late to add to the bagel order."

"J.J. knows my bagel preference," I assured him. I looked around for my phone, just so I could text him and get an ETA, and realized I must have left it in the TV room. "Mike, could you text J.J. –" I started, just as the door

swung open and J.J. strode in, lifting two white paper bags in triumph.

"I come bearing sustenance," he said. "Bagels and cream cheese and fruit salad so we don't get scurvy."

A *ding* sounded from the coffee maker. "And the coffee is ready," my dad said, removing the pot and starting to pour. "Excellent timing, son."

"Why, thank you father." J.J. shucked off his coat and flung it in the vague direction of a chair (he missed). Today he was wearing a knitted sweater featured Santa riding on the back of a T-Rex.

"I have questions," I said, gesturing to it.

"Charlie," my dad said, and handed me a cup of coffee with a generous splash of milk, just the way I liked it.

"Thank you," I said, taking a big gulp, then pointed to the mug he was currently filling. "Is that Mike's?" my dad nodded, and I carried it over to him. Mike gave me a nod and took a grateful sip.

"And not only do I have bagels," J.J. said as he pried the top off one of the cream cheese containers, "I have news. I turned alerts on for Sir Harry's Happy Christmas Gingerbread, and I got a hit this morning."

My heart leapt in my chest. "You did?"

"Yes!"

"Where?" Mike asked.

"New Jersey!" J.J. said triumphantly. I just stared at him. "What?" he asked, sounding defensive. "It's a wonderful place. The Garden State. Bruce Springsteen...Billy Joel..."

"He's Long Island," my dad said, pouring himself a cup of coffee and starting to investigate the bagel selection.

"Anyway, this place in Trenton has some, but they wouldn't hold it for me, so if we're gonna go, we should leave now. It's a two hour drive each way."

"Trenton?" my dad asked, eyebrows flying up. "You're going to drive that far?"

"It's for the gingerbread," I said defensively. But I could hear a tiny voice in the back of my head, echoing what both my mother and Bill

had said – at some point, should we really be holding onto traditions so hard? Like, four-hour round trip across New Jersey hard?

“It’s tradition,” Mike agreed as he dropped cinnamon raisin into the toaster and I looked through the bagel bag.

“Where’s my whole wheat everything?”

“It’s right there,” he said, rolling his eyes. “I didn’t forget. I also got Linnie’s blueberry even though they asked me three times if I was sure and that I was in my right mind and knew what I was doing.”

“Are you making fun of my bagel?” Linnie asked as she wandered into the kitchen, her hair tossed up in a topknot. “Also, what’s up with Danny? He’s out on the lawn yelling at someone about percentages.”

“He’s doing a deal,” my dad said with a shrug. “Commerce doesn’t stop.”

“Happily, baseball does,” J.J. said with a grin. “I’ve been off the clock since last week.”

“Want me to toast your bagel, Lin?” I asked her as I fished the blueberry out of the bag and held it out to her.

“I even got the scallion cream cheese for it, you weirdo,” J.J. said as he pried the top off the second cream cheese container. “How you can eat this is beyond me.”

“Um,” Linnie said. She looked from the bagel to the cream cheese and turned pale. “That actually...doesn’t sound so good.”

“See?” J.J. said in triumph. “Thank you. I’ve been telling you for years it’s a terrible bagel combination.”

“Coffee?” my dad asked Linnie, who nodded. “Coming up.”

“Okay,” J.J. said, as Mike’s bagel popped up out of the toaster. “If we’re going to the wilds of New Jersey on our quest, we have to motor. Be ready to go in ten?”

Linnie frowned and looked around. “Okay, what did I miss?”

Twenty minutes later, J.J. steered Helsing onto the entrance ramp for I-95. I’d taken a lightning-fast shower and grabbed my phone – dead, of

course – from the TV room before I hurried out the door.

It was just me and Linnie joining – Danny had to work, and insisted that his U.K. contact was going to come through, so we didn't need to make this trek. My dad and Mike both needed to do some last-minute shopping, and weren't swayed by J.J.'s promise that we'd be passing a *lot* of malls and they could do it on the way.

Linnie was sitting shotgun – she hadn't eaten anything, though J.J. had insisted on wrapping up her bagel and sending it with her – since her stomach was upset. “You don't have to come,” I'd told her as we pulled on coats in the front hall. “If you're not feeling well maybe you should just rest and watch your weird dentist elf movie.”

“Hermeiy is a classic character,” Linnie insisted, even as she pulled on her puffy coat. “Just because you've never understood his appeal doesn't make him weird. But I need to get out of the house. If I stay here, I'm just going to obsess about the conversation with Rodney, and what I should have said differently...it's better if I come with.”

“Great!” J.J. said, as he pulled on his knit cap – this one was blue with white knitted snowflakes and a blue and white pom pom. “Let's hit the road.”

As we rattled along in Helsing, I leaned forward from the backset – as far as my seatbelt and twine would let me – and looked at the tangle of wires protruding from the dashboard. “J.J., please tell me one of those can charge my phone.”

“Of course it can,” he said, and I handed it forward. “I had to rewire some things and figure out a kind of complicated adapter system, but we got there in the end. Helsing can do anything.”

“I don't think so,” Linnie said doubtfully as she looked around. “Honestly, Jameison, you need a new car.”

“No,” J.J. insisted as he stepped on the gas and the engine whined worryingly. It stopped a second later, though, which J.J. seemed to take as a victory. “See?” he said. “Helsing's doing great. I'm not going to give up my car for no reason.”

“But there would be a reason,” Linnie insisted. “Like being able to charge your phone, or not use string for a seatbelt, or go over fifty on the highway.”

“This car and I have history,” J.J. insisted as we sputtered along. Now that Linnie pointed it out, I noticed that we did seem to be going a lot slower than the other cars around us. Several drivers glared at us as they passed. “So much of my past is wrapped up in it.” He smiled fondly. “I lost something very special in this car.”

“Ew,” I yelped.

“Nope,” Linnie said, covering her ears.

“No!” J.J. said, looking affronted. “I lost a hundred dollar bill in here three years ago and have never found it.”

“Oh,” Linnie said, lowering her hands. “Okay – ”

“But now that you mention it, I did have sex for the first time in this car too,” J.J. said cheerfully as he changed lanes. “Right where Charlie is sitting, actually.”

“Okay,” I said, untying my twine to move over a seat. “That was so much more than I wanted to know.” I looked toward the front of the car. “Is my phone charged yet?”

“Give Helsing a chance,” J.J. said hotly. “He is an analog car. He wasn’t built for this high-speed digital world. Why do you need your phone right now anyway?”

“Is it Bill?” Linnie asked, as she turned around to look at me.

“Ooh, what about Billiam?” J.J. asked as he met my eye in the rear-view mirror. “Is it about my Christmas present?”

“What?” I asked, shaking my head. “No – why would it be about your Christmas present?”

“Tis the season,” J.J. said with a shrug. “It’s not outside the realm of possibility.”

“No, Charlie told Bill she loved him last night.”

“What!”

“Linnie!” I yelled, as J.J. changed lanes very slowly and a cacophony of horns erupted from all around us.

“What?” she asked, turning to face me.

“You don’t want to share this with your brother?” J.J. said, sounding hurt. “I was there for your meet-cute.”

“Technically, you weren’t,” Linnie pointed out as she pulled her coat around her more tightly. “But I was. You came right after.”

“So what did he say?” J.J. asked.

I sighed and slumped in my seat. “So *technically*, I didn’t actually give him a chance to replay because I said never mind and that I had to go.” J.J. and Linnie exchanged a look. “I saw that!”

“Charlotte,” J.J. said in his *wise man of the world* voice, “as someone who is an advocate of saying those three words as soon as you feel them —”

“Didn’t you tell that girl Kaya on the first date?” Linnie interrupted.

“Is she the one who left the restaurant and never came back?” I asked.

“Yes!” Linnie said. “J.J. didn’t know what to do with the scarf she left behind.”

“Anyway!” J.J. said loudly. “I think you should say it when you feel it. Otherwise, you’re just lying to yourself. There’s nothing wrong with being brave with sharing your heart.” J.J.’s normally cheerful expression slipped for a moment and he sighed as we drove down the highway, green exit signs flashing past the bare winter trees.

“I’m sorry about Quinn,” I said quietly.

“Thank you for not calling her Home Shopping Network,” J.J. said with a small smile.

“Aw, are we not doing that anymore?” Linnie asked. I shook my head and she nodded. “Gotcha.”

In the front of the van, I saw my phone suddenly light up. “My phone!” I yelled, pointing at it. “Finally. Linnie, can you hand it back?”

The cord barely stretched, but I was able to loosen the twine to lean



forward enough to grab it. J.J. launched into his description of what he was calling Christmas Trap Phase Two – this involved faking some kind of emergency so that mom would have to come to Connecticut, and then stealing the carburetor from her car so she couldn't leave.

"Is this plan based on *Sound Of Music*?" Linnie asked skeptically.

"It is!" J.J. said, pleased. "Remember the year for Halloween I went as the carburetor and Danny went as a nun?"

"No," I said, as I punched in my passcode, willing my phone to boot up faster. "You actually didn't. That was in the comic strip."

J.J. turned to look at me, then back at the road. "No," he said, shaking his head.

"That was A.J.," I confirmed, secretly glad that I wasn't the only one who sometimes messed this up, "not you."

"I'm gonna call Danny and check," J.J. muttered.

"I still don't think this plan is a good one," Linnie said.

"It worked for the nuns!"

They argued in the front seat, but I tuned them out as my phone finally connected to my network. My heart pounded as I looked down at the screen. I wasn't even sure what I wanted to see – would it be better if Bill reached out again, or worse? Or what would it mean if he hadn't?

I opened my texts and saw one new one from Siobhan, wishing me a Merry Christmas Eve and wanting to know when we could schedule a FaceTime, and one from Bill.

## **Bill**

Hi Charlie – I really think we should talk

Call or text when you can, okay?

My stomach plunged as I read it. Was that a good talk or a bad one? Was saying *we should talk* ever good? Deep down, I knew this was all my fault for not being brave enough to have the conversation last night – I'd

made the situation exponentially worse.

I was about to lock my phone again when I saw I had a new email. I opened my email app and my eyes went wide. It was from the study-abroad program – the one that I hadn't made it into. I clicked it immediately.

Dear Charlotte Grant,

Thank you so much for your application to Medill's Spring Semester Study Abroad in Paris. While we were not able to offer you a slot at the time you applied, due to a change in the number of registrants, there is a spot available for you if you would like to spend spring semester in the City of Lights!

We apologize for the short notice, but due to time constraints, we will need your response back by December 27th.

Thank you so much!

Happy Holidays!

I stared down at the phone, my heart pounding. I knew if I told J.J. he would declare it a Christmas miracle. But this meant I'd actually have to decide if I was going to do it. Could I really be that far away from my family and friends? From Bill? *You guys might be breaking up anyway*, a tiny voice reminded me, which was probably realistic, but also depressing.

I just hadn't expected that this was even an issue – much less something I'd have to figure out in the next three days.

But my first feeling – the way I'd felt when I'd first read the email – had been happiness and excitement. Which seemed to me to be a sign that I should at least be considering this.

I stared out the car window, lost in my thoughts, as J.J. held forth about his plan and we got onto the New Jersey Turnpike. “And then,” J.J. was saying, “after Mom is settled in, with the fire and the dog, and has some of the delicious gingerbread we're about to procure, and she hears from Pierre the mechanic –”

“Wait, who's going to play the mechanic again?” Linnie asked.

“And why is his name Pierre?” I piped up.

“I explained all this,” J.J. said, shaking his head. “It's –” but whatever it was got drowned out, as the car started to rattle, a whining sound coming from the engine.

“What is that?” Linnie asked, sitting up straight and looking around. “Why are you slowing down?”

“I'm not,” J.J. said, but Helsing was indeed starting to go even more slowly than the cars around us. “I'm pressing on the gas!”

“I...don't think it's working,” I said, as cars around us started to zoom past with frightening speed. I knew enough to know it was really dangerous to go much slower than the other cars on the highway – people weren't expecting it, and that's when you got hit.

“Come on, buddy,” J.J. said, patting the dashboard, his voice worried. “Just a little farther, okay?”

“Look,” Linnie said, pointing to the sign on the side of the road. It read VINCE LOMBARDI TRAVEL PLAZA. “J.J., just pull off here and we'll see what's happening with the van.”

“He has a name,” J.J. said, his voice choked, even as he put his blinker on.

“Maybe you should turn on the hazards,” I suggested.

“They don't work,” J.J. said as we sputtered over to the exit.

The engine started to smoke as we pulled into the Vince Lombardi

Travel Plaza parking lot. It was pretty full – people probably going to visit their families for Christmas. Probably not full of people heading to Trenton for gingerbread, but I couldn't be sure.

J.J. killed the engine and we all sat in silence in the van for a moment. He tried to start the car again, but the engine just made a groaning sound, and nothing happened. "Come on," J.J. muttered as he tried again.

"Jameison," Linnie said. "I'm not sure..."

"It's fine," J.J. said, his voice falsely bright. "I probably just need a jump or something. I'm going to call AAA. It'll be okay."

I was about to point out that it was probably *not* going to be okay but Linnie gave me a look and I nodded. "Okay," I said. I looked toward the rest stop – it looked like there was a Starbucks, a Cinnabon and a Popeyes – and what's more, it was probably not as cold as Helsing was quickly becoming. "Should we go inside and wait?"

"Good idea," Linnie said, opening her door.

"You guys go," J.J. said, his brow furrowed. "I'm just going to try a few more times."

I got out of the car and Linnie and I hurried up to the front entrance together, surrounded by families and bleary-eyed drivers. "Does it feel like it could snow?" she asked.

I paused for just a second and breathed in. The air did feel damp, and it was certainly cold enough. "I didn't hear anything about snow."

"We probably should have checked before heading off to New Jersey," she said as she shook her head and held the door open for me.

We stepped inside – there were fast food options, a travel mart, bathrooms, and a machine where you could make a souvenir penny. It was absolutely fine as far as rest stops went – but *not* where I'd ever want to spend my Christmas Eve day. "Is this crazy?" I asked.

"Probably," she said, and glanced at me. "But what specifically are you talking about?"

"Us driving all this way for gingerbread," I said slowly. "And now

we're probably not even going to get it, because of J.J.'s van. I don't know...we could have been at home, all together."

"Well, at least *some* of us are together in New Jersey," Linnie said. "But I know what you mean. Probably we should call it. No Sir Harry's Happy Christmas Gingerbread this year."

"Yeah," I said with a nod. "Um, so how are we going to get home?"

She laughed. "No idea. I guess...we'll figure something out?"

"Do you want anything to eat?" I asked, gesturing toward the food options. "I was thinking I'd get a latte – want to split a Cinnabon?" Linnie turned pale again and shook her head. "Are you still feeling sick?" I asked. "I hope you don't have a bug."

"I think," she said, pointing to the mini-mart, "that I'm actually going to see if they have anything to settle my stomach in there. Like Tums or something."

"Want anything else?" I asked, but Linnie shook her head.

"Just keep an eye out for our brother. I feel like Helsing has been his longest relationship, and he might be taking this hard."

I laughed. "Noted."

"And if the van is dead, he'll just have to face it," she said with a shrug. "You can only be in denial so long."

Linnie headed toward the mini-mart, and I started to go toward the Starbucks, but then stopped and pulled out my phone. Linnie was right—whatever was happening, I just had to face it.

I found a table, and took off my coat, and pressed Bill's contact in my favorites. He answered on the second ring, sounding stressed. "Hello?"

"Hi," I said quickly, my heart leaping into my throat at the sound of his voice. "I'm so sorry about yesterday. I shouldn't have done that. And you're right, we do need to talk, and –"

"Is this the one?" I heard a muffled voice say.

"Yes!" Bill said. "Uh – sorry Charlie, can I call you later? I can't talk right now."

“Sure,” I said. “Just –”

“Okay great,” Bill said, and I second later the call disconnected.

I leaned back against the plastic seat, swallowing hard. What *was* that? He’d texted that he wanted to talk – so why had he been so eager to get me off the phone? Suddenly, I imagined things from Bill’s point of view. If he’d told me he loved me, then never mind, then had gotten off the phone? I probably wouldn’t be super eager to talk to him, either.

I sighed. These revelations were bad enough – having them at a rest stop in New Jersey was making them worse. I got up and headed toward the Starbucks, more than ready to drown my sorrows in a latte.

By the time I’d waited on the incredibly long line and gotten my latte, I saw that Linnie was sitting at one of the tables, and I made my way over to her. There was a plastic bag from the mini-mart at on the table, and Linnie was staring down at it. “Hey,” I said, sliding into the seat across from her. “I would have gotten you something.”

Linnie just shook her head, and I wondered if maybe something else had happened with Rodney. I bit my lip, feeling incredibly out of my depth. “Hey,” I said, leaning forward. “It’ll all be okay. I promise. After the holidays, you’ll go back home, and everything will go back to normal.”

Linnie looked up at me finally, and I saw an expression of mingled excitement and dread on her face. “I don’t think it will,” she said slowly. She reached into the plastic bag and slid something across the table to me. It took me a second to realize what it was, and when I put it together, my jaw dropped open.

“Does this mean what I think?” I asked, and Linnie nodded.

“It does.” She took a big, shaky breath. “I’m pregnant.”

CHAPTER 6  
*Or,  
Five Stars for Fiona L.*

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“**I** CAN’T BELIEVE WE’RE HAVING A BABY!” J.J. SAID, his eyes bright, as he turned around to look at us from the front seat of the Uber we were riding in.

It was now getting close to two – we’d spent far longer at the Vince Lombardi Travel Plaza than we’d intended. AAA had come, but had declared van Helsing dead, and J.J. had no choice but to have it towed to a garage, and call an Uber to take us home. Linnie and I had stood a respectful distance away to give J.J. a moment with Helsing, who was being loaded onto a tow truck. “Goodnight, sweet van,” he said, his voice choked, as he patted the hood. “You deserved so much more than this.”

After he’d said his goodbyes, we’d gone back inside the travel plaza to wait for the Uber. And whether it would have been his reaction anyway, or it was because he was already emotional about Helsing, but either way, when Linnie told J.J. about the baby, he’d burst into tears, and then pulled us both into a hug. “I’m going to be an uncle!” he’d shouted to anyone in the nearby vicinity.

“How are you feeling about this?” I’d asked Linnie, as J.J. tried to find champagne – or at least sparkling cider – in a turnpike mini-mart.

“I mean – surprised,” she said, shaking her head. “It’s not like this was the plan. But also...really happy.” She gave me a wobbly smile, and I’d given her a hug, my own thoughts spinning.

I’d known, of course, that Linnie and Rodney would have their own family eventually. I just hadn’t known it would be so soon – that things would be changing this fast. “I’m so happy for you guys,” I said. I shook my head. “I really should have known the second that you didn’t want your blueberry bagel.”

Linnie laughed. “Excuse me, they’re delicious most of the time. Just not right now.”

“Okay,” J.J. said, sliding into the seat next to Linnie. “Uber should be here in twenty minutes. But in the meantime!” he dumped the contents of a plastic bag from the mini-mart onto the table. “I got some Sprite, which was the closest thing I could find to champagne. I figure we can shake it up a lot so it’ll fizz! And plus, you can drink it, which means you don’t have to be left out.”

I held up a onesie with *New Jersey State of Mind* printed on it. “Really?”

“The baby needs to know the moment we found out about its existence,” J.J. said.

“What are these?” Linnie asked, picking up a handful of Christmas-themed lottery tickets. Yule Be Rich! was printed on them.

“The drawing is tonight,” J.J. said. “And if I win, I’m giving all the money to you and Rodney for the baby.”

“That’s so sweet –” Linnie started.

“On the condition that you let me name the baby.”

“What?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. “J.J.”

“If I’m giving up 235 million, I want to get something out of it!”

“Okay,” Linnie said, rolling her eyes. “If you *win the lottery* and give us the money, you can name the baby.”



“Linnie,” I said, shaking my head. “Don’t do this. He’s going to name the baby something awful, like Trenton. Or J.J. junior.”

“J.J. does have a nice ring to it,” he mused. “But then people might think it’s a Spider-Man reference. But that might not be a *bad* thing...”

“You might at least want to talk to Rodney,” I suggested.

“No,” Linnie said, suddenly looking serious. “I want to tell him in person. So no telling anyone else about this, okay? It’s bad enough that you two know, before the father of my baby.”

“And that *is* Rodney, right?” J.J. asked in a faux undertone. “No judgement if not.” Linnie whacked him on the arm.

When the Uber had arrived, J.J. had decided that our uber driver (Fiona L.) didn’t count about the people who couldn’t know about the baby, because he’d spent almost the entire ride talking about what his uncle name could be.

“I think J.J. is good,” Linnie suggested. “There’s no need to complicate things.”

“I want to have a cool uncle name,” J.J. said, shaking his head. “Let Mike and Danny and Ellis just be regular old Uncle Firstname. I want this baby to know right away who their best uncle is. Maybe something like...Thunderbolt.”

“I like it,” Fiona L. said with an approving nod as she took the exit off I-95 to bring us back to Stanwich.

“Thank you,” J.J. said magnanimously.

“So were you trying for a while?” Fiona L. asked, looking at Linnie in the rearview mirror. “Or was it a surprise?”

“Um,” Linnie said, shifting uncomfortably in her seat. “Well...”

My phone rang and my heart leapt as I pulled it out of my coat pocket, hoping it was Bill calling back. But DANNY CALLING was on my screen, along with a picture of us outside of In N Out, holding with Double-Doubles, from my last trip to California. “Hey,” I said, answering. “What’s going on?”

"A lot," Danny said, speaking fast. "First off, the gingerbread arrived from England, so you can get the hell out of New Jersey."

"Oh, that's great! And we are," I said. "We're actually –"

"Second," he went on, his voice getting high and excited, "I remembered where Flat Santa is! Mike and I are going to over there now."

"Oh my god! Where?" I looked over at Linnie. "Danny got the gingerbread, and he thinks he knows where Flat Santa is."

"Flat Santa?" Fiona L. asked, as she slowed for a stop sign.

"Don't say anything," Linnie said to me in an undertone, "about..." I nodded.

"Oh, does he not know you're pregnant?" Fiona L. asked loudly.

"What?" Danny asked, sounding stunned. "Who's pregnant?"

"Not me," I said hurriedly. "It's...um..." I looked over at Linnie who made a gesture that seemed to say *ugh fine, go ahead*. "It's Linnie."

"She is?" Danny asked. "Oh my god, that's great. Mike! Guess what!"

"I think he's telling Mike," I said to Linnie, who sighed.

"We just need to make sure that I'm the one who gets to tell Rodney! It's bad enough that you all know before him!"

"And me," Fiona L. said, as she put on the blinker to pull into my dad's driveway.

"Uh – right," Linnie said, widening her eyes at me. "That's true."

"We're home now," I said to Danny, "so I'll just talk to you in person in a second."

We got out of the car – Fiona L. wished Linnie all the best, and told J.J. she liked the name Thunderbolt, but had he ever thought about going by Axl? J.J. told her he'd consider it. As we headed up to the front door, I noticed that Danny had finally moved his car out of Kalinda's spot, which made me happy. The last thing we wanted to do was antagonize my dad's neighbors.

We stepped inside the house, and practically bumped into Mike and Danny, who were heading out. "Group hug!" Danny said, as he and Mike hugged her.

“Gently!” I called to them, and Linnie laughed as they both took a big step back.

“How are you feeling?” Mike asked.

“What did Rodney say?” Danny asked, beaming down at her.

“Rodney doesn’t know yet because I want to tell him in person,” Linnie said, pointing at Danny, then at Mike. “So no telling anyone else. Just you four.”

“And our Uber driver,” J.J. added.

“And her,” Linnie conceded. “But nobody else until I get to talk to Rodney.”

“Mom and dad are going to be thrilled,” I said, smiling at her. “You know, whenever we’re allowed to tell them.”

“If you want to wait to tell mom in person too, you can do it after the holidays,” Mike said. “Maybe next week, before you head back to Boston?”

“Yeah,” Linnie said, her smile dimming. “Right.”

“Wait, where’s Flat Santa?” J.J. asked. He gestured to Mike and Danny’s coats. “Are we going to get him now?”

“That was the plan,” Danny said as he started for the door. “I’ll drive.”

“You’ll have to,” J.J. said in a sepulchral tone. “I have no more wheels. Helsing is dead.”

“Oh no,” Mike said, his voice incredibly insincere. “Not Helsing.”

“Where did you park the car?” I asked.

Danny paused. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you moved the car,” I said. “It’s not on the street.”

He just stared at me. “I didn’t move the car.” He walked out the door and down the driveway, looking around like the Porsche might appear at any moment. “Where is it?”

“I think that maybe it drove itself away,” J.J. said in an audible whisper. “It didn’t want to be seen with the beard.”

“Wait, seriously, where is my car?” Danny asked, looking flummoxed.

He turned to me – and suddenly I realized I actually might know the answer.

“I have a hunch,” I said, coming to join him. “Follow me.”

Kalinda’s house looked very similar to my dad’s, except it was cream with navy shutters. “I can’t believe this woman stole my car,” Danny fumed as we walked up the driveway.

“She did ask you to move it,” I pointed out.

“Still,” Danny said. “Does that just give her permission to just take it?”

“Maybe she didn’t steal it,” I said as I knocked on the navy painted front door. “Maybe it got towed!”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

The door swung open and Kalinda stood there. She smiled at me and then raised an eyebrow at Danny. “Yes?”

“Hi,” I said, giving her a smile back. “My brother was just...”

“Did you steal my car?” Danny interrupted, glowering at her.

“I told you you were in my spot,” she said.

“You can’t claim spots on a public street!”

“It’s a small cul-de-sac. It’s called courtesy. Have you heard of it?”

“Of course I have. And in my definition, it means not stealing other people’s vehicles!”

“Well, I just thought maybe you needed to be taught a lesson.”

“Oh, did you?”

I looked back and forth between the two of them. Neither one was glowering anymore – I couldn’t be sure, but it almost seemed like Danny was enjoying this. “So,” I said after a moment. “Um. Is the car... around?”

Kalinda reached into her pocket and pulled out a set of keys, then tossed them to Danny, who caught them with one hand. “One street over, on Winterset.” She shook her head. “And for god’s sake, *please* lock your car. Who puts keys under the visor?”

Danny laughed. "Okay, that was on me." He took a deep breath, like he was bracing himself. "I'm really sorry. I was being thoughtless and I apologize."

Kalinda smiled at him and brushed her hair back. "And I'm sorry for taking your car. Even if you deserved it. It's nice, by the way. I'd never driven a Porsche before."

"I hope you at least took it for a joyride."

"Maybe a little one."

I looked between the two of them, and I had the distinct feeling that both of them had forgotten I was currently there. "So..." I said after a minute, clearing my throat. "Um...Flat Santa?"

"Right," Danny said, blinking at me. "Right! We should...go."

"Happy Holidays," I said to Kalinda.

"You too," she said, giving me a smile.

"Uh," Danny said, turning back around and walking back. "Um – do you think after the holidays, I could call you maybe?"

Kalinda gave him an appraising look. "Lose the beard," she said, "and I'll consider it." She smiled at Danny and closed the door.

Danny just stood there for a moment, looking stunned. "Well," he said, clearing his throat. "Okay. Well."

"Nicely done," I said, as we walked down Kalinda's driveway together. "Very smooth."

Danny looked at me hopefully. "Really?"

"No," I said with a laugh. "I was being sarcastic. But she didn't seem to mind."

"I hope dad has her number," Danny said. "Or maybe I could leave a note in her mailbox..." he stroked his chin and then stopped. "The beard is bad, isn't it?"

"It's really bad," I said, beyond relieved I no longer had to try and pretend. "Like, so bad, Danny. Please get rid of it so that we can actually take pictures on Christmas we won't have to crop you out of."

Danny sighed and started walking again. “Fine. I’ll get rid of it.”

“Wait,” I said, turning to him. “You never told me – where is Flat Santa?”

Danny smiled at me as we reached the end of the driveway. “Exactly where we left him.”

## CHAPTER 7

*Or,  
Ocean's Four*

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“**I**’M NOT SURE THIS IS THE BEST IDEA,” I SAID, as I stood across the street and looked at our old house.

“I don’t think we have a choice,” J.J. said, as he pulled on his mittens – they had Yetis wearing Santa Hats on them.

“I don’t think you can pull off a heist in mittens,” Mike said, shaking his head at J.J.

“I don’t think we should call it a heist,” I said, getting more nervous about this the longer we stood there talking about it. “Doesn’t that imply premeditation or something?”

Danny shrugged. “Rodney would know.”

We all exchanged a look and I stamped my feet on the ground to try and warm them up. “Maybe we don’t call him about this?”

“Good idea,” Mike agreed. Rodney had already had to come to my brothers’ aid once when they were on the verge of being arrested, and I wasn’t sure he’d be able to handle it if we called him and told him we were about to embark on a little light B&E.

This had not been the original plan. After we’d picked up Danny’s

car, we'd regrouped to the house. My dad was still Christmas shopping, and Linnie was taking a nap. But I took a moment to admire the Sir Harry's Happy Christmas Gingerbread sitting on the kitchen table. This year, the house on the packaging was a cottage, with snow on the roof and a curl of smoke coming from the chimney. We decided to wait until that night to have some for dessert, and I left it with real reluctance. But we had a mission – we had to get Flat Santa back.

Danny told us as we drove that he'd remembered this afternoon where Flat Santa was – back at our old house, in the greenhouse, tucked under a planter.

"Why would it be there?" I asked him from the backseat (I'd given Mike shotgun) very relieved to have a seatbelt that wasn't literal string.

"Don't you remember two Christmases ago?" Danny asked. "We tried to play capture the flag on Christmas Eve, but it was too cold and we gave up?"

"No," Mike said, frowning.

"You kind of...weren't there," I pointed out, and Mike nodded, his ears turning red.

"Ah. Right. Moving on."

"And we couldn't find the Grant flag..."

"And you said we could use Flat Santa," I said slowly, the memory coming back to me now.

"And we didn't want to put the flag outside because we were worried about him freezing, so we decided the flag for once would be inside the greenhouse."

Mike shook his head. "You couldn't have remembered this when we were all packing up the house? We played a game of CTF!"

"He must have been hidden by the planter," Danny said. "But it's okay. We'll get him back now."

The plan had been to knock on the front door, say hello to the Pearsons, explain the situation, and see if they wouldn't mind looking in the



greenhouse for our Christmas mascot. But when we got to the house, all the windows were dark and there were no cars in the driveway. We rang the bell – I tried not to wince at the fact that they’d changed our regular old doorbell to one that played Pachelbel’s Canon – but nobody answered. So we’d retreated across the street to regroup, and that was when all the heist talk started.

It was beyond weird to be standing outside the place that had just been my kingdom, the first place I was welcome to come and go as I pleased, my whole world in one house. There were new plantings out front, and the mailbox had been changed – which really shouldn’t have been that surprising. Our mailbox had been a swan, once upon a time, until J.J. had crashed into it during the week he wanted to be a skateboarder, and knocked off its head. And we somehow didn’t replace it – so after that, it was just a white mailbox with inexplicable wings sprouting out of the side. It was even how I’d heard my parents give people directions – *and then look for the headless swan mailbox.*

“You know there’s no way anyone would know it used to be a swan, right?” I’d pointed out once after I’d heard my mother giving these directions. “Shouldn’t you just say, mailbox with wings or something?”

“Headless swan is much more memorable,” she’d said, giving me a wink. And then, of course, she put it in the strip, and after that, it was clear it wasn’t going to be replaced.

But now – it had been. A plain white mailbox was at the end of the driveway. The Pearsons was painted on it in a curly font.

“Does Flat Santa even still belong to us?” I asked, as this worrying thought hit me. “When you buy a house, do you get all the stuff on the property too?”

“Flat Santa is ours,” J.J. said fiercely as he clapped his mittens together. “And I think it’s fine if we wander into the backyard and look around and take a gander and get our Santa back. They’re not going to know.”

“Unless they have cameras,” Mike pointed out.

“Right, that,” J.J. said, not seeming bothered by this.

“They might have torn down the greenhouse,” Danny pointed out. “And we can’t know until we look. I think we should think of this as a recon mission, and if the greenhouse is still there, I’ll just pop inside and grab Flat Santa and we’ll be on our way.”

I nodded. “Okay,” I said. “So what’s the plan?”

We decided that Mike would stand on the street, serving as a lookout – all of us were annoyed we hadn’t thought to bring Waffles, since he would have provided an excuse for why Mike was just walking back and forth in front of a house that was no longer his – and Danny, J.J. and I would go around back and grab Flat Santa.

“Comms on,” Mike said, taking out his phone. “Synchronize watches.”

Danny frowned. “What?”

“I’ve just always wanted to say that,” Mike said. “But seriously, phones at the ready in case I need to call and let you know we’ve got company.”

“Sounds good,” I said, taking mine out. I looked to see if I had any new texts, or had heard anything from Bill – but there was nothing. But looking at it *did* remind me that I had to decide about Paris in the next three days, something I really didn’t feel at all up for right now.

“You okay?” Mike asked me, and I nodded a few too many times.

“I’m good,” I said. I looked at the house and took a deep breath. “Let’s do this.”

J.J., Danny, and I walked up the driveway together, and with every step I took, it just got weirder. My muscle memory was telling me to dash across the lawn and pull open the side door. I should have been halfway inside already, calling out to see who was home, heading straight for the kitchen. And I especially didn’t like that I was aware, as we crossed the driveway, that this was somewhere we were *not* supposed to be. That I was essentially exiled from what had been my home. It made it all just seem wrong, and for a moment I was wishing I’d

switched with Mike, and taken the lookout role. Because the closer I got to the house, it's like everything about this situation was screaming *you don't live here anymore*.

We crossed the breezeway hurried around the back of the house – and then we all stopped short, staring in horror.

“We can't tell him,” J.J. said, his voice hoarse. “He can never know.”

“No,” Danny said.

“Never,” I agreed. My dad's garden – his pride and joy, multiple winner of local garden awards, and the source of his friction with our terrible neighbor Don – had been torn up. The Pearsons had put a pool in the middle of the backyard instead. It was currently covered, and everything around it had been paved over with concrete, and filled with pool loungers and chaises, all now missing their cushions.

Over the years, we'd all begged for a pool, but seeing one now, I was glad that my parents had never actually agreed. The space where we used to play Capture the Flag was totally gone – something that I'd never even considered could be possible.

“Greenhouse is still there,” Danny said, nodding at it, in the corner of the yard. “I'm gonna go check.”

“I'll help,” J.J. said, and they hurried around the pool, both ducking low.

I stood where I was, just taking in the pool that felt so wrong for another moment, then turned to face the house. Without even meaning to, my gaze went up, to the third floor window that had been my room. I didn't know what it looked like now – but I realized suddenly that I didn't want to.

I could see through the back window, into the darkened kitchen, where there was a big, modern light fixture and wallpaper that looked like jungle fronds.

It hit me all at once – this wasn't our house anymore. I'd known it, of

course. But somehow I'd always imagined it just like we left it, as if we were ever coming back to live in it. As though it was just going to be waiting for us – despite the fact that the us, the family who had lived there, didn't even exist as a unit anymore.

It was the Pearsons' house now.

And that was okay.

My phone buzzed with a text. I looked down entered panic mode.

## Mike

Pearsons coming back get out get out get out!

“Danny!” I shout-whispered across the yard. Mike had sent it to all of us, but who knew if he and J.J. were even checking their phones?

I ducked low and started to dash across the lawn, just as J.J. and Danny ran out of the greenhouse, a familiar red-and-white piece of cloth clutched in Danny's hand. “You got him?” I asked, then shook my head and tried to focus. “We have to leave! Right now right now!”

“I know,” J.J. said, looking around in a panic. “What do we do?”

It was like we all knew what the answer was at the same moment, even if we didn't like it.

“No,” I groaned.

“I don't think we have another choice,” Danny said grimly. I saw the sweep of headlights up the driveway and knew we had to move.

J.J. led the way, dashing across the side of the yard and crashing through the hedge into the yard we were never, ever supposed to go into – the yard that we'd been careful to never let balls or frisbees fly into, because we knew we weren't getting them back – Don's yard.

I followed J.J. through the hedge, and heard Danny crash through behind me. “It's okay,” I said, as we pushed our way through branches. “It's December and it's cold. He's not going to be –”

We stepped onto the grass and I stopped short. Don was sitting on his back deck, bundled up and smoking a cigar. It dropped from his hand and landed on his pants when he saw us, his mouth falling open. “Grants!” he said in a strangled voice, gaping at us like we were a monster from his nightmares returning.

“Hi Don,” J.J. said, apparently deciding to brazen this out. He was already running around the side of the house, passing Don, whose pants were starting to smoke.

“Merry Christmas!” I called as I ran behind J.J., struck by an irrepressible urge to laugh, as Don looked both confused and furious all at once.

“Happy New Year!” Danny added as he rounded the corner.

When we got to the driveway, we ran full-out, not stopping until we cleared Don’s property and reached the road where Mike was standing a few houses down. “We did it!” Danny said, holding up Flat Santa in triumph. I saw that he looked a little bit worse for wear – a little more worn and dusty. But it was our same Flat Santa, and for the first time since I’d gotten back, it felt maybe like we’d actually be able to have Christmas after all.

“And we were able to scare Don,” J.J. said, grinning. “So I’d say we’re even on the whole *him calling the cops on Linnie’s wedding* thing.”

“Where was it?” I asked, taking Flat Santa from Danny and turning it over in my hands, brushing some dirt off his Santa hat.

“They turned the greenhouse into a place to store pool supplies,” Danny said, sounding disgusted. “The planter was still there, and he was underneath some water wings, just waiting for us.”

“What pool?” Mike asked, then shook his head. “Never mind. Guys –”

“Why don’t you look happier?” J.J. asked, picking up Mike and jostling him around. “It’s all gonna be okay! We have gingerbread! We

have Flat Santa!”

“It’s not going to be okay,” Mike said, his brow furrowed. J.J. set him down.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Mike held out his phone. “Dad just texted,” he said. “Linnie’s gone.”

CHAPTER 8  
*Or,  
Gingerbread Waffles*

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“**A**RE YOU SURE ABOUT THIS?” MIKE ASKED ME in an undertone as we pushed through the revolving door of Mayfair Towers for the second time in two days.

“Yes,” I said definitively as we walked up to the front desk. “I know she’s here.”

After Mike had told us about Linnie, we’d all gone back to Danny’s car and called my dad, who sounded incredibly frazzled. “Where is everyone?” he asked. “I got back from Christmas shopping to find an empty house and Waffles eating the gingerbread.”

“What?” I asked, feeling my stomach clench. “Like...just a piece of it?”

“All of it,” he said, sounding annoyed. “He chewed through the box! I don’t know where your sister is, and I can’t get in touch with her to tell her about the dog...”

“What do you mean, she’s gone?” Danny had asked. “Like maybe she’s just running an errand or something.”

“In what car?” I asked in a low voice.

“Maybe she’s on a walk?” but he sounded much less sure now.

“She left a note in the kitchen that says *Have to go for a bit will be back later tonight probably xo L.*” my dad cleared his throat, the way he did when he was nervous. “This isn’t like her, kids. Is she...okay?”

“Is this like a pregnancy side effect?” J.J. asked. “Like the opposite of nesting? Empty nesting!”

“Did you say pregnancy?” my dad asked, drawing in a sharp breath. “Linnie’s pregnant?”

“Yeah, and sorry,” J.J. said, since we’d all turned to glare at him. “I wasn’t supposed to tell you. She wants Rodney to know in person and for nobody else to know until he finds out, but we’re really screwing that part of it up.”

“I can’t believe this,” my dad said, his voice choked with emotion. “I’m going to be Pop-Pop!”

“Let’s workshop that name, Dad,” J.J. said, shaking his head. “I think we can really change up this whole name paradigm. I’m thinking I might go by Thunderbolt. Let’s think big!”

“But wait,” I said, feeling like we needed to get back to the issue at hand. “Linnie just left that note behind and took off?”

“It was here when I got home,” my dad said. “Wait, where are all of you?”

“Nothing,” Mike said at the same time I said “Driving around,” Danny said “Errands!” and J.J. blurted, “Caroling!”

“Okay, we’re going to come back to all that later,” my dad said. “But right now, I’m worried about your sister. Her phone is going right to voicemail...I just don’t know where she went.”

The conversation I’d had with Linnie the night before flashed into my head, and all at once, I knew where my sister had gone. “It’s okay, dad,” I said. I gestured to Danny to start the car. “I know where she is. We can go get her.”

“You do?” my dad asked, sounding surprised and relieved. “Where?”



“She’s in the city,” I said, buckling my seatbelt. “She went to see mom.”

So Danny steered the car toward the highway, the GPS lady telling him what turns to take as we made our way into New York.

“Snow,” Mike said, pointing out the window. He was sitting shotgun, Danny was driving, and J.J. and I were in the back, all our coats piled on the middle seat between us. I looked and saw that Mike was right – it had started to snow, big fat flakes that looked like they were sticking.

Danny turned on his windshield wipers, and met my eye in the rear-view mirror. “I didn’t check the weather,” he said, his expression worried. “I wonder if it’s supposed to last long?”

“Looks like we’re in a winter storm warning,” J.J. said, reading from his phone, just as Mike said, “Watch.”

“Watch what?” I asked.

“Mine says winter storm *watch*,” he said, holding up his phone.

“What’s the difference again?” I asked.

“I know one is worse,” Danny said, as he changed lanes. “But I’m out of practice about this stuff. In California, we’ll get flood warnings. And like alerts about mountain lions. And for mudslides. And earthquake activity –”

“You need to get out of there,” J.J. said, his eyes wide. “Come back East. We just have hurricanes and winter storms and the very occasional tornado.”

“Maybe,” Danny said with a shrug.

“Really?” Mike said, sitting up straight and looking at him. “I thought you were settled out there.”

“He lives in a hotel,” J.J. reminded Mike. “He could not be less settled. He’s behaving like a Wes Anderson character, without the charm or good facial hair.”

“I mean, it might be nice to change things up,” Danny said, with a shrug. “If I wanted to get out of the VC game, I could always go back

into hedge funds. And Stanwich is practically the hedge fund capital of the world.”

“You’d want to move back to Stanwich?” J.J. asked, sounding surprised.

Danny shrugged, meeting my eye again and giving me a smile. “Who knows? You can’t just keep doing the same thing forever, right?”

I gave him a smile in return, but then I looked out the window, at the traffic on the George Washington Bridge, my thoughts swirling like the snow falling outside.

I looked at Flat Santa, who was flopped over the back of the middle seat, his hat still a little dusty. I thought about all we’d gone through to get him back – and our gingerbread quest. And I realized something.

It wasn’t about Flat Santa, not really. Or the gingerbread. We were all trying so hard to hold onto something whose time had passed – using these as the symbols of things that couldn’t change, because so much else had. We were trying to keep Christmas just the same, as if that would stop anything else from happening.

It was why J.J. had held onto Helsing for this long – there was something to trying to keep your constants around you, the things that connected you to the past or an older version of yourself. But there came a moment when you had to let it go – when life moved forward without you, and if you didn’t move with it, you’d end up broken down on the side of the New Jersey Turnpike.

Because life was moving forward. Linnie and Rodney were going to be parents, Danny might leave California – and my life was moving forward too. It hadn’t been an accident I’d told Bill I loved him – I’d meant it. Which meant our relationship was moving forward too (or ending, but I was choosing not to focus on that at the moment). As I watched the snow falling outside, I realized that as soon as I could, I needed to talk to him and see where we were.

Because I knew now that I needed to accept the semester abroad in

Paris. I couldn't stay behind, trying to keep things the same – because they just weren't going to be. Things were changing. And that meant eventually, if I didn't change with them, I'd be the one towed away from a rest stop in New Jersey.

The house wasn't ours anymore. Flat Santa was just a piece of cloth that had spent two years in a greenhouse, covered by pool floats. It was our family – being together – that made it feel like Christmas. Not Sir Harry's Happy Christmas Gingerbread or the movies or any of our traditions. My mom had been right, and so had Bill – it might be time to make some new memories, ones that fit the way our family had changed.

It took longer than we'd expected to get into the city – there was holiday traffic, and everyone was going more slowly than usual because of the snow accumulating on the road. But we made it eventually, with Danny paying a truly exorbitant amount for a garage, and we hustled into Mayfair Towers together. “But what if she's not here?” Danny asked me, as we walked up to the desk.

“She's here,” I said confidently. Both Linnie's phone and my mother's had been going straight to voicemail, but I didn't need to have this confirmed for me. I knew she was here.

“I think she's actually doing the Christmas Trap,” J.J. said confidently. “She started to freelance her own version of the plan.”

“I really don't think she's doing that,” Mike said, shaking his head.

J.J. brightened. “Should we bet?”

“Oh,” the doorman behind the desk saw us and sighed. It was Norman, the same one from before. “You're back.”

“Hello!” J.J. said cheerfully. “We're here to see Eleanor Grant. 24th floor.”

While Norman sighed and called up to my mother, I took a step away from my brothers and pulled up my texts. I took a deep breath and started to write to Bill.

Me

Hey – I’m really sorry about earlier.

I think you’re probably on the plane, but call me  
when you land?

But I just wanted to let you know I meant what I  
said, 100%

Fly safe and talk soon

I hesitated for a moment, then added a heart emoji. I looked down at my phone for a few seconds, just in case Bill was going to write me back. But although my texts had been delivered, there were no three dots popping up.

Norman put the phone down. “You can go up,” he said with a sigh.

Unlike the day before, we knew we weren’t going to surprise anyone this time, or nearly give our mom a heart attack. By the time we got off the elevator and walked down the hall, we saw Linnie standing in the doorway of 24B, waiting for us.

“Hi,” she said, giving an embarrassed smile. “I guess you found me.”

“Don’t disappear and turn your phone off,” I scolded, enjoying the momentary feeling of getting to tell my big sister what to do.

“I know,” she said, shaking her head. “Sorry. I just freaked out a little bit. The baby, everything with Rodney...I just needed mom.”

“How did you even get here?” Danny asked.

“I called an Uber,” Linnie said with a shrug. “Fiona L. actually was still in the area, so she came back and picked me up.”

“How’d mom take the news?” Mike asked, as we stepped inside the apartment, after knocking the snow from our boots on the doormat.

“See for yourself,” Linnie said, as we walked into the living room,

where I could see my mother dabbing at her eyes with a tissue.

“Hi mom,” J.J. said. “You okay?”

“I’m going to get to be a Nana!” my mom said, smiling through her tears. J.J. shook his head.

“I think we need to get better names, everyone. We’re all thinking much too conventionally here! Let’s swing for the fences!”

“Sheridan,” my mother said, reaching out to Danny with a smile. But then she froze and took a step back. “Um...that beard is...well...”

“I’m getting rid of it,” Danny said, as he bent down to give her a hug.

“You are?” J.J. asked, brightening. “Wait – but then who actually won the bet? Was it me?”

“I can check the bylaws,” Mike said.

“Not that I’m not happy to see you all – again,” my mother said, looking at us, “but why are you here? This isn’t fair to your father, you know.”

We all looked significantly at Linnie. “Um,” she said, looking down at the ground, “I kind of left without telling anyone and turned my phone off.”

“Linnea,” my mom said, shaking her head.

“I know,” she said. “I won’t do it again.”

“Mom, your phone was off too,” I said, crossing over to sit on the couch next to Linnie. “Did you let the battery run out again?”

“Of course not,” my mother said, as she picked up her cell phone and squinted at it. “It’s just...out of batteries.” She sighed. “It’s so *annoying* when your kids are right.” She looked at Linnie and something in her eyes softened. “You’ll see.”

My phone buzzed in my jacket pocket, and I pulled it out, hoping that it was Bill calling. But my dad’s face was on my caller ID. “It’s dad,” I said. “I’ll let him know everything’s okay here.”

“And that you’re heading back home,” my mom said, shaking her head. “Jeff’s going to think this is some conspiracy to steal his Christmas from him.”

“Hi Dad,” I said, putting the phone on speaker. “We’re here at Mom’s, Linnie’s here –”

“We’ll be there in five minutes,” my dad said, sounding harried.

“You – will?” Mike asked, leaning closer to the phone. “Who’s we?”

“I’m with Rodney, he came to the house and insisted on going to find your sister,” my dad said, as a siren wail went by. A second later, I heard a perfectly harmonized howl. “And Waffles is with us, I didn’t trust him after the gingerbread incident.”

“What gingerbread incident?” my mother asked.

“We’ll be there soon, just –” a second later, the phone cut out.

“Okay,” Danny said, shaking his head. “So I guess Dad is coming?”

“And Rodney and Waffles,” Mike reminded him.

J.J. punched his fist into the air. “It’s all working,” he said. He grinned at Linnie. “You’re a genius.”

“Well, that’s true,” she said. “But why?”

“*Christmas Trap*,” J.J. mouthed to her, incredibly obviously.

“J.J.,” Linnie said, shaking her head. “I did not come to see Mom in order to further one of your harebrained schemes.”

“Sure,” J.J. said, giving her a huge wink. “Sure you didn’t. But nicely done anyway.”

My mom called down to the front desk and let them know two more visitors – and a beagle – would be arriving, then she and Danny went into the kitchen to see if she had anything in the way of snacks for people.

“I think it’s a good thing, right?” I asked, as I curled up next to Linnie on the couch. My mom had two windows that looked out on the park, but the blinds were drawn at the moment, giving the whole thing a feeling of unreality – like it could have been any time. It certainly didn’t feel like Christmas Eve, but I was trying to let go of the idea that Christmas Eve had to feel like one particular thing. “That Rodney came early from Boston to see you?”

"I knew he'd make it for Christmas," Mike said with an approving nod.

Linnie nodded. "It is," she said. "And I'll get to tell him about the baby. But that was one of the things I needed to talk to Mom about – I was freaking out about how we're going to do this. If Rodney's working all the time, I'm going to end up doing this on my own, and that's just going to lead to so many problems..."

"Just talk to him," J.J. said, his voice serious. "Don't make my mistake."

"J.J.'s right," I said, even though I knew I probably shouldn't have been the one to give out romantic advice right now. "It'll be okay."

"There is *no* food in the house," my mother said, coming back from the kitchen, shaking her head. "Since I thought I was going to be in the Galapagos, I pretty much cleared things out. We were just planning on ordering in. Maybe I'll see if the deli can deliver something..."

"I found these," Danny said, emerging from the kitchen as well, and holding up a bag of chips. He ate one and made a face. "That's stale. Very stale. Nobody eat the chips."

"Who's we?" Mike asked, just as the door swung open and my brother-in-law hurried in, my dad and Waffles, on a leash, walking behind him.

"Linnie?" he called. He stopped when he saw her. "Hi sweetheart," he said. Then he looked around. "And...everyone else, too. Hi guys."

"Rodney!" J.J. got up from his chair and started to bound over to him, but Rodney held up a hand.

"Just a second – I just have to do something first." He turned to my sister, and now that he was in front of me, I could see just how stressed and tired Rodney looked. "I was thinking about the things you said yesterday. And you're right. I've been doing this work that I don't even like, all to get something we don't even need. It's not making me happy. It's not making you happy."

“What are you saying?” Linnie asked, her eyes wide.

“I quit my job,” Rodney said, his face breaking into a smile, what felt like the first real smile I’d seen from him in ages. “But I know I can find another one, and it’s just us, and it’s not like we have any major expenses...”

J.J. laughed at that, then tried to cover it up with a cough. “Sorry,” he said quickly. “Nothing. Carry on.”

“What?” Rodney asked, looking around at all of us. My dad unclipped Waffles’ leash, and he trotted over to Linnie and nuzzled his head into her leg. “What is it?”

“You might want to sit down,” Linnie said, smiling at her husband, her face a mix of nervousness and fierce joy. “We’re pregnant.”

“What?” Rodney whispered. Mike jumped out of his chair and put it behind Rodney so that he could collapse onto it, and there was another round of hugs, and my mother called the deli down the street and had them deliver snacks – bags of chips, soda, seltzer and cut fruit.

My mom dragged in chairs from the kitchen, and we all sat around her living room in a loose semi-circle, eating and talking. Rodney no longer looked like he was going to fall over with shock. We’d even given him as phone back, because right when he’d heard the news, he’d frantically tried to call his old boss and get his job back, now that they were going to have baby expenses on top of everything else.

“No,” Linnie had told him firmly as J.J. used his advantage of being the tallest one of us to hold Rodney’s phone over his head. “I love that you quit that job. Like you said, you can get another one.”

“But I just said that,” Rodney said, eyeing his phone like he was planning on how to steal it back. “I don’t know anything! Why did we listen to me?”

“I want our kid to grow up seeing his dad do something he loves,” Linnie said firmly. “Something he believes in. Okay?”

Rodney nodded. “Okay.”



“Plus,” J.J. said around a mouthful of chips, “I’m gonna win the lottery tonight. So little Trenton’s future is all taken care of.”

Rodney frowned. “What did I miss?”

While we were catching him up, I looked around the room, and realized with a shock that we were all together after all. Not in the way I ever would have expected, but just to see my whole family, in the same room all together, laughing and arguing and trying to stop Waffles from stealing food, felt like a tiny gift I’d been given when I’d least expected it – the present under the tree you’ve overlooked.

I caught J.J.’s eye and he grinned and me and pointed around the circle, then tapped the side of his head. “All according to my plan,” he said, settling back in his seat. “I’m a *genius*.”

“No,” Mike and Danny said at the same time.

“Do you even know what we’re talking about?” J.J. asked, indignant.

“I don’t need to,” Mike said with a shrug. “The statement is just wholly untrue.”

“Hey!” J.J. protested, just as there was a knock on the door, and a second later, my mother’s neighbor came in, holding two bottles of Champagne. He was wearing a sweatshirt that read *New York Phil*.

“Um, hello,” Phil said, looking taken aback by the sheer number of people in the living room. He held up the bottles. “Eleanor, I had these – is this enough?” he nodded at my dad, and set down one of the bottles to reach over and shake his hand. “Oh, hi Jeff.”

“Good to see you, Phil,” my dad said, rising from his chair to greet him.

“Wait,” Danny said, shaking his head. “What’s going on?”

“I asked Phil if he had any champagne,” my mom said, turning slightly red. “We need to celebrate, right?”

“But why does he know dad?” Mike asked, frowning. My parents exchanged a look, then my mother took a deep breath.

“Okay kids. This wasn’t how I was exactly planning on...but I guess

that's neither here nor there. Phil and I have been seeing each other."

"You're *dating*?" Linnie asked, eyebrows flying up.

"At your age?" J.J. asked, sounding skeptical.

"Hey," my dad and Phil said at the same time.

"We were actually supposed to be on the Galapagos trip together," my mother said, coming over to stand next to Phil. "I was going to talk to you kids about it in the New Year, but..." she shook her head and laughed. "I should have known better than to make any plans."

"And you knew about this?" I asked, turning to my dad, who was calmly eating a piece of melon.

"Your mother and I were married for over thirty years," he reminded me. "We're still good friends. We do talk about our lives."

"So that was why you were so against my Christmas Trap idea," J.J. said. "Since you knew mom wouldn't actually be alone on Christmas."

"Christmas *trap*?" Rodney asked, sounding baffled.

"I'll explain later," Linnie said, then paused and shook her head. "Actually, I won't, because it's nonsense."

"So...what are you thinking?" my mother asked, looking around the room, sounding uncharacteristically nervous.

I exchanged a look with my siblings and Rodney. It wasn't that I hadn't been aware this wasn't a possibility that could happen, in theory, at some point – both Bill's parents had remarried, after all – but it was still surprising to be confronted with it now, in my mother's living room, in the form of a guy wearing a sweatshirt with an orchestra pun on it.

But then I looked at my mom, and saw how happy she looked. How my dad seemed at ease with both of them, and how nice it was to know that my mom wouldn't be alone at Christmas after all.

"If you're happy," Danny said, looking around at us like he was asking permission to speak for us as the oldest sibling. I nodded. "Then we're happy for you."

My mom's face broke into a smile. "Thanks, kids."

“By the way, I don’t think we’ve met,” Danny said with a laugh as he crossed over to Phil. “Danny Grant.”

“He doesn’t usually look like that,” J.J. explained hurriedly. “Just ignore the lower half of his face.”

“I’m getting rid of it,” Danny said, and everyone cheered.

“Oh good,” Rodney said. “It was getting hard to look at you. I kept wanting to close one eye.”

“Okay, we should celebrate,” my mom said, taking the bottles of champagne from Phil. “The baby, Rodney quitting his job, Danny shaving the beard...”

“J.J. winning the lottery,” J.J. put in.

“But then you guys should get back to your own Christmas,” my mom said. “I’m sure you have things planned back home.”

“Go back to Connecticut?” Phil asked, his eyebrows raising. “Tonight? I’m not sure that’s going to happen.”

“What?” Mike asked. “Why not?”

Phil frowned and gestured toward the windows with their drawn shades. “Haven’t you guys looked outside?”

## CHAPTER 9

*Or,*

*Baby, It's Bad Out There*

*Or,*

*No Cabs To Be Had Out There*

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**I**T TURNED OUT THAT WHILE WE'D BEEN CATCHING UP AND eating snacks, the weather had passed from a storm watch and/or warning to just a full-on winter storm. The roads were a mess, there were travel advisories all over the tri-state area, and my mom was insistent that she didn't want any of us on driving when conditions were still so bad.

So we settled in to wait out the storm. J.J. took over on the food front, calling in delivery from Veselka, his favorite Ukrainian diner, ordering latkes and borscht and beef stroganoff and pierogis.

He had just finished placing the order – times were running long because of the weather – when my phone buzzed and I saw that Bill was FaceTiming me.

I slipped outside into the hallway, realizing that this was something apartments did have over houses – it was easier to find a place to speak privately and not be outside, freezing. “Hi,” I said, answering the phone, smiling automatically as I saw his face.

“Hi,” he said cheerfully, “Merry Christmas Eve.”

I laughed at that. “You too.” Then I took a big breath, knowing that if I waited too long, I’d lose my nerve. “Listen, Bill – about what I said before. I’m sorry I tried to take it back. I didn’t want to.”

“I’m glad,” he said, looking at me, his gaze direct and serious. “Because it made me – really happy to hear it.”

My heart leapt. “It did?”

“Yeah.” He smiled at me, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Sorry for just blurting it out like that.”

“Blurting is the best! That’s how you know you really mean something. No second guessing or hesitating.”

“That’s a nice way to think about it.” I smiled back at him, wishing more than anything that we could be in the same room.

Bill squinted at me, then frowned. “Wait, where are you? It looks like a hotel.”

“My mom’s apartment building,” I said. “I’m in the hallway. It’s kind of a long story. Where are you?” From what I could see of Bill’s background, it looked like an airport. “Did you just land? Are you in New Mexico?”

“Still in New York,” he said, shaking his head. “Flight was cancelled because of the weather, but they re-booked me for tomorrow morning.”

“Oh no!” I said, and sure enough, in the background, I could see a lot of disgruntled-looking people, none of whom seemed happy to be spending Christmas Eve at JFK.

“I’m really sorry about before,” Bill said, and he started walking. It looked like he moved to a less-busy corner of a seating area, and things got a little quieter. “I didn’t mean to have to get off the phone so fast. But look!” he pulled something from behind his back and held it up to the phone.

I shook my head and laughed. “Is that what I think it is?”

“Yes!” Bill waved around the box of Sir Harry’s Happy Christmas Gingerbread. “I found it in Norwalk! That’s why I had to get off the phone so fast, I was worried the guy would say something and spoil the

surprise. The plan was to run it over to your house on the way to the airport, but then my mom was worried about the weather, so we didn't have time. But I'll just send it and you can have it for...I don't know... what comes after Boxing Day?"

"Or maybe," I said, a idea occurring to me, "there might be a more direct way to get the gingerbread."

"What do you mean?"

"What's your plan now? Are you going back to Mystic?"

Bill shook his head. "The roads are too bad, so I'm just going to hunker down here."

"You *could* do that," I acknowledged. "You could absolutely spend Christmas in the terminal at JFK, sleeping on the ground. Surrounded by strangers. Or...if the subways are running..."

Bill smiled, like he was seeing where I was going with this. "Yes?"

"Think you can make it to the Upper West Side?"

If the doormen in my mother's building weren't my biggest fans before, I had a feeling they *certainly* weren't now, after I'd greeted my boyfriend in the Mayfair Towers lobby by jumping into his arms, and then proceeding to make out with him on the lobby couches for at least twenty minutes.

When we finally took a break, and settled into the couch nearest the Christmas tree, I saw that the doorman behind the front desk was shaking his head, and not looking pleased. But whatever! It was Christmas, my boyfriend and I were not breaking up, and he'd arrived through a snowstorm, bearing gingerbread for me. What was I supposed to do, *not* kiss him?

"I can't believe you found this," I said, looking at the box of gingerbread. I smiled at him. "You're the best."

"It was important to you," he said simply. I leaned over and gave him a kiss and heard the doorman sigh audibly. "And plus," he said, "maybe

this spring we can do a gingerbread quest. It feels like we need a new one.”

“Yeah,” I said, turning the box in my hands and looking over at him. “About that.” I took a breath and told him all of it – applying for the study abroad program, then not getting it, then getting it – and having to let them know in three days. “And I think I want to go.”

“You should absolutely go,” Bill said immediately, smiling at me. “Congratulations! That’s so great.”

“But,” I said, as I set the box down on the lobby coffee table, “it would mean that I’d be gone. Like all semester.”

“I know,” he said. “And I’ll miss you, of course. But I can always fly out to meet you, or we could meet halfway –”

“Halfway to *Europe*? Where is that, Greenland?”

“A place I’ve always wanted to visit!” I laughed, and he continued on. “And we can FaceTime and talk, or maybe this summer I’ll come join you and we can go backpacking or something.”

I nodded, all these possibilities spinning in my head. My next few months were suddenly looking like nothing I could have predicted even a few days ago. But I was realizing just how fast things could change – suddenly Rodney was unemployed, Linnie was having a baby, my mom was dating a guy named Phil. And I was apparently going to go live in Paris for a semester. It was scary – but also really exciting.

The revolving door spun, letting in a blast of cold air and snow, and a bundled-up delivery person, bearing a towering stack of boxes, walked up to the front desk, tracking snow and slush across the marble floor. “Delivery for 24B,” he said, and the doorman sighed.

“I can get that,” I said, getting up. I smiled at Bill. “I hope you’re hungry.”

In the end, it wasn’t the Christmas Eve dinner that any of us would have predicted, but it was somehow perfect. All eleven of us – me, my

mom and dad, Bill, J.J., Linnie, Rodney, Danny, Mike, Waffles and Phil – were spread out around the living room, plates in laps or on the coffee table since we didn't even come close to fitting around my mom's kitchen table. My dad opened the champagne, and we toasted to the season, to the future member of the family who'd be showing up around September, to Bill not having to spend Christmas at JFK.

The food was delicious – I was especially partial to the blintzes and the latkes – and best of all, we had Sir Harry's Happy Christmas Gingerbread for dessert after all. Waffles, clearly remembering it, lunged at the box, but Rodney grabbed him just in time.

J.J. made everyone quiet down when the lottery numbers were read out – and though he didn't win the jackpot (to no one's surprise but J.J.'s) he did win a scratcher that was worth...forty-seven dollars.

"Here you go," he said, presenting it gravely to Linnie and Rodney. "Put it toward little J.J.'s future."

"I'm sorry, what's happening now?" Rodney asked.

"I told J.J. he could name the baby if he won the lottery," Linnie said, as Rodney gaped at her. "But forty-seven dollars doesn't count!"

"Technically, he did win a prize from the lottery," Phil supplied from his seat on the couch next to my mom.

"That's not super helpful, Phil!" Linnie said. My mom patted his knee.

"You're not naming our baby for forty-seven dollars," Rodney said, shaking his head.

"Or any amount of money. We're not selling naming rights," Linnie said to the room at large.

"You were willing to do it for 235 million," Mike pointed out.

"Okay, but that's the final price," Linnie said. "If anyone wants to give us 235 million, they can name the baby."

When we were cleaning up the kitchen, I volunteered to take the trash to the building's trash chute and Mike offered to go with me.



“Thanks,” I said, handing him a trash bag. We headed down the hallway together.

“Just wanted to let you know, I broke up with Riley,” he said.

“You did?” I asked, turning to him in surprise.

“Yeah. I just think I have more of a connection with Riley,” he said.

“I can see that. I mean they’re both great, but...”

“Plus,” he said, as he pulled open the metal chute door for me and I dropped the trash bag down it, “what Danny said kind of bugged me. I really don’t want to play the field. I want to have something real.” He dropped his own bag of trash down the chute, and a few seconds later we heard it land. “Like you and Bill have.”

I smiled at him as we headed back down the hallway to the apartment. “Well,” I said, “hopefully we can make it work.”

“He braved a snowstorm and chose to spend Christmas with our family,” Mike said, as he pulled open the apartment door and held it for me. “I’d say the chances are pretty good.”

With the snow not letting up, it was clear that we were going to be staying at my mom’s for the night. She gave her bedroom to my dad and Danny, and went to stay at Phil’s down the hall. Linnie and Rodney took the guest room – Waffles went with them – and me, Bill, Mike and J.J. bunked down in the living room, assembling couch cushions and pillows and sleeping bags for the night.

Bill and I pulled our sleeping bags next to each other, and from my place on the floor, I could look out the windows and see the snow falling on New York City, guaranteeing that we’d have a white Christmas.

It was quiet and dark in the living room – though I was pretty sure I could hear Waffles snoring in the next room – and I had assumed everyone had gone to sleep. I was about to do the same when Bill rolled over to face me.

“Hi,” he whispered.

“Hi,” I whispered back. “I thought you were sleeping.”

“Not yet,” he said. He held my gaze for a moment. “Just so you know – I love you too.”

My heart felt like it stopped, and then started beating double-time. “You do?”

“Of course I do.” He reached out and smoothed my hair back. “I just wanted to say it in person. I was actually hoping I’d find the right moment...”

“So you picked sleeping on the floor, surrounded by my whole family.” I nodded. “Makes sense.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” Bill said, clearly fighting to keep whispering. “Just – it’s what you said earlier. That maybe we don’t need to wait for the right moment. When you feel it, you should say it.”

“I love you too,” I said, smiling wide as I said it. “And I promise I won’t try and take it back this time.”

“Good,” he said. He kissed me, and we lingered there for just a moment. Then Bill kissed my nose, and I snuggled as close to him as I could get in a sleeping bag, and with my head on his chest, and the sound of his breathing, and the snow falling on the sleeping city outside, I drifted off to sleep.



SATURDAY,  
DECEMBER 25TH

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*Christmas Day*

## CHAPTER 10

*Or,  
Table for Nine*

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**W**HEN I WOKE UP, I SAW THAT BILL'S SLEEPING bag was neatly folded, his pillow stacked on top. There was a note that read, in his tidy block-print handwriting, *Had to go get flight! Merry Christmas & I'll see you next year. Love, B.*

I folded it carefully, knowing that I was going to be keeping it. I sat up and looked out the window. It seemed like the snow had stopped falling – everything was shining and dazzlingly bright. I knew it wouldn't last long – that soon, it would be gray and slushy and grimy. But for right now, it looked magical – like a fresh start.

I glanced around the living room. Mike and J.J. appeared to be still asleep, Mike curled into a tiny ball and J.J. splayed out like a starfish, mouth wide open and snoring softly. Resisting the urge to drop something in his open mouth, I got up as quietly as I could and pushed through the swinging door to the kitchen.

To my surprise, my mom was standing by the kitchen window, mug of tea in her hands, looking out at the city. "Oh hi," I said, crossing

over to the fridge and peering inside, even though I knew there wasn't much there – we'd eaten a truly impressive amount of Ukrainian food last night, which meant there weren't a ton of leftover options to be reheated for breakfast food. "I didn't know you were here."

My mom shook her head. "This is my apartment, you know."

"You know what I mean. I thought you were still at Phil's."

"I thought I should get back here before everyone starts waking up."

"He seems nice," I said, and my mom smiled. Phil hadn't said a ton the night before, and he had the slightly dazed look that people got when confronted with all of us at once – Rodney had worn it for about two years when he first started dating Linnie. But I'd seen how kind he was to my mom, always noticing if she needed something, and hurrying to get it for her. How she'd laugh and lean into him slightly. I didn't know him well enough to be entirely pro-Phil, but I was willing to give him a shot.

"How are you doing with all of this?" my mom asked, leaning back against the counter. "I know it's not the Christmas you expected."

"I think I'm okay," I said, thinking back to the night before – nothing that I would have planned on, but a lot of fun. "I guess I'm figuring out how to let go of some things."

My mother smiled at me. "You never liked doing that."

I shook my head. "I really don't."

"I feel like this is just part of life," she said, taking a sip of tea. "You have to let go of things sometimes. But not everything. Some of our traditions we have for a reason."

"Yeah," I said. "Like, right now, I'd really love some Christmas morning pancakes." As if on cue, my stomach growled.

My mom set down her tea and smiled. "You know, I bet that can be arranged."

There probably weren't many places that could, on Christmas morning, seat nine hungry people in the aftermath of a citywide snowstorm. But

the Hi-Hat diner, down the street from my mom's apartment, was one of those places. And we weren't even the only ones there! There were families and people sitting at the counter, the woman behind the register wearing a Santa hat, and carols playing over the diner's speakers.

As we'd made our way through the snow to the diner (J.J. narrating every step like we were in the Iditarod), I saw the plows rumbling down the road and knew we'd be able to get back to Connecticut after all. Which was honestly a relief – while it had been a fun adventure to sleep on my mother's floor one night, I wasn't sure I wanted to do two.

We ordered eggs and bacon and coffee and juice – but mostly, we ordered pancakes. They came out faster than I would have thought possible, and everyone dug in. I took a moment before taking my first bite, and looked around the table.

At Linnie and Rodney, who seemed happy and nervous and terrified and thrilled in equal measure. At Mike, smiling to himself as he texted Riley under the table, and Danny, telling Phil (who was back to looking overwhelmed) all about Kalinda, and their parking meet cute. At J.J., who was stealthily stealing bacon from my dad's plate every time he turned to talk to my mom. And my mom, who gave me a tiny wink, before turning back to my dad, and saying something that made him laugh.

“So what do you think?” J.J. asked, turning to me – I took the opportunity to steal a piece of bacon from his plate, telling myself that I was avenging my dad.

“About what?”

“This whole Christmas,” J.J. said, gesturing with his fork. He raised an eyebrow at me. “Same thing next year?”

I laughed, and pulled my pancake plate closer to me. They weren't my dad's pancakes, and they didn't have whipped cream that turned them into Santa. But I cut off a piece anyway, and took my first bite.

And it was delicious.