

ISBN: 978-1-62249-651-8

**Published by
Biblio Publishing
Columbus, Ohio
Biblio Publishing.com**

Tomorrow, After Christmas

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Dedicated to Jean, the best writer I know.

Prologue

When Cat Dunne stirred in the dark hours on the morning of Christmas Eve, her first thought was that it would probably be the worst day of the year. She was wrong; the worst day was yet to come; today, with its bag of mixed blessings, would end up it being one of the best. The beginning of something.

She was awakened by the ringing of a phone in the hallway outside the Roemer girls' bedroom. It was very early; it could not have been much past five-thirty or six. The cell's ringtone was harsh and jangling, the sound of an old-fashioned landline, the kind Cat had seen in movies. Mrs. Roemer's phone. She lay very still in the dark, listening to her neighbor's one-sided conversation. It was quiet at first, but soon Nancy's voice rose. "Oh, no, no."

Every nerve in Cat's body started to tingle. Mom? Could it be something about her mom?

Cat shivered. The air mattress on the floor was not uncomfortable, but it was cold, as air mattresses often are, in spite of the layers of blankets Cat had carefully placed on the floor beneath it. In spite of her fear, the chill inflamed Cat's anger at her mother. She was still so furious she could hardly contain it. Especially for her sister Sunny's sake. Sunny was just a little girl, and Jobeth Dunne was the most selfish person Cat had ever met. First it was school, now this stupid Christmas trip.

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Cat wasn't a child anymore; she understood that this self-centeredness had always been her mother's way and always would be. Yet, Jobeth regarded Cat as an unreasonable, selfish daughter—highly unjustified, in Cat's opinion.

Nancy had retreated to the room she and her husband Hugh shared at the end of the hall. Cat could hear them talking urgently, and there was a lot of movement and shuffling about. Doors opened and closed. A few interminable minutes passed before she heard a tap-tap at the bedroom door. Cat raised herself on her elbow and instinctively put a protective arm around Sunny, who was sleeping next to her.

"Girls, wake up," Nancy said in a soft but insistent voice. "Wake up, wake up." The door squeaked open.

Cat sat up and shook Sunny gently. The child whimpered and muttered. She heard the Roemer girls stirring in the beds behind her. The older girl, Lana, asked her mom what was wrong.

"We have a family emergency," Nancy said, and when she said "we" Cat let out a breath she didn't know she was holding. So not her mom. "Get up and get dressed as quick as you can, okay?" Nancy sounded close to tears. Groaning, the girls began to scramble reluctantly out of bed. The younger girl, Margot, whined fretfully, but Nancy told her sharply to be quiet and hurry and the girl fell silent.

"Mary Catherine," she said, and motioned Cat to follow her to the hallway. Cat threw back the

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blanket she and Sunny had been snuggled beneath. She shivered as she put her feet on the floor and pushed herself off the mattress.

In the hallway, Nancy said, "Cat, we need to contact your aunt. Can you get me her number?" Cat's heart started to pound again, but slowed when Nancy added, "and we'll need to contact your mom if we can reach her." Cat went back into the room for her phone. When she returned, phone in hand, Nancy was gone and Hugh was digging luggage out of the hall closet. She showed him the numbers for her aunt and uncle and he tapped them into his phone, then rubbed his eyes distractedly. "I'm sorry for all this disruption, Cat." He patted her on the shoulder. "Pack your stuff, okay? We need to be ready to leave soon, fast as we can."

"Okay, Mr. R. But what's happened?" Hugh started to speak, but Nancy came out of the bedroom, crying, and he turned away.

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Chapter 1

Annabeth

Something is coming. I sense it. I think: it's just Christmas. Still, I feel...waitful.

At eight in the morning on Christmas Eve, the temperature stands at sixty-two degrees. It's the warmest Christmas Eve I can remember in quite a few years. Official records would probably belie that. Nevertheless. It's warm.

I stand in front of our cabin, zipping my fleece jacket. I whistle for my dog Mila, and she plunges ahead of me into the weedy path through the woods. I'll have to check her for burrs later, but I prefer the narrow, leaf-paved path up the hillside to the lake to the steep walk down our driveway, with its treacherous pavé of loose gravel.

I breathe deeply of the fresh air, scented with pine, wood smoke and leaf mold.

The trail slopes gently away from what we optimistically call our "front yard" and crosses a narrow stream, really, no more than a run-off down the hillside, but pretty enough in the spring. It's bone-dry today. There's been no rain or snow for a week or more. I take an easy hop over the shallow trench and increase my stride as we climb.

I ought to feel good, and mostly, I do, even with this odd presage I have. October, my favorite month, is long past now, but I also love this time of year, when

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the autumn leaves are gone, and the woods and fields are a soft brown-gray; it has its own kind of beauty. Christmas is on the doorstep. But despite the holiday, I'm battling disappointment and a grudge of irritation. I push it to the back burner and quicken my pace. Ahead, I can see Mila's tail, a silky blond flag, disappear at the bending of the path.

I emerge from the woods onto a stony trail, a gradual slope up, narrow, but wide enough for a vehicle to access the water. I intend to skirt the small lake before I take the steep rustic steps up to the inn to see Nora.

I slow as the glimmer of water appears over the rise ahead. A few more breathless steps, and I'm on the ridge of the earthen dam that forms the north side of the lake. I pause to take in the familiar view. It's a beautiful spot; I've gazed from this vantage many, many times over the years, and I never tire of it. The lake is small, more a pond, really, and it's easy to see clearly the details on the far shore—a watercolor of reeds and marshy grasses, giving way to small trees as the land rises. It's utterly still on this soft Christmas Eve morning, the silvery surface perfectly reflecting the forested hillsides that surround it.

Everything seems deserted today, silent. For a moment, I have the unsettling sensation that I'm completely alone on the property. I stand on the bulkhead of the damn and let my imagination carry me away, listening for the furtive sounds of the woods breathing quietly. I look at the northern shore,

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imagining a wild creature stepping out of the trees to gaze back at me. I shiver, a frisson of vague and not unpleasant disorientation.

Of course, I see nothing more exotic than a gaggle of Canadian geese who have decided they've come far enough south in their migration. They glide low and silent over the water, landing in a gorgeous flurry of spray and wing. They are lovely but ordinary; anything that steps out of these woods will be no more exotic than a whitetail deer.

The spell is broken by Mila, crashing out of the brush next to me in a rattle of leaves and chatter of squirrels. I laugh and turn east toward the inn, but the sensation of isolation presses behind me. I shrug it off; when we first came to the cabin twenty-some years ago, I found being on the far side of the lake peaceful but lonesome; it made me nervy at night. But as the years passed and we grew into familiar affection for the place, I've come to feel at ease. Recently, we made the jump from renters to owners.

Above me are a long series of wooden steps and switchbacks that provide the inn's access to the water. I am pleasantly winded by the time I reach the top. Nora and Baxter Summerfield's place, the Summerfield Inn, perches on the edge of the high hillside. It's two stories, remodeled into what Nora calls 'modern rustic', with a central span of tall windows that face the lake and the sunset. The lobby and elegant great room are up top. There's an expansive upper deck, and porch below, facing a bit of natural landscaping and a stone fire ring.

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I pause at the fire ring and turn again, as I always do, for one more look below, where the lake sits placidly in its bowl of hills. I can just glimpse the tip of our cabin roof from this angle, nestled in its hollow. Smoke drifts in a lazy curl from the chimney. Turning away, I enter the inn through the ground floor, passing into the tiny in-house café. Mila sweeps in behind me, a familiar visitor here.

Two guests, their luggage at their feet, are relaxing on stools at the counter. Mugs of coffee warm their hands. A breakfast of fruit and homemade pastries is arranged on Nora's Depression glass. Resisting the urge to sample, I wave a casual hello and go up the steps to the front desk while the couple make over Mila.

Nora's husband Baxter is behind the counter, messing with the computer, leaning over a pile of rumpled bedsheets.

"Hi, Bax. Is Nora around?"

Bax snorts. "I wish. I hate doing the bed linens." He tips his head toward the parking lot. "She's up at the house working on Christmas."

"Where're the housekeepers?"

"Christmas Eve off."

"Oof. Too bad, buddy. I'll leave you to it. Unless...do you need help?"

Bax waves me off. "There's not much. These sheets, and the people up at Silver Maple cabin need firewood." He remarks that their two sons are around somewhere, hopefully doing their assigned tasks. The

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couple in the café are the last guests to leave before the inn closes for Christmas.

Bax and Nora live in one of the property's cabins, the one closest to the inn, a moment's walk away across the parking area. With enough success to afford a small staff to work the overnight shift, they are able to live apart in their own place.

I round up Mila and walk over to their cabin—a traditional house, really—not a true log cabin like ours. In its former life, when it was a rental, was called Hickory Stick and had capacity for ten. Now it makes the perfect family home. I let myself in, calling out, and find Nora in her kitchen, arms up to the wrists in a huge bowl of something gloppy—the genesis of Nora's grandmother's casserole dressing. Enough for twenty, by the look of it. I plop myself down on a stool at the island. "Hey".

"Annabeth! Hey, yourself." Nora peels herself out of a pair of disposable plastic gloves and drops them in the sink. "Are you on your walk? Beginning or ending?"

"Beginning."

She ruffles her short hair, which was once russet-brown but has transitioned to a striking silvery-gray. Nora is tall, wiry and athletic, just like Bax; far from making her look older, her spiky hair gives the impression of an ageless Norse goddess. Nora the Goddess is my closest friend in the whole world. She, Bax and their sons are truly family to us.

"Then I won't offer you wine..." she deadpans.

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I laugh. That's Nora—funny, irreverent, dry. I'm not sure she's joking about the wine, though. Every day, she has a hundred things on her plate. It's exhausting. I eye the bowl of glop warily. "Tell me again how many are coming tomorrow? Geoff made only four pies."

Nora rolls her eyes, wipes her hands on her apron and puts a cup of coffee in front of me. "It's not that much dressing! You gotta have leftovers, right? We've got..." she paused and counted. "...twelve. Wait, unless you finally heard from Jo."

I look down at my coffee, take a sniff. It smells like gingerbread. Again, I feel a twitch of sadness followed by a nudge of anger; Jo is the source of my discontent, but I swallow it down with a sip of coffee and plaster on a nonchalant expression. "No, I never did hear back from her. It's maddening. We even went to the trouble to buy gifts. Just in case. It would be just like her to show up at the last minute with no warning, and we wanted to make sure we had something for the girls."

Nora sighs. "I'm sorry. I know you were hoping they'd come down for Christmas." She dumps the dressing into an enormous baking dish and covers it with Saran. She offers me a cookie, which I decline; she pops it cheerfully into her mouth. She has a hearty appetite and a ferocious sweet tooth, but her job keeps her running day and night and she never seems to gain a pound. "Poor Annabeth. Are you homesick for your house in town?"

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“Kind of,” I admit, and take a deep breath. “But we were determined to try Christmas at the cabin. It sounds so romantic, you know?” I smile at Nora.

Nora nods; we’ve discussed this. This same homesickness oftentimes happens to guests who stay at the inn around holidays that are traditionally sentimental family events—it sounds fun on paper, but in reality, they often end up feeling a little melancholy.

Nora and Bax do their best to make it festive for those people. The inn is decorated to the hilt with pine and ribbon and an imposing tree. We, on the other hand, have brought very little from our Columbus residence; candles and my grandmother’s ceramic Christmas tree, still pretty even with a few of the plastic gumdrop bulbs missing.

I sip my coffee again. The gingerbread aroma reminds me of home. “I miss Jo.” I frown. “I don’t know why. We don’t get along that well. She’s such a...I don’t know, just so high-maintenance. And I miss the girls. We never see them and I feel guilty about that.”

“Well, that’s not on you. You try. Like this Christmas invitation.” Her head disappears into a lower cupboard. Pans rattle. “How was your Christmas Eve Eve?”

I laugh. She knows me so well. The day before Christmas Eve—we’ve taken to calling it Christmas Eve Eve—is my favorite day of the year. I love the entire Christmas season, which for me generally starts long before Thanksgiving. But Christmas Eve Eve, when the

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stress of the run-up to the holiday is mostly over, when there's not much left to do, is the very best. I suppose I would feel differently with a house full of kids, but alas, this we do not have. I like to spend the day quietly. I tell her that the day was peaceful and that I enjoyed being curled up next to the fire. I also tell her that I spent it impatiently waiting to hear from Jo.

Nora straightens, large pot in hand. "Annabeth, I'm so sorry this plan didn't work out for you. But please try to let it go. You're allowing someone else's choices, which you have *zero* control over, to ruin your favorite holiday. Embrace the change of scenery."

I slap my hands emphatically on the counter and stand. "You're right, of course. I love Christmas, every sentimental, traditional bit of it, and this Jo business is not going to ruin it for me." We have our Christmas Eve all planned out: a big fire in the fireplace, wine, exchange gifts, light the Advent candles and read the Christmas story. Watch the Pope on TV. It will be fine. Fine.

"Bax mentioned the boys," I add as carry my mug to the sink. "I take it William is home?"

"Yep. Rolled in a couple days ago." Her son is a freshman at Ohio State.

"Excellent. Harry must be happy." The boys were named, improbably, William and Harry, a coincidence of family namesaking that had nothing to do with the royal sons.

"He sure is. He has someone to help him with the chores." Nora laughs over her sons and pats my

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hand. "Forget about Jo. It's going to be a lovely day and we're overjoyed that you are going to be with us tomorrow. It's something we've always wanted to do, right? Have all of us together at the Summerfield Inn for the holidays? Like the adopted family that we are? Now hit the road, Jack. I got a turkey to stuff."

Mila and I take begin to take our leave, but as I step out the deck door, I lean back in. "Did you notice how warm it is?"

She shrugs. "It's Ohio. It's southern Ohio, in fact. The weather is unpredictable."

"You don't think it's too warm? I don't know—for some reason I have a weird feeling I can't shake."

Nora gives me a look and waves me off. We go on our way, following the long driveway south toward the gates of the inn, woman and dog. The light is milky golden and soft, the sky opaque and low with a hint of sun peeking through. Near the entrance to the main township road, we pass Silver Maple Cabin; just beyond is a wooded, well-marked trailhead; we enter, skirting a chunky, dried-up mud hole. The trail is well-trod, wide and curvy, mostly flat. Good for walking, good for ruminating. Mila zigs and zags around me, on her own mission; I poke my hands in my pockets, lost in thought.

Nora has been my most trusted friend and purveyor of good counsel for more years than I can count. While I ought to follow her wise advice, I have Jo on my mind and there she's stuck. My younger

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sister: lovely, stubborn, flighty, unrepentantly self-centered.

I think about a Christmas when we were ten and twelve. Too old to believe in Santa but still young enough to feel the magic of Christmas morning. Our parents loved Christmas, too—I suppose that’s where I get it—and they filled the corner of the living room around the tree with an avalanche of gifts, scrupulously divided between my sister and me, always the same number for each girl. Jobeth, at ten, was already a cynic, self-centered and sometimes mean, the prototypical annoying kid sister. I was easy-going and pragmatic and loved her enough to overlook her difficult nature.

That morning, Jobeth beat us all to the tree. When I awakened, I saw her empty bed in our shared room and heard the TV downstairs. Ready to dig into that pile of gifts, I slid out of bed, stopped at my parents’ door long enough to knock excitedly, and thumped down the stairs.

When I walked into our front room, I couldn’t believe my eyes. Jo was snuggled into the corner of the couch eating a donut and watching a Christmas parade on TV. Next to the tree were two piles of gifts, all unwrapped and neatly stacked.

“What the hell?” I exclaimed. We weren’t supposed to swear but I couldn’t help it.

Jobeth just shrugged. “I opened all of mine and then I was bored so I opened all of yours, too. Just to save time.” She gave me a wide-eyed look and a little

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smirk. “We got some good stuff. You should take a look.” Classic Jobeth. I was beside myself and I remember that my parents were furious.

Now I shake my head over this memory; it’s long enough gone that it feels amusing. Jo has no sentiment at all, never had, and I wonder what kind of Christmas traditions she gives her own girls. Does she leave their unwrapped gifts in two no-nonsense piles under the tree? Does she even have a tree? I cannot remember ever attending a Christmas at her house. It’s not her thing. The day could be a toss-away for her; on the other hand, if the mood strikes her, she may go way overboard. Nothing one day, deck the damn halls the next.

Jobeth has been married twice, but is now single again. I liked both her husbands, although I barely remember #1, the father of her older daughter, Mary Catherine, called Cat, who is seventeen. #2 I knew better; he was more recent and their daughter Susan–Sunny–is only five. I was sorry that they split, but not surprised. Longevity in a marriage, the patience, routine and sometimes tedium that go with it, are hardly Jo’s “thing”. I suppose she knows that; throughout both her marriages she kept our family name, Dunne, and both the girls have it, too.

I round a curve in the path and the trail ascends gently. Skirting another rough patch where a long-gone downpour muddied the way, I pause to check my phone. Reception out here can be spotty, but this section of the trail curves close to a well-populated

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road and the signal is stronger. No message from Jo. I dial her number and when she doesn't pick up, I text her a message.

Hey, sis. Merry Christmas Eve. Still hoping you and the girls will come down today and stay over. I tap send, think for a minute, then add another text.

If you come, I'll let you open all my presents for me on Christmas morning. I add a laughing-my-ass-off emoji. I wonder if she'll remember that long-gone Christmas and find the text funny. I suppose not; I'll be shocked if I hear back from her. Why do I feel compelled to keep trying?

I continue following the trail and soon emerge at a long, wide clearing with a weedy rut down the center; old logging roads crisscross the property. Mila runs in wide circles; she's quick, a buttery blur. I let her go crazy, burning off energy, then pick up the trail at the far end of the road.

Another half mile and I come to my goal, a tiny gazebo hidden in the trees, built by the inn. I'm now on the farthest side of the lake from our cabin. The path ends here, and the hillside descends steeply to the water's edge, down to the mucky, reedy marsh. It's so mild that I decide to sit for a bit; the gazebo is the perfect resting place and there's a ten-dollar view.

Jo and I were never close in the way that some sisters are. We are fundamentally different in a hundred small and large ways, although we do look very much alike, I'll say that. Our Irish shows in our fair skin and strawberry blond hair. Mine now sports

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more than a bit of silver, but Jo maintains hers and in fact tints it boldly—some might say copper, others might say “showy”.

I don't pay much attention to my heritage. I did the DNA thing, that's about it, but Jo touts hers. She likes to think of herself as a feisty and mercurial Celt, but it's also a way to excuse herself. She isn't mercurial, she's undependable. She's not feisty, she's emotionally difficult and fickle. It sounds as though I shouldn't love her, but I do...despite my constant and annoying exasperation with her. There's something about her toughness that's admirable. She has a prestigious job with a large insurance company, but that seems to be the only steady thing about her.

Her girls are an even bigger conundrum for me. I lean my arms across the gazebo's railing and rest my chin on my hands. We have no kids, Geoff and I. It's my biggest regret, although I suppose you shouldn't regret something that you can't help. I don't dwell on it, and I don't let it define my life. It just is. But I admit when I'm with Jo and her daughters, I feel an envy that's unbecoming in a Christian woman. I entertain the ungracious thought that if these were my daughters, what experiences could I give them that Jo won't, or can't?

I put this thought resolutely out of my head. It's not my place to criticize my sister's parenting. Although they don't live far from us, I don't see them often enough to make a judgement like that. I know she loves them and they are well-cared for. But I'm sure the

girls are more than a small part of my disappointment that Jo won't be here. I had, I suppose, a fantasy about an idyllic family holiday in the woods. About providing Cat and Sunny the picture-perfect Christmas that Jo would never think of creating.

I glance at my phone. Time to get back.

Mila is sitting against my leg as she's wont to do, but as I stand, she leaps up and growls, long and menacing, deep in her throat. It's a sound she almost never makes. I'm surprised and pause mid-movement. There's nothing in these woods that she hasn't seen before; no animal other than perhaps the occasional coyote that could be considered even vaguely a threat. She'll run the deer if she can, but she's generally obedient and comes back at my command. The only danger to her, with her buff-colored coat, are hunters, but the inn's land is posted no hunting or trespassing. The locals sometimes get permission from Bax to use the hiking trails or fish in the lake, but not, in general, at this time of year.

What could be alarming her? A trespasser? Or worse, a poacher? If so, he's not likely to reveal himself to me. I'm suddenly aware of how lonely it is in this spot, and how unreliable my phone is. At least I have a good-sized dog beside me, which is a deterrent to most strangers.

I stand and tell Mila to heel. No more running wildly until we get back on the inn side of the lake. As I step down from the gazebo, I see something I didn't notice before...footprints that aren't mine, in the loose,

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sandy dirt around the structure. And strange ones at that. They're big, and don't seem to be the sole of a boot. They look like sock prints, or maybe even bare feet. I stare at them, and for one quick minute, every true-crime TV show I have ever seen runs through my head.

Seriously, Annabeth? I shake myself and laugh it off, albeit uneasily. I take out my phone and snap a picture of the prints. I might show it to Bax later, just in case. Who would be out here walking around without shoes, in December? Not him or the boys. The prints don't look like they've been there since summer; they'd be tramped all over by hikers and guests. In town, I would suspect a homeless person; out here that seems dubious. I glance around the gazebo, looking for clues, trash, more tracks, but there's nothing. I don't feel inclined to go looking further.

Mila growls again and gives a yippy little bark, and now I feel alarmed. With her at heel, I move briskly. As I pass from the woods back onto the logging road, I pick up a sturdy branch and make as if to use it as a walking stick. Hurrying down the road, I retrace my steps through the pretty trail and finally emerge on our side of the lake. I've seen no sign of another person. Mila seems skittish, but doesn't growl again.

I toss my stick with relief and clamber back up to the inn's driveway, again passing the first of the rental cabins. A young woman is standing on the porch and waves to me; I wave back. Although the inn is

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closed, the cabins are still available; I wonder if the renter is staying over Christmas. The thought of a few other people around the grounds makes me feel a little better. Maybe they're walking around in the woods barefoot.

* * * * *

When I get back to the cabin, I find my husband in the kitchen assembling yet another pie. I roll my eyes, give him a peck on the cheek. "How many pies do you think twelve people can eat?" I grab the water pitcher from the fridge and pour a glass.

"Well, I was thinking," Geoff says, dropping rolled crust into a pie plate. "We might want some leftovers for Boxing Day, and people will want seconds, and I only had one pumpkin, so I'm making a couple more..."

I snicker. Geoff is a great cook, one of the thousand things I love about him, and one of the thousand things about him I struggle with. I'm not a big girl, but I'm not a dainty morsel, either. I have hips and a butt and I work hard to maintain a healthy waistline, no thanks to the pies, pot roasts and pasta concocted by my husband. Geoff Wolfe is tall and Nordic looking, with ruddy skin and sandy hair. He can carry all that food around easily; I can't. So, we have an agreement—for every explosion of home cooking, he has to allow me a couple days off—tuna

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salad and Diet Coke instead of tagliatelle and a nice chardonnay.

Geoff and I have been married almost thirty years, and I know him better than I know myself. At twenty, I was serious, wary and self-absorbed. Geoff was the opposite—gregarious, open, funny and a bit vague about where he wanted his life to go. It was love at first sight. We forced a longish engagement so I could be sure-sure-sure, but it was an overabundance of caution. It was meant to be, almost mystical. He felt familiar to me, like *family*, right away. Of course, that meant that through my rose-colored glasses I saw only his pluses and none of his minuses.

Jobeth never says so out loud, but I suspect she doesn't like Geoff much. It's hard to tell with her...she's such a prickly thing in general. When I married, she side-eyed her way through the ceremony and reception, looking like she wanted to run. I wasn't surprised when she burned her way through a succession of her own relationships; I was astonished when she finally did marry, and shocked to the tips of my fingers when she produced Mary Catherine, named for our mother. I figured she'd have no time for kids. I still wonder if I'm right about that, but I suppose there's maternal still water running deep that I just can't see.

I must consider with honest shame the envy I feel over the two children she has and I don't. It pains me some days that Geoff never seemed to mind our childlessness the way I did. I've ask him why many

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times and get the same shrug every time. I quit asking when it started to feel like picking a sore.

I think about this as I watch Geoff pop the pies into the oven. I tell him about my conversation with Nora and that William is home from OSU. All I get is a mild *hmmmm* in reply. His mind is elsewhere.

I'm about to show him the pictures I took of the footprints in the woods when his phone rings. He picks it up, but the call drops, a common annoyance out here. It rings again, immediately; it's Bax asking Geoff about cutting firewood for the cabins. I listen for a minute, then notice the time and wander off to shower, forgetting about the pictures. We have a nice, peaceful afternoon and evening planned, with a lot of nothing to do, and I'm determined to enjoy it, freshly scrubbed and bundled in warm fleece.

I pass through the big living room and as I do, I pause and again wish we would have taken the time to bring more Christmas stuff from home, but packing it up and bringing it all down here seemed like a ridiculous amount of effort. A few candles and some greens I pulled from the pine outside are scattered across the mantle; my grandmother's old ceramic tree sits dark and forlorn-looking on the table under the window. Long habit, learned from Grandma, compelled me to put it in a window—as if anyone way out here will pass by and see it. I stoop and plug it in and it makes me feel a bit more festive.

I sigh and move on to my shower. I have vowed to keep Christmas simple and simple it is.

Chapter 2

Annabeth

“Annabeth!”

I jump; the hair dryer bounces against the vanity of the tiny bathroom off our bedroom. I’m standing in undies and a faded t-shirt that has a print of the Grinch on it, working on my damp hair. Geoff pokes his head around the door.

“Anna, someone just came down the drive.”

“What? Who?” I look around for my jeans. I can’t think of a soul who would be visiting us out here unannounced, especially on Christmas Eve.

Well, except one. “Is it Jo?”

“No, but I think it might be her neighbors.”

It takes a moment for this to register. “Hugh and Nancy? I seriously doubt it...why in the world would they come here? Even if they had the address—which, why would they?—they’d never find our gate.” The cabin is definitely off the beaten path. Even I can’t find that driveway entrance half the time.

“I still think it’s them. Put on some pants, woman.” Geoff grins and gives me a little smack on the backside.

I confine Mila and our cat, Chaser, to the bedroom. Stumbling behind Geoff to the kitchen, I pull on jeans, running fingers through my mess of elflocks. Hoisting myself on tip-toe against the sink edge, I peek out the window overlooking our lane. The parking area

is down a short flight of steps, so all I can see is the roof of a Buick idling on the gravel, backed up to the sidewalk. Shadows move inside. Sure enough, I recognize the top of Hugh Roemer's balding head pop out of the car. The milky sunlight is gone and a light drizzle has started to fall.

Geoff opens the kitchen door before Hugh can knock. "Hey, man! What a surprise! Come on in."

Hugh sidles in, careful not to step off the rug onto the tile floor with wet boots. He's clearly unhappy. There are dark circles under his eyes and I can tell he's already eager to be on his way somewhere else. This is certainly not a social visit; he looks like a man who's going to ask for bail money. Immediately, my mind heads in a bad direction. This has to have something to do with Jobeth.

"Geoff, Annabeth. Merry Christmas. Sorry to drop in on you like this. We did try to call you this morning, but we couldn't get through." Absently, Hugh wipes his damp head with his hand.

Geoff nods. "Not surprised, reception can get iffy down here. What's up?"

I think of the dropped call my husband got earlier. How many others were there? Geoff is notorious for ignoring his phone or leaving it in random places. I look around for my own phone; I'm as absent-minded as he is.

"Well, the thing is, Nancy got a call this morning. Her mom in Covington had a heart attack. We're trying to get down there."

Tomorrow, After Christmas

"I'm so sorry," I interject. "I'll say a prayer for her." Geoff shakes his head sympathetically. What a terrible thing. At Christmas, no less.

Hugh shifts on his feet, embarrassed. "We weren't sure what to do about the girls. When we couldn't get through to you, we just took a chance that we could catch you here on the way south."

Girls? I'm puzzled. I vaguely recall that Hugh and Nancy have a couple of daughters. "Your girls?"

Hugh appears even more embarrassed, but also surprised and confused. "No, your girls. I mean, Jo's girls. Mary Catherine and Sunny."

Momentary shocked silence.

My heart skips a beat. "You have Cat and Sunny with you? Why?" I go quickly back to the window and peer out again, but I can't see the passengers, only silhouettes.

Hugh proceeds from confused to utterly baffled. "Well, because Jo left them with us over the Christmas holiday."

"She did *what*?" I am stunned...or maybe alarmed. "Where's Jo? Where in the world *is* she?"

Hugh opens his mouth to answer, but Geoff puts up a hand. "Stop, wait." He turns to Hugh. "Of course, we'll take the girls. Let's go get them out of the car so we can send you good folks on your way to your mom-in-law. I presume they have backpacks or bags or something? Yeah?"

"Right, backpacks, a roller bag, and also a bag of Christmas gifts from their mom that they're not

supposed to know about—at least Sunny isn't. I'll come help you in a sec, but..." He pauses and glances uneasily at my pink face. "I think I best have a few words with your wife."

Geoff nods and disappears out the door. Hugh turns to me. "I'm mortified, Annabeth. I had no idea that Jo didn't tell you what was going on."

I nod and cross my arms. "So, where is she?"

"She and her boyfriend—do you know him? Del? They decided to go on a cruise for the holidays." Hugh shrugs. "They asked Nance and me if we could watch the girls."

I don't know what expression I have on my face, but it must have been telling, because he hurries to add "...I guess, because she thought they would enjoy being with our girls for Christmas?" He paused. "I just assumed you knew."

I feel anger rising. "I didn't know. How long is she gone?"

Hugh clears his throat. "Until New Year's Day. Or the day after."

"Are you kidding me?" My voice starts to rise and I pull it back. "She expected you to take the girls for more than a week? At the holidays? Oh, my God, Hugh, I am so sorry. What was she thinking?"

"Well, we did wonder why she didn't ask you. She implied that you were busy elsewhere."

"Hmmm. I'm sure." I take a deep breath.

"But we didn't mind," he hastens to add. He's a truly nice man.