



A Time-Travel Christmas

A CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

KAREN
MCQUESTION

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NIGHTSKY PRESS

Book Description

A heartwarming tale of a Christmas miracle.

Christmas Eve 2022

After her boyfriend breaks up with her and her job is downsized, Elizabeth thinks life can't get any worse. That is until she gets the news of her beloved grandmother's unexpected death. Instead of spending the holidays together, Elizabeth will be planning a funeral. Heartbroken, she makes a wish on the brightest star in the night sky: *I wish I could see Grandma one more time.*

Christmas Eve 1957

Ten-year-old Dodie is home caring for her sick little sister while her mother retrieves her father from the airport. At first all is fine, but as Betsy's fever spikes dangerously high, a terrible snowstorm knocks out the power and phone. With her parents long overdue and Betsy nonresponsive, Dodie begins to panic. In the midst of this crisis, a woman comes to the door

saying she's lost. She seems vaguely familiar, and Dodie needs the help, so despite everything she's heard about strangers, she opens the door and lets her in ...

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For those who believe in Christmas magic

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CHAPTER 1

JUST WHEN ELIZABETH THOUGHT the day couldn't get any worse, the weather changed and snow mixed with rain came down with a fury. Her flight had left on schedule and arrived on time, so that was good, but the snow made it a harrowing trip from the airport to the inn. Luckily, the driver from the car service, an older gentleman named Angelo, seemed more than capable, navigating the dark SUV down winding country roads with practiced ease. When the sleet pummeled the windshield, he turned the wipers up to the highest setting. "Everything okay back there?"

She'd been hoping to avoid small talk. "Yes, I'm fine, thank you."

"The temperature good for you? I can turn the heat up if you're cold."

"No, it's perfect. Thanks." She hoped this answer would be the end of the conversation because she wasn't sure how much longer she could keep pretending she was okay. Elizabeth felt her throat tighten as she tried to hold back her emotions.

He caught her eye in the rearview mirror. “First time to Remeny?”

“No, I’ve been here before.”

“Business or pleasure?”

Neither, really. Besides, who went to Remeny, Wisconsin, for business? It was in the middle of nowhere. The residents lived spaced far apart on country lanes, out of sight of even their closest neighbor. Most of them were miles from the small but quaint downtown.

The village of Remeny was the opposite of the type of place you’d travel for business. It was the kind of place you’d go to visit your grandmother.

Still, he was trying to be kind, so she came up with a response that she hoped would be satisfactory. “Here for a family matter.”

His head bobbed up and down, like he understood. “This is the time of year for family. All year long it’s fine to call or text or email, but once the holidays roll around, that’s the time to see each other in person. Christmas is all about love and being with people you care about.”

Now he’d gone and done it. Suddenly, the tears she’d held back successfully for the entire trip flooded out. When she audibly sobbed, Angelo became alarmed and pulled the car to the side of the road.

Once they’d stopped, he turned to address her. “I’m so sorry, miss. Was it something I said?” His dark eyes were

sympathetic. He handed her a handkerchief, a white linen square edged in gold stitching.

She took it and dabbed her eyes. “I’m sorry, it’s just that my grandma died yesterday. I had the trip already planned. We were supposed to spend Christmas together.” And then the words spilled out. Elizabeth told Angelo, a complete stranger, all her woes. She’d recently lost her job at a marketing firm, a casualty of massive layoffs. Nothing personal, her boss had said. And then her boyfriend, Caleb—now ex-boyfriend—had suddenly broken up with her, saying he needed some space. Essentially, he’d broken her heart, then asked her to move out of the apartment they’d shared for the last year. She and Caleb had planned to go visit his family for the holidays, and knowing that she would be gone, her parents had decided to go on a cruise.

At the age of twenty-five, she’d found herself homeless, unemployed, and without family around at Christmastime. Staying with friends was an option, but not a good one. “I was so depressed. I didn’t want to dump all this on my grandma, but it came out during our last phone call.” She paused to take a breath. “And she invited me to come live with her for a while. She’s never been big on Christmas—in fact, she usually goes on a trip to avoid it—but she said that for me she’d stay home and decorate and we’d do it up right.” *Do it up right.* Such a Grandma expression. “I booked a flight and was so excited to be seeing her, and then I got a phone call from her friend, Barbara, saying that she’d had a heart attack and died.

It's so hard to believe she's gone." Elizabeth blinked back tears. "I just talked to her."

"Oh, how awful. And the heart attack was yesterday?" Angelo took off his knit cap and ran his fingers through his matted curly hair. "No wonder you're so sad. Anyone would be." He tilted his head. "It's Christmas Eve. I hope you're not going to be alone through all of this?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "My parents canceled their trip. They had some trouble getting a flight out, but they should be here tomorrow." She couldn't wait to see them, even if it did mean they were coming for the purpose of planning a funeral.

This would go down in her personal history as the worst holiday ever.

"Did you say your grandma wasn't a fan of Christmas?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Never was. There was some family tragedy that happened on Christmas Day when she was a kid, and after that, there were bad associations. When my dad was growing up, they celebrated it, but just barely, and she always took down the tree the next day. He said he got his gifts and that was about it." As a little girl, this story had made her so sad. No Christmas music or cookies or trips to the mall to see Santa?

And the worst part was that no one talked about the family tragedy. She only knew that her grandmother had a little sister who died on Christmas Day because she'd once overheard her parents talking about it when she was in middle school. It sounded as if her mother already knew the story, but her dad

had told it again, saying he wished he could do something to ease his mother's guilt in the matter. He'd said, "She's blamed herself for her sister's death for her entire life."

And now the holiday season was again bringing a heartbreaking loss. It was like they had a Christmas curse. She sighed. "This is going to be a terrible week for my family."

Angelo said, "I'm sorry to hear that."

She tried to hand him the handkerchief, but he waved off the gesture.

"Keep it. And again, I'm so sorry for your grandmother's passing."

"That's very kind of you." She clutched the handkerchief. "I'm fine, really. You can keep driving. I didn't mean to alarm you."

The rest of the drive played out in silence. By the time they headed up the hill to the Claremore Inn, Elizabeth had pulled herself together. Under different circumstances, she would have been awestruck by the elegant mansion. Over the years she'd spotted the building from the road below, but she'd never been so close and never had a reason to go inside.

Once owned by the richest family in the area, the Claremore home had been converted into an inn, with the second floor converted into eight deluxe rooms for those who wanted high-end luxury in a country setting. Even in the dark, the red brick building was impressive, with its covered entrance flanked by white pillars. The front was lit by coach lights on either side of

the massive front door. Soft interior lights made the leaded-glass windows glow from within.

Angelo got out of the car to retrieve her suitcase from the trunk, then opened the back door for Elizabeth. “Watch your step, miss,” he said. “It’s slippery. A person could fall and break a bone out here.”

“Thank you,” she said, handing him a tip.

He stuck the folded bills into his pocket and gestured upward. “Look at those stars! And one bright one, just like in the story.”

She tilted her head back, taking in the glory of the night sky filled with glittering stars. One in particular outshone the others. “It is beautiful.”

“Some say if you make a wish on the brightest star on Christmas Eve, it will be granted.”

Her mouth dropped in amazement. “I’ve never heard that before.”

He chuckled. “Maybe it’s just my family that says that.”

She nodded. “Thank you again. I appreciate that you took the time to let me talk.”

“Of course.” He held out a business card. “Here’s my number. Call me when you need another ride.”

“I will, thanks,” she said, sticking it in her jacket pocket. Doubtful that she’d need him since her parents would be renting a car, but you never knew.

CHAPTER 2

AS ANGELO DROVE BACK down the hilly driveway, she gripped the handle of her suitcase and surveyed the sky once again. Her gaze locked on that one bright star, and remembering what he'd said, she made a silent wish. *I wish I could see Grandma one more time.*

If she was going to make a wish, it might as well be an impossible one.

Elizabeth pulled her suitcase through the front doors of the inn and entered the lobby, wiping her feet on the rug in the entryway. Christmas music played softly, the perfect accompaniment to the decorations that covered every available spot. Garland draped the edge of the counter of the reception desk. The shelves on the wall behind it displayed figurines of elves frolicking in the snow. A life-size Santa and Mrs. Claus sat on a bench nearby. Large nutcrackers guarded the French doors that led into a communal sitting area, where Elizabeth spotted an enormous decorated tree and stockings on the mantel over the fireplace. A young couple sat in chairs in front

of the fireplace, sipping from wineglasses. The woman, not much older than Elizabeth, laughed at something her companion said.

Elizabeth felt her heart sink. So much merriment. There'd be no getting away from the reminders of holiday cheer, a stark contrast to her own grief.

An older curly-haired woman dressed all in red, wearing a necklace made of tiny blinking light bulbs, came around the corner before Elizabeth could tap the bell on the front desk. "Welcome to the Claremore," she said, her voice jovial. "You must be Elizabeth Rubi. I'm the owner, Margaret Twitchell, but you can call me Midge."

"It's nice to meet you, Midge." Elizabeth let go of her suitcase handle and reached into her purse for her phone. "I have my confirmation number—"

Midge waved her hand. "There's no need. I know who you are, and I have your room ready. I'm so sorry to hear about your grandmother. She was a lovely lady. What a loss."

"Did you know her?"

Midge nodded. "Mrs. Rubi was the first person to welcome me to the area when I bought the Claremore and moved here. She told me that when she was a little girl the local children used to sled down this hill."

"Interesting."

"Would you like a tour of the Claremore? I'd be happy to show you around."

“I’d like that, but ...” Elizabeth halted, trying to form the words in her head so she wouldn’t sound rude. In the sitting room, the couple clinked glasses, and both of them laughed. How could they be happy when Grandma, the best person she knew, was gone? The world seemed so empty now. It was hard to believe other people could carry on, not knowing the difference. “But could it be later, maybe tomorrow? I’m tired from traveling and would like to go to my room.”

“Of course,” Midge said. “I understand completely. Will you be wanting something to eat? We already served dinner, but I’d be happy to heat up a plate for you.”

Elizabeth had heard that the food at the Claremore was excellent. On occasion, local residents dined there as well. The problem was that her appetite was nonexistent. “That’s nice of you, but I’m fine. I just want to call my mom and then get to bed early. It’s been a long day.”

“If you change your mind, let me know. You might get hungry after you get settled. I’ll be available for anything you need until ten.” Midge reached under the counter, then shuffled through the contents of a drawer before retrieving a flat wooden key fob with the number eight stamped on it. She handed it to Elizabeth and gestured to the grand curving staircase off to her right. “Up the stairs to the end of the hall. You have our best suite, with a bay window overlooking the front and a deep claw-foot bathtub. You might want to set an alarm for tomorrow morning. We have a special Christmas Eve brunch being served at nine.”

“That sounds wonderful.” Elizabeth tightened her fingers around the key. Maybe she’d take a bath before climbing beneath the sheets. All she knew was that she wanted to make a quick call to check on her parents and then be alone with her thoughts. Trying to make small talk when she felt like crying was just too difficult. Hopefully, some rest would help.

“Do you need help with your luggage?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks.” She lifted her suitcase and made her way up the stairs, letting her hand glide along the gleaming railing. The second-floor hallway was also decorated for the holidays, with boughs of holly draped around each doorway. Coming to number eight, the last door, she slid her key into the lock and turned until she heard a solid click. Such a satisfying sound, and so different than the plastic swipe of a keycard. It also gave the place a feeling of being rooted in the past. She knew the Claremore had been built in 1958 or so, but the rehab done to make it an inn had managed to make it seem both historic and modern.

Once inside, she checked out the spacious room, peeking into the bathroom to find that yes, the tub was deep enough for a good soak. She unpacked quickly, tucking some clothing into drawers and hanging other items in the tall wardrobe. When done, she sat on the edge of the bed and took out her phone to call her mom.

“Elizabeth!” Her mother always sounded so pleased to hear from her. One of the advantages of being an only child.

Everything she did was celebrated. “Are you at the Claremore?”

“Yes, and my room is really nice. Thank you for making the reservation for me.” Elizabeth hadn’t been able to think straight after getting the shocking news of her grandmother’s death. Her father had been blindsided as well. Luckily, her mother held it together. “I feel a little foolish staying here when Grandma’s house is down the road, but ...” She paused to quell the catch in her voice. “I don’t think I could have slept there all by myself.”

“Of course not,” her mother said, soothing. “It would have been difficult for anyone.” As usual, her mom understood. She continued. “We’re all set for tomorrow. I’ll text you the flight information. If all goes well, we’ll be there midafternoon.”

“I can’t wait until you guys get here.”

“I know, honey. I’m sorry we’re not there already. It’s not for lack of trying.”

“I know.” What Elizabeth really wanted was for all of them to be together for the holidays, and *all of them* included her grandmother. It was so unfair and shocking to have her taken from them without any notice at all. Had she ever told her how much she loved and appreciated her?

No, she hadn’t. Verbalizing it had seemed silly. They’d been bonded by shared laughter, impromptu singing, and years of fun activities. She had fond memories of walks in the woods, building a tree fort in Grandma’s backyard, and learning how to make her grandmother’s famous apple strudel.

Yes, her grandmother was seventy-five-years old and had been widowed since Elizabeth was a toddler, but she didn't seem old. She still did the daily crossword puzzle, and it was fun to talk to her because she had opinions about politics and religion and celebrities. Very definite opinions. Her grandmother epitomized the word *feisty*. She was a confident woman who had no trouble speaking up for herself or others. Grandma was the first to recognize Elizabeth's artistic talents and encourage her to pursue her dreams.

Elizabeth had assumed she'd be around for a long, long time. "I still can't believe she's gone."

Her mother sensed the overwhelming sadness in Elizabeth's voice. "Hang in there, honey. We'll get through this together."

"I'm doing my best." Elizabeth stood up and walked over to the window, where she parted the curtains and surveyed the landscape. Here, without all the streetlights, it was darker than she was used to.

"She adored you, you know that, right?" Her mother sighed.

Elizabeth nodded. "It was mutual. She was the best."

Her father came on the line then, telling her he loved her. "Sorry you have to spend Christmas Eve alone, Elizabeth. I know it's your favorite time of the year. We'll celebrate later."

"It's okay, Dad. We can skip Christmas this year."

CHAPTER 3

AFTER SAYING GOODBYE TO her parents, Elizabeth set the phone on the nightstand. Her original plan, a bath and an early bedtime, was looking better and better. She pulled her hair into a topknot, then ran the water at the right temperature. Filling it took longer than anticipated.

She was immersed in the tub up to her neck when the lights flickered and then went out entirely, leaving her in complete darkness. From down the hall, she heard another guest call out in alarm. Quickly she pulled the plug to let the water drain, then carefully got out of the tub, reaching for the stack of towels nearby. After drying herself off, she pulled on the clothes she'd left on the counter of the sink, then slipped her feet into her shoes. Out in the hallway, she heard the scuffle of feet and the sounds of doors opening and closing. It sounded like guests were leaving their rooms and heading down the stairs. Listening at the door, she thought she overheard someone say something about a fire. *Is the inn on fire?*

Alarmed, she grabbed her room key and jacket, then headed out the door.

A window at the end of the hallway provided enough light to guide her to the staircase. Gripping the banister, she made her way down, following the sounds of voices in the entryway.

“That scared the crap out of me.”

“Do you have a generator?”

“I can take a look at your fuse box, if you’d like.”

“I was just telling my friend that at least we can still sit by the fire.” Elizabeth recognized the woman’s voice as the one who’d spoken in the upstairs hallway. So that was the fire reference she’d heard.

Overriding the general conversation was the sound of Midge’s voice trying to calm everyone down. “No generator and no need to look at the electrical box. This happens from time to time. Nothing to get excited about. Usually, it comes back pretty quickly. If you want, you can gather around the fireplace. I’ll add some logs. It really throws a lot of heat. Otherwise, I have flashlights you can take back to your rooms.”

Elizabeth stood on the edge of the cluster of people, all of them seemingly paired up. No one noticed her.

“What do you say?” one man asked jovially. “A glass of wine and a seat by the fire? Let’s make the best of this.”

The group nodded and murmured their approvals, all of them drifting into the sitting area. No one looked back and

urged her to join them. She felt invisible—a ghost drifting among the living.

Elizabeth wasn't in the mood to make small talk with strangers on Christmas Eve, but the thought of going back up the dark stairway by herself wasn't appealing either. Wordlessly, she slipped on her jacket and went out the front door.

Standing under the overhang, she realized that the brisk air felt good. The previous sleet had stopped, and now a light snow fell. Overhead, the moon hung bright in the sky. She fished her gloves out of her pockets, then pulled them on. *Better.*

Elizabeth hadn't realized how stressed she'd been until she felt the tension leave her shoulders. The bath had helped, and taking a moment for herself outdoors was the right call. When she exhaled, her breath came out in little frosty puffs. Through the leaded glass, she saw the blurred images of guests assembled around the fireplace. In the brief time she'd spent on the edge of their company, they seemed like nice enough people, but she knew that inevitably they'd ask about the circumstances of her stay. She wasn't ready to get into it, to say the words acknowledging Grandma's death, and to hear words of condolence from strangers.

Crying in front of Angelo was bad enough. She didn't want to bring anyone else down.

She took a few more steps away from the entrance, lifting her face to the sky. As a child she'd caught snowflakes on her

tongue and made snow angels. And one time she and Grandma had made maple syrup snow candy just like Laura Ingalls Wilder did in *Little House in the Big Woods*. It hadn't turned out as delicious as she'd anticipated, but they'd had fun doing it.

Her grandmother had been the one to introduce her to the Little House books, giving her the whole set for her birthday one year.

Elizabeth hadn't thought about that in a long time, but now the memory of sinking into the world of those books made her smile. She still had the books somewhere and could visualize the covers. Funny how the stories were embedded in her brain, when some of her own memories from that time were a little fuzzy.

The moon was full and the night sky clear. More stars were visible than she'd ever seen in the city. Again she spotted the one she'd wished upon earlier. One star to outshine them all. Wishing on stars was another thing she'd done with her grandmother. Grandma was good at stoking her childhood sense of wonder. An independent thinker through and through, she believed in having an open mind, even to the most fantastical ideas. In her company, Elizabeth could imagine that stars granted wishes, fairies lived in the woods, and the impossible was possible.

And always, always, her grandma made a point to encourage her artwork. Over the years, Elizabeth had filled dozens of sketch books with drawings of everything she saw

around her, real and imagined. On visits to Remeny, she'd showed her grandmother her latest work, taking delight in the praise that came her way.

Her eyes locked again on the brightest star. If she did see her grandmother one more time, she'd try to prevent her death so they'd have many more years together. She'd talk her into seeing a doctor and having her heart checked out before the fatal heart attack.

If only.

Elizabeth wiped flakes of snow off her eyelashes. She felt better now, ready to go back to her room. Right before she intended to turn away, she saw movement in the sky, a streak of light arcing its way toward the earth.

She narrowed her eyes. *What in the world ... ?*

There it was again. A burst of light danced across the sky. Did shooting stars move like that?

She reached for her phone to take a video before remembering it was still upstairs in her room. *Oh well.* Somebody somewhere had to be capturing this.

In retrospect, the next part happened both quickly and in slow motion. As she took a step to get a closer look, she slipped, losing her equilibrium. Her feet fell out from under her, and she came down hard, her tailbone slamming against the icy pavement, then sliding down the hilly driveway with a speed that took her breath away.

At the bottom, Elizabeth hit a bump, slamming her head against the ground. With her eyes closed, she saw stars. Opening them, she had a sense of dizziness.

She sat up, processing what had just happened, then called out, "Help!" as loud as she could. No one answered.

The driveway had been so slippery. Trying to walk back up was going to be a chore.

Surely someone at the Claremore had seen her leave the building and would come looking for her and help? But no, that was stupid thinking. They hadn't seen her at all, because she'd made certain of it. No one would miss her. She could be dead in a ditch and no one would even know she was gone until brunch the next morning.

She swore to herself. *So stupid.* If only she'd brought her phone or was wearing boots. Or had stayed in her room, for that matter. Grabbing her phone whenever she went anywhere was second nature. Of all the times to leave it behind, why now?

Maybe someday this would be a funny story, but probably not.

She got on her knees, then slowly rose to her feet, making sure the ground beneath her was secure. Standing helped her gain her sense of balance, and the dizziness subsided. Doing a mental inventory, she noted that the back of her head hurt, but she hadn't broken any bones. Taking off a glove, she reached back and ran her fingers over her scalp. No bump yet, but there would be.

She brushed off the front of her jeans, which were covered with snow. Another soak in the bathtub sounded good right now. She began to make her way up the hill, keeping her gaze on her feet to steady herself.

She moved slowly, one short step at a time, staying on the grass to avoid the ice. Thoughts whirred in her brain. Embarrassing as it was, should she admit what had happened to Midge in order to get an ice pack for her head? The power had only been out a short while. Chances were good the ice in the freezer would still be solid.

Funny that she was thinking of the freezer when she'd just skidded down a sheet of ice on her butt.

Elizabeth rounded her shoulders against the cold, wishing she'd thought to grab her knit hat. She was short of breath by the time she crested the top. She stopped to take in some air, then furrowed her brow, baffled. The Claremore wasn't there. She blinked in disbelief, then walked in a circle as if somehow that would conjure up the inn.

How could it not be here? She mentally retraced her steps, from the time she walked out the door, to the fall, to the trudge back up the hill. She'd walked adjacent to the driveway, hadn't she? Or had she walked on the grass, assuming she was near the driveway?

None of this made sense. There was only one hill in the area, and she was at the top of it. Buildings and driveways didn't just disappear. There had to be a logical explanation.

But there wasn't one. The only thing she could come up with was that the fall had caused brain damage. But she hadn't hit her head that hard. Yes, she'd seen stars, but she hadn't gone insane.

Or had she? No. The idea was unthinkable.

She walked the length of the property to the other edge of the hill, which she knew sloped downward to the woods. The snow, still falling lightly, now covered her hair. Her jacket, fine for short trips to and from a car, was insufficient for the weather. She stamped her feet on the ground and rubbed her gloved hands together.

This was ridiculous. She had to be in the wrong place—that must be it. In the Little House books, Pa had tied a rope from the house to the barn so they wouldn't lose their way. At the time she'd read it the idea seemed extreme, but now she could see the wisdom in it. Snowstorms could be discombobulating. It would be easy to lose your way.

Maybe there was another hill in the area, one she wasn't aware of? That had to be what happened. She'd slid farther than she thought and got turned around. Since buildings didn't vanish, that was the only explanation.

A plan. She needed a plan.

Ultimately, she decided it was better to go back down the hill toward the road. Maybe she'd get her bearings, and if not, eventually she'd reach houses where she could ask for help.

Elizabeth walked back down with a heavy heart. She was so frustrated she felt like screaming or curling up in a ball and crying, but that wasn't a useful response. Staying calm, that was the right tactic. Admitting her stupidity to others would be mortifying, but since dying of exposure was a real possibility, she could handle a little embarrassment.

Getting to the bottom of the hill, she crouched down to assure herself the road was actual pavement, and started to feel better. Reassured, she began walking down the road.

CHAPTER 4

WHEN LITTLE BETSY STOPPED talking, that's when Dodie started to get really worried. At age four, Betsy was a chatterbox. Everyone commented on it. At church, the older people seemed to get a kick out of it, even when Mama had to keep shushing her. Once she even had to take her out, leaving Dodie sitting all by herself until the service was over. Still, no one could stay mad at Betsy. She was curious, full of questions that needed to be asked and comments she couldn't keep to herself. She wondered why Mr. Alderson used a cane, and why dogs weren't allowed in church, and how the baby was going to come out of Mrs. Fogleman's stomach. Dodie had wondered that one herself, but the way their mother put an end to that line of questioning made it clear that little girls shouldn't be asking such things.

At ten, Dodie was the much older sister and in charge of what Mama called "keeping Betsy occupied." She didn't mind. It was fun to read her old books to her sister. They also colored pictures, sang, played dolls and blocks, and went out

in the woods with their big old dog, Angus, playing fetch and gathering up sticks for the fireplace. Dodie was also tasked with brushing Angus's thick black coat, which was no small thing, given how big and fluffy he was.

With Daddy traveling so much for work, the three of them were often home alone. She had to do her part, which was to take charge of Betsy, so Mama could do her part. Their mother was a gifted seamstress. Sometimes she made matching outfits for Dodie and Betsy, but usually she worked on clothing for other people. One time she made an entire wedding dress, and it was so beautiful that Violet Aldridge, the bride, had cried when she tried it on at their house. Most of the time, though, Mama worked on more ordinary clothing, making aprons, stitching hems, and replacing zippers.

The sound of the electric sewing machine was often what the girls heard from down the hall long after Mama had kissed them goodnight and tucked them in.

Their father had been away for three weeks this time. He was an engineer and did work for the government, deciding if bridges and highways were safe, and then telling the people how to fix them if they weren't. When he was gone, Dodie liked to look at the photos her mother had displayed in the living room. One was their wedding picture, and another was Daddy in his soldier uniform, back before Dodie was even born. There was a photo album filled with others, pictures of the girls when they were little, and some from when Mama and Daddy first met, and others of her parents when they themselves were children.

Mama was always a little sad when Daddy was gone, but now it was Christmas Eve and Daddy was coming home. Mama and the girls were planning to meet him at the airport. Dodie and Betsy even made a sign to hold up when he came off the plane. It said: *Welcome home, Daddy! We love you.* The hearts that Betsy made were lopsided, but Mama said they were fine. “Your father will love it!” she predicted. It would be a very long drive, and they’d be gone all day, so their mother packed sandwiches for them to eat during the trip.

They were in their coats, hats, mittens, and boots and heading out the front door when Betsy took one step outside and threw up on the front walkway. For the first time all day, Mama’s happy expression changed to one of dismay. “Baby girl, what happened?” she asked, crouching down to meet her eyes. “Are you sick?”

“My tummy hurts,” Betsy said, putting a hand over her stomach.

Mama felt Betsy’s forehead. “A little warm, but not too bad,” she said quietly. “Do you feel like you might throw up again?” She looked from the girls to their car parked on the road in front of the house.

“I don’t know.” Betsy looked up at Dodie as if her sister might know the answer. That was the thing with Betsy. She was too little to know many things. Dodie spent a lot of time explaining the world to her.

“Maybe it was something you ate.” Their mother’s mouth twisted in thought. “Or too much excitement.”

“We could bring a bag with us in the car,” Dodie suggested. “In case she has to do it again.”

Dodie thought this was a good idea, but Mama didn’t look convinced. “I hate to say it, but I think you girls should stay home. I’ll give Mrs. Dembiec a call and see if she will watch you for the day.”

“We don’t need Mrs. Dembiec,” Dodie said quickly. “I can take care of Betsy.” Having Mrs. Dembiec over would ruin everything. She never smiled, smelled of cherry cough drops, and sniffed constantly.

One time when Mrs. Dembiec was visiting their mother, she saw Dodie playing dolls with Betsy and said, “Aren’t you a little old to be playing with dolls?”

Her mother had spoken up in her defense. “Dodie’s only ten, and she’s a terrific helper. Believe me, I’d be lost without her here to keep Betsy occupied.”

Mrs. Dembiec peered over her spectacles and said, “Yes, I can see that the little one is a handful.”

A handful. She didn’t make it sound like that was a good thing, which made Dodie irate on behalf of her sister. Betsy was adorable, everyone said so, and full of life with lots of energy, which was also something people often said. People also commented on her glossy chestnut curls, so different from Dodie’s drab brown hair that was as straight as a ruler.

But now Betsy was sick, and their mother wanted Mrs. Dembiec to come babysit them for the entire day. It would be

awful.

Dodie spoke up again. "I've babysat Betsy lots of times. And Angus will be here with us." She often heard her mother talk about the dog, saying that having him in the house made her feel better with her husband away. Angus would keep them safe.

"I know you have, sweetie, but this will be all day. I won't get back until after dark."

Her mother made a good point, but there was so much at stake that Dodie didn't back down. "We'll stay inside the whole time. I'll take special care of her." She put her arm over her sister's shoulder. "I'll read to her and bring her drinks. If she gets sick again, I'll clean it up. We'll be fine, won't we Betsy?" Her little sister nodded.

Mama sighed and looked at her wristwatch. "I guess it will be all right. I can leave the sandwiches with you for dinner." She ushered them inside, talking as she went. "No turning on the stove or watching adult shows on the television. Keep the door locked. If you have any problems, call Mrs. Dembiec or Dr. Mackey. It's Christmas Eve, so they should be home."

"Of course, Mama. I understand." Dodie helped Betsy take off her winter attire and then did the same with her own jacket, hat, mittens, and boots.

Mama went into the bathroom and came out a minute later with a damp washcloth. She wiped Betsy's face, then sent her into the bathroom to rinse out her mouth. Walking into the kitchen, she spoke to Dodie. "She seems a little warm but not

too bad. I'll give her some children's aspirin before I go. It should cover her while I'm gone. Don't give her any other medicine. She might not be hungry, but you can try giving her ginger ale and saltine crackers."

"Yes, Mama."

Mama frowned, then got a pen and paper out of her purse. "I'll write down the phone numbers for Mrs. Dembiec and the doctor. If she throws up again, call the doctor. If anything else happens that worries you, call Mrs. Dembiec."

"I will."

Mama leaned over and kissed Dodie's cheek. "I'm sorry this happened and you can't go to the airport with me. I don't know how I would manage without you, Dodie."

Dodie nodded. When Betsy came out of the bathroom, Mama suggested she change into her nightgown. "I don't want to go to bed," Betsy said, a whine in her voice.

"You don't have to go to bed." Mama's voice was gentle. "Settle down on the couch and rest. Dodie can sing to you."

Betsy looked reluctant, but Dodie knew the right thing to say. "Remember, Santa is coming tonight, so you have to be a good girl and do what Mama says. Come on, let's go get you changed. I'll help you." She took her little sister's hand and led her up the stairs.

Mama waited until they came back down, then helped settle Betsy on the couch with the pillow and blanket Dodie had brought down. As if guarding Betsy, Angus took his place on

the floor nearby. Mama gave the same instructions she had before and made Dodie repeat them back. At the door, she took one last look back and said, “You girls be good.”

“We will.”

“The phone numbers are on the counter near the phone. Remember what I said.”

“I know, Mama. I’m not a baby.”

“I know that. You’ve been a good helper.” Her mother smiled. “I know we’ve had some difficult times, but tomorrow our whole family will be together for Christmas. It’s going to be wonderful.”

After Mama left, Dodie locked the door and kept her promise, never leaving Betsy’s side unless absolutely necessary, and even then returning as quickly as she could. For a few hours, everything was fine. Dodie read to her sister and then spun tales of Santa’s journey to visit the boys and girls of the world with toys and other presents. She brought the nativity scene out from under the Christmas tree and carried it to the coffee table to show Betsy. Her mother always said the little figures were not toys, so Dodie kept it respectful, telling the story the way she’d learned it in Sunday school.

She let the dog out twice to do what her mother called “his business.” While she was out there, she took note of the star-filled sky and made a quick Christmas wish on the brightest one. Angus wasn’t fond of the cold, so he did his business more quickly than usual, something she appreciated.

When Betsy got sleepy, Dodie tucked her in on the couch. “Just rest your eyes,” she said, stroking her hair. Betsy didn’t even object, so she must have been really tired. By then, the snow had begun battering the window, accompanied by the howling wind. Her mother hadn’t mentioned a storm, which worried her some.

Even Angus, normally calm, seemed unsettled by the sound of the wind, getting up and resting his head on Dodie’s lap. She rubbed behind his ears. “It’s okay, boy. We’re inside and safe.”

But their parents weren’t inside, and Mama hated driving in bad weather, but of course Daddy would be the one driving back, and he could do anything. She told herself it would probably be fine.

After that, Dodie ate one of the sandwiches and drank some ginger ale. She was staring at the kitchen clock when the power went out, startling her. In the other room, Betsy let out a cry, so she left her plate on the kitchen table and went to her. “It’s all right, your Dodie is right here,” she said. Even though the words were reassuring, she found the dark unnerving.

“I feel bad,” Betsy said in a mumble.

“I know, I know. Mama and Daddy will be home soon.” She rested her hand on Betsy’s cheek, then recoiled at the touch. Betsy was hot—burning up with fever. She found her way in the dark to the bathroom, dampened a washcloth, then returned to wipe down her sister’s face. “Is that better?”

As if saying words took too much effort, Betsy only whined in response, a pitiful sound.

“Betsy, are you okay? How do you feel?”

This time her little sister didn't respond at all. Outside the wind picked up, shrieking with a fury. Lightning flashed outside their living room window, followed by the rumble of thunder. A winter thunderstorm? How was that even possible? Panic grabbed hold of Dodie. All of the reassurances she'd given her mother melted away.

“I need to call the doctor.” She said the words mostly to calm herself. It was clear that with the power outage and Betsy so feverish, a grownup was needed. Even old Mrs. Dembiec would do. Rummaging through the kitchen drawer where her mother kept her odds and ends, her fingers located a flashlight. Switching it on and seeing the beam of light was reassuring. Dodie grabbed the piece of paper with the phone numbers off the counter and took the receiver off the cradle. With shaking fingers, she carefully dialed, letting the wheel spin back to its original place before going on to the next number.

It was only when she put the receiver up to her ear that she realized there was no sound coming through the other end. The phone was dead. She tapped the handset's cradle to see if that helped, but no. Still nothing.

Where were their parents? They should be here by now. Dodie knew she could bundle up and walk to the doctor's house, which was closer than Mrs. Dembiec's, but she couldn't leave her sister alone. She considered giving Betsy

more aspirin, but her mother had expressly told her not to. Why didn't the electricity work? It was so dark that it was hard to think straight. What if Mama and Daddy had been in a car accident and were stuck somewhere far away?

Dodie was really and truly afraid, but she was too big of a girl to cry. Still, she couldn't hold back the tears.

CHAPTER 5

AS ELIZABETH WAS WALKING down the road, the snow started up again, coming down so steadily it affected visibility. The wind pushed her forward, but the road here apparently hadn't been plowed, since the snow was deep, nearly up to her knees. She moved slowly. Every now and then she turned to look behind her, hoping for a car to come her way, but there was no traffic at all. Between the storm and Christmas Eve, it seemed that most of the area's residents had made the decision to hunker down at home. Probably a good thing, since once she finally came to a house, it was sure to be occupied. She wondered if they'd let her in. Most likely, with things the way they were today, they'd have her wait on the porch and call the police, which frankly would be fine. She was tired, cold, and wet. Her fear of being publicly humiliated had left her about five minutes earlier.

The road looked different than she remembered, but then again, she'd hit her head and it was dark. Besides, she wasn't entirely sure where she was. What she did know was that the

houses on this stretch were about a half mile apart from each other. Grandma's house was situated close to the road, but many of them were built farther back for privacy reasons.

Once again, Elizabeth wished she'd worn her boots. At least she'd had gloves in her pockets or she'd have frostbitten fingers by now. She continued on. As she walked, a flash of lightning lit up the sky, making her stop in her tracks. She'd never witnessed such a thing in the wintertime. A few seconds later came a rumble of thunder and then lightning again, this time striking a box mounted on top of a pole on the other side of the road. The hit caused an enormous boom. Sparks flew off the box, and a sick feeling came over her. She shouldn't be outside when conditions were like this.

Oh why hadn't she grabbed her cell phone? That would be the question everyone asked when they found her body after she'd been hit by lightning or died from the cold. A morbid thought, but she couldn't help it.

She picked up her pace. With each step, she felt more lost and alone.

And then, as if appearing by magic, there was the covered bridge. A local landmark, the wooden bridge was built over a creek not too far from her grandmother's house. Relief washed over her. She wasn't going crazy; she'd found a familiar place. Underneath the covering overhead, she rested for a few minutes, taking off her gloves and rubbing her fingers. Was she better off waiting out the storm here? No, she decided.

Now that she'd reached a landmark, she knew how close she was to Grandma's house. In ten minutes she'd be there.

Feeling heartened, she left the safety of the bridge and kept going. When she spotted the house in the distance, she could have cried from happiness. Luckily, her grandmother always left a key under the garden gnome on the front porch, so she knew she'd be able to get inside without any difficulty.

It was like Grandma was looking out for her.

Elizabeth shuffled through the snow-covered walkway to the front door, and that's when she noticed the beam of light moving inside. Her first thought was that a burglar had infiltrated the home. A downward glance showed that the garden gnome was no longer there. Whoever was inside had apparently gotten to the gnome with its hidden key first and then moved it somewhere else.

But maybe there was a logical explanation for the light source. The power had gone out at the Claremore, so it was probably out here too. Perhaps one of her grandmother's friends had brought a flashlight and was there with good reason.

The problem was, she couldn't think of a good reason.

Most of Grandma's friends were older. She couldn't imagine them going out during a lightning storm when there was a power outage.

She stepped off the porch and sidled along the front of the house until she got to the window looking into the living

room, then cautiously peered inside. As her eyes adjusted, she noticed a figure lying on the couch. Squatters? A beam of light appeared from the other room, shining in the direction of the couch, and now she saw that both the sleeping form and the person holding the flashlight were small in stature. Children. Had a homeless family encamped in her grandmother's house?

As she spied, Elizabeth became aware of her own heartbeat, a steady pounding in her chest. She now saw that the child with the flashlight—a little girl—stood over the one on the couch, stroking her head. It would be a touching scene if they weren't trespassing in a dead woman's house.

Elizabeth pulled away from the window and leaned against the side of the house, stunned. She considered her options. She could walk to the next house and ask the homeowners to call the police. She'd only met that neighbor once, but certainly they'd remember that Grandma had a granddaughter named Elizabeth.

Going to a neighbor's made the most sense, but what if they weren't home? She didn't want to keep walking. She was cold and tired. Her head hurt and her feet were wet, and she'd barely escaped being struck by lightning. Not only that, but she was here now. All she wanted was to go inside.

The children didn't look too menacing. The people inside didn't have to know it was her grandmother's house. She could say she'd had a car accident down the road and needed to use their phone. Even if they didn't let her in, they might call the police on her behalf.

But maybe not, since they weren't supposed to be here. She vacillated for a few minutes, and then, tired of her own indecision, she made her way back to the porch and rapped on the door.

CHAPTER 6

A KNOCK. DODIE TURNED away from Betsy and looked at the front entry. She hadn't heard a car in the driveway, and her parents would have used the key, so it had to be a neighbor checking on them. *Oh, thank goodness!* A surge of happiness swelled up from within. Finally help had arrived. She gave her sister a reassuring pat, then shone her flashlight toward the door.

The person knocked on the door again. Dodie rushed to open it, eager to have an adult here to help with Betsy. At this point, even seeing Mrs. Dembiec's grumpy face would be a welcome treat.

But when she flung open the door, it wasn't Mrs. Dembiec or Dr. Mackey at all, but a strange woman she'd never seen before. A layer of snow had collected on the visitor's head and shoulders. Her jacket was strange, puffy with metal buttons, and she wore blue jeans, like her mother did when she was going to work in the garden or scrub the floors. The woman's

cheeks were red from the cold, and the expression on her face made it clear she was surprised to see Dodie as well.

“Hi. Are your mom and dad home?” she asked.

Dodie hesitated, unsure of what to say. She finally settled on, “They’ll be home soon.”

“Oh, I see.” The woman smiled, and Dodie found herself relaxing. She didn’t seem scary at all. “Can I come in and use your phone? It won’t take long. It seems I’m a little bit lost.”

“The phone isn’t working,” Dodie said with a sad shake of her head. “I tried to call the doctor, and there wasn’t even a dial tone.” She gestured behind her. “There’s something wrong with my sister. She’s sick.” After a pause, she added, “Really sick.”

The woman frowned. “I’m sorry to hear that. So you two are alone here?”

Dodie looked back at her sister on the couch and didn’t say a word. From the floor, Angus lifted his head, then slowly rose and trotted over to join her. Dodie rested her hand on his broad head, finding his presence reassuring.

Again, the woman spoke. “My name is Elizabeth.” She smiled again. “Elizabeth Rubi.”

“I’m Dodie.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Dodie. It sounds like you’re having a difficult time. I might be able to help, if you’d let me.”

Dodie spoke to the dog. "It's okay, Angus." She gave his ears a rub. "He protects us."

"I can see that. It's good to have a dog. I had one when I was a little girl. He was my best friend."

There was something reassuringly familiar about the woman's sweet, sincere voice, so even though her parents had warned her against letting strangers in the house, Dodie held the door open and allowed her to come in.

CHAPTER 7

WHEN ELIZABETH ENTERED, SHE noticed a cabinet in the entryway that hadn't been there before. In the living room there were changes as well. The fireplace, the focal point of the room, was the same, but the Christmas tree next to it and the stockings hanging from the mantel were foreign to her. The furniture was arranged the same way as Grandma's, with the couch positioned as it had been, opposite two armchairs. Above the couch was a framed painting of some kind, about the same size as the one that had hung there all her life, but even in this dim light she could tell it wasn't the same picture or furniture. The TV was an old clunker, a boxy cabinet with a screen, set on the floor on four legs, in the exact spot where TVs had been situated as long as Elizabeth could remember. Was it possible that in the space of two days someone had managed to remove all of the house's contents and substitute them with entirely different things?

And move in a family with children and their very large black dog?

Unlikely.

Or had Grandma actually sold the house sometime earlier and not told them? No, the idea was unimaginable. So many times she'd talked about how glad she was that everything was on one floor. That she'd live in this house until her last breath. Besides, this house had been built by her grandmother's grandfather. It had been the family home for decades. She wouldn't have sold it without telling Elizabeth and her parents.

"My little sister is right here," said the girl, following the flashlight's beam to the couch. "Her name is Betsy. She got sick this morning when Mama was here, so I said I'd watch her while she went to the airport to get Daddy, and she was fine for a long time, but now she's not talking to me, and she's so hot and they were supposed to be back by now but they aren't. And then the storm came and the power went out." The words came out in a rush. "And I could've called the doctor, but the phone doesn't work. Our neighbor Mrs. Dembiec lives down the road. I wanted to go get her, but I had to stay with Betsy."

"I see." Elizabeth took off her gloves, stuck them in her pockets, and shook off her jacket, laying it on the floor. She took a seat on the edge of the sofa. "Do you mind if I check your sister's forehead to see for myself?" Without waiting for an answer, she placed the back of her hand against the child's cheek and was alarmed at the touch. Betsy was burning up with fever. "How old is Betsy?"

"She's four."

“Do you have a thermometer?”

“Yes. I’ll go get it.” Dodie took off in a hurry, taking the flashlight with her. She seemed happy to have someone else in charge. What she didn’t know was that Elizabeth wasn’t the right person for the job. She was an only child who’d babysat a few times as a young teen, but never when the children were sick. Growing up, she’d been fairly healthy. The few times she’d been sick, a dose of over-the-counter medication and some chicken soup had done the trick. She’d never encountered a child with this kind of fever. If she had her phone, she could look up what to do next, but on her own she felt ill-equipped.

When Dodie came back, she handed Elizabeth a slim glass tube with a silver tip, the likes of which Elizabeth had never seen before. She extended her hand for the flashlight and said, “May I have the light?” Dodie handed it over. She turned the thermometer over in her hand, not knowing what to make of it. “Don’t you have a digital thermometer? One with a numerical display?”

Quietly, Dodie said, “This is our only one.”

Well, no matter. Betsy’s body temperature was frighteningly high. The actual number didn’t matter. “You said your phone is dead. Can you call 911 and tell them it’s an emergency? Sometimes it still works, even if you don’t have network service.”

Dodie said, “But it doesn’t work at all.”

“Can you bring it to me? I might be able to get it to work.”

“I can’t *bring* it. It’s on the wall.”

“Can you show me?”

Without a word, Dodie reclaimed the flashlight, then turned and walked out of the room, with Elizabeth following on her heels. In the kitchen, the beam of light spotlighted a green rotary dial phone mounted by the back door. A curly cord hung four feet below the receiver. What in the heck? Somehow there was outdated furniture and an antique phone in her grandmother’s house? Her parents were going to be furious at the violation of the family home. For now, though, the sick little girl in the other room was more of a priority. “This is the only phone you have?”

“Yes.”

Elizabeth lifted the receiver and placed it against her ear. Just as Dodie had said, there wasn’t a dial tone. Perhaps the girls’ parents used cell phones and this was a statement piece. She gazed down at Dodie. “Does it normally work, or is it more of a decoration?”

Dodie shrugged. “It worked this morning. It’s ’cause of the lightning storm. Once the men come out in trucks to fix the box, it will work again.”

“Okay, so we can’t make a phone call.” Elizabeth ran through other options in her head. Going for help required leaving. It would take at least half an hour in this weather, and what if no one in the next house was home? They needed to do something right away. She exhaled. “I’ll tell you what we’re going to do. We have to get her body temperature down, so

you need to fill the bathtub with warm water. Not too cold, not too hot. Can you do that?"

"Yes, I can do that."

Dodie turned, the flashlight beam swinging in an arc, and Elizabeth reached for her sleeve to stop her from running off before she'd finished talking. "Also, look in the medicine cabinet and see if you have any Children's Tylenol."

"Ty-len-ol?"

"Anything for kids. Ibuprofen. Acetaminophen. Baby aspirin. Any of that would work."

"We have baby aspirin."

Elizabeth nodded. "Bring me that."

"But Mama told me not to give her any more today."

Why would she say that? Elizabeth considered overriding the absentee mother's instructions, but then it occurred to her that if Betsy had an allergy to the medicine, things could get really bad. Did she want to take that chance? "Okay, just fill the tub."

After Dodie took off, again running, Elizabeth felt her way around the kitchen. In a drying rack next to the sink, she found a drinking glass, which she filled with water from the tap. After returning to the living room, she picked up Betsy and held her like a baby. "You poor sweet thing," she said, cooing. The child's limp body was so hot that having her this close was almost unbearable. "Can you take a little sip of water?"

No response. Elizabeth held the glass up to her mouth, wetting Betsy's lips.

When that didn't do much, she dipped her fingers into the water and patted her flushed cheeks. A few minutes later, after Dodie made a brief stop in the room to hand her a dripping-wet washcloth, she wiped Betsy's face and neck. Betsy whimpered but otherwise didn't react, and Elizabeth had a horrible thought: *This child is dying*. No one could be this hot for any length of time and come out of it unscathed.

Something was seriously wrong.

"Let's get you in the tub," Elizabeth said, trying to keep her voice light. She rose from the couch and carried Betsy into the bathroom, where Dodie sat on the edge of the tub, flashlight on, her fingers trailing in the water.

She looked up. "I did what you said. Not too hot, not too cold."

"Help me get her nightgown off." Together they unbuttoned the back and slipped it over her head. Without taking off her undergarments, Elizabeth lowered her into the tepid water. Betsy cried out in shock, showing signs of life for the first time.

"She doesn't like it," Dodie said, alarmed. "You better take her out."

"Not yet." Elizabeth spoke soothingly to Betsy. "I'm sorry, sweetie, but you're too hot. We're trying to get you better." She splashed water over her head, soaking her hair.

Betsy cried out and weakly struggled against Elizabeth's grasp. "No, no, no," she said, her voice raspy.

"Take her out. Take her out. You're killing her," Dodie said frantically.

"I'm not killing her. I'm trying to help." Elizabeth held her firmly in the water, even as Betsy cried and weakly objected. Intuitively she knew it was the best thing, but she felt like a monster.

"She doesn't like it," Dodie said loudly, holding out a large towel. "Take her out right now."

Elizabeth pulled Betsy out of the water and wrapped the towel around her. As she was smoothing the little girl's wet hair back from her forehead, the beam of the flashlight held by Dodie shone on the tile above the tub. The tile Elizabeth had never seen before. Large squares, jade green in color. Not new, and definitely not the intricate blue pattern that reminded Elizabeth of her grandmother's Wedgwood china. She stared, trying to make sense of it. The tile didn't even look similar to what she was used to, so it wasn't that she was confused.

Without even asking, she took the flashlight from Dodie and aimed it around the room. The tub appeared to be the same, right down to the rubber stopper attached with a chain, but the floor had a black-and-white honeycomb-patterned tile she'd never seen before. A pedestal sink with a mirrored medicine cabinet sat next to a toilet, all of it completely different from what she remembered of Grandma's bathroom. Not new. Old-fashioned, in fact.

Dodie was right next to her now, consoling her sister. “Poor Betsy. Your Dodie’s here. You won’t have to go in that water anymore. I won’t let that happen.”

“Dodie,” Elizabeth said carefully. “What’s the address here?”

“The address of our house?”

“Yes.”

“628 Cardinal Lane.”

The same address as Grandma’s, then. “And what’s your last name?”

“Turner.”

Elizabeth felt the blood drain from her face as she pieced together details, once seemingly disparate and inconsequential, but now clicking into place, one piece at a time, making a complete picture. Turner. Her grandmother’s maiden name. The address on Cardinal Lane. Same as Grandma’s. The old-fashioned TV and thermometer, the kind she’d seen in old movies but never in real life.

Added to that was a rotary dial phone, a bathroom with fixtures from decades before, and a little girl who didn’t know what Tylenol was. It would seem that Elizabeth was in the right place, but was it possible she was in the wrong time?

“Can you tell me the day and year?”

“Of course I can. It’s Christmas Eve 1957.”

CHAPTER 8

NUMBLY, ELIZABETH SAT ON the floor of the bathroom with Betsy across her lap, watching as Dodie stripped off her sister's wet clothing, replacing it with new undergarments and a nightgown. How could it be 1957? She swallowed twice, feeling almost as if she was going to be sick. None of this made sense. Was she hallucinating or in the middle of some kind of dream? A fever dream, maybe, considering that the situation involved a feverish child?

In her heart, though, she knew that none of that was true. It felt real. It *was* real. She'd walked on solid floor. The water had been wet. And her jeans, once covered with snow, still clung uncomfortably to her legs.

And if it was in fact real, the little girls in front of her were her grandmother and her little sister. Elizabeth searched her memory, trying to remember if she'd seen photographs of her grandmother at that age, but she couldn't recall such a thing. She remembered her grandparents' wedding photo, but nothing before that.

“There you go,” Dodie cooed to her sister. “All better now.”

When Betsy was freshly clad, Elizabeth carried her back to the couch. Outside, the wind still howled. The house was still dark, and the child was still overly warm and lifeless. The bath had helped, but for how long? A thought moved through her brain and assembled, formulating into a question. “Dodie, is your full name Doreen?”

“Yes. Doreen Turner.” She nodded. “And Betsy is Elizabeth, like you.”

Just like her. She’d been named for her grandmother’s sister, the little girl who’d died before she even had a chance to grow up. From eavesdropping on her parents as a child, Elizabeth knew how this tragic story ended. The parents of these little girls had encountered both the storm and car trouble on the way home, necessitating a stay overnight at a motel. They’d tried to call but couldn’t get through to the house or any of the neighbors. When they eventually reached a police department three towns over, the police officer who answered the phone promised to check on the girls and give them the message, but he got busy with other calls and didn’t get there until morning. By then, Betsy was barely hanging on, her body burning up with fever, her breathing shallow and her heartbeat faint. By the time they got her to the hospital, it was too late. She died on Christmas morning.

But it wasn’t morning, so it wasn’t too late yet.

“Dodie, your sister is very, very sick. It’s important that we help her. Can you tell me why your mother said not to give her

baby aspirin?”

“I don’t know why.”

Knowing it was life-or-death, Elizabeth considered giving her the aspirin anyway. “But she’s had it before, right? So it’s probably okay for her.” She reached out and touched Dodie’s arm. “We really need to do something.”

“But Mama said not to.”

“I know,” Elizabeth said. “But she’s so sick that I think it’s okay if we don’t listen to your mother just this once.”

Dodie didn’t speak, so she kept going. “I’m going to give her the aspirin. If you stay here with her, I’ll get it from the bathroom. It’s in the medicine cabinet, right?”

“I’ll go. I know right where it is.” Dodie spoke in a rush, taking the flashlight with her.

Elizabeth waited, stroking Betsy’s head. “Little Betsy,” she said quietly. “I’ll do everything I can to make you well.”

She had trouble reconciling her memories of her grandmother and the idea of a younger sister with these two little girls. Consciously, her mind sat somewhere between disbelief and acceptance. But she knew her grandma well, and Dodie was her grandmother in a previous form, before she’d met her grandfather and given birth to her father and spent time with Elizabeth. Grandma always made Elizabeth feel like the most important person in the world. She wished she could talk to the grandmother she knew right now and ask her what to do. Grandma always had the answers. She remembered her

saying, “When you’re not sure what to do, it’s time to pray.” Elizabeth bowed her head and said a silent prayer, admitting that she was lost and unsure, and asking God to guide her to do the right thing. She ended with a plea. *If it’s your will, please save this little girl. Amen.*

From the other room, she heard the flush of the toilet. When Dodie came back, she handed her a glass bottle with a metal screw top.

Elizabeth said, “Thank you.” But when she opened it up and tried to shake the pills into her hand, nothing fell out. In disbelief, she tried again. “It’s empty.”

“I guess we’re out of baby aspirin,” Dodie said, and something in her tone was suspicious.

“Dodie,” she said carefully, “did you do something to the aspirin?”

“What?”

She spoke pointedly. “What happened to the pills that were in this bottle?”

“Mama said not to give it to Betsy. I need to listen to Mama.”

Elizabeth felt her heart sink. One child’s obedience was going to cause another child’s death. “What did you do with them?” She couldn’t keep the anger from her voice. She wanted to shake Dodie, to tell her that her actions were going to kill her sister, but then she sadly remembered that it had already happened. Maybe preventing Betsy’s death wasn’t

even possible. Who was she to think she could change the course of the past?

“I flushed them down the toilet. Don’t worry, Mama can buy more when she goes to the pharmacy next time.”

“Oh, Dodie.” Elizabeth lowered her head into her hands. “I wish you hadn’t done that.”

“I had to.”

Think, think, think. She could put Betsy back in the tub. She knew Dodie would object, but at this point, what other option did she have?

“You stay put. I’m going to check the phone again.” Elizabeth grabbed the light and went into the kitchen. She lifted the receiver and put it to her ear, then tapped on the cradle, which went up and down. Dead. Not a sound came from the earpiece. She hung up again, wishing she had a cell phone, then remembering that the cellular towers that made it operational didn’t even exist yet. In 1957, her cell phone would be useless for making calls. She shone the light around the kitchen. By now it wasn’t such a shock to see the room in a different form, but it was still unsettling. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a piece of paper on the counter right next to where she stood. Picking it up, she read:

Mrs. Dembiec: Cedar 8-6687

And below that:

Dr. Mackey: Hopkins 4-3695

Taking the paper into the next room, she held it out for Dodie to see. “You mentioned your neighbor and the doctor. What does this mean after their names? Cedar and Hopkins with the numbers?”

“That’s the phone number. The words are the exchange. We live right on the border, so we’re Cedar. On Dr. Mackey’s side, it starts up with Hopkins.”

“Oh.” *Weird*. Elizabeth had never heard of anyone having a phone number with a word in it. How would you even dial that? “How far away does Mrs. Dembiec live?”

“The next house down the road.” She pointed. “We walk there sometimes to give her vegetables from the garden. When it’s not too hot. Mama says it’s better to go first thing in the morning before the sun reaches its peak. I usually pull Betsy in the wagon, and she carries the vegetables on her lap.”

“She’s an older lady?”

Dodie nodded. “Very old, with white hair and false teeth. One time she had them out of her mouth and they were sitting in a glass of water.”

Elizabeth felt a rising sense of urgency that Dodie didn’t seem to share. Maybe it was good that she didn’t realize how dire the situation was. There would be time for sadness later. “Does Mrs. Dembiec live alone?”

“Just her and her cat, Misty.”

“And where is the doctor’s office?”

“In town.” Four or five miles away, then. The neighbor would be closer. She probably wouldn’t have children’s medicine, but maybe her phone was working and they could call for help. Or maybe she’d have a car and be able to drive Betsy to the hospital. “Dodie, since Mrs. Dembiec is the closest, I’m going to walk to her house and ask her for help. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Elizabeth picked her jacket up off the floor and slipped it on. She was starting to snap it up when Dodie piped up.

“But Mrs. Dembiec’s house isn’t the closest.”

“It’s not?”

“No, Dr. Mackey’s house is closer.”

Even better. Elizabeth let out a sigh of relief. “Then I’ll go there. Is it on this same road? Tell me where it is, and I’ll find it.”

Dodie stood up and pointed to the back of the house. “It’s not on this road. You go through the woods until it ends. In the summertime, there’s a path.”

But it wasn’t summertime, so that wasn’t helpful. “Straight back?” Elizabeth asked. “Can I keep in a straight line and find it?”

Dodie tilted her head in thought, then finally said, “It’s kind of curving.”

“But does it veer a lot? Or will it be easy to see Dr. Mackey’s house when I come out on the other side?” Elizabeth had never heard that a doctor once lived on the other side of the woods. What she remembered was a new subdivision, a cul-de-sac of about fifteen houses. Her grandmother had joked that this was where the rich people in Remeny lived.

“I don’t know if you’d see it,” Dodie said impatiently. “I know where it is.”

Betsy moaned, and Elizabeth reached down to check her forehead. Whatever progress they’d made from the bath was nearly gone; her body temperature was again alarmingly high. “She’s really sick, Dodie. I need to go right away.”

Dodie said, “I’ll do it.” Her voice was adamant. “I know right where it is. I’ve been there lots of times.”

This, Elizabeth was certain, was a bad plan. She already had one dying child on her hands—she didn’t need another fatality. Oh, if only Dodie hadn’t flushed the baby aspirin. “I don’t think that’s a good idea. The storm is bad, and it’s pitch-black out there.” She glanced toward the window. “It’s practically a blizzard.”

“It’s not a blizzard. It’s just snow. Snow can’t hurt me.”

Dodie spoke with the certainty of a stubborn child, but Elizabeth knew otherwise. She said, “That’s not true. People have died in bad storms.”

“I’ll bring the flashlight,” Dodie argued. “And I have snowshoes. I know where to go.”

Her certainty was reassuring, but she was still a child. Elizabeth thought back to her grandmother's stories of her youth. As teenagers, her grandparents had gone fishing and hiking when they were dating. "He liked that I was a real outdoors kind of gal," she'd said. She'd also talked about going skating on a nearby pond. Even into her seventies she loved gardening, hauling heavy bags of mulch with ease. She was a strong woman. Dodie was the same person, only younger. Could she make it through a snowstorm by herself? Elizabeth thought that maybe she could, but when it came right down to it, she'd rather be in peril than risk Dodie's life. After all, if Dodie died, she and her own father would never exist.

"I'll go," Elizabeth said decisively. "It's still snowing and it's hard to see."

"I know the way. And you don't." Dodie was starting to remind her of her grandmother when she was making a point. "I have snowshoes that only fit me, and I'll take Angus." The dog, hearing his name, lifted his head as if to agree and rose to his feet. "Come on, boy. Want to go for a walk?"

"But you must have adult-size snowshoes that I could wear."

"No." She shook her head. "Mama got them for me and Betsy last Christmas. I can walk on top of the snow."

She made some good points.

Elizabeth hesitated, then asked, "You're sure you can do this?"

“I know I can.” Without another word, Dodie went to the closet next to the front door and began to put on her outerwear, including snow pants. After wrapping a scarf around her face, she sat on the floor to pull on her boots. A pair of snowshoes, pulled out of the back of the closet, came next. Elizabeth watched, fascinated, as Dodie strapped her boots onto the snowshoes. Once finished, she rose to her feet and plodded over to the couch. Lowering her scarf, she kissed Betsy’s cheek. “Be good for Elizabeth. Your Dodie is going to get the doctor. He’ll make you all better.” She straightened and beckoned to the dog. “Come on, Angus. We have to go.”

CHAPTER 9

FLASHLIGHT IN HAND, DODIE set out the back door with Angus by her side. Normally the dog didn't like wintry weather, but seeming to realize this outing was of the utmost importance, he plunged into the deep snow, even though he had to do a little jump each time he moved forward. While she walked, the wind wailed and swirled the snow around her, making her glad she'd wrapped a scarf around her face.

She'd used her snowshoes many times before, but walking around the yard for fun and going a longer distance to get the doctor for her sick sister was an entirely different experience. She followed the beam of light, heading in what she knew was the right direction. From the Little House books, she knew how easy it was to get lost during blizzards, but she wasn't worried. The path they used to cut back to that set of neighbors was covered with snow, but the way was still evident due to the spacing between the trees. Overhead, the moon shone bright. She was not cold yet, except for the part of her face that was exposed, and even that wasn't too bad.

Dodie also had a sense that she was doing something important. Something that only she could do. The woman who'd showed up, Elizabeth, seemed very nice, but she didn't know how things were done. She wanted to give Betsy more aspirin when Mama said not to. The bath idea had been a bad one, only making her little sister upset. Elizabeth also thought she could find the doctor's house, but when Dodie had tried to explain where it was, Elizabeth had acted confused.

Betsy was her sister, so she should be the one to go for the doctor. She wasn't afraid of the dark, and she knew she wouldn't get lost. She'd trodden this path hundreds of times, delivering vegetables for the doctor's family, and one time picking up cough syrup when her mother wasn't feeling well enough to leave the house. Elizabeth seemed capable enough to stay with Betsy, even if she was a stranger. At first Dodie had thought she was a grown-up lady, but in a short while she'd realized Elizabeth wasn't much older than the teenagers she saw when she and Mama and Betsy went to the movie theater to see shows. Elizabeth meant well, but she didn't have all the answers. It was clear she wasn't someone's mother.

Plus, she could tell that Elizabeth was afraid and unsure.

Yes, this was the right thing to do. She would have done it in the first place, except she couldn't leave her sister alone.

The snow was just right for snowshoeing. Sometimes it wasn't and she wound up sinking anyway. It was like ice-skating—the conditions mattered.

Angus barked for no reason at all. A happy bark, not one of alarm, so she didn't shush him. Now he leaped through the snow like a much younger dog. Maybe he'd gotten tired of being cooped up in the house too. Angus was so smart that he followed the trail ahead of her as if he knew they were heading to the Mackeys'. Back at the house, he'd probably heard her say the doctor's name.

To keep herself from becoming afraid of the dark shadows, she began to sing the song about going over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house. The snow really was bright and drifting. With a sleigh, she'd get there much faster.

She'd sung the song twice when the thicket of trees began to thin, signaling she was almost to the other side. Coming out of the woods, she saw Dr. Mackey's house. From the back, she could tell that they didn't have electricity either, but she saw both movement and light within. Stepping carefully, she headed that way, following Angus, who was already barking outside their back door.

She was nearly there when the back door opened and Mrs. Mackey stuck out her head. "Who's there?" From inside the house, Dodie could hear a piano playing and the family singing "Joy to the World."

"It's me, Mrs. Mackey!" She had to shout to be heard. "Dodie Turner." One foot in front of the other, she made her way until she was standing right next to Angus. The dog was covered with snow but wagging his tail.

“Dodie!” Mrs. Mackey said. “What are you doing by yourself out in this weather? Come on in, child. Come on in!”

It was awkward climbing up the steps in her snowshoes, but Mrs. Mackey took her hand and pulled her inside.

“Your dog can come in too,” she said, holding the door open for Angus. “No one should be out in this.”

Angus bounded in, and then, to Dodie’s embarrassment, he shook off the snow, sending sprays of water everywhere. “I’m sorry,” she said, pulling her scarf down from her mouth. “He does that.” From the back door she could see through the arched doorway into the living room. Lit candles and a fire in the fireplace cast a soft glow. The music had stopped. “I’m here for the doctor. Betsy is really sick.”

Before she could say any more, Santa Claus appeared next to Mrs. Mackey, in full garb, including a red hat lined with white fur. “What’s this?” he asked.

“It’s Dodie Turner,” Mrs. Mackey explained. “Her sister is sick.”

He nodded. “I’ll get my bag and be ready in a jiffy.”

CHAPTER 10

SITTING IN THE DARK made the time drag, which raised Elizabeth's anxiety. The house was getting colder too, which added to the feeling that she should really be doing *something*. Going into the kitchen, she checked what she remembered as Grandma's "odds and ends" drawer. As it turned out, it was still being used for the same purpose. Or maybe *still* wasn't the right word at all. Maybe it had been the designated junk drawer right from the start.

She felt around in the drawer, her fingertips brushing over what felt like rubber bands, paperclips, and a pair of scissors until she located a box of matches. *Aha! Success.*

Back in the living room, she went to the fireplace and, using the light of one match, located the pile of wood stacked in a holder on the floor. Another quick look helped her find a pile of newspapers on a shelf beneath the coffee table. She stacked some wood in the metal grate and crushed newspaper to shove underneath. She opened the damper first and then, with one strike of the match, lit the paper and watched, pleased, as the

flame spread from the paper to the logs above. With some artful positioning of the logs with the poker, she had an actual fire going. Now that she wasn't in the dark, she could see three candles on the mantel in between each of the Christmas stockings. She wondered why Dodie hadn't lit them earlier, then realized she probably wasn't allowed to use matches. As an adult, her grandmother was such an independent thinker, it was hard to believe that she'd been such an obedient child.

The candles were white pillars, set in glass jars. Using the matches, she lit each one, then placed them around the room before returning to Betsy's side. "Isn't this better?" she said, half to herself. Picking up the damp towel, she wiped Betsy's face, arms, and legs. "Hang in there, Betsy. Dodie is going to bring the doctor, and he'll make you feel better."

Betsy's cheeks were flushed red from the fever and her hair was still damp, but the little girl's face, illuminated by the candlelight, looked sweet and innocent. Her breathing was slow but regular. How could it be she was destined to die?

Elizabeth folded the towel and set it on Betsy's forehead, then got up to look again at the newspapers. Now that there was light, she could actually read the date printed at the top. *December 24, 1957.*

She read it, then blinked and read it again, running her finger over the print to confirm it was real.

Despite the fact that she'd already accepted the possibility of time travel, seeing the date in print made it real in a different way. Betsy's illness had been so all-consuming that

she hadn't had time to ruminate on what this meant. If she actually was in 1957, that meant that the impossible was possible. Somewhere between the front door of the Claremore and the Turners' home, she'd traveled back sixty-five years in time. No wonder she felt out of her element.

Another thought hit her, and this one created a knot in her stomach. Since she didn't know how it had happened in the first place, how could she duplicate it to go in the opposite direction? It was entirely possible she wouldn't be able to go back to 2022. For the first time, the idea that she'd lost her mind was preferable to this new reality.

Before, she'd thought her problems might be solved with her phone, but now she knew that not having a phone was the least of it. She had nothing with her. Just the clothes on her back and a key to a room in an inn that didn't exist yet. No money and no identification. Once Dodie's parents arrived home, would they let her stay or would she be back out in the storm? Were there homeless shelters in Remeny in 1957? Somehow she didn't think so.

Elizabeth imagined a scenario in which she wandered in the cold, eventually dying from hypothermia. No one would be able to identify her body, so she'd wind up as a cold case in some morgue. Meanwhile in 2022, her parents would discover that their only child was missing, so close to the death of her father's beloved mother. Like they really needed another tragedy.

Could she convince Dodie's parents that she was actually their great-granddaughter who'd traveled back in time? She knew things about the future, politics and technology and scientific breakthroughs, but she was a little fuzzy on the dates and how things actually worked. She used her phone every single day yet couldn't explain how it functioned.

Most likely they'd think she was completely mad.

From the couch, Betsy let out a soft moan and shifted position. Going to her side, Elizabeth pulled up the blanket, which had slipped a bit, and tucked it around her body. She picked up the hand towel. "I'm going to get this wet, and I'll be right back," she said. "And Dodie and Dr. Mackey will be here soon. He'll make you all better." Even though Betsy didn't respond, she hoped her words brought her some comfort.

Would Dodie be back soon with the doctor? She hoped so. Part of her still wondered if she'd made the right decision letting her go. Taking the dog had been the tipping point in Dodie's favor. Her grandmother had often talked about Angus and how protective he was of her family. Elizabeth was sure that Angus would get her there, and after that, Dodie would have the doctor to help her return home.

She carried the candle into the bathroom and set it on the sink, then rifled through the medicine cabinet to see if there were other products for children. The bottom shelf held a small cup containing manicure scissors, tweezers, and a nail file next to a stack of Palmolive soap, a canister of hair spray,

and a comb and brush. The shelf above it held medicines and a metal tin of bandages with a flip-top lid. Holding the candle up, she read the labels of the bottles aloud: “Geritol, Sominex, Mercurochrome, Anacin.” She took the bottles and read the backs, but the only one that seemed close to being helpful was Anacin, which was a brand of aspirin promising “Fast Pain Relief.” On the back it said: “Anacin is recommended for the relief of pain of headache, neuralgia, and neuritis ... muscular aches and pains.” It went on to say it was good for arthritis, rheumatism, pain from toothaches, and the distress associated with normal menstrual periods. *Distress?* Had to be written by a man. She scanned the rest of the description, finally finding the mention of Anacin’s effectiveness in alleviating fever. Unfortunately, at the bottom it said, “For children under six, consult a physician.”

Betsy was only four.

But maybe it would be okay if she cut a tablet in half and crushed it? A half dose would probably be safe. That was assuming she could get Betsy to take it.

Elizabeth rinsed the towel in cold water and wrung it out, then took the Anacin with her to the living room. Anything was better than nothing when a little girl’s life was on the line.

CHAPTER 11

DODIE DIDN'T REALIZE THAT Santa was Dr. Mackey until he left to get his medical bag. Then Mrs. Mackey leaned over and whispered, "The grandchildren are staying the night, and he dressed up as Santa just for them."

From the other room, Dodie heard his booming voice saying, "Santa has to leave right now, but I'll be back later with all your gifts." Someone was jingling bells as he spoke. "Do you promise to be good girls and boys and listen to your mother when she tells you it's time to go to bed?"

"Yes, Santa!" they all exclaimed.

When Dr. Mackey came back to where Dodie waited, he still had the beard, white head of hair, and Santa cap. She could see the costume under his winter coat, but he'd substituted the white gloves with ones made of black leather, and his boots were the kind all the men wore, waterproof with laces up the front. He held up his medical bag. "Time to go, Dodie. You can fill me in on the way." He opened the door, gesturing for her to go first.

“You’d best go ahead and help her down the stairs,” Mrs. Mackey said. “She’ll trip in those snowshoes.”

Dr. Mackey nodded, then went ahead, holding her elbow steady as Angus followed behind. “We’re not going in your car?” Dodie asked as they crossed the backyard.

He pulled a flashlight out of his pocket and clicked it on, shining it toward the path ahead. “No. Walking is best. The plow hasn’t been through yet, and the roads are treacherous. I don’t want to take a chance of getting stuck.”

“And how come you still have a Santa beard?”

He smiled. “It’s attached with a special kind of glue and only comes off with baby oil. Removing it is pretty time consuming. Betsy sounded pretty sick, so I didn’t stop to change. Besides, the beard will keep my face warm.” The wind had subsided, and the snow was coming down more gently now. Angus ran ahead of them, while the doctor kept pace with her, talking as they went. After she explained about her parents not coming home and the power outage, he said, “So you said your sister threw up once and has a high fever. How high is her temperature?”

“I don’t know,” Dodie admitted. “We have a thermometer, but I’ve never used it before, and I guess Elizabeth doesn’t know how to use it either.”

“Who’s Elizabeth?”

“She’s a lady who got lost in the storm. She came to the door and was all wet and cold, so I let her in. She tried to help

but doesn't know much about anything. I left her with Betsy because I had to come get you and she didn't understand the way to your house."

"I see. So you don't actually know Elizabeth? Have you ever seen her before today?"

"No, but I think she might work on a farm."

"Why do you think that?"

"Cause of how she's dressed."

"I see."

"She put Betsy in the bathtub, but Betsy didn't like it, so I made her stop." Listening to Betsy cry like that had been heartbreaking. Dodie was proud of how she'd stood up for her sister.

"How did you know Betsy didn't like it?"

"She kept saying no, no, no, and crying. She wasn't talking before, so I knew it was a terrible thing. She just wants to lay on the couch and be left alone."

"So she hasn't been talking to you since your mother left?"

In the distance, hidden by the dark, she heard Angus barking, as if he was telling them to hurry up. "She did at first, and then she got too sleepy."

"I see."

"Dr. Mackey, do you think you have the right medicine to make her better?" She looked up at his face, still seeing Santa, except when he glanced down and met her gaze. And then she

saw the person behind the Santa Claus façade. His eyes were Dr. Mackey's for sure.

“I believe I do, Dodie. I need to examine her first, though, to determine the best thing to do.”

Dodie exhaled a sigh of relief. Finally, an adult who knew what to do and would take charge. Even dressed as Santa, he was a reassuring presence.

Or maybe it was because he *was* dressed that way. Everyone knew, even ten-year-olds who didn't believe anymore, that Santa was magic.

CHAPTER 12

ELIZABETH WAS IN THE kitchen attempting to crush an Anacin tablet with the bottom of a coffee mug when she heard Angus's barking, which meant, she hoped, that Dodie and the doctor were close by. Quickly, she dropped the Anacin into the kitchen garbage, set the mug in the sink, and went to the back door.

Through the glass, she saw the dog gamboling through the snow with an energy she wouldn't have thought possible. Behind him came a beam of light and two figures—one big and one small. She narrowed her eyes. Was the larger one wearing a Santa hat?

Sure enough, he wore a Santa hat. As he got closer, she took note of the beard and the red pants.

When she opened the door to let them in, Angus bounded in first. He gave a quick shake, sending moisture droplets flying, before continuing on to the living room. Elizabeth extended a helping hand to Dodie, who came next, followed by Santa.

“You must be Elizabeth,” he said, handing her his medical bag. “I’m Dr. Mackey.” He leaned over to unlace his boots. “How’s Betsy doing?”

“About the same,” she said. “I’ve been trying to cool her down with wet towels, but it’s only helping a little. Her fever is still high.”

He and Dodie shed their winter wear and hung their coats on hooks by the door, then followed Elizabeth into the living room.

“Oh, you built a fire,” Dodie said, approval in her voice. “Candles too.”

Dr. Mackey knelt down next to Betsy and began to examine her, shining the light in her eyes, checking her pulse, feeling her forehead, and listening to her heart. Without saying a word, he pulled a hypodermic needle out of his bag and drew some medicine out of a vial. “Elizabeth, can you hold the flashlight, please?”

She took it from his hand, glad to be of help. Deftly he turned Betsy onto her side. Dodie said, “What are you doing to her?”

“I’m giving your sister a shot of penicillin.” Dr. Mackey swabbed the site with a cotton ball doused with rubbing alcohol and quickly gave her the injection. He covered the spot with a small bandage and then gently returned her to her back.

“Will it fix her?”

“Dodie, when penicillin first came out, they called it a wonder drug. If any medicine can help Betsy, it’s this one.” He gave her a smile.

“Now what do we do?” Elizabeth asked.

“We watch and wait.” He returned the items to his bag.

The three of them kept vigil all night. Elizabeth couldn’t sleep, so she prayed, her thoughts reaching to the heavens above. Dodie brought out her pillow and blankets and curled up on the floor, near her sister and next to Angus. Elizabeth and Dr. Mackey each took one of the armchairs. Periodically they’d check on Betsy, with Dr. Mackey pointing out small improvements, that she was breathing more deeply or that her fever had lessened. Between the two of them, they kept the fire in the fireplace supplied with fresh wood so that it didn’t burn out. By the time Dodie was asleep, they’d established a comfortable rhythm.

About two in the morning, Elizabeth asked, “Do you always make house calls looking like Santa?” She sat in the chair with her legs tucked under her.

He chuckled, sounding very Santa-like. “It’s a tradition in my house. Every Christmas Eve, since my own children were little, I’ve dressed as Santa, and now I do it for my grandchildren. When Dodie came to the house, it sounded like an emergency, so I didn’t bother taking it off.” He tugged at the beard. “It’s secure. I need baby oil to remove it, so it will have to wait until I get home.”

“Won’t your family mind that you’re here?”

He shook his head. "I'm a doctor. We don't have regular hours. My wife has tolerated my schedule for thirty-eight years. She understands."

"I'm glad you came when you did. I was worried."

"You were right to be worried. Betsy is very ill."

"But she's out of the woods now, right? She's going to pull through it?" Elizabeth asked, a hopeful note in her voice.

He sighed. "Once her fever breaks, I'll feel good about her chances. I don't know how high her temperature was or how long she had the fever. The fact that you immersed her in the bath certainly helped."

"Dodie wasn't happy about that."

He looked down at Dodie, now fast asleep with her arm slung around Angus's neck. "She's a capable ten-year-old, but she's still a child. Believe me, you did the right thing."

"That's good to know."

"And what about you, Miss Rubi? How did you come to be here today?"

His question caught her off guard, and her head spun with what to say. It had been easy to tell Dodie, a child, that she was lost, but the doctor would most likely find that explanation suspect. Finally, she said, "Random happenstance. It was lucky timing, since I was here to stay with Betsy while Dodie went to get you."

He frowned, the furrows in his forehead looking very un-Santa-like. “Dodie said you were lost in the storm. Did your car break down?”

“Something like that,” she said. “I was wet and cold by the time I arrived. Believe me, I was grateful that Dodie allowed me to come inside.”

Luckily, he didn’t pursue it further, just nodded and got up to check on Betsy once again. Elizabeth rested her eyes and listened as he spoke soothingly to the little girl. That was the last thing she remembered before dozing off. She didn’t wake up until Dr. Mackey gave her shoulder a shake.

“Elizabeth?” he whispered. She opened her eyes to see the first light of day had filled the room. “It’s seven o’clock.”

She sat up and rubbed her eyes. “Sorry, I fell asleep.”

“No need to apologize. It was a long night.” He glanced back at Betsy, asleep on the couch, then whispered, “I have good news. Betsy’s fever broke. She drank some water last night, and I helped her get to the bathroom. She’s sleeping now, but she’s going to be fine.”

He did all that and Elizabeth never woke up? She said, “I’m so sorry. I should have been awake to help you.”

“I’m the doctor. I had it covered.” He handed her a piece of paper. “I’m going home now, but I wrote some instructions for her care. Are you going to stay here until Mr. and Mrs. Turner return?”

“Of course.”

“I’m hoping they just had to stop somewhere because of the storm. Once the power comes back on, I’m sure you’ll get a phone call.”

“That’s probably what happened.”

“Make sure they get my notes. And if you need me again, have Dodie and Angus come and get me. I can be here at a moment’s notice.”

“I will.” She got up and followed him to the back of the house to see him out.

In the kitchen, he pulled on his boots and jacket. “This is one Christmas I’ll never forget.” He placed the Santa hat on his head and pulled it over his forehead, then grabbed his medical bag off the kitchen table.

“The same for me. Thank you, Dr. Mackey.”

“And thank you, Miss Rubi.” He nodded in her direction. “I hate to think what would have happened without you.”

“I was glad to be here.” She opened the door for him.

“Merry Christmas.” His eyes twinkled. “I have a feeling it will be a good one.”

“Merry Christmas to you too, Doctor.” She shut the door and watched through the glass as he crossed the backyard and disappeared into the woods. The slate-colored sky was getting lighter by the minute, the dawn a celebration of Betsy making it through the night.

The enormity of this reality took hold in her mind. The doctor she'd watched save a little girl's life, a flesh-and-blood human being, with a wife, children, and grandchildren, was certainly long dead in her own time, a thought that filled her with sadness and grief.

The idea that she'd somehow traveled back in time and helped to prevent the death of a great-aunt she'd never met was incredible to think about in the light of day. Was Betsy's illness the reason she was here, and if so, what changes would her recovery make in her own family and the world in general? She tried to imagine a future for Betsy in the years ahead, but she could only see her as she was now, a chubby-cheeked four-year-old.

Her eyes still on the woods, Elizabeth became aware of a noise behind her. She turned to see Dodie and Betsy standing in the doorway, holding hands. "Elizabeth?" Dodie said. "Betsy's hungry. Can I make her some toast?"

As if to answer her question, the power came back on and the overhead fixture filled the room with light.

Elizabeth smiled. "Of course you can."

CHAPTER 13

ELIZABETH JOINED THE GIRLS in eating jelly toast and found herself watching them with rapt fascination. Dodie had told her sister that Elizabeth was the babysitter, and Betsy had accepted it without question. Like a little mother, Dodie got her sister situated at the table, poured her milk, and made her toast, spreading on a thin layer of grape jelly.

Elizabeth witnessed all of this, impressed with Dodie's capableness and reveling in Betsy's existence. Now over the worst of her illness, she regarded her toast with wide soulful eyes, taking tiny bites. When she glanced up at Elizabeth, her shy eyes watched under thick lashes. Precious. No wonder the family had been devastated to lose her.

During the dark of the night, Elizabeth had been completely preoccupied with the fear that Betsy was on the brink of death, but now she could relax. She'd also had time to finish processing the idea that Dodie was the younger version of her own beloved Grandma Doreen. Elizabeth had been irate when Dodie had flushed the baby aspirin down the toilet, but that

emotion faded now that Betsy seemed to be on the road to recovery. Now she could see firsthand what a gutsy little girl Grandma had been. Dodie had defied the decision of an adult in order to follow her mother's instructions and walked through a snowstorm in the dead of night to get the doctor. Laura Ingalls Wilder had nothing on her.

Dodie leaned toward her sister and said, "Can you take another bite, Betsy? Just one more, for me?"

Betsy nodded and took a nibble, then, after another urging from her sister, took a sip from her cup. The sight of her awake and sitting at the table seemed like a miracle compared to her nearly lifeless form of a few hours ago. Her eyes were heavy-lidded with sleep and her cheeks flushed; Elizabeth guessed that normally she was more energetic, but even so, she'd done a complete turnaround. She'd edged away from death and was back among the living.

"Good job, Betsy!" Dodie said, making her sister smile.

Last night Elizabeth hadn't seen Dodie's resemblance to her grandmother, but now it was apparent in her little facial expressions and the way she hovered over her younger sister. Ten-year-old Dodie's maternal side was the basis for all the mothering she'd do for the son and the granddaughter she'd have in the future.

The light poured in through the windows now, and she could see that the kitchen was simple and cozy. A teakettle sat on the back burner of the stove. Crocheted potholders hung from their loops on the wall closest to the stove. Coupons were

attached to the front of the refrigerator by magnets with the names of local businesses. Burnham Ford Motors. Security Bank. Schaefer's Groceries.

"Elizabeth?" Hearing Dodie say her name pulled her out of her thoughts. "May I ask you a question?"

"Of course."

"Is it Christmas morning?"

"Yes, it is. Merry Christmas, girls!"

They didn't respond, but gave her blank stares. Betsy pulled on Dodie's sleeve and whispered into her sister's ear. Elizabeth overheard her ask why Santa didn't leave presents when he'd been there during the night.

"I don't know," Dodie answered her quietly. "I guess we have to wait and see."

"Did Betsy ask about gifts?" Elizabeth said. When Dodie nodded, she explained. "When Santa was here last night, he brought you the gift of good health, Betsy, and that's why you feel better now. That was the most important thing he could give you at that moment. The gifts you usually get in the morning will arrive when your parents get here, because being with family is one of life's most precious gifts."

"When will Mommy come home?" Betsy's voice was quiet and tinged with sadness.

Finally, something Elizabeth knew from family lore. "Your mother and father had a problem getting here because of the weather, but they'll definitely be home by lunchtime. The

snowplow should be coming through soon and it will clear your driveway, so they'll be able to pull right into the driveway when they get here."

Dodie folded her arms. "Mr. Enderin is our snowplow driver, and he never does the driveway, Elizabeth. He only does the road. We have to shovel."

"Not this time," Elizabeth said firmly. "The driver will do it because he knows your father is coming home and it's Christmas Day."

Dodie folded her arms. "He never did before."

"He will today. You'll see." Dodie still didn't look convinced, so she tried a redirect. "Why don't the two of you wash up and get ready for your parents? I'll clean up the kitchen."

"Should we get dressed for the day?" Dodie asked.

"That's a good idea," she said, nodding, not really knowing if it was a good idea or not. Being responsible for children required so many decisions. Would Dodie pick out something appropriate? Was Betsy feeling well enough to leave the snugly comfort of her nightgown? And again, would she even be able to judge if their outfits were appropriate holiday attire for little girls on Christmas in 1957? Only time would tell.

While they were in their room, Elizabeth cleaned up the kitchen and washed the dishes. Finally, a task that felt familiar. The view out the kitchen window as she rinsed the plates was

nearly the same as in her time, which she found comforting. When she went to tidy up the living room, she was delighted to see that the Christmas tree lights were now on. For some reason, seeing Grandma's nativity set under the tree, along with the sight of stockings hanging on the mantel, made it officially seem like Christmas. Tears welled up in her eyes.

At that second, Elizabeth decided to live in the moment and worry about her return to 2022 later. Some time-traveling magic had brought her to this house at the exact moment she could be of the most help. She'd have to trust that it would guide her back when the time was right.

Dodie and Betsy returned with neatly combed hair, Dodie leading her sister by the hand. They wore matching red dresses with white sashes and tights and shiny black patent leather shoes. "You both look beautiful," Elizabeth said.

"I polished our shoes," Dodie said, pointing.

"I can tell. They're really shiny."

There was a long pause. Clearly, Elizabeth was supposed to lead right now. "I have an idea," she said. "Why don't we color some pictures? You can draw something to give to your parents for Christmas."

"I already made gifts for them in art class in school," Dodie said, sounding offended. "I wrapped them and everything. They're in my closet."

"Wonderful!" Elizabeth said. "Why don't you put them under the tree, and then we can color? Unless you're too tired,

Betsy?” Betsy shook her head no, which she took to mean that she was not too tired at all.

A few minutes later, after having set the gifts in place, Dodie returned with a stack of coloring books topped with a shoebox. At the kitchen table, she sorted out the art supplies, putting a coloring book of jungle animals in front of her sister and taking the top off of the box. Inside, Elizabeth saw a jumble of crayons, along with several drawing pencils. One of the books was a sketchpad of blank paper. “Can I draw too?” Elizabeth asked.

“Well, of course you can,” Dodie said kindly, this time sounding exactly like Grandma Doreen.

Using crayons, the girls worked on their artwork, while Elizabeth took a fresh sheet of paper and placed it in front of her. The pencils, she discovered after rummaging through the box, were varying degrees of hardness. Some would be perfect for outlining, while others were ideal for shading. She sorted through them and lined them up. Glancing at the sisters, their heads down as they worked, she had a flash of inspiration and knew what she’d be drawing.

She worked quickly, her hands creating the images almost without conscious thought. Sometimes it happened so easily, it was akin to moving on autopilot. She smiled as the images on the page took shape. So often she drew to keep her skills sharp. Just for practice. But this one might be a keeper. She glanced up, noticing the shape of Betsy’s sweet face, the slight curl of her hair around her face and the cherub mouth. She

really was an exceptionally beautiful child, but then again, most children were. Dodie, too, was very striking. Youth had its own beauty.

Elizabeth felt that a drawing captured a moment in time, and she had just the perfect one in mind.

The girls only stopped working when they heard the snowplow in the road. “Mr. Enderin!” Dodie said, sliding out of her chair and running into the living room. Betsy took a second longer, but soon she was right behind her. As all three of them watched, the plow turned into the driveway and took several passes until it was clear of snow.

Elizabeth couldn’t resist. “Told you so.”

Dodie frowned. “He never did that before.”

“It was a Christmas gift to your family,” Elizabeth said. “He was being kind.”

The girls waved to the driver, and he returned the gesture, a huge smile on his face. “Mama is going to be so happy. She hates shoveling,” Dodie said as he continued down the road.

Elizabeth didn’t know anyone who enjoyed shoveling, but now didn’t seem the time to complain about Wisconsin winters. “Once your father gets home, things will be easier.”

“That’s what Mama said.”

They went back to the table to finish their drawings, and when they were done, Elizabeth suggested rolling them up and securing them with a rubber band before putting them under the tree. Dodie had a better idea. “I have some ribbon.”

And so, the girls' pictures took a place of honor under the tree alongside the presents Dodie had created in school.

After that they watched the black-and-white television. Dodie turned the dial and adjusted the rabbit ear antenna, finally settling on a local television broadcast, a Christmas special, consisting of a local musical group singing and playing Christmas songs while dressed up as if they were in a Dickens novel. For the women, bonnets and cloaks, and for the men tall hats and fitted coats. A few of the ladies randomly held wicker baskets, the handles looped over their elbows. Their voices rang out loud and clear: *God rest ye merry, gentlemen* ... The show was filmed as if someone had stuck the camera in one spot and never moved it. At one point, they enthusiastically rang handbells as they sang. The presentation struck Elizabeth as incredibly amateurish, but Dodie was enthralled. Elizabeth got the feeling that their mother didn't let them watch TV that often. Betsy, still feeling not herself, lay down on the couch, her arm draped over the side, resting on Angus's head.

Betsy seemed about to drift back to sleep, but at the sound of a car honk outside, her fatigue was forgotten. "They're home!" Dodie cried, leaping off the couch and going to the window to see. Betsy, too, left her spot and joined her sister. Elizabeth stood behind the girls and watched as a maroon-colored Ford Fairlane came to a halt in the driveway. The doors to the vehicle swung open, and out came her great-grandparents, Fred and Caroline Turner, both dressed as if going to a business meeting, he in a dark-blue suit and she in a

belted dress and heels, their winter coats presumably left in the car. Fred sported dark-rimmed eyeglasses. Before this, it had been hard for Elizabeth to imagine the couple, whom she'd only seen in black-and-white photos, as living, breathing people, but here they were, a young couple in their thirties, rushing to the door to see their daughters.

The pair burst through the door and, without a pause, rushed to their girls. Dodie threw her arms around their father. "Daddy!" Betsy was a little more reticent but let her mother pick her up. Angus, who'd been sleeping in front of the fireplace, went absolutely crazy, barking and crying and jumping up on Fred Turner. Elizabeth stood off to one side, a surge of happiness filling her from within as she watched the scene play out. Not even noticing Elizabeth on the edge of the room, Caroline Turner apologized to her girls. "I'm so sorry we weren't here sooner. We tried to call so many times."

"The phone was dead," Dodie said.

"I know, sweetie, that's why we couldn't get through."

"And we didn't know where you were!"

Her mother smoothed Dodie's hair away from her face. "You don't know how sorry I am. Your father and I were sick with worry, but we got here as soon as we were able."

Dodie pointed. "Betsy was sick, but she's better now."

Caroline put a hand on Betsy's forehead. "A little warm, but not too bad."

“She was burning up before,” Dodie said, “but Dr. Mackey came and gave her some medicine.”

“He did?”

Dodie nodded. “It was a wonder drug.”

Fred said, “We’re so proud of you girls. I know it was terrible to be here all alone, but now it’s over and we’re together for Christmas.”

They hugged, creating a tight family circle. Angus stuck his nose in between the tangle of legs to be included, his tail joyfully wagging. A Christmas miracle from long ago that Elizabeth was witnessing now.

When the girls’ mother wiped away a tear and said, “Oh, my girls, you don’t know how worried I was.” Elizabeth found herself weeping too, partly because it was the most touching family moment she’d ever witnessed, but also because it couldn’t have happened without her.

CHAPTER 14

ELIZABETH KNEW THE EXACT second that her great-grandmother Caroline realized she was in the room, because she saw the startled look in her eyes. “Oh, excuse me. I didn’t realize someone else was here.” Despite the surprise in her voice, she managed a smile.

Betsy said, “That’s the babysitter.”

“I’m Elizabeth. Elizabeth Rubi.” She stepped forward to shake Caroline’s hand, then dropped her hand when she realized the gesture wasn’t acknowledged. Did women not shake hands in the fifties? Maybe not. “I’ve been helping out while you were gone.”

“She was lost,” Dodie said.

Both her great-grandparents were staring at her now. “Did the police send you to watch the girls?” Fred asked.

“No.” She shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. “Like Dodie said, I was lost. I came to the door to get

directions, and when I realized the girls were alone and Betsy was sick, I stayed to help.”

“You never asked for directions,” Dodie pointed out, throwing a hole in her story.

“Betsy’s fever was dangerously high,” Elizabeth continued. “Dodie went to get Dr. Mackey, and he was able to give her a shot of penicillin. She’s lucky that he came when he did.” The inference, which she hoped they’d pick up on, was that Betsy wouldn’t have survived without the penicillin.

“Then I guess it’s lucky you came along,” Fred said. “Where were you heading when you lost your way?”

“Oh, now that’s a story.” Elizabeth laughed nervously. “I was coming to surprise my grandmother for Christmas. She was supposed to be at a place called the Claremore on top of the hill near here, but after the driver dropped me off, there wasn’t anything at that location. I think my grandmother must have gotten confused. And then I got turned around in the storm. I was grateful that Dodie let me in, and then when I saw how sick Betsy was, I had to stay until I made sure she was fine.”

“The Claremore house? On top of the hill?” Caroline said. “The Claremore family hasn’t even started building yet. I’ve heard that the house is going to be very grand. A mansion.”

“What’s your grandmother’s name?” Fred asked. “We know most of the folks around here.”

Elizabeth shook her head. “Grandma Doreen’s not from around here.”

“Doreen’s my name!” Dodie exclaimed.

Her mother laughed. “You aren’t the only Doreen, you know. It’s such a pretty name that lots of girls have it.”

Fred said, “Is there some way we can help you find her? The roads are clear now. I’d be happy to drive you.”

Elizabeth saw the kindness in his eyes and felt a pang of guilt. She cleared her throat before answering. “As I said before, I was going to surprise her, but I guess we got our wires crossed. I’m not really sure how to find her.” Fred and Caroline exchanged a worried look.

Luckily, Betsy chose that exact moment to say, “Daddy, Santa forgot to come to our house. We don’t have any presents!”

“He didn’t forget, little one.” Her father reached out and took her from her mother’s arms. “We ran into Santa on the way home. He and the reindeer were having so much trouble with the storm that we offered to help out and deliver the gifts for you and Dodie. They’re all in the trunk of the car.”

Betsy’s face lit up at the news. “Yay!”

Caroline gave her husband a nudge. “Why don’t you go get them?”

“I can help,” Elizabeth offered, picking her jacket up off the floor and slipping it on, then pulling her gloves from her

pockets. With a nod, Fred took her up on the offer, and she followed him outside.

“It was nice of you to stay with the girls,” he said, turning the key in the lock of the trunk. “My wife and I were worried sick. They’re good girls, but they’ve never been alone for so long before. I can’t thank you enough for staying with Betsy so Dodie could get the doctor.”

“Dodie was the real hero, going out in the storm to get Dr. Mackey. I would have gone myself, but her directions weren’t clear to me. I was worried about her going out there by herself, but she was adamant that she could do it.”

Fred nodded. “When she gets an idea in her head, there’s no stopping her.” He opened the trunk to reveal a pile of wrapped presents inside. “My wife hides gifts in the car, away from little prying eyes.”

“That’s a brilliant idea.”

He stacked gifts into her outstretched arms, then took a step back to examine her face. “Have we met before? You seem so familiar.”

“No, we’ve never met.” Elizabeth had often heard that she was the spitting image of Grandma’s aunt Belle, Caroline’s sister, and she had to agree. She’d seen photos, and there was a definite resemblance. She said a silent prayer, hoping he’d drop the subject.

“Huh.” His brow furrowed in thought. Just when she thought he might say something else, he turned back to the car

to get the rest of the presents.

Dodie held the door open for them. Once Elizabeth was inside, Dodie took the gifts from her arms and set them under the tree. Fred joined her and arranged his load alongside them.

“Now,” Caroline said, crossing her arms. “Should we do lunch or open gifts first?”

“Gifts, gifts, gifts!” Betsy and Dodie said in unison.

And so it was decided.

CHAPTER 15

AFTER PUTTING AWAY HER gloves and slipping off her jacket, Elizabeth took a seat on the couch. Soon she came to find out that the Turner family had definite traditions when it came to opening Christmas presents. To begin with, Fred led them in prayer, thanking God for blessing them with health, home, and a loving family. After that, each one of them added something they were thankful for.

More of a Thanksgiving tradition, to Elizabeth's mind, but as she heard them speak, it struck her as being perfect for Christmas as well.

"I'm thankful for Angus," Betsy said, from her spot on the floor in front of the tree.

Her sister, seated next to her, nodded and said, "I'm thankful Betsy is feeling better."

Fred smiled at his wife, who sat next to him on the couch. "I'm thankful we made it home in time to spend Christmas with our girls." He nodded to his wife as he took off his

glasses, cleaned them with a handkerchief, then returned them to his face.

Caroline added, “I’m thankful for our new friend, Elizabeth. She’s an angel who was brought here to help our girls in their time of need.”

Elizabeth, whose eyes were welling up with tears, realized during the pause that she was expected to go next. She said, “I’m so thankful I got to meet all of you this Christmas. It means more than I can say.”

Looking around the room, she thought that she could stay here forever, safe in a place of comfort and family, never to go forward into the future where death and bad boyfriends awaited her. But of course, she’d miss her own parents and friends. No matter where you were, something was missing.

Caroline went into the kitchen and came back with a tray containing cups of eggnog and some Christmas cookies, decorated cutout cookies and jam thumbprint cookies. As Caroline went around with the tray, Fred opened the top of the stereo cabinet in the entryway and put a stack of records on the turntable. In the space of a few minutes, the sound of Frank Sinatra singing “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” filled the room.

Elizabeth took a sip of eggnog and nibbled at a cookie while she watched the girls opening their gifts. The lyrics of the song resonated with her. *Someday soon we all will be together, if the fates allow ...*

The fates sure allowed it this time around.

If she accepted the idea that she'd traveled through time, which appeared to be the case, she needed to pay attention. Each moment counted. She'd been sent here for a reason, presumably to help Dodie and Dr. Mackey save Betsy's life, and if that was the purpose, the fact that she hadn't been whisked away yet was a bonus. She'd received the gift of her own grandmother's Christmas past.

Eventually, if time-travel movies and books could be trusted, she'd be returned to her own place and time, so she might as well enjoy being here right now. Not knowing how she'd be transported back to 2022 was still worrying, but she took solace in knowing that for the moment, she was safe and warm and enjoying the taste of home-baked Christmas cookies.

Dodie and Betsy got far fewer presents than Elizabeth had received any given Christmas of her own childhood, but their gratitude was immense. They exclaimed over socks, new mittens, Slinkys, sweaters, yo-yos, books, and twin dolls who could drink out of bottles like real babies.

When Dodie finally got to the last gift, their mother said, "This one is for both of you."

Dodie and Betsy each tore at the paper, and when the lid of the box was open, Dodie shouted, "Play-Doh! I can't believe it. Just like at Patty's house." She turned her attention to her sister. "Wait till you see what we can do with this, Betsy! It's going to be so much fun."

Without being asked, Dodie gathered up the wrapping paper and crumpled it all up in a ball, which their father tossed into the fireplace. “Now it’s time for Mama and Daddy to open their gifts!” she exclaimed. Elizabeth could definitely see the beginning of her grandmother’s adult take-charge personality.

Again, the gifts were simple, but appreciated. Fred’s gift from his wife was a new wallet, already containing photos of his girls. Along the same lines, his gift to Caroline was a gold locket. She snapped it open to find that each side had a small oval photo, one of Betsy and the other of Dodie. “I love it!” she said, showing the girls their photos inside. She reached back and clasped it behind her neck. “I will cherish it always.”

Dodie brought over the presents she’d made in school, and her parents exclaimed over the ashtray and the clay pencil holder. “Miss Leamond had us paint them, and she fired them in a kiln,” Dodie explained. “That’s why they’re so shiny.”

“They turned out perfect,” Caroline said. “I can tell that you put a lot of work into making them.”

Their father agreed. “You did a wonderful job.”

Finally, the crayon drawings the two girls had done with Elizabeth made their appearance. Their parents unrolled each one and exclaimed over their daughters’ artwork.

“I love the colors you chose, Betsy!” Fred said.

Opening the second one, Caroline said, “This is wonderful, Dodie. You did a beautiful job.”

“And now for the last one,” Dodie said, handing over another rolled-up piece of paper secured with a ribbon.

Her mother slid the ribbon off the end and unfurled the paper. She stared at the picture and blinked, her hand flying to her mouth. She nudged her husband. “This is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

Fred addressed Elizabeth. “I assume you’re the artist who drew this?” His wife slowly turned the page around. With a start, Elizabeth realized that Dodie had included the sketch she’d done of the two girls.

Seeing it through their eyes, Elizabeth could see why the drawing had struck an emotional chord. She’d depicted the girls in their nightgowns, hair tousled from sleep, standing underneath the arched doorframe that led into the kitchen. In the picture, Dodie had her arm protectively around her little sister, while Betsy leaned against her sister for support. Their faces showed expressions of contentment. Elizabeth had drawn it quickly, without thinking about it too much. She’d been in the zone. So many times her best work came about that way. “Yes, I drew that,” she said.

“You didn’t say you were an artist,” Caroline said.

“I’m not really an artist,” Elizabeth said, feeling sheepish.

“Oh yes you are!” Caroline said. “This is phenomenal. You’ve captured the girls perfectly. I can keep this?”

“Of course.”

“I’m going to frame it and hang it where it can be seen and appreciated every day.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

“Like it? I love it.” Caroline spread it across her lap and stared. “Do you paint as well?”

“No, I work in marketing.” Seeing their confused faces, she clarified. “At an advertising agency. I used to think I’d be an artist, but it’s hard to make a living that way, so now I mostly just dabble in my free time.”

“But you’re so talented!” Caroline said, enthusiasm in her voice. “If you can create something this meaningful using drawing pencils, there’s no telling what you can accomplish. Promise me you’ll stop dabbling and seriously apply yourself to creating art. The world needs more beautiful things.”

Elizabeth felt a smile stretch across her face. “I promise.”

Caroline turned her attention back to the drawing. “I’ve been wanting to have the girls’ silhouettes done by a studio in town, but this is so much better. I don’t know how you did it, but you managed to perfectly depict their personalities, with Dodie taking charge of her sister and Betsy looking sweet and sleepy. The details are amazing.”

In the stereo cabinet, the Sinatra album had finished and another record dropped into place. A woman’s voice began to sing “White Christmas.”

Betsy got up from the floor and came to her mother’s side, then whispered something in her ear. “What, sweetie?” The

little girl handed her mother what looked like a small square of white paper. Holding it in her palm, Caroline read aloud: “*Angelo’s Driving Service. I’ll take you where you need to go. And there’s a phone number.*” She glanced up at Elizabeth. “Is this yours?”

“It must have fallen out of my pocket.” She thought back to going outside to get the presents from the trunk of the car. She’d pulled her gloves out of her pockets. It had to have happened then.

Funny, she’d forgotten that Angelo had even given her a card, but now she could hear his words in her head. *Call me when you need another ride.*

Not *if*, but *when*. How very curious.

“Is that the driver who delivered you?” Fred asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

“Yes.” She got up to take the card from Caroline, but Fred took it instead.

He said, “He dropped you off in a snowstorm without checking that you’d arrived safely. And then the power went out and the phones were dead. Thank goodness you found our house. You could have died. If I were your father, I’d read him the riot act.”

This was not going in a good direction, but there was no way to tell them that Angelo had in fact dropped her off at the Claremore and that what had happened next had nothing to do

with him. “He seemed like a good guy,” Elizabeth said. “And I’m fine, so it all worked out in the end.”

“You’re a nice young lady, but you don’t need to make excuses for him. This wasn’t handled correctly.” Fred held the card up between two fingers. “If you don’t mind, I’m going to give him a call. If I don’t straighten him out, this might happen again to someone else’s daughter.”

“But I—” Elizabeth couldn’t get the words out fast enough. Fred had already headed into the kitchen.

Caroline got up and put her arm around Elizabeth. “Don’t worry about it, dear. Just let Fred handle it.” She leaned in and conspiratorially added, “I’ve learned that men usually get better results when there are complaints involved. It’s a sad truth, but that’s the way of the world.”

CHAPTER 16

WHILE THE GIRLS PLAYED with their new toys, Elizabeth paced around the room, waiting anxiously. The call seemed to go through to someone, since she heard bits of Fred's end of the conversation—he called her a “nice young lady” and said she'd been “left stranded and *could have died*.”

As the conversation went on, Fred became less strident, even sounding a little apologetic. “I understand,” he said at one point, and later, “That's much better.”

Upon his return to the living room, he was grinning. “Good news!” he said. “Angelo apologized profusely. He realized that you'd been left in a bad way, and he felt terrible about the fact that you were out in the storm.”

Fred actually talked to Angelo? How was that even possible?

Fred continued. “He told me he managed to track down your family and they're waiting for you. He'll be here in twenty minutes to pick you up and take you to them. And”—

he held up one finger to make a point—“Angelo will not be charging you for the return trip. I made sure of that.”

“See!” Caroline said, a smile crossing her face. “I told you my husband was good at handling these kinds of things.”

Despite her spinning thoughts, Elizabeth managed to say, “Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Don’t think anything of it,” Fred said with a wave of his hand, indicating it was nothing. “After what you’ve done for my girls, it was the least I could do.”

As the twenty minutes ticked by, Elizabeth silently watched as Dodie sat cross-legged under the tree, reading to Betsy in a way that was not too different from how her grandmother read books to her when she was a little girl. The craziness of the situation struck her once again. She was sitting in a chair in her grandmother’s living room in 1957, watching her grandmother, at age ten, read to her great-aunt, who was only four. Meanwhile, her great-grandfather stoked the fire with a poker, while his wife was in the kitchen getting lunch ready. A touching family scene, but one that had happened before she was even born.

She had so many questions. Since Betsy survived, would she now be alive in 2022, or would some other crisis befall her in the upcoming years? And if she were alive in Elizabeth’s time, what about her grandmother, who’d passed away from a heart attack? What good would it do to gain a relative she didn’t know when she’d already lost one who was close to her heart? She was sure Betsy of 2022 would be a nice old lady,

but no one could replace her grandmother. Angelo had told Fred he'd tracked down her family, but "family" was a general term that could mean anything, including her parents.

And was it really Angelo on the phone? Because if so, she had a lot more questions.

So many questions it made her head spin.

She was so lost in thought that when Fred called out, "Someone's here," it startled her. His announcement caused the girls and Angus to stop what they were doing and get up off the floor to gather at the window. Elizabeth stood behind them, watching as a long yellow vehicle rolled to a stop on the driveway. It had a large metal grille in front, with hooded headlights on either side and tailfins in the back. It would have been the star of any classic car show. Once someone saw it, they'd never forget it.

Elizabeth was positive she'd never seen this car before in her entire life.

"A Ford Thunderbird," Fred said approvingly. "Nice."

Caroline, wiping her hands on her apron, came out of the kitchen to join them.

"Is that Angelo?" she asked Elizabeth when a dark-haired man exited the vehicle.

Elizabeth squinted and then her jaw dropped. Despite the change in his winter jacket and a new, more severe haircut, this was indeed the guy who'd driven her from the airport to the Claremore the other night. "Yes, it's him."

When Angelo came to the door, Fred fell into dad mode, shaking the man's hand and making him promise to take care of "our Elizabeth," a phrase that almost made her cry. There was a round of goodbyes, then, done quickly because Angelo was waiting in the open doorway.

Fred gave Elizabeth's shoulder a squeeze, but Caroline gave her a full-on hug and said, "I think you were heaven-sent to be with our girls when we were away. I'm so grateful to you for that."

"Hey!" Dodie objected. "I was the one who went to get the doctor."

"I know, sweetie," her mother said. "Dad and I are proud of you."

Tears sprang to Elizabeth's eyes, the realization of something profound and impossible coming to an end, connections made that she couldn't even have envisioned days ago.

She crouched down to say goodbye to little Betsy, then straightened up to address Dodie. "You were really brave to go out in the snowstorm by yourself," she said. "I was impressed."

"You were pretty helpful too," Dodie admitted begrudgingly.

"I have a feeling you'll have a good life, Miss Dodie." Elizabeth blinked back the tears, knowing this might be the last time she would see her grandmother.

Dodie lifted her chin. “Oh, I know I’m going to have a good life.”

“And when you get to be an old lady, can you please make sure you get regular checkups for your heart? It’s very important for you to remember that.”

Dodie nodded, then beckoned for Elizabeth to come closer. When she did, Dodie rose up on her tiptoes to whisper in her ear, “I’m never going to forget you, Elizabeth.”

“Believe me, I’ll never forget you either.”

CHAPTER 17

ELIZABETH CLIMBED INTO THE passenger side and gave Angelo an appraising look, but he didn't say a word, just started up the car. As they backed out of the driveway, she saw her relatives waving from the front window, the brightly lit Christmas tree in the background. She returned their waves, only letting her hand drop when the car was out of sight. Flakes of snow swirled across the car window, landing on the glass and disappearing into nothing. The inside of the car was quiet except for the hum of the car's engine.

Elizabeth finally broke the silence. "Can you please explain what's going on here?"

Angelo shook his head. "I'm not sure what you mean. I'm just the driver." His gaze was on the road ahead, but his mouth quirked into a grin.

"And yet, all of this circles back to you. I think you know more than you're letting on."

“That may be so.” He laughed. “But I think it’s better if you figure it out for yourself.”

“I know I traveled back in time and helped save the life of my grandmother’s sister.”

“Well, see, you’ve got it all figured out.”

“But how did it happen? And why?” They were approaching the covered bridge now. He slowed as they entered.

“Do you remember me telling you that if you made a wish on the brightest star on Christmas Eve, it would be granted?”

“Yes, but ...” Her mind went back to that moment, and she remembered what she’d wished for. *I wish I could see Grandma one more time.* She’d made the wish and then it came true. Not really what she’d had in mind, but technically it had been granted. “So where are you taking me now?”

“Home,” he said. “I think you’ll be pleased when you see what you find there.”



The Turner family stopped waving when the taillights became glowing dots in the distance. Dodie’s mother turned to her dad and said, “Her story didn’t really add up, did it?”

“No.” Her father shook his head. “I’m not sure how she could have been lost. There’s nothing but houses on this road, and the Claremore home won’t be finished for another year or

two. Why would her grandmother want to meet her there? It doesn't make sense."

"And why would a driver drop someone off in a snowstorm?"

"I think she must be rich, if she can hire someone to drive her around."

"She didn't look rich." Her mother looked thoughtful. "But she is a talented artist."

"I guess we'll never know the whole story, but I'm glad she was here to help the girls. Maybe Dr. Mackey will be able to tell us more the next time we see him."

"Maybe." The timer in the kitchen dinged, and her mother excused herself to go back to her cooking. Betsy was on the couch now, with a book lying open on her lap. The excitement had taken its toll on her, and her eyes were droopy with fatigue. Her father followed her mother into the kitchen. Dodie heard him offering to help, and then her mother said something that made him laugh.

They were all together in their warm, cozy home. Angus was asleep in front of the fireplace, snoring. Dodie felt the joy of Christmas aligned with a tinge of regret that she'd never experience this day again. Good days only happened once. But luckily, that was true of bad days as well.

The adults had been incredulous that Elizabeth had showed up in time to help with Betsy's illness, but it didn't surprise Dodie at all. Her mother had told her that if you make a wish

on the brightest star in the sky on Christmas Eve, it would surely be granted, so when she took Angus out that night, she'd wished for help in getting Betsy's fever to go down. Elizabeth arriving just in time for her to go to the doctor had clearly been the answer to her request.

It hadn't happened the way she'd intended, but that was the thing with wishes. They had their own way of doing things.

CHAPTER 18

AFTER PASSING THROUGH THE covered bridge, Elizabeth sat back to watch the snowflakes decorate the windshield. Angelo hadn't been as forthcoming as she would have liked, but he was right, she'd managed fine on her own so far.

When she finally took note of the landscape by the side of the road, her sense of direction was thrown off course. They'd left her grandmother's house a few minutes ago, but from what she could tell, they were now going back in the direction from which they'd just come. Ahead on the right was Grandma's place once again, confirming what she'd thought. As Angelo pulled into the driveway, she saw the gnome on the front porch and the pine tree. The tree hadn't existed in the yard in 1957, but now it towered over the roofline. A giant inflatable Frosty the Snowman stood in the middle of the yard, his outstretched hand waving in the breeze. Christmas lights lined the gutters and the peak over the garage, as well as being wrapped around the pine tree.

“That’s weird,” she said as the car came to a halt.

“What’s weird?”

“My grandmother never decorated for Christmas. Never.”

Angelo shrugged. “Maybe she got into the Christmas spirit this year.”

She turned to look at him. “And how did we get here when we weren’t going this way at all? In fact, a few minutes ago we were going in the opposite direction.”

“Really?” His eyebrows furrowed as if giving it some thought. “Must have been a magic bridge.”

“Could you please talk to me? I’m trying to make sense of this,” Elizabeth said. “Did someone else put up the lights, or is my grandmother still alive? I have to know. Please tell me.”

“Of course, I’ll be glad to get your luggage out of the trunk for you.”

So he wasn’t going to answer. She got out of the car and followed him to the back of the vehicle. The Ford Thunderbird hadn’t changed in appearance, but now the license plate had the word “Collector” at the top.

As Angelo opened the trunk, she saw her suitcase, the very one she’d left at the Claremore the day before. He hoisted it out and walked around the car with it, finally setting it down in front of her grandmother’s walkway. She followed. “I get it. You’re not supposed to give me too much information. But I have to know who and what I’m going to find inside the house.” Her breath came out in cold mists, and her heart

accelerated as she gulped in air. “I can’t knock on the door and not know. I’m so afraid of what I’ll see.” She leaned over and gripped her knees. “I think I’m having a heart attack. Seriously, I’m about to pass out.”

“You’re fine. Don’t worry,” he said soothingly. “You won’t have to knock on the front door.”

“Why not?” She straightened up to face him, but found herself alone. He’d been there one moment and was gone the next. Turning around, she noticed the car had vanished as well. It was as if Angelo and an enormous yellow Thunderbird hadn’t been there a second ago.

Another turn of events that if shared would make it sound like she’d lost her mind.

The front door opened. Standing there was her grandmother, who called out, “Elizabeth?” And then a second later, “Elizabeth!” Grandma rushed down the snow-dusted walkway without a coat on, leaving the door open behind her.

Something lifted in Elizabeth’s heart, the burden of loss cast aside. Wrapped in Grandma’s loving hug, tears flowed down her cheeks. Without realizing it, she’d been holding them back for hours.

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry,” Grandma said, stroking her hair.

Elizabeth stepped back to take in her grandmother’s face. “Why are you sorry?”

“I’m sorry that what’s-his-name broke up with you and that your job let you go. And I’m also sorry that your parents are

on a cruise at Christmastime. Alan and Linda offered to cancel it, but I told them not to be silly.” She took hold of Elizabeth’s shoulders and leaned in. “We’ll have fun, I promise. This will be a Christmas you’ll never forget.”

“It already is, Grandma.” She picked up her suitcase. “Being with you ... well, there’s no way it could get even better.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Elizabeth followed her grandmother inside. After the door shut behind them, she slipped off her shoes and walked into the living room, relieved to see it furnished with all the familiar pieces, along with a fully decorated Christmas tree. A pile of wrapped gifts waited next to the nativity scene on the floor.

The fire in the fireplace cast a warm glow. Three stockings hung on the mantel.

“It looks beautiful,” Elizabeth said.

“I have a surprise for you. Another visitor,” her grandmother said with a sly smile. “Wait till you see!” She rubbed her hands together and yelled toward the kitchen, “You can come out now!”

An older lady with a head of silver curls emerged from the kitchen, a smile stretching across her face. She walked toward Elizabeth with outstretched arms. “Well, if it isn’t my beautiful namesake. Bring it in.”

Elizabeth said, “Great-Aunt Betsy? Is it you?”

“Great-Aunt Betsy?” She pulled Elizabeth into an embrace. “My word! I haven’t been called that since sixth grade when I officially switched to Liz. Betsy was my baby name.”

“I still call her Betsy sometimes,” Grandma said with a chuckle.

“Even though I’ve told her not to, many times, I might add.” They laughed in the comforting way of sisters who’d shared every joy and sorrow, and in that moment, a flood of memories came to Elizabeth, the equivalent of a collage of Polaroid pictures coming into focus, showing everything in her life that was different and better because of Grandma’s sister. The great-uncle and all the cousins who filled the house during family gatherings. The sadness when both sisters lost their husbands within a year, but the solace they got in being there for each other. Aunt Liz looked at Elizabeth. “You’d think she’d treat me better, seeing as I was the one who insisted she see the doctor when she was so tired last year.”

Grandma nodded. “The doctor said that without that stent I could have died.”

“See!” her sister crowed. “I saved your life.”

“Finally, you paid me back for the time I saved yours when you were four. I only had to wait sixty-some years!”

Elizabeth took in the two of them and wiped tears from her eyes. She loved them both so much, with a fierceness she’d never felt before. Behind her aunt’s head, she spotted a framed piece of artwork hanging on the wall. Her sketch of the two sisters on Christmas morning 1957.

Her new collection of memories put the pieces together for her, helping her remember that this particular drawing, *her* sketch, had been hanging in that exact spot her entire life. It was, in fact, the reason she'd been inspired to become an artist herself. The idea made her smile.

A gray tabby cat walked into the room, winding his way around Grandma's legs until she stooped to pick him up. "Oh, you sweet boy," she said, and then looking at Elizabeth, "Mackey always has to be included in the party." The words were no sooner out of her mouth than Elizabeth remembered Mackey in all his incarnations—from his kitten days onward. She hadn't known how he'd gotten his name before, but now it was clear. Another piece of the puzzle snapped into place.

After that, the day only got better. They had dinner at the Claremore and made small talk with Midge, who didn't remember meeting Elizabeth at all. This was fine, because it made the conversation much less awkward. Great-Aunt Liz talked about her kids and grandkids, bringing Elizabeth up to speed on all of their doings. "We celebrated Christmas last week so I could be here with you," she said as the server cleared their plates away. "It's nice to have someone else cook and serve the dinner for once."

Afterward, back at Grandma's, they opened presents while playing Frank Sinatra's Christmas album. Her grandmother served her famous jam thumbprint cookies with cups of eggnog. Great-Aunt Liz insisted on adding a half shot of brandy to her eggnog, and in the interest of being amenable, Grandma and Elizabeth did the same. "Liz has been trying to

make spiked eggnog a family tradition for years now,” Grandma said with a grin.

As the clock struck ten, her great-aunt got up off the couch and excused herself to go to bed. “I’ll leave you two to talk,” she said, giving Elizabeth a kiss on the cheek. “See you tomorrow.”

Grandma said, “Good night, Liz.” After her sister was out of earshot, she said, “I’m so glad you’re moving in with me. You know you’re welcome to stay as long as you like.” She rubbed behind Mackey’s ears, the cat lying contentedly across her lap.

“I appreciate it. Thank you.” Elizabeth couldn’t imagine leaving anytime soon now that she had more time with her grandmother.

“And I had another idea,” Grandma said. “Food for thought. Why don’t you hold off on looking for a job for a bit and use the time to pursue your artwork? You have such talent. It would be a waste not to share it. The world needs more beautiful things.”

The world needs more beautiful things.

“I’ve actually been dabbling with creating a graphic novel for children,” Elizabeth said. “It’s in the beginning stages.” Just a start, but working on it had ignited a spark of the old joy she’d had in creating artwork.

“Well, there you go!” Grandma said. “Take the time to work on your project. You know it’s never too late to become what you were meant to be.”

“I hate to live off of you, though.”

“Pfft.” Grandma gave a dismissive wave, reminding Elizabeth of her great-grandfather Fred. “Think of me as a patron of the arts. My gift to you.”

She had no way of knowing that her mere existence was already a gift. When the fire had burned down to ash and Elizabeth could barely keep her eyes open, she reluctantly agreed with her grandmother that both of them should turn in for the night. She’d given Grandma a hug and was heading out of the room when her grandmother called her back.

“Yes?”

Grandma held out a small piece of paper. “This dropped out of your pocket.”

Elizabeth took it from her hand. It was a business card, yellowed with age. At the top it said: *Angelo’s Driving Service. I’ll take you where you need to go.* Below that was a phone number and a name: *Angelo Gabriel.* “You saw this fall out of my pocket?”

“Actually, my sister did. Some time ago.” And then her grandmother, who she’d never seen wink in her entire life, gave her an exaggerated wink accompanied by a grin. “Good night, Elizabeth. Sweet dreams.”

“Sweet dreams, Grandma. See you in the morning.”

“Oh, and Elizabeth?”

“Yes?”

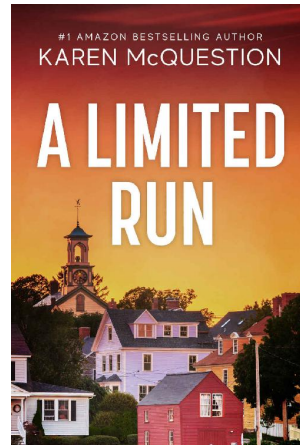
“Tomorrow, remind me to tell you the story of our family’s Christmas Eve in 1957. It was a true Christmas miracle, one I can recall as if it were yesterday. I think you’ll find it fascinating.”

Elizabeth grinned as a warm glow filled her heart. “Looking forward to it.” And she tucked the business card into her pocket and headed off to sleep.



The author loved writing *A Time-Travel Christmas* and hopes you enjoyed the story. If you did, she’d love to see your thoughts in a review, (if you’re the review-leaving type). Even a few sentences would be appreciated.

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And last but never least, I need to acknowledge my readers. Your continued interest and positive reviews keep me happily at work writing more. Being able to write fiction is my own version of a Christmas miracle.

Thank you.

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