

IVORY FIELDS

The Christmas Miracle



XMAS
with you
BOOK ONE



The Christmas Miracle

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BOOK ONE

IVORY FIELDS



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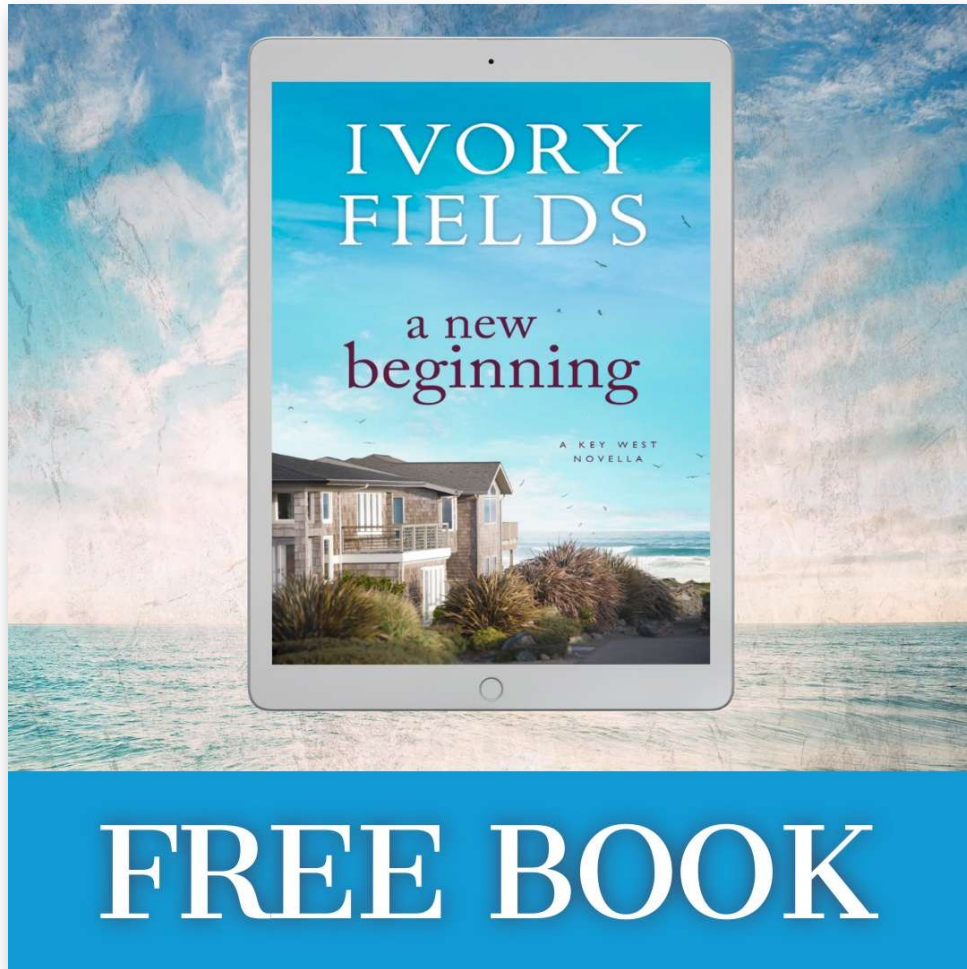
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Chapter One



“**Y**our breath is hot and smelly. We have to do something about that, or you can’t sleep with me anymore,” Winnie Proctor said.

It was an idle threat because she didn’t like to sleep alone. Her eighty-pound husky mix not only had bad breath, but he snored too. Winnie put up with Mutton since it was a whole lot better than the men she knew who wanted to take his place. She had a few serious relationships, but a deal breaker eventually came along, and neither was willing to compromise. There was Nelson, a producer at Channel Three who was always looking for an excuse to move back to LA. When they were both offered jobs there, she said no because she didn’t want to leave her father, and her sister Rosemary had just had her first baby. He chose LA and never looked back, and Winnie recovered from Nelson rather quickly.

The most recent flop was two years ago, and he was allergic to dogs. Dashiell had the audacity to ask that she get rid of Mutton, and he actually thought she would do it. It was the way he asked her to make such a huge sacrifice to accommodate him. He went to Tampa, and she remained in Erie, Pennsylvania. Again, Winnie recovered with no long-term damage.

Winnie turned on her nearby light and was thrilled when the room was illuminated. The city of Erie was encased in ice along with a good portion of nearby towns on the lake. An early freeze followed a rainstorm and power was out for most of Erie. Her job as a camerawoman meant she would go on a

few remote shoots and be driven around in a monster truck. She drove a tin-can-like EV, but Axel Dodge, one of the reporters had the truck, so they drove together. Since most of the city was without power, not many people could watch television, but they forged ahead regardless.

Winnie was still in bed when her phone chimed. Before looking at the screen, she guessed it was someone from her family reminding her that Thanksgiving was on Thursday. She didn't live under a rock and worked in the media, so she could hardly forget. Expecting her younger sister Rosemary, she answered.

"I know it's on Thursday and I'll bring rolls and cranberry sauce," Winnie said in a sleepy voice.

"Don't you dare buy it in a can," her friend Janey Laken said. She laughed.

"Janey, I thought you were Rosemary. What happened to your girls?" Winnie asked.

Janey had three daughters under eleven and the only time she had the opportunity to call was when they went to bed. If the phone rang at eleven, Winnie knew her friend was in her jammies enjoying a glass of wine and wanting to talk.

"They're officially on Thanksgiving break. Remember when we had two days off for the holiday? They have the whole week off now and soon the two-week Christmas break is here. I feel for the households that have to pay for childcare – I'd be in the poorhouse if that were me.

To answer your question, the girls are spending two nights with Aunt Gert. She's seventy and I thought all three girls would be too much for her, but she insisted. The woman has more energy than we do at forty-six."

"It's a change of pace for them and I'm sure they're on their best behavior. Pearl and Jade are pretty obedient, but I see Ruby as the little hellion. She's approaching the tween years, and who knows what she has in store for you and Barry." Winnie laughed.

“I blame you for Ruby’s insolence. She’s your goddaughter and some of her habits remind me of you at eighteen. I was a little scared of you when we first met,” Janey said.

“That didn’t last long because you realized I was fun and not scary. I was terrified and in order to cover that up, I decided to be loud. We were all caricatures of ourselves during the first semester because it was our first time away from home. I brought a tennis racket with me to seem athletic when I had never stepped foot on a court.”

“I’d like to spend the morning walking down memory lane with you as I lounge in bed with a cup of coffee, but I was calling for a reason. I want to invite you to Mystic,” Janey said.

“What’s the motive? I never wait until I’m invited, I just tell you I’m coming, and you do the same. Are you dying?” Winnie asked.

“No. I’m not dying and that isn’t something you should joke about.”

“Oh, come on. If we’re not dying, we’re dead. What’s up?” she asked.

Janey and Winnie met on their first day of freshman year at Boston College. They were on the same floor of the dorm and had roommates they didn’t much care for. They were both looking for reasons not to go back to their room and ended up doing things together. Janey’s twin brother Chance made them a triumvirate who did almost everything together. The Laken twins lived in Mystic, Massachusetts where they had grown up and Winnie visited at least half a dozen times per year.

Winnie considered staying in Boston after graduation, but she was offered an internship in Philadelphia. Family issues drew her home to Erie and that’s where she remained. Her father had a heart attack and having lost her mother, she didn’t want to miss time with her Dad. Dale recovered quickly and he had hardly any lasting effects. He encouraged Winnie to spread her wings and leave Erie, but she was comfortable and liked her job.

“I want to see you, of course, but Chance needs you, although he won’t admit it. He’s chairman of the Mystic Christmas Festival again this year and it’s a lot. Permits and other legal issues are really slowing him down because so much of it has changed from last year. He’s also dealing with work and Sammy who just turned three. Then, of course, there’s his marriage to Mary which is a full-time job in and of itself. It used to be a simple small town gathering to celebrate the season, but it’s grown, and people come from all over the North Shore to visit.”

“Why isn’t Chance calling to ask for help?” Winnie asked. “We’re as close as you and I.”

“You know Chance as good as me, and he has a Superman complex. He thinks he can do it all, but he’s only human and reluctant to ask for help,” Janey said.

“If he’s Superman, then Mary is his kryptonite. I’m surprised she’s not pitching in, but she probably gets a kick out of seeing her husband struggle.”

“Sounding very catty – you really don’t like my sister-in-law. That sounds like something I would say.”

“Chance is like a brother to me, and I never thought Mary was good enough for him. I shouldn’t pass judgment, but you won’t tell anyone – right?” Winnie asked.

“Of course not. Especially when I agree with you. So, can I count on you?”

“I’ll come sometime the week after Thanksgiving, and I’ll text you after I get the days off from work. I’ll stay at least a week if that works for you.”

“That’s fine, although my goal will be to keep you here through the holidays,” Janey said and quickly made an excuse to get off the phone so Winnie wouldn’t argue with her.

* * *

“Good work today,” Guillermo said. He was Winnie’s boss at *Channel Three News* and too nice to have the job he did. He

let the on-air talent walk all over him and the overall vibe was chaotic. Did they think they were in New York? Erie was a third-tier market at best and their market was being gobbled up by Buffalo.

“Thanks. I’ve lived through many storms like this, so it comes as second nature to me. Not much you can do about the ice except wait for it to melt. I wanted to talk to you about taking time off before Christmas. I know it’s short notice, but something came up and if possible, I’d appreciate it.”

“You have seniority around here, and of course. Are you interviewing with *CNN* or *National Geographic*?” Guillermo asked with a smile.

It was obvious that Winnie was overqualified for the job she had, and they were all waiting for her to jump to the big time.

“It’s nothing that exciting. I’m spending time with friends in the small town of Mystic, Massachusetts. They don’t even have a local news feed.” Winnie laughed. “You have my number in case something big breaks like, I don’t know, a scandal at City Hall.”

He chuckled because there was always a scandal at City Hall. “Enjoy yourself, Winnie. We’ve got you covered, and your job will be waiting for you upon your return.”

Winnie was dropped off at The Lantern where she had dinner plans. She was meeting Frank, the man she was dating, to tell him that she was leaving town. While she was at it, Winnie would let him know that they should cool their romance. She planned to say that she valued his friendship but didn’t have time for anything else.

Frank asked for the check after Winnie had given him his walking papers. As a way to protect his manhood, he left one parting shot.

“I totally understand your desire to end this little thing we’ve had going. It’s because I consider you a friend that I have to tell you that your best years are behind you. You can’t

go around kicking men like me to the curb. It isn't wise," Frank said.

Winnie wanted to throw a drink in Frank's face and make a scene, but she had too much class for that. "That sounds like something you've said before, no doubt to women who've broken up with you in the past. I know you're wrong and I think you're the one with your best years behind you."

She walked home in the middle of the street where the ice had been melted by passing vehicles and salt. She was losing faith that the right man for her existed. It was similar to the way she had felt about Santa Claus: he just didn't exist. If Santa was alive, he'd be in Mystic and maybe Winnie wasn't too old to believe in Jolly Old Saint Nick.

Chapter Two



The sound of melting icicles and cars speeding through the slush was all Winnie heard on the walk to her father's house. It was a mile, but she hadn't gone to the gym for a couple of days, so stretching her legs felt good. As she approached her father's house, she saw the windows were covered with condensation. There were silhouettes of people milling about and smoke spilled out of the chimney. The celebration was already in full swing.

Winnie's father Dale never remarried after his wife Beth died twenty years earlier. His sisters and friends were always trying to fix him up, but he had no interest. Dale had three kids and five grandchildren, which was plenty to keep him busy. He had been married to the love of his life and anyone else would just be a runner-up. Dale didn't think that would be fair to the woman.

His sister Gert was always bringing women around who she believed Dale might be interested in as a second wife. Rosemary, Tom, and Winnie thought it was amusing and had told Gert their father wasn't interested, but she persisted.

"Doll-face, you made it and not a minute too soon. You're aunt has outdone herself and brought three women for me to meet. Don't these women have families? Who agrees to go to a stranger's house because there is an eligible bachelor present?"

Winnie laughed and shook her head. "Aunt Gert is single. Maybe we should start bringing men to holiday events for her. I don't think a man exists that would be a match for your

sister. Oh, well, she means well and we're lucky to have her in our lives. Aunt Gert has tried so hard to be a mother to us after Mom died. That could never be, but bless her heart for trying."

Winnie made her way into the kitchen and came upon her younger sister, Rosemary. She had three children and two of them were running about while the third was strapped to her chest. Her husband Dave had meant to get a vasectomy after their two children and never got around to it. Their third child was a reminder that that was something he had forgotten to get done. They had a seven-year-old, one who was eight, and, of course, a newborn. Rosemary and Dave were great parents and they thrived on the chaos in their lives.

"Did you bring it?" Rosemary asked.

"Yes, I brought the cranberry sauce, and I made it rather than just opening a can. I used real cranberries and orange rind. The rolls are buttery and made with sage to add an extra punch."

"Whatever. Your fancy taste is too much for the kids, but the adults will love it."

"Next time, specify if you want something tasteless," Winnie said. "You didn't specify that I should cater to picky eaters."

Tom Proctor strolled into the kitchen with a gourmet salad and one that was basic so the kids wouldn't complain. Although, the chances were they wouldn't touch the salad. "Do I have to moderate a disagreement already?"

Tom was the oldest Proctor sibling at forty-eight. He was a lawyer and amicably divorced from his wife, Lainey. His two kids were in high school and the older one was just as straitlaced as Tom. His son Gavin wore only black with heavy eyeliner. He was also a musical genius and the most interesting person in the Proctor family.

"We're sisters and we're supposed to disagree," Rosemary said. "We agree on all the stuff that matters."

"How are you, Tommy Boy?"

“Good. I have the boys this Thanksgiving and that’s always a good thing. Sawyer’s debate club is going to a national competition in DC and Gavin is painting his room black.”

“Good for Gavin,” Winnie said. “He dances to the beat of his own drummer.”

“Curious, Winnie. Without children, what do you do with all your free time?” Tom asked. He said whatever was on his mind and Winnie was used to it. He rarely meant to be insulting or inappropriate.

“One thing I don’t do is obsess about not having kids. I work six days a week, work out, volunteer, and take still photos on walks throughout the city. Don’t worry – I’m not bored and lonely.”

“Sounds like you’re busier than I am,” Rosemary joked. She picked at a roll to remove any visible sage from the rolls. Her kids didn’t like any green stuff in their food.

“You guys are going to miss me for Christmas because I’m going to Mystic,” Winnie said.

“I love that for you,” Rosemary said. “Mystic is the prototypical small New England town and it’s especially known for its charm at Christmas. I hear they have an amazing festival.”

“Yea, and Chance is the chairman of the festival. Helping him is the main reason I’m going, but I welcome the excuse to spend the holiday with the twins.”

“Is Frank going with you?” Rosemary asked.

Hearing his name made Winnie’s skin crawl. “No. Frank and I parted ways, and it wasn’t pleasant.”

Tom heard her comment and stopped what he was doing. “Do I need to beat the guy up? Did he lay a finger on you?”

“No – nothing like that and if he had touched me, he wouldn’t be walking right for a week. He told me that my best years are behind me – do you guys think I look old?”

“Seriously? No way. You look better than I do and I’m the younger one. Frank’s the one showing his age with his pot belly. He should lay off the hair dye and let the grey come in because he’s not fooling anyone. Your green eyes and perfect skin are just as they were at my wedding fifteen years ago. I have that picture of you in my den and it’s the only time I wish we shared the same genes. Good riddance to him.”

“Thank you, sis. His comment stayed with me, and I started to believe it was true. I’m usually pretty thick-skinned about those things, but this one surprised me. It could be that next year I’ll be in my late forties and no longer mid, which means fifty is just over the horizon. My break is coming at the right time because I’m in a bit of a rut both professionally and socially,” Winnie said.

They remained in the kitchen chatting until they were drawn out by Aunt Gert. Winnie liked as well as loved her siblings. If she were stranded on a desert island, she’d like them to be with her along with Chance and Janey Laken. Her friends and family made being an almost middle-aged woman more than tolerable. Winnie counted herself lucky in that regard.

Winnie’s father opened with grace. They considered letting someone else do it, but no one wanted to be compared to Dale Proctor.

“For starters, I’m thankful and honored to have so many friends and family to share this table with. From my older sister Dee to little Merriam and everyone in between, I’m thankful for you all. We don’t look alike and some of us have accents different from others. I’m thankful for those differences because it makes each one unique with a perspective to add. Sorrow, joy, and everything in between – we’ve experienced it all at one time or another and leaned on someone at this table for support. Let’s all be thankful for our shared humanity and thank God for the bounty we are about to receive.”

As always, he hit it out of the park and set a perfect tone for the meal.

Dinner was winding down and the turkey sat as an abandoned carcass in the middle of the table. Aunt Gert gave everyone an option of pumpkin or apple pie...ala mode or not. The Proctor siblings had both because they claimed it was tradition, although no one knew its origin. Dale pulled a fast one on the woman he was seated next to. He slid into Tom's seat, which was next to Winnie when he got up.

"I hear you're going to Mystic for Christmas and I'm thrilled you're taking time off. If I were your age, I'd do anything possible to get out of this city. You're too talented to be floundering at *Channel Three News*," Winnie's dad said. "Your skills are being wasted on local news. There's a whole world out there to explore."

"I like it here," Winnie said unenthusiastically.

"I know you think I need you and I hate to disappoint, but I don't. Rosemary and Tom are here with my diverse collection of grandchildren. If I need you, I'll call."

"Sounds like you're kicking me out of the state of Pennsylvania."

"I'm not. I love you to pieces, Winnifred. You know that you look like your mother and have her kind heart as well. You've been a comfort to me since she left and now, you deserve more."

"I've put out feelers in the last year and I've been too busy to respond to some of the messages I received. A career move is something that has been in the back of my mind for a long time. I'll keep you posted."

There was crosstalk and a lot of laughter at the table as they finished up dessert. No one was moving, which was fine with Dale and the rest of the family. A good time at the holiday table was never broken up. He always said they could stay until breakfast, and he'd serve them up eggs.

Cousin Becky drank too much as always, and Aunt Patsy bickered with her husband Tony of fifty years. Winnie was just glad Aunt Gert hadn't grilled her about her love life. She'd

slip out and Winnie would be in the clear until they got together for Easter. It was something to be thankful for indeed.

Aunt Gert's ride was arriving any minute to pick her up and Winnie felt a tap on her shoulder. "It must be hard not having a husband and seeing Rosemary married with three children."

Winnie winced and smiled as she turned around to see her aunt's sympathetic face. "I'm very happy, Aunt Gert. My life is full, and I have plenty of nieces and nephews to borrow. What about you, has Mr. Right come along yet?"

Aunt Gert smiled. "I guess we're both holding out for perfection. With my luck, he'll probably show up at my funeral," she joked, and they both laughed.

After cleaning with Rosemary, her sister took her three children home, and Winnie was the last one remaining. She found her dad in his favorite chair as if he was waiting for her to come and say goodbye.

"I heard you mention at dinner that you are possibly coming home before Christmas. I hope you wouldn't do that on my account. Christmas is for the kids anyway and we'll have plenty of those. You deserve a Christmas miracle in your life and who knows, maybe Mystic can provide it."

"I have never had Christmas without you," Winnie said.

"You aren't too old to have firsts. I'll be here for Easter, and nothing will have changed. Forty-six is too young to be set in your ways," he said as he brushed his daughter's arm.

"I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too, Doll-face."

Winnie knew now that she was free to spend the holiday in Mystic and feel no guilt.

Chapter Three



The eight-hour drive to Mystic was tedious, but flying took about the same amount of time. She needed to change planes in New York and then deal with airport commutes. Checked bags were necessary so that had to be factored in as well. She stopped in Syracuse to stay with an old friend overnight, which was a delightful way to begin her vacation. The days were short, and she didn't want to drive at night when the streets in the Berkshires might freeze over at night.

It was about forty degrees when she pulled into town, but she cracked her window anyways. The marshy scent of the lower Mystic River told her she had arrived and put her in the right frame of mind. Winnie was so used to the same schedule and people when she was in Erie. It was a more relaxed vibe in Mystic and her priorities weren't being anywhere on time or checking her work emails. She also had replaced the bulky digital work camera with her trusty film loaded Olympus, the digital Nikon, or just her iPhone.

Winnie took quite a few photography courses at Boston College but majored in journalistic studies with a minor in history. Winnie didn't know what she wanted to do with her degree but was drawn to photography. She considered being in front of the camera and was told she had the face for it, but she felt relying on the way she looked was a bad idea. Anchoring the news was not something Winnie ever wanted to do, so she steered clear of on-camera journalism in general. Winnie had piercing, green eyes and shiny, dark hair, but she hoped that her most important traits were not ones you could see.

Photography for Winnie wasn't just about capturing an image. It was more about seeing something that other people didn't see. One of her favorite still photos was one she took of the Old Mystic River Bridge. It was no longer in use and one day she took hundreds of snaps of the dilapidated structure. Winnie nearly fell through the old timbers and came upon a hornet's nest, but it was worth the risk. The bridge was filled with history and voices from the past. She felt lucky to have come upon the structure, as that kind of find is a photographer's dream. Chance owned a climbing gym, and her photographs of the bridge were featured on the walls.

Winnie pulled onto Main Street and she was a block from The Stairway to Heaven, Chance's gym. She changed direction and stopped in for a visit.

"Looks like you're closing early," Winnie said.

Chance was putting the harnesses on the wall pegs and his employee was vacuuming.

"Winnie!" Chance threw his toned arms around her and lifted her off her feet. "You must have stopped here before going to the house, which means I matter more than Janey." He explained that they were closed on Mondays, but he showed up to help the cleaning crew.

Winnie laughed. He and Janey both jokingly claimed to be Winnie's best friend. They weren't otherwise competitive and always cheered for one another in life. She was happy to play the game.

"Not necessarily. She is the one who invited me to Mystic. I hear you might need a hand with the festival."

"You heard right. I'm being pulled in so many different directions. My manager quit, the festival is growing beyond my capabilities, and I have a family to take care of. I'm getting too old for the life I'm leading."

Winnie smirked. "Using age as an excuse at forty-six is lame. You should pay attention to your diet and alcohol intake. When is the last time you got eight hours of sleep?"

“You sound like my doctor. I know all that, it’s just that... forget it. You’re here now and I’m not going to waste time complaining when you can’t do anything about it,” Chance said.

Winnie detected something else was wrong, but he didn’t want to talk about it. Chance would open up eventually because he always did.

“How’s Sammy?”

“He’s everything. I don’t do anything before considering how it might affect my son. He’s three and talks up a storm, not that he always makes sense. It amazes me what mimics children are, so Mary and I watch our language like never before. I asked him how he was doing, and he stretched his arms before saying he was sore after a long weekend and that there weren’t enough hours in the day.”

“Let me guess, he stole your line,” Winnie said. “He was just two the last time I saw him, and he wasn’t quite forming sentences. I had been here, but you and Mary had gone to the Bahamas or some other exotic venue.”

“That was a horrible choice of vacation spots with a baby. Mary booked a room at an upscale resort that wasn’t family friendly. I wasn’t about to leave him alone with a stranger even though Mary insisted the resort babysitters were perfectly safe. We fought the whole time and Sammy fussed. Next time, we’re going to Disney,” Chance said.

“How’s the house?” Winnie said. “You were deep into a renovation project last time I was here.”

“It’s finally done. It’s never easy trying to blend opposite tastes. This is Mystic where every other structure is on the National Registry of Historic Places. Mary wanted a modern aesthetic, and I wanted something that reflects the age of the house. I didn’t want it to look like my grandmother’s house, but I didn’t think a minimalist approach is a good idea with a child. Hopefully, we’ll have at least one more too, although Mary is on the fence about that.”

Winnie could practically see Chance's blood pressure rise as he spoke about Mary. Janey hadn't mentioned that things between them were rocky, so the way he was talking seemed to come out of the blue. Chance had neglected to say one nice thing about his wife. He raked his hand through his wavy, blonde hair.

"Are things okay on the home front as far as you and Mary go?" Winnie asked. She'd never shied away from asking Chance that question in the past. She was hesitant this time because he knew how she and Janey felt about Mary. He would be understandably embarrassed if there were problems.

"Oh, yea. No one ever said marriage was easy." Chance quickly changed the subject. "Janey, Barry, and the girls are out Christmas shopping. Do you want me to follow you back to the house so you can let yourself in?"

"No need. I know where the spare key is kept, and I have a stop to make. The town has never looked better. I wasn't in the Christmas spirit before I got here, but now it can't be helped. If I had an ugly Christmas sweater, I'd start wearing it."

"I like seeing you in the spirit of the holiday. That smile of yours is always infectious and I have a hard time staying blue once I see it," Chance said.

Chance walked Winnie out to the car and light snow circulated in the breeze. If it were rain, they'd call it a mist. Wreaths were placed on the light poles and garlands crisscrossed the street. Every storefront was festooned, and prizes were given to the best storefronts in several categories.

Winnie looked back at the window of the gym. There was only a store-bought happy holiday sign with a candy cane taped to the bottom. "Nan Butterfield would put you over her knee if she saw that poor excuse for a holiday window. She represented Christmas in this town and entrusted you to keep the spirit alive."

"That window can be your first festival-related job. Janey was asked to judge the entries, but she turned them down because I'm a local business owner. If she didn't, they would

call a conflict of interest and we'd have festival gate 2.0," Chance said.

"What was the first scandal to beset the Mystic Christmas Festival?"

"Mrs. Landell was caught selling hand-knit hats and scarves that were made in China. A tag was left on one of her hats and Judy Johnson found it. Poor Mrs. Landell, Judy was the last person she wanted to figure out she was a sham. Judy tried to file charges and Mrs. Landell had to get a restraining order because she was being harassed. Mystic was divided and it was worse than the last presidential election."

"What was the outcome?" Winnie asked. It sounded much more interesting than a presidential election.

"Their husbands got together and walked out on strike. They stayed at the Harris Inn where they remained until a settlement was agreed upon."

"Did they come up with a compromise?"

"They did. Their husbands cut off their credit cards, and mind you, these are old school women who never had their own bank accounts, and everything was in their husband's name."

"Women like that are vanishing for good reason," Winnie commented. "Continue."

"Mrs. Landell donated all her Chinese made hats to a women's shelter in Boston. Judy stopped harassing her, which had included allowing her Chihuahua to use Mrs. Landell's garden as a toilet. Last year they had booths next to each other and they've started selling their wares on Etsy."

"Good for them. They learned a lesson in personal finance, so that's a good thing."

"I'm so glad you're here. You make me laugh and I'm always in a good mood when you're around. It's like the old days in college and I need a little nostalgia in my life."

"I'm happy to be here. We have so much to catch up on and I'll be here for two weeks at least. I hate to see you

stressed and I'll take anything off your plate that I can. I'm here for you."

"I believe that and it's a good feeling," Chance said. It wasn't the first time she had said that to him and they both knew she meant it.

Chance hugged Winnie and she thought back to all of the hugs they shared in college. She could not have made it through four years at Boston College (BC) without him. It took her a couple of months to realize that an attractive male could be a good friend or a best friend which both he and Janey became.

Chapter Four



Winnie walked down the festive streets of Mystic. The Laken family could trace their family tree back to the Mayflower or so said their Aunt Biddie. Janey and Barry lived in the house that had been in the family for three generations before them. Winnie thought the place was spooky and there had to be ghosts from past Lakens.

Winnie recalled the first time Janey and Chance invited her home to Mystic for a weekend. She had been to their house because Brookline wasn't too far from Mystic, but she had never stayed overnight. It felt like a bonus being best friends with twins, especially a girl and a boy. She had a male sounding board when she had issues with a boyfriend and Janey was always up for some girl talk. What she learned that weekend in Mystic was that they needed confidentiality and Winnie couldn't go blabbing to Janey about something Chance said or the other way around. They were both her close friends, but each relationship was separate.

Winnie had her first experience with that in Mystic that weekend.

"The bathroom is next to the kitchen, am I right?" Winnie got up from the couch in the middle of a television watching marathon.

"No, that one is out of order because the toilet won't flush. This house is a relic and there's always one that isn't working," Janey said. "Upstairs and you'll find it second door to the left. Should I pause it?"

“No need. I have TiVo back in my room. I can’t get enough of Sex and the City, and I must rewatch it three times during the week.”

Winnie got to the top of the stairs and forgot which door it was and which side of the hallway it was on. You’d think she would remember things since she was valedictorian of her high school class. She went with the one she thought was right and opened the door. It wasn’t the bathroom and she found Chance in tears on the bed. Winnie backed out and was going to leave without saying anything, but the floorboard squeaked.

Chance looked up. “You can’t get away with anything in this house. It’s like the house is a living thing and it tells on you. Secrets are impossible to keep around here.”

“Are you okay?” Winnie asked.

“Do I look okay?” he asked back in a snarky voice.

“Whoa. I can just leave if you’re going to be a jerk about it. You never talk to me like that.”

“I’m sorry, but I hate that you found me like this. It’s embarrassing that I’m on academic probation and the only person who knows is my father. I’m not dumb, but I faked stuff in high school. I even cheated a little, but it wasn’t something everyone else wasn’t doing. It’s not like I paid someone to take my SATs.”

Winnie was taken aback. “You got into Boston College which isn’t an Ivy but it’s a very competitive school. You couldn’t have faked your way in there.”

“I had help with that. The older woman, Nan Butterfield, whom I helped when I was younger was on the board of trustees. I think she pulled some strings, plus my father went there. I had tutors in high school, and they helped to some extent, but now I’m on my own and I’m failing.”

“We’ll get you a tutor. I’m sure your father will pay for it,” Winnie said.

“It’s embarrassing and I’m thinking of dropping out. I’m good with numbers, but it’s when there’s a lot of writing that I panic.”

“You’re not dropping out. I’d miss you too much, so we are going to make this work. I’m here for you, Chance,” Winnie said.

He sat up and dried his eyes. “I’ve never believed anyone who’s said something like that to me, but I believe you. I’ll let you help me with the mess in my brain, but you can’t ever tell Janey or anyone else. I have a single room so you can come to me, and no one has to know.”

“You’re asking me to keep a secret from my best friend.”

“I’m your best friend too,” Chance said and stared at Winnie with his convincing blue eyes. “Please keep this secret for me.”

“I’ll try,” Winnie said.

“That’s not good enough. I don’t want the label of whatever the heck is wrong with me to get around campus. My well-meaning sister has a big mouth, and you know how quickly rumors spread. I didn’t want anyone besides my father to know, but now you do. You can’t tell Janey.”

“Is your dad sympathetic?” Winnie asked.

“To an extent. He thinks I should have a handle on things by now. His life is busy with work, this house, and taking care of his father, so he’s stretched to the limit. I don’t fault him for being pissed that I’m on probation, as tuition for two kids at once is mighty expensive.”

“Okay, I will definitely keep it to myself and you can trust me on this. You have to let me work on this with you because it’s for your benefit. If you’re thinking that I’ll put up with your excuses, you’re wrong. I know we can do this and as a team, we’ll work through this,” Winnie said. “One more thing, can you please tell me where the closest working toilet is because I have to pee like a racehorse.”

Chance smiled and showed her the way.

Winnie went back downstairs and rejoined Janey in front of the TV. She didn’t say a word about Chance and his troubles. She never would.

* * *

For the next three and a half years, Winnie helped Chance with his reading issues. After a couple of months with little progress, Chance agreed to see a specialist. He was diagnosed with dyslexia and the doctor couldn't believe the condition hadn't been named sooner. She told them that the majority of cases that went on as long as Chance's were the result of shame and embarrassment.

They worked on techniques that could make dyslexia manageable. He tried tips, tricks, and proven methods. Anything Winnie or the professionals recommended, he tried. Chance told his professors about his diagnosis at the beginning of the term, and they worked with him to make success possible. He wasn't the first student of any of his professors to reveal that they were dyslexic. One of his professors gave him a list of famous people with this condition. It was pages long and included politicians, sports heroes, and even authors. Chance loved Roald Dahl, and to learn he had dyslexia was a huge surprise and inspiration.

Chance went from having a 2.4 GPA to a 3.5 at graduation. Outside of his professors and doctor, Winnie was the only person who knew. He said that someday he'd share his story if it could help other young people.

Winnie learned through that experience what true friendship meant. She knew without reservation that Chance would be there when she needed him most. Their friendship and that with Janey was comforting to her when life seemed unbearable.

Winnie walked into the Yarn Emporium where Christmas music played, and the scent of evergreen was in the air. Janey and Chance's Aunt Biddie had tried on two occasions to teach her to knit, and it hadn't taken. Winnie was too busy to get serious about the productive hobby, but she was sure that the third time would be the charm.

“How can I help you, unless you’re just browsing? I find a yarn shop to be a very cozy place and some people come in with no intention of buying anything,” the friendly saleswoman said. “We have a couple of plush chairs in the back if you just want to enjoy the ambiance. Some people use the space to knit while others just sit.”

“I appreciate your kindness, and now that I know about the chairs in the back, I’ll be sure to use them someday. I’m in town for a couple of weeks and I’ll be taking my first lesson for the third time – if that makes any sense,” Winnie said.

She chuckled. “I had my first lesson four times and now I’ve knit blankets for my dozen grandchildren. I also knit for other people’s grandchildren and hats for the preemies at Boston Children’s Hospital. I turned it into my third act in life.”

“You’re third act?” Winnie asked for clarification.

“Yes. My first act was Wall Street, getting married and having children. I went back to work in my second act and saw the last of my children leave the nest. My third act is retirement in this precious town where I knit, work here, and spend time with dear friends. My grandchildren are what matter most at this juncture in my life.”

“I guess I’m at the end of my first act, but I never married or had children. I suppose that means I’ll have an unconventional second act, or do I skip right to my third one?”

“Don’t you dare! The second act will be a surprise and I have a feeling it will surprise you most of all. Mystic at Christmas is the perfect place for a holiday miracle, but that won’t happen unless your heart is open to it. Now let’s get you set up with some needles and yarn. You have to promise to come back before you leave Mystic and tell me about your Christmas miracle. I’m Kristine with a K.”

“I’m Winnie, and I most certainly will.”

Winnie purchased her third set of knitting needles and red yarn that Kristine recommended. As she was leaving the Yarn Emporium, her phone rang and reflexively, she picked it up

right away. It had been her plan not to answer her phone as a rule when she was on Christmas vacation.

“Hey, you made it to Mystic,” Janey said.

“How do you know? Are you having me followed?” Winnie asked jokingly.

“No, I spoke with Chance, and he couldn’t wait to tell me that he saw you before me.”

“The two of you crack me up. Are you still with Barry and the girls?” Winnie asked.

“I am now but they’re going to drop me off in Mystic and then continue their shopping journey. Are you up for lunch at the Mystic Depot?”

“I can see it from where I’m standing. I’ll get a table for two and wait for you,” Winnie said as she pulled down her new winter hat. It was red and green with a pom-pom on top. Kristine had knit it and given it to her as a good luck token for her second act.

Chapter Five



The Mystic Depot was quaint like the rest of the town, with lace curtains and dark blue shutters on the wood shingled building. Smoke coming from the chimney hinted at an inviting hearth inside.

“Table for two, please,” Winnie said.

“Here’s the menu and a flyer for the Christmas Boat Brigade. Have you ever seen it?”

“No, but I’ll be sure to this year. I bet this is a great place to view the boats as they go by.”

“It’s the best. Nan Butterfield used to stop by every year, and we named the table with the best view in her honor. She used to come with Arlene Laken after Mr. Laken died. I’ll sit you there today if you’d like.”

“That would be fitting as I’m meeting Janey Laken-Pegula, Arlene’s daughter, for a late lunch.”

“Oh, I hope it won’t make her sad to think of her mother. I know she had an unfortunate end. Alzheimer’s is a cruel way to go.”

“It is, but Janey has a beautiful life that I’m sure her mother would want her to enjoy. She remembers her vibrant mother and not the one who slowly slipped away,” Winnie said as she was sitting at a table with a lovely view of the harbor. It was fun to imagine Nan and Arlene sitting in the same spot and what they might have talked about.

Janey walked in and at the very moment, Winnie realized how much she had missed her good friend. Her hair was as blonde as ever and it was cropped short. Janey didn't remember what color hair she had when she started going blonde from the bottle. She swore that was her color hair now and it would be forever. Her hazel, almond-shaped eyes lit up her face and she wore her signature red lipstick. Janey oozed confidence in the way she presented herself. She was on the showy side while her brother was very low key.

Winnie stood and they met with open arms.

“You look amazing, Winnie, as always. Your hair has gotten so long since I saw you last, and I don't see a single grey hair. Is that done by a stylist or is it just one more reason to be jealous of you?”

“It's just boring, long, dark hair. I have good genes, I guess. What my father hasn't lost has gone grey, so I don't know,” Winnie said.

They sat down and ordered salads because they were having pizza with Barry and the girls later in the evening. Janey filled Winnie in on the girl's action-packed lives which were nearly impossible to keep track of. She knew one was crazy about soccer, one ballet and the other was just noticing boys on her radar. Winnie had Ruby figured out, but the other two were a blur at only one year apart. Barry joked that they were hoping for twins because he figured they ran in the family. That didn't happen so they settled for Irish twins instead. Barry was an engineer for a chip manufacturer. He oversaw a lab and not even Janey knew what he did. It had something to do with getting a lot of information on a little wafer.

“The waitress told me that your mother and Nan Butterfield used to come in and sit at this table. What was the deal with that lady? Her fingerprints are all over this town.”

“Mystic as a town wouldn't exist without Butterfield Furniture,” Janey said. “They used power derived from the river and stayed here instead of seeking greener pastures.”

“Oh, my father has a Butterfield writing desk, and says it’s a collectible. They aren’t in existence anymore, right?”

“Not really. They had true artisans from Europe making the furniture, which is probably what your father has. When manufacturing came around, they changed and eventually sold for a sick sum of money. Nan was an heiress with a good heart. She gave to charitable causes and to the beautification of Mystic. Nan never married and had no direct heirs, so everything went to her nephew, Steven.” She made a sour face when she mentioned Steven.

“That’s sad that she never married unless that was her absolute choice,” Winnie commented.

“There are rumors that she had a secret lover, but he was never named. She disappeared back in the 70s for a while and no one knew where she was. Some say she took off with this man, but things didn’t work out. If my mom knew, she didn’t tell me about it,” Janey said.

“I love a good mystery. Was it some tall, dark and handsome man or was it a penniless pauper?”

“I don’t know,” Janey said with a laugh. “She knew my mother all her life because they were both from here. As I said, my mother never told me much about Nan, other than she was like a sister to her. I was going to ask, but then she got sick, and I doubt she remembered who Nan was.”

“Was Nan your mom’s age?” Winnie asked. She was drawn to the woman because she never married and that was the direction she was headed. It was encouraging to hear about happy well-adjusted women who never married or had children. It felt fine to Winnie, but most other people thought there was something wrong with her or a reason she wished to remain unattached,

“No, she was older by about ten years, I think. All that matters is that Steven Butterfield is a jerk and he’s making life difficult for Chance,” Janey said.

“How so? It’s festival related, I assume?”

“He wants to change the festival and take away the charm. It’s the opposite of what his aunt would have wanted.”

“Does he live in Mystic?” Winnie asked.

“He has Nan’s old mansion on the hill, and he plans to gut it and create some hideous, modern behemoth. His main residence is in Boston, where he owns a penthouse, of course.”

“Poor Chance. I’ll have to deal with Steven if I’m going to help Chance and now, I’ll be prepared for him.”

The waitress came and dropped the check. Winnie checked in about how Janey was doing as far as her mother’s death was concerned. She died after a long battle with Alzheimer’s, and it took its toll on Janey especially. It had only been a year and that was a short time to the person grieving. Arlene had lived with Janey, Barry, and the kids up until the final year when they knew she was better served in a care facility.

“Things get better every time I pull a month off the calendar. My mother loved Christmas, and she died around that time, so I thought this time of year would be tough. It’s surprisingly not because Mystic is such a happy place to be around the holidays,” Janey said. “Your visit doesn’t hurt either. I wish you lived here because we could do this more often.”

“I know. Who would have thought we’d be ladies who lunch? Hey, are you interested in coming to The Christmas Boat Brigade?”

“Wouldn’t miss it. The girls like it better than the festival. It’s after dark and the boats are lit up in festive colors. It’s really something to see,” Janey said.

They paid the bill and headed back to Huntington Drive.

* * *

Chance had been summoned to the house on the hill by Steven Butterfield. He remembered when that had meant something good. Nan Butterfield hired him when he was only fourteen to mow her lawn. It was a huge patch of grass, so he used a

riding mower. It was like driving before he got his license, which was a very big deal. Nan was a friend of his mother's, which is how she thought of him. Chance was secretly struggling with school that year, so the timing was perfect.

When Chance could drive, she asked him to drive her places like he was a chauffeur, except she sat in the front seat too. There were times that she didn't have a particular destination in mind, and they'd just explore neighboring towns. It was odd because she wasn't too old to drive but said she didn't like to. Chance didn't complain because she had a Mercedes.

After he graduated college, business school and was looking into opening a climbing gym, she asked him to help out with the Mystic Christmas Festival. He could hardly say no to the woman who had helped him so much. Soon Chance was chairman of the festival board. It went smoothly for years, but now that Steven was in charge, it had almost become more trouble than it was worth.

Steven thought Chance was at his beck and call and would summon him to his home every other night. He wasn't paid for the work he did and agreed to be chairman as a favor to Nan. He also did it for the town of Mystic. If he left, who knows what Steven would do to the event so many residents looked forward to?

Chance rang the buzzer so Steven would open the gate he had installed. What did he think would happen to his house in Mystic? A couple of security guards would have sufficed. He walked up the stone steps and there stood Steve. He was bald with a well-trimmed beard. Chance was usually casually dressed because of his line of work. It hardly made sense to wear a suit and tie at a climbing gym. Steve dressed casually but looked like he belonged in a suit.

"Chance, thanks for making the trip up," Steven said as he invited him inside.

"No problem. I'm curious about what the rush is about."

"I asked you up here before next week's board meeting because I wanted to warn you. There are going to be big

changes and we're implementing them this year."

"Ah, you already made big changes like the cost of booths," Chance said. "I thought we had agreed to do things gradually."

"Successful people don't do gradual. We are having new booths that we'll add on to the ones we have. Starting tomorrow, any locals who haven't signed up are out. I have some friends in Silicon Valley that are dying to show their wares. I do this for them, and they'll owe me big time. We're also having some national chains setting up booths and food trucks from Boston. I want to give the Christmas Festival a whole new vibe."

"I think it's too late to change things so drastically. You haven't been here all your life and don't know what this little festival means to the people of Mystic. I have to advise you against it," Chance said. He placed his hands in his pockets because he was making fists and his knuckles were white.

"Things are changing, Chance. You're a businessman and you know it's silly to keep something operating as is when it isn't making a dime. I want to turn this into a moneymaker and that's going to take bold moves. I'm not going to wait until next year, so I don't alienate the people of this little town. Mystic wouldn't be here if it weren't for the Butterfield name. I want to make the name mean something more than just old furniture. If you aren't on board, I'll have to find someone who is."

"I'll be at the meeting next week. I'm having someone helping me this year and she's coming along," Chance said.

"You aren't talking about Mary, are you?" Steven asked.

"No, Mary is busy with her own job. It's my friend Winnie from college."

Chance was surprised Steven remembered that his wife's name was Mary. She worked for a well-known PR firm, so maybe that's how he knew her.

"I didn't mean to ambush you and I know I've given you a lot to think about. I'll see you and Winnie next week," Steven

said.

“It’s Winnie – Winnie Proctor.”

“Oh, whatever, sorry.”

Steven walked Chance to the front door. He had never been so happy to walk out of Nan Butterfield’s house.

Chapter Six



Winnie walked in Janey's front door, and she was bombarded by Pearl and Jade who were in their soccer and ballet attire respectively. Barry must have loaded them up with sugar because they were on some kind of high. It was candy cane season, so perhaps that was the culprit. One can hardly begrudge a parent for giving into a child's sweet tooth during the holidays.

"Girls, neither of you had practice today," Janey said. "What's with the outfits?"

"We wanted to show Auntie Winnie because she might not be here for my first indoor match. It's not until January 12 and I thought she might want to take a picture of me," Pearl said with her brown hair in a high ponytail. She even wore her cleats and was carrying her water bottle.

"I thought I could dance for Auntie Winnie because she came all this way to see us," Jade said with her brown pigtails bobbing as she spoke.

"I'd love to see it all, but can we wait until I put my bags down because it's been a long day?" Winnie asked. "I want to have a chance to take my camera out too."

"I suppose we can go back to stringing popcorn. I don't know why we can't just buy the stuff because I know they have that at Target. It's right next to the fake trees," Pearl said.

They watched them scamper into the sunken living room. The floor was sprinkled with popcorn, and boxes of ornaments were open on the floor. Winnie was reminded of the holidays

in Erie. It looked like a perfect Christmas scene, and she wished her camera was in her hands. She took out her phone and took one quick photo because it was too perfect to miss. There was always a camera on hand with the phone and the picture quality was so good that everyone was becoming a photographer.

Barry craned his neck to assure the girls were occupied and out of earshot. He gave Winnie a kiss on the cheek and poured all of them a cocktail. Winnie had been a guest enough times for him to know she liked a gin and tonic.

“They’re exhausting. I don’t know how you do it, babe. I’m going to need a vacation from this vacation for sure,” Barry said. “Don’t get me wrong, I love spending time with the girls, and they surprise me how quickly they’re maturing. It’s just that being present every moment takes its toll.”

“Lucky, we have Auntie Winnie here this week to help – right Winnie?”

“I guess so. I was told Chance needed my help and now I’m thinking that was a ploy to get me here.” Winnie laughed. “Where’s Ruby?”

“She’s in her bedroom. You would have been proud of me, babe. She was sure I was going to cave and let her get her third ear piercing. Just as you said she would, Ruby told me you were fine with it, but it had just been a matter of finding the time to take her to the mall,” Barry said. “Can you imagine the fight between the two of us that would have created?”

“Yes, I can imagine, and it would have been ugly. I thought we’d be able to play good-cop bad-cop, but Ruby needs two bad cops. She’s only eleven which is really scary,” Janey said.

“She’ll be twelve next month and then we officially have a teenager,” Barry said.

“Don’t remind me. That kid is going to drive me to drink – oh, I already drink,” Janey joked and lifted her nearly empty glass. “I do love her, though. She’s my first born and from the moment I felt her kick, I knew she’d be just like me. I wish my

mother were here so I could apologize for the heartache I must have caused.”

“Have you cleared out your mother’s room?” Winnie asked delicately. She didn’t want to bring something up that they were trying to avoid.

“No. I was going to do some of it for Janey this week while I’m off,” Barry said.

“I can help. I won’t go through the personal stuff, but the last time I was here, the hospital bed was still in the room. That can’t be good for any of you. We can keep her pictures on the wall and even her things in the closet, but transform it into a place for happy memories,” Winnie suggested.

“You’d do that for me?” Janey asked.

“You know I will. I’ll never forget what you did for me,” Winnie said as she squeezed Janey’s arm.

* * *

Janey had been the one person who could convince Winnie to get out of bed after her mother died. She went through the wake, funeral and took care of everyone in the family that needed taking care of. After that, Winnie crashed like she never had before. Dale Proctor called her to Erie when Winnie hadn’t showered or even gotten out of bed in a week.

“Janey, it’s Dale Proctor and I need help with Winnie. I just lost Diane and I feel like I’m going to lose my daughter next.”

“Is she sick?” Janey asked.

Dale was calling from Winnie’s condo, and she was lying in the bed. She wasn’t responding to a thing he said.

“Physically she’s fine, but it’s like she’s checked out mentally. She’s catatonic and nothing I say is reaching her. I was going to call the doctor to see if she needed to be hospitalized, but I thought I would try you first.”

“I’m glad you did. I’ll be there tomorrow and swing by your place first so I can pick up the key.”

Janey let herself in the next morning after driving all night. Winnie had heard everything her father had said on the phone, and she didn’t think even Janey could pull her out of wherever she was. It wasn’t as if Winnie was intentionally hurting the ones she loved, but she couldn’t work up the courage to emerge from her state.

“Wow, this place is ripe. We have some work to do here, Winnie, and there has never been a challenge we couldn’t meet. Remember our horrible roommates during freshman year? They were so bad, and we were told to stick it out for the semester. We leaned on each other during that lonely time and that ended up as the reason we grew so close. In the future, we’ll look back on this time as just another bonding experience.”

Winnie dove deeper under her covers and wasn’t responding to Janey at all.

“Winnie, you stink, and you have your father worried. Don’t you think he’s been through enough? The least you can do is fake it for his sake. This present state you’re in isn’t working for any of us and we just want you back. Show us the fiery temper that you have and rarely let come out. Throw something or at least raise your voice because a good tantrum will do better than just sitting like a vegetable.”

Janey began cleaning up. She picked up the dirty clothes, started a wash, she ran the dishwasher, vacuumed and lit some scented candles. With all the banging around, Winnie didn’t move.

“You know that the next step is to have you committed to the hospital and I’m beginning to think that’s best. Gone are the days of the padded cell and bars on the windows, so this isn’t a threat. Do you think you need that kind of help because I can help set it up while I’m here?”

Janey had been there for hours and for the first time Winnie established eye contact.

“I don’t need that although some help might be needed. What I need right now is fresh air and a shoulder to cry on,” Winnie said. Her voice was scratchy. She had just started talking with no warning and Janey went with it.

“I’m here and my shoulders are waterproof. It’s nice to see you back among the living. I imagine you went away in your mind because things out here are too tough to deal with. I’ll open a window and we’ll brush that rat’s nest to make you look presentable on our walk,” Janey said.

“Can you call my dad and let him know I’m okay? I heard him calling me, but it was like I was lost in a maze and couldn’t get out.”

“I’ll call him, and he’ll let Rosemary and Tom know you’re okay. You had us all scared, but you’re back now and that’s all that matters.”

“I have to get to my parents’ house and help clear out my mother’s things.”

“You don’t have to do anything. I’m meeting Rosemary at your dad’s house this afternoon and we’re going to go over what needs to be done. Thinking that you have to do everything is what put you in this state. I’m here along with Chance and the rest of your family. We’re here to share the load because most things in life aren’t one-person jobs.”

“I’ll return the favor someday because that’s what best friends do,” Winnie said.

“Thank you,” Janey said.

* * *

Janey joined Winnie in her mother’s room and helped remove some of the old medical paraphernalia. Her mother hadn’t lived with them for the year before she died, and the cleaning was way past due. The house had several extra bedrooms, so it was easy to shut the door and forget about it.

“I’m sorry, but this is depressing and the Arlene Laken I knew would not want to see our sad faces, especially at

Christmas time,” Winnie said. “You must have an upbeat Christmas playlist on your phone. Let’s fill this room with some holiday spirit.”

“That’s what I’m talking about.” Janey played songs from the CeeLo Green *Christmas Album* for starters, and they began swinging their hips as they beautified the room. “This was a great idea. I thought about doing this every time I walked by the door.”

“I’m sure Arlene is swinging to the beat from her perch in heaven.”

“I think you’re right,” Janey said.

“As you said to me once, most things in life aren’t one-person jobs.” Winnie winked.

“I wish I knew of a nice, single guy here in Mystic,” Janey said.

The music couldn’t keep Janey from bringing up Winnie’s least favorite subject. Her Aunt Gert and Tom pointed out the obvious that she was single during Christmas. Winnie had been shocked Janey hadn’t mentioned it sooner.

“I told you about Frank’s parting shot, didn’t I?” Winnie asked.

“Yea and he seemed like a good guy, from what you told me. I guess you finally saw his true colors and you must know without a doubt that he was the wrong guy. Is anyone new on the horizon?”

“I feel like Frank and the men I’ve been dating in the past couple of years have all been the wrong guy. You’re fortunate because you met Barry while you were still in your twenties, and he has watched you grow into the woman you are today. He knows you well, including your flaws and any missteps you’ve made along the way.”

“Newsflash - I have no flaws,” Janey said jokingly. “No, seriously, I am fortunate to have found Barry when I did. I didn’t think he was the one for me because I thought he was too nice, but I was tired. Men before Barry were sexy, risk-

takers or bad boys and I was always making excuses for their flaws.”

“I have too much life behind me to explain it all at forty-six. I feel that when I meet someone new, there’s something I leave out and that something finds a way to break us up. A known commodity is what I need.”

“I was listening to a podcast when I was waiting for the girls to get out of school, and they were talking about how to meet a man when you’re over forty. It’s not easy because most of us have abandoned the bar scene and aren’t in college anymore. Work is the best option, but not for you, I gather.”

“Definitely not. The on-air talent is not my type and the people behind the scenes at Channel Three are mostly married and the ones that are single are gay,” Winnie said.

“You have to network. Let your friends, family and people you know from work know that you’re out there. Have you asked your brother if there are any single attorney’s at his practice?”

“No, but that’s a good idea and I’ll check him. Does Barry know of anyone?” Winnie asked.

“I’ll ask. I wish you weren’t so against the dating apps,” Janey said.

“That’s a rule that’s written in stone – no dating apps. I’ll ask Chance tomorrow if he knows anyone,” Winnie said. “He’s hiring for a new manager and maybe a dreamy man will walk in and apply.”

“You want my brother to hire a guy to be your husband?” Janey asked and laughed.

“I never said husband,” Winnie said.

They wheeled the hospital bed into the hallway and planned to donate it. All the amber bottles were put into a bucket to be turned in at the pharmacy. Some contained expired pills and it had been a bad idea to leave them lying around with young kids in the house. They unrolled an old photo from Woodstock where Arlene had been and loved telling stories about. It was then that they decided to turn it

into an Arlene-themed guestroom. It would be an inviting space in honor of a wonderful woman.

Winnie slept in the room next door and fell asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow. It was vacation time in Mystic, and all was well with the world.

Chapter Seven



Winnie heard Jade and Pearl laughing and joking at the breakfast table. They only had a few days left of school and were no doubt excited about their impending two-week break. She remembered those days because presents from relatives out of town were piling up under the tree. Most of the kids' gifts were coming from Santa Claus, so they hadn't arrived yet.

She was only seven when she stopped believing in Santa Claus because she saw the stash of gifts he was supposed to be bringing. They were in the attic where no one ever bothered to go. Most of the third floor was covered in cobwebs and she had always been told rusty nails were poking out of the floorboards. Winnie was curious why her parents went up there if the nail situation was so dangerous.

Winnie snuck up there when her parents were having their evening glass of wine after the kids were supposed to be in bed. Tom was in his room listening to his iPod Shuffle and Rosemary was fast asleep. Having her own room had its benefits and one of them was being able to sneak out, which she did often when she was older. When Winnie was seven, though, it meant she was free to explore the attic.

There was not a nail to be found and cobwebs were not as bad as her father had described. Winnie thought it was cool up there, and she'd have to bring Tom with her next time so they could investigate together. She saw the door to the storage closet and opened it because what seven-year-old could resist?

It was filled with toys and new sports equipment. They were the presents from Santa, no doubt destined for a spot under the tree in a week. Some were addressed to Winnie, love Santa and the thought that her parents would lie was upsetting. It was over, her Christmas fantasies crushed.

Her parents were shocked when she confessed to the snooping and quickly came up with a plausible excuse. They said that Santa sent them ahead early because he had too many to carry. It would have worked on most kids but not on Winnie.

Despite her feelings, she was glad to find out the myth was alive and well with Jade and Pearl. She wondered where Janey and Barry hid their Santa stash.

She pulled on her jeans, washed her face and was about to head downstairs. Winnie wanted to say goodbye to the girls before they left for school, but before she was able to run downstairs, there was a knock at the door.

“Hi, Ruby. If you keep growing anymore, you’ll be as tall as your mother.” Winnie gave her goddaughter a hug and knew Ruby was upset. She was so much like her mother and held on longer when something was wrong.

“I’m paralyzed with angst,” Ruby said.

It took everything for Winnie not to laugh out loud. Who says that? It was clearly something she picked up from Instagram, Snapchat or TikTok.

“I didn’t see you last night and I thought you might have something going on. What’s up?”

“I have Kelton Reeves for my Secret Santa at school, and I don’t want to screw it up because I kind of like him. I know I’m only eleven, but I’m almost twelve in middle school,” Ruby said.

“There’s no set age for when you start noticing boys as long as it’s not any younger than you are now. You’re probably thinking that Kelton doesn’t even know you’re alive.”

“He really doesn’t. Maybe if I got a third ear piercing, he would. Mom has been meaning to take me, but she’s been too

busy to bring me to the mall. It would be something fun that you and I could do together,” Ruby said as she looked up at Winnie with her doe-like brown eyes.

Winnie was floored that her clever goddaughter would try to pull the wool over her eyes. Ruby was appealing to her kind nature, and she probably thought, as a single woman, the boy angle would work on her.

“I’d be happy to go to the mall to pick out a gift for Kelton. Like your mother and father before me said, it’s a no on the piercing,” Winnie said flatly.

“No one in this house gets me. Most of the girls and some of the boys in the sixth grade have a double piercing in one of their ears. It’s not like I’m asking for a tattoo,” Ruby whined.

“Ruby, your parents have rules that you have to abide by while you’re living under their roof and I’m not going to go against what they’ve put in place. I also doubt most of the sixth grade has double piercings. You attend a small private school that’s known to be quite conservative.”

“I’ll just end up doing it myself with a needle and a potato.”

“Honey, that’s not going to attract guys. They want a fun and brave girl who doesn’t need a double piercing to prove she’s cool. If they don’t see that, they aren’t worth it. Don’t ruin the Christmas season by giving your parents a hard time. I know it seems like a lot to hang with the family, but you’ll look back on these times fondly someday,” Winnie said.

“I love you, Auntie Winnie, but I’m not liking you a whole lot right now.” Ruby huffed and walked downstairs out the front door to school.

Winnie made it downstairs to say goodbye to Pearl and Jade and promised them a photo shoot that night. It was obvious that they had yet to begin their social media journey. They had flip phones which they could only use to dial home in an emergency. They wouldn’t be allowed anything else until they crossed into middle school.

“Is it nice having Barry around to pick up some of the slack?” Winnie asked Janey after he took the girls to school.

“Yes, this week without carpooling is a dream. I’m hoping he sees the condition of the minivan and agrees to buy me a new one. He drives a brand-new EV, which he needs because he commutes. Oh, well. Folks deal with issues like this all the time in the developed world. My time in the Peace Corps taught me that most people don’t have a car at all.”

Winnie was pouring them both a cup of coffee when Chance burst through the door. He was wearing his Stairway to Heaven sweatshirt, so he was probably on his way to work.

“Good morning, brother. To what do we owe the honor?” Janey asked.

“I woke up this morning, and I decided I’m no longer going to allow Steven Butterfield to bully me or the town of Mystic. If he wants to play dirty, then so will I.” Chance took a heavy sip of the coffee Winnie poured him.

Chance explained the changes Steven wanted to institute this year, like limiting the local vendors to the ones that had paid. He told them about using national chains for food and bringing in people from California.

“You didn’t take all his bluster seriously, I hope. You have to play smart and not dirty. I found one of the flyers that you passed out to prospective vendors. They aren’t required to have their money in until tomorrow, so we make sure they’ve paid by the deadline, and that way, there will only be a few remaining booths for the tech entrepreneurs. As far as the vendors go, the contracts have already been signed and they get the priority spots. National chains aren’t going to be banging down the door to get a spot at the Mystic Christmas Festival. If Steven wants to make big changes, they will have to wait until next year,” Winnie said.

Chance grabbed her on either side of her face and kissed her. It was something he used to do when they made a breakthrough in managing his learning disability.

“Aren’t you glad Winnie decided to come to Mystic and help?” Janey asked.

“We still have a lot of people who haven’t paid yet. It usually isn’t a problem because we collect money the day of the event, if necessary,” Chance pointed out.

“Give me the names and I’ll visit each one personally, which is appreciated over a phone call,” Winnie said. “This Steven Butterfield sounds like a real piece of work, and I’m sure he’ll continue to get in the way. We’ll have to put out each fire as it’s lit.”

Chance was about to kiss her again when Janey pulled her brother back. “That’s enough, love birds. Geez, if you weren’t married, I’d think you had a thing for Winnie,” Janey joked.

Winnie felt her face warm when she heard the comment and Chance blushed. It was the first time in over twenty-five years that either of them had reacted to a comment like that and it happened often. It wasn’t unusual for them to be mistaken for a couple. Winnie was sure it was because they had been talking about getting her a man. She had men on the mind, and it had just carried over. Neither of them verbally reacted to the comment.

“I’d split the list with you, but with no manager, I have to be at the gym. Come by my house this evening and you can let me know how it went,” Chance said.

“Hooray, I can see Sammy,” Winnie chirped.

“No. He’s spending the night at Grandma Bayer’s house, but you can see Mary,” Chance said.

“As long as I won’t be intruding with your evening plans.”

“Absolutely not. Mary and I have nothing planned. We’ll just be enjoying each other’s company.”

Winnie detected Janey rolling her eyes at Chance’s last comment. She didn’t ask Janey about Mary on purpose because she didn’t want things to get gossipy. They had talked about Mary before she and Chance were married, but now, nothing good could come from it.

“I’ll email you the list and call if you have any questions.”
Chance checked his watch, and he was out the door.

Helping Chance was familiar to Winnie, and she was good at it. She considered the ability to put a smile on his face one of her superpowers.

Chapter Eight



Winnie's first stop was Mingus Needle's farm which was located as far away from downtown Mystic as you could get. He sold beef, bear and elk jerky. He had his own cows so that took care of the beef while the others came from his annual hunting trip to New Hampshire. He travelled to Florida once and ended up selling gator jerky that year.

Thank goodness for her navigation system because otherwise, Winnie would have gotten lost for sure. Unfortunately, Mingus' farm wasn't on the mapping system, so she was on the right road, but didn't know which farm was his. There were only three and one was abandoned, so Winnie took a guess. She knocked on the door.

"Can I help you? If you're selling, I can't chat because I'm in the process of cooking dinner."

"Oh, no. Are you Mingus Needle?" Winnie asked.

"No, ma'am. I'm Hugo Florio." He pointed across the road. "Mingus lives over there and he might be in the smokehouse out back. He's getting jerky ready for the Mystic Christmas Festival."

"Thank you so much. I'm actually helping Chance Laken with the festival and that's why I'm out here," Winnie said.

He smiled and nodded. The smile was vaguely familiar, and she had probably seen him in downtown Mystic.

"You have a good day."

Winnie left her car parked where it was and scampered across the road where she found Mingus tending his meat. It was warm in the smokehouse which was a relief because the mercury was dipping outside. Mingus had payment for the booth stamped and ready to be mailed.

“You saved me the cost of a stamp, little lady. Would you like a sample of my jerky while you’re out here? I have some here that’s been through the drying process. Taste it and tell me if you can figure out what animal it’s from. You aren’t a vegetarian, are you?” he asked.

“No and I’ve heard great things about your product. Will you give me a list of animals it might be?” Winnie said.

Winnie tasted the jerky, and the first thing she knew was that she never had it before, and it was cured in juniper berries. It tasted a little like Christmas.

“If you guess, I’ll give you a pack to share with Chance. He’s one of my favorite people in this town, as he always has a smile on his face.”

“I’d say it’s deer,” Winnie said.

“Nope, it’s not venison. It’s bear jerky, but I’ll give you a pack anyways. Don’t worry, it’s not the type that’s anywhere near endangered. A lot of hunters like me have great respect for the wildlife.”

“I’ve take enough of your time, and I look forward to stopping by your booth at the festival.”

“Drive safe.”

Winnie had never been to the outer reaches of Mystic. It was different, but the people were just as nice. She realized The Christmas Festival was an opportunity for all the different people of Mystic to come together. They were people who otherwise would cross paths.

The next name on the list had a black mark next to it and Winnie had no idea what that meant. It was the home of Gretta Van Raden. She made all sorts of maple syrup, which she flavored herself with berries she grew on her property. Winnie figured it would be fairly straightforward like Mingus had

been. If she were half as entertaining as he was, it would be a good visit.

This one was easy to find because it was closer to the lake in an area she was familiar with. She rang the buzzer. A woman appeared with a sour look on her face and Winnie had a feeling she knew what the black mark next to her name meant.

“Hello, sorry to pop in without calling first. I’m Winnie Proctor with The Mystic Christmas Festival.”

“Yes, I’m renting a booth and I hand deliver my check the day of the event. What can I help you with?” Gretta asked.

“We need the check by the deadline, which is tomorrow. I would explain, but it’s a long story. I’m here on behalf of Chance Laken.”

“The festival has never been the same since Nan died. I don’t get along with a lot of people, but her I liked. Chance and I had a fender bender a few years ago. It was his fault, but I was blamed,” Gretta said. “I considered no longer selling my syrup, but there was such a demand for my cranberry maple syrup. I return for the people of Mystic and not that Chance individual.”

Winnie looked inside on the table and saw numerous cameras and other photography equipment. “You’re a photographer too? Would it be too much to ask to see your cameras?”

Gretta’s eyes lit up like a lantern. She had an array of cameras from ones that were no longer made to the last models. Her walls were covered with stunning and heartbreaking pictures.

“A lot of those were taken in Sudan. I worked for the AP for thirty-five years. They are some of the photos I was unable to part with. Other photos I don’t bother hanging because the images are seared in my mind,” Gretta said.

“Your work is brilliant.” Winnie’s eyes moved towards the shelf. Her mouth fell open. “Are those Pulitzer Prizes?”

“They are. I received those in another lifetime. Now I make syrup.”

“I’m sure your syrup is wonderful, but these photographs are magnificent.”

Winnie and Gretta spoke for an hour and Winnie felt like she had met a kindred spirit. They spoke the same language and Gretta became a different woman when she talked photography. She asked to see Winnie’s portfolio some time and the prospect was flattering. Gretta heard where Winnie worked, and she had her convinced that the job was a waste of her skills.

They spoke about Chance also and Gretta agreed to give him a second chance. The pun was intended. Winnie guessed that being in war-torn areas had taken its toll and made her sour. Nan took the time to befriend her and then she died.

“Are you going to give me the check before I leave?” Winnie asked.

“Oh, of course and I can’t wait for us to go out together and take photographs. I’m old, but I’m sure there’s a lot I can learn from you.”

“I look forward to it as well. I’ll see you at the festival.”

Winnie couldn’t wait to tell Chance about her day. She had three more stops before she quit for the day. She was early enough to stop by the gym, so she could catch him there. It would save her a few miles of driving in the dark.

* * *

Winnie parked on the street in front of the gym and saw Chance inside cleaning up. He saw her through the window and waved.

“This is a pleasant surprise. I didn’t expect you to be finished this early,” Chance said.

“I went to five homes and got five checks. I love this town and met the most interesting people,” Winnie said. “I met

Gretta Van Raden, and she told me that the two of you had a kerfuffle. She's willing to bury the hatchet if you are. Did you know she's a Pulitzer Prize winning photographer?"

"I didn't. I love seeing you so excited. If you like Mystic so much, you should move here. It would be me, you, and Janey, just like old times."

"You know I would if I could. My family is in Erie, and I can't leave my dad."

"We're your family too and having you here would be a dream come true. You bring so much energy with you wherever you go. I'm sure Janey feels the same way, but I'm the one who could really use a friend right now," Chance said.

"Chance, what's up, you're scaring me. Are you sick?"

"No, I'm healthy as a horse."

There was a loud tapping on the window. It was Mary, and Winnie hadn't seen her since Arlene's funeral. She looked put together as always with a camel hair coat and black high heels.

Winnie handed the checks to Chance, and she opened the door for Mary.

"I heard you were coming to town, Winnie. I'm so glad we ran into each other. How's Channel Three?"

Mary always asked about the little television station and Winnie felt like she was mocking her. Mary worked at one of Boston's premier PR firms.

"It's very good. I love my job and the people are wonderful. How's Abrams and Lucas?" Winnie asked.

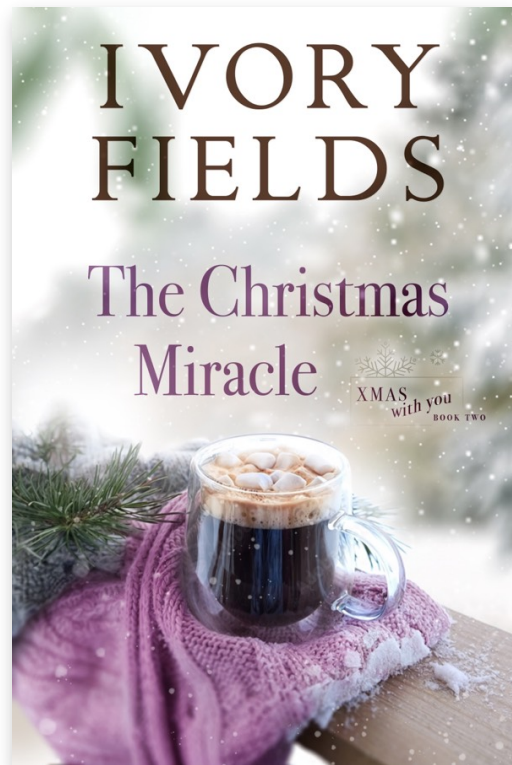
"Growing every day, but I love it."

"I should run. Chance, I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Winnie arrived at her car and realized she'd left her purse inside. She started walking towards the door and Chance had closed the blinds, but she heard something. It was Mary's loud voice and when she got to the door, she could hear what she was saying, and Winnie was horrified...

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