

*On the Way to
Christmas*

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THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

On the Way to Christmas

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Chapter 1

Going home for the holidays wasn't all happy smiles and Christmas carols when everywhere you looked you were bound to see smoldering bridges. And when you were Darby Brown, there were a lot of them.

Of course, Mom and Dad wanted to see Darby. But they were parents, and parents were prejudiced. They and probably her little brother were about the only ones. Fa-la-yuck!

Darby had no one but herself to blame for this, and she wanted to fix it, really. But she wasn't sure how.

"You'll figure it out," said Josh White, the man who was supposed to have fallen at her feet in adoration but had stubbornly remained upright.

She'd met him in a Starbucks in the fall, when the weather in New York was cooling down and pumpkin lattes were on the menu. She'd flirted with him while they waited in line for their drinks, and she'd charmed him because, well, that was

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what she did. And he'd charmed her. So they'd gone out. A few times.

He'd listened to her work woes and nodded thoughtfully when she told him about her awful boss who hated her because she was young and pretty, and the coworker who was sabotaging her. Yes, sabotaging her. (She knew what sabotage looked like—gossip and backbiting. She'd done her share of both.) He'd nodded thoughtfully again when she told him about her idiot neighbor who was always snarling at her about something. Then, after she got fired—fired!—and went on another rant when they met for drinks about how awful her boss was and the revenge she was going to take, he'd stopped calling. Was everyone in New York a jerk?

It turned out that, no, not everyone was. But someone was. Darby.

"Really?" Josh responded when she ran into him at a different Starbucks and informed him that he'd shown incredibly poor taste by ghosting her. "Maybe it was more a case of seeing that we're not a match," he suggested.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she demanded.

"Different priorities, different value systems."

"I have values. I don't cheat on my income taxes."

"Good for you."

What a tool.

Still, she'd stayed right there in Starbucks and kept talking to him. More like listening to him, really. Or maybe it wasn't really him speaking to her. Maybe he was a tool of a different kind. He didn't ask her out, but he offered to take her

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to church. Next thing she knew, she was doing some serious thinking about her life, her attitudes, and what was important.

Josh kept them at the friendship level, explaining that Darby needed to do some work on herself before he or anybody could really be with her. That hurt. But then, painful truths often do.

Now, here she was, coming home for the holidays, even though she didn't want to.

"It's been three years," Mom had reminded her when they'd talked on the phone. "You can't make a habit of staying away."

Sure she could. Her sister would as soon never see her again. And then there were . . . others. Anyway, Mom and Dad already had two kids to play with at Christmas. They didn't really need her.

"You have no excuse now," Mom had added.

Yeah, she did. "How about no money? You don't have it when you don't have a job, Mom." Okay, that had come out snotty. Old habits were hard to break.

"That's why we're sending you a ticket. We miss you, Darby Doll. Come home."

So much for the can't-afford-it excuse.

Now, here she was at Sea-Tac International Airport, waiting for her brother, Cole, to pick her up. She had a swarm of butterflies (did butterflies swarm?) in her stomach, and she half-wished she could turn right around and fly back to New York where she had . . . no one and nothing waiting for her. No one and nothing was preferable to what was probably waiting

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in Eagledale, the small town way, way north of Seattle. She was standing in front of the Alaska Airlines passenger pickup area when Cole pulled up in his pride and joy—a red Chevy truck, which, of course, every guy finishing up a master’s degree in construction management needed.

He screeched to a stop and hopped out. “Hey, sis! About time you came home.”

“Just for a visit,” she clarified.

“Why go back? You lost your job.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” she muttered as he picked up her suitcase and carry-on and stowed them.

“So, what happened?” he asked as they pulled away from the curb.

Great. Was everyone going to ask her this? “It didn’t work out.” Only a month ago she’d had a different take on things—one that blamed her threatened boss and jealous, sabotaging coworker. Now she had a more balanced version, and it wasn’t a story she was all that ready to tell.

“Got anything else lined up?”

“Not yet,” she said.

She’d updated her LinkedIn profile, sent out résumés, made calls, and haunted job boards, so far with no success. Every blog she read said her best bet was to be a referenced candidate, but she hadn’t figured out how to find any company insider to help her with that.

She’d so easily fallen into her job in New York—got it through a friend of a friend—both men, naturally. Women hated her. (As if she could help it that she had perfect hair,

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symmetrical features, and good taste in clothes!) Other than Josh and a couple of his buddies, the pool of people with helping hands stretched out was proving to be very shallow.

Like you are, whispered the new-and-improving Darby. She sighed.

“It’ll work out,” Cole said easily. “There’s tons of ad agencies in Seattle, and probably lots of companies that need technical writers. And words are your thing.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” she said. It was a gift.

One she’d misused often in high school and then again when she went away to college. She had a lot of rebuilding to do.

“How’s school going?” she asked. “You going to graduate cum laude?”

“I’m gonna graduate,” he replied with a cheeky grin.

Cole was a loveable goof—a people person and the king of charm. He’d be fine. He’d probably be a construction manager before he turned twenty-five.

“If you stay here awhile, you won’t have to come all the way back for the ceremony. You are coming to my graduation, right?”

“Of course.” She’d come to Erika’s graduation too. Not that Erika cared about Darby being anywhere near her anymore. Who could blame her?

“Rika’s already at the house. Mom made that peppermint divinity you like, and she’s planning on you guys all baking cookies together tomorrow.”

Yes, Mom had a whole week of fun activities planned.

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Cookie baking, tree decorating, a neighborhood open house. That was scheduled for Sunday, the day after next.

“Who all’s coming to the open house?” she asked. *Please don’t say Gregory.*

Sweet, loyal Gregory. Her heart gave a sick flop over how she’d treated her former childhood boy bestie. She had a lot of mean to make up for, but she hated the idea of atoning for her past by being publicly snubbed and humiliated, even if she had it coming.

Cole started rattling off names. A couple of neighbor girls she’d ignored, Mrs. Williams from two doors down. “And the Colliers,” he finished.

“As in Gregory?”

“Yep. Him too.”

Ugh. She wished she’d stayed in New York.

“He bought the Henrys’ old place.”

“I didn’t know that,” Darby said.

There was a lot she didn’t know anymore about Gregory Collier, former nerd turned teacher. Like why he chose to remain in Small Town, USA.

“That’s what happens when you stay away,” said Cole. “You miss out on what’s going on. Not that there’s that much going on in Eagledale.”

“Not even for you? Why don’t you have a serious girlfriend yet?”

“It’s hard to pick when so many want me,” he said, flashing that grin again.

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He'd meant it as a joke, but Darby could believe it. Her brother was as good-looking as he was good-natured.

Her sister was also good-looking and good-natured. Well, except when it came to Darby. Erika's animosity was well deserved.

What had happened to Darby? Why had she chosen to be a mean girl?

Oh, yeah. She'd taken to heart the old saying that the best defense was a good offense and found that donning the mean girl persona was a great defense against all kinds of insecurity. Plus she'd thought it was cool, almost like a superpower that left lesser mortals running scared. Lower others and raise yourself. The attitude and the snarky remarks became so habitual she never noticed them. They became who she was.

Who you were, she reminded herself. *Not who you are anymore.*

She suspected she was going to have a hard time proving it.

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Chapter 2

Fagledale was a small town, surrounded by pasture and farms with mountains in the distance and the Canadian border not far away. In keeping with the holiday spirit, snow had fallen, carpeting streets and frosting roofs. Daylight was fading and Christmas lights were winking on. Smoke curled up from chimneys. Welcome to Norman Rockwell Land.

Darby's family's house, a two-story Craftsman-style home on a corner lot, sat on a nice street with nice homes and nice people living in them. It came complete with a long front porch, a fireplace (perfect for hanging stockings at Christmas), and a large front yard where Darby and her friends had played frozen tag when they were kids. It had three bedrooms, one of which Darby and Erika had always shared. With only a two-year difference between the sisters, it had meant no privacy and plenty of fights over who controlled the TV their parents had let them have in their room. Darby almost always won.

They'd be sharing that room again. This year, Erika could

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watch whatever she wanted whenever she wanted. Hopefully the sound would fill the vacuum between them.

Mom knew all was not well between the sisters. When Darby had protested having to return to childhood and share a room, she'd merely said, "This will be good for you two."

Right. In a parallel universe.

"I told your sister the same thing."

So, Darby hadn't been the only one who wasn't thrilled with the sleeping arrangements. But, of course, being the perfect one, Erika must have acquiesced. Anyway, when it came to mapping things out for everyone for the holidays, Mom was a force to be reckoned with.

Darby walked into the house and was greeted by the aroma of pot roast. Her favorite. That meant there would be carrots and potatoes and Mom's homemade biscuits. Their old dog, Jackal, a golden lab, hobbled up to her, tail wagging, and she knelt to give him a hug and a face rub.

"Hey, you old boy," she said, and he moved in to give her a doggy kiss. Good old Jackal, he'd always loved her.

"Our girl is here!"

She looked up to see her mother rushing toward her, arms outstretched. Mom wasn't as slender as she'd been when Darby was little. She'd packed on some pounds and hadn't bothered to unpack them.

Darby had found it rather embarrassing when she was a teen fashionista. She'd outgrown that, though, and now there was something comforting about seeing this fifty-three-year-old woman with a thick waist and thick brown hair with

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threads of gray sneaking in. Crinkles now formed at the corners of her mother's eyes, looking at Darby with such love. Mom could have been in a greeting card commercial. Her very appearance said Home and Love.

By the time Darcy stood, Mom was on her, hugging her like the prodigal she was. "It's so good to have you home."

Darcy hugged her back. "It's good to be home." *Sort of.* At least, it was good to see her mom.

Other facets of her holiday return were a different matter. She felt like an ill-prepared cage fighter getting ready to step into the cage with the champ. Only a few months ago, she'd been so snatched, so cool, so confident. That was sure gone. Would there be any merry in this Christmas?

"Put your things away, then come on out to the kitchen," Mom said. "Erika's in there. She's got her hands in pie dough at the moment."

Of course she did. Erika was the artsy one. She was probably shaping dough into little trees to top the pie crust.

"It's the last of the blackberries from the freezer, by the way," Mom added. "I've been saving them for when you came home."

A traffic jam of emotion clogged Darby's throat, making it hard to get out a thank-you.

"Hey, it's not just for you," pointed out her brother. He would obviously help keep her humble while she was home.

Cole lugged her suitcase upstairs, leaving her to bring the carry-on. She freshened up, then put away her things in the same old dresser and closet she and Rika had used when

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they shared the room. Rika had taken the two bottom drawers, just as she had when they were growing up, and the rest of her clothes—properly stylish for an up-and-coming movie production assistant—were hanging in her side of the closet. Darby hung up hers, then took a deep breath and went back downstairs.

Only Mom and Erika were in the kitchen. Mom had a cup of tea already on the table for Darby, along with a small plate holding two pieces of pink divinity. Darby's favorite.

Mom was back at the stove, stirring a pot with the pie filling, as Erika put the bottom layer of crust in a fluted pie pan.

She barely looked up as she worked. "Hi, Darb."

"Hi, Rika." The exchange was stiff and chilly. Darby attempted to warm it. "You look great."

She did. Her reddish hair was cut in a midlength shag with bangs. She looked like an influencer ready for a shoot in her designer jeans and shirt. Erika had always been cute, but since getting the job as a production assistant in LA, she'd gone from cute to polished. Maybe part of her new look was simply confidence. She was doing what she'd always wanted to.

But she was minus the boyfriend she'd had last time she and Darby had been home together. Ugh.

"Thanks," Erika said.

Okay, this wasn't simply standoffish chilly. It was a deep freeze. Who could blame her?

For all appearances, though, it was a happy family dinner that evening once Dad came home from work, with some

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joking back and forth between him and Cole and compliments for Erika and Mom on the pie.

Then came the questions Darby was uncomfortable trying to answer. Like, what had happened to the hotshot copywriter position?

“I thought it was supposed to be such a great job,” Erika jabbed.

It should have been—working for a big-name clothing manufacturer headquartered in NYC. Talk about a dream job.

“It was,” Darby said. “My boss . . . *Hated me. Was a jerk.* She reined in her anger, knowing the bulk of it needed to be turned on herself. “It just didn’t work out.”

“What are you going to do now?” her father wanted to know.

“I’m not sure.”

“You should come home for good,” Mom said. “You’re too far away out there on the East Coast. Family should be together.”

Darby stole a look at her sister. Erika was concentrating on finishing her pie, in no hurry to second that motion.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” Darby said.

At least not that far in the future. She knew what she needed to do while she was home, though, and she had a tough job ahead of her.

After dinner Mom shooed the three siblings out the door. “Go have a good time. But don’t stay out too late. We have things to do tomorrow.”

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Yes, cookie baking and tree decorating. And Sunday would be the big neighborhood open house. Oh, goody.

“Let’s go over to Bruno’s,” Cole suggested.

A favorite hangout of the town’s millennials and Gen Zers, Bruno’s offered mile-high burgers and the world’s best onion rings, along with drinks and pool tables. It was Eagledale’s answer to Match.com and the last place Darby wanted to go. She was bound to run into someone she didn’t want to see.

Cole offered to drive. Any excuse to spend time with his beloved, the truck.

“I’m going to stay home,” Erika said once they reached the front hall.

“Come on, don’t be a lemon,” Cole coaxed, slinging an arm around her. Clueless.

She frowned and wiggled out from under him. “You guys have fun.”

“We will. Your loss,” he said. “Come on, Darb.”

When it came to choosing time with her brother and risking a chance encounter with someone she didn’t want to see, or an evening at home with her sister, who was probably already contemplating smothering her with a pillow, Darby opted for going out with her bro.

“Look at this snow,” he said. “They’re expecting four inches at Snoqualmie. Good snowboarding. We should go.”

At least her brother wanted to spend time with her. “Good idea,” she said.

Bruno’s was the same as it had always been—rustic, noisy, and packed with people. The heady aroma of old-fashioned

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greasy pub food was almost enough to make Darby forget she'd already eaten.

"Looks like there's a free table," Cole said, pointing to one of three pool tables lined up on the far side of the room. "Grab it and I'll get the drinks."

She nodded and started for the pool tables. On her way, though, she spotted her two best friends from high school. Ainsley and Laurel, both sporting similar pastel colors in hair that had cost them a fortune, were casual in jeans and sweaters and trendy boots, their coats thrown over the backs of their seats. Two out of the old foursome, back home and taking center stage. It had always been that way with Darby and her posse. Every boy had wanted them, and every girl had wished she could be one of them.

Darcy had lost track of one of the girls, but she'd kept in touch with Ainsley and Laurel, who were both living in Seattle. Well, until things had started going south at that impressive job she'd bragged about.

Ainsley was an influencer now, with a growing following, and Laurel owned her own business staging houses for Realtors. Then there was Darby, who was unemployed. She hadn't told either one she was coming home for the holidays. She certainly hadn't told either one that she'd been fired, especially after making such a big deal about her fancy job in New York (entry-level unimpressive, but nobody needed to know that) and her amazing life in the city.

Darby tried to slip past them but Ainsley said, "Darby! Am I hallucinating?"

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She should have bolted for the door the minute she saw them. Now she was trapped. She stopped and flashed her famous Darby smile.

“What are you doing in town?” Ainsley asked. “And you brat. Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“I thought you’d eighty-sixed Eagledale,” said Laurel.

Darby shrugged. “You have to come back for the holidays. Family.”

Ainsley rolled her eyes. “Everyone’s curse.” She shoved out a wooden chair with the toe of her boot. “Sit.”

Since when did Ainsley tell people to sit? The old Darby returned like the Ghost of Christmas Past and cocked a perfectly penciled eyebrow.

Ainsley changed tack and donned a more humble tone of voice. “Come on.”

That was more like it. “Can’t. I’m with the brother.”

“Ooh,” Laurel cooed. “Baby Bro can join us. I’m in between.”

Baby Bro, their nickname for Cole when they were in high school. They had enjoyed teasing him and making him blush. Now Cole was a big boy who didn’t blush, but Darby still didn’t want her brother getting eaten alive by Laurel.

“I think not. I don’t need you two gnawing down his ego,” Darby said, and Laurel snickered.

“Coffee Monday?” Ainsley suggested. “We so need to catch up.”

Even if her sister didn’t want to hang with her, at least someone did. She could fall right back in with her old posse

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and nurse the wounds to her pride that had been inflicted by her New York fail. It would make the holidays a lot merrier, for sure.

“Okay,” she said. “I assume Brewed Awakening is still in business.”

“Oh, yeah,” Ainsley assured her. “And wait ’til you see who’s running the place now.”

“Who?”

Ainsley shook her head. “Nuh-uh. You’ll have to wait and see.”

“All right. Ten on Monday,” Darby said, then moved away. She saw a guy gaping at her and gave her long, blond hair a shake just to give him a thrill—yes, she still could rock a joint—then joined her brother.

Cole was already at the pool table with a Coke for her and a beer for himself. “Looks like the princesses are in town for the holidays,” he observed as he chalked the tip of his cue stick. “You gonna hang out with them?”

She shrugged. “I might.”

“They haven’t changed,” he said as he leaned over the table. It wasn’t a compliment. “I’ll break.”

Darby mostly ignored her two old friends, concentrated on her shots, smack-talked her brother, drank pop, and after a while, made room for some onion rings. She couldn’t help noticing how the cutest guys in the room drifted toward Laurel and Ainsley’s table, bought them drinks, and generally drooled over them. They’d have been drooling over Darby too if she’d been at that table, and she’d have been flirting and

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letting them buy her goodies as well. And, in the end, blowing them off . . . just like Ainsley and Laurel would end up doing. Because, after all, they were only locals and, therefore, not worthy.

Except now her conscience nibbled away at the idea of behaving like that. The feeling made her uncomfortable. Did she want to go through the rest of her life using people?

The ride home with her brother was companionable and filled her with the kind of warmth all those ads for jewelry and home goods told people they were supposed to feel during the holidays. It even injected hope into her heart that she could repair the damage she'd done to her relationship with her sister. Christmas was, after all, about miracles. They were both laughing by the time they pulled into the driveway, finishing the last chorus of "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer."

The happiness switch got flipped off when she slipped into the bedroom she and Erika were sharing. Her sister was still awake in bed, propped up against pillows and texting on her phone. She didn't even look Darby's direction.

"I wish you'd have come with us," Darby ventured.

"I had things to do. That's how it works when you have a job."

The jab hurt. Darby forced herself to ignore it. "Aren't you in between movies?"

"It doesn't mean I don't have work. Or a life."

It was more than Darby could say for herself.

"Anyway, I'm going to be stuck with you enough just sharing a room," Erika added, each word chipped from ice.

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The same room they'd always shared. Every time they returned to it, it felt smaller.

Her sister's words drove away the last of the happy-happys from earlier. Darby dug her toothbrush out of her toiletry bag and slumped down the hall to the bathroom. Coming home had been a mistake.



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Chapter 3

Baking cookies together had always been a family tradition, and when Darby was a kid, she'd loved it. Mom always saved out a few to decorate tastefully, but for the most part gave both her and Erika free creative rein. Erika had the artistic eye, and while Mom was an equal opportunity praise-giver, Darby had known whose cookies she liked best.

As the sisters grew up it began to feel like Mom preferred everything Erika did—from the high school play she'd done the set designs for to those stupid cookies. Darby had written an essay her last year in middle school that won first place in a school-wide competition (“Anyone Can Be Beautiful”), and Mom had framed it, which had been great validation.

And then tucked it away somewhere, never to be seen again.

“For safekeeping,” she'd said. Who knew where it had wound up?

And so, somewhere along the way, Erika went from the

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little sister Darby told fairy tales to and tried to carry around to the pest who was always eavesdropping on Darby's conversations with her friends. And to the one Mom liked best.

Of course, Mom liked Erika best as they got older because Erika never gave her grief. That had been Darby's job. As the oldest, she was the trailblazer, fighting for later curfews and earlier dating privileges. Two years younger, Erika could do no wrong. Darby had been the prettier one, but Erika had been the good girl. Darby had been clever, but Erika had been adored. The sliver of resentment burrowed deep and festered. Not that Darby ever acknowledged it. Young girls weren't that skilled in self-analysis. Neither were grown girls, it seemed, as there'd been little enough of that on her last visit home.

Here it was—time to bake cookies again—and Erika would, of course, outdo Darby. Well, good luck with that. Darby watched the Food Network. She knew a thing or two now.

"I thought, in addition to our rolled cookies and snowball cookies, we could make bar cookies," Mom said when Darby and Erika reported for duty. "I found a great recipe that has a shortbread base and uses raspberry jam and white chocolate. I think you'd really like that one, Darby Doll," she said, using Darby's old nickname.

"It does sound good," Darby said.

"How about you make those and the snowballs while Erika and I work on the sugar cookies?"

So Erika and Mom would work together with Darby relegated to the bar cookie corner. "I can help decorate," she said.

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“Of course you can, if you want,” Mom said.

“Because you’ll do it so much better,” Erika added in her snotty sister voice.

“I didn’t say that,” Darby shot back.

“Now, girls. No squabbling. It’s Christmas,” Mom said, smiling at both of them.

“Sorry,” Erika muttered.

“Sorry,” said Darby, although she had nothing to be sorry about. Well, not at the moment, anyway.

“How your grandma would have loved this,” Mom said later from her post at the kitchen counter where she mixed frosting as Darby put a pan in the oven.

Another reason Darby hadn’t been all that thrilled to come home. It wasn’t the same without Grandma. She’d been Darby’s biggest fan. It had been Grandma who told her she was the prettiest girl in Eagledale, Grandma who told her she could be anything she wanted to be when she grew up—maybe even the next Danielle Steele. Mom had just told her to clean her room and be nice to her little sister.

Like you were so abused, she scolded herself. She hadn’t exactly suffered growing up.

Mom raved over how lovely the bar cookies turned out and gave Darby’s snowball cookies a thumbs-up, but Erika’s frosted trees and bells and snowflakes were works of art. She could have her own Insta following. Cookie queen, successful career woman—Erika had it all going for her. And here was Darby, going . . . nowhere. She’d always thought she was so special. Was she going to be one of those people whose best

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years were behind her before she even hit thirty? It was a humbling thought.

One of Erika's friends called, and she left to meet her for lunch, after assuring Mom she'd be back in plenty of time to help decorate the tree later. Then it was just Darby and Mom, sitting down for a cup of coffee before starting lunch.

"It's a treat to have you girls home again," Mom said as they settled at the kitchen table. "I hate that you're both so far away. You especially."

"Me?" Funny how when you came back home you picked up the same old habits. Like eye-rolling.

"Yes, you. You feel so out of reach all the way out on the East Coast. And texting isn't the same as being together in person," Mom added before Darby could point out that she texted regularly. Dutifully. "You're so talented. I'm sure you could get a job here in Washington."

"Frosting that particular cookie a little thick, aren't you, Mom?"

Her mother looked puzzled. "Why would you say that?"

Darby gazed at the dark liquid in her mug, looking for the right words. She couldn't find them, so she settled for, "Erika's the one you think is talented."

Mom looked both surprised and disgusted. "You're both talented, and I'm proud of each of you."

Darby nodded, took a sip of her coffee. There wasn't much she could say to that.

Mom did some gazing of her own, giving her mug a

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thoughtful turn. “Some people have favorites when it comes to their children. I’ve never understood that.”

“You could have fooled me,” Darby blurted, making her mother’s brows come together in an angry V. Okay, finding the right words was overrated. “Erika never got in trouble like I did,” she added.

Mom actually laughed. “You are twenty-eight years old, and we’re just now having this conversation? Erika never drove me nuts like you did. I swear, I think every time she saw you getting in trouble, she said to herself, ‘Okay, I’m not going to do that.’” Mom shook her head, took another sip from her mug. “You definitely gave me the most gray hairs, especially in high school. You were such a stinker. But I loved you like crazy. I always have and I always will.”

“Yeah?” Darby challenged. “If we were all drowning, who would you save?”

“All three of you. Your father would have to fend for himself.” Mom smiled at her and reached across the table to lay a hand on her arm. “Never doubt my love for you, because that would be a waste of time.”

Other than consoling each other after Grandma’s death, it was the most intimate conversation they’d had in a long time, and Darby felt tears coming to her eyes. She saw the same teary sparkle in her mother’s.

This time she did find the right words. “Thanks, Mom.”

Lunch consisted of BLTs, which both Dad and Cole gobbled up before going outside to tackle hanging Christmas

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lights. Mom had cleaning to do before the big open house the next day, and Darby offered to help her.

“Great. How about dusting?” Mom suggested.

One of the most boring jobs ever. “Okay,” Darby said, and sighed inwardly.

Her mother loved her knickknacks, and when it came to holiday decorations, she went crazy. She had a nativity set composed of a cast of thousands—Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus, of course, and the wise men, but also shepherds, sheep, cows, oxen. And camels. You couldn’t forget the camels. Then there were the little ceramic angels and Santas and elves and gnomes perched on every available surface—from the mantel to the buffet. Add to all that the furniture, including all the dining table chairs, and dusting would keep her busy for the afternoon.

It did. Then, after dinner, and after Erika returned home, it was time to haul out the many boxes of ornaments and decorate the tree—a giant monster Dad and Cole had brought home from the local tree lot.

Getting the thing into the living room required a team effort. It took a swing at Erika with one of its branches coming through the door—*You’ll never take me alive*—and tried to KO the mechanical Santa standing in the hallway, tipping it over and starting it ho-ho-ho-ing. Darby was able to duck just before Killer Tree could whack her in the face.

“Careful!” Mom scolded the men.

It was her favorite word when it came to tree trimming. She seasoned every other sentence with it as they worked,

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Jackal supervising. “Careful with those gold glass beads. They’re antiques.” As if they didn’t know this. She told them every year. “Be careful with those pinecone lights. Grandma got those in Germany when she was living there . . . And be careful with that ornament. It’s from the fifties.”

“I know, Mom,” Darby said after about the fifth careful.

“I know you know. Just . . . be careful.”

And Darby was. Then she picked up the one ornament she should have never even gone near. The fragile blown glass ballerina was an early present from their grandmother, back when Erika had been taking ballet lessons. It was beautiful and exquisite, full of sentimental value.

Darby watched in horror as it slipped from her fingers and landed on the hardwood floor. The ballerina’s head went one way, and her legs went dancing off the other. A delicately extended arm waved good-bye to the rest of her.

Erika turned at the sound, saw the dead ballerina, and gasped. “You broke her!”

Darby had just added the cherry to the hate cupcake. “I’m sorry,” she said. *Sorry* could be such a flimsy word.

“Whoa, she’s toast,” said Cole. “Jack, get away from that.” He shooed Jackal away as the dog came up to inspect the damage.

“I’ll get the broom,” Dad said, probably as an excuse to escape the female drama.

“You did that on purpose,” Erika accused Darby.

“I didn’t. I really didn’t.”

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“Darling, I’m sure she didn’t mean to,” said Mom, stepping in as peacemaker.

“Why were *you* hanging her anyway?” Erika demanded.

“I . . . don’t know.” What a dumb thing to do. “I just didn’t think.”

“Yeah, well, there’s a surprise,” Erika snapped, her eyes practically burning into her sister. “You never think about anyone but yourself.”

What could Darby say to that? Sadly, it was true. Jackal began to whimper. She wanted to join in with him.

“I’m done with this.” Erika tossed the cloth teddy bear ornament she’d been holding into the ornament box and stormed off.

Mom hurried after her, leaving Cole with Darby, the ballerina destroyer. “I didn’t do it on purpose,” she said to him.

“I know,” he said. “Rika’s always been a drama queen.”

But sometimes that drama was understandable. This was about way more than breaking an ornament. Darby had broken something much more valuable on her last visit. She just kept racking up the evil sister points.

She fell into the nearest chair. She could almost see the angel at the top of the tree shaking her head in disappointment. Jackal came and laid his head in her lap. Dogs were so forgiving. Why couldn’t everyone be more like dogs?

From upstairs the sound of a raised voice (Erika’s) drifted down to them. The words were muffled, but the anger came through loud and clear.

“I think she’s done helping,” Cole said.

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I think she's done with me, Darby thought.

Sure enough, Erika came stomping down the stairs a moment later. She grabbed her coat from the coat closet, yanked open the front door, and slammed it behind her.

Dad came back with the broom and began sweeping up. Mom returned and picked up a fresh ornament from the box, saying, "She'll get over it."

Darby had her doubts.

"So much for family time," Dad muttered as he walked away with the dustpan.

"We are still having family time," Mom insisted. "I didn't buy all that pizza for nothing."

Later, as they sat around the living room eating pizza and streaming old Christmas movies, Darby texted her pal Josh back in New York. Thomas Wolfe was right. U can't go home again.

It wasn't until the start of the next movie that Josh's reply came through. He'd probably been out with his nice friends, having a nice time, like he deserved.

Sure U can. It worked for the prodigal son.

Not workin for the prodigal daughter.

What U going to do about that?

Don't know.

I do. Try again.

Easy for him to say. To try again you had to have some idea

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of where to start. She texted Thanks a lot and set her phone aside.

On the TV, Nicolas Cage was having a serious discussion with a very strange angel. “You’re workin’ on a new deal now, baby,” the angel informed him.

He wasn’t the only one. Darby picked her phone back up and began looking around online for some kind of olive branch—what kind, she wasn’t quite sure.

Suddenly she saw it. Yes. That was what she was looking for.

It was a silver ornament in the shape of a wreath. In the middle of the wreath hung a smaller circle trimmed with cubic zirconia and stating I my sister. She did, but she had a long way to go to prove it.

What was that saying about the longest journey starting with a single step? Well, here was her first step, and one step at a time would have to do.

Two Christmas movies was all she could take, and she was in no mood to laugh at the antics in *Elf*. She went up to their shared room to wait for Erika to come home. She’d apologize again, promise to make it up to her. She tried to read the latest book she’d downloaded, but in the end, the time difference between coasts caught up with her and she fell asleep. By the time she awoke the next morning, Erika was already gone and she was alone.

She came down to breakfast to find everyone already at the kitchen table, downing bacon and eggs. “We didn’t want to wake you,” Mom said.

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Erika said nothing. No surprise there. Darby counted herself lucky that her sister hadn't put a pillow over her head in the night.

"What time does the circus start?" Dad asked as he helped himself to another cup of coffee.

"Two," Mom said. "I told you, Frank."

"I forgot."

"Never marry a man who doesn't listen to you," Mom joked.

"It's hard to keep up when there's that much talking," Dad shot back. "Too much for my ears to hold."

"I'm getting your hearing tested," Mom informed him. It was an ongoing threat.

Her parents cracked Darby up. They loved to trade insults, but they were so there for each other. They'd gone through their share of trials, but instead of dividing them, the challenges had made them stronger. They'd lost a baby in between Erika and Cole. Mom had survived breast cancer. Both of them had lost their parents. No matter what life threw at them, they stayed together. How did you find love like that? Darcy wished she knew.

Breakfast was long and leisurely, but once the dishes were cleared Mom turned into a drill sergeant. The men were put to work bringing up folding chairs from the basement and wiping them down, and the women got busy making appetizers and putting together cookie platters to set on the dining table, along with red paper plates and holiday napkins. The glass punch bowl was brought out and eggnog punch made. Scented

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candles were lit, background music was started, and soon the Browns' residence looked and smelled a lot like Christmas.

At ten minutes to two, their first guest dropped in. Mrs. Williams was an eightysomething who had been widowed for as long as Darby could remember. She loved to wear red sweaters and bright red lipstick to match, drawn on well beyond her lip line. The effort made her look like the world's oldest clown. Darby and her friends had made fun of her for years.

Why had they done that? Looking at the woman, so frail and glad to join them, she couldn't remember.

"It's so good to see both of your darling daughters," Mrs. Williams said to Mom, beaming at Erika and Darby.

Oh yes, what darlings.

Erika had been giving Darby the silent treatment all day, but now it was lights, camera, action, and she was all warm smiles and happiness. "You look great, Mrs. Williams," she said to the older woman.

Okay, that was stretching it. "How are you, Mrs. Williams?" Darby asked as she took the woman's coat.

The elderly woman waved a hand. "Don't ask. I'm turning into a dry old stick. Never get old, dears."

What to say to that? "I'll try not to," Darby said. Then added, "And nobody thinks you're a dry old stick." Somebody—her—used to, but Mrs. Williams didn't need to know that.

The doorbell rang, signaling another arrival. "Find a seat, Mrs. Williams," Mom said. "One of the girls will get you some punch."

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Mom opened the door and there stood Mrs. Collier. And Gregory.

Darby's heart jumped to attention. It had been a few years since Darby had seen him. Still, she hadn't expected such a transformation. This was Gregory? Where were his glasses? And why wasn't he skinny and nerdy-looking anymore?

And why was her mouth suddenly dry?

"I'll get your punch," she said to the old woman. Mrs. Williams wasn't the only one who could use a drink.



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