

## *Chapter 24*

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I pulled my Santa spirit out of a pocket of my well-worn, invisible caregiver's uniform, loaded my arms with boxes, and burst in with a jovial "ho ho ho." Mom, ensconced on her throne, was surrounded by throngs of loyal subjects, her cookie recipes. "What cookies do you want me to bake for you?" she asked excitedly.

To her, she was offering me a choice of either gold or silver jewelry. To me, she was asking one more question, making one more demand, probably requiring a shopping trip, packaging cookies for mailing to my brother, and a long wait in line at the post office.

I answered, "I always liked those round nut balls, without the powdered sugar." Why spoil her enthusiasm?

"I'll make those for sure. Maybe I can set up a table here like I used to, with all the cookie tins, plates, and napkins, so visitors could help themselves. Do you remember that?"

I did. She baked and we baked. She prepped cookie-baking sessions with crocks of dough, shoeboxes of cookie cutters, soup bowls of white icing with bottles of dye to tint our own unique colors, and a variety of sparkling sprinkles. We munched on snacks and sang along to sleigh bells ringing on the record player. Our

friends were welcome, with one caveat: They must be clean—surgical-suite clean. Wash your hands with soap, sit down, and don't touch anything, especially your hair, or you'll be right back at the sink. Most of us rescrubbed at least once. Cough or sneeze, and she excused you from the table.

"That was fun," I said. "You heaped every horizontal surface of the dining room with cookies; then neighbors walked in, loaded a plate, and sat down. Did you ever figure out who sneaked cookies and left a note from Santa all those times when we weren't home?" We never locked our doors, and no one even knocked before coming into our house.

"No, but it wasn't Grampa. He always turned a chair upside down on the table if he stopped by and we weren't home. It was probably Joey."

My teenage sweetheart took the blame for all unexplained pranks and mischief. Most of it he actually committed, along with a variety of genuine crimes that eventually landed him in jail, prison, and an early grave. Stealing cookies was the least of it. Somehow my family remembered him with unfaltering love, even though he broke all our hearts after he took up drugs and crime.

Dad giggled and said, "That Joey was a nut. Remember when he convinced your brother that red stuffed caterpillar was alive? Chip still laughs about how long he believed that."

Then Dad spotted the boxes I was setting on the couch. He hung up his cane and headed for his coat, saying he'd get the containers from the garage. He was peeved when I reported that I'd already stacked them on the porch, because hauling was a Man's Job, but I had to preempt him from teetering with boxes without using his cane. He opened the door and grabbed a box from the entryway. The door hit him in the butt and joggled him as he tottered in. Realizing I was waiting to retrieve another box, he sidled out of my way. I geared into high speed, grabbed two boxes, threw them on the couch, zipped around him, and snagged two more. My conscience screamed, *No one*

*is having fun here. It's not the accomplishment that counts; it's the attitude—remember?*

I ratcheted down my pace and my tenor. “Hey, Dad, could you hold the door for me?”

He held the door while I raced in and out and wedged containers on chairs and end tables; with minimal floor space, I didn’t want him to trip over an unexpected obstacle. Mom rattled off a steady stream of fond cookie reminiscences, necessitating only a nod or an “um, those were good” from me.

I started assembling the artificial tree I was loaning them, which suddenly seemed big enough for Rockefeller Center. I interrupted Mom’s revels, suggesting, “Maybe a smaller tree would fit better.”

“Why?” she snapped. “There’s plenty of space. Did you change your mind and want that one at home? We can get our own tree. We want a big tree. We can get one tomorrow. Ron will get us one. He already offered.” She underlined and bold-faced her voice: “*We’re having a big tree.*”

Criminy. I hadn’t canceled Christmas. I calmly said, “Okay. You’re welcome to this one. I was just worried you’d feel crowded.”

Dad suggested moving a chair and table into his bedroom, which I whipped out of the room before he could pick up either one. After thirty minutes, I was already sweaty and claustrophobic and my caregiver’s costume was noticeably drooping.

Mom tried to revive my sagging spirit, saying, “Right after Thanksgiving every year, your dad would say, ‘We’d better go get the trees before they’re all picked over; we can leave them outside in water.’ I’d bundle you all up and pack you in the station wagon, and we’d scour the tree lots. The trees never stayed outside in water very long, though.”

I knew she said *trees* in plural because we also chose and delivered her parents’ tree every year. My dad dragged it down to their basement, where the cousins gussied it up while the adults mused in sentiment and spiked eggnog. Every ornament

stored a memory, preserving a family anecdote my grandmother recounted as we gingerly hung the musty, tattered baubles.

Dad began rummaging through the boxes, looking for the lights. As I snapped on the top third of the tree, he stood in front of me and handed me the end of a string of lights, saying, "I'll hold them for you."

"Greeeeaaat," I said. Although I was puzzled about the logistics, I knew that stringing the lights was his job, and one more Man's Job that he couldn't do.

I plugged in the string, then methodically unwound it inch by inch as Dad awkwardly spun the twisted mess.

I looped the strand around the tree, weaving around him with every swirl. There was no position he could occupy that wasn't in my trajectory as we slowly draped five strings of lights. I could have finished them by myself in a fraction of the time, but the guilt would have festered long after I packed away the decorations in January.

I tempered my impatience by thinking of my beloved big old bear-dog, Dakota. As with Dad, her shiny black hair was graying, her senses dulling, and her hips wobbling. She plopped right in the middle of every project, but we always maneuvered around her with a kiss and a cookie.

I don't mean to diminish Dad's skills at helping or at inventing improbable, improvisational repairs. He was a genius at it. Much of the time, he was insightfully helpful. There were just occasions when his blindness or aging body—or, more likely, my haste—limited his ability to contribute. Those were the times when he became perplexed, parked himself in the project, and peered at it with his head cocked to one side. I just learned to enjoy it by envisioning the silly pairing with the dog who held my heart.

Under Mom's sovereign supervision, and with Dad's continuous assistance, I bedecked their apartment long after I considered it replete. I overembellished just to their liking with the

tree too big for the room, artificial greens swagged from stem to stern, and holiday keepsakes vying for attention no matter where I glanced. I laced outdoor lights over shrubs and suspended them in symmetrical swaths from the patio eaves, framing Mom's perpetual view toward the lake with an embroidered glow, all set on automatic timers. After festooning the mantel and doorway with colored lights, I plugged all the inside lights into easy on-off switches, since Mom couldn't bend to reach the electric outlets and Dad couldn't see the holes to plug into them.

Mom slid a big sheet of vinyl window stickers out from under her recipes, like pulling a rabbit out of a hat. How many other hidden projects did she have for me? "How do you think these would look?" We all knew she meant, "Would you arrange these on the windows?"

I said, "Those will look great. Last year I had the neighborhood kids in to decorate the windows with stencils and Glass Wax, like we used to do." We had daubed every window and mirror in the house, composing frosted masterpieces of angels, reindeer, bells, and snowflakes, with snowdrifts in the corners.

She went back to her recipes, humming "Frosty the Snowman," while I arranged and rearranged cherished Santas and snowmen and cloaked windows and doors with withered wreaths that Mom had made decades earlier. Nary an ornament or surface was overlooked.

Dad pulled their large ceramic Santa out of a box and held it up for directions. "Put Santa on the buffet, where everyone can see him," Mom said. "His poor broken nose. Joey did that." It didn't matter that Joey didn't do it and that every other body part of the sixty-year-old Santa was glued together now, too. It was different for me to have Joey memories to share, so I just enjoyed it. He was every breath of my adolescent and teenage years, but none of my friends here had known him. I smiled to myself, thinking Mom had just moved Joey out West to sit at her table, too.

"I wish we still had the train," Mom said with regret.

"How many cars were there?" I asked. "Three or four?" My mother's artistic sister and woodworking brother-in-law had made our most cherished Christmas decoration, a huge Santa train for the front yard.

"Four," they answered in unison; then Mom continued, "Don't you remember? Aunt Kay painted the big engine with Santa waving out the window, the coal car filled with Christmas trees, a boxcar decorated like a present, and the caboose with *Merry Christmas* on it. Your dad set it up after Thanksgiving, before he slathered cranberry on the first leftover turkey sandwich."

He defended his timing: "Someone was always around to help that weekend."

"Oh, I was happy you did it early," she said. "It kicked off the holiday for the whole street. Everyone came to see it. I served hot chocolate to the kids and hot toddies to the grown-ups."

I left them to their memories and ferried the empty boxes back to the garage, surprised that dusk was falling and I had chalked up a whole day to this endeavor. We sat at the table for a few minutes, reviewing schedules for appointments, haircuts, and other outings. By the time we looked around, it had grown dark enough for the holiday lights to twinkle inside and out. The result was as unexpected and magical as the sliding open of the back doors of the stage in the final scene of *White Christmas*. My parents were speechless and spellbound in their Christmas fairyland. The neighbors all around the lake had filigreed the view with lights that diamond-studded the rippling water. On my way home, I could have sworn I heard Bing Crosby crooning down on the dock.

My phone screeched just as I sank down on my couch with the dogs and my dinner. I was beat but relieved to check *decorate apartment* off my list. I picked up the bleating contraption, and Mom burst forth a rapturous flow before I finished hello. "How can we ever thank you? This is the prettiest tree we've ever had.

Ron came by to say the outside lights looked good and that he would do his the same way. This reminds me of arriving at the park downtown when we took you kids to see Santa. We'd wait for an evening when it was snowing a little, stuff you into snow-suits, and surprise you. But the surprise was for us, too. It was a wonderland of lights."

Dad was on the extension and broke in, "Remember Santa's cottage? And all the stores downtown were lit up and there were carolers strolling. It was magical. Just like this apartment."

Mom added in a wistful voice, "I sang there with the Mother Singers one night a week and Saturday afternoons. That was some cold singing, but I loved every minute of it."

I stifled a yawn and wondered how my parents had found the time and energy to shape all those sweet memories for us. Beyond all the childhood nostalgia, now I had today to fill my heart. It was so unexpected. They were still parenting this child.

## Chapter 25

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I was completing my final Christmas Day pre-party checklist, enjoying the music, cinnamon, and cedar, when my sister pulled into the driveway. I went out to help her carry in packages.

We filled our arms with her loot and started up the walk. She stopped and stared. “Your house is spectacular. It looks like a New England Christmas card. All you need is the train in your front yard.”

“Funny you say that—Mom wants me to call the neighbor she gave it to in 1968 and get it back. Chip thinks he might build one from a photo we have of it. He decorates every square inch of his house inside and out, too.”

“Me too.” She laughed. “I plan my tree while we’re passing the turkey and sweet potatoes at Thanksgiving.

“Oh my God,” she exclaimed as we went in, “look at your tree. It’s exactly like Mom and Dad used to do. Dad’s Lionel train, the village, even the bubble lights. You just need to string tinsel, one . . . single . . . strand . . . at . . . a . . . time. That drove me crazy. Just throw it, for cryin’ out loud.”

I said, “That’s why I skip tinsel altogether. And do you remember that Mom also removed each piece of tinsel when



she took down the tree, restrung it all back in the container, and saved it for the next year?”

She laughed and said, “A habit left over from Depression-era decorating, I suppose. I recognize all the ornaments you’ve made. I have every one you ever gave me. You and Mom are so crafty. Remember that year Mom decorated a hundred cookie tins with raw pasta and spray-painted them gold? The pasta actually ended up looking like flowers.”

I completed the memory, saying, “Then she baked dozens of cookies to fill the tins and gave them away as presents. They were beautiful, weird as it sounds. Where did Mom find the time to do all that?”

Linda didn’t pay attention to me because she was bending down, looking at the village.

“You didn’t leave a spot to crawl under the tree with your quilt, a pillow, and a dog. I never understood why you slept there when you were little. So did Chip. It couldn’t have been comfortable.”

“I was mesmerized by the view of the tree looking up through the branches. I still am. Try it sometime.”

She gave me a skeptical grunt, then asked, “Did Mom and Dad go to church last night?”

“No, I offered, but they wanted to stay home and talk to Chip and Jonquil on the phone.”

“Hard to imagine them not at church on Christmas Eve,” she said, “although that always was one of the most tense car rides of the year. The only sounds were the tires crunching in the snow and Mom fiddling with her purse clasp. I don’t know why she was that anxious about a church solo.”

In my memory, our childhood Christmas Eve crescendo came too soon and departed too fast, combining two main events: the candlelight midnight church service and Santa. My mother’s holiday solo was as anticipated and appreciated as any diva’s, and she practiced as if she were the star attraction at Carnegie Hall.

Although a polished performer, she was nervous to sing for this intimately entwined congregation of neighbors, relatives, and lifelong friends. The little church would be standing room only after the extra folding chairs in the aisles filled with once-a-year parishioners, and Mom knew every one of them. She knew the next day her neighbors could be whispering about a missed note or congratulating her on her success. Still, to my knowledge, she never missed a note.

My sister made a trip to the bathroom while I lingered in the memory of the church. I saw us flocking up the dark sidewalk, greeting our friends outside but shushing each other the moment we entered the nave. No one ever spoke unnecessarily or above a whisper, although the plush red carpet and deep velvet seat cushions subdued the sharp edges of any errant baby yelp.

The Christmas service joyously celebrated the holiday in ritual and song. Everyone in our pew sat riveted during Mom's solo, collectively motionless throughout "O Holy Night," until she trilled that very last "deee-*viine*" in her perfect soprano pitch. We reluctantly held our applause and reverently left the church in candlelit procession into the iridescent snowy hush, the only sound our soft humming of "Silent Night." By the time we arrived at home, Santa had delivered our presents and my grandparents were casually waiting for us, as if they just happened to be passing by.

As Linda wandered through my displays of family knick-knacks and nostalgia, I finished my food prep. I had worked hard through planning, shopping, and cooking to present a crowd-pleasing meal that wouldn't wear me out in the process. Too bad my parents couldn't shop for me. They had been pros in their heyday.

Mom had approached grocery shopping like a purchasing agent for a large corporation. She drafted a list for herself and a list for Dad, each outlined to flow with the floor plan of the targeted store. Dad repaired the cash registers in all the local

businesses, so they were his turf and he knew all the clerks. He undertook it as a social event, Mom attacked it as a mission, and kids didn't go.

When they returned home from the store hours later with the chassis scraping the driveway, we all unloaded the loot. That is, my parents and I unloaded; my sister was probably practicing elocution, my brother impishly unwinding a spool of thread around a room. The next step never changed for my parents' whole lives when they returned from the grocery store: Mom took off her rings, watch, and shoes, then constructed a big, dripping mess of a ham-and-Swiss sandwich with mayonnaise, mustard, lettuce, tomato, and pickles. Once she bit into it, she had to truss it together with two hands until the last bite. Dad slapped a slice of bologna and a slab of cheese between two pieces of plain white bread and deemed it terrific.

It was time to retrieve Mom and Dad, so I told my sister I'd be right back. I hesitated in the car in front of their apartment and gathered my holiday spirit, amused by the illuminated deer statues waving their heads in the garden. Every day my parents were sharing stories of their delight with the decorations, neighbors visiting, and "Merry Christmas" long-distance phone calls. My parents each thanked me profusely for everything I did. I imagined their gratitude as fuel and soaked it in to replenish my waning energy.

Since Thanksgiving, Mom's Christmas spirit had been on a roll and I was its designated driver. She studied the Sunday newspaper ads and recited her lists to me as if she were sitting on Santa's lap. I shopped, helped my parents wrap, and prepared everything for shipping in time to arrive cross-country. Weather and achy joints permitting, they had ventured out with me to absorb the spice of the season, singing along with Christmas carols ringing on the stores' PA systems and smiling at the bustling crowds. I drove them around to ogle Christmas lights at night.

I couldn't deny them their joy, and they weren't really demanding things, just suggesting, but to me it was the same thing. I didn't want my last conversation before a heart attack or stroke to be "Do you really need electric deer in the yard?" I firmly believed in guilt prevention.

I found them waiting at the dining room table with coats folded on their laps. "We're ready," Mom said. "We left the lights on for you to see. Aren't they beautiful?"

My crinkled parents were as sparkly as any Christmas decoration with their holiday sweaters, ear-to-ear smiles, and twinkling eyes. To see them so happy rekindled my holiday cheer. I snapped dress-up photos by their tree, then packed pies, presents, and their old bones into the car for the one-minute drive. They oohed and aahed all the way up my driveway and were awestruck when they entered the house, immersed in holiday fragrances, Christmas carols, and shimmering lights. The dogs demanded their attention first, but then Mom admired each decoration while I helped Dad inch down onto his hands and knees to see the train and village. I figured if he couldn't get up again, I'd get him a quilt, a pillow, and a dog.

Other guests were arriving, pretty much the same crowd as we had for Thanksgiving, unloading presents and greeting Mom and Dad. I detoured to the kitchen, overhearing snips of conversations with the hors d'oeuvres.

Dianna said to Mom, "I loved your Christmas letter."

"Thanks. I made some notes; then my Christmas elf composed the letter, added the photos, and printed seventy-five copies for me." Mailing a computerized Christmas letter symbolized a full, contemporary life to her, and she was proud of it. I was glad I'd made the time.

"That's good news about the house selling."

"It was a blessing," Mom said. "I kept worrying a hurricane would blow it away and we'd pay a mortgage on an empty lot the rest of our lives, or the kids would have to manage it as

a rental.” I hadn’t realized we’d shared the same secret disaster scenarios.

Dinner drew more praise than I’d hoped for, and everyone resettled in the living room for the pre-dessert entertainment. This was Mom and Dad’s first time to cast their lines into our traditional game, the Fish Pond. Each guest contributed two wrapped gifts valued around ten dollars. The pond was above flood stage this year because several of us overstocked it, making sure there were presents geared toward my parents.

We piled all the gifts in the middle of the living room floor and one by one hooked packages with a modified fishing pole. We fished and poached and laughed until we each weighed in quite a catch and had stories about the ones that got away.

When there were only two minnows left, Katy suggested that Mom and Dad, as the newest anglers at the pond, should fish again. Mom happily declined, saying, “No, I have enough. Let someone else have an extra turn.” I had rarely heard my mother utter the words “I have enough.” It was a measure of success I had never expected to achieve.

For entertainment during dessert, the dogs ripped open their gifts—big stuffed animals from the Goodwill—while we found places in our bellies to tuck in my elaborate Yule log cake. The evening settled over me as a satisfying blend of festivity and fulfillment. I basked in the spirit and soaked in every memorable moment. If this were the only late-life Christmas I was to have with my parents, it would serve as a perfect recollection.

Precious taxied home two tired but sated oldsters. The next day they were still reflecting their holiday glow and called to compliment me on the meal, presents, dessert, and atmosphere. I said I’d had good teachers.

After I hung up, I suddenly and sadly remembered that every year of my childhood, minutes after one of us tore open the first present, my mother’s post-Christmas depression started dripping over her like India ink. Mom didn’t even pretend to

enjoy her presents or anything else from that point on, and all her glitter gradually dimmed and lost its sparkle by the end of Christmas Day. We each persistently attempted to astonish her with as much joy on Christmas as she created for us, to no avail. Her depression resurfaced tenaciously each year as part of her tradition and held her hostage until the first bright, clear-blue, snowmelt day. Inspired by the rich, invigorating air, she opened the windows, hung sheets on the line, and dove into a project. Painting, upholstering, planning a party: It didn't matter what—she was back. Maybe she suffered from seasonal affective disorder, or maybe from something much more complex. It was never open for discussion.

This first year in Washington, my mother's cheer held on tight through the dark days of winter. I skeptically searched for a black scourge seeping over her smile but found only gratitude and grace. Maybe she had abandoned her traditional postholiday depression in Florida, leaving it behind with the bottle. I was not going to drop a bad memory on her mood by asking about it now. It would remain another mystery from my childhood, sealed safely in the corners of her heart, where "don't ask, don't tell" stalwartly guarded her secret.