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The
Christmas
Note



Donna
VanLiere



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One



All things must change to something new, to something strange.

—HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

GRETCHEN

November 30

I look out the window and wait, wondering what will happen today. Life is weird. Just when I think I'm making heads or tails of it, when I'm getting used to today, along comes a new morning. The kids are running through the condo screaming, listening to their own voices echo off the naked walls. As Ethan checks out every closet and cupboard space, his face is fixed in a wide, transforming smile, just like his father's. Emma is like me, more cautious as she looks, envisioning where her things will go. Her eyes flame



out fiery blue from her olive face as she swings her favorite stuffed animal, a bunny named Sugar, around her bedroom. When I was six, I had a stuffed dog named Henry. He's somewhere in the moving boxes. Ethan says that now that he's six he doesn't need a stuffed animal anymore, but I noticed he brought Friska the one-eared dog in the car with him. Seems all of us, no matter how old, have a hard time letting go sometimes.

The clouds look upset, puffing the sky up in a solid wall of gray. I hate moving when the trees have dropped their leaves. Everything's drab and bare and the feeling of emptiness chokes me. But that's today. Tomorrow will be different. "The truck is here!" I yell from the living-room window. My cell phone rings and I see that it's my mother. "It just pulled up," I say to her. "Bring your crew anytime."

I haven't lived near my mother since I left for college sixteen years ago, but Kyle and I always wanted to live closer to our parents; the trouble was always which one. Kyle's parents are still living in the small Oklahoma town where Kyle was raised, but I'd have to travel too far for work as a hygienist if we moved there. My parents are divorced. They decided when Jeff and I were teenagers that they couldn't live to-



gether anymore and it took me years to forgive them. I loved them always, but sometimes I couldn't stand to talk to either one of them because of what their decision did to our family. Dad lives in a town in Arizona near his children from his second failed marriage and enjoys his grandchildren there, but my mom doesn't live close to either Jeff or me. Not that she needed us; Miriam Lloyd-Davies stands just fine on her own, but I thought Emma and Ethan should be closer to her, three-blocks-away close, to be exact.

Ethan bolts past me and stands on the front stoop; it's not big enough to be called a porch. The builder planted some nondescript shrub in the spot by the door in a halfhearted attempt to make it feel homey. The garage door for the adjoining condo opens and I notice a car turning into the driveway. Ethan waves at the driver like he's been expecting her all day, and she pulls slowly up her drive, watching the moving men open the back of the truck, revealing all of our prized possessions. She stops her car and opens the door, staring at the movers without a hint of expression on her face. "Hi," I say, crossing my arms over my chest against the cold.

"We're moving in today," Ethan says, stepping closer to her. "What's your name?"



“Melissa.” She’s not heavy or thin, pretty or ugly. Her brown hair looks as if it was cut impatiently and her coat is too big for her. I can just see the tips of her fingers peeking from the sleeves.

“I’m Gretchen,” I say, stepping next to Ethan. “My daughter Emma is in the house.” She nods and I know she couldn’t care less.

“Emma’s eight,” Ethan says. “Two years older than me. My dad was in the army. We have all sorts of medals that he won.”

“Oh,” Melissa says, dragging the *O* out and raising her shabby brown eyebrows and puckering her lips in that way people do when they don’t approve of something: the soup, the new boyfriend, the performance of the car, the politician, or the way a new bra fits.

“All right,” I say, turning Ethan toward the moving truck and away from Miss Personality. “Let’s get busy.” She doesn’t offer to help or ask any questions of where we came from or how we ended up here, and from behind me I hear her garage door closing. I lead the men into the condo and point out where each box should go; in order to make today easier I had marked them with “kitchen,” “bathroom,”



“bedroom 1,” “bedroom 2,” and “living room” as I packed up our former home.

Mom’s car pulls in behind the truck, and she and her best friend Gloria step out. Mom is wearing black slacks and a soft green sweater. “Please tell me you’re not unpacking boxes in angora, Mom,” I say, walking toward the car. Ethan slams himself into her legs, and Gloria, although it’s only been twelve weeks since I was here scoping out a place to live, greets me with one of her I-haven’t-seen-you-in-twenty-years hugs. She’s outfitted in what a normal person moves in: jeans and a lightweight cotton shirt.

“No matter what you’re doing,” Mom says, reaching for me, “there’s never any reason to dress like a ruffian.”

“That’s what we are,” Gloria says, looking at me. “Ruffians.”

I’m still amazed that my mother and Gloria became best friends. Mom is all English with soft edges to her words and wardrobe, and Gloria is Georgia born and bred with fire in her soul and clothes from the thrift store, but they are good for each other. Gloria was widowed for more than a decade before marrying Marshall Wilson two years ago, but



somehow she and Mom still find time to prowl around and work together at Glory's Place, Gloria's center for single moms and their children.

Another car comes to a stop behind Mom, and four young guys step to the curb. I greet each one of them but know I won't remember any of their names ten minutes from now. My mind is inside each of those boxes and where the contents of each one needs to go. "Where'd you find all those guys?" I ask, watching them run up the ramp of the truck.

"Your mother still has a way with men," Mom says, kissing the top of Ethan's head.

Gloria laughs, walking to the house. "She put an ad in the university paper and said she'd pay for an hour's worth of work."

Mom trudges behind her, whispering through her teeth. "You make it sound so tawdry, Gloria!"

The truck is unloaded in less than ninety minutes with all the extra hands; the college guys even set up the beds for me and moved the furniture pieces into place. When they left at noon, they were carrying two pizzas Mom had ordered for them and a wad of cash. "I could have paid them, Mom," I say, unloading a box of glasses into a kitchen cupboard.



If I can get the kitchen set up, the beds made, and some clothes put into drawers, I'll feel great about today.

"Nonsense. I told you. This was my gift. This," she says, from the living room, "and a new sofa."

I can't see her but imagine her face pinched up into slight disgust. "We don't need a new sofa. That one's comfortable."

"Well then, I'll help with schooling for Ethan and Emma."

"They'll go to the public school, Mom. Taxes pay for that." I can hear her sigh. "Hey, Mom! Why don't you load up the kids and go get lunch for all of us?" She's trying so hard to be positive and not step on my toes or say something that upsets the children that she's driving me crazy. I'm relieved to get her out of the house for a while.

"She's worried," Gloria says. "The explosion and—" She turns to look at me.

"I know," I say, not letting her finish. I'm worried, too, but not in the sick-to-my-stomach way. I'm cautious or anxious; I don't know. I stopped believing a long time ago that life fits together like a jigsaw puzzle. The pieces are there; it just takes years,



a lifetime, or sometimes beyond that life before the pieces make sense. I'm just trying to put together the ones that fit today.

"For all her faults . . . and Lord knows she has a lot," Gloria says, making me smile, "deep down Miriam's a person."

I break down another box and lean against the counter. "I need to find a job, Gloria."

She stops and stands, grunting as she rises. "I know you do, babe, and I've already got the word out. The good news is people always need clean teeth."

"The bad news is the local dentists already have their hygienists. I'll have to look at the next town or two over."

Gloria wipes her forehead with her sleeve and small gray ringlets bob around her face. "Well, thankfully, people always get mad and quit or get fired or take a leave of absence to have a baby and then decide they don't want to work anymore. So let's hope somebody gets fired!"

I look around at everything that needs to be hooked together, like the TV and DVD player, the computer and printer, and all the stuff that goes with it to get Internet access. "I need my dad to come



help me with a lot of this stuff that I don't know how to do."

Gloria snaps her head up to look at me. "When's the last time Miriam's seen him?"

"My college graduation."

She laughs and swipes the hair out of her eyes. "That'll be good!"

I hadn't really thought of Dad and Mom seeing each other again when we decided to move to Grandon, but Dad *will* come visit the kids and me and Mom and Dad will be forced to be civil or hostile to each other. I can't think about that right now. All I know is that I need my dad.

We work until seven and my body is sore. I can't imagine how Mom and Gloria feel. Gloria looks as if she walked through a car wash, and Mom's honey-colored bob has been shoved behind her ears and her black slacks are sagging, ready for the dry cleaner. The kitchen is organized and Mom has stocked our fridge and freezer with food for the upcoming week.

The kids give big hugs good-bye and I help them find their pajamas in the drawers. "How long do we have to share a room?" Ethan asks, picking out his red jammies with the big football on the front.



“Until I don’t know,” I say, looking through Emma’s chest of drawers.

“This room is too crowded,” Emma says, balling up her blue jeans.

“Don’t wad those up, please. Lay them at the end of your bed so you can wear them tomorrow.” I pull a purple nightie over Emma’s head and pull her long hair out of the neck hole. “This room isn’t too crowded. You’ve got room for your beds and you each have a chest of drawers.”

“There’s no room for us to play,” Emma says.

I sit on the edge of her bed and look at them. I am exhausted. “I think we’re all tired and it’s easy to be negative when you’re tired. Let’s eat some soup and call it a day.”

The kids are overtired and I calm Emma down from a long crying jag at dinner. “I miss Daddy,” she says, tears streaking her face. I cry along with her and hold her on my lap while she finishes eating.



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