

12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS GIFTS



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Chapter 1: 2 Days Before Christmas

CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

As the orange sunset faded to dusky pink, a petite figure holding an acoustic guitar crept between dead dogwood trees. The skinny little blue-eyed thirty year-old with long stringy green hair zipped her ripping jean jacket. What used to be coat sleeves were nothing more than denim strands revealing crude floral arm tattoos - and goosebumps from the icy wind. As her ill-fitting red sneakers stepped past the sign reading Trailer World Rentals, she began to tiptoe.

“Sissy Sparks!” a man’s voice barked.

Sissy tiptoed faster past him but not fast enough. The towering unkempt lot manager outran her to her rusty trailer door and threw a padlock on it.

She pleaded, “You can’t do this to me! Not tonight! Please, I need sleep. Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeease.”

“You owe me two months rent!” fumed the balding man with a graying mustache bent on one side. Despite being dressed in a suit, he must have been sleeping in his Winnebago although it was only 6 PM.

“I’m tryin’ to get a job. No one hires me. Managers are shit!” Sissy vented, exasperated, “I mean store managers, not trailer park managers like you. You nice and fresh as a daisy,” she smiled sarcastically.

“Go get my money,” he whispered, then inched to her, his foul breath invading her dainty gamine face, “Your trailer stays locked until you bring me what you owe.”

“I need sleep!”

“You do?” he chuckled at her expense, then whispered, “You can sleep with me tonight.”

Her steely large blue eyes not leaving his, she grimaced and shook her head, “I’d rather sleep in my freezing car.”

He forcibly gripped her skinny arm, “You’re worthless!”

“Get your grimy hands off me!” she shouted, wriggling free.

“Where’s your family?”

“Back in North Carolina. Why?”

“Where?”

“Lake Lure.”

He grunted, “Fancy mountain community, Lake Lure. Borrow money from your family.”

“They don’t got no extra money.”

He grabbed her guitar, “I’m keeping this until you pay me.”

“It ain’t worth nothin’,” she argued while trying to wrestle it away.

“Not the way you play it. Not the way you screech and sing! But I can sell it.”

“This guitar is all I have!” she yelled. With all her might, the 5’1” lass wrestled the guitar away and broke free, strumming it aggravatingly loud to gloat her victory.

As she turned to run she looked down and saw the manager’s open wallet, showing much money, on the ground. She had time to steal it and get away - but hesitated.

He lunged toward her, “Don’t you steal my cash!”

She quickly grabbed it and defiantly yelled, “I don’t steal!”

She ran off with it teasingly, then tossed it back to him, his cash flying in the air. As he retrieved it, she disappeared into the dead dogwood trees.

CHICAGO

At exactly the same time, which was 5 PM in Chicago that December 23rd, singing Santas ringing charity bells and the beeping of stuck traffic were deafened by blizzard gusts. Between the giant buildings on State Street, entire crowds of Chicagoans leaving work slipped on crosswalks due to sudden snow squalls in front of them, behind them, above them and under them.

More snow abruptly plastered a monstrous iron door reading CHICAGO TAX ATTORNEYS. Handsome young blond Grant Morris exited, wincing his deep chestnut eyes in the assaulting freezing wind. One of his large hands pushed snow off his short blonde beard and gray tie, the other gripped his briefcase.

Dressed equally as conservative but wearing a bow-tie, silver-rimmed glasses and too much Old Spice cologne, sixty year-old Mr. Coner departed the building. As he fought the wind, his raspy baritone voice moaned, “Grant. I need you back in my office.”

“But I got a flight to catch to Lake Lure.”

“You have to postpone it. I’m sorry, Grant.”

Coner grabbed Grant’s muscular arm to pull him toward the door, but passersby with happy-colored packages inadvertently

blocked them from going inside. Just then a car horn beeped and a woman's shrill voice squeaked, "Grant!"

Grant looked to see a small Subaru, its' headlights flashing.

Grant protested, "That's my mom. I need to go." He sounded nervous for two reasons. One, he was as shy as they come and never talked back or disagreed. Two, his dominating mother designed him that way and at the moment she stood outside her car, glaring at him with anger, pointing to her imitation diamond watch.

Coner wouldn't release his mild-mannered diligent and dependable assistant, "Not yet. You need to finish the new client's tax sheets."

With his free hand, Coner waved over Grant's stout mother, Ida Morris. As she approached, the prudish woman with gray hair in a bun held down her flipping rabbit jacket to hide her flabby belly.

Coner smiled, "Ida, Ida, Ida. Grant needs to stay and prepare tax sheets for a new client. So sorry."

Hiding her frustration, Ida faked a full-toothed smile as best she could, taking into account a missing front tooth, "Well, of course the office is Grant's priority, isn't it always?"

As the wind died down, Ida prolonged her pretend smile belied by her deep eye creases, "Mr. Coner, is your lovely daughter at the office today?"

“She’s rearranging the bookshelves,” he said, shivering.

“Grant is quite taken with her.”

Coner smiled proudly at Ida, not seeing Grant’s shocked expression showing he obviously was not quite taken with Coner’s daughter. The handsome young blond man with soulful dark eyes tilted his head like a confused puppy, silently miming, “what??!” to his lying mother.

Ida continued, “Don’t be surprised if Grant asks your daughter out for a night at the opera.”

Grant silently mimed again, “what??!” and shook his head no.

Ida stopped Coner turning to see Grant’s dismay by brushing snowflakes off Coner’s slim shoulders. She batted her worn and tired sepia eyes at him, whispering, “I wouldn’t be surprised if one of these days you ask me out for a night at the opera.” As if she wasn’t brazen enough, she winked. Twice. Three times. Four times.

Coner’s eyes widened, surprised. He gulped in fright.

Ida detoured the awkward moment with, “I’ve taken enough of your time. I’ll book Grant a later flight if you say so, Mr. Coner. You know what is best, you’re such a powerful, successful man.”

Grant piped, “Wait! Mom! No. You told me this was the only time I could ever see my father?”

With her finger, Ida shushed her son's hairy lips. But Coner wasn't interested in their family drama anyway. He sternly stated, "Grant, we have work to do. The new client."

Ida clarified to Coner, "I'm not married, of course," batting her eyelids at a feverish pace like a hummingbird caught in a fan. She was anything but subtle. But Coner showed no interest in her spastic eyelashes or heaving bosom or her tiny plump fingers latching onto his collar as if she was drowning.

Ida explained, "Grant's father, way in North Carolina, is ... dying."

This new information had no effect on Coner but Grant's thick mahogany brows furrowed in surprise. His dashing wide mouth went dry, inadvertently sucking in his cheeks revealing the cutest dimples as if he wasn't already handsome enough for magazine covers.

Coner felt obligated to reply, "I am sorry. We all die, don't we? Right now I am freezing to death. Sorry I need to work your son to death."

The crusted tax executive smiled at his attempt of a joke.

Wiping drool from his full lips, Grant regained use of his vocal cords, "My father's dying?! How? Of what?"

Ida shrugged, "He didn't say."

"Mom, what exactly did he say? Every word."

“Grant, I was shocked to hear his voice. I haven’t heard it since our ... I don’t know how many years ago.”

“Yes, you do. You told him I’m his son? I’m thirty. So your whatever was about thirty-one years ago. Why did you never tell me before??”

Ida blushed, looking down, though her clutching fingers remained adhered to Coner’s crisp shirt as if she was a skydiver realizing her parachute would never open.

Ida whispered, “I’m sure handsome powerful important Mr. Coner is not interested.”

He was not. He smiled politely, his teeth chattering, “Nice seeing you, Ida. I am freezing. I have to get back to my desk.”

He had to remove Ida’s hands off of him, one finger at a time, as he insisted, “Grant, you have to get back to my desk as well. Come in as soon as you can.”

Coner reached for the heavy door and disappeared into the giant building foyer, his loud footsteps echoing off the marble floor.

“He shouldn’t wear so much cologne,” Ida whispered outside.

“Mom, the issue we have is not about cologne.”

She looked away from her son, “I was so embarrassed to get pregnant by a loser. And in North Carolina.”

“A loser? My father’s a *loser*?”

“We didn’t need him, I provided a good life for you, right? I gave you everything you needed.”

“Yes. Except a dad. I can’t believe I have a dad ... What is he like?”

“Nothing to look at from what I remember. Boring. Nothing special. Not like you. Now go help your boss, and ask out that daughter. You’re going to marry into a good family.”

“I’m not attracted to her.”

“You’re going to ask her out. She’s got money and dignity. She’s got old money, pillars of the community. You’re going to marry a dignified rich girl. Don’t you want that??”

“No.”

“Yes, you do,” she overruled, laughing, ripping a comb out of her purse to harshly comb her son’s bangs and soft short beard.

“Mom! If I miss the flight I may never get to meet my father.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

“I do have a choice,” he said defiantly, stepping toward her car.

Though he was taller and muscular, the shorter sturdy woman yanked him back, causing them both to slip on the snow and fall, four legs flailing in the air. Unconcerned that passersby could view her ripped slip under her risen skirt, half sitting, with her booted feet, she pushed her son like a hockey puck across the ice to the building door.

Thighs bruising, Grant resisted, “I never wanted to be a tax attorney!”

“Well, you’re going to be!”

Deeply conflicted, and crushed that he might never meet his father, Grant nevertheless acquiesced to his domineering mother, as he had a million times previously.

With one soft protest grunt, he opened the heavy door, shuffling his way through the marble corridor, through countless offices, to the oversized desk of Coner.

Over the next hour, with Coner’s incessant needling and direction, frustrated Grant input numbers into a computer, silently suffering his boss’s abusive Old Spice exploitation. Behind them, Coner’s nerdy daughter arranged books, looking longingly at uninterested Grant whenever he caught his breath and looked her way.

An hour later Coner disappeared and reentered carrying in an open deli box, announcing, “Dinner everyone!”

Grant sighed and rested back in his chair, “Finally. I ordered roast beef.”

Coner didn't hear him because other hungry employees shuffled in the office.

"Can I get a roast beef?" asked a suited woman.

Coner smiled, "This one says roast beef."

He tossed it to her. He did not toss it to Grant.

Exhausted Grant piped up, although quietly, as was his norm, "I ordered a roast beef, too."

"Grilled cheese for me???" a heavy man asked, needlessly shouting.

Coner threw him the grilled cheese then read the writing on the others, "This one says veggie. Who ordered pastrami?"

His nerdy daughter sprinted over, "Pastrami for me, Dad."

He kissed her forehead, "I knew it was for you."

"Veggie here," whispered a meek old woman.

Coner handed her a veggie sandwich, unwrapping it for her. Everybody left with their sandwiches leaving only Grant and Coner and one sandwich. Coner unwrapped it and bit into it.

Chewing, he looked to Grant, "You should have ordered something. How are those figures coming?"

Grant looked numb. He didn't say anything. He wiped

drool from his lips and closed his eyes, his strong brows wincing. “I have a father?” he mumbled to himself, then opened his eyes to stare wistfully out the iced window.

Chapter 2: 1 Day Before Christmas

CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

At 9 AM on December 24th, dozens of employees walked into downtown offices. The noise of hard shoes and traffic woke Sissy in the backseat of her rusty purple clunker car. She pushed off blankets, wiped sleep from her eyes, then pulled her scratched guitar with her to the sidewalk. After she set a stack of her resumes and a container for tips in front of her, she improvised song lyrics trying to impress those walking her way, “*Lady in blue suit and hat, I love your white hair like that, how do you do, going to your office are you? Hey, lady, can I give you my resume?*”

Sissy reached down to grab a resume and then held it out to the lady in the blue suit, hoping for a job or tip, but neither came. Ordinarily, Sissy would have demanded she have the last word, a cuss word, but since she saw a couple of men coming, she continued to sing with a surprisingly big-bodied voice for such a small-bodied girl, “*Oh we got a meetin’ today, isn’t that great oh hey, our ties match and so do our shoes, see you at lunch, pasta and booze?*”

She smiled. “Hey, where you guys work? Need an assistant? I can be it. Make you coffee, too. Or do you need a cook? Or a maid? Or a driver?”

They ignored her.

With no other prospects in view, Sissy spewed, “You assholes could have said no thanks and not just blow me off!”

They hurried away.

She crumbled the resume in her hand and threw it at them.

LAKE LURE, NORTH CAROLINA

At the exact same time but four hours east, an airplane pilot announced, “That was Asheville and under us is Lake Lure.”

From his window seat, Grant eagerly surveyed below him the morning-lit 717 acre Lake Lure in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina. It was surrounded by pines and evergreens but no snow.

The pilot’s monotone voice continued over the speakers, “The epic man-made Lake Lure is nestled in the Hickory Nut Gorge, surrounded by lush mountain tops and sheer granite cliffs. About a thousand feet elevation means only around four inches of snow annually, which residents like because they don’t have much shoveling. They want it to snow today for a

white Christmas tomorrow. But there's no snow in the forecast. Maybe rain."

Collecting his luggage at baggage claim, Grant noticed an approaching man about sixty years-old wearing a North Carolina sweater. He was almost six feet tall, like Grant, with similar large brown eyes and blonde hair. Convinced it was his estranged father, and overwhelmed to finally meet him, Grant wiped a tear and hugged him. The older man tensed.

Grant whispered to him, "I love you no matter what."

The man blushed and pulled away.

Grant repeated, "I love you, whoever you are. We don't know each other at all."

The man obligatorily mumbled in response, "I ... love you ... too," then turned, grabbed a suitcase from the conveyor belt and rapidly walked toward the exit doors.

Lugging his boxy suitcase, Grant chased him, "Dad! Wait for me! Dad!!"

A tall old woman in a bright pink holiday dress jumped in Grant's path. Despite stylish blonde hair and too much make-up, no one would ever consider her pretty. Airport ceiling lights reflected off the rhinestone rings on her shaking sixty-five year-old hand as it approached Grant's face, temporarily blinding him, "Now tell me, would your name be Grant?"

"I am Grant, yeah, but in a hurry to catch my dad."

“That’s not your dad. I’m your father’s sister, Kris. Welcome to North Carolina!”

As Grant searched her insecure hazel eyes, Kris’s hand suddenly flung to her chest and she collapsed against a wall. From her sparkling pink purse she grabbed a pill bottle and swallowed a pill. Sweat poured down her face, leaking eye shadow down her right cheek.

“You going to be okay?” Grant asked, concerned, helping the impaired eccentric woman to stand.

“No. To quote my doctor,” then she lowered her voice, ““Your heart don’t work no more. You gonna die.””

She giggled a delightfully infectious giggle pulling a chuckle from him as well.

“That’s scary,” he said, “Do you sign up for a heart transplant or something?”

“No. Honestly now, I am ready to cross over and let me tell you something, Grant ...”

Though she wasn’t beautiful, her smile was. She patted Grant’s cheek then took his beefy arm which was holding his suitcase, guiding him toward the exit doors, “Young man, about me dying. Well, years ago I was beat into a coma and I died, I crossed over ...”

She spoke emotionless of how when she was much younger, in a dark alley, she was beaten to a pulp by violent

thugs. As if that wasn't horrific enough, they pushed her head into a metal garbage container, leaving her to bleed to death.

"I died next to that alley garbage crate," she laughed, "My soul drifted up out of my bleeding body and I saw myself from ten feet above. Dead. My body was dead. But I was somehow in the air. My soul or spirit was still alive."

He stopped walking, "You died? You couldn't have died?"

She turned to him, admiring his young beautiful face and warm, kind eyes and innocence, "Oh I did die. I really did."

She explained that in the hospital, her EGK machine flatlined alerting the nurse that the patient was dead, then Kris's spirit fog again rose up, "My soul floated out of my dead body again. I floated to the ceiling, above my body, watching the frazzled nurse try to save my life." She smacked him with excitement, "But I was okay in the afterlife, Grant! I was in warm, glorious light surrounded by angels! Angels!!"

Kris excitedly shared her memory of floating through hospital walls and above other patients' beds where she encountered other spirits who were flying above ill children in comas, "I watched the angels reach the minds of sick kids in comas. They conversed, but without words. Telepathically. The angels replayed the kids' short life experiences, and that somehow helped the kids. Well, one died, because the child wanted to stay with the loving angels." Kris smacked Grant again with excitement, "But I saw the other side! And it's splendid! Swear. So young man, I am not afraid to die and I am

very, very ready to cross over for good when my stupid heart gives out.”

His thick brows met in confusion, but before the handsome man could ask her any questions, her hand grabbed his suitcase, prodding him toward the exit.

He sympathized, “You don’t want to live anymore?”

“I’ve been around long enough.”

“Why? Because your life is boring?”

“I wouldn’t say boring, but limiting.”

“Mine, too,” he growled, “I just feel like all I do is follow directions.”

“Same here and I for one am damn tired of following directions.”

Before he stepped through the OUT door, she stopped him, then she defiantly marched out through the IN door, proclaiming, “Nobody tells Kris what to do anymore!”

He chuckled and followed her lead to exit out the IN door, but he was flattened by a nearsighted traveler. Grant apologized profusely but each time he tried to stand, hurried people knocked him down. Kris butted the strangers to the side and eventually inched Grant out of the line of danger, pulling him out the IN door.

Having rebelled against the door sign directions, they both felt a bit victorious.

Kris led Grant to her parked car, a bright pink jeep, consistent with her brightly colored holiday dress, purse and rouge. As they drove on winding mountain roads through enchanting evergreens listening to holiday music, Kris pointed out picturesque cabins and the tall white Yacht Club on the lake. Occasionally they stopped, to rest her legs, she said.

Eventually Kris's jeep pulled into a private cobblestone driveway leading to a dolled-up red barn with white trim and tin roof. To the side was a sloping picnic table overlooking a field of dead grass, hay stacks and periwinkle winter irises.

After they unloaded the jeep, Kris pointed to a small pond in back where a few cows drank.

“We have our own pond, how fantastic is that?” she said, smacking him with excitement.

“I love it,” he grinned, smacking her back playfully, appreciating the giant oak trees and cows. “This is so old country. Like from a calendar or postcard.”

“You don't get out of Chicago much?”

“I never got out of Chicago. Not one day. Mom always has stuff she needs me to do in the city.”

“You never milked a cow?”

“No,” he laughed at the absurdity.

Kris approached a cow, and pet it, “This is Tokyo. She has big brown eyes like you. You both have such beautiful brown eyes. So deep. Feelers. Some people are cold, and some are feelers. You and Tokyo feel things deeply. You are beautiful souls.”

Grant shrugged.

Excited to demonstrate, Kris grabbed an old metal pail and milked Tokyo.

Grant sat on his suitcase, curious, “Does it hurt her?”

“No, of course not. I don’t hurt Tokyo. I love Tokyo. And Tokyo loves me.”

Grant noticed an aged Latin man in the side yard, repairing the rustic border fencing. They locked eyes. The man waved.

Assuming it was his father, Grant lost his breath, temporarily panicking. Then Grant slowly rose, shaking of anxiety, and smiled, and opened his arms as a long distance loving embrace, then hugged the air, closing his eyes in gratitude.

The older man returned the dramatic air-hug ... then resumed work.

Grant blushed, ashamed, “My ... father ... just blew me off.”

Kris followed Grant's eyes to the man, "You dear innocent boy, that's not your father. That's Juan the handyman."

Grant's face turned ever redder. Lightning flashed, followed by thunder.

Kris looked up to the swiftly moving clouds, "Pray we have a white Christmas tomorrow but it's more likely rain if anything. Now can you try to milk Tokyo?"

"Me? Nah, I don't want to milk Tokyo."

Kris's long jeweled fingers grasped Grant's hands, steering them toward the cow utter. However in ten seconds Grant's face got squirted by milk and he rose, upset, wiping it off.

Kris felt guilty, "Allow me to apologize. You told me you're tired of following directions ..."

"No, I just ... I mean why should I milk Tokyo? I'm not a farmer."

"But you can be."

"Why would I want to be a farmer??" he laughed.

"We were afraid you'd say that," she admitted, standing. "Grant, your father's health is no better than mine. He's ... in the hospital."

"Mom said he's dying? Of what?"

Kris skirted the question, gesturing dramatically, “He is bequeathing you this small farm and this delightful barn house.”

Grant’s big furry brows winced in confusion. He stammered something unintelligible. She smacked him with excitement, “He is bequeathing you this postcard life. It will all be yours!”

She beamed, pushing him toward the pond, where swans, geese and a few big hens played alongside five cows.

“He’s giving me all this? I don’t know what to say.”

She nodded, “You also inherit the five most wonderful cows on Earth and his feathered family.”

“What?? Are those swans?”

“Seven swans. Six geese. Three French hens. Now does that sound familiar?”

“No, I don’t think so. Should it?”

“It should. What a wondrous life you will have here taking care and enjoying our cows and our sweet feathered family.”

“No? What??” Grant muttered, kneeling to pet the one gray goose, who bit his forearm and attacked his legs.

Grant ran away, panicking, “No! I can’t move here! I am almost a tax attorney in Chicago!”

“But this is a more relaxing life!”

“This is not relaxing!,” Grant shouted at the goose chasing him, “What would I do out here in the country?? All alone??”

Kris eventually caught and restrained the violent goose, sharing, “Your father understands loneliness ... My dear, you would have the right to sell the property ... and go elsewhere ... if you find it necessary to do so.”

Kris could not have looked more disappointed.

Grant felt her hurt, “I’m sorry, Aunt Kris, but I can’t live on a little farm.”

Kris quickly wiped the tear falling from her eye, hoping he did not see it. “I ... do understand ...,” she lied.

“No, I don’t think you do.”

“Sure I do.”

“This is too ... weird.”

“Of course. All this thrown at you at once.”

“I live in Chicago.”

“Of course you do.”

“I’m a city man, almost a full tax attorney.”

“Of course.”

“I can’t live here.”

“I hear you. Okay. Then Plan B. If you won’t live here, you need to help me secretly give away the birds.”

“Give birds away? What??”

“Well your father and I won’t be around long, maybe only a week. Who knows? The birds need to find homes. But secretly.”

“Secretly?”

“You need to help me sneak the birds to our neighbors.”

“You’re going to force your neighbors to take your birds?”

“Force??” she recoiled, “No. These are so many lonely people in the world, child. In Chicago, and here in the country. And some lonely people are too stubborn to adopt a pet willingly. But they love pets that are given to them, forced as you say. If a new pet is already in their home, they can’t refuse, can they? They fall in love with them. So they can’t say no when they are in love, am I right? Have you ever been in love?”

“Me? Nah.”

“Why not?”

“There’s too much work to do, I guess.”

“Oh I have a girl for you ... If you like girls?”

“Yeah. Totally.”

“Delilah. Oh she’s marvelous. Conservative, gorgeous. Has her own money, too. Quite a catch.”

“I don’t have time for girls.”

“You do here,” Kris insisted.

“I can’t stay for more than a few days.”

“And why not?”

“I have to get back to work in Chicago.”

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

“Didn’t we pledge to stop taking directions?” she grinned.

He chuckled.

She pointed to the barn, “Come see our other birds. The front half of this made-over barn is our house, and the back half is for our cows and birds.”

Like a scene from a Disney movie, the lively geese, hens and Grant followed Kris into the back barn where inside an enormous twenty-foot iron cage housed eighteen other small birds.

“Incredible!” his jaw dropped, “What kind of birds are

these?”

Kris opened and walked into the exorbitant cage, shutting the intricately-carved arched gate behind her. Grant’s mouth opened further in awe listening to the birds piping hauntingly beautiful music.

“I’ve never heard anything so beautiful,” he gasped.

She smacked him with excitement, “Eleven sandpipers pipe that glorious music.”

She pointed to the many white sandpipers in high tree branches crossing the cage.

“Pigeons?” he asked, focused on two grayish birds on the ground cooing in an embrace.

“Oh no. These two are turtledoves and there are four calling birds, the ones on branches with orange feathers on them. Now does that sound familiar? Eleven sandpipers? Four calling birds? Two turtledoves?”

Grant fingered the cage from outside, like a zoo visitor. Inside, Kris paced like a caged animal.

Grant repeated, “Two turtledoves?”

“Two turtledoves. Eleven sandpipers piping?”

“This is like that Christmas song? *Twelve Days Of Christmas?*”

“Bingo,” she smiled, “These wonderful feathered beings are my Christmas gifts to your father the past few years. No one else dare know of our pathetic gift exchange and how lonely and pitiful he is, singing *The Twelve Days Of Christmas* to himself.”

Kris refreshed bird water, knelt and lifted a brindle partridge, “Meet William the partridge who you will sneak in Maria’s pear tree tomorrow morning, before she awakes.”

“I’ve never seen a partridge or any of these kinds of birds – wait! Partridge in a pear tree.”

“Like the song.”

He chuckled, “You serious?”

“Maria’s the only one with a pear tree and more than anyone else she needs company, so it’s perfect,” Kris mused, exiting the cage, handing Grant the lively partridge – who instantly bit his finger.

“Damnit!” Grant fumed.

“William! No biting!” Kris chided, her large fingers restraining the bird.

Blood dripped from Grant’s thumb, “This bird hates me. And I don’t much like him either.”

“He’s just afraid because you are afraid. That city energy.”

“I like the city. More than the country,” Grant exited, overwhelmed, frustrated.

Distressed Kris watched him walk out the barn door. She saw lightning flash and held her heart to prevent a spasm. Thunder roared.

Chapter 3: The 1st Day Of Christmas

CHATTANOOGA, TENNESSEE

Early morning Christmas day, hours before the light of dawn, Sissy's purple clunker pulled into an all-night gas station. She pumped gas into her lemon of a vehicle, careful not to go past thirty dollars. Under her breath she cussed out the world for her poverty, fingering more strands of her unraveling denim jacket.

An elderly male attendant cleaning trash bins under the bright pump island lights greeted her, "Merry Christmas."

"Yeah, you too," she smiled, "Hey will thirty bucks of gas get me to Lake Lure? It's like four hours."

The attendant shrugged, "Probably will, but I'd cut back the sight seeing."

"I ain't goin' to see sights."

"What ya goin' for?"

"Family. Kinda. My sister's a drunk. Maria. So you know how that goes."

He nodded and continued his work, disappearing into the dark.

Sissy marched her ill-fitting red sneakers into the gas station food store, where she salivated at the rotating hot dogs behind steamed glass.

“I put in thirty bucks of gas,” she told the busy lady cashier, then Sissy reached into her pocket and pulled out all her money. After paying thirty dollars, a dollar and eighty cents remained. Gratitude swept Sissy’s face like she held the winning Lotto ticket.

“How much for a hot dog?” she asked.

“Two fifty.”

“Shit, shit, I got one eighty. Shit.”

A tattooed teenager overheard and laughed. Sissy turned to him, “You snickerin’ at me? Is it my hair? I don’t know why I dyed it green. I make bad decisions.”

“I didn’t laugh at your hair, I laughed cuz you said “shit” so many times.”

The teenager waved her over to be out of view of the cashier, then whispered, “I’ll give you the extra dollar for the hot dog if you distract the cashier so I can sneak out with these.”

She looked at the many protein bars he had in his hands, then whispered, tilting her head, “We can’t steal from her.”

“It’s not stealing from her, it’s stealing from a billion dollar corporation that overcharges and owes us anyway. Jesus.”

“I don’t steal,” she whispered, shook her head and meandered away to the cashier, “How much for an apple fritter?”

The cashier replied, “Dollar fifty.”

Sissy gave all the money she had.

The cashier counted and said, “You get thirty cents back.”

Sissy smiled, “Keep it. It’s a tip. Merry Christmas. Go buy yourself a yacht and an airplane and penthouse.” Then Sissy bit ravenously into the donut and walked outside toward her car.

As she opened the rusted car door and looked down to enter her seat, she saw someone’s lost twenty dollar bill on the cement below stuck under her front tire. Screeching in excitement, she put the keys in her ignition and turned them but her car wouldn’t start. Three tries later it did, so she drove a foot, then put the car in neutral so she could grab the twenty. She held it above her head like a winning game show contestant and screamed.

She heard someone else scream so she turned to the store. The thief ran out with the protein bars, chased by the hollering cashier, who even followed him into the dark road, as cars beeped almost hitting them.

Sissy sat in her driver’s seat, freaked out, talking to herself,

“Oh no cashier! Don’t risk your life over some billionaire’s loot he ran off with. Some people got too much money.”

Reinforcing that theory, a shiny gold Rolls Royce and a brand new silver Tesla slowed down to avoid hitting the yelling cashier on the heels of the thief.

Sissy watched from her car seat, “A lot of people got too much money. And they need to be sharin’ it. Or us poor people will start to take it.”

She drove into the night street between the cashier and the thief deliberately allowing the thief to escape into a lot of trees.

LAKE LURE, NORTH CAROLINA

At the exact same time that December 25th, four hours east in Lake Lure, the sun was rising.

Kris’s pink jeep stopped momentarily outside a small brick grocery store. The elderly blonde in heavy make-up and rhinestone turtleneck sweater pointed to it, “I’ll take you in there soon. That’s Brick’s coffee shop.”

Holiday lights blinked in the window below the rustic sign reading BRICK’S FREE SPEECH CAFÉ MARKET.

In the passenger seat, Grant wearing his gray sweatshirt, surmised, “Looks like a small grocery store.”

“Yes, and coffee house. That is our neighbor hang-out.”

“There shouldn’t be an apostrophe in the sign,” he said.

“Brick’s. Oh, not bricks, like what it’s made out of. Brick is the name of the man who owns it. A real joker. He gives free coffee for jokes. You’ll love Brick.”

She drove a bit further down the winding forest road and parked between two small farms. Gesturing to a stone home with a stream in the distance, she whispered, “That’s Maria’s house.”

“Who is this Maria?”

“You’ll love her. You’ll love all my friends. And she’ll love you.”

“I hope she’ll love William the biting partridge,” he said, tentatively grabbing a small box with air holes. Through one air hole, William bit Grant’s finger.

“Damnit!” he howled.

“Shhh! You have do this silently.”

Grant repressed more howling in pain as the partridge continued to peck his raw fingers through the box. He ran to Maria’s front yard and set the box down by the dormant pear

tree. Out of his jeans' pocket he placed a yellow note on the box, then tiptoed to the doorbell, rang it, and dashed back to the jeep. He tripped over his big feet, falling into the jeep door.

Hearing Kris giggle, he chuckled as well.

Kris whispered, "Hurry you clumsy klutz! We can't let her see my jeep!"

He climbed halfway into the passenger seat as Kris drove away.

"Hey! I'm not even in."

The jeep turned and skid into a ditch then fortunately back onto the road. Kris turned off the engine.

"I'm sorry, my legs," she explained, "You have to drive from now on. Sometimes my legs, well, I lose feeling in them."

"Oh no. Is that heart related?"

"This old body is tired, all of it."

"I have to drive??"

"Yes, get over here quick."

Grant jumped out and hurried to the driver's seat, where Kris seemed unable to move.

"Move me over to the passenger seat," she pleaded, "I can't

move my stupid legs.”

He gently rolled his tall lanky aunt to the passenger seat where her eyes stayed fixed on Maria’s house.

Kris whispered, “Maria opened the front door. Hurry.”

“I don’t know how to drive,” he confessed nervously.

“Just do it,” she giggled, pushing his leg down on the accelerator, causing the car to jump and stop every few yards.

His mahogany eyes opened in fright, focusing on the road ahead, gripping the steering wheel until his raw fingers turned white. She pushed his leg down harder.

“We’re going to die!” he yelled.

“I already told you it’s wonderful on the other side.”

Her giggle was infectious. He grinned, chiding her, “I am not ready to die. Or be thrown in jail for not having a driver’s license!”

“We agreed to stop following directions ... orders ... regulations, right?”

“You want me to go to jail?”

She laughed and turned on the radio playing a Christmas tune, enjoying their wild adventure, that he was not yet enjoying. Then she slapped her legs over and over.

He was as concerned as she was, “Your legs? Any feeling yet?”

“Yeah. A little.”

From her doorway, pretty brunette Maria Florez’s haunting ebony eyes searched her yard overgrown with dead grass. She dropped a beer can and slurred, “Hello? Who’s there? Who rang my doorbell? Hey!?”

The yellow note by the pear tree eventually caught her attention. She ambled to it, steadying her balance, appearing much older than her thirty-three years. Reading the note, she heard the partridge shuffling and noticed the box. She slowly carried it inside. Luckily William did not try to bite her.

Inside her small stone cabin, she put the box on a wood rocking chair, then gently pulled out William, who seemed nauseous and cautious.

She set him on her maple-framed couch then went to her rustic kitchen area, poured water in a wood bowl and brought it to him. But he refused to drink.

She pulled her toaster onto the maple coffee table and made toast for her inebriated self and the strange bird. No matter how much butter she smothered on the bread, the bird refused to eat.

She glanced at a paneled wall and a framed wall photo of a ten year-old boy, and with misty eyes said, “My boy would love you. He loved birds.”

Her drunken mind flooded with sweet memories of her missing son and she fell asleep for hours. Eventually she woke, dizzily rose, ambled to her closet and pulled on her old blue parka. She pet the bird and as she stepped backwards toward the front door, explained, "I'm just goin' to the store. I'll be back with food for you."

Walking, and swaying, on the morning road, her haunting dark eyes winced at the sun between tall evergreens. She stumbled on, parting her dark bangs, unaware she was in the middle of the road. A sheriff van nearly hit her. The man shouted from his window but did not seem upset or surprised. He just yelled, "Merry Christmas, Maria!"

As the Sheriff beeped, she waved back, "Merry Christmas!"

She sauntered further to Brick's, opening the door which read COFFEE FREE WITH A JOKE I NEVER HEARD.

Working behind the oak counter in an apron and ugly Christmas sweater was infamous jokester Brick Evans. The shaggy-haired middle-age man waved his left hand with two gnarled fingers at Maria as she entered, "Where you been? You always come in earlier."

"No white Christmas again," she slurred.

She heard laughter from the center coffee station. Plump African-American Georgia Jonas, nearing seventy years-old, in a designer leather coat chuckled with Paul Leiter in baggy jeans, a flannel shirt and a black cowboy hat. The forty year-old cowboy was Maria's dream man, but sadly the dashing young

red-haired stud was already married.

Brick sang obnoxiously, “Merry Christmas, Maria,” as he shot her with a Santa squirt gun.

She smiled, tipsy, squinting, “Merry Christmas, Brick. Are you wearing a new sweater? Knitted by your wife?”

He grinned, “Ugliest thing I have ever seen. And this sweater, too.”

He laughed. Maria shook her head with disapproval at the joke at his wife’s expense.

Paul twirled his ginger mustache, “Merry Christmas, pretty gal.”

“Merry Christmas, Paul,” she said softly, “What did your wife get you for Christmas?”

5’4” Maria wobbled to 6’4” Paul. They fought their sexual attraction.

Paul said, “Just to be a good mom. Which she is.”

“She didn’t knit or buy you anything?”

“No need.”

Brick interrupted, “She hasn’t come in here and bought anything in like three years. Cheapskate.”

Maria probed, “I only met her once years ago. No one has seen her in years.”

Paul winked, “A woman’s place is in the home.”

Maria rolled her eyes, “Cowboy, you are a piece of work. I forgot why I came in here?”

Paul took her hand, “To dance with a cowboy?”

Paul pulled her into a slow dance prompting Brick to push a counter button which automatically played a soft country ballad. *Their song*, she thought to herself. As Paul softly maneuvered her head into his chest she felt his giant muscles and smelt his macho scent mixed with coffee, dreaming he was her husband.

Brick joked, “You come in for cigarettes, Maria? Milk? Bananas? Muffins? Adult toys? Firecrackers? Whoopie cushion? Gin? A hand buzzer? A fake cockroach?”

Georgia sighed, “I was hoping Santa would put firecrackers and adult toys in my stocking. Only got coal. It’s like he’s not even listening.”

Everyone laughed, then Georgia continued, “Hey Brick, Georgia needs more milk!”

Brick pointed to the wood refrigerator carved with running horses, “Well, Georgia can get her big black butt to the refrigerator. Georgia, you know where the milk is.”

Georgia pretended outrage, “Oh no you didn’t!”

Brick kidded, “I mean your big African-American butt.”

Georgia laughed, “You know that’s not politically correct anymore!”

Paul joined in the humor, “He means plus-size derriere of color. Is that correct these days?” Paul scowled at society’s preoccupation with political correctness.

Brick pressed a different counter button which played *The Stripper* song. Following the cue, Georgia good-naturedly swished and bumped to the sexy saxophone, grabbing the milk from the fridge, then swished back, as Paul, Brick and Maria cheered her on. Maria also tried to dance alluringly but lost her balance. Paul steadied her, longingly gripping her voluptuous figure by her waist.

Kris hobbled in, “Oh no. Is Georgia dancing for quarters again?”

Georgia joked back, “Fifty-cent pieces! Kris is so old Benjamin Franklin is in her yearbook.”

Kris happily participated in their morning repartee, “Georgia’s so old that the key on Benjamin Franklin’s kite was to her apartment. Some lightning storm last night but it’s a shame no white Christmas.”

Georgia snapped in jest, “White?! Never have you people wished for a black Christmas.”

Brick laughed, “We love you, Georgia.”

Kris hugged Georgia, kissed Maria's cheek, high-fived Paul, then grabbed eggs and a loaf of bread.

Maria remembered, "Bird food! Brick, you got bird food?"

"For chickens or wild birds?" he asked.

"It's a pigeon or something. Part ridge or something."

"Never heard of a ridge pigeon. Here. Take a handful of chicken feed."

Kris raised her voice, "Brick, please put bananas, eggs and bread on my tab. In a hurry because my nephew's waiting in the car." She grabbed bananas and exited.

Everyone looked confused and the room became so silent only the refrigerator hummed.

Georgia sat down on the cushioned window seat, aghast, "Nephew? Kris has a nephew?"

Paul was as perplexed, "All these years. Kris never even mentioned a sister or brother?"

Georgia huffed, "No she did not. And I'm probably that old trout's best friend. What is up?? She's been hiding relatives??"

Maria added, "I always worried about Kris being lonely, no family. Just her and that cute barn. I never been inside but driven by. She never invited anyone inside, did she?"

Georgia admonished, “No she did not!”

Maria replied, “Well, you haven’t either. No one has ever seen the inside of your gorgeous house, why is that?”

“My husband had people issues,” Georgia answered.

“White people issues. But I’m Mexican, okay, half white,” Maria asserted, “But Roy’s been deceased about two years?”

Georgia snapped her fingers, “How come you’re not inviting us over??”

Maria laughed, “I had several parties! You didn’t come.”

“It was past my bed time,” Georgia groaned, deep in thought, “Kris talked about cows, but never mentioned she had any family.”

Maria thought aloud, “Maybe cows can be family?”

“My wife is a cow,” Brick joked. “But it’s news to me Kris has any family. And I pride myself on knowing every little detail about all of you clowns.”

Outside the market, Kris stood still watching across the

street a green-haired girl connect jumper cables from her rusted purple clunker car to the pink jeep.

Sissy pulled her scarf tighter up her neck and yelled to Grant, “Now rev your engine and if I’m lucky my car will start. Probably won’t!”

Grant revved the engine as Sissy hopped in her car and tried the ignition. After six tries, it started.

She shrieked in joy, “Thanks!! Yay!!”

As she kept the car running, she dismantled the jumper cables and handed them to Grant. Leaning into this window, she offered, “Hey I just got a whole bag of fruit. Apples, oranges, bananas and even grapes, cuz it’s Christmas. You want them?”

“Ah, no thanks,” he smiled, charmed by the petite quirky thirty year-old, “You did all the work. I didn’t even know what jumper cables were.”

“Oh come on. You got me what I wanted for Christmas – heat! Take an orange? Or ya want the grapes? I don’t need grapes. Have not had ‘em for years anyway!”

As she ran to get the fruit, slamming both car hoods, he yelled, “No thanks, you bought them for you, not me.”

“I ain’t no charity case!” she insisted, throwing an orange at him as she drove off.

Picking it up he noticed Kris approaching and opened the

passenger door for her.

“Green hair,” Grant smiled, “Thought I’d only see that in Chicago.” He got in the drivers seat.

“I assure you that everything you have in Chicago we have here. Well maybe not the crime because I hear that in Chicago a guy gets stabbed every minute.”

“That poor guy. You’d think he’d move.”

Kris giggled, “That sense of humor is going to fit marvelously here. Brick actually requires inappropriate jokes at his store so I’ll bring you in soon. Promise.”

“Just bring me to see my dad. Which way is the hospital?”

Kris looked away, “Uh ... Grant, he’s ... in I.C.U..”

“Intensive Care???”

“We would not be helping him if we went today so I’ll take you there tomorrow.”

Outside the homey barn, two cold cows migrated into the cozy heated back barn, cuddling next to the other three cows

and humongous bird cage.

Meanwhile in the front barn at the rustic dining room table, Kris pet Gus the gray goose, now very calm, while handing financial papers to Grant.

Grant hesitantly moved his hand toward Gus the goose, whispering, “Can we be friends yet?” but Gus snapped at him trying to bite him, but fortunately missed.

Kris shook papers at Gus, “Gus! No biting!” After eye-contact with the goose, she said to Grant, “Gus says he’s sorry, Grant ... Sign here and everything is legally yours.”

“This is so weird. So generous. Last week I didn’t know about my father. Doesn’t he have other kids?”

Kris shook her head no, but her blonde bangs didn’t move due to much hair spray.

Grant signed the documents.

Kris watched, emotional, fondling a large brass cowbell, “Your father had no other children, Grant. Your mother always sent holiday cards so we did see photos of you as you matured but he had no inkling he was your father. Did your mother ever marry?”

He rolled his eyes, joking, “Do you even know my mother??”

Kris chose her words carefully, “She doesn’t know me.”

“Well she’s too bossy. No one would marry her. Did my dad marry?”

“No. Your mother was the only woman he dated.”

“Aw come on, Aunt Kris. Maybe he told you that, but I am very sure he had many women –”

Kris spoke sternly, “Grant, your mother Ida was the only woman your father ever dated.”

Grant was dumbfounded. Kris took Grant’s tense hand and maneuvered his uptight fingers to slowly pet Gus, who within a few minutes welcomed it.

Grant relaxed his fingers, and entire body, “Aw how sweet. I’m not gonna hurt you, Gus. I’m your friend. No more city energy, okay?”

Chapter 4: The 2nd Day Of Christmas

At sunrise, bearded blond Grant tiptoed to a stucco cottage and gently lowered a small iron cage of the two turtledoves on the doorstep. Then the athletic man in sweatshirt and jeans sprinted to the parked jeep where anxiously waiting was his Aunt Kris in a red and white striped cape and hat.

She furiously waved the yellow note, “You forgot the note. You goofball.”

Grant grabbed the note and like an Olympic relay athlete jumping rocks like hurdles, he dropped the note on the porch, rang the doorbell, then raced back, tripping in dirt. Jeans soiled but undaunted, he quickly rose and his muscular frame dashed to the jeep’s driver seat, where Kris applauded then high-fived him.

The two victoriously ed away on the winding road and disappeared in the morning forest.

Joe soon stepped out the front door. The long-haired forty-something unshaved man saw the cage, read the note, then searched the yard for who had left it. His demeanor was not fun and easy like the other Lake Lure citizens. His energy was gruff, paranoid, agitated and as dark as his shoulder-length curls.

After the sun rose at Brick’s FREE SPEECH CAFÉ MARKET, cowboy Paul, Georgia in a vanilla suede outfit and Maria in her old blue parka coffee clutched by the window. By

the counter, Brick lowered prices on Santa hats.

Joe, pretending he was blind with dark glasses and a steel cane, stumbled in with the cage of turtledoves, asking, “Would this be a grocery store?”

Brick answered, “It is, and a coffee house.”

“Excellent,” Joe said with a pretentious accent, “Is it acceptable I bring in these birds?”

“All animals welcome here, just don’t tell the health department I ignore their rules. It’s our friendly neighborhood store, not some government institution,” Brick barked, then curious, asked, “Are you blind?”

“They term it legally blind meaning I don’t only see blackness. I do see shapes. Big grainy shapes.”

Georgia found an opening for humor, “That eerily describes me. Merry Christmas. I’m Georgia.”

“Greetings to you, Georgia,” Joe said.

Brick moved to Joe and gently guided him to sit in a wooden folding chair, “Sit. Make yourself comfortable.”

“Hi Joe,” Maria said slowly, “I am Maria.”

“You don’t have to talk slow,” Joe said, “I’m blind, not retarded.”

Maria didn't laugh, "People can't use that word today."

"Society don't tell us in here what to do!" Brick admonished, "All words are welcome here. It's Brick's Free Speech Café!"

"Howdy Joe, I'm Paul, I am retarded," the ginger cowboy joked, "If you need anything - don't ask me."

"I'm Joe and I need peace and quiet," Joe smiled, "But I imagine that's the reason we all left the crowded metropolises?"

Maria probed, "What kind of birds you got there?"

Suddenly Kris hobbled in, exciting the turtledoves to frolic and chirp. Kris awed and pet them as if she had never seen them before.

"I haven't a clue what they are," Joe answered Maria, "Some stranger deposited them where I am currently leasing."

Noticing his cane and dark glasses, Kris waved her hand in front of Joe to see if he was indeed blind, "Oh my. A stranger left you birds? Where do you lease?"

"The sepia stucco cottage with terracotta roofing. Until I decide which estate to purchase."

"Did Roger move out??" Kris gulped.

"Unless he's hiding in dark corners," Joe mused.

“Good!” Brick laughed, “You get a free coffee. I give free coffee for jokes I never heard before.”

Georgia playfully shook her head, “Kris, what the hell are you wearing? You’re lucky you’re blind, Joe. Kris, the old battle-axe is in a candy cane cape and hat!”

Kris retorted, “Georgia’s mad she buy it first.”

Joe asked, all too serious, “Would this friendly neighborhood store carry the nutrition these discarded birds require?”

Georgia quipped, “Joe, Brick will sell you anything, even the skin off the back of his good hand.”

With his gnarled hand, Brick shook Joe’s hand, “Don’t worry, my two gnarled fingers are not contagious. Feel them? Military combat a hundred years ago.”

With his other hand, Brick slowly moved a hand buzzer toward Joe’s hand, waiting for the locals to see and react.

Georgia yiped, “Don’t! Brick’s gonna buzz you, Joe!”

Brick buzzed the man pretending to be blind.

Joe yelled.

Brick laughed, “Hand buzzer. Joking is the rule here, sorry no disability exceptions. All equal here. Blind, those who can see, pretty, ugly, tall, short, Republican, Democrat, young, old.

Everybody is treated the same here. I'm Brick Evans. You'll be seeing, uh, I mean, hearing, a lot of me and my ugly wife because we own the only market around here."

Maria shook her head, "His wife is not ugly."

Kris smirked, "Welcome to our crazy little community."

Joe was silent, then grinned, "Charmed to meet you townspeople."

"Losers," Brick corrected, "Say "Nice to meet you all, losers, or rejects, or clowns." Here the rule is to joke. About everything. Politics, religion, health, vaccines, immigrants, poverty, chemtrails, fish wives, you name it. No holes barred in here." Brick pointed to his butt.

Georgia explained, "Brick pointed to his butt hole, just so you know."

Joe moaned sarcastically, "I needed to know that."

Georgia continued, "We can even joke about Brick's overpriced weak coffee and stale homemade muffins -- which taste like sawdust. Only drier."

An oven bell rang. Brick looked to Kris, "Kris, your sawdust-dry cranberry bread is done. Can you smell it?"

Kris joked, "Smell this." She pointed then sat on a whoopie cushion on the window bench.

Maria and Paul chuckled.

Joe acted offended, “Eww! Did we forget our manners?!”

Georgia kidded, “Check your diaper, Kris!”

Kris laughed, “Joe, it was only a whoopie cushion but it is time to check my diaper.” She stood and adjusted her skirt for laughs.

No one guffawed harder than Brick, who handed Kris the warm bread and threw his arm around her, “If I wasn’t married, I’d go for you, darling.”

“Oh please,” Georgia joked, “Kris is older than Saturn.”

Kris immediately kidded back, “Georgia’s so old she took her driving test on a brontosaurus.”

“And squished it,” Georgia laughed, “I single-handedly ended the dinosaur age.”

Joe chuckled and pulled out the yellow note, “Might someone be kind enough to let me know if there are words on this?”

Brick glanced at the note, “It says “These Turtledoves are Madge and Moe and will come and go if you give them an opening in your home.””

A lightbulb went off in Maria’s head, “Same yellow note paper I got yesterday -- with my partridge.”

Georgia couldn't believe what she was hearing, "Partridge? Two turtle doves?? Come on."

Kris instigated, "Maria, did the Secret Santa put the partridge in your pear tree?"

"Yes! I think it was by my pear tree."

Georgia asked, "How does that song go?"

Paul and Maria started singing, "*On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me a partridge in a pear tree ...*"

Paul tried to hold Maria's hand but she needed both to search her cell phone, reading it aloud to the group, "This says 'The twelve days of Christmas is the period in Christian theology that marks the span between the birth of Christ and the coming of the Magi, the three wise men. It begins on December Twenty-Fifth, Christmas, and runs through January Fifth.'"

Joe chuckled, "How grand! A small town mystery, is it? And I suspect my sudden appearance may be a mystery gift in a way as well to you "clowns" and dare I say you may not appreciate me once I am unwrapped." Then he mimed playing a drumroll and hitting the cymbals.

The locals exchanged looks, not sure what to make of what he said. *Mystery gift?*

Why would they not appreciate him once he's unwrapped?

What was he hiding?

Chapter 5: The 3rd Day Of Christmas

On December 27th, the pink jeep blaring holiday music clumsily drove on a narrow road bordering Lake Lure, waves shimmering in the foggy sunrise.

Anxious Grant, wearing his office suit, clutched the wheel as he steered, “No street lights. I can’t see a damn thing.”

Kris, in a long pink leather coat and matching boots, joked, “Well if we crash into the lake I’ll let you know.”

“Promise?” he asked with sarcasm.

“It’s a promise, kiddo,” she said, petting the three French hens on her lap.

“Then the cops rescue us and I go to jail for driving without a license?”

“No one knows you don’t have a license. It’s our little secret.”

“You like secrets, don’t you?”

“They have their place, “ Kris kidded.

“Well I don’t like secrets. Not one bit. Or driving before sunrise. Or driving period. So we gave the turtledoves to a blind guy by mistake?”

“We did! How stupid can I be?”

“So stupid,” he laughed, “I love it. Hysterical. This is the first stupid thing I have been a part of! Besides sending cheesy air hugs to Juan, and assaulting an old man at the airport. My mom never let me do stupid things.”

“I promise to help you do more stupid things!”

“Excellent!”

“Tell me more about your mother, Grant.”

“Mother, smother. She loves me so much but ... controlling, manipulative.”

“Some women can be like that. Men, too..”

“Never met a woman who doesn’t have a secret agenda,” he growled, waiting for her response. When none came, he instructed, “This is where you say, “I’m a woman who does not have a secret agenda.””

She chose her words carefully, “I like you too much to lie to you.”

Uncomfortable, she moved her arms causing one hen to fall on the brake pedal. Kris screamed as Grant couldn’t brake and lost control and the jeep headed for the water. Fortunately, Grant grabbed the hen and braked just in time.

After he had regained his composure, he snapped, “Where

is Georgia's house?"

"Just around the bend. Relax. There it is."

The first flickers of sunlight shined over a vanilla Tudor mansion with wide turquoise shutters. The many dark arched French windows were lit with red and green Christmas lights.

"Wow, nice house. And what views," Grant marveled, "What's the inside like?"

"I've never been inside."

"I thought you were best friends."

"We are, but she never has anyone over. I know she misses her late husband so much and will appreciate my loving little hens." Then Kris spoke to the feathered animals, wiping a tear, "Georgia is going to take such good care of you! I promise."

Grant put the three French hens and a yellow note near a nativity manger on the porch. He rang the ornate brass doorbell then ran to the jeep, again tripping, banging his head against a tree branch. Then he quickly tiptoed to the car, muffling his screams, got in and drove away.

But this time Kris did not high-five him or applaud. She looked completely destroyed.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"My poor hens. Can you imagine your mother dropping

you at a strange house and driving away?”

“Awww. Can we go check on them later?”

“We have to, my baby hens will be so confused, absolutely distraught! Can you even imagine your parent not being there when you need them?”

Grant answered soberly, “Yes, not knowing my dad. Which way is the hospital?”

Kris gestured wildly, “It doesn’t matter today. We can’t see him today.”

“Why not??”

“Not today. He’s too sick. He could die.”

“Exactly! What if he needs me??”

She looked away.

He quipped, “I told you I don’t like women with secrets.”

“I know. I know.”

“I came here to see my dad. I have to fly home to Chicago to keep my job.”

“Of course, honey. Just not right now.”

The hens clucked wandering Georgia's manicured yard with trimmed ivy accenting the white picket fence. Inside, Georgia, who had not heard the doorbell, rose in her gold chiffon pajamas from her king-size bed of gold silk sheets. She put on a gold Versace robe, shuffled to her living room, picked up a pewter framed photo of Roy, her seventy-five year-old African-American deceased husband. She spoke lifelessly, "I still hurt. It's not your fault, Roy. But I'm a mess all alone. I have nothing to do." She exhaled deeply then placed the framed photo on her dressing table, next to a jeweled Jewish minora.

She shuffled to the kitchen and sat at the white marble table, weak, not moving an inch, doing absolutely nothing. She listened to the intricately carved Star Of David clock tick away seconds. Suddenly she heard a strange noise. Her tattooed eyebrows raised.

Investigating, she searched the house, then opened her front door to discover three portly hens. Her forlorn expression bloomed into a wide grin as she scrunched down to pet one.

"It's cold out here, chickens! Come inside until we find out who lost you!" she whispered, ushering them inside her warm kitchen. One refused to enter, so trying to get the hen inside, Georgia curiously discovered the yellow note.

Reading it, she put her hand over her mouth in surprise, then immediately dashed to her phone and dialed.

Brick answered from his store, “Brick’s Free Speech Café,” then he beeped a horn obnoxiously loud.

“I’m going to call the cops on your noise pollution!” Georgia kidded.

“Oh it’s the colored woman,” he joked, “Stop hitting on me. I am married.”

She chuckled, “Listen you pervert. I got the hens!”

“Is that like gonorrhoea? I don’t have penicillin here.”

“I got the hens! From the Secret Santa! I got the Three French Hens!”

He was as excited as she was, “Somebody gave you three French hens?!”

“Tell everyone! Give them my address, you retarded swindler!”

“How do I know your address? You’re too cheap to order delivery,” he laughed.

“Five Eleven Lake Road. But that’s for them. Not you, you degenerate.”

“I can’t leave the store, you birdbrain, but I’ll send everyone over! I’ll send muffins, too!”

“Oh god, we’ll all choke to death on your moldy pastries.

You better send paramedics, too.”

With that, she hung up, laughing, full of excitement, telling the hens, “Company’s coming. Help me straighten up this house!”

At Free Speech Café, Brick hung up the phone and announced to Maria in her old blue parka coat and Joe wearing black clothes and dark glasses, “Guess who got the hens?”

“What hens?” Maria asked.

“Georgia got the three French Hens, from whoever the Secret Santa is. She wants you to go to this address.”

Then Brick handed Joe a bagel with a cockroach on top, “Joe, here’s your everything muffin.”

Feeling, and secretly seeing, the roach, Joe shrieked.

Maria shook her head, ““Everything” at Brick’s includes fake roach.”

“I go the extra mile here,” Brick laughed, removing a tray of muffins from his small brick oven. He placed them carefully in a cardboard box, “Bring this tray of muffins to Georgia’s and tell her now that I have her address, I’ll creep by with my chainsaw when it’s dark,” he laughed.

“You are so bad,” Maria giggled, “Joe, you have to come with me to see Georgia with hens. Hear. Come and hear.”

Within an hour, Kris, Grant, Maria, and Joe were chatting on Georgia's chilly porch. Nearby, Georgia in rhinestone-studded cowboy hat, jeans and a Versace shirt chased the three French hens.

Also wearing a cowboy hat but in a hunter's jacket, Paul caught one of the animals, "They're fine to eat, same as regular chickens. They look more meaty but it's just feathers."

Georgia swatted Paul playfully, "Nobody eats my babies."

From her clunker car, green-haired Sissy in denim coat and jeans tentatively approached, startling Maria, who stood up in disbelief, "I don't believe this. Is that my sister!? With green hair."

Sissy hesitantly walked to them, "Brick told me to come and see."

Maria glared at her, "You plan to ignore me?"

"You're the one kicked me out."

"Come here. I almost miss you. Your hair looks awful," Maria frowned, stepping to Sissy. They awkwardly hugged.

Sissy walked nearer the door where Grant was constructing a chicken wire pen with direction from Kris, who was now

surrounded by the three hens missing her.

Kris said, “Sissy, I didn’t recognize you in green hair. I haven’t laid eyes on you in a coon’s age. Where have you been hiding?”

“I’ve been finding myself -- in a Chattanooga trailer park.”

Georgia joked, “I’m just glad you didn’t find me there.”

Joe laughed and mimed a drum roll and cymbal hit.

Grant waved hello to Sissy.

Her mascara-lined azure eyes enlarged, “Hey! You jumped my car! I love you!”

Kris giggled, “Sissy, I didn’t know that was you. This is Grant, son of my brother.”

Georgia touched Kris’s nose, “Kris, we didn’t even know you had a brother, much less a nephew!”

Grant slowly stood up, confused, “You didn’t know she had a brother?”

Kris whispered to Grant, “She’s joking.”

Georgia hugged Grant, “Welcome to Lake Lure! Grant’s adorable! Oh Grant we gotta make the hens a doggy door into the warm kitchen so they don’t freeze! Can you do that?”

Grant shrugged, “As long as my aunt shows me how.”

An Asian couple in their forties, dressed wealthy, wife Qi Xong and husband Li Xong, approached and pet the hens.

Li grimaced, “Dirty animals though.”

Qi confirmed, “You don’t want hen poop in kitchen.”

Georgia joked, “Don’t tell me that, tell the hens that! Kris, can we fence just a small part of the kitchen for them?”

Kris kidded dryly, “Will do, but is it racist to keep Chinese people in a small kitchen area?”

Laughing, Li and Qi hugged Kris.

Li said, “Qi like it. She like bondage,” then he stepped back and comically pretended to whip his wife.

Qi looked horrified, “I no like bondage!,” then she pretended to shoot her husband, who pretended to die overdramatically.

Georgia smiled, “Speaking of kinky, here comes my next door neighbor Delilah!”

Conservative brunette Delilah, almost thirty, wearing a matching tweed jacket and skirt, hugged Georgia, “Georgia’s kidding. I’m not kinky. I’m saving myself for marriage, but the sluts get all the good men ... Look at these hens! Out of the blue some stranger gives you hens?? Who is this mysterious Secret

Santa?”

Georgia shrugged, “I don’t know! Who raises hens up here?”

Paul wondered, “Kris, you got a farm, don’t you?”

Kris lied, “If a couple cows is a farm -- but I bet Georgia’s neighbors raise chickens?” In an effort to take the attention away from her and the hens cuddling around her legs, Kris pointed to farms across the road, “Chickens there I bet.”

Paul said, “And eggs. Now you’re making me hungry.”

“Well come inside!” Georgia offered nervously, “Brick sent muffins and I’ll make latkes and cheese blintzes.”

Maria was intrigued, “Latkes? Blintzes? What are blintzes?”

“Like sour cream crepes, potato pancakes,” Georgia shared, “My Roy had me make them every week. There’s something you neighbors should know -- why I never invited you inside.”

Kris joked, “She’s a serial axe-killer clown who sells drugs to kids on school playgrounds. Or worse, a politician.”

Joe played the imaginary drumroll and cymbal.

Georgia paced by the nativity set, “These decorations I do every year – the manger and green and red lights. They’re for you. Inside ... I’m ... I’m ... Jewish.”

Kris looked confused, “Oh honey, what difference does it make??”

Georgia said, “I’m the only Jew in our group. I’m an outsider. I’m different.”

Kris asked, “You think being Jewish is more different than us than being black is?”

Georgia confided, “Well I can’t hide being black.”

“There’s no need to hide anything, honey,” Kris said, embracing Georgia, “You are a delight everyday to all of us, you crusty old trout.”

Georgia laughed, “You wrinkled old trashy ... fat-shaming racist antisemite.”

Kris pretended to spank Georgia.

“Who cares your religion?” Delilah added, “I’m just glad I can finally see my neighbor’s home! Why did it take so long?!”

Georgia blushed and pointed to the hens, “Because ... I have three little daughters needing company now.” She smiled with pride then looked to Paul, “You know how wonderful daughters are. How old is yours now?”

“Eight years,” Paul smiled, “Amy, my little princess, just turned eight.”

Maria prodded, “How come we never see her?”

Paul shrugged as Georgia ushered her guests into her elaborate foyer and house, proudly showing everyone her jewel-framed photo of Roy and gold Hanukkah decorations. Sissy was uncomfortable in such a luxurious home, around such expensive items.

Kris and Grant stayed screwing chicken wire in place on the cold porch despite the harsh winds. Haunting beauty Maria tried to pet the hens but they hid behind Kris

Maria commented, “The chickens really like Kris, don’t they?”

Kris quickly formulated a joke, “Maybe because I am such a hot chic myself?”

Maria giggled, “That must be it.”

Preoccupied Grant locked into Maria’s eyes, “Maria, did you know Kris has a brother?”

Maria parted her black bangs with her finger and shook her head, “News to me. Want me to bring you guys plates of food?”

Grant nodded, “I’m starving, thanks Maria. Please.”

Maria smiled and disappeared into the house. After she was out of sight, Grant asked his aunt, “How could your neighbors not know about my dad?”

Kris raised her brows and mimed drinking to indicate Maria was an alcoholic.

Inside, Maria did want alcohol, but since none was offered and it was morning, she was too embarrassed to ask for it. She put a muffin on her plate and meandered away from the crowd to check her phone. She browsed a few minutes on CHRISTIAN SINGLES dating site, but not finding a dream man to take her mind off married Paul, she put away her phone and squeezed into Paul's chair with him. Paul winked and grinned, circling his arm around her.

Grant passed by, prompting Maria's memory, "Oops, Grant! I forgot to bring you and Kris breakfast plates."

"Let me do it," Delilah overruled, batting her lustrous green eyes, "We'll call it our first date, that a deal, Grant?"

Grant smiled showing his perfect teeth and dimples despite his thick blond facial hair, "I'd be so lucky. Thanks, Delilah. Which way's the bathroom?"

Delilah fluffed her beautiful dark long hair and shrugged. Georgia pointed to the bathroom.

Before he entered it, to his left he saw Georgia's ostentatious bedroom where Sissy's hands were searching through a bureau drawer.

He surprised her, "What are you looking for?"

Sissy covertly twisted a diamond ring onto her finger, then into her pocket, "Pretty antique dresser. I just love antiques. Rich people love 'em, too."

He walked over to her. She looked away, nervous.

He flirted, "You're not so bad yourself."

"You're lying. But if I grow out this green hair and put on blue eye shadow and my peacock dress with puffy sleeves that cover these tattoo mistakes ... well, I came in third at Trailer World's beauty contest ... six times."

He smiled, charmed at her history and bluntness, "You're so cute. And adorably weird."

"So "weird" no one will hire me."

"Weird and unemployed? You just the type of girl my mother would forbid me to date ... So you wanna have dinner?"

"Excuse me?"

"That's nerd for will you go out with me? ... I mean, we don't have to."

She sat on the bed, looking at his handsome face and muscular body, incredulous.

He gulped, "Was that stupid? My mother would hate you so I'd like to take you to dinner? I'm sorry. I don't get around much."

"Me? You and all that handsomeness want to sit across the table from me? By all means do!! Call me, I'll be staying 'cross town with my sister -- if she don't say no -- because she hates

me like your mama would.”

“Let me put your number in my phone.”

A few minutes later Grant exited the house to see Kris juggling a screwdriver to secure the chicken wire fence.

Kris pouted, “My loose fingers. I can’t even screw in a screw.”

Grant grabbed the screwdriver and took over the labor, “Who are you closer to? Georgia or the green hair girl?”

“Georgia’s my best friend, not that I’d ever tell that old goat.”

“Well green hair girl stole a ring from your best friend’s dresser.”

They looked up to see nosey Delilah handing them breakfast plates.

Kris frowned, “Sissy stole a ring?”

He nodded, “I think so. Should I say something?”

Kris huffed, “Georgia must be informed.”

Delilah interrupted, “Let me tell her. Next door neighbors have to look out for each other.”

Delilah handed them their plates, then pursing her full lips, she entered the house, surveying it like a detective, then crept to a seated Georgia. She bent down and whispered below Georgia’s cowboy hat, “Grant saw that nasty tattooed girl take a ring from your bedroom. I’m going to lock your front door so that scum can’t run away with it.”

Georgia rose and pointed to Sissy, “What’s your name again, Maria’s sister?”

Sissy smiled, “Sissy. Sparks last name. Maria and I got the same crazy momma, not the same crazy papa. Hers came from Mexico. Maybe mine is from Mars? Would explain why he’s never around. And my ears.”

Standing in the living room doorway, Grant chuckled.

Georgia put out her arms to embrace Sissy while roaming through Sissy’s pockets and pulled out the stolen ring.

Georgia scolded, “What degree of audacity possesses you, child?!”

“A ring? That ain’t my ring! Who put a ring in my pocket?”

Maria blushed for her sister, “Sissy!! You didn’t!”

Sissy slinked toward the door, but finding it locked, hid her head in shame.

Georgia lectured, “Biting the hand that feeds you, Sissy!”

Sissy looked like a trapped wild animal. She impulsively shouted, “Save me the finger-waving lectures, rich bitch. You one-percenters got so much money you get Taylor Swift views like this -- and I sleep in my dilapidated car. You get, get, get! I get -- evicted from Chattanooga Trailer World!”

The only one showing any sympathy was Grant.

Maria dialed her phone, “I’m calling the police on you, Sissy!”

“Who cares?” Sissy scoffed, “Jail don’t hurt me any more than you hypocrites do. In your fake sweet perfect Martha Stewart “cottages” and fake lives! This lady pretending she’s not Jewish. Faker.”

Sissy pointed to Delilah’s imitation Gucci purse, “This one here flaunting a fake Gucci.”

Delilah spewed, “It’s a real Gucci!”

Sissy grabbed it, turned it over and pointed to stitching, “It’s fake. Maria fake as shit -- pretending she’s happy when she’s really a mad hornet her husband was after me. And blind guy’s accent is fake trying to impress you rich types.”

Joe nervously retorted, “The trash must take itself to the curb.”

Sissy shouted, “You think these rich types want handicaps

around? You cramp their style, same as me.”

Disgusted, Delilah unlocked the door, “Get out. We don’t want low-lives like you here.”

Holding back tears, Sissy squeezed past Delilah to exit, ran a step and fell – over Delilah’s boot deliberately extended to make her trip. Embarrassed Sissy rose and ran.

Maria chased her.

Grant exited to watch Maria catch up with Sissy, and the sisters argue in the distance. He grinned, infatuated with Sissy.

Delilah meandered out and grabbed Grant’s hand. She purred, “Where should we finish our first date? The Yacht Club tonight?”

He was surprised such a beauty was serious about wanting a date with him. As he searched for words, he stammered, “Sorry, I got plans tonight.”

The savvy manicured brunette took a step back, “Not with that insolent street trash? I never met anyone like her. The vulgar way she talks back and breaks rules.”

He stared at Sissy, infatuated, grinning, “I know, right?”

Delilah’s mind spun: *this is ridiculous that he would prefer that dysfunctional tart over me. But he’s way too good-looking and sweet to give up on. I’ll think of something. I’ll get him to look at me like he looks at that deranged imbecile. I’ll win. I*

always do.

Later outside Kris's barn in the roaming picturesque field with haystacks, daffodils and winter irises, five cows grazed. Next to them, Grant, biceps bulging in a T-shirt, axed fallen tree limbs into firewood.

Once inside, he threw the wood into the fireplace. Kris, in a white robe, sat on the tufted leather sofa, her hands shaking trying to take pills. Without being asked, Grant assisted.

Kris was worried, "What will you do with the cows?"

"Let's go ask my dad what he wants."

"We have to find someone with land but not Paul because he'll eat the cows."

"Kris, I have been here three days and don't appreciate you playing games -- keeping me away from my dad."

"This morning he went into a coma and you're too young and healthy to be burdened with sickness and the dying so go on and have fun with Delilah. She's an extraordinary catch."

"Delilah is a knock-out, but Sissy's got something"

“Probably herpes. And your wallet.”

He laughed, “I feel bad for her.”

“Delilah’s gorgeous and successful and dignified -- so get to know Delilah, not looney Sissy. Sissy’s trouble.”

Worried that he may never see his father and feeling pressured by his pushy aunt, the humor left Grant’s face. He turned away pensive, then shot back, “We agreed not to take directions anymore, remember that?”

That night across town, robed Maria stepped out on the porch of her stone cabin to yell, “Sissy, get out of here! Bad seed! Delinquent! Rotten apple!”

Maria threw a beer can then stormed back inside her house.

In the dirt road, Sissy sat in her parked lemon of a car watching the beer can fizz by her worn tire. A sudden knock on her window made her scream and jump. She turned quickly to see Joe in his dark glasses, tapping the window with his steel cane.

She berated him, “Joe?! Why you here?!”

“What you said. About these people not wanting me either. Probably true.”

“What happened to your accent? Why you talkin normal now and not so haughty?”

“Maybe we can get the upper hand?”

“What you talking about?”

“Probably wasn’t the first time you stole? Let’s just say stealing ain’t new to me neither. Maybe we ought to go in business together? Oh I love chocolate chip,” he said, reaching for cookies on her seat, then chewing one.

Sissy’s jaw dropped, “You can see?!”

“There’s a lot of extra money up here.”

“Truth because most these homes only vacation homes, not like they even need ‘em. You’re faking blind? Why? So you can steal?”

Just then the pink jeep pulled up behind.

Joe whispered, “It’s that Grant guy. Don’t tell him what we said.”

“I don’t snitch,” Sissy whispered back.

Using his cane, Joe ambled away to a waiting cab.

In his sweaty T-shirt, beefy Grant eagerly walked from the jeep towards Sissy's car door, "What was that about?"

"I don't know. He's weird," she said dismissively, "Why you here?"

"We had a date. You haven't returned my calls."

"You told that lady I stole her ring!?"

"I'm sorry. Yes. You did, right?"

"You bringing me to police?"

"Why would I do that?"

"Then why you come here?"

"We had a date. You're hot," he grinned, grabbing her guitar from the backseat and fumbling with it, making up a song, "*Had a date but she just sits in her car* – how bad do I sing?"

"Look, I got no place to go."

"Come stay with me at my Aunt Kris's."

"Yeah, right. You think you can screw me on a first date??"

"As friends. I don't have any friends in this town and my aunt goes to bed so early. We can play cards or something. You need a place to stay. Why not?"

“You caught me stealing. I’m a mess. Call me unstable. Ain’t got no plan. Never been one to organize.”

He grinned, “I love that about you. So refreshing to meet a woman who doesn’t have rules or an agenda. Or any dignity.”

He smiled innocently, staring into her confused eyes. He kissed her thin lips softly, then walked to the jeep, waited a minute, then drove.

He beeped the horn and waved for her to follow.

She debated whether to or not.

When the jeep was almost out of sight and finally stopped beeping, she decided to press on the gas.

In the moonlight the jeep rolled slowly up the cobblestone driveway, nearly hitting Tokyo the cow. Grant put the car in park and jumped out, profusely apologizing to the frightened animal.

Sissy parked right behind, exiting her clunker quickly as well, “What happened? You almost hit this cow??”

Grant shrugged, “I’m not a good driver.”

“You’re a horrible driver,” she said emphatically, “You almost took off the mailbox. Who taught you to drive?”

He chuckled, “You don’t even want to know. I’m so glad you followed me.”

“Remind me never to get in your jeep if you’re behind the wheel.”

He laughed, “Okay.”

“This is Kris’s barn? Never saw it up close.”

“Come in inside. Let’s see if she’s up.”

Sissy waited in the paneled foyer as Grant knocked on Kris’s bedroom door, “Aunt Kris? You in there?”

Kris answered sarcastically, “No, I’m in Chicago, Illinois.”

He kidded back, “What are you doing in Chicago?”

“Me and your mom are competing in an ice-skating competition.”

“Oh good. As a team?”

“With the Rockettes.”

He laughed, “Hey we have company here.”

“Who??”

“Sissy.”

Kris did not answer.

He said, “Come out and I’ll make dinner.”

“What is Sissy doing here??”

“I asked her over.”

“Why?”

He shook his head, “We’re going to eat so come out and say hi if you want. No one is forcing you.”

Kris did not answer.

A while later in the warm country kitchen, Grant hummed as he pulled out food from the fridge, asking Sissy, “Sandwiches okay?”

Sissy smiled, “Duh. I eat sandwiches every day. Fine. Peanut butter and jelly usually.”

“Well, let’s see if we can make it special. Here’s potato chips. Ever have a PB & J on cranberry bread with potato chips in it?”

“I did not!”

“And I’ll add banana.”

“You’re so fancy.”

“Your sister Maria didn’t know Kris has a brother. Did you know?”

“Don’t think Kris ever mentioned him. I know I never seen him,” she said, picking up the cowbell and ringing it.

“Hey, don’t do that unless you want the cows to come in.”

She put it down quickly and pursed her lips like a lectured child.

He chuckled, “Do you know how cute you are?”

“Doubt it.”

“You’re hot. A ten.”

“Why you lying?”

“A nine.”

“A seven and a half,” she giggled, then from her purse, she grabbed eye-liner and applied it as Grant finished making sandwiches. She put on fire engine red lipstick and followed him as he took their ceramic plates to the living room.

He built a fire and they sat by it, eating and getting to know each other.

Afterwards, he washed their dishes and she dried them.

Then back by the fire, he lit candles as she played guitar

and expertly sang, unaware Kris watched from a doorway.

With her beautiful lilting sultry voice, Sissy improvised a song for her handsome date, *“I’m so young but my heart is old, been broken, burned but now it’s cold, but warming some, since you come, to town. Pretty city boy, don’t you let me down.”*

He applauded and promised, “I won’t let you down.”

“I can’t go much further down anyway,” she joked. “Got kicked out of a trailer park and my sister hates my guts because her husband was after me years ago and you ratted that I stole Georgia’s ring so Maria won’t let me stay with her and no one in Lake Lure will ever trust me again. I got no family, no money, no job, my car dies half the time. How could you bring me down anyways?”

He grinned, absolutely enchanted with her honesty. Self-conscious, she looked down at her guitar and she improvised more singing. With his applauding, she sang loudly, beautifully, as good as anyone he had ever heard.

In Kris’s pine-paneled bedroom, with her ear to the door, Kris thought the same thing. As much as Kris didn’t like Sissy, Kris couldn’t deny the girl was very talented musically.

Later Sissy and Grant fell asleep on the bear rug in front of the fireplace. When the fire was embers and he shivered from the cold, he carried her to the couch and placed a quilted blanket over her. Covering himself with a flannel blanket, he lay on the rug next to her, checking his phone.

He sighed, reading several messages from his boss Mr. Coner insisting he get back to Chicago and resume work.

Chapter 6: The 4th Day Of Christmas

As the sun rose on chilly December 28th, Sissy slept soundly on the soft couch in the living room of Kris's barn house.

Grant, laying on the floor beside her, whispered into his cell phone, "You have no one in the hospital with that name? How can my father not be there? ... Are you sure?"

"Very sure."

"Okay, thank you," perplexed, he hung up then pressed his face against Sissy's sleeping head, "Sissy, I have to drive my aunt somewhere. You go back to sleep. If you take off, I'll call you later."

She opened her cerulean eyes, groggy, "A city slicker like you don't call a country skank like me later."

"Time for Spank The Skank," he joked as he spanked her. She rolled under the quilt loudly laughing.

He put on his suit jacket and then gently knocked on Kris's bedroom door. She opened it, fully made up, in her pink coat, ready to head out before dawn. As she stepped out to the living room and saw Sissy on the couch, she frowned.

“What?” Grant whispered, “You want her out? She’s not going to steal anything.”

“Oh Grant I’ll be dead soon,” Kris whispered loudly, hoping Sissy would overhear, “I don’t care if that street urchin steals anything.”

Sissy scrunched her closed-eyes, hurt, but fought the urge to cuss out Kris. After all, Sissy wanted on her Kris’s blanket - and nephew!

Grant whispered quietly to his aunt, “Why are you so bothered by her? Georgia got the ring back.”

Kris stroked Grant’s short blond beard, sympathetic, then said in full voice, “Honey you can do so much better than her.”

They didn’t hear Sissy mumble profanity back because they were tiptoeing through the hall door which led to the back barn.

Kris opened the intricate cage door to collect the four calling birds, lovingly cradling them as Grant helped comfort them in a cardboard box.

“Who gets these?” Grant asked.

“No one,” she said, looking devastated.

“No one??”

“They’re not good pets in the way the others are, the others listen and come and go, and nest where a nest is. These will fly

away.”

“Do you want them to fly away?”

“No, I want things to be the same as they were! Them and me here – but I know the angels are calling me. I think the calling birds will be happier flying away than in some small cage,” she said, trying to convince herself as well as Grant, “We can’t very well sneak this enormous twenty foot cage to someone, can we?”

“I suppose not,” he shrugged.

“Then my babies will go free,” she acquiesced, petting them tenderly, shedding a tear, “Oh they probably always wanted that anyway,” then she looked at Grant pointedly, “It’s no good to cage someone that really wants to be free, is it?”

He wondered *is she talking about me in Lake Lure? Yeah, I think she’s talking about me. Here.*

Grant clumsily drove the jeep, Kris passenger. But this time it was silent except for the car heater. In his head, Grant was trying to figure out why his aunt had lied that his father was in the hospital when the hospital had no record of him. *Where was he? Had he died? Why hadn’t she told him?* In any event she was keeping secrets or lying, and he hated women that did that.

They did not realize that a car was following them on the icy road.

Paul in his black cowboy hat and flannel jacket was the first to find the yellow note taped to the open mailbox of a deserted abandoned flooded cabin by a waterfall. It read: FOUR CALLING BIRDS. NOW FREE.

The sexy ginger hunk dialed his cell phone, “Brick, it’s Paul. Secret Santa strikes again.”

Within minutes Paul waved to a gray Mercedes pulling up with Georgia screaming out the driver window, “Paul, this better not be a wild goose chase!”

He swung his cowboy hat, “Not a goose chase! Four Calling Bird chase!”

Maria in her worn blue parka and Delilah in a fur coat exited the car, as excited as Georgia in her Versace coat. The three ran over to Paul, reading the note in his hand.

Paul pointed to towering pine trees, “Two orange birds squawking in that tree – there’s one squawking in that dogwood tree there – there’s another on that rock.”

He balanced his leather boots on slippery rocks to get closer to it.

Georgia interrogated, “How in the world, with hundreds of homes in this town, did you happen to find four calling birds

and a small note? Maybe you're the Secret Santa, Paul??"

The cowboy shrugged, "Maybe. Or maybe I just figured out who it is and been following them at dawn."

He zipped his lips.

"Who is it then if it's not you?" Maria chided, poking him playfully, which caused him to fall in the near freezing shallow water. Laughing, he pulled her down on top of him.

Completely wet and startled, her holler turned into a giggle, "Who put a partridge in my pear tree?"

He tenderly put his strong arms around her, "You're not hurt, are you?"

She shook her head no, enjoying the romance of it. This was not unnoticed by Delilah who pulled Georgia with her to the car.

Maria and Paul were so engulfed in their opportunity for intimacy they did not even notice the car driving away.

As they were just about to kiss, Maria stopped, "Why didn't your wife come with you?"

He hedged, "It's complicated."

"Why don't we ever see this wife or daughter?" Though she was in love with him, she rose and walked away, struggling to balance.

He called, “Get back here.”

“Hey did they drive away without me??”

“Guess you’re stuck with me here.”

“Paul, I want to go home!”

Her sudden outburst surprised him, “Well then, I guess I have to drive you home.”

“I’ll walk.”

He ran past her, slipping, “It’s too far for you to walk. I’ll drive you.”

“I don’t want to talk to you.”

“We don’t have to talk. I’ll just drive you home, you nutcase.”

He smiled, opening his passenger door of his pick-up truck for her. Like a moth drawn to a flame, she couldn’t resist.

Driving her through the breathtaking forest, he tried to hold her hand, but she refused. He tried talking, and she listened, measuring every word, but she didn’t respond.

Nephew-aunt tension escalated at the charming barn property. Guarded, Kris milked a cow. Shivering Grant pet it but was uptight, avoiding his aunt's hazel eyes.

“This is Taiwan?” he asked.

“Yes, this is Taiwan. My precious Taiwan who I raised since she was a little calf. I see Sissy left?”

“She left a note saying she'll go try to make up with her sister.”

“They both have their problems. I wish them the best. But Sissy's energy can sour a home. ”

“I think Sissy's a lot of fun.”

“Good, now that you had fun, take out Delilah, on me,” she rose, pushing a smile, and from her pocket withdrew a handful of large bills. Shaking of weakness, she handed it to him.

He refused.

She insisted, “Oh, take Delilah to the Yacht Club, she's so much fun.”

He looked at her, but she still looked away, to Juan the handyman fixing picket fencing in the distance. She bragged, “The Yacht Club has better food and better jazz singers than Chicago. Delilah loves it there.”

Since she wouldn't make eye contact, Grant moved to be

directly in front of her eyes.

She coughed emitting cold visible icy air. Looking down, wiping saliva from her wrinkled lips, she offered, “Maybe I lied.”

“You lied?” he said with renewed interest in the conversation.

“About the jazz singers. And maybe I lied about the food. Probably not as good as Chicago. But for here, it’s sophisticated. Kinda.”

“Is that all you lied about?” he pressed.

She forced the money in his jeans and then out of her pocket she pulled out five golden rings, understated simple rings for the most part, not like the flashy costume jewelry she regularly flaunted.

She explained, “Tomorrow is five golden rings which we need to get to Delilah before dawn. But it would make so much more sense for you to sneak them to her tonight? After dinner at her place. Then she’ll find the five golden rings in the morning when you’re gone.”

Grant took the rings and studied them, “These look expensive?”

“Not that Delilah needs it. Her family’s loaded. She can afford real Gucci purses by the way. Sissy was so inappropriate to accuse Delilah of buying mock-offs!”

“I called the hospital. My father’s not there,” he shot back abruptly.

Kris felt a chest spasm like a knife stabbing her heart. She held her chest, unsteady, dizzy.

Previously, Grant would have cuddled or coddled her, been overattentive, ran to get her a pill, but he didn’t know who he was dealing with anymore. She obviously lied, and about the most important thing in Grant’s world – his missing father. Grant simply pocketed the rings, then kneeled on icy dead grass to take over milking the cow like a pro, petting it, more concerned about Taiwan than Kris.

Her hand covering her eyes, Kris wheezed, “My heart’s racing too fast.”

“Now I doubt every single thing you said.”

She finally looked at him, “Everything I said is true.”

“Do you just pick up young guys at airports pretending to be their aunts?!”

Kris turned around, her soul breaking.

He stared up at her, unmoved by her watering eyes.

She leaned down, stuttering, “You have ... have seen ... seen your father.”

“What? What do you mean I’ve seen him?”

“You have seen him and he adores you and couldn’t be more proud.”

“Where have I seen my father? Juan? Juan is my dad!” Grant stood up and looked to Juan. A million thoughts raced through his head. “Juan!” he shouted, and when Juan looked at him, Grant, like before, opened his arms as a long distance loving embrace, then hugged the air, closing his eyes in gratitude.

Once again, Juan returned the dramatic air-hug ... then resumed work.

Kris couldn’t help but giggle, “Honey, Juan is not your father. He’s the handyman.”

Grant didn’t see the humor. He felt violated and played with, “Brick? Is Brick my father?!”

He searched into Kris’s eyes but she closed them. Angry that she was hiding information, he clutched her shoulders, “It’s Joe? My dad’s blind. I have a blind dad. I could have been blind. I’m gonna go blind.”

She shook her head no, looking away, “Your dad’s afraid you will despise him.”

“I don’t despise blind people.”

“Just give us one more day,” she pleaded, “But everything I said to you is true. He thinks you’re the sweetest, kindest ... he loves you more than anything on Earth so you have to trust me.”

“How can I trust you?” Grant snapped, walking away.

Overwhelmed, Kris lost her balance then fainted, hitting her head on a stone, knocking off her blonde wig revealing short receding gray hair underneath.

Hearing the fall, he turned around and immediately squat over her unconscious body, tapping her face, “Kris?! Wake up! Kris, are you okay?!”

She was not okay.

She was dead.

Like she had done before when she was brutalized in the alley, her spirit fog rose out of her body, though he could not see it.

From the sky, her spirit looked down on him desperately trying to revive her unconscious wigless body.

Oh no, he can't see me without my wig!, she thought, and within seconds her spirit fog zoomed back into her body, which convulsed and coughed in pain, flipping open her fawn-colored eyes.

He was relieved, “Oh good, you're alive! I thought you died!”

She quickly grabbed her wig and tried to secure it.

“I didn't know you wore a wig,” he said, stunned.

“I need my pills.”

He helped her to rise and as soon as the dizziness passed, she ran away, her skirt askew, showing very hairy legs.

Watching her, his chestnut eyes widened, baffled.

A half hour later, in her ratty denim coat, Sissy was still knocking on Maria’s door.

Maria yelled, “Go away!”

Sissy rolled her blue eyes then played guitar, singing to herself, pacing the porch, admiring the tiny river stream winding through Maria’s yard.

Watching her, Grant clumsily parked the jeep and wearing his suit jacket and jeans walked the stone path toward Sissy. Her eyes grew, flabbergasted to see him.

She repeated her improved song to him, *“I’m so young but my heart is old, been broken, burned but now it’s cold, but warming some, since you come, to town. Pretty city boy, don’t you let me down.”*

“You look shocked to see me,” he said.

“Shocked if you want a second date. Not shocked if you brought the sheriff,” she quipped. She put down the guitar then playfully surrendered her wrists to be cuffed.

They locked eyes. Seeing his smile, she grinned and let him kiss her. Then he pretended to handcuff her against the door.

They fell inside as Maria, drinking a beer in her robe, opened the door, cussing, “Come in from the wicked cold, damn it. But if you steal anything again I’m dialing the police.”

“I never stole from you,” Sissy snarled, unsteadily rising.

“Just my husband.”

“He pawed at me and everyone ‘cuz you was too busy in Margaritaville.”

Maria spat on the porch, “Not gonna get into it now.”

Once inside, Sissy and Grant sat on the couch, petting the partridge, concerned that William was losing feathers everywhere.

Later, not talking to each other, Sissy and Maria improvised macaroni and cheese dinner with a can of green beans and rye toast. As Grant enjoyed it, lovingly admiring Sissy, Maria paid more attention to her beer and petting William, who almost seemed paralyzed.

Afterwards, since Maria avoided talking, Sissy insisted they play charades. Sissy’s overdramatic acting kept Grant laughing

and pulled giggles from Maria, slowly warming.

Grant was enjoying himself so much he did not want to leave, and prodded Sissy to play guitar and sing.

She improvised a song, “*Mister, got only one sister, she ain’t as fun, as a man but she’s the only one, sister ‘til my life is done, mister ...*”

Grant applauded and urged Maria to join in the singing – which she did. But it was soon embarrassingly obvious Sissy was the only one with musical talent in the family.

When Grant participated in vocals, Sissy stopped strumming the guitar altogether, giggling that it was pointless to continue and encourage more off-key notes. She was so simple and honest no one could get offended.

The three watched TV, petite Sissy falling asleep in Grant’s hairy muscled arms. Drunk Maria covered sleeping Sissy and Grant with blankets then disappeared into her bedroom carrying the sick partridge, pleading, “Don’t you leave me, little one. I can’t take someone else I love leaving. I just can’t. Why are you so sick? What did I do wrong??”

Chapter 7: The 5th Day Of Christmas

The wintry sunrise of December 29th revealed a yellow note and five golden rings outside Maria's stone home. They were around skinny tree pear tree branches. Looking at the tiny shiny objects from across the street was cowboy Paul, leaning on his pick-up truck hood.

Suddenly, naked giggling Sissy, wrapping herself in an orange blanket, ran outside, immediately chased by Grant in his underwear who caught her, folding his bulging arms around her.

Paul approached tentatively, his big cowboy boots crunching on decomposing leaves.

Sissy wiped the sleep out of her eyes, "Paul?! Why you here?!"

He pointed to the rings in the tree.

She moved to the five luminous items on the branch, "What are these?"

Paul answered, "Looks like rings."

Grant pretended to find the yellow note, read it, raised his furry brows, then handed it so Sissy.

She read it aloud, “”To Sissy. Five golden rings. To sell as you please.””

Paul stepped closer, studying the rings, handing them to her one at a time.

The handsome red-haired cowboy fingered his mustache as he surmised, “This one fourteen karat, a diamond over here. You just lucked into maybe ten grand.”

Her pretty light eyes bulged, “Ten thousand dollars!? Who would give me these? Everyone knows I tried to steal a ring! Why would somebody give me five golden rings?!”

Paul knowingly stared at Grant, who shrugged, acting innocent. Not only was Grant very exposed in his underwear but he was exposed as the Secret Santa to Paul. Fortunately Paul was not the type to tattle.

Holding the rings in one hand and using her other hand to pinch the blanket tightly above her bosom like a long dress, Sissy paced dramatically, “The way I carried on! Stealing and yelling! Like a worthless scrapper thief – like a psycho nutcase zero.”

Grant smiled, “A few more zeroes have been added.”

“I’m rich like they are!” she howled, “Paul, can you assemble them? I need to fully apologize and show them these rings! To the rich old black lady and all of ‘em.”

Paul reached for his phone, “Want me to call them for

you?”

“Please do it??” she pleaded, jumping.

As if she won the lottery, she held the rings above her head and ran excitedly through the yard. Skinny legs zigzagging below a colorful blanket bowing in the breeze, she looked like a crazy exotic bird. Grant watched, in love with this wild eccentric grateful little stick of dynamite.

Paul looked on curiously, wondering what the unpredictable juvenile-minded girl would do next, and why Grant snuck the five golden rings to his own girlfriend.

That evening, many cars were parked outside Georgia’s vanilla Tudor house with turquoise shutters.

In the living room, Georgia, wearing a flowing lavender designer gown, excitedly served homemade foods, gushing, “This is cholent. This is kugel. This is schnitzel, the way my Roy liked it.”

Sissy in too much make-up and red-ribboned curled green hair in an orange frilly dress sat on the sofa. The five loose rings slid up and down her trembling fingers which were clutching onto Grant’s. He again wore his Chicago business suit. Next to

him also squeezed onto the sofa was immaculately dressed Kris in all pink who shook her head at Grant disapprovingly.

On recliners across the room, finely dressed Qi and Li conversed with Paul, in flannel, and Joe, in black, gripping his ostentatious steel cane. Coyly moving his long black hair to the side and lowering his dark glasses, Joe's dark eyes met Sissy's - until she looked away, afraid.

Joe pretended, "Is that Sissy girl present? Might she explain the point of this meeting?"

"I'm right here, blind man," Sissy announced, "Like anyone can miss me in this clown make-up and orange dress. I am a sight for sore eyes, even blind ones, ain't I? People, y'all know I was gifted five golden rings, which embarrasses me to no end, as it should, because y'all know I tried to steal a ring."

Between bites of kugel, gorgeous Delilah in a tight beige cashmere sweater quipped, "I vaguely remember that."

"Who gave me these five rings?"

Everyone excitedly looked around for answers to the town mystery.

Joe asked, "Who can see if the said jewelry is inscribed?"

Sissy examined the loose rings, "Let me look. Hm ... I don't see no words."

She passed the rings to Grant, who inspected them and then

passed them to Kris, who inspected them, then passed them to Delilah on the adjacent chair.

Kris told Delilah, “You should keep these and wear them with your gold pant suit.”

Glaring at his aunt, Grant pointedly took the rings away from Delilah and handed them back to Sissy.

Sissy stammered, “I want to give these out to people. But not Delilah. Oh my god, she hates me and has reason I ‘spose. But she tripped me, so no way she gets a reward.”

Grant objected protectively, “No! Sissy, don’t give these out. You need money.”

Kris ordered, “Let the girl speak.”

Sissy debated, “I never gave nothing worth anything to no one, but ... I want to now ... I ought to. Georgia, may I please gift these to you in all your ... elegance?”

Georgia battled her mixed-emotions, her like and dislike for the vulnerable thief. “Sissy, what’s a prehistoric woman gonna do with more jewelry? Someone gave them to you. The ring you tried to steal was my husband’s. I do not want it for value, I want it because it’s part of Roy, a memory of our years together.”

Sissy digested that, blushing, “I hear you. And I was dead wrong. Horrible. No doubt I let you all down and none of y’all deserved that so I do appreciate you allowing me back in this

fancy place. Okay. But this assembly ain't 'sposed to be only to embarrass me. Is it? "Let's stare at the useless loser in green hair.""

Her vulnerability and bluntness made the following silence even more awkward.

She fought her humiliation and tears by copping an attitude, "Furthermore, I filled out applications at three restaurants, even the Yacht Club, believe that?"

Delilah huffed, "The club will never hire you."

Sissy scowled, "I'll be a waitress soon, I feel it in my bones, so I don't need hand-outs. Get it straight. I'm pathetic, we all agree, but not so pathetic I need pity rings, am I?"

Grant pressed the rings into her hand, "Sell at least one ring so you can pay for gas and food."

Sissy blushed a deeper red, "Even Grant pities me," then added sarcastically, "What a prize I am."

Kris acquiesced, with grandiosity, "Oh just keep them all, scallywag ... sell them if you need money. Go on. If you need it. Obviously you do."

Sissy frowned, "I didn't plan this to be shamed by you, Kris, though okay I am ashamed of my earlier actions. So you all know. I truly am."

Li spoke, "I feel better if Sissy keep rings. If she have

money, she no steal from me.”

Everyone chuckled. Joe played his imaginary drum roll and cymbal finale.

Sissy now blushed scarlet the color of her hair ribbons, sinking further into the sofa chair. She wanted to disappear, and yet she called for this meeting because she desperately wanted to be a part of this neighborhood, to belong if she could, to erase her sullied reputation, to be reborn. She hated herself and her constant need to afford meager food to survive. She used to hate rich people because she saw them as obstacles but suddenly she didn't hate rich people anymore because in her perception she herself had become rich.

She looked from eye to eye longingly, with unabashed honesty, “I don't know what to do, I feel I don't deserve these, and y'all agree I do not, don't lie,” then she rose, her pretty face sparkling with a new idea, “Is there a charity that needs ring money?”

Georgia crossed her arms, “Yes, there is. You are the charity, little one. We all go through that stage needing charity. Mine was in my twenties, like you. You need. You got. Don't even question where it came from.”

Conflicting thoughts raced through Sissy's brain. As she started to hyperventilate, Grant impulsively pulled her shaking head into his chest, to hide and protect her. His deep affection and care for her drew adoring smiles from Georgia and Maria, but dissatisfaction from Kris, and jealousy from seething

Delilah.

Out of compassion, to take eyes off Sissy, Georgia joked to the group, “None of you fat-shaming racist antisemites said you liked my schnitzels!”

“Oh, please,” Kris took the cue, “We don’t hate your religion. We hate your cooking. What do you put in these? Elmer’s glue?”

“Oh honey,” Georgia played, “I was not asking you. Everyone knows you have no taste. Look at that dress.”

Kris laughed, “Georgia is so old she wore the very first dress the Stone Age ever saw.”

Georgia chuckled, “Kris made it for me. From pterodactyl wings.”

Kris joked along, “You know how hard it was to find a pterodactyl big enough?”

Georgia snapped her fingers, “Oh no you did not.”

When all were laughing, Sissy snuck to the bathroom, where she cried as quietly as she could, ashamed to be a misfit and a thief. After a few minutes, she left the room startled to find Joe blocking her exit, one arm leaning against the door hinges, the other hand gripping the molding near the door knob.

“Good acting,” he whispered.

“I don’t act.”

“Then give me the rings.”

“No, you got more money than me,” she whispered.

“Trash, I don’t only steal for money. I steal to injure folks like they injured me. They stole my opportunities, kept me on the outside, treated me like a cancer because my family was no good. Today they stole your dignity, making you crawl back here and apologize. You’re the punchline.”

Sissy’s face caved believing her worst fears, “Dignity. Grant said I got no dignity. Is this like the high school jock who takes the ugliest girl to prom so everyone laughs? Like in the movie, *Carrie*??”

The laughter from the living room seemed to substantiate her paranoia.

Joe admonished, “They’re laughing at you trying so hard to be liked and fit in when you’re trash like me. Grant is out of your league. They all are.”

She digested that, pained, trying to move away but he had her trapped.

He continued to demean her using his softest voice to win her over, “Look at you. You right you ain’t no prize. Skinny and used. Which I love, and identify with. But Grant would only use you for sex while he’s in town. He ain’t worth it cuz he thinks you ain’t worth it. You’re better off with someone like me who

gets you.”

She was floored, “What?? You comin’ onto me?”

“I am just makin’ myself available. I see your worth. Grant sees easy sex.”

Overwhelmed, Sissy shook her head and wrestled his arms away and pushed past him toward the living room.

Chapter 8: The 6th Day Of Christmas

Marmalade clouds blocked the fuchsia sunrise on December 30th, the 6th Day Of Christmas. The pink jeep ineptly parked next to Georgia's Tudor estate at Delilah's upscale lodge home. Into her lawn of mint ivy, suited Grant tiptoed carrying chicken wire walls, which he quietly assembled into a temporary cage.

Now almost a pro with animals, he easily ushered his six geese friends out of the jeep across the ivy and into the chicken wire pen. His large work shoes tiptoed back to the jeep and opened the passenger door for Kris in her pink coat to exit, unaware that Gus the gray goose flew the coup and had followed him.

"You have to see the sunrise over the lake," Grant whispered to Kris. "We don't get these colors in Chicago."

"You're not still mad at me?"

"Why would I be mad?," he asked sarcastically, "Because you're hiding my dad? Because you lied my dad was in the hospital? Because the neighbors never met your brother? Nah, why would that make me mad? Nah. Are you still mad at me?"

"You didn't follow my directions to give Delilah the rings."

"For the first time in my life I didn't follow directions – because Sissy needs the dough. Delilah doesn't," he whispered,

raising his arms in victory. He felt something touch his leg and looked down to see Gus.

“Awww Gus. I’m gonna miss you too,” he said, hugging the goose, who affectionately rubbed against him. “I love you too, Gus, but you have to go back to your new home. We’ll visit you later. I promise.”

Kris, emotional, wiped her tears of sadness for surrendering her cherished Gus, but still chastised Grant, “Grant, you can do better than Sissy.”

“Look at this sunrise! Come out and see it.”

“My heart is skipping beats, dear, so standing now would be quite a gamble.”

Grant impulsively lifted Gus and placed him on Kris’s lap, then Grant suddenly picked up Kris, carrying his aunt and her favorite goose toward Delilah’s as the sun rose, clouds now rich with magenta and orange.

“Did my dad ever want kids?” Grant asked quietly.

“He didn’t think he would make a good father.”

Grant winced, a tear trailing his cheek into his soft beard, “I love you anyway.”

“What?”

“I love you anyway,” he repeated to the old woman getting

heavy in his arms.

“What ... are you ... implying?”

“Dad. Look at the sunrise. In Chicago, buildings block the sunrise. Never seen one with so many colors.”

“Dad?”

“Dad.”

“Dad? You think I am your father?!”

“How many sunrises will you get to see with your son?”
Grant whispered emotionally, lowering stunned Kris to stand.

Suddenly they heard a noise and turned to see Delilah opening her front door. Grant ran behind an evergreen as Kris dove to the ground, hiding from Delilah as she approached the geese pen. Threatened, Gus honked and pushed open the chicken wire, careening viciously towards Delilah.

She shrieked and retreated inside to escape the charging goose. An older wealthy man standing inside her foyer pulled her safely inside the house.

Grant immediately scooped Kris in his arms and carried Kris to the jeep.

Grant asked, “Who was the man inside her house?”

“What man?” Kris asked.

“Some older guy. In a suit.”

“Probably her father,” Kris said, “I never met her family but I hear they are very wealthy. Maybe he has connections to help you?”

A couple hours later, suited Grant and Sissy wearing a brown knitted sweater dress two sizes too big strolled a small road of touristy resort shops. He tried to hold her hand but she was standoffish, Joe’s warning to her repeating in her head, adamant that Grant was out of her league and she was only a joke to him. They passed a hair salon and walked into a jewelry store.

Grant said hello and shook the hand of an ancient hunched-over jeweler dressed in a posh suit with a hanging silver pocket watch. Sissy explained she wanted to sell the five rings in her hand which she was told were worth ten thousand dollars.

The old man examined Sissy’s rings with a magnifying glass for a long while as Sissy held her breath. Finally he spoke, “I can give you seven-thousand.”

Sissy scoffed, “We were told these five golden rings were worth ten thousand.”

“Five golden rings?” the man coughed, wiped his mouth, and examined the rings nearer to a lightbulb, “Were these the five golden rings from the Secret Santa?”

“You heard about that??” Grant smiled.

“The Secret Santa is all the town is talking about,” the man mused, “Something this exciting has never happened to Lake Lure. All my customers are hoping to get six geese a’ laying today. How about eight thousand?”

Before Sissy could scream yes, Grant negotiated, “Make it nine thousand and I’ll let you know who got the geese this morning.”

The man’s head shot up, “You know?? Who got the geese?”

“No idea,” Sissy admitted.

“Yes,” Grant corrected, “I know. Do we have a deal? Nine thousand?”

“Eight thousand. I am bound to find out soon who got the geese on my own.”

“Eight thousand five hundred,” Sissy insisted, “And if Grant tells you now who got the geese, you can call all your customers and tell them, and who knows, that could lead to a sale today for you. Maybe one will buy these rings from you for fifteen thousand.”

The man spread out the rings, tapping them all gently twice, “That is not impossible. Hm. Deal it is. Eight thousand five hundred. Who got the geese?”

Grant smiled, “Delilah.”

“Delilah Ernitz??”

“I don’t know her last name.”

“Yes,” Sissy shook her head, displeased, “Delilah Ernitz. Why did someone give that witch cute little geese? I am sure you know Delilah. She probably has come in here many times with her fake Gucci purse.”

“She has indeed! She’ll be the first call I make!” the hunched man inhaled excitedly, crossing to the register to count out the cash, then handing it to Sissy.

She jumped, waving the money above her head like a game show contestant, “I can’t believe this! Some Secret Santa made me rich!”

Her cell phone rang which she quickly answered, “Howdy? ... Yes, oh I do understand, yes, the green can be removed ... Yes, that is fine! Thank you, hon!”

She hung up, then her joy dissipated, wondering if Joe’s warning that the whole town saw her as a pitiful joke resonated. *Was the phone call I just got even real?*

Without a word, she tucked the cash in her worn purse and

walked outside, suspicious, needing to be alone to think.

Grant followed her, “Who called you?”

“Don’t you know?” she scowled.

“No. Who? Delilah??”

“Why would Delilah ever call me or even speak to me??”

“What did she say?” he asked.

“It wasn’t Delilah. It was a man.”

“Who was it?”

“Don’t you know?” She vented, brows furrowing.

“No, who?”

“Did you or Kris ask someone to phone me, Grant?”

“No.”

She turned away, “Was that a friend of yours playing a joke? Saying that they the Yacht Club hiring me as a waitress!? Of course they wouldn’t hire me after Delilah probably gossiped to the whole town I am a zero nutcase psycho scuzzy slut thief.”

“Playing a joke? I’m not playing any jokes on you. The Yacht Club called?”

She studied him, unsure. “I am not a joke, like *Carrie*.”

“Who is Carrie?”

“The movie. I am not a joke,” she fumed, counting the big bills in her purse, then marching into the hair salon.

He followed her inside, confused.

Once seated in the comfortable styling chair, Sissy told the flamboyant male hairdresser wearing rainbow Spandex, “Can we get rid of the green?”

“Duh, we can die it any color you like, Miss Thing,” he said, eyeing Grant up and down, “Does handsome want a different color on you?”

“I like the green hair,” Grant said, then chuckled, “Because my mother would hate it.”

“Are you meeting his mama?” the nosey hairdresser inquired.

“Not that,” Sissy said, “But do you think I should go back to my real color, mousy vacuum dust brown, or wanna try blonde?”

The stylist stepped back to judge her whole appearance,

“Girl, if you never been blonde, you have to try blonde. Everyone has to at least once. And no offense darling but your outfit could be improved, too.”

“We’re not here for an outfit,” Grant barked, protectively, “Nothing wrong with her outfit.”

“If you like thrift store clothes that look like thrift store clothes,” he snapped, “Now what color blonde? Sandy like your rambunctious beau here or are you feeling Marilyn Monroe bleached blonde?”

“On me?” Sissy sighed, “Hardly Marilyn here.”

“Miss Thang, you got a nice dainty figure and a Marilyn cut on you would accentuate your cheekbones,” the man offered, then with his fingers lifted her hair above her neck, “Like this.”

Grant looked concerned, “Why are you changing anything at all?”

“For the Yacht Club,” she glared at Grant, “If the call was real I start waitressing tonight, but no green hair they said.”

“You’ll make good tips but that club is so stuffy and boring and the jazz singers stink,” the hairdresser grimaced, “Once was enough for me, but it’s your life. They’d like you a blonde with a short cut, which would fluff it up more, not be so stringy and flat.”

“Just do it,” Sissy implored, “What do I care? Don’t even remember why I went green anyways. I got money for the

whole shebang, cut and dye, and if that sucks, I got more money to dye it rat brown.”

“Not another word. Let the artist do his work,” the man said arrogantly, grabbing scissors and cutting her hair.

Unsure it was a good idea, Grant sat in a chair, checking messages on his phone – messages from his mother and his boss – insisting he come home. When he tried to reply his brain shut down – he couldn’t complete a thought. So instead he focused on Sissy’s hour-long glamour transformation.

Surprisingly, the new Marilyn hairdo looked stunning on Sissy, now brewing with new confidence. She paid the man what he asked, then asked him what people tip, and she doubled it.

“I’m rich now like the stuffy upper crust in town,” she stated.

Outside the shop, gorgeous Sissy sashay-walked like a runway model as Grant marveled, “You look like a movie star.”

He scrunched to pet a stray Pitbull, “I miss my dog in Chicago!”

Sissy also squat to pet the friendly brown dog with a wagging short tail.

“Blessed dog. Blessed me,” Sissy mused, “Most blessed week of my entire life, all this money!”

He smiled with pride at her, “Best week of my life, too.”

She stood up, “Oh. Because your father, inheriting his estate. It’s unreal.”

He rose, “No ... this is the luckiest week because ... I met you.”

She studied his gorgeous face, unsure if he was joking, as the dog barked and ran to a man in the distance.

Grant read the uncertainty in Sissy’s trembling blue eyes, “You don’t believe me? You don’t believe you’re worth anything, do you?”

“I’m not in your league, although this hair and me being rich passes for a day or two, huh? I’m just a second-class misfit, not like first-class show-offs like Delilah.”

She grimaced.

He grinned and kissed her frowning thin lips, “You’re so original. So real. I love you.”

“Love?”

He was even caught off-guard that he said the L-word.

She rolled her eyes, “How could you love me?”

He softly kissed her again.

“You love ... my new look. I do look like I could be in movies, huh?”

“I loved you the first time I saw you,” he said.

“You did not.”

“When you were so real and grateful your car got heat. When you threw me an orange as you drove off.”

“Such a lost cause I was.”

“I never met anyone like you.”

“Ug. Why would you want to?”

He laughed, “Because you’re so ... real.”

“Still not as pretty or rich as Delilah.”

“Who cares about Delilah?”

“I was in Georgia’s bedroom when I heard her say she’ll bring you and your aunt breakfast plates at Georgia’s and that it would “be your first date” and you said “I’d be so lucky. Thanks, Delilah.””

“What was I supposed to say?”

“I don’t know. Maybe get away from me you gross imposter. She dies her hair.”

“So do you.”

“You could have said to her stop being trashy.”

“I like trashy,” he smiled.

She stifled a giggle, “You could have said “I don’t even like you” if you didn’t.”

“I would never tell anyone that.”

“You’re too nice. But nice isn’t exactly honest. I prefer guys who are honest with me.”

“I’m a nice guy.”

“The bad thing about nice people ... is you never know how they really feel. So Miss Wonderful got the geese today? How did you know that?”

“Uh ... Kris told me.”

“Well the geese got a paradise place now. I seen her property.”

“Let’s go see the geese,” he suggested.

“At her house??”

“Yeah, come on. Let’s check out those geese.”

“She hates me.”

“Because you’re so beautiful.”

“Hardly. I’m a skank.”

He spanked her, “Time for spank the skank again.”

She laughed, wriggling away.

Reluctantly, winding through blissful forest roads, Sissy drove Grant to Delilah’s, as they held hands in her dented purple car. As they passed the Yacht Club she showed him the goosebumps of excitement on her arm, vowing to be the best waitress they ever had.

She parked her car outside Georgia’s and she and Grant held hands walking next door to Delilah’s.

They approached Gus and the other geese being petted by Delilah, Maria and Georgia. Near them, cowboy Paul read the yellow note.

Delilah enjoyed being the center of attention and had dressed for it, wearing a pearl-colored pantsuit with pearl necklace and pearl earrings, “I wake up and I have geese! Can you believe it?” she shouted, “Hi Grant! You’re looking very handsome! Who did you bring with you?”

It wasn’t clear if Delilah didn’t recognize Sissy or if she did and was being catty.

Gus the goose immediately ran squawking to Grant.

Maria shouted, “Sissy! Thank god you got rid of that green hair!”

Sissy raised her middle finger at her sister.

Delilah was startled at Sissy's new look, "Wow, what got into you?"

"Got a waitress job at the Yacht Club," Sissy boasted.

"I better warn them," Delilah glared, "To watch their cash registers."

"Don't you dare!" Grant scolded, hugging the ecstatic gray goose, "I love you, Gus."

Delilah remarked, "How did you know his name was Gus?"

Paul covered for him, "I told him. The note said it."

Grant smiled appreciatively to Paul.

From her neighboring lawn, in her gold chiffon robe, Georgia raced over, "Mystery Santa gave you the six geese! Will they play with my hens?"

Paul nodded, "Seems so. These geese were someone's pets. Wild geese won't come near humans."

Maria inched to Paul, "Paul, what do you know about partridges? Mine won't eat and he's losing feathers and sometimes is so rigid like a dead bird. I can't lose little William. I love him so much."

Paul shrugged, “I don’t know anything about partridges.”

Grant offered, “Kris might know.”

Maria felt relief, “Can she come see William?”

Grant looked down, “Better for us to bring William there. Kris couldn’t even stand up yesterday.”

In her lemon of a car, Sissy drove Grant and Maria, cradling William the ill partridge, to Kris’s red barn.

Grant opened the front door for them. All three entered and could hear the sound of water like a bathtub filling.

Kris, really a pasty man out of make-up with one day beard stubble, hairy legs and receding short gray hair, in a white robe, drank juice in the kitchen.

Maria did not see him as she surveyed the barn living room and fireplace, “What a great place this is!”

Hearing guests, Kris panicked and holding her robe over her head ran across to her room and her bathroom.

Grant tracked his father, “Kris?! Sissy and Maria are here!”

Grant continued to follow the fleeting white robe toward the master bathroom as Sissy discovered Kris's blonde wig on the table.

She waved it in the air, curious, "Kris! You wear a wig just like Brick does!!"

Maria shook her head, "That's not Kris, that must be her brother."

Kris shouted, "It's Kris here! Brick doesn't wear a toupee!"

"Of course he does," Sissy laughed, "A bad one!"

Grant knocked on Kris's bathroom door. Inside, Kris hurriedly slapped on heavy make-up.

Sissy teased from the living room, "Kris! I'm trying on your wig!!"

Maria yelled, "My sick partridge needs help!"

Kris responded, "What is wrong with William?!"

Grant knocked on the bathroom door again, "Kris?? Can I come in?"

Kris opened the door just enough so Grant could sneak in then huffed, "Grant! You told them I'm a man!"

"No, no, but they won't care."

“You can’t tell them -- they’d despise me -- or beat me,” Kris whispered, frightened, ducking into a corner, haunted by the memory of thugs beating her in an alley.

Maria’s voice carried into the bathroom, “My partridge won’t eat anything and he’s losing feathers!”

Kris shouted back, “Sweetie, put William on the floor -- and just follow him!”

Maria lowered the sick partridge to the wood floor then she grabbed Sissy’s hand and they followed William outside to the pond where he excitedly played with swans.

Sissy pointed to them, “Look. All of a sudden William’s happy now!”

Maria couldn’t deny it, “He’s having fun for once. He didn’t have fun with me?”

“Maybe he needs to be more social?”

Watching William with renewed life, Maria relaxed wholeheartedly.

Sissy turned back looking for Grant.

Maria prodded, “So. This Grant thing. Is it serious?”

“Ask him. I don’t monitor his brain.”

“He’s a tax lawyer? That’s so respectful. Not exactly your

type.”

“You sayin’ he’s out of my league.”

“Well.”

“Well he is and it’s not your business, Maria.”

Fully dressed, Grant ran past them and jumped in the pond, gleeful as the swans played on top of him.

Sissy watched in adoration. Counting her blessings, then counting the birds, “Seven?? Seven swans?”

Grant realized she was unveiling the mystery of the Secret Santa and ran to stop her, forcing a kiss. She wriggled to the side and managed to question, “The Secret Santa gave your aunt seven swans?”

To shut her up, he carried her into the pond and kissed her.

Maria watched with mixed emotions. She was delighted her little sister was infatuated with a good man, but her own loneliness and pining for Paul brought up jealousy.

Adding to Grant’s and Sissy’s storybook romance, the swans swam around them like a scene from a Disney movie.

Wearing a flannel shirt and jeans, Grant ate dinner with Kris, in a sweater and pants, on a portable table and chairs inside the huge birdcage. The seven swans nestled their legs as the sandpipers flew around, singing hauntingly beautiful music.

“Their sounds are so amazing,” Grant smiled, studying Kris’s beard-stubbled man face without make-up hiding it.

“I’m so gonna miss these birds. Are you going to leave after we eat and see Sissy again? Don’t you think you spend too much time with that ... lost thing?”

“Sissy’s working.”

“Where is Sissy working?”

“The Yacht Club hired her as a waitress.”

“Oh no,” Kris looked worried, “I don’t think that’s the place for her.”

“It’s not your place to tell her her place.”

“Ouch,” Kris mumbled, “You’re still mad at me for lying?”

“I am ... but not as much as you think. I never had a dad ... so ... my expectations weren’t very high.”

“I am sorry I don’t meet your low expectations.”

“I didn’t say that.”

“You dream all your life of a father, and you end up with me.”

“You put yourself down like Sissy does. When she does, I think it’s so cute,” he smiled to himself, “But I don’t like to hear you put yourself down.”

“Oh let’s be honest. We’re adults. Of course you’re disappointed at what you see across the table.”

“Why? Because you dress up like a lady? I’m from Chicago, remember? I see it every day. Not a big deal.”

“Animals don’t care what you wear.”

“I don’t care what you wear. I just feel bad you’ve been hiding your whole life.”

“Only from humans -- but with animals, life is wondrous,” Kris said, wiping a tear, “They are my children. Can you even imagine how much it hurts to give away your children??”

“Well, you can’t get rid of me,” Grant said pointedly, gripping his father’s hand. “Sissy likes you even though you hate her. Tell her you’re a man. She won’t care.”

“Why tell anybody? Nobody needs to know.”

“This is not about them. This is about you. You need to tell. You need to be free. For your heart.”

“My heart is on its last beat.”

“Then for your soul. You said life goes on after death, right?”

“It does indeed.”

“And when you die, does your mind, your experiences, your memory go on to the afterlife?”

“They do indeed. So little old me will just continue to be little old me in the afterlife.”

“You’re not little. You’re almost as tall as me.”

“I meant little like insignificant. Grant, what did I do in my life to be so proud of, to take with me? I was a good parent to birds and cows. I wasn’t even a good parent to you.”

“You didn’t know you had a son.”

“I didn’t! I think about Brick and Bridget, how much they do for everyone. I never extended myself. I was afraid I guess of people getting too close, finding me out.”

“So you said when you die, your mind, your experiences, your memory all go on to the afterlife.”

“Yes, they do.”

“Then why bring baggage into Heaven? Why die feeling scared or hiding something? Wouldn’t it be better to die feeling

free?”

Kris didn't expect his son to be so profound. He leaned back absorbing the weight of his statement.

“So, Dad, be free. Show everyone who you really are.”

“I'm nothing.”

“Don't say that.”

“I'm useless. A joke.”

“You are wonderful, but why deny all of you? I mean, they all love your woman personality, they'll love your man personality, too.”

“I'm hardly a man. They'll hate me. Maybe beat me.”

“No they won't. And I'd protect you if anyone was an asshole.”

“Why does anyone have to know???”

“They don't have to know. You have to tell, so when you die, you're not hiding anything and don't become a grumpy ghost or something. Exposing who you really are is in your benefit.”

Kris thought about when he died in the alley and the angels he witnessed healing children. Those spirits were white light, pure love, certainly not carrying residual fear, as he believed he

would if he died suddenly. Kris's greatest wish was that he could be a healing angel one day and help others, partly because he felt he had not done that in his Earth life.

I need to be clean, Kris thought, gripping his son's hand, I so want to be one of those healing angels. I need to be light and lightness and pure and free and not bogged down with regrets and fears. I don't want to be a bitter grumpy scared ghost.

Chapter 9: The 7th Day Of Christmas

In matching white cowboy hats, Maria and Paul slow danced on the top observation deck of the Eiffel Tower. They were unconcerned with surrounding tourists and the honking of cars below.

“I love you with all my heart,” Paul said impulsively, pulling Maria into a kiss, massaging her back.

“But you’re married,” she sighed, looking down at his white shirt gripping his heaving pecs.

“My wife left me years ago. I have been afraid to tell anyone.”

“Oh Paul, I love you, too,” she gushed, and looking down saw her old worn blue parka turn magically into a white frilly wedding gown with a train that grew as he lifted and twirled her.

The dress fabric turned to silk and twirled up into the sky and became a cloud. The sun literally smiled and honked.

The knock on her bedroom door wakened Maria from her surreal romantic dream.

“Get up!” Sissy called, “Looks like you got company!”

Maria heard more honking. In a daze and wiping sleep from

her eyes, Maria wondered *what company? Was it Paul? To tell me he was single and wanted to marry me? And he would help me track down and adopt my son that my husband took? Was Paul in his car honking for me to run away with him?*

Wrapping herself in a worn floral robe, she peeked through her white lace curtains for a clue. Seeing no one, she excitedly pulled open her bedroom door to find blonde Sissy in jeans and a tie-dyed T-shirt sipping a cup of coffee. She was cradling William the partridge and looking out the front window.

Sissy waved over Maria to see seven swans honking in the outdoor stream that nippy morning of December 31st.

“You got swans,” Sissy shrugged.

“Swans??”

“I counted seven swans.”

Maria was confused, “Kris’s swans??”

“Know anyone else with swans??”

“Seven swans a swimming. The mystery Santa thing?”

“I got no clue,” Sissy laughed.

Overwhelmed, Maria grabbed her phone and dialed it as she opened her front door, instantly run over by the lively large white birds.

“Kris,” Maria panted into the phone, “Come over here and get your swans. This madness is going to push me to drink.”

She hung up and tried to usher out the swans, but they were having too much fun inside, excited to once again be with William.

Sissy put down the partridge on the aged rug so he could enjoy his friends, “Yep, these is Kris’s swans for sure.”

Maria opened the fridge, stared at a beer, fighting the urge to drink.

“I made coffee,” Sissy persuaded.

“I need a beer.”

“You don’t need no beer this early!” Sissy admonished, slamming the fridge door.

“I can’t take all this,” Maria inhaled, frazzled, glancing longingly at a photo of her young son on the refrigerator door.

“It’s eight A.M.! Lord knows you have reason to drink. But it ain’t helpin,” Sissy snapped, following the swans back to the living room.

Maria stood in the kitchen, shivering in cold, “All this noise! Last week I could wake up alone in quiet! Now all of a sudden I have a partridge and my wayward sister here and now a zoo!”

“I’m sorry I ruined your life again!”

“This is what makes me drink! This ... drama!”

“You was drinking when you was alone, we both know that. You can’t blame that one on me.”

Maria opened the fridge to stare at the beer again, fighting the need for alcohol for a full ten minutes until Sissy yelled, “Kris and Grant just parked outside!”

Suited Grant helped weak Kris, in thick make-up, blonde wig askew and flannel dress, walk the stone path to Maria’s front door.

Sissy yanked them inside.

Grant hurried feeble Kris to a rocking chair where Kris cradled little William and was besieged by his loving swans.

“So, what goin’ on?” Sissy pinched Grant.

Maria wiped the bags under her ebony eyes, “Kris, what are your swans doing here?”

Sitting next to Grant, Sissy postulated, “Some Secret Santa brought these to Kris? But changed his mind and brought them here?? Who is doing this?? Brick?”

Maria surmised, “Kris?! You’re the Secret Santa?”

“What?” Sissy looked perplexed, “Kris is the mystery

Santa?”

Kris shyly confessed, “Before I cross over I needed to find homes for my beloved animals.”

Grant added, “I was flown here to help.”

Maria gestured to the bevy of swans, “I get seven swans a-swimming because William needs company?”

Kris confirmed, “William recovered the minute he saw the swans, so this is the best place for the swans. And you’re a devoted mom and will be a devoted mom to our feathered family now.”

“I am not a devoted mom,” Maria felt humiliated, “Ask my son. When you find him.”

Straightening Kris’s wig, Sissy asked, “After I stole a ring, you figured you’d teach me a lesson, Kris -- and give me five rings?”

Kris admitted, “Nothing that poetic. Grant was supposed to give the rings to Delilah but he gave them to you instead. He insisted you have them, to sell.”

Sissy locked eyes with grinning Grant, then she asked Kris, “Whose rings were they? Yours? Your brother’s?”

“Yes,” Kris coughed, holding his racing heart and Grant’s hand. Then Kris slowly removed his blonde wig.

Maria giggled, “Your real hair is not so horrific.”

“For a vampire,” Kris laughed and wiped off his make-up, revealing two days beard growth. He pulled out his falsies and lifted his dress to show hairy legs, confusing Maria and Sissy.

Sissy was clueless, “You in menopause?”

Grant stated, “She, he, is a man.”

Maria sat down, stunned.

Sissy’s blue eyes enlarged, “Wait! You’re Grant’s papa?”

Grant patted Kris’s back, saying, “I just found out yesterday I have a gay dad.”

Kris corrected, “I’m not homosexual.”

That flabbergasted Grant, “You’re straight? You like women?”

“I experimented with your mother,” Kris explained, “But she can tell you I never had much ... desire. I just always saw a woman in the mirror.”

“Oh this is so ... wow, too much,” Maria was sympathetic, “Are you taking hormones to be a woman?”

Kris shook his head, “With this heart? Hormone shots could give me deep vein thrombosis and cause clots. And why change my equipment anyway? I don’t even use it.”

Maria winked, “Honey, I don’t use my equipment either.”

Sissy stood up, holding her aching head, “Kris, we don’t care if you wear wigs and dresses. Today, anyone wears anything. Nobody cares. Why the big secret?”

Kris quivered, “My dad kicked me out for wearing mama’s dress. I was sixteen. Never ever saw them again.”

“You poor thing!” Maria said, hugging Kris, then she walked into the kitchen, reached into the fridge and opened a beer, gulping it, “You crazy people make me drink.”

Sissy argued, “You drink alone and we all know it.”

Maria flashed her middle finger to her sister, then surmised, “Kris ... Tomorrow would be eight maids a-milking and you have cows. Is that the plan?”

Kris beamed with pride, “The five best cows on Earth. But I can’t get Grant to hide five cows on someone’s porch tomorrow before sunrise, can I? Please help me find someone who will take care of my cows. Someone with land obviously.”

Maria contemplated, “Eight milkmaids can milk five cows. So eight of us can milk your cows tomorrow. Then nine ladies dancing the day after. What were the plans for that?”

Kris shared, “No plans for nine ladies dancing.”

Grant added, “We’ve been taking this one day at a time.”

Maria was formulating a plan, “Can we show up at Paul’s for nine ladies dancing? Then we can see his wife -- if she exists.”

Obsessed with Paul, Maria looked off in the distance.

Still in the living room, Sissy was as nice and supportive as she could be to Kris, who did not return the affection.

Sissy suggested, “Kris, I wanna hear your whole life story, whole thing. Want me to make fish sticks here tonight? And mashed potatoes? I’m not working. The four of us for New Year’s Eve here?”

Kris grimaced, “Thank you but I barely had the strength to wobble here. I’ll be in my bed by afternoon. And Grant has other plans for New Year’s Eve tonight.”

“I do?” Grant asked.

Kris smiled, “Georgia and Delilah are having a thing, at Georgia’s house, and invited you.”

“They are?” he said, confused.

Kris insisted, “You must go, Grant, and you can see Sissy another night.”

Grant furrowed his hairy brows, “Can’t Sissy come?”

Sissy looked down, embarrassed for her recent tantrum when she was caught stealing a ring and holding the group

meeting where she clumsily apologized.

“Not tonight, sweetheart,” Kris pretended to frown, “Sissy wasn’t invited.”

Despite her not being invited, that evening Sissy’s car parked outside Georgia’s intimidating house. Suited Grant jumped out of the passenger door, but Sissy stayed glued to her seat, petrified, clutching the steering wheel in her outdated silver frilly party dress.

“Come on,” he said, “What are you still doing in the car?”

“No, you go in, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He was disappointed, “No. Are you sure? You were going to make a salad.”

She was disappointed, too, but in his reaction, “Grant.”

“What?”

“Go in if you want to go in.”

“Well I want us both to go in.”

“Then march over to my door like a man, open it, and pull

me out,” she snapped.

As he did, he mumbled, “I don’t force people to do things.”

“No, you don’t force people or take the lead,” she complained, grabbing the bag of salad mixings, “You follow, you let bossy people force you, like your mama, right? And that boss of yours? And Kris?”

“Hey, why the third degree? You’re not my therapist.”

“You got a therapist?” she giggled.

“No, it was a figure of speech.”

“I just don’t want to see you get walked over, Grant.”

“By Delilah? Is this what this is about?”

“Not like I want to see that bitch,” she snarled.

As Sissy led their way to Georgia’s door, Sissy couldn’t deny her jealousy of Delilah was partly the issue. Grant squat to pet the hens eating in the outdoor part of the chicken-wire cage as Sissy knocked on the door.

The knock went unheard due to the noise inside, so Sissy, further taking the lead, hesitantly opened the door herself. Gorgeous Delilah dressed in a low-cut shimmery green gown opened the door fully, her stunning smile fading seeing Sissy. The noisy crowd went silent.

“Oh,” Delilah said, furrowing her plucked brows above her engaging green eyes thick with mascara. She sipped from a champagne glass and held another.

“Happy New Year,” Sissy said, trying to smile, “I brought salad stuff.”

“Were you invited?” Delilah asked loudly, while handing a champagne flute to Grant.

He said, “Happy New Year’s Eve!”

Delilah gushed, “Happy New Year’s Eve, handsome. Come on in.”

He stepped inside Georgia’s foyer and waited for Sissy to follow. Sissy felt deflated, waiting for Grant to take charge and defend her with something like, “Go to Hell, she’s invited. I invited her.” But the mild-mannered mama’s boy didn’t have it in him. It would have ended her humiliation if he would tell everyone, “I insisted Sissy come!” But now, not only would she be perceived as a party-crasher, but an untrusted unwelcome party-crasher that everyone hated or pitied. Hiding her frustration, with the bag of produce she zipped inside passing everyone toward the kitchen.

Not a leader but a follower, Grant saw her and was going to follow her until Delilah trapped him against the foyer wall, boldly whispering, “Why should we fight this chemistry? I see in your eyes and lips you want me.”

“My eyes and lips?” he feigned confusion, knowing damn

well his eyes telegraphed that he found her very sexy and his lips salivated seeing her.

“You look so handsome in that suit.”

“It’s the only one I brought,” he looked down shyly, “You look like a model tonight. Quite a dress.”

“Do you like it?” she asked, posing sideways, pushing out her breasts.

Embarrassed, he turned to look into the upscale house interior. Across the room Georgia played poker with Paul, the Xongs and Brick, his arm around wife Bridget, a naturally pretty red-head in a red dress flaunting her voluptuous figure.

“Is that Brick’s wife?” Grant asked Delilah, surprised, “The way he talks about her, calling her a cow, I was expecting someone ugly.”

“He’s a joker, yeah that’s Bridget, she’s gorgeous, and so nice.”

From the corner of his eye, Paul spotted Grant and heckled, “What detective was onto you, Grant? Tell ‘em!”

Grant gestured to Paul, “Yep, Paul knew who was the Secret Santa! He was following Kris’s jeep for days!”

Maria bent down over Paul to use his lighter to light her cigarette. Paul patted the empty chair beside him, “Maria, sit down.”

As Maria inhaled the nicotine, she noticed Grant grinning at Delilah. Upset for her sister, Maria marched to Grant, asking, “Don’t you already have a girlfriend??”

“She’s in the kitchen,” Grant stated simply.

Maria marched into the kitchen and pulled out Sissy, announcing, “Look, Sissy’s here, Delilah!”

Delilah’s emerald eyes circled the guests hoping to encourage revolt, “Was Sissy even invited?”

“I invited her,” Maria lied.

Trying to save face and tuck her tail between her legs, Sissy smiled, “Did y’all hear Kris gave me the rings?! Y’all know Kris was the Secret Santa?!”

Paul grumbled, “Yup! And Brick told us Kris is a guy!”

Bridget threw her cards into the center of the table, “Could’ve knocked my socks off.”

Brick ranted, “Where does Kris get off lying all these years?!”

Even though Grant did not have the wherewithal to defend Sissy earlier, he defended his father now, “My dad’s heart is going so fast he can’t even stand up. But tomorrow, eight maids a-milkin is at his barn.”

Paul was incredulous, “Don’t expect me. I stay where men

dress like men.”

Brick echoed the sentiment, “Screw Kris! She, he, lied to us.”

Bridget rose, concerned, “She’s a big fake! I mean he is Kris.”

Georgia couldn’t so swiftly erase the friendship of Kris like the others seemed to, “Kris’s wit and warmth didn’t disappear.”

No one said anything as they continued to play poker.

“Or did it?” Good-natured Georgia was manipulating a scenario where Kris could explain himself, “Let’s find out, tomorrow if Kris is the same as we know or some monster like you think.”

Brick refused, “Bridget and I have no time for fakes.”

Sissy could not hold back, being an outsider herself, “Hypocrite. Your hair is fake.”

Brick looked uncomfortable, “It is not.”

Sissy pointed to Bridget’s breasts, “And those are fake.”

Bridget laughed off the attack, “These are real.”

Sissy couldn’t hold back her feelings, “You all lying in this town. All pretenders.”

Grant blushed and regretted coming to the party, and with uninvited Sissy, “No one is lying,” he reasoned, “No one is faking. People ... just don’t always present their total selves.”

Georgia rose and rubbed Grant’s tense shoulders in solidarity, “Brick, Bridget, you have a right to tell Kris how you feel. We all do. Tomorrow we will. All of us at Kris’s barn.”

“Not me,” Paul pounded the table.

Feeling in charge, since it was her house, Georgia pounded the table louder, insisting, “We’re all going. Cowboy, damn it, you too.”

“Who are you to tell us what to do?” Paul argued.

“Look, we all have secrets,” Georgia stuttered, “I never told you I was Jewish for years, afraid you’d cut me out of our group. Kris probably felt the same way.”

Brick drank bourbon, angry, “I haven’t lied to you people.”

Bridget commiserated, “If Brick lied to anyone, we’d lose our business.”

Brick held back emotion, “I’d lose what’s more important, I’d lose my friendships.”

Appreciatively, Georgia grabbed Brick’s hand, “And Kris was probably afraid to lose our friendships.”

Paul said, “She has. I mean he has.”

“She hasn’t lost mine,” Georgia insisted, “I mean he hasn’t lost mine, or whatever he she they is. He she they is still funny as Hell and good-intentioned and a part of our extended family. And you all are going to her, his, their barn tomorrow.”

Paul said gruffly, “I would never hit a woman but I have no problem hitting a man. And Kris is a man.”

The group read of mixed emotions as Georgia gathered the playing cards and handed them to Paul, “Violence is never the answer, cowboy. Deal the cards.”

Feeling unwelcome, and embarrassed for her blunt confrontational statements, Sissy stood behind a chair away from the group. She looked to Grant, hoping he’d come and defend her or make her feel like she belonged. But handsome marshmallow Grant was distracted by Delilah, who maneuvered him outside the front door.

Delilah pulled Grant on the porch, closing the door behind them. He scrunched to pet the hens in the cage.

Grant was exactly the kind of man Delilah pictured as her husband, someone as beautiful as she was, the testosterone partner of an A-list couple to be admired. She winked, “Come see our house — just next door.”

“Our house?”

“Of course, once we’re married everything is fifty-fifty. I even called a local tax office and recommended you for work.”

“Whoa. Delilah, I’m in love with Sissy,” he said, rising.

“You’ll be over her in a month. Like a venereal disease,” she quipped.

She kissed his wide furry lips tenderly and he was helpless to escape. She then shoved a paper in his pant’s pocket, whispering, “Phone me when it’s clear. I’m going home to our bedroom. Come over later.”

Flattered immensely, he couldn’t help but grin watching her as she seductively swished away to her stately house next door. Of course he was attracted to her, every straight man was attracted to her. But he was in love with Sissy.

When Grant reentered Georgia’s house, he was pleased to see Sissy sit down in the empty poker chair and play cards with the others.

Later he also joined in the neighborly but competitive card game.

An hour later, at Georgia’s prodding, they all counted down to midnight then cheered the New Year.

Brick and Bridget kissed. Paul pulled Maria into a kiss and following suit, Grant kissed Sissy, who finally smiled.

Chapter 10: The 8th Day Of Christmas

On the frosty New Year's Day morning, Georgia parked her sparkling gray Mercedes across the street from Kris's barn. She exited her car, her purple floral wool caftan cracking in the icy wind, then walked around to the passenger seat to assist out Joe, wearing his usual black.

Georgia shuffled "blind" Joe with his dark glasses and shimmering cane up the cobblestone path to the barn door. She loudly knocked, hollering, "Heyy!!!"

In jeans and a sweatshirt, Grant answered the door and whispered, "My dad's heart is racing and he's still asleep. So be as quiet as possible."

Georgia howled deliberately loud, "Kris!!!! Get up!!! Get up dinosaur!! Get up transvestite!!" She chuckled then asked Grant sweetly, "Grant, can you help Delilah carry in the beer?"

Grant stepped outside to see exiting the Mercedes backseat was Delilah in much make-up looking stunning in a tight copper designer dress more apt for an award show.

He approached her and smiled, "You got beer in there?"

"In the backseat."

“Let me grab that,” he offered, forced to brush against her to reach it.

With her hip she pressed against his jeans and sweatshirt even more, “I couldn’t sleep thinking about you all night.”

He kept his attention on the case of beer as he grabbed it and stood, “Happy New Year, Delilah.”

“Happy New Year,” she said, kissing his full furry lips, catching him off-guard.

As soon as he could back up from her, from the barn door, Sissy in pajamas raced towards them, jealous.

“Oh, Sissy, you slept here at Kris’s barn??” Delilah gulped, “Why am I not surprised? We were just talking about how cute you are.”

Sissy chastised, “Grant, you got on lipstick. Like father like son.” Then the petite blonde stole the heavy case of beer and lugged it inside the house.

Meanwhile in Kris’s pine-paneled bedroom, Georgia sat on the white whicker rocker next to Kris in his white whicker bed, as a man, three days beard growth, no make-up. Above him were many photos framed in rustic wood.

Kris asked her dear friend, “Is it bizarre to see me not in a dress?”

Georgia joked, “It’s bizarre to see you not in a suit. A Suit

Of Armor riding a horse to battle because you're so old."

Joe entered. Behind his dark glasses, he spied a checkbook in Kris's open nightstand and a wallet in Georgia's open purse. As Kris and Georgia joked about their old ages, Joe silently lifted the wallet.

He did not realize Sissy saw the theft as she entered with the beer. She put it down and lifted her guitar, singing, "*On the eighth day of Christmas, my true love gave to me eight maids a milkin'.*"

Georgia held Kris's hands with his old nail polish fading, "My oldest friend Kris, how could I hate you just because you want to eat, drink and be ..."

"Mary?" Kris stole the punch line, "Shout out to you for your compassion. Shout out because you're so old you can't hear. Joe, Sissy, Georgia's so old her Social Security number is three."

Georgia retorted, "Kris was around when the Dead Sea was just getting sick. Because she, he, left his Depends diaper in it."

As they laughed staring lovingly at each other, Sissy secretly tugged Georgia's wallet from Joe's pocket. Joe struggled to keep it but it fell to the floor.

Sissy was not about to let Joe steal, "Did somebody drop something?"

They all looked down, curious.

Georgia picked it up, apologizing, “Oh I’d lose my own head if it wasn’t attached.”

Sissy smirked at Joe.

Georgia tied a white scarf from her purse around her head and acted like an African slave, “Master Kris, I got to please my master at his plantation! Got to pick massa’s cotton and milk he-she’s cows!”

Kris chuckled. Georgia laughed, handing scarves to Sissy and Joe.

Sissy tied a scarf around her own head then one around Joe, “Act like a maid I guess.”

Joe said, “Georgia’s black so she can joke about slavery but I don’t think we can.”

Georgia asked, “Who told you I was black?”

Joe panicked and invented their history, “You said it when we first met.”

“I am joking,” Georgia said, “Now get down here with me and ask Master Kris what chores we doin’.” Then reciting the black maid’s line from *Gone With The Wind*, she squealed, “I don’t know nothin’ bout birthin’ no babies.”

Kris giggled, “Stop that!”

Delilah pulled Grant into the room.

Georgia proceeded, even more animated, “Ooh, cracker Massa Kris be the best massa, lettin’ us pick his whitey cotton and milk he-she’s precious cows.”

Maria entered just in time to see Sissy get on her knees and play-act along, “Massa Kris, do we need to milk your cows?”

Maria lectured, “Sissy!”

Joe said, “I don’t think we’re supposed to be joking like black slaves.”

Georgia scoffed, “Now you sound like a real slave to political correctness because your free speech and humor has been taken from you.”

Grant reasoned, “Today’s society says it’s wrong for a white person to act black ...”

Georgia lectured, “There were white slaves, too. Now stop being slaves to political correctness! Friends don’t have rules. Screw the laws that say only blacks can joke about blacks and only gays can joke about gay. Don’t tell me Kris is the only one in here that can use the sissy gay tranny voice. I am free to use any voice or joke I want,” then in stereotypical gay voice, she continued, “And next time girleeeenes, Kris wantsss ussss in fabulousssss sssssparkly rainbow ssssscarvessss.”

Georgia stood up and paraded around the room snapping her fingers like a sissy theater queen.

They couldn’t help but laugh, though Grant explained,

“Kris is not gay.”

Georgia was floored, “What do you mean he’s not gay??”

Delilah cut in, “I heard that a lot of straight men cross dress?”

Georgia said, “No they don’t. Kris is gay he’s just too old to remember.”

Kris shot back, “Honey, you’re older than the ring around Uranus.”

Georgia laughed, “Kris was around before electricity.” Then she handed a scarf to Maria, “Tie it on your head like a slave.”

Maria corrected, “No but I will tie it on my head like a milk maid.”

Kris giggled, “Georgia’s so old she introduced Adam to Eve.”

Georgia mused, “Kris is so old he owes Jesus five dollars.”

“Said the Jewish millionaire keeping track of my money,” Kris joked.

Shocked, Maria covered her mouth. But no one laughed harder than Georgia, “I’m just saying if your Jesus invested that five dollars for two thousand years in the stock market, his second coming will be in a limousine! Or one of those rock stars

two-story tour buses? What are all these photos on your walls about?”

Georgia examined one of many framed wall photos, “Why do you have a photo of my husband on your wall?! If you tell me my Roy was a secret gay I’ll drop my bleeding heart right here and stain your homosexual floor, you big queen.”

Kris howled, winking, “I am not gay, I want to get in your pantyhose, and not just to wear them.”

Georgia rolled in laughter, “You’re trying to seduce me?” then she playfully winked, “About damn time, you sexy thing.”

Kris pretended, “Yes, I killed Roy so you and I could hook up.”

Maria looked uncomfortable, “Aren’t we taking the humor too far?”

Joe said, “Yes. You guys are going to Hell.”

Kris said soberly, “Joe, no blind people go to Hell.”

Joe asked, “Why is that?”

Kris ginned, “The devil doesn’t want them to step on his tail.”

Grant chuckled then asked, “Did you hear about the blind man who walked into a bar?”

“And a wall,” Kris added.

“And a table,” Georgia added.

Georgia embraced Maria and Joe, “It is not possible to take humor too far between friends.”

Maria asked, “Since I’m half Latin do you guys joke about me wearing a sombrero?”

Kris pretended, “Yes, and that you must be an illegal.”

Georgia laughed, “Here for free health coverage. But we know we can always hire you to pick our crops.”

Kris snickered, “Or paint our cars. With spray paint. Or a roller.”

Maria tried not to laugh, “You guys are bad. This is in bad taste.”

Kris joked, “Bad taste. Like Georgia’s frock.”

Sissy joked, “So only I can joke about trailer trash? My parents are siblings.”

Maria protested, “They are not.”

Sissy laughed, “Maria and I have different fathers. She doesn’t know my parents are related.”

Maria argued, “Your parents are not siblings!”

Grant joked, “That would be hot, though.”

Sissy smiled, “I was kidding, they’re not brother and sister. They’re cousins.”

Grant grunted, “Hot!”

Sissy continued, “Well, second cousins and it’s legal.”

Delilah piped in, “Ewwwww. But that explains so much.”

Grant asked, “So any tax accountant jokes for me?”

The room grew silent as all tried to think of one. Finally Delilah reasoned, “There’s no humor in that.”

“You’re telling me,” he sighed.

Georgia scrutinized the photos on the wall, “Kris, why do you have my husband’s photo in your bedroom if you’re not a poof?”

Kris chuckled, “You’re in the photos, too, and I swear I never fantasized about either of you.”

Sissy pointed, “This one, Georgia, this is you.”

“Oh my lord,” Georgia reminisced, “That’s Roy and my wedding photo!”

Kris shared, “Cut from the newspaper thirty years ago. Brick and Bridget’s newspaper photo, their wedding, is right

above it.”

Sissy gestured to another framed photo, “Look, here’s Paul and Maria.”

Maria smiled, “We look like a couple. From Brick’s birthday party. Two years ago?”

Sissy snorted, “A dysfunctional couple.”

Delilah found her likeness on the wall, “Here’s a photo of me in college!”

Georgia held back her emotion, “The whole town is here in pictures. Everyone from the neighborhood.”

Grant handed a picture frame to Georgia, “My grandparents. Kris’s parents.”

The 1948 photo showed a very stern woman wearing a cross and a humorless man holding a Bible and a baby.

Moments later, Grant and Delilah carried out Kris to the picnic table. Grant handed the brass cowbell to Kris who rang it. Tokyo the cow looked up.

Sashaying flamboyantly to the field to meet the approaching cows were Sissy, Georgia and Joe, wearing scarves.

Joe asked, “How does a blind man be one of eight maids a milkin?!”

Grant yelled instructions, “Grab the pail then squat down and grab an utter.”

Georgia joked, “Maybe I’ll fake out Joe and lower my own teat just for a thrill.”

Just then Qi and Li arrived, dressed warmly in matching leather coats.

Li approached Kris, “You look scary.”

Qi followed with, “Oh, look, you are Kris? As man?”

Kris shrugged though even his old shoulders hurt, “The real me. Hideous.”

Li joked, “No more hideous than all Caucasians.”

Kris laughed, “Did you hear about the look-alike contest in China? Yeah, everybody won.”

Li laughed, “What do a racist joke and crossing the street have in common?”

Kris knew the punchline, “White people look both ways

before they start. What happens if an Asian with an erection walks into a wall?"

Qi snickered, "He breaks his nose. How many white people does it take to replace a light bulb? One to hold the bulb, and the rest to screw the whole world."

Li joked, "What you call a bench full of white people?"

Kris asked, "I don't know. What do you call a bench of white people?"

Bridget in flannel shirt and jeans interrupted. She stared into Kris's hazel eyes, smiled, then embraced Kris a long time, saying, "I can't stay mad at you. You're a beautiful person inside and out either way."

Kris sighed, "Don't you mean pitiful?"

Bridget frowned, "Why did you lie to us? Brick is so upset."

She released Kris and looked around to see the maids a milkin, then guided Qi, Li and Delilah to the field near the cows.

Kris yelled, "Li! What do you call a bench of white people?!"

They didn't hear him. A pick-up truck parked. Paul got out. Maria ran to him.

Paul tipped his cowboy hat, “You good at milking, pretty gal?”

Maria smiled, sober, “Maybe after dinner, margaritas and a slow dance.”

She passionately stared into his sexy green eyes and traced his thick red mustache with her finger.

He pulled her into a slow-dance and hummed their country ballad they had danced to at Brick’s store. Battling intense chemistry, he had no idea Maria’s plan was to invade his home the next day to see if he really had a wife.

Her head pressing against his sturdy shoulder, she asked, “Should you be dancing with me?”

He whispered, “I can’t help how I feel for you.”

She didn’t bother prying into his emotions further, knowing she would find out more in a day. She pulled him to the picnic table in the yard, witnessing Brick’s tantrum.

Brick yelled at Kris who fondled the cowbell, “I give you guys everything, tell you everything! I trust you to go in my cash register! How would you feel about a friend who lied to you every minute they knew you? You played us for fools!” then he yelled to his wife, “Bridget, we’re leaving!”

She yelled back, “Not yet, I’m milking Hiroshima!”

“Yes, now!” he ordered.

She paused, considering her options, then relented to her angry husband moving slowly towards him.

Paul read aloud from his phone, “The eight maids a-milking symbolize the eight beatitudes.”

Grant asked, “What are beatitudes?”

Paul explained, “The Beatitudes are sayings attributed to Jesus, eight blessings recounted by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew. Want me to read them?”

Kris shrugged pointedly, “You are welcome to be anything here, read anything you want.”

Paul read, ““Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.””

Grant surmised, “Could’ve been Sissy last week.”

Paul read on, ““Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be comforted.””

Kris reasoned, “Could be Georgia. Grieving long and deep for her husband. Maria ... about her missing son?”

Paul continued, ““Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.””

Kris wondered aloud, “My nephew Grant.”

“Me?” Grant moaned, “I am meek?”

“You’re meek,” Kris said lovingly, “You go along, sweet and shy as can be. Never angry, never bossy.”

Paul continued reading, ““Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” That is me. And Brick.”

Brick turned back to the group, “Can an atheist be righteous?”

“I guess you can,” Paul said, ““Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.””

Grant wondered, “Joe? He is blind and we gave him our mercy. And my dad?”

Paul nodded, “Right? Where else on Earth would a freak like Kris be included in a country family like this?”

Grant disagreed, “A lot of places, Paul. You’re out of touch with how the world is changing.”

Paul fingered his deep-set green eyes, “I cringe when I see how the world is changing.”

Bridget mused, “The only thing that is constant is change.”

Paul continued reading, ““Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God.””

Kris held Bridget’s hand and kissed it, “That is Bridget. And Georgia’s a peacemaker.”

Paul added, “Maria when she’s sober,” then he read more, ““Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.””

Kris spoke, “Me?”

Brick grunted, “Persecuted? I think it’s right we persecute you for lying to us.”

To defend his father, Grant pointed out, “Paul persecuted Maria as a drunk many times.”

“I love Maria,” Paul laughed, “You guys persecute me for loving her, because I am married. I have been persecuted for being Republican and Christian. Everyone’s persecuted at some time.”

Grant grinned, “Well, what I get from the eight beatitudes is that everybody gets into the kingdom of heaven. Right?”

Paul pocketed his phone, “Except sinners who don’t repent.”

Brick sighed, “I don’t believe there’s anything after we die. No Heaven, no Hell – just nothing.”

Kris stated proudly, “Oh there is life after death. I have seen it and it’s glorious.”

Paul looked doubtfully at Kris, “Kris, you ain’t seen Heaven.”

“He has! He told me. Look, if there’s nothing after we die that would be huge let-down,” Grant debated, “Not that I really know what happens after we die. Brick, who around here might take the cows?”

Paul offered, “I’ll take one or two.”

“They are not food!” Kris snapped.

Grant explained defensively, “These are his friends, he doesn’t want his friends butchered.”

Paul put his black cowboy hat on Grant’s head and asked him, “Why don’t you stay here and take over the farm?”

“No,” Grant put the hat back on Paul, “I need the city. My life is in Chicago.”

Brick pulled Bridget away. As she left, she embraced Kris one more time, whispering, “He’s just so hurt but he’ll get over it. He’s so stubborn it might take fifty years.”

Kris looked worn, “I don’t have fifty hours, maybe not even fifty minutes.”

Bridget threw kisses to kris as she followed Brick to their car.

Kris asked Paul, “I expect you despise me like Brick does?” Shaking, she reached for and held Paul’s hand.

Paul jerked his hand away, “I don’t hate you at all. But if I

saw you out in public? Just best to stay away.”

Kris remembered their closeness as friends, “We use to go to the State Fair together.”

Paul shook his head, “That was before I knew.”

Bothered at his coldness, Maria poked Paul. He shrugged and gestured to Kris, all but saying aloud he found Kris pitiful.

Kris blushed and nodded in agreement, “I am disgusting, aren’t I? No, I agree I am. Worthless. Old. So old I’m dying. In a ridiculous body no matter how you look at it. Fine if you hate me, Paul. I get it. I lied. I’d hate me. I do hate me.”

With views of Lake Lure, especially at night with marina and boat lights reflecting off silvery waves, the pricey Yacht Club was the locals’ foremost dinner destination.

Inside, plush velvet crowded booths faced either the lake or the bad jazz singer and grand piano.

With ridiculously over-curved hair and too much make-up, nervous blonde Sissy waited tables in her bulky waitress uniform. She handed elaborate menus to her customers and glanced up shocked to see they were Qi, Li, Georgia in purple

caftan, gowned Delilah and Grant, in his suit. Sissy gulped, feeling anxious and cornered.

Delilah grinned, her breasts almost completely visible in her low-cut ball gown, “You can take the girl out of the trailer but you can’t take the trailer out of the girl.”

“What you implyin?” Sissy spoke self-consciously, “Is my blonde hair too curled?”

Grant assured her, “No, you look fantastic.”

Sissy exhaled, “So do you. You all do. Nice dress, Delilah. They didn’t have it in your size? Can I bring you cocktails and appetizers? They got fancy stuff like bacon wrapped scallops, mini crab cakes, mini quickies.”

“It’s pronounced quiches,” Delilah corrected.

“I ain’t no English teacher, am I?” Sissy rebutted, perspiring.

Moments later Sissy delivered their drinks, took their order quickly then left and tripped, due to Delilah’s leg secretly tripping her.

After the salad course, the Xongs danced, quite showy, entertaining the crowd. Li even spun Qi around like professional ice-skaters, which got applause.

With leaking eye-liner, Sissy brought Grant’s party their heavy fancy entrée plates. Grant looked adoringly at her, but her

jealousy intensified seeing Delilah gripping Grant's muscular arm. Seated Grant noticed and inched away from Delilah, so much so that he fell out of the booth. Delilah helped him stand and yanked him to the dance floor, as the portly jazz singer sung off-key.

As Delilah danced clinging to Grant, he eyed Sissy and raised his arms, as if to say he was helpless.

Sissy flipped him the bird.

Chapter 11: The 9th Day Of Christmas

As the sun rose on chilly overcast January 2nd, the 9th Day Of Christmas, cars quietly parked outside Paul's tucked-away lodge home. The two-story home was painted white, its enormous windows sealed with black curtains.

Quietly exiting parked cars, wearing Santa hats and red skirts or dresses, were Maria, Georgia, Delilah, Qi, Bridget, and Sissy. Grant and "blind" Joe wore red shirts and blue jeans.

Maria carried extra Santa hats and lead the group, anxiously tiptoeing toward Paul's front door. She took a deep breath and knocked.

Paul in T-shirt and sweatpants, smoking a pipe, opened it, stupefied, "Maria, what are you doing here?"

Georgia hollered, "Paul! Your house is magnificent!"

His sexy green eyes enlarged in fright seeing the entire group, smiling in holiday hats. He stepped outside, quickly closing the front door behind him.

Maria smiled, "Today is nine ladies dancing. Ta da!" as she kicked her legs like a Vegas showgirl.

"No reason to dance here," Paul smiled, nervously, "Go do it up the road a bit."

Maria folded into his muscular arms, explaining, “Six ladies dancing drove here. Paul, your imaginary wife and daughter will make eight! Kris isn’t up to be number nine.”

Paul wanted to touch her, but he was frozen, “My wife is not a dancer.”

“If you have a wife,” Maria pried, “Tell her to put on something red and come out and dance.”

Paul whispered, “It’s better if you just leave.”

Georgia moved in, “Can’t she speak for herself?” she said, knocking on the door.

A blonde eight year-old in pigtails opened the door. Maria stepped back, surprised that Paul’s daughter existed.

“Close the door, Amy. Go back inside,” Paul instructed softly.

Amy looked confused, “Christmas was last week, not today.”

Maria scrunched down, “Amy, this is the ninth day of Christmas, did your dad tell you what is going on in Lake Lure? The Secret Santa Mystery?”

Amy looked confused, “No.”

Georgia enthused, “Like *The Twelve Days Of Christmas* song.”

Maria slyly maneuvered around Amy and stepped into the craftsman-style house. Before Paul could stop her, Maria saw Paul's wife.

From the wide foyer which led into a bright tiled kitchen, Maria's ebony eyes saddened watching a pretty forty year-old blue-eyed blonde in a wheelchair, making breakfast.

She smiled, "Hi, I'm Wendy, Paul's wife."

"Oh," Maria inhaled, "Oh, hi. I'm Maria."

"You're as pretty as Paul says. Are you hungry?" Wendy asked.

"No."

"Sausage, hashbrowns and eggs," Wendy tempted, "Thank you for coming over. No one ever does. As you can see, it's a damn hassle for me to go anywhere."

Paul walked in, dropping his pipe on the sturdy kitchen island. He turned his wife's cushioned wheelchair to face the intruders, explaining, "They just stopped by for a second and now they gotta get on."

"They???" Wendy asked, excitedly, "Who else is out there?! Get them all in here!"

Embarrassed Maria locked eyes with embarrassed Paul.

He reluctantly walked to the front door and announced,

“My wife Wendy says come on in.”

Wendy yelled, “We never get guests!”

Paul repeated, frustrated, “We never get guests!”

Delilah pulled in Grant, her unwanted fingers seemingly stuck to his pockets. Sissy followed behind them, jealous. All others entered, all stunned to see Wendy in wheelchair.

Wendy read their faces, “Paul, you didn’t tell them about the hunting accident?”

Paul blushed. All eyes wondered from Wendy to the many mounted wild game heads above the cabinets.

Eventually Amy broke the silence, “Want to see the new dolls I got for Christmas? I have sixty dolls now.”

Georgia didn’t miss a beat, “Sixty? Oh I have never seen sixty dolls. Can you take us to your room where we can we see sixty dolls?”

Amy skipped to her bedroom. Georgia immediately followed, as did Qi, Bridget, Sissy and Joe. Delilah pulled along Grant, leaving only Maria by Paul and Wendy in the tall kitchen’s awkward silence.

Maria forced a smile, “What. A. Beautiful. House.”

“Paul practically built the whole thing,” Wendy said proudly, “He can do anything with those hands.”

Maria recalled his gifted hands touching her many times when they slow-danced to *their* song. But she didn't say that. She asked, "Does he make margaritas?"

"The best!" Wendy laughed, "It's so early but I'd like one as well. Paul?"

He said sternly, "No. Maria can't handle her liquor." Then he pushed Wendy's wheelchair into Amy's room. Maria took a beat to catch her breath and wipe a tear, then followed.

Meanwhile, Brick stocked his shelves at Free Speech Café Market.

Kris, not in drag, now with four days beard growth, wobbled in the otherwise empty store, "My cab is waiting outside."

Brick noticed Kris, but resumed his work, ignoring him, furious that Kris had lied to him for decades about his gender.

Hurt, Kris held back tears, but had come with a mission, "Brick, I know you have a nice ... piece of land and I was wondering if ... you would share it with my cows. They need someone to love them. You saw how sweet they are."

Brick pretended not to hear and continued his work. Minute after minute, vulnerable Kris waited sheepishly for his reply. Which didn't come.

Back at Paul's house, Amy counting her lovely dolls seemed to captivate the group of adults in her room.

Joe inched backwards out the room making sure no one saw him leave it.

Sissy glared at Grant for tolerating Delilah's roaming invasive hands on his furry arms. Grant shrugged to Sissy as if to say, "What can I do?"

Sissy flipped him the bird.

No one else saw as their heads were turned to Amy, who finished her inventory, "Fifty-eight. Fifty-nine. Sixty."

Wendy surveyed the group, "Sixty dolls. And nine ladies dancing?"

Maria breathed heavily, "Not quite nine."

"Was I suppose to dance?" Wendy laughed, "I usually only dance at highway strip joints," she joked, "But hand me the hat."

I can't pass this up."

Maria relaxed, smiling, handing hats to Wendy and also to Amy.

The thrilled girl asked, "Can I, Dad?"

Paul nodded, "Sure, if you want to, Princess."

Minutes later outside, between blooming Hellebore rose bushes, Grant photographed Maria, Georgia, Bridget, Amy and Sissy practicing dancing in a kick line.

Meanwhile in Paul's spacious craftsman bedroom, Joe searched drawers and jewelry boxes.

Paul crept in, "What the hell you stealing?"

Joe feigned innocence, "Is this not the restroom?"

Paul grabbed Joe and threw him against the wall.

Joe swung back, way too focused for a blind man.

Paul tackled him.

Joe slithered free and kicked Paul's neck.

Paul reached into a bureau drawer for his pistol and impulsively fired a shot.

Wendy wheeled herself in, screaming, seeing Joe's lifeless body on the bedroom carpet, "You killed him!!"

“He was robbing us blind.”

“A blind man was stealing?! You killed a blind man!?”

At the Free Speech Café Market, Brick continued to ignore Kris who relented to trying to get his attention by throwing bananas at him.

Brick snapped, “Stop bothering me. Go home,” as he picked up the produce.

Kris wobbled to him and pulled his shirt. When Brick ignored that, Kris pulled Brick’s hair. It surprisingly came off! It was a toupee!

Kris was shocked, “Just like me, you’re pretending to be someone else?”

Brick glared meanly while repositioning his toupee atop his head.

The cab beeped. Kris wobbled out, promising, “I won’t tell anyone your secret, Brick. That’s your business, no one else’s.”

Paul looked down on Joe's dead body laying on his bedroom carpet.

Crying Wendy dialed the phone, "Nine One One?"

Joe's body moved slightly as he wheezed, "Dear girl, please do not bother the paramedics."

Paul smirked, "Look who's all better."

Confused Wendy hung up the phone, "You're not shot?"

Joe felt his chest and arms, still pretending to be blind, "I say, it appears not."

Wendy helped him to stand, "We're so, so sorry!"

Paul barked, "His hands were on your jewelry!"

Joe excused, "I was reaching for soap – I thought this was the bathroom."

He felt around for his cane, which Wendy wheeled to and reached down to grab, then handed it to him.

With guidance from his cane, Joe meandered out of the room.

Paul shrugged, perplexed.

Wendy slapped Paul's back, "Go help him find the bathroom!"

Minutes later outside Paul's house, the ladies did choreographed kicks and jazz hands. Wendy did her best from the wheelchair. The men applauded. The dancers bowed.

After they left to their cars, Paul wheeled Wendy into the bathroom and lowered her skirt.

She joked, "I bet we both pooped our pants today. I like Maria. Sweet energy."

"Yeah, she's fine as anyone, when there's not a keg of beer in her."

"I like her for you."

"For me?"

"People with working bodies have sexual needs."

"I married you. Better, worse, for richer, for poorer, sickness, health."

"But. We don't sex like we used to. And you shooting a

gun! Coulda killed that poor man! Jesus, Paul, you're trigger-happy again! Way too tense. God help us. God help you, baby. You have to release that tension ... Maria can help you."

At the same time outside Paul's house, Delilah leaned in Georgia's driver car window, whispering, "Go on. I'll make Grant drive me home."

"Girl, don't be too pushy. Men like space," Georgia advised, driving her Mercedes away.

Grant's pink jeep pulled up to Sissy's parked clunker. He said, "Sissy, Kris asks about you."

"I'll go check on her, him, sometime."

"Why don't you check on me?"

"Why do I need to? You got everything."

"Except you."

"I'm no prize. I can't even pronounce quiche."

Just then Delilah walked between them, getting in Grant's

passenger door, “Georgia took off. You have to give me a ride home, Grant.”

Sissy rolled her distrustful cerulean eyes and angrily turned the key in her ignition. The rusted old purple car wouldn’t start. She kept her head down in humiliation.

Grant jumped out of the jeep, opened both their hoods and retrieved the jumper cables from the jeep trunk. Smiling, he clasped them to the batteries, smiling, “You taught me this.”

Delilah felt a need to destroy Sissy completely so urged Grant, “Put the positive on the negative and negative to positive!”

Sissy spoke agitatedly, “Positive cable to positive cable! Negative to negative or you ruin our cars!”

“I remember,” he winked.

Sissy turned her key over and over to no avail.

To escape further humiliation, without a word Sissy disconnected the cables, threw them to Grant, slammed her hood and pushed her car downhill. Then she jumped in and turned the key and the engine started.

Grant looked amazed, in love with honest, pretty and resourceful Sissy.

Later at the Free Speech Café Market, pretty redhead Bridget entered with all the Santa hats. She handed them to Brick who was pricing goods.

He mumbled, “Remember when we bought our land? Was it zoned for livestock?”

“No, I wanted horses, remember?”

“Oh right. I remember that,” he nodded.

Maria entered and immediately went to the potato chip section and ripped open a plastic bag. Chewing, she hollered, “Did Paul come in?”

Brick answered, “Paul only comes in in the morning.”

“Put three bags of chips on my tab,” Maria sighed, choosing two more chip varieties. She opened all three bags and left, shoving food in her mouth.

Brick said to his wife, “No customers in here? You know what that means.”

“I’m on it. Boss.”

She pressed the button for *The Stripper* song, then bumped and grinded to it, shaking her bosom so much one of her falsies

fell on the floor. She laughed and retrieved it.

Chuckling, Brick comically pretended to strip in return.

Just then a handsome forty year-old in a black beard entered. He seemed distracted and grabbed a juice from the refrigerator, "Sorry to interrupt the dancing."

Brick laughed, "This is my wife. Who are you?"

"Larry."

"Welcome, Larry. What can I sell you?"

"Just this juice."

"I can't sell you my wife?" Brick joked.

They laughed.

"I am not for sale," Bridget chuckled and kissed Brick.

The stranger asked nervously, "Was that Maria Flores a minute ago?"

Brick and Bridget didn't answer.

"That pretty brunette," Larry repeated, "Is her name Maria Flores?"

Brick asked, "Larry who?"

"Doesn't matter," he said, "I'm a friend of hers."

Bridget said, “A friend would know if it was her.”

Larry shook his head, irritated, paid and left.

Bridget whispered to Brick, “Call Maria and warn her some stalker –”

“I’m on it. He’s not from around here.”

Inside the red barn house, Kris with four days beard growth stared into the dwindling fireplace.

Grant paced, dialing his cell phone.

Kris asked his son, “You’re phoning Sissy again?”

“Why won’t she pick up?”

“Worry about her later. We have a guest,” Kris gestured to Delilah, who sashayed in from the kitchen.

Delilah sipped her coffee, moaned in ecstasy, then put it down and searched her phone.

Struggling in pain, Kris shuffled to her, grimacing, “You’re not calling Sissy, too, are you??”

Delilah laughed, “Why would I call that loser??”

Kris shrugged, “Why would anyone?”

Delilah showed a phone video to them, “Fortunately, our Santa hats and red outfits are so distracting that no one will see what a bad dancer Sissy is.”

“Poor girl can’t dance,” Kris chuckled, delighted, but then commented, “But she can sing ... that girl has a voice.”

Grant dropped his jaw, “I know! Like the voice of an angel.”

“Hardly an angel,” Delilah contested.

Kris studied the phone video, “Who’s the lady in the wheelchair?”

Grant sighed, “Paul’s wife. Seems Paul accidentally shot her while they were hunting.”

“Oh no,” Kris sat down, overwhelmed. “That must be so hard on him.”

“On her!” Delilah protested.

“Oh yes,” Kris continued, “Of course. Must be so damn hard for both of them. Awww. I wish I could help her.”

Grant sat across from Kris, “How can you help her? You can hardly move yourself.”

“I cannot help her but I wish that I could.”

“Just saying. You can’t help her,” Grant stated plainly.

“Fine. I cannot help her. Now are you pleased?”

“You’re mad at me because I’m giving you cold facts?”

“I’m not mad at you, son, but I’m mad she can’t walk.”

“You can’t help her.”

Overcome with frustration, Kris fought a nervous breakdown, hyperventilating, hiding behind his hands. Hearing sobs, Grant tried to pull Kris’s hands away.

“Hey, come on, no need to cry.”

Kris lowered his hands, “I’m at the end of my life, and it seems so wasted. I always wanted to help people.”

“You helped me.”

Kris patted his heart, smiling a second, “I hope so. That was lucky I guess. But I’ve been in Lake Lure most of my life and I love these people but what did I do with my life? A joke here and there. Tons of make-up and pretense. A life should be more.”

“We all have jobs and get too busy to help others.”

“Grant, I feel rotten. No, I feel rotted. So full of regrets.

Why didn't I help people more? I was so centered in me, trying to be okay to look at, to be with, but I'll be in a grave soon and what will be my legacy? A hider, a bad drag queen? If I could do it all over again, I'd be there for others so much more. You helped me, son. More than you can possibly know. You give your innocence and your full heart, such a sweet boy."

"I'm sorry. I wish I could make you feel better."

Kris buried his profound sadness and lit up for a second, at least artificially, "You can help me if you take Delilah out for a nice dinner at the Yacht Club."

Grant shook his head, "Nah, I just want to stay here."

"Kris is right," Delilah flirted, "We're going out to the club, Grant. Won't you join us, Kris?"

Kris grimaced, "No, are you kidding?? I can't be seen like this."

"Yes, you can!" Grant challenged, "I'll go only if my dad goes. Like that. No make-up."

Kris looked terrified, "People can't see me like this!" He ambled to a wall mirror, disgusted at his beard-stubbed face. He grabbed make-up to apply.

Grant, stern, pulled the make-up away.

The sun set behind Georgia's magnificent Tudor home dimming the panoramic lake view.

In her silk bed, as she slept besides her, Georgia ate ice cream from the box and pleaded to her deceased husband, "Roy, did you see the chaos at Paul's house today? Mortified to crash in on that poor Wendy? Bless her heart. I miss you, old fool. It feels so long since you've snored me to hit you with pillows, I wish you'd spend just an hour with me, one hour. Just an hour! Roy, one hour, for mercy's sake."

The tall white Lake Lure Yacht Club had a dozen window booths overlooking the lighted piers on the gorgeous marina. Inside, more candle-lit tables surrounded the grand piano as the bad jazz singer sung a final flat bass note, then left to take a break.

With less curled hair and less make-up than last time, Sissy waited tables, not pleased to see Kris (out of drag), Grant and Delilah at a table being served by another waitress.

Delilah touched Grant's muscled arm but he noticed Sissy

and looked to her longingly, guiltily.

Terrified and self-conscious Kris darted her weathered hazel eyes around the room, noticing Paul at another table with men in flannel hunting shirts. Paul pretended he did not see Kris.

The Xongs saw Kris and excitedly approached his table. Kris smiled and hugged Li and Qi.

Li smiled, “You so brave to come here looking like that.”

Kris shrugged, “Tell me about it.”

Qi heard a song start and said to her husband, “Let’s dance to this oldie.”

Kris whispered, “I still don’t know the punchline. What do you call a bench of white people? What??”

Distracted by music, the Xongs left to lead a waltz.

As Kris watched many familiar old friends dance in couples, he drank heavily. He applauded as the waltz ended then nervously sauntered to the center microphone.

Many heads turned curiously at this new face, then realized it was their old friend Kris’s real face. The large room went so quiet one could hear a pin drop. Everyone saw Kris’s hesitant wobble, his nervous shaking hands, the wrinkles on his face showing a life of lies.

Kris cleared his throat and whispered to the gray-haired piano player in tux and bow-tie.

Then Kris spoke to the room, “May I please have your attention?”

All eyes but Paul’s stared at Kris as Kris continued, “You wonder, oh is this where the weirdo is revealed and embarrasses himself, herself and yourself? That was my plan a minute ago ... but it occurred to me that when I cross over, you people don’t come with me ... I can only take memories of who and what you are, so I pledge to remember you all with what you wear at this minute ... polite smiles ... and I’ll also take images of our good times over these long years ... I love each and every one of you to bits, always have -- but enough about me. Let’s discuss Sissy the new waitress screwing up everybody’s orders. She’s not a very talented waitress, is she? Honestly now?”

Kris pointed to distraught Sissy, who dropped the tray of food she was carrying.

Grant rose from his seat, “She’s a fine waitress and she needs this job!”

“Come up here, Sissy Sparks,” Kris demanded, “And show these people what you’re hiding behind that apron. This girl’s got big city talent! Wait ‘til you hear this bad waitress sing.”

Sissy froze, shocked.

Grant applauded encouragingly.

Delilah looked bored.

Kris extended his hands and Sissy took them, unsure what to do.

Kris moved to the piano player and whispered in his ear.

He played an intro to an old classic.

Sissy fidgeted, “Y’all already know I’m a bad waitress, agree. Well, okay, cool, I know this song.” She began to sing it, hesitantly at first, “*Summertime, and the livin' is easy. Fish are jumpin' and the cotton is high ...*” She closed her eyes and her worry of what others thought diminished and she surrendered to her musical genius, no longer blocking her full voice, “*Oh, your daddy's rich and your ma is good-lookin.' So hush little baby, don't you cry ...*”

Everybody was riveted by Sissy’s smooth jazzy voice and haunting notes ranging from alto to soprano.

Except Delilah, deliberately clicking wine glasses together to make noise.

Surprised by the song applause egged on by Grant, Sissy seductively removed her apron and threw it across the room. Then opening her misty light eyes as she practiced so many times in her bedroom, she sang her heart out, “*One of these mornings You're gonna rise up singing, Yes you'll spread your wings, And you'll take to the sky ...*”

Chapter 12: The 10th Day Of Christmas

The sun rose melting January 3rd's overnight frost on the tin roof of Kris's red barn. The cows and sandpipers slept warmly in the heated area inside the back barn.

In the pine-paneled bathroom connected to his bedroom, Kris shook his head at the mirror in disgust at five days beard growth. He reached for a razor but his head hurt, hungover, so he put it down and wobbled to his bed.

In his sweatshirt and jeans, Grant came in with a tray of one egg and toast, joking, "Last egg. We are out of eggs. Bet you regret giving up the hens now."

"Oh you know I do, and not for their eggs," Kris wiped a tear from his worn eye, "But we know they have a good home with Georgia."

As Kris ate in silence, Grant grabbed his father's wrist, listening to his pulse, "Daddio, you have a real slow heartbeat."

"Blame the alcohol."

"Thanks for what you did."

"Drinking all the alcohol in stock at the club?"

“No. I totally get why you did that. I would have, too. I mean about Sissy.”

“Sissy? Making her a star? As if I could,” Kris laughed, “I only handed her the mic. She is a star. Maybe not for Broadway but a star in the sense you can’t look away from her. Like a trainwreck. But she can sing. I only want to help the poor soul, and I only want to help you, too. The last thing I want to do is make you unhappy by pushing beautiful, wealthy, cultured, virginal Delilah on you but you are so preoccupied with a trainwreck.”

Pleased, Grant kissed his father’s forehead, “We’re out of coffee.”

“Go to Brick’s. Do you need money?”

“You gave me a thousand cash! I still have it.”

“That’s for taking out Delilah. Go get eggs and have fun at Brick’s. I have an account so just charge everything we need.”

“Okay.”

“I love you,” Kris said, enamored with his son.

Grant did not say it back, but smiled, also enamored.

A few minutes later, Grant parked outside Free Speech Café Market just as cowboy Paul entered the store.

Inside, Brick noisily rang up Georgia and the Xongs, all three in expensive leather winter wear. Sissy in a brand new denim jacket steadied drunk Maria, wearing only cotton pajamas because she forgot to wear her coat. Neither sister noticed cowboy Paul enter and sidestep to the coffee station.

Maria slurred, “No I don’t know a guy with a black beard, Brick -- I got me a stalker?”

“Larry somebody.”

“Who’s this Larry??” Paul asked, jealous.

“Paul! I’m a fool!” Maria walked then fell into his strong chest, “I’m so so so sorry we invaded your lovely home.”

Li smiled, “Maria was fool.”

Qi shushed her husband, “Because Maria has crush on Paul.”

Georgia explained, “Maria wasn’t sure Paul had a wife.”

Paul addressed the group, “You all saw Wendy ... Wendy is fine.”

No one said anything as Paul fixed himself coffee, “Truth

though?" he grunted, "Truth is Wendy is ungrateful. Refusing to use what I bought her for Christmas. A trampoline."

Everyone was shocked. Even drunk Maria covered her mouth. The awkward silence increased until Paul cleared his throat and threw his black cowboy hat in the air.

"Just a joke!" Paul laughed, "Did we forget that the rule here is to joke? I get a free coffee for that joke, Brick? Wendy actually gave me that joke."

Brick held up his thumbs, "You get a free coffee. Bring one to Wendy, too. The establishment encourages tasteless and inappropriate content. Like my wife."

Amidst the laughter, Grant entered and moved directly to kiss Sissy, who turned away from him.

He whispered with pride, "Everybody loved your singing!"

She reached to hug him, then retracted her arms and turned away, "They asked me to sing three nights a week."

Grant applauded quietly, "Amazing! You're on your way!"

"Thanks for applauding so much last night. You got others to."

"They couldn't get enough of you."

"Well, I owe you."

“You *could* help me,” he said.

She became guarded, “Doin’ what?”

“Today is ten lords a’leaping. Can you get ten guys to leap?”

“What??”

“I’m a stranger here. I can’t go up to ten guys and ask them to leap.”

“Why do ten guys need to leap?”

He looked incredulous, “The song. The Secret Santa mystery.”

“That’s over.”

“No,” he looked hurt, “It’s not finished until the twelve drummers drum.”

“Grant, everybody knows Kris and you was the Santa. Ain’t no people gonna leap today.”

“Just ask them.”

“You ask them! Stop being spineless.”

Insulted, and revealed as a pushover follower type, he battled to overcome his shyness, vowing that it had to done, closing his chestnut eyes in concentration.

Georgia swished to the coffee station, “How do you like your coffee, Grant? Let me make it for you.”

“Like my women,” he opened his eyes and winked, forcing himself to be extroverted, “Black and full-bodied.”

Sissy grinned at Grant’s new confidence.

Georgia smiled, “Listen to the city man. Preach.”

Brick pressed the button for *The Stripper* song, and Georgia good-naturedly swiveled as she prepared Grant’s coffee.

Georgia asked, “How is the prehistoric drag queen?”

“Very low heartbeat today,” he answered, then asked the group, “So, who is going to be ten lords a-leaping today?”

Paul retrieved his hat from the floor, “Got better things to do with my time.”

“Today, we need ten guys to leap,” Grant stated, quietly, “How easy is that? Tomorrow, nobody needs to do anything. I’ll set the eleven sandpipers free. And then in two days we all bang a drum. Then done.”

With his cowboy hat, Paul playfully hit Grant’s head, “Grant, you got a screw loose. You think jumping up and down is gonna get Kris’s heart to speed up?”

“No, nothing can,” Grant sighed, “But don’t you feel there is something bigger guiding this now?”

Paul pointed up, “God.”

Grant shrugged, “Maybe God, or momentum. Kismet. Favorable astrology? ... Like a Vegas winning streak?”

Sissy moved between the men, looking to Paul, her back to Grant, “It’s Grant’s jackpot week. He got himself a new aunt, and papa, and estate, and a bonus -- a virgin with a lake house. Sorry if I don’t see the point of ten guys leapin’.”

Georgia joked, “Picture them in gray sweatpants.”

Brick wiped the counter, “Count me out.”

Georgia joked, “I never wanted to see your fat ass in gray sweatpants anyway.”

Brick shot her with a squirt gun.

Paul refused Grant, “I only jump for my wife. Maybe Maria.”

Sissy pinched Paul hard, “Don’t tease her anymore, Paul!”

Maria slurred, “Leap! Like a ballet!” Maria leapt, struggling for balance.

Paul’s strong hands on her hips steadied her.

Sissy swat away his hands, “Don’t touch her! Let’s go home, Maria.”

Maria was off in her drunk fantasy, “Life is a ballet! Hey!! Hey!!! Joe plays drums!”

Georgia was confused, “Hm, we’ve seen Joe play invisible drums, not sure if he plays real drums ... I can find out, Grant.”

Grant smiled with relief, “Thanks, Georgia! Let me know. Please.”

Sissy pulled out Maria mid-pirouette, but Maria embarrassed herself further, peeking her head back in the store, slobbering, “Paul, you’re Romeo and I’m Juliet ... but you already have a Juliet.”

A few minutes later, Grant carried a bag of groceries to the pink jeep. As he drove the winding scenic roads through pine tree clusters, he spoke into his phone, “Mr. Coner, I’m sorry but I don’t know when I’ll be back ... my dad is dying.”

In the Chicago office, peeved Coner spoke loudly into his desk phone, “You’ve been gone ten days.”

“He has only days left to live.”

“Bury him and be here tomorrow! That is an order!” Coner

shouted, hanging up his phone.

Grant hung up, holding his head in frustration, and slammed on the breaks as many fishermen and one woman also carrying a fishing pole crossed the street.

He stopped the jeep and chased them into a field, shouting, “Excuse me! Just a sec! I know this sounds ridiculous, but I’ll pay you if you leap. With me.”

The group stopped, perplexed. The tallest man asked for clarification, “Leap?”

Grant leapt as if in a ballet. Half the men sped up to get away, half remained frozen in disbelief.

Grant reached for his wallet, “Fifty bucks each. Just to leap a bit like this.”

The tall man took a step forward, joshing, “Gosh, as much as I want to leap for a strange man, I just can’t leap.”

The shortest fisherman pointed, “Look at his pink jeep.”

The woman playfully leaped.

“I need men to leap,” Grant clarified, “A hundred bucks to each man that will leap?” then he leapt again as if in a ballet.

The heaviest fisherman held up his fist threateningly, “Wrong town, pervert,” then he lunged toward Grant, shoving him on a pile of sticks.

Grant held up his hands in surrender as the woman defended him.

The fishermen walked away, the heavy one leaping as the others snidely laughed.

Grant was shocked to return to the barn and find Sissy performing CPR on lifeless Kris who was laying in his bed.

“What happened?” Grant implored.

“I just got here. Kris died!!” She yanked the pasty old man, “Kris?! Kris?! Can you hear me??”

Grant joined in, “Dad?! Dad, are you alive??”

They did not see Kris’s fog-like spirit leap out of its body and float toward the ceiling.

Grant asked Sissy, “What are you doing here?”

“I came by to check on him!”

Though Kris was dead, he existed in consciousness and spirit form, though invisible to humans. He tried to get the attention of his son to let him know he was in the afterlife and

without pain, in fact he felt better than he ever had before, but regardless of Kris's shouting and waving ghost hands, Grant could not see him.

Kris adored his son, though they had known each other only a couple weeks. Feeling proud, suddenly their two weeks of experiences replayed before him like gasoline on water, on a sheen screen. This mini life review not only showed Kris their brief events visually from Kris's point of view, but also from Grant's. Somehow Kris could also experience Grant's feelings for him as they roller-coasted from yearning to distrust to love.

Kris felt so fortunate that at the end of his life he discovered a wonderful son. Kris flashed back to his one date with Grant's mother, Ida, over thirty years before.

Wondering about her, suddenly Kris's invisible ghost body magically floated into her current Chicago apartment. In the spotless outdated kitchen, Ida wore an apron and cooked, feeding scraps to an Irish Setter dog.

Although she was not as pretty as he remembered her, her physicality meant as little as his physicality did at the moment. Now without a human body, angelic Kris was unconcerned with appearances. All that seemed to matter now was Ida's vibration, her mood, intention and inner essence. He saw her beauty in her lifelong devotion to protect and nurture Grant. Kris could see she had a kind giving soul though she could be brash and irritating at times, like when she had been trying to force herself on Coner, with the same velocity she had forced herself upon him over thirty years ago.

Kris was confused why he could suddenly see Ida's entire life playing before him. A strange thought occurred to him that in the afterlife all souls have access to all information.

Kris reexperienced the awkward night of romance he had with Ida decades ago, wincing at his own insecurity and low self-esteem. He was surprised her emotions were similar. He was surprised to feel how desperate she was to be loved, which stemmed from her childhood when her parents favored her more attractive sister.

That made Kris wonder about his own childhood. Suddenly Kris's spirit fog was catapulted into his childhood home reliving his fifth birthday, his happiest day ever.

His doting hard-looking mother cut him a piece of special birthday cake with his name in blue icing. His rigid mustached father even smiled at him, adding ice cream.

"You're a good boy," his father said. It was the only time he ever spoke those words.

Kris was overwhelmed with the genuine love he could feel from both of his parents' hearts, a love he had forgotten.

Dwelling on the moment they kicked him out of the house, when he was sixteen, suddenly he was in the past, overseeing. His parents caught him wearing his mother's dress. His mother's face was catatonic and impossible to read. His father beat him and pushed him out the door, forbidding him to ever return.

A disembodied voice called.

Kris's spirit asked telepathically, "Who's calling me?"

A cloudlike light tunnel appeared above. Kris's spirit fog flew into a friendly light tornado, where smears of light passed him. He felt dizzy and exhilarated.

Kris asked, "You lights are souls?? I know you're souls. I know you somehow, don't I??"

Suddenly the tunnel stopped and a glowing light appeared.

Kris somehow knew who it was, "Dad?"

The glowing light leapt into Kris's spirit fog. Kris felt its immense love and recognized it most definitely as his father although the rigidity and judgment was gone.

Somehow from across the room, Kris saw his and his father's see-through human bodies embrace.

Kris's father projected telepathically, "Please forgive me. Take my light and energy, son. I am so sorry for how I treated you, son."

"I love you, too, Dad and I love Mama wherever she is. Mama, where are you? Mama??"

Instantaneously Kris's spirit fog rushed through a galaxy to find his mother's spirit and together they pulsed a strong heartbeat light.

Kris cried with emotion, “I forgive you for disowning me, Mama, because I understand everything now and for the first time I can see the challenges in your life!”

Now forgiven, her spirit face became happy and younger.

Kris’s consciousness was swept into his mother’s life review showing events of her challenging years in reverse, ending to when she was a girl playing with rabbits.

Kris projected telepathically, “Mama, I feel your love for animals. That’s where I learned to value animals.”

Though her spirit face did not move its lips, Kris heard her response, “Animals never let me down. Your father’s coldness let us all down. I felt let down when we kicked you out and you never came back.”

“How could I come back???” Kris pleaded.

They were interrupted by a strange voice screaming, “Kris! Kris ... Kris!”

Kris’s spirit was pulled back through the tunnel with light smear beings - who pushed him to the side where he saw a miraculous white-robed deity figure. Though the face was blurred, Kris recognized him as Jesus.

It resonated, “You can stay here, Kris, or go back a short while. There’s no wrong answer.”

Kris replied, “I am overwhelmed with your love, it’s like

every cell in my being is excited to be here!! And every cell is alive and healthy again! I need to stay with you.”

The deity projected telepathically, “Then leap up. Leap up.”

“I don’t deserve this. This “heaven” is for givers. Why am I here??”

“All souls knew this life before you incarnated. All are welcome back.”

“I need to give more. My son. He needs me.”

With Kris’s focus on his son, his consciousness was immediately looking down on Grant and Sissy in the barn bedroom, trying to revive his dead body. It was their voices he heard calling, “Kris! Kris!”

Grant cried over Kris’s body, “I love you, Dad. I love you.”

Without making the decision to return to his physical Earth body, Kris’s spirit was sucked back into it. He opened his wet eyes to see Sissy playing guitar over him and Grant, devastated.

Her beautiful voice sang more from the classic song, “*One of these mornings You're gonna rise up singing, Yes you'll spread your wings, And you'll take to the sky ...*”

Grant exclaimed, “Dad opened his eyes! He’s back!”

Kris was exhausted, and once again in pain, as he stammered, “I leapt into the after-life and my father’s light leapt

into me and Jesus wanted me to leap further away from this Earth life forever. Three leaps.”

Grant’s furry brows rose, “The tenth day of Christmas? Ten lords a-leaping?”

Kris continued, slowly, “I crossed over and I flew and I saw Mama and Dad and I saw Ida and your Kitty.”

Sissy was confused, “Grant, you got a cat?”

Grant was so shocked he could hardly speak, “No ... that’s my dog’s name. Kitty. I never told you guys that. So how could you know?”

“I just know,” Kris grinned, his fawn-colored eyes sparkling, “Grant’s mother, Ida, is cooking in her kitchen, wearing a tan top with imitation pearl necklace in an apartment three doors down from Grant’s. Grant’s interior is gray with blue walls in the halls and beige carpeting in his living room. His bedroom has framed posters of New York but one poster is set to fall out of the glass and be on the floor in a day or two. How do I know this? I don’t know how I know. Ida has cream walls and burgundy appliances and checkered burgundy and cream curtains and a rooster cookie jar for dog yumyums, but she’ll drop the rooster cookie jar and break it, I can see it. She’s cooking penne with mushrooms and drinking seltzer with lemon and baking a banana cream pie but she forgot to add vanilla. Ask her. She can’t find her matching imitation pearl earrings.”

Grant shook his head, “There’s no way you could know this.”

Sissy surmised, “Unless his soul really did leave his body.”

Grant cheered, “Whoa!!!”

Sissy agreed, “Amazing!! Unreal!!”

All three were aghast at the magnitude of the miracle. Even so, it deserved verification.

Grant dialed his phone and when his mother answered, he asked, “Mom, are you cooking?”

In her Chicago apartment, exactly as Kris had described, Ida answered, “I am.”

But readjusting the phone, Ida dropped the rooster cookie jar, breaking it.

She ranted, “Oh! There goes the cookie jar!”

“The rooster one?”

“Yes, I had it forever. Damn it.”

Grant enthusiastically parroted her words to Sissy and Kris, “She broke the rooster cookie jar! Mom, did you forget the vanilla in the pie?”

“That’s what I forgot!” Ida screamed, “I knew I forgot something. Hey! What is this??”

At the barn, Kris signaled he wanted the phone. Grant

gently handed it to him.

Kris spoke slowly to Ida, “Ida, this is Kris.”

Ida cleared her throat, self-conscious, “Kris? ... How are you, Kris? ... Long time.”

“I just flew in your kitchen, Ida, and see you’re still drinking seltzer with lemon.”

“You’re freaking me out!”

“I don’t want to freak you out but I only wanted to thank you for raising our boy because you did wondrous.”

Ida held back crying, “I did, didn’t I!”

“Your pearl earrings are in the key bowl.”

Perplexed Ida found the key bowl and below coins were her lost pearl earrings. She screamed.

Meanwhile at Free Speech Café Market, Brick rung up Maria’s items. Admiring how pretty she looked fully made-up and wearing jeans and a tight sweater, was Paul in the window seat, lighting his pipe.

Brick called, “Paul, who else lets you smoke a pipe in their place of business?”

“Just you. My favorite rule-breaker.”

“So screw Kris acting as if I am the bad guy! I’m a good guy.”

“You’re the best.”

Sober Maria sat next to Paul. Paul stroked her hair, “You look so damn pretty.”

“Really? Thanks.”

“You look amazing when you’re not drinking.”

“Well, make-up helps.”

He whispered, “Wendy told me to have fun with you and she wasn’t talking shuffleboard.”

Maria inched away, “She did no such thing.”

“Swear on my life.”

Maria searched his eyes, then frightened of the intimacy she looked away, “Wanna come by?”

“More than anything.”

“To see the swans and the partridge.”

“Go. Give me five minutes behind you.”

She gathered her jacket and bags and left.

Ten minutes later, Maria opens her front door and Paul leapt inside. He followed her as she fed the noisy swans. She reached for her last beer can but he wrestled it away from her and he poured it down the kitchen sink.

She watched, furious, “I need me a beer!”

“No more beer. I got to call Wendy.”

“Well what am I going to drink?!”

As he dialed his phone, he poured her a glass of water. She threw it in the sink, breaking the glass.

Paul spoke softly over the phone to his wife, “I’m at Maria’s. And. She asked me. To fix her TV.”

At Paul’s home, Amy held the table phone body and Wendy held the receiver, “I hear you. That is fine. Thank you for letting me and Amy know.”

“I tell you everything. Fixing her TV is your idea.”

“I am A-okay with you fixing her TV.”

“You sure?” Paul wanted to be absolutely clear, “Fixing. Her. TV?”

“Do it. Yes. Fixing her TV can take pressure off me. Off you.”

“Fixing her TV feels guilty, I don’t know. I love you. Tell me to get home right now and I will.”

“Don’t you dare. Fix her TV for me. Amy can take care of me tonight. Hang up the phone, Amy.”

His olive green eyes misty, Paul sauntered to Maria’s room and undressed. Maria’s computer played *their* song. This was the moment they had fantasized for years.

Maria lay in bed in a nightgown – then suddenly conflicted, she rose, opened a closet and put on her old thick full-body blue parka coat. Paul tried to take it off her but she kept it on, even zipping up the hood.

There was a knock on the red barn’s front door.

Sissy opened the door, pulling in Brick and Bridget, in

matching Carolina Panthers football jackets, “Kris died and revived! He’s telling secrets ‘bout the other side!”

Brick scoffed, “What other side?”

Seconds later in the bedroom, Grant, Sissy, Brick and Bridget surrounded Kris’s bed.

Seeing his old friend dying, Brick apologized, “I’m not mad at you, liar.”

Kris no longer had time for pleasantries, “Brick, Bridget, you argued about me in the car and you ate a casserole with broccoli and there’s two-hundred-one dollars in Brick’s wallet.”

Brick pulled out his wallet and counted it contained exactly that amount, “Exactly right.”

Kris grabbed and held Brick’s gnarled fingers, saying, “I can read your mind. You want to switch houses??”

Bridget confessed, “That’s why we argued! I always wanted a farm.”

Kris went into a trance, “You want Grant to take your gorgeous property in trade since it’s about the same value so you can farm and raise horses and cows. Oh thank you!”

Kris’s fingers pulsed with an iridescent white light as he gripped Brick’s fingers, “Bridget, you have Brick’s first letter to you in your underwear drawer and it’s purple.”

She confirmed, “Yes!”

Sissy squealed, “Lordy be! Listen to him!”

Kris continued as if in a trance, “Sissy, the angels say you need to write a song about me. I don’t know why. I don’t know how I ... I am both dead and alive for a very short while. That was just whispered in my ear.”

Grant pulled Sissy into his chest, “Unbelievable!”

Kris continued, “Brick made a leap today to change his whole family plan and Paul made a leap today, and I can see exactly what he is doing but it should remain private.”

Sparks ignited between Kris’s and Brick’s fingers, shocking them literally. Jerking their hands away, Brick exclaimed, “My fingers are no longer gnarled! You fixed my fingers?!”

Kris explained the psychic download he was receiving, “The molecules have been reprogrammed, changing cell memory. I have access to extraordinary energy and abilities that we have after death because I am dead and alive, in both realms, a glitch for a very short while. When we souls are born on Earth into a baby’s form, we agree to dismiss our unearthly magical abilities and it appears that my plug is loose -- almost unplugged -- so instead of being limited to Earth’s rules, one current, one channel, one radio station, I have them all back -- for seconds or minutes.”

Sissy kissed Kris and shouted, “We got to be recording this!”

She recorded Kris with her phone as he collapsed and died.

Grant didn't know if he should try to revive him or not, "He came back so happy. But his body is so sick. Should we let him go?"

Sissy started singing lullabies summoning Kris to return and a minute later Kris awoke briefly.

Kris could barely speak. His words were strained. He stammered, "I saw all ten lords a-leaping. I shared five. The angels tell me to help blind Joe with his leap. I will do that in secret ... These four ladies will benefit from the last four leaps. Sissy, Georgia, Maria and Wendy -- now I'm off to see Wendy. Grant, you told me I couldn't help her but I am going to try! So watch me fly -- and see how young I am!"

They could not see Kris's spirit leave his body. They could not hear Kris spirit scream with joy, "I'm free! Nothing aches! I can fly!!"

His soul steadily ascended upwards until it had a breathtaking aerial view of his entire woodsy neighborhood.

"I am magic! Look at me. It's all so beautiful. And look at me. I am finally beautiful! I am finally strong. I feel so young."

Kris's spirit fog dove over homes, and with concentration, he landed inside Paul's house.

His invisible spirit fog helped Amy who was struggling to move Wendy from her wheelchair into her bed.

Kris asked, “Does this woman need to be paralyzed?!” then he whispered in Wendy’s ear, “Wendy, why are you paralyzed?”

Wendy heard the bodyless voice and answered with her thoughts, not her voice, “My husband shot me.”

“Do you take any accountability for your physicality?”

“What can I do about it?”

“Do you take accountability?”

“Me?? It was Paul’s fault. I told him a hundred times to get rid of his guns.”

“If you leave the power with him, you cannot have the power.”

“I didn’t shoot me. He did.”

“Let’s take your power back.”

“What??”

“Join me, review and reexperience your Earth life. Here we go.”

Miraculously, Wendy’s life review played in her mind. But it was a supernatural occurrence. This wasn’t only her mind in memory. She was given a wider perspective on the events that created her entire life, her choices, her decisions, her beliefs, her

emotions. Kris could also experience her reliving her birth – to toddler – to child – to adult – to the shooting incident.

At eighteen years-old, Wendy studied her school books at the kitchen table. Her mother was wearing a bathrobe and washing dishes as her father entered in a suit.

Her father said to her mother, “Can you help me tie this tie?”

Her mother looked peeved, “We’re not going to the party.”

“Oh come on. Get dressed.”

“No, you said you’d tell me by noon. You didn’t tell me until one thirty.”

“You had five hours to get dressed.”

“The point is you did not do what you said. I’m not going.”

Wendy talked to Kris’s spirit, realizing, “Mother always found ways to punish Father. Oh ... did I do that with Paul? I did, didn’t I? Being paralyzed punishes Paul repeatedly. I want him to be punished. I told him to get rid of his guns but he wouldn’t. I hate him shooting animals. I used to hide his bullets. I thought being paralyzed would at least get him to give up his guns, but he didn’t. Used them a bit less. He sees me everyday like this, trapped in a chair. He did it. He knows he did it. I’m glad he sees he did it and I was right.”

“So you get to be right?”

“I am right.”

“How does that feel?”

“Well ... not as good as I hoped. But it’s what he deserves.”

“What do you deserve, Wendy?”

“A partner that loves me and won’t leave me. That’s Paul. I don’t care if he fools around as long as he doesn’t leave me.”

“What do you deserve, Wendy?”

“We have a great daughter.”

“What do you deserve, Wendy?”

“We have this house and all its amenities.”

“What do you deserve, Wendy? Freedom?”

“That would be welcome.”

“A body that is healthy again?”

“Well that’s not possible.”

“But what do you deserve, Wendy?”

“Well I deserve a perfect body but Paul ruined me.”

“What do you deserve, Wendy?”

“A healthy body, okay, a healthy body. I deserve that. I was always a healthy eater and exercised ...”

Satisfied, Kris flew up into the air and into the sky.

“Now I help Maria.”

His spirit flew over the forest roads until he was above a van.

Black-bearded Larry, driving, was terrified when the van drove on it's own making a U-turn by the Yacht Club. He screamed as he was unable to steer or brake the van as it sped on winding roads, eventually stopping outside Maria's stone house!

Handsome Larry's black business suit emphasized his thick black eyebrows and beard. Though he looked perfect on the outside, inside he was scared to death. Having no idea where he was, he rang the doorbell.

In her bedroom, Maria, wearing the parka, slow-danced with naked, frustrated Paul.

Maria explained guiltily, “My husband cheated on me. I can't do that to Wendy.”

Paul pleaded, “But she sent me here.”

“She was testing you.”

“No, she said sexually I need ... action. You.”

Maria found the wording disappointing, “How romantic.”

“I wanted you for years.”

“I know. Me, too, But it feels wrong. This “action”.”

The doorbell rang again.

Maria, in her parka, opened her door to see Larry.

“Hello?”

“Maria Florez?” he said, astounded, “I can’t believe my van drove to your house!”

“Have we met before?”

“Online dating site. Larry the stockbroker.”

“Is that right? Oh sure. I recognize you.”

“Am I a crazy stalker? Oh I hope not. I just pursue and investigate, which is why I am so successful at buying and selling I guess. I liked you online but usually the women don’t look as good in person and it’s so awkward when we meet, so I spy a bit before I meet the women just to see if they really are what they present, and not using ten year-old photos. I just try to avoid hurt feelings. I look like my photo and so do you.”

“I ‘spose that’s good.”

“Your face is like a mysterious work of art. But you deleted

your profile so I couldn't message or find you."

"I got confused, about looking."

Larry grinned at her, "So, anyway ... here is my card. Call me when I can take you to the best dinner of your life. You like country dancing?"

"I do. Interesting. Thank you, Larry."

He touched her parka and stepped inside, offering, "Let me fix your heater, you poor thing."

"No!" she refused, pushing him out.

"Well then another time. I'm relationship material. Looking to settle down, monogamous, you know, no drugs, no drink, great income."

"No drink?"

"Never even tried it."

"Oh."

"Oh?"

"Well, don't you think you should at least try it?"

"After the way I got to your house, maybe today I'd consider it – but no, my parents drank way too much. I saw what it did to them."

“Gotcha. Thank you. This is so much to take in. Good-bye.”

He smiled and walked away, leaping from stone to stone over her creek, incredulous at what had happened.

Outside the red barn, an ambulance loaded in unconscious Kris on a gurney. Sissy and Grant climbed in the back as well.

Siren blaring, the vehicle careened the winding mountain streets. Grant and Sissy gave room for a young paramedic to try and revive Kris with smelling salts.

The paramedic pleaded to dying Kris, “Come on, old man. You’re smiling so that means you’re still with us.”

Grant wondered aloud, “Or -- a smile like that might mean he is some place better?”

The paramedic issued electric shocks, forcing Kris into convulsions and to awake in pain, eyes open and afraid. Kris screamed, then went unconscious again.

Later in the small mountain hospital, Kris lay motionless.

A nurse checked his bedside monitor, then whispered to worried Grant and Sissy, “Nothing we can do but wait.”

The nurse left.

Grant and Sissy lay on the floor a pizza box apart with separate blankets and pillows.

Grant rubbed his own throbbing head, “Want to check out Brick’s house tomorrow?”

Sissy shrugged, “I don’t see why not.”

“And will you marry me?”

“Marry? You? What’s wrong with your head?”

He shuffled over to her and cuddled her, “This is my leap. I know it doesn’t make sense. My Chicago life made sense, but the joy level was one there. Since I’ve met you, my joy level is always ten.”

“Delilah seemed to make you joyous.”

“Kris made me take her to the Yacht Club. I’m not into her.”

“Bullshit, Grant. You acting helpless while dancing with

that beautiful bitch. No man is helpless.”

“I’m used to my mom telling me what to do, so it’s an old habit of just following directions, like the place I work.”

“I’m not gonna marry a man that can’t stand up for himself or any man I known for a week. You done lost your mind.”

Chapter 13: The 11th Day Of Christmas

As the first light of dawn filtered through white lace curtains on January 4th, Maria lay awake in her bed, still wearing her hooded parka. Her panicked breathing exemplified her mixed-emotions for Paul sleeping soundly next to her.

She quietly climbed out of her bed and bedroom and shuffled into the kitchen. After turning on the coffee maker, she walked outside to feed William the partridge and the swans who were nestling comfortably in blankets over rocks by her stream.

When the pretty brunette came back inside to pour herself a cup of coffee, Paul entered wearing his pants, pulling on his shirt and cowboy hat.

“I got to get home,” the rugged cowboy stated.

“I understand.”

“See you at Brick’s for coffee?”

“No, got mine here today.”

He smiled, nodded, then left.

She finally removed her parka.

Paul parked in his driveway and ran inside his house.

“Daddy’s home!” he shouted eagerly, tossing his black cowboy hat perfectly to land on a brass wall hook.

“We’re in here!” Amy hollered from the master bedroom.

His pig-tailed daughter was dressing dolls next to Wendy in the comfortable bed. Paul hugged them both tightly.

“I want to change their dresses again.” Amy said, leaving her parents to go to her own room.

“Okay, Princess!” Paul laughed at her curtness, then he kissed Wendy, “How is my queen?!”

“Good morning, King. How was your night?”

“A mistake,” he sighed, glancing at their framed wedding photo from nine years ago on the nightstand. “How was yours?”

“One of the best nights of my life.”

“What?? Without me??”

“Look. My toes,” she said proudly, pointing to them under the blanket.

The blanket moved that area.

Paul tore off the blanket in disbelief. He watched her naked paralyzed toes move ever so slightly.

“Holy Moly!” he whispered, “You moved your toes!!”

“There’s a tingling near my right ankle now.”

“Oh honey I love you, nobody else.”

“I love you, too, Paul.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“About last night??”

“No, the shooting accident.”

“That doesn’t matter a bit. I don’t care anymore if you’re sorry. You’ve been sorry three years. I am no longer a victim.”

He kissed her tenderly, “Last night was so weird.”

“I only want you to be happy.”

“You and Amy make me happy. Maria and me ... we didn’t do it. We just hugged. She put on a parka the whole night. I’m glad she did.”

Wendy, wishing for his happiness, looked disappointed.

At the Free Speech Café Market, with two perfect hands, Brick bagged food for Georgia modeling a giant chartreuse cartwheel hat and matching cape.

“What the hell are you wearing now?”

She laughed, “An army tent.”

“Takes me back to my days in the military.”

“If you ever did serve.”

He chuckled, “I put in service there and much more here to you uppity fashion show ingrates. This is way worse. You give me shell-shock.”

“If you didn’t have the only store around, no one would even talk to you with that acid personality.”

They both laughed then Brick got very serious.

“Did you hear Kris is in a coma?” he gulped.

Georgia instantly looked devastated, “In a coma?”

“Yesterday in her, his, bed at his barn he told us she, he, was happy to die, and just got back from a Near Death Experience and was telling us all about the superpowers he had. Now you know I think all that spiritual mumbo jumbo is hogwash, but he-she literally read our minds, knew we were

arguing in the car, that I had two-hundred-one dollars in my wallet, what kind of casserole we ate - and then he-she did this!"

Brick showed off his straight fingers.

Her jaw dropped, "Your fingers aren't twisted!"

"Said he had access to different energies than we do because he was not plugged into the Earth life!"

Her deep dark eyes widened in amazement. She covered her mouth with her hand, then with the other lifted her bag and walked out, exhilarated.

Walking outside, covered in goosebumps, she talked to herself, "I want a miracle, Roy. Can you hear me? Why can't I have a miracle?? Roy, you get down here and miracle me or I'm going to come up there and cause a ruckus and bring you down here myself!"

Georgia did not see Kris's spirit flying above her, longing for her friendship.

Kris flew up, ascended almost to the clouds, taking in the pristine aerial view of the lake. Then he dived down through the Xong's roof.

In their modern kitchen, Li and Qi tangoed to TV instructions. Suddenly the TV turned off by itself. They froze, puzzled, while still holding their hands outstretched in a tango pose.

Li asked, “How TV go off?”

Qi debated, “Outage?”

Li said, “No, lights still on.”

Suddenly the lights went off.

Then back on!

On the other side of the room, the microwave started by itself!

Spooked, the Xongs slowly turned to it, staying in tango position.

Qi whispered, “What happening?”

Li asked loudly, “ Hey! Someone here???”

Having fun haunting them, Kris’s spirit, with much effort, turned on and off more appliances, watching the Xongs in synchronized tango jut back and forth.

Li worried, “We got ghost?”

Qi shook her head, “Ghost no exist! We got bad fuse?”

For his grand finale, Kris slightly moved some of the colorful letter magnets on their refrigerator to get their attention. As they tentatively tangoed nearer to it, the letters magically moved to spell N-B-A.

Qi was perplexed, “NBA?”

Li exploded, “Kris! At Kris barn I ask what you call bench with only white people.”

“NBA?” she asked.

“Joke. White people not as good as black people at basketball so they sit on bench. NBA answer.”

His wife chuckled, then looked around, frightened, “Kris is ghost??”

He looked as freaked out as she was.

At the end of the Kris’s property, suited Grant and Brick in his Carolina Panther jacket approached suede-clad Juan who was fixing the fence. Recalling Grant sending air-hugs the prior week, Juan stopped working to smile and send Grant an air-hug. Embarrassed but feeling obligated, Grant returned the air-hug.

Brick looked confused.

Grant didn’t explain. He had other things on his mind, “Brick, the property goes to the fence here, and all the way to the other fence by Fukuoka the cow.”

“This property is larger than I expected, but mine is appraised about the same value because of my location.”

“Let’s go take a look.”

“And no pressure.”

“No pressure. I have to move back to Chicago anyway.”

Petite Sissy in a brand new but oversized rainbow sweaterdress hung on Grant in his suit as they explored Brick’s lush property. Even in the dead of winter it was breathtaking.

She was overwhelmed, “Never seen a yard like this, such perfect trees, all lined up. Fancy wrap-around decks that just don’t end.”

“Right? Like a fantasy! I’ve never felt this way before in my life. Like I’m dreaming.”

“I love you, Grant, more than anyone. Ever ... But you can do better. Delilah’s better. I hate her but she’s better. Fact.”

“I don’t want to do better. I am in love with you. Skank.”

She laughed, “That is the nicest thing anyone ever said to

me.”

She wiped a tear of joy from her light eyes. He spun around, kissing her thin grinning lips. With her fingers, she traced his furry face and ears.

Brick called to them from his large dark wood doorway, “Stop doing porn videos on my property! Come inside where I can watch!”

Jokester Brick showed Grant and Sissy the impressive house interior. It didn’t look like a magazine layout like the exterior, but the well lived-in abode had great structure to it. A breezy foyer led into a living area with cathedral ceiling and amazing forest views. The kitchen had outdated but charming cherrywood cabinets. Each of the two loft bedrooms had curved stained-glass glass ceilings which extended into their private baths.

Sissy asked, “Can we sleep here tonight?”

“Sure thing,” Brick answered, “Pick a guest room.”

Grant took charge, “Can we be alone?”

“Oh, alone??” Brick followed, “Gotcha, sure, Bridget and I can sleep at the farm tonight, in fact, that’s probably a smart idea so we can feel it out before we make such a drastic change.”

As Kris's spirit fog darted in and out of homes then soared higher up for aerial views, the sky began to snow. He tried to feel the snow but his ghost hands were unable to make contact. However, with fervent concentration, his fingers materialized to an extent that snow would stick on them momentarily. But as soon as he was distracted, he again became invisible unable to contact physical matter.

Kris's spirit dove in through Georgia's roof.

Georgia, robed in gold chiffon, pet a hen while playing Solitaire on her living room coffee table.

Kris twisted and became a light, and with more effort of his, a tiny dim light actually visible to Georgia. At first she thought it was a puff of smoke. With all his might, Kris enlarged his luminescence, then spun to totally captivate her attention.

Her eyes opened like saucers in wonderment of what she was witnessing – a muted rotating disco ball? – and not just one but now two?

Suddenly the new one leapt across the room and assembled into Roy's see-through human body, but that was not visible to Georgia. She could only see erratic miniscule light flashes.

Kris used his ghost lips to mouth, "Georgia! Roy's here."

But she could not hear him.

He tried for minutes, to no avail. Finally he used his mind to concentrate on those words and sent them telegraphically to her.

She heard him! Frightened of the bodyless voice, she jumped, confused, begging, “Roy, you didn’t say something?? Roy??”

Georgia could not see Roy nor Kris’s spirit forms.

With much concentration, Kris telegraphically messaged her, “Yes, your Roy is here, you old trout.”

Georgia held her mouth to hold back her laughter, “Who you calling an old trout? Is that old Kris??”

“Young Kris, you old fool. Roy is with you and always has been and always will be.”

She wiped a tear and hugged her French hen, “Oh Roy, I miss you so much! Kris, why can’t I hear Roy??”

“He’s much further away.”

“He died two years ago.”

Kris sent her more telepathic thoughts, “I am partly still alive, in a coma on occasion, you weathered dinosaur. So apparently I can still access your dimension and do temporary tricks.”

“You’ve always been a carnival act.”

“From where I am, I can contact both you and Roy so I brought you together. Finally I do something nice for you, right? Roy tells me for an hour. You won’t be able to hear him and he can’t move any physical objects, but you will feel his love. Love never dies. Watch this. Watch what I can do.”

Kris used all his energy to move the glass hourglass on her shelf to magically turn upside down.

She screamed then laughed, “I knew you’d time us, you chincy bitch.”

At 10AM in the hospital room, Kris’s coma face grinned. Grant noticed because he was placing Kris blonde wig on Kris at the time.

Grant stood back, “Sissy! He’s smiling!”

“He she is!” Sissy said, incorrectly assuming, “I guess he likes his wig back on.” She could not know Kris was smiling supernaturally interacting with Georgia.

Grant answered his ringing cell phone, “Oh, hello again Mother.”

Ida paced in her Chicago apartment as she spoke to Grant, “Your boss is threatening to fire you.”

“Kris is in a coma, Mother.”

“Poor thing. But do you have to be there when he dies?”

“I don’t have to, I want to be.”

“Well I want you to be at the tax office. Coner’s daughter got a beauty make-over.”

“Tell Coner to fire me if he can’t wait. Maybe I’ll just stay here forever.” Grant hung up, surprising himself – and Sissy, who marveled, “Who this strong defiant man I see?”

“Your strong husband.”

She laughed, “Husband?? Ha. You gonna be strong because I tell you to?”

“Yes.”

“Then you still the same lost boy doing what you told. Fact. I don’t wanna tell you what to do, Grant.”

Grant looked confused.

With arms flailing in the snow flurry, Georgia in her chartreuse hat and cape ran into the Free Speech Café Market.

Joe, wearing dark glasses and dark clothes, inched toward the open cash register as Brick cleaned the window seat table. Joe stopped trying to steal when he heard Georgia enter, who looked for Brick, then hurried to him, “Brick, you sourpuss! Got me a miracle, too! Better than yours. Roy came. Too much to believe, but it happened!”

Brick lit up and swung her around, “Last week I wouldn’t have believed you. Now I do. How is Roy?”

“Same. Same old Roy!”

Joe didn’t have time to steal. He sat in a chair, “Dare I congratulate you on whatever brings such exuberance.”

“Nothing, just miracles!!” she laughed, “Oh. Joe, do you play drums?”

Joe smiled, “Drums and keyboard tend to occupy my time most productively, why do you ask?”

Georgia moved to Joe, caressing his shoulders, “Grant needs twelve drummers drumming. How can we make that happen?”

Brick joked, “Careful Joe, Georgia will sleep with you for a drum solo.”

Joe kidded, “If I only had a dime for every time that

happened.”

Brick smiled, “That’s my Joe, finally joking like the rest of us. Keep it up and we’ll adopt you into our crazy family.”

Georgia grabbed Joe playfully and ushered him toward the door, “Let’s get out of here before Brick the pervert subjects us to more of his mentally ill fantasies.”

Georgia drove her Mercedes carefully on the wet roads, Joe passenger, side-eyeing her big purse, which was open enough for him to see shimmering jewelry in it.

Outside the sepia stucco cottage that Joe was renting, she parked, musing, “I haven’t been in this cabin in years.”

She grabbed her purse, got out of the car, opened Joe’s door, and with his cane, Joe led her to the front door.

As she stepped inside, she commented, “You kept the decor.”

“There’s a reason blind people don’t win awards for interior decorating.”

“Half the time I forget you’re blind,” she blushed, looking

around, “Where are the turtledoves?”

“I don’t hear them now,” Joe said, gesturing to their cage on a shelf and a hole in the wall above it, “They come in and out through a hole on the wall. Do you see it?”

Georgia inspected it, “Very nice. I hope they come when I’m here.”

“They usually come when I play music and they sing along and dance.”

“How do you know they dance? Do you feel them?”

He was caught lying, so continued to do so, “Yes, I feel them.”

“But aren’t your hands on the instruments?”

She noticed a keyboard and drums, which Joe sat down to play.

Immediately the turtledoves squeezed in through the wall hole, gently purring, enjoying Joe’s expert music and haunting folksy jazz voice. Georgia applauded the birds and Joe losing himself in weird folk song after weird trippy folk song. The ethereal soft music was like a hypnotizing lullaby to her, so she closed her warm eyes, sinking into a recliner, swaying her head back and forth to the slow drums, exactly like the turtledoves.

Neither Georgia nor Joe could see Kris’s spirit in the room, visiting his beloved birds, as well as scrutinizing Joe.

Joe side-eyed Georgia, wanting her to fall asleep so he could loot her purse. He tapped the drum slower and slower until she was indeed so relaxed she was asleep ... almost.

He whispered, "Excuse me as I use the powder room."

While he tiptoed toward the bathroom, he gingerly lifted Georgia's wallet and diamond watch from her open purse.

In the bathroom, he quietly spilled the wallet's contents, counting her credit cards and cash. Fingering the diamond watch, he raised his smiling face to the mirror.

Suddenly his vision went foggy and instead of his reflection he saw another face appear. It was Kris's angry ghost face staring into Joe's soul.

The spirit image telepathically cursed Joe, "You create your world. You created being blind."

Kris's image dissolved and as it went, so did all of Joe's vision.

Joe saw only blackness.

Joe was blind for real.

Joe shook his head and rubbed his dark eyes – but he could only see black! He panicked, moved nearer the mirror, felt around for the light switch and flicked it ten times – but nothing returned his sight. He clumsily shoved back the bracelet, cards and cash in Georgia's wallet.

In helplessness and daze, he stumbled back into the living room and heard Georgia humming. He did not know if her eyes were still closed but he had no choice but to try to sneak her things back in her purse, hoping she would never notice. Blindly, his fingers reached for her purse, then he quietly sunk the watch and wallet into it.

Her eyes were indeed closed. She had not noticed. She opened her eyes and yawned as Joe clumsily stumbled to find his chair, drums and keyboard.

She smiled, “You’re really talented, Joe. You could go pro.”

He hid his panic and muttered, “Sadly I am too unconventional to elicit a large audience.”

“You sound very commercial to me. I’m going to recommend you to the Yacht Club.”

“That fancy place?”

“They need better singers than the stale talent been there for years.”

He resumed playing music and he sung, but now it was not to impress her, it was to channel his dire frustration of actually being visually handicapped. His melodies and lyrics and soul projected differently now – more depth and urgency - noticed by them both.

Moved, she wiped a tear, “I’m taking you to lunch since

you treated me to the most magnificent concert of my life.”

“You go. I’m not hungry.”

“Oh come on.”

“No, not today.”

He was startled to hear the same ghost voice from before, “Listen, Joe. You must go with Georgia.”

Kris’s spirit voice was not unfamiliar to Georgia, so she overheard it, though it was not intended for her.

She said, flustered, “Joe, what did you say?”

Joe stammered, panicked, “I ... I must ... go.”

Georgia rose and noticed her wallet and diamond watch hanging out of her purse, “I need to get a new purse. My stuff is hanging out of it. Good thing you’re not a thief.”

“Like that deplorable Sissy character. You should get a restraining order.”

“Hush. Only thing that girl steals now is hearts.”

The lunch shift at the Free Speech Café Market was filled with locals. Wearing matching silver ski outfits, Qi and Li drank coffee in the window with Delilah, gorgeous in white faux fur. Sissy in her rainbow dress and Grant in his suit ate at a table by the coffee station.

Sissy tempted Grant, “If you moved to Lake Lure we could come here everyday.”

“There’s a lot I don’t like about Chicago, but I think I’d be bored in a small town.”

Georgia guided blind Joe into the noisy store.

Sissy stood up and waved to them, “Georgia, want this table? We’re leaving.”

Georgia hollered, “Yes! Thanks hon!” then she said to Joe, “I’ll go order.”

Georgia twirled to the counter where Brick and Bridget worked fastidiously.

Grant rose and told Sissy, “I need to pay.”

He also went to the counter, leaving Sissy alone, who watched Joe stumble all the way to her table.

Sissy whispered to Joe, “I ain’t a snitch but you steal from any of my friends and I call the cops.”

Joe whispered back, “I had her diamond watch and I put it

back. Sissy, I'm really blind. Something happened."

"And I'm Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer."

"I'm serious," he said, feeling out the chair and sitting, "Help me. I can't see anything. It's just black."

"How stupid you think we are?" she scoffed, cleaning off the table, "I'm tired of your lies. Convin' me I was out of Grant's league. You won't lie to any of us anymore, Joe." Suddenly she got an idea and threw up her hands, "Brick, show us your healed hand!"

Brick stopped working to flash his hands, pointing to the fingers that used to be gnarled.

Locals gasped and applauded.

Sissy announced, "I saw it happen. A miracle happened! I saw it!"

Georgia excitedly turned to face the crowd, "I had a miracle yesterday! It's personal but I testify to miracles happening right here in Lake Lure! Believe!!"

Brick testified, "I didn't believe in miracles until this."

Sissy screamed, "Look at Joe! Look at him! Stand up, Joe!"

Joe was totally perplexed and stayed seated.

Sissy poured a cup of hot coffee and threw it at Joe, who

did not dodge it as she expected. He rose, screaming, scalded.

Delilah yelled, “Sissy you monster, what the hell did you do!?”

Sissy yelled louder, “Joe can see!”

Joe argued, “No, I can’t see!!!! My flesh is burning!”

Sissy assumed he was faking so she persisted, “Then maybe another cup of hot coffee on you will help you see?!”

As she poured a cup, Kris’s spirit fog flew in and out, invisible to everyone but Joe. That initiated Joe’s sight to come back – and it did fully - just as Delilah tried to stop Sissy from throwing the second cup of hot coffee on Joe.

Sissy threw it anyway.

This time Joe dodged it.

Joe exclaimed in relief, “I can see!!!! I can see!!”

Sissy smirked, “Another Lake Lure miracle! Joe’s sight has returned!”

She cockily poured another cup and threw it at him, which he dodged again.

People applauded supportively.

Georgia was overwhelmed, “Joe! You can see!”

Sissy urged on more coffee throwing, “Help him out, neighbors!”

Qi threw her hot coffee at Joe’s back. He dodged most. People applauded.

Li yelled, “Kris’s ghost came refrigerator! With punchline for racist joke!” then he threw his hot coffee at Joe. Joe dodged most, cursing.

Baffled at what was happening, Delilah threw her coffee at Joe, intentionally also aiming some at Sissy. While Joe successfully dodged it, Sissy did not.

Sissy grabbed Delilah’s white fur and pushed her across the room, crashing her over a chair. As Delilah pounced a return attack on Sissy, not far away locals threw food at Joe, which he tried to dodge.

Georgia pulled screaming Delilah from cussing Sissy as Grant restrained Sissy’s fists.

Unable to use her arms, Sissy restored her attention on Joe and with her teeth pulled off Joe’s dark glasses to the floor where she smashed them with her red sneakers.

Joe knelt in the middle of the café, “Praise the mysterious forces which influence our lives! Halleluia!”

People applauded and moved in to congratulate him.

Arms flailing, Georgia danced around him, “Believe!!

Miracles are happening here!”

Sissy saw flirty Delilah reaching to caress Grant so Sissy poured another cup of hot coffee, and glared at Delilah, threateningly, “Bitch, you don’t see he’s with me?? You must be blind. I throw coffee on blind people. Hoping they get a miracle. So are you blind or can you finally see me?”

Delilah backed away, looking down, defeated.

It was late afternoon when Grant and Sissy arrived at the heated back barn where the cows lay on straw, escaping the outside snow.

He asked her, “How did you know a miracle would happen for Joe??”

She looked away, “Ah ... I felt it.”

He looked at her in awe.

Inside the huge birdcage, Juan fed the eleven sandpipers, then exited the cage, asking, “Need me for anything else?”

Grant said, “Wait, Juan can you get twelve drums from somewhere? We just need them one day, tomorrow.”

Juan nodded, “My cousins have drums.”

“Can we get them for a day? Tomorrow morning?,” Grant asked, pulling money out of his wallet, handing it to Juan.

Juan shrugged, “Sure, if they don’t have a gig.”

Before Juan left, he sent air-hugs to Grant – but Grant surprisingly pulled him into a real hug. Juan smiled then exited.

The newly confident Grant moved Sissy to the bird cage door, asking, “You ready to let them free?”

“Uhuh, not yet. They’re playing our song.”

The pipers piped an otherworldly beautiful whistling symphony through their pipe-like bills.

Sissy entered the cage, coyly undressing, pretending to move like a wild animal.

Grant ripped off his clothes and entered the cage, acting like an ape, leaving the gate open.

Totally in love, they made beautiful love together, their bodies lusting for each other like magnetized hot coils.

After sex, she noticed, “It’s so quiet.”

“True. It’s usually noisy here.”

“They’re gone. Every piper flew out.”

In the snow, Sissy drove slow, Grant passenger.

Nearing Brick's home, she rolled down her window and yelled, "Careful driving, Brick! The snow is slippery!!"

From his automobile, Brick thumbed up and Bridget waved.

Later when they were in Brick's bed, Grant lay on his back, smiling, as Sissy clung to his furry chest.

He whispered, "Will you marry me?"

"Stop it. Of course not."

In the freezing barn, Brick in his Carolina Panther football jacket, searched the walls, “Where the heck is the damn heater!?”

He hit the cowbell in frustration.

Shivering Bridget, in her matching jacket, dropped a casserole.

Brick took his anger out on her, “So now we don’t eat?!”

“My fingers are ice! My teeth are chattering!”

Having heard the bell, a cow pushed open the front door to get inside. Brick tried to push it out, “Help me keep this cow out!”

But with all their strength they could not push out the cow.

Brick was disgusted, “The door won’t shut! Too much snow!”

Chapter 14: The 12th Day Of Christmas

Much more pristine snow blanketed Lake Lure throughout the night into January 5th, the 12th day of Christmas. In the barn living room, the cow slept next to Brick and Bridget in their football jackets shivering under couch blankets, despite a low flame in the fireplace.

Brick vented, “Frostbite is so romantic.”

“If by romantic you mean infuriating!”

“Get angrier! We need the body heat!,” he teased, pulling his tried and true red-haired love nearer.

Someone knocked on the front door. Bridget stomped around the cow to answer the door.

In his suede jacket, Juan entered holding clear plastic bags with twelve drums. He looked surprised, “It’s freezing in here!”

“It sure is!” Bridget smiled politely, “Who are you?”

“Jaun,” he said, immediately crossing the room to lift a curtain to turn on the wall thermostat.

At Free Speech Café Market, a poster on the door promoted Brick singing “The Twelve Days Of Christmas” at sun fall, just hours away.

Inside, Bridget, gorgeous and voluptuous with her falsies hiding under a red tight knit sweater, passed out pizza slices. Locals eagerly devoured the delicious food and pet William the partridge on the counter adjacent to the cage of two friendly turtledoves.

Sitting by the window, drinking coffee and watching the snowstorm were excited locals and tourists. In the distance, the sound of drums could be heard. They cheered as they saw in the snowstorm a group emerging.

Leading this small parade was reborn Joe, no longer pretending to be blind, proudly drumming, expertly drumming. Following him, playing drums not so well, were Georgia, Juan, Grant, Sissy, Maria, Larry, Delilah, Paul, Bridget and the Xongs. All were dressed in their favorite coats of different colors and all their cheeks reddened in the freezing weather.

Three French hens, six geese and seven swans meandered between the twelve happy drummers nearing their neighborhood store. Diverse townsfolk walked behind them, cheering.

Drumming, Delilah in her white faux fur pointed to a group of birds flying above them.

Sissy in her new denim coat elbowed Grant, in his suit,

“Look up! Seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven. All our sandpipers.”

As the bird flock lowered, their gorgeous piping music could be enjoyed.

Grant reminisced, “Sissy, they’re playing our song.”

Drummer Delilah pushed herself between Grant and Sissy, trying to literally break them up.

Upset to see that invasion, with her drumsticks, parka-clad Maria poked Delilah over so that Sissy was again next to Grant.

Undaunted, Delilah snuck in between Grant and Sissy once more, pushing out her heaving bosom, “Grant, you look so handsome playing drums.”

He smiled politely, “Thanks.”

Sissy looked livid, “You don’t see me, Delilah?”

Delilah refused to look at her, “I see you fine but I’m not talking to you, I’m talking to Grant, who asked me to drum. Grant, how about you and me hitting the Yacht Club later?”

Grant met her eyes. For a split second they saw each other’s souls and it was like they were the only two people in the world, despite being in a chaotic drum parade.

It was clear Delilah craved him, and that she would her entire life, and that she had a great deal to offer, regardless of secrets yet to share.

Grant saw in her a beautiful woman, a sexy woman, and he knew they could have a lot of fun and great sex. For awhile. But he knew his attraction to her was surface, and fleeting, and certainly not worth losing the love of his life, Sissy.

Grant spoke to her, loudly above the drum beats, “Delilah, you’re fantastic, and some guy is gonna be so lucky to marry you, but it won’t be me! I’m marrying Sissy! Leave me alone!”

Humiliated, Delilah stopped in place, the small parade moving on without her.

Maria glowed with happiness for her sister, “Are you guys really tying the knot?!”

“I don’t know,” said Sissy then she asked Grant, “Did you push off Delilah for me or for you?”

“I did that for me,” he answered honestly, unsure what answer Sissy wanted.

That was the answer she wanted to hear. She smiled at his blossoming confidence, and announced, “Yes!”

“Yes you’ll marry me??” Grant asked, surprised.

Sissy nodded.

Grant immediately knelt in front of her, “Sissy Sparks, will you marry me?”

She nodded again, grinning, “I’m in love with you, Grant,

but not the people-pleaser in you. The real you. I can finally see who you are now. You stood up for yourself with Delilah, and with Kris when he wanted to give his rings to her. You made the decision where they go. I love your standing up even more than the fact I got the rings. And this whole parade was all your doin'. I see who you are now and I want to spend my life with you."

The parade continued without them.

Bridget stepped out of Brick's to applaud the drum-and-animal parade, pointing above. More birds chirped excitedly joining the pipers.

Paul saw them, "Thirteen birds."

Georgia corrected, "Fifteen."

Paul grinned, "The four calling birds. At the flooded Tudor house, remember?"

Grant overheard and spoke with relief to his fiancée, "The four calling birds found the sandpipers!"

Sissy mused, "They were in a cage together so long so at least now they have each other and are free."

They did not get that analogy also pertained to them.

As Gus the goose cuddled Grant's legs, the four calling birds chirped and the eleven sandpipers piped, and together they magically flew around the drummers, then up to the sky, and

disappeared into the snowy horizon.

The heavy snow carried the drum sounds a mile away to Paul's house. In the living room, Amy in peach pajamas played with dolls. Next to her was Wendy in her wheelchair, wearing a black and white zigzagged nightgown, shocked and trembling.

Amy asked, "What's wrong, Mom?"

Wendy minimized her inner drama, "Nothing at all. Nothing is wrong, Princess."

Wendy gripped her wheelchair sides, "Amy, go get all the pillows in the house and put them all around me."

"Why do you want pillows?"

"I'm going to try something."

Content with her explanation, Amy gathered pillows from the sofas and beds and piled them around Wendy's wheelchair.

Wendy gripped the wheelchair, concentrating hard to lift herself up.

Amy watched intensely as Wendy's lifeless feet began

clenching. “Mom, you can move your feet??”

Wendy inhaled, “It’s time for Mommy to stand.”

Amy asked, concerned, “Should I phone Dad?”

“No, this is just you and me. Mom and daughter moment. To cherish or to laugh about. Just use all your strength to hold me if I get weak and fall.”

Wendy seemed electrified, buzzing as she perspired, pushing through excruciating pain to teeter her upper body off the chair and balance over her unsteady legs. She declared, “I will. Not! Be! Paralyzed!!”

With her hands still gripping the heavy chair, Wendy screamed as her legs rose, miraculously restoring her leg muscles enough, forcing her butt and stomach and chest to rise.

She could not see the invisible spirit of Kris using all his concentration and supernatural abilities to help.

Wendy screamed, “I will not be paralyzed!!”

She stood triumphantly as lightning flashed and thunder roared.

Partying inside Free Speech Café Market was every local but Wendy and Amy. The sun set as the crowd ate, drank and goofed around in Brick's warm store.

Sissy played guitar, nodding *go ahead* to Brick.

Brick inhaled helium from a balloon then sang in a comically high voice, "*On the twelfth day of Christmas, my true love sent to me, twelve drummers drumming.*"

On cue, Joe and the other drummers drummed.

Brick continued comically singing, "*Eleven pipers piping.*"

Bridget and ten others blew party whistle blowers.

Brick continued, "*Ten lords a-leaping.*"

Grant and Li leapt and tried to get the other men to as well. They succeeded, except for Paul.

Brick inhaled more helium and sang, "*Nine ladies dancing.*"

Bridget and eight other ladies danced.

Brick crooned, "*Eight maids a-milking.*"

As planned, Bridget and seven others squirt-gunned milk on Brick, accidentally knocking his toupee off. He laughed and put it back on, then he realized he was no longer fooling anyone so he tossed it off and sung, "*Seven swans a-swimming.*"

He pointed to the seven gregarious swans, then sang, “*Six geese a-laying,*” pointing out the friendly geese being fawned over and petted, then sang, “*Five golden rings.*”

Everyone wearing a ring on their fingers pointed to their own rings.

Brick sang on, “*Four calling birds!*”

Bridget, Sissy, Joe and Juan made bird sounds.

Brick caroled, “*Three French hens.*”

Bridget yelled, “Or French kisses.”

She surprised her husband with French-kisses. The group catcalled.

Brick withdrew his lips to sing, “*Two turtle doves.*”

Joe opened the cage of turtledoves and the two beautiful birds flew out.

Brick ended, “*And a partridge in a pear tree.*”

Sober Maria held up William the partridge, now healthy and purring in her arms.

Brick ended his comedy act by sitting on a chair with a whoopie cushion. As people laughed at the embarrassing sound, he stood up, “You bananas make every day here a joy. I love you, you inappropriate clowns. I love I have friends in low

places. I love my neighbors in low places and my neighbors in high places. Let's say a prayer for our neighbor Kris who might be flying in high places."

Brick's hand gestures showed his perfect, healed hands.

Georgia testified, "Kris healed Brick's fingers! Lake Lure somehow bought us miracles!" then she threw her arms around Brick - and Joe as well.

Joe blushed, "Kris changed my life, healing my vision."

Sissy beamed in pride for Joe.

Brick prodded Sissy, "Sissy, sing something."

"Can I? Cool, cool!," she stuttered, "Joe, think ya can help me out?"

Joe nodded and took a drum and began a slow percussion intro.

Pretty Sissy strummed her guitar and improvised a song, "This one's for Kris. Let me improvise something. Okay. Here goes. *I woke with broken wings, so my fairytale dreams, stayed frozen in the snow, until I got to know, not all birds fly in the sky, some fly low and some fly high ...*"

Everyone moved to the beat: Georgia, Bridget, Brick, Li, Qi, Maria, Larry, Paul, Delilah, Grant, Sissy, Joe, Juan and other locals.

Suddenly Grant stopped moving and froze in place. Sissy kept singing but looked at him for an explanation.

Grant's deep brown eyes enlarged and he whispered in her ear, "My dad ... he just died for good. Don't ask me how I know. I just do."

At the mountain hospital, Kris's bedside monitor stopped beeping to alert "death." The last of Kris's spirit fog rose through the ceiling.

Kris's energized spirit fog flew up to join the beloved feathered family, the four calling birds and eleven sandpipers, presently exploring new cloudy frontiers. Now completely crossed over into the afterlife, Kris was no longer able to maneuver events for his Earth neighbors to such an extent. However Kris resonated such purity and clarity and freedom that in time could indeed become an angel, having intention to help humans in need, specifically hospitalized children, per the rules and restrictions of the hereafter.

Grant and Sissy immediately married, choosing to live in Lake Lure, and visit Chicago several times a year. With the inheritance Kris left Grant, the newlyweds had enough money to live for a year without working, but Sissy kept singing at the Yacht Club, attracting enthused tourists as well as vacationing music executives.

When she wasn't singing in public to accolades, she and her adoring husband dedicated their time to producing professional music written and performed by Sissy, with Joe's keyboard and drum expertise. Their city exec contacts launched her music videos internationally and within months it wasn't only North Carolinians following her career, but millions of fans internationally.

Magazine covers featuring Sissy and her guitar revealed Kris's premonition of her upcoming fame was eerily accurate.

The following Christmas, a Chicago stadium crowd applauded. Sissy, in new jeans and new form-fitting denim shirt, played guitar onstage and sang her hit about Kris, as Joe in a funky plaid suit drummed next to her and in the theater wings Grant in a gray muscle shirt played the cowbell.

Sissy emotionally shared, "This song is dedicated to someone who changed my life years ago. For you, Kris, wherever you are. *Took so long to see you, because you always hid, you didn't think you mattered, but look how much you did ...*"

Kris hadn't only changed Sissy's life. He had changed the

lives of all of his neighbors. As insignificant and foolish he felt his life was, he had orchestrated positive events that no one could ever deny.

Bald Brick enthusiastically milked the cows on his new farm, which used to be Kris's red barn. Smiling Bridget rode up to her husband on the horse she always dreamed of owning.

In Maria's stone home, ravishing Maria in a tight black dress and Larry in a black suit played with the seven swans and partridge. Her missing son had been reunited with them.

In Chicago, Grant gave his mother Ida away in her marriage to Mr. Coner. Pregnant Sissy sang, *"Took so long to see you, because you always hid, you didn't think you mattered, but look how much you did ..."*

In Georgia's gorgeous manor, her three French hens cuddled Georgia as she played poker with Joe, Qi, Li, Delilah, Paul and – Wendy who rose and walked to bring the hourglass to the table. Music from the radio played Sissy, *"Took so long to see you, because you always hid, you didn't think you mattered, but look how much you did ..."*

THE END