

## The Bookish Holidays of Nina Hill

By Abbi Waxman

*In which our heroine enjoys the spirit of Christmas. Mostly.*

“The problem with Christmas in Los Angeles,” said Liz stepping back and nearly flattening a passerby, who shot her a look she completely failed to notice, “Is that it doesn’t look like Christmas in the movies, and in L.A. that’s the only Christmas that counts. Everything else is just, you know, *reality*.”

Nina Hill, her business partner and friend, shrugged. Liz was inclined to Pronouncements, and Nina had learned which to respond to and which to ignore. Whining about Christmas fell 100% into the latter category.

“Are you criticizing my window display?” asked Polly, from inside the window. Her voice was slightly muffled by the glass, but Nina could hear the threat. “Are you saying it lacks seasonal joie de vivre?” The young woman backed carefully down the stepladder, her reindeer earrings swinging. “Listen, I’ve sprayed so much fake snow in here I’m as high as a kite on propellant, and if I injure myself you’ll be getting a workman’s compensation claim in your stocking.”

“Well,” said Liz, who was her boss at Knights, the independent bookstore where they all worked, “That’s not the worst thing I’ve found on my upper thigh.”

Both Nina and Polly shot her a disgusted look, but the older woman just shrugged. “What?” She headed back into the bookstore. “I’m going to work on the tree.” She looked behind her at Nina, who was still staring at the window, “You going across the street? Full-fat latte, extra shot.”

Nina turned to cross the road, wondering anew at her colleague’s telepathy. Or mind control, one or the other. Opening the door to the café, she spotted her friend Vanessa on top of a chair, hanging cookies from the rustic ladder that decorated the back wall. Why there was an old wooden ladder on the wall was anyone’s guess, but it was supposed to add...something. An authentic, countryside feel... because farmers love to store their implements at a rakish angle fifteen feet off the ground.

“I guess it’s decorating day on the Boulevard,” Nina said, looking up at Vanessa. “Polly was just creating perfect snowy corners on our windows.”

Vanessa didn’t turn around but kept fiddling with a push pin and an almost invisible length of red thread. “You’re leaving it a bit late, no? Christmas is next week!”

Nina shrugged. “It turned out Liz and I both felt the same way about holiday decorations in November, so we decided to wait until it really felt like Christmas...and then it sort of became a stand-off to see who could hold out the longest and then we came in the other day and Polly had bought an actual tree and gone ahead without us. And she’s Jewish, so I guess we’d really left it too late.”

Vanessa looked at her for a moment. “I’m not going to lie, you and Liz are turning into an old married couple.”

Nina narrowed her eyes at her friend. “Thanks for your observation.”

Vanessa got down off the chair and dusted her hands on her apron. “Between you and me,” she lowered her voice, “This is the fourth batch of snowflake cookies since our holiday décor started. They get dry and then the points break off onto customers’ heads, so I took these out back and sprayed them with fixative.” She sighed. “I’m hoping they make it to New Year.”

“A sensible precaution.”

Vanessa headed back to the kitchen. “The other day a customer wearing a wooly hat walked out with a piece of cookie balanced on her pom pom, because I couldn’t work out how to casually brush it off. I’m hoping she wasn’t divebombed by hungry birds as she went about her business.”

“This is L.A.,” said Nina, “Most of the birds are gluten free, she was probably fine...”

Vanessa headed towards the counter. “I miss real snowflakes, I won’t lie. It’s all very well, this perfect weather, but it’s supposed to be so much more, you know, *wintery* this time of year.”

“This time of year being winter?”

“That’s the one.” They both turned to watch two schoolgirls walking in, each wearing skirts so short they could have been re-classified as belts.



Nina thought it was a terrible idea, but Polly and Liz were adamant.

“It’s a fantastic idea. We can host it here.” Polly was already pulling a piece of paper across the back-office desk, ready to start sketching out plans. The store itself was only dimly lit, because they’d just closed for the day.

“There’s no room.”

“We’ll make room.” Liz had finished her third extra-shot latte of the afternoon and was possibly over caffeinated. “We’ll move the bookshelves.” She grinned, “Thingy can help us. He’s strong.”

Presumably Liz meant Nina’s boyfriend. “Tom? He’s not here. He’s in Chicago for another week or so.” Nina frowned at her partner. Vanessa was wrong; she and Liz weren’t like an old married couple. They were like newlyweds, still negotiating their altered roles. “How many teams will there be? There’s not enough time. When were you thinking of doing this? Will we have food? We shouldn’t have booze, it’s asking for trouble. Are we talking mixed ages? All topics? Holiday questions only? What will we give for prizes? What will we sit on?”

Liz and Polly had frozen and were regarding her with alarm.

“Dang,” said Polly, “We may have pushed her too far.”

“She’s going to blow,” agreed Liz. She reached out and shoved Nina into the one comfy chair. Then she bent at the waist and spoke slowly and clearly.

“We’re suggesting a holiday trivia contest, the weekend before the actual holiday. Trivia contests are your jam, remember? You enjoy them. You excel at them. It will be festive and seasonal.”

Nina stared at her. “I thought you hated the holidays?”

“No,” said Liz, “I love the holidays, I hate the shopping and starting too early. I like the food, the movies, the warm socks, everything else.”

“Oh.”

Polly was enthusiastic. “It’ll be fun! All the other stores on Larchmont can field teams to challenge us.” She clapped her hands, “It’ll make BizDev Betty so happy!” Larchmont Boulevard had a dedicated business booster lady, who worked tirelessly to support the stores and customers of the neighborhood, and who Polly had given this ever-so-slightly insulting nickname. Her name wasn’t even Betty.

Nina shook her head. “We can’t have a team, they’ll accuse us of cheating.”

Liz frowned. “If we don’t have you we don’t have a special advantage, why would they think that?”

“Because we’re running the contest and could look at the questions?”

Liz looked scandalized, but Polly shrugged, “Let’s make the prizes really good then and cheat all the way to the bank.” She looked at her colleagues.

“Kidding.”

Liz shot her a look. “Fine, Nina can run it, we won’t have a team, I really don’t care.”

“Just adults?” Nina was actually starting to consider this, and could feel herself beginning to get excited, despite her normal reluctance to agree to anything sudden, on principle.

“Or maybe just kids?”

“Or both!” Polly warmed to this idea. “We can have a bookclub kids team. Your little bookworms will cream the opposition.”

Nina looked worried, “Wouldn’t that also seem like cheating? Should we invite other boo...”

Suddenly Liz let out a noise like a pterodactyl getting its tail stepped on. The women jumped, and Polly let out a string of inventive curses.

Liz pointed to the corner of the office. “Mouse.”

Polly immediately sat on the desk and drew her legs up off the floor. Nina frowned at her. “If there is a mouse it isn’t an Olympic sprinter. I think you’re probably safe over here.”

“How do you know?” Polly was pale. “I don’t like mice, unless they’re helping Disney princesses, dancing in *The Nutcracker* or appearing in the classic Nathan Lane film, *Mousehunt*.”

“I don’t like them either,” said Liz, darkly. “They eat books and poop in the cash register.”

Nina and Polly looked at her. “That seems improbable,” said Nina.

The three women stared at the corner and lo and behold, a tiny mouse suddenly appeared and took a few tentative steps towards a large cardboard box.

“Oh no you don’t,” said Nina, “That box just came from Berkley, it’s filled with quality contemporary fiction, you are not snacking on that.” She walked confidently towards the mouse, who immediately disappeared.

“Great,” said Liz. “Now it’s just going to wait until we’re gone and then it’s going to come out and eat the Dostoevsky.”

“Well good luck to it then,” replied Nina, lifting the box of books off the floor and putting it on a chair, “I’ve always found classic Russian literature pretty hard to digest.”



The next day was one of those special Los Angeles winter days that look like summer through the window and feel like winter once you step outside. Blue skies, check, bright sunshine, check, but temperatures low enough to wear that awesome beanie you’ve been holding onto since you wore it once last December.

As Nina turned the corner onto Larchmont Boulevard she saw Liz and Polly standing outside the bookstore. She hurried a little.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“Hopefully,” replied Liz, “A bloodbath of epic proportion.”

Polly turned and made a face at Nina. “Liz hired a cat.”

“You hired a cat?”

Liz waved her hand, airily. "Hired is a strong term. I rented a cat."

"From where?"

"Craigslist, whence all magical things come."

"What did that ad look like?" Nina wondered, "And why are we standing outside?"

"The ad said Cat Available, and we're outside because as soon as I put Mr. Line down he started sniffing around the office, and I didn't want to see the actual killing part." Liz swallowed. "The sight of blood makes me faint."

Nina sighed. So many questions, so little caffeine. "I'm sorry, please start at the beginning and go slowly."

Polly made an exasperated sound. "Someone told her..."

"My neighbor..."

"...Her neighbor told her we should get a cat," Polly said, "to get rid of the mouse."

"But I hate cats," said Liz.

"So she went online and somehow, because that's how Liz rolls, found someone who was willing to let her have the cat they were trying to rehome, for a nominal fee, for a short amount of time."

Liz said, "However long it takes to kill the mouse."

"Mice, presumably," Nina corrected, "The average house mouse can have about 50 babies a year. If we're seeing one, we're not seeing many others." She turned to Polly, "Did you know, a mouse can squeeze through a hole the size of a dime and jump a foot into the air?"



Polly glared at her. "Thanks for that nightmare fuel."

Liz shrugged. "Look, we have a professional on the job now. It's only a matter of time until we're mouse-free."

"But why are we outside?" Nina looked at her watch. "We're supposed to open in ten minutes." She thought of something else, "And why is he called Mr. Line?" She had a vague idea, but hoped she was wrong.

"Ferdinand Edmund Line."

Nina rolled her eyes. She'd been correct. "F.E. Line?"

Liz grinned. "Ferdinand after the bull, Edmund after the kid in the Narnia books and Line because it was funny."

Nina took hold of the door handle. "I'm going in."

Liz looked worried, "I shut the office door, don't go in there without listening carefully first."

They entered the store cautiously. "What am I listening for," asked Nina, "tiny cries for mercy? The clashing of miniature swords?"

Inside it was silent. Over on the check-out counter sat the biggest cat Nina had ever seen. Her own cat, Phil, was no supermodel, but this guy was...burly. He was the color of marmalade, with stripes and a white ruff of Elizabethan proportion on his chest. He was a timeless classic with magnificent whiskers, and he knew it.

"I thought you said you closed the door to the office?" Polly asked.

"I did," said Liz, looking in that direction. "But I guess he opened it."

“It’s amazing it’s still attached at the hinges,” said Nina. “Are you sure you weren’t looking in the livestock section of Craigslist? He’s enormous. I’ve seen smaller sheep.”

Liz peeped around the corner of the office door. “No blood.”

Polly peered around her shoulder. “No tiny shoes, no crying mouse babies, no nothing. Either Ferdinand ate him tail and all, or he simply ignored the problem and went to find a good spot to snooze instead.”

Nina looked at the cat, who regarded her calmly through round orange eyes. She noticed that the floor around the counter was covered in all the things that had been on the counter the night before. Scissors. Bookmarks. Pens. A small container of ironic pins. It had probably taken him several minutes to push it all off, but he was clearly a cat who loved to complete a task. Ferdinand blinked lazily and put his head down.

“Oh well,” sighed Liz. “So much for that genius idea.” She bustled off towards the office. “I’ll email the guy and take him back. Then I guess I’ll call the exterminator.” Her voice drifted back. “It’s a pity, because the owner calls him Fluffy, which is just wrong. He’s much too regal for that name.”

Nina frowned at Polly. “I thought she hated cats.”

Polly shrugged. “People who say they hate cats just haven’t met the right cat yet.” She was scratching the enormous orange beast behind the ears. He was allowing it. “The right cat changes everything.”



Her boyfriend Tom called that evening.

“Hey, baby.” Just the sound of his voice relaxed her. They had only been together a matter of months, but he’d dovetailed into her life as if designed for it. He made her feel so safe, like a security blanket in a flannel shirt and work boots. But Nina seemed incapable of having positive feelings without also suffering their negative opposite: When Tom wasn’t there she worried she would lose him, then she got annoyed at herself for not being a strong, independent woman who didn’t need no man, then she would beat herself up for not allowing herself to feel her feelings, then she would get tired and eat something she probably shouldn’t and THEN she would punish herself for squashing her feelings with food...you get the picture. It was exhausting sometimes simply being alive.

Unaware of all this rumination, Tom thought a Larchmont Holiday Trivia Contest was a great idea. “And you’re going to run it? Can you think up enough questions?”

“Holiday Trivia? Sure... I thought I’d do holiday movies, holiday books, holiday traditions, holidays around the world... easy.”

Tom said, “I bet it’s harder than it looks.”

“Maybe.” Nina changed the subject. “Hey, by the way, the store is infested with mice. Well, mouse at least.”

Tom laughed. “Can you have a single-mouse infestation? My workshop has mice, they’re cute.”

“They carry disease.”

“Probably not as much as we do.”

“Liz got a cat from somewhere, but he seems completely disinterested in eating mice.”

“Just stop feeding him anything else, he’ll warm up to it.”

Nina smiled, “I’m texting you a photo. He’s got enough fat reserves to last the winter.” There was a pause as Tom waited for the photo, which showed Ferdinand being petted by five young women who’d come in to get the new Leigh Bardugo and had spent the first ten minutes obsessing over the cat. Nina added, “Plus, he already has an Instagram hashtag, #ferdinandthebookcat.”

The photo arrived, and Tom whistled. “Wow, he is... big boned.” He added, “Could he be a Maine Coon, do you think?”

Nina shrugged. “I think he’s half alley cat, half pit bull.” She explained about Craigslist. “Liz emailed the guy so she could return him, but so far she hasn’t heard back.”

“He probably took off the minute her car rounded the corner. The cat’s been eating him out of house and home.”

Their conversation took a more personal turn, and eventually Nina hung up and went to bed, coasting on the warm glow of being listened to and understood. She lay there reading a Nero Wolfe mystery, enjoying the rare sound of rain pattering on her roof, until Phil burst through his cat door full of

outrage at the sky water. She toweled off the wet spiky bits, fed him, wiped the muddy paw prints off her counter, and climbed back into bed. Phil washed himself completely dry, which shouldn't be possible but is, and curled up next to her. She closed her book and turned off the light, marveling at the rain and the subtle whistling of Phil's breath through his tiny cat nostrils, her lips turning up in a smile as she drifted off to sleep.



In the end, of course, Nina gave in and the Knights' Holiday Trivia Contest was born. Polly revealed previously secret design skills and made flyers, sent out emails, and posted it on social media. It turned out people were dying for a holiday themed trivia contest, and before long there were four teams entered, two from rival independent bookstores, which made Nina work doubly hard on the questions.

Liz was worried that the mouse would make an appearance during the contest and cause a stampede, but Nina reassured her.

"The mouse is more scared of us than we are of it, remember."

"Speak for yourself," said Polly. "Those tiny little claws, the whippy tail, the beady eyes..." She shuddered.

Nina rolled her eyes. "Get a grip."

The big orange cat had been a total bust at pest control, but a huge hit in customer service. People started coming in just to see him and stayed to buy books. Ferdinand, in the time-honored way of cats through the ages, had looked around and realized Liz was the hold-out, the key to his survival. He could tell she didn't like him, so he began a charm offensive that was almost nauseating. He would trot up to her when she arrived and make a little quail trill of greeting. At first she would fix him with a cold eye and say, "You're on borrowed time, Sir, as soon as your owner replies to one of my thirty emails you're out of here," but after a few days she simply trilled back. He would butt his head against her when she rang up a sale and curl up on the desk when she was in the office.

That very morning she'd had the balls to say, without even a hint of a blush, "We should have gotten a store cat years ago. I've always loved cats."

Polly and Nina looked at each other. Then they looked at Ferdinand, who was standing in Egyptian Cat Pose, his tail tucked neatly around his toes. His eyes glowed at them, there was a moment of mutual understanding, then Nina shrugged.

"Great idea. We haven't actually seen a live mouse since he got here, so even if he's not killing them, he's scaring them away."

"I made him a bed in the office."

Nina went to look. Liz had cleared a corner of the office that hadn't actually been clear since they'd had a roof leak in 1999 - before Nina's time, obviously - and installed an entire suite for the cat. A large wicker basket was

comfortably stuffed with a pillow covered with a fluffy plaid blanket, and nearby was a fish-shaped floor mat with a pair of dishes for water and food. A covered litter box stood a polite distance away. Nina frowned and went back into the store.

“Where did you find dishes with his name on?”

“Etsy.” Liz was shameless. “I ordered him a velvet collar with his name embroidered on it too, I’m hoping it gets here by Christmas.”



In the end there were five teams at the contest, including one with several of the kids from the book club Nina ran at the store.

Annabel Girvan, one of the members, had brought her little sister Clare with her. Nina knew her family pretty well and wasn’t surprised to see the youngest member in attendance. Clare was a force of nature.

“Hi there,” she said as she walked up to Nina and hugged her around the waist. “I heard there’s a cat here now, can I see it?”

“Sure, he’s over...”

But Clare had already spotted him and was gone. You would think, from the enthusiastic mutual greeting, that they were old friends from high school, but that was just Clare. She created her own idiosyncratic weather system of

happy curiosity wherever she went. She almost made Nina want to have kids. Almost.

Clare's mom Lili and her sister Annabel weren't far behind.

"Hi Nina," said Lili, hugging her too. "Are you excited for the contest?"

"Sure," said Nina. In truth, she was feeling a little bit anxious. She found crowds of people a little alarming, but the trivia aspect of the event put her on solid ground. Right at that minute she was ok, but she had half a Xanax in her pocket just in case. She wished Tom were there, but he was still finishing up in Chicago. Heavy weather across the Midwest was threatening to derail his homecoming for the holiday, but she wasn't going to think about that now.

She looked at Annabel. "Are you ready?"

Annabel was a serious child, but her eyes were gleaming. "Totally. Logan and I hung out yesterday and studied." Logan was Annabel's best friend and fellow book club member. "And," Annabel leaned closer, "We got her sister Chesney to join the team, she's our secret weapon."

"I'm your secret weapon," said Clare, suddenly appearing. She was holding Ferdinand, who was putting up with it for the first time as far as Nina could tell. No one else had ever attempted it, and Clare was nearly invisible behind a cloud of ginger fur. She bent carefully and put down the cat, who shook himself and sauntered off to look for Liz.

Annabel looked down at her sister, a touch scornfully. "You're not on the team."

"I'm still a secret weapon."



“Sure, if there’s a question about bugs, or Pokémon, or how many people die every year from something weird, feel free to shout out.”

Clare looked back, clear-eyed. “I will.” She turned to Nina, “Did you know falling icicles kill about 15 people every year?”

“Huh, no, I didn’t,” said Nina, committing the statistic to memory. “I did know cows kill about 20 people a year in the U.S.”

Annabel turned away. “You guys are so weird, I’m going to find Logan.”

Clare and Nina looked at each other.

“Bee stings kill, like, 100 people a year,” said Clare.

“And 13 people die every year when vending machines fall on them.”

They smiled at each other.

“I love facts,” said Clare.

“Ok, baby, let’s let Nina get ready for the contest.” Lili put her hand on Clare’s shoulder, “I think Edward found us some seats.”

Nina looked around and spotted Lili’s boyfriend sitting in the middle of a row of folding chairs, leafing through a gardening book. He looked up and grinned at Lili and Clare as they came over, and Nina could see Clare chattering away as she climbed onto his lap. Lili had lost her husband several years before, and it was nice to see her happy with a new relationship. In a random coincidence, Lili’s sister Rachel was married to Tom’s brother, Richard, and Nina knew from Tom that things were going well for the couple. It’s always nice when good things happen to good people, thought Nina, because it certainly isn’t always the case.

Nina turned as Polly tapped her on the arm. "I think all the teams are here, we should get going."

Nina nodded, and went to the front of the store.

"Good evening, folks, time to take your seats." People shuffled into silence, and Nina smiled around. "Welcome to the first ever Knights' Holiday Trivia Contest. The rules are very simple: Each team has been provided with a buzzer..." she paused, "Please sound your buzzers so we all know who is who." Of course, they all hit their buzzers at once, which meant a cacophony of farmyard sounds and bells. Nina laughed, "Sorry, should have said one at a time..."

A moo. A neigh. A bark. A rooster crow. And a car horn.

"Why do we have a horn and everyone else has an animal?" asked the team from The Last Bookstore, one of the other independent booksellers in the city. It was a beautiful store, and Nina went there often to covet their extra space and admire their arches made of books.

But now she simply shrugged. "It was random."

The Last Bookstore team muttered.

Nina ignored them. "I will ask the questions and the first team to buzz in gets to answer. If they get it wrong, the other teams get a crack at it." She looked around for Polly. "And now my lovely colleague, Polly, will tell you about the prizes."

Polly, who was dressed as a dreidel, though Hanukkah didn't start till the next day, said, "First prize is a five-pound box of See's soft centers for each

member of the team.” There was whooping from around the room, “Second prize is a one-pound box each, third prize is a lollipop, and all the teams have already been given candy canes.” She grinned, “It’s not a car for everyone, or a trip to the Bahamas, but it’s definitely worth competing for.”

And then the contest began.

“Our first category is Holiday Stories,” said Nina, her long red hair glinting under the lights of the children’s reading corner. “What is Scrooge’s first name?”

Moo, said the kids’ buzzer. “Ebenezer,” said Logan, a look of intent focus on her face. She had her blonde shoulder length hair pinned back tightly with dragon barrettes, so as not to be distracted by something as simple as hair.

“Yes,” said Nina. “First point to the kids.” She looked at her list. “Which of Santa’s reindeer shares a name with the symbol of another annual holiday?”

Pause. The sight of twenty or so pairs of lips reciting that part of *The Night Before Christmas* that names all of them, then, cock-a-doodle-do!

“Yes?”

“Cupid!” The team from the ice cream stores on the Boulevard (The Frostees) high-fived each other. Normally there was healthy competition between the two stores, which occupied opposite sides and ends of the street, but in honor of the holidays they’d buried the hatchet and combined forces.

“Great, the Frostees scoop a point,” said Nina, grinning as everyone groaned. “Next, in the classic *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, what is the name of the mountain range?”

An immediate moo, followed by “The Pontoons!”.

“A second point for the kids team,” said Nina, pausing as Annabel raised her hand. “Yes?”

“We’re not the kids team,” said Annabel, “We’re the Little Literature Lovers.” She blushed slightly, “I came up with the name.”

“Oh, sorry,” said Nina, coughing to cover her smile. “Apologies. Well, the Little Literature Lovers are in the lead right now, so let’s press on.”

By the end of the story round the scores were pretty even, and Nina called for a one-minute break before she started the holiday movie round. Wine glasses were refilled, apple cider was shared, and someone passed around a tray of cookies. Ferdinand, who had been hiding in the office from all the people, appeared and slowly walked across to where Liz was sitting and hopped onto her lap. He overflowed quite a bit, but she managed to hold onto him.

Nina started up again. “Alright, in the movie *A Christmas Story*, what is the name of the neighbors whose dogs eat the Christmas turkey?”

Pig Snort! Then, “The Bumpuses!” said the team from Skylight Books, another fantastic independent bookstore. Immediately cries of ‘Bumpuses’ erupted across the store, as everyone channeled the exasperated father in the movie.

“In the movie, *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*, what is the name of his little Elf friend?”

Car horn. The Last Bookstore. “Hermey!”

Nina smiled. She looked around; the store was full, the contest was fun, she felt happy and confident...could this warm feeling in her heart be holiday spirit? Or was it eggnog and heartburn?

“In the movie, *Jingle All the Way*, what’s the toy everyone’s fighting over?”

“Turbo Man!” shouted the Frostees, then tried to backtrack by hitting their buzzer over and over. Over the crowing of roosters, Nina raised her voice. “No points if you don’t use your buzzer! This is a trivia contest, not an anarchist free-for-all.” Having restored order, she continued. “The song, *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, was originally performed in which movie?”

Pig snort. “*Meet me in St. Louis.*”

Suddenly there was a disturbance in the audience, and Nina looked up to see Lili Girvan trying to make her way out of the row of chairs. Edward was looking up at her, concerned, and Clare was saying “Mommy?”

And then Lili crumpled and fell.



“I don’t really know,” said Nina to Tom, later than night on the phone. “She recovered very quickly, and Edward took her home. She made Annabel stay to finish the contest, so she can’t have felt that worried.”

“I’ll ask Richard about it next time we speak,” Tom said, “I’m hoping to see them all after Christmas Day.”

“If you get home in time,” said Nina.

“Yeah.” He paused, “It’s snowing like hell right now. Who won the contest?”

Nina smiled, “The kids did. It was a bit of a triumph actually. Logan’s sister Chesney answered the tie-breaker between them and Skylight Books, it was great.”

“What was the tie-breaker?” Tom was a trivia nut as well, it was how he and Nina had first met.

“What does your true love give to you on the seventh day?”

“Swans-a-swimming,” he said, immediately.

“How do you know that so easily?”

He laughed, “For some reason that one always stuck in my head. Whenever anyone says the number 7, I say, in my head, swans-a-swimming.” He sounded embarrassed suddenly, “That might be more information than you want.”

Nina replied, “Every time anyone says someone says the word *award* I hear the dad from *A Christmas Story* saying, ‘It’s a major award’, and then I

usually add “fra-gee-lay...it must be Italian” and if anyone says the word *mostly*, I think of Newt from *Aliens* saying ‘they mostly come at night...mostly.’”

“Thank goodness for that. Not just me, then.”

“Nope. My whole thought process is like a pinball machine, bouncing from one random association to another.”

“That’s why we love each other.”

“I thought it was my incredible physical beauty.”

“Nope, I love you for your random mind. Your incredible beauty is just something I’ve had to accept.” His voice was soft, and suddenly Nina missed him so much it hurt.

“Are you going to make it home for Christmas?”

“I’m going to do my best sweetheart, I promise. The best laid plans of mice and men, right?”

“I guess.” Nina paused. “Speaking of mice, I think Ferdinand is now a permanent member of staff at Knights.”

“Does he get benefits?”

Nina laughed, “He’s got more room in the office than any of us and all the catnip he could ever want.”

“So, Liz has been persuaded to keep him?”

Nina snorted. “Liz is behind the whole thing. She’s given up on hearing back from the owner, he never answered any calls or emails. And, to be fair, the mice seem to be gone.”

“So, he’s doing his job.”

“Yes, bless his little white socks.”

“Is he going to be alone over Christmas? The store is closed, right?”

Nina snuggled down into her blanket. She was sitting in her favorite reading chair, fleece-lined socks tucked under a knitted blanket her mom had sent her. “Liz says she’s going to take him some turkey and check on him. I wouldn’t be surprised if she doesn’t hang out with him for several hours, it’s really a love story.”

“Cats can be very beguiling,” Tom said. “Look at me and Phil.”

Nina laughed. Phil barely tolerated Tom, even now. Tom brought him treats and toys all the time, but Phil still occasionally bit him for no reason, especially if he came in and found them in bed together. He specialized in the midnight sneak attack, but Tom always forgave him. “I’d bite anyone I found in bed with you too,” he’d say.

“I’m sure he’ll warm up eventually,” Nina said.

“I’m not going anywhere, so he’ll have to,” replied Tom. “I’m a patient man, I’ll wear him down.”

“I look forward to watching you try,” replied Nina, smiling at the thought of having Tom around forever. “Call me tomorrow.”

“Of course, little bookworm. Sleep well.”





Christmas Day dawned bright and cold, but by the middle of the day a steady rain had started to fall.

Tom had called with the bad news that his flight had been cancelled.

“They cancelled a couple hundred flights,” he said. “I’m staying at the airport just in case, but don’t hold your breath.”

“Ok,” said Nina, sad but understanding. What could you do about snow in Chicago? Precisely nothing.

As a child Nina had enjoyed small and traditional Christmases, but as an adult she had made her own tradition. She would sleep in, then jump out of bed to put a Sara Lee frozen Pecan Coffee Cake into the oven and give Phil his present (a small can of red salmon and a new catnip mouse) and open her own (whichever new book she’d selected and saved for this very purpose). She would leap back into bed to wait for the coffee cake, then lie there all day reading and eating cake. It was her present to herself, and she hadn’t been unduly upset when Tom said he would probably be away over the holiday. She liked him a lot...but solitude to read and eat in peace was deeply desirable.

This had also been a strange year for Nina, because she’d discovered a whole family she’d never known about before. Her mom had raised her as a single parent, but it turned out Nina’s father had been alive and well her whole life, had married three times, had at least one affair (with Nina’s mother), and produced 5 children including Nina. These new relatives ranged from fruit bat crazy to totally wonderful, and they’d pressed her to join them for the holiday. She’d politely declined: Her home-made traditions and routines were the

handrails she clung to, and she was in no hurry to let go. However, she did reach for her phone to call Millie, the youngest of her newly discovered sisters. Millie was 11, and the only one who'd actually had a good parenting experience with the father in question, who'd taken almost his entire life to get his act together. For most of the family his death had been the final goodbye of a man who said goodbye all the time, but for Millie it was a real loss.

“Hey, Nina!” said Millie, sounding cheerful.

“Happy Christmas, sis,” Nina replied. “Big plans?”

“Not really,” Millie sounded slightly less cheerful. “Mom’s being a bit hyper, I think to cover the fact that she misses Dad, and I’m trying to be happy so she doesn’t feel worse, and it’s all a bit stressful.”

Nina pondered. She didn’t have any experience or advice to share, so she went for neutral but common ground. “Sounds challenging...read any good books lately?”

“Yes,” replied her younger sister, the relief evident in her voice. “I went back and re-read the whole Susan Cooper *The Dark is Rising* series, I’m just finishing the last one now.”

“It’s an excellent series. Did you get the Ursula K. Le Guins I sent you?”

“Yes, I forgot to text you. Thanks! Do you think it’s ok to go straight from *Dark is Rising* to *Earthsea*?”

Nina laughed. “Yes, as long as you’re ready to disappear for a while. Both series completely took over my life when I was your age.”

Millie sounded rueful. "I could use a break from real life right now, it's hard doing Christmas without Dad, he made it so much fun."

"I'm sorry." There wasn't much more Nina could say, "You might as well climb into a book and pull the covers tight, things will probably be better when you're done."

"Isn't it funny we talk about books and beds in the same way?"

Nina smiled. "That's why reading in bed is so perfect. You're protected by two sets of covers..." She heard a voice in the room where Millie was, and recognized the cadences of Eliza, Millie's mom. "Do you have to go?"

"Yes," said Millie, "Am I seeing you next week?"

"Yes," replied Nina, "We're starting a new book in book club."

"What is it?"

"You'll have to wait and see. Have a lovely Christmas."

"You too, Nina. I love you."

"I love you too, Mills." Nina hung up. She'd picked the first of the *Earthsea* books for book club. If Millie was going to enter the world of Le Guin, she might as well do it with a posse.

Nina had chosen *The Starless Sea*, the new Erin Morgenstern, for her Christmas read, and was about a million miles away when the phone rang. The sound startled her and rudely awakened Phil the cat, who responded to the sudden threat by digging his claws into her knee.

“I’m sorry, who is this?” said Nina, disengaging each claw individually and trying not to swear at the cat. “Liz, is that you?”

It sounded like Liz was talking from inside a sack, but then Nina realized she was just freaking out and trying not to cry.

“I can’t find Ferdinand! I’ve looked all over the store and he’s not here.”

Nina frowned. “Was the door open?”

“No! Of course not! I unlocked it when I came over with the turkey, and this morning he came right over.”

“Wait, you were there this morning as well?”

“Yes! I brought him smoked trout for breakfast.” There was a pause. “It’s a special occasion.”

Nina raised her eyebrows. “No judgment, Liz, just asking. And you locked it when you left and it was still locked when you came back?” Phil jumped down from Nina’s lap in a huff, stalking off to beat up his new mouse and see if more salmon had arrived during his nap.

Liz was babbling, “Yes, because I had to put the plate down to unlock it, and that meant taking off the oven gloves, because it was hot, so I did all that and then when I got in he didn’t come.”

“You were bringing him hot turkey?”

Liz sounded like she wasn’t in the mood for an interrogation. “Nina! Focus! My cat is gone!”

*Her* cat? “Don’t panic, I’ll come over and help you look. He’s enormous, he has to be somewhere.”

“Well, I’ve looked everywhere.”

“Calm down. I’m on my way.”



As she approached the store she saw all the lights were on. Nina knocked on the glass, but then, as Liz didn’t appear, used her keys and went inside.

“Liz?”

“I’m in the stock room...” Liz sounded tearful, and Nina hurried to the back of the store and down a few steps. The stock room, as the name suggested, was where they kept old stock, new stock, stores of merchandise, the folding chairs for events and things like that. It was more utilitarian than the office, but also far larger.

Nina came through the door somewhat cautiously. “Liz? Did you find him?”

Liz was kneeling on the floor, and as she turned to face her Nina was shocked to see the older woman was crying. “Yes, but he’s dying. He hid away in the mail cupboard and every time I try to move him he bites me.”

There was a commotion on the stairs and Polly appeared.

“Ok, panic over, I’m here.” She saw Nina. “Wow, she called out all the troops. Did you find him?”

Nina nodded, but frowned a warning.

“He’s in the mail cupboard.”

“Is he writing a letter?”

“No,” said Liz, still very upset. “I think he’s dying. He won’t let me pet him.”

Polly pushed past Nina. “Let me take a look, I watched an entire National Geographic docu-series on the history of cats last week, I feel totally qualified to evaluate.” She giggled.

Nina raised her eyebrows. “Polly, are you drunk?”

Polly made a face. “What’s drunk, really? Liz called me while I was still at dinner with my family. We’re very traditional Jews, we go for Chinese on Christmas day, and I may have had several glasses of wine.” She looked serious for a moment. “Chinese food is very thirst-making.”

Nina nodded at her, then rolled her eyes when Polly got down on her knees and elbowed Liz aside. Polly reached in her hand, then pulled it back again. “Oh...it’s wet in there. Hang on...” She pulled out her phone and switched on the light. “Let’s take a look...”

There was a pause. Then Polly said huh, fiddled with the phone a second, then took a photo inside the closet. Ferdinand growled warningly at the flash, but Polly just shushed him.

Then she sat back and turned the phone around. “Is it just me...or is that a kitten?”

Liz and Nina pushed forward. There, on the screen, was indubitably a very small kitten, pushed up against Ferdinand’s tummy.

“Um. Where did he get that?” said Liz, nonplussed.

Nina looked at her. “Maybe someone gave it to him for Christmas?”

“You think?” Liz was clearly struggling.

“No, Liz,” said Polly. “Take a deep breath: Ferdinand is giving birth to kittens, right here and now, in our mail cupboard.”

“But he’s a boy.”

“Well then he’s a miracle cat, because he’s already given birth to one kitten and is on his way to another.” Polly worked her phone. “Hang on, I’m googling it.” She muttered, “I guess that explains his incredible roundness.”

Liz and Nina stared at her.

“I just thought he was a full-bodied kind of guy, you know...” said Liz, “I never had a cat before. And besides,” she added, “this is a safe space for all body types, so, you know...” she trailed off. “I ordered him a collar with his name on it.”

Nina shrugged. “So? Why shouldn’t a girl be called Ferdinand? Restrictively gendered names are so old-hat.”

“Alright,” said Polly, peering back into the closet with her flashlight, “According to this web article, everything seems just fine and we should just stand by and let her get on with it.”

There was a knocking from upstairs in the store. Nina, starting to giggle a bit at Ferdinand’s Surprise, headed up.

Clare Girvan was standing outside the store, knocking. She was wearing a puffy jacket and a Santa hat, but still Nina hurried to open the door and get her in out of the cold.

“Clare! What are you doing here? Where’s everyone else?”

“Surprise!” Clare said, and then stepped back to reveal Tom, crouching behind her.

Nina nearly toppled over. “What? I thought you were in Chicago!”

He picked her up and swung her around. “I was!”

Over his shoulder Nina could see Lili and Edward with Annabel, and Lili’s sister Rachel and her husband Richard. Tom’s brother. They all grinned and waved.

Tom was bubbling over with excitement and chattering away. “I was stuck in Chicago, but then I got a standby seat to San Francisco, which was at least the right state, then I took a tiny plane to Orange County because it was the only one with room, and Richard drove down and got me from the airport. I wanted to surprise you.” He looked down at her. “I’m so glad to see you, but why aren’t you at home?”

“Oh my gosh,” said Nina, suddenly remembering. “The cat is having kittens, that’s why I’m here.”

There was a blur and a noise as if of rushing wings, and Clare bolted into the store, closely followed by Annabel. Laughing, Nina turned to follow, the rest of the family trailing after them.



While the stock room was bigger than the office, it still wasn't what you would call large, and it was quite a squeeze. Once the kids had taken quick peeks at Ferdinand and her babies, which now numbered four, Polly sent them all back upstairs. She had watched three different videos about how cats deliver kittens, and had totally taken charge. "She's done now, but she still has to deliver the placentas, and settle down to nurse. She needs peace and quiet, so off you go." She waved her hands at them and returned to her kitten vigil. Nina couldn't be completely certain, but it looked like Polly was having a marvelous time. Who knew?

"I don't know about you," said Liz, walking into the office. "But I need a drink." She opened her desk drawer and pulled out her trusty bottle of brandy. "I keep this in case someone faints, and right now that someone might be me. Anyone else?"

Tom took a glass, as did Edward, Richard and Rachel.

"I'd like to propose a toast," said Liz, "To Ferdinand the Book Cat, who made me see how wrong I was about cats, and then doubled down by bringing four more into my life."

"We're not having five store cats," said Nina.

"No, of course not. We'll find homes for at least three of them."

Annabel opened her mouth, but her mom was way ahead of her. "No kittens," said Lili, "Don't even ask."

“Hey,” said Clare, “Maybe we’ll get lucky and you’ll have kittens instead of a dumb baby.” She looked around with gleaming eyes. “Wouldn’t that be awesome?”

There was a short, uncomfortable silence.

“Um...” said Edward, who had gone very red. “Lili, what is she talking about?”

Lili, who was even redder, looked at her sister Rachel, who grinned, and then at Clare. “I’m not sure...”

Clare frowned at her. “You’re having a baby. Annabel said.”

Everyone swiveled to look at Annabel, who put up her hands. “Clare brought me the test stick thingy and asked what it was.” She looked upset. “I’m sorry Mom, I guess she found it...”

“Why are you sorry?” asked Clare. “I think it’s awesome. Don’t you think it’s awesome, Edward? It’s awesome.”

Everyone swiveled to look at Edward, who was looking at Lili. “Is it true?”

Lili, her eyes shining with a combination of embarrassment, worry and the beginnings of hope, nodded.

Edward leapt forward and picked her up, kissing her firmly and then setting her down gently. “I think it’s the most wonderful news I’ve ever heard.”

“Of course,” said Clare, “It would be a lot better if it was kittens. I’m just saying.”



The next morning Nina woke up next to Tom and was surprised to see Phil sitting on his chest purring like a lawnmower.

Tom turned his head, careful not to unbalance the cat. “What did you say to him?”

“Nothing,” said Nina. “Honestly, I never even mentioned you.”

“Well, when I woke up he was here.”

“I told you he’d come around eventually. Maybe he’s having a Scrooge-like epiphany, overwhelmed with holiday spirit?”

Phil got up, stretched, and turned to walk down the bed, stepping very pointedly on Tom’s balls with each of his four feet.

“Well,” said Tom, in a strangled voice, “I guess his goodwill to all men stops just before me.”

“Or he’s taking the Nutcracker concept very literally.”

Tom grinned at her and reached out. “Do you know what I want to do now?”

“No,” said Nina, though she was getting a good idea.

“I want to get a head-start on next year’s naughty list.”

Nina giggled. “All you want for Christmas is me?”

Tom kissed her and pulled her close. "All I want forever is you." He buried his face in her neck for a minute, then lifted his head to gaze at her. "But for Christmas is a very good start."