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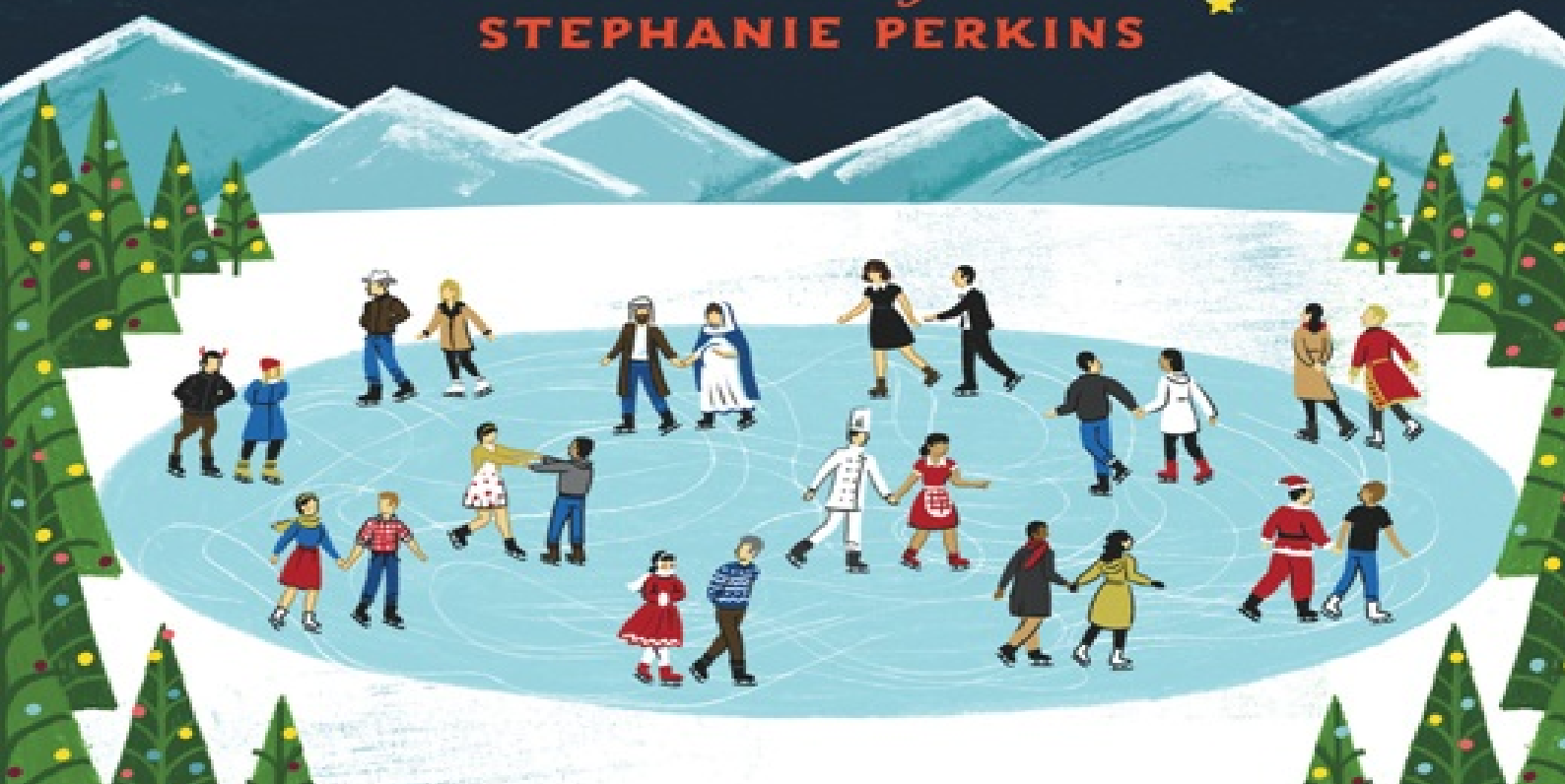
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MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME

Twelve Holiday Stories

Edited by

STEPHANIE PERKINS



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FOR JARROD, BEST FRIEND AND TRUE LOVE

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Dec. 31, 2014, almost midnight

It was cold out on the patio, under the deck. Frigid. Dark.

Dark because Mags was outside at midnight, and dark because she was in the shadows.

This was the last place anyone would look for her—anyone, and especially Noel. She'd miss all the excitement.

Thank God. Mags should have thought of this years ago.

She leaned back against Alicia's house and started eating the Chex mix she'd brought out with her (Alicia's mom made the best Chex mix.) Mags could hear the music playing inside, and then she couldn't—and that was a good sign. It meant that the countdown was starting.

"Ten!" she heard someone shout.

"Nine!" more people joined in.

"Eight!"

Mags was going to miss the whole thing.

Perfect.

Dec. 31, 2011, almost midnight

"Are there nuts in that?" the boy asked.

Mags paused, holding a cracker piled with pesto and cream cheese in front of her mouth. "I think there are pine nuts..." she said, crossing her eyes to look at it.

"Are pine nuts tree nuts?"

"I have no idea," Mags said. "I don't think pine nuts grow on pine trees, do they?"

The boy shrugged. He had shaggy brown hair and wide-open blue eyes. He was wearing a Pokémon T-shirt.

"I'm not much of a tree-nut expert," Mags said.

"Me neither," he said. "You'd think I would be—if I accidentally eat one, it could kill me. If there

were something out there that could kill you, wouldn't you try to be an expert on it?"

"I don't know...." Mags shoved the cracker in her mouth and started chewing. "I don't know very much about cancer. Or car accidents."

"Yeah..." the boy said, looking sadly at the buffet table. He was skinny. And pale. "But tree nuts specifically have it out for me, for me *personally*. They're more like assassins than, like, possible dangers."

"Damn," Mags said, "what'd you ever do to tree nuts?"

The boy laughed. "Ate them, I guess."

The music, which had been really loud, stopped. "It's almost midnight!" somebody shouted.

They both looked around. Mags's friend Alicia, from homeroom, was standing on the couch. It was Alicia's party—the first New Year's Eve party that Mags, at fifteen, had ever been invited to.

"*Nine!*" Alicia yelled.

"*Eight!*" There were a few dozen people in the basement, and they were all shouting now.

"*Seven!*"

"I'm Noel," the boy said, holding out his hand.

Mags brushed all the pesto and traces of nuts off her hand and shook his. "Mags."

"*Four!*"

"*Three!*"

"It's nice to meet you, Mags."

"You, too, Noel. Congratulations on evading the tree nuts for another year."

"They almost had me with that pesto dip."

"Yeah." She nodded. "It was a close call."

Dec. 31, 2012, almost midnight

Noel fell against the wall and slid down next to Mags, then bumped his shoulder against hers. He blew a paper party horn in her direction. "Hey."

"Hey." She smiled at him. He was wearing a plaid jacket, and his white shirt was open at the collar. Noel was pale and flushed easily. Right now he was pink from the top of his forehead to the second button of his shirt. "You're a dancing machine," she said.

"I like to dance, Mags."

"I know you do."

"And I only get so many opportunities."

She raised an eyebrow.

"I like to dance *in public*," Noel said. "With other people. It's a communal experience."

"I kept your tie safe," she said, and held out a red silk necktie. He'd been dancing on the coffee table when he threw it at her.

"Thank you," he said, taking it and slinging it around his neck. "That was a good catch—but I was actually trying to lure you out onto the dance floor."

"That was a coffee table, Noel."

"There was room for two, Margaret."

Mags wrinkled her nose, considering. "I don't think there was."

"There's always room for you with me, on every coffee table," he said. "Because you are my best friend."

“Pony is your best friend.”

Noel ran his fingers through his hair. It was sweaty and curly and fell past his ears. “Pony is also my best friend. And also Frankie. And Connor.”

“And your mom,” Mags said.

Noel turned his grin on her. “But especially you. It’s our anniversary. I can’t believe you wouldn’t dance with me on our anniversary.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said. (She knew exactly what he was talking about.)

“It happened right there.” Noel pointed at the buffet table where Alicia’s mom always laid out snacks. “I was having an allergic reaction, and you saved my life. You stuck an epinephrine pen into my heart.”

“I ate some pesto,” Mags said.

“Heroically,” Noel agreed.

She sat up suddenly. “You didn’t eat any of the chicken salad tonight, did you? There were almonds.”

“Still saving my life,” he said.

“*Did* you?”

“No. But I had some fruit cocktail. I think there were strawberries in it—my mouth is all tingly.”

Mags squinted at him. “Are you okay?”

Noel looked okay. He looked flushed. And sweaty. He looked like his teeth were too wide for his mouth, and his mouth was too wide for his face.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I’ll tell you if my tongue gets puffy.”

“Keep your lewd allergic reactions to yourself,” she said.

Noel wiggled his eyebrows. “You should see what happens when I eat shellfish.”

Mags rolled her eyes and tried not to laugh. After a second, she looked over at him again. “Wait, what happens when you eat shellfish?”

He waved his hand in front of his chest, halfheartedly. “I get a rash.”

She frowned. “*How* are you still alive?”

“Through the efforts of everyday heroes like yourself.”

“Don’t eat the pink salad, either,” she said. “It’s shrimp.”

Noel flicked his red tie around her neck and smiled at her. Which was different than a grin. “Thanks.”

“Thank *you*,” she said, pulling the ends of the tie even and looking down at them. “It matches my sweater.” Mags was wearing a giant sweater dress, some sort of Scandinavian design with a million colors.

“Everything matches your sweater,” he said. “You look like a Christmas-themed Easter egg.”

“I feel like a really colorful Muppet,” she said. “One of the fuzzy ones.”

“I like it,” Noel said. “It’s a feast for the senses.”

She couldn’t tell if he was making fun of her, so she changed the subject. “Where did Pony go?”

“Over there.” Noel pointed across the room. “He wanted to get in position to be standing casual near Simini when midnight strikes.”

“So he can kiss her?”

“Indeed,” Noel said. “On the mouth, if all goes to plan.”

“That’s so gross,” Mags said, fiddling with the ends of Noel’s tie.

“Kissing?”

“No ... kissing is fine.” She felt herself blushing. Fortunately she wasn’t as pale as Noel;

wouldn't be painted all over her face and throat. "What's gross is using New Year's Eve as an excuse to kiss someone who might want not want to kiss you. Using it as a trick."

"Maybe Simini *does* want to kiss Pony."

"Or maybe it'll be really awkward," Mags said. "And she'll do it anyway because she feels like she has to."

"He's not going to maul her," Noel said. "He'll do the eye contact thing."

"What eye contact thing?"

Noel swung his head around and made eye contact with Mags. He raised his eyebrows hopefully and his eyes went all soft and possible. It was definitely a face that said, *Hey. Is it okay if I kiss you?*

"Oh," Mags said. "That's really good."

Noel snapped out of it—and made a face that said, *Well, duh*. "Of course it's good. I've kissed girls before."

"*Have you?*" Mags asked. She knew that Noel talked to girls. But she'd never heard of him having a girlfriend. And she *would* have heard of it—she was one of Noel's four to five best friends.

"Pfft," he said. "Three girls. Eight different occasions. I think I know how to make eye contact."

That was significantly more kissing than Mags had managed in her sixteen years.

She glanced over at Pony again. He was standing near the television, studying his phone. Simini was a few feet away, talking to her friends.

"Still," Mags said, "it feels like cheating."

"How is it cheating?" Noel asked, following her eyes. "Neither of them is in a relationship."

"Not that kind of cheating," Mags said. "More like ... skipping ahead. If you like someone, you should have to make an effort. You should have to get to know the person—you should have to work for that first kiss."

"Pony and Simini already know each other."

"Right," she agreed, "and they've never gone out. Has Simini ever even *indicated* that she's interested?"

"Sometimes people need help," Noel said. "I mean—look at Pony."

Mags did. He was wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt. He had a half-grown-out mohawk now, but he'd had a ponytail back in middle school, so everyone still called him that. Pony was usually loud and funny, and sometimes loud and obnoxious. He was always drawing on his arm with ink pens.

"That guy has no idea how to tell a girl he likes her," Noel said. "None at all.... Now, look at Simini."

Mags did. Simini was small and soft, and so shy that coming out of her shell wasn't even on the menu. If you wanted to talk to Simini, you had to climb inside her shell with her.

"Not everyone has our social graces," Noel said, sighing, and leaning into Mags's space to gesture toward Pony and Simini. "Not everyone knows how to reach out for the things they want. Maybe midnight is exactly what these two need to get rolling—would you begrudge them that?"

Mags turned to Noel. His face was just over her shoulder. He smelled warm. And like some sort of Walgreens body spray. "You're being melodramatic," she said.

"Life-or-death situations bring it out in me."

"Like coffee table dancing?"

"No, the strawberries," he said, sticking out his tongue and trying to talk around it. "Duth it look puffy?"

Mags was trying to get a good look at Noel's tongue when the music dropped out.

"It's almost midnight!" Alicia shouted, standing near the television. The countdown was starting

Times Square. Mags saw Pony look up from his phone and inch toward Simini.

“*Nine!*” the room shouted.

“*Eight!*”

“Your tongue looks fine,” Mags said, turning back to Noel.

He pulled his tongue back in his mouth and smiled.

Mags raised her eyebrows. She hardly realized she was doing it. “Happy anniversary, Noel.”

Noel’s eyes went soft. At least, she thought they did. “Happy anniversary, Mags.”

“*Four!*”

And then Natalie ran over, slid down the wall next to Noel, and grabbed his shoulder.

Natalie was friends with both of them, but she wasn’t a *best* friend. She had caramel-brown hair and she always wore flannel shirts that gapped over her breasts. “Happy New Year!” she shouted at them.

“Not yet,” Mags said.

“*One!*” everyone else yelled.

“Happy New Year,” Noel said to Natalie.

Then Natalie leaned toward him, and he leaned toward her, and they kissed.

Dec. 31, 2013, almost midnight

Noel was standing on the arm of the couch with his hands out to Mags.

Mags was walking past him, shaking her head.

“Come on!” he shouted over the music.

She shook her head *and* rolled her eyes.

“It’s our last chance to dance together!” he said. “It’s our senior year!”

“We have months left to dance,” Mags said, stopping at the food table to get a mini quiche.

Noel walked down the couch, stepped onto the coffee table, then stretched one long leg out as far as he could to make it onto the love seat next to Mags.

“They’re playing our song,” he said.

“They’re playing ‘Baby Got Back,’” Mags said.

Noel grinned.

“Just for that,” she said, “I’m never dancing with you.”

“You never dance with me anyway,” he said.

“I do everything else with you,” Mags whined. It was true. She studied with Noel. She ate lunch with Noel. She picked Noel up on the way to school. “I even go with you to get a haircut.”

He touched the back of his hair. It was brown and thick, and fell in loose curls down to his collar. “Mags, when you don’t go, they cut it too short.”

“I’m not complaining,” she said. “I’m just sitting this round out.”

“What’re you eating?” he asked.

Mags looked down at the tray. “Some kind of quiche, I think.”

“Can I eat it?”

She popped another one in her mouth and munched it around. It didn’t taste like tree nuts or strawberries or kiwi fruit or shellfish. “I think so,” she said. She held up a quiche, and Noel leaned over and ate it out of her fingers. Standing on the love seat, he was seven-and-a-half feet tall. He was wearing a ridiculous white suit. Three pieces. Where did somebody even find a three-piece white suit?

“S’good,” he said. “Thanks.” He reached for Mags’s Coke, and she let him have it—then he jerked it away from his mouth and cocked his head. “Margaret. They’re playing our song.”

Mags listened. “Is this that Ke\$ha song?”

“Dance with me. It’s our anniversary.”

“I don’t like dancing with a bunch of people.”

“But that’s the best way to dance! Dancing is a communal experience!”

“For you,” Mags said, pushing his thigh. He wavered, but didn’t fall. “We’re not the same person.”

“I know,” Noel said with a sigh. “*You* can eat tree nuts. Eat one of those brownies for me—let me watch.”

Mags looked at the buffet and pointed to a plate of pecan brownies. “These?”

“Yeah,” Noel said.

She picked up a brownie and took a bite. Crumbs fell on her flowered dress, and she brushed them off.

“Is it good?” he asked.

“Really good,” she said. “Really dense. Moist.” She took another bite.

“So unfair,” Noel said, holding on to the back of the love seat and leaning farther over. “Let me see.”

Mags opened her mouth and stuck out her tongue.

“Unfair,” he said. “That looks delicious.”

She closed her mouth and nodded.

“Finish your delicious brownie and dance with me,” he said.

“The whole world is dancing with you,” Mags said. “Leave me alone.”

She grabbed another quiche and another brownie, then put Noel behind her.

There weren’t that many places to sit in Alicia’s basement; that’s why Mags usually ended up on the floor. (And maybe why Noel usually ended up on the coffee table.) Pony had claimed the beanbag by the bar in the corner, and Simini was sitting on his lap. Simini smiled at Mags, and Mags smiled back and waved.

There wasn’t any booze in the bar. Alicia’s parents put it away whenever she had a party. All the barstools were taken, so Mags got a hand from somebody and sat up on the bar itself.

She watched Noel dance. (With Natalie. And then with Alicia and Connor. And then by himself with his arms over his head.)

She watched everybody dance.

They had all their parties in this basement. After football games and after dances. Two years ago Mags hadn’t really known anybody in this room, except for Alicia. Now everybody here was either her best friend, or a friend, or someone she knew well enough to stay away from ...

Or Noel.

Mags finished her brownie and watched Noel jump around.

Noel was her very best friend—even if she wasn’t his. Noel was her *person*.

He was the first person she talked to in the morning, and the last person she texted at night. Not intentionally or methodically. That’s just the way it was between them. If she didn’t tell Noel about something, it was almost like it didn’t happen.

They’d been tight ever since they ended up in journalism class together, the second semester of sophomore year. (*That’s* when they should celebrate their friendiversary—not on New Year’s Eve.) And then they signed up for photography and tennis together.

They were so tight, Mags went with Noel to prom last year, even though he already had a date.

“Obviously, you’re coming with us,” Noel said.

“Is that okay with Amy?”

“Amy knows we’re a package deal. She probably wouldn’t even like me if I wasn’t standing right next to you.”

(Noel and Amy never went out again after prom. They weren’t together long enough to break up.)

Mags was thinking about getting another brownie when someone suddenly turned off the music and someone else flickered the lights. Alicia ran by the bar, shouting, “It’s almost midnight!”

“Ten!” Pony called out a few seconds later.

Mags glanced around the room until she found Noel again—standing on the couch. He was already looking at her. He stepped onto the coffee table in Mags’s direction and grinned, wolfishly. All of Noel’s grins were a little bit wolfish: he had way too many teeth. Mags took a breath that shook on the way out. (Noel was her *person*.)

“Eight!” the room shouted.

Noel beckoned her with his hand.

Mags raised an eyebrow.

He waved at her again and made a face that said, *Come on, Mags*.

“Four!”

Then Frankie stepped onto the coffee table with Noel and slung an arm around his shoulders.

“Three!”

Noel turned to Frankie and grinned.

“Two!”

Frankie raised her eyebrows.

“One!”

Frankie leaned up into Noel. And Noel leaned down into Frankie.

And they kissed.

Dec. 31, 2014, about nine p.m.

Mags hadn’t seen Noel yet this winter break. His family went to Walt Disney World for Christmas.

It’s 80 degrees, he texted her, and I’ve been wearing mouse ears for 72 hours straight.

Mags hadn’t seen Noel since August, when she went over to his house early one morning to say good-bye before his dad drove him to Notre Dame.

Noel didn’t come home for Thanksgiving; plane tickets were too expensive.

She’d seen photos he posted of other people online. (People from his residence hall. People at parties. Girls.) And she and Noel had texted. They’d texted a lot. But Mags hadn’t seen him since August—she hadn’t heard his voice since then.

Honestly, she couldn’t remember it. She couldn’t remember ever thinking about Noel’s voice before. Whether it was deep and rumbled. Or high and smooth. She couldn’t remember what Noel sounded like—or what he looked like, not in motion. She could only see his face in the dozens of photos she still had saved on her phone.

You’re going to Alicia’s, yeah? he’d texted her yesterday. He was in an airport, on his way home.

Where else would I go? Mags texted back.

Cool.

Mags got to Alicia’s early and helped her clean out the basement, then helped Alicia’s mom from

the brownies. Alicia was home from college in South Dakota; she had a tattoo on her back now of a meadowlark.

Mags didn't have any new tattoos. She hadn't changed at all. She hadn't even left Omaha—she got a scholarship to study industrial design at one of the schools in town. A full scholarship. It would have been stupid for Mags to leave.

Nobody showed up for the party on time, but everybody showed up. “Is Noel coming?” Alicia asked, when the doorbell had stopped ringing.

How would I know? Mags wanted to say. But she did know. “Yeah, he’s coming,” she said. “He’ll be here.” She’d gotten a little chocolate on the sleeve of her dress. She tried to scrape it off with her fingernail.

Mags had changed three times before she settled on this dress.

She was going to wear a dress that Noel had always liked, gray with deep red peonies—but she didn't want him to think that she hadn't had a single original thought since the last time she saw him.

So she'd changed. Then changed again. And ended up in this one, a cream-colored lace shift that she'd never worn before, with baroque-patterned pink and gold tights.

She stood in front of her bedroom mirror, staring at herself. At her dark brown hair. Her thick eyebrows and blunt chin. She tried to see herself the way Noel would see her, for the first time since August. Then she tried to pretend she didn't care.

Then she left.

She got halfway to her car, then ran back up to her room to put on the earrings Noel had given her last year for her eighteenth birthday—angel wings.

Mags was talking to Pony when Noel finally arrived. Pony was in school in Iowa, studying engineering. He'd grown his hair back out into a ponytail, and Simini was tugging on it just because it made her happy. She was studying art in Utah, but she was probably going to transfer to Iowa. Or Pony was going to move to Utah. Or they were going to meet in the middle. “What's in the middle?” Pony said. “Nebraska? Shit, honey, maybe we should move home.”

Mags felt it when Noel walked in. (He came in through the back door, and a bunch of cold air came in with him.)

She looked up over Pony's shoulder and saw Noel, and Noel saw her—and he strode straight through the basement, over the love seat and up onto the coffee table and over the couch and through Pony and Simini, and wrapped his arms around Mags, swinging her in a circle.

“Mags!” Noel said.

“Noel,” Mags whispered.

Noel hugged Pony and Simini, too. And Frankie and Alicia and Connor. And everybody. Noel was a hugger.

Then he came back to Mags and pinned her against the wall, crowding her as much as hugging her. “Oh, God, Mags,” he said. “Never leave me.”

“I never left you,” she said to his chest. “I never go anywhere.”

“Never let me leave you,” he said to the top of her head.

“When do you go back to Notre Dame?” she asked.

“Sunday.”

Noel was wearing wine-colored pants (softer than jeans, rougher than velvet), a blue-on-blue striped T-shirt, and a gray jacket with the collar turned up.

He was as pale as ever.

His eyes were as wide and as blue.

But his hair was cut short: buzzed over his ears and up the back, with long brown curls spilling over his forehead. Mags brought her hand up to the back of his head. It felt like something was missing.

“You should have come with me, Margaret,” he said. “The young woman who attacked me couldn’t stop herself.”

“No,” she said, rubbing Noel’s scalp. “It looks good. It suits you.”

* * *

Everything was the same, and everything was different.

Same people. Same music. Same couches.

But they’d all grown apart for four months, and in wildly different directions.

Frankie brought beer and hid it under the couch, and Natalie was drunk when she got there. Connor brought his new college boyfriend, and everyone hated him—and Alicia kept trying to pull Connor aside to tell him so. The basement seemed more crowded than usual, and there wasn’t as much dancing....

There was about as much dancing as there would be at a normal party—at somebody else’s party. *Their* parties used to be *different*. They used to be twenty-five people in a basement who knew each other so well, they never had to hold back.

Noel didn’t dance tonight. He stuck with Pony and Simini and Frankie. He stuck by Mags’s side like he was glued there.

She was so glad that she and Noel hadn’t stopped texting—that she still knew what he woke up worried about. Everybody else’s inside jokes were seven months old, but Noel and Mags hadn’t missed a beat.

Noel took a beer when Frankie offered him one. But when Mags rolled her eyes, he handed it to Pony.

“Is it weird being in Omaha?” Simini asked her. “Now that everybody’s left?”

“It’s like walking through the mall after it closes,” Mags said. “I miss you guys so much.”

Noel startled. “Hey,” he said to Mags, pulling on her sleeve.

“What?”

“Come here, come here—come with me.”

He was pulling her away from their friends, out of the basement, up the stairs. When they got to the first floor, he said, “Too far, can’t hear the music.”

“What?”

They went down the stairs again and stopped midway, and Noel switched places with her, so she was standing on the higher step. “Dance with me, Mags, they’re playing our song.”

Mags tipped her head. “‘A Thousand Years’?”

“It’s our actual song,” he said. “Dance with me.”

“How is this our song?” she asked.

“It was playing when we met,” Noel said.

“When?”

“When we met,” he said, rolling his hand, like he was hurrying her along.

“When we met *here*?”

“Yes. When we met. Downstairs. Sophomore year. And you saved my life.”

“I never saved your life, Noel.”

“Why do you always ruin this story?”

“You remember the song that was playing when we met?”

“I always remember the song that’s playing,” he said. “All the time.”

That was true, he did. All Mags could think to say now was, “What?”

Noel groaned.

“I don’t like to dance,” she said.

“You don’t like to dance *in front of people*,” he said.

“That’s true.”

“Just a minute.” Noel sighed and ran downstairs. “Don’t go anywhere,” he shouted up to her.

“I never go anywhere!” she shouted back.

She heard the song start over.

Then Noel was running back up the stairs. He stood on the step below her and held up his hand

“Please.”

Mags sighed and lifted up her hands. She wasn’t sure what to do with them ...

Noel took one of her hands in his and put her other hand on his shoulder, curling his arm around her waist. “Jesus Christ,” he said, “was that so hard?”

“I don’t know why this is so important to you,” she said. “Dancing.”

“I don’t know why it’s so important to you,” he said. “Not to dance with me.”

She was a little bit taller than him like this. They were swaying.

Alicia’s mom came down the stairs. “Hey, Mags. Hey, Noel—how’s Notre Dame?”

Noel pulled Mags closer to let Mrs. Porter squeeze by. “Good,” he said.

“You guys really fell asleep against Michigan.”

“I’m not actually on the football team,” Noel said.

“That’s no excuse,” Mrs. Porter said.

Noel didn’t loosen his grip after Alicia’s mom was past them. His arm was all the way around Mags’s waist now, and their stomachs and chests were pressed together.

They’d touched a lot, over the years, as friends. Noel liked to touch. Noel hugged. And tickled and pulled hair. Noel pulled people into his lap. He apparently kissed anyone who raised their eyebrows at him on New Year’s Eve....

But Noel had never held Mags like this.

Mags had never felt his belt buckle in her hip. She’d never tasted his breath.

Mrs. Porter came back up the stairs, and Noel held Mags even tighter.

“A Thousand Years” began again.

“Did you tell somebody to start it over?” Mags asked.

“I put it on repeat,” he said. “They’ll stop it when they notice.”

“Was this on the *Twilight* sound track?”

“Dance with me, Mags.”

“I am,” she said.

“I know,” he said. “Don’t stop.”

“Okay.” Mags had been holding herself rigid, so that she’d still be standing upright, even if Noel let go. She stopped that now. She relaxed into his grip and let her arm slide over his shoulder. She touched the back of his hair again because she wanted to—because it was still missing.

“You don’t like it,” he said.

“I do like it,” she said. “It’s different.”

“You’re different.”

Mags made a face that said, *You’re crazy*.

“You are,” Noel said.

“I’m exactly the same,” she said. “I’m the only one who’s the same.”

“You’re the most different.”

“How?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “It’s like we all left, and you let go—and *you’re* the one who drifts away.”

“That’s bananas,” Mags said. “I talk to you every day.”

“It’s not enough,” he said. “I’ve never seen this dress before.”

“You don’t like my dress?”

“No.” Noel shook his head. She wasn’t used to seeing him like this. Agitated. “I like it. It’s pretty. But it’s different. You’re different. I feel like I can’t get close enough to you.” He pushed his forehead into hers.

She pushed back. “We’re pretty close, Noel.”

He sighed, frustrated, and it filled her nose and mouth. “Why don’t you have a boyfriend?”

Mags frowned. “Maybe I do.”

He looked devastated and pulled his head back. “You wouldn’t tell me something like that?”

“No,” she said, “no—Noel, of course, I would. I’d tell you. I just don’t know what you want me to say. I don’t know why I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“It’s going to get worse,” he said. “You’re going to keep changing.”

“Well, so are you,” she said.

“I never change.”

Mags laughed. “You’re a kaleidoscope. You change every time I look away.”

“Don’t you hate that?” he asked.

Mags shook her head. Her nose rubbed against his. “I love it.”

They’d stopped swaying.

“Are we still dancing?” she asked.

“We’re still dancing. Don’t get any big ideas, Margaret.” He let go of her hand and wrapped his arm around her, too. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“I never go anywhere,” Mags whispered.

He shook his head like she was a liar. “You’re my *best* friend,” he said.

“You have lots of best friends,” she said.

“No,” Noel said. “Just you.”

Mags held on to his neck with both arms. She pushed on his forehead. He smelled like skin.

“I can’t get close enough,” Noel said.

* * *

Somebody realized that the song was on repeat and skipped to the next one.

Somebody else realized that Mags and Noel were gone. Natalie came looking for Noel. “Noel! Come dance with me! They’re playing our song!”

It was that Ke\$ha song.

Noel pulled away from Mags. He grinned at her sheepishly. Like he’d been silly on the stairway but she’d forgive him, wouldn’t she? And there was a party downstairs, they should be at the party, right?

Noel went downstairs, and Mags followed.

The party had changed while they were gone: Everybody seemed a little bit younger again. They

kicked off their shoes and were jumping on couches. They were singing all the words to the songs they always sang all the words to.

Noel took off his jacket and threw it to Mags. She caught it because she had good hands.

Noel looked good.

Long and pale. In dark red jeans that no one else would wear. In a T-shirt that would have hung off him last year.

He looked so good.

And she loved him so much.

And Mags couldn't do it again.

She couldn't stand across the room and watch Noel kiss someone else. Not tonight. She couldn't watch somebody else get the kiss she'd been working so hard for, since the moment they'd met.

So, a few minutes before midnight, Mags scooped up a handful of Chex mix and acted like she was going into the hall. Like maybe she was going to the bathroom. Or maybe she was going to check the filter on the furnace.

Then she slipped out the back door. No one would think to look for her outside in the snow.

It was cold, but Mags still had Noel's jacket, so she put it on. She leaned against the foundation of Alicia's house and ate Alicia's mom's Chex mix—Mrs. Porter made the best Chex mix—and listened to the music.

Then the music stopped, and the counting started.

And it was *good* that Mags was out here, because it would hurt too much to be in there. It always hurt too much, and this year, it might kill her.

“Seven!”

“Six!”

“Mags?” someone called.

It was Noel. She recognized his voice.

“Margaret?”

“Four!”

“Here,” Mags said. Then, a little louder, *“Here!”* Because she was his best friend, and avoiding him was one thing, but hiding from him was another.

“Two!”

“Mags...”

She could see Noel then, in a shaft of moonlight breaking through the slats of the deck above her. His eyes had gone all soft, and he was raising his eyebrows.

“One!”

Mags nodded, and pushed with her shoulders away from the house, then Noel pushed her right back—pinning her as much as he was hugging her as much as he was crowding her against the wall.

He kissed her hard.

Mags hooked both arms around the back of his head, pressing their faces together, their chins and open mouths.

Noel held on to both of her shoulders.

After a few minutes—maybe more than a few minutes, after awhile—they both seemed to trust the other not to go.

They eased up.

Mags petted Noel's curls, pushing them out of his face. Noel pinned her to the wall from his hips to his shoulders, kissing her to the rhythm of whatever song was playing inside now.

When he pulled away, she was going to tell him that she loved him; when he pulled away, she was going to tell him not to let go. “Don’t,” Mags said, when Noel finally lifted his head.

“Mags,” he whispered. “My lips are going numb.”

“Then don’t kiss,” she said. “But don’t go.”

“No...” Noel pushed away from her, and her whole front went cold. “My lips are going numb—were you eating strawberries?”

“Oh, God,” she said. “Chex mix.”

“Chex mix?”

“Cashews,” she said. “And probably other tree nuts.”

“Ah,” Noel said.

Mags was already dragging him away from the wall. “Do you have something with you?”

“Benadryl,” he said. “In my car. But it makes me sleepy. I’m probably fine.”

“Where are your keys?”

“In my pocket,” he said, pointing at her, at his jacket. His tongue sounded thick.

Mags found the keys and kept pulling him. His car was parked on the street, and the Benadryl was in the glove compartment. Mags watched Noel take it, then stood with her arms folded, waiting for whatever came next.

“Can you breathe?” she asked.

“I can breathe.”

“What usually happens?”

He grinned. “This has never happened before.”

“You know what I mean.”

“My mouth tingles. My tongue and lips swell up. I get hives. Do you want to check me for hives?”
Wolfish.

“Then what?” she asked.

“Then nothing,” he said. “Then I take Benadryl. I have an EpiPen, but I’ve never had to use it.”

“I’m going to check you for hives,” she said.

He grinned again and held out his arms. She looked at them. She lifted up his striped T-shirt.... He was pale. And covered in goose bumps. And there were freckles she’d never known about on his chest.

“I don’t think you have hives,” she said.

“I can feel the Benadryl working already.” He dropped his arms and put them around her.

“Don’t kiss me again,” Mags said.

“Immediately,” Noel said. “I won’t kiss you again immediately.”

She leaned into him, her temple on his chin, and closed her eyes.

“I knew you’d save my life,” he said.

“I wouldn’t have had to save it if I didn’t almost kill you.”

“Don’t give yourself too much credit. It’s the tree nuts who are trying to kill me.”

She nodded.

They were both quiet for a few minutes.

“Noel?”

“Yeah?”

She had to ask him this—she had to make herself ask it: “Are you just being melodramatic?”

“Mags, I promise. I wouldn’t fake an allergic response.”

“No,” she said. “With the kiss.”

“There was more than one kiss....”

“With all of them,” she said. “Were you just—embellishing?”

Mags braced for him to say something silly.

“No,” Noel said. Then, “Were you just humoring me?”

“God. No,” she said. “Did it feel like I was humoring you?”

Noel shook his head, rubbing his chin into her temple.

“What are we doing?” Mags asked.

“I don’t know....” he said eventually. “I know things have to change, but ... I can’t lose you. don’t think I get another one like you.”

“I’m not going anywhere, Noel.”

“You *are*,” he said, squeezing her. “And it’s okay. Just ... I need you to take me with you.”

Mags didn’t know what to say to that.

It was cold. Noel was shivering. She should give him his jacket.

“Mags?”

“Yeah?”

“What do *you* need?”

Mags swallowed.

In the three years she and Noel had been friends, she’d spent a lot of time pretending she didn’t need anything more than what he was already giving her. She’d told herself there was a difference between wanting something and needing it....

“I need you to be my person,” Mags said. “I need to see you. And hear you. I need you to stay alive. And I need you to stop kissing other people just because they’re standing next to you when the ball drops.”

Noel laughed.

“I also need you not to laugh at me,” she said.

He pulled his face back and looked at her. “No, you don’t.”

She kissed his chin without opening her mouth.

“You can have all those things,” he said carefully. “You can have me, Mags, if you want me.”

“I’ve always wanted you,” she said, mortified by the extent to which it was true.

Noel leaned in to kiss her, and she dropped her forehead against his lips.

They were quiet.

And it was cold.

“Happy anniversary, Mags.”

“Happy New Year, Noel.”



The **LADY** and the **FOX**
KELLY LINK

Someone is in the garden.

“Daniel,” Miranda says. “It’s Santa Claus. He’s looking in the window.”

“No, it’s not,” Daniel says. He doesn’t look. “We’ve already had the presents. Besides. No such thing as Santa.”

They are together under the tree, the celebrated Honeywell Christmas tree. They are both eleven years old. There’s just enough space up against the trunk to sit cross-legged. Daniel is running the train set around the tree forwards, then backwards, then forwards again. Miranda is admiring her best present, a pair of gold-handled scissors shaped like a crane. The beak is the blade. *Snip, snip*, she slices brittle needles one by one off the branch above her. A smell of pine. A small green needle rain.

It must be very cold outside in the garden. The window shines with frost. It’s long past bedtime. If it isn’t Santa Claus, it could be a burglar come to steal someone’s jewels. Or an axe murderer.

Or else, of course, it’s one of Daniel’s hundreds of uncles or cousins. Because there isn’t a bear and the face in the window isn’t a jolly face. Even partially obscured by darkness and frost, it has the Honeywell look to it. The room is full of adult Honeywells talking about the things that Honeywells always talk about, which is to say everything, horses and houses and God and grouting, tanning salons and—of course—theater. Always theater. Honeywells like to talk. When Honeywells have no lines to speak, they improvise. All the world’s a stage.

Rare to see a Honeywell in isolation. They come bunched like bananas. Not single spies, but battalions. And as much as Miranda admires the red-gold Honeywell hair, the exaggerated, expressive Honeywell good looks, the Honeywell repertoire of jokes and confidences, poetry and nonsense, sometimes she needs an escape. Honeywells want you to talk, too. They ask questions until your mouth gets dry from answering.

Daniel is exceptionally restful for a Honeywell. He doesn’t care if you are there or not.

Miranda wriggles out from under the tree, through the press of leggy Honeywells in black tie and party dresses: apocalyptically orange taffeta, slithering, clingy satins in canary and violet, foam white silk already spotted with wine.

She is patted on the head, winked at. Someone in cloth of gold says, “Poor little lamb.”

“Baaaah humbug,” Miranda blurts, beats on. Her own dress is green, fine-wale corduroy. Empire waist. Pinching at the armpits. Miranda’s interest in these things is half professional. Her mother Joannie (resident the last six months in a Phuket jail, will be there for many years to come), with Elspeth Honeywell’s dresser and confidante.

Daniel is Elspeth’s son. Miranda is Elspeth’s goddaughter.

There are two men languorously kissing in the kitchen. Leaning against the sink, where one of the Honeywell kittens licks sauce out of a gravy boat. A girl—only a few years older than Miranda—lays soiled and tattered Tarot cards out on the farmhouse table. Empty wine bottles tilt like cannons; butcher knife sheathed in a demolished Christmas cake. Warmth seeps from the stove: just inside the Aga’s warming drawer, Miranda can see the other kittens, asleep in a crusted pan.

Miranda picks up a bag of party trash, lipstick-blotted napkins, throwaway champagne glasses, greasy fragments of pastry, hauls it out through the kitchen door. Mama cat slips inside as Miranda goes out.

Snow is falling. Big, sticky clumps that melt on her hair, her cheeks. Snow on Christmas. None in Phuket, of course. She wonders what they give you to eat on Christmas Day in a Thai prison. Her mother always makes the Christmas cake. Miranda helps roll out the marzipan in sheets. Her ball flats skid on the grass.

She ties the bag, leaves it against the steps. And here is the man in the garden, still standing before the window, looking in.

He must hear Miranda. Surely he hears her. Her feet upon the frozen grass. But he doesn’t turn around.

Even seen from the back, he is recognizably a Honeywell. Lanky, yellow-haired; perfectly still, but is somehow *perfectly* still, perfectly posed to catch the eye. Unnaturally natural. The snow that is making Miranda’s nose run, her cheeks blotchy with cold, rests unmelted upon the bright Honeywell hair, the shoulders of the surprising coat.

Typical Honeywell behavior, Miranda thinks. A lovers’ quarrel, or else he’s taken offense at something someone said, and is now going to sulk himself handsomely to death in the cold. Her mother has been quite clear about how to behave when a Honeywell is being dramatic when drama isn’t required. Firmness is the key.

At this last thought of her mother, Miranda has some dramatic feelings of her own. She focuses on the coat, sends the feelings away. It is *quite* a coat. A costume? Pilfered from some production of the Eighteenth century. Beautifully cut. Not a frock coat. A *justacorps*. Rose damask. Embroidered all over with white silk thread, poppies and roses, and there, where it flares out over the hips, a staghorn beetle on a green leaf. She has come nearer and nearer, cannot stop herself from reaching out to touch the beetle.

She almost expects her hand to pass right through. (Surely there are ghosts at Honeywell Hall.) But it doesn’t. The coat is real. Miranda pinches the damask between her fingers. Says, “Whatever it is that happened, it isn’t worth freezing to death over. You shouldn’t be out here. You should come inside.”

The Honeywell in the *justacorps* turns around then. “I am exactly where I am supposed to be,” he says. “Which is here. Doing precisely what I am supposed to be doing. Which does not include having conversations with little girls. Go away, little girl.”

Little girl she may be, but Miranda is well armored already against the Honeywell arsenal of tantrums, tempests, ups, downs, charm, strange.

Above the wide right pocket of the *justacorps* is a fox stitched in red and gold, its foreleg caught in a trap.

“I’m Miranda,” she says. And then, because she’s picked up a Honeywell trick or two herself, she says, “My mother’s in jail.”

The Honeywell looks almost sympathetic for the briefest of moments, then shrugs. Theatrically, of course. Sticks his hands in his pockets. “What’s that got to do with me?”

“Everyone’s got problems, that’s all,” Miranda says. “I’m here because Elspeth feels sorry for me. I hate when people feel sorry for me. And I don’t feel sorry for you. I don’t know you. I just don’t think it’s very smart, standing out here because you’re in a mood. But maybe you aren’t very smart. My mother says good-looking people often don’t bother. What’s your name?”

“If I tell you, will you go away?” the Honeywell says.

“Yes,” Miranda says. She can go in the kitchen and play with the kittens. Do the dishes and be useful. Have her fortune told. Sit under the tree again with Daniel until it’s well past time to go to sleep. Tomorrow she’ll be sent away home on a bus. By next year Elspeth will have most likely forgotten she has a goddaughter.

“I’m Fenny,” the Honeywell says. “Now go away. I have things to not do, and not a lot of time to not do them in.”

“Well,” Miranda says. She pats Fenny on the broad cuff of the sleeve of his lovely coat. She wonders what the lining is. How cold he must be. How stupid he is, standing out here when he’d be so welcome inside. “Merry Christmas. Good night.”

She reaches out one last time, touches the embroidered fox, its leg caught in the trap. Stem stitch and seed stitch and herringbone. “It’s very fine work, truly,” she says. “But I hope he gets free.”

“He was stupid to get caught,” Fenny says, “you peculiar and annoying child.” He is already turning back to the window. What does he see through it? When Miranda is finally back inside the drawing room where tipsy Honeywells are all roaring out inappropriate lyrics to carols, pulling out Christmas crackers, putting on paper crowns, she looks through the window. The snow has stopped. No one is there.

* * *

But Elspeth Honeywell, as it happens, remembers Miranda the next year and the year and the year after that. There are presents for Miranda under the magnificent tree. A ticket to a London music festival that she never sees. A makeup kit when she is thirteen.

The year she is fourteen, Daniel gives her a chess set and a box of assorted skeins of silk thread. Under her black tights, Miranda wears a red braided leather anklet that came in an envelope, no letter from Phuket. The kittens are all grown up and pretend not to know her.

The year she is twelve, she looks for the mysterious Fenny. He isn’t there. When she asks, no one knows who she means.

The year she is thirteen, she has champagne for the first time.

The Christmas she is fourteen, she feels quite grown up. The man in the *justacorps* was a dream, some story she made up for herself in order to feel interesting. At fourteen she’s outgrown fairytale Santa Claus, ghost stories. When Daniel points out that they are standing under the mistletoe, she kisses him once on each cheek. And then sticks her tongue in his ear.

* * *

It snows again the Christmas she is fifteen. Snow is predicted, snow falls. Something about the chance of snow makes her think of him again. The man in the snowy garden. There is no man in the garden, of course; there never was. But there is Honeywell Hall, which is enough—and seemingly endless hours of Honeywell adults behaving as if they were children again.

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