

Chapter One

It was the night before Christmas.

Well, to be more precise, it was the afternoon before Christmas. But before I take you into the beating heart of the action, let's get one thing out of the way. I know from experience that if it comes up later, it will distract you so much that you won't be able to concentrate on anything else I tell you.

My name is Jubilee Dougal. Take a moment and let it sink in.

See, when you get it up front, it's not that bad. Now imagine I was halfway through some long story (like I'm about to be), and I dropped that one on you. "By the way, my name is Jubilee." You wouldn't know *what* to do next.

I realize Jubilee is a bit of a stripper name. You probably think I have heard the call of the pole. But no. If you saw me, you'd get the idea pretty quickly that I'm not a stripper (I think). I have a little black bob. I wear glasses half the time, and contacts the other half. I'm sixteen, I sing in choir, I attend Mathletes events. I play field hockey, which lacks the undulating, baby-oiled grace that is the stripper's stock and trade. (I have no problem with strippers, in case any strippers are reading this. I'm just not one. My major concern, stripe-wise, is the latex. I think latex is probably bad for your skin because it doesn't allow it to breathe.)

My objection is that Jubilee *isn't a name*—it's some kind of a party. No one knows *what* kind. Have you ever heard of someone throwing a jubilee? And if you did, would you go? Because I wouldn't. It sounds like something where you have to rent a large inflatable object, put up bunting, and make a complicated plan for trash disposal.

Come to think of it, it might be interchangeable with hoedown.

My name has a lot to do with this story, and like I said, it was the afternoon before Christmas. I was having one of those days when you feel that life . . . *likes* you. Finals were over and school was done until New Year's. I was alone in our house, which was feeling very cozy and snug. I was dressed for the night in a new outfit I'd saved for—a black skirt, tights, a sparkly red T-shirt, and my new black boots. I was drinking a little eggnog latte that I'd cooked up for myself. All my presents were wrapped and ready to go. It was all leading up to the big event: at six, I was supposed to go to Noah's house—Noah Price, my boyfriend—for his family's annual Christmas Eve Smorgasbord.

The Price Family Annual Smorgasbord is a big deal in our personal history. It was how we got together in the first place. Before the Smorgasbord, Noah Price was just a star in my sky . . . constant, familiar, bright, and far above me. I'd known Noah since the fourth grade, but it felt like I knew him in the same way that I know people on television. I knew the name. I watched the show. Sure, Noah was a bit closer than that . . . but somehow when it's real, when it's your life . . . that person can feel even farther off and more unobtainable than an actual celebrity. Proximity doesn't breed familiarity.

I had always liked him, but it never really occurred to me to *like* him, like him. I never thought that was a reasonable thing to want. He was a year older than me, a foot taller, broad of shoulder, bright of eye, and floppy of hair. Noah was the whole package—athlete, academic, school-government bigwig—the kind of person you think must only date models or spies or people who have laboratories named after them.

So when Noah invited me to come along to El Smorgasbord on Christmas Eve last year, I more or less ruptured an eye in my excitement and confusion. I couldn't walk straight for three days when I got the invitation. It was so bad that I actually had

to *consciously practice walking* in my room before I went to his house. I had no idea if he had asked me because he liked me, or if his mom made him (our parents know each other), or because he lost a bet. All my friends were just as excited, but they seemed to understand it more than I did. They assured me that he had been eyeing me in Mathletes, laughing at my attempts at trigonometry jokes, bringing me up in conversation.

It was all so *crazy* . . . as weird as finding out that someone had written a book about my life or something.

When I got there, I spent most of the night safely propped up in a corner talking to his sister, who (though I love her) is not exactly deep. There is only so much you can say about your favorite brands of hoodies before you feel the conversational walls closing in. But she can go like a champion. Elise has some Thoughts on the Subject.

I finally took a break just as Noah's mom was setting out another plate and I could make the Oh-excuse-me-but-doesn't-that-look-good excuse. I had no idea what was on it, but it turned out to be pickled fish. I was backing away, but his mom said, "You have to try a piece."

Being a bit of a lemming, I did. But this time, it worked out, because that's when I noticed that Noah was watching me. He said, "I'm so glad you took some." I asked him why, because I really think I suspected it was all a bet. ("Okay, I'll ask her to come, but you guys have to give me twenty bucks if I can make her eat pickled fish.")

And he said, "Because I've been eating it."

I was still standing there with what I assume was a very enchanting expression of total stupidity etched on my face, so he added, "And I couldn't kiss you unless you'd had some, too."

Which is both gross and breathtakingly romantic. He could always have just gone upstairs and brushed his teeth, but he stayed and lurked by the fish for me. We snuck off to the garage, where we made out under the shelf of power tools. That was the start of it all.

So, the particular Christmas Eve I'm about to tell you about wasn't just any Christmas Eve: this was our *one-year anniversary*. It was almost impossible to believe it had been a year. It had all gone by so fast. . . .

See, Noah is always really busy. When he emerged into the world, tiny and wriggling and pink, he probably had to get footprinted and out of the hospital as quickly as possible to get to a meeting. As a senior, a member of the soccer team, and president of the student council, his time had been whittled away to almost nothing. I think in the year that we had been dating we had had about a dozen proper dates with just Noah and me going somewhere by ourselves. About once a month. We'd had plenty of joint appearances. Noah and Jubilee at the student-council bake sale! Noah and Jubilee at the soccer-team raffle table! Noah and Jubilee at the food drive, in the tutoring room, at the homecoming-organizational meeting . . .

Noah was aware of this. And though tonight was a family event with many people in attendance, he promised me there would be time just for us. He had made sure of it by helping out in advance. If we put in two hours at the party, he promised, we could escape to the back room and exchange our gifts and watch *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas* together. He would drive me home, and we would stop for a while. . . .

And then, of course, my parents got arrested, and all of that went to hell.

Do you know the Flobie Santa Village? The Flobie Santa Village is such a big part of my life that I just assume everyone knows what it is, but I've been told recently that I make way too many assumptions, so I'll explain.

The Flobie Santa Village is a series of collectable ceramic pieces that you can put together to form a town. My parents have been collecting them since the time I was born. I've been staring down those tiny plastic cobblestone streets since I was big enough to stand on my own. We have it all—the candy-cane bridge, Lake Snowbegone, the gumdrop shop, the gingerbread bakery, Sugarplum Alley. It's not small, either. My parents bought a special table to put it up on, and it takes up the center of our living room from Thanksgiving until New Year's. It requires seven power strips to make it all work. In order to diminish the environmental impact, I got them to turn it off at night, but it was a struggle.

I was named after Flobie Santa Village building #4, Jubilee Hall. Jubilee Hall is the biggest building in the collection. It's the main place that presents are made and wrapped. It has colored lights, a working conveyor belt with gifts stuck to it, and little elves that turn as if they're loading and unloading them. The elves of Jubilee Hall each have a present glued to their hands—so what it really looks like are a bunch of tortured beings doomed to pick up and set down the same gift over and over again until the end of time or until the motor breaks. I remember pointing this out to my mom when I was little; she said I was missing the point. Maybe so. We were clearly coming from different directions on this subject, considering she felt those little buildings were important enough to name her only offspring after.

People who collect the Flobie Village tend to get a little obsessed with it. There are conventions, about a dozen serious Web sites, and four magazines. Some of them try to play it off by

saying that Flobie pieces are an investment. And they *are* worth a lot of money, it's true. Especially the numbered ones. You can only buy those pieces at the Flobie showroom on Christmas Eve. We live in Richmond, Virginia, which is only about fifty miles away—so every year on the night of the twenty-third, my parents leave with a car full of blankets, chairs, and provisions and sit in line all night and wait.

Flobie used to make a hundred numbered pieces, but last year they reduced it to ten. This is when things got bad. One hundred pieces wasn't nearly enough, so when the number went down to just one-tenth of that, the claws came out and the fur started to fly. There was a problem last year when people tried to hold places in line—a problem that quickly turned into people smacking each other with rolled-up Flobie catalogs, throwing cookie tins, stomping on each other's lawn chairs, and dumping lukewarm cocoa on each other's Santa Claus-hatted heads. The fight was big enough and ridiculous enough to make the local news. Flobie said that they were “taking measures” to make sure it didn't happen again, but I never believed that. You can't buy that kind of publicity.

But I wasn't thinking about that when my parents drove off to get in line for piece #68, the Elf Hotel. And I still wasn't thinking about it when I was drinking my eggnog latte and whiling away the time until I got to go to Noah's. I did notice that my parents *were* later arriving home than usual. They usually got back from Flobie around lunchtime on Christmas Eve, and here it was, almost four o'clock. I started doing some of the general holiday duties to keep myself busy. I couldn't call Noah . . . I knew he was busy getting ready for the Smorgasbord. So I added some extra ribbon and holly to his presents. I switched on all the power strips that power the Flobie Santa Village, setting all the enslaved elves to work. I turned on Christmas carols. I was just stepping outside to turn on the lights on the front of the

house when I saw Sam advancing toward our house with his storm-trooper stride.

Sam is our lawyer—and when I say “our lawyer,” I mean “our neighbor who happens to be an extremely high-powered lawyer in Washington, D.C.” Sam is exactly the person you want to take on a huge corporation or to represent you when you’re being sued for a billion dollars. He is not, however, Mr. Cuddles. I was about to invite him in to try one of my delicious eggnog lattes, but he cut me off.

“I have some bad news,” he said, ushering me into my own house. “There’s been another incident at the Flobie showroom. Inside. Come on.”

I thought he was going to say that my parents had been killed. He had that kind of tone. I envisioned huge piles of the Elf Hotel flying off the belt, taking down everyone in sight. I had seen pictures of the Elf Hotel—it had sharp candy-cane spires that could easily impale someone. And if anyone was ever going to be killed by an Elf Hotel, it would be my parents.

“They’ve been taken into custody,” he said. “They’re in jail.”

“Who’s in jail?” I asked, because I’m not super-quick on the uptake, and because it was much easier for me to envision my parents being taken down by a flying Elf Hotel than it was to think of them being taken off in handcuffs.

Sam just looked at me and waited for me to catch up on my own.

“There was another fight when the pieces came out this morning,” he explained, after a pause. “An argument about who was holding spots in line. Your parents weren’t part of it, but they didn’t disperse when the police told them to. They got hauled in with the others. Five people have been booked. It’s all over the news.”

I felt my legs starting to wobble, so I sat down on the sofa.

“Why didn’t they call?” I asked.

“One phone call,” he said. “They called me, because they thought I could get them out. Which I can’t.”

“What do you mean, you *can’t*?”

The idea that Sam couldn’t bust my parents out of the county clink was ridiculous. It was like hearing a pilot come over the intercom and say, “Hey, everyone. I just remembered I’m no good at landing. So I’m just going to keep flying around until someone has a better idea.”

“I did my best,” Sam went on, “but the judge isn’t budging. He’s sick of these Flobie problems, so he’s making an example of them all. Your parents instructed me to take you to the train station. I only have one hour, then I have to be back for hot cookies and a sing-along at five. How quickly can you pack?”

This was delivered in the same gravelly tone of voice that Sam probably used when pounding people on the stand about why they were seen running from the scene covered in blood. He didn’t look happy that this task had been foisted on him on Christmas Eve. Still, a little touch of Oprah would have helped.

“Pack? Train station? What?”

“You’re going to Florida to stay with your grandparents,” he said. “Couldn’t get a flight—they’re being canceled all over the place because of the storm.”

“What storm?”

“Jubilee,” Sam said very slowly, having concluded that I was the least-aware person on the planet, “we’re about to have the biggest storm in fifty years!”

My brain wasn’t working right—none of this was going in.

“I can’t go,” I said. “I’m supposed to see Noah tonight. And Christmas. What about Christmas?”

Sam shrugged, as if to say that Christmas was beyond his control, and there was nothing the legal system could do about it.

“But . . . why can’t I just stay here? This is crazy!”

“Your parents don’t want you alone for two days over the holiday.”

“I can go to Noah’s! I *have* to go to Noah’s!”

“Look,” he said, “it’s all arranged. We can’t reach your parents now. They’re being processed. I bought your ticket, and I don’t have a lot of time. You’re going to have to pack now, Jubilee.”

I turned and looked at the twinkling little cityscape next to me. I could see the shadows of the doomed elves as they worked away in Jubilee Hall, the warm glow of Mrs. Muggin’s Cake Shop, the slow but merry process of the Elf Express around the little expanse of track.

The only thing I could think to ask was, “But . . . what about the village?”

Chapter Two

I’d never actually been on a train before. It was taller than I imagined, with second-“story” windows that I guessed were the sleeping cars. Inside, it was dimly lit, and most of the people stuffed in there looked catatonic. I expected the train to steam and chug and shoot off like a rocket, because I watched a lot of cartoons in my misspent youth and that’s how cartoon trains work. This train glided off indifferently, as if it had gotten bored with standing around.

Naturally, I called Noah the moment we set off. This was a slight violation of the I'm-going-to-be-slammed-until-six-so-I'll-just-see-you-at-the-party no-call policy, but never have circumstances been more understandable. When he answered, there was a cheerful clamor in the background. I could hear carols and the clanking of dishes, which was a depressing contrast to the claustrophobic muffle of the train.

"Lee!" he said. "Kind of a bad time. See you in an hour?"

He made a little grunt. It sounded like he was lifting something heavy, probably one of the freakishly large hams his mother always managed to get her hands on for the Smorgasbord. I presume she gets them from some kind of experimental farm where the pigs are treated with lasers and superdrugs until they are thirty feet long.

"Um . . . that's the thing," I said. "I'm not coming."

"What do you mean, you're not coming? What's wrong?"

I explained the parents-in-jail/me-on-train-in-storm/life-not-really-going-as-planned situation as best I could. I tried to keep it light, like I found it funny, mostly to keep myself from sobbing on a dark train of stupefied strangers.

Another grunt. It sounded like he was shifting something around.

"It'll be fine," he said after a moment. "Sam's taking care of it, right?"

"Well, if you mean not getting them out of jail, then yes. He doesn't even seem worried."

"It's probably just some little county jail," he replied. "It won't be bad. And if Sam's not worried, it'll be okay. I'm sorry this happened, but I'll see you in a day or two."

“Yes, but it’s Christmas,” I said. My voice got thick, and I choked back a tear. He gave me a moment.

“I know this is hard, Lee,” he said after a pause, “but it will be fine. It will. This is just one of those things.”

I knew he was trying to calm me down and generally console me, but still. One of those things? This was not *one of those things*. One of those things is your car breaking down or getting stomach flu or your faulty holiday lights sending out a spark and burning down your hedge. I said as much, and he sighed, realizing I was right. Then he grunted again.

“What’s the matter?” I asked, through a sniff.

“I’m holding a huge ham,” he said. “I’m going to have to go in a minute. Look, we’ll do another Christmas when you get back. I promise. We’ll find some time. Don’t worry. Call me when you get there, okay?”

I promised I would, and he hung up and went off with his ham. I stared at the now-silent phone.

Sometimes, because I dated Noah, I empathized with people who are married to politicians. You can tell they have their own lives, but because they love the person they are with, they end up pulled into the juggernaut—and pretty soon, they’re waving and smiling blankly for the camera, with balloons falling on their heads and staff members knocking them out of the way to get to the All-Important Significant Other, who is Perfect.

I know no one is perfect, that behind every façade of perfection is a writhing mess of subterfuge and secret sorrows . . . but even taking that into account, Noah was pretty much perfect. I’d never heard anyone say a bad word about him. His status was as unquestioned as gravity. By making me his girlfriend, he demonstrated his belief in me, and I had picked up on his conviction. I stood straighter. I felt more confident, more

consistently positive, more important. He *liked* being seen with me; therefore, I liked being seen with me, if that makes any sense.

So, yes, his overcommittedness was a pain sometimes. But I understood. When you have to take a big ham to your mom, for instance, because sixty people are about to descend on your house for a Smorgasbord. It just has to be done. The rough must be taken with the smooth. I took out my iPod and used the remaining power to flick through some photos of him. Then the power died.

I felt so alone on that train . . . a weird, unnatural kind of alone that bore into me. It was feeling just beyond fear and somewhere to the left of sadness. Tired, but not the kind of tired that sleep fixes. It was dark and gloomy, and yet, it didn't seem that things would get any better if the lights were turned up. If anything, I would be able to get a much better look at my unpleasant situation.

I thought about calling my grandparents. They already knew I was coming. Sam told me he had called them. They would have been happy to talk to me, but I wasn't feeling up to it. My grandparents are great people, but they are easily rattled. Like, if the grocery store sells out of some frozen pizza or soup they advertise in the circular, and they've gone to the store just for that, they'll stand there debating their next move for a half an hour. If I called them, every aspect of my visit would have to be discussed to the smallest detail. What blanket would I need? Did I still eat crackers? Should Grandpa get more shampoo? It was always sweet, but a little too much for my mind at the moment.

I like to think I am a problem solver. I would distract myself out of this funk. I dug into my bag to see what I had managed to collect as I was rushed out of the house. I discovered that I was woefully unprepared for the trip ahead of me. I had grabbed the

bare essentials—some underwear, jeans, two sweaters, a few shirts, my glasses. My iPod was out of power. I had just one book with me. It was *Northanger Abbey*, part of my winter break reading list for English. It was good, but not exactly what you want when you're feeling the creeping hand of doom.

So, for about two hours, I just looked out the window as the sun set, the candy-color pink sky turned to silver, and the first snow began to fall. I knew it was beautiful, but knowing something is beautiful and caring about it are two very different things, and I didn't care. The snow got harder and faster, until it filled the view and there was nothing left but white. It came from all directions at once, even blowing up from underneath. Watching it made me dizzy and a little ill.

People were coming down the aisle with boxes of food—chips and sodas and prewrapped sandwiches. Clearly, there was a food source somewhere on this train. Sam had shoved fifty bucks in my hand back at the station, all fifty of which would be extracted from my parents once they were breathing free air again. There was nothing else to do, so I got up and made my way down to the snack car, where I was promptly informed that they were out of everything except some floppy microwaved pizza discs, two muffins, a few candy bars, a bag of nuts, and some sad-looking fruit. I wanted to compliment them on being so well prepared for the holiday rush, but the guy working the counter looked really beaten. He didn't need my sarcasm. I bought a pizza disc, two candy bars, the muffins, the nuts, and a hot chocolate. It seemed smart to stock up a bit for the rest of the trip if things were going that fast. I stuffed a five-dollar bill into his cup, and he nodded his thanks.

I took one of the empty seats at the tables braced to the wall. The train was shaking a lot now, even as we slowed. The wind was smacking us from either side. I left the pizza untouched and

burned my lips on the chocolate. It was the most action they were going to get, after all.

“Mind if I sit here?” a voice asked.

I looked up to find an exceptionally beautiful guy standing over me. Again, I noticed, and again, I didn’t really care. But he did make more of an impact than the snow. His hair was as dark as mine, meaning it was black. It was longer than mine, though. Mine only goes just past my chin. His was pulled back in a ponytail. He looked Native American, with high cheekbones. The thin denim jacket he was wearing wasn’t nearly enough protection against the weather. There was something in his eyes, though, that really struck a chord—he looked troubled, like he was having a hard time keeping them open. He had just gotten himself a cup of coffee, which he was clutching kind of intently.

“Sure,” I said.

He kept his head down when he sat, but I noticed him glancing at all the food I had in the box. Something told me that he was a lot hungrier than me.

“Have some,” I said. “I was just getting stuff before they sold out. I’m not even that hungry. I haven’t touched this pizza at all.”

There was a moment of resistance, but I pushed it forward.

“I realize it looks like a pizza coaster,” I added. “It was all they had. Really. Take it.”

He smiled a little. “I’m Jeb,” he said.

“I’m Julie,” I answered. I wasn’t in the mood to go through the “Jubilee? Your name is *Jubilee*? Tell me, what do you use for your routine—baby oil or some kind of nut oil? And does someone wipe down the pole after each use?” conversation.

Everything I explained to you in the beginning. Most people call me Julie. Noah called me Lee.

“Where are you headed?” he asked.

I had no cover story for my parents or why I was here. The full truth was a little too much to throw at a stranger.

“Going to see my grandparents,” I said. “Kind of last-minute change of plan.”

“Where do they live?” he asked, looking at the swirling snow that was beating at the window of the train. It was impossible to tell where the sky ended and the ground began. The snow cloud had crash-landed on top of us.

“Florida,” I said.

“Long way. I’m just going to Gracetown, next stop.”

I nodded. I’d heard of Gracetown but had no idea where it was. Somewhere on this long, snowy path between me and nowhere. I offered the box of food to him again, but he shook his head.

“That’s okay,” he said. “But thanks for the pizza. I was kind of starving. We picked a bad day to travel. Guess there’s not a lot of choice, though. Sometimes you just have to do stuff you aren’t sure about. . . .”

“Who are you going to see?” I asked.

He turned his gaze back down and folded up the plate the pizza disc had come on.

“I’m going to see my girlfriend. Well, kind of girlfriend. I’ve been trying to call her, but I can’t get a signal.”

“I have one,” I said, pulling out my phone. “Use mine. I’m not even close to using my minutes this month.”

Jeb took the phone with a wide smile. As he got up, I noticed just how tall and broad-shouldered he was. If I wasn't so completely devoted to Noah, I would have been deeply smitten. He crossed the few feet, just to a spot by the other side. I watched him try the number, but he clicked the phone shut without ever speaking.

"I couldn't get her," he said, sitting back down and returning my phone.

"So," I said, smiling. "This is, kind of your girlfriend? You still aren't sure if you're dating yet?"

I remembered those times well, when Noah and I first got together, and I wasn't sure if I was his girlfriend. I was so deliciously nervous all the time.

"She cheated on me," he said plainly.

Oh, I'd misread that. Badly. I felt the pang for him, right in the middle of my chest. I really did.

"It's not her fault," he said after a moment. "Not all of it. I . . ."

I never got to hear what had happened, because the door of the car flew open, and there was a screech, kind of like the sound that Beaker—the horrible, oily cockatoo we had as a fourth-grade pet—used to make. Beaker was the bird Jeremy Rich taught to scream the word *ass*. Beaker loved to screech and scream the word *ass*, and he did it really well. You could hear him all the way down the hall in the girls' room. Beaker eventually got moved to the teachers' lounge, where I guess you're allowed to spread your greasy feathers and scream "*ass*" all you like.

It wasn't *ass*-screaming Beaker, though. It was fourteen girls in matching, form-fitting sweats, all of which read **RIDGE CHEERLEADING** on the butt. (A form of *ass*-screaming, I

suppose.) Each had her name on the back of her sleek warm-up fleece. They clustered around the snack bar, yelling at the top of their lungs. I really hoped and prayed that they wouldn't all say "Oh my God!" at once, but my prayers were not heard, maybe because God was busy listening to all of them.

"There is *no* lean protein," I heard one of them say.

"I *told* you, Madison. You should have had that lettuce wrap when you had the chance."

"I thought they'd at least have *chicken breast!*"

To my enduring dismay, I noticed that both girls having this conversation were named Madison. Worse: three of the others were named Amber. I felt like I was trapped in a social experiment gone wrong—maybe something involving replicants.

A few of the group turned on us. I mean, to us. They turned to me and Jeb. Well, actually they just turned to Jeb.

"Oh my God!" said one of the Ambers. "Is this not the worst trip ever? Did you see the snow?"

She was a sharp one, this Amber. What would she notice next? The train? The moon? The hilarious vagaries of human existence? Her own head?

I didn't say any of that, because death by cheerleader is not really the way I want to go. Amber wasn't addressing this to me, anyway. Amber had no idea I was even there. Her eyes were on Jeb. You could almost see the robotic core in her corneas making all the focusing adjustments and lining him in the crosshairs.

"It's pretty bad," he said politely.

"We're going down to Florida?"

She said it like that, like a question.

“Should be nicer there,” he said.

“Yeah. *If* we make it. We’re all at cheerleading regionals? Which is rough, because it’s the holidays? But we all had Christmas early? We did ours yesterday?”

This is when I noticed that they all seemed to be carrying really new-looking stuff. Shiny phones, conspicuous bracelets and necklaces that they played with, fresh manicures, iPods I’d never even seen before.

Amber One sat down with us—a careful sit, with her knees angled together and her heels turned out. A perky sitting pose of someone used to being the most adorable in the general vicinity.

“This is Julie,” Jeb said, kindly introducing me to our new friend. Amber told me her name was Amber, and then rattled off all the Ambers and Madisons. There were other names, but to me, they were all Ambers and Madisons. Seemed safe to think of it that way. I had at least a chance of being right.

Amber began chatting away, telling us all about the competition. She did this amazing thing where she included me in the conversation *and* ignored me at the same time. Plus, she was sending me a mental message—deeply subliminal—that she wanted me to get up and give my seat over to her tribe. They filled every available bit of space in the car as it was. Half of them on the phone, the other half depleting the water, coffee, and Diet Coke supply.

I decided that this was not what I needed to make my life complete.

“I’m going to go back to my seat,” I said.

Just as I stood, though, the train slowed dramatically, throwing us all forward in one big splash of hot and cold liquids. The wheels cried out in protest as they dragged down the track for

about a minute, and then we stopped, hard. I heard luggage all up and down the train thundering down from racks, and then people falling where they stood. People like me. I landed on a Madison and slammed my chin and cheek on something. I'm not sure what it was, because the lights went out at the same moment, causing a massive yelp of dismay. I felt hands helping me up, and I didn't need to be able to see to know it was Jeb.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Fine. I think."

There was a flicker, and then the lights came back up one by one. Several Ambers were clinging to the snack bar for dear life. There was food all over the floor. Jeb reached down and picked up what was once his phone, now a neatly snapped two-piece affair. He cradled it in his hand like an injured baby bird.

The loudspeaker crackled, and the voice that spoke over it sounded genuinely rattled—not the cool, bossy tone they were using to announce stops along the way.

"Ladies and gentlemen," it said, "please remain calm. A conductor will be checking your cabin to see if anyone has been injured."

I pressed my face against the cold window to see what was going on. We had come to rest next to what looked like a wide road with lots of lanes, something like an interstate. Across the way was a glowing yellow sign, suspended high over the road. It was hard to see through the snow, but I recognized the color and shape. It was for a Waffle House. Just outside of the train, a crew member was stumbling along through the snow, looking under the carriage with a flashlight.

A female conductor threw open the door to our car and started surveying everyone. She was missing her hat.

“What’s happening?” I asked when she reached us. “We look really stuck.”

She leaned down and had a good look out the window, then gave a low whistle.

“We’re not going anywhere, honey,” she said in a low voice. “We’re just outside of Gracetown. The track dips down below this point, and it’s completely covered. Maybe they can send some emergency vehicles to get us by morning. I don’t know, though. I wouldn’t bet on it. Anyway, you hurt?”

“I’m okay,” I assured her.

Amber One was holding her wrist.

“Amber!” another Amber said. “What happened?”

“I twisted it,” Amber One moaned. “Bad.”

“That’s your support wrist on basket toss!”

Six cheerleaders indicated (not subliminally) that they wanted me to move out of the way so that they could get to their wounded member and sit her down. Jeb was trapped in the throng. The lights went dim, the heater audibly cranked down, and the loudspeaker came back on.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the voice said, “we’re going to cut a bit of power to conserve energy. If you have blankets or sweaters, you may want to use them now. If any of you require extra warmth, we’ll try to provide whatever we can. If you have extra layering, we ask that you share it.”

I looked at the yellow sign again, and then back at the cluster of cheerleaders. I had two choices—I could stay here in the cold, dark, stranded train or I could actually *do* something. I could take charge of this day that had run away from me too many times. It wouldn’t be hard to get across the road and over to the Waffle

House. They probably had heat and lots of food. It was worth a shot, and it was a plan I felt Noah would have approved of. Proactive. I gently pushed my way through the Ambers to get to Jeb.

“There’s a Waffle House across the street,” I told him. “I’m going to go over and see if it’s open.”

“A Waffle House?” Jeb replied. “We must be just outside of town, along I-40.”

“Don’t be crazy,” Amber One said. “What if the train leaves?”

“It’s not,” I said. “The conductor just told me. We’re stuck here all night. Over there, they probably have heat and food and a place for people to move around. What else are we going to do?”

“We could practice our enthusiasm rounds,” one of the Madisons ventured in a tiny voice.