

ONE WEEK IN DECEMBER

by

[Holly Chamberlin](#)

Chapter 1

Wednesday, December 20

It was just after five in the evening, the worst possible time to be leaving Boston—no, trying to leave Boston—for destinations north. Add to that the fact that it was only days until Christmas and the weather channels were predicting a fierce snowstorm, and the results were—not good.

Becca Rowan hadn't been able to get out of the office early, as she had planned; as she was walking toward the elevator, her assistant had come charging into the public hallway from the offices of Saville and Co., a mid-size and rapidly growing advertising firm, with a plea for crisis management.

"Can't Ralph handle this?" Becca had asked, knowing, of course, what answer she would get from Mary.

"Well, he could but ..."

"Fine. Let's go." Better that she solve a problem now than leave it to someone else and be called on the fix what further mess would, inevitably, have been made. Becca had been called that annoying term, a "workaholic," but she preferred to regard herself simply as a professional. And she had a high and accurate opinion of her professional worth. After all, she was Saville's presiding vice president and if things continued the way Becca thought they would, she would be president before her thirty-fifth birthday, less than three

years in the future. It was a goal she was pretty confident she had the discipline to achieve.

Later, crisis managed, Mary had wished her boss a happy holiday and asked if she was going anyplace special. It was unlike Becca to take almost an entire week off; Mary's curiosity was justified.

"I'm going to Maine to see my family," Becca had replied tersely. "Oh, how nice. That should be fun."

What could one say to that kind of standard remark, and still be considered a socially acceptable person? "Like hell it will" would probably not cut it.

"Yeah," she said, and then, "Merry Christmas."

As she walked once again toward the elevators, her assistant had called out her thanks for the generous gift Becca had given her that morning. If Becca required dedication from her staff, she also rewarded it well. Becca had raised her hand in acknowledgement, but she hadn't turned around. She was uncomfortable with expressions of gratitude.

Now she had been on the road for half an hour and had only just reached the outer city limits. Under normal conditions the drive from downtown Boston to her parents' house in Kently, Maine, took about two and a half hours. But these were not normal conditions. Snow was falling and drivers were getting tense. And they were getting stupid.

"Merry freakin' Christmas to you, jackass!" Becca leaned on the car's horn. Not that the idiot driver who'd just cut her off would realize the horn was meant for him, but it felt good to make the noise.

Becca drove on, concerned with being hyperaware of the messy road conditions. She wondered if she'd beat the worst part of the storm. The Boston weather reports varied wildly in their predictions about when the storm would slam the part of Maine to which Becca was headed, and island area about fifty miles north of Portland, almost as if the meteorologists, or at least the superbly styled models reporting the weather news, didn't quite care. This didn't surprise Becca. To many people in Massachusetts, though certainly not all,

anything north of Portland was a hinterland better left to its own devices.

And in Becca's grumpy opinion, those devices were not at all sufficient. "The roads probably won't even be plowed," she muttered. "I'll probably crash into a snow bank and freeze to death before morning. Because of course there won't be cell phone service. Or maybe I'll be trampled to death by a rabid moose as I'm trekking along an abandoned road vainly hoping to come across a house with a light in a window. A house that doesn't contain a gun-toting survivalist and his seventeen wives."

As if in response to her nasty thoughts—but in reality due to her inattention—the car slid a bit. Deftly, Becca got it back on the straight and narrow. She had spent a fair amount for the Volvo S80 T6 and its all-wheel drive, but in situations like this one, with snow falling, roads wet and slippery, and drivers in a hurry, she felt the investment had paid off.

Still, the incident had disturbed her. If it had been any other holiday at any other time, Becca would have unhesitatingly gotten off at the next exit and driven straight home. But this Christmas was different. This time, Becca had to be with the Rowan clan.

The Family Rowan. Currently members ranged in age from Nora at eighty-six to the twins, Michael and Malcolm aged eight. Four generations of the Rowan family were planning to meet under one roof to celebrate the Christmas holiday. Becca reviewed a mental picture of them all.

She didn't care much one way or the other about seeing her younger sister, Lily. Lily was a nice girl, a young woman now, a senior in college, but she and Becca were virtual strangers. Though Lily shared an apartment in Allston with two schoolmates, and Becca had a condo in the South End, only a few T-stops away, they never saw each other except at family gatherings like the one Becca was journeying to now. In fact, it hadn't even occurred to Becca to offer her sister a ride north. Such an offer would have saved Lily bus fare

and offered Becca companionship, if indeed she'd wanted any. But Becca rarely wanted companionship. At least that's what she'd come to believe. Self-reliance had become a deeply ingrained habit.

As for Becca's parents, Steve and Julie, it had been a full year since she had seen them. Not that they hadn't issued invitations to visit them in Maine. They had, and each time, Becca had made an excuse as to why she couldn't get away from the office. The one time in the past year they'd come down to Boston for a weekend and stayed at the Copley Plaza—her father, she vaguely remembered, had said something about seeing a photography show at the Museum of Fine Arts—Becca had lied to them about being out of town on business. In fact, she'd spent the weekend on her own in Provincetown, trying to relax on a crowded beach and paying inordinate prices for decidedly average meals. All rather than have lunch or dinner with her parents and confront her growing anger toward them. All rather than face her mounting discontent.

Becca registered the fact that she was finally entering New Hampshire. Maybe she would get to her destination before midnight, after all. She wondered if her older sister, Olivia, who lived in Framingham, Massachusetts, would be driving north that night as well, her husband, James, in tow. Poor James. You couldn't help but like him, he was such a—well, such a likeable guy. Not that he exactly suffered being married to Olivia, but Olivia could at times be tiresome. She was a know-it-all and could be bossy and though she was smart—she had earned a masters degree in marketing—she could be oddly rigid and narrow-minded. But hey, Becca thought, James, who seemed to be eminently reasonable and good-natured, saw something in Olivia, so she couldn't be all that bad. Together they owned and managed a payroll service company that employed about six people in all. From what Becca could tell, they did well; she knew that a few years earlier James and Olivia had taken a two-week trip to Paris. And all those ultimately fruitless fertility treatments couldn't have been inexpensive.

And then there was Nora. Becca hadn't seen her grandmother, her father's mother, since the previous Christmas, either. She and Becca's grandfather, Thomas, had originally owned the farmhouse in Kently. When Thomas died, Nora nominally sold the house to her only child, Steve, and when he retired, he and his wife, Becca's mother, had sold their house in Winchester, Massachusetts, and moved to Maine full-time. Becca was looking forward, in a way, to seeing Nora, but at the same time she knew full well that her grandmother might just be her greatest opponent in what she was sure to be a full-scale family battle.

Finally, and most importantly, David and his wife, Naomi, would be there, with Rain, and the twins in tow. David, Becca's older brother, was the only Rowan boy of his generation and, in Becca's opinion, was appropriately spoiled and bursting with self-importance. It was David she was most worried about, even afraid of, but the time had come to act. The time had come to take back what was rightfully hers, and no amount of intimidation or bluster was going to stop her from achieving her goal. She wasn't respected in the advertising world for her lack of determination or drive, that was for sure.

Still, Becca yawned, as if just thinking about the upcoming struggle had exhausted her. The truth was, she had been up almost all night working on a report she'd promised herself to complete before heading out for the Rowan house. It would be one less thing nagging at her conscience this last full week in December. Becca realized she would need her wits about her if she were to present her case and convince the family of her rights.

Becca shivered and turned up the heat in the car. She hadn't bothered to change out of her work clothes before starting out. The only concession she had made to the trek north was to change her three-inch heels for a pair of expensive tan leather driving moccasins. She'd bought them a few weeks ago at Neiman-Marcus and justified their cost by considering them a much-deserved Christmas present.

Becca's clothes probably—no, definitely--weren't suited to life in rural Maine, but she had done the best she could with preparing a

wardrobe for the week. Not that an actual “wardrobe” was necessary. A pair of sturdy, waterproof boots; a pair of flannel-lined jeans; a few pairs of SmartWool socks; a heavy wool sweater; a parka of some sort; and fleece hat, mittens, and scarf would do the trick. Oh, and maybe an ice pick, shovel, and blowtorch for getting out of the front door.

No, the clothing that Becca had brought with her was more suited for life in Boston. Two pairs of wool dress slacks; three cashmere sweaters, one beige, one black, the other gray; a gorgeous, soft-as-butter leather coat in a chocolaty brown; a fashionable faux-fur hat. Her only acknowledgement of the northern landscape she was visiting was a pair of sturdy, waterproof boots she’d dutifully bought at L.L.Bean. Even Becca had to admit that “The Bean” knew what it was doing when it came to footwear for the great outdoors. The great, wet, cold, and sloppy outdoors.

Becca loathed and despised the winter and everything about it. She planned to spend as little time as possible out of doors once in Kently. Assuming, of course, the atmosphere in her parents’ home didn’t grow to be too antagonistic. If it did, she might be forced to bundle up and get away for awhile. Besides, knowing the way her mother and grandmother cooked, it would do her good to get in some exercise this week. Fat was their friend; even vegetables were served with a pat of butter melting on top.

Luckily, at thirty-two, Becca could still be called lanky. She suspected that, like her father, at some point in her forties or fifties she would begin to put on some weight, but right now, it was easy to keep fit, given her high metabolism. And the twice-weekly sessions with a trainer at a local gym didn’t hurt. But those sessions were more about maintaining health than watching weight. Becca didn’t want osteoporosis sneaking up on her. No amount of designer clothes could make you look good when you were doomed to spend your days staring at your feet.

Becca's hair was a classic chestnut brown, of medium thickness. She wore it in a chin-length bob, which required a re-shaping every three weeks. It was an expense that long ago Becca had built into her budget. What fashion guru had said that a good haircut made a woman's look? Whoever it was, Becca believed him, or her.

Although not a particularly popular style with women her age, Becca wore her nails long and carefully polished, and she had been doing so since she was about fourteen. Neither her mother nor her grandmother wore their nails long; in fact, only one other woman in the Rowan family—sixteen-year-old Rain—shared Becca's interest in nails not bluntly cut or bitten off at the quick.

Rain also had what were considered the "Rowan eyes," as did Becca and her father, Steve. They were large, slanted slightly upward at the outer corner, and were a peculiar shade, something like moss on a stone, an arresting combination of green and brown.

A familiar sound brought Becca fully back to the moment. Her iPhone, which was clipped to the wide patent leather belt of her fitted suit jacket, was ringing. It was Mary. Becca checked the time on the dashboard. She wondered what her assistant was doing staying so late at the office when the boss was on vacation. Didn't she have anywhere better to be, or anyone special to meet?

Suddenly, it occurred to Becca that she hadn't asked her trusted assistant where she was spending the Christmas holiday. In fact, she realized in a flash that she knew very little about Mary's personal life, or about the personal lives of anyone at Saville and Co. She wasn't sure if this bothered her or not. She did know for sure that she had absolutely no desire to let any of her colleagues into her own personal life—what there was of it.

She took the call. "Hey. What's up?"

What was up was that one of their oldest—and most demanding—clients wanted a major change made to the new print ad before the end of the following day. Becca listened, and then told Mary exactly what

the account supervisor should say to the client. It involved the word “no.”

“Won’t they be angry?” Mary questioned. Becca pictured her mild-mannered assistant with hunched shoulders, as if flinching in anticipation of a blow.

“Yes,” Becca said, “they’ll be angry. But there’re not going anywhere. We’ve made them more money than they know what to do with. The changes can wait until I get back.”

The call ended, Becca glanced in the rearview mirror to assure herself for the tenth time that she hadn’t forgotten to bring anything vital. Her laptop rested on the back seat, along with a soft leather briefcase that contained several paper files. Her mother would frown on Becca’s bringing work along to what was supposed to be a warm and cozy family vacation, but Julie had never understood the attraction of a career. Her primary goal and function in life had been the raising of her children, and she’d seemed to find great satisfaction in that. Becca had vague memories of her mother dabbling in a pyramid scheme business; she recalled boxes of makeup samples piled up on the kitchen table, and neighborhood women coming over for “parties” that involved homemade coffee cake, bottles of inexpensive wine, and the sampling of pink lotions and floral-smelling potions.

Finally, Becca spotted up ahead the bridge that crossed over into Maine. The journey to the bridge from Boston was only fifty-five miles, but tonight it had seemed interminable. As a matter of habit Becca read aloud the sign on the bridge, welcoming travelers. “‘Maine,’” she muttered, ‘The Way Life Should Be.’ Yeah, right. A bunch of shaggy moose, smelly fish, and people whose idea of culture is the annual lobster-gorging contest.”

On some level Becca knew she was being unfair and prejudicial—Maine was a gorgeous state; nobody could deny that, and its people were strong, resourceful, and independent—but on another level she just didn’t care. If her parents hadn’t retired to the freakin’ sticks, then

she wouldn't have been caught in that god-awful traffic and facing a treacherous slog through the snow that had been falling heavy and wet for the past ten miles.

A monstrous SUV roared past in the left lane. Becca glanced at it with a frown that turned into openmouthed astonishment as the perky blonde kid in the backseat gave her the finger.

She was dying to flip the bird right back at him but wasn't stupid enough to get herself forced to the side of the road by the no doubt perfectly coiffed, painfully worked-out soccer mommy behind the wheel of her insanely large gas-guzzling vehicle, who no doubt would defend her little brat of a son from any and all accusations of wrongdoing. And then threaten to sue Becca (her husband would be a celebrity lawyer or a Wall street CEO reveling in a recent outrageous bailout) for child abuse.

Becca gritted her teeth—her dentist had been warning her for the past year to stop gritting and grinding; Dr. Olds had said something about TMJ and subsequent surgery—and drove on.

If that kid were her kid, there was no way he'd even think about flipping someone the bird ever, not a classmate and certainly not a stranger, a female stranger at that. She wasn't a fan of corporal punishment, but there were plenty of other ways to teach a kid right from wrong and to make him aware of the consequences of acting like a deviant.

Aware of an accelerating heart rate, Becca took a deep and she hoped a calming breath—after her last blood pressure reading her doctor had strongly advised her to learn and use several calming techniques—and turned on the radio. Some cool jazz would be helpful, she thought, maybe a song by Madeleine Peyroux or Jane Monheit, but all she could find in this unfortunate zone were cheesy Christmas songs. She tried another station. More cheesy Christmas songs, these fuzzy but unmistakably chipper. Again she changed the channel. Again she was disappointed. Damn it for having forgotten to bring her iPod.

What the hell was a reindeer doing with a red nose, anyway? Did it have a drinking problem? And if any kid really did see his mama kissing Santa Claus under the mistletoe, Becca was sure he'd be in therapy for the next twenty or thirty years of his life, not singing about it like it was all a big joke.

Peace on Earth and Goodwill to All. Yeah, like that was ever going to happen. Becca turned off the radio and glanced at her watch. She still had at least another two hours to go before reaching the dear old family homestead. Just great. Just freakin' great. And now she had to pee.

It could safely be said that Becca Rowan was not in a holiday mood.

Chapter 2

Lily Rowan supposed she should feel peaceful and grateful and all those good warm and fuzzy things you're supposed to feel at Christmastime, but she didn't feel any of those things. All she felt was sad.

Lily stood at one of the living room windows, watching the snow that had been falling for about an hour and thinking of how Cliff, had he been there with her, would have had his arm around her waist and his head tilted next to hers, his adorable shaggy hair shining in the candlelight.

At this time of the year, Julia Rowan, Lily's mother, liked to place a single white candle in each window of the house in the traditional way. The candles were not electric; Julie Rowan was conservation minded in certain ways, and seemingly unafraid of several open flames in each room in spite of the fact that her dog, a Chinkook named Hank, had on more than one occasion nearly swiped a candle

to the ground with his tail. But, as Julie pointed out, almost only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades (Lily had no idea what that meant, exactly), so the candles remained on the windowsills and each night, before Julie retired for bed, the candles were carefully snuffed out with an old-fashioned, long-handled pewter candle snuffer. This prevented hot wax from splattering on the windows.

Lily sighed and hugged herself. The reality was that Cliff wasn't here in Maine with her this Christmas. He was back in Lexington, Massachusetts, at his parents' house because he'd done the unthinkable and Lily had found out his crime. Cliff Jones, Lily's boyfriend of more than three years, had cheated on her with a mutual friend, a girl they knew from economics class and someone they'd chatted with at a few parties.

It was horrible. It was unforgiveable. Lily felt—no, she knew—that she would never get over Cliff's betrayal and that, quite probably, she would never love again, certainly not like she'd loved Cliff. Like she still loved Cliff, and that was the real problem. Because as much as she hated Cliff, she also still loved him and wanted him back, though she couldn't imagine any circumstance under which she would take him back—assuming he wanted to come back—because once a cheater, always a cheater. That's what she'd always believed. You got one shot with someone and if you ruined it by sleeping with someone else—like your girlfriend's classmate!—well, that was it.

Still. Cliff. Lily missed him, his broad shoulders (in truth they were kind of bony) and his fantastic smile (albeit a fairly crooked one), and his ability to make her laugh (Lily was the only one on whom his magic seemed to work; Cliff's buddies found him somewhat dull but tolerated his company for the way he threw around his cash; no one knew where he got the cash because he didn't have a job, but no one hesitated to take it).

Cliff was supposed to have joined the Rowan family for Christmas but, given the circumstances, Lily had come alone, taking the bus from Boston to Portland, where her father, Steve, had picked her up

just the day before. They'd had lunch at Becky's Diner on Commercial Street before heading north and the tuna melt and hot chocolate Lily had ordered made her feel just a little bit better being without the love of her life for Christmas.

Lily sighed again and turned away from the window. Her grandmother was giving the swags of pine draped along the mantelpiece a final adjustment. Nora might be eighty-six years old but to Lily she would always be—well, ageless. Just—Grandma. It was she who'd decorated the first floor, with fresh pine branches and small sprigs of mistletoe and folk-art-inspired Santa Claus statues. She had a knack for making an already cozy place even cozier, a pleasant moment somehow truly happy. Lily appreciated that quality in her grandmother and hoped she would become half the woman Nora was. And that meant being caring and sympathetic and, when required, tough enough to stop a self-indulgent flood of tears.

Lily remembered the night she had learned of Cliff's perfidy. She'd called her grandmother in hysterics. She hadn't even thought about the possibility that she might have gotten Nora out of bed, or that Nora had been busy at some important task. No. When Lily needed Nora she simply reached out. She'd always been closer to her grandmother than to her mother, at least for as long as she could remember, which was back to the time when her older sister Becca went to live for a year with her brother, David, and his wife. Anyway, that night Nora had managed to calm Lily's grief with a few well-considered words of advice and a few genuine endearments. Lily had even managed to sleep through the rest of the night without disturbing dreams of violent revenge against her errant boyfriend.

If some people found it odd or unusual that two people, two women of the same family but so far apart in age could be so close, that was not Lily's concern. Besides, she wasn't looking for a hip older companion; she wasn't in need of a cool, Botoxed grandma in low-rise jeans and a page on My-Space. Instead, in Nora, Lily found just what she did need—the maternal warmth her mother didn't quite

provide, the wisdom of someone who'd learned from the experiences she'd lived, and the common sense that only comes from having survived the making of plenty of mistakes.

Nora retreated into the kitchen just as Steve Rowan came the front stairs and reached for a navy blue parka on the coatrack.

"Where are you going, Dad?" Lily asked.

"Just out to my studio for a bit. I had a brainstorm about my project." He smiled. "Well, I think it was a brainstorm. I want to go and find out."

Lily assured him of his brilliance as a photographer, and he was gone. Lily thought that her father looked very tired and worn. She worried about him a little; sometimes he seemed so much older than her mother though they were only months apart. Lily knew her father had worked very hard for his family, spending long hours at the firm and often working all weekend. In fact, it was his dedication to the law that had inspired her to apply to law school. She hadn't made a final decision on what area of law she wanted to specialize in, but she thought that elder law sounded interesting. Or maybe probate, though she knew that some estate settlements could be angrily contested. She didn't think she had the stomach to be a criminal defense attorney or, for that matter, a divorce attorney. The idea of counseling a person on how to make the life of another person miserable—even if he or she deserved it—didn't appeal to her in the least.

Julie Rowan came into the living room, put her hands on her hips, and sighed.

"Now where in the world did I put my glasses?"

Lily smiled. Her mother was far from scatterbrained, but for some reason Lily couldn't fathom, she liked to pretend that she was. Lily thought it was kind of an endearing quirk.

"They're on your head, Mom."

Julie patted the top of her head and laughed. "Of course! I knew that all along."

Julie was a warm person overall, if not sentimental, and she'd always been a devoted mother. But the truth was that by the time Lily came along—and quite a surprise she'd been—Julie's energy for the little girl was limited. Then, a few years later, when everything had happened with Becca, well, Lily might have been little more than an afterthought in the course of Julie's days. But there'd been Nora to fill any emotional gap left by Julie's preoccupations, and Lily had thrived. If she hadn't exactly been spoiled, she had been pampered, but it seemed to have done her no great harm. If a little naïve, Lily was also kindhearted; if a little sheltered, she was also eager to learn.

Nora joined them and together the three women conducted a last-minute check of the house to be sure it was ready to receive its guests. Lily had learned that the house had been constructed in a very traditional New England style that some called a “telescope house.” The original part of the building had contained two rooms now used as the living room and dining room, as well as the kitchen. The center stairs, still in existence, had led to the second floor; originally that had consisted of four small, equal-sized bedrooms. Above that was the attic that had once been used as the children's bedrooms and, if there were any, the servants' quarters.

Over the years, and long before the Rowans had bought the place, an addition had been put on that was a smaller version of the original. This had contained the bathrooms and additional bedrooms; one if those rooms now served as the den, and another, as Nora's bedroom. Lily didn't know exactly what other work had been done over the years to result in the house her family occupied now, but she thought the overall affect was very pleasing.

The exterior of the house was just as pleasing in its overall simplicity—white clapboard with no decoration; four-over-four windows; a fairly steeply sloped shingle roof. Unlike other, extreme versions of the telescope house, the barn sat about an eighth of a mile from the house. In the few years before retirement, Steve had begun a renovation that transformed the barn into a photography studio and

workshop. It was now a clean, well-lighted space (Lily couldn't place the phrase but knew she'd heard it somewhere) to which her father enjoyed retreating.

When it had been determined that fires were roaring in every fireplace (originally, the house had one in every room) and that food was warming in the oven, the women turned to a review of the sleeping arrangements.

"Nora, of course, will be in her own room," Julie said.

"Of course," her mother-in-law said. "There's no point in even trying to dislodge an old woman from her domain."

"Or an old married couple from theirs, so Steve and I will be in our room. Rain will bunk with you, Lily, all right?"

Lily nodded. "Sure. It'll be nice to get some girl time with her."

David and Naomi are in the Lupine Room, and Olivia and James will be in the Queen Anne's Lace Room." Julie had stenciled flowers on the doors of these rooms and enjoyed referring to them by their flowery names. She and her husband slept in the Peony Room. Steve did not share his wife's enthusiasm for this pretension, but he said nothing. He believed that everyone had a right to her quirks and hobbies. "And I'm putting the twins in the Foxglove Room."

"The old sewing room?" Lily said. "But what about Becca? That's where she usually sleeps."

"Oh, I thought I'd ask her if she'd mind sleeping on the couch in the den. Naomi called the other day. It seems the boys have been clamoring to sleep in their own room and not on the floor of their parents' room. They grow up so quickly, kids these days. Anyway, I'm sure Becca won't mind sleeping in the den. There's just not enough room in there for two air mattresses!"

Lily wasn't at all sure that Becca would be happy about the new arrangement. She guessed that her sister would agree with good grace but knew that underneath she'd be seething. The last few times Becca had been with the family, Lily had sensed something she could barely

articulate, some notion that Becca didn't feel like one of them, like a Rowan, that in some way she felt alienated. But maybe Lily had misread her older sister. That wouldn't be surprising. Becca was kind of distant with everybody, kind of hard to figure out.

Lily hadn't once heard Becca mention a friend, and now the thought occurred to her that maybe Becca didn't have any friends.

"It's hard to believe," Nora was saying, "that the family hasn't seen Becca since last Christmas."

"But, Grandma, she's visited David and Naomi."

"Well, of course, Julie said. "That's to be expected. But the rest of us haven't seen her. She's always had some excuse or other not to show up for a gathering."

"She does work very hard," Lily said, though in fact she didn't know much about her sister's work or how much Becca claimed about her hectic schedule was true. Not that she suspected her sister of lying about it—why would she lie?—but the fact was that Lily and Becca weren't close and never really had been. At least, not that Lily could recall.

The phone rang and Julie hurried off to the kitchen to answer it. When she returned a few moments later it was to announce that Olivia and James had decided to drive up from their home in Framingham, Massachusetts, the next day. They hadn't been able to close up the office early enough and didn't want to risk driving in a storm.

"That would be James's decision," Nora said. "I suspect Olivia would be willing to move Heaven and Earth to get here tonight."

"Did you see that e-mail Olivia sent last week?" Lily asked. "The one about wanting us all to sign up with some ancestor research Web site?"

"Your grandmother and I aren't online, my dear. The only computer around here is the one in your father's studio."

"Oh. Right. Anyway, I was wondering where Olivia got her fascination with the family's history. With genealogy and the family tree and all that."

Nora shook her head. "It's more like an obsession, it seems to me. Mark my words, she'll spend most of the time this holiday rummaging up in the attic, looking for whatever it is she's looking for."

"Ghosts?" Lily wondered aloud. "The real kind, not something from a horror movie."

Nora smiled. "I'm not sure there's a difference, is there? Anyway, mark my words, she's looking for something."

"Treasure," Lily suggested, only half joking. "I bet she thinks there's treasure buried somewhere in the attic walls."

Julie removed the place settings she'd put out for her oldest daughter and her husband. "I think she's looking for answers. But I'm not sure to which questions."

"Skeletons! Every family supposedly has skeletons in their closets. Maybe Olivia's looking for scandalous secrets."

"Well, she won't find any evidence of scandalous secrets in a pile of old junk," Julie said.

The three women quietly finished setting the table for dinner. The tablecloth was a cheerful affair Julie had picked up at Marshall's on her last visit to Boston; it was decorated with images of massive red poinsettias and bordered with lacy, intertwining pine branches. The napkins, large white squares, were embroidered around the edges with depictions of holly clusters. The fact that they were still brilliantly white amazed Lily. Laundry wasn't one of her strong suits. And the thought of ironing made her squirm. She had heard that in the "old days" some women actually ironed their husband's underwear and their babies' cloth diapers. Well, disposable diapers had solved one problem, but there was no way the ironing of underwear was going to happen in her household!

"Whatever happened to the idea of James and Olivia adopting a baby?" Lily asked suddenly, prompted by the thought of diapers. "Wasn't there some talk about that a year or two ago? Or am I imagining it?"

“You’re not imagining it,” Lily’s mother replied. “James spoke to me about the possibility once or twice, after it was clear that Olivia wasn’t going to be able to sustain a pregnancy. But then, I heard nothing more. And it’s not a topic I feel comfortable bringing up, especially with someone as — tense — as Olivia.”

“Of course not. I was just wondering.”

“That woman can be prickly,” Nora said, as if to herself. Then: “Well, I’d better tend to the cinnamon rolls if they’re going to be ready for dinner. You know how David likes my cinnamon rolls.”

Yes, thought Lily with yet another sigh. And Cliff, the love of her life, had liked Nora’s cinnamon rolls, too.

Chapter 3

“Are we there yet?”

“Are we there yet?”

David didn’t reply. Why the boys thought it so hysterically funny to drive their father to the brink of insanity by chanting that question — in unison — over and over and over again, David just didn’t know. He knew the reference. Michael and Malcolm had picked it up from *The Simpsons*. He just didn’t know why they should find it so funny. David, it had been pointed out to him, didn’t have a great sense of humor.

“Okay, guys,” he said wearily. “I get it.”

“There’s nothing to get, Dad!”

The boys laughed and were on to another pastime, this one less annoying to their father. David peered in the rearview mirror to see their brown and blonde heads bent over some sort of comic book. Or something. David hoped it had been printed on recycled paper.

David Rowan, thirty-eight years old, was the second child and only son of Steve and Julie Rowan. He worked for the state of New Hampshire as a geological engineer; his primary concern was preservation of the environment, and he could preach about the joys of greening for as long as someone would let him. And few people had the energy to stand up to or resist David Rowan once he got going. His personality was forceful and dynamic. And as the only boy of the Rowan family, he was also a bit spoiled (though he would deny that) and used to being “special.” Still, David was a good guy, someone people naturally turned to in a crisis.

David glanced quickly at his wife of seventeen years, seated in the passenger seat beside him. Naomi Henley-Rowan was also thirty-eight. They’d met while still in college and had married just before David started graduate school. After all the years together, David still found Naomi to be beautiful, inside and out. He knew he was very lucky to have found her and he tried very hard to let her know how deeply he appreciated her loving him back. At least, he hoped he had. David knew that he could—on rare occasions—be a bit of a stubborn jerk.

Naomi, sensing her husband’s glance, smiled at him. She noted for what was likely the millionth time his long dark eyelashes. Though she would never admit to being bowled over by so frivolous a thing as eyelashes, she had been bowled over from the moment she first saw David in their sophomore year in college. After a while, of course, she’d been attracted to the strength and goodness of his character, but those long dark eyelashes still could work their magic.

Naomi was a busy, productive woman. She had a potter’s wheel on which she made planters and bowls and mugs that she sold on consignment at a small local store specializing in local handmade goods. She tended a thriving vegetable garden that provided a good portion of the family’s produce, and she had recently learned how to put up preserves. One afternoon a week she was the library’s Storytime reader, a project she enjoyed more so as her own children

were past the point of wanting to be read to by their mother. On Tuesdays and Thursdays she worked as a salesperson at a family-owned and-operated hardware store in town.

Naomi dressed to fit her lifestyle, in jeans or chinos or cords, topped off by loose-fitting blouses or T-shirts. She tended to wear sturdy sandals well into autumn, with socks when the temperature dipped below 45 degrees; in winter she replaced them with standard L.L. Bean boots. Still, she wasn't adverse to the very occasional evening out in Portsmouth at a decent restaurant that served the kind of wine she would never dream of buying at home—expensive—and delicacies such as duck liver pate, even if it meant shunning the usual footwear for one of her two pairs of high heels. On these rare occasions, Rain took pleasure in teasing her mother about her usual ultracasual wear; she also helped Naomi with her makeup, which Naomi appreciated since she had virtually no skill in that department.

Naomi looked over her shoulder. Rain sat slouched against the door of the seat just behind her father, listening to her iPod, mouthing words Naomi was glad she couldn't make out. Rain had the Rowan family eyes—large, slanted slightly upward—and they were a very distinctive shade, a mix of green and brown, a color shared by Steve and Becca. In fact, from her chestnut brown hair to her lanky frame, Rain looked all Rowan, almost as if there had been no other set of DNA involved in her making. Sometimes, this unsettled Naomi.

It was hard to believe Rain had been their daughter now for sixteen years. Naomi could remember with great clarity the moment she had carried the little bundle of pink baby and blanket over the threshold of their small, clapboard farmhouse—a mini version of the one David's parents now lived in—and officially welcomed her home.

Naomi had always wanted a family, and Rain's arrival, though quite unexpected, was for her a joy. For David, too. He'd risen to the occasion as he always did—David was nothing if not responsible and proud of it—and taken on the role of adoring father.

Rain hadn't yet begun to date in any serious way, for which Naomi was glad and David was even gladder. Naomi pitied the first boy who would come to their door to pick up Rain for a movie or party. David would intimidate him; there was no doubt about that. If her husband was a bit of a throwback to the age of manly men whose primary job it was to protect the women in his life, then so be it. He could be a lot of worse things, like an alcoholic or a criminal, someone like the guy Becca had gotten involved with all those years ago...

"Mom! Michael poked me!"

"I did not! Anyway, you looked at me."

"I'm allowed to look at you. Right, Mom?"

"Looking is allowed, Malcolm."

"See? I told you so."

Naomi rolled her eyes into the darkened sky. The boys were a proverbial handful, but Naomi got a real kick out of their antics. Most of their antics, anyway. They were high-spirited rather than unpleasantly willful, with Michael more the ringleader and Malcolm more his willing follower. Twins ran in Naomi's family—two of her cousins had had twins and her mother had been one of two girls—so neither she nor David had been surprised when the doctor had first detected two heartbeats. Sure, the family budget had to be reimaged a bit, but so far, Naomi felt that they'd been very lucky, blessed even.

She had three wonderful children. She lived in a lovely little town in a sweet little house. She did work she enjoyed. And best of all, she had a husband who loved her as much as she loved him. In Naomi's admittedly prejudiced opinion, she and David were quite a team.

Naomi knew she was a good foil to David's somewhat domineering style: she could subtly rein him in when they were with company and David began to pontificate or control the conversation. He didn't mean to offend or alienate people; he just had a firm belief in the sense and truth of what he had to say. To be honest, most of what David stated was reasonable and intelligent; it was just that his manner could turn off his listeners and, on occasion, even his wife.

A memory came to Naomi's mind just then. Early on in their relationship, David had taken her home to meet his parents. Naomi had been nervous, of course, but Julie and Steve were casual and welcoming and before long, she'd felt right at home with the older Rowans. Still, during dinner, when David had launched into a rant against his parents' ignorance on matters concerning the environment — a rant, Naomi came to learn, that was largely unjustified — and Julie had castigated her son, calling him “an arrogant jerk,” Naomi had been shocked. After dinner when the women were cleaning up (that was Naomi's first indication that the division of labor in the Rowan house ran along pretty traditional lines), Julie had given her future daughter-in-law some advice. “If you don't talk back to him and point out his inappropriate behavior,” she'd explained, “he'll simply become unbearable. Besides, once you let him know he's out of line, he always tries to step back in. He really is a good boy.” Naomi supposed that was true; after his mother's scolding at dinner, David had been almost docile, even sweet. That mood had lasted all the way home.

Naomi's parents had died long before she met David, leaving her not only an orphan, but one without siblings. She was grateful for the Rowans, glad to be part of the family that had embraced her warmly from the beginning. In truth, the Rowans were pretty easy to like. Most of them were, anyway.

Everyone got along well with Steve; he was as inoffensive a person as Naomi had ever met. What he had been like in his law practice she had trouble imagining. Given his financial success and his stellar reputation, no doubt he had been tough, smart, and dogged.

And Julie. Naomi got along very well with her mother-in-law; she and Julie were quite similar in several ways. They were both devoted to their family, both practical women, hardworking and generally easygoing. And, of course, the secret they shared served as a further bond between them.

Her relationship with her sister-in-law Olivia wasn't quite so close or so smooth, but honestly, Naomi couldn't think of one person other

than Olivia's husband, James, who really got along well with her. Even Olivia's parents seemed at times to tiptoe around their oldest daughter. Olivia had definitely changed since Naomi had first met her, when she and David were dating in college. Now she seemed rarely to smile; she seemed to have lost what little sense of humor she'd had back then. But Naomi didn't spend inordinate amounts of time worrying about her sister-in-law's disposition. For all she knew, Olivia was a ball of fire when alone with her husband or out with her girlfriends. Well, she doubted it, but anything was possible.

From the sudden and unusual quiet of the backseat came Michael's voice.

"Are we there yet?"

A half second later, Malcolm said, "Are we there yet?"

"Yeah, Dad." It was Rain, unplugged. "Are we?"

Naomi grinned at her husband. "Well, David, Are we?"

Chapter 4

Becca made only critical note of the surroundings—dark, velvety sky strewn with bright pinpoints of cold, clear light; fresh, crispy air; the encouraging smell of a wood fire—as she hauled her luggage from the trunk of her car and then, laptop slung across her chest and briefcase on her shoulder, she stumbled through falling snow to the front door of the house she hadn't visited in over a year.

As she drew nearer to the house, L.L. Bean boots now replacing her driving moccasins, she heard sounds of laughter from within, laughter and a familiar booming voice. David was announcing his presence to the world, as was his very annoying habit.

Through one of the living room windows she could see her sister-in-law Naomi, still in her coat. The family must have just arrived.

Preoccupied, Becca jumped when the front door swung open and her mother came dashing out—wearing no coat, only a sweater—to greet her. Julie loved the cold weather.

“Becca! Come in, come in! It’s so good to see you. Here, let me help you with those bags.” Julie reached for her daughter and Becca backed away.

“No, Mom,” she said, “it’s okay, I’ve got them.”

“Don’t be silly.” Julie grabbed the briefcase from Becca’s shoulder. “Give me that, Lord, what’s in here, bricks?”

“Just some stuff for work.”

“Now, don’t tell me you’re going to be working all week. It’s Christmas!”

There was no point in arguing; it was the same old refrain. Becca, you work too hard. Mom, it’s my job and I like it. But you know what they say about all work and no play. But I like it. But. But. But.

Julie turned and led the way into the house. Becca rolled her eyes behind her mother’s back. Wasn’t Julie too old—or something—to be wearing her hair in a braid down her back? Couldn’t she at least wind it on top of her head? Why a swinging braid of thick, graying hair should so infuriate her Becca didn’t care to examine.

Once inside, she was met with the usual chaos of arrival. Greetings were shared; coats removed and passed along to the coatrack in the front hall; bags were tumbled at the foot of the stairs. It was all as usual. It made Becca feel very uncomfortable and she stood for a moment, silent and stiff, until her younger sister approached her.

“Hi, Becca.” Lily gave her sister a weak and awkward hug.

“So, how’s school? Becca said by way of greeting.

“Fine.” Lily shrugged. “You know.”

“When do you graduate?”

“Next June.”

“Huh,” she said. “Time flies.” What now? “And what are you planning to do after graduation?”

“Going to law school,” Lily replied. “If I get into one.”

“I’m sure your grades are fine,” Becca said, though she had no knowledge whatsoever of her younger sister’s academic track record. In fact, Becca realized that she had no knowledge of just about anything having to do with Lily. In fact, if she turned away from her sister at that very moment, she doubted she could tell you the color of her eyes. Becca looked—really looked—and noted that Lily’s eyes were cow brown, like their mother’s. Those eyes must have come from her mother’s side of the family, from the Dobbs family. She would try to remember that. If she remembered to remember.

Lily turned to answer a question posed by her mother, and Becca found herself receiving a quick, one-armed hug from her brother. And then he was off, lifting an enormous duffle bag and heading for the stairs.

“Hey to you, too, David,” she mumbled to his back.

Naomi came close and smiled her familiar, genuine smile. “It’s so good to see you, Becca,” she said.

Naomi meant it. She was happy to see her sister-in-law. She was incapable of guile. Her sincerity upset Becca. It was much more difficult to confront a nice person than a nasty one.

Michael and Malcolm tore out of the kitchen, each clutching a cookie, raced through the living room, and made for the stairs to the second floor.

“Boys!” Naomi called. “Say hello to your aunt!”

Something was shouted over their shoulders. It sufficed for Becca. If the truth were to be told, the twins meant virtually nothing to her. She certainly didn’t hate them. But neither did she love them. When they were out of sight, they were out of mind. Even now, greeting the boys, she felt surprise at their existence. She felt vaguely bad about this but not bad enough to attempt a closer relationship. Besides, she got the distinct feeling that Michael and Malcolm weren’t all that interested in her, either.

Becca turned to her grandmother now, and gave her a slightly awkward hug. Nora felt frailer than Becca remembered. It had only

been a year since she'd last seen her grandmother. Could so much have changed in a year? Of course. Why not? Time was not a friend.

"How are you, Grandma?" Becca asked, though if there were something wrong with Nora, her grandmother would be the last to talk about it. Nora was as close to stoic as anyone Becca had ever known.

"Just fine," she said. "And you, Becca?"

"Fine. Great." Becca knew that Nora hadn't believed her response, which was even to her own ears, meaningless.

Then, a girl of sixteen came loping into the living room from the direction of the kitchen at the back of the house. She was tall and lanky, with long chestnut brown hair and the Rowan eyes. She was dressed fashionably but appropriately for her age—Naomi would have seen to that-- no bared midriff—in medium-rise jeans and a striped wool hoodie.

Becca wondered if she had been as pretty at sixteen as Rain was, so fresh and unspoiled. The answer was that yes she had been. And then, she had not.

"Hi, Aunt Becca!" the girl called.

Aunt. The word tugged painfully at Becca's heart. She was flooded by the all too familiar feelings of loss and regret—and worst of all, guilt. Rain's eyes, so like her very own, so not like Naomi's... *Yes*, she thought. *My resolve is firm.*

"Hi, Rain," she said, stepping forward to greet the girl. Then Becca took her daughter in her arms and hugged her.

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