

For Lee

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First published in Great Britain 2023 by Farshore
An imprint of HarperCollins Publishers
1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

farshore.co.uk

HarperCollins Publishers
1st Floor, Watermarque Building, Ringsend Road
Dublin 4, Ireland

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ISBN 978 0 75 550377 3
Signed edition ISBN 978 0 00 866658 3

Printed and bound in the UK using 100% renewable electricity at CPI Group (UK) Ltd

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library.

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THE CHRISTMAS CARROLLS

THE CHRISTMAS CLUB

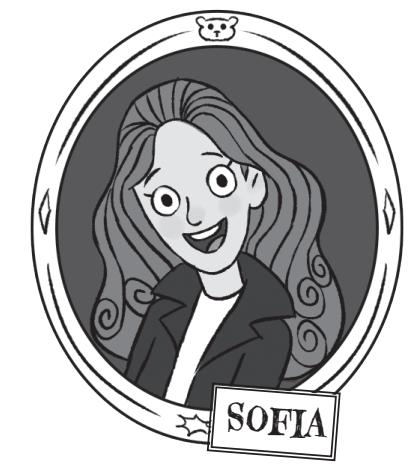


MEL TAYLOR-BESSENT
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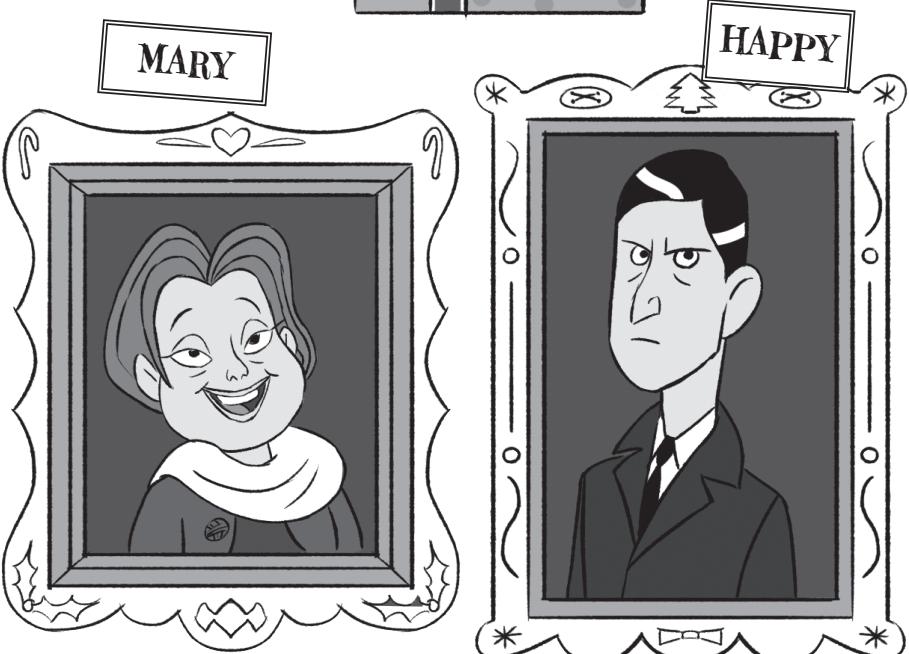
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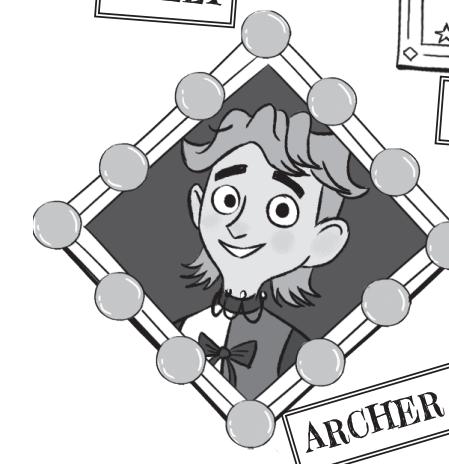
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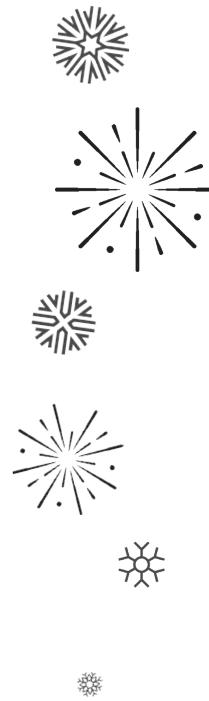


SUE



ARCHER





HOLIDAY EVE

1

Have you ever been so excited you thought you might laugh, fart, and throw up all at the same time? That was pretty much how I spent all of Holiday Eve (like Christmas Eve, but it's the night before you go on holiday!).

Mum was trying to squeeze extra presents into her Santa suitcase. My little sister, Ivy, was sneaking elf teddies into our hand luggage. Dad was baking his fourth batch of gingerbread cookies for the flight. And Reggie – our diva donkey who wants to be a reindeer – was staring dreamily at the clouds like all his Christmas wishes were about to come true.

"Reggie?" I said, nuzzling my face into his furry neck. "Can you believe you're going to be on a plane tomorrow? You'll be above the clouds! You'll see what Santa sees when he's flying his sleigh. You'll finally experience what it's like to be one of his reindeer!"

Reggie's hooves moved up and down so fast, you would've thought he was auditioning to be a tap dancer.

"Hee-haw?" he brayed, grinning from ear to ear. I laughed. "Yes, you can have the window seat."

"Hee-haw?"

"And when we get to New York, we can have a snowball fight in Central Park."

Reggie stopped tapping his hooves and leaned so close to me, I could see right up his slobbery snout. "HEE-HAW?"

I smiled at his wonky eye and inflatable antlers. "Of course," I said, knowing how important it was for him to look like a proper reindeer when he finally flew above the clouds. "I've packed tons of extra antlers. And some Rudolph noses. *And* your reindeer audition video in case

we bump into Santa flying over the Atlantic Ocean."

Reggie let out a *sigh* snort of relief.

"Try to relax," I said, patting his back as he propped his chin on the windowsill and gazed up at the clouds again. "Tomorrow will be here before we know it and *everything* will be perfect, OK?"

Mayyyyybe 'perfect' was the wrong word given what *actually* happened the next day. But right there, in that moment, I thought nothing could spoil our explitement (when you're so excited, you think you might explode!).

We were going to NEW YORK!

I had packed and unpacked my suitcase twelve times. I'd written Christmas cards for everyone on our plane. And I had made a photo book to document everywhere we went and everyone we met. It was going to be the holiday of a lifetime, and my three best friends – Reggie, Archer (my bestest best friend from school), and Sue (a dancing penguin and the newest member of the Carroll family) – were coming

with us! Could you bell-ieve it!? It had all happened so quickly, we hadn't even had time to add our November decorations to the house.

"This trip is going to be tinsel-riffic!" Mum sang as she packed her fifteenth Christmas apron into her box of emergency Christmas aprons.

I helped her squish the box into the boot of the car and then busted out a quick 'we're going on holiday' dance. It wasn't my best performance, if I'm totally honest with you. But a bit like a nervous fart, I couldn't hold it in any longer.

Just as I was finishing my last head-nod, hip-thrust, twirl-in-the-air-and-POSE, Archer arrived with Patrick, his carer, who we all call Pa.

"Are you quite sure about this, Mrs Carroll?" Pa said, helping Archer pull his suitcase out of the car. "This New York trip must be very expensive."

"Please!" Mum smiled warmly. "Call me Snow. And I promise, we haven't paid a penny. We won a competition, remember?"

Pa gazed up at our house and fell silent. I would've asked if he was OK, but it was a pretty normal reaction to seeing our house on Sleigh Ride Avenue. Even someone like Pa who had seen it eleventy squillion* times seemed to be overawed by its beauty and elegance and the giant Santa head that barfed sweets when you pressed its nose. (*I know eleventy squillion isn't a real number, but it's my favourite non-number and the one I use when I don't know what the number is, because sometimes not knowing is as fun as knowing. You know?)

"We were named the Most Festive Family in the UK," I reminded Pa, just in case he'd forgotten the other eleventy squillion times I'd told him. "And our prize was this trip to New York! To be in the Christmas season parade! We're going to be on the lead float!"

"It sounds incredible," Pa said, tearing his eyes from the house to peer at our car bulging with five suitcases and a sack of presents tied to the roof. "But are you sure you can take Archer, too?"



• *Holiday Eve* •

"Archer helped us win the competition," Mum said, wrapping her arm around Archer's shoulders. "This is as much his prize as it is ours."

Archer's awkward smile spread from ear to ear. It made me smile harder, and then he smiled even harder, and then I smiled so hard my cheeks hurt and it made me wonder if I should become a Professional Smiler when I'm older. Of course, I also wanted to be the mayor of Lapland and qualify as an Olympic present wrapper (it wasn't an official sport yet, but I was working on it!). Basically, I wanted a job that spread cheer all over the world, and smiling seemed like a pretty good way to do that, wouldn't you agree?

"Right then," Mum said, stuffing her hands in the pocket of her packing apron and presenting Pa with a Christmas card. "This has all the information about our hotel and flight times. We'll send you as many photos as we can, and we'll be back in a week to tell you all about it!"

Pa hugged Archer and then hopped into his car.

"Enjoy your holiday, folks!" he shouted out of the window. "I've heard that life-changing things happen in New York!"

After waving Pa goodbye, I taught Archer my 'we're going on holiday' dance. Then we left Mum stuffing things in the car, and we jigged and hopped all the way to the kitchen where we found Dad, Ivy, Sue and Reggie.

"Look, everyone!" Dad shouted over his whirring cake mixer. "Sue taught Ivy to walk!"

I'm not sure if 'walk' was the right word, given that Sue was a penguin that loved to dance. But Ivy was definitely doing some kind of wonky wobbly waddle (say that three times fast!). We all clapped and cheered as she ~~wobbly~~ waddled wobdled around the room, clinging on to Sue's flipper and shooting us a cheesy grin as if to say, 'Aha! Now I can cause twice as much mischief!'

Archer and I sat on the kitchen floor for ages, taking turns to catch Ivy when her waddling got too

wobbly, and taking photos on the christmacam. Mum even turned the volume up on the festadio so we could sing along to some Christmas tunes, and Dad made us some super-shocking snowball sundaes that had popping candy inside the ice-cream and giant snowball gobstoppers hidden at the bottom of the glass. It was the perfect Holiday Eve.

As we all started yawning, Dad turned the oven off, Archer closed the curtains, and Ivy nuzzled into Mum's shoulder.

"How long 'til we get on the plane, Snowflake?" Dad asked.

My brain whirred with numbers and confusing calculations. "In two tinkles of a Santa hat and one swish of a reindeer tail?" I said.

"Sounds about right to me!" Dad smiled. "Come on, everyone. Let's get to bed. Tomorrow is a big day."

But before we'd even made it out of the kitchen, Reggie let out a loud "HEE-HAW!" and started chasing his tail in explitement. Archer and I did everything we

could to calm him down. We offered him candy-cane cakes and pine-cone pies. We sang relaxing Christmas songs. We read him *The Night Before Christmas*. We told him he could have a sleepover in my bedroom instead of sleeping in his stable. We reminded him how important it was to get a proper night's sleep before a big day. We even tucked him into my bed, gave him all the blankets, and told him to count sheep elves.

I don't know what time it was when he eventually fell asleep, but I do know that Sue had been giving soft penguin snores for hours, and I was half expecting the sunrise to start peeking through the curtains. Eventually I fell asleep, too. But then . . .



DREAMING OF NEW YORK

2

“HOLLY! ARCHER! REGGIE! SUE!”
“What's going on?” I said, sleepily rubbing my eyes. “What's all the shouting about?”

“WE OVERSLEPT!” Mum cried, appearing at my bedroom door with a snoozy Ivy draped over her shoulder. “THE PLANE LEAVES IN AN HOUR!”

“WHAT?” I shouted back. “ARE YOU SLEIGHRIOUS?”
Sue woke up and started peeping. Archer sat bolt upright, his eyes barely open. Reggie karate-kicked the blankets off his body, fell out of bed with a solid THWUMP, and scrambled towards the door like

someone had attached a rocket to his bum.

"HEE-HAW!" he bawled. "HEE-HAAAAAW!"

"Reggie's right," Mum said, frantically pulling me and Archer towards her. "We need to get in the car now. We don't even have time for breakfast."

There was a clattering of pans from the kitchen, followed by a loud groan and the sound of a whizzing whisk.

"THERE'S ALWAYS TIME FOR BREAKFAST!" Dad yelled. "GET YOURSELVES IN THE CAR AND I'LL BE THERE IN A JINGLE-BELL JIFFY!"

Right on cue, my stomach grumbled.

"You heard your dad," Mum said, yanking homemade 'Christmas Carrolls' jumpers over our heads. "Get to the car as quickly as you can. I just need to . . ." She paused awkwardly and lowered her voice. ". . . grab something from the safe."

"Hang on, Mum," I said, admiring the fairy lights around the collar of our new Christmas jumpers. "When did you have time to make these?"

"Oh, it's just something I rustled up." Mum popped a tiny jumper over Ivy's head. "I know Sue doesn't like to be cold, so I've made jumpers for her and Reggie, too. New York can be quite chilly at this time of year."

Sue waved an appreciative flipper in the air. Mum blew her an air kiss and then darted away.

My tummy lurched. What could Mum – the most organised person in the world – possibly have left to pack?

"Wait here," I said, watching Mum sneak into her bedroom and close the door behind her. "Mum's fetching an extra Christmas surprise, and I'm going to find out what it is!"

Archer helped Sue put her jumper on as I tiptoed across the landing and silently opened the door to Mum and Dad's bedroom.

Mum was on her hands and knees, rummaging at the back of her wardrobe and humming nervously to herself. I slipped across the floor and watched her enter a code on the Santa safe.

A few seconds later, the safe door clicked open. Mum pulled out a giant stocking wound up in so much Toughened Tinsel that it took her several minutes to untie it. When she finally pulled it open, she put her hand inside – and pulled out another fluffy stocking. This one had been wrapped in so much ribbon, Mum had to use scissors to cut it open. My eyes boggled as she pulled out another stocking, and *another* one, and *ANOTHER* one. The last stocking was so small, I wondered if all she'd find inside was a lump of coal.

Mum held the last stocking close to her chest. This one was tied at the top with golden rope and fastened with a padlock.

What could possibly be so precious, so fragile, so *secret* that it needed more security than Santa's secret grotto?

Mum fumbled with the numbers of the padlock, unwound the golden rope, and put her hand inside. I held my breath. Beads of sweat formed on my brow. Any minute now and the big Christmas secret would be –

"COME ON, EVERYONE!" Dad's voice yelled up the stairs. "WE SHOULD BE ON THE ROAD ALREADY!"

Mum jumped so high, her hand flew out of the stocking. Four passports landed on the carpet. One was covered in wrapping paper and a tag that said 'DO NOT OPEN'.

Mum shoved the passports to the bottom of her bag. I slipped back out of the room as she closed the Santa safe, took a deep breath to compose herself, and then emerged from the bedroom as if nothing had happened.

"Come on, Hols," she said, ruffling my hair as I pretended to be watching paint dry and absenlately NOT spying on her. "What's the hold-up?"

I opened my mouth to tell her that *she* was the one holding us all up. But I knew passports were a sensitive subject. It was the one thing we didn't talk about. The one thing we didn't question. The one thing we'd promised Mum we'd never bring up.

Inside her passport was something so secret, not even Dad knew what it was. Something so secret, it

gave Mum nightmares. Something so secret, it almost stopped us from going on holiday all together.

Mum's real name.

Dad honked the horn on the Jingle Bell Jeep. I ran into my bedroom and shoved some tinsel bracelets on my wrists, wrapped a fairy-light belt around my trousers, and threw snowflake confetti in my curls for extra grey-haired Mrs Claus vibes. Then I hurtled down the stairs, squeezed into the car beside Archer and Sue, and got an earful of HEE-HAWs from Reggie to show how furious he was for making him wait so long. If Reggie'd had his way, he would've been at the airport yesterday.

As Dad handed us boxes of winterberry waffles for the journey, I let my thoughts drift to the different Christmas miracles we might witness in a place as exciting and chaotic as New York.

Mum told me there were over EIGHT MILLION people living in New York City. She said it had the most skyscrapers in the world (they're these really,



really tall buildings that look like they can reach the clouds!). She said that the library there held over fifty million books, and that New York City was known as 'the city that never sleeps'.

It certainly sounded like the most exciting place on Earth (second to Santa's workshop in Lapland, of course), but it almost sounded too good to be true. Apparently, New York had Christmas trees that were *four times* as tall as our house, and oversized decorations

that filled all the shops, restaurants and streets. There were Christmas parties, and Christmas parades, and Christmas markets with every flavour of hot chocolate and eggnog you could imagine. Everything sounded so big, and over the top, and so overflowing with Christmas, I wondered if it was ready for us . . .

Or if we were ready for IT.

SNOW NEED TO PANIC

3

Thirty minutes later, we were hurtling through the airport with five Santa suitcases, four portions of Christmas pudding, three perfectly wrapped presents, two outrageous parents and a partridge in a pear tree my best friend pulling a donkey.

"Can the Carroll family please come to gate 25C," a booming voice announced over the Tannoy. "That's gate 25C for the Carroll family."

"Hurry!" Dad yelled. "We're going to miss the plane!"

Mum shoved the last of her winterberry waffle

• *The Christmas Club* •

into her mouth and readjusted the candy canes she'd hidden in her hair for mid-flight snacks. "Coming!" she shrilled, sprinting so fast she looked like a reindeer trying to take off.

Ivy clung to Mum's shoulder, giggling as she bounced up and down, and screaming "Ciiiiis-maaaas" at the top of her lungs.

People everywhere stopped and stared. Some even darted out of the way as we raced through the airport, past sweet-smelling perfume shops and bustling lounges

• *Snow Need to Panic* •

where holidaymakers waited for their flights.

"What's everyone staring at?" I said, sitting on my Santa suitcase as it drove across the shiny floor.

The suitcases were Dad's invention. He'd put tiny motors inside so the wheels turned on their own. All we had to do was walk alongside them. No pushing required! Genius, right? I took it to the next level by riding ON TOP of mine, but I bet you would too if you were carrying a plump penguin in a Christmas pudding baby carrier.



Reggie galloped ahead, hee-hawing at passersby and shooting them his trademark wonky smile. It was oh-fish-ally the most excited I'd ever seen him.

"This is the final call for the Carroll family," the voice on the Tannoy droned. "Unless you arrive at gate 25C in the next three minutes, your plane will leave without you."

"GO, GO, GO!" Dad wailed, running even faster.

"Where's gate 25C?" Mum shouted. "Where's gate 25C?"

"Gate 25C?" said a man wearing a blue suit and a tiny airline badge. "That's the gate for the private planes. It's on the other side of the airport."

We skidded to a halt. All of us, that is, except Reggie. Distracted by a stunned family taking his photo, Reggie toppled into Mum, who stumbled into Dad, who fell on top of his Santa suitcase and sent it crashing to the ground.

WHOOSH!

Dad's suitcase burst open, sending his Christmas

jumpers and festive pants raining down on us like presents being thrown from a sleigh.

"It's snow-kay!" Dad shouted, dashing after his other runaway suitcase as it zoomed away through the terminal. "Snow need to panic!"

But Dad *was* panicking. Mum burst into a nervous rendition of *I Wish It Could Be Christmas Every Day*. Reggie let out the loudest trumpet-style exifart (excited fart) I'd ever heard, and the stench made Archer throw up in his mouth. Ivy started squealing when a pair of Dad's 'ho-ho-ho' pants landed on her head, and I tried to show everyone my 'this is all totally normal / there's nothing to see here' dance routine.

"Last call for the Carroll family," the voice on the Tannoy shrilled. "Your plane is about to depart."