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# Kristin Hannah

## winter garden

Can a woman really know  
herself, if she doesn't  
know her mother?



# *Winter Garden*

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ST. MARTIN'S PRESS  
New York

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For information, address St. Martin's Press,

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

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# Book design by Kathryn Parise

Excerpts from “Requiem 1935–1940” and “We Don’t Know How to Say Goodbye” from *Poems of Akhmatova*, selected, translated, and introduced by Stanley Kunitz with Max Hayward © 1967, 1968, 1972, 1973 by Stanley Kunitz and Max Hayward, originally published by Little Brown and currently available from Mariner Books. Reprinted with permission by Darhansoff Verrill Feldman Literary Agents.

## LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Hannah, Kristin.

Winter garden / Kristin Hannah.—1st ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-312-36412-0

1. Mothers and daughters—Fiction. 2. Russian Americans—Fiction. 3. Domestic fiction. 4.

Psychological fiction. I. Title.

PS3558.A4763W56 2010

813'.54—dc22

2009039230

First Edition: February 2010

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



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*To my husband, Benjamin, as always;*

*to my mother—I wish I had listened to more of your  
life stories when I had the chance;*

*to my dad and Debbie—thanks for the trip of a lifetime  
and memories that will last even longer; and*

*to my beloved Tucker—I am so proud of you.  
Your adventure is just beginning.*





Not, not mine: it's somebody else's wound.  
I could never have borne it. So take the thing  
that happened, hide it, stick it in the ground.

Whisk the lamps away . . .

Night.

—ANNA AKHMATOVA, FROM *POEMS OF AKHMATOVA*,  
TRANSLATED BY STANLEY KUNITZ, WITH MAX HAYWARD

# Prologue



1972

On the banks of the mighty Columbia River, in this icy season when every breath became visible, the orchard called Belye Nochi was quiet. Dormant apple trees stretched as far as the eye could see, their sturdy roots coiled deep in the cold, fertile soil. As temperatures plummeted and color drained from land and sky, the whitened landscape caused a kind of winter blindness; one day became indistinguishable from the next. Everything froze, turned fragile.

Nowhere was the quiet more noticeable than in Meredith Whitson's own house. At twelve, she had already discovered the empty spaces that gathered between people. She longed for her family to be like those she saw on television, where everything looked perfect and everyone got along. No one, not even her beloved father, understood how alone she often felt within these four walls, how invisible.

But tomorrow night, all of that would change.

She had come up with a brilliant plan. She had written a play based on one of her mother's fairy tales, and she would present it at the annual Christmas party. It was exactly the kind of thing that would happen on an episode of *The Partridge Family*.

"How come I can't be the star?" Nina whined. It was at least the tenth time she'd asked this question since Meredith had finished the script.

Meredith turned around in her chair and looked down at her nine-year-old sister, who was crouched on the wooden floor of their bedroom, painting a mint-green castle on an old bedsheet.

Meredith bit her lower lip, trying not to frown. The castle was too messy; not right at all. "Do we have to talk about this again, Nina?"

"But *why* can't I be the peasant girl who marries the prince?"

"You know why. Jeff is playing the prince and he's thirteen. You'd look silly next to him."

Nina put her paintbrush in the empty soup can and sat back on her heels. With her short black hair, bright green eyes, and pale skin, she looked like a perfect little pixie. "Can I be the peasant girl next year?"

"You bet." Meredith grinned. She loved the idea that she might be creating a family tradition. All of her friends had traditions, but not the Whitsons; they had always been different. There was no stream of relatives who came to their house on holidays, no turkey on Thanksgiving or ham on Easter, no prayers that were always said. Heck, they didn't even know for sure how old their mom was.

It was because Mom was Russian, and alone in this country. Or at least that was what Dad said. Mom didn't say much of anything about herself.

A knock at the door surprised Meredith. She looked up just as Jeff Cooper and her father came into the room.

Meredith felt like one of those long, floppy balloons being slowly filled with air, taking on a new form with each breath, and in this case the breath was Jeffrey Cooper. They'd been best friends since fourth grade, but lately it felt different to be around him. Exciting. Sometimes, when he looked at her, she could barely breathe. "You're right on time for rehearsal."

He gave her one of his heart-stopping smiles. "Just don't tell Joey and the guys. They'd give me a ton of crap for this."

"About rehearsal," her dad said, stepping forward. He was still in his work clothes, a brown leisure suit with orange topstitching. Surprisingly, there was no smile lurking beneath his bushy black mustache or in his eyes. He held out the script. "This is the play you're doing?"

Meredith rose from the chair. "Do you think she'll like it?"

Nina stood up. Her heart-shaped face was uncharacteristically solemn. "Will she?"

The three of them looked at one another over the expanse of the Picasso-style green castle and the costumes laid out across the bed. The truth they passed among themselves, in looks alone, was that Anya Whitson was a cold woman; any warmth she had was directed at her husband. Precious little of it reached her daughters. When they were younger, Dad had tried to pretend it was otherwise, to redirect their attention like a magician, mesmerizing them with the brightness of his affection, but as with all illusions, the truth ultimately appeared behind it.

So they all knew what Meredith was asking.

“I don’t know, Meredoodle,” Dad said, reaching into his pocket for his cigarettes. “Your mother’s stories—”

“I love it when she tells them,” Meredith said.

“It’s the only time she really talks to us,” Nina added.

Dad lit a cigarette and stared at them through a swirl of gray smoke, his brown eyes narrowed. “Yeah,” he said, exhaling. “It’s just . . .”

Meredith moved toward him, careful not to step on the painting. She understood his hesitation; none of them ever really knew what would set Mom off, but this time Meredith was sure she had the answer. If there was one thing her mother loved, it was this fairy tale about a reckless peasant girl who dared to fall in love with a prince. “It only takes ten minutes, Dad. I timed it. Everyone will love it.”

“Okay, then,” he said finally.

She felt a swell of pride and hope. For once she wouldn’t spend the party in some shadowy corner of the living room reading, or in the kitchen washing dishes. Instead, she would be the center of her mother’s attention. This play would prove that Meredith had listened to every precious word Mom had ever said, even those few that were spoken softly, in the dark, at story time.

For the next hour, Meredith directed her actors through the play, although really only Jeff needed help. She and Nina had heard this fairy tale for years.

Later, when the rehearsal was over and everyone had gone their separate ways, Meredith kept working. She made a sign that read ONE NIGHT ONLY: A GRAND PLAY FOR THE HOLIDAY and listed their three names. She touched up the painted backdrop (it was impossible to fix entirely; Nina always colored outside of the lines), and then positioned it in the living room. When the set was ready, she added sequins to the tulle ballet-skirt-turned-princess-gown that she would wear at the end. It was nearly two in the morning by the time she went to bed, and even then she was so excited that it took a long time for her to fall asleep.

The next day seemed to pass slowly, but finally, at six o’clock, the guests began to arrive. It was not a big crowd, just the usual people: men and women who worked for the orchard and their families, a few neighbors, and Dad’s only living relative, his sister, Dora.

Meredith sat at the top of the stairs, staring down at the entryway below. She couldn’t help tapping her foot on the step, wondering when she could

make her move.

Just as she was about to stand up, she heard a clanging, rattling sound.

*Oh, no.* She shot to her feet and rushed down the stairs, but it was too late.

Nina was in the kitchen, banging a pot with a metal spoon and yelling out, "Showtime!" No one knew how to steal the limelight like Nina.

There was a smattering of laughter as the guests made their way from the kitchen to the living room, where the painting of the castle hung from an aluminum movie screen set up beside the massive fireplace. To the right was a large Christmas tree, decorated with drugstore lights and ornaments Nina and Meredith had made over the years. In front of the painting was their "stage": a small wooden bridge that rested on the hardwood floor and a streetlamp made from cardboard, with a flashlight duct-taped to the top.

Meredith dimmed the lights in the room, turned on the flashlight, and then ducked behind the painted backdrop. Nina and Jeff were already there, in their costumes.

There was only a little privacy back here. If she leaned sideways, she could see several of the guests, and they could see her, but still it felt separate. When the room quieted, Meredith took a deep breath and began the narration she'd composed so painstakingly: "Her name is Vera, and she is a poor peasant girl, a nobody. She lives in a magical realm called the Snow Kingdom, but her beloved world is dying. An evil has come to this land; it rolls across the cobblestone streets in black carriages sent by a dark, evil knight who wants to destroy it all."

Meredith made her entrance, taking care not to trip over her long, layered skirts as she took the stage. She looked out over the guests and saw her mother in the back of the room, alone somehow even in this crowd, her beautiful face blurred by cigarette smoke. For once, she was looking directly at Meredith.

"Come, sister," Meredith said loudly, moving toward the streetlamp. "We shall not let this cold stop us."

Nina stepped out from behind the curtain. Dressed in a ratty nightgown with a kerchief covering her hair, she wrung her hands together and looked up at Meredith. "Do you think it is the Black Knight?" she yelled, drawing a laugh from the crowd. "Is his bad magic making it so cold?"

"No. No. I am chilled at the loss of our father. When will he return?" Meredith pressed the back of her hand to her forehead and sighed

dramatically. “The carriages are everywhere these days. The Black Knight is gaining power . . . people are turning to smoke before our eyes. . . .”

“Look,” Nina said, pointing toward the painted castle. “It is the prince. . . .” She managed to sound reverent.

Jeff moved into place on their little stage. In his blue sport coat and jeans, with a cheap gold crown on his wheat-blond hair, he looked so handsome that for a moment Meredith couldn’t remember her lines. She knew he was embarrassed and uncomfortable—the red in his cheeks made that obvious—but still he was here, proving what a good friend he was. And he was smiling at her as if she really were a princess.

He held out a pair of silk roses. “I have two roses for you,” he said to Meredith, his voice cracking.

She touched his hand, but before she could say her line there was a loud crash.

Meredith turned, saw her mother standing in the center of the crowd, motionless, her face pale, her blue eyes blazing. Blood dripped from her hand. She’d broken her cocktail glass, and even from here Meredith could see a shard sticking out of her mother’s palm.

“Enough,” her mother said sharply. “This is hardly entertainment for a party.”

The guests didn’t know what to do; some stood up, others remained seated. The room went quiet.

Dad made his way to Mom. He put his arm around her and pulled her close. Or he tried to; she wouldn’t bend, not even for him.

“I never should have told you those ridiculous fairy tales,” Mom said, her Russian accent sharp with anger. “I forgot how romantic and empty-headed girls can be.”

Meredith was so humiliated she couldn’t move.

She saw her father guide her mother into the kitchen, where he probably took her straight to the sink and began cleaning up her hand. The guests left as if this were the *Titanic* and they were rushing for lifeboats stationed just beyond the front door.

Only Jeff looked at Meredith, and she could see how embarrassed he was for her. He started toward her, still holding the two roses. “Meredith—”

She pushed past him and ran out of the room. At the end of the hall, in a shadowy corner, she skidded to a stop and stood there, breathing hard, her eyes burning with tears. She could hear her dad’s voice coming from the

kitchen; he was trying to soothe his angry wife. A minute later a door clicked shut, and she knew that Jeff had gone home.

“What did you do?” Nina asked quietly, coming up beside her.

“Who knows?” Meredith said, wiping her eyes. “She’s such a bitch.”

“That’s a bad word.”

Meredith heard the trembling in Nina’s voice and knew how hard her sister was trying not to cry. She reached down and held her hand.

“What do we do? Should we say we’re sorry?”

Meredith couldn’t help thinking about the last time she’d made her mother mad and told her she was sorry. “She won’t care. Trust me.”

“So what do we do?”

Meredith tried to feel as mature as she had this morning, but her confidence was gone. She knew what would happen: Dad would calm Mom down and then he’d come up to their room and make them laugh and hold them in his big, strong arms and tell them that Mom really loved them. By the time he was done with the jokes and the stories, Meredith would want desperately to believe it. Again. “I know what I’m going to do,” she said, moving through the entryway toward the kitchen, until she could see Mom’s side—just her slim black velvet dress and her pale arm, and her white, white hair. “I’m never going to listen to one of her stupid fairy tales again.”



We don't know how to say goodbye:  
we wander on, shoulder to shoulder.  
Already the sun is going down;  
you're moody. I am your shadow.

—ANNA AKHMATOVA, FROM *POEMS OF AKHMATOVA*,  
TRANSLATED BY STANLEY KUNITZ, WITH MAX HAYWARD



# *One*



2000

Was this what forty looked like? Really? In the past year Meredith had gone from Miss to Ma'am. Just like that, with no transition. Even worse, her skin had begun to lose its elasticity. There were tiny pleats in places that used to be smooth. Her neck was fuller, there was no doubt about it. She hadn't gone gray yet; that was the one saving grace. Her chestnut-colored hair, cut in a no-nonsense shoulder-length bob, was still full and shiny. But her eyes gave her away. She looked tired. And not only at six in the morning.

She turned away from the mirror and stripped out of her old T-shirt and into a pair of black sweats, anklet socks, and a long-sleeved black shirt. Pulling her hair into a stumpy ponytail, she left the bathroom and walked into her darkened bedroom, where the soft strains of her husband's snoring made her almost want to crawl back into bed. In the old days, she would have done just that, would have snuggled up against him.

Leaving the room, she clicked the door shut behind her and headed down the hallway toward the stairs.

In the pale glow of a pair of long-outdated night-lights, she passed the closed doors of her children's bedrooms. Not that they were children anymore. Jillian was nineteen now, a sophomore at UCLA who dreamed of being a doctor, and Maddy—Meredith's baby—was eighteen and a freshman at Vanderbilt. Without them, this house—and Meredith's life—felt emptier and quieter than she'd expected. For nearly twenty years, she had devoted herself to being the kind of mother she hadn't had, and it had worked. She and her daughters had become the best of friends. Their absence left her feeling adrift, a little purposeless. She knew it was silly. It wasn't as if she didn't have plenty to do. She just missed the girls; that was all.

She kept moving. Lately that seemed to be the best way to handle things.

Downstairs, she stopped in the living room just long enough to plug in the Christmas tree lights. In the mudroom, the dogs leaped up at her,

yapping and wagging their tails.

“Luke, Leia, no jumping,” she scolded the huskies, scratching their ears as she led them to the back door. When she opened it, cold air rushed in. Snow had fallen again last night, and though it was still dark on this mid-December morning, she could make out the pale pearlescence of road and field. Her breath turned into vapory plumes.

By the time they were all outside and on their way, it was 6:10 and the sky was a deep purplish gray.

Right on time.

Meredith ran slowly at first, acclimating herself to the cold. As she did every weekday morning, she ran along the gravel road that led from her house, down past her parents’ house, and out to the old single-lane road that ended about a mile up the hill. From there, she followed the loop out to the golf course and back. Four miles exactly. It was a routine she rarely missed; she had no choice, really. Everything about Meredith was big by nature. She was tall, with broad shoulders, curvy hips, and big feet. Even her features seemed just a little too much for her pale, oval face—she had a big Julia Roberts-type mouth, huge brown eyes, full eyebrows, and thick hair. Only constant exercise, a vigilant diet, good hair products, and an industrial-sized pair of tweezers could keep her looking good.

As she turned back onto her road, the rising sun illuminated the mountains, turned their snowcapped peaks lavender and pink.

On either side of her, thousands of bare, spindly apple trees showed through the snow like brown stitches on white fabric. This fertile cleft of land had belonged to their family for fifty years, and there, in the center of it all, tall and proud, was the home in which she’d grown up. Belye Nochi. Even in the half-light it looked ridiculously out of place and ostentatious.

Meredith kept running up the hill, faster and faster, until she could barely breathe and there was a stitch in her side.

She came to a stop at her own front porch as the valley filled with bright golden light. She fed the dogs and then hurried upstairs. She was just going into the bathroom as Jeff was coming out. Wearing only a towel, with his graying blond hair still dripping wet, he turned sideways to let her pass, and she did the same. Neither one of them spoke.

By 7:20, she was drying her hair, and by 7:30—right on time—she was dressed for work in a pair of black jeans and a fitted green blouse. A little

eyeliner, some blush and mascara, a coat of lipstick, and she was ready to go.

Downstairs, she found Jeff at the kitchen table, sitting in his regular chair, reading *The New York Times*. The dogs were asleep at his feet.

She went to the coffeepot and poured herself a cup. “You need a refill?”

“I’m good,” he said without looking up.

Meredith stirred soy milk into her coffee, watching the color change. It occurred to her that she and Jeff only talked at a distance lately, like strangers—or disillusioned partners—and only about work or the kids. She tried idly to remember the last time they’d made love, and couldn’t.

Maybe that was normal. Certainly it was. When you’d been married as long as they had, there were bound to be quiet times. Still, it saddened her sometimes to remember how passionate they used to be. She’d been fourteen on their first date (they’d gone to see *Young Frankenstein*; it was still one of their favorites), and to be honest, that was the last time she’d ever really looked at another guy. It was strange when she thought about that now; she didn’t consider herself a romantic woman, but she’d fallen in love practically at first sight. He’d been a part of her for as long as she could remember.

They’d married early—too early, really—and she’d followed him to college in Seattle, working nights and weekends in smoky bars to pay tuition. She’d been happy in their cramped, tiny U District apartment. Then, when they were seniors, she’d gotten pregnant. It had terrified her at first. She’d worried that she was like her mother, and that parenthood wouldn’t be a good thing. But she discovered, to her profound relief, that she was the complete opposite of her own mother. Perhaps her youth had helped in that. God knew Mom had not been young when Meredith was born.

Jeff shook his head. It was a minute gesture, barely even a movement, but she saw it. She had always been attuned to him, and lately their mutual disappointments seemed to create sound, like a high-pitched whistle that only she could hear.

“What?” she said.

“Nothing.”

“You didn’t shake your head over nothing. What’s the matter?”

“I just asked you something.”

“I didn’t hear you. Ask me again.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Fine.” She took her coffee and headed toward the dining room.

It was something she’d done a hundred times, and yet just then, as she passed under the old-fashioned ceiling light with its useless bit of plastic mistletoe, her view changed.

She saw herself as if from a distance: a forty-year-old woman, holding a cup of coffee, looking at two empty places at the table, and at the husband who was still here, and for a split second she wondered what other life that woman could have lived. What if she hadn’t come home to run the orchard and raise her children? What if she hadn’t gotten married so young? What kind of woman could she have become?

And then it was gone like a soap bubble, and she was back where she belonged.

“Will you be home for dinner?”

“Aren’t I always?”

“Seven o’clock,” she said.

“By all means,” he said, turning the page. “Let’s set a time.”



Meredith was at her desk by eight o’clock. As usual, she was the first to arrive and went about the cubicle-divided space on the warehouse’s second floor flipping on lights. She passed by her dad’s office—empty now—pausing only long enough to glance at the plaques by his door. Thirteen times he’d been voted Grower of the Year and his advice was still sought out by competitors on a regular basis. It didn’t matter that he only occasionally came into the office, or that he’d been semi-retired for ten years. He was still the face of the Belye Nochi orchard, the man who had pioneered Golden Delicious apples in the early sixties, Granny Smiths in the seventies, and championed the Braeburn and Fuji in the nineties. His designs for cold storage had revolutionized the business and helped make it possible to export the very best apples to world markets.

She had had a part to play in the company’s growth and success, to be sure. Under her leadership, the cold storage warehouse had been expanded and a big part of their business was now storing fruit for other growers. She’d turned the old roadside apple stand into a gift shop that sold hundreds of locally made craft items, specialty foods, and Belye Nochi memorabilia. At this time of year—the holidays—when train-loads of tourists arrived in Leavenworth for the world-famous tree-lighting ceremony, more than a few found their way to the gift shop.

The first thing she did was pick up the phone to call her youngest daughter. It was just past ten in Tennessee.

“Hello?” Maddy grumbled.

“Good morning,” Meredith said brightly. “It sounds like someone slept in.”

“Oh. Mom. Hi. I was up late last night. Studying.”

“Madison Elizabeth,” was all Meredith had to say to make her point.

Maddy sighed. “Okay. So it was a Lambda Chi party.”

“I know how fun it all is, and how much you want to experience every moment of college, but your first final is next week. Tuesday morning, right?”

“Right.”

“You have to learn to balance schoolwork and fun. So get your lily-white ass out of bed and get to class. It’s a life skill—partying all night and still getting up on time.”

“The world won’t end if I miss one Spanish class.” “Madison.”

Maddy laughed. “Okay, okay. I’m getting up. Spanish 101, here I come. *Hasta la vista . . .* ba-by.”

Meredith smiled. “I’ll call on Thursday and find out how your speech went. And call your sister. She’s stressed out about her organic chemistry test.”

“Okay, Mom. I love you.”

“Love you, too, princess.”

Meredith hung up the phone feeling better. For the next three hours, she threw herself into work. She was rereading the latest crop report when her intercom buzzed.

“Meredith? Your dad is on line one.”

“Thanks, Daisy.” She picked up the call. “Hi, Dad.”

“Mom and I were wondering if you could come to the house for lunch today.”

“I’m swamped here, Dad—”

“Please?”

Meredith had never been able to deny her father. “Okay. But I have to be back by one.”

“Excellent,” he said, and she could hear the smile in his voice.

She hung up and went back to work. Lately, with production up and demand down, and costs for both export and transportation skyrocketing,

she often spent her days putting out one fire after another, and today was no exception. By noon, a low-grade stress headache had crawled into the space at the base of her skull and begun to growl. Still, she smiled at her employees as she left her office and walked through the cold warehouse.

In less than ten minutes, she pulled up in front of her parents' garage.

The house was like something out of a Russian fairy tale, with its turretlike two-story veranda and elaborate fretwork trim, especially this time of year, when the eaves and railings glittered with Christmas lights. The hammered copper roof was dulled today by the gray winter weather, but on a bright day it shone like liquid gold. Surrounded by tall, elegant poplar trees and situated on a gentle rise that overlooked their valley, this house was so famous that tourists often stopped to photograph it.

Leave it to her mother to build something so absurdly out of place. A Russian dacha, or summerhouse, in Western Washington State. Even the orchard's name was absurd. Belye Nochi.

White Nights indeed. The nights here were as dark as new asphalt.

Not that Mom cared about what was around her. She got her way, that was all. Whatever Anya Whitson wanted, her husband gave to her, and apparently she'd wanted a fairytale castle and an orchard with an unpronounceable Russian name.

Meredith knocked and went inside. The kitchen was empty; a big pot of soup simmered on the stove.

In the living room, light spilled through the two-story rounded wall of windows at the north end of the room—the famous Belye Nochi turret. Wood floors gleamed with the golden beeswax that Mom insisted on using, even though it turned the floors into a skating rink if you dared to walk in stockinged feet. A huge stone fireplace dominated the center wall; clustered around it was a grouping of richly upholstered antique sofas and chairs. Above the fireplace hung an oil painting of a Russian troika—a romantic-looking carriage drawn by matching horses—sailing through a field of snow. Pure *Doctor Zhivago*. To her left were dozens of pictures of Russian churches, and below them was her mother's "Holy Corner," where a table held a display of antique icons and a single candle that burned year-round.

She found her father in the back of the room, alongside the heavily decorated Christmas tree, in his favorite spot. He lay stretched out on the burgundy mohair cushions of the ottoman bed, reading. His hair, what he had left of it at eighty-five, stuck out from his pink scalp in white tufts. Too

many decades in the sun had blotched and pleated his skin and he had a basset-hound look even when he was smiling, but the sad countenance fooled no one. Everyone loved Evan Whitson. It was impossible not to.

At her entrance, his face lit up. He reached out and squeezed her hand tightly, then let go. “Your mom will be so glad to see you.”

Meredith smiled. It was the game they’d played for years. Dad pretended that Mom loved Meredith and Meredith pretended to believe him. “Great. Is she upstairs?”

“I couldn’t keep her out of the garden this morning.”

Meredith wasn’t surprised. “I’ll get her.”

She left her father in the living room and walked through the kitchen to the formal dining room. Through the French doors, she saw an expanse of snow-covered ground, with acres of dormant apple trees in the distance. Closer, beneath the icicle-draped branches of a fifty-year-old magnolia tree, was a small rectangular garden defined by antique wrought-iron fencing. Its ornate gate was twined with brown vines; come summer, that gate would be a profusion of green leaves and white flowers. Now it glittered with frost.

And there she was: her eighty-something-year-old mother, bundled up in blankets, sitting on the black bench in her so-called winter garden. A light snow began to fall; tiny flakes blurred the scene into an impressionistic painting where nothing looked solid enough to touch. Sculpted bushes and a single birdbath were covered in snow, giving the garden a strange, otherworldly look. Not surprisingly, her mother sat in the middle of it all, motionless, her hands clasped in her lap.

As a child it had scared Meredith—all that solitude in her mother—but as she got older it had begun to embarrass, then irritate her. A woman of her mother’s age had no business sitting alone in the cold. Her mother claimed it was because of her ruined vision, but Meredith didn’t believe that. It was true that her mother’s eyes didn’t process color—she saw only white and black and shades of gray—but that had never struck Meredith, even as a girl, as a reason for staring at nothing.

She opened the door and went out into the cold. Her boots sank in the ankle-deep snow; here and there, crusty patches crunched underneath and more than once she almost slipped. “You shouldn’t be out here, Mom,” she said, coming up beside her. “You’ll catch pneumonia.”

“It takes more cold than this to give me pneumonia. This is barely below freezing.”

Meredith rolled her eyes. It was the sort of ridiculous comment her mother always made. "I've only got an hour for lunch, so you'd better come in now." Her voice sounded sharp in the softness of the falling snow, and she winced, wishing she had rounded her vowels more, tempered her voice. What was it about her mother that brought out the worst in her? "Did you know he invited me for lunch?"

"Of course," her mother said, but Meredith heard the lie in it.

Her mother rose from the bench in a single fluid motion, like some ancient goddess used to being revered and adored. Her face was remarkably smooth and wrinkle-free, her skin flawless and almost translucent. She had the kind of bone structure that made other women envious. But it was her eyes that defined her beauty. Deep-set and fringed by thick lashes, they were a remarkable shade of aqua flecked with bits of gold. Meredith was sure that no one who had seen those eyes ever forgot them. How ironic it was that eyes of such remarkable hue were unable to see color.

Meredith took her mother's elbow and led her away from the bench; only then, when they were walking, did she notice that her mother's hands were bare, and turning blue.

"Good God. Your hands are blue. You should have on gloves in this cold —"

"You do not know cold."

"Whatever, Mom." Meredith hustled her mother up the back steps and into the warmth of the house. "Maybe you should take a bath to warm up."

"I do not want to be warm, thank you. It is December fourteenth."

"Fine," Meredith said, watching her shivering mother go to the stove to stir the soup. The ragged gray wool blanket fell to the floor in a heap around her.

Meredith set the table, and for a few precious moments there was noise in the room, an approximation of a relationship, at least.

"My girls," Dad said, coming into the kitchen. He looked pale and slight, his once-wide shoulders whittled down to nothing by weight loss. Moving forward, he put a hand on each woman's shoulder, bringing Meredith and Mom in close. "I love it when we're together for lunch."

Mom smiled tightly. "As do I," she said in that clipped, accented voice of hers.

"And me," Meredith said.

"Good. Good." Dad nodded and went to the table.



Mom brought a tray of still-warm feta cheese corn bread slices, drizzled with butter, put a piece on each plate, and then brought over bowls of soup.

"I walked the orchard this morning," Dad said.

Meredith nodded and took a seat beside him. "I guess you noticed the back of Field A?"

"Yep. That hillside's been giving us some trouble."

"I've got Ed and Amanda on it. Don't worry about the harvest."

"I wasn't, actually. I was thinking of something else."

She sipped her soup; it was rich and delicious. Homemade lamb meatballs in a savory saffron broth with silken egg noodles. If she didn't exercise extreme caution, she'd eat it all and have to run another mile this afternoon. "Oh, yeah?"

"I want to change that field to grapes."

Meredith slowly lowered her spoon. "Grapes?"

"The Golden Delicious are not our best apple anymore." Before she could interrupt, he held up his hand. "I know. I know. We built this place on Golden Delicious, but things change. Hell, it's almost 2001, Meredith; wine is the new thing. I think we could make ice wine and late harvest at the very least."

"In these times, Dad? The Asian markets are tightening and it's costing us a fortune to transport our fruit. Competition is increasing. Hell, our profits were down twelve percent last year and this year doesn't look any better. We're barely hanging on."

"You should listen to your father," Mom said.

"Oh, please, Mom. You haven't even been inside the warehouse since we updated the cooling system. And when was the last time you even looked at one of the year-end statements?"

"Enough," Dad said with a sigh. "I didn't want to start an argument."

Meredith stood up. "I need to get back to work."

Meredith carried her bowl over to the sink, where she washed it. Then she put the left over soup in a Tupperware container, stored it in the impossibly full refrigerator, and washed the pot. It hit the strainer with a clang that seemed loud in the quiet room. "That was delicious, Mom. Thanks." She said a quick goodbye and left the kitchen. In the entryway, she put her coat back on. She was out on the porch, breathing in the sharp, frigid air, when her dad came up behind her.

“You know how she gets in December and January. Winters are hard for her.”

“I know.”

He pulled her into his arms and held her tightly. “You two need to try harder.”

Meredith couldn’t help being hurt by that. She’d heard it from him all her life; just once she wanted to hear him say that Mom should try harder. “I will,” she said, completing their little fairy tale as she always did. And she *would* try. She always did, but she and her mother would never be close. There was just too much water under that bridge. “I love you, Dad,” she said, kissing his cheek.

“I love you, too, Meredoodle.” He grinned. “And think about grapes. Maybe I can still be a vintner before I die.”

She hated jokes like that. “Very funny.” Turning away, she went to her car and started the engine. Putting the SUV in reverse, she swung around. Through the lacy snow on the windshield, she saw her parents through the living room window. Dad pulled her mother into his arms and kissed her. They began to dance haltingly, although there was probably no music in the house. Her dad didn’t need any; he always said he carried love songs in his heart.

Meredith drove away from the intimate scene, but the memory of what she’d seen stayed with her. All the rest of the workday, while she analyzed different facets of the operation, looking for ways to maximize profit, and as she sat through endless management and scheduling meetings, she found herself remembering how in love her parents had looked.

The truth was, she had never been able to understand how a woman could be capable of passionately adoring her husband while simultaneously despising her children. No, that wasn’t right. Mom didn’t despise Meredith and Nina. She just didn’t care about them.

“Meredith?”

She looked up sharply. For a moment there, she’d been so lost in her own life that she’d forgotten where she was. At her desk. Reading an insect report. “Oh. Daisy. I’m sorry. I guess I didn’t hear you knock.”

“I’m going home.”

“Is it that late already?” Meredith glanced at the clock. It was 6:37. “Shit. I mean, dang it. I’m late.”

Daisy laughed. “You’re always staying late.”

Meredith began organizing her paperwork into neat piles. “Drive safely, Miss Daisy”—it was an old joke but they both smiled—“and remember Josh from the Apple Commission will be here at nine for a meeting. We’ll need donuts and coffee.”

“You got it. Good night.”

Meredith got her desk ready for tomorrow and then headed out.

Snow was falling in earnest now, blurring the view through her windshield. The wipers were moving as fast as they could, but it was still difficult to see. Every pair of oncoming headlights momentarily blinded her. Even though she knew this road like the back of her hand, she slowed down and hugged the shoulder. It reminded her of the one and only time she’d tried to teach Maddy to drive in the snow. The memory made her smile. *It’s snow, Mom. Not black ice. I don’t have to drive this slow. I could walk home faster.*

That was Maddy. Always in a hurry.

At home, Meredith slammed the door shut behind her and hurried into the kitchen. A quick glance at the clock told her she was late. Again.

She put her purse on the counter. “Jeff?”

“I’m in here.”

She followed his voice into the living room. He was at the wet bar they’d installed in the late eighties, making himself a drink. “Sorry I’m late. The snow—”

“Yeah,” he said. They both knew she’d left late. “Do you want a drink?”

“Sure. White wine.” She looked at him, not knowing what she even felt. He was as handsome as ever, with dark blond hair that was only now beginning to gray at the temples, a strong, square jaw, and steel-gray eyes that always seemed to be smiling. He didn’t work out and ate like a horse, but he still had one of those wiry, rawhide bodies that never seemed to age. He was dressed in his usual style—faded Levi’s jeans and an old Pearl Jam T-shirt.

He handed her a glass of wine. “How was your day?”

“Dad wants to plant grapes. And Mom was in the winter garden again. She’s going to catch pneumonia.”

“Your mom is colder than any snowfield.”

For a moment, she felt the years that bound them, all the connections that time had created. He’d formed an opinion of her mother more than two decades ago, and nothing had happened to change it. “Amen to that.” She

leaned back against the wall. All at once the crazy/hectic/hurried pattern of her day—her week, her month—caught up with her and she closed her eyes.

“I got a chapter written today. It’s short. Only about seven pages, but I think it’s good. I made you a copy. Meredith? Mere?”

She opened her eyes and found him looking at her. A small frown creased the skin between his eyes, made her wonder if he’d said something important. She tried to recall but couldn’t. “Sorry. Long day.”

“You’re having a lot of those lately.”

She couldn’t tell if there was a hint of accusation in his voice or just a simple honesty. “You know what winter is like.”

“And spring. And summer.”

There was her answer: accusation. Even last year she would have asked him what was wrong with them. She would have told him how lost she felt in the gray minutiae of her everyday life, and how much she missed the girls. But lately that kind of intimacy felt impossible. She wasn’t quite sure how it had happened, or when, but distance seemed to be spreading between them like spilled ink, staining everything. “Yeah, I guess.”

“I’m going to the office,” he said suddenly, reaching for the jacket he’d draped over the back of the chair.

“Now?”

“Why not?”

She wondered if it was really a question. Did he want her to stop him, to give him a reason to stay, or did he want to leave? She wasn’t sure, and really, she didn’t care right now. It would be nice to take a hot bath and have a glass of wine and not have to try to think of what to say over dinner. Even better not to have to cook dinner at all. “No reason.”

“Yeah,” he said, kissing her on the cheek. “That’s what I thought.”