1

No one knew that Carol Langstrom hated Christmas. Okay, *hate* was a strong word, but thanks to her parents' dysfunctional relationship during her childhood—particularly whenever the holidays came around—she would nearly break out into hives at the sound of "Jingle Bells." One year she had even complained to a big-box store manager when she saw a display of artificial trees before Halloween. And those obnoxious "have a perfect Christmas" online pop-up ads nearly drove her to distraction. Some people counted the days until Christmas, but her countdown went until December 26 because she couldn't wait until Christmas was over and done with.

As an employee of a home-staging firm that spent most of the year getting expensive houses ready to sell but caved to focus on holiday decor in late October, the months following Halloween were something to endure and escape. Carol knew the layout of the holiday section of their warehouse by heart and even dreamed about its colorful contents sometimes. Her boss's love of everything Christmas had begun years ago. Marsha Forrester had collected dedicated clientele along with faux life-sized reindeer, enormous pine-scented artificial trees, five-foot-tall nutcrackers, and enough realistic-looking elves to fill a shelter for unemployed height-challenged holiday workers.

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Early on, Carol learned to conceal her yuletide phobia when the calendar turned to November. From that day on, Divine Design seemed to go into hypermode, concocting everyone's dream Christmas. Well, not everyone. Just the well-heeled, self-obsessed, somewhat overindulgent, and entitled clients. All of whom seemed to have Divine Design on speed dial and were equally determined to outdo their neighbors and friends with the very latest in "festive yet tasteful" holiday decor. People, in her undisclosed opinion, had too much time and money on their hands. Of course, she kept her personal feelings toward them and Christmas to herself. After all, she was a working girl.

"Carol," Marsha Forrester said urgently over the phone. "Did you drop the new wreaths at the Barstrums' yet?"

Carol could tell by the sharp tone that her normally cool and controlled boss was even more stressed than she sounded right now.

"Yes," Carol answered. "I removed the dried ones and hung the fresh wreaths myself. But if Mrs. Barstrum had simply spritzed the originals with the bottle of water I left for her, or asked her housekeeper to do it, they would've been fine. The sun just beats down on that southern exposure—"

"Yes, yes, I know," Marsha said, cutting her off. "And I did remind her that our faux wreaths are even prettier than fresh ones, not to mention reusable, but she insists on the real thing."

"Right." Carol slid her black carry-on bag into the back seat of her Uber and listened impatiently as Marsha droned on about how they might be better off by letting some clients go next year.

"Just the difficult ones, of course."

"The holidays have gotten super busy for us." Carol peered at the darkening sky. "Anything else?"

"I suppose you're on your way to the airport by now?" Marsha sounded a little wistful. "Off to your sunny destination. I'll admit your plan sounded a bit harebrained at first—I mean,

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Christmas in the Bahamas of all places—but it's suddenly rather appealing."

"Especially with this storm coming." Carol slid in, closed the car door, and leaned back. "Seattle's supposed to be inundated with a deluge by tomorrow."

"Someone must've been dreaming of a *wet* Christmas here." Marsha laughed without sounding particularly jolly. "Well, think of me while you're down there working on your tan."

"I'll send you pics," Carol promised. "Have a good Christmas, Marsha."

"You too, Carol. Oh, by the way, have a good birthday too. I always forget that you share your birthday with Jesus. My little Christmas Carol." She chuckled like this was a new joke and not something Carol had heard her entire life. "And I believe this year is a big one for you too." Her laughter had a sharpness to it. "But don't worry, honey, today's forty is yesterday's thirty. Just wait until you hit the big 6-0 like me next spring. Now that's getting serious."

"Oh, Marsha, you're so youthful for your age," Carol reassured her egotistical boss, reminding her that age was just a number as the Uber driver expertly navigated the late-day city traffic toward SeaTac. But even as she smoothed Marsha's vain feathers, her mind wandered to how she was what some would call middle-aged yet was still stuck in the single lane.

"Well, I must go. Warren is here to take me to dinner." The sound of air kisses came over the phone and then the call ended. Carol slid her phone into her purse and wondered if it was fair to call forty middle-aged. Sure, if one only lived to eighty that would be true. But weren't people supposed to live longer these days? Still . . .

Carol was good at faking a lot of things. Like not despising Christmas, or that cream-colored sofas were sensible for a client with two ill-mannered doodle dogs and an elderly, incontinent cat. She could even pretend that she loved her "career in design,"

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which was mostly staging homes for realtors once the holidays were behind them. She could even feign how lovely it was living alone and being "independent" and act like remaining single was her personal preference.

But with each passing year spent alone, it seemed to matter a bit more. Just not enough for her to settle down. And that was exactly what she'd be doing if she got seriously involved with any of the men who had pursued her—*settling*. And that did not sit well with her. Of course, even if she did meet Mr. Right, perhaps in the Bahamas, would she even know it? Besides, didn't she always tell her girlfriends, the ones who were also still looking, that Mr. Right was a mere figment in fairy tales and Hallmark movies?

By the time her driver pulled into the Delta terminal, the rain was pelting sideways in enormous droplets. She would not miss this a bit! She thanked the driver, gathered her bag, and was relieved to see that she still had ample time to make it through security and grab a bite. Feeling strangely out of place in her summery garb and sandals when everyone else sported parkas and slickers and winter hats and scarves, she made her way to her gate. After overhearing passenger chatter in TSA about a storm blustering on the Atlantic and the possibility of cancelations, she wanted to ensure her direct flight to Miami wasn't affected.

To her relief her flight wasn't even delayed. Imagining a nasty nor'easter pounding into the Eastern seaboard, not down South where she was headed, she felt relatively reassured as she waited for a seat in a crowded café. She should be in Nassau by midday tomorrow, basking in the sun with all thoughts of Christmas blown away by this inconvenient winter storm. She almost felt sorry for the passengers whose journeys might be rocked by Mother Nature's Christmas present. Almost.

As she dined on a chef salad and a glass of white wine, she began to truly relax for the first time in weeks. She had this

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vacation in the bag. Sure, her father and stepmother were miffed that she wasn't joining them for Christmas. They wondered why she wasn't dying to visit them in their fabulous estate in British Columbia, like she usually did. But she'd never really bonded with Dad's new wife and never really felt at home in their "perfect" house. Her stepmom Barb had bought it with her divorce settlements, then furnished it with only the "best of the best."

It made no difference that Carol's parents had been apart for almost thirty years now, that her mom had left Dad for another man, or that their marriage had been a disaster for as long as Carol could remember . . . Something about their miserable break had always left Carol feeling more broken than ever during the holidays. Probably because as a child that's when she always felt torn down the middle.

Still, like so many other things, she'd learned to cleverly conceal this childish angst beneath a veneer of togetherness and sophisticated nonchalance. She rationalized that her "selfless" rationale was to protect those around her. She'd spare them from seeing her old wounds or sensing her pain. Especially during the holidays. But she knew that wasn't wholly true . . . her pride was wrapped up in the facade too.

The alarm on her phone chimed, jarring her back to reality. It was time to head to her gate for boarding. Her check prepaid, she only needed to grab her lightweight carry-on and hurry down the bustling terminal. With no coat or hat or miscellaneous travel gear to wrestle with, she hurried past an artificial Christmas tree, then, with the tinny sound of "Twelve Days of Christmas" grating on her ears like a dentist's drill, she paused to let a woman burdened with cumbersome luggage and two small children go past her.

Carol smiled pleasantly at them, winking at the little boy with the chocolate-smudged face. The kids were cute, but Carol was mostly smiling at how lightly she had been able to pack. It

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was unusual for a person who liked to be prepared for everything when she traveled, but Carol never had much use for summer clothes in Seattle. Plus, bringing little gave her a good excuse to peruse shops in Nassau. She'd heard it was a trendy place. As she turned toward her gate, she couldn't help but observe even more anxious faces, which drew her attention to the gate signs. Red streaks across the screens told her there'd been numerous delays and several cancelations. Hers was one of the few flights with no changes. She sighed in relief, even though she felt for the many now-stranded travelers all around her. But traveling during the holidays was like that. You had to roll with the punches, right?

She kept moving forward until she reached her gate, where passengers were already lined up. Like her, most were dressed for warm weather and in good spirits. Jokes were made about how they were all escaping the big winter storm. Before long, they were loaded on, buckled in, and preparing for takeoff. She stared out the window at the darkened skies as they taxied. The illuminated runways were being pounded with sheets of rain. Good riddance, Seattle, see you next year!

No time was wasted on the soggy runway, but shortly after takeoff they were hit with strong turbulence. Yet no one seemed concerned. Passengers remained in good spirits, making light of the bouncy ride, and flight attendants assured everyone they'd soon be out of it and drinks would be served.

Not generally a fan of air travel, Carol attempted to ignore the bumpiness, focusing instead on the beach read she'd loaded onto her Kindle that morning. She preferred a "real" book in her hands and planned to get something good at the resort, but she had been determined to travel light, so this would do for now. After a while, the flight smoothed out and Carol closed her eyes and, thanks to her earlier glass of pinot gris, managed to fall asleep.

But she woke to a violently jolting plane and the pilot's calm

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but serious voice on the intercom system. "We're forced to make an unscheduled stop in Grand Rapids." He cleared his throat. "This is due to a development of multiple tornadoes down south."

"Tornadoes?" echoed the man behind Carol.

"Grand Rapids?" the older woman at her side exclaimed. "Why on earth are we going there?"

"Probably because they're not having tornadoes in Michigan," the man in the aisle seat said. "Don't get yourself all worked up, Helen. We'll catch another flight when the weather clears."

"How long will *that* take?" she demanded.

"Do I look like a weatherman?" he growled back.

"Well, you're the one who insisted we needed to take this trip at Christmastime," she shot back. "I told you it was a ridiculous idea." And on they bickered, back and forth. Meanwhile, the whole atmosphere of the plane followed their lead. The previously cheery crowd began to groan and complain as frustrated flight attendants attempted to calm everyone.

"It's just a temporary inconvenience," the flight attendant patiently told the feuding couple. "You'll get connected to other flights in the terminal. It might take some doing, but you'll reach your final destination. The storm won't last forever."

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2

By the time Carol rolled her "lightweight" carry-on through the crowded Gerald R. Ford International Airport, it was feeling heavier. Outside, illuminated by airport lights, snow was starting to fly, and inside, all the TVs were tuned to news and weather stations as anchors reported that several major storm fronts had converged on the Eastern seaboard from Maine to Florida and were wreaking havoc on air travel. As she walked through, trying to decide what to do now, Carol noticed how every gate was bearing the dreaded "canceled" signs. Instead of looking like a terminal, the place resembled a messy campground with people and bags piling up everywhere.

Although she knew it was probably pointless, Carol joined a herd of other disgruntled travelers who were lined up in front of Delta's information counter, staffed by a single clerk. When Carol's turn finally came, she could see the weary young woman had memorized her spiel and was politely reciting the same message she'd given the rest.

"We're so sorry for your inconvenience. It's unlikely that any flights will go out before midday tomorrow, but we do expect this storm to pass by then. We suggest you wait it out in an airport hotel and contact us later for more flight information.

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Probably by morning." The clerk smiled stiffly and handed Carol a list of airline numbers and domains as well as the names of some local hotels. "Have a good day."

Carol thanked her and, resisting the urge to point out it was nighttime, reached for her phone. After calling several of the nearby hotels, where she either got a busy signal or a recording saying there were no vacancies, she gave up. Checking the time, she realized that here in the eastern portion of the country, morning was just a few hours away. Why not simply camp out in the airport and be first in line for morning flights? And like scores of other weary travelers hoping to get comfy, she found a corner in a less-crowded gate, secured a seat near the window, and returned to her beach read, using her carry-on as a footstool. It helped a little, but it wasn't like stretching out on a sunny Bahamian beach without a care in the world . . . Hopefully by tomorrow.

The book failed to transport her, and out the nearby window, the winter sky remained dark, snow continued to fall, and morning felt like it had been abducted by some evil force. Carol's back throbbed from the hard seat, and her sandaled feet felt like swollen ice cubes. To thaw them and get some blood flowing, she found a kiosk with stale coffee and walked around the terminal, sipping and watching for an agent to come and occupy the ticket counter where a few disgruntled travelers were already clustered like vultures.

Finally, a dull gray light began to illuminate one of the big windows. Even then the only thing really visible was a nearby runway blanketed in snow with even more blowing down in what appeared to be nearly whiteout conditions. A chill ran through Carol as she looked out on the scene.

After getting a fresher cup of coffee, she stood with a crowd gathered around the TVs listening as newscasters called this "the storm of the century," which sounded more unbelievable each time they said it. Hadn't they been saying that for years

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now? But clearly no flights would depart this airport anytime soon. Feeling totally discombobulated, Carol sat down to ponder her situation. Getting a hotel seemed like an impossible dream but she tried anyway, hoping some travelers might've checked out in hopes of finding flights.

After many fruitless calls, she suddenly recalled her mom had an older sister who lived somewhere in Michigan. Although her mother and aunt were estranged, Carol remembered how this aunt used to send Christmas cards. Greetings her mom tossed in the trash, sometimes unopened, along with some harsh muttered words. For as long as Carol could remember, her mom had harbored a boatload of anger and resentment toward her older sister, but she'd always refused to divulge her reasons. Still, if Carol had a relative living nearby, perhaps they'd have a spare bed. Anything was better than another night trying to sleep in an uncomfortable chair among strangers.

Of course, Michigan was a large state, and it was very possible this aunt lived too far away. Or that she'd moved. And even if her home was nearby, could Carol possibly impose on someone she'd never met? Just until flights resumed? She wondered how old this aunt might be. Mom used to say that Maria helped raise her, but Mom was in her mid-sixties. Her sister might be ancient, or she could have passed on. And road travel in this weather could be too perilous for an elderly woman. Besides that, what about the sisterly dispute? Of course, that was a long time ago, and Carol was well aware that Mom could hold grudges. Maybe she'd brought this estrangement on herself . . . Or this older sister could be a real witch.

Feeling she had little to lose, Carol picked up her phone, which was in desperate need of a charge. She hadn't spoken to her mother in ages. They rarely talked anymore, not even at Christmastime. Did she really want to deal with her now? It was possible her mother's number had changed. That had happened before. But feeling desperate and hopeless, she gave

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it a try. To her surprise, her mom answered right away in her deep, raspy voice. "Mom, uh, is that you?" Carol suddenly felt tongue-tied.

"Carol Louise!" Mom said eagerly. "I was just thinking of you last night. How serendipitous that you should call. How are you doing, darling?"

"Well, not so good actually." Carol gave a quick lowdown on her unraveling travel plans. "So I'm kind of stuck in Grand Rapids of all places."

"That explains why you're calling so early. But believe it or not, I was actually awake."

"Sorry. I forgot the time difference."

"That's okay. I was just sitting out here on the patio in the moonlight having me a smoke. Please, no lectures. But, good grief, if you have to be stuck somewhere, why Grand Rapids? Isn't that in the northeast somewhere?"

"It's in Michigan. And it wasn't exactly my choice to get stuck here." Carol tried to keep exasperation from her voice. After all, her mom was being surprisingly friendly.

"Too bad you didn't get laid over down here in Phoenix. We're having a beautiful weather, and—"

"I'm glad to hear it," Carol interrupted. Her mom could go on and on about trivial matters when she was in the mood, which she seemed to be now. "I actually called because I think I remember you mentioned having a sister up here in Michigan."

"Oh, yeah, Maria." Her tone grew sharper. "I suppose she still lives up there. She's been there forever."

"You don't happen to have her phone number, do you?"

"Are you kidding?" Her laugh sounded more like a cackle, followed by a smoker's cough. "Sorry, sweetie, but Maria and I aren't exactly on speaking terms."

"Right." Carol frowned. "What about her full name? Or her husband's name. Maybe I could look them up."

"Good grief. Why would you do that?"

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"Because half the holiday travelers are stranded here, there are no hotel vacancies, and I just spent the night in the airport and am tired."

"Oh, well then, I suppose any port in a storm." She humphed. "Well, her name is Maria O'Harney. I remember the O'Harney name because she married an Irish man and Dad never forgave her for that."

"I see. And do you recall Mr. O'Harney's first name?"

"Ron? Tom? Don?" She paused. "Yes, that's it. Donald O'Harney."

"Great. Now do you happen to know where they live? Is it anywhere near Grand Rapids by any chance?"

"Really? You expect me to remember that too?" Another pause. "Well, I do recall he was a teacher in Grand Rapids, but that was eons ago." Mom hemmed and hawed. "You know, Maria used to send me Christmas cards. That is until Ed and me moved out here. She either quit sending them or the post office just don't forward them anymore. But seems I recall Dad saying that Donald gave up a perfectly good teaching job to buy a silly little farm in a one-horse town. Sounded like a dumb move to me."

"Do you have any idea what the town was called? That might help."

Mom started rattling some names off. "It had Creek or Springs or some kind of water word in it, but my memory is getting more and more like Swiss cheese these days. There's some holes." She laughed.

"Well, that might be enough to start a search. Thanks, Mom." Carol sighed. "It's not like I have many options anyway or anything else to do." She paused when her phone beeped. "I have to go before my cell battery gives out. "If I do find your sister, do you want me to tell her hello for you?"

Mom coughed loudly. "No thanks, sweetie. As far as I'm concerned, Maria is dead."

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"Okay then." Carol took a deep breath. "I hope you and Ed have a good Christmas."

"You too, darling. Nice to hear your voice. Call me again and let me know how things turn out, okay?"

Carol agreed to do this but felt fairly certain she would "conveniently" forget. Hopefully she'd be so occupied with her Bahamian vacation by tomorrow, she'd be too busy to call anyone. That seemed a reasonable excuse.

After finding an unoccupied outlet, she plugged in her charger and started her search for small farm towns near Grand Rapids with a water word in the name. After trying Sugar Springs, she tried Venus Lake and then Miller's Creek and got lucky. A Donald and Maria O'Harney appeared to be residents with ages listed as mid-seventies. That seemed to fit. Encouraged by this, Carol even put the extra directory charge on her credit card in order to obtain their number and full address. And suddenly the phone was ringing . . . and ringing . . . and ringing. She checked the terminal clock overhead, worried perhaps she was calling too early. But it was after seven now, and if they were a farm family like Mom had said, they should be up.

"Hello?" an elderly female voice crackled over the phone.

"Hello?" Carol tried not to sound too desperate. "Is this the O'Harneys'?"

"Yes, and if you're trying to sell me something, you can just—"

"No, no, I'm sorry to disturb you, but I think you might be my aunt."

"That's just fine. Now, if you're a scammer, and you're about to tell me you're in jail and need bail money, you can go jump in a lake. I already got troubles aplenty, thank you very—"

"I'm really sorry to bother you." Carol couldn't help but smile. This woman had spirit. "But can you tell me, are you Maria? Is your maiden name Banducci?"

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"Yes . . . ?" Her tone, still laced with suspicion, softened slightly.

"And is your younger sister Rosa Louise Banducci?"

The other end went silent.

"Hello?" Carol worried she'd lost the connection—or that the woman had hung up.

"Is this about Rosa?" Maria asked with quiet urgency. "Did something happen to her? Is she, is she . . . dead?"

"No, no, not at all. In fact, I just spoke with her. She's alive and well in Phoenix, Arizona. I'm her daughter, Carol Langstrom."

"You're Carol? Carol Louise? Goodness gracious . . . Well, I never."

"I'm not sure how close Miller's Creek is to Grand Rapids, but I'm on my way to the Bahamas for a vacation and got stuck at the airport. I really could use a shower . . . and a bed. Even for just a few hours if flights ever get going again today." Her nerves spiked at the silence on the other end. "I mean, if you have room."

"Of course. I have plenty of room." Maria paused. "But I'm not able to come get you."

Carol's heart sank. "I know this weather is atrocious. I didn't expect you to drive."

"Oh, it's not that. I drive in weather like this all the time. It's just that I can't right now. Not today anyway."

"I thought I could take an Uber?"

"A what?"

"A taxi. Do you think a taxi would go that far?"

"Oh, goodness, that'd cost a fortune, honey. No, don't do that. Tell you what, I'll send Victor for you. He owes me a favor since he'll be driving Don's old Chevy. I was about to call him just now anyway. Give me your number, and I'll call you right back if he can go fetch you. And even if he can't, we'll figure some way to get you out here."

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Carol recited her number, then said goodbye and ended the call. After about five minutes, her phone chimed, and her aunt said to look for "an old red pickup with rails and a plow" and that Victor would be there in about an hour. "Due to the snow. Otherwise, it'd be half that time. But you gotta take it slower in the snow."

Carol thanked her and hung up, then wondered if this was a ridiculous plan. She looked around the still-crowded terminal, seeing weary travelers, most with dismal expressions as they looked at their phones. All gates still proclaimed that flights were canceled. Well, for better or worse, she would meet her aunt and uncle today. If nothing else, it should be interesting. Carol had never experienced much family growing up. Her dad had one younger brother who lived in eastern Washington. She'd met him and his relatively large family only a handful of times. As she recalled, his four kids were all very loud boys. Plus, they'd been quite a bit younger than her, and she'd never had much fun with them when they came to visit. She was always glad to see them loaded back up in their minivan heading for home.

After about forty minutes passed, she went down to the passenger pickup area and stared out the window. Still pondering over family and relatives, she wondered if she might have other cousins. If Maria and Don had kids, they'd most likely be older than Carol since it sounded like Maria was at least ten years older than Mom. Maybe Victor was their son, which would make him Carol's first cousin. Might be nice to have a cousin. She saw a red pickup pull up, but it was a newer model driven by a woman, and a man and teenager ran out to get inside. She kept her eye on the busy lanes of traffic and wondered what rails and a plow were, anyway? Was Victor driving a tractor?

She checked her phone to see that nearly an hour had passed. The blizzard was still raging. What if roads, like the runways,

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were closed and Victor wasn't able to get through? Would someone let her know? She was about to call Maria back when she noticed an older pickup that, beneath its coat of snow, appeared red. A big thing on the front bumper was probably a snowplow and alongside the bed were wooden boards that resembled a fence. She figured those must be the plow and rails. This must be her cousin. Waving, she stepped outside, toting her carry-on with wind whipping at her flimsy, unbuttoned cardigan.

She shivered and attempted a feeble smile as a tall, lanky man dressed in a fleece-lined leather coat, blue jeans, and a cowboy hat hopped out and jogged around to meet her. "I'm Victor. You must be Carol. Let's get out of this pronto." Just as he reached for her carry-on, a strong gust of wind flipped his hat off his head. She reached up to grab it, but a thin leather strap beneath his chin kept it from taking flight. "Stampede strings," he said, winking. "Now get inside"—he yanked open the passenger door and practically shoved her in—"before you freeze your, uh, rear end off."

He slammed the door with a loud clang and swooped up her bag, easily tossing it into the pickup bed—right into a heap of snow. Then with his hat flapping in the wind behind him, he ran around to the driver's side and hopped in. As she watched him remove his hat, giving it a shake before hanging it on a gun rack behind him, she wanted to comment about how he'd buried her bag in the snow, but then she saw how cramped the cab was and kept silent. Her waterproof bag was probably snow-proof as well. Her feet felt icier than ever, but at least it was warm in here. Or warmer, at least. She shivered. Maybe calling it warm was an exaggeration.

"Here," he handed her a plaid wool blanket. "Put this around you." He shook his head. "Man, you sure don't know how to dress for weather, do you?"

"I wasn't planning on being in Michigan today," she replied a bit sharply.

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"Obviously." He put the truck into gear and pulled out.

"I'm supposed to be in the Bahamas right now." She knew her tone was haughty, but she couldn't seem to stop herself.

"Well, someone must've got confused." He laughed.

She suspected he meant her but didn't see the humor in the situation. "My flight got redirected. But if I was in the Bahamas, I assure you I'd be quite comfortable. They happen to have a very warm climate down there. Unlike here."

"Well, you're not in the Bahamas. And any seasoned traveler flying in wintertime should be prepared for any kind of weather or possible layover. Neither are uncommon during the holidays."

As much as she tried, she couldn't think of the perfect smart aleck response to his derisive comment. And he was probably right. She should've been prepared. If any of the terminal shops had been open, she would've bought some warm socks and shoes and perhaps even some kind of jacket. But she decided not to pick a fight since her cousin was focused on driving—probably a good thing considering some of the mishaps she witnessed along the side of the road—and since he'd traveled a fair distance to get her. She wasn't sure if the cars she saw were abandoned or stranded or what, but a number of vehicles were partially buried in snow here and there. Conditions really were hazardous. Perhaps she'd have been safer at the airport after all, but it was too late for that now.

"I, uh, I assume you get weather like this a lot in Michigan?" she queried. "People are used to driving in it?"

"Not necessarily. I mean, the weather. Our winters can do just about anything from be unseasonably warm to something like this. It's not very predictable. At least not for the last five years or so. But the severity of this storm did catch some folks by surprise."

"Apparently." She pointed to a pair of cars that had clearly collided at an intersection up ahead. "I just figured people up

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here would know how to handle driving in snow better than this."

"They do handle it better when it's only snow, but this storm started with rain that turned to a sheet of ice and was then covered with snow. Have you ever driven on ice?"

She tried to remember. "I, uh, I don't think so. We really don't get too much ice in Seattle. And when we do, I stay home."

"You're from Seattle?"

"Yes. Didn't your mom ever mention that?"

"Not that I recall." As he waited for the light to change, he turned to look at her, a curious expression on his face. "Should she have?"

"I guess not." She pointed ahead. "The light's green."

"Thanks." He gently moved forward. She had to give him credit. He was a cautious driver. As he navigated the mostly empty city streets, finally turning off on a more rural sort of road, she studied him. He was definitely good-looking. With his thick, wavy hair and dark eyes, he appeared to take after the Italian side of the family. She'd only met her maternal grandfather once. She'd been four years old when Mom had taken her to visit Poppy Banducci, as Mom had told her to call him. They'd taken a train somewhere back East, but all Carol really remembered was a big, dirty city and having to climb stairs up to an apartment that was too hot and smelled strange. All to see the white-haired old man who never budged from his recliner, held an unlit pipe, and kept telling her to "speak up!"

She glanced at Victor again, wondering if he'd ever met Poppy Banducci. But unless she was mistaken, her cousin wasn't much older than her . . . or he was aging well. So his experience with Poppy, if he'd had any, was probably similar to hers. Even so, for the sake of conversation, she was about to ask when he spoke up.

"I was pretty surprised to hear Maria has a niece."

Carol felt her brows arch. "That's what you call her? Maria?"

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He shrugged. "We're pretty informal around here. I could call her Mrs. O'Harney, but I doubt she'd like that much."

"No, I guess not. I just assumed you'd call her *Mom*. I tried calling my mom by her first name once when I was a teenager, because she was, well, let's just say she's never been terribly maternal. But when I called her Rosa, I thought she was going to knock me down."

He raised his brows. "Did your mom hit you?"

She couldn't help but chuckle. "No, but she had quite a temper."

He laughed. "My mom is hot-tempered too, but she mostly just yelled when I was a kid. I guess it comes with being Italian."

"That's what my dad used to say about my mom. Probably not very PC, but he called it her hot Italian blood. Her temper was one of the reasons they split. Just one of many."

"Your parents divorced?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I was just a kid so it was a long time ago. I don't think I was scarred too much by it." She forced a laugh. "I'm not seeing a therapist or anything."

"I'm sorry."

"That I'm not seeing a therapist?" she teased.

Now he laughed, making the edges of his eyes crinkle in an attractive way. Maybe he was older than she'd guessed. Well, if first impressions were true, and she knew from experience that a person could be fooled, Victor was a good guy. And perhaps this unplanned visit with relatives would turn out better than expected. Any port in a storm, right?

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