

SILENT NIGHT



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To Dad, for the Triffids



OH, CHRISTMAS TREE

24 December

At 4 p.m., the Christmas lights came on automatically, and I practically jumped out of my skin. It was especially unfortunate as I was underneath the tree, lying on my front, intently focused on the presents. I wasn't touching them (of course), but trying to figure out if the red-wrapped box at the back was big enough to be a PlayStation. The whole tree jingled, and I felt my hair fill with fir needles. A sparkly glass mushroom dropped to the carpet beside me.

It wasn't just the lights coming on that'd made me jump, though – I was on edge, away from home and out of my comfort zone.

‘You trying to use X-ray vision on those gifts again, Mase?’ said Dad, hovering in the doorway of the family room. ‘Don’t bother, they’re all socks.’

‘Even that one?’ I pointed to a long gift-wrapped tube – clearly a poster.

I was grateful he’d not made a big thing of my obvious anxiety.

‘It’s a tube of socks.’ Dad grinned.

‘And that one?’ I waved my glasses at a thin, flat present wrapped in reused stripy paper.

‘Of course! Very thin, flat socks.’

Mum came in from the kitchen and topped up Dad’s glass of Prosecco, as wind and rain hammered against the old cottage windows. ‘This weather!’ she said. ‘Thank goodness we got here when we did.’ She peered out of the window, not that she could’ve seen far through the lashing Storm Elena was giving South Wales. ‘I’m a bit worried about the others driving in this. Send them another text will you, Ed?’ She drew the curtains and gave me a reassuring wink. ‘You OK, Mase? If it all gets a bit much, just nip upstairs for a bit. Christmas is stressful for everyone, but we’ll take it like we do everything, right? One step at a time.’ A car horn

sounded from outside the house that wasn't home. 'Oh! They're here!' Mum sighed in relief.

Dad took a hearty swig of fizz, put his glass on a side table – beside one of the many weird miniature Christmas trees that decorated the house – and clapped his hands together. 'Only three hours late; that's pretty good for your Auntie Suzie, storm or no storm. Now the celebrations can properly start.'

I shuffled closer to the tree, keeping my back to the gifts, almost protective. Outside, car doors slammed and then people (and two burly chocolate Labradors) bundled loudly into the hallway. Bags thumped on to the carpet, raincoats were handed off and greetings of 'Happy Christmas Eve!' were muffled by hugs. Dad squeezed my shoulder.

Mum's sister, Suzie, found me first. 'Come on, Masen – give yer bestie aunty a hug. *It's Christmas!*'

I got to my feet and succumbed to an embrace of perfume, fruitcake and damp air.

'You're taller than ever!' She turned to Mum. 'Isn't he so tall now, Taylor? And ooh, what's that . . .?' I knew what was coming as she grabbed my chin. 'Getting a little fluffy, aren't we? And not even fourteen yet.'

I cringed – my cousin Conor was right behind her, wearing his trademark tube socks and jorts. He was stroking his chin in an exaggerated way and sniggering. Auntie Suzie didn't notice. 'They grow up that quick these days.' She laughed loudly, but even though I was the butt of the joke, I smiled. Suzie's loud personality was everything that would normally make me shrink into myself, but my aunt got a pass. Her laughter was infectious. 'And where's my little Jossy?' she asked, accepting a glass of Prosecco, still in the hallway. My younger brother, dressed in a suit and tie, launched himself down the stairs and into a hug.

With Jos still attached to her, Suzie wafted around the family room of the holiday cottage. 'This place is gorgeous! Did they decorate it for you? You don't always get that in an Airbnb.' She surveyed the room, touching the fake ivy and ruffling the shiny garlands. Then, she spotted the strange miniature tree on the coffee table. 'That's . . . um, cute too.' She shrugged. 'If you like that sort of thing.'

The 'cute' little Christmas trees were in every room. They were about thirty centimetres tall –

sort of A4 size if you included the red sparkly pot – and covered with . . . well, no one could agree quite what. I said flowers, Dad said fungi and Mum went for something in between. Each tree was heavy with rubbery blooms made of fat, juicy petals in various colours. And they had weird markings that shimmered and rippled through a colour spectrum – a bit like deep-sea creatures. They even glowed in the dark. I wouldn't call them cute, especially as they smelt so bad. A cross between air freshener and mouldy bread.

‘Strange, isn't it?’ Mum ran her fingers over velvety, vivid pink petals. ‘Like something one of the kids would've made at a Christmas craft fayre. But out of Play-Doh.’

‘Maybe you shouldn't touch it,’ said Suzie, wrinkling her face.

Mum wiped her fingers on her jeans. ‘There's loads of them. I reckon the owner ordered too many by mistake and dumped them all here. They're in the bathrooms, the hall . . .’ The dogs, Fran and Kika, wandered into the family room, sniffing everything but avoiding the little trees, looking at them suspiciously.

‘Good girls, no eating the weird plants,’ Suzie said to the dogs. ‘That would be too much drama for Christmas Eve. I would like to chill this holiday.’

Me too, Suzie.

But as I watched the rest of the newly arrived gang flood into the sitting room, chilling seemed utterly impossible. Conor patted me on the head, then started wrestling on the sofa with his dad, my uncle Mikael. My dad’s two brothers, Scott and Benedict, and Benedict’s husband Bradlee sat on the other sofa and broke into a loud rendition of ‘Last Christmas’. The dogs chased Jos around the coffee table, licking any available bare skin and knocking everything flying. Mikael’s elderly mother Nanny Sasha was the only one who was quiet. She ambled in and plonked herself on the nearest chair, earbuds in, probably listening to the *Wicked* soundtrack, if I knew her.

We were a happy family, but a loud one. And a big one – hence the cottage: the only place Mum could find that was big enough to seat us around one table. I’d only agreed to it because Mum promised I’d have somewhere to retreat. I adored my family (well, except Conor) but sometimes I just

needed a break from them. So, Jos, Conor and I were going to sleep on our own in the caravan parked on the drive. I had a bolthole and we all got to feel a bit more independent. I'd already checked it out too, and there were absolutely no weird little mushroom-trees.