

LBDIS

We know
books

ORNAMENT
PARK



PROLOGUE

*Every Kringle in Kringletown
celebrated Christmas a lot.
But Cole Black on Whistler Lane,
unfortunately, did not.*

*Cole became a recluse during the
Kringle Christmas season.
No one knew why; no one could quite give a reason.*

*Martha said it was because he was
alone and very single.
Mae said it was because he was never
named the Town Kringle.*

*But to me, the true reason is a story far too sad.
For at the age of eighteen, he
lost both Mom and Dad.*

*Whatever the reason, his loss or
his status of being single,
he spent Christmas in the dark, hating
the cheery people of Kringle.*

*From his window, he would stare
with a crinkle of a frown,
at the lights and the wreaths spread
all throughout town.*

*They would sing, they would smile,
they would offer him a wave.
All the while he would scowl from
atop his dim, dreary cave.*

*For him no decorations, no cookies,
no little boy drumming.
For December 1st was tomorrow, and
he knew what was coming.*

*The town would awake, the snow
lightly packed in rows.
The baubles would shine; there'd
be tying of the bows.*

*Because just around the corner, the
bells would soon jingle,
announcing the start of who's
named the Town Kringle.*

*Cole Black had no interest, not a lick nor a care.
Why would he take part in such an asinine affair?*

*"Who cares who celebrates Christmas
more?" he would grumpily say,
his motto until a shift of the wind on one blustery day.*

*From his window he peered at the
commotion over the fence.
The sight of a familiar redhead made
his soulless heart grow tense.*

*"What is she doing here? There has to be a reason.
She can't possibly be here for the
entire Christmas season."*

*But her bags stacked high, in the
middle of the driveway,
were a red flag waving, announcing a very long vacay.*

*But why? It's been years, exactly ten, to be fair,
since she strutted around with her deep red hair.*

*No, he must find out; he must stop her visit right now.
She can't stay here, not for Christmas;
he must stop it...but how?*

CHAPTER ONE

STOREE

“YOU KNOW, YOU NEVER TRULY get over the first pucker of your nips when that mountain air hits you,” I say as I stuff my mittened hands into my jacket pockets while I survey the backdrop of freshly powdered mountains.

Taran, my sister, looks at me from over her shoulder and dramatically rolls her eyes. “It’s thirty-seven degrees—pretty nice for being at an elevation of over ten thousand feet at the beginning of December.”

“Pretty nice?” Good God, this is not pretty nice; this is frigid. “Guess I need to be grateful for global warming then, or else I think my breasts would be two pucks of ice on the ground right now.”

Taran stands tall with two duffel bags in hand. “Global warming is never something to joke about.” With that, she walks up the snow-cleared sidewalk to Aunt Cindy’s pink Victorian house.

In case you didn’t catch it from her tone, Taran is the uptight one of the two of us. Being the older sister has led her to adopt a starchy, prickly, slightly severe personality. She’s always dealing with a crisis, there’s always something to complain about, and nothing ever goes our way in the Taylor family.

Hence the five bags of luggage and trip to Kringletown, Colorado, for the unforeseeable future at the beginning of December.

No, this is not our hometown.

No, this is not the place I’d choose to visit in the wintertime thanks to my body’s affinity for the California climate.

And no, I would not jump at the chance to spend Christmas with my cranky, well-mannered, loves-a-good-lecture sister.

I love her, but she sure knows how to take the J-O-Y out of jolly.

Unfortunately for yours truly, Aunt Cindy had a recent fall—the tell-tale occurrence of many an octogenarian.

Once a spry sprite, known throughout her small town as the jolliest of them all, Aunt Cindy was on her way to remove a fresh batch of gingerbread cookies out of her oven when she, as she put it, felt a squeeze in her hip, then a seize in her left butt cheek, which in turn caused her to spin, wobble, and then fall to the ground. And because she's a frail old coot, she had nothing to cushion the blow to the hip, and well... she broke it.

From there, you can imagine what happened. A broken hip to an elderly human is considered a death sentence—according to Aunt Cindy.

So of course, all hell broke loose.

Siren emojis went off in the family group text.

An emergency family meeting was called.

And before I knew it, I was staring at my computer screen, a shot of my father's nostrils clouded in hair as the main image while he attempted to figure out "this Zoom thing."

Mom sobbed in a sarong decorated with birds of paradise from her timeshare balcony in Cancún.

Dad consoled her while he wore a straw hat with a sunblock-painted nose.

Taran rapidly jotted down her issues on a notepad, like the good nurse she is.

And I sat back in my oversized, single-lady recliner, braless and snacking on a canister of chocolate-covered raisins I purchased from Costco that day, watching it all unfold.

"Something has to be done. Someone has to take care of her," Mom squealed about her only living relative.

Did I mention, to me and my sister, she's *Great-Aunt* Cindy? But what a freaking mouthful, so we just say Aunt Cindy.

But she means the world to our mom.

She's the matriarch of a very small family on my mom's side.

And despite the adoration my mom has for this woman who has taken seriously the role of dedicated parent in her life, the Horbachs and the Lindons were just coming into town, and my mother couldn't possibly leave her tropical paradise, because that would mean missing the pinochle tournament that was about to begin—she and Dad have been practicing and they were going to win it this year.

Which meant... I was brought into the picture.

You know, because even though I have a remote job editing Lovemark Channel movies, I have all the time in the world to tend to an elderly woman who broke her hip.

Now, just between you and me, I do have the time because I'm not currently editing anything—currently on a break with editing, putting me more in watch mode right now, leaning into the Lovemark holiday movie schedule—but *they* didn't need to know that.

But it was decided that I, Storee Taylor, was nominated to take care of Aunt Cindy.

And frankly, I have no clue how to take care of an old woman with a bum hip—so probably not a bright move on the family's part.

"Are you just going to stand there or are you going to help with the bags?" Taran asks, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Just getting used to the thin air," I say and press my hand to my chest. "Oof, hard to breathe. You know, I think I might be experiencing altitude sickness, not sure this is the place for me to be. Perhaps we airlift Aunt Cindy to California."

Taran whips the pillow I couldn't live without into my chest and says, "You're fine," before picking up the bag of snacks I made her stop to get before driving into the mountains and heading back into the house.

She never truly mastered the art of good bedside manner.

Grumbling under my breath—breath that I swear I can see as I huff along the sidewalk—I make my way up the porch of the familiar Victorian house that we used to visit every Christmas before Mom and Dad purchased their Cancún timeshare—Bosom Bungalow. My mom’s “bosom” buddy owns part of the timeshare as well, and they think it’s a funny name. Ahhh, parents, aren’t they fun?

As I get close to the door, I can practically smell the warm gingerbread and freshly harvested pine—a combination of scents that I associate with one person and one person alone—Aunt Cindy.

Hate to admit it, but even though I’d rather be wrapped up in the comfort of my childhood twin-sized Barbie comforter while talking to my ficus, Alexander, about Lovemark’s lineup for the season, being here—the scents, the scenery, the snow—it’s making me a little—and I mean a little, just the tiniest, minute, so-small-you-can-barely-even-recognize-it bit—warm and fuzzy inside.

And I mean that, because this town and I... we have history.

Sordid history.

Embarrassing history.

The kind of history that has kept me away for ten years.

But my mortifying history doesn’t negate the fact that Aunt Cindy’s house has always provided a sense of comfort during the holiday season.

I’m just about to cross the threshold of the house when Taran buzzes out, a mission to accomplish. This girl is a workhorse, and when her mind is set on something, she doesn’t stop until it’s accomplished.

“If you’re going to stand still, mouth agape, please do it off to the side.” Her shoulder bumps into mine as she moves past me and heads to the car. Sheesh!

“My mouth wasn’t agape,” I mutter before heading into the foyer of the old, creaky house that I know has been home to Aunt Cindy for longer than I’ve been alive.

This place *is* Christmas. It’s the pine garland-wrapped staircase and the battery-operated lights in the window. The delicately executed velvet bows strategically placed in every greenery-swathed doorframe. The single piece of mistletoe hanging in the living room leading you to the expertly decorated tree full of matching baubles and bulbs, ribbons, and the golden angel at the top. It’s the hand-crafted green-and-red quilts hanging like tapestries on the walls, the crystal stemware used as candy dishes full of pillow mints that melt on your tongue the moment they enter your mouth. And it’s the exquisitely wrapped presents under the tree decorated in matching paper, bows, and gift tags. Together, it’s a snapshot of my childhood, where Christmas made me believe in miracles, made me believe in magic, and gave me all the warm feelings about the holiday season.

But as I scan the house from the nonexistent entry rug where I’m supposed to dust off my shoes, my eyes fixate on the bare banister, the naked doorframes, the missing stemware—not a pillow mint to be found.

What the hell?

“Seriously, Storee, can you please make yourself helpful?” Taran says as she plops another bag of food on the floor.

“Where’re... where’re the decorations?” I ask.

“What?” Taran asks as she wipes the back of her hand over her brow.

She can’t possibly be sweating. I know she lives in Denver, but these are arctic temperatures we’re dealing with here.

I gesture to the empty space. “There aren’t any Christmas decorations.”

Taran looks over her shoulder and then back at me. “Correct.”

“Um... why not?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Taran says sarcastically. “Maybe because Aunt Cindy broke her hip, and the last thing she can manage right now is decorating her house so you can feel the Christmas magic the moment you walk in.” *Ah, excuse me, Miss Rude.*

She blows past me again, back to the clown car to unload God knows what at this point.

"A simple answer of 'she hasn't had time' would have sufficed," I call after her.

Yikes, she's ripe.

I tuck my pillow under my arm, take off my shoes, and then head into the living room, the bare and very odd-looking living room.

I've never seen it like this before. Normally where the tree would go, there's a pink Victorian chair in impeccable shape for what I assume is its age. The *Happy Days* nativity scene, which Aunt Cindy pays homage to every year, is *not* perched on the fireplace. No stockings hung, no logs by the fire, no cranberry garland draping along with her green damask curtains.

It's just... plain.

And frankly, it's scaring me.

I know I joked about a broken hip being a death sentence, but this decidedly barren room is making me feel like I'm visiting a mortuary rather than a place full of the Christmas spirit.

Also, color me confused because I didn't think she ever took her decorations down. Naïve, perhaps, but this *is* Kringletown—well, just Kringle if you're local—the most highly elevated Christmas town in the country. Year-round, instrumental Christmas music plays from speakers strategically placed along the main streets. Light post decorations are only switched out for a different style every month but never stray from the classic red, green, and gold hues of the jolly holiday. Twinkle lights are never taken down, hot chocolate never stops being pumped into visitors, and you can't walk down the street without being told at least twice that Santa is always watching.

So pardon my confusion in thinking that Christmas decorations remain a fixed aesthetic in the homes as well.

Guess I was wrong.

The front door shuts, and Taran stands in the entryway, hands on her hips.

I turn toward her. "Why is it so quiet in here? Where's Aunt Cindy?"

"With Martha and Mae at their house."

"The Bawhovier twins?" I ask, referring to the center of gossip in Kringletown. If you want to know anything—and I mean anything—about the town, Martha and Mae Bawhovier are the people to ask.

They keep notes; I've seen them. Stacks and stacks of town gossip disguised as leather-bound books on their bookshelves. One day, when they both die, I have no doubt Kringletown will archive said gossip books in the town library, revealing all of the innermost secrets of those who have lived through a lifetime of holiday festivities.

"Yes, they've been watching over Aunt Cindy for us. Were you not paying attention to the emergency family meeting?" Taran asked.

"Kind of blacked out after I was forced to be a caretaker for my foreseeable future."

"You're being dramatic."

"Says the one who gets to go back to the comfort of their home while I have to sponge bathe an elderly woman who I've only seen wear a turtle-neck and slacks my entire life," I reply.

"It should be an honor for you."

My eyebrows shoot up as I lean forward and whisper, "An honor to see Aunt Cindy naked? What's wrong with you?"

Taran's jaw clenches. "An honor to take care of a relative who has provided you with many wonderful memories throughout your young years. This is the circle of life, Storee. They take care of us while we navigate life at a young age, and when they become old and feeble, it's our turn to repay them."

God, she's so... annoyingly right.

"Doesn't mean I need to be honored to see her naked," I say with a lift of my chin.

Taran shakes her head and then pushes a large black suitcase forward. It's not mine.

"What's that?" I point to the suitcase.

"That's mine."

Hope springs forward.

"Wait, are you staying?"

"I don't think I have a choice in the matter," she says. "I was going to see how this plays out, but from the few short minutes we've been here, I can confidently state that I can't trust you to take care of Aunt Cindy on your own."

I clasp my hands together in excitement. "Great, then should I just take off?" I thumb behind me toward the door. "I mean, weird that you brought me all the way here just to tell me that you're going to take care of everything, but you have demonstrated a flair for the dramatic every now and then."

"You're not leaving—we're doing this together." She starts carting her large black suitcase up the stairs.

"Um, care to repeat that?" I say while moving toward the stairs to watch my sister manhandle her suitcase, which is three-quarters her size, up the wooden steps.

When she reaches the top, she stares down at me. "Depending on what the hospital says about my request for time off, there might be days that I have to drive back into Denver for a day or two of work. I need you to stay here with Aunt Cindy, but I refuse to let you do this alone, given your inexperience in taking care of anything."

"Pardon me," I say with a stomp of my foot. "But do you not recall how I've raised Alexander? He's flourishing. And because Harriot, my neighbor, is taking care of him while I'm here, he will continue to flourish."

"Comparing our Aunt Cindy to a ficus is not even close to the same thing, Storee."

I cross my arms over my chest in defiance. "Says the person who bought Alexander a birthday present this year."

"You asked me to grab some fertilizer when I came out to visit you. I highly disagree with calling that a birthday gift."

"It was his birthday, and you brought it to him. I see it differently."

With another roll of her eyes, she pushes her suitcase toward the red room.

"Uh, what are you doing?" I ask, heading up the stairs as quickly as my frozen legs will take me.

"Being productive...unlike you," she says.

With my pillow still tucked under my arm, I reach the top of the stairs. "You know the red room is mine."

Taran stands in front of the doorway, her five-foot-seven frame just an inch taller than me, but from the straight set in her spine and staunch attitude, she seems almost like she's seven feet tall, staring down at me, the oblivious peon.

"The red room is bigger."

"Well aware, as that's why I always stayed in it." I thumb behind me again and add, "That nightmare of a room is yours."

"Nope, not this time," she says.

I take a hesitant step forward. "Taran, you know I can't sleep in there."

"You're older now—you'll be fine."

"I won't be," I say in a panic. "They...they come alive."

"Oh my God, Storee, seriously, you need to grow up." She pushes through the door of the red room with her bag while I chase after her, heat enveloping my ears and cheeks.

"I am grown up, and I'm even more hyper aware of what that room has to offer. The nightmares...the exorcism it needs to cleanse the air."

Taran opens her suitcase and starts unpacking, loading up the provided dresser with her clothes. The red room is a familiar comfort with its red walls, red carpet, red curtains, and red bedding. Every Christmas, Taran and I would share this room, the trundle under the bed an easy pull out for her to sleep on. Originally, the nightmare room was Taran's, and