
A VERY MERRY ROSWELL CHRISTMAS

An Order of the PenTriagon Story by Jill Domschot

DECEMBER 24, 2018

After resting her head with a midmorning nap, Heloise creaked down the dilapidated staircase, feeling the damp and cold embrace her. Her grandma's house was old, so old that when winter temperatures set in, there was no hiding the decay through the opening of windows and sunshiny breezes. This winter, an uncharacteristic blizzard had swept through New Mexico, leaving the eastern grassland of Roswell under a blanket of ice and snow.

Her head throbbed from the cold and the withdrawal from her medication, which she had run out of day before yesterday. She didn't like taking the medication, anyway; it was mandated that she and others like her take it, those who had not responded appropriately to the alien virus inoculation and were officially deemed "damaged."

She had a loop of thoughts running through her virus-besotted head as she avoided the rotten boards and holes in the floor: boil hot water, start a fire, and check the streaming weather report in the living room. Even though she wore a thick blanket around her like a cloak, she couldn't help shivering. She wanted to check the stream, but a fire! Oh, a fire would be wonderful! And tea would be wonderful, too, if she had any left. As it was, she would have to settle for a mug of pretend tea, hot water swirling with steam in one of the old china cups.

The hope for a miracle was too strong in her heart, though. Maybe it was because of the dream she'd had while napping, a dream of...she couldn't think his name without blushing. *Robert*. The heat crept to her face. He was an older boy from the virus-damaged program, one she'd seen at her last checkup. She'd dreamed they were sitting in front of a fire together, as adults. And they wore heavy robes and crowns. *King and queen of Roswell?* It was a funny thought, but the dream image was too vivid to let go of, the idea of having a crush more gratifying than embarrassing.

She bypassed the kitchen and went straight into the living area, where the pale daylight washed over the ragtag Christmas decorations she'd helped set up before her grandma had taken the bus to Santa Fe for the annual census-keeping of the New American Republic, colloquially known as the Pax Americana. With her not-so-queenly robe, she drifted through the squashed and faded paper chains, the old tinsel, and looked with disappointed expectation at the corner that would have had a tree

gracing it in previous years. This year she'd tacked up a few angel and snowflake craft projects as placeholders. The Talking Heads were to thank for the empty corner, as they couldn't decide about Christmas.

Currently, Heloise was more concerned about having a grandma for Christmas than about Christmas itself. She didn't relish being left alone any longer in this big old frigid house. She had no idea why people celebrated Christmas, anyway. She supposed it was an excuse to give loved ones presents, but Heloise had only one loved one: her grandma. And she and her grandma were on government ration coupons because of their damaged heads. The ration coupons couldn't be used for anything but useful household items. In other words, that doll Heloise had always wanted as a little girl never turned up under the tree. And nor did any pretty dresses. She had imagined herself spinning around with richly colored lace and tulle, but the dream had never been fulfilled.

She turned on the stream and pressed "Weather." The dreaded words scrolled over the wall: *Freezing temperatures expected overnight.* But then: *I25 South of Albuquerque now open.*

Heloise's heart leapt with hope. That might mean her grandma could drive home for Christmas! Then her heart fell again. According to the report, all highways leading to and from Santa Fe and heading east toward Roswell were still closed and would remain that way over the holiday. Tears welled up in her eyes as she contemplated her situation. Stores were also closed, as their parking lots were sheets of ice, and there were only so many salting vehicles and snow-mobiles to go around.

Even if Heloise could get away with using her grandma's rations without the elderly woman being there—yes, they probably would make an exception, especially regarding the empty medication bottle—there were no stores open to redeem the rations from. And supplies were dwindling. No tea. No bread. No meat of any kind. Not that they usually had much in the way of meat. Bacon sometimes—or eggs. They usually couldn't afford both. There was one can of soup in the pantry, which she could eat tonight or save for tomorrow.

Her stomach growled at the thought of that soup, a salty concoction of chicken and vegetables. Granted, there wouldn't be much chicken in it, but still, it had meat! She should wait, though. She should definitely wait. What would Christmas be without both food and her grandma? Normally, the government issued special ration coupons for holiday foods that could even be redeemed at participating restaurants. But not this year. Not with the blizzard.

Before she could turn the stream to a non-news station, one that might be playing old holiday movies, the Talking Heads popped on the screen. Not that anyone could stop them popping up if they had something important to relate to the public. They were hardwired into the walls and were

wont to pop up at the most inopportune moments. Also, they weren't officially known as the Talking Heads. Heloise had always called them that because their heads were spotlighted in an otherwise darkened studio space, which made them appear as detached balls lolling about in a primal state of an unborn universe, talking, incessantly talking.

They were officially known as the "Peace Board". They were a group of scholars representing multiple disciplines, brought together to determine the veracity of, well, everything. They sussed out what was true and what was false, with a focus on educative texts, religious works/beliefs/traditions, and news stories. Hence, they alone were responsible for the Pax Americana, as they had determined that most if not all the divisive elements of society could not be verified as true and, therefore, must be outlawed.

That's why there was no Christmas tree this year. They tended to debate for years on end before making truth pronouncements, and they could not come to a consensus on Christmas. The economics expert thought Christmas was great, always stood for it. The rest of them talked in circles. It hurt Heloise's head so badly. None of it made any sense, except the curious state of a nation that ideologically got along.

No, that didn't make sense, either. It didn't have to make sense if people thought people getting along was *nice*. But people were stupid. Heloise blamed the alien visitations and the virus they'd spread. What else could she blame? It had all started before she was born, anyway, and the presence of the alien ships had long since ceased. Whatever their purpose was here on earth—and nobody had yet discovered that—seemed to have been worked out. Whether it was leaving behind the virus that had curbed the population explosion or some other scheme, nobody could say. Before the Talking Heads had shut down conspiracy-oriented talk radio, the show hosts had determined the aliens were in cahoots with American pharma to dumb down the population with their inoculations.

"Look," the economist expert interrupted the other heads, "if you accept Good Friday as a valid and true religious expression, you have to accept Christmas. For Jesus to have died, he had to have been born at some point. That's all Christmas is, a celebration of his birth. Pretty innocuous. And yet fuels the economy every year."

"Really, Stuart," a Mideast archeologist said, "we've already been over this. We don't sacrifice truth to the almighty dollar. Christmas isn't just about Jesus being born. It's about his being born of a virgin. *A virgin*. Physically impossible. No verifiable proof that it happened."

"But we *do* accept Jesus as a valid historical figure," the Muslim scholar pointed out.

The economist, always the straight man, wore an expression on his face Heloise could only

describe as smug. A smug straightness. “If he was a real historical figure, then he was born at some point. You get rid of Christmas, and you get rid of Good Friday, too. And Good Friday passed muster last year.”

The climatologist wearily chimed in, “Look, we all know how it really went down. Mary got knocked up. She and Joseph got married, and then somebody decided to concoct the virgin birth story because they didn’t think anybody would follow an illegitimate prophet. There, I fixed it. You can keep your precious, money-making Christmas.”

The archaeologist grunted. “No proof of that either. Find proof, and we’ll go with you.”

The Christian was the quiet, turn-the-other-cheek scholar. He didn’t speak much, but when he did, all the bobbing heads leaned in to listen. “What kind of proof do we have that Jesus lived at all? I know we already determined that there was enough historical evidence to consider Jesus a factual reality, but all that evidence has been tainted with rejected falsities, like his resurrection and ascension into heaven. It’s been my argument from the beginning that every historical proof of Jesus is tainted.”

“You’re the Christian scholar,” The Muslim said. “We Muslims accept Jesus, but our religion doesn’t depend on him. Yours does. Are we bringing your entire religion into question now?”

The Christian scholar, pale and bearded—mild-mannered and generally well-liked—gently shook his head. There was a certain enviable wisdom that shone from his pale blue eyes. “You would like that, wouldn’t you?”

All the heads chuckled wryly.

“But no,” the Christian continued. “Not at all. The Christian tradition is one of love for your neighbor, of self-sacrifice and mercy. It’s hard to convince mankind to live this way. It’s my educated opinion that Jesus was merely the tool early Christians used to bring this about. They were a people persecuted, living under that other time of great historical peace, the Pax Romana. But it wasn’t peaceful for everybody, was it?”

For a moment, the heads stopped nodding and bobbing, and they stared. They often didn’t quite know how to respond to the Christian scholar, as his perspective was all-encompassing and yet deep at the same time. Like a flood. The Christian was like a lapping flood.

The economist cleared his throat. “No. Those niceties aren’t going to work if your Jesus isn’t real. You want peace. I want stability for people, and I call that peace. You pull the foundation from any philosophy, religion, culture, and all you have are empty words. Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

All the heads shouted at once, each desiring to be the one voice that brought the economist down. It was like this every time, had been for years. Heloise’s grandma said the economist played the devil’s

advocate on purpose. After all, their debates had to seem real.

Heloise wished they would make their decision and shut up. Her head hurt even worse after the long nap, with the cold air threatening to break through like icepicks. She tried to turn the wall screen off, but this was apparently one of the streams considered mandatory for the American Republic. It wouldn't shut down, and neither could she change the stream to a holiday movie, her favorite kind, in which an everyday woman tried to make sense of her workaday life at Christmastime. At the end, the woman would kiss the right man under the mistletoe, and everything would suddenly make sense.

Heloise pressed her hands over her eyes as if that could make the voices stop speaking. Although the economist didn't add much more to this conversation, she had to admit she liked him because he stood up to the others. On the other hand, he created dissent, while the others pushed for peace. And peace was what everybody wanted to maintain. Albeit, it was a curious kind of peace that often felt like death, but that was probably just a result of her meds.

"Chrissmasss," an unrecognizable voice hissed.

What the...? Surely, that wasn't part of the debate. She didn't want to let in too much light, so she spread her fingers and peered through them at the wall, which seemed to bend toward her. She yelped.

"I suppose you think mercy farms will be as lucrative as Christmas tree farms," the economist's voice swooped toward her.

"And why not?" some other scholar asked. "Wouldn't that be a better use of resources?"

"Because mercy is not for sale!" shouted another.

She pulled her hands away from her eyes, grabbed the remote, and tried once again to shut the men up. But they wouldn't stop, and now the whole wall was rippling under the mildewed wallpaper. How long had she been without her drugs? Withdrawal caused hallucinations, but she'd never known it to happen this quickly.

"Chrissmasss."

This time, she spotted the hisser: a little green man wearing a Santa hat. An alien? On the scholars' debate? But the scholars were too busy arguing to notice him. Or maybe they didn't notice him because he wasn't in the room with them. He was in the room with Heloise—he stepped through the wall and into her living room. He was short with a rotund belly and black slanted eyes; he looked identical to the dozens of statues that graced businesses in Roswell. She'd never quite believed in that vision of aliens, thought it was an invention of local artists. Yet, here he was, in all his green glory.

She should have been frightened. Every time she dreamed of aliens—which she often did, as a fallout of the alien virus—they were glowing with an eerie light, emanating darkness from their black

vacuous eyes. Heloise shuddered at the thought.

The little green man stared at her, unblinking. He had black vacuous eyes, too. Why wasn't she frightened of him?

"Christmas has wrought more death and destruction than any other holiday combined," an unknown scholar intoned.

Heloise jerked her eyes away from the alien, willing it to disappear as hallucinations should. She caught the images that flashed across the stream: bloody battles. Were people really fighting about Christmas in all those battles? She had a hard time paying attention in school, but somehow, she didn't think the Crusades were fought over a holiday. Or even the Revolutionary War. Or...were those World War I era uniforms? She shook her head.

"Chrissmasss."

The alien was still there.

"Death and destruction," she heard, and all the scholars' voices repeated the words. "Death and destruction; death and destruction; death and destruction."

"Thisss way," the alien said, and he—if it was a *he*—gestured toward the door.

From her vantage point, she could see that the sun had emerged from behind the layer of gauzy white and was sparkling brightly on the snow. The alien, hallucination notwithstanding, probably knew best. If she went outside, she might clear her head of this headache. In fact, there was probably a church open that would feed her. Churches tended to be warm, too.

If there was one thing the rationing coupons did purchase, it was useful clothes. She dropped the blanket and dressed from head to toe in long pants, boots, a coat, and a scarf and mittens. When she tip-toed down the rotten stairs as best as she could in her pair of clunky snow boots, the alien was waiting for her by the door.

Good idea? Bad idea? It didn't matter. Heloise was impulsive by nature; it was the meds that had changed her into this boring dependable person, and now *boring and dependable* was losing its grip on her mind. Just as she followed the alien out the door, she heard the scholars arguing over the war images.

"Just because a battle takes place on Christmas day doesn't mean it's about Christmas," came the exasperated economist's reply—basically the words that were in Heloise's head.

"It's the spirit of the holiday that causes violence!"

"Spirit? No, no, we deal in facts, not spirits, good sir!"

Heloise slammed the door behind her and stomped through the snow on the steps. The snow

there was so pristine that breaking the crust on it was satisfying. The boots gave the impression she was a larger creature than she was. When she reached the sidewalk, it was clear many feet about her size and smaller had already made their marks. Who wouldn't go out and play in this, maybe sled down the one hill in town? Even though there was no longer a winter break from school, let alone a Christmas one, the schools would never open in this kind of weather.

The first church she came to was a defunct Baptist building that had shut its doors after the scholars determined what churches were allowed to preach as verifiably true information. One unified church had sprung up as a result of the scholars' proclamations, and many local bodies had closed their doors because they were no longer bonified. Catholics had disappeared entirely from America because the Pope disagreed with the scholars. Denominations that weren't regulated by quite so lofty a figurehead fractured, some joining the unified church, others dying because they were too stubborn to let go of their core beliefs.

St. Andrews, the Episcopal church on the corner past the defunct Baptist church, had kept its doors open, due to its philosophy, writ large on the sign: *Here to minister to the community*. Yet, somehow, it didn't appear open today. Heloise tried the front doors, but they were locked up tight, the stained glass beside them dim and murky.

So much for a hot meal at that church. It was possible the whole town was down on supplies, since delivery trucks could no more drive through closed thoroughfares than Heloise's grandma could. There were more churches, though. There was a Methodist church a few blocks away, the oldest church in town. They weren't about to shut their doors over a few political regulations. At least that was what the plaque outside their church stated.

But this grand old building was shut up tighter than a drum, too. If those two churches weren't open—the most active places in town for musicals, potlucks, and charity drives—what was the likelihood of finding another one?

She searched the horizon, heard shouting off in the distance, but saw no one except the green alien, who, in keeping with a hallucination, was leading her where she'd already planned on going. That is, he was following her by remaining one block ahead. It was disconcerting.

She crunched her way up the sidewalks towards Main Street, where a lot of other small footprints had gone, according to the record in the snow. The sun that had sparkled momentarily before she'd traversed her front door had disappeared again without melting the snow even a little. Without the sun, it was cold! She wrapped her scarf tightly up to her mouth.

Oddly, as she approached Main Street, she saw objects scattered in the snow. It was odd because

she had just been thinking about the things she had never gotten for Christmas, and there they were. First: a princess dress, a little worse for wear, but with all the lace and tulle and sequins she had dreamed about. But of course, she was way too big for a dress like that now, and her stomach clenched in empty sorrow at the thought. And then a doll. A perfect baby doll, with dimpled feet, a blue cloth diaper, and a sculpted tuft of baby hair.

No, she had no desire any longer to play with dolls. She was too big for that, too. But how could she let such precious items go to waste? True, not all little girls were as deprived as those who had to be on government rationing, but there were little girls just like Heloise around. Girls who were orphans because their parents had died in the last great sweep of the virus before inoculations. Girls who were stuck living with relatives who had survived the virus only to be subsequently damaged by the cure. Heloise was not alone, and she would find somebody to give these precious items to. She tucked them carefully inside her coat.

As she continued to follow the steps, it turned into a trail of breadcrumbs, but with entire sandwiches splayed open in the snow, their filling spilled out and now rendered inedible except by dogs. Well, Heloise supposed if she were hungry enough, the food wouldn't be inedible. But it was a shocking waste, nonetheless. Then she realized where the footsteps were leading her: to the Salvation Station, a charity store that sold cheaply or even gave away second-hand items throughout the winter, also providing sandwiches and hot coffee to the eligible poor.

And today, there was a ruckus outside their Main Street location.

"Get lost!" the fat man at the door shouted, as he roughly shoved a boy out of the way, such that the kid slipped and fell onto the icy sidewalk.

The kid howled in rage.

"Mark my words, I'll make sure the police come, whether they want to or not!" the man shouted before shutting the door and glaring behind the glass.

Heloise shook her head. The police wouldn't be out in this weather. They were too dull, too pacified by...peace. On the other hand, the boys were enacting their own sense of justice, as they formed a circle and cheered on a fight. That a full-grown adult would allow this and shield himself behind a door enraged Heloise. It enraged her because she spotted the small head that tried to push its way through the other boys' legs. She knew that head, that boy, because he and his little sister were in the same virus-damaged program she was. His name was Timmy. He was probably eight or nine years old, and small for his size. Yet a group of boys closer to Heloise's age was beating him down.

Fueled by her own rage, she marched around the group and pounded on the door of the Salvation Station shop.

“No way!” the guy mouthed.

She pounded again.

This time, the guy walked away. Conveniently, however, he’d left a snow shovel leaning inside the recessed entryway. Heloise grabbed the shovel and raised it over her head. She was lucky because the boys hadn’t paid her any attention, not even when she’d banged on the shop door. They were too involved in bullying a kid half their size. She brought the shovel down on a shoulder—she’d meant to hit the head, but the shovel was heavy and unwieldy in her spindly arms.

The kid yelped. “What the—?”

He spun around, but she’d already moved aside and was aiming for another boy. Her goal was to break open their ranks, so Timmy could get himself up and run away. The second boy had faster reflexes and had turned on her and shoved her in the gut before she could step away. She barely caught herself before falling over on that small space of cleared sidewalk, which was speckled with salt. But somehow, she managed to maintain her hold on the shovel, and she picked it up and took another swing.

Now she’d not just distracted the group of—she took a quick count—six boys, but she’d become the main attraction.

“Hey, Frankie!” a boy in an orange cap yelled. “She’s got your sister’s doll.”

Briefly, she caught Timmy’s eyes. He was pale and shaking, blood running out the corner of his mouth. *Run!* she mouthed. Timmy ran. Unfortunately for her. Yes, that was what she’d wanted him to do, but now she was alone, faced with six boys. Five. One took off like a shot after Timmy.

She held the shovel in front of her and ran after the sixth boy. “Hey! Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?”

Whump! It felt like a rock had hit her back, but she suspected it was a snowball. Thankfully, she was wearing a thick coat. *Whump, whump, whump!* She hit the road, where the snow had been worn down by whatever vehicles had dared to drive down Main. *Whump!* That last attack caused her to lose her balance as her feet met the packed, icy snow. She fell on her back and lost hold of the shovel.

A dark-headed boy leaned over her and screamed, “The alien freak’s got your sister’s doll! Get her, get her, get her!”

Instinctively, her arms flew over her chest, where the little doll’s head was peaking out of her coat. The dress was tucked under the doll, the tulle scratching a little where the skin of her neck was

exposed. She rolled over and tried to push herself up. The boy pushed her back down and then proceeded to sit on her and hold down her arms.

She kicked at him with her legs. “Get off me!”

“No way,” he said.

Another boy yanked the doll from out of her coat, at which point he spotted the dress and yanked that out too.

“I’m pretty sure it’s too small for you, little princess,” she sang out.

In response, he tried to rip the dress in two, but only succeeded in ripping its bodice a little before tossing it away in the icy wind. Then a snowball hit Heloise on the cheek. This whole situation was so stupid. She didn’t even know these boys. Sure, she recognized them. Everybody in Roswell knew everybody else. But they weren’t in the virus-damaged group; she didn’t have anything to do with them at school.

“Why are you doing this?” she gasped out as another snowball hit her cheek.

“You attacked us, you alien freak.”

“You were hurting Timmy!”

“He stole Frankie’s sister’s things. And then you stole them. You both deserve to die!”

“I didn’t know. It was lying in the snow. He can have it back, just get off me!”

“It’s not that simple,” the boy said, enunciating his words as if he were in the Italian mafia. “You mess with Frankie, you mess with all of us.”

“Ugh! You’re acting retarded. Stop it!”

He laughed like a maniac, his face so close to hers she could smell his sour-pepperminty breath. It smelled like he’d been sucking on candy canes, which was more than she’d managed to consume. Her stomach growled with ferocity and before she knew what she was doing, she’d reached her head up and bitten him on the nose.

She immediately regretted it, even though the boy hollered and rolled off her, clutching at his face. Partly it was the nasty lingering taste in her mouth she regretted, but mostly it was because they all pelted her at once with hard-packed, rock-filled snowballs as she lurched to her feet.

“Zombie! She’s a freaking zombie! Kill her!” the boy with the damaged nose screamed.

“Zombies are the undead, idiot,” another boy laughed. “You can’t kill the undead. You have to chop off their heads.”

Since the boy—apparently, Frankie—had dropped his sister’s doll to pelt her, Heloise snatched it and ran off with it, taunting them as she went. She didn’t know why; she should have just run off

while she had a chance. They'd have grown bored of chasing her after a while. But she just couldn't. She could not let these boys get the best of her. That was the last wild thought she had before one of them yanked her backwards by her scarf. To regain her balance, she overcorrected and fell forward, and the little doll flew from her arms.

She tried to get up, but a different boy grabbed her and held her by the neck while the others threw things at her unmercifully—mostly snow, but whatever they could find lying around. Meanwhile, Frankie kicked the doll and beat at it with a stick. *His sister must love his gifts.* She was beginning to feel numb to the pain and think circumspectly about why she'd ever removed her queen's robe and ventured outside in the first place.

Oh, yeah...the alien, the little green man who blinked on as if a hologram of her thoughts. He blinked and faded, blinked and faded as the boys rained their wrath down on her.

"Death and desstruction," the alien hissed. "Chrissmasss."

And then something hard hit her head, and she lolled forward, no longer able to see anything but a vacuous black space.

When her eyes blinked open again, a leering demon face stood over her. The demon was, in fact, shaking her.

"No," she begged. "You can have the doll, I don't care. Please."

"She's alive!" the demon shouted.

A fat adult face looked down on her, and then a pasty little boy face, a little bruised, but otherwise beautiful. Timmy. Timmy and the shopkeeper and...a demon. The demon ripped off his face. She gasped. But it was only a mask. Underneath, it was...

"Robert?" she whispered. She had to be dreaming...again. How embarrassing. Or maybe he was another hallucination, like the alien. "You frightened me."

He grinned at her. "I didn't think I could fight six boys without scaring the hell out them first."

The shopkeeper shook his head. "Hooligans. All of them! Ever since they closed the roads, they've been roaming around. *This*. This is what happens when the adults are out of town."

Heloise tried her best to glare up at him, but her head hurt too much. What was he doing while they beat up on little Timmy? Or on her, for that matter? The big fat adult could have taken them all on, but he'd hidden instead. Robert gave her his hand and pulled her up. His hand did not feel like a hallucination.

"Where did you come from?" she asked.

"Timmy came and got me. He said you needed help." He coughed, his breath white in the

dimming wintry air. “Timmy and I are neighbors,” he said, as if it needed explaining.

It didn’t. All three of them were the virus-affected—different ages and stages, but they understood each other regardless.

“Do you have sandwiches left?” Heloise asked the fat man.

“Absolutely not,” he said. “And I wouldn’t open my doors if I did. Not after all the thieving little brats that went through there today.”

“But—but you’re charity shop.” Heloise cringed at the shrieky sound in her voice.

“Even a charity shop doesn’t accept rioters and thieves,” the man huffed out. “Anyway, I’m going home to my family. They’re probably wondering where I am, why I haven’t come home. I didn’t have to stay and make sure you were all right, you know.”

Heloise could only humph indignantly as she watched the man turn around and walk away from them.

“Don’t be too hard on him,” Robert said.

“Why not?”

“Because none of this is his fault.”

“He should’ve helped Timmy. Timmy’s too little to defend himself.”

“He also didn’t have to open up the shop at all. No other stores have. Now you know why.”

Heloise knew he was right, and she also wondered now, as she watched Timmy gather up the ripped dress and beaten doll, if Timmy had stolen those items from the shopkeeper.

“Did you steal those?” Heloise asked him.

Timmy held them up. “No, they were free. They just had to be checked out. You can’t have more than two items per person. These were my two.”

“For your sister?” she asked.

“Yes! She’s never had a Christmas present. But Frankie stole them from me.”

“Timmy, where’s your sister right now?” she asked.

“At home. Where else would she be?”

Heloise looked at Robert, alarmed. “Alone?”

“She’s fine,” Timmy said. “I told her I was going to get us food and special treats.” Then his face turned downcast, and he dropped the dress and doll in defeat. “They ruined everything. I was only going to be gone a few minutes and bring us back sandwiches, but Frankie wrecked those, too.”

“No, no, he didn’t. I have a can of soup,” said Heloise. “Let’s take it to your sister. And I’ll fix the dress and doll.”

Timmy kicked the doll. “They can’t be fixed. They’re garbage!”

“I’ve known Heloise a long time,” Robert said. “She can fix them. And I have a few pieces of bread left. Do you have any food at all at your house, Timmy?”

Heloise forced a smile, even though it wasn’t true. Robert didn’t know her at all. And honestly, she didn’t know if she could fix the gifts. But the biggest problem right now was rescuing a little girl who’d been left alone. She picked up the dress and doll and retucked them inside her coat, then took Timmy’s hand to force him to move in the appropriate direction.

“I have hot cocoa and marshmallows,” he said after a long pause. He obviously hadn’t wanted to admit that.

“What?!” Heloise and Robert exclaimed almost in unison.

“My dad got it with our extra holiday rations right before he went to Santa Fe. It was going to be our special treat this year.”

“We usually go to the automat and have coconut cream pie with our rations,” Heloise said.

“My dad works. We don’t get special holiday rations, but the principal always gives us a holiday turkey.”

Silence fell at that point. Of course, Heloise knew Robert’s dad worked. He was the history teacher at the high school. She was imagining the smell of a roasted bird.

“Do you have that turkey at your house, Robert?” she asked, trying not to sound too hungry. “Not that we should cook it, but...I’m just wondering.”

“No. Because my dad went to Santa Fe, and they closed the schools.”

“Ah.” She swallowed hard.

“I would cook it for you if I had it,” Robert said. “It’s stupid we’re all left alone like this with nothing.”

Yes, it was stupid, but it happened every year. Nobody reported on anyone else because all the parents did it. They had to. There weren’t that many motels in Santa Fe, and there certainly weren’t enough rooms for entire families. Parents did what they had to do to avoid delinquency in their census filing, which insured jobs and disability for everybody in the state. Meanwhile, authorities turned their backs and pretended not to notice.

“I’ll go get my can of soup, it’s chicken!” She tried to sound cheery as they stopped in front of her grandma’s dilapidated house.

Whatever the case, she didn’t want them to go inside. The outside was normally embarrassing enough—the patchy yard, tilting porch, broken shingles—but the snow was hiding most of it in its

erie blue glow. It almost looked charming, like some of the better-maintained twentieth-century houses. She took a breath and entered and found no hissing green aliens, but the heads were still bobbing around on the living room wall. She ran to the pantry, grabbed the soup can, and darted back outside before she could hear what the current debate was about.

Fifteen minutes later, they were at Timmy's doorstep. His house was in better repair, as was Robert's, a door down. This was a working-class block of houses—newer, flat brick houses, with the skeleton arms of wintering pecan trees dotting the yards.

Timmy slammed open his front door. "Jana!"

Heloise and Robert peered in the open doorway. The heads were bobbing on his wall, too, as they were no respecter of houses. But the living room was otherwise dark. And cold. Very, very cold.

"Geez, Timmy, didn't you leave the heat on?" Robert called after the boy, who had disappeared into the yawning darkness.

Timmy returned alone with a worried frown. "I couldn't get it to work. She was wrapped up in blankets on the couch when I left. I'm not stupid."

"Where is she now?" Robert gestured to the empty pile of blankets.

"I don't know. She's not answering me." His little voice quavered.

Heloise instinctively moved forward and searched through the blankets. "Where would she go?"

"Her pink blanket's gone. I don't know. Next door? To Robert's house?"

The three hastily headed for Robert's house. The porch light was on there, as well as a living room lamp. It was also warmer. And curiously silent, except for the heavy sobbing of a tiny creature huddled under a pink comforter. There were no bobbing heads on the wall, Heloise realized. Instead, there was a giant hole in the wallboard that had exposed the timber beneath. Somebody had performed a not very gentle operation on the mandatory wall streaming unit. Also, there was a Christmas tree in the corner, dangling with ornaments and flashing lights.

"Jana!" Timmy ran over to her and hugged her. "What are you doing here? I told you to stay at home."

"You wouldn't come home," she sobbed. "You left me and wouldn't come home."

"Jana, I always come home. You know that. I'm your brother. You know that."

"I was scared."

"But it's only just getting dark, and I told you I'd be home." He sounded frustrated, as if all this was too much for him. And it no doubt was. It was too much for Heloise, and she was quite a few years older.

“I was scared of the aliens.”

“What aliens? There haven’t been alien ships here for years. No aliens are going to come get you.”

“But there was an alien. In our house. It stepped out from the wall and talked to me.”

“Do you want some hot cocoa, Jana? Let’s have some cocoa.”

“We’re supposed to wait for Daddy.”

“Daddy won’t care. I’ll go get it from next door.”

“Don’t leave me, Timmy!” she wailed. “Don’t leave me again!”

Heloise ran over to her side and pulled out the doll and dress from her coat. “Look what Timmy got you! We just need to fix it up.”

Jana was temporarily distracted by this new development. Heloise left her holding the goods and went to find Robert, who had disappeared. She found him in the kitchen, rooting through the freezer. It appeared he was pulling out...about twenty bread ends.

“What are those?” she asked.

“My dad throws the heels in the freezer and uses them to stuff the turkey. We only have two pieces of fresh bread left, but we can toast these and then pour your soup over the top. It will be more substantial.”

“That’s a really good idea.” She meant it, too, and her stomach rumbled in response. “Do you have any meds? She’s got to be out of hers if she’s seeing aliens.”

“She isn’t.” That was Timmy, bearing a can of cocoa mix and a bag of marshmallows.

Heloise thought she would faint at the sight of so much food but tried to focus on the problem at hand. “Why is she hallucinating, then?”

“Because my dad always tricks her into taking her pills, and I can’t trick her like he does, so she hasn’t taken any since he’s been gone.”

Robert snorted. “I haven’t taken meds for five years, and I’m not seeing any aliens. You want to know why? My dad removed the wall stream. He thinks the government’s trying to control us with it.”

“Oh, so that’s why you have a Christmas tree. You don’t know...”

“That they outlawed Christmas trees and are thinking of outlawing Christmas? Of course, I know. Nobody in this house cares. Make yourself useful and help me put butter on this bread.”

As she was in awe of him, she obeyed without comment. Timmy, however, scampered off to respond to his sister, who had suddenly taken up a new bout of wailing. She was, no doubt, just as hungry as Heloise, since her brother’s promised sandwiches had never materialized. *Ugh!* Heloise’s

rage bubbled up again. Why did some people have to take it on themselves to ruin everything for others? She had to fix the doll and dress—to spite the stupid boys.

“Robert, you don’t have a mom, do you?”

“Of course, I *had* a mom. Everybody had one before the virus.” He sounded a little testy. “Why? Would a mom not make toast this way?”

“I have no idea how a mom would make toast. I just wondered if you had anything I could fix that dress and doll with.”

Robert shrugged. “I wouldn’t know. My dad locked up her room, and nobody goes in there. All I remember about her is she hated her job and would go hide in her room when she came home. You can go in there if you want. First door on the left from the living room.”

Heloise dropped a lump of butter on the last piece of bread. “I thought you said it was locked up.”

“The key’s above the door.”

Going in his dead mother’s room made her uncomfortable, but nonetheless, she retraced her steps, past the twinkling lights, the hole in the wall, and Timmy and his sister. She reached above the door casing and found the key and unlocked the door.

When she flicked the light on, she found a perfectly arranged, tidy little office with a writing desk and shelves filled with books. On the desk, there was a pen jar and a little clay pot—the kind kids made in kindergarten—filled with paperclips and tacks. There was also a sheaf of paper with a pen lying across it as if the writer had just gotten up for a break and would soon return.

The top page said, “A Christmas Tale.” Even though it was none of her business, Heloise picked up the top page and read the handwritten story beneath. Unfortunately, after Christmas was stolen away by rebellious elves, the story trailed off without an end.

That had been the way of things during the plague—stories without endings. She turned away and went to the closet, where she hit pay dirt: a carefully covered sewing machine and, surrounding it, a shelving and storage unit with craft supplies squirreled away. Heloise had no idea how to use a sewing machine, but the needles and threads housed in their cubbies would work just as well.

And for the doll? Well, that would be different. The doll would need a little washing up, and where the lip paint had worn off, perhaps something in these drawers would help. Acrylics? She wasn’t sure it would stick. She gathered up some potential art supplies, plus bright pink and purple spools of thread and a needle and a pair of scissors.

“Look!” She presented the tools to Jana. “We can fix up your doll, but first we should give her a bath.”

“It’s not a ‘her’.”

“Oh, why not?”

“He has a blue diaper.”

Her brother gently punched her on the shoulder. “You know you’ll get in trouble if you talk like that.”

“Ow!” she cried, and then jutted her chin out stubbornly. “This baby’s a boy, like my brother.”

And then she punched her brother right back.

Heloise led her to the bathroom to prevent yet another fight today, and she squirted the doll with shampoo and washed it gently with a washcloth. “So, what’s your baby’s name?”

“Seb,” she said without hesitation.

“Short for Sebastian?”

“No, just Seb.”

Heloise wasn’t about to argue the name choice. No more fights. She continued to scrub away at “Seb’s” face while Jana washed out the diaper. But before they could finish—some of the marks on the doll weren’t coming off—Robert called them to the table for dinner. They wrapped the baby in a hand towel and hung the diaper from the towel rack and ran in the dining area, which was attached to the kitchen. Hunger was a powerful motivator.

Robert had set the table with four bowls and spoons—each bowl looked very full, and that was the bread, of course, adding substance to four small portions of soup. Robert waved his hand from his forehead to his chest, and then across his shoulders, before dipping his spoon in.

“Why did you do that?” Heloise asked.

“Do what? Cross myself? Because that’s what we do before we eat.”

“Do you go to church?”

“No, my dad doesn’t like church anymore.”

“Neither does my grandma.” She blew on her food and took a tentative bite. It was delicious, salty and buttery. “What does it mean when you cross yourself?”

“It depends on when you do it. We do it to bless our food, and sometimes it’s used to ward away evil.”

“How does it do that?” She knew it was a stupid question, but her life had been devoid of any kind of religious education, except what she heard from the Talking Heads.

“It’s just a sign of Jesus, and so you’re asking Jesus to do those things. At least, I think.”

“I know who Jesus is,” Jana said, her mouth full of food. She and her brother had both been shoveling food in since they’d sat down.

“Who is he, then?”

“He’s the baby in Mama’s Navivity set.”

“Nativity,” her brother corrected.

“I lost him when I was a really, really little, and we just pretend he’s in his bed. Seb can be Jesus now.”

“You didn’t lose him when you were really, really little, Jana. It was last year. And who’s Seb?”

“The doll,” Heloise said.

“He won’t fit in Mom’s nativity set.”

“Will too.”

“Will not.”

Lest that go on forever, Heloise abruptly changed the subject. It was clear she wasn’t going to get a lesson on Jesus, anyway. “Robert, I didn’t know your mom wrote stories.”

Robert looked up at her sharply. “Yeah, I guess that’s what she did in her room when she came home from work.”

“There’s an unfinished Christmas story on her desk.”

“She died right before Christmas. I don’t really like to think about it.” He was quiet for several beats, and then said, as if he couldn’t contain himself, “What was the story about?”

“Rebellious elves that stole Christmas.”

“They always do,” Timmy said. “The last time we had something good for Christmas, Jana snuck in and ate it all.”

“I did not!”

“Did too!”

“Did—”

“We have hot cocoa for everyone!” Robert reminded them. “So, shut up, and I’ll start boiling the water.”

Jana jumped up, hollering about marshmallows, but they all froze at the sound of banging and shouting outside. Robert peeked out the dining room window.

“What is it?” Heloise asked.

But Robert held up his hand to silence her. “That stupid pack of boys. Do they know where you live, Timmy? Because they’re throwing things at your living room window.”

“Frankie sometimes follows me home from school. He hates me. I don’t know why.”

It was unfortunate that the middle school was on the same block as the elementary school—this

kind of bullying was not uncommon. Heloise had avoided it back when she was in elementary school by being as invisible as possible.

Heloise peered over Robert's shoulder. "Maybe they'll go away when they realize nobody's there."

"Yeah, right," Robert said. "They'll trash the house when they realize nobody's there. We'll have to get rid of them ourselves."

Heloise did not like his idea, but that was probably because she'd already fought a losing battle with those boys. "Really? What about Jana? She's too little to be in a stupid warzone."

"Take her and Timmy to my mom's room and do whatever you were going to do in the first place. Fix the dress and doll."

"You're going to fight them by yourself?"

"I've got a whole armory in my bedroom. Paintguns. Pellet guns. I'm loaded."

But Heloise felt frozen to the spot. For a start, there was the alien again. Outside, in the street. Two aliens, to be precise. Her head spun. Now there were four and counting. They were flickering to a staccato beat like the lights on the Christmas tree.

"Do you see the aliens?" she whispered, her head pounding with pain.

"Of course, I see them. They're not real. They can't do anything."

She gulped. "How do you know? Earlier, one was hissing at me."

"I'm sure it's just part of this year's simulation. Trying to make them look cute so you trust them. That's what my dad would say. Anyway, have they ever actually touched you?"

"No, but they led me to those boys. I think they're trying to kill me."

Robert looked at her disparagingly. "Take the little kids and go hide. I'm sure the aliens won't find you in my mom's room. Since they're not real."

"I'm not hiding," Timmy said. "I can help."

"No."

"But I'm really good with pellet guns."

"Fine, but you have to do what I say."

Apparently, everybody had to do what Robert said. Heloise gathered up the things she'd collected and took Jana in the writing room. She left the door propped open, so she could hear what was going on, and then settled down with Jana and the sewing supplies. Almost immediately, Jana ran out into the hallway.

"What are you doing?" Jana asked, as the two boys went barreling past them, loaded up with guns and ammo.

“Get in the room!” Robert ordered.

“Hey, Robert,” Heloise retorted, “you might want to lighten up, or you’re going to cause Word War IV. Unless that’s what you want.”

“Of course, I don’t want to do this. I was invited to take part by Timmy because they were beating you up, remember?”

Heloise heaved a gusty sigh. It was true. Why hadn’t she just stayed home? But if she had, what would have happened to Timmy? Maybe nothing. Maybe the shopkeeper would have finally intervened. It was best not to think about it.

“All right, let’s sew this dress,” she told Jana. “You should probably try it on first.”

Trying the dress on was a reasonable distraction from the sudden sounds of all-out war. Jana twirled around in the dress.

“I think it fits you perfectly,” Heloise said. “What a beautiful princess dress. Now take it off, and I’ll sew up the ripped part.”

Jana did as Heloise told her, which was a good sign. For a few minutes, all was peace in the little room, with Heloise stitching up the ripped bodice on the dress. She didn’t have much practice sewing, but she’d done a little bit because neither she nor her grandma were given an allowance for clothing more than once a year, and the allowance only covered necessities. If a clothing item wore out before then, or Heloise ripped a pair of pants on the playground, it had to be mended. And Heloise had always taken pride in ensuring it didn’t look as if it had been mended at all. Careful, small, deft stitches she made while Jana spun around and rocked the baby doll, which was still wrapped in its swaddling hand towel.

But eventually, Jana grew bored and peeked out the door again. Before Heloise could stop her, she’d scampered into the living room.

“Jana!” Heloise shout-whispered, which was unnecessary, given the boys were all shouting outdoors.

Jana ignored Heloise and slipped outside. Heloise had never had to babysit little kids before. This was an exasperating turn of events—especially when Jana took up bawling a minute later. It appeared she’d been hit with a flying projectile.

Heloise ran outside and scooped her up and fled back inside, slamming the front door as she went. She was tempted to lock the door but thought that would not be good for Robert or Timmy if they needed to retreat or get another weapon from the pile just inside the door. And locking it from the inside would not prevent Jan’s leaving again. Instead, Heloise grabbed the little girl and held onto

her and tried to drag her back to the writing room. For being such a little sprite, she had the abdominal strength of an ox and had soon broken free of Heloise's arms and run back to the front door.

"I want my brother!" she cried.

"Don't go out there! You'll get hit again. Let's watch them from the window. We'll be able to see if we turn out the lights in here."

Heloise proceeded to turn out all lights except those on the Christmas tree. Then she parted the curtains slightly and lifted Jana so she could see outside. Of course, the window was fogged, but Heloise rubbed it clear with her sleeve. It was mayhem outside. Paintballs, snowballs, and pellets flying everywhere. Not to mention the projection of flickering green aliens.

With a gun in his hand and crouched beneath a snow-heavy bush, Timmy was in a better position than he'd been in earlier that day. However, from Heloise's perspective, she could see the small army of hooligans creeping closer and closer. Timmy would soon be a sitting duck with nowhere to go. Robert was the right flank of the two-man army, protecting the front door and window, not Timmy.

The window had fogged up again, and Jana grew bored and squirmed out of Heloise's arms. And then out of nowhere, bright lights and music flashed all over Robert's front yard.

"Feliz Navidad! Feliz Navidad!" the music blared. "Prospero año y felicidad!"

The world outside seemed to freeze at the sudden onslaught of holiday cheer. Were the lights and music on a timer? But, no. It was Jana, who had discovered a power strip on the floor with an on-off switch. Just as suddenly, Jana turned the switch off again, plunging everybody in darkness and silence. Heloise laughed. People often said, *out of the mouths of babes*, but this was more like, *from under the hands of babes*.

"Turn it on again," she urged Jana.

Jana complied. She turned it off; she turned it on.

"Keep doing that. I'll be right back."

Heloise grabbed a pellet gun from Robert's stockpile, and she ran out with a scream like a banshee, shooting wildly at the encroaching boys. Meanwhile, Jana had not tired of the game and continued turning the lights and music on and off. Robert and Timmy were obviously inspired by Heloise, if not Jana, and they too, screeched like banshees and ran head-on at the enemy rather than merely defending their positions. For roughly fifteen minutes of pure adrenaline fun, the three beat down their enemies.

And that's when the neighbors decided to appear—first a couple from across the street, and then from the right and the left. Also, it seemed Jana had grown tired of flipping the switch, and the lights

and music remained on.

“Troops, hold back! Don’t hit the neighbors!” Robert shouted.

The big burly man from across the street grabbed the boy named Frankie, picked him up, and threw him into a deep drift of snow.

“He’s just a child,” the woman behind him protested.

“No, he’s not. He’s a criminal little twit. Like all the rest of them.”

“I’m calling the police,” she said.

“Good, do it!” the man roared, and proceeded to pick up the next boy he came to, hurling him into the bushes. “Maybe they’ll do their job for once.”

The other men joined in, not one of them in the peace-making mood. Perhaps it was the jolly music. Heloise backed up, onto the porch, and then into the open doorway. The men didn’t seem interested in her, or Timmy or Robert for that matter. But just in case, she would get out of their way. If she couldn’t easily fight a bunch of sniveling middle-schoolers, she wouldn’t do well with full-grown men either.

From her vantage point, the scene unfolded like a dream: the aliens flickering, the lights and song bright and blaring, Robert and tiny Timmy joining a throng of men in rounding up the six brats—yes, she counted, and they were all there.

Then the cops appeared, adding to the chaos with their own lights flashing and sirens blaring.

Heloise slammed the front door closed, her heart pounding. The Christmas decorations weren’t precisely outlawed, except the tree, but that was a minor infraction compared to the hole in the wall where the heads should have been bobbing. Removing the stream was a federal offense. Regardless, she thought it wise to get rid of as many offenses as possible and quickly leaned down to turn off the outdoor lights and music. There, she found Jana fast asleep on the floor, her thumb stuck in her mouth, and her other arm encircling the doll.

She hauled the little girl up and tucked her on the couch with the pink blanket. Then she unplugged the Christmas tree and dragged the whole thing, stand and decorations and all in front of the hole. Because it didn’t quite cover it, she yanked up the fake snow from around the base of the tree, took a few tacks from the writing desk, and tacked the snow to the wall. Afterward, she sank to the couch and prayed the cops would be lenient to Robert and Timmy, not to mention the neighbors.

Soon, she would find out, as Robert and Timmy entered the house with a police officer at their heels.

“It—it’s really not what it looks like in here.” Robert stumbled around for an excuse, but he froze and shut his mouth when he saw the tree covering the gap in the wall.

“Eh, I don’t care if you have a Christmas tree,” the cop said. “Let’s not worry about that. I just want a straight story. I also want to know who’s in charge around here. We’ve turned our backs long enough on minor children being left alone for days in the middle of winter.”

“Well, sir, I’m in charge,” Robert said. He stood to his full height. “Timmy’s parents asked me to care for him and his sister while they went away. I fed them, and now, as you can see, the youngest is fast asleep.”

The cop glanced at Heloise and Jana, relaxed on the couch. Heloise put her finger to her lips and pointed at the sleeping child.

“Okay, that seems to be in order. You said the boys outside attacked you first?”

“Yes, we were just defending ourselves. I have no idea why they picked us, or maybe we were the first people to fight back.”

“Yeah, we’ve gotten calls about them all day.”

Heloise wanted to ask him why they hadn’t responded to those calls until now, but she bit her tongue instead. It would be best to keep the cops on their side.

The man rubbed his chin and looked, perplexed, at the blank wall on the other side of the Christmas tree. “I guess they finally decided to shut down the stream for the day. All freaking day they’ve been going on about Christmas. And we’ve got to listen to it. I wish they would just make up their puny little minds.”

Robert nodded. “I know, right? That’s why my dad decided to put up a tree. They can’t decide, and it reminds us of my mom. May she rest in peace.”

“I’m sorry, son.”

Robert made a show of looking down at the floor with deep sadness, and Heloise willed him not to overdo the poor little sad orphan shtick. Perhaps it wasn’t acting, though. Meanwhile, Timmy crashed on a lounger, which was no doubt genuine exhaustion, but it added to the dramatic effect.

The cop looked kindly at the little boy. “I’ll leave you kids alone. Just make sure you lock up your house and don’t go out anywhere tonight. It’s going to be a cold one; I doubt there will be any more trouble, but you never know what happens when parents leave their kids alone.”

Robert nodded knowingly. “So much for the Pax Americana.”

“Pox Americana, more like. P-O-X. Get it?” He cringed at his own joke. “Speaking of, no more music and lights tonight. We got at least three calls just about that.”

“No, sir, of course not.” Robert looked almost embarrassed—for real, not acting this time. “My dad puts that up for New Year’s Eve. The neighbors are used to it. I think that’s why they came out to help when the girls turned it on. It’s not the right holiday.”

“I’d like to pretend it was my master strategy, but it was only an accident,” Heloise said.

The cop threw his head back and laughed, and then he kept laughing as if it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard. Robert and Heloise just stared at him in awe. Was it stress relief? Booze on the job?

When the man finally stopped laughing and left them, and the vehicular lights and activities from outside disappeared for good, Robert locked up and declared, “Good riddance!”

“I thought he was kind of pleasant,” Heloise said.

“Yeah, just a regular guy.”

This time, Heloise busted up laughing. Stress relief. Definitely stress relief.

Robert gave her a disparaging look but pointed at the tree and thanked her for her work. “I doubt he would’ve been so pleasant if he’d seen the hole in the wall.”

Heloise shrugged and tried to stop laughing. “I was just trying to make it Christmasy in here. Whatever that means. Speaking of, I never finished the princess dress. I should finish it and wrap it with paper. I’m pretty sure your mom has paper in her closet, too. Birthday paper.”

She took her sewing in the dining area, where she could risk having a bright light without disturbing the sleeping kids. Robert went to the kitchen and put the kettle on, as if they’d had no disturbance at all, let alone a major battle outside the house. Ten minutes later, he set a mug in front of her, filled with steaming cocoa and melting marshmallows.

“Cheers,” he said, and clinked her mug.

“Thank you. For everything. You didn’t have to help me today at all.”

“Yeah, I did. Timmy asked me to. Somebody has to watch out for him. His dad’s always at work, and he doesn’t have a mom.”

“Just like you.”

“Yeah. And you too, right?”

Heloise nodded, but didn’t add the part about not having a dad either. “You’re really lucky your mom left you stories. I think you should finish her Christmas one.”

Robert wrinkled his nose. “Why would I do that?”

“Why not? If my mom had left an unfinished story behind, I would finish it for her.”

“I don’t write stories, that’s why. And I’ve never even read my mom’s stories. She never let me. Did she always write about elves? How would I know?”

They sat and sipped their chocolate while Heloise finished out her immaculate stitching—some things were just too difficult to talk about. When she went to find the wrapping paper, Robert followed her and sat down at his mom’s old writing desk.

After satisfactorily wrapping up the dress, the lone present felt incomplete. “We should wrap up something for Timmy, too. I bet he’s never had a Christmas present, either.”

Robert didn’t respond, however. He was too engrossed in reading his mom’s story.

She hesitantly tapped him on the shoulder. “Robert? Do you have anything you could give Timmy for a present?”

“Give Timmy? Sure, I have a bag of peanuts hiding on the top shelf of the pantry. You can give that to him, since he shared his hot cocoa with us.”

“A bag of peanuts?” Her eyes widened in awe. “I thought maybe you would have an old toy you don’t use anymore.”

“I was saving the peanuts for Christmas day.”

“And I was saving my can of soup.”

“It all makes sense, then. Wrap up the peanuts for Timmy.”

Heloise choked back tears as she went to fetch the little bag, complete with a picture of a happy peanut man on it. Once wrapped, she placed it and the dress gently under the tree. Then she tucked the couch throw around the little boy. A sliver of bright moonlight fell on him from the crack left in the curtains, and she studied his pale, bruised-up face. He looked peaceful and comfortable, and so young. Too young to be left on his own.

She would close those curtains tightly against...whatever lay outside. But first, she stared out at the night. No longer were there any signs of flickering aliens, of hooligans, or even of neighbors finally pushed too far. Porch lights were on, up and down the street, but all lay in stillness under a clearing sky.

As an afterthought, Heloise took the baby Seb that had fallen from Jana’s arms as she flopped over in her sleep, and she placed him beneath the tree, too. Looking at him under the tree, she was glad she hadn’t fixed his mouth with a bad paint job. He was perfect the way he was. And she liked this new concept of gift-giving. It felt right to her. If only she had a gift for Robert, this Christmas would be perfect.

Her mind conjured the dream she’d had earlier, and a blush rose to her cheeks. His house didn’t even have a fireplace. Hers did, but she would never invite him inside. Oh, well. She slipped into his mom’s old room and curled up on the soft, carpeted floor and watched him as he picked up the pen, thought for a while, and began writing. He was going to do it! He was going to finish his mom’s story!

“How are you going to end it?” she drowsily asked.

“I’m not sure yet,” he said, “but it’s going to have a king and queen in it, who will curb the rebellion.”

A king and queen. Heloise smiled to herself. “Will the Peace Board approve of your story?”

“I hope not.”

“Will it have aliens in it?”

“No.”

“Sumptuous banquets with roast turkey and real tea?”

“On every page.”

She wanted to add *kissing under the mistletoe?* but figured that would be pushing her luck. “I can’t wait to read it.” And she meant it. “But make sure the queen doesn’t get fat from all that turkey.”

“Oh, why not? Fat queens are the most generous. Or so I’ve heard. Kind of like grandmas.”

She couldn’t help herself, after all. “No! Not like grandmas. A young queen the king will want to cuddle up by the fire with and then kiss under the mistletoe.”

“Wow, I think you should write this story. My stories don’t have couples kissing under mistletoe.”

“Well, if you insist. And then I can give it to you for Christmas. What’s life without romance?”

“What’s life without fighting bloody wars to save Christmas?”

“True, but saving Christmas deserves a cuddle and a kiss.” What was she saying? She was past embarrassment, though. She sighed and fell dreamily to sleep at the sound of Robert’s very faint, but not unkind laughter.

THE END