

SECRETS OF THE ABANDONED BUS

LYDIA ARLINGTON

AND THE REVIVED CHRISTMAS

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Edited by Nickolas S. Wallace

Colorful lights glowed brightly on various trees. A chill was in the air, and snow was falling softly from the darkening sky. Snow crunched beneath my feet. It was almost winter, and Christmas was coming soon.

I was walking home from visiting an abandoned bus. The bus was discovered by my now-deceased mother when she was a girl. It was from the school that she used to go to, but one day the school was robbed, and the robbers apparently filled one of the buses with books. However, the books weren't from the school; I suppose no one knows where they came from—except the robbers, maybe. No one ever claimed the books, and the bus was old; the school was going to buy new ones anyway. For some reason, the bus ended up in an alley that people don't really go through.

Pushing a strand of dark-brown hair away from my face, I picked up the pace a little bit as I walked down the sidewalks of Wilsonville, Nebraska. That's where I live. The sun's last rays were beginning to sink over the horizon.

I love this time of year, I thought to myself. Wilsonville is in the holiday spirit. Christmas lights are going up—the white ones are very pretty. Sometimes I walk into a store and hear someone humming a holiday tune. Various houses have paper snowflakes on the windows...

Christmastime is amazing.

Plus, you can sit by the fireplace with a mug of hot chocolate, a couple of cookies, and a good book.

"Hello? Earth to Lia."

I snapped out of my thoughts and turned to where the male voice had come.

Lia's just a nickname. My real name is Lydia—Lydia Brook Arlington.

"Sorry. What did you say, Cody?" I asked.

Cody—who's actually named Kodiak—is one of my best friends, alongside my other best friend, Felicia Blackwood, whom we call Fay. (Yes, we all have nicknames.)

Cody grinned and adjusted his knit hat over his head of strawberry-blond hair. "Fay and I were talking about frosting snickerdoodles over at my house on Tuesday! Want to come?"

I laughed. Cody *loves* snickerdoodles—we all do—and his mom's ones are wonderful.

"Frosting snickerdoodles?" I asked. "I've never tried that."

Fay smiled at me, and in the dim light, I saw her blue eyes glitter. "I haven't either. But it sounds good—especially if the frosting is pink."

"No, please, no," Cody replied and shook his head in dramatic disgust. "No pink."

"How about red and green?" I suggested with a grin.

Cody heaved a sigh of relief. "That would be much better."

"Could we try pink sprinkles then?" Fay teasingly inquired, pushing her ponytail of sandy-brown curls over her shoulder.

"Never!" Cody yelled. However, I could tell he knew Fay wasn't serious. He was just playing along.

My friends had been with me at the bus because we were searching for some good stories. Now, they were coming over to study for a test that was coming up in school. We were almost home.

“Oh, I almost forgot to tell you,” I said. “Grandmother’s going to let us have hot chocolate while we study.”

Fay and I both burst into laughter because when Cody heard the news, he instantly darted toward my house.

* * *

“Hi, Grandmother,” I chirped as my friends and I walked into my house. I breathed in a sweet scent and grinned, almost instantly recognizing it.

Sugar cookies.

I’ve lived with my grandmother ever since my parents died a few years ago. She’s my only relative to live in this part of Nebraska, and she is good company.

My dog, Charity, barked happily when we came in and ran to greet us.

“I’m happy to see you, too,” I said with a smile, picking up the small dog that had black, white, and brown spots. She tried to lick my face, making me jerk my head back a little.

Felicia scratched Charity behind the ears. I smirked and handed Charity to Cody, and Fay and I both laughed aloud when Charity licked Cody on the nose.

We headed to the kitchen and greeted Grandmother. I grinned when I smelled hot chocolate. Grandmother smirked.

“I said you three could have some when you came, didn’t I?” she asked with a smile, motioning a pitcher of hot chocolate.

I nodded. “Yes. Thank you, Grandmother!”

Cody and Fay thanked her, too.

She smiled and went back to drying the dishes. “You’re welcome.”

We set our schoolwork down on the kitchen table.

Grandmother turned around, dishtowel in hand, and said, “Did any of you hear that Nicole Miller’s sister moved to Wilsonville today?”

“I didn’t,” Cody replied.

“She did?” Fay asked.

I grinned. “May I introduce myself to her tomorrow?”

Grandmother nodded. “Sure.”

I turned to my friends. “You guys can come too if you want.”

Cody gave a thumbs up. “Of course!”

“Yeah,” Fay agreed. “I’d like to as well.”

“Sweet!” I replied. “So, should we go to meet her after school tomorrow?”

Cody and Fay nodded, both grinning.

I grinned back. “Sounds good!”

* * *

The next day, Cody, Fay, and I were walking toward Nicole Miller’s house—her sister moved in with her—and Cody was holding a plate of snickerdoodles. Fay was holding flowers she was going to give the Miller sisters and was teasingly reminding Cody not to eat any of the snickerdoodles.

As for me, I was going to give Nicole and her sister some wax candles I made last night. They were pinecone scented and smelled amazing. Plus, it was festive.

When we arrived at Nicole's doorstep, Cody, Fay, and I looked a little awkwardly among ourselves, wondering who should ring the doorbell. Finally, Cody grinned, likely finding all of our unusual awkwardness humorous. He casually rang the doorbell.

We waited a moment until the door opened, revealing a chestnut-haired woman in her late twenties. She smiled at us.

"Hello, children. How are you today? Won't you come in?"

"Hi, Nicole," I told the woman, smiling at her.

"We're well," Fay said, wiping her feet on the doormat and walking into the house. "How are you?"

"I'm well, thank you."

"We heard that your sister moved in and wanted to welcome her to Wilsonville!" Cody chirped.

"That's so nice," Nicole replied, smiling warmly at us as she gently shut the door.

"And," Fay began, showing Nicole the flowers, "these are for you and your sister."

"How lovely!" she exclaimed. "It's nice to see flowers during this time of year."

Felicia nodded. "I agree. Mother and I grew them in the sunroom."

Cody and I gave Nicole the snickerdoodles and the candles, and she was very grateful, telling us we shouldn't have gone to such trouble.

"No problem. It was fun!" I said, Cody nodding in agreement.

"I'll go get my sister. She's in her room and might not have heard you guys come in," Nicole explained.

A moment later a young woman with long, wavy, raven-black hair and deep-blue eyes appeared. She was pretty and wore a black dress that had a white flower print on the skirt.

I grinned at her and offered a handshake. "Hello! I'm Lydia Arlington."

She gave what appeared to be a somewhat forced smile and replied a little stiffly, "Gracelyn Miller."

I was rather surprised by her actions, and I quickly glanced at Cody and Fay, seeing they seemed to feel the same as I.

There was a moment of silence, but Fay, thankfully, broke it. "I'm Felicia Blackwood."

Cody followed the introductions. "And I'm Kodiak Nobleman—but calling me Cody is fine."

Gracelyn gave one nod but didn't say anything.

This might be the most awkward introduction I have ever experienced.

"Look, little sister," Nicole said, motioning to the gifts my friends and I had brought, which were on the table. "The children brought us these lovely gifts. Wasn't that sweet of them?"

Again, Gracelyn nodded. "Yes. Thank you..."

I breathed a literal sigh of relief. "You're welcome!"

Maybe she's just a little shy at first?

Another spell of awkward silence filled the room. I searched my mind for something to say.

After a moment of silence, I truthfully said, "I hope you'll find yourself right at home here in Wilsonville!"

"Thank you..." Gracelyn replied.

That's when I heard it in her voice. All of a sudden, I started to realize why Gracelyn was acting the way she was. How she felt right then was how I felt about three years earlier.

She's in pain! I thought to myself, a little bit startled. *She must be grieving. But what happened?*

Before I knew it, I was staring her in the eyes. I wanted to tell her that I knew how she felt and that it was okay to grieve and a whole bunch of other things that came to my mind, but I didn't say a word. After all, she didn't know me. She didn't know I was an orphaned girl living with my grandmother. Well, unless Nicole told her.

Gracelyn looked away from my gaze after a moment, but I felt that, deep down, she might have understood I knew something was up.

* * *

"Thank you again for coming," Nicole said to my friends and me. Gracelyn was in the house, but Nicole was standing outside on the front porch, talking to us.

"No problem," Cody replied, giving a grin.

"Please excuse Gracelyn's quietness and all," Nicole told us. "She's certainly going through a very difficult time."

Fay nodded. "If you don't mind me asking, what has happened?"

Felicia must have noticed something was amiss as well.

Nicole heaved a sigh. "She was going to marry this coming year, but..."

"But what?" Cody asked.

"Well... her fiancé passed away three months ago," Nicole explained.

I gasped. "Oh, I'm so sorry! I didn't know."

Nicole gave one nod. "Yes, thank you. I hadn't known him very well, but..."

"...it still hurts very bad," Cody finished for her.

"I can't even imagine how hard that must be for your sister... and for you, too," Fay said softly.

Nicole sighed heavily. "I understand that everyone needs time to grieve, but... I worry that Gracelyn hasn't been happy for even a moment since he passed. That troubles me."

"You... are afraid she mightn't be happy until a very long time," I said softly.

I understood how Nicole felt. It took Grandmother a long while after Mom and Dad died before she started to be herself again. Of course, I wasn't the same either. Neither of us was, and we still aren't exactly like we were before. There's always a part of your heart that's missing when you lose someone you dearly love.

"Yes," Nicole replied. "I am."

"Well, it will definitely take time," Cody began. I felt he knew from personal experience with me. "But don't lose hope!"

“And let us know if you need anything,” I said sincerely.
Nicole gave us all a small smile. “Thank you, children. You’re so kind.”

* * *

“I feel so sorry for Miss Miller,” Felicia said, referring to Gracelyn.
Cody, Fay, and I were all decorating the bus for Christmas.

“Me too,” Cody replied. Somehow, he was *sitting atop the bus* and hanging Christmas lights around it!

I nodded in agreement as I taped a paper snowflake to one of the bus windows.

We were quiet for several minutes, each working on our decorating.

“Hey,” I said, breaking the silence, “do you think there are any Christmas books in the bus?”

“Worth a check,” Cody said, adjusting his Santa hat.

Fay turned to look at me as she put a wreath on the door of the bus. “Sure. Go for it.”

I smiled and went inside the bus, mindful not to step over any books on the floor.

I began my search, sorting through the many books.

“So far,” I shouted to my two friends who were still outside, “I don’t see any—! Hmm? What’s this?”

Between a couple of books, I saw a paper that was yellowish, which I assumed was due to age.

“What is it?” Fay asked, making her way onto the bus.

“Yeah, what’s up?” Cody asked. (He nearly stepped on a book on the floor as he came in.)

“Look at this,” I replied, gently prying the page from its spot. It was folded in half.

Fay leaned over my shoulder to look.

I slowly unfolded the paper and gasped. “Why, this was written by mother!”

“What does it say?” Cody asked.

I cleared my throat and read aloud:

*I know that sadness occurs naturally to mankind,
but I hope your broken heart will mend soon.
It is not wrong to grieve, but I wish for you to have peace.
This life is only temporary, but a soul never dies.*

*Much love,
Liliana.*

I swallowed hard and gently folded the note back up, tucking it into the pocket of my dark-purple coat. “I... I wonder who this note was for.”

Fay put a hand on my shoulder reassuringly. “It is a very heartfelt note.”

“It must have been for someone pretty special to her,” Cody added kindly.

“I think... I’ll show Grandmother this...” I said softly. “Perhaps she’ll know.”

* * *

Later, when I got home, I slipped off my tall, brown boots; hung up my coat; and headed to the kitchen, where Grandmother was.

“Grandmother,” I said as I entered the kitchen. “May I show you something?”

Grandmother turned around from where she was making gingerbread men. “Of course. What is it, Lydia?”

I handed the folded note to Grandmother. “I.. found this in the bus. Do you know whom it was for?”

Grandmother unfolded the note and quietly read it to herself. I saw tears glisten in her eyes. “Yes. I do.”

“Whom?” I asked and started cutting out gingerbread men with the dough. “If you don’t mind me asking.”

“It was for me.”

I stopped cutting the cookies, my hand and cookie cutter paused midair. “Really..?”

Grandmother nodded. “Liliana was twenty-one when your grandfather passed away. It was five months after your parents’ wedding..”

I nodded solemnly. “I’m sorry, Grandmother.”

“Her note gave me comfort,” she continued.

“Grandmother,” I began. “Nicole’s sister—Gracelyn—could use some comfort..”

Grandmother looked curious. “Why’s that?”

“Her fiancé died a few months ago,” I said sadly.

“Oh...” Grandmother replied softly. “I see.”

“Nicole is worried that Gracelyn won’t be happy for a very long time.”

Grandmother nodded. “Maybe I’ll talk to Nicole about seeing if she and her sister would like to come over for dinner soon. Gracelyn might need something like that to get her mind away from her grief.”

“Yeah,” I replied. “And she’ll have church to attend. That always helped me feel better when I was lonely...”

* * *

About a week later, Nicole and Gracelyn were at my house for dinner. Grandmother had talked to Nicole about it beforehand, and she agreed that it would be good for Gracelyn to do something like this.

So, after dinner, we were sitting in the living room, trying to “break the ice” with Gracelyn. She had been rather silent at the dinner table, though she was still polite and answered the simple questions we asked.

“So, Lydia,” Nicole began, sipping a cup of tea, “how old are you now?”

“Thirteen,” I answered.

“Growing up fast,” Nicole replied with a smile. “When was your birthday?”

“June twelfth. When’s yours?” I asked with a grin.

Nicole let out a small laugh. “November twentieth.”

“When is your birthday, Gracelyn?” I asked.

“October eighteenth,” she replied simply and stiffly.

Nicole gave me a small smirk. "I'm twenty-seven, and Gracelyn is twenty-two."

Grandmother let out a small laugh. "I remember those days..."

"And I've yet to experience 'those days,'" I said grinning.

Grandmother gave me a somewhat sly-looking smirk. "All in due time."

I nodded.

"So, Gracelyn," I said, changing the subject, "what do you like to do?"

She flatly responded, "Crochet."

"Oh, me too!" I chirped. "I can crochet, but I've never been able to knit. It's impossible."

"I also like embroidery."

"I've never tried that before," I replied. "It sounds fun, though!"

Grandmother smiled fondly. "I used to make samplers often when I was a girl. Your mother loved to make them too, Lydia."

"Samplers are lovely," Nicole replied.

I smiled. "In that case, I should try making one sometime."

* * *

"Thank you so much for having us," Nicole said in the kitchen to Grandmother.

"Oh, you're very welcome. It was a nice evening."

Gracelyn gave one nod. "Thank you."

She was still rather stiff in her mannerisms and hadn't been extremely talkative, but I understood how she felt.

"Anytime," Grandmother replied, smiling warmly.

Gracelyn headed to the front door, and I followed her.

I took a deep breath. "Miss Miller, may I show you something?"

Gracelyn turned to me. She didn't smile or anything but gave one nod again.

I carefully pulled the note my mother had written years ago out of my navy-blue skirt's pocket.

"I... want you to have this," I said slowly. "My mother wrote it for my grandmother. I'm truly sorry for what has happened to you. I know that sometimes things just seem so... empty. You don't have to read it now, but... please read it—sometime."

Gracelyn quietly took the note and gave one nod again. For a moment there was silence.

"Thank you."

I inwardly breathed a sigh of relief at the two words. Although Gracelyn's mannerisms appeared cold, I saw tears glisten in her eyes, and I knew she meant what she said.

I had already talked earlier to Grandmother about letting Gracelyn have the note, and Grandmother agreed. She told me to decide if and when I should give it to her.

Now seemed like the time.

* * *

"Whoo-hoo!" a very familiar male voice shouted as I felt something cold, hard, and round hit me in the shoulder.

It was the afternoon of Christmas Eve, and my friends and I were going to spend the day together.

“Cody!” I yelped. Scooping a mound of snow into my hands, I shaped it into a ball.

Throwing the snowball at my strawberry-blond friend, I laughed when he shrieked in an almost girly fashion. The throw was successful, as it hit Cody’s hat and knocked it over into the snow.

Winter weather in Wilsonville can be long and cold, but the snow is certainly fun to play in.

“I’ll help you, Lia!” Fay replied. She had a snowball in her hand. You could almost see the mental calculations going through her mind as her blue eyes scanned for the proper angle to throw her ball.

At last, Fay threw the snowball. It was a very good throw—especially for Fay since studying was more of her strong point. However, Cody had seen her plan, and although he didn’t understand all her mental calculations, he certainly knew Fay was aiming at him. He ducked out of the way and playfully threw out an insult.

“Seriously? Is that all you’ve got?”

Fay quickly made another snowball and threw it at Cody, but this throw was weaker, and she had been in such a rush she missed even without him dodging.

“Ha! You throw like a girl!” Cody teased again in a sing-song voice.

Fay started tossing more snowballs, all of which Cody dodged with ease.

Meanwhile, I was making a heap of snowballs at my “fort,” which was really just a nearby evergreen.

I gasped, though, when I heard Cody let out a loud shriek.

I turned my head just in time to see one of Fay’s snowballs collide with Kodiak’s face.

Felicia giggled.

“Cold, cold!” Cody yelled, brushing the snow off his face with his coat sleeve.

I laugh. “Your nose is *so* pink.”

Cody’s cheeks turned pink too, but I wasn’t sure if it was from the cold, embarrassment, or both.

Fay and I looked at each other and giggled like the giggling schoolgirls we are. Clearly, she could see Cody’s pink cheeks as well.

Suddenly, Fay’s laughing stopped. “Lia—look out!”

“Ow!”

I reacted only seconds too late because I felt a snowball hit me in the forehead. I didn’t see who threw it, or from where, but I certainly *felt* it.

Only seconds after it hit me, I recovered from my shock and quickly decided to be dramatic. I let myself fall forward, landing facefirst in the snow.

I could hear Fay gasp in horror, and then there was a moment of silence. Thankfully, since my face was in the snow, no one could see me grin widely.

They fell for it!

“Oh, Lia—I didn’t mean to hit you that hard!”

I clearly heard concern in the voice.

Rolling onto my back, I saw three teens looking down at me worriedly.

“Got you!” I chirped, an enormous grin splitting across my face.

“It was Ryker!” Cody quickly defended himself.

I turned to look at the older boy with dark-brown hair and hazel eyes—Ryker. He was seventeen and Cody’s older brother by about four years. Both boys liked to joke around and had good senses of humor.

“I didn’t see you sneak up on us,” I said, rising to my feet and brushing the snow off my coat.

Ryker grinned. “You were an easy target.”

I rose an eyebrow.

Fay laughed. “Well, I happen to know Ryker was a little concerned when you were facefirst in the snow.”

Cody nodded in agreement. “I didn’t see that coming either, though, to be honest.”

I smirked as Fay inconspicuously handed me a couple of snowballs behind my back.

I took several steps back, and my grin only grew as the two boys looked at me, confused.

“Hey guys,” I began, “better watch out!”

* * *

“Mother told me to invite Nicole and Gracelyn over for dinner tonight!” Fay chirped.

It was Christmas morning, and Cody, Fay, and I were building a snowman. We were going to Fay’s this evening for dinner. It’s a tradition for all our families to spend Christmas together.

“Really?” I replied.

“Then in that case,” Cody began, “we had better finish this snowman quickly!”

I carefully stuck a long carrot into the snowman’s face. Smirking a little, I turned to Cody. “We would have already been finished with a snowman if it hadn’t been for you.”

We had been working on a different snowman earlier, but Cody had received a sled for Christmas and had been testing it out when he inconveniently crashed into our snowman. So, we started over again, making sure Cody wouldn’t collide with this one too.

Cody gave me a fake scowl. “I didn’t mean to!”

“I know,” I replied with a laugh. “You never do. We’re almost done, anyway.”

“I hope they’ll come,” Fay said, a hint of worry noticeable in her voice.

I hadn’t talked to Gracelyn that much since I gave her the note. Honestly, I wasn’t sure what she thought about it. I wasn’t even sure if she read it. She was still cold in her mannerisms; she barely spoke and rarely smiled.

Cody sighed. “Well, my mom and I made some jam to give to them, but Gracelyn was just in her room with the door shut the whole time. I hope she’s okay..”

“When was this?” I asked.

“About a week ago.”

The only times I had seen her recently was at church services.

Wrapping a scarf around our snowman, Cody asked, “You think we should all go to their house when you invite the Miller sisters over, Fay?”

“It’s fine with me,” Felicia replied, adjusting the snowman’s hat.

“Sweet!” Cody cheered. “Then Gracelyn will just need to accept.”
And I sure hoped she would.

* * *

“You ring it,” Fay hissed.

“Why me?” I asked in a whisper. “You’re the one inviting her.”

“I’m nervous.”

Cody playfully rolled his eyes. “Relax, girls. It’s just pushing a doorbell. It takes, like, zero strength.”

The strawberry-blond boy then rang the doorbell of the Miller sisters’ house, giving us a smirk.

We waited a moment—nothing.

“Um... maybe they’re not home?” Cody asked.

“Beats me,” I replied.

Fay shrugged her shoulders. “We could ring the doorbell again; maybe they didn’t hear.”

Cody was about to do so when the door slowly opened.

“Merry Christmas, Gracelyn!” my friends and I all cheered.

“Why are you here?”

Well, that’s not the most festive thing I’ve heard today...

“My mom wanted me to invite you and Nicole over for dinner tonight—at six o’clock!”

Fay chirped.

Gracelyn was silent for a moment, leaving us all in suspense.

“Thank you for the invitation,” Gracelyn began, her voice sounding stiff. “However, I think I shall decline.”

“Why?” Cody asked bluntly, tilting his head.

“I don’t feel like it,” Gracelyn replied blandly. “However, I will inform Nicole on your invitation, as she may be interested.”

She started to shut the door.

“Wait!” I said, on impulse sticking my foot in between the door and its frame. “Won’t you please just consider again?”

“Please?” Fay asked quietly, but still loud enough to be heard.

Gracelyn just stared at us. She started to shut the door again, but I wasn’t quite finished.

“Hey, stop! I understand that you don’t want to open up wounds, but you can’t stay shut in your house forever, only leaving to go to services and the grocery store,” I pleaded.

There was an awkward silence again, and I refused to break my gaze from Miss Miller’s eyes. After a moment, she broke the gaze, and I slowly moved my foot away from the door.

“You don’t have to come; I can’t make you,” I said slowly and seriously. “But I know I’d be almost dead inside if I hadn’t opened up when I did. Please reconsider.”

I watched in gloom as the door shut and the click of the lock sounded.

Then I quietly turned around and walked down the driveway.

* * *

It was a little past six, and I stared out the Blackwoods' window, my friends doing the same.

"Still no sign of either Miller sister," Cody said sadly, solemnly munching on a frosted snickerdoodle.

"Only you could make eating a snickerdoodle a solemn affair," Fay said, turning from the window to our strawberry-blond friend.

Cody simply shrugged.

I smiled a little, shaking my head.

A moment passed, and I said, "I just wish Miss Miller could be happy; don't you...?"

Cody nodded. "Yeah... Christmas is such a happy time."

"I hate to think of how she must feel, though," Fay said. "Being without her fiancé on Christmas..."

I shuddered a little, remembering the pain of spending my first Christmas without Dad or Mom. Christmases still weren't the same, but I was glad to be surrounded by the people I loved.

Gracelyn must wish she could be with her fiancé, the one person she loves more than anyone else.

Fay sighed, taking another long look out the window. "I don't think they're coming..."

I looked out too. Sadly, I didn't see anyone.

Cody slowly finished his snickerdoodle.

For one long moment, I gazed out the window and then turned away, feeling defeat sink in.

* * *

"Ho, ho, ho!"

I playfully rolled my eyes. Cody had been pretending to be Santa, constantly asking Fay and me what we wanted for Christmas.

We were still waiting for the Miller sisters, Mrs. Blackwood saying they could be running late. However, it was about fifteen minutes past six.

"You've been a good little girl this year," Cody told Fay.

Fay giggled.

Cody turned to me. Stroking his fake, white beard in thought, Cody inquired of me what I'd like for Christmas.

"It's Christmas evening, so aren't you asking a little late?" I responded, smirking.

"It's never too late to ask what a good little boy or girl may want for Christmas," Cody told me in a very mature tone, trying his best to make his voice sound deep. "Maybe my elves and I need to know for next Christmas."

"I suppose it never hurts to ask," I said. "What do you want, Santa?"

"Snickerdoodles, of course—ho, ho, ho!"

Ryker, who was actually wearing fake reindeer antlers, came over to us and asked Cody, "What do *I* get this year, Cody Claus?"

"Coal," Cody replied promptly.

Ryker narrowed his eyes at his younger brother, but I could tell he was amused.

“Kidding!” Cody said quickly. “You get carrots.”

“Carrots?” asked Ryker, baffled.

“Santa” rolled his eyes as if telling Ryker what he was about to say was obvious. “You’re a reindeer, remember?”

Ryker let out a large sigh. “I suppose that’s true.”

I laughed, but then something caught my eye.

“Guys, look!” I yelled, dashing toward the window.

Fay was looking through the window in an instant. “Oh, they *are* here!”

“Hey, they’re coming after all,” Ryker said with a large grin.

“Whoa, look at that pie Nicole’s holding! Mm...”

We all turned to look at Cody due to his statement.

Kodiak’s cheeks turned a light dusting of pink from all of us staring at him.

We turned our attention to the door, though, when it opened.

“Hi!” we all cheered.

Enthusiastically, I said, “It’s so great to see you.”

The adults came over toward the front door, and everyone welcomed the Miller sisters.

“I’m so sorry we’re late,” Nicole apologized. “The pies took a little longer than expected.”

Gracelyn was holding a pie as well. Cody’s eyes lit up at the desserts.

My eyes lit up too—not because of the pies but because Gracelyn Miller, who had been taken over with grief for the past few months, smiled. I wasn’t sure if it was due to Cody’s reaction upon seeing the pies, his and Ryker’s Christmas attire, or something else altogether, but it was a smile.

* * *

It was after dinner, and all of us (minus Cody, who was eating snickerdoodles in the kitchen) were in the living room, chatting. I was very happy that Gracelyn engaged in, and even started, conversations.

I went over to her, holding a plate that contained one of the pieces of pie she made.

“I bet this’ll be great!” I said cheerily.

Gracelyn gave me a small smile but didn’t say anything.

“So, Gracelyn,” I began, smiling back a little. “If you don’t mind me asking... what made you decide to show up?”

She was quiet for a moment.

“After you left, I was thinking...”

“And...?” I asked, grinning.

“Well... I got to thinking about how I can’t just isolate myself forever.”

I nodded.

Gracelyn cleared her throat a little. “It seemed like... spending Christmas without... him... would be impossible.”

“Then why did you?” I questioned.

“Because I realized something.”

“What?”

“Although I didn’t feel like celebrating, Arwin would not have wanted me to be sad forever...”

“That was his name, wasn’t it?” I asked softly.

Gracelyn nodded and said in a quiet voice, “Yes—Arwin Westwood. I would have been Mrs. Westwood...”

“Gracelyn,” I began a little hesitantly. “If you don’t mind me asking... how... did it happen?”

There was another moment of silence.

“He... had been sick for a long time...”

For a moment, I didn’t say anything. Then I quietly replied, “I’m so sorry...”

“Thank you...”

“My mother was a nurse.”

Gracelyn turned to look at me. “And your father?”

“Dad was the manager of three aquariums. He worked the most at the one in Ashland, though.”

She rose an eyebrow. “That’s quite impressive.”

“He loved whales—and I guess I got that from him.”

“So I see,” Gracelyn said, motioning to a bracelet I was wearing. It had a whale charm on it and was *perfect*. Grandmother gave it to me for Christmas today.

I laughed a little. “Grandmother always knows just what I’d like.”

“And *you* knew just what *I* needed,” Gracelyn replied.

“I did?”

“That note you gave me... Your mother’s words were very heartfelt.”

“Oh, you read it!” I chirped. “I was hoping you would.”

Gracelyn nodded. “I didn’t at first. However, after a couple days, I saw it on my nightstand and, well, you know.”

I nodded.

“Well...” I began, “after Dad and Mom died, so much was different. I moved in with Grandmother, for one, and it seemed like *everything* changed.”

Gracelyn sighed. “I know what you mean about that last part.”

“I’m still not sure how I got myself up in the mornings and went to school. Sometimes, it felt impossible to listen to the lessons, you know? Everything was so *normal* for *everyone*—everyone but me. It wasn’t that I was mad at them because of that or anything. It was just that I wanted to feel like I used to—like how everybody else felt.”

“Um, that’s not true,” Cody cut in.

I rose an eyebrow at the boy. He had finally finished his cookies, it appeared.

Fay was standing next to him, and it was clear that they had both been listening to me as I talked to Gracelyn, although I hadn’t noticed.

“Sorry for interrupting,” Fay said a little sheepishly, somewhat sending Cody a glare.

Cody simply gave Fay a little smirk back and cleared his throat. Turning to me, he said, “You weren’t the only one who didn’t feel normal—Fay and I didn’t feel like we used to. And we still don’t!”

“How come?” I asked.

“Our best friend’s parents passed away, so naturally, that affected us too,” Cody replied matter-of-factly. “Right, Fay?”

Fay nodded. “Absolutely.”

I smiled a little. “Well... thanks!”

“Oh, children,” Gracelyn breathed. “I *am* so sorry for my behavior!”

“It’s all right,” I replied quickly.

Cody nodded. “Yeah, we know you were really sad.”

“Of course,” Fay added softly. “I’m so glad you came over tonight!”

“As am I.”

It was at that moment when Ryker came rushing into the living room, a pile of boardgames in his arms.

“Who’s ready for these?” he exclaimed with a grin.

“I, for one, am!” Gracelyn replied enthusiastically.

I exchanged very happy looks with my friends.

“Merry Christmas, Gracelyn,” I said.

She looked at me and smiled. “Merry Christmas, Lydia.”

And then I went on to have a lovely Christmas evening surrounded by loved ones, snickerdoodles, and Christmas cheer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DANIELLE RENEE WALLACE is a teenage author born in Washington State. She established a large love for reading during her elementary school years and a strong love for writing while in middle school. At fourteen, Danielle published her first book, *Lydia Arlington and the Aquarian Mystery*. She currently lives in Texas with her parents, two older brothers, and a German shepherd.