

A Samhain Publishing Freebie

The Worst Christmas

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The Worst Christmas aka, The Only Thing That Would Make This Christmas Worse
A Prequel to "What She Deserves" by Ellie Marvel (aka Jody Wallace)

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Winnie was halfway to the podium when the fat green bean bounced off her forehead. It ricocheted down her shirt, leaving a trail of grease on her yellow sweater.

Most of the nearby table, especially the brand new president of the Honor Society, who'd thrown the bean, broke into snickers.

"Real mature, Peter." Winnie wiped at the smear with the print-out of her speech while everyone stared and laughed. She'd begged her mom for months to buy her a cashmere like the fashionista crowd sported during the winter. The burn of humiliation began in her cheeks and flooded all the way to her toes, paying particular attention to her stomach. If only she had a big handful of mashed potatoes to smack Peter with.

If only she had a baseball bat to smack Peter with.

"Now you're really a beanpole," said Sally Jones. The cheerleader tossed her curly blonde hair as everyone laughed harder at the not-very-witticism.

Winnie pretended she hadn't heard. It's what she always did whenever anyone used the dreaded nickname. Trying hard not to shake, she rubbed harder at the stain and let her long hair hide her hot face. God, her posh sweater. Why, green bean, why? This *sucked*.

"Is there a problem, Ms. Sampson?" Mrs. Beaker asked, her nasal voice amplified. "We're waiting."

Clenching her stupid speech, Winnie waved at their club sponsor and race-walked to the podium. Like having to stand in front of everyone and tell them how lucky they were to have a butthole as their president wasn't bad enough, now she had to do it looking like a slob.

She reached the podium without tripping over her long, skinny feet in the unaccustomed high heels. Once there, she tried to adjust the microphone higher--she was five ten and had been for several years--but she couldn't loosen the clasp. Thumps and bumps echoed through the speaker system followed by a high-pitched squeal.

Everyone laughed. Laughed more, that is.

She hated this town.

The honors club wasn't the most popular organization at Tallwood High. But it was Winnie's favorite extracurricular. The club did eldercare visits at a local rest home, they organized reading rallies, they sponsored study groups and mentoring, they raised funds for an annual senior trip, and they had an awesome club website Winnie helped maintain.

Best of all, it looked great on applications, college or otherwise.

Would have looked better if she could have put president, but no, that jerk Peter Duvall had won, making her vice-president.

She finally got the microphone fixed and flattened her speech on the podium. Her inkjet printer had a new cartridge and the words were sharp and black.

She cleared her throat and began. "Every year at the holiday banquet we welcome next year's officers. This year you've elected Peter Duvall as your president."

Risking a glance at her audience, her gaze first fell on Peter, the lights of the banquet hall glinting off his glasses. Across the table from him, Sally Jones was gossiping with another cheerleader, probably mocking what nerds everyone here was and how they were going to ditch the dinner ASAP and head to Sally's boyfriend's house to party.

They'd probably hitch a ride with quarterback Chase McKnight who, oh my God, was looking right at Winnie!

"And...um...er," she stammered.

Duh. Of course he was looking at her. She giving a speech.

"We hope to continue the good works of the society and..."

Winnie frowned at the paper. The ink had smudged in the center, grease stains from her shirt obliterating the words that had been so painful to type. All hail President Peter, the most heinous little punk in the whole school.

"And issue in a great year as most of us..." Good gravy, what did that say? "As most of us become senators."

Chuckles rippled through the audience.

"I mean, seniors." Winnie closed her eyes and wished she could start over. Or call in sick. What she wanted to say was they could all go suck it when Peter and his lameness meant the club did next to nothing compared to previous years. When their senior trip got cancelled due to lack of funds. When it became a club in name only.

She stumbled through the rest of her speech, skipping most of it because she couldn't read it, and in about two minutes it was over.

"So anyway," she said, a familiar resentment torturing her gut, "you elected him, and it's his turn to speak. But first I guess I should lower the microphone." She smiled. "A lot."

This time, everyone laughed at Peter.

As she left the podium, Mrs. Beaker said, "Winifred, the cheap shot at Peter was not okay. It's not like you to be such a poor sport. Please come to my office when we return to school in January."

"Yes, ma'am." Winnie fled to the women's restroom to have a spot of nervous breakdown. The only thing that would make this night worse would be...

"Hey." A smooth, masculine voice brought her up short before she escaped. "You can maybe get that out with hairspray."

Chase McKnight--tall, blond and handsome--stood next to the water fountain between the men's and women's restrooms holding a silver flask.

Winnie's heart stuck in her throat like a bite of overcooked banquet chicken. "What?"

"The stain." Chase pointed at her chest.

Oh man, he was looking at her boobs! He was checking her out! He was...

"I don't know how you did that," he said. "but it looks like hell."

The grease on her sweater had been replaced by black, streaky ink. "Oh, no."

"Hairspray or baking soda. But it's probably ruined." He drained the flask and began rinsing it in the fountain.

Forget the sweater. Winnie watched Chase's movements with spellbound fascination. He'd been her secret crush for three years. Part of it was he seemed so much more grown up than the rest of the idiots around here. The other part was he was totally hot.

"Is that...alcohol?" she whispered.

He grinned. She'd never talked to him before and here he was, smiling at her. "Not anymore."

He was just so...cool. And hot. And cool. That's all there was to it.

"Of course," she said right before an awkward donkey laugh blared out of her mouth.

Really, Winnie? Just plaster "dork" on your forehead and be done with it.

He got a funny look on his face and tucked the flask into his blazer's pocket.

"Yellow's so not your color, by the way."

"I..."

It was a good thing he walked off, because she had no idea how to respond.

Not her color. What did that mean? That he thought she had a color? That he thought yellow was ugly? That he thought *she* was ugly? Jeez, if only she had somebody to talk to, but she hadn't confessed her ridiculous infatuation to her girlfriends on the debate team.

Yeah, Winifred Sampson, the school's biggest nerd, crushing on Chase McKnight, the school's hottest stud. So sad. The only thing that would make this night worse would be...

#

"Hurry up, babe, it's freezing." Her dad leaned over and opened the door of the muddy landscaping truck. Chase, Sally and the other cheerleader, walking across the half-frozen parking lot of the hotel where they'd had the banquet, all started laughing when the truck backfired.

Okay, she'd specifically asked to be picked up in the sedan. Not the truck. God. Dad had on what she thought of as his lumberjack coat, too, all stinky and huge.

Winnie jumped in, ducked as far into the seat as she could without hitting the floorboard, and stuck her hands next to the vent. At least the embarrassment thawed her cheeks. The snow had started to change over to ice, and she was wearing a pencil skirt with the sweater. Her legs were pretty much frozen.

She raised her head enough to see if Chase was still watching. Would he tell Sally about her sweater and what a donkey she'd been? Why couldn't she have been cool and cute the one time she got to talk to him? Who knows what could have come of it?

"What are you doing down there?" Dad asked.

Winnie straightened halfway. She wasn't about to tell him she was hiding from the guy she had a crush on and the meanest girl in high school. "Why did you drive the truck, Dad? The heater hardly works."

"Roads are bad. The truck's heavier."

"I thought we weren't supposed to get snow?" Winnie squinted through the light precipitation.

"It's sleet." Dad fiddled with the gearshift and the vehicle lurched. "Hope Rudolph's nose is bright enough to see through this junk."

Her dad was such a goof. Sometimes it was fun to be his little girl, but other times she wished he'd acknowledge the fact she was practically grown up.

"Rudolph can take a vacation this year. Mom finished the Christmas shopping weeks ago." She wiggled her achy toes. "Not that I peeked."

"You couldn't have peeked," Dad teased. "I was in charge of hiding the gifts this year and there's no way you and Tabby found them."

"You're the master of disguise, Dad." Only not. He'd stashed the gifts in the shop attic, like always. It had taken her little sister all of five minutes to find them. Winnie preferred to be surprised. "Anyway, Christmas Eve is, like, five days away. The weather could be in the seventies by then."

"Weatherman says not." He braked suddenly. "Look, there's Petey. I thought you said he wasn't driving." Her dad had initially suggested she hitch a ride with Peter to the banquet. Just because Peter worked for Dad and was always at the house, her parents assumed they were bff.

As if.

"Come on, Dad, no," Winnie complained, but her dad pulled up beside Peter, standing by the door of his own pick-up. Great. No doubt he'd have something snide to say about her performance tonight.

When Dad rolled the window down, cold air blasted away the tiny bit of warmth in the cab. "Merry Christmas, Petey!"

"Merry Christmas, Joe." Peter's voice cracked.

"I hear you beat our little Winnie in the presidential race." Her dad jokingly shook his fist. "I'll have to take that out of your paycheck, son."

"Yeah, gosh. Yeah."

Winnie held her breath and waited for him to make fun of the stain on her sweater, her boffed speech--something. Peter always acted like he was one of the adults while she was a stupid kid when he got around her parents. She couldn't decide if it was more or less annoying than the way he acted at school.

But instead of mocking, Peter rubbed a hand over his mousy hair, which he kept in what he probably thought was a hipster ponytail. He glanced at Winnie and then away. "She'd have made a better president."

For a moment, Winnie was stunned, but then she realized he was just saying that to impress her dad. He'd run against her to be an ass, and they both knew it. *Gloat some more, nerd boy. We'll see who shakes free of Tallwood in the end.*

"You'll be fine, Petey." Dad reached out the window and patted Peter's scrawny arm. "With my girl on your team, what can't you two accomplish?"

"I guess." Wind drove sleet and snow against Peter's round glasses and reddened his cheeks and ears. His wrists stuck out of his ugly trench coat. Nobody besides pretentious dweebs wore trench coats. Even Winnie knew that.

Besides, she wasn't with Peter, she was against him. She didn't understand why her parents liked him so much. He was a total fake. Whenever he was around them, he was all Mr. Respectful and Mr. Hard Worker and Mr. Gosh I Love Your Lasagna, Mrs. Sampson, I Mean Claire.

Whenever there were no adults, he showed his real face. The one that brought to mind rats and bastards.

"Hey, I meant to tell you. The chains we put on the tires work great. I can't thank you enough, Joe." Peter leaned down--since when did he have to lean down?--and stared at Winnie through her dad's open window. To her surprise, his nose was red, not brown.

"Merry Christmas, Winifred."

"Ho ho ho." She rested against the icy passenger's window and hugged her arms around herself. Could they just go home and start the holidays? Finally?

"You and your mom should come over for Christmas Eve dinner," Dad said to Peter. "Lasagna."

"Dad!" Winnie exclaimed. Christmas Eve was for family only. Just the four Sampsons. They ate, played carols and games, watched a movie, popped popcorn, and decorated the tree. Everyone got to pick one gift to open before they hung their stockings, ate some more, put cookies out for Santa, and went to bed. It was their family thing. Their annual routine. And she liked it that way.

What was Dad thinking?

"Oh. Wow." Peter wiped ice off his face. "I'll talk to Mom, but we usually, you know."

"Claire and I would be thrilled if you could come."

"I'd like that. Thanks." Peter looked at her again. Was he dreaming up ways to turn her Christmas Eve into as big a suckfest as the banquet?

Why did he do it?

Why did he constantly bug and harass her?

She kept hoping if she ignored him, he'd quit, but so far, so bad. He had to be the most immature sixteen year old in the world. He made fun of her, threw things at her, and sometimes? He pulled her hair. Pulled it. Like a baby. He was pretty much all-around stupid, even if they were both straight A students.

The only thing that would make this night worse would be...

#

The house was completely dark when they got home.

"Why aren't the Christmas lights on?"

"I don't know, babe. Let's find out." Every year Dad strung up their house like it was Las Vegas. She and her mom and sister pretended it was ridiculous, but they loved it. The reds and blues and greens, shining and blinking in a huge, festive waste of electricity. She had a favorite--the cheeky Rudolph Dad stuck in the place of honor every year, right next to the chimney. Dad's latest addition to the flashing jumble was a giant inflatable snowman that glowed from within.

Mom, however, saved trimming the tree for Christmas Eve. They always had a live tree and planted it in the back yard on January 1. The less time it was in the house, the better its chances of survival. Winnie could walk along the fence row and point to every year's tree, except 1993 because deer ate it.

The snowman loomed like a ghost as they wound through the yard decorations, the sleet a constant hiss against the ground. The three-quarter moon lit their path. Winnie held her arms over her head while her pumps crunched and slipped in the frozen grass. The tips of the branches on the birch in the yard had fattened with ice.

Mom opened the front door when they reached the porch. She was holding a kerosene lantern. In the house. What was going on?

"Electricity's out." Mom shut the door behind them. Winnie kicked off her damp, cold pumps and did a little chilly foot dance across the wooden floor. "You might want to leave your coats on until your Dad gets a fire started."

Dad harumphed. "We don't have any--"

"Wood," Mom finished his sentence. "I know, Joe. I warned you we'd need wood."

"I was going to chop some tomorrow. People are winterizing their yards. It's been--"

"Busy," Mom interrupted. "For months. And months."

Dad tried one more time. "It's sleeting."

"Good thing the wood's under the barn overhang." Mom pointed at the door. "Do you want to freeze on the couch tonight or be warm and cozy in your bed?"

"You're right as always, Claire." Her mom and dad exchanged an amused glance, some sort of private joke. "I will chop some wood and I will do it now."

Dad turned around and went right back out the door, his boots clomping off bits of ice.

"How was the banquet?" Mom asked her. "Speech go okay?"

"Fine." Her feet began to thaw. Finally. She was glad her parents hadn't been there to see her get in trouble with Mrs. Beaker. The holiday banquet was members only.

"Fine fine or I don't want to talk about it fine?" A towel draped over Mom's shoulder, and the house smelled like dessert and kerosene.

"Fine fine." Winnie added a detail so her mom would quit prying. "The food wasn't that good." Especially not the beans.

Her mom was an excellent cook. Winnie was spoiled when it came to food. She had a super high metabolism, not that being supermodel skinny got her any attention from boys. In fact, it seemed to have the opposite effect. No titties, no dates. When Chase McKnight had stared at her chest, the only thing he'd seen was the stain.

No, this night officially couldn't get any worse. Seriously. Winnie was sure of it.

"I took a pumpkin pie out of the oven before we lost power. Will that help?"

But it could get better.

"Definitely." Winnie made her way carefully through the darkened house to the kitchen where she found her younger sister, Tabitha, shoveling down pie by the light of a flashlight. "Where's the pie?"

"Last piece," Tabby said through bulging cheeks.

"You're such a pig." Pumpkin pie would have been a nice bandage on the wound of her crappy night. Losing to Peter, embarrassing herself in front of the whole club, ruining her sweater, and then that thing with Chase possibly calling her ugly. Now the night really couldn't get worse.

"Want a bite?" Tabby opened her mouth wide and stuck out a pie-covered tongue. "La la la."

"Gross." Winnie sniffed her way around the kitchen and located the pie pan. Sure enough, empty except for crust. "Mom, Tabby ate the last piece of pie!"

Mom entered the kitchen and set the lantern on the counter. Its brilliant white mantels made Winnie squint. "Tabitha, I told you one piece. One."

"Big piece." Tabby belched and laughed.

Tabby was eleven, hooked on basketball, and a pain in everybody's behind. "I'm full anyway," Winnie grumbled. "How long do you think the power will be out?"

"I don't know." Mom glanced out the kitchen window, into the darkness of the back yard. Sleet tapped the windowpanes, building up on the sills like crystals. "Surely they'll fix it in a couple hours."

"Is it just us?" Tallwood was a rural community, lots of farmers and not much industry. The population was spread out across the county, and Winnie's family lived down a gravel driveway in a large private lot.

"Helen called and their power's out too. I'm glad I finished the pie. I don't know if we have enough kerosene for the camping stove."

A couple times, they'd lost power for a day and cooked meals on a portable kerosene stove. Once in the summer they'd just camped out and roasted hotdogs, turning an annoying circumstance into a family vacation.

Winnie didn't think they'd be camping out tonight. The temperatures were supposed to drop to the low twenties and stay there all week, although the forecasters always pretended there was going to be a white Christmas even if it was in the sixties and sunny. It was just a thing the local stations did.

This wasn't Christmas. And ice wasn't white.

"I'm going to go watch some TV."

Tabby ticked her plate with her fork. "Can't, there's no electricity."

"On my laptop," Winnie said. "I downloaded an episode of the new Star Trek."

"Can't, the battery's dead."

"No, it's not, I charged it this morning."

Tabby laughed again and Winnie whirled to face Mom. "If she's been on my laptop again, she's grounded. You said so."

"Dad said I could," Tabby insisted. "I had to do my homework."

"Homework? There's no school for two weeks! Mom, this is totally unjust." It wasn't fair. Tabby got away with everything while Winnie had to beg for a ride to the holiday banquet. If they'd let her get her license this wouldn't be a problem, but no, they didn't think she was ready, though she'd had her learner's permit for ages.

"I did say I'd ground you if you got on your sister's laptop again." Mom crossed her arms.

"Dad said I could," Tabby said in a sing-song voice.

"I have an idea. Postpone her grounding until January. It's still basketball season," Winnie suggested.

Tabby protested with a screech as loud as microphone feedback while Mom's forehead scrunched. Behind Mom's back, Winnie flipped Tabby off. The brat had eaten the last piece of pie. She deserved to sweat.

"I'll let it go. It is Christmas," Mom concluded.

What a shock. Oh well. She could always read a book, and the power would be back soon. It wouldn't affect Christmas.

When Winnie had been young, they'd traveled in December, but after Tabby's birth, they'd started staying home. Shopping the week before, groceries, with Christmas Eve and Christmas Day reserved for the immediate Sampsons. Winnie knew it was geeky to like to hang out with your family, but at Christmas she did.

Which reminded her. Dad had totally put a stink on Christmas Eve by inviting Peter over. Peter's mom was nice, but Peter? Here on Christmas Eve, on family night, eating up the lasagna and beating everyone at every single game? Laughing at her singing? She bet he'd even make fun of the movie, which was against family rules. Even Tabby behaved on Christmas, but Peter wouldn't.

Maybe Mrs. Duvall wouldn't want to come. Maybe she'd want to have their own family night. Winnie should send her that article she'd read about family bonding in one of her Grandy M's Happy Circle magazines. Anonymously of course.

"Claire?" Dad stuck his head in the back door. "I've chopped enough for tonight. I'll finish up tomorrow when I can see better."

"Did you fill the wood rack on the porch?" Mom asked.

"One load, but we need more." He nodded at Winnie. "Suit up, babe."

Winnie slipped out of her coat. "I'm not wearing barn clothes. I can't carry wood."

"What happened to your new sweater?" Mom exclaimed.

Oh crap. "Ink, I think."

"Winifred Sampson, can't you keep anything clean?"

"Slob," Tabby added, before picking a crumb of pie off her shirt and eating it.

Winnie glared at all of them. "It was an accident."

"That sweater cost...I don't even want to think what that sweater cost." Mom threw her dishtowel over her head, hiding her face. "Arrrrrr!"

"Better get your butt out to the barn and start carrying wood," Dad advised. "After you change outta that sweater."

Complete. Rock. Bottom.

The only thing that could make this worse would be...

#

Five days later, Winnie stood at the sink, trying to wash a baking dish in slimy, lukewarm water. The lantern guttered on the counter beside her as the kerosene level grew low.

The power hadn't come back on since the night of the banquet, and now it was Christmas Eve. In fact, the substation thought they might not be able to return power to rural areas for three more days. Even though the forecasters said the storm would be pass north of Tallwood, the ice had hit like a ton of dead holiday decorations.

Below freezing temperatures made heating an issue. Roads that weren't impassable were patched with dangerous black ice. Several inches of frozen precipitation--you couldn't call that stuff snow--had landed on the county, while falling trees had snapped lines all over. The crown of their birch tree had plunged right into the poor giant snowman.

On the plus side, with the power out, there'd been no danger of electrocution when she and Dad had cleaned up the mess.

They had enough wood and kerosene that heating the house wasn't an issue, but water had been at a premium. That meant nobody'd had a shower since the night of the banquet, and everyone, even the dog, was getting a little ripe.

Gagging whenever she caught a whiff of herself was maybe the worst part of the whole thing.

Mom paced anxiously into the kitchen for the eighty-seventh time. Winnie knew it wasn't because of the dishwashing, it was because Dad had braved the icy roads today to buy supplies--like something for Christmas Eve dinner.

He'd left hours ago. Now it was dark. Their cellphones had all lost charge a couple days ago, so there'd been no way to contact him and check his progress--or his safety.

Mom opened the nearly empty fridge, stared into it, and closed it again. With the electricity out, they'd shifted all perishables to coolers. Not that much was left. Pickles, mustard, questionable lunchmeat, diet sodas nobody liked, a couple marinade bottles, some leftover pinto beans and a loaf of stale bread.

"How are the dishes coming?" Mom asked.

"I could use a change of water." When Winnie tilted her head, she could see a rainbow sheen of oil on the dishwasher's surface.

Mom rattled the kettle they kept boiling on the kerosene camp stove. "Winifred, the pot's empty. Did you not refill it when you started the dishes?"

"It's Tabby's turn to gather icicles," Winnie said darkly. Tabby knew it, too, because Winnie had reminded her thirty minutes ago. She suspected Tabby was using the last of the flashlight batteries to read instead of finding ice chunks that weren't tainted by dirt.

Of course Tabby wouldn't get in trouble for slacking off. It was almost Christmas, and only Winnie got fussed at when it was almost Christmas.

Well, and Dad. She could only imagine how much Mom was going to fuss at him when he got home so late. How in the world were they supposed to cook if it was almost time to eat already? This was turning out to be the crappiest Christmas ever.

"I don't care whose turn it is," Mom began, but a crack like a rifle shot sounded in the distance.

"That's either your Dad's truck or another tree falling over the lines." Mom hurried toward the front door.

Winnie dried the dish on a stained dishtowel and dunked her hands into the gross water to see if anything was hidden beneath the surface. Two forks. She scrubbed those, rinsed them, and stuck them in the drainer.

She may as well get her boots on. If she wasn't helping Dad carry in groceries, she'd be gathering icicles soon enough.

"Is it Dad?" she yelled to Mom.

"I don't think so."

Winnie wiped her hands on her grubby sweatpants. Under them she wore thermals. They had to layer up to keep warm. Though wood and kerosene were ample, one fireplace and one portable heater didn't keep the house particularly toasty. She and Tabby slept in the floor of the living room in sleeping bags.

She didn't even like to think about what going to the bathroom entailed.

After Winnie donned her boots, she headed for the living room. Mom was squinting out the dark front window at the vehicle easing down their driveway. Headlights sliced through the gloom.

"Who is it?" Winnie looked over her Mom's shoulder.

The truck pulled into the cleared out space where Dad had been parked, and the headlights flicked off. By the light of the nearly full moon, Winnie could see it wasn't the landscaping truck.

It was Peter Duvall.

"What the hell is he doing here?" Winnie exclaimed before she could stop herself. "He'd better not be expecting dinner."

"Winifred Sampson!" Her mother shot her an exasperated look. "You're not too big for me to wash your mouth out with soap."

Winnie was four inches taller but decided not to point that out. "Sorry. So what is he doing here?"

"I don't know." The truck door slammed, and Peter hopped out. Of all things, he had on a red Santa hat.

It looked extremely stupid with his ugly trench coat.

Peter picked his way through the ice and powerless decorations, stamped his way up the porch steps and knocked on the door.

"Hello, Peter." Mom shut the door behind him quickly, blocking the cold air. "Is there a problem with Joe? Don't tell me he ran out of gas."

"Nothing like that." Peter shoved his hands in his pockets and stared at the bare pine tree in the living room, where it was waiting for the annual Sampson family decoration. "He sent me to give the girls a ride."

Mom's eyebrows arched. "A ride?"

"We're not going anywhere. It's Christmas Eve." Winnie crossed her arms, hopefully covering the stains on her sweatshirt, and inched behind her mother. Peter Duvall was the last person she wanted to see when she hadn't bathed in five days.

Okay, the second to last person. If it'd been Chase McKnight at the door, she'd have run screaming into the back yard.

"He gave us a call about dinner tonight, but we'd already eaten." Peter smiled.

"Mom's ham wasn't as good as your lasagna, Mrs. Sampson."

Winnie rolled her eyes. "We're not having lasagna. No oven."

"Oh, yes, he told me he'd invited you and Susan. I'm sorry that isn't going to work out." Mom laughed. "We'll reschedule after the ice storm."

"Our power's been back since this morning." Peter glanced at Winnie. "Yours isn't, huh? No running water?"

"Clearly." Winnie shot him a drop dead look. He smirked.

"Anyway," Peter said, "he thought you might like to eat at the Iris tonight. The hotel's doing a turkey special. Since you can't all fit in the truck, he sent me to fetch the girls. He was right behind me."

Another gunshot cracked outside, and sure enough, Dad crept down the frosty driveway and parked beside Peter.

The Iris? Tonight? Without a bath? The Iris, at the Astaria Hotel, was Tallwood's closest thing to a five star restaurant. It was probably two stars in the grand scheme of things, but for Tallwood, it was fine dining. A huge step up from the local diner, pizza place, barbecue joint or fast food. If any of her classmates' families had gone out to a nice dinner tonight, at least half were guaranteed to be at the Iris.

"Mom," Winnie protested, "we can't go anywhere on Christmas Eve. It's, like, sacrilegious or something."

Peter seemed to be enjoying her discomfort. "I didn't know you were religious, Winifred."

Mom sighed, but it was a happy sigh. "I think your father's idea is wonderful. I wasn't looking forward to cooking a big meal on the camp stove."

"But Mom." Winnie lowered her voice. "The hygiene situation is not optimal."

"Half the town is out of electricity." Mom shook her head. "They'll all be in the same shape we're in."

"They'll all be home with their families."

"I don't know about that." Peter rocked back on his heels, and the jingle bell on his cap tinkled. "The parking lot was pretty packed when I was, um, driving past."

"Hello, my ladies." Dad tramped in the front door carrying two huge bags of groceries. "Reservations for six-thirty. Chop chop!"

"This is insane." Winnie threw up her hands. "This is not what our family does. We stay home. We decorate the tree. We watch a movie. We don't go out for dinner."

"We do this year." Dad shoved groceries at her. "Put these away, babe. I've got to get the rest before it freezes."

"I can help," Peter offered.

"Stay in here where it's warm, Peter. I need to speak with Joe." Mom shrugged into her parka and followed Dad back out the door.

Without a word, Winnie stomped into the kitchen and began putting away the groceries. There was barely room in the coolers for everything. She didn't see why they should leave the house when they could have some delicious cheese slices, lettuce and bagels.

"Where's this go?" Peter held up a box of tampons and rattled it. "Hm, if I remember correctly from health class, it goes--"

"You're disgusting. Give me that." Winnie, her face burning, snatched the box and stalked to her bathroom, where she flung it under the sink. She whirled and almost bumped into Peter. "Back off, space invader."

He tapped his watch. "You probably want to get gussied up or whatever."

"Don't remind me." She pounded on Tabby's door. "Tabby, Dad's making us go to the Iris for dinner, so you'd better get ready in the next five minutes."

"Really?" Tabby yanked open her door, saw Peter, and gasped. "Petey, are you having dinner with us? That's so awesome. Hey, nice hat."

For reasons Winnie couldn't fathom, Tabby thought Peter was "cool". But Tabby was from another planet anyway. Winnie used to tell her sister they found her in the back yard in a seed pod.

"Mom and I already ate," Peter explained. "I'm just giving you and Winifred a ride since you can't all squeeze in your Dad's truck."

"Fabu. I'll get my boots." Tabby raced down the hall toward the living room.

"You can't wear that," Winnie called after her. Tabby was, like Winnie, dressed in stained sweats. Unlike Winnie, Tabby had had hers on four days instead of two.

She stopped abruptly, skidding in socked feet across the wooden floor of the living room. "I guess I can put on jeans. Coming through." She hurtled to her room and slammed the door.

"And are you wearing that?" Peter eyed Winnie's outfit.

"Clearly, no." What would be warm enough for the temperatures and nice enough in case she ran into anyone from school? Not to mention, what in the world was she going to do with her hair? She'd braided it the second day of the ice storm and hadn't touched it since. It was one giant dreadlock now.

"Too bad. You might start a new fashion. Garbage chic."

"Is someone talking to me?" Winnie held a hand to her ear. "All I hear is buzz buzz." He leaned against the wall. "T-minus four minutes to departure."

Winnie rolled her eyes, kicked her door shut and locked it. She trusted Peter about as far as she could throw him. Shivering in her cold room, she peeled off layer after layer until she was nothing but goose bumps. She hastily spritzed all her important parts with body spray, found clean undies, and yanked on a pair of tights and her long black suede skirt. Sweaters, tops, blouses. What was dressy enough? What was warm enough? What was clean?

Nothing. God.

Peter rapped on the door. "T-minus one."

"Come on, primpo. Nobody cares what you look like," Tabby yelled.

"Both of you shut up." Winnie's hand fell on the yellow cashmere she'd worn to the banquet. The bean and ink stains were still there, but... Cashmere and suede. She'd be like a catalog ad for rich people. She added a bright, striped scarf and draped it strategically over her chest. Glancing in the mirror, from the neck down she didn't look too grubby. But the hair--argh! She coated it with hairspray and smashed all the spray tendrils with her hands. For good measure, more body spray. She smelled like the perfume counter at the mall, but at least she didn't smell like butt.

She emerged to find Peter and Tabby at the front door, waiting impatiently. "I'm starving," Tabby said. "Hurry up."

Peter removed the Santa hat. "You want to wear this?"

"Um, no, because I'm not a dork." Winnie slid into her muddy snow boots. They were mostly hidden by the long skirt. So much for the catalog ad.

He rattled the bells. "It's festive."

Peter could pretend to be nice all he wanted. Winnie wasn't fooled. He always had some ulterior motive, and it always seemed to be, "How can I make fun of Winnie today?"

"It doesn't match my outfit."

"Nothing matches that hideous scarf." Tabby grabbed an end and started dancing around, tugging Winnie by the neck.

She wrenched it free. "Are you trying to strangle me? That hurts."

"Sorry, your ugly scarf forces me to disco." Tabby struck a pose.

Peter was frowning at Winnie, so she frowned back at him. "What?"

"That's the sweater you had on at the banquet."

"So what?"

"It's still dirty."

"Thanks to you." She dragged her parka off of the coat rack and shoved a black ski cap on her plastered hair. "After you so helpfully splatted me with beans, I tried to blot the grease off with my speech. Someone told me toner doesn't come out." She wasn't about to tell him that someone had been Chase.

Maybe the scarf would detract from the fact yellow wasn't her color, too. Stupid sweater.

Peter reddened. "Sorry."

"Sure you are." Like he cared. He dressed worse than she did. His pants were always high waters and sometimes he belted them. He was Chase's opposite, except they both had blond hair.

"I'm outta this dump." Tabby clopped out on the porch just as Mom and Dad came in, both hauling sacks of groceries.

"You girls go hold our table," Mom said with a big smile. "Dad and I will be along shortly. This is such a good idea, Joe."

"I can stay and help you. Tabby and Peter can hold the table," Winnie suggested.

"Peter has other things to do. It's Christmas Eve," Dad said.

"Then how are we getting home after dinner?" Winnie asked.

"We'll worry about that later." Her parents exchanged a grin. What were they so pleased about? She looked forward to Christmas all year and now it wasn't happening right.

"We won't have to worry if we stay home." Winnie jutted out her chin. This decision was entirely unfair. Christmas was going to suck. Like it didn't already.

"Don't argue," Mom threatened. "Santa might bring you coal."

"At least we could heat the house with it," Winnie grumbled, but followed Peter out the door. She could tell there was going to be no changing her parents' mind. They didn't care how humiliating it would be if she were spotted by any of her classmates looking like this. And apparently they didn't care they were ruining Christmas.

Peter waited by the icy stairs as she tromped down them, probably so he could get a close up in the event she slipped and fell.

"Weird Christmas, huh?" he said as they walked to his truck.

"Yeah." Winnie's breath froze in the air, moonlight glinting on the tiny bloom of fog. "If we had to have an ice storm, I wish it was in January so we could miss school."

"I enjoy school." Peter held the driver's door of the truck cab open for her while Tabby drew vulgar stick figures in the condensation on the passenger's window.

"Really?" In truth, Winnie didn't dislike school, she just disliked certain things about it. Peter and his obnoxious sense of humor being one of the things. It surprised her he liked school. No matter how much he picked on her, there were bigger groups of idiots, like the football team, who picked on guys like Peter.

Except for Chase, of course, because he wasn't like the rest. Even if he didn't think yellow was her color.

"I hate school," Tabby said. "I only go for b-ball, baby."

Peter eased the truck down the icy driveway. "I enjoy it more now that nobody's stuffing me in trash cans."

"Who did that? What morons." Tabby elbowed Winnie, who was scooped as close to Tabby as possible so her leg wouldn't touch Peter's. Winnie elbowed her back.

"It doesn't matter." Peter guided the truck around debris from a fallen tree next to the road. "They don't do it anymore."

When Peter had been a freshman, he'd been stuffed into the trash more than anyone else, thanks to his big mouth and small stature. As for Winnie, no trash for her. She just got ignored. Mostly.

"If somebody at high school tries to stuff me in the trash, I'll sue them," Tabby said. "After I kick them in the nuts."

"If Mom hears you talk like that, you'll get in trouble." Winnie sincerely doubted Tabby would follow in her nerd footsteps. One, her grades weren't that good. Two, she was on the basketball team. Something about group activities of the sports variety turned normal teenagers into herd beasts.

"Nah, she'd blame your bad influence," Tabby said with a snicker.

Soon they reached the highway. Banks of dirty snow and ice lined the road the whole way to town. With the low temperatures, nothing had really melted. At the Astoria Hotel, Peter had to wait while a family in a minivan pulled out before he could get a spot.

"Looks like everyone and their dog didn't want to cook dinner." Winnie didn't see Chase's car, but that didn't mean he wasn't here with his family or something.

"No dogs allowed. Except you, Winnie." Tabby cackled. "Last one in's a rotten egg!"

"Do you have to like your family?" Winnie commented as Tabby raced across the parking lot, barely avoiding a collision with a couple exiting the lobby doors.

Peter accompanied her at a slower pace. He hadn't put the Santa hat back on, but his blond hair hung in thick waves over his ears. It looked clean--damn him. "You don't have to like anybody, I guess."

"Not when they're obnoxious." She stepped onto the hotel sidewalk. Salt crunched under her boots.

Peter halted in the parking lot and scuffed his toe on the patchy ice. "Um. Merry Christmas. I have to, uh, go to the mall and get Mom a gift."

"You didn't get your Mom anything yet?" Winnie began unbuttoning her parka, anxious to reach the cheery glow of the lobby. Twinkling lights and giant wreaths festooned the exterior of the hotel, and through the front windows she glimpsed a beautifully decorated Christmas tree. It didn't make up for this complete perversion of family tradition, but it would be warm. "You'd better hurry, they might close early."

"I know." He shrugged. "She's about your size. What do you wear, a kid's large?"

"Whatever." She turned to go.

"Seriously."

"Women's small." She glanced over her shoulder. "I recommend a gift card. Something tells me you suck at figuring out what women want."

"I can come up with something better than a gift card." He walked backwards across the parking lot and held out his arms. "Don't forget, I am the president of the honor society."

Winnie would have flipped him off, but in mittens it wouldn't have the intended effect. "Go away, Peter."

"Thanks for the ride, Peter. Good luck at the mall, Peter. Merry Christmas, Peter," he called in a high-pitched voice.

She flounced toward the lobby. Unfortunately, flouncing and icy sidewalks proved to be a bad combination, and her feet slid out from under her.

She landed on her butt in a wet, salty heap of slush next to the sidewalk. Ice and snow from the holly bushes beside the landing showered her, snagging on her hat and hair.

Peter cracked up. Between gasps, he managed to yell, "You okay, Grace?"

"I told you to go away!"

A huge, hot lump formed in her throat. She'd made a fool of herself without any help from Peter. She was going to have bruises galore, and Peter was going to have another embarrassing story about her to tell anyone who'd listen. Her bottom hurt and her pride hurt more. She breathed deeply to calm herself, the cold air stinging her nose. Nothing could make this worse except...

The lobby doors opened. To Winnie's utter dismay, Tod Hammond and Sally Jones exited through them. With a groan, she hid her face in her mittens. Maybe they wouldn't recognize her. It wasn't like her defining features were visible when she was huddled on the ground in a bulky winter coat and snow boots.

"Dude, who's the klutz?" Tod asked.

"Who cares?" Sally sounded pissed. A pissed off Sally Jones noticing her was the last thing Winnie needed right now. "Just take me home, Tod."

Please don't stop please take her home please don't stop please take her home.

Somebody kicked her boot.

"Hey, dude, are you dead? Get up," Tod urged.

"It's a girl, stupid, she's in a skirt."

Winnie waved them on without showing her face. If Peter told them who she was, she'd kill him. Instead of his snide voice, she heard the distinctive sound of his truck and risked a peek.

Incredible. Peter was driving off, bypassing an opportunity to mortify her. Sally and Tod stormed across the parking lot, their argument fading.

Winnie clambered to her feet and brushed the ice off her clothes. This was the first thing that had gone right since the night of the banquet. Really, since she'd found out Peter had beaten her in the election, forcing her into the vice-president's role.

Her suede skirt was probably as ruined as her sweater, and her parents had lost their minds. She hadn't bathed in five days and she'd slept with stinky Tabby the whole week. In the floor.

But Sally Jones hadn't recognized her, hadn't made jokes about Jack felling the Beanstalk.

She had no idea how she was going to get home after the meal since Dad's truck wouldn't magically grow a seat and Peter was off to the mall being a loser. Her classmates could be inside the restaurant, and they'd probably all had showers. But she and her family were going to have a delicious Christmas Eve dinner together, even if it wasn't the right dinner or the right place.

Bonus--she wouldn't have to do dishes.

This might not be so terrible if...

#

Dad whipped open the door of one of Astaria Hotel's two-bedroom suites. "Ta-da!" Winnie stared around the suite in wonder, barely able to believe her eyes. "This is for us?"

"This is for you, honey. Merry Christmas."

Like the fancy suite wasn't enough of a treat, somebody had set up their Christmas tree in the center of the room, balanced carefully in its stand. Somebody had piled all the gifts around it. Somebody had put the box of decorations next to the tree and several overnight bags next to that. Somebody had carried the coolers of food into the suite's kitchenette.

Somebody had saved Christmas.

Must be her parents. She didn't know anyone else who loved her this much.

Winnie and her sister raced around the room like children, whooping, while Mom and Dad smiled.

Stockings hung on the mantel. The right stockings, too. Christmas music played quietly through the sound system through hidden speakers. It was the right music. A selection of traditional holiday snacks and DVDs filled the coffee table. All the ones she would have chosen herself. And best of all, Rudolph on the balcony, where his bright red nose flashed on and off, letting Santa know where the Sampsons were spending Christmas Eve.

This. This was what their Christmas had been lacking. Food. Family. Flexibility. Fun. Electricity.

Running water.

"First shower!" Winnie yelled and raced for the bathroom.

No, it wasn't a normal Christmas. It wasn't the expected Christmas. But Winnie realized it might be the best Christmas of all. Things couldn't get much better than this.

Okay, they could get a little better if...

#

Winnie opened her last gift, the one wrapped in silver paper. Clearly a professional job. Inside was a pristine white box from one of the mall's nicest stores. "What is it?"

"Ooh, la la, Christine's," her sister crowed. "I didn't get anything from Christine's."

Winnie tossed the ribbon and bow at her. "I didn't get anything from Sports Galore."

The Sampsons didn't go overboard with presents, but the ones they did exchange were heartfelt and appropriate. She'd been happy enough to spend the night in a real bed, wearing fresh, clean pajamas, with fresh, clean skin. After that, the gifts had been gravy.

A gift from Christine's was better than gravy.

With eager hands, she folded back the gold tissue paper to reveal a silky soft cashmere cardigan. And camisole! The deep red fabric was so rich it looked like wine. She

ran a hand across the expensive material, her fingers practically tingling. "Mom. Oh my God. Thank you so much."

Her mom's lecture about hundred dollar sweaters and personal responsibility had been clever misdirection. Winnie had never guessed she'd receive another article of clothing this costly. This awesome. This much better than her yellow sweater.

The twin set was a complete surprise. A shock, really.

Mom raised her eyebrows. "Honey, I don't recognize that. Your doing, Joe?"

Winnie held the sweater to her chest. The cashmere was so thin and perfect it didn't even itch. She couldn't wait to wear it to school. Maybe Chase would notice and tell her red was her color. After her laptop, it was the most beautiful thing she'd ever owned.

"Must be from Santa," Dad said from the overstuffed recliner he'd claimed as his own. "I guess the fireplace in the suite isn't just for show."

"Well, thank you, Santa, I love it." For the second time in twenty-four hours, a hot lump blocked her throat. This time the warmth in her heart dissolved it. "I absolutely love it."

Santa didn't say she was welcome, but it didn't matter. This Christmas miracle wasn't getting anywhere near Peter Duvall and his green beans.

About The Author

Ellie Marvel aka Jody Wallace grew up in the South in a very rural area. She went to school a long time because she couldn't find a decent job and ended up with a Master's Degree in Creative Writing (Poetry). In addition to author, her resume includes English teacher, technical documents editor, market analyst, wife & mother, web designer, and general all around pain in the butt. She is currently published in romance fiction under the names Jody Wallace and Ellie Marvel. She has always lived with cats, and they have always been mean.

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