

## *Chapter 1*

When I was eight years old, Santa crashed in my backyard.

I was asleep, having a scary dream about a bear in my school cafeteria. Bears, fires, and my mom dying. Those were my recurring nightmares.

My mom jostled me awake. “Darling girl, something’s happened.” I could tell she hadn’t gone to bed yet because she was still in her party clothes. Her sparkly bracelets clinked against each other as she shook me. I looked at my Minnie Mouse clock—it was almost two a.m.

Christmas already.

Christmas was my favorite day of the year. Santa always came, though I always missed him by seconds. My mom and I were united in our commitment to catching him. The year before, she’d set up a video camera on a tripod in the living room, facing the tree. It caught him scattering presents before running out the front door. We didn’t have a fireplace, so my mom said he used the VIP entrance. I’d heard the door slam, but by the time I jumped out of bed to investigate, falling snow had erased his footsteps from the yard. I watched and rewatched that tape, marveling at the evidence that magic was real.

One year Santa arrived while my mom and I were watching *Miracle on 34th Street* and eating Campbell's tomato soup on TV trays. Reindeer hooves thumped on the roof, and when I looked out our front window to the street, I saw Santa running away from our house like he knew he'd given himself away. It was only ten degrees in Chicago that year and I still chased him for three blocks.

This was going to be the year I caught him. I wasted no time sitting up and throwing my covers back. I'd worn my purple LA Lights sneakers to bed so I'd be prepared for exactly this scenario. "Where is he?" I demanded, like I was a hardened detective about to squeeze a confession from a perp.

"The backyard," she said, and I sprinted downstairs, through the kitchen, and out the back door.

Our yard was a small dark square. Thick winter clouds hid the moon and city stars. But enough light spilled from the kitchen that I could see something red twinkling in the corner. Snow swallowed my shoes and soaked my socks as I ran closer to inspect.

From the back door, my mom asked, "What is it?" She was bare-foot, wearing a black velvet dress with shoulder pads.

I picked up a fragment of red glass. "I think it's Rudolph's nose." How would Santa find his way without Rudolph's nose? "This is *devastating*." I'd learned how to spell that word for my last weekly spelling test before winter break. Picturing Rudolph with only the shards of a once-blinking nose on the tip of his little furry face gave me the same seasick feeling I'd experienced when my parents argued over who was going to have me for the summer, or when my mom fell asleep on the couch and I couldn't wake her up, or when she was two hours late to pick me up from school. Like I wasn't on solid ground. Like I didn't know what was going to happen.

"Look over there," she said.

I followed her finger, running to the bushes that lined our chain-

link fence, and crouched down. Was that silver wrapping paper? It was all torn and crumpled up. In the yellow light from the kitchen, it looked like wreckage. TWA Flight 800 had exploded over the Atlantic Ocean that year. I couldn't forget the pictures I'd seen on TV.

When my mom gasped, I whipped my head around. Was he here? "His hat," she said. "On the garage."

I looked up and saw Santa's red hat dangling upside down from a gutter. That could not be good.

"Do you think he's dead?" I asked.

I crept closer. Along the side of the garage, where we kept the trash cans, I found a shiny stack of boxes. "All my presents are here!" I called, falling to my knees in the snow.

"He must have crashed," she called back. "But he made it out okay."

I shaded my eyes from the motion-sensored floodlight. "How do you know?"

"Because otherwise his sleigh would still be here," she said, backlit from the kitchen, a dark and beautiful silhouette.

That answer was fairly logical coming from my mom, a woman who sometimes didn't make sense. She wasn't like other moms. Other moms did mom things, like pack my friends' lunches with Fruit Roll-Ups and heart-shaped sandwiches. My mom wanted to do those things—she bought the snacks and the cookie cutter—but they never happened. Was it really that hard? I wondered. I was only eight, and I was capable of making my lunch every day. Then again, I was one of the most responsible kids in my grade. The teacher usually picked me to feed the class hamster and lead the recess line. So maybe my mom and I were just different in that way. Me, responsible. My mom, forgetful. I suspected other kids' moms remembered to wake them up for school in the morning, so they weren't late. In my house, it was the other way around. I shook my mom awake every

morning at ten to eight, when it was time to leave, but it usually took her so long to get out of bed, dressed, and into the car that I missed morning announcements and most of math. But I didn't ask my friends about their morning routine. I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer.

I was shivering, so I hugged my gifts and carried them inside. One of them was the exact size and shape of a Tickle Me Elmo box, the thing I wanted most. Every toy store in Chicago was sold out. You could get a Tickle Me Elmo only from Santa, and even then, he had to like you.

In the living room, my mom helped me arrange my presents under the tree. We'd gotten it only that morning. Everything in our house ran behind schedule. The tree was lopsided and dry, but my mom had saved it by using twice the number of lights anyone else would have used. It lit up the living room, pinpricks of gold in the dark, like flying over a city at night.

"Do you want to open one?" she asked, prodding my shoulder.

I longed for that Tickle Me Elmo. "I'll wait. It's not Christmas morning yet."

"You've got to let loose a little," she teased.

*No, I don't think I can.* Only one person in our two-person household could be loose. Otherwise, nothing would get done. I'd never do my homework or get vaccinated or even go to school. I took my role as grown-up very seriously.

I told her we needed to go to bed, and she lay down with me, her velvet dress curled around my flannel pajamas. She was still my safe place. I tried to fall asleep, but she beat me to it, snoring softly, so I was careful not to move a muscle. If I woke her up, she'd stay up all night and sleep until the afternoon, straight through Christmas morning.

At a sleepover two years later, my best friend, Gabby, told everyone

there was no Santa, and it turned out all the girls knew that already. I pretended to know that, too, but then I said I had to go to the bathroom so I could cry without their seeing. I felt so stupid. I didn't know what was worse: that I'd still believed in Santa, or how much I wanted to keep believing in Santa. He'd brought an uncomplicated magic to my complicated life. My mom might have forgotten to pay the bills, but Santa was coming. I didn't have to worry or wonder or plan. He would be there, using the VIP entrance, delivering gifts.

When I finally understood, sometime around my fifteenth birthday, that my mom wasn't forgetful, but instead had a problem with alcohol, I reexamined my Christmas memories. Some parents put presents under the tree labeled *From Santa*. Some parents told their kids to leave out cookies and carrots in case Santa and his reindeer got hungry. Some parents even went so far as to eat those cookies and carrots. Those parents were amateurs compared to my mom. She brought Santa to life. I'd cherished him for showing up, predictably, every year on Christmas Eve. I'd cherished him for being the opposite of her. But he was her, all along.