

Winter Trials
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Winter Trials was originally published in “Echoes of Winter”, a compilation of short stories by a group of YA authors.

They share a little bit of magic, romance, and festive feelings!

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Chapter One

Mid-December brought with it a new flurry of snow, cementing the fact that it was well and truly winter. It might make the rolling Yorkshire countryside pleasant and picturesque when the sun finally got out, but right now it was a harsh grey world, driven on a cold wind.

Mark pulled his collar up against his scarf, and made sure his hat was secure. It may only be a short run from the bus to the school buildings, but it was sure to be bloody cold. Outside, he slipped and skidded on the snow compacted to ice by his fellow students, and was glad to get into the main school building.

Out of habit, he nodded to the other Year 11 students he was friends with, but he kept a sharp eye out for his best friend. Harry was standing further down the corridor, looking half-hypnotised and half-annoyed.

“What’s up with you?” Mark asked.

“I’ve just come from orchestra practise. Because of some annoying Year 7 brats pestering Mr Smith, he

agreed to 'let' us play Christmas carols for the whole bloody session." Harry shook his head. "It's like I can still hear Rudolph, I can't get rid of it."

Mark grinned at his friend's discomfort as he led the way to class. Luckily his school had put hooks at the back of each classroom for their coats – it made it feel like they were back in primary school, but at least their cold, wet coats would dry over the hot radiators.

"Do you know how boring it is to play Rudolph?" Harry continued, not finished with his rant. "I mean sure, if it's just guitars, we get all sorts of chords, layers and stuff. But *this*... in the lesser part of the orchestra, we get one note every bar or so. Dun... dun... d-"

"OK, I get it." Mark cut in, aware of all the weird looks they were receiving from the rest of the class. He sat down and hurried to pull Harry into the seat next to him.

"I'm just saying, it's a completely classist issue. String snobs come first – of which we're exiled. Then the wind; then brass; and then us lowly guitar players."

"And I've told you before, if it's such a big deal – quit. Or start holding your guitar like a cello." Mark retorted, somewhat tired of this argument from Harry. Maybe he should've let him carry on with the Christmas carol rant.

Harry's attention was fortunately stolen by Mrs Green, as their History teacher tried to get them to remember what had been covered just yesterday.

An hour later and the bell rang. Mark grabbed his stuff and made his way to his next class.

"So, Mark, can you help me with Christmas shopping this weekend?" Harry asked as soon as they were out of Mrs Green's control.

Mark looked to Harry, why didn't it surprise him that he still had gifts to get the very weekend before Christmas. "Sure."

"Good, I need your help to find something for Sarah."

Mark rolled his eyes. Sarah was a lovely girl, and Mark hoped that Harry could go a whole term without screwing up their relationship. "Why d'you need me?"

"She won't tell me what she wants, only does that annoying girl-thing and just hints." Harry grinned. "Besides, Sarah *talks* to you."

"She talks to me as much as any other guy." Mark retorted. "I just listen instead of thinking about her boobs."

"So do you think we can get something in Tealford?" Harry asked, glossing over his friend's comment.

"Er, no. Try the Fashion Outlet near York?" Mark replied, as he hovered by the Chemistry classroom. "Unless you want to jump on the train and risk Meadowhell?"

Mark chuckled at his friend's look of horror.

"So who will you be kissing under the mistletoe?" Harry asked, changing the subject to Mark's own weakness.

Mark grit his teeth and gave a forced smile. "Nobody."

"There's always Dean." Harry goaded.

Mark thumped him on the arm, then pulled his books out before the teacher had a go at them. "One of these days, I'm gonna deck ya."

Mark hunkered down as his teacher started the day's lecture. As they were the only openly gay students at Tealford High School, people seemed to expect Mark and Dean to get together. Unfortunately, Mark couldn't stand Dean; and he didn't care to find out how the other felt about him. Which didn't stop Harry from using it as a very lowly attack.

When the dinner bell went, Sarah came bounding up. She gave Harry a sweet kiss, and a smiling hello to Mark.

"Have you guys decided if you're going to the Christmas do yet?" She asked, looking between them. The posters had only been up a few hours, but as far as Sarah was concerned, decisions shouldn't take half that long.

Mark sighed, Friday the 21st wasn't only the school party, it was the Winter Solstice. "I dunno, I might have a family thing on."

Sarah's eyes widened. "Oh yeah, isn't it time for your grandmother's voodoo stuff?"

Mark stared at her, completely off balance from her comment. He glanced at Harry and noticed his best friend stifling his laughter. "What misinformation have you been feeding her?"

"C-couldn't... resist..." Harry choked.

“Sarah, do me a favour... don’t believe a word this arse tells you about my family.” Mark said, leading the way to the trays of hot pizza and chips.

“So it’s not true that your grandmother is a witch?” Sarah asked, nudging him out of the way so she could get a plate. “Everyone in Tealford knows that.”

Mark glanced up at the dinner lady, but the middle aged woman was paying no attention to the teenagers. “Sure, Nanna’s a witch, but none of that ‘voodoo stuff’.”

Mark paid and walked to an empty table, waiting for the other two to join him. Harry sat down and immediately got stuck into his dinner. Sarah was a little more distracted, finding something of interest in the far corner.

“That must be the new guy Stephanie was on about.” She said conspiratorially, ducking down before she was caught staring. “He’s cute.”

Harry’s head snapped up, his cheeks full of pizza and a smear of tomato sauce on his lips.

“Tsk. Not as cute as you, of course, Harry.” She said, almost sincere.

Mark twisted in his chair, trying to see what the fuss was about. He couldn’t see much through the crowded hall, a mere glimpse of dark blond hair. “What’s his story?”

New pupils were rare at Tealford High School. When they were eleven years old, the kids from all of the surrounding villages and hamlets made the daily trek to Tealford. Five years later, they graduated. Nobody young ever moved to this area. Sure, a few retirees came

this way after a lifetime in the city, dreaming of 'The Good Life', but never anyone their age. Mark supposed that was enough to spark the school's interest. It also didn't hurt if he was cute.

"He's from London," Sarah replied, "I heard that his parents died recently and he's moved Up North to live with his aunt."

"A Londoner?" Harry asked, craning his neck to see the alien.

"A Londoner? Maybe he'll be a bit more open-minded than these country boys."

The trio looked up to see Dean hovering by their table.

"I don't remember asking you." Mark retorted.

Dean ignored him, gazing across at the new guy. "I love his hair, it's got to be a dye job though – nobody has dark gold hair like that. Ugh, couldn't you just imagine running your hands—"

"Dean!" Sarah was the first to snap. "Seriously, not every thought you have is golden, enough with the sharing."

Dean huffed and carried his tray away, finding a table of girls that were giggling over the new arrival.

Harry paused with a forkful of chips halfway to his mouth. "He does have a point..."

"You did not just say that?" Mark asked, as he joined Sarah in laughter.

"No, shut up, not the running your hands through his hair thing!" Harry argued, blushing bright red. "I mean, he could be, y'know, gay."

Mark rolled his eyes. "Any guy in the world could be gay, Harry. It doesn't take a London accent and trendy highlights."

Mark chuckled as Harry threw a burnt chip at his head, in retaliation.

As they got a warning look from the supervising teacher, Mark quickly changed the subject.

"I was gonna ask you guys if you wanted to come to mine for the Winter Solstice. We usually have a party every year, and Nanna's been nagging me about not bringing any friends." Mark asked, not meeting their eyes. "I mean, I'll understand if you'd rather go to the school party."

"Yes!" Sarah piped up, excited at the prospect of getting an inside look at a witch's Winter Solstice. "I mean, yeah, that sounds fun."

Harry looked a little more dubious. "We won't have to dance naked around a fire, or anything?"

"No, that's only optional." Mark answered with a shake of his head. Nudity and the Yorkshire winter didn't go together well. "There is a bonfire, but it's basically just an opportunity to eat, drink and be merry. There's very little witchy stuff that goes on."

Mark gathered his coat and bag and headed towards the common room, which was sure to be packed on a wet, miserable day like today.

"Hey, maybe you could invite the new guy to your party." Sarah suggested.

Mark rolled his eyes. "Sure, I'll just ask the good-looking stranger if he wants to come round to my Nanna's and dance naked around a fire."

Mark was suddenly aware of the engulfing silence.

"Who'll be naked doing what now?"

Mark turned at the oddly-accented voice, to face the last person he expected to see. The new guy gazed curiously at him, his blue eyes sparkling with amusement. He stood as tall as Mark, and close up he was just as handsome as everyone had said.

"I-I, um..." Mark tried to gulp down his nerves, but the embarrassment just crept back up.

Thankfully Sarah jumped in to rescue him. "Hey, you're the new guy! How are you enjoying Tealford?"

He looked down at Sarah with a wary smile. "Good thanks, and I think I should change my name to 'New Guy'."

Sarah rocked onto the balls of her feet, excited by the direct contact of his electric blue eyes. She blushed as she replied, "What's your real name? I'm Sarah, this is Harry and Mark."

"Damian." He replied, glancing distractedly down the corridor. "I've gotta go, um... I might see you around."

Without waiting for a response, Damian traipsed off down the corridor, leaving the trio watching him disappear.

Sarah bounced on the balls of her feet, gripping Harry's arm. "Ugh, if I was single right now, I'd stalk that boy until he loved me."

“Psycho much?” Mark teased.

“Yeah, and luckily the guy you’re with is pretty awesome, and didn’t just hear that.” Harry added drily.

“Aw, you know I love you most.” Sarah replied, pouting.

Mark saw his cue to leave, as the two started to spout nonsense which would inevitably lead to kissing. Harry and Sarah might think they were the new Romeo and Juliet, but when they snogged in public, it was just plain gross.

Chapter Two

As school ended, the snow had turned to sleet; wet and very cold on the biting wind.

Mark wrapped up and hovered in the relative shelter of the school wall. Harry and Sarah had already disappeared on their bus that circled the villages to the south, leaving Mark to wait for the bus to travel the west route.

Out of the corner of his eye, Mark spotted a very fashionable trench coat, with a very blue face above it.

"Y'look bloody frozen." Mark ejected.

Damian gave him a withering look, his jaw clamped shut to stop his teeth chattering.

"Don't you have a warm coat?"

"This is..." Damian stuttered. "It did the job down south."

"Well, it won't do for a Yorkshire winter." Mark gestured at the sleet. "This is nowt yet. It gets worse."

Damian swore beneath his breath. He looked up as a car's headlights swung round in their direction.

"That's my aunt. See you tomorrow, Mark." For a moment his blue eyes met Mark's, then Damian hurried off to the waiting jeep, head tucked down.

Mark watched him leave for the second time that day. Well, the good news was he hadn't mentioned nudity, and he'd managed to address Damian in full sentences that even made sense. The bad news, he must have sounded like an old woman, wittering on about the weather.

The school bus finally crawled up, beeping its horn to announce its late arrival. Mark filed on with the rest of the impatient students.

The bumpy ride was a bit of a blur, and in no time Mark was clambering down from the bus, before starting the half-mile trek to his house. His parents wouldn't be home from work for another hour and a half. His Mum worked as a nurse in the local GP surgery, and his Dad... well his Dad did some sort of office job that Mark didn't entirely understand. At least Nanna was likely to be in her half of the house.

The big old farmhouse had originally been a single home, but before Mark had been born, his grandad had decided he was getting too old to maintain the big house. It was logical to split the place into two, giving the larger half to the young, newly-married couple that were Mark's Mum and Dad.

Since his grandad had passed away a couple of years ago, it seemed only right that Nanna got both her independence and privacy, plus her family close by.

Mark marched up the driveway, the melted snow sloshing underfoot. He caught some movement to his far right, and looked up to see Nanna walking slowly through the garden, a broom held above her head.

Mark sighed and headed towards her. "Nanna, you're not helping overcome the stereotypes when you do this stuff."

"Stay there." She warned, not taking her eyes off the old coal house. "That evil bloody tabby cat from Mr Hick's place has been harassing poor Tigger again."

The old woman stalked forward, fixated on her target. Suddenly she swung her brush down and started shouting like a banshee. There was a brown and orange streak across the grey ground.

"And stay out, you-"

Mark laughed as his Nanna broke into a swearing tirade after the disappearing cat.

"Hmph, I don't know what you're laughing at, young man. You'd do the same if you'd seen that mangy thing having a go at Tigger." She huffed again and turned back to the house, walking straight to the kitchen.

Despite the cold, the old woman was wearing nothing more than her old house cardigan. She always claimed that the cold didn't bother her, and that everyone else was just being nesh. Mark wondered if the immunity to cold was a witch thing.

He followed her into the warm kitchen, and drifted over to the Aga. Tigger was sprawled in front of it, his tail lazily flicking. Nanna had gotten him as a kitten, to help keep the mice away. Inspired by his orange coat and white paws, the young Mark had insisted calling him Tigger.

He never did chase mice much; Tigger had wrapped the family around his paw, and became a pampered house cat.

“Can’t you do something witchy to keep the tabby away?” Mark asked.

Nanna snorted as she put hot water in the teapot, before putting the tea tray on the kitchen table. “No, for such a small thing, it wouldn’t be worth the potential consequences.”

Mark leant over and stole a biscuit to go with his cuppa.

“Have you asked Harry and his girlfriend to come to the Winter Solstice?” Nanna asked, as she had for the past fortnight.

“Ha, I actually have. They said yes.” Mark replied.

Nanna raised a brow in surprise at her grandson’s confidence.

“Why are you so keen for them to come this year?”

Nanna sipped her tea, taking her time. “You’re sixteen now.”

“Yeah, I’d noticed.” Mark remarked, sneaking a second biscuit. Mark hadn’t made a huge deal when he turned sixteen at the end of November, he’d just gone ice-skating with a group of friends. But his parents had

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