



MIRIAM THOR

SHE'S PLANNING TO SKIP
CHRISTMAS THIS YEAR.
HER BROTHER HAS
OTHER IDEAS.

*A
Kringle
Family
Christmas*

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Family
Christmas

Miriam Thor

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Dedication

To my brother, Andy. I will love and miss you until we meet again.

1

Sitting cross-legged on her couch, Bethany Kringle stared at her laptop, willing it to start ringing. It had been a few weeks since she'd talked to her brother, and he was now—she glanced at the clock at the bottom of the screen—five minutes late for their Saturday night video chat.

Absently, she twirled a strand of black hair around her finger, hoping nothing was wrong. Matt wasn't deployed yet, but something unexpected still could have happened. From experience, Bethany knew that was true, regardless of location or circumstances.

To keep her thoughts from spiraling further, Bethany forcibly turned her mind to a more pleasant topic. She and Dad were leaving to go backpacking on Monday. This year, they were going to the Florida Trail, along the Suwannee River. Bethany was looking forward to the warmer weather and to having such a long break from work. Mostly, though, she was looking forward to being gone, not only for Christmas, but for the two weeks surrounding it. They weren't coming back until New Year's Eve.

She was about to take out her phone to make sure she hadn't left anything off her list of things to pack when her computer started ringing. She eagerly

accepted the video call, and after a moment, her brother's face appeared on the screen.

"Hey, Matt," she said, her previous anxiety draining away at the sight of him.

"Hey, Beth." He grinned. "Sorry I'm late. One of my friends asked me to help him move his couch into his new apartment. This is his first time living off base since he joined the Navy."

Fondness surged through Bethany. It was so typical of her brother to be late because he was helping someone. "Don't worry about it," she told him. "How are things going?"

"Good. Same old, same old." He shrugged, aiming for nonchalant and missing by a country mile. "How are things at home?"

Bethany studied her brother. Despite his casual façade, she could practically feel the excitement radiating off him in waves.

"Things are pretty normal for Dad and me," she replied, "which I suspect isn't actually the case for you." She raised her eyebrows. "Something you want to tell me?"

Matt sighed. "I never have been able to get anything past you." He chuckled. "You know, you look just like Mama when you do that."

A pang of grief struck Bethany at the mention of her mother, but she resolutely shoved it down. Matt had news to share, and she refused to ruin his good mood. "So?" she prompted when he didn't continue.

"Well, I was going to wait until the end of the call to tell you, but..." He beamed at her. "I'm coming

home for Christmas!”

Bethany’s heart skipped a beat. “You’re what?” she stammered. Surely, she’d misheard.

“I’m coming home for Christmas. Isn’t that great?”

She had not, in fact, misheard.

Her brother was coming home for Christmas, the holiday she and her dad had been planning to skip, just as they had both years since her mom died. That did not fit Bethany’s definition of great. She pasted a smile on her face anyway. “It’s... incredible. But...how is that possible? You’re scheduled to be deployed in three days.”

“I found out last week that our deployment has been postponed until January...something to do with replacing some plating on the hull. Anyway, as soon as I knew we’d be stateside for Christmas, I requested leave, and my C.O. just approved it.”

“Wow,” Bethany said. She’d taken a few deep breaths during that explanation, but they’d done little to quell her rising panic. “How long will you be here?”

“About two weeks.”

Her head spun. She was glad she was already sitting down.

“We should arrive on the sixteenth,” Matt continued, thankfully not noticing her anxiety. “We haven’t booked the flight yet, so I’m not sure what time we’ll get there.”

Even with the buzz that had started to fill her ears, Bethany caught a crucial word in those sentences.

“We?” she asked, hoping against hope that her brother was using the ‘royal we’ to refer to just himself.

Matt's expression turned sheepish, and he ran a hand through his hair.

Bethany braced herself.

"Do you remember me talking about my friend, Jay?" he asked.

Not trusting herself to speak, Bethany nodded.

"Well, Jay doesn't have any family, so...I might have invited him to spend Christmas with us."

Still unable to find words, Bethany just stared at her brother. Not only was he coming home for Christmas, but he was bringing a friend with him. Of course, he was. It was such a *Matt* thing to do. The kind of thing Mama would have embraced wholeheartedly because her children's friends were always welcome in her home. The kind of thing that caused Bethany more stress than it probably should.

"I know I should have asked you first," Matt said, sounding a little nervous now. "I just didn't want to get your hopes up that I'd be home for Christmas before my leave request got approved. It's OK, right?"

Bethany imagined how her mother would have reacted. "Of course," she said, forcing the words through her tight throat. "I'm just surprised. You said the two of you would get here on the sixteenth?"

"Yep," Matt said, all trace of nerves gone. "We have to be back on base by the thirtieth, so we'll probably fly back on the twenty-ninth."

"OK," Bethany said, feeling a little detached from her body. "Sounds good."

Matt gave her another beaming smile. "Thanks, Beth. I knew I could count on you. So, listen, I'm sure

you're planning to go get the tree tomorrow on the eighth, but do you think you could wait until we get there? Jay...had a rough time growing up. I'm not sure he's ever had a real family Christmas, so I want him to get the full experience."

"Sure." Bethany hadn't been planning to get a tree at all, so waiting for them wouldn't be an issue. It would actually make things easier.

"Awesome. You're the best, Beth. I don't—"

"Hey, Kringle, can you help me carry my mattress upstairs?" a voice from off-camera interrupted.

Matt turned around. "Sure. Just let me wrap this up." He looked back at Bethany. "We're about done, right?"

"Yep," she agreed easily. The sooner the call ended, the sooner she could freak out without her brother knowing.

"I'll e-mail you our flight itinerary when we get it, and I'll see you on the sixteenth."

"See you then." Bethany managed to reply.

Matt grinned. "We'll make it a Kringle family Christmas to remember." He ended the call.

Bethany let the smile slide off her face.

We'll make it a Kringle family Christmas to remember.

Bethany could still hear Mama saying those words. Just as she could still picture the sparkle in her mother's eyes as she led their family to the truck every year on December eighth. Even as adults, Bethany and Matt, when he was home, had squeezed into the truck's small backseat, so the Kringles could head to the tree farm and officially begin the Christmas season.

As the granddaughter of Italian immigrants, Mama had always insisted that the Christmas season began on the eighth of December, regardless of what television or culture said to the contrary. While their family may have started celebrating later than many other homes, Mama had made up for it with how many fun traditions she'd packed into the days leading up to Christmas.

When Bethany was a teenager, she'd asked her mom why she was so enthusiastic about Christmas.

With her eyes shining, Mama had replied, "Well, with a name like Kringle, we have to do Christmas right."

Bethany blinked back tears at the memory. Without a doubt, Mama had succeeded at that endeavor. Every Christmas Bethany could remember had been special, with the exception of the two that had passed since her mom died.

The first year, Mama had only been gone a couple of months, and Bethany had just moved back home so that her dad wouldn't be alone. She'd planned to keep up most of her mother's traditions that year until Dad found her crying over a box of Christmas decorations.

Gaze soft, he'd taken the box from her and said, "Why don't we go backpacking instead?"

He hadn't said instead of what, but Bethany had understood and nodded. The next day, she'd asked Dr. Travis, the gynecologist who ran the clinic where she worked, if she could take an extended vacation during December. Thankfully, her boss had been understanding. She'd told Bethany that as long as she

found another ultrasound technician to cover for her that it would be fine. Since the clinic had several technicians on their PRN list, it hadn't been hard to do.

She and Dad had gone backpacking on the Appalachian Trail. The trip had been a balm to Bethany's heart so soon after losing her mother, a reminder that there was still beauty in the world if she took the time to look for it.

Bethany had thought skipping Christmas would be a one-time thing to help them deal with their grief when it was at its sharpest. Over the year that followed, Bethany had learned how to do a lot of things without her mother. And while she knew she could never replace her mom, she'd tried her best to make home feel as "normal" as possible for her dad and for Matt when he came to visit. When Matt had told them he wouldn't make it home for Christmas, Dad had surprised Bethany by asking if she wanted to go backpacking again that December.

Bethany had agreed immediately. She'd been quietly dreading trying to continue all of her mother's Christmas traditions. Going backpacking instead had been a welcome relief.

This year, when Matt had told them he'd be deployed during the Christmas season, Bethany had been the one to ask her dad if he wanted to go backpacking again. He'd agreed as quickly as she had the previous year.

Bethany had already scheduled her vacation days and found technicians to cover for her. She and her dad had planned to leave on Monday morning.

Bethany heaved a sigh. So much for that plan.

Glancing at the non-festive room around her, she felt as if she was drowning. Matt had no idea that his family hadn't celebrated Christmas for the last two years. When she and Dad had first made the plan to go backpacking for the holidays, she'd immediately decided she wouldn't tell Matt. She hadn't lied to her brother. She'd just been vague and let him draw his own conclusions.

Matt had loved Mama's Christmas traditions more than anyone, and Bethany hadn't wanted him to feel as though those traditions had been lost, too. When he thought of home, she'd wanted him to be able to picture it as normal as possible. She'd always planned to continue Mama's traditions the next time Matt came home for Christmas. She'd just thought she'd have more than a week's warning.

Bethany bit her lip. Matt had said he wanted Jay to get the "full experience," which meant he was expecting to cram as many of their mom's Christmas traditions as possible into the week leading up to Christmas. How would Bethany manage that? Even Mama had needed over two weeks to fit in every thing.

Lord, please help me make Christmas special for Matt and Jay, just like Mama would have.

With her resolve solidified, she called, "Dad!"

"Yeah?" he yelled back.

She followed his voice toward the garage.

"Change of plans. Would you help me get the Christmas decorations out of the attic?"

2

As the plane began its final descent, Jay MacDonald stared out the window, not focusing on the Birmingham skyline. All he could think of was the e-mail he'd received a few days ago, reminding him that his current enlistment with the Navy was coming to an end, and he had to decide if he wanted to re-up. It was a much harder decision than he'd thought it would be.

Help me know Your will, Father.

"Hey," Matt said, nudging his arm. "You're not still worried about being an unwelcome guest with my family, are you?"

Jay turned to look at his friend. Like him, Matt was traveling in uniform, so he looked the same as he did every day. "Nope," Jay told him honestly. He wasn't as sure of his welcome as Matt wanted him to be, but he hadn't been dwelling on it.

Matt smiled. "Good. Because Mama always said that anyone we invited to our house was family while they were there, so you're an honorary Kringle this Christmas."

"I know. I know." Jay resisted the urge to roll his eyes. His friend had told him the same thing at least three times already.

Matt gave him a knowing look. "Yeah, but there's

a difference between knowing and believing.”

The plane jolted a little as it touched down, and the pilot made an announcement, saving Jay the trouble of responding. It wasn't that he didn't believe his friend was sincere. Jay had no doubt that he was welcome with Matt, no matter where they were. It was just, as a former foster kid, Jay had trouble believing he was truly welcome in anyone's home, especially when he hadn't met them.

On top of his own issues, Jay noticed that most of Matt's assurances started with the phrase, "Mama always said..." Since Matt's mother had passed away over two years ago, Jay couldn't help but think that what Matt's father and sister said was more relevant than what his mother would have said since she wasn't here. Jay didn't have the heart to point that out.

When the plane came to a stop and the Jetway was connected, Jay grabbed his carry-on bag and followed Matt off the plane and through the Birmingham airport. His friend didn't even glance at the signs as he took each turn. When they passed the security checkpoint, Matt rushed toward a young woman with black hair and scooped her into a hug.

Walking at a more sedate pace, Jay joined them just as Matt pulled back and held the woman at arm's length.

"Welcome home, Matt," she said, her voice brimming with affection.

"Thanks, Beth. It's good to see you." He released her and turned toward Jay. "Beth, this is Jay, one of the finest cooks in the U.S. Navy. Jay, this is my sister—"

“Bethany,” the woman interrupted, looking at him with warm brown eyes. “Nice to meet you.” She held out her hand.

Hiding his surprise, Jay shook it, matching the firm grip she gave him but carefully not exceeding it. Her hand was a lot smaller than the ones he was used to shaking.

“Nice to meet you, too.” He released her hand.

Bethany looked back at her brother. “Let’s go get your luggage.”

The two siblings chatted as they headed to baggage claim. Tagging along behind them, Jay discreetly studied Bethany. Like Matt, she had an olive complexion, but her features were more delicate than her brother’s. Her black hair was pulled back into a ponytail. He guessed that when she took it down, it would fall a little past her shoulders. She had a nice figure, too.

Jay hadn’t given much thought to what Matt’s sister would be like, but he hadn’t expected her to be this pretty. Based on the jeans, t-shirt, and tennis shoes she was wearing, she was more practical than stylish. And she’d shaken his hand. He wished more women would do that when they met someone. Jay never initiated handshakes when meeting women because he’d noticed it made most uncomfortable, but just standing there felt awkward.

Bethany had solved that problem by offering her hand to shake. She’d also had no problem interrupting Matt to introduce herself using her full first name. Jay made a mental note always to call her Bethany no

matter how many times Matt called her Beth.

Jay was a firm believer in calling people what they wanted to be called. He didn't dislike his first name, Jamison, but he'd learned that if he went by it, some people would insist on calling him Jamie, the name of a foster sister he hadn't gotten along with at all. And going by his last name, as was common in the Navy, lent itself to hamburger jokes. Jay tried to be a good sport about them, but as he got to know people, he always asked them to call him Jay.

When they had their luggage, the three of them walked to Bethany's car.

"You really didn't have to pay to park and come in," Matt told his sister as he put his suitcase in the trunk. "A curbside pickup would have been fine."

Bethany crossed her arms. "And how would I give you a proper hug from the driver's seat? Not to mention—"

"Never mind." Matt raised his hands in surrender. "Forget I mentioned it."

"I will." Bethany smirked as Jay put his own suitcase in the trunk. "Now, let's get going. Dad's waiting for us."

Jay followed Matt to the passenger side of the car. When Matt tried to open the door to the backseat, Jay gave his shoulder a shove.

"Sit in the front with your sister," he said. "I'll take the back."

"But you're—"

"Not who she wants to spend time with right now." Jay opened the back door and sat down, his gaze

daring Matt to move him.

His friend gave a put-upon sigh, but climbed into the front seat.

“Let’s listen to some Christmas music,” Matt said after they were out of the parking garage. “I’m surprised you don’t already have it on, Beth.”

“Silly me. I thought we might actually talk on the way home,” Bethany said, though she obligingly switched on the radio.

Jay’s brow furrowed. Hidden beneath the teasing, he’d heard a hint of real defensiveness in Bethany’s tone. Judging by Matt’s chuckle, he hadn’t noticed, but Jay was good at reading people, even when they tried to hide their emotions. Bouncing between foster homes, it had been a survival skill he’d honed to a sharp edge over the years.

Though Bethany’s reaction concerned Jay, he certainly didn’t know her well enough to do anything about it, so he tried to focus on the music instead. After a few minutes, he realized the radio station Bethany had chosen played only Christmas music during this time of year. He hadn’t known stations like that existed, and he was surprised there was enough demand to warrant it. Although judging by Matt’s enthusiasm as he sang along, he shouldn’t be.

When “The First Noel” started playing, Jay noticed Bethany’s grip tighten on the steering wheel. Her jaw was tense as well.

He frowned. Something was clearly bothering Bethany. But what? Jay knew from Matt’s stories and from the way she’d hugged him that Bethany adored

her brother and was truly glad to have him home. Normally, this would lead Jay to conclude that his own presence was the problem, but that didn't feel right either. Bethany's eyes had seemed sincerely welcoming when she shook his hand, and she hadn't shown any signs of tension until they were on the road.

With a mental shrug, Jay turned to look out the window. He didn't have enough information to figure out what was troubling Bethany, so it was pointless to try right now. Jay would be on the lookout for more clues, though, and if he figured out what the problem was, he would do what he could to help her. It was the least he could do in return for her welcoming him into her home for Christmas.

3

Bethany shouldn't have been surprised that Matt wanted to listen to Christmas music on the way home from the airport. Their mom had always turned on Christmas music as soon as they got in the car this time of year. It was such a small thing that Bethany had forgotten about it in the midst of her other preparations, but she thought she'd handled it well. She doubted Matt had any idea she hadn't listened to Christmas music in the car for over two years. She'd even managed to keep her composure when one of Mama's favorite songs came on, though it had been a near thing.

The sun had set during the hour it took them to drive home, and it was almost fully dark when she turned onto their dead-end street. Matt looked at her as she pulled up in the driveway.

"No Christmas lights?" he asked.

Fortunately, that was something Bethany had thought about.

"You said you wanted Jay to have the full Christmas experience," she told him. "I figured if that included getting a tree, it included hanging lights, too."

Matt tilted his head. "Good point. That's why you're the brains of this operation."

“And don’t you forget it,” she said with mock solemnity, though she couldn’t keep her lips from twitching.

When she’d parked the car, Bethany popped the trunk and walked inside while the men grabbed their bags. “Dad, we’re home,” she called, heading toward the kitchen.

She crossed paths with her dad on his way to the door.

“The lasagna is on the stove,” he told her.

“Thanks,” she replied, a bit of tension leaving her shoulders.

Right before she’d left, she’d put the lasagna in the oven and set two timers, one to remind her dad to uncover the lasagna and one to tell him to take it out of the oven. He’d been in the garage tinkering when she explained what she needed him to do, and while he’d assured her he would listen for the timers, it was a relief to know he actually did. They did *not* need a repeat of the infamous ziti incident that had led Mama to ban her husband from even touching the oven for years.

As Bethany grabbed a loaf of bread to slice, her dad greeted Matt, presumably with his usual bear hug, and welcomed Jay to their home. For a moment, Bethany worried that she should have stayed in the foyer to show Jay to the guest room. She was about to set down the knife and head back that way when she heard her brother say, “Come on, Jay. I’ll show you where you’re staying.”

Bethany’s mouth turned up. Apparently, some of

Mama's lectures about hospitality had left an impression on Matt. It had just taken a few years to see it.

Bethany had just finished buttering the bread when the three men settled onto the couches in the living room. She looked at them over the breakfast bar.

"Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes."

Dad smiled at her. "Thanks, sweetie."

"Do you want any help?" Jay asked, turning his piercing blue eyes to her.

Bethany lost a second of reaction time to pure shock.

Matt took that second to chime in. "Don't be ridiculous. You're a guest. No need to earn your keep."

Jay ignored Matt, waiting for Bethany to answer. Her heart did a flip-flop, much like the ones she'd done when she took gymnastics years ago. "I've got everything almost ready," she told him. "Just relax for a few minutes."

"All right." He turned his attention back to Matt, who shook his head at him.

"I told you—"

"Jay, how long have you been in the Navy?" Dad asked, changing the subject.

As Bethany put the bread in the oven, she reflected on Jay's offer to help. Her mom had been very traditional when it came to gender roles, especially where cooking was concerned. Mama had insisted that Bethany help her in the kitchen from a young age, but Matt, like their father, had never been permitted to do more than remove things from the oven.