

OLD LIKE US

Starlight
Eldercare

New Year
Reflections

ROD TRENT



Welcome, dear reader.

You're invited to settle in by the fire and join Eleanor, George, Mabel, and Harold — the Starlight crew — for one last adventure as the year draws to a close. This is not just a story about growing older; it's a celebration of enduring friendship, shared history, and the mysteries that keep life interesting, no matter how many years have passed. Within these pages, you'll find laughter, heartfelt memories, and the kind of camaraderie that turns ordinary evenings into unforgettable chapters.

As the clock ticks toward midnight at Starlight Eldercare, our quartet welcomes you into their circle. Together, you'll relive capers from childhood, solve new puzzles, and discover that the greatest adventure of all is the one you share with your dearest friends. This final story of 2025 is a toast to the bonds that last, the joy of reminiscing, and the promise that every ending is just the beginning of another tale.

So pull up a chair, grab your favorite mug, and let the Starlight crew remind you: the best stories are those we live — and retell — together

And, oh yeah. Make sure you make it to the end. Eleanor has a message for you.

I began my career writing fiction, a passion that has never dimmed even as I ventured into the world of technology content to pay the bills and drive my career forward. The act of creation is not just a job; it is a therapeutic escape, a return to the

roots of my creativity, and I am thrilled to be sharing this passion with you. In a very real way, this book is just for me. Selfish, huh? But for those that know me, I share everything, so, I hope you both excuse and enjoy my attempted intrusion into your world.

- Rod

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Not the end...

Chapter 1

Embers of Memory

Starlight Eldercare liked to put on a show for the holidays. On New Year's Eve, the common room still clung to the last shreds of Christmas, twinkling with festive defiance. Garlands drooped along the tops of bookshelves, a slightly lopsided tree blinked from its corner sentry post, and the fragrance of pine needles and cinnamon candles did battle with the ever-present undertone of strong, institutional coffee.

Eleanor Grace Hudson felt every bit of her seventy-eight years as she lowered herself into the deepest armchair, the kind that promised a soft landing and no judgment if you happened to nod off mid-conversation. The chair groaned in response — a loyal accomplice, that one. Around her, three faces she knew better than she knew her own lined up to form a familiar semicircle, each with their favorite mugs and the worn-in comfort of lifelong friendship.

George Alexander Reynolds arrived next, surveying the seating arrangement like a retired general inspecting the front line. He had the sharp profile for it: a beard trimmed with military precision, wire-rimmed glasses perched on the bridge of his nose, eyes always alert for a breach in the ranks. He set his coffee on the table with the deliberation of a man who'd long ago learned to savor the little things — like fresh caffeine, or an evening spent with people who got his jokes.

On Eleanor's right, Mabel Louise Bennett made a grand entrance, all flutter and color and stories waiting to spill out. Tonight she wore a scarf as red as holly berries, and her green eyes were already sparkling with the anticipation of company and cider. She claimed her spot with a gentle bounce, looping

the scarf around her neck once, twice, as if to cinch in all the stories for later.

Last but never least, Harold Eugene Mitchell took his time crossing the room. He moved like a man walking through a minefield of invisible inventions — perhaps he was, in that quicksilver mind of his. Bald head shining and eyes hidden behind round spectacles, he cradled a mug of cider between both hands, drawing in the warmth before he sat.

“Isn’t it a bit dangerous to leave you three unsupervised?” Mabel teased, arranging her scarf with calculated drama. “Somebody might start singing ‘Auld Lang Syne’ before the clock even strikes ten.”

Eleanor let out a chuckle, the kind that started in her chest and worked its way up. “As long as no one tries to waltz on the linoleum, I think we’ll survive the night.”

George arched an eyebrow. “Speak for yourself, Eleanor. I saw you tap-dance at the Spring Fling last year.”

Eleanor placed a hand on her heart in mock outrage. “That was a coordinated effort. Besides, Mabel started it.”

Mabel grinned, unrepentant. “And you finished it. If memory serves, Harold here tried to build a metronome out of his dessert spoon and half a custard cup.”

Harold lifted his mug in salute. “Engineers improvise,” he said, deadpan, but the twinkle in his eye gave him away.

Steam curled up from the mugs, carrying with it the quiet promise of a long, easy evening. The fireplace crackled, throwing flickers of orange over Eleanor’s silver hair, which she’d just had trimmed that morning. She felt lighter for it, and a touch more mischievous.

"Alright," she said, leaning forward, elbows on knees. "Since we're all here and fortified against the cold, I propose a round of storytelling. George, you look like you're about to burst if you don't get something off your chest."

George, who had been busy drawing a perfectly straight line through the condensation on his coffee mug, looked up with feigned innocence. "What could possibly make you think I have anything to confess?"

"Because you've been holding court with the nurses all week," said Harold, smiling over the rim of his mug. "Word travels fast. We've all heard about the Christmas Specter incident."

A hush fell over the circle – well, not a hush so much as a pause, a gathering of suspense that was as much part of their ritual as the drinks or the armchairs.

Eleanor could not suppress her grin. "I do believe you owe us a recap, George. And don't you dare leave out the part where you accused the janitor of being an international jewel thief."

George sighed, but it was the resigned, theatrical sigh of a man who loved every minute of being in the spotlight. "You exaggerate. I merely suggested that the janitor bore a passing resemblance to the Antwerp Diamond Bandit. Completely understandable, given the circumstances."

Mabel cackled, pressing her scarf to her lips to stifle it. "The circumstances being...?"

George set his mug down with great care. "The circumstances being that our hallway Christmas tree went missing. Overnight. Not even a pine needle left behind."

"Wasn't that the three-foot artificial one from the supply closet?" asked Harold. "The one with the crooked angel?"

George nodded. "Precisely. Gone without a trace. All that remained was a trail of white polyester snow and a suspiciously sticky candy cane."

Eleanor wagged a finger. "And you immediately leapt to international jewel thief."

"Not immediately. There was a process," George protested, though his mouth twitched at the corners.

Harold interjected. "If I recall, the process began with a list of suspects and ended with a security stakeout."

"That's the detective's creed," George replied, straight-faced. "Trust nothing. Suspect everyone. Especially custodial staff with mysterious gaps in their résumés."

Eleanor laughed. She let herself enjoy it fully, the warmth of her friends and the fire seeping in past old aches. "What about motive? Did you ever figure out why someone would want a three-foot fake tree?"

George shrugged. "Motive is for the courts. I'm a man of action."

Mabel reached over to squeeze Eleanor's hand, her eyes dancing. "He never changes. Not even after all these years."

The circle dissolved into giggles and good-natured ribbing, each taking a turn to jab at George's legendary suspicion and overactive imagination. For a few minutes, the outside world shrank away — the ticking of the grandfather clock, the echo of distant televisions, even the snow softly heaping itself against the window ledges. All that mattered was here, now, in the cocoon of lamplight and shared memory.

Eleanor savored the moment. She let her gaze drift over the room: the worn spines of mystery novels on the shelf, the

tarnished menorah standing guard on the side table, the crayon-colored drawing of a snowman (Harold's granddaughter, if she remembered right) taped crookedly above the thermostat. It was nothing grand, but it was theirs.

"So, who solved the mystery?" Eleanor prompted, returning to the scene of the crime.

"Technically, it was Harold," George conceded, tilting his mug in Harold's direction.

Harold accepted the honor with a modest nod. "Just applied a little deductive reasoning and a dab of WD-40. Turns out the night nurse borrowed the tree for her grandson's holiday play."

"And the janitor?" Mabel asked, barely containing her smile.

"Innocent," George admitted, "but I still say he's hiding something."

"Probably just dreading your next interrogation," Eleanor said, and the laughter started up again.

They talked like that for an hour or more, cycling through old cases and new ones, real or imagined, each story more outrageous than the last. Time unspooled like a ribbon, and with each turn around the circle, the world seemed a little lighter, the room a little brighter.

When the clock finally chimed ten, Eleanor leaned back, letting the fire work its magic on her bones. She looked at the friends arrayed around her, each changed in ways both subtle and profound, yet comfortingly the same where it counted. Here, in the golden glow and the gentle roar of the fireplace, it was easy to believe that nothing bad could ever last long, and that good company could solve even the most puzzling of mysteries.

She smiled, and for once, she didn't feel the years at all.

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As the laughter simmered down, the fire in the hearth grew bolder, its flames licking higher with the wind's encouragement outside. It gave the room a sense of drama, as if the old fireplace itself was eager to be part of the conversation. Harold was the first to break the mellow silence, removing his glasses and buffing them with a frayed blue handkerchief.

"Do you ever think we've come full circle?" he asked, squinting at his reflection in the lens before sliding the glasses back onto his nose.

Eleanor cocked her head. "You mean how we started as mischief-makers and ended up – well, the same?"

Harold grinned, his cheeks creasing with the effort. "Exactly. I was thinking of Mrs. Abernathy's cat, back in the fourth grade."

George's low chuckle rumbled across the circle. "The infamous Whiskers Caper."

Even Mabel's eyes, so often fixed on the horizon of her own imagination, snapped into focus. "That was you two?"

"Four of us," corrected Harold, nodding at Mabel and Eleanor. "You and Eleanor broke into the garden shed for the magnifying glass and the little fishing net."

Mabel clasped her hands together in mock horror, then relaxed into a delighted smile. "I remember now! Eleanor, you made me wear that ridiculous brown cap so we'd blend in with the shrubbery."

Eleanor lifted her mug in a sheepish salute. "I stand by the logic. No one expects the shrubbery."

George barked a laugh. "You looked like a pair of garden gnomes."

The four of them sat in a contented pause, letting the memory ripple through. Harold's voice softened. "We must've spent three days looking for that cat. Drew maps. Set traps with sardines. Made George practice cat sounds behind the hydrangeas."

"And in the end," Mabel said, her green eyes brimming with the memory, "Whiskers was sleeping under the radiator in the school library the entire time."

"It was a comprehensive investigation," George said with mock dignity. "We were thorough."

Eleanor caught Mabel's eye, and for a moment the two shared a private laugh—just like childhood, where the language of glances was more eloquent than any words.

"It's true, though," Eleanor said, more quietly. "We never really changed. Every adventure since then—it's always been the four of us, somehow."

"Even the Christmas Specter," added Harold. "A missing tree isn't much different from a missing cat."

"Except the tree doesn't bite," observed George, rubbing his wrist as if he could still feel the memory.

"Not unless you count plastic splinters," Mabel quipped, then tugged her scarf as she warmed to the thread of nostalgia. "Remember the apple heist at Jenkins' orchard? Eleanor planned every last detail."

Eleanor feigned offense, pressing a palm to her cheek. "I believe you were the mastermind, Mabel."

"Never," Mabel said, but she was smiling. "You mapped out the fence patrols. You memorized the layout of the barn. You even brought gloves so we wouldn't leave fingerprints."

George, ever the straight man, added, "We got caught anyway. Old man Jenkins had a hound the size of a Buick."

"That dog chased us clear to Main Street," Mabel said. "We nearly lost Harold to the rosebush."

"I was extracting valuable botanical samples," Harold deadpanned.

The fire popped as if to punctuate his point, scattering shadows up the wall.

Eleanor leaned back and let herself watch her friends. There was Mabel, always gesturing, her scarf a flag of bright rebellion. Harold, polishing his glasses after every punchline, a ritual as predictable as sunrise. George, sipping his coffee with exaggerated gravitas, pretending not to smile when he very much wanted to. It all felt achingly familiar.

She found herself speaking before she realized what she was about to say. "Maybe that's what keeps us young—chasing mysteries, even if we're only chasing shadows. Or trees. Or each other."

There was a lull, not awkward, but full—the kind of hush that let everyone gather their own stories before letting them tumble out. Mabel filled it first.

"I think," she said, "that life would be dreadfully dull without a little mischief and a few conspirators."

George raised his mug. "To old friends, and older mysteries."

Harold tapped his cup to the toast. "And to Whiskers, wherever he may be."

The mugs clinked together, the warmest kind of toast.

For a while, they traded memories as if they were playing cards, each hand a little stronger than the last. George told the story of the time they'd built a raft out of trash can lids and nearly sank the duck pond. Eleanor, not to be outdone, recounted the eighth-grade science fair, where Harold's baking soda volcano nearly took out the school janitor (not an international jewel thief, that time).

Through it all, the banter ran fast and easy. They finished each other's sentences, corrected minor details, filled in the gaps that the years had frayed. The conversation was less a trip down memory lane and more a four-lane highway with everyone fighting for the wheel.

When the laughter ebbed, Mabel let her hand drift across the table, fingers lightly touching the rim of Eleanor's mug. "We always did work best as a team," she said, her voice quieter now. "No one else would put up with us, anyway."

Eleanor squeezed Mabel's hand, then glanced at George and Harold, who both wore the same look—a mingling of affection, nostalgia, and something close to awe. How many years had it been, really? A lifetime, and not enough.

She felt her heart swell, just a little. "It's nice to know," Eleanor said, "that whatever comes next, we'll face it together. Even if it's just another missing Christmas tree."

Harold lifted his mug again. "Or a misplaced cat."

George smiled, a real one this time. "Or a midnight apple raid, if anyone's feeling adventurous."

"Oh, please," Mabel snorted. "With our knees? We'd be lucky to raid the pudding cups in the dining room."

They all burst out laughing again, the sound bright and buoyant, echoing off the polished wood and the walls lined with forgotten bestsellers.

In that moment, Eleanor realized that this – more than any headline mystery, more than any solved caper – was what she loved most: the easy joy of old friends, the comfort of memories worn soft by time, the certainty that, even as the world around them changed, their small circle would always be a place to call home.

She lifted her mug, not to make a toast, but simply to savor the heat and the company, and settled in for whatever story came next.

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The hour inched closer to midnight, but none of the four looked at the clock. Not tonight. The room had settled into a companionable haze, the gentle sizzle of the fire competing only with the occasional gust against the windowpanes. The tree in the corner blinked with a steady pulse, casting tiny constellations on the ceiling.

George Alexander Reynolds found himself leaning further back in his chair, the rigid lines of his posture slowly yielding to the soft embrace of the cushion. He let his eyes wander, taking in the familiar tableau – Eleanor, all wit and silver resolve, recounting the moment she'd cornered the "Specter" by the laundry chute; Mabel, her scarf gradually slipping from her shoulders, punctuating each sentence with a grand sweep of her hand; Harold, glasses perched and hands folded, issuing small, precise corrections to keep the tale honest.

George said little. He didn't need to. The others carried the current of conversation, drifting from laughter to reflection and back again, weaving a tapestry of memory that asked only for an appreciative audience. George was happy to oblige. He'd

spent most of his life scanning for inconsistencies, piecing together clues, keeping his wits sharper than most men's knives. But here, with the people who'd known him since short pants and scabbed knees, he could relax into the role of silent witness.

He watched as Eleanor mimed the haughty tip-toe she'd used to sneak past the night nurse ("Like a cat, only with less stealth," Mabel offered). She caught George's eye and winked, a little spark passing between them, a private joke as old as their friendship.

George exhaled, slow and full. The years had carved lines into the faces around him, but the essence — the bright, undimnable core of each friend — remained untouched. Mabel's laughter still tilted just a bit wild; Harold's smile curled up more on one side than the other. Eleanor's eyes sparkled with the same stubborn curiosity that had once led her to scale the library shelves in pursuit of a forbidden biography.

It was strange, George thought, how people could stay the same even as everything else changed. He wondered if, long after they'd forgotten the specifics of any given day, they'd remember this feeling: the easy warmth, the sense of belonging, the knowledge that nothing — not time, not even the inevitability of lost memories — could ever erase what they'd built together.

A lull fell, as if the room had paused to catch its breath. Mabel reached for her cider, her scarf now a bright puddle around her neck. Harold took a slow sip, content in the moment. Eleanor let her gaze settle on George, and for a second, her smile softened into something almost tender.

George gave her a small nod. No words needed.

He reached for his mug, the coffee now lukewarm but still offering its comfort. He lifted it, just slightly, in the direction of his friends. It wasn't a formal toast — just a gesture, brief and understated, meant only for this room and this night.

Eleanor caught it and returned the motion, her blue eyes dancing. Mabel and Harold joined in, their mugs raised in wordless reply. Four old friends, saluting the stubborn, miraculous endurance of their shared story.

As their cups touched the air between them, George felt a weight lift – a contentment so complete that he closed his eyes for a heartbeat and let it settle in deep. When he opened them, the fire was still burning, and the laughter had started up again, as inexhaustible as the stories yet to be told.

And for once, George didn't feel the need to solve a thing.

Chapter 2

Midnight Approaching

The fire in the Starlight Eldercare common room had worked itself into a proper performance. It clattered in the grate with an energy that belied its age, scattering light across the tinsel-draped garlands and the spines of well-loved books. The tree in the corner blinked on, stubborn as ever, throwing sequined shadows against the ceiling and casting a greenish glow over the four friends drawn close by warmth, tradition, and a mutual fondness for loitering after hours.

Mabel Louise Bennett wrapped both hands around her mug, as if afraid the cider might slip away and take her stories with it. The scarf at her neck had slipped askew, its bold red stark against her cardigan, but she made no move to fix it. Her green eyes, always the first to signal mischief or marvel, had gone soft now—distant, with a watery brightness that caught the fire’s every flicker.

She drew a steady breath. “You know,” she said, “I used to think the hardest thing in life was change. But it’s not. The hardest part is staying yourself through it.”

George, ever the anchor, leaned forward, hands steepled over his coffee. His beard had gone a little wild in the last hour, the careful trim undone by laughter and heat, but his gaze was sharp and steady. “You’ve never had trouble with that, Mabel. If anything, the rest of us have spent decades trying to keep up with you.”

Mabel smiled, her lips twitching at the corners, but there was something behind the smile that wasn't ready to let go. "That's generous, George, but even I had days I wasn't sure who I was anymore. Remember when Mom died?" She didn't look at anyone directly, but her voice found them all. "I was lost. Completely. I'd come home from school, and everything — every single thing — felt wrong. Like I'd stepped sideways into someone else's house."

Eleanor, perched in her armchair like a seasoned judge ready to issue a verdict, nodded in understanding. The firelight picked out the silver in her hair, glinting along her jaw as she tucked a stray strand behind her ear. She leaned in, her blue eyes fixed on Mabel. "You kept coming, though," Eleanor said. "To debate club, to the library, to our little stakeouts behind Jenkins' hardware. You never missed a day, even when it must have felt like drowning."

"I only made it through because of you three," Mabel replied, her voice dropping to a whisper at the end. "You were the only thing that didn't change." She blinked and sniffed, not quite apologizing. "If you'd given up on me, I'd have floated away like a sad little helium balloon."

Harold, who had been busy recalibrating the marshmallow-to-cider ratio in his mug, looked up. "I don't think there's a power in the universe that could unmoor you, Mabel." He gave her a gentle smile, the kind you might reserve for the very brave or the very young. "Besides, we needed you as much as you needed us. Maybe more."

There it was again — that hush, more sacred than awkward, as if the room itself bowed its head in respect. The fire hushed along with them, settling to a conspiratorial murmur. Mabel drew the back of her hand across her cheek, then dared a glance around the circle.

"Sometimes," she said, "I wonder if we became friends because we recognized something in each other. Something... what's the word? Essential."

Eleanor's lips curled in approval. "That's the word. I believe in that." She sat up a little straighter, drawing herself in with a look of fierce dignity. "The older I get, the more I realize how rare that is. All the things we chase—jobs, places to live, even family sometimes—they come and go. But this?" She waved a hand to indicate the four of them, the flicker of fire and gold. "This stays. Or at least, the memory of it does. And honestly, I'd take that over all the other fleeting nonsense."

George lifted his mug, but only halfway, as if afraid to disturb the moment. "To essentials, then. To things that last." He took a sip, slow and considered, like a man who'd spent his life learning to savor what mattered.

Mabel's smile returned, steadier now, her voice gaining strength with it. "I think we're awfully lucky. Not everyone gets to carry their best friends into old age." She set her mug on the table, fingers tracing the rim. "Most people lose track, or grow apart, or just run out of things to say. But we're still here. Still getting into trouble."

Eleanor's laugh was soft but sure. "If the staff ever figures out how to split us up, Starlight will never be the same."

Harold grinned. "They'd need a quantum physicist and at least three lawyers."

A pulse of laughter circled the group, less raucous than before, but richer—thick with memory and understanding.

The room, it seemed, had its own heartbeat now: the sigh and crackle of burning wood, the tick of the clock above the mantle, the occasional, inevitable pop as resin yielded to flame. Outside, wind brushed the windows with gentle insistence, but in here the warmth was absolute.

For a few long minutes, nobody spoke. The silence was so comfortable, it felt like a reward.

Eleanor's gaze drifted from friend to friend, finally landing on the tree in the corner—its battered ornaments catching every stray ember of light. "You know what I wish?" she said quietly.

The others looked to her, all at once.

She reached up, as if to pluck a thought out of the air. "I wish we could bottle this. Tonight, I mean. The laughter, the old stories, the... the essential parts." She gestured, a little helpless in the face of what she meant. "So when things get hard—and they always do—we could just uncork the memory and take a sip."

Mabel pressed her hands to her heart. "You just did, Eleanor. That's what you're doing right now."

George nodded. "She's right. Some things don't need a bottle. They stay because we want them to."

Harold took another sip, then set his mug down with a faint, decisive thunk. "I, for one, am never letting go."

They all nodded, four heads in perfect unison.

And for a while, the fire was the only one doing the talking.

The world outside could be cold, and dark, and unpredictable. But here in the stubborn, golden glow, everything worth keeping was safely gathered in. The air was thick with the scent of pine and cinnamon, the embers hissed softly in the grate, and every heart at the table beat just a little easier, anchored by the essential fact of the others.

The night was far from over, but for now, that was all anyone needed.

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The spell of easy silence was shattered by the tremor of Harold Eugene Mitchell's tablet. The device, dormant for most of the evening, startled itself awake with a sharp chime and a persistent, almost petulant vibration against the wooden armrest. Harold blinked, the sound cutting cleanly through the soft hush of the common room.

He fumbled for the device, his hands briefly betraying a quiver – then righted himself, clearing his throat as he angled the screen away from prying eyes. His round spectacles slipped to the tip of his nose, and he nudged them up with the side of a finger, squinting at whatever digital specter had roused it at this hour.

"Well," Harold said, voice a shade more alive than before, "this is interesting."

Mabel's head whipped around, scarf trailing over her shoulder like a comet tail. "Is it another one of those trivia newsletters?" She sounded disappointed, or perhaps eager for it to be more.

"Not quite," Harold replied, thumbing through the notification with deliberate gravity. "It's about Sparky."

George's posture shifted instantly. He set his mug down, leaning in with an intensity that made the chair creak. "The same Sparky as before? I thought he'd gone back where he came from."

Harold nodded, his eyes darting along the screen's blue-white glow. "That's what we all thought." He paused, scanning the message for detail. "Someone claims to have spotted similar... phenomena. Just outside town."

Eleanor straightened, her silver hair catching the firelight in glimmering lines. "Another visitor?"

Harold considered, then shrugged. "Possibly. Or a very determined hoaxer with access to a surprising number of LED lights."

Mabel drew her knees up, balancing her mug on them like a magician with a crystal ball. "Oh, I knew it!" She spoke with triumphant delight, as if she'd been waiting for this development since the first mention of "Sparky" weeks ago. "Harold, read us the details. Every word."

He obliged, tapping the message open with a flourish. "All right, let's see. 'Unusual light patterns, erratic motion, high-pitched humming, and a faint smell of—'" He stopped, brow furrowing. "'—burnt marshmallows?'"

George let out a low laugh, sharp as the snap of kindling. "That's either a sign of extraterrestrial activity, or someone's trying to bake at the old drive-in again."

Mabel ignored the skepticism, her hands fluttering. "What else does it say, Harold?"

He resumed. "Local sighting, two nights ago. No visual confirmation beyond the lights, but the observer claims the whole thing lasted less than five minutes." He looked up, scanning their faces for the effect. "It's signed with initials only, but the IP address is from the edge of town."

A ripple of excitement passed through the group, tempered only by the wary gaze of George, who had taken to rubbing the bridge of his nose in slow, contemplative circles.

"I don't know," George said. "The last time we went chasing cosmic mysteries, it ended with half the facility convinced the Fourth of July parade had been moved up three months."

Mabel grinned, unrepentant. "It was worth every minute."

Eleanor's voice cut in, cool and measured. "Let's think about this. Are we sure it isn't a prank?" She narrowed her eyes at Harold, who responded with an innocent blink.

"Statistically," Harold said, "it's more likely to be an attention-seeking hoax than a second encounter. But statistically, the first Sparky event should never have happened either."

"Statistics have never stopped you before," George muttered.

Mabel leaned over, lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Eleanor, don't you want to know? What if Sparky's come back? What if he needs us?"

Eleanor smiled, but it was the smile of a woman who knew the price of curiosity. "You do remember what happened last time, right? We were nearly caught sneaking out past curfew. And I'm still not convinced the janitor didn't see us."

"He didn't," Harold said, waving the thought away. "I checked the security footage. Twice."

George let out a long, even breath, the kind that could have extinguished every candle in the room if given half a chance.

“It’s not that I’m not curious,” he said. “I just think we ought to consider the consequences. The nurses are already onto us, and I’d rather not spend the rest of the winter on extra bingo duty.”

Mabel’s eyes sparkled, a challenge in every pixel of green.

“You’re just afraid of another pudding cup incident.”

“That was never proven,” George retorted, the corners of his mouth twitching.

Harold gave the group a level look. “All I’m saying is, we don’t have to go running off into the night. But maybe we could —”

“— ask around,” Eleanor finished for him.

He nodded. “Or just keep an ear to the ground. If it’s real, it won’t be long before more people start talking.”

The group fell into a brief, thoughtful hush, each considering the prospect. Mabel tapped her fingers against her mug, drumming out a rhythm only she seemed to know. Eleanor’s gaze flickered between her friends, weighing possibility against prudence. George, always the strategist, stared into the fire, mapping out contingencies on the backs of his eyelids. Harold, for his part, seemed content just to have something new to wonder about.

The fire snapped, tossing a small burst of sparks up the chimney. For a moment, the dance of orange and gold was all the light there was.

“Maybe George is right,” Eleanor said at last. “Maybe it’s nothing. But I’ll admit, I like knowing there’s still some mystery out there. Even if it’s just a few blinking lights and the smell of burnt sugar.”

Harold grinned, a boyish gleam in his eye. “The universe is a big place. Stranger things have happened.”

George relented, but only a little. “If you’re going to investigate, do it quietly. And no fireworks this time, Mabel.”

She held up both hands in protest, nearly spilling her cider. “Scout’s honor.”

Harold’s gaze lingered on the tablet, the screen’s glow reflected in his glasses. He looked up, and his smile softened. “I suppose it doesn’t matter if Sparky’s out there or not. Either way, we’ve got good company.”

Mabel raised her mug. “To mysteries. Cosmic or otherwise.”

Eleanor joined the toast, her blue eyes shining with mischief and affection. “To curiosity.”

George, though still skeptical, clinked his mug to theirs. “And to not getting caught.”

Harold laughed, the sound bright and clear, ringing out over the fire’s hush.

For a while, the four sat there, letting the excitement of the new rumor settle in alongside the comfort of shared memory. The night, once again, belonged to them: to their questions, their jokes, and the unspoken promise that no matter what the universe threw their way, they’d meet it together.

Outside, the wind pressed close against the windows, eager for a glimpse. Inside, the world was warm and full of possibility.

And in Harold’s lap, the tablet hummed with a soft, contented light, as if pleased to be part of the adventure.

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As the evening drew further into its quiet stretch, the grandfather clock on the mantel began its pre-midnight routine, the slow, inevitable ticking filling the spaces between laughter and new plans. George Alexander Reynolds sat back, rubbing at the sharp line of his beard – a habit he'd never quite lost, even after decades of retirement. He watched the three other faces arranged around the coffee table: Eleanor, hair shining silver in the fire's sway; Mabel, hands still animated as she relived the more dramatic moments of past encounters; and Harold, who was currently holding the world's most smugly satisfied tablet.

It was George's nature to take the long view. He'd been that way since childhood, always trying to see not just the next step, but the ten after that. So it came as a small surprise, even to him, when he realized that his vision kept circling back to the present moment. The world could wait. Right now, this – old friends, the hush of the common room, the thin blue glow of the tree – was enough.

He took a slow breath, letting the scent of pine and the faint trace of burnt marshmallow (the result of Harold's experimental cider) fill his lungs. "Perhaps," he said, more to himself than anyone else, "we don't need to choose."

Mabel glanced over, scarf bobbing. "Choose what?"

George looked at each friend in turn. "Between chasing the next mystery and enjoying what we have. Friendship itself is the greatest adventure, isn't it? Whether we're hunting down cosmic visitors or just sharing stories by the fire."

He set his mug down with deliberate care, the ceramic thumping softly against the wood. "I think if I had to pick only one thing to carry with me, it would be this."

There was a moment – measured in heartbeats, not seconds – when nobody spoke.

Then Eleanor nodded, the gesture slow and regal. "Well said, George. I suppose the next mystery will find us when it's ready." She smiled, eyes gleaming in the lamplight. "Until then, let's make sure to keep the stories coming."

Harold looked up from his device, the light reflecting in his glasses. He seemed unusually shy, his next words coming out in a careful, almost reverent tone. "I'm grateful," he said, "for every experience we've shared. Even the misfires and the pudding cup incidents." He grinned, the shyness melting away. "Especially those."

Mabel raised her mug. "To friends who make life bearable — and a little less ordinary."

The fire popped, sending up a brief flurry of sparks that danced and vanished in the dark. Each of them raised their own mug in silent toast, the circle complete once more.

The clock inched closer to midnight. George let his hand fall to the arm of the chair, feeling the nap of the fabric, the weight of the moment. He looked around the circle — Eleanor, always the captain; Mabel, the dreamer; Harold, the builder and fixer — and felt a profound sense of rightness. They had come through so much, together and apart, and now, in this quiet patch of time, they were exactly where they were meant to be.

He cleared his throat, half for effect and half for the pleasure of it. "Here's to whatever the new year brings. We're ready for it, I think."

"Speak for yourself," Mabel said, her voice thick with laughter. "I haven't been ready for anything since 1984."

Harold, who'd finally put down the tablet, raised his mug for a proper clink. "To the next adventure. Even if it's just breakfast tomorrow."

Eleanor added her own, softer cheer: "To essentials."

The mugs met in the center of the table, four sturdy vessels brimming with tea and cider and a thousand shared memories. For a brief second, it seemed the fire flared brighter, illuminating the garlands, the drooping tree, and the faces of friends who knew each other's stories by heart.

The new year would arrive soon enough. But for now, they were content to linger in the glow, listening to the hush of the room and the ticking of the clock, hearts light and full.

And when at last the embers faded, it was not with an ending, but with the promise of all the chapters yet to come.

Chapter 3

Full Circle

The fire in the Starlight Eldercare common room had mellowed to a coppery glow, flickering in the hearth like the last act of a well-rehearsed play. The Christmas tree, still blinking its string of blue and yellow lights, cast half-shadows across the four friends arrayed in their favorite semicircle. In that gentle twilight, everything looked softer—except, perhaps, the wrinkles, which seemed to deepen into battle lines when the flames caught them just so.

It was late, though no one dared glance at the clock. Time had, for tonight, lost its edge.

Eleanor Grace Hudson sat forward, elbows propped on her knees, her posture undiminished by the years. Her silver hair—recently trimmed by the less-than-talented, more-than-enthusiastic salon student—glinted with hints of gold and rose from the embers' reflections. Tonight, she wore a cardigan the color of strong tea and a pair of woolen socks that made her look faintly piratical. Every so often, she'd tap her mug against the side table to punctuate her thoughts.

George Alexander Reynolds lounged opposite her, back nearly swallowed by the chair's embrace. His beard, now drifting to salt more than pepper, had grown out just enough to soften the square cut of his jaw. He nursed his mug with slow deliberation, each sip measured and appreciated as if coffee itself might become extinct at any moment. Every so often, he'd reach up to smooth the unruly bristle on his chin, as if grooming for a portrait.

Mabel Louise Bennett was a study in perpetual motion. Even seated, she managed to shift her weight, reposition her legs, and adjust her bright scarf a dozen times an hour. The scarf itself looked like something hand-knit in a fever dream of primary colors. Her green eyes, wide and restless, darted from friend to friend, always hungry for the next twist in the conversation.

Harold Eugene Mitchell rounded out the quartet, perched with the fragile dignity of a librarian in a windstorm. He'd layered two cardigans, one on top of the other, and his lap was a nest of knitted blanket and tablet device. He polished his round spectacles with a faded handkerchief whenever the talk got especially interesting, the better to see with—or perhaps to buy time for a cleverer response.

There was no rush. They'd been at this for hours, years, a lifetime.

"Do you ever wonder," said Eleanor, her voice low and crackling like the fire, "if we've become the people we swore we'd never turn into?"

Mabel perked up instantly. "What, you mean old?" She poked a bare toe from beneath the blanket. "Speak for yourself, El. My mind is still in the seventh grade."

George snorted. "That would explain the marshmallow incident."

Mabel bared her teeth in a mock growl, then turned to Harold for backup. "You don't think we're boring, do you?"

Harold, distracted with his spectacles, bought himself a few seconds before answering. "Not at all. Statistically speaking, we're at least two standard deviations more interesting than the facility average."

Eleanor grinned. "That's not saying much, Harold. The most exciting thing most people here have done in the last year is switch to lactose-free pudding."

Mabel raised her mug in salute. "A toast to the lactose intolerant! May their coffee always be sweet and their pudding always bland."

They all joined in, the clink of ceramics a tiny chorus over the gentle rumble of the fireplace.

George watched his friends, one hand curled around the handle of his mug, the other smoothing his beard. "We may have slowed down a little," he said, "but I'd argue our adventures have only gotten more... creative."

Mabel caught the spark. "The midnight protest over institutional Jell-O? Or the time we nearly got kicked out for hacking the bingo system?"

Eleanor's eyes gleamed. "I'll have you know, that was a legitimate act of civil disobedience."

"Harold wrote the code," George deadpanned. "All I did was suggest we could do better than the usual numbers."

Harold colored, just a touch. "It was a simple algorithm. No one got hurt."

"Except for the pride of that one nurse," Eleanor recalled, her smile sharpening. "What was her name—Henrietta?"

"Helga," George and Mabel chimed in unison.

"Helga!" Eleanor repeated, savoring it. "She almost had us blacklisted from trivia night."

Mabel shivered theatrically. "The horror."

The fire, as if eager to join in the laughter, spat a bright tongue of flame up the chimney.

Eleanor's gaze shifted to the tree in the corner, with its determined lights and battered ornaments. "You know what gets me?" she said, quieter now. "That none of us ever planned to end up in a place like this. And yet, somehow, it's the best time I've had in years. Maybe ever."

There was a pause—a genuine, weighty one this time.

George nodded, the motion slow and deliberate. "I used to think that the world shrank as you got older. But here—" He swept his hand at the circle of friends, the fire, the cluttered table of snacks and scribbled crossword puzzles—"it's gotten bigger, in a way."

Harold grinned behind his mug. "Perspective is everything. There's an entire universe on this tablet, if you know where to look."

Mabel eyed him, mock-suspicious. "Are you hinting at a new conspiracy?"

Harold's smile widened, but he didn't answer. Instead, he lifted the tablet just enough that its blue glow painted his chin like an underlit villain. "Maybe."

Eleanor saw the motion and pounced. "What's on your mind, Harold? You've been sitting on that device like a mother hen with a secret."

Harold wiggled his eyebrows. "There may or may not be an encrypted message in the facility network."

"Who's it from?" George asked, intrigued despite himself.

"Could be from anyone," Harold said, coy. "But the address is untraceable. All I've managed to decode is a timestamp: midnight, tonight."

The group leaned in, the air thick with old habits and sharper senses.

Mabel, never one to let a mystery breathe, pressed him. "What do you think it is? Aliens? A prank from the nurses? The return of Sparky?"

Harold shrugged, feigning indifference but betraying a flicker of excitement. "Only one way to find out."

Eleanor glanced around the group, her blue eyes shining in the firelight. "Who says we're slowing down?" she said, a challenge and a promise all at once. "We might have a few more surprises left in us yet."

The friends shared a look, an unspoken agreement settling over them like a warm shawl. Whatever the message was, whatever the night held, they would face it together.

Eleanor shifted her weight, bringing her mug closer to her chest. "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that the best stories happen after curfew. That's when all the rules stop mattering so much."

Mabel nodded, her scarf slipping to reveal a wild tuft of gray-streaked hair. "I live for the after-hours," she declared. "Everything good is just waiting for everyone else to fall asleep."

George stroked his beard, the gesture now part of the rhythm of the night. "What's your theory, Harold?"

Harold toyed with the corner of his handkerchief, then spoke softly. “I think someone’s trying to tell us something. Something important. Or at least interesting.”

Eleanor leaned forward, her voice a conspiratorial hush. “Maybe it’s another resident. Someone with a secret.”

“Maybe it’s management,” said George, his tone light but eyes watchful. “Setting a trap for the four notorious troublemakers of Starlight.”

Mabel snorted. “Let them try. We’re the last line of defense against institutional boredom.”

The laughter this time was quieter, but deeper—shot through with the confidence of people who’d survived much and found, against all odds, a way to enjoy it.

For a while, they let the fire do the talking. The flames threw gold and amber up the walls, painting Mabel’s scarf and Eleanor’s cheekbones, catching the silver in Harold’s eyebrows and the deep lines around George’s mouth.

Eleanor, feeling the weight of the moment, turned serious. “You know,” she said, “most people think you slow down as you get older. But it’s not that at all. Time just... feels different. Sometimes it’s like you’re running to keep up, and other times, it’s standing so still you could almost touch it.”

Mabel smiled, her eyes soft. “I like the stillness. It lets you see the people around you a little clearer.”

George murmured his agreement. “I used to worry about what would happen when we all went our separate ways. Now, I know we never really do. Not if you don’t want to.”

Harold’s smile was small but steady. “The connections last. Even when the details fade.”

Eleanor nodded, the motion final. “So, whatever’s waiting for us at midnight—we’ll tackle it together. As always.”

Mabel raised her mug, the gesture as solemn as it was silly. “To the next adventure.”

The others joined in, and the clink of the cups sounded like a promise.

The firelight played over the four friends, their features cast in relief by the shifting orange glow. The tree in the corner blinked stubbornly on, the last holdout against the growing dark.

In that little pocket of warmth and quiet, the world outside faded away, leaving only the comfort of shared memory and the thrill of what might come next.

Somewhere, deep in the facility, a clock began to tick toward midnight. But there was no hurry. For now, they had all the time in the world.

And perhaps—just perhaps—a few more surprises left.

...

The room’s hush began to ripple, disturbed by the gentle migration of other Starlight residents. It always happened this way: laughter drew people like moths, and soon enough the small cluster of friends became the axis of a slowly widening circle.

Mrs. Finch arrived first, her gait regal despite the tennis-ball tips of her walker. She wore a knitted shawl the color of ripe plums and a look that said she had known every secret the world ever tried to keep. She gave a gracious nod to the four, then settled into a chair near the fire with a basket of rainbow yarn and two needles already waltzing in her hands.

Behind her, Mr. Peterson shuffled in, bearing a large Tupperware of cookies that he set—no, presented—on the coffee table with the solemnity of an Olympic judge. “Shortbread,” he declared, “from my daughter in Florida. She says I’m getting too thin.” He cast a sidelong glance at his own belly, which had not been thin since Carter was president.

Mabel was the first to break the fourth wall of their circle. “Oh, those look dangerous. Hand them over before George eats the lot!”

“I’ve been framed,” George protested, but his hand hovered close to the cookies anyway.

Eleanor greeted the newcomers with a smile, waving them into the warmth. “Take a seat, Mrs. Finch. You’re just in time for the main event.”

Mrs. Finch did, and the way she slid into the conversation, it was clear she had attended many firesides like this. She worked her needles in a hypnotic rhythm, eyes never leaving the interplay of jokes and stories. Mr. Peterson leaned in, elbows on knees, utterly content to be audience to whatever madness or mischief happened next.

More residents trickled in—some drawn by the promise of company, others by the scent of cookies and cider. A pair of sisters settled onto the low sofa. The retired high school principal found himself a corner by the bookshelf, where he could peer out from behind his newspaper but never miss a beat.

The four friends exchanged glances—amused, accepting. It was never just about them, not really. The true magic was in making everyone feel like they belonged to something special.

The conversation picked up speed and mass, the way good conversations do. Stories rolled from the past year, some true, some improved in the telling. There was talk of last spring’s thunderstorm, which had shorted out half the lights in the facility but also led to the impromptu sing-along in the darkened hall. There was a spirited debate over which nurse was the sneakiest (consensus: Nurse Rhonda, who could materialize at your elbow with pills or bad news at a moment’s notice).

Throughout it all, mugs were topped off, cookies nibbled down to crumbs, and the fire kept its tireless tempo. The tree in the corner blinked with the stubborn cheer of a parade float, its glow brightening as the rest of the lights dimmed for the night.

Eleanor found herself watching the steam curl above her cider, the way it caught and bent the colored lights from the tree. She listened—really listened—to the sound of voices intermingling, the laughter that stitched its way through the air. She had never been much for big

gatherings, but something about this—about the easy togetherness—made her feel like a girl again, part of something that couldn't be ruined by time or chance.

Across from her, George let himself sink further into the armchair, posture loosened by contentment. He surveyed the room through the rim of his coffee mug, eyes soft and attentive. Every so often, he'd catch Eleanor's gaze and nod, as if to say, "Yes, I see it too. It's good, isn't it?"

Mabel, of course, was in her element. She had migrated from her chair to the hearth itself, sitting cross-legged and passing cookies to anyone within reach. "I'm the Cookie Pusher," she announced. "Try one, or face my wrath!"

Even Harold was smiling more than usual. He'd perched his tablet on the edge of his knee, one finger hovering above the screen in anticipation. Now and then he'd sneak a glance at the glowing digits of the mantel clock, but otherwise he seemed entirely present.

The conversation found its rhythm, ebbed and surged, until there came a lull—a momentary hush as everyone refilled their mugs or cradled warm hands around them.

It was Mrs. Finch who broke the silence, her knitting needles briefly paused. "You four," she said, "have the best stories. It's like a free show every night." There was no envy in her tone, just admiration.

Mabel gave an extravagant bow from her spot by the fire. "We aim to please. But only if you promise not to report us to the administration."

Mrs. Finch wagged a finger. "Honey, I am the administration. I run this place on Tuesdays and alternate holidays."

Laughter spread again, buoyed by the undercurrent of togetherness. The clock on the mantel ticked closer to twelve, the sound just audible beneath the conversation.

Harold picked up the tablet and peered at the screen, a slow grin spreading across his face. He set it down, closed the cover, and looked at his friends with a mischievous glint. "Some mysteries," he said,

“can wait until next year.” He winked at Eleanor, who gave him a regal little nod of approval.

George raised his mug, the gesture simple but weighted with decades of camaraderie. “To friendship,” he said. “To the stories that keep us young, and the friends who make it all worthwhile.”

Mabel lifted her cider. “To adventures past and future!”

Eleanor joined in, her voice clear and unshakeable. “And to making every moment count.”

The toast rippled outward, picked up by Mrs. Finch, Mr. Peterson, and the others in the room. For a brief moment, the ordinary world fell away, and all that remained was the light, the warmth, and the knowledge that this—this improbable family—would see another year together.

As the clock on the mantel began to chime, the circle of friends—now doubled, maybe tripled in size—raised their mugs as one. The fire burned brighter, the tree blinked on, and the sound of laughter carried through the halls long after the echo of midnight faded.

If you’d asked Eleanor what she remembered about this night, years down the line, she wouldn’t have mentioned the cookies or the cider, not even the mysterious message left unsolved. She’d have said it was the way the room felt—full, alive, and gently buoyed by hope.

And in that golden space, with all their stories and secrets and private jokes, it was easy to believe that the best adventures were still waiting.

Midnight arrived, but none of them minded. They were too busy living.

...

When the twelfth chime faded into the hush of the Starlight common room, something subtle changed. The world, so recently crowded with expectations—midnight, resolutions, the infinite weight of a new year—seemed to let go, just a little. The circle of friends shifted in their seats, as if settling deeper into themselves.

Eleanor sat with her hands folded in her lap, mug forgotten for the moment. She let her gaze drift around the room, over the new arrivals and the old companions, the twin poles of memory and possibility. There was a gentle fullness in her chest—a sensation that was less about being old, and more about knowing how quickly the best moments slip through your fingers.

She listened as Mabel cajoled Mrs. Finch into another story, as George and Mr. Peterson debated the merits of homemade cookies versus store-bought, as Harold and the principal from down the hall traded tech gripes with the practiced skill of men who'd lived through every flavor of obsolescence. The room glowed with something bigger than firelight.

For a long minute, Eleanor just breathed it in. Then, perhaps out of habit or perhaps out of some ancient reflex, she looked up—past the circle, past the blinking tree, out toward a place nobody else seemed to notice. She imagined there was someone else out there, perched just beyond the edge of the lamplight, watching and waiting and hoping for a sign.

She met the eyes, looking directly from the pages of this book to you, dear reader.

“Oh, hello,” Eleanor said, the words soft but clear. “I see you, too, dear readers.”

There was a kindness in her blue eyes as she smiled, her voice cutting through the last lingering traces of the midnight bell. “I suppose you’ve heard most of our stories by now. Maybe you even know how some of them end.” Her gaze crinkled with humor and something gentler. “Or maybe you don’t. That’s the best part, isn’t it?”

She shifted, crossing one ankle over the other. “Age is just a number. People say that all the time, but let me tell you—after seventy-eight years, I can say it’s a good thing. Because what really matters are the people you gather along the way.” She gestured at the circle, the room, the wider world. “The ones who see you, even when you’re being impossible. Especially then.”

Eleanor paused, as if waiting for a response only she could hear. “So, to you, dear friends—wherever you are, whoever you’re with—happy new year. Thank you for sitting with us by the fire, for listening to our ridiculous adventures, for reminding us that stories are only worth telling if someone is there to share them.”

Her hands opened, palms up, an invitation and a benediction all at once. “The world is a strange and beautiful place. There are mysteries out there for all of us, if we’re brave enough to look. But I hope you spend at least a little of your time holding on to the people who make it brighter. That’s what matters most in the end.”

She waited a moment longer, as if to make sure her message landed. She nodded once.

And then, just like that, she was back in the thick of things—leaning toward Harold, who had just revealed the punchline to some inside joke, laughing so hard she had to dab tears from the corners of her eyes. The fire crackled, the mugs clinked, and the whole world felt, for one miraculous stretch of midnight, exactly as it should be.

There were adventures waiting for them in the year ahead, Eleanor knew. But for tonight, it was enough to be here, together, with the laughter and the warmth and the promise of all the stories still left to tell.

And if, somewhere, a reader had lingered to the end—well, that was another kind of adventure entirely.

HAPPY NEW YEAR!

Not the end...

Join our quartet in their next adventure, **Old Like Us** will be back soon...

Watch Amazon for details, or visit Rod's Fiction Universe:
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In a cozy gathering at the Starlight Eldercare facility, lifelong friends Eleanor, George, Mabel, and Harold reflect on their shared adventures and mysteries from the past year, reminiscing about youthful stories and the unbreakable bond that has strengthened over decades. Amid laughter and gratitude, they acknowledge life's challenges lightened by companionship, toast to enduring friendship, and eagerly anticipate the new year together.

Stay tuned to the end! There's a message for all of the fans!