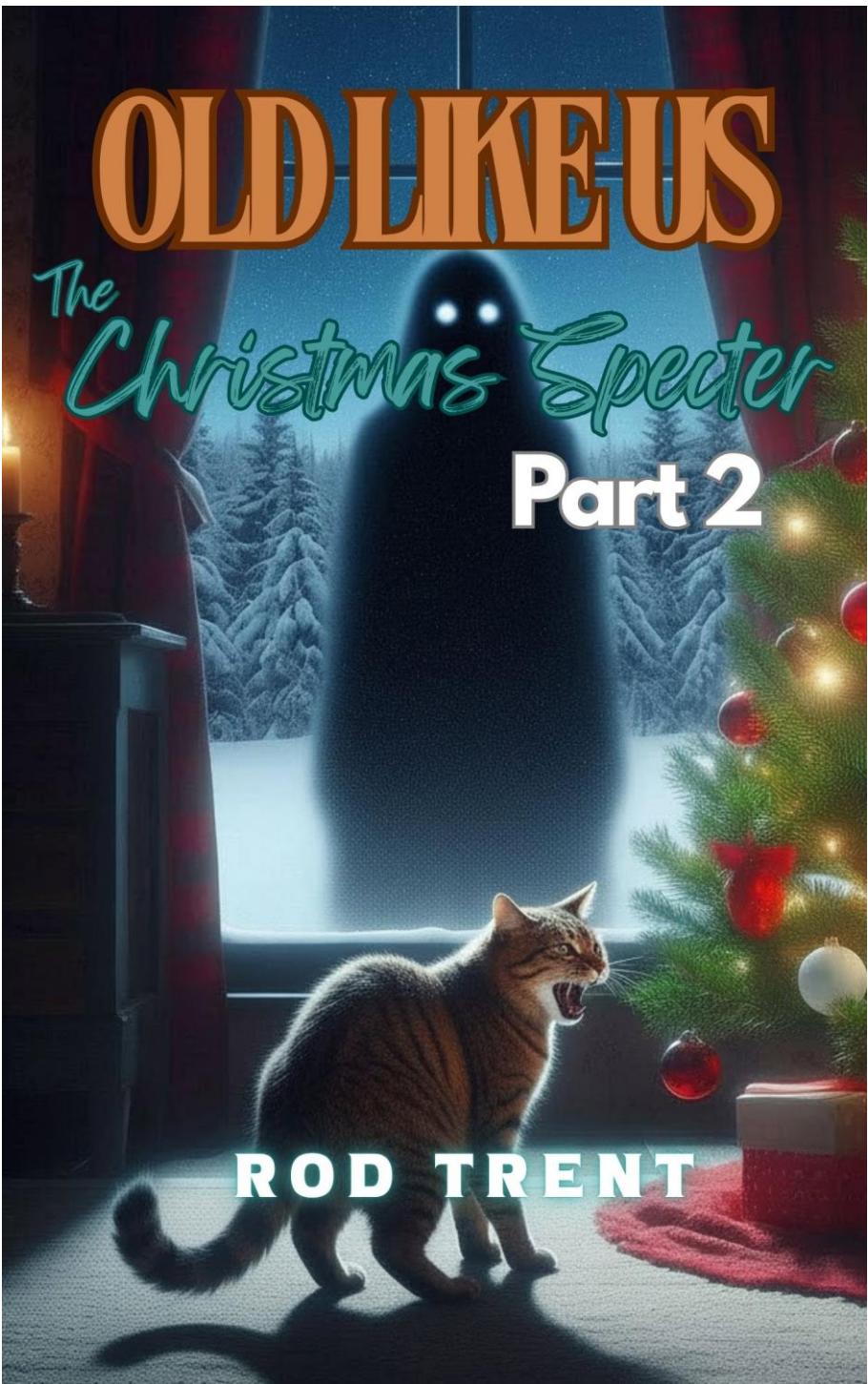


# OLD LIKE US

*The Christmas Specter*

## Part 2

**ROD TRENT**



Welcome back to Starlight Eldercare Facility, where the holidays are never just about tinsel and tradition—they’re about mystery, camaraderie, and the indomitable spirit of friendship. In this installment of the “Old Like Us” series, our beloved Silver Sleuths—Eleanor, George, Mabel, and Harold—return for another unforgettable Christmas, only to find themselves revisiting their mystery from last Christmas (**Old Like Us: The Christmas Specter**).

As the snow falls and the scent of pine and cinnamon fills the air, the Starlight Mystery Committee is drawn into a series of strange events, some of the familiar—moving wheelchairs, shattering glassware, and unexplained cold spots—that threaten to turn their cozy holiday into a supernatural whodunit. With their trademark wit, warmth, and stubborn resolve, the quartet must untangle clues both scientific and spectral, all while navigating the chaos of family visits, mischievous cats, and the ever-present demands of Christmas cheer.

This story is more than a ghostly caper; it’s a celebration of aging boldly, of finding purpose and adventure at every stage of life, and of the bonds that make even the strangest Christmas miracles possible. Whether you’re a returning fan or new to the world of Starlight, you’ll find laughter, heart, and a touch of holiday magic in these pages.

So settle in, pour yourself a mug of cocoa, and join Eleanor, George, Mabel, and Harold as they prove

once again that you're never too old for a little mystery – or a little mischief – at Christmas.

Thanks so much to all of you! The Old Like Us fandom is growing and I truly appreciate each of you coming along for the ride.

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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# Chapter 1

## Tinsel, Tradition, and a Touch of Mystery

Starlight Eldercare Facility's common room looked particularly radiant this December afternoon. Afternoon sunlight splashed in through the window, setting the tinsel aglow and giving the place a soft golden hue. The scent of pine needles—real ones, none of that spray-can business—mingled with cinnamon from the kitchen, and somewhere in the corner, a portable speaker played “Jingle Bell Rock” at a volume just loud enough to muffle the tick-tick of Eleanor Grace Hudson’s watch as she directed the annual tree-trimming committee.

Eleanor’s “committee” consisted of three people, but as she’d reminded them, small teams got more done. She sat upright in her wheelchair at the command center (otherwise known as the card table), a clipboard balanced on her knees, a pencil sharp as her wit wedged between her fingers. With her snow-white hair perfectly coifed and her blue eyes more alert than the star atop the tree, she scanned the room with the kind of intensity that once made high school students tremble over essay deadlines.

Eleanor glared down at her wheelchair as if it were a personal affront. Ever since their Thanksgiving jaunt to Harvest Moon pumpkin farm, her knees had betrayed her—swollen and stiff, refusing to carry her through Starlight's halls without assistance. She drummed her fingers against the armrest, remembering how she'd once darted between classroom rows with the speed of a hummingbird. Now she sat, directing from a stationary command post, silently praying this new indignity wouldn't become her permanent reality. Getting old 'sucked', she silently cursed.

“All right, George,” she finally called after swallowing her pride, “try moving the red bauble two inches left. No, my left. Think Euclidean geometry.”

George Reynolds, former detective, current stickler for spatial accuracy, perched on a step stool beside the twelve-foot tree. His wire-rimmed glasses slid down his nose as he squinted at the target branch. “I’d have thought you’d want the decorations symmetrical, Eleanor. But this year, you’re all about organic chaos, huh?”

“It’s not chaos,” Eleanor said, with just the faintest hint of glee, “it’s artistry. Even Picasso had rules.”

Mabel Bennett, the unofficial Storyteller-in-Residence, flitted between boxes of ornaments, holding each one up for the group to see. “Oh! This one is a treasure!” she exclaimed, dangling a snowflake of blown glass between her thumb and forefinger. She cleared her throat theatrically. “Once upon a time, in the wilds of Norway, my third cousin – twice removed – raced across the tundra in a sleigh drawn by reindeer. And as legend goes, this very snowflake fell into her lap during a blizzard –”

“ – and you rescued it from certain doom at the bottom of your sock drawer,” Harold Mitchell cut in, not unkindly. He sat a little apart from the others, cross-legged on the loveseat, tablet propped against his knee. “Did your cousin’s sleigh also invent wireless internet, or am I conflating your stories again, Mabel?”

Mabel held the snowflake to the light, watching the blue shadows dance on the white walls. “Some people appreciate the poetry in life, Harold. Some people,” she repeated, shooting a teasing glance at him, “just appreciate a strong WiFi signal.”

“Poetry’s good, but so are facts,” Harold murmured. His gaze flicked to Eleanor, who gave him a look, the kind that said, Be patient; your turn will come.

The four of them – once the terror of the Starlight mystery circuit, ever since the infamous “Whiskers Mystery” of last December – were like cogs in a familiar, well-oiled clock. Each brought their strengths to bear: Eleanor’s ironclad logic, George’s unerring eye, Mabel’s flair for the improbable, and Harold’s quiet knack for noticing what everyone else ignored. If Starlight had a Christmas spirit, it was their combined force of will.

The room buzzed with the comfortable noise of old friends bantering, occasionally punctuated by the gentle jingle of glass and the slap of tape against cardboard. They moved together in a rhythm honed by years of solving puzzles harder than untangling fairy lights.

“Does anyone else remember the year we went all blue and silver?” George mused, setting an ornament in place with surgeon-like precision. “Looked like a cold front in December.”

“Don’t remind me,” Eleanor replied. “Half the residents thought it was a memorial for the dearly departed. We had three complaint letters.”

“I liked the blue,” said Harold, still watching his tablet but smiling at the memory. “It was...soothing.”

Mabel, not to be outdone, rummaged in the next box and produced an angel made of tin foil, pipe cleaners, and yellow yarn. “This beauty,” she said, “is the original. Year one. Created by the legendary Eleanor, who at the time refused to let anyone else touch the scissors.”

“I stand by that policy,” Eleanor said, with the grave authority of a former educator. “Have you seen what George can do to a pair of scissors? It’s a crime scene.”

George just grunted and stretched for the next branch, careful to keep his balance. “I did solve the crime, though, didn’t I? Case of the Disemboweled Construction Paper.”

“And justice was served,” said Mabel, setting the angel aside with exaggerated reverence.

The banter was light, but Harold’s attention wavered, and more than once he paused, fingers poised above his screen, brow furrowing. He seemed half-distracted, as if he were assembling a puzzle no one else could see.

“Harold, you look like you’re about to launch a rocket,” Eleanor said, glancing over her glasses at him. “What are you plotting?”

He blinked, caught. “Oh, nothing. Just...running diagnostics.” He tapped the tablet for emphasis, but his tone lacked its usual playful undercurrent.

Mabel set her ornament on the table, her face settling into concern. “Is something wrong? Did the new router finally defeat you?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” Harold said, but not convincingly. “Just a little distracted, that’s all.”

The moment stretched, and for the first time since they began decorating, a hush fell. Even the speaker’s Christmas playlist switched to a slower, softer tune.

George, who’d been determinedly ignoring the subtext, finally gave in. “Is this about last year?” he asked, not looking away from the tree. “You’ve been...quiet since the anniversary.”

Harold hesitated. He looked up, and his voice was gentler than usual. “I’ve been meaning to say...some things didn’t add up last year.”

Eleanor set her clipboard aside, every muscle in her frame attentive. "Harold, if you have concerns, out with them. No sense bottling up data."

Harold exhaled, the tablet finally dropping to his lap. He looked at each of them in turn. "I know we said it was Whiskers. The strange noises, the missing slippers, the lights flickering. Classic mischief. But...I keep coming back to the files. The motion sensors. The patterns weren't consistent with an animal. Or a person, for that matter."

Mabel cocked her head. "Are you saying we have a ghost, Harold?"

He smiled, but there was no humor in it. "I'm saying we ruled out too much, too soon. There were — anomalies. Power surges. Temperature drops. The old cliches. But the data doesn't lie."

George stepped down from the stool, the tree forgotten. "Why didn't you say something sooner?"

"I thought maybe I was being dramatic," Harold admitted. "Or maybe I just wanted it to be a tidy story, like you said. 'Whiskers, the Christmas Cat, and the Great Starlight Mischief.' It's a good headline." He looked at Mabel. "But sometimes, the facts aren't as neat as the stories."

Eleanor's eyes narrowed, but she nodded. "We have to go where the evidence leads. Even if it's uncomfortable." She rolled herself closer to the group, setting the clipboard aside with a decisive tap. "Let's hear your full theory, Harold. From the top."

Harold's shoulders dropped in relief, and the lines on his face softened. "Okay. It started with the flickering lights, right? But the maintenance logs show the outages were only in this room. Only at certain times — always after sunset, never during the

day. The sensors in the hallway picked up motion, but it moved too fast for a cat. Almost as if—" He broke off, uncertain.

"Go on," Mabel prompted.

"Almost as if it wasn't...physical. Not in the normal sense."

George's mouth twitched, part skepticism, part curiosity. "Are you suggesting an entity?"

"I'm suggesting something we haven't considered," Harold said, voice steady. "And last night, I saw it again. A shadow, just before the lights flickered. Only this time, it looked...human."

The silence hung heavier, weighted with possibility.

Eleanor reclaimed the floor with a brisk clap. "Well, then. If Starlight has a ghost, or a poltergeist, or—heaven help us—a genuinely troublesome Christmas spirit, we're the team to crack it." She eyed her friends with a glint of mischief. "George, gather the floor plans. Mabel, start collecting witness statements. Harold, run every diagnostic you have. And someone put on a fresh pot of coffee; this is going to be a long night."

Mabel clapped her hands, delighted. "Best Christmas committee meeting ever!"

George only grumbled, but he was already reaching for the box marked "Extension Cords: For Emergencies Only."

And Eleanor, satisfied, made a note at the top of her clipboard: Operation Starlight Specter. Underlined, twice, in perfect teacher's script.

The tree could wait. This, after all, was what they did best.

...

The committee reconvened the following day, spirits high and sleeves (and in George's case, pant legs) rolled up. George had spent the night combing the facility's blueprints, tracking every electrical wire and vent shaft; Mabel conducted "interviews" with anyone who passed through the common room, extracting confessions and rumors with the skill of a late-night radio host; Harold, for his part, installed motion-activated cameras disguised as "festive security elves" at the entrances and exits. Eleanor orchestrated their efforts from her wheelchair, her clipboard upgraded to a binder thick enough to stun a moose.

They'd barely begun to unravel the first tangle of lights when the strange phenomena began.

The four of them stood by the half-decorated tree, reviewing the prior night's logs. Harold scrolled through images on his tablet, brow creased. "Nothing. No movement, no shadows, not even a dust bunny after midnight."

"That's because it prefers an audience," Eleanor said, tapping her pencil against her lip. "Mabel, what did your informants say?"

Mabel lifted a sheaf of index cards. "The most credible witness is Mrs. Chan from the west wing. She reports a sudden cold draft and — her words — a 'tingle down the back of my neck like when a ghost is watching you on Halloween.' She's very sensitive, you know."

"Sensitive to cookies, maybe," George muttered. "She ate six during last year's bake-off."

Mabel sniffed, "That's how she gets her psychic energy."

Eleanor was about to issue their next round of assignments when her wheelchair lurched. Not a minor nudge, but a sudden, decisive slide — three feet backward, wheels squeaking against the linoleum.

Everyone froze.

George, balanced precariously on the step stool, threw his arms out in panic and toppled onto the tree skirt, miraculously landing between two boxes of ornaments. Mabel clutched the snowflake from the “sleigh in Norway” to her heart, wide-eyed. Harold’s glasses nearly slipped off his nose as he stared at Eleanor’s new position, then at the empty space she’d just occupied.

Eleanor’s own hands hovered over the wheels, fingers splayed. “Well, that’s a first,” she said, and tried to roll herself back. The wheels offered their usual resistance — no sign of motorized mischief or a trick floor. “I don’t suppose any of you saw what caused it?”

“I saw you move, but...” Harold trailed off, jaw working. “You didn’t do it.”

Mabel blinked rapidly, then let out a soft, “Wooooo-ooo,” like an old-fashioned ghost. George, from the floor, shot her a look.

“If this is a prank, it’s a very convincing one,” he said, brushing stray tinsel off his slacks and regaining his dignity. “Harold, check your logs.”

Harold was already on it, fingers flying across the screen. “Nothing. But —” He paused, then raised his head, eyes bright. “I can cross-reference with the pressure sensors at the entryway. Maybe it’s — uh, I don’t know, a vacuum effect?”

“From what?” Eleanor asked. “The only thing sucking the air out of this room is your rationalization.”

Mabel leaned in, still clutching the snowflake. “It’s a sign. The spirit is reaching out. Maybe it wants to communicate!”

George huffed, but there was less skepticism than before. “If it wants to talk, it can use words like the rest of us.”

Eleanor’s gaze swept the perimeter. The decorations, the windows, the lamp with its friendly yellow glow. “Stay focused. If there’s a pattern, we’ll find it. And nobody decorates alone. Understood?”

Everyone nodded, and the session resumed with an undercurrent of nerves.

Ten minutes later, as George positioned a final row of icicles on the lowest branches, a new sound broke through the music—a series of faint clinks, followed by the unmistakable crash of glass. All eyes snapped to the dining cart in the corner, where a neat row of water glasses had just toppled, one after the other, in a slow, deliberate line.

This time, no one said anything. They simply stared, hearts thumping in unison, while the final glass completed its journey to the carpet with a tiny, plaintive “tink.”

Eleanor’s voice cut through the tension. “No merry Christmas with specters roaming free,” she said, her words crisp as the December air. “We need to investigate properly this time.”

A beat, and then Mabel said, “We should form a new committee. The—what should we call it?—the Paranormal Parlor Investigators?”

Harold grinned, nerves easing. “I’ll update the group chat.”

George, for once, didn’t object. He looked around, then muttered, “Fine. But I’m not cleaning up after poltergeists. That’s where I draw the line.”

Eleanor smiled, sharp and triumphant. “The line, as always, is exactly where we say it is.”

The friends gathered, a little closer than before, and returned to their work—if work was the right word for what was quickly becoming the most exciting Christmas on record.

They were deep in discussion, voices hushed but animated, when the door to the common room swung open. The facility director breezed in, arms laden with boxes of decorations and an expression as bright as a Christmas star.

“Wonderful! You’re all here,” she announced, setting down the boxes. “Just in time—families arrive tomorrow. I want this place picture-perfect.”

The friends exchanged glances, some knowing, some panicked.

Eleanor assumed her most teacherly tone. “Not to worry, Director. The decorating committee is working overtime.”

“Excellent!” the director beamed, oblivious to the nervous energy thrumming in the air. “I knew I could count on you.”

She bustled out, leaving them in a flurry of tinsel and silence. For a moment, they all just looked at each other, the weight of what had just occurred settling in.

Harold spoke first, voice soft but firm. “We have less than twenty-four hours.”

George nodded. “Plenty of time.”

Mabel bounced the snowflake in her palm. “For some people, Christmas is the season of miracles.”

Eleanor’s eyes sparkled, alive with anticipation. “And for us, it’s the season of mysteries.”

The speaker, as if in agreement, played the opening bars of “Silent Night.” But in the common room at Starlight Eldercare,

nothing was silent, and nothing would be still — at least, not until the mystery was solved.

They set to work, decorating and plotting in equal measure, as outside, the first gentle snow of December dusted the world in white.



# Chapter 2

## Whiskers or Wraiths: The Great Debate

The morning after Starlight's night of moving wheelchairs and self-yeeting glassware, the common room looked like a crime scene disguised as a Christmas card. Festive shrapnel — tinsel, red velvet ribbon, odd-shaped ornaments — lay in neat but unfinished piles on every surface, interspersed with a battalion of coffee cups and the occasional muffin crumb. The sunlight made a polite entrance through the east window, slicing through the tree's half-strung lights and painting rainbow streaks on the battered old table where the Starlight Mystery Committee had reconvened.

The committee itself looked, if not fresh, then at least alert. Eleanor, resplendent in a deep-blue sweater and sporting a scarf dotted with tiny gold stars, presided at the table's head, the clipboard now supplemented by a legal pad and a multi-color set of Post-its. To her left, George sat with his arms crossed and a stack of paw-print diagrams arranged in a perfect grid in front of him, glasses pushed to the tip of his nose as he glared at each print as if it owed him money. Mabel had her own section, notebook already open to a page entitled "THE SPECTRAL INTRIGUE" in marker, her hands cradling a mug of something suspiciously fragrant and her eyes alight with anticipation. Harold, last to arrive but first in technical firepower, wheeled in a rolling tray laden with his tablet, two sets of headphones, and a bag of mysterious black boxes whose purpose he refused to divulge.

A Bluetooth speaker in the corner piped out “Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree” at a level just below “lively,” and somewhere underfoot, the facility’s resident feline, Whiskers, stalked the perimeter with the self-importance of an officer on patrol.

Eleanor rapped her pencil on the tabletop, calling the meeting to order. “All right, team. We have twelve hours until the first family arrivals. That’s twelve hours to solve the mystery, finish decorating, and keep George from personally reenacting the story of the Grinch. I want status updates.”

George raised a hand, as if he were back in grade school. “I’ll go first,” he said, “because I have hard evidence.” He nudged his papers forward. “First, the paw prints. I dusted for powder on the tree skirt and measured the impressions against Whiskers’ paw. Most matched—”

“Most?” Mabel interrupted, with a dramatic gasp.

“—but three prints did not.” George pointed at the offending diagrams with a stubby finger. “They’re too large, too spaced apart. Unless Whiskers has taken up ballet and grown an extra toe overnight, we have an outlier.”

Eleanor arched an eyebrow. “Outlier how?”

“They’re not feline. Closer to...well, human.”

“Human?” Mabel exclaimed, clutching her mug. “What, do we have a sleepwalking giant among us?”

“I checked the shoe logs.” George looked pleased with himself. “No footprints—just bare prints. Like someone, or something, was tiptoeing.”

Mabel’s eyes widened, and Eleanor nodded approvingly. “That’s good, George. Let’s record that.”

Harold cleared his throat. “May I?”

Eleanor gestured grandly. “The floor is yours, Mr. Mitchell.”

Harold glanced at his tablet. “The cameras picked up the glass tumbling sequence—slow motion, but no visible hand. I ran the video through a filter for shadow movement, just in case. No dice.” He tapped, and a short clip played on his screen: glasses wobbling, then toppling, then rolling to a stop in a line that defied every law of probability and most laws of physics.

“But,” Harold continued, eyes sparkling, “the pressure sensor under Eleanor’s wheelchair? It registered a weight increase right before she moved. Not a lot—maybe a pound or two. But it was enough to trigger the motion.”

“Like a ghostly hitchhiker!” Mabel blurted.

“Or someone pushing from behind,” George said, dry as toast.

Harold shook his head. “I checked the hallway footage—no one there.”

Eleanor scribbled furiously. “Any anomalies in temperature, Harold?”

He grinned. “I thought you’d never ask.” He flipped to a heat map. “Just before the incident, there’s a cold spot. Right behind you, Eleanor. Drops ten degrees, then returns to normal.”

The table fell silent. Even the Christmas carol seemed to pause for dramatic effect.

Mabel spoke first, voice soft. “I know you’ll laugh, but...I felt something last night. A chill, not just cold, but...like a shiver that starts inside your bones. Right when the tree lights flickered.”

George grunted, but didn’t contradict her.

Eleanor looked up, blue eyes sharper than the tinsel icicles hanging overhead. “So let’s recap. We have: unexplained cold spots, phantom paw prints, and movement with no visible cause. The Whiskers Theory is looking less likely by the hour.”

George scowled, but nodded.

Mabel leaned in, her hair catching a beam of light. “I think we’re dealing with the supernatural. Maybe a Christmas ghost, like in Dickens. It would be poetic, you have to admit.”

“Or we have a prankster with high-level access and a vendetta against decorating committeees,” George countered.

Eleanor held up a hand. “Both theories stay on the table. Mabel, canvass the residents for any past ghost stories or sightings – details, not just rumors. George, keep up with the physical evidence. Harold, set the sensors to higher frequency and add sound monitoring. I’ll coordinate and cross-reference everything tonight.”

The group nodded, the old rhythm of shared inquiry taking hold.

Whiskers, sensing a lull, hopped onto the window ledge and stared at them through narrowed eyes.

Mabel, always ready to add fuel to any fire, pointed at the cat. “Look at that face! He knows something.”

“Maybe he’s in on it,” George deadpanned. “That would explain the collusion.”

Eleanor snorted. “If Whiskers is the criminal mastermind, then we’re all doomed. But I suspect we’re dealing with something – or someone – more complicated.”

Harold tapped his pencil on the table, a neat little echo of Eleanor's opening salvo. "I suggest we bait the entity. Cameras, temperature sensors, maybe a decoy event."

Mabel's face brightened. "A séance! Or a midnight reading. Spirits love drama."

George's eyes rolled, but not unkindly. "Just make sure it's not another 'Norwegian reindeer' story."

Eleanor smiled, satisfied with the plan. She tapped her pencil once more and declared, "All right, team. Today, we solve a mystery, finish this tree, and maybe—just maybe—get a good story out of it. Let's go."

They rose (or, in Eleanor's case, rolled) with renewed purpose. The Christmas carol shifted to a jazzy instrumental, the tree sparkled defiantly, and outside, the snow fell in quiet, determined sheets.

In the background, Whiskers gave a single, imperious meow, as if to say: You'll never catch me. But the four friends knew better.

The game was afoot.

...

The mystery committee had just begun to disperse—Harold to his digital lair, Mabel to the kitchenette in pursuit of "spectral snacks," George to the windowsill for a paw print check—when a low, irregular thump echoed from the hallway just beyond the common room. It wasn't the stately tread of a staff member, nor the stealthy shuffle of Whiskers on patrol. It was a half-muted, stubbornly persistent noise, like someone was knocking from the other side of a thick wool blanket.

Eleanor was the first to register it, eyes narrowing as she straightened in her wheelchair. "That's not the heat ducts," she said, matter-of-fact. She signaled George and Harold with a subtle tilt of her chin; Mabel, who had just returned with a scone in one hand and a napkin in the other, froze mid-bite.

"Investigation, now," Eleanor said, voice soft but urgent.

George flicked on his phone's flashlight, leading the way, with Mabel behind him, and Eleanor close behind, expertly piloting her wheelchair like a ship's captain through a minefield. Harold brought up the rear, already priming his tablet camera for evidence capture.

The hallway outside the common room was colder and quieter than expected, the kind of quiet that makes you doubt your own footsteps. The thumping had stopped, replaced by a light, almost apologetic swish of fabric on metal. At the far end, just outside the staff lounge, a navy-blue uniform hung from a coat hook, swinging gently. Beneath it, a single house slipper lay overturned on the linoleum.

Eleanor gestured, and George moved forward, approaching the uniform as if it might bite. "Wasn't here an hour ago," he noted, crouching to examine the floor. He turned the slipper over—no footprints, but a faint smear of something reddish on the sole.

Mabel edged closer, keeping a safe distance from the uniform itself. "What do you think happened?" she asked, voice just above a whisper.

Eleanor rolled forward and fished a tiny, high-powered flashlight from her cardigan pocket. She flicked it on, the beam as sharp as her tone. "Let's take a closer look at those scratches," she instructed.

Now, with the light aimed directly at the uniform, it was impossible to ignore the damage: three long, deliberate gashes running diagonally across the chest, threads pulled into ragged loops, edges tinged with that same red-brown residue George had found on the slipper. Unlike the wild, looping marks Whiskers left when in a mood, these were almost mathematically parallel, close and straight.

George frowned, bending in for a closer inspection. "These don't look like cat scratches," he said, voice measured. "Claws leave arcs, not lines. And these are deeper, more like a box cutter or—" he paused, "—or something with an edge."

Harold, already snapping photos, set his tablet to macro mode and leaned in. "I'll run these through the database," he murmured. He took a series of tight shots, each one capturing the tiny, brutal perfection of the cuts.

Mabel, hand to her mouth, whispered, "It's almost...surgical."

Eleanor's eyes didn't leave the fabric. "Who was on staff duty last night?" she asked.

George shrugged. "Could check the rotation log."

"We'll do that. But first—" Eleanor reached out and with a pen tip gently teased at one of the frayed seams. More of the red-brown stuff came loose, a powdery crumble instead of the sticky mess one might expect. She sniffed, then recoiled. "Iron. Blood, maybe, but old."

Harold straightened. "Definitely not fresh. And the cuts are too clean for an animal. Too deliberate."

The hallway creaked as the four huddled closer, the temperature seeming to drop another degree. Mabel, whose courage ebbed and flowed on a five-minute cycle, managed a nervous laugh. "Maybe it's a ghostly tailor, making alterations for the dearly departed."

George shot her a look. "If so, it's got terrible bedside manner."

Eleanor allowed herself a thin smile. "I'd say this is our first real clue. And not one easily explained away by feline mischief." She locked eyes with Harold. "Check the footage for anyone coming or going. And let's bag this for further study."

Harold produced a sealable evidence pouch (from where, no one could guess) and handled the uniform like it was priceless. Once sealed, he labeled it: "Hallway Incident, December 10, 10:22 a.m."

George, always one for details, noted the time and location on his legal pad. "We should ask if anyone's missing a uniform. Or a slipper."

Mabel, whose sense of drama was rarely dimmed for long, stepped back and surveyed the scene. "This feels bigger than last year's Whiskers Case," she said, a note of awe in her voice.

Eleanor's gaze swept the corridor, lingering on the spot where the fabric had brushed the wall. "Every story leaves a mark," she murmured. "This one's just started."

The four exchanged a look, as if acknowledging – without words – that this was no ordinary holiday mystery.

And as they made their way back to the common room, each felt the gentle tug of anticipation, equal parts excitement and dread, for whatever the next clue would bring.

...

The return to the common room was less a retreat than a regrouping. Eleanor insisted they set up shop in full view of the Christmas tree—her rationale being that all the best mysteries unfolded under the light of something sparkly. George grumbled but complied, pushing the heavy table closer to the tree’s base so its ornaments glimmered over their shoulder, a silent jury for the case at hand.

Mabel, true to form, had acquired a plate of ginger snaps and passed them around as “brain food.” She settled in, flipping her notebook open to a page now festooned with sticky tabs and quick-draw sketches of their top suspects (Whiskers, “Unknown Night Stalker,” and a ghostly figure in a top hat, just for fun). Harold plugged his tablet into a portable speaker, pulling up an interactive dashboard he’d cobbled together between scenes.

The evidence arrayed on the table would’ve made any police procedural proud: photos of the scratched uniform displayed on the tablet, the bagged-and-tagged garment itself folded with an almost military precision, George’s paw print diagrams annotated in three colors, and a new column of post-its where Eleanor, ever the teacher, had written “Whiskers-possible” and “Definitely-not-Whiskers.”

“All right,” Eleanor said, rapping her pencil in a quick-fire rhythm. “Let’s review. George, start with the timeline.”

George cleared his throat and adjusted his glasses. “Incident One: Christmas tree toppled at 8:16 p.m. Incident Two: Water glasses shattered at 8:42 p.m. Incident Three: Wheelchair moved at 8:58 p.m.” He pointed at his legal pad. “Whiskers was accounted for—by both Mrs. Chan and the night nurse—in the laundry room at 8:40 p.m., and again in the west corridor at 9:00. That means the glass incident and the wheelchair event were physically impossible for one cat to accomplish, unless Whiskers can teleport.”

Mabel couldn't resist. "Maybe Whiskers is a quantum cat. Here and there, and nowhere, all at once!"

George gave her a look, then continued. "The uniform incident occurred at 10:22 a.m. today, with no witnesses and no staff reporting missing attire yet. The pattern suggests escalating behavior, not random mischief."

Eleanor nodded. "Thank you, George. That puts most of last night's events firmly in the 'Definitely-not-Whiskers' column."

She turned to Mabel. "Resident interviews?"

Mabel leafed through her notebook with a flourish. "According to my sources, Mrs. Chan had a 'cold shiver' every time she passed the trophy case in the east wing. Mr. Patel swears he saw someone — 'tall and shadowy' — by the elevator at 8:30. And our very own Director Simmons reports hearing Christmas music in the staff lounge at three in the morning, but the radio was unplugged."

George muttered, "That's not even possible."

"Exactly!" said Mabel, triumphant. "All the major sightings cluster around the east wing, and always after sunset. Classic haunting behavior."

Harold brought up the facility map on his tablet and began dropping digital red dots at every incident location. As the dots multiplied, a rough line traced its way along the east wing, curving through the common room and ending at the staff lounge.

"It forms a path," Harold observed. "A looping pattern. Like it's retracing a route."

Eleanor's eyes lit up. "Or repeating something from the past. We need a list of prior staff and residents. See if there's a connection."

Mabel, chewing a ginger snap, snapped her fingers. "Like a Christmas Carol, but with more breaking and entering."

George leaned forward, tapping the map. "If it's a person, they know the building. If it's...something else, we're dealing with a residual memory or unfinished business."

Mabel fanned herself with her notebook. "Ooh, I love unfinished business. It always makes the best twist endings."

Eleanor gathered her papers, her movements brisk and efficient. "All right. Here's our next move: George, check for more physical evidence along the path. Mabel, interview night staff – focus on anyone who's noticed odd behavior. Harold, up the camera coverage and rig sound sensors in the common room and east wing. I'll coordinate findings and start digging through the old staff rosters."

They paused, the weight of their task settling in.

The tree, half-decorated but still proud, shimmered as if in encouragement.

At that moment, Director Simmons popped her head in, her smile as practiced as a politician's. "How's the decorating going?" she asked, surveying the evidence spread with a raised eyebrow.

Eleanor didn't skip a beat. "We're making excellent progress. We may even have a surprise for the holiday party."

Director Simmons beamed. “Wonderful! Just a reminder – families arrive tomorrow. I want the place looking perfect. And –” She lowered her voice, glancing at the uniform bag. “Try not to scare the new volunteers. One of them fainted last year after Mabel’s séance.”

Mabel held up her hands, indignant. “That was a guided meditation!”

Simmons shook her head, the way one does at a beloved but incorrigible puppy. “Carry on, but remember – Christmas cheer, not Christmas fear.”

As the door clicked shut, Harold whispered, “She’s going to love this year’s report.”

Eleanor, eyes twinkling, surveyed her team. “Let’s finish what we started. No merry Christmas with specters haunting the halls.”

Mabel raised her ginger snap like a toast. “To the Starlight Mystery Committee – best in the business!”

George grunted, but his lips curled in a rare, small smile. “Just don’t assign me the glitter again.”

They got to work, each falling into their familiar groove – papers rustling, tech whirring, debate flying. The hum of Christmas carols wound through the room, now joined by the occasional, not-so-distant yowl of Whiskers.

And as the afternoon light shifted, and the first hints of evening cast long blue shadows on the walls, the four friends pressed on, determined to crack the case before the first jingle of tomorrow’s bells.

Some people say it's the children who make Christmas magical. But here, in the Starlight Eldercare Facility, it was a handful of stubborn old souls, a plate of cookies, and the shared thrill of chasing after something just out of sight.

Maybe that's all the holiday miracle anyone ever really needs.

# Chapter 3

## Stakeouts and Surprises: The East Wing Chronicles

At exactly 7:00 p.m., the east wing of Starlight Eldercare Facility became the center of the known universe—at least as far as Eleanor Grace Hudson and her mystery committee were concerned. The rest of the building had been coaxed into a gentle hush by a combination of decaf cocoa and the evening’s televised bingo; here, in the dim recesses of the old reading room, something altogether different was brewing.

Eleanor rolled her wheelchair into position, commanding the room with a clipboard, a constellation of multi-colored sticky notes, and an air of expectancy that could curdle milk. “Operation Starlight Specter commences now,” she announced, glancing pointedly at her three companions.

George Reynolds took the cue with practiced precision, settling himself by the tallest of the ancient bookshelves. He’d rigged a makeshift station there—paw-print diagrams, a measuring tape, and his trusty flashlight arrayed before him like the world’s least-threatening armory. He clicked the light on and off, inspecting the area for signs of feline or otherworldly tampering.

Mabel Bennett had staked her claim in the most comfortable armchair, legs tucked under her and notebook open on her lap. She’d brought a battered tin of ginger snaps (“For stamina,” she insisted), which she offered to each member of the committee with a conspiratorial wink. “This is the exact spot where Mrs. Chan says she felt the ‘cold hand of destiny,’” Mabel declared, pointing at the chair’s gently worn armrest. “If we’re going to see a ghost, this is prime real estate.”

Harold Mitchell took up residence at the card table, his tablet set up like a mission control panel. Every few minutes, he’d glance at the array of motion-activated camera feeds—each cleverly disguised as a

“festive security elf” and positioned for maximum coverage of the reading room, the corridor outside, and the rarely-used emergency exit at the far end of the wing.

The only sound for the first hour was the slow whirr of the heating system, punctuated by the occasional snap of a cookie and the low, secretive murmur of committee members comparing notes. The lamps along the wall had been set to their lowest setting, casting long, strange shadows against the deep green carpet and the racks of encyclopedias.

After forty-five minutes, George yawned (discreetly, but Eleanor noticed) and leaned closer to the shelf. “If this is anything like the ‘Whiskers Incident,’ we’re in for a long haul,” he said, running his finger along the edge of a dust jacket.

“It’s not about quantity of incidents, George,” Eleanor replied, making a note on her pad. “It’s about the quality of our observation.”

“I’d settle for a little quantity right about now,” Harold muttered. He tapped his tablet. “Cameras are picking up nothing but the world’s slowest spider in the corridor. We need a higher test sample.”

“We need to be patient,” Mabel said, nibbling at the edge of a ginger snap. “Spirits keep their own schedules.”

George snorted, but not unkindly. “Why do you suppose they’re always night owls?”

“Better marketing,” Mabel replied, deadpan. “No one’s afraid of a breakfast ghost.”

They waited. And waited. The clock in the hallway struck eight, then half past. The cookies diminished, the notebook filled with whimsical sketches of what the Starlight ghost might look like (“Tall, shadowy, a definite sense of drama”), and still—nothing. Even the heating system seemed to lose interest, cycling down to a dull whisper.

By the end of the second hour, a thin layer of disappointment had settled over the committee. George sat with his chin propped on his hand, eyes drooping. Mabel doodled a haunted gingerbread house. Harold watched the tablet with the weary vigilance of a man expecting

spam emails and not much else. Only Eleanor remained sharp, blue eyes flicking between the group, the clock, and the perimeter.

“Are we sure this is the right spot?” George finally whispered, breaking the silence.

He never finished the sentence.

A book—one of those oversized hardbacks with gilded edges and a title in Latin—launched itself from the very top of the bookshelf, soared over George’s head, and landed on the linoleum floor with a WHUMP that reverberated off the cinderblock walls.

George leapt to his feet, flashlight forgotten and hands splayed in the universal sign for What on Earth Was That.

Mabel’s eyes went as wide as the ginger snaps. “Oh my stars,” she gasped, fumbling for her pen.

Before anyone could recover, three more books burst from the shelf in quick succession. They didn’t fall—didn’t even tumble. They shot, one after the other, in a perfect arc across the reading room, smacking the floor with crisp, efficient finality.

Harold groped for his tablet and flipped to the camera feed. “Nothing! There’s no one up there—nothing but dust!”

Eleanor, never one to miss a teachable moment, snapped, “Describe the trajectory, Mabel. Diagram it.”

Mabel, hands shaking, began to sketch the pattern on her notepad. “They went—like—like a rainbow, almost. Not random, very...deliberate.” Her voice trembled, but she was already mapping out the paths.

George, whose initial shock had given way to pure detective instinct, stooped to inspect the books. “No sign of tampering,” he reported. “No footprints. No paw prints, either.” He aimed his flashlight at the top of the shelf and added, “Nothing knocked over. Just the books themselves.”

Eleanor inched her wheelchair closer. “Harold, run a heat scan of the shelf. Any residuals?”

Harold's fingers flew over the tablet, cycling through spectral modes like a television remote. "Negative. Ambient temperature only. Wait—hold on—there's a cold spot." He pointed at the grainy blue map on his screen. "A five-degree drop, right where the books were."

As if in answer, a sudden draft rippled through the reading room, lifting the ends of Eleanor's scarf and sending a shudder down Mabel's spine. The windows were closed, the vents all accounted for, but the chill was unmistakable.

"It's freezing!" Mabel squeaked, teeth chattering.

George checked the window for gaps, then shook his head. "Nothing open. And there's no way Whiskers—or any animal—could have gotten up there. The shelf is seven feet off the ground."

For a moment, nobody moved. Even the building seemed to pause, holding its breath. The silence was total, broken only by the faint, persistent hum of the security elves' hidden cameras.

Eleanor took a long, steady breath. "All right, team," she said, voice resolute but with an edge of awe. "We record, we analyze, and we don't jump to conclusions."

Mabel, emboldened by the structure of protocol, scribbled notes with the urgency of a court stenographer. "Book order, time stamps, flight paths. Got it."

Harold watched the screen, eyes glued to the grainy playback. "I'll see if I can enhance the footage—maybe there's something we missed in the shadows."

George knelt, lined up the books in the order they'd landed, and snapped photos from every conceivable angle. "No scuff marks on the floor. They landed clean, like someone set them down with force, but not a single scratch."

Eleanor clicked her pen and flipped to a fresh page. "Pattern of escalation," she murmured, as much to herself as the group. "First, the tree and the glasses. Now this. There's intent."

Mabel, ever the dramatist, couldn't help herself. "I told you it wanted to make contact," she whispered. "Maybe it's lonely. Or maybe it just loves literature."

Harold snorted, but only a little. "Whatever it is, it's not showing up on any standard spectrum. That's...unusual."

Eleanor's blue eyes flicked from her notes to the books on the floor. "Nothing about this is standard. But it's nothing we can't handle."

She set her clipboard in her lap, the motion crisp, decisive. "Let's reset, document everything, and wait. If it happened once, it can happen again."

So they did. For the rest of the hour, the four friends moved in careful, collaborative silence—restacking the books, logging every detail, and glancing often at the tops of shelves and the corners of the room. The ginger snaps were gone by ten o'clock, but the sense of anticipation was stronger than ever.

At precisely 10:14, a new sound joined the old: the faint, unmistakable tinkle of a bell, coming from the farthest shadowed alcove.

Mabel stiffened, then whispered, "That wasn't here before."

Eleanor nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

George, perhaps the bravest or the most stubborn, clicked his flashlight and walked toward the sound. There, sitting on the edge of a reading table, was a tiny brass bell, its handle still vibrating from use.

He picked it up, examining it with the skepticism of a lifelong empiricist. "Anyone know where this came from?"

Eleanor shook her head. "Never seen it before."

Harold scanned the table, looking for heat signatures or fingerprints. "Nothing. It's colder than the surface it's sitting on."

Mabel, eyes shining, said, "Maybe it's a calling card."

Eleanor smiled, just a little. "Or an invitation to continue the investigation."

The four friends gathered around the reading table, the bell between them, each feeling the old, familiar thrill of discovery—and the new, delicious tingle of something just out of reach.

As the clock crept toward midnight, the committee braced themselves for whatever came next, united by the certainty that the night was far from over.

...

Midnight came and went, but the east wing's reading room was anything but quiet. If the first volley of flying books had been a warning shot, the next hour was open warfare.

The committee had barely finished resetting the toppled books when a fresh salvo hit. This time, the volumes didn't merely leap from the shelves—they seemed to choose their moments, waiting for George to pass by before tumbling directly at his feet, or flinging themselves past Harold's elbow as he hunched over his tablet.

Eleanor, cool as ever, ramped up the operation. "George, catalog each impact. Measure the angles and distances. If there's a logic, we'll find it."

"On it," George muttered, ducking a rogue dictionary. He dropped to his knees, tape measure extended, and began noting the spacing of each new arrival with the focus of a bomb technician defusing live rounds. "We're at ten books in—none of them from below the third shelf. Trajectories are...unnaturally precise."

Mabel, her initial awe morphing into delight, scribbled furiously in her notebook. "We're witnessing a haunting in real time," she whispered. "Nobody's going to believe this. Well, almost nobody."

Harold, meanwhile, cycled through every sensor at his disposal. "Thermal's useless—whatever it is, it's not putting off heat. Cameras are picking up the movement, but not the cause. Wait, hang on." He zoomed in on one feed, his voice rising with excitement. "There's a blur—a shadow, maybe?—but it's not a consistent shape."

Eleanor rolled to a safe vantage near the far wall, clipboard balanced expertly as she called out, “Can we isolate the blur? Pinpoint a pattern?”

Harold nodded, fingers tapping. “Give me a minute.”

The air in the room grew noticeably colder with each passing minute. By one a.m., their breath hung in pale clouds, mingling with the floating dust motes in the slanted light of the wall sconces. Even George, usually immune to drafts, shivered as he bent to photograph the latest set of impact marks.

Just as Mabel reached for another ginger snap, the biggest book yet—a two-volume encyclopedia bound in battered maroon—rocketed off the shelf and landed dead center on the reading table. The sound was seismic; the cookies bounced, the lamp shuddered, and Harold’s coffee sloshed over the rim of his mug.

“Did everyone see that?” Eleanor asked, not bothering to hide her excitement.

“Front-row seats,” George said, snapping a picture of the encyclopedia in its new habitat.

Mabel leaned in. “It didn’t just fall. It flew. Like, it was thrown. By someone—or something—with a sense of purpose.”

“I’m starting to think it’s got a sense of humor,” Harold said, mopping up coffee. “Or a grudge against encyclopedias.”

They laughed, nerves fraying around the edges, but the camaraderie was unshaken.

The next incident was less funny.

Without warning, the lights flickered—once, twice—and then dimmed to a ghostly twilight. The temperature dropped another ten degrees. Before anyone could react, the east wing doors slammed open with the force of a gale.

Framed in the doorway stood three children, frozen in place and wide-eyed. Two were grade-schoolers in matching pajamas, the third a teenager in a fuzzy red hoodie.

“Grandma, the ghost!” one of the younger children squealed, pointing directly at the still-vibrating book on the table.

Behind the children, a harried-looking woman—their mother, presumably—gawked at the chaos. “What on earth—”

Mabel leapt to her feet, ginger snaps in hand. “No need to panic! Just a...just a bit of holiday excitement. Would you like a cookie?”

The children stared, transfixed, as a fourth book slid off the shelf and landed at their feet with a soft thud.

The mother edged them into the room, as if hoping closer inspection would make the incident less bizarre. “I heard a crash,” she said. “Are you—are you all right?”

Eleanor, never missing a beat, wheeled forward. “We’re fine. In fact, we’re conducting a little...experiment for the holiday party.”

The teenager, skeptical and sharp-eyed, cocked an eyebrow. “Is this a prank?”

“Only if you believe in poltergeists,” Mabel said, then immediately regretted it. “That was a joke. Just a joke.”

The two younger children ignored the adults entirely, fixated on the movement of books and the cold air. “It’s a ghost,” the smaller one whispered to the other, “just like in the movie.”

Meanwhile, the youngest wandered over to Harold’s card table and peered at the tablet. “What’s that?”

Harold, at a loss, showed the child the video feed. “We’re watching for...well, for things that move on their own.”

The child pointed at a blur on the screen. “I saw it move! Look, right there!”

Eleanor, sensing the situation slipping, tried to regain control. “Thank you for your keen observation, young man,” she said. “We’ll be sure to add your report to our notes.”

But the children's mother was already hustling them out of the room, murmuring reassurances and casting wary glances back at the four investigators.

As the doors swung closed behind them, a silence descended—a silence full of the unsaid. Then, with perfect timing, the facility director materialized in the open doorway.

She took in the scene: the scattered books, the visible clouds of breath, and the motley crew of elders surrounded by evidence, cookies, and technology.

"Would someone like to explain," she said, voice crisp as a peppermint, "why I have three families asking if Starlight is haunted?"

No one spoke for a moment.

Mabel, always the first to jump on a grenade, said, "We're...beta-testing the new safety protocols? For the library?"

Eleanor spoke over her. "We're working to ensure the comfort and peace of mind for all residents—and guests. Rest assured, Director, we have everything under control."

The director's eyebrows arched so high they threatened to disappear into her hairline. "Is that so. Because what I see is a mess, and several frightened children, and—" she peered at the thermal camera still running on Harold's tablet—"some sort of scientific gadgetry. If you're ghost hunting, at least have the decency to not scare the guests."

"Understood," said Eleanor, stone-faced.

The director paused, her eyes softening just a touch. "Look, I know you all mean well. But please—keep it down, keep it tidy, and keep the residents from thinking they're being haunted by Charles Dickens."

She swept out, the echo of her steps chased by a faint giggle from the hallway (the children, apparently, were already trading stories).

When the door clicked shut, the committee relaxed, releasing a collective sigh.

“That could have gone worse,” George said, stacking books with a new sense of urgency.

Harold ran a hand over his scalp, bewildered but impressed. “The blur really did show up on the feed. I wasn’t imagining it.”

Mabel, already scribbling in her notebook, whispered, “The ghost has fans now.”

Eleanor gazed around the room, blue eyes sharper than ever. “We regroup. We analyze. And we solve this—before it makes tomorrow’s front page.”

The group set to work, moving with renewed purpose even as the temperature began to climb back to normal. Outside, the faint laughter of children echoed down the corridor, and in the east wing, the promise of another mystery hung in the air, just waiting for its curtain call.

...

The east wing, once again, belonged to the committee—though this time, it was a victory by default. The post-midnight quiet pressed in from all sides, broken only by the faint crackle of static from Harold’s tablet and the nervous scribble of Mabel’s pen. For the first time in ages, Eleanor Grace Hudson sat silent at the head of the table, fingers steepled beneath her chin, lost in thought.

George took the lead, stacking the last of the displaced books and eyeing the battered encyclopedia with suspicion. “Well,” he said, “I think we can officially cross Whiskers off the suspect list.”

Mabel, notebook open and overflowing with diagrams and timestamps, nodded solemnly. “It’s not a cat. It’s not a prank. It’s not even one of Harold’s experiments.” She looked to Harold for confirmation.

He didn’t argue. Instead, he pulled up the night’s footage for the fifth time, slow-motion replay casting shadows across his face. “The movement’s real,” he said, voice low. “It’s not a glitch, it’s not trick photography. These books—” he tapped the screen, “they move on their own. No wires, no hands, no heat signatures.”

Eleanor finally spoke. Her voice was rough at the edges, the command worn down by hours of relentless phenomena. “We have to face facts,” she said. “We’re dealing with something...unprecedented.”

George snorted, but without his usual bite. “At least it’s a well-read ghost.”

Mabel, sensing the shift in mood, reached into her tote for the emergency chocolate. “I think it’s trying to send us a message,” she said, breaking a bar into quarters and distributing it. “Like, maybe it wants us to notice it. Or maybe it wants us to finish its business.”

Harold chewed his chocolate with the distracted air of a man troubleshooting a nuclear reactor. “If it wanted to hurt anyone, it had plenty of chances. But the worst injury so far is me spilling my coffee.”

Eleanor let out a breath, her blue eyes scanning each of her friends in turn. “We need to proceed with caution. There will be residents, staff, and now—” she gestured toward the corridor, where the echoes of children’s laughter still lingered—“families. We can’t have a repeat of tonight. Not with outsiders here.”

“Do we tell anyone?” Mabel asked, voice uncharacteristically small.

“No,” said Eleanor, sharp as a snapped pencil. “Not unless it becomes a danger. We keep this to ourselves, gather all the evidence we can, and resolve it quietly. Starlight’s reputation depends on it.”

George agreed, if only to avoid paperwork. “We’ll secure the east wing. Double-check all sensors and cameras. If the activity escalates, we escalate with it.”

Harold nodded, already making a list on his tablet. “I can program a real-time alert. If anything moves, we’ll know instantly. Even if it’s just the air.”

Mabel, notebook hugged to her chest, whispered, “If only we could ask it questions. Like, directly.”

George considered. “Maybe that’s not a bad idea. We could...set up a controlled experiment. See if it responds to us.”

Eleanor allowed herself a wry smile. “A séance, Mabel? You’re rubbing off on us.”

“It doesn’t have to be a séance,” Harold said. “But maybe we try communicating. Log every response. We approach this like any good mystery: gather data, test theories, rule out the impossible.”

The plan, once spoken aloud, steadied them. The old rhythm reasserted itself—assignments distributed, notes compared, the warm current of shared purpose flowing through the group. For a while, they worked in tandem, the night’s earlier chaos receding behind the familiar comfort of procedure.

At two a.m., the final notes were jotted, the final sensors checked. The east wing was as orderly as it would ever be, and the air had finally returned to its usual temperature—just shy of “comfortable.”

They packed their things in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. Mabel was the first to speak as they left the reading room behind. “I’ll bring extra ginger snaps tomorrow. Just in case.”

George grumbled, “Make it chocolate chip and you’ve got a deal.”

Harold hung back for a moment, glancing at the now-empty shelf where the books had first launched themselves. “Good night,” he said, half to the room and half to whatever presence lingered there.

As they made their way down the corridor, the faintest trace of music drifted after them. Not Christmas carols, but something softer—an old lullaby, hummed by a voice no one could quite place. They stopped, listened, and then, as one, looked back.

Eleanor was the last to turn away, her expression equal parts wonder and determination.

The investigation, she decided, was far from over. But for tonight, they had done their best.

And in the morning, they would face the mystery again—armed with evidence, friendship, and the unshakable certainty that no ghost, no matter how persistent, could outsmart the Starlight Mystery Committee.



# Chapter 4

## Carols and Clues: Unraveling the Holiday Ghost

By 10:00 a.m., the Starlight Eldercare Facility's common room had transformed from festive living room to makeshift detective headquarters. The half-decorated Christmas tree, stubbornly refusing to topple despite last night's supernatural dramatics, loomed over a rectangular folding table now crowded with paper evidence, three clipboards, four mugs of hot beverage (tea for Eleanor, black coffee for George, decaf with peppermint for Mabel, and a mystery liquid for Harold), and a forensic lineup of ginger snaps.

Eleanor sat at the table's short end, the clipboard balanced against her knees declaring, in her confident block script, "Operation Starlight Specter." Neatly divided columns, each with its own highlighter color, were labeled "Date," "Time," "Incident," "Location," and – added that morning – "Suspect." To Eleanor's immediate right, George had commandeered a generous stretch of table real estate for his scratch diagrams, timeline charts, and two rulers (one metric, one imperial, for scientific rigor). Mabel's area was a study in chaos: ginger snaps spilling from an antique tin, notebook open to a doodle of Whiskers in a Sherlock cap, and post-it notes half-obscured by a fine dusting of powdered sugar. Harold, of course, worked entirely off a tablet, which he swiped and tapped with the efficiency of a man trying to crack NORAD.

The morning's sunlight splashed across the floor and over the tree, making the tinsel fragments and crumpled wrapping paper on the carpet glint like forensic evidence at a particularly jolly crime scene. A fresh pot of coffee percolated from the kitchenette. Somewhere in the hall, a vacuum whined, then

died, leaving the common room steeped in the hush of conspiracy.

Eleanor called the meeting to order with the ceremonial thwack of pencil on tabletop. “First up, let’s recap last night’s events and address any new evidence.”

George cleared his throat. “I’ll start. After reviewing my findings from the east wing, I’ve concluded the scratches on the staff uniform were not random. In fact —” he flourished a printout of a close-up photo, “— they are too uniform to be accidental.” He flicked the picture to the center of the table. “Note the spacing between marks. Each set is approximately 2.3 centimeters apart, which, coincidentally, matches the width of Whiskers’ left front paw.”

Eleanor raised an eyebrow, blue eyes sharp as tacks. “You measured the cat?”

“Last spring, after the Great Laundry Room Incident,” George replied, only a little defensive. “For the record, I also checked the right paw. Slightly smaller, but within margin of error.”

Mabel, having selected the most symmetrical ginger snap, nibbled thoughtfully. “So, you’re saying our suspect is...Whiskers?”

George nodded, but not before eyeing the ginger snap with unspoken envy. “All the evidence points to him. However, I’d like to enter this.” He produced a timeline drawn in red and blue ink. “According to the incident log and Whiskers’ last known locations — verified by Mrs. Chan and the night nurse — he was in the west wing at the time of the tree event, and in the east corridor during the glassware mishap.”

Eleanor considered. “And the uniform incident?”

"That's the outlier," George admitted. "No confirmed cat sighting in that area at the time."

Mabel set down her cookie, fingers dusted in sugar. "I'd like to state for the record: Whiskers was locked in Mrs. Pemberton's room all morning. She wouldn't let him out, not even for breakfast, because she was convinced the tree debacle was a direct result of feline sabotage."

George grunted, conceding the point.

Harold, who'd been silent, swiveled his tablet for the others to see. "I've cross-referenced all available footage from the security elves. The time stamps for each incident match George's log exactly. Here—" he zoomed in, "—the glass crash. No visible cat, not even a tail. And here—" another swipe, "—the uniform. Still nothing."

"So Whiskers has mastered invisibility?" Mabel offered, not entirely joking.

"Or," Harold said, "there's another factor at play."

Eleanor wheeled herself closer to the evidence board propped on the nearby credenza. She pinned up the latest photos: one, a perfect row of glass shards on the carpet; another, the close-up of the uniform gashes; and a third, a paw print in tinsel that Harold had enhanced in Photoshop for dramatic effect.

"So," Eleanor said, her voice gathering steam, "either we have a cat with the power to phase through solid objects and alter its mass at will—" She paused for effect, allowing the group to savor the absurdity. "—or we have an accomplice."

The table fell silent, save for the quiet tap of Harold's stylus on the tablet.

Mabel, not one to let silence linger, leaned forward. "Well, if Whiskers didn't act alone, who—or what—did? We already ruled out all the residents, right?"

George frowned. "The timeline rules out the human staff. The only people in the affected zones during the incidents were ourselves and...maybe that little girl who visited last night?"

Mabel's face lit up. "The one in the reindeer pajamas? She was adorable! But also, she was with her mother the entire time. I doubt she had time to engineer a ghostly cat attack."

Eleanor nodded. "Agreed. Let's consider non-human accomplices. Any other animals in the building?"

Harold scrolled through the facility registry. "No dogs, no birds. Technically, Mrs. Pemberton's room is a 'No Cat' zone, but we all know how well that rule is enforced."

"So, it comes down to Whiskers and...a supernatural force?" Mabel said, voice hushed with just a touch of awe.

"Not necessarily," George cut in, practical as ever. "What about mechanical malfunction? Vents, air currents—Harold, could the glassware have been toppled by a change in pressure?"

Harold considered, then shook his head. "I checked the HVAC logs. The system was stable during each event. No surges, no spikes. And the motion sensors did pick up activity, but only at the exact moment of impact."

Eleanor chewed her pencil eraser, deep in thought. "Which leaves us with two possibilities: an invisible accomplice, or an extraordinary escalation in Whiskers' skill set."

Mabel, apparently unfazed by the prospect of spectral involvement, offered the tin of cookies around the table.

"Investigation always goes better with snacks," she said, and managed to get a half-smile out of George.

Harold, emboldened by sugar, leaned in. "I have a theory. What if Whiskers is being manipulated? Not just blamed for the mess, but actually...compelled?"

Eleanor seized on the idea. "By what?"

Harold shrugged. "A presence. Or maybe an electronic impulse – something we haven't thought of yet."

George, never one for flights of fancy, opened his mouth to object, then closed it again. "If you can prove it, I'll buy you a year's supply of ginger snaps."

Mabel, delighted by the possibility of a wager, clapped her hands. "That's the spirit! Pun intended."

Eleanor glanced at the operation board, where a new sticky note read: "Suspect List: 1. Whiskers 2. The Unseen 3. Rogue staff member." She added a fourth: "4. Unknown force."

"Whatever it is," she said, "we'll get to the bottom of it. Today. We'll set a perimeter, monitor the common room, and see if we can catch our culprit in the act."

George muttered, "I hope it's not Whiskers. He's a lousy poker player."

Mabel offered, "Maybe we should bait the trap with tinsel? Or ginger snaps?"

Harold, eyes gleaming, said, "I can rig the motion sensors to alert us instantly. If anything moves, we'll know."

Eleanor looked at her assembled committee, the strange, warm certainty of purpose settling over her like a wool blanket.

“Team,” she said, “if Starlight wants a mystery, we’ll give it a Christmas Eve to remember.”

They huddled closer, the tree casting fractured sunlight over their plans, and made ready for whatever came next.

For in this house, the spirit of investigation was alive and well. And so, apparently, was the other kind.

...

By lunchtime, George had overtaken one end of the table with a fresh roll of butcher paper, the surface already a tangle of lines and dots, each cluster annotated in his crabbed, all-caps handwriting. He’d color-coded the mysterious incidents in red, Whiskers’ confirmed whereabouts in blue, and the few open questions in green for “pending.” At first glance, the chart looked like a traffic map of a very unlucky city; on closer inspection, it mapped out the impossible geometry of last night’s hauntings.

The four friends clustered around, Mabel squeezing between Harold and Eleanor to get a better look.

“Observe,” George intoned, ruler poised like a conductor’s baton. He drew a straight line from the common room incident (red dot, 8:16 p.m.) to the east wing uniform-slash (red dot, 8:22 p.m.), then arced his ruler to a third: the staff lounge event at 8:27 p.m. “That’s an eleven-minute spread. No physical way for a cat, or anything else short of a drone, to make all three locations in time.”

Mabel piped up, “Unless Whiskers has a clone.” She grinned, but her eyes were fixed on the chart, thoughtful.

Eleanor leaned in, reading upside down with the ease of long practice. “And the witnesses?”

George tapped three blue dots with the butt end of his ruler. "Confirmed by staff and residents. At 8:16, Whiskers was in the solarium with Mrs. Chan. At 8:22, he was sighted napping in the west corridor. At 8:27, he was trapped in the supply closet after following Mrs. Pemberton in."

Mabel nudged a ginger snap in George's direction. "You know what this means."

George snorted. "It means we're dealing with a phantom cat. Or an elaborate hoax."

Eleanor's pen hovered over her clipboard. "Or a second party, using Whiskers' reputation as a smokescreen."

Harold, never one to be left behind in deductive leaps, pulled up his camera logs on the tablet. "I've reviewed the motion sensors in each location. All three show activity, but only the first — here —" he pointed to the common room event, " — has video of Whiskers. The other two? Nothing. No visual, just the aftermath."

"So maybe we're dealing with two entities," Mabel said, voice a mixture of awe and delight. "One real, one not-so-real."

George rolled his eyes, but not unkindly. "Or it's a person trying very hard to look like a cat. There are costumed pranksters in the world."

Eleanor frowned. "Not in this building. The last time anyone attempted a costume prank was the Halloween of 2019, and the repercussions were severe. Mrs. Novak still refuses to eat anything orange."

"Then what are we missing?" Harold asked, half to himself.

Eleanor considered the evidence board. “Intent. There’s escalation, yes, but also purpose. Someone—or something—is trying to make a point. The question is, what?”

Harold tapped the timeline. “I can rig the security elves to flag simultaneous activity. If something moves in two places at once, we’ll know.”

“Do it,” Eleanor said.

Mabel took a long, meditative bite of cookie. “Maybe the answer isn’t in where Whiskers was, but where he wasn’t.”

George paused, pencil mid-scribble. “Go on.”

Mabel shrugged. “If every time something weird happens, Whiskers is accounted for, then maybe the real culprit is waiting for him to be out of the way.”

Eleanor smiled, the sharp, rare kind that said she liked where this was going. “So, we look for the gap. The pattern in the absences.”

The committee fell silent, each mind whirring through the possibilities.

George, after a moment, shook his head in wonder. “Well, I’ll be. We’ve been chasing the cat, but the answer’s in the spaces between.”

Harold, eyes alive with the thrill of a new puzzle, tapped at his tablet. “I’ll run the numbers. We’ll know by sundown.”

Eleanor set her pen down and leaned back. “Excellent work, all of you. The only thing more mysterious than this ghost is how we ever solved anything without ginger snaps.”

Mabel raised her cookie in salute. “To the power of snacks and shared delusion.”

Even George laughed, and the warmth in the room almost, but not quite, overpowered the faint chill that crept in from the east corridor.

Operation Starlight Specter, at least for the moment, had a new suspect: the empty air itself.

...

By evening, the halls of Starlight Eldercare had settled into their usual hush—an after-dinner lull broken only by the shuffle of slippers or the faint click of dominoes. But in the east wing, under the dim glow of motion-sensitive sconces, four figures prowled with purpose, flashlight beams slicing through the hush like searchlights across a stage.

Eleanor led the charge, wheelchair rolling smoothly on the polished linoleum. She wielded a small but powerful LED torch, the kind favored by amateur astronomers and professional nosy parkers. George strode just behind, measuring tape coiled at his hip, and a carpenter's ruler—retrieved from a neighbor's tool kit—clutched in his left hand. Mabel, scarf wound high against the chill, padded alongside, eyes wide and alert, notebook ready for field notes or spontaneous poetry. Harold brought up the rear, tablet at the ready and headphones slung around his neck, collecting every decibel the corridor offered.

They paused outside the staff lounge, where last night's uniform incident had been logged.

"Check the baseboards," Eleanor said, voice low but urgent.

George dropped to a squat, ruler outstretched. "There—" he pointed, "—three fresh scratches. Still sharp at the edges. Made within the last twelve hours, max."

Mabel knelt beside him, peering at the marks. "But Whiskers hates this part of the hall. The vents hiss and make him jump a foot in the air."

Eleanor swung her torch, illuminating the vent above. "Any tinsel?"

Mabel scanned the floor, then grinned. "As a matter of fact—" She plucked a single, silvery thread from the linoleum. "You'd think he'd shed less, being so short-haired."

George snorted. "You haven't seen my sweaters."

Harold, who'd been scanning the corridor with a sensor app, frowned at the readout. "Temperature dropped three degrees in this section last night," he said, "and only here. The rest of the wing was stable."

George ran a finger over the scratches. "Could be metal-on-wood," he said, "but it's too fine for a coin or a key. And—" he glanced up at Eleanor, "—there's a repeating pattern. Like...almost like handwriting."

"Or a code?" Mabel ventured.

Harold shook his head. "Not Morse, not binary, not any cipher I know. But it's deliberate."

Eleanor rolled closer, her blue eyes keen in the half-light. "Let's document it and move to the next site."

They advanced down the corridor, stopping at every odd mark or hint of movement. Twice, they caught only the tail end of Whiskers darting from shadow to shadow, his eyes reflecting the torchlight like twin marbles. The cat never stayed long—just a flash, then gone, as if he too was tracking the invisible interloper.

By the time they reached the far end of the east wing, the evidence was conclusive: scratches, tinsel, temperature drops, but always in places the cat was least likely to go. The pattern was unmistakable—something, or someone, was mimicking Whiskers, but with intent.

Eleanor shivered, not just from the draft that curled around her ankles, but from the sense that they were being watched. She glanced over her shoulder. Nothing, just the echo of their own footsteps.

"Does anyone else feel that?" she asked, voice tight.

George nodded. "It's colder here."

Harold checked his device. "Down to sixty-one. That's a full five degrees below baseline."

Mabel pulled her scarf tighter, eyes darting from vent to doorway. "Maybe we should go back—"

But just then, a sound filled the corridor. Not a crash, or a meow, but a thin, sweet melody: "Silent Night," faint and fragile, drifting on the air.

The four froze, straining to listen.

"It's coming from the wall," Eleanor whispered. She wheeled forward, ears sharp.

Harold frowned. "PA system's off. I checked it myself after dinner."

Mabel edged closer to the speaker grille above the supply closet. "That's impossible. Unless..."

The music grew, the notes crystalline, as if played on a music box hidden behind the drywall. Then, just as suddenly, it faded—replaced by a silence so complete it rang in their ears.

George was the first to recover. “No one turned that on,” he said. “No one could have.”

Harold fumbled with his tablet, switching to the recording app. He replayed the last thirty seconds; the tune played back, clear as church bells.

Eleanor’s face was pale, but determined. “There’s our proof,” she said, voice husky with awe. “Not Whiskers. Not us. Something else.”

The group huddled in the chill, the echo of “Silent Night” hanging in the air like a secret. For a moment, even George had nothing to say.

Finally, Mabel broke the silence. “Well,” she whispered, “if it’s a ghost, at least it has good taste in holiday music.”

Eleanor managed a tremulous smile. “And if it’s a prankster, they’re about to be very disappointed.”

They turned, heading back toward the common room, steps a little quicker than before. Behind them, the corridor returned to quiet. But as they walked, the faintest trace of melody followed, like a promise – or a dare.

Harold saved the file, labeling it: “East Wing, 7:43 p.m. Unexplained Melody.”

George muttered, “Tomorrow, we catch it in the act.”

Eleanor nodded, eyes bright in the dark. “Tomorrow, we finish what we started.”

And as the four investigators vanished around the corner, the vent above the supply closet shivered, shedding a fresh sliver of tinsel to the floor.



# Chapter 5

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## Family Ties and Haunting Hints

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The Starlight common room had never buzzed quite like this before. Maybe it was the holiday, or maybe it was the fact that the building had just survived a full week of poltergeist-grade mischief without a single major incident. Whatever the cause, the energy that morning was cranked up to eleven, as if every light and laugh in the building had decided to throw a block party. A decibel or two above the usual, Eleanor Grace Hudson directed the chaos from her wheelchair—clipboard in hand, scarf cinched against her neck, and the absolute conviction that order could still be imposed on seventy-two hours of holiday pandemonium.

Families swarmed in, a blur of coats, parcels, and festive hats, each new arrival greeted with the same professional cheer as a state dignitary. George, caught in the slipstream of incoming visitors, corralled folding chairs from the storage closet and lined them in perfect rows, his natural sense of geometry barely keeping up with the sprawl of grandkids and great-aunts. The scent of cinnamon and pine needles rolled over the room like a low fog, chasing away the ghostly chills of the previous nights and replacing them with the warm, relentless press of impending togetherness.

Amidst this, Whiskers lay under the Christmas tree, eyes half-lidded, the picture of a cat who'd seen every possible holiday disaster and considered each one beneath his notice. Three children, bundled in sweaters and still wearing their boots, circled him in a ritual that was half adulation, half safari.

"Here, kitty kitty!" one sang, dangling a red felt ornament like a lure.

Whiskers' tail twitched; he measured the distance between himself, the ornament, and the lowest-hanging tinsel. Then, in a move worthy of a trained acrobat, he snared the ornament, rolled, and shredded the ribbon in a single pass. The children shrieked with delight and dove after him, overturning a box of unstrung lights and scattering tinsel across the floor like confetti.

Eleanor's blue eyes flicked from clipboard to chaos and back again, her voice cutting through the noise like a snowplow. "Careful with the heirlooms, please!" she called, then, with a softer edge, "And someone check the tree skirt — Whiskers is not supposed to eat the pinecones."

From his post near the window, Harold Mitchell tried to capture the moment. His tablet hovered uncertainly between camera mode and video, the digital lens zooming and blurring as he fought to keep up with the action. The children's movement was too fast, the light too variable. He tapped the screen, fingers jittery, and watched as the image pulsed in and out of focus. There was a light sweat on his brow, barely noticeable unless you knew to look for it, and every so often he'd stop, press a fist to his sternum, and take two slow, measured breaths before resuming.

"Having some trouble, old man?" Mabel's voice rang out as she swept in from the kitchen, arms full of mismatched mugs.

"Human subjects," Harold replied, trying for a joke but landing closer to a wheeze. "They never stay still."

Mabel grinned. "That's why I only tell stories about them." She set a mug down in front of Harold, the steam curling in a little S-shape. "Drink up. It's got enough cocoa to jumpstart your heart, and a splash of peppermint to boot."

He sipped, grateful, though the mug trembled slightly in his grasp.

Mabel made a show of balancing her tray with one hand and, with the other, distributing the cocoa to every open palm in her orbit. “Take it slow, folks,” she instructed, “or you’ll be bouncing off the walls faster than the twins here.” The twins, small, identical, and powered entirely by sugar, had already built a tinsel fort around the tree’s base and were in the process of annexing the ottoman.

As Mabel worked the room, she launched into a dramatic retelling of the previous Christmas’s “Great Tinsel Debacle.” “Picture this,” she began, her voice low and theatrical. “It’s Christmas Eve. The stockings are hung, the cookies set out, not a creature stirring—not even a mouse, or so we thought. Then, from the darkness, a glimmer. A flash of silver. And who should appear, wrapped like a holiday roast, but Whiskers! Completely tangled. Looked like a sparkly sausage.”

The children doubled over laughing. Even the more stoic adults—one hunched over a crossword, another scrolling her phone—cracked smiles.

“True story,” Mabel insisted, raising her cocoa. “I still have the photos.”

“I’ve seen the photos,” George deadpanned from across the room, arms crossed over his chest. “You used them for the facility Christmas card.”

Mabel winked. “That was marketing, not journalism.”

Eleanor clapped her hands for attention, her teacher’s voice never far away. “All right, folks. Let’s get everyone seated for lunch. If you’re missing a chair, raise your hand. George is on the case.”

"Already done," George called, as he nudged the last chair into place with his foot.

Eleanor beamed. "Efficiency. I knew there was a reason I kept you around."

In the lull before the meal, the children gathered at Mabel's feet, drawn by the promise of another story or, more likely, another sighting of Whiskers. Mabel obliged, producing a battered deck of playing cards from her pocket and performing a sleight-of-hand trick that ended with Whiskers appearing to pull a queen of hearts out of his own fur. The applause was instantaneous and, judging by the cat's unblinking stare, only marginally appreciated by the feline population.

Amid the laughter and the sound of clinking mugs, Harold drifted further into himself. He watched, one hand on his tablet, the other pressed flat against his chest. The voices in the room blurred to a single note; the colors bled together, bright and too vivid. He blinked and the image on the screen doubled, then righted itself. He steadied his breathing, trying to hide the effort.

Mabel noticed. She knelt beside him, voice pitched low. "You okay, Harold?"

He forced a smile. "Just a little winded. Never did have the stamina for marathons."

"Lucky for you," she said, pressing a peppermint candy into his palm, "this is a sprint. And you're winning."

He laughed, grateful, and tried to focus on the present.

From her post at the head of the room, Eleanor watched it all, the joy and the worry in equal measure. She made a mental note of Harold's paleness, the way he rubbed at his arm when he thought no one was watching. But there were a dozen details

demanding her attention, so she stored the concern for later and moved to the next item on her mental checklist.

The staff rolled out lunch: ham sandwiches, tomato soup, a tray of carrot sticks that was largely ignored in favor of the cookies Mabel had snuck in from the kitchen. The room filled with the chatter of old friends and new acquaintances, stories unspooling as the hours did. Somewhere, the building's ancient stereo system worked its way through a playlist of holiday standards, the notes weaving through the conversations and laughter like a familiar thread.

It was, for a few hours, perfect.

But as the clock inched toward afternoon, the energy in the room shifted. Harold's hands, already shaky, grew less reliable; he dropped his spoon twice, fumbling for it with uncharacteristic clumsiness. The color drained from his face, and the sweat above his brow refused to fade. He tried to stand and nearly lost his balance, saved only by George, who caught his elbow with a firm, steady grip.

"Whoa, there," George said, voice low and full of something like fear.

"Just a dizzy spell," Harold insisted. But his words were mushy, and he clung to the table as if it were a life preserver.

Eleanor was at his side in an instant, her chair nudging between the others like a tugboat in a crowded harbor. "George, help him to the hallway," she said, every syllable crisp. "Mabel, get water."

The room's festive noise faded into the background, replaced by a rising wave of concern.

"We've got you," Eleanor said, voice softer now, hand over his. "Just breathe, Harold. You're not alone."

He nodded, but his breath came in short, shallow pulls.

In the distance, Whiskers padded over, meowed, and curled himself around Harold's ankles, as if even the cat understood that the air had changed.

A great-grandchild, sensing the seriousness, went quiet and watched, thumb planted in her mouth.

Mabel arrived with the water, a peppermint candy, and a look that could have split concrete. "Drink," she ordered. "Then tell us if it's the same as before."

Harold sipped, the liquid sloshing in the cup, and forced a weak laugh. "You're a very demanding nurse," he said.

"That's why I'm not a nurse," Mabel replied, but the line lacked its usual punch.

George kept a hand on his friend's shoulder, steady and unyielding.

Eleanor glanced at Mabel, then Harold, and said, "We'll call for the nurse, just in case."

"No," Harold said, a little too forcefully. "Let's not cause a fuss."

Mabel rolled her eyes, but didn't argue. "Fine, but you're not moving until you finish the water. I'll tie you down with tinsel if I have to."

Despite himself, Harold smiled, and some of the color returned to his face.

The staff, alerted by the commotion, sent over a nurse with a blood pressure cuff and a clipboard. The families, sensing the private nature of the moment, drifted to the other end of the common room, their laughter a gentle background hum.

Eleanor stayed close, her blue eyes missing nothing. "You'll be all right," she said. "Just too much excitement and not enough breakfast, I'll bet."

Harold nodded, though his hand still shook.

Mabel pressed the peppermint into his palm again. "Take it. Peppermint's good for what ails you."

He did, and the friends sat together, a small, tight circle in the corner of the room, watching the world carry on around them.

For a time, the hum of voices and the warm light of the Christmas tree filled the space between them. The children returned to their games, the adults resumed their conversations, and even Whiskers, apparently satisfied, resumed his post under the tree.

The worst of the spell passed, and Harold's breathing eased. George released his grip, only after being sure Harold wouldn't topple over.

"You really are a stubborn mule," George said, not unkindly.

Harold, recovering, managed, "Takes one to know one."

The friends laughed, and even Eleanor relaxed, if only for a moment.

Outside, the snow fell in slow, deliberate flakes, coating the windows in a lacy white. Inside, the scent of pine, cinnamon, and chocolate remained, twining through the air like a promise.

If there were ghosts at Starlight that day, they stayed out of sight, content to watch as the living made their own kind of magic.

The afternoon rolled on, and with it, the certainty that no matter what came next – be it mystery or mayhem – the four of them

would face it together. Even if one of them did so from a seat with a slightly better view of the emergency exit.

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It started with a snapshot. The great-granddaughter, pigtails flying, had cornered Whiskers under the card table. For a second, the cat and child were locked in a standoff, neither blinking, both poised for mischief. Harold, ever the documentarian, lined up the shot on his tablet, but the picture kept swimming – edges smearing, focus slipping away. He blinked, once, twice, then tried again. His finger hit the “capture” button, but instead of a sweet candid, the screen was a mess of digital noise.

He blinked again, harder, but the room only tilted more. The chatter and laughter thinned out, replaced by the odd, distant echo of silverware on porcelain. Harold set the tablet down, intending to steady himself with a breath. His lungs, however, didn't get the memo. Each inhale was thin and wobbly, like the last inch of air from an old party balloon.

Someone called his name. He turned, but the room was bright, brighter than it ought to be, and the holiday lights streaked in messy lines across his vision. His legs felt full of sand. He stood anyway, muttered an apology – “Back in a sec, friends” – and left the tablet on the table, its screen still flickering through failed attempts at photography.

He pushed through the crowd with a practiced smile, careful not to alarm the families or, worse, the children. The hallway beyond the common room was a tunnel of white, the sconces too sharp, the linoleum spinning under his feet. He'd intended to get to the end of the corridor, maybe splash water on his face, but halfway there, his knees folded, and he found himself propped against the wall, breathing fast and shallow.

He slid down, landing on the cool floor, back pressed to the cinderblock. The walls seemed to pulse in time with his heartbeat. He shut his eyes and waited for the world to catch up.

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It was Eleanor who noticed first, counting heads like a seasoned general and finding one soldier short. She left her clipboard on the table, maneuvered her chair through the throng, and scanned the hall. There was the telltale glint of Harold's glasses at the far end, a little haloed by the glare from the overhead fixtures.

"Harold?" she called, her voice low but unmistakable.

He didn't answer, so she pushed off, rolling down the corridor with a sense of purpose that dared anyone to get in her way. He was slumped, breathing rapid and ragged, but conscious.

Eleanor reached him, took his hand in hers, and kept her tone as steady as she could. "I'm here, Harold. Talk to me."

He squeezed her hand, eyelids fluttering. "Sorry," he managed. "Didn't want to — make a scene."

"You're not a scene, you're family," Eleanor said, the words crisp and sure even as her heart did flip-flops. She patted his knuckles with her other hand, then raised her voice. "Mabel! Get in here!"

Within seconds, Mabel appeared, trailing the scent of cocoa and determination. She had a cup of water and a damp napkin in one hand, and from her cardigan pocket she fished the ever-present roll of peppermint candies.

"Breathe with me, Harold," she said, and knelt down, her face inches from his. She demonstrated, slow and deep. "In, two

three. Out, two three.” She handed him the water and, with the practiced efficiency of a mother of five and a teacher of hundreds, unwrapped a peppermint and pressed it into his palm.

Harold tried to mimic her breathing. He coughed once, then managed, “You always come prepared.”

Mabel smiled, brushing sweat from his forehead with the napkin. “I wasn’t going to let you miss dessert.”

George arrived last, striding down the hall like he was about to break up a bar fight. His first instinct was logistics: “Should we call the nurse?” But the second was pure loyalty — he crouched beside Harold, solid as a rock, hand clamping onto Harold’s shoulder.

“Just got a bit overwhelmed,” Harold mumbled, eyes flicking up to George. “Not as spry as I used to be.”

George snorted, but there was relief in it. “None of us are, but you set a mean pace. Sit tight.” He stayed kneeling, one hand on Harold’s shoulder, another bracing himself against the wall.

Mabel shifted position so she could gently press the cool napkin to Harold’s neck. “You were clammy,” she explained. “This’ll help.”

Eleanor leaned in, her wheelchair practically nose-to-nose with the two men. “You scared the life out of me, Harold,” she said, softer now.

He chuckled, but the laugh rattled in his throat. “Just wanted to see if you’d notice.”

George grumbled, “She’d notice if the planet spun a half-degree off axis.” But the pressure of his hand said he wasn’t letting go.

They sat there, the four of them wedged into the narrow hall, blocking traffic and not caring one bit. The sounds from the common room felt far away, a world apart from the bubble they'd formed in the corridor.

Gradually, Harold's color returned. The tremor left his hands. His breathing, once shallow and frantic, slowed until it matched the cadence Mabel set. After a few minutes, he looked up and managed, "Back in the land of the living."

Eleanor gave his hand a final squeeze before letting go. "You're not leaving it any time soon, understood?"

Mabel stood, dusting off her knees. "Once you can walk, you're going straight to a chair, and I don't want any more of this lone-wolf heroics."

Harold nodded, chastened. "Deal. Sorry for the scare."

George helped Harold to his feet, keeping a grip on his elbow until it was clear the spell had passed. "Let's not do this again," he muttered, then added, "But if you have to, warn us first."

They laughed — a little shaky, but genuine — and started the slow march back to the common room, moving as one unit. Eleanor led the way, Mabel flanked Harold like a bodyguard, and George hovered behind, ready to catch any misstep.

When they re-entered the common room, nobody gave them more than a passing glance. The families had returned to their own dramas: toddlers demanding second helpings, an uncle snoring quietly by the window, two teens glued to their phones. It was as if nothing had happened at all.

But as the four friends reclaimed their table, a new understanding settled among them — a reminder, sharp as peppermint, that time was short and every moment together was a small, stubborn miracle.

Harold sipped the rest of his water, then accepted the mug of cocoa Mabel handed him. His voice, steadier now, carried only a trace of apology. "Just got a bit overwhelmed," he repeated. "Too much excitement, not enough rest. I'll pace myself."

Eleanor patted his wrist. "We'll pace you, thank you very much."

Mabel grinned, and even George's glare softened around the edges. The committee was whole again.

And somewhere, just beyond the laughter and the music and the rising scent of baked goods, the ghosts of Starlight—if they were there at all—watched and learned.

Because sometimes, even for the most persistent of hauntings, there was nothing quite so powerful as four friends who refused to let go.

...

The rest of the afternoon passed in a gentle blur, the common room pulsing with the comforting monotony of shared food, board games, and the relentless shuffle of slippers on linoleum. Harold, for once, surrendered to the armchair Mabel had commandeered for him, mug of tea in one hand, a tartan blanket across his knees, and the committee never more than an arm's length away.

"Nice bow," he said, nodding at Whiskers, who now sported a velvet ribbon under his chin. The cat, either resigned or secretly pleased, paraded the length of the room, pausing every so often to let himself be admired or, more likely, to survey the terrain for anything edible.

"He let them put it on," Mabel marveled, "and didn't even try to kill anyone." She set another round of peppermint cookies on the table, then pressed a palm to Harold's cheek in a quick,

businesslike gesture. “Color’s better,” she announced, “but you’re still not allowed to skip supper.”

Harold smiled and sipped his tea, warmth radiating from the mug to his hands and, slowly, to the rest of him.

George, who’d stationed himself between Harold and the closest fire exit (“Just in case you pull another stunt,” he’d said), peered over the latest incident log. He kept one eye on Whiskers, one on the grandkids building a gingerbread house with alarming architectural ambition, and another – if possible – on the east corridor.

Eleanor rolled her wheelchair to a stop beside Harold’s chair. She lowered her voice, keeping the conversation private, even as the common room hummed. “You’ve been pushing yourself, Harold. This case can wait a day. Let’s call a truce with the ghosts until after Christmas.”

He wanted to protest, but the effort felt unnecessary. “Maybe just a half-day,” he allowed. “Or a quarter.”

She smirked. “I’ll take it.”

A moment later, the relative calm fractured. A tearing sound, sharp and unmistakable, echoed from the east wing. Not a festive rip of wrapping paper, but the shearing, angry snap of fabric pulled far past its limit.

Mabel’s head shot up. George’s grip on the logbook went white-knuckled. Eleanor and Harold exchanged a single look – the sort that comes from solving a thousand puzzles together, the sort that meant: time to move.

“I’ll check,” George said, already standing.

Eleanor was ahead of him. "We go as a team," she said, rolling forward with purpose, Mabel in pursuit, Harold bringing up the rear, supported on either side.

The hallway was empty, except for the drifting flakes of what looked like shredded polyester. They followed the trail — tufts here and there, and then, in the alcove near the fire door, the evidence: a set of heavy curtains, split down the center, hanging in twin shrouds, the edges ragged and stippled with tinsel. On the floor, beneath the window, a dusting of white thread tangled with the metallic sheen of Christmas garland.

A cold draft snaked through the break in the curtains. Eleanor wheeled closer, examining the damage with the calm detachment of a field surgeon. "Fresh," she murmured, pointing to the way the threads curled outward from the cut. "And forceful. Someone—or something—wanted through in a hurry."

George knelt, tracing the tear with careful fingers. "These marks," he said, "they're too coarse for cat claws. Look more like...well, fingers. Human, but wrong."

Mabel, surveying the floor, made the next connection. "And Whiskers," she pointed back toward the common room, "hasn't left the party in hours. The kids kept him in their sight the whole time."

Eleanor nodded, then directed her gaze to Harold.  
"Temperature?"

Harold, already primed, tapped his tablet. A blue graph slid across the screen, the line dropping sharply at the exact time of the incident. "Here. A ten-degree drop, just like before. Only lasted a minute."

The four clustered together, peering at the evidence in silence. Outside, the wind rattled the glass. Inside, the only movement was the slow swirl of tinsel at their feet.

“What are we dealing with?” Mabel asked, voice a whisper.

Eleanor looked at her, then at George and Harold. “It’s not Whiskers. Not a prank. It’s...something that wants our attention. And it’s not finished yet.”

George, always practical, straightened up and brushed the threads from his hands. “Well, we’ve got an airtight timeline, physical evidence, and sensor data. If this thing wants to make itself known, it picked the wrong facility.”

Mabel laughed, and the sound bounced down the hall, brave and bright. “You hear that, ghosts? We’re on to you!”

Harold smiled, exhaustion forgotten for the moment. “Maybe we ought to thank it,” he said. “It brought us all together, didn’t it?”

Mabel agreed, nudging him with her elbow. “Not to mention improved the décor. I never liked those curtains anyway.”

Eleanor looked out the window, past the fluttering remnants of the curtain, to where the snow covered the world in clean, unbroken white. “Come on, team,” she said, turning the chair back toward the light and noise of the common room. “We have cookies to finish, presents to wrap, and a Christmas Eve to enjoy. Tomorrow, we hunt ghosts. Tonight, we make memories.”

The committee filed in after her, side by side, the last of the afternoon sun glinting off Whiskers’ new ribbon and the tinsel on George’s shoes. The mystery of the east wing would wait, patient and persistent.

For now, there was a tree to finish, children to corral, and cocoa to drink before it cooled.

And somewhere, just out of sight, the unseen guest lingered in the corridor – a silent observer, perhaps, but not unwelcome. Because at Starlight, even the strangest visitors knew that, in the end, it was the company you kept that mattered most.

# Chapter 6

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## Traps, Tinsel, and Tension

The Starlight common room, that December evening, looked like Santa's workshop after a Category Five blizzard: glitter, tools, and half-wrapped evidence everywhere. The Christmas tree, only partially decorated, loomed in the corner – a dozen limp, unstrung lights coiling around it like a python that had lost the will to live. Here and there, motion sensors (some real, some distinctly homemade) perched like ornaments among the branches, their tiny red eyes blinking in the dim. The room crackled with static and anticipation.

Eleanor Grace Hudson, wrapped in a navy cardigan with the collar turned up like a sea captain at the prow, directed the operation from her wheelchair. Her clipboard (now officially "The Case Log") bore a detailed map of the room, annotated in at least three colors of ink, plus sticky notes marking "HIGH SUSPICION ZONES" and "POSSIBLE GHOST ENTRY POINTS." Every so often, she checked her watch, then barked out an order or a correction with the kind of clarity that could stop a parade.

"George, your last sensor's off axis. The motion cone covers the window, not the chair. It'll miss half the room."

George Reynolds, ex-detective and self-appointed King of DIY Security, was midway up a step stool and in the process of zip-tying a laser pointer to the star atop the tree. He adjusted the sensor with a grunt, peered down the line of sight, and grumbled, "I'd have had this sorted already if Mabel stopped swapping the batteries for her talking Santa."

"Priorities," Mabel called from the sofa, where she was tangled in a garland of metallic blue and gold. She held a length of tinsel between thumb and finger, tongue pressed to the side in concentration as she threaded it through the legs of every chair in a six-foot radius. "Trip wires are more important than singing figurines, George. Everyone knows that."

Harold Mitchell, the group's digital mastermind, sat cross-legged on the rug, his tablet open to a dizzying array of camera feeds. "Mabel, don't tangle it with the power cables," he said, only glancing up for a split second. "If you trip the router again, we'll lose the whole feed."

Mabel sniffed, but adjusted her handiwork with a flourish. "A good trap's got to be seen, not just heard, Harold."

Eleanor observed the exchange with an approving smile. If there was one thing she liked better than a mystery, it was a smoothly running team of misfits. She marked the log, circled something twice, and pointed. "Harold, once the last camera's up, do a full sweep. George, double-check the field of view on sensor three and patch the gap with a motion-activated ornament. Mabel, you and I will rig the actual bait."

Mabel perked up. "Bait? We're using bait?"

Eleanor rolled her chair closer, voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. "Not just any bait. We're going to use Whiskers' favorite treats. If the ghost is copying the cat's M.O., we set a decoy that's irresistible to both."

She produced, from beneath the blanket on her lap, a shallow box lined with crumpled tissue and a scatter of freeze-dried salmon nibbles. It had "WHISKERS—PRIVATE" written in Sharpie on the lid, underlined for emphasis.

George, skeptical, eyed the box. "You think a ghost's going to be lured out by cat food?"

“Not just the food,” Eleanor said. “It’s the principle. We introduce a variable. Either the cat goes for it, or something else does. Either way, we document.”

Mabel’s eyes shone. “Can I help set the trap?”

“Of course. But use gloves,” Eleanor added. “We don’t want to contaminate the scene.”

Harold piped up from the rug. “All feeds are up. Security elves one through four are live. I’ve also got motion sensors on a rolling log. Any movement beyond baseline gets flagged. Oh—and I’ve set the system to chime every time something crosses a perimeter.”

Eleanor made a notation, then looked at the room with deep satisfaction. “Well done, team. Now, before the first family returns from dinner and sets off a chorus of carols, let’s run a dry test.”

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The next thirty minutes passed in a flurry of adjustments, troubleshooting, and last-minute recalibrations. George discovered that the first motion sensor was being triggered by a heating vent, which he fixed by taping a paper coffee cup over the duct (“Classic perimeter defense,” he declared). Mabel ran three trip wires, each a different color, across the main walkways—“For maximum visibility,” she claimed, but it was really because she couldn’t decide which looked most festive. Harold programmed the feeds to record to cloud storage, then cross-referenced all time stamps to the official Starlight clock.

“Like mission control at NASA,” he joked, and nobody corrected him.

They worked in quiet camaraderie, the kind that needs no explanation. At one point, George and Mabel bickered over

whether to use red or green electrical tape to anchor a sensor, and Harold solved it by using both and calling it “seasonal redundancy.” Eleanor orchestrated the show from her mobile command post, ticking off tasks, solving arguments, and never once raising her voice—she didn’t have to.

As dusk gave way to night, the common room lights dimmed on a timer, replaced by the cold blue glow of the sensors and the soft, warm haze from the tree. Outside, the snow thickened against the window, muffling the world and making the room feel like a ship adrift on an infinite sea of white.

Eleanor rolled to the center of the room, called the others close, and cleared her throat.

“Team,” she said, her voice calm but charged, “last night, something tried to communicate. Books moved. Temperatures dropped. There was intent, but we didn’t have the coverage or the coordination to catch it in the act. Tonight, that changes.”

She met each of their eyes in turn.

“George, your sensors will detect movement. Mabel, your trip wires give us physical evidence. Harold, your cameras see what the human eye cannot. I’ll monitor the whole system and coordinate the response. If it’s Whiskers, we’ll know. If it’s an imposter, or a ghost, or something we haven’t considered—we catch it red-handed. No more doubt. No more speculation. We finish this.”

There was a beat of silence, the weight of the moment settling like new-fallen snow.

Then, with a sly smile, Mabel whispered, “We’re hunting ghosts on Christmas Eve. That’s got to be a first, even for us.”

George straightened his collar, tried to look unimpressed, but the glint in his eye gave him away. “Let’s just hope we don’t catch more than we bargained for.”

Harold nodded, tucking his tablet under his arm. “All systems go, Eleanor.”

Eleanor glanced at her clipboard one last time, then shut it with a decisive click. “Stations, everyone. We lie in wait.”

\*

With the efficiency of four people who had planned the same event dozens of times (though never quite like this), the committee took up their positions. George staked out the kitchen entrance, peeking through the pass window. Mabel concealed herself behind the piano, notebook open and pen ready for field notes—or, if necessary, dramatic poetry. Harold claimed the armchair nearest the central sensor bank, tablet propped on his knees, headphones in place for audio monitoring. Eleanor rolled into the nook behind the tree, perfectly positioned to see both the bait and the sensors, clipboard in hand.

The room fell to a hush, the only sounds the ticking of the wall clock and, faintly, the soft whirr of the camera motors.

For a time, nothing happened. The bait sat undisturbed. The trip wires sagged slightly under their own weight. The security elves blinked their red eyes at the darkness, but registered no change.

Eleanor jotted notes, watched the room, and tried not to think about her own pulse, which was thumping harder than she would admit.

From the kitchen, George sent periodic updates by whisper-shouting: “All clear. No movement.” After the third time, Mabel

wrote in her notebook: “George remains as vigilant as a meerkat, but with less subtlety.”

After half an hour, Harold signaled with a flashlight flicker, their pre-arranged code for “sensor alert.” Eleanor tensed, scanned the field, and saw – nothing. She motioned to Harold for details.

He mouthed, “Temperature drop. Three degrees. No movement, but something’s here.”

Eleanor bit her lip, gripped the arms of her chair, and waited. The sensation was electric, like the instant before a thunderclap.

Mabel, who’d been silent until now, scribbled a note and slipped it across the carpet using a holiday cookie tin as a delivery vehicle. Eleanor caught it with one hand, read the scrawl – “Can ghosts read? Should we leave out a note?” – and nearly laughed. Instead, she scribbled back: “After we catch it, you can interview it.”

A minute later, the silence fractured.

The tree lights flickered, every sensor in the room flashed red, and from the far end of the common room there came the unmistakable sound of bells – dozens of them, all at once, jangling in a discordant carol.

For a single, wild moment, the air shimmered; the tinsel trip wires quivered, the sensor lights strobed in a pattern that seemed almost purposeful, and the “WHISKERS – PRIVATE” bait box skittered a full foot across the linoleum, propelled by nothing visible.

Eleanor’s hand shot to her clipboard. She logged the time, the event, and her own heartbeat, which had skipped at least three beats.

Harold, already recording, zoomed his camera on the box. "It's moving," he hissed, voice urgent but elated. "Nobody touched it. There's nothing under it. It's just—moving."

George, from the kitchen, shouted, "I saw it! The box just slid! There's a draft, or—or something!"

Mabel, notebook forgotten, crept out from behind the piano, her eyes huge in the dim. "Is it—Is it over?"

Eleanor held up a hand for quiet, scanning the room. The tree lights flickered once, then steadied. The bells stilled. The temperature, according to Harold's display, began to climb back to normal.

For a heartbeat, all was still.

Then, from beneath the tree, there came a sound: not a meow, not a rustle, but the faint, unmistakable clink of glass on glass.

Eleanor rolled forward, nerves taut as violin strings. She reached for the box—just as it jerked again, then settled.

There, perched atop the tissue, was a single, shiny glass bead—one that hadn't been there before.

Eleanor examined it, holding it up to the tree lights. It was red, the color of a stoplight or a warning. She set it back in the box, careful not to disturb the arrangement, and called the team to gather.

"Report," she said, her voice steady but soft.

George recounted the sliding box and the wave of cold that hit just before it moved. Mabel described the bells, the flickering lights, and the sensation of "something watching." Harold displayed the feed, replaying the moment in slow motion; the box trembled, skated, and stopped, then the glass bead appeared as if conjured.

Eleanor listened, made notes, and at last, addressed the room.

"Tonight," she said, "we caught more than a ghost. We caught proof. Maybe not of the afterlife, maybe not of poltergeists—but of something. Some force, some will, some—" she hesitated, then allowed herself a small smile, "—Christmas miracle, if you like."

They stood together, the four of them, in the half-dark. Not a word passed between them for a long moment, but the warmth in the room had returned. The investigation would continue—of course it would—but for tonight, they had caught their ghost. Or, at least, it had let itself be caught.

The clock chimed midnight. The sensor lights blinked off, one by one. The tree glowed steady and soft.

Eleanor looked at her friends, her notes, and the little red bead shining in the center of the bait box.

Tomorrow, they would analyze the data. Tomorrow, they would explain the unexplainable, or at least try.

But tonight, they had each other, and the magic of the chase, and the knowledge that not every mystery needed to be solved to be worth the effort.

"Good work, team," Eleanor said, rolling her chair to the head of the table.

And with that, the Starlight Mystery Committee settled in for a well-deserved rest—each secretly hoping, in their own way, that the ghost would pay them another visit before Christmas morning.

...

The stakeout began in high spirits, with Eleanor calling for "radio silence" every fifteen minutes and Mabel passing out

micro-doses of peppermint fudge as a “staying-aware incentive.” George insisted on maintaining an hourly log, which rapidly devolved into noting each minor cramp or “suspicious gust of air.” For the first hour, their posts behind sofas, potted Ficus trees, and the dim glow of the piano’s music lamp felt daring, even glamorous—like being extras in a mid-century detective show, but with more orthopedic support.

Two hours in, the glamour faded. George’s back ached from crouching in a “tactical posture” behind the utility cart. He massaged the bridge of his nose, then checked his watch for the fifth time in as many minutes. The second hand lagged, like it, too, had been felled by boredom.

“Movement report,” Eleanor whispered from her nook, clipboard pressed tight to her chest.

“Negative,” George responded. “Unless you count the slow death of my vertebrae.”

“I’m going to need traction after this,” Mabel whispered. She’d chosen her hiding spot for the view—behind a tall potted palm, catty-corner to the bait—but after ninety minutes the only thing she could see was the slow creep of dust settling on the credenza.

Harold, cross-legged and rigid behind the armchair, glanced up from his tablet. “No change in the feeds. Pressure sensors are flatlined. Even the temperature’s steady.”

Eleanor’s pencil tapped a staccato on the clipboard. “Patience. The best ghosts always wait for the stroke of midnight.”

Mabel groaned softly. “It’s only ten-thirty. I’ll never make it.”

George shushed her. “I hear something.”

They all fell silent, breath held, eyes straining. At first, nothing. Then, a faint tick—a trip wire. A moment later, the high-pitched beep of the first motion sensor, followed by the rapid-fire jingle of half a dozen holiday bells.

Eleanor bolted upright. “All units, go!”

George surged from behind the cart, nearly toppling it in the process. He reached the trip wire and stopped short. There, illuminated by the low lamp and the blinking LED of the motion sensor, was Whiskers—Starlight’s one-man demolition crew—entwined in a blue-and-silver garland, three bells hanging from his tail, and a red tinsel strand trailing from one ear.

For a moment, the four investigators simply stared, processing. The cat let out a baleful yowl, then sat down hard, sending a fresh cascade of bells jangling across the floor.

“Well,” George said, mustering what little dignity remained, “we caught something.”

Mabel crept out from behind the palm, unable to hide her giggle. “You look like you lost a fight with a Christmas wreath, buddy.”

Whiskers glared, then began the painstaking process of licking tinsel off his own whiskers.

Eleanor rolled forward, her disappointment only slightly masked by her teacher’s “teachable moment” tone. “It’s still data, team. We can now rule out Whiskers as the cause of the previous events.”

Harold, recovering first, checked the camera log. “I got the whole thing. Multiple angles.”

George gently extracted the cat from the tinsel snare, careful not to further injure Whiskers' pride. "Go on, you menace," he said, setting the cat down. "Your work here is done."

The committee circled around the trip wire, each with a different brand of letdown—Eleanor with a sigh, Harold with a huff, Mabel with a shoulder slump, George with a grumble about "classic misdirection."

But before they could reset the trap, the air in the room shifted.

It was subtle at first: a faint shiver, a flicker of the Christmas lights. The trip wire, now slack, began to sway—just a little, but enough to catch the eye.

Then, a sound. Not the jingle of bells, but a slow, steady tapping: from the wall behind the tree, then from the ceiling, then from somewhere deep inside the air vents.

Mabel froze, eyes wide. "Did you hear that?"

"Affirmative," Harold whispered. He checked his tablet, then frowned. "Temperature's dropping. Three degrees. Right at the tree."

George squinted at the corner. The ornaments on the lower branches trembled, as if brushed by an invisible hand. One, a heavy ceramic snowman, rocked back and forth before settling in a new position.

Eleanor made a note, voice hushed but urgent. "Log the sequence. Time: 10:48 p.m. Sensory anomalies present—visual, audio, and temperature."

Whiskers, who'd been attempting an escape through the kitchen, turned tail and darted back under the piano, all dignity abandoned.

The lights flickered, once, then steadied. The tapping grew louder, more insistent, like someone rapping out Morse code on the cinderblock wall.

Harold's fingers flew over the tablet. "There's something else – audio feedback. It's coming through all the mics. Like a hum, but not electrical. More...organic."

Mabel pressed a hand to her mouth, trying to steady her nerves. "Are we sure it's not the heating?"

George shook his head. "Vents are off. And that sound's coming from inside the room."

The four clustered near the tree, every sense straining. The cold pressed in tighter, the hair on Eleanor's arms prickling beneath her cardigan.

Then, all at once, the motion sensors went berserk – beeping and flashing, every alarm in the room firing in perfect unison. The tree shook, ornaments clattering against each other. The glass bead, left in the bait box from before, rolled out and spun in a perfect circle on the floor.

"Harold, get this," Eleanor said, voice high with excitement.

He was already recording, but he leaned closer, narrating in a hush: "Object in motion – no visible cause – documenting trajectory –"

Mabel, never one to let a moment pass, reached for the bead. The instant her fingers touched it, the lights died – plunging the room into total darkness.

For a heartbeat, nobody moved. The darkness pressed in, thick and absolute.

Then, with a snap, the emergency lights kicked in. The room glowed blood red. The tree flickered, then tipped perilously, several ornaments shattering as it leaned at a sharp angle.

Eleanor's voice, steady despite everything: "Everyone all right?"

"Fine," said George.

"Still here," said Harold, tablet glowing in the red gloom.

Mabel, voice trembling but brave, added, "I think it wants us to follow."

The bead, impossibly, continued its slow roll across the floor, moving in a line toward the far end of the common room.

Eleanor led the way, clipboard held like a shield, as they followed the bead's path. The tapping intensified, now echoing through the floor itself. As the bead reached the baseboard, it stopped, then tipped into a narrow gap between wall and carpet.

Harold scanned the spot with his tablet. "Cold spot. Right here. It's off the scale."

George, ever the skeptic, knelt and peered into the gap.  
"There's...something behind the panel."

He reached in, and after a moment's struggle, pulled out an envelope – old, yellowed, sealed with a dab of red wax.

The four stared at it, hearts thumping in unison.

Eleanor took charge. "Let's get it to the table. Open it together."

They gathered, Whiskers perched nearby as if suddenly invested in the outcome. Eleanor broke the seal, slid out a single sheet of folded paper, and read aloud:

"To whoever finds this – Know that I am here, and have always been here. I mean no harm. I only wish to be remembered, and to remember the love I once had in these halls. Please, do not be afraid. All I want is to join in your joy."

A hush fell over the room.

Mabel sniffed, dabbing her eyes. "It just wanted to be part of the party."

Harold, never much for sentiment, nonetheless murmured, "That's...pretty sweet, actually."

George looked at Eleanor. "Case closed?"

She smiled, tired but triumphant. "Case closed."

For a long moment, the four friends just sat – soaking in the peace that followed, the warmth returning as if the very walls exhaled in relief.

Then, somewhere in the hallway, a soft, happy bell chimed. Just once, but enough.

Mabel grinned. "Sounds like someone's satisfied."

Harold checked the sensors: normal. The lights flickered, then steadied. The tree, though a little battered, stood upright.

George gave Whiskers a scratch under the chin. "Sorry we doubted you, pal."

Eleanor leaned back, her clipboard resting easy in her lap.  
"Well, team, we did it. We gave the ghost a Christmas it'll never forget."

As the clock inched toward midnight, and the last of the tension melted away, the Starlight Mystery Committee basked in the

glow—red emergency lights and all—of a mystery well solved, and a night well spent.

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It should have been the most peaceful moment of the night. With the envelope's note read and the tree once more upright, the four friends allowed themselves to exhale, lingering at the table long after the "case closed" declaration. Whiskers had curled into a cinnamon roll on Eleanor's lap, purring so thunderously that it vibrated up her arms and into her collarbones. The sensors were quiet. Even the wind outside the windows seemed to have called a truce.

Harold, still clutching his tablet, looked up and grinned. "Should we call in the next of kin? Or will that just make us look more deranged than usual?"

"Let's hold off until morning," Eleanor said, stroking the cat's head. "Give the ghost time to enjoy its own company for a bit."

George snorted, but it was a happy sound. "If it acts up again, maybe we just add a place setting at Christmas brunch."

Mabel, twirling the red glass bead between her fingers, smiled at the thought. "Every haunting should be so polite."

It was as close to "happily ever after" as anyone at Starlight could remember.

But just as Mabel set down the bead, ready to propose cocoa and a round of gin rummy, a new sound sliced through the room. A single book slid off the top shelf behind her—soft thump, then silence. She startled, then laughed. "Late entry for most dramatic performance," she said.

Before she could finish her joke, three more books tumbled off the shelf, one after the other, bouncing open at their spines and scattering pages over the linoleum.

Whiskers hissed and leapt from Eleanor's lap, darting for cover under the credenza.

Eleanor sat up straight, eyes sharp. "Team, that was not the cat. Sensors?"

Harold checked his readout. "Negative movement on all sensors. Temperature's fine. Cameras are..." He squinted at the screen. "Wait. I'm getting static. The feeds are cutting out, one by one."

George stood, hands braced on the table. "Probably just interference from the power. Old building, bad wiring."

Mabel, voice thin, added, "Or it's mad that we opened its mail."

The air grew colder, not gradually but all at once—a sharp, skin-prickling drop. The trip wires Mabel had strung earlier began to sway, lightly at first, then with more force, as if a parade of invisible dancers were skipping through the paths. The sound of bells started up again, this time less jolly, more frantic.

"Reset the perimeter," Eleanor ordered, wheeling her chair to the source of the disturbance.

George went for the trip wires, but even as he moved, another book launched off the bookshelf—this time, arcing high enough to strike him square in the shoulder. He staggered back, more stunned than hurt.

"Alright, that's enough!" George shouted, voice tight. "If it's not Whiskers, then what is it?"

No one answered, but a dozen more books ejected themselves, some clapping open, others skidding across the floor. Harold, glued to the tablet, tried to capture video but every attempt resulted in a flickering mess of digital noise.

“Nothing’s coming through,” Harold said. “It’s like the cameras are being...jammed.”

Eleanor’s jaw set. “Focus, team. This is escalation. Whatever it is, it wants our attention.”

Mabel, near the piano, watched as the trip wires lifted and danced, threading through the air without a visible hand. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered, “and terrifying.”

The next moment, every sensor light in the room turned red, then off. The tree, recently the site of so much pride and effort, began to shake—not violently, but in a slow, rippling way, like a storm bending a field of wheat. The ornaments shimmered, colliding softly, making a strange, discordant melody. The whole room pulsed with the sensation of being inside a tuning fork.

Harold’s fingers trembled as he tried to steady the camera. “There’s a hum,” he said. “You all feel that?”

George, clutching his shoulder, muttered, “I hear it. It’s like a...buzz, just behind my eyes.”

Mabel stared at the glass bead, which had begun to vibrate across the tabletop, pulsing in time with the humming.

Then, abruptly, the tree shook harder. Ornaments flew off in a spray, lights snapped from the branches and whipped around the trunk. A low, wordless wail began to build—a sound both mechanical and very much alive.

Eleanor gripped her clipboard, voice rising above the din. “Stay together! Don’t let it divide us!”

But already, the chaos was complete. The tinsel trip wires tangled and whipped, wrapping themselves around chair legs and the ankles of the committee. The books circled the room in a manic ballet, thudding into walls and tumbling over furniture. The sensors beeped an irregular, panicked Morse code.

Harold tried to reset the feed, sweat running down his temple. “No use,” he said. “It’s burned out the system. Every channel’s dead.”

George, who had started the night an unflappable skeptic, now looked pale and desperate. “What do we do?”

Mabel’s hands shook so badly she dropped the glass bead, which rolled under the table and vanished. “Maybe we’re dealing with a feline phantom after all,” she said, the joke brittle and sad.

The humming reached a crescendo, rattling the very window panes. The tree bent at a perilous angle, teetered, then—slowly at first, then all at once—crashed to the floor, sending a blizzard of ornaments, tinsel, and broken bulbs skittering across the linoleum.

For a heartbeat, the noise was absolute.

Then, as suddenly as it began, it was over.

The hum died. The trip wires stilled, the books lay in silent heaps, and the only light came from the emergency bulbs, painting the wreckage in sickly red. The four friends stood amid the carnage, breathless, dust and glitter settling on their hair and shoulders like confetti after a parade.

Eleanor, clipboard still clutched in both hands, was the first to speak. "Well. I suppose the case remains open."

George wiped his brow, then surveyed the room. "If anyone asks, we say it was a freak accident."

Harold managed a shaky laugh. "Yeah. Right. An accident."

Mabel looked at the broken tree, then at the shreds of her beautiful tinsel web. For a moment, she seemed on the verge of tears; then, she straightened her scarf, squared her shoulders, and forced a smile. "At least it waited until we finished the investigation."

From under the credenza, Whiskers poked out his head, one eye fixed on the toppled tree, the other on the committee. He gave a single, unimpressed meow.

Outside, the snow fell heavy and silent, muffling the world beyond the windows. Inside, the Starlight Mystery Committee stood together, a little more battered, a lot more humble, but no less determined.

"Tomorrow," Eleanor said, "we clean up. Tonight, we celebrate surviving."

Mabel nodded, and Harold, not trusting himself to speak, just smiled.

George looked around at the wreckage, then at his friends, and shrugged. "Some mysteries aren't meant to be solved."

They gathered in the kitchen, made cocoa, and watched the storm in companionable silence. And if, somewhere deep in the walls, a bell jingled or a book creaked free of its shelf, no one mentioned it.

They had work to do tomorrow.

But tonight, in the red glow and the hush of Starlight, they had each other—and that was enough.

# Chapter 7

## Paw Prints and Phantom Revelations

The east wing, after midnight, belonged to the Starlight Mystery Committee. Not that anyone else wanted it; the halls were cold, the ceiling lights trimmed to a dusky glow, and the lingering aftermath of the Christmas Eve incident had left the staff on edge and the residents in their rooms, doors firmly shut. The only movement was the slow drift of snow past the window and the barely-there reflection of Eleanor's wheelchair as she rolled into position just outside the library alcove.

George arrived second, as always. He carried a metal tape measure in one hand, a carpenter's pencil in the other, and wore a headlamp the size of a small fruit bat. "Perimeter check," he announced, then squatted, flicking the tape out with a crisp click. It echoed in the hush, absurdly loud. He frowned at the number, jotted it in a tiny spiral notebook, and retracted the tape with military precision.

Mabel drifted in next, not so much walking as sidling, her notepad clutched to her chest and her scarf tied like a stage magician's cravat. She pointed her pen at the Christmas tree – a little battered but re-erected, the topmost ornament still askew from the previous night's poltergeist encore. "If you ask me," she said, "it's waiting for an audience."

"No one asked you," George said, but without teeth.

Harold, last and least subtle, wheeled a rolling suitcase brimming with "equipment" – by which he meant a tablet, a tangle of charging cords, and a GoPro that he'd mounted on an old medical walker. He wore his best "investigating" slippers

(rubber-soled, for stability) and a puffer vest several shades brighter than the local fire code allowed.

They gathered in the narrow reading room, which Eleanor had transformed into a command post: one folding table, a pitcher of lukewarm water, and a tray of peanut butter crackers arranged in a pattern that Mabel had dubbed “the mystery grid.” Eleanor took charge as soon as they’d all parked, her blue eyes scanning the group with the intensity of a drill sergeant and a second-grade teacher combined.

“Tonight, we focus on data collection,” she declared. “No showboating. No off-the-cuff theorizing. And above all — no touching anything without gloves. If we’re going to catch a ghost, we’re going to do it by the book.”

Mabel raised her hand. “Which book?”

“The one I wrote this afternoon,” Eleanor replied, producing a stapled document labeled ‘Standard Operating Procedure for Apparitional Observation and Evidence Gathering.’ She handed copies to the others, who received them with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

George grunted, flicked to the first page, and started reading upside down. “Does this say we’re not allowed to run?”

“It says we maintain dignity at all times,” Eleanor said. “If you must run, do it at a brisk walk.”

Harold had already turned on the GoPro and was angling it at the Christmas tree. He whispered, “Camera rolling,” as if he were David Attenborough. The screen on his tablet showed a heat map of the room — mostly green and yellow, except for a single cold spot by the window.

Mabel peered at the map. “That wasn’t there earlier,” she observed, her voice just a hair above a whisper.

Eleanor nodded, then turned her wheelchair to face the window. “Let’s keep it in sight. Harold, sweep the room every five minutes. George, measure any new disturbances. Mabel, document everything — verbatim.”

Mabel saluted with her pen. “On it, boss.”

The first thirty minutes were uneventful. They sipped water, nibbled crackers, and watched as the cold spot inched along the wall, never quite approaching the tree but never leaving the room, either. The only other sound was the faint Christmas playlist drifting from the nurses’ station, a syrupy rendition of “Silver Bells” that looped every forty minutes with algorithmic reliability.

It wasn’t until Mabel’s pen snapped (a drama she performed with much fanfare) that George spotted the first anomaly.

“There. On the rug,” he said, pointing with the tape measure as if directing traffic. “Right by the old return cart.”

Eleanor leaned in, squinting. Even with the low light, it was obvious: a set of paw prints, large and distinct, pressed into the dust and grit that the custodial crew never managed to fully conquer. Unlike Whiskers’ usual delicate stampings, these prints were huge, each toe the size of a walnut, the pad as broad as a teacup.

“That’s not possible,” Mabel whispered. “Unless Whiskers had a growth spurt and a side of radioactive exposure.”

Harold took three rapid photos with his tablet, then flicked the camera to night vision. On the screen, the paw prints glowed faintly, as if dusted with phosphorescence. “Look at that,” he breathed. “The thermal camera shows negative Kelvin right in the tracks. There’s a cold shadow following the prints.”

George knelt by the prints, holding the tape measure alongside. “Four inches wide,” he said. “Three times Whiskers’ size.

Unless someone's let a bobcat in, we've got ourselves a physical impossibility."

Eleanor's hands were steady as she leaned over her lap desk to make notes. "Document everything. Then let's see where the prints lead."

The tracks crossed the rug, skirted the base of the Christmas tree, and continued up the wall to the windowsill, where the cold spot had taken up residence. They stopped just shy of the glass, toes pointed outward, as if the owner had paused to look at the world before vanishing.

"Are those... glowing?" Mabel asked, craning her neck.

"Yes," George said, a little awed despite himself. "They're reflecting the flashlight. See?" He clicked his headlamp to high, and the paw prints lit up in a spectral blue.

Eleanor called a huddle. "Thoughts?"

Harold, always the scientist, said, "It could be some kind of phosphorescent residue. But the cold reading—that's new."

Mabel, ever the poet, suggested, "Maybe it's a snowcat. A spirit of winter. Like in those folktales my grandmother used to tell."

George rolled his eyes, but less dismissively than usual. "Or it's a prank. Someone with time on their hands and a size thirteen snow boot."

Eleanor considered, then said, "Mabel, check the archives for any mentions of animal hauntings. Harold, run a chemical scan on the dust. George, sweep the perimeter—see if the prints continue outside."

The team dispersed, the old rhythm of mutual reliance and friendly one-upmanship clicking into place. Mabel scurried to the ancient filing cabinet in the corner, flipping through folders

with the delicacy of an archaeologist. Harold crouched by the prints, tablet braced on his knee, and ran the thermal app over and over, each time more convinced of the reality of the cold. George methodically measured every new track, calling out widths and angles for Mabel to record.

The cold spot at the window persisted, unmoving, even as the rest of the room gradually warmed from the shared body heat and the nearby radiator. Eleanor stared at it, unblinking, until Mabel returned waving a faded news clipping.

"Here," Mabel said, tapping the yellowed paper. "Nineteen seventy-eight. A janitor reported seeing a 'white beast with eyes like blue fire' prowling the old wing. The report said it left no prints, but the next day, half the staff came down with chills."

George frowned. "Sounds like mass hysteria."

Harold's eyes lit up. "No. That's a real phenomenon. Some viral outbreaks cause hallucinations or chills, and the mind fills in the rest. But this—" he gestured at the glowing prints, "—this is physical. We can see it."

Eleanor nodded, then, in a rare show of uncertainty, said, "Let's not jump to conclusions. But if the pattern holds, the entity will return at three a.m.—same as last night."

Mabel checked her watch. "We've got forty minutes."

They settled in, eyes trained on the window. The Christmas tree sparkled behind them, ornaments trembling as if in anticipation. Every so often, a new print would appear—never while they watched, but always within seconds of them glancing away. It was as if the thing, whatever it was, was playing with them.

At 2:57, the cold spot pulsed, the temperature dropping so quickly that Harold's tablet beeped a low-battery warning.

Their breath clouded in the air, swirling in miniature storm fronts.

"Get ready," Eleanor said, her voice steady.

And then, right on the dot, the glass on the window frosted over, ice crystals spiderwebbing across the pane in fractal patterns. The paw prints lit up electric blue, casting a faint glow on the far wall. For a split second, Eleanor thought she saw a shape—white, sinuous, and longer than any housecat—but when she blinked, it was gone.

Harold whispered, "Did you see that?"

"Yes," said George, who'd been trying to snap a photo but managed only a blurry streak of blue.

Mabel, scribbling furiously, said, "I think it's trying to get inside."

Eleanor exhaled, her own breath visible. "Maybe. Or maybe it's just trying to be seen."

The cold slowly faded, the glow dimmed, and the paw prints—each as neat and impossible as before—remained. Eleanor looked around at her friends, the team she'd drafted, trained, and come to rely on for every adventure.

"We'll keep watch," she said, "and keep looking for patterns. But for now, let's call it: Starlight is haunted—by something with paws, and, apparently, a sense of timing."

They laughed, quietly, not wanting to scare away whatever spirit was out there.

As they packed up, Mabel said, "Maybe next time, we should leave out a saucer of milk."

Harold grinned. "With a side of peanut butter crackers."

George added, "And a bigger litter box."

Eleanor just smiled, and made a note to schedule a follow-up — same time, same place, tomorrow night.

Because a mystery, like a Christmas tree, was never finished after the first try. You just kept adding to it, one impossible detail at a time.

...

They followed the blue-glowing paw prints through the hush of the east wing, each step raising the tension in their bones and the dust on the old linoleum. At first, Eleanor led, guiding her chair over the impressions with the methodical pace of a surveyor mapping the edge of the world. George walked beside her, tape measure at the ready, headlamp sweeping the floor and walls in arcs of white. Mabel trailed behind, notepad pressed to her mouth, eyes darting from the prints to the darkened doorways and back again. Harold, after triple-checking that the GoPro still ran and the tablet battery was holding, lagged to photograph each new development with the focus of a man determined to make the front page of a peer-reviewed journal.

The prints led them straight to the Christmas tree, where the scent of pine, both real and artificial, seemed stronger than before. It was silent except for the distant echo of Bing Crosby from the nurses' station, crooning about sleigh rides. The tree itself looked untouched, regal even — every ornament exactly as it had been after the last group fix. The trip wires were still in place, each a different hue, though the tinsel that Mabel had strung so painstakingly had lost all its snarls and now shimmered in perfect, undulating lines from branch to branch.

Eleanor drew the group to a halt, eyes narrowed at the tree. "Observe," she whispered, using her teacher's voice, but

gentler. “Ornaments on the lowest branch—those were smashed last night.”

“They’re back,” George whispered, awestruck. “I swept up the glass myself. I remember it because the dustpan stuck to the—” He stopped, staring. “They’re not just similar. They’re the same. Look at that crack in the snowman.”

Mabel, notebook shaking in her hand, wrote: “Ornaments unbroken. Tinsel rearranged. Prints terminate at tree base.”

Harold scanned the tree with his thermal app. “Nothing. Cold spot’s gone.”

Mabel turned to Eleanor. “Maybe it left.”

Eleanor shook her head, lips pressed thin. “Or maybe it’s still here, and it doesn’t want to be found.”

George circled the tree, ducking beneath the branches, muttering measurements and making little marks in the dust with his pencil. “There’s a fresh print on the skirt,” he said. “And a streak—like something brushed past.”

They heard it, then—a sound like the sigh of silk, or the flutter of a scarf in a winter draft. The tree shivered, every ornament chiming against its neighbor, and the lights—twined through the needles—flickered in a wave, from base to tip and back again.

“Did anyone see that?” Harold whispered.

“See what?” Eleanor asked, eyes darting.

Harold pointed at the tinsel, which had begun to move, almost imperceptibly, as if a careful hand were smoothing each strand back into place. “There. At the center. The light’s bending.”

Mabel stared, unblinking, and then nodded. "Something's there. I can... I can almost make out a shape. Tall. Lighter than air."

George stepped back, nearly bumping into Mabel, and for the first time looked more excited than scared. "It's manifesting."

The tree trembled, ornaments clicking. Then, in the space between two garlands, they saw it: a pale shimmer, shaped like a person, the outline so faint it could have been a trick of the eye—except all four of them saw it at once. The form grew more distinct by degrees, the way fog thickens in a valley before dawn. It reached out, one translucent hand steadyng a gold glass bell, and another—slow and deliberate—hooking an ornament back onto a branch where it belonged.

Harold fumbled with the tablet, desperate to record the moment. "It's... it's not showing up," he stammered. "The camera's glitching, but there's a temperature dip—right where the shape is."

The form paused, as if aware of being watched. The face resolved, old and lined, with the kind of cheekbones and chin that time itself cannot erase. There was a suggestion of a smile: not mournful, but serene.

"It's not trying to scare us," Mabel breathed. "It's... helping. Fixing what got broken."

Eleanor watched, hands gripping the armrests of her chair so tightly the knuckles gleamed. "That's Mrs. Winters," she said, voice trembling only a little. "She used to decorate the tree every year. She'd sneak in after lights out, just to make sure everything looked perfect for the morning."

George blinked. "She's been gone three years."

Eleanor nodded. "Her daughter moved her into hospice, but... she asked that the tree tradition continue." Eleanor's voice,

steady now, was almost reverent. “I don’t think she ever really left.”

They all watched as the ghost of Mrs. Winters circled the tree, fixing the baubles and the tinsel, smoothing out the skirt, and even rearranging the gifts beneath—wrapping paper shifting as if caught by an invisible breeze. When she was done, she hovered for a moment by the topmost branch, straightening the battered old star, and then she turned to the group.

For a long second, the form faced them head-on. The eyes, though not quite eyes, seemed to twinkle; the smile deepened, and then, with the same gentleness as before, the form drifted toward the reading room’s side table.

There, resting among the clutter of case notes and water pitchers, was a small, old-fashioned Christmas ornament: a blown-glass robin, its paint faded to pink and gold, the string frayed almost to nothing. Mrs. Winters’ shape reached out, touched the ornament, and then—slowly—faded away. The room warmed instantly, and the only trace left was the robin, which glimmered in the lamplight.

“Did anyone...?” Mabel started, then stopped, staring at the ornament.

Harold, a little breathless, said, “It’s on the log. The temperature drop, the motion, the whole thing. But nothing on video—just static.”

George, more gently than anyone would expect, picked up the robin and held it between thumb and forefinger. “She used to put these at the very top,” he murmured. “Said it brought good luck for the coming year.”

Eleanor rolled her chair closer, studying the ornament and then the tree. “I remember that. She’d tell the whole floor to stay up late, so everyone could watch her finish the decorations.”

Mabel, eyes glassy, said, “She wasn’t haunting the place. She was just... making sure it felt like home.”

They looked at each other, four old friends with a secret now too lovely to be frightening.

George set the ornament gently on the table. “The scratches, the mess, the fallen glass – it was never Whiskers. It was her. Fixing, not breaking.”

Harold, running his fingers over the frayed string, said, “That explains the cold spots. She always kept her window open a crack, even in January.”

Mabel laughed, a wet, relieved sound. “It’s the sweetest haunting I’ve ever heard of.”

Eleanor, eyes brighter than the tree lights, said, “We should put the robin on the star.”

George nodded, and – without ceremony, but with infinite care – tied the ornament’s faded string to the battered, lopsided star at the tree’s top. It caught the glow of the nearest bulb, a perfect point of light.

The group stood back, admiring the work. The tree shimmered, complete at last.

“I think she’d like that,” Eleanor said.

They lingered, reluctant to break the spell, until the clock in the hallway chimed two. The room was warmer now, the air easy, every breath a comfort.

As they gathered their notes and packed away the instruments, Mabel paused by the reading room door, glancing at the faded black-and-white photo of Mrs. Winters on the wall – the same smile, the same hands, reaching up to place an ornament on a much younger, skinnier tree.

"See you next Christmas," Mabel whispered, and closed the door behind her.

The tree, with its glass robin, glowed on in the darkness, watched over by a spirit who asked for nothing more than to be remembered.

...

They lingered in the reading room, gathered around the table where the robin ornament rested, its faded glass haloed by the lamplight. In the hush that followed Mrs. Winters' visitation, it felt wrong to speak too loudly, so the team's debrief came out in murmurs and soft laughter, as if they feared the walls themselves might shatter if startled.

George set the tape measure aside and took a long look at the old photograph, propped upright in its nickel frame. "She was good with her hands," he said, studying the image. "Every ornament hung at the exact same angle. See that?" He tapped the corner, pointing out the robin — brighter in the photo, but unmistakable.

Eleanor leaned forward, tracing the edges of the picture. "She called it 'the luck bird.' Claimed her mother brought it over from Germany before the war. Every Christmas, she'd make a production out of hanging it last, so everyone would remember it was there."

Mabel, still clutching her notepad, leafed through her scribbled diagrams. "All the strange events, the cold spots, even the 'haunting' — they've only ever happened in December. Look." She turned the pages for the others. "No sightings before Thanksgiving. Then, right on schedule, the reports start rolling in. Almost like clockwork."

Harold, eyes glued to his tablet, had already started compiling the data. "It's more than that," he said, voice rising with

excitement. “I set the sensors to log background noise, right? Every single time we registered a temperature drop, the system also picked up a spike in ambient sound – specifically, Christmas music. Bing, Nat King Cole, Mariah if it’s the night staff. When the carols go up, the temperature goes down, and the ghost activity starts.”

George snorted. “So we’re haunted by holiday cheer?”

Eleanor smiled, but there was something thoughtful behind it. “Or by tradition. Starlight changes so much every year. But Christmas – especially for people like Mrs. Winters – was the one constant.”

Mabel patted the robin ornament, careful not to smudge its fragile paint. “She wasn’t making trouble,” she said. “She just wanted the tree to look perfect.”

There was a pause, each of them letting that idea settle. Even Whiskers, who had re-emerged to rub against Eleanor’s chair, seemed content to sit and watch the bird without any further sabotage.

Harold swiped through the last of the thermal images. “There’s still something I don’t get. The prints. Why cat paws? Why that size?”

George, with the air of a man solving the final clue in a crossword, said, “Because Mrs. Winters had a cat. Giant, long-haired thing. Used to nap in the tree skirt all December. You could hardly tell where the tinsel ended and the cat began.”

Eleanor’s eyes lit up. “Snowball! I’d forgotten.” She looked at the group, delighted. “That monster could eat a full roast chicken and still beg for seconds.”

Mabel grinned. "He used to nap in the windowsill all day, then wake up and patrol the hallways at night. A perfect accomplice for a ghost."

Harold, shaking his head in wonder, said, "So the entity's not just Mrs. Winters. It's her and her cat. The cold spots, the prints, the feeling of something watching—it's them, together, still doing their rounds."

They sat in comfortable silence for a time, each savoring the warmth, the robin's glimmer, and the glow from the Christmas tree—a little brighter now, or maybe it just seemed that way with the ghost story resolved.

Eventually, George broke the peace. "What do we do about it? The staff will want a report."

Eleanor closed the robin gently in her palm and handed it back to George, who hung it on the star with quiet reverence. "We tell them the truth," she said. "That Whiskers is innocent, the sensors work, and the tree will be safe as long as we let Mrs. Winters finish her decorating."

Harold's brow furrowed. "Should we... warn anyone?"

Mabel shook her head. "No. Let them enjoy it. If the story gets out, it'll just turn into another urban legend. I say we keep it for ourselves."

"Agreed," said George, surprising everyone, even himself. "Some things are better left as they are."

They started to pack up, Mabel gathering her scattered notes and Harold gently disconnecting the GoPro from its walker mount. George rolled up his tape, fastidious as ever, and Eleanor wheeled to the far side of the room, shutting off the lamp but leaving the tree lights on.

As they made their way to the door, Mabel lingered just a moment, looking back at the tree. She raised her hand in a tiny wave, then whispered, "Good night, Mrs. Winters. Good night, Snowball."

They walked the length of the east wing in silence, content in their shared secret. At the corridor's end, Eleanor stopped and turned her chair to face her friends.

"We did good work," she said. "You should all be proud."

George grunted. "You think we'll see her next year?"

Mabel smiled, eyes sparkling. "Wouldn't be Christmas without a little magic."

Harold, already plotting upgrades for the next stakeout, said, "Maybe next time, we leave out a bowl of chicken. Just in case."

They laughed, and the sound filled the hallway, echoing all the way back to the reading room.

Back in the library, the robin ornament caught a glint of moonlight from the window. The tree stood perfect, and on the rug below, the faint outline of paw prints slowly faded – until, at last, they were gone.

And if, in the quiet hours before dawn, the faintest strains of "Silent Night" drifted through the east wing, not a single person at Starlight was surprised.

# Chapter 8

## A Christmas Revelation: Spirits and Celebrations

If Starlight Eldercare Facility had a soul, it lived in the common room. Christmas morning found the place before sunrise, swaddled in the gentle gold of lamplight and the hush that comes only once a year — before the world, and all its obligations, could gather enough nerve to wake.

At the far end, the fireplace flickered against the cold, and before it, Eleanor Grace Hudson positioned her wheelchair with the precision of a seasoned general. The heat didn't reach all the way to her toes, but it was good for the mood and, more importantly, for the view: the Christmas tree, now restored to its full glory, stood tall in the corner, crowned by the robin ornament that caught the lamplight in red-gold sparks. She shifted herself in her wheelchair seat, still bothered by needing it, but all the work of the last week — the stakeouts, the lost sleep, the midnight snacks and low-grade bickering — had come down to this: a perfect tree, a peaceful room, and the four old friends arrayed in a semicircle around the glow.

George Reynolds, bundled in his third-best cardigan ("not festive, but reliable," he'd declared), sat with his ankles crossed and his eyes on the window, as if watching for dawn itself. Every so often he'd reach up and fuss with the cuff, then catch himself and smooth it with a self-conscious swipe, checking to see if anyone had noticed. They had. No one said a word.

Mabel Bennett clutched her notepad to her chest like a talisman, the cover already half-worn from years of storytelling and, more recently, field notes. Her slippers — pink, sequined, a gift from

one of her grandkids – twitched now and then as if she might at any moment leap up and declare the day officially magical. But she held herself still, lips pursed in anticipation, eyes never leaving the tree.

Harold Mitchell, in the armchair closest to the credenza, fiddled endlessly with his tablet, tapping the screen, waking it, putting it to sleep, then waking it again as if afraid to miss an alert. The device – so recently the key to their “Standard Apparitional Observation Protocol” – was now just a nervous habit, a stand-in for a man who, if left to his own devices, might start re-running the night’s sensor logs for fun.

On the table: a chipped blue carafe of hot cocoa, mugs, and a plate of ginger snaps arranged in a circle with one missing (Mabel’s, if you tracked the evidence). The air itself carried a note of pine and cinnamon, the kind that clung to everything in December and seemed, by some unwritten rule, to make even hospital-grade heating ducts feel like a woodland cottage.

For a long while, the four said nothing at all. The silence wasn’t awkward, but full: of memory, anticipation, and the exhausted satisfaction of a job well done. Every now and then one would shift, or clear a throat, or sigh softly – small noises that only made the hush deeper by contrast.

Eleanor, never content to let a moment drift, broke the spell. “Anyone else awake enough for cocoa?” she said, her voice rough at the edges, but not unkind.

George, ever the skeptic, raised his mug in salute. “You know, I never understood cocoa before six a.m. But I see the appeal.”

Harold, not taking his eyes off the tablet, said, “It’s tradition. I’m recording the audio, by the way. If anything happens, I want it on the log.”

"Careful," Mabel teased. "The ghosts might not like being eavesdropped."

"That's the point," Harold said, and even cracked a smile.

Mabel took a cookie from the plate and broke it in half, offering the larger piece to Eleanor. "For luck," she whispered. "And because you did all the work."

Eleanor accepted, then rolled her chair a bit closer to the fire, letting the heat soak in. "We all did," she said. "Even Whiskers, wherever he's sleeping it off."

For a second, they all pictured the facility cat, sprawled in a sunbeam or — more likely — under a warm radiator, blissfully unaware that his Christmas Eve antics had been upstaged by something older and more persistent.

On the windowsill, frost crept in symmetrical patterns, each line catching the outside light in silver filigree. The room was the color of promise, of waiting. For all their talk of hauntings and evidence, none of them quite said what they were thinking: that this was the hour the world changed, or didn't. That maybe the boundary between memory and magic, living and gone, was thinnest just before the sun cracked open the day.

The clock on the mantel ticked 6:04. A small sound, but it drew every eye.

Outside, the sky shifted from black to pewter to the faintest blush of gold. And then, just as Mabel was about to launch into a story ("My grandmother always said...") something shimmered by the tree.

It was nothing, at first — a refraction, a blur in the air, like heat above pavement on a summer day. But it steadied, gathered itself, and began to coalesce in the space between the tree and the edge of the old rug.

Mabel was the first to see it, the notepad slipping from her hands to her lap. "There she is," she whispered, almost reverent.

Eleanor didn't speak, but her hand found the armrest of her chair, gripping tight.

George blinked twice, then removed his glasses and polished them—an old reflex, but this time he couldn't blame the smudge for what he saw.

Mrs. Winters.

Or the shape of her: not flesh and blood, but a soft white luminescence, tall and serene, with the outline of a holiday sweater and, incongruously, an apron. Her hair caught the light and made a faint corona around her head. There was no menace, no horror—just a presence, warm and oddly familiar.

Beside her, barely visible, the ghost of a cat: larger than life, fur fluffed out in a regal halo, tail wrapped around translucent paws.

Snowball.

The spirit approached the tree, hands hovering but never quite touching. She gazed up at the robin ornament—now just the tiniest bit askew—and straightened it with a gesture so gentle that the whole tree seemed to relax into itself, the tinsel and lights settling, the star gleaming steady.

"All's right at last," Eleanor said, so softly that only those at the table could hear.

George, ever the empiricist, found his voice. "Well, I'll be."

Mabel giggled, a sound at once childish and ancient. "She just wanted to finish her tradition."

Harold, recording the scene, tapped his screen with trembling hands. "It's real," he said, eyes wide. "I mean, not just a story. It's... really her."

Mrs. Winters glanced their way. Not a word was spoken, but there was something in her eyes—recognition, gratitude, the quiet delight of a job well done. The cat padded a lazy circuit around her feet, then sat and watched, just as it must have done a hundred Christmas mornings before.

The four friends sat in awe, not moving, not even daring to reach for another mug or cookie.

The sky outside brightened. The shimmer faded, slow and gentle, until the spot by the tree was empty again—except for the robin, now perfectly aligned, catching the first ray of real sunlight as it crept into the room.

They sat together, the silence somehow deeper and lighter at once.

After a time, Eleanor let out a breath she didn't know she'd been holding. "That's one for the log, Harold," she said.

He nodded, still staring, still recording.

Mabel picked up her notepad, flipped to a new page, and wrote, in careful script: "Christmas morning. Mrs. Winters at the tree. All's well."

George wiped his glasses, then, almost bashful, reached out to put a hand on Eleanor's arm. She squeezed it, and for a moment, there was nothing more to say.

The scent of ginger and cocoa mingled in the air, and in the hush of the world's best-kept secret, the four friends looked at the tree, and each other, and knew that sometimes, the right ending is just a beginning in disguise.

...

The silence that followed Mrs. Winters' appearance was thick enough to stir with a spoon. Not one of the four friends dared a word, not even Mabel, who generally could be counted on to fill any lull with speculation or a fresh theory. Instead, they watched as the spirit hovered near the tree, haloed by the softening dawn.

The air felt charged—a subtle pressure, as if the whole room was holding its breath. Then, Mrs. Winters turned, not toward the four of them, but to the small table on the far side of the fireplace. There, set neatly among the mugs and a red-checkered runner, was a single candle—white, unscented, and until that moment, entirely overlooked.

Without so much as a draft, the candlewick caught. A steady, golden flame leapt up, flickered once, then settled, illuminating the wax from within. The ghostly woman seemed to smile—no teeth, just the creases at the eyes, that signature warmth they'd seen in the black-and-white photos from the lobby wall.

Mabel's pen scratched quietly across her notepad. "Lit a candle. Unsure how. Possibly residual energy?" She underlined the last bit, then bit her lip, uncertain whether to write "miracle" or "manifestation" in the margin. She settled on "holiday miracle," then circled it three times.

Harold, hands shaking, steadied his tablet on the arm of his chair. The device's camera whirred and clicked, trying to focus on the apparition, but mostly catching the glowing edges of the flame and the gentle motion of Mrs. Winters' silhouette as she crossed the room.

She made her way, step by step, to the armchair by the window. Not just any armchair—her armchair. Eleanor and the others remembered well the way Mrs. Winters used to plant herself there every morning, coffee in one hand, crossword or jigsaw or

knitting in the other, her laugh as constant as the ticking of the mantel clock. The ghost paused at the chair, reached out with transparent fingers, and, to their surprise, the fabric creased under her touch. Only a fraction, but enough.

"She's here," Harold whispered. "She's really... here."

Eleanor reached for her mug but found her hand unsteady, so she folded it in her lap instead. "Let her finish," she whispered, not so much a command as a plea.

Next, the spirit drifted to the upright piano, an instrument that had not, to anyone's knowledge, been properly tuned in a decade. Resting on the music stand was a battered copy of "100 Carols for the Season," its edges frayed, pages decorated with penciled-in harmonies from generations of residents. Mrs. Winters leaned over it, almost as if reading, and with the barest movement of her hand, turned a page.

This time, the four friends heard it—a faint chime, not quite a note but enough to ruffle the air and raise the fine hair on their arms. Mabel scribbled furiously. "Possible auditory phenomenon," she wrote, before scratching it out and replacing it with, "She loves the carols. She wants us to sing."

George, who had spent most of the last few minutes oscillating between skepticism and awe, found himself on his feet, cardigan buttoned all the way up. He took two careful steps forward, stopping at a respectful distance from the piano. Bowing his head, he spoke in the most solemn voice any of them had ever heard from him. "We understand now. It was you all along." He looked at the cat, sitting primly at Mrs. Winters' feet, and added, "And your Snowball too."

The spectral feline, sensing its cue, rose and padded beneath the tree. With a flick of its translucent tail, it batted at a low-hanging silver ornament—a bell, of course—which swung gently back and forth, catching and scattering the light. For a moment, the

friends watched the ornament, hypnotized, then returned their gaze to the woman and her companion.

Mrs. Winters moved on, gliding to the mantle where a length of evergreen garland hung, festooned with ribbon and the occasional candy cane. Her fingers traced the garland, lingering on a hand-tied bow. The bow tightened, just a hair, as if the ribbon itself remembered her touch.

Sunlight, now emboldened, pooled through the windows and across the floor. The spirit turned once more to face her audience, expression peaceful. She lingered a heartbeat longer, then, with a nod, faded into the warming air, her outline scattering like the dust motes in the beams of morning.

As the light brightened, so did the mood. Where there had been awe, there was now a sense of closure—a gentle relaxation, as if the room itself exhaled and returned to the business of Christmas morning.

Mabel set her pen down, pinched the bridge of her nose, and sniffed back tears. “We did it,” she said, voice thick. “She’s happy.”

Eleanor, always the teacher, offered a small smile. “You documented it, didn’t you?”

Mabel nodded, dabbing her eyes. “Every second.”

Harold, for once, put the tablet aside and just stared at the tree, the robin ornament glinting at its crown. “I never thought I’d see the day,” he said, almost reverent. “A real haunting. A real goodbye.”

George, not usually prone to emotion, gave the room one last sweep, then sat down hard and poured himself a second mug of cocoa. “What do we do now?”

Eleanor, after a thoughtful pause, said, "We finish the holiday. We celebrate. And we let her rest."

As if on cue, the ghost cat—now only a memory—flickered by the hearth. For a second, the bell on the tree jingled, then stilled.

Just before the spell was gone for good, Mabel stood, took a ginger snap from the plate, and held it out toward the empty space beside the candle. "For you, Mrs. Winters," she said, smiling through her tears. "And for Snowball, too."

The flame on the candle, instead of guttering, burned a little brighter. The four friends watched it, basking in the warmth—not just of the fire or the sunlight, but of something old and kindly, gone but never quite lost.

For a while, no one spoke. They simply watched the light, each of them mulling over what they'd seen, and what it meant for every Christmas to come.

When the first voices from the hallway filtered in—children, parents, the morning staff come to join the celebration—it felt right, like the opening chord of a long-awaited song.

Mabel, returning to her seat, summed it up best: "Until next Christmas, Mrs. Winters."

And the candle, steady and proud, answered for them all.

...

As the morning brightened into proper Christmas, the Starlight common room shook off its hush and opened itself to the world. First, it was the creak of the side doors—one, then three, then a parade of them, letting in crisp air and the thud-thud of boots. Then came the laughter, big and unruly, the kind that spilled out into the hallway and dared the rest of the building to keep up.

By eight-thirty, the room was full. Not “packed” in any fire-code-breaching sense, but brimming with the sort of energy that could resurrect a block party with nothing but a few plates of cookies and some decent coffee. The tree, resplendent with its robin-topped star, was flanked by an explosion of parcels and gift bags—most of them with the kind of wrapping that said “last-minute,” all of them with bows bigger than the gifts themselves. Tinsel drifted like snow on every available surface. The air was heavy with cinnamon rolls, pine, and the tang of citrus from a plate of homemade jellied slices.

Families flooded in: adult children with hair just beginning to gray, grandchildren in new sweaters or the last-minute pajamas from a holiday sale, and even a few great-grandkids, already sticky with sugar and wild from anticipation. The residents of Starlight glowed in their best vests, scarves, and sweaters—some with the tags still on, gifts from daughters, sons, or, in at least one case, the facility’s own holiday drive.

Staff set up a buffet table that bent under the weight of treats: egg bakes and scones, ham and potatoes, three different kinds of coffee cake. Mugs clinked, plates were loaded and reloaded, and the nurses—outnumbered at last—took turns sneaking cookies and coffee from the spread.

Eleanor watched from her chair near the fire, the red shawl her daughter had brought her draped perfectly over her shoulders. The two of them shared a resemblance—sharp eyes, strong chin, a way of looking at the room as if it were a riddle they already knew the answer to. Her daughter fussed over the way the shawl draped, then fussed over nothing at all, eventually content to just sit and talk, their heads together in close conversation.

George’s son arrived in a flurry of scarf and oversized down coat, hand-delivering a tin of peanut brittle and a firm, bone-rattling hug. He made a beeline for the tree, ran an expert eye

over the ornaments, and laughed at the robin at the top. "She still got you to put it up," he said, grinning at his father.

"Some things are tradition," George said, voice gruff but eyes gentle.

Mabel's grandchildren gathered around her like acolytes, drawn by the promise of a new holiday legend. They sat at her feet, three in matching Christmas socks and two more balanced precariously on the arms of her chair. She told them about "the Christmas ghost"—not with fear, but with a sense of wonder. "She was a lovely woman, a bit of a stickler for tree placement, but always had a sweet for the little ones," Mabel said. "And every year, she made sure the robin at the top could see the whole room."

One of the children asked, in a stage whisper, if the ghost was "still here now." Mabel winked and pointed at the robin. "You never know," she said. "She only shows herself to true believers." This satisfied them, and after a round of wide-eyed glances at the tree, the kids tore into their cookies with renewed zeal.

Harold, legs draped with a plaid blanket and cocoa in hand, sat with his great-grandson—a small, round child with the patience of a mayfly—teaching him how to zoom on the tablet. He showed him the footage from the night before (the "shimmer" in the air, the swinging bell), and the boy, unimpressed by ghost stories but fascinated by technology, declared it "the coolest science trick ever." Harold took this as a win.

Through it all, the four friends found ways to orbit one another, sometimes together, sometimes apart, always within a single line of sight. They traded stories with their families, accepted the offerings of homemade fudge and hand-knitted socks, and at every chance exchanged the subtle, knowing looks of people who'd shared an unrepeatable secret.

It was Mabel, sharp-eyed even through her holiday glasses, who spotted Whiskers first. The cat made his entrance from the utility closet, trailing a strand of gold tinsel from his tail. With the feline dignity known only to animals who have survived both street and shelter, he surveyed the scene, ignored the proffered scraps from the buffet, and headed straight for the tree.

A great-grandchild – the boldest of Mabel’s brood – attempted to intercept Whiskers with a toy reindeer, but the cat weaved past, focused on the robin at the top. At the base of the tree, he sniffed once, then plunged halfway under the lowest boughs, his rear end wagging in the air. Seconds later, he emerged triumphant, a glittering red ornament clutched between his teeth.

Applause broke out, led by Harold’s great-grandson, who cheered, “The hero strikes again!” The children crowded around, and Whiskers, sensing an appreciative audience, dropped the ornament and licked his paw, nonchalant.

Harold, never one to let a good moment go uncelebrated, snapped a photo on the tablet and sent it to the printer at the front desk. Within minutes, the picture – Whiskers, tinsel in mouth, surrounded by laughing children – was passed around the room.

The celebration rolled on: games of cards, the slow opening of presents, the occasional off-key carol. The staff, relieved to find the morning crisis-free, lingered at the edges of the crowd, sharing in the food and the laughter. There was no talk of ghosts, only of tradition, and the tree – its robin gleaming in the sun – became the centerpiece for every story, every memory, every impromptu family photo.

At one point, the four friends found themselves alone for a minute, seated in a loose circle near the fire. The morning’s

bustle had faded to background, the sounds of children and old songs blending into a comfortable hum.

"We did it," George said, looking from one friend to the next.  
"We solved the case."

"And helped a soul find peace," Eleanor added.

"Plus, we made Whiskers a local celebrity," Mabel said, gesturing at the cat, who now occupied a place of honor in the lap of the youngest visitor.

Harold raised his mug. "To Mrs. Winters, and Snowball, and every Christmas yet to come."

They toasted in silence. Outside, the sun hit the window at just the right angle, sending a beam straight to the robin at the top of the tree. For a second, it gleamed like new, every facet catching the light, and the four friends sat back, content, each with the sense that this Christmas—ghosts and all—would be one for the ages.

The final photo of the morning caught them there: the tree aglow, families clustered close, Whiskers purring, and the robin shining in the center of it all. Eleanor, mug in hand, looked straight at the camera, the faintest glimmer in her blue eyes.

If Starlight had a soul, it lived here—among the stories, the friends, and the memories, always ready to welcome one more Christmas morning.



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The Starlight Eldercare Facility buzzes with holiday anticipation as residents Eleanor, George, Mabel, and Harold prepare for visits from their families. While decorating the Christmas tree, they reflect on their adventurous year and remember a mystery they left unsolved: the strange happenings at Starlight. Last year, they attributed the disturbances to Whiskers, the facility's cat, but some incidents never quite added up. As Christmas approaches, similar events occur—glasses tipping over, books flying off shelves, shredded curtains, and eerie noises. The crew wonders if they were too quick to blame Whiskers and decide to investigate once more.

Eleanor leads the charge as the group organizes stakeouts and interviews fellow residents. They find fresh scratches in one hallway and hear odd noises near the east wing. Mabel jokes about a "feline phantom," but they dismiss it as a prank or ghostly mischief. Their search turns up little evidence of Whiskers' presence at many of the scenes, casting doubt on last year's conclusion. Determined to get to the bottom of things, they set traps and continue their pursuit of any unusual activity. One night, during a particularly chilly stakeout by the Christmas tree, they spot a shimmering figure—a spirit! It vanishes before they can approach, leaving them stunned but thrilled to finally have proof of a ghost.

