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MIDNIGHTS

31 December 2014, *almost midnight*

It was cold out on the patio, under the deck. Frigid. Dark.

Dark because Mags was outside at midnight, and dark because she was in the shadows.

This was the last place anyone would look for her—anyone, and especially Noel. She'd miss all the excitement.

Thank God. Mags should have thought of this years ago.

She leaned back against Alicia's house and started eating the Chex mix she'd brought out with her. (Alicia's mom made the best Chex mix.) Mags could hear the music playing inside, and then she couldn't—and that was a good sign. It meant that the countdown was starting.

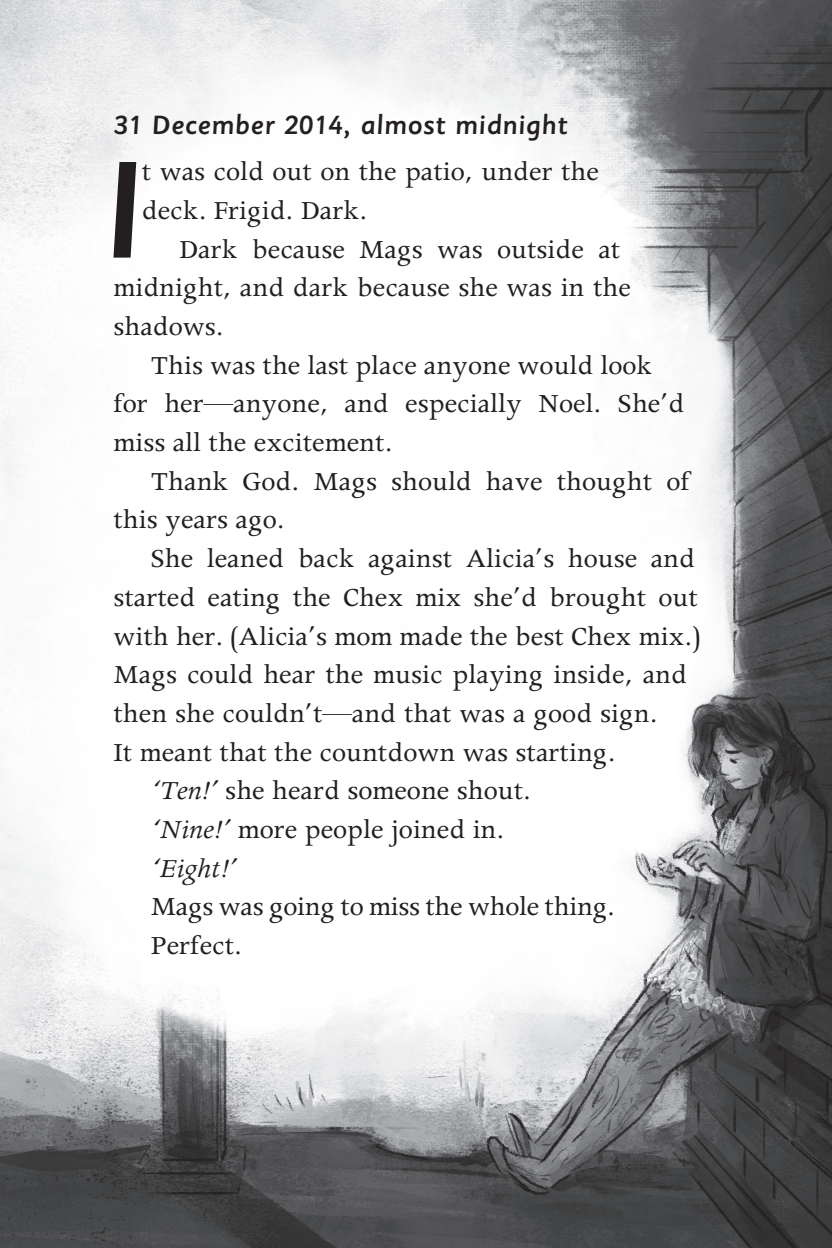
'Ten!' she heard someone shout.

'Nine!' more people joined in.

'Eight!'

Mags was going to miss the whole thing.

Perfect.



31 December 2011, *almost midnight*

'Are there nuts in that?' the boy asked.

Mags paused, holding a cracker piled with pesto and cream cheese in front of her mouth. 'I think there are pine nuts . . .' she said, crossing her eyes to look at it.

'Are pine nuts tree nuts?'

'I have no idea,' Mags said. 'I don't think pine nuts grow on pine trees, do they?'

The boy shrugged. He had shaggy brown hair and wide-open blue eyes. He was wearing a Pokémon T-shirt.

'I'm not much of a tree-nut expert,' Mags said.

'Me neither,' he said. 'You'd think I would be—if I accidentally eat one, it could kill me. If there were something out there that could kill you, wouldn't you try to be an expert on it?'

'I don't know. . . .' Mags shoved the cracker in her mouth and started chewing. 'I don't know very much about cancer. Or car accidents.'

'Yeah . . .' the boy said, looking sadly at the buffet table. He was skinny. And pale. 'But tree nuts specifically have it out for me, for me *personally*. They're more like assassins than, like, possible dangers.'

'Damn,' Mags said, 'what'd you ever do to tree nuts?'

The boy laughed. 'Ate them, I guess.'

The music, which had been really loud, stopped. 'It's almost midnight!' somebody shouted.

They both looked around. Mags's friend Alicia, from homeroom, was standing on the couch. It was Alicia's party—the first New Year's Eve party that Mags, at fifteen, had ever been invited to.

'Nine!' Alicia yelled.

'Eight!' There were a few dozen people in the basement, and they were all shouting now.

'Seven!'

'I'm Noel,' the boy said, holding out his hand.

Mags brushed all the pesto and traces of nuts off her hand and shook his. 'Mags.'

'Four!'

'Three!'

'It's nice to meet you, Mags.'

'You, too, Noel. Congratulations on evading the tree nuts for another year.'

'They almost had me with that pesto dip.'

'Yeah.' She nodded. 'It was a close call.'

31 December 2012, almost midnight

Noel fell against the wall and slid down next to Mags, then bumped his shoulder against hers. He blew a paper party horn in her direction. 'Hey.'

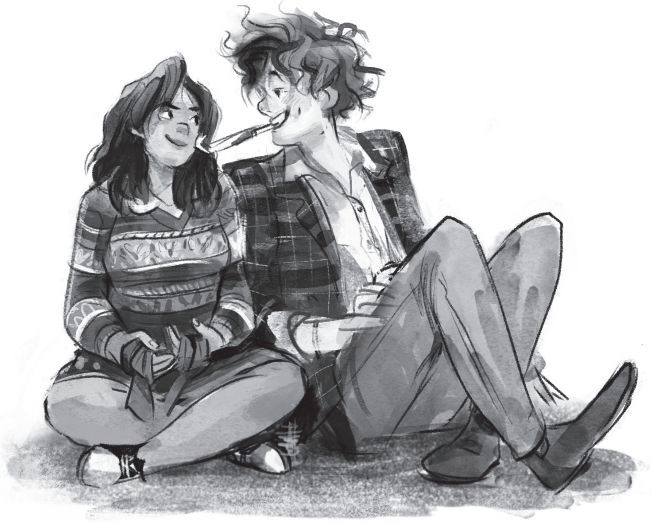
'Hey.' She smiled at him. He was wearing a plaid jacket, and his white shirt was open at the collar. Noel was pale and flushed easily. Right now he was pink from the top of his forehead to the second button of his shirt. 'You're a dancing machine,' she said.

'I like to dance, Mags.'

'I know you do.'

'And I only get so many opportunities.'

She raised an eyebrow.



'I like to dance *in public,*' Noel said. 'With other people. It's a communal experience.'

'I kept your tie safe,' she said, and held out a red silk necktie. He'd been dancing on the coffee table when he threw it at her.

'Thank you,' he said, taking it and slinging it around his neck. 'That was a good catch—but I was actually trying to lure you out onto the dance floor.'

'That was a coffee table, Noel.'

'There was room for two, Margaret.'

Mags wrinkled her nose, considering. 'I don't think there was.'

'There's always room for you with me, on every coffee table,' he said. 'Because you are my best friend.'

'Pony is your best friend.'

Noel ran his fingers through his hair. It was sweaty and curly and fell past his ears. 'Pony is also my best friend. And also Frankie. And Connor.'

'And your mom,' Mags said.

Noel turned his grin on her. 'But especially you. It's our anniversary. I can't believe you wouldn't dance with me on our anniversary.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she

said. (She knew exactly what he was talking about.)

'It happened right there.' Noel pointed at the buffet table where Alicia's mom always laid out snacks. 'I was having an allergic reaction, and you saved my life. You stuck an epinephrine pen into my heart.'

'I ate some pesto,' Mags said.

'Heroically,' Noel agreed.

She sat up suddenly. 'You didn't eat any of the chicken salad tonight, did you? There were almonds.'

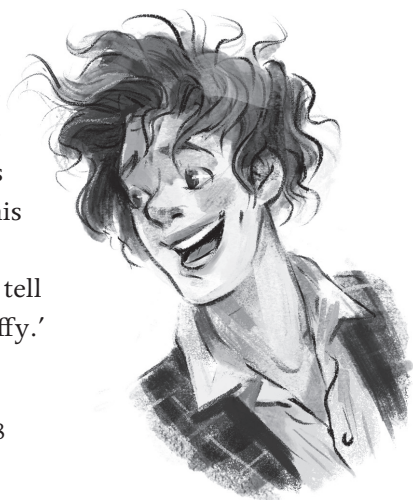
'Still saving my life,' he said.

'*Did* you?'

'No. But I had some fruit cocktail. I think there were strawberries in it—my mouth is all tingly.'

Mags squinted at him. 'Are you okay?'

Noel looked okay. He looked flushed. And sweaty. He looked like his teeth were too wide for his mouth, and his mouth was too wide for his face.



'I'm fine,' he said. 'I'll tell you if my tongue gets puffy.'

‘Keep your lewd allergic reactions to yourself,’ she said.

Noel wiggled his eyebrows. ‘You should see what happens when I eat shellfish.’

Mags rolled her eyes and tried not to laugh. After a second, she looked over at him again. ‘Wait, what happens when you eat shellfish?’

He waved his hand in front of his chest, halfheartedly. ‘I get a rash.’

She frowned. ‘*How* are you still alive?’

‘Through the efforts of everyday heroes like yourself.’

‘Don’t eat the pink salad, either,’ she said. ‘It’s shrimp.’

Noel flicked his red tie around her neck and smiled at her. Which was different than a grin. ‘Thanks.’

‘Thank *you,*’ she said, pulling the ends of the tie even and looking down at them. ‘It matches my sweater.’ Mags was wearing a giant sweater dress, some sort of Scandinavian design with a million colors.

‘Everything matches your sweater,’ he said. ‘You look like a Christmas-themed Easter egg.’

‘I feel like a really colorful Muppet,’ she said.

‘One of the fuzzy ones.’

‘I like it,’ Noel said. ‘It’s a feast for the senses.’

She couldn’t tell if he was making fun of her, so she changed the subject. ‘Where did Pony go?’

‘Over there.’ Noel pointed across the room. ‘He wanted to get in position to be standing casually near Simini when midnight strikes.’

‘So he can kiss her?’

‘Indeed,’ Noel said. ‘On the mouth, if all goes to plan.’

‘That’s so gross,’ Mags said, fiddling with the ends of Noel’s tie.

‘Kissing?’

‘No . . . kissing is fine.’ She felt herself blushing. Fortunately she wasn’t as pale as Noel; it wouldn’t be painted all over her face and throat. ‘What’s gross is using New Year’s Eve as an excuse to kiss someone who might want not want to kiss you. Using it as a trick.’

‘Maybe Simini *does* want to kiss Pony.’

‘Or maybe it’ll be really awkward,’ Mags said. ‘And she’ll do it anyway because she feels like she has to.’

‘He’s not going to maul her,’ Noel said. ‘He’ll do the eye contact thing.’

'What eye contact thing?'

Noel swung his head around and made eye contact with Mags. He raised his eyebrows hopefully; his eyes went all soft and possible. It was definitely a face that said, *Hey. Is it okay if I kiss you?*

'Oh,' Mags said. 'That's really good.'

Noel snapped out of it—and made a face that said, *Well, duh*. 'Of course it's good. I've kissed girls before.'

'*Have* you?' Mags asked. She knew that Noel talked to girls. But she'd never heard of him having a girlfriend. And she *would* have heard of it—she was one of Noel's four to five best friends.

'Pfft,' he said. 'Three girls. Eight different occasions. I think I know how to make eye contact.'

That was significantly more kissing than Mags had managed in her sixteen years.

She glanced over at Pony again. He was standing near the television, studying his phone. Simini was a few feet away, talking to her friends.

'Still,' Mags said, 'it feels like cheating.'

'How is it cheating?' Noel asked, following her eyes. 'Neither of them is in a relationship.'

'Not that kind of cheating,' Mags said. 'More

like . . . skipping ahead. If you like someone, you should have to make an effort. You should have to get to know the person—you should have to *work* for that first kiss.'

'Pony and Simini already know each other.'

'Right,' she agreed, 'and they've never gone out. Has Simini ever even *indicated* that she's interested?'

'Sometimes people need help,' Noel said. 'I mean—look at Pony.'

Mags did. He was wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt. He had a half-grown-out mohawk now, but he'd had a ponytail back in middle school, so everyone still called him that. Pony was usually loud and funny, and sometimes loud and obnoxious. He was always drawing on his arm with ink pens.

'That guy has no idea how to tell a girl he likes her,' Noel said. 'None at all. . . . Now, look at Simini.'

Mags did. Simini was small and soft, and so shy that coming out of her shell wasn't even on the menu. If you wanted to talk to Simini, you had to climb inside her shell with her.

'Not everyone has our social graces,' Noel said, sighing, and leaning into Mags's space to gesture toward Pony and Simini. 'Not everyone knows how to reach out for the things they want. Maybe midnight is exactly what these two need to get rolling—would you begrudge them that?'

Mags turned to Noel. His face was just over her shoulder. He smelled warm. And like some sort of Walgreens body spray. 'You're being melodramatic,' she said.

'Life-or-death situations bring it out in me.'

'Like coffee table dancing?'

'No, the strawberries,' he said, sticking out his tongue and trying to talk around it. 'Duth it look puffy?'

Mags was trying to get a good look at Noel's tongue when the music dropped out.

'It's almost midnight!' Alicia shouted, standing near the television. The countdown was starting in Times Square. Mags saw Pony look up from his phone and inch toward Simini.