

## ***Let There Be Suspects***

### CHAPTER ONE

Given a chance to make a Christmas wish, most people ask for peace on earth. This year, peace is high on my list but maybe not quite at the top. In addition to the really important stuff, I'm also wishing for a personal miracle. I, Agate Sloan-Wilcox, the wife of a minister and theoretically something of a role model, am praying that Junie, my mother, will arrive in the middle of our parsonage open house wearing something, *anything*, straight off the rack of a Dillard's Department store.

In a moment of contrition, I confessed this to my oldest sister Vel. An extraordinary cook, Vel knows instinctively how to season or spice anything and improve it doublefold. She had been blending cloves and nutmeg to make a mulled wine punch, but now she reached for a cinnamon stick and pointed it at me.

"Junie? You're kidding, right? Last December when she visited me in Manhattan I gave a quiet little holiday dinner. She wore a royal blue sari studded with rhinestones and embroidered with shepherds and Magi."

I had no trouble picturing this. Junie is short, pale and Polish, but this has never stopped her from dressing like a maharani or geisha. To Junie, clothing is theater.

Of Junie's three daughters Vel, with her ash blond hair and gray blue eyes, actually looks the most like our mother, although she's a head taller and her features are sharper and stronger. But Vel is as cautious as Junie is reckless, as conventional as Junie is free-spirited. While Junie might show up at *my* party dressed as the ghost of Christmas Past, Vel, an accountant for a Fortune 500 corporation, was already dressed in the ubiquitous uniform

of her profession. Dark power suit, pale silk blouse, a simple string of pearls.

Vel shook the cinnamon stick in emphasis. "Junie claimed the sari was her personal rendition of Christmas night in the Holy Lands. The Magi looked like the Grateful Dead."

Teddy, my youngest daughter looked up from the platter of Christmas cookies she was decorating with colored icing. A green spot at one side of her mouth told me where some of the icing had gone.

"How can somebody wear a sorry? What was Junie sorry for?" Teddy is a first grader at the Emerald Springs Elementary School and a collector of words. It's possible she's getting a head start on the SATs.

"Not spelled the same way. S-A-R-I," Vel said, always happy to instruct. "It's a length of cloth, usually silk, that women in India drape around them like a dress."

Since both Vel and Teddy are precise, logical creatures I knew a discussion of culture and clothing was on its way. As it picked up speed without me, I thought about the past weeks.

Accompanied by our youngest sister Sid, Vel arrived two days ago for a family reunion. The reunion was Junie's idea. Unfortunately she forgot to mention it to me until three weeks ago. By the time she remembered, everyone had their airline tickets, everyone except Junie herself, who twenty years ago envisioned her death in a midair crash and hasn't boarded an airplane since.

Even less fortunately, by the time Sid and Vel called to tell me their flight times, my plans for an all-church open house to spread Christmas cheer to our congregation were already carved in stone.

The open house is a necessity. My husband Ed is barely into his second year as minister at the Consolidated Community Church in Emerald Springs, Ohio. Last Christmas we were just settling in, and entertaining was

out of the question. Things quickly went from bad to worse. This past September when I should have entertained the church board at a traditional Labor Day party, the chalk outline of a body was gracing our front porch.

Now it was time to make up to our parishioners both for my lapses as a hostess and our front porch drama. It was time to erase memories of bodies and near death experiences. It was time to take back the parsonage.

I just hadn't expected to take it back with my screwball family on the premises.

Vel and Teddy had exhausted the topic of historic Asian dress, and I quickly routed the subject back to Teddy's grandmother. "Don't you think just this once Junie will realize that blending in is its own form of creativity?"

"Who's blending what?" Sid stumbled in from my living room where she had been busily adorning everything that didn't move. At least I was fairly certain this was Sid hiding behind the brush pile nestled in human arms. I glimpsed a green angora sweater and heather-toned wool pants. From what I could tell she had stripped the branches from every evergreen in a ten block radius.

"We're talking about Junie," Vel said. "Aggie thinks Junie will have the good sense to try and blend in today, since a minister lives here and his entire congregation has been invited to the open house."

I love to hear my sisters' laughter. Sometimes.

After the noise died down, Sid deposited her assortment of limbs by the kitchen door and stood back to survey the space above my cabinets, a showcase only she and Martha Stewart would consider embellishing.

"I thought I'd drape these along the tops. Maybe here and there I'll add those satin balls we tied in clusters last night. I still have some left."

I tried to picture this. Until now my cabinet tops have housed only dustballs, spiderwebs and a collection of toothpick holders. My mother-in-law Nan started the collection for me and gives me another each Christmas

as payback for marrying her only son. Fragile bits of china are the perfect gift for a mother with young children and a cat. I was pretty sure the latest addition was wrapped and waiting under the majestic blue spruce in my living room.

As she planned where to place the garlands lying at her feet, Sid wound her brown hair into a knot on top of her head. With only a twinge of jealousy I can say that Sid is the prettiest of Junie's daughters. She has the delicate features both Vel and I lack, a slender model's figure and posture so perfect people invariably ask if she's a dancer. Sid, short for Obsidian, has eyes as black as the stone she was named for and a rose tinted complexion inherited from her Irish father.

Men see Sid and they register the entire perfect package. Men see me and register my ample breasts and little else. I have Sid's dark hair and Vel's dimples, but no stranger who sees us together suspects we are sisters.

"You're going to need a stepladder," I warned. "We only have a rickety one, and it's going to take a lot of effort to haul it in here. You're afraid of heights."

Sid wasn't swayed. "You just don't want to clean up the needles."

"I'll only consent if you promise to accidentally destroy Nan's collection."

"Deal," Sid said. But of course we both knew she wouldn't. The toothpick holders are antiques, and Sid is a great admirer of all things pedigreed and dignified.

Take Bix Minard, for instance. Bix is Sid's latest conquest and a reluctant addition to our family reunion. Boyfriend Bix wasn't in my house more than ten minutes before I'd been treated to a rundown of the many branches of his family tree, heavy with the fruit of Revolutionary War heroes and latter day diplomats. As an encore I'd been gifted with a description of

the family home in the Hamptons, where he was pining to spend the holidays with folks more notable than we.

We—the progeny of Junie Bluebird and her assortment of husbands—are definitely not notable. My sisters and I were raised at craft festivals and Renaissance fairs, wintering in campgrounds, ersatz artist colonies and dumpy city apartments. Traveling back and forth from coast to coast we gained and discarded fathers, banded together to thwart our craftswoman mother, and developed the ironclad bond a more normal childhood would not have encouraged.

We know each other far too well. Vel and I have already predicted that Bix Minard will not be the last of the men Sid latches onto in her endless quest to feel settled and respectable. As if to prove our case, Bix went for a walk several hours ago and hasn't been seen since.

Finished with her preparations Vel backed away from the stove. "Okay, I've combined the spices and cranberry juice, and I'm putting it on to simmer. All we have to do when people arrive is add the burgundy and keep it away from anyone under twenty-one."

"Shall we card everybody who walks through the door?" I thought this might be a new high mark in my approval rating with the church Women's Society. For the most part the Women's Society is made up of older women who meet during the day in what is mostly an historical re-enactment of Women's Society meetings of a century before. Most of those who attend are warm-hearted and generous, able to overlook my failings and those of my children. A few thrive on the details. I hope the open house will convince them to find a new calling.

"I'm done." Teddy slid back her chair, pale amber pigtails flapping. "I only decorated the ones that are real."

She abandoned the room before her aunts could question her. I walked over to peer down at the platter of cookies and saw that although

the trees and stars were fully adorned, the cutouts of angels were as naked of frosting as the moment they'd emerged from my oven. I was left to explain this newest wrinkle in Teddy's pursuit of a workable theology.

"Remember when I told you that somebody on the school playground told Teddy there's no Santa Claus? Well, now she's skeptical about *everything*. Over the holidays she's supposed to write a story about angels, but last night she told me that since angels aren't real, there's no point. I guess she's extended the angel ban to cookies."

Sid slipped her arm through mine. "There's not much of Junie in Teddy, is there?"

She was right. Our mother is a great champion of angels. Of course Junie is a great champion of a lot of things: leprechauns, unicorns, anything that goes bump in the night. She's not a believer exactly, she's just eternally optimistic.

Sid disappeared to find the stepladder so she could plunk pine boughs and clustered ornaments among the cobwebs. By the time Vel and I had cleaned up our messes, the ladder had come and gone, and the kitchen was transformed.

Technically Vel, Sid and I are only half sisters because each of us has a different father, but a childhood shared is more important than genetic code. Having survived together, we are closer than identical triplets. Now I felt a wave of warmth as I realized how much they had helped me today.

Warmth wasn't the first thing I felt when I realized this family reunion and open house were going to overlap. I very nearly panicked. But now that the shock is over, I'm beginning to think it might be a lucky accident. My sisters have an issue or two to settle in their personal lives, but they are lovely, talented and approachable. Sid has decorated the parsonage until it looks like a Christmas fairyland. Vel has spent the last two days cooking her generous heart out.

So what if our mother is a little unorthodox? If Junie comes in the midst of the merriment wearing nothing but a reindeer skin, there's still one chance in a thousand nobody will notice.

As she is prone to do, Vel took charge. "I think we ought to set out Sid's fruitcake and everything that won't spoil."

Although Vel is our gourmet cook, Junie made sure Sid and I know our way around a kitchen, too. The moment Junie announced this reunion, Sid baked a fruitcake, and it's a masterpiece. In the true spirit of Christmas, she agreed to donate it to the open house. This is one fruitcake guaranteed not to be recycled for years to come.

As Sid retrieved the cake I made my way to the dining room laden with dishes. Only a small portion of the food had been prepared by my hands, but as Vel and I heaped the table with spreads and dips, home baked brownies and cookies, platters of tea sandwiches and slices of fruit, I pictured my stock rising with the congregation.

I know it's not my mission to make everybody at Tri-C love me, but at least one afternoon a year, I don't mind making them blissfully happy.

The fruitcake arrived on a crystal platter I had borrowed from a locked closet in the parish house. Sid set the platter in the center of the dining room table and everyone in attendance applauded. Sid had studded the glazed top of the cake with fruit and nuts in the shape of holly boughs. If Junie got here in time to see the cake before it was demolished, she would be proud.

Sid stepped back to be sure the platter was in the center of the table. "Did Junie tell the rest of you she's bringing a surprise with her?"

To appear as if I was involved in the preparations, I rearranged two of the dips so they were on opposite sides of a platter of vegetables. "She forgot to tell me there *was* a reunion, remember? What kind of surprise?"

"Vel? Did she say anything to you?" Sid asked.

"Nothing concrete."

Sid stopped fooling with the fruitcake and moved on to a platter of brownies, building a perfect pyramid. I expected to see Aman-Ra poking his head between crumbs.

"If Junie's bringing a surprise, it could be just about anything," Sid said. "Maybe we have a new father."

"Maybe she's delivering a herd of alpacas. Junie's version of a college fund for Deena and Teddy." Vel brought in the last of the dips and set them near the middle before gesturing to an empty space at the edge. "Have I left enough room for the sacred punch bowl?"

The bowl that matches the crystal platter is still safely packed in a box in the hallway, because it, too, belongs to the Women's Society. In the fall I destroyed its predecessor trying to thwart a murderer. The Women's Society claims to have forgiven me, but the subject still comes up now and then. It *was* an unlikely choice for a weapon.

Since I wasn't fooling anyone, I stopped playing with dips and vegetables and tried to sound prim. "The punch bowl is not sacred. Not in the same way a cow is sacred to Hindus or a tree is sacred to a Druid." I paused. "Of course Ed will need a new church immediately if anything happens to this one and I'm remotely involved."

Even a mere mention of the world's religions will pull my husband from the unlikeliest places. Ed, looking scruffy and sleepy-eyed, wandered in from installing the Christmas lights on the porch and pondering—I'm sure—which version of the New Testament to use for his Christmas Eve readings. Last year he used the Cotton Patch Version, in which Jesus is born in Gainesville, Georgia. He still gets questions about this.

Ed was wearing his favorite green sweater, which is older than our firstborn Deena. The corduroy coat he'd thrown over it is an orphan from the church's lost and found. "I might need a new church if we don't get

busy and finish the Christmas tree. We've just got an hour and a half before everybody arrives."

Since we had done everything we could in the dining room we let him lure us into the living room. The room is so different after Sid's hard work that I hardly recognize it. All of Junie's girls are talented at making something out of nothing. These days I do it professionally, renovating and flipping houses with my realtor friend Lucy Jacobs. But Sid is the one who really inherited our mother's artistic talents. Professionally she uses them as an event planner at an Atlanta area country club.

Once again I admired glass bowls of polished fruit, willowware platters of pine cones and evergreen tips, red and green bows tucked in among books and family photos.

"It really is perfect," I told Sid. "But you've set a standard I'll never meet again."

Sid is not particularly sentimental, but at the praise, she slipped her arm around my waist. "No prob. I'll always be on call."

Despite Ed's fears, the tree was well on its way. Christmas trees were a big deal during our childhood. My sisters and I could never be sure where we'd spend Christmas, but we could always depend on a tree and a party to decorate it. I had passed on the tradition to my own children.

The moment the girls had waited for all day had arrived. I went to the stairs and called them to come down. Deena showed up first. My eleven year old daughter is poised on the brink of adolescence, although most of the time I'm in denial. Her skin is still clear, her figure is more American Girl than Barbie Doll, but day by day, disdain for the adults in her life is growing. Luckily that disdain hasn't yet extended to her aunts. In the past two days she has spent copious amounts of time with each, sharing thoughts and feelings, bonding, and pumping them for information she can use against me.

Teddy arrived with Moonpie, our silver tabby, under one arm, so that he could supervise. She dropped him on the couch, where he immediately took cover behind one of Sid's gift-wrapped pillows. Pushing her glasses up the bridge of her freckled nose, Teddy came to rest in front of the tree. She's a hard kid to excite, our Teddy, but the thought of decorating the tree had done it. Her blue eyes were sparkling.

For a moment I found it hard to breathe. I adored every single person in the room. And how often can anybody say that?

An hour later I still loved them, although possibly a tad less. But the blue spruce was stunning nonetheless.

I looked at my watch and officially started the countdown. "Thirty minutes until they begin to arrive."

"Haven't we forgotten something?" Sid pointed to the bare top of the tree. "Don't you have Junie's angel?"

Every year the highlight of our tree is a Junie heirloom, a porcelain angel clad in ethereal lace, satin and tulle, with gossamer wings laced with gold filigree. The year she crafted our tree topper Junie made hundreds and sold them at astronomical prices, though none of the others were as lovely. Every Christmas as a finale to the tree decorating party, the youngest child in attendance was lifted high to place the angel on the highest branch. My own family has continued the tradition.

"Teddy?" I turned to find Teddy squinting at the top branch where the angel should be. "You're the youngest today. Are you ready?"

"Hillary has a star on her tree. Stars are real."

I thought it was too bad Teddy had chosen Christmas as a time for logic. Now that Santa Claus had gone permanently up the chimney, he'd taken an awful lot of childhood fun without leaving so much as a ho-ho-ho.

We were saved another go round in the angel wars by someone banging on the front door. Suspecting Bix had finally returned, I made it to

the hallway just in time to see the door open with a bang and my mother appear in the doorway. Junie's petite body was smothered by a gorgeous gold caftan with a pair of jeweled Aladdin style slippers curling out from under them. The caftan wasn't from any rack at Dillard's, but I was so relieved to see Junie merely looked exotic, I wanted to weep with gratitude.

Then I heard Sid gasp. At the same moment she grabbed my arm.

"Oh, my God. Keep her away from me."

Before I could ask what she meant, Sid tugged harder. "I mean it!"

I realized Sid wasn't referring to our mother. Junie had stepped to one side and with a flourish, she had ushered in someone who had been hidden behind her.

Years had passed since I last glimpsed Ginger Newton, but there was no mistaking the young woman who was now standing beside my mother. I stared at cinnamon red hair, porcelain skin, and a smile so sweet my blood sugar launched into orbit. Ginger Newton, an all too frequent guest at our childhood dinner table.

Ginger Newton, the poster child for Sociopaths Anonymous.

"I mean it. Keep her away from me, Aggie," Sid whispered as her fingers dug ditches in my arm. "Or I swear I won't be responsible for the consequences."