

Winter Trees

A Marigold Manor Story

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Bellevue, Nebraska

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For Maureen Nichols,
who has worked in Assisted Living facilities for over twenty years.
Your dedication and stamina amaze me.
Your friendship and encouragement inspire me.

*All things are possible to those who believe, yet more to those
who hope, more still to those who love, and most of all to those
who practice and persevere in these three virtues.*

—BROTHER LAWRENCE

CHAPTER ONE

The day began like a typical Monday. I slept through my alarm, spilled coffee on my first outfit, and hit every red light on the way to work. The ashen color of the Nebraska sky melted into the gray-black slush piled along the side of the road from a snowfall two days ago. It did nothing to improve my sour mood. When the sun finally did break through the clouds, it sat at the perfect spot to blind me as I pulled into the parking lot of Marigold Manor Assisted Living. To top it off, I found my office door unlocked and George Franklin standing behind my desk wearing nothing but his boxers, dark socks, and dress shoes. You'd think that'd be my biggest worry, but it wasn't. The fact that he seemed to be talking on the phone scared me more. I could only hope he hadn't gotten an outside line and called China.

I stepped into my office. "George? What are you doing here?"

He placed a hand over the mouthpiece of the phone. "Gladys, darling, you know you must call me Mr. Franklin when we're at work." His baritone voice still held on to the Southern drawl he'd acquired growing up in the Carolinas. "We have to maintain appearances." He went back to his phone conversation. "Please, tell corporate I'll be on the next flight to St. Louis."

Although I've never liked my given name of Virginia Elizabeth, I can assure you I've never thought of myself as a "Gladys." With my tall frame and red hair, I've always thought I should be named something more exotic, like Rene or Jasmine. I satisfied myself with the nickname "Ginny." I closed the door and hung my jacket up on the coat rack, taking note of George's robe draped over one of the rungs. At least he hadn't walked down the hall in just his skivvies.

"Gladys?" George hung up the phone and grabbed my mug. "Coffee?"

"Coming right up, Mr. Franklin." I figured it was better to humor him today than try and bring him into reality. I'd let Karen, the head nurse, know what'd happened. Maybe she could up his dose of Aricept.

As I walked back through the lobby of Marigold Manor, several residents called out greetings. I waved at Bernice and Agnes, who played cards at the corner table. Mary sat in front of the fireplace, staring into the flames with a serene smile on her face. The fireplace stood in the middle of the lobby and opened up on either side. In the far corner of the front half of the room sat a baby grand piano bathed in sunlight from the large picture window. An overstuffed love seat covered in a hideous cabbage rose pattern dominated the sitting area, flanked on either side by two wing-backed chairs. Frank and Bill sat in them with their noses stuck behind newspapers. Bill peered over the top of the page and gave me a wink.

"Hey, good-looking. How are you today?"

“Fine Bill, and you?”

“Still on top of the sod, so I must be doing something right.” His face lowered again behind the paper.

I continued into the dining room, where Samantha and Rachel sat at the table next to the coffee machine. Sam looked resplendent in her fuchsia jogging suit and matching lipstick. Even her hair had taken on a pink tinge this morning. Rachel pushed her wheelchair back. Her polyester floral house coat barely covered the top of her legs.

“We were supposed to have sausage patties today.” Rachel glared at me. “Not links.”

I got out two Styrofoam cups and poured coffee for me and George. “I’m not in charge of food. I only do activities.”

Rachel grunted. “No one will do anything around here. You all pass the buck. I want some action! We said at the last food committee meeting we wanted patties, not links. And here we get links.” She pointed a bony finger at the offending pork products on her plate. I found it strange that her fingers remained skinny while the rest of her gained weight.

“I’ll talk to Chester.” I sighed and took the coffee into the kitchen. “*Hola.*”

Chester, the cook, glanced up from where he stood wiping off the counter. A first-generation American born from two Mexican immigrants, he spoke perfect English but indulged me in my desire to retain the small amount of Spanish I’d learned in high school. Besides, the rest of the kitchen staff spoke only Spanish, so I needed to try and keep up my vocabulary.

“*Hola, Ginny.*” Chester waved his dish towel at me. “*Como estas?*”

“*Cansado.*”

“Tired?” Chester frowned. His mustache crept down around his mouth like a fuzzy caterpillar. “It’s only Monday!”

“I know, but they’re already complaining.”

Chester scowled. It was cute the way his eyes squinched up and his mouth puckered. “Aye yi yi. Is it Rachel again? About the sausage?”

I nodded. “You’ve heard?”

“You’re the third person she’s sent in to tell me. I told her, the food service was out of patties yesterday. I’ve already got them on order for Friday.” He threw the towel on the counter. “She’ll have her patties by Saturday. I’ll have Maria cook them special for her.”

“*Gracias.*”

“*De nada.*” His deep brown eyes twinkled and he waved a finger at me. “Don’t stay out late tonight. Then you won’t be tired.”

I stuck my tongue out at him and headed back into the dining room. Chester knew I wasn’t out late. The whole facility knew I had no social life. It had been two years since my fiancé had died, and I had yet to be on a date. Susan, the administrator, had ordered me last Friday to RSVP for the Christmas party, or rather the *holiday dinner*, next month. It would be my first real outing since Mark was killed in a car crash. I wasn’t looking forward to it.

Rachel gave me the evil eye as I left the kitchen. I took a deep breath. “Chester’s on it. You’ll have your patties by Saturday.” I hurried off before she could complain some more. I called to one of the med aides as I made my way back to my office.

“Sandy, can you help me with George? He’s commandeered my desk.”

The petite blonde groaned. “Give me a minute. I’ve got Margaret Ann in the bathroom. I’ll get her then come down to you.”

“Thanks.”

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Frank Leno lowered his paper so he could watch Ginny walk back to her office. The girl’s red hair lay in a thick braid down her slender back. It swayed as she moved. “If I were forty years younger . . .”

Bill, one of the few men in this facility who still had the sense God gave him, chuckled. “If you were forty years younger, you’d still be too old for her, you old goat.”

Frank sighed and did the math. He’d be thirty-six. Maybe that’d still be too old. But some women liked older men. They saw them as more mature, better providers. He’d made a great life for his wife and four children, spending twenty-eight years in the Navy, retiring as a rear Admiral. He’d had another career as a school superintendent while pulling in his Navy pension. When he’d finally retired, he’d been able to collect on a state pension as well. Yes sir, he’d done well for his family. Frank’s gaze roamed around the lobby of Marigold Manor. *And now I’m here.*

Agnes Pendleton caught his eye and gave him a smile. Frank smiled back. He’d been a rover all his life. He liked women — all kinds of women — young, old, skinny, or fat. He liked being around them and making them laugh. He blamed his Italian blood, the tradition his grandfather imparted of putting women on a pedestal. That and his rugged good looks made him a magnet for women, even now, past his prime. He may have put on a few pounds, but he still had most of his teeth and a thick head of deep-gray hair.

Agnes blushed as he stared at her. He looked away. *No, Agnes I don’t want to start anything with you.* He might like women, but he did have his standards, and at ninety, Agnes was a little too old and a little too gone for his liking.

He checked out Agnes’s card partner, Bernice. Now, she wasn’t half-bad. She was only in her eighties and still had most of her marbles. Frank shook his head. *Who am I fooling?* He folded his paper and tucked it under his arm.

Bill’s bald head popped up from his paper. “Leaving?”

Frank nodded. “It’s nearly nine. My daughter has her grandkids web cam me on Mondays.”

“Web cam?” Bill swore under his breath. “You know how to do that?”

“You gotta keep up with the times, my man.” Frank tapped a finger against his temple. “Only way to keep the brain working right.” He waved to his friend and headed to the elevator. As he waited for the cab to arrive, he thought about what he’d said to Bill. It was true. The one thing he feared the most, especially after living here for a year, was the thought of becoming like his wife had: bedridden, not knowing who he was, who the kids were. Not even remembering how to eat. What kind of life had that been? *Please, God. Don’t let me end up like her.*

“You plan on taking up residence here, or you actually going to ride the thing?”

Frank looked down at the rotund woman in the floral housecoat and scowled. Rachel Johnson was one ornery, crazy, old loon. “Morning, Rachel.”

“Don’t ‘Good morning’ me. Get in the elevator, or move aside so I can go up.”

Frank entered the cab and pressed the “door hold” button to give Rachel a chance to wheel in. He smiled at the thought of pressing the “door close” button instead and watching the door try to slice the old crone in two.

“Press the button, you fool. Or, are we just going to sit here on this floor for the rest of the day?”

Frank pressed the second floor button and sighed as the doors closed.

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Sandy, the med aide, arrived in my office after I’d given George his coffee and pretended to “take a letter” to corporate. She told him that one of the VPs had called an emergency meeting in the boardroom. I helped him put his robe back on, insisting that he needed to wear his jacket to the meeting, and we led him out to the dining room. The visual clues of the tables and silverware, as well as the smells from the kitchen, were usually enough to bring George back to, if not reality, then at least acceptance of where he lived. His wife came in as I brought him another cup of coffee.

Helen approached the table. “I’m sorry, dear. They came to give me a whirlpool this morning. He was still asleep when I left. Has he been much trouble?”

I shook my head. “He seems to like my office. Look for him there if you ever lose him again.”

Helen sighed as she watched her husband stare blankly out the window. “I’m sure it reminds him of work. The corporate life was all he knew for so many years.” Her pale blue eyes moistened. “It’s one of the few things I think he remembers.”

The woman before me stood straight but I could see the burden that weighed her down. I’d sat with her one afternoon as she’d told me her story. George had married her in Germany after WWII and brought her home to help with his parents’ farm while he attended college. She’d left all her family back in Europe, and although they had three children, it had to be difficult to be without extended family when struggling with a disease like Alzheimer’s.

Helen smiled at me. “I’ll take care of him, dear. You do what you need to do.” She placed a hand on her husband’s shoulder. “George? Are you all right?”

He jumped at her touch. “I need to find a phone. I need to call my wife.”

I could see the pain in Helen’s eyes. “She called earlier. She’s gone out to the hairdressers then over to Carol’s house.” Carol was their youngest daughter. George seemed to calm at the mention of her name.

His eyes searched Helen’s face. “My wife knows I’m here?”

“Yes, George.” Helen sighed and sat down opposite him. “She knows.”

Once George was settled, I ran up the hallway to the activity room to get it ready for “Sittercise,” our half-hour daily exercise program for the residents. They could remain sitting in their chairs and wheelchairs, but we used weights and stretch bands to help them keep some of their muscle tone and mobility. Harsh sunlight streamed in through the windows in the back of the room, it reflected off the several inches of snow and the windshields of the cars in the parking lot. A brisk Nebraska wind whipped through the pine trees that lined the facility’s driveway. I was glad the snow had arrived early this year to cover the brown mud and barren trees left from autumn. As I watched, an elm tree outside the window seemed to shrug off its snowy coat, leaving its branches to wave aimlessly in the wind. It looked like a hand — a giant hand trying to grab hold of something to support it against the forces that sought to rip it from the ground. I shivered and adjusted the blinds so the sunlight wouldn’t bother the residents with sensitive eyes.

Sam strolled in, steering her walker like a shopping cart. Her kids had found her a bright purple one, and it fit her exuberant personality.

“Howdy, Ginny.”

“Morning, Sam.” I smiled again at her fuchsia ensemble. “I sure do like that color on you.”

“Pink’s always been a favorite of mine.”

“Well, it becomes you.”

Sam groaned as she swung her walker around and sat. “My advice to you, darling: don’t grow old. It’s for the birds.”

“We’ll get your blood pumping this morning. That’ll make you feel better.” I placed a one-pound weight and exercise band at every chair.

“I don’t think I believe you, but I’ll try it.”

“We’ll play some hangman after that, get your brain working, too.”

“You’re a slave driver.”

I laughed and left the room to round up some of the regular attendees who either needed a daily reminder or help coming down. The mottled blue and pink carpet whispered under my feet. I barely noticed the oil paintings of mountain streams and English cottages as I pushed Margaret Ann’s wheelchair down to the elevator. She mumbled something under her breath.

I leaned down, bringing my face even with hers. “I’m sorry, Margaret. What did you say?”

Her brown eyes held a depth of sorrow I could only begin to understand. “Don’t you get tired of being with old people?”

I pressed the button for the elevator and knelt by her side. “Nope. I never do.” The doors opened, but I didn’t move. “I like being with great people.”

Margaret Ann let out a snort of disbelief, but her mouth softened into a small smile. “You’d do better with kids your own age.”

“People my age aren’t half as interesting, or fun, as you are.” I patted her hand and stood to roll her into the elevator.

I had always felt more comfortable with older people, but never more so than after Mark died. Not one of our residents was immune to the grief of losing someone they loved. Husband, wife, sibling, or child. They understood my pain. I’d only been a volunteer then, helping out when I visited my grandmother, but these wise people had wrapped me in hugs of consolation and given me what no one else had been able to: acceptance. They didn’t pressure me to “get on with my life.” They didn’t continually ask me how I was doing. They allowed me to grieve and showed me in a thousand little ways that they understood my sorrow.



“Don’t get me wrong,” Bill said as he and Frank rode the elevator to the second floor after lunch. “It’s not that I mind that gospel music, but it’s the way some of those ladies sing it.”

“I know,” Frank said. “Half of them are deaf, and they’re out of tune. Like drowning cats.”

“Exactly.” Bill hobbled out to the hallway as the doors slid open. He gestured toward the couch in the upstairs atrium. “You want to sit here today?”

From downstairs, the residents began an off-key rendition of “Just a Closer Walk with Thee.” Frank groaned. “Let’s go to the game room. It’ll be quieter.”

Bill leaned heavily on his cane, grimacing as he walked toward the glass-enclosed game room. A soft-serve ice cream machine hummed in the corner. Styrofoam bowls, plastic spoons and cones sat next to it. A variety of sprinkles and toppings lay nearby. Frank and Bill sat at one of the three Formica-topped tables along the far wall. On the other side of the room, a bookshelf held stacks of board games and puzzles. A pool table, dart board, and a miniature shuffle board table filled in the rest of the space.

“You want to play some checkers?” Frank asked.

“Sure.”

“I’ll grab us a set.” Frank rapped his knuckles on the table as he stood. He found the game in the bookshelf and brought it back. “It’s cold out there today.”

Bill grabbed the red pieces. “Is it?”

“I went out to get some milk this morning. I think we’ll get more snow soon.”

They set up the game in silence. Frank nodded to indicate Bill should go first. He slid a red checker forward a square. “The nights seem longer.”

“We’re getting close to the equinox, the shortest day of the year.” Frank made a move.

“All the days seem short now.”

“What do you mean?”

Bill advanced another piece. “Time’s going by too fast. There’s a lot I’d hoped I could do before I died, you know?”

“Like what?”

Bill stuck out his lower lip as he contemplated either Frank’s move or his question. “I’d always wanted to go back to Europe. I wanted to see Germany now, without the bombs and the blood. I bet it’s a beautiful place.”

“I was in the Pacific theater.” Frank jumped one of Bill’s pieces. “I have no desire to go back. Too hot.”

“Isn’t there something you wish you’d done?”

Frank stared at the board. “I always wanted to go to Rome. I wanted to see the Vatican and St. Peter’s Basilica.” He watched as Bill made another move. “Wouldn’t you love to see the Sistine Chapel?”

“That’s the one that guy painted on his back, right?”

“Michelangelo. It took him years.”

“Why didn’t you ever go?” Bill asked.

“I never had time. Work seemed too important.”

Bill nodded. “My wife and I didn’t have the money for a trip like that. That’s what I thought, at least. Now I wish we’d maybe not bought the new cars. I would have liked to take that trip.”

Frank crowned one of Bill’s checkers. “There’s still time. I’d go with you to Germany if you’d come with me to Rome.”

The bald man made a dismissive noise. “No use now. I couldn’t walk around like I’d want. I can barely make it around here.”

Frank shrugged. “So, we get you a wheelchair. I’ll push you.”

“You’d get sick of me.”

“Let’s do it. Let’s plan a trip for the spring.”

“You think we could?”

“Why not?” Frank moved one of his pieces into Bill’s territory. “King me.”

His friend stacked the checkers. “It would be a hoot, wouldn’t it? Two old goats like us wandering Europe?”

“You let me know when you want to go, and I’ll start planning it.”

Bill jumped two of Frank’s men. “I’ll think about it and get back to you.”



It had been a long day, even for a Monday. A resident fell at lunch and had to be taken out in an ambulance. A volunteer had called in sick, which meant I’d had to do manicures that afternoon. I sat at my desk, trying to plan out the calendar for December, when the phone rang. I knew Patty, our administrative assistant, had left early for an appointment, so I answered it.

“Thank you for calling Marigold Manor Assisted Living. This is Ginny. How can I help you?”

A tenor voice answered. “Just the girl I wanted to speak to.”

“Who is this?”

“It’s Dan. From St. Andrew’s.”

“Father Dan.” I smiled to myself. I’d known him since he and I were kids. I still couldn’t believe he was a priest. “How are you?”

“I wanted to give you a heads-up. Father Timothy is out of town this week visiting family. I’ll be filling in for him on Wednesday.”

“I’ll let the residents know.” I tapped a pencil against my desk. “Stop by the office when you’re done. I’d love to see you.”

“Will do. Gotta run.”

We said our goodbyes and I went back to revising December’s calendar. I was ready to pull my hair out trying to make room for all the carolers, schools, and churches that wanted to come in over the holidays. Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate their goodwill, but no one seems to understand the work it takes to coordinate all these extra visitors so no one’s feelings get hurt.

I promised myself I’d finish the task in the morning and shut off my computer. The phone rang again. I glanced at the lights on the multi-lined console. It was my direct line. I lifted the receiver. “This is Ginny. How can I help you?”

“Virginia, it’s your father.”

I closed my eyes and pinched the bridge of my nose. “Hi, Dad. You’re back from Mexico already?”

“We got back a week ago.” I made a mental note that he hadn’t bothered to call on Thanksgiving as he continued, “I wonder if you could do lunch on Wednesday with Brittany and me? A sort of belated birthday celebration.”

Only a month late. Not too bad. I opened my date book and swore to myself. I was free. “Sure. Could we make it for 12:30?”

“Noon works better for me. I’ll see you at DelRico’s.”

I sighed. “I’ll get there when I can.”

“See you at noon.”

He hung up before I had the chance to say goodbye. Typical. I puffed out my cheeks and let the air out slowly, like a deflating balloon. I grabbed my coat, locked my office door, and set off down the hallway to the dining room to have dinner with my grandmother.

Edith had moved to Omaha after Grandpa Lloyd died when I was eighteen. She'd sold the farm and used the money to buy a cute two-bedroom house in Bellevue. Two bad falls and a broken hip had forced her to consider assisted living. My mother had wanted to build a guest house on her property and get Edith residential care, but my grandma had wisely refused. She still had money from the sale of her and Grandpa's farm, so she had gotten herself a room at the top-of-the-line residential home then told me to move into her house, rent-free: a dream come true for a struggling college student. I visited during the week when I could and made sure to pick her up on Sunday for church.

When Mark and I had started dating, he'd loved to visit Edith with me. We'd spent hours around her tiny kitchen table, drinking tea and eating shortbread cookies. She had a way of putting everything in perspective. She still does.

I started volunteering for the facility almost immediately, calling Bingo or helping with special events. About six months after Mark died, the Activities Coordinator offered me her job. Her husband was retiring from the military, and they planned on moving near their family in Montana. It took me two days to think about her offer. I took it— not for the money, but for the change. The work could be difficult and demanding, but it had a great many rewards as well. Not the least of which was I could visit with my Grandma Edith every night before I went home.

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Frank stuffed the chocolate brownie in his mouth. Not bad. Not as good as his wife's brownies, but a close second. He looked over at Bill's plate. Bill still picked at his casserole.

"You going to eat your brownie?"

"What?"

Frank pointed at the dessert. "You going to eat that?"

Bill's eyes narrowed. "I might."

Frank sighed. "Never mind." Esther and Mary, the others who'd been at their table, had finished their meals and were probably already in bed in their apartments. Frank glanced out the window. The sun had set about an hour ago, and the street lamps burned orange in the parking lot.

"Frank, my man." Chester, the cook, sat at the table. "How are you, sir?"

"I'm good." He gestured to his empty bowl. "The soup was superb this evening."

Chester smiled broadly. "Thank you."

"He was trying to scam me out of my brownie," said Bill. "I think I'll save it for a snack tonight."

Chester raised an eyebrow at Frank. "You want another? I have a couple in back."

Frank puckered his lips together, then nodded. "If you got another handy, I could make room."

The cook squeezed Frank's shoulder. "I'll be right back."

Frank picked up his coffee cup and walked over to the machine for a refill. Nothing better than a fresh cup of coffee and a nice dessert. He watched the kitchen door swing open and Ginny walk out, carrying a bowl of soup and a roll. He noticed Chester behind her, the cook's gaze following her to the table she shared

with her grandmother. He'd seen the look in Chester's eyes before. Frank grinned as he walked back to his table. Chester set a brownie on Frank's plate and offered another to Bill.

Bill shook his bald head. "No, thanks. One's enough for me."

Chester shrugged and took a bite. Frank sipped from his mug then popped his brownie into his mouth.

The cook frowned. "If you chewed your food, it would last longer."

Frank swigged a mouthful of coffee and swished it around to remove any sticky brownie leftovers from his teeth. "And if you moved to the other chair, you'd have a better view of Ginny."

Chester stopped mid-bite. "What?"

The old man leaned forward, his voice low. "Go get yourself a cup of coffee and sit down at the other chair."

"*Por que?*"

Bill looked between the two of them. "What are you talking about?"

"I don't know." Chester finished his brownie. "He's a crazy old man."

Frank chuckled. "You can't fool me. I know that look."

Bill pushed himself up from the table. "I'm done. I can't follow either of you." He grabbed his dessert and wrapped it in a napkin. "I'll see you tomorrow."

From his seat Frank watched as Ginny leaned in to say something to her grandmother. The two women laughed. The reflection of the dining room sconces sparkled in Ginny's eyes. "You're missing it."

Chester shook his head. "She doesn't think about me like that."

"How do you know?"

The cook shrugged. "She just doesn't."

"She doesn't know what she wants anymore." Frank put his pale hand on Chester's darker-skinned arm. "You need to make a move. Soon."

Chester sighed. "I have to go."

Frank tilted his head. "Don't wait too long. Someone's going to snap her up."

Chester stood and headed toward the kitchen, but not, Frank noticed, without another glance toward Ginny.

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It took another fifteen minutes before Chester finished cleaning the kitchen. He groaned and took off his apron. He'd put in a double shift, and his muscles told him they'd had enough. He said goodnight to the other kitchen staff and grabbed his coat. He thought about what Frank had said. *Would Ginny ever consider going out with a guy like me?*

Chester shook his head. Too many women outside of the neighborhood thought of him only as a cook. Most people in Omaha gave him a look that read, *Oh, great, another illegal working in a kitchen.*

He shoved his hands into his pockets as the doors to the facility slid open. His breath rose in little clouds of steam. Up ahead in the parking lot, Ginny's hair glistened in the light of a street lamp. She looked up as she unlocked her car door and waved.

"Goodnight, Chester!"

"*Buenos noches*, Ginny. Be careful driving home. The roads may have iced."

"You too. *Hasta mañana.*" She disappeared into her car.

Chester paused as Ginny's car sputtered then died. She tried again. The engine turned over and purred. He waved as she passed him. She smiled and waved back. Chester shivered.

You can't risk it again. You know it won't end well.