

## Just Like the Ones We Used to Know by Connie Willis

The snow started at 12:01 a.m. Eastern Standard Time just outside of Branford, Connecticut. Noah and Terry Blake, on their way home from a party at the Whittiers' at which Miranda Whittier had said, "I guess you could call this our Christmas Eve Eve party!" at least fifty times, noticed a few stray flakes as they turned onto Canoe Brook Road, and by the time they reached home, the snow was coming down hard.

"Oh, good," Tess said, leaning forward to peer through the windshield, "I've been hoping we'd have a white Christmas this year."

At 1:37 a.m. Central Standard Time, Billy Grogan, filling in for KYZT's late-night radio request show out of Duluth, said, "This just in from the National Weather Service. Snow advisory for the Great Lakes region tonight and tomorrow morning. Two to four inches expected," and then went back to discussing the callers' least favorite Christmas songs.

"I'll tell you the one I hate," a caller from Wauwatosa said. " 'White Christmas.' I musta heard that thing five hundred times this month."

"Actually," Billy said, "according to the St. Cloud Evening News, Bing Crosby's version of 'White Christmas' will be played 2150 times during the month of December, and other artists' renditions of it will be played an additional 1890 times."

The caller snorted. "One time's too many for me. Who the heck wants a white Christmas anyway? I sure don't."

"Well, unfortunately, it looks like you're going to get one," Billy said. "And, in that spirit, here's Destiny's Child, singing 'White Christmas.' "

At 1:45 a.m., a number of geese in the city park in Bowling Green, Kentucky, woke up to a dark, low, overcast sky and flew, flapping and honking loudly, over the city center, as if they had suddenly decided to fly farther south for the winter. The noise woke Maureen Reynolds, who couldn't get back to sleep. She turned on KYOU, which was playing "Holly Jolly Oldies," including "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree" and Brenda Lee's rendition of "White Christmas."

At 2:15 a.m. Mountain Standard Time, Paula Devereaux arrived at DIA for the red-eye flight to Springfield, Illinois. It was beginning to snow, and as she waited in line at the express check-in (she was carrying on her bridesmaid dress and the bag with her shoes and slip and makeup—the last time she'd been in a wedding, her luggage had gotten lost and caused a major crisis) and in line at security and in line at the gate and in line to be de-iced, she began to hope they might not be able to take off, but no such luck.

Of course not, Paula thought, looking out the window at the snow swirling around the wing, because Stacey wants me at her wedding.

"I want a Christmas Eve wedding," Stacey'd told Paula after she'd informed her she was going to be her maid of honor, "all candlelight and evergreens. And I want snow falling outside the windows."

"What if the weather doesn't cooperate?" Paula'd asked.

"It will," Stacey'd said. And here it was, snowing. She wondered if it was snowing in Springfield, too. Of course it is, she thought. Whatever Stacey wants, Stacey gets, Paula thought. Even Jim.

Don't think about that, she told herself. Don't think about anything. Just concentrate on getting through the wedding. With luck, Jim won't even be there except for the ceremony, and you won't have to spend any time with him at all.

She picked up the in-flight magazine and tried to read and then plugged in her headphones and listened to Channel 4, "Seasonal Favorites." The first song was "White Christmas" by the Statler Brothers.

At 3:38 a.m., it began to snow in Bowling Green, Kentucky. The geese circling the city flew back to the park, landed, and hunkered down to sit it out on their island in the lake. Snow began to collect on their backs, but they didn't care, protected as they were by down and a thick layer of subcutaneous fat designed to keep them warm even in sub-zero temperatures.

At 3:39 a.m., Luke Lafferty woke up, convinced he'd forgotten to set the goose his mother had talked him into having for Christmas Eve dinner out to thaw. He went and checked. He had set it out. On his way back to bed, he looked out the window and saw it was snowing, which didn't worry him. The news had said isolated snow showers for Wichita, ending by mid-morning, and none of his relatives lived more than an hour and a half away, except Aunt Lulla, and if she couldn't make it, it wouldn't exactly put a crimp in the conversation. His mom and Aunt Madge talked so much it was hard for anybody else to get a word in edgewise, especially Aunt Lulla. "She was always the shy one," Luke's mother said, and it was true, Luke couldn't remember her saying anything other than "Please pass the potatoes," at their family get-togethers.

What did worry him was the goose. He should never have let his mother talk him into having one. It was bad enough her having talked him into having the family dinner at his place. He had no idea how to cook a goose.

"What if something goes wrong?" he'd protested. "Butterball doesn't have a goose hotline."

"You won't need a hotline," his mother had said. "It's just like cooking a turkey, and it's not as if you had to cook it. I'll be there in time to put it in the oven and everything. All you have to do is set it out to thaw. Do you have a roasting pan?"

"Yes," Luke had said, but lying there, he couldn't remember if he did. When he got up at 4:14 a.m. to check—he did—it was still snowing.

At 4:16 a.m. Mountain Standard Time, Slade Henry, filling in on WRYT's late-late-night talk show out of Boise, said, "For all you folks who wanted a white Christmas, it looks like you're going to get your wish. Three to six inches forecast for western Idaho." He played several bars of Johnny Cash's "White Christmas," and then went back to discussing JFK's assassination with a caller who was convinced Clinton was somehow involved.

"Little Rock isn't all that far from Dallas, you know," the caller said. "You could drive it in four and a half hours."

Actually, you couldn't, because I-30 was icing up badly, due to freezing rain that had started just after midnight and then turned to snow. The treacherous driving conditions did not slow Monty Luffer down, as he had a Ford Explorer. Shortly after five, he reached to change stations on the radio so he didn't have to listen to "those damn Backstreet Boys" singing "White Christmas," and slid out of control just west of Texarkana. He crossed the median, causing the semi in the left-hand eastbound lane to jam on his brakes and jackknife, and resulting in a thirty-seven-car pileup that closed the road for the rest of the night and all the next day.

At 5:21 a.m. Pacific Standard Time, four-year-old Miguel Gutierrez jumped on his mother, shouting, "Is it Christmas yet?"

"Not on Mommy's stomach, honey," Pilar murmured and rolled over.

Miguel crawled over her and repeated his question directly into her ear. "Is it Christmas yet?"

"No," she said groggily. "Tomorrow's Christmas. Go watch cartoons for a few minutes, okay? and then Mommy'll get up," and pulled the pillow over her head.

Miguel was back again immediately. He can't find the remote, she thought wearily, but that couldn't be it, because he jabbed her in the ribs with it. "What's the matter, honey?" she said.

"Santa isn't gonna come," he said tearfully, which brought her fully awake.

He thinks Santa won't be able to find him, she thought. This is all Joe's fault. According to the original custody agreement, she had Miguel for Christmas and Joe had him for New Year's, but he'd

gotten the judge to change it so they split Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, and then, after she'd told Miguel, Joe had announced he needed to switch.

When Pilar had said no, he'd threatened to take her back to court, so she'd agreed, after which he'd informed her that "Christmas Day" meant her delivering Miguel on Christmas Eve so he could wake up and open his presents at Joe's.

"He can open your presents to him before you come," he'd said, knowing full well Miguel still believed in Santa Claus. So after supper she was delivering both Miguel and his presents to Joe's in Escondido, where she would not get to see Miguel open them.

"I can't go to Daddy's," Miguel had said when she'd explained the arrangements, "Santa's gonna bring my presents here."

"No, he won't," she'd said. "I sent Santa a letter and told him you'd be at your daddy's on Christmas Eve, and he's going to take your presents there."

"You sent it to the North Pole?" he'd demanded.

"To the North Pole. I took it to the post office this morning," and he'd seemed contented with that answer. Till now.

"Santa's going to come," she said, cuddling him to her. "He's coming to Daddy's, remember?"

"No, he's not," Miguel sniffled.

Damn Joe. I shouldn't have given in, she thought, but every time they went back to court, Joe and his snake of a lawyer managed to wangle new concessions out of the judge, even though until the divorce was final, Joe had never paid any attention to Miguel at all. And she just couldn't afford any more court costs right now.

"Are you worried about Daddy living in Escondido?" she asked Miguel. "Because Santa's magic. He can travel all over California in one night. He can travel all over the world in one night."

Miguel, snuggled against her, shook his head violently. "No, he can't!"

"Why not?"

"Because it isn't snowing! I want it to snow. Santa can't come in his sleigh if it doesn't."

Paula's flight landed in Springfield at 7:48 a.m. Central Standard Time, twenty minutes late. Jim met her at the airport. "Stacey's having her hair done," he said. "I was afraid I wouldn't get here in time. It was a good thing your flight was a few minutes late."

"There was snow in Denver," Paula said, trying not to look at him. He was as cute as ever, with the same knee-weakening smile.

"It just started to snow here," he said.

How does she do it? Paula thought. You had to admire Stacey. Whatever she wanted, she got. I wouldn't have had to mess with carrying this stuff on, Paula thought, handing Jim the hanging bag with her dress in it. There's no way my luggage would have gotten lost. Stacey wanted it here.

"The roads are already starting to get slick," Jim was saying. "I hope my parents get here okay. They're driving down from Chicago."

They will, Paula thought. Stacey wants them to.

Jim got Paula's bags off the carousel and then said, "Hang on, I promised Stacey I'd tell her as soon as you got here." He flipped open his cell phone and put it to his ear. "Stacey? She's here. Yeah, I will. Okay, I'll pick them up on our way. Yeah. Okay."

He flipped the phone shut. "She wants us to pick up the evergreen garlands on our way," he said, "and then I have to come back and get Kindra and David. We need to check on their flights before

we leave."

He led the way upstairs to ticketing so they could look at the arrival board. Outside the terminal windows snow was falling—large, perfect, lacy flakes.

"Kindra's on the two-nineteen from Houston," Jim said, scanning the board, "and David's on the eleven-forty from Newark. Oh, good, they're both on time."

Of course they are, Paula thought, looking at the board. The snow in Denver must be getting worse. All the Denver flights had "delayed" next to them, and so did a bunch of others: Cheyenne and Portland and Richmond. As she watched, Boston and then Chicago changed from "on time" to "delayed" and Rapid City went from "delayed" to "cancelled." She looked at Kindra's and David's flights again. They were still on time.

Ski areas in Aspen, Lake Placid, Squaw Valley, Stowe, Lake Tahoe, and Jackson Hole woke to several inches of fresh powder. The snow was greeted with relief by the people who had paid ninety dollars for their lift tickets, with irritation by the ski resort owners, who didn't see why it couldn't have come two weeks earlier when people were making their Christmas reservations, and with whoops of delight by snowboarders Kent Slakken and Bodine Cromps. They promptly set out from Breckenridge without maps, matches, helmets, avalanche beacons, avalanche probes, or telling anyone where they were going, for an off-limits backcountry area with "totally extreme slopes."

At 7:05, Miguel came in and jumped on Pilar again, this time on her bladder, shouting, "It's snowing! Now Santa can come! Now Santa can come!"

"Snowing?" she said blearily. In L.A.? "Snowing? Where?"

"On TV. Can I make myself some cereal?"

"No," she said, remembering the last time. She reached for her robe. "You go watch TV some more and Mommy'll make pancakes."

When she brought the pancakes and syrup in, Miguel was sitting, absorbed, in front of the TV, watching a man in a green parka standing in the snow in front of an ambulance with flashing lights, saying, "—third weather-related fatality in Dodge City so far this morning—"

"Let's find some cartoons to watch," Pilar said, clicking the remote.

"—outside Knoxville, Tennessee, where snow and icy conditions have caused a multi-car accident—"  
She clicked the remote again.

"—to Columbia, South Carolina, where a surprise snowstorm has shut off power to—"

Click.

"—problem seems to be a low-pressure area covering Canada and the northern two-thirds of the United States, bringing snow to the entire Midwest and Mid-Atlantic States and—"

Click.

"—snowing here in Bozeman—"

"I told you it was snowing," Miguel said happily, eating his pancakes, "just like I wanted it to. After breakfast can we make a snowman?"

"Honey, it isn't snowing here in California," Pilar said. "That's the national weather, it's not here. That reporter's in Montana, not California."

Miguel grabbed the remote and clicked to a reporter standing in the snow in front of a giant redwood tree. "The snow started about four this morning here in Monterey, California. As you can see," she said, indicating her raincoat and umbrella, "it caught everybody by surprise."

"She's in California," Miguel said.

"She's in northern California," Pilar said, "which gets a lot colder than it does here in L.A. L.A.'s too warm for it to snow."

"No, it's not," Miguel said and pointed out the window, where big white flakes were drifting down onto the palm trees across the street.

At 9:40 Central Standard Time the cell phone Nathan Andrews thought he'd turned off rang in the middle of a grant money meeting that was already going badly. Scheduling the meeting in Omaha on the day before Christmas had seemed like a good idea at the time--businessmen had hardly any appointments that day and the spirit of the season was supposed to make them more willing to open their pocketbooks--but instead they were merely distracted, anxious to do their last-minute Lexus shopping or get the Christmas office party started or whatever it was businessmen did, and worried about the snow that had started during rush hour this morning.

Plus, they were morons. "So you're saying you want a grant to study global warming, but then you talk about wanting to measure snow levels," one of them had said. "What does snow have to do with global warming?"

Nathan had tried to explain again how warming could lead to increased amounts of moisture in the atmosphere and thus increased precipitation in the form of rain and snow, and how that increased snowfall could lead to increased albedo and surface cooling.

"If it's getting cooler, it's not getting warmer," another one of the businessmen had said. "It can't be both."

"As a matter of fact, it can," he'd said and launched into his explanation of how polar melting could lead to an increase in freshwater in the North Atlantic, which would float on top of the Gulf Stream, preventing its warm water from sinking and cooling, and effectively shutting the current down. "Europe would freeze," he'd said.

"Well, then, global warming would be a good thing, wouldn't it?" yet another one had said. "Heat the place up."

He had patiently tried to explain how the world would grow both hotter and colder, with widespread droughts, flooding, and a sharp increase in severe weather. "And these changes may happen extremely quickly," he'd said. "Rather than temperatures gradually increasing and sea levels rising, there may be a sudden, unexpected event--a discontinuity. It may take the form of an abrupt, catastrophic temperature increase or a superhurricane or other form of megastorm, occurring without any warning. That's why this project is so critical. By setting up a comprehensive climate data base, we'll be able to create more accurate computer models, from which we'll be able to--"

"Computer models!" one of them had snorted. "They're wrong more often than they're right!"

"Because they don't include enough factors," Nathan said. "Climate is an incredibly complicated system, with literally thousands of factors interacting in intricate ways--weather patterns, clouds, precipitation, ocean currents, manmade activities, crops. Thus far computer models have only been able to chart a handful of factors. This project will chart over two hundred of them and will enable the models to be exponentially more accurate. We'll be able to predict a discontinuity before it happens--"

It was at that point that his cell phone rang. It was his graduate assistant Chin Sung, from the lab. "Where are you?" Chin demanded.

"In a grant meeting," Nathan whispered. "Can I call you back in a few minutes?"

"Not if you still want the Nobel Prize," Chin said. "You know that hare-brained theory of yours about global warming producing a sudden discontinuity? Well, I think you'd better get over here. Today may be the day you turn out to be right."

"Why?" Nathan asked, gripping the phone excitedly. "What's happened? Have the Gulf Stream temp readings dropped?"

"No, it's not the currents. It's what's happening here."

"Which is what?"

Instead of answering, Chin asked, "Is it snowing where you are?"

Nathan looked out the conference room window. "Yes."

"I thought so. It's snowing here, too."

"And that's what you called me about?" Nathan whispered. "Because it's snowing in Nebraska in December? In case you haven't looked at a calendar lately, winter started three days ago. It's supposed to be snowing."

"You don't understand," Chin said. "It isn't just snowing in Nebraska. It's snowing everywhere."

"What do you mean, everywhere?"

"I mean everywhere. Seattle, Salt Lake City, Minneapolis, Providence, Chattanooga. All over Canada and the U.S. as far south as—" there was a pause and the sound of computer keys clicking, "Abilene and Shreveport and Savannah. No, wait, Tallahassee's reporting light snow. As far south as Tallahassee."

The jet stream must have dipped radically south. "Where's the center of the low pressure system?"

"That's just it," Chin said. "There doesn't seem to be one."

"I'll be right there," Nathan said.

A mile from the highway snowboarders Kent Slakken and Bodine Cromps, unable to see the road in heavily falling snow, drove their car into a ditch. "Shit," Bodine said, and attempted to get out of it by revving the engine and then flooring it, a technique that only succeeded in digging them in to the point where they couldn't open either car door.

It took Jim and Paula nearly two hours to pick up the evergreen garlands and get out to the church. The lacy flakes fell steadily faster and thicker, and it was so slick Jim had to crawl the last few miles. "I hope this doesn't get any worse," he said worriedly, "or people are going to have a hard time getting out here."

But Stacey wasn't worried at all. "Isn't it beautiful? I wanted it to snow for my wedding more than anything," she said, meeting them at the door of the church. "Come here, Paula, you've got to see how the snow looks through the sanctuary windows. It's going to be perfect."

Jim left immediately to go pick up Kindra and David, which Paula was grateful for. Being that close to him in the car had made her start entertaining the ridiculous hopes about him she'd had when they first met. And they were ridiculous. One look at Stacey had shown her that.

The bride-to-be looked beautiful even in a sweater and jeans, her makeup exquisite, her blonde hair upswept into glittery snowflake-sprinkled curls. Every time Paula had had her hair done to be in a wedding, she had come out looking like someone in a bad 1950's movie. How does she do it? Paula wondered. You watch, the snow will stop and start up again just in time for the ceremony.

But it didn't. It continued to come down steadily, and when the minister arrived for the rehearsal, she said, "I don't know. It took me half an hour to get out of my driveway. You may want to think about canceling."

"Don't be silly. We can't cancel. It's a Christmas Eve wedding," Stacey said, and made Paula start tying the evergreen garlands to the pews with white satin ribbon.

It was sprinkling in Santa Fe when Bev Carey arrived at her hotel, and by the time she'd checked in and ventured out into the plaza, it had turned into an icy, driving rain that went right through the light coat and thin gloves she'd brought with her. She had planned to spend the morning shopping, but the shops had signs on them saying "Closed Christmas Eve and Christmas Day,"

and the sidewalk in front of the Governor's Palace, where, according to her guidebook, Zunis and Navajos sat to sell authentic silver-and-turquoise jewelry, was deserted.

But at least it's not snowing, she told herself, trudging, shivering, back to the hotel. And the shop windows were decorated with ristras and lights in the shape of chili peppers, and the Christmas tree in the hotel lobby was decorated with kachina dolls.

Her friend Janice had already called and left a message with the hotel clerk. And if I don't call her back, she'll be convinced I've taken a bottle of sleeping pills, Bev thought, going up to her room. On the way to the airport, Janice had asked anxiously, "You haven't been having suicidal thoughts, have you?" and when her friend Louise had found out what Bev was planning, she'd said, "I saw this piece on Dateline the other night about suicides at Christmas, and how people who've lost a spouse are especially vulnerable. You wouldn't do anything like that, would you?"

They none of them understood that she was doing this to save her life, not end it, that it was Christmas at home, with its lighted trees and evergreen wreaths and candles, that would kill her. And its snow.

"I know you miss Howard," Janice had said, "and that with Christmas coming, you're feeling sad."

Sad? She felt flayed, battered, beaten. Every memory, every thought of her husband, every use of the past tense even- "Howard liked . . ." "Howard knew . . ." "Howard was . . ."-was like a deadly blow. The grief-counseling books all talked about "the pain of losing a loved one," but she had had no idea the pain could be this bad. It was like being stabbed over and over, and her only hope had been to get away. She hadn't "decided to go to Santa Fe for Christmas." She had run there like a victim fleeing a murderer.

She took off her drenched coat and gloves and called Janice. "You promised you'd call as soon as you got there," Janice said reproachfully. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine," Bev said. "I was out walking around the Plaza." She didn't say anything about its raining. She didn't want Janice saying, I told you so. "It's beautiful here."

"I should have come with you," Janice said. "It's snowing like crazy here. Ten inches so far. I suppose you're sitting on a patio drinking a margarita right now."

"Sangria," Bev lied. "I'm going sightseeing this afternoon. The houses here are all pink and tan adobe with bright blue and red and yellow doors. And right now the whole town's decorated with luminarias. You should see them."

"I wish I could," Janice sighed. "All I can see is snow. I have no idea how I'm going to get to the store. Oh, well, at least we'll have a white Christmas. It's so sad Howard can't be here to see this. He always loved white Christmases, didn't he?"

Howard, consulting the Farmer's Almanac, reading the weather forecast out loud to her, calling her over to the picture window to watch the snow beginning to fall, saying, "Looks like we're going to get a white Christmas this year," as if it were a present under the tree, putting his arm around her-

"Yes," Bev managed to say through the sudden, searing stab of pain. "He did."

It was spitting snow when Warren Nesvick checked into the Marriott in Baltimore. As soon as he got Shara up to the suite, he told her he had to make a business call, "and then I'll be all yours, honey." He went down to the lobby. The TV in the corner was showing a weather map. He looked at it for a minute and then got out his cell phone.

"Where are you?" his wife Marjean said when she answered.

"In St. Louis," he said. "Our flight got rerouted here because of snow at O'Hare. What's the weather like there?"

"It's snowing," she said. "When do you think you'll be able to get a flight out?"

"I don't know. Everything's booked because of it being Christmas Eve. I'm waiting to see if I can get on standby. I'll call you as soon as I know something," and hung up before she could ask him which flight.

It took Nathan an hour and a half to drive the fifteen miles to the lab. During the ride he considered the likelihood that this was really a discontinuity and not just a major snowstorm. Global warming proponents (and opponents) confused the two all the time. Every hurricane, tornado, heat wave, or dry spell was attributed to global warming, even though nearly all of them fell well within the range of normal weather patterns.

And there had been big December snowstorms before. The blizzard of 1888, for instance, and the Christmas Eve storm of 2002. And Chin was probably wrong about there being no center to the low pressure system. The likely explanation was that there was more than one system involved—one centered in the Great Lakes and another just east of the Rockies, colliding with warm, moist air from the Gulf Coast to create unusually widespread snow.

And it was widespread. The car radio was reporting snow all across the Midwest and the entire East Coast—Topeka, Tulsa, Peoria, northern Virginia, Hartford, Montpelier, Reno, Spokane. No, Reno and Spokane were west of the Rockies. There must be a third system, coming down from the Northwest. But it was still hardly a discontinuity.

The lab parking lot hadn't been plowed. He left the car on the street and struggled through the already knee-deep snow to the door, remembering when he was halfway across the expanse that Nebraska was famous for pioneers who got lost going out to the barn in a blizzard and whose frozen bodies weren't found till the following spring.

He reached the door, opened it, and stood there a moment blowing on his frozen hands and looking at the TV Chin had stuck on a cart in the corner of the lab. On it, a pretty reporter in a parka and a Mickey Mouse hat was standing in heavy snow in front of what seemed to be a giant snowman. "The snow has really caused problems here at Disney World," she said over the sound of a marching band playing "White Christmas." "Their annual Christmas Eve Parade has—"

"Well, it's about time," Chin said, coming in from the fax room with a handful of printouts. "What took you so long?"

Nathan ignored that. "Have you got the IPOC data?" he asked.

Chin nodded. He sat down at his terminal and started typing. The upper left-hand screen lit up with columns of numbers.

"Let me see the National Weather Service map," Nathan said, unzipping his coat and sitting down at the main console.

Chin called up a U.S. map nearly half-covered with blue, from western Oregon and Nevada east all the way to the Atlantic and up through New England and south to the Oklahoma panhandle, northern Mississippi, Alabama, and most of Georgia.

"Good Lord, that's even bigger than Marina in '92," Nathan said. "Have you got a satellite photo?"

Chin nodded and called it up. "And this is a real-time composite of all the data coming in, including weather stations, towns, and spotters reporting in. The white's snow," he added unnecessarily.

The white covered even more territory than the blue on the NWS map, with jagged fingers stretching down into Arizona and Louisiana and west into Oregon and California. Surrounding them were wide uneven pink bands. "Is the pink rain?" Nathan asked.

"Sleet," Chin said. "So what do you think? It's a discontinuity, isn't it?"

"I don't know," Nathan said, calling up the barometric readings and starting through them.

"What else could it be? It's snowing in Orlando. And San Diego."



"It's snowed both of those places before," Nathan said. "It's even snowed in Death Valley. The only place in the U.S. where it's never snowed is the Florida Keys. And Hawaii, of course. Everything on this map right now is within the range of normal weather events. You don't have to start worrying till it starts snowing in the Florida Keys."

"What about other places?" Chin asked, looking at the center right-hand screen.

"What do you mean, other places?"

"I mean, it isn't just snowing in the U.S. I'm getting reports from Cancun. And Jerusalem."

At eleven-thirty Pilar gave up trying to explain that there wasn't enough snow to make a snowman and took Miguel outside, bundled up in a sweatshirt, a sweater, and his warm jacket, with a pair of Pilar's tube socks for mittens. He lasted about five minutes.

When they came back in, Pilar settled him at the kitchen table with crayons and paper so he could draw a picture of a snowman and went into the living room to check the weather forecast. It was really snowing hard out there, and she was getting a little worried about taking Miguel down to Escondido. Los Angelenos didn't know how to drive in snow, and Pilar's tires weren't that good.

"-snowing here in Hollywood," said a reporter standing in front of the nearly invisible Hollywood sign, "and this isn't special effects, folks, it's the real thing."

She switched channels. "-snowing in Santa Monica," a reporter standing on the beach was saying, "but that isn't stopping the surfers. . . ."

Click. "-para la primera vez en cincuenta anos en Marina del Rey--"

Click. "-snowing here in LA for the first time in nearly fifty years. We're here on the set of XXX II with Vin Diesel. What do you think of the snow, Vin?"

She gave up and went back in the kitchen where Miguel announced he was ready to go outside again. She talked him into listening to Alvin and the Chipmunks instead. "Okay," he said, and she left him warbling "White Christmas" along with Alvin and went in to check the weather again. The Santa Monica reporter briefly mentioned the roads were wet before moving on to interview a psychic who claimed to have predicted the snowstorm, and on a Spanish-language channel she caught a glimpse of the 405 moving along at its usual congested pace.

The roads must not be too bad, she thought, or they'd all be talking about it, but she still wondered if she hadn't better take Miguel down to Escondido early. She hated to give up her day with him, but his safety was the important thing, and the snow wasn't letting up at all.

When Miguel came into the living room and asked when they could go outside, she said, "After we pack your suitcase, okay? Do you want to take your Pokémon jammies or your Spider-Mans?" and began gathering up his things.

By noon Eastern Standard Time, it was snowing in every state in the lower forty-eight. Elko, Nevada, had over two feet of snow, Cincinnati was reporting thirty-eight inches at the airport, and it was spitting snow in Miami.

On talk radio, JFK's assassination had given way to the topic of the snow. "You mark my words, the terrorists are behind this," a caller from Terre Haute said. "They want to destroy our economy, and what better way to do it than by keeping us from doing our last-minute Christmas shopping? To say nothing of what this snow's going to do to my relationship with my wife. How am I supposed to go buy her something in this weather? I tell you, this has got Al Qaeda's name written all over it."

During lunch, Warren Nesvick told Shara he needed to go try his business call again. "The guy I was trying to get in touch with wasn't in the office before. Because of the snow," he said and went out to the lobby to call Marjean again. On the TV in the corner, there were shots of snow-covered runways and jammed ticket counters. A blonde reporter in a tight red sweater was saying, "Here in Cincinnati, the snow just keeps on falling. The airport's still open, but officials indicate it may have to close. Snow is building up on the runways--"

He called Marjean. "I'm in Cincinnati," he told her. "I managed to get a flight at the last minute. There's a three-hour layover till my connecting flight, but at least I've got a seat."

"But isn't it snowing in Cincinnati?" she asked. "I was just watching the TV and . . ."

"It's supposed to let up here in an hour or so. I'm really sorry about this, honey. You know I'd be there for Christmas Eve if I could."

"I know," she said, sounding disappointed. "It's okay, Warren. You can't control the weather."

The television was on in the hotel lobby when Bev came down to lunch. ". . . snowing in Albuquerque," she heard the announcer say, "Raton, Santa Rosa, and Wagon Mound."

But not in Santa Fe, she told herself firmly, going into the dining room. "It hardly ever snows there," the travel agent had said, "New Mexico's a desert. And when it does snow, it never sticks."

"There's already four inches in Espanola," a plump waitress in a ruffled blouse and full red skirt was saying to the busboy. "I'm worried about getting home."

"I'd rather it didn't snow for Christmas," Bev had teased Howard last year, "all those people trying to get home."

"Heresy, woman, heresy! What would Currier and Ives think to hear you talk that way?" he'd said, clutching his chest.

Like she was clutching hers now. The plump waitress was looking at her worriedly. "Are you all right, señora?"

"Yes," Bev said. "One for lunch, please."

The waitress led her to a table, still looking concerned, and handed her a menu, and she clung to it like a life raft, concentrating fiercely on the unfamiliar terms, the exotic ingredients: blue corn tortillas, quesadillas, chipotle-

"Can I get you something to drink?" the waitress asked.

"Yes," Bev said brightly, looking at the waitress's name tag. "I'd like some sangria, Carmelita."

Carmelita nodded and left, and Bev looked around the room, thinking, I'll drink my sangria and watch the other diners, eavesdrop on their conversations, but she was the only person in the broad tiled room. It faced the patio, and through the glass doors the rain, sleet now, drove sharply against the terracotta pots of cactus outside, the stacked tables and chairs, the collapsed umbrellas.

She had envisioned herself having lunch out on the patio, sitting in the sun under one of those umbrellas, looking out at the desert and listening to a mariachi band. The music coming over the loudspeakers was Christmas carols. As she listened, "Let It Snow" came to an end and the Supremes began to sing "White Christmas."

"What would cloud-seeding be listed under?" Howard had asked her one year when there was still no snow by the twenty-second, coming into the dining room, where she was wrapping presents, with the phone book.

"You are not hiring a cloud seeder," she had laughed.

"Would it be under 'clouds' or 'rainmaker'?" he'd asked mock-seriously. "Or 'seeds'?" And when it had finally snowed on the twenty-fourth, he had acted as if he was personally responsible.

"You did not cause this, Howard," she had told him.

"How do you know?" he'd laughed, catching her into his arms.

I can't stand this, Bev thought, looking frantically around the dining room for Carmelita and her sangria. How do other people do it? She knew lots of widows, and they all seemed fine. When people mentioned their husbands, when they talked about them in the past tense, they were able to stand there, to smile back, to talk about them. Doreen Matthews had even said, "Now that Bill's gone, I can finally have all pink ornaments on the Christmas tree. I've always wanted to have a pink tree, but he wouldn't hear of it."

"Here's your sangria," Carmelita said, still looking concerned. "Would you like some tortilla chips and salsa?"

"Yes, thank you," Bev said brightly. "And I think I'll have the chicken enchiladas."

Carmelita nodded and disappeared again. Bev took a gulp of her sangria and got her guidebook out of her bag. She would have a nice lunch and then go sightseeing. She opened the book to Area Attractions. "Pueblo de San Ildefonso." No, that would involve a lot of walking around outdoors, and it was still sleeting outside the window.

"Petroglyphs National Monument." No, that was down near Albuquerque, where it was snowing. "El Santuario de Chimayo. 28 mi. north of Santa Fe on Hwy. 76. Historic weaving center, shops, chapel dubbed 'American Lourdes.' The dirt in the anteroom beside the altar is reputed to have healing powers when rubbed on the afflicted part of the body."

But I hurt all over, she thought.

"Other attractions include five nineteenth-century reredos, a carving of Santo Nino de Atocha, carved wooden altarpiece. (See also Lagrima, p. 98.)"

She turned the page to ninety-eight. "Chapel of Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrow, Lagrima, 28 mi. SE of Santa Fe on Hwy 41. 16th century adobe mission church. In 1968 the statue of the Virgin Mary in the transept was reported to shed healing tears."

Healing tears, holy dirt, and wasn't there supposed to be a miraculous staircase right here in town? Yes, there it was. The Loretto Chapel. "Open 10-5 Apr-Oct, closed Nov-Mar."

It would have to be Chimayo. She got out the road map the car rental place had given her, and when Carmelita came with the chips and salsa, she said, "I'm thinking of driving up to Chimayo. What's the best route?"

"Today?" Carmelita said, dismayed. "That's not a good idea. The road's pretty curvy, and we just got a call from Taos that it's really snowing hard up there."

"How about one of the pueblos then?"

She shook her head. "You have to take dirt roads to get there, and it's getting very icy. You're better off doing something here in town. There's a Christmas Eve mass at the cathedral at midnight," she added helpfully.

But I need something to do this afternoon, Bev thought, bending over the guidebook again. Indian Research Center—open weekends only. El Rancho de las Golondrinas—closed Nov-Feb. Santa Fe Historical Museum—closed Dec 24-Jan 1.

The Georgia O'Keeffe Museum—open daily.

Perfect, Bev thought, reading the entry: "Houses world's largest permanent collection of O'Keeffe's work. A major American artist, O'Keeffe lived in the Santa Fe area for many years. When she first arrived in 1929, she was physically and psychologically ill, but the dry, hot New Mexico climate healed and inspired her, and she painted much of her finest work here."

Perfect. Sun-baked paintings of cow skulls and giant tropical flowers and desert buttes. "Open daily. 10 a.m.—6 p.m. 217 Johnson St."

She looked up the address on her map. Only three blocks off the Plaza, within easy walking distance even in this weather. Perfect. When Carmelita brought her enchiladas, she attacked them

eagerly.

"Did you find somewhere to go in town?" Carmelita asked curiously.

"Yes, the Georgia O'Keeffe Museum."

"Oh," Carmelita said and vanished again. She was back almost immediately. "I'm sorry, señora, but they're closed."

"Closed? It said in the guidebook the museum's open daily."

"It's because of the snow."

"Snow?" Bev said and looked past her to the patio where the sleet had turned to a heavy, slashing white.

At 1:20, Jim called from the airport to tell them Kindra's and David's planes had both been delayed, and a few minutes later the bakery delivered the wedding cake. "No, no," Stacey said, "that's supposed to go to the country club. That's where the reception is."

"We tried," the driver said. "We couldn't get through. We can either leave it here or take it back to the bakery, take your pick. If we can get back to the bakery. Which I doubt."

"Leave it here," Stacey said. "Jim can take it over when he gets here."

"But you just heard him," Paula said. "If the truck can't get through, Jim won't be able to—" The phone rang.

It was the florist, calling to say they weren't going to be able to deliver the flowers. "But you have to," Stacey said. "The wedding's at five. Tell them they have to, Paula," and handed the phone to her.

"Isn't there any way you can get here?" Paula asked.

"Not unless there's a miracle," the florist said. "Our truck's in a ditch out at Pawnee, and there's no telling how long it'll take a tow truck to get to it. It's a skating rink out there."

"Jim will have to go pick up the flowers when he gets back with Kindra and David," Stacey said blithely when Paula told her the bad news. "He can do it on his way to the country club. Is the string quartet here yet?"

"No, and I'm not sure they'll be able to get here. The florist said the roads are really icy," Paula said, and the viola player walked in.

"I told you," Stacey said happily, "it'll all work out. Did I tell you, they're going to play Boccherini's 'Minuet No.8' for the wedding march?" and went to get the candles for the altar stands.

Paula went over to the viola player, a lanky young guy. He was brushing snow off his viola case. "Where's the rest of the quartet?"

"They're not here yet?" he said, surprised. "I had a lesson to give in town and told 'em I'd catch up with them." He sat down to take off his snow-crusting boots. "And then my car ended up in a snowbank, and I had to walk the last mile and a half." He grinned up at her, panting. "It's times like these I wish I played the piccolo. Although," he said, looking her up and down, "there are compensations. Please tell me you're not the bride."

"I'm not the bride," she said. Even though I wish I was.

"Great!" he said and grinned at her again. "What are you doing after the wedding?"

"I'm not sure there's going to be one. Do you think the other musicians got stuck on the way here, too?"

He shook his head. "I would have seen them." He pulled out a cell phone and punched buttons. "Shep? Yeah, where are you?" There was a pause. "That's what I was afraid of. What about Leif?" Another pause. "Well, if you find him, call me back." He flipped the phone shut. "Bad news. The violins were in a fender bender and are waiting for the cops. They don't know where the cello is. How do you feel about a viola solo of 'Minuet No.8'?"

Paula went to inform Stacey. "The police can bring them out," Stacey said blithely and handed Paula the white candles for the altar stands. "The candlelight on the snow's going to be just beautiful."

At 1:48 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, snow flurries were reported at Sunset Point in the Florida Keys.

"I get to officially freak out now, right?" Chin asked Nathan. "Jeez, it really is the discontinuity you said would happen!"

"We don't know that yet," Nathan said, looking at the National Weather Service map, which was now entirely blue, except for a small spot near Fargo and another one in north-central Texas that Nathan thought was Waco and Chin was convinced was the president's ranch in Crawford.

"What do you mean, we don't know that yet? It's snowing in Barcelona. It's snowing in Moscow."

"It's supposed to be snowing in Moscow. Remember Napoleon? It's not unusual for it to be snowing in over two-thirds of these places reporting in: Oslo, Katmandu, Buffalo--"

"Well, it's sure as hell unusual for it to be snowing in Beirut," Chin said, pointing to the snow reports coming in, "and Honolulu. I don't care what you say, I'm freaking out."

"You can't," Nathan said, superimposing an isobaric grid over the map. "I need you to feed me the temp readings."

Chin started over to his terminal and then came back. "What do you think?" he asked seriously. "Do you think it's a discontinuity?"

There was nothing else it could be. Winter storms were frequently very large, the February 1994 European storm had been huge, and the one in December 2002 had covered over a third of the U.S., but there'd never been one that covered the entire continental United States. And Mexico and Manitoba and Belize, he thought, watching the snowfall reports coming in.

In addition, snow was falling in six locations where it had never fallen before, and in twenty-eight like Yuma, Arizona, where it had snowed only once or twice in the last hundred years. New Orleans had a foot of snow, for God's sake. And it was snowing in Guatemala.

And it wasn't behaving like any storm he'd ever seen. According to the charts, snow had started simultaneously in Springfield, Illinois, Hoodoo, Tennessee, Park City, Utah, and Branford, Connecticut, and spread in a completely random pattern. There was no center to the storm, no leading edge, no front.

And no let-up. No station had reported the snow stopping, or even diminishing, and new stations were reporting in all the time. At this rate, it would be snowing everywhere by--he made a rapid calculation--five o'clock.

"Well?" Chin said. "Is it?" He looked really frightened.

And him freaking out is the last thing I need with all this data to feed in, Nathan thought. "We don't have enough data to make a determination yet," he said.

"But you think it might be," Chin persisted. "Don't you? You think all the signs are there?"

Yes, Nathan thought. "Definitely not," he said. "Look at the TV."

"What about it?"

"There's one sign that's not present." He gestured at the screen. "No logo."

"No what?"

"No logo. Nothing qualifies as a full-fledged crisis until the cable newschannels give it a logo of its own, preferably with a colon. You know, O.J.: Trial of the Century or Sniper at Large or Attack: Iraq." He pointed at Dan Rather standing in thickly falling snow in front of the White House. "Look, it says Breaking News, but there's no logo. So it can't be a discontinuity. So feed me those temps. And then go see if you can scare up a couple more TVs. I want to get a look at exactly what's going on out there. Maybe that'll give us some kind of clue."

Chin nodded, looking reassured, and went to get the temp readings. They were all over the place, too, from eighteen below in Saskatoon to thirty-one above in Ft. Lauderdale. Nathan ran them against average temps for mid-December and then highs and lows for the twenty-fourth, looking for patterns, anomalies.

Chin wheeled in a big-screen TV on an AV cart, along with Professor Adler's portable, and plugged them in. "What do you want these on?" he asked.

"CNN, the Weather Channel, Fox-" Nathan began.

"Oh, no," Chin said.

"What? What is it?"

"Look," Chin said and pointed to Professor Adler's portable. Wolf Blitzer was standing in the snow in front of the Empire State Building. At the lower right-hand corner was the CNN symbol. And in the upper left-hand corner: Storm of the Century.

As soon as Pilar had Miguel's things packed, she checked on the TV again.

"-resulting in terrible road conditions," the reporter was saying. "Police are reporting accidents at the intersection of Sepulveda and Figueroa, the intersection of San Pedro and Whittier, the intersection of Hollywood and Vine," while accident alerts crawled across the bottom of the screen. "We're getting reports of a problem on the Santa Monica Freeway just past the Culver City exit and . . . this just in, the northbound lanes of the 110 are closed due to a five-car accident. Travelers are advised to take alternate routes."

The phone rang. Miguel ran into the kitchen to answer it. "Hi, Daddy, it's snowing," he shouted into the receiver, "We're going outside and make a snowman," and then said, "Okay," and handed it to Pilar.

"Go watch cartoons and let Mommy talk to Daddy," she said and handed him the remote. "Hello, Joe."

"I want you to bring Miguel down now," her ex-husband said without preamble, "before the snow gets bad."

"It's already bad," Pilar said, standing in the door of the kitchen watching Miguel flip through the channels:

"-really slick out here-"

"-advised to stay home. If you don't have to go someplace, folks, don't."

"-treacherous conditions-"

"I'm not sure taking him out in this is a good idea," Pilar said. "The TV's saying the roads are really slick, and-"

"And I'm saying bring him down here now," Joe said nastily. "I know what you're doing. You think you can use a little snow as an excuse to keep my son away from me on Christmas."

"I am not," she protested. "I'm just thinking about Miguel's safety. I don't have snow tires-"

"Like hell you're thinking about the kid! You're thinking this is a way to do me out of my rights."

Well, we'll see what my lawyer has to say about that. I'm calling him and the judge and telling them what you're up to, and that I'm sick of this crap, I want full custody. And then I'm coming up there myself to get him. Have him ready when I get there!" he shouted and hung up the phone.

At 2:22 p.m., Luke's mother called on her cell phone to say she was going to be late and to go ahead and start the goose. "The roads are terrible, and people do not know how to drive. This red Subaru ahead of me just swerved into my lane and--"

"Mom, Mom," Luke cut in, "the goose. What do you mean, start the goose? What do I have to do?"

"Just put it in the oven. Shorty and Madge should be there soon, and she can take over. All you have to do is get it started. Take the bag of giblets out first. Put an aluminum foil tent over it."

"An aluminum-foil what?"

"Tent. Fold a piece of foil in half and lay it over the goose. It keeps it from browning too fast."

"How big a piece?"

"Big enough to cover the goose. And don't tuck in the edges."

"Of the oven?"

"Of the tent. You're making this much harder than it is. You wouldn't believe how many cars there are off the road, and every one of them's an SUV. It serves them right. They think just because they've got four-wheel drive, they can go ninety miles an hour in a blizzard--"

"Mom, Mom, what about stuffing? Don't I have to stuff the goose?"

"No. Nobody does stuffing inside the bird anymore. Salmonella. Just put the goose in the roasting pan and stick it in the oven. At 350 degrees."

I can do that, Luke thought, and did. Ten minutes later he realized he'd forgotten to put the aluminum foil tent on. It took him three tries to get a piece the right size, and his mother hadn't said whether the shiny or the dull side should be facing out, but when he checked the goose twenty minutes later, it seemed to be doing okay. It smelled good, and there were already juices forming in the pan.

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After Pilar hung up with Joe, she sat at the kitchen table a long time, trying to think which was worse, letting Joe take Miguel out into this snowstorm or having Miguel witness the fight that would ensue if she tried to stop him. "Please, please . . ." she murmured, without even knowing what she was praying for.

Miguel came into the kitchen and climbed into her lap. She wiped hastily at her eyes. "Guess what, honey?" she said brightly. "Daddy's going to come get you in a little bit. You need to go pick out which toys you want to take."

"Hunh-unh," Miguel said, shaking his head.

"I know you wanted to make a snowman," she said, "but guess what? It's snowing in Escondido, too. You can make a snowman with Daddy."

"Hunh-unh," he said, climbing down off her lap and tugging on her hand. He led her into the living room.

"What, honey?" she said, and he pointed at the TV. On it, the Santa Monica reporter was saying, "--the following road closures: I-5 from Chula Vista to Santa Ana, I-15 from San Diego to Barstow, Highway 78 from Oceanside to Escondido--"

Thank you, she murmured silently, thank you. Miguel ran out to the kitchen and came back with a

piece of construction paper and a red crayon. "Here," he said, thrusting them at Pilar. "You have to write Santa. So he'll know to bring my presents here and not Daddy's."

By ordering sopapillas and then Mexican coffee, Bev managed to make lunch last till nearly two o'clock. When Carmelita brought the coffee, she looked anxiously out at the snow piling up on the patio and then back at Bev, so Bev asked for her check and signed it so Carmelita could leave, and then went back up to her room for her coat and gloves.

Even if the shops were closed, she could window-shop, she told herself, she could look at the Navajo rugs and Santa Clara pots and Indian jewelry displayed in the stores, but the snowstorm was getting worse. The luminarias that lined the walls were heaped with snow, the paper bags that held the candles sagging under the soggy weight.

They'll never get them lit, Bev thought, turning into the Plaza.

By the time she had walked down one side of it, the snow had become a blizzard, it was coming down so hard you couldn't see across the Plaza, and there was a cutting wind. She gave up and went back to the hotel.

In the lobby, the staff, including the front desk clerk and Carmelita in her coat and boots, was gathered in front of the TV looking at a weather map of New Mexico. ". . . currently snowing in most of New Mexico," the announcer was saying, "including Gallup, Carlsbad, Ruidoso, and Roswell. Travel advisories out for central, western, and southern New Mexico, including Lordsburg, Las Cruces, and Truth or Consequences. It looks like a white Christmas for most of New Mexico, folks."

"You have two messages," the front desk clerk said when he saw her. They were both from Janice, and she phoned again while Bev was taking her coat off up in her room.

"I just saw on TV that it's snowing in Santa Fe, and you said you were going sightseeing," Janice said. "I just wondered if you were okay."

"I'm here at the hotel," Bev said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Good," Janice said, relieved. "Are you watching TV? The weathermen are saying this isn't an ordinary storm. It's some kind of extreme mega-storm. We've got three feet here. The power's out all over town, and the airport just closed. I hope you're able to get home. Oops, the lights just flickered. I'd better go hunt up some candles before the lights go off," she said, and hung up.

Bev turned on the TV. The local channel was listing closings- "The First United Methodist Church Christmas pageant has been cancelled and there will be no Posadas tonight at Our Lady of Guadalupe. Canyon Day Care Center will close at three p.m. . . ."

She clicked the remote. CNBC was discussing earlier Christmas Eve snowstorms, and on CNN, Daryn Kagan was standing in the middle of Fifth Avenue in a snowdrift. "This is usually the busiest shopping day of the year," she said, "but as you can see-"

She clicked the remote, looking for a movie to watch. Howard would have loved this, she thought involuntarily. He would have been in his element.

She clicked quickly through the other channels, trying to find a film, but they were all discussing the weather. "It looks like the whole country's going to get a white Christmas this year," Peter Jennings was saying, "whether they want it or not."

You'd think there'd be a Christmas movie on, Bev thought grimly, flipping through the channels again. It's Christmas Eve. Christmas in Connecticut or Holiday Inn. Or White Christmas.

Howard had insisted on watching it every time he came across it with the remote, even if it was nearly over. "Why are you watching that?" she'd ask, coming in to find him glued to the next-to-the-last scene. "We own the video."

"Shh," he'd say. "It's just getting to the good part," and he'd lean forward to watch Bing Crosby push open the barn doors to reveal fake-looking snow falling on the equally fake-looking set.



When he came into the kitchen afterward, she'd say sarcastically, "How'd it end this time? Did Bing and Rosemary Clooney get back together? Did they save the General's inn and all live happily ever after?"

But Howard would refuse to be baited. "They got a white Christmas," he'd say happily and go off to look out the windows at the clouds.

Except for news about the storm, there was nothing at all on except an infomercial selling a set of Ginsu knives. How appropriate, she thought, and sat back on the bed to watch it.

At 2:08, the weight of the new loose snow triggered a huge avalanche in the "totally extreme slopes" area near Breckenridge, knocking down huge numbers of Ponderosa pines and burying everything in its path, but not Kent and Bodine, who were still in their Honda, trying to keep warm and survive on a box of Tic-Tacs and an old donut Kent found in the glove compartment.

By two-thirty, Madge and Shorty still weren't there, so Luke checked the goose. It seemed to be cooking okay, but there was an awful lot of juice in the pan. When he checked it again half an hour later, there was over an inch of the stuff.

That couldn't be right. The last time he'd gotten stuck with having the Christmas Eve dinner, the turkey had only produced a few tablespoons of juice. He remembered his mom pouring them off to make the gravy.

He tried his mom. Her cell phone said, "Caller unavailable," which meant her batteries had run down, or she'd turned it off. He tried Aunt Madge's. No answer.

He dug the plastic and net wrapping the goose had come in out of the trash, flattened it out, and read the instructions: "Roast uncovered at 350° for twenty-five minutes per pound."

Uncovered. That must be the problem, the aluminum foil tent. It wasn't allowing the extra juice to evaporate. He opened the oven and removed it. When he checked the goose again fifteen minutes later, it was sitting in two inches of grease, and even though, according to the wrapping, it still had three hours to go, the goose was getting brown and crispy on top.

At 2:51 p.m., Joe Gutierrez slammed out of his house and started up to get Miguel. He'd been trying to get his goddamned lawyer on the phone ever since he'd hung up on Pilar, but the lawyer wasn't answering.

The streets were a real mess, and when Joe got to the I-15 entrance ramp, there was a barricade across it. He roared back down the street to take Highway 78, but it was blocked, too. He stormed back home and called Pilar's lawyer, but he didn't answer either. He then called the judge, using the unlisted cell phone number he'd seen on his lawyer's palm pilot.

The judge, who had been stuck waiting for AAA in a Starbucks at the Bakersfield exit, listening to Harry Connick, Jr., destroy "White Christmas" for the last three hours, was not particularly sympathetic, especially when Joe started swearing at him.

Words were exchanged, and the judge made a note to himself to have Joe declared in contempt of court. Then he called AAA to see what was taking so long, and when the operator told him he was nineteenth in line, and it would be at least another four hours, he decided to revisit the entire custody agreement.

By three o'clock, all the networks and cable newschannels had logos. ABC had Winter Wonderland, NBC had Super Storm, and Fox News had Winter Wallop. CBS and MSNBC had both gone with White Christmas, flanked by a photo of Bing Crosby (MSNBC's wearing the Santa Claus hat from the movie).

The Weather Channel's logo was a changing world map that was now two-thirds white, and snow was being reported in Karachi, Seoul, the Solomon Islands, and Bethlehem, where Christmas Eve services (usually canceled due to Israeli-Palestinian violence) had been canceled due to the weather.

At 3:15 p.m., Jim called Paula from the airport to report that Kindra and David's flights had both been delayed indefinitely. "And the USAir guy says they're shutting the airport in Houston down. Dallas International's already closed, and so are JFK and O'Hare. How's Stacey?"

Incorrigible, Paula thought. "Fine," she said. "Do you want to talk to her?"

"No. Listen, tell her I'm still hoping, but it doesn't look good."

Paula told her, but it didn't have any effect. "Go get your dress on," Stacey ordered her, "so the minister can run through the service with you, and then you can show Kindra and David where to stand when they get here."

Paula went and put on her bridesmaid dress, wishing it wasn't sleeveless, and they went through the rehearsal with the viola player, who had changed into his tux to get out of his snow-damp clothes, acting as best man.

As soon as they were done, Paula went into the vestry to get a sweater out of her suitcase. The minister came in and shut the door. "I've been trying to talk to Stacey," she said. "You're going to have to cancel the wedding. The roads are getting really dangerous, and I just heard on the radio they've closed the interstate."

"I know," Paula said.

"Well, she doesn't. She's convinced everything's going to work out."

And it might, Paula thought. After all, this is Stacey.

The viola player poked his head in the door. "Good news," he said.

"The string quartet's here?" the minister said.

"Jim's here?" Paula said.

"No, but Shep and Leif found the cello player. He's got frostbite, but otherwise he's okay. They're taking him to the hospital." He gestured toward the sanctuary. "Do you want to tell the Queen of Denial, or shall I?"

"I will," Paula said and went back into the sanctuary. "Stacey--"

"Your dress looks beautiful!" Stacey cried and dragged her over to the windows. "Look how it goes with the snow!"

When the bell rang at a quarter to four, Luke thought, Finally! Mom! and literally ran to answer the door. It was Aunt Lulla. He looked hopefully past her, but there was no one else pulling into the driveway or coming up the snow-packed street. "You don't know anything about cooking a goose, do you?" he asked.

She looked at him a long, silent moment and then handed him the plate of olives she'd brought and took off her hat, scarf, gloves, plastic boots, and old-lady coat. "Your mother and Madge were always the domestic ones," she said, "I was the theatrical one," and while he was digesting that odd piece of information, "Why did you ask? Is your goose cooked?"

"Yes," he said and led her into the kitchen and showed her the goose, which was now swimming in a sea of fat.

"Good God!" Aunt Lulla said, "where did all that grease come from?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Well, the first thing to do is pour some of it off before the poor thing drowns."

"I already did," Luke said. He took the lid off the saucepan he'd poured the drippings into earlier.

"Well you need to pour off some more," she said practically, "and you'll need a larger pan. Or maybe we should just pour it down the sink and get rid of the evidence."

"It's for the gravy," he said, rummaging in the cupboard under the sink for the big pot his mother had given him to cook spaghetti in.

"Oh, of course," she said, and then thoughtfully, "I do know how to make gravy. Alec Guinness taught me."

Luke stuck his head out of the cupboard. "Alec Guinness taught you to make gravy?"

"It's not really all that difficult," she said, opening the oven door and looking speculatively at the goose. "You wouldn't happen to have any wine on hand, would you?"

"Yes." He emerged with the pot. "Why? Will wine counteract the grease?"

"I have no idea," she said, "but one of the things I learned when I was playing off-Broadway was that when you're facing a flop or an opening night curtain, it helps to be a little sloshed."

"You played off-Broadway?" Luke said. "Mom never told me you were an actress."

"I wasn't," she said, opening cupboard doors. She pulled out two wine glasses. "You should have seen my reviews."

By 4:00 p.m., all the networks and cable newschannels had changed their logos to reflect the worsening situation. ABC had MegaBlizzard, NBC had MacroBlizzard, and CNN had Perfect Storm, with a graphic of a boat being swamped by a gigantic wave. CBS and MSNBC had both gone with Ice Age, CBS's with a question mark, MSNBC's with an exclamation point and a drawing of the Abominable Snowman. And Fox, ever the "fair and balanced" news network, was proclaiming, End of the World!

"Now can I freak out?" Chin asked.

"No," Nathan said, feeding in snowfall rates. "In the first place, it's Fox. In the second place, a discontinuity does not necessarily mean the end of the wo--"

The lights flickered. They both stopped and stared at the overhead fluorescents. They flickered again.

"Backup!" Nathan shouted, and they both dived for their terminals, shoved in zip drives, and began frantically typing, looking anxiously up at the lights now and then.

Chin popped the zip disk out of the hard drive. "You were saying that a discontinuity isn't necessarily the end of the world?"

"Yes, but losing this data would be. From now on we back up every fifteen minutes."

The lights flickered again, went out for an endless ten seconds, and came back on again to Peter Jennings saying, "--Huntsville, Alabama, where thousands are without power. I'm here at Byrd Middle School, which is serving as a temporary shelter." He stuck the microphone under the nose of a woman holding a candle. "When did the power go off?" he asked.

"About noon," she said. "The lights flickered a couple of times before that, but both times the lights came back on, and I thought we were okay, and then I went to fix lunch, and they went off, like that--" she snapped her fingers, "without any warning."

"We back up every five minutes," Nathan said, and to Chin, who was pulling on his parka, "Where are you going?"

"Out to my car to get a flashlight."

He came back in ten minutes later, caked in snow, his ears and cheeks bright red. "It's four feet deep out there. Tell me again why I shouldn't freak out," he said, handing the flashlight to Nathan.

"Because I don't think this is a discontinuity," Nathan said. "I think it's just a snowstorm."

"Just a snowstorm?" Chin said, pointing at the TVs, where red-eared, red-cheeked reporters were

standing in front of, respectively, a phalanx of snowplows on the Boardwalk in Atlantic City, a derailed train in Casper, and a collapsed Wal-Mart in Biloxi, "-from the weight of a record fifty-eight inches of snow," Brit Hume was saying. "Luckily, there were no injuries here. In Cincinnati, however--"

"Fifty-eight inches," Chin said. "In Mississippi. What if it keeps on snowing and snowing forever till the whole world--?"

"It can't," Nathan said. "There isn't enough moisture in the atmosphere, and no low pressure system over the Gulf to keep pumping moisture up across the lower United States. There's no low pressure system at all, and no ridge of high pressure to push against it, no colliding air masses, nothing. Look at this. It started in four different places hundreds of miles from each other, in different latitudes, different altitudes, none of them along a ridge of high pressure. This storm isn't following any of the rules."

"But doesn't that prove it's a discontinuity?" Chin asked nervously. "Isn't that one of the signs, that it's completely different from what came before?"

"The climate would be completely different, the weather would be completely different, not the laws of physics." He pointed to the world map on the mid-right-hand screen. "If this were a discontinuity, you'd see a change in ocean current temps, a shift in the jet stream, changes in wind patterns. There's none of that. The jet stream hasn't moved, the rate of melting in the Antarctic is unchanged, the Gulf Stream's still there. El Niño's still there. Venice is still there."

"Yeah, but it's snowing on the Grand Canal," Chin said. "So what's causing the mega-storm?"

"That's just it. It's not a mega-storm. If it were, there'd be accompanying ice-storms, hurricane-force winds, microbursts, tornadoes, none of which has shown up on the data. As near as I can tell, all it's doing is snowing." He shook his head. "No, something else is going on."

"What?"

"I have no idea." He stared glumly at the screens. "Weather's a remarkably complex system. Hundreds, thousands of factors we haven't figured in could be having an effect: cloud dynamics, localized temperature variations, pollution. Or it could be something we haven't even considered: the effects of de-icers on highway albedo, beach erosion, sunspot activity. Or the effect on electromagnetic fields of playing 'White Christmas' hundreds of times on the radio this week."

"Four thousand nine hundred and thirty-three," Chin said.

"What?"

"That's how many times Bing Crosby's 'White Christmas' is played the two weeks before Christmas, with an additional nine thousand and sixty-two times by other artists. Including Otis Redding, U2, Peggy Lee, the Three Tenors, and the Flaming Lips. I read it on the internet."

"Nine thousand and sixty-two," Nathan said. "That's certainly enough to affect something, all right."

"I know what you mean," Chin said. "Have you heard Eminem's new rap version?"

By 4:15 p.m., the spaghetti pot was two-thirds full of goose grease, Luke's mother and Madge and Shorty still weren't there, and the goose was nearly done. Luke and Lulla had decided after their third glass of wine apiece to make the gravy.

"And put the tent back on," Lulla said, sifting flour into a bowl. "One of the things I learned when I was playing the West End is that uncovered is not necessarily better." She added a cup of water. "Particularly when you're doing Shakespeare."

She shook in some salt and pepper. "I remember a particularly ill-conceived nude Macbeth I did with Larry Olivier." She thrust her hand out dramatically. "'Is that a dagger that I see before me?' should not be a laugh line. Richard taught me how to do this," she said, stirring the mixture

briskly with a fork, "It gets the lumps out."

"Richard? Richard Burton?"

"Yes. Adorable man. Of course he drank like a fish when he was depressed--this was after Liz left him for the second time--but it never seemed to affect his performance in bed or in the kitchen. Not like Peter."

"Peter? Peter Ustinov?"

"O'Toole. Here we go." Lulla poured the flour mixture into the hot drippings. It disappeared. "It takes a moment to thicken up," she said hopefully, but after several minutes of combined staring into the pot, it was no thicker.

"I think we need more flour," she said, "and a larger bowl. A much larger bowl. And another glass of wine."

Luke fetched them, and after a good deal of stirring, she added the mixture to the drippings, which immediately began to thicken up. "Oh, good," she said, stirring, "as John Gielgud used to say, 'If at first you don't succeed' . . . oh, dear."

"What did he say that for--oh, dear," Luke said, peering into the pot where the drippings had abruptly thickened into a solid, globular mass.

"That's not what gravy's supposed to look like," Aunt Lulla said.

"No," Luke said. "We seem to have made a lard ball."

They both looked at it awhile.

"I don't suppose we could pass it off as a very large dumpling," Aunt Lulla suggested.

"No," Luke said, trying to chop at it with the fork.

"And I don't suppose it'll go down the garbage disposal. Could we stick sesame seeds on it and hang it on a tree and pretend it was a suet ball for the birds?"

"Not unless we want PETA and the Humane Society after us. Besides, wouldn't that be cannibalism?"

"You're right," Aunt Lulla said. "But we've got to do something with it before your mother gets here. I suppose Yucca Mountain's too far away," she said thoughtfully. "You wouldn't have any acid on hand, would you?"

At 4:23 p.m., Slim Rushmore, on KFLG out of Flagstaff, Arizona, made a valiant effort to change the subject on his talk radio show to school vouchers, usually a sure-fire issue, but his callers weren't having any of it. "This snow is a clear sign the Apocalypse is near," a woman from Colorado Springs informed him. "In the Book of Daniel, it says that God will send snow 'to purge and to make them white, even to the time of the end,' and the Book of Psalms promises us 'snow and vapours, stormy wind fulfilling his word,' and in the Book of Isaiah . . ."

After the fourth Scripture (from Job: "For God saith to the snow, Be thou on the earth") Slim cut her off and took a call from Dwayne in Poplar Bluffs.

"You know what started all this, don't you?" Dwayne said belligerently. "When the commies put fluoride in the water back in the fifties."

At 4:25 p.m., the country club called the church to say they were closing, none of the food and only two of the staff could get there, and anybody who was still trying to have a wedding in this weather was crazy. "I'll tell her," Paula said and went to find Stacey.

"She's in putting on her wedding dress," the viola player said.

Paula moaned.

"Yeah, I know," he said. "I tried to explain to her that the rest of the quartet was not coming, but I didn't get anywhere." He looked at her quizzically. "I'm not getting anywhere with you either, am I?" he asked, and Jim walked in.

He was covered in snow. "The car got stuck," he said.

"Where are Kindra and David?"

"They closed Houston," he said, pulling Paula aside, "and Newark. And I just talked to Stacey's mom. She's stuck in Lavoy. They just closed the highway. There's no way she can get here. What are we going to do?"

"You have to tell her the wedding has to be called off," Paula said. "You don't have any other option. And you have to do it now, before the guests try to come to the church."

"You obviously haven't been out there lately," he said. "Trust me, nobody's going to come out in that."

"Then you clearly have to cancel."

"I know," he said worriedly. "It's just . . . she'll be so disappointed."

Disappointed is not the word that springs to mind, Paula thought, and realized she had no idea how Stacey would react. She'd never seen her not get her way. I wonder what she'll do, she thought curiously, and started back into the vestry to change out of her bridesmaid dress.

"Wait," Jim said, grabbing her hand. "You have to help me tell her."

This is asking way too much, Paula thought. I want you to marry me, not her. "I-" she said.

"I can't do this without you," he said. "Please?"

She extricated her hand. "Okay," she said, and they went into the changing room, where Stacey was in her wedding dress, looking at herself in the mirror.

"Stacey, we have to talk," Jim said, after a glance at Paula. "I just heard from your mother. She's not going to be able to get here. She's stuck at a truck stop outside Lavoy."

"She can't be," Stacey said to her reflection. "She's bringing my veil." She turned to smile at Paula. "It was my great-grandmother's. It's lace, with this snowflake pattern."

"Kindra and David can't get here either," Jim said. He glanced at Paula and then plunged ahead. "We're going to have to reschedule the wedding."

"Reschedule?" Stacey said as if she'd never heard the word before. Which she probably hasn't, Paula thought. "We can't reschedule. A Christmas Eve wedding has to be on Christmas Eve."

"I know, honey, but-"

"Nobody's going to be able to get here," Paula said. "They've closed the roads."

The minister came in. "The governor's declared a snow emergency and a ban on unnecessary travel. You've decided to cancel?" she said hopefully.

"Cancel?" Stacey said, adjusting her train. "What are you talking about? Everything will be fine."

And for one mad moment, Paula could almost see Stacey pulling it off, the weather magically clearing, the rest of the string quartet showing up, the flowers and Kindra and David and the veil all arriving in the next thirty-five minutes. She looked over at the windows. The snow, reflected softly in the candlelight, was coming down harder than ever.

"We don't have any other choice than to reschedule," Jim said. "Your mother can't get here, your maid of honor and my best man can't get here-"

"Tell them to take a different flight," Stacey said.

Paula tried. "Stacey, I don't think you realize, this is a major snowstorm. Airports all over the country are closed--"

"Including here," the viola player said, poking his head in. "It was just on the news."

"Well, then, go get them," Stacey said, adjusting the drape of her skirt.

Paula'd lost the thread of this conversation. "Who?"

"Kindra and David." She adjusted the neckline of her gown.

"To Houston?" Jim said, looking helplessly at Paula.

"Listen, Stacey," Paula said, taking her firmly by the shoulders, "I know how much you wanted a Christmas Eve wedding, but it's just not going to work. The roads are impassable. Your flowers are in a ditch, your mother's trapped at a truck stop--"

"The cello player's in the hospital with frostbite," the viola player put in.

Paula nodded. "And you don't want anyone else to end up there. You have to face facts. You can't have a Christmas Eve wedding."

"You could reschedule for Valentine's Day," the minister said brightly. "Valentine weddings are very nice. I've got two weddings that day, but I could move one up. Yours could still be in the evening," but Paula could tell Stacey had stopped listening at "you can't have--"

"You did this," Stacey snapped at Paula. "You've always been jealous of me, and now you're taking it out on me by ruining my wedding."

"Nobody's ruining anything, Stacey," Jim said, stepping between them. "It's a snowstorm."

"Oh, so I suppose it's my fault!" Stacey said. "Just because I wanted a winter wedding with snow--"

"It's nobody's fault," Jim said sternly. "Listen, I don't want to wait either, and we don't have to. We can get married right here, right now."

"Yeah," the viola player said. "You've got a minister." He grinned at Paula. "You've got two witnesses."

"He's right," Jim said. "We've got everything we need right here. You're here, I'm here, and that's all that really matters, isn't it, not some fancy wedding?" He took her hands in his. "Will you marry me?"

And what woman could resist an offer like that? Paula thought. Oh, well, you knew when you got on the plane that he was going to marry her.

"Marry you," Stacey repeated blankly, and the minister hurried out, saying, "I'll get my book. And my robe."

"Marry you?" Stacey said. "Marry you?" She wrenched free of his grasp. "Why on earth would I marry a loser who won't even do one simple thing for me? I want Kindra and David here. I want my flowers. I want my veil. What is the point of marrying you if I can't have what I want?"

"I thought you wanted me," Jim said dangerously.

"You?" Stacey said in a tone that made both Paula and the viola player wince. "I wanted to walk down the aisle at twilight on Christmas Eve," she waved her arm in the direction of the windows, "with candlelight reflecting off the windowpanes and snow falling outside." She turned, snatching up her train, and looked at him. "Will I marry you? Are you kidding?"

There was a short silence. Jim turned and looked seriously at Paula. "How about you?" he said.

At six o'clock on the dot, Madge and Shorty, Uncle Don, Cousin Denny, and Luke's mom all arrived. "You poor darling," she whispered to Luke, handing him the green bean casserole and the sweet potatoes, "stuck all afternoon with Aunt Lulla. Did she talk your ear off?"

"No," he said. "We made a snowman. Why didn't you tell me Aunt Lulla had been an actress?"

"An actress?" she said, handing him the cranberry sauce. "Is that what she told you? Don't tip it, it'll spill. Did you have any trouble with the goose?" She opened the oven and looked at it, sitting in its pan, brown and crispy and done to a turn. "They tend to be a little juicy."

"Not a bit," he said, looking past her out the window at the snowman in the backyard. The snow he and Aunt Lulla had packed around it and on top of it was melting. He'd have to sneak out during dinner and pile more snow on.

"Here," his mom said, handing him the mashed potatoes. "Heat these up in the microwave while I make the gravy."

"It's made," he said, lifting the lid off the saucepan to show her the gently bubbling gravy. It had taken them four tries, but as Aunt Lulla had pointed out, they had more than enough drippings to experiment with, and, as she had also pointed out, three lardballs made a more realistic snowman.

"The top one's too big," Luke had said, scooping up snow to cover it with.

"I may have gotten a little carried away with the flour," Aunt Lulla had admitted. "On the other hand, it looks exactly like Orson." She stuck two olives in for eyes. "And so appropriate. He always was a fathead."

"The gravy smells delicious," Luke's mother said, looking surprised. "You didn't make it, did you?"

"No. Aunt Lulla."

"Well, I think you're a saint for putting up with her and her wild tales all afternoon," she said, ladling the gravy into a bowl and handing it to Luke.

"You mean she made all that stuff up?" Luke said.

"Do you have a gravy boat?" his mother asked, opening cupboards.

"No," he said. "Aunt Lulla wasn't really an actress?"

"No." She took a bowl out of the cupboard. "Do you have a ladle?"

"No."

She got a dipper out of the silverware drawer. "Lulla was never in a single play," she said, ladling the gravy into a bowl and handing it to Luke, "where she hadn't gotten the part by sleeping with somebody. Lionel Barrymore, Errol Flynn, Kenneth Branagh . . ." She opened the oven to look at the goose. ". . . and that's not even counting Alfred."

"Alfred Lunt?" Luke asked.

"Hitchcock. I think this is just about done."

"But I thought you said she was the shy one."

"She was. That's why she went out for drama in high school, to overcome her shyness. Do you have a platter?"

At 6:35 p.m., a member of the Breckenridge ski patrol, out looking for four missing cross-country skiers, spotted a taillight (the only part of Kent and Bodine's Honda not covered by snow). He had a collapsible shovel with him, and a GPS, a satellite phone, a walkie-talkie, Mylar blankets, insta-heat packs, energy bars, a thermos of hot cocoa, and a stern lecture on winter safety, which



he delivered after he had dug Kent and Bodine out and which they really resented. "Who did that fascist geek think he was, shaking his finger at us like that?" Bodine asked Kent after several tequila slammers at the Laughing Moose.

"Yeah," Kent said eloquently, and they settled down to the serious business of how to take advantage of the fresh powder that had fallen while they were in their car.

"You know what'd be totally extreme?" Bodine said. "Snowboarding at night!"

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Shara was quite a girl. Warren didn't have a chance to call Marjean again until after seven. When Shara went in the bathroom, he took the opportunity to dial home. "Where are you?" Marjean said, practically crying. "I've been worried sick! Are you all right?"

"I'm still in Cincinnati at the airport," he said, "and it looks like I'll be here all night. They just closed the airport."

"Closed the airport. . . ." she echoed.

"I know," he said, his voice full of regret. "I'd really counted on being home with you for Christmas Eve, but what can you do? It's snowing like crazy here. No flights out till tomorrow afternoon at the earliest. I'm in line at the airline counter right now, rebooking, and then I'm going to try to find a place to stay, but I don't know if I'll have much luck." He paused to give her a chance to commiserate. "They're supposed to put us up for the night, but I wouldn't be surprised if I end up sleeping on the floor."

"At the airport," she said, "in Cincinnati."

"Yeah." He laughed. "Great place to spend Christmas Eve, huh?" He paused to give her a chance to commiserate, but all she said was, "You didn't make it home last year either."

"Honey, you know I'd get there if I could," he said. "I tried to rent a car and drive home, but the snow's so bad they're not even sure they can get a shuttle out here to take us to a hotel. I don't know how much snow they've had here--"

"Forty-six inches," she said.

Good, he thought. From her voice he'd been worried it might not be snowing in Cincinnati after all. "And it's still coming down hard. Oh, they just called my name. I'd better go."

"You do that," she said.

"All right. I love you, honey," he said, "I'll be home as soon as I can," and hung up the phone.

"You're married," Shara said, standing in the door of the bathroom. "You sonofabitch."

Paula didn't say yes to Jim's proposal after all. She'd intended to, but before she could, the viola player had cut in. "Hey, wait a minute!" he'd said. "I saw her first!"

"You did not," Jim said.

"Well, no, not technically," he admitted, "but when I did see her, I had the good sense to flirt with her, not get engaged to Vampira like you did."

"It wasn't Jim's fault," Paula said. "Stacey always gets what she wants."

"Not this time," he said. "And not me."

"Only because she doesn't want you," Paula said. "If she did--"

"Wanna bet? You underestimate us musicians. And yourself. At least give me a chance to make my pitch before you commit to this guy. You can't get married tonight anyway."

"Why not?" Jim asked.

"Because you need two witnesses, and I have no intention of helping you," he pointed at Jim, "get the woman I want. I doubt if Stacey's in the mood to be a witness either," he said as Stacey stormed back in the sanctuary, with the minister in pursuit. Stacey had on her wedding dress, a parka, and boots.

"You can't go out in this," the minister was saying. "It's too dangerous!"

"I have no intention of staying here with him," Stacey said, shooting Jim a venomous glance. "I want to go home now." She flung the door open on the thickly falling snow. "And I want it to stop snowing!"

At that exact moment, a snowplow's flashing yellow lights appeared through the snow, and Stacey ran out. Paula and Jim went over to the door and watched Stacey wave it down and get in. The plow continued on its way.

"Oh, good, now we'll be able to get out," the minister said and went to get her car keys.

"You didn't answer my question, Paula," Jim said, standing very close.

The plow turned and came back. As it passed, it plowed a huge mass of snow across the end of the driveway.

"I mean it," Jim murmured. "How about it?"

"Look what I found," the viola player said, appearing at Paula's elbow. He handed her a piece of wedding cake.

"You can't eat that. It's-" Jim said.

"-not bad," the viola player said. "I prefer chocolate, though. What kind of cake shall we have at our wedding, Paula?"

"Oh, look," the minister said, coming back in with her car keys and looking out the window. "It's stopped snowing."

"It's stopped snowing," Chin said.

"It has?" Nathan looked up from his keyboard. "Here?"

"No. In Oceanside, Oregon. And in Springfield, Illinois."

Nathan found them on the map. Two thousand miles apart. He checked their barometer readings, temperatures, snowfall amounts. No similarity. Springfield had thirty-two inches, Oceanside an inch and a half. And in every single town around them, it was still snowing hard. In Tillamook, six miles away, it was coming down at the rate of five inches an hour.

But ten minutes later, Chin reported the snow stopping in Gillette, Wyoming; Roulette, Massachusetts; and Saginaw, Michigan, and within half an hour the number of stations reporting in was over thirty, though they seemed just as randomly scattered all over the map as the storm's beginning had been.

"Maybe it has to do with their names," Chin said.

"Their names?" Nathan said.

"Yeah. Look at this. It's stopped in Joker, West Virginia, Bluff, Utah, and Blackjack, Georgia."

At 7:22 p.m., the snow began to taper off in Wendover, Utah. Neither the Lucky Lady Casino nor the Big Nugget had any windows, so the event went unnoticed until Barbara Gomez, playing the quarter slots, ran out of money at 9:05 p.m. and had to go out to her car to get the emergency twenty she kept taped under the dashboard. By this time, the snow had nearly stopped. Barbara told the change girl, who said, "Oh, good. I was worried about driving to Battle Mountain tomorrow. Are the plows

out?"

Barbara said she didn't know and asked for ten rolls of nickels, which she promptly lost playing video poker.

By 7:30 p.m. CNBC had replaced its logo with Digging Out, and ABC had retreated to Bing and White Christmas, though CNN still had side-by-side experts discussing the possibility of a new ice age, and on Fox News, Geraldo Rivera was intoning, "In his classic poem, 'Fire and Ice,' Robert Frost speculated that the world might end in ice. Today we are seeing the coming true of that dire prediction-

The rest had obviously gotten the word, though, and CBS and the WB had both gone back to their regular programming. The movie "White Christmas" was on AMC.

"Whatever this was, it's stopping," Nathan said, watching "I-80 now open from Lincoln to Ogalallah," scroll across the bottom of NBC's screen.

"Well, whatever you do, don't tell those corporate guys," Chin said, and, as if on cue, one of the businessmen Nathan had met with that morning called.

"I just wanted you to know we've voted to approve your grant," he said.

"Really? Thank you," Nathan said, trying to ignore Chin, who was mouthing, "Are they giving us the money?"

"Yes," he mouthed back.

Chin scribbled down something and shoved it in front of Nathan. "Get it in writing," it said.

"We all agreed this discontinuity thing is worth studying," the businessman said, then, shakily, "They've been talking on TV about the end of the world. You don't think this discontinuity thing is that bad, do you?"

"No," Nathan said, "in fact-

"Ix-nay, ix-nay," Chin mouthed, wildly crossing his arms.

Nathan glared at him. "-we're not even sure yet if it is a discontinuity. It doesn't-

"Well, we're not taking any chances," the businessman said. "What's your fax number? I want to send you that confirmation before the power goes out over here. We want you to get started working on this thing as soon as you can."

Nathan gave him the number. "There's really no need-" he said.

Chin jabbed his finger violently at the logo False Alarm on the screen of Adler's TV.

"Consider it a Christmas present," the businessman said, and the fax machine began to whirl. "There is going to be a Christmas, isn't there?"

Chin yanked the fax out of the machine with a whoop.

"Definitely," Nathan said. "Merry Christmas," but the businessman had already hung up.

Chin was still looking at the fax. "How much did you ask them for?"

"Fifty thousand," Nathan said.

Chin slapped the grant approval down in front of him. "And a merry Christmas to you, too," he said.

At seven-thirty, after watching infomercials for NordicTrack, a combination egg poacher and waffle iron, and the revolutionary new DuckBed, Bev put on her thin coat and her still-damp gloves and went downstairs. There had to be a restaurant open somewhere in Santa Fe. She would find one and

have a margarita and a beef chimichanga, sitting in a room decorated with sombreros or piñatas, with striped curtains pulled across the windows to shut the snow out.

And if they were all closed, she would come back and order from room service. Or starve. But she was not going to ask at the desk and have them phone ahead and tell her the El Charito had closed early because of the weather, she was not going to let them cut off all avenues of escape, like Carmelita. She walked determinedly past the registration desk toward the double doors.

"Mrs. Carey!" the clerk called to her, and when she kept walking, he hurried around the desk and across the lobby to her. "I have a message for you from Carmelita. She wanted me to tell you midnight mass at the cathedral has been cancelled," he said. "The bishop was worried about people driving home on the icy roads. But Carmelita said to tell you they're having mass at eight o'clock, if you'd like to come to that. The cathedral's right up the street at the end of the plaza. If you go out the north door," he pointed, "it's only two blocks. It's a very pretty service, with the luminarias and all."

And it's somewhere to go, Bev thought, letting him lead her to the north door. It's something to do. "Tell Carmelita thank you for me," she said at the door. "And Feliz Navidad."

"Merry Christmas." He opened the door. "You go down this street, turn left, and it's right there," he said and ducked back inside, out of the snow.

It was inches deep on the sidewalk as she hurried along the narrow street, head down, and snowing hard. By morning it would look just like back home. It's not fair, she thought. She turned the corner and looked up at the sound of an organ.

The cathedral stood at the head of the Plaza, its windows glowing like flames, and she had been wrong about the luminarias being ruined—they stood in rows leading up the walk, up the steps to the wide doors, lining the adobe walls and the roofs and the towers, burning steadily in the descending snow.

It fell silently, in great, spangled flakes, glittering in the light of the street lamps, covering the wooden-posted porches, the pots of cactus, the pink adobe buildings. The sky above the cathedral was pink, too, and the whole scene had an unreal quality, like a movie set.

"Oh, Howard," Bev said, as if she had just opened a present, and then flinched away from the thought of him, waiting for the thrust of the knife, but it didn't come. She felt only regret that he couldn't be here to see this and amusement that the sequined snowflakes sifting down on her hair, on her coat sleeve, looked just like the fake snow at the end of White Christmas. And, arching over it all, like the pink sky, she felt affection—for the snow, for the moment, for Howard.

"You did this," she said, and started to cry.

The tears didn't trickle down her cheeks, they poured out, drenching her face, her coat, melting the snowflakes instantly where they fell. Healing tears, she thought, and realized suddenly that when she had asked Howard how the movie ended, he hadn't said, "They lived happily ever after." He had said, "They got a white Christmas."

"Oh, Howard."

The bells for the service began to ring. I need to stop crying and go in, she thought, fumbling for a tissue, but she couldn't. The tears kept coming, as if someone had opened a spigot.

A black-shawled woman carrying a prayer book put her hand on Bev's shoulder and said, "Are you all right, señora?"

"Yes," Bev said, "I'll be fine," and something in her voice must have reassured the woman because she patted Bev's arm and went on into the cathedral.

The bells stopped ringing and the organ began again, but Bev continued to stand there until long after the mass had started, looking up at the falling snow.

"I don't know how you did this, Howard," she said, "but I know you're responsible."

At eight p.m., after anxiously checking the news to make sure the roads were still closed, Pilar put Miguel to bed. "Now go to sleep," she said, kissing him good-night. "Santa's coming soon."

"Hunh-unh," he said, looking like he was going to cry. "It's snowing too hard."

He's worried about the roads being closed, she thought. "Santa doesn't need roads," she said. "Remember, he has a magic sleigh that flies through the air even if it's snowing."

"Hunh-unh," he said, getting out of bed to get his Rudolph book. He showed her the illustration of the whirling blizzard and Santa shaking his head, and then stood up on his bed, pulled back the curtain, and pointed through the window. She had to admit it did look just like the picture.

"But he had Rudolph to show the way," she said. "See?" and turned the page, but Miguel continued to look skeptical until she had read the book all the way through twice.

At 10:15 p.m. Warren Nesvick went down the hotel's bar. He had tried to explain to Shara that Marjean was his five-year-old niece, but she had gotten completely unreasonable. "So I'm a cancelled flight out of Cincinnati, am I?" she'd shouted. "Well, I'm canceling you, you bastard!" and slammed out, leaving him high and dry. On Christmas Eve, for Christ's sake.

He'd spent the next hour and a half on the phone. He'd called some women he knew from previous trips but none of them had answered. He'd then tried to call Marjean to tell her the snow was letting up and United thought they could get him on standby early tomorrow morning and to try to patch things up—she'd seemed kind of upset—but she hadn't answered either. She'd probably gone to bed.

He'd hung up and gone down to the bar. There wasn't a soul in the place except the bartender. "How come the place is so dead?" Warren asked him.

"Where the hell have you been?" the bartender said and turned on the TV above the bar.

". . . most widespread snowstorm in recorded history," Dan Abrams was saying. "Although there are signs of the snow beginning to let up here in Baltimore, in other parts of the country they weren't so lucky. We take you now to Cincinnati, where emergency crews are still digging victims out of the rubble." It cut to a reporter standing in front of a sign that read Cincinnati International Airport. "A record forty-six inches of snow caused the roof of the main terminal to collapse this afternoon. Over two hundred passengers were injured, and forty are still missing."

The goose was a huge hit, crispy and tender and done to a turn, and everyone raved about the gravy. "Luke made it," Aunt Lulla said, but Madge and his mom were talking about people not knowing how to drive in snow and didn't hear her.

It stopped snowing midway through dessert, and Luke began to worry about the snowman but didn't have a chance to duck out and check on it till nearly eleven, when everyone was putting on their coats.

It had melted (sort of), leaving a round greasy smear in the snow. "Getting rid of the evidence?" Aunt Lulla asked, coming up behind him in her old-lady coat, scarf, gloves, and plastic boots. She poked at the smear with the toe of her boot. "I hope it doesn't kill the grass."

"I hope it doesn't affect the environment," Luke said.

Luke's mother appeared in the back door. "What are you two doing out there in the dark?" she called to them. "Come in. We're trying to decide who's going to have the dinner next Christmas. Madge and Shorty think it's Uncle Don's turn, but—"

"I'll have it," Luke said and winked at Lulla.

"Oh," his mother said, surprised, and went back inside to tell Madge and Shorty and the others.

"But not goose," Luke said to Lulla. "Something easy. And nonfat."

"Michael had a wonderful recipe for duck a l'orange Alsacienne, as I remember," Lulla mused.

"Michael Caine?"

"No, of course not, Michael Redgrave. Michael Caine's a terrible cook," she said. "Or-I've got an idea. How about Japanese blowfish?"

By 11:15 p.m. Eastern Standard Time, the snow had stopped in New England, the Middle East, the Texas panhandle, most of Canada, and Nooseneck, Rhode Island.

"The storm of the century definitely seems to be winding down," Wolf Blitzer was saying in front of CNN's new logo: The Sun'll Come Out Tomorrow, "leaving in its wake a white Christmas for nearly everyone--"

"Hey," Chin said, handing Nathan the latest batch of temp readings. "I just thought of what it was."

"What what was?"

"The factor. You said there were thousands of factors contributing to global warming, and that any one of them, even something really small, could have been what caused this."

He hadn't really said that, but never mind. "And you've figured out what this critical factor is?"

"Yeah," Chin said. "A white Christmas."

"A white Christmas," Nathan repeated.

"Yeah! You know how everybody wants it to snow for Christmas, little kids especially, but lots of adults, too. They have this Currier-and-Ives thing of what Christmas should look like, and the songs reinforce it: 'White Christmas' and 'Winter Wonderland' and that one that goes, 'The weather outside is frightful,' I never can remember the name--"

" 'Let It Snow,' " Nathan said.

"Exactly," Chin said. "Well, suppose all those people and all those little kids wished for a white Christmas at the same time--"

"They wished this snowstorm into being?" Nathan said.

"No. They thought about it, and their-I don't know, their brain chemicals or synapses or something-created some kind of electrochemical field or something, and that's the factor."

"That everybody was dreaming of a white Christmas."

"Yeah. It's a possibility, right?"

"Maybe," Nathan said. Maybe there was some critical factor that had caused this. Not wishing for a white Christmas, of course, but something seemingly unconnected to weather patterns, like tiny variations in the earth's orbit. Or the migratory patterns of geese.

Or an assortment of factors working in combination. And maybe the storm was an isolated incident, an aberration caused by a confluence of these unidentified factors, and would never happen again.

Or maybe his discontinuity theory was wrong. A discontinuity was by definition an abrupt, unexpected event. But that didn't mean there might not be advance indicators, like the warning flickers of electric lights before the power goes off for good. In which case--

"What are you doing?" Chin said, coming in from scraping his windshield. "Aren't you going home?"

"Not yet. I want to run a couple more extrapolation sets. It's still snowing in L.A."

Chin looked immediately alarmed. "You don't think it's going to start snowing everywhere again, do you?"

"No," Nathan said. Not yet.

At 11:43 p.m., after singing several karaoke numbers at the Laughing Moose, including "White Christmas," and telling the bartender they were going on "a moonlight ride down this totally killer chute," Kent Slakken and Bodine Crops set out with their snowboards for an off-limits, high-avalanche-danger area near Vail and were never heard from again.

At 11:52 p.m., Miguel jumped on his sound-asleep mother, shouting, "It's Christmas! It's Christmas!"

It can't be morning yet, Pilar thought groggily, fumbling to look at the clock. "Miguel, honey, it's still nighttime. If you're not in bed when Santa comes, he won't leave you any presents," she said, hustling him back to bed. She tucked him in. "Now go to sleep. Santa and Rudolph will be here soon."

"Hunh-unh," he said and stood up on his bed. He pulled the curtain back. "He doesn't need Rudolph. The snow stopped, just like I wanted, and now Santa can come all by himself." He pointed out the window. Only a few isolated flakes were still sifting down.

Oh, no, Pilar thought. After she was sure he was asleep, she crept out to the living room and turned on the TV very low, hoping against hope.

"-roads will remain closed until noon tomorrow," an exhausted-looking reporter said, "to allow time for the snow plows to clear them: State Highway 56, I-15 from Chula Vista to Murrietta Hot Springs, Highway 78 from Vista to Escondido--"

Thank you, she murmured silently. Thank you.

At 11:59 p.m. Pacific Standard Time, Sam "Hoot'n'Holler" Farley's voice gave out completely. The only person who'd been able to make it to the station, he'd been broadcasting continuously on KTTS, "Seattle's talk 24/7" since 5:36 a.m. when he'd come in to do the morning show, even though he had a bad cold. He'd gotten steadily hoarser all day, and during the nine p.m. newsbreak, he'd had a bad coughing fit.

"The National Weather Service reports that that big snowstorm's finally letting up," he croaked, "and we'll have nice weather tomorrow. Oh, this just in from NORAD, for all you kids who're up way too late. Santa's sleigh's just been sighted on radar over Vancouver and is headed this way."

He then attempted to say, "In local news, the snow-" but nothing came out.

He tried again. Nothing.

After the third try, he gave up, whispered, "That's all, folks," into the mike, and put on a tape of Louis Armstrong singing "White Christmas."