

*I seem to have developed a habit of giving the gift of story to my readers every holiday season, and why stop now? So here's my Christmas present to you. Beth Hamlin, the teenage sister of my male protagonist from Storm Chaser, has appeared in every fiction work I've had published so far, so I thought it would be fun to visit with her again. Her friend, Cassidy Quinn, first appeared in The No-Campfire Girls and is the main character from a YA mystery that's not yet published. Although this story references events from The No-Campfire Girls and The Notorious Ian Grant, it's not necessary to read them first ... although naturally, I hope you'll read them sometime. Merry Christmas!*

## LOOK OUTSIDE

*by Mark R. Hunter*

"Long distance friends are the best." Beth Hamlin lounged in front of her computer, flipping her blond hair as if she didn't have a care in the world while she worried about her friend's downcast expression.

Her words had the desired effect, bringing at least a hint of a smile to Cassidy Quinn's face on the monitor screen. "Why is that?"

"Because whatever friend is with you at the moment is the best." Ooh, she should write that down. "Unless they're enticing you with eggnog, spice flavored drugs, or violent Christmas rap music."

"Is there such a thing as violent—you're wearing green! You always wear yellow!"

It was the first real hint of emotion since they'd started their Christmas Eve Skype conversation. Cassidy had been braiding her dark hair—which led Beth to her own hair flipping—as she stared off into space, or whatever was on the wall in her own room. Only boys or family could bring this kind of distraction to a fifteen year old, and being one herself, Beth would know.

Sighing, Beth looked down at her green fleece sweater. "I'm branching out. By that I mean it was a gift ... it was this or the one with Rudolph on it, and whenever I bent my arms his nose glowed."

"Good choice, then."

“Being festive is important.” Beth dodged to one side, the better to show the three foot cardboard cutout of a yellow horse hanging from her bedroom wall behind her. It was covered with blinking, multicolored lights. “Merry Christmas from Secretariat!”

“I miss Secretariat. I miss camp.” Cassidy paused, seeming to focus her attention, then glanced over her shoulder at a much more traditional Christmas tree that stood before the Quinn home’s picture window. “I can only stay on another minute. We’re doing the family thing tonight—my sister’s coming over, and she promises to cook so my dad won’t poison us. I won’t get to see my friends on *this* side of the internet until tomorrow.”

“Well, maybe a small family gathering will be fun. We’re doing it bigger this year: my brother’s fiancée is bringing two family members, and Fran will be here, too.”

“What ... Ian Grant *and* Charles Grant? What’s that like?”

“It’s very weird.” Beth sat up straighter, as if it would somehow help her explain. “You know how much of a fuss got made over us, after what happened at the camp this summer? These guys get ten times the attention just walking down the street. I once saw Charles Grant kill Charlton Heston in a movie ... now he’s sitting at our dinner table, getting in trouble with Mom for taking a phone call from Steven Spielberg.”

Cassidy burst out laughing.

“Don’t get me started on Ian Grant. The guy’s a lunatic.”

“But you’re working for him. You’re working for the man People Magazine voted *most likely celebrity to get arrested in a sting operation*.”

“A teenager’s gotta have spending money. Anyway, everything that happened this summer mellowed him. Well, kind of.” Beth glanced at the clock in the corner of her screen. “Is your dad home yet?”

“Soon. He’s doing a part time gig for our town’s private detective.”

“That sounds exciting ...” Since her own brother was a cop, Beth knew better, and Cassidy’s grimace confirmed it.

“Dad says it’s all sitting around, waiting to watch people. Not even watching them—waiting to watch them.” Another dramatic sigh. “But the money—you know—college fund. I’m applying for a job at the amusement park next summer.”

“Sorry.” A change in subject would be good. “They say it may snow up here.”

She might as well have suggested a rain of brimstone, considering Cassidy's depressed reaction. "It's forty-five degrees here. I miss snow."

Beth already knew that. It was the same thing Cassidy said at Thanksgiving, and twice since then. "It could snow." She glanced at the clock.

"No, it's forty-six degrees now. It never seems to snow in southern Indiana anymore. You've got it so good in the north."

Beth's brother wouldn't agree, and neither would their guests. "Ian's been walking around in five layers. He's miserable." *Californians.*

"Is Ian's mom alive?"

A strange question that Beth had half expected. "Yeah, but he splits his holidays between her and Charles. Heh, I called him Charles."

Again, Cassidy's gaze lost its focus. "He should call her."

"He did."

They looked at each other, over three hundred miles and shared tragedy.

"I was little when my dad died, but I talk to him every holiday," Beth said. "He's only a few miles from here." In Rose Hill Cemetery.

Even from here, she could see Cassidy take a shaky breath. "My dad uses the same decorations every year. The stuff my mom used to put up. She had awful taste, it's so pretty. Then every Christmas Eve, we'd go out on the back porch, find a star, and wish for snow."

"It could snow."

"Forty-six." Behind Cassidy, something glittered through the window.

A small beep came from Beth's computer. Smiling, she pushed her chair back. "I want to say Merry Christmas and then goodbye, because you've got something to do."

"What?"

"Look out the window."

"You're not outside stalking me, are you? That would be weird." Cassidy turned around. Then she turned back. Then she turned again, and her surroundings darkened as she shut off the nearest lamp. "It's ..."

"I'm sorry, I didn't hear that."

A confused face looked back to the computer screen. "It's snowing."

"That's because we're the Camp Inipi Hotshots, baby! We can change the weather."

"But ... forty-six."

"I'll bet you'll find your dad and sister already out there. Go enjoy it!"

"But ... did you do this?"

"It'll melt later, but there should be enough for snowballs, snowmen, dancing in the snow—all the important snow stuff. I'm signing off, talk to you tomorrow—have fun!" She reached out and cut the connection, before Cassidy could ask more questions.

Immediately a knocking came at the door, and it cracked open enough to expose five wiggling, white gloved fingers. "Ho, ho, ho!"

"I'm not sure that means the same in Hollywood as it means here."

"Merry Christmas from your lunatic employer." The door opened all the way, to reveal Santa Claus. Instead of a white beard, Santa had a sexy stubble and twinkling blue eyes that Beth knew came from colored contact lenses. The red clothes were probably more for warmth. "Santa has it on the highest authority that you've been a very good little girl."

"Oh, yeah?" She swiveled around to face him. "The highest authority was listening through the door. So, what'd you get me, Mr. Claus?"

Ian Grant threw his arms into the air. "Get you? It cost me six hundred and fifty bucks to rent that snow making machine!"

"It—it did?" With Ian agreeing to their plan so quickly, she hadn't considered the cost.

His fake outrage immediately fell away, and he turned to grab something behind him, in the hallway. "You do for friends and family."

"But you've never even met Cassidy."

"I wasn't talking about her, kiddo." He carried something into the room, a large item covered with a horse blanket. "You're my best Hoosier employee."

"I'm your only Hoosier employee." He covered her gift with a horse blanket? That was almost cruel—the horse she'd been taking care of since the big summer storm just recently

went back to its repaired home. That left her with only Secretariat, who would be crushed by a horse blanket.

“You know, if all goes well you’re going to be my sister, or possibly I’m going to be your brother, or maybe both.”

“You really did get me something? But—“

“Sorry I didn’t wrap it.” Ian laid the item carefully on the bed, then drew the blanket aside. It was black leather, and possibly the most beautiful saddle she’d ever seen, and ... it had her first name tooled onto the skirt.

“But ...” Beth swallowed. “I don’t own a horse.”

“You haven’t opened your family gift yet.” Ian just grinned. “Look out the window.”

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