

One

December



Kyle Hunter

Chapter One

The radio perched on the kitchen table crooned “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,” spurring Nikki Mancini to hum as she rolled out a soft mound of dough on the wooden cutting board.

“This crust is almost ready, Mom. It’s for lemon meringue, right? Hint, hint . . .” Nikki raised her eyebrows and grinned. Her mother leaned over the stove, one hand holding the pan lid, the other grasping a wooden spoon. She sniffed and plunged the spoon into the bubbling sauce to stir it. Long shafts of winter sunlight, cloudy with swirls of flour dust, spilled through the kitchen window.

Nikki’s Aunt Trudie answered, “Mincemeat, Nikki.” Trudie leaned over the counter and poised her knife over a pile of nuts. She had the same thick, black hair and laughing eyes as her twin brother, Nikki’s father. “Not very Italian, but it’s one of your dad’s favorites.” She turned toward Nikki and smiled. “My kids like it too.”

“Are they coming this year?” Nikki blew a stray hair away from her cheek then glanced at her aunt. The radio launched into an orchestral version of “Silver Bells.”

“Just Drew and his girlfriend for Christmas Day. Shelby is spending the day with her boyfriend’s family this year. Can’t have everybody at once, I guess, especially as the kids grow up.”

Nikki frowned as she pressed the dough into the glass pan and patterned the edges with her thumbprints. She was only twenty-four, but would probably still be at this very table thirty years from now, the single daughter, making piecrusts at Christmas.

“We’ll still have a crowd.” Her mother loved Christmas and was clearly enjoying her tasks. She shot Nikki and Trudie a jubilant look. “Not that I mind, of course.”

Nikki rolled her aching shoulders backward a couple of times. She, too, enjoyed the annual tradition of helping her mother cook on holidays, basking in the festivity, surrounded by tantalizing smells and traditional music. Thankfully, she one lived one town away, which enabled her to drop by her parents’ house easily and often anytime throughout the year.

There would be twenty around the table this year, which was why Nikki, her mother, and her Aunt Trudie worked with the unflinching focus of a military campaign two days before Christmas.

The Big House, as her parents’ home was called by family members, was the official gathering place for the Mancini clan. For Nikki, *this* Christmas stood apart from other holidays. The very thought of one particular guest due to arrive later that day stoked a flutter like a flock of birds deep inside her.

“Are Danny and Cheryl coming tomorrow, Marie?” Aunt Trudie nudged her glasses up on her nose.

“Yes, tomorrow afternoon.” Nikki’s mother moved briskly to the refrigerator and back to the stove, a wedge of fresh parmesan in one hand. “Danny couldn’t get away from the dealership any earlier. Lots of people must be buying cars for Christmas gifts this year. I wish my Danny lived closer, like Nikki and Laura. Once the new baby comes, I’ll probably have to go out to them.”

“And isn’t Mike coming this year too?” Trudie asked. Something inside Nikki’s stomach jolted. She lifted her head, trying to look nonchalant, unsure if it had worked.

“Yes, it’s his year.” Nikki’s mother chuckled. “He knows he’d be disowned by the family if he didn’t come for Christmas at least every three years. Jim and Catherine are on their way to the airport now to pick him up. They should all be here by dinner.”

Nikki glanced down at her watch. She squirmed in her chair.

“I guess Mike has made his own life out in San Francisco. It’ll be nice to see him again, after all this time. Remember, Nikki, when you were young and had that crush on him?” Trudie chuckled, ignoring the pained look Nikki knew must be plastered on her face.

“Please, Aunt Trudie.” A hot flush crept up Nikki’s neck. “I took a lot of teasing for that. For years.”

“Said you wanted to marry him. It was so cute. You were only, what, six or seven?”

“Something like that.” Nikki sighed, and her mind groped for options to change the subject. Snow that evening? Flu outbreak? She’d have to think of something.

“I’m surprised he’s not married yet,” her mother said. “So handsome and smart.”

Nikki shrugged with feigned indifference.

“He was engaged, or almost, to that girl who dumped him. Stephanie, or something?” Trudie shook her head. “He’s almost a member of the family but I know so little about his life.”

Marie swiped her hands on her apron. “We’ll put those pies in the freezer and thaw them Christmas morning.” She turned to her youngest daughter, her dark eyes smiling through rimless glasses. “Thanks for all your help.”

“Sure, Mom. I’m glad to help.” Nikki wiped her hands on a moist rag.

Trudie said, “Bet you’re glad to have a couple weeks vacation, Nikki. Teaching teenagers has got to be challenging.”

“Try it in a foreign language.” Nikki pictured her students and smiled. “I really love them, though. There’s a problem kid or two every year, and this year it’s Torrie the Terror, in French Two. I’m always on the fence between wanting to be her friend and wanting to smack her.”

Trudie and Marie laughed. Nikki was grateful that the conversation had moved on from Mike and her childhood infatuation. “I’ve finished these crusts, so I’m going to go out to cut some greenery for the mantle.” She slid the chair away from the kitchen table with an abrupt scrape and slipped into her fleece jacket, stealing another glance at her watch. Just a few more hours.

In the hall Ginger, the aging orange and white cocker spaniel, gazed up at her with watery black eyes. Nikki bent down and rubbed her ears, cooing, “My good old girl.” At least Ginger wouldn’t remind her of childhood embarrassments. Ginger would keep Nikki’s secret.

She slipped out the front door and was met with the chill of December, refreshing after the hot kitchen. The pine scent from the wreaths affixed to the huge double doors

added a slight tang to the winter air. Nikki headed to the bushy white pine tree in the back yard, clippers in hand.

After college she hadn't been very adventurous, coming back to Adams Bridge, where she'd grown up. Still, there was something reassuring about being able to drop by the Big House on weekends or anytime she wanted to. And it felt good to be part of a large, close family. Especially at Christmas.

Nikki pushed her glove away from her wrist to glance once more at her watch, trapping the pine boughs in the crook of her elbow. Mike's plane was due to touch down in about one hour.

Three years since she'd seen Mike. Would things be any different this time? If only she could just feel nothing but friendship for Mike Branagan, and finally be rid of the chronic, aching chasm of unreturned love. Maybe she'd get through the holidays with their friendship intact . . . as well as her heart.

Once back inside the house, she arranged the pine on the mantle near the couch where her sister, Laura, sat with her boyfriend, Trey. Nikki glanced down at her arm. Five thirty-two.

At about six-thirty car doors slammed outside and a clatter of voices approached the front porch. Nikki swallowed and braced herself. *It's just Mike. You've known him your whole life.*

That was part of the problem.

There was a loud knock, then the muffled "Ho, ho, ho," her grandfather's voice on the front porch. Her mother eagerly yanked open the front door. Grandpa Jim's navy blue down parka doubled his body volume, the collar nearly hiding his whiskered jaw and wide grin. Mike materialized behind him like a long-awaited vision. He looked weary in his tan bomber jacket, his chin smudged with a five o'clock shadow. Thick dark hair swung across his forehead and deep brown eyes lit his slightly rounded face. Nikki's heart tugged inside her.

Lastly, Catherine, Nikki's step-grandmother, shuffled in, carrying a covered dish. She pulled the door behind her with a clack and placed a casserole into Marie's waiting hands. "Whew, it's cold!" She shivered and unwound her frizzy, red scarf. "Traffic wasn't as bad as we expected on a holiday. We made good time."

Immediately Mike was enfolded in hugs. “Frank, Laura, great to see you,” he said to Nikki’s father and sister. “Marie, you look good.” He gave Nikki’s mother a tight hug then shook hands with Trey. When he saw Nikki, his face widened into a warm smile, dimples lengthening. Her insides seemed to liquefy.

“Hey, Nikki.” Mike’s arms encircled her and he lifted her up off the ground.

“You look just the same,” she whispered against his ear as she breathed in the faded scent of his cologne.

“And you just keep getting better.” He pulled back, his hands still on her shoulders. Was he simply glad to see her, or might there be more? She pulled her tunic sweater down further, in case he noticed the five pounds she’d gained since September.

“You must be tired and hungry, Mike.” Nikki’s mother pulled his jacket away from his outstretched arms and piled it atop Jim’s and Catherine’s. “Dinner’s ready, so we can eat now.”

Everyone filed into the dining room, chattering as they went. Nikki and her mother brought platters of roast beef, potatoes, vegetables, steaming biscuits, and gravy into the dining room. Nikki began to relax, since the moment which she’d obsessed about for weeks was finally past. At least Mike seemed glad to see her.

Blinking colored Christmas lights around the picture window competed with the steady glow of the red tapered candles spaced down the long table. The clink of cutlery against china plates broke into the hum of conversation while muted strains of Christmas music floated in from the den. Mike was the center of everyone’s curiosity, having given little news over the past three years.

“What do you do in San Francisco?” Trey broke his usual silence and leaned forward on his elbows.

“I’ve been working as a graphic designer for a software company. I also have a few rental houses I fixed up and rent to low-income families.” He glanced at Nikki, holding her gaze for a second, just before a new volley of questions came from her mother.

Mike answered Marie and, appearing eager to turn the attention away from himself, turned to Nikki’s father and asked, “How is the car business doing, Frank? Has the economy affected it very much?”

Nikki's father shrugged. "Last year we opened up a new dealership, so that makes four. The one Danny manages has been doing well, so in all, it's very good. I should start thinking about retiring." His impish smile belied the sincerity of his words.

"I don't know what I'd do with Frank underfoot." Marie grinned as she reached for the gravy boat. "I'd have to work fulltime instead of part time."

The remainder of the meal passed in a blur as the noise level rose and the food kept flowing from the kitchen. Nikki stayed quiet, observing and listening. She longed to fill her eyes with the sight of Mike, after years of what felt like starvation, but didn't dare. She'd be mortified if anyone guessed her feelings, she'd carefully hidden them for so long. When dessert was finished Nikki stood to help clear the dishes.

"Nikki, sit a while and then we'll do it together," her mother said gently. Then to no one in particular she added, "Nikki's been a huge help during the holidays."

"It's okay, Mom. I don't mind." Nikki gathered some plates into a pile, doing what she did so easily, fading away into practical work. Catherine rose to help her as the conversation around the table continued.

After the last counter had been sponged off, Nikki was alone in the kitchen. She rummaged under the sink for dishwashing powder then stood to find Mike leaning against the counter. "You disappeared," he said. "Not tired of me already, are you?"

"Hardly." She met his eyes, which were filled with amusement and warmth. "There were too many people all talking at once. And just wait till Christmas, when that number will triple." She grinned to let him know she didn't really mind.

He crossed his arms and smiled back at her, the same relaxed warmth she remembered, had imagined so many times. He was really here in the flesh. "I have an idea, to get you away from the noisy crowd," he said. "Why don't we meet for breakfast tomorrow so we can catch up? Jerry's Deli for some lox and bagels, hot coffee, fried eggs? Tempted?"

"Hmm. Might be noisy there too. How about Pancake Palace?"

"Ten o'clock?"

"You're on. Do you remember how to get there?"

"Pancake Palace? That was my second home in high school. All-nighters at the Palace, remember?"

“No, I guess I was out of your life by that time,” Nikki said quietly. Instantly she regretted her words, fearing he’d hear an accusation.

His expression was sober, his voice no more than a whisper. “My loss. We’ll catch up tomorrow at ten, okay?”

Mike stepped toward her for a hug goodbye. It was only a brotherly hug but Nikki felt carried away by a dream, buried in his arms for just a moment. With difficulty, she released him. “See you tomorrow.”



At the old farmhouse where he’d spent his high school years, Mike sank wearily onto the foot of the bed in his old room, which smelled of decades-old furniture and musty books. Following a quick cup of hot chocolate with Jim and Catherine, he’d begged for sleep and trudged up the creaky stairs. His body was fatigued, but his thoughts were in freefall, as his present collided with the past.

Along one wall knotty pine shelves displayed his high school wrestling and basketball trophies, faded team photos, and school banners. Several sketches of animals and landscapes that he’d drawn as a teenager, yellowed with curled up edges, were still thumb-tacked to the wood paneling. He should really clean all this up one day. It had little bearing on his current life and provoked a truckload of negative memories. He felt like a completely different person than he had been then. Or had he ever been that person?

His new life in San Francisco was uncluttered, carefully sealed off from shadowy memories of grief and loss. There, he could pretend he didn’t have a past.

He leaned toward the shelf to peer at a photo of himself with Danny, standing in soccer uniforms, feet spread apart, grins reaching wide. They must have been eight or nine, shortly after they had become best friends.

Absent from the shelf was a photo of his parents. At first it had been too painful to have their faces staring at him every day. After that, he just never bothered to put their picture out with the others. Back when life was normal, when his parents were absorbed with their busy lives, he’d spent a lot of time hanging around with Danny, Nikki, and Laura at the Big House, in the above-ground pool or in the neighborhood. After the accident he was there even more, at Marie’s insistence, for every holiday, for dinner, all the time.

Maybe Marie had felt sorry for him. At any rate, the Mancinis had always treated him like a member of the family, especially Jim and Catherine, who'd taken him in when his parents were suddenly ripped out of his life.

Only Frank had been distant and communicated disapproval without words. Mike wasn't a Mancini. No, he would always be Mike Branagan, and he was alone, despite his borrowed family.

He missed San Francisco already.

Mike toed off his shoes, leaned back, and stretched full-length on the bed. Felt good, after a long day of traveling. He hooked his arms behind his head and stared up at the ceiling, letting fatigue flow over him like shallow waves. A month ago, he'd decided that this would be his last visit to New York. He'd made the trip at Christmas every three years, mostly for Jim and Catherine. He owed it to them, especially after some of the rough patches they'd put up with during his adolescence. Yet these trips were blocking his full recovery, sucking him back into the past each time he came east. Sure, he'd miss them all, but in time they'd fade from one another's memories, like a slow case of amnesia.

He sighed. So much for *those* plans. Ely's phone call last week changed everything. Mike's infrequent contact over the years with his father's friend had threaded some comfort and continuity into his life, and brushed the surface of his aloneness. As the executor of his parents' estate, Ely had completed all the necessary financial tasks following the accident. But when he'd called out of the blue a week ago and claimed to have new information about his parents' deaths, an unwelcome jolt thundered through Mike's fragile complacency. After thirteen years.

He had no choice but to wait for Ely's return to town after Christmas to hear the news. In the meantime, he'd attempt to enjoy the holidays and the people who, despite everything, still seemed to care about him.

And Nikki. An altogether different emotion rushed unbidden when he thought of how she looked tonight, her gray eyes sober, her olive skin set off against a bright red sweater. There it was again, this surprising attraction to her, which had begun three years earlier during his last visit.

He smiled, picturing her following him around when she was only seven. Yet tonight she looked even more grown-up than she had three years ago. Seeing her drew his

thoughts where they probably shouldn't go. He shook his head. And how amazing, that they'd both found faith about a year apart. Who could have guessed that would happen?

He couldn't figure her out, though. She'd been quiet at dinner, almost avoiding his eyes, though he'd tried several times to catch her gaze. At least tomorrow they'd talk over breakfast and catch up on the last few years, hopefully renewing the friendship they'd had as kids . . . the friendship he'd allowed to slip away, just when he'd so needed a friend.

Despite the emotional turmoil these Christmas visits provoked, seeing Nikki again might add a much-needed bright spot. He'd find a way to resolve the tug of attraction he felt when he was with her. Soon enough he'd be back in his own world on the West Coast.