

A  
HEARTSTOPPER  
NOVELLA

# THIS WINTER



ALICE OSEMAN

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF HEARTSTOPPER AND LOVELESS

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*ALICE OSEMAN*



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“It is evident by this,” added Jane, “that he comes back no more this winter.”

—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*



Victoria Annabel Spring,  
Age 16

## *TORI*

I wake up two hours after I fall asleep. The amount of sleep I get on Christmas Eve seems to be decreasing each year, probably because my average falling-asleep time gets steadily later due to my rather worrying internet addiction. Maybe, eventually, I'll just stop sleeping altogether and become a vampire. I'd be good at that.

Not gonna bother complaining about my sleeping pattern right now, though, because it's Christmas and this is the one day of the year when I should at least

try not to complain about anything. This is hard when your seven-year-old brother is hitting you in the face with a pillow at six o'clock in the morning.

I say something along the lines of “nooooo” and retreat under my duvet, but this doesn't stop Oliver from following, tearing back the covers and crawling onto my bed.

“*Tori*,” he whispers. “It's *Christmas*.”

“Mm.”

“Are you awake?”

“No.”

“You are!”

“No.”

“*Tori*.”

“Oliver . . . go wake Charlie up.”

“Mum said I wasn't allowed.” He starts ruffling my hair. “*Tori*iiiiiii—”

“*Ugh*.” I roll over and open my eyes. Oliver is

completely under the covers, looking at me, wriggling with excitement, his hair sticking up on end like a dandelion. Charlie and I have discussed at length how it's possible for Oliver to be related to us, since he's the literal embodiment of joy and we're both miserable fucks. We concluded that he must have got all the happy genes.

Oliver has a Christmas card in his hands.

“Why do you have a—”

He opens the card and a disgustingly cheerful version of “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” begins to play right into my ear.

I groan and shove Oliver off the bed with one hand. He rolls onto the floor and bursts into giggles.

“So annoying,” I mutter before sitting up and turning on my bedside lamp, resulting in a shriek of “YAY!” from Oliver. He begins to wander around my room, opening and closing the card so



it repeats the first two notes over and over again.

Christmas is okay at our house. It's chilled. Quiet. Dad calls it a Spring Christmas, which he thinks is hilarious. We open presents when we wake up, then family come over for Christmas dinner and stay until late, and that's it. I play video games with my brothers and cousins, Dad always gets drunk, my Spanish grandfather (Dad's dad) has an argument with my English grandfather (Mum's dad)—truly wonderful stuff.

But it's not exactly a normal Christmas Day this year.

My fifteen-year-old brother, Charlie, has an eating disorder. Anorexia. He's had it for a long time, but it's been particularly bad these past few months, and the stress of it caused him to have a self-harm relapse in October. He lived away from home for a few weeks at a psychiatric ward that specifically cares for teenagers

who have eating disorders and it definitely helped, but it's still been rough. Obviously.

I don't really think there was a reason he got so ill. That stuff just happens, like diseases or cancer. So it's not his fault. Actually, I think it was probably my fault it got so bad. When I noticed that something was *off* with him, I didn't tell my parents and I didn't ask him what was wrong. I didn't talk to him enough. I didn't do enough.

But it's not about how I feel. It's not even about my parents. Christmas is a stressful time for people with eating disorders, since food is such a big part of the day, and I know Charlie's been feeling anxious about it. He's been stressed all week, arguing with Mum pretty much every day and shutting himself in his room.

So today is about supporting Charlie.

I pick up my phone, ignore the notifications, and text Becky, my best friend.

## **Tori Spring**

(06:16) *HAPPY CHRISTMAS. Be thankful you don't have siblings. I am tired. Oliver threw a pillow at me. Enjoy sleep. Bye. xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx*

Mum and Dad said we can't wake them up until at least 7:30. It's 6:17 now. I get up and open my curtains to find the world still dark, tinged yellow from the streetlamps. I fall back into bed and put the radio on. It's playing a quiet hymn for once, instead of "All I Want for Christmas Is You." It's nice. Oliver is spinning around in my desk chair and a choir is singing "Silent Night," my eyes are closing again, and now Oliver's sitting in my bed with me, the musical card on a pile of clothes on the floor, it's 6:29, 6:42, 6:55 . . . Oliver's pulling my hair gently, he's talking about what presents he wants and whether Father Christmas ate the biscuits we left him, and I'm mumbling something, I don't know what, I'm drifting off . . .

And then my bedroom door opens again.

“...Victoria?”

I wake up for the tenth time. It's Charlie, just visible in the dim light, standing at the door in a navy Adidas sweatshirt and checked pajama bottoms. He looks tired but he's smiling. “You awake?”

“No,” I say. “I'm having an out-of-body experience. I'm just my ghost.”

Charlie snorts and enters my room. I turn to Oliver, who has fallen asleep against my shoulder, and give him a little nudge with my elbow. He snaps awake and sees Charlie.

“CHARLIE'S HERE!” he yells and charges from the bed towards him, slamming into Charlie's legs and almost causing him to fall over. Charlie laughs and picks Oliver up like he's a baby, which he does at least once a day, causing Oliver to giggle. “Wow, you're very awake, aren't you?”



“Can we go downstairs yet?”

Charlie carries Oliver towards my bed. “Nope, Mum said seven thirty.”

“*Arrghhhh.*” Oliver wriggles in Charlie’s arms and drops down next to me, immediately snuggling under the covers. Charlie sits down next to him, against the headboard.

“Ugh. Younger brothers are annoying,” I say, but I’m sort of grinning too. I curl up under the duvet. “Couldn’t you stay in your own beds?”

“Just doing our job.” Charlie smiles. “Are you listening to Radio 4? What’s with the church music?”

“I don’t think I can deal with Mariah Carey at this time of the morning.”

Charlie laughs. “Me neither.” Like Oliver, he has hair sticking up from his forehead. He’s also got purple circles under his eyes—I can’t remember what he looks like without them anymore. Aside

from that, he looks almost like his normal self, all long-limbed and gentle.

“I only slept for, like, two hours,” I say.

“Same,” he says, but I think his lack of sleep might be for different reasons from mine.

“How many presents does Father Christmas give you when you’re seven?” asks Oliver, who’s now standing up on my bed and trampling over the duvet. Charlie and I laugh.

“Seven,” says Charlie decisively. “The same as the number of years you’ve been alive.”

“So . . . when I’m eighty, I’ll get eighty presents?”

Charlie prods Oliver in the chest and he falls over with a wide smile. “Only if you’ve been good!”

“I can’t wait till I’m eighty,” says Oliver.

“Me neither,” says Charlie.

It’s good that we’re all back together now. It felt weird, just me and Oliver and Mum and Dad. Oliver’s

still too young to talk to properly, and I don't hate my parents or anything but I don't feel like I'm too friendly with them either. Mum has this thing where she avoids talking about anything even slightly deep or emotional. Dad's the same, but he makes up for it by talking about books all the time. We all get along fine, but I don't feel like we ever talk about anything important.

They still don't even like talking openly about Charlie's eating disorder, even though he's getting proper treatment now. I thought things might change, that we might start being more open about feelings and stuff.

But we're not.

“Can you imagine being a *really old man*?” Charlie says, putting on an old-man voice. Oliver giggles, shuffling up to join us against the headboard. Charlie's smile is contagious.

They start playing I Spy. Today's going to be difficult for everyone, but everyone has difficult days, I guess. I

used to think that difficult was better than boring, but I know better now. There have been a lot of difficult days in the past few months. There have been too many difficult days.

“Happy Christmas,” says Charlie, without any warning. He leans over Oliver and rests his head on mine. I lean a little too, my head on his shoulder. The radio plays. I think the sun is rising, or it might just be the streetlamps. I’m not going to think about the past few months, about Charlie and me, about all the sadness. I’m going to block it all out. Just for today.

“Happy Christmas,” I say.

I try not to fall asleep again, but I still do, Oliver’s laugh ringing in my ears.



It’s ten to twelve and me and Charlie are still in our pajamas, sitting on the sofa playing the new edition of *Mario Kart*. It was a present for Oliver, but he’s busy

with the very large amount of toy tractors that people gave him.

My parents got me a new laptop and Charlie a new phone—things we both asked for. They don't really do surprise presents. And while Charlie and I have never really tried too hard with presents before now, this year I got him a Bluetooth speaker for his bedroom and he got me a laptop case with Wednesday Addams on it. I think we both know each other better than we thought we did.

“Is it me or is this version way harder than the old one?” I ask Charlie.

He attempts to swerve Baby Mario around a corner but ends up driving off a cliff instead. “It really is. I used to actually be *good* at this.”

I drive Bowser directly into a tree and fall into last place. “D’you think we should try Rainbow Road?”

“I dunno. I don’t think my self-esteem can take the hit.”

“Wow.”

He snorts. “Too real?”

I smirk. “Maybe.”

“Kids?” Mum wanders into the room. She’s got her Christmas dress on—a purple thing that’s actually quite nice—and her hair curled. She always makes us dress up nice for Christmas, as if we’re supposed to do something other than slob on the sofa for twelve hours. She raises her eyebrows at us. “You going to get dressed soon?”

Charlie says nothing, so I say, “Yep, in a minute.”

“Don’t be too long. Everyone’s arriving in half an hour.”

“Yeah, we’re just gonna finish this level.”

Mum leaves. I glance at Charlie, but he hasn’t looked away from the screen. I don’t think they’ve had an argument today but I can feel one brewing. And I’m not going to lie, Mum is kind of pissing me off a little

bit. She's been really snappy with Charlie since he got home, which isn't helping anyone. If she just checked in with Charlie politely—like, asked him how he's feeling today—maybe Charlie wouldn't mind actually opening up to her.

“You feeling okay about today?” I ask. I don't want to bring up Christmas dinner. Charlie and Dad made a meal plan so Charlie could feel prepared, but I read online that talking to Charlie about food and eating all the time actually makes him feel worse.

“I'm fine,” he says. I guess maybe we shouldn't talk about it.

We get to the end of the level, and then I say, “We have to do Rainbow Road before we go get changed.”

“Really? You think you can handle that amount of absolute failure?”

“You never know. I might be good at it.”

Charlie laughs at me. “We'll see about that.”



I end up wearing the only skirt that I own, which is gray, with a collared shirt and jumper. I rarely get dressed up, since I am the most unsociable person ever to grace the earth, so I take the opportunity to brush my hair, which is probably the first time I've done that this entire holiday. Ten points to me.

Family members start to arrive and Charlie and I are on “greeting duty,” which involves more hugging than I would like. First Grandma and Grandad arrive, Grandad grumbling about something to do with his car. Grandma gives us an apologetic look. Then our Spanish grandparents arrive, having traveled from Mojácar last week to stay with Uncle Ant's family, and Charlie has a mangled conversation in Spanish with Abuelo while Nan embarks on a long lamentation on how I cut most of my hair off over the summer.

Dad's brother and his family arrive with them—Uncle

Ant and Aunt Jules, and our three cousins: Clara, a twenty-year-old veterinary student; Esther, who's my age; and Rosanna, a twelve-year-old who never seems to stop talking. Then we've got Mum's sister, Aunt Wendy, several older relatives where I'm still not sure how exactly we're related, Dad's sister Sofia and her husband, Omar, and their new baby boy—the house is pretty full. Hopefully a bit later I'll be able to sneak off to my room for a break.

We don't see our cousins more than a few times a year, but it has become clear to me over recent years that they are very much unlike Charlie and me. Mainly because they seem determined to be friendly and fun all the time.

“Charlie, darling,” says Clara from across the Kids Table once Christmas dinner is fully underway. Clara looks excellent in whatever she wears and has been allowed to attend Christmas Day in jeans, which annoys me quite a lot. She points a fork at Charlie,

who's on my left. "You need to tell us all about your new boyfriend."

Esther perks up at this, staring at Charlie through her glasses. Esther doesn't usually talk to us as much as Clara and Rosanna, but, from what I can tell from her Twitter, there's a possibility she might not be straight and is therefore always interested in Charlie's love life, what with him being the only openly gay person in our entire family.

Charlie shuffles in his chair. He's wearing black jeans and still the navy Adidas sweatshirt, which I suddenly realize belongs to Nick. I think he chose his outfit purposefully to annoy Mum.

Clara takes a decisive mouthful of potato. "What's his name?"

"Nick." There's a bit of hesitation in his voice. He probably didn't expect an inquisition on top of his other issues with dinner.

“How long have you been going out?”

“Er . . . eight months.”

“Oh! Not exactly new, then!” Clara laughs.

Charlie fiddles with his sweatshirt sleeves. “Haha . . . no . . .”

Clara clearly can't tell that she's making Charlie uncomfortable. Charlie keeps glancing towards where Grandma and Grandad are sitting, making sure they can't hear anything from our table. Charlie doesn't want to come out to Grandma and Grandad yet because we think they might be a bit homophobic. Lots of old people are, unfortunately.

“And you met at school, did you?”

I wish Clara would just shut up. This isn't her fucking business.

“Yeah.” Charlie forces a laugh. “Did Uncle Ant tell you all this, or . . . ?”

“Oh God, yes—you know what he's like.”

Esther watches Charlie carefully. Rosanna is trying to plait Oliver's hair, much to Oliver's irritation.

Clara continues, "You should *totally* bring him to ours tomorrow."

Esther meets her eye and grins. "Oh my God, yes."

We go to their house every year for Boxing Day, and boyfriends and girlfriends are always welcome, but it's not like me or Charlie have ever had anyone to bring before, since he only started dating Nick in April and I dislike most people.

Charlie smiles awkwardly. "Oh, I think he's doing stuff with his family tomorrow."

Clara pouts. "Aw, that's a shame." And then her piercing gaze swaps to me. "What about you, Tori? Any lovely men in your life?"

I fight down the urge to hysterically laugh. "Um. No. Haha. No."

Clara does the laughing for me. "Oh gosh, you are

not missing much, I promise you that. Straight boys are the absolute worst.” She points her fork towards Oliver. “Let’s all hope that this one turns out better.”

“He might not be straight,” Esther finally pitches in. Her voice sounds startlingly like Clara’s, but I think I like Esther more than Clara. We’ve had some okay conversations about *Doctor Who*.

“You’re so right,” says Clara, leaning on one hand, gazing at Oliver like he’s a newborn. “Charlie, when did you know you were gay?”

Charlie’s eyes widen in fear at the prospect of having to embark on this conversation, but thankfully, at that moment, Dad appears at the head of the table, still with his apron on over his shirt and waistcoat, and a Christmas cracker crown hanging dangerously off the top of his head. “How’s everybody doing over here?” He looks specifically at Charlie and claps him on the shoulder. “Everyone doing okay?”

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