



Elita discovers the secret to savoring the good gifts all around her. Through the wisdom revealed in nature and a loving spiritual mentor, Elita learns what it means to have access to the riches of God's kingdom and how to enjoy the beautiful life God has given her.

Interested in the whole book?  
Select your preferred book seller:

MOODY PUBLISHERS 

AMAZON



BARNES & NOBLE



GOOGLE PLAY



CHRISTIANBOOK.COM



WALMART



TARGET



## CONTENTS

1. The Worst December Ever 7
2. A Warning 13
3. Joy's Big News 19
4. Mrs. Crisp's Assignment 29
5. The Winter Dance 35
6. Mrs. Burgley's Email 41
7. Savor 47
8. The Surprise in the Tree 53
9. A New Perspective 61
10. Joy's Bad Day 65
11. The Birding Challenge 69
12. Back to the Woods 73
13. Something There 81
14. The Demonstration Speeches 85
15. A Failure 91
16. The Three Words (Top Secret) 95

17. The Mystery in the Woods 99
18. Have You Ever Wondered? 103
19. Mr. Keller's Answer 107
20. Margo's Christmas Party 113
21. Imping the Owl 117
22. Mrs. Burgley's Surprise 125
23. Everything Better 129

About the Author 135

To Think About and Talk About from *The Disappearing Seat* 137

Acknowledgments 141

## CHAPTER 1

# THE WORST DECEMBER EVER

How can your entire life fall apart in *seven days*? How can you feel so good one minute, and the next minute, feel like God has forgotten you—like all your blessings have disappeared, melting away like snowflakes on a sunny winter day?

I stood in our small, warm kitchen, trying to get my mom's attention as she packed up Cally's dance bag. My little sister (she's eight with tons of energy) had dance practice every night for the first couple of weeks of December to prepare for *The Nutcracker* ballet. It's kind of a big deal in our town. The Potter family loans out their enormous barn for the performance. They put out folding chairs, build a big stage, and hang a huge red curtain in front of it to make it look like a theater. Our town's *Nutcracker* performance is always on a Saturday night, the second weekend in December. This year, Cally earned three parts in the show: a party guest, a mouse, and a peppermint stick.



My mom scurried around the living room like a frantic squirrel.

“Mom! Are you listening to me?”

She rushed out the front door, her arms overflowing with bags holding hoagies and grape juice boxes for the dance team. As she stuffed the bags into the car trunk, she called out, “We’ll talk later, Elita.”

Have you ever noticed that sometimes adults rush around like they’re being chased by some invisible thing?

*Rush, rush, rush.*

I don’t like people rushing me. I like to take my time with things.

I get it though: my mom works as a second-grade teacher during the day, and then at night during performance season, she volunteers to arrange dinner and help all the little boys and girls with their costumes, hair, and makeup to help pay for Cally’s classes. Being a dancer is *expensive*.

My mom popped back into the house, her puffy black winter coat swishing, to grab her purse, kiss me on the top of my head, and tell me I was being too dramatic about what happened in Nature Club and then in Mrs. Crisp’s class. She squeezed my shoulders in a quick hug. I shooed her off me but smiled at her. “Hey, you *were* listening to me,” I joked.

I pretend I don’t like her snuggling me all the time, but I guess I like it.

I spun around to face my dad, who stood over the stove stirring a big pot of his famous venison chili. I almost started to tell *him* all my bad news, but then I stopped. I knew he had a lot on his mind with the big snowfall coming.

Dad manages a hardware store, and things get crazy in the Pennsylvania wintertime. He sold out of snow shovels and rock salt soon after Thanksgiving, and I heard him tell Mom the delivery truck for the new shipment would come in a week late. It's a whole different way of living during a Pennsylvania winter. Snow might start in November and last all the way till March. You need supplies to help you de-ice your car, melt driveway ice, warm your house, and shovel snow from your driveway and sidewalks. You need warm blankets and lanterns and batteries in case the power goes out. But it's not all boring stuff. Dad's store has a whole back wall of sleds—saucers and toboggans and even tubing ones—for the big sledding hills. Pennsylvania is *hilly*.

I try to give my dad some space when he's stressed out. Last week, my mom told me to try to notice what other people are going through. Other people have problems, too.

Basically, I'm selfish. I'm trying to work on this.

*Sigh.*

Who could I talk to about my *three big problems*? Mrs. Burgley—my wisest older friend from the woods—left me and moved to South Carolina to live near her grandchildren. She told me I could email her any time. *Ugh*. I wouldn't even know how to explain it all. I tried to picture her with her hair like silver cotton candy piled on her head and her eyes that sparkled when she talked to me. I missed how she'd served me ginger tea and Oreo cookies at her cottage down the forest trail. She shared the secret with me of what to do when I felt left out and unpopular when middle school started. But now she was gone. She floated away in my mind like my fairy godmother who I didn't know how to summon back.

And God? Where was God now?



I lumbered up the wooden staircase to my bedroom. It's the coldest room in the house in winter; I pile loads of warm blankets and wear wool socks to bed to stay warm. I love my room because it feels like the forest with light brown walls and my dark green bedspread. Even though it was too early to sleep, I changed into my red flannel Christmas pajamas and slid under the covers. My dad would call me down to dinner soon, but I wasn't hungry. I turned over and squished my face into my pillow.

It was only Tuesday, and I was having the worst week ever. I just wanted December to end, and it literally just started.

December was cold, boring, and empty.

If October and November meant the beauty of a Pennsylvania autumn and my crush, Stephen Rackley, sitting by the firepit with me, roasting marshmallows as we watched for the red fox, December meant cold, white silence and icicles that hung down from the roof and windows like big jaws devouring my house.

It's like December was eating me alive.

I thought about my friends. What where they doing now? Margo was probably texting her group of popular friends all about her next viral video. Even though Margo and I were friends again—after she excluded me from her lunch table and ruined the start of my seventh grade year—it wasn't easy having a beautiful, rich, and *seriously famous* friend. Companies mailed Margo things just so she'd talk about their products in her videos, for example. She called it her "unboxing videos." And she wore clothing I could never afford.

What about Allie Wu? She was probably studying or at her mom's bakery. Allie didn't care what anyone thought about her,

and she made the fox videos from our fall science project go all over the internet. Her dad was the superintendent of our school district. I feel like Allie is always on her best behavior, and she sometimes seems impatient with me because I'm not as good at things like math or talking to people in conversation like she is. I think Allie could be president one day.

Kee? Where was Kee? Field hockey, volleyball, indoor track, or soccer practice—I don't even know what season it is for her. Besides, she spends all her time with Matt and the boys from the soccer team.

I mean, I could have texted Margo or Allie or Kee, but I felt too sad and mad to talk to anyone.

And Stephen? Stephen my perfect crush? I thought I didn't need all Stephen's attention anymore, but maybe I did. He'd rather talk to Joy Keller now.

Joy Keller. Supposedly my new best friend. Not anymore.

*I can't handle this.*

How does anyone survive seventh grade when you hear the worst news ever from someone who's supposed to be your new best friend?







## CHAPTER 2

# A WARNING

That first weekend in December—before I heard the worst news in Nature Club on Monday morning and then *more* awful news on Tuesday in Mrs. Crisp’s class—we had decorated the house for Christmas. We had put up garlands of pine over doorways, wreaths on the windows, and a manger scene with all kinds of wooden animals around Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, and the baby Jesus. We always wait to put our Christmas tree up till the week before Christmas; we cut down a real tree from the Christmas tree farm down Route 45. My mom always lit candles that smelled like gingerbread, played *Bing Crosby Christmas Classics* music nonstop, and when my dad lit a fire in our fireplace that night, she brought out hot cocoa and called our home our beautiful “Christmas cabin.”

Everything felt perfect just a few days ago. Until it didn’t.



By the way, my mom makes the best hot cocoa from scratch. She adds vanilla to melted chocolate on the stove, slowly stirs in milk, warms it just enough (so it doesn't burn the roof of your mouth—that's the worst), pours it into huge mugs, and tops it all off with homemade whipped cream with crushed candy cane pieces in it. She makes her special hot cocoa for her students, too. She decorates her classroom for winter with a fake fireplace made with flickering tea lights illuminating orange and yellow tissue paper and dozens of blue and white construction paper snowflakes dangling from the ceiling with fishing wire.

I help her cut out snowflakes every winter. I'm pretty good at cutting snowflake patterns. Yesterday, we sat at our kitchen table, snipping patterns into folded paper. There's a special way to fold a six-point snowflake. I love unfolding my paper to reveal a beautiful snowflake. It looks so jumbled and terrible at first, like you can't believe anything good can come of those strange cuts in the paper.

Cally isn't allowed to help. She's the worst with scissors.

I went to bed that night feeling so cozy and warm. I had no idea what was coming. Our home and the trees were tucked in by mounds of beautiful snow. I talked to God that night. I told Him I couldn't wait for the Winter Dance with Stephen Rackley and our group on Friday. I thanked Him for Mrs. Burgley and the autumn-colored dress she made me. I thanked Him for spaghetti and meatballs and my mom's amazing garlic bread that my dad said we'd have for dinner this week. I thanked Him for the blueberry pie we made from berries I picked in summer and froze for winter. I even thanked Him for sending me my new best friend, Joy, and how we'd already talked about making our own flies for

trout fishing in Spring Creek this summer and how the Great Horned Owl in the tree by Joy's house would have her owlets in the spring. I finally had new binoculars, too.

I don't just talk to God. Lately, I've been *writing* to God in my journal. I love my journal. I always keep it with me.

It's new for me, all this talking and writing to God. I basically choose five things (sometimes more) from the day I liked and just write them down and thank God. It makes me feel good. It settles me down.

*Stephen. Mrs. Burgley. Meatballs. Blueberry pie. Joy Keller. Thank You, God. Thank You for everything.* I chose a special sticker from my snowflake sticker sheet and stuck it next to my gratitude list. I love snowflakes.

I closed my journal and snuggled down into my blankets. The sun had set, and the sky looked dark outside my window. I made myself still as a stone, listening.

I like to listen to the forest in winter. There's not much to hear except for one wonderful thing:

Owls.

I listen for the owls. Owls become active at night.

And in case you think owls migrate to warmer places, don't worry. Our county in Pennsylvania has owls that stay all year round—the Eastern Screech Owl, the Great Horned Owl, the Barred Owl, and sometimes even the Snowy Owl.

The hooting of an owl is one of my favorite sounds in the whole world. It makes me feel cozy and hopeful and sometimes a little achy inside, like I'm hoping for something. Hooting feels like longing, I guess, but in a good way.



Then, I heard him: the Great Horned Owl.

*Hoo-h'HOO-hoo-hoo. Hoo-h'HOO-hoo-hoo.*

I imagined his flight above the trees in the moonlight. I pictured him landing on a tree branch, shaking the snow to the ground. I imagined him tucking his wings into his body, warming himself. I saw him watching his surroundings intently, turning his head with his big ear tufts and bright yellow eyes. He hooted again. Normally when a male owl keeps hooting, it's because there's danger. He's defending his territory.

Again, he hooted, different and more urgent, and close to my window. I held my breath and clutched my green blanket. Was he calling out a warning?

Silence. Then I heard a scream, high pitched, like a woman shrieking.

But it wasn't a human. I knew the sound well: the red fox.

I sat up and clenched my jaw, my back teeth scraping in fear and anger.

Was the owl hunting my fox?

Wait! I heard the owl hooting his danger call.

Was the fox hunting the owl?

I listened for a few more minutes and realized the forest returned to the quiet of winter. Whoever was prey had escaped, I knew; otherwise, I'd hear the distress cries of either creature. The fox might now curl up in the snow, his fluffy tail wrapped tightly around him. The owl might fly back to his home near Joy's house in the pines. I reached over to my nightstand and pulled my Field Notes journal onto my bed. I grabbed my favorite pen, and I wrote down this question:

*A Warning*

*Is an owl more likely to eat a fox, or is a fox more likely to catch an owl?*

Then I wrote down some of my thoughts: *I love the sound of the Great Horned Owl and do not like the scream of a fox at night. I hope my fox is safe. And I hope the owl eats well tonight. God, take care of the animals. Keep them warm and happy.* I took an owl and fox sticker and put them on the page next to my questions.

I burrowed into my warm blankets, curling up like a fox.

I fell fast asleep, not realizing how terrible December was about to become.



Interested in the whole book?  
Select your preferred book seller:

MOODY PUBLISHERS 

AMAZON 

BARNES & NOBLE 

GOOGLE PLAY 

CHRISTIANBOOK.COM 

WALMART 

TARGET 