



Vanessa and Bella Find the Spirit of Christmas

A Vanessa Gordon Story

by

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I.

Vanessa Gordon woke up. She did not open her eyes but lay still on one side in the warmth of her bed letting the day creep in slowly. She felt a soft pressure behind her knees and knew that Smudge, her little black kitten, was snuggled up next to her on top of the comforter.

Today was Monday, she thought, the first day back to school after the Thanksgiving holidays. She smiled to herself. Sixth grade was going well and school was always fun as the year drew to a close. There was the year-end program and choir performances to look forward to. One of her friends, Amanda, had told her that the Spirit Club would put up holiday decorations this week. Everyone would be excited and upbeat, anticipating all the festivities.

Even with her eyes still shut she sensed that it was early. The smell of coffee wafted down the hall and into her bedroom. She heard early morning sounds from the kitchen. And another sound – rain. It had to be raining hard. The drumming on the roof might be what woke her up, she decided. It was not a tempo for walking or marching, but a fast run-for-your-life beat.

Vanessa opened her eyes. She pushed back the covers, got out of bed and walked over to look out her bedroom window. Smudge joined her, sitting on the window bench. It looked as if it had been raining for a while. There were big puddles on the lawn and she could see heavy splashes as the raindrops fell. For some reason the rain gave Vanessa a dark, uneasy feeling deep inside. It was coming down fast and had a fierce energy. Vanessa sat still, looking out into the darkness, feeling strangely agitated. Suddenly Smudge's ears stood up straight, her body tensed, her back arched and she let out a low growl. It startled Vanessa. She looked outside warily but could see nothing except the rain. She reached out and stroked Smudge's head. "It's okay," Smudge, "she told the small black

cat. It's okay. It's just rain." But she wondered. Finally she gave a little shudder, trying to shake off the bad feeling, and stood up. It was time to get ready for school.

Isabella Galvan was already at her locker when Vanessa made her way through the groups of students in the main hallway of Mojave Middle School. "Hi, Nessie," she greeted her best friend, "Sorry I couldn't come over yesterday, but my uncle and aunt didn't leave until late and my mom wouldn't let Javi or me go anywhere!"

"I figured you were trapped," Vanessa laughed as she opened her locker. She looked at her reflection in the mirror mounted on the inside of the door. "I'm going to have to put my hair back. It got wet and I hate that it's so straight! Ugh." She made a face as she searched in her locker for the hairbrush and the little tin box filled with barrettes and clips and elastic bands.

"I'll trade you some of my curls for your straight hair," complained Isabella. She was using a pick to pull her dark brown curls out. "They get all tight when it gets wet like this."

"They make you look like an angel, Bella," Vanessa told her. "I'd take your curls over droopy straight hair anytime." She reached over and pulled a small strand of curly hair down over Isabella's forehead. It sprung back, hanging down just enough to look like it had escaped on its own and to call attention to Isabella's big brown eyes. "See how cute you look!"

Isabella looked in the mirror on the inside of her locker door and pulled out another couple of curly strands. Then she turned to Vanessa and made her stand still while she arranged stray strands of blonde hair on either side of her face. "There!" she said, standing back and nodding approval. "Swift!"

Vanessa did a mirror check. Better. She put away the brush and the tin box. The first bell rang. Grabbing their textbooks and supplies, the two girls closed their lockers and headed for their homeroom. They slid into their seats as the final bell buzzed. Students around them scrambled to sit down and arrange their belongings.

The PA system activated and students quieted down for morning announcements. They were surprised to hear Principal Wilson's voice, directing teachers to escort their classes immediately to the gym. There was no explanation. Isabella and Vanessa looked at each other as they stood and lined up. Isabella raised an eyebrow. Vanessa shrugged in response. They followed their classmates into the gymnasium, climbed up onto the bleachers and sat down.

A few moments later, Principal Wilson entered and walked quickly to the podium that had been moved to the middle of the gym floor. He was not smiling and did not wave at any of the students as he usually did. He adjusted the microphone. "Please sit down. I want total silence - now."

Vanessa and Bella glanced at each other. Something was definitely off. The gym got very quiet very fast. Then Vanessa remembered the feeling of unease that she had experienced earlier that morning. It shot through her again. She shivered. Principal Wilson started speaking.

“His SUV was hit by a drunk driver,” reported Principal Wilson. He went on to explain that the vehicle was hit so hard that it rolled at least once. The truck that hit it rolled multiple times. Mr. Reynolds, Mojave Junior High’s popular music teacher, was in the hospital in critical condition. His wife was also in the hospital. His two children, a three-year-old son and a five-year-old daughter, were safe.

Principal Wilson paused. Three hundred students and their teachers sat in shocked silence. Then a soft sob trembled through the air and suddenly it seemed that everyone was crying and whispering.

Vanessa realized she had both her hands cupped over her mouth. She turned and looked at Isabella. Isabella looked stunned. Vanessa squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her hand over her forehead. Two little kids. That was what she was thinking. Two little kids close to her brother’s age. Dylan was four, and she could not imagine him being in a wreck like that, then not having their parents with him afterwards.

Mr. Wilson was calling for order. All holiday events and choir performances were cancelled, including the annual holiday assembly. The crying seemed to intensify, and Mr. Wilson was saying something about grief counselors.

“It was probably Mr. Reynolds who was drunk,” said a voice behind her. Both Vanessa and Isabella whirled around. It was Logan Miller, sitting with a couple of his friends, smirking. “He’s so basic; probably drinks so he has some rizz!”

Vanessa felt her cheeks get red. She wanted to stand up and punch Logan in the face. “Shut up, you freak!” she whispered and turned back around.

“Oooh,” said one of his friends. “Preppy girl’s mad at you, Logan.”

Isabella looked at Logan and his friends. “Losers!” she hissed. Then she grabbed Vanessa’s hand and they started down the bleachers towards the floor of the gymnasium.

At dinner that evening, Vanessa’s parents brought her and her brother, Doug, up to date. Mrs. Reynolds had had surgery and was expected to be released from the hospital within a week. Mr. Reynolds’s parents were at the Reynolds home taking care of the two children. Mr. Reynolds’s condition had been upgraded to ‘serious.’ Dad said this was a very positive thing.

“Vanessa, you haven’t eaten much,” observed Mom. “What are you thinking?”

Vanessa sat quietly for a few minutes, gathering her thoughts. Then she told them about the assembly and how the news about the accident had affected everybody. “Mom, Dad, you can’t imagine how bad it was all day,” Vanessa said. “Half of the students called their parents and went home. And everyone is so sad. Every single class there were people crying. In most of our classes we didn’t do school work, we just sat and talked about it. Usually when we come back from Thanksgiving vacation, people are happy and excited for the holidays. Right now everything is pretty grim. And it doesn’t feel like there is anything anyone can do to fix it.”

Mom sighed. “Nessie, all we can do is comfort the people around us and show them that we care. And one of the ways we show that we care is by doing what we should be doing. It is certainly understandable that you students are upset. I imagine the teachers that work with Mr. Reynolds are also very rattled. This is one of those bad things that life throws at us. It is just awful. But we can’t give up and become so overwhelmed that we are of no use to anybody!”

Vanessa had a hard time falling asleep that night. Smudge snuggled close and listened intently while Vanessa explained how bad she felt. “Do you remember this morning, Smudge, when we woke up and it was raining and dark outside? Remember that bad feeling we had?”

Smudge’s ears perked up and she looked intently at Vanessa.

“It was like a premonition of something wicked! And I know you felt it too, didn’t you? That’s kind of scary to think about right now.” Vanessa looked into Smudge’s eyes. In the dark they looked like black pools reflecting little slivers of light. Vanessa had not even told her best friend about that foreboding that had rolled through her early that morning. But Smudge had felt it also. And Vanessa could tell Smudge anything. Smudge listened and always helped her work things out.

Vanessa was quiet for a moment, then sighed. “Mom said we should show the people close to us that we care,” murmured Vanessa, as she pet Smudge’s soft little head. “And I understand about not giving up. But I don’t understand how just going to school like nothing happened is useful either. I am already 11 years old, and there should be something I could do!”

Smudge began to purr quietly.

“Oh, Smudge, I know you would help if you could,” said Vanessa, scratching behind the cat’s silky black ears. The soft purring continued and soon the beginning of a thought developed. It wasn’t anything specific. It was more like a swirling mist, a feeling that there WAS something she could do, and she could figure it out if she could just see it a little more clearly. The idea eluded her but somehow it made her feel better. And as she thought about it, she drifted into a gentle sleep.

II.

Language Arts (LA) was the last class of the day. Vanessa was taking Spanish and Bella was taking French, but they were in the same language lab. The two girls left homeroom and headed down the hall towards the LA lab. A group of five or six girls were clustered around another girl who was sobbing loudly. They were all wearing black T-shirts with black jeans.

Vanessa and Isabella stopped. “Riley, what’s going on? What happened?” Vanessa asked one of the girls in the group.

“What do you mean, ‘what happened?’ Mr. Reynolds almost died, that’s what happened!” Riley’s tone was sarcastic, aggressive and definitely not nice.

“Right,” answered Vanessa, as she and Isabella backed away from the group and walked quickly down the hall. They stopped just outside the LA lab and stood there for a moment looking at each other.

Isabella was first to speak. “Look down the hall, Nessie,” she said. “It’s actually pretty empty and there’s still a few minutes before the bell. My parents said that Mr. Reynolds is getting better. I mean, he got hurt very badly, but he is getting better. So why are so many kids not coming to class or they’re here but then they’re running around dressed all in black. I mean, this is depressing!”

“This is crazy!” agreed Vanessa. “Everyone is unhappy or they’re in a bad mood. I’m so over it. You know, I like school but I don’t even want to be here anymore. I am so glad it’s our last class today!” She peeked into the classroom. “And look,” she directed Isabella. “It looks like we have a substitute teacher. He probably doesn’t speak Spanish or French or Japanese. I bet we don’t do Exploration Groups today!”

Mojave Junior High School used an internet-based language application, so each student could sit at a computer station, put on earphones and work at their own pace, so long as they kept up with the weekly class goals. Once a week the class broke into “Exploration Groups,” and worked on grammar and conversation with the other students and a real teacher. Vanessa liked the freedom that this arrangement offered, so Language Arts was one of her favorite classes.

Sure enough, the bell rang and the students who were there stood around uncertain as to what to do since the doors to the individual group work rooms were still locked. The teacher wrote his name on the big whiteboard at the front of the room: Mr. Hamill. He announced that there would be no breakout groups today and that students should go to their stations and continue to work on their weekly group assignment.

Vanessa and Isabella looked at each other triumphantly, nodded their heads in unison and gave each other a very discreet fist pump. Then each girl went to her assigned cubicle.

Vanessa hung her backpack on the hook, logged onto the computer, checked the microphone and pulled on the earphones. She sighed. The turmoil in the hall had unsettled her. It seemed wrong in a way she couldn’t explain. She clicked to start the first lesson.

The instructions on the screen directed her to say each sentence out loud.

The program prompted her. “Cantamos en mi fiesta. Van a cantar en mi fiesta.”

Vanessa repeated the two sentences in Spanish. Once she said the sentences aloud, the translation appeared at the bottom of the screen so she could check her work.

We are singing at my party. They are going to sing at my party.

She started to click to the next problem, then stopped. She looked at the screen. The idea in her head came into focus as if a thick filter had been removed.

Vanessa recalled that the entire first chapter of their Music Appreciation textbook was about the importance of music and how people connect with music. “Music,” Mr. Reynolds had said, “helps people express joy and love, and it helps people deal with pain and grief. It helps us feel less alone.”

Yes, thought Vanessa. That is exactly what we need right now! Music! And singing! Like a party! Maybe we could get the entire choir together to go out caroling. And maybe we could all go to the hospital and sing for Mr. Reynolds.

Vanessa could hardly wait for class to be over so she could share the idea with Isabella.

Isabella was enthusiastic. “We’d have to get some kind of help. There are about fifty kids in choir, and fifty kids is a lot.. We need to ask our moms right away.”

“Okay,” agreed Vanessa. “Like, first thing when we get home, okay? I’ll ask my mom, and you ask your mom. If we explain how bad it is at school and how depressing it is, maybe they’ll say yes!”

Vanessa let herself in through the front door and headed for the kitchen. Her mom and dad were both there, sitting at the kitchen table. They looked up and greeted her, smiling.

“How was school?” asked Dad, his hands wrapped around the big coffee mug in front of him.

“Sit down, Vanessa, and let me get you a snack,” said Mom, pushing her chair back.

Vanessa slid into her usual chair at the table “No, Mom, it’s okay. I’m good,” she said. “But,” she continued, looking serious, “school is terrible. Our Language Arts teacher was out today. And Riley and Lily and Chloe and some of their friends came to school dressed all in black. Right before Language Arts, they were standing over by the lockers in the hall and one of them was crying really loud. And Riley said Mr. Reynolds was going to die. And it’s so bad that I was thinking that I don’t even want to go to school anymore.”

“Good grief,” exclaimed Dad. “Isabella’s dad and I took some things over to the Reynolds’s house today to help his parents who are caring for the two children. Mrs. Reynolds will be released from the hospital in a couple of days, and they told us that Mr. Reynolds is doing even better than expected. How do these rumors get started?”

“Vanessa,” said Mom firmly, “not going to school is not an option.”

“Oh, I know,” said Vanessa quickly. “I know. And Bella and I thought of something that might help everyone.”

“Oh, and what is that,” asked Mom suspiciously, on guard for any further no-more-school nonsense.

“A party!” declared Vanessa decisively. “We need to have a party with music and singing. And we need to do something that will let Mr. Reynolds know that we are thinking about him.”

Vanessa continued talking, trying to get all her points in before her mom could say anything, most especially before she could say ‘No.’ “So Bella and I thought maybe we can get the choir together

and go caroling and get someone to take us to the hospital and maybe they would let us in and we could sing for him.”

“Vanessa, take a breath,” said Mom. “There must be at least fifty kids in the choir. That’s number one. Then, number two, time is very limited between now and Christmas. It’s difficult to plan an event that big, even when you have lots of time to do it. And, last but not least, the hospital is very unlikely to approve a large group of kids traipsing through the halls.”

“I think it’s great that you are trying to do something about the situation,” said Dad, encouragingly. “Maybe,” he continued, “you’re on the right track. Maybe, though, it’s a matter of scale.” He and Mom exchanged a long look.

“What does that mean?” asked Vanessa. Somehow it didn’t feel like ‘No.’

“It means,” explained Mom, “that sometimes you can’t fix everything; but you can do something. Vanessa still didn’t know what that meant, but it still didn’t sound like ‘No.’

Mom’s cell phone rang. Mom glanced at the screen and, as she picked it up she said, “It’s Cecilia.” She left the table and walked into the hall towards her studio.

Vanessa sat still. Cecilia was Bella’s mom. Vanessa wished that she could tiptoe down the hall and try to hear what was going on, but Dad was sitting there with her.

“You know,” said Dad, “planning and putting together a party is a lot of work. And it gets more complicated if time is short, especially during the holidays. If your mom and Mrs. Galvan agree to this, you and Isabella need to be ready and willing to help with everything.”

“We will,” promised Vanessa, nodding her head.

Mom came back in the room. “Vanessa, go get started on your homework. I will need you to help me clean up after dinner. Mrs. Galvan and Isabella will be here at 7 o’clock sharp. We’ve got a party to plan and I have some things to do before that.” She smiled, leaned over and kissed Dad on his cheek, and disappeared down the hall and into her studio.

Dad winked at Vanessa as he got up to put his cup in the dishwasher. “Game on,” he said.

It was seven o’clock on the dot when Mrs. Galvan showed up with Isabella and Javier. “Hi, Maureen, Hi, Vanessa. We’re here. And Javi was hoping he and Doug could do their algebra homework together.”

“Not a problem,” said Mom. “Doug is in his room, Javi. Why don’t you go let him know you’re here.”

“Thanks, Mrs. G!” Javier threw her a big grin as he headed towards Doug’s bedroom.

Vanessa and Isabella sat down on one side of the kitchen table and Isabella’s mom sat down on the opposite side. Mom brought a cup of coffee to Mrs. Galvan, then turned to get one for herself.

Vanessa saw a black streak disappear under the table. She leaned sideways and looked. Dad's chair was pushed up to the table. Smudge had jumped onto the chair seat which was hidden under the table. She looked like a tiny black panther on a secluded ledge on a mountain cliff. Vanessa smiled at Smudge. Smudge looked back at Vanessa, her bright green eyes alert. Vanessa heard Mom pull her chair out to sit down and she sat up straight. Mom caught her eye. "Is everything okay down there?" asked Mom.

"Perfect!" replied Vanessa. "Smudge came to help."

Mom sat down and picked up the papers that were in front of her, tapping the edges on the table to straighten the stack. "I am calling our first Party Planning Committee meeting to order," she said.

Isabella and Vanessa squirmed expectantly in their seats and exchanged a smile.

"I'll take notes," offered Isabella's mom, and she took out her cell phone, pressed the screen a couple of times, then placed the phone on the table beside her. "We're recording," she said.

"Wonderful," said Mom. She paused and looked at Mrs. Galvan, who nodded encouragement. "You two want to have a party and help cheer up your friends. We think we are lucky to have daughters who are so thoughtful. So we would like to teach you how to plan the perfect party."

"You are both growing up so fast," said Isabella's mom. "This is a good way for you to start learning grown-up skills. And there is nothing that chases away gloominess faster than planning and doing nice things for others."

Mom passed out the papers. "This is your party planning guide. Use it to take notes and keep it in a notebook in a safe place. Understood?"

She looked at Isabella and Vanessa. Each girl shook her head, 'Yes,' as they each took one of the papers and looked at it. This is what they saw:

TEN STEPS TO PLANNING THE PERFECT PARTY

1. TYPE
2. THEME OR PURPOSE
3. DETAILS (DATE, TIME, LOCATION)
4. GUESTS
5. INVITATIONS
6. DECORATIONS
7. FOOD AND DRINK
8. ACTIVITIES
9. ENTERTAINMENT
10. PARTY FAVORS

"This is a lot of stuff," remarked Isabella.

“I don’t even know where to begin,” said Vanessa. “What do we do with this?”

“Start at the top,” suggested Isabella’s mom. “For example, Isabella, **what type of party is this?**”

“I don’t know what you mean,” replied Isabella hesitantly.

“Well,” prompted her mom, “is it a birthday party, a going-away party, a holiday party, or...”

“Oh, okay. It’s a holiday party, a Christmas party!”

“And **what is the purpose of this Christmas party?**”

“To cheer people up?” asked Isabella uncertainly.

“To make it seem more like Christmas is really coming,” offered Vanessa tentatively.

“To somehow let Mr. Reynolds know we are thinking about him,” added Isabella, looking at Vanessa. Vanessa nodded in agreement.

“So,” Mrs. Galvan summarized, “we are talking about having some of our friends come together to try to capture the spirit of Christmas, and to share that spirit with Mr. Reynolds? Is that right?”

Both girls agreed. “Yes. That’s exactly right!”

Vanessa’s mom looked enthusiastic. “I can already think of some cute ideas for **invitations**. Let’s set the **date, time and place**, shall we?”

After consulting their calendars and some back and forth, both moms agreed that Saturday, December 18th would work.

“Maybe we should have a sleep over,” suggested Vanessa.

“No!” said both their moms at the same time.

Isabella and Vanessa laughed.

“Isabella’s aunt Marisol and her husband will be here visiting and will be staying with us,” explained Mrs. Galvan. “I don’t think I can manage a party at the same time. Can we have it here? And could we make it from – say – 2 p.m. until 5 p.m.? Then everyone is home for dinner and family time.”

“That sounds perfect,” agreed Vanessa’s mom.

“That would be great,” sighed Isabella’s mom. “But then let me do the **food**. In a pinch, I can get the restaurant to make most of it.” Isabella’s dad owned a Mexican restaurant that was always on The Best in City list. Isabella and Vanessa gave each other a thumbs up sign.

“Next, **guests**,” said Mrs. Galvan, checking the list in front of her. “Who are you inviting?”

“Well,” Isabella hesitated. “We were thinking the choir, but we know that’s a lot,” she added hurriedly. “So maybe just the girls in the choir?”

“Hmmm, no,” said Mom. “That’s probably thirty girls, including you two,” she explained. “We simply can’t do that large a party in such a small space, and there is no time to try to find a bigger venue. I think a total of 10 people would work well, so that’s 8 of your friends, plus you two.”

“That sounds splendid,” agreed Isabella’s mom. “Isabella and Vanessa, your job is to decide on who you want to invite and make certain you have their addresses and phone numbers for their moms. Can you do that in the next two days?”

Vanessa glanced over at Isabella, then looked at her mom. “But, Mom,” she said, “Ten isn’t very many. How will that change anything?”

Mom smiled and said, “It’s the ripple effect.”

“What is the ripple effect?” asked Isabella.

Isabella’s mom answered. “Right now your school is like a big lake of negative thoughts and emotions. This party is like a small pebble of hope and goodwill. We are going to throw it into the middle of all that misery. And we are trusting that our little pebble will generate lots of ripples of positive energy and happiness that spread over the entire lake.”

“Do you understand?” asked Mom, smiling gently. “And if we do this right, the spirit of Christmas will touch many more than just 10 people. You’ll see. It’s a lot like magic. Keep your eyes open and you will see it happening, I promise.”

Vanessa’s mom paused and looked over the list on her laptop. “Okay, I think we’re finished. We should meet again right here in two days on Thursday after school. Does that work?”

Everyone agreed.

“Let’s summarize quickly,” she continued. “Looking at our list, items 1, 2 and 3 are done, done and done. Item 4 – **Guests** – Vanessa and Isabella are responsible for choosing the guests, then giving us the names of each guest, as well as a parent’s phone number and a full address for each one, right?” She looked across the table at the two girls.

Vanessa and Bella looked at each other and nodded in agreement.

“Moving on,” continued Mrs. Gordon, “I’ll be responsible for the **invitations**. I’ll do a couple of designs that we can choose from. Cecilia, you’ll do the **menu**, right? Oh, and item 6 - **decorations** – the house will be decorated for Christmas, so that’s basically done also.”

Mrs. Galvan looked at her watch. “23 minutes. Four items completed. Three items in process. Three to go. Great job, everyone!” She smiled fondly at her daughter and Vanessa. “You two girls,” she said, “are going to be so good at this!”

III.

The next day, school seemed different. A lot of people were smiling, and it was in math class just before lunch period that Vanessa realized that they were smiling back at her, that she had made it happen.

She thought about what her dad always said whenever she or Doug were unhappy. "Smile," he would tell them. "Smile, and the world smiles with you." Vanessa never thought much about it. Honestly, sometimes it was a bit annoying, especially if she wanted to be in a bad mood! But she considered it now and realized that Dad might be right. It could almost be like a super-power!

Vanessa and Isabella breezed through the day, busy with their secret mission! They decided on the guest list before classes started that morning, and they gathered all the contact information they needed before the end of the day. They didn't tell anybody at school about the party. That way, it would be a nice surprise for those who received an invitation, and they wouldn't take the chance of hurting someone's feelings by telling them they weren't invited. So when Amanda asked her why she wanted her mom's phone number, Vanessa just shrugged and said that her mom had asked her to get it. Amanda said something about moms going crazy during the holidays and they both laughed. Which was better than thinking about Mr. Reynolds and crying. Vanessa pictured a little stone splashing in a lake. Mom and Mrs. Galvan were right. There were little ripples already.

Later that afternoon Vanessa was in her room at her desk making a neat list of guests for the next Party Planning meeting. Suddenly she heard her brother, Doug, yell, "Smudge, stop it! No! No! Nessie, come get your cat!"

Vanessa jumped up and ran to her brother's room. Doug and Javier had been playing a video game. Smudge was hiding under Doug's desk. A large poster was lying flat on the floor. Dylan had run into the room and was standing in front of Doug's desk, shaking a chubby finger at Smudge and saying, "Bad cat!"

"What is going on?" demanded Vanessa. "What happened?" She picked up Dylan and carried him to the doorway. "Stop it, Dylan. Smudge is just a little kitten. Don't scare her!" Vanessa set Dylan down outside the doorway. Then she turned to Doug.

"Your cat knocked over my science project," he said, indicating the poster on the floor.

Vanessa bent over and picked it up. It was one of those three-section poster boards and had been the focus of Doug's first-place science project last year. "I'm sure it was just an accident. Where was it?" she asked.

"Against the wall over there."

Vanessa propped the board against the wall where Doug was pointing. "Sorry," she said. She turned and took a step towards Doug's desk. Suddenly Smudge leaped out and rushed toward the poster, scooted in behind it and knocked it over again. One of the side panels clipped the edge of the desk and flipped open as it hit the floor with a dull whop sound. This was followed by a thump as Javier's

phone and gimbal fell. Smudge jumped on top of the flat posterboard, crouching like a panther waiting to pounce. Then she abruptly pushed off and raced madly out the door, past Dylan and down the hall into Vanessa's bedroom.

Dylan screeched, ran back into the room and jumped onto Doug's bed beside Javier. Doug and Javier were shouting. Vanessa quickly picked up the gimbal. The phone looked fine. She put it back on the desk. She turned and picked up the poster board, folding the side section onto the middle piece. She placed it against the wall again. And suddenly she figured it out!

The boys were still loud, but now they were laughing and mimicking Smudge's moves. Vanessa ignored the noise. She looked at the poster board, opened each side panel, then closed them. She turned and looked at the phone clamped into the gimbal.

"Javi," she said, loud enough to get his attention. "Javi, I need to talk to Bella now. Can you call your mom and see if she can come over. Please."

Javier snapped his cell phone out of the gimbal and obligingly made the call. After talking for a moment he held his phone out to Vanessa. "She can't come over and I have to go home for dinner. But here, you can talk to her."

Vanessa took the phone and walked into the hallway. "Bella," she said gleefully, "Smudge figured it out. We can use a poster board with three sections and make a giant card. And we can get Doug and Javi to take pictures for us. I have lots of ideas. It will be the best!"

"I have news, too," said Isabella, excitement in her voice. "I asked Papa if we could use the small karaoke machine from the restaurant. And he said 'yes.' He just bought a new one – a really big one – but we can use the old one."

"The one with the lights on it and the awesome speakers?"

"Yes. Plus he said it has a whole library of Christmas songs!"

"Oh, Bella. This is amazing! We can figure this out tomorrow at school. I'll go talk to Doug and Javi before Javi leaves. And you talk to him when he gets home. What if he could video us singing karaoke and then put it on his UVue channel? Then Mr. Reynolds could watch it"

"Oh, that would be perfect. Go ask him. I'll see you tomorrow morning!"

Vanessa went back to Doug's room. Javier had his jacket on and was gathering his belongings into his backpack. She handed him his phone. "Thanks," she said. Then she announced, "Bella and I are having a party in a couple of weeks."

The two boys paused and looked at her. "We are aware," said her brother. "So what? We're going to go hang out at the movies that whole afternoon."

“Well, no, that’s not exactly what we were thinking,” said Vanessa, trying to look like a small, sensitive little sister who could not possibly continue to exist without her big brother’s help. “We need to talk.”

A few minutes later Mrs. Galvan called to find out where Javier was. As he and Doug headed towards the back door, Vanessa hugged herself and turned and danced toward her bedroom. Their brothers were going to help! It was going to be awesome!

Smudge was laying on her bed. Vanessa draped herself over the little cat and gently hugged her. Smudge hated to be picked up, but she tolerated Vanessa’s love attacks. Vanessa nuzzled the top of Smudge’s head with her nose. “You are the smartest cat in the whole world, and you have the best party ideas! I am so glad you are my little panther! We are going to have the most wonderful party ever! And I think you found a way for us to share it all with Mr. Reynolds and his family!” Then Vanessa laid down next to Smudge, and happily told her about school and friends and party ideas until it was time for dinner.

IV.

The second meeting of the Party Planning Committee was called to order after school on Thursday afternoon. Smudge attended again, sitting in Dad’s chair and holding a small Santa’s hat in her front paws. “Where did Smudge get the Santa hat?” Vanessa asked her mom.

Mom laughed. “I think she found it in the big box while I was finishing decorating in the living room. I tried to put it on her, but you can imagine how that went! So I tossed it back into the box, and the next thing I knew she had fished it out again and was carrying it around with her. So I let her have it. She seems to like it a lot.”

Everyone laughed. Smudge looked at them all with her big green eyes, as if waiting patiently for the meeting to begin.

The two girls snacked on crisp apple slices and thin slices of creamy white cheese while their moms looked over the guest list. “Amanda, Terry, Kambree, Catherine, Alexa, Tiffany, Sue and Crystal,” read Bella’s mom. “Okay. What happened to Riley and Lily?” she asked.

“They’re still dressing in all black,” replied Bella, “and they all got in trouble yesterday for drawing fake tattoos on their neck and their arms. It was kind of gross.”

“Plus they’re hanging out with Logan Miller and his friends. They’ve been acting kind of mean. They just make me nervous,” added Vanessa.

“You know what,” said Vanessa’s mom, “You need to follow your instincts. And I think we know most of the girls on this list. But who is Catherine?”

“She’s new,” said Vanessa. “She transferred in last month. She’s signed up for choir, but we haven’t had a practice with her yet.”

“She’s very pretty,” added Isabella, “but she doesn’t really talk to anyone. She is either shy or really stuck up. We decided to invite her and find out.”

“Oh, a mystery guest!” Mrs. Galvan smiled. “Spicy!”

Moving on, Nessie’s mom brought out two different sample invitations. Choosing was hard because they were both cute, but they finally agreed on which one they would use. Mom assured the girls that she would send them out the very next day.

Food was next on the list. “Pizza is easy,” said Bella’s mom, but everyone always does pizza. What if we serve chicken salad wraps and miniature hamburger sliders? We’ll add a tray of vegetables and dip. Then we’ll put out big bowls of potato chips and corn chips, more dip, and lots of Christmas cookies and brownies. It’s a bit more grown-up than pizza, and everyone should be able to find something they like.”

Vanessa and Isabella agreed that sounded perfect!

“Now,” said Mrs. Galvan, pausing to make sure everyone was paying attention, “Now we want to decide what your guests will do once they are here. An **activity** would be something your guests can do, like signing a card for Mr. Reynolds. Maybe we can go to the card shop and look for something nice for him. And the **entertainment** part might be watching a Christmas movie on TV. What do you girls think?”

Vanessa and Isabella looked at each other and smiled. “We have these two items under control,” said Isabella to their moms.

“Yes,” said Vanessa, nodding her head decisively. “Activities and Entertainment – done and done!”

Mrs. Galvan and Mrs. Gordon looked surprised. “Do tell!” said Vanessa’s mom.

Vanessa explained. “We are going to decorate a tri-fold poster board like the ones you use for science fair projects. We’ll put paper frames on it, frames that you can slip actual pictures into. And we need a bunch of colored markers and some fun stickers. Doug and Javi are going to take pictures of each girl, then print them so we can put each one in a frame. They will also take one big group picture and some pictures of smaller groups singing. We can all decorate it and write notes like “Get Well” and “Merry Christmas” for Mr. Reynolds. It will be amazing!”

“And,” chimed in Isabella, “A movie might be boring. We want to sing. Papa told me we can use the karaoke machine. He said he will come over and help hook it up. He even said there is a whole Christmas library of songs for it. And Javi and Doug are going to take videos and put them together and do a private group post on Javi’s UVue channel! He will give everyone a code. Then they can watch it during the holidays with their parents and their friends.”

Isabella took a breath. The two girls sat looking across the table at their moms. The two moms looked at the girls, then at each other. Mrs. Gordon shook her head. “I am astonished,” she said to

Isabella's mom. "I am simply astonished. And in the very best way!" She looked at the two girls. "Have your brothers actually agreed to this?" she asked.

"For sure! Yes," both girls answered. "And we are having a meeting with them Saturday afternoon to review everything. We are going to work on the frames for the poster board on Saturday morning, so we can show it to them in the afternoon and they will understand exactly what needs to happen."

"You two young ladies are just full of surprises," exclaimed Isabella's mom. "And what do you have planned for party favors?"

"Maybe reindeer headbands or Santa hats," replied Isabella.

"Or friendship bracelets in Christmas colors," offered Vanessa. "We don't really have anything for certain picked out."

"That's okay," said Vanessa's mom. "Because we do."

She stood up and went over to the kitchen counter. Isabella's mom joined her there, bringing their coffee cups for a refill. They whispered together as they worked, their backs to the two girls. Then Mrs. Galvan brought their coffee cups back and sat down. A moment later, Vanessa's mom brought two mugs of hot chocolate with peppermint sticks and placed one in front of each of their daughters.

"What do you think?" she asked.

The mugs weren't just large round cups with a flat bottom. The cups were hexagonal in shape and stood on short pedestals. "It's like a cup in a princess story," said Vanessa softly. "I love how it has its own little stand. It makes it look so special."

"Look at the Christmas tree!" exclaimed Isabella, examining the picture on one side of the cup.

Vanessa took a sip of hot chocolate and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "I love hot chocolate," she sighed. "And I think it tastes better because the mug is so pretty"

"Possibly," said mom, handing Vanessa a napkin. "That is why we surround ourselves with lovely things. They set the mood and can make us feel good. And special ornaments or decorations at the holidays keep us connected over the years to family and friends."

"But what does this have to do with party favors," asked Isabella with a puzzled look on her face.

"We thought you could give each of your guests one of these mugs along with a couple of packets of hot chocolate mix," explained Mrs. Galvan. "It is something they could use every year during the holidays, a beautiful Christmas mug that would hold not just hot chocolate but also warm memories."

"But we need eight of them. Aren't they expensive?"

“Not if you find ten of them in a thrift shop at the mall,” exclaimed Mom triumphantly. “What do you think?”

“I think they might be perfect,” said Vanessa, and Isabella agreed.

“Okay.” Vanessa looked at the list in her notebook, then looked at Isabella. “I think we have everything on our list figured out. Now we just have to get things done.”

“I think you are right,” said Isabella. “Meeting adjourned!”

And just like that Vanessa and Isabella went from planning to being very busy putting plans into action. The next few days flew by. They made picture frames from heavy decorative paper and arranged them on the poster board. They dressed up in their party outfits with their velveteen leggings and pretty Christmas sweaters. Doug took their pictures and Dad helped print them. Then they all worked to make sure the pictures slipped easily into the frames glued to the posterboard. Vanessa and Isabella wrote little messages to Mr. Reynolds under their pictures and decorated them with Christmas stickers. That way their guests would know exactly what to do. They made certain there were several sets of black, red, green and gold markers, and plenty of stickers available.

The Christmas mugs were packed in glittery white shred in frosted boxes. Each mug held two envelopes of hot cocoa mix, a peppermint stick and a little bundle of cinnamon sticks. The girls closed each box using a Christmas sticker and wrote a name on each box using a gold marker. They stacked them on a small table that was placed next to the big Christmas tree. The party favors looked enchanting and they smelled nice, too.

Everything was ready. Vanessa was eager, but she was also a bit scared. She had never had to be in charge of a party before. She wanted everything to be perfect, but there were so many things to think about. She was sure she would never get to sleep that evening, but she didn’t realize how tired she was. Once Smudge cuddled up and started purring, she fell fast asleep.

V.

Vanessa opened her eyes and immediately sat up in her bed. It was Saturday. It was party day! She felt excited and anxious all at once. What if nobody comes? What if everyone comes and they don’t like it? What if? What if?

She and Isabella were the hostesses. Their moms had explained what that meant. It was their job to make sure everyone enjoyed the party. They needed to remember to introduce each of their friends to Isabella’s aunt and uncle. They had to make certain everyone got a turn with the karaoke equipment. They needed to be positive that Doug took a picture of each girl for the card. They must help Javier with whatever he needed to make the videos. And be sure that everyone got food. And that everyone signed the card for Mr. Reynolds. And – what else? It was a lot, for sure!

Vanessa flopped back onto her pillow. Smudge walked over and patted her face. Vanessa turned and ran her hand gently from Smudge's head down to the base of her tail. Smudge arched her back and moved closer. Vanessa laughed. "Okay, Smudge, one more time, but then we have to get up. We've got to make a party happen! I'm kind of scared," she confided to the small cat, "But Bella and I are eleven years old. I know we can do this." She started to add, "How hard could it be," but stopped herself, feeling that she didn't want to do or say anything that might jinx their efforts.

Mom was busy cutting potatoes when Vanessa wandered into the kitchen.

"There you are," said Mom. "Set the table, Vanessa. We're going to have an early lunch so we can get everything ready on time."

"I'll go get dressed first," offered Vanessa.

"No, no, you're fine. Let's not put on our party outfits until we've eaten and cleaned up. That way we won't spill on them."

So Vanessa set the table. Then she stepped softly into the dining room. The big table looked beautiful with the white tablecloth and a centerpiece with reindeer and pine cones, poinsettias and candles. An air of hushed expectation filled every corner.

In the living room, the Christmas tree lights reflected like misty twinkling galaxies off the frosted boxes holding the party favors. A long table covered by a red cloth stood against the wall near the front door. At one end was a large tray filled with a colorful forest of conical trees, each with a small red star on top. The big posterboard card for Mr. Reynolds stood near the center of the table. Vanessa had checked everything last night – the colored markers, the Christmas stickers. She checked again. They were still in place. The area for the karaoke machine was clear and Mom had put a small tree on either side. Everything was ready.

Time seemed to have slowed. Vanessa sat on the sofa, feeling the same mix of emotions that she had felt when she first woke up. Just then Mom called everyone to come eat. Vanessa and Doug spent a good part of the meal explaining what 'brunch' means to Dylan, much to the amusement of their parents.

Vanessa was in her room getting dressed when Isabella arrived with her mom and her brother. She joined Vanessa in her bedroom and they were busy fixing their hair and putting on their matching jingle bells earrings when they heard Mr. Galvan in the living room. That meant that the karaoke machine was here. "It's almost time," Bella said breathlessly to Nessie.

"I know," replied Nessie. "I'm so nervous."

Isabella's Aunt Maribel came in and helped them with makeup - a touch of blush, a few sweeps of mascara, and tinted lip balm. They did a final mirror check, whirling in front of the closet's mirrored doors. Vanessa liked the way the make-up made her look older. But she was still nervous.

The two girls followed Aunt Maribel down the hall and into the kitchen for a final Mom Check. “Don’t you two look so pretty!” declared Mom, turning Vanessa around and plucking a strand of hair from her sweater.

“Ay, mi hija,” sighed Mrs. Galvan, as she arranged Isabella’s curls on her forehead. “You are both growing up so fast. You both look lovely!”

“Did you thank Aunt Maribel for turning you into runway stars?” asked Mom.

“Thank you, Aunt Maribel,” both girls said together, giggling.

“And speaking of stars,” said Mrs. Galvan, “I suggest you go in the living room and check out your brothers.”

Doug and Javier were helping Mr. Galvan test the karaoke equipment. Looking like models in some designer video, the boys were wearing matching gray slacks, black t-shirts and gray blazers, and they were both sporting fedoras. They looked really grown up and very handsome.

“Wow,” exclaimed Vanessa. “Just Wow!”

“You look like movie producers for sure,” said Isabella.

Their brothers looked up and grinned. “You like?” asked Doug.

“Totally cool,” answered Vanessa. “And, seriously, thank you for doing this for us!”

“No problem,” said Javi, getting a hug from Isabella. “This will be the first real video we will have to edit that has sound and everything!”

“Do you think it will turn out okay?” Now Vanessa was nervous.

“Don’t worry,” laughed Doug. “If it doesn’t, we still have the recording from the karaoke machine. Oh, and by the way,” he continued with a big smile, “you two look really, really nice.”

Vanessa wondered if she should be concerned. What if they didn’t get any video for Mr. Reynolds? She didn’t have time to worry about it, though. The van from the restaurant pulled up. Mrs. Galvan enlisted Vanessa and Isabella to hold the door and help as the food was delivered. When the van pulled away, Mom and Mrs. Galvan and Aunt Maribel began arranging platters and bowls on the table. Vanessa and Isabella helped by putting small water bottles in the big copper pot filled with ice. Hot cider was in pitchers on the table.

Mr. Galvan finished the sound check with Doug and Javier. Suddenly the disco lights came on, dancing around the living room walls and ceilings, filling spaces that the Christmas tree lights couldn’t reach.

The adults migrated into the kitchen. Javier and Doug were conferring in the living room, checking the camera settings on their phones. Isabella and Vanessa were standing near the dining room table.

Vanessa heard the chimes from the grandfather clock in the family room. The doorbell rang. Dad peeked out of the kitchen and looked at Vanessa. He winked. She winked back. Game on!

Isabella and Vanessa ran to open the door. It was Kambree and Alexa. Isabella took them over to meet all the parents and her aunt and uncle. The doorbell sounded again. Vanessa opened the door to Crystal. She gave her a hug, then guided her over to the table with the card for Mr. Reynolds, explaining what they were doing. She had just asked Doug to take Crystal's picture for the card when doorbell rang again.

Maybe it was because things started happening so fast that she did not have time to be nervous. Maybe it was just because she and Isabella were so close. When she thought about that afternoon later on, Vanessa wasn't sure. But she and Isabella immediately found a rhythm working together, and they fell quite effortlessly into their role of hostess. Every guest was warmly welcomed and was introduced to the adults. Everyone evidently got food, because by the end of the party it had all disappeared.

All of the girls voted Javier and Doug as their favorite paparazzi. And Isabella and Vanessa decided they would have to vote them Best Brothers of the Year. They managed all of the pictures and videos so smoothly that Vanessa and Isabella didn't even have to think about them. Dad helped by printing pictures almost as soon as Doug took them, and the huge posterboard quickly turned into a masterpiece.

Since all of the girls they had invited were in the school choir, nobody was shy about singing. Vanessa had reminded herself to make certain Catherine got a turn at the microphone, but she didn't have to worry. She was introducing Amanda to Aunt Maribel when suddenly a beautifully controlled, silky contralto voice filled the entire house. "O Holy Night, the stars are brightly shining..."

Everyone gathered around to watch. Catherine was holding the microphone and the attention of the room. Her intonation was perfect. She smiled and, holding the microphone in one hand, held out her other arm in a beckoning motion. Tiffany and Kambree joined her. Both of them were really good at improvising harmonies. After the second verse, Alexa and Amanda joined in. It was as if they had been practicing together for weeks. Everyone applauded warmly at the end. Vanessa had been watching Catherine and hoping that Javier was able to capture the entire performance. This will make Mr. Reynolds feel better fast, she thought to herself. She leaned over to Bella and whispered, "We're going to win the regional choir championship next year for sure!"

Performance after performance happened after that. Everyone joined in. The karaoke was a huge hit. And it turned out that Catherine wasn't stuck up at all! She was just very shy and had absolutely hated having to move and change schools. But by the end of the afternoon, Catherine had nine new friends. She wasn't shy once she got to know you, and she had a wickedly funny sense of humor.

How did three hours pass so fast, wondered Vanessa, as parents arrived to pick up their daughters. Isabella and Vanessa thanked each guest for coming and gave them each a party favor. And now

each box held a double treat. Javier and Doug had included a card with a link to Javier's UVue channel, a viewing code and a note: "This connection goes live at 12 noon on December 19th. Be there!"

Vanessa and Isabella stood at the front door waving goodbye as their last guest left with her parents. Then they stepped inside and shut the door. "We did it. We really did it! The two girls did an impromptu dance move, twirled and clapped their hands together, a double 'up high.'"

Their parents agreed. The party had been a huge success. They had been wonderful hostesses. "Do you remember what you said the purpose of this party was?" Mom asked them. "You told us that you wanted to get some of your friends together to capture the Christmas spirit and to share that spirit with Mr. Reynolds."

Bella's mom was nodding in agreement. "I remember," she said. "And you clearly achieved your goals. Just look at this card for Mr. Reynolds."

Everyone gathered around the long table. The photographs looked almost professional. There was one of each of the girls, a group shot of all ten of them, and several other pictures of smaller group. There were little poems and sweet messages and cute little drawings. "Mr. Reynolds and his entire family will enjoy this," said Dad.

"This is a treasure," commented Aunt Maribel. "It will certainly lift Mr. Reynolds' spirits. And Doug might be young, but he is a talented photographer."

Vanessa looked around. "Where is Doug?" she asked.

"He and Javier are over at our house editing the video they shot," said Mr. Galvan. "From what I understand," he said, looking at Mom and Dad, "he might not be home early. In fact, is it okay with you if he spends the night? Apparently editing is not as simple as it sounds. I think those two might have bitten off more than they can chew."

"That's fine," said Mom. "But I really hope they are able to do the edits like they want. They worked so hard and I want them to be successful also."

It wasn't until the next day that Vanessa realized exactly what they had accomplished. Mr. Reynolds had been discharged from the hospital a few days earlier, so Dad and Mr. Galvan delivered the card to him at his home just before lunch. When they returned, everyone was gathered in the Gordon's family room eager for an update.

They all had questions. "How is Mr. Reynolds?" "Did he like the card?" "Did you give him the code for the video?"

Mr. Galvan and Dad were smiling. They said that Mr. Reynolds had a ways to go before he would be able to get around well, but he was making great progress. And the card? Mr. Reynolds was speechless when they presented it to him. In fact, stressed Isabella's dad, his entire family was overwhelmed. Then Mr. Reynolds's mom started crying. His wife opened the tri-fold board and

stood it up beside their Christmas tree so they could all enjoy it. Mr. Reynolds requested that Isabella and Vanessa express his thanks to all of his students that participated. He said that it was probably one of the best gifts he had ever received. Isabella and Vanessa beamed with pride.

Then, recounted Mr. Galvan, they gave Mrs. Reynolds the information for UVue, but she wasn't sure how to use it, so Dad set it up for her on their TV. It wasn't noon yet, but he showed her how to put in the code. And there was the video!. Javier and Doug had done it! And Javier must have just posted it! Mr. Galvan told them how Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds, their children and his parents were watching the video with obvious enjoyment when he and Dad left.

Just then Javi and Doug walked in, looking tired but very happy. "We did it!" announced Javier proudly. "We had a lot of trouble with the audio and syncing everything, but we did it!"

"And we finally figured out how to do the cool transitions, too," added Doug. "Is there any food?" he continued, without taking a breath. "We're starving!"

Mom and Mrs. Galvan laughed. "There are sandwiches and chips on the kitchen table. Get a tray and come in here. We are getting ready to view your masterpiece," said Mom. Dad had it ready to go when the two boys came back with their food. Javier proudly pointed out that the video had been viewed 57 times already. People were sharing the code with other family members and with friends!

Vanessa snuggled in between her mom and her dad on the big sofa with her little brother, Dylan, in her lap. As the video started, she could see Smudge curled up in the far corner under the Christmas tree with the little Santa hat under her front paws. Javier's video was well done and truly captured the spirit of the party. Vanessa watched as Catherine took the mike, cued up the karaoke player and began to sing, "O Holy Night...."

Vanessa closed her eyes. They had done it. It had been scary and challenging, but they had worked very hard and they had made a difference. She envisioned a small golden pebble plop into the middle of a big ominous black lake, and ripples - hundreds of ripples - spreading out from the center where the pebble had dropped. Small at first, they grew larger and more powerful as they spread, and the water became crystal clear and welcoming.

Dylan wiggled in her lap. He turned and looked up at her. "Nessie, he said, "Is Christmas magic?"

"Oh, yes it is, Dylan." Vanessa gave her little brother a hug. "It most surely is!"



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