

“Did you know that on Christmas Day in 1914, all the soldiers in World War I called a truce and played a game of soccer?”

Finley turned to her sister, slightly surprised that she paid any attention to what went on during social studies. “Rowan, Mr. Walton said that there’s not conclusive evidence that a soccer game even took place,” Finley said. “But it’s kind of neat, even if it’s just a hoax.”

“I don’t think it’s a hoax,” Rowan announced. “But who do you think won?”

“England,” Finley replied. “Oh, definitely England. That is, if the match actually did happen.”

“It did,” Rowan said assuredly. “I know it did.”

Finn was entertained by the ten-year-old’s confidence, although she doubted Rowan’s historical accuracy. By the time Finn was playing soccer that evening, she’d forgotten about the match.

However, Rowan hadn’t forgotten. She held onto the idea until late at night, after everyone else in the house had fallen asleep. Rowan couldn’t get the idea out of her head: the two people who were enemies became friends. The two people who were fighting stopped, instead deciding to work together.

Her alarm clock said 11:42, but she couldn’t wait anymore. The question was pressing on her, more than she could stand. Rowan tiptoed out of bed and snuck into Finn’s room.

“Finn!” she whispered. “Finn!”

Finn rolled over, not thrilled to hear her little sister’s voice at this hour of night. “What?” she muttered.

“Does Dad like to play soccer?” Rowan asked, climbing into Finn’s bed.

“Yeah,” Finley replied. “Yeah, he’s the one who got me into it. Are you seriously waking up this late to ask me if Dad likes to play soccer?”

“I want to play soccer on Christmas,” Rowan said. “And then Dad and Mom will be playing together like they were before they got divorced.”

“They’re not gonna get back together, Row. They got divorced because they were fighting so much and needed to be apart. I don’t think they’re going to be spending time together.”

“Oh.” Rowan tried to stop the tears that were forming in her eyes. Finn realized the enormity of what she’d said and paused, attempting to find a bright side to the situation.

“I know it’s different. But it can still be good,” Finn said. “We get two parties, two sets of gifts, two different Christmas meals and everything else.”

“I don’t want two,” Rowan said. “I want one. I want our normal party where Mom and Dad and me and you and Oliver are here and together and not fighting. I want our normal presents and normal meals and everything else that’s normal.”

“Rowan, Mom and Dad aren’t gonna be able to do that this year. They don’t get along well enough to do stuff together. Maybe when they get over being so angry at each other we could do stuff like that, but not this year.”

“But all of us already had different birthday parties,” Rowan . “I just want one Christmas party.”

“I’m sorry, Row. It’s just not gonna happen this year,” Finn replied.

“Yes, it does,” Rowan protested, scooching off of Finn’s bed and walking through the door. Finn sighed as she picked up her phone and texted her dad. She knew what he’d say, but she’d try.

Sure enough, he said exactly what Finley thought he would say when she called him that morning.

“Finn, your mom and I can’t get along well enough to do a Christmas party this year. I know this sucks, and it could change in the future, but this is life right now.”

She’d hung up angry, heading to her older brother’s room to complain. “Do you want to deal with our father?” she asked. “Rowan came into my room just last night, suddenly upset about Christmas not being with both parents. So I call him, wondering if he could maybe put

aside whatever complex he has against Mom for, like, an hour, and he tells me no, and that they just can't do a Christmas party this year."

"I mean, I get that they wouldn't plan it together in the beginning, but seriously? It wouldn't kill them to spend an hour together to give Rowan a decent Christmas."

"Thank you!" Finley said. "Any chance you want to explain that to him? Maybe saying it enough times will get it through his head."

"If you want to handle Mom, then I'll try Dad again," Oliver replied. Finley agreed, hoping that her mom would be a little more relaxed about the entire thing.

She wasn't.

"I can't do it, Finn," she said. "I'm sorry. I know this is rough on her. On all of you."

"It's tougher on her," Finn corrected. "Even if you don't do a full party together, could you even play a game together? Open gifts together? Do something the way our family used to do?"

"I'd think about it," she said. "I'd have to know what your dad says."

Finn took that as a success.

As Christmas got closer and closer, however, the opportunity to have a full family Christmas was shrinking. Finn knew that the lines of communication were completely shut between her parents, and there wasn't much she could do to open those lines.

It was Christmas Eve when Finn finally admitted to herself that a big family celebration wasn't going to happen. She hoped that Rowan would adjust to the idea, but she also knew her sister. Rowan wasn't one to adjust. She would keep pressing until she got her way.

Finley woke up to a familiar sound on Christmas Eve night. Little feet padded across her bedroom floor and climbed into her bed. "What's going on?" Finley asked, as Rowan took over half of the bed.

"I want a Christmas together," Rowan whispered. "With you and Mom and Dad and Oliver and me."

"I know," Finn replied. "And I'm sorry, Rowan, but it's not gonna happen this year. Dad said no."

"Why does he get to decide?" Rowan asked. "Why is Dad in charge? All of us want a family Christmas."

"I don't know," Finley replied, pondering the question.

Why did their Dad decide for the rest of them? Why did his anger mean that his kids couldn't celebrate Christmas like they wanted to?

The question pressed on her as they opened gifts Christmas morning. There was no one in the corner recliner, no one throwing balls of wrapping paper at the kids. It wasn't really a celebration-- at least, not the kind any of them wanted.

After they opened their gifts, the kids headed off to pack in preparation for a second Christmas at their Dad's. Two sets of Christmas parties sounded like fun, but it wasn't turning out to be as great as any of the kids expected.

Finn and Rowan were waiting in the living room when their Dad's truck pulled up. Finley was on her way outside when she realized that they were missing someone.

"Oll!" she called. "Oliver James!"

He appeared at the back window, nearly making her jump out of her seat. "Outside," he whispered. "Leave your stuff inside. Wear sneakers. Go."

"Why?" Finn asked.

"Do you want this or not? Just go!"

Finley listened, somewhat begrudgingly. "Mudroom," she directed Rowan. "Sneakers on."

"Why?"

Finley shrugged. "Just do it," she commanded, realizing how much trust she was placing in her brother. She ushered them out the back door and behind the house while she peeked around the corner to see what Oliver was doing.

“Hey! You guys coming?” their dad called.

Oliver ignored him, stepping inside the garage. “Not yet!” he replied. Finn headed into the garage after him.

“What are you doing?” she asked, as he dug around the shelves.

“Christmas,” Oliver replied. “Remember?”

“I thought Dad said no.”

“I don’t care,” Oliver replied. “His daughter wants to spend half an hour with both of her parents. Dad is going to happily oblige.”

Their dad climbed out of his truck. “Hey, what’s taking you--”

“You can shut the truck down,” Oliver replied. “We’re gonna play soccer. Boys versus girls.”

“Oliver, I told you that I’m not--”

“And I told you that you can suck it up,” Oliver said. “And don’t get on me for disrespect because what you’ve been doing to us kids is pretty disrespectful. We’re calling the shots for once, and Rowan and Finn and I want to play soccer. You and Mom can do that for us.”

Oliver watched his Dad’s face change from angry to thoughtful. He clearly didn’t want to do it, but he hadn’t been given much of a choice. It was either a soccer game or wreaking havoc on the already-strained relationships.

“Mom!” Finn called, figuring out what Oliver was doing. “Hey, we’re gonna play soccer! Come on, girls versus guys!”

“Finley, I’ve got stuff to do. I don’t have time to come out and--”

Finn stepped back inside. “Yes, you do. Rowan wants to play soccer, and for as much as she’s given up this year, we’re going to let her have this one thing.”

Finley saw Amanda’s mind change, slowly but surely. She slipped on her sneakers and headed outside, just as Oliver was dropping the ball in the center of their makeshift field. “Go!” Oliver called.

And they watched. Oliver and Finley watched the smiles on the Rowan's face grow bigger and bigger. They watched their parents get along for a few minutes as they played the game, holding their own Christmas truce.

It may not have been World War I, but it was their own war. The kids versus the parents.

And the kids won.

The hug that Finley got from Rowan at the end of the game made every conversation and every argument worth it. Every bit of anger worked its way toward making this truce happen.

After the boys barely outscored the girls, the kids headed over to their Dad's house. Once gifts were open, they all retreated into their rooms, and life ensued.

Until, late that night, Finn poked her head into Oliver's room. "Hey," she said. Oliver turned around, a little startled.

"Look, you usually suck, but today you didn't," Finley said, doing her best to keep a straight face. "So thank you."

"Well, you're usually a pain, but you did something nice for Rowan. And we usually like her, too. So thank you."

"I love you."

"I love you, too."