

The background of the cover is a serene winter scene. In the foreground, a snow-covered path leads towards a line of evergreen trees. The trees are heavily laden with snow, and some have small green lights or ornaments. The sky is a pale, hazy blue, filled with numerous small, bright white stars or snowflakes. A bright, glowing sun or moon is visible in the center of the sky, creating a soft, ethereal light. The overall mood is peaceful and magical, evoking a sense of hope and wonder.

THE TREE OF HOPE

A Mill River Christmas story

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
DARCIE CHAN

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by

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The Tree of Hope is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Cover image: Melinda Nagy

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"That's it, a little to the left, now back a bit. Perfect!"

Josie DiSanti stood in the living room with her family, grinning as her son-in-law and her younger daughter's boyfriend wrestled a large Christmas tree into position. It was a magnificent Frasier fir, easily eight feet tall even after the two men had trimmed its trunk for the stand.

"Your stand is stable. If you're sure this is where you want it, I'll secure it to the wall," her son-in-law, Sheldon Frye, said from one side of the tree. "We put the cable around the trunk before we brought it in." Sheldon's face was flushed, and he reached a gloved hand up to wipe a few beads of sweat from his forehead.

Josie nodded. "Hook 'er up, boys. We can still make minor adjustments with the tether in place."

Matt Campbell, the other tree handler, stepped around back, where a steel cable trailed out of the branches. He grabbed the end, pulled it tight through a screw-eye protruding from the wall about four feet up from the floor, and clipped the end of the cable back on itself. He chuckled as he leaned back to inspect his work.

"What?" Josie asked, feigning indignation. "Haven't you ever seen a support cable for a Christmas tree before? It's definitely the way to go, safety-wise."

"To be entirely honest, yours is the first one I've seen," Matt said, "and sure, it makes sense, to keep a big tree from falling over. It's just that...well..."

"Yes?" Josie asked, a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "What's so funny, then?" She noticed the desperate glance Matt shot at her younger daughter, Emily.

"Your home is impeccable, and as nice as you keep it in here--" He paused and looked hopefully at Emily again.

"I think he just means that with your perfect interior decorating, the screw-eye in your wall looks tacky and out of place," Emily said. She smiled at Matt, who was wincing as a red blush crept into his cheeks.

"Oh, it looks horrible," Josie agreed. "But, I use it every Christmas, and it has too much sentimental value for me to remove it."

Emily inched forward to slide her arm around Matt's waist and peer behind the tree. "I can't believe that same screw-eye has been there all these years," she said.

"What's really unbelievable is that your mother managed to install it there in the first place," a voice called from the sectional sofa. Ivy Collard, Josie's elderly aunt, was seated there, watching everything. "That was some night."

"Some night?" Josie's elder daughter, Rose, and her ten-year-old son, Alex, were coming down the stairs. Each carried a cardboard box labeled "ornaments." "I think these are the last of them," Rose said. She and Alex set their boxes down near several others piled on and around Josie's loveseat. "What night were you talking about?"

"Years ago, when you girls were little. It was coming up on your first Christmas in this house, and it was the night your mom brought home her first real Christmas tree," Ivy said. She let out a little cackle. "She was hell-bent on getting it up for you girls to decorate in the morning. Lordy, lordy, it was a night I'll never forget."

"Sounds like a good story," Matt said. Emily smiled up at him and gave a little nod.

"It *is* a good story," Sheldon said. "I wouldn't mind hearing it again."

"I've never heard it," Alex said. "Please, Grandma? Will you tell us?"

"Tell it, Josie," Ivy chimed in. "By some miracle, we're all here together this year, and it would be just the thing to boost our holiday spirit for the pitch-in this evening."

"All right, all right," Josie said. "Let me just get the lasagna out of the oven, so I don't burn up my contribution. Why don't you guys grab some drinks and get comfortable? I'll be right back."

When she returned from the kitchen, Sheldon, Rose, Alex, Emily, and Matt had joined Ivy on the sectional. Someone had moved the boxes that had been stacked on the loveseat, so she lowered herself onto its cushions and cleared her throat.

"It was December 1984, a few weeks before Christmas. Rose, you were five, and Emily, you were three. We'd been living in this house for almost a year. It was starting to feel like home, even without your father there. I hadn't started working yet, so money was tight, but I wanted to have a real Christmas tree for you that year, something fresh-smelling and beautiful, and not some old plastic thing.

"So, one evening, I asked Ivy to watch you while I went out to get a tree and then help me put it up once you were asleep. Of course, I'd never had a real Christmas tree myself. Your dad and I always put up a little fake one that didn't even look real, and growing up, I was lucky if my own mother remembered the holiday at all. So, you see, having zero experience with real trees, I really didn't know what I was getting myself into...."

Mid-December 1984

Well after nine o'clock on a Saturday night, Josie pulled into her driveway and hurried up her walkway. Rather than going inside her house, though, she gave a soft knock and opened the front door just enough to stick her head inside.

"Aunt Ivy? I'm back. Can you help me get the tree inside?"

"Sure thing, honey. I've just got to pull on my boots."

Josie went back to her car. She was standing beside it, gazing up at the enormous Christmas tree that was resting on the roof of her old station wagon. The trunk end loomed above the windshield, while the top of the tree extended past the back window.

"...heard on the weather that we're in for some snow tonight, but I--". Ivy had come up beside her, but her aunt never finished her sentence once she saw the tree.

"Isn't it gorgeous?" Josie gushed. "It's the biggest one they had left. They got it up there and tied it for me, but the guys said we should be able to undo it and roll it off with no problem." She glanced at Ivy, who was still staring at the tree with her mouth agape. "Aunt Ivy?"

"Kid, when you said you were going to get a tree, I didn't think...." Ivy sighed and shook her head. "What's done is done. Let's see if we can get that beast off your car and inside."

It took half an hour in the frigid night air and all of their combined strength to move the tree down to the ground and pull it inside. Warm from the exertion, they stripped off their coats and gloves as they caught their breaths. Only once it was resting on the living room floor did Josie realize *how* large it was.

"At least the hard part's done now that we've got it here in the house."

"You think so, do you?" Ivy's voice was playful.

"Of course. Now, we'll just slip on the base and stand it upright by the front window." Josie went into the spare room off the living room and came back smiling and carrying a Christmas tree stand. "Can you imagine what the girls will do when they see it tomorrow?"

"I hope we can get it up by tomorrow," Ivy muttered.

"Sounds like you need a good dose of holiday cheer," Josie said to her aunt as she went to the end of the trunk. The smile on her own face disappeared, though, when she realized that the trunk was so big around that it made the stand she held look like a rinky-dink miniature.

"Problem?" Ivy asked.

"Not really. We'll just need to trim the trunk a little to get it into the stand."

"I figured as much. Do you have a saw?"

"Um...no. I haven't bought any tools, yet. Do you?"

"Nope. Not a saw, at least. And at this hour, I don't know who we could call to borrow one."

Josie pursed her lips as she stood staring at the tree trunk. Without a word, she turned suddenly and went into the kitchen.

"Josie? What are you doing?"

"I don't have a saw," she answered as she began to look through a large cupboard, "but I have something else that might work."

"In the kitchen?"

"Yep. Here it is!" Josie emerged from the kitchen holding a large, serrated electric knife. "I picked this up at a tag sale last spring. It worked well on my Thanksgiving turkey, but maybe it was meant to be used on my Christmas tree, too."

"You've lost your marbles," Ivy said, but Josie was already plugging in the knife at the outlet nearest the trunk.

"Would you run up and close the door to the girls' room? I have no idea how loud this will be, and I may be at it awhile."

Ivy threw up her hands. "All right," she said. She was halfway up the stairs when Josie fired up the knife. What began as a soft whirring quickly became a loud, grinding racket. She pulled the door to Rose and Emily's room completely shut and hurried back downstairs.

Josie was kneeling beside the tree trunk, using the knife to slice off strips of bark and the layer of wood just beneath it. The knife groaned and whined as bits of bark flew everywhere. The scent of fresh-cut pine mixed with the acrid smell of a nearly-overheating motor.

"I don't think I can get all the way through the trunk, but the bark is pretty soft, so I'm going to try to whittle it down enough that it'll fit in the stand," Josie said. She straightened up for a moment to stretch her back.

Ivy chuckled. "I've never seen anyone so pig-headed about getting something done," she said. "Whoever heard of using an electric knife to trim a tree trunk? I wonder what Tony would say if he were here."

"He wouldn't be surprised at all. He understood my stubbornness. Actually, he was just as stubborn as me, but he was better than I was about giving in," Josie said.

"Just one of the ways he showed you how much he loved you," Ivy said quietly.

"Yes. One way out of many." Josie reached forward to pull at a loose piece of bark on the tree trunk. "You know, Aunt Ivy, I do feel in my heart that Tony knows what I'm trying to do right now. It's for our girls, after all. I do think he's watching over us, from somewhere." Blinking back tears, she smiled wistfully at the older woman before resuming her sawing.

Josie worked on the tree trunk for the better part of another hour. "I hope this is enough," she said as she finally put down the knife and stretched to place her hands at the small of her back. "The blade is totally shot. It actually did a pretty good job, though. Come see."

Ivy came from the sofa to peer over her shoulder. The end of the tree trunk was now tapered into what looked like a large, half-sharpened pencil.

"Well, I'll be dipped," Ivy said. She held out the stand. "Here, honey. I opened the support bolts at the base as far as they'd go. See if it'll fit now."

Josie took the stand and lined it up with the tree trunk. Slowly, she slid the metal ring of the stand over the end of the trunk. The three support bolts lightly grazed the newly-exposed wood, but she was able to get enough of the trunk in the stand for the bottom of the tree to fit into the water reservoir.

"Yes!" Josie hollered, before she remembered the girls upstairs and clasped a hand over her mouth.

Ivy nodded her approval. "Shouldn't take long now. Tighten those bolts, and let's stand it up."

With the stand securely on, they grasped whatever sturdy parts they could and raised the tree until it stood upright. Once vertical, the pine was even more imposing. It was easily six feet wide at the bottom and so dense that Josie could barely see Ivy through its branches. The thin stalk at the very top of the tree was bent over against the ceiling.

Josie sighed. "I can trim the top with a scissor, but let's get it where we want it first."

Together, they maneuvered the tree across the carpet to the front corner of the living room so it would be visible in the large front window of the house. Another problem quickly became obvious, though. As soon as they released their hold on the tree, it wobbled and began to tip over. Ignoring the pine needles that scratched her hands, Josie rushed to grab the trunk before the tree crashed to the floor.

"Lordy, lordy, it's like Larry Bird with his foot crammed into one of the girls' Barbie shoes." Ivy shook her head. "What a mess."

"We're not giving up now, not after we've come this far," Josie said. "We just need a way to stabilize it."

"Let me run next door and get whatever I have in my tool box," Ivy said. "I don't have much, but maybe we can figure out something."

"All right. I'll hold the tree while you go." Josie watched as Ivy quickly threw on her coat and left the house. It was such a blessing for her and the girls to have ended up in the house right next door to Ivy's. Their little house itself was a blessing, too, having been provided by a stranger who still remained anonymous. And, Josie was grateful to have an aunt who had been immediately loving and supportive, despite them having been virtual strangers when she and Rose and Emily had first arrived in Mill River.

Keeping a firm grip on the tree trunk, Josie closed her eyes. Her cozy house was silent and still. She could feel the stately presence of the tree beside her, as if it radiated strength and reassurance. She breathed in the warm, pine-scented air, felt it flow deep down into her lungs and soothe the heart that still ached for her late husband.

Something about the tree seemed to be telling her that everything would be okay, and truthfully, it was starting to be. As difficult as it had been to pick herself up and go on after Tony's death, she had. She was standing again. Yes, she was still unstable and wobbly, but she was in a place where she had the support she needed. Ivy and Father O'Brien and Ruth Fitzgerald and so many other dear people in Mill River had hold of her just as firmly as she now held the trunk of her oversized Christmas tree. And she truly felt that her dear Tony was still with her from wherever he was, helping her when she needed it. She was surviving, and she was increasingly hopeful that she would be able to support herself and the girls. She would thrive in the little Vermont town.

The sound of Ivy opening the front door and the accompanying burst of cold air interrupted her thoughts.

"It's starting to flurry," Ivy said. "I do believe we'll get more than a few inches tonight."

"Good. It'll feel more like Christmastime," Josie said with a smile. "You brought the tool box?"

"Yep. I don't even know what all I've got in here. It's been a long time since I opened it." Ivy set down a little red tool box and opened the lid. "Screwdriver, needle-nose pliers, tape measure. Stud-finder and picture hangers. Work gloves. This thingamajig," she said, holding up a large, rusted pipe wrench. "And under the top tray, there's a bunch of nails and screws, all sizes."

Josie looked down at the Christmas tree stand. "You have nails?" An idea came to her, and she felt a surge of excitement. "Do you have a hammer?"

"I thought I did," Ivy said. "No, I know I've got one somewhere, but it's not in here."

"Maybe that doesn't matter. What size nails do you have? Any big ones?"

Ivy began to carefully rake her fingers through the sharp metal hardware. "Some. How many do you need?"

"Four. They don't all have to be the same size or the same kind, as long as they're all pretty long."

"Four long nails, check," Ivy said, holding up the kind Josie requested.

"Good. Now, can you come here and hold the tree for a minute? I think I've got something we can use as a hammer."

"Here we go again," Ivy said, rolling her eyes. Still, she stepped forward and slid her arm gingerly through the tree branches to grasp the trunk. As soon as Ivy had a good grip on it, Josie went into the kitchen and got her metal meat mallet out of a drawer.

"Now, give me those nails," Josie said when she returned to the living room.

Ivy handed them to her, a wary expression on her face. "I'm not sure I should ask what you're going to do."

"Just watch, then," Josie said. She smiled at her aunt before she got down on the floor. "Make sure and hold the tree steady, okay?"

Lying on her stomach on the carpeted floor, Josie eased herself beneath the lowest branches toward the legs of the stand. There was a hole in the end of each leg. When she reached the closest one, she took one of the nails, positioned its point in the hole, and used the meat mallet to pound it in. When perhaps of an inch of the nail remained, she pounded on the nail head sideways so that it bent and hooked securely over the edge of the stand.

"You're nailing the tree to the floor?" Ivy's voice was filled with incredulity. "Josie?"

"Yes, Aunt Ivy. I'm nailing the tree to the floor."

"But...you'll make holes!"

"The carpet will hide them." Josie commando-crawled to the next stand leg. "Better than having the tree fall over on one of the girls."

When she'd nailed all four legs of the stand to the floor, Josie slid out from under the tree and jumped to her feet. "All right, let go of it, and keep your fingers crossed."

Ivy released her grip on the trunk and carefully began to pull her arm out of the branches. The tree quivered. For a few seconds, it remained perfectly vertical, but as Ivy's arm brushed one of the limbs, it slowly, slowly lurched forward and then stopped. Josie looked at Ivy. They both waited, scarcely breathing.

The tree remained upright at an angle, but it didn't topple over.

Josie felt elated and frustrated at the same time. They were *so close*.

"We just need a way to pull it back a little. The weight of the tree might actually be enough to pull it out of the stand or yank those nails out of the floor if it really tips. If only I'd nailed it to the wall instead."

"Honey, there's no way under the sun to nail a tree like that to a wall."

"I know, I know. Let me see what else you've got in that tool box." Josie went to the little red box and picked through the assorted hardware inside. A silver glimmer near the bottom, beneath the darker nails, caught her eye. She grabbed at it and pulled out a large screw-eye.

"This would be perfect!" Josie said. "I can screw this into the wall and then run a rope through it and around the tree. It'll pull tight and keep the tree up straight! Ivy, do you have any rope? Or string?" She grabbed the stud-finder out of the tool box and went back to the tree.

"I have no idea," Ivy said. "I might. I've got boxes of stuff in my attic that I haven't opened in twenty years, but it would take forever to go through them, and we still might not find any."

"I need something strong...something long enough to go from the tree to the hook..." Josie thought aloud as she eyed the wall on the backside of the tree. "I've got it! But first, I've got to anchor this in the wall."

It was lucky that the tree was leaning slightly forward, because it opened up some space on the other side. Josie squeezed in and pressed the stud-finder against the wall. When it beeped, indicating the location of a wooden two-by-four, she looked carefully at the wall to gauge where to place the

screw-eye. Then, Josie took a deep breath, pressed the point of the screw to the wall, and began to apply pressure as she turned it.

"I'll just have to muscle it into the sheetrock to get it started, but I'll need something to turn it with once I hit the stud. A regular screwdriver won't work with the eye. Can you hand me those pliers you have? Any maybe that big wrench thing?"

Josie first tried the pliers, but they were too small and pointed to close around the eye. The pipe wrench, though, proved ideal. She tightened its jaws on one side of the eye and then rotated the wrench handle around in a large circle. Its grip on the eye and leverage it gave her were excellent, and she soon had the eye twisted in as far as it would go.

"Well, I'm glad you didn't have to resort to another kitchen utensil for this part," Ivy said as Josie handed the pliers and wrench back to her.

"Oh, I was ready to." Josie laughed. "I was thinking that my little round garlic press would have been the perfect thing to grab the round part of the screw-eye if the wrench didn't work."

"I guess you have more 'tools' than you thought you did," Ivy said.

"I guess so." Josie took a deep breath. Okay, I'm just going to get something out of my room, and we should be able to get the tree standing perfectly straight." Josie went upstairs and took a pair of pantyhose from her lingerie drawer. On her way back down, she opened the door to the girls' room to look in on them.

They were in their beds, sound asleep. Emily was on her back under the covers, her mouth open and her curly red hair fanning out all over her pillow. Rose was on her side with her arms tucked against her chest and her sheet and blankets bunched up at her feet. Josie tiptoed into the room, pulled the covers up and over Rose, and gently stroked her older daughter's blond hair. She touched Emily's little head, too, and then quietly left the room.

"I've got the rope," she announced as she came down the stairs. Grinning, she swung the pantyhose in a circle above her head, as a cowboy might do with a lasso.

"Nylons, huh?" Ivy let out a snort. "They're strong, I'll give you that. And anyway, I'm done doubting you."

"Good," Josie said. "Now, if you could hold the tree so that it's straight, I'll tie this around it and through the screw-eye."

As Ivy held the tree in position, she reached into the branches and placed the waistband and top portion of the pantyhose against the trunk. Next, she wrapped each of the legs of pantyhose once around the trunk and pulled them toward the screw-eye. Finally, she shoved the two sock portions through the eye and knotted them back on the taut, stretched portion of pantyhose extending from the trunk.

"Wait just a sec before you let go," Josie said. She ran to the kitchen again, this time to fetch a scissor, and pulled one of the dining room chairs with her to the tree. With the added height, she was just able to snip off enough of the top twig to leave room for her star topper. "Okay," she said, climbing down from the chair. "Let go, slowly."

Ivy released her grip and extricated her arm from the branches. They stepped back from the tree together -- the tree that now stood beautifully, perfectly straight before her picture window.

"Kid, that is one helluva Christmas tree," Ivy said as she squeezed Josie around the shoulders. "The girls are gonna be blown away when they see it."

"I hope so. Thank you so much, Aunt Ivy. I couldn't have done it without you."

"Pish, I didn't do much. You were the one who figured out how to put it up. You had your mind and heart set on it. Just goes to show you what you can overcome and what's possible if you stay strong and determined."

Josie hugged her aunt and walked with her to the front door. "Will you come by in the morning to decorate with us?"

"I'd love to," Ivy said. "I don't have to open The Bookstop until noon tomorrow, and I wouldn't miss it for the world."

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"That's about it, I guess," Josie said, glancing at each member of her family. "That's the story of our second Christmas tree. I can't believe I was so young and stupid back then."

"You weren't stupid, Mom," Emily said. "You just made do with what you had, in a pretty clever way."

"And, no wonder you're so good with tools, Em," Rose said. "You obviously inherited the 'handy gene' from Mom."

"Maybe so," Emily said. "Although I doubt I'd be as skilled with a meat mallet."

"Grandma, what happened in the morning, when Mom and Aunt Emily saw the tree?" Alex asked.

"You would've thought Santa Claus had come early," Josie said, smiling as a wave of nostalgia washed over her. "They came running into my room, screaming about the huge tree downstairs and wanting to start decorating it right away." Josie looked at Rose and Emily in turn. "I was in such a deep sleep, it took you girls bouncing on the bed to get me up. After Ivy left the night before, I stayed up later than I should've. It didn't matter that I was tired and losing time for sleep, or that my hands were all scraped up and covered with sap from handling the tree. I just wanted to sit awhile by myself and enjoy it."

"I probably would've done the same thing, after all that effort," Emily said.

Rose nodded. "Yeah, me too. I remember coming into the living room in the morning and seeing the tree, but I had no clue back then what you'd done to get it there for us."

"You've always done a lot for us, Mom," Emily said, her voice quiet and yet filled with emotion. She smiled wryly. "Too much, sometimes. But all those years ago, when you were so lost yourself, I don't know how you managed to hold everything together for us."

Josie felt her chin quiver. "I *am* prone to overdoing it. It's what happens when you have children. You love them more than yourself. You want to do everything for them, give them everything. You girls were...are...*my* everything. Putting that tree up, I felt strong and determined, and for the first time, I could see the path ahead after your father died. I started to believe that I could be successful in something as difficult as building a life for us, even if it seemed impossible at times. I still think of that tree as my 'tree of hope.'"

"And I still think of it as Larry Bird wearing a Barbie shoe and nylon stockings," Ivy said. Her own loud cackle joined the laughter of her family.

"We ought to head over to the town hall," Josie finally said. "The pitch-in will be starting soon, and I'm sure Ruth could use a hand getting things ready."

Rose nodded. "I promised her I'd help set out the food dishes."

"Maybe they've got a tree that needs putting up," Matt said. "Whaddya think, Sheldon? You ready for round two?"

Sheldon groaned as he got to his feet.

"I can't wait!" Alex said as he bounced up from the sofa. "And when we come back, we can decorate *our* tree! I love Christmas!"

Josie felt profound gratitude and love as she looked at her family, all together and happy in her cozy little house, and at the lovely new evergreen standing perfectly straight before the front window. "So do I, sweetie," she told Alex before pulling him into an embrace. "They get better and better, and this Christmas will be the best one yet."