

Kate Christie

Solstice





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About the Author

Kate Christie was born and raised in Kalamazoo, Michigan. After high school, she left Michigan to attend Smith College in Massachusetts, where she studied women in a major way—the motto of Smith's Women's Studies department. More recently, she earned a Master's in Creative Writing from Western Washington University. A marketing and development writer by day, Kate spends most evenings writing fiction. Currently she lives in Western Washington with her partner of nine years and their two wonderful dogs. *Solstice* is her first published novel.

To Kris for, well, you know.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my parents for supporting my writing aspirations from a young age, and for giving me my first word processor more than two decades ago. Thanks also to my partner for supporting me during the variety of occasions when I “took time off to write”—as the movie says, put it on my tab.

Chapter One

~SAM~

Just before the summer solstice, my still-new life in Seattle began to shift until it was as unpredictable as the fault lines buried beneath the city. Trees and plants were in full bloom that week and clouds rushed overhead on trade winds, casting shadows over Puget Sound and the buildings dotting the city's hills. Outside the window of my office on the fourth floor of a Belltown walk-up, winos and executives shared the sidewalk peacefully, moods augmented by massive doses of sunlight on these, the longest days of the year. Gazing out my window toward the ferry terminal where mammoth white and green ferries drifted in to rest against the wooden pilings before reversing again into the Sound, I sensed something brilliant not too far off, portended by clear skies and the scent of seaweed.

Friday morning a week before the solstice, my manager paused in my office doorway. "Do you have a minute?" Jim, a forty-something who dressed in Gap khakis and dyed his hair to

hide the gray, was among the older people in our tech start-up, one of the many proliferating throughout Seattle.

I minimized the window where I was hard at work comparing mountain bike models at REI.com over my daily decaf mocha latté. “What’s up?”

“There’s a Web technology conference in Chicago next month I thought we might send you to. What do you think?”

For anyone else, attending a conference in Chicago would have been a treat. For me, though, Chicago was awfully close to home. I faked a smile. “Sounds good.”

He gave me a thumbs-up and disappeared down the sunlit hallway, his trail runners squeaking softly against the laminate wood flooring.

Last time I’d been home, Christmas lights had glowed bright from the other houses on our street. Now, in mid-June, the Michigan countryside would be a blend of green and gold, winter wheat nearly ready for harvest, row upon row of young corn reaching for the summer sun. I knew those fields intimately from frequent train rides between Chicago, where I used to live, and Logan, where I grew up. When I moved to Seattle, I was sure I was leaving those treks behind for good.

By the end of the day, Jim had e-mailed me an itinerary to review along with a link to the conference Web site. Knowing I had family in the area, he added, he’d given me some extra time in the Midwest. Rubbing my temples where a headache had suddenly begun to threaten, I examined the itinerary. The conference ended on a Friday, but my return ticket wasn’t until Sunday. Which meant I would have two whole days with my parents—assuming I told them I was coming.

I closed Foxfire and replied to Jim that the trip plans passed muster. At least I had a month to get used to the idea. And anyway, I didn’t have a choice. I had to go home. Even my brother went home again.

The next morning, I dozed in the sunlight pouring in through my half-open blinds, until my cat Chloe managed to convince me that her hunger had reached a true crisis point. After feeding her, I donned workout gear and rode my bike to Green Lake, a nearby city park, where I stretched out on the boat stadium steps, watching geese and ducks cruise past under a wide blue sky. No doubt about it, Seattle was fabulous in the summer. Too bad I would have to spend a week away from the city in July, arguably the best month of the year.

Before I moved to Seattle, my friends and family in Chicago and Michigan warned me that I would find the Pacific Northwest a dismal, rain-drenched place to live. Their dire predictions didn't sway me, though. I packed my Ford Ranger, crossed the Mississippi, and headed west. I reached my new home in summer, which in western Washington, I discovered, consisted of five or six months of cloudless, low-humidity days and nights. I e-mailed my relatives and friends regular updates on the gorgeous weather, but I knew it would take more than anecdotal evidence to alter their image of my new home.

When the winter rains finally did arrive, I learned that Seattleites possessed nearly as many words for rain as Michiganders had for snow. But despite all the talk, the winter precipitation ended up being pretty close to what we got back in the Midwest. The difference was that while snow retained and reflected light, the dead vegetation, steel-blue water, and low sky common to Northwest winters didn't. Seattle felt grayer, even if it wasn't. Fortunately, spring and summer came sooner to Seattle than in other parts of the country.

My first year on the West Coast had passed quickly, and I hadn't even once regretted leaving Chicago and the level Midwest for Seattle and its San Francisco-grade slopes; windy Lake Michigan and sailboats for choppy Puget Sound and car ferries; Lincoln Park for Phinney Ridge; the Cubs for the Mariners.

By now I was nearly used to waking to melancholy animal calls from the Woodland Park Zoo, just across the street from my apartment building. I was still learning Seattle’s urban landscape, though, so different from Chicago’s glass and steel skyscrapers and old-school stadiums—colorful murals of orcas and fir trees decorating the whitewashed sides of brick buildings downtown; Safeco Field, with its giant retractable roof designed to let in the sun and keep out the rain; the Pink Elephant Car Wash sign guarding Denny Way; the many bridges in and around the city, floating, draw and stationary; and, of course, the Space Needle, a fixture at the northwest edge of downtown. On sunny mornings on my way to work on the number 5 bus, I would watch the gleaming skyline of Seattle approach, the glaciated dome of Mt. Rainier looming over Capitol Hill, and I would realize yet again how lucky I was to live here.

Suitably stretched, I started around Green Lake on the gravel trail near shore, dodging the hordes of weekend walkers, stride lengthening as my muscles warmed and loosened. I loved running, loved the sensation of my body moving freely, deliberately through space. Soon I was lost in my own world of wind and sun and water, so when I passed a familiar face, I barely paused. She was younger than me, with short brown hair and an athlete’s body in tank top and shorts. I knew her immediately. But I didn’t stop until she called, “Hey, Sam! Wait!” and jogged after me.

“I thought that was you,” she said when she reached me, slightly breathless. Her companion, a tall, muscular woman, had stopped a little farther down the path and was checking her watch. “Sam Delaney, right?”

“Right.”

“You don’t remember me, do you?”

With her dimples and smooth, unlined skin, she looked just the same. “Emily, right?” Emily Mackenzie had been a freshman when I was a senior in high school back in Michigan. We’d played soccer together.

“You do remember,” she said, smiling. “My mom told me you moved out here.”

“My mom told me you lived here, too.” Which wasn’t a lie, exactly. I’d just known she lived in Seattle before my mother mentioned it.

“I heard about your brother. I’m really sorry.”

“Oh. Thanks.” I ran a hand over my ponytail. The last time I’d talked to Emily, I’d recently finished my junior year of college and was in Logan for a short visit before heading back to Chicago for the summer. Chris, my brother, was home, too, visiting from New York. We’d gone to see a Logan High soccer game and afterward had headed down to the field to say hi to some of the players and Tony, my old coach. Emily had hugged me and told us about the Division I soccer scholarships she’d been offered. She’d decided on the University of Washington.

“I’ll be a Husky next year,” I remembered her saying, a big grin on her face. And Chris and I had both grinned back. It was hard not to smile around Emily.

“I have to go,” I said now, abruptly. “Nice seeing you.”

“Oh.” Her friendly look faded. “I guess I’ll see you around, then.”

“Right.” I turned and started to run again, concentrating on the sound of my shoes crunching over gravel and trying to blot out the disappointment I’d seen in her eyes just before I turned away. At some point, I was bound to bump into someone who knew Chris. After all, he’d been gone for a year now. I just hadn’t been expecting it this morning.

I picked up my pace and ran faster than before, pushing my legs and lungs harder than either wanted. By the time I reached the stadium again, I was slightly dizzy and soaked with sweat. As I unlocked my bike, I looked up to see Emily and her friend run past the boathouse. If she turned her head, she would see me. But she didn’t.

Which was better, I assured myself, pedaling out to the main road and heading for Café Lulu, my favorite neighborhood

coffee shop and usual Saturday morning destination. Normally I would have taken the path around the lake, but this time I stuck to the street, my mother's voice haranguing me as I rode along at the edge of the road: "Samantha, where's your helmet? Do you want to become a vegetable, young lady?"

And I should have worn a helmet, especially in traffic. But it wasn't like you lived forever.

At the café, I ordered my usual bagel and juice. Paper bag in hand, I rode my bike over to the lawn next to the Green Lake community center. There, I kicked off my shoes, dug my toes into the grass, and started in on breakfast. In high school, Tony, our coach, had informed us that we had thirty minutes after a workout to fill our glycogen window, and I'd never forgotten. Around me weekend warriors congregated on the community center playing fields, volleyball and softball players sharing the lawn with a women's soccer team. I watched the women play while I ate. They kept shanking the ball, which told me they hadn't played much soccer. Unlike Emily Mackenzie. Or me.

When we were five, my best friend Natalie Sipsma and I joined a youth soccer league in Logan. For a few years, we were the only girls on our neighborhood team. Then more and more girls in the area took up soccer, until eventually there were separate, gender-specific leagues. My mother tried to convince me to play in the girls' league in junior high, but I refused. So did Nat. No way were we going to miss out on our last few years of playing with the boys.

Nat and I were among the first generation of Logan kids who'd played soccer for ten years already when we started high school. But by the time we were senior co-captains, girls like Emily Mackenzie were trying out for the team. Emily grew up playing club soccer, traveling to tournaments in all corners of the United States and Europe. While Nat and I played a couple of years on the state team as alternates, Emily led her age group's state team in scoring.

I crumpled the bagel wrapper and lay back on the grass,

watching a lone cloud meander across the sky. Sometimes I thought I could remember every moment of every soccer game from the time I was eight or nine on. Which was strange, given that so much of the rest of my life off the soccer field was a haze. Trips I went on with my family, classes I took in school, even the night Chris ran away from home and the day he returned years later were pretty much a blur. The main thing I remembered about the day Chris came back was thinking that he'd grown up to look like Jude Law.

But I could call up important soccer moments easily. Like the first time I put a penalty kick over the goal at the age of eight and everyone, including me, was impressed I could kick the ball that high. Or the goal I scored on a banana kick from the corner of the field when I was twelve. Or the penalty kick I made in District Finals senior year to win the game.

Emily, the future star, lurked in the background of most of my soccer memories. Her older sister Beth was my age. But while Beth was the semi-hippie, future environmental activist offspring of intellectuals, I was the jock daughter of the lead counsel at Helix, the pharmaceutical giant based in Logan. Emily was nothing like her sister. The first time I saw her play she was only ten, and she was already the best female soccer player I knew. She was still just a kid when we played together in high school, her feet almost too big for her body. Now she was about my height with a medium build—a good size for a soccer player I'd thought when I watched her play the previous fall, her senior season at U-Dub. She was the same scoring machine I remembered, only more confident, more mature. After each game, I thought about walking down to the field to say hi, but something had stopped me.

I hadn't played soccer since leaving Chicago, a fact that now struck me as nearly inconceivable. Lying on the grass thinking about my soccer past made me realize how much I missed it. Maybe I should think about playing again.

I'd been lying there for a while when a shadow passed over

me and stayed. I squinted up at the culprit, trying to pick a face out of the halo of short brown hair. Emily.

I sat up and knocked over my juice. “Shit.” I righted it again quickly.

She lowered her mountain bike and herself to the ground next to me. “Lulu’s, hmm,” she said, eyes on my crumpled bag. “Good coffee there. I’m a fan of Revolutions myself.”

That didn’t surprise me—Revolutions was a hipster coffee shop right off the lake, its ultra-modern interior as different from Café Lulu’s family atmosphere as another coffee shop could get.

My silence didn’t seem to bother her. “Filling your glycogen window?” she asked, her voice teasing.

I couldn’t help smiling at that. “Yeah.”

“Tony has no idea the lasting impact he’s had on us. I’m glad I ran into you again, Sam. It’s really good to see you.”

“It’s good to see you too.” I wasn’t convinced, though, not really. I couldn’t forget the look on her face when she had mentioned my brother earlier. I wasn’t sure how I wanted her to look at me, but pity definitely wasn’t it.

Emily and her smile, though, were just as hard to resist as they had ever been, and for a little while, as we discussed soccer (naturally) and our Seattle lives, I even started to relax. But before either of us had revealed much of ourselves, she asked, “Do you miss your brother?”

I pictured Chris the last time I’d seen him, lying in a hospital bed in our childhood home the previous spring too weak to even lift his head. Something inside me shut off. A minute later, I was lacing up my shoes.

“I have to go,” I announced, and there it was again in her eyes, just for a moment, that disappointment I didn’t get. Her life was clean, untrammled. Mine was not.

“You should come play soccer with my rec team,” she said, standing up beside me. “E-mail me if you’re interested—my address is my name, all one word, at Gmail.”

“Maybe,” I said, inwardly cringing at my own coldness but

unable somehow to stay still around her. And then with an awkward half-wave I was off, pedaling away from the community center, ignoring the urge to look back. I guided my bike around Green Lake toward home, dodging the people crowding the gravel path. I couldn't shake the sense that the life I'd built for myself in Seattle was on the verge of losing its careful order. Running into Emily now, having my past and present collide only a month before I was due to return home, was too much for my brain to wrap itself around.

I crossed Green Lake Way and followed a dirt path in among the trees of Woodland Park. From my building, it was all downhill to Green Lake. You could pedal a couple of times and coast the rest of the way, practically. But on the way home you had to work.

I preferred the ride home.

*We hope you enjoyed this
Bella Appetizer.*

