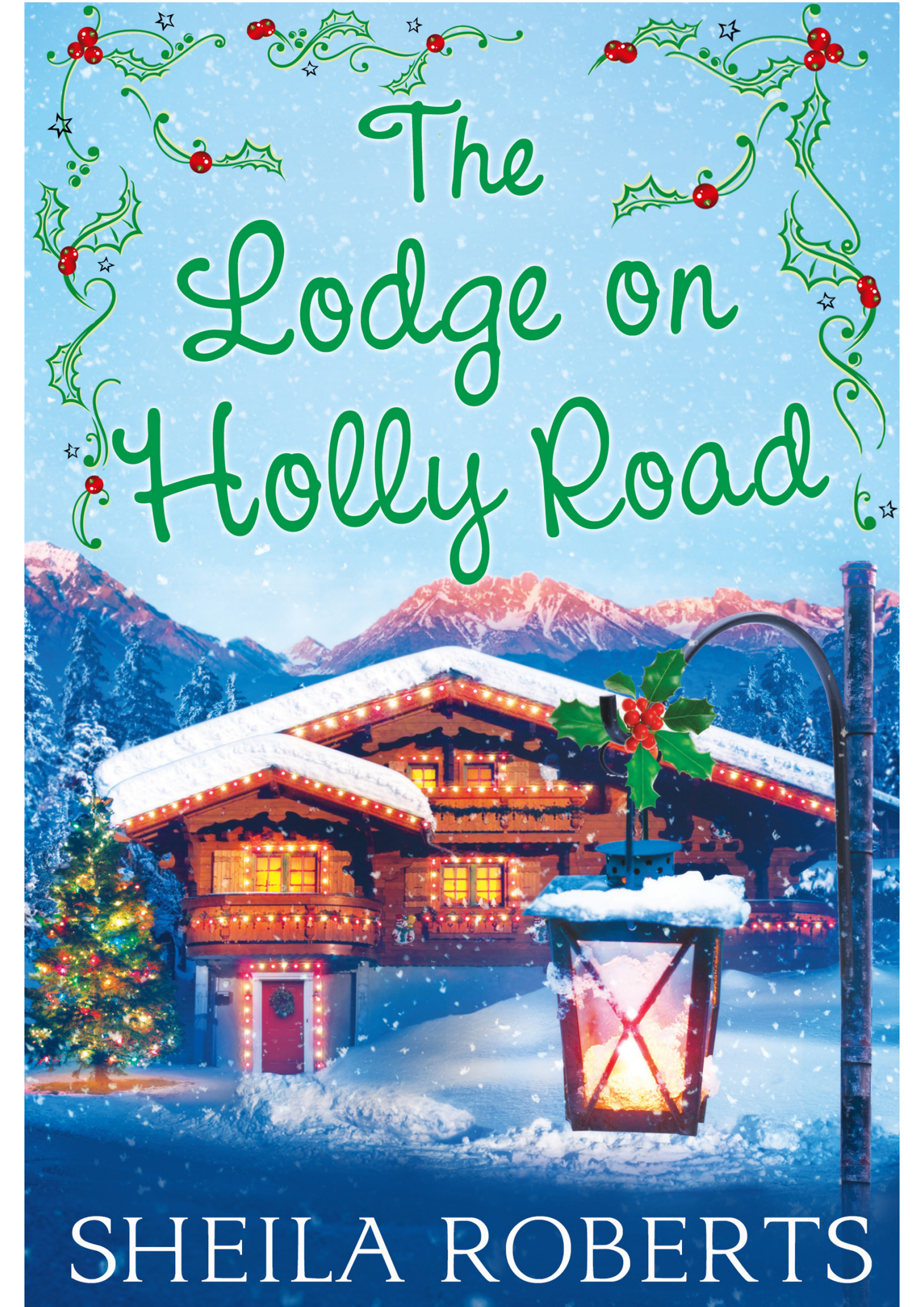




The Lodge on Holly Road

SHEILA ROBERTS

MIRA

Sheila Roberts

The Lodge on Holly Road

«HarperCollins»

Roberts S.

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How Santa Gets His Christmas Spirit Back... James Claussen has played Santa for years, but now that he's a widower, he's lost interest – in everything. So his daughter, Brooke, kidnaps him from the mall (in his Santa suit!) and takes him to Icicle Falls. She's arranged a special Christmas at the lodge owned by long-widowed Olivia Wallace and her son, Eric. And yet... Brooke wants Dad to be happy, but she's not ready to see someone else's mommy kissing Santa Claus. Single mum Missy Monroe brings her kids to the lodge, too. Lalla wants a grandma for Christmas, and her brother, Carlos, wants a dog. Missy can't provide either one. What she'd like is an attractive, dependable man. A man like John Truman... But John's girlfriend will be joining him in Icicle Falls, and he's going to propose. Of course, not everything goes as planned. But sometimes the best gifts are the ones you don't expect! Welcome to Icicle Falls, the town that will warm your heart. Praise for Sheila Roberts's; Sheila Roberts makes me laugh. I read her books & come away hopeful and happy. '– bestselling romance author Debbie Macomber's; perfectly captures the charm and cheer of the holiday season' – Booklist

How Santa Gets His Christmas Spirit Back...

James Claussen has played Santa for years, but now that he's a widower, he's lost interest—in everything. So his daughter, Brooke, kidnaps him from the mall (in his Santa suit!) and takes him to Icicle Falls. She's arranged a special Christmas at the lodge owned by long-widowed Olivia Wallace and her son, Eric. And yet...Brooke wants Dad to be happy, but she's not ready to see someone else's mommy kissing Santa Claus.

Single mom Missy Monroe brings her kids to the lodge, too. Lalla wants a grandma for Christmas, and her brother, Carlos, wants a dog. Missy can't provide either one. What she'd like is an attractive, dependable man. A man like John Truman... But John's girlfriend will be joining him in Icicle Falls, and he's going to propose.

Of course not everything goes as planned. But sometimes the best gifts are the ones you don't expect!

[Praise for Sheila Roberts and her Christmas novels](#)

"This amusing holiday tale about love lost and found again is heartwarming. Quirky characters, snappy dialogue and sexy chemistry all combine to keep you laughing, as well as shedding a few tears..."

—RT Book Reviews on Merry Ex-mas

"Merry Ex-mas is the absolute perfect holiday book! It has everything great women's contemporary fiction should have—a great storyline filled with romance, humor and a bit of mystery tucked in here and there, fabulous personable characters filled with charm..."

—Sharon's Garden of Book Reviews

"An engaging humorous tale of three sets of ex-couples coming together over the holidays. The ensemble cast makes for a fun frothy frolic as the ghosts of Christmas past reunite..."

—Harriet Klausner on Merry Ex-mas

"Roberts' witty and effervescently funny holiday novel will warm hearts. Realistic characters populate the pages of this captivating story."

—RT Book Reviews (Top Pick) on On Strike for Christmas

"Roberts' charming holiday-themed contemporary story set in the Seattle area offers hope, comfort, and a second chance for those who believe, and a nudge to change the minds of those who don't."

—Booklist on The Snow Globe

"Within minutes of cracking open the book, my mood was lifted.... The warm, glowing feeling it gave me lasted for days."

—First for Women on The Snow Globe

"This lighthearted and charming read will appeal to fans of Kristin Hannah's magical, light romances and readers who enjoyed Roberts's previous holiday offerings."

—Library Journal on The Snow Globe (starred review)

"Witty characterizations, slapstick mishaps, and plenty of holiday cheer."

—Publishers Weekly on The Nine Lives of Christmas

The Lodge on Holly Road

Sheila Roberts



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For Sandy Hamilton, aka Santa Colorado

[Dear Reader,](#)

Can you remember the thrill of coming downstairs as a child on Christmas morning and rushing to see what Santa left for you under the tree? I can! Good old Santa Claus, a kid's best friend. And you see him everywhere: at shopping malls, in parades, at family holiday gatherings. There he is, ho-ho-ing, handing out treats and generally making everyone feel good.

Except everyone doesn't always feel good during the holidays. Strained relationships, hard times, grief and loss can steal our holiday joy. With that reality in mind, I got to wondering what would happen if Santa were to lose his Christmas spirit. What if a man who once loved to play Santa Claus was coping with grief and didn't want to be jolly anymore? And what about the people he'd find himself interacting with? What if they were having problems, too? If several people who were facing holiday challenges all found themselves gathered together in one spot for Christmas, how would they cope?

Well, just to see, I gathered a bunch of people together at the Icicle Creek Lodge in Icicle Falls and asked them to help each other figure out how to have a merry Christmas. I hope I succeeded and I hope you'll enjoy this holiday tale of love and laughter.

You can always find me on Facebook. And please visit my website, www.sheilasplace.com, to find out more about Icicle Falls, the Hallmark Channel original movie based on my Christmas novel, *The Nine Lives of Christmas*, my contests and more. And let me know what you do to make Christmas special.

Merry Christmas to you, your family and friends!

Sheila

Contents

[Cover](#)

[Back Cover Text](#)

[Praise](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Dedication](#)

[Dear Reader](#)

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

Chapter Seven

Chapter Eight

Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Twenty-One

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

Recipes from Olivia

Gumdrop Cookies

Old-Fashioned Cookies

Breakfast Casserole

[Copyright](#)

[Chapter One](#)

Jolly Old Saint Nicholas

The toddler wasn't simply crying. Oh, no. These were the kind of earsplitting screams that would make the strongest department-store Santa want to run for his sleigh. Her face was a perfect match for James Claussen's red Santa suit, and both her eyes and her nose had the spigot turned on full blast.

What was he doing here, sitting on this uncomfortable throne, ruling over a kingdom of fake snow, candy canes and mechanical reindeer? What had possessed him to come back to work? He didn't want to be jolly, even imitation jolly.

"Come on, Joy," coaxed the little girl's mother from her spot on the sidelines of Santa Land. "Smile for Mommy."

"Waaah," Joy responded.

I understand how you feel, James thought. "Joy, that's a pretty name for a pretty girl. Can you give your mommy a big smile?" he coaxed.

"Waaah," Joy shrieked, and began kicking her feet. The black patent leather shoes turned those little feet into lethal weapons. Come tomorrow he'd have a bruise on the inside of his left thigh.

"Ho, ho, ho," James tried, but the shrieks only got louder.

Okay, this was as good as the picture with Santa was going to get. He stood and handed off the child, who was still kicking and crying, barely dodging an assault to the family jewels in the process. The jewels weren't so perfect now that he was sixty-six but they were still valuable to him and he wanted to keep them.

Shauna Sullivan, his loyal elf, sent him a sympathetic look and ushered up the next child, a baby girl carried by her mother. Rosy-cheeked and alert, probably just awake from a nap, the baby was dolled up in a red velvet dress with white booties on her feet and a headband decorated with a red flower. She was old enough to smile and coo but not quite old enough to walk or, thank God, kick Santa where it hurt.

This baby girl reminded him of his daughter, Brooke, when she was a baby, all smiles and dimples. Big brown eyes that looked at him in delighted wonder. Oh, those were the days, when his kids were small and Faith was still...

Don't go there.

"And what would this little dumpling like for Christmas?" he asked, settling the baby on his lap.

For a few seconds it looked as if she was actually concentrating on an answer. But then a sound anyone who'd had children could easily recognize, followed by a foul odor, told him she'd been concentrating on something else. Oh, man.

"Smile, Santa," Krystal, the photographer, teased, and the smelly baby on his lap gurgled happily.

James had never been good with poopy diapers but he gave it his best effort and hoped he looked like a proper Santa.

Finally, they were down to the last kid in line. Thank God. After this, Santa was going home to enjoy a cold beer.

That was about the only thing he'd enjoy. Oh, he'd turn on the TV to some cop show, but he wouldn't really watch it. Then he'd go to bed and wish the days wouldn't keep coming, forcing him to move on.

He especially dreaded the next day, December 24. How he wished he could skip right to New Year's Day. Or better yet, go backward to New Year's Day two years ago, when he and Faith were planning their European cruise.

Stay in the moment, he told himself. *Stay in character*. He put on his jolliest Santa face and held out a welcoming arm to the next child.

This one was going to be a terror; he could tell by the scowl on the kid's freckled face as he approached. He was a big, hefty burger of a boy, wearing jeans and an oversize T-shirt, and could have been anywhere between the ages of ten and thirteen. Logic ruled out the older end of the spectrum. Usually by about eight or nine, kids stopped believing.

"And who have we got here?" James asked in his jolly I-love-kids voice.

Normally he did love kids and he loved playing Santa, had been doing it since his children were little. He'd always had the husky build for it, although when he was younger Faith had padded him out with a pillow. No pillow necessary now. And no need for a fake beard, either. Mother Nature had turned his beard white over the past few years.

These days he wasn't into the role, wasn't into Christmas, period. Santa had lost his holiday spirit and he was starting to lose his patience, too. Very un-Santa-like. He should never have agreed to fill in today, should have told Holiday Memories to find another Santa.

His new customer didn't answer him.

"What's your name, son?" he asked, trying again.

"Richie," said the boy, and landed on James's leg like a ton of coal.

"And how old are you, Richie?"

"Too old for this. This is stupid." The kid crossed his arms and glared at his mother.

"So you're twelve?" James guessed.

"I'm ten and I know there's no such thing as Santa. You're a big fake."

Boy, he had that right.

"And that's fake, too," Richie added.

James was usually prepared for rotten-kid beard assaults, but this year his game was off and Richie got a handful of beard before James could stop him. He yanked so hard he nearly separated James's jawbone from the rest of his skull. For a moment there he saw stars, and two Richies. As if one wasn't bad enough.

"Whoa there, son, that's real," James said, rubbing his chin, his eyes watering. "Let's take it easy on old Santa."

Now Richie's mother was glaring, too, as though it was James's fault she'd spawned a monster.

"Look, Richie," he said, lowering his voice. "We're both men here. We know this is all pretend."

And Christmas is a crock and life sucks. So deal with it, you little fart.

James reeled in his bad Santa before he could get loose and do any damage. Good Santa continued, "But your mom wants this picture. One last picture she can send to your relatives and brag about what a great kid you are." *Not*. "Can you man-up and pose so she can have a nice picture of you for Christmas?"

Richie scowled at him suspiciously, as if he was up to some strange trick.

James sweetened the holiday pot. "I bet if you do, you'll get what you want for Christmas." Now the kid was looking less adversarial. James pressed his advantage. "Come on, kid. One smile and we can both get out of here. Whaddya say?"

Richie grunted and managed half a smile and Krystal captured it. "But you're still a fake," Richie said.

And you're still a little fart. "Ho, ho, ho," James replied, and rocketed the boy off his leg, sending him flying.

"Hey, he shoved me," Richie said to his mother, and pointed an accusing finger at James.

“Trick leg,” James said apologetically. “Old war injury. Merry Christmas,” he called and, with a wave, abdicated his holiday throne.

“Okay,” he said to Shauna, “I’m out of here.” Thank God today was over. He was never doing this again. He didn’t care if every Santa on the planet was home with the flu.

“You can’t go yet,” she protested, and began looking desperately around the mall.

After a ten-hour day? Oh, yeah, he could. “No kids, and it’s ten minutes till the end of our shift. We’ll be okay to leave. Right, Krystal?”

Krystal frowned. “Well...”

It was nearly five o’clock. All the moms and kiddies were now on their way home to make dinner. The next Santa crew would arrive soon to deal with the evening crowd. All they had to do was put up the Santa-will-be-back sign. What was the problem? Maybe Shauna and Krystal felt guilty about stealing a couple of extra minutes from work.

Not James. He’d worked hard all his life and he had no qualms about stealing a few minutes for himself now. For over forty years he’d been a welder at Boeing. Then he’d come home and work some more, putting that addition on the house, mowing the lawn, cleaning the garage, repairing broken faucets.

Of course, he’d also realized the importance of playing—backyard baseball with the kids, Frisbee at the park, board games on a rainy Sunday afternoon. And real life had taught him that you had to take advantage of everything good, even little things like getting off ten minutes early. Because you never knew what cosmic pie in the face was waiting for you around the corner.

“Come on, ladies,” he said, putting an arm around each of them and trying to move them in the direction of the Starbucks. “The eggnog lattes are on me.” They still balked. He’d never known the women to turn down a latte. He glanced from one to the other. “Okay, what’s going on?”

“It’s a surprise,” Shauna said.

James frowned. He hated surprises, had hated them ever since Faith got sick.

“It’s a good one,” Krystal said as if reading his mind.

And then he saw his daughter hurrying down the mall toward him and the heaviness settling over him was blown away. There she was, his brown-eyed girl, all bundled up in boots and black leggings and a winter coat, her hair falling to her shoulders in a stylish light brown sheet. Once upon a time, it had been curly and so cute. Then suddenly she’d decided she needed to straighten her hair. He never could understand why the curls had to go. But then he’d never understood women’s fashion.

He’d also never understood why she thought her face was too round or why she thought she was fat. Her face was sweet. And she was just curvy. As far as he was concerned she was the prettiest young woman in Seattle. That wasn’t fatherly prejudice. It was fact, plain and simple.

“Daddy,” she called, and waved and began to run toward him.

Krystal had been right. This was a good surprise.

“Hello there, angel,” he greeted her, and gave her a big hug. “Did you come so your old man could take you to dinner?”

“I came to take my old man somewhere special for Christmas,” she said. “Thanks for not letting him get away,” she told his holiday helpers.

“No problem,” said Shauna. “Have a great time.”

“For Christmas?” James repeated as Brooke linked her arm through his and started them walking toward the shopping mall’s main entrance.

They were going somewhere for Christmas on the twenty-third? Did that mean she wouldn’t be spending Christmas with him and Dylan? It was their first Christmas without Faith (well, technically their second since she’d died on December 24 the year before). He’d assumed he and his son and daughter would all be together to help one another through the holidays.

But she was an adult. She could do what she wanted. Maybe she'd made plans with friends. If she had, he couldn't blame her for wanting to escape unpleasant memories. Maybe she'd found someone in the past couple of weeks and wanted to be with him. She shouldn't have to babysit her dad.

"Don't worry, Daddy," she said. "I've got it all under control."

He didn't doubt that. Like her mother, Brooke was a planner and an organizer. She'd organized their Thanksgiving dinner, gathering his sister and his cousin and her husband, assigning everyone dishes to bring.

But what was she talking about? "Got what under control?"

"You'll see," she said with a Santa-like twinkle in her eyes.

Oh, boy, another surprise. "What are you up to, angel?"

"I'm not telling, but trust me, you'll like it."

He wouldn't like *anything* this season but he decided to play along. "Okay, lead on."

He hoped she hadn't spent too much money. Kindergarten teachers didn't make a lot and he hated to think of her spending a fortune on some fancy meal. He'd be happy enough with a hamburger. Anyway, he'd rather eat in the car than go into a restaurant dressed in his Santa suit.

They were out of the mall now and at her trusty SUV. She complained about her gas mileage but he was secretly glad she had this vehicle. It had all-wheel drive and handled well in the snow, so he didn't have to worry about her when she was driving in bad weather. Seattle rarely got much of the white stuff, but they'd had a couple of inches earlier in the month and the weatherman was predicting more by New Year's.

James had always loved it when they had a white Christmas. It meant snowball fights with the kids and hot chocolate afterward. Faith would lace his and hers with peppermint schnapps.

"No frowning allowed," Brooke said as they got in.

"Who's frowning? Santa doesn't frown."

"He never used to," Brooke said softly.

"Well, Santa's getting too grumpy for this job. It's about time for the old boy to pack it in."

His daughter shot a startled look in his direction. "Daddy, are you crazy?"

"No, I'm just..." *Sick of this ho-ho-ho crap.* It would never do to say such a cynical thing to his daughter. "Ready for a break," he improvised.

"You can't take a break," she protested as she drove out of the parking lot. "You're Santa."

James studied the crowd of cars rushing around them, people busy running errands, going places, preparing for holiday gatherings with loved ones. Most of the men in Seattle would be out the following day, frantically finding gifts for their women. He wished he was going to be one of them.

He reminded himself that he still had his kids. He had a lot for which to be thankful, and if Brooke had plans for Christmas, well, he and Dylan could make turkey TV dinners and eat the last of the cookies she'd baked for them, then watch a movie, like *Bad Santa*. Heh, heh, heh.

Now they were on the southbound freeway. Where were they going? Knowing his daughter, it would be someplace special.

He smiled as he thought about the contrast between her and his son. Dylan would come up with something at the last minute, most likely a six-pack of beer and a bag of nachos, their favorite football food. Naturally, Dylan would help him consume it all.

James was wondering what downtown Seattle spot his daughter had picked for dinner and was hoping it was in the Pike Place Market, where anything went in the way of dress, when they exited I-5 onto I-90, heading east out of Seattle. "Dinner in Bellevue?"

"Maybe," she said, determined to be mysterious.

They passed Bellevue. And then Issaquah, getting increasingly farther from the city. Where the heck was she taking him?

When they reached North Bend at the foot of the Cascades, he said, "So, we're eating here?"

“Actually, dinner’s in the backseat,” she said, nodding over her shoulder to a red cooler. “I’ve got roast beef sandwiches and apples and a beer for you if you want it.”

If they weren’t going out to dinner, then where were they going? Now he began to feel uneasy. How long was he going to be stuck in this suit? “Okay,” he said, making his tone of voice serious so she’d realize he was done fooling around. “What’s going on?”

“We’re going to Icicle Falls,” she said brightly.

“What?”

“This is a kidnapping.”

That was not funny. “Brooke,” he said sternly. “I’m not going to Icicle Falls.”

“Daddy,” she said just as sternly. “We’re *all* going to Icicle Falls. For Christmas. I booked us rooms at the Icicle Creek Lodge.”

“You can’t spring this on me, baby girl,” he said. “I don’t even have a change of clothes.”

“Not to worry. Dylan’s bringing clothes when he comes up later.”

He should’ve known she’d think of that. She’d probably given her younger brother a detailed list. He tried another argument. “I can’t leave my car at the mall.”

“Dylan’s picking it up after work and driving it to Icicle Falls. See? Everything’s under control.”

No, it wasn’t. It wasn’t remotely under control. James was getting hauled off to some stupid Bavarian village that would be chock-full of Christmas lights and happy tourists when all he’d wanted was to spend Christmas at home with his kids. Being depressed because his wife wasn’t there with them. And making the kids feel bad. Ho, ho, ho.

“We thought we should do something different this year,” Brooke added gently.

Maybe she was right. They could’ve tried to celebrate the way they’d always done with a big dinner on Christmas Eve, followed by a candlelight service at church and then pancakes and presents in the morning and friends over in the afternoon to sing Christmas carols and eat cookies. But it would all have been hollow and empty.

Still, he’d planned on trying. He’d bought a bunch of Christmas movies for them to watch and stocked up on cocoa, put up the tree and stuck their gift cards in among the branches. “I figured we’d have Christmas at home,” he said. Now he sounded like an ingrate and he didn’t want to do that. Anyway, it was too late now. They were halfway to Icicle Falls. The Polar Express had left the station.

“I think this will be good,” Brooke said. “It’s our gift to you.”

“Your gift?” Staying in some lodge would be expensive. “Oh, no. I’ll take care of it.”

“Daddy,” she said firmly. “You’ve always taken care of us. And you’ve always been Santa,” she added, smiling at him. “Now it’s our turn. So don’t ruin the game.”

He sighed and looked out the window at the stands of evergreens they were rushing past. He guessed he could play along.

As long as nobody asked him to be Santa this year. Because Santa had lost his Christmas spirit and he didn’t care if he ever found it again.

Chapter Two

All I Want for Christmas Is...

“What are you doing?” screeched Mrs. Steele, startling Missy Monroe.

This was not good because Missy was in midcut. The scissors took a slide and an extra half inch of hair disappeared.

“Ack!” Mrs. Steele cried.

“Sorry,” Missy muttered.

“Stop!” Mrs. Steele commanded. “That’s too short!”

It sure was now. “I’m sorry,” Missy said earnestly. “I thought you said you wanted to go shorter so the cut would last.”

“Shorter, not bald,” snapped her unhappy customer, scowling at their reflections in the mirror.

Short of gluing the woman's hair back on, there was nothing Missy could do now. "I think, once we've styled it, you'll like it."

"Style? You have no style. How did I get stuck with you, anyway?"

Missy had just been thinking the same thing about Mrs. Steele. But she'd been the next available stylist, and there'd been no way she could wiggle out of taking the woman. She strongly suspected all the other stylists had been dawdling over their haircuts in an effort to avoid getting the old witch. Dummy her. She should've dawdled, too.

Nobody liked Mrs. Steele. She was sixty-something and skinny and wore a frown right along with her expensive clothes. Maybe if she ate more chocolate she'd be happier. Or if she went to some couture hair salon. But Mrs. Steele was notoriously cheap, which was why she was at Style Savings Salon. She never tipped and she was never happy, no matter what you did.

"Well, it's too late now," Mrs. Steele said with an irritable flick of the hand. "You've already gotten the color wrong. I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you can't cut hair, either."

Mrs. Steele had picked that color, but now it was Missy's fault. Sooo unfair. She loved doing hair and helping women look their best, but sometimes she hated this job.

"Don't worry," she said. "It'll look nice." Well, the cut would, anyway. If Mrs. Steele had listened to her advice, the color would have been perfect, too. After a certain age, raven's-wing black didn't do a woman any favors.

Fortunately for Mrs. Steele, Missy knew what she was doing. She'd find a way to blend in this little slip of the scissors. She snipped some more and then put in some of the salon's hair root lifter. This really *was* going to look nice...if only Mrs. Steele would stop frowning.

But all the product in the world, all the careful styling, couldn't redeem the fact that Missy had failed to be psychic and know what Mrs. Steele had really wanted, which was probably to look like Jennifer Lawrence or some other movie star. (Good luck with that.)

Mrs. Steele glared at herself in the mirror, her thin lips pressed together in an angry line. Then she glared at Missy. "My God, but you're incompetent."

She was not! She did hair, not plastic surgery. If Mrs. Steele wanted a miracle, she should have gone to church. Missy bit her lip to keep in the angry words.

Now everyone in the salon was staring, all the other last-minute holiday customers no doubt thanking God that they hadn't gotten stuck with the incompetent stylist, all the other stylists thankful that they hadn't gotten stuck with Mrs. Steele. Missy could feel the heat of embarrassment over this undeserved criticism from her collarbone to the roots of her powder-blue dye job.

"I'm sorry you're not happy," she said.

"I'm certainly not. The color's wrong and the cut is awful. I'm not paying for this."

Oh, great. Mrs. Steele was going to walk, and that meant it would come out of Missy's paycheck.

"And I'm not coming back here," she added as Missy removed the plastic cape.

"Good riddance," muttered the stylist next to Missy as Mrs. Steele stormed out the door.

"I thought her haircut was pretty," said the woman sitting in the chair.

It was, darn it all. Well, never mind. In another hour she'd be done and out of here and on her way to having the best Christmas ever. She got her broom and swept up the raven's-wing black locks left behind by the old crow, all the while hoping that a big tipper would come in before they closed.

The door opened and in came—oh, no, not this guy. Again, all the other stylists started cutting in slow motion. Nobody wanted Larry the lech.

"Welcome to Style Savings," sang out Shiloh, their manager. She went to where their cash register and appointment schedule sat to get old Larry checked in.

Larry was somewhere in his forties and, more than anything, he resembled the Pillsbury Doughboy. He was the king of the boob grazes, and there wasn't a stylist in the salon he hadn't hit on, including Missy. And she'd bet that today he was going to be all hers. Goody.

Sure enough, Shiloh was giving her The Look. She set aside her broom and came over to conduct Larry to her chair. She could practically feel his pervy stare burning her butt as they crossed the salon. Ugh.

She settled Larry in his chair and fastened a cape around his neck. “What would you like today, Larry?”

“You,” he said with a wink.

Gag. If she was married she could flash him her ring.

But marriage had never happened for her. Men had happened, two to be exact, one for each kid. Man Number One had been what some might have considered a youthful mistake, but she’d loved him like crazy. And when she got pregnant, they’d planned on getting married...until he tried to break up a bar fight and got killed for his trouble. Right before he’d been about to enlist in the army, too. Even though she’d had a child with him, his parents hadn’t bothered to make a connection with their grandchild. Hardly surprising considering that they’d pretty much written off their son.

That was sick and wrong if you asked Missy. People could change. She would never write off *her* kids. They were the best part of her life, even if things hadn’t worked out with their dads.

And boy, things really hadn’t worked out with Man Number Two, who was also out of the picture but for a completely different reason. She’d jumped into that relationship, driven by loneliness, anxious to find a father for Carlos. Man Number Two had been separated from his wife. They’d been ready to get a divorce...until wifey informed him she was pregnant. He told Missy just as she was about to break the news of her own pregnancy to him. (She’d read somewhere that condoms were 98 percent effective. Leave it to her to land in the 2-percent category!) His family was happy that he’d finally “come to his senses” and was reuniting with his wife. They’d never said anything to her face but she knew they’d never approved of her. She wasn’t about to stay around and be accused of screwing up the man’s life. So, figuring a pregnant wife trumped a pregnant ex-girlfriend, Missy had decided to let him go and stick with single parenthood. She was already raising a child on her own. What was one more? By Man Number Three, she was using more reliable birth control, but she wasn’t making smart choices. He hadn’t been good father material. He hadn’t even been good boyfriend material, the cheating rat.

After a couple more short-lived love attempts, she wised up and realized it was better to be alone than to settle. In fact, better to live up to her own potential as a woman than to worry about meeting a man who’d make everything fall into place.

Still, every once in a while she’d see a happy couple strolling the mall and sigh. Why were there so many Mr. Wrongs out there and so few Mr. Rights?

That wasn’t all she wondered. Sometimes she wondered how she was going to give Carlos and Lalla the kind of life they deserved.

But when those grim thoughts came along she pushed them firmly away. Yes, she’d made some mistakes and not everything had gone according to plan, but she had two great kids and she’d manage somehow. She was only twenty-six. She had time. Someday she was going to work at a fancy salon and be successful. And someday maybe her prince would come, ready to exchange his Corvette for a minivan, and carrying a wedding ring in his shirt pocket. Meanwhile she had...Larry.

“Larry, you know I’m not into guys,” she lied.

“I think lesbians are sexy,” he said.

“Let’s soak your head, er, wash your hair,” she said.

Larry always wanted his hair washed. That gave him a close-up view of the boobage.

She got him all washed up, trying to keep her boobs out of range. (Larry often had to scratch his nose during the process and his hands usually got lost on the way there.) Then it was time for a cut. His hair was thinning so he kept it long and shaggy in an attempt to compensate. He always reminded the stylists that he only wanted a little trim. After the incident with Mrs. Steele, Missy was going to take off barely anything.

She began, oh, so carefully, snipping.

“Could you take a bit more off here,” he said, pretending to reach for his ear. Before she could dodge his pudgy paw he’d scored his first boob graze. “Oh, sorry,” he said.

Yeah, that was why he was leering.

Was it the final straw, or rather follicle? Had she inhaled too many fumes while giving Bessy Hart her perm a couple of hours ago? Was she going insane? Who knew? But something got into Missy. Maybe it was the spirit of the Grinch.

She gave Larry a wicked smile and cooed, “No problem.” Then she picked up a section of hair and made a radical cut. Oh, that felt good. *Let’s do it again.* Another section of hair disappeared.

“Whoa,” said Larry. “Just a trim. Remember?”

“Trust me. I know what I’m doing,” she said with a Grinchy grin, and more of Larry’s hair vacated his head. Then she got out the clippers.

“Whoa, stop,” Larry cried.

Too late. She was already running the clippers up the back of his head.

“Hey,” he protested, trying to move his head. That got him a nick in the ear. “Yow! What’s with you?”

“Just giving you a trim,” she told him sweetly. “Like you said.”

“That’s no trim! It’s a scalping.”

“Oh, Larry, I’m sorry,” she said. “I guess we’d better stop.” With half his head buzzed and the other half shaggy. Hee, hee.

“You can’t stop now! I look like a freak.”

Yeah, it would be a shame to look like the freak he was. “Well, Larry, if you promise to keep your hands to yourself we’ll finish this.”

“What do you mean?”

She didn’t say anything, merely stood there, staring at him in the mirror until he actually made eye contact.

Then he scowled. “Okay, okay.”

She rewarded him with a smile. “You’re going to look totally buff.”

“Buff, huh?” He thought a moment. “Yeah, buff is good.”

When she was done, Larry’s hair was ready for the marines. Too bad the rest of his body wasn’t. She handed him a mirror and turned the chair so he could see the back of his head.

He nodded approvingly. “Hey, it’s not bad. I kinda like it.” He smiled up at her. “Nice job.”

Oh, great. She’d earned the undying devotion of Larry the lech. “Um, thanks,” she said.

She took off the cape and Larry forgot his promise and decided to stretch. She was too fast for him this time and danced backward, away from his lecherous paws. He frowned.

But when he paid, he gave her a ten-dollar tip.

She watched him go out the door and sighed. “Why do I feel like a pole dancer?”

Shiloh was next to her now. “You should be so lucky. Pole dancers make a lot more than we do.”

Two more cuts, two more decent tips and then she left to collect the kids from the babysitter and hit the road for their Christmas adventure. So far their Christmases hadn’t exactly been something you’d put on a greeting card. Often there’d been a boyfriend involved and a fight, or a tipsy neighbor stopping in to share the yuletide cheer, drink in hand, always a scraggly bargain tree with cheap presents that broke by the end of the day or weren’t what the kids really wanted.

She wasn’t going to come through in the Santa department this year, any more than she had last year, since Carlos still wanted a dog. It was hard to produce a dog when her landlady didn’t allow pets. “All that barking, my nerves couldn’t take it,” Mrs. Entwhistle said whenever Missy broached the subject.

Mrs. Entwhistle lived in the other half of the duplex Missy rented and was hard of hearing. She probably wouldn’t hear a Saint Bernard barking in her ear. She sure never heard when the teenagers

down the block were partying till all hours of the morning or racing their cars. Or when the couple across the street had too much to drink and started yelling loud enough to drag Missy out of a sound sleep.

“Dogs are so messy,” Mrs. Entwistle would add, strengthening her argument.

So were children. Missy never pointed that out. The last thing she wanted was Mrs. E. deciding she didn’t want children living next door, either. So, no dog for Carlos. They couldn’t really afford a dog, anyway. But how did you explain that to a seven-year-old?

And then there was Lalla. Oh, how she wanted a grandma. This was even more impossible to produce than a dog. It had just been Missy and her mom when she was growing up. So there was no grandma by marriage. And Missy’s mom was no longer on the scene. After wrapping her car around a tree while under the influence, Mom had gone to climb inside that great whiskey bottle in the sky.

Still, in spite of the no-dog-no-grandma thing, Missy was going to give her kids a wonderful Christmas this year. They were going to Icicle Falls to stay at the Icicle Creek Lodge, a big, beautiful place with a fireplace in the lobby and rooms that had fireplaces, too. At Christmas, the B and B not only provided its usual breakfast but dinner on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. One of her clients had told her about the place, and she’d been saving for it all year. This was going to be a Christmas her kids would never forget.

She could hardly wait to get up there and show them the real, live vintage sleigh in the lobby, decorated with greenery and ribbons and filled with presents and teddy bears. There’d be no dog and no grandma in there, but staying in such a cool place should make up for the fact that Carlos was getting a stuffed dog and Lalla was getting a princess doll.

The kids were literally bouncing with excitement when she picked them up. Or maybe it was a sugar buzz, since her girlfriend Miranda’s three kids were also bouncing. And yelling. And jumping on Miranda’s tired couch. Miranda was very fond of Oreos and thought them an excellent afternoon snack, usually ignoring the carrot and celery sticks Missy gave her to dole out. (“Hey, the kids like Oreos better.”) Carlos’s pants were muddy and ripped, a sure sign he’d been playing in the run-down playground half a block away, hopefully not unsupervised, and Lalla’s dress had a chocolate stain on the bodice while her ever-present tiara sat crookedly on top of her cornrows. Obviously, they had enjoyed themselves.

“Are you guys ready for fun?” she asked, hugging them both.

“As if they don’t have fun here,” snorted Miranda.

Of course they had fun at the babysitter’s. She gave them junk food and they could watch cartoons all afternoon. Miranda had a good heart, but was she a good influence? If only Missy could afford to put the kids in some fancy day care with planned activities and...carrot sticks.

Well, down the road. She wouldn’t always be at Style Savings. Oh, no. She was already looking at employment sites online. She’d done makeovers for a couple of her friends and was putting their before-and-after pictures in a notebook so she could show just how expert she was when she finally went to interview at that high-end salon. Unlike her mother, who never got beyond waiting tables at the nearby breakfast place, she was going to make something of herself. She was going to make her children proud.

And, meanwhile, this Christmas, they’d be making a memory worthy of the Hallmark Channel (which she’d be able to afford someday). She thanked Miranda, then said, “Okay, guys, let’s go,” and with a squeal they bolted for her beater Honda.

“Have a great time,” Miranda said, giving her a hug. “And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.” Which pretty much left the field wide-open.

The kids were already buckled in when she got to the car. She put on her own seat belt and then turned on the radio, choosing a local station that was playing Christmas carols. All right. *Now* they were ready. They pulled away from the curb, singing “Jingle Bells.”

They'd only just entered the freeway when Lalla yelled from the backseat. "Stop it, Carlos!" This was followed by, "Mommy, he's poking me."

"Carlos, cut it out," Missy said in her firm mommy voice.

"I'm bored," Carlos complained.

"Well, look for Priuses," she suggested. Dumb suggestion because this game called for the first person who saw a Prius to say "Beep-beep" and slug the other Prius hunter in the arm. "Never mind," she amended. "Just..." She fumbled around in the paper bag on the seat next to her and found what she was looking for. She tossed the plastic bag of munchies into the back. "Have a carrot."

"Yuck," said Carlos.

"Yuck," parroted Lalla.

"Well, you guys sure aren't getting any more sugar," she informed them.

"Are we there yet?" Lalla demanded.

Hmm. Maybe she should've picked someplace closer for their perfect Christmas.

[Chapter Three](#)

It's Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas

Olivia Wallace's Icicle Creek Lodge was decked out for the holidays. Her oldest son, Eric, and his burly friend Bubba Swank had hauled in her antique sleigh from the lodge's storage garage and it was now set up in the lobby, brimming with brightly wrapped faux presents. The staircase banister was dressed in greenery, and mistletoe had been hung in various key spots around the lodge and in the private family quarters. The big tree on the front porch was decorated with lights. Red poinsettias filled in any gaps.

Olivia Wallace smiled as she surveyed her domain. George would have been so proud.

That thought always comforted her. And made her a little wistful. How she wished her husband was here to help her run this place. Not because Eric wasn't doing a wonderful job. He loved the lodge as much as Olivia did, and would probably take it over someday. No, it was more because she knew how happy she and George would have been. They'd shared the vision for this place and he'd never lived to see what a huge success it had become. They'd grown, added on, developed a reputation. Oh, yes, George would have loved this.

Well, most of it. Olivia hid a frown as one of her more difficult guests came down the stairs with his wife, his rolling suitcase thump-thumping behind him. He missed the last step and went tottering off sideways.

Oh, no! Please don't fall. This descendant of Ebenezer Scrooge would sue her by New Year's Day if that happened.

He righted himself, thank God, and she could hear him muttering all the way across the lobby to where she was manning the reception desk. "Those stairs are uneven."

At times like this Olivia really didn't like being an innkeeper. She braced herself for the barrage of complaints.

Sure enough, Mr. Braxton marched to the reception desk, his wife walking behind him like a reluctant shadow, and slammed down his keycard. "We didn't sleep a wink last night."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Olivia said.

"The people down the hall were up partying all night."

There had been two younger couples who'd been en route to Seattle to spend Christmas with family and had decided to stay the night. Olivia had suggested they try Zelda's for dinner and they'd gone merrily off, full of good cheer. They'd probably overindulged in huckleberry martinis or the other house specialty, a Chocolate Kiss. She imagined they'd been a bit noisy on the way back to their rooms. Still, that wasn't her fault.

"Making a racket in the hall at all hours," Mr. Braxton continued.

"I'm terribly sorry," Olivia said. "I do wish you'd come down and said something to me. I'd have been happy to talk to them."

“Ha! Come down in my bathrobe and pajamas? I think not. And breakfast this morning.”

Olivia stiffened. “What about breakfast?”

“All those carbs.”

No one made crepes like Olivia. She served them stuffed with wild huckleberries and berry-flavored whipped cream. And she always served some sort of protein along with them. “If I remember correctly, breakfast also included sausages,” she said, some of the sweetness seeping out of her voice. “And fruit.”

“I thought it was very good,” said Mrs. Braxton, her voice barely above a whisper.

Her husband ignored her. Now he produced his printed bill. “I want a refund.” Behind him, his wife studied her feet.

Ooh, of all the cheap, contemptible... Olivia would have liked nothing better than to tell this man exactly what she thought of him.

But men like this rarely saw their shriveled souls for what they were. So, instead of saying, “You win the bad-boy lump of coal award for the day,” she said, “I’m sorry your stay wasn’t to your satisfaction. We try hard to give all our guests a pleasant experience.”

“Well, you failed with me!”

“I can refund fifty percent of your room price.” Sometimes, when guests had a complaint (and that was rare), Olivia gave them a gift certificate for a free night. Not Mr. Edward Braxton. She had no intention of encouraging him to return.

“I want a full refund,” he insisted.

This man was a bully. And there was only one way to treat bullies. “Mr. Braxton,” she said firmly, “you stayed in a lovely room with a beautiful view. We even left Sweet Dreams chocolates on your pillow.”

“My wife ate mine,” he muttered.

“And we gave you a lovely breakfast this morning, featuring my very own gourmet crepes. Which you ate. You made no complaint at breakfast, nor did you inform me of any special dietary needs when you registered. And there was a place on your registration form to do so. Now, you are a businessman, correct?”

He looked at her suspiciously. “Yes.”

“Then I ask you, would you give yourself a full refund?”

His brows formed an angry V. “Now, see here.”

“It’s Christmas, and in the spirit of the season, I’m offering you a fifty-percent discount. Would you like it?” she finished in a tone of voice that plainly said, “Take it or leave it.”

“Fine. I’ll take it.”

“An excellent decision,” she said.

“But I don’t like it,” he growled after they’d finished the appropriate paperwork.

“I’m sure you don’t,” she agreed.

“Come on, Thelma,” he snapped at his wife, and made for the front door.

“Bah, humbug,” Olivia muttered as she walked through the door marked Private into her family’s living quarters.

Right now the only family living there was Eric and her and Muffin the cat. They could easily make room for a wife. And children. Or remodel.

Three bedrooms were at the back. The rest of the family quarters was like any other small home, entered through a front door with a window of etched glass. Once inside, visitors found a great-room-style layout with a small but state-of-the-art kitchen, a dining area and a cozy living room, complete with an electric fireplace, where she could hang Christmas stockings.

Three stockings hung there now. One was marked Olivia, and her boys usually slipped in a couple of stocking-stuffer-size boxes of Sweet Dreams chocolates. The next stocking in line had Eric’s name on it. That she would fill with nuts and candy bars and his favorite hot sauces and jellies from

Local Yokels, which specialized in Northwest products. The last stocking belonged to her younger son, Brandon, who was currently in Wyoming but who managed to get home for Christmas every year. Brandon was her wandering boy, trying to find himself. But his internal compass always brought him home for important holidays. His stocking would get filled with Snickers bars and Corn Nuts, his all-time favorite snack.

Normally the sight of her decorations cheered her. The ceramic nativity set on the mantel had been a gift from her mother-in-law years ago, and she cherished it. Her little tree was loaded with ornaments she'd collected over the years. And she'd hung mistletoe in the archway between the kitchen and dining room. She frowned at it. Why did she put that up every year?

Her frown deepened. All right. This was a very bad attitude she had brewing. She'd been perfectly happy until her encounter with her grumpy guest.

"Mr. Braxton, I am not going to let you ruin my day." She picked up her knitting (a scarf she was finishing for her friend Muriel Sterling-Wittman for Christmas) and got to work. Knitting always made her feel good. She imagined herself poking Mr. Braxton in the bottom with one of her knitting needles, and that made her feel even better.

She'd barely gotten started when the doorbell rang. Oh, she knew who that was, and the mere thought of what she'd find when she opened the door was enough to drive the memory of Ebenezer Braxton from her mind. Yup, there stood Kevin from Lupine Floral, looking like a fashion model in his trendy jeans and gray wool coat. And he was wearing the red scarf she'd knit for him the Christmas before.

"I have something for my favorite innkeeper," he sang, holding out a huge holiday floral arrangement.

"You'd better not let Ann Marie or Gerhardt Geissel hear you say that," Olivia cautioned with a smile. Although, knowing Kevin, he said the same thing when he delivered floral arrangements to them.

He grinned and winked. "I can see you're all ready for Christmas here at the lodge."

"Of course we are. It's my favorite time of year."

"This place could be a movie set," he said with a dramatic sigh. "Olivia, you are the queen of Christmas."

"Well, if I'm the queen, then you and Heinrich are my princes. I look forward to your lovely arrangements every year. Please tell him that."

After a few more pleasantries, Kevin was on his way to flatter more of the residents of Icicle Falls, and Olivia took the arrangement over to the kitchen counter and removed it from its box. As she'd expected, it was a feast for the eyes with red and white roses, delicate ferns and baby's breath. Candy canes bloomed inside the big red ribbon bow wrapped around the vase. Gorgeous.

She didn't have to read the card to know it was from Eric but did, anyway, just so she could delight in the message. "Merry Christmas to the world's best mom. Love, Eric."

She pulled a tissue from her sweater pocket and dabbed at eyes that had suddenly grown misty. She had such a wonderful son. She was so lucky that he'd opted to stay in Icicle Falls and help her run the lodge. As if that wasn't enough, every year he sent her a Christmas bouquet. He'd been doing it for fourteen years, ever since George died. At first the arrangements were small and simple, fitting a young man's budget, but as he'd gotten older they'd gotten more elaborate. And more expensive.

The door from the reception area opened and he walked in.

"Look what came," she greeted him.

"Well, whaddya know. I guess Santa came through again."

"Santa Son," she said with a smile. "They're lovely. I wish you wouldn't be so extravagant, though."

"You're worth it," he said, stopping to kiss her on the cheek before going to the refrigerator to forage for lunch.

“There’s leftover potpie,” she said. As if he didn’t know; as if that wasn’t what he was looking for. It was one of his favorite meals and she made it for him on a regular basis.

“Got it,” he said, pulling out the casserole dish. “So, has everyone checked out?”

“All but our last guests. I haven’t seen them yet.”

“The couple with the baby? They just left.”

“Well, then, that’s it until our Christmas guests start arriving. I’ll get their room and the Braxtons’ cleaned after lunch.”

He shook his head. “Why you gave Morgan time off the day before Christmas Eve I’ll never understand.”

“Because we don’t usually have that many rooms to clean. She can have a break and we can save some money.”

“We don’t need to save money anymore. And it would be nice if you didn’t kill yourself right before the Christmas rush.”

“Cleaning two rooms isn’t going to kill me. I’m not that old yet.”

Her son wisely didn’t argue the point.

She fingered a red rose. “I’m glad we’ve got so many people staying with us for the holidays.” Having other people to think about made it so much easier.

“Yeah, we’ve got plenty this year.”

“It’s going to be wonderful,” Olivia predicted.

“As long as we don’t get any more Braxtons,” Eric said. “I hope you didn’t give him a refund.”

“Did he ask you for one?”

Eric nodded. “Ran into me in the upstairs hall. Please tell me you didn’t give in to that jerk.”

Olivia shrugged. “Fifty percent off.”

Eric shook his head. “You’re too soft, Mom.”

“Well, it’s Christmas.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to humor jerks like Braxton.”

“I couldn’t bring myself to be as small as him, not at Christmas. Anyway, he’ll get what’s coming to him. We all do at some point.” And sometimes people got what they didn’t deserve, like losing a spouse. Olivia shooed that thought away. “Heat me up a little of that potpie, will you? Then I’m going to get those rooms cleaned and finish my shopping before the day gets away from me,” she said, forcing cheer into her voice. “Can I pick you up anything?”

“Nah, I’m fine. And I’ll clean the rooms. I’ve done all my outside work for the day and I need something to do.”

He was always working, but she decided to let him have his way.

“All right, then, you’re in charge,” she said when lunch was done and she was ready to leave for the store. Actually, he was pretty much in charge even when she *was* at the lodge, which left Olivia free to enjoy cooking for their guests. What would she do without him?

It was a question she asked herself a lot lately. She wanted her son to find a nice woman and settle down, but so far no one in Icicle Falls had fit the bill. What if Ms. Right lived somewhere far away and didn’t want to move to Icicle Falls? Olivia wasn’t sure she could run the lodge alone, wasn’t sure she wanted to. But she hated the idea of closing it. It had meant so much to George. And to her.

What will be, will be, she told herself. Meanwhile, she had a lot to be thankful for. Eric was here, helping her. And Brandon, her baby, would be coming home for Christmas. Both her boys at the lodge. It was going to be a perfect holiday. Well...almost perfect. As perfect as it could be without George.

Once at the Safeway, she got busy picking up the items on her grocery list. Her friends Pat Wilder and Ed York had come in to get some lunch at the deli and she stopped to visit with them for a few minutes. Honestly, those two acted more like infatuated teenagers every day, she thought as she made her way to the produce department.

She realized she was suddenly feeling slightly Scroogey herself. She could have blamed it on the grumpy Mr. Braxton but she knew the real reason. Still, it was better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.

Probably better to quit hanging mistletoe around the lodge, too.

No, no. People needed to celebrate. Someone would make good use of that mistletoe, even if it wasn't her. She made a quick detour to the baking aisle, grabbing some chocolate chips and more flour. When she got home she was going to bake cookies.

* * *

Eric had dinner with his mom, then left her finishing up a knitting project and enjoying some old Christmas movie on TV to go meet up with his pals for a pre-Christmas beer fest at Zelda's, a favorite hangout for locals and tourists alike.

He found the place brim full of holiday cheer and people. A tree dressed up in pink ribbons and lights greeted visitors when they came in and the bar was decorated with silver tinsel and bells. The cocktail waitresses all wore Santa hats. So did half the customers.

Eric went over to the table where Bubba Swank and Rob Bohn were waiting for him. They hadn't waited to order, however, and had both already made a dent in their beers. Bubba raised his in salute. "Merry Christmas. Got your shopping done?"

"Of course," Eric replied. "Unlike you slobs, I don't leave it till the last minute."

"You also don't have anybody but your mom to shop for," Rob said.

His mom and his brother, but it didn't take long to buy iTunes and Bavarian Brews gift cards. "Yeah? And who've you got to shop for besides Ivy?" Eric retorted. Rob and Ivy had a couple of kids, but Eric knew who bought the presents for them, as well as all the other people on their Christmas list.

"My parents," Rob insisted. "And my brothers."

"And *you* buy their presents? Not your wife?"

Rob was silent, and Bubba gave a snort.

"So, you going to Seattle to see Gina?" Eric asked Bubba.

"First Christmas with the girlfriend," Rob put in. "I'm betting that's a yes."

Bubba frowned at his beer. "Actually, that's a no."

"Uh-oh," said Eric.

"Uh, you still have the girlfriend, right?" asked Rob.

Bubba shook his head. "She broke up with me day before yesterday. By text."

"Seriously?" Of course, breakups happened all the time, but Eric was surprised to hear about this one. Bubba was a nice guy, good-looking with a six-pack and the kind of strong jawline that seemed to draw women like a magnet. He owned a big place on Mountain View Drive and had a successful business. Plus he was a great guy. If Bubba couldn't hang on to a woman, what hope was there for someone like Eric, who wasn't exactly calendar-boy material and who worked running his mom's lodge?

"That's harsh, man," Rob said. "How come?"

"She said she didn't see it going anywhere."

"Which meant she didn't want to move," Rob deduced.

Bubba nodded. "I think that's about it."

"I guess she doesn't know what a gold mine Big Brats is. Did you tell her you're a millionaire?"

Bubba shook his head again and took a long swig of beer. "Only a half millionaire. She can probably do better in Seattle."

"I doubt it," Rob said. "But that's the problem when you get involved with tourists. They come up for some laughs and then they return to their real life. You were good enough to flirt with, hang out with this summer, but when it came right down to it..."

"I guess I should've known," Bubba said with a shrug.

"Yeah, you should have," Rob said. "Drink local and date local."

“First you gotta find someone local,” Bubba said. “We can’t all meet a cute little cheerleader in high school and live happily ever after.”

Now Rob wasn’t looking quite so happy.

“Uh, you guys are okay, aren’t you?” Bubba asked.

Rob smiled but it seemed forced. “Sure. We’re okay.”

“Yeah?” Eric wasn’t buying it.

“Okay, we’ve got some shit going on. Well, I’ve got some shit going on.”

Rita Reyes was at their table now, ready to take Eric’s order. “Merry Christmas, Eric,” she said. “How are things at the lodge? Are you guys full up?”

“Not quite,” he said. “There’s still time to make a reservation for Christmas dinner.”

“Someday I’m gonna treat myself and do that. Your mom’s Christmas dinners are legendary. So, what can I get you?”

“Hale’s Mongoose.”

“I’ll have another,” Rob told her, and she nodded and hurried off. “There’s a fine-looking sugarplum,” he said, admiring the view as she threaded her way among the tables.

“Hello,” Bubba said, tapping him on the head. “Married man?”

Rob frowned.

“So, what’s going on with you two?” Eric asked, returning them to the subject at hand.

Rob contemplated his beer. “Sometimes I wonder if, aw, I don’t know. I think we got married too young.”

“Don’t tell me you’re thinking of leaving Ivy,” Eric said.

“I don’t know,” he said again. “Sometimes I feel like I missed out somehow.”

Eric couldn’t believe his ears. Rob and Ivy were the perfect couple. In fact, he’d envied his old high school buddy. Rob seemed to have the perfect life. He’d married into a great family, and Christmas Haus, the shop he and Ivy owned, was a gold mine. It was originally called Kringle Mart, and they’d recently changed the name and doubled their business. In addition to sitting on a gold mine, he was married to a pretty woman who was about as nice as they came. A perfect life, a perfect marriage. If Rob couldn’t make it, who could?

Lately, Eric had been feeling the pull toward marriage. It seemed as though all his friends were happily paired off, either married or in a serious relationship. Well, it had until tonight.

“You’re nuts if you leave,” he told Rob.

“Yeah, probably,” Rob agreed. “But I wish I’d stayed single like you, man. Your life is your own. You can do what you want. All of that, plus good home cooking.”

Who was he kidding? Eric’s life was tied up in running the lodge and watching over his mom. Yeah, the home cooking was great and there was nothing else he’d rather do than run the lodge, but living with your mom didn’t exactly make for a great sex life.

“Yeah, right,” he said. “My life’s so great, that’s why I’m hanging out with you two—who, by the way, are a real pair of downers.”

“Love can be a downer,” Rob said morosely.

Rita was back with their beers. Just in time because Rob had swilled all of his. He lifted up his glass. “Okay, guys, here’s to the new year. Let’s hope it gets better.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Eric said. And *better* for him would include a woman. He was getting tired of his bachelor existence, tired of things not working out. His younger brother didn’t seem to mind going through women like candy but Eric did. He was ready to settle down.

Except if someone in a practically perfect marriage like Rob could be discontented, if a nice guy like Bubba couldn’t hang on to a woman, what chance did he have? And where was he going to find Ms. Right? Date local, great idea. But he’d tried the local girls and nothing had come of it. He’d even expanded his search to nearby Wenatchee and that hadn’t panned out, either. Was he too picky?

No, he decided. It wasn't picky to want what his folks had. They'd been so happy. Maybe that was some older-generation thing. Maybe it didn't work that way for people his age anymore. Who knew?

All he knew was that hanging out with his friends should have put him in a good mood and instead they were a holiday bummer.

Never mind, he told himself. Santa's still alive and well, and it's Christmas in Icicle Falls. Your life's not so bad.

But hey, Santa, if you're listening, it could be better.

[Chapter Four](#)

I'll Be Home for Christmas

"What do you mean you won't be coming for Christmas Eve?" John Truman's mother demanded.

John had not been looking forward to this conversation, which was why he'd put it off to the last possible minute. "I'm doing something with Holland."

"With her family?" his mother asked suspiciously. When it came to Christmas and her kids, Mom didn't like to share.

"No. Just the two of us. But we'll be back Christmas Day."

His mother harrumphed. "That's all well and good, but it'll just be us on Christmas Day. What am I supposed to tell the aunts and uncles, and your cousins? And Ben's bringing his fiancée, too."

As if John hadn't already met his big brother's girlfriend a million times. Anyway, if all went according to plan, he'd be showing up on Christmas Day with a fiancée of his own.

When he shared this with his mother, she wasn't all that excited. "So, you're going to do it."

"Yep. We're driving up to Icicle Falls tonight to stay in this really cool B and B and I'll propose on Christmas Eve. Then we'll come by the house on Christmas Day and show you the ring."

There was a long moment of silence on his mother's end. "Well, John, we love you and you know we'll welcome her into the family."

And that was as much as he was going to get out of his mother. She and Holland hadn't quite warmed to each other yet. Mom thought Holland was self-centered. Translation: Holland didn't always want to go along with Mom's social plans for the family. Holland thought Mom was controlling. Translation: Holland didn't always want to go along with Mom's social plans for the family. They were both strong women but John knew they'd really come to love each other. Eventually. Once Mom got over the idea that Holland wasn't good enough for him.

All moms thought that about their kids, right? Except she loved his brother's fiancée, probably because Margo fell right in with everything Mom wanted to do, from impromptu family picnics to Father's Day barbecues. But Holland had a family of her own, and an important job at a Seattle ad agency. She had a social life, too. She had girlfriends, and a book club, and that all took time. And she and John had friends. They couldn't necessarily drop what they were doing and come running whenever Mom called. That was what Holland said when she balked at Mom's latest plans for family (and girlfriend) solidarity. Fortunately, she'd never said it to Mom's face, or there would've been hell to pay.

"I just hope you know what you're doing," his mother added.

Oh, yeah. Feeling the motherly support here. "Thanks, Mom."

"You haven't even been together a year."

"Eleven months." Close enough. And they'd known each other before then. They worked in the same downtown building and had hung out at lunch sometimes.

"And you two did have that rough patch," she continued.

"Everybody has rough patches, Mom." He remembered his parents doing their share of fighting when he was in grade school. "Anyway, that was months ago." He and Holland had worked things out since then. Okay, so they still had a fight once in a while. Every couple had disagreements, right?

“We’re fine now.” And they were going to have a great time up in Icicle Falls, where he’d booked them a room at the kind of classy place Holland would love, with a fancy lobby and fireplaces in the rooms. Oh, yeah. It was going to be totally romantic. He had everything planned out. A late dinner at one of the local restaurants, shopping the next day, followed by a romantic sleigh ride and maybe some skating in the outdoor rink in the town square. Then, after Christmas Eve dinner, he’d whip out the ring he’d bought, get down on one knee and ask her to marry him. After that they’d have champagne in their room, get a fire going in the fireplace and heat up the sheets. Oh, yeah. Holland was going to be blown away.

“I just don’t want to see you hurt,” his mother said.

Had his mother been a wet blanket in another life? “What makes you think I’ll get hurt?” He wasn’t an idiot, for crying out loud.

Another silence on the other end of the line. “Honey, sometimes you’re not...”

“Not what?”

“Not very realistic.”

Okay, sometimes he *was* an idiot. But how could he have known Sarah Schoop was out to use him? Okay, so she’d gotten him to buy her a few expensive presents. He hadn’t minded. He liked being generous. Maybe he liked being obtuse, too. He and Sarah would probably still be together if his mother and sister hadn’t done an intervention after his sister overheard Sarah asking him to pay for her boob job. They’d explained that Sarah loved him only for his 401k. Yeah, Sarah was a mistake. But he was older and wiser now. Once a guy passed thirty, he developed a little more discernment. And one thing he knew—Holland didn’t need to use him. Well, except as a sex toy.

“You need a woman with a good heart,” said Mom.

“Holland has a good heart.”

“I’m sure she does...somewhere.”

“Mom,” John said sternly, “you’re talking about the woman I love.”

“Don’t remind me,” she said.

“Okay, I have to go,” he said, pissed.

“All right, but what am I supposed to tell the family tomorrow?”

“Tell them that the next time they see me I’ll be engaged.”

That didn’t make his mother happy but it sure made him smile.

He was barely off the phone with Mom when his smartphone rang. This time it was the love of his life. “Hey,” he said. “I’m just leaving to pick you up.”

“Yeah, about that.”

Oh, no. His mind latched on to the image of a building getting whacked by a giant wrecking ball. He could practically hear the crack and crumble of his carefully laid plans. “What?”

“I have to work late.”

Two days before Christmas? Was she working for Ebenezer Scrooge?

“You go on up and I’ll meet you there.”

Oh, yeah, take two cars to a romantic getaway. “No way. We’ll wait and go tomorrow morning.” He’d paid a good chunk of change for the room but so what?

“No, you may as well have fun. Just go on up.”

How was that supposed to be fun without her? Here he was, planning to sweep her off her feet, and instead she was pulling the rug out from under him. “I’m not going up without you. That’s lame.”

“No, it’s not. Anyway, you paid for the room. You might as well use it.”

“It wouldn’t be the same without you. I’ll wait and we can go up later, after you get done at work. I’ll drive. You can relax.”

“There’s nothing relaxing about the way you drive,” she informed him.

John frowned. Honesty was important in a relationship, but sometimes Holland was *too* honest, especially when it came to his flaws. “Thanks a lot,” he muttered.

“Come on, John. Don’t be like that.”

“Like what?”

“All disappointed and grumpy.”

Kind of hard not to be disappointed. He’d had this all planned, and she’d known about it for a month. Since when was she so gutless that she couldn’t tell her boss she couldn’t work late?

“It’s been a sucky day. I just want to get a good night’s sleep in my own bed,” she continued, further bruising his ego.

Yeah, God forbid she’d want to cuddle up to him. They were serious, an item. Weren’t they supposed to want to be together?

“So I’ll see you up there tomorrow. Where are we going again?”

“The Icicle Creek Lodge,” he said, but not grumpily. He was not grumpy.

“Okay, see you there,” she said, and ended the call.

No matter what Holland said, he wasn’t going to go off and start their romantic getaway alone. “This reeks,” he grumbled as he tossed his phone onto the seat next to him and drove home.

Home was a one-bedroom apartment in Seattle’s Belltown. He guessed he’d find some Bruce Willis movie on Netflix and kick back with a beer.

And let that room at the Icicle Creek Lodge sit empty?

Yeah. That was the gallant thing to do because what kind of turd-brain went off and started a romantic weekend without his girlfriend?

A pissed one.

The car was all loaded with the champagne in the trunk, along with his suitcase. And, as Holland had pointed out, the room at the Icicle Creek Lodge was paid for. So, he could go home to his apartment and sit around feeling grumpy or he could go on up to Icicle Falls and check in to a really cool place, get everything ready for when she came up tomorrow. Hmm.

No, it didn’t feel right.

Still, he’d already paid the money. He called Holland again.

“What?” she snapped.

“Are you positive you don’t want to go up tonight? I’ll give you a back rub when we get there,” he promised. Holland loved his back rubs.

“No, I don’t. I’m not sure when I’ll get done and I’m tired from having to come in early. And I told you, I had a sucky day. I’ll see you up there tomorrow. Okay?”

Well, there was no reason to get snappy. Oh, except for PMS. And if that was what was going on he’d be better off letting her get a good night’s sleep.

“Fine,” he said, a little snappish himself. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“See you tomorrow,” she said in a quasipatient tone of voice, as if she was dealing with someone who was a severe trial.

He knew when to give up. If she wanted to take two cars and waste gas, fine. “Okay.” He wanted to urge her not to take all day getting up there, but then he remembered that possible PMS thing so he didn’t. Instead, he said, “See you when you get there.” He added, “I love you, babe,” but she’d hung up. Well, he was the more romantic of the two of them. Weird, but there you had it.

He was also the thrifter of the two, probably because he didn’t make as much as she did. There was nothing wrong with being thrifty, and hey, if she was determined to bring her own car, then he’d go up tonight.

He turned toward I-90, brought up Pandora and got the Christmas music going. Once he hit Icicle Falls he’d maybe enjoy a late dinner at Zelda’s restaurant, where he’d planned to take Holland, just to check it out. And wish she was there.

She’ll be there tomorrow, he reminded himself. And then everything would go according to plan.

He made good time until he neared Snoqualmie Pass. Then the sleeting rain that had started around Bellevue turned to snow and traffic slowed down. There was a veritable logjam of cars in the

spot designated for putting on chains, and with the way the snow was coming down, he could see why chains were required. Maybe Holland wouldn't want to deal with that. Damn. He knew he should have waited and come up with her.

He quickly called her and got an impatient hello. "Hey, chains are required."

"Okay, thanks."

"Uh, you okay with doing that?" This was their first time going to the mountains together. What if she couldn't put on chains?

"I do know how to put on chains, John," she said.

"Okay, fine. You home yet?"

"Yeah, and I'm about to take a bath."

Oh, there was an image to make a man smile. "Get good and relaxed," he said. "See you tomorrow."

"Okay, bye." And then she was gone.

He pulled up behind a Honda that had seen better days, where a woman in a black parka and jeans and tennis shoes was struggling to get chains around one of her rear tires. Unlike Holland, who was leggy and svelte, this woman filled out her pants with a well-rounded bottom. She wore glasses and had curls of blue hair escaping from a red knit hat. Two little kids, a Latino boy and a cute little girl with big brown eyes and cornrows, were hanging out the back windows, trying to catch snowflakes in their mittened hands. Meanwhile, the woman was still struggling with the chain. It wasn't hard to see why; she wasn't wearing gloves. Her hands had to be frozen. She stopped to blow on them and glared at the chain.

Here was a job for Super John. He got out of his car and came over. "Can I help you with that?"

She looked up at him gratefully and rubbed her hands together. "That would be great. I just can't seem to get these stupid chains on."

"It's hard when your hands are cold."

"I forgot to pack my gloves. Here we are, going to the mountains, and I forgot to pack gloves. Can you believe it?"

"Looks like you were packing for more than yourself," John said. The girl had joined the boy at his window and was now regarding John. She was cute as a button with her big brown eyes and that goofy tiara on her head. Her parka was a little frayed but clean. The boy's coat looked too small for him but it, too, was clean and his mittens looked new.

"My mom needs help," said the boy. "I could've done it."

"I'm sure you could," John agreed. He wondered what had happened to these kids' dads. This woman sure wasn't alone because she was a dog. She had a round face and blue eyes and Angelina Jolie lips. Cute, he thought. Not that he was interested, of course. It was just an observation.

He introduced himself to the mom and learned her name was Missy Monroe. Cute name, too. "Where are you guys headed?"

"To Icicle Falls," she said. "We're going to spend Christmas up there."

"No way. Really? Me, too," he said.

"All I want is to get there in one piece. I've never put on chains before," she confessed.

She had them laid out properly, with the connector facedown. Unfortunately, she was putting them on the wrong tires. "Well, you made a good start," he said, "but I'll bet this is a front-wheel-drive car, which means you need those on the front tires."

She took that in. "Oh. Oops."

"Easy to fix," he said. "Let's move the tires off the chains and try again."

She nodded and hopped behind the wheel. Moments later the chains were matched with the correct tires.

"Gosh, I'm glad you came along," she said as he hooked them up. "Even if I got them on, they would've been useless."

“No problem,” he said. Yeah, good thing he’d decided to come up today. Otherwise, this poor woman would’ve worked away at those chains until her hands turned as blue as her hair. “So, where are you staying in Icicle Falls?”

“We’ve got reservations at this place called the Icicle Creek Lodge.”

“No way,” John said again. “That’s where I’m staying.” That made her face light up like a Christmas tree. Uh-oh. Maybe she thought he was single. “Uh, with my girlfriend,” he added.

Her face reddened. “Oh.” She looked over to his car, where there was plainly no girlfriend.

Now he felt embarrassed. “She had to work late. She’s joining me tomorrow.”

The woman nodded slowly, taking that in. “Oh.”

“And are you, uh, meeting someone?”

“No.” For a moment she seemed a little sad, but that was replaced by a forced brightness. “Just the kids and me. We’re going to have a perfect, old-fashioned Christmas.”

He nodded approval. “Great.” He finished with the last chain and stepped away from his handiwork. “Okay, you’re good to go.”

“Thanks,” she said, and smiled at him as if he was some sort of genius.

He waved away her thanks. All in a day’s work for a holiday superhero. “If you have any problem, I’ll be right behind you.”

“Well, I guess I’ll see you there,” she said.

“Yeah, see you.”

“And thanks again for helping me with the chains.”

“No worries.”

She gave him a bashful smile and then hopped into her car. He could hear her instructing the kids to buckle up. The car started and the sounds of “The Little Drummer Boy” drifted out to him. The son leaned his head out the window and waved, and John waved back.

“Come on, Carlos, we’re not moving until you’re buckled in and the window is up,” said his mom.

Up went the window and the car chunk-chunked its way back onto the highway. John gave them one last wave and then got busy with his own chains. Someday that would be him, he thought as he pulled back onto the highway, taking his kids up to the mountains for Christmas. Maybe they’d even cut their own Christmas tree.

They’d have to do that without Holland. She wasn’t much into hiking, even in nice weather.

But she liked to shop and she liked good wine, and that was another reason he’d picked Icicle Falls. He’d done a search for holiday getaway spots in Washington and the town had come up at the top of his search list. It wasn’t hard to see why. In addition to its charming town center it had lots of those cute shops chicks loved, along with local wineries and good restaurants. Oh, yeah. It was a Holland kind of place. And the Icicle Creek Lodge was the frosting on the red velvet cake. They were going to have a great time.

[Chapter Five](#)

Do You See What I See?

There were oohs and aahs from the kids the moment they hit town. Driving past all those buildings with the fancy paintings on them and the cute little signs dangling above the doors, the potted Christmas trees strung with twinkle lights sitting on every corner, it was as if they’d gone to Germany for the holidays. One shop even had a life-size Nutcracker standing guard outside. Wow.

Once they’d gone through the town itself, Missy’s directions sent her down Icicle Creek Drive, a wooded road surrounded by snowy woods. “See the llama farm?” she said, pointing. “That means we’re almost there.”

Sure enough, there was Holly Road, the side road veering off the main drag. She turned onto it and followed a scenic, curved road. She could already see herself walking down it, taking the kids into town to see the sights.

Then she saw their home for the holidays. Carlos and Lalla stared in awe at the Icicle Creek Lodge as if it was the Taj Mahal. It was pretty impressive—a big stone-and-timber building that looked like something from another time with a sweeping front lawn carpeted with pristine snow. The roof was strung with icicle lights and a tree bejeweled with colored lights sat on the front porch, which ran along the front of the building. Oh, yes, just like in the picture.

“Wow!” cried Carlos, racing toward the lodge.

“Not so fast,” Missy said. “I need you to help me carry in our stuff.”

“I can help,” offered John Truman, who had just gotten out of his vehicle. He’d caught up with them quickly after chaining up his own car and, true to his word, had been behind them all the way like some sort of guardian angel.

He sure was a cute guardian angel, with hair the color of red some women would pay a fortune for and freckles strung across his nose. He wasn’t as good-looking as other men she’d fallen for but she was willing to bet he also wasn’t a sleaze bucket.

There would be no falling for this guy, she reminded herself. He was already taken. “That’s okay,” she said, handing a grocery bag of snacks to Lalla, who, like her brother, couldn’t seem to stand still.

“Mama,” Lalla gasped, “I just saw Santa Claus.”

“There’s no such thing, stupid,” Carlos told her scornfully.

“Is, too!” Lalla shot back.

“Don’t call your sister stupid,” Missy scolded. She wanted to add that there was, too, such a thing as Santa, but couldn’t quite bring herself to do it, considering that Santa had been rather a disappointment to her children, especially Carlos. “Where did you see Santa, princess?” she asked her daughter.

Lalla pointed to the lodge. “I saw him go inside.”

“Santa doesn’t stay in houses,” Carlos said impatiently. “He lives at the North Pole.”

So much for not believing in Santa, Missy thought with a smile, and gave her son the backpack with his clothes.

“Maybe he’s visiting friends,” John said. Missy had a trash bag with the kids’ presents in it and he insisted on carrying that, as well as the beat-up carry-on suitcase she’d picked up at a garage sale.

“Maybe we’ll see him,” Lalla said, and hurried up the front walk.

“Race you!” Carlos dashed ahead of her.

“I think they’re stoked,” John observed.

“They’re not the only ones,” Missy said. Oh, yes, this was going to be such a great Christmas. And she didn’t need a man to make it great. Still, as she made her way up the walk with her new friend beside her, she couldn’t help wishing he wasn’t already taken.

* * *

James wished he was in jeans and a shirt instead of this red Santa suit. If he were, he’d be more inclined to linger and talk to Olivia Wallace, the friendly owner of this B and B who was checking them in, supervised by a big orange cat sitting on top of the check-in desk. There was something pleasant about this woman, something that said, “Take a deep breath, relax, everything will be all right.”

She was plump and round-faced. Her hair was as gray as his, a pretty silver-white, softly curled and very feminine-looking. Put her in a red skirt and a lacy blouse and some granny glasses, and she could pass for Mrs. Claus. She’d moved her wedding ring to her right hand, which told him she was widowed. It would be comforting to talk with someone who’d been where he was.

Olivia smiled. “I swear, you’re the most realistic Santa I’ve ever seen.”

Realistic or not, who went out in public dressed like Santa? He felt like an idiot. “I don’t normally parade around in this outfit,” he said.

"I kidnapped him from work," Brooke explained. She petted the cat and it purred and leaned into her hand for more. "He's a professional Santa."

"Oh, that must be fun!" said Olivia.

It had been. Once upon a time. James shrugged.

"He's been Santa for as long as I can remember," Brooke continued, warming to the subject. "At family gatherings, for church events, orphanages, fund-raisers. He always goes to Children's Hospital and visits the kids."

Okay, this was becoming embarrassing. And now voices outside announced that more guests were arriving.

"I think I hear children," he said. "Let's get out of here before they see me and wonder what Santa's doing wandering around the lodge two days before Christmas."

"They'd probably love to meet you," Brooke said.

Well, he didn't want to meet them. "Honey, I really want to change out of this outfit."

"Of course," Olivia said, handing over the keycards for their adjoining rooms. "We serve breakfast from eight to ten. If you have any special dietary needs that weren't addressed when you registered, please let us know. Christmas Eve we'll be offering a special dinner at six and on Christmas Day we'll serve dinner at five."

"Fabulous," Brooke said.

"The elevator's right around the corner if you prefer to use it. I hope you'll enjoy your stay." Olivia smiled at both of them again, but her smile seemed to linger on James.

"I hope we'll see you around," he said, and then felt instantly guilty. That had been...too friendly. His wife had been gone only a year. He had no right to be smiling at a woman, taking in her generous curves. Her breasts.

His thoughts traveled back to Faith's mastectomy. A double. She'd mourned the loss of her breasts, but he'd just been glad to have her alive, still with him. Who cared about the breasts? Of course, she'd talked about reconstructive surgery and that had made him nervous. Even though it was a common procedure, what if something happened?

Something *had* happened. She'd barely gotten her new breasts when the damned cancer came back, this time in her spine. He'd nursed her the best he could, tried to learn to cook. But his specialty had remained heating soup. Thank God they'd had friends who brought over hot dishes. Thank God for his daughter. He wished he was thanking God that his wife was still alive.

Now the voices were getting nearer. Santa was in no mood to see anybody. He grabbed Brooke's suitcase and marched for the elevator.

She hurried after him, catching up with him just as the doors opened. As they stepped off the elevator and walked under the archway toward the hall where their rooms were, she said, "Oh, look. Mistletoe."

That made him even grumpier. But it wouldn't do to be grumpy when he was with his daughter and she'd gone to so much trouble to make their Christmas good. "Well, then, I'd better kiss my angel," he said, and gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek.

She hugged him back. "We're going to have fun."

"Yes, we are," he lied.

"Look!" came a childish voice from the lobby. "There he is."

Crap. "Okay, let's go," he said, and picked up his pace.

* * *

"I saw him!" Lalla cried, pointing to the third landing. "He was right there and he was kissing a lady."

If he was on the third-story landing, he was gone now. The kids would love it if there was somebody here playing Santa Claus. Missy hadn't taken them to the mall to see Santa yet and she'd love to get their pictures taken with him.

Of course, they'd written letters to Santa. She'd helped Lalla write hers and it had read, "Dear Santa, I love you. Please bring me a grandma. My grandma is in heaven with the angels and can't bake me cookies or read me stories. Merry Christmas. We will try to make you some cookies if Mommy can buy some cookie mix." They hadn't gotten around to the cookies, but Missy had assured Lalla that Santa would bring her something, anyway.

Carlos hadn't been quite so loving in his letter. He'd written it himself and it was short and to the point. "Dear Santa, if you kant bring me a dog furgit it. Merry Kristmas, Carlos." Well, okay, so Santa wouldn't come through. They'd still have fun.

How could they not? She looked around the huge, beautifully decorated lobby. The carpet was dated but in pristine condition with a muted floral pattern. Sturdy ornate furniture gathered around a big fireplace on the back wall, impressive with its style and the carving on the mantelpiece. The fireplace was laid with wood, ready to be lit, and Missy could envision herself standing in front of it. A grouping of three large potted poinsettias sat on the coffee table and two wingback chairs flanked it. A baby grand piano occupied space in one corner and Missy knew from what she'd read on the website that later that evening someone would be seated at that piano, giving the guests a concert. But best of all was the antique sleigh sitting front and center in the lobby. It was decorated with red ribbon and greens and filled with presents and teddy bears. Some delicious aroma hung in the air, bringing the promise of cookies.

"Well, aren't you two the most beautiful children ever," the woman at the reception desk greeted them. "What are your names?"

"I'm Lalla. I'm named after a Orca princess." Lalla pointed to her tiara.

"Moroccan princess," Missy corrected her, and Lalla nodded vigorously.

"Of course. Anyone can see you're a princess," said the woman.

That was the plan, always had been, from the moment Missy learned she was having a girl. She'd picked the name, not just because of her daughter's mixed ethnicity and skin color, but because she wanted Lalla to know she was special and to grow up confident that she could become anything she wanted. There would be no low self-esteem in *her* family. No, sir.

"This is Carlos," Lalla continued. "He doesn't believe in Santa."

The woman put a hand to her heart. "Oh, dear. I'd better not tell Santa that. It will hurt his feelings. You know, Icicle Falls is his favorite place to visit," she said, lowering her voice conspiratorially.

"I saw him," Lalla said eagerly. "Who are you?"

"I'm Olivia Wallace, and this is my home. I hope you'll enjoy staying with us. We have you and your family in 205," she said, addressing both Missy and John, who'd been standing next to Missy, enjoying the show. She handed a little envelope with the keycards to John.

He turned red from his neck to the tips of his ears. "Um, we're not really together. We just, uh, met on the way up."

Olivia flushed. "Oh, excuse me."

"John put the chains on my car," Missy told her.

"Well, that was nice. It's good to see that chivalry is still alive and well," Olivia said approvingly.

"It sure is," Missy agreed. "Okay, guys, let's go see our room," she said to the kids. They were off with a whoop, racing for the stairs. "And don't run," she called, trailing after them with their bags.

She was still within earshot, so she heard Olivia say to John, "Now, there's a sweet young woman."

"Yeah, she's pretty nice," John said.

He thought she was pretty nice. She thought he was pretty nice, too. Pity he wasn't in the market for a woman.

Except that even if he was, a classy guy like that who drove a nice car and not an old beater wouldn't want to hang out with a girl like her, someone who lived in a dumpy neighborhood, shopped

at Goodwill and garage sales and fed her kids mac and cheese from a box. At least she didn't smoke anymore. She'd kicked that habit and was already saving money as a result. Still, she'd never make enough to put her in his class. Men like John dated girls who worked in offices and shopped at Nordstrom and Macy's, girls who never got their hair done at inexpensive salons.

She frowned. It shouldn't matter what a person wore or what sort of car she drove. It was what she was like on the inside that counted. And on the inside Missy was an office-working, Nordstrom-shopping, high-end-salon kind of woman. Someday, someday soon, she'd have the life to prove it. And meanwhile, she was staying at a classy place and giving her kids a classy Christmas. *So there*, she concluded, lifting her chin. That chin-lifting stuff wasn't such a good idea, made it hard to see the stairs. She tripped, and her suitcase slid down a couple of steps. Oops. She grabbed it and kept on going, her cheeks burning. *Nordstrom on the inside*, she told herself.

* * *

John watched out of the corner of his eye as Missy Monroe and her kids went up the stairs. He wondered if Missy was seeing someone, if there was some man hoping to step into her ready-made family. There had to be someone. She was too cute and too sweet to be totally on her own.

Although if she *was* seeing someone, he probably would've come up here with her. After all, who did Christmas alone?

None of your business, he reminded himself as Olivia gave him his keycard.

"You're in 207," she informed him.

Right next door to the Monroe family. For a millisecond he wondered if he wanted to be that close to Missy and company. He felt a little like an alcoholic who'd just been offered a bottle of twenty-year-old Scotch.

But then he chided himself for being stupid. Yeah, Missy was cute, but so what? He was in love with Holland, and he wasn't some low-life scum who hit on other women when he was about to become engaged, so it was no big deal. That resolved, he went to his room.

Oh, man, Holland was going to love this. The room had it all—antique furniture but a state-of-the-art TV and DVD player, a small fridge for his champagne, a view of the mountains out the window, a snowy-white comforter on the king-size bed and an electric fireplace. Oh, yeah. This was going to be romance to the max. He could picture Holland and him in that big bed going at it and then cuddling together, watching the flames. If only Holland had come up tonight.

Well, she'd be here tomorrow, and that would come soon enough. Meanwhile, what was he going to do with himself? He went to the window and looked out. The snowy scene beckoned him. What the hey, might as well go check out the town, find something to eat.

He heard whoops coming from 205 as he walked past and for a moment wondered what Missy and her kids were going to do now.

Never mind. He wasn't up here to hang out with Missy Monroe and her kids. He was here for a romantic getaway with his girlfriend.

Who hadn't arrived yet. With a sigh, he walked down the hall.

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