

# MIRACLE ON Woof Street



**KIMBERLY HANSON**

*Miracle on 30 Woof Street*

KIMBERLY HANSON

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# *Chapter One*

## REX



“Come on now, buddy. Don’t look at me like that.” I can’t help but keep the grumble out of my voice as I look down at Tag. He tilts his head to the side, giving me an accusatory glare. The Santa hat on his head moves with him but somehow doesn’t fall off. It never does. “I can’t give you any more treats. It wouldn’t be fair to the others. They already think I play favourites.”

He growls, lifting his lips to show me his sharp teeth.

“It doesn’t have to be like this.” I narrow my eyes and put on my best *‘I’m not afraid of you’* face as I cross my arms and glare back at him. We enter into a staring contest, neither one of us wanting to back down.

We stay like that for a moment—me trying to act tough, him actually being it.

I roll my eyes and let out a sigh. “Fine, but only because I can’t be here all day.”

I toss Tag another biscuit from my treat pouch before turning and walking out of my office into the hallway. I pretend not to hear the loud sigh behind me, followed by the dramatic flop of Tag throwing himself onto his doggy bed.

“Good job, Rex. You’re a pushover with your own dog, and an overly dramatic one at that,” I mutter as I make my way down the hall. Tag may be a gruff German Shepherd, but he’s really the biggest teddy bear and I don’t know what I’d do without him.

Even if he bullies me into giving him more treats.

As soon as I open the door to the play area, I’m instantly welcomed by a rush of fur and yipping from three very excited dogs. The artificial tree in the

corner of the room is guarded by a red picket fence adorned with twinkling lights. The empty boxes of 'presents' underneath it gives the room a warm feeling. Fake garlands hang around the windows. I've placed little knick-knacks all around. My feeble attempt at holiday cheer, making me feel like I'm spending Christmas with more than just my four-legged friends.

"Alright, alright. I know you smell the treats. This has nothing to do with me." I bend down and rub Lucy behind the ears as she stares back at me with her big brown Labradoodle eyes. "I know you love me. Right, Luce?"

She licks my hands as the other dogs playfully circle my feet. I can't help but laugh at their excitement.

I have three rescue dogs with me right now in the shelter. Lucy, a Bolognese named Fluffy, and a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever named Ginger.

I pick Fluffy up while Ginger runs excited circles around the room. It breaks my heart that no one has come to adopt these lovable pups, but in a town as small as Candy Cane Creek, there aren't a lot of families searching. I have to rely mostly on people contacting me from surrounding areas, usually looking for a specific breed.

In the meantime, I love them all as if they are my own, even if I can't keep them all. I've done the best I can to include them all as family, including setting the shelter up on the same acreage as my home on the edge of town. It lets me be close enough to everything I need, but just far enough away that I have room for all the pups to run.

And then there is Tag.

I've had him since before I opened the shelter last year. He is my buddy. My best friend. Even if he takes an attitude with me when it comes to treats. He doesn't get *too* jealous of the other dogs. Usually.

He came into the Miracle on 30 Woof Street Pet Rescue like many of the other animals I take in. He was abandoned, left out in the snow around Christmas, shivering, and cold. I'd taken one look at him and knew that there was no way he was going to anyone but me. Ever since then, we've been inseparable.

I put Fluffy back on the ground and get all three to line up in front of me. I make them do simple commands to earn their treats. Nothing fancy. A 'sit' here and 'shake a paw' there. It is the week before Christmas, after all. There is no way I'm going to start earning the reputation of being the town Scrooge. Especially not in a holiday-crazed one like mine.



After making sure all the dogs have everything they need for the night, I tuck them into their beds and say goodnight. At least I don't have to worry about them finding out Tag guilted me into giving him an extra treat.

Letting out a sharp whistle for my wayward pup, I stop briefly in my office to grab my jacket. He comes running as I slip it on, falling in beside me, still with that ridiculous Santa hat on. All I can do is shake my head and chuckle.

He had found the hat in an old box last year and growled at me until I put it on his head. His sharp white teeth bared in a mocked, but still intimidating, snarl until the red felt was placed on his head. I don't know how he keeps it on, or why he even wants to, but he hasn't let anyone near it since, and even sleeps with it on.

Crazy dog.

I lock up the shelter and walk to my truck, opening the door, and moving aside for Tag to jump in first. We make our way into town, cranking up the Christmas carols and singing along to 'Winter Wonderland' more enthusiastically than necessary while driving through town. Well, I sing; Tag howls like he is calling on the rest of his pack somewhat in time with the chorus.

After the end of a song and a brief rendition of 'All I Want for Christmas is You,' I park in front of The Candy Cane Cafe. "Stay here."

He gives me a dramatic huff as he slumps down in his seat.

"Don't worry, I'll grab you a treat and we'll go for a walk." With an eye roll, I open the door and jump out, shivering at the blast of cold that hits me. In a few rushed steps, I'm at the door, smiling at the warmth that welcomes me with the smell of coffee.

"Hey, Rex! I'll be right with you!" Cassie shouts as she carries an empty tray through the swinging doors into the kitchen.

I take in the earthy, rich aroma of the ground beans mixed with the sugar and spice of the cookies Cassie undoubtedly went to collect.

My gaze roams to the festive decor as I lean against the counter. The tree in the window is expertly decorated with its carefully placed bulbs and lights. The window itself is sprayed with fake snow and a cartoon drawing of a reindeer holding a mug and candy cane painted in the corner. The sun is just setting, letting in the last of the day's light, giving everything just an added hint of sparkle.

I need to up my decorating game.

“Sorry about that, Rex. I didn’t think you were going to make it in today. You don’t usually come in this late,” Cassie says as she wipes her hands on her apron.

“I got caught up at the shelter, but I couldn’t pass up my daily Holly Jolly Latte.” Even if it will most likely keep me up most of the night now.

“You got it. Anything for Tag?” she asks as she turns, grabbing a to-go cup.

“The usual for him, too. You don’t want to see him when he doesn’t get his gingerbread cookie.”

Cassie laughs as she glances up from pumping syrup into my cup to look through the window. In typical Tag fashion, he straightens in his seat, tongue lolling out to the side of his mouth.

Never one to shy away from attention.

“We wouldn’t want to disappoint him,” Cassie chuckles as she moves to the espresso machine.

“Will you have a booth at the Christmas Festival this weekend?” I ask as she pours the frothed milk over the coffee. My eyes track the movement, knowing that the sweet and spicy mixture will be in my hands shortly.

She gives me a smile as she creates a perfect holly with the milk on my coffee. “I sure am. I know it’s a little silly, considering the cafe is only a block from the square, but there’s something different about being there while everyone’s walking around. The excited chatter. The kids running around.” She gets a starry-eyed look on her face as she places the latte in front of me on the counter. “What about you? Will you have one for the shelter?”

“Yup. I’m hoping to raise enough money to expand so I can provide training for my dogs to be therapy animals.”

“Rex, that’s so amazing and thoughtful.” Her hand closes on top of mine with a squeeze. “You’re so amazing.”

“I don’t know about that.” I feel the blush on my face. I’m suddenly very aware that there isn’t anyone else in the cafe with us, which is a first. While Cassie and I exchange ‘hellos’ and small talk, the cafe is usually too busy for any sort of meaningful conversation. Or touching. The touching is new.

I take my hand and pull out the wallet from the pocket of my jeans, taking out enough cash to cover my drink and Tag’s cookie. Anything to avoid Cassie’s appreciative gaze. Not knowing how to respond, my default is to *avoid, avoid, avoid.*

“Trust me, Rex. Not everyone would look for ways to help people and animals, instead of making money. Anyone can tell that you love those dogs, and the homes that they end up going to.”

*Avoid. Avoid.*

“Uh, yeah. Well, they’re great.” I put the cash on the counter and take my drink and the offered cookie bag. We lock eyes and there’s a glint to hers that hasn’t been there before. I don’t know what to make of it, so instead, I do what I do best, and make an excuse to leave. “Anyway—thanks for the coffee. And the cookie. My night would be unbearable with a miffed Tag.”

“Anytime, Rex.” She hesitates, rocking from her heels to the balls of her feet while she looks down at her hands and then back up at me. “You know, the Christmas Eve dance is coming up...”

How had I forgotten about the dance?

*Wait, is she waiting for me to ask her?*

My hands are sweaty as I grip the items in my hand. “Oh, is it? I seem to have completely forgotten.”

“Are you going with...?” she starts, but I glance at the clock behind the counter and shuffle back to the door, pushing it open as I back away.

“I’m really sorry to have to—uh—caffeinate and run, but I have to go. Thanks again, Cassie! See you tomorrow!”

*Smooth, genius.*

I shake my head as I open the passenger side door to my truck to find an impatient dog tilting his head at me. “Don’t judge me. You weren’t there.”

Tag yips at me and flops his tail against the seat.

“Yes, I’m aware I could have handled that better, but this is *Cassie*. She supplies me with my caffeine. I can’t flirt with her. I can’t flirt with anyone.” My heart starts beating wildly in my chest. “Wait, was she flirting with me? Did I read that wrong?”

I’m now asking my dog for advice on flirting. Maybe I am as pathetic as I think I am.

I grab Tag’s leash and clip it on to his collar as he jumps out of the truck. “Just for that, I’m going to make you wait until *after* the walk for your cookie.”

Tag sighs but starts down the street beside me. I don’t dare sneak a glance inside the cafe in case Cassie’s watching me. Instead, I walk with my head held high, drinking my peppermint and spice latte, relishing in the secret mix that Cassie refuses to reveal to anyone.

I don't need to focus my thoughts on what happened in the cafe, or the horror that will come tomorrow when I have to face Cassie again.

I certainly won't think about the upcoming dance.

Nope, those aren't even going to cross my mind.

While not thinking about any of that, I walk into a pole that hadn't been there before. A pole that is wearing a very expensive-looking wool coat, that is also now covered in my Holly Jolly Latte.

My eyes trail up to find that it's not a pole, but the face of a woman with wild auburn hair and striking green eyes. Eyes that right now are shooting lasers at me that would melt Jack Frost.

If I thought what happened a few minutes ago was bad, this is much, much worse.

## *Chapter Two*

## HOLLY



“Trish, you don’t understand. It’s like this town threw up Christmas.” I can’t help the disdain lacing my words as I look up and down the street.

Every pole is wrapped in ribbon and lights. Every tree is wrapped with multi-coloured bulbs and ornaments. Every window is painted. Every bench is covered in ribbon.

It’s as if I landed in the North Pole, not Candy Cane Creek, British Columbia.

Although, I should have figured it would be this bad by the name.

“So, get your car fixed and get out. What’s the problem?” my best friend, Trish, says on the other side of the phone, sounding more than mildly disinterested. I can picture her picking at her perfectly manicured nails, finding that more interesting than my current predicament.

“The mechanic said he can keep it in the shop, but they might not be able to get the parts in and fixed until after Christmas. I could be stuck here until the twenty-seventh.”

“That’s ridiculous. Who makes a client wait that long?”

“This holiday-crazed town,” I mutter under my breath. I readjust the grip on my suitcase as I wheel it behind me, wondering what I did to deserve to get the assignment in this Christmas snow globe of a town. The only thing that made it worse was having my car break down the minute I crossed the nauseating ‘Welcome to Candy Cane Creek’ sign. It even boasted a waving Santa decorated in striped candy.

*Just my luck.*

“Well, I guess you have to stick it out, then. It’s not like you had plans at

home.”

While I don't enjoy the holiday itself, the stark reminder that I would have been alone doesn't help my mood. My heart sinks at the thought of the last time I *wasn't* alone for the holidays. A time that was longer ago than I care to admit, but still burns a hole in my heart.

I place my phone between my shoulder and cheek, pulling up my falling purse when I'm jolted by someone walking into me and the quick assault of a sickly-sweet aroma mixed with hot liquid running down the front of my coat.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I bark. “Trish, I'll call you back.”

My gaze lands on a dog wearing a Santa hat. Next to the annoyingly festive fur ball are a pair of black boots. I trail my eyes up to see dark jeans make way to an ugly Christmas sweater partially covered by a black leather jacket. I can't help the anger that rushes out of me as I look down at my brand-new tan wool coat.

“Do you have any idea how much this coat costs?” I yank my hand off my luggage and pocket my phone with the other.

“I am so sorry. I'll clean it for you. I mean, get it dry cleaned for you.” His voice is deep and gravelly. Not what I was expecting from someone wearing a knit sweater with elves climbing a ladder up a Christmas tree.

“I don't think anywhere in this town would be able to clean a Massimo Dutti coat.” I frantically swipe at the coffee, hoping it doesn't stain.

“I'll take it to the next town over. There's a great dry cleaner. Carl can clean anything. Even a Mario Dotti.”

“Massimo Dutti,” I correct.

After deciding that I've gotten off all the peppermint sugar monstrosity that I can, I look up into the most striking pair of blue eyes.

“Sure, that's what I said.” The overly jolly Christmas elf with the nice eyes gives me a smirk. “I am really sorry. I didn't see you there.”

“Yeah, well, maybe you should be more careful when walking your dog.”

*Nope, don't let those blue eyes and that smirk fool you. He ruined your brand-new jacket. The one you saved for months for.*

“Hey, now that's a little unfair. You didn't see me either.” Mr. Blue Eyes tilts his head as he looks at me. “I'm sorry, we got off on the wrong foot and this isn't the impression of Candy Cane Creek I want you to have. I'm Rex Wellington.”

He holds out his hand to me, and all I can do is look at it as if it's going to bite me. *Rex Wellington?* A name like that sounds like he should have a

number like ‘the third’ behind it while living in a mansion in the city, not standing in the North Pole with Santa Paws’ helper at his feet. “How do you know I’m new here?”

“In this town? I don’t know if you noticed, but it’s not that big. Everyone knows when there’s someone new.” His hand is still reaching out to me, his eyebrow now raised.

I slip my hand in his, feeling the warmth of his palm against mine. I feel a rush pass over me at our connection.

*Interesting.*

“Holly Day,” I answer, watching to gauge his reaction. It usually goes one of two ways. They either don’t take in the ridiculousness of my first and last name together, or they think it’s the funniest thing in the world.

As a child, I thought it was the best name in the world. Now, not so much.

“Holly Day, huh?” he says with a smile, not letting go of my hand. “How fitting.”

“For?”

“For being here over Christmas.”

“Oh, there’s nothing fitting about that.” I take my hand back from him, once again grabbing my suitcase. “And I didn’t intend to be here over the holidays. I came to do my job and leave. Sadly, my car had other plans.”

“Your car?” he repeats, running his finger over his lower lip as he looks at me pensively.

“Yes, it decided to break down as soon as I crossed that...” I wave my hand, not knowing how to describe what I had seen. “Welcome sign.”

“Ah, yes, that sign is something.”

We stand for a moment, looking at each other. The silence is awkward, but not as much as the dripping sugar that is passed off as coffee is running down my expensive wool coat.

“So anyway, if you could point me toward the closest hotel, that would be great.”

“Oh, it’s right over there.” He points behind me. I turn to look at a large red brick building with an iron hanging sign that reads ‘The Mistletoe Inn.’

*They really play up Christmas here.*

“Thanks, I’ll just make my way over...”

“Oh, it’s full,” he says as I turn back to him. He hasn’t moved from his spot. His dog tilts his head as if judging me.



“Do you work there?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know it’s full?” I raise my eyebrow as I ask him.

“It’s the week before Christmas.”

I look at him, confused, as if that should mean something to me.

“Right. You aren’t from here,” he continues. “The weeks leading up to Christmas are always busy with various events leading up to the big day, like the cocoa walk, pyjama shopping…”

“Okay, you’re going to need to elaborate on that last one.” I pinch my nose as I feel a headache coming on. I’m not sure what sort of Christmas dimension I’ve stumbled on, but I am not prepared.

“Everyone gets into their pyjamas, does some last-minute shopping, and then meets at the town square for hot cocoa and carols around the tree.”

I stare at him, not knowing what to say. My mind can’t wrap around the picture of adults and children wearing their pjs in public to do all of that. “Alright—where’s the next hotel?”

“There is no ‘next hotel.’ We just have the one.”

“Of course you do,” I spit out the words before taking a breath, trying to find some inner calm to deal with this situation. “Is there a bus to the next town? A taxi? Anything in this holiday-loving town stuck in time?”

“Not at this time of day.” He looks down at his dog and visibly sighs. “Look, I know this will sound ridiculous, but I have a guest house that’s free.”

I narrow my eyes at him, considering his offer. If someone offered this to me in the city, I’d go running the other way. “I don’t know…”

“I promise I’ll try my best not to spill anything else on you.”

I let out an audible sigh and look up to heaven as I try to figure out how I landed here.

“But I really will get that dry cleaned for you,” he continues. “If you don’t feel comfortable, I understand. I’m sure I can find someone else in town with a spare room or drive you half an hour to Hope.”

It is starting to get dark, and to be honest, the last thing I want to do is get back in a car and drive after coming all this way. Looking at the man in front of me, I don’t get any mass murderer vibes, only a strikingly handsome man in a Christmas-loving elf sort of way. My experiences of travelling through small towns, especially at this time of year, have shown me that people genuinely want to help one another. Even strangers.

I take one last look around the deserted street before my shoulders sag and I surrender to my circumstance. “Thank you. I would appreciate a place to stay.” I look up at his smiling face and feel my ice-cold heart start to thaw a little. “But just for tonight.”

“Just for tonight,” he says as he looks down at his dog. “Now, let’s go get you settled.”

He reaches behind me and takes my bag, rolling it behind him as he turns and walks down the street. “I can take care of my own luggage.”

“I know,” he says as he looks behind me, not stopping as he strolls down the street with his dog at his side.

“Then let me.” Every ounce of my independent, strong-willed city girl wants to yell and demand that I can do it myself. I force myself not to stomp my foot like a toddler as I rush to catch up with him.

He stops for a moment and turns to me. “Just because you can do something doesn’t mean you have to.” He looks at me for a moment before continuing. “I take it you aren’t used to having someone do things for you. Take care of you.”

Wow, if there was ever an understatement of the year, that would be it.

Thinking back, I can’t remember a time where I didn’t have to do things on my own. Where I had someone that would carry my luggage for me, make me a cup of tea, or even open a door for me.

Not even with Josh.

“That’s what I thought.” Rex turns and continues to stroll down the sidewalk.

I watch for a moment as this strange, but handsome, man walks away with my possessions, and I can’t help but feel—content. As if it is perfectly normal.

As I follow them down the road, I can’t help but wonder if I’m making a big mistake or stumbling onto something that might work in my favour.

# *Chapter Three*

REX



“This is it. I know it’s not much, but I hope it’s okay for you.” I step aside and let Holly in, watching her as her eyes dart around my small guesthouse. It hasn’t been updated since the early eighties. Faded floral wallpaper lines the living room walls. The kitchen has yellowed, once-white cabinets with a gold trim and painted countertops. Fake garlands line the tops of the cabinets and the fireplace in the living room is still decorated with matching greenery and red stockings. I’d completely forgotten it was still decorated for Christmas.

I lived here when I first bought the shelter and was having the main house renovated. I know it’s not a luxury accommodation or anything Holly was no doubt used to, but it had to beat having nowhere else to sleep.

“It’s—quaint,” she says with a tight-lipped smile as she stands stiffly in the centre of the living room. “And festive.”

“Yeah, can’t really get away from the Christmas spirit around here.” I place her bag on the floor and gesture to the small hallway to my right. “The bedroom and bathroom are down there. There’s a small closet just outside the bathroom door with towels and extra linens. I’m sorry, there isn’t much in the way of food here, but I can bring you whatever you need from the main house. Come up and grab whatever you like, at any time. The door is always unlocked.”

“You leave your front door unlocked? Aren’t you worried about being robbed?” Her eyes open wide.

“In Candy Cane Creek? No.” I laugh as I shake my head. “You’re more likely to have someone walk in and drop off a casserole than take anything from you.”

“Right.” Her voice trails off as we look at each other. There was an energy shift on the ride over. The cab was quiet, but it felt—different. She felt different. I couldn’t explain it any other way than it was as if the fight she had in her had lessened.

“Anyway, I’ll let you get to it.” I make my way to the door. My hand rests on the doorknob, but I hesitate to leave. I turn to find her watching me. “I’m sorry today didn’t go as planned. It’s not the best introduction to our town, but I hope you learn to love it.”

“It’s not your fault,” she says quietly. “Thank you for letting me stay here. You didn’t need to open your home to me, especially after the way I treated you.”

Sadness crosses her face as she looks down at her feet.

“You’ve had a hard day.” I take a moment and look at her. *Really* look at her. The coffee stain on her cream-coloured coat doesn’t look as bad as it had before. The earthy scent of the coffee mixed with the sugary sweet peppermint lingers in the air. I’ll need to get it to Carl first thing in the morning. I’m not sure how fast he’ll be able to get it back to me, but I might be able to bribe him with a little holiday cheer in the form of a latte and cookies from The Candy Cane Cafe.

What really grabs my attention is how she’s lost the fight she had on the sidewalk. I don’t know why, but I want to find out what made her sad, and who made it so hard for her to accept help and kindness.

“Yeah…” Holly starts as she looks down at her feet before she brings her gaze back up to me. “I’m still sorry. I appreciate what you’ve done for me.”

Silence hangs between us. I can neither move away from her, nor find the right words to say. Tag yips at my side, reminding me how awkward I’m being.

“What’s with the hat, anyway?” Holly asks as she looks down at Tag.

“Oh, that,” I chuckle as I give Tag’s head a pat. “I found it in an old box when we moved in, and he claimed it. Won’t let anyone touch it until Boxing Day.”

“And it just—stays on?” She tilts her head to the side, appraising Tag.

“Yup, even sleeps with it on. He’s almost become the town’s unofficial Christmas mascot at this point.”

“Alright then.” Her eyes linger on Tag for a moment until she brings her gaze up to mine. “You have a very interesting dog.”

“He’s something alright.” I mutter as I look down at the animal in

question. I love him, but he's definitely quirky. The sudden silence and awkwardness between us is almost too much to bear. I shift between my feet, placing my hands in my pockets. "I'll be back in a little bit with some food to hold you over until the morning."

"You don't have to do that," she protests.

"Please, let me. Oh, and I can take your coat when I come back. I'll have it cleaned for you right away."

A small smile graces her lips. One so small I almost miss it. "Alright, thank you."

I nod and rush out the door. My heart is beating fast, my palms are sweaty.

*Was is happening to me?*

I rush back to the main house, checking in with Lucy, Fluffy, and Ginger on the way, seeing they still have food and water and are comfortably dozing in the light of the tree. Tag stays at my side as I make my way to my house and head straight for the kitchen, pulling out the makings of a midnight snack.

*Or an eight-thirty snack.* I correct myself, taking note of the time on the microwave.

I turn the kettle on and rummage through the cupboards. Pulling out the gingerbread and snowman sugar cookies, along with snowflake crackers, I place them on a wooden carrying tray with a mug. Not too bad for not expecting guests.

Reaching over my counter, I pull two candy canes from a vase and place them next to the cookies.

Is this overkill for a woman who hates Christmas? Probably.

Was I going to change it? No.

I have the most inexplicable urge to prove to her that Christmas really is the most wonderful time of the year, even if I don't know why I'm so determined she knows it.

My electric kettle clicks off and I open the cupboard. My metal coffee tins are thrown in amongst carefully arranged boxes of tea, ranging from caffeinated to herbal. I was told they were for different occasions, or different moods, but they've always baffled me. I never drink it, only offer it to guests, but I can't bear to be without it.

Pulling out the box of Christmas tea, the smell of black tea, oranges, and spices washes over me, stirring up memories I'm not ready to face. Not today

with a stranded stranger in my guest house.

Without dwelling on it any longer, I make a cup of tea and an instant coffee for myself. It's not my ideal coffee, but it works when I don't want to brew a full pot and judging by the way Holly recoiled at the smell of my Holly Jolly Latte, I'm going to say she wouldn't appreciate my gingerbread-flavoured java.

Balancing all the items on the tray with the addition of milk and sugar, I head to the door with Tag at my heels. I shiver as I shut the door behind me and make the small walk from the main house back to the guesthouse.

The door opens before I can knock, revealing Holly in a black sweater and blue jeans, looking even more beautiful than she did before. I shake my head as I walk past her. I'm here to bring her tea and cookies. I'm not here to think about how her dark auburn hair reminds me of the ruby ribbons wrapped around the poles of the town square, or how her deep green eyes are like Christmas trees.

"You really didn't have to go to all of this trouble," she says as she closes the door behind me and Tag.

"It's really nothing." I place the tray on the coffee table. "I hope you don't mind tea, and I didn't know what you take with it, so I brought a little of, well, everything." I look down at my offerings and realize that I may have tried a little too hard. Or not hard enough. What was the proper protocol for someone stuck in a town they don't want to be in?

"I like tea." She smiles as she sits down on the edge of the oversized plaid chair. She clasps her hands and rests them on her legs, bouncing a little as she looks between me and the tea.

"It's just tea, I promise." I give her the best *'I'm not a serial killer,'* smile as I pass her the mug. "Do you mind if I join you? I don't want to impose."

"Not at all," she smiles and wraps her hands around the mug. "I'm sorry. Things like this don't happen in Vancouver, and if they do, it's usually not a good thing."

"I can promise you Candy Cane Creek isn't like the big city." I sit on the couch across from her and take a sip of my coffee, trying to hide my wince from the overly bitter instant grounds. Tag sits at my feet, curls up, and almost immediately begins to doze.

*I really need to stop drinking this stuff.*

"I can see that." She takes a sip of her tea and looks back up at me. "In case you couldn't tell, I'm not much of a Christmas person."

“You? Nah. You fit right in with Mrs. Claus and the elves,” I joke.

“Hardly. What I’m trying to say is, I’m sorry for how I acted. I try to avoid anything to do with the holiday.”

“So what are you doing here, then? This town is an odd destination if you don’t like Christmas.”

Holly sighs. “I’m here for work. I’m a Freelance Blogger, and my client wants different Christmas traditions in small towns all over B.C.”

“So you’re being paid to travel here to write about a topic you hate?” I place my ankle on my knee and take a sip of coffee as I drink her in.

“Hate is a strong word—intensely dislike? Actively avoid? Either way, the client hired me to write a series, and Candy Cane Creek is my last stop. I was just supposed to come in, take some pictures of the town, get a feel for how you celebrate here, and get back to the city well before Christmas Day. But now...” She looks down at her mug, shoulders slumping.

“And you did all of this without booking a room at the Inn? How long were you planning on being here?” My mind races as I try to figure this woman out. I don’t know who would travel to a town for work, only to not plan to stay.

“Honestly? The afternoon. I was just going to take some pictures, ask around about the different traditions, and then head home.” She shrugs, staring down at the mug in her hands.

“Now you’re stuck in a town that looks like Santa’s Village, drinking Christmas tea in a stranger’s guesthouse, without a way to get home.” I feel sympathy for the woman across from me. I know what it’s like to be stuck somewhere you don’t want to be; in a situation that makes you feel lost. Defeated. Hopeless. Looking at Holly right now, it looks as if she’s feeling all of those things. An idea crosses my mind and I sit up suddenly, drawing her gaze. “What about your family? You’ll miss being home with them for Christmas.”

“No, I won’t.” She relaxes back into the chair, holding her mug tighter. “My parents live in Toronto and do their own thing. They usually go on a cruise or a lavish vacation somewhere warm.”

“Siblings?”

“Nope. Just me. It honestly makes it easier for me. That way I don’t have to pretend to like the tradition of being shoved in a room with people I see once a year, getting presents I’ll never use, and having to take off perfectly good days I could use to work.”



I rest my free arm along the back of the couch as I watch her. I know the feeling of being alone on Christmas well, which is what makes me feel closer to her. I was her—except for the hating Christmas part. I’ve always loved the holiday, but I know what it’s like to feel so helplessly alone. Those are my own ghosts of Christmas past, and ones that I want to keep locked up tight along with the boxes of tea in the cupboard in my kitchen.

“Well, since you’re here, you can have the true Candy Cane Creek holiday experience if you’d like. For your assignment, of course.”

She guards her smile with her mug. “Of course. I might as well. You know, for the assignment.” She takes a sip of her tea and places her mug on the coffee table before resting back in her chair. “What would this entail?”

“Well.” I lower my leg and place my mug on the coffee table with hers. “We have events pretty much every day from now until Christmas. Tomorrow is the cocoa walk. We also have a Christmas market this weekend, and the pyjama shop. Everything leading to a dance on Christmas Eve.”

“Oh, I don’t plan on staying that long. As soon as my car is ready, I’m heading back home.” She doesn’t bother to hide her annoyance as she crosses her arms over her chest.

The thought of her leaving sends an unwarranted pain through my heart, and I’m not sure why. I’m not looking for a date. I’m certainly not ready for a relationship after what happened.

So why does it make me panic thinking she wouldn’t be around?

“While you’re here, why don’t I take you around? If you are here on Christmas Day, there is a big feast at the old barn for anyone who doesn’t have their own dinners. Most of the town ends up there by the end of the night anyway, but it’s a big potluck to make everyone feel welcome and included.”

“The town really does that?” her voice is filled with awe as I continue talking.

“Yes, it’s one of my favourite things about the town. No matter who you are, or what you’re going through, you’re welcome to dinner.” I think back to my first Christmas in town. I felt so lost and alone. I wasn’t even going to show up to the town dinner until my neighbour, Edith Jenkins, forced me to.

“That’s really nice,” she says softly as she wrings her hands in her lap.

Her eyes widen and hold mine. I’m frozen, unable to look away from her evergreen gaze. My heart is beating out of my chest and I’m starting to feel things I haven’t felt in a very long time. Not since Lauren.

“I should go,” I blurt as I stand suddenly, grabbing my mug off the table. Tag bolts up, his German Shepherd instincts kicking in, looking for the cause of my sudden outburst. Once satisfied there is no impending danger, he huffs, falling to my side as I walk to the door.

“Oh, okay?” Holly stands as well and follows me. “Thank you again for the tea and snacks.”

“You bet. If you need anything, come up to the main house anytime.” Once again, I’m breathless at the sight of her. The porch light reflects in her eyes, looking like a lit up Christmas tree. “Your coat.”

“My coat?” she asks, sounding dazed.

“May I please have your coat? To get it cleaned.”

“Right.” She snaps back to reality, disappearing for a moment behind the door, coming back with the wool coat in her hands. “Thank you. Have a good night, Rex.” She gifts me another glimpse of a smile as she leans against the door.

“Have a good night, Holly.” I take the coat from her as I use every ounce of willpower I have in me to turn and walk away.

Tag yips at my feet as we make our way back home.

“We’ll see her tomorrow, bud,” I tell Tag as we go, and for the first time in a long time, I’m excited about what the next day will bring.

# *Chapter Four*

## HOLLY



I wake to a light streaming in through the window, blinding me as I crack my eyes open. The late morning sun reflects off the snow outside, making everything brighter than I want it to be. I can't help but grumble as I get out of bed and go in search of tea. Specifically, more of that Christmas tea from last night. No matter how much I dislike the holiday, that drink last night was delicious.

Throwing on a sweater and jeans, I make my way down the hall, shivering with every step. I immediately miss the warmth of the bed, but it's nothing that a good cup of tea can't fix.

I open every cabinet, looking for anything that will resemble a tea bag. Dated china and glasses fill one side of the kitchen, matching the decor from the last millennium. A normal person would feel the nostalgia of this and smile at the reminder of their childhood. Not me. Thinking back to that time period only makes me want to leave this place faster, go back to the city, and forget all about Candy Cane Creek.

I have a feeling I don't really want to, though. And it's all thanks to a handsome, blue-eyed dog owner.

Letting out a sigh, I know there's only one place I'm going to get my tea, and that's at the main house. While it feels foreign to me to just walk into someone's home like I own it, I don't seem to have any other choice.

I put on my boots, grumbling when I realize I don't have a coat. I look out the window and see it's only a couple hundred feet from this door to the main house. Surely I can make it without catching hypothermia, especially if I make a run for it.

I rush out the door, closing it harder than I need to behind me as I dash

down the stairs, trying to stay in the path that Rex must have shovelled at some point since he left last night. With my head down, I hug my chest and start to sprint. The bitter cold wind whips against my face as I keep my eyes down, focused only on the path directly in front of me.

I place my right foot down in front of the other and immediately feel my mistake. I failed to notice the shimmery ice patch under the powdered snow, and now my arms are flailing, trying to regain balance as my feet fly into the air. I twist at the last second, laying in a previously untouched patch of snow, arms and legs spread as if I were making a snow angel.

I look up at the clear sky above me, wondering how I got here. If everything had gone according to plan, I'd be at home in my apartment in the city, curled up in front of my electric fireplace, reading a novel, and pretending it was anything but the Christmas season. Instead, I'm laying in the snow, stuck in a town that is the epitome of the season I can't stand, and now I'm cold and wet, too.

Two shadows cross over me, one significantly shorter than the other. It's only a second later when two heads appear, both tilted to the right, one with a quizzical look and the other wearing a large fluffy Santa hat.

"Are you okay?" Rex asks as he holds out his hand for me.

"Just. Fine." I grit out through my teeth as I take his hand and let him pull me up.

Of course, he would see me fall. Of course, he and his ridiculously quirky dog would come to my rescue. Why wouldn't they?

Rex grasps my outstretched hand and lifts me as if I weigh no more than a doll. Once I'm on my feet, he brushes snow off my shoulders and arms, looking me over. "Are you alright? You didn't hit your head, did you?"

"No. I—uh—I'm fine. Just a little winded."

*And embarrassed.*

"Let's get you inside and warmed up." Rex places his hand on my lower back as he holds my hand in the other.

"Really, I'm fine," I demand as I pull away from him. I promptly slip on another piece of ice. This time, Rex is there to grab my waist and hold me to him.

I ignore the way my heart rate climbs from a simple touch. Or the way my cheeks flush as he looks down at me with a smile.

"Are you sure about that?" His smile grows wider.

"Yup. Just—maybe you should salt more." I brush the hair out of my face

and straighten the best I can, trying to act cooler and more put together than I am.

“Sure.” He laughs as he walks me to the main house. This time, not letting go of me the whole way.

Once safe and inside Rex’s warm home, I’m immediately welcomed with the scent of coffee. While it’s not my go-to, I would take anything warm right now.

“Take a seat in the kitchen. I’ll be right in,” he says from behind me as I shuck off my boots and make my way down the hall.

A wooden staircase with a beautiful oak bannister wrapped in garland and ribbons stands to my right. White walls adorned with family photos and wreaths line the walls with every step. I continue my way through the first floor, shocked to see a small table decorated with a poinsettia surrounded by various snow globes. I’ve never seen anyone decorate like this. Let alone a man. A man who, as far as I know, lives alone.

The polished hardwood floor leads me to an open kitchen. I’m greeted with crisp white walls with floating shelves and matching white cabinets decorated with more wreaths and ribbon. Small potted poinsettias, greenery and holly adorn the nearly empty countertops.

What really takes my breath away is the large island in the middle of the room. A rustic wood island is topped with a sparkling light grey marble countertop that shines in the morning light, making it the most magnificent centerpiece of the room. The kitchen itself is nearly the size of my apartment. Something this amazing is a house that I could only ever dream of.

If I ever had a desire to live outside of the city. Which I don’t.

At least, I think I don’t.

“Here you go,” Rex says as he comes up behind me, placing a fleece blanket over my shoulders.

I jump at his touch, having not heard him enter the room.

“Is everyone in town this...festive?” I ask as I take a seat on a wooden stool at the island.

“Usually,” he chuckles as he fills his kettle from the island sink. He looks up at me with a smirk that I shouldn’t find adorable, but I do.

“And you did all this yourself?”

This time, he lets out a deep laugh. “No. I’m helpless with decorating. Edith came over and ‘surprised’ me one day while I was at the shelter. If left to me, there would probably be lights haphazardly thrown on the mantel or a

sad-looking tree in the living room.”

Sadness clouds his face as he speaks and for reasons unbeknownst to me, I want to know what put it there.

“And Edith is?” I let my voice trail off, wanting to know who this Christmas decorating ninja is.

“My neighbour.” The bright smile is back on his face as he speaks of her. “She sort of adopted us when we moved in. She’s helped me through a lot.”

“Us?” I ask, noticing his face drop at the use of the word.

I can’t help but let my gaze roam to see if there is any trace of another person who lives here. His ring finger is bare; no pictures in the kitchen. I’m mentally kicking myself for not looking closer at the pictures on the wall in the hallway.

Of course, this handsome, incredibly nice stranger would be married. There’s no way a man like this would be single, especially in a small town.

But the question is, why do I care?

He turns quickly and opens a cupboard, pulling down two mugs before closing it and moving to the next one. Boxes upon boxes of tea line the shelves, along with a few lone cans of coffee.

“You really like tea, huh?” I try to lighten the mood.

“No, actually. I can’t stand it.” He places his hands on the counter in front of him, and with his back turned to me, he drops his head to his chest. “But my wife does. Or did.”

“Wife,” I repeat. The word feels rough on my tongue as I say it, as if it were laced with molasses and struggled to come out.

“She,” he pauses for a moment, his voice soft. “She passed away. Last year.”

At that moment Tag strolls into the kitchen, Santa hat fixed firmly on his head. He sits next to his owner, placing a paw on his foot. He is rewarded when Rex drops his hand and pats Tag’s head.

“I’m so sorry.” I pull the blanket closer around me.

“Thanks.” He sniffs and turns to me. “Her name was Lauren, and she was the tea lover. This is all her tea. She bought all this when we moved into the house, saying she needed to have one for every mood.” He chuckles as if in recalling something funny. “I just couldn’t get rid of it. I’ve checked the expiry, and they are all still good, so I just make it for guests when they come over.”

A shiver rolls through my body, and it’s not from being cold and wet. The

man in front of me is no longer a slightly weird, handsome, Christmas-loving stranger, but instead a lonely man, missing his wife, trying to make it through a season that is meant to be spent with the ones you love.

A silence falls over the kitchen, and for once, I don't know what to say. He doesn't need any more of my empathy, nor is he acting like he wants it.

"Do you have any more of that Christmas tea? It was really good."

"I do," he says as the corner of his mouth lifts into a slight smile. "Sorry, I should have asked if you would prefer coffee over tea. I only have gingerbread flavour and judging by your reaction to my Holly Jolly Latte last night, I assumed you weren't a fan of sugary drinks."

"You'd be right there," I laugh. "Wait, that monstrosity that spilled on my coat is called a 'Holly Jolly Latte?'"

"Yes. It's a holiday special of Cassie's at the Candy Cane Cafe."

"Is everything in this town Christmas related?" I can't help the questions that fly out of my mouth. I could say that it's research for the blog I'm writing, but I find myself oddly fascinated by the town and its people. Or maybe just one person in particular.

The kettle clicks off and he gets to work making a tea for me and a cup of coffee for himself from the pot on the counter.

"Pretty much. The town prides itself on being a Christmas village all year long. People even come during the summer. July is one of our busiest tourist months." He pops a tea bag into my mug, followed by the boiling water and hands me my drink.

I immediately wrap my hands around it, letting the warmth shake off the lingering bone-deep chill.

"You know, I haven't even asked you what you do. Let me guess." I sit up and tilt my head, appraising him. His dark brown hair is styled in a messy-but-trendy manner. His beard is short and nicely trimmed, which makes his crystal blue eyes even more striking. He's wearing black-framed glasses around his intense blue eyes that I find myself getting lost in. I didn't notice before that he no longer dons the horrible knit sweater, but instead is wearing a red and black plaid shirt which hangs open over a black fitted t-shirt. Worn jeans complete his outfit, making him look every inch the small-town man he is. "You're a lumberjack."

Rex barks out a laugh. "No. Try again."

"Baker?" I spit out, trying to gauge his reaction.

"Couldn't be farther from the truth." He brings the coffee mug to his lips



and takes a sip.

Why are my eyes glued to him? Why does my brain stop, and I lose my train of thought?

*Job. Non-baker/lumberjack. Right.*

“Accountant?”

“Should I just tell you since it seems you’re never going to guess it on your own?” He raises an eyebrow and there’s that smirk again. The one that makes me forget I want nothing to do with this town or anyone in it.

“Please,” I say as I take a sip.

“I run a dog shelter here on the farm.”

I almost spit out my tea, but resort to choking on it instead.

“Is it that bad?” he asks as he rushes to my side, placing a hand on my back. Tag follows and sits at my other side, looking up at me with what I could only describe as a dog’s look of concern.

“No!” I exclaim, rubbing my chest to ease the burn lodged there. I soften my voice as I continue. “No, not at all. I never would have guessed that.” I reach down and give Tag a pat, reassuring him I’m no longer in danger.

“Yeah, I get that a lot.” Rex takes a seat on the stool beside me as Tag lies on the floor, making himself comfortable in the sun’s rays that stream through the window. “Would you like to meet the dogs?”

I turn in my seat. “I’m not really much of a dog person.”

“I don’t know about that. You and Tag seem to get along just fine.”

As if knowing he’s being talked about, Tag lets out a huff.

“I’m going to try to not be offended by that,” I say to the dog in question.

“Come on. Let’s finish our drinks and you can come with me to feed the dogs and let them run around. Then I’ll take you into town and show you all the Christmas glory Candy Cane Creek has to offer.” His eyes light up as he speaks, letting me know just how much he loves his job and the town. It’s starting to melt my cold, grinchy heart, and I don’t know how I feel about that.

“I don’t know. I’m not sure if I should brave it out there again. Plus, there’s the small matter of not having a jacket.”

“I dropped your coat off this morning. It should be ready before your car. I think I can find something for you in the meantime.” He takes another sip of his coffee as he studies me. “Please? I really think if you had a proper introduction to the town, you’d feel different. And we wouldn’t want the blog readers to get the wrong impression about the town, would you?”

“Using logic on me, Mr. Wellington?” I can’t help the smile that spreads across my face. “Fine. Let me finish this tea and then you can see if you’re up to the challenge.”

“I’m always up for a challenge.” The look he gives me is heated and makes me think he means more than changing my mind about the town.

Just as quickly as it appears, the look is gone and is replaced with sadness. His shoulders slump, and his gaze stays fixed on the coffee in his hands. “I’ll go get a jacket for you to wear.”

Rex stands abruptly, draining his coffee in one gulp, and walks to place his mug in the sink. He doesn’t look back as he leaves the room.

“What just happened?” I ask an empty room.

Tag doesn’t move, just gives me another dramatic huff from the floor.

Surprisingly, I agree with the dog.

# *Chapter Five*

REX



I don't know what I was thinking back there, flirting with Holly. What would Lauren think?

The rational side of my brain knows Lauren would want me to move on. In fact, she told me to. But the other side of my brain tells me it's too soon. I shouldn't be entertaining the thought of being interested in another woman. I tell myself that's why my body froze at Cassie's touch, by her kind words, and how she was on the verge of asking me to the Christmas Eve dance.

But my heart? My heart is a traitor.

It tells me there's a reason why talking to Holly is so easy. Why I don't feel anxious at her touch, not in the way I did with Cassie's? My heart tells me that maybe Holly is stranded here in Candy Cane Creek for a reason other than assignment or an ill-fated trip.

God only knows what the real reason for all of this is, but one thing I know is that I'm not ready to face the answers. Not yet.

Grabbing a thick flannel jacket out of my closet, I make my way back downstairs to the kitchen. Holly's scrolling through her phone, mug resting against her lips even though she's not drinking from it. She's focusing so intently on whatever has captured her attention, and I don't think she hears me coming.

"I've got a jacket here for you, if you're ready?"

She jumps, putting her phone and mug on the counter. "Oh—yeah—I'm ready."

Tag perks up, giving me a look I know is intended to tell me he'd rather do anything than move.

I roll my eyes at him as I close the distance between us, holding my jacket open for her. She looks quizzically between me and the jacket before finally turning and sliding her arms into the sleeves.

The fact she hesitates with a look of confusion on her face is startling to me. I know the city is different from small towns, but surely men there do things like carry luggage and help women into coats. Don't they?

"Thank you," she says softly, pulling her auburn hair out from the collar. "Tag doesn't look like he's too happy about going back outside."

"He can stay." Tag huffs as he flips onto his back, legs bent in the air while he basks in the sun's rays. "Come on, let me introduce you to the others."

Our short walk to the shelter is silent. Holly keeps her head down, her steps slow and careful, as she follows my tracks. I offer her my hand, but she waves me off, clearly intent on making it on her own.

Once inside, Lucy, Ginger, and Fluffy immediately start barking, unable to contain their morning excitement.

"Are they always this—excited?" Holly asks, taking a tentative step inside the common room.

"Pretty much." I walk over to their large crates and open the doors. One by one, I'm bombarded with jumping furballs, all trying to get their morning pets. I laugh as I squat down and give each of them a thorough belly rub.

I keep sight on Lucy as she breaks away from the pack. Her golden curled fur bouncing as she bounds over to Holly who, in return, stands stock still with her eyes wide, looking down at the approaching animal.

"Are you afraid of dogs?" I stand and face her.

"No, not afraid." She backs up further against the wall. "More...cautious."

I walk to them, bending down, giving Lucy a scratch behind her ears. "Well then, this little lady would be a great dog to start with. She's the nicest, most cuddly pup out there."

Holly gazes down at Lucy, who's sitting like a perfect show dog with her big brown eyes looking up at her. "Are you sure?"

"Here." I reach into my pocket and pull out a dog treat. "Hold out your hand and say 'shake.'"

Holly looks between me and the treat wearily before taking it. She gazes down at Lucy, sticking out her hand. "Shake?" Her command comes out as a question.

I move beside Holly, guiding her hand palm up. "Now squat down to her

level like I was so she can reach your hand. Next time you say it, say it firmly. Make sure she knows you're the boss."

Holly rolls her shoulders back and squats down. "Shake," she says loudly, with more authority.

Lucy diligently places her paw in Holly's hand, looking up for approval.

"Did you see that? She shook my hand!" Holly laughs.

"Great! Now give her the treat and say, 'good girl.'"

Holly opens her other palm and holds it out to Lucy, who immediately gobbles it up. "Good girl!"

I reach into my pocket and grab another treat, placing it in Holly's palm. "Now 'spin.'"

Holly gives the command and giggles as she watches Lucy chase her tail twice before sitting nicely at Holly's feet. She gives Lucy the treat along with an ear scratch, telling her what a good dog she is.

Fluffy and Ginger look on from their dog beds by the Christmas tree, lazily watching the show.

"Are you going to be okay here while I grab their food and water?"

"I think so." Holly sits down, continuing to pet Lucy.

I smile as I walk into the storage room. Filling their individual food bowls, I think of how much Holly has changed since she first landed in our town just the day before. She's slowly starting to warm up, to let herself relax. I can't stop thinking about what her life must be like in the city. How she's become so self-reliant that it's hard for her to accept any help.

She's a mystery to me. One that I can't stop trying to solve.

Walking back into the room, I stop in my tracks at the scene before me. Holly is sitting on the floor in the middle of a circle of dogs. Lucy's head is resting on her outstretched leg as Ginger and Fluffy wiggle on their backs trying to get belly rubs.

What leaves me transfixed isn't the dogs' reaction, but Holly's. The smile on her face is genuine as she laughs, scratching bellies with one hand while playing with Lucy's fur with the other. I take in the moment, feeling like an outsider, but not wanting to disturb the peace she's found.

"You're just the cutest little thing, aren't you?" she laughs as she scratches Ginger's belly before turning to the others. "You all are."

"You're going to spoil them with all those belly rubs. They won't know what to do with themselves when it's just me now," I joke, placing their food bowls down on their individual mats.

“Oh, sorry.” Holly jumps up abruptly, wiping her hands on her pants as the dogs scatter.

“I’m just kidding. They love the attention.” I close the distance between us, placing my hand on her arm. “It looks like you love it, too.”

The same rush I felt yesterday overcomes my body like a wave. My heart rate speeds up; I get butterflies in my stomach. I didn’t know a thirty-year-old man could still get butterflies, but here I am, and they’re swarming.

“Maybe a little.” She looks up at me through her lashes, the corner of her mouth tipped up in a shy smile.

“Let me grab their water and we can head out.” I let myself linger for just a moment longer, looking into her green eyes before I manage to pull myself away.

I make quick work of filling their water bowls and making sure the dogs have everything while we venture into town.

Stepping out into the cold, I smile as it starts snowing. There’s something about snow that fills me with a sense of peace. I don’t know if it’s the resounding silence that comes with it, or the stillness of my surroundings, but it’s always given me a sense of calm that nothing else has ever done before. Even the closing of my truck doors is muffled by the echoing silence.

“So, what’s first on the list?” Holly pulls my jacket closer around her and buckles her seatbelt.

“Food.” I rest my arm along her headrest, looking over my shoulder as I back my truck out of its spot. “Kringle’s has the best brunch food in town.”

“Kringle’s? Like Kris Kringle?”

“The one and only.” I give her a smile as we make our way onto the main road.

“Everything is Christmas themed here?” She opens her phone and starts typing.

“Yup.” I keep my eyes on the road while sending her a glance when I can. “What are you working on?”

“I’m taking notes for the blog.” She continues to type, not looking up. “You said there’s some sort of hot cocoa walk?”

“Yeah, that’s tonight. There’ll be booths in the town square to get hot cocoa and apple cider, and then everyone wanders through town and looks at the lights. There’s an official competition where you can vote for your favourite, but no one takes it too seriously. It’s all in good fun.”

“Right.” She takes a break from her furious note taking and looks out the

windshield.

“Hey, why don’t you look at it as if you’re experiencing the events for fun, not as an assignment. See it how the people in town see it.”

“But this is an assignment. I wouldn’t be here otherwise. Plus, I’m going to be leaving as soon as my car is ready, so I probably won’t be here for all the events, anyway. I need to talk to you, and some other people in town, to get the facts so I can write the blog and be done with it.”

“Hmph,” I scoff.

“You don’t believe me?” Holly turns in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest.

“No, I do.” I pull into a parking spot in front of the diner and turn off the truck. “But I think it’s just because you haven’t fully experienced the magic of Christmas.”

“Oh, I have,” she bites out. “And it wasn’t so magical.”

“Maybe you need to experience it Candy Cane Creek style, then.” I get out of the truck and make my way around, but before I reach the passenger door, she has it open and jumps out. “I was going to get that.”

“Get what?”

“Your door.”

“My—door? Why would you get my door?” She tilts her head and looks at me as if I’d gone crazy.

“Why wouldn’t I get your door? It’s the gentlemanly thing to do.”

“Gentlemanly...Have I somehow gone back in time when I crossed the city line? We’re still in the twenty-first century, right?”

“Wouldn’t that be something? Time travel *and* a Christmas town. Sounds like your ideal trip right there.” I can’t contain my sarcasm as I watch her try to piece this together. “I don’t know what the city boys in Vancouver are doing, but around here, it’s what we do. We open doors, we pull out chairs at tables, help you into your jacket. Don’t think about pumping your own gas.”

“I...” Holly stops. I can see the thoughts crossing through her mind as she waits.

“Let me get your door next time. Please?”

“I guess so?”

“Thank you.” I smile as I open the diner door. I dramatically brush my arm in front of me, showing her the way in. “After you, m’lady.”

She shakes her head with a smile as she walks past me. Following closely behind, I’m immediately welcomed with the comforting smell of coffee and



fried food.

“Morning, Rex! It’s good to see you. Grab a seat anywhere,” Sylvie says, rushing past us with a tray of food in her hands.

“Thanks, Sylvie.” Chatter fills the diner as I place my hand on Holly’s back, leading her through the tables. I guide her toward the back, where there’s a booth and fewer prying eyes.

“Is it always like this?” Holly asks, settling into the booth across from me.

“Like what?” I ask, picking up my menu and reading through the options, like I don’t have them all memorized.

“So—informal.”

“Yes. We don’t really do ‘formal’ here.” I place the menu down, clasping my hands on top. “We’re a small town where everyone knows everyone. There’s not much need for fine dining or overly scheduled events. We like to keep things simple.”

“Well, I wasn’t expecting a Michelin star restaurant, but I also wasn’t expecting—well, I don’t know what I was expecting, really.” She focuses on the menu before looking around the table. “Are those candy canes?”

I follow her gaze to a small vase at the end of the table. “Yes, would you like one?” I ask, grabbing a wrapped candy, and offering it to her.

“Um, no, thank you. It’s a little odd to be placing them with the condiments on the table, isn’t it?”

“Oh, honey, the candy canes are a condiment!” Sylvie states as she walks up to our table, coffeepot in hand. “Isn’t that right, Rex?”

“You know it.” I flip my coffee mug over and slide it in front of her.

“How is a candy cane a condiment?” Holly asks.

“Show her.” Sylvie laughs as she finishes pouring my coffee.

I pour a little creamer into my mug from the bowl of pods and unwrap the candy cane, sticking it in my coffee and using it like a stir stick. “See, instant sugar and flavouring.”

“This is the strangest place I’ve ever been to in my life.” Holly’s eyes are wide as she watches me stir my coffee.

“Would you like to try?” Sylvie asks, giving the coffeepot in her hand a slight shake.

“Oh, no, thank you. I don’t drink coffee. Do you have tea? Maybe something less minty?”

“Sure, hon. Black tea, okay?” Sylvie asks, shooting me a glance, letting

me know there will be many questions once she gets me alone.

“That would be great.”

Sylvie leaves us alone and I find myself unable to look away from Holly.

“What?” she asks, looking up at me.

“Do you really hate *everything* to do with Christmas?”

“Not hate,” she replies, looking back down at the menu.

“Why?”

“I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Holly, I’m trying to see what I can do to help you actually enjoy your time here in Candy Cane Creek. Trying to help you write the best blog to represent our town and do it justice. Now, come on, what made you so Christmas adverse?” I watch as she keeps her head down, focusing on the menu much too intently. “Bad Santa experience? Embarrassing Christmas party?”

“You aren’t going to stop, are you?” She asks, looking up at me.

“I just want to help you, and I can’t do that if I don’t know what I’m up against.”

“Fine,” she sighs, sitting up straighter on the bench. “I was stood up at the altar on Christmas Day.”

I stare at her, eyes wide open as I process what she just told me. Of all the things I could have imagined that would have turned her off Christmas, that was not even on my radar.

# *Chapter Six*

REX



“I’ve got your tea here,” Sylvie says as she places a plate with a metal teapot and a tea bag in front of Holly. “What else can I get ya?”

“I’ll get the Gingerbread Pancakes with a side of bacon, please,” I say as I hand Sylvie the menu, not taking my eyes off Holly.

“Just a bagel with cream cheese and fruit for me.” Holly hands over her menu, avoiding my eyes, as if she didn’t just drop a North Pole sized bomb right before getting her tea.

“Coming right up!” Sylvie says cheerfully as she scoops up the menus and rushes off to the next table.

“Sorry, repeat that again. You were stood up at your wedding on Christmas Day?”

“Yup,” Holly answers, dropping her tea bag into the pot.

“How long ago?” I ask, wrapping my hands around my coffee. Half of the candy cane had already melted, leaving only the hook hanging from the rim.

“Five years ago.”

“Did you like Christmas before that?”

Holly’s shoulders drop. Gone is the light and carefree woman from the shelter earlier. In its place is a sullen, sad woman, and here I am asking her to bring up what had to be her most painful memory.

Lord help me, I can’t stop.

I want to know everything about Holly Day. I want to know what I can do to make her love Christmas again. Find love again.

Wait, find love? Is that what I want? Is that what I’m ready for?

“Yes.” She takes a deep breath before she continues. “I loved Christmas growing up. I was the one that pushed for a Christmas Day wedding. I

thought it would be romantic and magical.”

“What happened?”

She closes her eyes for a moment before opening them and steeling her gaze. Unshed tears fill her eyes as she speaks. “He left a note saying he was sorry, but he couldn’t get married. The pressure for a ‘perfect day’ and a ‘perfect wedding’ was too much. Last I heard, he left for Alberta and hasn’t been home since.”

“Why would he think that any of that has to be perfect?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it was me. I wanted things a certain way. I wasn’t quite a ‘bridezilla,’ but I knew what I wanted and how I wanted it done. Josh wanted a fall wedding and something small. Out of the city. I insisted on this lavish wedding with Christmas trees lining the chapel and twinkling lights everywhere.”

“It sounds beautiful.” I’m not lying when I tell her this. Lauren and I had a winter wedding. The snow fell outside the chapel windows as we exchanged vows. Mistletoe and holly were tucked with fragrant greenery on all the tables. The menu was holiday themed with festive food and desserts for all the guests to enjoy.

“It was. Sadly, we didn’t get to enjoy it. Apparently, he showed up, saw everything, and panicked.”

I reach across the table, taking her hand in mine. Her cold hand feels so small. So fragile. Much like how she looks right now. “I’m so sorry. Holly. You didn’t deserve to go through that.”

“Thanks,” she says timidly, letting me hold her hand for a moment more before withdrawing and pouring her tea into a mug. “After that, I haven’t wanted anything to do with the holiday. Or relationships.”

I bring my mug to my lips and take a sip, letting the bitterness of the coffee and sticky sweetness of the candy cane wash over my tongue. “Have you talked to him since?”

“No.” She pours some milk into her tea and takes a sip. I don’t think she’s going to say anything else for a moment until she sighs and proceeds. “He sent his friends to collect his things. Couldn’t even face me. Can you believe that? He left me to deal with all the guests, food, venue, and he didn’t even have the decency to face me to get his things from my apartment.”

“That’s horrible.” I don’t know what else to say as I sit stunned, listening to what Holly had been through. No wonder she’s been keen to avoid anything to do with the season. Even less so with relationships.

Not that I'm looking for that either.

"Yeah. Anyway, since then I haven't celebrated the holiday. I don't see the point in it, and I definitely don't believe in Christmas magic."

"I don't blame you, but I hope you can see that there's still joy to be had with the season."

"Maybe for others, but not for me," she says into her mug.

"We'll see about that."

"Here are your orders." Sylvie expertly slides our plates in front of us. My mouth immediately begins to water at the smell of the large stack of gingerbread pancakes.

"Thanks, Sylvie," I unwrap my cutlery from the paper napkin, giving her a smile as I prepare to dig in.

"That's a lot of pancakes," Holly says, eyeing up my breakfast.

"It is." I pick up the little container of syrup and start pouring it over the top.

"And you're going to eat all that?"

"I'm going to try." I put the syrup down and start cutting into the delicious stack of holiday joy. "Why? Would you like some?"

"No," Holly gasps before straightening and clearing her throat. "I mean, no, thank you. I'm fine with my bagel and fruit."

"Alright. Your loss," I say, cutting into the stack.

"Can I get you anything else?" Sylvie asks with a smirk on her face. I don't know what's given her that look, but she seems very pleased at whatever she thinks she saw.

"I think we're good. Thank you, Sylvie." I look across at Holly, who is currently pushing fruit around her bowl with her fork.

"Do you have something against pancakes, too?" I put a piece of the offending food in my mouth and close my eyes in unwavering joy, letting the warm spices and sugar wash over my tongue. I've always been a sucker for holiday foods, gingerbread being at the top of the list. Lauren would laugh when I would spend the whole month of December completely unable to deny any holiday treat that came my way, but refused most desserts and sweet foods the other eleven months of the year.

"Other than it's just a stack of sugar for breakfast?" She narrows her eyes at me as I take another forkful of delicious, syrup-soaked pancake.

"Yes, other than that."

"No, nothing against pancakes." She puts down her fork and takes a bite

of her bagel.

The rest of our breakfast is eaten in silence. Sylvie comes back to check on us once more and refills my coffee, but we're left with an awkward silence that fills the booth like a heavy cloud.

Once we finish our meals and no longer have our food to occupy us, I wipe my mouth with the paper napkin and stand. "I'll be right back."

Walking over to the counter, I wave to get Sylvia's attention.

"What can I help you with, Rex?" she asks with a smile as she walks over.

"Just the bill, please." I pull out my wallet and glance over at Holly, who's frantically typing on her phone.

"I could have brought it over to you. Unless your date isn't doing well." She raises an eyebrow as she asks.

"No, no. This isn't a date. Holly's car broke down yesterday, the inn was full—"

"And you thought you'd take in a stranded, beautiful woman?"

"Sylvie, you have this all wrong. I'm just helping her out. She's also writing a blog on Candy Cane Creek, and I want to make sure she has the right experience. That's all."

"Mm-hmm," she responds, handing me the bill with a gleam in her eye.

"It's true. This isn't a date. I have no ulterior motive. You know there isn't any room at the Mistletoe Inn right now. What was I supposed to do? Leave her with nowhere to sleep?"

"No, of course not." Her gaze softens. "You're a good man, Rex. We all just want you to be happy. Especially after what happened with Lauren."

"Which was only a year ago, remember? It's too soon." I thumb through my wallet and take out more than enough to cover the bill plus tip.

"It's not—" Sylvie starts, but I cut her off.

"Thank you, Sylvie. For everything. I really appreciate it, and I know how much you and everyone in this town have been looking out for me. But please, don't make more of this than it is."

She takes in a deep breath and sighs. "Fine."

"Thank you." I nod and head back over to the table. "Ready to go?"

"Don't we have to pay first?" Holly asks, looking past me.

"Already taken care of."

"Rex, you can't keep paying for things and..." She waves her hand in my direction. "Doing whatever you're doing. I can take care of myself."

“I know you can.” I shrug.

“And pay for my own food.”

“I’m sure you can.”

“And open my own door.” Her cheeks get pink, frustration lacing her words.

“Mm-Hmm,” I half-smile as I reach across her, grabbing my jacket and holding it open for her.

“And I can put on my own jacket,” she huffs.

“I’m sure you can.” I shake the jacket a little, letting her know I’m waiting for her to stand up and put it on.

“So then, why don’t you let me?” She stays in her seat, looking up at me defiantly.

“Because there’s a difference between ‘can’ and ‘should.’”

She scoffs but stands and turns, putting her arms into the jacket. “So, what’s next on the Christmas adventure?”

“I thought I would take you around town a bit, show you the sights a little before I need to go back and check on the dogs.” I steer her out of the diner and instead of going back to my truck, I lead her down the sidewalk.

We stroll past the town square with people setting up the booths for the Hot Cocoa Walk later today. Kids run through the workers, giggling and chasing each other while the parents try to set up. Others stand in a sectioned off area, building elaborate snowmen.

“What’s going on over there?” Holly asks, pointing at the group.

“The snowman competition. People take it very seriously. Probably the most competitive event we have. The people that enter spend days building and carving their entries.”

“Hmm.” She whips out her phone and starts typing again before snapping photos. “Have there been any other competitions already?”

“Yes. We’ve had gingerbread houses, and the Big Cookie Bake-Off.”

“Those sound intense,” she says as she holds up her camera to take another picture of the builders.

“It can be.”

“Are the prizes really big?” She places her phone in the back pocket of her jeans and turns to me.

“No,” I laugh and shake my head, rubbing my finger along my lower lip. “Mostly bragging rights and gift cards to stores in town.”

We begin walking on the path when a group of kids rush past us, one



knocking into Holly by accident and sending her skidding on the snow. I reach out and grab her arm to steady her, but it only causes her to lose her balance even more.

Slamming into me, she knocks me backwards, sending me flying into the snowbank behind me. Holly lands on me with a '*whoosh*,' both of us having the wind knocked out of us. Laying on top of me, with her hands braced on my chest, she looks down with wide eyes. Seeing her with her wild auburn hair and big green eyes makes me realize that I am falling. And I don't mean in the snow.

# *Chapter Seven*

## HOLLY



“You’re telling me this town is Christmas 24/7?” Rachel asks excitedly. I called to give her an update on the blog she’s hired me to write, especially since I was getting more of an experience in Candy Cane Creek than I had expected.

I place my phone between my ear and my shoulder as I reach for a cookie. I don’t want to admit how addicted I am to the cookies Rex brought over last night. I also don’t want to admit how much I enjoyed my time with him this morning, which included a stop at Mrs. Claus’ Bakery. I may have bought more cookies than I could reasonably eat in the short time I’m in Candy Cane Creek, but I couldn’t help myself. If anything, the cookies are a good distraction.

If I was eating the cookies and talking to Rachel, then I wasn’t thinking about how much I enjoyed spending time with Rex, and I certainly wasn’t thinking about how I fell on him earlier. Of all the things that could have happened while we were taking a stroll through town, taking a tumble which ended in me landing directly on him was not something that I counted on.

There were too many emotions to deal with there. Too much baggage that needed to be unpacked with the feelings that it brought up. Any time I got physically close to him, I got butterflies in my stomach and my palms got sticky. All things I haven’t felt since Josh. All things I never counted on feeling again.

“Yes. Everything is Christmas, right down to the names of the businesses. Kringle’s Diner and the Candy Cane Cafe. I’m even staying at a dog rescue shelter called ‘Miracle on 30 Woof Street.’”

“Please explain the name of that one,” she says with a laugh.

“The address is thirty Woof Street. You can’t make this stuff up.”

“I love it. This is exactly what I was looking for. Places in B.C. that embody the spirit of Christmas.” Rachel’s voice takes on a dreamy tone as she continues talking.

“If you say so,” I respond flatly, taking another bite of my cookie.

“Tell me more about this dog rescue. How did you end up staying there?”

“It was the weirdest thing. I was walking through town after my car broke down and I ran into the owner. Literally. He spilled the most disgusting sugary coffee I’ve ever smelled all over my new coat.”

Rachel gasped. “Not the Massimo Dutti.”

“The very one.” I take another bite. “Anyway, the one and only inn is full because of all the holiday events, and he offered me his guest house. I only meant to stay the one night, but my car still isn’t ready, and I don’t have anywhere else to go.”

“Okay, that’s a little romantic. It’s like you’re living in your own romance novel.” Rachel’s dreamy tone only makes my heart rate kick up.

My life most certainly is *not* a romance novel.

“Please, Rachel. You know how much I don’t like those.”

“That doesn’t make it any less true. Listen, you’ve written for me for a while now, and I like to think we are friends.”

“You know we are.”

“Then believe me when I say I want what’s best for you. Maybe there was a reason you were stuck there longer than you wanted, and it wasn’t just to enjoy some of the holiday spirit you always seem to avoid.”

“Hmph,” I scoff at her, taking another bite of my Santa Claus cookie.

The irony is not lost on me.

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

“I am not leading lady material. Rex is not my leading man. This isn’t a meet cute ending in a happily ever after. This is my life.”

Rachel pauses a moment before she continues. “Is he handsome?”

“Who?” I ask, wiping the delicious crumbs from the side of my mouth.

“The owner of the shelter. Is he handsome? Single?”

“Yes, to both.” I’d be lying if I tried to deny that I found Rex handsome. With his blue eyes, dark hair styled in a messy way only men can pull off. He’s the classic handsome type, if you like a rugged, Christmas sweater wearing lumberjack. “It doesn’t matter because I’m not looking. And he’s not my type, anyway.”

“Well, maybe your ‘type’ isn’t working for you.”

I think about that, and how Josh played nicely into the category of what I considered that to be. Josh is clean cut, moderately handsome, and always dressed in a suit and tie. His casual look was chino pants and a polo. Now that I think of it, I don’t think I ever saw him in jeans. Days at the beach or meeting friends for drinks downtown consisted of him dressed in business casual. I never saw him with a beard or even a five o’clock shadow. I always wondered if he kept a shaving kit on him at all times, since he never allowed for facial hair.

I don’t think Josh was ever relaxed. He was always ‘on call’ for his job as a newspaper editor.

“It doesn’t matter what I think, anyway. I’m going to be out of this town as soon as my car’s fixed. I’ll be back in Vancouver before you can say ‘Ho, Ho, Ho.’”

“Did you just make a Santa Claus reference? Maybe these towns are wearing off on you after all!” Rachel joked.

A knock at the door saves me from answering her.

“Rachel, I have to go.” I start to walk to the door as I rush my friend and boss off the phone. “We’re going to check out a Hot Cocoa Walk.”

“That sounds romantic.”

“No romance. Purely for the blog. I’m going to drink hot cocoa, walk around town to see lights, and interview as many people in town as I can to get more information about the events in town. Then I’m out of here.”

“You’ve said that, but I think there’s more to it.”

I open the door and see Rex and Tag in front of me, both looking very festive. “I’ll talk to you later,” I say before I hit the end call button, not taking my eyes off Rex. He’s dressed in another knitted sweater, this one with rows of reindeer and trees underneath a black leather jacket. At his feet sits Tag, Santa hat still planted firmly on his head.

“Are you ready to go?” Rex asks.

“Yes, I’ll just grab my—uh, your—jacket.”

“It’s alright. You should keep it. It looks better on you, anyway.” His cheeks turn pink, and he looks down as if shocked at what he said.

I feel myself blush, too, as I reach behind the door and grab his plaid jacket. I don’t want to admit how much I like the way it feels. How warm it is. How much it smells like him, which is a mix of coffee and dog. Two scents I never thought I would find appealing, but with him, it’s comforting.

I step into my boots, grab my purse off the hook, and walk outside. There's a somewhat awkward silence as the three of us pile into his truck. Was Rex flirting with me? Or trying to? It had been so long since a man had tried, I don't know if I'm imagining it.

He couldn't be. He just lost his wife last year and is clearly not ready to move on if he still has a cupboard full of her tea.

Am *I* ready to move on and flirt? It's been five years since the '*Christmas-that-shall-not-be-mentioned.*' While I haven't tried to get out and date since then, I also haven't met anyone that caught my attention.

Not like Rex Wellington has with his Christmas sweaters and quirky dog.

Tag sits in the back, nose pressed against the window as we make our way into town. Christmas music plays softly through the speakers; Rex hums along to Elvis' 'Blue Christmas.'

"Elvis fan?" I ask, trying to break the tension that I'm probably imagining in my mind.

"More like a Christmas music fan," he says with a smirk that shouldn't make my heart skip a beat the way it does. "You?"

"Oh, I don't know. I don't really listen to music."

"What? Who doesn't listen to any music?" He takes his eyes off the road for a moment to look at me in surprise.

"I don't know. I guess I just never think to turn any on." I shrug my shoulders, looking out the windshield.

"What do you listen to when you're driving?"

"Podcasts and audiobooks mainly."

"Romance books?" Rex asks, sneaking another look at me with a smile.

"Gosh, no. Thrillers or murder mysteries, usually. I love True Crime podcasts."

"I don't get the appeal of those."

"I don't know. There's something interesting about finding out the psychology behind it."

"Hmm," he replies, staring ahead, deep in thought. "So, no music in the car. What about when you're writing your blog?"

"No, I don't have anything playing. I find it too distracting."

"While doing things around the house?"

"No."

"Going for walks?"

"Nope."

“In the shower?”

“Definitely not,” I laugh.

Rex parks his truck on the main street, which I have since learned is called Candy Cane Lane. Because, of course it is.

He turns toward me in his seat. “You’re the most fascinating person I’ve met since moving here.”

“Thank you?” I’m not sure if it’s a compliment or meant to be judging by how he’s looking at me, as if I were a puzzle to be solved.

“You don’t like Christmas but write about it for blogs. You have an unnatural dislike for pancakes.”

“That one isn’t fair. You’re eating a stack of cake with sugar drizzled on top and call it breakfast,” I interrupt.

“It’s a breakfast staple and it’s delicious,” he responds before continuing. “And now I find out you don’t listen to music. Ever.”

“Not *ever*. I go places where there’s music in the background. I know about music; I just don’t listen to it on my own.”

“See. Interesting.” Rex opens his door and climbs out. “Stay there.”

Tag lets out a sound behind me that, if he were human, I’d say it is a scoff. But instead, the German Shepherd places his head beside my seat as if keeping an eye on me.

“I’m not going anywhere.” I say, looking at him. He replies by raising a furry eyebrow. “What? I learned my lesson. He likes opening doors, helping me into jackets, and things. I get it.”

I look through the window at Rex as he rounds the front of the truck. I do get it. He’s like a man from the past when they want to take care of their women. Protect them. Not leave them in front of a hundred of their family and friends to explain they had wasted their time being pulled away from family traditions for a defunct wedding.

Rex opens my door and moves to the side, giving me room to jump down with Tag right behind me. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He holds out his elbow and I hook my hand through, letting him guide me down the street.

The town looks magical in the twilight with the sun dipping low beyond the horizon. The tree in the square is lit up and the booths all have lanterns or strings of lights in festive colours. People mill about, smiling, and saying hello to us as we walk, while also giving me curious, but kind, smiles. I guess in a town like this, I am a bit of a mystery. A newcomer who I’m sure they’ve

all heard about by now.

This experience has been so vastly different from being in the city. There I can disappear. I don't want to run into someone? I can switch coffee shops and networking events. Problem solved.

Here? Everyone knows everyone and everything.

I'm not sure if I find that charming or scary.

"Cassie will have a booth set up with the best hot cocoa you've ever had. She has lots of different flavours. Something for everyone."

"And Cassie is?" I ask, trying to sound neutral when my heart races as fast as my mind, searching for any reference Rex might have made to a woman named Cassie.

Not that I care.

Or that I'm interested.

In fact, I don't even know why I'm asking other than for conversation.

I know I'm lying to myself. Rachel's questions must have put Rex being single on my mind. That's all. No attraction what-so-ever.

"She runs the Candy Cane Cafe. Makes the best lattes, and hot cocoa, in town." He smiles as he talks about her, which makes me curious if it's just his love of caffeine, or if there is something more to his love of her coffee.

"I see." I look straight ahead, my hand fixed in his elbow as we enter the town square. Almost as if I were staking a claim on him, although I don't know why. I have no claim on him. I have nothing. And if that wasn't the statement of the year, I don't know what is. "Is that where you got that horrific drink you spilled all over my jacket?"

Rex laughs. "Yes, that's exactly where I got it. I promise she'll have something that even you will like."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I stop and turn to him, heat rising in my face.

"Nothing," Rex laughs as he starts walking again, taking me with him. "It just means that she'll have something that even Christmas haters will enjoy."

"I don't *hate* Christmas."

"Whatever you say."

Again, I'm struck with how to respond to Rex. I want to continue joking—flirting?—but I'm at a loss. I don't know how to react to him because I don't know how I feel about his joking or flirting. I don't joke or flirt. I'm not that person, but Rex makes me want to be that person.

And that scares me.



I try not to think about it as we pass people chatting and strolling between the few scattered booths. Kids run about wildly, laughing as they eat cookies and drink from to-go cups. The image in front of me is so familiar, yet so foreign at the same time. Sure, kids run and play in parks in Vancouver, but this feels different. Not as guarded. The kids and the parents seem more carefree. It feels—peaceful.

Rex leads me over to a booth in the centre of the square. Behind the table, filled with baked goods and large carafes, stands a beautiful blonde dressed in a tight-fitting black jacket and matching toque. Her cheeks are pink from the cold wind, perfect black liner rims her big blue eyes, which twinkle as she laughs with a customer in front of her. It's like she stepped out of a photo shoot, not standing in the middle of small-town British Columbia during a Christmas festival.

I look down at my oversized plaid jacket, jeans that could use a wash, and now-muddy boots. I run my fingers through my hair, trying to tame what I'm sure are some pretty wild curls, realizing that I didn't put any makeup on this morning. Everything about my appearance is so unlike me. I'm always put together. I'm never covered in dirt and snow or wearing clothes that aren't mine. I never forget to put on makeup before I leave the house.

Walking up to this typical small-town girl, I wonder if Rex regrets having me on his arm. I'm nothing like her at the moment. Not the polished city woman that takes pride in how put together I am on any given day. I would never dare to even run out to the grocery store looking like this back home, let alone a public event. Looking over at him, I can't help but feel a pain in my heart when I see the smile that grazes his lips as he looks at the other woman. I may be on his arm, but his eyes are only for her right now.

What am I even doing? I should be talking to the townspeople and learning about the Hot Cocoa Walk. Finding out why people flock to this tiny Christmas-obsessed town. I don't have time to be laying claim to a man I'm certainly not interested in and am never going to see once this week is over.

Making the decision to end these feelings here and now, I pull my hand from his arm, ignoring Rex's questioning, and mildly hurt, look on his face. Instead, I straighten my spine as I march over to the booth with the cheery, blonde, hot cocoa-supplying elf with the biggest smile I can muster.

I hold my hand out to her and steady my voice. "Hi, there. You must be Cassie. I'd like to ask you some questions."

# *Chapter Eight*



I immediately feel the loss of Holly’s hand on my arm, questioning her change in mood. Her body had tensed up as we walked up to Cassie’s tent. I couldn’t help that my eyes were immediately drawn to the baked goods and drink offerings the closer we got. It’s as if Cassie knew my weaknesses and had all my favourite treats today. Gingerbread cookies and cupcakes. Sugar cookies decorated as snowmen and Santas. I even spied a cranberry white chocolate bar that I had discovered was just about the closest thing to sugary heaven you could get.

And that was *before* I noticed the Holly Jolly Latte and peppermint hot chocolates.

Just as I was about to decide what I was going to order, that’s when Holly started to pull away from me. Her abrupt change in mood is baffling, but so have most of our encounters in the last two days.

I walk up beside her, giving Cassie a friendly smile as she glances over at me, tilting her head.

“What questions would you have for me?” Cassie asks, her gaze flicking between Holly’s and mine.

I face Holly, crossing my arms over my chest as Tag takes a seat next to me. His head tilts with the pom-pom of the Santa hat falling in front of his face. He doesn’t seem to mind; his attention is fixated on the women in front of him. I shake my head, drawing my attention to the same.

“Do you mind if I voice record this? Just for notes later when I write my blog?” Holly asks, pulling her phone out of her pocket.

“Your blog?” Cassie’s eyes widen, becoming more frantic.

“Cassie, this is Holly,” I interject, seeing that the word of who Holly is

hasn't spread as quickly as I thought. "She's visiting Candy Cane Creek to write a blog on small towns that celebrate Christmas."

"Sorry, I should have introduced myself better," Holly adds, not looking in my direction.

Interesting.

"Uh, okay. Well, welcome to Candy Cane Creek. How do you know Rex?"

"Oh, I don't. I'm just staying with him."

Cassie's smile slips for a moment before she recovers. "Staying with Rex?"

"Her car broke down and the inn is full. She's staying in the guest house on my property."

"I see." Cassie hits me with a fierce look before turning back to Holly. I'm not sure what I said that upset her, but I clearly did.

My mind races back to the night I met Holly. Had I been right in that Cassie was flirting with me? Was she now upset I'm here with Holly? This whole situation is so confusing to me.

Holly tapped her phone a few times and held it up between her and Cassie. "I hear you're the owner of the cafe that makes the famous Holly Jolly Latte. I won't ask you for the recipe; I know you hold that close to your heart, but can you tell how it came about?"

"I made it by accident, actually."

I stand up straighter.

I didn't know that about my favourite drink. Come to think of it, there's not a whole lot that I know about Cassie, or her shop, at all other than what I order there. Why have I never thought to ask? Now that I think about it, is there anyone in town I've ever really tried to get to know?

"I was making myself a latte a couple of years ago and I accidentally put the wrong syrup in. I continued making it without thinking until I started to drink it. Once I got over the shock and figured out what I'd done, I put it on the menu. It's been a holiday staple ever since."

"That's very interesting." Holly continues asking her questions; some about the cafe, some about the town. I only half listen, but I can't seem to take my attention away from Holly.

The way she cradles the phone in her hand, like she's a journalist seeking the next big story. How she asks insightful and inquisitive questions. If I didn't know better, I wouldn't have known that she had such a strong dislike

for the holiday. Before long, she's laughing alongside Cassie as if they had been friends for their whole lives. Even if we didn't get off on the right foot, Holly is easy to get to know. I've opened up to her more in the last couple of days than I have to anyone here in over a year. At least, not since losing Lauren.

I look down at Tag, wondering if he's watching this interaction just as closely as I am, but he's flopped onto his belly, trying to catch his long tail in his mouth. He lazily snaps at it a few times, biting nothing but air, or the pompom of his hat. At the fourth try, he successfully catches it and starts in on what I assume is quite the itch. He lets out a low, satisfied growl that I've come to associate with contentment in him.

If he could roll his eyes to the back of his head as he bit at his tail, I'm sure he would.

I shake my head, looking back at the women in front of me, who both stare expectantly. "Sorry, what was that?"

"I was telling Holly here about the dance that happens on Christmas Eve. How the barn is turned into a wintery Christmas wonderland. Also, how there's a good track record of the couples that go to that dance together," Cassie says, the corner of her mouth lifting as she bats her eyes at me.

I bite at my bottom lip, trying to hold back the cringe as Cassie mentions the dance again. And the eye batting. I've never seen her bat her eyes like that before. I can't tell if she's trying to tell me something, or she has some ash from the nearby fire pit in her eye.

"Uh, yeah, I've heard the dance is something."

"You haven't been?" Shock is written all over Holly's face. Of course, it would be. Everyone in Candy Cane Creek has been to the dance. Well, everyone but me.

"No. We moved here in the summer and then, well..." I trail off, turning my head to the side and avoiding their gazes as unshed tears fill my eyes. I can't finish the sentence. I can't say and then Lauren fell sick, and she was taken from me before Christmas.

"I'm sorry, of course." A hand grasps my arm and squeezes, drawing my attention back to the two women. It's Holly that has her hand on my arm. Holly that reaches out and offers me comfort, knowing exactly what it was that I can't say. This stranger that has only known me for less than a day can already read me so well.

"Oh! Yes, of course," Cassie adds a moment later. "I'm sorry, I wasn't

thinking. Of course you haven't been yet."

Holly searches my eyes for another moment before offering me a quiet smile while squeezing my arm. She turns to face Cassie, dropping her hand in the process, and begins asking her for details about the dance, but I can't concentrate on that. All I can focus on is the lack of warmth where her hand was.

"So what can you tell me about the Cocoa Walk tonight?" Holly asks, holding her phone up between her and Cassie.

"It's been a tradition for as long as I can remember," Cassie chuckles. "There are people in town that take the light competition very seriously, even if it's only for fun and bragging rights."

"And the tents and things here in the square? How did this come about?"

"Oh, it just sort of happened, I guess. Candy Creekers are always looking for reasons to gather. Isn't that right, Rex?"

Both women turn to face me. Cassie with the same smile on her face she had in the cafe and Holly with an expectant, but hesitant, look.

"Uh, yeah?" I answer, not quite sure what they're expecting me to add to the conversation.

Tag yips beside me, bringing my attention down to him. His tail thumps on the ground as he looks up at me, giving me a look like I answered in the dumbest way possible, which I'm sure I did.

"Right," Holly says, raising her eyebrow at me before turning back to Cassie. "And the festival this weekend? What can you tell me about that?"

"A lot of the businesses in town have tents to sell their items, including home crafters and bakers that only sell at this time of year. There are events for kids, and it wraps up with town-wide carolling around the gazebo."

"That's sounds pretty amazing, especially for a town the size of Candy Cane Creek."

"Like I said, any reason to get together." Cassie looks over at me. "You really didn't tell her about any of this? Not even about your tent?"

"You have a tent, too?" Holly asks, her eyes wide.

And their attention is on me again. Is it getting hot all of a sudden? I feel a rising heat under my layers as they both look my way. "I, uh, I told her there was a festival."

Cassie rolls her eyes as she chuckles. "He's so modest. He has a tent to raise money for the shelter. He wants to start training the dogs as service animals."

“No, he definitely didn’t tell me that.” Holly’s tone softens as the hand holding her phone drops a little.

“It’s just a pipe dream right now. But the dogs I have already are so sweet; they deserve a good home, and if they can help someone at the same time, it’s a win/win.”

“I see.” Her gaze lingers on mine for another minute before turning to Cassie. “Is the cafe connected in any way? You seem to know a lot about the shelter.”

“Oh, no. Rex and I are just good friends; isn’t that right, Rex?”

Both women are looking at me again.

I feel the flush in my cheeks under their attention. Cassie has a large smile on her face while Holly has a look I can’t quite place. Whatever it is, it’s not a happy one.

“Candy Cane Creek is a really small town, Holly. Everyone helps each other out. I’m sure I must have mentioned my goals to Cassie while picking up a coffee a time or two.” I don’t know why I feel the need to let Holly know that there isn’t anything going on with Cassie and me. I’m not even sure where the ‘good friends’ comment came from. All I know is I need to get out of this situation—now. “Cassie, can we please have a Holly Jolly Latte and a black tea, please? And two of the white chocolate cranberry bars?”

“White chocolate what?” Holly asks.

“Just trust me. They are amazing.”

She narrows her eyes at me like she doesn’t believe me but doesn’t say anything else.

Cassie looks between us before tapping the order into her system and getting to work on the drinks.

“Is everything okay between you two?” Holly whispers as she slides her phone back into her purse.

“I think so?” I answer with a question, not entirely sure about what she means or if Cassie and I are okay. Is there any reason for us not to be okay?

“If there’s something going on between you two...”

I look up at Cassie to see her back turned to the espresso machine, thankful for the loud noise it makes as she makes my drink. “No, there’s nothing going on,” I whisper.

“Hmmm,” she hums, leaning away as her gaze surveys the town square.

I’m not sure what’s going on right now, but I know I don’t like it.

# *Chapter Nine*



## HOLLY



**T**here are so many lights.

Sure, there are lights and festivals in the city, but nothing like this. Not even in the suburbs.

Lights are strung between the houses, making an avenue of lights that can be seen from the next town over. Some houses have themes of either Christmas villages with blow ups and robotic moving animals and Santas. Others are a mix of lights that look more like a jumble of holiday decorations strewn across yards.

“This is...something,” I say, my eyes darting from house to house.

“I probably shouldn’t have started you on this street. They go a little overboard,” Rex chuckles beside me.

Tag lets out a small bark beside him, giving Rex the dog equivalent of a side eye.

This dog is growing on me.

“So are there judging requirements? Different categories?”

“No, or if there are, no one knows what they are. Everyone just writes their favourite house on a ballot back at the square and the winner is the one with the most votes.”

“So like a popularity contest?”

“Yes, and no. People here don’t really vote for their friends or family; they just vote for who they like the best. I may not have been in town long, but I know that everyone here just wants to have fun and enjoy the holiday. There aren’t any politics or arguments. Just plain ol’ good fashioned Christmas fun.”

The concept of a town, or any group of people really, gathering together

and having fun without any other motives, is really stunning to me.

Maybe this little town isn't so bad after all.

"Come on, let me introduce you to some people. They'll be able to help you with your blog."

Rex places his hand on the small of my back, guiding me toward an elderly couple admiring one of the houses. I try to ignore the butterflies in my stomach that flutter at his touch, but it's getting harder and harder to ignore.

*You're only here for another couple of days. Don't get any ideas.*

"Mr. and Mrs. Dexter? I'd like to introduce you to Holly," Rex says, drawing the attention of the couple while not removing his hand from my back.

"Rex, dear, I've told you to call us John and Millie," the woman says with a bright smile. "It's so nice to meet you, Holly. I've heard you're joining us in town for a little while."

"Yes, just until my car is fixed."

"Oh, well, I hope it's for longer than that. I hear you've been a real addition to our town."

"I have?" My mind races, trying to think of what I might have contributed to the town at all in the day I've been here.

"Oh, yes, especially with your blog. We love that you're drawing attention to our little town," John says. "Plus, we're happy to see Rex here smiling again. It's been a while."

I don't look over at him, but I feel Rex stiffen beside me. I don't want to add to that, so I choose to ignore, hoping Rex appreciates the change in subject.

"Rex says you can tell me a thing or two about the town for my blog. Would you mind if I record our conversation on my phone so I can write about it later?"

"Oh, not at all. We would love to help any way we can," Millie answers.

I shift, pulling my phone out of my bag, finding myself brushing up against Rex. My heart races, but I try to play it cool, especially when I find him relaxing into me, his hand shifting to my hip to steady me as I pull up the recording app on my phone.

"How long have you both lived in Candy Cane Creek?" I ask, trying to focus on my blog and not the hunky Christmas-loving lumberjack beside me.

"Oh, our whole lives! I can't say we've ever really been too far away from here," Millie answers, looking up lovingly at her husband.

“We took a brief trip to Alberta once when my brother got married forty years ago, but that’s true, I don’t think we’ve ever travelled too far from home.”

“Wow, that’s amazing. What is it about the town that makes you want to stay so close?”

John and Millie look at each other with such love and happiness that I feel a pang of loss. It’s not for what I lost with Josh, because I don’t believe we ever looked at each other like that. If anything, it makes me realize what I was missing when I thought I had everything. What I’m still missing.

“It’s home,” John says, not looking away from his wife.

“It’s where our friends and family are—for the most part.” She gives her husband a final smile before turning her attention to me. “Plus, the town itself is like an extension of us. The people here are family, even if they aren’t blood. There’s a sense of community and belonging that I don’t think we would ever find anywhere else. That’s what made you stay, isn’t it, Rex?”

I look up at him, seeing him even more uncomfortable by our attention, even if it’s only the four of us.

He clears his throat before answering. “Uh, yeah.”

He removes his hand from my waist and leans away slightly. I bite my lip and look down, immediately feeling the loss of his touch.

I try my best to brush off the thought of it, knowing it must be hard to be constantly reminded of his wife. I couldn’t imagine the pain of losing someone you thought you were going to spend your life with. Yes, it hurt when Josh left, but that’s a different kind of hurt than what Rex went through.

I ask John and Millie a few more questions about the upcoming events and the town in general, trying not to overthink Rex looking off into the distance beside me, seemingly in his own little world.

I thank the couple as they stroll off to look at the rest of the lights, leaving me with Rex and Tag. The mood has shifted, and now I feel like I’m intruding on Rex. As if me being here has stirred up emotions that he’s not ready to deal with.

“Rex, I—”

“Should we move on to the next street?” he interrupts.

I open my mouth to answer, thinking that it’s best if we focus on my blog and not on whatever might or might not have been happening before we spoke with John and Millie, but I’m interrupted once again by a growl and

bark from behind Rex. I peek my head behind him to find Tag growling and barking at an inflatable of Max with fake antlers on his head, standing next to the Grinch. Tag jumps at the blow-up dog and rears back when the fan inside of the sidekick makes it move. I guess to Tag, it looks like this gigantic dog is trying to start a fight.

“Is he okay?” I ask.

Rex snaps out of his thoughts, looking down at me. “Huh?”

“Tag. He seems to have taken offence to Max there.” I nod to the scene behind him, just in time for Rex to lunge and sink his teeth into the fabric.

“Tag! No!” Rex yells, reaching for Tag’s collar and pulling him back just in time for the grinch and his faithful sidekick to deflate.

“Seriously, Rex? Another one?” a man yells as he comes storming out of the house in front of us.

“Another one?” I ask, turning to Rex as he physically wrestles with his dog.

The man approaches us, hands on his hips. “This is the third one, Rex.”

“I know, I’m sorry, Mark. I’ll get you another one tomorrow.” Rex sighs, finally getting Tag to settle at his side. The dog has a smug look on his face—one I didn’t even know dogs could have. Whatever battle the dog thought he was in, he’s clearly convinced he won.

Mark shakes his head as he unplugs the now torn blow up and picks it up. “I’m going to have to buy stock in the company that makes this if he keeps this up.” His tone says he’s not overly upset, which is amazing considering what just happened, and it not being the first time.

“It won’t happen again, will it, Tag?” Rex asks, narrowing his eyes at his dog, not taking his hand off Tag’s collar.

Tag lets out a sound that I can only compare to a grumble as he looks down at the ground.

Mark gives one more shake of his head before turning and walking back to his house, shoving the tattered decoration into his garbage can as he goes.

“So, this has happened before?” I ask.

“Uh, yeah. Tag seems to like to enter into a battle of the Christmas dogs with Mark’s blow ups.”

“Right,” I counter, not sure what else to say.

This town keeps getting more and more interesting. Or maybe it’s just the man beside me and his quirky dog.

# *Chapter Ten*

REX



“Come on, Fluffy. You can do it.” I try to encourage her to go after a ball I threw for her. She huffs at me as she lies on the grass, digging her face behind her paw, hiding her eyes.

I stand up from my kneeling position, brushing grass off my jeans. I was hoping the dogs would perform a little better, considering we're in a gated tent at the Christmas Festival, trying to raise money to train these pups to be service dogs.

Right now, I can't even get them to play fetch.

As if on cue, feeling my disappointment, Lucy gets up from the ground and dives headfirst into a kiddie pool I have set up filled with plastic balls. The multi-coloured orbs go flying, some over the fence, hitting people as they walk by. Undeterred by the mess she's making, Lucy decides to run circles around the tent before diving back into the pool, sending another round of plastic projectiles into the air.

I rub my hands over my face, unsure of how to handle the scene playing out before me.

Ginger barely looks up from her nap in the corner while Tag huffs, gets up, and turns so his back is facing the chaos. He sighs, the force of his displeasure sending the pom-pom of his hat into the air before he closes his eyes and takes another nap.

This isn't how I envisioned today going. I thought I'd trained them all enough to do simple commands. Well, enough to impress some of the people of the town into possibly donating some money to bring in a professional to train them properly. The way they're going, I'll be lucky if I raise enough to feed them for the day.

“You’ve got your hands full, I see,” Jacob Winters laughs as he walks up to my tent.

He may be my best friend here in Candy Cane Creek, but that doesn’t mean I appreciate his commentary.

“I’m trying my best here,” I grit.

“Hey, I didn’t mean anything by it.” Jacob holds out his hands in front of him in surrender. “Do you need any help?”

“Not unless you know how to train these dogs in the next five minutes.” I look at Lucy, who is now chasing after a blue ball along the inside of the wooden fence I’ve put up. She yips and wags her tail before jumping at the ball, sending it flying another foot in front of her before she repeats the process all over again.

“Uh, no. I don’t think I can help you there,” he answers, watching Lucy while rubbing the back of his neck. “I actually came over to see if you could help me.”

“Sure, what do you need?” I ask, picking up a ball and throwing it for Ginger, who only watches the ball as it rolls past her snout. I let out an exasperated breath, not sure what I was thinking trying to convince the town I could get them trained well enough to be service dogs.

“I was hoping you could introduce me to your reporter friend.”

Now that gets my attention. “Who, Holly?” I look at him, wondering what my friend is up to. “She’s not a reporter. She writes a blog.”

“Same difference,” he says with a shrug.

“Why?” My heart picks up speed at the thought of Jacob wanting to meet her. He’s single, my age. The women in town seem to think he’s handsome with the way they give him attention. I don’t know the full reason why he hasn’t settled down yet, but he’s a good guy. Any woman would be lucky to have him.

So why does the thought of him having an interest in Holly make my stomach turn?

“I’m hoping she would be interested in mentioning the inn in her story. I heard she wanted to stay there when she first got into town, but we were full.”

Right. Or course it has to do with his inn. It’s the centre of the tourism in our town. People book a year in advance to stay there around Christmas. Of course he would want it mentioned.

But it doesn’t lessen the twisting feeling in my gut.

“Yes. She hadn’t planned on staying in town and didn’t think to book a room, not that you would have had any available this time of year, anyway.”

“No, but I would have shown her around, given her the full experience without having a room. You know how guests love the dining room and the library.” He looks behind me, surveying the town square. “Where is she? Can you introduce us?”

“She’s, uh, not here.” It’s my turn to rub the back of my neck, avoiding his questioning gaze.

“Why not? I thought you were showing her around while she’s here. Giving her the real Candy Cane Creek experience.”

“I am,” I say hesitantly. I don’t really want to tell Jacob why I snuck out of my own house early this morning to come to the market without Holly seeing me. I don’t want to bring up the fact that I might be falling for her, and that stirs up a bunch of emotions that I’m not ready to deal with.

I *really* don’t want to tell him about Cassie and how I don’t know what’s going on there, other than she’s no longer just the one I get my Holly Jolly Lattes from anymore.

I still, worry rushing through my body.

*I can still get my Holly Jolly Latte, can’t I?*

“What is it? What happened?” Jacob asks, concern written on his face.

“Um, nothing?”

“It’s not nothing when you answer that with a question.”

I look around, breathing out a sigh of relief that no one is around. I don’t need the people of Candy Cane Creek hearing this and making it part of the gossip chain by morning.

“I’m not sure, exactly, but I think Cassie might have been flirting with me.”

He looks at me with a blank face, taking a moment and blinking as he stares at me. “And?”

“What do you mean, ‘and?’”

“Cassie always flirts with you,” he says nonchalantly, as if it was a fact everyone knew. When he takes in my shocked expression, he continues. “Wait, you didn’t know?”

“No! How was I supposed to know? I go in, I get my Holly Jolly Latte, and I leave. It wasn’t until the other night I thought maybe she was. She brought up the dance and touched my hand...”

Jacob chuckles, shaking his hand. “Touched your hand? That’s it; you



two have to get married now.”

“Jacob,” I huff, closing my eyes and rubbing them with my fingers.

“Relax, Rex. It’s not a big deal.”

I drop my hand and open my eyes, looking at him and his smug face.

“So what does this have to do with Holly? Wait, do you have feelings for Holly?”

“I...don’t know. Maybe? I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“Because of Lauren?”

I look away and nod. I’m not ready to admit that I might be ready to move on. My stomach turns at the thought of it, but my heart? Well, it’s not so hesitant. I look at the people milling about the square. Kids are running, chasing each other. People stop at different booths, buying Christmas goodies and laughing with the vendors. Couples walk hand in hand as they peruse the items for sale.

This is what Lauren would have loved. She had been looking forward to all of the holiday events Candy Cane Creek had to offer. Sadly, she got sick and passed before it happened. The thought of her missing out on this, something she would have loved so much. It breaks my heart knowing she never got to see any of this.

A heavy weight drops in my stomach when I realize I’m experiencing this with someone else.

“It wouldn’t be a bad thing, you know?” Jacob says, drawing my attention back to him. “If you had feelings for someone.”

“It hasn’t been that long, Jacob.”

“I’m not saying you need to go and get married tomorrow; I’m just saying that it’s long enough that you can start thinking about it. Maybe go on a date. Holly’s planning on going back to the city, right?”

I nod, knowing that everything about Holly is probably public knowledge by now.

“That’s perfect. Have fun and see what feels right. If you’re not ready, there are no hurt feelings since she’s leaving.”

Why does the thought of Holly leaving send a wave of panic more than the idea of me taking her on a date?

Rex lazily gets up from his slumber and trots over to me, sitting at my side. He looks up at me, the pompom of his Santa hat resting over his eye, causing him to shake, trying to move it. After the third unsuccessful attempt, I take pity on him and move it for him, securing it safely behind his ear.

I'm still astonished the thing stays on his head. It must be by pure Christmas magic.

"Maybe you're right. It's been so long. Heck, I don't even know when I'm being flirted with. I haven't tried to date anyone in ten years. Where do I even start?"

I give Tag a scratch on the head, knowing I'm asking Jacob, but secretly wishing it was Tag that would answer. They both stood beside me while Lauren was sick. As I helped her through her treatments that did more harm than good. They were with me when she passed; being there for me in more ways than I could count as I tried to navigate life without the one I thought I would grow old with.

Now I'm asking the two people—beings? Mammals?—I'm closest with in town how I restart a life vastly different than what I had imagined my life being.

"You start by taking your time and seeing where this goes. Do you like Holly?"

I take a deep breath and nod, not wanting to lie to Jacob, but not ready to say it out loud, either.

"Then use your time together to explore that."

"When did you get so wise?" I ask jokingly, needing to lighten the mood—more specifically, my mood.

"I don't know what you're talking about. I've always been wise," he laughs.

I roll my eyes but laugh along with him.

"What's so funny?" Holly asks, walking up to the tent, her eyes searching between Jacob and me. The smile on her face nearly takes my breath away.

"Just Rex here doubting my intelligence," Jacob says with a smile. He holds his hand out to her. "I'm Jacob Winters. Owner of The Mistletoe Inn."

"It's nice to meet you. I'm Holly Day."

"Holly..." Jacob starts, but I cut him off by catching his eye and giving him a sharp shake of my head. He narrows his eyes at me briefly but continues, "It's nice to meet you, Holly. I've been hoping to catch up with you to talk about my Inn. I understand that we were regretfully full when you were looking for a room, but I would love to give you a tour for your blog. Really show you what it's like."

They discuss Holly stopping by for a tour tomorrow, but I can't help but watch her as she interacts with Jacob. She's being professional and polite.

She's asking him questions about the history of the Inn and its role in the holiday festival line up. I try to pay attention, but I can't. I'm mesmerized by the smile on her face and the way her eyes light up as she gets into her work mode. I watch as her hands become more animated as she speaks excitedly with Jacob. I'm learning that she's interested in the history of the building and how it played an important role in the development of Candy Cane Creek as a city.

History. That's what gets her excited. What motivates her behind her stories. I'll just need to tie in the history of some of our traditions and that will keep her interested.

Maybe for longer than just the next few days.

As if reading my mind, Tag gives a yip beside me, pushing his nose into my palm.

"Yeah, yeah. I get it."

I know what I need to do now. The question is, what will I do if she wants to stay?

# *Chapter Eleven*

## HOLLY



I'm asking Jacob questions about his inn and trying to stay focused for the blog, but my attention is on Rex.

They looked to be in a serious discussion when I walked up, but once they broke into laughter, I figured it was safe to say good morning.

I'll admit I was a little sad when I woke up to find Rex and Tag already gone this morning, but after our encounter last night, I can't blame him. I'm not sure what came over me once we met up with Cassie, but I didn't like the way she was flirting with him. I don't have any right to claim him, but once I saw he got sad thinking about his late wife, I felt protective of him. As if he needed someone to be there for him. I don't know why I thought it would be me. It *can't* be me. I won't be here long enough.

What surprised me even more was finding a thoughtful basket on the cottage porch this morning. Even though Rex is pulling away from me, he's still thoughtful enough to leave a thermos of his Christmas tea, a breakfast sandwich wrapped in foil, and keys to a car parked right outside my door. This strange man with an even stranger dog is making me feel things I shouldn't be feeling while confusing me more than anyone ever has.

Now, as I stand here asking Jacob about the history of the inn and its significance in the town, especially around the festival, I can't help but notice that Rex is just as withdrawn. He's got something on his mind, but I don't know if I have the right to pry.

"It's really the reason the whole Christmas season in Candy Cane Creek started," Jacob says, grabbing my attention.

"Why do you say that?" I hold my phone up higher, making sure I record what Jacob is saying.

“Well, my great-grandparents established the Inn when the town was still just a trading village. They built it from the ground up and opened it as a place for travellers to stay while they came to trade or travelled further up north.”

“How interesting,” I add, loving how there’s so much history in the Inn alone. “And the Christmas events?”

“Well, that started because my great-Grandma was so in love with Christmas. Once the Inn opened and they settled into their new town and business, they wanted to celebrate with the town. Really make it a community. So, they started the Christmas Eve dance. At first, it was held in the dining room in the Inn, but it quickly became so popular that they had to move it to the barn, where it is now.”

“That’s impressive. And the other events?”

I sneak a glance at Rex to find he’s watching us just as quietly and intently as Tag, who is sitting at his feet. Both have their heads cocked a little to the same side, looking more alike than a man and dog should.

“Shortly after the dance became popular, they decided to add the tree lighting a few years later, and the other traditions grew as the years went on. It seemed as if every generation added their own.”

I open my mouth to ask another question when a large crash comes from the corner of the tent. Red and green balls are flying, and a child-sized inflatable pool shakes from side to side. “What...?” I start, but immediately stop when Rex rushes from my side.

“Lucy!” he bellows, rushing to the pool, which is quickly deflating and emptying of balls.

The golden Labradoodle perks her head up with a mouthful of plastic, a growl escaping her otherwise cute face.

“Lucy, drop it,” Rex says forcefully, taking a cautious step forward.

The dog doesn’t back down. Instead, she bends down, her tail in the air, and narrows her eyes at him.

“Come on now, Lucy. You know this is no way to act. You’ve ruined the pool.” Rex places his hands up in front of her, taking another small step forward. He speaks to Lucy as if she were a child, not an animal. I find it both odd and endearing at the same time.

“I thought you trained her,” Jacob jokes, not even bothering to stifle a laugh.

“Not the time, Jacob,” Rex says out of the corner of his mouth, not

looking away from the standoff he's in with the little golden troublemaker.

"I'd say she'd make a fine service dog. You know, for anyone needing protecting from kiddie pools and multi-coloured balls," his friend continues.

"Are you going to help him or just rile him up?" I whisper, not taking my eyes off the scene in front of me.

"Oh, I'd say he's got it under control," Jacob laughs.

"Lucy, drop it," Rex says again, getting closer to the corner.

Lucy shakes her head from side to side, letting out another growl as she backs up a step. Colourful balls litter the grass and the other dogs only look at her with a passing interest, as if they are used to her antics. Even Tag has lost interest, turning his back and plopping down to watch the people passing by. Most of those who stroll past look on or stop to watch Candy Cane Creek's version of man versus beast.

"Ah ha!" Rex says, grabbing the pool and giving it a hard tug.

I can only watch in horror, lifting my hand to cover my open mouth as Lucy lets go, causing Rex to lose balance and fall backwards. The pool lifts over him, hovering upside down for a moment while raining the rest of the balls down on him before covering him like a blanket.

Lucy jumps on what I can only assume is his stomach, causing an 'oof' to come from under the plastic before Lucy lunges and grabs a corner, pulling back to reveal Rex's stunned face.

"Rex! Are you okay?" I rush to his side, trying to shoo Lucy off Rex's chest, but she only looks down at him in triumph.

"Yeah," he answers slowly, slowly moving his head from side to side.

Jacob chuckles as he grabs Lucy by the collar and guides her off Rex before extending his hand and helping his friend up.

"Now you help?" I ask, rolling my eyes.

"I don't need help with my dogs," Rex says, brushing grass off his jeans.

"Clearly," Jacob says.

Rex glances behind me, and his face darkens. Following his gaze, I see a lot of the townspeople staring in our direction. Most with sympathy, some openly gossiping while staring.

"There's nothing to see here!" I say loudly, gaining everyone's attention. "Rex was...training Lucy to do a new trick, and she got a little overexcited. That's all. You know Labradoodles and how dramatic they are."

I actually know nothing about dog breeds and pray I'm at least relatively close to the mark about Lucy's breed. The nods of the people in front of me

tell me I guessed right.

“Lying now, are we?” Jacob whispers as he steps up beside me with a chuckle.

“I didn’t see you jumping in to help him. He’s raising money to train these dogs or at least get them adopted. I’m just trying to help with damage control. He’s your friend. You could have done more than just stand there and laugh.”

Jacob lets out a deep breath. “You’re right.”

At least he had the decency to look abashed about it. I didn’t get the impression he was trying to be mean to Rex, but he certainly wasn’t jumping up to help him, either.

“What do you need, Rex?” Jacob asks, looking around the tent.

“I think I’m just going to pack up and go home. There’s no point in staying here. Or coming back tomorrow, for that matter.”

“Don’t say that,” I say, closing the distance between Rex and I, placing my hand on his arm. “This is just a little setback. Who knows, maybe someone found it endearing and will come back to ask more questions or make a donation?” I know it’s a stretch as I say it, but the look of disbelief on Rex’s face only confirms it.

“No, I think it’s best just to get everyone home.” He takes a step away to grab a garbage bag and start loading the scattered plastic balls in.

I slump my shoulders, missing the feel of the soft fabric of his plaid shirt under my hand. I’m overcome with sadness at how today played out for him. I’d really hoped that even though the town was familiar with him and his shelter, that new attention would be brought to him and his dogs. As much as I know he will be sad at being separated from Lucy, Ginger, or Fluffy, that he would be able to find them good homes with families to love them.

He doesn’t look at either of us as he cleans up the mess. Instead, he picks up the balls one-by-one, putting them in the black bag while still lovingly avoiding a bouncing Lucy as she circles around him.

“Come on, Berry. Let’s get to work,” Jacob says, shoving a black garbage bag into my hands.

“Berry?” I ask, raising an eyebrow.

“Holly is a berry.”

“Do you give all strangers a nickname?”

“You aren’t a stranger anymore, Berry. You’re a Candy Cane Creeker now,” he says with a smile.



“I’m not staying, you know. I’m leaving as soon as my car is fixed.”

Jacob looks between Rex and me. “Sure, you are,” he chuckles to himself before joining Rex and helping him shove the now torn pool into a garbage bag.

I’m left standing and watching them, wondering why I no longer feel the excitement of leaving town and heading back to the city. I hate to admit it, but the town is growing on me. Looking at the moody man in front of me, with plaid shirts, dorky Christmas sweaters, and quirky dogs, I think it’s maybe more than just the town I’m starting to care for.

# *Chapter Twelve*

## REX



The coffee mug in my hand turned cold a long time ago, but I don't have it in me to remake it. Yesterday turned into such a mess.

I'd had every intention of showing how playful and loving the dogs are. I'd envisioned families coming and meeting them. Either falling in love with them to start the process of taking one home, or donating to the shelter, either for my costs or the training program. Instead, I have a shredded pool, a sore back, and enough humiliation to make me want to stay home alone on my property until the new year at the earliest.

"What am I going to do, Tag?" I ask, looking down at him. He's laying at my feet, his ear twitching before flopping back down at my voice. His big brown eyes look up at me in a sorrowful plea.

"I know, I'll figure it out. They are wonderful dogs, even if they do have the worst timing for zoomies and rebellions..."

Tag chuffs, giving me as close to a doggy eye roll as he can.

"Don't forget you were like that too when I first met you. It's not their fault you're a grumpy old man now."

Tag takes exception to this, baring his teeth at me and snapping them together before getting up and leaving the kitchen.

"See! Grumpy old man!" I exclaim as he pads into the living room. I pick up my coffee and wince as I take a sip. "And I'm arguing with a dog."

"Did you win, at least?" Holly asks as she walks into the room with a smile on her face.

"It's debatable." I place my mug on the counter in front of me. "How much of that did you hear?"

"Enough," she chuckles, taking a seat on the stool across from me. "Are

you really not going to the market today?”

“What’s the point? I think they showed off enough yesterday. Plus, it was a lofty goal to think I would raise enough to bring someone in to train them. I don’t know what I was thinking.” Pushing my glasses up higher on the bridge of my nose, I brace my hands on the counter and hang my head to my chest.

“You were thinking you wanted to make a difference. That you wanted to find good homes for these amazing dogs,” she starts softly. “You were thinking that if you could help someone the way I think these dogs helped you, it’s worth a shot.”

I didn’t hear her move, but as she finishes, she’s right next to me. I feel her hand on my shoulder, the comforting weight easing the tension building around my heart. I haven’t felt this lost since Lauren died. Once again, I don’t know what I’m going to do now that what I thought of as my future plans are disappearing.

“I have an idea,” she says, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “I spoke with Rachel last night. I want to do a special blog post on animal shelters. Specifically, yours.”

My head snaps up, my gaze meeting hers. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Then it’s a good thing you aren’t asking.” The corner of her mouth quirks up in a wry smile.

I rub my hands over my face, unsure of what to say.

“Just think of how much it would help. Not just for you at Woof Street, but for shelters all over,” she continues.

I lower my hands. “You have that kind of reach?”

“I mean, not to toot my own horn or anything, but I have a solid readership. My articles on Rachel’s blog always have high numbers. My social media following is decent.”

“I didn’t realize I had a celebrity staying with me,” I joke, starting to feel some of the tension easing from my chest.

“Hardly.” She rolls her eyes. “But I think I can help. If you let me.”

I look into her green eyes, seeing how much honesty and emotion are pouring from them. Maybe this is the break that I need in order to help the shelter. I’ve been doing everything I can to try to reach the communities outside of Candy Cane Creek to find families that want to adopt Lucy, Ginger, and Fluffy. Not to mention potentially helping other dogs that might be stranded in areas outside of my own.

“What would you need from me?”

“Not much,” she starts, walking around the island again and hopping up on her stool. “I would just need to ask you a few questions about your shelter and the dogs. What the adoption process is like. I would need to take some pictures of you and the dogs.”

“Me?” I stammer.

“Well, you are the face of the shelter, are you not?” There’s that smile again. I don’t know how I feel about the fact it makes me want to do whatever she asks of me.

“Wouldn’t that be the dogs?”

“No, silly. While they would help, people would want to see the handsome man behind the pups.”

I raise my eyebrow. “You think I’m handsome?”

There’s that panic again.

But it’s not in the same way I felt it with Cassie in the cafe. This is different. This is...hopeful?

“Is that seriously what you took away from that?”

I turn and grab the kettle, filling it in the sink while avoiding her gaze. I’m still torn about my feelings for Holly. While I do find her beautiful, smart, and funny—all things that make me wish she were staying in Candy Cane Creek instead of going back to the city—it still feels too soon after Lauren. I promised to love her for the rest of my life. While I know this is what she would want for me, it still feels wrong.

“I think you’ve got enough water there, Rex,” Holly says behind me.

I look down to see water overflowing from the top of the kettle. I rush to turn off the tap, pouring some of the water out before wiping down the outside.

“I got distracted.”

“I’m sorry if I made you feel uncomfortable. That’s not what I intended. “

“No, you didn’t.” I shake my head, placing the kettle back on its base and flicking on the switch. I take a deep breath, feeling like I’m ready to confide more in Holly. There’s something about her that makes me feel safe. Like I can tell her anything and there won’t be any judgement. “I was thinking about Lauren.”

“Oh,” she says, looking down at her clasped hands in front of her on the island. “Can I ask what happened?”

I nod, taking a mug down from the cabinet and grabbing the Christmas tea Holly likes. I sigh, looking at the boxes of tea in front of me, almost

asking them permission to continue.

First, I talk to dogs. Now, boxes of tea.

“We found out she had MS shortly after we got engaged.” I close the cupboard door and brace myself for a moment before turning to her. “She didn’t let it stop her from getting her dream wedding.”

“She sounds like a strong woman.”

“Very,” I nod curtly, dropping the tea bag into the mug and finally facing Holly as I place it on the island between us. “It progressed quickly, but we were able to pull off the Christmas wedding she wanted. It was the perfect day. The church was filled with evergreens and holly. We had Christmas trees that lined the hall during the reception. We even had a turkey dinner for everyone, complete with signature holiday drinks.”

“It sounds incredible.”

The compassion in her eyes nearly makes me lose the strength to keep talking. “It was.”

I can still see Lauren walking toward me as I wait at the altar, her white dress fitting her perfectly with lace capped sleeves and a long train. Her bouquet was filled with red and white roses, red berries, and greenery. She insisted on it being wrapped in a ribbon of burlap because she said it ‘felt right’ with the rustic holiday theme we had.

Holly gives me a moment to live in the past, which I’m thankful for.

“Anyway, soon after we got married, the MS started progressing quickly. It was harder for her to work, even at home, so she had to move to part time. We lived in the city then. I worked in an office. We did the things we thought we should do as a young couple starting our lives together. But when it all got too hard for her, we decided to move here. We passed through here one year over Christmas while we were travelling, and we fell in love with the town. The property was big enough that we could open the shelter and the house was perfect for what we wanted.”

“Did you always want to run a dog shelter?”

“No,” I laugh, grabbing the kettle once it clicks off, steam billowing out of the opening. “I have a business degree and was working for a communication company. Sure, I loved dogs, but I never saw myself doing this.” I look out the window at the fenced-in field that I use to let the dogs roam. “No, this was Lauren’s dream. She wanted land with animals. She wanted to help them find the right homes with people that will love them.”

“And you were happy with leaving your job? Leaving the city?”

“Oh, yeah. I didn’t question it.” I look back at Holly’s stunned face. I would assume that for someone like her that loves the city and having the job she does, it would be hard to imagine giving it up to do what I did. “I would have done anything for Lauren to make her happy. In doing so, I found my happiness. I love Candy Cane Creek and I love this shelter. It fulfills me in a way that the city and a desk job never did.”

She looks at me for a moment, tilting her head to the side as she observes me. “You know, now that you mention it, I don’t think I can see you in a suit and tie behind a desk.”

I laugh, filling her mug with water and sliding it across the island to her before placing the kettle back on its holder. I turn and rest my back against the countertop, folding my arms over my chest. “Oh, yeah? That’s hard to imagine?”

“Mr. I-wear-Christmas-sweaters-for-fun? Yes, I would say that’s hard to imagine.”

I chuckle. “That’s fair, but it’s what I did.”

“Have you ever thought of going back to that?” she asks, dipping her tea bag in and out of the hot water, still watching me.

“No, it’s never crossed my mind, to be honest. This is my home now.” I rub my hand over my beard, thinking about how I want to say what I want to say next. “We moved into this house in the summer. For a while, it looked like Lauren was doing okay. We were settling in the home; Tag first came to us as a rescue and quickly became part of our family. We were really happy.”

“And then?” Holly asks quietly.

“And then she caught pneumonia. She tried her best to fight it, but the quickly progressing MS mixed with the illness was too much for her.” I look down at the floor, trying to hold back the tears that always come when I talk about this. I’ve gotten okay with talking about Lauren without crying, but this part? This part still hurts too much.

“Oh, Rex. I’m so sorry you had to go through that. That must have been horrible for both of you.”

I close my eyes, willing the tears away when I hear Holly get up from her stool and walk to me.

“Rex?” she whispers. “Can I hug you?”

I nod, too afraid to speak.

I uncross my arms and let her hold me, taking a breath before I wrap my arms around her, too. She comes to just under my chin, tucking perfectly into

my chest as she holds me tight.

“You’re a good man, Rex Wellington,” she says into my chest.

“I don’t know about that. I took care of my wife. That’s what a husband does. That’s what you do for the people you love.”

“You’d be surprised at how many people don’t live by that.”

It’s my turn to squeeze her as I think of all she’s lost in her life. Her fiancé, her parents, living far away. It breaks my heart to think of how alone she’s been. I wonder if she’s ever had someone to even care for her.

Her lack of awareness of having someone even open a door for her tells me that she hasn’t.

It makes me want to show her what it could be like. That *I* want to be the one to show her what it’s like.

Without thinking, I raise my hand from her back and brush a lock of her hair behind her ear. She looks up at me, wide eyed and mouth slightly open as I trail my finger along her soft skin and cup her cheek.

“Rex?”

“Yeah, Holly?”

“What’s happening?”

That’s a good question. I’m not sure what’s going on, but I know that whatever it is, I’m going to run with it. “Honestly, I have no idea.”

I look into her Christmas-tree-coloured eyes for a moment longer before slowly lowering my head toward hers. I hear her sudden intake of breath as I inch closer to her, giving her time to pull back if this isn’t what she wants. It also gives me a moment to make sure I’m doing the right thing. I don’t want to be caught up in my emotions. Letting my vulnerability do something I wouldn’t normally do.

My lips are a breath away from hers when a large crash comes from the living room, followed by a yelp and a growl that is distinctively Tag. A moment later he appears in the doorway, tail wagging, wrapped in a silver glittery garland that I’m sure a moment ago belonged on the fake tree in my living room.

“What...?” Holly jumps, turning around in my arms until her back is to my chest.

“Tag and his wonderful timing,” I breathe, lowering my forehead to rest on the top of her head.

I’m not sure if I should scold or thank Tag for his interruption, but it’s made me realize one thing.



I don't want Holly to leave.

# *Chapter Thirteen*

## HOLLY



**T**he charm of Candy Cane Creek isn't just in the festive decorations or the holiday themed treats that make you come back for more. It's the people.

*During my time in the quaint little town, it was easy to get caught up in the Christmas spirit and believe that I, too, lived in this fairytale-like town where stress, deadlines, and real life didn't exist. It makes you forget you aren't in Santa's Village or living inside of a snow globe.*

*It makes you want to believe in Christmas magic.*

I let my fingers hover over the keyboard of my laptop, not sure where I want the direction for this blog to go. After all, there is so much I could write about.

Jacob gave me the grand tour of his inn earlier today. The Mistletoe Inn is exactly what I expected. A large bed-and-breakfast style lodging with a grand staircase, a large dining room, and decorated elegantly in a way only a small-town inn can pull off. Even with its dated wallpaper, floral decorative linens, and dark wood—everything.

What really impressed me was the holiday themed high tea brought out on a three-tiered serving tray, served with endless tea in an actual porcelain teapot, decorated in what I was told are hand-drawn poinsettia leaves around the top.

Jacob sat with me while we ate mini turkey and cranberry sandwiches. He told me more about the history of the Inn and Christmas activities while we enjoyed cranberry and white chocolate scones with real clotted cream. He then teased me and nearly begged for information about Rex and me while we munched on freshly baked gingerbread cookies.

*“Come on, Berry. You have to tell me something,” he nearly whined, a pained expression on his handsome face.*

*“I don’t have to tell you anything,” I laugh, wiping the side of my mouth with the poinsettia embroidered napkin before placing it on the table in front of me. I lean back in my chair, astonished at how much I ate, and how incredible every bite of it was.*

*“You’re the first person Rex has even noticed since Lauren passed. We’ve all been there for him during his grieving, but we also want him to be happy.”*

*“And what makes you think I will make him happy? I don’t even live here.”*

*But could I?*

*The thought has been racing through my mind more often than I’d like to admit.*

*“Cassie has been trying to get his attention for months and he’s never done more than be polite and order the overly-sugary latte from her every day.”*

*“It does smell over-sugared,” I agree, hoping to change the topic from my (lack of a) love life to something more tolerable, like our general dislike for the Holly Jolly Latte.*

*“I’m a coffee purist. Just a little cream. Tiny bit of sugar if it’s too bitter, but other than that, nothing belongs in a coffee.” Jacob makes a face of disgust while giving his head a slight shake.*

*“Or no coffee at all,” I laugh, reaching for my teacup and holding it up to him in a silent cheers. “So you aren’t one of the Candy Cane Creekers that uses the peppermint candy as a stir stick?”*

*“No, candy canes and coffee should be enjoyed. And not liking coffee is just a disgrace. Coffee is life.”*

*“If you say so,” I say with a smirk as I drink my gingerbread tea.*

*“Anyway, back to Rex.”*

*“There’s nothing to say,” I sigh, placing my mug back on the saucer, which is also trimmed with deep red poinsettia leaves.*

*He gives me a curious look before picking up his own mug and taking a large sip, never taking his eyes off me. “Just don’t hurt him.”*

*Jacob’s words ring in the back of my mind all day. I’m not sure how I would hurt Rex. I don’t want to hurt him.*

*I’ve been up front with him that I’m not staying in Candy Cane Creek.*

Once my car is fixed, I'm heading back to the city. This is all assuming there is even anything going on between us.

But then there was our almost-kiss in his kitchen yesterday. I don't know if we were both so caught up in the emotion of his admission about his wife or what it was, but there was something. A moment. A fraction of time where we both stood together and the only thing that existed was us. And in that moment, I wanted that kiss more than anything.

I turn my attention back to my work, needing to put Rex out of my mind. As much as I don't want to hurt him, I don't want to get hurt, either.

I spend the next hour reviewing my audio notes and writing about the town, trying not to make it sound like I'm playing favourites, but I am. Candy Cane Creek is creeping into my heart, and I don't know how I feel about that.

I curl up on the couch in the living room of the guest house, laptop propped up on my lap, and type. I clear my mind, letting the words flow until there are no more.

Glancing up, I see the festive bouquet the town mayor brought me. William Claus—because of course his last name is Santa related—stopped by while I was at the Inn. He's an older gentleman with white hair, white beard, and an apparent preference for wearing red and white. He's kind and soft-spoken and had a gleam in his eye when he presented me with a bundle of red and white poinsettias, greenery, and pinecones.

I can't help but smile as I think back to the jolly man who only wanted to stop by to make sure I was feeling welcomed and enjoying everything the town had to offer.

And this is why I feel the wall the size of Mount Crumpet I have around my heart starting to crack.

A knock on the door pulls me out of my gut-churning emotions. Thankful for the distraction, I put my laptop aside and go to the door, surprised to find Cassie on the other side.

"Hi, is everything okay?" I ask, looking her over for any sign of panic. Especially after our exchange at the market, where I felt like she was trying to stake some claim over Rex. I'm surprised to find her here.

"Oh, yeah, everything's fine. I'm here to take you pyjama shopping."

"Sorry, what?"

"For the PJ Shopping event tonight. Rex did tell you about that, right?"

"He did..."

"Great! He asked me to take you to town to get some pjs for tonight." Her

smile is genuine as she beams at me. “Oh! And he asked me to give you this.” She removes fabric that was draped over her arm and hands it to me.

“My jacket!” I exclaim, loving the feel of the soft wool back in my hands. I hug it to my chest, relief washing over me as I see all the coffee stains are gone. “Wait, Rex asked you to bring it? To take me?”

Why didn’t he ask me himself?

A sadness I wasn’t expecting replaces the relief. Was the almost-kiss too much for him? I should have read the situation better. Of course, he was emotionally vulnerable after telling me about Lauren. He wanted comfort, not someone to try to kiss him.

“He’s busy at the shelter. Something about Fluffy getting into doggy Christmas treats and making a mess. Also, he didn’t think he would be the right one to take you shopping.”

“Oh, I see.” Of course not. Why would you want to take a stranger shopping for pyjamas after you almost-kiss her and then rush out of the room? Sure, the rushing part was mostly because Tag thought it was a good idea to try to get the Christmas pickle ornament from the middle of the tree and ended up toppling it, all while decorating himself in garland, but that’s besides the point.

“You don’t mind, do you? I know we got off on the wrong foot, and I’m sorry about that.” She looks sheepish as she glances between me and her hands folded in front of her. “I guess it’s not a secret that I like Rex. I thought...well, it doesn’t matter what I thought. It’s clear that he likes you, and I can respect that.”

“Thank you, but I don’t think that’s necessary. I’m only going to be in town for a few more days. I don’t know what the town thinks...but it’s not that. It can’t be that.”

Cassie tilts her head. “Hmkkay. If you say so.”

She looks like she doesn’t believe me. I’m not sure I believe me, but it’s what needs to be said.

“Well, we need to get going if we’re going to get back in time to get ready for the shopping event.” She looks down at the coat I’m hugging. “Did you want to put on your Matthew Davey...”

“Massimo Dutti,” I correct her.

“Yeah, your coat and we’ll get going?”

I look back at my laptop, realizing I’m not going to be getting any more writing done for today. Plus, I will need to experience the shopping event

tonight to really immerse myself in the Christmas culture they've got going on here.

I grab my purse from the hook behind the door and slide on my boots. "Lead the way."



"WHAT ABOUT THIS ONE?" Cassie holds up a fleece onesie with strings of Christmas lights hanging in vertical off-centre lines. Some of them even light up.

"It's a little...much." I say, narrowing my eyes at the offending sleepwear.

"Got it. You're looking for something a little more...subtle," she says, putting the onesie back on the rack.

I have to admit that the time I've spent with Cassie has been fun. She had a Christmas tea latte waiting for me in her truck, saying that she was under strict instructions from Rex not to bring her coffee or the Holly Jolly Latte. I couldn't help but laugh as Cassidy mimicked Rex while she drove down the highway, lowering her voice to imitate him. *'Under no circumstances should you bring Holly coffee. At all. Especially the Holly Jolly Latte. While it's my favourite drink, I may have traumatized her with it when I spilled it over this coat.'*

I chuckle now, thinking back at it.

"Oh, I know! This one!" Cassie explains, holding up another onesie with felt reindeer antlers.

"What happened to subtle?" I chuckle, looking at the hood with a stitched on reindeer face.

"Oh, come on. You need to have a little fun with it. People go all out with their pyjamas. It's like a Christmas version of Halloween."

"Hmm," I answer noncommittally.

I peruse the table with the folded holiday themed sleepwear, disappointed nothing catches my eye. I'm not sure why I'm putting so much thought into it. It's not like I'll ever see these people again. So what if I show up with antlers and a cartoon reindeer's face? Other than my pride, which, let's face it, I left the moment I first stepped foot in this town, I have nothing to lose.

For a fleeting moment, I wonder what Rex would think of it. Would he

think it's funny? Cute?

I wonder what sort of pyjamas he would wear to something like this, if he is even going at all. If he does, I bet it's something as outlandish and gaudy as his Christmas sweaters.

"You know what? Let's go with the reindeer one."

"Really?" Cassie asks excitedly, her eyes wide and an ecstatic grin on her face.

"I mean, it's not my usual style, but if I'm going to get the full Candy Cane Creek experience, I should fully immerse myself, right?"

"Right!" She gives her hands a little clap as she moves side to side in what looks like a happy dance. "Oh, this is so exciting. I was thinking of getting myself the elf one! How fun would it be when we show up together as a reindeer and an elf? Straight out of the North Pole!"

I laugh, feeling Cassie's excitement rub off on me. "It would be."

Even though I don't know Cassie that well—or at all—I feel like this is a friendship that I don't have, but somehow miss. I've never had a girlfriend that I could get dressed up and go to silly events with. I've gone shopping with friends, sure, but it's always been about who would buy the newest fashion or what brands they were buying. It was never just for pure fun. Never just for the experience of bonding.

It's here in this discount department store that I find yet another reason to view Candy Cane Creek as more attractive than being back home in the city.



# *Chapter Fourteen*

REX



“Don’t look at me like that,” I grumble as I look down at Tag. He’s sitting at my feet, his head tilted to the side, the Santa hat still somehow staying affixed to his head. He raises the ridge above his eye, looking at me in disbelief.

“I’m just here to support the town. I have no idea if Holly’s going to be here. I haven’t heard from her, or Cassie, all day.”

I break my gaze from his, surveying the street in front of me. People laugh as they walk about in their pyjamas under their heavy coats, as the snow has started to fall again. With bags of last-minute Christmas gifts in their hands, they walk store to store with families and friends, enjoying the season.

And I’m stuck here feeling like the Grinch with Max at my side.

I look down the street, seeing the Candy Cane Cafe open but no Cassie. In her place is Macy, the college student home for the holidays that fills in for her when she’s in town. I wonder if that means she’s still out with Holly.

I also wonder if it means I can go get my Holly Jolly Latte without being bombarded with questions like I was this morning.

I’m not sure what I was thinking when I asked Cassie to take Holly pyjama shopping other than I’m certain Holly didn’t pack to be wandering the streets at night with what she had on her, and I was even more certain she didn’t want to do that shopping with me. I’ll admit, I took the coward’s way out after almost kissing her in my kitchen yesterday, but I didn’t know what else to do. My mind had raced as I fixed the tree after Tag got it in his furry head that he needed the pickle ornament from the tree and ended up toppling the thing, getting caught up in the process. While I straightened the tree and

replaced the ornaments on the branches, I kept replaying our conversation over and over; wondering how I went from telling her about Lauren to being fixated on placing my lips on hers.

My heart races at the memory.

*What do you want me to do?* I ask Lauren quietly, sucking in a breath as if by some miracle she'd answer.

Lauren always knew the right thing to do in every situation. Unlike me, she was bubbly and loved being in a crowd. She would speak to everyone with ease and always knew the right thing to say. Where I'm perfectly happy blending into a crowd and staying in the back, Lauren was always front and centre. It was one of the things that drew me to her. She was beautiful and glowing as she would greet strangers and friends alike, making them feel like they'd known her for a lifetime when it was only a few moments.

The day she turned that attention on me was one of the best days of my life.

But now she's gone, and I'm left here in a situation I don't know how to handle with a woman that makes me feel things I haven't felt since Lauren.

These new feelings are different. Quieter. As if instead of shining a bright spotlight on me, it's a dim glow that brings comfort. A feeling of being safe.

And I don't know how to handle that.

I'm saved from my internal struggles when a to-go cup wafting the sweet smell of a Holly Jolly Latte is thrust into my hands.

"Here. You looked like you needed one but dread the thought of going in there."

I look over to see Jacob with a knowing smile on his face.

"Thank you. And the cafe didn't offend me. I'm just...taking in the sights." I avoid his gaze as I take a sip of my latte, immediately enjoying the comfort that comes with it.

"Uh, huh. So it has nothing to do with the Cassie/Holly showdown at the Cocoa Walk the other day?"

"There was no 'showdown.' And how did you even hear about that?" I take a deep breath. "This town..." Of course, it was part of the gossip chain. I've been hearing a lot about how the town has come alive, discussing my love life since Holly stepped foot over the town border.

"Whatever you say, man." He chuckles as he drinks from his own cup.

"Cassie took Holly out shopping today for pyjamas for tonight. They're friendly." At least, I hope they are.

“Did you orchestrate that?”

“I asked Cassie if she would take Holly shopping, if that’s what you mean.” I turn to Jacob, who’s still donning that ridiculous smile.

I take a moment and take my friend in. He’s not wearing a jacket, instead he’s wearing the brightest ugly Christmas sweater I’ve ever seen with an embroidered Santa riding on the back of a T-Rex. The navy blue of the sweater is made blinding by large white snowflake dots that make it hard to look at him. He’s wearing matching blue and white pants that make way to his black boots.

“Where did you get that thing? I can barely look at you.” I wince, looking away from him and letting my eyes readjust.

“It’s great, isn’t it? I ordered it online just for tonight,” he answers proudly.

“It’s...something.”

“That’s enough of your tomfoolery.”

“My...” I turn to him, raising my eyebrow.

“You heard me. You need to snap out of it. Don’t deflect your mood onto my amazing Christmas sweater.”

“Our definition of ‘amazing’ is vastly different,” I mutter into my cup as I take another sip.

“I have to say, I was expecting more from you and your pjs tonight, Wellington. You wear plaid every day. You didn’t even bother changing out of your jeans.”

I look down at my clothes. “I...” I sigh. “I’m not feeling it tonight, alright?”

He looks at me and drops his shoulders. “Look, I know this must be hard for you. With Lauren being gone, it being Christmas, your feelings for Holly.”

“I don’t have feelings for Holly,” I interject, firmer than I mean to.

“Alright, your *denial* of your feelings for Holly,” Jacob says with an eye roll. “The rest remains true. You’ve been dealing with a lot. I wish you’d let us in to help you.”

“What are you talking about? Help with what?”

“With life! With you. You stay on your property, only coming into town when you want your coffee or for supplies. You need to have people around you, Rex. You can’t shut them out forever, and you especially shouldn’t shut Holly out. You deserve to be happy again.”

I'm about to argue that I don't shut people out when I realize that's exactly what I've been doing. And not just to the people of Candy Cane Creek.

After Lauren died, I saw less of my family, responded less to their calls and texts to where they only send them on holidays now. I don't talk to any of my friends from the city. The only ones I let in are my dogs.

The weight of Jacob's hand on my shoulder is grounding, supportive, as he continues. "We want to be here for you. You're one of us now."

The corner of my mouth ticks up in a small smile. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

He holds my gaze for a moment before giving a tight nod and dropping his hand. "Good, because there are two women coming our way that also want to be there for you. How they will be is up to you."

I follow his gaze over my shoulder to see the cartoon head of a reindeer with antlers sticking up, huddled close and laughing with an elf. Both are in fleece one-piece pjs, hands wrapped around cups with steam coming out the tops as they walk toward us.

Even with her auburn hair covered by the reindeer head, she's still the most beautiful woman in town. Her long curls peek out around her neck, almost blending in with the dark brown of her pyjamas. Her big green eyes glance up and meet mine. A look of surprise crosses her face before she smiles. I can't help but smile back. Just being around her makes me happy. It's a feeling that's both unsettling and comforting at the same time.

"Cassie! Holly! You made it!" Jacob exclaims enthusiastically beside me.

I question his eagerness, but I can't take my eyes off of Holly. She looks adorable in her pjs, with a hint of pink on her cheeks as she approaches us.

"I wasn't sure if you were coming," Holly says as she stops in front of me, the spicy scent of her apple cider filling my nose.

"I wouldn't miss it."

We stand like this for a moment, lost in each other's eyes.

"I like your pyjamas," I say, wanting to smack my forehead at the corny statement.

"Thanks," she replies, breaking our eye contact and looking down at her outfit. "It wasn't what I was going with, but Cassie talked me into it. I have to say, it's growing on me."

"If it helps, I got the matching one," Cassie says with a grin, looping her arm through Holly's. "Santa's elf and his reindeer. Get it?"

“I get it,” I chuckle.

“Your pyjamas are fitting. Almost as if we planned it,” she says bashfully, motioning to my own outfit.

I look down at the thick flannel cotton fabric. It’s completely dark red except for a sewn-in a black belt with a gold buckle. I threw my black leather jacket over top and finished with my black boots, but the Santa vibe is still present.

“Did you know that he was wearing this? Is that why you suggested these?” Holly asks Cassie with wide eyes, making the connection between our outfits.

“No, I promise. He just asked me to take you shopping. Everything else is a coincidence. I promise.”

“It’s true. I didn’t even know I was going to wear this one until right before I put it on,” I plead, hoping she sees there wasn’t an ulterior motive.

“Wait, that one? You have more than one of those?” Holly asks, turning her attention back to me.

“I have a couple, yes.”

“I should have known.” She closes her eyes and shakes her head, as if in disbelief.

“How about some shopping?” Jacob interjects, rubbing his hands together. He holds his arm out to Cassie with a slight bow. “M’lady. May I escort you to the nearest shop?”

“Why, yes, sir. That would be lovely.” Cassie disengages her arm from Holly’s to hold on to the crook of Jacob’s elbow. They take a step away, looking into the window of the store behind them.

“So, you had a good day today?” I ask.

“Yes, thank you. I have to say I was pretty surprised to see Cassie on my doorstep this morning, but it turned out to be a pleasant surprise. We had a lot of fun shopping. We even grabbed lunch in town.” A genuine smile crosses her face as she speaks about her day, warming my heart. “I wasn’t sure how it was going to go, all things considered, but it was really great. Thank you for arranging that.”

“You’re welcome. Wait—what do you mean ‘all things considered?’” Now she has my full attention. What does she know that I don’t?

“Her crush on you,” she says casually. The look on my face must tell her that I wasn’t prepared for that. “Wait, you didn’t know?”

*Did I know?*

I mean, there was the hand touching thing the night Holly came to town and the mention of me asking her to the dance, but did that mean she has a crush on me?

My heart rate skips into overdrive having someone say it out loud. Having *Holly* say it out loud.

“Rex? Are you okay?” Holly places her hand on my shoulder as I take a step back. Tag yips at my side, jumping to attention as he notices the change in my demeanour. Even though he bullies me into things like extra treats and cookies, he’s always at attention when it comes to me.

“Yeah, um...I’m fine.”

“Do you need to sit down?” Her hands brush down the length of my jacket from my shoulder to my elbow, getting ready to hold me up if she needs to. Or attempt to, at least.

“What’s going on?” Jacob and Cassie rush back over, concern etched on their faces.

I immediately look at Cassie, trying to read into what she’s thinking. She doesn’t look any more concerned than anyone else would be, does she?

Now I’m overthinking things.

“Nothing. I’m fine. Just...uh...” I don’t know how to finish my sentence, but I definitely can’t say ‘started having a panic attack at the thought of Cassie having a crush on me.’

“You know what? It’s so silly. We, uh, were having a contest to see who could hold their breath the longest.” Jacob and Cassie look at us in disbelief, eyes darting between Holly and I. Holly’s eyes are wide, finding mine as she continues. “I, uh, picked up the tradition at another town I was in. Whoever can hold their breath the longest will...they will get the most presents from Santa! Yes, that’s it.”

“Right,” Cassie says, unconvinced. “So, I guess Holly won?”

“Yup, *thank-you-years-of-swimming*,” Holly says proudly, as if finally believing her lie.

“Better luck next time, bud,” Jacob says, hitting me on the back. “Let’s start our shopping! We don’t want the ladies to end up empty-handed tonight, do we?”

Holly and I follow Jacob and Cassie as we make our way into the first store, but I’m not paying attention to what’s for sale. All I can think about is how I’ve been so oblivious to Cassie’s feelings.

I don’t have any romantic feelings for her, but that makes me wonder

about Holly. I've come to terms with how I feel about her, but maybe I've been reading her wrong, too.

One thing's for sure, I've never been more confused than I am right now.



# *Chapter Fifteen*

HOLLY



“**W**hat do you think of this one?” Cassie asks, holding a scarf up in front of my face.

“It’s nice.”

“Just nice? Feel this? It’s so soft.”

I hold my hand out and run it along the soft merino wool, barely letting the buttery texture register. “Yeah, it’s nice.”

“Okay, what’s wrong?” she asks, taking the scarf away and plopping it back on the table in front of us.

“Wrong? Nothing’s wrong?” I fib, not meeting her eyes.

“I know we’re new friends and all, but that doesn’t mean you get to lie to me,” she prods, following behind as I trail down the display in front of me.

I smile, watching the scene in front of me. Rex and Jacob are waiting outside with Tag. They sent us in and told us to take our time while we look for gifts. I glance out the window, seeing them as they play with Tag, who’s running circles around their feet as Jacob holds out a treat, trying to get him to do some trick on command.

“See! There is something going on. What is it? Is it Rex? Oh my gosh, what did he do?”

“What? Nothing!” I look over at her as she studies my face. “Are you sure you want to talk about this?”

“Why wouldn’t I want to talk about it?” She tilts her head to the side, regarding me.

“Well, I picked up on some feelings you have for Rex...”

“Oh, that.” She looks past me for a moment, her gaze fixed on the men

outside the window. “I can’t lie about that. I’ve had feelings for Rex for a while. It was so horrible about him and his wife. It was just never a good time, you know? But then he started coming into the cafe every day for his latte and he seemed like he’d been coming into town more. I don’t know. But it doesn’t matter, because he never looked at me the way he looks at you.”

My heart stills. How does he look at me? Do I look at him the same way?

I can’t stop the tumbling thoughts in my head as I look between Cassie and Rex.

“Hey, calm down,” she laughs. “This can’t be news to you.”

“No, it’s not. We, uh, sorta had a moment yesterday. I think it’s what spooked him and got him to ask you to take me shopping.”

“I mean, I won’t be sorry for that because today has been awesome, but what kind of moment?” She leans towards me, waiting for me to fill her in.

“We were talking in his kitchen. He told me all about Lauren and what happened. He really opened up to me. And then we—we almost kissed.”

“Almost? Why just almost?” Her voice is hushed and her eyes wide as she leans in closer.

“Well, Tag sorta decided he was going to get an ornament off the tree and ended up knocking it over, wrapping himself in the garland.”

“Oh Tag,” Cassie bursts out laughing, wiping the tears from her eyes. “That dog has horrible timing.”

“Or good timing. We can’t kiss. We can’t do anything. I’m leaving to go back to Vancouver as soon as my car’s done. Why does everyone keep forgetting that?”

Why do I keep forgetting that?

“Is that still what you want?” The laughter stops as she grabs my arms. “Are you still thinking of leaving?”

“My life is in the city, Cassie. I can’t stay in Candy Cane Creek. It’s literally the exact opposite of what I wanted for my life. It’s a small town. It’s a *Christmas* small town. I don’t belong here.”

“Says who? You can do your job from anywhere, proven by the fact that you’re here in the first place. You told me you spend most of your time when you’re not working by yourself. You can’t tell me that’s better than here with a community that already loves you.”

“They don’t know me, Cassie.”

“They know you enough to have welcomed you in. To show you around the town and make you feel welcome. Enough for Rex to open up his home

to you. He doesn't do that for just anyone," she huffs out. She lets out another deep breath before dropping her shoulders. "We care about you, Holly."

My eyes start to mist as I take in her words. It's true that I've felt more at home here than I ever have in the city. My small one-bedroom apartment feels like a jail cell compared to the guest house at Rex's. The concrete high rises and city lights block out the countless stars that take my breath away every night.

I also can't deny that the people have made me feel more at home, more loved, than anyone in Vancouver.

"What is it about Christmas that makes you want to leave so much?" Cassie whispers.

I look down at the table before me, seeing sentimental ornaments with sayings like 'Our First Christmas,' and 'Baby's First Christmas.' Is that something I would be celebrating had Josh and I stayed together? Would we have children?

"It's complicated."

"It's only complicated if you make it that way."

I trace my finger over the 'Our First Christmas' ornament, thinking about how it didn't even cross my mind to get one for Josh and me.

"I was supposed to get married on Christmas. It didn't work out." I fixate on the rough texture of the glittery letters, letting it ground me to where I am. I'm in Candy Cane Creek with someone who's declared herself my new best friend. I'm not in the city. I'm not surrounded by my parents telling me I must have done something wrong for Josh to have stood me up. I'm not with the women I thought were my friends that distanced themselves from the disgraced writer who caused a social scandal in their circle.

I'm just me. In a small town where people don't judge, and with a woman that wants to be my friend even though I'm linked to a man she's had a crush on for a while.

"I'm so sorry, Holly." Cassie pulls me into a side hug, wrapping both of her arms around me.

I cradle her arm that's across my chest with both of mine, closing my eyes and resting my head against hers. It's been so long since someone's just hugged me.

"Thank you," I whisper.

"Do you know what you need?" she asks, pulling away.

"I'm almost afraid to ask."

“Some stollen and apple cider.” She nods her head as if it’s decided, even though I’m completely lost.

“Some stollen?”

“Yes, the German Christmas dessert. Anita from the bakery makes *the best* stollen and mixed with her apple cider, it’ll cure any sadness this time of year.” She glances around the table, picking up her forgotten sweater and the ‘Our First Christmas’ ornament. “We can’t walk out of here without buying anything. The boys will get suspicious.”

“And you think an ‘Our First Christmas’ ornament won’t raise any eyebrows?” I chuckle.

“Think of it as a memento of *our* first Christmas as BFFs.” She strolls off to the cashier, leaving me behind to watch after her.

What a strange town.

What’s even stranger is, I’m beginning to love it.



“Do you mind if I join you?” Rex asks as he approaches the bench I’m sitting on.

“Not at all.” I slide over, giving him room to sit beside me.

We watch in silence as some local kids play with Tag, throwing a frisbee for him as he chases after it, the Santa hat flopping on his head as he runs.

“How does that hat stay on?” I ask in awe, watching the black and tan dog run through the town square.

“Christmas magic. It’s the only thing I can think of,” he says, giving me a shy smile that looks utterly adorable on him. “Did you really have a good day with Cassie?”

“I did.” I turn slightly to face him. “We had a lot of fun shopping, and she took me to a great cafe in town. I have to admit, I was shocked when I first saw her at my door this morning, but it turned out to be a pleasant surprise.”

There I go, thinking of the guest house door as *my* door again.

“That’s great. I was hoping it would work out.” He takes a sip from his mug and looks at me. “How is it you can drink apple cider, but you think the Holly Jolly Latte is a monstrosity?”

I can’t help but let out the belly laugh building in me. “For starters, this is a holiday classic, and it’s more spice than sugar. Plus, I don’t like coffee.

That's the main thing I have against it. The sugar is just collateral damage."

"So you have a sweet tooth, then?"

"Have you seen the number of cookies I've been eating since I got here?"

I chuckle.

"I'll be sure to remember that. Anita goes all out for Christmas, but she has the most amazing desserts between then and New Year's, too. By the time the new year rolls around, we're all ready to sugar detox." He takes a breath before continuing. "You know, when I first moved here, I was told about the history of Mrs. Claus' Bakery."

"Oh, yeah?" I ask, intrigued, crossing one leg over the other and resting my elbow on my knee. "Is it more than just a normal bakery?"

"Oh, yes. When Anita and her husband got married, they bought the location they're at now and completely transformed it into a bakery fit for the North Pole. Anita's husband, Jack, wanted something that would really add to the town. He wanted a way that they could contribute to the Christmas festival but also be a meaningful business for the rest of the year."

"I love that." I'm completely drawn in by the history of the business. I love learning what makes small towns unique. Their quirks. And this town has a lot of them. "Let me guess, their last name is Claus?"

"Nope, Frost." Rex bites his bottom lip, suppressing a smile.

"Stop it! It is not! Jack and Anita Frost?"

"It's true!" He chuckles, holding his hands up in front of him in surrender. "I believe the original name was going to be along the lines of 'Anita Frosting Bakery.'"

"Anita Frost. Like 'I need a frosting?' That's amazing."

"Yes, but they decided to go with something more...festive. To really fit in with the town."

"Candy Cane Creek is something else," I say with a smile.

Silence falls between us once more as we look into each other's eyes, a smile on both of our faces. My breath hitches as I take in just how handsome he is. His brown hair looks nearly black under the dark night sky; his blue eyes are vibrant behind his black-rimmed glasses. Even in his ridiculous Santa pjs, he's still the most handsome man I've ever seen.

Not that I can talk, as I'm currently dressed like a reindeer.

I shiver, the cold sinking into my body as snow starts to fall lightly around us. The pathway in front of us has been cleared from the previous snowfalls, and I've never been more thankful for the salt sprinkled over all

the cleared patches to prevent any more falling, especially on my part.

“Cold?” Rex asks. Without waiting for an answer, he puts down his mug and takes off his jacket, sliding it over my shoulders.

“But what about you?” I can’t help but pull the edges of his coat tighter around me, taking in his spicy sweet scent that now envelops me. It’s a mix of dogs and candy canes. Something that could only be uniquely Rex.

“I’ll be fine,” he says, lowering his arm so it rests on the bench beside me.

He had moved closer to me when putting his jacket around me. The heat from his jacket now matches the heat from his arm across my shoulder as it presses against mine. I’m shivering again, but not from the cold.

“Rex...” I start, not really knowing what I’m about to say, but also stunned as I look past him at what is approaching us.

Tag rolls toward us on top of a skateboard, his tongue sticking out the side of his mouth, the Santa hat fixed on his head. He’s wearing skiing goggles as he glides past us as if it were the most natural thing in the world for him to be doing.

“Did you see that?” I ask, whipping my head around to follow the skater pup.

“Tag,” Rex huffs in annoyance, taking off his glasses and rubbing his eyes.

A group of teens break out in laughter as they run after the getaway dog, trying to catch up with him as he navigates his way through the shovelled paths.

“I’d better go get him before he causes more of a spectacle of himself than he already has.” Rex stands and looks down at me as if he wants to say something else. He opens his mouth and shuts it again, looking between me and the path Tag rolled down. “Do you mind waiting here and I’ll give you a ride back?”

“No, take your time.” I stand, putting my cup on the ground and pulling off his jacket. “Take this.”

“No, I’ll be fine. I’m probably going to have to run after him, anyway. Just—wait here. Please?”

I nod, holding his gaze for a moment more before watching him retreat down the path after his wayward dog.

This town really is something else.

# *Chapter Sixteen*



REX



I let out a heavy sigh as I look down at my ringing phone where Chuck's name is displayed.

"Hey, Chuck," I answer as I bring the phone to my ear.

"Rex. I just wanted to let you know the new girl's sedan is ready. I managed to get the part in early. She's lucky. I know how much she wanted to get out of here before Christmas."

"That's good," I say, feeling anything but good. "Why are you calling me and not her?"

"I couldn't get a hold of her. I think her phone's dead and I know she's staying in your guest house. I figured you could pass along the message for me."

"Yeah, sure." I look around my living room, feeling a sense of dread at this bit of information.

"Thanks. She can stop by today any time before three. I'm closing up early for the dance. Say, will you be there? I heard something about you bringing the new girl?"

"Her name is Holly, and I don't know. We haven't talked about it." That is, if she's even going to be in town.

We say our goodbyes and hang up, leaving me staring at the phone cradled in my hand. Tag looks up at me from his dog bed next to the tree, raising the ridge of his brow in a questioning glance.

"That's it, buddy. Her car is ready. I guess she won't be with us for much longer."

Tag chuffs, tilting his head and resting it on his paws, not taking his eyes off me.

“What do you want me to do? I can’t make her stay.” More staring. “I mean, I *could* ask her to stay, but what are the chances? She’s made it clear her life is in Vancouver, not in Candy Cane Creek.”

Another chuff.

I stand, sliding my phone into the pocket of my jeans and head to the door. I mutter as I stomp on my boots, frustrated with my ‘*meddling dog*’ who ‘*thinks he knows better.*’

I continue mumbling as I walk the distance from my house to the guest house; each step feels like walking in wet cement, bringing me to what I’ve been dreading. To what I’ve been trying not to think about.

Holly leaving.

I raise my hand to the door, but I take a moment before I knock. I don’t know why I need to gather the nerve to tell her about her car. This is what she’s wanted this whole time. All she’s wanted from the moment she crossed the border into Candy Cane Creek was to leave. I mistakenly let myself believe that she could want to stay, but I know I was only fooling myself.

I rap my knuckles against the door before shoving them into my jeans’ pockets. I look behind me, blowing out a large breath and seeing the steam that leaves my mouth in a white cloud. I should have grabbed a jacket, but my mind wasn’t on my warmth or my well being. It was getting this over with.

“Rex, hi,” Holly says with a smile as she opens the door. “Come in, you must be freezing.”

She moves to the side and I take a step in, giving just enough space for her to close the door. This may be my guest house, but this is the last place I want to be right now. I just want to pass along the message and leave.

“Is everything okay?” she asks, standing in front of me with a look of concern on her face.

“Uh, yeah.” I take a moment to look at her. *Really* look at her. “What...?”

“Don’t,” she pleads, her expression turning from concern to pleading. “Cassie bought it for me and insisted I wear it today.”

“What do you have planned?” The tension in my chest eases as I look at her. *Holly* is wearing a Christmas sweater. And not just any sweater, it’s a brown knitted one with a reindeer with Christmas lights wound around its antlers.

“Nothing, really. I planned on going into the Candy Cane Cafe to put the finishing touches on my blog post and upload it, but the next thing I know,

she's on my doorstep with this saying I *had* to wear it today." She opens her arms, giving me the full view of the sweater.

I can't help but bite back a laugh. "It's...festive."

"Do you know what makes it even better? She has an elf one. This is going to follow me around forever, isn't it? I'm always going to be the reindeer and Cassie will always be the elf."

"There are worse things." I bite my lip, trying as hard as I can not to laugh. I know my face is no doubt turning red, fighting the need to show how amusing I find her right now.

"Are there, Rex? I don't know about you, but I didn't wake up this morning thinking I'd continue my streak as Santa's sidekick." She takes a look at my own sweater. "On second thought, you probably did."

I look down; my sweater is knit with different puppies and reads 'I believe in Santa Paws.'

"I won't apologize for this. Santa Paws is real. You've met Tag."

She closes her eyes for a moment, her body sagging. "I'm sorry. I'm just stressed about the blog. I need to get it uploaded today and I'm having a hard time finishing it."

"Do you need more to work with? If you want, I can take you around town again, introduce you to more people..."

"No, it's not that. Quite the opposite, actually. There's so much to write about, I don't know how to condense it all. How to make it represent everything I've grown to love about Candy Cane Creek without making it look like I'm playing favourites."

I watch as she starts to pace. It doesn't escape me that she said she loves Candy Cane Creek. It lessens some of the tightness in my chest. Makes me hope there's more than just the town she loves.

Because as much as I wanted to avoid or deny it before, I'm in love with Holly Day. It may have taken the thought of her truly leaving or for her to express her love of my town while wearing a reindeer sweater, but either way, I love her.

"What if you don't?" I ask, making her stop pacing.

"I don't what?"

"What if you don't hide how much you love us?" I clear my throat as I cover up what I really mean, that I hope that I'm included in what she loves. "How much you love Candy Cane Creek, that is." I take a step toward her. "Would it be the worst thing if you favoured us?"

“I...uh...” She looks up at me as I walk in front of her, brushing a strand of her auburn locks from her face. “No?”

“Are you asking me?” I tilt the corner of my mouth up in a smile as I brush my knuckles along the soft skin of her cheek.

Her eyes are wide as she looks up at me. They’re so green, like the colour of the needles on the fir trees that line the property around us. I could stare into them all day.

“I just don’t want to come across...unprofessional.”

“It’s not unprofessional to have a preference.”

“No, but...” She stops, her hand making its way to hold on to my wrist as I continue to brush the back of my hand along her skin. “I can’t remember why I had a problem with it before.”

I glance down at her lips before meeting her eyes once more. “Holly?”

“Yes, Rex?”

“I came over here to tell you that I got a call from Chuck. Your car is ready.”

“Oh,” she says, looking down and moving as if she’s about to pull away.

But I’m not going to let that happen.

“But now, I also want to tell you that I don’t want you to leave.”

“You don’t?” Her grip on my wrist is tighter as she looks up at me with hope in her eyes.

“No, I don’t. I’ve come to really care about you, Holly. In a way I never thought I would again. You fit here in the town. With all of us.” I suck in a breath. “With me.”

“Rex, I...”

“I know what you’re going to say, Holly. Your life is in Vancouver. You don’t want to live in a small town, but I want you to think about it, please?”

“I don’t know, Rex. You’re asking me to give up my whole life—everything I’ve ever known—for a town I’ve been in for less than a week.”

*And for someone I’ve known for less than a week.*

She doesn’t need to say the words; I can practically hear her thoughts.

“I know. I have no right to ask.” I let go of her, taking a step back, and turn toward the door. “Your car is ready to be picked up any time before three, otherwise you’ll have to wait until after Christmas.”

My hand is on the doorknob, ready to rush back to my place and drown my sorrows in hot cocoa, when her soft voice stops me.

“Don’t leave like this, please?”

The sadness in her voice nearly breaks me. This isn't what I want. I don't want to be the one asking her to give everything up just to be with me. I'm not that guy. I got frustrated at the guys like that in those movies, thinking that they could just demand it and it would be so.

But I want to. Heaven help me, I want to plead with her to stay.

"This isn't goodbye, is it?" I ask, still facing the door.

I can't look at her. If I look at her, I'll ask her again to stay. I'll take her into my arms and hold her until she realizes that Candy Cane Creek needs her. *I need her.*

"No, this isn't goodbye. Not right now."

I push down the rising emotion in my throat, not willing to show how much her words are affecting me.

"But soon," I whisper.

"Yes, soon," she says back, just as softly.

I close my eyes, bracing myself for the eventual hurt that's going to be coming once we do say those goodbyes.

"Will I see you at the dance tonight?"

"You're going?" I turn to face her in shock.

"Cassie asked me and I..." She looks down at her hands, a bashful look on her face. "I was hoping that I would see you there."

A lock of her auburn hair falls over her face, blocking the adorable blush that crosses her cheeks. As I look at her, I almost forget that I'll be losing her soon. Not to mention the embarrassment I feel after putting myself out there for her to just turn me down.

"Do you really want me to?"

"Of course, Rex. Why wouldn't I? I'd kind of hoped...well, I don't know what I hoped," she trails off.

I hold my breath, wondering if I should allow myself the slightest bit of hope at her question. She wouldn't be running from town if she wanted to see me at the dance tonight.

"I'll be there—if you want me to."

"I do." She perks up. "I mean, I would love to see you there."

"Then I'll be there." I look over my shoulder out the window for a moment, looking for something—anything—that would tell me I'm making the right decision. As if hearing my silent question, snow starts to fall lightly, creating an ethereal picture of the world outside.

It reminds me of something Lauren would say when we had our first

snowfall.

*'The first snow brings magic with it.'*

She truly believed that even with all the chaos snow can cause, it also brought a peace and joy unique to winter. She loved everything about snow and was happiest in the winter months.

Maybe it's the sign I've been looking for.

I turn to face Holly, who's looking at me with anticipation, as if knowing I'm struggling with an internal war that only I can understand. She's been nothing but patient and understanding, and here I am confusing her and asking her to move to a town that's foreign to her.

But if I don't do this now, I may never get my chance, and that hurts more than the thought of never having it.

"Holly?"

"Yeah, Rex?"

I take a step, closing the distance between us as I cup her cheek once more, looking into her evergreen eyes.

She sucks in a breath, placing her hands at my waist, clutching at the fabric of my shirt, waiting for me to gather my courage.

"I don't want you to leave."

"I know," she breathes.

"But if you do, I can't let you leave without doing this."

I lower my lips to hers, feeling her clasp my shirt tighter in her fists at my waist. Despite her dislike of the season, her lips taste like candy cane and berry, a mix that will be forever cemented in my mind when it comes to Holly Day.

Pulling back, I keep my eyes closed, one hand still cupping her jaw, the other on her back holding her close to me. If this is the only kiss I'll share with her, I'm going to need another moment wrapped up in her.

"Rex?" she whispers, her voice as breathless as I feel.

"Mmhmm?" I close my eyes tighter, preparing myself for what she's about to say.

"You make me not want to leave."

## *Chapter Seventeen*

### *The Christmas Caravan Candy Cane Creek: Canada's Hidden Christmas Village*

The final stop on my Christmas tour of B.C. has taken me to the small town of Candy Cane Creek, nestled between the Okanagan and Lower Mainland; this little town is everything a Christmas lover would need. From the themed stores to the perfectly decorated streets, it's as if you walked into the North Pole.

But it's not just the visuals that will have you in the holiday mood, it's everything about this town. The week leading up to Christmas they have numerous events that will keep you busy and feeling joyful.

The Cocoa Walk kicked off my stay in town. Everyone meets in the town square to grab a hot beverage of their choice—usually hot cocoa or the infamous Holly Jolly Latte from the Candy Cane Cafe—before walking through town to look at the Christmas displays the residents have decorated their homes with. It's a decades long tradition that has turned into a way for the town to gather and catch up while judging the outdoor decor for the top award of bragging rights.

There are also snowman building competitions, sugar cookie decorating, weekend Christmas market, and a shopping night that has everyone showing up in their best holiday pyjamas and braving the cold to do a little bit of last-minute shopping.

What will really warm your heart is the way that as soon as you cross the city line, you're welcomed as if you are a Candy Creeker yourself. Their kindness and hospitality is one that you've never experienced anywhere else.

If you were to ever experience a little bit of Christmas magic, it would happen in a place like Candy Cane Creek.



# *Chapter Eighteen*

## HOLLY



“Are you sure about this?” I ask through the bathroom door of the guest house, looking at myself in the mirror over the sink.

“Well, I can’t answer you honestly until you come out here,” Cassie responds with a chuckle in her voice.

I blow out a breath, smoothing down the fabric of the dark green dress, wondering if I’ve officially lost my mind. The ruffles barely skim the top of my shoulders, giving way to my bare arms that I’m sure will be cold halfway through the night. The fitted top leads way to a tapered waist, with the skirt flowing out to the top of my knees. Cassie brought dark green heels that fit me perfectly, matching the exact colour of the dress.

If you added some jewels to me, I’d be a Christmas tree.

I had been skeptical when she showed up at my door with the outfit in hand. What are the chances that we are the same size in both clothes and shoes? But yet, here I am, wearing that and having it fit perfectly.

“Holly, if you don’t come out here in the next two seconds I’m coming in!” she yells through the door.

“Alright, alright. You’re pushy, did you know that?” I say, opening the door.

I hold my breath while she takes me in. Her eyes widen as she scans my—her—outfit. “Wow Holly! You look amazing!”

“Is it too much?” I ask, looking down and giving my skirt a little twirl. “I’ve never been to a dance in a barn before. I thought it would be a little more...casual?”

“Don’t be silly! This is the biggest event of the year!”

I look down at her, noticing for the first time she ditched her long coat,

revealing a strapless red sweetheart dress with a black lace overlay. Her dress is fantastic. Her brown hair falls in soft curls around her shoulders, and her makeup is neutral and classic, giving her the small-town girl look while also being elegant. “Your dress is beautiful.”

“Oh, this old thing?” she says with a laugh, letting the hem sway around her knees as she moves to show it off.

I turn again, looking at myself in the mirror, wondering what I’ve got myself into. I’ve done my hair and makeup like I would have done for any other holiday event in the city. I put my hair into an updo, two French braids meeting in a messy bun at the nape of my neck. The makeup around my eyes is lined heavier than normal, with a shimmer on my lids. Had I been going to a party in the city, I would have felt comfortable. Confident. But here? I feel so out of place.

“What’s the matter?” Cassie asks, stepping behind me and looking over my shoulder into the mirror.

“I don’t know, I...this feels wrong.”

“What do you mean? You look gorgeous! You’re going to be the fanciest one there!”

I look at myself harder this time, not even recognizing myself. “I think that’s the problem,” I whisper.

Cassie regards me silently for a moment in the mirror before straightening her back with a determined look on her face. “Then we fix it.”

“We don’t have time. We’ll be late,” I say, wondering if I should just wipe all this makeup off, put on my reindeer pyjamas and crawl into bed.

“So? Then we’ll make sure we are fashionably late.”

I look up, meeting Cassie’s eyes. She has a hint of mischief in them that should get me worried.

“Come on. You don’t want to leave Rex waiting, do you?” she taunts.

“I still don’t know how you’re so okay with me being with him.”

Am I with him? Are we together?

That causes a whole other stir of butterflies in my stomach. I’m supposed to be leaving. If you asked me even a couple of days ago, now that I have my car back, I should be on the road and halfway to Vancouver by now. But here I am, standing in the guesthouse of Rex’s property, losing yet another tie to the place I called home.

“I’m okay with it because now I see I’m not what he needs. You are.”

“What do you mean?” I whip around to face her, my skirt twirling

forcefully at my knees. Had I moved any faster, I would have been tangled up in it.

“You’re bringing him out of his shell. He’s in town more. Letting people in.” She takes a step forward, placing her hands on my arms. “He’s only lived here a short time, but everyone in town is very protective of him and his shelter. I’m sure you’ve seen that. But we all noticed the difference in him, even within these last few days.”

“Have you all held a town meeting or something? How do you know this?”

She laughs. “Every day is a town meeting at the cafe. My shop is like the hot spot of all the town gossip.” She drops her hands off me and takes a step back. “While I love your look, I think I know what you mean about it not being right. Do you trust me?”

That’s the million-dollar question.

When was the last time I trusted someone? *Fully* trusted someone?

The last time I did, he left me on my favourite holiday to pick up the burning pieces of our life in front of all our family and friends while he fled the province.

But maybe it’s time I let that go. Being here these last few days, I notice how much I miss having someone I can count on. Friends I can turn to.

A man to love and could love me.

Because Santa help me, I think I’m falling for Rex Wellington.

Taking a steeling breath, I look at Cassie and nod. “I trust you.”

She claps her hands and lets out an excited squeal before getting to work.



STANDING in front of the doors to the barn, I look up at the lights decorating the red structure, wondering if I’m making the right decision.

If I go inside, I’m telling Rex, and myself, that I’m opening myself up to not only a relationship with him but also to the town. I know Rex will never leave this place, and if I’m being completely honest with myself, I can see why. It’s an amazing little town, even if it likes to celebrate the holiday that gives me the most pain year-round.

“Are you okay?” Cassie asks, standing at my side.

“I think so.”

She grabs my hand, her warm palm surrounding my cold one and giving it a squeeze. “This is a good thing, you know?”

“Is it?” I ask, not looking at her, but also not letting go of her hand. She hesitates for a moment. I turn and face her to see she’s also standing at the entrance. “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know.”

I follow her gaze inside the doors of the barn where Rex and Jacob stand around a high-top table, a glass of some sort of reddish-pink drink in their hands.

“Do I want to know what they’re drinking?” I ask, wondering if I’m seeing something bob in their drinks.

“Oh, that’s the Crantastic Punch,” Cassie answers matter-of-factly.

“The...what?”

“You have to try it! It’s a mix of cranberry, orange, and ginger. It’s so good.” Her tone becomes more upbeat as she describes the drink, and I let her momentary weariness go without comment. I don’t know if it’s a sadness over Rex or an interest in Jacob, but either way, I could tell she didn’t want to talk about it.

“We should get in,” she says, pulling my hand toward the door. My step almost falters, thanks to thinking it was a good idea wearing heels when there’s ice and snow, but Cassie doesn’t let me waver. She’s a woman on a mission to get inside this barn, and my fall isn’t part of her plan.

The men meet us as soon as we’ve checked in our coats. Jacob gravitates to Cassie as Rex gives me a heartwarming smile.

“Holly, you look beautiful,” he says, leaning down to give me a kiss on the cheek.

I feel myself blush, heat blasting my skin where his lips grazed.

“Thank you.” I look down to see him in a dark red button-up shirt, jeans and his signature black boots. What has me chuckling is his tie. The dark green tie contrasts nicely with his shirt, but it’s the flashing light up candy canes that has me giggling. “Nice tie.”

He holds the end of it away from him, looking down as it flashes in tune with a silent melody. “Why thank you. Special occasions call for special ties.”

I look around him. “No Tag tonight?”

“No, he’s too grumpy for this scene. I left him at home to keep watch over the other dogs.”

“Keep watch, huh?”

“Well, as much as Tag can with that group.” He drops his tie, his gaze meeting mine.

Wes Brown’s version of ‘Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas’ plays over the speakers, filling the barn with the calming sounds of jazz beats mixed with his soothing voice. I can’t help but smile as I get lost in Rex’s ice-blue eyes, the crinkle at his eyes from his own smile staring back at me.

Couples gather on the dance floor behind him, swaying to the merry tune. I can’t help but wonder what it would be like to be held in Rex’s arms. To rest my head on his shoulder and get lost in the melody.

“Can I get you a drink?” he asks, breaking me of my momentary daydream.

“Yeah, sure. Thanks. Cassie says I need to try the Cran...” I trail off, not remembering what she called it.

“Crantastic Punch,” he says with a wink as he finishes the last of his own. “It’s actually pretty good. I will warn you, though. It’s really sweet and—festive. I know how much you love both of those things.”

It shouldn’t, but it warms my heart that he remembers those things about me. My preferences and tastes. Ever since that first day he’s always been so careful to bring me the Christmas tea I like and making sure no one brings me a Holly Jolly Latte. Thankfully, Cassie laughs it off rather than being offended that I don’t care for her signature drink.

“Thank you for the heads up. I’ll try it this once. ’Tis the season and all,” I joke.

“Your wish is my command.” His eyes leave mine as he glances over my shoulder. With a nod of his head, he’s off to the far side of the barn with Jacob, leaving me to watch after him.

Cassie steps beside me, her gaze on the men’s retreating backs as well. She lets out a sigh, her shoulders slumping.

I can’t help but wonder what she’s thinking about as she watches Rex walk away. Is she telling me the truth about how she feels about him? Does she resent me?

I look down at the dress, thinking about how she picked this out for me and helped me change my hair and makeup. What if this was some way for her to sabotage my Christmas Eve with Rex? That’s something that would happen in the city if we both had feelings for the same man. Not with everyone, but for sure with a lot of women I thought I was ‘friends’ with.

If that were true, I don't know what her angle would be. She's been nothing but kind to me since we went shopping. Tonight she brought me this dress and shoes. She helped me change my hair from the elaborate updo to more natural curls that fall around my shoulders. She helped me wipe off my heavy makeup and carefully apply a more natural, shimmery look. As I turn my attention to the other women in the barn tonight, there's nothing that would make me stand out.

My heart beats at a wild pace as my mind races. I'm starting to lose touch with reality. Maybe I don't know this place as well as I thought. These people. Do I really know them at all?

"Hey, are you okay?" Cassie places her hand on my arm, concern etched on her face.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I brush off her concern with a shake of my head.

"Are you sure? You look like you saw a ghost there for a second."

I take a deep breath, giving her a small smile. I've been around Cassie long enough to know she's not the best liar. No one in town is anything other than genuine and honest. I'm being ridiculous thinking otherwise.

Have I really become that jaded that I can't recognize when people are being honest?

Rex and Jacob return with drinks in hand, and I gladly accept the bubbly red drink with floating cranberries.

"This is...festive," I say, holding it up to my face and taking a sniff.

The pungent smell of ginger and orange fill my nose, momentarily filling me with nostalgia from when I adored the season. Taking a small sip, the bitterness of the cranberries mixes with the carbonated ginger ale and orange, balancing out the tart and sweet.

"So, what do you think? Good, right?" Cassie asks with a beaming smile at my side.

"Yes, I'll give you this one. The punch is really good."

We spend the next hour laughing and dancing, both as a group of four and just Rex and I. As we sway together with my hand in his and my head on his shoulder, I can't help but think how much my life has changed in such a short amount of time. Bing Crosby's soulful voice sings 'White Christmas,' making me think that maybe I can once again wish for things that I thought I'd lost. A husband. Kids. A family. Christmases filled with laughter and love as we sit around the fire with our hot cocoa and tea. Sleigh rides and sledding in the snow.

I realize that it's not just the town or the song, but it's Rex. *He* makes me want these things. Even if I'm too scared to admit it.

"Hey," I say softly, lifting my head from him to look into his eyes. "Do you mind if we go and get some air?"

"Not at all."

He leads me from the dance floor to the door, stopping only to grab our jackets from the coat check.

"Is everything okay?" he asks once we are away from the door, the music and laughter nothing but a soft murmur. He places his arm around me, tucking me into his side as we follow the shovelled path.

"Yes. I think so, anyway. Everything about this town is the opposite of what I know back home. People are nice. They aren't trying to walk over you to get ahead or take what they want. They are genuine and kind. It's a place I didn't know existed outside of books and movies."

"Towns like this exist in more places than just Candy Cane Creek. You only need to know where to look."

"And you? Do men like you exist anywhere outside of Candy Cane Creek?"

He chuffs. "That, I don't know about."

"I hope not," I say, holding him tighter, placing my head back on his chest. "I want to be the only one that has someone as special as you."



# *Chapter Nineteen*

REX



Hope fills my chest at her words as I hold her in my arms.

“Do you really mean that?”

“Of course I mean it, Rex. I may not have appreciated your Christmas-obsessed quirks when I first got here.”

“I’m hardly obsessed,” I interject.

“*But*,” she stresses as she continues, a hint of a smile on her face. “I do now. I see how incredibly kind and considerate you are. I see how much compassion you have for the dogs in your shelter and the people of the town. You went out of your way to try to raise money to train them to find homes, Rex. You’re a good man.”

“So, what is this about, then? I feel like something happened back there.”

“No, not at all. It’s nothing like that.” She shakes her head, looking down.

I can’t help but notice the way the curls in her hair bounce with the subtle movement, or the way the coloured lights that line the roof of the barn reflect off her auburn locks. She’s so beautiful, but she acts like she doesn’t know what sort of hold she has over me.

She sucks in a breath before returning her gaze to mine. “I like you, Rex. You make me want things I haven’t thought about in a very long time.”

“Does that mean you want to stay?” I try not to let hope creep in. If I let it in, I’ll be devastated if she leaves.

“I think so,” she whispers. “But it’s a lot, Rex. Moving here...” She shakes her head. “I would be giving up my whole life after just a few days.”

“I know this is crazy. It’s moved fast, but if I’m honest, it’s been one of the best weeks of my life.” I pause, looking over her shoulder into the barn,

seeing the townspeople laughing and enjoying the evening. “The people here love you, Holly. I...well, I think I’m falling in love with you, too.”

“Rex,” she pleads, drawing my gaze back to hers as I hold her hands tight in mine.

“You don’t have to say anything to me. I understand that none of this is what you wanted.”

“It’s not that easy.”

“I know.” The corner of my mouth tips up in a sad smile. “But nothing worth having is ever easy.”

She sucks in a breath. “It’s not that I don’t see myself falling for you and the town, but you have to understand there’s more than just packing up and leaving the city. There’s...”

“There’s what?” I ask after she hesitates.

“When Josh left me, he didn’t just ruin my love of Christmas. He broke me, Rex. I was going to *marry* him. I had already mentally committed my life to him, and I thought he’d done the same for me. When he left me there in the church...” She shakes her head. “Even with everything that I think I want—a husband, kids—how do I trust again after that?”

I let go of her hands and wrap my arms around her, pulling her in close to me. I kiss the top of her head, taking in the sweet coconut scent that feels so out of place with the snow falling around us.

“You have no idea how sorry I am that he did that to you.”

“Thank you, but that doesn’t lessen how afraid I am to put myself out there again. I’m not saying you’re him—believe me, you two couldn’t be any more different—but the wariness is still there.”

I run my fingers through her hair, encouraging her to look at me. “I’m not him, Holly. I can’t promise that I’ll never let you down or disappoint you, but I can’t imagine any situation where I would willingly leave you like he did, or any way.”

“You can’t promise that, Rex.”

She attempts to look away, but I cradle her face, not letting her avoid my gaze. I want her to hear me. *Really* hear me.

“I’m well aware that things happen out of our control. I learned that very quickly with Lauren. I also shut my heart down like you are. I couldn’t see how far I’d gone until I’d met you, and Jacob pointed out how I wasn’t letting you—or anyone—in. I realized that I had done that. I moved to this town to embrace the community and closeness, and what do I do the moment

I need them? I turned away and locked myself in my shelter. Now that I've started to lower my walls and let them in, let *you* in, I want the same for you."

"Rex..."

"It doesn't have to be with me. I know I'm asking a lot of you, but please let someone in. No matter what happens between us, Holly, I want you to be happy. I need to know that you will at least try to give yourself that."

Tears fill her eyes as she looks at me. "And Cassie?"

My eyebrows draw together. "Cassie? What about her?"

"I'm still trying to wrap my head around it. She likes you but stepped aside and became my friend? I've never experienced that before. Back home, I would be shunned by her. Roadblocks put up between us. She would have only been nice to me to sabotage this somehow."

"This isn't the city, and Cassie's not like that. And even if she still does have feelings for me, it doesn't matter because the only woman I see is you."

"Really?" she asks, eyes wide in surprise.

"Yes. I've only ever looked at Cassie as a friend, but with you, I want more. I want it all. I want to watch you scrunch up your face while I eat a stack of gingerbread pancakes and drink my Holly Jolly Latte. I want to see you dress in fuzzy animal pyjamas and go shopping. Play with the dogs. See you interact with the people of Candy Cane Creek. More importantly, I want to hold you in my arms, kiss those lips, and make every doubt and insecurity you've ever had go away."

"Oh, Rex." The tears in her eyes flow freely now.

I reach up with my free hand, wiping the tears with my thumb. "What do you say, Holly? Do you think you can give us a chance?"

"I want to," she whispers, clutching at the fabric of my shirt on my chest.

My thumbs brush more of her tears from her face as I study her eyes. I want to make all her hurt go away. Part of me hopes I never meet Josh, but at the same time, I'm glad I have her and he doesn't. If she lets me in, I'll vow to show her not all men are like him. Not all towns are like Vancouver. Not all friends are fake.

I lean in closer, dropping my head to kiss her when my finger catches on something before falling to the ground.

Holly sucks in a breath as she grasps her ear. "My earring."

I drop to my knee, looking for a diamond stud among the snow. My eyes adjust to looking in the glistening snow as it reflects the lights from the barn.

“Do you see anything? I’m afraid to move in case I knock it somewhere.”

“Not yet, just hold tight.”

I study the impressions in the snow before a single sinking hole the size of a stud catches my eye near her foot. Carefully, I brush the snow away until the stone twinkles back at me. As delicately as I can, I pick it up, worried I’ll push it deeper into the fluffy pile below it.

Pulling it out from its pillowy enclosure, I hold it up to Holly, the diamond sparkling in the reflection of the moonlight.

“You found it!” Holly exclaims, taking her earring from my fingers, careful not to drop it again.

“Oh, my gosh! He’s proposing! Marcus! Get over here!” someone yells from inside the barn.

Peering around Holly, wondering who in town is getting engaged, I’m shocked to find everyone rushing to the door to watch *us*.

“It’s so soon!”

“When you know, you know.”

“Christmas magic is at work again!”

People chatter from the doorway. What once was an empty entryway now stands half the town with the other half clamouring to get a look.

“I’m so happy you found this,” Holly says as she places her earring back in her ear, completely oblivious to the crowd gathering behind her. “I bought these as a present to myself last year. I would hate to have to replace them.”

“Um, Holly?” I say, frozen in place as I realize that I am, in fact, down on only one knee.

Did I mean to do that when I went to look for her earring? No, but I did.

“Yes, Rex,” she smiles down at me.

“I don’t want to alarm you, but I think the people in town have the wrong idea about us.”

“What do you mean?” she asks with a quizzical look on her face. “Don’t they think we’re already together?”

“Well, yes.”

“Aren’t we together? I mean, I know I have my hesitations, but I thought that with us almost kissing back there, it’s what was going to happen.”

“Um, well, I still want that to happen.” I glance around her again, seeing that people are still gawking at us. Some with happy smiles, hands clasped against their chests. Others with curious gazes, no doubt wondering why I’m still on my knee, which is currently so cold I can’t feel it.

“Then what’s the problem?”

“Turn around.” I gather the energy to stand, bracing myself for her reaction.

“Why are they all watching us?”

“Well, they, uh—they think I just proposed to you.”

“They...” she whips around to face me, looking down at where I knelt, her hand flying to her ear. “They what?”

“Someone saw me down on my knee handing you a diamond...”

Her eyes open wide, her mouth in a silent ‘o’ as she gasps.

“Look, it’s just a simple mistake.” I move around her, placing my body between the crowd and Holly. “It’s not what you think. I dropped her earring when I went to kiss her, and...”

“You kissed her?”

“Are you together?”

“Did she say yes?”

People bombard us with questions.

I never in a million years thought I would be facing the town like a questioning firing squad; inquiries about my love life being hurled at me as fast as shots fired.

I hold my hands up in surrender. “I’m sorry to inform you that it’s not what you think.”

Before I can explain any further, Holly brushes past me, wiping at her cheeks. “I can’t do this.”

I’m amazed at the speed she exits on her heels given the snow and ice, but she’s gone before my mind can catch up with her leaving.

“I’ll drive her home,” Cassie says as she rushes past me, chasing after Holly.

“What happened, man? Did you actually propose to her?” Jacob asks beside me, placing his hand on my shoulder. “I mean, I know you guys are moving fast, but I didn’t think *that* fast.”

“No,” I answer simply, watching as the women pile into Cassie’s car and drive off.

I have a feeling I lost it just as quickly as I found it.

# *Chapter Twenty*

## HOLLY



“I can’t do this, Cassie.” I grab my clothes from the drawer, throwing them in the general direction of my rolling travel bag, not caring if they land all the way in. I’ll figure it out later.

“It was a simple misunderstanding, Holly. No one is going to think anything of it tomorrow,” Cassie tries to reassure me, standing in the bedroom doorway, eyeing me like I could sprout two heads at any moment.

My mind reels. Yes, I was considering the option of one day having a husband and family. Possibly with Rex. But seeing him down on one knee after everyone assumed he was proposing was too much. It made me realize just how quickly this has all moved.

“I’ve been here less than a week, Cassie. This isn’t normal.”

“It wasn’t like he was actually proposing,” she says, rolling her eyes and crossing her arms over her chest.

“I know that,” I snap, sounding harsher than I intend. I close my eyes, grasping my shirt in my hand harder than necessary. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t be taking this out on you. Out on any of you.”

“So why are you? I mean, forget about me; you’re frustrated, but why are you leaving and taking this out on Rex?”

I look down at the shirt in my hand and whisper, “I don’t know.”

“Do you like him?” she asks.

I keep looking down at the shirt, noticing it’s the plaid one he gave me on my first morning in town. He told me to keep it and, to be honest, I never wanted to give it back.

I think of the time we’ve spent together. How he’s opened up his home—and his heart—to me. He’s been nothing but kind and patient and what have I



done? Freaked out over a misunderstanding.

“Yes, I like him.”

“So, why are you leaving?”

I look up at her, tears welling in my eyes. “I need to know if it’s this place that is making me feel what I’m feeling. This has never happened to me before, Cassie. I’ve never just come to a town and been swept up in the community and the events. I’ve never met someone like Rex and had everything just fall into place.”

“Literally,” Cassie says, trying—and failing—to cover it as a cough in her hand. When I look up at her with a huff, she adds, “What? He fell into you, and then, if I heard correctly, you fell into him.”

I let out a soft chuckle, thinking of how we met.

Was that really only less than a week ago?

“What I’m saying is, are you really ready to throw away what might be an amazing relationship because you’re scared? We’re all scared, Holly. I was scared to put my feelings out there for Rex, but you know what? Even though it’s not going to work out, and I completely believe that it’s for the best now, I’m happy I did because now I know I can do it. So when the right person comes along, I’ll be able to know that I did it, got rejected, and I’m still okay.”

I know she’s right, but my mind still fills with the ‘what ifs.’

“What happens when the Christmas magic is gone, Cassie? When the decorations come down and the spirit of the season is gone? Will what we have be enough? Surely even Candy Cane Creek doesn’t stay like this all year round.”

She laughs. “No. We love Christmas, but we are also realistic.” She takes a moment to regard me before continuing. “But seriously, there’s no magic, Holly. Yes, the season brings its own magic, but everything that I’ve seen between you and Rex is real. No matter the season or the holiday, I believe that what you have is real. Is it fast? Yes, but that’s life. Sometimes you meet the right person, and it just clicks.”

I want to believe her. I also know that if I really stop and think about it, what I feel for Rex is significantly different than what I felt for Josh.

The sound of a knock at the door breaks our conversation. I know it’s him. I’ve gotten to know his knock, just like I’ve gotten to know how he takes his coffee—either the overly-sugary latte or black with a candy cane. I’ve gotten used to the way he smells, which is peppermint with a hint of dog.

It's become a comfort in the short time I've known him, but yet, it makes my stomach do a tilt-a-whirl, thinking about what it means.

"I'll get it," Cassis says. She hesitates for a moment before crossing the room and pulling me into a hug. "Please don't stay away for too long. It won't just be Rex that misses you."

And with that, she's gone.

I hear their muffled voices down the hall as I throw my shirt into my rolling bag, closing my eyes and fighting back tears.

How did I get here? How did I go from wanting something with Rex to having it make me so scared over a simple misunderstanding?

"Can I come in?" Rex's hushed tone makes me open my eyes. He's rid himself of his jacket and boots, standing in front of me in his light up tie, making me wish I could rewind the clock a couple of hours to when I was in his arms. To before I freaked out and ran off.

To when I still believed that we could just be *us*.

"Of course. It's your house." I turn to the dresser, pulling out another shirt.

"You're really leaving?"

The hurt in his voice breaks my heart.

"I have to, Rex. I don't live here." I turn, throwing my shirt in my bag. "This was always the plan. I get my car fixed and I go back home to Vancouver. "

"I know. I just thought..."

He doesn't need to say the words. We both know what he thought. If I'm honest, a couple of hours ago I thought the same thing. That I could stay. That I could be a part of Candy Cane Creek with their over-the-top decorations and festivals. With their Christmas themed stores and events.

With Rex.

"My apartment is there. My job."

"Isn't your job to travel? Write your blog? Why can't this be your home base?"

Why can't he be my home base?

"I'm not saying it can't be," I whisper, not looking at him. "I'm just saying I need time. I don't want to end this—us—I just need time."

"So long distance, then? Is that what you're asking for?"

"Yes? No. I don't know," I say in a frustrated tone, lifting my hands and covering my face.

I hear his soft footsteps on the hardwood floor before I feel his hands on mine, lowering them. I look into his beautiful blue eyes, framed with his black glasses and his floppy brown hair. I don't see anger or contempt in them, only caring and concern.

Maybe even...love.

"I don't want to pressure you. Just know that if you come back, I'll be here. But my life is in Candy Cane Creek. If you end up being in Vancouver or anywhere else, I understand. Know that I'll always hold a special place in my heart for you and our time together. You've taught me it's okay to open my heart again. That I *can* open my heart again. For that, Holly, I'll be eternally grateful."

I don't try to hold in the tears as he pulls me into a hug and kisses the top of my head.

We stand like that for a few moments; me clinging to him while tears fall from my eyes. Him holding me tight and brushing his lips over my hair, telling me softly it'll be okay. I don't know if the reassurances are for me or both of us, but it's working.

With a final squeeze, he gives me another kiss on the head before he turns and leaves the room without another word.

That's when I fall onto the bed and cry.



"HOLLY! Open up, I know you're in there!" Rachel yells through my door, breaking my blissful silence.

I got back to my apartment late last night, texting Rachel to let her know I made it back to town before shutting off my phone and hiding it under my pillow. I didn't trust myself not to text Rex, just like I had to stop myself from turning around on the highway and heading back to Candy Cane Creek at least a dozen times.

"Holly! Open up! I'm not above calling the building manager and making up some Christmas emergency!" Rachel yells again, knocking louder this time.

I groan as I get up, knowing she will do just that if I don't get to the door in the next ten seconds. Pausing the movie I was half watching, I place the remote next to the melting tub of ice cream before shuffling over to the door.

*Merry Christmas to me.*

I sigh as I open the door, not looking, as I walk back to the couch and wrap myself in my blanket.

“Well, aren’t you a merry sight?” she says, closing the door and walking to me. “Are you watching a Christmas movie? And eating candy cane ice cream?” Her eyes open so wide I think they might jump out of her head. “What is that on your head? Antlers?”

I wrap the blanket around me tighter, burrowing into the couch. “Maybe.”

“What happened?” she asks, her voice softer as she takes a seat on the couch, making me move my feet to give her space.

“My car was fixed. The blog post was done. I came home,” I say, staring at the paused TV.

I can’t take my eyes off the couple on the screen. They’re wearing fluffy jackets and festive toques, lost in each other’s eyes as the snow falls around them. Not long ago, that was Rex and I. Now, I’m here, wallowing while dressed like a fuzzy reindeer.

“That’s not all. It wasn’t long ago you were gushing about Rex. Then, I get a text you’re in town and then nothing. I have to say, the movie and the ice cream are concerning. You hate both of those things.”

“Hate is a strong word,” I grumble, wishing I could grab another bite of the overwhelming peppermint and sugar treat without drawing more attention to my odd behaviour.

I probably shouldn’t tell her I also drank my coffee black with a candy cane this morning, either.

Thank goodness for the fully stocked gas station I found on the way home.

“Fine. You still need to tell me what happened, though.”

So I do. I tell her about the town, but not the unbiased, fluffy version in the blog. I tell her about Cassie and Jacob. I tell her about the people. The community. How they welcomed me with open arms and not just because of the attention they could gain from the blog, but because that’s just who they are.

More importantly, I tell her about Rex.

“So, what are you doing here, then?” she asks, playfully swatting at my legs.

“I live here, Rachel,” I answer, as if it were the simplest question in the world.

“So? People move all the time. Plus, you’ve never liked this apartment and you’ve been miserable in the city for a while. Why do you think I’ve asked you to do so many travel blogs lately?”

“You...what?” I ask, sitting up.

“It’s really hard to take you seriously with those antlers on.” She shakes her head. “It’s been a long time since I’ve heard you as happy as you were the last time I talked to you there. Honestly, I was expecting to get a call asking me to pack up your things, not to find you like this.”

“I was happy...” I whisper, looking back at the couple on the screen.

“So, what are you doing here?”

That is the question. What am I doing?

All I’ve known since Josh left me was to deflect and avoid. I’ve worked to keep my mind off everything else, making sure I left no time to think of anything else. This past week, I found myself working less and just enjoying life.

I had forgotten what it was like. What being happy felt like.

Maybe that’s what really scared me. Am I afraid of being happy?

It makes sense, or at least, part of it does. The last time I thought I was happy, I ended up alone in a church with all my family and friends witnessing the single most humiliating event of my life.

But deep down, I know Rex would never do that to me. Rex isn’t Josh. Not even close.

I draw my attention away from the clearly in-love couple to my friend. “What do I do, Rachel?”

She looks between the screen and me. “You go back to Candy Cane Creek, and you save Christmas.”

“Is it really that easy?”

“There’s only one way to find out.”

I look back at the screen for another moment, knowing that’s exactly what I need to do.

The city no longer feels like home.

This apartment feels small and closed in compared to the guest house on Rex’s property.

Everything is...not Candy Cane Creek.

I know it will take more than showing up to make things right. Apologies need to be made. Promises need to be fulfilled.

Decision made, I stand, taking a look at the mess I’ve made with my self-

pity party. “You’re right. This isn’t the place for me.”

Rachel stands with me. “So, what are you waiting for?”

Meeting her eyes, my heart races in both fear and anticipation.

“There’s something I need to do first.”

# *Chapter Twenty-One*

REX



“I can’t believe this is how I’m spending my Christmas morning,” I say to myself, looking up at the rotating fan on the ceiling of the pet shelter. Elvis’ smooth voice fills the speakers playing from the corners of the room.

Normally, I play light jazz, or classical because I’ve heard it calms animals. Maybe any other animals than these wild things, but if anything, it calms me. Normally.

Not today.

I’m laying on my back as Fluffy pads in circles on my chest trying to get comfortable. Her little Bolognese body acting as if she were on her dog bed and not pressing down on my lungs.

She’s lucky she weighs next to nothing.

Not that it’s been easy for me to breathe since last night, anyway.

I roll my head to the side when I see movement, watching as Lucy lifts the ridge of her golden brow. She watches Fluffy with envy, as if she could also fit her fifty-pound Labradoodle body on my chest the same way.

“Don’t even think about it,” I say, narrowing my eyes at her.

She huffs and flops back down.

Yup, I’m officially the Grinch.

Looking back up at the ceiling, I let my mind wander to the events of last night, trying to figure out what went wrong so quickly. One minute I had Holly in my arms, dancing to Christmas music, feeling like we were the only ones in the world. Feeling that maybe, for the first time in a long time, things were going right.

Then, there was the moment in the snow. That fraction of a second where



we went from almost kissing to having her run off. My chest hurts, and not just because Fluffy stretches, digging her nails through my sweater and into my skin, but because I know that Holly didn't just leave me. She left the town. And I have no idea if she's ever coming back.

"Well, Merry Christmas to you," Jacob's voice says from the doorway.

I don't bother to look over, knowing I'll see confusion, sadness, or worse—pity—in his eyes.

"Merry Christmas," I grumble.

"Are you really listening to 'Blue Christmas?' Please tell me you don't have it on repeat."

"I'm not confirming or denying that statement."

*Who's he to judge me? The Christmas police?*

"I brought you a Holly Jolly Latte," I hear him take a step into the room, most likely lifting his foot over the doggy gate rather than opening it like he normally does.

"Impossible. Cassie never opens on Christmas," I grumble.

"No, but it helps that he knows the owner," Cassie says from the area of the doorway.

I shut my eyes, not wanting an audience for my pity party.

"I appreciate you coming, but don't you have somewhere better to be on Christmas morning?" I lift my hand, pinching the bridge of my nose.

Fluffy doesn't appreciate my movement as she turns on my chest and faces away from me. I don't know how I end up collecting the dogs with the biggest attitude problems, but I do.

"And miss this joyous occasion? I think not," Cassie says sarcastically, sitting cross-legged next to me. Ginger walks up and gives her a sniff before plopping down and rolling onto her back, offering herself for Cassie's belly rubs.

As if Cassie has a say in the matter.

Cassie only chuckles before using both hands to give Ginger a good scratch, making Ginger's back leg twitch.

"Are you really letting REXY wallow like this, Ginger? Shouldn't you be cheering him up?" she says in an overdramatic, playful voice.

"There's no cheering," I grumble as I pick up Fluffy off my chest and place her on the ground beside me. This seems to anger her even more as she snorts before walking off to her dog bed and laying down, still facing away from me. I shake my head as I accept my Holly Jolly Latte from Jacob's

extended hand, wondering just what else could go wrong this Christmas.

“Bah Humbug,” Jacob says with a smirk.

I take a sip of my coffee, feeling even worse when it doesn't give me the immediate uplifting feeling it always does.

“Look, you're in a horrible place right now, but you couldn't make her stay,” Jacob says, taking a seat next to Cassie.

“And you don't know that she isn't coming back,” Cassie adds.

“Do you know something? Have you heard from her?” I sit up straighter, noticing that I'm desperate for any information on Holly I can get.

“Sorry, no. I just mean that I know she was really torn up about leaving. She's just as sad as you are, Rex. She might just need some time.” Cassie looks back down at Ginger, who's now curled up and resting her head on Cassie's leg. “You know as well as we do how much of a change this all was for her. To go from Christmas being one of the most painful times of the year to, well...this. In case you don't remember, Candy Cane Creek is a lot to take in, especially from someone that's not from here.”

I blow out a breath, thinking back to when Lauren and I first moved to town. Being from the city, we were both blown away, and leery of how *nice* everyone was. They accepted us into the community, no questions asked. When Lauren got sick, they took care of us. When she passed, they took care of me. They made sure we always had food and someone to lean on if we needed it—sometimes even when we didn't realize that's what we needed.

Throw in Holly's view of the holiday and I can see why it would be overwhelming. Not to mention her hesitation towards relationships.

I didn't have the hurt of someone choosing to leave me. I know with my whole heart that if Lauren had a choice, she would still be with me right now. I couldn't imagine dedicating my life to someone just to have them throw it away.

“So, what do I do?” I ask into my coffee cup.

“Well, you don't sit and listen to the saddest Christmas song ever on repeat, that's for sure,” Jacob scoffs.

“Elvis is classic. Take that back,” I respond.

“Plus, we all know ‘The Christmas Shoes’ is the saddest Christmas song ever,” Cassie adds.

Jacob and I both nod. I won't argue with her on that one. I avoid listening to that song at all costs.

“Okay, so other than stop listening to sad Christmas songs, what do you

suggest?”

Cassie and Jacob look at each other, both donning smiles that tell me they’ve already concocted a plan.

“You come with us,” Cassie says, turning her attention back to me.

“I’m scared to ask where,” I counter.

“You’ll see,” she says, rubbing her hands together.



“YOU’VE GOT to be kidding me,” I mutter as I stand in the town square, looking at the scene before me.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Cassie asks, rocking back and forth from the balls to the heels of her feet.

“It’s...something,” I answer, looking up at the big tree in the middle of the square.

The decorations have changed from a classy mix of string lights and oversized bulb ornaments to something straight out of a Dr. Seuss book. Large and small bulbs of every size and colour fill every branch of the fifty-foot tree.

“Did this happen last year?” I ask, not taking my eyes off the sight in front of me.

“Nope,” she says, popping her ‘p.’ “Brand new this year. Isn’t it great?”

I look up at the very top. “Did they curve the tree at the top? How...?”

“No idea. This was all William’s idea. He’s been working in secret with the council for months,” Jacob adds, looking up.

“Well, now their outfits make sense,” I say, looking over at William and the council as they huddle in close discussion near the base of the tree. The men are wearing knit sweaters and dress pants, the women all in dresses that seem to remain flared out unnaturally. What they all have in common are fake upturned noses and outlandish hair. “So, what is this exactly?”

“It’s a Who-Breakfast!” Cassie exclaims excitedly.

“Did you have something to do with this?” I ask Jacob, knowing that the Inn is usually involved with anything that needs to be catered.

He responds, giving me a closed-lip smile and running his fingers over his mouth like he’s zipping his lips.

“Come on!” Cassie links her arm with mine and pulls me forward.

I'm immediately greeted by people in town—some dressed like Seuss characters, some not—as they wish me a Merry Christmas. No one mentions the fiasco that happened in front of everyone last night, and for that, I am eternally grateful.

Cassie and Jacob lead me to a long table, which really must be about ten tables lined up together, all packed with food. There's everything from sausages, hash browns, and eggs to pancakes and waffles.

"Take your pick! There's a little of everything," Jacob says, handing me a plate. "There's your favourite Gingerbread pancakes. I made sure to get your favourite recipe from Hal at the diner."

"You did not!" I gasp, gaping at him. "Hal's kept that recipe under lock and key! I've begged him for it for over a year now!"

"What can I say? I have my ways," Jacob smirks.

"If you two don't mind, I would really like to start eating all of this." Cassie muscled her way in between us, getting in front and piling sausages on her plate.

"Seriously, though. What is all this? I don't remember there being a breakfast last year."

"There was. The theme changes every year, but the sentiment is the same. We all gather around the tree and share breakfast with one another before going home and opening presents with family."

"How did I not know about this?" I ask, astonished. I thought I'd experienced everything the town had to offer for the holiday season. I'd used it as a distraction. Surely I would have remembered an event like this.

"I think you were in too much of a haze to think about it," Jacob starts, putting a sausage on his plate now that Cassie has moved to the hash browns. "We all knew you were grieving and wanted to respect that, so we didn't push."

"And now?" I ask, taking his place in line, finding myself surprisingly hungry now that I'm in front of all this food.

"Well, you still are. I imagine you never stop. But this year it's different. Cass and I couldn't let you sit at home when everyone wants you here."

I stop, looking over at him as he grabs a spoonful of scrambled eggs. "You and 'Cass,' huh?"

"Don't. We're focusing on you." He narrows his eyes at me as he places the scoop of food on his plate and replaces the spoon.

I follow down the table in silence, taking a little of everything as I make

my way down.

Except for the pancakes. I take more than my share of those, especially if Hal only shares his recipe with Jacob.

We find spots at a table with Brent and Megan Sanders, and I listen happily as they talk about their plans for the day. How they can't wait to open presents with their kids, who are currently running around the square with most of the other children from town, hyped up on sugar and Christmas excitement. I stay silent, acting as if I'm enjoying the food—which I am—but I'm really actively trying to think about how much all of this makes me feel sadness.

I miss Lauren and the Christmas we were supposed to have together.

I miss Holly and the ones I thought we would share.

Twice now I've envisioned my Christmas going so dramatically different and again, I'm left here all alone, wishing for what would never be.

# *Chapter Twenty-Two*

REX



By the time the town's annual Christmas dinner comes around, I'm peopled out. While I appreciate Jacob bringing me to the Inn and spending the day with him and his family, I'd rather be alone.

As usual, the Inn was decorated beautifully. I couldn't help but sit in the corner by the window, staring out at the freshly fallen snow. Everyone else was gathered around the tree, exchanging gifts and chatting. Jacob gave me a sad smile as he brought me a refill of my coffee. His mom would pat my shoulder and have some quiet words of encouragement while she brought me a cookie or scone. I think the only one who got me was his uncle, who sat with me in silence as he read his book, warding off anyone else who dared to come up to try to engage with us.

That's right, I'm the epitome of Christmas cheer.

I don't blame Jacob. He and Cassie have made it their mission to make sure I'm not alone today. I'm not sure if it's out of fear that I'd end up back on the floor in the shelter listening to sad Christmas songs, or because they truly feel no one should be alone on Christmas. Either way, they've made sure that I'm always with someone.

Before last year, I would have never imagined a circumstance where I would have wanted to be alone on Christmas. These last two years? It's all I want.

"Merry Christmas, Rex," Millie says, patting my arm as I walk into the barn. "No Tag with you tonight?"

"No, he was cozy in his bed. He wanted to stay there." What I don't tell her is that he is also moping and avoiding me like it's my fault that Holly left.

"That's too bad. Be sure to stop by before you leave tonight. I have a little

something for your dogs.”

I pause as I look at her. “You...do?”

“Yes, dear. Those dogs make me smile.” As she says it, a wide, genuine smile crosses her face. “Why, when that golden one jumped into the pool and sent balls flying at the market? Well, I haven’t laughed like that in ages!” She laughs, wiping a tear from her eye. “Makes me miss my dog, Happy. You know, I’ve been thinking about getting another dog. Something small. Maybe we can talk in the new year? I would love to have someone to look after again.”

Now it’s my turn to smile. “I would love to, Millie. We’ll find you a dog that’s just the right fit for you.”

With another pat of my hand, she’s off with well wishes for the next person.

I stand next to the doorway, looking over the room. Most of the town has gathered. Men and women stream in, arms full of bags and casserole dishes as they say their hellos, and weave through the crowd. Children run about, showing off their new toys or playing their new games. People chat and laugh while drinking their hot cocoa and apple cider.

I’ve never felt like such an outsider in town before. I know it’s my own doing right now as I stand off to the side, just observing, but I can’t help it.

“If I can get everyone’s attention, please,” William speaks in a loud, booming voice that I recognize as his ‘mayor tone,’ that is reserved for when he’s on town business. His long white beard stands out against the deep red of his shirt. He’s wearing black pants that are held up by matching black suspenders, making him look like the jolly old elf that should be napping by this time of Christmas day, not hosting a dinner.

Everyone quietens and starts finding a seat. I grab one at the table closest to me, nodding to the others as they sit around me.

“I would like to welcome everyone to the official annual Candy Cane Creek Christmas Dinner!” William announces, causing everyone to erupt into a round of applause.

“As if there’s an unofficial one,” Jacob scoffs, as he takes a seat beside me.

“Stop being such a grinch,” Cassie says as she sits at my other side. “Just ignore him. He’s pouting.”

“I am not pouting. I don’t pout,” he says, the bottom of his lip sticking out slightly.



I raise my eyebrow at him in response, but he just mimics my action before looking away.

“And why would he be pouting?” I ask Cassie, knowing Jacob is too far gone to answer me.

“I am *not* pouting,” he interjects.

“Fine. Why is he very adamantly *not* pouting?” I ask again, grateful for the distraction from my own sadness.

“The Inn drama,” she answers casually, not looking at him.

“The Inn drama?” I’ve been with both of them all day. I’m not sure how I missed anything this big, even with how distracted I’ve been.

Cassie gives me an exasperated look, like she’s over dealing with both of us. “When William announced the council’s plans to start expanding the Christmas events, including the approval of a second inn in town. You really weren’t paying attention, were you?”

“Apparently not,” I mutter. I turn to Jacob. “But why is that a bad thing? The Mistletoe Inn is always booked up during the holidays. You’re usually turning people away. Surely another inn would be a good thing for the town while not affecting your business.”

“It’s not that there is another one. It’s who’s going to be running it,” Cassie says.

“And who’s running it?” I ask.

“Eric Davis,” Jacob says angrily.

I have more questions, but the room quietens down as William starts speaking at the front of the room. I hear him speak about the importance of community and hope. Two things that I’ve definitely lost sight of. As I look around the room, I think about how Lauren and I moved here for both of those things. The two things we definitely were lacking in the city. It’s also the two things I seemed to have pushed away in the time since she passed.

As I truly look at the room, seeing everyone who has given up their evening and own traditions to eat Christmas dinner with the town, truly welcoming in people like me that didn’t have anyone else to celebrate the day with. It brings a tear to my eye to think that for a second time in just as many years, I almost pushed their friendship away because I didn’t want to accept it. But now, as I sit between Jacob and Cassie, I feel for the first time that I truly belong. That all of these people are my family, and I can rely on them.

Even if I am missing the one person who I really wanted to spend today with.

“It’s on days like today we hold close those we love and remember those we lost.” William holds my gaze for a moment before moving on. “But most importantly, we share our love for those around us. I couldn’t dream of living in any place other than Candy Cane Creek, and I know many others here feel the same. I’m proud to be your mayor. We aren’t just neighbours, we’re family. And now, just like family, we will share Christmas dinner together.”

The mayor closes in prayer before guiding the first few tables to go up and get their food.

Since we’re sitting near the back, I figure we’ll be a while, so, I turn to Jacob. “So who’s Eric and why do you have that response?” I’ve been here for over a year, and I can’t remember ever meeting someone with that name, which is shocking. This is very much an ‘everyone-knows-everyone’ town.

“He moved to Gingerbread Grove before you got here,” Jacob says angrily before he downs his glass of Crantastic Punch.

I don’t know much about the neighbouring holiday town, only hearing that for the last few years, they’ve changed the name of their town from Woodland Springs to Gingerbread Grove in an attempt to bring people in during the holidays. They also want to be a destination that brings people in this time of year, much like Candy Cane Creek.

“And you don’t like him because...?”

“Because he had the *audacity* to leave Jacob when he was his best friend and manager of the Mistletoe Inn, only to move to Woodland Springs to head up their ‘revival,’” Cassie says with air quotes.

“You should be mad at him, too,” Jacob says, leaning across me while looking at Cassie. “He left you, too, you know.”

“And that’s water under the bridge, Jacob. Plus, my love life shouldn’t be any concern of yours,” she says back, also leaning in toward me.

*Interesting.*

“Anyways,” I say, leaning forward to break up their tense discussion. “So, if he left to run Gingerbread Grove to be like Candy Cane Creek, why would William approve him running another inn here?”

“That’s the million-dollar question,” Jacob grumbles, looking ahead where the mayor is laughing with the people at his table. “He was just as mad as everyone else when Eric left and started all the changes to compete with us.”

“Right,” I answer, not sure what else to say. Because I’ve been so withdrawn from the town lately, I seem to have missed a lot of the politics

that is also going on. Like a competing town. Or a new inn.

Maybe I should start paying more attention.

Cassie's phone buzzes, pulling her attention away from the tense stare Jacob is sending the mayor. She gasps when she looks at the screen, clicking and scrolling frantically.

"What is it?" I ask, worried that something bad has happened.

Her eyes scan her screen as her hand covers her mouth. I get anxious the longer she sits in silence, but I wait patiently for her to look up at me.

"I can't believe it. I can't believe she did this," she finally says.

"Who did what?" I demand, doing everything in my power not to yank the phone out of her hand and see what she's talking about.

Without another word, she hands me her phone.

I scroll to the top of the page, sucking in a breath as I read the headline. I know Jacob's reading over my shoulder, but I don't wait to see if he's reading what I am. I need to see it all to believe it.

"Wow," Jacob says over my shoulder.

"Yeah," I say back, my eyes never leaving the screen.

"Did you know she was going to do this?" Cassie asks.

"No. I mean, she mentioned it, but I assumed once she left, it wasn't going to happen. I didn't know it would be like...this."

"This is incredible," Jacob says over my shoulder.

A bark behind me draws my attention away from the screen. "Tag? What are you doing here?"

"He brought me here. I hope you don't mind."

My eyes dart to the woman at the door and my heart stops. Standing like an angel with streams of the outdoor lights falling on her auburn hair, flecks of snow on the strands. She's wearing that tan jacket that caused me so much trouble when we met, but now, I can't help but notice how beautiful she looks wearing it.

"Holly?"

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

*The Amazing Love at Miracle on 30 Woof Street*

*By Holly Day*

There's a little town in the heart of B.C. that drew my attention for its festive decorations and quirky traditions. It's a town filled with Christmas joy, where the residents live by the rules of Christmas—spreading joy and love. What I've come to learn is that it's not only for the human residents, but for the furry ones as well.

I had the privilege of staying on site at the Miracle on 30 Woof Street Pet Rescue. There, I was able to witness firsthand how much the owner, Rex Wellington, loves and truly cares for his dogs. Not only does he treat them as if they were all part of his family, but he spends his own time and resources to launch his projects. Projects such as raising money to bring in a professional that can help train his dogs to be service dogs. That way, not only can they be the companions that so many are longing for, but also potentially save lives as well.

During my time at the Pet Rescue, I was shown time and time again just how loveable and entertaining Lucy, Ginger, and Fluffy are, and how quickly they capture the hearts of those they meet. Although they haven't found their forever homes yet, I know that in time, they will find the families that are the right fit for them.

Of the millions of pets that end up in shelters every year, I can honestly say that these dogs have been lucky to end up at the Miracle on 30 Woof Street. Not only are they able to live their best lives in a Christmas obsessed town, but they have an owner that truly cares for them. Not just to bring them

in and get them out the door as fast as possible, but someone that wants to make sure they have a good home. That the family that will be bringing them into their lives is just as good of a fit for the pet as the pet is for the family. It's because of this that Rex's lofty goal is so worthwhile, because it would support a program that would give the dogs a purpose while fulfilling a need for humans as well.

If you find it in your hearts to donate to the Miracle on 30 Woof Street Pet Rescue this holiday season, please follow the link...

# *Chapter Twenty-Four*

## HOLLY



“Holly? You came back?”

“I hope you don’t mind.” I take a step forward, pulling off my leather gloves as I walk toward him. “I stopped at your house first to see if you were there. That’s when Tag decided to be, well, a tag along.” I chuckle.

Tag stands proud beside me, Santa hat on his head, but a garland of loose fitting lights hang around his neck like an oversized necklace.

“That better not be from the tree, Tag,” Rex warns.

He snaps at him in response before flopping down at my feet.

“We’re going to give you some time,” Cassie says as she stands from the table. She walks forward and gives me a hug. “I’m so glad you’re back. I know you weren’t here for long, but it just didn’t feel the same without you.”

I wrap my arms around her, all without taking my gaze away from Rex’s. “It’s good to be back.”

“Yeah, it’s uh, food time,” Jacob says, giving me a hug once Cassie stands back. “Welcome back, Berry.”

“Thanks, Jacob,” I add before he’s pulled away by Cassie.

I stand, hovering awkwardly by the door, leaving a few feet between us.

“Merry Christmas.” I inwardly cringe, knowing that isn’t the best opening I could have with him, but my brain couldn’t think of anything else without babbling everything I’ve been practicing saying to him during my car ride up here.

“Uh, Merry Christmas to you, too,” he says, shuffling on his feet and looking everywhere but me.

“The barn looks great. You weren’t kidding about how magical it is.” Another cringe. At this point, I might just kick myself out of town.

He nods, glancing over his shoulder to look at the barn before turning back to me, but still not meeting my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I start, pleading with him with my eyes. “I shouldn’t have left.”

He nods.

“Did you see the blog?”

He nods again.

I wish he would talk to me. I wish he would get mad, yell, cry, do anything to let me know that I’m not too late. That I didn’t throw away what Rex and I had because I was scared.

That he still feels something for me.

Tag huffs and rolls to his side. It’s an action that I think tells Rex he’s not happy with his responses. If I’ve been able to correctly pick up on his canine cues over the past week, that is.

“Rex, please talk to me. Do you want me to leave?”

“No!” He says, putting his hands out in front of him and taking a step.

Well, that worked.

He clears his throat and takes a step toward me, lowering his voice as he looks around at the tables close by, all who are watching us with rapt attention. “Can we talk outside?”

I nod and follow him out, pulling my jacket tighter around me to ward off the chill. It’s incredible to think that it was just a week ago that we met when he spilled his coffee all over it. So much has happened. So much has changed.

“Rex, I…” I start just as he says. “Holly, I…”

We both smile and chuckle, shyly looking at one another.

“Please, let me say what I need to say,” I plead.

He gives a slight wave of his hand, letting me proceed.

“I’m so sorry that I left town. I shouldn’t have run the way I did. I got scared when I put two and two together and saw that the town thought you were proposing. It wasn’t the thought of you asking me to marry you that scared me, it was the thought of opening up myself to that hurt again.” He opens his mouth to speak, but I put my hand up to silence him. “Please, just let me finish.”

He takes a deep breath, but nods without saying a word.



“We’ve talked about it before, and I know you aren’t Josh, but being left at the altar is a kind of hurt that I don’t think ever goes away. Not really. Even though I know you aren’t him, and would never do anything like that to me, I would always still have the question in my mind if it would happen again, and *that’s* what scared me.”

I pause, letting him know that I’m done with my monologue if he wants to interject.

“So, what changed?” he whispers.

Tears fill my eyes, and I glance behind him at the barn, seeing the town filled with joy as they share Christmas dinner with people who are not just their neighbours but their family. Tag sits proudly by the door, Christmas lights blinking around his neck and Santa hat perched on his head as he watches us.

Bringing my gaze back to Rex’s, I let it all pour out. “I realized that even though I was only here a short amount of time, it felt more like home than Vancouver ever has. *You* feel more like home than anyone ever has. Rachel made me see that I’m only hurting myself by ignoring it.” I suck in a breath. “I hope the blog about the shelter showed you how highly I think about you and what you do. You’ve created such an amazing place for the animals. You care about them so much, and everyone can see that. I feel honoured that you care about me, too. At least, I hope you still do.”

Rex blows out a breath, letting his shoulders slump forward.

I will back the tears with each breath that passes without him speaking. I don’t know how much more I can take, waiting to hear if he forgives me. If I can even be forgiven at all.

“Say something, please,” I plead.

His eyes search mine. “So, what does this mean? You being back in Candy Cane Creek.”

“I know it might take some time to make it up to you, but I would like to stay. I’m hoping you still want me here. That you still want us.”

“Oh, Holly,” he says before closing the distance between us, wrapping me up in his arms. “I never stopped wanting you here. Wanting us.”

I sag into him in relief, not bothering to hold back the tears as I wrap my arms around his waist.

“But, I need to know that you aren’t going to do this to me again. I can’t bear to think that every time you get scared, you’re going to run.”

“I’m not going to.” I pull back to look into his eyes. “I asked Rachel to

look after my place until it sells. I already have a call into my realtor.”

“Wow, really?” The corner of his mouth ticks up into a sly smile. “What if I didn’t take you back?”

I chuckle. “Well, then I guess I would have to find another Christmas obsessed town with a handsome pet rescue owner to take me in. I’m not sure if he’ll ruin my jacket or not, though.”

“I hardly ruined your jacket,” he chuckled with a roll of his eyes.

I look up at him, my arms still wrapped around his waist, thinking just how lucky I am. “Thank you.”

“There’s nothing to thank me for, Holly. I’m just happy you came back.” He strokes his hand down my hair and kisses the top of my head. “I know I can’t rid you of the fear of what happened with Josh happening again, but I promise you that I will do my best to always talk to you about everything, even the hard things. Even if that means I have hesitations or worries, but I’ll never leave you in the dark about anything important. Especially something as important as spending the rest of your life with someone.”

I nod, holding him tighter before looking up at him. “And I promise to be better about telling you how I feel, not just running away.”

“If we stick to those promises, I think we’ll be fine.” He brushes a strand of hair off my face with a smile.

“I think so, too.” I look down for a moment, feeling the heat of a blush at my cheeks. “I love you, Rex.”

His eyes sparkle behind his glasses as he cups my cheeks. “I love you, too, Holly.”

Rex leans in slowly, his gaze never leaving mine. My heart beats rapidly, knowing this is it. With this kiss I give him my promise to give not only Candy Cane Creek, but us a chance.

And this time, my rapid heartbeats are from excitement, not fear.

Just as his lips are about to touch mine, a loud bark comes from behind Rex. Tag looks up expectantly at me as he sits, his festive adornments in place.

I chuckle and drop on my heels, giving him a scratch on his head. “I love you, too, Tag. I’m sorry I left you and the others.”

Tag gives a huff, looking to the side as if he doesn’t quite believe me.

“I see you aren’t so easily persuaded.” I reach into my pocket, pulling out a puppy cookie shaped and decorated like Santa Claus. “I know this won’t make up for everything, but maybe it’ll be a start.”

Tag tilts his head to the side, regarding me just long enough to make me wonder if I'm going to be rejected by a dog on Christmas Day.

"Come on, Tag. She did bring you a cookie after all," Rex encourages.

"And you led me here to Rex. That makes me think you aren't so ready to get rid of me."

With a raised ridge above his eye, he licks my hand before taking the cookie and storming off back into the barn.

"I have to admit, I didn't expect Tag to be a harder sell than you," I chuckle as I stand.

"What can I say? I guess I'm just a softie and he's an old grump."

"I won't argue with you there." He takes a step toward me, holding his arm out to me. "Would you please join me for Christmas dinner? I can promise you it's the best in town."

I giggle—actually giggle—while I take his arm. "I'm pretty sure it's the only dinner in town. I think I saw everyone in there."

"I mean, if you want to be *picky* about it," he starts as he leads me back toward the barn. He stops just as we're about to cross through the doors, turning to me. "I'm really happy you came back, Holly. I know none of this has been easy for you."

"And it hasn't been easy for you, either. I can't begin to imagine what you've gone through. Experiencing all of this after losing Lauren." I place my free hand on his arm, holding him close to me.

He looks down at my hands holding him and nods. "And I want to thank you for being so patient with me while I navigate this as well. I never thought I'd be here again. Having to start over..."

"But here we are...doing it together."

"Yes, together." He brings his gaze back up to me with that dazzling smile of his, and I know that everything will be okay.

# *Epilogue*

HOLLY



*One Year Later*

“Are you sure you have everything?” Cassie asks as she glances over the table in front of her.

“Yup.” I can’t look away from the standing full-length mirror, the ornate gold finishing showing off the engraved roses and vines that adorn the frame. Twinkling fairy lights finish the look, making me smile at how magical it all looks.

“Hey, are you okay?” Cassie asks, placing a hand on my arm.

“Hmm? Oh, yeah,” I say with a smile, drawing my gaze from the mirror. I look at her, dressed in her burgundy sleeveless dress. The rounded neckline and sequined top give it the fancy feel while the flowing skirt lets it be comfortable. Or so she’s told me.

Her blonde hair is up in a simple sweeping bun with a lock of her hair falling over her face, similar to the style my own hair is currently in.

“You seem distracted; are you sure?”

“Cassie, I’ve never been happier.” I say, hoping that I sound convincing.

“You’re thinking about him, aren’t you?”

I blow out a breath, looking back at the mirror. “It was about this time last time my mom came in and told me Josh wasn’t coming.”

“Rex isn’t Josh,” Cassie says, placing her hand on my arm. “And I promise he’s here. Jacob has been texting me updates non-stop. They were here before we were.”

“I know,” I say with a smile—a genuine one—as I catch her gaze in the mirror.

Her eyes open wide in shock. “You haven’t been talking to him, have you? That’s against the rules!”

“No, I haven’t been talking to him. But Jacob has been texting me, too. Rex was worried that I would be concerned and wanted to ease my fears. So no, we didn’t break any rules.”

Cassie lets out a sigh. “Thank goodness.”

I run my hands along my white dress, letting the folds of the silk slip through my fingers. I opted for long sleeves, the billowing sleeves tapering at my wrists. The tight-fitting bodice gives way to an A-line, floor-length skirt with a train. It’s simple and perfect.

I feel like a Christmas princess.

“You look beautiful,” she says, looking at my reflection over my shoulder.

The soft smile on her face melts my heart. “Thank you.”

It’s hard to believe that it’s just been a year since I first came to Candy Cane Creek. All of our situations were so different. And now, everything is just as it should be.

A knock at the door draws my attention away.

“Are you ready?” My dad says as he peeks his head in. His smiling eyes reach mine as I take him in. His hair is more salt than pepper now, and he has more lines around his eyes, but he’s still the same man I grew up with. While we might not have been close since they moved away, he’s still the same kind-hearted man I remember.

“Yes,” I say confidently, turning to him.

He closes the door behind him and turns, tears springing to his eyes. “Holly, you...” he sniffs, wiping his eyes with a handkerchief from his pocket. “You’re beautiful.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I say, trying to hold back my own tears.

“Mr. Day, don’t make her cry. She just got her makeup all perfect,” Cassie jokes, wiping at her own eyes.

“Jacob is waiting for you at the main doors when you’re ready,” Dad says to Cassie.

She suppresses a smile with a bite at her bottom lip. “I’ll...uh...meet you out there.”

She slips out of the room, rushing to Jacob.

“What’s going on with those two?” Dad asks. “Jacob had the same smile on his face.”

“It’s complicated,” I say with a shake of my head.

Reaching over, I grab my bouquet from the table beside me. Lifting it to my face, I inhale and take in the calming scents of the red and white roses and pine that make up the arrangement. I asked the florist to add a few Holly berries for fun, and have the ribbon wound around the stems match the deep red of the berry.

I try to focus on the scents, letting it ground me as my heart rate ticks up. Even knowing that Rex is in the church, and most likely standing at the altar, I still can’t help but think what if.

What if he gets cold feet?

What if he calls it off once I’m walking down the aisle?

What if it happens again?

“I know that face,” Dad says, reaching into his jacket pocket. “Rex thought you might start panicking about now, so he asked me to give you this.”

He hands me a note, taking my bouquet from me as I quickly open it.

*Dearest Holly,*

*I know what you’re thinking and don’t. There’s nothing that could keep me from marrying you today.*

*Not even with the promise of the biggest stack of gingerbread pancakes I’ve ever seen.*

*I love you, and this is going to be the happiest day for us. It’s the start of our lives together, and it’s something I’ve been waiting a year for. I would have married you that Christmas Day in the barn if you’d let me, but you deserve better than that. You deserve today. Having all of our family and friends here. Having a wedding that’s just perfectly us.*

*Plus, Tag wouldn’t have allowed anything but the opportunity to be the best ring bearer there ever was.*

*So, please, stop worrying and come meet me at the altar. I can't wait to be your husband.*

*Love,*

*Rex*

“YOU PICKED A GOOD ONE,” Dad says, wiping a tear from my eye.

“I did...this time,” I joke.

He gives me a smile before exchanging the note with my bouquet and placing it back in his jacket pocket. “I’ll keep this for now. What do you say we go and get you married?”

“Let’s go and get me married.”



REX

“NERVOUS, SON?” Pastor Rick asks, breaking me from my intense stare at the church doors.

I become aware I’m rocking from my heels to the balls of my feet, hands clenching at my sides.

“No, not nervous. Anxious? Concerned? I don’t know.” I close my eyes and shake my head. “I just really want to see her.”

“She’ll be coming out soon,” he says, placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

I smile at the people in the pews as I wait, hating the attention on me.

The knot in my stomach lessens and I blow out a breath as the music starts and the church doors at the end of the aisle open.

Tag sits at the door, Santa hat affixed to his head and a large red bow that I know contains our wedding rings tied in place around his collar. As if given a silent command, he stands and starts trotting down the aisle, putting on a show for everyone in the room. His tan and black fur is fleshly washed and brushed, fanning out around his neck like a lion as he makes his way toward



me.

“Show off,” I jokingly scoff as he sits at my feet, looking up at me.

He huffs, looking out at the church before him as if sitting on a throne.

Ginger, Fluffy, and Lucy yip from their corner, the smiling faces of their new families beaming back at me as they sit next to their new furry pets.

Next, Josh and Cassie appear at the top of the aisle. Cassie looks pretty in her deep red dress, complimenting Josh in his black suit with the same colour pocket square sticking out of his jacket pocket. She’s holding onto his arm, bouquet in hand as they walk toward me.

They look happy, and in a way I don’t think is meant for just Holly and me.

He gives her a wink as they reach the altar before helping her up the stairs to stand opposite me. She gives me a smile before her gaze shifts to Jacob, her cheeks turning red.

“What just happened there?” I whisper to Jacob, only to find him looking at her with the same gleam in his eyes.

“Nothing for you to worry about today, my man.”

The music shifts to the wedding march, and I no longer find myself distracted by what’s going on with our bridal party. I suck in a breath as the doors open and I see Holly and her dad. She’s a Christmas dream in a long, white dress. I can’t take my eyes off her as they take slow, agonizing steps toward me, my eyes never leaving hers.

“Be patient,” Jacob whispers, placing a hand on my shoulder.

I notice I tried to take a step forward, as if subconsciously I needed to run down the aisle and meet her there.

The weight of his hand keeps me in place until they are standing in front of me. Jack gives her a kiss on her cheek before turning to me, his hand outstretched.

“Congratulations, son. Welcome to the family.”

“Thank you,” I say, taking his hand and giving it a firm shake.

We both nod before his hand is replaced with Holly’s.

“Hi,” I whisper to her.

“Hi, yourself,” she whispers back.

I take a moment to take her in. Her long veil is off her face, covering her hair and trailing down her back. “You are…astonishingly beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Her cheeks turn a gorgeous pink colour as I lead her to the altar.

Pastor Rick starts the ceremony, leading us through what we're to say. When it comes to the vows, I take a steadying breath, hoping I can be strong for this portion of the ceremony.

"Holly, I never thought I would get a second chance at happiness. I certainly didn't think I would get it as a result of spilling my Holly Jolly Latte all over your Maximus Dante jacket."

"Massimo Dutti," she corrects, earning us a chuckle from everyone in the room.

"Still, the only thing that could have brought us together was Christmas magic. Two people who were so hurt, and so alone, finding their happily ever after in a town called Candy Cane Creek.

I promise to love you, cherish you, and live as if we have Christmas magic all year round."

I wipe a tear from Holly's eye before she takes a piece of paper from Cassie.

"Rex. I didn't know what I was getting myself into when I came to this town. I certainly didn't think I would fall in love with a Christmas-obsessed man and his quirky dog."

"Not obsessed," I correct, earning us more chuckles.

"Nevertheless," she continues with a cheeky smile on her face. "I did, and I'm so grateful for it. I promise to love you, always bring you coffee with candy canes, and indulge you when you need your fix of gingerbread pancakes."

Next we exchange rings, all while Tag makes sure to include himself by giving each ring a good lick before they are taken from his collar.

With an exchange of 'I Do's' and the proclamation of our marriage, I lean in, capturing her lips with mine as the crowd cheers. My hand finds its way to her waist, holding the silky fabric in my hand as I hold her close.

"Hi, Mrs. Wellington," I say, pressing my forehead to hers.

"Hi, Mr. Wellington," she whispers.

Tag yips at our feet, pulling our attention to him.

"Yes, you're included in this family, too," Holly jokes, giving him a good scratch on the head.

I turn to the crowd, seeing them standing and clapping. It's not just our family and friends that are here, but the whole town. They've taken time from their Christmas Day to celebrate our wedding with us, and now we will celebrate the holiday as one big family.

I take Holly's hand and lead her out of the church to a small room at the side for a moment of privacy while everyone makes their way to the barn for the traditional Candy Cane Christmas dinner—and our reception—I can't help but think how lucky I am to not only be given a second chance at love, but a second chance at family.

For that, I'm eternally grateful.

## *About the Author*

Kimberly Ann lives in BC, Canada with her husband, two children and adorable German Shepherd. She's a stay-at-home mom who also homeschools her two children as they explore and learn the world together. Kimberly loves to read, drink coffee, and explore the world around her.

Kimberly writes sweet small town romance filled with emotion, hope, and love



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