



SECRET
**SANTA**

a novelette

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**a novelette
by Tiffany Miller**

Secret Santa

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1

If Holly had to listen to Jingle Bell Rock one more time she was going to rip the speakers right out of the wall. Starting with the one right next to the pretzel stand and working her way around the perimeter of the entire mall until every last one of the noisy offenders were incapacitated. Three times within the first two hours of her shift was simply. Too. Much.

Her far-too-cheery-while-working-retail-in-December coworker, Anne, sashayed to the counter with a tray of fresh pretzels, bopping to the tune as if she'd never heard it before.

Holly scowled at her. "I thought you were making more of the cinnamon sugar? We keep running out of those."

Anne's smile didn't slip one iota. In fact, her merriment seemed to feed off of Holly's glowering mood. She answered in a sing-song voice. "Those are coming out next. Just putting the classic out first." She nodded at an approaching customer.

Holly's cue to plaster on her best fake smile. She turned to the cash register, her smile falling away as a man with a polyester red suit and fake, fluffy beard walked toward her.

Santa.

Correction. The *mall* Santa.

Getting a pretzel?

He said hello first, his words muffled by the ridiculous beard. "Could I get a classic, please?"

Holly stared at the man for several seconds. "Tired of cookies and milk?"

A glimpse of a smile from behind the overflowing mustache. "Don't tell anyone. Don't want any disappointed kids."

"You realize you *are* in a public place, right? Like, a kid could see you right now."

"Santa" made a show of looking around the nearly empty mall. "I think I'm in the clear." He gave her a wink.

"Okay, so maybe a Wednesday afternoon isn't the peak time for kids to be flocking to the mall. But they could still see you. Are you prepared to crush their perception of 'jolly Saint Nick' all for the sake of a mall pretzel?"

He squinted, regarding her for a moment, before a light chuckle escaped the white beard. "All they'll see is a Santa who is open to all varieties of junk food. After all," he held his arms out, "I'm still fully in costume." Another hidden smile, another wink.

Was Santa flirting with her? Gross.

Time for this conversation to end. "That'll be \$3.95."

Anne spoke up from the oven at the back of the square store. "Oh, Santa doesn't pay. He gets free pretzels."

Holly leveled a look at the man in front of her. "Seriously?"

His answer was a shrug. "So maybe Santa likes free junk food."

Without breaking eye contact, Holly grabbed the tongs, opened the warmer that held the pretzels, bypassed the hot and fresh ones that Anne had loaded a minute before, and pulled out the very last pretzel. It was hard and a little bit crusty. She slid it into the paper holder and handed it to him with a smug smile.

"Here you are... *Santa*." Maybe this would keep him from coming back and winking at her again.

His cheeks lifted in what she assumed was an infuriating grin. His eyes flicked to her name badge. "Holly. Fitting." He took the pretzel. "Thanks, Holly. Merry Christmas."

She rolled her eyes as he walked away.

Jingle Bell Rock began to play on the speakers.



Anne handed Holly a piece of paper with a cheesy clip art Christmas tree at the top.

“What’s this?”

She’d already moved over to the counter to begin rolling out dough and slipped on a glove. “New Year’s Eve invitation. Every year there’s a big party for all of the mall employees. They hold it in the food court and have it catered. There’s games and last year there was even a live band. It’s all free and actually a lot of fun.”

Holly couldn’t imagine a place she’d rather be less on New Year’s Eve than a mall food court. She tossed the paper in the trash can. “Who’s they?”

Anne held up a long strip of pretzel dough and twisted it with the expertise of someone who’d been doing it for years. “Hm?”

“Who puts on the party? Who pays for all that?”

“The Mitchells. They’re the family that owns the mall. They do stuff like that year round.” Anne looked up, her eyes round and shining. “Two years ago, they brought in a replica of the Times Square ball and dropped it at midnight. It was obviously a much smaller version, but still... a lot of fun.”

Holly crossed her arms and watched Anne twist dough and move the pretzels to the baking tray until it was full. “How long have you been working here?”

“Five years now, I think?” She hoisted the tray and moved it to the oven in a smooth motion. “Not all of it has been year round, though. Sometimes just during the holidays.”

“Ugh, that’s the worst time to work at the mall.” Holly had only been manning the pretzel stand since right after Thanksgiving and the last two weeks had about done her in. Five years doing it over and over? She couldn’t imagine.

Anne was young, and obviously energetic. Why waste that energy here? “Don’t you want to do something else?”

She gave Holly a funny look that said she didn’t understand the question. “I don’t plan to work in a pretzel stand for the rest of my life, if that’s what you’re asking. But it’s been a nice job while I finished high school and as I go through college. Especially during the holidays. It’s really good money. And where else can you see decorations like this?”

Both girls looked out into the food court and the wide halls that stretched in all directions beyond it. The Christmas decorations *were* stunning. Garland and lights draped elegantly over the open spaces, and oversized

ornaments hung from the ceiling in between. Flocked trees covered in lights littered various corners of the mall. Of course, all trees—inside or out—had to be covered in fake snow.

Her family up in Rhode Island would be enjoying a white Christmas—they'd already had three snowfalls in as many weeks—but here in Florida? No chance.

To complete the over-the-top Christmas scene, "Santa" walked around the corner and made a beeline straight for the pretzel stand. Holly groaned.

Anne nudged her with an elbow. "What's the groan for? I caught how he was flirting with you yesterday."

"Then you shouldn't need to ask what the groan is for."

A giggle fell from Anne's lips. "The costume may be hiding it, but trust me. If you saw him without it, you would *not* be complaining."

"Then you flirt with him."

"He's too old for me. He's more your age."

Offense colored Holly's tone. "You think I'm old? I'm only 27!"

Anne flitted away just as Santa approached, his cheeks (that appeared to be painted with red makeup) sitting high again.

"Well, if it isn't Holly jolly Christmas again."

Holly rolled her eyes. "Santa." Best to get this interaction over with as quickly as possible. She grabbed the tongs and reached to the back of the pretzel warmer and pulled out the oldest, driest pretzel. She wrapped it in paper and handed it over the counter with a smile that wasn't the slightest bit sarcastic. Well, maybe a little bit.

He took the pretzel with a thank you. For a moment, she thought maybe she'd succeeded in sending him on his way, but instead he turned to the side and leaned his hip against the counter.

"Did you guys get the New Year's Eve invitations today?" His teeth—which were perfectly straight and strikingly white—bit into the hard bread and tore off a piece. Holly took a bit of pleasure at how much he had to work to chew.

Anne answered for them both as she pulled a tray of fresh pretzels from the oven. "Yep, got them today. Will you be there?"

He couldn't answer right away as he was still trying to swallow. "I always am."

A puzzled look crossed Anne's face as she watched Santa wrestle another bite free. Holly had to turn away to keep from laughing at his immense effort. Surely a free pretzel wasn't worth all that.

"What did you do, Holly, give him the worst pretzel you could find?" Anne shot a scowl her way and slid a pretzel from the still-hot tray in a paper wrapper. Holly's answer was a smirk and arms crossed over her chest.

Anne held out the fresh pretzel. "Here, take this one. That one should be thrown away."

He took a bite, his eyebrows shooting up in appreciation. "Delicious. You make the best pretzels, Anne."

She giggled and blushed under his compliment, flitting away to put the next tray in the oven and leaving Holly to move the new pretzels to the warmer. She did so without looking up at him or saying a word. If he expected her to flirt or make her swoon like her silly coworker, he'd be sorely disappointed.

“Are you going to the New Years Eve party?”

The heat from the warmer swirled toward her face. She took her time placing each pretzel just so, not answering his question until she finished. And then only gave a simple, “Hm?”

His cheeks remained high. They hadn't fallen yet, as a matter of fact. “Are you going to the party?”

“Not if I can help it. May not even be here by then. Might get fired for giving out old pretzels to Santa.”

A peek of a smile through his white beard. “I wasn't going to say a word.”

“I could tell.”

She locked eyes with him—his were a lovely shade of baby blue—silently challenging him to look away first.

Finally, “My next shift starts in five. See you later, Holly.”

3

Three days went by before Holly saw Santa again. She had two days off in a row, and he must have been too busy granting greedy children superfluous wishes the other day. Or maybe he had a day off, too. Could Santa take off a day in December? Maybe someone else shared the gig with him. How many Santas did a mall typically have, anyway?

It figured that the day Holly did see him would be after she'd had a terrible morning. She woke up late and had to rush while getting ready, only to still be late because it was raining—NOT snowing because... Florida—and apparently that meant drivers had to go ten miles under the speed limit. And she couldn't find her earbuds. The only saving grace of long hours at the pretzel stand was her lunch break, where she could pop in her earbuds, blare her music, and pretend she was anywhere else.

The man dressed up as Santa stood in front of her grinning—she was getting pretty good at recognizing his expressions under the fluffy beard—and right now *anywhere else* sounded especially tempting.

She didn't return his smile and pulled a pretzel from the warmer. One in the middle this time, lest Anne catch her again and reward him with an oven fresh one.

"Here." She thrust the pretzel over the counter.

He tilted his head to the side. "You okay, Holly? You seem like you're having a bad day."

"Right, because I'm usually a ray of freaking sunshine."

He looked from one side to the next, glancing around the nearly empty mall. Monday morning wasn't exactly the busiest time. Looking back at her, he pulled the beard below his chin.

"Tell me what's wrong."

Holly gaped at him. Before, she'd gotten little glimpses of his mouth and his perfect teeth, and she'd already noticed the clear blue of his eyes. But *now...* his chiseled jaw, perfectly scruffy cheeks, and full mouth set into a concerned line all came together in one handsome package. Anne hadn't been kidding.

His eyebrows lifted ever so slightly as he waited for her to tell him all about her troubles.

"It's fine. I'm fine." Her breath left her in a sigh. "I forgot to set my alarm last night, so I woke up late. And I can't find my earbuds, which are basically the only things that help me get through the day here."

His expression scrunched like he could relate to long, wearying shifts. “Are they the expensive kind?”

She blew air through pursed lips and shook her head. “No way.”

The side of his mouth ticked upward. “Don’t tell me you still use wired earbuds.”

Her brow furrowed, ready to be offended, but softened at the teasing glimmer in his eyes. Her hands flew to her hips. “They work just as well.” She spoke louder as he began to chuckle. “And I’m not about to drop a hundred bucks on something stupid like earbuds.”

Handsome Santa held up his hands. “Promise I’m not judging. Only a bit surprised.”

“Well it’s a good thing they weren’t expensive, isn’t it? Since I lost them anyway?”

“You have a point there.” He took a bite of his pretzel. “So why not go buy a new pair?”

She’d thought the same thing this morning when she couldn’t find them. But then she checked her bank account and realized that she barely had enough to cover her cell phone and electricity bills that were both due this week. Earbuds would have to wait.

Not that she was about to tell a stranger dressed up as Santa Claus about her woefully slim finances. Gorgeous or not.

She cleared her throat and straightened. “Do you know how hard it is to find wired earbuds anymore? I miss the days when you could find them in the front of Target for like, five bucks. But now everyone is too good for those and only want the bluetooth kind. Kids included. Ridiculous, if you ask me. But I guess this season has a tendency of bringing out greed, doesn’t it?”

“It can also bring out the best in people. You know... compassion. A giving spirit. Holiday cheer.” He winked at the last item he listed. A wink that had an entirely different effect when she could see his entire face.

“Yeah, well...” She shifted on her feet and looked out into the mall, hoping for an out from this conversation. It was too much for a morning when she hadn’t had time for coffee. “Might want to put the beard back up. There’s a kid back there.”

His eyes widened slightly as he tugged the disguise back into place. “Guess it’s time to get back to the North Pole.” Another wink. Definitely not the same effect. “I hope your day gets better, Holly.”

4



The next morning, Holly slumped into the back entrance of the pretzel stand, shrugging off her soaked jacket before clocking in. More rain that should be snow. If only she were home.

Nope, not gonna go there. Definitely not going to go there.

She opened her employee locker to shove her purse inside, stopping short while holding her bag in midair.

Next to her name tag was a small, square box wrapped in red paper and topped with a shiny silver bow.

What the heck? She spun, searching the small back room as if it held any clues as to who left her the gift. Anne? Was there a Christmas exchange she didn't know about? Maybe it was meant for someone else. Because who would give her something?

She lifted the box. A tag, previously hidden by the bow, displayed her name in an elaborate script. Okay, so *someone* had given her a gift. But who?

Curiosity got the better of her and she ripped the paper. Lifted the lid of the box to find...

Earbuds.

Wired earbuds.

Holly stared at the simple gift in her hands, unsure if she wanted to laugh, cry, or be furious that "Santa" had taken it upon himself to give her something she didn't ask for. Under the earbuds was a handwritten note that simply said, "I hope this brings you some holiday cheer. 'Tis the season, after all."

She pushed the feelings of frustration aside. A hint of a smile even tugged at her mouth. The gift was unnecessary, but the gesture—the thought behind it—was kind.

She couldn't wait to blare music into her ears at break time.

5

Holly didn't see Santa the day she found earbuds in her work locker, nor the next day. The day after that, she caught a glimpse of him as she shoved a tray of garlic parmesan pretzels into the oven—she was working that shift with Brian, who insisted on working the register because he “didn't know how to work the oven”—but he'd gotten his pretzel and continued on his way before Holly could so much as throw a brief smile this way.

Each day the mall got busier and the crowds thicker. And louder. Kids crying frequently blocked out the repetitive Christmas music, though Holly regretted ever being annoyed by the songs. She'd listen to Jingle Bell Rock a hundred times over if it meant she didn't have to hear one more kid scream about wanting a toy or *not* wanting a picture with Santa.

Add to all that opposing schedules, an entire week passed before she saw him again. In the lull of the afternoon, he weaved through the small crowds of people in the food court, grinning as though he was just as happy to spot her as she was him.

No.

She wasn't happy to see him. She just wanted to tell him thanks for the earbuds. And, now that she'd gotten another paycheck, pay him back. She didn't like debts.

She forgot all about telling him so as soon as she realized he wasn't alone this time. His hand clutched a long red leash, and at the end of the leash was a gangly Great Dane. Wearing antlers.

Now *this* was the kind of customer Holly could get excited about seeing. The dog's droopy eyes flicked from one spot to the next as his nose sniffed the air—no doubt catching wind of the pretzels Anne would be pulling out any minute.

Holly didn't even try to keep the squeal out of her voice. “Oh. My. Goodness. Who is *this*?”

“This,” Santa said after instructing the animal to sit, “is Goose. Well, Comet when he's on duty.” He rubbed Goose's ear, to which the dog leaned into his touch before turning his sorrowful face in Holly's direction and whimpering. “Goose, no begging.”

He didn't whine again, but Goose's eyes were locked on Holly's movements as she grabbed a small paper bowl and filled it with a few pretzel bites. “Can he have some?” She opened the door from the counter before he had a chance to stop her.

His answer was a warm laugh. “How come he gets the fresh pretzel treatment while I’m still getting the ones made the day before?”

Holly crouched before Goose and fed him a pretzel before rubbing the soft spot right behind his ear. “Anyone as cute and as sweet as this guy gets as many pretzels as he wants.” Her voice took on a tone reserved for small babies and dogs. “Isn’t that right, Goose?” Still scratching the dog’s ear, Holly glanced up. “Is he yours?”

“Yep. The kids like seeing him when they visit Santa.”

“How come you haven’t brought him in before now?”

“I have. He usually stays with one of the elves when I take my break.”

“He’s *really* sweet.” She stood. “What pretzel would you like today?”

He quirked an eyebrow. “I get to choose?”

“I’m feeling generous today.”

A grin peeked from beyond the beard. “I’d love one of those garlic ones. They smell incredible.”

Holly nodded and hurried back behind the counter, donned a new pair of gloves, and pulled out a fresh garlic pretzel. “Thanks for the earbuds, by the way. Totally unnecessary, but it was pretty nice of you.”

He took a large bite of the pretzel, his eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief. “What earbuds?”

“I want to pay you for them, though.”

“You want to pay for a gift?”

“Well, yeah. I barely know you. I mean, I don’t even know your name. I appreciate you getting them and all, but I want to pay you back.”

Another bite before gesturing with the pretzel in his hand. “First of all, my name is Santa, and giving gifts is kind of what I’m known for. Although I don’t know a thing about these earbuds.”

Holly squinted, crossing her arms over her chest. He was making this difficult.

His response to her obvious frustration? Wagging his eyebrows. “Guess you’re going to have to just... *accept* the gift.”

He finished his pretzel with a flourish and made a show of pulling Goose/Comet to his feet before turning on his heel.

Humph. He may think he was going to get away with giving away presents willy-nilly, but Holly wasn’t about to let it slide.

She’d find a way to pay him back.



Holly might not be the stand-up seasonal mall employee that Anne was, nor was she the merriest person to be around during the “most wonderful time of the year,” but if there was one thing she could do, it was bake.

And Santa might not be willing to accept payment for the earbuds—or even admit he’d given them to her—but she’d pay him back with the one thing arguably better than money.

Cookies.

Not just any cookies. Browned butter toffee chocolate chip cookies. That would show him.

She even went out of her way to arrange them in a little Christmas tin that she’d picked up at the dollar store, and make Goose his own batch of dog-safe treats. A smug smile filled her face as she watched the pair—Santa and his awkward reindeer—amble to the pretzel stand. He was going to wish he had accepted the cash. Or, if she hadn’t lost her touch, he’d be more than happy with this exchange instead.

“Morning, Holly.” Hands propped on his hips, accentuating the very round and obviously fake “bowl full of jelly” stomach. “You seem happy today. Dare I say even a bit... cheerful?”

She pressed her lips together and peered at Goose, whose head reached far past the counter while standing. “All thanks to my good friend Goose here. I have something for him.”

Santa put a hand to his heart, pretending to be hurt. “Goose is your friend after meeting him once? To think I’ve been coming here all month and I’ve yet to be called such.”

She allowed a coy smile to slip. “I know *his* name.” She reached for the smaller Christmas tin filled with dog treats, stashed under the counter and next to the larger tin of cookies. “Can he have these?” She pulled off the lid to display cookies cut in the shape of gingerbread men, biting her lip as she realized Santa might not be okay with giving his dog homemade treats. What if Goose had allergies? Or was on a diet? Way to go, Holly! Why hadn’t she considered any of that before baking them last night?

Santa stared at her long enough that she was certain he’d give her one of the excuses her brain had already decided on. She began to put the lid back on when he stopped her.

“Did you *make* those?”

“Yeah. I’m sorry. I should have asked if he’s allowed to have dog treats, or if he’s allergic to anything. I wasn’t thinking.”

He put a hand out, covering the top of hers and preventing her from again trying to hide the treats away. “Holly. He ate soft pretzel bites yesterday, remember? Goose will eat anything.” A gentle laugh rumbled out of his chest and she found herself chuckling along with him. She *had* forgotten about the pretzels.

“I can’t believe you made these. I didn’t know it was possible to make homemade dog treats.”

He plucked one of the gingerbread men from the top and made Goose lay down before feeding it to him. Holly leaned over the counter to watch him gobble it down in half a second.

She glanced back up at Goose’s owner, who was watching her with those bright blue eyes. Whose hand had definitely touched hers a moment before. Which had definitely *not* sent a shiver down her spine.

“Yeah, um. They’re actually,” she coughed to clear her throat, “they’re pretty easy. I can give you the recipe if you’d like.”

If only that stinking polyester beard didn’t cover most of what was sure to be a smile that left her breathless. Or maybe it was best that it did. She wasn’t going to be the girl who swooned over Santa, for crying out loud.

She coughed again. “Um, I also made some for you.” She pulled out the larger tin, a portrait of Santa Claus on the lid. She picked that one thinking it would be funny.

His eyebrows shot up, disappearing under the brim of his red and white hat. “Dog treats?”

“What? No. Of course not.” An unstable laugh escaped. It sounded far too similar to a giggle. “These are browned butter toffee chocolate chip cookies. Humans only.”

Santa’s bright eyes widened. “Browned what? I don’t think I can remember the full name of those, let alone make something like that.” He lifted the lid, the perfect circle of delicious and chewy cookies peeking up at him. He threw his head back and groaned. “Oh my gosh, those smell amazing. You made these? Seriously?”

A furious blush spread over her cheeks at his compliment. She used to bask in comments like that, each one fueling her on toward her dream of starting her own cookie business. But it had been so long since that dream had died—since she’d baked something for someone else—that now the kind words made her more self-conscious than anything.

“I wanted to thank you for the earbuds.”

He ducked his chin, leveling a solid glare at her. “Holly. I told you I don’t know anything about earbuds.” His voice dropped to a loud whisper. “*And you don’t owe anything for a gift.*”

“Would you—” Her voice cut out with a sudden flare of frustration. “Would you just take the cookies? If you don’t want them, fine. I’ll give them to Anne. Or throw them in the trash for all I care.”

“Hey, hey.” He pulled the beard below his chin without looking around. “I do want them. And thank you for making them. I can’t wait to try one.” He

made a show of taking the top cookie and biting it in half. He chewed once before he stilled, his eyes growing round as they found hers. "Holy cow."

Holly sniffed back the stupid tears that had threatened a moment before, now closer to laughter at his reaction. "Good?"

He chewed some more before throwing the rest of the cookie in his mouth, grabbing the edge of the counter as he swallowed. He shook his head. "'Good' is a terrible way to describe those. Perfection, maybe. Masterpiece? Most definitely."

"You're being a little dramatic."

He grabbed another one. "You can call me whatever you want as long as I can have more of those."

She slid the tin closer to him. "They're yours. I made the whole batch for you."

One side of his mouth curved upward. "Really?"

Holly nodded. Their eyes locked and for a moment she forgot how dumb it would be to swoon over a man in a Santa suit.

"Santa! Mommy, it's Santa!"

The trill of a young child's voice broke the building tension, and "Santa" made quick work of his beard before turning around to greet him or her. Immediate giggles filled the air.

"Santa's eating cookies!"

He turned his head toward Holly just enough to wink. She didn't find it even a little annoying.



Over the next several days the crowds at the mall only grew, both in volume and consistency. Still, it didn't keep Santa and Goose from stopping by the pretzel stand and chatting for at least a few minutes. Holly ignored the knowing smile Anne gave her every time he came around the corner, sticking out in the thick crowd with his bright red suit. She also pretended she wasn't taking more time than usual on her hair and makeup in the mornings, even though she definitely was.

Five days before Christmas, not even the prospect of flirting with Santa later could brighten her sour mood as she drug herself into the break room to clock in for her shift. Traffic had been terrible driving to the mall and even worse once she made it into the parking lot.

This. This was the reason she despised this time of year. Too many people. Too much pressure. Why did anyone pretend they enjoyed being stressed for an entire month straight?

She shrugged off her jacket and stopped short in front of her locker. A note was taped to the front.

"Anne said you work tomorrow and usually take your break at 1pm. Can we take our breaks together? My treat. -S"

Holly yanked the note from the metal door, clutching it in her hand and trying but failing to suppress a growing smile.

Mood improved.



Holly didn't see Santa the day she found the note, so she didn't have the chance to give him her answer. She spent more time still on her makeup the next morning and curled her hair—even though it would wind up in a ponytail anyway—just in case. Hopefully her yes was implied. Just like she hoped it was implied that he would not be dressed as jolly Saint Nicholas when they went... wherever they were going. Surely he'd change out of the suit, right? And maybe this time actually tell her his name?

The minutes ticked by slower than they had any right to all morning. After every customer she glanced at the clock on the wall, willing one o'clock to hurry up and get here already, until Anne finally called her out on it.

"Staring at the clock isn't going to make time move faster." She said it with the same knowing smile she'd had for the last week. Holly tried her best not to look up after that. Or at least only do it when she knew Anne wouldn't see.

Five minutes until one she kept her eyes peeled on the crowds, searching for the telltale shock of bright red polyester, so much so that she jumped when a familiar voice said her name.

"Holly? Did you get my note?"

She stared at the man standing just off to the side of the register so as not to interrupt the line of waiting customers. He was... well, he couldn't be further from the plump and padded man she'd gotten used to. His arms were *muscular*. And if she had to guess, his abs probably were as well. Good grief, how had the Santa suit hidden all that? She would have second guessed her assumption it was him at all if it weren't for the now familiar smile and baby blue eyes.

She tried to speak and coughed instead, instantly choking on her own spit. Lovely. The customer standing directly in front of the register screwed his face up in disgust. Anne was at her side in a second and ushered her away to her break, the same little smile as before still pasted to her face.

Holly untied her apron and tossed it in the back before coming around to the customer side where the non-Santa Santa still waited. This was ridiculous. She needed to know this guy's name.

He had a smile waiting for her. "Ready?"

"Where are we going? I only get thirty minutes."

They began walking further into the food court. "Oh, I thought we'd go big and fancy for the first date." He wiggled his eyebrows. "So you get to pick any place you want right here in the food court."

She chose to ignore his use of the word date. "My choice of *any* place? Wow, you are going all out."

He held out his arms and a grin stretched across his face to match. "I am nothing if not impressive."

Holly chose P.F. Changs and ten minutes later, they had their food and found an empty table. No sooner had they sat down then Holly started with her first, most pressing question.

"Before this goes any further, you have to answer something."

"Goose is hanging out with one of my elves. Don't worry, he's being properly spoiled."

She stabbed a piece of broccoli and pointed it at him. "Not the question, but still good to know."

"I figured it would come up eventually." He flashed another grin. Gosh, he was a lot more disarming out of costume.

"Your name. Tell me your real name."

"You don't know my name?" His hand went to his chest. "Here I am treating you to this very classy lunch break date in the mall food court and you don't even know my name?"

"Ha-ha."

He dropped his hand, but not the teasing smirk. "My name is Chris."

"Chris? As in Kris Kringle?"

He chuckled at that. "I've never made that connection before, to tell you the truth. Just Chris as in... Chris."

Holly set her fork down and extended her hand over the table. "Well it's nice to finally meet you, *Chris*."

He shook her hand, amusement flicking in his eyes. "You know, you've come a long way from the first time we met. I guess the Christmas spirit finally wore you down, huh?"

"I wouldn't go that far." She took a bite of beef and gestured around them. "What about this 'Christmas spirit' is so appealing? Day in and out, it's frazzled people spending money they don't have and stressing about stuff that doesn't matter. Who cares if little Susie gets the latest doll that talks and cries and who knows what else?"

"Aw, come on. There's a lot more to the season than that. Sure, some people let it stress them out, but it's a great time of year to think of others and do something nice for them."

"They should do that year round." She waved her hand in the air. "This is all too commercialized."

He took a bite of General Tso's. "There's got to be something you like about this time of year."

Sure there was. But she wouldn't experience any of it this year, just like she hadn't for the last three since moving to Florida.

"Anyway," she said. Past time for a subject change. "Any cookies left over?"

Chris answered with a short laugh. “Yeah, right. Those were gone that night. I did share with my family, but not enough. I ate way too many. You could sell those, you know.”

Holly swallowed. “Um, I tried that actually. Didn’t work out.”

Chris’s mouth dropped open. “Seriously? How did you not become the official city cookie maker with skill like that?”

She shrugged. “Poor business sense. Prime location that was way more than I could afford. Huge cookie chain moving in down the street six months later. I don’t know... pick one.”

He reached across the table and squeezed her hand. It only lasted for a couple of seconds, but it was enough to send goosebumps over her arms and down her back. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s fine. It was like two years ago, so I’m over it.”

Liar.

“Do you think you’ll try again someday?”

“I doubt it. The first time I’ve baked in over a year was when I made you those cookies.”

He wiped his mouth with a napkin and threw it on his empty plate. “If it’s any comfort, you still have the magic touch.”

The side of her mouth flicked up. “It is. Thanks.”



She would not cry at work. She would *not*.

Despite Holly's internal reproof and vain attempt to just focus on the customer in front of her for crying out loud, unwanted tears poked at the corners of her eyes.

Should have let the call from her mom go to voicemail. Because then she could have avoided her siblings, nephews, and niece in the background, laughing and talking loudly as they decorated sugar cookies. Mom had made a big batch of her delicious hot chocolate and homemade whipped cream—Holly's favorite. No doubt the house was adorned as in years past, a glistening tree in the living room and a fire roaring in the fireplace. There were probably even fat, fluffy flakes of snow falling softly outside, the cherry on top of a perfect moment that Holly was yet again missing.

Definitely should have let it go to voicemail. But how could she not answer a call from her mom two days before Christmas? Especially after she'd taken extra care to find out Holly's break schedule. Mom had no idea that a five minute phone call would seriously derail the last few hours of Holly's shift.

She handed the customer in front of her their change and sucked in a steely breath before the next person in line stepped up to the register. She could do this. She could get through the next two hours.

She could get through the next two days.

Her resolve left her in a deflated sigh the moment she locked eyes with the next customer. Chris, in his Santa suit, and Goose standing next to him. His cheeks drooped when he saw the pooling tears in her eyes.

He stepped close to the counter and leaned in. "Holly, are you okay?"

She blinked and shook her head before trying her best to feign a smile, but she knew it fell short of convincing. "I'm fine. What pretzel would you like today?"

Chris wasn't having it. "Have you already had your break?" When she nodded, his brow furrowed. He called for Anne. "Can I steal Holly away for a few minutes? Do you have someone who can cover for her?"

Anne pushed a lock of hair from her forehead. "Brian will be back from his break in five minutes. You can have her then."

"Perfect. Thanks, Anne."

Three more people joined the ever-growing line behind Chris. She couldn't leave them swamped like this. Holly spun to face her younger coworker. "I already had my break."

Anne waved a hand in response and slid a tray into the oven. "It's fine. Don't clock out."

She turned back to Chris, whose brow had softened. He spoke before she had a chance to argue with him. "I'll go change and be right back, 'kay?"

Ten minutes later, Chris wore a light sweater and jeans instead of red polyester, Goose had been freed from his antlers, and the three of them walked outside, starting at the back of the mall where only employees parked.

Holly hugged herself. "I really am fine, you know. You're gonna get my coworkers mad at me."

He shrugged. "Doubtful. And Goose needed a walk anyway. He's eaten so many treats over the last two weeks that he could use all the exercise he can get." He flashed a half smile that Holly didn't return. He nudged her arm.

"Wanna talk about it?"

"About what?"

"Whatever had you about to cry."

Dang it. She'd tried convincing herself that he hadn't seen the threatening tears and had nearly succeeded. Of course she would cry in front of the hottest guy to ever pay her attention. "It's nothing."

He glanced down at her, the setting sun catching his eyes and making him squint. "I'm sure it's something if it made you so upset. But I understand if you don't want to talk about it."

"Thanks."

They walked for another minute in silence, ambling slowly along the curb and stopping every time Goose wanted to sniff something. When they started moving again, Chris asked, "What do you want for Christmas?"

The question caught her so off guard she pulled her head back and frowned. "What?"

"It's not that strange of a question to ask, is it? I mean, it is only a couple of days before Christmas. And I *am* Santa." He added the last part with a bit of a grin and a wink.

Holly laughed softly, her shoulders relaxing as she did. The fresh air was exactly what she needed—she felt a little better already. Or maybe it was thanks to her charming company.

"Well? What do you want for Christmas?"

Goose found another fascinating spot in the grass on the other side of the curb, so Holly took the opportunity to face Chris. "I don't think even Santa can give me what I want."

"Hm. Try me."

She bit her bottom lip, unsure if she should say it. He could make fun of her. But then, had she known him to be anything but kind and gracious in the weeks since she'd given him that first terrible pretzel? She inhaled a deep breath. "Snow."

He tilted his head to the side. "A white Christmas?"

She nodded as Goose lost interest in the spot in the grass and picked back up to a steady trot. Chris and Holly walked to keep up with him.

“I’ve missed snow every year since moving here. Don’t get me wrong—going to the beach in January is fantastic. But I guess I didn’t realize how much I’d miss all four seasons.”

“Where are you from?”

One simple question and the tears were close again. She dropped her head and focused on her feet so maybe he wouldn’t see. “Rhode Island. My whole family is up there.” Well, if he didn’t see the tears, he’d certainly be able to hear them choking her voice.

“It’s got to be difficult to be away from them. Especially this time of year.”

Her only answer was a nod.

“No plans to visit over the holiday?”

A humorless laugh flew from her mouth. “Right. Because I’ve got a spare five hundred dollars laying around for a plane ticket. No. I can’t visit.”

“I’m sorry. Do you have any other plans for Christmas?”

She stopped, even though Goose hadn’t. When Chris realized she was a few feet behind, he called for Goose and walked back to her. Inexplicably, anger bubbled in her stomach.

“My plans for Christmas consist of sleeping until noon, eating ramen for lunch, and pretending that it’s just a normal day so I don’t spend the few hours I’m awake thinking about everything I’m missing back home. Sounds picture perfect, doesn’t it?”

He tugged on the leash again to keep Goose close. “I get it. I’ve had my fair share of lonely holidays, too.”

He didn’t deserve to bear the brunt of her frustration. But when his reaction to her outburst was compassion, it only made her angrier. She needed to yell and throw a fit. Not be understood.

“Oh, I’m *sure* you’ve had so many Christmases like mine. Spent in a town that still feels foreign, in a terrible retail job, and with no friends or family. Believe it or not Chris, there’s a bunch of people who don’t go around thinking about what they want for Christmas. Or who love the songs and the decorations and the pressure. We just want the stupid day to be over already.”

She spun on her heel and stormed back to the employee entrance to the food court, ignoring Chris’s calls after her.

10



Holly agreed to work a double shift for Christmas Eve. Partly because everyone else actually had plans and she did not, and partly because she would get time and a half for holiday pay. Being so busy that she didn't have time to think about the festivities she was missing in Rhode Island was a bonus.

She didn't see Chris in the first four hours of her shift. Probably a good thing after she snapped like she had. Poor guy had been nothing but nice to her and how did she repay him? How she hadn't scared him off yet with her Scrooge-like tendencies, she had no idea.

Except maybe she had. In between customers she caught a glimpse of him—in all his Santa Claus regalia—at the Orange Julius counter. Her outburst must have been the final straw. The last reason he needed to give up and stop trying to soften her cold, dead heart.

At 4pm, with five hours left to go, Holly slunk to the breakroom for her thirty minute lunch. She opened her locker and plunged her hand in to reach for her brown paper bag, stopping just in time to keep from knocking over a mug.

"Really, Chris?" She sighed and pulled out the mug—with a Santa on the side of it, of all things—and peeked inside. It held a few packets of hot chocolate, a candy cane, and a few wrapped gourmet marshmallows. A note stuck up from between the hot chocolate packets.

"While this won't be as delicious as your mother's hot chocolate, I hope it will make you feel a little more at home."

She gaped at the note, reread it a few times, and gaped again. She hadn't told Chris about her mom's hot chocolate. Had she?

No, definitely not.

So how did he know about it? He'd clearly been the one who gave her the earbuds, even if he did still deny it. But... who knew about the hot chocolate?

11



The pretzel stand closed at 9pm, but by the time they'd served the last customer, rang out the register, and cleaned everything up, Holly and her coworkers didn't leave until closer to 10. They weren't alone. Most of the mall employees were just now leaving as well, having lived through the chaos that is a mall on Christmas Eve.

Holly followed Brian outside through the employee entrance in the back. She rummaged through her purse for her keys, hidden probably at the bottom under receipts, lip gloss, and other various bits of trash. Finding the keys, she clutched them in her hand, only to look up and find Chris instantly next to her. She jumped so much that the keys flew out of her hand and landed at least five feet away into the parking lot.

Chris grabbed the keys and handed them to her with a small laugh. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

Hand against her beating chest, Holly exhaled a long breath. "I didn't expect to see you here this late. I thought your last shift ended an hour ago." Truthfully, she hadn't been sure she would see him at all once the Christmas season passed. Especially after the way she'd acted the last time she saw him.

"I was waiting for you."

She frowned. She couldn't help it. The man was unrelentingly *nice*. "Why?"

He shrugged. "I wanted to walk you to your car."

It only took a minute to cross the parking lot to her small, run down sedan, but for the entire sixty seconds her mind raced with everything she should say.

Apologize. Explain. Excuse him from ever spending time with her again. Beg forgiveness.

They reached her car and she still hadn't spoken a word. Instead of saying any of the things running through her head, she blurted, "Where's Goose?"

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jeans. "Oh, my sister came by to pick him up a couple of hours ago. By eight o'clock he's usually snoring at my feet and is more of a tripping hazard for the little kids than anything else."

"I'll miss seeing him."

The corner of his mouth curved upward. "I'm sure we can work it out for you to see him again. Who knows? Maybe our second date can be at a park and Goose can have the time of his life."

There was that word again. Why would he want another date with her? “Second date?”

Chris’s smile faltered and he shifted from one foot to the other. “Yeah. I mean, if you’d want to. I hated to wait so long to ask you out again, but our schedules have been crazy with the holiday that I thought I should wait.”

With a huff, she let her arms fall to her side. “Why would you want to go out with me?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She gave an exaggerated shrug. “Because I was harsh and unfair the last time I saw you. Because I’ve been meaner than nice to you. And let’s face it... you could get any girl you want. Why are you wasting your time with some sarcastic grump?”

“Are you finished?” When she nodded, he put a hand on the sides of her arms and ducked his head so he could look her in the eye. “I don’t think I’m wasting my time at all. I happen to like you, Holly.”

She opened her mouth to list more reasons why he shouldn’t, but he cut her off. “I think you’re funny and witty. You’re more thoughtful than you give yourself credit for. And what you call grumpy I call a person who is doing their best to get through the holiday while missing the people she loves the most. Why wouldn’t I want to get to know that person better?”

His face was so earnest. And she’d needed to hear those words more than she realized. “You went to Orange Julius today. I thought you were upset after I snapped at you.”

“I only went there because you guys looked swamped and I only had a few minutes for my break. Trust me, I would have rather seen you and eaten a days-old pretzel.”

He winked, and she couldn’t help herself—she laughed.

A smile bloomed over his handsome face. “Would you like to join me and my family for dinner tomorrow?”

Holly’s laugh evaporated. Did he just ask her to spend Christmas with him and his family? She swallowed a ball in her throat. “Chris... I don’t know. That seems like a lot.”

“No pressure, I promise. But I know my mom would love to have you join us. The house will be full and loud, no doubt, but there’s always a ton of food.” He slid his arms down to her hands and gave them a light squeeze. “Come on. I can’t stand to think of you being alone.”

She wanted to say yes. Because the thought of spending the entire day by herself, with only a ten minute Facetime call with her family to keep her company, sounded more depressing than she wanted to admit. But she barely knew Chris and knew none of his family. Wasn’t spending a major holiday with them rather... intimate?

As if he could hear her thoughts, Chris reached up to tuck a piece of hair behind her ear, a far more tender gesture than a quick touch of the hand or squeeze of the arm. “Please, Holly? I’d really love it if you said yes.”

Between the goosebumps along her arms and the sudden dizziness in her head, Holly really couldn't conjure up anything more eloquent than a breathless, "Okay."

12



Dinner at Chris's parents' home was at 5pm, so Holly still slept until noon on Christmas day. She took a long shower, called her mom and talked to everyone for half an hour, and spent a couple of hours getting ready and stressing over what to wear. Chris had given her woefully few details. Did they usually dress up for Christmas dinner? Would everyone be in pajamas? After throwing almost every piece of clothing she owned on her bed, she finally settled on black pants and a red wrap sweater that cinched at her waist. She risked the chance of looking overdressed if everyone was, in fact, in their pajamas, but that would be better than the other way around.

She had an hour to kill before she had to leave, so she whipped up another batch of browned butter toffee chocolate chip cookies to take with her. Chris hadn't said if she should bring anything, but she couldn't show up to a stranger's home on Christmas day and not offer something as a thank you. Besides, they seemed to have won Chris over, so maybe the cookies would do their magic on his family, too.

The nerves that had been building all afternoon crescendoed when the GPS instructed her to pull into a development laden with large, brick homes. These were the kind of homes that screamed wealth without having to say a word. Of course Chris came from money. *Because why wouldn't he?*

Holly pulled into the driveway of a stunning two story brick home, inhaling and exhaling deep breaths to calm herself. A couple of hours, that was it. Chris had invited her and insisted everyone else would be happy to have her there. And if they didn't? Well, perhaps she could cut a couple of hours down to one instead.

She grabbed the plastic container full of cookies and exited her car. At least she had them as a secret weapon.

The house came into full view as she rounded her car. It was definitely large. White lights lining the edges of the roof, swaths of garland hung from the windows, and a wreath decorated the front door. A twinkling Christmas tree peeked beyond the curtains of the large front windows. Holly's shoulders relaxed. It was bigger than she was used to, but the house surprisingly reminded her of her home in Rhode Island. Cozy. Inviting. Even if it was sixty degrees with not a snowflake in sight.

While she remained frozen on the walkway, the front door opened and Chris stepped outside. He wore a brilliant smile and a blue sweater that matched his eyes.

"I was beginning to think you weren't going to come."

Holly held out the container. “I made these. I hated to come empty handed, but I also had no idea what to bring, so I brought cookies. I hope that’s okay.”

His eyes went round as he peeked under the lid. “Are these the butter toffee ones?”

A giggle escaped her lips at his apparent excitement. “They are. I figured they were a hit with you, so maybe they’ll work in my favor tonight, too.”

“Well, you definitely don’t need the help, but I’m also *really* excited you brought more of these.” He put a hand on the small of her back. “Come on in. We’re setting the table and will be sitting down to eat in a few minutes. I’ll introduce you to everyone.”

They were nearly at the front door when Holly spotted a decorative plaque mounted into the brick. *The Mitchells, est. 1987.*

She stopped short. Where had she heard that name before?

“The Mitchells. They’re the family that owns the mall.”

Her mouth gaped open. “Chris? Tell me your last name isn’t Mitchell.”

“Um... my last name isn’t Mitchell?”

She glanced up to find him wincing. *“Seriously? Your family owns the mall? Why didn’t you tell me?”*

“Come on, can you blame me? I had a hard enough time getting you to talk to me at all. I doubt you would have given me the time of day if you knew who my family was.”

She hated to admit it, but he was right. But she might have given him better pretzels.

“Besides,” he continued, “my aunt and uncle are the owners. And I promise they’re wonderful people and will love meeting you.”

With a hard swallow, she nodded and faced the door. Chris ushered her inside before she had a chance to second guess every decision she’d made that month and began to introduce her to his family members. Good thing the house was as big as it was, because Holly quickly lost count of the aunts and uncles, cousins, and nieces and nephews. Chris showed her off to each one, gushing about the cookies he still held. (*“These are seriously the BEST cookies I’ve ever eaten in my life. Wait until you try one.”*) She met his grandparents and then his sisters, who both gave her a big hug and equally large grins to Chris, which Holly pretended like she didn’t see. His parents were busy running back and forth from the kitchen to the dining room, but both gave her a warm welcome and thanked her for the cookies. Holly was even glad to find Goose among the kids—the older ones leaning against him and the younger ones laying over his back—and gave him plenty of ear scratches.

Minutes before everyone was called to the table, Chris leaned toward her ear, his whispering breath tickling her neck. “Now was that so bad?”

“I’ll be fine as long as there isn’t a quiz later.”

Dinner was delicious and as loud and chaotic as Chris had promised it would be. Half of the family was in the dining room and the other half in the living room because there were simply too many to fit at one table. Holly took

turns listening to the multitude of conversations, answering questions, and laughing along to jokes. Chris's sister, Camille, sat on the other side of Holly.

"I've heard a lot about you, you know," she said between bites of mashed potatoes.

Holly grabbed her water goblet and took a sip, praying it hid her growing blush. "Is that right?"

"Oh yeah." Camille nodded, her eyes widening in a way that looked remarkably like her brother. "For the entire month of December we've heard all about Holly from the pretzel stand. Chris is pretty smitten with you."

No hiding the blush now.

"Oh, *you're* the girl from the pretzel stand?" Chris's Aunt Meri, the one he'd whispered about being a co-owner of the mall right after Holly met her, brightened from across the table. "Yes, you have certainly put a pep in our Chris's step. I think you're the reason he stuck out the entire season as Santa, you know."

"Really?" Another sip of water. "Should I say you're welcome or I'm sorry?"

Aunt Meri laughed, the full and rich sound rising above all the other voices. Enough to grab Chris's attention from the conversation he'd been engrossed in with a cousin. His aunt pointed at him and then Holly. "I like this one."

Chris cast a questioning look at her, but all Holly offered was a small shrug and scrunch of her nose.

By the time dinner was finished, Holly's stomach and heart was bursting. Maybe she'd made a mistake in hiding from the holidays over the last few years. She thought it would be easier to ignore the days that she once spent with her family, but it had only made her dread the season altogether. But tonight, surrounded by a large and loud family that opened their arms to her, a piece of her heart that had been neglected and bruised found a small portion of healing.

After the tables were cleared and the dishes cleaned up—which Holly insisted she help with and was glad when Chris's mom and sisters accepted—she found a seat on the plush leather couch in the living room. A few of the nieces and nephews played on the floor in front of her with what she assumed was new Christmas toys. She thought of her own nephews and niece and, while she still missed them until her heart ached, the pain wasn't as all-encompassing like it usually was.

Chris appeared in front of her, holding out a hand and wearing a smile. "Wanna go for a walk?"

They slipped outside without anyone noticing and set off at an easy pace down the street. The sky was dark, but their path was well lit by stars and the Christmas lights hanging on each of the neighboring houses.

Holly was the first to speak. "Thank you for inviting me, Chris. Your family is amazing and has been so welcoming. I don't think I realized how much I needed today."

His hand found hers, lacing their fingers together with ease. The simple and effortless gesture sent a fresh batch of goosebumps along her arms.

“I’m really glad you came.”

“You know, your aunt said something kind of interesting at dinner. She said she thinks I’m the reason you finished out the season as Santa. Do you not usually stick around for the whole month?”

He scratched the back of his neck with his free hand, his face scrunched as if he didn’t want to admit the truth.

“Chris!” Her admonishment came out as more of a laugh than anything.

“In my defense, I usually only help for a couple of weeks at the beginning of the month so my nieces and nephews can come see me. They love it for some reason, even though they know it’s me.” When she began to shake her head in mock disappointment, he added, “You try wearing that padded suit for hours at a time! And the beard is a lot itchier than it looks, you know.”

She stopped walking and faced him, still gripping his hand. “But you stuck it out this year.”

His eyes reflected the shine of the Christmas lights around them. “I did.”

“Why? I wasn’t exactly nice to you.”

He shrugged and they began walking again. “I already told you. I like you. You’re fiery.”

“Stubborn is more like it.” They walked for another minute before she added in a quiet voice, “My dad wanted to buy me a plane ticket to fly home.”

Chris looked at her, but didn’t say anything, instead waiting for her to continue.

“I couldn’t accept it. I think it hurt his feelings. But I just... I couldn’t. My parents actually took a chunk of money out of their retirement fund to help me start my cookie business. And then I lost my business and lost their money. I can’t take any more, you know? I have to do this on my own from here on out.”

As long as she lived, she would regret losing their money. Somehow, even if it meant taking on multiple seasonal jobs every year, she would pay her parents back.

“Believe it or not, I understand. I don’t have the exact same experience, but I get not wanting to live off of your parents. A lot of people assume I have it easy because my parents have money.”

Oops. She’d made the same assumption since learning where he lived and who his family was.

“In reality, I have a small studio apartment on the other end of town and I’ve worked for everything I have. I’m still getting there. I wanted to do it on my own, too.”

Knowing that Chris understood the drive to succeed on his own was possibly even more attractive than his disarming grin. Holly caught his eye and sucked in a sharp breath. If she wasn’t careful, she was going to find herself falling for him. Hard.

They looped around the development and back to his parents’ house, but instead of walking to the front door, he tugged on her hand and led her to what

she supposed was his car. He reached into the passenger side and pulled out a wrapped box.

“I have something for you.”

Her face fell. “But I don’t have a gift for you.”

He tilted his head, a smirk playing on his lips. “What have I told you about gifts, Holly? They don’t require anything in return.” He took a step closer. “And here I thought you were starting to accept that.”

Her brow furrowed. He looked so pleased with himself, like he’d managed to keep a secret from her. At once it dawned on her. “Did *you* get me the hot chocolate?”

A grin stretched over his face. “I thought the Santa mug might have been a bit heavy-handed.”

“But how did you know? I didn’t tell you about my mom’s hot chocolate.”

“Anne told me. I asked her if she knew something that would cheer you up.”

Holly put a hand on either hip. “Will you finally admit that the earbuds were from you?”

Chris winked and held out the wrapped gift. “Never.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

She accepted the gift and peeled away the wrapping paper. She opened the plain white box and pulled out... a snowglobe. In the middle was a snow covered house with a snowman in the yard and Santa, his sleigh, and reindeer in a line on the roof.

“I know it’s not the real thing, but this was the closest I could get to making it snow.”

Holly’s breath hitched as she swallowed a wave of emotion. She shook the snowglobe, watching the little white pieces fall over the perfect Christmas scene. Lifting her face, she met Chris’s tender expression with one of wonder.

How had she managed to stumble upon someone who so thoroughly surprised her? Who refused to be scared away and instead looked for ways to make her smile? To make her day brighter?

A hint of worry passed over his face. “Do you like it?”

She nodded. “It’s beautiful. Probably the most thoughtful gift I’ve ever received.” She shook the globe again and waited until the snow settled. “Thank you.”

He brushed her cheek with his fingertips. “I wish I could give you the real thing.”

Her eyes locked onto his, the air between them growing suddenly thick. “It’s perfect.” She stepped closer, eliminating the bit of space between them. “I changed my mind about what I want for Christmas, though.”

“Oh?” His voice came out huskier than usual. “Tell me what it is and I’ll see what I can do. It is my job, you know.”

Holly hummed and smiled before whispering, “This.” She stood on her tiptoes as he bent his neck to meet her halfway, his hand stretching open to

cup the side of her face. His lips touched hers in a gentle kiss. Enough to make her lightheaded, yet brief enough to leave her wanting more. So much more.

“So,” he said with a half smile when they parted, “What are you doing for New Year’s Eve? I heard something about a party in a mall food court.”

She answered with a laugh and kissed him again.

THE END