



A Curvy Carol (A Curvy Girl Christmas #2)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: Everyone knows that if you want to have an incredible Christmas season, you go to Garland, Maine, where the entire town joins in on celebrating Christmas.

Well, everyone except me.

Every year since my parents divorce, theyve fought to make Christmas at their place the best. Shuffling back and forth between the two and running ragged with all the activities has ruined the holidays every year.

So this year, I finally tell them both Im done celebrating Christmas. And they agree on one condition: I have to show the new guy in town the best Garland has to offer this year.

I thought it would be a tedious set of tasks to show him around, but for the first time Im having fun during the holidays. Even better? I think he likes me too.

That is until I learn our arrangement wasnt just a way for me to get out of the Christmas Olympics with my parents. There was something in it for him too.

And at the end of it all, I have to wonder Was any of it real for him, or would I have been better off celebrating with my parents after all?

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CAROLYNN

It's the least wonderful time of the year.

Unfortunately, my parents didn't get that memo. My mom's place was entirely decked out in holiday decor from bottle-brush Christmas trees on every spare surface to the spray snow stuck on the windows and the smell of tree-shaped sugar cookies baking so we could decorate them later.

There was no escaping Christmas. Not when you had my parents. And not when you lived in Garland, Maine, a place renowned for its holiday celebrations.

In fact, my only "safe" territories were my bedrooms at my mom and dad's places, where I refused to have any Christmas decor. No red, green, gold or blue touched this space. But I could still smell the sugar cookies baking as I worked on my latest embroidery project—a black cat sitting atop a stack of books.

A few knocks sounded on my bedroom door. "Carolynn, don't forget we have plans tonight, okay?" Mom said.

"Okay, Mom," I said halfheartedly with a sigh. I gathered my cross-stitch project into my favorite tote bag.

The door opened, and Mom peeked her head in, Rudolph antlers nestled amongst her curls. "You're going to look so cute in that sweater I got you. Did you see it in your

closet?”

I nodded. “I saw it.” Mom liked to order me Christmas clothes each year and laid them out in my closet to make sure I wore them. She was obsessed with creating a picture-perfect family and making me feel normal despite the divorce.

The truth was, I hated all the holiday activities she and Dad planned for me every year. Making each year a Christmas to remember was such a big deal to them, especially since the big D, meaning I couldn’t really relax or have fun. All I wanted was to spend time with my friends and work on my crafting projects while school was out.

I picked up my tote bag and walked to the bedroom door where she waited. “I’ll see you later.”

“Tell the girls I said merry Christmas!”

“I will,” I mumbled. Before she could say much else, I went out the front door and made my way to Cider Center.

Belle and the rest of my friends were probably already there. The lighting of the tree was one of their favorite things about Garland. I liked going with my friends, even if I wasn’t crazy about the holidays anymore.

Several minutes later, I found Belle, Bethany, Holly, and Sera in the crowd.

They hugged me hello, and we found a good spot near the front to watch the star being put on the tree and lit up.

All around us, kids screamed to be put on their dad’s shoulders, and moms held fussy toddlers and babies. A small tug of jealousy hit my chest at seeing the intact families.

To shake the feeling, I stared up at the Christmas tree. It stood well over thirty feet tall, covered in so many lights and ornaments that it took your breath away. Even for someone like me, who wished I could fast-forward through December every year.

I had to admit, something about the tree was special. Legend said that this tree had been crafted at the North Pole itself. Some people liked to make a wish when the star was set atop the tree, believing that there was actual magic in Garland that made wishes come true. But I stopped making wishes a few years back. Not even the Garland tree could stop my parents' separation.

The firetruck beeped as the ladder raised next to the tree. The mayor of Garland always did the honors of placing the star atop the tree, so once the ladder stalled, he made his way up, up, up toward the very tip of the tree. Little kids cheered and laughed and pointed.

"Here we go," Belle said excitedly under her breath.

I lifted my lips at her excitement. At least she still enjoyed the season.

When the mayor reached the top of the tree, he pulled out a megaphone, the large star in his other hand. "It's the most wonderful time of the year," he said, echoing the familiar song. "Today, it's my honor as your mayor to place the star on the tree and light up Garland, knowing that the holiday spirit of the people of Garland shines brighter than any light on this tree."

Carefully, he placed the star at the very top. Whispers sounded around me, hundreds of people making their wishes. Each of my friends had their eyes closed, lips silently moving.

Out of nowhere, I made a quick wish, keeping my eyes on the star. I just wish to enjoy Christmas this year, I thought to myself.

A second later, the star lit up. Its bright light made the crowd gasp and clap. And even though I forced a smile on my face so my friends wouldn't worry, I could hardly remember the last time I looked forward to Christmas, much less truly enjoyed it.

The last few years, it had transformed from a fun time of year in Garland to activity after activity and photo after photo split between my two parents. It was like they'd forgotten what Christmas was really about and turned it into a competition or a big, long list of things to cross off.

After the mayor came down and thanked everyone for coming, my friends and I gathered around to talk. "Wish on anything special this year?" I asked the group, rubbing my hands together for warmth.

"Just that we remain friends like this forever. No matter what," Sera said. She always said something sweet.

"That's a great wish," Belle replied.

Holly glanced toward Santa's Workshop down the street. "So, who do you think will be picked to be Santa this year?"

This was another one of the things that made Garland special. Every year, someone was selected to be Santa and would take pictures with kids at the mall. It was a big honor to be picked, although the process of getting selected was a huge mystery. No one even really knew for sure how to apply or how you got nominated. And no one ever knew Santa's true identity either.

"Maybe they'll pick Mr. Thornton," I joked about our grumpy, middle-aged math teacher. He was definitely more Grinch than Santa material.

Everyone else shuddered.

We walked away from the tree and kept making guesses, each one crazier and crazier.

As we reached Cocoa Corner, the local coffee shop, we all got ready to part ways.

Everyone had something different going on for Christmas this next week. We would hardly be able to see each other.

Not that I would've had time with everything my parents had planned anyway. So the five of us agreed to meet up on New Year's Eve at Haley's big blowout party. I always loved that party—not just because it was fun, but it meant I had a whole year before having to do the Christmas thing again.

I glanced down at my crafting bag. Hopefully, I'd have time to finish my friends' cross-stitch gifts by then.

We all said our goodbyes and I gave my friends a final wave and made my way to the Garland bookstore. They had cozy chairs where I could sit and cross-stitch for a while. I would've preferred my room at home, but Mom was there and what I really needed was some peace.

I loved my parents, but lately it was like they weren't really listening to me at all. I had no idea how to get through to them that the Christmas Olympics wasn't my idea of a good time. They didn't have to make up for the divorce by making Christmas as cheery as possible—we could just settle into a new normal. One that involved a lot less tinsel.

Sitting in the bookstore turned out to be just what I needed. I made good progress on my project, getting lost in each stitch while listening to music playing softly over the speakers.

After half an hour or so, when I got up to stretch, I saw a book on the shelf. It was

like a sign. It was some sort of self-help book on family conflict and setting boundaries. I flipped through the pages, then sat back down, reading a few chapters, my project forgotten. For the first time, I didn't feel so powerless over the situation. An idea was starting to tease at the edges of my mind—one that could change everything.

I bought the book, because it didn't feel right not to after reading so much of it, then grabbed my stuff and went home.

I couldn't take another Christmas like this, smiling on the outside and secretly miserable on the inside. I wouldn't even have my friends around to make it better with how busy we all were.

My heart started beating quicker as I got home and set my stuff down. Mom walked into the living room from the kitchen, untying the back of her Christmas-themed apron. "Oh, good. You're home. Now we can head over to your dad's to get started on the popcorn garlands."

"Mom," I jumped in, not believing I was really going to do this. I felt almost lightheaded as I said, "I'm not going."

Her mouth fell open, and I could tell she was getting ready to read me the riot act or fuss over me, sure I had to be sick or delirious or both.

But I continued, trying to sound firm. "I'm not celebrating Christmas with either of you this year."

Now she looked aghast. "Carolynn."

"I want a family meeting," I said. "We need to talk."

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:07 am

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WHIT

I wasn't quite sure what to expect from a town like Garland, but it sure wasn't the over-the-top scene I'd stepped into. Right now, I was surrounded by hundreds of people for the famous Christmas tree lighting, all dressed in Christmas clothes and chatting happily with each other while Christmas music played over big speakers.

It was the kind of moment that made you think you'd been transported to a cozy movie. There was no way it was real.

Except it was.

When my parents had told me three months ago that they'd bought the local lodge and we were moving, I couldn't believe it. It was like they were in the middle of a midlife crisis or something.

They both worked high-stress corporate careers. Then, all of a sudden, we were leaving it all behind, packing up our lives, and moving to this small Christmas-obsessed town.

And while they were busy at the lodge, I was here to watch Garland's most famous Christmas tradition: the lighting of the tree. Someone had told me if you made a wish on the Christmas star, it would come true.

I watched the star on the giant tree at Cider Center light up the sky. The crowd around

me gasped. My mouth fell open. I'd never see anything like it.

Nearby, a couple of guys my age stood together, smiling and talking about something. They probably went to the high school here.

I'd only moved here in the middle of last semester, so I didn't know a ton of people yet. Since I had finished up my classes from my old school online, I wouldn't be enrolled here until the new year.

Supposedly, we'd moved here so we could spend more time together as a family and get out of the bustling city. Live somewhere with fresh air and nice people. But so far, all my parents did was run the lodge.

I didn't have any siblings, but this was sort of how I imagined having a baby brother or sister would be. The lodge required Mom and Dad's attention pretty much all the time, and sometimes, I got stuck babysitting.

It wasn't too bad, except for the fact that I really could've used some friends. I missed my old friends like crazy.

So far, I really liked Garland. It was the opposite of the big, hectic city we'd lived in all my life. Here, people actually said good morning to you. They made small talk instead of ignoring you.

The problem was, I wouldn't have the chance to make any friends until the new semester started after the holidays.

It was a huge bummer because Christmas was my favorite time of year. At least back home, I'd had a couple of good friends to hang out and do things with. Now all I could see were families and friend groups enjoying the season. And me? I was alone.

After the lighting of the tree, I walked around town for a while. There were lots of things to do, but it felt lame doing them on my own. Like the sleigh ride. Maybe next year, I thought to myself. Or maybe if I could find a way for my friends to visit.

I wondered where the high schoolers hung out in this town.

After checking out the mall, I headed back to the lodge. It was almost dinnertime. I hung around for a while, bored and wondering when Mom and Dad would have a chance to eat with me.

The lobby was busy, so I made my way to the grounds in the back. The lodge was over fifty years old, and it sat on a large property. Almost a hundred acres, mostly forest, and this time of year, it was completely covered in snow.

I took a seat on one of the benches outside, admiring the view. Mountains sat majestically in the background covered in snow and evergreen trees. A couple walked along the trail, hand in hand, and I saw a family building a snowman together under an orange lamplight along the winding path. They were probably on vacation, enjoying all a Garland Christmas had to offer. A small spot of jealousy burned in my chest, and I shifted on the bench, trying to quash it.

Then I spotted Dad. It looked like he was talking to the groundskeeper. The guy had worked here for years, saying he started after he graduated high school. Now he was about my dad's age and knew the property like the back of his hand.

I gave Dad a wave, and he waved in return before turning back to the groundskeeper.

It seemed like everyone had a place here in Garland. My mom and dad had their jobs to do at the lodge. The families visiting had each other. And all the people around this picture-perfect town had friends and loved ones to spend their time with.

It was by far the most beautiful Christmas season I'd ever experienced.

But even so, I couldn't help but think that I couldn't fully enjoy it.

Garland was supposed to be the most magical place on earth this time of year, but I'd never felt more alone.

CAROLYNN

By the time I got to Scrooge's Diner, Mom and Dad were already there waiting for me. Even though they were at the same booth, they sat as far apart from each other as possible.

I could tell from the second I walked in that they were having one of their quiet but relentless arguments with one another. I knew for a fact they thought I didn't see them, but I did, no matter how quickly they straightened up and pasted on fake smiles.

"Carolynn, honey, there you are," Mom said.

I glanced back and forth between them, wondering which side to sit on. Talk about a metaphor for my life the past few years.

"Everything okay, sweetie?" Dad asked, scooting over and making room for me.
"Something on your mind?"

Mom made room for me in the booth too, and I caught the lightning quick glare she shot at Dad.

With a sigh, I pulled a chair over from a nearby table and sat down so I was between them.

Now Dad shot Mom an accusatory look.

“I called this family meeting here today because I can’t take it anymore,” I said. “And I meant it when I said I’m not celebrating Christmas with either of you this year.”

At that exact moment, Scrooge arrived at our table, notepad in hand. I was pretty sure he’d had the same one for about a decade from the looks of it. He gave us a more awkward look than usual, seeming deeply uncomfortable at the conversation he’d walked into. “What can I get ya to drink?” he asked, avoiding eye contact.

“Orange soda for me,” I said.

Mom and Dad each ordered a water. “With a slice of lemon, please,” Mom added, giving her best smile that said we were a perfectly normal family, even if she and Dad happened to be divorced.

Scrooge left, and I turned back to my parents.

“Honey, your father and I have been talking about it, and we can change some things so the holidays are easier—”

“No,” I replied, with a shake of my head. “I love you both, but every year, Christmas is more and more stressful, and I’m not doing it anymore. I need a break.” My voice got louder with every word I spoke, emotion filling my words.

They sat there, taken aback. I never went against anything they said, much less raised my voice at them, but I couldn’t help it. I needed them to really hear me this time.

Besides, I wasn’t saying it with anger. It was more like a desperate plea. And a line drawn in the sand.

I went on, taking advantage of their stunned silence. “Every year feels like a competition. Who will plan more activities? Who will create more memories, take more photos?”

Mom’s mouth fell open. Dad looked like I’d just announced I was moving away to the moon.

Scrooge came over with our drinks, placed them on the table, and scampered off.

“I just want Christmas to be peaceful this year,” I finished. “We can revisit it next year.”

Mom gathered her senses first. I could see tears brimming in her eyes already, and I steeled myself for her response. “Honey, you’re not thinking straight. Maybe school has been hard lately. You’re not getting out of the house enough. But you know what? Christmas is a time for family, for us to be together.” She took my hand. “Even if we are divorced, you know we try to make it special for you. We want to make sure you get time with both of us.”

Dad cast his gaze down. I didn’t know if that meant he agreed or didn’t want to voice his opinion.

Since he wasn’t speaking, I did my best to keep my composure. “I know, Mom, but that’s the problem. I don’t want you guys trying so hard to make Christmas perfect every year. It just ends up making it impossible to enjoy the holidays at all.”

Mom glanced at Dad like she wanted him to argue with me more, but he said, “We can’t make you do something you don’t want to do.”

Mom turned to him, and I could tell she was wondering why he wasn’t on her side and presenting a united front.

“I just want one year where I do what’s important to me,” I added, hoping they’d understand where I was coming from at least a little.

“And what’s important to you?” Mom asked. “What do you want to do that’s so different than how we try to make Christmas special?”

I sighed. “I just want to stay home sometimes. Not do every single thing, all the time. I want to cross-stitch. Maybe read and watch movies. And not just cheesy Christmas movies either.”

Dad studied me, and I could tell he was really thinking about what I was saying, even if Mom didn’t look convinced at all.

“Okay,” Dad said.

“Okay?” Mom and I said at the same time. My voice was laced with hope while hers definitely had a tone of surprise. And not the good kind of surprise.

“On one condition,” he said. He turned to Mom. “If you agree,” he added. Smart of him, I thought.

“I was talking to my boss the other day. As you know, they’re new in town. They have a son who’s your age who could really use some company this holiday season. He doesn’t know anyone, and he seems like a nice kid. What if, instead of spending every minute with us this season, you show him what a true Garland Christmas is all about?”

He turned to Mom, and I could tell she was really considering the idea too.

“But, Dad,” I whined. “I said I want to do what’s important to me this year for a change. Not show someone around and take them on sleigh rides and stuff.” I didn’t

like babysitting all that much—especially not some boy my age. Guys at school weren't exactly friendly to me, if they acknowledged me at all.

"Maybe your father's right," Mom said. "I think this could be good for you."

"I just want to stay home and work on my cross-stitch projects," I pleaded.

"Well, it's this or our usual Christmas family plans," Dad said. "Besides, I know this kid could really use a friend right now."

I thought about it, really dreading the whole idea. But it had to be better than our crazy family Christmas marathon. And who knew? Maybe this kid, whoever he was, didn't really want to do this either. We could pretend to meet up and go our separate ways.

In that case, it had to be a win-win, right?

"Fine," I replied, taking a sip of my orange soda. "It's a deal. But no crazy family photos this year."

Now they looked at each other.

"Just one?" Mom asked.

I heaved a sigh. "One."

"Deal," Mom said with a small smile.

Scrooge came back, presumably to take our order.

"At least there are some good AI options these days," Mom muttered to herself.

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WHIT

There was a knock at my bedroom door so I set my comic book aside. “Come in.”

Dad popped his head in. “Whit, we have great news, buddy,” he said. Then Mom came in behind him.

Uh oh. Whenever Dad used the word “buddy,” it was his way of trying to soften me up before sharing some bad news. And both of them being here? It must be pretty bad.

I still remembered being ten and him using that word before letting me know that I had to go to band camp, even though I had no musical talents whatsoever. And any time I was going to get a no to hanging out with my friends, he used the word then too.

Exhibit C? When Mom and Dad had told me that we were going to be leaving everything behind to move to Garland because they’d bought the lodge. “Buddy, you know we’ve been needing a change...”

So of course, it made sense that now my stomach turned with familiar dread.

I sat up. “What great news?” I asked cautiously.

He came in and took a seat on my bed. The nice house we’d moved into wasn’t far

from the lodge, but I was sure he had to be getting back soon. The holidays were a busy season in Garland, and it was a lot to manage. “I know it’s been hard on you, moving here and leaving behind all your friends.”

I gave a shrug. It had been, but I wasn’t sure there was anything I could do about it now.

His mouth turned up into a grin. “Well, we’ve been able to find a new friend for you here in Garland. There’s so much to do here in town, especially this time of year, and we hate for you to miss out because we’re busy running the lodge. So your mother and I thought it would be a great idea to have someone your age who can show you around. Not to mention having at least one friendly face when you start at the new school in January.”

“So this person appeared out of thin air?”

“We found you a new friend,” Mom said happily.

My mouth fell open. They had done what?

Dad waited expectantly for me to start jumping up and down or something. “So, what do you think?”

I sighed. “Dad... what do you mean you guys ‘found’ me a new friend? Like a play date? That’s so lame.”

I never said anything like that to them, but they’d also never set me up on a playdate since I was five years old. So what if I’d struggled to find new friends to hang out with here in Garland? That didn’t mean they needed to go out and find me a friend like I was some kind of charity case.

Dad patted my shoulder. “Just give it a try. They’ll be able to show you around town, do all the fun stuff the kids are doing these days. Besides, I hear this kid could use a friend too, and we’ll cover the cost of whatever activities you guys want to do.”

I groaned. I could already picture an awkward sleigh ride with another guy my age who also didn’t want to be there.

“The dad is even offering some extra cash for you to go back and visit your friends over spring break or this summer if you want. We just want you to give this a shot. You never know.”

The thought of seeing my friends again had my heart twisting in my chest. I missed them like crazy. “Fine. Alright. When will I meet this ‘new friend’?”

I was expecting them to say next week or something. Instead, Dad grinned. “They’re waiting for you at Cocoa Corner now.”

“What?” I demanded. “Now? Dad!”

He patted my shoulder one more time, then started walking out. “You don’t want to keep your new friend waiting too long.”

I began pulling on my shoes. “You two owe me for this one.”

But part of me was a little curious about who this friend was. Were they in my grade at school? Maybe they’d be into the same stuff as me.

When I got downstairs, Dad was grabbing his keys. “I’ll drop you off near Cider Center before I head back to the lodge.”

Wow, they really weren’t giving me a chance to back out of this. I pulled on my

jacket, gloves, and hat and followed him out to the truck. “How will I know who it is? What’s his name?”

“Carolynn,” he said.

I did a double take. I almost turned back around then and there. “She’s a girl?”

Dad smirked. “Aren’t you a little old to believe in cooties?”

I fought an embarrassed smile. “Whatever. I just thought it would be a guy.” Now it was even more embarrassing that my parents were setting me up. How lame she must think I was.

We rode a few minutes to the town center, tourists milling up and down the sidewalks, in and out of shops. And then Dad parked in front of Cocoa Corner, a coffee shop with a wall of windows catty-corner to the giant Christmas tree in town.

After a quick goodbye, Dad was heading back to the lodge and I was left on my own, watching his truck head drive away.

Then I turned around and made my way to Cocoa Corner.

I hadn’t been there before, but I’d walked past it a few times. It seemed like your standard café sort of place. Mom and Dad said it was supposed to have the best hot chocolate and pastries in town.

I walked in, a little bell ringing as I let the door shut behind me. There were several people sitting at the booths, but only one girl who looked like she was on her own and waiting for someone.

Her eyes met mine, and right away, I noticed how pretty she was. From the blonde,

curly hair spilling from her ruby-colored stocking hat to her pink cheeks and green eyes... I was pretty sure I froze for a second before realizing I needed to go over to her.

“Carolynn?” I asked, taking off my hat and gloves and stuffing them in my pockets.

She stood up and stuck her hand out. “Yeah. Whittaker?”

“I go by Whit,” I said, taking her hand. I couldn’t help but notice how soft it was. It matched the rest of her features. Her face was round, and her hips and chest curved generously under her long black sweater and leggings.

We sat down, and I wondered if her parents had made her come here too. Probably, although suddenly, I couldn’t help but feel that I had gotten the better end of the deal.

Christmas season seemed to be looking up for me, especially if I was going to get to spend time with her.

A guy in a bright green apron delivered a couple of hot chocolates to our table.

“I thought you might want one,” she explained, then thanked the barista.

“Thanks,” I said, reaching for my mug.

“You’re welcome,” she said with a tentative smile. I made her eyes crinkle slightly, and my chest squeezed a little. Man, I must really be lonely that a simple smile had me reacting like this.

But at least I wasn’t the only awkward one. Her eyes darted away from me like she wasn’t sure what to make of this either. We did a few minutes of small talk before she seemed to relax a little. Enough to say something I thought I would never hear in the

town of Garland, Maine.

“I’m not really a fan of all this Christmas stuff,” she admitted.

“What do you mean you don’t like Christmas?” I asked incredulously. I set down my cup.

She shrugged looking down at her mug, the marshmallows a melted white goo on top of the drink. “It’s just so overdone at this point. It probably doesn’t help that I’ve lived in Garland my whole life,” she explained.

“I thought that was the one big upside of moving here,” I said, glancing around. “How big of a deal Christmas is here. It’s like I’m in a storybook or something. I have to admit it’s always been my favorite holiday, but my parents are so busy this year. They don’t have time to do all the fun stuff in town.”

“Well, then, this should be an interesting arrangement,” she said, “seeing as how I hate doing all the endless Christmas activities.”

I made an exaggerated gasp. “So I’m basically stuck with Scrooge for the holidays?” I quipped.

That made her smile, which made me grin like an idiot. I liked being the one to make her smile.

“Basically,” she said. “Can’t say I’m sorry. If you want to back out, now’s the time.”

Something about the way she said it made me think that she was like me and didn’t have much of a choice about being here. At least way less of a choice than me. So I didn’t fall for her bluff.

“No, it’s okay. I’m in,” I replied.

She seemed to droop a little bit, but she didn’t say anything. So I was right. I was curious about why she had to do this, but I made a mental note to ask another time.

“There’s one condition,” I added, taking another sip of my hot chocolate. It really was the best I’d ever had.

“What is it?” she asked.

“We’ve got to do everything before Christmas Day,” I said. “I really want to experience a Garland Christmas.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

“And who knows? Maybe I can convince you that Christmas isn’t so bad after all.”

Carolynn shook her head, but I could see the corners of her lips turn up into the slightest of smiles. “We’ll see.”

She stood up.

I pointed to her hot cocoa. “You haven’t finished your drink. You’re leaving already?”

“It’s not my favorite,” she said. She asked me for my number, and we quickly exchanged info. She tapped out a message and hit send.

An address appeared on my screen from a new number. Her number. “Meet me there tomorrow at 10 a.m. sharp.” She turned to go but then looked back. “And wear your pajamas.”

CAROLYNN

The next day, Whit showed up at the Garland Express. I'd arrived early, just wanting to get out of the house so I could work on my latest cross-stitch project in peace.

Mom hadn't stopped peppering me with questions since I'd gotten home from meeting Whit yesterday, and it was driving me crazy.

I was pretty sure she had all these hopes and expectations for me hanging out with Whit.

Which was utterly mortifying. Especially no guy had been interested in me to date. Surely it wasn't about to happen now when he was about to start at Garland High and meet all the pretty, skinny girls there.

Really, I just wanted to get this whole thing over with so I could have some time to myself. Although, it was already way better than feeling stifled at activity after activity with my parents. At least Whit was my own age, although he seemed to be like everyone else in Garland: crazy about Christmas.

"Hey," Whit said, coming up to me where I sat on a bench in the waiting area. He wore buffalo plaid pajama pants, black snow boots, and big black winter coat.

"Hey," I said, hastily putting my project into my bag. In the back of my mind I wondered what he thought of my form fitting black fleece pants and matching top.

But he seemed more concerned about my project.

“What’s that?” he asked as I got up from the bench.

“Nothing,” I replied, tucking my coat over my arm. “Come on.”

He followed me to the ticket booth for the Garland Express where a few families and couples waited in line. It was a train that took you on a long ride around the mountains and forest surrounding Garland. I’d been on it so many times that it no longer really felt like anything special at this point.

The train ride wouldn’t be too bad compared to everything else there was to do in Garland. The ride would give me a couple hours to sit and watch the countryside go by. Maybe Whit would go to the viewing deck and I could cross stitch on my own.

“Two tickets, please,” I told the girl at the cash register.

Whit pulled out some cash and paid. I supposed his parents were footing the bill then , I thought to myself.

The girl handed over the tickets and gave us her spiel on the magic of the train and whatnot.

Then we got on the train, the engine already rumbling. Because it was morning, there was hardly anyone else getting on the train. We got a compartment all to ourselves, which was nice.

I took a seat by the window, and Whit sat down opposite me.

He stared out at the tall, majestic mountains that lay in the distance, blanketed in snow. “What a view,” he breathed.

Here was my chance. “There’s actually a viewing deck that’s all glass windows you can go watch from.”

“Will you come?” he asked. Something about the way he asked had my stomach fluttering in far too hopeful of a way. I had to remember what this was—a way to get out of the Christmas Olympics.

“No, I’ll save our spot.”

“Then I’ll stay with you,” he replied.

Why wasn’t I disappointed by that? Giving up on figuring out my own tangled thoughts, I pulled out my cross-stitch project, the table between us keeping it mostly hidden from Whit’s view.

The train got going, and we were quiet for a while, Whit taking in the views as the train got out of town. I glanced up here and there, making an occasional comment about what we were seeing.

A guy in a fancy waiter’s uniform stopped at our table, small notepad in hand. “Hot chocolate?” he asked.

“No, thanks,” I said.

“I’ll take one,” Whit piped up.

I sighed. “Orange soda, please, if you have it.”

The waiter nodded and set off. Just a few minutes later, he was back with our drinks in hand.

I sipped on my drink while Whit worked on his hot chocolate. “I could have this every day and not get tired of it,” he said.

“You’d be surprised,” I replied, sarcasm in my voice. Hot chocolate was a staple at every Garland Christmas event.

While the train chugged on, we got to talking. It turned out we actually had some stuff in common. Not only were we in the same grade, but we were also both only children.

“Well, I guess that explains why we’re here,” I said. “Do your parents also want to spend way too much time with you?”

Whit smiled sadly. “I’d say the opposite, really. They’re busy running the lodge. It’s practically their baby. They wanted me to make sure I found some friends.”

“Oh,” I replied. That sounded nice. Parents who left you alone. “Well, my parents are divorced, and it seems like every year they try to make up for it more and more.”

Whit winced a little. “Sorry to hear it.”

I sighed. “It’s okay. It wouldn’t be so bad if—” I stopped, realizing I hardly knew Whit and I was telling him my innermost thoughts.

Even my best friends didn’t really know about this stuff. I tried not to complain about my parents because I knew they loved me and were doing their best—even if their best felt a little suffocating time to time.

But something about Whit made him very easy to talk to, even made me want to confide in him.

Whit waited for me to go on. “It wouldn’t be so bad if...?”

I chewed on my bottom lip for a moment, trying to decide what I should share. “If they didn’t put so much pressure on being the perfect divorced parents. It’s like they try to outdo each other every single Christmas and I miss just being with them without all the pressure.”

Saying that out loud made me realize just how much I was hurting. Maybe I still wasn’t completely over the divorce. I picked up my orange soda and drank some of it to make the frog in my throat go away. The Christmas music playing sounded even louder in the silence.

Like he could sense my need for a subject change, Whit said, “So, what all is there to do here in Garland? I have a feeling this is just the tip of the iceberg.”

Grateful for the new topic, I put down my soda and said, “Where would I even begin?”

He looked at my crafting bag, which sat on the table. A small notebook with a pen tucked inside peeked out. “May I?” he asked.

I nodded.

He grabbed the notebook, carefully opening it to a blank page in the middle. “Let’s make a list.” He began jotting something down. “Ride the Garland Express,” he said.

“Check,” I replied.

He crossed it out, then looked up at me. “What else? Build a snowman?”

I chuckled. “There’s a whole competition for that.”

He lit up. “Really? Cool.” He jotted that down.

We went on, until the list got pretty long.

“That’s fourteen things,” he said, holding up the notebook. “Ambitious, but I have faith in us.”

I took the notebook, going through the list.

- 1 - Ride on the Garland Express
- 2 - Enter the snowman building competition
- 3 - Cocoa at Cocoa Corner
- 4 - Volunteer at Santa's Elves
- 5 - Eat at Scrooge's Diner
- 6 - Make a wish on the Christmas tree
- 7 - Go ice skating at Fall La La La La
- 8 - Go caroling with the Carol Karens
- 9 - Watch a movie at A Wonderful Film
- 10 - Take a candy making class at Candy Cane Co.
- 11 - Take a sleigh ride from Rudolph

12 - Get a souvenir from Santa's Bag

13 - Pick out a Christmas ornament from The Nutcracker

14 - Get snowflakes painted on your nails at Vixens

“We can cross number six off, since that one already passed,” I pointed out.

Whit nodded.

“And number three,” I said, crossing it out. “Already did that one too.”

“But we’ve gotta go back,” Whit chimed in. “I want to try everything on the menu.”

I chuckled at his enthusiasm. Then I bit my lip as I realized we’d left something off the list.

“What?” he asked. “Did we miss one?”

I hesitated. There was another big thing that people did in Garland, although it was more of an unofficial, clandestine sort of activity. “Let’s just say you can’t really buy a ticket for this one.”

Whit’s brow furrowed. “What is it? Tell me.”

Struggling to make eye contact, I told him. “Just know you’ll need to find someone else to do it,” I said, probably a little too forcefully. I could feel my face turn hot.

Whit looked even more confused and a little amused too. “What are you talking about, Carolyn?”

I took a breath. “Mistletoe Hill.”

“What do you do at Mistletoe Hill?” he asked, but I could see the wheels in his head starting to turn.

“Yeah,” I replied, putting the notebook and pen down on the table. “What you think happens there, happens there.”

He raised his eyebrows, seeming more amused than ever. He grabbed the notebook and pen, then began writing. “Kiss a pretty girl at Mistletoe Hill,” he sounded out.

I rolled my eyes, fighting the heat on my neck.

He hooked the pen through the spiral. “Okay, I think this is a great list, don’t you?”

I mustered my most sarcastic voice. “I can’t wait.”

He grinned. “Me neither. We’ll start with Scrooge’s after we get off the Garland Express.”

I shook my head but didn’t fight him on it. I definitely wasn’t going to admit that a small part of me was actually looking forward to spending more time with him.

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6

WHIT

On the way to Scrooge's, Carolyn finally told me about the crafting stuff she had in her bag.

"Cross-stitching?" I said. "I thought only grandmothers did that."

She gave me a shove. Not nearly enough strength behind it to do any real damage, but I pretended to fall anyway.

"Just so you know, plenty of young people cross-stitch," she replied. She sounded offended, but I was pretty sure she was just teasing.

We kept walking. "Do you knit too?" I went on.

She put her hands on her hips and stopped walking. "Actually, yes. And I crochet too. What of it?"

I laughed, and she shoved me again, but it only made me laugh more. I was actually having fun with her—and feeling a lot less lonely. "Nothing's wrong with crafting," I replied. "It's kind of cute, actually."

She rolled her eyes, and we kept walking, but I could see the hint of a smile on her face. Her green eyes always smiled before her lips followed.

This had worked out way better than I could've imagined so far. I had to admit that I really liked Carolynn already. I liked spending time with her.

We made it to Scrooge's and went inside, getting out of the cold. I held open the door and gave a playful bow. Carolynn led the way, and we made our way to a booth tucked in the corner.

I sat down and looked around. "Where are the Christmas decorations? Everywhere else I've been has had about five different Christmas trees and enough tinsel to make the world's biggest tangle."

Carolynn shook her head. "That's because the owner of this place is Scrooge."

I looked at her. "Scrooge? I thought that was your name."

She let out a surprised laugh and then playfully hit my arm. "It might surprise you to know there's one person in town who hates Christmas more than me."

"Are you being serious?"

"As a heart attack," she quipped, pulling out a menu from the holder with the salt and pepper shakers and all the little sweetener packets. "His parents owned this place, back when they were still alive. They passed away a long time ago, so he's run it since he was really young. People say he was never the same after his parents died. Hence the nickname Scrooge. He's a good guy, just doesn't like Christmas anymore."

A middle-aged guy with a backward hat walked out of the back. He wore a flannel shirt, and he just had that sort of worn look, like life had put him through the wringer one too many times.

Someone at the counter opened a laptop and asked him a question making his

eyebrows draw together. “This place is for eating only,” he said gruffly. “Not some internet café.”

I gave her a skeptical look. Scrooge did not look like he belonged on the “nice list” to me.

“No, I mean, he’s also pretty cranky most of the time too,” she added in a whisper. “But that’s Scrooge. He’s harmless, really. And he’d do anything for you if you really needed him. Just keeps to himself most of the time.” She glanced down at the menu, although I had a feeling everyone in this town probably had it memorized.

“Hm,” I said, curious. But I picked up the menu and started going through it.

Heavy footsteps sounded nearby, and we looked up to see Scrooge approaching. “What’ll ya have?” he asked, getting straight to the point.

“Two orange sodas,” I said, glancing at Carolynn.

She opened her mouth, but then nodded.

He left with a grunt.

We kept looking at the menu. It had all of your standard stuff.

“It’s pretty basic,” Carolynn said. “You know, Scrooge is always open to suggestions on how to improve it though.”

“Really?” I asked, studying her. This place looked kind of untouched by time.

“Oh yeah.” She nodded. “He’ll even give you a free meal if he uses one of your suggestions.”

Before I could ask more, Scrooge was back with our drinks.

He set them down and stood there. I looked up at him, waiting for him to say something, only to realize he was waiting on us to order.

I turned back to the menu. “Uh, I’ll have the burger and fries, please.” I noticed the menu said they were crinkle fries, and without really thinking about it, I added, “You know, you should really call them Kris Krinkle Fries.” Maybe I would get a free meal out of this for both of us.

Silence.

I went on. “You know, Kris Kringle. Like Santa Claus? Kris Kringle Fries. Perfect for Christmas in Garland.”

Scrooge’s lips settled into a hard line, and Carolynn’s mouth fell open a bit as her eyes darted between us.

“Christmas,” Scrooge spat out, “is the worst time of the year. Did you know that? This town is downright foolish for buying into it so much. Just making corporations richer, year after year.”

My mouth fell open too. “Oh, uh... I think it’s kind of nice.”

“Nice?” A vein in his neck bulged.

I shifted in my seat. “Yeah. All the lights and stuff? It’s pretty.”

Scrooge pointed to the door. “Get out.”

I tried to open my mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

“OUT!” Scrooge yelled.

A few people at the other side of the diner turned our way, snickering.

I turned to Carolynn for help, but she was already grabbing her stuff and getting up. I stood up too, and we hurried toward the door.

“Don’t let the door hit ya!” Scrooge called.

Once we were outside, I stared at Carolynn. “What—”

Then she burst out laughing. Like, non-stop, clutching-her-side laughing.

Meanwhile, I could only stare at her in shock.

When she finally stopped laughing, she wiped at her eyes. “Oh my gosh, that was the funniest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Funny? I’m pretty sure he was close to punching me. Or having a coronary.” My own heart was still beating fast.

She began laughing again. “I told you he was cranky and didn’t like Christmas, and then you went and told him...”

She couldn’t finish her sentence because she started laughing again.

I stood there, blinking. “You’re the worst.”

When she was done laughing, she said, “Don’t sweat it. Scrooge is part of the Garland charm. Getting kicked out of the diner is like an initiation.”

“An initiation, huh?” I said sarcastically. “More like a near-death experience. I’m pretty sure my life flashed before my eyes.”

She laughed some more at my expense. “Don’t worry. My friends and I got kicked out two years ago for trying to gift him a ball cap that looked like a Santa hat.”

I shook my head as I pulled out the notebook from her bag, flipped it open, and crossed off eating at Scrooge’s Diner. “Let’s move on to the next thing, shall we?” I suggested. I looked down to read the list. “I know. Let’s go get a souvenir from Santa’s Bag. Sounds safe.”

She snickered as I gave the notebook back.

“Let’s go, Christmas Carol,” I teased.

That had her rolling her eyes again. “Don’t call me that.” There was still a smile in her eyes as she said it, though.

“I think it suits you,” I joked.

Shaking her head, she said, “Come on. But then we’re done. This is about all the Christmas cheer I can take in one day.”

CAROLYNN

I still couldn't believe Scrooge had thrown us out of the diner, but then again, it was right on brand. At least one not-so-lucky person got kicked out around this time of year and gave everyone something to talk about until next Christmas.

Whit and I made our way to Santa's Bag, which had some of the coolest and most unique souvenirs around. It used to be my favorite place growing up, even if it didn't really draw up a lot of excitement for me anymore. My parents and I would each pick out a new decoration for our tree, and it was fun to see all the different kinds we'd picked out over the years. Now there were two different trees, two trips to Santa's Bag. And the old decorations we picked stayed in a box in my mom's garage because it didn't feel right to split them up. Mom kept the decorations but didn't have the heart to put them up without Dad.

"Do you think I'll be allowed back into Scrooge's?" Whit asked as he held the door to Santa's Bag open for me. "There's not a lot of restaurants in town."

Coming back out of my thoughts, I walked inside, turning back to grin at Whit. "Maybe, if you never mention Christmas or menu changes ever again around him."

Whit scoffed. "He knows he lives in the most Christmas-obsessed town in America, right?"

I shrugged. "As if he could forget."

We began looking around, shelves and shelves surrounding us. Whit's eyes immediately lit up at all the trinkets and things filling the shelves. He picked up a delicate snowflake ornament. "Wow." He set it gently back on the shelf. "Where do they find all of this stuff?"

I watched as he studied another intricate ornament. This one was a beautiful gingerbread man, complete with incredibly realistic gumdrop buttons. "A lot of it is handmade, actually," I explained. "Some of it's made by the owners of the shop, Mr. and Mrs. Curran, but most of it is made by local artisans."

We continued walking, and Whit stayed perpetually in awe of everything in the store. I realized it was fun seeing it through his eyes.

"This has to be my favorite thing on the list yet," he murmured. "I mean, I wouldn't even know what to pick."

Mrs. Curran saw us and walked over. "Carolynn, how are you? I haven't seen you in a while."

I waved. "Hi, Mrs. Curran, I'm good. How about you?"

"Just fine, dear, thank you for asking. Still cross-stitching and crocheting every minute you can?"

I smiled. "Yes, ma'am."

She grinned back, her smile making her eyes crinkle. "That's nice. You know I'm always looking for unique pieces. And I pay good prices."

"That's sweet, but I don't usually make Christmas items," I replied.

She patted my shoulder. “Well, if you ever do, you know where to find me.”

I nodded, and she turned to Whit. “And who’s this?”

“This is my...” I wasn’t sure if we qualified as friends, so I stuttered out, “This is Whit. He’s new in town. His parents bought the lodge.”

Her face lit up. “Welcome to Garland, dear. I hope you’re liking it?”

Whit nodded enthusiastically. “I really am. I’ve never experienced any place like it. It really is magical like everyone says.”

That made Mrs. Curran smile. “That’s good to hear, dear.” She raised her finger like she’d just remembered something. “You know, we have something special this year. Let me show you.”

She led us toward the register, where a snow globe sat on a display. I’d seen plenty of snow globes around Garland before, so I wondered what was different about this one.

Mrs. Curran picked it up and shook it, making snowflakes fall over the figures inside. “Custom-made snow globes.” She handed it to Whit, who took it carefully in his large hands. “Wow,” he repeated. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

Inside stood a beautiful family with a snowman. The level of detail was insane, from the little boy's snowy mittens to the crooked carrot for the snowman’s nose.

“How is it so realistic?” I asked.

“We can take a picture and use our 3D printer to make a miniature replica.”

Whit shook the globe, holding on to it tight.

Snow fell all around the family, and for a second, I pictured me and my family inside, back when I was little and we were still together.

Whit met my gaze, and offered the glob to me. I shook my head, so he handed the globe back.

“I bet it makes the perfect gift,” I said, still entranced.

After that, we kept looking around the store. We finally left, decked out in “Garland, ME” shirts, keychains, and beanies. Whit had also gotten the gingerbread ornament he’d seen. “My parents will love this,” he said, bag in hand. A small part of me felt jealous that he only had to bring the gift to one place. That he didn’t have to sit through two Christmas dinners, open presents in two different places.

As we got to Cider Center, I checked the time on my phone. It was getting late. The day had been a whirlwind, in a good way, which was surprising. “I should start heading home,” I said. We’d come to a stop in front of the Garland Christmas tree, which sparkled with lights against the dusky backdrop of town.

Whit’s gaze turned from the tree to me. “This was the best day,” he said, and something in my chest fluttered. “Thanks a lot for showing me around. Hopefully, you didn’t suffer too much.”

I smiled. “It wasn’t too terrible.”

It’d actually been kind of cool experiencing Garland with Whit, who’d never done these things before. It was like I had a new appreciation for some of the things I’d grown to dread the last few years.

Whit’s gaze locked on mine, and we stood like that for a second or maybe several. I couldn’t tell.

Whit's eyes flickered down to my mouth, and before I knew it, I had done the same to him. His lips were full, light pink. Not smiling like usual.

I noticed how close we'd gotten, and right when I thought he was about to kiss me, the sound of loud screams and laughter nearby had us each taking a step back.

Whoa. Had that really almost happened?

Whit's face told me he was probably thinking the same thing. He cleared his throat. "Want to meet up again tomorrow, cross off a couple more things from the list?"

I nodded, barely comprehending the words coming out of his mouth. "Yeah, okay." I gave him a wave. "Bye, see you tomorrow." Then I was off, rushing toward my house, still in disbelief at what had just almost happened.

Had I really let myself get carried away with him? Had he been attracted to me?

Showing him around town was just supposed to be a way of getting out of spending Christmas with my parents. That was it. Suddenly, it felt like it was becoming more than that, which was crazy. Right?

All I knew about relationships was that they usually ended. I'd seen it with my parents.

The happily ever afters and perfect Prince Charming? Those things only existed on TV, not in real life.

Definitely not my life. Definitely not with Whit.

WHIT

We met at a place a few minutes from Cider Center called Santa's Elves, and it turned out to be one of the most magical places in Garland.

The building that housed Santa's Elves was larger than the boutique that was Santa's Bag, and it seemed older too, like it'd been around for a long time and could've used a fresh coat of paint or two.

But apparently, this place did a lot of good in the world. They made sure there were gifts for every child in Garland when their parents couldn't afford it, packaged Christmas meals for families who'd fallen on hard times, and even visited the elderly who were missing their loved ones this season.

A lady named Mrs. Mulberry ran it. She could've passed for a real-life Mrs. Claus, both in looks and how saint-like she seemed.

Mrs. Mulberry gave me a tour of the place, from the food pantry to the storage closets full of clothes and other donations to the industrial kitchen. "Our incredible volunteers have kept this place going for almost eighty years," she said as we made our way back to the front. "And I suspect another eighty if I have any say in it. We make a difference for a lot of families in and around Garland. Our mission is to bring a little love and Christmas magic to as many people and children as we can every year, whether it's the Christmas season or not."

Carolynn turned to me as we reached the reception desk. “My friends and I volunteer here about once a month. There’s always something to do.”

“I bet,” I replied, looking around. “What a cool place.”

A woman with a toddler in tow walked in, and Mrs. Mulberry told her to wait a moment before turning to us. “Carolynn, honey, why don’t you both take pantry duty this week?”

Carolynn nodded. “Sure thing, Mrs. Mulberry.”

She led me toward the pantry, and I followed, wondering what pantry duty was.

The plan was to spend a few hours here, doing what we could to help. We went inside, where large shelves full of canned goods and household items lined the walls.

“What’s pantry duty?” I asked.

Carolynn turned to me. “We’re going to go through and check the expiration dates of the canned food. Make sure nothing expires within two weeks. It’s easy. Come on.”

She showed me what to do. It was pretty simple. I was able to reach the items highest up on the shelves, while she went through the bottom shelves.

In no time, we had set aside a handful of items that were going to expire soon.

After that, Mrs. Mulberry had us pack up several care baskets for some of the elderly folks in town. She gave us a list of what to include, and once again, we got to work.

Carolynn had a way of making the baskets look really nice, so I began modeling mine after hers. And it turned out I had a knack for tying the bright red ribbon.

“How do you get it perfect every time?” Carolynn asked, clearly frustrated with hers.

I moved over to help her, taking the ribbon in my hands. My fingers ended up brushing hers, and I could’ve sworn I saw her blush a little. “Like this,” I said, making a big bow in no time. “Having parents like mine has its advantages, I guess.”

We’d spent hours upon hours making everything perfect at the lodge, including the bows hanging in every corner. But I liked doing this better, especially getting to do it with Carolynn.

Mrs. Mulberry walked in and brought her hands together in excitement. “Oh, you two have done a wonderful job.”

We grinned.

“What can we help with next?” I asked, my hand on one of the baskets.

“Actually, these baskets need to start going out. Someone’s coming by tomorrow to help me deliver most of them, but I have one that needs to go out today.”

“Okay,” Carolynn said. “Just tell us where.”

Pretty soon, we were on our way.

“That place is pretty neat,” I told Carolynn as we walked. I held the basket in my arms.

“Yeah,” she replied. “Most people think so. The city is able to fund a good part of it, but they’re always looking for donations and volunteers to be able to do more.”

“Well,” I said. “They just got one more volunteer.”

Now I had at least one place I could go when I was bored or lonely. It was great feeling useful and like I could make a difference. I wondered if my parents knew about Santa's Elves. Maybe they could make an ongoing donation. I made a mental note to ask them about it later.

After walking for twenty minutes or so, we reached an old house on the outskirts of town. The yard was covered in a blanket of snow and the driveway only had a small path shoveled for someone to walk through, but the Christmas tree in the window shone bright and merry.

"This is Mrs. Sanderson's house," Carolynn said as we walked up the front steps. "Her husband passed away several years ago, and she doesn't have any family in town."

I wasn't sure what to say to that, especially with the sad feeling in my chest, so I watched her knock on the front door.

A minute later, it opened up to reveal an old lady with short snow-white hair. "Carolynn," she beamed. "And who's this? Come on in."

We went into a home that looked like something out of an old Christmas movie. The walls were covered in wood paneling, and every spare surface had cotton made to look like Christmas fluff, decorated with small figurines, snow globes, and even a nativity set.

"This is amazing," I said, glancing around. "Do you collect Christmas decorations?"

She gave a hearty chuckle. "I thought that was required of everyone in Garland."

Carolynn laughed, and the sound warmed me in a way I hadn't expected. "That's the truth."

“Come sit,” she offered us. “Carolynn, I want to hear all about your latest projects and your handsome friend here.”

My cheeks flushed, and Carolynn grinned at me like she was enjoying my embarrassment.

Mrs. Sanderson turned out to be a really nice lady. She talked and talked and talked, and we listened.

She was grateful for the care basket, and she offered us cookies in return. We sat down at her kitchen table to enjoy them.

“Belle dropped these by just yesterday,” she told us.

I turned to Carolynn, wondering if she knew who Belle was. Everyone seemed to know each other here, except for me.

“She’s one of my best friends,” Carolynn explained. “She makes the best cookies in town.”

“More than just the town. These are probably the best cookies I’ve ever had in my life,” I said, taking another bite.

Mrs. Sanderson poured us each a glass of milk, and I was a little sad when my cookies were gone.

We stayed and chit-chatted a little more. I spotted a cross-stitch hanging above her mantel that said Merry Christmas in fancy cursive print. I pointed to it inquisitively as we walked into the living room. It looked like some of the things I’d seen in Carolynn’s bag, but she didn’t like to do Christmas designs.

Mrs. Sanderson's eyes crinkled when she smiled, and it reminded me of my own grandmother. She was visiting us after the Christmas rush at the lodge died down. "Carolynn made me that lovely piece," Mrs. Sanderson told me with a smile. "Last year. I get compliments on it all the time."

My eyebrows drew together as I gave Carolynn a questioning look. I thought she didn't like Christmas. And she didn't act like the type to go around making Christmas presents for little old ladies in town. Was this just another one of her yearly traditions with her parents, or was there a side to Carolynn I hadn't yet seen?

Carolynn's cheeks flushed as she turned to Mrs. Sanderson. "I'm glad you love it."

After that, we headed back into town. "Feeling like a hot chocolate?" Carolynn asked me.

I looked at her in surprise. "I thought you didn't like hot chocolate, Christmas Carol," I teased.

She shrugged. "I'm in the mood for one today."

"Okay," I said with a grin. It was cold out, so a steaming hot mug of anything in my hands sounded great. "That was nice of you, by the way, to make her that cross-stitch."

"I liked making it for her," Carolynn said. "I'm actually working on something else for her this year that I'm hoping Santa can deliver."

We kept walking and chatting, and the more we did, the more I realized Carolynn really had a soft heart under that seemingly hard exterior. She was funny too.

I also couldn't help but wonder if she'd ever come out of her shell long enough to be

more than just a friend.

We'd only met a couple days ago, but there was something special about her.

The day before, there had been a special moment between us, and I couldn't help but wonder if it had been a fluke.

Or the start of something more.

CAROLYNN

So far, we'd been successful crossing six items off our list. Not bad for a couple of days. At this rate, we'd be done in no time.

For some reason, that made my chest feel a little weird, but I ignored the feeling and reminded myself the sooner we got this over with, the sooner I could have the peaceful Christmas I wanted.

Whit gave me a wave. "Hey, Christmas Carol."

I rolled my eyes. "Hey, Whit." I needed to come up with a nickname for him too, but nothing came to mind at the moment.

"Ready to build a prize-winning snowman?" he asked.

Today was the annual Garland snowman building competition. Just like the star lighting ceremony each year at Cider Center, this was a pretty big deal.

People didn't just stack three snowballs together, add a carrot, and call it a day. They really went above and beyond and created art from the snow.

I used to get really excited about the competition as a kid, when Mom, Dad, and I would go for the gold each year but never placed despite my best efforts. Now it was just another thing we did together every Christmas that I dreaded because now my

parents alternated years, and it was always awkward going back to the parent who didn't participate and telling them about it.

Something told me this year would be different.

Whit was different.

We looked around. People had all sorts of tools, supplies, and props with them and were taking up residence at the different plots within the park. We didn't have any specialty equipment. Which meant we'd probably get beat out. I should have asked Dad for some of his tools.

Whit seemed to read my mind. "Don't let all the fancy stuff fool you," he said. "I think we can come up with something really good without any of that."

I looked at him. "What do you think we should do?" All of a sudden, I felt really lame and unprepared, like we should've given this some thought ahead of time.

He glanced at my crafting bag. "How about something with a cross-stitch design?" he asked.

"Cross-stitch with snow? What do you mean?"

After explaining his idea to me, we got to work.

Whit used a big plastic shovel he'd brought along to make a giant pile of snow. Meanwhile, my mind sparked with an idea. "I'll be right back."

It didn't take long to make a run to Santa's Elves and ask for a few bottles of water. I packed them in my bag, then stopped at a grocery store on the way back, looking carefully for what I needed on the shelves until I spotted the food coloring.

I made it back to Whit and set the bag down before helping him roll together the snowman. I checked the clock. We still had plenty of time if we worked quickly.

My hand brushed Whit's, sending butterflies cascading through my stomach. I glanced at him to see if his reaction was as strong as mine, but his gaze was firmly on our project.

I had to admit that it annoyed me. Not Whit's touch or his indifference—but the butterflies. It was a silly distraction, feeling that sort of way toward him.

He was the cutest guy I'd ever met, and I knew every girl at school would think so come January. He had no reason to fall for a girl like me. I wasn't a thin and beautiful cheerleader, which was probably his type. That seemed to be every high school boy's type. So I wasn't about to indulge in even the smallest crush on Whit. Especially when I wasn't sure I wanted a romantic relationship with anyone at all.

After making the snowman, we kept going with our special design, adding a really cute and intricate Santa Claus out of X's painted into the snow. Whit finished up the beard, perfecting the shape and details. "You're good at this," I told him.

He grinned. "I like to draw sometimes, and it's coming in handy."

We added the colored water bottles to the design last, placing them carefully all around.

Finally, the timer went off loudly, which meant it was time for the judging. This was the moment of truth.

We finally allowed ourselves to look around at what everybody else had done.

"Look at that," I murmured. Someone had gone all out and built a snowman family,

complete with Garland gear and very realistic presents. “There’s some real talent this year.”

“Yeah,” Whit replied. “But I also think our design is really good.”

I took my phone out on impulse and took a picture of him in front of it. He made a funny pose, which made me laugh. Then he took my phone and took a picture of me too. I thought we were done, but then he said, “Come here.”

My cheeks were flushed, and not from the cold, as I went to stand beside him. I didn’t really like having my picture taken. But then he put his arm around my shoulders, making the butterflies dance all over again.

I didn’t have to force my smile as I looked at the phone and he took a selfie of us together. With it done, I stepped to the side, feeling embarrassed about how strongly I was reacting to just having his arm around me. I looked around, too nervous to meet his gaze.

The judges were already going by each snowman, carefully scoring each entry. It was going to take a while before they got to us, much less finish judging. And without Whit’s arm around me or the exertion of making a snowman, I was shivering.

Whit must’ve noticed because he said, “I could go for some hot cocoa. Want to go? We can get you cider instead.” He winked.

I looked up at him and nodded, trying not to notice how close his face was to mine.

Just like before, I reminded myself that Whit would never go for a girl like me.

10

WHIT

While we sat and sipped our drinks together, the judges continued making their rounds outside.

We shed our wet gloves, and Carolynn held on to her hot mug with pink fingers, still shivering a little. Hopefully, the cider would warm her up from the inside out.

“Your nose is as red as Rudolph’s,” I quipped.

Her smile sent a bolt of warmth straight to my chest. She was even cuter when she brought her fingers to her nose like she could warm it up before I remembered it was red.

For a second, I thought about wrapping my arms around her. I thought about being that close to her, and my hands itched to touch her. I set them in my lap and looked away. Carolynn wouldn’t want some guy she just met making a move.

“What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I replied quickly. “You know, I think we’re going to win,” I went on, changing the subject.

Carolynn turned her gaze back to the window. “I don’t know. A lot of people take this contest really seriously. We kind of entered on a whim.”

She seemed thoughtful, like something was on her mind.

“Do you miss spending time with your parents this Christmas?” I asked, setting down my own mug of hot cocoa. I hoped she would continue spending time with me, but I’d understand if she was missing her time with them.

She shrugged. “I know I should, but I don’t really. I didn’t like it, being the only child and all. It was like being pulled in two directions every year.”

She paused, seeming to reflect for a moment. “The holidays stopped being fun, honestly. They just reminded me of the breakup instead.”

Hearing the hint of hurt in her made me feel an ache deep in my chest. It must have been hard for her to go through that. I couldn’t imagine my parents splitting up.

Right when I was about to respond, though, someone came in through the door. The little bells on the door jingled as they did.

It was some kid who looked like he was in elementary school. He spotted Carolynn. “The judging is done! Carolynn, come and see. I saw them talking about your snowman for a while.”

Then he ran back out, the door slamming shut behind him.

Carolynn turned to me, seeing if I was ready.

“What are you waiting for? Let’s go,” I said, a hopeful feeling making me light again. Could our snowman have won the whole thing?

We scooted out of the booth, leaving our mugs behind, and made our way back to the competition.

The judges were announcing the winners to a large crowd with a microphone. First through third place would receive a trophy (and some serious street cred, according to Carolynn).

“This year’s third place winner is...,” one of the judges began.

“He’s one of the Garland city council members,” Carolynn whispered.

The judge paused to read from a clipboard in his hands. “Or winners, I should say. Carolynn Hansley and Whittaker Atwood!”

Carolynn’s mouth fell open. Meanwhile, the crowd began clapping and cheering.

“We’ve gotta go up there,” I said, grabbing her hand and leading the way. I loved the way she squeezed my fingers in return.

We got another round of applause as we accepted the trophy.

“Highly creative design,” the judge told us. “Well done.”

We thanked him, posed for a picture for the local paper, and made our way back.

Carolynn studied the trophy for a minute before handing it to me. “I really can’t believe we placed.”

“Eh,” I replied. “We were robbed.”

“Robbed?”

“Obviously we deserved first place,” I tossed back jokingly. “Between the design and that last minute run to the store, we earned it.”

That made her laugh, which I liked. I almost wanted to tell a joke just to hear the sound again, to watch the way her eyes crinkled with her smile.

Trying not to stare at her, I studied the trophy too, which featured a golden snowman. “Do you want the top half or bottom half?” I teased.

“It’s okay,” she told me. “You can keep it. To remember your first Christmas in Garland and all.”

I locked my gaze on hers, smiling.

It wouldn’t just be a souvenir from my first Christmas in Garland.

It’d serve as my reminder of my first Christmas with her.

CAROLYNN

I came into the kitchen where Mom was cooking dinner and showed her the picture of Whit and me holding our trophy.

She wiped her hands on her Christmas apron and zoomed in on the picture so she could read the plaque. “You won third place?” Mom asked, clearly surprised. We had never placed in all the years we competed. “That’s great, honey. I’m glad you had a good time.” There wasn’t even a hint of jealousy in her tone.

This was the first time I was really sharing any details about what had happened with Whit with Mom. But I couldn’t help it. It had been a fun day.

Best of all, Mom and Dad both finally seemed more relaxed about the holidays. Maybe they could tell how much I was starting to enjoy my time with Whit. I told her all about my day with him while we sat and ate chicken and dumplings at the table, bottle-brush Christmas trees standing between us.

After dinner, we put our dishes in the sink and got busy washing and drying them.

“This was a good idea,” Mom said as she scrubbed a pot. “I’m glad we decided to change things up this year.” She sighed. “You know, I have to admit the holidays have been a lot less stressful.”

I raised my eyebrows at her, and she looked at me kind of sheepishly. “I hate to say I

told you so, Mom, but I told you so,” I said. She handed me the pan, and I worked to dry it.

She gave me a friendly nudge but went on. “I actually took a nap today. And I have an appointment at Vixen’s tomorrow for a spa day. I could get used to this.”

I smiled. “You should. This has been a nice change of pace.”

Mom had such a high-stress job that it was nice to finally see her relax and do something for herself.

“I still have presents to wrap,” she continued, grabbing our silverware from the bottom of the sink. “But maybe I can do that with a glass of wine and a show tonight...” Her eyes lit up like that would be a treat for her, and I couldn’t help but laugh. I liked this side of her.

Eyes still bright, she turned to me. “Hey, what do you think about baking some cookies with me? For old time’s sake?”

“Mom,” I groaned.

“Nothing crazy,” she replied quickly. “Just a couple dozen.”

I still hesitated.

“They don’t even have to be from scratch,” she added. “And they can be regular chocolate chip, not Christmas cookies.”

I gave in. “Okay. Maybe I can be the taste tester.” I smiled. I used to say that was the best part of being an only child—I always got to lick the spoon.

Within a few minutes, I was helping her mix the cookie dough and line the trays.

Mom put on some Christmas music, probably out of habit more than anything else, and it wasn't even that bad.

After a few minutes, I realized it was because she wasn't putting on any pressure to make it perfect. She danced around, not caring that the cookies weren't perfectly shaped or in the oven for exactly twelve minutes.

"I could get used to this too," I told her when the cookies had cooled down and we each grabbed one to try with a glass of milk. They were so good I was sad when mine was gone.

She gave me a hug and then we cleaned up together, storing the cookies in Ziplock bags. She even suggested I set one aside to take to Dad.

Once we were done, I got ready to head to my room for a quiet evening of crafting and maybe a movie since Mom wanted to wrap presents in the living room.

Just as I was grabbing my crafting bag, I realized I could hear something outside. "What's that?" I asked.

"Is that singing?" Mom asked, coming into the living room and going to the window. She pulled back the curtains. "Oh, it's the Carol Karens! They're coming right around the corner."

I went and looked too. There was a whole group of ladies from Garland who everyone called the Carol Karens. Every year, the week before Christmas, they went around town singing and caroling. They were some of the nicest old ladies around, even if they did love to gossip almost as much as they loved to sing.

Mom wrapped herself in a robe, then went to the front door and stepped outside. I was right behind her, although caroling wasn't really my thing.

Sometimes people joined in with the Carol Karens, but I was happy listening for a few minutes and giving them a wave.

They reached the neighbor's house, and I could see that they'd already added a few Garlanders to their group. I was pretty sure the entire neighborhood had come outside to watch and listen.

Then I noticed someone in the group waving at us.

"Oh, look, who is that?" Mom asked.

The person gave another wave before I recognized who it was. Whit.

He was singing with the Carol Karens?

"Oh my gosh," I said, wanting to run away.

Of course, it made complete sense why he was with them. Singing with the Carol Karens was on our list, but I'd been secretly hoping we could get out of that one.

Now I wanted to hide. I was wearing my matching snowflake pajamas with my snow boots and robe. Not my best look. Maybe I could pretend I wasn't home. That he'd seen someone else.

Mom must've noticed me trying to sneak away because she turned back to me and said, "Where are you going? Do you know that young man?"

Young man? I wanted to evaporate. She must not have recognized him from the

picture with our trophy now that it was dark outside, which may get me out of this...

"I've gotta go," I told her.

"He's waving at you," she said. "He's coming up here."

Oh no.

I turned back, and sure enough, Whit was making his way up our driveway.

He approached us with a grin that made me melt like our snowman would this spring.

"Hey, Carolyn, where are you going?"

I mustered up a smile. "Hey, Whit. What are you doing here?"

"This is on our list," he said, a little too happily. "So, of course, I had to join in."

"Oh, you're Whit!" Mom said, clapping her hands. "Carolyn, you should definitely join them. That sounds so fun."

"You and I have different definitions of 'fun,'" I muttered.

The Carol Karens finished their song and began moving to the next house.

"Come on," Whit said. "Grab your coat."

I groaned again. "You can't be serious."

"As serious as a peppermint shortage," he replied, pulling out our list and holding it up like that sealed the deal. Mom chuckled at his simile, and I could tell he was winning her over too.

Before both Mom and Whit could join forces against me and drag me into the street, I went inside and got my coat, gloves, and hat.

But I was not happy about it at all.

I got all bundled up and found Whit waiting outside with my mom, a smug smile on his annoyingly handsome face.

“I really am not enjoying how happy you are right now,” I said, mostly sarcastically. “Both of you.”

“Why?” Whit asked, his grin growing even bigger. “Don’t you like singing carols ?”

“No,” I replied flatly.

“Oh,” he said, nonchalantly. “That’s too bad. Let’s go.”

Mom looked just as happy as Santa with a plate of cookies. “You two have fun.”

I gave her a wave and followed along behind Whit until we caught up to the Carol Karens. They seemed a little too happy to have us.

Once they were done cooing over how cute we were together—and making me blush like crazy—they began a new song, “Silent Night.”

Whit started singing right away. He had a nice deep voice. Meanwhile, I tried to get away with lip-syncing. It wasn’t fair that he was good-looking and had a voice like he could win American Idol someday.

Whit nudged me. “Come on,” he whispered.

“No,” I shot back.

Halfway through the song, though, one of the Carol Karens turned back to me again, giving me a pointed look and waiting for me to sing.

I wanted to disappear. I hated singing.

“Don’t make me tell your mother,” she said.

That was the last thing I needed. And I had no doubt Mom would say I wasn’t following through on my part of the no-Christmas deal. So I figured if I could belt out a few notes, maybe they’d all leave me alone and the sooner I could go home.

I opened my mouth, began singing, and tried to pretend no one was there. Especially not the guy I was starting to crush on, despite my logical brain fighting it kicking and screaming.

Right away, the Carol Karens turned toward me, each of them giving me a smile or clapping at the sound of my voice.

“Hey, you have a really pretty singing voice,” Whit told me.

I nudged him away, but felt myself blushing hard and tried to keep singing like it was no big deal.

A few songs later, thankfully, the route was done.

The Carol Karens turned around and began heading back into town, gossiping non-stop. Whit and I followed just a few steps behind.

“That was fun, wasn’t it?” Whit asked.

“Sure,” I said sarcastically, drawing out the word.

“Well, it was fun for me,” Whit said sweetly. “And I’m glad you were there with me.”

I had no sarcastic response for that, so we kept walking. At least it was dark enough outside to hide my blush.

“You know you don’t have to walk me home,” I said. “I know it’s out of the way for you.”

“I want to,” he replied simply, making my heart beat faster. I liked spending time with him... and it seemed like he enjoyed his time with me too. Maybe going caroling hadn’t been such a bad idea.

All too soon, we were on the sidewalk leading to my house.

As we walked up the steps, I noticed something hanging above the door.

“Is that what I think it is?” Whit gazed up at what looked very much like mistletoe. Amusement was clear in his voice.

“No,” I said quickly, avoiding his gaze. “It’s not.”

Had that been there before? I was pretty sure it hadn’t...

I chanced a look at Whit. All I wanted to do was go inside and disappear. A moment ago, I’d felt something happening between us, but what if he didn’t feel the same?

Regardless of my inner turmoil, Whit looked as cute as ever, and I was sure he was just being nice to me. That was all. I opened my mouth to tell him good night when

he leaned in and gave me a kiss on the cheek.

My mouth fell open. Then I saw him watching me and closed it.

“Just following tradition,” he said, grinning and shoving his hands in his pockets.
“Good night, Christmas Carol.”

And with that, he was gone.

Meanwhile, my heart raced at about a hundred miles per hour as I watched him disappear into the night, and I lifted my hand to my cheek.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:07 am

12

WHIT

The last time I'd seen Carolynn, we'd ended up under some mistletoe, so I'd given her a kiss on the cheek.

And ever since, I couldn't help but wonder if she would ever see me as more than a friend.

I had no idea.

I did know Carolynn and I were on a roll with our list.

The next day, we planned to attend a candy-making class, which I was definitely excited about.

Garland had some of the best candy I'd ever tasted, but especially the best candy canes. We were supposed to. Make some in the class today.

Carolynn met me at Candy Cane Co., and after a quick, friendly greeting, we went inside.

There were a few other people there for the class, mostly kids.

The owner, Mr. Cole, was there to teach us himself. He pointed to some aprons hanging on the wall. "Before we begin, you'll need to put those on."

I grabbed a couple and went back to the counter.

“Thanks,” Carolynn said as I handed her one.

These aprons were definitely not normal aprons. They were bright green and designed to make you look like an elf.

I put mine on, doing my best to tie it in the back.

Carolynn was trying to do the same before saying, “How about we give each other a hand?”

“Good idea,” I replied, turning around.

She tied mine, and then I did the same for her. My hands shook as I worked the straps around her curves, and I swore I heard her breath hitch as my fingers brushed her back over her white sweater.

But any tension between us eased when we saw each other. I had to say, we looked pretty ridiculous.

Even more so when we pulled on some hairnets next.

Giggling, she snuck out her phone and snapped a picture of me. But I got her back by taking a picture of her, too. She looked so cute, laughing and trying to hide her face behind her phone.

The class made the funny outfits totally worth it, though. We learned how to roll and shape the candy. Then we got to pick our own colors.

“I’m definitely feeling the green,” I told Carolynn. “Maybe with some blue. What do

you think?”

“Part of me wants to go classic red, but I think I’m going to do purple and pink. Just to be a rebel.” She winked. It was the cutest thing ever.

I nodded, trying to play it cool. “Solid choice.”

We got to work, and pretty soon, we had made our very first candy canes.

We got faster as we went along, and by the end of the class, we each ended up with several candy canes to take home with us. They even had ribbon to tie around the candy canes to give as gifts if we wanted to.

I snapped a quick picture of us at the end of the class. Then we set our candy canes aside and transformed back into humans.

As we stepped out of Candy Cane Co., I looked at Carolynn. “That was fun.”

“Yeah,” she said. “It was. And we got a ton of candy out of it too.”

As we made our way toward Cider Center, I got an idea. “I kind of want to take this candy back to the kids at the lodge,” I said.

“That sounds nice,” she said, walking beside me.

“Want to come with me?” I asked, hopeful. I wasn’t ready to be done spending time with her for the day. I tried not to think what it would feel like for Christmas to be over, our list all crossed off.

She smiled. “I’ll tag along.”

It was a longer walk back to the lodge, but we talked the whole time. I took in the sights, asking Carolynn about them as we went along. She explained that a statue of a guy riding a reindeer wasn't Santa but the town's founder. Hearing about a guy who'd created such a legacy made me smile. I wondered where we'd be without him.

Finally, we made it to the lodge. Just as I predicted, there were tons of kids around outside, playing in the snow. As soon as they saw me, they ran up to me.

I'd helped them make snowballs the other day, which apparently made me their hero.

"Whit! Look at the snowman I made," one boy told me. It was a little lopsided but solid.

"Nice work, Roger," I said, giving him a high five.

About five more kids were trying to talk to me at once. And I tried to sort it out in my head to respond.

Carolynn laughed. "I thought you didn't have any friends in town yet."

I grinned and shook my head. "I have you," I quipped. I saw her cheeks turn pink, which gave me butterflies.

I turned back to the kids, secretly pleased with myself. "Who wants some candy?" I asked, holding up the bag.

That practically had the kids launching themselves at me.

Carolynn and I started handing out candy canes, making sure every kid got one.

"Can I have one for my sister?" Roger asked Carolynn.

“Why, of course,” she said, giving him an extra one. “That’s very kind of you.”

I saw his chest puff up with pride before he stuffed it in his coat pocket. Carolynn might have had a tougher outer shell around me, but around these kids? She was effortlessly warm and caring. It made me like her even more.

The kids ran off, already opening their candy. Carolynn and I turned to each other. “I’d call that a success,” she said.

“For sure,” I said, unwrapping my last candy cane for her. “What should we do next?”

13

CAROLYNN

Mom texted me, asking if I wanted to grab a bite to eat at Scrooge's. So Whit and I decided to take a break for lunch and meet up again after.

It was a quick walk to Scrooge's, but I enjoyed walking around town anyway, even if I didn't always like doing all the Christmas things.

My stomach grumbled by the time I met Mom there, and we headed inside.

Thinking of the last time I'd been here had me close to laughing at the memory. I picked up the menu in an attempt to cover my smile.

Still, Mom hardly missed a beat. "Having a good time with Whit?" she asked, glancing down at her menu.

I kept my eyes on mine. "Yeah, he's nice." Which was true.

I told her about the candy-making class we'd gone to that morning.

"I can't believe old Neve Cole is still running that place," she said. "He's gotta be as old as Saint Nick."

Meanwhile, my mind went to Whit. He seemed different from the rest of the guys at my school, and I only hoped things stayed the same between us once school started

back up.

Although my stomach turned at the thought of that not being the case. Whit was a cute guy. He'd fit right in at Garland High.

Why would he stick with me when he was sure to have other girls all over him?

I shook my head instinctively, trying to put that thought out of my head.

Even though we both studied the menu, we ended up getting our usual: burgers and fries. Scrooge made the best burgers and fries in town.

While I sipped on my orange soda, Mom told me all about what was going on at work. It was nice to hear her talking about her life for a change, instead of having her pepper me with questions about mine.

When we were done, Scrooge stopped by our table and dropped off the check without a word.

Mom took out her credit card. "Garland would not be Garland without Scrooge," she said.

I nodded. "You're right. You went to school with him, right?"

"He was a few years older than me, but yeah. It's terrible what happened."

We all knew Scrooge had gone through something, but I knew better than to ask. No one talked about it, especially not Scrooge.

* * *

After lunch, we headed our own ways again.

“See you at home for dinner,” Mom said, giving me a hug. “Have fun. Whit sounds like a good boy.”

He was, but I wasn’t about to tell her that—especially since I’m pretty sure she was the one who left out mistletoe for us. I told her goodbye then I headed to the ice rink to meet Whit and check off the next item on our list.

Fall La La La La wasn’t far, definitely closer than the lodge, but when I got there, Whit was already inside.

He stood at the railing, gazing at the skaters on the rink as I came up behind him.

“Boo,” I teased.

He looked back at me with a smile. “Hey, Christmas Carol. How was lunch?”

“Good,” I replied, almost surprised at my own great mood. “How about yours?”

“Fast,” he said. “But also good.”

“Scrooge says hi,” I teased.

He gave me a friendly nudge. “Does he now? I’ll have to stop by and say hi back. Or should I say ‘Season’s Greetings’?” He smirked.

I laughed, almost surprised how easy it was to let go and just enjoy my time with him. Usually it took me longer to open up and make friends, but things were different with Whit.

He smiled at me and then turned to the rink, something in his expression I couldn't quite read.

"You ready?" I asked.

Whit gave me a nervous look. "Actually, I've never been ice-skating before," he confessed sheepishly.

"Really?" I asked.

"Really," he replied. "Not a lot of snow in Houston. We did go skiing one time in New Mexico, but my dad got hurt, so we never really did snow sports again after that."

"Well," I said, grabbing his arm and pulling him toward the front counter. "You live in Garland now, so skating is practically a requirement."

He followed along, still looking hesitant. "Carolynn, I'm going to make a fool of myself out there. That preschooler over there is going to be skating circles around me, I just know it."

I glanced back. "You're probably right," I replied, which made even more color drain from his face. "But luckily, you're in the presence of an expert." I grabbed his arm again, trying not to think about how much I liked the contact. "Come on."

14

WHIT

I watched Carolynn skate away gracefully.

The more I got to know her, the more impressed I was, especially watching her skate. She looked like a pro on the ice.

Meanwhile, I clung to the rail at the edge of the rink as if my life depended on it. Well, standing upright depended on it. I could hardly manage to stand much less move on the ice. I'd told her to go ahead while I got my footing, but the plan didn't seem to be working. Besides, it was far more enjoyable to watch her in her element.

Carolynn did a large circle around the rink. As she went, she made a small jump and twirled, landing effortlessly and completing the spin. As she got closer to me, she came to a stop and began spinning quickly.

I had to admit how much I really liked her curves. There was something about the way she carried herself and how her hips swayed that drove me a little crazy.

Carolynn skated the rest of the way to me, and I noticed a familiar blush on her cheeks.

"You're really good," I said with a smile.

"Thanks," she replied breathlessly. "Years and years of practice."

I looked down at my skates as I hung on to the wall. “Yeah, I’m not sure there’s much hope for me, Christmas Carol.”

I felt and probably looked like a baby deer with long and awkward legs, trying to walk for the first time. Except fawns got skilled at walking much faster than me with skating.

“You’ll get the hang of it in no time,” Carolynn told me. “Come on. You won’t learn to skate by staying so close to the wall.”

She took my hand and led me toward the middle of the rink. I was painfully slow (and kind of scared), but Carolynn stuck beside me. She gave me tips and guided me until I was finally able to make a slow but mostly steady circle around the rink myself.

“Whoa,” I cried out in disbelief as I came to a stop. “I did it.”

“You know, part of being a Garlander is knowing your way around the ice. Some kids learn to skate before they learn to ride a bike around here,” she said with a grin. “So you’re going to have to practice.”

“Noted,” I replied, hanging on to the wall again, unsure if she was being sarcastic or for real about what she’d just said.

It was probably true. There were kids who had to be in preschool who were out here skating like little professionals. It made me that much more determined to do better—and really, not embarrass myself more in front of Carolynn.

I let go of the wall and continued practicing circles, doing my best to keep my balance while pushing up my speed.

Carolynn stayed near me, sprinkling in some encouragement along with some more guidance.

Just when I thought I was starting to get the hang of ice-skating, I lost my balance. But I shot out my arm and Carolynn grabbed it, steadying me. Her hand slid down to my hand and continued hanging on. I didn't let go either.

I looked at her with a sheepish grin. "Thanks," I said.

She smiled. "No problem."

I probably could've let go of her hand at that point, but I didn't want to in the slightest. Her gloved hand in mine just felt right, and I had a feeling it would be even better off the ice.

We kept skating, going around in circles or figure eights for a long time while I slowly improved.

At first, I felt like a polar bear trying to learn how to ride a bicycle, but after a while, I finally felt a little bit of confidence.

Especially with Carolynn right next to me.

"You're getting the hang of it." She beamed.

I squeezed her hand. "You think so? I'm pretty sure those preschoolers over there were laughing at me just now."

Carolynn laughed. I liked how close she stood to me. "They were not."

I pulled her along again, liking how connected I felt to her on the ice. "Let's practice

some more.”

15

CAROLYNN

I was exhausted by the time I got home.

The last few days had been like nothing else I'd ever experienced in my life, in a good way, but after all that ice-skating I was wiped out.

I showered, pulled on my favorite pajamas, and then promptly got into bed, wondering if Whit was just as tired as I was. I smiled at the memory of him learning to skate. Most guys would have been too macho to struggle something new like that, but he stuck with it until he could make a lap around the ice on his own.

Our list peeked out from my crafting bag at the foot of the bed. I reached over and grabbed it.

There were only two items left? How was that possible?

I tucked the notebook back and then lay there for a while just thinking about how quickly this Christmas season had gone by so far. I'd been so hesitant to even agree to this whole thing. Now I didn't want it to end, although I wouldn't admit that to my parents. I hardly wanted to admit it to myself.

An ache filled my chest, and I realized I was really going to miss hanging out with Whit when all of this was over. I was sure we'd be in some of the same classes at school, but I had a feeling it wouldn't be the same. Especially not with so many other

girls around. He was so handsome I was sure he'd have plenty of options. And if history told me anything, I was last on any guy's list.

Even knowing that, I couldn't help but hope for more. I played the last several days in my mind, smiling at the memories.

This had been the best Christmas I'd had in a long time, even if Christmas was still two days away. He'd taken all of the pressure off of the holiday and off of the crazy dynamic with my parents.

It was like, even though he'd been a perfect stranger, he'd made things perfect. Had been perfect.

Already, I didn't want to think about next Christmas without him. He was so easy to talk to. Was I crazy to hope he felt the same?

I grabbed my phone from my nightstand and texted him. Hopefully, he was still up.

Carolynn: Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. Can you believe it?

A minute later, three little dots began moving up and down on the screen, letting me know he was still awake and about to reply. I smiled, looking forward to his message.

Whit: Time flies when you're having fun.

A warm feeling spread in my chest. He was enjoying himself too.

Carolynn: We have just two items left on the list.

Whit: Really? Already? What are they?

I checked the list beside me before I began typing.

Carolynn: We've got to get an ornament from The Nutcracker. Then we can paint snowflakes on our nails at Vixen's.

Whit replied right away.

Whit: Wait. Both of us?

Carolynn: Yep :D

Whit: Okay, I don't have a problem with that. Just as long as it's with you ;)

That made me blush. He was very good at that.

Carolynn: You wouldn't rather play video games or something?

Whit: Nah, I'd rather hang out with you. It'll be fun.

I blushed again, thankful he couldn't see my face or how giddy I was at a simple text. Although, nothing seemed simple with Whit—it was all special. Not sure what to say in response but wanting the conversation to continue, I changed the subject.

Carolynn: So. What's your favorite Christmas tradition?

I saw those three little dots going for a couple minutes.

I began closing my eyes, letting them hydrate. I was physically tired but beyond happy we were talking and not just crossing items off a list.

Then my phone buzzed, letting me know he'd responded.

My eyebrows rose as I realized it was a voice message. Something about it seemed more special than a text. Maybe just because I loved the sound of his voice.

I pushed play and closed my eyes again as I listened.

Whit's voice rang clear as if he was right beside me. "My favorite Christmas tradition," he started. "Let's see. Christmas has always been different for us than other families since my parents have always had really demanding jobs. Ever since I can remember anyway.

"So there's never a lot of time to stay at home and do all the Christmassy things people in Garland do. But, on Christmas Eve, we always spend time together as a family. We have a tradition of baking cookies. When I was little, they were for Santa. Now that I'm older, they're still for Santa, I guess, but we eat them all before he gets here. It's my favorite thing to do, just the three of us. Things finally quiet down for an hour or two, before the craziness of Christmas Day."

He went quiet for a second before speaking again. "Yeah, that's my favorite tradition. Although this thing you and I've got going... I have a feeling it could have the makings of another great tradition. Don't you think?" I could almost hear the smile in his voice.

I definitely could see enjoying this time with him next year, I thought to myself.

It felt scary for some reason to text him back and say that.

So I told him the truth I was comfortable with sharing.

Carolynn: I've had more fun this year than I ever expected... Good night, Whit.

Whit: Good night, Christmas Carol.

My eyes closed, and I smiled as I pulled the covers up around me.

Whit had quickly become a good friend, maybe more. But I had a hard time looking to the future. So instead, I focused on right now. And for now, he made me happy.

16

WHIT

We had two items left on our Christmas list.

Just two.

I could hardly believe it. These past few days with Carolynn had flown by, when all I wanted was more time with her.

The next morning, we met at the nail salon called Vixen's in Garland.

"Ready for the best manicure you've ever had?" Carolynn asked with a familiar smile.

More like the only manicure I'd ever had.

"Ready," I replied with a firm voice and a salute. That made her laugh, which I liked. I had a feeling my days would become dull without her.

I followed Carolynn inside.

It was a really nice place. Every surface shined, and Christmas decorations filled every corner.

Ladies sat in a long row of chairs getting their nails done. In another corner, one lady

sat back with a thick red robe on and two thin slices of cucumber over her eyes. “I bet my mom would love this place,” I told Carolynn.

“Sounds like you need to bring her,” she said as we walked up to the front desk. A woman greeted us with a warm smile. “Welcome to Vixen’s. Do you have an appointment?”

“Uh...” I began.

“Yes, we do,” Carolynn stepped in expertly. “Ten o’clock for Carolynn.”

“Ah, yes, two deluxe manicures. Follow me, please.”

She led us to a table with two spots. We took a seat. “Can I bring you a beverage?” she asked.

A minute later, she was back with some juice and even some cookies.

“I could get used to this,” I told Carolynn. Breakfast had only been a couple of hours ago, but suddenly, I was starving.

She grinned. “I bet you could.”

In no time, a Vixen employee wearing a bright green apron sat down in front of us. She took my hands.

“What are we doing today?” she asked. She wasn’t my mom’s age, but she wasn’t our age either. Probably somewhere in between.

Carolynn jumped in. “Snowflakes,” she said. “Over clear polish.”

The woman nodded approvingly. “Matching snowflakes it is.”

Another employee joined her, and in no time, I had white delicate snowflakes painted on my nails. When they were done, they left us at our seats, saying we should let our nails dry for a few minutes under tiny fans.

“I knew you’d pull those off perfectly,” Carolynn told me.

I grinned. “Thanks. Although I’m surprised you’d be caught dead with Christmas stuff on you.”

She fought a smile. “What do you think?” Carolynn asked. “Have you ever been in a salon or spa before?”

“Actually,” I replied, “yeah. My mom’s big on self-care, so she has me and Dad accompany her all the time to get pedicures.”

“I like your mom already,” Carolynn said.

A few minutes later, we walked out of the salon. I noticed Carolynn kept looking at her nails, seeming pretty pleased. Maybe she was warming up to Christmas after all.

“Where to next?” I asked her.

She pulled the list out of her jeans pocket. “Let’s see.” She glanced at it. “Oh, yes. The Nutcracker. You’ll like it there.”

She took my hand. “Come on.”

When she let go of my hand a minute later, she didn’t say anything and neither did I, although I definitely wanted to reach back out for her hand.

We walked into The Nutcracker a minute later. It wasn't too far from a bar called Make it Schnappy, which made me chuckle to myself. Garland had the best names for places.

The Nutcracker was a tiny shop filled from top to bottom with all sorts of home goods and decorations, mostly for Christmas. There were tons and tons of unique ornaments, wreaths, and even wrapping paper.

"Wow," I said. "Garland has the best stuff."

Carolynn smiled. "I thought we could each pick out an ornament. You know, to commemorate your first Garland Christmas."

"Great idea," I said. We began looking around together.

It took a while for each of us to settle on a favorite. I wanted to take home about five different ornaments, but I liked Carolynn's idea of picking one that would always remind me of this year.

Finally, I held up a tiny but spectacularly crafted train. "I've got mine."

She turned around and held up a tiny snowman. "Me too."

We didn't have to explain each other's choices. That was the beauty of it. I knew what hers meant, and she knew what mine meant.

A charming old lady named Ms. Merriweather wrapped up our ornaments, and we were on our way.

"I guess this is it," Carolynn said when we left. The way she said it made me think (and hope) that, like me, she was kind of bummed that this whole adventure was

coming to an end.

“I guess you’re right,” I told her, trying to muster up the courage to tell her that I didn’t want this to mean that we would no longer hang out.

But before I could, she took something out of her crafting bag. “Here,” she said, handing me a cross-stitch. “I didn’t wrap it, but this is for you.”

I took it, holding it carefully so I could look at all the details on it. There was a train on there, with a mountain in the background. There were snowflakes all around. “Carolynn, this is great. Thank you.”

She shrugged, not quite meeting my eyes. “It’s no big deal. I’m glad you like it.”

It was a big deal to me though. I already knew where I wanted to hang it in my room. Another idea popped into my head too, though.

“Actually, there’s one more thing I want to add to the list, before we officially complete it.”

Carolynn’s brow furrowed. “What’s that?”

I grabbed her hand. “Come on.”

17

CAROLYNN

Whit wouldn't give me a single hint about what he wanted to add to the list. He just kept dragging me along behind him.

The only clue I had was that it involved the lodge because that's where we were headed.

I was out of breath by the time we got there, and so was he. But he had me wait in the warm lobby before I looked through the windows and saw him pull around a shiny blue snowmobile.

My mouth fell open, and I stepped outside. "A snowmobile?"

"Come on," he said with a grin, reaching his hand out to help me get on.

I hesitated. "I don't know about this, Whit." There wasn't a lot of room on that seat.

"Trust me," he said.

And I couldn't say no to that smile.

He helped me on before climbing on himself. He sat in front of me, with his hands on the handlebars. And I realized just how close we were.

My front pressed to his back, and I tried to reach back to give him room. But he glanced over his shoulder at me, eyes heated, and said, “Don’t make me beg to have your arms around me.”

Butterflies erupted in my stomach. Was Whit flirting with me?

Before I could overthink it, the engine roared, and I clutched on to him for dear life.

“Whit, I don’t know about this!” I shouted to him through the noise of the engine.

He turned back, another big grin on his face. “It’ll be fun.”

I hugged him tighter, and we took off.

We absolutely whizzed through the snow, making a turn back toward town. But then he turned off toward the main road.

Where were we going?

I tried to guess where we were heading, but everything I could think of was in town.

Right when I thought maybe we were simply riding around for the fun of it, we turned a corner and I saw it.

Mistletoe Hill.

At the top of the small tree-covered hill, there was a secluded place with no trees. Just a large rock where couples were known to sit and do more than just talk, blaming it on the mistletoe leaves.

Maybe he didn’t realize this was Mistletoe Hill, I thought.

Except he took the snowmobile straight up the hill like he knew exactly where he was going.

My heart beat just as fast as when we were flying over the snow.

I held on to him even tighter, his warm body shielding me from the cold air.

Finally, we made it to the rock, and he turned off the snowmobile.

He got off and held his hand out to me again.

I couldn't do anything but stare at him, shocked.

Was this actually happening?

Whit let his hand drop, and instead, he took a step or two closer to me. "You said a kiss at Mistletoe Hill was a Christmas staple around here." He paused, looking at me with the most mesmerizing brown eyes. "I wanted to share it with you."

I didn't trust myself to speak. Instead, I lifted my hand for him. Before I knew it, he'd helped me off the snowmobile.

He led me toward the rock, and we sat on top of it, surrounded by trees. "It's beautiful up here," he said softly.

"Yeah, it is," I managed. Everything seemed so still, like even the wind was holding its breath to see what would happen next.

He turned to face me, held my gloved hands in his. "This has been the best Christmas I've had in a long time."

I smiled. “Me too.” I meant it.

Whit looked so steady, but I thought I might pass out from nerves. My heart was pounding inside my chest.

Slowly, he leaned in, and I closed my eyes in response.

Before I could overthink it, his lips were on mine. All at once, it felt sweet and powerful and about a thousand other emotions.

His hands went to my waist. My hands went to his shoulders, as if I’d somehow learned this dance without knowing it.

This was the most amazing Christmas Eve ever. Maybe my wish on the Garland Christmas star had come true.

A persistent buzz interrupted us. We pulled back, and Whit grabbed his phone from his pocket. “It’s my dad,” he said sheepishly. “He needs the snowmobile back. There’s an emergency.” He took my hand. “Come on.”

Just like that, the moment was over.

As we rode back to the lodge, I couldn’t help but wonder what the kiss meant to him. Was it the start of something more? Or the last item crossed off our list?

Despite the high I felt at my first kiss, my heart sank as I realized... our time together could be over.

18

WHIT

The whole way back to the lodge, I could hardly concentrate on what I was doing. I couldn't stop thinking about Mistletoe Hill and Carolyn's mouth on mine or her arms around my waist, her cheek pressed to my back.

But somehow, we made it back.

Dad was waiting for us in front of the lobby, a worried crease in his brow. He said a quick hello to Carolyn and gave me an apologetic look before hopping on the snowmobile and taking off.

As the engine's roar faded, Carolyn said, "I should head home."

For a second, I wondered if she was upset or something, but she added, "I have dinner with my dad tonight." She toed her boot in the snow then looked up at me. "See you later?" she asked.

I nodded even though I didn't want to say bye to her yet. "I'll walk you home?" I offered.

But she gave my hand a squeeze and said, "It's okay." She let go of my hand and turned to go into town.

I stared after her for a second before the cold started seeping through my clothes. I

didn't have Carolynn nearby to keep me warm anymore. So I walked into the lodge and found Mom cleaning up and tidying the gathering area. Since I had nothing better to do and she seemed tired, I helped her out.

While she wiped down the furniture, I vacuumed the floor of the gathering area. If there was one thing I knew about Mom, it was that she prided herself on how clean she kept the lodge. By the time we were done, the place was sparkling.

Before Mom could move on to the stairs, Dad was back.

He walked in and took off his gloves and coat with a sigh. "Well, I got them to the 24-hour clinic. They're going to be just fine. Poor guy won't be doing much snowshoeing for a while, though. His ankle was sprained pretty badly."

Mom went over to him and kissed him on the cheek. "Well, I'm glad you were around to help."

Then she turned to face me, still holding on to Dad. "Anyway, it's Christmas Eve. You know what that means. How about some cookies?"

"Don't have to tell me twice," I said. "I'm sure I could eat at least a dozen."

Dad grinned. "I'm sure you could, kid."

No matter how busy Christmas Eve got, we never used frozen or pre-made cookie dough. We always made our chocolate chip cookies from scratch.

I sifted the flour while Dad put on some music and lined some trays with parchment paper. Meanwhile, Mom opened up a bag of chocolate chips. In no time, we were rolling up perfectly sized balls of dough and placing them on the trays.

Mom indulged in some leftover cookie dough while the cookies baked in the oven.
“This never gets old.”

Dad took her hand, and they danced to the music for a couple minutes. It wasn't long before Mom grabbed my hand, and I proceeded to twirl her.

I was not a great dancer, but I figured it was a good skill to have, especially with a pretty girl like Carolynn around.

I passed Mom back to Dad, and I watched them dance like they were newlyweds.

That was the kind of relationship I wanted one day. I wanted it with Carolynn.

Before I knew it, my mind was transported back to Mistletoe Hill.

Her blue eyes looking up at me. The crisp frigid air against my skin. Her nose cold against my cheek.

What would happen once the Christmas season was over? All of this had started because my parents had wanted me to make a friend here in Garland.

I'd gotten way more than I'd bargained for with Carolynn. She was perfect, and I didn't want things to end or change between us.

The sound of my parents laughing brought me back down to Earth.

They seemed to remember that I was in the room.

“How was your first Christmas season in Garland, hon?” Mom asked.

She sat down at the breakfast table in the kitchen, and Dad and I followed suit.

“Good,” I replied. “I’ve enjoyed it more than you know.”

Dad put his arm around Mom. “Well, Carolyn’s dad said he’ll have the rest of the payment for you tomorrow. I’m sure you’ll want to make plans to see your friends soon.”

“It’s okay, Dad,” I replied. “I don’t want the money. It doesn’t feel right anymore. Carolyn’s become a real friend to me.”

Dad nodded. “Okay, if that’s the way you feel. I’ll let him know.”

CAROLYNN

The next day was Christmas morning, and this year, it was Dad's turn to spend it with me.

So I'd packed up my things after I'd gotten home yesterday and headed to his house.

While his house was in Garland, too, and it was nice enough, I still missed my bed and my room at Mom's house. That's where I stayed throughout the week, while I spent most weekends with Dad.

This was the part of the holidays I hated the most. I couldn't just stay in one place. I had to be traded back and forth every single year like a library book being shared between patrons.

But I tried to focus on what I was grateful for, like how hard my dad tried to make Christmas morning special, even though I wasn't a little kid anymore. He had several presents under the tree for me. So I went to get a box cutter while he waited in the living room on the couch with a cup of coffee.

I dug through the junk drawer in the kitchen, wondering what Dad had gotten me. I was hoping for more cross-stitching and crochet supplies, but really, I had gotten everything I wished for this Christmas: to enjoy myself. It hadn't happened the way I imagined... Spending it with Whit was even better.

I kept rummaging, taking out a large envelope and setting it on the counter so I could see where the box cutter was hiding. That's when I noticed Whit's name in a messy scrawl on the front of the envelope.

I picked it up. Had I read that right? Then again, not a ton of names started with a W.

Yeah, it definitely said Whit.

I froze for a second, wondering what an envelope with his name on it was doing in my dad's house.

Without even thinking about it, I peeked inside the unsealed envelope, pulling out the flap. There was a significant stack of cash in there.

Now I was even more confused.

What did this mean?

With the box cutter completely forgotten and hardly feeling my legs, I made my way to the living room.

"Dad?" I said, holding up the envelope. "What's this?"

Dad quickly sat up from the couch. "Oh, that," he said.

"Yeah," I replied. "What's this about?"

Right away, I could tell he didn't want to answer the question, which only made the pit in my stomach grow larger.

"Well," he said. "Lots of kids have winter jobs, so I wanted to make sure he wasn't

worried about working while spending time with you.”

My brain short circuited. “You’re paying him?” I managed. “And he knew about it?”

Dad cleared his throat. “Well, your mom and I know how hard the holidays can be for you, honey, and we just wanted you to have fun...”

It was like he’d dumped ice water over my head. Just when I thought I had a holiday free of my parents’ antics, they’d been pulling the strings all along. It made my stomach turn. Because I’d thought what Whit and I shared was real, not him performing a job for compensation. “So, all along, you were paying him to hang out with me?” I repeated, wishing that he’d correct me. If not, I thought I was going to throw up.

“I just wanted to make sure he didn’t miss out on the cash he could have made with a part time job,” Dad told me, but I was hardly hearing him anymore.

The envelope fell from my hand. I turned tail and left the room. If I stayed, I would say something I’d regret. Or worse, I’d start crying and not be able to stop.

I made it to my room and shut the door behind me, hard.

Slowly, I got into bed and pulled the covers around me. My entire body felt numb.

I couldn’t stop playing back every interaction with Whit in my mind. And now I realized he always insisted on paying.

Riding the train, making the snowman, eating at Scrooge’s, getting our nails done...

Kissing at Mistletoe Hill.

It had all been for money.

He hadn't just done it because his parents made him. The only reason he'd hung out with me was because my parents had paid him to.

I shut my eyes and pulled the covers tighter around me like I could smother the flaming hot pain slicing through me. The tears came anyway.

I'd come to have real feelings for Whit, but spending time with me had just been a part-time holiday job for him.

I should've known a guy like him would never go for a girl like me.

But I had wanted it to be true so bad.

I'd wanted my Christmas wish to come true.

Well, it looked like Christmas wishes didn't come true after all, not when I'd wished for my parents to stay together, and not even now.

This was truly the worst Christmas ever, which was really saying something.

More and more tears streamed down my face.

A few minutes later, Dad knocked on my door, but I ignored him.

I couldn't believe my parents had done this to me.

This was a thousand times worse than doing all of their stupid Christmas activities.

How could they be so heartless?

And Whit.

How could he do this? I'd genuinely thought he was a good guy. But all along, he'd just been doing it for the money. He was a really good actor, making the lonely girl fall for him.

I had half a mind to confront him about it, give him a piece of my mind.

But I didn't think my heart could handle it.

Instead, things were over between us. I was not going to talk to him at all, ever again.

20

WHIT

I woke up in the morning, a smile on my face as I remembered my first kiss with Carolynn.

When my parents told me I was going to be spending Christmas with a local, I thought I'd just be seeing the sights of Garland. Maybe a few behind-the-scenes spots while getting a little cash to see my friends back home.

Meeting Carolynn, and falling for her, had never been part of my plan; it was better.

I got my phone off the nightstand and sent her a text.

Whit: Merry Christmas, beautiful.

Part of me hoped she would reply right away, but I knew that was unrealistic. Even though Christmas was the busiest day for my parents at the lodge and we didn't get much family time until dinner, I knew her parents really cared about making Christmas special for her. Surely she was busy with breakfast and opening presents. I hoped she got everything she wished for on the Christmas star.

After a couple minutes of waiting, I got dressed and then went to see what my parents were doing. They looked slammed, making sure the guests had everything they needed. I went to help Mom fold fresh towels from the dryer, but she shooed me with a hand towel.

“No work for you on Christmas,” she said with an exasperated smile. “Go have some fun, enjoy yourself.”

I raised my hands in surrender. “Fine.”

She gave me a gentle smile. “Starting tomorrow, the busy season will finally start dying down. We’ll have a small crowd either stick around or come in for New Year’s, but nothing crazy like the Christmas season, and I promise we’ll get more time together. But for now, I want you to have a nice holiday. Maybe take a spin on the snowmobile? See if Carolynn’s free?”

I nodded. “Thanks, Mom.” After finding my dad and wishing him a merry Christmas, I went outside and got the snowmobile from the shed. It felt strangely empty without Carolynn riding with me, her arms around my waist, her cheek warm against my back.

I checked my phone to see if she’d replied. Nothing.

Shoving down my disappointment, I fired up the engine and took off.

In the next few hours, I rode around the lodge grounds and out even farther into the forest, going past Mistletoe Hill and remembering my first kiss with Carolynn before swinging around and making it back to the lodge. It was fun to ride through the trees and see Garland from above, smoke puffing up from chimneys, homes and roads poking out from a blanket of snow.

But I was getting cold, so I rode back to the lodge, even though my parents were busy working.

After putting the snowmobile back in the shed, I warmed up inside and then made my way into town.

The first place I passed was the skating rink. Right away, I thought about Carolynn teaching me to ice skate and what it was like to watch her move gracefully across the ice. It seemed like everywhere I went I had a memory with her—I couldn't wait to make more.

I walked around town for a while popping in and out of businesses that were open. There was a sizable crowd out shopping and spending time together. Garland didn't seem to be one of those places that completely shut down on Christmas Day. In fact, it looked more like everyone came out to eat, shop, and be merry.

Which only made me wonder more about Carolynn. Was she out here with her family? Was she alright?

I checked my phone again. Why hadn't she spoken to me at all today?

A new text came through my phone, and my hopes rose, until I saw it was a message from my mom.

Mom: We're starting on dinner. Should be ready in an hour.

With a sigh, I changed direction to make it back home.

After dinner, I checked my phone again for what felt like the millionth time with no message from Carolynn.

Dad must have seen my features fall, because he asked, "Everything alright?"

I nodded. "Yeah." But I didn't elaborate. "It's Christmas. Let's celebrate."

I was sure I'd hear from Carolynn tomorrow, even if a small but growing part of me felt like maybe something was off.

* * *

The next morning, I texted her again after breakfast despite the sense of dread growing in the pit of my stomach.

Whit: Hey, Christmas Carol. Want to go ice-skating again?

I waited and waited, but still no reply.

Now I knew for sure: something was wrong.

I racked my brain trying to figure out what I had done. But I couldn't think of anything. Was she having second thoughts about our kiss at Mistletoe Hill? That was the only thing I could think of.

If that was the case, I needed to see her. I needed to find her, talk to her, and clear this up. Because being her friend was better than nothing.

It was never my intention to make her uncomfortable, and if that was the case, I'd apologize or do whatever it took to fix things between us.

I couldn't stick around the lodge knowing something was wrong, so I headed into town, hoping I could come up with a plan to fix the issue. But how was I going to do that if she didn't respond to my text messages and tell me what I'd done?

I sent her one more message.

Whit: Everything okay?

After waiting for something, anything, from her after several minutes, I gave up.

All I could do was walk around and try to get my mind off of it for now.

But I decided that if she didn't respond by lunchtime, then maybe I'd go to her house and find out what was going on that way.

She had to talk to me, right? Tell me what was going on?

It was crazy how quickly I'd gotten used to having her in my life.

I missed her like crazy too.

As I neared Scrooge's, my stomach grumbled. I hadn't had much breakfast, being more focused on Carolynn than anything else. Surely by now Scrooge had forgotten me and would let me come in to eat.

I took a peek through the window, only to be completely surprised by what I saw.

It was Carolynn.

She sat at a booth toward the back alone. Wearing her stocking cap and her head tilted toward the table, she would've been easy to miss, but I would've recognized her anywhere, especially her long blonde hair.

She picked despondently at her lunch, an orange soda in front of her plate. Then I noticed her phone sitting on the table.

It was like a punch to the gut.

She was ignoring me, and I was going to find out why.

21

CAROLYNN

I had escaped to Scrooge's for the time being, but at some point, I'd have to go back home and face my parents.

I ignored the texts from my parents and wiped away the tears threatening to run down my cheeks.

Just when I thought Christmas with my parents couldn't get any worse, they had paid a boy to hang out with me.

I felt so humiliated. All this time I thought I was making a friend, maybe even more, but all I was making was a fool of myself. Now, every memory I looked back on of Whit and me was layered with shame. He had to have thought I was pathetic, needing my parents to pay someone to spend time with me.

Scrooge came by, and I quickly got it together and pretended to study the menu. "What'll you have?" he asked.

I ordered my usual burger and fries, with an orange soda.

Scrooge had it out in no time, and I began eating. Even though I was hungry, I wasn't in a big mood to eat. I let out a sigh as I looked at my meal. Any other day, this would have been perfect—getting some time to myself with the best food in town. But today, I just felt sad.

Scrooge must've wondered if something was wrong with the food because he came over again. "Everything okay?"

Exhaling carefully, I looked up at him. "How do you do it, Scrooge? How do you keep from celebrating Christmas every year?"

He grunted. "Christmas is for family. It's easy to avoid the whole thing when you don't have a family around anymore." He looked like he had half a mind to walk off, but he didn't.

I felt kind of bad for him, since he didn't have a family anymore, but I was also tired of dealing with mine.

His dark brown eyes shifted from the left to the right. And then he sighed and ran a hand over his scruff. "Is this about that boy?" he said gruffly. I was sure he was wondering if he needed to hurl a frying pan the next time Whit came in here.

I shrugged my shoulders. "It's complicated."

"Well, I know family can be complicated too," he said. "I'll tell ya one thing. Even if they're difficult, they usually are doing what they think is best because they love you."

I stared up at Scrooge. I'd never heard him talk this much before, especially about family.

"I know family can have their difficulties and their quirks, but... you never know. One day, they can be here, then gone the next."

I nodded. "You're right."

Already, I could feel the anger at my parents dissipating a little. Dad had said how hard it was to see me sad around the holidays, and being with Whit had made me happy—even it felt painful now that I knew the truth.

Even if I missed what I thought we had, I wasn't sure I wanted to see him ever again. Or that I could stomach the humiliation of facing him.

Just then, the bells on the front door rang out. We both turned to see who it was.

I gasped a little under my breath, seeing Whit come through the door, and Scrooge leaned closer. "Do I need to kick that kid out again?" he asked quietly.

"No," I replied quickly. The last thing I needed was another scene at Scrooge's. Even though it was the day after Christmas, the diner was far from empty. "I'm okay."

Scrooge looked as dubious as I felt as he left and Whit approached my table.

I shifted uncomfortably, not meeting his eyes.

"Hey," he said quietly. "Is it okay if I sit down?"

I finally looked up at him, surprised to see the hurt in his eyes. The shock I felt had me nodding and saying, "Sure."

He sat across from me. "I got worried when I didn't hear from you."

I didn't say anything. Not sure what to say, really. There was so many thoughts swirling through my mind that I could share, but I didn't want to be embarrassed more by crying in this diner.

"Talk to me, Carolynn? What is it?" he pleaded. "I thought we were friends?"

“Friends?” I said drily. Hurt crept through the bitterness in my voice. “Did you think I would never find out?”

He looked more puzzled than ever. “Find what out?”

He really was a good actor, but I wasn’t convinced anymore. “I know, Whit,” I told him. “I know that my parents paid you to spend time with me.”

22

WHIT

I couldn't believe what was happening. I'd never expected Carolynn to find out about her parents paying me.

But the thing was, I'd never seen it as getting paid to hang out with her. Just a chance to go see my friends.

Our arrangement had been as much for me as it had been for her. But she had found out and clearly assumed the worst—that what we shared didn't matter to me at all. Desperation drove me to think of a way to clear this up and get back to what we had before. I missed her, but even worse than missing her was seeing her in this much pain.

“How could you do this to me?” she asked, hurt shining in her pretty blue eyes. “I trusted you.”

“Carolynn,” I tried, my voice low. “It's not what you think. It wasn't like that.”

“What was it then?” she said, anger in her voice. Clearly, she was trying to keep her voice down too. “Please explain, because I hate feeling like this.”

But I struggled to find the right words. “My parents, they wanted me to make some friends,” I began.

“But you weren’t interested,” she accused, voice shaking. “Is that why my parents paid you?”

“It’s been hard here for me, living in Garland but finishing my classes at my old school online. Honestly, I would have hung out with you for free just to not be by myself for a little bit. But then they offered to pay me before I could even say that,” I told her. “I thought I could use the money to visit my friends during spring break because I miss them so much. But after I got to know you, I turned it down. I didn’t care about the money.”

“You turned it down?”

I nodded.

She shook her head, keeping her voice almost in a whisper. “It doesn’t matter. You lied to me. You should’ve told me the truth from the beginning.” She crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked away. Even so, I saw the tears in her eyes.

My heart sank.

A few people nearby were starting to stare at us, but I tried to keep my attention on Carolynn. The last thing I needed was to get kicked out again by Scrooge. Although, if I were him, I’d probably do the same thing if I saw some bozo making Carolynn cry.

“You’re right,” I replied. “I should’ve just been upfront about it. But be honest. Would you have stuck around?”

She turned to me, fire in her gaze.

“Or would you have refused?”

The embers in her eyes simmered down just a bit.

“This wasn’t just me in it for the money, Carolynn. I needed this. You. I’ve had nobody here,” I went on. “If I had to do it again, I wouldn’t have even taken the stupid money.”

She wiped at her eyes quickly, and I wished in that moment I could just take her hand and comfort her.

“I get that,” she sniffed, “but the worst part of all of this was finding out the way I did. Being in the dark like an idiot when all of you knew. Finding out our friendship was based on a lie. It makes me wonder if anything you said to me was true.”

I opened my mouth, unsure of what I could say to that, but then she got up and said, “I need to go.”

She dropped a few bills on the table and left the restaurant, hurrying down the sidewalk.

Instead of chasing her, I let her go, knowing it would do no good to go after her. She didn’t want to be near me anymore, and I had to respect that. Even if I hated it.

Even if it killed me that things between us were probably over for good. After all, it was my fault for not just telling her what was in it for me, when I knew all along what was in it for her.

I sank like a snowman after a day in the sun, staring at the table in front of me and then glancing around. The people in a booth nearby hastily went back to eating.

I sighed, wondering how I was ever going to get out of this mess. I’d already tried explaining to Carolynn how I felt, but it was no use.

Now I'd lost my only friend and the girl I was so crazy about. I was hoping to ask her to be my girlfriend on New Year's Eve at the party she told me about.

Scrooge came over to the booth, and I thought for sure he was going to kick me out. Instead, he started picking up Carolynn's plate and drink.

"You know," he said, not making eye contact, just continuing about his cleanup, "The people who take the longest to let someone in are really the ones who have the hardest time getting hurt."

I stared up at him. I hadn't ever heard him string that many words together, and I definitely hadn't been expecting him to say something so deep. "What do I do?" I asked him.

"She let you in," he said. "She got hurt. Now you need to find a way to make it right." He sauntered off with the plates, and I was left there on my own.

I let out a frustrated sigh. I'd tried to make things right already.

But as I got up and left the diner, I wondered... was there another way?

23

CAROLYNN

My head was spinning with the conversation—or argument—I’d just had with Whit.

I had to get away from him, his eyes that saw too much, his cologne that scattered my brain cells, his explanations that made too much sense and frustrated me at the same time.

I had to think about it all. Or maybe put all thoughts of Whit out of my mind; I had no idea which would be better.

I wiped the tears streaming down my face. The cold weather instantly turned the hot salt water frigid as I walked down the sidewalk, trying not to make eye contact with anyone passing by. I still felt embarrassed, angry, and shocked. And now I was crying in public for the second time today.

He’d seemed genuine when he was talking to me just a few minutes ago, but it felt impossible to let go of the feelings of betrayal and humiliation.

I wasn’t sure I could ever live it down.

After everything I’d been through with my parents’ divorce, I’d already been skeptical of relationships. This seemed like the final nail in the coffin.

Maybe I could be happy with just my friends—forget about boys altogether. A swell

of pain went through my chest as I realized just how much I missed them. I knew they'd have good advice for me.

I got out my phone and started a text in our group chat, only to delete it.

This was dumb. I felt dumb. It would be too embarrassing to admit what happened to them.

I wasn't sure I would ever be ready to talk about this.

So I shoved my phone back in my pocket and kept walking.

Somehow, I ended up at my favorite spot in Garland, the bookstore. The smell of books mixed with soft music always had a way of making me feel better, even now.

I took a seat at the farthest chair in the back, surrounded by shelves with my back to the door. After several deep breaths, I dug out my new cross-stitch project. A few stitches in, I put it away again in frustration.

Even cross-stitching wasn't helping me escape the madness that was my mind for a few minutes.

I took another deep breath, hoping it would dissolve the frog in my throat.

Then the sound of my name had me quickly wiping at my eyes and turning around.

"Carolynn, is that you?" I heard, trying to locate the source of the voice.

Then I spotted her. It was Mrs. Curran from Santa's Bag winding around one of the shelves

“I thought I recognized those long blonde curls coming in here,” she said with a kind smile.

“Hi,” I mustered. If she noticed my tears, she didn’t say.

She stuck her hand into her tote bag, clearly looking for something. “I’m glad I ran into you.” She must’ve found what she was looking for before because she finally took her hand out of the bag and held something out to me.

Wait, it was a...

“Your snow globe,” she beamed. “It’s ready. I’ve been meaning to give it to you.”

I’d forgotten all about the custom snow globes she was making this year. “But I didn’t order one,” I said.

“It’s your Christmas gift, dear. From that young man.” She handed it to me, and just like that, there were tears in my eyes again. “Do you like it?” she asked with a smile.

I nodded quickly, trying not to break down at what I saw, at her kindness. “It’s beautiful.”

And it was.

There was Whit, and there was me. Little miniature versions of us, standing in front of the snowman we’d built for the annual Garland snowman competition.

I couldn’t help it. A tear rolled down my cheek.

Whit and I’d had so much fun together. Now it was all over.

Worst of all, I'd really let myself believe that he liked me as more than a friend. That part hurt the most.

"Honey, are you okay?" Mrs. Curran. "Did something upset you?"

I wiped away the fresh wave of tears, and before I could lie and say I was okay, someone else walked into the bookstore.

"Carolynn, there you are." It was my dad. "I was hoping I'd find you here."

Quickly wiping my eyes, I got up, the snow globe in my hands. "Thanks, Mrs. Curran. I love it."

She patted my shoulder, and I walked over to my dad. "Hey, Dad," I managed.

"Hey, pumpkin. Look, can we talk?" he said, tilting his head toward the door.

I nodded and followed him out of the shop. I was ready to be done crying in public.

As we walked home, Dad made his case.

"Listen, I'm sorry for what happened, Carolynn. I understand now why you're so upset about me paying Whit and all. I should've thought it through better or at least told you."

I didn't say anything, just kept walking.

"I guess I just felt guilty that you couldn't have the Christmas you really deserved, you know?"

We saw a family walk past us. In one swift move, the dad tossed his young daughter

up onto his shoulders and she laughed with glee.

We kept walking, and I tore my gaze away from them.

“I remember when you were that little,” Dad said with a wry smile. “Good times, huh?”

I blinked back tears. They had been the best times. But now they were over.

“I know how hard it must be around the holidays, with all the happy, whole families in Garland. I’m sorry,” he said. “I just wanted you to have a fun Christmas this year.” His voice broke a little, and I felt bad.

Without saying a word, I hung on to his arm and we kept walking. Scrooge was right—he loved me and was just doing his best. “It’s okay,” I finally said. “Let’s just forget about it.”

“Maybe you would’ve done the same thing in my position,” Dad went on. “If you saw how miserable your kid was and you didn’t know what else to do.”

“Maybe,” I replied. “I can’t pretend to understand how a parent brain works,” I quipped.

That got a chuckle out of him. “And you know, your payment was getting out of Christmas, so really, each of you got paid if you think about it.”

“That’s true,” I said. I had kind of forgotten about that part. “I forgive you, Dad. I just don’t know if I can forgive Whit. So much has happened...”

We continued walking, still several minutes away from home.

Dad sighed. "Relationships aren't just happily ever after like in the movies, you know."

"I know," I said, keeping my eyes on the sidewalk. Even though he and Mom tried to hide it from me, I'd heard the tense whispers and noticed how they wouldn't make eye contact for a while before the divorce.

"Relationships require forgiveness," he said. "You have to decide what mistakes are worth accepting and forgiving and which ones aren't."

We reached our house, Dad's words echoing in my mind. Once we got inside, I told him I was tired and going to take a nap.

He kissed the top of my head. "I love you, Car."

"I love you too," I said. I meant it.

Then I went to my room and lay down. And even though I'd hoped to sleep away my troubles, I couldn't. There were a million thoughts racing through my consciousness, and I couldn't sort them all out.

Especially when it came to what Dad had said about relationships requiring forgiveness.

Was the mistake Whit made worth forgiving?

24

WHIT

I picked up some snow and packed it carefully onto the top of the igloo. It was coming along nicely despite being kind of small. Only young children could fit through the entrance.

Even so, building this with some of the kids staying at the lodge was a good distraction from everything that had gone down with Carolynn.

“This is the best igloo I’ve ever seen!” a kid next to me shouted before he crawled inside the structure.

“I hope so,” I replied. “We’ve spent all afternoon on this thing.”

He crawled back out, and another kid, a little girl, crawled in his place. “Whoa!” she cried. Her words were muffled by all the snow. “I’ve never been in an igloo before.”

My lips tugged up at her excitement. “Well, now you have,” I told her as I packed more snow around the entrance.

Maybe I wasn’t a great ice skater yet, but igloo making seemed to be a skill of mine.

“Let’s make a snow family for the igloo,” the little girl said. “A snow girl and a snow boy.”

“Great idea,” I said, and we got to work making the base of the snow people.

“Whitney, have you ever had a girlfriend?” another one of the boys asked me. Whit wasn’t even short for Whitney. I wasn’t sure if he was picking on me or just confused.

“Um, it’s Whit,” I reminded him. “And uh, that’s kind of a personal question.”

But both kids were still waiting for my answer. Right away, my mind went to Carolynn. She had sort of become my girlfriend. Maybe. Before it all ended.

“Not really,” I said lamely as we worked.

I’d come out here to get my mind away from Carolynn, and here I was, thinking about her again. It was hard to stop thinking about her, especially when building snowmen had been one of the fun things we’d done together.

I still remembered that first day we’d spent with each other, riding the Garland Express and seeing how much she hated Christmas. Thinking she was beautiful but guarded.

She was the kind of person who was rough around the edges but had a heart of gold she only showed a select few. It was my favorite thing about her—feeling like I was in on a special secret. It was clear to me that she didn’t show everyone her kind interior right away, but after a while, she had trusted me enough to show me her true self.

A fresh wave of guilt struck my chest.

She’d let me in and allowed herself to be vulnerable enough to enjoy Christmas for once, only to feel betrayed by me in the end. Would she have been better off

schlepping between her parents' houses, overwhelmed with activities and trying to act like she was having a good time?

I hated that I even had to wonder.

I kicked at a pile of snow and sighed.

"Are you okay, Whitney?" the same kid asked me.

"Yeah," I replied halfheartedly, giving up on correcting him.

I wasn't, really, but I wasn't about to explain the train wreck that was my love life to an eight-year-old.

His little brother came up to me. "My dad says it's okay to kick snow if you're upset. Just don't kick people. Or something someone built."

"Sounds like good advice," I said.

"Are you mad at somebody? Like your best friend?" he asked me.

"Just myself," I replied, and we continued working on our snow girl.

After a while, their parents called them in so they could go get lunch. They said goodbye, and I waved back before heading inside myself.

It was freezing cold outside, and my fingers were numb even through my gloves, so I had to give up on being busy and go inside to warm up.

As I walked through the lobby, an older woman came in, and I immediately recognized her. It was the lady from The Nutcracker.

To my surprise, she spotted me and waved. I stopped in my tracks as she made her way over to me.

“Oh, I’m glad I ran into you, young man,” she said. She had to be a full foot shorter than me. She kind of reminded me of my grandma.

“Your snow globe is ready,” she said, pulling a small box out of a large bag. She handed it to me, and I took it, mostly puzzled before realizing this was the snow globe I had ordered for Carolynn and me.

“I already gave Carolynn hers yesterday. She loved it,” she told me.

“Good,” I said quietly. “I hoped she would. Thank you.”

Her eyes lingered on me for a moment, and she looked like she wanted to say something. Instead, she patted my back and was off again. It seemed she had several orders to deliver to the lodge because she headed over to my mom, who stood at the front desk.

Meanwhile, I studied the snow globe. It was perfect.

A tiny, curvy figure with blonde hair stood next to a taller figure with short dark hair. It was us. With a snowman behind us and snow all around. I shook the globe and watched the snow fall around us.

It was magical, just like the last several days with Carolynn.

Staring at this globe, I knew one thing. I had to find a way to get her back.

I hadn’t thought of anything yet, but there had to be something I could do.

I walked back home and placed the snow globe carefully on my dresser.

As I had some lunch, I thought things over. I was pretty sure I needed some sort of grand gesture, just like in those cheesy movies my mom liked to watch this time of year. And maybe some flannel. The guys were always wearing flannel in those movies.

After I finished eating, I got back into my coat and gloves. Then I pulled my boots on and headed into town.

I had an idea, and I needed to get back to The Nutcracker. When I walked through the heavy wooden doors, I spotted what I was looking for on the shelf. I'd seen this before but hadn't thought much of it.

Now, it might be the answer to getting Carolynn back.

I grabbed the box off the shelf and headed to the register.

Ms. Merriweather was there, and she smiled wide when she saw me. "Hello again!"

"Hi," I replied.

"Hello." She took the box and scanned it. "Starting a new project, I see."

I nodded. "A special project, for Carolynn."

She winked at me. "Good luck."

Something about her words felt like magic. Goosebumps ran down my neck, but I ignored the feeling, paid for the kit, and headed home.

I had work to do.

25

CAROLYNN

The sound of the doorbell woke me. I hadn't even realized I'd fallen asleep.

My latest cross-stitch project had fallen to the living room floor beside me, and my hair had to be a mess.

I sat up on the couch, brushing the blond strands out of my face. "Mom?" I called.

I heard her call back from the kitchen. "Honey, can you get that?"

Not like I have much dignity left, I thought. Between Whit and then crying all over town.

I pushed the thick blanket off my legs and walked over to the door, wiping sleep sand from my eyes. On the way, I peeked outside the window, but no one was there.

So I pulled open the front door seeing small package wrapped in matte red paper on the front step. With my eyebrows drawing together, I picked it up. There wasn't any postage on the sides... This must have been hand-delivered.

I stepped out onto the porch, the concrete cold under my bare feet, and glanced around. The streets were empty, a light dusting of snow on the pavement. Just a set of footprints remained in the thin layer of snow.

“Who is it?” Mom called from the kitchen.

With the package under my arm, I closed the door behind me. “It’s just a package!”

Probably something from a friend of hers , I thought. They always did a gift exchange around Christmastime.

But as I walked to the kitchen, looking for her name on the box, I didn’t find it... I found my name instead.

I took a seat on the couch to inspect the package closer. There was no return address or even a “From” label. Just my name.

Carefully, I tore open the package to find out what was inside. Layers of red and gold tissue paper covered a small fabric square, cross-stitched with a beautiful Christmas-green background with creamy white cursive lettering that said, “I’m sorry.” My chest tightened, realizing who could be behind the delivery. Had Whit been this close to my house? Had he made this himself?

There was a tiny snowman in the corner of the design. My thumb went over it, feeling the stitches. I turned it over to examine the work and what I had thought was a cardboard backing was actually a card. I peeled back the tape to open the letter.

My breath hitched at the sight of his handwriting filling the page.

Dear Carolynn,

I would’ve cross-stitched this note too, but you probably would’ve been waiting until next Christmas for me to get it done.

That part made me giggle. Feeling a little lighter, I kept reading.

So please accept this note as my way of saying how sorry I am. You're right to be mad at me. I messed up by not being transparent, and if I could go back and do it again, I would tell you the truth. In a flash. But I can't.

I want you to know that I never saw our arrangement as being paid to hang out with you or anything like that. I was happy to get some money to see my friends back home in the spring. But to tell you the truth, I was also excited to meet someone and finally make a friend here in Garland.

Little did I know I would get to meet you. Getting to know you was the best Christmas gift I could have asked for. You're creative, strong-willed, determined, and so thoughtful (even if you don't want everyone to know). The week we spent together was one of the best in my life.

I hope you can forgive me, especially because I miss you.

If you're willing to give me another chance, will you meet me by the Garland Christmas tree at two o'clock today?

If the answer is no, I understand, and I'll keep my distance. But if the answer is yes, I promise this will never happen again.

Your friend,

Whit

I blew out my breath to keep the tears from falling down my face.

I looked over the letter again, hardly able to believe that Whit had actually written it for me. And the cross-stitch... It had probably taken him hours.

The truth was I missed Whit too. A lot. But I couldn't help but still feel torn about seeing him again.

I had always been careful to keep my guard up, especially around romance and boys. And the one time I hadn't, I'd ended up hurt.

But did I really want to lose Whit as a friend, or maybe even more, forever?

I glanced at the clock on the wall.

Two o'clock was going to roll around pretty soon. What if I couldn't decide by then? Would Whit think I hadn't forgiven him?

I also didn't want to be in limbo and undecided. That almost seemed like the worst option.

Mom walked into the living room. As she did, she wiped her hands on her apron. Her eyes traced me and landed on the cross-stitch sitting beside me on the couch.

"I'm guessing the package wasn't for me?" she asked.

I shook my head.

"Everything okay?" she questioned, but I could tell from the tone of her voice that she knew it wasn't. Taking a seat next to me, she pressed, "What is it?" But already, she was looking at the cross-stitch in my lap. "I'm guessing that's from Whit?" Along with Whit and Dad, she'd apologized for the situation. But even though I'd forgiven her, the jury was out on Whit, and I needed to make a decision.

"Yeah," I said, finally responding. I folded the letter back up. "He wants me to meet him later, if I decide to give him another chance," I added.

“And?” Mom asked. “What do you think? Are you going to go?”

I shrugged, determined to keep the tears at bay. It had been a long time since I let someone close enough to make me cry this much. “I don’t know.” I sighed. “My heart and my head are saying two different things.”

We’d never really talked about anything having to do with boys. Thankfully, she was staying pretty cool about it, taking her time to think over her response. “I can see why you’re hesitant,” she finally said. “It’s not easy when trust is lost between two people.”

I turned to her, wondering where she was going with this. “I just don’t want to go through this sort of thing again,” I said. I couldn’t bring myself to say the word breakup since Whit and I weren’t really more than friends, but that’s what all this felt like.

“Oh, honey,” she said. “That’s life. That’s relationships and being around people. Which you have to do.”

I smiled a little. “Do I?”

She nudged me, clearly knowing I was teasing. “Yes. You can’t stay in your room crafting forever. At some point, you’ll probably meet someone you really like and maybe even fall in love, and that means potentially getting hurt. But it doesn’t mean you don’t go through the experience.”

I furrowed my brow. “How can you say that? After everything you and Dad went through?”

Now she shrugged. “I’ve thought a lot about it, and if I’m being completely honest, I’d go back and marry your father again if I had it to do all over.”

“Really?” I asked. We’d never talked about this stuff before, at least not like this.

“Really,” she replied, and I could tell she meant it. “It was hard in the end, and even after, but we made a lot of really great memories. And had a family. You know, love between two people ends sometimes, but it’s beautiful while it lasts.” She gave me an encouraging smile.

I smiled back, then glanced at the cross-stitch in my hands. “Thanks, Mom.”

She stood up and gave me a kiss on the head, like she used to do when I was little. “It’s totally up to you to do what you think is right, but hopefully, that helped a little.” Then she walked back into the kitchen.

It did help. It definitely did.

I glanced at the clock. If I hurried, I’d have time to change and still make it by two.

26

WHIT

I was on the verge of thinking I should just head home when I turned around and saw her.

It was Carolynn. She'd come.

I couldn't help but give her a wide grin and wave as she approached me wearing a thick red coat, black leggings, and a gray stocking cap. Her cheeks were red, and she had a tentative smile on her lips. As she stopped just a couple feet from me, relief flooded my chest.

I knew I'd missed her, but it wasn't until that moment that I realized just how much.

"You came," I managed, voice thick with emotion.

She nodded. "I got your letter."

"I was hoping you would," I told her.

"And your cross-stitch too," she said, a smile on her face. "It did kinda look like a kindergartener made it, but it was sweet all the same."

I clutched my chest in mock pain, making her laugh, and I was happy things felt like they used to. Her laugh was quickly becoming one of my favorite sounds.

“Seriously, though,” I said. “I spent hours on that. I just wanted to make it up to you.”

She sort of nudged me, and I liked the contact. “Like I said, it was sweet.”

I thought I might kiss her then, but Rudolph rang his bell a few feet away. “Who’s ready for a sleigh ride?” he called.

It was just me and Carolynn, the way I’d requested.

“We are,” I said loudly.

Carolynn turned to me, a puzzled expression on her face. “Where are we going?” she asked. The way her blue eyes sparkled had my heart skipping a beat.

I gently moved a lock of hair from her face. “I thought I’d show you all the places we’ve been together,” I said, my eyes locked on hers. “Tell you what it all meant to me.”

“Oh,” she said, her voice hardly above a whisper.

“That sound okay?” I asked her softly.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

We got into the sleigh, sitting side by side, and when Rudolph asked if we were ready, we both nodded.

He got the horses to go, and Carolynn and I cuddled under a thick blanket as we went past every place we’d spent time together.

Our journey began at the Garland Express and the mountains. We rode past the train

station, admiring the view of the perfectly white snow.

“That’s where we made our list,” I said. “I’ll never forget it.”

I went on. “I thought you were great to talk to in the train compartment. And I can’t tell you how awesome it was to finally have someone to hang out with.”

The ride went on, and we reached the outskirts of town. We passed by Vixen’s spa, and I showed off my nails. “This was definitely in my top three. I might have to go back to get them redone.”

She grinned.

Next, we passed by the Santa’s Elves and the ice-skating rink. “Santa’s Elves was fun too,” I added. “Getting to know you more. Ice-skating had to be top two,” I told her. “It was a lot of fun having you teach me, even if I really sucked at it.”

Cocoa Corner was next. Where we first met, where I had my first cup of Garland hot cocoa. “I still remember the first time I saw you,” I told her, close to her ear. “You kind of took my breath away.”

Her gaze found mine, but she didn’t say anything at first. She just shook her head and glanced down like she couldn’t believe me. “Me?” she finally said.

“Yes, you,” I replied, wondering why she didn’t know how stunning she was. “I thought you were beautiful. Still do.”

Next was Scrooge’s. We didn’t go right past it, but it was close enough that we could see it. “Ah, Scrooge’s. Not my favorite, being tossed out on the street, but Scrooge makes a mean burger, I’ve got to admit.”

Carolynn began laughing, probably at the memory of Scrooge's forehead vein pulsing like it might burst and me getting kicked out. The sound was so contagious I joined in.

It had been embarrassing as heck for me, but it was funny now.

After a while, we rode past A Wonderful Film, and somehow, Carolynn ended up snuggled next to me, under my arm. Probably the cold, I told myself. But I hoped it was also something else. Like wanting to be close to me, how I wanted to be with her.

We didn't say anything for a while. I'd just point out every place that had been on our list.

Candy Cane Co.

Santa's Bag.

The Nutcracker.

Even a glance at Mistletoe Hill, far off in the distance.

So many memories. With her.

Pretty soon, we'd been everywhere on the list.

We finished up back at the Garland Christmas tree, at Cider Center.

The sleigh came to a slow and steady stop. My arm remained around Carolynn. I wasn't ready to leave, to separate from her.

I turned toward her, and she toward me.

“I never want to lose you, Christmas Carol,” I admitted.

Did she feel the same?

27

CAROLYNN

My heart pounded so hard inside my chest I was sure Whit had to hear it.

Listening to Whit describe the past week and a half blew me away. While this had started as a deal I'd made with my parents to avoid a holiday I dreaded—it had been special for him from the start.

As he helped me off the sleigh, my throat felt tight with emotion. “This was amazing,” I mustered.

He grinned. “One more thing for the list.”

“Another?” I said with a chuckle.

He took my hand and led me toward the Christmas tree.

It wasn't far.

As we walked, everything that had happened raced through my mind like a blur. Every single memory. The pain and hurt. His letter.

But by the time we arrived at the tree, my mind was clear. So was my heart.

I wanted Whit in my life.

As a friend... As more.

We stopped in front of the tree, and I turned to Whit. He did the same, but didn't say a word. Instead, his eyes searched my face.

"Being with you, everything we did together, has been the most fun I've had in a really long time," I said.

He smiled, and his hand lightly touched my cheek. "Me too."

Before I could chicken out, I said, "This year, at the star lighting ceremony, I wished that I could finally enjoy Christmas. I thought that would mean not celebrating at all." I laughed a little and turned toward the tree. Here we were, where I'd made that very wish what felt like forever ago. "But Garland gave me so much more. It gave me you."

He gently cupped my face and brought his mouth to mine. It was better than fireworks—it was magic, Garland magic.

When we broke apart, he smiled his familiar, kind smile. "You don't know how happy that makes me."

He pulled me in close for a hug, and we stayed like that for a while. I took it all in, never wanting to forget a second of it.

Whit was a wish come true.

* * *

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