

An Evergreen Christmas

By

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Chapter One

Dr. Holly Green stood in front of the 3rd floor hospital elevators and tapped her black ballet flats against the white tiled floor. Christmas was one week away. All she had to do was to muddle through the holiday season, just as she did every year. *Can this elevator be any slower?* she thought. She glanced at her watch. Two minutes had gone by and the elevator was still on the 1st floor. Surgical rounds were on the 6th floor. *Come on. I'm going to be late.* Holly was always on time. In fact, she was traditionally the first of the surgical team to arrive. Her day had already started badly. How the barista managed to mess up her order, she had no idea. She was at that coffee shop every morning, 6 a.m. sharp and always ordering a skinny latte. *For God's sake, how could that girl get it wrong?* Holly sipped her coffee. The elevator doors parted. "Finally," she said under her breath. She gritted her teeth. The elevator was packed, but then two women and a man got out, leaving room for her. Holly paused and glanced at the elevator crowd.

"Come on in, Dr. Green," a nurse wearing dangling reindeer earrings said.

Everyone in that elevator wore a hokey Christmas accessory. Wreath brooches, tree ornament necklaces, and Santa hats stared back at her. Even the nurses wore red and green scrubs today in celebration of the hospital Christmas party. Holly wore her everyday white blouse, black skirt, and black ballet flats. Not a hint of holiday cheerfulness. There was no way she was going to ride up the elevator with Santa's elves. She backed away from the elevator. "Go on," she said. "I'll walk." The elevator doors shut. Holly strode to the stairwell and opened the metal door, spilling her hot coffee onto her wrist. "Darn it!" She curled her fingers around the lid and climbed the stairs to the 6th floor. Despite her jaunt up five flights and a leaky coffee cup, Holly was the first one there. She set her cup onto the nurse's station counter, walked over to the circular chart rack, and spun it like a roulette wheel.

Clifford Jackson, an intern on the team, arrived next. He rushed to the chart wheel.

"Uh, I'll get those, Dr. Green."

Clifford plucked out a patient list from his lab coat pocket and loaded every chart on that list

onto the rolling rack used for rounds. The rest of the surgical residents and medical students arrived.

Holly tapped her watch. "I have a busy O.R. schedule today so let's hop to it. And since Dr. Jackson arrived here before all of you, he will assist me in surgery today."

Clifford shrugged as the other residents glared at him. Holly strutted paces in front of the team and stopped before the first patient room on the rounding schedule. She folded her hands across her chest and waited for the rest of the team to catch up. A medical student pushed the squeaky cart along the hall. Holly spun on her heel. "Sometime today, folks."

The team picked up pace. They filed in frenzied order, the long white coat residents first, their eyes focused on Holly, their attending, tailed by the short coat medical students who tugged at the stethoscopes hanging around their necks. The team halted at the first patient's doorway.

Holly smiled and gazed at her team, hesitating long enough to watch them squirm. *Ah, who to pick on first?* The medical students shifted their weight. She squinted at the young female student at the back of the pack who licked her lips. Holly zeroed in on her name badge. "Ms. Candice Baxter, please present the first patient."

Candice pulled a stack of index cards from the breast pocket of her lab coat. The team stood in silence as she shuffled the stiff cards, flipping the corners like a neophyte black jack dealer. She cast her eyes downward onto her white card. She cleared her throat and read in a subdued and jagged voice, "Mrs. Shale is a..."

Holly rolled her eyes. "Stop. Ms. Baxter, won't you join me upfront and present the case utilizing the three C technique: concise, clear, and coherent."

A resident snickered.

Holly shot her finger at him. "You'll present the next case. Meanwhile, Ms. Baxter will tell us everything we need to know about the woman in this room." Holly glanced at her watch and then at Candice who at this point had collected a row of sweat beads across her forehead. "You have 60 seconds to present. Go."

The medical students and residents parted. Candice walked through the open path towards Holly. She looked down at her white index card. It flickered in her trembling fingers. "Mrs. Shale is a 61 year old woman." She paused. "Um. She came to the emergency room with pain. Right upper quadrant pain," she stuttered. "And, uh, was started on antibiotics." Candice dropped her stack of cards. They scattered at Holly's feet. Candice squatted, scooped up her cards, and

blurted out, “Mrs. Shale has impacted gallstones requiring surgical treatment. And, uh, I believe she’s going to the operating room today.”

Holly shook her head. “Dr. Clifford Jackson. Please present the patient so that we can all move on.”

Will this week never end!

Clifford nodded. “Mrs. Shale is a 61 year old woman who presented to the E.D. last evening with a chief complaint of right upper quadrant abdominal pain, worsening over the last three days accompanied by nausea and vomiting, exacerbated after eating, and fever. Pertinent findings during her work up included leukocytosis, elevated pancreatic enzymes, and an ultrasound that revealed cholelithiasis with thickening of the gallbladder wall and obstruction of the common bile duct. She has received 24 hours of intravenous antibiotics and has been NPO in anticipation of surgery this morning. She has consented to the laparoscopic cholecystectomy.”

“Thank you, Dr. Jackson. After you assist me with her surgery today, teach our new medical students how to present patients on rounds. Perhaps by the end of their surgical rotation, they’ll not slow us down.”

Clifford bowed his head. “I’ll make sure they’re better prepared tomorrow.”

“Good,” Holly said curtly.

Holly strode into the patient’s room, her team shuffling behind her. She rounded Mrs. Shale’s bed and stood next to her. “How are you this morning, Mrs. Shale?”

The plump red haired woman grimaced. “I’ve been better.”

Holly patted her the woman’s hand. “You’ll feel better once I remove that meddlesome gallbladder.”

“Thank you, Doctor.”

“You’re welcome. And go easy on the holiday treats this year.”

Tears spilled from Mrs. Shale’s lower lids and rolled over her ruddy cheeks. “Don’t worry. This is the first year my dear Martin won’t be with me. I’m passing on Christmas.”

Holly’s mouth went dry and her heart fluttered in her chest that squeezed tighter and tighter against her ribs. She licked the inside of her lips.

“I’m so sorry,” she said.

Holly hadn’t celebrated Christmas in years. There wasn’t any point. And like every year, she’d ride out the holidays, grateful once the whole hullabaloo faded.

“I’ll see you in the operating room. Do have any questions?”

Mrs. Shale shook her head.

“All right.” She waved the team out of Mrs. Shale’s room, lingering long enough to give her patient an extra wave and a nod.

Behind schedule, Holly had the residents present the remaining cases on rounds. She didn’t have the patience or the time to listen to any more med students’ unpolished attempts. She dismissed the team and walked briskly toward the stairwell, bypassing an elevator ride with the hospital merrymakers. Holly jogged back down the three flights and flung the metal door to the operating suites open, smacking straight into the chest of a man in green scrubs heading the opposite way.

“Sorry,” they said in unison.

They danced back and forth, trying to dodge out of the other’s way, only to further collide. Holly sighed. “Why don’t you just stand still and I’ll go around you.”

“Sounds like a plan, Dr. Green.”

She ducked past him. In a hurry to the women’s locker room, she hadn’t read his name badge, which was strange since she didn’t recall seeing him before. But she did notice his dark auburn wavy locks and the crinkle of his deep brown eyes as he smiled at her apologetically, as he rightfully should have for obstructing her path. He did have a solid broad chest, she thought, which made bumping into him tolerable. Who was he? Holly shrugged. Chronic delay plaguing her day thus far, she’d find out later. Luckily not on call that night, she’d have time to change into her scrubs, extract Mrs. Shale’s gallbladder, pop back out of her scrubs, and high tail out of the hospital before being roped into attending the party.

Holly kicked her shoes from her feet and slid off her blouse and skirt. She plucked her O.R. clogs from her locker and arranged her ballet flats, toes and heels parallel in their place, and hung her clothes onto the silver hooks. She shut the blue metal door. Hers was the only locker not decorated with photos, magnets, and stickers. Dr. Holly Green, written in black marker across a strip of masking tape, graced the front of her locker door. She donned the shapeless green hospital scrubs and pulled her blonde hair into a ponytail, tucking it beneath her scrub cap. Snapping on blue paper shoe covers over her clogs, she gave herself a quick once over in the mirror before heading out the women’s locker room, almost colliding with two nurses.

“Good morning, Dr. Green. Happy Holidays,” said one.

The other nurse yanked off her scrub cap and cinched the red ribbon dangling from her ponytail. “Merry Christmas. See you at the party.”

Holly smiled, not wanting to be cast a Scrooge. “Sure. Maybe. I have a surgery to do.” She stumbled over the words. Waving to the nurses, she hurried off to the O.R. schedule board. By the time she finished Mrs. Shale’s cholecystectomy, the locker room would be empty. She’d slip out without notice. They wouldn’t miss her anyway. She ducked out of the holiday shindig every year. This year would be no different.

Holly gazed at the board. Her O.R. start had been time delayed. She jammed her hands onto her hips and narrowed her eyes. Holly didn’t recognize the surgeon’s name that had bumped her from her time slot. “Noel Shepherd,” she muttered. “Who is this guy, and why is he in my O.R.?”

She pumped her arms with each step, all the way to O.R. 5. Turning military style around the corner, she halted at the steel scrub sink and cleared her throat. The masked surgeon, his arms coated with suds beneath a spray of water, turned his head toward her. He grinned beneath his surgical mask, his eyes crinkling upwards. It was he. The same guy she collided with earlier. Not only did he bump her from her case, but he also sported a Santa sticker on his beeper.

Chapter Two

Noel rinsed the lather from his forearms and held them up over the scrub sink. Water trailed down from his arms and dripped from his elbows. “We haven’t formally met. I’m Noel Shepherd, new guy on the surgical block. Bumping into you, and then bumping you from your O.R. time slot, has probably landed me on your “not so nice list.”

Thank goodness he didn’t say “naughty list”, Holly thought.

“I’m so sorry.” He tilted his head toward the O.R. “The poor fellow in there has Crohn’s disease and needs an urgent small bowel resection.”

Holly relaxed her pursed lips and dropped her hands from her hips. “A small bowel resection trumps a cholecystectomy.” She turned around to face Clifford Jackson, her star intern of the day. “We’ll follow Dr. Shepherd’s case.”

Noel sidled up to her, elbows bent above his waste, arms shiny wet. “Since I don’t have a team assigned to me yet, how about you and Dr. Jackson scrub in with my case, and then I’ll assist you with your cholecystectomy? That way we’ll finish with our patients and still have time to crash the Christmas party.”

Holly tracked her gaze from Noel’s eyes that gleamed above his surgical mask, to the soft brown hairs peeking through the “V” of his scrub top. He was messing with her plans to dodge the hospital’s festivities, but she couldn’t decline his offer. It could work to her advantage, too. She’d be done with her duties and could be home earlier than she had anticipated.

“All right,” Holly said. “Dr. Jackson, let’s scrub.”

“Great. Thanks for your help.” Noel leaned his back against the O.R. door, arms above his waist, and nudged it open. He winked at her. “See you inside.”

Holly wrinkled her forehead. Was this new guy flirting with her? He did steal her O.R. And besides, she didn’t socialize with hospital staff. She had never dated anyone at Granite State Medical Center. In fact, she couldn’t recall the last time she was on a date.

Clifford glanced at her and then at Noel.

“What are you looking at?” Holly asked.

Clifford grinned. “Nothing, Dr. Green.”

Holly handed him a surgical mask and then grabbed one. “Start scrubbing. And don't contaminate anything in there, including yourself.”

He nodded, a smile still on his lips. “Yes, Dr. Green.”

Holly peeked through the O.R. window as she scrubbed her arms. While Noel checked out the surgical equipment on the blue draped sterile table, she checked him out. He was tall and athletic looking. *He certainly must have time to work out.* The final bonus was his taut derriere, nicely outlined even in his scrub pants. Noel turned to face the window and glimpsed at her, the corners of his eyes crinkling upward. Holly flashed her eyes to the stream of water spraying from the silver faucet, averting his gaze, denying she'd been watching him. She fought the heat rising to her cheeks. Thank God she could hide behind her mask. Clifford continued to lather his forearms, saying nothing. Instead, he whistled.

“Don't you dare whistle in that O.R.,” she said.

“Yes, Dr. Green.”

Holly and Clifford stood opposite Noel at the operating table. They resected the young man's diseased bowel, forcing to give the 22 year-old a diverting ileostomy, his small intestinal contents to spill into a bag draped across his belly. She peered at Noel above her surgical mask. His eyes no longer lighthearted, he focused on his suturing. They taught Clifford throughout the case, even letting him throw some stitches.

“Good job,” they said at the same time.

“This stinks,” Clifford said. “He's younger than I and he has to wear this bag. What kind of Christmas is that?”

Holly laid her gloved hand over Clifford's hand. “Although it's an especially unfortunate time, it's temporary. Dr. Shepherd will reanastomose it later. This young man will get better and have less pain.”

“Well said, Dr. Green. We're finished here. Now let's cure Mrs. Shale.”

Holly stopped in the pre-op holding area to speak with Mrs. Shale. She rapped on her door.

“Sorry for the delay in your surgery. I know you're anxious. I ordered morphine to keep you comfortable. How are you feeling?”

Mrs. Shale gazed up at her with a smile.

Must be the morphine, Holly mused.

“Thank you for checking on me,” Mrs. Shale said. “I have minimal discomfort.”

“Whom shall I speak with after your surgery?”

“No one, dear. I mean doctor. Martin and I had no children, and the rest of my family live at quite a distance. I don’t want to bother them.”

Holly rested her hand on Mrs. Shale’s hand. She never got attached to patients, a stance ingrained into her from her surgical residency training, but there was something special about this woman. Perhaps she identified with Mrs. Shale, both avoiding the holidays. “I can call whomever you would like.”

“That's all right. I'm fine. Just let me know how my surgery went once I'm awake.”

“How about when you go home. Do you need help?”

“No, dear. I'll make do. With the belly button surgery, I'm sure I'll be up in no time. I trust you, doctor.”

Ordinarily Holly disliked patients calling her dear but oddly enough she didn't mind Mrs. Shale addressing her as such.

“I'm confident that I can remove your gallbladder laparoscopically so your recovery will be faster. Dr. Shepherd, another surgeon, and Dr. Clifford Jackson, the intern you met on rounds today, will be assisting me. Dr. Shepherd will greet you before your surgery.”

“Oh my, three surgeons. I feel so important.”

Holly tapped Mrs. Shale's hand. “You are important.”

“Thank you, dear. I mean Dr. Green.”

Noel Shepherd walked into the room, his surgical mask dangling from his broad neck. She wondered how many women had had their arms wrapped around it? Holly curled her toes beneath her O.R. clogs, but that didn’t work. Standing next to him, her pulse bumped anyway. Noel shook Mrs. Shale's hand. *Hmmm. Nice guy.* “Hello. I'm Dr. Noel Shepherd. I'll be assisting Dr. Green with your surgery.”

“Thank you. I'm glad to meet you and I’m happy you'll be there. Hopefully my gallbladder won't give you too much trouble. That way you can make it to the hospital party.”

“You're our priority. No rush job for you,” Holly said.

Noel smiled at Mrs. Shale. “You're in good hands with Dr. Green.”

“Yes, I know.”

“It's nice to meet you,” Noel said. “I have to check on one of my patients, but I'll see you in the operating room before you go to sleep.”

Noel glanced at Holly and gave her a grin and a nod before he left the room.

Mrs. Shale nudged Holly. “He's a handsome man. I see no ring on either of your fingers.”

Holly knew where this was heading. “We remove all jewelry before performing surgery.”

Mrs. Shale smiled. “He reminds me of my Martin, of course when we were younger. You two have a great time at that party...and afterwards, who knows? Dear, will you hand me my purse before they check it away?”

“Sure.” Holly handed Mrs. Shale her black patent leather purse.

Mrs. Shale rooted through her bag. She took out a wad of tissues. “I want you to have this.”

Holly arched her eyebrows. “A wad of tissues?”

“It's not the tissues, but what's inside.”

Holly peeled away the ball of fluff. Her mouth dropped open. “I can't take this.”

“Sure you can. I want you to have it. It suits you.”

She palmed the gold metallic ornament dotted with boughs of holly. Holly squeezed Mrs. Shale's hand. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome. Just do a good job on my gallbladder.” She winked.

Holly winked back. “Will do.”

Cradling the ornament all the way to the women's locker room, Holly set it on the top shelf of her locker, admiring it once more before easing the door closed. She'd add it to her private collection tonight. Holly paused before the mirror, fixed her scrub cap, and wiped away the tiny dots of mascara peeking past her lower lashes before joining Clifford and Noel in the O.R. She patted Mrs. Shale's hand until the woman's eyes flickered shut from the anesthesia.

Noel nudged between Holly and Clifford, scrubbing next to her.

“She's a nice lady,” he said.

“Yes, she is.” Holly thought of the ornament safely stashed in her locker and smiled.

“That's the first time I've seen you smile today. I can tell by your eyes,” Noel said.

She pressed her lips tight beneath her surgical mask. “Let's get going.”

He leaned over the sink and stared into her eyes. “There it is again,” he teased.

Darn him! Why is he doing this? Unable to keep from grinning, she rolled her eyes. Holly

flicked water from her fingertips. “Mrs. Shale’s gallbladder awaits us.”

They crowded around the O.R. table. The diseased organ put up a good fight, but Holly won, extracting it free, ridding Mrs. Shale’s pain. She let Clifford suture the small incisions, supervising his handiwork. They all shook hands after the case. Noel lingered at their grasp, holding Holly’s hand an extra few seconds. The warmth of his hand penetrated past the latex of his gloves and shot straight to her hand. For the first time, Dr. Holly Green was speechless.

“See you at the party,” he said.

“Uh, I have to dictate the surgery and do my post-op orders. And I want to wait until Mrs. Shale wakes up. She has no family here,” Holly stammered. Then she gritted her teeth. Why did she lose control when around him?”

“I’ll wait,” Noel said, mischief in his eyes.

Obviously he’s not picking up on my hint that I’d rather not attend. “Please, go ahead. I don’t want to keep you.”

“It’s no problem. You dictate. I’ll do the post-op orders,” he countered.

Holly shifted her weight. “No really, go on.”

“I’ll stay.”

Clifford kept silent.

The anesthesiologist pulled out Mrs. Shale’s breathing tube. She coughed and sputtered. “She’s waking up.” He pointed to Holly. “You dictate. He does the orders. And that’s final.”

“See, Sid says that’s final.”

“Since when does Sid get a vote in this?”

“Since he and I are becoming fast friends. Right, Sid?”

“Right. Can we go now?”

They eased Mrs. Shale from the O.R. table onto a bed and wheeled her to the recovery room. Holly dictated the surgery while Noel sat with Clifford, entering the post-op orders into the computer.

“Dr. Green?” Mrs. Shale muttered.

Holly walked over to her. “I’m right here. Your surgery went well.”

“Thank you.”

Holly arranged Mrs. Shale’s bed covers, pulling the warm blanket past her patient’s shoulders.

“I’ll let the nurses take care of you, but I’ll check on you later.”

“Have fun at the party with that nice young doctor. Not the intern one. He’s just a baby. But you know whom. Then tell me all about it later.” She waved her hand at Holly. “Now scoot.”

“Your orders are done,” Noel announced. “I’ll walk you to the party.”

Panic rose in her throat. “I need to stop at the locker room.”

“Me, too. I’ll swing into the men’s locker room, change my clothes, and I’ll meet you outside.”

Dang, he was persistent, she thought. With him guarding the door, the chance she’d slip out unnoticed dwindled. She had no choice but to make an appearance at the hospital’s holiday celebration.

Holly took off her scrubs and changed back into her black and white outfit. She reached into the locker’s top shelf and inched the tissue wrapped ornament past her fingertips. She rolled it into her palm before gingerly depositing it into her tote. Holly glanced about the room. She was alone. She grabbed her cell phone from her bag and called her Aunt Mae, the woman who had raised her.

“Hi Aunt Mae. How are you?”

“I’m fine, sweetheart. Please tell me you’re coming for Christmas Dinner.”

“I’ll be there.” Holly drew a deep breath. “I need to ask a favor of you.”

“Anything, dear.”

“Page me on my beeper in about 20 minutes.”

She pressed the phone to her ear. Silence.

“Anything but that. Holly, go to the hospital party. It’s okay to have a good time. Call me when you get home.”

Holly sighed. “Okay.”

“Good girl. I love you.”

“I love you, too.”

She slid the phone into the bag and slipped the tote into her locker, positioning it for a quick escape. After a few bites of appetizer and a sip of punch, she’d sneak back, grab her belongings, and race home before anyone noticed. Holly paused. There was only one way out, and Noel was on the other side of that door. She pushed the locker room door open, wincing as it groaned on its hinges.

“Ah, there you are,” Noel said. “Ready to go?”

Yes, she was ready to go. Ready to go home. She pressed her lips into a smile. “Sure.”

Noel wore a white shirt and black trousers. They would have matched had he not sported a red tie dotted with tiny penguins and had that Santa sticker on his beeper. Not a speck of seasonal sparkle adorned her outfit.

They walked side-by-side to the hospital cafeteria, their collegial distance narrowing.

Holly glanced down at his beeper. “Nice pager.”

He grinned. “A little girl I operated on yesterday gave me that Santa sticker.”

Heat radiated from her cheeks. “That was nice of you. I bet that meant a lot to her.”

Hmmm. Double nice guy!

“Yeah. She got a kick out of it on rounds.” He fiddled with the pager clipped to the waistband of his trousers. “I like it.”

She smiled. “It suits you.”

Holly kept secret about the ornament her patient had given her. It would have sparked uneasy conversations about tree trimming. She had the perfect spot for it at home.

Muted music pulsed past the double cafeteria doors. Noel pushed them open, waving Holly inside. A crisp rendition of Dashing Through the Snow surrounded her. She passed beneath swags of evergreen draped along the wooden doorframe and entered the holiday bash she had avoided every year.

Noel rested his hand on Holly’s shoulder. Her breath hitched at his gentle squeeze as he guided her toward the buffet. Maybe she’d stay for a little while.

“Let’s get something to eat while there’s food left,” he said.

He handed her a plate and then took one for him. For every mini quiche Holly put on her plate, Noel added two more.

“That’s plenty,” she said.

“That’s not even a meal.”

He piled her plate with shrimp and cheeses despite her protests.

“I will blame you for an evening of indigestion.”

“It’s once a year.” He looked down at her with his pleading brown eyes. “I’ll share my antacids with you.”

“And I need you to share this plate with me. I can’t eat all this.”

“Done.” He tilted his head toward the tables. “Come on. I see two empty chairs.”

Holly followed him, balancing her overflowing plate. They passed a group of doctors and nurses who hushed their conversations and glanced sideways at her. They apparently were as stunned as she was to see her, she having succeeded in dodging the festivities every year, except for today.

“Merry Christmas, Holly,” they said, more in a question than a hearty salutation.

She nodded curtly. “Yes, uh, Merry Christmas to you too.”

Holly scooted closer to Noel, hiding behind him, her plate almost colliding with the back of his shirt. She halted before smacking into him. Her heart pounded. She cast her eyes toward the door, her discomfort palpable. Perhaps this was a bad idea, she thought, sure everyone was staring at her back, gossiping about her impromptu appearance. She peered around him to see who was sitting at the table. Clifford and Candice popped up from their seats.

Clifford cleared his throat. “I finished my work, and uh, I reviewed how to properly present patients with Candice.”

“Yes, he did,” Candice interjected. “And if you will please give me another chance, Dr. Green, I’m sure I won’t disappoint you.”

Holly waved her hand up and down. “Please sit, both of you, and enjoy the party. Candice, I was tough on you in order to make you better. I’m confident you’ll ace your surgical rotation.”

“Thank you, Dr. Green,” Candice gushed.

“That’s all right. Let’s sit and eat.”

“Good idea,” Noel said.

He pulled out Holly’s chair. She sat. But before she could inch forward, he guided her to the table. *Triple nice guy!*

Holly and Noel sat across from Clifford and Candice, a glittery reindeer centerpiece between them. Every time Noel turned his head away, Holly slid food from her plate onto his. Clifford and Candice snickered.

Noel turned to face them. “What’s so funny?”

Holly grinned. “Nothing.”

Clifford and Candice shrugged.

Noel looked down at the mountain of food on his plate. “Hey!”

She laughed and held her hands over her plate, guarding any “give backs.”

“Yeah, well, more for me,” he teased.

Sipping her punch, Holly winked at him. *It was so spontaneous. Where did that come from?*

Noel leaned toward her. Holly’s heart skipped a beat.

He touched her hand. “I’m glad you came.”

Holly set her drink down. “Me, too.”

The party wasn’t that bad, she thought. Aunt Mae was right.

Everyone began to clap. Holly whipped around in her chair to see what all the hub-up was about. A group of ICU nurses dressed as reindeer galloped into the cafeteria, performing a kick line number to Jingle Bell Rock. Holly clapped along with everyone else, tapping her toes beneath the table. The cafeteria pulsed with revelry. They weren’t the Rockettes, but they were entertaining nonetheless. Noel whooped and hollered, whistling at them. Holly laughed so hard her cheeks hurt. And just as she let go, she saw him standing in the corner, clapping as well, Dr. Maxwell Thornton, the elder surgeon who struggled to save her parents that night. She stopped clapping and searched in frenzy for a back way out. The dancing nurses distracted everyone, including Noel. Now was the best time for her to slip out through the kitchen.

She eased her chair back from the table, and tiptoed away, weaving through the crowd. Pushing the kitchen’s silver stainless steel doors open, she stood dazed, hoping no one had followed her.

“Can I help you?” a woman in a white cafeteria dress asked.

“Uh, no.” Holly glanced about the kitchen and spotted a tray of green Jell-O squares. She picked up a plate of the hospital gelatin. “Just what I was looking for.”

The woman furrowed her black bushy eyebrows. “With all that food out there, you want Jell-O?”

“Yes. Thanks.”

She snuck out the rear kitchen door and into the empty hospital corridor, jiggling lime gelatin on a poinsettia trimmed paper plate in her hand. She knew exactly what to do with it. Holly headed to Mrs. Shale’s room.

She inched her patient’s door open.

“Who’s there?” Mrs. Shale asked.

Holly pattered into the dim room. “It’s me, Dr. Green.” She walked over to the window blinds and snapped them open. The waning late winter afternoon sun filtered into the room. “I

brought you something.” She set the lime Jell-O on Mrs. Shale’s bedside table. “Why are you lying here in the dark?”

“I was trying to get some sleep. Every time I doze off, a nurse comes in to take my temperature and blood pressure. I guess not everyone went to the hospital shindig. Speaking of the party, how was it? Did you have fun?”

Holly paused. “Mmm, yes.”

Mrs. Shale eyed the lime gelatin on the holiday themed paper plate. “Please tell me they didn’t serve green Jell-O at the party.”

Holly smiled. “No. I had the chef whip this up special for you.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll bring you something more substantial tomorrow.”

Mrs. Shale patted Holly’s hand. “I can’t wait. Surprise me.”

“Absolutely. How do you feel about Orange Jell-O?” Holly teased her.

Mrs. Shale chuckled. “I’ve always been partial to citrus.”

“See you in the morning.”

“Have a good night, dear.”

She shut Mrs. Shale’s door and made it to the women’s locker room undisturbed. Tucking her tote bag under her arm, Holly bypassed the elevators and trotted down the stairwell. Sneaking out the hospital lobby, she walked to the parking lot. The brisk winter wind nipped at her neck. She raised the collar of her coat and clicked the remote on her key ring unlocking her car. The headlights flashed. Setting the tote gently onto the passenger seat, careful not to break the ornament in her bag, she ducked into her car and closed the door. Holly sat a minute before starting the engine. She took a chance, attending the party. She knew it was too good to be true. Taking a deep breath, Holly pulled out of the parking lot. In fifteen minutes tops, she’d be home.

Holly scrambled from her car to the front door. Shivering, she stomped the snow from her shoes and fumbled with her key ring until reaching the one for the house. Once inside, she shut the door, pushing it against the wind.

Lucky for me, she thought, leaving that party just before this snowstorm.

She slipped off her ballet flats in the foyer and wiggled her frigid toes in her drenched stockings. The weatherman lied. No snow in the forecast, he predicted. Ha! Holly ran to the

bathroom on the balls of her feet. She peeled off her stockings, sat on the edge of the tub, and cranked on the water, warming her feet beneath it. She closed her eyes.

“Ah, much better.”

Reaching for a fluffy white towel, she patted her feet dry. Mom had always decorated the whole house during Christmas, including the red and green Santa towels she'd hang in the bathroom. But practical white was fine for her. She knew where the Christmas towels were. Holly set them purposely far back on the top shelf of the linen closet, a place she couldn't easily reach.

After pattering into her bedroom, she removed her blouse and skirt, and hung them in her closet flush with her other attire. Not on call, and in for the evening, Holly put on a white long sleeved cotton shirt and the blue lounge pants with a snowflake print that her Aunt Mae had bought her, and slid on her favorite white, furry bunny slippers. She paused at her dresser and stared at the gold-framed photo of her at thirteen, flanked by her mom and dad, at a Christmas tree farm. They went there every year. It was the last photo of them together, their last Christmas. She wiped the tears overflowing from her lower lids, swiping them across her cheek and fingered the ornament hanging from the corner of the frame. It was the last one her parents had bought, a silver glass ball with a green glittery Christmas tree. She pulled out Mrs. Shale's ornament from her bag and hung it onto the opposite corner of the frame. Taking three steps backward, she admired the only Christmas decoration in her house.

The house was closed up after her parents died, but Aunt Mae never sold it. Holly was sure her aunt knew that someday she'd return. The house where she had spent her childhood comforted her, although the holidays continued to haunt her. She left it every year to have Christmas dinner with Aunt Mae.

Holly shut the bedroom door and headed into the kitchen where she fixed herself a cup of hot cocoa. Settling onto the couch with her mug of hot chocolate she picked up the TV remote and clicked it. Channeling surfing through Christmas classics, she tuned into a world news station. One sad news story after another, she was about to shut off the TV when the doorbell rang.

She sighed and set her mug onto the coffee table. “Who could that be?” she muttered.

Holly tiptoed to the front door. If it weren't someone she cared to speak to, she'd pretend she wasn't home. She squinted and with one eye, peeked through the peephole. Holly shook her

head. On the other side of the lens was Noel Shepherd, his face in a comical, distorted oval with his nose three times bigger than his forehead and chin, holding a plate of cookies.

Chapter Three

“Holly, I know you’re there. I see your car in the driveway. Please let me in. It’s freezing out here.”

“Just a minute.” Her stomach flipped. *What is he doing here? How am I going to explain my get away?* She shifted from side to side in her bunny slippers.

Although she had planned to spend a quiet evening alone, she couldn’t leave him standing there. Holly twisted the deadbolt, unlocked the door, and let Noel into her private sanctum.

Noel stomped the snow from his shoes and stepped into the foyer. Holly shoved the door shut and locked it again. The man that had left her speechless, the man that had prodded her to the hospital Christmas party, was now the man who was in her house alone with her.

Noel eyed her from her head to her bunny slippers and grinned. “I guess you’re not expecting much company.” Holly’s eyes widened and her toes bunched. She had traded scrubs for loungewear. No one at the hospital would’ve guessed she’d wear something like this. But it was too late to hide from Noel.

Noel tilted his head and peered past Holly. “I’m sorry to have come unannounced. I don’t mean to bother you and your family.”

Holly waved him inside. He clearly wasn’t going to just drop off a plate of cookies. “Come in, Noel. You’re not bothering anyone. I live alone.” For the first time, she hated to admit that.

He hesitated. “Um. Well, I hope I’m not interrupting your evening.”

Yeah, okay he was, but she refrained from telling him so. Instead, she shook her head. “You’re not.” Noel slipped off his snowy jacket and hung it on the coat rack. Holly pointed to the living room. “Have a seat.”

Noel set the plastic wrapped plate of cookies onto the coffee table, hiked the hems of his trousers, and plopped onto the couch. He hadn’t changed his clothes since the party. Holly glanced at his penguin print tie and then down at her homey attire.

He loosened his tie and winked at her. “Nice snowflake pants. You would have been a hit at

the party in those. Why did you leave? I turned around and you were gone.”

She hesitated and then lied. No way was she going to admit that she was dodging an encounter with the elder Dr. Thornton. Holly had no idea he’d make a guest appearance. “My pager went off. I needed to check on Mrs. Shale. You remember, my patient with the cholecystectomy?”

“Yeah, I recall. Is she okay?”

“Yes, fine. Afterwards, I decided to home.”

He furrowed his forehead. “I thought you weren’t on call.”

“I wasn’t, but I requested the nurses call me about her.” She hoped he’d drop the inquisition, but just in case he persisted, she changed the subject. Holly hugged her mug. “I’m drinking cocoa, but I could brew some coffee for you.”

Noel shook his hand. “No need, but I’ll have some of that cocoa.”

“It’s from a mix,” she blurted out guiltily. Her mom made the best hot chocolate, the kind that stuck to your top lip on a bitter winter day. The kitchen silent from her mom’s humming and hugs, Holly had switched to instant cocoa years ago. Hers could never taste like her mother’s anyway.

“Sounds good to me.” Noel stood. “I’ll give you a hand in the kitchen.”

“It’s okay, Noel. It’s just cocoa.”

He stood there as if waiting for an invitation.

“Relax. I’ll bring you a cup.”

Clearly this wasn’t about cocoa.

Holly strode into the kitchen and set her cup onto the counter. She could ask him into the kitchen. No, that’d be awkward. She had already told him to stay where he was. Too late now. The moment had passed. Holly crossed her hands and shivered.

“Noel,” she called. “There’s a thermostat on the hallway wall. Could you inch it up a bit?”

“Sure,” he answered, his voice suspiciously not that distant.

Holly filled a kettle with milk and set it on the stove. She turned around to fetch a mug from the cupboard and smacked into Noel. Holly jerked back and blinked. Her heart beat wildly.

He embraced her shoulders. “I’m so sorry to have startled you. I took care of the heat, and I thought I’d come here to help you. Noel cocked his brow. “Not helping, am I?”

She didn’t have to wait for the heat to kick in. His touch warmed her plenty.

“That’s all right. Thanks for adjusting the thermostat.” She pointed to the top kitchen cabinet. “You can get a mug down from there.”

Noel reached into the cupboard and pulled out a mug. Holly reared back, her eyes wide open.

He stared at her, his eyes nearly as wide as hers. “Um. I’m guessing not this one.”

Noel had plucked out her dad’s favorite mug. She had forgotten it was still up there.

“No. It’s fine. It’s a good mug,” she said, her voice cracking. “Fine. Fine. Fine. Bring it here.”

He gingerly juttled the cup towards her. Holly sprinkled cocoa dust into it and filled it with warm milk.

“Spoons are in the drawer to your left,” she said. Their gazes met.

“Okay,” he said slowly, carefully. Noel reached into the drawer and pulled out a spoon, his eyes on Holly the whole time.

Holly cleared her throat. “Let’s go to the living room, shall we?”

Still cautious, Noel nodded. “Okay.”

She grabbed her mug from the counter and headed toward the couch. He followed close behind, the steam from his hot chocolate teasing the back of her neck. They settled onto the couch, a sofa pillow between them. He set his hot cup of cocoa on the coffee table and pulled back the plastic wrap from the tray of cookies he had scavenged from the hospital party.

He handed her a chocolate chip cookie. “These are the best.”

“Thanks,” she said, accepting his offering.

Gooey chocolate chunks melted on her lips. She licked the sweet cream away, leaving telltale smudges at the corners of her mouth.

Noel handed her a poinsettia print paper napkin. He grinned. “Told you they’re the best.”

She dabbed her lips. “My favorite, too.”

He grabbed the TV remote. “Mind if I change the channel?”

“No, go ahead.” After all, he was her guest.

Wouldn’t she know it? The guy picked, ‘It’s A Wonderful Life’, the Christmas classic movie she had perused right by.

Noel crunched on a cookie and smiled. “I love this part. Who would have thought a swimming pool would lie under a gymnasium floor? Amazing. I wish I went to a high school

like that. We had a gym, and we had a pool. But two in one? Whoa! That was some architectural coup.”

They watched the dancing high school students on screen fall into the pool as the magical gym floor parted beneath them, giggling like teenagers themselves. That was the second time he had made her laugh that day, a holiday personal record for her.

By the end of the movie, they had devoured the cookies.

Noel leaned back into the couch and rubbed his belly. “That takes care of dinner.”

“I’m stuffed as well.” She scooted into the corner of the couch and sat cross-legged facing him. “You’re new at the hospital. Where did you come from?”

“I grew up in the Northeast, but when my family moved to Houston, I followed them. I practiced general surgery there for a few years. After the woman I was going to marry ran off with a fellow surgeon, I needed a change of scenery. That’s how I ended up in New Hampshire. Granite State Medical Center offered me a good position. I accepted.”

Holly shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not.” He grinned. “I like it here so far. Some things are just meant to be.”

Her palms grew moist. She quickly wiped them on her snowflake pants. “I don’t think so.”

“Don’t believe in kismet, do you?”

“I believe random events happen.”

They sat in silence.

Why does he keep smiling at me? Especially since I trounced his destiny theory.

“This is quite a large house for you. Did you grow up in it?”

“Sort of. I spent my childhood here. I moved out for a while, then I returned.”

“Ah, sentimental reasons. Your folks retire to a smaller place? Are they nearby?”

Holly pressed her lips together. More questions. Questions she didn’t want to answer. Noel was a nice enough guy. He meant no harm. Apparently he didn’t know, and she wasn’t ready to confess the past to him.

“Yes. They are in a smaller place close by,” she said. That was true. The cemetery was not far.

He ran his fingers through his hair. “I didn’t intend to pry.”

“That’s all right,” she said pointedly, hopefully making it clear to Noel that she didn’t want to discuss the issue any further.

He picked up their empty mugs and the tray with cookie crumbs. "I'll take these to the kitchen."

"Thanks. Put them in the sink. I'll get to them later."

Noel returned to the living room and sat back on the couch. He tossed the pillow that had separated them to one side and scooted closer to Holly. Her foot twitched. "Where's your Christmas tree?"

Holly shrugged. "I don't have one."

"I don't either. I have boxes all over my apartment. I've been so busy getting used to the hospital, I haven't purchased one yet. But there's time. I passed this Christmas tree lot on the way here. They still have plenty of nice evergreens left."

"I'll pass this year. Besides, I'm on call Christmas Eve, and I have plans for Christmas Day. I really don't have time to decorate a tree."

That explanation would have to suffice. Aunt Mae dismantled the last Christmas tree to grace that house after her parents' funeral while Holly stayed tucked away in her aunt's home with family friends.

Noel snapped his fingers. "What a coincidence! I'm on call Christmas Eve, too. Hey, I have an idea. Since we're both pressed for time, and away from our families, let's share a tree. I'll even pay for it."

He had a childhood glimmer in his eyes with that "please, please, can we?" kind of look. She couldn't completely decline his proposition, not now anyway.

"Noel, that's sweet of you. Maybe. I don't know."

He took her hands. "It will be fun."

She didn't pull away from him, but shook her head.

"Just think about it." He let her loose. "I've taken up enough of your night. I'll see you in the morning on rounds."

"I enjoyed the company and the cookies." Holly didn't want him to leave, but they had just met. She didn't want to be pushy. And she was hopelessly out of practice.

"We'll have a proper dinner next time." Noel stood. "May I use your bathroom before I go?"

"Sure. It's down the hall, first door on your left."

Holly rocked out from the couch and walked over to the window. Peeking through the drapes, she watched the boys from next-door tap snow from their shovels. With the TV on and

then immersed in conversation with Noel, she missed that they had cleared the snow from the drive. She opened the front door and yelled, “Thanks, boys. Wait here. I’ll get some money.”

“No need to pay us, Dr. Green. It’s the holidays.”

“Yes, it is. But I want to give you something.”

She hurried to her bedroom to retrieve her wallet. Holly halted in the doorway. There stood Noel, in her bedroom, staring at the ornament decorated framed picture of her and her parents.

Holly skidded to a stop. Her breath pumped. “What are you doing in my bedroom?”

Noel stared at her, question deep in his eyes. “They’re not alive, are they?”

He had discovered that which she had worked so hard to bury during the holidays. Now she was forced to tell him.

Chapter Four

"I didn't mean to take a wrong turn," Noel said. "I was on the way to the bathroom when I saw a sparkle from the corner of my eye. It was coming from these ornaments." Noel pointed to the glittering globes hanging from the picture on her dresser. He reached for the photo. Holly held her breath. But his hand stopped short of the frame. "This is an old photo of you and your parents. I noticed there aren't any recent ones anywhere in your house. And you were so evasive when I asked you about them. Then I figured it out. They aren't retired. They're gone."

Her throat burned and her eyes began to sting. *Don't do it! Don't cry!* Emotions banged in Holly's head so she simply nodded.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "I recognize you. You look about twelve here."

Holly took a stuttering breath. "Actually thirteen. It's the last photo of my parents and me. They died two weeks after that picture was taken at a Christmas tree farm we visited every year."

Noel backed away from her dresser. Their awkward gazes collided in silence.

Holly cleared her throat and interrupted the quiet. "Uh, the bathroom is one door down. I'll meet you afterwards in the living room."

Noel raked his fingers through his hair. "I didn't intend to invade your privacy, and I, uh, certainly didn't expect to be in your bedroom, for uh, any other purpose," he stammered.

Holly lightly scratched her cheek. "It's all right, Noel. I didn't take it that way."

"Okay then." He pointed toward the door. "I'll meet you back in the living room."

They danced around each other, their heads bobbing to and fro, dodging one another just like in the hospital when they first met.

She waved her hand toward her bedroom door. "Please, you first."

He fiddled with his shirt collar. "Thanks."

Between the two of them, she didn't know who was more flustered.

Meanwhile, Holly sat on the sofa. She pressed her palms to her knees, steadying them before

Noel arrived. She yanked a throw pillow onto her lap in a desperate attempt to camouflage her knocking knees.

Noel let out a 'Humph', heralding his approach. He sat diagonally, facing her. Holly hugged her pillow.

"If you're not ready to tell me about it, it's okay. I don't want to force you."

He touched her hand. It was warm and unwavering. She hadn't trusted anyone other than Aunt Mae in years. But there was something about Noel. The way he looked at her, holding her in his gaze a few seconds longer beyond mere politeness. Holly drew a deep breath. She'd say it quickly, like ripping off a Band Aid. "I don't speak to anyone about it. I know they gossip about my avoiding the hospital Christmas party every year, but I doubt they know the truth. I guess they think I'm sort of a Scrooge. I prefer it that way. Please don't mention this to anyone else. I don't want their pity."

Noel gently squeezed her hand and scooted closer to Holly. "Your secret is safe with me. What happened, Holly?"

Her stomach knotted but Holly told Noel everything about the night a drunk driver crashed into her parent's car, fatally wounding them on Christmas Eve. He didn't interrupt her once, nodding at her words. They flowed from her lips until she shared her secret life hidden from hospital view.

She swallowed hard. "I stood there frozen, in the emergency room, unable to move. I didn't understand what was going on. In between the backs of nurses I caught a glimpse of them, lying separated on blood soaked gurneys. Dr. Thornton yelled, "Get her out of here." Next thing I remember was my Aunt Mae hugging me to her chest. Some other people took me to her home. She whispered in my ear it was okay to go with them. I can't recall how much time had past, but when my aunt came home, I looked into her eyes. I knew then my parents were dead."

Noel shook his head. "I'm sorry I prodded you to that party. You left after seeing Dr. Thornton, didn't you?"

"Yes. But I don't blame him. I hadn't seen him in years, and I didn't want to relive that night. Ironically, I became a surgeon to heal others when I couldn't heal myself."

He touched her cheek. "You do help others, every day. I'm sure your parents are proud of you."

Her heart hammered in her ears. She feared he'd feel the beat echoing across her cheek.

Holly guided his hand from her face, his fingertips the last to leave her hot skin, and squeezed it, giving her hand an intentional chore to distract it from trembling. It worked. Now if she could only stem the moisture from her eyes. The wetness intensified. Noel's face blurred before her eyes, and the edges of his hair grew fuzzy. Why did he have to say they'd be proud of her? It smacked her unexpectedly hard, right through her chest, the arrow of his well-meaning comfort. She had to think quickly. She had to get out of that couch and out of that room before she'd embarrass herself. Holly Green, M.D. never cried. And she wasn't going to start today.

She turned her head away from him and pushed off the sofa. "I'll make us coffee," she said. It was the best excuse that came to her. Holly fought not to bolt to the kitchen. That would be too obvious.

She could hear herself breath as she scooped the grains into the filter. Holly held her breath. Silence. Relieved that Noel hadn't followed her, she spread her hands across the counter and leaned forward. Her pulse slowed in tandem with the pop -pop of the percolator.

"Sugar or cream?" Holly called from the kitchen.

"Both, please," he replied.

She poured two cups and grabbed two saucers. Blinking the moisture from her lower lids, she returned to the living room with the steaming java and set them onto the coffee table.

"Thanks," he said. "That smells great."

She nodded. "Special blend."

They stirred their coffee. The tinkling sound of silver spoons against porcelain filled the air. And then it happened. Noel had let her off her cathartic hook. He had changed the subject.

Between sips, they shared anecdotes from their medical school and surgical training years. They too were once just like Clifford and Candice. Holly laughed retelling her misadventures and amusing patient antics. What she didn't mention was Mrs. Shale's Christmas ornament. She'd let Noel believe it was a family heirloom, keeping secret about her patient's gift. She didn't want anyone to see her as growing soft, except maybe Noel. And that was a "big maybe."

They set down their empty cups, their tales exhausted, their guffaws waning. The tapping of snow shovels against asphalt echoed through the living room window. They stood at the same time.

"The boys must be finished clearing the drive."

Noel winked. "Let's go see if they've done a decent job."

They walked to the window. Holly pulled back the curtains. Noel leaned in behind her and rested his hand on her back. She peeked through the frosty glass. He moved closer to her, grazing her cheek with his. Holly's shoulders melted the second Noel touched her. She leaned back into his chest, so solid, so secure. Noel wrapped his arms around her. Letting Noel Shepherd into her house was the best decision she'd made all day.

"Hey, those boys have certainly earned their pay." He eased in closer and said softly in her ear, "I would have done it for free, you know."

Holly twisted around in his arms and faced Noel. She grinned. "Not in those shoes."

He tapped her on her nose. "Apparently you and I listened to the same weather report."

"If you don't like the weather in New Hampshire, then wait five minutes," they said in unison, laughing at their coincidental timing.

"Now that the drive is clear and I can find my car, I'm heading out."

Her heart sank. First she didn't want him to stay. Now she didn't want him to leave.

Holly reached her hand up and patted his shoulder. "Thank you for coming by with the cookies."

They lightly bumped their heads together.

"You're welcome. I'll bring more next time."

Holly circled past him. "Let me get your jacket."

She plucked Noel's jacket from the coat stand and handed it to him.

He slid it on, zipped it, leaned over, and kissed her on the cheek.

Holly blinked. Warmth spread from her stomach to her chest. And when he opened the door, she didn't flinch despite the winter wind daring her to shiver. She waved to him as he ran to his car. "See you, tomorrow."

Noel waved back as he ducked into the driver's seat. "Bright and early!"

She slowly eased the door closed and watched him back out into the street. Then she saw it, Noel's scarf draped over the coat rack. She flung open the door.

"Hey, Noel," she called. "You forgot your scarf."

But he was gone. She shut the door and leaned her back against it, holding Noel's scarf. Holly ran her fingers across the smooth, soft wool. She shook her head and smiled. *He left that on purpose!*

Holly held his scarf up to her nose and sniffed. It was warm as if he had just worn it.

Hugging it, she retreated to her bedroom. She folded it into neat quarters and she laid Noel's scarf on the dresser next to the framed photo with the ornaments. She'd return it to him tomorrow.

Holly prepared for bed and slipped beneath the covers. She reached for the lamp on her nightstand when her cell phone buzzed. Her heartbeat jolted. She sprang upright. *It's him! Did he remember he forgot his scarf? Does he want to talk?* She licked her lips and grabbed the phone, yanking it to her eyes. Holly sighed as she watched Aunt Mae's phone number scroll across the screen. *Oh shoot! I forgot to call her.*

"Hi, Aunt Mae."

"I'm sorry. Did I wake you, dear?"

Holly shook her head. As if her aunt could see her! She paused. "No. I just got into bed."

"Is everything all right? You sound a bit strange."

She wiggled between the sheets. "Yes, everything's fine. I'm sorry I didn't call you earlier. I had company after I came home from the party."

"I'm so happy you went. How was it?"

"It was...okay. I did okay."

"I knew you would. You need to get out more. Who came over?"

"Oh, uh, another surgeon from the hospital."

"Do I know her?"

Holly rolled her eyes. She knew Aunt Mae's M.O. well. "It was a man. He's new on staff."

"That was nice of you to invite him."

"I didn't. He came over to drop off some cookies. I left the party early to attend to a patient." *What a lie!*

Now Aunt Mae paused. "I hope your patient is all right."

"She is."

"So tell me about this new surgeon. What's his name?"

"Not much to say." *Another lie.* "His name is Noel. We operated together and then went to the party."

"Noel. What a nice name. Very Christmassy."

She dared not mention his penguin tie and Santa sticker. That would only spur her aunt into more 'oohs, ahs.' "A lot of men are named Noel."

“Ooh. Kismet! It being the holiday season and all.”

“I’m really tired, Aunt Mae.” *Liar*. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow. I love you.”

“I love you, too, dear. Sweet dreams,” her aunt crooned.

“Okay. I’m hanging up now.”

Holly tapped the “end call” button and turned off the light. Her cell vibrated and then jingled. She sat up and flicked on the light to read the text message.

“Thanks for a nice night. Got your cell from the hospital, feigning emergency! See you tomorrow. BTW. This is Noel.”

She grinned and texted back. “Thanks, NOEL, again for cookies and company. Glad you’re home safe. See you tomorrow for sure.”

Chapter Five

Holly stood smiling in front of the elevator, her coffee in one hand, and her tote bag with Noel's scarf in the other hand. Today was going to be a good day. The barista got her order right, she had three O.R. cases today, and she had peeked at Noel's schedule first thing this morning. He had two surgeries. She'd keep rounds tight. That way she'd invite him to breakfast. She'd bring the scones she had bought at the coffee shop with her, sparing him from the, okay but bland, hospital cafeteria morning menu.

The elevator doors parted. Holly squeezed inside, bunching up with the morning rush hour nurses and docs. About to turn around to face the doors, she saw a cap of deep auburn hair beyond the crowd. The elevator stopped on the next floor. The people shuffled around, allowing space for the sole person to join them. Holly slipped sideways to make more room. She glanced up. There was Noel with his back pinned against the back of the packed elevator. He smiled and shrugged. Her heart pounded. She gripped her coffee cup so hard that the plastic lid popped off. Clifford caught it. Oh my God! She hadn't noticed her intern was in the crowd.

Clifford snapped the lid back on. "Here you go, Dr. Green."

"Uh. Hi. Thanks."

Heat rose up her face. Monosyllabic words were all she could mutter.

The throng of medical staff slid out on the sixth floor and dispersed, leaving Holly, Noel, and Clifford standing just outside of the elevator. The doors whooshed closed.

"Is it always crowded like that?" Noel asked.

Holly and Clifford nodded.

Holly stared at Clifford, hoping he'd get the hint and leave before she'd have to tell him to shoo.

"I'll get the charts ready," Clifford said.

"That would be helpful. Get everybody ready. I'll be there shortly."

Clifford grinned. "Yes, Dr. Green."

He lumbered away in his boat-sized loafers. Holly smiled and shook her head. His gait awkward as a puppy, one would never have guessed he had the steadiest hands.

Holly and Noel stood alone.

He broke the silence. "That was fun last night."

"Yes, it was." *Please say something more prolific.* But before she could say anything, the hospital ward secretary interrupted.

"Dr. Shepherd, your new team is waiting for you."

"I'll see you later, Holly...Dr. Green. Perhaps we can have breakfast before our cases."

Hey, I was going to say that, she thought. "That will be great."

Noel winked. "I'll meet you after rounds at the nurse's station."

Holly smiled. "Absolutely."

Noel followed the secretary. Holly sighed. She had never been clumsy, until now.

Holly gulped the last of her coffee and tossed the empty cup into the trashcan. She straightened her lab coat and smoothed her hair before heading to the surgical wing. Her team was waiting for her with quizzical looks upon their faces. Today was the first day she hadn't been standing on the unit, tapping her toes, and glancing at her watch.

"Good morning, Dr. Green," they said.

"Good morning to all of you." She strode ahead of her team, not looking back. "Who's up first?"

"I am," Candice said.

Holly turned to face her and arched her eyebrows. "Go."

Candice gave a succinct summary of the first patient, her voice not quivering once.

Holly nodded. "That was an excellent presentation, Ms. Baxter."

Candice gave a curt nod back. Holly looked at Clifford and smiled. He had taught the timid medical student well.

One by one, her team performed with precision. They were ahead of schedule, having rounded on every patient except the last one- Mrs. Shale. A nurse exited her room right before Holly and her team was about to enter it.

"Good morning, Dr. Green," she said. "I took care of Mrs. Shale last night. Her temperature has been creeping up, and this morning it's 101."

Holly knitted her eyebrows and walked inside Mrs. Shale's room. She waved to her patient

and scooted up to her bedside. The group of residents and medical students surrounded Mrs. Shale.

“Did my nurse tell on me?” Mrs. Shale teased.

Holly smiled. “Yes, she did.”

“I’m fine. The thermometer must be wrong.”

Holly winked at her. “Let’s see.” She picked up the digital thermometer from the bed stand. “Open wide.”

Mrs. Shale frowned. “I guess I have no choice. Looks like I’m outnumbered.”

The team chuckled. Mrs. Shale relented and opened her mouth. Holly slid the probe under her tongue.

“Close, please,” Holly said.

Mrs. Shale obeyed. She rolled her eyes while they waited for the verdict. The digital thermometer beeped.

“Open, please.” Holly read the result. “Aha. Not 101.”

“See? I told you that thing was off.”

Holly grinned. “Your temperature is 101 point 2.”

Mrs. Shale shook her head. “Nah. It can’t be.”

Holly held the thermometer in front of her doubting patient.

Mrs. Shale reached for her eyeglasses and pushed them to the bridge of her nose. “All right. I am a tad warm. But I’m feeling well.” She stifled a cough.

“I heard that,” Holly said. She stuck her stethoscope into her ears and rested her hand on Mrs. Shale’s shoulder. “Lean forward a little.” Placing the stethoscope against her patient’s back, she instructed, “Take some deep breaths.” She listened.

“I’m all right,” Mrs. Shale protested.

“Shhh! Just breath. In and out.” Holly frowned at the crackles coming from Mrs. Shale’s lungs. She removed the earpieces. “Your lungs are not expanding enough, a common problem after anesthesia. You have postoperative pulmonary atelectasis. You need to exercise your lungs, to expand them, otherwise you’ll end up with pneumonia.” She picked up the incentive spirometer, the post-operative breathing device, from the bedside stand and handed it to Mrs. Shale. “Show me how much you can inhale.”

Mrs. Shale blew out a breath and clamped her lips around the plastic tube’s mouthpiece that

was connected to a chamber with numbered slash marks and gave a strained inhalation. She barely raised the piston of the flow meter. “I guess I need practice.”

“Yes you do.” Holly shoved the yellow marker half way up the chamber. “You have the hang of it. I’m sure you’ll get better. I want you to do this ten times every hour. Your goal is to bring that piston up to this yellow marker and beyond. I’ll stop by later and check on your progress. Because you have a fever and crackles in your lungs, I’m ordering a chest x-ray. If your fever persists, I may need to start you on antibiotics.”

Mrs. Shale clung to the device. “I promise to practice hard.”

Holly smiled. “I know.”

She liked her, secretly comforted by her maternal ways. Mrs. Shale reminded her of her Aunt Mae. They could have been sisters. Always keeping a professional and courteous relationship with her patients, her interest in Mrs. Shale surprised her.

Mrs. Shale waved to the young doctors and medical students. The team grinned at her and said altogether, “Goodbye, Mrs. Shale.”

Everyone took a shine to her.

Noel popped his head into the room. “How’s our star patient doing this morning?”

Mrs. Shale pouted. She raised her spirometer. “I got an “F-minus” this morning. But I deserved it. I have “atillastasis.”

“Ah. You have postoperative atelectasis,” Noel teasingly corrected Mrs. Shale.

“Yeah. That’s what I said,” she countered

Noel and Holly grinned at each other.

“You can both stop by later,” Mrs. Shale said. “We’ll have a contest to see who has the best lungs.”

Noel shot a finger at her. “You’re on.” He squinted. “See you at high noon.”

Mrs. Shale waved at the team. “No offense, but you youngsters go on. I’ve got some serious work to do.”

Holly and Noel let their teams pass and lingered behind them outside of Mrs. Shale’s room. She slipped her hands into her lab coat pockets as they walked side by side. It was casual enough gesture without seeming eager. Perhaps the scones safely stashed in her locker were over the top. After all, he did bring her cookies. But it was not about the confections. It was about sharing them with Noel. Her life had revolved around the hospital with her heading straight home after

long days in the operating room. Aunt Mae had called her a hermit. And Holly acknowledged that. Maybe she was more of a hermit crab, crawling into her shell, it sheltering her from others, others that probably found her aloof. *Am I aloof? No. I'm reserved. I'm focused. Okay, they're the all the same thing.* Perhaps she needed to ease up a bit. The party was fun. And she already let Noel into her life, albeit unanticipated. Now she desperately wanted him to stay.

“Holly?”

She blinked at Noel’s voice.

“You seemed a million miles away. Everything okay?”

“Yes. Yes. I was just worried about Mrs. Shale. Maybe I’m missing something. It was a challenging case.” It was true, but her thoughts had wandered further.

Noel rested his hand on her shoulder. Her breath hitched.

Panic struck her. Perhaps others were watching them. Holly lunged straight into her professional and protective mode. “I don’t know, Noel. Her abdomen is non-distended. She has no nausea or vomiting. Her skin is a bit flushed, but her sclera are clear. I don’t detect any jaundice. We dissected the anatomy clearly. I believe she has pulmonary atelectasis. We’ll push her to use the incentive spirometer. She’ll get better.”

He nodded. “I know how it is. We replay every surgery we do.”

That would be something she would say, cool and objective. And just as she was about to concur, the corners of his eyes crinkled upward. He gave her shoulder an extra yet gentle squeeze.

“See you at breakfast, meet you at noon in Mrs. Shale’s room, and pick you up at your house at seven.”

Holly opened her mouth. “Whaa?” God! She couldn’t even utter a simple word like “What.”

Noel threw her a smile before catching up with his new team.

Holly plucked her hand from her pocket and waved to him. *Oh, so weak!* She had to get her day back on track. Holly hustled down the hallway toward her team with a bounce in her step and a grin on her face. She halted and rocked on her toes. Her team stared at her, some grimacing. She’d surprise them this morning with no stinging critiques.

“Excellent work, guys!” Holly glanced at Clifford and Candice. “Dr. Jackson and Ms. Baxter, you will assist me on the first case, a breast biopsy-and,” she pointed to a resident and a medical student, “you two will assist me on a port placement. The rest of you finish up with

patient care and then join me in the surgeon's lounge at 10 a.m. I will then choose two more of you for the final case today. If I do not pick you, don't worry. Everyone will get an opportunity to help me in the O.R."

The team quietly chattered amongst themselves, their faces beaming.

Holly's chest swelled beneath her lab coat. They did perform admirably, and it felt good to reward them.

After her team dispersed, she straightened her ponytail and headed to the unit's station. Noel sat smiling in an office chair while leaning backward with his hands clasped behind his neck, and surrounded by a group of nurses. They were all laughing. Even the stoic unit secretary giggled. The new king was holding court. Holly backed away. The unit nurses were at least ten years younger, nicely made up, and with manicured nails. Holly glanced down at her stubby fingernails and her overgrown cuticles. Her hands were chapped and dry from chronic surgical scrubbing. How could she compete with those nurses? She snuck away to the elevator and pressed the button.

"Hey, wait up, Holly," Noel called.

The elevator doors parted. The car was empty.

"I guess we picked the right one," he said.

He waved his arm, motioning for her to step inside first. They stood shoulder-to-shoulder, silent for a few seconds.

Holly looked straight at the closed doors. "Looks as if you've got a good team there. And the nurses seems to like you."

"Yes, they're a good group. Being new on staff, I'm getting to know them and they're getting to know me. But I'm partial to the first one that bumped into me."

Holly glanced at him. She cracked a smile. "You were in my way," she teased.

"Now you're going my way."

Her heartbeat skipped. "Well that cuts down on collisions." The accidental kind, she mused.

He raised a flirtatious brow. "Hopefully not all of them."

Another skipped beat! Heat spiraled up Holly's neck and crept to her earlobes. She prayed for the doors to open before the blush spread to her face. When the doors parted on the operating room level, Holly darted out, unsure how to act around Noel in the hospital. In private, well that was a separate matter.

“I’ll catch up with you in pre-op holding,” she called.

Holly sprinted to the women’s locker room and ducked inside, releasing the fire from her face. She quickly peeled off her standard black and white clothes and donned surgical scrubs. Holly grabbed the paper bag with the scones inside, hesitated, and then pulled it from the top shelf of her locker. She stared at Noel’s scarf. Deciding to give it to him during their dinner date, she patted it before shutting the locker door. Holly caught her reflection in the mirror. Her blonde hair was shiny and neatly pulled back. She puckered her lips. With a surgical mask covering her mouth, there was no point wearing lipstick. And her lips would stick to the inside of the mask. Mascara would do, and it was in keeping with her everyday look. Her own natural blush, more so around Noel, precluded any extra attention to her cheeks. She drew a deep breath, grabbed the scones, and headed for the pre-operative holding area.

Noel was already talking to his first patient and Clifford and Candice were waiting outside the cubicle of Holly's first case. She motioned for them to follow her into the patient's assigned area. Patting the young woman's hand, she introduced them. Her patient's hand trembled. She reassured her that the breast lump in her left breast was probably benign and she empathized with her anxiety. Holly reviewed the operative consent with the woman and asked her if she had any questions. The woman shook her head, tears in her eyes. Holly sat at her bedside and handed her a tissue. The woman blew her nose and thanked her. She reassured the frightened woman she'd be right by her side in the recovery room and would then speak with the her husband.

Holly exited her patient’s room, Clifford and Candice following behind her like ducklings. Noel, seated at the pre-op station, bounced his pen against the teal Formica desktop, catching it repeatedly. He glanced up at her, smiling, missing the ballpoint’s trajectory. It flew from the counter’s beveled edge, ricocheted off the medication cart, and leapfrogged five times in the air before landing at a nurse’s feet.

Noel blushed. “Oops! Sorry. I guess it’s time for breakfast.”

Old Nurse Ryan frowned. She bent over and picked up the pen. “Please, Dr. Green, take him off my hands.”

“Gladly,” Holly said. She crooked her finger at Noel. “Let’s go, Dr. Clumsy.”

“Hey, I was doing well until you distracted me.”

“I distracted you?”

“Yep, that’s what happened.”

The nurse shook her head and handed him his pen. “Good thing you’re operating in different rooms.”

“I think we make a good team,” Noel said.

“I’ll vouch for him. He’s better with a scalpel.”

Holly picked up her bag of scones. Noel grabbed the edge of the bag, opened it, and peeked inside.

“Are those scones?”

Holly nodded. “Surprise! But we’ll patronize the cafeteria and buy their coffee.”

“I love those,” Candice blurted out.

Clifford gently grasped her arm and pulled her away. He shook his head at her. “We’ll meet you in the O.R., Dr. Green.”

Candice protested. “But...”

“We’ll get a quick bite on our own,” Clifford told her.

Candice grinned. “Oh, I get it.”

Holly and Noel walked away.

“Kids,” Noel said.

“Uh huh. So says the juggler.”

Noel shrugged. “Let me see those scones.”

“Oh, no. These babies will never see the ground.”

“Come on. Let me try!” he teased.

Noel chased her down the hall.

Holly hugged her bag. “No!” She laughed.

“Give me those scones, Green!”

“No way, Shepherd.”

They playfully tussled all the way to the cafeteria.

Noel pointed to a table far in a corner. Holly had her eye on the same one. They slid into the wooden seats and faced one another. He propped his hands on the table and leaned toward her.

“This is nice of you.”

“You brought cookies the other day. I’m just trying to keep up.”

He laid his hand on hers. Her pulse picked up pace. Could he tell? Could he feel the beat of

her wrist? She pressed her hand harder onto the table, disguising the flutters she could not control.

Noel's eyes pressed into Holly. "You don't need to keep up with me. I'm not going anywhere. And the cookies were an excuse to stop by."

She took a deep breath. "Okay. " *Oh, more than okay!* "Let's enjoy the scones."

Noel pushed back his chair. "I'll get us coffee and some plates."

"I had a latte this morning. Just get me a small cup, two creamers and two sugars."

"You got it!"

She watched him trot off to the cafeteria and halt in line with the other nurses and docs waiting to grab a quick breakfast, ready to whip her head straight ahead should he turn his head toward her. But he didn't. Apparently he was too busy chatting with the nurses surrounding him. Holly frowned. Squinting, she tried to identify the culprits. She recognized the two O.R. nurses. The other one she thought was from ICU. The line moved, and so did Noel and his fan club. Why should she care? Noel was a congenial guy. He certainly wasn't going to exist in a vacuum.

Noel exited the cafeteria counter, smiling, with two Styrofoam capped coffees, two plates, and zero nurses. Ironically, the only nurse that took a shine to Holly, was the one not partial to him.

"Here you go." He set her coffee beside her plate.

"You're popular with the nurses today," Holly sheepishly prodded.

"I'm a novelty." He scrunched his face. "Once they get to know the real me they'll scatter, warning everyone that I'm heading for the O.R about to make rounds." Noel furrowed his forehead. "My team will declare mutiny and when word gets out, medical students will fight to be on a different team." He arched his eyebrows. "Maybe yours."

She chuckled. "Not likely."

Holly ruled the surgical floor with an iron fist. In return, she expected the best from her team and the nurses. No slackers! Her intensity had gotten her where she is now, the best surgeon at Granite State Medical Center. Well, now tied with Noel. But he had an advantage. He had a way with people, staff, and patients. His humor and genuine bedside manner garnered attention and respect. The staff, with the exception of Nurse Ryan, who had probably been at the hospital since its doors opened, avoided her, perhaps rightfully so. Holly had long raised her shield. Noel was the first to stick around long enough to peek behind her armor. And her patients liked her. Well

known in the community for her surgical skills, patients flocked to her office. But they were not interested in her personal past. Mrs. Shale was her first exception.

Noel took a sip of his coffee, keeping his eyes focused on hers over the brim of his cup. He set his drink down. “Why don’t you think residents and students want to be on your team? They looked happy today. They learn so much from you. They leave you being better doctors.”

Holly grasped her hot coffee with both hands and quietly slurped. She set the cup gently on the table. “I’m a hard ass.”

Noel cracked a smile. “Nah!”

“Okay. I can stand to lighten up a bit.”

He nodded. “Yes, you can.” He wagged his finger. “Now if I can only get on Nurse Ryan’s sweet side.”

Holly propped her elbow on the table and dropped her chin into her palm. She grinned. “I’ll see what I can do.”

Noel grabbed the paper bag and rustled it open. “Let’s finish these scones before we head off to the O.R.”

He bit into one and chewed, swallowing it in seconds. Holly ate as quickly, too. She was used to eating on the run.

He swiped a paper napkin across his lips. “I’ve got two cases this morning, and then,” he glanced at his watch, “we have the first of our two dates: Mrs. Shale’s room at noon and Chez Jacques at 7:30. Remember, I’m picking you up at seven.” Noel winked. “Let’s synchronize our watches.”

Holly laughed. She glanced at her watch. “I’ve got 7:15 a.m.”

“Seven fifteen it is,” he said.

They gulped their coffee and crunched their scones in preparation for their respective 7:30 operating room start times. Having peeked at his O.R. schedule earlier, she knew his itinerary for the morning but she’d not admit she had checked it out.

“The scones were delicious,” he said.

Noel stood and cleared their cups and plates while Holly pushed back her chair. As she got up from the table, she spied Clifford and Candice across the room. When they noticed her, they bolted from their table, tossed their trash into the waste receptacle, and scooted out of the cafeteria.

Noel grinned. "They're eager to please, aren't they?"

"Both are doing well. Candice, the medical student, has improved substantially, and you met Clifford, my intern, the day before."

"Yeah, good hands."

"He has potential."

Noel nudged her. "They're learning from the best."

Holly arched her eyebrows. *More points for him!*

Noel rested his hand on Holly's shoulder.

She fought not to inch closer to him. "Clifford learned a lot during your case, Noel." *Okay, public display of affection under control. God, the man is sexy!* But how long could she hold out?

Noel nodded. "We both taught him well on that one." He searched her eyes and leaned in closer. "We should operate more together."

All right. Heartbeat ready in rocket mode. Easy! Easy! Holly took a quick breath. "I'd like that." *Good! Short and to the point. Hold off, Holly. Don't be so eager.*

Holly and Noel walked together along the operating room corridor, garnering the attention of their colleagues and O.R. staff who all turned their heads toward the couple. By afternoon, they'd be the stars of the hospital rumor mill. Perhaps she should stop caring what other people thought.

"See you at high noon." Noel said. "I'll score us an incentive spirometer each. Then we'll whip Mrs. Shale's lungs into shape."

"Deal!" *Wow, fun and sexy!* This was the first time she couldn't wait to get through her day. Instead of curling up in her bunny slippers, she'd be curled up in Noel's arms, of course after Chez Jacques.

They parted for their respective O.R. rooms. Holly couldn't help it. She glanced back at him. He was already looking at her.

Holly's patient lay on the operating room table, her eyes darting about the cold, white tiled room. The stark walls were only interrupted by a row of silver stainless steel glass cabinets housing an assortment of surgical supplies. The circulating nurse called a time out, a necessary recitation identifying the patient, the intended procedure, the stated consent form, the patient's

medical allergies, and the O.R. staff present, including Dr. Green as the surgeon of record. Everyone in the O.R. suite confirmed the correct data. Holly held the woman's hand while the anesthesiologist pushed the syringe filled with sedative into her IV. The woman's eyelids fluttered and her hand relaxed away from Holly's grasp.

"She's out," the anesthesiologist said. Holly waited until he inserted a breathing tube through the woman's mouth and into her airway before stepping outside of the O.R. to scrub. Clifford and Candice were already waiting at the scrub sink, blue bouffant scrub caps on, and light blue surgical masks covering their noses and mouths. Holly, wearing her own flower print scrub cap, grabbed a mask and tied the ribbons from the ends behind her head. They leaned over the stainless steel sink next to one another, and scrubbed their hands with antiseptic sponges from elbows down under the faucets.

Holly rinsed the lather from her hands and shook the excess water from them. Droplets flew from her fingertips, splattering onto the sink back. Holding her wet hands above her waist, her elbows bent, she nudged the O.R. door with her backside. She glanced at Clifford and Candice who stood like speechless subjects, letting their queen enter first. "Are you guys ready?"

They nodded.

She tilted her head into the O.R. "Well, come on. A chance to cut is a chance to cure."

They hurried their pace. Holly smiled beneath her mask. While the O.R. nurse cleansed the woman's left breast with Betadine, a sepia tinted antiseptic solution, Holly led Clifford and Candice over to the screen mounted on the wall displaying radiologic views of the woman's mammogram and breast ultrasound. She reviewed the digital films with them, pointing out the problematic mass, and quizzed them on the differential diagnoses of a breast lump, nodding with approval at their correct list.

"I'm impressed. You've both prepared well for this case."

The crinkle of their eyes above their masks disclosed their pride.

Yes, her day was right on schedule.

They moved to the O.R. table. Candice stood next to Holly while Clifford and the surgical scrub tech, took their places opposite them. Holly arranged blue sterile towels around the woman's breast, leaving the suspicious area exposed.

"Scalpel," she said.

The scrub tech handed it to her. As Holly incised the skin above the breast mass, she heard

Candice's breath hitch. Without turning her head, she asked, "Ms. Baxter, are you all right?"

Candice cleared her throat. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Good. Then hold this retractor here so I can excise this mass. Clifford, give me exposure on your side."

Neither Clifford nor Candice spoke, only doing as Holly ordered them.

Holly scooped out the shooter marble sized mass and handed it to the scrub tech. "Please send this to pathology for a frozen section."

"Will do," she said. The scrub tech plopped the pearly white lump into a container and handed it to the circulating nurse.

They waited around the surgical table for the pathologist's preliminary tissue diagnosis.

Holly glanced at the scrub tech who had known her for years, anticipating every move Holly made in her O.R. "These two are awfully quiet," Holly said. "Aren't they?"

The scrub tech dutifully nodded. "Yes, they are, Dr. Green."

Holly turned and searched Candice's eyes. Her ink spot pupils shouted female fear, fear of the sensitive issue at hand. Holly contemplated her own angst at every breast biopsy, at every excision, especially on women her age or younger, prompting self-exams that would fade until the next case struck. She focused on Candice's frightened eyes.

"It's scary operating on women with breast lumps," Holly said softly. "And they're scared, too. But we're here to give them answers, good or bad, and get them the best treatment possible. You're helping in that process today."

She heard Candice swallow hard and watched the lump in her throat rise and fall. Holly rested her gloved hand over Candice's hand.

"Dr. Green and I have operated on many breast lumps," the scrub tech added. "Even with the benign looking ones, we hold our breaths."

The tension in Candice's hand eased beneath Holly's touch.

She winked at Candice.

"Holly, it's Doug," Dr. Netz's voice blared over the O.R. speaker. "I have the frozen section results. Looks to be a fibroadenoma with clear margins."

Holly grinned beneath her mask. "Thanks, Doug."

"You're welcome. Have a good day."

"And it's a good day for her. Her lump is benign as I expected. She'll need follow up

mammograms and breast exams.”

Candice sighed. The scrub tech gave her celebratory high five.

“Okay, ladies and,” she glanced at Clifford, “gentleman. Let’s close.”

Holly let Clifford suture the subcuticular tissue and had Candice cut the suture ends. She finished the incision with a cosmetic closure.

“Your instrument count is correct,” the scrub tech said.

“Good job, everyone. Dr. Jackson and Ms. Baxter, dress the wound. I’ll meet you in the waiting room. We’ll speak to her husband together. Afterwards, I want you to go to the surgical ward and finish your notes and orders. I’ll come up later and cosign them.” She glanced at the anesthesiologist. “You can wake her up now.”

She patted Candice on the back before leaving the O.R. Holly hustled to Noel’s O.R. room and peeked inside it. His back to her, he was still on his first case. The timing was perfect. She’d finish her next two surgeries right about the same time he’d complete his cases for the day. Barring any emergency surgeries, they’d be off at 5 p.m. when the on call team began their vigil.

Holly met Clifford and Candice as planned. Their faces beamed with accomplishment. She recalled that heady feeling as a medical student and then a surgical resident when she’d get her chance to perform in the O.R. Pure adrenalin. There was nothing like it. There still isn’t. Well, except when she was with Noel.

Holly and her team entered the waiting room. The woman’s husband shot up from his seat, his forehead furrowed. He clenched his hands together. She watched the anxiety dissolve from his face as she relayed the good news. He released his hands. His shoulders relaxed. The man shook Holly’s hand, thanking her, and acknowledged Clifford and Candice. Everyone left that room happy.

As they walked out of the waiting room, Candice said, “It’s so nice to give people good news.”

“Yes, it is,” Holly said. She’d not deflate the elated medical student’s surgical dreams with tales of somber news. Candice would learn soon enough that not every case ended well.

After Clifford and Candice took off, Holly went to the recovery room and as she promised she sat at her patient’s bedside until the woman was alert. She squeezed the woman’s hand and announced the bright prognosis. Tears streamed down the woman’s cheeks. Her patient hugged her. Holly’s day was getting better by the moment and her night promised to cap off a fabulous

24 hours.

Her next two cases flew by without a hitch. As always Holly's favorite scrub tech anticipated all her instrument needs, her hand offs crisp. The residents and medical students were eager to learn, and no one accidentally contaminated her surgical field. A banner morning it was!

Her cases done for the morning, Holly dictated her last operative report in the recovery room. The telephone receiver pressed to her ear, she caught Noel out of the corner of her eye. She was right. They did finish their surgeries at the same time. He leaned over her, his breath on her cheek, and scribbled a note on the pad in front of her. She raised her finger while continuing to dictate. Noel tapped his index finger on his note, and then made funny faces at her, trying his best to make her laugh. She pressed the pause button on the phone.

Clutching the receiver in her hand, she shook her head and laughed. "You're distracting me."

"Oops, sorry," he teased.

Noel plopped into a chair and picked up the receiver from the phone next to Holly. He began to dictate at the same time as she, speaking a bit louder, a mischievous grin on his face. It was like trying to count while someone else shouted out random numbers. She rushed through her dictation and hit the "end" button, and then stuck her tongue out at him. She could never figure out how the hospital transcriptionists were able to comprehend their lightening fast summaries. Holly read Noel's note while he finished his dictation. It read, "Meet me in Mrs. Shale's room." Holly tapped him on his shoulder before she left and nodded.

Noel paused his dictation. "You beat me, Green. But I'll win the first annual incentive spirometry challenge. Be afraid, Green. Be very afraid."

She shrugged. "I happen to have excellent lungs."

He winked at her. "Well that will come in handy! See you, at high noon."

Holly teasingly held out her palms and waved her fingers. "Bring it, Shepherd."

The recovery nurses laughed and said, "Whoa!"

"What? She's not going to win. I was on my high school swim team, and I have the lungs to prove it."

Holly jabbed her hands to her hips. "Oh, come on, Shepherd. What was that? Twenty years ago?"

"I happen to have won every swim meet. You'll see."

Holly smiled. “The surgical glove has been tossed.” She playfully flipped her ponytail from her neck and left the recovery room. She knew he was watching her.

Holly giggled softly all the way to the women’s locker room. She’d grab her lab coat to wear over her scrubs and then she’d go up to the surgical floor to sign off on her team’s work before heading to Mrs. Shale’s room. About to open her locker, she paused. Her hand rested on the metal handle. Not an eaves-dropper, she couldn’t help but listen to the nurses chatting behind their bathroom stall doors.

“Have you checked out that hot new surgeon, Noel Shepherd?”

“Yeah. I saw him at the Christmas party, and today I stood in line with him at the cafeteria. I was about to give him my phone number, but Ashley from ICU beat me to it. She told him that we’re all going for drinks at Callahan’s tonight and invited him to come along.”

“Hey, fair game. He’s single.”

“I hear he’s sweet on Holly Green.”

“Oh, come on. Honestly, there’s no competition there.”

The toilets flushed. Holly snatched her lab coat and bolted from the locker room before the nurses could see her.

Her mind stunned and her body restless, Holly ran up the stairwell, bypassing the elevator. Her heart pounded more from the sting of hurt than from the climb. Drawing several deep breaths, she managed to compose herself before venturing onto the surgical unit. She gathered her team, congratulated them on their performance, and then dismissed them for lunch. Sitting in front of the computer screen, Holly grasped her ponytail and wound it around her finger while waiting for her electronic inbox to load. The nurses’ snarky remarks replayed in her head. She rubbed her eyes before reviewing her charges’ notes.

“Are you ready for the challenge?”

Holly jerked at the sound of his voice. She swung in her chair away from the screen to face him.

Noel blinked. “I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I, uh, was preoccupied.” Why was she, a capable surgeon, stammering?

Noel held up two incentive spirometers. “One for you and one for me. Mrs. Shale has her own. Let’s go see if she’s been practicing!”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll meet you in her room in a minute.”

“Okay, but I’m going to start counting. One. Two. Three.”

She laughed and logged off the computer. “All right, I’m coming. Be prepared to lose, again!”

Noel arched an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

Holly snatched one of the pulmonary flow meters. “Yeah.” She strode past him. “Who says I can’t compete,” she muttered. She’d prove those nurses wrong!

Mrs. Shale waved to them as they entered her room. Her eyes tracked to Holly first, her look lingering. It was the kind of motherly clairvoyant stare when a child is troubled. Her gaze shifted to Noel. “So are you youngsters ready?”

“Youngsters?” Noel plopped into a chair. “Flattery will get you everywhere.”

Holly sat into a chair opposite Noel, Mrs. Shale sandwiched between them.

“Okay. Here are the rules. We each get three tries. Then we’ll add up our milliliters of air moved. The winner gets an all expense paid trip to the hydrotherapy pool.”

Mrs. Shale and Holly “oohed” at the same time.

“Leave it a swimmer to suggest the pool,” Holly said.

Noel shrugged. “I do love the water, especially hot massaging currents during New Hampshire winters.” He smiled at Holly. “Or any kind of massage.”

Mrs. Shale’s face pinked as her lips pulled into a smile. She glanced at Holly and then at Noel. “Sound’s pretty enticing, Dr. Green.”

“Dare to dream, Shepherd,” Holly quipped back.

“Do they sell swimsuits in the gift shop?” Mrs. Shale asked.

Holly and Noel burst out laughing.

“Mrs. Shale, if you win, I’ll buy you a bathing suit,” Noel said.

Mrs. Shale shot her finger at him. “You’re on!”

“All right,” Holly said. “One. Two. Three. Go!”

They exhaled, their breaths transforming the room into a wind tunnel, and stuck the coiled plastic tubes into their mouths. Holly watched her patient far exceed the yellow goal marker she had set for her. She then shot her eyes to Noel’s effort and she sucked harder. After round one, she and he were tied.

“Well played, Dr. Green. But Mrs. Shale’s a close second. Round two. One. Two. Three.”

They inhaled, driving their yellow pistons up the measured canisters.

Mrs. Shale yanked the spirometer from her lips and raised her fist in victory. “I won!”

Holly and Noel nodded in acknowledgement.

About to start the third and final round, a knock on Mrs. Shale’s doorway interrupted them. Holly’s eyes widened. Ashley, the ICU nurse, leaned against the doorframe with a toothy smile on her face. She waved a note at Noel.

“May I see you a minute, Dr. Shepherd?”

Holly rolled her eyes. Noel’s popularity among the nurses was rocketing.

Noel set his spirometer on the bedside table. “I’ll be right back.”

Noel and Ashley disappeared around the corner. Holly craned her neck toward the door.

“Can you hear them?” Mrs. Shale asked.

Holly frowned and shook her head. “I’m wondering if he has forfeited.”

Mrs. Shale patted her hand. “Trust me. He’ll be back. I see how he looks at you.” She smiled and nodded. “And here he comes.”

Noel plopped back in the chair. He grabbed his spirometer, but his eyes were focused on the doorway. “Okay, here goes the final round.”

Holly’s heart plummeted to the growing pit in her belly. *I bet she handed him her number. I’ll give him a way out of our date. I’ll tell him I’ve traded call and won’t be able to go to dinner.* As Noel started to count, Ashley poked her head into the doorway. Holly gritted her teeth. On the count of three she exhaled, jammed the mouthpiece past her lips, and inhaled with such gusto that the piston popped clear out of the canister. It sailed over Mrs. Shale and landed in Noel’s lap.

“Wow,” Noel exclaimed. “Looks like we have a winner!”

Ashley stared at Holly, her lips pressed upward in a forced smile, and clapped.

Holly slumped in her chair and recovered her breath. Ashley was the real winner.

Chapter Six

Holly relinquished her victory to Mrs. Shale who performed beyond her expectations.

“I’m stepping down as winner of the First Annual Incentive Spirometry Challenge. Mrs. Shale, you are the true champion. Now lean over and let me listen to your lungs.”

She plotted her stethoscope along her patient’s back in parallel, from the apices to the bases, and listened. “Perfect. Nice and clear. And your fever has gone.”

“I did exactly as you ordered, dear.”

Holly smiled. “It shows. I owe you a bathing suit.”

Mrs. Shale plump cheeks reddened. “I haven’t gone swimming in years.” She sighed. “When we were younger Martin and I used to go to Lake Winnepesaukee every summer. We have a cottage there. Now I rent it out. I don’t want to go back there without him. We had such good times.”

“Once your incisions heal, we’ll get you back into the water; heated whirlpool in the winter and crystal blue lake in the summer.”

“Let’s start with the hydrotherapy pool first.”

Holly nodded. “Okay.”

Mrs. Shale and her were kindred spirits, spirits that avoided their ghostly pasts.

Noel shook Mrs. Shale’s hand. “Congratulations.”

“Thank you.” She waved her hand. “Now you two go on. Far be it for me to rest on my laurels.” She picked up her incentive spirometer. “I need to keep up my skills.”

Noel shot her a thumb’s up. “That a way to go.”

Noel rested his hand on Holly’s back. Holly’s shoulders tensed for the first time to his touch. “Let’s go finish our respective rounds so we can get out of here. Gosh, Green, you shot that piston out like a canon. Do you sing opera, or something?”

“Uh, more like something. Noel, about dinner this evening.”

He lowered his hand to the small of her back. “I’ll pick you up at seven.” He darted off

before she could utter her planned excuse.

“Darn him,” she muttered. She wasn’t going to share him with anyone. Holly felt her face sag. Noel hadn’t promised her any exclusivity. Perhaps she had unfortunately expected that was where they were heading.

Holly blinked her eyes several times during check out rounds that afternoon, struggling to pay attention to her team as they stared at her in silence each time she paused. She’d clear her throat and stride past them just so they’d recognize her, the same old demanding Dr. Green. Softening was one thing, but morphing into a mush of an attending, thanks to Noel, was something else. Holly thanked her team and dismissed them.

Holly hadn’t seen Noel on the surgical unit since they had parted outside Mrs. Shale’s room. Sinking into the station’s computer chair, she logged on, and while waiting for her inbox to load, she leaned back, crossed her legs, and placed her hands behind her neck. She spun in her chair in semi-circles, facing the unit secretary during one of her wider swings.

The secretary froze her fingers on her keyboard and squinted at Holly. “Are you okay, Dr. Green?”

Holly jerked up in her seat. “Yes, I’m fine.” She pointed to the screen. “But this computer’s on break.”

“Mmm. Mmm. Mmm. Tell me about. It’s been down three times today.”

Her inbox flashed on the monitor. Holly dragged the mouse to the down arrow and scrolled the items poised for her review. She pulled away from the screen. “Yikes! I’ll be lucky to leave here by midnight.”

“If I can input these lab and radiology requisitions by 5, so can you.”

Holly stretched her fingers. Clicking away on the myriad of messages was therapeutic. She finished her list in less than an hour. Holly threw her hands in the air. “Voila! Done.”

“Ha! So am I,” the secretary said. “High five, Dr. Green.”

They smacked hands in the air. In all her years at Granite State Medical Center, no one had interacted with her in such a jovial fashion.

The secretary nodded. “You’re all right, Doc.”

Holly bounced from her chair. “That was fun.” She reached into her lab coat pocket and pulled out an unopened roll of mints. Peeling off the foil top, she held out the candies.

“Lifesaver?”

The secretary picked off the first one. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Holly popped one in her mouth and waved to the secretary.

With a bounce in her step, she left the unit. She had changed her mind about backing out of her date with Noel. Now she couldn’t wait to see him. Maybe Ashley handed Noel some important lab results. With extra energy to burn, she pumped her legs down three flights of steps. She hummed all the way to the women’s locker room. Holly flung off her scrubs and donned her black slacks and white silk blouse. She shrugged. At least her outfits always matched. Grabbing Noel’s scarf, she folded it into neat fourths and tucked it in her tote. She swung her locker closed and glanced at her watch. It was 5 p.m., still plenty of time to get ready for tonight.

Holly pulled her car into the drive. The wheels crackled over the snow. The neighbor boys waved to her.

“We’ll get this cleared out for you in an hour tops, Dr. Green,” they shouted, holding up their shovels like soldiers about to enter battle.

“Come in for hot chocolate when you’re done.”

“Thanks, Dr. Green.”

She fished her house keys from her coat pocket and unlocked the front door. Holly hung up her coat and stomped the snow free from her boots. Easing them off her feet, she padded across the polished oak floors, cooled since her morning departure, and slid into her toasty slippers, sighing as her toes welcomed the warmth. She wiggled them in her furry white bunny slippers, last year’s Christmas gift from Aunt Mae. After long hours standing in the O.R., she looked forward to slipping them on every night.

She tugged the living room window curtains aside and peered through the sheers. The boys scraped the snow with fury, forming parallel mounds on each side of the driveway. Clumps of white flew from their shovels. Holly smiled at their effort. Her quaint Victorian house had been transformed into a ski chalet. The boys waved to her. Holly gave them a thumb’s up sign. She could afford to have her drive cleared professionally, but she championed the boys, having made extra cash shoveling snow in her youth. She tipped her wrist and glanced at her watch. The boys had predicted right. They had completed the job in less than an hour.

Holly let the curtains fall back into place and hurried into the kitchen, her slippers’ bunny ears flopping to and fro with each step. While heating a pot of milk on the stove, she retrieved

three mugs from the cupboard, leaving her dad's favorite one behind. As she closed the cupboard, there was a knock at the door.

"Come in, guys," she yelled.

The front door squeaked open. Despite the stovetop aglow, a quick chill filled the room.

"Leave your wet boots by the door and come into the kitchen."

She set the mugs onto the kitchen table and filled them with hot cocoa. The boys rounded the table and sat, rubbing their hands over the steaming chocolate. Holly plunked miniature marshmallows into each mug.

"Thank you, Dr. Green," they said in unison.

While they sipped their cocoa, Holly went into her bedroom, picked up three envelopes, and returned with them to the kitchen, handing each boy one.

"Go ahead, open them," she said.

The boys tore into their envelopes.

"Wow," one exclaimed, holding up his iTunes gift card. "Cool! Thanks, Dr. Green."

She smiled. "You're welcome, guys. Merry Christmas."

"Hey, where's your tree, Dr. G.?" Sam, the boy who lived across the street asked.

Holly shrugged. "Don't have one."

"Oh, okay."

The boys finished their hot chocolate and washed out their mugs.

"Thanks, guys."

"No problem," Sam said. "The next snowstorm is on us." The others nodded in agreement.

Holly waved to them as they left, the boys still chattering about their planned music downloads. She crossed her arms and smiled. The iTunes cards along with cash went over big just as Holly had hoped. They deserved it, and the small gifts satisfied her urge to make someone happy at the holidays without all the hoopla. And they even tidied up after themselves, which freed her for the next hour to get ready for her dinner date with Noel.

She shuffled in her bunny slippers to the bathroom and slipped them off, leaving them positioned perfectly parallel to the bath mat. Cranking the shower to steamy hot, Holly's muscles relaxed beneath the spray. Accustomed to the brevity of military style showers, she let herself enjoy a full ten minutes. Tonight was special. The last time she'd gone out to dinner was four months ago, and that was with Aunt Mae to the local diner. Not that there was any wrong with

the diner, home of the best Reuben sandwich in New Hampshire, but she looked forward to dressing a bit more formal. Her black cocktail dress begged to leave her closet, even for one night, its price tag still dangling from its sleeve.

Stepping out of the tub, she reached for the stark white bath towel. She pressed its rich piles to her skin, it still pink from the hot water. Knotting the towel between her breasts, she grasped the hair dryer and heated the fogged mirror in concise spirals with surgical precision. Her muted image sharpened as the steam dissolved from the glass. She set the blow dryer down and stared at her reflection. Holly frowned. Maybe the nurses were right. She couldn't compete with them in that "girly" way. She was ten years their senior, and a decade plus of sleepless call nights was etched upon her face. She puckered her lips and squinted, inspecting her every little line, every flaw of her face, tugging the skin over her cheekbones toward her ears. Holly dropped her hands from her face and placed them on the vanity countertop. She leaned closer to the mirror. The natural look wouldn't do this evening. She pulled open a drawer containing make-up that was still sealed. Gifts from Aunt Mae.

"You're a lovely young woman," she'd say, "but a little on the pale side, always cooped up at the hospital. A smidgeon of blush over a nice foundation comes in handy on a winter's day."

She left the drawer open while drying her hair, contemplating just how much to apply.

Her blonde shoulder length hair dry and shiny, she gave the ends just enough of a wave with the curling iron. She nodded to her reflection. A scalpel wasn't the only instrument she wielded with success. Holly rubbed in a few dabs of foundation onto her face, finishing her efforts with sparing pats of powder and a glimmer of blush. Black mascara and a hint of rose pink lip-gloss completed her makeover. She still looked like Holly Green, but just with a little polish.

Slipping her feet back into her bunny slippers, she pattered into her bedroom, exchanging terry cloth towel for matching sheer black bra and panties, a luxury lingerie impulse buy. She retired Mr. and Mrs. Rabbit for the evening. Holly pulled on hosiery and rescued her black cocktail dress from her closet. She cut the price tag off with a sharp snip of scissors. It was like slicing through an opening day red ribbon. Tonight it would be her and Noel's opening night. She wiggled into the black dress, stretching her arms through the lacy long sleeves. The "V" neck bodice revealed just enough cleavage, not too virginal, not too slutty. She slid her feet into a pair of black pumps. Wearing operating room clogs and flats every day, Holly practiced walking in heels, teetering a bit in the beginning, but promenading elegantly within the next ten minutes.

The living room grandfather clock chimed seven times. Her heart beat fast and her stomach fluttered. She skirted from her bedroom without tripping in her heels, and sat on the sofa, poised with legs crossed, awaiting Noel's arrival.

Holly glanced at her watch. Seven-ten. No Noel yet. She shifted on the sofa. When the clock played its quarter past the hour tune, there was a knock on the door. She leapt from the couch, and started to run toward the door, but slowed to a brisk walk, not wanting to appear too desperate. With one hand on her coat dangling from the coat rack and the other on the doorknob, she smiled and opened the front door. She had to look down to find him. Ten year-old Sam stood on her stoop holding out a drugstore plastic bag.

"This is for you, Dr. Green. Merry Christmas."

"Oh, Sam!" Although disappointed Noel wasn't on the other side of her door, Sam's toothy grin pulled a smile onto her lips.

"Go head, open it," Sam said, a blush gracing his cherub cheeked face.

Holly pulled the edges of the bag apart and peeked inside. A Christmas card without an envelope sat on top of a box of cherry cordials.

"Did you spend the money you earned on this gift?"

Still smiling, Sam shrugged.

"Thank you, Sam. That's so thoughtful of you. Come in. I don't want you to have spent your hard earned money on me. These are actually my favorite chocolates. But let me give you some spending money for yourself."

He shook his head. "Not necessary. I'm glad you like the candy. I picked out the card all by myself."

"It's lovely!"

"I gotta go, Dr. Green. I'm late for supper. You should really get a Christmas tree. Then you could put those chocolates under it. But just because you don't have a tree, doesn't mean you can eat them before Christmas."

She winked at him. "I promise I'll wait until Christmas! Goodnight, Sam."

Holly stepped out on her stoop and watched Sam cross the street and go back inside his house. She looked down her street both ways. No cars. No Noel. Sam wasn't the only one late for dinner.

Seven thirty came and went.

Holly slumped into the sofa and grasped a throw pillow by its edges, flipping it in circles, and when the clock struck eight, she tossed it aside, stood, turned off the living room light, and retreated to her bedroom. Unzipping her dress, she let it slide down her legs, and then hung it back into her closet. She slid off her hose and removed her fancy lingerie, trading them for cotton panties and pajamas. Holly sniffled while brushing her teeth. She took a deep breath. Noel Shepherd wasn't going to make her cry. He was probably clinking his beer mug with Ashley and the Granite State Medical crew at Callahan's right this minute. She trudged into her bedroom, set her alarm clock to 5:30 a.m., and dodged under her bedcovers. It was just after 8:00 p.m. Ordinarily she stayed up until 11, but there was no point in prolonging the evening.

Headlights filled her bedroom. Holly squinted. A car had pulled into her drive. She heard its door shut. Footsteps led up to her stoop. Three knocks thudded on her front door, and after a pause, the doorbell rang.

"Holly. It's Noel. Are you all right?"

She pulled the sheet over her head and didn't answer back.

Chapter Seven

Holly gritted her teeth. Noel's persistent knocking on her front door echoed in her head. She whipped back the covers and crammed her feet into her bunny slippers. Grabbing her robe, she punched her arms through the sleeves and yanked the belt around her waist, knotting it with haste. She stomped into the living room and turned on the light. Holly jammed her heels into the hardwood floor with every furious step. The man was over an hour late. He didn't even bother to call. *Coward! I bet he didn't want me to hear the bar crowd's cheers in the background.* She clenched her fingers around the doorknob, yanked open the front door, and glared at him. Noel's eyes widened. He leaned back.

She shot her hands to her hips. "What do you want Noel?"

He paused and then softly said, "Perhaps I have the wrong house. Does Dr. Holly Green live here?"

She twisted her lips. "You're looking at her."

“Well, although she looks quite sporting in those pajamas,” he gazed downward, “and in those furry rabbit slippers, she might be a tad underdressed for Chez Jacques, not to mention that those bunnys may bolt when they see the chef’s version of lapin.”

“I waited for you for an hour, dressed and ready to go. You now show up at my door like there’s nothing wrong. And you want to know if I’m all right. No Noel! I’m not.” Holly pressed her hand on the doorframe and pushed on the door, distancing herself from him.

“Wait,” Noel yelled. “I texted you a least a dozen times telling you I had the reservation changed to 8:30 because my patient, the young guy with Crohn’s disease that you assisted me with in the O.R., had a complication. I had to transfer him to the ICU. That’s why I’m late.”

Holly’s lower lip dropped. “You didn’t go to Callahan’s Bar?”

He shook his head. “No. Why would I?”

She opened the door and motioned for him to come inside. Her palms moistened. “I overheard the nurses inviting you to happy hour, and then I saw Ashley giving you a note. I’m so sorry, Noel. How’s your patient?”

“He’s stable. And he’s Ashley’s brother. The note she slipped me was about her concerns. This was going to be my happy hour, hopefully our happy hour, but I’m not so sure now.”

The lump in her throat gripped her hard. She’d done exactly what she’d been trained not to do, formulate a wrong conclusion without the facts. Facts she didn’t get because she was too distracted preparing for a fabulous night, leaving her cell phone in the bottom of her tote, Noel’s messages not received.

Holly swallowed. “I hadn’t checked my cell. I never saw your texts. I’m so sorry.”

“Apology accepted.” He cocked his head and grinned. “Do you still want to go out?”

She blinked, caught off guard at his offer, especially since she acted so foolishly, almost shutting the door in his face. “Sure. Have a seat in the living room. I’ll be ready in ten minutes.”

Holly walked casually to the bedroom and eased the door shut. Then the private frenzy began. She kicked off her bunny slippers, whipped out of her pajamas and granny panties, strapped on her black bra, slipped into the matching panties, and jammed her legs into the hose. Yanking her closet door open, she grabbed her dress and wiggled back inside it, dancing around the bedroom while zipping it closed. “Shoes. Where my shoes?” Kneeling, she gritted her teeth as she searched under her bed. “Ah, there they are.” She slid the black pumps on, tottered out from the bedroom and into the bathroom. In her disgust with Noel’s absence, she hadn’t washed

off her make-up. A few pats of powder and fresh coating of mascara would suffice. She reapplied the lip-gloss and ran a brush through her hair. Holly glanced at her watch. *Ha! Eight minutes!* She had two minutes left to catch her breath and to walk into that living room with grace. She took a deep breath and headed down the hallway and into the living room.

Noel rocked out of the couch, his eyes wide and his eyebrows arched almost to the top of his forehead. “Wow!”

Holly twirled just for the effect. “I’m ready.”

They walked to the coat rack. Noel lifted Holly’s coat from the brass hook and held it up for her. Her back to Noel and about to slide her arms into the sleeves, she paused.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “I’ll be right back.”

Noel stood clutching the shoulders of her coat. Holly ran into the bedroom and retrieved his scarf from her dresser. Returning with it, she took her coat from Noel and hung it back onto the rack.

Noel narrowed his gaze and furrowed his forehead. “Did you change your mind?”

Holly smiled and shook her head. “Nope.”

She circled his Burberry plaid scarf over his head and wrapped it around his neck. Her fingers brushed his warm skin. Holly knotted it and patted it against his chest, another innocent chance to touch him. His breath heated her. Noel leaned into Holly and lowered his head. He tilted left. She tilted right. His lips pressed onto hers. Without a second of hesitation, she rested her hands on his shoulders. His hands slid to the small of her back. Noel’s heartbeat pulsed against Holly’s chest, his rhythm mingling with hers. Her stomach flipped and her knees weakened. She hadn’t realized how much she craved to be held until Noel slipped into her life.

Their lips parted and they eased away from each other.

Noel grinned. “I’ll have to think of something else to leave behind.”

Holly tapped Noel’s nose. “Here’s to forgetfulness.” She lifted her eyebrows. “I’ll take my coat now. We don’t want to be late for dinner.”

Noel reached for Holly’s coat and helped her into it. “I kept you waiting long enough.”

The boys had cleared the snowy drive down to the asphalt. Thankfully Holly could walk to Noel’s car in her black pumps without having to change into boots. She crunched across the scattered rock salt, the dig of her heels staccato while Noel, in his size eleven loafers, crackled out bass beats behind her. He quickened his pace ahead of her and opened the passenger side

door. Holly scooted into the car's seat, letting him shut the door once she was tucked in. This wasn't so bad, she thought. Relinquishing control didn't exist in her repertoire, but she could bend a bit tonight.

When they arrived at Chez Jacques, Holly, used to being in complete control, darted out of the passenger side, shut her door, and stood by the side of the car.

Noel got out of the car and closed his door. Clicking the remote on his key ring, he locked the vehicle. He paused and glanced at her with a huge grin on his face. "Hungry, aren't you?"

Holly met him at the back of the car and held out her hand. "Starved!"

He held her hand all the way to the restaurant's entrance, his grip inviting. Noel halted before the door.

"What are you waiting for?" she asked.

He looked at her squarely. "You are a challenge, Dr. Green."

She smiled. "Yes. And don't you forget it, Dr. Shepherd."

Noel winked. "Oh, I won't."

He opened the restaurant's door and escorted her inside, his hand resting on the small of her back. She was starting to like it there.

A woman, squeezed into a black sequined dress, who Holly gauged couldn't have seen her twenty-third birthday, greeted them. "Welcome to Chez Jacques," she said in a soft, lilting voice while tossing a strand of her elbow length ebony hair over her bare shoulder.

Holly shot her eyes to Noel and then to their "hostess with the most-est" and then back to him. If he was peeking at her cleavage, he kept it under cover well.

"Good evening," he said. "I'm Dr. Noel Shepherd and this is Dr. Holly Green. We have dinner reservations for 8:30."

The vampy hostess smiled at Noel, but glanced askew at Holly. Holly's lips pressed into a tight smile. Noel was a sexy man and a surgeon, the ultimate draw for a lot of women, nurses and hostesses aside. If their relationship were to flourish she'd have to muster her own self-confidence. After picking up dinner menus, the hostess cat walked in front of Noel as she led them to their candlelit corner table. Aha! Holly caught him glimpsing Miss Fake Parisian's derriere. Their sultry hostess leaned towards Noel as she handed him his menu and then she slowly but intentionally scooted Holly's across the table and under her nose.

"The waiter will be with you shortly." She tilted her head at Noel "Enjoy. And si'l vous

plait, let me know if I can do anymore for you.”

Do anymore? The French would choke on their escargot. “Thank-you,” Holly said, but the young woman had already turned away, not acknowledging her. “Tart,” Holly muttered.

Noel peeked over his menu. “What did you say?”

“I said that I’ll have the tart for dessert.”

He looked down at his menu. “Yes, that does sound delicious.”

Unsure if he had picked up on that slip, Holly hid behind her menu.

He grasped the top edge and lowered it, revealing her face. He tracked his eyes from her eyes to her cleavage, and then back to her face. “You look beautiful this evening.”

Was this damage control or was he sincere? She gazed into his unwavering brown eyes. Holly smiled. *Sincere, definitely sincere.*

Neither on call that night, Noel ordered a bottle of Beaujolais.

Noel raised his glass of wine. Holly followed suit.

“Here’s to a night that nearly didn’t happen,” he said.

They clinked their glasses and sipped their wine, gazing at one another over their crystal brims.

“I apologize for accusing you of ditching me for the gang at Callahan’s.”

Noel shook his head. “Ah, wine under the bridge. I hadn’t considered Callahan’s, but maybe you and I could go there some time after check out rounds.”

Holly paused. She had never hung out with the hospital crowd, always rushing home instead. Although she wouldn’t really be comfortable there, Holly recognized that Noel was new in town and that he needed to network.

“Maybe,” she said. It was the best answer she could give him at the moment.

“Maybe yes, or maybe no?”

“Maybe, Maybe.”

“Good enough. I’ll stop haranguing you.”

Holly feasted on her Duck Confit while Noel cut into his Coq au Vin. They ate in silence for a few minutes, their forks and knives chiming against their china. Holly caught him glancing down at the pager attached to his belt.

“Do we need to go? Is there a problem with your patient?” Holly asked between bites.

“No. I’m just paranoid. When I left him in ICU, he was already turning the corner. Even

Ashley was relieved. She said she'd stay with him until 10 or so, and would call me with any concerns. And the ICU nurses are top notch. They'll page me if there's a problem."

"They are the best. I know how it is. I replay surgeries in my mind all the time. Was everything hemostatic before I closed? Did I dissect all the anatomy clearly? On and on. I think that makes us prudent and caring surgeons."

"I do too. Mrs. Shale has certainly taken an extra liking to you."

"And I to her. She's alone. Her husband, Martin, had died earlier this year. This is her first Christmas without him." She glanced down at her plate. "I know how it is." Her eyes began to burn. Holly blinked the pain away. She had to stay in control.

Noel's eyes softened.

He knows what I'm feeling.

Holly swallowed back the lump threatening to rise to her throat. She quickly continued the conversation about Mrs. Shale. "I looked her up in the computer under demographics. She didn't have any family listed. I don't think she and Martin had any children." Holly took another bite of her dinner. She looked into Noel's eyes that had not once wandered over to their hostess. "I plan to discharge her from the hospital tomorrow. I don't want to send her home alone, even if a visiting nurse could check on her. I want her to stay with me for a while, especially during the holidays. I have a big house with plenty of bedrooms. She'd have her own bath. I'd cook for her. Bring her meals. Noel, am I crazy to get so personally involved with my patient?"

Holly took a deep breath after her litany.

Noel took her hand. "No. You're not crazy. It's doable. I think it will be good for her, and for you."

"Great. I'll ask her tomorrow."

They finished their dinner and their wine. Warmth percolated through her body. She even indulged in dessert with her coffee. In keeping with the slip of her tongue, Holly ordered the lemon tart while Noel dug into his profiteroles au chocolat. It was the perfect night.

The waiter brought the check. Noel signed the credit card bill with a gleam in his eyes, a hefty price for sure, but his male ego let the ink flow without hesitation. Eh! She'd bump him from an O.R. after the holidays. Holly rested her chin in her palm. He'd probably not even mind, she mused.

Holly stood as Noel pulled her chair from the table. She was proud she hadn't teetered once

on her high heels the whole night. That practice session in the privacy of her bedroom had paid off. Their hostess smiled through her red lipstick at Noel, but curtly nodded at Holly.

“Au revoir,” she cooed to him. “Please come again.”

“Merci,” Holly replied before Noel could speak. “Bon nuit.”

The young woman blinked as if she was turning Holly’s three words about in her head searching in her cerebral cortex for the area containing the French to English Dictionary. Holly’s chest swelled and her pink lip glossed lips curved upward as she waved to the bewildered hostess before heading to the coat check, Noel in tow.

“Thank you, for a lovely evening, Noel,” she said while slipping her coat on.

Noel donned his coat. “Oh, it’s not over yet.”

Her heart picked up pace. “Noel, I need to take this a little slower. Let’s not rush things.”

Noel grinned. “No. That’s not what I meant...yet.”

Holly took his hand. “Oh, okay.” Happy shivers spread through her at the very thought of a “yet”!

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and escorted her to his car. The winter night was clear with stars dotting the sheet black sky. It felt so good to let go and lean against him. They strode under the canopy of their breaths. His hand pressed into her upper arm as if he were saying, “It’s all right. I’ve got you.” She could smell the leather of his gloves. Holly wiggled her fingers inside of hers. She paused and let him open the car door for her. And as Holly sat and buckled her seatbelt, Noel leaned inside and kissed her. Before she could respond, he darted around the vehicle and jumped into the driver’s side.

Noel tapped the steering wheel. “Okay. Let’s roll!”

Holly sat there, her mouth open and her eyes wide. The man was one big surprise after another.

She gazed out the window. This was not the direct way to her house. She knew where she was, but Noel was taking the long way to get there, driving along meandering side streets. The wheels crunched over rock salt. The popping sound faded as Noel pulled the vehicle to a stop. Holly exhaled and her stomach dropped. Noel had brought her to a Christmas tree lot. He unsnapped his seatbelt and bolted from the car. He trotted over to Holly’s side while humming, “Oh Tannenbaum.”

Holly sat still buckled in her seat, clutching her balled, gloved hands to her heart. *Just tell*

him you need to go home.

It was too late. He had sprung open her door and undid her seatbelt. Noel held out his hand. Holly had no choice but to take it. He pulled her to her feet. And as she walked along side him toward the rows of Scotch Pines lined up like soldiers for inspection, she teetered in her heels.

Noel grabbed her arm before she disgraced herself among the fellow tree pickers surrounding them.

“Whoa. Are you all right?”

Holly straightened her shoulders. “Yes. I’m fine.” The words came sharp but her mind was muddled.

He yanked her along like a reluctant child. “Come on. I need a tree. Help me choose one.”

Oh, thank God. The tree was for him. She’d quickly pick one and then she could go back home.

Noel let go of her hand and dodged through the maze of evergreens. Holly stopped in front of one of the trees. Its graceful, sweeping branches caught her attention. She peeled off one of her gloves and poked its beveled needles. The tree well watered, they bent easily to her touch. She poked it again, smiling this time. Holly leaned into it and sniffed. The tree smelled of her father’s flannel shirt, the one he wore every year to the Christmas tree farm, the pine still fresh upon his chest as she pressed her cheek to him as he hugged her in victory of the perfect tree. She touched the evergreen one more time before putting her glove back on. Sweating beneath her coat, Holly turned away from the tree and searched for Noel.

“Noel?” she called.

He popped out from around the tree.

Holly jolted backward. “There you are.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to startle you. Have you chosen one?”

She pointed to the third tree in the row opposite the one she had lingered at, one she had not even inspected. “That one.”

“That one it is!”

Noel took her hand and they walked to the check out booth, standing in line with the other customers. The line moved quickly. They approached the white bearded chubby man with a red and black plaid hunter’s cap snug around his ears.

“Good evening, folks,” he said. “We got plenty of trees to pick from. Truck just pulled in

from old McNourney's farm with a bunch of beauties this afternoon. Which Christmas tree is the one for you?"

Heat rose to Holly's cheeks and a droplet of sweat trickled down her spine. She knew the farm well. Her toes curled in her shoes. She nudged Noel.

"I'm not feeling well. I overindulged at dinner. I'll wait for you in the car."

Noel took off his glove and stroked her cheek. "You do feel warm. I won't be long. Here are the car keys. Go rest inside. Turn on the heater. I'll get you home soon and tuck you into bed."

"You okay there, Miss?" The man asked.

"Yes. I'll be fine."

Holly took the keys from Noel and scurried past her evergreen tree, dodging into the safety of his car. She shifted in her seat and then spied out the window. The pudgy bearded man tottered beside Noel, his arms swinging along his plaid fleece jacket that matched his cap. He carried a red ribbon in his hands that were clad in tan leather, work gloves. They turned away from her. She leaned closer to the window and squinted. The man tagged the tree. Noel turned and shook his hand. He jogged toward the car with a huge grin on his face. He tapped on her window. She could hear him through the glass.

"Are you okay?"

Holly nodded.

Noel rounded the car and got in. "How come you didn't turn on the heat?"

"It's warm enough in the car. I guess I needed to sit a bit, to digest that huge meal." She lied. "But I'm much better now." Holly touched his hand. "Did you get your tree?"

"Yep! They even deliver. Now let me deliver you home and tuck you in for the evening."

She squeezed his hand. "Thank you for everything, Noel."

He squeezed back. "You're welcome. I had a great time."

"Me too."

Holly sank into her seat. The tension in her neck dissolved and she uncurled her toes in her pumps. She glanced at Noel. As they passed street light after street light, she traced the tiny black dots of stubble poking through his cheeks and chin with each illumination. The flutter in her stomach grew warm as it crept downward. Should she invite him to stay or would that be too forward? She grinned. The gossip at the hospital would churn into a frenzy, but it certainly would be amusing to listen to.

Noel pulled into her drive and helped her out of the car. They lingered under the porch light. He cupped her cheeks and pressed his lips to hers. A dog barking across the street interrupted them. Holly and Noel glanced at Sam's house. The light in the window snapped off.

"We've been spotted," she said.

"I'm sure we'll continue to entertain them, especially tomorrow when I pick you up at six sharp." He kissed her again. "I'd stay but you need your rest. Wear something casual and warm."

Oh, my God. He said he'd stay! She wanted to jump up and down like a kid, but instead, she quickly tilted her head. "For what?"

"It's a surprise."

"Come on, Noel. Tell me."

He skipped over her porch steps on the way to his car. Turning around he waved to her. "See you tomorrow, Dr. Green!"

Then he backed out of her driveway, riding off like a bandit in the middle of the night. She waited until he turned the corner before venturing inside. Holly slid off her coat and hung it on the rack. Kicking off her pumps, she twirled in circles, splaying her arms out like a child who's discovered recess for the first time. She stumbled to the bedroom, deliciously dizzy from her whirling about and from her evening with Noel. Holly unzipped her dress and let it drop below her knees, stepping free from it. She hung it in the rear of the closet and promised the dress she'd take it out again. Wanting to keep the lacy lingerie on a bit longer, she slid into her bunny slippers and shuffled to the living room and searched for her shoes. She plucked one from the sofa and gazed about the room for its mate. Hmm? Where is it? Carrying the sole shoe, she passed the kitchen and halted. Walking backward, she glanced inside it. *I'll be darned. There it is.* Kneeling on the floor, she giggled and retrieved the other pump from beneath the kitchen table. Ever fastidious, this was so not like her. The playful, carefree, Dr. Shepherd had entered her life, and that wasn't so bad.

Chapter Eight

Wrapped in her down comforter and heated from her night of a blissful slumber, Holly wiggled her toes and stretched her legs. Fluttering her eyes open, she yawned, raised her hands over her head, and plopped them upon her pillow. She twisted about, rousing the rest of her body, and then rolled to her side.

“Oh, no,” she yelled, and bolted upright in bed.

Swooning from her night with Noel, she hadn't set her alarm clock. The glowing blue digits on her nightstand mocked her, “Ha, Ha, Holly. You overslept!”

Whipping off her covers, she slammed her feet into her bunny slippers and dashed into the bathroom. After a lightening quick shower, she hopped into her standard black trousers and white button down shirt. Holly glanced in the mirror at her unadorned face. Ordinarily she wouldn't care, but now there was Noel, and people would be looking. She had to make an effort. After rubbing in foundation, brushing on blush, then polishing it all off with powder, Holly applied a smidge of mascara. She was finally set. With it being an O.R. day, Holly sleeked her hair back into a ponytail and snapped a velvet black elastic band around it. There was no time to brew coffee, or stop at her favorite coffee shop. Holly stuffed a breakfast bar into her tote and yanked on her coat and boots. She reached for her keys on the key hook, but for the first time in her regimented life, they weren't there. She dropped her tote to the ground and froze in front of her door. *What's happening to me? I danced around like a bad ballerina, flung off my shoes, overslept, and now I can't find my keys.* She slapped her hands to her sides and gazed up at the ceiling. *And I'm wearing makeup!* Her heart fluttered. She was changing. *It's all right. You'll be fine,* she comforted herself. Holly patted her coat pocket. There they were. She pulled them out.

She smacked her forehead with her palm “Keys!” Holly glanced at her watch. “Damn it!” Okay, she'd be late but Noel was worth it. Mr. Moretti was probably just opening up his jewelry store. He had his store, Special Touch Jewelers, ever since Holly could remember. Her mom and dad were one of his best customers. Holly would quickly call him and order the key ring for

Noel. She whipped out her cell and found the phone number. Mr. Moretti answered on the second ring. Holly let him know exactly what she wanted engraved on Noel's present and luckily good old Mr. Moretti assured her he'd have it ready for pick up later that day. Holly tapped "end call" on her cell and grinned. Everything was all set. She'd invite Noel to Aunt Mae's house for Christmas dinner, and then she'd give the man she was falling so fast in love with his gift.

Holly grabbed her keys and headed for the hospital, praying the rest of her day would proceed on schedule. Noel said he'd pick her up at six this evening. Holly smiled, wondering what his surprise was. Now she had her own surprise for him.

Holly skidded to a stop at the 6th floor surgical station where her team gathered on the unit awaiting her. Straightening the lapel of her white lab coat, she cleared her throat. "Let's go. First patient, please."

The surly unit secretary extended her arm over the counter. Her eyes still on her computer screen, she handed a plastic covered coffee cup to Holly. "Here you go, Dr. Green."

The muted chatter of her team ceased. Their eyes widened.

Holly took the coffee from her. "Thank you, Ms. Carson."

Without batting an eyelash in Holly's direction or missing a key stroke, she said, "You're welcome, Dr. Green."

Holly sipped her coffee. "Well now, shall we proceed?"

Her surgical team snapped to attention. Clifford, her intern and the only brave one to engage her, gave her a glance and a nod. Holly, while holding her coffee in one hand, shooed him forward with her free hand. Clifford disappeared into the crowd of residents and medical students.

Rounds flowed smoothly, each presenting resident and student desperate to impress Holly with their lists of differential diagnoses, pharmaceutical prowess, and proposed therapies. She passed by Noel and his crew. He winked at her. Luckily her team was far enough ahead of her, and his team behind him, for any of them to notice. He knew that too. Sly devil!

He mouthed, "Six o'clock," and moved on.

Holly finished her coffee and dropped the empty paper cup into a waste receptacle. She caught up with her team who paused outside of Mrs. Shale's room. Holly strode past them and approached her pet patient.

Smiling she said, “Hail to the Queen of Incentive Spirometry. Your chest x-ray this morning is crystal clear and you’ve been afebrile for over twenty -four hours. Your white count is within normal limits, your incisions are well approximated, and you’re tolerating a regular diet.”

“English, dear,” Mrs. Shale said.

“You get to go home!”

To Holly’s surprise, Mrs. Shale laid there, her forehead furrowed and her lips pressed. “Oh,” she uttered.

Holly ushered her team from Mrs. Shale’s room, telling them she’d meet them in the next patient room. She sat on the edge of Mrs. Shale’s bed. “What’s wrong?”

Mrs. Shale fiddled with her hospital gown. “Nothing. I’ll gather my belongings. Perhaps one of those wonderful nurses can call me a cab. You and Dr. Shepherd, and all the nurses have been so kind to me.” She patted Holly’s hand. “I’ve received the best care here. I’m going to write a letter stating as much to the head of this hospital.”

“Thank-you. But you won’t need a cab. I have a huge, empty house. I’d like you to stay with me, at least for a few days.”

Mrs. Shale shook her head. “I can’t. I don’t want to be a bother, especially at Christmas.”

“You won’t. And it is especially at Christmas that I invite you to stay with me. I don’t have decorations or a tree. It will be very low key. You’ll have your own bedroom and bath, and the whole house at your disposal. Come and go as you please.” She squeezed Mrs. Shale’s hand.

“Please? I know you don’t have any family. I checked.”

Mrs. Shale glanced downward. “I’m sorry I wasn’t straight with you.”

“It’s all right,” Holly said softly.

Mrs. Shale looked up at her. “Okay. I’ll come. But I don’t want to be in your way, and I do apologize ahead of time for being a holiday party pooper.”

Holly nodded. “You’ll fit right in. I have one scheduled operation, and then Noel...Dr. Shepherd, will cover my patients while I take you to my house and get you settled in.”

Giving Mrs. Shale an extra pat, Holly went straight to the computer and inputted her discharge orders. Before leaving for the O.R. she reminded Mrs. Shale’s nurse she’d return after her case to pick up her patient.

The nurse smiled. “That’s very nice of you, Dr. Green.”

“She’s alone. I have a big house. I’m looking forward to her stay. She’ll be fine.”

The nurse stared at her and then she finally blinked.

Holly stuffed her hands in her lab coat pockets. "I'll be back for her."

"Uh, okay," the nurse said.

Everyone seemed to be staring at her. Of course she just kept rambling in front of the nurse. She'd never given as much as a hint to her private life. Here she was talking about her home. And Ms. Carson, the, "I don't have time to get to know all of you," stoic unit secretary, engaged her the other day and handed her coffee today. The woman who'd worked there as long as Holly could remember had never done that for anyone, not even Noel, the popular new surgeon on the block. Holly grinned. *I guess the Lifesaver candies worked!*

She pumped down the stairwell stairs. The combination of caffeine and her newly found congeniality among the staff pulsed in her veins. She reviewed her day in her head: one short surgery, one trip home with Mrs. Shale in tow, one return for Grand Rounds, check out rounds, and then home again to primp for Noel's mystery date. Holly skipped the last three steps. She jumped to the floor and whipped past nurses, fellow surgeons, and anesthesiologists en route to the women's locker room. Their heads spinned in her direction as they checked out the new "Dr. Holly Green."

After changing into her scrubs, Holly swung her locker door shut and found the two nurses who had mocked her standing next to her.

"Hello, ladies," Holly said with an extra lilt.

"Good morning, Dr. Green," they recited like schoolgirls.

She pointed at one of them. "I believe you're in the O.R. with me today." She gave the young nurse a wide smile. "See you there."

Holly watched with amusement as the nurses scampered from the locker room, whispering and nudging one another.

Some things never change.

Holly donned her floral surgical cap and her blue booties. Her shoulders pushed back, she strode to her own personal arena, her O.R.

The patient, a woman in her fifties who unlike her patient from the other day, had a biopsy positive for breast cancer. Her scar from the lumpectomy Holly had performed on her last month had healed but the woman's spirits hadn't. Holly held her patient's hand as the anesthesiologist put the woman to sleep. The port placement would be simple. Chemotherapy during Christmas

wouldn't. Holly sent her residents and students to the emergency department for the rest of the day.

The case was going smoothly, but Holly couldn't resist sending the circulating nurse, "Nurse Gossip," out of the room to fetch suture she didn't need. Holly's eyes crinkled up. She smiled mischievously beneath her mask as the nurse fled from the O.R., obeying Holly's trumped up requests.

Holly's longtime scrub tech, winked at her. "You are so bad!"

Holly shrugged. "Who knows? I just might need that suture."

The scrub tech nodded. "Right."

Even the anesthesiologist chuckled.

The befuddled nurse ran back into the O.R. with the suture package in her hand. About to pop it open onto the surgical field, Holly said, "Thanks so much, but it looks like I won't need that suture after all. I'm already closing."

The nurse narrowed her eyes. Holly swore she heard her hiss behind her mask. "I'll put it back," she said curtly. She stomped from Holly's O.R., smacking the metal O.R. door on her way out.

"Gee. I wonder what's wrong with her?" Holly asked with a gloat in her tone.

The anesthesiologist leaned back in his chair and stifled a laugh. "I don't know."

Holly waited for her patient to rouse in the recovery room before leaving, reassuring her that her surgery went well and that she could go home later that day to spend the holidays with her family, returning for out patient chemotherapy the day after Christmas. The concession at least made the woman smile. Now she was off to pick up Mrs. Shale.

Mrs. Shale stood looking out the window while clutching her black purse when Holly entered her room.

"Are you ready to go?" Holly asked.

Mrs. Shale turned to face her. "Yes, dear." She walked over to her bed and grabbed the white plastic drawstring bag with the Granite State Medical Center logo stamped on the front of it. Holly knew the bag contained the usual hospital soap, shampoo, comb, and a box of tissues. "I don't want to be a bother," Mrs. Shale said, demurely.

Holly shook her head. "You're not, and you won't. Do you have your spirometer?"

Mrs. Shale smiled and tapped her bag. "Have it right here."

Holly waved her arm towards the door. "After you."

A male hospital volunteer, about Mrs. Shale's age, dressed in a navy vest sporting the same hospital logo and black trousers stood at the doorway with a wheelchair. Mrs. Shale glanced at Holly.

"Hospital policy," Holly said.

The silver haired man with a neatly trimmed mustache held out his hand to Mrs. Shale. "Please, have a seat." He winked at her. "Don't worry. I'm a safe driver. No accidents yet!"

"Well, uh, okay," she said.

Mrs. Shale scooted into the wheelchair. She held her purse and bag on her lap while the volunteer adjusted the footrests, and then gingerly placed her feet onto them.

"My name is Charley...Charley Donahue," he said.

"Maureen Shale."

"Ah, a hearty Irish name."

Holly smiled watching Mrs. Shale blush.

"Born O'Malley," she said.

"O'Malley don't you say. I went to St. Catherine's High School with some O' Malleys."

Mrs. Shale tapped the wheelchair's armrests. "I went to St. Catherine's High!"

Charley leaned over and gazed at Mrs. Shale. "I thought you looked familiar. Maureen O'Malley! Of course! I sat next to you in Sister Clara's mathematics class."

Mrs. Shale squinted at him. "Charley?"

"The same ole kid with the cow lick," he said.

She squeezed his hand. "Oh my gosh." Mrs. Shale glanced at Holly. "Can you believe this coincidence?"

Holly shot her hands to her hips and smiled. "As my Aunt Mae would say, Kismet!"

The wheels of wheelchair spun in an even rhythm, not too slow, not too fast, as Charley chauffeured Mrs. Shale to the hospital lobby.

Noel jogged into the lobby, the back of his white lab coat wafting behind him. "I hope you two haven't been waiting long."

"Nope. You're right on time," Holly said.

Noel glanced at Charley's nametag. "Hello. I'm Dr. Noel Shepherd, new surgeon here at

Granite State. It's nice to meet you...Charley Donahue."

"Likewise," Charley said. "And if you ever need anything done or any patient services, I'm your man."

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

"I'll get my car and swing around to the front," Holly said. She took Noel's hand and gave it a squeeze. "Thanks so much for covering my team and my patients. The woman whom I inserted a port this morning should be going home. No one is critical in the house. Oh, how's Ashley's brother doing?"

Noel cradled her hand. "He's out of ICU and stable."

"I'm so glad." She wanted to kiss him but this was hardly the appropriate time. She'd wait until tonight. "I'll get Mrs. Shale settled in and then I'll be back in time for Grand Rounds. Save me a seat."

"Absolutely. Go. Don't worry. I've got everything covered, especially reserving a seat for you next to me in the auditorium."

He let her hand loose. Their fingers slowly slid apart.

Noel breathed life into her. She half ran and half skipped to the doctor's parking garage, not caring who saw her. Noel's humming of "Oh Tannenbaum" from the other night still stuck in her head. Holly hummed a verse while pulling up to the hospital's main entrance. Cutting the engine, she jumped out and helped Mrs. Shale into the front seat. Charley made sure she was securely fastened inside. Holly caught him slipping Mrs. Shale a note that she promptly pocketed into her purse. They waved to each other as Holly started the car and drove away.

After giving Mrs. Shale a tour of her home, Holly led her to her room. Mrs. Shale sat on the mahogany sleigh bed and hugged her purse. What a coincidence that she and Charley sat next to one another in high school only to meet decades later! Kismet as Aunt Mae would say. These two were meant to cross paths. Sure that Charley snuck Mrs. Shale his number, Holly pointed out the telephone on the nightstand, twice, *just in case*.

While placing Mrs. Shale's belongings into a dresser drawer, Holly paused, her eyes wide open as the front door creaked open and then groaned closed. Her father never got around to lubricating the hinges. Now it reminded Holly of her dad when he returned from work every evening and the countless times she and he bolted in and out of that door during their Saturday

outings, giggling about his procrastination despite her mother's rattling of her honey do list as a constant reminder. Then her mother would throw her hands into the air and end up laughing with them. Her dad swore he'd get around to it after that Christmas. The door never got fixed. She wouldn't do it now. She just couldn't.

"I'm here," Aunt Mae called.

"We're in the blue room," Holly called back.

With its crème sateen Victorian wallpaper, eggshell white drapes, and patchwork quilt framed with red roses, nothing in that room related to any shade of blue. Her mother christened it the blue room while standing in front of the window, one day, gazing at the azure sky wrapping around the mountains. She said it simply came to her. Holly would catch her after coming home from school, leaning toward the window, palms splayed upon the sill, still in meditation, deep inhalations through her nose, long exhalations through her lips. She'd let her be, intrigued by her mother's peaceful repose. In the spring, her mother would open the window and bask in the wafts of lilacs seeping into the room. As busy as her life was as a surgeon, Holly always opened the window in the blue room every spring, letting the sweet scent of lilac soothe her, her mother's presence palpable at her side.

Aunt Mae poked her head around the doorframe. "Hello."

Holly smiled at her aunt's boisterous salutation. She hated to bolt off to the hospital so soon after bringing Mrs. Shale to her home but she had to get back to grand rounds. Noel was going to present his young patient with Crohn's disease, his surgery, and his complicated post-operative course. Holly had to be there. Having assisted Noel in that case, she needed to be there to support his actions and to support him. Her aunt and Mrs. Shale contemporaries, Aunt Mae had bubbled over at spending an afternoon with Mrs. Shale. "Don't you worry, dear," she told Holly. "We'll get along just fine. Does she like to quilt?" Before Holly could answer she had no clue, Aunt Mae pressed on, "Well, it doesn't matter. I'll show her. We'll have a great time."

Holly waved to her aunt. "Come in, Aunt Mae. This is Mrs. Shale."

Her aunt tottered into the bedroom and took Mrs. Shale's hands. "It's so nice to meet you, and I'm so glad you'll be staying here with Holly because she's all alone in this big house."

Holly rolled her eyes.

"I know this house forwards and backwards," Aunt Mae said. "I'll show you where everything is."

“Is that one of those portable quilt cases you have there?” Mrs. Shale asked.

Aunt Mae beamed. “Yes, it is. You must be a quilter.”

Mrs. Shale popped up from the bed. “Twenty-six years and at least fifty projects under my belt.”

“Wow! You’ll have to give me some pointers.” Aunt Mae grabbed Mrs. Shale’s hand.

“Come, we’ll sit in the living room. I’ll make us lunch. Then I’ll show you what I’m working on. Maybe we can take a ride over to the quilt shop later this afternoon.”

“Oh, that would be wonderful.”

The two women scurried towards the door.

Holly stood frozen in the middle of the blue room, her eyebrows arched. “But, uh.”

Aunt Mae turned to face her. “But what, dear?”

“Perhaps Mrs. Shale would like to rest.”

Aunt Mae looked at Mrs. Shale. Mrs. Shale shook her head. “See, she doesn’t want to rest.”

“But.”

Her aunt flicked her fingers at Holly. “Oh, posh. We’ll be just fine here, she and I. Go back to the hospital. And quit worrying. You’ll get wrinkles before your time.”

Her aunt and Mrs. Shale, her aunt’s new best friend and quilting guru, giggled like schoolgirls all the way down the stairs. Holly paused in the bedroom. She wasn’t sure how she had been left behind by the two of them, but she got what she wanted, to see that Mrs. Shale was comfortable in her home. Holly nodded to herself. Mission accomplished.

Holly strode past the hospital’s front desk. She straightened the lapels of her white lab coat before entering the auditorium. With Aunt Mae and Mrs. Shale’s busy bantering about which stitch is better, they hardly noticed Holly leaving the house. The tiers of the auditorium seats were full: medical students at the rear, interns and residents filling the center, and attending physicians up front. Holly eased to the front row and sat next to Noel.

“How did it go?” he asked.

Holly shrugged. “They don’t need me.”

Noel patted her knee and winked. “Aw! I need you.”

Holly pressed her lips into a smile. Her stomach fluttered and her pulse bumped. Noel was everything she had always desired: smart, sexy, talented in the O.R. like she was, and he made

her laugh. But was she ready for him in her life? She had gotten used to living alone, not having to hide her quirks. The clothes in her closet led a regimented life. She aligned her bunny slippers in perfect parallel at her bedside. The bristles of her toothbrush had to face right. Why? She had no clue. She'd done that since childhood. Her mother wasn't overly fastidious, and her father was a mess cat when her mother wasn't looking. Why was she the way she was? Hmm. She glanced at Noel who despite the Chief of the Surgical Department's introduction of today's topic tracked her from the corners of his eyes. She could hardly believe he'd be interested in her aside from a collegial point of view. No one had been in the past. She dated sparingly, men outside of medicine. Noel would break her pattern. Her heartbeat spiraled. Holly gripped the armrests of the auditorium seat. She was about to lean towards Noel to wish him well in his presentation when Noel stood and walked up to the podium.

The medical crowd hushed as the Chief tapped on the microphone and announced Noel, signaling the beginning of Surgical Grand Rounds.

Noel greeted his colleagues and while resting his hands on the podium, he began his presentation on Crohn's disease. His speech flowed. Noel sailed through his dissertation. Holly tilted her head gradually from one side to another, peeking at the crowd without seeming obvious. She grinned. They were riveted. Even those ensconced in the nose bleed section of the auditorium stayed awake. Her chest swelled with pride. Noel raised his finger to the projectionist. Everyone's eyes remained glued to the screen as Noel clicked slide after slide of his experience with Crohn's disease. Then a picture of he and Holly operating together popped onto the screen. Her eyes widened. He didn't tell her he was going to do that!

"This particular case of the young man with extensive, and unrelenting Crohn's disease was one of my most challenging surgeries. His post-operative course was rocky, requiring a brief transfer to the intensive care unit. As per my case slides, abdominal abscess, sepsis, pulmonary embolus, acute hemorrhage and wound infection were all ruled out. Anemic, he did receive two units of blood, one in the recovery room and one in ICU. His ileostomy was not draining adequately and after attention to this, the patient was transferred out of the ICU. His remaining course has been uneventful, and he'll be home for Christmas. I'd like to acknowledge Dr. Holly Green for her skill in the operating room. Dr. Green's experience and assistance in this surgery was the key to this patient's successful outcome."

Noel motioned for Holly to stand. Applause echoed in the auditorium. Holly stood, turned

around to face her colleagues, smiled, and nodded to them, and then faced Noel, giving him an extra bob of her head. He grinned back at her and concluded his presentation.

The crowd rose from their seats and milled about, chatting with one another. Noel pumped down the stage steps and strode over to Holly. He raised his hands as if to embrace her, but stopped short.

“How did I’d do?”

He gazed at her, his eyes searching hers for approval.

She straightened his tie and smiled. No one was looking anyway. They were busy in their own conversations. “Excellent.”

Noel’s face pinked. “I’m good in the O.R., but I stink at knotting ties.”

“You looked fine. She wagged her finger at him. “And you didn’t tell me I’d make it to the big screen!”

Noel winked. “Surprise. You deserved the credit.”

Holly shifted in her shoes. “Thanks.”

Noel took her hand. “The drug reps brought pizza. Let’s go get a slice before the med students devour every pie.” Despite colleagues lingering after Grand Rounds, Holly didn’t pull away from Noel’s grip.

They stood in the long line with other docs, a slice of pizza sometimes being the only meal they’d get on a busy night on call. Holly and Noel walked to a corner of the reception room, balancing their paper plates with pizza hanging over the edges. Noel stuffed the gooey cheese tip into his mouth and bit off a hearty chunk while Holly nibbled at the apex of hers, patting her lips with a white paper napkin between bites.

“Hey, Green. You better get going on that pizza. You do remember that I’m picking you up at six tonight?”

Holly took a more substantial bite. She could hardly wait to find out what Noel had planned, and teasingly kept secret from her.

Noel trotted over to the table and grabbed an empty paper plate. Returning, he covered her pizza plate with it. “Check out rounds are done. Your patients are fine. Go home. Finish your pizza. I’ll see you at six.”

“But.”

“But what?”

“But” was the only word she could get out of her mouth today.

Noel placed his hand onto her upper back and gently prodded her toward the door. He waved to her. “Bye.”

“All right. I’m going. I hope Mrs. Shale is doing well.”

Noel tapped his finger at her. “Holly, has your aunt called you?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“So there you have it. They’re fine. Probably flitting about town. You worry too much. Go home. Get ready.”

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise.”

Darn! He still wasn’t going to tell her.

She arched her eyebrows. “Another surprise?”

“Why? Is there a quota?”

Holly laughed softly. “No. I’ll be ready at six.”

Holly swung into the parking space right in front of the jewelry store. She leapt over a snow bank and rocketed inside. Her heart sank. Mr. Moretti had already left for the day, but the woman behind the counter handed Holly the special gift Mr. Moretti had promised her. Clutching her chest, Holly happily sighed and wished the woman a Merry Christmas. She gently slid the small red box into her tote. Now to rush home and get ready for her mystery date with Noel. She eyed the pizza left over from Grand Rounds on the passenger seat. A quick dinner is exactly what she needed.

Pulling into the driveway, Holly spotted tire tracks in the snow leading out to the street. Aunt Mae’s car was gone. Noel was right. They were indeed flitting about the town. Carrying her care package pizza in one hand, Holly unlocked the front door. She stomped the snow from her boots, strode into the kitchen, and set her post Grand Rounds pizza onto the kitchen table. Returning to the doorway, she slipped off her coat and boots, hanging her coat on the coat stand and lining her boots in parallel beneath it.

“Mrs. Shale,” she called, just in case her aunt had gone on a solo errand.

Holly waited a few seconds. No response. Her Aunt Mae had hijacked her guest. She shrugged, climbed the stairs, and pattered in her stockings to her bedroom where her bunny

slippers awaited her. She slid her feet into them. “Ah!” Holly reached inside her bag and pulled out Noel’s present. She’d stash it inside her mom’s old hatbox. Holly kept it on a shelf in her closet hidden behind her hats and scarves. It still had her mom’s scent mixed with faded shades of “Shalimar” perfume, her mother’s favorite. Holly couldn’t part with it.

Noel’s gift safely stored, Holly plopped down the stairs, shuffled into the kitchen, and poured herself a glass of soda. Sitting at the table alone, she drummed her fingers on the wooden table. Her tapping fingers were the sole sound in her empty home. With no one around to see her, Holly slurped the rest of her pizza, washing it down with the soda. *Where are they? It’s dark already.* She’d become the parent, her Aunt Mae and Mrs. Shale her wayward children. She’d just thrown the paper plate away and put the empty glass into the sink when she heard tires crunching over the snowy driveway. Pressing her lips tight, Holly marched toward the front door, stopped, and jabbed her hands to her hips, waiting to scold Aunt Mae and Mrs. Shale the second they strolled inside.

Aunt Mae pushed the door open, clutching a shopping bag with its sides bulging. The women quit giggling.

Holly narrowed her gaze. “Where have you been?”

Her aunt blinked. “Out.”

Holly rolled her eyes. “I can see that. Mrs. Shale just got out of the hospital and you’re dragging her around town.” She shook her head. “I called you to help get her settled.”

Aunt Mae cocked her head. “And I’m doing that. I fixed us lunch. She took a nap. And then we went to the quilt shop for a whole 30 minutes. We’re planning to spend a nice evening quilting while you and Noel go out.” Aunt Mae glanced at the overstuffed bag. “And yes, I carried our purchases.”

“We were only gone a half hour,” Mrs. Shale said. “I feel fine, dear, honestly. You worry too much.”

“Another one telling me I worry too much.”

“You do,” the women said in unison.

“Come on, Maureen. Let’s put this bag in your room and let Holly get ready for her date.” Mrs. Shale waved and left for her room. Aunt Mae stroked Holly’s cheek. “Relax. Have a wonderful time with Noel. She’s okay. It’s good for her to keep busy, her husband, Martin, gone and all. You know how it is. But the two of you need to move on.” Holly frowned. “Don’t be like

that. And Noel has such a nice evening planned for you.”

Holly exhaled. “Okay.” Aunt Mae was right. She had to move on, and Noel was thankfully slowly inching her forward. Baby steps. That’s exactly what Holly needed. Baby steps.

“I’ll tend to Mrs. Shale.” Her aunt pointed at her. “And you tend to yourself. Noel will soon come a calling.”

Holly giggled at her aunt’s old fashioned, but quaint, quips. “Come a calling?”

“Yes. That’s what they called it in my day, but regardless, romance hasn’t changed.”

Holly grinned. “So, is someone going to be calling on you?”

“Hmm. Maybe.”

“Ooh, tell me more. What secrets have you been keeping?”

“None of your bee’s wax.” Aunt Mae flicked her fingers. “Now scoot.”

Holly pulled up the hem of her black sweater, yanked it over her head, and tossed it onto her bed. She had grabbed it out of her dresser out of habit. “No black tonight,” she muttered. Rummaging through a drawer, she chose a deep red one instead. The next thing to go was her ponytail. She slid the hair tie down her restrained strands and shook her blonde hair free. Holly glanced at her new look in the mirror. “Hmm. Not bad.” She shimmied into a pair of thermal underwear and slipped her jeans over them. Noel did tell her to dress warm.

She had just zipped up her jeans when headlights flooded into her room. He was here. Holly jogged down the stairs, her woolen socks muting every hurried step. She paused at the bottom with one hand on the banister not wanting to seem anxious. Taking a deep breath, she slid her hand off the banister and walked coolly into the living room. Aunt Mae had already let him inside.

“Hello, Noel.”

Aunt Mae arched her eyebrows, her signal for, “Who are you fooling?”

The corners of Noel’s eyes crinkled upward. “Hi. I expected you in black, but wow, you’ll definitely stand out on the ice in that red sweater.”

Holly blinked. “Ice?”

“Surprise! We’re going ice skating, that is after burgers and fries at Callahan’s Pub.”

Her pulse bounded beneath the turtleneck of her sweater, her red sweater in which she’d have nowhere to hide in a crowd. She hadn’t skated since her teens and the last thing she wanted

was to be noticed at Callahan's, the place brimming with hospital staff she had taken great pains to avoid. Definitely back to black.

"I'll be right back, Noel. I'm just going to change."

"No," her aunt and Mrs. Shale cried out.

Aunt Mae shot her finger at Holly. "Stay here."

Holly pulled on her boots. "What's going on?"

"You'll see." Noel said, a gleam in his eyes. A suspicious gleam, Holly thought.

Holly jabbed her hands onto her hips. "Why do I get the feeling I'm the only one who's not privy to this evening's plans?"

Noel shrugged. He lowered her hands from her hips and held up her down jacket. She threaded her arms into the sleeves and zipped it up. Noel plopped a knitted cap onto her head and handed her a pair of mittens. "Now you're ready."

"Noel, I don't have a pair of..."

"Here they are. I found them," Aunt Mae called. She tottered into the living room hugging a pair of ice skates.

Holly's mouth dropped. "Mom's," she whispered.

"Take them," Aunt Mae said.

She held the ice skates out to Holly. Holly stood frozen, her arms plastered to her sides.

"Take them," her aunt repeated, shoving them closer to Holly. "Yours don't fit anymore."

Holly stared at the silver blades, shiny as the day she stashed them away in the attic. Her mother had polished them dry that last time they skated on Putney's pond, hanging them neatly in the hall closet.

"Holly, clean your skates before putting them up," she called.

"Yes, Mom. I'm going over Amy's house."

"Be home for supper."

"Yes, Mom."

It was the last time they had skated at the pond that winter. Thirteen and on holiday break, she had no time for her mom. Her best friend, Amy, had new skates, an "accidental" premature Christmas package pillage. All the kids would be at the pond that Saturday. She had bolted onto the ice, ditching her mom for her friends, save to mention to her how much she wanted a pair just like Amy's.

Holly's eyes burned. She bit her lower lip, restraining the tears. If she had known that her mom would never return to Putney's Pond, she wouldn't have acted like that. But if her mom was hurt by her daughter's self-centeredness, she didn't show it. Dad gone for the day, Mom skated alone, smiling and waving ever so slightly so as to not embarrass Holly in front of her teenage entourage. Up until last year, they had always skated together, mitten to mitten. Her mom had taught her to skate the minute she could walk. The clink, clink, clink of her choppy first tries had matured to rhythmic swooshes and whirs. Her mother would clap. *"Hooray! Hooray! That's my girl. Spin. Spin. Cross your arms in tight. Spin. Spin."*

She didn't deserve these skates!

Aunt Mae took Holly's hand. "Your mother would be thrilled for you to wear these. She was so proud of you."

Holly shook her head. "No. I treated her so poorly that last time."

"You were thirteen. Your mom understood that. She never loved you less. Please."

Holly cradled the ice skates.

Aunt Mae pushed her and Noel towards the door. "Now go and have a good time." She winked at Noel before closing the door.

Holly cocked her head. "What was that all about?"

She could tell he was stifling a grin.

Noel shrugged. "Beats me."

Chapter Nine

Holly took a healthy bite of her burger.

“Glad to see you’re enjoying your dinner. It’s not Chez Jacques, but Callahan’s has the best burgers in New England. And I’ve downed a lot of hamburgers in my days.” Noel arched his brow. “I guess as a surgeon, I shouldn’t admit that.”

She patted her lips with a paper napkin. “I’ll forgive you this one time.”

Noel stuffed a French fry in his mouth. He chewed it with happy vigor and swallowed. “After tonight, I’m switching to salads.”

“It’s the holidays, Noel.” She wagged her finger at him. “And who brought me cookies?”

“Okay. After the holidays, I’ll make it my New Year’s resolution.” Noel chomped on his deluxe burger. After swallowing, he leaned across the booth’s table toward Holly. “So, what resolutions are you going to make?”

She hesitated. “I don’t believe in resolutions.”

“I know you’re not keen on Christmas, but New Year’s too?”

Holly bit into a French fry. “Yep.”

Noel propped his elbow onto the table and plunked his chin into his palm. “That’s tragic. Who am I going to kiss at midnight?”

She grinned and shrugged.

He leaned closer. “There’s always mistletoe. You better be careful where you step.”

“I’ll be safe. I’ll be at the hospital on call.”

Noel stole one of her fries and waved it in front of her. “I wouldn’t count on that because I’ll be on call also.” He bit into the fry.

Holly plucked a fry from his plate. “Then I’ll have to be extra careful.” She snapped the potato slice in two, eating one half and feeding the other half to him.

“Boy, it’s going to be tough giving up fries.”

The door to Callahan’s Pub squeaked open ushering a burst of winter air. The pub buzzed

with the boisterous chatter of the gaggle of Granite State Medical Center staff. Holly peered from the booth's edge. Nurses and doctors she knew hugged and high-fived one another.

"Hey, look. There's Noel and...uh Holly Green?" The gossipy nurse from the locker room yelled above the crowd.

Holly sank in her seat. *Oh, no. Not tonight.*

The nurse tottered over to them. Every clomp of her high-heeled boots jabbed at Holly, but she smiled over gritted teeth as the nurse leaned over and hugged Noel. Ashley stood behind her fellow nurse and shrugged.

Noel stiffened at her dramatic hug. "Hi. Good to see you."

She whipped around to face Holly. "Dr. Green, what a surprise? I've never seen you here at Callahan's."

"Noel and I were just grabbing a quick dinner before going off for the rest of the evening."

The nurse tilted her shoulders towards Noel. "Oh, you have to stay. The gang's all here. I'm so happy you took us up on the invite to Callahan's. You'll have a great time."

Noel reached for Holly's hand. "I am having a great time, but we already have plans for the evening."

"Well okay." She shot her finger at him. "But come back again...soon."

Ashley tugged at her friend's sweater sleeve. "Let's go." She smiled at Holly. "It is nice seeing you. I hope you and Noel will come back."

"Thanks, Ashley. And I'm glad your brother will be home for Christmas."

"Me too." She waved to Holly and Noel and then dragged her friend away.

Noel squeezed her hands. "Sorry about that."

Holly shook her head. "Don't be. I avoided coming to Callahan's, and I did have my reservations, but I'm actually thankful you've brought me here. The burgers are indeed the best."

"You're welcome."

The waitress cleared their plates. Both passing on dessert, Noel paid the bill. He stood up and rounded the table. Grabbing Holly's hand, he slid her across the wooden bench seat, grinning the whole time.

Holly laughed. "You have me skating before I hit the ice."

Noel pulled Holly to her feet and yanked her to his chest, wrapping his arms around her, his embrace firm but not restraining. Noel pressed his lips to hers. Heat shot from her lips to her

toes, enough to keep her toasty on the ice for the rest of the night.

When they eased apart, patrons pounded their fists on the pub's bar counter and cheered, "Mistletoe! Mistletoe! Mistletoe!"

Noel pulled Holly past the Callahan's Christmas tree and halted her beneath the doorway's mistletoe.

"Not so safe now, are you?" he teased.

Holly tilted her head back. The tree's twinkling lights flickered behind Noel. Her breathing rose to a crescendo as she waited for his kiss. And at that moment, she didn't care whose eyes were upon them. The warmth of his breath caressed her cheeks as he leaned towards her, closer, and closer, her heart beating faster in tandem to the blinking Christmas lights. He rested his mouth upon hers and then pulled her in closer. She pressed harder galvanized by the revelry of the crowd, their pounding whirring in her ears.

"Longer. Longer. Longer," they yelled.

They froze in their embrace, her arms swaddled about his broad shoulders, and his palms cupping her hips. His neck pulsed beneath her fingertips. Not since her parents had she felt that same soft comfort.

Holly blinked and widened her eyes when they parted. Adrenalin rushed through her. Grabbing his hand, she yanked Noel through the door of Callahan's and into the snow covered parking lot.

"Anxious, aren't we?"

She twirled around, tasting every snowflake on her tongue, before clutching the car door handle. She jerked it. Pulled on it again, thinking her fingers had not gotten an adequate purchase. Nothing.

Noel snickered and pressed the remote on his key ring. After two beeps and a flash of headlights, Holly swung the car door open and bounced into the seat.

Noel got into the car, buckled his seat belt, and slid the key into the ignition. He glanced at Holly.

She clicked her seatbelt closed and gave him a grin that tapped her cheekbones. "I'm going to skate circles around you!"

"Hmm." He smiled. "Is that a challenge?"

"Yes, it is Dr. Shepherd."

He pointed at her. "I accept, Dr. Green."

Giddy from dinner and ooh, those two kisses, she hadn't given any thought to where they'd whirl about on the ice until Noel pulled up to Putney's Pond. He parked on the side of the road in full view of frolicking skaters. Her smile melted. Lips pressed tight, she gazed at a mother pulling her little girl up from the ice, dusting off her bottom, and then hugging her. They skated away, mitten to mitten.

Panic whirred in Holly's chest. "Noel, I can't."

She turned to face him but he wasn't there. The tap on her window made her jerk back into the seat.

Noel waved to her and held up her mother's skates. "Come on. Give me everything you've got, Green!"

She couldn't disappoint him. He had planned such a wonderful evening for them. Why ruin it? Holly took a deep breath and opened her door. Noel grasped her hand, and mitten-to-mitten, he pulled her to him and kissed her. With his skates slung over one of his shoulders and Holly's skates over the other, they crunched over the snow holding hands all the way to the red wooden shed, the same place her mother would sit her down on a bench and lace up her skates before putting hers on.

The night before Christmas Eve and with the kids on holiday recess from school, the rural rink was packed with families, and teenagers snaking around them. Holly sat on a bench next to Noel who was furiously lacing up his skates.

"I'm going to beat you to the ice," he teased.

She hesitated but then grabbed her skates. "No you're not!"

Holly and Noel knotted their skates in synchrony and popped up from the bench at the same time.

"Go," Holly yelled.

They "duck walked" from the shed to the ice, the silver blades of their skates chopping into the snow until they glided onto the frozen pond. Noel gripped Holly's hand and whipped her ahead of him. She whipped him around her. They split from one another and half raced around the rink, careful of others stumbling about. After three laps, she raised her arms in victory.

"I win," she shouted with glee.

Noel skated up to her, shearing a small fountain of ice with his hockey stop.

“Here’s your consolation prize.” She glided towards him, performing a perfect T-stop in front of him, and kissed him.

He smiled. “I like second place.”

Holly skated away from him. “Watch this. I hope I can still do it.”

She veered to her right, her right foot catching an outside edge and then an inside one. Hugging her arms to her chest, she spun, spinning faster and faster the tighter she held them in, lost in a blissful blur, her mother whispering in her ear, “*Spin. Spin. Spin. My darling.*”

Stabbing the ice with her toe pick, she stopped and held out her arms. “Ta da!”

Noel clapped. “Bravo! Bravo!”

Holly did it. She’d made her mother proud.

Their racing competition completed, Holly and Noel skated holding hands for a few more laps around the rink. An older couple passed them.

“That’s so sweet,” Holly cooed.

“I think it’s sad.”

She cocked her head up towards him, her mouth open. “Why would you think that?”

“Because they passed us,” he said, curtly nodding. “We can’t have that.” He tugged her hand. “Come on.”

They picked up pace and snuck by the couple. Noel spun around and skated backwards while holding both her hands. She pulled one hand away and smacked him on his shoulder. “You are so bad.”

“Yes, I’m absolutely wicked.” He peeled off her mitten and kissed her hand, his warm breath wafting in clouds above them.

Her fingers tingled, cradled in his touch.

“I’m sorry. Your hand must be cold.” He blew on her fingers and then slipped her mitten back onto her hand.

Her stomach fluttered and gooseflesh popped onto her skin beneath her red sweater, not the frigid kind, but the prickly, tiny bumps that nudged every hair on her neck to exhilarating attention.

“Noel, You’ve totally surprised me tonight. I can’t remember the last time I’ve…”

He hugged her and whispered in her ear, “Let go?”

“Yes,” she whispered back.

He pulled her off the rink. “Let’s get these skates off. The finale of surprises is yet to come.”

“Where to now?”

“You’ll see.”

Noel reached out to carry Holly’s skates to the car, but she gently resisted.

She clutched her mother’s ice skates to her chest. “Please, I’d like to carry them.

He smiled. “I understand.”

Holly held the skates to her heart. *I’m so sorry I ignored you the last time we were here. I love you, Mommy.*

A tear escaped down her cheek. She swiped her mitten across her face.

“Hey, hurry up slowpoke,” he teased.

“Coming,” she called, turning to gaze once more at Putney’s Pond before trotting up next to Noel.

Holly let Noel open the car door for her. Scooting inside, she placed the ice skates at her feet and buckled her seatbelt.

“Ready?” he asked.

“I guess. It’s been a fun filled night thus far, so I trust you to lead me to the last surprise.”

“It will definitely top off tonight.”

Holly shimmied her shoulders into her seat. “Well let’s go then.”

Fifteen minutes later, Noel pulled into her drive.

“Okay, you have me stumped,” Holly said.

The lights were still on. She felt as if she was back in high school on a date, her Aunt Mae holding vigil until she returned safely, scolding her if she snuck in past curfew. The living room curtains shifted.

“I can’t believe she waited up for me.”

“Stay right where you are,” Noel said.

“Are you going to blindfold me?”

“Nope, but I wish I had thought of that.”

He rounded the car and opened her door. Holly grabbed her skates, draping the tied laces over her shoulder. Noel offered her his hand. After helping her from the car, he held her hand all

the way to the porch steps.

“We’re here,” he yelled.

“Noel, my aunt is not deaf.”

They trotted up the three steps.

Noel twisted the doorknob and pushed open the front door. “After you.”

Holly stepped inside her house.

“Surprise!” Noel, Aunt Mae, Mrs. Shale, and little Sam from across the street yelled.

Holly’s mouth dropped open. She blinked and shook her head.

A Christmas tree filled a corner of her living room. A red ribbon hung from a branch. It was the same tag she had watched the white bearded man tie to that evergreen with Noel next to his side. Boxes of ornaments circled the tree, boxes that she had stowed away safely in the attic. Her eyes roamed to the dining room table that was covered with plates of cheese and crackers, a bowl of popcorn, cups of cocoa and tea, and tiny tortes shaped like Christmas trees. A wave of bitterness washed up to the back of Holly’s throat.

She swallowed the acid back down. Her stomach clenched. It was such a wonderful night, and now this. Holly turned her head slowly towards Noel. “You lied to me,” she said flatly.

His eyes widened. “What?” Shock etched across his face.

Holly narrowed her eyes. “The night we went to the Christmas tree lot, you told me you bought that tree for yourself.”

Noel paused, his mouth open. “And for you,” he said softly.

“I didn’t ask for one,” she said a bit more loudly.

“Holly!” Aunt Mae said.

Mrs. Shale sat quietly on the sofa.

Holly glanced at her. “I thought you would understand.”

“I do, dear.”

Sam grabbed his jacket. “Um. I gotta go. Goodnight, Dr. Green.”

“Sam, please stay. I’m not upset with you,” Holly pleaded.

“It’s okay. I put your chocolates under the tree. You don’t have to keep them there. My feelings won’t be hurt.” He waved to her from the door. “See you after Christmas.”

“Goodnight, Sam,” she called.

“Holly, you scared the poor boy off,” Aunt Mae said.

“I told him to stay. He left of his own accord. And he didn’t seem frightened to me,” Holly said. “It’s late anyway.”

Aunt Mae cleared the dining room table. “Yes it is. Come on, Maureen. Let’s go upstairs.”

Mrs. Shale stood from the sofa. “Goodnight, dear.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Shale,” she said, softly. “Goodnight, Aunt Mae.”

Her aunt shook her head at her. “Goodnight, Holly.”

Holly walked over to the tree, her back to Noel. “You have to take this back. Or take it to your house, like you were supposed to.”

“It’s late. It’s not like you can return a tree at customer service. And it won’t fit on my car. That’s why I had it delivered,” Noel responded, his voice growing louder with a mixture of dismay to outright disappointment. Noel took a deep breath and softened his tone. “Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. You’re on call. You won’t have to look at it. You’ll be at your aunt’s house for Christmas. I’ll arrange for someone to pick it up the day after.” Noel walked up to her and rested his hand on her shoulder. “Holly, you kissed me at Callahan’s under the mistletoe with Christmas tree lights twinkling in the background. I thought you were having a great time.”

She turned to face him, not bothering to swipe the tears trickling down her hot cheeks. “I was.”

Noel wiped her cheeks with the back of his sleeve. “We’ll decorate this tree better than the one at Callahan’s.”

Holly sniffled. “Everything at Callahan’s; the tree, the mistletoe, that’s all fantasy.”

Noel squinted. “Our whole evening was a fantasy to you?”

“Of course not. That’s not what I meant. Noel, this is my reality. I’m not ready for all this.”

“Okay, But Holly, this *is* your reality, and you’re missing it because you’re too busy with the past. I’m sorry about all of this. I made a mistake. We...I...have to get up early. I better go.”

Resorting to her barricading stance, Holly wrapped her arms across her chest. “I think that would be best.”

Noel lowered his eyes. “Okay,” he said softly and then left, slowly clicking her front door closed.

Holly clutched her head and squeezed her wet eyes shut. It felt like a bomb was ready to go off in her chest, about to leave her insides splintered into a million pieces. It was all her fault. Noel was gone.

Chapter Ten

Holly flopped onto the sofa, waiting for the crunch of his tires to fade. The house was silent and Noel was gone. Hugging herself, she stared at the evergreen tree, its branches lush and wintry fragrant. She had picked out the tree for Noel between the many vying to be chosen to come home with a family and be adorned with glossy ornaments and glittery tinsel. Holly stood and walked over to it, relaxing the squeeze of her arms pressed to her chest. She gazed down at a box of ornaments. Its lid was loose and cocked to one side, revealing the first row of Christmas bulbs. Each ornament was neatly quartered in an appointed cardboard slot. She knelt and pulled one out of the box by its hook and cradled it in her palms. Her tears dried. Holly smiled. The bright blue ball with a snowman, his twig fingers holding onto his black hat, swirls of glitter “wind” wrapping around him, was her childhood favorite, the first one to grace the tree every year. Crowning herself the best snowman builder at the age of seven, Holly had begged her father to buy her that ornament. She lifted it and was poised to hang it onto the tree when a creak of a stair startled her. She tucked her snowman quickly back into the box.

Mrs. Shale appeared at the bottom of the stairway and paused, her hand resting on the dark wood banister. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“I’m okay,” Holly said softly. *A lie.* She wasn’t going to burden Mrs. Shale. “But you’re up late. You need your rest.”

Mrs. Shale walked into the living room and sat in wing-backed chair facing Holly. She drew a deep breath. “You said I didn’t understand, but I really do.”

Holly’s shoulders sank. “I didn’t intend to accuse you of that. I was just overwhelmed. Noel’s final surprise of an evening that had gone so well left me gobsmacked. I behaved poorly. I’m so sorry. And I’m afraid I blew it with Noel, not to mention disappointing Aunt Mae.”

“Your aunt loves you, and Noel is a good man. He reminds me of my Martin. Martin adored Christmas. He’d grumble about stringing up lights on the house. There was always a bulb that burned out, foiling the whole string. Oh, he’d be out there all night until every one of those lights

obeyed.” Mrs. Shale laughed. “Then he’d boast to everyone that it wasn’t that hard, offering tips for outdoor decoration.”

Holly pulled up from her knees and sat cross-legged at Mrs. Shale’s feet, gazing up at her. “Martin sounds like my dad. He was in charge of the outside while Mom decorated the inside with garland. She loved doing up the bathrooms, too. I used to tease her that she had the largest selection of Christmas themed towels and scented soaps.”

Mrs. Shale leaned forward and brushed Holly’s hair from her eyes. “You miss that, don’t you?”

Holly shrugged. “The white fluffy towels in my bathrooms do remind me of snow.”

Okay, that was a stretch.

“I guess they do,” Mrs. Shale said, nodding. She paused for a few seconds. “I didn’t agree with surprising you with the tree initially, but Noel had called your Aunt Mae earlier and told her how you had admired this particular tree at the Christmas tree lot, so we thought you’d be okay with it here, even enjoy it. We misjudged your readiness. We shouldn’t have pushed you, expecting you to jump right into our tree trimming party.”

Holly shook her head. “It’s not your fault. I know everyone just wanted to see me happy.”

Mrs. Shale rubbed her chin. “Martin had been ill, his heart failure worsening over a month’s time. He died this past spring. Although I miss him terribly, I can’t imagine how you felt that Christmas Eve. You were a child who lost her parents. I am a grown woman who had forty-three years with a wonderful husband. When I said that I understood, I couldn’t possible have. I’m sorry your evening ended like that.”

“It’s okay. And I know this Christmas must be difficult for you too. I need to apologize to Noel.” She pressed her lips tight for a moment. “ But I don’t know how to do it. It will awkward.”

Mrs. Shale stroked Holly’s hand. “You’ll know when the moment is right. And I’m sure he’s forgiven you.”

“We’re both on call tomorrow. There’s no way I’ll be able to avoid him.”

“Do you really want to duck him?”

Holly shrugged. She figured Noel wouldn’t be looking for her anyway, not after she completely deflated him.

Mrs. Shale rocked out of the chair. “I’m turning in. Sleep on it, dear. Everything will all

look different in the morning. I promise.”

Holly’s throat caught. “My mom used to say that.”

Mrs. Shale winked. “Wise woman. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Shale. And thank you.”

“You’re welcome, but I should be thanking you for taking me in.” She gave Holly’s hand a squeeze. “We’ll get through this Christmas together.”

Chapter Eleven

Holly's stomach twisted in knots. It was Christmas Eve. The forecast predicted a snowstorm and she was on call, along with Noel. Holly stood in the stairwell and took a deep breath before ascending the last flight of stairs to the surgical unit. Having blown any lasting relationship with Noel, she had bypassed her morning coffee, downing a glass of orange juice for breakfast instead, and that's only because Aunt Mae and Mrs. Shale wouldn't let her out of the house until she swallowed every drop. They had even shoved scrambled eggs and toast onto her plate.

"I want that plate completely cleaned off, young lady," Aunt Mae had admonished her. "And I laid out your boots, hat, and scarf, and I tucked your gloves into your coat pockets. So there's no excuse for you not to finish your breakfast."

"What am I? Ten?" Holly grumbled. She sighed. *Well, I guess I acted like a ten-year-old last night.*

Holly's stomach rumbled in protest from her gunshot breakfast. She rubbed her disgruntled belly. This was going to be a long night. Holly had to make amends with Noel. She'd start by thanking him for the wonderful tree and his thoughtfulness. Then she'd ease into the real contrition that she had behaved badly. Holly's heart squeezed. She climbed the final flight and paused behind the gray metal stairwell door. Holly pumped her fist. *That's it! After rounds, I'll ask Noel to meet me in the call room. I'll hug him. Kiss him. Tell him I've been a jerk. Noel will forgive me. We'll have a nice lunch afterwards. A smile graced Holly's lips. Yes! Then we'll go back to the call room. And who knows? If it stays quiet, we'll dabble in some Christmas Eve revelry...alone!*

Holly burst through the door with renewed vigor. She practically skipped down the hallway, only easing her happy gallop when the unit clerk popped her head from her computer, raising her eyebrows at Holly. Holly nodded to the clerk and proceeded past her with her usual staccato strut. But today Holly's strut had an extra kick to it.

Then she spotted Noel, gathered with his surgical team and chatting with a bunch of doe

eyed nurses, throwing in a laugh or two for good measure. Holly shot him a huge grin. But Noel merely nodded, his lips only curving upward slightly. Her pulse shot up. Not only had she embarrassed herself in front of Noel, but she swore the whole staff was staring right at her.

Holly cleared her throat. "Um, sorry I'm late." She certainly was not going to confess that her aunt made her eat all her breakfast, delaying her arrival. She could always blame the snow. But she didn't. Holly eyeballed her team. "Go on to the first room," she said quickly before her throat dried up. "I'll catch up with you."

Holly darted into the call room. She slid off her boots, slipped out of her coat, and peeled off her gloves. It was frigid outside but her hands were sweaty. She rubbed her palms on her skirt. Holly stepped into her black flats and flung on her lab coat. On her way out of the call room, Holly caught her reflection in the mirror. *Oh my God*, she muttered. Her cheeks were beet red, not the rosy, frosty winter kind, but the dreadfully flushed kind. Complete humiliation. Holly hated that Noel didn't seem bothered one bit. But then why should he? She gave a brief little snort and patted her hair. "Just go out there and do your job," she said to the woman cringing back at her in the mirror. After splashing some cold water on her face, Holly left the call room with two missions: avoid Noel at all costs, and get through Christmas Eve.

Holly pinned her shoulders back and strode past the nurse's station. With her chin held high and her eyes straight ahead, she assumed her Napoleonic stance in front of her team. She couldn't help but glance across the hallway at Noel who was leading his team on morning rounds. She darted her eyes away from him the second he responded to her gaze with a slight cock of his head and raise of a brow while his resident presented a case. His lips relaxed open as if he wanted to say something to her, and she leaned away from her team, so desperately wanting to say something to him, but then they moved farther apart. Their respective rounds moved in opposite directions, until Noel was no longer within her eyes' reach.

Her stomach fluttered and her mouth had gone dry. Holly quickly licked her lips. She curled her toes in her shoes and took a deep breath. Everyone expected the old Holly Green, and that's what everyone was going to get.

Holly roamed her eyes about her group of medical students and residents. Their eyes shifted from one another, waiting like sacrificial lambs to be called upon. She furrowed her forehead. "Where's Dr. Clifford Jackson?" Her intern was the only doctor on her team who consistently arrived even before she did for morning rounds.

“Excuse me, Dr. Green,” the unit clerk called. Holly’s team parted, letting the woman through. “I have a message from Dr. Jackson. He says he is unavoidably delayed due to the heavy snow. He’s stuck in traffic. The clerk juttred the note out to Holly. Holly took the paper from the stoic woman and shoved it into her lab coat pocket.

“Thank you,” Holly said politely.

The unit clerk rolled her eyes and shook her head. “Just to let you all know that I am not an answering service.” Then the woman let a wink escape towards Holly. “I am going back to my own work now.”

Holly nodded with a slight smile. “Okay, and thanks again.”

“Uh huh,” the woman muttered and then strode away.

Holly knew the clerk had a rare sweet spot for her and for Clifford.

“Well, let’s go on, shall we? She waved the team on with a flick of her wrist. “I’m sure Dr. Jackson will join us as soon as possible.” Holly zeroed in on Candice. “Present the next case, Ms. Baxter.”

After Clifford’s tutelage, Candice shined in her presentation. Holly would show her appreciation by giving Clifford more O.R. time. She glanced at her watch. Morning rounds were over, and there was still no sign of Clifford. She dismissed her team and bid them a Merry Christmas. Holly grinned at the quizzical looks upon their faces as they left in silence, glancing back at her ever few steps as if they hadn’t recognized her. Yes, she was changing, softening a bit around those rough, raw edges of hers that she had purposely placed to keep everyone at bay. But she hadn’t changed fast enough to keep Noel. Her shoulders sank. Noel was nowhere in sight. His team was gone and so was he. Holly frowned. Was he entertaining the nurses? She’d go and check.

Holly tiptoed to the end of the corridor. She halted. Why was she even sneaking around? For God’s sake, she was Dr. Holly Green! She balled her hand into a fist. *This is my hospital!* She drew a deep breath and turned the corner with gusto. But all she saw were nurses entering their notes on the computers and the unit clerk with the phone to her ear. No Noel. She’d ask the unit clerk. The woman knew everything and had eyes in the back of her head. No one made a move on 6 West without the clerk knowing about it. Holly approached the nurses’ station. She ducked into the unit kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee, buying some time before getting the nerve up to inquire about Noel without looking like some pathetic, lovelorn woman. She inched

up behind the unit clerk.

The clerk, who apparently was on hold, or perhaps not even listening to the person on the other end of the phone asked, without turning her head, “Can I help you, Dr. Green?”

Holly blinked while cradling her coffee. *How does she do that?* “Uh, have you seen Dr. Shepherd?”

The clerk spun around in her chair, the phone still pressed to her ear. “Dr. Shepherd went to the cafeteria,” she paused, “with Margo.”

Holly’s heart slammed in her chest. She recognized the snooty nurse’s name, the same one who had mocked her in the locker room and practically shoved her breasts in Noel’s face that night in Callahan’s Pub. Holly squeezed her cup until coffee squirted from the lid’s spout and sprayed the lapel of her lab coat. The nurses stopped typing at their keyboards. One grabbed a tissue.

“Oh here you go, Dr. Green,” the nurse said with sympathy in her eyes.

Holly set her coffee cup on the counter and furiously dabbed at her lab coat. Her hands trembled. Oh so bad for a surgeon.

“Hurry and splash some water on it or it will stain,” another nurse said, a mixture of pity and worry across her face.

No one was afraid to be around her anymore. *Oh my God, they feel bad for me. Everyone knows Noel and I aren’t an item anymore. They want to hug me instead run from me. The hospital rumor mill must be on overdrive! I have to out of here.*

“Thank you,” she quickly said to the nurses. “I’ll go and wash it out in the call room.” Holly met the unit clerk’s gaze, a weird soulful look in the woman’s eyes. “Please page me when Dr. Jackson arrives.”

The clerk nodded. “Will do, Dr. Green. Now you go take of yourself...uh...I mean take care of your coat.”

Holly curtly nodded. She couldn’t escape fast enough, leaving her coffee behind.

Holly dodged into the doctor’s call room and shoved the door closed. She plopped onto the bed, swung her legs up onto the mattress, and flopped her head onto the pillow. Tucking her hands behind her head, Holly stared at the stark ceiling tiles. The call rooms were all clones; rectangular cubicles with white walls, a generic picture of mountains or gardens poised on one

wall, a standard single bed with an extra stiff mattress and a crunchy hospital pillow to match, one Formica fake wood nightstand with a dim lamp, an ancient TV set mounted on a rack high above the foot of the bed with a remote that only worked if you smacked it a few times, and a sterile bathroom with a no frills shower. The only difference in the call rooms was that Holly was in one room and Noel was “supposed to be” in the other, a wall, not to mention awkward emotions, separating them.

Holly lay there fiddling with the pager clipped onto the cinched waistband of her scrub pants. No way was she going to that cafeteria. Her chest ached at the thought of Noel and Margo tucked into a corner booth, the same booth that she and Noel shared just a few days ago. She puckered her lower lip. *Why did Noel act that way? Did I misinterpret the last few days with him? What about that kiss in Callahan’s, right there in front of the tree, in front of everyone there? Holly gritted her teeth. Even Margo! And what about the ice-skating? The way we held hands. That twinkle in his eyes. Didn’t that mean anything?* She sighed. *Oh, I get it. He can’t handle that I have this freakish fear of Christmas.* Then she sniffed. *God, I don’t blame him.* She did basically kick him out of her house after he surprised her with that evergreen. *Why didn’t he just tell me?*

Her ruminations wore her out. Holly closed her eyes and drifted away, away to a place that scared her most, Christmas Eve past – twenty years past. But there were no dramatic ghosts to visit her. There were only her nightmares:

Blood everywhere. Mommy and Daddy barely visible, the crowd of hovering nurses and doctors obstructing her view. Dr. Maxwell. Why is he so pale? Why is he turning away? There’s something wrong. Aunt Mae says, “We have to go now, dear.” “Go where Aunt Mae?” My feet are shaking in my boots. “I don’t want to go. You can’t make me! Mommy! Daddy!”

Holly bolted up in the bed, breathless, her pulse hammering. Then her pager blared, making her heart drive even harder. She snatched the beeper from her pants, blinked her eyes, and read the emergency page scrolling across the screen. She flung off the covers and rocketed out of the call room, smacking chest to chest with Noel.

“You got it, too?” Noel asked, looking just as flustered as she felt.

“Yeah. Let’s go. Something big is happening.”

Noel gave Holly a gentle nudge between her shoulder blades. “I’m with you.”

That was reassuring on both levels, personal and professional. She thanked God he was

there, right by her side.

Holly and Noel sprinted down six flights of stairs to the emergency department, bypassing the elevator. She needed to do something with the adrenaline that was shooting through her veins, the mystery of the catastrophe awaiting them clanging in her head. They skidded to a stop at trauma room 3 and slid on their yellow protective gowns, goggles, and masks.

“What do we got?” Holly shouted with authority. Her heart stopped when she saw who lay upon the steel table, unconscious, intubated, and with IV tubing snaking from his body. It was Clifford, her intern.

Horror panned every face on the trauma team.

“It’s one of ours,” the ED attending choked. “Status post MVA, brought in tubed, pressors and fluids on board. Hemodynamically unstable. BP 80/50, sinus tachycardia at 150, belly distended, H&H 6 and 18. FAST shows blood in the belly. Bets are on a ruptured spleen.”

A wave of nausea swept over Holly’s stomach. She swallowed back the bile burning in her throat. Guilt swirled in her head. Why didn’t she check on his arrival to the hospital? She was so consumed with her thoughts of Noel. Holly took a deep breath. It wouldn’t have mattered. The car wreck was out of anyone’s control, including hers. Clifford was bleeding into his belly, in shock, and flirting with death. Holly had to save him, now. *Please, God, no!*

“Get him to the O.R., stat. I’ll meet anesthesia there,” Holly ordered.

Holly and Noel stripped off their gowns.

Noel grasped her hand. “Let’s do this, together.”

Chapter Twelve

Holly stood at the scrub sink, tying on her scrub cap. She reached for a surgical mask. Her eyes pierced the glass into O.R. 6 where Clifford lay on the narrow operating table, pale, a breathing tube jutting from his mouth, and dwarfed beneath the baffles of the inflated heating blanket draped across his shoulders. A mix of guilt, fear, and determination swirled in her head. While an O.R. nurse washed Clifford's belly with Betadine, preparing him for Holly's knife, another nurse and scrub tech counted the surgical instruments spread across the sterile blue clothed table, shiny silver instruments soon to be dulled by Clifford's blood. Her heart pumped clear to her neck. *Steady, Holly. Clifford needs you.*

She felt his hand on her shoulder, strong and reassuring. Holly turned to face him, searching into Noel's deep brown eyes that gazed back at her from above the rim of his mask, not the reunion she had fantasized about. He blinked in rapid succession. God, he was just as torn up about Clifford as she was.

"Let's do this," he said softly.

"Noel?" Holly whispered.

He shook his head. "It's okay, Holly. He'll be all right. We'll be all right."

That's all she needed to hear.

Holly whipped her head to the thump, thump, thump of sneakers hitting the linoleum of the O.R. corridor in a running pace.

Candice Baxter sprinted towards Holly and Noel. She skidded to a stop. With hands on her hips and panting, she blurted out, "I came as soon as I heard."

Holly shook her head and said with muted authority, and in the nicest way she could muster in that moment, "Candice, this isn't a medical student case."

Candice shot back, "You'll need exposure. I'll hold retractors as long as you need. I'll cut suture. I'll suction."

Her little lamb of a student had grown up right before her eyes.

Holly met Candice's gaze. "Okay, get scrubbing."

Candice grabbed a surgical mask.

Holly, Noel, and Candice scrubbed their hands side by side at the sink just outside O.R. 6. No one said a word. The jets of water from the automatic faucets pelted the stainless steel. The lather from their arms plopped into the sink, the foam pooling there until it swirled into the drain. They flicked their wet arms in synchrony as if expertly choreographed. Holly backed into the O.R., her hands held as high as her hopes. Noel and Candice followed her inside the O.R. Holly darted her eyes to the collapsed empty bags of blood strewn on the floor. She swallowed hard behind her mask, hiding her horror that Clifford might die this Christmas Eve.

"We're squeezing in the fifth unit of blood," the anesthesiologist said. "He's tachycardic but his heart rate is slowly coming down. However his blood pressure is still low. We're pouring the blood in as fast as we can."

Holly glanced at the anesthesiologist. "I know. You're doing the best that you can."

They had just been donned with their surgical gowns when the anesthesiologist yelled, "I got V-tach! Oh, man! He's in V-fib."

Clifford's heart was quivering at a lightening pace, completely ineffective in sustaining blood to his organs.

Holly reached for the defibrillator paddles and smacked them onto Clifford's chest. She hadn't even opened him up yet. "Shock! Shock! Shock! "Live! Live! Live!" Holly cried out.

"He's back," the anesthesiologist yelled. "Thank God!"

Holly took a deep breath. She heard everyone else in that O.R. exhale.

"Scalpel, please," Holly commanded.

As she opened up Clifford's belly, blood flooded the operative field.

"Suction! I need suction!"

Candice went straight into action, plunging the suction catheter into the pool of blood. Swirls of deep red snaked through the plastic tubing, then splattered into the suction canister. It was what Holly had feared. Clifford's spleen was ruptured.

Holly and Noel grabbed vascular clamps and together, in perfect rhythm, cross-clamped every culpable blood vessel, stopping Clifford's hemorrhaging. Candice suctioned the field dry. Holly lowered her head and sighed. Clifford wasn't out of the woods yet, but it was a good start.

Noel rested his hand upon her hand, the warmth of his skin penetrating past the latex of his

gloves, and through her gloves. The corners' of his eyes crinkled upward. "Excellent work, Dr. Green."

Holly grinned beneath her mask. "Excellent work back at you, Dr. Shepherd." She met everyone else's relieved gaze. "Strong work, all. Now let's finish up, shall we?"

Everyone cheered, "Here! Here!"

Holly turned to face Candice. She squeezed Candice's hand. "Strong work," she reiterated, watching the thankful glee in her student's eyes.

They finished Clifford's emergency splenectomy. Holly smiled at his improved heart rate and blood pressure.

Candice followed the anesthesiologist and nurses as they wheeled Clifford, with his breathing tube and multiple IVs, to the recovery room.

Holly sniffed behind her mask. "I'll be right there," she called.

Holly and Noel stood alone in the ruins of Clifford's surgery. They ripped off their blood stained gowns. Holly tore off her mask, finally letting the tears web across her lashes. She'd get it all out now, with only Noel to see, before pulling herself together. She couldn't enter the recovery room like this. She'd wait a few minutes, allowing the nurses and anesthesiologist to settle in Clifford. Noel peeled off his mask. Tears pooled in his lower lids. They'd won the battle for now, but maybe not the war.

Noel opened his arms. "Holly," he said softly.

She sank into his embrace. Their shoulders shook as they released every bit of pent up adrenaline.

"Let's go take care of Clifford," he whispered in her ear. "Then we need to talk in the call room."

Holly nodded but her stomach plummeted. "We need to talk" never ended well. She quickly licked her lips. "Okay."

Holly and Noel parted but walked side by side to the recovery room, not another word passing between them.

"I'll enter the post-op orders while you dictate the surgery," Noel said, his voice succinct.

"Okay." God, why couldn't she come up with any other words?

Holly finished her report and Noel keyed in the computerized orders. Candice sat by Clifford's bed, patting his hand while glancing every now and then at the monitors over his head.

Holly walked up behind Candice and placed her hand on Candice's shoulder. "Get some

rest. His blood count is up and his pressures are stable. Urine output looks good. He'll go to the ICU in a bit."

Candice nodded. "He'll be fine now. Thanks to you and Dr. Shepherd."

Holly smiled a little. "And thanks to you, too. You'll make a fine surgeon one day."

Candice lowered her head and blushed. "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Miss Baxter."

And now for Noel's blistering news. There was no avoiding it. He had already left for the call room. Part two of a dramatic Christmas Eve awaited her.

With his door open, Holly found Noel sitting on the call room bed. Her heart was about to bust. He stood and motioned for her to come inside.

Well, here it goes, she thought. *Holly, it's just not going to work out between us.*

But as she ventured closer, Noel grabbed Holly's hand and pulled her to his chest. Before she could say anything, Noel pressed his lips to hers and kissed her long and hard. Definitely not the goodbye kind of kiss. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders. He held her tight about the waist. Everything that happened between them, and that day, had completely washed away.

She inched away from Noel's embrace, breathing him in as their lower lips lingered, straining to part. Holly gazed up at him grasping for words. Her head buzzed. She trudged her heart into that call room, fully expecting Noel to nudge her away.

Holly drew in a deep breath, her lungs stuttering. She shook her head. "Noel, I'm so sorry."

He pressed his lips together, paused, and cradled her hands. Holly's fingers twitched in his touch, a feeling so foreign to her normally rock steady hands.

Noel blinked. "I'm to blame. I pushed you. The tree was supposed to be a surprise. I didn't mean to hurt you...bring up wounds that still need healing."

Holly bit her bottom lip. "It's okay. Just like Clifford today, I accept that things happen...terrible things...even on holidays that are supposed to be filled with happiness." She inhaled again, sighing out all that had been bubbling inside of her. "Mom and Dad are gone. But you're here. Aunt Mae is here, and so is Mrs. Shale, who's fighting to move on. I need to move on, too."

Noel let loose of Holly's hands and gently cupped her cheeks. "I'll be with you the whole time."

Holly wiggled closer into Noel's arms. The call room bed creaked. Noel brushed the stray hairs away from her forehead, and kissed her on her head, then trailed his lips down the slope of her nose, stopping at her mouth. Snuggled in his warm arms and his velvet, full lips, Holly couldn't think of a better way to wake up on Christmas morning. Clifford had regained consciousness and improved steadily during the night. His breathing tube had been removed and he even rasped, "Merry Christmas" to Holly. Her heart melted at that moment. She laid in Noel's arms the rest of the night, dismayed, but gratefully so, that neither hers nor Noel's beeper had gone off even once. A glorious silent night!

"Good morning, Dr. Green," Noel teased.

Holly's whole body grinned. "Good morning to you, too, Dr. Shepherd."

Noel wrapped his legs around hers. She lay there blissfully entwined with him. Holly kissed his nose.

"Come to Christmas dinner. Aunt Mae would love to have you." Holly set her mouth on his. She closed her eyes, giving into the heat, the good kind of adrenaline that spread through every vessel, down to every tiny capillary leaving her so deliciously flushed. She eased away from him, reveling in that loopy, but still sexy look upon his face. "I'd love for you to come, too."

"Uh...okay...I'd...uh...I mean I'll...uh...be there," he stuttered.

Yes! She had the man completely tongue-tied. *Dr. Holly Green, back in control!*

Noel gave Holly a quick pat on her bottom. He rolled away from her and up out of the bed, his back to her. "We better get going or will be late for check out rounds this morning. I'll meet you there in a minute."

He headed straight for the bathroom. Holly stretched in the bed and smiled. "Okay, she teased. See you in a bit."

Holly snuck into her "call room" for a quick stop in her bathroom, leaving Noel a modicum of privacy. She straightened out her ponytail that had gone askew somewhere between Clifford's emergency surgery and her night dozing in Noel's embrace.

They happened to exit "their" rooms at the same time.

"Ready?" Holly asked with an arch of her brows.

Noel nodded with a sheepish grin. "Absolutely." Then he whispered, "To be continued at a

later date.”

Holly smiled back. “Absolutely.”

Holly and Noel walked side-by-side, close but yet maintaining professional decorum, to the 6 West nurses’ station.

The nurses whipped their heads toward Holly and Noel, and the unit clerk spun in her chair to face them.

The clerk crossed her arms across her ample chest. She peered over the rim of her glasses and grinned. “Oh, well, well. Good morning there Doctors Green and Shepherd. Mmm, mmm, mmm. Someone had a not so silent night. Merry Christmas.”

Holly glanced down at her wrinkled scrubs and then at Noel’s equally rumpled ones. Heat spread clear to the tips of her ears.

She smiled and quickly nodded. “And Merry Christmas to everyone.” Holly eyed the fresh on call team. “Rounds?”

Candice Baxter popped her head around the corner. “Sorry I’m late.”

“You’re right on time, Ms. Baxter,” Holly said without any bite to her voice. She winked at Candice. “Merry Christmas.”

Candice widened her eyes. “And Merry Christmas to you, Dr. Green.”

Before parting for their respective holiday relief teams, Holly reached for Noel’s hand. Their fingertips discreetly touched.

“See you at 4 o’clock?”

Noel grinned clear to his cheeks. “I’ll be there at three.”

Chapter Thirteen

Holly hummed all the way to the parking garage while swinging her key ring on her finger. Her breath floated in puffs that whisked over her head. Clifford had made a miraculous recovery, check out rounds had cranked like clockwork, and she was going home! Holly grinned. She couldn't wait to see the look on Noel's face when he opened his present. Holly recalled hiding the key ring she had bought Noel in the hatbox. Now she'd dive right back into that box. Holly danced on balls of her feet, frigid, as she shoved the key into her car door. She shimmied inside of it. Her shoulders shook. Holly rubbed her gloved hands together. She gave the steering wheel a happy tap and started the car. Soon Noel's touch would warm her from her giddy head to her frosty feet.

It had stopped snowing and the roads had been plowed and salted, making the drive home smooth. As Holly pulled into the driveway, the car crackled over the salt crystals. She had just opened her car door when something buzzed past her ear. She jerked backwards and right onto an ice patch. Her heart pounding, Holly grabbed the car door handle halting her from sliding in her boots into a full split.

"Oh, my gosh! Dr. Green, I'm so sorry," yelled Sam as he crossed the street while cradling his remote control to the toy helicopter that was now sticking tail up in a snow bank, not looking in either direction as he ran toward her.

The oncoming car stuttered on its brakes, fishtailing towards the boy.

"Sam!" Holly screamed. "Watch out!"

A horn blared as Sam skittered across the road. Holly pushed off her car and pumped her hands as she sprinted toward Sam. She clutched him to her chest. Together they tumbled onto Holly's driveway. The boy's rapid-fire heartbeat shot straight through her coat, thumping wildly against her quivering beats. Holly stood and pulled Sam up with her. The woman driving the car flew out from her open car door. She ran towards Holly and Sam.

"Oh, my," she said, half panting, her breath hanging erratic in the cold air. "Are you all

right?”

Holly clutched Sam’s hand. “We’re okay. How are you?”

The woman’s finger’s trembled. “I’m, uh, stunned. I’m sorry. I didn’t see the little boy. Everything happened so fast.”

Holly rested her hand on the woman’s shoulder. “It’s all right,” she said. She glanced down at Sam whose eyes were wide as saucers. “We’re all okay. Thank you for stopping to make sure. Have a Merry Christmas!”

The distraught woman quickly nodded. “You, too.” She patted Sam on his head. “I’m so glad you’re okay. Maybe you should play in your back yard. Merry Christmas.”

Sam lowered his eyes contritely, “I will ma’am.”

The woman gave a nervous wave from her window as she drove off with barely her foot to the gas. Holly plunked the crashed helicopter from the snow. Shaking it clean, she handed the toy back to Sam.

Holly hugged him. “I don’t think it’s broken. She gazed at Sam with a partly pensive and a partly admonishing look. “Christmas present?”

Sam twisted his lips. “Yeah. Right out of the box.”

“Sam! You get in here this minute,” his mother called from the open door.

“I’ll be right there, mom.”

Holly raised her hand and waved to Sam’s mom. “I’ll walk him over, Mrs. Roberts.”

Holly strode next to Sam, restraining from holding his hand. Humiliation on any day would stink, but this was Christmas. She waited for Sam to trudge to the door stoop.

Mrs. Roberts waved back. “I’m sorry Sam nearly beamed you with that helicopter, Dr. Green. It was his father’s idea of a gift!”

Holly waved back. “It’s okay. It was an accident. All good now! Merry Christmas!”

“Merry Christmas to you and your family, Dr. Green.”

She waited for the door to shut. Holly shook her head. *Poor Sam*. She’d send over some chocolate chip cookies to him later.

Holly hopped over the ice patches and skipped up her porch steps. She stuck her key in the door, but it was unlocked. Holly eased the door open. A swirl of hot turkey and nutmeg spiced apples teased her nose. Her lashes webbed with tears. *Mom’s apple pie!*

“Hello? Mrs. Shale?”

She always went to Aunt Mae's for Christmas Dinner. What was going on?

Aunt Mae popped her head around the corner of the kitchen. "Oh, Holly! You're home. Her aunt strode towards her, wiping her wet hands on her poinsettia print apron. She stopped a few feet before Holly. Aunt Mae's chest rose up and down beneath her apron. She drew a deep breath, her eyes never wavering from Holly's. Aunt Mae swiped her hands one more time. "I thought we'd have Christmas dinner here, in your house, since Mrs. Shale's already over here, and, uh, I didn't want to tire her out." Aunt Mae waved her hands defensively. "I'll do everything. You just rest. Long night, dear?"

Holly didn't answer her. Instead she threw off her coat and hat and tossed them on the coat rack. She peeled off her boots, and then ran in her stocking feet right into Aunt Mae's arms. Holly sobbed on her aunt's shoulder, inhaling the holiday kitchen scent in the fibers of her apron.

"I love you, Aunt Mae."

Aunt Mae stroked Holly's hair. "Bad night, Sweetheart?"

Holly gulped back her tears. "Unbelievably bad and unbelievably good." She snorted and pulled away from her aunt's shoulder. "I'll tell you later."

"Okay," Aunt Mae said softly.

Holly kissed her on the cheek. "Thank you for doing all this."

Aunt Mae raised a pensive brow. "Really? I can stop now and take all the food to my house."

Holly squeezed her. "Don't you dare!"

Aunt Mae tapped Holly on her shoulders. "Go take a nice hot shower and a nap. I'll wake you up when dinner's ready."

Holly squinted. "Uh, Aunt Mae. I invited Noel."

Aunt Mae raised her arms and then cupped Holly's cheeks. "Oh, how wonderful, child! You belong together. I'll set an extra plate." Her aunt then narrowed her eyes at Holly, but her lips curled into a smile. "Something indeed happened at that hospital."

"It did, Aunt Mae. It did."

Holly turned around, and was about to head upstairs, when Noel's bare evergreen tree stared right at her. She froze. The tree sat in the corner of her living room, aching for ornaments to dangle from its plump branches.

Aunt Mae rushed over to Holly and put her arm around Holly's shoulders. "I'm so sorry,

dear. There's no one to pick up the tree on Christmas Day. We had to leave it there, at least until tomorrow."

Holly darted her eyes to the boxes of ornaments surrounding the tree, one with its lid ajar. It was the same box Holly had opened the other night, the one with her snowman.

"Oh..." Aunt Mae sighed. "I was so busy with preparing dinner that I forgot to put those boxes back into the attic."

"That's okay," Holly said softly.

She eased from her aunt's embrace and inched toward to the tree, kneeling in front of the forgotten evergreen she had unknowingly chosen. Holly gently lifted the stray lid off the ornament box housing her snowman. She reached inside it and pulled the aged, but still glittery bulb by its silver metal hook, dangling her favorite childhood ornament from between her fingers. The snowman danced before her eyes. Holly softly laughed, mesmerized by the jolly little guy as if this was the first time she was seeing him. And after all these years, tucked away in a box, it certainly seemed all so new to her. But it wasn't. Ever since her father had bought her that snowman, it was the first one to grace her family's Christmas tree and the last one to be put back into the box, stored safely away in the attic until the next Christmas. Next Christmas never came after the accident, her snowman sealed from her sight. Until now.

In the hush of her living room, Aunt Mae's breaths dove in between Holly's flaring puffs as she raised the frosted, snowman bulb high above her head. Her father had used to swing his big arms around her waist and lift her up, holding her tight as she hung her beloved ornament high in the tree. Now Holly could easily reach it, but she'd give anything to feel his arms once again. The tree branch responded with a slight bounce as Holly clipped her snowman into place. She gave a short sniff before turning around to face Aunt Mae.

"How does it look?" Holly asked.

Aunt Mae clapped. "Beautiful, just beautiful. Your mom and dad, I know, are smiling right now. So proud of you, and the woman you've become."

Holly ran to Aunt Mae and melted in her aunt's embrace. It was not her father's or her mother's arms, but the arms that blanketed her were from the woman who loved her just as much. And hopefully Noel's touch would be next.

"I'll finish the rest of the tree before dinner, I promise," Holly sniffed.

"It's okay. Slow down, dear." She winked at Holly. "Perhaps Noel will help you decorate

the tree. The two of you did pick it out...in a way.”

Holly jerked back from Aunt Mae. “Noel!” She glanced at her watch. “Two o’clock! He’ll be here in an hour. I better getting ready.” Holly kissed Aunt Mae on the cheek and bolted up the staircase. She had to get to that hatbox stashed in the back of her closet.

Holly quickly showered and then rummaged in her closet in her bathrobe and bunny slippers, her wet hair wrapped in fluffy white towel turban spiraling up from her head. She gently shoved out Aunt Mae’s and Mrs. Shale’s wrapped presents; a quilted throw for Mrs. Shale and the single cup coffee maker that Aunt Mae had had her eye on all year, vowing she was going to get one of those one of these days. She drew a deep breath. *It has to be here somewhere.* Her heart raced as she swept her hand across the top shelf in her closet. There it was, the hatbox containing Noel’s gift, hidden behind a stack of scarves. She grabbed it off the shelf and ran to her bed. Holly tossed the hatbox onto the bed and flipped off the lid. The red-boxed leather keychain she had bought him lay at the bottom nestled in white tissue paper. The tissue crinkled as Holly flung it aside, pulling out Noel’s present like a pearl from an oyster. Her eyes widened. Wrapping paper! Shoot! I never wrapped it. Holly stamped her foot. She had placed what remained of decades old paper back into a plastic sealed container in the attic, amazed that the paper was still crisp and the print bright.

The attic stairs groaned as Holly unfolded them. Her toes curled in her bunny slippers with every grip of wooden stair. She climbed up into the frosty attic. Her shoulders quivered and her teeth chattered while she popped the lid on the container. Holly bowed her head. Yes! Just enough wrapping paper left over for Noel’s gift. She pulled out a square of deep blue paper with white snowflakes and closed the lid, promising herself she’d refill that container for next Christmas. Down the stairs she went, clutching her prized paper. She folded the stairs back into place and dodged back into the bedroom. She wrapped Noel’s present with neat little corners, sealing the box with sparkly white ribbon. Holly glanced at it, tapping it with happy accomplishment as if she’d just performed the most intricate surgery. Now to work on presenting herself!

Holly blow-dried her hair, curling it into gentle waves, and applied her make-up with a light touch: a dab of foundation, a flick of blush, a whoosh of bronze eye shadow, and a stroke of mascara. She smiled at her reflection, this time not escaping from the mirror. Just enough make-

up on without hiding behind it, she mused.

Pattering back into her bedroom, Holly slid into the black dress that had made it out of her closet for a record three times. She just finished shimmying into her stockings when the doorbell chimed, its announcement echoing up the stairwell. Noel! She glanced into the dresser mirror and patted her hair. Holly smiled, baring her teeth, making sure they harbored not a dab of food or dot of lipstick. She shifted her gaze to the framed picture of her parents and her, their last Christmas time photo, and the two ornaments hanging from the corners, her parents' last one and the one Mrs. Shale's had given her. She eased both off the frame and blew her parents a kiss. "Merry Christmas Mom and Dad," she whispered to them.

With an ornament in each hand, Holly slipped into her bunny slippers without giving it a thought and slowly descended the stairs, a huge smile on her face, as if everyone had waited for her debut. And there was Noel, at the bottom of the stairwell, his hand on the polished banister, clean shaven, a chocolate brown dinner jacket with creased pants to match, a wave of his hair teasing his forehead, and a smile rivaling the one she couldn't help etch across her face. Who knew that only a few hours ago they were in wrinkled scrubs with mussed hair and sleep in the corners of their eyes?

Noel blinked. "Wow!

Heat snaked from her neck to her cheeks.

"Nice bunny slippers! I like those."

"Ahh!" Holly's mouth hung open. She thought he was talking about her sexy little black dress. "Oh, my Gosh!" Holly turned on her heels and rocketed up the stairs.

"Holly?" Aunt Mae called.

"Hey, Holly. Come back. You look great," Noel yelled.

She could hear his footsteps right behind her. "I'll be right down, Noel."

But it was too late. He had already caught up with her.

Holly's chest heaved. "Noel."

Noel walked right up to her, cradled her face in his hands, and rested his lips on hers. She stood there, in her bunny slippers, her arms limp by her sides, an ornament in each hand, and her mouth held completely captive in his lips. Her stomach dipped at his every press. When he finally eased away, her head lolled on her neck he had made so magically pliable a minute ago. She had forgotten about her bunny slippers until she blinked her way back to her intended

mission. Holly kicked off her slippers and slid into her black satin pumps.

Noel grinned. "Hey, those are nice, too."

"Oh, you like these?" Holly asked, striking a playful side pose.

"I like everything," Noel said, softly. "Last night, this morning, *now!*"

He held out his hands. "I'll take those downstairs, if you want."

Holly clutched her ornaments. "No, I want to put these on the tree, myself. But you can grab those two packages. Oh! Oh! Not that small one." She grinned. "I'll come back for that one."

A quizzical look crossed Noel's face. "Oh, okay." He looked back at her, his eyes soft. "How about we decorate that tree together?"

His arms full, Holly gave Noel a quick peck on his lips. "I'd like that."

While Holly sifted through the ornament boxes, Noel struggled to untangle a ball of Christmas lights. He had taken off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves half way into the job, politely declining Holly's assistance. He'd wave his hand. "I can do it!" Every time she'd giggle, he'd arch a brow and smile. "Almost done!" After a good thirty minutes, Noel shot his hands to his hips and puffed out his chest. "Okay, I got it!"

What is it about men and electricity? Holly mused. "That's great!"

Holly and Noel rounded the tree, stringing the lights along every branch, careful not to knock off the lone snowman ornament.

With a gleam in his eye, Noel plugged the end into an outlet. The barren tree sprang to life.

"How beautiful," Mrs. Shale said from her recliner.

Holly picked up the ornament Mrs. Shale had given her and smiled at her. "This one's next."

Mrs. Shale sniffled. Tears spilled from her cheeks. Holly's throat tightened. She shouldn't have said that. She made Mrs. Shale cry. Holly quickly tucked the ornament in a box.

"No, no," Mrs. Shale cried between gulps. "You don't understand. I'm crying because I thought I'd never see that ornament hang on a tree again." She raised her hand. "Please, put it up. Martin loved Christmas."

Holly retrieved the ornament and hung it next to her snowman. Then she reached for her parent's one. Her fingers trembled. Noel knelt beside her and rested his hand on hers. Holly's heart beat wildly in her chest. She thought she could do it. Maybe not.

"It's okay, Holly. You don't need to hang it this year." He stared deep into her eyes. Holly's

eyes began to sting and her mouth went dry. Other than her Aunt Mae, meeting Noel was the best thing that had happened to her since her parents died. He kissed on her head. “We can put it away for now.”

Holly shook her head. “No, I don’t want to, Noel. It belongs on this tree, this beautiful tree that I gave you so much grief about.”

He smiled and kissed her, his lips as tender as his heart. “It’s in the past,” he whispered. “Where would you like it, Holly?”

“The other side of my snowman.”

Holly released the ornament into Noel’s hand. He hung it next to Holly’s snowman. “Good?” he asked.

Holly bit her bottom lip and paused. Then she answered, “Perfect.”

When the last ornament was hung upon the tree, the doorbell rang. Aunt Mae ran from the kitchen, no longer wearing an apron, but a red dress with a wreath brooch pinned to her collar.

“I’ll get it,” she called like a nervous schoolgirl.

Holly glanced at Noel. “I wonder who that could be? I thought it was just us.”

Noel shrugged.

Dr. Maxwell Thornton, and Charlie Donahue, the volunteer from the hospital sweet on Mrs. Shale, stood on Holly’s doorstep smacking the snow from their shoes.

“Come on in boys,” Aunt Mae chimed.

The men’s faces pinked.

“Boys?” Holly whispered to Noel.

He shrugged again.

She gently poked her elbow into Noel’s side. “You’re no help,” she teased.

Holly rocked from her knees, stood, and walked to the front door. “Dr. Thornton and Mr. Donahue, what a nice surprise. Please, come in.”

Holly raised her brows at Aunt Mae who grinned and shrugged.

What is with all the shrugging today?

Noel crept up next to Holly and extended his hand. “Nice to see you, Dr. Thornton.”

“Same here, Dr. Shepherd. Merry Christmas.”

“Merry Christmas to you too, Sir.”

Dr. Thornton clapped Noel on his back. “Call me, Maxwell.”

Noel nodded. "All right, Maxell. And call me Noel."

"Will do."

Maxwell Thornton eyed Holly carefully and hesitated. Holly drew a deep breath and hugged the man who worked valiantly to save her parents' lives that night so long ago. "Thank you for coming."

"Thank you for having me in your home today."

She squeezed his hand. "You're welcome anytime."

And by the doe eyed look between Aunt Mae and Maxwell, Holly had a feeling she'd be seeing more of him outside of the hospital. Charlie Donohue had already made his way to the living room sofa where Mrs. Shale had conveniently relocated to from her armchair.

Noel squeezed Holly's elbow and whispered, "Should be an interesting dinner."

Noel pulled out Holly's chair. She held her breath for a few seconds and sat as he gently pushed her to the holiday table. Ordinarily she'd help herself, but today was Christmas and everyone's eyes were on Noel and her. They were queen and king at this table, but their court was just as cozy. After helping their ladies to the table, Maxwell scooted his chair closer to Aunt Mae and Charlie Donohue's face beamed over his red bowtie as he patted Mrs. Shale's hand. Holly blinked. When did this all happen? Maybe there was more to Aunt Mae and Mrs. Shale's lunchtime outings than the two sly women let on.

"Oh, Aunt Mae. This all looks so delicious." Holly inhaled with a huge smile on her face. "It smells heavenly."

"Here! Here!" Everyone cheered.

Aunt Mae flicked her hand and blushed. She tapped her wine glass with her silver spoon. "Okay, all. Let's hold hands and bow our heads."

Holly slipped her hand into Noel's warm hand. He squeezed her fingers delicately with a surgeon's touch, a touch that set off every tiny nerve ending in her body. Her skin pulsed. Holly felt the rhythmic response of Noel's heart stream through the pads of his fingers. Aunt Mae took her other hand. Flanked by the two people that meant the most to her, Holly bowed her head and thanked God for sending them to her, and asked his forgiveness for all those years she was so angry with Him. Her throat tightened. And suddenly a warm breeze touched her ever so slightly on the back of her neck. Holly's heart fluttered so fast that her breath could not keep pace with it.

Shalimar! It was her mother's favorite perfume. The sweet scent clung in the air about her.

She whispered to Noel, "Do you smell that?"

He whispered back, "Yeah, the turkey smells great."

No one could smell that but her! And then came what nearly sent her flying from the table. Her daddy's bristly cheek wisped across hers.

"Whaaa?" Holly uttered, about to bolt from the table.

Noel squeezed her hand tighter. "It's all right, Holly. I'm here. We're all here."

She took a deep breath and swallowed. The faintest whisper buzzed in her ear. "Merry Christmas, Sweetheart." The breeze left as mysteriously as it came. Tears webbed her lashes. Holly sniffed softly.

"Are you all right, Holly?" Aunt Mae asked, concern echoing in her voice.

Holly sniffed again, her parent's visit whirling in her mind and her body still brimming from their heavenly touches. Miraculously tranquil, she smiled. "I'm fine, Aunt Mae. I'm fine. Go on."

"Today we celebrate the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ. We also celebrate our blessed beginnings. To Holly and Noel, who have found one another in this holiday season." Noel stroked her fingers in his palm. Warmth spread through her chest and her neck pulsed. "To my new and dear friend Maureen Shale. And to Maxwell and Charlie, who have brightened our Christmas. May we gather at this table this holiday, next Christmas, and the in the coming days. Lord, please, bless this bountiful meal for which we are eternally grateful. Amen."

"Amen," everyone joyfully resounded.

Maxwell carved the turkey. Mashed potatoes and an assortment of festive vegetables were passed around. Silverware clattered against the fine china.

Noel stood and raised his wine glass. "Merry Christmas!"

They all clinked their glasses.

Noel linked arms with Holly in their own intimate salutation. "I'm so happy I bumped you from your O.R. that day!"

Holly grinned from ear to ear. "Me, too!"

Holly sliced, the still steaming from the oven, spiced apple pie. Her mom's recipe, Holly had two servings herself! After sitting back in their chairs and rubbing their bellies while telling jokes, the men rocked out of their seats and cleared the table. Aunt Mae and Mrs. Shale followed

them into the kitchen.

“Ah, alone at last,” Noel quipped. He grabbed Holly’s hand. “Let’s go sit by the tree before the others make their way there. And by the sound of the laughter coming from the kitchen, I think they are going to be huddled in there for quite a while.” His eyes twinkled. “I have something for you.”

Holly hugged him. “And I have something for you!”

Noel gently touched his forehead to hers. “Hold onto that thought for later.”

Holly thumped him on his chest and shook her head teasingly. “That’s not what I meant.” She grinned. “At least not yet!”

They snuck away into the living room and ran hand in hand to the evergreen waiting for them in the corner. Its bright lights beckoned them. Holly and Noel skidded to the tree like kids on Christmas morning and knelt. Noel grabbed a big box wrapped in gold foil with a huge red satin ribbon cascading from the top. “This is for you!”

“Noel!” Holly whispered. She grabbed his gift. “For you.” She felt her cheeks pink. She could always blame the heat from the Christmas lights. “The paper’s kind of dated.”

He kissed her lips. “It’s great. I love it.”

Holly nudged him. She bounced on her knees. “Well open it, silly!”

“You first!”

“How about we open them at the same time?”

Noel winked at her. “I love a woman with brains!”

“One,” Holly shouted.

“Two.”

“Three,” they yelled together.

Wrapping paper crinkled. Bows flew into the air.

Holly ripped open her box. “Noel!” She tugged out a pair of white leather ice skates. A rainbow of lights flashed in the polished silver blades. “Oh, I love it. Thank you! Thank you!”

Noel’s eyes shined. “Look inside, Holly.”

Holly squinted. She dove her hand in one boot. She shrugged.

“The other one. Check the other one.”

He leaned in to her, his breath heating her cheek. Holly pulled out a small box and unwrapped it. She popped open the box. A silver chain with a glimmering diamond studded

snowflake lay mounted on deep blue velvet. “Oh, Noel! It’s beautiful.” She gently freed the necklace. “Put it on me, please.” She turned her back to him. Noel slipped the snowflake necklace across her neck and clasped it. He kissed the back of her neck. “Merry Christmas, Holly.” He whispered in her ear. “Wait until Valentine’s Day.”

Holly whipped around to face him. “I love this. I love you.”

She pressed her mouth to his, not caring whether anyone caught them. Noel raked his fingers through her hair, settling them at the back of her neck sending tingles down her spine. At this rate he’d not even get to her present. She eased from his embrace. “Open mine,” Holly whispered.

Noel thumbed open the box and pulled out the leather key ring. “I need one of these. Thank you.”

Holly bobbed up on her knees. “The key. The gold key. Read it.”

Noel held the gold key up to the Christmas lights.

“It doesn’t fit anything,” she interrupted, “but...”

Noel read the inscription. “The key to my heart.”

“Holly!” he said softly, his voice cracking a bit.

Holly grasped Noel’s hands. “You’ve unlocked me from a very dark place I’ve hidden in for a long time.” Now her voice cracked. “I love you, Noel Shepherd, even though you took my O.R.” She grinned. “Just don’t do it again!”

“You’ll have to pry me away.”

Under the very evergreen tree that she had chosen for a purpose unknown to her that night, Dr. Holly Green kissed Dr. Noel Shepherd for a very long time.

The End

About the Author

Tanya Goodwin is a physician and an author who loves to write medical romance and romantic suspense with a medical edge. Tanya is a member of Romance Writers of America, Mystery Writers of America, and Sisters in Crime. For more about her sweet holiday medical romances, please visit www.holidayheartbeat.com. For readers who would like to discover Tanya's "suspense side," she would be thrilled for them to stop by at <http://www.tanyagoodwin.com>

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