

1 SKYVIEW MANOR/CHRISTMAS EVE

The gray clouds hung heavy and low in the sky. Suddenly, as if they could no longer bear the weight, they began to shed their load flake by flake. As the crystal flecks hit the windshield, Holly Donnelly exclaimed, "This is too perfect! It's actually starting to snow. We're going to have a white Christmas after all."

Holly put on her blinker and turned past the fierce lion sculptures framing the entrance of Skyview Manor, their ferocity tempered by the Christmas wreaths festooned with red ribbons around their necks.

"Thank heaven it waited until we got here," her sister, Ivy, replied, smiling as she surveyed the grounds. "If my flight had been delayed just an hour more we might have had trouble driving."

"I told you not to worry and that everything would work out." Holly pulled up in front of the Tudor revival mansion's massive oak front door.

"Yes, but you always say that, even right before disaster strikes," Ivy teased, unbuckling her seatbelt.

"Well, I just don't see any point worrying before I have to." Holly popped the trunk button, opened her door and got out of Pearl, her Cadillac CTS, affectionately named for its color. She stood for a moment looking up at the grand façade of the manor house.

Ivy followed her gaze, pulling her coat tightly around her. "I just love this place. Spending Christmas here this year was the best idea you ever had."

Holly sighed, her breath visible in the cold air. "Well, with Nick in Boston and Dave... you know, I thought we both would be a little mopey if we just stayed home. We always talked about staying here. The only downside is Lucky has to spend Christmas

with the neighbors, but she adores them. When we get back you'll just have to bake her those dog biscuits she loves and all will be forgiven."

"I'll make a double batch," Ivy said, turning and embracing her sister in a bear hug.

After a moment, Holly pulled back. "C'mon. Let's get you inside with the luggage. This snow is really starting to come down. I'll park the car in the lot while you check in."

"Oh, this is going to be great," Ivy said, helping Holly get their bags out of the trunk. "I can't wait to see the decorations."

Holly arrived at the check-in desk just as the desk clerk was handing Ivy the keys to their room. "Look. Real keys. Not plastic cards." Ivy giggled.

The clerk smiled and said, "We'll have your things brought up to your room shortly. Our Christmas Eve dinner begins in exactly one hour."

"Great! I'm starved," Ivy said zipping her handbag shut.

Holly rolled her eyes and shook her head. "When are you not hungry?"

Ivy shrugged and laughed. "Let's go see our room."

"Ms. Donnelly?"

Holly turned to face a slim, rather tall, young woman with ashy brown hair who had come up behind her. "Becky? What are you doing here?"

"I'm here with my grandmother. She arranged for our family and some friends of hers to spend Christmas here. How about you?"

“I’m here with my sister.” Holly turned and put her hand on Ivy’s arm. “This is Becky Powell. She was in my English Composition class this past semester—one of only two A’s in the class. Becky, this is my sister, Ivy.”

Ivy extended her hand. “An ‘A’ from Holly? Congratulations! I know that’s not easy to achieve.”

Becky beamed as she shook Ivy’s hand.

“Becky! Becky, where are you?” A shrill voice filled the entrance hall. The smile left Becky’s face as she looked across the room to where an elderly woman was seated in a wheelchair beside a blazing fireplace. She quickly released Ivy’s hand and said, “That’s Grandmother. I’ve got to go. It was very nice to meet you.”

As she rushed off, Holly called after her, “Maybe we can find time for a chat.”

Without stopping, Becky glanced back over her shoulder, nodding, but slightly shrugging her shoulders at the same time. The sisters watched as the grandmother’s stern face turned into a grimace when she spotted Becky coming towards her.

“Where have you been?” The old woman banged a clenched fist on the side of her chair.

Becky lowered her head and spoke so quietly Holly and Ivy couldn’t hear her reply. The grandmother also lowered her voice, but continued addressing Becky, her finger punctuating the air as she spoke. Becky remained standing in front of the wheel chair, looking down at the floor. The old woman concluded her tirade, raising her chin with the regal air of a grand dame. Becky moved to the back of the wheelchair, clasped the handles and wheeled her grandmother through an enormous stone archway out of sight.

“That poor girl,” Ivy said, lacing her arm through Holly’s.

“She was such a delight to have in class, a really good writer. I’m sorry to see her treated that way,” Holly said frowning.

“C’mon. We need to get up to our room and dress for dinner. I’m...”

“I know. You’re starved.”

2 A ROOM WITH A VIEW

“Oh, Holly!” Ivy’s eyes widened as she stood in the doorway looking into their room. A king-size, four-poster bed covered in a white comforter with gold trim faced an eight-foot tall mahogany armoire. Plush pillows sat on a gray upholstered chaise facing the six diamond-patterned casement windows that looked out on the grounds.

“Going in or are do you plan to just stand outside and admire the room?” Holly put her hand on Ivy’s back and gently prodded her forward.

Once in the room Ivy flew over to the windows. After a moment she sank onto the cushioned window seat and turned to Holly. “The only reason I know I haven’t died and gone to heaven is Dave’s not here.”

“If I could have arranged that, I would have.” Holly sat down beside Ivy on the window seat.

“I know.” Ivy unbuttoned her coat and turned, looking out at the falling snow.

“You seem to be adjusting to life without Dave.”

“Oh, I have my days, but, yes, I guess I’m adjusting,” Ivy replied frowning. The frown quickly turned to a smile. “But now I want to know how you’re adjusting to life *with* Nick?” she giggled, giving Holly a gentle punch on the shoulder.

Holly stood up, taking off her coat. "I'm adjusting."

"C'mon. I want details. Dish!"

The image of a bare-chested Nick Manelli standing in her bedroom doorway that morning popped into Holly's mind. She remembered how his muscle-toned skin glistened after his shower.

"Judging by that faraway look in your eyes, I'd guess everything is just dreamy."

"Stop it." Holly stood up and walked towards the armoire, hesitated, then turned to face her sister.

"Okay. You were right. He's great. He's attentive and caring, and I feel like I'm living a fantasy. Happy now?"

"Yes, yes, yes. How you fought me when I said he was right for you! I just have one more question."

"What?"

"How is he as a lover?"

Holly felt a slight shiver remembering the feel of Nick's lips on her neck the night before and his arm around her waist when he kept her from getting out of bed this morning. "He's okay," she replied, not looking Ivy in the eye.

"Just okay? I've never seen you more mellow, so I suspect he's more than just okay."

Holly dropped her coat, picked up a satin bolster pillow from the chaise and threw it at Ivy. A knock on the door prevented Ivy from returning the volley. Holly opened the door to a baby-faced young man with curly, brown hair clad in a bell hop uniform.

"Where would you like me to put your things?" he asked with a cheerful smile.

"Come in," she said. "You can leave the bags over here." Holly pointed to a spot beside the armoire.

The bell hop wheeled the luggage trolley to the spot Holly indicated. As he unloaded their bags, he said, "You ladies are very fortunate. The snow is starting to come down really heavy. Now that the sun set, the temperatures are dropping and roads are icing up."

"We are lucky," Ivy said as the bell hop finished and headed back to the door. She opened her handbag and located her wallet. "Thank you for bringing the bags up so quickly," she said, handing him a tip.

"My pleasure. Thank you," he replied looking from Holly to Ivy. "Are you twins?"

Holly and Ivy laughed and exchanged a knowing look. "Just sisters," Holly replied.

"We've been asked that question for more than fifty years now," Ivy said.

"No way you're fifty years old," he said shaking his head.

"You already got your tip, young man." Holly made a shooing motion towards the door.

The bell hop laughed, stepping into the hallway. "Merry Christmas!"

"Merry Christmas," the sisters replied in unison.

As the door closed, Ivy looked at her watch and opened her small overnight bag. "We better hurry. Dinner starts in just fifteen minutes." As she entered the bathroom with her toiletry bag, she looked back over her shoulder. "You can finish telling me about Nick's...uh...bedside manner after dinner."

She managed to close the door before the pillow Holly aimed at her reached its target.

