

CHAPTER ONE

December 21st

Outrage fueled Holly McDonald as she sped to a showdown in the town she'd left at age twelve. Such a strong emotion made for an uncomfortable travel companion. Especially when headed to a wedding. Especially when she was the maid of honor. Especially four days before Christmas.

Little white puffs flew out of the black of the night sky. Wet snowflakes splattered the Toyota Corolla she'd borrowed. Holly turned up the defroster to remove fog from the windshield and cranked the heater to its hottest setting. Between her mission to stop her friend's wedding and the stiff, sideways Illinois wind buffeting the car and trying to push her into the other lane, she couldn't stop shivering. Fortunately, Stilton lay only a few miles ahead. After completing her task, shelter, hot food, and a warm bed topped her priority list. She couldn't think of her own comfort now, though. She had to get to Bree.

A signboard along I-55 for the IVEY CHRISTMAS TREE FARM caught her eye. Her chill abated in the warmth of fond memories.

Luke Ivey. She couldn't honestly say she'd thought of him in years. Once he'd been her closest pal, although they'd lost touch after she'd left Stilton. After his dad passed, he and his brother, Micah, had taken over running the Ivey Orchard, according to Bree.

Poor Bree. Her friend would be devastated when Holly told her what she'd seen a few days before in Chicago, after Bree had left for the holiday at home. From here on out, the Christmas season would always remind Bree of having her heart broken by Alan the Cheater.

Holly replayed Bree's voicemail in her head. She had called Holly's cell Thursday, but Holly didn't have time to retrieve the message until after work.

"Holly, you'll never believe it! I'm getting married!" Bree squealed. "Alan proposed last night! God, I wish I could see your face! I've been so busy. We were able to convince Reverend Jacobs to squeeze us in on Sunday--this Sunday, the 23rd--so we wouldn't have to live in sin. Of course I want you to be my maid of honor. I've picked out a dress for you and arranged for your fitting Saturday morning. Can you believe this?"

Actually, no, she couldn't. Holly had listened in stunned silence. It should have been the unlikely speed of the wedding grabbing her attention, but she couldn't get past the part about Alan proposing. On Wednesday.

"I'm heading to his grandma's farm. She's going to let me wear her wedding dress! From, like, 1940. I'm so excited. She's going to adjust it to fit me. Let it out probably and shorten it." Bree laughed ruefully. "Anyway, Alan said there aren't cell towers close by, so you won't be able to reach me, but I'll be home late Friday night. Can't wait to see you! Bye."

Not trusting Alan, Holly had called, but Bree's phone went to voicemail. What Holly had to tell her needed to be said in person.

The turnoff ramp for the Ivey Orchard and Christmas Tree Farm appeared between gusts of snow, and Holly impulsively flipped on her turn signal. Someone there liked her. Someone there was easy to be with. And the Iveys used to serve the richest hot chocolate. Even if she couldn't get a hot drink, she could at least warm up in the store. No reason to hurry and tell Bree something that would devastate her, especially as she wouldn't be back until late. Hopefully, Luke would be inside, and they could catch up on the old days. Had her childhood buddy changed? Would they still be able to read each other's minds?

Judging by the crowd in the parking lot, the Christmas tree business proceeded as briskly as the wind gusting through the evergreens. The smell of pine made her nostalgic. Her favorite Christmases had been spent in Stilton. Caroling, bonfires, ice skating and, of course, the Star Night tree lighting in the town square. Originally, her grand plan for this year had been to snuggle up with the novel she'd bought herself as a present. Until Bree's call announcing her surprise wedding on the twenty-third.

Holly hustled inside the shop, rubbing the sleeves on her black wool coat to chase the chill. People huddled around the same two wood stoves she remembered, one of which she delighted to see stood near a counter with the free hot chocolate. She'd have paid for it any time, and on a day like this, the Iveys could be making some serious cash. Eyeing the crowd, she added mini marshmallows to her steaming drink. No one looked familiar. She took a sip

and let out an appreciative sigh over the decadent chocolate. Luke and his brother continued to use their mom's recipe. Sheer perfection in a cup.

Senses still tuned to life in the big city, she became aware of a tall man watching her as she drank. His blue eyes reminded her of Luke as a boy, wearing a serious expression as he'd re-assembled something he'd dismantled. This guy's frown and ruffled hair made him appear a little stressed.

He stepped up to her, and she tilted her head back, despite the three inch heels on her black leather boots. Luke or Micah? While Luke had been her best buddy, his younger brother had been an occasional tagalong companion. This man searched her face, his eyes the deep Ivey blue. His forest green Ivey Orchard vest deepened the hue. But only Luke had that little scar over his eyebrow from when she'd pushed him out of their treehouse.

"Luke?"

Some of the reserve left his face as his posture eased. "I'm sorry for staring. I feel like I should know you."

She smiled wider with delight at seeing him. "I should hope so. You're the only boy I've ever trusted with my binoculars. Which you promptly broke."

His face lit with recognition. "Holly?" At her nod, he swept her into a hug. "Of course. You're home for Alan and Bree's wedding."

"Something like that." Her old friend had developed muscles. She wanted to fan herself. He was hot and making her so.

"This is perfect. Are you doing anything right now?" He snatched away

the cup and pitched it into the trash bin behind her.

"Hey! I wanted that last sip."

He grabbed her hand and dragged her along the path he cut through the customers.

"I'm delighted you want to catch up," she said as she teetered along behind him. "But I'll be here all weekend. I just stopped in to say hello. And you have all these customers."

"I know the store's full. That's the problem." The outside door opened as a man entered, and Luke darted through with her in tow. An oversized shed dressed as a small house sat a few yards off to the left.

"I can't believe this timing," he continued. "You're a life saver."

"I am?" Her insides grew as cold as her cheeks. This didn't sound like just catching up. It sounded like Trouble. Being included in Luke's plans had usually ended with her being grounded. "How?"

He pulled open the shed door to reveal a darling living room decked out for the season. He nudged her in where red carpet covered the floor. A large golden throne upholstered in dark green, heavy-weight twill sat in the middle of the room in front of a camera on a tripod.

"Our Mrs. Claus is sick. I need you to fill in."

"What?" She stared as he flipped on lights on the Christmas tree with its icicle ornaments. "Don't you or Micah have another employee or a girlfriend you can hoodwink into this gig?"

Bree had mentioned that Luke hadn't become serious with anyone since his last girlfriend broke up with him. But "not serious" and "not dating" weren't the same thing. And girls had always chased Micah, even in grade school.

"No. I was assessing the crowd for a stand-in when I saw you."

Did that mean he didn't have a girlfriend or his girlfriend wouldn't do it? Not that she cared, other than idle curiosity.

Luke's five o'clock shadow made him too scruffy to pose as anything but a man. As did his height, his broad shoulders, and his general *maleness*. The boy she remembered had grown into a compelling guy. "What about putting a wig on Micah?"

"He's taking pictures." Luke turned. "Why? Are you going somewhere right now?"

"Yes, I'm--"

"Are you *late* going somewhere?" Luke interrupted. "Can you phone and explain to whoever's expecting you? That would be Bree, right?"

Unable to predict when she'd get away from work and certainly not knowing she'd arrive in Stilton around six, Holly hadn't made any firm plans. Bree still hadn't called when Holly had pulled into the parking lot. Not that she would confess her lack of plans to Luke. He'd likely monopolize her all night.

She grinned at the thought before catching herself. This was Luke, after all. Thinking about him romantically was...different. He'd grown into an amazingly handsome man, but underneath remained the boy who knew all her

childhood secrets.

"Can't you spare me half an hour or so," he continued, "*please*, for old time's sake? Didn't you see all those kids?"

She hadn't noticed the kids in particular, but a visit with Santa explained why so many families were out on such a wicked evening.

Of course, he'd have to bring up *for old time's sake*. She couldn't turn him down now, she thought on a sigh. They shared too much history, and too many good memories remained.

She didn't have anywhere to rush to, other than to break her best friend's heart.

"I really need you, Holly. If I had another option, I wouldn't ask."

Her gut clenched at his words. "I guess I could help out for a little bit."

He gave her a one-armed hug this time instead of swinging her around, more like her old friend. "Don't worry. It'll take less than two hours."

"Hold on a minute. How did this become two hours?"

He glanced away, most likely to avoid meeting her eye. She'd only been half-right to describe it as hoodwinking someone into the job. She'd been out-and-out blindsided.

Luke looked at her and smiled. She supposed he meant it to reassure her, but it made her heart race instead.

"It's Star Night," he said. "The ceremony starts at nine, so I'll have to be out of here before then. Micah will finish closing the shop when I leave."

Star Night. Her chest ached with memories. The tree lighting ceremony held a magical, never forgotten place in her heart. Would it hold the same appeal for her as an adult? "Stilton still puts up a huge tree in the town park?"

"It's tradition." His matter-of-fact reply encapsulated the old-fashioned charm of the town.

Her nomadic family hadn't developed many traditions, for the holidays or anything else. They weren't even gathering this year. She'd had no one to share the holiday with before Bree's call.

Christmas in Stilton had always held a special place in Holly's heart. Maybe because she'd been a child or maybe because she'd never lived in a small town after her family left here. Not that Luke needed to know why she'd capitulated. He had ammo enough.

"Okay, fine." Her tone implied he'd dragged her into the act as surely as he'd dragged her out of the shop. Hopefully, he wouldn't hear the tingle of excitement that being Mrs. Claus evoked. "We wouldn't want to spoil tradition."

"You're the best friend ever, Holl. Always have been."

"Yeah," she muttered, thinking of Bree's likely response to her next undertaking. "I may need you to remind people of that later."

"I could always depend on you. I'm glad you haven't changed. Although you do need to *get* changed. I'll show you the outfit."

She glanced around the room set up to receive the children. "Where's Santa?"

His lips twitched into an almost-smile.

She stiffened. "Hey, I'm not doing this alone. No kid wants to visit with Mrs. Claus. They want the big guy."

He bowed from the waist. "Pleased to meet you, Mrs. C. I'm the big guy."

If she'd encountered this man on the street, she would have stolen a second look, but she wouldn't have recognized him. He'd grown taller, more muscular, and, most outstanding of all, more confident. He oozed sex appeal but also came across as a man to cuddle up with while reading a book. Someone to cook dinner for, then go to bed with. Comfortable, but hot.

She gave him the once-over while he straightened the seating. Was she eyeing Luke again? *Luke?* Worse still, he passed inspection with no drool left to spare. Her old friend had been gawky and geeky. This man had her checking her breath for freshness.

Good grief. She couldn't believe she harbored amorous thoughts about Luke. Her Luke. Only...not. Her attraction to him disconcerted her. She might even be blushing. Although he wasn't exactly a stranger, he wasn't her twelve-year-old pal either.

"Here's the changing room." He gestured to a small area behind a thin red curtain dotted with holly leaves. Reaching in, he pulled out a hanger with a Santa suit. "Space is limited, but I won't look if you don't." His grin reminded her of the old days and brought a jab of sharp joy. "Besides, I've seen it before."

"Not the grown-up version you haven't. I've changed from when we were

ten."

He looked her up and down. And back up a second time, making her mouth go dry. "I can see that," he said. "You used to be scrawny."

Her face flaming, she stepped past him and swiped the curtain closed.

She dropped her coat and tugged off her sweater, overly-aware of the noises he made through the thin cotton divider. She banished both the image of him dropping his pants and her urge to peek. "You're one to talk, buddy."

"True. I was a bean pole with rubber limbs. That was my nickname in high school. Beanpole." A grunt sounded, and she pictured him pulling on Santa's boots. "I had no coordination, but fortunately that changed, too."

She swallowed the automatic flirty response she'd have given a man in Chicago. She couldn't flirt with Luke. It was just plain weird that she found him so different and so much the same. And so appealing.

Holly peeled out of her boots and jeans then yanked the dress over her head. She didn't have to worry that she'd attract Luke. Or anyone. This wasn't a short-and-sexy Mrs. Claus outfit for a corporate Christmas party. The ankle-length, frumpy red velvet dress had sewn-in padding in the bust, torso and rear. The gray wig with its top-notch bun itched as much as the dress. Small square-framed glasses that were almost in style again--but not--perched on her nose. Granny glasses. With a sigh, she pulled on the green felt elf shoes with a bell on the pointed ends. She hoped he looked as ridiculous as she felt.

"Ready?" she called.

Luke couldn't believe his luck. Not only had he found a Mrs. Claus to fill in for pictures with the kids, but it was his best friend from childhood, home for the holidays. Added to that, he'd have the honor of serving as best man when Alan, his closest friend from high school, got married. All in all, the holidays were shaping up to be memorable.

It didn't hurt any that his "old buddy" Holly had grown up to be hot. They'd spend a lot of time together in the next few days preparing for the wedding of her best friend to his. They'd be paired up for the wedding dinner and dancing, which could lead to more, if they had any chemistry of that sort. He grinned. What would it be like to kiss the girl who taught him to gig frogs?

Holly stepped out and forever banished the image of that scrappy tomboy. Luke forgot about his task and just stood staring. Even the padded dress couldn't hide her appeal. The ugly wig hid her rich brown hair with the lighter streaks running through, like caramel swirled through chocolate. Her brown eyes glimmered with laughter behind the old-fashioned lenses. She sparkled. Creamy cheeks rounded down to a soft mouth that confirmed she was no longer ten. Maybe the ideas those red, full lips created in his head made her appear more mature. His mouth went dry, but he had to say something. He cleared his throat. "You'll never convince anyone you're an old woman."

"I'll layer on some face powder. Do you have something to age you when

you attach the beard?"

"There's some stage makeup in the box over there. We'll make do."

"Then you might want to finish putting on your pants."

He glanced down at his zipper, glad to discover she was teasing. She crossed to the box while he hitched the wide red suspenders over his shoulders and adjusted the padding. "This stuff stays in place while the kids sit on my lap but it's heavy."

"Here." She extended the beard to him, with some gummy stuff on it to make it stick. "I haven't seen spirit gum since those plays back in high school."

"Where did you wind up going to high school?"

"We lived in Phoenix my freshman year." She pressed the beard to his chin, lapping the sideburns over her hands. "I went to Portland, Oregon, for the next two, then finished my senior year in Boston." Her fingers smoothed the gummy hair up his cheeks, pressing gently but firmly.

A prickle of awareness hit him. Her touch, the warmth of her body so close to his, and her flowery perfume all affected him. Had it not been Holly MacDonald standing before him, he might have pulled her closer. Might have stolen a kiss. Might have tried for more. He swallowed. "What, uh, roles did you play?"

She smiled. "I could never act, as you may remember from the times I flubbed when lying about our shenanigans. But I worked with costumes and loved making props and scenery. Did you ever act?"

"I was never in a school play, but I got out of a speeding ticket once."

She chuckled. "I never could talk myself out of one. Fortunately, I don't own a car now since I don't have to drive often in Chicago."

Luke couldn't imagine not having his truck, but then, he worked outside of town at the Orchard. Their vastly different lifestyles made him sad, but he couldn't pinpoint why. So he changed the subject. "Micah got this face glue from the woman he's dating. What we'd been using didn't stick as firmly as we'd like. Jayne teaches kindergarten, and I guess they do a lot of plays at the elementary school. Her sister who has the flu was supposed to be our Mrs. Claus."

"And Micah's girlfriend couldn't do it because...?"

"She the kindergarten teacher," he repeated.

"Oh, right. The kids would recognize her."

"She's also been taking care of her sister, and now she's starting to feel sick. We didn't want to chance the kids getting the flu."

Holly poked at her wig in the mirror. "And your girlfriend?"

He grinned, taking her off-hand question and the way she avoided his eyes as signs of interest rather than friendly curiosity. Holly being attracted to him made his awareness of her a little less weird. "I'm not dating anyone right now."

She nodded and lined her face with makeup pencils then applied powder. He'd played Santa since his dad passed, but he'd never looked as believable as

Holly did. She turned to do him up. He grimaced as she aged his face, making her laugh.

"Stop being such a girl," she said.

"A girl would enjoy make-up." He pushed her hand away. "That's enough. I'm sure I look older than Mrs. Johnson did when we had her."

"We had her my last year here. Sixth grade," she said in a soft tone. "Did she pass on?"

He made a scoffing noise as he pulled on his red jacket and wide black belt. "That woman is too stubborn to even fully retire. She's still substituting. My cousin's kid had her a few weeks ago."

"You're kidding. She must be about one hundred and twenty years old."

The door banged open. "You decent?" Micah stepped in then came to a stop when he spotted Holly. "Well, hello, Mrs. Claus. Sorry, I would have knocked if I'd know Luke found anyone. Or anyone so beautiful."

"It's Holly McDonald," Luke said, cutting off Micah's nonsense. She looked like someone's grandma. His brother would be embarrassed when he realized he'd flirted with their former neighbor.

"Good to see you again, Micah."

"Hey, Holly. Uh, nice of you to step in."

She laughed. Micah clearly had no idea who she was. "Holly from next door. Back when you were nine."

Micah's mouth dropped open before he laughed and hugged Holly up off

her feet, swinging her back and forth.

Luke frowned. Micah should knock it off before he cracked her rib.

He set her down, still grinning like a loon while she adjusted the stuffing in her red dress.

"What are you doing in town?" he asked.

"She's here for Alan and Bree's wedding, of course."

"That's right," Micah said. "You and Bree were friends."

"Still are." She glanced at her hands, folded across her middle. "I hope we always will be. Anyway, we arranged to go to the same college. We roomed together without killing each other or ruining our friendship."

"I'd love to catch up while you're here. Save me a dance at the reception, okay? But right now, we've got cranky parents worrying about the weather, and about twenty kids with last minute instructions for Santa."

Luke groaned in a deep Santa voice. "It happens every year. What are the elves going to say when I hand them the new list?"

"Bribe them with cookies. You don't need any more." Holly poked his padded stomach. "There's more than a bowlful of jelly in there."

He tugged on her wig, pulling it askew. "They eat enough of your cookies already, Mrs. Claus."

"Hey, cut it out." She crossed to the mirror and tweaked pieces of hair back inside the gray.

Micah retrieved the camera from the locked cabinet. "As fun as it is

watching you two rediscover your old friendship--by acting like twelve-year-olds--we need to get started if we plan to get the kids out of here before the Star Night ceremony."

"Sorry," Holly said. "That was my fault. I knew he'd get me in trouble."

"I'm sure it was hardly ever your fault," Micah said.

Wrong once again, bro. Luke smiled to himself. At least half the time, Holly had planned their more dangerous escapades. "Remember the smoke bomb?"

She laughed. "I'd rather not."

"Is that like 'Remember the Alamo?'" Micah asked. "Luke, sit in the chair while I do a dry run with Holly."

Luke took his seat.

"Better not to ask," Holly said to Micah. "If you don't know, they can't charge you with accessory."

"The smoke bomb?" Micah narrowed his eyes. "The school gym?"

Holly folded her hands, glancing at Luke. "I don't recall."

"Me, neither," Luke said. "And no one can prove anything."

"I'm glad they didn't have cameras in schools back then," Holly said. "We'd have been in so much trouble."

"Delinquents." Micah smiled. "We had to get this camera two days ago and it's a little finicky. It'll be fine. I just need to adjust it."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" she asked.

Luke kept his eye on Holly as Micah showed her what he was doing. They stood really close together, their bent heads almost touching. The shutter clicked a few times.

Micah pointed to the machine in the corner. "Holly, is there any chance you know how to work the printer? Because that's your job. It's pretty simple once you figure out all the buttons."

They moved to the corner where Micah proceeded to walk her through the process. She held up a photo and laughed.

"You're Grumpy Santa." She brought the picture over to Luke. "That'll just scare off the children."

He shrugged, self-conscious about being caught glaring at them. "I don't have to be Jolly Santa until there's a kid in here."

"Hey," Micah said, "while you're right there, Holly, sit on his lap so I can adjust for height. We always get teenage girls posing together."

Micah moved behind the camera again, attention seemingly on the adjustment. But Luke suspected him of foul play. They had teenagers in here every night. Determined for the situation not to be uncomfortable, Luke patted his knee and made it a joke. "Come tell me what you want, little girl."

"Oh, now you're Pervy Santa?" She perched on his leg, holding her weight off him by grasping the back of the chair.

The shutter clicked.

"Let's try that again," Micah said. "It's out of focus for some reason. Is

one of you moving?"

"You don't weigh anything," Luke told her as the shutter clicked again and again. "Relax. You're making the picture blurry."

"I am not." But she released her death grip on the chair and put her hand on his shoulder.

"I was wrong," he panted out, as though in agony, "you weigh a ton."

She laughed. "Your fault."

"You've been sneaking my cookies, Mrs. C."

"I take the Fifth."

"Five cookies at a time? I believe it."

"Don't make me blacken your eye, Santa. I can do it, too."

"I remember."

Micah straightened. "Okay, you two. I've got it."

Holly jumped off his lap as though sitting on fire ants.

"You did great, Holly. Santa's not grumpy anymore." Micah smirked.

"Just the opposite, I'd say."

Luke scowled at his brother. Best to change the subject and smooth over the sudden awkward tension in the room. At least, *he* felt it, so surely Holly did, as well. "Here's the deal. Any child can visit with Santa for free. Teens and adults pay four dollars just to visit with Santa, one dollar of which we donate to the county food pantry. Parents can take pictures if they want, but the instant print photos we take cost three dollars. Teens and adults wanting a picture pay

another dollar."

She tipped her head, considering. "I imagine the teens take pictures with their phones, so you're netting three bucks off them. That would help defray the paper and ink costs for the little kids' photos. Are you breaking even?"

Luke spied the red velvet hat with its white ball and trim and retrieved it from the shelf. "Barely, but we have our reasons for doing it this way. One, it's Christmas. Two, having Santa's Cabin brings more customers out here. Even if they don't buy a tree, they usually get some garland or a poinsettia, cider or an ornament. Three, it creates good will that carries over for the orchard business. We're usually featured in the paper, so we get free advertising, too."

"Reason four," Micah put in, "three dollars seems cheap for an instant photo. Parents are more likely to buy one than if it cost more. We let parents take their own pictures so even the folks that can't afford to pay can have photos of their kids with Santa. So, five, that small amount covers our cost."

"When did you start this?"

Luke met his brother's eye for a moment. "Two years before Dad died. He'd always wanted to do something more for the community than give fruit to the food pantry. He made a great Santa."

"I think it's sweet. My colleagues would have a field day trying to convince you to charge more so you don't go broke."

Micah grinned. "Sassy as ever. And on that note, it's time to open the doors. Are you ready?"

"No," Holly said.

"No," Luke said.

"Great. Let's get started."