

FAWN LOWERY



SANTA'S
HELPER

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Santa's Helper

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Dedication:

To the wonderful hardworking editors at eXtasy Books.

Holly Jeffries raised both hands and ran her fingers through her hair. Of all the times for things to go wrong—it had to be now. Christmas was two days away—the arrival of Santa Claus was scheduled for tomorrow evening—Christmas Eve—and the man who had played the role for the past twenty years was laid up with a broken leg.

And that wasn't her only problem. She had managed to convince her employers, Marilyn and John Weston, to take that holiday cruise they had been wanting, and leave her in charge. As Assistant Manager, she felt she was capable of holding down the fort for six weeks. All five hundred rooms of the Mountain Laurel Lodge were booked, and there was a full schedule of events ongoing to keep everybody entertained. But just that morning, she had received word that a quarter of the kitchen staff were not coming in because of a wage dispute, and the housekeeping staff was considering joining their cause.

Holly rose from the wide mahogany desk in the office of the lodge. The Mountain Laurel had been in the Weston family since Franklin Weston, John's father, helped construct it during the twenties. The establishment bore the sweat and tears of the Weston family, and surely more difficult times than those

facing her had been overcome. She glanced at the family portraits gracing the paneled wall as she opened the door and stepped into the impressive lobby. The generations of Westons stared back as if overlooking the running of their beloved hotel.

Red carpet, plush and fit for a king, spanned the large lobby, stretching from the marble counter at the front desk to the massive double glass doors at the main entrance. Ornate brass and glass chandeliers illuminated the wide expanse leading into the large dining room. At the back of the lobby stood a massive stone fireplace with a fire blazing away in its deep firebox. Clusters of guests clad in colorful ski garb were seated in the leather furniture grouped near the fire. A medley of seasonal songs could be heard playing over the speaker system. Christmas decorations adorned the foyer and spilled over into the dining room. The outside of the lodge, nestled in the valley beneath the towering Rocky Mountains, was adorned in twinkling lights and exquisite ice sculptures.

She glanced at the list of stand-ins to play Santa and wondered if she could possibly get Eileen, the lodge secretary, to make the calls. She turned her steps toward the front desk, spying the woman talking with one of the guests. As a last resort, she had ruled out calling the Westons and asking their advice. She knew they would call off their cruise immediately and fly back to Colorado, and she didn't want that. They were overworked as it was, and needed the vacation.

A loud commotion pulled her attention back to the

front entrance just as she neared the desk. Oh, no, she thought, I hope something else isn't going wrong.

She saw Thomas, the doorman, dressed in his red coat and matching hat, rushing forward to greet someone, joined by a number of the grounds crew. Surely there weren't any celebrities arriving that she was unaware of. She laid the list she carried on the counter and headed for the front entrance, just as the crowd shifted and she was able to see the tall man at the center of the commotion. He looked vaguely familiar. Then it dawned on her why she should have such a thought. He looked familiar because she had spent the past year staring at his picture hanging on the office wall. He was Mike Weston, Marilyn and John's son, and he was even more handsome than his picture portrayed. A little shiver of lust raced along her insides as she watched him interact with the group of men outside the front entrance.

Her emotions suddenly somersaulted. What was he doing there? Surely his parents had notified him of their holiday plans. She raised one hand and clutched the soft angora sweater at her throat. What if he had come to help out in his parents' absence? She bit her bottom lip. She hated to think that perhaps she wasn't relied on as much as she hoped. But then, since the series of problems concerning the staff had arisen, she could use a fresh perspective. She knew from talking with Marilyn and John that Mike was an attorney specializing in corporate law. She should stop wondering about him, and go greet him, she reminded herself. After all, he was coming through the front entrance and momentarily he'd see her

frozen in place like one of the ice sculptures gracing the front lawn. She forced her legs to move, to carry her body in his direction. They met mid-way in the wide lobby, their eyes locking.

* * * *

His gaze drank her in, quickly scanning her petite figure from the mop of curly red hair on her head to the fashionable black leather boots on her feet. Her face was heart-shaped, with a peaches-and-cream complexion. She had large brilliant blue eyes, a tiny, pert nose that accentuated her full lush lips and when she smiled, a tiny dimple in her left cheek winked at him. And perhaps the most striking aspect that grabbed his attention was the fact that she wore no makeup—he couldn't detect a trace of powder or lipstick.

* * * *

Holly gave him a rapid assessment, though she had familiarized herself with his handsome countenance since starting work at the lodge almost a year ago. Still, his looks were mind-jarring in real life. His high cheekbones gave his handsome chiseled features a distinguished look. She saw at once the resemblance to his Weston ancestors. A lock of sandy brown hair hung loosely across his forehead, giving him a devil-may-care appearance. And he had a mouth that begged to be kissed, with a lower lip that was slightly fuller than the top. Quickly, she glimpsed his left

hand, in search of a wedding band. Finding none, she felt the welcoming smile she had stretched across her face grow in proportions.

"I'm Holly Jeffries," she said, her voice a hoarse croak.

"Mike Weston," he said, smiling down at her and offering his hand.

His clasp was warm, given the fact that it was freezing outside and he wasn't wearing gloves. She wondered briefly if other...more private regions were equally warm, then momentarily chided herself for having such errant thoughts.

"It's very nice to meet you," she continued, her hand still in his. Then it dawned on her that she hadn't seen his name on any reservation—for surely she'd have been hovering near the front door awaiting his arrival if she had. She gave a brief shake to her head, sending her curly cap dancing about her earlobes.

* * * *

The motion didn't go unnoticed by Mike Weston. His mother had called her a doll when she told him about Holly and his dad had been equally taken with the spry young woman. When he learned of his parents' vacation plans, and of Holly being left in charge of the lodge, he thought it might be the perfect time to come for a visit. And too, a Christmas anywhere but at the lodge, would seem anything but festive.

"I'll be staying in my parents' quarters," he said.

* * * *

Here's a man who can read my mind, Holly thought, as Mike released her hand and shrugged out of his coat. She noticed the way her hand still felt warm even after he broke the contact and a silly little thought flitted through her mind. For some unexplained reason, she felt as though everything she had ever wished for was just about to come true.

"I'll talk with the staff," Mike assured her, gazing intently into her eyes. "Don't worry. I'm very good at negotiating." He gave her a white-toothed smile that almost buckled her knees.

"And there's one other thing," Holly said, eyeing him. Everybody on the lodge's Santa list was either already booked or retired altogether. She had no choice but to ask...or beg. "I need you to dress up as Santa for the Christmas party."

He laughed suddenly, and almost jumped off the couch. "Do I look like I could play Santa Claus? I'm an attorney—not an actor." He crossed the room to plop down on the corner of the desk, staring at her as if not believing his ears.

"Mike." She crossed the room. She stood in front of him, then for some unknown reason—she was never quite certain of why she did things sometimes—she pushed his knees apart and inched her body between his thighs.

"What's this? Persuasion?" Mike asked, a slanted smile gracing his lips. But he made no show of pushing her away. Instead, he wound his arms

around her waist and proceeded to pull her closer to his body.

"Please say you'll do it," Holly urged. She had stared at his picture hanging in the office so long that she felt she already knew him to some extent. She brought her arms up to twine around his neck, and then she leaned her breasts into the solid wall of his chest.

He let out a long breath and inched his open palms up her back. "I warn you. I can be talked into anything – if the right ammunition is used."

"That's what I'm counting on," she informed him. She urged his head down with the slightest pressure of her hand at his nape, but when his lips melded with hers, she suddenly lost all power over the situation.

She'd wanted to kiss him since she'd first seen his picture hanging in the office, and now that it was actually becoming a reality, she almost fainted. She let out a pent-up moan and pushed her body against his, as though she was collapsing in a passionate swoon.

His lips fit perfectly with hers. They melded at first touch and when Mike deepened the kiss, all thoughts beyond the immediate act fled her mind. Her senses were consumed by his touch, alive as never before. He sucked her bottom lip between his, and played along its fleshy length with his tongue.

And his hands – they caressed her back, lowered to her hips and then rose to glide familiarly across the sides of her breasts. She hadn't been in many men's arms, but she was well aware of the effect she was having on him. She felt his breathing quicken and the

growing arousal between his legs.

She knew in the back of her mind that she should call a halt to things before they got any further out of control – but she simply couldn't help herself.

* * * *

"Holly," he suddenly said, dragging his mouth from hers. "Holly, we really should stop." He listened to what he was saying and wondered why. It wasn't every day that a beautiful woman threw herself into his arms. But this wasn't just any woman. This was Holly Jeffries, the young woman his parents had grown quite fond of...and he was quickly coming to the realization that he too, found her quite interesting.

Her eyes flickered open, and a flush lit her cheeks. "I'm sorry. I guess I got carried away." She paused her words, staring at him, but she made no move to dislodge her body from between his legs. And though he held her by the upper arms, he didn't push her away, either.

"You came to help out—didn't you?" Her fingers inspected the top button on his shirt. She gazed up at him through her eyelashes, a tiny attempt on her part to play coy.

He was quiet for a brief time, staring at her and trying to imagine himself dressed up as Santa and entertaining a passel of kids.

* * * *

"I'll make you a deal," he said suddenly.

Holly raised her eyes immediately to peer questioningly at his face. What could he possibly have in mind? Would she sleep with him?

No. It probably wouldn't be that simple. Her pulse quickened as she waited to hear his words.

"I'll be Santa – if you be my helper."

"Helper? What do you mean?" A thousand things crashed through her mind. There was so much to do – surely he knew how busy she was.

"Doesn't Santa have elves who help him? Aren't the elves the ones who make the toys?" His face was glowing with expectation and his brown gaze was accessing Holly's surprised face with a measure of humor.

Holly suddenly combed her fingers through her hair. She didn't want to be his elf. She wanted to oversee everything and be in charge. It was to be her first experience at being in charge. How was she to ever convince the Weston's that she was Manager material if she were dressed up as an elf and assisting Santa Claus?

"I can't," she hedged, all set to beg some more...if necessary.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Then I can't be Santa," he said matter-of-factly.

"But we need a Santa for the party – the children are expecting Santa, Mike."

He shook his head from side to side. "Sorry. I'm not making a fool of myself –"

"Alright!" she interrupted, irate. "Alright, alright. I'll do it. I'll be your helper."

He laughed suddenly and tickled her ribs,

surprising her. "You'll make a cute little elf," he said, kissing her cheek.

But his touch only served to ignite her passion for him and it was all Holly could do to push out of his arms. In the back of her mind she was picturing herself dressed in green tights and a little short tunic and oh, God – those pointed elf shoes!

* * * *

Mike proved to be an excellent negotiator, which only slightly surprised Holly. He convinced the kitchen staff to wait until his parents returned from their vacation to air their grievances, and promised he'd act as mediator for the meeting. An agreement was reached and those who had refused to come in to work relented and came in.

The lodge was a flurry of activity as Christmas Eve dawned. Holly was busy making last-minute checks on the party and the arrival of Santa. She had given Mike the red Santa suit and fluffy white beard and chosen one of the elf costumes for herself. She was a little nervous about the brevity of the suit. The tunic was short—mid-thigh—and the matching tights left little to the imagination. However, if she wanted Mike to be Santa, she had to be his helper. In the end, begging hadn't gotten her much.

She spent the better part of the morning making final checks with the housekeeping staff, and then met Mike for a quick lunch in the dining room. He was seated at a small table near the front windows of the lodge when she arrived. She paused, looking at

him for a moment. He was, perhaps, the most handsome man she had ever seen. Everything about him—physically—appealed to her. A small smile touched her lips. She could hardly wait to see him in the Santa suit, his stomach all stuffed and the bushy white beard in place.

"Holly," he called.

She raised one hand to acknowledge and cut across the room to join him. She had eaten breakfast hours earlier but she noted he was just getting around to it. He poured her a cup of coffee and set it before her as she slid into the extra chair at the table.

"Thanks for fixing things with the kitchen crew and the housekeeping staff," she said, her tone sincere.

"You owe me," he remarked, dousing a stack of hot cakes with maple syrup.

"Beg pardon?" Holly remarked, laughter in her tone.

"I said 'you owe me'," he repeated, glancing across the table at her.

She let out an exasperated breath and propped her elbows on the table. "What could you possibly want—"

"You."

It was stated so simply. He wanted her. No haggling. No room for discussion. On the one hand, she was excited by his words. The thought that this handsome man might find her attractive—

"Just as soon as Santa's big party is over," he tacked on. He shoved a big bite of pancakes dripping with syrup and melted butter into his mouth.

Holly gathered her courage, smiling across the table at him. God! He was gorgeous and her pulse fluttered in her wrist. The place between her legs tingled.

"I don't recall offering myself up." It was one thing to flirt with him—but anything more could be a life-altering experience.

"My memory is better than yours," he cut in.

Holly's mouth dropped open.

"Claire makes the best pancakes," he said, forking another large bite into his mouth. "What time is Santa expected to arrive?"

Holly swallowed to ease her dry throat. "Eight o'clock."

He paused in his eating and locked gazes with her. "I'm looking forward to seeing you in the little elf suit." He smiled. "And then I'm looking forward to helping you out of it."

Surprise shot through Holly. Surprise and a surge of sexual arousal so strong she almost fell out of her chair.

"You're not serious," she said in a low whisper. Glancing around, she wondered if anybody overheard him.

* * * *

"I'm perfectly serious." He put down his fork and took a sip of his coffee, then replaced the cup in the saucer. "The second I laid eyes on you—I wanted to strip off your clothes and take you right there in the center of the lobby. Then when you needed my

help—" He winked at her. "You merely gave me something to bargain with."

"This isn't a game—you're not in court!"

He leaned across the table and stared into Holly's eyes. "I came home for Christmas because this lodge has such wonderful memories for me. The fact that my folks are off on vacation dampens my spirits a little—we won't be spending Christmas together for the first year in my life." He refrained from revealing all that his folks had told him about Holly's horrible childhood—the death of her parents when she was three and the series of foster homes that followed until she was eighteen and earned a scholarship to college. It had been his parents who gave her the opportunity to test her newly acquired ability in hotel management. "Christmas has always had special meaning for me, and this year will be no exception.

"Do you believe in the magic of Christmas?" he asked, one eyebrow arching in curiosity. His eyes traveled over her face, so exquisite in form and beautiful, even without the benefit of makeup. The lack had intrigued him from the very moment he looked at her. She was the only woman he knew who didn't rely on enhancements to show off her beauty.

* * * *

Holly didn't answer, only stared across the table at him. So far she hadn't seen any magic—at Christmas or any other time in her life. She had been pushed from pillar to post and back again, always ending up feeling rejected.

She hadn't expected him to speak so openly about his personal life. And she hoped he didn't expect the same of her. She stifled a shudder of dread. Her life hadn't been the sort one boasted about, but she was determined to overcome it, one way or the other.

"I'm sorry," he suddenly said. "I was under the impression that you were getting into the spirit of the season, Holly. Weren't you the one who planned the Christmas party?"

"Yes, but that doesn't mean I—" she paused her words. He was getting far too personal for her benefit. If things continued in the vein they were, she'd be wiping tears from her cheeks and spilling her guts to him. And she was beyond that. She had made up her mind to do whatever it took to make something of herself. She suddenly relived the episode in the office when she threw herself into Mike's arms and begged him to dress up as Santa. She couldn't help but smile at the incident.

"What's so funny?" he inquired, returning his attention to his food.

"I guess you think I throw myself at every available man," she said, keeping her voice low.

"No, I don't think that at all, Holly." He aimed a teasing smile at her. "I think you find me as arousing as I find you."

She couldn't help but appear startled. Yes, that that was true. But she hadn't expected him to voice the words so easily.

"And I find nothing at all wrong with going with one's hunches."

"I've been doing that all my life," she suddenly

admitted. She turned her head, glancing around the crowded restaurant. Almost every table was filled and the noise level was almost deafening. Perhaps, she thought, her choice of careers was indicative of her life, up until now. The constant flow of people in and out of her life, the procession of foster homes—perhaps she chose the hotel field to fulfill her need for people around her. She gave a brief shake of her head. Maybe that explanation wouldn't make much sense to anyone else, but it sounded reasonable to her.

"Then what's wrong with going with your hunch now? I can tell you want me as much as I want you."

"I don't sleep around," she muttered, preparing to rise from her seat.

He grabbed her hand before she could clear the chair. "Good. I'll feel honored to be your first."

* * * *

The guests began gathering in the lobby at dusk awaiting the start of the Christmas party and Santa's arrival. A live band had been hired for the occasion and Christmas carols filled the lodge with seasonal melody. The fragrances of hot mulled cider and mouth-watering desserts from the kitchen drifted throughout the lobby. And the hotel staff was decked out in bright red uniforms, complete with red stocking caps with white cotton trim.

Holly rode the elevator up to her apartment to change into her elf costume, dreading the ordeal lying ahead. Why had she allowed Mike to force her into such an arrangement? Surely his parents wouldn't be

pleased when they learned of what she had done.

She was almost dressed when someone knocked on her door. Reluctantly, she opened the door to find Mike leaning against the doorjamb, the red Santa suit in place, the beard and hat in one hand.

"I came by to make certain you don't back out on our deal," he said, his chuckling making his stuffed belly jiggle.

"That's an insult," Holly exclaimed, eyeing him with a growing smile. "You look ridiculous."

"Now *that's* an insult," he stated, laughing harder. He pushed off the doorjamb and stepped inside her apartment, his gaze raking her figure with an appraising glint.

Holly left him in the living room of the apartment and returned to the bedroom to finish dressing. She had only to place the green felt cap on her head and secure it, then step into the pointed-toed shoes, and she would be ready to accompany him down stairs.

"Let's get it over with," she announced, returning to the room where she had left him earlier. But she was surprised to find him seated comfortably on the sofa, a look of serene compliance on his handsome face.

"We have time; sit with me," he patted the couch beside him.

Holly stood in the middle of the floor and looked at him. She didn't altogether trust him to behave himself. After all, he had been quite outspoken with her at lunch. Finally, after several minutes passed and they had done nothing beyond stare at each other, she gave in and sat beside him on the couch—only to

have him immediately pull her across his lap.

"Ho ho ho. Tell Santa what you want for Christmas, little girl," he bellowed, his grasp on her waist tightening.

"Mike," she yelped, trying to wiggle free.

He only pulled her tighter against his chest, preventing her from moving at all. "Don't you think I need to practice?" he asked, laughing.

Holly turned her head and looked at him as a flutter of awareness wafted through her insides. At least he didn't have the beard on and insist she kiss him. He was so darned good looking it was hard to resist him. But then, she realized, she really didn't want to. She sighed and leaned her body into the solid wall of his chest, giving him invitation to cuddle with her.

He nuzzled her neck with his lips, and then trailed tiny little kisses up the arched incline to the corner of her mouth before claiming her lips with his. Holly moaned and gave in to her desire to return his kisses. They were hot and moist, and the way he took total control of her senses couldn't be explained.

She was nestled against the pillowy softness of his belly, and suddenly it seemed funny to her. She was seated on Santa's lap and working up quite a passionate feeling for further exploration. Maybe Mike's announcement of his need for her had merit after all—but then she told herself to discount it. He was a wealthy attorney from New York and the heir to the Mountain Laurel Lodge—what could he possibly see in her?

She pulled away suddenly and got to her feet.

Straightening her elf suit, she headed for the door of the apartment. "Let's go," she announced. "There's a party waiting for you downstairs."

"We could have our own party right here, Holly," he murmured, levering himself off the soft couch. "Aren't you going to help me with my beard?"

She paused. He sounded as if he really needed her help, for once. She smiled and turned to look at him, then crossed the room and took the white beard out of his hand. She had no idea how to go about helping him put it on—perhaps there was some sort of glue that the previous Santa had used to keep it in place. A sudden thought of a child pulling on the artificial beard rose to mind. That wouldn't do. Santa couldn't be exposed right in front of everybody.

Her fingers touched his cheek as she began positioning the cotton beard on his face, and it was almost impossible not to look at him. The heat from his skin shot straight up her arm and made her nerves quiver. There was something about this man that spoke to every pore of her body. Quickly, she pulled in a deep breath, catching the fragrance of his cologne.

His hand was suddenly stroking her hair, delving amidst the curls at her nape. In the next second, he was pulling her into his arms and kissing her. Her fingers tangled in the white cotton beard pressing against her face as his mouth covered hers in a long, searching kiss.

It was time they went downstairs, Holly thought, but she lacked the will to free herself from Mike's embrace. Maybe there was something to the magic of

Christmas after all.

The telephone rang suddenly, jarring Holly back to the present. Shaking, she pulled away from Mike and went to answer it, hoping there wasn't another problem to deal with.

Marilyn and John, Mike's parents, were on the line.

"We just called to say Merry Christmas, Holly," Marilyn said, a happy lilt in her voice.

Holly spoke briefly to the couple, then handed the phone to Mike so he could talk to them.

"She's doing a great job," she heard him say into the phone. She had gone back into the bedroom to make a final check on her costume. Mike had managed to upset the little green cap she had pinned to her hair. When she returned to the living room, he was off the phone and trying to adjust his beard.

Holly smiled at him, thinking what a striking figure he made dressed as Santa, and then led the way out of the apartment. The party was due to start and Santa was about to make his grand entrance—along with his nervous elf helper.

* * * *

The crowd was in place waiting for Santa. The children were clustered together near the towering Christmas tree at the front of the lobby and an area roped off with red velvet ribbon surrounded a setting designated for Santa. An imaginary toyshop had been erected—quite appropriate for Santa and his helpful elf.

Apprehension welled up inside Holly as the

elevator doors slid open into the foyer and Mike prepared to make his grand entrance. She glanced at him while tugging on the hem of her short elf tunic only to have him wink at her. A feeling akin to joy washed over her and for an instant she questioned the action. Then she was following Mike into the main lobby as he began a loud series of HO HO HO's, drawing every eye in the gathering.

The children erupted in a screaming roar of welcome.

"Santa Claus!" they all yelled in unison.

Holly realized then that Santa was indeed the star of the show and she would garner little, if any attention in the elf suit. Her worries had been unfounded, as Mike had said. She put aside her fears then and became immersed in the celebration. There were gifts of every description beneath the big-lighted tree and each child received one, along with a small bag of Christmas candy. Holly's job was to dispense the gifts under the tree into Santa's hand once the child had sat on his knee and told him what he wanted for Christmas. And since Holly had been the one to wrap all the gifts, she knew which was appropriate for either a boy or a girl.

* * * *

It took almost three hours for Santa to visit with all the children, and then, in order for Santa to discreetly slip away, a Christmas cake and holiday drinks were served in the dining room.

"I'll have you know, not one kid tried to yank my

beard off," Mike said as he and Holly rode the elevator back up to her apartment.

"And nobody told me I looked silly in this elf suit," Holly added.

"Honey," Mike said, his voice firm. "You're the sexiest elf I've ever laid eyes on." He pulled her into his arms, and chuckled when his padded belly got in the way.

Suddenly the doors of the elevator slid open, giving Holly the chance to make a getaway. But it was short-lived. When she headed across the foyer to her apartment, Mike followed on her heels. Realizing he was behind her, she stopped and turned to face him. The conversation they had at lunch suddenly flooded her mind, bringing a blush to her cheeks.

His hands immediately spanned her waist as he bent his head to kiss her. And Holly didn't try to resist him—her senses were alive with want, though she was somewhat confused by the feelings.

"Mike," she said, managing to break the kiss. The bushy beard tickled her face and while his kiss was erotic in every sense of the word, the act of kissing him in full costume bordered on the kinky side of things. She couldn't help but laugh at the idea of Santa and one of his elves making out.

"I'm going to be living here for as long as my parents are away, Holly." His hands were busy on the hem of her tunic, lifting it higher and higher along her waist. "You better get the door open because—"

His words spurred her to move. Quickly, she twisted the doorknob and stepped inside the apartment. Mike continued to tug at her clothing,

until she stepped out of his reach, then he began pulling off his own clothes. He quickly rid himself of the red suit and stuffing, stripping down to a single pair of boxer shorts right before Holly's eyes.

"So that's what Santa wears under his red suit," she remarked, chuckling.

"Now show me what you have under your elf suit," he laughed, reaching for her.

Holly took a step back. True, she was rapidly developing feelings for Mike and also true, there was no one else in her life. But if he thought she was willing to have an affair with him while his parents were away —

"I'm relocating to Colorado Springs from New York," he explained.

Surprised, Holly looked at him with raised eyebrows.

"My parents are talking about retiring," he continued.

It was clear to Holly then why he was there and why she had been able to convince Marilyn and John to take that cruise. Suddenly, she felt as though she wasn't capable of doing anything right. She felt hot tears sting the back of her eyes and turned her back to Mike.

"You've got it all wrong, Holly," he said, quickly reading the dejected expression on her face. He clutched her arms and turned her around. "Until they hired you, they never considered taking off and leaving anybody in charge. They've done nothing but brag about you for the past year." He smiled broadly at her. "You're the reason I'm here as well."

She frowned, perplexed.

"I had to come see this wonderful woman my parents were so enamored with. And I can see why they love you, Holly."

"Love?" she repeated. She had never been told by anyone that they loved her. A pang of sorrow nearly ripped her apart.

Mike gathered her into his arms. His hands slid along her back, pressing her breasts into his chest, then lowered to caress her hips. In the next instant, he took hold of her tunic and pulled it over her head.

"Mike!" she yelped, aware that she suddenly stood before him in a pair of green tights that were three sizes too small, a white lace bra—and an elf hat and pointed-toe shoes.

"Holly," he growled, reaching for her again.

He scooped her up into his arms and headed for the bedroom while Holly clutched at his neck and shoulders. She liked the feel of his bare skin and before he released her, she was already contemplating how her warmth would feel pressing against his.

"All my life I've hated Christmas," she divulged as Mike stood her on her feet beside the bed. He pulled her elf hat off her curly mop of hair and hooked his thumbs in the waist of her tights. "It was always the loneliest time of year for me, because I never knew where I'd be—whether in one foster home or another."

Mike paused his hands. He could tell by the tone of her voice that it was taking a lot out of her to reveal her most inner feelings to him, but he sensed she was doing it because she wanted him to know of her life

before coming to work at The Mountain Laurel.

"I'm almost thirty years old, Holly. And I've yet to find the woman I want to fall in love with—until now." He touched his mouth to hers, kissing her cheeks; he felt the hot moisture of her tears. He raised his hands, cupping her face, then ran the ball of his thumb beneath her left eye, catching a tear that was trapped in her lashes.

"I've stared at your picture, wondering about you, since I first came to work here. I can't explain how incredible it was to see you coming through the lodge doors," she said, her voice a shaky whisper.

"I've already rented office space in town, Holly. I'm going to live here permanently. And when my parents decide to retire, I'll be close by to help you run the lodge—if you ever need me."

Holly went quickly into his arms, pressing her body against the length of his and feeling the hardness in his boxer shorts. He wanted—planned—to have sex with her. What he had said in the dining room was true. He would be her first.

His hands moved quickly to rid her of her clothing, and then he slipped off his shorts and came to her, pushing her down on the bed.

Holly pulled in a deep breath as his length settled atop her body. His heat at once melded with her body warmth and an exquisite sensation spread along her limbs. She wound her arms around his naked shoulders and received his mouth with hers, parting her lips for his tongue to enter and explore her mouth.

A heat began to build inside her—an erotic heat that filtered to every part of her body. Her senses

were filled with his scent, his tangy cologne and the heat of his skin. His hands were caressing her nakedness, skimming along her hips and then delving between her legs, sending her emotions spinning out of control. Her breathing quickened and she began moving her hands along his naked body, bringing a rash of moans and shivers from him. She felt emboldened by his reactions to her touch. A sudden feeling of power zinged through her insides, making her eyes flicker open in sudden need to look at him.

But the light in the room was dim, the space illuminated only by the nighttime sky seeping in through the open drapes at the window. As on so many nights when she lay in bed alone, her eyes went to the window. A swirl of snowflakes careened before the glass, hitting and pressing in icy shimmers.

"It's snowing," she murmured.

Mike raised his head and glanced out the window. "Remember when I said Christmas was magic?" he asked.

"And I said I'd never seen any magic at all."

He traced his thumb across her lower lip. "I've always believed there was magic about Christmas. Peace on Earth. Family. Love." He dipped his head and brushed his lips across hers. "I want to make you mine, Holly. I want to claim you. I want to show you the magic of Christmas."

He parted her thighs with his knee and fitted his hard cock between her legs, pressing forward; he penetrated her body, making the breath catch in her throat.

"Merry Christmas, my darling."

At first it hurt, but as Mike continued to move and she began to move with him, it became the most pleasurable sensation she had ever experienced. Then when the onset of orgasm took over her body, she gave herself over to it, allowing Mike to bring her full circle.

Later, as she lay secure in Mike's arms, she traced her fingertips along the bare curve of his hip as a peaceful feeling spread throughout her being. He had seemingly appeared out of nowhere and fixed all that threatened to go wrong, and now for the first time in her memory, she had someone in her life at Christmastime. Perhaps, she dared to believe the magic of Christmas was real.

The End

About the Author

*C*hristmas has always been a special time for me. I come from a large family—five sisters and two brothers—and too many cousins to count. We are a farm family and while quite rural, at holiday time we all manage to converge on the old family home to share the companionship of siblings and to embody the Spirit of Christmas. May the joy of the holiday season warm your heart and soul.