

Rosette

Sweetheart Rose

Next Door
Santa

Tamela Tumlin

Next Door Santa
by Tamelia Tumlin

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Dedication

To my family for their never-ending support.

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Praise for Tamelia Tumlin

Ms. Tumlin, in my opinion, has a grand future with her storylines. I believe this author could become addictive! See what you think!

Brenda Talley—The Romance Studio

Tamelia Tumlin is one author we should all be watching. *Prince of Thieves* is a delight from beginning to end. You will not want to put it down.

Debby Guyette—SingleTitles.com

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"You've got to be kidding me!" Holly Winters muttered as she turned her compact car into her driveway and screeched to a halt.

When she had seen the orange-and-white moving van drive up to the empty house next door a week ago, she knew her new neighbor would be trouble with a capital T. Now she had proof.

Holly jerked the gearshift into park and glared at the brightly lit home. Christmas lights twinkled from every crevice of two-story structure. Even though dusk had settled over her small Louisiana neighborhood, she could still see Santa and eight—no, nine—flying reindeer perched on the rooftop, ready to take flight at any given moment. She would be more than happy to see them leap into the air. For good. Several festive holiday scenes also dotted the landscaped lawn. Every inch of her neighbor's red brick home and lush green turf shouted Christmas.

The one holiday Holly planned to skip this year.

She grabbed the steaming vanilla latte—her fourth since breakfast—from the cup holder in the console, reached for her briefcase with her other hand and slid out of the car. Lifting the frothy caffeine to her nose, she inhaled and counted to five, hoping the scent of vanilla beans would alleviate some of her irritation. It didn't. But the steam did fog her glasses. She blinked several times and waited for her lenses to clear before shooting one more glare toward the reincarnated North Pole next door. Holly tightened her lips and slammed the car door shut with her hip before stomping toward her porch.

"Merry Christmas!"

She froze in mid-step. The two cheerful words grated on her already raw nerves. Great. Now she would have to make small talk with Santa himself. Closing her eyes, she gritted her teeth and took two deep, calming breaths. A valuable lesson she had learned in one of her yoga classes.

"Merry Christmas!"

The greeting was louder this time. Masculine loud. Holly grimaced and turned toward the voice. Her breath hitched.

Between well-lit, plastic Victorian carolers in an enchanting scene straight out of Dickens stood the sexiest man she had ever laid eyes on. Unfortunately, his Cheshire cat grin oozed Christmas cheer. Just her luck. If she wasn't so peeved about the extreme holiday décor, she might have appreciated his six-foot, tanned, muscular physique. Or the dark wavy hair resting just below the collar and his deliciously sinful bedroom eyes.

Okay, maybe she couldn't actually see his eyes since she was several feet away, but if they were anything like the rest of him, she was sure they were gorgeous. But gorgeous eyes or not, she was in no mood for Christmas cheer. Or a sexy neighbor.

Not this year.

"Merry Christmas," Holly muttered. She sprinted up the porch steps. Well, sprinted as best as she could in three-inch spiked heels and a semi-tight, black skirt and blazer. Just because he was a holiday fanatic didn't mean she had to be.

"You wouldn't happen to have an extra extension cord, would you?"

Good grief! What else could the man possibly have to plug in? He had already sucked most of the electricity from the power plant, leaving precious little for anyone else. She wasn't even sure she would have lights in her own house.

"No." Holly shifted the briefcase and fumbled for her house key, feeling just a twinge of guilt for her curt reply. His crestfallen face didn't help matters.

She finally found the right key and performed a balancing act with her latte and briefcase as she inserted it into the keyhole. Escape was only seconds away...

"I'm Lake Carrington, by the way."

Holly didn't have to turn to know Mr. Christmas now stood on her porch. So much for a quick escape. She couldn't exactly rush into her house and slam the door without being rude. And she wasn't a rude person. Good manners instilled by two wonderful parents prevented her from exhibiting such unacceptable behavior.

Taking another deep breath, she prepared to endure the painful introductions. "Holly Winters." She gritted her teeth and rolled her eyes heavenward. *Couldn't he take a hint?* She grimaced then turned toward the deep masculine voice. Her breath caught in her throat. Up close, the man was even more gorgeous. Yep, he had very sexy eyes. Cobalt blue with just a hint of lighter flecks smattered about.

Lake extended his hand.

Holly arched a brow and shifted the briefcase, attempting yet another balancing act as she shook his hand. Somehow she managed a firm grasp without hitting him with the attaché. His hand was warm and slightly calloused. Not to

mention the mere touch caused her stomach to perform acrobatics. She snatched away her hand, hoping he didn't notice the sudden surge of heat in her cheeks.

Get it to together, Hol. You've touched a man before.

Just not in a while. A year Christmas day to be exact. But who was counting?

She swallowed hard and mumbled something to the effect of nice to meet you. At least she hoped that's what she said. With her heart slamming against her chest and the sudden roaring in her ears, the words sounded garbled.

"Where are your decorations? Only three days until Christmas, you know." Lake grinned, observing her yard enhanced only by a lone concrete birdbath in the middle.

"I don't do Christmas."

Lake blinked. His dark brows drew together as his gaze studied her face. "You don't do Christmas?"

"No."

"May I ask why not? Religious reasons perhaps?"

Holly shifted and gripped her briefcase. The porch moaned in protest. She didn't like the direction this conversation was heading. "Personal reasons."

"I see," Lake rubbed his chin. His eyes lightened to a pale azure.

The effect softened his rugged, handsome features. Holly's heart fluttered against her ribs. She barely heard his next question.

"What about a tree?"

Holly ignored her fluttering heart and stifled a sigh. He was getting too personal. And she didn't do personal. *Time to nip*

this conversation in the bud. She turned toward her front door. "No tree. No lights. No nothing. Now, if you'll excuse me, I've had a grueling day at the office and all I want to do is take a bath and go to bed." She turned the key and pushed her front door open a fraction, praying he would get the point.

"What do you do?" He nodded toward her briefcase.

"I'm a defense attorney."

"Impressive," Lake blew out a breath. "At least I know where to go if I ever get into trouble with the law."

His grin told her she shouldn't hold her breath. He was a model citizen. "Right. Now, if you'll excuse me," she repeated, pushing the door the rest of the way open. She flipped on the living room light. Well, at least she had some juice left. He hadn't sucked it all out of the power plant. Not yet anyway.

"I'd better get back to my project." Lake cleared his throat.

Holly glanced over her shoulder. Bad mistake. He gave her another heart-stopping smile and her resolve melted. A little.

She *could* invite him in for coffee, couldn't she? No harm in a cup of coffee. The invitation didn't have to mean anything. Just a beverage between new neighbors.

Before she could wrap her mind around the unexpected desire to be neighborly Lake took a step backward.

"Nice to meet you, Holly. I'll see you around." He turned and half-walked and half-jogged back to his own yard.

Holly stepped inside, closed the door behind her and dropped the briefcase on the hardwood floor. Her latte, now tepid from the frigid Louisiana night air, had lost its appeal. Not only had Mr. Christmas sent her senses into a tailspin, he

had also ruined her latte. He was definitely trouble all right. With a capital T.

* * * *

Dashing through the snow. In a one horse open sleigh...

The chords of the Christmas carol barreled through Holly's bedroom window, sending her straight from her soft comfortable bed to her feet. She groaned and glanced at her bedside clock.

Seven forty-five.

Who in their right mind would be singing Christmas carols at seven forty-five on a Saturday morning?

She scowled and slipped into a pair of electric pink fuzzy slippers. Muttering a very unladylike word, she walked to her window and yanked open the maroon-and-forest-green plaid curtain. She peeked through the blind and gritted her teeth.

Her new neighbor. Who else?

Her frown deepened as she watched Lake place an engine and three box cars in a straight line in front of Santa's Workshop. The North Pole Express glared back at her in large bold white letters across the side of the engine. Lake's deep baritone voice wafted across the hedge through her bedroom window. Every cheerful note grinded on her nerves like sandpaper. So much for sleeping late.

Holly yanked off her pajamas and slid into a red jogging suit. She pulled her hair into a loose ponytail then went to brush her teeth. No point in bothering with makeup. She didn't have any reason to doll herself up.

Not for him or any other man. Not anymore. Not after Steve. One year ago Christmas day, she had been expecting an engagement ring from her ex-boyfriend. Instead she received her walking papers. Her four-year relationship ended with one heart-breaking sentence. "I think we should see other people."

Devastated, Holly spent the last year throwing herself into her work and refusing to even try dating again. At twenty-six, she didn't have any more years to waste on a man. Nor did she want to. And since Christmas had been such a disaster last year, she hoped to skip it this year. All of her family lived in Montana, and since she still had tons of prep work to finish before a big trial scheduled for early January visiting them was out of the question. A nice, quiet uneventful Christmas was just what the doctor ordered.

Holly peeked out the blind once more. Instead of peace and quiet, Christmas had come to her. In the form of one very sexy next door Santa. She could try to ignore the festivities across the hedge separating their property lines but with Lake's incessant caroling, that would be impossible.

Instead, she planned on marching right over to Lake's house and find out exactly why he felt the need to break into song at 7:45 on a Saturday morning. Holly drew her brows together, pursed her lips and stomped down the hall. She slammed the door behind her on her way out.

"Good morning!" Lake waved as Holly made her way around the hedge toward his yard. He was on his haunches working on the train.

"It could have been," she mumbled, sidestepping the candy canes lining his driveway. She could really use a latte about right now. Her sleep-fogged brain refused to comprehend why anyone would willingly get up early on Saturday, much less sing.

"Something wrong?" Lake snapped the last track into place and stood. He stretched his arms heavenward. His joints snapped back into place. The movement tightened his sweater across his chest.

Holly gulped. Did he have a six-pack under there? A vision of ribbed chest muscles popped into her mind. She gave herself a mental shake. *Concentrate, Hol. Quit ogling the new neighbor.*

"Are you campaigning for Santa's job this year?" Holly blew a long sigh between her lips.

"I beg your pardon?" Lake blinked, his eyes widening.

"This." Holly waved toward the festive scenes. "All of this."

"I don't follow."

"Don't you think you've gone a bit overboard here? I don't think even the North Pole is this brightly lit and festive. You could land airplanes over here." Holly wove through the Dickens village until she reached him. Even though he towered over her by at least four inches, she planted her hands on her hips, narrowed her eyes and lifted her chin a notch. "Isn't this a bit much?"

"You have something against Christmas?" he challenged in a subdued tone, his blue eyes darkening a shade.

"No, of course not. In moderation," she added, shooting another glance toward the scenery.

Lake bit the inside of his cheek and scanned the décor. "I didn't realize it was a problem. I was just trying to bring a little Christmas cheer to the neighborhood." He glanced across the street then grinned sheepishly. "I guess this isn't a very festive street."

Holly followed his gaze. "No, most of the neighbors are senior citizens. They don't do much decorating."

"You're not a senior citizen," Lake added, giving her an appreciative glance. "What's your excuse?"

Heat zipped through her veins as his gaze slid over her.

A slow grin spread across his face as his gaze rested on hers.

Holly's heart beat erratically and her mouth went dry. She blinked and swallowed hard.

Lake looped his thumbs through the belt loops on his faded jeans, rocked back on his heels and waited. His gaze never left her face.

She felt her cheeks heat up like furnace as she realized that he was staring. And waiting.

"I didn't have a very good holiday last year." Holly swallowed again, gave herself a mental shake and adjusted her glasses. "My long-term relationship ended on Christmas day. I was hoping to avoid all of the holiday hoopla this year."

Concern entered his eyes. "I see." Then, a shadow crossed his face. "We all have our crosses to bear, Holly. How you handle them is what makes the difference."

Holly shot him a sharp glance. She didn't miss the catch in his voice. "What's your cross, Lake?"

Lake hesitated then plunged a hand through his dark hair. He sucked in a long breath then reached for her hand. "Come with me and I'll show you."

His hand trembled in hers and Holly's heart melted a little as he led her into his house. The scent of cinnamon wafted through the living room. Holly bit back a grin at the lone candle burning on the glass coffee table in the middle of the room. The scent reminded her of her mother. Every Christmas, her mother decorated the house with cinnamon sticks and mistletoe. Nostalgia stabbed Holly in the stomach. She brushed it away and focused her attention back to Lake's home.

She wasn't surprised by the white twinkle lights and garland outlining his mantle. Or the tapered red candles in the windows. The inside of his home was just as decorative as the outside. Except the Christmas tree. In one corner of the living room stood a bare cedar tree. No decorations. No lights. Nothing.

Lake led her to the mantle and reached for a picture of a smiling little girl with blue eyes and dark hair.

He handed her the picture. "That's Kelsi. She was my daughter."

Was? Holly's heart constricted. She swallowed hard and looked at Lake. His own eyes shimmered with unshed tears.

"She was killed in a car accident this past summer. Her mother and I have been divorced for several years and Kelsi lived with her most of the time. She spent her holidays and summers with me in Tennessee. After the accident, I took a job here in Louisiana, hoping to start over without the painful

memories." Lake closed his eyes. "Christmas was her favorite holiday. She loved everything about the season. The smells, the lights, the decorations. Everything."

He opened his eyes and tightened his chin. "I almost didn't celebrate Christmas this year either. Then I realized by continuing with our traditions, I could still have a little piece of her with me." His lips moved into a tight smile. "Maybe I did go a little overboard. I apologize."

Holly wanted to kick herself in the behind for being so insensitive. Here she was wallowing in self-pity over a jerk who really wasn't worth the time of day while her poor neighbor was only trying to hold onto to a small piece of his family.

Holly laid her hand on his arm as tears stung her eyes. "I'm so sorry, Lake. I can't imagine how hard this must be for you. You're right. We all have our problems. How we handle those problems is what makes the difference. Thank you for showing me the true meaning of Christmas." When his brows drew together, she added, "Love. Christmas is about love."

A ghost of a smile touched his lips as he took the picture and carefully placed it back on the mantle.

"What about your Christmas tree? Why don't you have any decorations?" Holly asked, swallowing a lump in her throat.

"We always decorated the tree on Christmas Eve. Trimming the tree with a steaming cup of cocoa was our special tradition." His voice caught again and he cleared throat. "I don't suppose ... I mean would you want to..."

Holly gave him a bright smile. "I would love to help you decorate your tree. Especially, since I don't have one of my

own this year." She pulled a face then added, "I'm sure Kelsi would have wanted you to continue your traditions. She's probably looking down from heaven right now with a big smile at all the holiday cheer."

Lake nodded. "I suppose she is."

Still, he didn't look quite convinced. "I'm sure she knew how much you loved her." Holly touched his arm. "She would want you to be happy."

The sadness in Lake's eyes vanished and he grinned. "Yes, she would. And Kelsi would have loved you. You're exactly what she always said I needed. A good woman who could keep me in line."

Holly's lips turned up at the corners. "Since I haven't been too neighborly, why don't you let me take you out for breakfast? Besides I could really use a latte about right now."

"Only if it's vanilla," Lake laughed.

"Is there any other kind?" Holly beamed. "And we'll definitely need a sticky bun to go with it."

Lake took her hand once more.

For the first time in a long time, Holly felt peace. Real peace. And hope. She had discovered the true meaning of Christmas and had somehow found someone who might be exactly what she needed. Not to mention, there was a good chance she might decide one day to become Mrs. Claus to her next door Santa.

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