

Christmas
at Holiday House

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One

ABBY POWELL DROVE THROUGH THE DOWNTOWN area of Silver Bells, Colorado, fighting the odd sensation that she had somehow slipped onto the set of a Hallmark movie.

This couldn't be real, could it? No town could possibly look so festive and charming and...perfect.

On this day before Thanksgiving, Christmas seemed to have already taken over the ski resort town. Snow was lightly falling, dusting everything with a soft, pearly powder. The holiday season was in full view, from the brick storefronts adorned with colorful Christmas lights twinkling merrily in the dusk to the wreaths on every door in sight to the crowds of shoppers in parkas and coordinating beanies who made their way out of the stores, arms heavy with bags.

If she rolled down her windows, would she hear Christmas music chiming through the early evening? She was tempted to check it out but glanced in the rearview mirror and decided her five-year-old son probably wouldn't appreciate a sudden ice-cold breeze.

This snow-globe perfection seemed like a different planet from Phoenix, where her apartment complex manager at least had made a bit of an effort to get into the spirit of things. Before they left, she had noticed a new string of lights on one of the saguaro cacti in the common area near the barbecue.

"Are we almost there, Mommy?"

She shot another glance at Christopher. "Nearly, honey. This is the right town. Now I only have to find the address."

"Good. I'm tired of the car."

She smiled at his overly dramatic tone. No one could sound more long-suffering than a five-year-old. "I know it's been a long drive, but you have been such a good boy."

"Course I have. Santa's watching."

Christopher had been obsessed with Santa since before Halloween. She wasn't exactly sure what had flipped the switch this year. If someone could figure out the inner workings of a five-year-old boy's brain, she wanted to meet that person.

Maybe her son was finally old enough that the concept of a benevolent gift-giver made more sense. Or maybe his friends at preschool had discussed it at length.

"If he is watching," she said now to her son, "I know he has seen a boy who's been a big help to his mom on this drive."

This trip, nearly eight hours, was their longest road trip together. Christopher really had been wonderful. She hadn't been sure how he would be able to entertain himself for the journey. This would be a good test for the longer trip from Phoenix to Austin in a month's time, when she would be hauling a trailer full of some of their belongings.

The only other long road trip they'd ever taken together

had been in February when they had driven the six hours from Phoenix to Southern California. They had spent a long weekend there playing on the beach and spending an unforgettable day at Disneyland, just the two of them.

Everything was just the two of them these days.

Abby ignored the pang that thought always stirred in her. She did her best. She and Christopher took many trips to the zoo, the aquarium, local museums and festivals. She made certain her son had a rich life, filled with swimming lessons, playdates and educational opportunities.

She never felt like it was enough. Did every single mother worry she wasn't hitting some mythical benchmark that defined good parenting?

Probably. Single or not, likely every parent, regardless of relationship status, stressed about the same thing. Why hadn't anybody warned her worry was part of the job description?

Her navigation system instructed her to make a right at the next street. At the stop sign, she signaled, then obeyed and was struck by how the business of the downtown area seemed to melt away, replaced by a serene, tree-lined road bordered with older homes behind iron fences, each more lovely than the one before.

Where was Holiday House, her destination?

She peered down the street through the soft, swirling flakes that had begun to fall harder, obscuring her view.

Navigation system or not, she expected she would know the place when she saw it. During the two years they had been college roommates, Lucy Lancaster had shown her plenty of pictures of the huge, graceful mansion where her friend had spent the happiest moments of her childhood.

Abby could picture it in her mind: three stories, with a wide porch across the entire front, a smaller porch on the second level and three thick Doric columns supporting them.

She drove slowly, peering at each house.

“Will the lady like us?” Christopher asked, his voice worried, as they continued on their way.

Christopher had been a precocious, adventurous toddler but since Kevin’s death, he had become more nervous around other people.

That was another reason she was moving to Austin—for herself and for her son. Both of them needed to reach outside themselves and embrace the beautiful world around them. Kevin, who had spent his entire career trying to help others, wouldn’t have wanted them to be insular and withdrawn.

Abby smiled in the mirror. “How could she not like us? We’re adorable.”

Chris giggled, his dimple flashing. The sound chimed through the interior of her small SUV, warming her heart. He was a complete joy. How dark and dreary her world would have been without him these past two years. In the early days of grief and shock, he had been the only thing dragging her out of bed in the mornings.

“Don’t worry,” she said now. “Winifred Lancaster is wonderful. She’s our friend Lucy’s grandmother, so you know she must be awesome.”

That connection seemed to reassure Christopher. “Lucy’s funny. She’s my friend.”

“I know. Aren’t we lucky to have her in our life?”

“I like it when she sends me stuff from other countries.”

That wasn’t an infrequent occurrence. Lucy had lived in a dozen countries since they lived together at school, always trying to make a difference in the world. It helped that Lucy had a freakish facility for languages and probably spoke eight or nine by now.

First she was in the peace corps in central Europe, then she worked for a nongovernmental organization in North Africa, focused on improving educational opportunities for girls. For the past two years she had taught English in Thai-

land. Wherever she traveled, she stayed in touch with Abby, often sending local treats or games or toys made by her students to Christopher.

Her life seemed exciting and fulfilling, though Abby wasn't entirely sure her friend was as happy as she said she was.

"In one hundred feet, your destination is on the left."

The disembodied voice of her navigation spoke through the car, making them both jump.

"Is that it? That big house?" Christopher asked, a new note of excitement in his voice.

Abby swallowed. Holiday House was vast, easily the biggest house on the block—the biggest one in town, from what she had seen driving here. The house and large garden took up almost half a block at the end of the road.

"Oh, my."

It was gorgeous, everything Lucy had said and more, illuminated with tasteful landscape lights as dusk gave way to night. How was it possible that she and Christopher were lucky enough to be able to spend a few weeks here? Abby wanted to pinch herself.

"I really hope she likes us," Christopher said.

Abby's cell phone rang with a FaceTime call before she could even turn into the driveway. When she saw it was Lucy, she pulled over to the side of the road and shifted her car into Park so she could safely take the call.

"Do you have spies watching for me or something?" she asked, only half joking when her friend's face flashed on the screen.

"No. I was just checking in, wondering how close you are."

"We couldn't be any closer." She turned her phone camera around so Lucy could see what Abby was looking at out the window—the beautiful pale house that gleamed in the snow.

"Are you just getting there?" Lucy's relief was obvious in her expression. "Oh, I'm so glad. How was your drive?"

“Mostly uneventful. We learned that Mr. Jingles isn’t a great traveler, but we made do.”

Their cat had thrown up in the first hour then yowled about every hundred miles, requiring a stop. She hadn’t minded too terribly, since Christopher always seemed to need a stretch and bathroom break around that same time.

“Hi, Lucy,” Christopher called from the back seat.

Abby turned the phone in that direction, where her son waved enthusiastically.

“There’s my favorite dude.”

“We went on a long car ride, only now I want to be out of my car seat.”

“You’re there, kiddo. I can’t wait for you to meet my grandmother. I think you two are going to love each other.”

“Okay.” That seemed to put the last of Christopher’s worries to rest and he put his headphones on to watch the rest of his show.

“Thank you so much for doing this,” Lucy said to her. “I honestly don’t have words.”

“Really?” Abby teased. “With all the languages you speak?”

Lucy rattled off a bunch of words that Abby assumed all meant *thank you*. She picked up *gracias* and *merci*, but that was it.

“Seriously, I can’t thank you enough. I still can’t believe you agreed to drop everything to help out Winnie. You’re going to love her, too, I promise.”

Abby shrugged. “The timing was right. My last day at the hospital was Saturday and we were only going to spend the month kicking around Phoenix before the move to Austin.”

The past twenty-four hours were a blur, really, from the moment Lucy had called her, frantic, to tell her that her beloved grandmother had sustained a serious fall. She was in the hospital with a broken wrist, sprained ankle and bruised ribs. She needed home care in order to stay in her house, and

did Abby have any friends from nursing school in Colorado who might be looking for work?

She wasn't sure if Lucy had asked her to come out or if Abby had offered. It didn't matter, she supposed. By the end of the phone call, she had agreed to travel to Colorado for a few weeks to help Winifred, until Lucy could finish her school term and make it home to Silver Bells herself.

It would be a lovely adventure for her and Christopher, she told herself again, as she had repeated about as often as Jingles and Christopher had needed bathroom breaks.

She wanted to give her son the best Christmas ever and couldn't imagine a better place to do that than Silver Bells, a beautiful historic winter resort town tucked into the Rocky Mountains. They weren't staying the entire month and expected to be back in Phoenix for Christmas itself. Two weeks should be enough to enjoy the holiday spirit in this beautiful town.

"You know I love your grandmother," she said to Lucy. "We'll all be fine."

Lucy hesitated. "There is one tiny complication I should probably mention."

Her friend was going to offer a complication *now*, when Abby was a hundred feet from her grandmother's door? "Please don't tell me I just spent eight hours in the car with a five-year-old and a dyspeptic cat for nothing."

"No. Not for nothing. But..." Lucy paused again. "I may have misled you about how desperate the situation was. Not on purpose, I promise. I was only going on the information I had."

"Misled me how?"

"When Winnie called to tell me about her accident and asked me to find a home nurse, she led me to think she was in dire straits. She told me Ethan, my brother, was insisting she go into a rehab facility."

“That’s often the best place for older patients after a fall, so they can receive supported care.”

“She absolutely refuses. Winnie wants to be home and I’ll admit, I don’t blame her. She loves Holiday House, especially this time of year.”

It was not hard to see why, Abby thought, looking at the grand house on display in front of her.

“Where is the part where you misled me?”

“She led me to believe that if I didn’t find a nurse, Ethan would have her carted straight from the hospital to a rehab center.”

“Have things changed?”

“Not really. But kind of.” Lucy looked apologetic. “I thought Ethan was going to be out of town until next week, and by the time he got back you would be there and it would be a done deal. I had arranged with Winnie’s friends to get her home from the hospital and for someone to stay with her until you could get there. Unbeknownst to me, my brother rearranged his schedule and ended up flying back to town this morning instead of next week. I had no idea he would be there, I swear.”

Okay. So she would have Lucy’s brother to deal with, too. No big deal. She had been a nurse for years, with plenty of experience dealing with arrogant doctors and demanding family members. How hard could Ethan Lancaster be?

Unless he had already arranged for Winnie to go to assisted living, in which case she *had* just traveled eight hours in a car with a five-year-old boy and said dyspeptic cat for nothing. “So do you need my help or don’t you?”

“We do. Definitely. Winnie and I need you more than ever. She really can’t be alone at the house, especially now with a broken wrist. If you’re not there, Ethan is sure to move her out of her house.”

“If she is in her right mind, he can’t make her go.”

As much as Abby adored Lucy, her friend's brother sounded like a jerk. During the two years she and Lucy had been roommates at Arizona State University, before she graduated and married Kevin and Lucy left to work overseas, she had never met Ethan. She knew *of* him, though, and knew he had been living overseas, managing one of the family's hotels in Dubai. She wasn't eager to meet him now.

"He might not be able to force her, but Ethan can be persuasive. He says this is the perfect opportunity, while she is recovering from her accident. He's been saying for years that Holiday House is too big for her and too much work. This latest accident will only reinforce his opinion. My brother can be stubborn. Like all the Lancasters, I guess. Once he makes up his mind, he can be immovable."

The whole thing sounded tangled and ugly, the kind of family drama Abby had always tried to avoid and of which she had zero personal experience.

She glanced behind her and saw that Christopher still had his headphones on.

"Are we going to have to barricade ourselves inside Holiday House with your grandmother and fight off your brother like that kid in *Home Alone*?"

Lucy grinned. "As much as I would pay to see that, no. Just be your amazing self, that's all. I talked to Ethan earlier today and told him the cavalry was on the way—namely you—that you were a nurse and amazing and would be the perfect one to stay with Winnie while she recovers, until I can get there. He's not happy about it, but what can he do?"

What had Lucy dragged her into? She hadn't said anything about her brother throwing a wrench in things during any of their previous conversations over the past twenty-four hours.

"I don't want to referee a fight between you and your brother, with your grandmother in the middle. I can find a hotel for tonight and go back to Phoenix tomorrow."

“I need you there. So does Winnie. Please, Abs. You’ll love her and you’ll love Holiday House.”

Abby had no doubt she would love the house, which might just be the most beautiful structure she had ever seen in real life.

She wasn’t crazy about the rest of it. She wasn’t good at family squabbles and didn’t want to be caught in the middle.

“Everything will be fine. I’ll be there in two weeks. At that point you can decide whether you want to stay and spend Christmas with Winnie and me, or go back and finish packing for your big move.”

She was here not only to help Lucy with her grandmother’s medical needs but also for Christopher, she reminded herself. She wanted this Christmas to be perfect for him.

Oh, she knew her hopes were probably unrealistic. No Christmas could be perfect, but it would have to be better than the past two she had been through.

Two years ago, she had spent the holidays still reeling from Kevin’s death, only ten days before Christmas, battling her own grief as well as that of a confused, sad toddler.

Her days had been busy dealing with the police investigation, paperwork and the hospital’s hollow apologies for their egregious security lapses that allowed an unstable patient to bring a loaded weapon into the facility and shoot the very resident who had been trying to help him.

The previous year, the hospital where she worked—across town from the one where Kevin had died—had been short staffed in the middle of a local influenza outbreak and she had been forced to work overtime through the entire holidays.

This year, she had vowed things would be different. Christopher had turned five the previous month, old enough to begin forming long-term memories. She wanted those memories to be good ones, not of a frazzled mom working long hours and too tired the rest of the time to have fun with him.

“I don’t want to battle your brother, Lucy.”

“You won’t have to. Ethan isn’t unreasonable. He might seem overbearing and bossy. Part of that is his personality and part of that is from his position as president and CEO of Lancaster Hotels. But underneath his gruff, he’s a reasonable guy. He adores Winnie and wants the best for her. We just differ a little right now on what that is.”

The man wanted to move his grandmother out of her home against her wishes. That didn’t exactly endear him to Abby.

“I guess we’ll see how reasonable he is,” she said, more determined than ever to stand up for Winifred Lancaster now.

Lucy’s face lit up with relief. “You’re staying. Oh, yay. I could hug you right now. I owe you big-time. Seriously. Anything I own is yours. I mean that. Which, okay, isn’t much, but I offer it freely.”

She smiled. Lucy had never been one to care about material possessions, which was one of the things Abby loved about her. Someone meeting her for the first time would probably have no idea her family owned an entire luxury hotel group.

“I will pay you that back in spades, I promise. Thank you. I’ll check in tomorrow to see how you’re settling in. Bye. Bye, Christopher.”

She turned around. “Lucy says bye,” she said, loudly enough for him to hear beneath the headphones.

He waved but didn’t look away from the screen.

Okay. She could do this. Abby turned to pull onto the driveway. Someone inside must have seen Abby’s SUV approach. The black iron gates slid open smoothly before she reached them.

Her stomach jumped with nerves as she continued up the long, winding drive and pulled up to the house.

When she climbed out to unbuckle Christopher from his car seat, her son gave her a winsome smile of thanks while their cat meowed from his carrier.

“Can we take Mr. Jingles?” Christopher asked.

Like the rest of them, the cat was tired of traveling, but she didn’t want to toss a rascal of a cat into what might be a volatile situation.

“We had better leave him here for a moment until we check things out. He’ll be okay in his carrier for a few more moments, since he has his sweater on and we won’t take very long.”

To be safe, she set a quick alarm on her watch to remind her about Jingles in twenty minutes.

The cat seemed content for now in his carrier. Abby left the dome light on as well so he wouldn’t be nervous, then walked up the big steps to the front door, Christopher’s hand held tightly in hers.

A few pine boughs decorated the window on one side of the front door but not the other, as if someone had started the job of decorating for the holidays and become sidetracked. Winnie must have been in the middle of it when she was injured.

Maybe Abby and Christopher could help her finish. It would be a fun activity for them, in between helping Winnie.

“Can I ring the bell?” Christopher asked eagerly.

“Go ahead.”

What child didn’t love ringing doorbells? she wondered as chimes sounded in the November air.

A moment later, warmth rushed out as the door was opened by a tall, dark-haired man in a white dress shirt and loosened tie. She had a quick impression of sculpted features and blue eyes much like Lucy’s. This could only be Ethan Lancaster and he wasn’t happy to see her, at least judging by his scowl.

“Hi. I’m Abby Powell. I’m a friend of Lucy’s. This is my son, Christopher.”

He didn’t smile a greeting. “I know who you are. Come in. Maybe you can talk some sense into my grandmother.”

He didn’t wait to see if they followed before heading back

down the hall. After a moment, Abby walked into a grand foyer dominated by a sweeping staircase.

She didn't know what else to do but close the door behind them and follow him, trying not to notice how his tailored shirt clung to a strong back and tapered to lean hips, or the way his hair curled just so at the nape of his neck.

She was exhausted. That was the only explanation she could find for the instant attraction curling through her.

She gripped Christopher's hand as Ethan Lancaster led her down a hallway lined with artwork she would love to examine in closer detail at a later time.

After what felt like forever, he reached an open doorway where she could hear a game show playing on a television.

Ethan Lancaster led the way into a huge bedroom decorated like something out of a Victorian bordello, with flowered wallpaper, fringe-edged red satin curtains and large dark furniture pieces. Dominating the room was a giant four-poster bed with a canopy that matched the curtains.

In the middle of the bed rested a petite woman with wrinkled features and hair the pink color of cherry-flavored cotton candy.

Perched around her were three little corgis, who lifted their heads long enough to yip a quick greeting in unison, then promptly closed their eyes as if they couldn't be bothered to care.

"Abby. Darling. So wonderful to see you. How long has it been?"

"At least a decade," she answered, walking closer to kiss the woman's cheek in greeting.

She had only met Winifred Lancaster a few times, when the woman came to visit Lucy.

Winnie was unforgettable. Though small in stature, she was the kind of woman who commanded attention wherever

she went, mainly because she seemed intensely interested in everyone around her.

Winnie had insisted on including Abby whenever she would do anything with Lucy. They had gone to dinner at several of the better restaurants in the Phoenix metro area. She had even met Kevin when he could break away from his med school classes.

Abby immediately sat down on the side of the bed and took the older woman's free hand in hers. "Well, I have to say, you look better than I had feared," she said, which made Winnie break out in raucous laughter.

"I'm not quite knocking on death's door, you mean."

"Not even walking up the sidewalk, from what I can see. Lucy tells me you had a bad fall."

"She tripped on one of the blasted dogs and tumbled halfway down the stairs," Ethan Lancaster said darkly. "How long did you lie there in pain, Winnie?"

His grandmother sent him an annoyed look. "Not long. Only an hour or so, until I was able to get to my phone and call for help."

An hour. It sounded like an interminable time frame. She couldn't even imagine it, though she knew the woman's injuries could have been much worse.

"Things aren't as bad as my darling grandson is making them sound. I only broke my wrist and sprained an ankle."

"Don't forget the bruised ribs and the pulled muscles in your shoulder," Ethan said darkly.

Winnie pulled a face that made Christopher giggle from halfway behind Abby.

"How can I forget them, when they insist on reminding me every time I breathe?"

She peered around Abby. "And who is this handsome young man? This can't be Christopher."

"Yes, it can," Abby's son answered rather defensively, which

made Winnie smile. “My name is Christopher Kevin Powell. I just had a birthday and I turned five.”

“I am Winifred Elizabeth Johnson Lancaster. My friends call me Winnie and I regret to say that I am much older than five.”

“I like your dogs,” Christopher said. “They’re cute. What are their names?”

She grinned with delight, though Abby didn’t miss the twinges of pain in her eyes. “Thank you. I like them, too. They are Holly, Ivy and Nick. See, Ethan? This is a young man of taste and refinement.”

“No doubt,” Ethan said, his tone mild and without inflection. He didn’t roll his eyes, but he might as well have.

“I’m so glad you’re here, my dear,” Winnie said. “Thank you so very much for coming to my rescue.”

“I’m happy I could help,” Abby said.

“I feel so much better knowing you can be here to help me.”

Ethan’s glower seemed to deepen. “You need to be in a facility where they can care for you properly. You can’t even shower yourself here.”

“This is my home and exactly where I want to be. Now I can be, since Lucy found a solution all the way from Thailand. Abby is a highly qualified nurse and, with her help for the next weeks until Lucy can make it home, I should be fine. Problem solved. She can help me get around, and you can go back to running your empire.”

“I had everything arranged with that nice new facility by the hospital.”

“Well, you can unarrange it. You ought to know better than to make plans for me without asking my permission. I might be old, but I’m not senile yet.”

His laugh sounded more frustrated than amused. “I’m well aware. You’re the sharpest old bag I know.”

Winnie didn't appear to be offended by this, at least judging by her hoot of laughter.

Ethan reached for her hand and the sight of that wrinkled, age-spotted hand in his made Abigail's knees feel a little wobbly. Probably just hunger, she told herself.

"I just want what's best for you. You know that," Ethan said.

Winnie turned her fingers over and squeezed his. "I know that, darling. I appreciate it. I do. But right now, spending Christmas in the house that I love is absolutely the best medicine for me."

His sigh held capitulation and annoyance in equal measure. "We need to have a serious talk after the holidays. You live in this huge, crumbling heap by yourself. It's not safe."

"Watch it, young man. This is your family's legacy. Before you call it a crumbling heap, maybe you should remember that without this house, you wouldn't have a hundred hotels spread across the globe, including three right here in Silver Bells. Your ancestor mortgaged this house to buy his first hotel after the silver mines ran out. Without that, we all would have been bankrupt."

She had a feeling this wasn't the first time they had had this exact same conversation.

"Now, Abby," the woman said, turning to her. "You and Christopher have been driving a long way. Ethan can bring in your luggage and help you to your quarters. There's a two-room suite just down the hall, so you'll be close to my room if I need you."

"That sounds perfect."

"Ethan can show you everything."

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" her grandson asked, undeniable worry in his eyes.

"Fine. Just fine. The dogs will keep me company. When you're settled, come back and talk to me," she ordered Abby.

“Ethan, darling, I’ll see you tomorrow for Thanksgiving dinner. I’m planning a late one, five p.m. You can still make that, can’t you?”

He sighed again. “Again with Thanksgiving. I thought you agreed to forget about it. I can bring you a meal from the hotel.”

“I didn’t agree to any such thing. Don’t be silly. A big Thanksgiving dinner here is a tradition.”

“Traditions don’t matter in this situation. You’re injured. The last thing you need to worry about is Thanksgiving dinner.”

“I won’t be worrying about anything. It’s all been arranged. I won’t have to lift a finger, trust me.”

“I can help,” Abby offered.

“I can, too,” Christopher said, though he obviously had no idea what he was volunteering to do.

“There you go.” Winnie beamed at her. “I have ready-made helpers. We’ll see you tomorrow. Five p.m. sharp. Will you help Abby with her bags now? Christopher, do you mind staying here and keeping me and the dogs company?”

“I don’t mind one bit,” Christopher said, plopping into a chair next to his new friend’s bedside with an expression of delight.

After another charged moment, Ethan walked out into the hall, all but vibrating with frustration.

Left with no choice, Abby followed him. The man looked even more stern and forbidding up close, his mouth set in a tight line.

He was gorgeous, she couldn’t deny that, with blue eyes, lean features and an appealing afternoon shadow along his jawline. He also smelled delicious, some intoxicating mix of expensive leather and a pine-covered mountain.

Not that she noticed or anything.

She had to clear the air between them or she was in for an

uncomfortable few weeks. "I'm sorry. When Lucy asked me to stay with your grandmother, I had no idea I was walking into a family disagreement."

His rigid expression eased slightly. "It's certainly not your fault. This is an old argument, I'm afraid. I've been trying to convince Winnie to move for years, but she insists she's fine here. Recent events have proven otherwise."

"Because she fell?"

He nodded. "I can't imagine how terrifying that must have been for her, all alone here. Next time, she might not be able to make it to the phone to call for help. I wish I could convince her she would be safer in a one-level condo somewhere."

She didn't know Winnie well, but Abby was still quite confident that would not be an easy sell. At the same time, she couldn't entirely fault the man for wanting to look after his grandmother.

"Do you want me to leave? I told Lucy we could go to a hotel tonight and return to Phoenix first thing tomorrow."

"That's not my choice. Winnie and Lucy want you here, so obviously I've been outvoted."

"Sorry."

"Again, not your fault." His rigid expression softened further until he looked almost approachable. "You've had a long drive. Let's get you settled for now. You're going to need all your strength to keep up with my grandmother."