

# *Miss-ing You This Christmas*

He came for a story. She stayed for love.



A Paige Turner Production

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## **Part One**

The drive from the airport had taken nearly two hours longer than it should have. Mark Holly drummed his fingers against the steering wheel as his rental sedan crawled through Pine Hollow, caught in slow-moving tourist traffic.

The town—if you could even call it that—consisted of one main street lined with brick storefronts that looked like they'd been frozen in time somewhere around 1952. Christmas decorations covered every available surface: wreaths on doors, garland strung between lampposts, twinkling lights in every window. An enormous Christmas tree dominated the town square, and someone had gone to the trouble of hanging what had to be thousands of ornaments on it.

It was aggressively quaint. Aggressively festive. Aggressively... everything.

It was exactly the kind of place that made Mark Holly's teeth ache.

The irony wasn't lost on him: a man named Holly, who couldn't care less about Christmas, sent to cover a town that clearly lived for it.

Mark pulled his car into a parking spot near what appeared to be the town's only bookstore and checked his phone. Still no signal. Of course. He'd lost reception about twenty miles back.

Mark grabbed his messenger bag and stepped out into the cold, his breath misting in the December air. Los Angeles didn't prepare you for this kind of cold. He pulled his wool coat tighter and headed for the bookstore, hoping they'd at least have WiFi. Through the window, he could see floor-to-ceiling shelves, a stone fireplace with stockings hung across the mantle, and—of course—a Christmas tree in the corner.

Winters Books was mercifully warm. A bell chimed above the door as he entered, and Mark surveyed the predictable interior: cozy to the point of claustrophobia, with armchairs clustered near the fireplace and tables stacked with books about holiday baking and small-town mysteries. A woman behind the counter looked up from her laptop, light brown hair pulled into a casual side braid.

"Welcome! Can I help you find something?"

"Actually, I'm looking for the Pine Hollow Inn. My GPS lost signal a few miles back." Mark approached the counter, his phone already out. He pushed his hair back from his face—it had gotten too long again, falling to his collar in dark waves.

"Oh, you're staying at Patricia's place? It's easy—just two blocks down Main Street, you can't miss it. Big white Victorian with the wraparound porch."

"Perfect, thank you. Do you have WiFi here?"

"Password's on the counter." She gestured to a small sign, then smiled warmly. "Are you here for the festival?"

"Working, actually. I'm a journalist covering it."

"How wonderful! I'm Emma, by the way. This is my place."

"Mark—" His phone started ringing as soon as it connected to the WiFi. Karen calling back. "Sorry, do you mind if I take this?"

"Go ahead." Emma turned back to some paperwork at her desk.

Mark answered, moving toward the window. "Karen, hey—"

"You hung up on me. What happened?"

"Lost signal. There's literally nothing for miles around this place." Mark lowered his voice. "Listen, I've seen the town. It's exactly what you'd expect. Christmas everything, probably fake snow machines and carolers on every corner."

Behind the counter, Emma's pen stopped moving.

"That's what readers want," Karen said. "Heartwarming small-town Christmas magic."

"Right. Magic." Mark couldn't quite keep the sarcasm out of his voice. "Look, I'll make it work. Do the interviews, get some quotes about tradition and community, blah blah blah, the true meaning of Christmas. Same story, different town."

Emma's shoulders had gone rigid. She wasn't even pretending to work anymore.

"Don't be too cynical," Karen said. "Try to find something genuine."

"No promises." Mark glanced around the bookstore. "Between you and me, these small towns are all the same. Everyone's aggressively friendly, everything's 'special' and 'tradition,' but it's just... quaint for the sake of being quaint."

Emma's jaw tightened.

"Just write something good," Karen said. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Mark ended the call and turned back to find Emma looking at him with an expression that had cooled considerably from her initial welcome.

"All set?" she asked, her tone polite but distant.

"Yeah, sorry about that. Work calls." Mark pocketed his phone. "Thanks for the directions."

"Of course." Emma stood up from her desk. "You know what? Let me get you some hot cocoa. On the house. As a welcome to Pine Hollow."

"Oh, you don't have to—"

"I insist. It's a town tradition, welcoming visitors with something warm." There was an edge to her voice now. "We're very big on tradition here."

Emma disappeared into a back room and returned with a to-go cup, steam rising from the top. "Here you go. Careful, it's—"

She stumbled. The cup tilted. Mark saw it happening in slow motion: Emma's hand slipping, the liquid arcing through the air, his own hands coming up too late. Hot chocolate splashed across his chest, soaking through his button-down shirt and the t-shirt beneath. The sweet smell of cocoa filled the air.

"Oh my God!" Emma grabbed napkins from the counter. "I'm so sorry, I don't know what happened, the cup just—are you burned? Are you okay?"

Mark held his arms out, hot chocolate dripping from his torso. The shirt clung to his skin. "I'm fine. It's fine."

"Here, let me get you something dry." Emma was already moving to a closet near the back. "We have a lost and found. Can't have you walking around soaked."

She returned with a sweater. Knitted, in shades of red and green with snowflakes across the chest and a Nordic pattern around the collar and cuffs. A Christmas sweater.

"This has been here since last Christmas, no one's claimed it. You can keep it."

In the small bathroom, Mark peeled off his soaked shirt and pulled on the sweater. It fit reasonably well even if the cut was a little off: a little snug across the shoulders, too short in the arms, and too loose at the waist. But it was warm and dry. The

Christmas pattern was ridiculous, but he was in no position to be picky.

Mark gathered his wet shirt and headed back out. Emma was behind the counter again, and when their eyes met, her expression was coolly neutral.

"Thanks for the sweater," Mark said carefully.

"You're welcome. Enjoy the festival." Her tone was perfectly polite and completely insincere. "If you leave your shirt here, I'll get it cleaned for you."

Mark left quickly, his wet shirt abandoned on the counter. He was pretty sure Emma had spilled that cocoa on him deliberately, though he couldn't prove it.

The wind hit him the moment he stepped outside. A sharp gust that sent his hair whipping around his face. Mark fumbled with his car keys, trying to unlock the door while holding his messenger bag.

He drove the two blocks and parked in front of a white Victorian house with a wraparound porch and a hand-painted sign. Grabbing his suitcase from the trunk, Mark headed inside, his hair still wind-blown and messy around his face.

The interior was exactly what he expected: floral wallpaper, antique furniture, the faint smell of lavender and cinnamon. A woman in her sixties rose from behind the desk and smiled warmly.

"Welcome to Pine Hollow Inn! You must be our guest from Los Angeles. I'm Patricia."

"Yes, that's me." Mark set down his suitcase, ready to check in and finally get to his room.

Patricia consulted her computer, then smiled even brighter. "Welcome to Pine Hollow, Miss Marks! We've put you in the Rose Room—it's our nicest suite, overlooks the town square. Perfect for getting inspired for your article! Now let me grab your key."

"I'm sorry, Miss—?"

She disappeared through a door behind the desk. Mark stared after her. He must've misheard her. Yes, that had to be it.

"Here we are!" Patricia hustled back with an old-fashioned key on a brass fob. "Room 3, top of the stairs and to the right. I'll have your bags taken up. In the meantime, the welcome reception just started in our dining room. Everyone's so excited to meet you!"

"The what?"

"The reception for festival participants and volunteers. I mentioned it in my confirmation email—didn't you see it?" Patricia was already coming around the desk. "No matter, you're here now! Let me take you in and introduce you around."

"Wait, I should probably—" Mark gestured vaguely at himself, and then towards the staircase.

"You look lovely, Miss Marks! Very festive. Come on, everyone's waiting."

Before Mark could protest further, Patricia had taken his arm and was guiding him toward a set of double doors. Mark caught a glimpse of himself in a decorative mirror as they passed.

The Christmas sweater was decidedly feminine now that he really looked at it, with its fitted waist and slightly flared hem, its half-sleeves. His hair, loose and voluminous from the wind, falling in dark waves around his face. His delicate features, cheeks rosy from the cold.

If you didn't look too hard, he looked like a woman.

"Here we are!" Patricia pushed open the doors to reveal a room full of people. "Everyone, this is our visiting journalist from Los Angeles!"

Faces turned toward them. Smiling, welcoming faces.

"This is Miss Holly Marks," Patricia announced proudly. "She'll be covering our festival for her publication. Let's all make her feel welcome!"

Miss Holly Marks.

The registration must have been entered backward. Holly, Mark S. instead of Mark S. Holly. And Patricia, seeing the Christmas sweater and the long hair, had assumed...

Mark opened his mouth to correct her. To explain the mistake. But Patricia was already introducing people, and they were coming forward to shake his hand, and the moment to interrupt politely had passed.

"I'm Sarah Mitchell, I run the bakery. Welcome to Pine Hollow!"

"Tom Walsh, fire chief. Great to have you here."

"Jennifer Hayes, I teach at the elementary school."

The names blurred together. Mark shook hands, smiled, tried to figure out how to correct this without making it mortifyingly awkward for everyone involved.

"Let me get you some cider," Patricia said, guiding him toward a refreshment table laden with cookies and drinks. "You must be tired from your drive."

"Actually, I should clarify something—" Mark started.

"Patricia, you didn't tell me our journalist was here!" A woman in her forties approached, elegant in a burgundy dress. "I'm Claire Donovan. I do costumes for the children's pageant. I'd love to talk to you about the creative process, if you're interested."

"Of course, I'd be happy to—"

"Holly!" Patricia handed him a cup of hot cider. "That's such a lovely name. Very fitting for someone covering a Christmas festival."

Mark took the cider automatically. The warmth of the cup seeped into his hands. Everyone was looking at him with such genuine welcome, such warmth.

He should tell them. Should explain right now that there had been a mix-up, that he was actually Mark Holly, male journalist from LA, and someone had gotten his name backward.

But the words stuck in his throat. It would be so awkward. Embarrassing for Patricia, who'd already introduced him to a room full of people. And he'd still be stuck here for three days, being the journalist who'd been mistaken for a woman. Small towns thrived on gossip.

Maybe... maybe he could just let it go for now. Fix it later, privately, when it wouldn't cause a scene.

"Thank you," Mark heard himself say. "Everyone's been very welcoming."

Patricia beamed. "We're so glad you're here. Oh! There's someone you should meet."

She waved at a man across the room. He was tall, early thirties, with dark hair and an angular face that was classically handsome. He wore jeans and a dark green flannel shirt, and when he turned toward them, his expression was politely reserved.

"Luke! Come meet our journalist."

The man approached with an easy stride. "Luke Shepherd, this is Holly Marks from Los Angeles. Holly, Luke runs the tree farm outside town. Has been in his wife's family for three generations."

Luke offered his hand. His grip was firm, his gaze direct. "Welcome to Pine Hollow."

"Thank you," Mark said, hyperaware of how his voice sounded, whether it would give him away.

Luke's eyes traveled briefly over the Christmas sweater, but his expression remained neutral. "First time visiting?"

"First time," Mark confirmed.

"Mm." Luke nodded once, then seemed to run out of things to say. An awkward pause stretched between them.

"Luke's tree farm is one of the most beautiful in the county," Patricia filled in brightly. "Families come from all over during the season."

"It keeps me busy," Luke said, his tone making it clear he wasn't interested in elaborating.

"You should interview Luke for the article!" Patricia offered. "Get a local business perspective—"

"Maybe. I'll have to see." Luke's response was noncommittal, almost dismissive. "We're pretty busy this time of year."

Another pause. Luke looked like he wanted to be anywhere else.

"Dad!"

A little girl ran up to them. Maybe seven or eight, with dark hair in braids and a gap-toothed smile. She attached herself to Luke's leg, looking up at Mark with bright, curious eyes.

And just like that, Luke's entire demeanor transformed. His face softened, his posture relaxed. He rested his hand on the girl's head affectionately.

"This is my daughter, Lily," he said, and his voice was completely different now. Warm, gentle. "Lily, this is Miss Marks. She's a journalist visiting from Los Angeles."

"Hi!" Lily beamed at Mark. "Are you here for the festival?"

"I am," Mark said, caught off guard by the sudden shift in Luke.

"I'm in the pageant! I'm an angel and I have wings and everything!" Lily bounced on her toes. "It's going to be so good. Are you going to come watch?"

"I'll definitely be there," Mark said, meaning it. Lily's enthusiasm was infectious.

"You should sit with Dad! He always comes to watch me." Lily looked up at Luke adoringly. "Right, Dad?"

"Wouldn't miss it, bug." Luke said, smiling down at her. Then he seemed to remember Mark was there, and the warmth faded slightly. "We should let Miss Marks enjoy the party. Come on, let's get you some cookies."

"It was nice meeting you," Mark offered.

"You too." Luke's response was polite but perfunctory. He guided Lily toward the refreshment table without looking back.

"I see you've met Luke. He tries his best, but you can tell his heart's not in it anymore. He's been talking about selling the farm and moving somewhere easier."

Mark turned to find a woman standing beside him. Early thirties, hair in a side braid, wearing jeans and a green sweater. Her expression was amused, knowing.

And familiar.

The bookstore. The hot chocolate.

"You," Mark said.

"Me," the woman agreed. "Emma Winters. We met earlier, though we weren't properly introduced." She offered her hand. "Holly Marks, is it?"

Mark's stomach dropped. "Look, about the phone call—"

"Later." Emma's smile was sharp. "First, let me introduce my wife. Jess!"

A woman with short blonde hair and warm brown eyes joined them, slipping her hand into Emma's. "This is our visiting journalist?"

"Holly Marks," Patricia said, appearing beside them. "From Los Angeles. Holly, this is Emma Winters and her wife Jessica. Emma owns the bookstore."

"We've met," Emma said smoothly. "I lent Holly the sweater after a little accident earlier."

Jessica's eyes traveled over the Christmas sweater, and something knowing passed over her face, but she just smiled. "It suits you. Very festive."

"Everyone keeps saying that," Mark said weakly.

"Because it's true!" Patricia said. "Now, let me introduce you to Mayor Brennan..."

Patricia steered Mark away for more introductions. The room was warm, crowded, overwhelming. Everyone was friendly, welcoming, and completely convinced he was a woman named Holly. Through it all, Mark kept thinking he should find Patricia, should explain, should fix this before it went any further.

But every time he opened his mouth to make an excuse, someone else pulled him into conversation.

Mark accepted another cup of cider and tried to figure out his next move. Maybe he could take Patricia aside later, explain quietly, ask her to spread the word that there had been a misunderstanding—

"So."

Emma appeared at his elbow again, without Jessica this time. Her expression was bright with barely contained amusement.



"Holly Marks," she said, low enough that only he could hear. "Interesting name. Though when I searched online for journalists from Los Angeles with that name, all I found is one Mark Holly. Who is very much not a woman."

Mark's mouth went dry. "There was a mix-up with the registration—"

"Patricia got it backward," Emma said. "And when she saw the Christmas sweater and the hair, she assumed you were a woman." Emma's smile widened. "And you just... went with it."

"I was going to correct her—"

"But you didn't. And now you're in too deep to fix it without massive embarrassment all around." Emma looked delighted. "This is magnificent."

"Look, you've got to help me. Explain to Patricia privately—" Emma shook her head. "No, I don't think I will."

Mark stared at her. "What?"

"You heard me." She shrugged on her coat. "You got yourself into this mess. You can get yourself out."

"But you're the one who gave me the sweater!"

"You're also the one who spent fifteen minutes on the phone talking about how backwards and pathetic this town is. About how our traditions are garbage and nobody with any taste would care."

Mark felt his stomach drop. "You heard that."

"Every word." Emma buttoned her coat. "So forgive me if I'm not rushing to save you from a little embarrassment. Maybe this will teach you something about assumptions."

"This isn't just embarrassing, it's—" Mark lowered his voice as Patricia passed by. "I can't keep pretending to be someone I'm not."

"Then don't." Emma pulled on her gloves. "Tell them the truth right now. I'm sure they'll understand." Her smile was sharp. "Though you might want to practice your apology. Somehow I don't think 'sorry I've been lying to you all evening' is going to go over well."

Mark glanced around the room. Sarah was hugging Patricia goodbye. The mayor was pulling on his coat. Jennifer was gathering her things. Everyone had been so kind, so welcoming. The thought of announcing now that he'd been deceiving them—

"I didn't mean to lie," he said quietly.

"And yet." Emma adjusted her scarf. "Good luck, Mark. I'm sure you'll figure something out."

She turned to leave, and Mark felt panic rise in his chest. "Wait. What am I supposed to do?"

Emma paused in the doorway. "About what?"

"About tomorrow! I have interviews scheduled around town, and—" He gestured helplessly at himself. "I can't show up like this."

"Like what? Wearing a sweater?" Emma's expression softened slightly. "Look, I'll stop by the inn tomorrow morning. Seven-thirty. I'll bring your shirt back and we'll... talk."

"Talk about what?"

"About your options." Emma's smile returned, mysterious now. "Just don't do anything drastic before then, okay? No midnight confessions or running back to Los Angeles."

"I wasn't going to—"

"Good. Because the roads are going to be terrible tonight, and besides, you have a story to write. Isn't that what you're here for?" She gave him a little wave. "See you tomorrow, Miss Marks."

She disappeared through the door before Mark could respond.

Mark excused himself and climbed the stairs to the Rose Room, his mind racing. Emma would help. She'd said she would. She'd bring his shirt back and they'd "talk" and somehow this would all get sorted out.

He just had to make it through one night. One night, and tomorrow everything would be back to normal.

Mark unlocked his door and stepped into the rose-papered room. His suitcase sat on the luggage rack. The bed looked impossibly inviting. Through the window, snowflakes glinted in the moonlight.

Mark set his phone on the nightstand and went to the window. Below, the town square was empty, the Christmas tree glowing softly in the darkness. It looked peaceful. Perfect.

Mark pulled the curtains closed and started getting ready for bed, trying not to think about tomorrow, or Emma's gleeful

smirk, or the fact that at least once in the last few hours, he'd briefly stopped wanting to leave quite so urgently.

Outside, the snow continued to fall, soft and steady, covering Pine Hollow in white.

Mark woke to pale winter light filtering through the lace curtains. For a moment, he forgot where he was—then memory crashed back. Pine Hollow. The inn. The party.

Miss Marks.

He groaned and pulled a pillow over his face. Seven-fifteen, according to his phone. Emma would be here in fifteen minutes with his shirt and whatever "options" she'd cryptically mentioned.

Mark showered quickly, grateful to scrub away the previous evening. He pulled on jeans and a t-shirt from his suitcase, ran a comb through his damp hair, and felt marginally more like himself. The Christmas sweater lay draped over a chair, a physical reminder of how spectacularly things had gone wrong.

A knock at the door, precisely at seven-thirty.

Mark opened it to find Emma standing in the hallway, holding a large canvas tote and a garment bag draped over her arm. She was dressed casually—jeans, boots, a cream-colored sweater under her winter coat. Her expression was unreadable.

"Morning," she said. "Can I come in?"

Mark stepped aside, and Emma entered, setting her bags on the bed. She glanced around the Rose Room with obvious amusement. "Very on-brand."

"Emma, please tell me you brought my shirt so I can fix this."

"I did bring your shirt." Emma reached into the tote bag and pulled out his button-down, cleaned and pressed. "But if you wear it downstairs, everyone in town will know by lunchtime that you lied to them last night. Sarah will cancel. Luke will cancel.

You'll get nothing for your article except maybe some resentful quotes about city people who think they're better than everyone else."

She set the shirt on the dresser and unzipped the garment bag.

"Or," Emma continued, pulling out a dark green skirt and cream blouse, "you can commit to the role for three days, get the real story, and leave with something actually worth publishing."

Mark stared at the clothes. "You want me to keep pretending to be a woman."

"I want you to get the story you came here for. This is how you do it." Emma's voice was matter-of-fact. "Your choice. But if you're going to do it, we need to start now. Sarah's expecting you."

Mark looked at the skirt, then at his cleaned shirt, then back at Emma. This was insane. But she was right about one thing. If he came clean now, he'd lose everything. Three days of awkwardness versus going home empty-handed and explaining to Karen why he'd blown the assignment.

"Fine," he heard himself say. "What do I need to do?"

Emma's smile was satisfied. "Strip down to your underwear."

Mark's face went hot. "What?"

"I need to see what we're working with."

This was really happening. Mark pulled off his t-shirt and jeans, standing in his boxers and feeling absurdly exposed. "Okay."

Emma surveyed him with a critical, completely professional eye. "Not much body hair. That helps. Here." She handed him a pair of panties and a bra. "Bathroom's fine if you're shy."

Mark took the garments and retreated to the bathroom. The underwear were simple boy shorts in navy, the fabric softer and thinner than his boxers. He stepped into them, and they clung to

him in ways that felt too intimate, made him too aware of his body. Less coverage, less barrier between his skin and the world.

The nude bra was more complicated. He fumbled with the hooks, fingers clumsy, before finally managing to fasten it in front and rotate it around. The band settled around his chest, snug and constricting. The empty cups hung there, obviously empty.

Mark stepped out, and Emma was arranging items on the bed. She glanced at him and pulled out two flesh-colored silicone shapes. "Jessica will get a kick out of this. These are hers from a few years ago."

Mark blinked. "Your wife?"

"She doesn't need them anymore. Grew her own." She offered no further explanation, and Mark was too overwhelmed to follow up. "Go ahead."

Mark slid the forms into the bra cups. They had real weight to them, pulling on his shoulders in a way he hadn't anticipated. He looked down and saw the swell of breasts against his chest.

"Good." Emma stepped closer, adjusting the forms slightly, making sure they sat correctly. Her lips twitched. "Well, that's a look."

Mark followed her gaze. Women's underwear with a bulge clearly visible in front, contrasting with a bra with obvious curves, his bare legs. "This is insane."

"Probably." Emma handed him a robe, which he donned gladly. "Sit down. Let me see your hands."

Mark sat, and Emma took his hand, examining his nails with a critical eye. "You bite them."

"Sometimes."

"Nervous habit?" She pulled out a nail file and started working, the rasp rhythmic against his nails. "Or just bored?"

"Does it matter?"

"Not really. Just making conversation." She filed each nail into a rounded shape, smoothing the edges. "You know, most people would have run screaming by now."

"I still might."

Emma smiled and shook a bottle of pale pink polish. "Too late. Hold still."

The brush strokes were cool and wet against his nails. Mark watched as each nail transformed from ragged to glossy pink. It looked absurd.

"Let those dry," Emma said. "Don't touch anything."

She moved behind him, and Mark felt her fingers in his damp hair. "What are you—"

"Relax. I'm not going to scalp you." The blow dryer started, hot air and the pull of a brush through his hair. "Though you really should use conditioner. This is like straw."

"I condition," Mark protested.

"Not well." Emma worked methodically, sectioning and drying, creating volume Mark had never managed on his own. Then came the heat of a curling iron, strands of his hair wrapped around hot metal. "So, Luke seemed interested last night."

Mark's stomach flipped. "He was polite."

"He was cold to you, actually. Which means he found you interesting." Emma released a curl, moved to the next section. "Luke doesn't do polite anymore. Not since Emily died. If he doesn't like someone, he just... disappears. The fact that he stayed and talked means something."

"He barely said ten words to me."

"Exactly. That's progress." The curling iron moved through another section. "Usually he just nods and leaves. You should feel flattered."

"I feel like I'm losing my mind."

"That too." Emma sprayed something that smelled chemical and sweet. "There. Don't look yet."

Before Mark could protest, she'd spun the chair away from the mirror. Makeup came next. Cool cream smoothed over his face, brushes sweeping across his eyelids, the strange sensation of someone else touching his face with such casual intimacy.

"Fair warning," Emma said as she worked, "I'm not a makeup artist or anything. But I can give you the basics. Enough that no one should look twice."

"Close your eyes." A brush swept across his lids. "Other eye." "Look up." "Down." "Stop squinting, I'm not going to poke you."

Mark tried to hold still while Emma worked. Foundation, powder, eyeshadow—he could feel the layers building, transforming his face.

"You have good bone structure," Emma observed, dragging liner along his lash line. "Feminine, if you work with it. Lucky you."

"I don't feel lucky."

"You will when this works." She stepped back. "Okay, you can look now."

Mark turned to the mirror.

The person looking back was... different. The makeup had softened his features, made his eyes larger, his cheekbones more prominent. The styled hair framed his face in waves. The breasts created curves under his bathrobe.

But he could still see himself underneath. His jaw was still there, defined and masculine even under the foundation. His shoulders were still broad. His hands, even with the pink nails, were too large.

He looked like a woman. Sort of. If you didn't look too hard.

"It's not perfect," Emma said, reading his expression. "But it doesn't need to be. People see what they expect to see. They'll

expect a woman, so that's what they'll see." She pulled the tights from the bed. "Come on, these are easier if you sit."

The tights were a struggle. Mark had to shimmy into them, the sheer material clinging to his legs, compressing everything. Emma watched with barely concealed amusement as he nearly fell over trying to pull them up.

"Graceful," she said dryly.

"Shut up."

The skirt came next. Emma held it while Mark stepped in, then zipped it up the side. The fabric settled around his hips with unfamiliar weight, hitting just below his knees.

Mark struggled with the blouse, his fingers fumbling with the backward buttons. After the third failed attempt, Emma batted his hands away and buttoned it herself.

"I'm not going to be dressing you every morning, but we're running late."

The blouse fit snugly across the breast forms, but pulled slightly at the shoulders. Too tight there, too loose at the waist. Close, but not quite right.

Emma handed him the ankle boots. "Two-inch heel. Nothing crazy. But you're going to feel off-balance."

She was right. Mark stood and immediately pitched forward, his weight wrong, his center of gravity shifted. He took a few experimental steps. The skirt swished around his legs. The heels clicked on the floor. The breasts shifted with each movement.

"Smaller steps," Emma said. "You're walking like you're wearing sneakers. You'll trip."

Mark adjusted, taking shorter, more careful steps. It felt ridiculous. It felt unnatural.

It felt exactly like what it was: a man in women's clothing, trying not to fall over.

"Here." Emma fastened a small gold necklace around his neck. The metal was cool against his skin. Then clip-on earrings that pinched. "Stop fidgeting with them, you'll knock them off."

She handed him a brown leather purse. "Phone, wallet, keys, notebook. Everything you'll need for the day."

Mark transferred his belongings, the purse hanging strange and unfamiliar on his shoulder.

Emma stepped back and looked him over with a critical eye. "Okay. You'll pass. As long as no one looks too hard." She paused. "The jaw's still there. The shoulders are a bit broad. But between the makeup and the clothes and people's expectations..." She shrugged. "You'll be fine. Probably."

"That's not reassuring."

"It's not meant to be." Emma headed for the door. "Come on. Sarah's expecting you, and you'll walk slower in heels."

Mark grabbed his wool coat from the chair. "What about a coat?" he asked.

Emma glanced at it. "That'll be fine. It's cold out, no one's going to judge you for wearing a practical coat. Besides, I didn't think to bring one." She opened the door. "Ready?"

Mark looked at himself in the mirror one more time. The woman looking back was imperfect. Too angular in places, too broad in others. But convincing enough. Feminine enough.

Wearing a men's wool coat over a cream blouse and green skirt.

He touched his face, feeling the smoothness of foundation, the strangeness of his own features transformed.

"Holly," Emma called from the hallway. "Let's go."

The name sent a jolt through him. Not his name. Not really.

But for the next three days, it would have to be.

Mark—Holly—pulled on the coat and followed Emma out the door.

The inn was quiet except for voices drifting from the dining room below. Mark descended the stairs carefully, hyper-aware of each step in the unfamiliar heels. The skirt swished. The breast forms bounced. Everything felt wrong.

Patricia looked up from the front desk as they reached the bottom. Her face broke into a warm smile.

"Good morning, Miss Marks! Don't you look lovely today. That color is perfect on you."

"Thank you," Mark managed, trying to keep his voice soft.

"Sarah called this morning—she's very excited about your visit. Said she's making a special batch of cookies just for you."

Guilt twisted in Mark's stomach, but he smiled and nodded.

Outside, the morning was cold and bright. They walked down Main Street toward the bakery, Mark taking careful steps in his heels. People waved as they passed.

"Morning, Emma! Morning, Miss Marks!"

Mark waved back, heart pounding. But no one looked twice. No one seemed to notice anything odd.

The bakery appeared ahead, warm light glowing in the windows. Through the glass, Mark could see Sarah pulling a tray from the oven.

"You've got this," Emma murmured, then turned towards the bookstore, leaving Mark alone on the sidewalk. He took a deep breath and stepped inside the bakery.



The bell chimed. Sarah looked up, and her face lit up. "Holly! Come in, come in! I'm so glad you could make it."

She pulled out a chair, already talking about her grandmother's recipe, the smell of cinnamon and sugar filling the air.

It was working.

The interview went smoothly. Sarah was warm and enthusiastic, talking about her grandmother's recipes and telling stories while Mark took notes and sampled cookies that melted on his tongue. She never questioned anything, never looked at him oddly.

But then, toward the end of the interview, Sarah's smile faltered slightly.

"I hope you'll capture what makes Pine Hollow special," she said, refilling his coffee. "While we still have it."

Mark looked up from his notes. "While you still have it?"

Sarah's expression grew wistful. "The festival won't be the same without Luke's farm. But I understand why he needs to do what's best for his family."

"I'm sorry, what about Luke's farm?"

"Oh." Sarah looked surprised. "I thought everyone knew. He's selling it. After this season." She sighed. "His wife Emily's family owned that land for three generations. But since she passed... well, Luke's doing his best, but you can tell his heart's not in it anymore."

Mark wrote this down, his mind racing. "Do you know who's buying it?"

"Some tech company so they can build a data center." Sarah's voice dropped. "They're planning to bulldoze everything—build server farms across land where families have been coming for Christmas trees for decades. Can you imagine? Those windowless warehouses, visible from Main Street."

"That's... unfortunate."

"It's devastating," Sarah said quietly. "The farm is why tourists come here. They want the tree tours, the hot cider, cutting their own tree. It's authentic. Charming." She gestured around her bakery. "Without that draw, why would they come to Pine Hollow? My bakery, Claire's boutique, Emma's bookstore—we all depend on Christmas tourism. If that dries up..." She didn't finish the sentence.

Mark left the bakery with more than just cookie recipes in his notebook.

The pattern continued through the afternoon. Tom Walsh at the fire station mentioned in passing that the town's Christmas tree for the square had always come from Luke's farm. "Not sure where we'll get it next year with those server farms going in." Jennifer at the elementary school said wistfully that the kids loved the annual field trip to Luke's farm, but this year would be the last one. "Once you bulldoze it for a data center, there won't be anything to visit."

Everyone was trying to stay positive. Everyone was putting on a brave face. But underneath the Christmas cheer, there was grief.

By two-thirty, Mark understood: this year's festival wasn't just a celebration. It was a wake.

His phone buzzed. A text from Emma.

*Emma: how's it going? u should talk to Claire Donovan at Magnolia Boutique, she does all the costumes for the pageant. great story there*

Mark: *a clothing boutique?*

*Emma: she's a costume designer and knows everyone. trust me, it'll be good for your article*

Mark sighed and headed to the boutique. He'd met Claire briefly at the party last night—she'd been warm and stylish in her burgundy dress. Now, pushing open the shop door, he found her arranging a display of winter scarves.

"Holly!" Claire looked up with a bright smile. "Emma said you'd be stopping by. I'm so sorry about your luggage situation."

Mark blinked. "My what?"

"Your suitcase? Emma texted me this morning. Said the airline lost it and you've been making do with borrowed clothes." Claire's expression was sympathetic. "That must be so stressful, especially when you're on a deadline."

Mark's mind raced. What was Emma playing at? "Oh, that. It's... it's fine, really. Emma lent me some things—"

"Which was sweet of her, but let's be honest. Emma has many wonderful qualities, but fashion sense isn't one of them. Very... librariancore." She pulled out a measuring tape, paused, and then set it aside. "Let's do the interview first, then I'll get your measurements."

"I really don't think—"

"Nonsense. Consider it Pine Hollow hospitality."

The interview went well. Claire was articulate and passionate, showing him photos of past pageants, explaining her design process. But partway through, she too brought up the farm.

"This will be my last year doing Lily's angel costume," Claire said softly. "Luke mentioned they'll probably move after he sells the farm. Closer to a city, where there are better schools." She smiled sadly. "I understand. It's hard to stay in a place that reminds you of what you've lost."

Mark took notes, a picture forming. Luke wasn't just selling a farm. He was leaving. Taking Lily and starting over somewhere that didn't hurt.

"But enough sadness," Claire said, standing. "Let's talk about getting you some proper clothes."

"Claire, I appreciate the offer, but—"

"I insist. Really." Claire's smile was warm but firm. "Emma told me your suitcase might not arrive until after you leave. We can't have you stuck with one borrowed outfit. Stand up, let me see."

Before Mark could protest, Claire had a measuring tape out. She worked professionally, jotting numbers in a small notebook. Bust, waist, hips, inseam. Mark stood there, face burning, as she measured him like he was actually a woman in need of a wardrobe.

"Perfect," Claire said finally. "I'll put together some pieces for you. Professional but stylish." She waved away his attempted protest. "I'll have everything delivered to the inn first thing tomorrow. No arguments. We take care of visitors in Pine Hollow."

Mark left with a notebook full of quotes and a growing sense that Emma was orchestrating something beyond his control. What was she up to? Why tell Claire his luggage was lost?

He tried texting her, but got no response.

By the time he made it back to the inn, it was nearly six. Mark climbed the stairs to his room, his feet aching in Emma's boots. He just wanted to get out of these clothes, take off the makeup, and think.

He unlocked the door and stopped.

His suitcase was gone.

The luggage rack where it had sat that morning was empty. Mark checked the closet, under the bed, the bathroom. Nothing. His suitcase—with all his male clothes, his sneakers, his underwear—had vanished.

On the bed, carefully laid out, was a white nightgown. Cotton, with delicate lace at the collar and hem. Feminine and pretty and absolutely not his.

There was a note on the pillow in Emma's handwriting:

*You committed to three days. No backing out now! I'll give you your clothes back after the festival. The nightgown is a loaner—try not to spill anything on it. New wardrobe arrives tomorrow morning. You're welcome. —E*

Mark stared at the note, then at the nightgown, then at the empty space where his suitcase had been.

She'd taken his clothes. Emma had actually stolen his suitcase.

He couldn't leave now even if he wanted to. He had nothing to wear except what was currently on his body and whatever Claire delivered tomorrow. He was trapped.

Mark sat heavily on the bed, still holding the note. Part of him wanted to be angry. Part of him wanted to march down to Emma's apartment, wherever that was, and demand his suitcase back.

But a larger part of him recognized that Emma was right. He had committed. And some part of him that he didn't want to examine too closely wasn't entirely upset about being forced to continue.

He looked at the nightgown. White cotton, modest but undeniably feminine.

He was going to have to sleep in this.

Resigned to his fate, Mark began removing his clothes. The skirt first, then the blouse. The tights peeled off, leaving his legs feeling strange and exposed. The bra with its forms—the relief when he unhooked it was immediate, but his chest felt oddly light without the weight.

He caught sight of himself in the mirror and stopped.

His body looked... different.

Not dramatically. Not in any single way he could point to definitively. But his waist looked narrower. His hips looked wider. His skin was smooth, what little body hair he had seemed lighter, finer.

Mark ran his hands down his sides. Did his waist actually feel smaller? The curve from his ribs to his hips more pronounced?

Couldn't be. That was just from wearing the tights all day, right? They'd compressed everything, redistributed his shape. It would go back to normal.

He touched his chest. The skin was soft, smoother than usual. And was there a slight swelling beneath his nipples? Or was he imagining it?

“You’re imagining it,” he told himself firmly. “It’s been a long day. You’re tired.”

Mark pulled on the nightgown. The cotton was soft, sliding over his skin. It fell to mid-calf, the lace collar sitting delicately against his throat.

He caught his reflection in the bathroom mirror and saw a masculine woman getting ready for bed.

Mark washed his face, scrubbing away the makeup until his skin was bare and pink. His reflection looked back—features softer than he remembered. More delicate.

It was just the lighting. The exhaustion.

He climbed into the warm bed, the nightgown shifting around his legs. His phone buzzed.

*Emma: don't be mad. this is for your own good. Claire's putting together a much better wardrobe than I could. u can thank me later.*

Mark stared at the text for a long moment, then typed back.

*Mark: u stole my suitcase!!*

*Emma: borrowed. you'll get it back Saturday*

*Mark: I could leave. buy new clothes and just leave*

*Emma: u won't. u want this story. maybe let yourself enjoy this just a little bit. sleep well, Holly. big day tomorrow!*

Mark set the phone down without responding. He turned off the light and lay in the darkness, the nightgown soft against his skin, his body feeling strange and foreign.

Emma was wrong. He wasn’t enjoying this.

Except—

He thought about the way Patricia had smiled at him that morning. The warmth in Sarah’s voice. The easy way people had talked to him, opened up to him.

He thought about how natural it had started to feel, walking in the heels. Wearing the skirt. Responding to "Miss Marks" without even thinking about it.

"Three days," he reminded himself. "Two and a half, now. You can do this."

Outside, snow began to fall again. And somewhere in the darkness, Mark's body continued its subtle changes. Exhausted and confused, he slept through it in his borrowed nightgown, unaware that by morning, going back would be even harder than it already was.

~2~

## Part Two

Mark dreamt he was being squeezed by a boa constrictor. He awoke to find the nightgown twisted around his body like a rope wrung from both ends, cotton fabric coiled and cinched until he could barely breathe. He sat up, trying to pull it straight, the fabric sliding over his skin.

Having wrestled the nightgown into submission, the rest of it all came back to him. The missing suitcase. Emma's note. Being trapped in this role for two more days.

He threw back the covers and went to the bathroom, the nightgown flowing around his bare legs. In the mirror, his reflection looked tousled, androgynous. His hair was a mess of waves from sleeping on it styled. His face, bare of makeup, looked softer than he remembered.

Mark splashed water on his face and tried to wake up properly. It was seven-thirty. Claire's delivery was supposed to arrive this morning.

His phone buzzed. A text from Emma.

Emma: *morning! Claire should have dropped off clothes by now, check the door. also, u should talk to Elise at Classic Beauty. her team does hair/makeup for all the pageant kids. opens at 9.*

Mark: *I look like I slept in yesterday's hairstyle*

Emma: *then it's perfect timing* 😊

Mark found a garment bag hanging on his door handle. He brought it inside and unzipped it.

This was not Emma's practical wardrobe.

There were several outfits: dark indigo jeans in a tight women's cut, paired with a cream blouse that had flutter sleeves and a bow at the neck. A burgundy pleated skirt that would hit above the knee, with a fitted black sweater. A wine-red velvet dress with a sweetheart neckline and delicate crystal details. Formal, for the festival.

There were shoes. Black ankle boots with a chunky three-inch heel. Brown knee-high riding boots. Classic black pumps with a thin heel he was fairly certain wouldn't support his weight.

Underneath were packages of tights, delicate panties, and several matching bras of various styles and colors.

A note from Claire: *"These should get you through the rest of your stay. I erred on the side of style. Show these small-town folks what LA fashion looks like! —Claire"*

Mark sat on the bed, holding the velvet dress. It was beautiful. Soft and feminine and exactly the kind of thing an attractive woman might wear to a Christmas pageant.

There was no way in hell he was wearing it.

Mark took a breath and started with the basics. New underwear. Black, high-waisted this time, more fitted than yesterday's, lace accents that tickled as they settled into place. A matching black bra, which he was getting marginally better at fastening. The forms slipped into the soft cups with their now-familiar weight.

He looked at his options. The dress was too much. Too obviously feminine. The jeans caught his eye. Actual pants. The

most masculine option available, even if they were women's jeans.

Mark pulled them on. They were tight— incredibly tight—the stretchy denim clinging to his legs as he worked them up. He had to lie on the bed to zip them, sucking in his stomach. The waistband sat high, squeezing his middle. The fabric molded to every curve of his legs and hips.

He stood and looked in the mirror.

The jeans fit well through the legs and hips, emphasizing curves he didn't remember having. But at the crotch—

Mark frowned. He could see the clear outline of his penis through the tight denim. The jeans were designed for a woman's body, flat in front, and his very male anatomy was very obvious.

He couldn't wear these. Not without giving himself away immediately.

"Damn it," Mark muttered, struggling to peel the jeans back off. They clung stubbornly, and he had to shimmy and pull to get them down his legs.

Fine. The skirt then.

The burgundy skirt was shorter than Emma's had been, hitting a few inches above his knee. It was pleated, the fabric falling in neat folds that swished and moved with every movement. He stepped into it and zipped it up the side. The pleats settled around his hips, the skirt flaring slightly when he moved. More leg showing than yesterday, which made Mark immediately uncomfortable.

He was going to freeze in this. Tights. He needed tights. He found a new black pair in the bag, sheer and delicate, and slowly rolled them up his legs.

The fitted black sweater came next. It was soft, clinging to the breast forms and tapering at his waist. The neckline was a simple

scoop, showing his collarbones and the delicate gold necklace. He stepped into the black ankle boots with their three-inch heels.

Mark looked at himself in the mirror.

More feminine than yesterday. The shorter skirt showed a lot more leg. The fitted sweater emphasized his narrow waist and the swell of the breast forms. His hair was a disaster, though—flattened on one side, wild on the other.

He tried to fix it with water and a comb, but it was hopeless.

And his body—

Mark turned to the side, examining his profile. His waist definitely looked smaller than yesterday. His hips wider, filling out the skirt perfectly.

That wasn't possible. Bodies didn't change overnight. It was just the waist of the skirt sitting so high, he wasn't used to it. That's all it is.

Mark forced himself to stop looking. He was imagining things.

He grabbed his coat, phone, and purse—the weight familiar now on his shoulder—and headed downstairs.

At nine-thirty, Mark walked into Classic Beauty. The space was small but cheerful, decorated with tinsel and twinkling lights.

"You must be Holly!" A woman in her fifties approached, blonde hair styled in perfect waves. "I'm Elise. Emma said you wanted to chat about the salon's role in the pageant?"

"That's right," Mark said, pulling out his notebook. "I understand you do hair and makeup for everyone?"

"We do! Every single one of them. It's organized chaos, but we love it." Elise gestured to a chair. "Please, sit. We can talk while I work."

"While you work?"

"Well, honey, you can't do interviews looking like you just rolled out of bed." Elise smiled warmly. "Let me give you a proper blow-out, maybe trim those ends a bit. We can talk during—I promise I'll give you everything you need for your article."

Mark's heart hammered. "I really don't want to take up your time—"

"Nonsense. Multitasking." Elise was already sectioning his hair with clips. "Jamie! Can you come do Holly's nails while I handle her hair?"

A younger woman with pink streaks in her dark hair appeared. "Sure thing. Hi, I'm Jamie."

"Holly," Mark managed, feeling suddenly overwhelmed.

"Let's get you set up." Jamie pulled over a small table and arranged her supplies. "Hands here, please."

Mark placed his hands on the white towel while Elise began working on his hair behind him. It felt strange—two people working on him simultaneously while he was supposed to be conducting an interview.

"So," Mark said, trying to focus, "how many children are usually in the pageant?"

"About twenty," Elise said, trimming his ends with quick, precise snips. "Ages five to twelve. We start planning in November."

Jamie had started removing yesterday's polish, the acetone smell sharp in the air. "The littlest ones are always angels," she added. "They're so cute in the wings and halos."

"Luke Shepherd's daughter Lily is an angel this year, right?" Mark asked.

Elise's hands paused briefly in his hair. "She is. She's been so excited about it." Her voice softened. "I'm glad she'll have this memory. With Luke selling the farm and everything..."

"You've heard about that?"

"Everyone's heard." Elise resumed cutting, her scissors making soft snicking sounds. "It's all anyone can talk about, really. We're trying to stay positive, but..." She sighed. "This might be our last real festival. Without the farm as a draw, I don't know if tourists will keep coming."

"What color for your nails?" Jamie held up several bottles.

"Whatever you think," Mark said.

"Berry. It's festive." Jamie shook the bottle and began painting. The brush strokes were cool and precise, coating each nail in deep burgundy. "So are you going to write about the farm situation in your article?"

"I'm not sure yet," Mark admitted. "I'm still gathering information."

"You should talk to Luke," Elise said, blow-drying a section of his hair now, the heat warm against his scalp. "Though he doesn't like talking about it. He's pretty closed off since Emily died."

"I'm interviewing him this afternoon, actually."

"Good luck with that." Elise worked methodically, creating volume with her round brush. "He can be... difficult."

"Okay, don't move your hands at all," Jamie said, applying topcoat. "They need at least twenty minutes to dry. I'm going to do your brows while you wait."

"My brows?"

"They need shaping," Elise said matter-of-factly. "Nothing dramatic."

Jamie positioned Mark's head back and examined his eyebrows. She held up tweezers. "This'll sting."

It did. Each hair she plucked sent a sharp pain across his brow bone. Mark tried not to flinch, his hands still carefully immobile on the armrests, berry nails gleaming wetly. He couldn't take notes like this, couldn't do anything but sit still while Jamie reshaped his brows.

"So what made you want to cover a small-town festival?" Elise asked, curling another section of his hair.

"My editor thought it would make a good holiday piece," Mark said, trying to hold still for Jamie. "Human interest, community traditions, that sort of thing."

"Are you enjoying Pine Hollow so far?"

Mark thought about the past day and a half. The charade, the stolen suitcase, the way people had welcomed him so warmly. "It's been... interesting."

"That's diplomatic," Jamie said with a laugh, still plucking. "Emma mentioned your luggage situation. That must be stressful."

"Claire's been very generous."

"Claire's the best," Elise agreed. She stepped back to examine his hair—now styled in soft, glossy waves with professional layers framing his face. "There. Much better. Now, Jamie's going to do your lashes while I attend to another customer."

"Lashes?"

"They'll make your eyes look amazing. Now close your eyes and don't move." Jamie positioned his head into the light. "This takes concentration."

Mark closed his eyes and felt Jamie's fingers on his face. The process was painstaking—he could feel liquid being applied to his eyelids, cool then warming as it dried.

"So the pageant is on the last night of the festival?" Mark asked, eyes still closed, trying to maintain the interview.

"Right before the dance," Jamie said. "The kids perform at seven, then everyone heads to the dance at eight. It's the highlight of the whole festival."

Jamie worked in silence for a while. It took twenty minutes per eye—forty minutes total of sitting perfectly still, feeling like weight was accumulating on his lids.

"Okay, open," Jamie said finally.

Mark blinked carefully. His lashes felt heavy, thick. When he blinked, he could feel them moving, brushing against his skin. Jamie handed him a mirror.

His eyes looked completely different. Larger, more open, framed by dark, full lashes that curled dramatically upward. Combined with the shaped brows—no longer heavy but defined and arched—his face looked softer. More delicate. Feminine.

"Let's do your makeup," Elise said, returning. "Don't want you heading to the tree farm without your full face on."

She narrated each step as she applied it, apparently assuming Mark was interested in learning the latest makeup styles and techniques. Foundation smoothed with a damp sponge. Concealer under his eyes. Powder to set everything. Neutral eyeshadow in browns and taupes. The new lash extensions made his eyes even more dramatic with the shadow. A thin line of eyeliner. Pencil to fill in and define his newly-shaped brows. Highlighter on his cheekbones. Soft pink blush. Finally, a rosy lipstick that complemented the berry nails.

Mark looked at himself in the salon mirror. The styled hair with its professional layers. The shaped brows and dramatic lashes. The polished makeup. The berry nails.

"Thank you," he said. "Both of you. This was... very helpful. For the article, I mean."

"Of course," Elise said warmly. She handed him a small makeup bag. "This should get you through the next few days. Powder for touch-ups, the lipstick, some remover wipes."

Mark stood, testing his balance in the heels, his reflection catching his eye again. The woman in the mirror looked polished, professional, ready for anything.

Except he wasn't a woman. And Mark didn't feel like he was ready for anything.

His jawline was still there if you looked closely. His shoulders still a bit broad for the sweater. But the overall effect...

"I hope you'll write something that shows what the festival really means to us," Jamie said quietly. "While we still have it."

There was that phrase again. While we still have it.

"I'll do my best," Mark promised.

By the time he walked out of the salon in a daze, Mark had great material for his article and looked like he'd stepped out of a magazine.

He hurried to his car, the heels clicking on the sidewalk, his styled hair bouncing with each step, the short skirt swishing around his thighs. Next up, the interview with Luke at his farm. He needed to get moving.

He caught his reflection in a shop window as he passed and stopped.



That woman—polished, pretty, with perfect hair and dramatic lashes and a short skirt showing off her legs—was him.

And in fifteen minutes, Luke was going to see him looking like this.

Mark's stomach fluttered with something that might have been nervousness or anticipation or both.

He got in his car and drove toward the tree farm, his heart pounding, ready or not for whatever came next.

The drive to Shepherd Tree Farm took Mark through the outskirts of Pine Hollow, past the last cluster of houses and into open country. Snow-covered fields stretched on either side of the road, dotted with evergreens. He turned down a long driveway

marked by a weathered wooden sign: "Shepherd Tree Farm - Christmas Trees & Wreaths."

Mark's hands were tight on the steering wheel, his berry-colored nails bright against the black leather. The farmhouse came into view, a two-story structure with white siding and dark green shutters, smoke curling from the chimney. Beyond it were rows and rows of Christmas trees, their branches heavy with snow. A red barn stood to one side.

He pulled into the cleared parking area and killed the engine. For a moment, he just sat there, looking at himself in the rearview mirror. The dramatic lashes. The perfectly styled hair with its professional layers. The shaped, filled brows. He looked more convincing than ever.

And he was about to spend the afternoon alone with Luke.

Mark grabbed his purse and notebook, then stepped out of the car.

The cold hit him like a wall.

Wind whipped across the open fields, cutting through his sweater instantly. Mark wrapped his arms around himself, shivering hard. His coat—where was his coat?

The salon. He'd left it at the salon, so dazed from hours of being plucked and painted that he'd walked out without it.

"Shit," he muttered, his breath misting in the air. Too late to go back now. Luke was expecting him at noon. Mark walked quickly toward the farmhouse, his heels sinking into snow-dusted gravel, the wind making his carefully styled hair whip around his face.

Movement caught his eye. Luke was by the barn, stacking firewood. He wore jeans and a dark green flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up despite the cold. When he heard Mark's car door, he looked up.

And stopped. Just froze mid-motion, a piece of firewood in his hands, staring.

Mark felt heat creep up his neck despite the cold. He could see Luke taking it all in: the styled hair, the dramatic lashes, the burgundy pleated skirt blowing in the wind, the fitted black sweater, the boots with their three-inch heels.

Luke set down the firewood slowly, still staring. Then he seemed to catch himself and walked over, his expression shifting back to something more guarded. "You're late."

"I'm sorry. The salon took longer than—" Mark shivered hard, wrapping his arms tighter around himself.

Luke's eyes narrowed. "Where's your coat?"

"I forgot it. At the salon. I wasn't thinking—"

"City people." Luke shook his head, but there was something almost amused in his tone. "You're going to freeze. Come on."

He walked toward the farmhouse without waiting, and Mark followed carefully, his heels wobbling on the gravel. Luke held the door open, and Mark stepped into blessed warmth.

The interior was cozy. Hardwood floors, exposed beams, a stone fireplace with a fire crackling. Photos covered the mantle and walls. Luke and Lily. An older couple. And a beautiful dark-haired woman who must have been Emily.

"Wait here." Luke disappeared down a hallway and returned a moment later with a puffy winter coat, deep purple with faux-fur trim around the hood. He held it out. "You'll need this if we're going outside."

Mark hesitated. "I couldn't—"

"It was my wife's." Luke's voice was matter-of-fact, but something flickered in his expression. "She'd have wanted someone to use it. Better than sitting in a closet."

Mark took the coat, the fabric soft and well-cared-for. He pulled it on. It fit perfectly. The sleeves were the right length, the shoulders aligned, the way it closed around his body felt natural.

Luke looked at him for a long moment, his expression unreadable. "Looks good," he said finally, then cleared his throat. "Coffee?"

"Please."

While Luke was in the kitchen, Mark looked around. The house felt lived-in, loved. Lily's drawings on the refrigerator. A basket of toys in the corner. Books stacked on the coffee table. This was Luke's life, real and grounded and nothing like Mark's sterile apartment in Los Angeles.

Luke returned with two mugs. "Cream and sugar?"

"Just black."

They sat at opposite ends of the couch, the space between them deliberate. Mark pulled out his notebook. "So, tell me about the farm. How long has it been in your family?"

"Three generations." Luke's tone was professional, distant. "My wife's family started it in 1962. Her grandfather, then her father. I took over when we got married."

"And how long—"

"She died three years ago." Luke sipped his coffee. "Anything else?"

Mark tried a different approach. "What varieties of trees do you grow?"

"Douglas fir, Noble fir, some Nordmann firs." Luke's answers were brief, factual. "We plant new trees every year to replace what we harvest."

This was like pulling teeth. Mark tried again. "I heard from several people in town that the farm is really the heart of the festival. That families come back year after year—"

"They do."

"Can you tell me what that means to you? The tradition of it?"

Luke was quiet for a moment, looking into his coffee. "It meant something to Emily. Her family built this place. Created something that mattered to people." He looked up, his eyes meeting Mark's. "But traditions don't last forever."

"Because you're selling."

Luke's jaw tightened. "Who told you that?"

"Sarah. And Claire. And Tom, and Jennifer, and pretty much everyone I've talked to." Mark kept his voice gentle. "It seems like the whole town knows."

"Then I guess you don't need to hear it from me."

"I'd like to. If you're willing to talk about it."

"It's not really relevant to your article," Luke said, standing. "You're here to write about the festival. Not my personal decisions."

"The farm is part of the festival. And losing it—"

"Will be fine." Luke's voice was harder now. "The town will adapt. They'll find something else to draw tourists. Life goes on."

"Does it?" Mark asked quietly.

Luke looked at him sharply. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I just wonder if you're really okay with this. Selling your wife's family legacy to a tech company that's going to put your neighbors out of business."

"That's none of your concern."

"Maybe not. But I've talked to a lot of people in the past two days. And they all say the same thing. Luke's a good man, but he's been different since Emily died. Closed off. Going through the motions." Mark stood, closing his notebook. "I'm not trying to judge you. I'm just trying to understand."

Luke's expression was tight, controlled. "Look. You came all this way. I'll show you the farm. Give you the full tour. And you can write whatever you want about traditions and community

and the importance of Christmas spirit." His tone was bitter. "But don't pretend you know anything about what I've been through."

He grabbed his work jacket from a hook by the door. "Coming?"

Mark followed him outside, the purple coat warm against the wind. Luke walked quickly between the rows of trees, pointing out different varieties with clipped, professional explanations. Mark took notes, asked questions, tried to keep up in his heels.

"These ones are seven years old," Luke said, touching a branch. "They'll be ready next season." He paused. "Not that it matters. They'll all be clear-cut by spring. Make room for the servers and the power lines."

"You don't sound happy about that."

"I'm realistic about it." Luke kept walking. "The farm barely breaks even anymore. Big box stores sell artificial trees for half the price. People don't want to drive out to the country and cut their own tree when they can pick one up while grocery shopping."

"But the people I've talked to—"

"Are being sentimental. Which is sweet, but sentiment doesn't pay the bills." Luke stopped walking and turned to face him. "You want the truth? I'm tired. This place reminds me every day of what I lost. Emily loved this farm. It was her dream, her legacy. But it's not mine. And I can't keep running it just because it makes other people feel good about tradition."

There was pain in his voice, raw and real. Mark took a step closer.

"What if it's not just about other people?" Mark asked. "What if it's about Lily? About giving her roots, a place that's hers?"

"Lily will be fine. Kids are resilient." But Luke's voice wavered slightly.

"Are they? Or do they just learn to hide their grief because their parents are hiding theirs?"

Luke's eyes flashed. "You don't know anything about my daughter."

"You're right. I don't." Mark held his gaze. "But I know what it's like to go through the motions. To chase the next thing, the next story, the next city, because staying still means feeling everything you're trying to avoid."

The moment stretched between them, something shifting in the air. Then Luke's expression closed off again. "We should head back. It's getting cold."

They walked in silence, the purple coat keeping Mark warm, the wind carrying the scent of pine. At the farmhouse, Luke stopped.

"Look, I appreciate you coming out here. And I'm sorry if I was..." He trailed off. "It's been a long few years."

"I understand."

"Do you?" Luke looked at him, really looked at him, and for a moment Mark thought he saw something in Luke's eyes. Recognition, maybe. Or curiosity. Something that made his heart beat faster.

Then the moment broke.

"Dad!"

Lily burst out of the house, bundled in a pink puffy coat and boots. "You're back! And you brought Miss Marks!" She beamed at Mark. "Hi! Did you see the farm? Did Dad show you the trees? Did you pick a favorite?"

"He showed me everything," Mark said, smiling despite himself. Lily's enthusiasm was infectious.

"Are you coming ice skating tonight?" Lily asked, bouncing on her toes. "We're going to the rink in town. Everyone goes on festival weekend. It's so fun!"

"Oh, I don't think—"

"Please?" Lily looked up at him with huge, hopeful eyes. "You can skate with us! Dad's teaching me to go backwards."

Mark glanced at Luke, who looked trapped. "Lily, Miss Marks probably has other plans—"

"I don't, actually," Mark heard himself say. Maybe this would be his chance to get the real story out of Luke. "I'd love to come. If that's okay with your dad."

Luke's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly. He looked at Lily's excited face, then at Mark, then sighed. "If you want to come... we'll be there at six."

"Perfect," Mark said.

"Yay!" Lily grabbed Luke's hand. "This is going to be the best festival ever!"

"I should go," Mark said, suddenly feeling like he was intruding. "Thank you for the tour. And for the coat." He started to take it off.

"Keep it," Luke said. "You'll need it tonight. For skating."

"Are you sure?"

"It's just a coat." But the way Luke said it suggested it was more than that.

Mark walked back to his car, the coat warm around him, his heart beating against his ribs. In the rearview mirror, he could see Luke watching him drive away, Lily waving enthusiastically beside him.

This was getting complicated.

Mark touched the soft fabric of Emily's coat, felt the weight of the lash extensions, looked at his berry nails on the steering wheel.

Everything was getting complicated.

But for the first time since arriving in Pine Hollow, Mark wasn't entirely sure he minded.

Mark spent the afternoon conducting interviews: the mayor, the fire chief again for a few follow-up questions, a woman who ran the community center. Everyone was warm and welcoming, and no one looked at him twice. The skirt, the heels, the makeup, it was all just part of who they expected Holly Marks to be.

By five o'clock, he was back at the inn. He had an hour before meeting Luke and Lily at the ice rink. Mark went to his room and looked at himself in the mirror.

The makeup was holding up well—Elise's work was professional—but his lipstick had faded. Mark pulled out the cosmetics bag and carefully reapplied the rosy lipstick, trying to remember Elise's instructions. It took three tries, but the result was passable.

Mark stood and looked at the burgundy skirt he'd been wearing all day. Ice skating seemed like it would be easier in pants. He pulled out the dark indigo jeans from Claire's wardrobe, the ones that hadn't fit that morning.

Maybe he'd try again.

He stripped off the skirt and tights, then pulled on the jeans. The denim slid on more easily than he expected. Still tight, but manageable. The dark fabric stretched as he worked them up his legs, over his hips. When he reached to zip them, he had to adjust himself carefully, tucking everything downwards and backwards, as flat as possible.

He looked in the mirror.

The jeans fit. Really fit. His hips filled them out, creating curves that looked natural. His waist was narrow where the high waistband sat. And at the crotch—he turned to check from different angles—nothing obvious showed. The tight denim smoothed everything into a flat, feminine line.

"The jeans must have more stretch than I thought," Mark told himself. "Or I've gotten better at... arranging things."

He kept on the fitted black sweater from that morning and pulled on the brown knee-high boots. He zipped them over the jeans, the leather soft and supple. The look was casual, feminine, put-together.

Mark studied his reflection. The dark jeans tucked into the boots made his legs look impossibly long. His lashes were still dramatic, dark and full without any mascara. His eyebrows were perfectly shaped arcs. His hair fell in glossy layers around his face, still holding the style from this morning's blow-out.

He looked like he was getting ready for a date.

The thought should have bothered him more than it did.

Mark grabbed Emily's purple coat—it went well with the black and denim—and his purse, then headed downstairs.

The town square was beautiful at night—strings of white lights, the glow from surrounding shops, classic Christmas music playing from speakers. The temporary ice rink was crowded with skaters. Families, couples, teenagers.

Luke and Lily were waiting near the rental booth. Lily spotted him first and waved. "Holly! You came!"

"I promised, didn't I?"

"Have you ever been ice skating?"

"Not really, no."

"That's okay! Dad's really good. He can teach you." Lily grabbed his hand. "Come on, let's get you skates!"

Mark rented a pair of white figure skates and they found a bench. Mark laced his carefully, watching as Luke helped Lily with hers.

"So Lily," Mark said casually, pulling out his mental reporter toolkit, "are you excited about the pageant?"

"So excited! I get to wear wings and everything." Lily bounced in her seat. "Dad says I have to practice my line every night."

"What's your line?"

"The angel said unto them, Fear not!" Lily proclaimed dramatically. "I have to say it really loud so everyone can hear."

Mark glanced at Luke, who was focused on Lily's skates, but there was the ghost of a smile on his face. "That's a big responsibility."

"I know! Dad says I'm going to be perfect."

"I said you'd do great," Luke corrected gently. "Not quite the same thing."

Mark tried to leverage the moment. "It must mean a lot, continuing traditions like the pageant. Especially with the farm—"

"Ready?" Luke stood abruptly, cutting him off. His expression had closed. "Lily, stay where we can see you, okay?"

Right. Not talking about the farm. Mark mentally adjusted his approach.

They made their way to the rink entrance. Lily shot onto the ice immediately. "Come on!"

Luke stepped onto the ice, then turned and offered Mark his hand. Masculine courtesy.

Mark took it. The moment his skates hit the ice, his feet tried to slide out from under him. Luke's grip tightened, steadying him.

"Small steps," Luke said. "Don't lock your knees."

Mark tried to move forward. His ankles wobbled, his skates wanting to go in different directions. He'd spent the day trying to keep his balance in heels. This was worse.

"You really weren't kidding about never skating," Luke said.

"I'm from Los Angeles. We don't have a lot of ice."

"Fair point." Luke adjusted his grip, supporting more of Mark's weight. "Just relax into it. Push and glide."

They made slow progress around the rink. Mark focusing on not falling, Luke providing calm instruction.

After a few minutes, Mark tried again. "So how often do you bring Lily here?"

"Every winter. She loves it."

"That's sweet. Family traditions are—"

"Holly." Luke's tone was patient but firm. "I'm not doing an interview right now."

Mark felt his face flush. "Right. Sorry."

They skated in silence for a bit. Mark felt awkward, caught being too obvious. He was just trying to do his job, but Luke clearly had seen through it.

Lily circled back around them. "Dad! Remember that movie where the bad guys slip on the ice?"

"Which one, Lily-bug? That describes about five different movies."

"The one with the funny kid! He's all like—" Lily made an exaggerated surprised face and waved her arms.

Luke laughed. "The Wet Bandits."

"Yeah! That one's so funny."

Mark had no idea what they were talking about. Lily skated off again, and Luke glanced at him.

"You have no idea what we're talking about, do you?"

"Not really, no."

Luke looked genuinely surprised. "Wait, you've never seen Home Alone?"

"I've heard of it. Never watched it."

"That's..." Luke seemed to be struggling with this information. "That's like saying you've never had pizza."

"I've had pizza."

"But you haven't seen Home Alone." Luke was looking at him differently now. Curious, slightly baffled. "What about A Christmas Carol? Miracle on 34th Street? It's a Wonderful Life?"

"Nope."

"Elf? The Grinch? Even the claymation Rudolph?"

"I think I might have seen parts of some of these playing in airports," Mark admitted. "But no, not really."

"Are you Jewish?"

Mark laughed. "No. Just never really got into Christmas."

Luke had stopped skating, just holding Mark's hands to keep him steady while he processed this. "How is that possible? You're named Holly."

"Just my name."

"Still." Luke shook his head, but there was something almost amused in his expression now. "A woman named Holly who doesn't watch Christmas movies and doesn't celebrate Christmas, sent to cover a Christmas festival. That's..."

"Ironic?"

"It's something." Luke started skating again, pulling Mark along. "Must be lonely sometimes. Being on the outside of something everyone else shares."

Mark hadn't expected that. The empathy in Luke's voice, the understanding. He looked up and found Luke watching him with an expression that was no longer guarded. Just open, curious.

"Maybe a little," Mark admitted.

"Well," Luke said, and there was warmth in his voice now, "that's fixable. Christmas movies are easy. You just have to actually watch one."

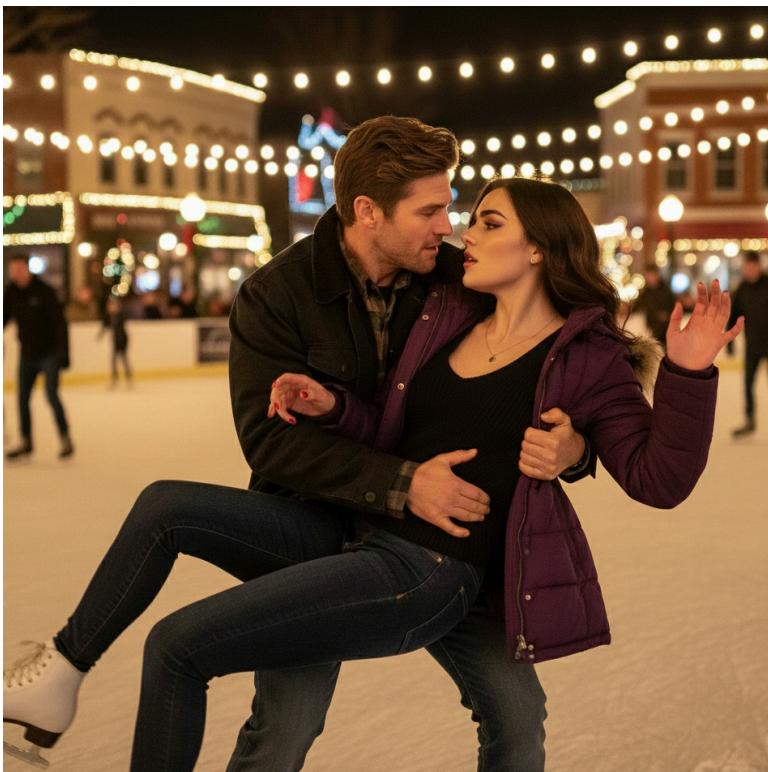
"Is that an offer?"

Luke's expression shifted—something that might have been panic, or interest, or both. "I—maybe. Someday. If you're—"

Mark's skate caught on a rough patch of ice. His feet went out from under him, his balance completely gone. He was falling—

Luke caught him. Arms around his waist, pulling him close, steadying him before he could hit the ice.

For a moment they were inches apart, Luke's arms solid around him. They both froze.



Luke's eyes were very green this close. Mark could see the exact moment Luke registered how close they were, could feel his breath, could see something shift in his expression. Awareness, attraction, fear.

"I—" Luke started.

"Dad! Can we get hot chocolate? Please?"

Lily had appeared beside them, oblivious. Luke released Mark quickly, stepping back, his expression shuttering.

"Sure. Yeah. Hot chocolate sounds good."

He carefully offered Mark his hand again and guided him off the ice. The moment was over, and Luke's walls were back up.

They got hot chocolate from a vendor and found an empty bench. Lily sat between them, chattering about her friends, about school, about the pageant. Luke sipped his cocoa and looked anywhere but at Mark.

Mark could feel the tension radiating off him. Whatever Luke had felt during that moment on the ice, he was fighting it hard now.

"Holly!"

Mark turned to see Emma approaching, holding her own cup of cocoa, Jessica beside her. She was bundled in a long coat and scarf, her cheeks pink from the cold.

"I thought that was you," Emma said, her eyes taking in the scene: Mark in the tight jeans and black sweater, sitting next to Luke, Lily between them. Her smile was knowing. "How was the skating?"

"I only fell once," Mark said.

"She did great," Luke added with a smirk. "Natural athlete."

"I wouldn't go that far." Mark felt Emma's assessing gaze and tried not to squirm. "Luke caught me before I actually hit the ice."

"How chivalrous." Emma's smile widened. "Pine Hollow at Christmas... there's something in the air. The town has a way of giving people what they need, even when they don't know they need it."

Mark blinked at her.

"Oh! We're decorating the community center tomorrow morning for the pageant. Could use an extra pair of hands. You interested?"

"Sure. What time?"

"Nine? It's not glamorous—hanging garland, arranging flowers, setting up the stage. But it's a good way to see how everything comes together."

"I'd like that."

"Perfect." Emma glanced between Mark and Luke, something knowing in her expression. Luke was very focused on his hot chocolate. "Well, don't let me interrupt. Good night, you three."

She walked away, and Mark watched her go, wondering what she was thinking. Emma had orchestrated so much of this—the makeover, the stolen suitcase, the suggestions of who to interview. Was all of this part of her plan? Or was something else happening, something even Emma hadn't anticipated?

"She's intense," Luke observed. "But she means well. Emma's always been protective of Pine Hollow."

"I've noticed."

They sat in comfortable silence for a few minutes, drinking their cocoa, watching people skate. Lily leaned against Mark's side, her energy finally waning.

"We should probably head home," Luke said reluctantly. "It's a school night, and someone's going to be exhausted tomorrow."

"I'm not tired," Lily protested, then yawned.

Luke smiled. "Sure you're not." He looked at Mark. "I can walk you back to your inn. If you want."

It wasn't enthusiastic, but it was an offer. Mark took it. "Sure. Thank you."

They started walking, Lily skipping ahead of them, pointing out Christmas lights and decorations. Luke kept his hands in his pockets, his shoulders slightly hunched against the cold.

"I'm sorry," Mark said after half a block. "About earlier. Talking about Lily to try to get you to talk about the farm. That was..."

"Transparent?" Luke's tone was dry but not angry.

"Yeah. Pretty transparent."

"It's your job. I get it." Luke was quiet for a moment. "But Lily's not part of the story. She's just a kid who's going to lose the

only home she's ever known because her dad can't keep it together."

The rawness in his voice made Mark's chest ache. "Luke—"

"Forget it." Luke shook his head. "Not your problem."

They walked in silence for another minute. The inn came into view ahead, warm light glowing from the windows. Lily had run ahead to look at a particularly elaborate window display.

Luke chuckled to himself. "You know, you showed up in Pine Hollow with no clothes, no coat... I'm surprised you even remembered your notebook. You're lucky this town is so welcoming."

Mark affected an exaggerated Southern belle accent: "Ah have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

Luke laughed, more genuine this time. "Yes, you're a regular Blanche DuBois."

"I—wait, you know—"

Luke's expression shifted to mock offense. "What, tree farmers can't know Tennessee Williams?"

"No, I didn't mean—"

"We have books out here, Holly. Some of us even read them."

But there was warmth in Luke's voice now, teasing.

Mark laughed, relieved. "I'm sorry. That came out wrong."

"It did." Luke smiled. Really smiled, for the first time all evening. "But I'll forgive you. This time."

They'd reached the inn. Lily ran back to them, and Luke put his hand on her shoulder.

Mark smiled. "Goodnight, Luke. Goodnight, Lily. Thanks for including me tonight."

"Goodnight, Blanche," Luke said, his eyes meeting Mark's. There was something in his expression. Warmth, humor, the ghost of that moment on the ice.

Then he turned and walked away, Lily's hand in his, leaving Mark standing on the inn's porch with his heartbeat loud in his ears.

He climbed the stairs to his room, exhausted but somehow energized. The evening had been awkward, tense, but it had ended well. Luke had smiled. Had teased him. Had walked him home.

Maybe he'd get Luke to open up. Maybe he'd get his story after all.

Back in his room, Mark stripped off his boots and peeled off the jeans, grateful to be free of the constricting denim. Then the sweater. Finally, he reached for the bra clasp.

The relief when he unhooked it was immediate. Mark shrugged out of the straps, pulled the bra and forms away from his chest, and—

Stopped.

The weight didn't disappear. Not completely.

Mark gaped down at his chest. There was still a swell there. Small, but undeniable. Real.

He touched them carefully. Soft tissue, warm to the touch. His fingers found his nipples—more sensitive than they'd ever been. When he pressed gently, he could feel the tissue beneath, warm and supple.

These weren't the forms. These were his.

Mark stared in the mirror. Small swells, not even an A-cup, but definitely there. The nipples were darker, more prominent. When he turned to the side, he could see the curve of them, the way they moved naturally with his body.

His hands were shaking. Did the breast forms cause this? Could this be a reaction to the silicone?

He ran his hands down his sides, feeling the narrow waist, the wider hips. Touched his face, softer skin, more delicate features.

His thighs rounder, fuller. He pushed his panties to the floor and found himself smaller, his penis noticeably reduced, his testicles drawn up tight against his body.

His body had changed. Was changing. This wasn't clothing creating an illusion. This was real.

Emma's words echoed in his head. Magic. Emma had talked about magic. The town giving people what they needed.

Had Emma done this? Was this some kind of spell, some small-town witchcraft?

Or was he losing his mind?

Mark pulled on the white nightgown with shaking hands. The fabric settled against his new breasts, the lace collar soft against his throat. He looked at himself in the mirror.

A woman in a nightgown. Not a man in costume. A woman.

He needed answers.

He picked up his phone and typed and deleted ten different texts. Turns out there isn't any good way to ask someone "are you turning me into a woman" over SMS.

Tomorrow morning, he'd confront Emma. Demand to know what was happening to him, what she'd done, what "giving people what they need" actually meant.

He climbed into bed and stared at the ceiling, questions churning through his mind. When sleep finally came, it was fitful and shallow.

In the darkness, the magic continued its work.

~3~

## Part Three

Mark barely slept. Every time he closed his eyes, he felt them. The breasts, shifting against his nightgown's fabric. And Emma's words kept echoing in his head.

"The town has a way of giving people what they need."

Dawn's first light finally began to creep through the lace curtains and Mark gave up on sleep. Throwing off the covers, he noticed the nightgown was even tighter across his chest.

Mark sat up slowly, looking down. The fabric was tented in a way it hadn't been last night. He touched his chest through the cotton and felt more weight, more fullness.

He got out of bed and went to the bathroom mirror.

The breasts were larger. Noticeably larger. Not the small growths from last night. These were proper breasts, A-cup at least, with more shape and definition. When he moved, they moved naturally with his body.

And his hair—

Mark touched his hair with shaking hands. It was longer, falling well past his shoulders now instead of just brushing them.

And the color had changed. No longer the dark brown he'd had his whole life, but a lighter, warmer brown with golden tones visible in the morning light.

He ran his fingers through it, feeling the length, the softness. It was his hair, but it wasn't. Just like these breasts were his, but they weren't.

The transformation had accelerated overnight.

Heart pounding, Mark pulled at the hem of the nightgown, pushed down the waistband of his panties, and looked.

Everything was still there. But smaller. Much smaller. His penis had shrunk to barely more than a nub, his testicles drawn up tight and diminished. He touched himself with trembling fingers, confirming what he was seeing.

Still there. But for how much longer?

Mark's lip quivered. This was real. This was happening. His body was changing whether he wanted it to or not.

*Get out, a voice in his head screamed. Get out of Pine Hollow before you change completely.*

But if he was going to reverse this, he needed answers first. Mark took a shaky breath and reached for the nude bra Claire had provided. He fastened it—easier now, his fingers knew the motion—and adjusted it. The cups filled completely with his real breasts. No forms needed. No padding. Just him.

The matching nude panties came next, sliding up his legs and settling over hips that were undeniably wider than they'd been three days ago. The fabric hugged curves that were his own now. His shrunken genitalia barely registered under the delicate fabric.

Then the jeans from last night. Mark stepped into them and pulled them up. They slid on easily, no resistance. No need to adjust anything, no need to tuck or arrange. The jeans fit his body perfectly, hugging his hips and thighs, the waistband sitting snugly at his narrow waist.

He looked at himself in the mirror. The jeans and bra showed the truth: his body had changed. Was still changing. By tomorrow morning, would there be anything left of Mark at all?

By eight-thirty, Mark was dressed in the brown boots and cream blouse, his hands shaking as he did his makeup as best he could, remembering Elise's instructions. The berry nails caught his attention every time his hands moved. The lash extensions made his eyes look huge and feminine. His reflection showed a woman with medium brown hair and real breasts getting ready for the day.

He grabbed his purse and Emily's purple coat and headed out, needing answers.

The community center was already bustling when he arrived. The space was organized chaos, everyone working together towards their common goal.

Emma stood near the stage, clipboard in hand, checking things off a list.

Mark walked straight to her. "Can we talk? Privately?"

Emma looked up, surprised. "Sure. Everything okay?"

They stepped into a side hallway, away from the noise. Mark's heart was pounding.

"Yesterday," Mark said, trying to keep his voice steady. "You said something. About Pine Hollow giving people what they need."

Emma's brow furrowed. "Okay?"

"What did you mean by that?"

"I—" Emma looked confused. "It's just something people say? Like 'there's magic in the air' or whatever. Small town mysticism. Why?"

Mark searched her face. She looked genuinely puzzled, not evasive. Not guilty.

"Has anything... strange happened since I got here?"

"Strange how?" Emma tilted her head. "Holly, are you feeling alright?"

Mark looked at her. Really looked at her. Emma had no idea. She wasn't behind this. She didn't know anything about what was happening to him.

"I'm fine," Mark said, forcing a smile. "Sorry. I just... didn't sleep well."

"Well, we've got coffee and donuts in the kitchen if you need some fuel." Emma squeezed his arm. "And thanks for coming to help. We can use all the hands we can get."

Mark followed her back into the main hall, feeling foolish. What had he expected her to say? That there was magic in the water? That the town was casting spells on him? That was insane. Magic wasn't real.

But his breasts were real. The changes to his body were real.

Mark spent the next hours hanging garland, arranging chairs, helping wherever he was needed. But his mind was racing the entire time.

If Emma didn't do this, then what was happening? Something he was eating? Was Patricia drugging him? No, that was crazy. Was it the air? Some kind of environmental trigger he couldn't identify?

He needed to leave. Get out of Pine Hollow before whatever this was went any further. His car was at the inn. He could go, drive back to LA, figure this out somewhere that wasn't actively changing him.

By eleven, Mark made his excuses and left.

Emma watched him go. Across the room, her wife Jessica looked up from the craft table where she was helping kids make ornaments. Their eyes met.

Jessica raised an eyebrow, a question. Emma's slight nod was barely perceptible. Then she turned back to her clipboard, a small smile playing at her lips.

Some things couldn't be rushed. Some things people needed to figure out on their own.

Back at the inn, Mark went straight to his room, giving only a clipped response to Patricia's warm hello. He'd leave now. Just get in the car and go.

He looked around for his suitcase before remembering Emma still had it.

Fine. He didn't need it. He could stop at a Target or something on the way to the airport, buy a men's t-shirt and jeans, change in the bathroom. He'd look ridiculous but he'd be away from here.

Mark grabbed his messenger bag and reached for his laptop.

The laptop.

The article. His deadline. Tomorrow. Shit.

Mark stood there, laptop in hand, and felt his resolve crumble. If he left now, spent the next several hours driving, even more flying home, he'd never make his deadline. He needed to write it first. Today. Then he could leave this afternoon.

Mark sat heavily on the bed and opened his laptop. He opened a new document, stared at the blank screen, and started typing.

*Pine Hollow (pop. 1,200) is the kind of town that appears on Christmas cards—picturesque main street, historic buildings, a town square that could be a movie set. This weekend, they're hosting their annual Christmas Festival, a tradition that draws tourists from across the region.*

He stopped. Read it back. It was fine. Boring.

Mark deleted it and started again.

*The Pine Hollow Christmas Festival is under threat. Not from budget cuts or lack of interest, but from progress. Luke Shepherd, owner of Shepherd Tree Farm, is selling his family's land to a data center developer. The farm has been the centerpiece of the festival for three generations, but after his wife's death, Shepherd is ready to move on.*

Better. More honest. But still missing something.

Mark stopped and started, struggling for the next two hours to get his article written, deleting words almost as fast as he wrote them. He stared at the screen. He had all the pieces. The farm sale. The threat to local businesses. The town's dependence on Christmas tourism. Sarah's worried face. Claire's sadness. Emma's resigned acceptance.

And Luke. Luke's pain, his guilt, his struggle between grief and responsibility.

But how did it all fit together? What was the story actually about?

Mark closed the laptop. He couldn't write this yet. He didn't understand it yet.

The festival started at six. The pageant at seven. If he was going to write about Pine Hollow's Christmas tradition, he needed to see it. The moment when everything came together, when the town showed what it was really about.

A few more hours. That's all. He'd see the festival, get what he needed for the article, write it tonight, and leave right afterwards, before anything else could change.

Mark looked at the garment bag hanging on the closet door. Inside was the formal dress Claire had provided for tonight.

He looked down at himself. The breasts were even more prominent now in the afternoon light. B-cup, definitely. Real weight, real shape. His waist was narrow, his hips curved. His thighs were fuller, softer. His face in the mirror was delicate,

feminine, framed by hair that now fell well past his shoulders in waves of medium brown with warm golden highlights.

He'd come this far. Might as well finish what he started.

The festival was already in full swing by six-thirty. The town square had been transformed. Lights strung everywhere, vendor booths selling crafts and hot drinks, music playing from speakers. The ice rink was crowded with skaters. Children ran between the booths with hot chocolate. Adults gathered in clusters, laughing and talking.

It looked exactly like something out of a Hallmark movie, Luke Shepherd thought.

The community center was crowded within minutes of the doors opening. Families filed in, taking seats in the rows of chairs facing the small stage. Children ran around excitedly while parents tried to corral them. The air smelled of pine and cinnamon, and Christmas music played softly from speakers.

Luke stood near the back, Lily having already been whisked away to the backstage area with the other pageant kids. He wore dark jeans, a white button-down shirt, and a dark jacket. He'd shaved and styled his dark hair. He looked uncomfortable, making polite conversation with neighbors while keeping his distance from the main crowd.

He didn't want to be here. Every conversation carried undertones of loss, of sadness over the town's future. People tried to be cordial, but Luke couldn't help feeling like they all blamed him for what was going to happen to them. It was exhausting. But Lily had been so excited, and he couldn't disappoint her. So he'd smile through the conversations, watch his daughter be an angel, then leave as soon as politely possible.

Luke glanced toward the door—

And froze.

A woman stood in the doorway, silhouetted against the evening light. She was scanning the crowd, her posture uncertain, like she wasn't sure she belonged there.

Then she stepped fully into the light, and Luke's heart stopped.

Holly.



She wore a wine-red velvet dress that seemed to glow in the warm lighting. The fitted bodice had a sweetheart neckline edged with delicate crystal details that shimmered like stars. Three-quarter sleeves covered her arms, and a thin satin sash emphasized her waist. The skirt fell to just below her knees in soft, elegant folds that moved gracefully with each step.

Her hair, falling past her shoulders in glossy waves, was a warm medium brown with golden highlights. Her makeup was minimal, subtle but polished, making her eyes look huge with those dramatic lashes. She clutched a small purse in her hands, each finger tipped with a berry-colored nail.

She looked beautiful. Not pretty, not cute. Beautiful. Like she'd stepped out of one of those classic Christmas movies, the heroine arriving at the town dance.

Luke couldn't move. Couldn't breathe. He just stared as Holly's eyes swept the room, nervous and searching.

Then her gaze found his.

For a moment, they just looked at each other across the crowded room. Luke saw her expression shift. Relief, maybe? Or nervousness? She took a breath, then started walking toward him.

People noticed. Conversations paused. Heads turned to watch Holly cross the room in that stunning velvet dress.

She stopped in front of him, and Luke realized he was supposed to say something.

"Hi," he managed.

"Hi." Her voice was soft, uncertain. "I wasn't sure if I should come."

Luke was still staring. He couldn't help it. The dress, the way it fit her, the crystal details sparkling in the light. Her soft hair, her plump lips begging to be kissed. The way she looked at him with those big eyes, waiting for him to respond.

"You look..." Luke's voice came out rough. He cleared his throat and tried again. "You look incredible. I mean, wow. That dress is—you're—" He stopped, feeling his face heat. "Sorry. I'm not usually this tongue-tied."

A small smile touched Holly's lips. "It's okay. I'm nervous too."

"You shouldn't be. You look..." Luke shook his head, giving up on words. "Really beautiful, Holly."

"Thank you." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, a gesture so naturally feminine and vulnerable it made Luke's chest ache. "Claire picked it out. I think she went a little overboard."

"She didn't." Luke couldn't stop looking at her. The velvet begged to be touched, rich and festive. The sweetheart neckline was elegant without being revealing. The whole effect was stunning. "It's perfect."

Holly's cheeks flushed pink. "Luke—"

"Dad!" Lily appeared, bursting through the crowd in her angel costume, complete with wings and a tinsel halo. "Holly! You came! And you look so pretty!"

"Thank you, sweetheart." Holly crouched down carefully in the dress. "You look beautiful too. Are you ready for your big moment?"

"I'm so nervous!" Lily bounced on her toes. "What if I forget my line?"

"You won't," Luke said gently. "You've practiced a hundred times."

"Miss Patricia says we're starting soon." Lily grabbed both their hands. "You have to sit together so I can see you both!"

Before either of them could respond, Lily had dragged them toward a pair of empty seats near the middle of the room. Luke found himself sitting next to Holly, close enough that he could smell her scent—something light and floral—and feel the soft velvet of her dress brush against his hand.

The lights dimmed. Patricia walked to the front and welcomed everyone. The pageant was about to begin.

Luke was acutely aware of Holly beside him. The way she sat, the way the dress draped across her lap, the way her hands were

folded nervously in front of her. The way she bit her lip slightly, watching the stage.

He should be focused on Lily. On his daughter's big moment.

But he couldn't stop looking at Holly.

The pageant was charming in the way that small-town productions always were. The children were adorable, some forgetting their lines, others projecting their voices too loudly. Mary and Joseph made their way to the stable. The shepherds watched their flocks. The wise men brought their gifts.

And then the angels appeared.

Lily stood center stage in her white robe and tinsel halo, her wings slightly crooked. She looked so small up there, so brave.

"Fear not!" Lily proclaimed, her voice clear and strong. "For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy!"

Luke's chest swelled with pride. She'd done it. Perfect.

He glanced at Holly and found her smiling, her eyes a little misty. When she noticed him looking, she whispered, "She's wonderful."

"Yeah," Luke said softly. "She is."

Their eyes held for a moment longer than necessary. Luke felt something shift in his chest, something warm and terrifying.

The pageant ended to enthusiastic applause. Parents rushed forward to collect their children. Lily found them immediately, throwing herself into Luke's arms.

"Did you see? Did you see? I didn't mess up!"

"You were perfect, Lily-bug." Luke held her tight, then released her so Holly could hug her too.

"You were amazing," Holly said, and Lily beamed.

Patricia appeared on stage again. "Thank you all so much! Now, if the children would like to go with their parents to change,

we'll be starting the dance in about fifteen minutes. Everyone's welcome to stay!"

The crowd began to shift. Parents herded children toward the back rooms. Others headed toward the refreshment table that had been set up along one wall.

Lily looked up at Luke hopefully. "Can I go play with my friends for a little bit? Before we have to go home?"

"Sure. Stay where I can see you."

Lily ran off, and Luke found himself alone with Holly again. The room was emptying slightly as people moved around. Christmas music had started playing, softer now, festive instrumentals.

"Do you want to—" Holly gestured vaguely toward the refreshment table.

"Actually," Luke said, "Would you want to dance? With me?"

Holly managed a nervous smile. "I—yes. Yeah, I'd like that."

They walked to the open space in front of the stage that served as a makeshift dance floor. A few other couples were already there, swaying gently to the music. The lights had been dimmed, strings of white Christmas lights providing a soft, romantic glow.

Luke took Holly's hand, his other hand settling at her waist. He could feel the satin sash under his palm, the soft velvet warm from her body. Holly's free hand rested on his shoulder, light and tentative.

They started to move, finding a rhythm. The dress swayed with each step, the fabric brushing against Luke's legs. Holly's hand in his was small, her berry-tipped fingers entwined with his.

"I'm not a very good dancer," Holly admitted quietly.

"You're doing fine." Luke's voice came out rougher than intended. "Better than fine."

They moved in silence for a moment, the music soft around them. Luke was intensely aware of every point of contact: her hand in his, his palm against her waist, the way she was looking up at him with those big eyes framed by dark lashes.

"The pageant was beautiful," Holly said softly. "Lily was perfect."

"Yeah." Luke's throat felt tight. "She was. Emily would have loved seeing that. She always said the pageant was her favorite part of the festival."

Holly's expression softened. "Tell me about her. About Emily."

Luke was quiet for a moment, surprised by the question. People usually avoided asking about Emily, like mentioning her would cause him pain. But Holly just looked at him with those open, understanding eyes, waiting.

"She was so warm, so happy. Our family's rock," Luke said finally. "The farm was a part of her. She grew up there, knew every tree. When we got married, taking care of it felt natural. Like we were continuing something important." He paused. "After she died, I thought I could keep it going. For her. For her memory."

"But?"

"But every day there just reminds me of what I lost. Every row of trees we planted together. Every family tradition she started." Luke's hand tightened slightly on Holly's waist. "I thought I was honoring her by staying. But maybe I've just been pretending I could keep her alive by keeping the farm."

Holly was quiet, just listening, just being there. It made Luke want to keep talking.

"I've been pretending about a lot of things," he admitted. "Pretending I'm fine. Pretending I can handle this alone. Pretending I'm not—" He stopped.

"Not what?" Holly's voice was gentle.

"Not lonely. Not ready to move on. Not interested in..." Luke looked down at her, at the way the Christmas lights reflected in her eyes. "Not interested in feeling something real again."

Holly's expression shifted. Something that looked almost like pain. "Sometimes we pretend because we're afraid of what happens if we stop."

"Yeah." Luke pulled her slightly closer. "Exactly. But you—you make me want to stop pretending."

"Luke—"

"You're genuine," Luke continued. "You don't put on an act. You're just... you. You say what you think. You ask hard questions." He smiled slightly. "More important, you make my daughter smile."

Holly's face had gone pale. She looked stricken. "Luke, you don't—"

"I know you're leaving tomorrow," Luke said. "I know this is complicated. But I can't pretend I don't feel—"

"There are things you don't know about me." Holly's voice was tight, almost panicked. "I'm not—"

"I know everything I need to know," Luke interrupted, his hand coming up to cup her face. His thumb brushed her cheek, and he felt her lean into the touch despite her words.

"Luke, please—" Holly's eyes were bright with unshed tears. "You need to let me tell you—"

"Whatever you think you need to confess," Luke said, his voice low and intense, "whatever you think will change my mind about you—it won't. I've spent three years being afraid to feel anything. I'm done being afraid."

"But I—"

Luke leaned in, slowly enough that she could pull away if she wanted.

She didn't pull away.

Their lips met. Soft at first, tentative, questioning. Holly made a small sound, her hands tightening on his shoulders. Luke pulled her closer, deepening the kiss, feeling her body against his, the velvet soft under his palms, her lips warm and sweet and perfect.



For a moment, everything else fell away. The crowd, the music, the complications. There was just this. Holly in his arms, kissing him back like she'd been waiting for this as long as he had.

When they finally broke apart, both breathing harder, Luke rested his forehead against hers.

"Holly—"

"I can't." Holly's voice was panicked suddenly. She stepped back, out of his arms. "I'm sorry. I can't do this."

"What? Why—"

"I have to go." Holly was backing away, her expression stricken, tears on her cheeks now. "I'm sorry, Luke. I'm so sorry."

"Holly, wait—"

But she was already turning, already moving toward the door. Luke started to follow, but Lily appeared at his elbow.

"Dad, where's Holly going?"

He watched Holly grab Emily's purple coat from a chair and disappear through the exit into the night. Snow was falling outside, visible through the windows, coming down harder now.

"I don't know, Lily-bug." Luke's chest felt tight. "I don't know."

Mark ran.

The heels weren't made for running, but he couldn't stop. He burst through the community center doors into the cold night air, snow falling all around him. He fumbled with the purple coat, pulling it on as he ran toward where he'd parked his car.

He'd kissed Luke. Luke had kissed him. And it had felt right, felt perfect, felt like everything Mark hadn't known he wanted.

But it was built on a lie. Luke didn't know. Luke thought he was kissing Holly Marks, a woman, not Mark Holly, a man. Except Mark wasn't even sure what he was anymore, with breasts growing on his chest and his body reshaping itself and—

He couldn't think about it. He just needed to leave. If he stayed, he'd keep changing. By tomorrow he might not be Mark at all.

Get in the car, drive away from Pine Hollow, away from the magic or whatever this was, away from Luke's hurt expression that was now seared into Mark's memory.

The rental car was parked down a side street. He fumbled with his keys, hands shaking. The velvet dress was beautiful but impractical, the skirt catching around his legs. The heels sank into

the snow. The coat was warm but not warm enough for running in December.

He got the door open and climbed in. Started the engine. The heels made it awkward, his foot kept slipping off the pedals, the angle all wrong. He should take them off, but there wasn't time. He just pressed the gas with the pointed toe, feeling the car lurch forward as he put it in gear.

The tires spun on the snow-covered road. The car fishtailed slightly as he overcorrected, his heel catching on the brake.

He needed to be more careful. The roads were getting slick, and driving in these shoes was treacherous. But he kept his foot on the gas, turning onto the main road out of town.

The snow was falling heavier now, fat flakes that the wipers could barely keep up with. Visibility was dropping. Mark leaned forward, trying to see the road.

He should slow down. Should pull over and wait for the storm to pass.

But he couldn't. If he stopped, he might keep changing. If he thought about what had just happened, about Luke's lips on his, about the way his heart had felt like it might burst—

The car hit a patch of ice.

Mark felt the wheels lose traction. He tried to steer into the skid, but the car wasn't responding. It was sliding, spinning, the world a blur of white and darkness.

Then the sickening crunch of metal as the car left the road.

Everything stopped.

Mark sat there, breathing hard, his hands gripping the steering wheel. The engine had died. The car was tilted at an angle, nose-first in a snowdrift. Outside, the snow was falling even harder, accumulating on the windshield.

He tried to start the engine. Nothing. Tried again. Click, click, nothing.

He tried his phone. No signal. Of course no signal.

Mark's breath was fogging in the air. The heat had cut off with the engine. He needed to get out, flag down a car, walk back to town, something.

He pushed open the door and stepped out into the storm.

The cold hit him like a physical thing. Wind whipped around the sheer tights, snow immediately soaking through the fabric. His heels sank into the snowdrift, and he stumbled, barely catching himself on the car door.

He looked around. Snow. Trees. Darkness. No headlights in either direction. No houses. No lights. Just the endless white curtain of the storm and the wind howling through the trees.

Mark tried to walk, but the heels were useless in the snow. He made it three steps before his ankle turned and he fell hard, velvet dress soaking through, snow burning cold against his skin.

At least the car provided some shelter from the wind. He crawled back and pulled himself inside, slamming the door against the elements. He was shaking violently now, wet and freezing.

He pulled Emily's coat tighter around himself, but it wasn't enough. The cold was seeping in through the wet dress, through everything.

Mark's eyes grew heavy. So cold. So tired. He leaned his head back against the seat.

He'd run away from the one place where he belonged, and now he was going to freeze to death in a ditch.

This was not how this was supposed to end.

**~4~**

## **Part Four**

Consciousness came to Mark slowly, then all at once.

Miraculously, he wasn't dead. But he also didn't know where he was. This wasn't the inn. The bed was different, the room was different, the light coming through the curtains was—

The crash. The snow. The car in the ditch.

Mark sat up slowly, his head aching slightly. He was still wearing the wine-red velvet dress from last night, now wrinkled and uncomfortable. A thick quilt had been draped over him—someone must have covered him after he'd fallen asleep.

He was in a small bedroom with cream-colored walls and simple furniture. Through the window, he could see snow covering everything, the trees weighted down with white, deep drifts against a red barn.

The barn. Luke's red barn. He was at the tree farm.

Oh no.

The door opened a crack, and Lily peeked in. When she saw Mark was awake, her face lit up.

"Holly! You're awake!" She pushed the door open wider.  
"Dad! She's awake!"

Footsteps on the stairs, and then Luke appeared in the doorway with a mug of coffee. He stopped when he saw Mark sitting up, and his expression was careful, concerned.

"Hey," Luke said softly. "How are you feeling?"

"I—what happened? How did I—"

"We found you," Lily said, climbing onto the edge of the bed. "Dad and me. We were driving home and I saw your car in the snow and Dad stopped and you were so cold and we brought you here and—"

"Lily, breathe," Luke said gently, but he was smiling. He came into the room and set the coffee on the nightstand. "You ran off the road about two miles outside town. Lily and I were heading home from the festival when we spotted your car. You were pretty out of it—cold, in shock. I got you here and put you in the guest room." He gestured to the dress. "We got you warmed up, covered you with a blanket, and let you sleep."

Mark's face flushed. He was acutely aware of the way his hair must look, the smeared makeup. "Thank you. For rescuing me. For—"

"You scared us," Lily said, her voice small. "We thought you were really hurt."

"I'm okay," Mark assured her. "Just embarrassed."

"You should be embarrassed," Luke said, but his tone was gentle. "Typical city folk, driving in that storm without four wheel drive. What were you thinking?"

Mark couldn't meet his eyes. "I—I don't know. I'm sorry."

Luke was quiet for a moment. "Well, you're stuck here now. Storm dropped another eight inches overnight. Roads won't be clear until tomorrow at the earliest." He paused. "So it's the three of us for a while at least."

Mark's heart jumped. Trapped here. With Luke and Lily. And if his body kept changing—

"I should—" Mark looked down at the dress. "I should change. This is—"

"There are clothes in the closet," Luke said. "Emily's. You're about the same size. Wear whatever you need." He put a hand on Lily's shoulder. "Come on, Lily-bug. Let's give Holly some privacy. Breakfast in twenty minutes?"

"Okay! We're making pancakes! Dad lets me flip them!"

They left, and Mark was alone with his racing thoughts and the ruined velvet dress.

From the closet, Mark selected a soft cream-colored cowl-neck sweater and dark leggings, grateful for something comfortable and warm. In the bathroom, he washed his face, scrubbing away last night's makeup. His reflection looked back at him: soft features, longer hair falling past his shoulders in waves of medium brown, the changes that had been happening for days now undeniable. A face that no longer needed makeup to look feminine. Which is good, because he didn't have any makeup here anyway.

He looked like a woman. He felt like one. The weight of the breasts under the sweater, the curve of his hips in the leggings, the way his body moved.

But not completely. Not where it mattered most.

Mark took a breath and went downstairs.

The kitchen was warm and bright, sunlight streaming through the windows. Lily stood on a step stool at the stove, carefully watching a pancake. Luke stood beside her, supervising, ready to catch her if she wobbled.

"Okay, now!" Luke said, and Lily flipped the pancake with intense concentration. It landed perfectly, and she squealed with delight.

"I did it! Did you see, Holly?"

"I saw," Mark said, smiling despite everything. "That was impressive."

They ate breakfast together. Pancakes with maple syrup, bacon, orange juice. Lily chattered about the pageant, about her friends, about how she'd spotted Mark's car last night. Luke was quieter, but he kept glancing at Mark.

After breakfast, Luke helped Lily down from her chair. "Lily-bug, why don't you go pick out which ornaments you want on the tree? Holly and I need to talk for a minute."

"Okay!" Lily ran off to the living room.

Luke sat back down across from Mark, his expression serious. "About last night. At the festival."

Mark's chest tightened. He'd been dreading this.

"When I kissed you, and you ran—" Luke stopped, choosing his words carefully. "I need to know if I misread things. If I did something you didn't want."

"No," Mark said quickly. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"Then why did you leave like that?"

Mark looked down at his coffee. "It felt like starting something I couldn't finish. It wasn't fair to either of us."

Luke was quiet for a long moment. "Okay," he said finally. "I won't push. But Holly—" He reached across the table and squeezed Mark's hand once. "I meant what I said. All of it."

Then he stood. "Come on. Let's go decorate that tree before Lily hangs all the ornaments herself."

They spent the morning decorating. Luke brought out boxes of ornaments, each one with a story. Lily hung them on the lower branches with enthusiasm, asking Luke to lift her for the higher ones. Luke added the special pieces: glass ornaments that had been Emily's grandmother's, a star for the top that Lily insisted Mark should place.

As Mark stood on the step stool, reaching to position the star, he felt it. The rightness of this moment. The three of them together, creating something beautiful.

"Perfect," Luke said softly, looking up at him. And Mark wasn't sure if he meant the star or something else.

They took a walk outside when the sun came out briefly, Lily making snow angels while Luke showed Morgan the farm covered in white, beautiful and peaceful.

They built a snowman in front of the barn, Lily insisting it needed a scarf and hat. Luke disappeared and returned with an old top hat and striped scarf, and Morgan couldn't help but laugh at the result, slightly lopsided but charming.

When they came back inside, shaking snow from their coats, Lily announced she wanted to make cookies.

"Grammy's snickerdoodles?" she asked hopefully.

"Grammy's snickerdoodles," Luke confirmed, pulling out the worn recipe card.

They gathered in the kitchen, Luke measuring ingredients, Mark creaming butter and sugar, Lily carefully cracking eggs with her tongue between her teeth in concentration.

"You have to mix it exactly right," Lily explained seriously to Mark. "Or they won't taste like Grammy's."

"I'll do my best," Mark promised.

Luke showed Mark how to roll the dough into balls, then roll them in cinnamon sugar. They worked together, and Mark felt the morning's tension slowly dissolving. Lily helped, her small hands working carefully, leaving floury fingerprints everywhere.



"Dad says mom used to make these every Christmas," Lily said. "He says I'm good at it like she was."

"You are good at it," Mark said gently.

"She would have liked you," Lily continued, placing another dough ball on the baking sheet. "Dad's been really happy since you came to town. He smiles more. He doesn't look so sad all the time."

Luke's hands stilled at the counter. He glanced at Mark, something vulnerable in his expression.

"Your dad's a good man," Mark said carefully. "He's just been through a lot."

"I know." Lily nodded wisely. "Losing someone you love is really hard. That's what Grammy says. But she also says love

doesn't go away just because someone dies. It stays with you. And there's always room for new love too."

Out of the mouths of babes.

They baked in shifts, filling the kitchen with the warm scent of cinnamon and sugar. Lily insisted on taste-testing every batch, declaring each one "perfect!" Luke made hot chocolate, and they sat at the kitchen table eating warm cookies and talking.

And slowly, sitting in that warm kitchen with flour on his hands and hot chocolate warming his chest and Lily's laughter filling the air, Mark felt his resistance crumbling.

This was what he wanted. All of it. The warmth, the family, the traditions, the belonging. Not just for a day or a week, but forever.

He wanted to wake up in this house every morning. Wanted to bake cookies with Lily every Christmas. Wanted to watch Luke smile over the breakfast table. Wanted to be part of something bigger than himself.

He wanted to stay.

But even as the realization settled into his chest, sweet and painful, Mark knew it was impossible. He couldn't stay. Because staying would mean eventually Luke would discover the truth. Would see what Mark still was beneath the changes. Would know Mark had been lying from the very first moment.

And Luke deserved better than that.

Mark excused himself to use the bathroom, and once the door was closed, he leaned against it and tried to breathe through the ache in his chest.

He wanted something he could never have. And that hurt more than he'd imagined possible.

They spent the rest of the early afternoon watching A Christmas Story together on the couch, Lily nestled between

them providing running commentary. The movie was sweet and funny, and Mark found himself laughing despite the ache in his chest.

When it ended, Luke stood and stretched. "I should get started on dinner. Turkey takes about four hours, so if I want it ready by seven..."

"You're doing a whole turkey?" Mark asked. "For just the three of us?"

"It's tradition." Luke smiled. "Christmas Eve dinner is always a bigger deal for us. We get a little dressed up, set the table properly, make it special. Emily started that, and—" He stopped. "Anyway. It's tradition."

"Wait." Mark stopped. "Today is Christmas Eve?"

Luke looked at him, confused. "How hard did you hit your head last night? Of course it is. Why?"

Mark felt his face flush. He'd been so consumed by everything—his transformation, his car crash, his feelings for Luke—that he somehow hadn't even registered that it was Christmas Eve. Which meant—

"My article," Mark said, his voice hollow. "My deadline is today."

Luke's expression shifted. "Can you write it here? The laptop's in my office. Internet's spotty because of the storm, but it should work well enough."

"I—yes. Thank you."

"Take your time," Luke said. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need anything."

In Luke's small office off the living room, Mark opened the laptop and stared as the cursor blinked on a blank document.

He'd been putting this off all week, not knowing how to write it, not knowing what angle to take. But now, sitting here in Luke's

house, his heart breaking with the weight of wanting something he couldn't have, Mark finally understood.

He understood what this place meant. What it represented. What would be lost if it disappeared.

Mark started typing.

*I came to Pine Hollow expecting a story about a quaint small-town Christmas festival. What I found instead was a story about what we risk losing when we choose convenience over connection, efficiency over authenticity, progress over preservation.*

The words poured out of him. Everything he'd seen this week, everything he'd felt, everything he'd learned about what mattered and what didn't.

He wrote about the festival and the pageant, about families cutting their own trees and children believing in Christmas magic. He wrote about the town and its people. Sarah at the bakery, Claire at the boutique, Emma at the bookstore. About a community that depended on each other, that showed up for each other, that created something beautiful together.

He wrote about Luke and the farm. About a man carrying grief and duty in equal measure, about three generations of love and care poured into the land. About what it meant to honor the past while building a future.

He wrote about the data center that promised tax revenue and infrastructure investment but would employ only a handful of technicians while destroying the very thing that made Pine Hollow worth visiting. About how some things couldn't be measured in profit margins or quarterly earnings.

He wrote about finding home in unexpected places. About making the choice to stay when leaving would be easier. About recognizing that you're exactly where you're supposed to be.

Mark read it through again, his vision blurring. It was good. Maybe the best thing he'd ever written. A love letter to a life he couldn't have.

"Dinner in fifteen minutes!" Luke called from the kitchen.

Mark hit save and closed the laptop. He'd send it after dinner. Right now, he needed to get changed.

He went upstairs to find something appropriate for the Shepherds' Christmas Eve dinner.

He found it near the back of the guest room closet among Emily's clothes: a dress in pure white silk with a subtle sheen. Long sleeves, modest neckline, delicate pleating across the bodice. The skirt fell to just below the knee in soft, fluid lines. Simple but elegant. Perfect.

Luke had set the dining room table with fine china and crystal, white candles glowing in silver holders. He'd changed into a dark suit with a burgundy tie. Lily wore a red velvet dress, her hair in careful braids.

"You look like an angel!" Lily declared when she saw Mark on the stairs.

Luke looked up and smiled. "You look beautiful," he said softly. "Really beautiful."

They sat down to the meal Luke had prepared, turkey and all the traditional fixings. Lily chattered happily about Christmas, about what she hoped Santa would bring, about how this was "the best Christmas Eve ever."

Luke and Mark talked too, less guarded now than they'd been that morning. Luke talked about Christmases past, about traditions and memories. He told stories about Emily, his voice warm with remembrance rather than pain. Mark listened and asked questions, and felt his heart breaking a little more with each passing minute.

This—this right here—was what he wanted. This family, this warmth, this belonging.

And tomorrow it would be over.

After dinner, they moved to the living room. Luke started White Christmas, and they watched it together on the couch, Lily between them. The movie was sweet and romantic, full of hope and happy endings.

When it ended, Lily was fighting sleep despite her best efforts.

"Bedtime, Lily-bug," Luke said gently. "Santa can't come until you're asleep."

"But I'm not tired," Lily protested, though her drooping eyes said otherwise.

"Come on." Luke scooped her up. "Let's get you into your pajamas."

He carried her upstairs, and Mark stood, starting to clear the coffee table.

Ten minutes later, Luke came back downstairs. Mark had moved to the kitchen and was rinsing dishes at the sink.

"You don't have to do that," Luke said.

"You cooked this whole meal yourself," Mark said without turning around. "The least I can do is clean up. Go sit down. Relax."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely."

Luke hesitated, then went into the living room. Mark heard the couch creak as he sat down.

Mark took his time with the dishes, letting the warm water run over his hands, focusing on the simple task. Not thinking about tomorrow. Not thinking about leaving. Just being here, in this moment, in this kitchen, in this life.

Mark finished drying the last dish and set it in the rack. The kitchen was clean, the dinner mess dealt with. He dried his hands on a towel and headed back to the living room.

He found Luke on the couch, laptop open, tears streaming down his face.

Mark froze in the doorway. "Luke?"

Luke looked up, quickly wiping at his eyes. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have—the laptop was there and I opened it and your article was right there and I—" He stopped, took a breath. "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have read it without asking."

Mark's heart stopped. "I—it's not finished. I was going to read it over again before—"

"It's perfect." Luke's voice was rough. "Holly, it's perfect. You're right. About everything."

"Luke—"

He stood, setting the laptop aside. "I've been so focused on running away from the pain that I couldn't see what I'd be running away from. The good things. The things that matter." He crossed to her. "You made me see it clearly. You gave me that gift."

"I just wrote what I saw—"

"I can't leave this place. I'm keeping the farm." The words came out strong, certain. "I'm not selling. I'm staying."

Holly's eyes went wide. "Luke, that's—that's wonderful—"

"Stay with me." Luke took her hands in his. "I know it's fast. I know it's crazy. But stay, Holly. Make a life here. With me. With Lily. We could—we could build something together. A future."

Mark's heart stopped. This was it. The offer of everything he wanted.

And he had to say no.

"I can't," Mark whispered.

Luke's expression faltered. "Why not?"

"My life is in LA. My job, everything I—"

"Bring it here. Or start over. I don't care." Luke's grip on his hands tightened. "Holly, didn't you feel it today? Baking cookies with Lily? Decorating the tree? Being part of this family? I know you felt it. I saw it in your eyes."

"I did," Mark said, his voice breaking. "I do. But I can't—"

"Why?" Luke's voice rose slightly. "Just tell me why. Is it me? Is there someone in LA? What am I missing here?"

"It's not you—"

"Then what?" Luke demanded. "You wrote that article. You see what this place means, what it could be. You see us. So why are you walking away?"

"Because I'm not—" Mark stopped, the truth caught in his throat. "I'm not who you think I am."

"What does that mean?"

"It means—" Mark pulled his hands away. "It means I can't stay. Please don't ask me to explain."

"Don't ask you to explain?" Luke's voice was louder now, frustration breaking through. "Holly, I'm laying everything out here. And you won't even tell me why?"

"I'm sorry," Mark said, tears streaming down his face. "I'm so sorry."

"That's not an answer!" Luke's voice echoed in the room. "Why won't you just TELL me what's going on?"

"I can't!"

"Why not?"

"Because you'd hate me!" The words tore out of Mark before he could stop them. "Because if you knew—" He stopped, covering his mouth.

Luke stared at him, his expression cycling through anger and hurt and confusion. His jaw worked like he was trying to find words, trying to understand. "I let you into my home, into my

daughter's life. Into my heart." His voice cracked. "And you won't even trust me with whatever this is?"

Mark's tears fell harder. "Luke—"

"I thought—" Luke stopped, running a hand through his hair. "I thought we had something real. I thought you felt what I felt." He laughed, a bitter sound. "God, I'm an idiot. I read your article and thought you understood. Thought you saw me, saw this place, saw what we could build together."

They stood there in silence, the air heavy with everything unsaid.

Luke finally shook his head. "I don't understand this. Any of this. But I'm not going to beg. We'll call a tow truck for your car first thing tomorrow and I'll give you a ride back into town." His voice was quiet now, defeated. "I hope you find whatever it is you're looking for in LA, Holly. I really do."

He turned and went upstairs. Mark heard the bedroom door close.

Mark stood alone in the living room, tears streaming down his face, his whole body shaking. He'd ruined everything. Tomorrow the roads would clear and he'd have to leave and Luke would never know—

He sank onto the couch, burying his face in his hands. The article was still on the laptop screen, words about home and belonging and having the courage to stay. Words he'd written but couldn't live. He couldn't be Holly forever. The deception would unravel eventually, and when it did, Luke's hurt would be so much worse.

Better to leave now. Better to—

A small sound made him turn.

Lily stood in the hallway in her pajamas, her eyes wide and scared.

"Holly? Why are you crying? Why was Dad yelling?"

Mark quickly wiped at his face, but the tears kept coming. "It's just a grown-up argument. Nothing for you to worry about." He tried to smile. "Let's get you back to bed."

"Will you read me a story?" Lily asked. "Dad usually does but he seems upset."

Mark's heart clenched. "Of course. Come on."

He followed Lily upstairs to her bedroom, a cozy space with a pink comforter and shelves full of books and toys. Lily climbed into bed and handed Mark a picture book about angels.

He sat on the edge of the bed and read it slowly, his voice occasionally catching. The story was about an angel who felt different from the others, who didn't think she belonged, until she found the people who needed her most.

When he finished, Lily's eyes were drowsy.

"Holly?" Lily murmured.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"I love you."

Mark's vision blurred. "I love you too, Lily. So much."

He sat there until Lily drifted off to sleep, her small hand still clutching his. As he sat there in the darkness, watching her breathe, Mark felt something bloom in his chest. Warmth. Not metaphorical, actual physical warmth, spreading from his heart outward like water flowing through channels.

He carefully extracted his hand from Lily's and stood, the warmth intensifying. It radiated down his arms, through his torso, pooling lower.

Mark left the room quietly and made it back to the guest room before the warmth concentrated, focusing between his legs with an intensity that made him gasp.

The warmth built and built, a pressure that was almost unbearable, and then—

It was gone.

Mark lifted the white dress with shaking hands. He reached under the waistband of his panties, and felt—

Nothing. Nothing male, at least. Just smoothness, a small tuft of brown hair, and soft folds.

The transformation was complete.

Mark—Holly—stared at her reflection, waiting for panic or fear or regret.

Instead, she felt relief. Wholeness. Peace.

She went to the laptop and opened it with trembling hands. She pulled up the article, read it through one more time, then hit send.

Then she opened a new email and started typing.

“Dear Karen—”

Holly's fingers hovered over the keyboard as she took a deep breath. Then she kept typing, the words coming easily now. When she finished, she read it over once, then hit send before she could second-guess herself.

Done. It was done.

She opened the top drawer of the guest room dresser and let her hand brush across the fabrics - silk, satin, soft cotton. Everything felt different now, more vivid. The textures registered against her fingertips with an intensity she'd never experienced before, sending little shivers up her arm. Her senses felt heightened, awakened, as if her new body was more attuned to sensation than her old one had ever been.

A smile crossed her lips as she made her selection.

Minutes later, Holly took a breath and opened her bedroom door, padding down the hallway to Luke's room. Light showed under the door. She pushed it open quietly.

She found Luke on the edge of the bed shirtless, dressed only in flannel pajama pants, his head in his hands. When he looked

up and saw her, his expression shifted from exhaustion to confusion to something else entirely.

Holly stood in the doorway wearing a deep blue silk nightgown, thin straps barely clinging to her shoulders, lace trim at mid-thigh. Her hair fell loose around her shoulders. Her face was flushed.



"Holly. What are you—"

Holly crossed the room, leaned against the bed between Luke's legs, her hands on his bare shoulders. "I quit my job," she said, her voice steady despite her racing heart. "I sent my resignation tonight. I'm not going back to LA."

Luke stared at her. "What?"

"I'm staying," Holly said, looking directly into his eyes. "Here. In Pine Hollow. With you. With Lily. If you'll still have me."

Luke's expression cycled through disbelief, hope, fear. "But you said—downstairs, you said—"

"I was scared." Holly took his hands in hers. "I was terrified. Of what staying would mean. Of letting myself have something I wanted this much. Of—" She stopped. "Of a lot of things. But after you left, Lily woke up. She heard us fighting. And she told me something that made everything clear."

"What did she say?"

"She said she loved me." Holly's eyes glistened with tears. "And I love her. I love you, Luke. I love Lily. I love this farm and this town and this life. And I'm not leaving."

Luke pulled her into his arms so suddenly she gasped, holding her so tight she could barely breathe. She felt him shaking.

"I thought I'd lost you," Luke said against her hair. "I thought—"

"You didn't lose me. You'll never lose me." Holly pulled back just enough to look up at him. "I'm home, Luke. Finally, completely home."

Luke's hands came up to cup her face, his thumbs brushing away her tears. "I love you," he whispered. "God, Holly, I love you so much."

"I love you too."

Then he kissed her, desperate, grateful, full of relief and joy and promise. Holly kissed back, her hands circling his neck, pulling him closer.

Luke's hands moved to the thin straps of the nightgown, his touch gentle, questioning. Holly nodded, and he slid them down her shoulders. The silk pooled at her waist.

He looked at her with such tenderness, such desire, that Holly felt as if she couldn't breathe.

"You're so beautiful," Luke murmured, his hands moving over her breasts, and Holly gasped at the sensation. Overwhelming, perfect, real.

They moved together on the bed, and Luke was careful, attentive. His hands explored Holly's body. The narrow waist, the curve of her hips, the softness of her skin. Every touch made Holly feel more present, more whole, more herself than she'd ever felt.

Luke's lips traced down her neck, across her collarbone, lower. His touch was reverent on her breasts, her stomach, everywhere. When his hand moved between her thighs, Holly arched into it, her fingers digging into his shoulders.

This body was different—more sensitive, the pleasure building and spreading in waves that made her dizzy. She'd never felt anything like this before.

"Is this okay?" Luke whispered.

"Yes. God, yes."

Luke moved over her, his weight settling between her thighs. His hands slid down her sides, over her hips, gently parting her legs wider. She could feel him against her new entrance, hard and insistent, and her body responded with wetness, inviting him in.

When he entered her, Holly gasped, not from pain but from the overwhelming rightness of it. The sensation was overwhelming. A slow, inexorable fullness as he pushed inside. Her body stretched to accommodate him, yielding to him, surrounding him. There was pressure, intensity, a feeling of being filled that made her eyes water.

This was real. She was really a woman. Completely, fully, undeniably. The tears that fell weren't from sadness but from relief, from joy, from finally being whole.

Luke kissed her tears away and began to move. Slowly at first, each stroke sending sensation radiating through her body. Not just where they were joined but everywhere, up her spine, through her breasts, making her entire being feel electrified and new.

She wrapped her legs around him, and the angle shifted. Suddenly every thrust hit something inside her that made her cry out.

"There?" Luke asked softly, and did it again.

"Yes. God, yes. Right there."

They found their rhythm, bodies moving together, and the pleasure built in waves unlike anything Holly had known before. In her old body, pleasure had been sharp, finite, localized. This was oceanic. Deep and consuming, building through her whole self.

Luke's hand found her breast, and the dual sensations made Holly moan. Her hand slipped between their bodies, finding where she was most sensitive.

When the orgasm came, it swept through her like a tide, her body clenching around him in rhythmic pulses as pleasure crashed through her in surges that seemed endless. She heard herself crying his name, felt Luke shudder and groan as he came with her, the two of them holding each other through it.

After, they lay tangled together, both breathing hard. Luke was still inside her, and Holly could feel the gradual softening, the slow slip of him from her body. It felt like a loss.

"Are you okay?" Luke asked, brushing hair from her face.

Holly laughed, the sound watery with tears. "I'm more than okay. I'm—" She stopped, overwhelmed. "That was incredible."

"Yeah," Luke agreed, kissing her softly. "It really was."

"I can't believe you're really staying," Luke murmured.

"I can't believe it either," Holly admitted. "But I am. This is where I belong."

Outside, the world was quiet and white. Inside, Holly felt warm and safe and exactly where she was meant to be.

She wasn't running anymore.

She was home.

~

## Epilogue

Holly stood at the window of the Pine Hollow Gazette's small office, watching the snow fall on Main Street. Outside, the town was alive with Christmas Eve energy. More families than she'd ever seen, people carrying packages from the boutiques, clusters of tourists taking photos in front of the decorated storefronts.

Pine Hollow had been saved. And Holly got to write about it every week.

She rested one hand on her rounded belly, feeling their daughter flutter and shift. Five months pregnant, and she'd never felt more beautiful.

"Holly?" A deep voice called from the doorway.

She turned to see Luke and Lily standing there, both bundled in winter coats and grinning. Lily held a thermos.

"We brought you hot chocolate!" Lily announced. "Dad said you've been working all day and need a break."

Holly smiled. "You're not wrong."

Mark Holly's Pine Hollow article from last year had won an award and been picked up nationally. The attention had brought visitors to the town. People who wanted to experience the

authentic Christmas tradition he'd written about. The farm had thrived. And so had every business on Main Street.

Nobody ever noticed that Mark Holly never wrote another article.

Holly Marks had taken over as editor of the Gazette six months ago, when old Mr. Nichols finally retired. Every week she got to write about the people and places she loved, to be the voice of a community that had become hers.

"Ready to go?" Luke asked, crossing to help her with her coat.

She shook her head. No coat. She was always running hot at this stage of the pregnancy and the forest green sweater dress would be enough to keep her warm. "Where are we going?"

"To see the tree!" Lily said. "Everyone's gathering in the square for the end of the festival. We can't miss it!"

Holly gathered her things and pulled on a cream beret over her warm golden brown hair tied in a loose braid. Her wedding ring—a simple gold band engraved with holly leaves—glinted in the light as she took Luke's offered hand.

They stepped out onto Main Street together, and Holly breathed in the cold air, the scent of pine and cinnamon and snow. Luke's arm went around her waist, careful of her belly. Lily held her other hand.

They walked slowly through town, and Holly saw it all with fresh eyes. The families who'd come from neighboring towns just to experience Pine Hollow's Christmas. The storefronts that were thriving instead of struggling. The life that had returned to this place.

All because Luke had chosen to stay. All because they'd chosen each other. All because Pine Hollow had changed her.

"Holly! Luke!" Emma called from outside the bookstore. Inside, Jessica was busy arranging a display of Christmas novels in the window.

They walked over. Emma's eyes went to Holly's belly and she smiled. "Looking radiant as always."

"Thank you."

Emma's gaze met Holly's, and something knowing passed between them. They had never again discussed that first day, the cocoa spill, any of it. But sometimes Holly caught Emma looking at her with a gentle, knowing expression.

Like she understood. Like maybe she'd seen this before. Holly glanced inside the bookstore, where Jessica was laughing at something with a customer, and wondered.

Emma gave her a small wink and smiled at Luke. "Nice job on the town tree. It's a beautiful one this year."

They continued on toward the town square, where a crowd was already gathering. In the center stood the Christmas tree. Massive, perfectly shaped, its branches heavy with lights.

"That's from our farm," Lily announced proudly to a family standing nearby. "My dad grew that tree."

The family smiled, and Holly's chest felt warm with love and pride.

They found a spot near the front, and Holly looked up at the tree. This tree that Luke had grown, that represented everything they'd fought to preserve. In a few minutes, the mayor would address the crowd, officially closing the festival and sending everyone home to their families for Christmas Eve.



Luke's arm tightened around her waist. "You okay?"

Holly looked at the tree towering above them, then at the families gathered around. Some local, some visitors, all here because of the tradition that had almost been lost. She looked at Lily, who was chattering excitedly to anyone who would listen. She felt their daughter moving inside her, ready to become part of this story.

And she looked at Luke, this man who'd taught her what it meant to be brave enough to stay, to choose love over fear, to build a life instead of running from one.

She thought about Mark, that lonely journalist who'd arrived here a year ago, cynical and disconnected, not knowing he was

looking for home. He'd come to Pine Hollow to write a story he didn't want to write about a quaint small-town Christmas.

And she'd found everything she never knew she wanted.

"I'm home," Holly said, and meant it with every part of herself.

She was Holly Marks Shepherd. Editor. Wife. Mother-to-be.

She was exactly where she was meant to be.

And she was never leaving.

~

## Author's Note

*Thank you for reading!*

"*Miss-ing You This Christmas*" started with a suggestion from Alanawriter: what if someone wrote a Hallmark Christmas movie... but with a TG twist? I couldn't resist. Hallmark movies have their own delightful formula: small towns, widowers with precocious kids, big city cynics who discover what really matters, Christmas magic that fixes everything. They're comfort food, and I wanted to see what happened when you added body transformation and gender identity to that mix.

This story let me play with something I don't usually do: genuine sweetness. My previous work has leaned into darkness, manipulation, and moral ambiguity. But there's something powerful about writing a story where the transformation isn't a punishment or a trap, it's a gift. Where the magic doesn't destroy the protagonist but helps them discover who they were meant to be. Where "living a Hallmark movie" becomes literal in the best possible way.

The challenge was balancing Hallmark wholesomeness with the kind of substantive TG content and character development that this

*genre deserves. I wanted the Christmas magic and the small-town romance, but I also wanted the body horror of waking up changed, the panic of being trapped in a role, the genuine emotional journey of accepting a new identity. Morgan/Holly's transformation needed to feel earned, not just convenient.*

*I hope you enjoyed this festive departure from my usual tone. Sometimes we all need a story where everything works out, where love wins, where Christmas magic is real and kind.*

*You can find all my stories, updates on future projects, and links to my reader Discord at <http://paigeturnertg.github.io>*



*Merry Christmas!*

*Paige*

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