



**DECK**

the



**walls**

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# Deck the Malls

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# I

## Gender is Hard, Let's Go Shopping!

I've always liked Christmas, almost despite myself. There are so many aspects of it that felt over-commercialized, or weirdly religious, or just otherwise *off*, but yet somehow all of the trappings and traditions never failed to melt my heart into a gooey mess. It probably dates back to my childhood, back when I still believed in flying reindeer and Santa Claus and a family that wouldn't disown me for being queer. Even today, with a more healthily developed adult sense of cynicism, the whole holiday season couldn't help but just be *magic* in some ineffable way that I loved, full of limitless possibility and the hope that other people were nice and good, if only for a season.

That's why this year I had been looking forward to December for *months*, especially when my boyfriend suggested that we spend the holidays together with his family. Unlike me, Zach still had his classically perfect nuclear family, and from what he said, his Christmases had always been right out of a storybook, with stockings over the fireplace and presents under the tree and a big family meal on the actual day. It sounded so wonderful and nice.

At least until I had to go and ruin everything because of who I was.

That sounds like a dramatic, way-too-angsty exaggeration, but no, *literally*. I just *had* to finally come to a realization about myself, after months of internal identity crisis. Thanks to some *remarkably* specific websites, a lot of wholesome gender-focused wish-fulfillment fiction, and the help of one very patient online author who helped talk me through my feelings, I finally admitted it to myself: I wanted to be a girl. I *was* a girl already, even. And that part was great! It helped to explain so much of my life and struggles in retrospect.

At least until I realized that I would have to tell my boyfriend, Zach.

Sure, maybe I could have tried to keep quiet until December was over. But I had the sneaking suspicion that I would just be a nervous wreck for a full month, and then wind up blurting out 'I'M A GIRL' in the middle of Zach's dad trying to carve the Christmas turkey, and then he would slip and cut off a finger or something and there would be blood everywhere and everyone would be screaming and Zach would tell me he never wanted to see me again and the

police and the ambulance would arrive and I'd go to double ultra mega jail or something. Okay, also, it might be relevant that I have sort of a runaway imagination, at least as it comes to theoretical catastrophes.

Instead of all *that*, I figured it would be better for everyone if I just came out to Zach immediately, so that way he could dump me and have a nice Christmas alone with his family. Everyone *else* could be happy, at least. And keep all their fingers.

That's why I told him straight out. I sat him down for a serious conversation, and then... well, then *after* several minutes of nervously trying to figure out the words while he grew increasingly worried, I just *said* it. I told him I was transgender. I was a girl.

That's when I expected him to dump me. But... instead, he just stared at me, blinking like he had seen a ghost. He finally asked what name and pronouns I wanted to use, and I told him she/her and 'Holly'—yes, yes, I *know* but it's not a Christmas thing, I *swear*, it's just a nice name—and he stared at me, not saying anything. I was just getting ready to flee, or burst into tears, or spontaneously combust, when he finally shook himself, nodded, and said the last thing I'd ever expected to hear:

"Hey, do you want to go to the mall?"

\* \* \*

That's how I wound up in the back seat of Zach's car as we drove to the local mall. It was the *back* seat because Zach was driving and his sister Madison had claimed the front passenger side before I could say anything about it. She was still in high school and honestly was kind of terrifying, the exact kind of effortlessly cool and self-absorbed teen girl who always always made me uncomfortable because— ...wait a second.

Huh.

Because I always felt jealous and wished that could be me. Like I said, a lot of my life started making more sense once I figured out the gender stuff.

But that didn't change the fact that Zach's sister always slightly worried me. Usually she was nice enough, but today she was acting particularly frosty, her eyes glued to her cell phone as she texted her friends or looked at... whatever app it was that the teens used these days. Either something new and completely inscrutable or they had gone retro and were talking to each other

on ebay listings. Oh God, if I didn't even know what the kids were into, that meant I was *old* now, wasn't I?

Madison was the reason for the mall trip, supposedly. Zach said she had been bugging him to take her Christmas shopping, and this would be a good opportunity for us to look for gifts as well.

But I knew there had to be something he wasn't telling me. He was nervous. I knew him well enough to be able to see it in the little things, the way he kept humming to himself along with the song on the radio as he drove. He only did that when he had too much energy and was worried about something. Or when it was a really good song, which 'Little Drummer Boy' most assuredly *wasn't*. And if *he* was worried, that meant that *I* should be worried. It made me nervous enough that I wanted to just get it over with and talk more about things, but... Well. His sister.

So I sat in silence, chewing on my bottom lip as I grew more and more concerned. It wasn't that long of a drive, but more than enough time for me to feel my mental condition growing more and more precarious until I was barely hanging by a thread.

And then we were there. I could tell, because one, we pulled into the parking garage, and two, Zach said, "We're here!" in a voice that was entirely too loud and cheerful.

"Right, so, um..." I got out of the car, looking around for Zach. On most of our dates, he had this weird but endearing habit of always coming around to my side, and then we'd hold hands as we set off to do whatever. But this time he wasn't there.

"Um!" he said. "I'm... I've got to... look for a thing. Why don't you take Madison with you and we'll meet up in a bit?"

"But..."

"Great!" he said, and then practically ran away. My heart seemed to have departed with him.

"Oh god, he hates me now," I muttered to myself.

"Or he wants to buy you a Christmas present," Madison said, looking up from her phone to narrow her eyes at me. "What's with the two of you today? Something is... off."



"It's nothing," I said. "We're fine. Why wouldn't we be fine?" I mean it wasn't as if I had just told him I was a girl and now couldn't even bear to be around me alone anymore. My shoulders drooped.

"Uh-huh." Madison rolled her eyes. "Whatever, let's go." And with that, she set off across the parking lot, leaving me to try and catch up.

\* \* \*

The mall was even more crowded than usual. It was one of the holdovers from the golden age of indoor shopping in the 1980s, and even then, it had been the largest shopping mall in the whole state. Now, times were a lot more rough, and the third floor at the top was all closed off, but it still drew enough shoppers to keep the lower two afloat. Plus, the owners had started renting out a lot of the spaces to weirder kinds of stores, so it wasn't quite as much homogeneous consumerism as a normal mall. The Abercrombie & Fitch sat right between an occult supplies store and a place that did custom Lego kits.

Honestly, I always kind of loved coming here. You could easily spend a whole day walking around, just browsing all the stores or sitting along the promenade to people-watch. Zach and I even had some personal history here, given that this is where we met...

Though that made me sad all over again. At the rate that today was going, our relationship would soon be history, too. I let out another heavy sigh.

"So, what do you need to get?" I asked Madison, trying to keep up with her as she made a beeline through the mall, presumably heading to some fashionable store or another. She ignored me. "Are you Christmas shopping? Or just personal stuff? Or did you just want to see your friends? I know that when I was in high school, all the girls hung out at the mall on the weekend even if they didn't buy anything. Just as, like, a social thing."

She abruptly stopped, whirling around, and I almost ran into her. "Hey," she said. "Is that Santa Claus?" She pointed behind me, and I turned to look.

Actually, there *was* a Santa Claus there. He must have been off-duty, because he was lurking in the side corridor that led to the mall bathrooms. Though he wasn't the *real* one, obviously. I don't think the real Santa Claus vapes.

"Yeah, uh—"

When I turned around, Madison had vanished. I frantically looked around, searching through the milling crowd of people but she was just... *gone*. And I



wasn't stupid. She had ditched me. Just like her brother. I really was radioactive today, wasn't I?

With not much else to do, I wandered through the mall without any real goal other than to try and see if I could come across Zach or Madison again. There were a lot of happy couples today, and every time I saw a girl walking hand-in-hand with her boyfriend, I felt a pang in my heart. If only that could be me...

But no. I might be a girl, but I wasn't a girl like she was: pretty, and confident, and effortlessly feminine. I don't know that I ever would be. And then when I tried to distract myself by looking in the windows of shops instead, I kept coming across stores with beautiful dresses or chic outfits or comfy sweaters on display. And that only made my heart hurt more. Maybe I could go in and try something on...? But not alone. Not looking the way I looked now.

At a loss, I sat down on a bench on the second floor, overlooking the plaza at the very center of the mall. *Something* was going on there. There was some huge thing reaching up to the very ceiling and covered up by long curtains. Was that a Christmas tree? That's where they usually put one up. But then why wasn't it out yet?

"Psssst," a voice said from nearby.

I blinked.

"Psssssst, hey you!" it said again. I looked over at a planter close to the wall, where a bush was shaking gently.

I inched away a bit, looking around. But this was a quiet corner, and everyone else walking around was on their way to somewhere else. "Me?"

"Yeah! C'mere." The bush shook a bit more. And... jingled softly?

"I... I'm not going to talk to a bush," I said.

And then someone undeniably strange popped their head up from behind the bush. She wore a green cap, festooned with little silver bells, and she had... pointy ears? She gestured me over, urgently. "I'm incognito! On a mission from..." Her voice dropped to a stage whisper. "*The North Pole.*"

My eyes went wide. "Okay, um. I don't know who you are, but—"

"I'm Kristen!" she chirped. And then she jumped out from behind the bush, throwing her hands up and wiggling her fingers. She was tall, wearing some kind of goofy costume that had a green skirt and top with bright red trim. And

it had even more tiny bells on it than jingled as she moved. "Kristen, the Christmas elf!" she announced. And then she must have realized that she was supposed to be incognito, because she ducked behind the bush again.

I wasn't sure whether I should humor this weirdo or not, but she seemed harmless enough, and I couldn't help it: I was *incredibly* curious as to what was going on. So I very tentatively approached... only for her to reach out to grab my hand and pull me back behind the bush. "Aaah!"

"Okay!" she declared, grinning at me with the kind of intensity usually reserved for serial killers. "So, the good news: I've got a list with your name on it. And it's the Nice one!"

I stared back at her. "I seriously doubt you have my name on any list."

"Wanna bet?" The way her eyes lit up and her smile shifted into a smirk made me worried. She started digging through a pocket, eventually coming up with a crumpled sheet of paper.

"Santa writes out his lists on college-ruled notebook paper?" I said doubtfully.

"Just look at it."

I flattened out the sheet, and tried to make out the scrawled handwriting. Sure enough, at the top of the page, the words 'NICE LIST (TOP SECRET)' were printed in big block letters. And further down, between 'Laura Jane Grace' and 'Elliot Page' was my name.

My *real* name: Holly Jacobsen.

I stared at Kristen the supposed elf. And then at the paper. And then at her again. "H-h-how did you get this?" I said, a little bit frantically.

"I toldja. Santa gave it to me."

My mouth opened and closed again, as my eyes practically burned a hole through the paper. It was there. I wasn't hallucinating. How? Why?

"See, the North Pole is a pretty well-run operation, but there's a whole lot of kids in the world, and so sometimes something falls through the cracks. And wouldn't you know it: for some reason we had your letters to Santa filed under the wrong name for the longest time. We only just got the paperwork through to start remediation on past requests."

I blinked at her. "Past... requests...?"

"Yup! You know, the stuff you wished for most deeply in your heart when you were young. Let's say... early puberty-ish?" She grinned.

What had I even wanted at that age? It wasn't like I needed a bunch of kid's toys any more. But even then, I had never been that invested in action figures or dirt bikes or whatever. If anything, the thing I had *really* wanted was...

"No," I said, feeling suddenly out of breath. "Really?"

"Yup!" Kristen chirped. She bounced up and down on her heels, sending all of her bells jingling.

I can't remember ever sitting down to write a letter to Santa directly, but... could I have? Could I have asked to be a girl then? Could... could my wish be coming true?

"It's a good thing we're at a mall, so we can get started right away!" Kristen grabbed ahold of my hand. "On Bashful, on Donner, on Grumpy and Blitzen! Let's get this girl dressed up to look like a vixen!"

"Wait, I think a couple of those are dwarves, not reindeer— aaa!"

And with that, I was being dragged through the mall by an elf on a mission.

# II

## Elf Improvement

She wound up pulling me all the way across the mall to get to where she was going. Halfway there, I saw Madison, sipping an Orange Julius and still looking at her phone as she sat on a bench outside of Forever 21. I tried to wave and get her attention. “Hey, Madison! Hey, I—”

She looked up at me, her eyes going wide at my predicament. And then Kristen dragged me onward, ignoring my protestations, and Madison disappeared back into the crowd.

When we finally arrived at a store, it was one that was immediately familiar. Threads of Fate was a fixture at the mall, another one of the weird locally-owned places that rented space to sell quirky clothes rescued from thrift shops and outlandish bespoke outfits of all sorts. It was the kind of place that had a mannequin wearing a full maid dress on display in the front window. I had always been intensely curious about it, but a bit scared to step inside, outside of one year where a friend had convinced me to go look for Halloween costumes there. I spent most of that visit floating around the same rack of clothes as I considered crossdressing in this one adorable pumpkin dress, but then I chickened out and... Ugh. I still regretted that.

But now Kristen didn’t hesitate in pushing me across the threshold and into the store. Inside, a bored-looking girl in her early twenties sat behind a counter, flipping through a magazine. She wore a truly hideous Christmas sweater depicting the events of hit song, “Grandma Got Ran Over by a Reindeer,” as well as a nametag with ‘Sarah’ printed on it. When she heard us, she immediately put on a customer-service smile, but then as she saw Kristen it softened into something more authentic.

“Hey, Kristen,” she said. “What’s up? Everything on track for the—”

“I am on a *mission* from *the North Pole*!” Kristen announced, pointing one finger skyward for emphasis.

Sarah’s eyes narrowed, her smile dropping. “Uh huh.”

"We need to get this girl a Christmas dress!"

Sarah flicked her gaze over to me and I did my best to shrink and hide behind a rack of scarves. "Oh?" She paused. "*Oh*. You mean... Okay."

"In fact," Kristen announced. "I'm thinking we need *the* Christmas dress."

"*The* dress?" Sarah echoed, sounding alarmed.

"W-what dress?" I chimed in.

But Kristen just grinned at me, looking more like some kind of devil than an elf. "Sarah, I'm going to have you to take care of the measurements while I run and pick up the rest of what we need."

Sarah gave her a half-hearted salute, and Kristen took that as her cue to set off again, pulling me through the store to the changing room at the back, singing all the while.

"~ Deck the Holls with fancy dresses! ~" She paused, looking over her shoulder. "By Holls I mean you, Holly. It is a *pun*, a literary device that is a play on words."

"I-I know what a pun is," I said. "And wouldn't it make more sense to keep the 'boughs of Holly' part instead?"

"~ Soon we'll style her chestnut tresses! ~" Kristen continued singing, ignoring me. She reached over to pat me on my head, speculatively eyeing my hair.

"Wait, what?" No one had ever called my hair *chestnut* before. It was just, like, *brown*. And... who says *tresses*?

"~ Don we now our Christmas stockings! ~" She paused for the briefest moment to grab a pair of stockings that were striped red and white like a candy-cane.

"I-I can't wear those!"

"~ Then your boyfriend's jaw'll be dropping! Fa la la la la, la la la LA ~!" She shot me a wink as she pushed me into the changing room, pulling the curtain shut behind me. A second later, the stockings came flying over the top of the divider, hitting me in the face.

"Blugh. Wait!" I looked around in desperation. "What? You can't just leave me here! Kristen?"

When the curtain pulled back, it was just Sarah. Though frankly, that seemed like a relief. She had a much more manageable level of energy. Across her neck hung a stretch of measuring tape, and across her face was a sympathetic smile.

"You okay?" she asked.

I paused, trying to collect my thoughts. "I... have no idea."

"Sorry," she said. "Kristen can be... a bit much. But you're in good hands. She'd never do anything to harm or embarrass you." Sarah breathed out a sigh, chuckling. "At least on purpose."

"I— I'm just at a loss."

Sarah nodded. "From experience, it's best to just go along with it, and trust that it'll work out in the end. Now turn around and raise your arms."

I did as told, still so confused that I didn't even realize what was happening until I felt the measuring tape go snug around my chest. Then a blush *definitely* spread across my face.

"Uh..." I said, desperately trying to think of something else to talk about. "How do you know Kristen anyways?" I chewed on my lip, my voice dropping. "Is she — is she really from the North Pole?"

Sarah choked back a laugh. "Yeah. Sure. *Santa Claus* assigned her here to oversee all of the Christmas celebrations for this year." Fondness crept into her voice. "Which, to be honest, she does have some really good ideas for. The whole thing tonight is going to be great. At least if she doesn't keep getting distracted by ridiculous hijinks. I swear to God, one of these days she's going to get fired for pulling some stunt."

"Fired... from the North Pole?"

Sarah's voice was light. "Yeah, those elves should really unionize, huh?" I felt the measuring tape wrap around my waist, and then slide down to my hips.

"I just..." I let out a sigh. "I'm sorry. I'm having a really tough day, and I think my boyfriend is going to dump me, and now all of *this* is happening..."

"That sounds really rough," Sarah said. She turned me around again. Her head tilted to the side as she looked me over. "Do you want a hug?"

I grimaced. I mean... yes, of course I did, but wouldn't that be weird?

"As a platonic thing," Sarah said gently, seeing my hesitation. "I'm already seeing someone, and so are you. Um. Hopefully. But you just seem like you could use a hug."

I nodded slightly, and Sarah leaned forward to wrap me in her arms, my head resting comfortably on her shoulder as I let out a shaky breath. One of her hands rubbed my back gently. "It's going to be okay," she said. "I don't know what Kristen is up to, but I'm sure she's just trying to help. And I promise I'll try to rein her in if she gets too far out of hand."

As I took another deep breath, I felt a bit better. More centered at least. "Thank you," I said.

She pulled back slightly, smirking up at me. "Besides, I think it might be a Christmas miracle: you're basically a perfect fit for *the* Christmas dress."

Oh. Uh oh. Panic was back once again. I tried to fight through it.

"Wh-what dress?"

Sarah smiled enigmatically and ducked back into the store proper. A moment later, she returned, bearing a hanger with a dress on it.

*The dress.*

I knew it immediately; how could you not?

It was a deep green, patterned with swirls of snowflakes in silver thread that sparkled and glimmered in the light. Fuzzy white fabric lined the top, while the waist had a chunky belt before blooming outward in a wave of swirling cloth. It was *beautiful*, the kind of dress that took your breath away.

There was no way I could wear it.

Sarah could see the hesitation written on my face, and she let out a sigh. "You've got to at least try it on, right? If you don't, you'll regret it." She smirked. "Not the least of which because Kristen will make it her life's mission to annoy you," she muttered.

"Did someone say my name?" Kristen called out from behind Sarah, making her jump. She grinned deviously. "I'm baaack! Thanks for texting me the measurements, babe."

"Wait, what measurements?" I said. "Mine?"



Kristen just winked at me, and she pushed a paper bag into my arms. "Now let's let this girl get all dressed up." With that, she drew the curtain shut again, and I was alone, just as bewildered as before.

But... yeah. The dress was just so pretty. I couldn't imagine myself wearing it. But Sarah had me dead to rights: if I let this opportunity slip away, I'd regret it forever. I let out a heavy sigh. Better to just go through with it, to put on the dress, so I could see how ridiculous and terrible I looked. Then at least I could crush out all of the weird hopes that I had that it'd be nice. I could get back to my real life.

I looked down at the paper bag. And what was this, some kind of accessories to go along with it? I reached inside, and the first thing I pulled out was another note, written on more college-lined notebook paper, in the same terrible handwriting as before.

"This is more of a present for Zach than you," I read aloud. "He's on the nice list too. Winky face."

No, but it actually had the words 'winky face' written there. I blinked at it in confusion.

I reached inside to see what else was there, feeling some kind of silky cloth. A bow or something? I pulled it out into the light.

I was holding a deep red bra and panty set that could best be described as *scandalously* lacy. My face immediately went so red that I felt like I was going to burst a blood vessel.

"I— You— Wh— Kristen!" I choked out, trying not to shriek.

And all I heard in response was a tremendously self-satisfied giggle.

\* \* \*

I don't know why, but I put it all on. *All* of it, even though I was blushing up a storm the entire time. And then, before I could even take stock of what I looked like or anything, Kristen was back, sweeping me away to go somewhere else. She paid for the dress, too—"It's not exactly a present if you have to buy it," she explained.

Sarah just smiled and mouthed "looking good!" at me as she rung us up, and then Kristen was off on another tear.

It was like being caught in the grasp of a festive, overly-supportive tornado. Kristen was surprisingly good at keeping me distracted, because otherwise I would have been *entirely* panicked at the thought of being out in public wearing what I was wearing. But as we went, every time I was about to realize my situation and start running complete-and-total-meltdown.exe, she pointed up at some holiday decoration as we power-walked past, telling me some holiday factoid or spinning a wild story about the time her brother got his head stuck in a wreath. It was all so ludicrous, and I felt vaguely like I was having a particularly vivid dream.

Our next stop was, as promised, at a hairdresser's. The older lady there obviously knew Kristen too, because as soon as we walked in, she rolled her eyes and said, "What now?" But she had a smile on her face too. It seemed like everyone knew Kristen, and they all found her exhausting, but somehow endearing too. Kristen explained—okay, no, actually, Kristen didn't explain anything. She just said to give me "the works" and the lady nodded like that made sense.

I was going to protest, but... Well. I was in this now, wasn't I? I just let out a sigh and sat down in the chair, Kristen beaming in my direction.

The two of them chattered about some recipe for eggnog as I got my hair cut. Or... touched up, maybe? My hair was stuck in kind of an awkward, medium length. I had always hesitated to cut it, but also hesitated to do anything more ambitious or feminine with it, so it could only be described as a mess. But I guess it was also plenty to work with. When she finished I—

Found myself immediately being dragged somewhere different, *again* before I could get a good look at myself. "Have fun, girls!" the hairdresser called as we left, and I felt a new wave of confusion mixing with a strange kind of validation.

Everyone was just being nice, right? Or, well, she saw that I was wearing the dress and stockings, so she knew who I was trying to be, and she was acting polite about it. Even though it didn't actually *work*, I was sure. It couldn't. Could it? I mean, everyone had to just see me as... as a guy in a dress. And *that* thought curdled in my stomach.

But then Kristen started quizzing me on the proper number of marshmallows to put in hot chocolate and I found myself pulled into a heated argument—I'm just saying, if you try to put six in a regulation-size cocoa mug, there's not going to be any room for the hot chocolate at *all*.

And then we were at some fancy makeup shop, the kind of place where even I knew everything had to cost an arm and a leg. Some intimidatingly fashionable salesgirl with tight leather pants and winged eyeliner you could cut yourself on

caught sight of us, moving towards us like some kind of predatory gazelle who sensed fresh meat. But then when she saw Kristen, her whole face lit up, and she let out a squeal of delight.

"Heyyy!" Kristen said in response. "My friend needs to be ready for a hot date."

"Wait, what?" I asked, but Kristen winked at me again. That was getting sort of annoying.

"Ohhhh..." the salesgirl said, drawing out the word. "For the...?" She wiggled her eyebrows, and Kristen nodded smugly.

"I— I don't know what—"

"Don't worry, sweetie, you're in good hands," she said, and pounced.

The girl grabbed my chin firmly, turning my face back and forth as she sized me up. "I— I'm sorry," I said, though I wasn't certain for what. For... existing?

"You have good skin," she mused to herself, ignoring me. "I think you want to go for a natural look. Accentuate your best features. I could totally murder you for those cheekbones."

"Please don't," I squeaked.

She just laughed, in a way that was *mostly* not threatening. And then she sat me down, piling up an intimidating collection of brushes and tubes and pencils and palettes as she got to work.

\* \* \*

Between the dress, and the hair, and the makeup, and my nails—the salesgirl here had painted them white, and was now using a toothpick to draw little red candy-cane stripes across each one, because Kristen insisted she was way better than the nail salon down on the first floor—I had totally lost track of time. It had definitely been a while though. We had to be slipping into the evening hours, and I still hadn't seen any sign of Zach. Primarily because I was being dragged around constantly, but I had to worry that he was looking for me by now.

I *hoped* he was at least. He wouldn't just leave without me, would he? But even with all my anxieties working at full force, I knew better than that. Zach was a good guy. The *best* guy. He wouldn't just run off. He'd find me, and sit me down, and hold my hands, and then break up with me as kindly as possible.

That's what he was doing: figuring out the exact way to let me down as easily as possible. I didn't deserve a guy like him. But good news: soon he'd be free to date someone better.

"Hey, you okay?" Kristen broke in, disrupting my train of thought. "You look sad all of the sudden. And this is a no-bummers zone."

I tried to force myself to smile. "Oh. Sorry."

Her eyes narrowed even further. "Yeah, that's not gonna cut it. What's wrong, girl?"

That word hit me in the center of my chest, pricking at my heart in a place that I felt particularly tender. I didn't feel like I quite deserved it. I... I knew I was a girl. But it felt like that was just something I should keep to myself, you know? I didn't want to bother anyone else. I should just lock myself away so no one else had to deal with this whole mess. And yet here I was, dressed up ridiculously, having all of these super nice people humoring me even when they *had* to see how awful and pathetic I looked.

But I didn't know how to say that, exactly. So I sighed, and pushed it all down deep inside, and tried a bit harder to smile. I've had a lot of experience looking outwardly fine while feeling dead inside, and this wasn't any different.

Kristen still looked unconvinced, but she remained silent, frowning.

"All done!" the salesgirl said, looking up from my nails. "Just be careful with them for a bit, okay?"

"Sure," I murmured. "Thank you. I... I know it must be kind of a hassle to spend all this time on someone like me." I tried to affect a joking tone. "I'll go and stop scaring other customers away."

The girl gave me a weird look. "It's no problem."

Meanwhile, Kristen gasped, snapping her fingers as if she had just made a crucial deduction. "*That's* what this is, isn't it? Of course you'd get dysphoric. You feel bad because you don't feel cute. But really? *Really?*"

I looked at her blankly. I was... supposed to feel cute? I know the dress was beautiful, and I believed the hairdresser and the makeup girl were good at their jobs, but it was still *me* underneath.

"Come on, Holly. Have you *seen* yourself?" Kristen demanded.

My mouth twisted. "Um. No. Because you keep rushing me off before I get the chance, remember?"

Now the salesgirl had turned to glare at Kristen. "Hold on, what exactly are you doing to this poor girl?"

Kristen threw her hands up. "I don't know, I figured it'd be better to wait for the big reveal!"

"Well, we need to get her some validation, stat. C'mon, sweetie, there's a mirror over here."

I sighed. "I guess," I said, trying to muster up some enthusiasm for it. If I had to be honest with myself, I was making excuses. I was in a hair salon and now a makeup store: there were mirrors *everywhere*. There was no way that Kristen would really have been able to keep me from looking if I had really wanted it. I just... I just knew what this had to look like to other people. I wanted to preserve the tissue-paper-thin illusion that maybe it was okay for just a bit longer.

But it was time to face the music. I tried to convince myself that it was better to know for sure how bad things were, so that way I wouldn't be surprised at how people treated me when they saw me.

So I followed, my head hanging as I stared down into the floor. Should I pretend it's good? So Kristen doesn't feel bad? But if it really was rough, trying to fake enthusiasm would *really* wreck me. How exactly was I supposed to deal with this and still protect my heart? My stomach churned.

"Oh, hold on," Kristen said. She pulled something out of a pocket—a red ribbon?—and ran it through my hair, pulling it snug and then tying a bow. I kept my eyes downcast, preoccupied with my own thoughts.

"Thanks," I murmured.

"You can look up now," Kristen said softly. "It's going to be okay, Holly."

And begrudgingly, I did. And then I suddenly couldn't breathe.

There was a girl there. And as is the way with seeing a certain kind of beautiful but also approachable girl, my heart immediately started into awkward, pained jealousy. But then my brain said that that girl had to be *me*. And my heart didn't quite understand, and decided the only proper response was to double down on feeling all the feelings twice as hard.

She was just so *pretty*. The dress was gorgeous, somehow managing to disguise my horrible blocky shape: the flared skirt portion provided the illusion of full hips that I knew I didn't have, the belt gave me a well-defined waist, and in harmony with everything else, my shoulders looked positively normal. My face was still recognizably me, but a better me, someone who appeared soft, vibrant, interesting. My eyes looked ever so slightly bigger and more expressive, and my lips were more full and red. And my hair! Kristen had tied an adorably cute red bow in my hair, helping hold part of it back to properly frame my face, and the rest fell in wavy curls almost down to my shoulders. It was the kind of hair that 'chestnut tresses' felt appropriate for, not some kind of flowery overexaggeration. I looked unmistakably feminine.

I *never* thought I would be able to look like this.

"Okay, normally, I'd say crying is good and healthy and positive," the salesgirl said. "But you're going to ruin your makeup so hold it in, kay?"

I blinked rapidly, doing my best.

"Now that's the reaction I wanted," Kristen said, her voice dripping with satisfaction.

"You're the worst," I whispered back. I couldn't tear my eyes away from my reflection. "Thank you so much."

# III

## Holly, Did You Know?

"Okay," Kristen said, as she led me into the food court area. "No, no, no, none of that shrinking and hiding stuff. Shoulders back, head up! You look great."

"I— I do," I admitted, blushing a bit.

"Then act like it!" Kristen grinned. "So, hold tight here for a bit, okay? Enjoy a complimentary glass of holiday punch while we wait for the main event."

I glanced around for the first time. The food court was on the second floor, overlooking the central plaza from the opposite side of that bench I was sitting at before. Tonight, most of the tables and chairs had been moved aside to leave lots of empty room, and small groups of people were milling about in the space, chatting with each other as they sipped their drinks. Though people were dressed up enough that I didn't feel too out of place, they also appeared to be more festive than usual—just about everyone had some kind of small holiday accessory.

"What's going on?" I asked. "What is all this?"

Kristen wiggled her fingers. "Christmas magic!"

I blinked. She did not explain further.

"And now I have to take care of a few final things. I'll be back!" She pushed me lightly towards the food court, and by the time I had regained my balance, she had disappeared again. She had an uncanny ability to do that.

At sort of a loss, I wandered forward, trying not to freak out too much about being alone in this crowd. Were people looking at me more than normal? No one was laughing. But... I shivered. I needed something to drink.

Off to one side of the area, working out of a kiosk that I *knew* had to be a repurposed Dippin' Dots, a waiter in a snappy red vest and slacks was pouring punch in little cups. I hesitantly approached.



"Can I just, um..." I gestured at the neat row of cups.

"Yes, ma'am," he said brightly, stirring the bowl of punch with a ladle. "Drinks are free to any patrons during the tree reveal and lighting ceremony, as long as you're wearing appropriately festive attire." He looked up at me, and then blinked, his mouth forming an o. "Wow," he said.

I grimaced, tucking a piece of hair behind my ear. I knew it, I liked the way I looked, but everyone else who saw me just saw...

"You look *fantastic*," he said. "That's... wow. Um. Uh. Wow. I have some extra headbands and stuff for people who didn't dress up, but... well, you've certainly got that covered. Can I, um, get you some punch? Or hors d'oeuvres? I mean, I don't have any of those but someone does somewhere I think and I could... Um."

I looked down at the row of cups already poured, and took one. "Thank you," I said.

"No, thank *you*." His smile seemed to be frozen in place, and I chuckled nervously.

As I walked away, I heard him muttering to himself, "*God. 'No, thank you?' Idiot. Augh.*"

That was... strange.

But sure. Maybe this was okay, after all. I made my way to the railing to look out across the plaza, up at the curtains currently hiding the object at their center. Far above, skylights showed the sky rapidly darkening. It'd be night soon. And I still hadn't found Zach again.

A sudden new intrusive thought struck me: even if I did look like a girl now, wouldn't that make things worse? When we dated, he thought I was a guy, so... Maybe he would have been fine with me being a kind of masculine girl, but if he saw me trying to be femme, wouldn't that be a bridge too far? He... he had said that he was bi, but we hadn't ever really talked about in great detail. And even if he liked girls, that didn't mean he'd like *me*.

I took a sip of my punch and let out another heavy sigh.

"Hey there cutie, what's got you so down?" a voice said from my side. When I turned, there was a guy there, about my age and wearing a button-up and a blazer. As he took a sip of his punch, his eyes wandered up and down me in a way that made me feel more than a little uncomfortable.

I don't know if it was discomfort or awkwardness or what, but my mind fixated on a small detail. "Aren't you supposed to be wearing some kind of festive accessory?" I asked.

He shrugged. "They gave me a Santa hat but it's not really my style." He took a step closer. "I must say, you certainly wear the season well, though."

"Um. Thanks?" I said, taking a step back.

"Of course." He flashed me a smile. "You should cheer up though, it's a party!"

I gave him a flat look. "Yeah. I'm just wondering where my boyfriend is at."

"Oh." But then he rallied. "Well, if he's leaving a lovely lady like you all alone, then he's not much of a boyfriend, is he?"

I blinked. "*Excuse me?*"

"Maybe you need someone who's more interested in you?" The guy smirked, leaning in closer.

I leaned back. "I think I'm fine, thanks."

He reached out to take my arm, but I jerked away. "C'mon," he said, sounding a bit annoyed. "What's your boyfriend got that I don't?"

Was this guy serious? I made a face. "Respect for other people? A working knowledge of consent? Enough taste to know you don't need to use the *whole* bottle of cologne?"

"Hey," he said, voice harder. "What makes you think you can talk to me that way?"

I tried to take another step back, but the railing was behind me. I was stuck. How was I supposed to get this guy to leave me alone? Sure, he definitely saw me as a woman, but this wasn't *flattering*, it was just... unpleasant. And a little bit scary too. I *really* wished that Zach was here, even if I didn't know what I wanted him to do. I just... I just knew that he would protect me. But I was on my own. I—

"She's not interested," Madison said, from behind the guy. "Beat it, jerk, before I call mall security."

He turned around, ready to make a scene, but in the face of the full scorn of a high-school girl, he hesitated. "Whatever," he said, stalking off. "Bitches."

I stared after him, still a little bit stunned. "Th-thanks," I finally said to Madison.

She shrugged, walking over to the railing with me to look out across the plaza. "Whatever. He was a creep. You shouldn't have to deal with that."

"Mmm." I sipped more punch.

"Sooo..." Madison said, sneaking a glance at me from the side. "Nice outfit. Is this, like, an all the time thing? Or just dressing up for a dare or something?"

I froze, trying not to spit the punch back out. Honestly, something about what I was wearing was so comfortable, and felt so... so *right* that when I had gotten distracted by something else, I forgot that I was even presenting that differently. It was baffling. I should be constantly freaking out and instead I just felt like I was floating. Until something like this suddenly brought me crashing back down to earth.

I weighed my options, but decided that the truth was best. Better to rip the bandaid off, she already hated me to begin with. "All the time. Or, well, not exactly *this* all the time, but I'm a girl, yes. My name is, um... Holly." I braced myself for her reaction.

But she just nodded, a brief smile flitting across her face. "Cool," she said. "Does Zach know?"

"Y-yeah." I let out a sigh. "Though I only told him earlier today. I'm... I'm not sure where we stand."

Madison glanced over at me, her eyes narrowing as she looked thoughtful. "Can I ask you a question?"

Uh oh. But yeah, I guess I owed her that much. "Sure?" I said, trying to prepare myself for a particularly invasive or harsh question.

"Why do you like my brother?"

I blinked. Of all the things she could ask, I never expected that.

I thought about it for a long moment. And then my eyes drifted over across the mall, as a smile crossed my face. "Did you know that this is where we met?" I asked.

She raised an eyebrow. "In the food court?"

"No," I said. I pointed over to a small store. "At that board game and hobby shop. It was... I guess a bit over a year ago, now. I had a friend who brought me to a game night to try to get me into some CCG, but then he basically ditched me."

"Not much of a friend," Madison said.

I smirked at her, staying silent a moment. She must have recognized the irony, because she glanced away, muttering, "Sorry. I guess I ditched you today too."

"It's fine," I said. "But okay, so there was a draft tournament and everything, and I didn't even know how to play. I was about to resign myself to sitting by myself in a corner all night, when Zach noticed that I was alone and not having a good time. He came over to teach me how to play. Even though it meant he'd miss the tournament himself." I chuckled. "I *still* don't really understand the rules, but I remember being so happy at having someone else actually pay attention to me and want to spend time with me. Particularly someone so nice, and..." A blush spread across my face. "So cute."

She smirked. "That does sound like my brother."

"And when we were getting ready to leave that night, he asked me for my number. I've never had, um, someone do that before. We started texting. And then hanging out. It turns out we have a lot of similar interests, and..." I let out a breath, a fond smile growing on my face. "Well, I just like being around him. He makes me feel special, you know?"

"Ugh," Madison said. "Gross."

I giggled. "Sorry." But then my smile started to fade. "I'm just worried whether he still feels the same way, or if he's realized now that he's made a mistake. I—I know he didn't sign up to date me as... You know. This." I gestured at myself, my outfit. "He liked me before, but what reason would he have to like Holly?"

Madison frowned at me. "I like Holly," she declared. "More than before, honestly. You're way less of a gloomy sad-sack."

"Hey!" I paused, considering. "I guess you're not necessarily wrong, though."

"He was acting weird," Madison admitted, "but I think that's just because of some past baggage."

I blinked. "What do you mean?"

"He didn't tell you about his ex?" she said, sounding surprised.

"...No?" I said.

"They were friends for ages, and then they started dating, but..." She hesitated.

"Um, I'm not sure whether it's my place to talk about this, honestly."

"Hey girls," another voice broke in. I turned around to see Vaping Santa—though I guess he wasn't vaping at this exact moment, just standing there, beard and hat askew. "You seen an elf anywhere?"

"I'm sorry, what?" Madison said.

"About yea high?" He raised his hand to about an inch above his own head.

"Green outfit, lots of bells? Way too much energy? Goes by the name of Kristen? We need her to start the ceremony and she's vanished."

"No," Madison said. "Now go away."

Santa shrugged and walked away before I could say anything else.

"Weird coincidence," Madison mused. "That was the name of Zach's ex, actually."

"Huh?"

"But it's like I was saying: Zach was crazy about her and they were inseparable, but then... well, things changed and she dumped him. It was cold-blooded. I think in general, Zach is probably more worried about you leaving him behind than anything else about it."

"What?" I let out a breath. "I would *never*. Zach is... he's way, way too good for me."

Madison grinned. "And that's why I like you, Holly." She glanced away. "But if you ever repeat that I will deny it to my dying breath."

"Sure," I said, feeling kind of warm and fuzzy inside. I giggled. And then the joy drained away a little. "I just wish I could actually *find* Zach. I've not seen any sign of him ever since we arrived."

"Isn't that him down there?" Madison said, pointing.

I followed her finger to see... yes, that was him! Standing right next to a familiar green-bedecked elf. They were talking, Kristen's arms gesturing wildly as she said whatever she was saying. Did they— did they know each other? Then Zach rested his hand on her shoulder, and she went still, looking at him intensely. And she reached out to touch his arm, in a familiar, almost intimate manner.

"Wait a second," Madison said, a frown growing on her face. "That... that *is* his ex. Kristen."

"What?"

Right then, Kristen looked up and over towards Madison and me on the second level, and our eyes met for a moment. Even from this distance I could see her reaction: her eyes widened, and she immediately looked stricken and guilty. Zach hadn't noticed, he was still looking at Kristen with concern, his arm still resting on her shoulder. The shoulder of his ex. Who Madison just implied he still had feelings for. Who had involved me in some complicated plan for no apparent reason.

Until now. Now, a reason came to mind.

After all, why would they be hiding things from me otherwise? What could they possibly be doing? At *best* this had to be a cruel joke at my expense. And that seemed about right—that's who and what I was. A joke. Not even deserving of pity, just ridicule. It must have been so funny parading me around all day, and — and then Zach was going to run off with *her* instead and...

Why would he do this? I knew he was going to dump me, but like *this*?

I was hyperventilating a little bit now.

It didn't all make sense in my head but it didn't *have* to. I was caught in a whirlwind of hurt and confusion and I didn't know how to handle it. It was more than I could bear.

So I ran.

Madison shouted after me in confusion, but I just took off at a sprint, not paying attention to where I was going, just trying—and failing—not to cry.

# IV

## Joy to the Girl

As it turns out, the only thing keeping the third floor blocked off was a notice taped to a caution-wet-floor sign. I wasn't *trying* to break any rules. I just wanted to get somewhere away from all of the people staring at me and judging me, and my only option seemed to be to go up. That's how I found myself sitting on a bench on the dim and deserted top floor, still able to hear the faint noise of the party going on below me. Everyone seemed to be having a lovely time without me. I was just grateful that it wasn't too dusty here—I didn't want to have to feel guilty for ruining this dress, too. Now I could just cry in peace, without ruining anyone else's evening.

I sniffled. I wished I had a kleenex or something though.

"Holly? Is that you?"

I knew that voice. It was the person I *least* wanted to see. The cause of this whole mess. Some Christmas magic *this* had been, alright.

"Go away, Kristen," I said, trying to keep my voice steady and mostly succeeding.

She ignored me, walking over from the stairwell. Figured. Why would she start caring about my feelings *now*? I wanted to yell at her, or just scream in general, but I didn't even have the emotional energy any more. So I sniffled again, feeling quietly miserable.

She sat down on the far end of the bench, leaving plenty of space between us. "Do you want, uh..." She pulled a tissue out from a pocket, offering it to me.

I crossed my arms, looking pointedly in the other direction. She sighed and put it away again.

Both of us just sat there without saying a word. The silence hung heavily in the dim and empty atrium, particularly colored as it was by the distant sounds of people enjoying themselves.



Finally, Kristen sighed, leaning back on the bench and kicking her feet out. "You're going to have to talk to me. I don't know what's going on in your head. I want to help you, but—"

"Oh?" I said, too sharply. "Is that what you want? Could have fooled me."

Her eyebrows shot up. But I frowned and looked away again, not wanting to give her the satisfaction.

Again, we lapsed into silence.

"Holly," she said, her voice taking on a pleading tone. "Please. Tell me what's going on. If you want to yell at me, that's fine, but... say *something*."

Fine. She wanted to know what my problem was? I'd tell her.

I took a breath. I... I didn't even know how to start, but as soon as I began, the words came pouring out. "You've been dragging me around all day without stopping to think about my feelings." She had the decency to look a bit ashamed at that. "You make up some wild story about... about the North Pole and Christmas magic and I *know* it's not true, I'm not *eight*, so what are you doing? You're trying to trick me. What else are you not telling me? Maybe something important, like the fact that you used to date my boyfriend?" She looked a bit pained and I knew I was on the right track. My stomach twisted. "So here's my guess: You realized what a mistake you made in breaking up with Zach, and saw your opportunity now. You'd... you'd dress me up ridiculously and parade me around to be a laughingstock, knowing all the while that then Zach would realize that he could be with a *normal* girl, especially one he probably still has feelings for. The two of you could get together and leave me behind, broken and useless. How about that?"

She gaped at me, blinking slowly. "Wait— What? Really?"

"What else am I supposed to think?" I asked, staring down at the tiled floor.

And then... she laughed, a sharp bark that sounded more like surprise than real amusement.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just..." She coughed, and her tone grew more solemn. "No, I'm really sorry, Holly. I shouldn't have come up with this whole scheme. I thought it'd be cute to play pretend with all the Christmas magic and stuff, but it's only made you feel confused and bad, and that's my fault. I'm so sorry."

I felt like I was going to throw up. "So I'm right then? I knew it."

"No," she said firmly. "Everything else you said was wrong. Like staggeringly wrong." She let out a sigh, and then muttered, "...and they call us lesbians 'useless.'"

I froze. "Huh?"

"Well, that's the first part. I'm absolutely not interested in getting back with Zach. We tried that, and it doesn't work. Besides, I'm dating Sarah, and we're very happy, and not looking for any further partners at the moment."

"Th-the girl from the clothes store?"

"Yup," she said. "She's a cutie, right?"

I blinked owlishly at her.

She rolled her eyes. "Anyways, the point is that I absolutely did not try to dress you up to look ridiculous or anything. If I did, I *clearly* failed, because you look hot as hell right now."

I stared down at the dress, smoothing it out. "I... I guess."

"*Trust* me," she said, staring at me with a bit of unnerving intensity. "You may be straight or whatever, but I'm not, and it's a *good* look, girl."

"Um."

She smirked. "I know, I know, you're taken. And so am I. I'm just saying."

I shook my head. "But then what *were* you doing? I... I just don't understand."

"Okay." She took out a deep breath. "So, Zach came to me today for help, because you came out to him, and he didn't know how to deal with that."

"Of course," I said. "He's trying to figure out how to break up with me without hurting his feelings."

Kristen made a frustrated sound. "Seriously? And what, date a 'normal girl?'" She even made quotation marks with her fingers, as if the sarcasm wasn't obvious enough in her tone.

"Probably, yes."

Kristen sighed. "Yeah, about that. He came to me because he's head over heels for you and is convinced that *you're* going to break up with him. God, you two

are a pair. But to be fair to him, that's kind of exactly what I did to him. Except we started dating a little bit *after* I started transitioning, not before. He was just so helpful and supportive throughout the whole process, and I was trying to work out a lot of stuff, you know..."

"Wait," I said. "What?"

Kristen looked at me. "You know, cause gender and sexuality are complicated, and interconnected, and I had to kind of unpack a lot of assumptions and internalized garbage that made me question who I was and who I was attracted to. And it turns out I'm plenty happy to just be a lesbian, but—"

"No, no, I mean... You're... like me?"

Kristen raised an eyebrow. "Yeah. I'm trans. Did you... did you not know that?"

"How was I supposed to know?" I said, my voice a bit strained.

"Oh. I guess." She smiled, looking for the first time like she was caught off guard as a faint blush dusted her cheeks. "That's flattering though. Thanks. But does it really matter?"

I thought about that. Did it? "...No? But also, yes."

"Sorry," Kristen said. "I guess that's why I just kind of pushed you headlong into a lot of stuff, because for a long time I really wished that someone else would do the same for me. But our experiences aren't the same, and I shouldn't have assumed as much." She chuckled dryly. "I mean, that's not even what Zach wanted me to do, I just got the idea stuck in my head and charged off to plan a screwball caper."

"Oh. Then... wait, what *did* Zach want?"

"He just wanted to know how to make you happy," Kristen said, and my heart did a little flip in my chest. "How to treat you so that you felt safe and loved." She rolled her eyes, but smiled. "What a sappy dork."

I was suddenly close to crying again. I hadn't expected the emotions to come from *that* direction this time. He... he felt that way about me? Still?

Kristen shrugged. "So I told him 'woo her, admire her, make her feel like the most sublime creature on earth.' You know how it goes. But he wanted something more concrete to—" She paused. "Actually, I think you should go talk to him yourself about this."

"Really?" I said. Something unfamiliar fluttered inside me, and I knew it had to be... hope? Maybe... maybe this would be okay, after all?

"Yeah," Kristen said. "If you two actually just set aside all your fears and talk to each other, I think this is going to work out totally fine."

We were suddenly interrupted as all the sound below us changed. People were saying something in unison—counting? And then a brief hush, and then loud cheers. As I looked up, I could see the very top of the curtains at the plaza center dropping away, revealing a truly gargantuan Christmas tree. Even though only its peak was visible, I could see the elaborate decorations and the criss-crossing colorful lights flicker to life as they came on.

"But now I've missed the big Christmas tree reveal," I said, sighing. "Maybe you're right, maybe this was our opportunity, but I've really screwed everything up. Oh gosh, and made you miss it too! Is that okay? Didn't they need you to help with it?"

Kristen shrugged. "They could handle it on their own. Don't worry about it."

"I just... I just feel bad. If I hadn't run off... if I had just kept it together... We could be down there together. Instead, now I've *missed* it."

"Holly," she said, resting a hand on my arm. "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that it's important to do things at your own pace and in your own way. You'll still get your big moments, I promise."

"But..." I twisted the fabric of my dress lightly in my hands. "Not tonight, I guess. I must look like a mess. I can't go down there like this."

Kristen scooted a bit closer on the bench, and produced the tissue and a few makeup brushes from somewhere in her elf uniform. "Don't worry, give me a few minutes and I'll have you looking perfect again." She grinned. "C'mon, I know better than to expect to give a trans girl a makeover without getting some tears *somewhere* along the line tonight."

\* \* \*

I stood at the top of the stairs. Below me I could hear holiday music and happy voices, and I imagined it had to be a whole party going on at this point.

And of course, Zach was there, somewhere. Waiting. Looking for me.

"I-I can't do this," I said, frozen in place.

"Holly..." Kristen let out a frustrated sigh. But then she stopped, taking a breath and releasing it slowly. "Okay," she said. "We're doing things at your speed and not mine. But I want you to tell me: is this you genuinely not able to handle the pressure and wanting to stay up here? Or is this just your anxieties coming to the front, and deep down you know you really want to see Zach, but you need a little push?"

I swallowed. "The latter," I admitted.

"Good," Kristen said. She slipped her hand into mine, and went down a single step on the stairs. She smiled, and tugged my hand very very gently. "Here's your push. I'm with you, okay? This is going to be great."

My smile only wavered slightly. "Okay," I said, steeling myself.

And I took one step, and then another.

At the bottom of the stairs, the food court was even busier than before. There was a DJ playing a selection of Christmas songs, and in the big space in the middle, couples were dancing. I could barely pay any attention to that, though. A thought crossed my mind that people might notice my arrival from the restricted third floor and stare at me or something, but it just floated past without really catching. I didn't care about what these people thought at the moment. There was only one person who I cared about now, and my eyes scanned the crowd looking for him.

How would Zach even react when he saw me? Would he be shocked? Dismayed? Would he even recognize me at all? None of those felt particularly good to think about, but I had to be realistic—I know I was dressed far differently than normal, and... and even if he reacted badly at first, that didn't mean he wouldn't change his mind with time. I had to stay positive.

"Boyfriend, one o'clock," Kristen whispered.

I sucked in a sharp breath. And then looked ahead and to my right. There he was, standing awkwardly by himself. He wore a pair of reindeer ears on a headband and I couldn't help but find it tremendously endearing—of course, no matter the unexpected situation, he'd accept it with a smile and a goofy kind of energy that I loved. But right now, he looked a little bit lost and dejected, his shoulders slumped and hands jammed into his pockets.

I made my way down the stairs, drawn to him like there was a magnet pulling me in that direction. I only barely registered the other people around me,

pushing past them while I muttered hasty apologies. And then I was past the worst of the crowds, and he was in front of me, less than ten feet away.

He looked up, and our eyes met. He blinked.

And then the biggest smile spread across his face. At first, he just looked relieved, like I was a cold drink of water after a week of wandering in the desert. And then his eyes drifted down to see me in my entirety, what I was wearing, how I looked... and now the emotion written across his face could only be described as pure wonder. He opened his mouth, and then closed it again, trying to keep a straight face, but his lips kept curling upwards. He couldn't take his eyes off me. He started shaking his head slightly, as if unable to do the math, and then stopped, distracted by noticing some other little thing about me and my appearance.

I walked over, moving slowly, and as I did, his face grew more and more red. But then, I was also completely unable to stop from blushing at all the attention he was paying me.

"H-hey Zach," I said.

"Holly! H-hi," he stammered in turn.

"Um..."

"You look beautiful," he blurted out. "I mean you always did, a-and that doesn't define you or anything, but..." He trailed off, still staring. Then he shook his head again, collecting himself and regaining some more of the calm that I was used to from him. "I'm sorry, you just look so beautiful and I don't know what to do about it."

I giggled a bit, feeling a little delirious. "Um. Yeah, Kristen helped me out with the dress. And the hair and the makeup. She's very thorough, huh?"

"Yeah," he said, sounding thoughtful. "Except..."

I hesitated. "Except?"

Zach shifted in place. "Okay, this was supposed to be a Christmas present. I looked basically everywhere today for something good enough for you." He looked me over again. "Though I feel like now I'm realizing that that was an impossible task. But I did get something, and... I can't help but feel like maybe now is the right time?"

"If— if you want to," I said.

He reached into his pocket, pulling out something small. Then he took my hands, making me shiver at his touch. He slipped the thing—a box?—into my hands as he held them. As he looked into my eyes, I knew this was the Zach I loved: genuine, warm, vulnerable but strong. He smiled bashfully at me. “I hope you like it.”

I looked at the little velvet box. “Jewelry?” I said. “But... I couldn’t possibly...”

“Just look,” he insisted.

I carefully cracked the box open to see a necklace resting inside. It wasn’t fancy or ornate or anything, but classy in a restrained kind of way. On a thin silver chain, there was a pendant shaped like two spiky green leaves crowned with a few bright red berries. “It’s...”

“Holly,” Zach said. “I mean, maybe that’s a little too on the nose. I just wanted a way to celebrate you, to show you that I’m so happy that you’re able to be yourself. I— Um. I hope that’s okay.”

Tears pricked at my eyes again. “It’s perfect,” I whispered, and then I couldn’t help myself, I flew forward to hug him as tightly as I could.

He stiffened only for an instant in surprise, and then he let out a relieved breath and hugged me back. This— this was what I was afraid I was going to lose. The way he wrapped me in his arms, making me feel small, and protected, and loved. I practically melted into his hug—I knew my heart certainly was.

“I was so scared,” I whispered, not letting go. “I thought you’d want to break up with me.”

Zach squeezed me tighter. “Never. I love you, Holly. I wasn’t expecting this, but I feel so lucky that now I get to know the true you. Every moment I get to spend with you is a revelation.”

Now I *was* crying a little bit again, even if I tried to keep it under control so as to not wreck Kristen’s efforts.

I finally had to let go in order to take a moment to try and put the necklace on. Zach helped me fasten the chain as I held my hair out of the way.

“How does it look?” I said, unable to keep a smile off my face.

“Perfect,” he said. “Beautiful.” But he wasn’t even looking at the necklace. He just kept staring into my eyes, and I had to blush and look away.



"But— but I didn't get you anything," I protested. "How can I accept this?"

Zach's fingers brushed under my chin and he tilted my head up to look at him again. Then his hand drifted up and to the side, touching the ribbon tied into a bow in my hair. "What do you mean?" he said innocently. "There's such a pretty gift right in front of me, all wrapped up with a bow and everything."

"O-oh," I said. "Jeez. When did you get so smooth? That's not fair."

Zach just grinned. "Hey," he said, taking my hand and intertwining his fingers with my own. "Would you... would you like to dance?"

I looked over to the open space of the food court, where couples were swaying back and forth to the time of the music. "I'm not sure if I know how," I admitted. "I've never been much of one for parties."

"Me either," he said, looking sheepish. "I figured it was just a good excuse to get to hold you close. And I guess also to make everyone at this party jealous that I get to be with the most beautiful woman any of them has ever seen."

"Oh my God," I said, blushing furiously. "You can't just *say* that."

"What? It's true."

He bowed deeply, still holding my hand to touch his lips to it. When he looked up at me, his eyes were twinkling. "My lady?"

"That's so cheesy," I said. "I love it." I took a breath. "I love *you*."

He grinned, pulling me forward onto the dance floor, and I followed his lead. Raising my hand in his own, he spun me in place, my dress flaring out as I went. A wave of giddiness bubbled up inside of me. Then, as if it was the simplest thing in the world, he pulled me close again, his chest close against mine, his arm resting securely against my back. He must have been holding out on me—he *did* know how to dance, didn't he?

I let out a perfectly content sigh. Kristen had been right: maybe I missed the tree lighting or whatever. But everything about this moment was *mine* and it was *perfect*. If I could live in this moment forever, that would make for a pretty nice eternity.

And then the music abruptly changed, shifting to a faster, more upbeat tune. Wait a second...

"This one goes out to a very special lady!" Chelsea said, her voice a bit distorted from the mic she was using. I looked over to where she was standing *on top of* the DJ's table. She pointed right at the two of us, and the other people on the dance floor looked confused, but started clapping.

"Oh no..." I said, my face going red.

"~ Have a holly jolly Christmas! ~" the verse began.

Zach started laughing. Traitor. But I started giggling too.

And then Chelsea started singing herself as the song reached a certain point. "~ Oh ho, the mistletoe, hung where you can see! ~" When I glanced back at her, my eyes went wide. She was pointing *above* us. I slowly tilted my head to look upwards and... at the center of the dance floor, right where we were, there was a sprig of mistletoe hanging from the ceiling.

"Oh," Zach said.

"Yeah," I said, myself.

Our eyes met. I gently bit my bottom lip. "Well," I said. "It's not like we have much choice, right?"

Zach just smiled, sending butterflies fluttering in my stomach. And then, he dipped me backwards, leaning in to catch my lips with his own.

It wasn't like we hadn't kissed before. We had been dating for a while now. We had kissed a fair few times, even though it wasn't really my favorite thing. After the initial excitement of it being *Zach* who I was kissing had worn off, the action itself always felt a little bit awkward to me.

But this time? Suddenly it made *sense*. Suddenly I got it. It was *right*. I wasn't a gay guy kissing another guy. I was a girl kissing her boyfriend. On the middle of the dance floor, at a Christmas party, while everyone around us cheered, apparently.

Yes, I could get used to this.

The kiss lasted an infinity and also ended too soon for my liking, but when I had to come up for air, I found myself still safe and secure in Zach's arms. Stars had to be twinkling in my eyes as I looked up at him.

"This is the best Christmas ever," I breathed out. "I never want it to end."

Zach just grinned. "It's December 2nd. We've got a lot of the holiday season left, Holly."

I couldn't wait to find out just what surprises were still in store.

Because as it turns out... apparently Christmas magic does exist, after all.