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# FINDING HOLLY

Holiday House Book One

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MISTY MALONE

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## Chapter 1

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Clint Calloway finished unpacking his suitcase, putting the last of his shirts in the dresser. Looking around the room that would be his for the next month, he nodded in satisfaction. He was a contractor and worked hard all summer building houses. In January he started working in his workshop at his home, making special order, custom pieces of furniture. December was his time off, and he liked to get away for at least a couple weeks to go skiing. That was his relaxation, and he looked forward to it every year.

This year was going to be extra special. His brother, Gabe, and his wife and their two children had been living in Alaska for the past two years working on a special project for the company he worked for. They hadn't seen their family during that time. He successfully finished it and was moving back to Kansas, but the company had given him the month of December off. Clint, Gabe and his family, along with their widowed mother, had rented a house in Colorado near two ski resorts for the entire month of December. His sister, Danielle, and her husband and their two children would be joining them for a week or two over Christmas.

He went downstairs to the kitchen and accepted the cup of coffee his mom handed him. After learning Gabe and his wife, Nina, were helping their kids with their unpacking, he decided to go into the small, nearby town of Overton. "I rented a condo in town for a week a few years ago and did some skiing. I'm going to go see if anything's changed much. I won't be gone long. While I'm there I'll scout out a grocery store and a couple restaurants for us."

"Okay. Will you be back for dinner?"

"I would certainly think so, but if something comes up I'll call and let you know," he said as he kissed her cheek before shrugging on his coat and leaving.

He drove into town and past the condo he'd rented. Everything looked just like it had a few years back, which was rather comforting. He parked in a downtown lot and walked around, taking in the few changes he noticed, before heading to the local coffee shop. That was the best way to get all the information he was looking for, like how the skiing was right now.

He was close to the coffee shop, which was nestled neatly at the foot of one of the larger and busier ski slopes in the area, when he saw a young woman standing alone, staring up at the mountain. She got his attention, not only because she looked a little intimidated standing there, maybe partly because she was so petite, but because he thought she was quite possibly the cutest little lady he'd ever seen. Her blond hair had a definite redness to it, though he wouldn't call it classic red. There were curls everywhere, and they made the red seem a bit more prominent. Although he wasn't usually a big fan of curls, these looked right for her. She was absolutely adorable. He couldn't tell if she was looking at the mountain itself, or the skiers on it, but whatever it was, she looked worried. "Are you watching someone you know?" he asked as he approached.

He apparently startled her, and she jumped a bit, but recovered quickly. "Uh, no, I'm just looking at how big it is, and how

fast everyone is going as they're coming down." She paused a moment before adding, "And how well everyone seems to be able to ski."

"Ah, a beginner," Clint said with a smile. "Don't let that scare you. Have you seen the beginner slope? You should watch it a few minutes and you'll see an entirely different skill set."

"There's a beginner's slope? Maybe it wouldn't look as intimidating."

"I'd be happy to show it to you," Clint said, "and if you're here alone I'd be happy to teach you to ski."

"You would?" She turned from the hill she'd been staring at to look at him. "Why would you do that?"

Her question threw him for a moment or two, but he quickly recovered, as well. "Because I love to ski and like to see others enjoying it, as well. There are ski instructors here, but unless you've already booked lessons, it may be rather difficult getting in now. This month is their busiest season and they book up quickly."

"I haven't booked any lessons yet. In fact, I haven't actually gotten myself convinced I can do it yet, either. I told myself when I came here that I was going to at least try it, but looking at everyone rushing down the slopes now, I'm not so sure I want to get out there and make a fool of myself."

"Nonsense," Clint said. "I'm Clint Calloway." He extended his hand.

"Holly," she said as she shook his hand.

"Why don't I buy you a cup of coffee or hot chocolate and we can talk a little bit. I'll show you the beginner's slope first, and maybe that will make you feel more courageous."

"I'd love to see that," she said, looking a little relieved. "There's no way I could get out there and try it with all those people who know what they're doing."

"Come with me," he said as he led her with a hand on her back past the coffee shop and around the corner. They were

standing on a side street with much less traffic, both vehicles and foot traffic. "This is where we would start you out."

She looked up to a smaller, less steep hill, with lots of skiers, many of whom were on the ground or in the process of getting back up, and smiled. Clint thought she was a very pretty young lady before, but the big smile that erupted on her seemed to light her whole face up, and she was beautiful. He couldn't help but return her smile. "Does this one look less frightening?"

"Well, I might be able to talk myself into giving that one a try," she said a bit impishly.

"Are you ready for a cup of coffee now?"

"A glass of wine would do more to get me convinced to try skiing, but a cup of hot chocolate would probably be safer."

"It definitely would be," Clint said with a chuckle. "Wine's not a very good skiing instructor."

Fifteen minutes later they were seated with two cups of hot chocolate in front of them. "So, Holly, are you here alone, determined to try skiing?"

"Yes, and no. I'm here alone for now, but my family will be joining me in just under two weeks. We've all rented a house for two weeks over the holidays. I rented a condo for a couple weeks until the house is ours. My sister and her husband and their two kids are coming, along with my dad. All three of those adults love to ski and they're planning on taking the two little ones so they can learn how to, as well. I don't want them to be teaching me at the same time they're teaching them."

He couldn't help but smile. "Afraid of being shown up?"

"Something like that, yes," she admitted. "Their kids are quick learners for everything. They'd be zipping down the hills, having a blast, and I'd still be on the beginner's hill trying to stay standing for two minutes. Besides making me look and feel bad, I'd slow everyone down. That's not something I want to do."

"If you said you've got two weeks until they get here, we can have you skiing by then. You won't be ready for the advanced

hills, but we can have you going down the easier hills and laughing right along with the rest of your family.”

“You sound awfully confident,” she said. “You look pretty athletic, what I think of as a true athlete; tall, dark and muscular. I, however, am far from that. I'm more what you'd call klutzy.”

“Don't count yourself out before you even try it. You don't have to be extremely coordinated, as you'll see once we get started. Speaking of getting started, when should we do that? Are you ready now?”

“I don't know about now,” she said hesitantly. “I need time first to—”

When she paused, Clint suggested, “To get nervous first? I say we go right now, but limit it. We'll just go over a few preliminaries, then get you up on skis, but not for long. We'll end the first lesson before you have a chance to get too worked up. That way you'll be ready, but not quite as nervous, for another lesson tomorrow. Come on, let's go.”

He stood and held his hand out for her, keeping a relaxed tone. It had the exact effect he was hoping for, and without giving his suggestion too much thought, she put her hand in his and let him lead her out of the coffee shop. He started talking as soon as they were outside, as he led her to the resort entrance. He kept his conversation upbeat, telling her little insignificant things, such as how nice the weather was right now for skiing, and how amenable it would be to a first lesson. He explained a few things he would go over first before they actually put skis on.

Everything he said was meant to keep her listening to him and all the positive things he was saying, and not give her time to get nervous. It seemed to him as though it was working, so he kept it up. Once inside, he did much the same, emphasizing positive things all during their first lesson. If she needed to do something differently he first praised how well she did something else, then told her to try bending her knees just a little more next time, or whatever it was he felt she needed to change.

His strategy worked, and by the time he felt they'd done enough for the first day, his positive attitude had become catchy. She was all smiles, and objected when he suggested they stop for the day. "Stop? Now? But I'm just starting to get the hang of it," she complained.

"Which is why I think we should stop now," he said with a big smile. "You're doing wonderfully, and I want to keep it that way. If I throw too much at you at once you won't know what to focus on tonight while you're going over this in your mind. This is a good place to stop, but if you're up for it we'll try again tomorrow, if you have some free time?"

"I don't have any special plans tomorrow, and I'll be free whenever you have time, if you don't mind working with me again, Clint. I hate to take all your vacation time."

"Nonsense. I've enjoyed this afternoon, and I can't think of a better way to spend my vacation time than helping a beautiful young lady learn to ski. I look forward to getting to know you. I can be free anytime tomorrow, as well. How about if I pick you up around eleven o'clock tomorrow morning? We can ski a little, I'll buy you some lunch, and if you want we can ski a little more in the afternoon?"

"That sounds terrific. I can just meet you here if you want. It's within walking distance of where I'm staying."

"Then how about if I drive to your condo, and we can walk from there?"

"Sounds good."

"Okay, Holly, I'll see you then. Oh, let me get your phone number and I'll give you mine just in case something comes up, we can get in touch with each other."

"Good idea."

"Holly, I'm sorry, I don't even know your last name," he said as he was putting her name into his phone.

When she didn't answer right away, he looked up. Her face



was bright red, which he found terrifically cute, but confusing. "It's Rudolph," she said rather quietly.

He couldn't hide his smile. "So I met Holly Rudolph while on a Christmas vacation. I love it. Why does that embarrass you? I think it's cute."

"You didn't grow up with that name, either," she said.

"Ah," he said, realizing right away what she was saying. "I think it's cute now, but I'm assuming kids did a fair amount of teasing about it when you were young?"

"More than a fair amount," she confirmed.

He nodded in understanding. "Can I ask, the fact that your parents named you that, and you're here on a family vacation over Christmas, can I assume your parents like the holiday season?"

"That's an understatement. Christmas was always big at our house. Mom and Dad always said they felt Christmas was the best time of year ever. It's an important religious holiday, but even if people aren't religious just about everyone celebrates Christmas. It's not just a one-day celebration; it's a whole season, with lots of joy and merriment. People are happier."

"That's true. I like that thought, lots of joy and merriment."

Holly couldn't help but chuckle. "You'd like my sister's name then."

"Why; what's her name?"

"Merry, with an e, Joy."

Clint smiled, but agreed. "Merry Joy Rudolph I imagine got teased some growing up, as well?"

"Yep," she assured him. "But our parents really did like everything about Christmas and the holiday season. The whole concept of Santa is a man that gives children gifts, while asking for nothing in return, other than good behavior. And it's not just Santa giving gifts; it's everyone. Offices have a party and gift exchange, kids have a party at school, neighbors and friends exchange gifts. Mom and Dad always said they thought it was

great that kids see people giving other people gifts, and that it makes them feel good giving, and not just receiving.”

After thinking about that a few moments Clint nodded his head. “Your parents sound like very smart people. That is all true.”

“They are smart. Or were,” she said with a bit of sadness. “We lost Mom about three and a half years ago, but Dad's still a big Christmas enthusiast. He'll be here with us. He's coming up with Merry and her husband and their two kids; Ellie, who's five, and Seth is seven.”

“That's who all will be at the house you've rented?”

“Yeah. My cousin and her family were going to come, too, so we rented a bigger house this year, but now they can't make it. It was too late to get a smaller house, so we'll have more room than we need, but better to have extra room than not enough. This house is supposed to be decorated for the holidays, including a tree, so it'll be fun to see new decorations. We've rented a house before in different places, but we always have to decorate it ourselves. It's fun to make it a whole day, a family event, but it'll be kind of neat seeing someone else's decorations this year, I think, too.”

“That's true. Most of the houses around here that they rent out over the holidays are decorated. My understanding is there's a service around here that people hire to go in and decorate for the holiday, then they go in afterwards and take everything down. You're right, though, that's one thing I like about it, too, is getting to see how someone else decorates. The house we're staying in is outside of town a ways, but it's nicely decorated, very festive.”

“I think Merry made the arrangements for our house. It was either she or Dad, but I think she said it's at the edge of town, the east edge, I think, but she said they guaranteed it would be decorated. I'm excited to see it.”

“I hope it looks as nice as the one we're staying in. Maybe

some day I can take you out so you can see it. I think you'd like it."

"I'd like that. I love looking at decorations. Speaking of which, did you see the park at the center of town? I've never seen a town that had a square park right in the center of town, but I like it, and I love how they decorated that."

"I haven't seen it yet. I came in from the west, but I'll drive past it before going back home so I can see it. Thanks for the heads up. Would you like me to walk you back to your condo before I leave?"

"Thanks anyway, but I want to do a little shopping before I go back. I have a couple gifts to get yet and I want to do that and have them all wrapped before my family gets here."

"That sounds like a good idea."

"Let me give you the address, though, so you have it for tomorrow."

Ten minutes later Clint was driving back to spend the evening with his family, with a big smile on his face. He was looking forward to spending time with Gabe and his family again, and now he was also looking forward to tomorrow and seeing Holly again. This vacation was turning out to be fantastic.

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CLINT THOROUGHLY ENJOYED THE EVENING. Getting caught up with Gabe and his family was great, and Danielle and her family had surprised them all by arriving while he was in town. They hadn't thought they would be able to get the extra time off, but it had worked out. Now all of them, including their mother, would have time together to get caught up.

Gabe and Nina's kids, Isaac, who was seven, and Jessica, who was five, missed their cousins and were happy to see them again. Danielle and Jay had two kids, as well. Their son, Austin, was six and their daughter, Lydia was four. They were close enough in

age to Gabe's children that they played well together, much to the delight of the adults. It also gave the adults time to get caught up on each other's lives, and hear about life in Alaska. Everyone was ready for bed a bit early.

As Clint turned toward the steps, Gabe stopped him. Once everyone else was upstairs, he asked, "So, what's her name and when do we get to meet her?"

"What are you talking about?" Even as he asked, he knew what his brother was asking. Gabe was only eighteen months older than him, and the two of them had grown up close. Clint had never been able to hide anything from his older brother. Apparently two years apart hadn't changed anything.

"You know what I'm talking about. Did you just meet her or is this an ongoing thing? Have you finally found the one you're ready to settle down with?"

"Whoa, slow down here. I just met her this afternoon when I went in to Overton. I gave her a ski lesson."

"One lesson won't do. Are you giving her another one tomorrow?"

"At eleven o'clock," Clint confirmed with a smile.

"Good timing. A little skiing, some lunch, and more skiing," Gabe said with a nod. "And if that lesson goes well, after another couple lessons you'll be ready to bring her here and introduce her?"

"If things go well you'll get to meet her, yes," Clint confirmed.

"Okay, just checking." The two shared a laugh, but Gabe got serious then. "Good luck, and I mean that, little bro. I know you'd like to find the right one and settle down, and I give you a lot of respect for hanging in there and not just settling. I know there's been more than one lady that would have accepted a proposal from you, but I'm glad you've waited. I'm sure the right one is out there. Who knows, it could be this ski bunny." When Clint put his hand up, Gabe waved him off. "Don't worry, I'm

not pushing, simply saying you never know when the right one will come along. I'm rooting for you."

"Thanks." He turned again toward the steps, but stopped. "I mean that. I think I needed that little pep talk. You're right; I'd love to settle down and get married and start a family. I want it to be with the right woman, though. I've met some nice ladies, and I thought a couple of them might have been the one, but the more I got to know her, the more I knew I liked her, had a great deal of respect for her, but there just wasn't a special spark there. I'm not sure what exactly it is I'm looking for, but I have this feeling I'll know it when I see it. Am I being crazy about that, expecting too much?"

"No, I don't think so. I liked Nina from the first time I met her, but by about the fourth or fifth time I saw her I knew she was something special. It was like she ignited a fire in me every time she walked into the room. That's what I hope you find soon."

"Me, too. I thought maybe I was being too particular, but when I get married I want it to be for life. Too many people are getting divorced, and that messes with a lot of lives. Not just yours, but hers, any kids you have, and everyone's family. I don't want that. I want what you and Nina have. I can almost see that fire that still ignites in you every time you look at her."

Gabe smiled. "It shows, huh? Keep hanging in there, Clint, I'm sure your little fire starter is out there, too."

"I just have to find her. Easier said than done."

"Maybe, or maybe she'll find you. Or maybe you've already found her and have the kindling in place. Maybe you just have to wait for the kindling to catch fire."

The brothers went upstairs to their bedrooms, and Clint fell asleep that night thinking about Gabe's words.

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CLINT RANG HOLLY'S doorbell precisely at eleven o'clock the

next morning, and was happy to see her answer the door right away with a big smile on her face. “Ready to go?”

“I’m so excited,” she said. “I kept going over everything you told me yesterday, and I can’t wait to go try it again.”

“I like that attitude,” he said with a chuckle. He helped her into her coat, and made sure she had her hat and gloves. “Okay, now get your scarf and we’ll be ready to go.”

“It looks nice and sunny out,” she said. “I don’t think I’ll need the scarf.”

She started toward the door, but he stopped her with a hand on her arm. “It’s sunny, but it’s still pretty chilly. Once we start going down the hill it’ll seem even chillier, and a scarf feels good. It’ll keep the back of your neck warm, and you can put it around your face if it gets cold, too.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Why don’t you take it? If you don’t think you’ll want it I’ll put it in my pocket, but at least you’ll have it if you decide it might feel good.”

She scowled a bit, but got it. “Okay, but I really don’t think I’ll need it.”

Clint didn’t say a word; simply put the scarf in his big pocket and led her out the door. Once they were at the slopes he reviewed things with her and was happy to see she had indeed gone over things, and was doing great. Before long they were making their way down the beginner slopes.

After her first trip down her face was a little red when she admitted she’d been wrong and asked if she could have her scarf. He smiled as he handed it to her and she thanked him. She also admitted she’d been wrong, and thanked him for bringing it. He thanked her for being honest, and went back to her lesson, without dwelling on the scarf. She was doing well for a beginner, but when she did fall he was right there at her side helping her up. He also kept a positive attitude going, telling her how well she did for so long before falling.

For the most part, the positive attitude he kept in place was returned in kind, with one exception. She fell once, and Clint was there to help her back up. Once she was standing, she tried to brush his hands away so she could start down the hill again, but he held her arm a few moments. “Make sure you have your balance before you start down again, Holly. You looked like you were leaning backwards a bit, and I think that upset your balance. Why don't you—”

“I'm fine,” she insisted. “I just hit some loose snow and it threw my balance off. That's all there was to it.” She pulled her arm free of his and started down the hill again, but Clint wasn't surprised when he saw her fall again shortly after starting. She was still leaning backwards. He hurried to her and reached out a hand, but she kicked her boot into the snow, causing a divot. “Damn loose snow,” she said.

Her language surprised him, since there were children around. A lady not far from them steered her children away from them, but it didn't seem to bother Holly. He pulled her up and guided them over to the side, where they had more privacy. “Hey, Holly, watch your language. Parents bring their children here for family fun, and that's not the kind of language they want them to hear.”

To her credit, Holly paled. “I'm sorry,” she said sincerely. “I'm afraid I have a bit of a temper, and sometimes it gets away from me before I realize it. I didn't even know I'd said anything.”

“We'll have to watch for that temper then,” he said in a serious tone. “Try to keep it under control here, with all the kids around.”

“I will,” she assured him. “Again, I'm sorry.”

“Okay. Now, if your temper is under control, listen to what I'm trying to tell you about how you're leaning backwards on your skis. I think that's what's causing you to lose your balance.”

“Okay,” she said rather meekly. She listened as he explained and showed her what he was trying to tell her, and once she

understood what he meant, she tried again. They made their way the rest of the way down the hill with no more problems. "I'm sorry I didn't listen to you earlier, Clint," she said. "You were right, again, like with the scarf. Once I fixed that problem I was okay."

"Thank you for the apology," he said sincerely. "Remember that the next time I try to tell you something, and hopefully we can avoid a repeat temper tantrum." Without any further words he steered her to the top of the hill, and soon they were laughing again as they made their way back down.

When he asked if she was ready for lunch, she talked him into skiing just a little longer before stopping. He loved seeing how much fun she was having, and headed them back up the hill. An hour later he insisted they stop and rest, promising they could go back out after lunch.