



Holly Lane Preview

Sue Ann trudged through the department store, feet tired, shopping bags in hand, and the spirit of Christmas nowhere to be found despite – or maybe because of – the sound of "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" echoing through loudspeakers overhead.

Oh God, it was only the day after Thanksgiving – she had a whole month of this private hell to go. Or a lifetime, depending upon which particular private hell she chose to focus on. The private hell of this first Christmas without Jeff would last a month, but the private hell of losing her husband and their life together would keep right on lingering.

One day at a time. Just take one day at a time. That was the advice in the divorce self-help guide her bookstore-owner friend, Amy, had foisted on her. And the truth was, it was a simple but good rule to live by during tough times. So she resolved not to look ahead to all the potential problems she'd face in the future, and not to even let herself anticipate all the awkward, sad moments she would experience at holiday events in the coming weeks – *just get through today. Finish your shopping, then get the hell out of Dodge.*

Dodge, in this case, was her hometown of Destiny, Ohio, where she'd been born and raised and had lovingly refurbished a big Victorian house with Jeff on Holly Lane, just a few blocks from town square – a house that suddenly felt much emptier since he'd left nearly six months ago. So now she was escaping the house and everything else, just for the weekend – she'd rented a cabin on nearby Bear Lake to sort of just ... collect herself, center herself, and gear up for the coming holiday season.

To her surprise, she'd learned that even in a small town where everyone knew you, it was possible to keep a low profile if you tried. Somewhat, anyway. And that was exactly what she'd instinctively done since Jeff's departure. But Christmastime brought invitations to all sorts of parties and events, and she had a child whose happiness meant the world to her – and all things considered, she knew it was time to face her loss and start living her life again, as best she could. Whether she felt ready for it or not.

It was her friend, Tessa, who'd suggested the cabin for Thanksgiving weekend – and Jenny and Amy, as well as their other friend, Rachel, had all thought it sounded like a good idea. Tessa had actually *bought* a cabin out in the woods when she'd been looking for some peace, and not only had she found it – she'd also inadvertently stumbled across the love of her life there, as well. And though a man was the last thing Sue Ann sought, the peace and solace sounded good. Like one final retreat inside her sorrows, and a time to gather enough courage to break out of this lonely shell she'd built around herself.

She headed for the department store's side door, thinking of the cooler full of Thanksgiving leftovers in the trunk of her car just outside. She was already in Crestview, the larger nearby town where Destiny-ites came for any significant retail needs, and Bear Lake wasn't far away. She'd also tossed Christmas cards and her real estate study guide in the car, too, just in case she got in the mood for such tasks. But mostly, her plan was to relax. Read a book. Sit by the fire. Maybe bundle up and take a walk outside to enjoy the scenery.

And perhaps it was all just some grand test she was giving herself – maybe she thought a woman who could enjoy a weekend alone in a cabin was a woman who was stronger than she'd felt these last months. But whether it was about relaxing, or gathering courage, or proving something to herself, she was ready to make her way to the lake and leave all the shoppers, music, and early holiday stress behind. *Quiet cabin, here I come.*

"Hi."

The deep male voice had come from somewhere nearby – but she was the only person currently in this part of the store. Taken aback, she stopped, looked around, and wondered if she was losing her mind.

And she was just about to continue on her way – when she heard it again. "Over here." It made her flinch. Then look around once more. And this time her eyes caught on a wooden structure to one side of the store aisle – with a life-size fake furry reindeer head protruding from it.

"What's wrong?" The reindeer's mouth moved as it spoke and its head even tilted pointedly, as if challenging her. "Haven't you ever talked to a reindeer before?"

Oh brother, this felt weird. Because someone was in there who she couldn't see, but he could see her. It didn't seem quite fair and left her feeling oddly intimidated. "Um ... no," she finally said. Quietly. Because she didn't really want to be seen conversing with a reindeer.

"I mostly talk to kids," the reindeer said.

"Then ... um ... how did I get so lucky?"

"Because you're pretty."

"Oh." Dear God, was she blushing? Because a reindeer had told her she was pretty? She felt like an idiot. And yet ... still oddly flattered. She hadn't felt anything remotely close to pretty in a long time.

"And I'm supposed to tell you the Cub Scouts are doing free gift wrapping by the Customer Service desk," the reindeer added. "I'd help them, but when it comes to scissors and tape, I'm all hooves."

"I see," Sue Ann replied, unwittingly amused but still wary. "Well, I'm on my way out."

"My loss," said the reindeer.

Which made Sue Ann blink, then pull in her breath. This was ridiculous. A reindeer was making her blush.

"Wanna come back to my stable for awhile?" he asked then – and this time she had to stifle a laugh. "We could have an eggnog or two. Then maybe, you know, play some reindeer games."

Her cheeks heated up all over again. Over reindeer games? Or was it that the reindeer's antlers now slanted at a jaunty angle that somehow actually felt suggestive? – even though that made no sense at all. And she wanted to be offended that the reindeer was being so forward – but she couldn't. Because he was funny. And sounded cute. And was making her feel ... like a woman, a desirable woman, for the first time since Jeff had announced he'd fallen out of love with her.

"That's, um, flattering," she finally said, unable to hide a small smile now, "but I really have to go."

"You'd break a poor reindeer's heart? At Christmastime?"

She tilted her head and couldn't believe she was still having a conversation with a fake deer. "I'm sure some cute doe will catch your eye when you get back to the North Pole."

The reindeer actually managed to shrug, as if to say: *Maybe, maybe not.*

And Sue Ann tried to suppress a grin as she turned to go.

"Merry Christmas," called the reindeer.

"You, too," she said with a last glance in his direction, then headed for the door. She was still eager to get out of the store, away from the music, away from the crowds, away from everything.

But as silly as it seemed, that reindeer had made her day.

Order *Holly Lane* today!