



*The
Christmas Cast-off*

REGIFTING HAS NEVER BEEN THIS ROMANTIC



ROBIN BAYNE

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“And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”

At last, an office party she could get behind. Holly Martin grinned at the sparkly red and green invitation. Who didn't love guilt-free re-gifting? So much better than last year's Karaoke Christmas, or the year before when they had the cut-throat gingerbread house building party. Her two-story layered cottage had begun to crumble during the judging, so she'd joked that it had structural damage from termites. And who could forget that one year with the ugly-sweater Christmas party? Some of the men from accounting had decided their hairy chests were ugly enough. She shuddered at the memories.

Would there ever be a year they could just celebrate the birth of Jesus? Probably not. She should be grateful for anything labeled a Christmas party, anyway, since some firms now called them holiday or winter festivals. And this year, Holly would be looking forward to celebrating at Davidson Marketing's cast-off party.

Thanks to the Human Resources department, this party actually sounded fun and practical. Yanking open her bedroom closet door, Holly gazed up at her “extra gift” shelf, where presents in need of new homes waited, like the oddball toys on Misfit Island. A pink polka-dotted blanket with sleeves, a ten-foot leopard

print scarf, neon slippers, an electric aroma burner. So many to choose from. Which item should she designate for this year's event?

"Hello..." Jo's voice rang from the kitchen. "You here, Hol?" Her roommate was a dear friend, known for her booming voice and a passion for matchmaking.

"Back here." Holly reached for the hot pink blanket, shook it out full size and then started to fold it.

"Hey, what's up?" Jo bounced into the room, her blonde ponytail in motion.

Holly showed her the invitation.

"How cool is this?" Jo glanced at the closet. "You have so much stuff to shop from." She leaned toward her friend. "Of course, this means you will also be bringing home someone's cast-off gift."

"Yeah, that's true." Holly sighed. "I need a date. Do you want to be my plus one?"

Jo looked at the card again and shook her head. "Sorry, that's the night of my family reunion in Westminster. I guess you can't come with me to that. Brandon has to work." She snapped her fingers. "I know!"

Holly narrowed her eyes. She knew that tone. "What?"

"There is a guy who just started working at the church. He's a handyman. Name is Nick, I think. Very cute, very quiet. I bet I could get you a date with him. And before you protest, there's nothing wrong with being fixed-up, you know."

"No! I mean, no thank you. No blind dates or fix-ups. You know I hate that."

"OK... but you don't know what you might be missing. He says he hasn't dated much since he moved here, but I'm telling you, he's a cutie. Just working a lot

of hours, I think he has two jobs. He's also going to help build and run the living nativity scene this year. I could introduce you after the service on Sunday and see what you think then."

Holly ignored her friend, instead pulling more unwanted items from her top closet shelf. She had to pick something any of her coworkers might like. Then, she'd think about a dress and what other friend might be available to go to the party with her. After all, she didn't want to be alone when the ugly sweater guys started getting rowdy.



As the organist played the recessional music, Holly's thoughts drifted to the party again. She'd had three days to think about it and still had not made a single decision. She collected her purse, Bible and bulletin and glanced around at the dwindling attendees for any sign that Johanna was nearby with her handyman friend. The coast looked clear, so she made her way out the back of the church, nodding at Mrs. Graham and Mr. Chafey who were deep in conversation, sidestepped a few boxes near the rear exit and burst through the door into cool, fall sunshine. The scent of a wood fire filled the air.

"Holly!" Jo's voice rang out, unable to be ignored. With a sigh Holly turned and smiled at her friend, who was dressed in her favorite Sunday-best blue dress. Beside her was a very tall, very good looking man, although his clothes were scruffy. No, rugged, she decided.

"This is Nick Foster." Jo turned to the man. "Nick, this is my best friend Holly Martin. She's looking for a

date for her office Christmas party, it's not formal, and I thought you might be interested. You know, since you don't know many people in the area yet."

Nick looked as uncomfortable as she felt. He even fidgeted a bit under her scrutiny. "Hi, Nick. Sorry my friend is such a busy-body." Holly extended a hand, which he shook firmly, but not painfully so. No enthusiasm, either.

But he blushed! He blushed. How cute was that? A dark haired, dark skinned man who could blush. Holly smiled, meanwhile wondering how to get out of Jo's invitation. He looked nice enough, but what did she know about him? Could be dangerous for all she knew.

Jo chatted away about the re-gifting party, and how if Nick didn't have anything to re-gift that was fine. When Holly heard the term "arm-candy," she snapped to attention.

"Johanna! Cut it out." She did not need a good looking man on her arm to impress her coworkers. "Look, I'm really pleased to meet you, Nick, but I—"

"I'm sorry I won't be able to escort you," Nick said, meeting her gaze. "I have other commitments."

Jo looked at him. "But you don't even know what night it is."

Holly tried to conceal her smile.

Panic lit Nick's grey eyes. "Well, I, uh..."

"No worries, Nick, seriously, Jo shouldn't have put you on the spot." She fumbled for her keys in her purse. "Gotta run, bye you two." Hurrying toward her little black sedan, Holly wondered just why the guy wasn't interested in the date. Not that she wanted him to accept, of course, but why would he say no so abruptly? She pulled her compact mirror out and examined her face. Perfectly OK. Even her curly hair

cooperated, thanks to the low humidity. No spinach in her teeth.

So what hadn't he liked?



By Tuesday Holly couldn't stand it anymore—she had to talk to Nick again. She'd never been *so* curious as to why someone didn't seem to like her. As soon as she could break away, she shut down her computer, slid her feet into her favorite wedges and powdered her nose. She then drove to the church, through rush hour traffic, and was relieved to find the door to the office still unlocked.

Holly entered and closed the wood door behind her, a dull echo following.

Mrs. Graham looked up and smiled. "Hello, dear, are you here for the choir auditions?"

Holly grinned at the thought. "That's not really my thing. We don't want to drive people out of the service." She breathed in deep of the smell of paper, lemon furniture polish, and the secretary's floral scented perfume. "Actually, I was thinking of volunteering to help with the nativity. Is Nick around?" She gazed toward the hall door.

"No, I guess you haven't heard. We didn't have the budget to keep him on full time right now. But he will be back to work on the scenery and help with the animals. Is that what you want to help with?" Mrs. Graham adjusted the little gold glasses on her nose.

Holly sighed. She hadn't thought this through very well. Her pulse raced a bit as her mind considered how she could contribute something worthwhile.

"Are you all right, dear?" The wall clock ticked off

moments behind her.

“Yes, um... I wanted to volunteer to help with decorations for the nativity. You know, after Nick and the guys build the actual set, I could bring linens and whatever else is needed.” She released a relieved breath. “And I could help with the costumes, and maybe the smaller animals. Not the big ones though, I’m kind of afraid of those.”

“Well I’m sure your help will be welcome. When we hear from Nick, should I give him your phone number?”

“That would be great.” She scribbled her cell number on a business card and handed it over. With any luck, she’d be talking to Nick again soon. She may even be able to gaze into those grey eyes again. But for now, she had to head to the mall and find a dress for the Christmas party this weekend. She couldn’t help but wonder what color Nick would like to see her in. All she needed was to talk to him again and ask him out. Holly wished Mrs. Graham a good evening and headed for town.



It’s perfect!” Jo smoothed the burgundy silk folds of Holly’s new party dress. “Where did you find it?”

“Believe it or not, I stopped in O’Brien’s first to get hose and there it was shimmering on a mannequin, calling to me. My size. And the best part is I had a thirty-percent-off coupon. So you like it?”

“Well yes, duh, I just said so. It will go great with your green eyes and that dark hair of yours.” Jo reached over to brush her friend’s hair from her shoulders. “Do you think Nick will like it?”

Holly sputtered as she hung the dress on a closet hook. "How will Nick see it? The party's day after tomorrow and I haven't spoken to him since we met. Looks like I'm going stag this year."

Jo shrugged. "You never know. In fact, I believe he will be in the church field tonight when they unload materials for the stable."

"How do you know that?" Holly eyed her friend warily.

"A little birdie told me."

"Huh. I guess I should run over there, after all, I volunteered. You know, see what I could help with." And Nick hadn't called her yet.

"Right, just because you *volunteered*." Jo nodded knowingly. "By the way, have you asked anyone else to go with you? Maybe there's still time."

"Time before the party?"

"Yes, the party!" Jo tapped her nails on the dresser. "So did you?"

Holly moved to her closet and pulled down items from the top shelf, ready for a new subject. "So which thing should I cast-off on Saturday night?"

Jo just watched her.

"This leopard scarf, which could wrap around my neck forty times?" Holly whipped the cotton snake around the room before moving to an electronic gadget. "How about this deck of scented playing cards? Or this sound machine that repeats the same pattern of ocean and jungle over and over?"

Jo clucked her tongue and turned her attention to the array of misfits. "Take any of them, you'll never use any of that stuff. Then, whatever you don't take, donate to some charity. Doesn't matter. Anyway, I'm going to stop by church because I promised to help as

well. Want to ride with me?"



Three pickup trucks were departing as they arrived. Jo bolted from her car and Holly followed, watching her step as they mingled among the men stacking wood and assembling supplies. She spotted Nick right away, his strong muscles obvious beneath the Rugby shirt he wore. Would he be more receptive to her tonight?

"Glad to see you girls. Lots of stuff to be done." Jim, the church's music director, approached them with a hearty wave. "The stable will go up probably tomorrow, and we have a huge light-up star to hang. Jo, still depending on you to coordinate the sheep and donkey arrivals. Not sure we can get the camel." Jim swiped a hand over his forehead and then looked down at a clipboard he carried. "I'm arranging the music, and Pastor will lead prayers." He turned to Holly. "Can you help Mandy Jones with the costumes?"

"Sure. I will call her tomorrow after work, unless she's here now?" She turned and glanced around, but instead of her old friend she spied her new interest—Nick Foster.

He caught her gaze and when she thought he might ignore her, he offered up a soft smile and a nod. Holly decided that was a positive greeting. "I think I spotted Mandy, be right back." She took off, leaving Jo and Jim discussing the finer points of roping off areas and animal safety.

She smelled the newly delivered wood as the men arranged the panels for the stable. Nick wore heavy

gloves and easily lifted and shouldered the various pieces. The four men worked as a team and made their job look effortless. Holly hung back, not wanting to get in the way, until they finished a batch and stepped back to sip on bottled water.

"Hi, Nick," she said then, approaching. Despite the cold weather he was sweating. He took a long drink.

"Hi. Are you helping?" He recapped his bottle. "I didn't expect to see you until the show kicks off."

"Helping with costumes. Did you get the message I left for you? And I wanted to say hello, and apologize for Jo's interference the other day. She likes to think she's a matchmaker, you know?"

"And are you in need of being fixed up?" His small smile grew wider.

"No!" Holly sputtered a little. "She thought you were cute, and she already has a boyfriend, so--"

"I'm cute?"

Holly groaned. This was not going the way she'd hoped. She reached down into her purse and fumbled for her phone, some kind of distraction.

"It's OK. I think you're cute too." Nick whispered the last, leaning toward her ear.

"Oh." She blinked a few times and forgot the phone. "Thank you."

"I just am not a party person, so I hoped I didn't offend you by saying no to your friend's invitation. I'm more the type of guy who'd rather stay home and maybe have the guys over. Unless I have a date." He winked.

A loud bang rang out and they both jumped.

"Hey, Nick, could use a hand over here." A pile of dropped wood lay at the man's feet.

Nick yanked off one glove and gently brushed a lock of hair away from her eyes. "See you later."

Her heart pounded at the touch, which was quickly over. She watched him assist the group, not hesitating to lift the heavy stuff. Sending up a quick prayer for their safety, Holly wandered back to the last place she'd seen Jo. Maybe her friend would have run into Mandy Jones, the costume girl, because Holly needed to focus on something besides Nick Foster.



Holly's skirt swished around her ankles, the silky material tickling as she walked. Her office party was in full swing, dance music playing as the DJ directed and waiters circulated with little trays of appetizers. She tapped her foot along with the beat of an eighties tune and sipped soda from a tiny glass. Glancing around, she noted she wasn't the only employee without a date. Everyone appeared to be having a good time, and she hoped they'd start the re-gift exchange soon so she could leave. Her feet ached in the mid-rise silver heels, and her face muscles were tired of forced smiling. On top of that, the overwhelming scent of perfume in the air had begun to make her queasy.

"Are you having a good time?" Dave Mackey, her supervisor, approached and took a position by her side.

"Yes, thank you." She shifted her weight to the right, hoping to relieve her foot pain.

"Great." Dave swirled his drink and watched it as if mesmerized. "I wanted to ask if you'd help me with the re-gifting. My original plan was for everyone to come up as I call their name, and they can pick any of

the wrapped items from the table.”

“OK. What would you need me to do?”

“Well, I just thought it would be more fun if you held up an item like a showgirl on TV, and people could call out if they wanted it.”

Holly didn't think that was a good idea because inevitably more than one person would want the same box, but she smiled at her boss and nodded. “Sure, but I'll have to kick my shoes off first.”

Holly ended up with a light tan velour blanket, she'd picked it because of the sparkly silver and white snowflake wrapping. But at least it was a practical item. She had watched as Tim from accounting opened her donation- the sound machine. His expression was rather amused, so she felt good about that. When the last gift had been selected, she bent to gather her shoes when Dave handed her an envelope that hadn't been part of the event.

“There's someone claiming one last gift, he asked me to give this to you,” he said, winked, and left her to take a look inside. Her coworkers were mingling and donning coats to leave, paying her no attention. She glanced around again, confident no one was watching like she was being punked, and opened the envelope. A single sheet of lined paper was inside.

“Sorry I couldn't escort you tonight, but if you step out the back door I have something for you.”

Nick! It had to be from him. She gave the paper a quick sniff—hoping for a manly smell of some sort—but it just smelled like notebook paper. After fastening her heels and finding her jacket, she thanked Dave and his boss for the party and exited to the rear of the room, which opened onto a patio lit with tiny white Christmas lights.

And she saw him. Leaning against a low cement wall, wearing a black jacket and jeans, holding something white in his hands. Holly moved toward him, smiling. "Hi, Nick. What a nice surprise."

"I felt bad that you didn't have a date. Jo told me. So I brought you this." He held up a small bouquet of white roses. "Kind of late to the party, I know, but I wanted you to have these."

Holly's eyes teared up as she accepted his sweet gesture. "That's the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me."

Nick's eyes widened and he held up both hands. "Please don't cry on me, I can't handle that."

"I'm not, I promise." She leaned in and kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

"Want to get a cup of coffee?"

"That'd be great. My car or yours?"

They agreed on his SUV and after she stashed the blanket in her car, he drove them to the local diner, which was a '50s themed eatery with jukeboxes and checked tablecloths. The scent of fresh coffee and apple pie filled the air. When they had both ordered decaf, Holly reached across the table and patted the back of Nick's hand.

"Thank you again for bringing the flowers. That was so sweet."

He shrugged. "Not that big of a deal. So tell me where you work. Where you live."

Holly smiled and described her office job with a large accounting firm, her fun and crazy coworkers and how she lived with her best friend. "I had a normal childhood, one sister, went to the community college for two years. Jo started dragging me to church with her and now I love it." She poured cream into her

cup. "How about you?"

"Also pretty normal, boring even." He sipped his black coffee and kept his gaze on her. "Only child, degree in Engineering, my parents were killed in a car accident three years ago and I live alone now."

Holly reached for a napkin. Why had she thought he was nearly destitute? She knew a bit about what being an engineer meant, but not enough to talk with any intelligence or ask the right questions. "Engineering, wow. Have you worked for any major companies? And I'm so sorry about your parents. That must have been really tough."

"Thanks, it was. I sold their house and got a small place of my own. I was laid off last month and am doing odd jobs while I interview." The waitress breezed past and refilled their cups, described all the types of pie they had available and patted Nick's arm before leaving in a blur of motion.

So Jo really hadn't provided good information on Nick, Holly thought, but that was OK. She liked discovering it on her own. "How did you get involved with the living nativity?"

"The church I grew up in always had one, with all the Biblical animals. I started by helping take care of them, and later by building sets and coordinating parking, practical stuff."

"That's really neat. I've never been to one. I had to search the internet to search ideas for the set designs and costumes."

"I think you'll love the whole thing. It gets cold though, so dress warm." Nick signed the check that had just been dropped at their table. "Let's get you back to your car."

She nodded and reached for her coat and purse

from the seat beside her. As she slid from the booth, Nick's warm hand guided her elbow. Her heart melted a little more—flowers and manners, all in one guy.



The nativity scene unfolded across the field at Holy Nativity Church, cars streamed in one side for parking and the stable sat at the other. Animals chattered and children watched with wide eyes, pointing at a sheep here and a donkey there. One of the girls from the youth group handed out candy canes to the kids, along with a card explaining the Christian meaning of the sweet treats. Fresh greens had been cut and the fragrance mixed with stable smells. Holly and Mandy assessed the costumes they'd put together for the Holy family and the wise men.

"Uh oh," Mandy said as they approached the manger. "We forgot one little thing."

Holly looked around, checked Mary and Joseph, and then focused on the "Jesus" doll. "No swaddling clothing. How did we forget that?" She snapped her fingers. "I've got something. Be right back."

She hurried to her car and grabbed the tan blanket from the back seat. Her cast-off gift would be perfect in the manger. From a distance it would blend right into the scene.

Holly rushed back to the stable, and placed the doll into the velour, then backed up into a hard surface. She whirled to find Nick right behind her, grey eyes gazing at her.

"Hey, thanks for the last-minute addition."

"Glad I had it in the car." She looked around. "The

stable looks fantastic. Very realistic.”

“Well, it is actually a stable. Just one that comes apart into panels.”

Jim walked by and smiled. “Thanks for all your help, both of you.” He looked at Nick. “Any news on that last interview?”

Nick nodded. “They want me to fly to Denver. They may have an opening there next month. Any word if the church has any more work for me?”

“No, sorry. After tonight’s take-down, that’s it for the budget.” Jim clapped Nick’s shoulder before moving on.

“Denver?” Holly’s heart dropped at the thought. Three thousand miles away. Looked like this friendship was going to end sooner rather than later. She rubbed her arms and looked at the ground.

“Maybe. I really don’t want to move.” He touched her cheek. “Especially since I met you. But... both of my part-time jobs have ended. There is one position I could apply for... I hadn’t yet because I’m not sure I’m qualified.”

“But you could try? It’s local?” She felt a smile coming on. Hope!

“It is. I’d probably still move, but only to the next county.” He picked up her hand tugged her toward the concession stand. “Let me buy you a hot cocoa.”

Once they were sipping the steaming drinks, Nick said, “Thank you, for giving up your blanket for the manger.”

“It was from the re-gifting party.”

“Doesn’t matter, a gift is a gift. It’s been a great night.”

“I love your spirit. You aren’t feeling down that your jobs are ending? That your bosses just cut you

loose like that?"

Nick shook his head, reached for her hand and pulled her closer to him. "Nah. After all, I'm in good company." He lifted her hand and motioned toward the stable. "Even Jesus had to sleep outside like a cast-off. No room at the inn."

"That's true. If you need any assistance, I'll help you put together a resume. You're great with a hammer. And a blueprint."

"I really don't want to move anywhere else. And I accept your offer." He turned her to him. "I really like you. Just so you know... I prayed I'd have the nerve to tell you that."

Holly tilted her forehead to rest on his, her gaze sliding sideways to the tiny wooden manger he'd built. "I'm so glad you did. I really, really like you too. Merry Christmas, Nick."

"Merry Christmas, Holly."

Thank you

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