

*Light
a
Christmas
Candle*

A HOLIDAY
ROMANCE

REGINA ANDREWS



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CHAPTER ONE

“Sing with me, Dillon.” Lucy Carrington started the first verse of her favorite Christmas song, “Silent Night,” as she carefully guided her SUV down the dark, unfamiliar streets of Chestnut Crossings, her new hometown.

“I can’t hear you, Dillon,” she prompted her black lab to sing along with her. And as usual, Dillon started “singing” his part, howling right along with her. Before long, they were both at full volume.

The song ended, and Lucy turned the corner. “You must be hungry, my dear boy. You’re so patient. I’ll get you back home soon, I promise.”

She glanced at Dillon and patted him affectionately. “We got you to the park late tonight for your walk. Sorry. But I needed time in the art studio at the workshop to finish up that last batch of Christmas candles for the holiday bazaar tomorrow and —”

A loud crash on her front grill rang through the darkness. “What was that?” She jammed on the brakes. “It’s OK. It’s OK,” she murmured, trying to stop Dillon’s barking.

Grabbing a flashlight from her glove box, she hustled out of the car. “Oh God, please. I hope I haven’t hit someone, not right before Christmas.”

With Dillon close to her heels, she raced to the

front to see what she'd hit. "Is anyone there?" she called. "It's so dark out, I can't see a thing, Dillon...but I hope— Whoa!"

Her foot hit something, and she tumbled to the ground. Dillon's barking reached a higher, more frenzied level.

"Shhh. Quiet, quiet, Dillon. It's OK, boy. I'm OK." She brushed blonde hair from her eyes, realizing her ponytail had broken loose.

"At least I didn't hit someone, but oh, my ankle—" Struggling to get up, she tugged at her foot. It was stuck between two of the trash bins she had smashed into. She kept trying to get her foot free, but the harder she tried to get out, the worse she seemed to be stuck.

"What's going on out here?" A deep male voice boomed through the darkness. Then floodlights snapped on.

Suddenly, the street was bathed in brightness that illuminated rows of historic homes decorated for Christmas, rolling lawns with tall, majestic trees, and a stone church in the yard in front of her. The scene reminded Lucy of the artwork on the Christmas cards her family used to get in the mail.

Tears of nostalgia and regret stung her eyes at the memory, because the days of her ever going back home to her family in Raleigh were long gone. She blinked again, her heart heavy because even though she loved her parents dearly, she couldn't be who they wanted her to be. They were non-believers, and she loved Jesus with her whole heart. The sad irony was that her faith had driven her and her parents apart. It felt like it

would be forever, but she had hope that Jesus could work out a reconciliation.

She had to make it on her own now, just her and Dillon. And what made it even worse was that it had just happened on last Friday the 13th, which happened to be her 25th birthday.

“Who’s there?” the man called, even louder this time.

“I hit your trash cans, Sir. I’m sorry,” she answered. The extra light helped Lucy see her foot. She wiggled it free and then heaved herself up. Dillon assumed a protective stance by her side. Unlike her parents, she could count on Dillon’s loyalty and protective instincts.

“It is just so dark out here,” she continued. “There aren’t many streetlights, and I couldn’t see the cans. I’m not very familiar with this area. I’m sorry,” she repeated.

“Are you injured?”

“No, I’m fine. My foot twisted—”

As the stranger walked towards her, she noticed the command and confidence in his stride. Reflective light glinted off his eyeglasses. He appeared to be in his early thirties, with close-cropped, sandy hair and a strong, athletic build.

Dillon ran toward him, tail straight up in the air. Lucy was just about to call the dog back, but stopped. The stranger crouched on one knee and patted the dog reassuringly.

“It’s OK, boy. It’s OK. Good boy.” His voice was strong and soothing, and calmed Dillon immediately.

Lucy watched with interest. Not everyone had that kind of knack with dogs.

"What's your name, friend?" he asked. Dillon twisted around and tried to lick the stranger's face. He succeeded, and slobbered joyfully all over the man's glasses.

"His name's Dillon," she answered, limping over to join them.

"And what's yours?" His electric blue eyes pierced through the space between them.

"I'm Lucia Carrington, but everybody calls me Lucy."

"Lucia. The patron saint of candles." He looked at her thoughtfully.

"Not many people know that," she said.

He nodded. "I know."

He held her gaze for a minute, and she gazed back. His eyes were blue, clear, and sharp. Feeling the strength and power of the positive energy shooting between them confused her a little, but it intrigued her a lot. Everything else around them seemed to have vanished, leaving the two of them together.

"How about you?" she finally asked after a long minute.

"Well," he said, standing to his full height, which Lucy guessed to be right around six feet. "That's a loaded question."

"Why?" She chuckled. "It's actually probably a pretty common question, isn't it?"

"Maybe. But maybe not." The corners of his eyes crinkled up, as though he were wincing. "Not when

your name is Hamish.”

“*Hamish?*”

“Hamish Sullivan. My parents were on a Scottish kick when I appeared. You’re laughing. Wait, Lucy— did you just snort?”

In spite of herself, she had snorted. “Yes. I’m sorry, really. It is a noble name. *Very* noble. The first time I’ve heard it, though, and the way you said it was kind of funny—”

“With a name like Hamish, I’d better have a good sense of humor. Luckily for me, the English form of it is James.” He stuck out his hand. “So everybody calls me Jim. Jim Sullivan. Nice to meet you, Lucy Carrington. And you too, Dillon.”

She shook his hand, appreciating his firm, strong grip. “Again, I have to tell you I am really sorry about your trash cans, I couldn’t see, and I was a little distracted—”

“It’s no big deal, really. Don’t worry about it.” He gave her a look from the corner of his eye. “I’m just glad that you and Dillon are OK, and that there’s apparently no serious damage to your car. For now, there’s a lot going on, so I’ll get back inside.”

The neighborhood looked really quiet to Lucy, so she wondered what he meant. “OK, sure. But please let me take care of—”

“No, please.” He hitched his thumb in the direction of the church. “Inside, I’ve got most of the congregation down in the Parish Hall. We are rehearsing the Christmas pageant, which is in a few days. So even though I would love to stay and chat out

here with you and Dillon, I have to get back to them. *After* I clean up this mess."

"I'll help you clean up, Jim. It's my fault. Just go back inside and take care of what you need to do."

"No, that's ridiculous—"

"No, it's not. It won't take me long to fix it." Scooping up some of the scattered trash, she dumped it into one of the uprighted cans. "I'll stop by tomorrow with a check to replace your trash cans. They look pretty totaled. But they'll be OK for the collection tomorrow."

Glancing up, she saw him looking at her with a funny expression on his face. She couldn't tell if he was angry or amused, so she just kept talking. "I'm sorry, but I don't have my checkbook with me. See, I'm new to town—"

"You already told me that."

"Right. I'm staying at the motel out by Grace Harbor. It will only take me a few minutes—"

Jim shook his head. "It's really not worth it for you to do that. But, if you insist, I trust you to come back tomorrow. If you came back now, it would be just another interruption, no offense. I would have to stop the rehearsal again, after keeping all of them waiting while I have been out here...*all this time.*"

"OK," she wanted to laugh, but she wasn't sure if he was kidding or actually impatient to get away. "I understand. Sorry again. Go back. I'm going to be at the holiday bazaar for most of tomorrow, so I won't be able to get your check to you until late afternoon."

Then a thought struck her. "Oh wait, I have an

idea. I could come by early tomorrow morning. Would that be OK?"

"Actually, I'm kind of busy in the morning. I have a service to lead early and then we're having an Advent prayer meeting."

Lucy's eyes widened. "A service to lead? You're a priest?"

"Not a priest. I'm the pastor here."

"You're the pastor. Oh, wow. I didn't know that." *And you don't look anything like how I picture a pastor, either. More like a geologist or something... definitely the outdoorsy type.*

"It's OK. As you said, you're new to town."

Again, she wasn't sure if he was serious. But she couldn't help laughing this time. And then she felt that energy crackle between them again.

"That's your second snort, Lucy." He watched her, eyes warm as he gently pushed up his glasses and smiled back at her.

Lucy found all this really, *really* appealing, which made her flustered and confused. She tried to stay on track. "I'd like you to have your check. Should I mail it? Or maybe I could drop it off..."

He held his hands up in a gesture of "stop." "Come back tomorrow after the bazaar. That will be fine. Unless I find you first, Lucy Carrington."

His gaze held hers again for a moment, and she thought he looked as if he were about to smile at her. But he didn't. She told herself she must have thought wrong.

"OK," she agreed. "I'll see you tomorrow. Say

good night, Dillon.”

The dog gave her a quizzical look before trotting over to Jim and rubbing his head against his leg.

“Nice boy,” Jim murmured, giving the dog an affectionate pat.

“That’s his good night nuzzle,” she explained. “I trained him to do that. But until now, he would only do it with me. That’s the first time he’s ever done it to someone else.” She was beaming. “It means he likes you.”

“Your boy has excellent taste, then. Nice to meet you, Lucy Carrington— and Dillon. And thank you.” Jim’s eyes sparkled as he turned and headed across the lawn toward the church.

For a moment, she watched him walk away, thinking about their encounter and how easy he was to talk to. She turned to Dillon. “Well, what about this, Dillon? Our pastor looks like an expert adventurer and acts like he could command a throng of thousands. Something tells me that this might just be the beginning of something very...exhilarating.”

CHAPTER TWO

The next day dawned bright and sunny, a perfect December morning in North Carolina. Scattered fog covered parts of the sky, while patches of mist danced on the ground.

Lucy turned on the local radio station and was encouraged when the meteorologist said, “The skies will stay sunny all day, so get out there and enjoy, everyone. And remember, today is the last holiday bazaar before Christmas, so make sure to head over to Chestnut Commons and get all your last-minute gifts.”

“At least the weather is cooperating,” she said, giving herself a pep talk. Lucy hoped for an excellent turnout, since she definitely needed to sell a lot of candles to make ends meet.

She continued to pray while she packed up all her candles, folding table, chairs, banner, treats for Dillon, and other items for the bazaar into her SUV. Then she hit the road.

A few minutes later, Dillon looked at her quizzically as she pulled into the parking lot of the local hardware store. “I just have a quick errand here,” she explained. “I’ll be right back, good boy.”

And she was back, true to her word in less than fifteen minutes. After loading her purchases into the

SUV, they headed to the main road, driving along the scenic coastline to the holiday bazaar.

Lucy caught her breath as she arrived at Chestnut Commons. With walking paths, a play area for children, and an enormous granite fountain, it was the perfect image of an old-fashioned American town square.

“Look Dillon.” she whispered, “it’s so beautiful.” The trees in the Commons twinkled with holiday lights strung in their branches, giving the area a festive look and a feeling of holiday cheer. Excitement filled her heart at the bustling activity that was already underway. Food trucks were unpacking and musical performers, painters, and artisans were getting set up in white tents before the official 8:00 am opening.

She pulled into a parking spot. A glimmer of hope spread through her, as bright as the lights twinkling in the trees. Maybe she would make some new friends here, and maybe she’d be successful selling her candles.

“And with a bit of God’s grace, I’ll be able to talk to someone about finding a place to rent in town, too, instead of staying in Grace Harbor at the motel much longer. Right, Dillon?”

The lab looked at her and whined as if he’d understood and was answering.

She hopped out of her SUV and ran into Bonnie LaViolette, one of the directors, whom she knew from the art studio workshop where she made her candles.

“Hi, Lucy. Welcome. Here’s a map of the grounds with all the vendors listed. Your spot is right over

there, close to the main entrance." Bonnie pointed to an area not too far from where they were standing.

"It's a prime location. I was so happy when your number was drawn for it at the lottery. There's always so much competition for that place."

"This is turning out to be a great day."

"And I hope it's the first of many for you," Bonnie said warmly. "It's great to have you here in Chestnut Crossings."

"Thank you. I like it here a lot."

"I'm glad. Hey, you know, all through the year we have a farmer's market here— every Saturday morning. It's a great activity. It really draws the community together. But for the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas we call it a holiday bazaar, and it just seems to get everyone into the spirit of the season."

"I can see why." Lucy agreed. "It's enchanting, looks just like a fairytale...And you said they have a farmer's market here also during the other months?"

"Yes. All year long," Bonnie said. "And we always need help. Hint, hint, hint. Not so subtle, am I?"

Lucy laughed. "You can count on me to help, for sure. I'd be happy to. Plus, I need to sell my candles. I don't have a job now, so they are my livelihood."

"Oh, I didn't know you were looking for work. I'll keep my eyes open for you, if you like."

"That would be excellent, Bonnie. Thank you." Lucy paused. "And maybe you could let me know if you hear about an apartment for me to rent in town, too? Grace Harbor is beautiful, but it's a bit far from

the center of Chestnut Crossings.”

“Sure, I hear things all the time at work. That church day care center is like a town information kiosk.” Bonnie laughed. “And as the director, the parents tell me everything, so I’ll keep that on my radar, definitely.”

“Thanks again.”

“Let’s get you settled first, and then you can thank me. One thing I know, you have found a home here, I am sure. Any questions, you just let me know. I hope you enjoy yourself today.”

“You, too,” Lucy called as Bonnie scuttled off into the crowd. She turned to Dillon, “Looks like we made a really wonderful new friend.”

With a yawn, Dillon stretched out beside the table, rested his head on his paws and closed his eyes.

“OK, I’ll set it all up by myself,” she muttered and then chuckled.

After making several trips back and forth to the car, she was ready to set up. She opened her long folding table, shook out a big red-and-green plaid table cover and watched it float all the way to the ground. Next, she painstakingly arranged her candle jars on the table, using evergreen boroughs and pinecones to separate the different fragrances. Her final touch was a stack of her oversized business cards with “Carrington Candles” in a flowing, flowery script.

She was admiring her work when she heard Bonnie’s voice behind her, “Lucy, this is spectacular. You’re a natural for this.”

“Aw, thank you. I hope you’re right. All this is

scary in my position right now.”

Bonnie pointed to one of the candle groupings on the table. “What are these?”

“That’s a section with some of my holiday candles. You know, like cranberry, evergreen, cinnamon, peppermint bark, holiday sugar cookie, hot cocoa, and roasted chestnuts. And over here,”—she pointed to another side of the table— “are the citrus and fruit fragrances. Like lemon, strawberry, and orange blossom.”

“I love how you have them in jars, but you also made pillar candles and tapers.”

“Thanks. I try to give my customers a nice, broad selection. And I can make custom candles, too.”

“And I noticed that you put the roasted chestnut candles in a very prominent position.” Bonnie winked.

“Well they *should* be in a very prominent position. After all, we live in Chestnut Crossings and the bazaar is being held in Chestnut Commons.”

Lucy turned quickly at the voice behind her, and Dillon stood and started barking. Lucy was surprised to see Jim standing there wearing a plaid lumberjack shirt, jeans, and hiking boots. He wore the look well...really well.

“Pastor Jim, good morning,” Bonnie cried. “I thought you had an Advent meeting this morning?”

“I did, too,” he said with a wry smile. “But apparently this Holiday Bazaar has a lot more appeal today.”

Bonnie looked stunned. “No one showed up?”

“Not a soul.”

"Well, maybe you can schedule another one for later on?" Lucy offered.

"Oh, you are optimistic, aren't you Lucy Carrington? I don't think so. Sitting and studying loses its appeal when there's something more fun to do. So, that's why I'm here." He raised one eyebrow at Lucy.

She laughed at his antics.

"Do you two know each other?" Bonnie looked from Lucy to Jim in disbelief.

"A little bit," Lucy offered, flustered at the memory of the clumsy way they met.

"We bumped into each other briefly last night." Jim's voice was as smooth as silk.

"Oh?" Bonnie's eyes narrowed. "Did you try out for the pageant, Lucy?"

Suddenly, Dillon jumped up on Jim and licking him without restraint.

"Oh, my. Oh, mercy." Bonnie fluttered around the display. "Lucy, he might knock your table over."

"Down, Dillon," Lucy called, hoping that Bonnie hadn't seen her laughing at the comical scene.

"He's fine, Bonnie," Jim said confidently, patting Dillon who stood still and seemed to be enjoying Jim's attention.

"It's OK, not to worry," Lucy said. "Jim's got a real way with Dillon."

Bonnie's mouth fell open as if she were just about to say something when a man carrying a stepladder and a hammer approached Lucy's display.

"Morning, everyone. Pastor Jim, we're ready for you at the raffle table," he said. He looked at Lucy's

set-up and a smile spread across his face.

"Wow, my wife would love some of these candles," he said. "I'll be back to buy them for her later on, so don't sell out on me, OK?"

"I'll try," Lucy answered as he walked off.

"I hope you both have a good day," Jim said, "but for now I'm being called."

"Oh, yes, Pastor, you do have a calling. I don't know what we would do without you here in Chestnut Crossings," Bonnie gushed.

"Well thank you for your kind words. I guess it never hurts to butter up your boss." They all shared a laugh and he said, "See you later."

"See you," Lucy called. She watched him walk off across the Commons, taking his long strides. But before he left, he gave Lucy a look, and she could have sworn there was a wink involved. However, with the morning sun shining on his glasses, she couldn't be positive.

"Tell me, tell me, tell me." Bonnie squealed. "How in the world did you ever meet him? You didn't mention it to me."

"Actually, it's kind of embarrassing," Lucy said, quickly relating her accidental encounter with Jim and his trash cans.

"But the most interesting thing was the way he bonded with Dillon. I don't ever remember seeing that. He really has a way with animals. It's very unusual."

Bonnie nodded. "He has a real way with people, too. He's only been here for a little over a year, and already he has brought us so much closer together. On

so many levels—spiritually, emotionally and helping us all bond as a faith family and prayer community.”

“That’s fantastic,” Lucy said thoughtfully. “It’s obvious that he’s a very special person.”

“Absolutely.”

“Where did he come from before he was here?”

“A small town up north, I think in Maine, as I recall. Yes, it was in Maine.” Bonnie nodded. “He had been there for quite some time. Such a nice man,” she mused, as if thinking out loud.

“Bonnie. Bonnie.” Two women wearing volunteer smocks approached Lucy’s area waving their arms in the air. “There’s an emergency at the demonstrations tent, and we need you to go over right away.”

“I’m sorry, Lucy. I really have to—”

“Go, go, of course,” Lucy urged. “Let me know if there’s something I can do to help. I mean it.”

“Thank you.” Hurrying toward the two women, Bonnie called, “Here I come Susie. Hey, April. Hang on.” She disappeared into the crowd that seems to be growing larger by the minute.

More people streamed in, and before long, there was a line at Lucy’s table...And they kept coming and coming. Her candles vanished faster than she could fill the empty spaces on her display table.

Before she knew it, the day had flown by, and shadows were growing long on Chestnut Commons. As dusk fell, a deeper fairytale feeling settled onto the setting. This experience was the beginning of something good, and she wanted to keep the happy memory forever. She took a few quick pictures with

her phone to post on her blog.

Dillon became restless, and the wind had a nippy feel to it, so Lucy decided to call it a day. She packed up her things and was surprised when she went back to her van. Looking at her inventory, she was amazed to see that she had sold nearly every single candle she had brought with her.

“Just one quick stop,” she promised Dillon. “And then we’ll take you for a nice run in the park before we head home.”

It was time to visit Pastor Jim and deliver what she had promised him the night before. She drove carefully down Main Street, hoping deep down that he wouldn’t be home. Something about him made her a little antsy and she couldn’t put her finger on it.

She was still embarrassed about the accident the night before, but this feeling was more than embarrassment... Or unease... or restlessness. It made her feel flushed...and flustered.

Pulling into his driveway, she glanced around, and she hadn’t been there for twenty seconds when he opened the front door and came out into the yard.

“I knew you’d be coming here,” Jim said cordially. “It’s clear to me that you’re a woman of your word.”

“That I am; you’re absolutely right.”

Her heart pounded as she hopped out of the SUV and walked over to meet him. She hoped that she had done the right thing. Would he like the surprise she had in store?

“How’d you make out at the bazaar?” he asked casually.