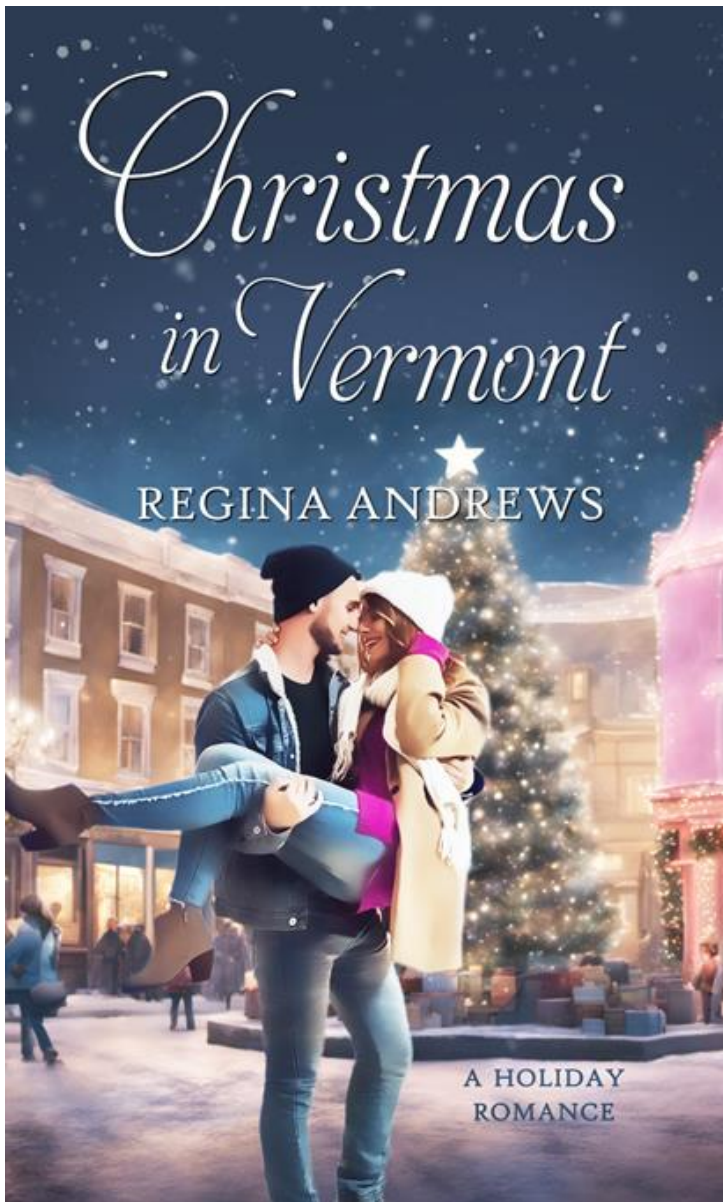


Christmas in Vermont

REGINA ANDREWS

A HOLIDAY
ROMANCE



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Regina Andrews

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Dedication

For my wonderful parents, whose love, guidance and encouragement have supported my endeavors throughout my life. And for Jonathan, my husband... thank you for making every day sparkle with joy and love.

1

Reaching the top of the flight of stone steps, Christal Birchwood took a deep breath. The frigid December air filled her lungs, energized her spirit. Even after two years of studying in Switzerland, she still could not get enough of the cold weather. Something about it invigorated her and seemed to sharpen all her senses, making them more keen and alert and crackling with energy.

Wearing her favorite peacock blue suede gloves, she gripped the brass door handle of Holly Berry Vintage Jewelry. Thumbing the latch, she swung open the door. The tinkle of the shop bells welcomed her to her new position. Now it was real; her dream was coming true and she was starting her new life this very minute, as a certified gemologist—here in her hometown of Holly Berry, Vermont.

One of her mother's favorite phrases came into her head, and she whispered it like a prayer, remembering her mother's faith and devotion: "Embrace it, enjoy it, and always do your best." *I promise I will, Mom.*

Walking into the vintage jewelry store was like taking a step back in time. Beautiful polished oak floors ran throughout the space, leading the eye to gorgeous glass display cases, each illuminated from within. Deep

forest green and navy blue velvet liners, positioned strategically, underpinned the sparkling array of stunning estate necklaces, bracelets, watches, earrings and more. The showroom gleamed with treasures, aglow with the warmth of polished gold, silver, platinum and a seemingly endless rainbow of dazzling gemstones.

"I know you are here with me, Mom," she whispered, fingering the treasured locket on a delicate chain around her neck. "I promise I will do my best to make you proud of me, even though you are not here...I know you are with me."

"Good morning, Miss Birchwood."

The booming baritone startled Christal, and she swung around to see the shop owner, Mr. Cowsill, walking across the showroom towards her. Christal smiled, the sight of him genuinely warming her heart.

A bright smile lit his face. "Right on time. Excellent. Excellent. This is exactly what we want, especially on a beautiful day like today."

"Good morning, Mr. Cowsill, and it is a glorious day, isn't it?"

He gave a hearty laugh. "Why don't we save the formality for when we have customers in the store? When it is just the two of us here, it's OK to use our first names, OK, *Christal*?"

"Fine with me, *Tom*." She nodded. After all, he had known her since the day she was born.

"Good, we are on the same page about that. Now, let's get you settled in." He took her around a quick tour of the shop, explaining the arrangements in the

different display cases. There was a side door towards the back with a window that overlooked the showroom.

"This is going to be your gemology office," he said as they stepped in.

Christal's eyes widened with delight as she reviewed the way Mr. Cowsill had set up her work area. There was a large desk and wide counter space with an assortment of instruments—a refractometer, a polariscope, a gemological microscope, a 10x loupe, daylight and UV lamps, a hand spectroscope, and more. "This is fantastic, Mr.—I mean, Tom. You have all the professional equipment a gemologist could ever need. I can see you went to a lot of trouble to research this. And I appreciate it very much."

"Anything for you, Christal." He glowed. "Remember that. Anything."

"This is going to be so wonderful."

"There's just one thing I can't offer you right now," Tom said. "And I'm really sorry about it."

"What is it?"

"Coffee. My coffee maker broke two weeks ago, and I haven't gotten around to replacing it yet."

"That is no problem at all. In fact, it might be nice for me to treat you to celebrate my first day. How about if I just dash over to Holly Berry Café and pick up some for us? It's just around the corner."

"You don't mind?"

"Not a bit. Now, tell me how you like yours and I'll be right back." He gave her the details, and clutching her bag, she swept off, closing the door

gently behind her. The tinkle of the doorbells warmed her heart, already sounding like music to her ears.

Stepping onto the sidewalk, she marveled at how different she felt from when she had entered the shop just a little while earlier. It was as if she had been there all along, as though everything had been working up to this very moment. There was a song in her heart as she placed her order at the café, and she even decided to bring a few pastry treats as well. She couldn't wait to get back and set up her desk and explore all the treasures in the shop.

She nearly floated up the staircase, and balanced the treats in one hand as she opened the door with the other. It was still very early, so she would have plenty of time to settle in and enjoy her coffee with Tom before any customers came into the store.

Much to her surprise, when she walked in, Tom was actually with a customer. They had their heads bent over a display case containing vintage watches, and they were both intently focused on one piece in particular.

"I'm back," she announced cheerfully. "If you're busy, I can leave your things in the office."

At the sound of her voice, both Tom and his customer looked up.

"That was faster than fast. Come on over here for a minute, Christal," Tom called, a smile lighting up his face. "I'd like to introduce you to a good friend of mine, Dr. Cole Townsend."

She placed her bundle on a nearby countertop. Loosening the cashmere scarf from around her neck,

she joined them at the display case.

“Cole, this is Christal Birchwood. She’s originally from here in Holly Berry Village, and recently returned from studying gemology in Switzerland for two years,” Tom explained. “To my delight, she’s agreed to join me as our official business gemologist.”

Christal switched her gaze from Tom to Cole. The man was tall and rugged, with dark curly hair, and deep brown eyes that seemed to be looking right into her soul.

“Very nice to meet you,” she said, slipping off her glove and extending her hand.

“Likewise,” he replied in a voice that was both strong and compelling. His grip was firm, and on purpose, Christal made sure to match it equally with hers.

There was something intriguing about his eyes, and the atmosphere around him that Christal sensed. She couldn’t put her finger on it exactly, but it made her want to know more about him.

“Cole is actually rather new to Holly Berry Village,” Tom offered. “He came here about a year ago, bought the Romney place, barn and all. Completely redid it.”

“That must have been quite a project,” she replied. “I remember that place, and it was rather run down.”

“You’re right; it really was in need of a lot of help. But that’s the kind of challenge I just can’t resist.”

Christal did not miss the twinkle in Cole’s eyes as he spoke. Tilting her head to one side, she smiled. “So you’re someone who likes an adventure.”

"That's one way of putting it," he said slowly, his gaze never leaving her face.

"But, oh, he did a fantastic job." Tom gushed. "All that renovation and construction going on at the very same time that he assumed the position of our town doctor. It was incredible."

"I've got Tom to thank here for advising me to put in air conditioning," Cole said wryly. "I wasn't too sure about how in touch with reality he was, because I never thought you'd need air conditioning in Vermont. But boy, you were right." He grinned at Tom.

Christal did a double-take. He was even more handsome when he smiled, if that were possible. "Meeting Tom was quite a blessing for me," Cole continued, "and he's turned out to be a great friend."

"Seems to me that all of Holly Berry Village is blessed to have you, Cole. True, we haven't had too many emergencies, but it's as if you're supposed to be here with us. And on top of all of that, you are a GP on staff at the hospital in Sleighborough."

"And how are you enjoying yourself, in the city hospital and in our little village?" Christal asked.

"Feels like I've found a home here," he replied, keeping his gaze on her face.

"That's excellent," she replied.

Tom cleared his throat. "I can take that coffee now, please, Christal. And when you get settled, just stop in, and we'll organize some of the new estate arrivals for you to assess."

"Perfect," Christal handed him his cup and the bag with his treats. "There's a little something extra in

here to celebrate our first day together.”

“Thank you. What a good hire.” He chuckled and he went towards the back room.

She turned to Cole. “And here’s a coffee for you, too. I have a habit when I’m ordering—I always ask for a couple extra...just in case.” She placed the cup on the display case.

“Interesting strategy. Thank you very much.” He gave her a nod. “I actually came in here looking for something today. I’m in the market for a necklace. Do you think you could help me find one?”

“I’d be happy to,” she replied cheerfully, but inside, disappointment settled in. What was wrong with her, thinking he’d be available? Of course there was someone in his life. He was a gorgeous doctor with a great personality. She took a deep breath to compose herself. “Did you have any particular style in mind?”

“Yes. Elegant, classy, and sensational. And I know that she loves emeralds. Does that help?”

“It’s an excellent help, absolutely. I see two of them here that might fit the bill for you.” She tested the sliding door to the display cabinet and was surprised to see that it was unlocked. That would be something she would need to mention to Tom. Even though they were in a small town, security really had to be their top priority.

Christal slid out two velvet showcase racks, one navy blue and one ruby red, and placed them both on top of the display case. The two necklaces were very different in style. One was a modern take on a

Byzantine design, and the second was a chandelier necklace, virtually dripping with diamonds and emeralds.

“Do either of these seem like something that you might be looking for, Cole?”

“Absolutely. This one.” He indicated the vintage chandelier style necklace. “I’d like to see it on you so that I can picture what it would look like on the recipient.”

“Of course,” she replied, hoping that she had covered up her surprise. She slipped off her coat and placed it on a chair. Today she had worn her favorite scoopneck dress, so he would have a good picture of what the necklace would look like on whomever he planned to give it to.

She removed the necklace carefully from its display pillow and undid the clasp. Then, she pulled her long hair to one side. She attempted to fasten the jewelry around her neck, but was having trouble. Turning to him, she asked, “Could you please help me with this?”

“My pleasure.” He stood close to her and took the necklace from her.

When he placed it around her neck, his hands felt warm against her skin. She closed her eyes, inhaling, just for a moment, the fragrant, masculine scent of him. Clean clothes, and freshly scrubbed hands...and she could feel his breath against her neck, almost like a caress.

Her heartbeat quickened, outpacing the ticking of the wall clock beside her. Without even realizing what

she was doing, she leaned back towards him ever so slightly. It had been so long... Her pounding heartbeat told the tale of the loneliness that she had been feeling the past few years. She felt his breath, again...and moistening her lips, she opened her mouth to say something that would dissipate her errant thoughts—

“Almost got it,” Cole whispered.

His breath tickled her ear, and she let out a short sound and flinched. The movement caught her off balance, and she started to fall backwards. She let go of her hair as her hands went outward. Cole let go of the clasp and caught her.

She put her hand over the necklace to keep it from falling, and looked over her shoulder at him. “Sorry. I’m overly ticklish.”

As his gaze met hers, her breath hitched. His eyes were almost mesmerizing.

“It’s all right,” he said as he slid his hands up her shoulders and back towards the jewelry at her neck. As his hand moved, something snagged on her hair, and he halted abruptly, hands frozen in place.

She lifted her left shoulder instinctively and slanted her gaze sideways. She could see nothing but Cole’s fingers gripping her shoulder.

“Don’t move,” he whispered.

“What happened?” She matched his tone. Why were they whispering?

“My watch caught in your hair. Hold still while I work it free.” He started to move back.

“Ouch!” Her hair pulled.

“Sorry,” he shot out quickly and moved closer to

her. His right arm came around the front of her to meet his left wrist, and gently he worked her hair free.

"Almost," he said.

"Who wears a watch these days, anyway?" she asked, to distract herself from his soft breath moving the tendrils of her hair. The tickling made her want to shiver, but she schooled herself. Her ticklish nature was what had gotten them into this mess.

"It's a—"

"What in the world is going on in here?"

Tom's voice echoed through the showroom.

Christal was so startled that she jumped and ripped Cole's watch from her hair. The necklace nearly fell on the floor. She clutched it to her chest and turned to see Tom, who looked very confused.

"Nothing, nothing at all," Cole replied in a calm and neutral tone. "No need to get upset, Tom. Your new assistant was just showing me a piece I am interested in purchasing."

"Looked as if she was showing you more than jewelry. Besides, my new associate has no business opening a case or modeling any of these items. This is none of your affair, Cole. It would be better if you left us alone now."

"Tom."

"I'm serious, Cole."

Tom turned to Christal. "I thought you had more sense and decorum than this, Christal. I am very disappointed in you. You don't leave me any option."

"But the case was unlocked," she protested.

"Tom—" there was a tone of warning in Cole's

voice, but Tom paid no attention to it.

“I can’t have this, Miss Birchwood, and you should know that. This is an upstanding community. I don’t have any choice. But I will be sure not to mention this to anyone. We will just say that you had a change of heart.”

“No, no, I did not have a change of heart. I want to work with you. I want to be here. This is my livelihood, my dream!” Christal’s voice shook from the panic rising in her chest.

“We are all professionals, Tom. You’re overreacting.” Cole’s voice was cool and steady.

“Save your breath, both of you.” Tom shook his head, and snatched the necklace from Christal. “I had high hopes for you, but you don’t leave me any option,” he repeated. “Please put your coat on and leave.”

2

“What in the world got into you?” Cole’s eyes flashed at his friend. He could still hear Christal’s sobs echoing in his mind as she had dashed out the door and down the steps. “How could you do that to her?”

“Don’t you dare go all high and mighty on me.” Tom shook his fist in the air. “I know you used to be a preacher, but you’re not one now. So you’ve got no business telling me the difference between right and wrong.”

Cole counted to ten, trying to compose himself. He had never seen this side of his friend, and he was appalled. “This has nothing to do with me, Tom. And it has everything to do with you.”

“What do you mean, nothing to do with you? Who else was standing there ready to take her dress off, because that’s what I saw, and when I walked in, the guy I saw with her was you.”

“Oh, come on. There was no such thing as that going on. I was helping her with the clasp, and that’s all.”

“That’s all, because I stopped it, and didn’t give a chance for anything else to happen.”

“It’s useless to try to talk reason into you when you’re this upset,” Cole said with a sigh. Moving to the

door he called over his shoulder: "I'll catch up with you later."

The showroom door latched shut with a depressing sense of finality. Cole walked down Main Street, his fists clenched into balls and jammed into the pockets of his jacket. Tom was completely wrong in his assumption, but Cole knew that, deep down, he'd been strongly attracted to Christal. What would have happened if they had remained alone? If his watch hadn't gotten tangled in her hair?

Beautiful hair...He swallowed, his eyebrows furrowed in a deep frown, mirroring the pain that he felt in his heart. Christal had the same deep auburn hair as Melissa. He swallowed again, trying to erase the memory. But he couldn't. There was too much of him tied into it. He was the one who was responsible for his own sister's death.

If he hadn't insisted on taking that missionary trip to Africa, nothing would have happened to her. It had been his fatal flaw. As a pastor, he could not see beyond the mission that he felt compelled to undertake. When all along, his real mission was one of being a loving protector. He could see that now in hindsight.

But back then, all he'd seen was the calling to go to Africa, and he'd insisted his sister go with him. After all, he couldn't leave her behind, so God must've meant for her to go, too. Yes, Melissa had eventually agreed to the trip. But it was against her good judgment. She didn't think it was going to do her any good at all. He had been elated...and Melissa had been

right. She contracted a deadly disease on the third week into the mission and was gone in just a few days.

Where many would have blamed God—and a part of him had for a while—he realized that it was his own pride and stubbornness that had put his sister in jeopardy. Pride at thinking he knew what God wanted for someone else. Stubbornness at not listening to Melissa when she'd said she wanted to stay home. And his sister had paid the price. He'd failed God and Melissa. He deserved neither mercy nor happiness. His would be a life of penance and restitution.

So he said goodbye to his vocation. It was the least he could do. Instead, he devoted himself to healing those who were sick. He redirected his energy, his spirituality, and his mental and physical strength to taking care of those around him and bringing them back to good health. It was the least he could do to make reparations for the man he had been, back then.

The man he was now—he could only hope that God would forgive him. He promised to live a life of solitude, so that he would not ruin anybody else's life. The only contact he would have with anyone would be to bring them back to good health, using the talents and abilities that he had.

A part of him did recognize the irony in his choosing medicine when he didn't want to be responsible for harming anyone, but medicine had rules, procedures, recommended doses—tested knowledge that had come from experts, and not decisions based on his own intuition. Medicine was solid. His raw judgment was not.

The image of Christal drifted into Cole's mind. He passed the shops on Main Street without fully seeing them. The bakery, the Holly Berry Café, the gym, the bank, the hairdresser... all the small businesses that he did his best to patronize were today being passed by in a blur. All he could see was Christal. Her smooth, pale skin, her sparkling green eyes, and her beautiful smile....and then the devastated look on her face when Tom had pulled the plug on all her dreams.

And it was his fault. Sure, he hadn't intended harm, but what did that matter? He hadn't intended to harm his sister, but Melissa was still gone. His choices had consequences. How could he possibly make it up to her? She would never want to see him again as long as she lived, he knew that. It would be only natural. Tom had raved about how she had studied in Switzerland to become a certified gemologist, and now that was all gone. In all likelihood, she would have to move away from Holly Berry Village to find another position in her profession. In one instant, her whole life had been changed, and her hopes and dreams shattered. And it was all because of him.

"Look out!"

The loud cries of a man next to him brought him back to reality. In an instant, he saw that the woman in front of him on the sidewalk was about to step right into the path of a bus that was pulling up close to the curb to pick up passengers.

Without thinking, he reached out and grabbed the woman back towards him by both shoulders, pulling her away from the curb with both of his arms around

her. He clutched her back close against his chest tightly, using all his strength.

"Let me go, let me go, you—" she screamed, struggling to get away from him.

"Don't worry, I've got you," he murmured reassuringly. "You're OK. Don't worry, it's all right."

But she broke free and turned to face him, her fists raised in self-defense. And then she stopped. "It's you," she whispered, wild-eyed and still nearly out of breath.

"Christal," He looked her up and down, and saw no signs of any injury. "Thank goodness you are OK."

"Why did you do that? Why? Everything is over for me now, don't you see? All I need is for Tom to see your arms around me. He'll never forgive me!" She shrieked, and fell sobbing against his chest.

The man who had yelled, alerting Cole to the danger, ran over to them while holding his cell phone in the air. "Want me to call for an ambulance or something?"

Cole shook his head but held up an index finger to signal the fellow to stick around for a while. He continued to stroke Christal's hair while he led her to a nearby bench to sit. He needed to soothe her, to calm her.

"It's all right, it was all just a big misunderstanding. We will straighten it out." He kept his voice low and comforting. "We will straighten it out," he repeated. "Everything will be OK, Christal."

"How can you say that?" She challenged, backing away from him. "How can you say that everything will

be OK? What do you know, anyway?"

One thing he did know was that she was breathing more normally now, and appeared to be stabilizing. With that in mind, Cole put his thumb and index finger together, signaling "OK" to the helpful stranger, and the man went on his way.

Then he turned to Christal. "I believe it will be OK," he said. And he meant it. "I know it will. And I will do everything I can to make it right."

"The only thing I want you to do is to stay away from me, don't come near me," she said, her voice low and her eyes flashing. "I just lost my job." She sobbed. "I know it's not totally rational to blame you, but I do. I can't help it."

If she had delivered a right-hand punch to Cole's jaw, it could not have hurt him more than hearing these words from her. She was right. "I will make it up to you, I promise."

"You have no idea how awful this is." She sobbed, new tears streaming down her cheeks. "No idea."

Cole was nearly moved beyond words. "I'm truly sorry, Christal. I was just looking for a necklace for my aunt."

"Well, that's not what Tom Cowsill thinks, and I guess it's not what he saw."

"What he saw was you being a good employee, trying to help me. That is the truth. What he infers is something else...maybe it's his problem, not yours or mine."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Look, you were only trying to assist me in