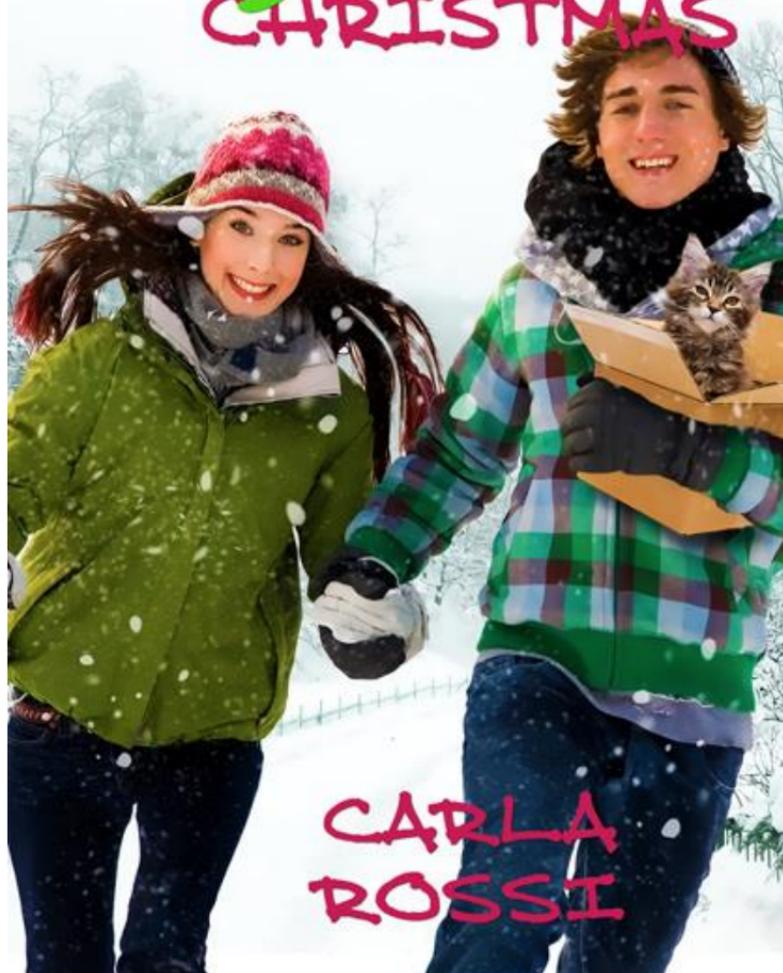


How Nick & Holly
wrecked
saved
CHRISTMAS



CARLA
ROSSI

How Nick and
Holly ~~Wrecked~~
Saved Christmas

Carla Rossi

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How Nick and Holly Wrecked Saved Christmas

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Dedication

To Ashley, one of my favorite choir nerds.

About Carla Rossi

Carla Rossi is a multi-published, award-winning author as well as a cancer survivor, life-long music minister, and speaker. She has been writing inspirational romance for Pelican Book Group since 2007. Carla lives north of Houston with her husband and writing partner— a Maine Coon Cat. She has three grown children and one grandson.

Day One - The Unwelcome Coincidence.

"You!"

I blink hard because it can't possibly be true. I must have my contacts in backwards, but how could I possibly tell? My face is swollen, my eyes are turning black, and the bandage on my nose obscures most important obstacles in front of me. "What are *you* doing *here*?"

"Holly..." he says all embarrassed-like and clearly as surprised as me.

"Forget it," I say and attempt to drag my bright purple rolling suitcase up the last two snow-covered steps. "It's the cherry on top of my Christmas vacay to find you here. Yay me." I keep tugging, but the stubborn wheels won't slide over the last slippery step. "This is insane! This is a senior complex. How do they expect the decrepit people to get up these stairs?"

Nick clears his throat. This causes me to look at him again which in turn hurts my face. He's pointing to the center's accessible ramp, and I can't believe I haven't passed out from the embarrassment.

“Let me help,” he says.

The snow crunches beneath his brown winter boots. My smashed nose barely works, but I can’t miss the scent of cigarette smoke and intense something-or-other men’s body spray he’s been squirting to cover up his habit.

“Stay away from me, Nick Zernigan. I’ve had enough of your help.”

I lunge forward with such force I lose my balance and fall to one knee. Nick’s boots are crunching snow again and I practically lie all the way down with my broken face to the icy porch boards to avoid his outstretched hand.

“I’ve got it,” I say and struggle to stand up, my gloves and jeans now saturated with wet, heavy snow. “Stay back.”

“Whatever,” he says and turns.

“Wait a minute. Why are you here? Your house is twenty miles away on the other side of the lake.”

“What are you, my probation officer?”

“Why? Do you have one of those?”

“No.” His breath swirls in front of him in the frosty air as he adjusts his hat over his stringy black hair. I swear his teeth are chattering. “My great-aunt and uncle live here. Well, my aunt does. My uncle died a couple weeks ago. My dad thought I should spend some time here while he... Never mind.” He nods toward my bag and stuffs his hands in the pockets of his coat. “Why are you here?”

“Sorry about your uncle.” The cold stings the inside of my sore nose. “My granny’s here,” I rush to add and finish the conversation. My anger bubbles again and I refuse to share with Nick Zernigan how my mother’s boyfriend has whisked her away to

somewhere tropical while I've been banished to the old folks' home to rot over Christmas. The situation is so unfair I know my teeth will crack if I keep gritting them about it. "Anyway." I tug my coat closed. "I can't believe we both have family here."

"It's no great mystery, Holly. Black Diamond West Virginia isn't all that big."

He must think I'm stupid. "Yes, I know. We have a mountain and a lake. The best of skiing for two seasons. Almost Heaven West Virginia and all that. I've been on this God-forsaken mountain my whole life too, you know."

"Yeah, well, see you around."

Nick hesitates.

I do, too, but try to avoid his coal black gaze. The length of his lashes defies the laws of nature. He looks like a catalog model, and I look like I've been hit by a bus—all because of him.

"I'm sorry again about the... You know." He waves his finger in front of his face and then points it my way.

My glare is as cold as my swollen face will allow. "Forget it."

He opens the door for me. "Merry Christmas, Holly."

Humph. Christmas is wrecked.

"Merry stinkin' Christmas, Nick."

I love my granny. She is the rock star of all grannies everywhere. But she didn't deserve to have me dumped on her doorstep at Christmas any more than I deserved being the dumpee.

"Knock knock, *cheri*," she chirps. "You awake? I heard your phone going off."

I pull the buds from my ears and peek out from under the six quilts she heaped on me to keep me from freezing to death. "I'm awake," I say and glance at my phone. "It's 9:00 PM and I'm in bed. I've reached a new level of pathetic."

She laughs, and I see she's brought another blanket.

"Step away from the quilt, Granny. You've already buried me so deep in the patchwork avalanche that I'm losing signal."

"This entire complex is wireless. You should have plenty of signal unless the snow's picked up. Sometimes it gets slow when there's heavy snow on the mountain."

I produce a nasally half-snort. The mountain. Hate it.

I adjust my pink and black flannel bottoms and twist my tank into place.

She shivers and makes sure the blinds are all the way down. "It's always so cold in this room. Are you sure you-"

"Positive."

She laughs and pulls away layers of bedding and neatly folds and stacks quilts at the end of the dresser. "How's that?"

"Better." I pat the bed.

Granny settles in on the end. "Were you talking to Amanda?"

"Texting."

"You know there's no reason Amanda can't visit you here or pick you up to go out. I'd be happy to send you for a Christmas luncheon together at the tearoom."

My treat.”

“Thanks, Granny, but Amanda is in Ohio with her family.”

I imagine my best friend crammed in an SUV with her slutty older sister, obnoxious younger brother, and her over-protective parents. It’s a wonder her head stays attached with all the information she stores. Her sister does this, her parents don’t know that, her brother got in trouble there... No one but Amanda seems to know what’s really going on. But at least she’s with her family at Christmas. Her *whole* family.

“Now,” Granny says. “What do we need to do about that nose? Do you need acetaminophen? Or do we need to change the tape? It’s starting to peel around the edges.”

I growl. I grunt. I groan and flop myself into the deep downy pillows. “There’s nothing left to do,” I wail. “It doesn’t hurt anymore. All this dressing can come off in the morning. As of now, it’s supposed to be healing on its own. I have a decongestant and some antibiotics.” I crawl toward granny and put my head in her lap. “I’m hideous.”

She gathers my hair in her slightly crooked fingers and runs her red nails across my scalp and through it like a comb. It feels so good I curl into a kitten-like ball and lean into her hand. It is the best feeling.

My mother never does this.

“*Mon cheri*, you are not hideous. There is no permanent damage and you will heal. The bruising will get lighter every day. You will be good as new when school starts again.”

“Ug... School. They’ll gawk at me anyway.” I moan and twist. I am so irritated and angry with the whole situation I can think of little else. “I was the only

junior with a solo in the holiday show. The only female vocalist with *two* Christmas classics—and one of them was that duet with Tyler Hallmark.”

“I was there, *cheri*. I remember.”

“Then I’m sure you also remember how that freak-show loser Nick Zernigan, assaulted me with the *Baby, It’s Cold Outside* set-piece and ruined the show. And quite possibly my life, career, nose, and vocal reputation.”

“A terrible accident, I agree, but certainly not a career or life-ending tragedy.”

“Nick and his crew were in charge of set construction and design. They should have made sure that poorly painted piece of plywood was secure. Instead, I get pounded with a falling two-by-four, mid-song.”

“There was faculty supervision, *oui*?”

“*Oui*.”

“It’s not Nick’s fault. You don’t know for sure what happened, and someone should have been double-checking the work. That’s common safety procedure.”

“*Oui, mamie*,” I answer again, but my French phrases don’t sound eloquent and natural like my nearly one hundred percent French granny. I sound like a hillbilly mountaineer trying to be chic.

Granny shrugs and runs her hand along my bare arm. “It was a magnificent performance.”

“It was a nightmare of public humiliation.”

“Agree to disagree,” she says. “And by the way, this is not an old folks’ home.”

“I know.”

“I heard you call it that when you were sassing your mom on the phone earlier. It’s a senior

community. I'm not old."

She can call it what she wants, but she had to be at least fifty-five to get an apartment here. "I know it's not like a nursing home or anything... And I was only making a point with mom. Point being I can't eat dinner at four o'clock and I'm sure I'm the only person visiting at Christmas who's under sixty."

"This is like any other apartment building. We can eat dinner when we want because we make it—or order it—ourselves. Lots of residents have visitors at Christmas."

"And lots of residents vacation in southern climates at Christmas. Maybe your old neighbor Carl will run into my mom and Jake."

Granny stretches out and rests her head in her hand. Her lavender sweat pants and matching zipped hoodie bring out the blue in her eyes. With her perfect upturned nose, shiny hazelnut-from-a-box hair color, and near-flawless skin, it is impossible to determine her age. She refuses to disclose the assumed advanced number and I refuse to make like a detective and ruin the game.

"You know your mother and Jake are planning to arrive home on Christmas day."

"I know. She insists they will be back and we'll have family Christmas at our house, but what's the point? We will have already missed everything. Caroling with the church, Christmas Eve service... And I was supposed to sing the cantata with the chancel choir until *this* happened."

I point again at my repulsive disfigurement. Granny snatches my hand from mid-air.

"You are beautiful, *mon amour*." She reaches for a strand of hair that has dropped across my shoulder.

“Look at this. Long, dark, thick. So much like your mother’s at your age. And those eyes. So blue. Everything will heal, and your mother will be back for Christmas, and we’ll have a wonderful time.” She sits up and adjusts the huge sapphire ring that has slipped out of place on her small finger. “Now. I did not decorate for Christmas because I thought I would enjoy the decorations at your house. But since you’re here for a few days, would you like to deck the halls? Would that put you more in the holiday spirit?”

I would rather thread my eyeballs onto a strand of tinsel.

“Fine, fine,” she says and heads for the door. “We don’t have to put up a tree.”

“Oh no, Granny, did I say that out loud? Sorry.”

“No you did not, but I can read that beautiful face. We can enjoy the decorations in the recreation center downstairs. There will be festivities all week for the residents. There’s a Christmas film festival with everything from *It’s A Wonderful Life* to *Elf*. There’s a Christmas dance, karaoke... You name it.”

“I thought you said this wasn’t an old folks’ home.”

“It’s not. But there’s an activity director who plans events to keep residents involved. And that reminds me. Don’t call me “granny” in front of my friends here.”

“Excuse me?”

“That word makes me sound old.”

I gasp and fake distress. “Why Granny, are you ashamed of me? It’s this train wreck of a face, isn’t it?”

“Oh no, *cheri*. You are the brightest gemstone, the most brilliant and fiery diamond of my existence.”

Must. Stop. Her. Now. Once she’s making

gemstone references, it's only a short hop to memory lane and hours of stories about her work as an international jewelry, er, something-or-other. It remains a mystery what she actually did for a living once my grandfather disappeared.

"OK, lady, take your foot off the gas. What would you like me to call you?"

She shrugs. "Call me by my first name. Call me Collette."

"Done. Anything else I should know? Do you have a boyfriend hidden around here? You didn't by chance find us a nice new wealthy grandpa for Christmas now, did ya?"

"Oh, Holly, don't be gauche."

"*Wh-at?* You know I need a car. A wealthy new grandpa might come in handy."

She pauses near the door to smile at me.

"*Je t'aime, Holly,*" she says and blows me a kiss.

"*Je t'aime, Collette.*"

Day Two – The Terror Continues.

“Nick? What are you doing back here?”

“Hey, Holly,” he says as we press against the crowd at the popcorn machine. “It is a free country, you know. I can visit my aunt any time I want.”

“Sorry.” I don’t know what it is about this guy that gets on my last healthy nerve and makes me forget my good manners. “I’m surprised, that’s all. I mean, I’m stuck here because I don’t have a car and my mom’s out of town. But you have transportation. You have a choice.”

“No, I don’t. But yes, I’m free to come and go—as is everyone here, Holly. It’s not a prison.”

I scan the rec room. There is no one else near our age. “Debatable,” I snap back and then once again feel the need to apologize. “Sorry. What do you mean you don’t have a choice?”

“My dad’s out of town. He wouldn’t let me stay at home alone. I’m staying with my aunt for a few days.”

And now I feel sorry for Nick the way I’ve been feeling sorry for myself.

We push forward with the crowd. Nick towers over the others and stretches around them to grab

bags. "I'll get it," he says. You should step back. Someone might bump your nose."

I glance at the old guy beside me and then smile at Nick. "It's not exactly a mosh pit, but OK."

"How many?"

I want to say two, but then I'd look like a pig. "One. For Granny."

"Meet me at the drink table."

I slide my phone and bottle of green glitter nail polish into my pocket as I approach the table. I catch my reflection in the large silver coffee maker. Granny was right. The swelling is down and the angry red streak across the bridge of my nose is slowly turning pink.

"I got what I could." Nick has six small paper bags trapped between his fingers. "These old guys are serious about their popcorn."

I push hair away from my face and unsuccessfully try to take a bag from his grasp.

"Uh... Sorry," he says and pulls his hand away. "If I let go of one, I let go of them all."

"I'll get the drinks," I say and pick up a cup. "May I offer you red stuff or yellow stuff? Or there's coffee."

"No coffee. My uncle used to say this coffee is like Army coffee. He suggested I stay away from it. That one looks good."

"Red stuff it is." I fumble with the spout on the large plastic dispenser. "I know what you mean. My granny drinks some crazy-strong brew so I'd do about anything to see a venti red holiday Starbucks cup right now."

"Anything?" He is teasing-slash-flirting with me. His smile is wide and shy and I turn away because semi-bad-boy and rumored loser, Nick Zernigan, must

never know I think he's a hottie. Especially since I'm wearing navy yoga pants and a vintage—meaning tattered—WVU sweatshirt. Who knew he'd be back?

"I'm sorry about yesterday, Nick. I was upset about something else and was rude to you."

He shrugs. His oversized mustard-colored thermal shirt moves on his slender body as he now cradles the popcorn bags in his arms. "A hard blow to the nose with a board will do that to a person."

"About that," I continue and separate two more cups from the stack. "I'm over it. I know it wasn't your fault. It was an accident."

His eyes get so big I want to laugh. Leave it to me to make any guy feel completely uncomfortable.

I look away. "So... Does your aunt want red stuff, too?"

"No. She brought something."

I pick up the full cups.

"It looks good," he says too fast as if the words were trying to escape from his mouth.

"What?"

"I mean you look good. Your nose."

"Thanks. It feels better with the tape off. I tried dusting some powder around my black eyes and adding some make-up, but I don't think it helped. I look like a seriously deranged raccoon who knows how to use lip gloss."

He laughs. "No. It's not—"

His words are cut off when a short—like real short—woman slaps him on the back. A few pieces of popcorn bounce out of the bags.

"Nick! Glad you could make today's movie."

From the polo shirt with the complex's name on it to the ID badge and coiled key ring bracelet at her

wrist, I know this is the great activity director I've heard so much about. And I have to say it. She has a man's haircut. I'm not saying it looks bad or anything, but if she's trying to look like a female Ryan Seacrest, she's pretty much nailed it.

"You must be Holly." She extends her hand. "I'm Tanya Bates, the activity director here."

I put the cups back down. "Nice to meet you, Tanya."

She motions over her shoulder. "I've been visiting with your grandmother and Nick's Aunt Ivy. I understand you're a very talented vocalist."

I look their way. Granny and the assumed Aunt Ivy are cozied up in a cluster of chairs around a small table not too far from the big screen. Granny waves and, like a dork, I wave back before I remember how embarrassed I am.

"Thank you, but no, I'm not that big a deal."

"I hope you'll consider participating with us this week. Tomorrow is Christmas karaoke. We'd love to hear you sing."

Wow. Just *wow*.

Nick is no help at all as he looks at the ceiling as though he doesn't hear.

Tanya returns her attention to him. "We're on for tomorrow morning?"

"Sure. I'll be there."

"Great. We have karaoke tomorrow night and the dance is the day after. We can also talk about setting up the room for the interfaith Christmas Eve candlelight service. Father Jonathan and Pastor Allen are going to let me know what they need."

"Sure thing."

"And Holly. Glad to have you. I hope you'll