

The Gift

By Ruth L Brown

“Thanks for waiting.” Holly shifted the squirming Jack to her left arm while she got her keys ready. Was it too much to hope he didn’t smudge her freshly polished red fingernails?

“It’s no problem.” The owner of Dog Days Pet Supplies and Grooming Services walked out the door behind her so she could lock up. “Jack’s so cute, I love seeing him.”

Jack, a mix between a Teacup poodle and miniature toy poodle, was a solid black ball of curly hair with round little eyes that gleamed with mischief. He was decked out with a red and green plaid bow around his neck and red toenails the same color as her fingernails. His minute tail was now coifed with a ball of hair on the end.

“Merry Christmas to you.” Holly threw up her right hand and waved before fleeing toward her car.

“Merry Christmas and Happy New Year!”

At her car, Holly inserted the key and opened the door. Jack began growling at the four foot teddy bear riding shotgun in her 1955 pink Cadillac Coupe de Ville.

“Hush!” She sat down and waited for Jack’s little body to stop vibrating with low growls. “Don’t poke a hole in my leather seats,” she admonished as she plopped him down on the bear’s lap.

Jack stared at her.

“I don’t have a treat and you look ridiculous.” She patted him on the head before digging out her cell phone. Hitting the speed dial, she waited several rings before her sister answered. “I’ve got your little pooch now.”

“Oh good! I just simply ran out of time to go back for him.”

“Why you insist on dressing him up is beyond me.” Holly stole another look at him. He sniffed around in the seat, walking between the bear’s legs.

“I want him to look good for the party, silly.”

“He’s a dog, Barbara. A d-o-g dog.”

“So?”

“You and this dog are a hopeless cause.”

“Do you have the candy?” Barbara asked.

“Yes. I’ve got candy canes, licorice sticks and a bunch of other stuff. I’ve also got a surprise for Natasha.”

“What?”

“I’m not telling.”

“Holly, I swear—”

“Now, now! No swearing on Christmas Eve. I promise there is nothing to spill or stick onto anything.”

“Good!”

“Okay then, I’m on my way.”

“I can’t wait for you to get here.” A slight giggle came across the phone. “I have a little gift for you as well.”

“What did you do?” Holly’s voice was accusatory. “Don’t tell me. I’m not sure I want to know.”

“I have someone for you to meet.” Barbara’s voice came out in a sing-song style.

“Oh no!”

“Oh yes!”

“Who?”

“David’s cousin. David says he’s a super guy. You’ll adore him.”

Holly sighed. The last time she was supposed to adore someone, she took one look at him and wished she was an only child. “I’m not coming now.”

“Oh yes you are. I need you to pick him up at the Park Vista.”

“Don’t do this to me again!” Holly looked at Jack. “Your momma is insane.”

“I learned my lesson, Holly, with the last guy. This one is really special. I’ve seen a picture and he’s cute. He owns a real estate business and he’s very wealthy.”

“I don’t care if he’s the Grand Poobah of his own country and sitting on a golden throne.”

“Trust me.”

Holly scoffed. “How old was the picture?”

“Not much.”

“How old?”

“I don’t know, college days maybe.”

“Oh brother.” Holly let her head fall a moment in frustration. “Okay. I’ll go get him. What’s his name?”

“Forest Monroe.”

“Forest?”

“Yes. I’ll let him know you’ll be there in ten or so. What are you wearing?”

“Black dress with my red cape.”

“Ooh.”

“Shut up.” Holly hung up and threw the phone into her purse wedged behind the passenger seat. The bag of candy sat next to it and she snagged a candy cane. Might as well have fresh breath. She checked her reflection one more time. Her dark hair, a short severe cut that emphasized her eyes and cheek bones, needed nothing, but she reapplied lipstick. Here goes nothing.

Traffic through Gatlinburg wasn’t as bad as she expected and the holiday lights on the poles and store fronts made her feel as if she were driving through a fairyland. She drove up the steep hill to the Park Vista hotel overlooking Gatlinburg and struggled to find a spot to park. The Cadillac wouldn’t fit just anywhere.

“Well Jack, looks like we’ll have to park illegally right in front of the doors.”

Afraid to leave Jack in the car, she put his thin leash on and dropped him gently to the ground after climbing out. The sliding doors unnerved him and he began barking and backing up.

“Oh geez.” Holly scooped him up and walked on in. The lobby was decorated with white lights, garland and giant bouquets full of evergreens and berries.

“Ma’am?”

Holly spun around. The concierge was coming her way.

“You can’t park there.”

“I know. I’ll only—”

“She’s with me.”

Holly turned back toward the main lobby. The most hunky guy was standing there in a dark suit and an overcoat draped on his arm. Drinking in his blond hair cut in a rakish style and

blue eyes in a well defined masculine face, she could only stare.

“Yes sir, Mr. Monroe.” The concierge made a small bow and left them.

Forest held out his hand. “You must be Holly. I’m Forest.”

Realizing her mouth was open, she gave herself a mental shake and extended her hand.

“Hi.” Was that the best she could do? “Nice to meet you.”

“Same here. Would you like to have a drink before we go?” He stepped over beside her and held his free hand out toward the lobby.

Reluctant to release him, she forced herself. “I guess we better pass. I have the dog here and...”

“I understand. Shall we go then?”

“Sure.”

Holly tried to catch a few glimpses of him as they walked out. He had to be over six foot and if his shoulders were any indication, athletic to boot. Tall, lean, blond and handsome.

Barbara’s ‘trust me’ was right on!

Jack squirmed to get down and she placed him on the sidewalk.

“Is this your car?” he asked when they stopped at the large pink Cadillac.

She smiled. “Yes, it is. Are you willing to ride in a pink car?”

He laughed. “Why not?”

Jack pulled toward the bushes.

“Most guys like the car, but hate the color.”

“I’m not ‘most guys’.”

She cocked her head at him in acknowledgement. “Alright then.”

Jack whined and headed for the cigarette can.

“I think I need to take him over to the grass.”

“I’ll go with you.”

They moved away from the lobby doors. The sun made a last effort on top of the hill, but the surrounding dips and valleys were already dark. They moved away from the walk and crossed the grass toward the tree line. Jack squatted to do his business and Holly looked away.

“Oh look! A fairy ring.” She pointed to a spot a few feet beyond them closer to the trees.

“A what?” he asked.

“A fairy ring. See the mushrooms?”

Forest squinted. “Ah. That’s what you call a group of mushrooms?”

She laughed. “When they are laid out in a circle like that I do. Fairies live there you know.”

“I see.” He turned back to her, his white teeth very noticeable. “It’s bound to be a magical night if fairies are about.”

Holly blushed under his scrutiny. “That would be nice.”

“I agree.”

Her heart thumped hard. What were the odds of having it all? She couldn’t begin to fathom, but this man here seemed worth a gamble.

With the bear moved to the backseat and Jack between them, Holly drove the car down the hill toward the main drag. The lodge wasn’t too far away, but they had a bit of time to get acquainted.

“Your car appears to be in excellent condition.” Forest ran his hand over the edge of the

seat in her direction.

Jack jumped forward and swatted at it, receiving a brief tussle for his efforts.

“This is my father’s legacy to me. He restored old cars. Barbara has a Chevy BelAir. I got the Caddie.”

“Very nice.” He looked at her. “You haven’t been tempted to sell it?”

“No. I could never sell something that meant so much to him. I take her out on Sundays and special occasions.”

“You’re a very good daughter.”

“He was a very good father.”

“Are you like your sister? I know a little about her.”

“I’m the kooky one. She’s very sensible except when it comes to Jack.”

Jack stood up and looked at her.

“What makes you kooky?”

“I like taking risks. Rock climbing, hang gliding, white water rafting...driving pink cars.”

Forest shifted in the seat to look at her better. “Ah. I like that.”

“You know my sister set us up tonight.” Lay it on the table and get it over with.

Forest laughed, his eyes crinkling on the edges with the lasting grin. “I agreed to be roped in.”

“Oh?”

“They emailed your picture to me.”

“You approve then?”

“Most definitely.”

Holly felt a smile spread across her face. “Tell me something, if I may be blunt.”

“Go ahead.”

“Why aren’t you married?”

“Why aren’t you?”

“I haven’t found the right guy.”

“I haven’t found the right woman.”

“Touché.” Holly pulled into the drive at the lodge and turned off the car. Jack started jumping across her lap to look out the window. “What sort of woman are you looking for?”

“One that takes risks.”

Holly’s stomach flipped over. “Do you think the fairies followed us?”

“I hope so.”

“Shall we go in?”

“If you insist,” he said.

“I guess we should...” She watched his mouth as he spoke, mesmerized.

“Probably...” Forest leaned over and sampled her lips in a light kiss that promised so much more.”

When he released her, Holly took a deep breath and let it out in a contented sigh. “Are you sure you don’t mind riding around in a pink Cadillac?”

“Do I get to drive?”

“Sometimes.”

“I can live with that.”

Inside the front door, Barbara greeted them and took their coats. In moments she had her sister pulled aside.

“Well?”

“Tell me what’s wrong with him, because I’m not seeing it.” Holly smiled at him from inside the great room.

Barbara glanced in the same direction. “He’s gorgeous!”

“Shh!”

“Honey, there is nothing wrong with him. Go for it.”

Forest crooked his finger at her.

“Merry Christmas, little sister,” Barbara said, giving her a hug.

“Merry Christmas to you, too. If you’ll excuse me, I believe I must take advantage of your gift.” Holly released her and walked back to him.

Forest cleared his throat and pointed up. Over her head was a fresh sprig of mistletoe with tiny pearl berries.

“Do you believe in tradition?” he asked, while pulling her into his arms.

“I would be disappointed if you didn’t.”

“Here’s to fairies and mistletoe.”

“Here’s to us.” Holly surrendered to his kiss and knew for sure. It was going to be a great Christmas.