ydh presents

A Holiday Romance

Written by
Award Winning Author

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Dedicated to all the
wonderful tourism businesses in YDH.

This year, in collaboration with romance novelist Veronica Bale, bestselling author of The Ghosts of Tullybrae House, we at YDH bring you a Hallmark-worthy holiday romance set right here in our region of York, Durham and Headwaters. Follow along with Noelle Cane and Nick Snowdon as they meet the wonderful people behind our YDH shops and attractions, and discover the warmth and memories that Christmas in a small town has to offer.

CHAPTER I
I'll be Home for Christmas

Noelle Cane is fed up with her big city job in a top-tier marketing firm—as fed up as she is with the whole Christmas season! Little does she know that when she returns to her quaint hometown of Uxbridge, she will meet handsome Nick Snowdon, who knows a thing or two about falling in love with a small town and its people. Join Nick and Noelle as they experience the holidays in YDH… and just maybe they'll experience falling in love of a different kind.



That's it! I quit! I'm outta here!

At least, that's what Noelle wanted to say. Instead, she kept her teeth clenched shut as she waited patiently for her boss, Jay Marley, to finish the email he thought was more important than her. Noelle's company laptop, office key, and parking pass lay neatly on the edge of Mr. Marley's desk, ready to be entered into the inventory system as "Returned."

Two weeks ago, she had handed in her resignation letter. Ten years in the big city at a top marketing firm had been an adventure, but now it was time for something new. Ten years, it seemed, had been too much. In that time, Noelle's bubbly personality and optimistic outlook had become jaded—and she would be the first person to admit it. But could anyone really blame her? She'd seen the competitive side of marketing, and what it was really like behind-the-scenes to create those glossy advertisements and dazzling commercials that were splashed across magazine covers, subway posters and primetime TV shows.

In her opinion, Christmas was the worst time of the year for it all. Well, if she was going to quit, to cut herself loose and try something new, then now was the time as all that festive nonsense was gearing up again for yet another year.

Bah humbug!

"Did you say something, Miss Cane?"

Whoops… she'd whispered the quiet part out loud.

"No sir," Noelle fibbed. "Just clearing my throat."

Mr. Marley raised an eyebrow, clearly not believing

her. But he said nothing as he finished his email, picked up his desk phone, and punched three numbers on the dial pad.

"Yes, Kirk," he said into the receiver. "Thank you. Can you send security up? Ms. Cane is ready to clear out her desk." He hung up the phone and stared at her with a non-committal expression, long fingers knitted together in front of him. "Well, Ms. Cane. I think we have everything we need from you. We wish you the best of luck."

"Thank you, Mr. Marley," Noelle returned. "It's been a wonderful opportunity, and I've learned so much."

Mr. Marley nodded. That was it. Clearly no love lost, then. With a feeble smile and another less-than-charitable sentiment in her head (that she was definitely not going to whisper out loud this time), Noelle turned and made her very last departure from his office.Her work bestie, Dash, was hovering outside Marley's door.

"I'm so jealous," Dash exclaimed in a hushed tone. "The one that got away. I'm going to miss you so much around here!"

"We'll keep in touch," Noelle promised. "Let's figure out a day to do lunch in a week or two. Catch up a bit, huh?"

Dash rolled their eyes. "Only if you promise not to be your usual Grinchy self. I tell you, Christmas brings out the worst in you!"

Now it was Noelle's turn to roll her eyes. "Overblown, overpriced, overhyped season that feels no different than any other time of the year except for

the annoying music, annoying decorations, and really annoying false cheer? Puh-leeze. But who knows? Maybe once I get back to my small-town hometown, I'll recapture that Christmas spirit."

Dash laughed—a little too loudly. There was an angry shush from the other side of a grey cubicle partition beside them.

"Sorry Frank," they both whispered in unison, sharing a snicker.

Dash sighed, and gave Noelle a big hug. "Your sarcasm is as sharp as ever. Well then, Candy Cane. Security's coming down the hall. Time to clear out your desk and pretend like you were never here and the last ten years were just a bad dream."

Noelle gave Dash a playful shove on the shoulder and scowled… though the effect was ruined by the grin that spread across her lips. "Don't call me that."

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The snow had just started to fall by the time Noelle steered her car off the highway and onto the rural roads where she'd grown up. With the dense cloud cover overhead and the white flakes in the air, the orange street lamps bathed the night in a warm amber glow. It was just a short jaunt north from here to her home town of Uxbridge, but first she had a quick fifteen-minute detour east to make. She pulled over to the side of the road and fished her cell phone out of her coat pocket.

The phone rang three times before it was picked up

on the other end.

"Hello?" said the familiar voice that filled her with joy.

"Hey Grandma," Noelle said happily into the phone. "I'm almost there."

"Oh, Noelle. I was beginning to worry when the snow started falling. You're not driving right now, are you?"

"Of course not, Grandma. I've pulled over, safe and sound. I'm just making a quick stop in Uxbridge."

Her grandmother chuckled on the other end. "Got to have your favourite coffee."

"You know me so well. I'll be quick."

"Say hi to Arthur for me," Grandma said before she bid farewell and hung up.

Back on the road, Noelle steered her car towards nearby Port Perry. The town was just as lovely as she remembered from years past—street lamps, planters and shop windows were all garnished with festive holiday decorations. Noelle Cane may have a jaded view of the season, it was true, but even she didn't mind how pretty everything looked at this time of year.

The windows of the little coffee shop known as Nexus Coffee Company were lit up invitingly. Noelle pulled into a street-side parking space and walked lightly towards it, being careful not to slip on the new snow.

Arthur Field, Nexus's owner, was behind the counter, chatting with a customer.

"Noelle," he exclaimed happily. "Long time, no see. Coming for a visit?"

"For good," she said.

"Oh?" Arthur's brows raised slightly.

She answered with a resigned sigh. "I quit my job. I'm coming home. But don't worry. It's a good thing."

"Well, as long as it's a good thing," he agreed. "Can't say I'm sorry you'll be staying a while. What can I get you?"

"I'll have a cup of the Heritage coffee, please."

"I should have known," Arthur chuckled. "It's your favourite."

"And can I have a bag of the beans to take home to Grandma?"

"Bag of Fair Trade Heritage Beans. You got it."

"And… can you throw in a Breville Barista Express?"

"Sure. We have a few in stock. You're lucky—the brewing equipment's all going fast with Christmas around the corner. What happened to your other one? It couldn't have broken."

"Oh, no. Still as good as the day I bought it," she assured him. "I left it with my roommate. Sort of a goodbye-and-sorry-for-the-short-notice-on-moving-out gift."

"Ah, I see. One Heritage coffee, one bag of Heritage beans, and a Barista Express coming right up."

Once her purchases were handed over, Noelle headed back to her car and drove the rest of the way to her grandmother's house in Uxbridge.

Pulling into the familiar driveway always felt like coming home, no matter how long she'd been away. Except now, instead of the prospect of a big city job in marketing looming on the horizon, she had a brand new adventure waiting for her:

Noelle Cane was going to try her hand at being a social media influencer.

Sure, she had almost no followers on Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, X, SnapChat, LinkedIn, or any of the other online places where people made a name for themselves. But she knew a thing or two about hustle. She'd done it for ten years, after all. And she certainly knew a thing or two about how to market something to people. She'd done that for ten years, too. All over this region that she'd called home as a child—from Orono in the east, to Shelburne in the west, all the way up to Georgina in the north and everywhere in between—there was so much to see and do and share. Thanks to the popularity of social media, Noelle was determined to make a career out of doing just that: sharing it all.

If Christmas was the perfect time to quit one job, then it was the perfect time to start another. Noelle was ready to wrap and package and share as much social media content as people could handle, and she was ready to become an independent, self-employed, self-reliant entrepreneur. She was never going back to a big city marketing job ever again, and Christmas in a small town was her ticket.

Bah humbug, indeed!

CHAPTER 2
A Picture-Perfect Christmas Tree for Two

Noelle Cane has quit her big city marketing job and come back to her small, picturesque home town of Uxbridge. Even though Christmas is so not her thing, she is determined to spend the holidays capturing everything Christmassy there is to see and do in York Durham Headwaters, and share it on social media to become an influencer. Little does she know that she is about to meet a handsome stranger who will teach her how to fall in love with Christmas in a small town again.



Noelle's brand new espresso machine buzzed delightfully as rich, dark liquid poured from the two spouts into the coffee cup below… into an ancient mug from her grandmother's cupboard with the words "Wishin I's Fishin" on the side. Oh well, it was the coffee that mattered, not the vessel it was enjoyed from. When it had finished brewing, she took a long, luxurious sip.

Heaven!

"Do you want one, Grandma?" she called into the living room.

"No thanks, dear," the lady's sweet voice called back. "I'll make a tea in a bit."

Taking a seat at the kitchen table, Noelle scrolled her phone to review her list.

Oh, the list. She always had several on the go. Being the hyper-organized individual she was, Noelle positively could not function without her lists. This one, she'd spent a good hour on last night. It was important because this was going to be her very first series of content for her new career as an influencer.

As she reviewed what she was going to do for the day, a knock interrupted her concentration.

"I'll get that," she said, and scurried to the front door still in her jammies and fuzzy slippers.

What was waiting on the other side stopped her dead in her tracks. There on her grandmother's front step was a handsome stranger. He was bundled against the cold in a wool coat and scarf, and carried an armload of brightly wrapped parcels. The scene was like a meet-cute straight out of a holiday movie. If Noelle hadn't been so

dumbstruck, she would have rolled her eyes and gagged.

But her eyes refused to roll. Instead they were locked on the warm, chocolate-hued eyes staring back at her. From the face of a stranger…

A stranger who was somehow familiar, though she couldn't say why.

"Hello," the stranger said in a deep timbre.

"Hi," Noelle said, finding her voice just in time. "Can I help you?"

"Is that Nick?" Grandma called from the living room.

"Hi there, Hattie," the man called back. "I've got your packages from Shelley at Blue Heron Books."

Noelle stepped back as her grandmother shuffled over, also still dressed in housecoat and fuzzy slippers.

"Oh, look at that," Grandma exclaimed. "Gift wrapped and everything. How kind."

Nick laughed, glancing to Noelle for a brief moment with a twinkle in his eye. "Shelley said it's extra special just for you, and not to tell anyone, or else everyone will want theirs wrapped too. Have you been by lately?"

"No, but I've been meaning to."

"Oh, you should see it all decked out for the season. Shelves and shelves of books, with those creaky hardwood floors and beautiful decorations everywhere. It's like stepping back in time or something."

Now Noelle did roll her eyes—playfully at least. Nick noticed.

"Not a Christmas fan?"

"Oh, where are my manners?" Hattie said. "Nick, this is my granddaughter Noelle. She's come home from the

big city to stay."

"Nice to meet you." Noelle stuck out her hand for a shake.

Nick paused, then shook her hand tentatively. "I guess you don't remember me, huh?"

Puzzled, she raised her brows. "Uh…"

"We went to high school together. We had different friend groups, though. I guess it's easier for me to remember one of the most popular girls in school than for you to remember the wallflower."

"Oh, don't say that. You did look a little familiar."

"It's okay," he grinned. "I was in the school band, did the drama club, hung out in the art wing. You were the go-getter in the sports clubs, valedictorian, all that. We just never crossed paths."

"Nick came home to help his mother about five years ago," Grandma explained.

"My dad passed," he added.

"I'm very sorry," Noelle said. "Your mom's a lucky lady to have such a helpful son."

"We all are," her grandmother continued. "He spends all his spare time helping everyone else in town, too. We call him Saint Nick around here because he's always so kind and helpful. Would you like to come in, Nick? Have a cup of something hot to warm you up before you're off?"

Noelle began to object—she was, after all, in her pajamas. But Nick was quicker. He beamed a smile.

"I'd love to."

"I'll make it," Noelle offered. "Coffee?"

"Coffee sounds great."

He followed her into the kitchen while her grandmother went back to her pink recliner in the living room.

"So what are you up to these days?" Nick asked while she busied herself with making a new cup of coffee. This time in an ancient mug with an image of Queen Elizabeth at her coronation.

"Well… I just quit my job, actually. Coming home to start something new."

"Oh?"

She nodded proudly. "I'm going to try my hand at being a social media influencer. See if I can't build a career off of it. I already know how. I was in marketing for ten years, so it should be a cinch as long as I'm prepared to hustle. I'm starting today, as a matter of fact."

"That's exciting," he said. "What are you planning?"

"Well, I've got a first series outlined to cover all of the cut-your-own and family-run Christmas tree lots in the area. I'm going to post a reel, a TikTok, a You Tube video, a blog article, then pin all that to my Pinterest board…" She glanced sheepishly at him from beneath her lashes when she heard herself. "Sorry. I get a little enthusiastic when I talk about social media marketing."

Nick shrugged, amused. "Don't apologize. I like it. Which ones are you visiting?"

"Here, I have a list. Spent a bit of time on it last night." Noelle handed her phone over to him.

Nick nodded as he scanned the list. "Niemi Family Farm in Mount Albert, Erin Hill Acres. You know these

aren't exactly in the area, right?"

"Well… Okay, maybe."

He continued to scan. "Vivian Plantation, Hope's Christmas Tree Farm, Pingle's Farm Market, Elliott Tree Farm. You're going from here to out past Orangeville all in one day?"

Noelle opened her mouth to justify her decision, but promptly closed it again. "Now that you say it like that, it sounds kind of nuts, huh?"

"I would say ambitious," Nick amended.

"Why don't you help her out with this, Nick?" Grandma said from the doorway of the kitchen, where she'd apparently been silently hovering. "If you have time, that is."

"Oh, Grandma," Noelle admonished. "I'm sure Nick can't drop everything on a whim."

"Generally that's true," he agreed. "But today I've got nothing on the go. I'd be happy to help."

He smiled at her. She smiled back. Probably a little warmer than she meant to, but he had such a nice smile that she couldn't help herself.

"I'd be thrilled to have help," she relented. "Any suggestions on what I can do instead of everything all in one day?"

"How about you pick one, cover it really well, and then you can mention the others? I mean, there are great options here, and you've sure done your research. But it looks like you would want to go visit one place and spend a lot of time there. Make a proper memory, you know? It's not just about getting your tree and leaving."

"That's what I was thinking. They're each a destination. Bonfires, hot drinks, food trucks, tobogganing—there's a common thread here of spending time with friends and loved ones. Take Elliott Tree Farm, for example. They've just opened up the Maple Syrup Museum of Ontario in their heritage barn. And Hope's Christmas Tree Farm has a holiday market. They all have such wonderful things. I want to cover it all, but I don't know which to choose."

"I know Marjo Niemi, as it happens," Nick suggested. "I'm sure she'd love to be featured. Not only do they have their Christmas market going on, but the Equine Assisted Learning programs her daughters operate are unique and noteworthy. Plus, they have some seriously tasty fresh-made Finnish baked goods. It's a pretty incredible place."

"All right then. Niemi's it is. When do you think you'll be ready?"

"I'm ready now. You?"

Noelle giggled. "Let me get changed. I may have answered the door in jammies and fuzzy slippers, but I'm not going out this way!"

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Later that night, Noelle sat in her grandmother's living room in front of a gently crackling fire in the hearth, with her laptop and a mug of hot chocolate. Grandma had gone to bed an hour ago, so the house was hers to get her work done.

The day had been fun—far more fun than she'd been

expecting. Now she had downloaded all of the footage she'd captured from her day at Niemi Family Farm, and was remembering with each clip just how magical the experience was.

"I'm here at Niemi Family Farm in Mount Albert, Ontario, just a short drive north from Toronto," she watched her on-screen self say as she strolled through the picturesque Christmas market, lightly dusted with fresh snow. "For many people, having a live Christmas tree is a time-honoured tradition. But I'm going to let you in on a little secret: I've never had a real tree before, so this is a first for me!"

She relived the moment that she and Nick wrestled playfully over who was going to eat the fresh-made cider donut while riding the Polar Express in Christmasland, and who was going to do the filming.

"You never said I had to be in the video," Nick argued with humour through her computer.

She watched the video clip of Marjo Niemi, who owned the farm with her husband, as she held up a golden loaf of Finnish cardamom bread for the camera with an enormous smile on her kind face. What a great story, this farm was. Noelle had learned that it was a true family farm, with several of the Niemi's ten children working alongside their parents, who had dreamed of having a family farm when they came to Canada from their native Finland.

Nick, by the way, had been right about the Finnish baked goods being seriously tasty. There was only a quarter of the entire loaf of "pulla" from that clip left on

Grandma's counter.

At the end of the visit, Nick and Noelle had picked out a pre-cut tree together. The stately Fraser fir now sat in Grandma's garage waiting to be decorated, and Noelle's calendar now had a date with Nick marked on it for the very next day. They were going to Vivian Plantation in nearby Whitchurch-Stouffville to do a second feature on the cutting-your-own Christmas tree experience.

It wasn't exactly a date, to be fair. That's not how Nick had put it, at least.

"You got your tree, but I need one too," she heard him say at the end of the last video clip—apparently she'd forgotten to stop filming. He gave her a cheeky grin; the memory made her grin back at the computer screen. "And since I did you a favour today…"

"Yeah, yeah," she replied laughingly from behind the camera. "I owe you one. But you're not going to convert me. I still think Christmas is a humbug."

And she did. To Noelle Cane, Christmas was still an overblown, overhyped, overpriced season, but even she had to admit that there had been nothing slick and glossy and manufactured about today. It had been nothing like the advertising she was used to at her big city marketing firm. Today had been real. The people had been real. The smiles and the fun and the warmth had been real.

"Bah humbug," she mumbled to herself, determined to cling to her Scroogey outlook.

Somehow, it didn't sound quite as convincing as it had just a few days ago.

CHAPTER 3
Small Town Delights at Christmas

Noelle Cane and Nick Snowdon visit a family-run Christmas Tree farm for the ultimate holiday experience. Does Noelle still think Christmas is a humbug after such wholesome activity and warm-hearted hospitality with a handsome friend at her side?



Under a cerulean blue sky tickled with a scattering of powderpuff clouds, Noelle Cane and Nick Snowdon hiked the trails of Uxbridge. Every now and again, Noelle would stop and set up her tripod to take video and photos for her latest instalment of social media posts: Winter Hiking in Uxbridge—The Trail Capital of Canada. The air was crisp, just enough to freshen the cheeks but not so cold as to be intolerable. In fact, much to her surprise (and even though this was the exact point of her winter hiking posts) the air was refreshing and inviting.

Not to mention her companion, Nick, made the zero-degree weather feel just a little warmer.

"I've been out here before, but never in winter," she noted as they reached their destination, the lookout of the former Skyloft Ski Resort. "Definitely not since Trail Hub opened. This view is incredible!"

Nick breathed deeply, as if savouring the intangible fragrance of approaching snow. "It is, isn't it? I love the concept of this place—a hub at the centre of Uxbridge's vast network of trails where you can start your journey, end it, or take a break. Grab a bite to eat, relax in the chalet, take in local art. Turn your hour-long hike into full-day experience."

Noelle nodded. "All that in a rustic setting. Hold on, I want to get a shot of the exterior."

He waited patiently while she aimed her camera, capturing several stills and short video clips of the charming stone exterior, with its soaring windows that gazed over the panoramic view of Uxbridge's protected natural spaces.

"I'm going to have to come back in the fall," she concluded. "This valley set on fire with autumn leaves must be breathtaking. So, are you hungry? Do you want to grab a bite at the restaurant?"

"I'd love to."

Side by side, they headed into the chalet in search of The Handlebar Grill, one of Trail Hub's two onsite restaurants.

"This is stunning," Noelle exclaimed, catching the view of the valley from inside the building.

A couple seated at a table by the window noticed her awe.

"We love it," said one of the pair. "We come as often as we can. I'm Jake. This is my partner Chesney."

"Nice to meet you." Noelle offered her hand for a shake. "I'm Noelle. I like this cafeteria-style layout."

"It's convenient," Chesney agreed. "If you're looking for a proper farm-to-table, sit-down restaurant, you'll want to check out The Nest. It's awesome—locally sourced food, craft beer and cider from local brewers. There's nothing quite like it."

"Can I ask what the camera is for?" Jake inquired.

"I'm trying to build my career as an influencer," she answered. "But I'm sort of starting from scratch, so my friend here, Nick, is helping me."

"Friend." Jake winked knowingly. "Uh huh. That's what that magical spark between you two is. Friendship."

Noelle and Nick shared a glance and a nervous chuckle. Nick shrugged with nonchalance.

"What can I say? I'm in the presence of beautiful

nature, and the company of a beautiful hiking partner."

Jake leaned over to Chesney. "I can't tell if her cheeks are going pink because of the cold or because of the giggles she's trying to hold in," he teased.

"Why don't you grab something to eat and join us?" Chesney offered. "We can give you a testimonial for your influencer feed, if you'd like."

"That would be great," Noelle replied, thankful for the change of subject. "We'll be right back."

She and Nick ventured towards the kitchen station, with a mouth-watering array of prepared hot and cold meals, snacks and fresh-baked treats.

"They seem friendly. Do you mind if we sit with them a while?"

Nick shook his head. "Not at all. I find that the hiking community is quite friendly. People are passionate about it, whether cyclists, hikers, runners, snowshoers or skiers. It's like a family. That's why I love Trail Hub. It's like coming home while you're out on the trails."

"Ooh, I like that. Come home on the trails. Mind if I steal it for this piece?"

"Be my guest. Just don't credit me. I'm more of a behind-the-scenes kind of guy."

When they had their food, they returned to their new friends, where Noelle set her tripod and camera up so Jake and Chesney could give their testimonials. The footage was going to turn out great—she could already tell. They were both funny, warm and witty, and their clips were infused with laughter and enthusiasm. She could feel her creative juices kicking into high gear.

"So are you two at the end of your day out, or are you just getting started?" Chesney asked when she'd turned the camera off.

"We've already been out for a good two hours on the trail," Noelle said. "I don't know about Nick, but I feel like I've got more in me today. I'm thinking that maybe I'll head into Port Perry and get some video of the historic downtown all decorated for Christmas."

"You'll want to get hot chocolate at Mad's Cafe then," Jake suggested.

Noelle pursed her lips. "That sounds familiar. Where is that again?"

"You know That Place on Queen? That place that sells eco-friendly bath, body and home products and décor? It's a bakery, too."

"Ah, right. I love that place. And… I mean, Nick, you're welcome to come. I'd love if you came—well, not love—I'd really like—er, if you're not doing anything, that is…"

"Look at her all flustered," Jake pointed out with humour. "Aw, I feel bad for teasing her now."

"Oh, stop." Noelle swatted playfully through the air at him.

"I don't have plans," Nick put in. "I'd love to go."

"Great! I can get all kinds of video. The town, all the shops, and maybe we can even chat with Elizabeth Werner, who owns That Place on Queen. Hey—we can even pick out ornaments for our tree and do a whole feature on shopping local for Christmas gifts. Oh, I'm getting so many ideas!"

Their new friends gave an astonished laugh.

"That's quite the day you have planned," Chesney noted. "Hope you have an extra battery pack with you."

Noelle tapped her bag. "I sure do."

"I meant for you, not your camera."

She giggled, chagrined. "Yeah. I tend to go over the top when I get ideas. It's my Achilles heel."

When they'd finished their meal and said goodbye to their new friends, Nick and Noelle ventured into the parking lot at Trail Hub where Noelle had parked her car for their hike.

"Sorry," she said once they'd buckled in. "I didn't mean to put you on the spot. Please don't feel like you need to come with me. I know it's a lot for one day."

Nick shrugged. "I'm up for it if you are."

"Yeah? Great!"

She steered the car out of the parking lot and onto the rural road towards Port Perry, trying to ignore the note of hesitation she sensed in his voice.

They made good time, and found a parking spot at the bottom of the downtown core near the lake.

"Do you mind if we take video first?" Noelle asked. "The snow is just starting to fall. It'll look so pretty."

Together, they walked up and down the gorgeous historic downtown. Past the blue and white storefront paneling of Marwan's Global Bistro, renowned for its internationally inspired menu and already showing signs that it would be a busy night. Past Old Flame Brewery, with its turn-of-the-century charm, and past the Piano Inn and Café, whose exterior was lit up like a Christmas

tree.

"I do love the way it looks when it's all done up for the season," Noelle admitted. "I still maintain that I hate Christmas, but these small towns are so pretty. I forgot about that, being away for ten years. I almost feel like I'm falling in love with it all over again. If that doesn't sound too cheesy."

"A little," Nick jested, nudging her shoulder as they walked with his own. "But I don't understand why you dislike Christmas so much."

"It's too commercial. Everyone pushing for sales, paying marketing firms like mine to dupe people into buying things they don't need because if they don't, someone will be offended that they didn't get a present. You're sold on this picture perfect family meal in all the glossy magazines, but in reality that's a lot of work and it causes people a lot of stress to live up to an image. There is so much in terms of expectation, and companies are hopping on the bandwagon for an easy cash grab."

"Yeah?" Nick pointed across the street. "What about Luke's Country Store over there. Locally owned business selling gorgeous furniture. Is that a company that's jumped on the bandwagon for an easy cash grab? Are they trying to dupe people into buying something they don't need?"

"Well… no," she admitted. "That doesn't count. They're good people operating a good, small-town business. It's different in a place like this. For these businesses, it's less about the commercialism of Christmas, and more about family, friends and memories."

When he slanted her a knowing glance, she sighed. "Okay, you made your point. I get that it's not all an overblown, overpriced, overhyped season. How you experience Christmas is entirely up to you, and not necessarily the advertising that's being thrown at you whether you want it or not."

"I love Christmas here," he said. "I can't imagine spending it any other way. And I get what you're saying about the commercialism. I left the big city, too, so I know what the holidays can be like there."

They popped in to Brock's On Foot shoe store to browse the selection, Noelle taking more video of the festive decorations amongst the quality footwear.

"You left the big city to care for your mom?" Noelle said, continuing the conversation once they were on the street again.

"I did. Although, that wasn't the only reason."

"Oh?"

Nick hesitated, considering. "I… kinda had my heart broken. My long-term partner and I decided to separate. I thought we were going to get married and spend the rest of our lives together. But, well, things don't always work out the way you want them to."

"I'm sorry," Noelle offered. "That's tough."

He shrugged. "It was a while ago, now. I've accepted it and moved on."

"Anyone special now?" she joked, and then grinned when he flashed her with a coy glance.

"Maybe," he replied. "It's new. I'll let you know how it turns out. So what do you say? You ready for

hot chocolate and ornament shopping? I'm officially freezing."

"Me too."

They left Brock's On Foot, and made their way to That Place on Queen.

The aroma of a hometown café infused the eclectic shop the moment they opened the door. Inside was a testament to local craftsmanship, with a wide variety of body care items, home decorations, clothing and gifts. It was the kind of place one could get lost in for an hour or two, simply browsing and admiring the quality of artisanal products.

"Oh, look at this one." Noelle made a beeline towards a glass ornament of a Christmas gazebo. "This will be perfect in my grandmother's front window."

"That's a beaut," Nick agreed. Then he picked up a bottle of handmade lotion. "I think this would be a great gift for my mom. She loves this kind of stuff. Handmade things from local artisans is her jam."

"Isn't it everyone's?"

From behind the counter, the owner, Elizabeth Werner, spotted her newest shoppers.

"Hey Noelle," she called. "I didn't know you were in town. So nice to see you again."

"Hey Elizabeth," Noelle called back. "Yeah, I'm home to stay. Do you know my friend, Nick?"

"Oh, everyone knows Saint Nick," Elizabeth said with a wink.

"How are you, Elizabeth?" Nick waved.

"Just great, Nick. Your mom was in here the other

day looking at those lotions. That would be a great buy for her for Christmas. Maybe a stocking stuffer or something."

"That's exactly what I was thinking. There's a reason you're called the Stocking Stuffer Capital of Canada!"

Once they had paid for their purchases and Elizabeth had poured them each a steaming cup of hot chocolate, they sat down at a small, cozy high table for two.

"Oh, shoot," Noelle said as she slid the chair close to the table. "I forgot to get video of us shopping. Dang. I really wanted to do a segment on it."

"Yeah…" Nick evaded.

She gazed at him intently. "What is it? You were a little off earlier. I didn't say something to offend you, did I?"

He shook his head emphatically. "Of course not. It's just that… well, do you mind if I say something?"

"Um… I guess."

"I know that I'm not a big city marketing professional or anything, so take what I'm about to say with a grain of salt. But it seems like you're so focused on getting everything in for your social media clips that you might be missing the point of what you're trying to showcase."

"Oh—I…" Noelle bit her lip, relenting. "Maybe you're right. I've always been a go-getter, I guess."

"And that's amazing. I mean it, I envy your energy. And hey—what do I know? Like I said, I'm not the professional here."

"No, that's fair," she allowed. "I feel like I'm behind the eight-ball if I want to be an influencer. I have

experience from the marketing side of things, but not on how to build a platform from the ground up. I want to make sure I succeed, and the only way I know how to do that is to hustle."

He nodded. "I get it, and I don't blame you. Hey—I have an idea. I have a friend that works for York Durham Headwaters. They're the regional tourism organization for this area. My friend, Jessica Elliott, is the marketing manager."

Noelle laughed. "Saint Nick indeed. Is there anyone you don't know?"

"I couldn't say. But whoever I don't know, I think it's safe to say that Jess does. She works with influencers and runs the social media portfolio for YDH… not to mention lots of other things. She's an absolute superstar. I'm sure she'd be happy to talk to you if you have questions about being an influencer."

Noelle raised her brows, impressed. "That would be kind of great. Like, really great."

"Do you want me to see if she's around now?"

"If you don't mind."

Nick pulled out his phone from his jacket pocket and dialed a number. A few ringtones later, a young lady with long brown hair was smiling pleasantly on his mobile screen.

"Hey Nick," Jessica, said brightly. "What's up?"

"Hey, Jess! I was wondering if you had a quick moment to talk to my friend Noelle here. She's interested in becoming an influencer."

Nick turned the screen so that Noelle was in view.

"Hi Noelle," Jessica said. "It's nice to meet you."

"You too. Thanks for taking the time. I'm a little lost with this whole influencer thing, and Nick said that I might be overdoing it with how hard I'm working. What's your take?"

Jessica laughed. "That's a good question. There's definitely no doubt that being an influencer and running a social media profile is hard work. You have to approach it from the mindset of an entrepreneur. The upside is that no one's going to push you to work, so there's not that pressure to deliver. The downside, though, is that no one's going to push you to work, so there's no pressure to deliver. Take that as you will."

Her quip rang true on so many levels. "That makes sense," Noelle acknowledged. "It's a double-edged sword, I see. How hard is too hard, do you think?"

Jessica thought about it for a moment, her head tipping back and forth on the FaceTime screen of Nick's phone. "See, the thing is, you have to love what you do," she said. "Don't forget that social media is supposed to be fun. We work with lots of influencers at YDH—there's Chris Mitchell from Travelling Mitch, Krystle Ng-a-Mann from Dine and Fash, Lindsay Davies from I've Been Bit, and so many more great influencers. They all have robust platforms and they all work really hard. What genuinely comes through on their work is that they're having fun while they're doing it. When you watch their reels and see their photos, you have fun along with them. That's the whole point, so I would say that as long as you're having fun, you're not working too hard. When the work begins

to feel like to much, then take a step back and find a way to make it fun again."

"Sounds like great advice," Nick said, eyeing Noelle expectantly.

"It is," she agreed. "I just have to find a way to put it into practice. It's tough when I'm trying to have fun and run the video and photography at the same time."

"Why don't you have someone do that for you?" Jessica suggested. "If you want, I can put you in touch with one of the photographers we work with. He's amazing at what he does."

"You'd do that?" Noelle clasped her hands beneath her chin, pleased. "That would be really helpful. I'd appreciate that."

"No problem. I'll send Nick the info and he can pass it on to you."

Noelle was truly grateful. "Thanks so much for your time, Jessica."

"Thanks, Jess," Nick added. "You're going to be at Canada's Wonderland for Winterfest next week, right?"

"Definitely. I'll see you there. Nice to meet you again, Noelle. And good luck."

CHAPTER 4
Christmas the Olde Tyme Way

Nick and Noelle discovered the breathtaking views of Uxbridge's trails in winter, and fell in love with the small, historic downtown of Port Perry. Join them now as they reconnect through some old-fashioned Christmas tree decorating, and discover the magic of an Olde Tyme Christmas celebration in historic Main Street Unionville. What other magic will they discover together this holiday season?



Knock, knock, knock.

Noelle had been waiting for that knock eagerly since the moment she opened her eyes that morning. She did an involuntary little hop of excitement at its arrival. Her grandmother, who was at that moment coming into the living room from the kitchen with a big plate of fresh-baked cookies, winked.

"Ooh, Saint Nick's here."

Noelle rolled her eyes. "He's just a friend, Grandma."

"You're not fooling anyone, dear. Not even yourself."

Ignoring her grandmother's insightful comment, Noelle skipped happily to the front door to find Nick standing on the step. It had begun snowing at some point while they were waiting for him, and now his hair and shoulders were covered in fat, white snowflakes.

"Delivery." He held up a canvas tote full of DVDs. "I did my best to borrow as many as you asked for: A Christmas Story; A Christmas Carol—the 1951 version; Bad Santa; The Best Man Holiday, T'was the Night Before Christmas—the animated one with the mice; A Big Fat Family Christmas, and… Die Hard."

Noelle pouted briefly. "No Krampus?"

"Not without buying it, unfortunately. And you told me not to do that."

She flipped her hand dismissively. "Ah well. There's always the streaming platforms."

Nick stepped through to the warm entranceway and Noelle closed the door behind him.

"You know, for someone who's an admitted Grinch about Christmas, you sure do like your Christmas

movies. By the way—why wasn't The Grinch Who Stole Christmas on your list?"

"Because I own it already. All three versions."

Nick removed his coat and handed it to her, then stepped into the living room.

"Good morning, Hattie," he said to Noelle's grandmother, who was still holding the red and green cookie plate that came out every December for the last forty-odd years.

"Sweet boy," Hattie said. "Oh, by the way, I heard from Lori at Sharon Temple the other day. She said to pass along her thanks for the non-perishable food donations."

Noelle glanced between them. "What's Sharon Temple?"

"It's the national historic site and museum in Sharon, East Gwillimbury," Nick replied. "They run their Old Fashioned Christmas event. It's free with the donation of a non-perishable food item. I organize a whip-round from some of the businesses and contacts I have out here, and bring them over."

"How do you know someone from East Gwillimbury, Grandma?"

Hattie lifted her chin. "I'm not quite the shut-in you think I am, thank you very much."

Noelle glanced with humour towards Nick, who returned the look.

"I'm stressing out a bit this year, though, Hattie," he continued. "My calendar's booking up, and I'm having some difficulty finding time to do all of the donation

deliveries I usually do. I've got the Uxbridge Fantasy of Lights donations covered for their Optimist Club, and Elpida Café and Roastery—"

"What are they doing again?" Hattie put in.

"They run a monthly art contest in support of local artists, and they're also involved in raising money to bring water to coffee-growing communities and contributing to fairness and equity for women in the coffee farming industry."

"Ah yes, that's right."

"They're pretty incredible. Anyway, I'm not sure I'm going to be able to get out to Orangeville for their Christmas in the Park this year, or to Mount Alverno Luxury Resort for their Mistletoe Mountain."

"Now I feel bad," Noelle said. "I'm taking up all your time. We don't have to go to Unionville this afternoon if you have better things to do."

Nick shook his head. "No way. I'm not missing the Olde Tyme Christmas on Main Street Unionville."

"Can I help you, then? I mean, if you can't make it out to Orangeville and Mount Alverno, maybe I could do that for you. I don't mind spending time at a luxury resort. If it's for a good cause, of course."

Nick chuckled. "I think I should let you know what you're getting into first. Orangeville is easy. There are a few families out here who have ties to Orangeville, and they help sponsor the Christmas in the Park event, which is the fundraiser for the Orangeville Optimist Club. I'm just the delivery guy. But for Mistletoe Mountain, you're going to have to dress up like an elf and help out their

visit with Santa Claus." When Noelle started to shake her head, Nick quickly added, "It's for a good cause, you said so yourself. A portion of the proceeds goes to the Canadian Cancer Society."

Noelle groaned. "Ok, fine. But only because it's for a good cause. That, and I happen to rock an elf outfit."

"You're the best." He leaned in to give her a peck on the cheek… the first time he'd ever done so. Realizing the significance of the moment, Nick stepped back, an embarrassed half-smile spreading across his lips. "I'll, um… I'll send you the details when I have them."

"Put your game faces on, kids," Hattie said as she looked out through the front window. "Your guest of honour is here."

They both followed Hattie's gaze. Making his way up the driveway was a pleasant-looking gentleman dressed in a red plaid shirt and black baseball cap.

"That must be Barry," Noelle said excitedly (almost as excitedly as she was when Nick arrived), and hurried to the door. "Barry Best?"

The man shook her hand. "Yes, hi. Noelle?"

"That's me. Very pleased to meet you, and thank you so much for coming today. Jessica Elliott at York Durham Headwaters had so many nice things to say about you. You came highly recommended."

"I'm glad to hear it," Barry said. "I've been working with YDH pretty closely for the last several years."

"Come in and take a look at how we've got things set up—we're going to be decorating the Christmas tree, as I mentioned—and then you can tell us the best way for

you to do the photography and video for my social media feeds."

Barry entered the living room, where Noelle introduced him to her grandmother and Nick. After a brief chat about the best way to capture the activity, he went back out to his vehicle to bring in his equipment.

"Do you mind if we have Christmas movies playing in the background?" Noelle asked as he set up.

"Not at all. If you're planning on adding music or voiceover to the video, the background noise won't be an issue. The TV is out of the way, so it won't be in any of the shots."

She clapped her hands together, thrilled. "Awesome. Last Christmas it is. I love Emilia Clarke and Henry Golding together."

She set the DVD player going, and then went into the spare room to get the decorations she'd laid out for the tree.

"Here," she said, handing one of three baskets to Nick, and the other to her grandmother. "I thought we could each have a basket. They're organized by categories so we shouldn't run into clumping issues. As long as we all make an effort to spread our own baskets out, it'll look awesome. Grandma, you've got tinsel and garlands. Nick, you're on bulbs, and I've got miscellaneous ornaments."

"Nick glanced in Noelle's basket. "These still have the price tags on them. And… hey, I'm pretty sure I saw this one at That Place on Queen the other day. You didn't go back there, did you?"

She looked at him with wide, innocent eyes. "Not

important—No, don't look at the tag. It's not new."

"And I'm not a day over twenty-nine," her grandmother quipped drily.

"How about we just wing it and see what we come up with?" Barry suggested. "The photos and video shouldn't pick up any clumping, and you can sort it out later if you need to. Just act natural, and do your thing. I'll let you know if I need you to move or do anything specific."

"Wing it," Nick said, nodding. "Like this?"

He plucked a random bulb from his basket and tossed it at the tree. Immediately, Barry began snapping photos to capture the candid moment. The bulb landed on a branch and fell to the ground.

"Jeepers, Nick," Noelle gasped. "Good thing they're plastic."

"Oh, come on. Where's your sense of adventure?"

Click, click, click went Barry's camera.

She raised an eyebrow in mock consternation. "Sense of adventure, he says. Like this?"

She picked out an ornament from her own basket, and turning around, tossed it over her shoulder at the tree. It landed solidly on a branch, the hook catching its intended target.

"Show off," Nick jested.

"C'mon, Grandma. Your turn."

Grandma put down her basket, fished out the longest garland of the bunch, and stretched her neck back and forth. Then without hesitation, she began to lasso the metallic green garland in the air and let go. It soared for a brief moment, then landed on the tree unceremoniously,

hanging half off the back and half over the arm of the couch.

"Touchdown," she whooped, throwing her arms into the air. Everyone burst into a fit of laughter.

And that is how they decorated the tree. Tossing things at it haphazardly, sometimes aiming and sometimes not. It was far from the picture perfect experience she'd been hoping for, and even farther from the picture perfect outcome. But it had been fun. A ton of fun. Noelle had never laughed so hard while decorating anything.

"These are fantastic," Barry said as he reviewed the images through the camera once the monstrosity of a tree had been garnished to the max. He turned the lens for his subjects to see as well.

Noelle peered closely at the digital images. She was sure they would be a mess. She was wrong. Instead of portraying the chaos that had been, the images were as good as anything she and her marketing team in the big city would have spent weeks trying to manufacture with professional models and design teams. Better, even. Everything looked so natural and fun. These images weren't a lie, weren't manipulations for the sake of advertising.

The images that Barry had captured, along with all the laughter and warmth, were real.

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The last rays of daylight were disappearing in the

evening sky as Nick and Noelle pulled into the large parking lot behind the shops and restaurants of Main Street Unionville for the annual Olde Tyme Christmas event. It was difficult to find a spot, for it seemed that all of the Greater Toronto Area and beyond had turned out for the festivities.

"We didn't bring skates," Noelle lamented. "There's free skating at Crosby Community Centre."

"Oh, I don't skate," Nick responded. "Never learned how."

"What? I thought everyone knew how to skate."

"Easy for you to say, Miss Captain of the Highschool Hockey Team." He poked her playfully in the ribs. She giggled and squirmed out of the way.

"Fair enough. Let's get up to the main street and see what's what. I saw on the website that there are activities going on for another hour. Then it will be time for the parade."

They ascended the stone steps that brought them up to the main shopping section of the town, which was lit up as brightly as the Christmas tree in Grandma's living room.

"Wow," she said, looking around. "It's breathtaking."

Carolers strolled up and down the street, singing holiday favourites. Stores and businesses welcomed guests inside for holiday shopping. Volunteers dressed up in costumes delighted visitors—kids from one to ninety-two, as the carol went. And parade-goers were beginning to stake out their spots on the sidewalk for the big parade.

"Guess we missed the photos with Santa," Nick

noted. "He's probably getting ready in his sleigh by now."

"I'm sure there will be time after the parade. You want a photo with Santa?"

He slanted her a meaningful glance. "I wouldn't mind. As long as you're in it."

She turned her face away, biting her lip bashfully. Heat flushed her cheeks, warming them pleasantly against the crisp winter air.

"Come on, let's go shopping," she said, taking his arm. Together they strolled down the magical street, with its historic buildings decorated splendidly. Two amongst hundreds of jolly people eagerly waiting for Santa to arrive.

Those Currier and Ives fellows had this in mind when they painted their vintage Christmas postcards, she thought happily.

CHAPTER 5
Heaps of Snow and No Place to Go

A sudden turn in the winter weather means Noelle is snowed in while on the road, she'll have to make an unplanned stay at Hockley Valley Resort. What unexpected Christmas joy awaits at this luxury hotel and spa set in the rolling hills of Headwaters?



One had to admit it: Doing a good deed for someone in need was a great way to lift one's spirits. Noelle was feeling quite chipper as she got into her car after a day out and about doing good deeds in the region of Headwaters. That morning, she had driven to Mount Alverno Luxury Resort in Caledon for Mistletoe Mountain. Nick had agreed to be an elf for their Brunch With Santa event some time ago, but when he realized he could no longer make it, Noelle offered to step in for him. Dressed in pointy shoes, a pointy hat, and pointy ears, she'd had so much fun watching the glee on the faces of all the children (and even the adults!). And though she'd only committed to that one portion of the experience, she ended up staying around for the wreath-making workshop, the local artisan Christmas Market, and for good measure, the live music and entertainment.

After all, as Nick pointed out, it was for a good cause. A portion of each ticket would be donated to the Canadian Cancer Society.

Afterwards, she had proceeded to Orangeville for their Christmas in the Park, to hand over the donations Nick had collected for the Optimist Club. And, of course, she had to stay for the entertainment, festive treats, and to see the glee on the faces of the visitors young and old. One simply could not donate and run without staying for the glee and merriment.

Worn out in the best way possible, covered in glitter and glue, and tapping along to Mariah Carey's All I Want for Christmas is You from her car radio, Noelle began the hour-long drive back home to Uxbridge, and imagined

phoning Nick to give him an update on how it had all gone…

Perhaps in front of a cozy fire with a nice glass of wine.

But there was a problem. No more than five minutes into her drive, what had started as a light sprinkling of snowflakes soon turned into a thick, heavy snowfall that was beginning to make the roads dangerous. With a sinking heart, Noelle soon realized that she was not going to make it back. Disappointed but in the interest of safety, she pulled over to the side of the road to look for accommodations for the night.

She scrolled through her phone's web browser at the results of her search. There were lots of places that would have been perfectly suitable, but one made her finger hover in place more than the others.

"Hockley Valley Resort," she murmured, pursing her lips as she mused over the possibility. Clicking on the Images tab, she gave a low whistle at the gorgeous photos which were posted online. Talk about luxury!

Noelle hesitated. Considered. Debated with herself. Decided… heck yeah. She'd spent all day doing good deeds, why not reward herself with a little treat? Since she was going to be snowed in anyway, might as well make the experience memorable. Happy once more, she pulled back onto the road and made the careful drive to Hockley Valley in the nearby community of Mono.

Steering her vehicle up the winding drive of the resort was like crossing the bounds of some magical land. The warm glow coming from the resort lit up the snow-

covered landscape as if the whole thing were the scene within a winter snow globe. As Noelle parked her car, suddenly grateful for the unexpected gift of being snowed in, she texted her grandmother with her whereabouts so that her grandmother would not worry. Once she'd sent the message, she glanced to the right, and noticed a series of life-sized snow globes across the lawn. They twinkled in the distance as staff moved around them, clearly in the process of setting something up.

Bowing her head against the thick snow falling softly from the sky, she exited her car and walked gingerly through the ankle-high carpet of snow to the front entrance of the resort. On the other side of the glass doors, the entire lobby was strung with festive garlands, wreaths, bows and lights. The reception desk was to the right of the entrance, so Noelle approached the on-duty staff member.

"Hi there."

"Good evening," the receptionist said. "Checking in?"

"Actually, I don't have a reservation," Noelle admitted. "Looks like I'm snowed in for the night. I was wondering if you had anything available."

"Yes, the weather has taken a turn, hasn't it?" The receptionist typed on the keyboard. "We do have a few rooms available. But only our Regal and Vice Regal rooms."

"What do they come with?"

"They're our premium bi-level rooms with wood-burning fireplaces—"

"You had me at wood-burning," Noelle jested, cutting

the receptionist off. "I'll take it."

She provided her information for the system, and as it was being entered, she thought about the snow globes again.

"I noticed these globe structures outside. What are they? What's going on?"

The receptionist's face lit up. "Oh, yes. That's our snow globe experience. It's quite spectacular. From now until Mid-March, we offer a five-course, farm-to-fork meal complete with a wine pairing for each course—some from the neighbouring Adamo Estate Winery, depending on the meal. Each globe is equipped with twinkle lights to set the mood, and your own faux fur throw and space heater to ward off the winter chill."

"Oh, wow," Noelle gasped. "You don't happen to have availability for tonight, do you?"

"I doubt it. I'll have to check the system. This is a popular event, and reservations are usually booked in advance. Plus, we require a minimum of two guests."

"That's too bad. That would have been a pretty incredible experience to just happen upon."

The receptionist checked the system, hesitating when the reservation screen came up. "Actually… I'll have to check with my manager, but it looks like you might be in luck. Turns out we had a cancellation just an hour ago. The guests who have booked their stay couldn't make it because of the snow."

"If it's going, I'd love to jump in there and take that spot. I'll even take on the two-person minimum."

The receptionist glanced at Noelle quizzically. Noelle

chuckled sheepishly in response.

"I'm in the process of building up a career as a social media influencer," she explained. "My platform is focused on all the amazing things you can see and do not far from home. I'm not, like, super-famous or anything. I've just started. But this would be a great feature for my channels, if you don't mind."

"We don't mind at all. We love when people share their experiences with us. Let me just check with my manager."

A quick phone call from the front desk phone, and Noelle was given the green light to take over the cancelled spot.

"Here you are then."

Noelle was handed her room key, with directions to her suite and information about the Wi-Fi password.

"We encourage you to check out our spa services as well," the receptionist added. "And our onsite restaurants Babbo and Cabin are available if you're hungry our would like something to drink."

Noelle offered her thanks, and made her way to her room, very aware that she was not carrying any overnight luggage, which felt unusual. But at least she had an emergency toothbrush and hairbrush in her purse, so for one night she could rough it.

She smiled to herself at the thought. Roughing it in a place as luxurious as Hockley Valley Resort. The two words did not belong in the same sentence.

When she opened the door to her room, she stopped and stared in amazement. The first level opened up before her, with a grand, spiraling wrought-iron staircase

leading to the second level. There was indeed a wood-burning fireplace, around which a comfortable sitting area was arranged. On the second floor she found a huge, king-sized bed and stunning four-piece bathroom suite.

Oh, this was going to be heavenly tonight. Looks like she was going to get her cozy fire and glass of wine after all.

The thought made her sad, though. All this luxury and no one to share it with. It would have been so nice if her grandmother could be here with her. Or maybe Dash, whom she hadn't had a chance to speak to since she'd quit her job.

Or Nick. They hadn't been on an official first date yet, and even though he'd hinted at his feelings for her, he never confirmed. Yet, the thought of cozying up with Nick here, at a rural resort in front of a wood-burning fireplace after a five-course snow globe dinner, was exactly what she was yearning for.

That gave her an idea. Eagerly, she pulled her mobile out of her coat pocket.

What are your plans tonight? she texted him.

He responded quickly. I'm snowed in. So probably just hang here and watch a movie. Mom has gone to bed, she has a bit of a cold. Why?

I'm snowed in too. But you'll never guess where—I'm at Hockley Valley Resort!

A "mind blown" emoji popped up in response.

I was wondering if you wanted to do dinner together.

Um… how would that work if we're both snowed in?

iPad with a data plan and FaceTime, she responded,

and then quickly began typing.

It's not just any dinner. It's a special snow globe dinner done outside in the cold. But inside the globes, it's warm. There are blankets and space heaters and twinkle lights, and it's a five-course meal with wine pairings. Would you like to join me?

There was a pause, before he answered with: Sure, rub it in. Five-star meal for you, microwave mac and cheese for me.

Lol. I know we won't be eating the same thing, but I'd love if you would keep me company.

She held her breath as she watched the three little dots which meant he was typing.

I'd love that.

And then, Our first digital date.

She was glad that he couldn't see her face just then, with its goofy ear-to-ear grin. Or her happy dance. One look at her half-Irish-half-Saturday-Night-Fever happy dance and he might just change his mind.

Great, she typed once her disco jig settled itself down. I'll FaceTime you when dinner's about to start.

Can't wait.

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At the appointed hour, Noelle left her room and went to the lobby, where she was picked up by a waiting golf cart that would take her to the globes over the recently-shovelled pathway. Once they arrived, she was greeted by the host for the evening and shown to her globe.

"No companion tonight?" the host asked.

Noelle held up her iPad. "My date is joining me shortly."

Alone in her globe, with the majestic ambience and soft music playing in the background, she FaceTimed Nick. His smile was like a warm hug on a cold, snowy evening.

"You look like an angel with that glow all around you," was the first thing he said.

She blushed. "Flatterer."

"So, what do you think? Is it as amazing as you were hoping?"

"Judge for yourself."

She held the tablet up, moving the screen around the space so he could see it all.

"Yep. I would rather be there with you than where I am right now," he said wistfully.

"Here's the menu," she added, pointing the screen at the slim white card with elegant type.

"Farm-to-fork, local products," he noted, reading the list. "That is impressive."

"It all looks so delicious. I'd ask to have your meal boxed up to take home, but I'm not sure how it will transport. Gourmet food is best eaten fresh-cooked."

She turned the screen back so she could see his face.

"I agree," he said, nodding. "Don't worry about me. You enjoy it. Make your second meal a midnight snack."

"How much do you think I can eat?" she quipped, feigning dismay. "I'm pretty sure I'll be full after this, but thanks for the offer."

Dinner began shortly after. The food was delectable,

the wine expertly paired. With each course, she turned the iPad so Nick could see what was coming, and with each course, he smacked his lips comically. It turned out to be the best digital date she had ever had. It was almost as wonderful as if he'd been there with her in person.

Almost.

CHAPTER 6
There's No Place Like Home for the Holidays



It was nearing December 25th. Almost Christmas Eve for those who celebrate the occasion. Hanukkah had officially concluded, Kwanzaa was just around the corner, and the general spirit of joy and good tidings was still vibrant in people's hearts.

In just over a month, Noelle's dedication to building her career as a social media influencer was going better than she could have dreamed. Already, she had reached five thousand followers across all of her platforms, and that number was increasing every day. Her strategy had been ambitious, and it was beginning to pay off.

Interestingly, though, she saw more engagement and activity when she took Nick's advice and slowed down. For the posts, videos, blogs and reels where she'd taken the time to truly enjoy what she was doing, that enjoyment seemed to resonate with her followers. She wasn't just sharing the details of an experience, she was sharing the experience itself, along with all the warmth and laughter and fun she'd had.

It truly was about quality over quantity, it seemed.

And it had all been because of Nick. He'd dropped everything to help her with this big little project of hers, to help her enjoy the Christmas season in a small town. But then again, she'd known all along that the holidays in the big city, and the shiny, glossy marketing job she had given up, wasn't a true representation of the spirit of the season. Gifts weren't given because they were obligations, they were given with affection, with consideration and with love. That was the way it should be.

Which is why she had a gift for Nick. She'd brought

it with her to their very first date: A snowy, horse-drawn carriage ride through the historic downtown district of Port Perry. They stood now in line, waiting for their turn to board the old-fashioned carriage along with other happy visitors who made this wholesome activity a holiday tradition.

"Here," she said, handing him the silver and white bag which she'd stuffed and fluffed and wrapped so carefully.

He glanced curiously at her. "What's this?"

"I wanted to get you something to say thank you for everything you've done for me. You don't know how much I appreciate your support and advice."

He opened the bag. Inside was a card.

"Oh wow," he exclaimed when he saw what it was. "A gift certificate to The Chef Upstairs for a cooking class for two."

"I heard great things about them. It's apparently quite interactive. It's not only a cooking class, it's a unique dining experience. And you don't have to take me if you don't want to. You can choose whomever you want. I know you've spent a huge amount of time with me and you have probably been neglecting your other friends."

"Don't be silly," he said. "You know I'm taking you. I wouldn't dream of bringing anyone else."

"Okay," she relented. "Then I promise I won't take any videos or photos to make reels and social media posts with. This one will just be about doing this together and having fun."

Nick chuckled. "You know, I don't even mind the social media stuff. I'll leave that one up to you. You have

my full blessing to go ahead if you want to. If you don't, it's your call."

Their conversation was interrupted by the clip-clopping of horses' hooves. The carriage was here! They climbed in, settled onto the seat, and the driver signalled for the horses to walk on.

"There's something else in there," Noelle said once they were on the move.

Nick looked deeper, and found the delicate glass ornament she'd bought for him.

"It reminded me of you," she said.

"It's gorgeous. Where did you get it?"

"From this place in Shelburne called Granny Taught Us How. I was out that way for the Orangeville Christmas in the Park—as you remember. That was the night I got snowed in and stayed over at Hockley Valley. Anyway, I stopped in to Granny Taught Us How just before then."

"I don't think I've heard of that place."

Noelle's face brightened. "Oh my gosh, it's so cool. It's in a historic building that was once an Orange Lodge. They've got unique gifts, home décor items, and one-of-a-kind finds. People actually travel there from all over to check out all the neat stuff, and then to stop at Mrs. Mitchell's Restaurant next door, in a historic schoolhouse built in 1889. I stopped in there, too. It was so charming! I meant to just get a little nibble, but I ended up ordering a whole meal."

"I'm glad you had the opportunity to go. Let's make a plan to go there together soon, if you love it that much."

"I do. And I'd like that."

They exchanged warm smiles, warm enough to ward off the chill of the outdoor carriage ride. As they went, they passed through historic downtown Port Perry, past all the shops Noelle had grown up with, now decked in their finest, festive decorations. They passed the little green hut where Santa was welcoming children, and the Scugog memorial library with its annual Bakersville Animated Gingerbread Village. They passed The Wee Tartan Shop, The Port Cheese Company, Nexus Coffee, Marwan's Global Bistro, and all of the familiar, small-town shops that were now busy with last minute shoppers.

Noelle realized, as she looked out over the town, that she was looking out with fresh eyes. She never quite appreciated how wonderful the holidays in a small town could be. Even with all the sugary, cheesy, cozy movies on the Hallmark channel at this time of year that were based on this exact theme. It had taken a move to the big city to figure it out, but she understood it now.

And it was all thanks to Saint Nick.

EPILOGUE
A New Year's Eve Outdoor Skate

The Richmond Green Skate Trail in Richmond Hill was not just any outdoor skating rink—it was a glorious 250 metres of stake trail that meandered through gorgeous natural space. On New Year's Eve, it was packed with eager skaters, some brand new to the activity and some as seasoned as if they were walking. There were old faces and young, and all of them merry.

All except one. Nick Snowdon clung to Noelle Cane's hand with an iron grip as though his life depended on it, and concentrated on putting one bladed foot in front of the other. It had taken an hour to get this far, but at least he was making progress. His stumbles and awkward steps had by now progressed to small little glides.

Noelle, on the other hand, had been on skates since she was three years old. She'd played competitive hockey all the way through university. She could skate backwards as easily as forwards, with eyes closed as easily as opened. She was his support this New Year's Eve, just as he'd been her support while she worked on growing her fledgling career as a social media influencer.

"I told you I've never skated before," Nick said in a sort of half-laugh, half-whine.

"Really? I couldn't tell."

He burst into a chuckle. "Don't make me laugh. You're going to make me fall."

"Don't worry, I'll catch you," she said. Then she added, "And besides, admit it. You're having fun."

"Maybe," he allowed. "I'm not sure. I'll let you know when my limbs aren't frozen with fear."

The weather was deliciously crisp with the promise of a fresh new year, and the night sky overhead was lit up by the remaining holiday lights, as well as lamp posts along the trail. It was nearly ten o'clock. Almost time for the skate trail to close.

"So, did you hear back from that sponsor that contacted you?" Nick asked as they began their final lap for the evening.

This had been a major development for Noelle. On Boxing Day, she had received an email out of the blue. It was from a body care brand that made small-batch products. Chemical free, dye free, cruelty free, vegan. They had a small but selective list of influencers they worked with, and they were interested in adding Noelle to their roster. If all went to plan, it would be her first official sponsor.

"I did," she replied. "I signed the contract with them this morning. We're touching base on Monday to outline the campaign. They're even sending me a sample box of their products."

"That's amazing," Nick exclaimed. "Your first paid gig. You're officially a professional influencer. I'm so proud of you."

"I'm proud of me, too," she laughed, exhilarated. "I can hardly believe it. You know, your friend Jessica Elliott from York Durham Headwaters was right: It's so much better when you love what you do. I honestly don't feel like I've been working this past month. It's just been one

big adventure."

"Keep it up. I think you've got a bright future ahead of you if—"

Suddenly, Nick's feet slipped out from underneath him and he fell like a tree trunk… but he didn't hit the ice. Noelle was there to catch him.

As he climbed back to his feet, using her as a human support pole, their faces came mere inches from one another. He did not back away, and nor did she.

Nick leaned closer, Noelle closed her eyes, and…

That, dear friends, is where our story ends. What happens next is between Noelle and Nick. After all, we at York Durham Headwaters don't kiss and tell From our family to yours, we wish you the very best for the holiday season, and a bright and happy New Year.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Hello, dear friends. I was so excited to have the opportunity to collaborate with York Durham Headwaters on this Hallmark-worthy holiday romance set in YDH. Why, you might ask? Well, the answer is that this is my home. I live here in York Durham Headwaters, believe it or not. Many of the places Nick and Noelle visited, and many of the experiences they've had, are based on my own experiences and visits. The warmth and the laughter and the fun—it's all real. I am a huge fan of exploring all there is to do in this region, so it was quite special to me to be able to do what I do and bring a little story to it, and to share all that is wonderful about YDH through the eyes of Nick Snowdon and Noelle Cane. Thank you for coming along on this holiday journey. From me and the team at York Durham Headwaters, Happy Reading!

Veronica Bale is a writer of historical romance and women's fiction, and is the author of the best-selling novel The Ghosts of Tullybrae House.

For more on her books, or for how to connect with her on social media, visit www.veronicabale.com