

LIGHTING UP *Christmas*

A COLLECTION OF FOUR CHRISTMAS ROMANCE NOVELLAS

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THE BRIGHT SIDE OF *Christmas*

AMY R. ANGUISH



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*For CHARIS, my local writing group. You have become like another family
and I don't know what I would do without your support and friendship. God
blessed me richly when he helped me find you.*

CHAPTER

One



A BEAT POUNDED through the thin walls of Robert Bradshaw's duplex. Granted, it wasn't past curfew or anything, but that didn't mean he wanted his neighbor's music invading his space. Not even at ... two-thirty in the afternoon.

How was he supposed to handle his virtual therapy clients with that noise in the background? The next session was scheduled for three. He needed to put an end to this now.

Setting his laptop aside, he marched out of his office and into the main part of his house. The closer he came to the front door, the louder the music grew. And the vaguely familiar rhythm slowed his steps while he tried to determine how he knew it. Was that—?

Sure enough, as he opened his front door, "Jingle Bells" filled the air. On November first.

No.

Just ... no.

On his front porch, he peered around the short fir tree. It divided the small yard halfway between the front stoops. A petite brunette, decked out in a red-and-green-striped top, blue jeans, and bare feet, was wrapping her porch posts with red and white Christmas lights.

He'd seen her before, coming and going, but never actually met the woman. But what in the world was she doing? It wasn't even Thanksgiving yet.

"Hey!" He waved to try and catch her attention.

"Jingle Bells" switched to "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree." The girl shimmied and did a little twirl as she continued to wind the string of lights around her post. She probably couldn't hear anything over that music.

He glanced down at his gray-and-black-socked feet and sighed. The longer he took with this confrontation, the less time he had to review his notes before his next appointment. Much as he hated to ruin a good pair of socks, there just wasn't time for shoes.

"Excuse me." He strode off his porch and through the grass—which he discovered several steps in was still damp from the rain last night. Bother. "Hey!"

"Oh." She froze, her eyes wide, hands raised above her head, that strand of lights dangling from her fingers. "Hi."

"Can you turn it down?"

"What?" A slight wrinkle formed in the middle of her forehead, somehow adding to the cuteness of her round face. "Sorry. Can you ...?"

Next thing he knew, she'd passed the lights into his hand and dashed into her side of the duplex. A second later, the carols blissfully ended. Mission accomplished.

"Thanks so much for holding those. I couldn't hear you over the music."

He barely kept from rolling his eyes. "Well, you took care of what I needed. I couldn't hear anything on my side of the duplex because of the noise, and I'm about to meet with a client. I appreciate you turning it down."

She gave him a sheepish grin. "I didn't even think about the sound carrying through the walls. Last year, the girl who lived on that side was out here hanging lights with me, so we cranked it up and both enjoyed it."

He shoved the strand of lights at her. "Why, exactly, are you hanging lights?"

She blinked. "For Christmas."

"It's barely November."

"Right."

"It's not Christmastime."

She blinked again. "I always start putting my lights up right after Halloween."

Start. She *started* to put her lights up. Did that mean this could go

on for a while? And how many lights did she plan to hang? Good thing his bedroom was on the other side of the unit. What if there were so many lights on this place that they kept him up all night? Wait.

His brain filtered through the rules he'd agreed to when he moved in. Wasn't there a clause? "I thought the rental company said we couldn't have lights."

"Well,"—she smirked—"my uncle happens to own these units. I'm sort of grandfathered in. Or uncled in, if you prefer. I pay him to let me hang lights by keeping him stocked with holiday cookies. And the clause says no lights on the roof. A few on the front are okay."

"A few."

She nodded. A few he could handle, though he wasn't sure they agreed on what constituted "a few."

He really needed to go prep for his next appointment. But ... "You realize there's a perfectly good holiday between Halloween and Christmas, right?"

"Yes. I love Thanksgiving." She tucked the end of her strand of lights into the rest so it wouldn't fall and then held out her hand. "I'm Holly Belle, by the way. I've seen you around these last few months but haven't had a chance to meet you before now."

He hesitated before sliding his fingers over hers and shaking. "Robert Bradshaw."

"It's nice to meet you." She grinned again. "I promise to keep my music quieter. I had no idea you met with clients over there."

"It's all online, but still ..."

She nodded. "What kind of clients do you meet with?"

"I'm a therapist." He hooked his thumb over his shoulder. "And I better get back to it so I can start that next appointment on time."

"Right." Holly rocked on her heels. "Well, it was nice to meet you, Robert. Let me know if there's anything else I can do to help you out. Sorry again for the music."

She picked up a bundle of lights and walked toward the fir tree that grew between their front windows.

"Where is that going?" He walked with her since he did need to get back inside.

"Oh, I put this one on the tree here."

He stopped in his tracks, in spite of the wet grass. "Half that tree is on my side."

"Right." She held the net up in mid-air and studied him. "Sorry again. I didn't even think to ask if you had a different plan for this tree. I can leave it for when you decorate. Even if it is after Thanksgiving." Her lips quirked up in a little smirk.

"I'm not going to decorate." He crossed his arms over his chest.

Her hands slowly lowered. "Not at all?"

"No."

Holly tried to draw a full breath. Her new neighbor didn't decorate for Christmas? How was that possible?

Sure, he was a single guy, a bachelor. A handsome one, even, with his dark curly hair just long enough to wave on top and his neatly trimmed beard. But not to hang a wreath or anything—was he a scrooge?

"Okay, great." She shifted her net of lights and cocked a hip. "I'll just decorate the tree, then, since you don't have any plans for it."

"No."

She froze again. "What?"

"No. Half that tree is technically mine."

"Right. But you said you weren't going to decorate it, so I might as well—"

"You can decorate *half* the tree."

Was this guy for real? "Half?"

"Right." He stepped closer and used his finger to indicate the middle of the tree. "This is where my side starts. Don't cross that line."

Holly pinched her lips together. He couldn't be serious. If she only put lights on half the tree, that would look ridiculous.

But he didn't stick around to add anything. No indication he was joking or teasing. Not even a *goodbye*. He marched through his front door and let it shut with more force than necessary.

He *was* a scrooge!

Holly narrowed her eyes toward his side of the duplex even though he couldn't see her. If there was anything she loved in life, it was a challenge. And living next door to someone who hated Christmas was definitely a challenge in her book.

Okay, Mr. Robert. Time to see how serious you were about that threat.

She draped the netted lights over the whole tree and jerked her

chin in his direction, her lips pursed. Decorating half a tree wasn't done. Besides, what was he going to do about it?

Back on her porch, she finished wrapping her posts. The seventy-degree sunshine from earlier in the afternoon was fading as the sun sank toward the horizon. Living in Middle Tennessee had lots of perks, but being this close to the time zone line meant an earlier sunset this season. No more decorating today.

Her plans included windows, roofline, door, pathway lights, and some of those swirly Christmas trees. Not to mention the tree that would go in her front window in the living room. A wreath for the door. And a few cute items to go on the rocking chair on her front porch.

Christmas was her favorite time of year, and she fully embraced the current trend of decorating early and leaving it up late. She'd decorate for Christmas in July if she could get away with it.

What would Mr. Scrooge say about that?

Rubbing her hands together, Holly grinned. She never had been good at staying in the lines ...