WISHING FOR MISTLETOE

A SMALL TOWN CHRISTIAN ROMANCE

LOVE ON SANCTUARY SHORES
BOOK SIX

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Wishing for Mistletoe
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"For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:38–39, NASB 2020)

CHAPTER 1

November

Ariel Highbridge pulled the hood of her coat tight at her throat as The Haven ferry plowed through the choppy waters of Lake Huron on its way to Sanctuary Island. By the end of November, ferry service would cease until spring, and the only way to reach the island would be by private boats—until ice formed on the surface of the lake—and small aircraft.

She shuddered, both from the cold and the thought of flying in one of those tiny planes. The cold she could live with. But she wouldn't go anywhere in a tin can with wings. The very idea gave her nightmares. No, once she was on the island, it would be her home for the next six months. Whatever else happened, the next time she stepped onto the mainland, it would be from the ferry.

"Shauna," a male voice called above the sound of the wind. "Come back inside."

Laughter drew Ariel's gaze to the side. She guessed the girl at the railing to be about ten or eleven years old. Although she wore a warm coat, gloves, and boots, her head was uncovered, and curly red hair blew around in the wind, like a sweater caught in a blender.

"Shauna. Come on."

"Just a second, Dad."

"Now, Shauna."

Shauna looked at Ariel and grinned. Almost as if they shared a secret.

Ariel smiled in return. "You'd better do as your dad says."

Shauna laughed again, whirled away from the railing, and ran toward the doorway to the passenger deck. Ariel caught only the back of the man's head as dad and daughter disappeared inside, the door closing behind them.

Her heart pinched as she remembered her own father. He'd had to summon her back from misadventures about a million times while she was growing up. How long-suffering he'd been with her as she'd pushed his boundaries, a little more every year. Life without him had never been the same, and the passing of a dozen years hadn't stopped her from wishing she could talk to him even one more time.

What would Charles Highbridge think of his only daughter if he could see her today? He'd been gone more than a decade now. Would he be proud or disappointed of the woman she'd become? What advice would he share with her if only he could?

"I miss you, Dad. I could sure use some advice right about now."

The harbor at Sanctuary Island drew closer. Toward the southeast side of the island, she saw the big resort hotel—the Shore View Palace—that drew tourists to Sanctuary throughout the summer. Beyond the dock where passengers would disembark from the ferry, she saw the small town of Sanctuary. Her friend, Gwyneth Muldoon, had told her no motorized vehicles were allowed within the five square blocks that made up the town proper. Residents walked or rode bicycles, and in the winter when snow blanketed the ground, they used skis and snowshoes. In season, tourists often went through the town in a horse-drawn carriage, stopping to visit shops and galleries.

With some creaks and groans and the growl of engines, the ferry slowed as it drew closer to the dock. Pushing the hood off her head, Ariel went inside the main deck to retrieve her briefcase and rolling suitcases.

Please, God, help me find my creativity again. Let this place be the answer. I don't have any others.

Fifteen minutes later, Ariel set foot on the dock and rolled her two suitcases through the open gates, past the ferry offices, across the road, and into town. Gwyneth's instructions were easy enough to follow: Once in town, continue on Main Street past the town square and go all the way to Sixth Street. Turn left and go two blocks.

Her friend's home was on the northwest corner of Superior and Sixth. A cream-colored house with red trim.

A chilly wind pushed against Ariel, and roiling clouds

threatened rain. She quickened her steps, eager to get inside before she got drenched. Despite her warm coat, she was shivering by the time she arrived at her destination. The house wasn't large, and it was definitely old. But it looked well cared-for. As fast as her icy fingers could manage, she retrieved the key from her purse and unlocked the front door.

She found the switch on the entry wall and flicked on the lights, providing her the first glimpse of what would be her home for the next six months, thanks to Gwyneth's generosity.

"I never visit the island in the off-season," her friend had told her. "You'll have the house all to yourself. And no tourists either. You'll have plenty of time to regroup and refresh. Not to mention you'll have few distractions. Unless you like to snowshoe or ski the trails."

Ariel had laughed at that. She wasn't a winter sports person. Winter was meant for warm fires, hot spiced apple cider, and a good book.

"And writing," she said aloud as she walked deeper into the house, turning on more lights as she went.

There were two bedrooms on the main floor. The larger one was decorated in hues of teal and mauve. Lovely and restful. The second bedroom was chintz from the wallpaper to the curtains to the bedspread and pillow shams. Even the framed prints on the wall. It was straight out of the 1950s and made Ariel smile. How like Gwyneth —who loved books and movies set in that era—to make such a choice.

While the chintz theme didn't spill into the living or

dining rooms, the home's furnishings made her think of her maternal grandparents' house in Boise. They'd purchased the home as newlyweds, and according to Ariel's mom, Grandma Dot hadn't changed a thing for the next fifty years. Ariel thought that an exaggeration, but her memories of the old house said it could be true. Her heart pinched, remembering the wonderful hours she'd spent with her grandmother as a little girl, baking cookies, helping in the garden. Grandma Dot, a widow of twenty-two years, had lost her battle with breast cancer twenty years ago and, like Dad, a hole had been left in Ariel's life with her passing.

Ariel continued her exploration of the main floor, checking out the tiny bathroom, the bright yellow kitchen, and a small laundry room. She took the time to study each of the framed photographs hanging in the hallway. Photos of Gwyneth at camp and after college graduation. Photos of her on a trip to England and Ireland. Fun photos with her family with everyone making a silly face at the camera. There was even one photo of Gwyneth and Ariel together outside a theater on Broadway in New York. What great memories.

Moving on, she discovered a third bedroom at the top of a set of steep and narrow stairs, although its true purpose seemed to be for storage.

By the time she returned to the living room, rain pelted the large window overlooking a small backyard. An ancient tree, bare of leaves, was in one corner with a rope-swing hanging from a gnarled limb. In the other corner of the yard stood a shed.

Although it was midday, the darkness of the storm

tempted her to curl up in the bed and take a nap. But she couldn't do that. She needed to unpack and settle in.

On her way to retrieve her suitcases from the front hall, she remembered Gwyneth had said she would leave a note with important information in the kitchen nook. She went into the kitchen and found the note, as promised.

Hi, Ariel. Welcome to Sanctuary. I hope it proves to be just that for you. A sanctuary.

My friend Tom Fuller lives right next door. If you need help of any kind, he's the one to call. He's very handy. Can fix most anything, and he loves to help. A really great neighbor. He's widowed with a young daughter, and when he isn't at school (he's a teacher), he's usually at his house. His number is on the pad next to the phone.

Another friend of mine promised to bring over enough food to get you through the next couple of days until you can stock up on what you want. Check the fridge and the cupboards.

Gwyneth's note then listed a couple of places to eat in the off-season as well as directions to the grocery store and the bookstore. What more could Ariel need? Right?

The furnace and water heater are in the half-basement. You get there by stairs outside. The fusebox is in the

laundry room. There's a toolbox on the porch if you need a wrench or screwdriver or hammer. Extra lightbulbs are under the bathroom sink.

If there's anything I've forgotten to write down, you can always call me. Feel free to poke around. I'm not hiding anything. LOL!

Make yourself at home. Move things around to however you like.

I'm praying for you, Ariel. I believe God has something special in store for you during your time in Sanctuary.

Love, Gwyneth

Ariel set the note back on the counter. "I hope you're right, Gwyneth. I really hope you're right."

Tom Fuller looked out his kitchen window, thankful they'd made it home from the ferry before the downpour. Lights were on at the Muldoon house. "Hey, Shauna."

"Yeah."

"Looks like Miss Gwyneth's friend got here while we were gone."

His eleven-year-old daughter came into the kitchen in a flash. That's how she did most things. She rushed. She raced. She flew. Now she hopped onto the counter with ease and looked out the window with him. "Let's take her some cookies. That's the friendly thing to do. Right, Dad?"

"It sure is, kiddo." He pushed kinky red curls away

from her face. "Go ahead and bake some."

Shauna dropped to the floor, and in no time at all, she had the oven preheating, she'd taken the roll of cookie dough from a shelf in the refrigerator and retrieved a knife from the utensil drawer. As she peeled back the plastic on the dough, she asked, "Do you know what her name is?" She began slicing, concentrating hard, her tongue peeking out the corner of her mouth.

"Hmm. Miss Gwyneth told me, but I forget what it was."

"That's not good."

"You're right. I should've paid more attention. I'll do better next time."

Shauna went to a cupboard beneath the counter and removed a large cookie sheet. She placed the twelve round slices of cookie dough on the pan, careful to have the same distance between each one of them. Watching his daughter, Tom reached for the oven mitts so he would be ready when the timer sounded, letting them know the oven had reached the desired temperature. He didn't have long to wait.

Half an hour later, with Tom holding an umbrella and Shauna carrying a plastic container holding almost a dozen warm sugar cookies, the two of them walked to the neighbor's front door. Shauna rang the bell. When no one answered, she rang it again. This time, Tom saw movement through the frosted glass. Then the door opened a couple of inches.

Tom smiled as he leaned to the right so the woman could see him better. "Hi. I'm Tom Fuller. This is my daughter, Shauna."

"We brought cookies to say welcome to the island." Shauna held up the container. "They're still warm and really good."

The door opened wider, and he got his first glimpse of Gwyneth's unnamed friend. She was slender and pretty with wavy brown hair falling around her shoulders. But it was her eyes that captured his attention. Not truly blue and not truly green, but somewhere in-between. Aquamarine, he thought. And amazing.

He cleared his throat and repeated, "I'm Tom Fuller."

"I'm Ariel Highbridge."

"Hey, you were on the ferry. Dad, she was on the ferry with us."

That was hard for him to believe. This time of year there weren't many passengers on the ferry. If he'd seen her, he would have remembered. Surely he would have.

"You're right. I was on the ferry." Ariel opened the door the rest of the way. "I'm sorry. Come in out of the rain. Please."

Tom closed the umbrella and leaned it next to the door on the stoop before stepping inside. Thankfully, Shauna didn't dash into the house, dripping water everywhere. When Gwyneth was here during the summers, his daughter treated this house like it was her second home, going in and out almost at will.

Shauna offered the container of cookies again. "There was a dozen, but I ate two."

Ariel laughed softly as she accepted the plastic box. "I love sugar cookies. Did you bake them yourself?"

"Yes." She glanced up. "Dad helped a little."

Ariel lifted her gaze. "Then I must thank you, too." She

smiled again.

It had been ages since Tom reacted to a woman's eyes or a woman's smile. In the first couple of years after his wife died, he'd spent most days in a haze of grief, just putting one foot in front of the other and trying to be both dad and mom to his daughter. But even in the last couple of years—as friends had begun to bug him about getting out there, dating, really living again—he'd failed to feel even a spark of interest in the women he met.

Until now.

"How come you're staying in Miss Gwyneth's house?" Shauna asked, ever the curious one.

If Ariel minded his daughter's bluntness, she didn't show it. "I wanted to get away for a while, and she thought I'd like to stay here for the winter."

"Where're you from?"

"Shauna," he warned softly.

"I live in Idaho. Do you know where that is?"

Shauna screwed up her face in thought, then answered, "Almost to the Pacific Ocean."

"You're right. It is almost to the ocean. Idaho comes just before Washington and Oregon."

Tom decided he'd better take his daughter home before she gave Ariel the complete third degree. Not that he wasn't interested in hearing Ariel's answers. He would like to know more about what she did in Idaho, where she lived, what brought her to Sanctuary Island for the winter, and plenty more. But now was not the time.

With a hand on Shauna's shoulder, he said, "We'll go now and let you settle in. We're right next door if you need anything. Don't hesitate to ask if you do."

"Thank you, Mr. Fuller."

"Tom. My name's Tom."

"Except when he's at school," Shauna interjected. "He's always Mr. Fuller there. Even *I've* gotta call him Mr. Fuller when we're at school." She ended with a roll of her eyes and a soft huff of air.

"Come on, you." He turned Shauna toward the door, and they went back out into the rain.