

# Christmas in Evergreen: Tidings of Joy

Nancy Naigle

**B**EN WALKED OUTSIDE WITH KATIE, stopping her before she crossed the street. “So, did you learn everything you needed about Evergreen?”

She cocked her head to the side. “If I’m being totally honest, it all feels a little too good to be true.”

There it was again. Her doubt agitated him. “Which part? I’m just curious.”

“Well, first off, you have a guy who looks exactly like Santa Claus on vacation.” She pointed inside, where Nick was still sharing coffee and pie with the artist.

“Yeah. Nick.” Ben knew how that looked. “He splits his time between Evergreen and—”

“The North Pole?” she teased.

“No.” The joke bothered him more than it

should. "Burlington. He comes from Burlington for the month of December."

"Look. Fine. But come on, even your alleys are decorated for Christmas. I get it. I'm all for it. I mean, you have to put on a good Christmas show. It's for the tourists." She was being playful about it, even raising her hands into the air and spinning as she spoke.

"No. It's not that." His jaw pulsed. "It's not like that at all. We truly love the holidays, and it's wonderful that people like to get out of the city and come here to Evergreen to enjoy a real Christmas."

"Wait-wait-wait." She held her hand up, increasing the space between them. "Are you saying that city Christmases aren't real?"

"No. I'm not saying that." Or am I? This isn't going well. "I mean we're not cynical here."

"Who says we are?" She tempted him with those pretty eyes, although right now they were carrying a bit of challenge too.

Honestly, he hadn't meant to accuse her or the city of being cynical. He dropped his hands to his side. What could he say that wouldn't just dig him in even deeper?

They'd gotten as far as the gazebo before he stopped her. He made an effort to keep his voice level and calm. "If you're truly interested in Evergreen, it's important to understand that we embrace this for real. I want you to experience the real Evergreen if you're going to write about it."

Their eyes held for a long moment.

Her smile softened, open to giving it a try.

He relaxed a little, excited to experience it with her.

A shrill scream, followed by the sound of something breaking, came from inside the Kringle Kitchen. Ben and Katie turned and raced for the diner. He entered first, with Katie on his heels.

As the door shut behind them, they both came to a full stop just inside and gasped.

You could've heard a pin drop in the Kringle Kitchen at that moment. All eyes were trained on the wooden floor at the entrance.

Shattered glass and water had splattered across the floor in front of Hannah. Chunks of the heavy wooden base were strewn too. An evergreen tree lay on its side next to the horse drawn carriage, as if there'd been a terrible traffic accident. Even the church had been flung off to the side, lying near the counter in a precarious position, its steeple off to the side.

Hannah stood there, frozen in place with her mouth hanging wide.

Nick stood just behind her with Carol, Ezra and Joe looking on, all in a state of shock.

David clutched his folder, tears in his eyes.

With her hands straight out to her sides, fingers splayed wide, Hannah slowly raised her head. "I was just trying to make a wish." She could barely get the words out.

Ben's muscles involuntarily tensed as he watched the woman process what had just happened.

On the floor, the town's most treasured holiday attraction, the snow globe, lay in a hundred messy pieces. Had the magical snow globe tradition just come to a tragic end?