The Twelve Wishes of Christmas RUBY BASU



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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Chapter 1

WELCOME TO PINEFORD

Sharmila Mitra stood in the bracing freshness of the winter air tracing her fingers along the words of the sign. Exhaustion after ten hours of travelling warred with the excitement and slight sense of unease she had ever since she found out she'd be spending Christmas in the quintessential small US town of Pineford.

'Are we going to take this photo or not?' her best friend, Penny, asked, waving her selfie stick.

Sharmila gave an exaggerated sigh. 'If we must.'

'We must,' Penny confirmed. 'Although whether I can get us both in the frame is a different question.'

'Perhaps you should squat a bit,' Sharmila replied, shaking her head. Good to know even a transatlantic flight hadn't affected Penny's ability to make a quip about their ten-inch height difference.

After several false tries, they finally snapped a shot they were both happy with.

Penny rummaged in her bag then pulled out a marker pen. 'Do you think we should increase the population by two?'

'I don't think staying here for less than a month qualifies,' Sharmila said, removing the marker from Penny's hand with a playful tug. 'The town is bound to welcome you with open arms as an honorary resident. Isn't that what happens in those romance movies you love?'

Sharmila gave her the side-eye. 'Or I'll be made into a skin suit. That happens in movies too.'

Penny wrapped her arm around Sharmila's shoulders, giving her a loving shake. 'That's the positive outlook I know and love.'

'I'm trying to be positive,' Sharmila said as they got back into the car. 'But it's strange. I guess I still don't believe this is really happening.'

'Why not?'

She shrugged. 'Things like this don't happen to people like me.'

'People like you? You're exactly the kind of person it should happen to. You deserve something good to happen after everything you've been through.' Penny squeezed Sharmila's shoulder. 'Who'd have thought that when you took pity on the lonely old man in your aunt's teashop, this would be the result? When was that? A year and a half ago?'

Sharmila inclined her head. Just like in the films she loved so much, a series of coincidences, or fate, had brought her to Pineford. To think, if she hadn't been helping out in her aunt's café while she was on a sabbatical, she never would have met Thomas Adams.

She wasn't even supposed to be working that day – she'd had plans to visit some nearby tourist attractions when her aunt called asking if Sharmila would cover for her in the café because of an emergency. It was only months later, she found out that it had also been a quirk of fate that Thomas had gone into the café that morning.

She could never explain what impulse led her to start talking to Thomas, particularly when, beyond taking meal orders and handling payment, she tended to avoid conversations with the café patrons. But something about his loneliness, his sorrow, and his distant expression spoke to her. He looked the way she felt. If it hadn't been July when they first met, she wouldn't have had her much-loved Christmas in July movies playing in the background. Then they would never have bonded over their holiday stories and she would never have told him her secret wish to experience a small-town American Christmas.

Earlier this year, Thomas had asked her to keep this December free. She'd been curious, of course, but he refused to give her any details, telling her it was a surprise. She didn't think she would be able to take time off, especially since she would have only been back at work at the law firm for a few months after her sabbatical. Then fate again intervened when an opportunity came up for her to transfer from her firm's Birmingham office to their London headquarters. She had enough time before starting at the new office to take a long holiday in December.

And now here she was, in Pineford. It was like living in a fairy tale. If only Thomas were there to experience it with her.

'Are you all right, hun?' Penny asked. 'You haven't said anything.'

'Yes, I'm OK.' She gave Penny a small, sad smile. 'I was thinking about Thomas. I really liked him. We got on so well so quickly. You know, I'd been really looking forward to seeing him last July when he was supposed to visit England again. It was really disappointing when he didn't come. If I'd known he was ill, that he was dying, I would have gone to see him instead. I miss him.' She gave herself a mental shake. That was enough. Giving in to her emotions wasn't going to help. 'But this gift he left me, this holiday. It's huge, more than I could ever imagine. It doesn't make sense.'

'Oh, come on, Sharms! I've told you before. Everyone wants to be adopted by your family for your mother's curries alone. Didn't you tell me Thomas wanted you to call him "mama" because he wanted to be an honorary uncle?'

Sharmila chuckled. 'Yeah, and of course Thomas knew "mama" refers to a maternal uncle so he managed to tease my dad at the

same time.' She gave one last glance at the sign before they drove off. She bit her lip. 'I can't believe I'm going to experience my first real Christmas this year. Like straight out of the movies.' She took a deep breath. 'Come on, Jeeves. Onwards to the inn!' she said, motioning to crack an imaginary whip.

If the old-style charm of Pineford Inn was any indication of the town, it was exactly right for her Christmas fantasy. The outside was picture perfect with its white-boarded façade and extensive wrap-around decking, with pillars interspersed between the balustrades. She spent so long taking photos and staring at the inn Penny had to drag her inside.

The reception area was a Christmas grotto. Sharmila's gaze went from the garlands festooned round the banister, to the mantelpiece, down to the logs already crackling in the fireplace. She tilted her head back following the height of the real fir tree as it almost reached the wooden ceiling beams in the lounge, red and green ornaments placed immaculately.

Exactly how she imagined it would be.

While they completed the check-in formalities, Sharmila and Penny were each offered a mug with a piece of cinnamon sticking out of it. She loved the welcoming touch; it suited the old-world atmosphere of the inn. She raised her mug and clinked it softly against Penny's. Almost in unison, they sniffed their drinks. She detected apple and spices. Could it be hot apple cider? She'd only tried the alcoholic version of cider before.

She took a sip, tasting the spices and notes of citrus. Perfect. This holiday was already getting off to a great start.

'Miss Mitra, Miss Calloway. I have your reservations right here. Two rooms booked for three nights, checking out on Monday morning.'

Sharmila cast wide eyes at Penny, her heart sinking at the news. Of course, it was too good to be true. She took a deep breath, then turned back to talk to the desk clerk. 'Is the booking only for three nights? My understanding was we'd be staying here for

the duration of our visit - until the twenty-eighth.'

The clerk frowned as she stared at her computer screen. 'I'm sorry. The computer's showing a Monday checkout but let me go speak to someone. I won't be a moment.' She went into the back office.

'Don't you dare!' Penny warned when Sharmila's shoulders slumped.

'What?'

'I know how your mind works. You're thinking you knew this was too good to be true.'

Sharmila lips quirked slightly, despite her panic, at how well her friend knew her. 'Well, can you blame me? When there's a problem as soon as we arrive?'

'You have to be positive. The world isn't as bleak as you think it is. It'll all be fine, you'll see.'

'Well, sorry if that hasn't been my experience so far.' She closed her eyes briefly. Her words had come out much sharper than she intended. The last thing she wanted to do was alienate Penny.

Sharmila may have passed on the chance to come to Pineford if it weren't for Penny, preferring in recent years to stay firmly inside her comfort zone. But Penny had encouraged her to seize the opportunity, and say yes to the trip, even offering to join her without a moment's hesitation. Penny's presence meant everything to her.

Without Penny's optimistic outlook on life over the last few years, Sharmila wouldn't have been able to handle her grief. She looked up at Penny, expecting to see hurt or even anger in her friend's expression but all she saw was love and compassion.

'I'm sorry, Pen,' she said, reaching out to hug her.

'It's OK, Sharms. You know I understand,' Penny said, returning her hug. 'After losing Hari suddenly and now Thomas. You've dealt with a lot. But you have to stay positive. Thomas wanted you to stay in Pineford until the end of the month. I'm sure everything's been arranged. Do you have the email from the lawyer? Why don't you check what it said?'

'Oh yes.' She dug into her carry-on, pulling out a folder.

Penny chuckled. 'I can't believe you're still printing off emails and boarding tickets.'

'Got to have contingencies,' Sharmila mumbled as she rifled through the folder. 'What would happen if the network went down or there was no Wi-Fi or I broke my phone? You'd be sorry you made fun of me then. Ah, here we are.' She read through the email. 'Actually, it doesn't specifically say we're staying at the inn the entire holiday, only that rooms have been booked here for our arrival.'

'See, I'm sure there's nothing to worry about then.'

Before Sharmila could say anything, a woman with a warm smile and hideous Christmas jumper, probably in her late forties, came out of the office.

'Welcome, welcome. I'm Jill, Jill Ford. My husband, Graham, and I own Pineford Inn. We've been looking forward to your arrival. It's a pity Graham isn't here to meet you. He's somewhere setting up for tonight but I'll introduce you soon. Anyway, what was I saying? Oh yes, we're pleased to have you both staying with us. I'm sorry there's been some confusion about your booking but we only have you staying here until Monday. But I knew your booking was arranged on behalf of Thomas Adams. He stayed at the inn when he visited last year, you know. Such a lovely man, may he rest in peace. Anyway, I had a moment of genius and checked against his name and I found a note that Mr Bell, our local attorney, wants to meet with you. I'm sure he'll be able to clear up everything. Of course, if there's been a mistake, we'll do everything we can to sort out a room for you. Although, we are booked up for the season. But you're probably going to worry until you know what's going on, so let's see what I can do.' She glanced at her watch. 'If you're not too tired, I can contact Mr Bell now and ask him to meet you here?

His office is in town, but it can be difficult to find if you don't know your way around. If he can't come here one of us can drive you in, I'm sure. In the meantime, here's a brochure for Pineford's WinterFest. We have hundreds of Christmas activities. You've come at the perfect time. We're having the tree-lighting ceremony tomorrow. That's our first big event.' She handed Sharmila the brochure and, with a broad smile, walked back into the office.

Sharmila blinked rapidly trying to absorb all the information. Warm-hearted, larger-than-life personalities weren't just a movie stereotype, at least not in Pineford anyway.

'It appears there's no room at the inn,' she observed to Penny as they went to sit on a couch by the fire.

'I'm sure they have a stable if you need it, though I suspect Jill Ford would give up her room if you don't have somewhere to stay,' Penny teased. 'I bet it won't come to that and Mr Bell will have all the answers.'

Sharmila nodded. To pass the time while she waited for Mr Bell to arrive, she read the lengthy list of activities for WinterFest. Pineford pulled out all the stops for the season. Some of the events were straight out of her dream Christmas.

Within an hour, she was sitting in a small private office at the inn opposite Thomas's attorney, waiting while he read through some files to remind himself of the details of Thomas's legacy. She folded and unfolded the hem of her sweater, knocked some imaginary dust off the knee of her trousers, then clasped her hands in her lap. Why was she so nervous? She'd faced lawyers and judges regularly in the past. And Mr Bell wasn't even adversarial.

But this would be the defining moment – when she found out whether Thomas's gift was real. When she had first heard the news, she was convinced there'd been a mistake. Why would he leave this holiday in Pineford to her? And what did his family think about it? How much did they know about her?

She still couldn't believe Thomas was making her fantastical dream come true. She'd turned her back on many more realistic dreams – mainly plans and hopes for the future – especially in the last few years. It was surreal that it was this whimsical wish to experience a true small-town American Christmas that was being granted.

Mr Bell cleared his throat, bringing her attention back to him. As he went through the bequest, Sharmila leaned forward.

'All right, let me check I've got this right,' she said. 'I'll be staying at Thomas's house while I'm here?'

'That's correct.'

'I thought his family was forced to sell Holly House years ago when he was a teenager.'

'That's also correct. Mr Adams repurchased it last Christmas. It's been vacant ever since. Don't worry, it's been cared for during that time. Lucas Healy, Mr Adams's nephew, has been taking care of upkeep since Mr Adams passed away. He's visiting Pineford for the holidays and, I believe, has just arrived in town, so you may want to meet him at some point. He's staying at this inn too.'

'Then shouldn't he stay at the house?'

'No. The terms of Mr Adams's will are clear. You are to stay at the property throughout December. Mr Healy knows about this and he doesn't have a problem, but he has asked for some maintenance to be carried out while you're there. It would be external work. It shouldn't interfere with your stay, though.'

'Well, of course, it's his property,' she replied, confused when he gave her a shifty look and cleared his throat.

'Finally, Mr Adams expressed a wish that you complete this list of activities while you're here.' He handed her an envelope. 'He called it your Christmas Wishlist.'

Sharmila chuckled. It sounded just like something Thomas would do. 'I can't believe he went to all this trouble.'

'Indeed. The terms of the gift state if you remain in Pineford until after Christmas Day and complete all the items on this list by the end of the year, then a sizeable donation will be made to a charity of your choosing.'

'Sizeable?' She paled when he told her the amount. She cleared her throat. 'OK. I guess that's an incentive.'

The matter of Thomas's wealth had never crossed her mind before; it was irrelevant. But thinking about it now, how else would he have been able to travel to the UK and also fly to India twice in the time she had known him. With the amazing holiday and hefty donation to charity, she realised there was more to Thomas than the slightly eccentric old American she knew.

'Miss Mitra, there are a few conditions I need to tell you about. You are free to talk about the wish list with other people. However, I'm afraid there's a provision that you must keep this potential donation a secret, otherwise you forfeit it.' There was the barest of movement on the attorney's lips.

'But why? That's strange. Why would Thomas want me to keep it a secret?'

Mr Bell was finding it harder to keep a straight face. 'My instructions are this condition has been included because that's what happens in the movies.'

Sharmila slumped back in the armchair and laughed. The first real laugh she'd had in ages. Who could have imagined Thomas mama would turn out to be Santa Claus and her fairy godfather wrapped up in one?

Mr Bell left a few minutes later. She could wait until she was in the privacy of her room to read the letter, but she was alone in the office now and too excited about Thomas's wish list for her.

She opened the envelope, pulling out a sheet of paper. She recognised his handwriting straight away. They'd kept in touch through letters in the post rather than email, which he'd considered a necessary evil for business purposes, and only then, when a phone call wasn't possible. Handwritten letters also appealed to Thomas's sense of whimsy and he'd always been proud of his penmanship.

She started reading the first page.

My dear Sharmila,

I've never been a man of many words so don't worry, this won't be a long letter.

Apart from the first day they met, she would never have described Thomas as a man of few words. Whenever he spent time with her family, particularly her dad, it was always a matter of trying to find a gap in the conversation if she or her mother wanted to speak. She carried on reading.

I never thought, in visiting England again after so long, that fate would have led me to your aunt's café, and it would be the beginning of a whole new adventure for me. Traveling to India for Durga Puja and Holi and learning about your culture and traditions were highlights of my life but getting to know you and your family was one of my greatest blessings. You all opened your hearts and your home to a lonely, slightly cranky old man and welcomed me into your family as an honorary Mitra.

You have given me so much, I wanted to give you something in return—a chance for you to spend Christmas in a small town doing all the festive activities we talked about as we watched your Christmas romance movies.

I wish I could be with you as you experience the American Christmas you have longed for. I wish I was there to share my memories of Pineford with you. Even though I won't be with you in matter, I'll always be with you in spirit. (See how I used what your parents taught me about Hinduism!)

Sharmila half-laughed, half-sobbed as she read Thomas's words. It was so typical of him to inject humour into his poignant message.

But I don't want this to make you sad; Christmas should be a time for joy. So to help you get into the true spirit of an American Christmas, I have ten wishes for you to fulfill.

I hope you have fun with these wishes. You, Sharmila Mitra, are a very special person who deserves all the happiness in the world.

Much love, Thomas mama

Sharmila took a couple of shaky breaths, determined not to be sad since Thomas didn't want that. She turned over the sheet. It was a list titled '*Ten wishes for Christmas in Pineford*'.

Wish 1 Enter and complete the Puzzle and Pie Contest

Wish 2 Build a snowman in the Snowdreams Competition

Wish 3 Enter the Festive Dessert Competition

Wish 4 Enter the Gingerbread House Competition

She snorted. She could guess why Thomas had chosen these particular wishes. Most of them were quintessential seasonal activities. And they should be easy enough to do – she'd seen each of them on the brochure for Pineford WinterFest.

Wish 5 Take part in the Pineford Christmas Spectacular Parade

She rubbed her chin. Did that mean she had to actually be in the parade, like on one of the floats? How would she even go about taking part in Pineford's parade? Perhaps Jill could point her in the right direction.

Wish 6 Go ice skating on an open-air rink Wish 7 Drink eggnog by an open fire Eggnog? She grimaced. Thomas had laughed when she asked why anyone would want to drink cold custard. Now, she was going to find out.

Wish 8 Host a Christmas party

A party! Her stomach churned at the prospect of getting to know people well enough to ask them to a party. But it was Thomas's wish, so she would have to find a way.

Wish 9 Pick out and cut down your Christmas tree

She took a deep breath, holding back tears. Thomas knew how much fulfilling this wish meant to her.

Wish 10 Recreate the final scene from a Christmas movie

She rolled her eyes. Thomas was a crafty old man. He probably expected her to pick one of the romantic films – the kind they'd bonded over. He was such an old romantic at heart. But those films were about falling in love. Love and romance were the furthest things from her mind. The only difficulty in completing this wish would be finding a scene that only had one or, at most, two characters so she could do it with Penny. She was *not* going to embarrass herself by asking other people for help with this one. She made a mental note to check the ending of *Die Hard*.

She finished reading the letter and folded the sheet of paper, putting it back in the envelope and pressing it briefly to her heart before she wiped away her tears.

Ten wishes, three weeks, and a whole lot of Christmas spirit to look forward to.