

THE HOLLY & THE IVY

READING SCRIPT

Pg 1 of 11

I'm Brenda Collins Deeks and I write light paranormal and cozy mysteries as BC Deeks. This isn't a typical author reading, for those who are familiar with them. It's an afternoon tea with a theme around family holiday traditions. The library asked me to talk to you about how I wove family traditions into a holiday-themed novel that I wrote, entitled, *The HOLLY AND THE IVY*.

It's about a female police officer named Joey Frost, who has lived in the fictitious town of Carol Falls, Vermont her entire life. In the lead up to Christmas, there's an unexplained upswing in civil disobedience around town just as she's angling a job promotion.

Did I mention this is a holiday themed story? Well, I might have gotten a bit carried away with the Christmas references. Did you notice the name of the town? And the heroine? And then there's the mystery - an infant is left in the manger of the town's nativity scene. In fact, it might be entertaining to go through the book to see how many of the thematic word plays you can find - some of them are really well hidden!

Anyway, it's a lot of fun to write a holiday themed book. You get to close your eyes, imagine those sugar plums, listen for the jingle of bells... and start typing.

My heroine, Joey Frost, is from one of well established families in the community. The current Frosts are the third generation to live in the ancestral home and operate their successful maple syrup operation.

The light posts up ahead marked the entrance gate leading to The Frost's traditional white farmhouse. Joey was out of time to question the kids unless she pulled over. She could hear Fletch, as if he were sitting beside her. 'Joey, you're just doing what's expedient. There's no reason you have to ask them now. Why can't you wait until their parents are present? Why can't you wait until your partner is present?' When she didn't have a good answer, she knew he was right. She pressed down on the gas pedal and drove through the gate. Who needs a conscience when you have Noel Fletcher in your head?

Frost farm was dressed up like a dollhouse. Nets of colored lights were draped over the snow-covered lilac shrubs running up both sides of the lane. The sheltering

THE HOLLY & THE IVY

READING SCRIPT

Pg 2 of 11

evergreen trees on either side of the house, and the entire front porch, were outlined with Christmas lights, and the final touch was a magnificent wreath on the oak door beckoning them to come on in. Just the sight of it boosted Joey's mood and put a little spring in her step. Sammy took Ivy's hand and led her up to the front door like he lived there, but stopped short of letting himself in. They stood admiring the big wreath of evergreen boughs, tied in a red velvet bow, until Joey reached over his shoulder and pushed open the front door.

Christmas music immediately assailed them as they stamped their feet on the deck of the veranda before stepping into the warmth of the inner foyer.

Just beyond the foyer a wide staircase, wrapped in garlands and ribbons, led up to the bedrooms, bathrooms, and what used to be their playroom but was now the media room. In the living room across the hall, a fire roared in the large stone hearth, with candles and thick fresh boughs draped across the mantle. The Christmas tree, a lush Fraser Fir, was fully dressed with a mishmash of decorations, many made by childish hands using construction paper, glue sticks, sparkles, markers and, in one case, a guitar string—an inspired design by her brother, Jimmy. Streams of silver tinsel danced around twinkling mini lights on every branch. To Ivy Belmont, it must seem like they'd stumbled into Santa's castle at the North Pole. These were all things Joey took for granted.

But even in a Christmas book, there has to be conflict or there would be no story at all. Think about it - even Rudolph was being bullied by the other reindeer at first - until he triumphed and became the most famous reindeer of all.

It's easy to forget that the holidays can put incredible pressure on some families, especially those who are already struggling.

That's what I wanted to address in my story. I introduced another family named the Belmonts; a husband and wife with five children, from toddlers to a teen. Mr. Belmont lost his job in the last municipal budget cut and he isn't handling it well.

In the background, Taylor picked up a call, listened, and then told the caller an officer would be there in a few minutes.

THE HOLLY & THE IVY

READING SCRIPT

Pg 3 of 11

He still hadn't moved to get out of her way, so she called out, "I'll take it, Taylor. Where to?" Might as well, since she was at work anyway, and it would get her away from Fletch without looking like she was running away. "Billy Boy's. A drunk and disorderly."

Not a call she'd be anxious to grab under normal circumstances but this wasn't a normal day. "On it," she said, ducking under Fletch's arm.

"Not without me, partner," Fletch said, brushing her shoulder as he reached past her to grab his jacket.

"I'm driving," she said, her voice sounding weaker than she'd intended.

Fletch smiled. "Okay. I'll take shotgun."

Their destination was around the corner and two blocks down from the police station. Even though it was close by, carrying a drunk wasn't an option. It was a long three-minute drive, made in silence.

Billy Boy's Bar was not meant for tourists. It was a serious drinking establishment where the local men could have a brew, eyeball nearly naked waitresses, play some pool, and not worry about how many F words they used in a single sentence. Twinkling fairy lights in the street side windows were barely visible through the grime on the glass and the plain wreaths hanging in each pane were more for hiding the patrons from prying eyes than providing any holiday atmosphere.*

As they pulled to the curb, she recognized Sammy Lincoln, the mayor's son, standing on the sidewalk. Nearby, a slender young girl in an oversized parka was arguing with the bouncer at the door of the establishment. Stuffing her hands in her pocket, Joey stepped in front of her new partner as she approached the trio. She could hear the girl's voice rising.

"But I just want to take him home before he gets into any trouble."

The bouncer, who Joey knew as Zack, looked over at their approach. "Too late for that, doll."

THE HOLLY & THE IVY

READING SCRIPT

Pg 4 of 11

The girl turned and her already pale face lost the last stain of color. Joey recognized her from the high school. Ivy Belmont lived down near the gas station a block or two east of the bar. A good girl. Her mother cleaned houses for a living, the Frost farm included.

Obviously, this is a tough home situation a young teen to deal with at any time for, especially over the holidays. You can imagine that Belmont house isn't dressed up for the holidays in quite the same way.

Joey glanced at the Belmonts' Christmas tree. It was covered in an odd assortment of ornaments made from kids' craft supplies, and underneath were packages marked FROM SANTA, wrapped with bright foil paper, sealed with tape bearing a discreet Frost Farm logo. On every one was a big red tag stencilled with a child's name. Joey closed her eyes and sent a silent blessing to Verna and Ivy's caring creativity, and her own parents for their Christmas Basket program. Without it, there wouldn't be anything under the tree for the Belmont children this year. At the top of the tree, she noticed the worn-out star was blinking erratically, looking like it would go out any moment, like Sammy's young life might if they didn't find him quickly. Joey blinked back tears. She had to focus on the more immediate crisis.

Oliver Belmont was not sober when he answered the door, but had not completely disappeared into the bottle yet, either. He stared at them with rheumy eyes, almost as if he were expecting them.

Fletch took the lead. "Mr. Belmont, we need you to come with us to answer some questions regarding an incident this morning. Is there someone else in the house to look after the children?" It didn't look like Verna had come directly home when she left the Lincolns' home, which made their job easier, but it also posed a problem. Fletch hoped the older man had child care alternatives.

Fortunately, Belmont was sober enough to remember.

"Neighbor'll take 'em 'til the wife gets back."

"That's Mrs. White, isn't it?" Joey asked.

THE HOLLY & THE IVY

READING SCRIPT

Pg 5 of 11

When Belmont nodded, Joey appealed to Fletch with her eyes. She flicked her gaze down the hall behind Belmont, where the seven- and nine year old kids stood watching and listening, their solemn little faces pale but dry eyed.

His heart shrank a size in his chest. Crap, she was leaving him to deal with the kids. Was this revenge? No, she cared too much about her people to do anything other than what she thought was best for them. What was she trying to do?

“Why don’t I run over and see if she’s home while Mr. Belmont gets his coat and lets his kids know when their mother will be home?” Joey said, pointedly and caught Fletch’s eye.

He gave her a slow nod. Message received and acknowledged. These kids needed some reassurance from their father that they weren’t being abandoned, that their mother was coming home soon. They needed to hear it from their parent. They needed to believe that their world was still safe and secure—even if it wasn’t the truth. He saw some of the tension bleed out of her before she turned away from him and headed next door.

The kids gathered in the living room as their father explained he was leaving. To Fletch’s surprise, Belmont’s tone was gentle and he hugged each one, reassuring them there was no need to worry. To give them some semblance of privacy, Fletch assessed the room. The Christmas tree was dressed with the paper snowflakes he’d seen the kids working on during his last visit, and there was wrapping paper, tape and scissors on the floor. But there didn’t seem to be any presents under the tree.

He felt a small finger poke into his thigh. It was one of Belmont’s youngest boys, his eyes pooling with unshed tears. “Will you make sure Santa knows where to find Daddy this Christmas?”

Fletch had never taken a punch to the stomach as powerful as that child’s words. He had no answer. The elderly Mrs. White saved him when she bustled into the living room. She had Christmas shortbread in a tin and sent the kids down the hall to the kitchen to wash their hands and wait for her at the table. She reassured Joey that the children would be fine in her care until Verna Belmont got home—they were well behaved, and the

THE HOLLY & THE IVY

READING SCRIPT

Pg 6 of 11

older ones tended to the younger ones quite well, she told them. Joey left her cell phone number in case any problems arose.

Once the kids were out of the room, Belmont wasn't as cooperative, but Joey convinced him it wouldn't take long to get the paperwork out of the way so he could return home. Fletch thought they were lucky to arrive before the man was fully in the bag or the situation may have turned nasty. Finally, with Belmont in the back seat, Fletch took the wheel. Joey turned away from him again to gaze out the window. The sun was bouncing off the snow and the street was decorated for the holidays, but Fletch had left his heart in the sad little bungalow at the end of Spruce Street.

You can see where I drew on traditions that I know from living in places like Cochrane, or the small city where I grew up. The community comes together to help the less fortunate with a Christmas Hamper, and you just know our heroine is going to get more involved than she should. Let's see what happens next;

In the background, Taylor picked up a call, listened, and then told the caller an officer would be there in a few minutes.

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THE HOLLY & THE IVY

READING SCRIPT

Pg 7 of 11

“But I just want to take him home before he gets into any trouble.”

The bouncer, who Joey knew as Zack, looked over at their approach. “Too late for that, doll.”

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Sammy, who’d been turned away from them, swung around and, seeing Joey, stepped in front of the girl like a bodyguard. He lived on Maple Farm Road not far from Joey’s parents’ farm. She’d known him most of his life, babysat him for years.

“Hi, Sammy. Hi, Ivy,” Joey said. She could feel Fletch’s presence behind her. It was distracting, not being able to read his face, to guess what he was thinking. It could take months to years for two officers to develop a smooth, well-coordinated partnership. The first day was bound to be uncomfortable, Joey told herself, but she didn’t believe it. Fletch was her supervisor, so it would definitely take longer, or never happen. She had to hope the chief meant for theirs to be a short term relationship.

Ivy stepped out from behind the boy and stood tall with her hands on her hips.

Joey wasn’t fooled by the brave front. “Why don’t you head home now, Ivy. Let us take care of your father for you.”

The girl pushed her chin out. “He doesn’t mean to cause trouble. He hasn’t been himself since he lost his job.”

“Ivy, your father’s problem is a bit bigger than that,” Joey replied.

“No. He was fine until the town council made all those funding cuts and he lost his job and his benefits, and his pension . . .” Her voice hitched so she pressed her lips together. So strong for a sixteen year old.

Sammy’s face flushed. “My dad’s an idiot. He doesn’t get that his decisions hurt other people.”

THE HOLLY & THE IVY

READING SCRIPT

Pg 8 of 11

Joey wished there was some way she could fix what was happening to these two kids, already caught up in adult problems. “The mayor doesn’t always get to make the decisions he’d like to personally, Sam. He has to consider what’s best for the whole town, now and in the future. It gets really complicated.”

Sammy wasn’t interested in any excuses and crossed his arms over his chest.

Joey heaved a sigh. Nothing to do but focus on the issue at hand. She flicked a glance at Fletch, standing a few feet behind her, to see how he was reacting to the situation. She wasn’t clear about their reporting relationship in the field. Was he still her supervisor? Partner? Only an observer? He wasn’t giving her any signals so she decided to ignore him.

“Christmas is a tough time of year, Ivy. You go on and we’ll bring him home to you safe and sound.”

“Give me your word of honor.” Ivy’s voice was tough, demanding, but she pinched her lips together tightly to steady the tremor.

“I promise, Ivy.” Joey replied. “Sammy, could you please see her home safely?”

Once they were out of earshot, Fletch finally spoke up. “You shouldn’t make promises you can’t keep.”

“I don’t. I’m going to keep this one.” Then she took a breath. A new partner wouldn’t be questioning her judgement on their first call together. He was acting like her superior.

“Christmas is hard for lots of folks, but that doesn’t give him the right to cause trouble for other citizens,” he replied.

Irritation sizzled at the back of her tongue but she controlled it. “In our town—for a father of five kids—we cut him some slack and help him through the rough times.”

Zack, who’d been standing by, nodded his agreement and held the door open for them. “Sorry to bother you officers, but we were afraid Mayor Lincoln might show up for his weekly pool game.”

THE HOLLY & THE IVY

READING SCRIPT

Pg 9 of 11

“Thanks, Zack.”

“Huh?” Fletch gave her a puzzled look. As an outsider, he wouldn’t get the connections between the mayor and their Drunk & Disorderly.

“Our mayor hobnobs with his constituents at this end of town over a beer and a game of pool every week around this time.”

So getting back to the traditions;

In the book, I touch on the traditions that the town itself has such as repeated events like a tree lighting that the whole town attends, and a festival that is called Frosty Frolics, which is when the baby shows up.

And I drilled down more specifically into Family Traditions – that some are important to maintain, and some can be changed to reflect evolving needs.

Remember I said, the Frosts go back several generations? Imagine what tradition means to them.

***Tradition** was a huge part of Frost family life. Yet, tonight, when Joey told her mother what she wanted to do for Christmas dinner the next day, Sylvia had said it was time they introduced a few new traditions and had given her a hug.*

The Frost household was a model of New England rural life. Harold Frost was head of the household, except when it came to the holiday festivities. It would not have occurred to him that Sylvia would do anything except carry on the Frost Family traditions, as his mother had before her. And, for almost forty years, his wife had filled the family home with holiday cheer. She made sure the lights were hung outside the farmhouse and the wreaths, on every window. She strung garlands up the staircase and over the mantle. She placed candles and candy dishes on every tabletop, made sure the silverware and crystal sparkled, the tree was dressed and appropriate presents were under it.

Yet, when Joey asked to change their traditional Frost family Christmas celebration scheduled for the very next day, her amazing mother had agreed without hesitation. Now that she’d set things in motion, it was her daughter who wasn’t sure how

THE HOLLY & THE IVY

READING SCRIPT

Pg 10 of 11

she felt about letting go of the old way of celebrating the holiday. The trappings of the season she'd so taken for granted. Would her older brothers be upset with her? What would her father say? When the family gathered around the dining room table every year for the Christmas feast, Harold Frost would take his place at the head, raise his glass of wine, and toast their blessings and those of past generations. Everyone would hold up their glass and solemnly repeat, 'God bless us every one'. When Joey and her brothers were small, they thought they were so grown up to be included in the toast. It was only much later that they discovered their mother had filled their glasses with grape juice—white to protect the table cloth. It was typical of her mother, though, not to leave anyone out, even the youngest.

By the very end of the story, lets see where our heroine lands on the question of tradition.

Joey had to wonder if they'd somehow stumbled onto the true meaning of Christmas, or had some little angel nudged them onto the right path.

Harold and Sylvia sat at either end of the table, happy to be sharing another holiday meal with multiple generations of their brood. Joey hadn't had a chance to ask her mother how her father had taken the changes to the traditional Frost family Christmas.

Harold Frost stood with a glass in hand. Nerves twitching, Joey followed his gaze around their holiday table trying to gauge his mood. He smiled at her two brothers; Garret with his new fiancée, and then at Jimmy and his wife of only a week. From the stern look he gave Fletch, Joey thought her man would be receiving a serious talk before the end of the night—there was inherent risk in taking up with the only Frost daughter.

She finally relaxed completely when she saw the warm smile her father sent to the Belmonts and the Lincolns. She had done the right thing...just as her parents had taught her to do.

Her father cleared his throat. "This home provides safe shelter to our children, their wives and loved ones, as well as to the generations to follow and to those that have passed. We are ever thankful for the food on our table and the many blessings we have received through the year. We welcome our neighbors and friends, and their beautiful

THE HOLLY & THE IVY

READING SCRIPT

Pg 11 of 11

children, and wish them joy, peace and happiness in the year ahead, confident in the knowledge that they have the caring support of their community.”

He raised his glass to deliver the traditional Frost family holiday toast. He paused and in that moment, Sylvia reassured Verna, as one of her boys emptied his glass in one gulp. “He’s fine. It’s just white grape juice.”

Amid the laughter, everyone down to the smallest child, lifted their glass and solemnly said, “God bless us every one.”

As you can see, The Holly and the Ivy is a story within a story. There's the cozy mystery - that I've very skillfully avoided telling you about so you'd still have to read the book - and there's the story of Christmas which is about Family and Community and how one can't exist without the other. And, since this is a Christmas story, I will tell you that everyone lives happily ever after – more or less.