

TINSEL AND TEACUPS BY ELLE RUSH

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Chapter 1

That no-good, treasure-stealing antique hunter was already here.

She could smell it.

What Rachel Best actually smelled was the combination of a woodsy aftershave and leather with a hint of dust, but she knew what that meant. Owen Daye was already at the Christmas craft and antique sale, swooping in and snatching up the best finds of the day.

She'd travelled far and wide over the last few months, but as usual, the biggest sale of them all was at the River Street Community Center in her hometown of Holiday Beach. People flocked from all over northern Minnesota for the best Christmas present buying opportunities in the county. They filled the parking lot, laughing as they tromped through ankle-high drifts. In another month, they'd be grumbling about having to shovel the same snow, but right now, winter was fresh on the scene, and the Christmas decorations on every building sparked holiday cheer in everyone who saw them.

Rachel would appreciate the scenery on another day. Her flat tire meant that her archrival had thirty extra minutes to scout the deals. But she wouldn't let that setback defeat her. She was a woman on a mission.

The last antique sale of the season was always hit or miss. Some people slapped an antique label on all the old junk they'd found over the spring and summer as they'd cleaned out garages and cottages. It was the others she came for, the ones who catered to real antique buyers. Rachel might get lucky at a table from the first group, but like Owen, she needed an authentic dealer.

She had to go by instinct when she shopped, but Owen was a professional, which gave him a slight edge. She'd begrudgingly admit that he actually knew his stuff. He'd taken over his grandfather's business in Holiday Beach over the summer, and was at the community center to buy furniture, vintage clothes, and knickknacks for Golden Daye Antiques. He was welcome to it all, with one exception.

Teacups.

Yes, she owned a coffee shop. The best coffee shop in Holiday Beach, in her mostly unbiased opinion. By the Cup served caffeinated creations in custom-made maroon mugs with granite gray interiors so she had no need for the teacups for her business. She was on a hunt for fine bone china for totally altruistic reasons, and to make sure she got the best of the best the sale had to offer, she needed to beat Owen to the punch.

Rachel quickly glanced around the hall and saw several tables filled with possibilities on either side of the room. She let herself get caught in the flow of bargain seekers and drifted down the first row. A stand filled with colorful Pyrex cookware caught her eye, but she forced herself to move past it without slowing. She hesitated beside a collection of glass cases filled with vintage paste jewelry that was calling her name, but she steeled her resolve and kept going.

There! On the last table before the double-wide homemade fudge and nuts booth on the corner. She saw some Old Country Roses fruit cups on a shelf, and a Spode Blue Italian platter on display. There was bound to be an odd teacup and saucer in the mix. Most people needed to pick up a replacement piece to a certain pattern to complete a set, but Rachel wanted the odd, unmatched ones because they were notable. Memorable.

She saw a Lenox Holiday teacup at the far end of the table. *Perfect*. The creamy cup with delicate sprigs of mistletoe cried out for her to buy it. She skirted the woman with a double stroller, went wide around the man carrying a six-foot-tall wooden giraffe, and ducked back into the table. And somehow, in those three seconds, her prize had vanished. She saw it floating above the table, attached to a hand attached to an arm in the sleeve of a leather jacket she recognized. “Owen,” she growled.

“Good morning, Rachel.” He sounded friendly, but the twinkle in his green eyes had a sparkle that was mocking her. He had to look down at her because he was so much taller, which only annoyed her more. “What are you doing here?”

“Not buying that Holiday teacup, apparently.”

“You’ve got to be fast in the antiques game.”

“Did you leave any teacups behind for the rest of us?” It was a game they’d been playing at every antique show throughout the summer and fall. Unfortunately, she’d come up the loser more often than not.

“Probably as many as you left for me at the sale in Bixby last month. Vintage china is a rough business. This beauty’s a real find, isn’t it?” Owen beamed. “We can’t keep stuff like this

in stock. This particular piece is going to finish a place setting I have back at the store. Do you collect this pattern?"

"Not specifically," she admitted.

"How about the Spode?" he asked, pointing at the platter.

"Not a chance."

He handed the cup and saucer to the vendor, then lifted the huge platter to inspect it more closely. "This place has been a goldmine today." He pointed over his shoulder. "I cleaned out a stall back there. They had a Botanical Gardens sugar and creamer pair. I also got three of their lead crystal snifter sets, and two Rolling Stones albums." He turned the platter over and checked the stamp on the bottom. "I'll take this too," he said.

"We had quite the selection of vinyl last year, but we decided that china was more profitable and sold it all off in the spring. But I'm glad to see that Golden Daye Antiques is keeping a broad variety of stock for the store. You are Goldie's grandson, aren't you?" The woman didn't wait for an answer. "He's such a dear. I was pleased to hear he's on the mend." Without taking a breath, she continued. "This sale is a great start to my morning. Can I interest you in anything else?" she asked as she reached behind the table for a large sheet of bubble wrap.

Rachel watched the vendor hand over a large paper bag with the wrapped cup, saucer and platter in it. When Owen added it to the three other bags he was already holding, an idea began to form. If the vendor was feeling chatty, she could slow down Rachel's competition for a while. "Actually, my good friend is Goldie's grandson, and he's desperately on the lookout for other one-of-a-kind pieces. He'd like to hear about everything you have." She winked at the woman while slapping him on the shoulder. "I'll bet you find all sorts of treasures here, Owen. I'm going to check out the far wall while you shop here and take a trip back to your car to drop off all your goodies. Don't worry, I'll leave one or two teacups for you. Maybe."

She dodged shoppers as she strode through the aisles, wearing a triumphant grin. With Owen tied up, she gave herself a few extra seconds at each table, her eyes peeled for her next find. Unfortunately, her cunning plan didn't work as well as she'd hoped. Soup bowls, candy dishes, and teapots abounded, but the prize she was after was elusive. Didn't the vendors know she had a deadline? "My kingdom for a decent teacup," she muttered to herself when all she found was yet another floral-patterned cup that she'd seen a hundred times already.

Finally, in the middle of the last row, she found something worthy of her attention. A current of air came from behind her. “Forget it, Owen. I’m calling dibs on the butterfly,” she said in warning.

His soft chuckle was right in her ear. “Are you sure you want that old thing?”

“Definitely.” She squeezed past the tall woman looking at a ceramic cow creamer, then carefully picked up the cup and saucer. Rachel had seen pictures of butterfly teacups before, where a delicate butterfly took the place of a handle. This one was spring pink with a monarch handle, and the saucer was fluted like flower-petals in a matching pink with gold trim. If it was the only thing that she purchased today, it would be worth the trip. She didn’t see any chips or cracks, so she carefully set the cup back on the saucer. “How much are you asking?”

The answer made her swallow hard. But it was such a good piece she couldn’t walk away. Not when Owen would snap it up the second that she put it down. “I’ll take it.”

“Great find, Rachel. You’ll be happy with that,” he said. He had some nerve, being a good sport about losing out on such a treasure.

“Thanks.”

The truth was that although she was happy with it, she wouldn’t be happy with it for long. That was the whole point. That teacup and eleven other unique ones like it were only going to be in her hands for another month. Then she was going to pass them on to others who wanted them, or just wanted to do a good deed in the spirit of Christmas.

In the four years she’d owned By the Cup, Rachel had been fortunate enough to do a booming business in the summer. Holiday Beach, Minnesota, was a vacation destination that specialized in going all out for the holidays. From Memorial Day to Labor Day, the town was full of campers and tourists. Their Independence Day celebrations lasted for an entire week.

For the other nine months of the year, she stayed afloat thanks to the town’s year-round residents and visitors who came in for the various special events on the calendar. But like in many resort towns, the off-season lasted much too long compared to what people had saved while things were good. In the spirit of community and giving, Rachel had decided to do what she could to help.

Throughout the year, she collected rare, memorable, or outright wacky teacups from antique sales around the state. Then, in December, she displayed them around the coffee shop and let people bid on them in a silent auction. The winning bid got to take home the cup filled

with their beverage of choice. Her Cup of Cheer fundraiser was a small one, but the donation she made to the food bank ensured a few local families got through the long winter better than they otherwise would have.

For the first three years, Goldie Daye had been her partner in crime. Owen's grandfather had set aside a few teacups that he acquired here and there and sold them to her at cost so she could have some exciting options for people to admire and compete for. Sadly, since a bad fall had sent him into semi-retirement in the summer, Rachel hadn't been able to visit him. She'd approached Owen, who had taken over the store, to see if he was interested in partnering with her for the event, but he hadn't responded to any of her messages. She'd given him a pass for the first few months, letting him get settled in a new house, town, and job, but after he'd ignored her the last time, she let that idea go and decided to move ahead on her own.

This butterfly teacup was number eleven. She needed one more, and she'd finally be done. But the tables had turned against her again. Owen was empty-handed and able to move easily through the crowd, while she was laden with packages. She'd only purchased the one teacup, but when she'd seen an entire section of hardboiled detective paperbacks on a table of used books, she'd loaded up and bought two grocery bags full.

Rachel didn't expect to find anything else, not with only a dozen booths left to investigate. One of them held shoebox after shoebox of sports and gaming cards. Another table was full of military memorabilia. The colorful one beside it held stacks of crocheted baby clothes and piles of knit caps.

And then, at the table she would have seen first if she had turned right instead of left when she first walked through the doors, she saw it.

It called to her, shining like a beacon of all that was beautiful and right in the world.

A Prairie Pioneer cup and saucer.

Right there. In Holiday Beach. Like it wasn't an extraordinary event that needed an announcement trumpeted around the entire town and a private spotlight to shine on its glory.

Rachel froze in the middle of the aisle, auction forgotten. She'd seen a picture of a Prairie Pioneer before, a faded photograph that hadn't done it justice now that she'd seen one in person. It wasn't pretty or popular, but it was memorable and unique. It was thicker than a standard teacup. Similar to a pottery mug, it was made of clay. But what made it truly special was its

design; it was formed and fired all as one piece, so taking a sip of tea meant the drinker could hold it by the cup or by the saucer.

The style didn't last long. Her own knowledge and further personal research indicated the Prairie Pioneer was only popular for a few years in the 1930s, probably because most folks in the Great Depression were too broke to buy fancy, breakable china. But Rachel had always loved the practical idea behind the unique design.

This particular sample was granite gray cup with a royal blue saucer, both flecked with black and white specks. It had an extra-wide loop in the handle for convenient gripping, unlike some of the tiny bone china ones that were too small to actually use.

There were rumors about an even more exclusive variety of Prairie Pioneer teacups: a set of minis the creator put out each December when the regular cups had been in production. The minis were strictly ornamental, smaller than espresso cups, and while they had the same solid backgrounds, the designer had painted small holiday scenes on the saucer portions. Rachel could only imagine how beautiful they were.

She closed her eyes and squeezed her hands to her chest. This was the find of a lifetime. Rachel did a little victory dance. Seeing it before Owen was only the cherry on top of the teacup sundae.

"Sold!" she cried, pointing to the table.

"What's sold, dear?" a voice asked.

Rachel opened her eyes.

It was gone.

There was a blank space on the table.

"Where did it go?" Rachel demanded.

"Where did what go?" Peggy Zimmer asked. Holiday Beach's postmistress for the last two decades was a stickler for accuracy.

"The blue and gray Prairie Pioneer teacup. It was right there." Rachel pointed at the empty spot, then waved her hand through it in case the cup was still there but had magically turned invisible. She wasn't taking any chances.

"Oh, that nice young man bought it."

There was only one "nice young man" in the building who would have snatched that prize from the hands of victory. The teacup was gone, and Owen was the thief.

“He can’t!” It was hers.

“He already did. I know that you were here first, but you didn’t say anything. You didn’t even approach the table. You just stood in the aisle like some kind of statue.”

“I was imagining owning it!”

“But you didn’t say you wanted to buy it,” Peggy said. “I’m sorry, Rachel. Owen Daye asked if you were interested in it. He even tapped you on the shoulder to get your attention, but you didn’t turn around. So I sold it to him.”

“Where did he go?”

“He said that it was his last purchase for the day.”

This couldn’t be happening. Of all the men in all the world to be in the community center that day, he had to be the one to get it. “I don’t believe it.”

“I wish you’d said something, Rachel, but I can’t undo the sale.”

“It’s not your fault, Peggy. It was mine for waiting so long. I should have pounced on it the second I saw it.”

“The good news is that you can still buy it. You know Owen’s going to put it up for sale in the shop. Just talk to him and get it before it hits the shelves,” Peggy suggested.

“I’m going to do just that.” And get *her* teacup back from that no-good, treasure-stealing, arrogant jerk!