



TANGLING WITH
the Grinch

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
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TANGLING WITH THE GRINCH

A PINEVILLE WORLD CHRISTMAS NOVELLA

A COUNTRY CHRISTMAS SERIES

DEBRA ELISE



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TANGLING WITH THE GRINCH and Debra Elise—1st ed.

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About the Author

ABOUT

I had a feeling this was the year I'd finally fall in love—I just didn't know it would be with the grumpy, grinchy single dad who takes over running the Pineville Christmas tree farm.

Mazie

I've never been worried about not finding "the one." I've always believed I'd recognize him the moment I see him, so as my friends got married, I continued to build my pop-up gift business until he shows up. Now at 35, I've checked off two of my top three goals: purchasing my first house and opening a storefront. And I'm confident the third one will happen just in time for the holiday season.

But first, I'm committed to one more pop-up at the tree farm. He'd given me my first shot ten years ago, and I would not let the aging owner down.

Only this year, Sheridan's son is running the farm and I literally run into him on the first day. Not a great way to make a first impression, but oh, what an impression he made on me.

Walker

I never wanted what my cantankerous old man spent more time working on than with his family, so when he leaves me his tree farm, I scramble to make it work until I can find a buyer and fast.

Christmas is my least favorite time of the year and I only tolerate it for my young son. Now, I just have to get through

the next four weeks of non-stop *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town* and pine-scented *everything*.

Then a whirlwind of peppermint-scented sunshine slams into me as I inspect the barn where my father rented out space for holiday treats and over-priced snow globes.

Every day I try to ignore how my body aches for her, but what I don't expect is how slowly but surely, she gets under my defenses with her smile and yes, her non-stop holiday spirit.

When she discovers I'm selling the farm, will I be able to prove to her I'm not the total grinch she believes me to be?

Welcome to Pineville, where love always finds a way.

Walker kissed me first, well kind of, but then denies our instant connection. But I'm not worried. He's The One and I'm determined to be the last woman he ever kisses.

WALKER

THE CRACKLE AND CRUNCH OF DRY LEAVES FILLED THE AIR, mocking me as I strode toward the old red barn on my old man's tree farm. Scratch that my tree farm. Dang it, my Christmas tree farm.

"Dad, this is the best day ever!" My seven-year-old, Devon, had found the tire swing.

The ancient oak stood out in a sea of evergreens, with its gold and red-orange leaves. Well, the leaves had all fallen, but the childhood memory of watching the tree turning colors was one of the positive memories I had during the months leading up to our father's all-consuming passion—and it wasn't spending time with his four kids, well at least with me.

Mason Sheridan hadn't passed along his love of farming to any of us. Oh, he'd tried. Maybe a bit too hard. The farm hadn't always grown a variety of fir and blue spruce trees. When dad first bought the land, the crops were mainly mint, wild rice and barley. That was before he sold off chunks of it over the years to developers in order to pay mom's medical bills. Now all that's left are those darn trees.

And surprise, surprise, instead of making things easy on his kids, because whenever did he do anything that was easy, he put a stipulation in his will just for me. Besides the one where he named me executor and manager of the farm. He decreed that there would be one more tree season no matter what time of the year he passed, and I was the one who had to run it.

And now I had to meet some lady named Mazie who ran the holiday gift shop in the barn where I'd had my first kiss when I was twelve. Her name was Jessica, and she was an older woman of thirteen. We'd snuck away from our job of helping customers pick out their trees when things had gotten slow. She'd moved away the following year and broke my heart. The first, but not the last woman to do so.

I can still hear my dad's disappointment ringing in my ears as I get closer to the barn that's seen better days. We were staying in the farmhouse I'd grown up in, which held even more memories, mostly of mom. It was bittersweet for sure, but Devon was having a blast and that's all that counted.

"Devon, I'm headed inside. Don't get too crazy on that thing. That rope has been there since I was your age." Standing with my back to the barn doors, I knew I was stalling. I knew that once I entered, then this whole debacle of overseeing the Christmas tree farm that had made me run as far away as an eighteen-year-old could get would become real.

Dammit, I don't have time for this. Spending six weeks away from my business back in Seattle and taking my son out of school was more than inconvenient. It was my dad's way of having the last word one final time.

Jeez, why'd he have to pick me? He knew how pissed off it would make me to come back here. And I guess I had my answer. I needed to shake off this mood for my son. He was so mature for his age, sensing when I wasn't fully present in the moment. And that was the last thing I wanted for him. It was how my dad was with me, and I swore I'd never be that way if I ever had kids.

So here I was, all tied up in knots over something that can't be changed, but that didn't mean I had to like it.

So distracted by the memories this place stirred up, I wasn't paying attention when I turned around to head inside that instead of the wooden handle, I found myself holding a soft, warm peppermint-scented female a good eight inches shorter than me.

"Oomph! Oh, my." The surprisingly sexy voice traveled directly south to the territory behind my zipper and settled, sending signals to my brain, rerouting blood flow. A signal I hadn't received quite so quickly, at least since my teenage years.

Holding her upper arms, I kept her from falling backward. Her head snapped up at the change in direction and I was face-

to-face with a decidedly younger and sexier version of the woman I thought I'd be meeting.

While my long-neglected appendage attempted to stand at attention, I took in a deep breath and tried my best to untangle myself from the gorgeous, curvy brunette wearing garland around her neck like a scarf and a dusting of green glitter on her chin.

“Are you okay, ma'am?”

“I'm so sorry I wasn't paying attention to where I was going.”

Speaking at the same time, I took a large step back, putting as much distance between us as I could without making her feel self-conscious about how quickly I removed my hands. Her breathy voice was like another hit of adrenaline I wasn't sure my zipper could withstand.

This reaction was the strangest damn thing. I was a long way from my twenties when a strong wind would have made me instantly hard, so what was it about her that had me wishing we were alone and close to a bed?

“I'm good. Just, uh, embarrassed. Anyway, you must be Mr. Sheridan's son, Walker. I'm Mazie Cameron. I'm so sorry for your loss.” The expression on her upturned face was so sincere and if it were any other moment in time, I could get lost in her dark brown eyes. But it wasn't. And I couldn't.

The mention of my dad was the bucket of cold water my out-of-control libido needed.

Mazie held out her hand. It was dwarfed in mine as we shook, and I swear electricity sparked.

“Thank you, Ms. Cameron. I'm sure the lawyer informed you that this will be the last year you can run the gift shop. I hope it doesn't hurt your business, but running this tree farm was our dad's dream and none of his children want it. I'm just here to fulfill what was laid out in our his will, then I'll be putting this place up for sale come the new year.”

Her expressive eyes narrowed then she released a long “hm” which sounded awfully like “yeah right, buddy.”

Although I realize I came off a bit harsh, I wanted to make sure she understood what was what right up front so there'd be no false hope of changing my mind.

“Really? That'd be such a shame. This place is such a big part of so many families' holiday traditions. I'm sure once you see how much the community loves this place, how the children get a thrill from hunting down the perfect tree, cutting it down themselves or watching the staff bundle it up, and then there's the gift shop. Did you know we have at least a dozen local artisans who sell handmade items from wooden toys to holiday home décor and unique gifts found nowhere than right here in Pineville and the tree farm has always been their showcase?”

The challenge in her tone should have put me off, instead it fanned the fire already lit inside me. The one that had flared to life the moment we bumped into each other.

And her excitement over everything Christmas and this farm should have had the opposite effect on me. Instead, as I watched her talk, focusing my gaze on her full, cherry red lips, all I could picture was the two of us rolling around naked and me dropping kisses along her flushed pink skin.

Nope, not going to happen. Besides, she wasn't my type. Anyone who loved the holidays as much as she obviously did was not someone I needed in my life. I was just going through a sex drought, is all. One of my own making, sure, but since gaining full custody of Devon four years ago, there wasn't much room in my life for dating.

And no matter how pretty and tempting Mazie was, I would not be sucked into her orbit.

“Are you feeling okay? You look as if you just sucked on a lemon? Oh, hi there. What's your name?”

A lemon? That's a bit harsh. So focused on Mazie I hadn't realized that Devon was standing next to us, his gaze bouncing between us.

“Hi, my name's Devon Sheridan, ma'am. What's yours?” Devon had lost both his front teeth last week and had refused

to smile ever since. But not today. His toothless grin filled his face as he gazed up at Mazie.

Rolling my eyes, I let out a long sigh as I took in her reaction to my son's interruption. It was both a blessing and a curse, the Sheridan charm. And my son seemed to have found his. I needed to remember that and make sure I held mine in check. I'll let Devon be the good cop while I, as usual, play the bad cop.

"Nice to meet you, Devon. Are you excited about the opening of your grandpa's, I mean your dad's, Christmas tree farm? We'll have free hot chocolate and cookies every day. I was just checking the supplies for the gift shop. I bring in items crafted by local artisans each season and help out with the wreaths that are made right here on the farm. Maybe you could help me out? If it's okay with your dad." Mazie's smile rocked me back a step. It rivaled Devon's in wattage, but it had a whole different effect on me than my son's.

I had to hold firm.

Releasing a low whistle, I placed a hand on my son's shoulder. "You act fast, Ms. Cameron. We just met and you're already recruiting. What's next? You going to ask me to wear that ridiculous Santa suit my dad wore every Christmas Eve?"

Maybe there was too much rude and not enough tease in my tone as I'd meant because by the height of her eyebrows just now, I could very well be on her naughty list. And with that thought, my mind took a left turn to a decidedly sexier naughty list than the one ol' Saint Nick ever checked.

I tried again to sound a bit more neutral. "Neither one of us is here to participate in any of the holiday activities, Ms. Cameron. I'm just here doing my duty, then we'll be heading back to Seattle.

Better she knew right from the start where I stood about my son taking part in the holiday activities on the farm and with her. The last thing I needed was to be around her tempting body every day.

Mazie's smile disappeared as I spoke. She crossed her arms under her firm, and perfectly sized to fit in my palms breasts. It took every bit of effort to keep my gaze on her face and I prayed that she didn't notice the bobbing of my Adam's apple as I swallowed a moan at the alluring picture she made. Did she have any idea how she was affecting me?

"You're awfully young, Mr. Sheridan, to be so...grinchy."

"Young?" I let out a scoff. "I'm forty-two. Old enough to know better. How old are you? Twenty-five, twenty-six? There's more to life than running a tree farm that's only useful for a handful of weeks of the year. I'm only here because I have to be, not because I want to be. Not because I have joy for the season or whatever good tidings it's supposed to bring. My son will not be working anywhere on the farm and that includes the gift shop. I, on the other hand, have no choice, so if you have any issues, you've got my number."

Instead of arguing with me, she stared me down. Not in defiance, but in speculation. No, that wasn't right. It was like she could see right through my bluster. For a moment, I saw what might have been a flash of empathy, then interest, but that too disappeared in an instant so I wasn't sure.

But I was mesmerized either way as her luscious lips thinned out, and she gave me a slight nod.

I was being a dickhead, and I knew it. Instead of arguing with me, her gaze dropped from my face to the tip of my battered cowboy boots and back up again. Not only did I feel the heat from her perusal, and perhaps some mutual interest, I also felt her disappointment.

Rarely do I let what others think of me bother me. I'd long ago developed a thick skin toward other people's opinions, and it had become even thicker when my ex took off. But with Mazie, as ludicrous as it seemed, I wanted her to like me even knowing nothing could come between us. I refused to let another beautiful woman lead me around by my hormones.

"Oh, I have your number all right, Walker." She dropped her arms and gave Devon another smile. "It was so nice meeting you. I hope you visit me next week after we open."

I've been known to hand out candy canes." Her smile disappeared when she looked back at me. With a quick nod, she spun on her heel and walked back inside the barn.

"Dad, she was nice. Why'd you have to be like that?"

"Like what?" I knew what he meant but instead of answering me, he rolled his eyes, turned and ran back to the tree. I was left alone, staring at Mazie's heart-shaped backside as she bent over a box of holiday ornaments. She'd effectively dismissed me. But my body wasn't getting the memo.

If anything, her standing up to me made me harder, and more interested than I should be considering what I'd said. The only thing that saved me from further embarrassing myself was my mid-thigh jacket covering the evidence of a less than five-minute interaction with a woman I just met.

Apparently, my body and my brain were ready to do battle, and whether I wanted it or not, I had a feeling Mazie Cameron would be more than worth breaking my self-imposed hiatus.

MAZIE

I COULDN'T GET HOME FAST ENOUGH. The first person I needed to speak to was Natalie, my best friend and, as of last April, my sister-in-law. "I met him, Nat." The words rushed out of me even before she finished saying hello when I called her.

"You mean old man Sheridan's son? Which one is taking over the farm, again? Hunter or Walker?" I could hear Ellie cooing in the background. She was just a couple weeks old and her husband Easton, my brother, had left today for a road game. He was in his last season as a wide receiver for the Washington Sentinels. I'd been helping out when I could and will probably end up at her house later, but I just couldn't wait to tell her.

"Walker. And he has a son, Devon. But let me say this again: *he's the one*, Nat. *The One* I've been waiting for." My head was still buzzing from the events of the day. Running into the man of my dreams, literally, had my heart racing pretty much non-stop since. There was just the little matter of his attitude toward Christmas, but I'm sure once he gets settled in, meets with the employees and sees how valuable the gift area in the barn is, not to mention profitable, he'll change his mind about selling the place. At least that's what I kept telling myself the entire drive home.

I knew my guy would show up this year, and he did. Just in time for my favorite season. And bonus. The moment we

touched, okay, ran into each other, I swear my ovaries exploded and every follicle on my body electrified, making every hair stand on end.

Natalie let out a noisy yawn and mumbled, “Well, wasn’t that the plan? To meet at the barn at one o’clock.”

My poor sleep deprived bff. She’d been doing her best to get Ellie on a feeding schedule, but the baby had her days and nights messed up. Oh, the joys of motherhood. It was something I couldn’t wait to experience myself.

“Okay, I know you’re tired, but I need you to focus. Six-foot something, silver at the temples with the sexiest dimpled chin, a few days growth of beard, and a bit, maybe slightly okay pretty grumpy Walker Sheridan...Is. The. One.” Out of breath and shaking, it hit me that I forgot to eat lunch. But somehow, I didn’t think my low blood sugar was totally to blame for how I was feeling. No, Walker had had quite the effect on me.

“Mazie Cameron, you better not be pulling my leg. I’ve had two hours of sleep in a row in the last couple of days and I’m not playing.”

I laughed at how stern she sounded, but I couldn’t help it. Oh, how I loved her and was so grateful to have her as my best friend.

“Wait, are you sure? Absolutely, one hundred and two percentage positive Walker is, *The One*? I can’t recall much about him since he’s older than us and left for the service the day after he graduated. I’m not even sure he’s been back home since. I seem to remember having a conversation with his sister Stassi that his ex-wife did a real number on him and basically deserted him and their young son when the kid was only three.”

We’d been saying one hundred and two percent since we were kids, and I could always count on Nat for good intel. And now things made a bit more sense. But I suspected there was more there-there with Walker’s father, I was sure of it. But figuring out how to deal with my slightly, okay, a lot grinchy guy would have to wait. I had an equally grumpy momma to

feed and a niece to cuddle while Natalie ate and took a much-deserved nap.



IT WAS NEARING midnight by the time I made it back home. In between numerous diaper changes and reassuring Nat that yes, I was more than capable of taking care of Ellie while she slept in the next room. I mean, I babysat most of the neighborhood kids through middle and high school. I could definitely take care of one sweet, angelic newborn.

But who knew such a tiny thing could produce so much poop? I removed my stained top and put it in the washer, then headed for a nice, long, hot shower. After finishing my nightly routine, I settled in and let my mind wander. Of course, it wandered to the grumpy new owner of the tree farm.

Walker Sheridan hit me in all the right places. However, the unexpected attitude toward Christmas, which I hadn't expected considering he grew up on the farm, plus his father's love of the season, was something that could be overcome. I hoped.

And then there was his son, also unexpected but in no way an issue. Funny how I never considered that my Mr. Right would have a child.

As I snuggled even deeper under my favorite comforter, in the king bed that I'd bought last year with the intention of sharing it with *The One*, my mind raced with ideas on how to convince Walker not to sell and how I could spend more time with him.

There was no way I was going to let him get away now that I'd found him. I saw the shadows behind his eyes as he tried to convince me the tree farm didn't mean anything more to him than a duty he had to see through to the finish. Well, whether Walker Sheridan wanted it or not, he was going to get a continuous drip of holiday cheer between now and Christmas

Eve, so powerful that, like the classic cartoon character, his heart would grow large enough to let me in.

And the first step would be figuring out how to get him to kiss me the next time I see him.

WALKER

THANKSGIVING WAS A WHIRLWIND OF FAMILY AND GOING through our dad's personal items and stuff of our mom's we had no idea he'd held onto all these years. My brothers Roman and Hunter, along with our younger sister, Stassi, were in Roman's office after dinner, while his wife Miranda entertained Devon. She'd offered, claiming she needed the practice. Plus, we'd all agreed to clean up the kitchen before leaving which only seemed fair since we ate all of her delicious food.

My son was in heaven, he'd never experienced a family holiday, and it hit me how wrong it was of me to stay away from Pineville. But no matter how much my siblings wanted it, I was not changing my mind about the farm. I know their relationship with our dad was much different from mine, but I couldn't let that sway me.

I guess as the oldest I got all the parenting mis steps and even with Roman telling me about how my dad regretted his ultimatum before I left for the Marines, it still didn't change the years of me feeling my dad cared more about the farm and those damn trees than he did me.

"Hey, Walker, you keep frowning like that and Santa's gonna leave you coal in your stocking. Again." Stassi chuckled. Instead of going through the box in front of her, she was typing on her cell. "I'm making my Christmas list. What should I get Devon this year?"

"Legos." I mumbled, then went back to searching through the box I'd been assigned. But instead of focusing on the task at hand, my mind flashed to running into Mazie yesterday and the Christmas cheer radiating off her. Well, until I acted like a jackass.

The interaction had unsettled me more than I'd like to admit. And when combined with my instant attraction to her, well, it just made me grumpier than usual.

She made me feel things I hadn't in years. Every time I closed my eyes last night, all I saw was her thousand-watt smile, and that led to me stripping her and kissing every inch of that sweet, curvy body.

Damn, I needed to get laid.

“Walker, you have to see how much the farm means to the community. And to dad's employees. I think selling to another developer is a mistake. Aren't there enough cookie cutter houses on the land he sold after mom died? I mean, isn't it kind of our duty to Pineville and the surrounding towns to keep the tradition going?” Stassi had been bending my ear about tradition for the last thirty minutes and if Devon wasn't down the hall, I'd have cut her off a long time ago.

I didn't want to be the grinch, not really. I just didn't know how to be anything else from the beginning of November through December twenty-fifth. “Alright, you run it.” I did my best to keep the bite from my words, but from her wide-eyed response, guess I failed.

“Listen, sis. We may have grown up in the same house, but for you it was all twinkling lights and hot cocoa when dad added those trees. It consumed him, and I didn't have a choice at twelve-years-old. And for all the years until I left, he chose those damn trees over me. You know how many of my basketball games he went to? None. He always had an excuse and claimed he was ensuring our future. Well, all I wanted was for him to just once be there and sit on those uncomfortable bleachers and watch me play. So, if you're so committed to keeping it open, it's all yours.” I ran my hand down my neck, instantly regretting the rough sound of my words.

“Hey, Walker, we get it, but don't take it out on Stassi. She was only in kindergarten when the trees were mature enough to open the business for customers. It's all she knew growing up.” Roman, the negotiator of the family, answered for our sister.

“It's okay, Roman. I can handle Mr. Grumpy Pants. Maybe I should run it, but what would I do the rest of the year? We need to decide as a family what to do, Walker. You're not

alone in this, you know?” Stassi sat down next to me on the couch and punched me in the arm. “I’m sorry things were different for you.” She rubbed the spot where she hit me, then patted me on the knee and stood back up.

“Okay, who’s hungry for pie?” She clapped her hands together, then called out to my son, “Devon, your dad says you can have two pieces of pie!” Sticking her tongue out at me, she giggled, then ran out of the room.

Hunter busted out laughing. “You, my grumpy pants brother, deserved that.” He hadn’t said a word the entire conversation, and he hadn’t seemed very happy about what I said to Stassi. That was my baby brother. He thought things through before making an ass of himself. Hunter got up and followed our sister, and I was left with Roman.

I knew he wasn’t afraid to stand up to me. He was just smart enough to do it in private. “So, we don’t have to make any decisions tonight, or next month, for that matter. Let’s see how this season goes, and if we can keep it profitable in order to pay the employees at the very least. I’d really like to hold off till after the new year after Miranda has the baby, okay?”

Roman was so like our dad in some respects that I had a hard time not taking out my old issues with him. But he was happier than I’d ever seen him now that he married Miranda and their first kid was on the way. I just hope things work out for them unlike they did for me and Devon’s mom.

“What if I don’t want to wait? It looks like I’m the only one in this scenario that loses. None of you can drop what you’re doing to run things for the next month. I’m it, Roman. And I don’t want it.”

“What about Devon?”

“What about him? He’s just excited he doesn’t have to go back to school next week.”

“I mean, how does he feel about being on the family farm? Seeing where you grew up?” Roman asked.

“Is this the guilt trip portion of the evening? Because if it is, I have no problem telling you where to shove it.”

Roman puffed out his chest, then yelled, “Hey, Dev. Your dad just told me you’re getting a new bike for Christmas.”

Sounds of excitement rang out down the hall.

“What the hell was that about?” My whole family had lost their minds.

“Don’t you think you owe him, us, some time to come to terms with dad being gone? And I’d like some time to get reacquainted with my nephew. Since you have to be here, I suggest you take a hard look at how happy that kid is and try not to make the same mistake dad did with you. Stop being such a hard ass, and enjoy yourself, Walker. C’mon, what can it hurt?”

Roman held out his hand, and I took it. He pulled me up, and we stood toe to toe. “I know it’s hard this time of year for you to be back home, and I appreciate what it took for you to be here. More than the other two are aware of. And I also know that it’s not just dad’s passing that has you so freaking grumpy. Am I right?”

Damn, I hated when he was right. Staring him down wouldn’t do much good. We were pretty evenly matched size wise, so wrestling him to the ground would probably end up in a tie. It just sucked that the time of year my ex chose to desert Devon and I was approaching and added to my dislike of Christmas.

“The past is past, bro. That little boy needs to see his dad, if not jumping for joy all the time, making more of an effort to not be so grumpy about everything all the time.”

I let out a grunt instead of using my words, which only made Roman laugh harder.

“Man, you really need a woman.”

For the first time in a very long time, I busted out laughing. He had no idea just how right he was. And if I didn’t want to turn into a sexless single dad any longer than I already was, I needed to take his advice.

But how was I going to get another chance at making a better impression on Mazie so she wouldn’t laugh me out of

my own barn the next time I saw her?

MAZIE

IT HAD BEEN a week since Walker and I ran into each other. When I was on the farm, I'd only seen him from a distance. He'd done his best to stay out of the barn whenever I was there. His behavior made me all the more determined though. I had plans for the sexy grinch, but I needed him to at least be in the same space as I was.

Fortunately, I had the pleasure of seeing Devon every day. He was on the tree swing at every opportunity, and I'd bring him a cup of cocoa before I got too busy with customers. I'd thought about quizzing Devon about his dad, but that felt all kinds of wrong, so we talked about his school, his friends, and what his favorite shows were.

Today I put the finishing touches on the gingerbread cookie station that had become a yearly tradition. It kept the kids busy while their parents shopped, plus they were my favorite Christmas treat when I was a little girl.

Carla, one of the farm's part-time employees, came in shortly after we opened. "Hi, Mazie. The place looks amazing this year."

"Thank you. Oh, my gosh, I love your elf ears. Are all the employees wearing them?"

She accepted the treat, unwrapped it, and popped it into her mouth. "Yes, and it was quite a battle with the new boss to

let us have our fun.”

Digging into my apron pocket, I pulled out a mini candy cane from my stash. “That deserves a reward. I’m still trying to figure out why he’s so anti-Christmas.”

“YEAH, it’s kind of weird, huh? In fact, I just overheard him arguing with one of his brothers. Walker wants to throw out a box of his mom’s decorations from when they were all young. I mean, who would do that? Anyway, thanks for the treat. I was hoping you could set aside one of those cinnamon stick three-wick candles and one of those gorgeous little carved trees for me? I don’t have anywhere to keep them right now since my shift started. Well, two minutes ago. I promise I’ll come back when I’m done to pay for it.”

And this is why I need to pull out all the stops this year to show Walker what an important part of Pineville the tree farm and this shop are. Not just the employees, but I’d been getting texts all morning asking about the items I’d posted on social media last night.

This place was needed and special. And whether Walker wanted to admit it, I just feel that deep down he knows it too. And Carla’s bit of unintended intel just gave me the perfect excuse to track him down.

I let the cashier know where I was headed, and that I’d be back in ten. On my way out, I saw Devon in his favorite spot. “Hey, bud. Do you know where your dad is?”

“Hi, Mazie. Do you have hot cocoa?” Devon’s face lit up with hope.

“Oh, shoot. Not right now. But when I come back after talking to your dad, I have something fun for you to do in the barn. You like gingerbread cookies?”

His cute little face scrunched up, then he hopped down off the swing. “I like cookies. What’s gingerbread?”

“You’ve never had a gingerbread man at Christmastime?”

“Nope. Just Santa, and reindeer, and snowman cookies. No ginger men. What do they taste like?”

I can't believe this poor child had been deprived of the best holiday cookie ever. Now I had two missions for the day. “They taste like, well, heaven and Christmas. Don't go anywhere and I'll be back soon and we'll decorate and eat some together.”

“Alright!”

Devon's cheers followed me as I made my way to the Sheridan farmhouse where Devon had pointed. I'd never been inside and always wondered what it looked like. Every inch of the outside had always been lit up with twinkling lights and pine boughs wrapped with ribbon on the railings and pillars during the season. It had been a picture postcard. But not today.

No lights or decorations to be found.

Yeah, this grinch must be stopped.

And I was just the woman to change his mind.

Hopefully.

Stepping onto the porch, I knocked on the front door and waited. And waited. So I knocked again, then turned around to look at the view. The house was situated on a slight incline. There were several elves running back and forth, helping customers and holiday music blasted from several speakers. At least there were lights strung above the pre-cut tree lot. Now all that was needed was a dusting of snow.

Where could he be? I scanned the lot again for his tall frame and his handsome, if perma-frown-wearing face amongst the cheerful tree buyers and merry elves. I did see his sister, Stassi, helping out and I think Hunter, the youngest brother, was helping a family get their tree tied down on top of their SUV. But no Walker.

Was he really so grinchy he couldn't even help out his family? Well, my ten minutes were almost up, so I turned back to the front door with my hand raised for one more attempt.

Instead of wood, my fist knocked on a very firm, very muscular chest.

“What the...oh, it’s you,” Walker growled.

The rumbly vibration of his words traveled along my hand and arm before landing and zapping my lady bits. *Oh, my.* I opened my hand, then flattened my palm and rubbed in a lame attempt to soothe his bruised flesh. That’s my story and I’m sticking to it.

Instead, what happened as I absorbed his body heat and lost myself in his heated gaze was further confirmation that he’s *The One*. The way he was looking back at me with his pupils blown wide in desire and the feel of his hand on the back of mind as he held me in place instead of pushing me away made me sway into him.

The moment was like a movie. Our connection, explosive.

For a split second, I thought he was going to lean in too and kiss me. Then someone shouted his name, and he pulled his hand away from mine and I swear I heard him let out another growl.

“I, uh, I’m so sorry I wasn’t paying attention.” The words rush from me. My heart was racing from that almost kiss and I just prayed I didn’t sound like a fool.

“Yeah, well, no harm done. What’s up? You have a knick-knack emergency or something?”

And just like that, the desire I’d thought I saw radiating from his gaze disappeared and Walker’s face morphed back into that stupid frown.

“No, I uh, heard you had some childhood decorations you wanted to unload, and I thought I could help you out with that.” I ginned, trying to ignore my still humming body need to touch him again.

“Um, yeah. No. Now, if you don’t mind, my knuckle-headed brother, Hunter, is waving like a loon over at the bundling shack. Excuse me.”

And before I could step out of the way, he grabbed my upper arms and shifted me to the side. He stepped around me and jogged down the steps, leaving me staring after him. It all happened so fast I was left staring at his very cute ass in a well-worn pair of jeans, not one bit ashamed that I was checking him out.

Because as fast as he seemed to want to get away from me, I heard him sucking in a hiss of air as he touched me and felt what I knew was an obvious bulge behind his zipper as he brushed past me.

Oh, yeah, there was no way he could pretend there wasn't something happening between us now.

WALKER

SPENDING THE AFTERNOON AT HALF-STAFF HADN'T HAPPENED to me since I was a pimple-faced teenager. It was damn distracting as I, under much protest, helped Hunter with the customers who needed their trees tied on top of their cars.

“What is your problem, bro? Is it really that hard to lend a hand around here? These trees,” Hunter flung his hands out, “these trees paid for my and Stassi’s college, man. I know you and dad had your issues, but can’t you just set all that old crap aside and make this last season on the farm a positive one?”

I looked around to see if anyone was near enough to overhear us. Shit, he was right, but that didn’t make the negative reaction I felt to this place just go away. “You’re right. I’m acting like a jerk. It’s just been tougher than I thought, you know?”

Hunter stood a couple of inches taller than me and looked so much like our dad. It was sometimes a gut punch seeing him again after being apart. I knew he was different than our dad, plus he had no interest in taking over the farm as he built his own career. It was strange that he was the one checking my attitude and giving me advice.

“I know. Well, at least I think I know since I was more interested in video games than what was going on between you and dad. You’re just lucky your kid seems unaffected by your constant scroogy personality.”

Talking about Devon always brought a smile to my face. “He’s the best thing that came out of my marriage, so I do my best to hide how this place really makes me feel.”

“Yeah, well, I say you’re walking on a thin line there. I think you need an infusion of holiday cheer. Maybe some spiked eggnog later?” Hunter looked at his watch. “We’ve got another forty minutes till we close. How about we head over to O’Malley’s Pub? I’ll call Roman to see if he can pry himself

from the hospital, and maybe Miranda can watch Devon for a couple of hours. How does that sound?”

It was tempting, but I had an apology to deliver. And maybe get a chance for a do-over with Mazie. I’ve only been around her twice, but my body was begging for a taste of the lusciously curved and peppermint-scented Mazie Cameron. See if she was interested in a short-term fling because if I was going to be around her for the next few weeks I knew I wouldn’t be able to concentrate on anything else, including finding a buyer for the farm, until I worked her out of my system.

“Maybe another time. I, uh, promised Devon, I’d meet him at the gift shop and he could pick out presents for Miranda and Stassi. He hasn’t had a lot of interaction with women outside of teachers and that’s my fault. He’s so excited to be around his aunts and get some much needed and deserved female nurturing. It’s become crystal clear to me that he needs more of what I can give him.”

We walked back to the shack to finish up. Hunter threw an arm over my shoulder, then said something that stopped me in my tracks.

“Maybe I should tag along. Mazie is one fine piece of *ahhhh*...hey, what the hell, man?”

I dragged Hunter around the back of the shack and pushed him against the aging pine. “I don’t want to hear you ever speak like that again about her.”

Stepping away before I decked him, I wiped my hand down my jaw and tried to get myself under control. *Jeez, where had that come from?*

“Walker, I was just going to say, fine piece of holiday candy. I’m just teasing, bro. I’m not the total douchebag toward women Stassi makes me out to be.” My brother straightened his jean jacket and waited me out.

“Right, and reindeer really can fly. Look, I’m sorry. I don’t have a good reason for my reaction. Let’s finish up so I can go meet up with Devon.” I tried to control my accelerated

breathing while I tried to figure out why I responded like a jealous lover. I may want Mazie under me, or on top, or anyway she'll have me for the matter, but that was no reason to try to take Hunter out.



TWENTY MINUTES of searching for Devon had my blood pressure at code red levels. He couldn't have gone far. I'd specifically told him to stay in the house once it got dark out. That kid never disobeyed me, so there was only one place that held the kind of fascination a seven-year-old couldn't resist.

The closer I got to the barn, the doors still wide open even though we'd closed down ten minutes ago, was a signal that Mazie was still inside. And from the laughing that filtered out, my son was with her.

"Devon, your dad is going to love it. Let me find some tissue paper and a bag so you can get it home without him seeing."

One thing from the Marines that still came second nature to me was my ability to enter a building quietly, using stealth tactics that had me standing in Mazie's path not two feet away from her. Spinning on her heel, she looked up and let out a startled cry, but she was moving at full speed and once again she ended up in my arms.

"Where-where did you come from?" Low and breathy, her words hit me below the belt and with her trying to untangle herself from me and Devon snickering behind her, I did my best to adjust myself without using my hands. Dammit, what is it with this woman? I was forever and immediately hard.

Unable to find some relief without drawing Mazie and my son's notice, I grinned and bared it. The best I could hope for was neither one of them to look below my belt.

"I'm here for Devon. Sorry to keep running into you. You okay?" I watched closely as she smoothed her clothing and I noticed her face was now flushed in a pretty rosy hue.

“Oh, not a problem, really. I mean, it’s not like you’re trying to purposely scare me to death, right?” Mazie’s gaze landed on my crotch and her blush deepened. Clearing her throat, she turned back to Devon. “Hey, can you bring me the ornament I decorated so I can tuck it away behind the counter?”

Devon’s face morphed comically. “Huh?”

Mazie laughed nervously. “You know,” she pointed to an object on the table next to where my son was standing, “that one.”

Hmm. Something was up. And someone was trying to keep me from seeing what they’d been working on. Who was I to spoil my son’s surprise? Not me. I’d prove to them both I could be less grinchy. “Hey, I should check the wiring for the extra lights you added. I’ll be over by the circuit breaker box. Devon, once you give Ms. Cameron her ornament, I need you to run back to the house and clean up for dinner. I’ll be there as soon as I discuss something with Ms. Cameron.”

“But dad, you said I could pick out some gifts for Stassi and Miranda.” My son gave me the saddest looking puppy dog eyes I’d ever seen.

Who was this kid?

“Right, well, we’ll do that another day. We still have some time. Now, please do as I say.” From the corner of my eye, I watch Mazie swipe an object off the table and hide it under her apron, then walk toward the checkout counter.

“Can we have burgers?” Devon asks.

“I picked up a frozen pizza.”

“Woo-hoo! I’ll see you tomorrow, Ms. Cameron.”

“Bye, Devon. Thanks for all your help.” Mazie stood watching me with an unreadable look on her pretty face. A face that was still slightly pink.

With a wave and a hop, my son made a beeline for the old house that could use some renovating if we had any hopes of finding a buyer. Just one more thing to keep me in Pineville

longer than I wanted. But now that I was alone with her, maybe my time here wouldn't be wasted.

Waiting a few extra beats to make sure Devon was truly on his way to the house, I opened the circuit box and flipped everything off except for the lights along the roofline of the barn.

“Oh, but I'm not ready to go yet.” Mazie's tone was more than a little put out.

I closed the distance between us until I stood less than a foot away. She seemed a bit unsettled by my closeness, so much so that she backed up until she bumped into the wall.

Well and expertly trapped, I leaned an arm above her head, dipping my chin until we were eye to eye. “Three times now I have had you in my arms and I know you've seen how you've affected me.” Taking a long sniff of the scent I've come to associate with Mazie, peppermint, and something else I couldn't identify, I leaned closer to her neck and whisper, “I don't ever operate this way when I'm attracted to a woman, but there is something about you that has me perpetually hard. If I don't kiss you now—”

And her reaction reassured me I didn't need to worry about her being attracted to me. Mazie cut off my words with her plump lips. She let out the sweetest moan and I took advantage of the opening, slipping my tongue into her hot, silky mouth and drank like a starving man.

And I was. It had been so long for me but that still didn't explain this intense reaction to her. Because if it were anyone else, I know I wouldn't come within fifty feet of a woman whose business revolved around Christmas.

Yet, here I was swallowing her up. I couldn't get close enough and when I pressed my lower half against hers, grabbed her hips and pulled her up tight against my aching cock, she released another moan. This one rough and needy and I was effing lost in her.

I banished the words “too fast” from my mind as we began to grind against each other like a couple of horny teenagers.

Hell, I was never this into any of the girls I dated in high school or the ones I hooked up with in the service before I got married.

The noises she was making spurred me on, and I took a hand from her hip then tunneled it under her shirt, finding her warm flesh. I feathered the back of my fingers up her soft skin until I reached the full underside of a breast. I cupped it, then squeezed lightly and was rewarded for my efforts with a throaty sounding, “yes.”

I’m not sure how long we were wrapped up in each other, but the thought of taking her against the wall began to filter through my brain. Reaching for the top button of her slacks, my fingers fumbled in their haste and I let out a short chuckle and mumbled against her lips, “Guess I’m not as smooth as I thought I was.”

Her minty breath tickled my nose as she sighed. “Oh, you’re very smooth.” Pressing her lips back onto mine, she hooks a leg around my waist and presses her full tits against my chest and I lose whatever coherent thought I still thought I had.

“Dad! I’m hungry. Can I turn on the oven?” Devon’s words were as effective as a bucket of snow dumped down my pants. *Shit!*

Mazie jumped off and away from me, her breath coming out in little gasps.

“No! I’ll be right there.” I stayed locked on Devon until he turned and ran out.

“I’m sorry, Mazie. I picked the absolute wrong time for that. I’m sure you understand that he comes first?”

She nodded quickly, sending her hair bouncing along her shoulders. Lord, she was beautiful. Even hidden in the shadows as we were with light from the roofline shining outside on the packed snow, I could see the glow on her face and her eyes bright with desire. I’d done that. And I couldn’t wait to do it again, plus a lot more.

My chest felt tight as I kissed her on the forehead. I knew if touched her lips again, my son most likely would turn the oven on and we'd soon be hearing sirens for the local fire department. How she'd wrapped me up so quick in all-consuming need was better left untouched. At least for now.

"I, ah. Maybe we could grab a bite to eat one day or something?" Those were not the words I meant to say. I'm not looking to date Mazie or woo her, well, except into bed. I'm past wanting something permanent with a woman, and the ex leaving me and Devon when he was barely three-years-old had convinced me I'd never let anyone else back into our lives.

"You don't look too sure about that? You want to try that again. This time with feeling?" Mazie looked almost as confused as I felt.

"Well, I didn't think you'd like it very much if I asked for a, what do the kids call it these days, booty call? It's just I'm not here permanently and I kind of forgot that as I was holding you up against the wall just now."

Mazie shook her head, then stormed away and grabbed her things. "Yeah, I almost forgot, you're too old for Christmas, so knowing the correct hook-up lingo shouldn't come as a great surprise. Look, Walker. We obviously are attracted to each other, and I'm no prude and if all I wanted was sex with you, well, let's just say I'd text you directions to my house in a heartbeat. But I don't."

"*Oh-kaay*. Maybe I read this situation wrong, but you just had your tongue down my throat minutes ago, so you can't put this all on me. You wanted that," I waved my hand behind me to the spot where I'd just had her pinned to the wall, moaning my name, "just as much as I did. There's no need to get all prissy about hooking up." I air quoted, "hooking up," then rubbed my hands down my face.

Shit, how did this get so turned around so fast?

"Look, I'm sorry. I need to get going and feed my kid. Maybe tomorrow we can start again?" I wanted to wait to see what her answer would be, but she stood holding her things in front of her like a shield, not saying anything.

Walking away was the easy part. Wiping how she tasted, how she felt wrapped around me, was going to be one hell of a trick. For once I couldn't wait for Christmas to arrive, so I finish my executor duties and go back to Seattle.

Later that night, after I tucked Devon into bed after his bath and three bedtime stories, I stared at the ceiling of my parents' bedroom long after midnight. When I finally drifted off into a fitful sleep, I dreamt Mazie was laying next to me, sharing my life, helping me with the farm and raising Devon.

That was one hell of a kiss and now I had less than three weeks to forget I ever experienced it. How was I ever going to survive?

MAZIE

IT HAS BEEN two weeks since, “*The Kiss*,” with the man I considered, “*The One*” and I was no closer to figuring out how to get him to see me as more than a potential bed partner than I was when he’d left me standing alone in the barn, needy and achy to take whatever he offered.

But I knew deep down I just needed a bit more time in proving to him that his past Christmases didn’t need to define all his Christmases, and by this Christmas Eve I vowed to show him exactly how good we could be together even with his grinchy attitude. But then again, I could see Devon’s excitement at being on the farm and all the events on the tree lot had begun to slowly chip away at the wall Walker had put up after he’d left Pineville.

I also came home most days burned to a crisp from Walker’s smoldering gazes. Oh ,he looked at me like he did that night in the barn and often. But he never touched. Well, if things went according to plan tomorrow night, I was ready to change that.

Business had been booming, and it had seemed to thaw Walker’s attitude toward selling the place. Part of the success had been from increasing the social media marketing and partly because people were curious to see if Walker had changed his dad’s operation.

I'd been dividing my time between the tree farm and my store front on Main. I'd hired two part-time employees to help me out knowing it would cut into my profit for the season, but I wasn't going to have my last year running the gift shop be anything but the best ever.

Just about every day, I managed to find a reason to get Walker to stop by the barn.

From approving the carolers we'd hired to roam the pre-cut lot to donning the Santa suit one Sunday afternoon when there were two dozen kids waiting to see the jolly old elf and share their wishes. He'd grudgingly accepted, but the joy on Devon's face when he found out his dad was one of Santa's helpers had gone a long way in making the time Walker spent with the kids not just a positive experience for all the kids, but I think for him too.

"Hey, Mazie. The place looks so great. I'm surprised you have anything left in here. I've heard so many of my friends gushing over the new artisans you've brought in."

"Hey, right back, Miranda. Wow, thank you. That's so nice to hear. I'm so glad you were able to make it out. How are you feeling?" Walker's sister-in-law used to work as a nurse at Harmony General. She was now happily married and expecting her first baby with Roman, who was just a couple of years younger than Walker.

"I'm ready for this little one to be here, but I've got a few more weeks. Could you show me a few things? I've got just a couple more people to buy for than I'm going up to the farmhouse and pick up Devon for a sleepover. I finally convinced Walker to let us take our nephew for a night of pizza and Pixar movies."

Hmm. Walker's going to be all on his lonesome tonight. I may just have to pay my favorite grinch a visit later.



I'D NEVER CONSIDERED myself to be forward when it came to sex and men. Meaning I didn't show up on a guy's doorstep wearing sexy lingerie with seduction my goal. But when opportunity strikes, especially when the man I wanted to seduce was a single dad, you need to go for it.

When I visited Natalie for a quick hug and a snuggle with baby Ellie, I told her what I was going to do.

"I wish I could meet him first, but I get that you feel like you need to move now. I'd just hate for you to be disappointed come the beginning of the year if he decides to sell the place and go back to Seattle. But if you're sure he's the one, then go get him." She gave me the hug I really needed and, with her words playing over and over in my mind as I drove back out to the farm, taking a chance on love was all that mattered to me.

I'd waited so long for him that for me there was no turning back. It wasn't like I was going to jump his bones the minute he opened the door. My plan was to talk first, then seduce. But now that I was sitting in my car outside his house, I had a moment of uncertainty and self-doubt.

What if he only wanted one-night? Would I break down? Would I beg him to give me—us—a chance? Would he laugh at me and call me crazy for believing I'd fallen for him the moment we met?

"Mazie? You okay?" Walker knocked on my car window.

I jumped, screamed, then covered my face with my hands. *Great way to begin the most important night of your life, Mazie.*

The car door opened, and Walker reached his hand inside to help me out. I grasped him and let him guide me to stand next to him.

"What's going on?" His gaze captured mine, a look full of questions.

"Um, hi. I was wondering if we could talk?"

"Sure." He didn't move toward the house, but patiently waited for me to talk.

“Could we go inside?” I asked hopefully.

“Mazie, are you here for a hook-up?” Walker’s eyes darkened, his pupils blown wide as he finished the question.

Biting my lip, I knew I had two choices, but the way he was looking at me and after weeks of fantasizing about our kiss and what it would be like to roll around naked with him had me thinking maybe the talk could wait.

“No, not a hook-up in the traditional sense. I was hoping maybe you could tell me why you’ve been avoiding me first?”

He released a heavy sigh. “Maybe we should go in and talk. You’ve got to be cold in that thin coat and,” he looked down my legs and raised his eyebrows, “no pants or nylons. Um, Mazie, what are you wearing under there?”

Grinning, I locked my car, then scooted around him and walked toward the porch steps. “You’ll find out. After we talk.” I put more swing into my strides and was rewarded with a loud groan. I waited patiently for him to catch up and open the door.

“You’re playing with fire, Mazie. I hope you know what you want because I’m ready to throw you over my shoulders and take you to my childhood bedroom and fulfill some of my favorite teenage fantasies.”

“That’s big talk for someone who kissed me like he was dying a couple of weeks ago, then spent the time since treating me like a stranger and getting no more than five feet close to me.”

Walker closed the distance and stood so close behind me without touching that it was as if I was standing in front of a furnace. Every nerve ending came alive within me, my girly parts pulsing, and if he wanted to take me right here in the December freezing temps, I’d strip in record time.

“Maybe I had to think about things before submitting to the easy part.”

Walker threw me for a loop on that one. “What’s the easy part?”

“Sex. Hot and furious, and most certainly unforgettable. I’m sure it would have been spectacular that night if my son hadn’t interrupted us, but I’m glad he did. It woke me up, some parts more than others.”

I giggled nervously at his joke. Oh, there he was. The person I’d suspected he’d been hiding behind old hurts and long-held beliefs.

“You think that’s funny? Wait until you hear what I’ve come to realize.” He rested his chin on my shoulder and sniffed me.

“Did you just sniff me?”

“You know I did, sweetheart. The better question would be, why?”

Why? How could a girl think when the sexy, hard bodied man of her dreams was pressing his obvious need for her into her soft backside?

He made me so aware of myself and my need for him that all thought of explaining what my plan had been—vanished.

“I, um, guess you like me and the way I smell.” My breath hitched, then left me all together as his large hands finally touched me. He squeezed my hips, massaging the curves I’d always been self-conscious about until now. He whipped me around to face him and *oh, my*, the naked desire in his eyes for me would be burned into my memory for as long as I live.

“Let’s go inside and talk.” He reached behind me, twisted the doorknob, and pushed me gently backward over the threshold.

I barely heard the door slam behind us before he scooped me up and strode up the staircase. I’d always wanted to see what the inside of the old farmhouse looked like, but that could wait as everything whizzed by in a blur.

Hanging on tight, I wrapped my arms around his neck. My gaze locked on his. “You, uh, always talk to women like this?”

Walker stepped into a room I’m guessing was his childhood bedroom from the marine posters on the wall and let

me go. I bounced once, then twice, on the twin mattress and waited for his next move.

Falling to his knees, Walker placed his hands on my knees and spread them wide, then settled himself into the v between my thighs. My stomach did somersaults at the move, followed by dozens of flutterings deep in my core.

He cradled my face, so we were eye-to-eye and I never felt more cherished or turned on. “I never talk to women like this. But you’re no ordinary woman, are you, Mazie Cameron?”

Again, Walker managed to steal my breath, and all I could do was nod.

“I’m going to apologize now for the small bed, but there’s no way I’m taking you to the master bedroom. At least not until I buy a new bed and get rid of all the old furniture that’s falling apart. I know you want to talk, but I’m guessing since you haven’t yelled at me or left, this is what you want too, right?”

Another nod. My mind was screaming “yes” but I just couldn’t make my vocal cords cooperate. This was beyond what I’d imagined being with the right man would be.

“I promise we’ll...talk...later. Much later. Right now, I’d rather show you how I feel. Sound good?”

There was no way I was going to just nod again, so I managed a “yes, please” which came out scratchy and low and perfectly conveyed how desperately I wanted him.

From calm to frenzied kissing and clothes and boots and my long overcoat laying in a heap on the floor, Walker was standing next to the bed stripped bare, his erection and the grin on his face vying for my attention.

“I’m liking your little scraps of lace, Mazie, and I appreciate you wearing them just for me, but they have to go.”

As bold as I’ve ever been in my life, I peel my bra and panties off slowly as I watch his lips press into a thin line and one of his large hands wrapped around the tip of his cock.

With his eyes on me, I lean back and wait for him to make the next move.

“Oh, shit. I almost forgot. Hold on.”

That wasn't the exact reaction I expected from him considering I'd spread my legs wide for him, so there'd be no question how turned on I was. “Um, everything okay?”

“No, I mean yes. It's just been a while, and I forgot protection. And when I say a while, I mean years. I'm clean, but I think I have a condom in my travel kit.”

Releasing a sigh, I laugh. “I'm on the pill and it's been well, not quite years, but it's been more than a while for me, too. Come here.” I opened my arms, and the answering grin was all I needed.

The creak of the bed filled the room when Walker climbed on the tiny mattress. But neither one of those things mattered.

“You're so beautiful, Mazie.”

He kisses my lips, my neck, and right behind my ear, which makes me even wetter than when I first saw him naked. I run my hands over his shoulders and knead his biceps as I trail my fingers down between his legs.

“Where you headed there, sweetheart?” he growls.

Damn, his growls are the sexiest thing ever.

“Oh, you know, south.” I cup my hand under his balls and lightly squeeze.

His low moan sends a thrill up my spine. I lift my legs and press myself against his cock. The sweet pressure takes the edge off my need for him, but I want more. I need him inside of me.

“Not yet. I need to see if you taste like peppermint besides those full lips of yours. Now I've already kissed here and here, but what about...”

Walker takes a nipple in his hot mouth and swirls his tongue around the rigid tip. I press myself closer to him, loving the sensation. He wraps his other hand around my

breast and begins to massage, then flicks that nipple. And soon I'm on sensation overload and need him to move.

My arms drop to my sides and I grip the sheet, then lift my hips and grind myself against him. "Y-y-yes." My voice sounds different to my ears. He has me so wound up.

"Patience. I'm almost done, but there's one more spot I still need to taste." Walker pulls away from me, allowing him space to drop open mouth kisses along my torso, beginning another round of intense pleasure.

Then he settles between my legs and nips the top of each thigh, and slowly licks the sting away. I open wider for him, needing him to touch me right....there, ah, yes.

His tongue flicks my swollen bud slow. Too slow. I need want him to go faster and I must have said something because he chuckles and the vibration from his lips on my engorged flesh only makes me want more.

And he doesn't make me wait long. His thumbs spread my outer lips, and he's flicking me again with his tongue until I think I'll pass out from the intense pleasure. When I feel the first sharp tingle of my orgasm, he ramps me up higher by alternating between my clit, then diving his tongue inside me.

"Please, Walker." The cry escapes me as I crash over the blissful cliff. He continues stroking, prolonging the orgasm until I'm a writhing under him now screaming his name.

"I need...want...you inside me. Now!"

Once again, Walker is a step ahead of me. On his knees, he notches himself at my entrance and pauses. His gaze captures mine as he cradles my face and gives me a slow, sexy smile. Locked on to each other, he enters me, filling me, then pulling out and repeating the process until my body is shaking.

"You're the one, Mazie." He says my name and slams into me. This time, his strokes are short and fast, and I'm on the edge of another orgasm as his thumb presses between my slick folds.

I squeeze my eyes, throw back my head and call out his name again as bright white lights bursts behind my eyelids, my

body vibrates from another orgasm.

He shouts my name as he climaxes after me and we ride the wave until he collapses on top of me. Raining kisses along my jawline, he wraps his hands under me, pulling me on top, holding me close.

“That was....” I couldn’t finish. Because I know I didn’t need to. He experienced it as well.

“Yes, it was. And I was right.”

What?

“Okay, I’ll bite. What were you right about?”

“You taste like peppermint, everywhere.”

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

MAZIE

“YOU’VE GOT SOMETHING RIGHT HERE.” I pointed to the side of my face to show my husband where some icing from his gingerbread cookie had become stuck in his whiskers. My husband. I loved saying that phrase even if I only thought it in my head.

I watched as he brushed his beard, which only managed to spread it further on his face. Devon burst out laughing from across the table of the cookie station Stassi was running this year for us. She was still working at the accounting firm in downtown Pineville but had agreed to help out where ever she could on the tree farm.

Walker had sold his business in Seattle at the beginning of the year after he told his siblings he was moving home and not selling the tree farm. He and Devon had settled in with me in my tiny two-bedroom home while the Sheridan farmhouse was renovated. We’d moved in just in time for Thanksgiving. Devon loved the old staircase, which had been restored and slid down it every day, proclaiming he would show his little brother how to do it soon. Considering Asher was just two months old, soon would definitely have to wait a couple of years.

“Did I get it yet?” Walker rubbed his face against mine, further smearing the sweet treat onto me.

“Hey, I’m not a napkin.” I tried to shield Asher from his father’s antics, switching the sleeping baby to my other side.

“No, you’re not. You’re better than a napkin because now I can lick the icing off your gorgeous face.” Walker wiggled his eyebrows, then dipped down and kissed my cheek. “Mm-mm, tasty. And you smell delicious too. Peppermint, my favorite.” He laughed.

“Ugh! No kissing!” Devon cried out as he slapped his hands over his eyes.

“Hey, bud, you know that’s what parents do, right?” Stassi wrapped an arm around her nephew’s shoulder and chuckled.

“But why would anyone want to do that?” He peeked through his fingers, only to see his dad kissing me more.

“I’m out of here.” Devon ran from the barn, high-fiving his Uncle Hunter on his way to the tire swing.

“Hey Walker, don’t you get enough of that at home? You keep that up and baby number two won’t be far behind that little chunk Mazie’s holding.”

Walker and I eye look at each and grin.

“No way!” Hunter chuckled. “I was just joking. You can’t already be pregnant again. I mean, can you?”

Stassi snickered at her clueless brother. “Um, yeah, she can. What’d you do, sleep through sex ed in high school?”

Walker slapped Hunter on the back. “Someone has to keep the Sheridan name going. Roman and Miranda are doing their best with the girls, but you and Stassi are lagging a bit.”

I laughed softly so as not to wake the baby. “Walker, give them a break. When they find ‘*The One*’ they’ll know. Sometimes it just takes time. We’re proof of that, right?”

Walker picked up the peppermint icing bottle, squirted a blob on his finger, then dabbed it on my lower lip.

Both Hunter and Stassi groaned at their brother's antics. Something my husband would have never done last year or any Christmas before then. "We're getting some cocoa. We'll see you later." The siblings walked away, grumbling about neither being ready to settle down. But I had a feeling they both would in the coming year.

Turning my attention back to my mischievous husband, I ask, "What are you up to, Mr. Sheridan?" Reaching up to wipe the icing off, he snags my wrist.

"Uh, uh, uh. I have plans for that." Leaning down, he licks the frosting from my lip, then kisses me long and slow and oh, my, this man knows how to kiss.

When we pull back for air, I can't help but sigh. The grinch is long and truly gone and in his place is the man I'm so very glad I waited for.



THANK you for reading Mazie and Walker's story. If you have a moment, I would love it if you left a brief review and after you do, please check out the rest of the books in the Country Christmas series -- <https://geni.us/Acountrychristmas>

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Debra Elise, a USA Today Bestselling Author, lives with her husband and their two teenage sons in the beautiful Pacific Northwest. Her books are steamy & sweet featuring later in life characters across several genres including paranormal and suspense.

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