



THE *Scrooge* OF THE

MOUNTAIN

TESSA KLEIN

The Scrooge of the Mountain

Mountain Men of Whispering Winds

Book 7

Tessa Klein

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Chapter 1

Nick

“MERRY CHRISTMAS, NICK!” Quinn says as she slides my coffee across the counter.

Bah! Humbug! I think old Ebenezer was onto something. There’s too much joy in the world this time of year. Too much cheer. And as I glance around Windy Brews, there’s too much tinsel.

I grunt. “Thanksgiving was last week.”

But that detail matters to no one in Whispering Winds. Pumpkins were tossed and garlands went up the day after Halloween. Wreaths and ribbons and twinkling lights were soon to follow. If the residents of this small town had their way, Christmas would be a year-round affair. There’d be public fountains dispensing hot chocolate with Santa’s elves handing out candy canes and marshmallows. Mariah Carey would serenade Main Street from strategically hidden speakers.

Speaking of... All I want for Christmas is not to have this song assault my ears every time I walk inside a building.

“So the countdown to Christmas begins,” Quinn says, readjusting her elf ear hat. “The Christmas market opens this weekend! Are you going?”

I remove the Christmas-themed, buffalo-plaid coffee sleeve from my paper cup and slide it back to her.

“No.”

I sip my coffee, turn, and then head for a booth, ignoring Quinn as she mutters Scrooge under her breath as though it's something I should be ashamed of.

I'm not. I embrace my inner Scrooge wholeheartedly. There's no magic in Christmas for me anymore, and nothing could change that.

I find an open booth as far away from the speakers as possible and check my phone. There's a message from Aiden that I missed.

Aiden: Running late. There's a hot chocolate vendor at the Inn and Juliet wanted some. Want me to grab you one?"

Okay... I was only half-kidding about the fountains but apparently, the town read my mind. Before I have the chance to respond, the door to Windy Brews opens and Aiden and Juliet walk inside.

I sigh when I see him wearing a bright red Santa hat on his head. I groan when I spot Pumpkin, their Corgi, wearing the same elf hat as Quinn. Apparently, not even animals are safe in Whispering Winds' Christmasfication.

"Merry Christmas, Nick," Juliet says as I slide out of the booth.

My jaw tightens as I lean in for a hug. "Morning. How was the trip?"

I've known Aiden my entire life. We spent our childhood running all over this town and surrounding mountains. Never thought I'd see the day he'd leave Whispering Winds, but he's been back and forth between here and there more times than I can count.

He's been helping Juliet as she winds down her role at her old office, transitioning to our joint venture here in Whispering Winds—combining Juliet's matchmaking business with our romantic cabin escapes. The rentals are thriving, but with Juliet's addition, we'll be booked year-round.

"Wonderful! And I have some great news." Juliet's so excited that she's nearly vibrating. "The first couple is set to arrive in two weeks."

That's not good. Well, it is good, but not ideal.

"That's great," I say slowly, forcing a smile as I glance toward Aiden. "I thought we planned on next year. Aren't we fully booked with our current cabins until March?"

"Yes, but I found the *perfect* couple. They're Christmasholics who wanted to spend the holiday together. I know the last cabin still needs work, but Aiden said we could finish it before they arrive."

It's already done. I've been living in it for nearly a month because it's closer to my unfinished cabin than my childhood home. Once the snow starts, it's difficult to trek back and forth up the mountain.

"Christmasholics?" I'm not sure that's a word.

"They're addicted to Christmas," Juliet says, looking at me like I'm the odd one.

Aiden clears his throat. "You'll be done with your cabin by then, right?"

I should've been done more than a month ago, but that's the story with construction. Everything that can go wrong, will go wrong. Delays, delays, delays. And building in the mountains above Whispering Winds proves to be a constant challenge.

"About that..."

There's a brief pause in the conversation, filled in only by the incessant jingling of bells, children laughing, and *Wham!*

"I'm grabbing some scones," Juliet says slowly. "Would you like anything?"

I shake my head. "No, thanks."

Juliet leaves with Pumpkin, and I slide into the booth with Aiden.

"What's going on with your cabin?"

I take a sip of my coffee and sigh, wondering how this is going to work. "It won't be done in a couple of weeks. It's nowhere close."

This was the situation I wanted to avoid. My cabin should've been done well before Christmas, so I wouldn't have to spend it in my childhood home. I'd been living there since I moved back, but once the holiday decorations started going up around town, old memories resurfaced.

Aiden takes a sip of his hot chocolate, narrowing his eyes as he thinks. "And your parents' home? I know you'd rather not stay there over Christmas."

"I'd make it work, but unfortunately, the heat pump finally ate it yesterday. Its replacement is backordered and won't ship until after Christmas."

Aiden sighs. "Must be chilly."

"You could say that."

If I hadn't been at the house when it died, there'd be a lot more problems on my hands. Broken pipes. Flooding. The works. A freezing house is the best-case scenario.

"You can stay with us. It might be a little chaotic with the in-laws visiting, but we'd love to have you."

I wave him off. "Thanks, but I'll pass." I don't want to ruin the festive atmosphere for them. "I have some options. I'll make sure the rental's ready. Juliet has nothing to worry about. I'll be out of there before the couple arrives."

"She's obsessed with this Christmas couple. They're all she's talking about."

"I can tell," I say, nodding to him. "Nice hat."

Aiden shakes his head. "When's the last time you celebrated Christmas?"

"I think you have an idea."

Aiden rubs his eyes as I take a sip from my coffee, leaning back as I look around the coffee shop. There's not a wall that isn't decked with boughs of holly, garlands, or lights. I'm surprised anyone who works here doesn't constantly have headaches from the twinkling lights, cloying smells, and Christmas music.

“The Inn might have room,” Aiden says after a brief pause.

I set my cup down. “No chance. If Windy Brews looks like this, I can’t imagine the Inn.”

“It’s *gorgeous*,” Juliet says, sliding into the booth next to Aiden. “They have a twenty-five-foot Christmas tree. Garlands and holly and lights. And the aromas? I’m not sure what Lizzy is cooking up in that kitchen but it smells divine. And to top it all off...”

I zone out for the next minute or so as Juliet describes my personal hell. After a few minutes, Juliet notices my lack of enthusiasm.

“You don’t like Christmas, do you?”

Aiden’s eyes flare and he tries to mumble something to Juliet but I stop him with a shake of my head.

“It’s not my favorite holiday.” I don’t elaborate. Aiden can fill her in if he wants. This isn’t the time or place.

She opens her mouth to say something, but Aiden puts his hand on her arm, squeezing once as he whispers something in her ear.

“Well, that’s too bad,” she says, sipping her hot chocolate.

Thankfully, that’s the last I hear about Christmas as we move on to something more important: the state of our business. We’re entering a growth phase, so we’ve been looking at hiring more people. An interior designer is at the top of the list. We know how to build great cabins but decorating them leaves much to be desired.

Forty-five minutes and a few scones later, we finally finish our meeting.

“I’ll let you know if there are any cancellations,” Aiden says as I slide out of the booth. “And our home is always open to you.”

I grunt in response. I’ve already resigned myself to roughing it in my unfinished cabin, battling the elements as best I can because living at my parents’ house is a non-starter.

If I'm going to live without heat, I'd rather it be in the mountains.

“Merry—” Juliet says before stopping herself. “Happy holidays,” she sighs.

“Happy holidays,” I grit out even though it pains me.

I'm not usually this miserable to be around but I have a checkered history with Christmas. And seeing all the decorations, hearing all the classic songs, and smelling the same smells brings back some painful memories.

Juliet lights up but I turn, heading for the door, bracing myself for the explosion of Christmas on Main Street.

As I open the door, I pause because it's even worse than I remember.

“Bah... Humbug...” I mutter under my breath before clutching the collar of my coat and marching down the sidewalk.

I need to get out of this holiday hellhole.



A FEW WEEKS LATER...

Aiden: The cabin is yours.

Nick: What?

Aiden: The guy can't make it. He got sick or something. Juliet just found out.

Nick: They canceled?

Aiden: Not yet, but I doubt she'd want to spend Christmas alone.

Nick: Alright.

I may not believe in Christmas miracles, but I can't deny something like one has been handed to me. And now there's only one way to celebrate: A roaring fire, a bowl full of stew, and the only Christmas movie I can stomach: *Die Hard*.

Maybe this Christmas won't be so bad after all.

Chapter 2

Eva

“THIS HAS TO BE A JOKE.”

It’s so unthinkable that I *have* to say it out loud. There’s no way this could happen, right? Riiiiiiight?

I groan as I stare at the message on my phone. A part of me thinks I might be hallucinating them. Maybe I had one too many of my mother’s famous Christmas cookies. Or maybe the marshmallows I added to my hot chocolate were laced with something other than sugar. Maybe, just maybe, this is all some elaborate ploy my mother concocted to keep me with her for Christmas.

There’s no *way* the man I paid a matchmaker to find for me... the man I’m supposed to spend Christmas with... the man who loves this holiday as much as me... used unpasteurized eggs to make his eggnog.

I let out a monstrous groan as I sit down in the trunk of my car. I glance back at all the decorations I’ve just finished loading and then at the others in the middle of my parents’ driveway, waiting for me to load.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. I was supposed to swing by my parents, pick up extra decorations, wish everyone a merry Christmas, and begin the long drive to Whispering Winds—the quaint town I’ll be spending Christmas in. Not anymore...

Evan: I can’t make it. Eva, I’m so sorry. I’m sick... It’s really bad.

Evan: Eggnog... it was the eggnog. I had a friend who raises chickens give me some fresh eggs. They're as organic and natural as eggs can be

Evan: Everything hurts and everything leaks.

I gag a little in my mouth as I re-read the last text.

Evan: It burns. Why does something so sweet burn this much?

There's about a twenty-minute delay where I imagine his body is exorcising a Christmas-flavored demon from his body.

Evan: I'm so sorry. I called Juliet. I let her know. We can reschedule

Twenty minutes later, and I still haven't figured out what to say. This was supposed to be the first time I had a romantic, Christmas experience. I've always been single. I've always spent my Christmas watching my sisters receive glittering jewelry or my brother's perfect family come downstairs in matching pajamas, looking like they're walking out of some LL Bean or Lands' End cover shoot.

I love Christmas, but I hate being reminded how unlucky I am when it comes to my love life. Where's my romantic sleigh ride? Where's my kiss underneath the mistletoe with someone other than my dog? Where's my Christmas miracle?

Eva: Don't worry about it. These things happen. We'll figure things out once you're better.

Eva: Merry Christmas!

He sends me a few Christmas emojis but I'm done. It looks like I'm going to have another repeat this year. Maybe it's for the best. Evan and Eva? It would never work.

A few minutes later, Juliet calls me but I let it go to voicemail. I don't have the heart to answer. Being single never used to bother me, but as I've watched each one of my sisters get married and my brother's family slowly grow, it feels like I'm not experiencing everything Christmas has to offer.

I don't know. All I know is that for the first time in my life, my Christmas spirit is at an all-time low because I'm going to have to cancel all the festive activities I'd planned.

Defeated, I close the door to my car and head back to my parents' house. It feels like a walk of shame as I meander up the driveway and then the sidewalk to the front door.

I pause for a few moments, drumming up the courage to enter. When I finally open the door, smells that should cheer me up don't. If anything, I'm finding the smell of baking gingerbread cloying. And the sound of my favorite Christmas music is grating against my ears. What's happening to me?

My mother's coming down the stairs, her arms filled with her favorite Nutcracker figures.

"What's wrong, Eva?"

"It's off. The cabin. The sleigh ride and Christmas market. Everything."

She sets down the Nutcrackers and then pulls me into a big hug.

"I don't understand. Did a storm of the century knock out an entire town and they had to cancel Christmas?"

I snort. "No, Evan got food poisoning from his eggnog. He can't make it anymore"

She raises an eyebrow. "Unpasteurized eggs?"

"Yeah."

"Rookie mistake, sweetheart."

"I know," I say, letting out a resigned sigh.

"Well," she says, pulling away. "Christmas is still on here. Everyone will be overjoyed to know you'll be joining us. The kids will be ecstatic that they'll be having their favorite Aunt at their table for Christmas dinner."

"Yeah," I say through gritted teeth.

Exactly what I wanted to avoid. Another dinner at the kids' table because apparently, I'm not an adult unless I have a significant other joining me.

Honestly, though—sometimes the kids' table is far more interesting. My niece can talk to ghosts or so she told me this

past Thanksgiving. One of them likes me too, so I have that going for me. Maybe I can parlay a seat at the adult table with my newfound ghost boyfriend. Although, I would probably be escorted elsewhere instead.

“I made your bed, just in case. I thought you might get a little homesick.”

Wow. Am I that predictable? Did my family seriously believe that this was some farce? Something that I’d try out for a little bit but then head back home?

“On second thought,” I say, a fire building inside me. “I’m still going. I’m going to call Juliet tomorrow morning and we’re going to figure it out. There has to be more than one eligible bachelor in Whispering Winds.”

“Honey...”

There’s that look. The same look I used to see when I was a kid. But rather than make me back down, I’m redoubling my effort. I’m not going to let a little tainted eggnog ruin my Christmas cheer.

I’m going to Whispering Winds. I’m going to spend Christmas in a gorgeous cabin in the mountains. I’m going to go on all of those festive activities I planned. And I’m going to have a great time doing it, with or without a man.

“Merry Christmas, Mom. I’ll let you know when I get there.”

I call out for Dasher my Dachshund, the bell jingling on his collar as he trots over to me.

“I’ll keep the room open for you, just in case. It’s okay if you change your mind.”

I kneel and pick up Dasher.

“I’ve never been more certain about anything before.”

But as I load up the last of my decorations into my car, I’m not so sure. Am I going to spend Christmas alone?



AS I DRIVE down the Main Street of Whispering Winds, it feels like I'm entering an entirely new world. Strings of twinkling lights hang between lampposts, each one wrapped in a bright red ribbon to make them look like candy canes. My windows are shut but I can smell cinnamon and clove and hear the faint sound of Christmas music trailing from some unknown location.

Thankfully, the next stop light turns red and I ease onto the breaks. I can hardly breathe as I attempt to take in the overwhelming amount of Christmas spirit around me. There's not a single storefront that isn't festive, as though the entire town banded together to create a magical winter wonderland. With fat, fluffy snowflakes falling lazily from the sky, blanketing buildings and cars and making the bright holiday colors pop, I'm almost certain that I've stumbled across a real-life Christmas village.

And for the first time since I left, I'm at ease. I know my choice to spend the week leading up to Christmas without my family was the right one. If I can't find someone as obsessed with Christmas in a town like this, I never will.

I see children—and a few dogs—in elf outfits ambling down the sidewalk. A few of them clutch candy canes while others sip from what I can only assume is the best hot chocolate in the world. My eyes flare when I see an enormous man in a Christmas sweater hauling a tree twice his size over his shoulder and then dropping it into the bed of a truck.

There's an older, white-haired vendor selling roasted chestnuts on the street corner, and I'm not sure, but I think he might be Santa Claus. He turns, eye twinkling as he taps his nose and winks at me before handing a container to a small child.

A car behind me lays on a horn, yanking me from my trance. But rather than the typical honking sound, the car's horn has been replaced with a rendition of *Jingle Bells*. When

I look through my rear-view mirror, I see a rickety, old truck driven by a bearded man in a Santa hat carrying a huge haul of Christmas trees.

He hits the horn again and *Deck the Halls* begins to play.

Rather than dwell on the legality of the horn, I press my foot on the gas and navigate to a nearby parking spot. I pause, staring at the cheerful atmosphere surrounding me. I love Christmas, but this town *loves* Christmas.

The drive to Whispering Winds was long and tiring, and I'd planned on heading straight to the cabin to rest, but after experiencing the festive energy of this downtown, I feel rejuvenated.

I need one of those hot chocolates, and I know where to find some.

Windy Brews...

After turning off my car, I wrap my scarf around my neck, glove my hands, and brace myself for the bitter cold. By the time I make it to the coffee shop, my cheeks are as rosy as Rudolph's nose.

But once I see the Christmas explosion inside Windy Brews, I forget all about my numb cheeks and tingling fingers. And I can't think of a more fitting song to play at this moment.

Yes, Mr. Crosby—it *is* beginning to look a lot like Christmas, and I'm loving every second of it.

"Welcome to Windy Brews," the barista behind the counter says. "Can I tell you about our holiday drinks?"

You know that giddy feeling before opening your first Christmas present? Or maybe the feeling of watching someone open up the *perfect* gift you found for them. That's how I feel right now. I'm so excited that it feels like I'm shaking as I slowly unwind my scarf from around my neck.

"Yes," I say, nodding my head. "Absolutely, you can."

"Great," the elf-eared barista says, her candy-cane earrings jingling. "You'd be surprised how many people decline."

“A bunch of Scrooges with no Christmas cheer.”

The way she’s staring at me makes me think I’ve found a kindred spirit. “I know, right? Well, you’re in for a treat. We have the best holiday drinks in town.”

“The only ones in town,” a male barista deadpans from behind her.

“They’re still great,” she says with a shrug.

She gives me the rundown, and she’s not wrong. Peppermint bark mochas. Gingerbread, eggnog, s’mores, and candy cane lattes. Christmas-spiced everything. There are so many that it feels like my brain is breaking as I stare at her, my mouth agape

“So what can I get you?”

I swallow. “All of them?”

She grins, and without skipping a beat, she says, “Mistletoe Madness? I’m surprised you know it’s on our secret menu. I haven’t seen you around Windy Brews before.”

“Lucky guess. And you’re right. This is my first time at Windy Brews. In Whispering Winds, actually. I’m here for the holidays.”

“There’s no better place to spend Christmas,” she says as she rings me up. “But I have to ask... Why?”

I snort. “I’m not sure you have time for that story.”

She glances behind me. “No one’s in line, and I love a good story. I’m a writer. Children’s books mostly.”

“Well, in that case...” By the time I finish recounting everything that led me to this point, my drink is ready.

“Wow,” she says. “Hopefully, you two can reconnect after the holidays. Or Juliet could find you a mountain man here.”

“Mountain man?”

“You haven’t seen any?”

“Should I?”

“You can’t miss them. Mine’s coming in right now,” she says, nodding behind me.

I turn around and see a man who barely fits through the door limping toward us. He seems a little grumpy, but a person who turns their walking stick into a candy cane can’t be all that bad. Besides, I doubt she’d be with a grump—I know I never could.

“Juliet had a hand in our meeting,” she says. “I’m Quinn by the way.”

“Eva,” I say before finally taking a sip of my drink.

My eyes flare as the heavily spiced drink wakes up taste buds I never knew I had. Dear lord, this drink is out of this world.

“What did I tell you?” Quinn says.

“It’s like Christmas distilled in a cup. I...” I take another sip, closing my eyes and moaning as the life-changing experience rushes through me all over again.

Quinn slides a small baggy across the counter. “Pop a few of these inside, and you’ll never want anything else.”

“Drugs?” I ask, lifting the bag to inspect it.

“Better. Mom’s peppermint bark.”

“It’s better than her blackberry cobbler.”

I turn around, following the sound of the deepest voice I’ve ever heard. All I see is a mass of flannel. I slowly follow the line of buttons up until I see a beard and the face partially hidden beneath it.

“But it’s more elusive,” Quinn says as I turn back to her. “It’s only available at the Christmas market each weekend. Sells out in minutes unless you have a hookup.”

“How much do I owe you?” I ask, clutching the peppermint bark.

“On the house. Your drink too.”

“I can’t.”

“Of course you can. Call it an early Christmas present or a welcome to Whispering Winds.”

I don't know what to say. I've been in town for less than half an hour, but it feels like home. “Thanks, Quinn. You're so kind. And if everyone is as friendly as you, it's going to be hard to leave in a week.”

“Can't say there's a person nicer than Quinn,” the man says, “But I suppose I'm a little biased.”

Quinn's cheeks flush a deep red, and I'm beginning to think I've taken far too much of Quinn's time.

“The town seems to have that effect on people,” Quinn says.

“Thanks again. I hope to see you around.”

“The town's small so I expect you will. Besides, now you're hooked.” She nods to my drink.

“Drugs,” I mutter.

“I prefer Christmas in a cup.”

I take another sip and then turn around to head out of the shop as Michael Bubl  croons about having a merry little Christmas.

I think I will, Michael. I think I will.



BY THE TIME I make it up the mountain to my cabin, I'm hopped up on Mistletoe Madness and Mom's peppermint bark. If this isn't a drug, I don't know what is because holy hell I'm amped for Christmas right now. And I'm wondering why my family never rented a cabin in the woods for Christmas. Tall, snow-capped, coniferous trees surround the cabin. And with all of the exterior finishes, it resembles a real-life gingerbread house.

Crap. In my hurry to leave, I forgot to pack a gingerbread house. I think. I better double-check. If I did, I'll simply make

the gingerbread and icing from scratch. I'll have one baked, assembled, and decorated before *Elf* finishes.

I park my car, take the final swig of Mistletoe Madness, and crush the cup against the dashboard. *Whoa*. This stuff is dangerous. Is it legal? I try not to think about it. All I know is that when I step outside, it doesn't feel as frigid. I'm warm and energized as I trudge through the winter wonderland.

I take another look at the cabin. It must be the only building left in Whispering Winds that isn't decorated. I asked Juliet to make sure it wasn't decorated so Evan and I could do it together. It's too bad he couldn't make it, but I'm not letting it dampen my Christmas cheer. Nothing could dampen it in a place like this. It's *gorgeous*, and once I finish decorating it will be perfect.

I might have to put in an offer and hope Juliet sells it because I could see myself living in Whispering Winds. It could be the kick I need to get my own interior design company going or open up a Christmas store. That's the *real* dream. But I'm getting ahead of myself. I'm blaming it on the Mistletoe Madness.

I head up the steps of the front porch and find the lockbox. After entering the code, the box opens and reveals... Nothing. There's no key inside the box.

I take another look but there's nowhere for the key to hide. Did they forget to replace it? I'd cleared everything up with Juliet this morning. She's going to help me find another match.

I take my phone out and call Juliet but there's no service, so I heave myself onto the porch swing with a sigh, waiting for some Christmas miracle to fix everything.

But I can't sit here and wait. And I don't want to go back into my car and drive back to Whispering Winds. I won't accept defeat. I hop back to my feet and try the door. To my surprise, it's unlocked.

"Thank you, Whispering Winds."

I head inside and am completely blown away. The pictures did not do this cabin justice. It's *gorgeous* with all its wood

and stone finishes. And when I deck these halls? I'll never want to leave.

They forgot to clean up though. There's a plate in the sink and some food in the fridge, but it doesn't bother me. Nothing could bother me in a place like this.

After taking a quick stroll, I select the best place for the Christmas trees. Both of them, because having one feels inadequate for this space. It's my Christmas this year so I'm going all out.

I take out my phone, load up my Christmas playlist, and let it blast. I've got work to do. And task number one? Remove the *Die Hard* DVD from the coffee table and hide it in a box.

Christmas movies only.

Chapter 3

Nick

SOME PLACES never leave you no matter how long you've been gone. I left Whispering Winds over a decade ago, but there hasn't been a day that I thought of the mountains, my friends, and the old life I'd left behind to live with my grandpa a few states over.

A part of me always knew I'd come back. The other part resisted because I wasn't sure what I'd find when I returned. It's not easy coming home to the town that took your parents. To the home that used to be filled with so much joy and happiness. The first time I stepped inside my childhood home I could only stay a few minutes before I had to leave and book another night at the Inn.

Too many memories. Most of them were good but when the people who shared them with you are no longer around, it felt like I was opening up an old wound. I thought I'd mended it over the years, but some wounds never heal. They might scar over but the damage remains.

It's strange how certain smells can dredge up long-forgotten memories. How some seemingly insignificant object like clock or fountain pen or a painting can pull me back into a different time. Everywhere I looked I saw a part of me, my mom, my dad, and the life we shared.

Before my grandpa passed he made me a promise to return. I reluctantly agreed but pushed off the decision until Aiden contacted me. We used to build forts together in the mountains of Whispering Winds, pretending to be like the mountain men we saw around town. A few of them befriended

us, showing us where to fish and forage and helped us with our forts.

My parents lived in a tamer part of the mountains, but I always wanted to live higher in the mountains, living off the land in a cabin I built myself. Aiden did that, and he was expanding into building rentals. When he offered me a joint partnership with him and his wife, I jumped at the chance. This was my opportunity to live out my dream. It was finally time to come home.

Thankfully, I returned when I did because the house was falling into a state of disrepair. At some point, the handyman my grandfather and I had been paying for routine maintenance stopped working. It could've been avoided if I sold the house, but I never could pull the trigger.

I've spent the last few months fixing up the house, working on cabins with Aiden, and building my own. Most of my time has been spent with Aiden, so the other projects have moved ahead at a snail's pace. With the holiday season in full swing, construction has stopped, so I've been able to pay attention to both of my projects. But it's a little too late.

The heat pump in my parents' home finally gave out and a tree I'd been putting off cutting down took out part of the roof in an ice storm. I've made a few patchwork fixes but it's not enough to make it habitable during winter. Everything I need is either back-ordered or delayed, so without the rental cabin, I'd be roughing it in frigid temperatures or losing my mind to the constant thrum of Christmas music at the Inn.

Thankfully, it hasn't come to that. I'll be spending Christmas in the mountains alone and I can't think of anything better.



UNFORTUNATELY, as I pull up to the cabin I've been living in for the past month, I'm not the only one here.

That shouldn't be there.

I ease to a stop next to the bright red Subaru parked in my spot. It's not Aiden's truck. It's not Juliet's car either. It doesn't belong to anyone I know or want to know for at least one reason: Whoever owns the car believed it was a good idea to turn their rear windshield wiper into a candy cane. And the license plate? XMASEVA.

I've never met this person but I already have an image in my head: They're wearing an obnoxious Christmas sweater, a reindeer antler hat, and the acrid smell of eggnog seeps from their pores as they hum Christmas carols to themselves.

This is the last thing I want to deal with at the end of a long day, spent mostly troubleshooting the busted heater at my parents' house. Nothing I tried worked and my fingers were nearly icicles by the time I finally accepted defeat. The house won't get any heat until the replacement arrives but of course, it's been delayed until after Christmas.

Snow crunches beneath my boots as I slowly walk around the unknown vehicle, searching for what, I'm not sure. I guess I'm confused and hoping for answers. No one should be here. The only booking has been canceled. Right?

Shit. Did Aiden not check? My jaw tightens as I rub the back of my neck, wondering if I should call Juliet. It's no use though. There's no cell service at this cabin, and I'll get my answer soon enough.

"Seriously?" I mutter.

There's a big red ball on the grill of the car but there's only one antler. Hopefully, it didn't cause an accident whenever it flew off. Christmas fanatics are a different breed. I tend to keep my distance but no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to escape them.

That should change once my cabin's built. It's little more than a skeletal frame, boarded up to keep out the weather and wild animals. Once it's done, I won't step foot in Whispering Winds from Halloween until the new year because Christmas begins on November 1st and ends sometime in January.

I'm not sure what I'm going to do about my current situation, but I'm not liking my options. The steps creak as I slowly make my way to the front door, an oversized wreath hanging from it.

That shouldn't be there. And neither should the sound of music.

I haven't touched the door handle and already I hear it. *The* song. The song I've already heard a half dozen times today through no effort on my part. The song that haunts my dreams and creates waking nightmares for me.

As soon as I open the door, every single sense in my body ignites. I'm being hit from all angles by Christmas. Lights that weren't hanging from the mantle when I left twinkle menacingly at me. The smell of spiced cider and balsam and sugar cookies is so strong that I'm pretty sure all the fine hairs in my nostrils are singing. And to make matters worse, I hear someone in the back bedroom, belting out the song. It's muted, but there's no mistaking it.

"Sweet Jesus," I mutter to myself, my limbs refusing to move as I try to comprehend what's happening here. I'd only been gone a few hours. Was this little elf waiting for me to leave? There's Christmas decorations, and then there's *this*.

A slight jingling of bells comes from the couch as I take another step inside the door. I look at the couch and a dog dressed in a gaudy Christmas sweater rounds the corner and trots over to me, panting as he sits in front of me.

"I'm sorry, little guy," I say, kneeling to give him a few good pets and remove the reindeer antler headband from him. I toss it and he flops to his side, inviting me to rub his belly. Gratitude for my kindness, I'm sure.

"Don't you worry," I say, stroking him as his hind leg kicks. "I'll burn the antlers in the wood stove and see to it that you never have to endure another day with..."

Holy shit. Was that an angel?

I caught only a glimpse of the angelic figure as it glided by the bedroom door but it was enough to send my body into

overdrive. The Christmas decorations were driving me to the edge of insanity, but one look at that beauty is making me plummet straight into it.

“Jesus, doggy. Who is that? Who’s your...”

Fuck. My throat is craggy as every muscle in my body seizes. It feels like I’m having a damn heart attack. Like every bit of air has been vacuumed out of my lungs. I’m feverish from a single glance. A full look would destroy me.

I no longer hear the song. My vision tunnels as I focus on the open doorway, urging the Christmas miracle hiding behind the bedroom walls to reappear and finally put an end to this madness.

I stumble to my feet, shutting the door behind me. It’s freezing out, and I don’t want that angel to catch a chill. Her voice. It’s heavenly as she transforms the bane of Christmas into my favorite song. I never thought I’d say this, but I could listen to this song all day if she sang it to me. If she...

“All I want for Christmas...” she sings, her voice growing louder as she moves closer to the open door. “Is youuuuuuuuuOH MY GOD!” she screams as she finally notices me, launching the candy cane she was using as a microphone straight at me.

I don’t even attempt to move because one: It’s not close to hitting me. And two: All my attention is on the gorgeous woman who, after launching said candy cane, forgot to ensure that her towel was wrapped tightly around her body. The towel that’s now in a heap at her feet.

She’s screaming at me but I don’t understand a word she’s saying. It’s like I’m underwater, drowning in the pure, feminine perfection in front of me. I’m a dead man. This angel has killed me where I stand with a body that’s like none I’ve ever seen. Not even Michelangelo could sculpt one like hers—none of the Old Masters in their wildest dreams could ever conceive of this ideal beauty.

The curve of those hips were made for my hands to take hold. Those slender legs would slot perfectly in place around

my waist. Around my face as she suffocates me. A death any man would welcome with open arms and an open mouth.

I've never seen a woman like her in my life, and urges I've never experienced before crash through me like an avalanche. Possessive. Obsessive. I can't describe the feelings surging through me. All I know is that I want her. I need her. And I'll do whatever it takes for her to be mine this Christmas. For... Forever.

"Get out!" she screams, grabbing a Christmas-tree-shaped pillow from the chair next to her and clutching it over her body.

It's too late. I've seen everything. I *want* everything. I take a step forward.

"Stay back!" She makes a move as though to throw the pillow covering her but she stops herself. "I'll... I'll..." She looks around somewhat nervously as she collects her thoughts.

I pause. "Hit me with that pillow?"

Please. For the love of all things Christmas, make it happen.

She pulls another candy cane out of seemingly thin air. How many does she have? Is this the Christmas magic everyone talks about?

"No. This candy cane," she says, waving it in the air.

"I hope your aim is better—"

She throws it right at me but I snatch it out of the air. She groans as I snap it and pop a broken piece in my mouth. Hmm. Better than I remember.

"Thanks," I say, taking another step as it crunches in my mouth "I haven't eaten since breakfast."

A red ornament flies past my head and crashes against the wall. My girl snatches a pine cone from the mantle to reload. "There's no need for that. I'm not going to hurt you... Eva."

She gapes at me, dropping the pine cone. "How did you..."

“Your license plate. You’re not exactly discreet, Christmas Eva.”

Her cheeks flush and I wonder how warm they’d feel against my palm. How the rest of her would feel against me.

“Okay, you know my name. But have you met my scary dog? Take another step and I’ll have him chase you out of here.”

“You mean the one with the flimsy antlers I was just giving belly rubs to?”

“Dasher,” she growls as the Dachshund rolls over in front of me.

I kneel, eyes trained on Eva as I rub his belly. “See? We’re friends. He’s not chasing me anywhere.”

I swallow hard as my gaze travels across the bare parts of her. Shoulders. Arms and hands. Legs, feet, and fucking ankles. There’s not a part of her that isn’t sexy. That I wouldn’t drag my tongue across if given the opportunity. But the way she’s looking at me makes it clear she’s off the menu for me.

“What about you and me? Can we be friends?” My voice is so thick and gravelly that I hardly recognize it. I hardly recognize myself in this whole encounter. It’s like I’m having an out-of-body experience as I’m interacting with a goddess.

But I don’t want to be friends. That would never be enough for me. I want all of Eva. I want her to be mine. I want her to be... my wife?

Jesus. This is not like me. I’ve never met a woman in my life who’s ever had this kind of effect on me. I hardly dated anyone, so the urge to make Eva my wife is crazy.

But what’s crazier is that I don’t even care about the Christmas music blasting my eardrums. I don’t mind seeing all the tinsel and garland and bright lights all around me. All I care about is spending more time with Eva.

There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to extend my time with her. I’d drink eggnog. I’d sing Christmas carols. I’d dress up as Saint Nick so long as she’s the first in line to sit on my lap.

“Who. Are. You?”

Your soulmate, Eva. Fucking yours. That’s who I am.

“And what are you doing in my cabin?”

“The cabin I built?” I breathe.

“You built this?”

I take another step because I need to be closer. I need to see if she smells as good as she looks. Feels as soft as she seems. And for the first time, she doesn’t take a step back or act like she’s going to throw something else at me. She holds her ground as her eyes narrow on mine.

“I did. Along with the rest of the cabins for Juliet’s matchmaking service. I’m Nick.”

I’m less than a foot away from her now as I extend my hand.

She looks at it. “I’m not falling for that,” she says.

“You think it’s some trick? That I’m hoping your pillow slips and I see you naked again?”

For the first time since we’ve met, she lets a smile slip. It’s brief but it hits me square in my chest. I’ll do whatever it takes to see it again.

“Yes,” she says.

“Well, it’s not a trick. I want to shake your hand.” Touch you. I lean in and whisper, “But you’re not completely wrong.”

She lets out a raspy sigh as I pull back, the rest of her beginning to redden.

“I’m going to get dressed,” she says, stepping backward.

Shame that she didn’t turn around.

“And then you’re going to explain to me why you’re inside the cabin I rented. If this is the kind of service you provide...” She shakes her head before stepping back into the bedroom and shutting the door in my face.

She has no idea the kind of service I want to provide.

Breakfast in bed.

All-inclusive.

Full. Fucking. Service.

Chapter 4

Eva

HO-HO-HOLY CRAP.

The man behind the door I'm currently leaning against is like none I've ever met. Everything about him is bigger—his height, broad shoulders, limbs, and his... *ahem*. Beard.

I was never fond of beards until I saw his. Even as I flung a candy cane at him, all I wanted to do was stroke it. Give it a little tug like a kid on Santa's lap. What I wouldn't give to braid sprigs of holly in it or weave it with some tinsel or silver bells. He'd be Father Christmas in the flesh by the time I got through with him.

Phew.

I'm getting *way* too far ahead of myself. I can't share a cabin with a stranger, even though said stranger makes my body melt with a single look from his dark, chocolate eyes or makes me want to take up rock climbing so I could reach his lips.

What is happening to me?

I let out a deep, raspy groan as I pull myself to my feet to get dressed because I'm freezing.

"Everything okay in there?" Nick asks from somewhere behind the door.

How can a voice be that deep? And how can it simultaneously make my entire body erupt in goosebumps and warm me up?

Mountain man magic, apparently. Maybe Quinn was on to something. Maybe I do need to find myself a mountain man. Maybe I need to *get my sugar cookies out of the oven!*

I launch myself onto the bed and yank on the pair of leggings I set out. After rolling off the bed and flat on my face, I brush myself off and swallow my pride because I've got sugar cookies to rescue. I tear my favorite Christmas sweater off a hanger, throw it on along with a pair of reindeer slippers, and high-tail it to the bedroom door in the hope of salvaging what's left of my first batch of Christmas cookies.

"Nick," I say, reaching for the door handle. "Can you please turn off the—"

I swallow the rest of my words as I stare at Nick, munching on one of my sugar cookies.

"These are great," he says, swallowing before devouring the rest of the cookie in a single bite.

I'm not sure what to think as I watch Nick move toward me. "Did you just steal one of my sugar cookies?"

"Consider it a tax," he says, closing the gap between us. "For saving them. A few seconds longer and no one would be enjoying your cookies tonight."

That voice. I swear it's my weakness. Everything that comes out of his mouth sounds so sinful. Like I should be bathing myself in holy water after a short conversation with him. His voice presses buttons I never knew I had. I can feel it all over my body. How is that possible?

"Okay," I breathe, my voice a little raspier than usual. "But that doesn't—"

"Hot chocolate?" Nick proffers a steaming mug towards me that smells heavenly. As it should because it's my secret recipe I've honed over the years. "I saw it on the counter and warmed it up for you."

I swallow as I take it from him. "Thank you."

"Marshmallows too?" His hand hovers above my mug as I wonder what else he has hidden under his sleeves. "I found the

bag in one of the cabinets.”

“Yes.”

In plops a handful of miniature marshmallows.

“And how about a sugar cookie to stir it all up?”

I should be annoyed at how easily this man disarms my defenses, but with a mugful of hot chocolate in my hand, it’s hard to be anything but content.

Am I really going to let him do this to me? Yes. The answer is yes.

I let out a breathy sigh. “’Tis the season.”

Nick grunts and then sets one of my candy-cane-shaped cookies into the mug, stirs once, and then brings his thumb to his lip and sucks.

“Don’t want to waste a drop,” he rasps as I try to catch the breath that was just squeezed out of my lungs and ignore the clench deep in my core.

But it’s useless trying to ignore the chain reaction he sets off inside of me with his deep voice, his irresistible balsam scent, and his commanding presence. I’ve hardly known him for a few minutes but I’m drawn to him like he’s a tall mug of hot chocolate.

“Now that you’re situated, why don’t we talk about how we’re going to share this cabin?”

By the time I realize what he just said, he’s already sitting down on the couch.

“Excuse me? Are you trying to bribe me with my own hot chocolate and sugar cookies to let you stay?”

He smiles and it makes my entire body tingle and my heart race. I take a bite out of my hot-chocolate-infused sugar cookie and wow—I’m in heaven.

“Is it working?” he asks, that smile growing by the second as he drinks me in with those warm eyes. They’re a shade darker than my hot chocolate, but their effect on me is on a different level.

“Who *are* you?” I ask.

Although I mean it rhetorically, he answers it anyway.

“I told you. I’m Nick. I built this cabin. Lived in it for the past month. And even though I intended to live in it alone a little while longer, I don’t mind sharing. ’Tis the season, after all.”

I narrow my eyes.

“Was that sarcasm?”

His smile falters for a moment but then he recovers. “Maybe,” he says, his allure dwindling by the second.

He might have the appearance of a god, but there’s one flaw I won’t abide by: Christmas hating. I might be jumping to conclusions, but my intuition is rarely wrong when it comes to Christmas.

“What are your feelings about Christmas?” I ask, cutting to the chase. Might as well get this over with because I’m not sure I’ll be able to share a cabin with someone who hates my favorite holiday.

Wait, am I considering sharing a cabin with someone I don’t know? Someone the size of a full-grown grizzly bear? Resembles one too?

Maybe...

“It’s complicated,” he says as his jaw tenses.

“How can it be complicated?”

But as soon as the words come out, I want to take them back. And when I see Nick’s smile falter, I feel awful. I’m being judgmental with someone I don’t know anything about. Someone who gifted me hot chocolate and sugar cookies to boot. He can’t be that bad, right?

I can’t turn him away. It’s the season to be merry, and I refuse to be a Grinch, even though he has a tendency to mock my favorite holiday.

“Sorry,” I say before he has a chance to respond. “You don’t have to answer that.”

There's that smile again. "I don't mind."

Nick strokes his beard as he looks at me, heat flooding through me as a silence lingers between us. It's as thick and solid as his muscles. And every second that passes feels like an eternity as my stomach twists into ropy knots.

It's strange how anxious he makes me feel, but not in a bad way. It's a different kind of nervous energy. Anticipation? I'm not sure.

"I guess the shiny veneer of Christmas has worn away for me over the years. Doesn't feel like it used to. Hasn't in many years."

He runs a hand through his thick, wavy hair—the color of roasted chestnuts and much longer than I'm used to seeing on a man. But I'm beginning to realize that Nick's not like most of the men. There's something wild about him. Rough and rugged. The way he talks and moves is different.

It's strange how fast I'm warming up to him.

"Give me a week, and I'll have you belting Mariah Carey along with me."

He laughs. A deep, rumbling laugh that makes my heart beat a little fast and my knees wobble. And when our eyes meet again, I have to brace myself on the doorframe. If looks could scorch, he better watch out where that gaze lands because it could set this cabin on fire.

"That'd be a Christmas miracle for sure," he rasps. "But I'm more interested in the fact that you've come around to sharing this cabin."

I swallow. "I guess I have."

"I'll be sure to stay away from your eggnog though. I don't want to spend Christmas clutching a toilet."

"You know about that?"

"As I said, I work with Juliet."

I sigh. "Well, let the record show that I didn't give him tainted eggnog. He brought that on himself. Besides, my

eggnog is phenomenal. You'll love it."

"No one thinks eggnog is phenomenal."

I don't know why I'm fighting him on this because he's not wrong. Eggnog isn't even my favorite drink. I guess it's the nostalgia of it. But now that I'm thinking about it, I rarely drink more than a mug of it a year—sometimes not at all.

"But that hot chocolate," he says. "That *is* phenomenal."

"You had some?"

"Another tax, Eva."

And for a brief moment, all I can think about is his lips on this mug. Dipped in chocolate. His tongue, swiping away every last drop. His tongue, tasting...

Oh, no. I need to calm down. I don't even know this man, and I'm already daydreaming about him doing... things. I need to get a grip if we're going to share this cabin for—wait. I still don't know why he's living in the cabin I was supposed to be renting.

"Why are you here again?"

"The heater's out in my home. Won't be replaced until after Christmas. I'm building a different cabin for myself, but I've been working on cabins like this one all year, so I've been falling behind schedule. I've got nowhere else to go, Eva. You're not going to kick me to the curb so close to Christmas, right?"

I cross my arms. "Only if you don't mock my favorite holiday."

He raises his hand. "Mountain man's honor."

"Isn't it scout's honor?"

"Nothing stronger than a mountain man's word."

"Is that what you are? A mountain man?"

"I'll let you be the judge of that." He smiles and then pats the spot next to him on the couch. "Why don't we start the

festivities right? I've got the perfect holiday movie queued up for us."

Dasher hops onto the couch and then rests his head on Nick's lap as he stares at me.

"Please don't tell me it's *Die Hard*."

His smile deepens. "I won't tell you it's not *Die Hard*."

I stare at him a bit longer, trying to unpack what he just said but it's getting far too late for me to think straight, so I say. "No. I'll pick the movie."

"So long as you sit next to me, I don't mind." He pats the seat one more time. "I won't bite. Neither will Dasher."

He strokes Dasher's head, staring at me as a small vein of jealousy opens up inside me. I wonder how that hand would feel on me.

I shake myself out of it. "I'll be back."

Nick nods as I disappear into the bedroom again and retrieve a DVD from my suitcase. It's the first Christmas movie I watch once December rolls around. Well, I guess once Halloween ends. I can't help myself, and it will be the fourth time this year that I've watched it.

And if I'm honest, I think it's a fitting movie for Nick. He might learn a thing or two if he pays attention.

I slide it into the player, my body warming up as I feel Nick's gaze following me. It's unsettling how he can make my body react by simply looking at me. I haven't found a Christmas tree for the cabin yet, but his gaze is lighting me up like one.

"Can I get you anything?" I ask as I press play.

"I can't get enough of your cookies."

Tingles radiate all across my body as I turn around and meet his gaze. He's still stroking Dasher's head. I've never seen him more at peace than he is on Nick's lap.

"Okay," I say before heading to the kitchen, surreptitiously splashing some water on my face before returning with a plate

full of cookies.

“Christmas comes early,” Nick says, taking a bite out of one of the snowman-shaped cookies.

I groan. “Could you stop with the cheesy Christmas clichés?”

“Just getting into the Christmas spirit. That’s what you want, right?”

I grab a cookie. “I want you to mean it. Remember what I said? Or have you forgotten your mountain man oath not to mock Christmas?”

He swallows and that smile falters. “You’re right,” he says. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine.”

Maybe there’s hope for him yet.

“So what are we watching?”

“*The Muppet Christmas Carol*. My favorite.”

“Scrooge,” he mutters under his breath.

“Seen it?”

“A long time ago.”

He slides his arm across the back of the couch as he sinks into it. His arm barely touches the back of my head, but it electrifies my entire body. And when I breathe in his scent? Game. Over.

I’m not sure how I’ll be able to focus on this movie.



A FEW THOUGHTS come to mind when I wake from the deepest sleep in recent memory. The first: Where am I? The second: How did I get into bed? And the third: What is that amazing smell?

Thankfully, it doesn’t take long to remember that I’m in the bedroom of my rented cabin, but the answer to the second

question doesn't come as easily. I have no idea how I got into this bed because I don't remember falling asleep. The last thing I remember is the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come making their appearance to old Ebenezer Scrooge. Everything after that is black.

Did Nick carry me to bed? Tuck me in? Did he...

I look down and see I'm still in the same clothes I wore last night. Okay, modesty intact. Kind of. He saw far more of my body than any man ever has.

Ugh... Reliving the moment when my towel slipped yanks me from the cozy feelings I'd been basking in since I woke up. And now I'm so heated that I have to fling the covers off me.

I take a deep breath and immediately my body has a strong reaction to the answer to my third question: Nick's scent is all over the pillow. Another breath. And another...

What's wrong with me? I must be losing my mind because I've never been like this before. Then again, no man has ever left his scent on one of my pillows before. This is new territory.

I sit up, looking for Dasher at the foot of my bed, but he's not there. He's *always* there. I'm surprised he didn't wake me up for his breakfast.

"Dasher?"

When I don't hear him, my brain runs through all sorts of worst-case scenarios. Did Nick let him out and forget to let him back in? Is he out there in nothing but his sweater? Did a bear... No.

I rush out of the bedroom only to find him curled up on the couch, his head resting on a blanket and folded pillow. I guess I'm not the only one drawn to Nick's scent.

Speaking of... I don't see the mountain man around. Maybe he decided that sharing a cabin with a Christmas fanatic wasn't worth it after all. I'd be lying if I said I'm not disappointed. Even though it's clear he doesn't share the same affinity for Christmas as I do, I was looking forward to changing his mind.

“You like him. Don’t you, Dasher.” Dasher shoves his nose into the blanket and then groans. “Why don’t we head outside? I bet you need to potty.” He doesn’t move. He doesn’t even look at me. “Food then?” Nothing. Is he sick? Does this town have a vet I could take him to?

I sit down next to him, giving him a few pets before letting him rest and heading into the kitchen to figure out what smells so good. There’s a note on the kitchen table.

Eva,

Had to get an early start on the day. Some good news on the heater front. Might be getting it earlier than I expected. Maybe you won’t have to spend Christmas with a Scrooge like me after all.

I made a frittata. Yes, mountain me love frittatas. It’s in the oven keeping warm. Dasher’s been fed and he’s been out. He wanted to come with me but I had to put my foot down.

Looking forward to another movie tonight. My turn to pick though. I’ll give you a hint. There’ll be enough action to keep you awake this time.

Nick

P. S. You mentioned wanting to get a tree. I know just the place. I’ll meet you back at the cabin at 2pm.

I can’t help but smile as I read the note a few more times, skipping the first paragraph of course. When I take the frittata out of the oven and give it a taste, I’m in heaven. My mountain man knows how to cook.

Whoa. My mountain man? I’m getting way too far ahead of myself. I hardly know anything about this man. But I think I know someone who might. Looks like I better save room for a little more Mistletoe Madness. Peppermint bark too.



“NICK AS IN NICK BECKER? Are you sure you’re spending Christmas with him?”

I sigh as my first sip of Quinn's amazing Christmas concoction hits me just as hard as it did yesterday.

"I think so? He works with Juliet and Aiden." I set my drink down. "I don't know his last name but he's as big as a house. Long, wavy chestnut hair. A beard so thick that birds and squirrels dream of nesting in it. Muscles like you've never seen."

I go on and on and on describing Nick to Quinn as she sits there, quietly taking it all in until I finally finish.

"We're going to pick out a Christmas tree together."

Quinn blinks at me, opens her mouth, and then closes it again. After breaking off a piece of peppermint bark and carefully chewing it for a few beats, she says, "I don't know what to say."

I press my eyebrows into a thin line. "What do you mean?"

"Nick is the biggest Scrooge in the town. Are you sure this isn't a setup? It wouldn't surprise me if he ended up burning the tree down once you guys get it back to the cabin."

I blow a raspberry with my lips. "No... he wouldn't do that. Right?" I add as Quinn stares at me blankly.

"No," she says, a faraway look on her face. "No, I'm sure he wouldn't," she adds in the least convincing voice I've heard, finally shaking herself out of it.

I sigh. "I know it seems crazy, but I think I might be making some progress. I think by the end of this he might *like* Christmas."

Quinn blinks at me as she sips her drink. "Anything's possible," she says, setting her mug down. "Christmas miracles are real after all. But this one might be pushing it."

The bell at the front of the cafe rings and Quinn's gaze turns to it.

"Juliet's here," she says.

She wanted to meet me in person to apologize for the miscommunication. Halfway down the mountain, I received a

slew of missed calls, voicemails, and texts from her apologizing. Nick was supposed to be leaving the night before I arrived. The rental would've been cleaned the following day with everything prepared for my arrival with my match. But once he canceled—or, more precisely, the eggnog canceled him—her husband thought I was out, so he let Nick know that he could stay as long as he needed to.

He didn't know that I'd communicated with Juliet about coming to the cabin after all. I had so many fun festivities planned and she might be able to find me a last-minute match. Or at the very least, someone I could spend Christmas with so I wouldn't be completely alone.

"I am *so* sorry, Eva," Juliet says as a way of greeting. She slides her purse onto the empty chair next to us before unloading her scarf, gloves, and hat neatly on top.

"It's fine. I mean it."

"No, it's not. This is not how I run my business. How can I make it up to you?" She looks at Quinn as though she just realized she's there. "Quinn!"

She stands up and they hug, quickly chatting about something before they both sit down.

"No, really," I say when Juliet turns back to me. "It's not that big of a deal. Nick's going to pick out a Christmas tree with me later."

And for the second time today, I see another blank face staring back at me. "But he hates everything to do with Christmas," she says, more as a statement of fact than a retort. "I don't see why he—" Her eyes flare. "Actually, that's great. Mistletoe Madness?" She asks, pointing to the cup in front of me.

"Yes," I say, drawing it out. She seemed quick to change subjects. Am I missing something huge with Nick? Some secret that everyone in this town knows but me.

"Should I be worried? You two seem bewildered that Nick wants anything to do with Christmas. Honestly, it's a fun

challenge for me. I've never had to convince anyone of the magic of Christmas before."

Both of them nod slowly in unison but don't respond.

"I could offer another match if you'd like," Juliet finally says. "If Nick becomes too much of a Scrooge."

I'm not sure I know what they mean. Sure Nick seems a little grumpy about the holiday, but I've been around plenty of real-life Scrooges before and they're far more vocal than he's been.

Maybe...

A few thoughts pop into my mind but I shake them off for now. If he hates Christmas as much as Quinn and Juliet believe, then he'd never suffer through the festivities I'm about to put him through. Not even for me. And I wouldn't want him to.

I shake my head. "No. I think I'd break Dasher's heart if I kicked Nick out. I've never seen him so smitten with anyone before."

Dasher spins around beneath my legs as soon as I say Nick. He's *hooked*. But then again... I might be too.

I never thought I'd like someone who doesn't like Christmas. I'll spend the rest of my time trying to bring him over to the light side. We've got gingerbread, hot chocolate, and most importantly, mistletoe.



NERVES SWELL in my chest the whole way up the mountain. I'm not sure what to expect but I'm excited to see what Nick has planned for me. I've never looked for trees with anyone other than my family.

I hope he's able to keep up because I know exactly the kind of tree I'm after, and I'll sort through as many stacks of them as I need to in order to find the perfect one. Usually, the

Christmas tree would already be up by now—backups on standby—but I'm a little out of my element this year.

It's not until I pull up to the cabin and find Nick standing outside dressed in full-flannel, including a trapper hat that I realize just how far out of my element I am.

He's holding an axe, shouldering some rope, and there's a small sled next to him. Or maybe it looks small because he's so big.

"We're not cutting down a tree are we?" I ask when I get out of my car.

Nick just stares at me with the widest smile I've ever seen.

"Are we?" I ask again even though I already know the answer.

What did I get myself into?

Chapter 5

Nick

I WAS fourteen the last time I cut down a Christmas tree. Once I was able to handle an axe, my dad and I would roam the mountain on one of his friends' properties until we found the perfect tree. We'd be at it most of the day, trekking through snow and fighting off the cold with a few thermos' filled with my mother's stew. Another one filled with hot chocolate.

My mom always tried to convince my dad to pick one up at a tree lot, but he'd never budge. And after a few Christmas excursions with him, neither would I. It was our tradition, after all.

It's a different experience, braving the wilderness to find the perfect tree. Sometimes we'd run into mountain men hunting or fishing or collecting firewood. We never talked much during the excursions, but sometimes he'd share a story about my grandpa I hadn't heard, or some strange fact about Christmas I never knew.

I looked forward to this all year. Much like he did with his father. I always thought I'd carry on the tradition with my son or daughter, but I guess life had a different path for me.

But maybe I can start it with Eva.

I glance at her over my shoulder. Her cheeks and nose are a pale pink from the cold—the only parts of her exposed to the wintry air. Even though the sun's hiding behind a blanket of gray sky, she looks radiant—as gorgeous bundled up as she does naked.

Whew. That's a sight I won't forget any time soon. Every inch of her body was imprinted on my mind in an instant.

"We'll take a break up here," I say.

"Finally going to show me what's in that big red sack?"

I smile but it's stiff with frozen cheeks. "A few presents."

"You really are Old Saint Nick, aren't you?"

"I might be. Waiting on the white hairs though."

"I bet they'll come any day now."

"Calling me old?"

She brushes past me, smiling as she says, "Maybe. Try to catch up, old man."

I pause, watching her as she trudges on ahead of me. God she smells amazing. As sweet as her sugar cookies. Spicier than cinnamon. Each time she passes by, it feels like I'm a cartoon character, floating in the air as they're drawn to a pie cooling on a windowsill. I could never get enough of it.

When I finally catch up to her, she's brushing off the snow on a fallen log.

"Does this work?" she asks, gesturing to the log.

"Perfect."

I drop my bag and fish out a thermos full of stew and a couple of bowls. Eva lets out a sigh as she rests her hands on her lap and glances up at me. "What do we have here?"

"Stew," I say, handing her a bowl.

She looks at the bowl and then at me. Over to the thermos and then back to me as she raises an eyebrow. "Dare I ask what kind, Mr. Mountain Man?"

I untwist the cap, setting it down as steam escapes.

"Beef, potatoes, carrots, onions. A few secret ingredients I can't share. It's my mother's recipe."

Eva seems to relax at the mention of my mother.

"No squirrel?"

“Fresh out,” I say, handing her a steaming bowl.

She brings the bowl to her face, smiling as she breathes it in. “Smells delicious.”

“My mom used to make it for me and my dad while we were out hunting for a tree. No matter how frozen we got, her stew always warmed us back up in no time.”

“Good. I might be bundled up, but I’m freezing. Do I just...” She brings the bowl to her lips, tipping it back as she pretends to sip it.

“Spoons,” I say, scratching the back of my neck. “Knew I forgot something.”

I reach into my pack and take out a couple of spoons. I plop one in each of our bowls. She takes a spoonful, brings it to her lips, and blows, stopping me mid-bite.

Holy shit.

Heat pools immediately in my pants. Fuck the stew. Watching the way Eva’s lips purse when she blows heats me faster than this stew ever could. Add that to the list of things I never thought could be sensual.

She moans after taking her first bite, sealing my fate. I’m going to freeze to death out here because all the blood that should be warming my extremities is rushing between my legs.

“That’s amazing,” she says. “Compliments to your mother, she’s an amazing cook.”

“Yes, she was,” I say without thinking.

Eva sets her spoon down. She opens her mouth to say something but then closes it again as she stares up at the snow falling softly on us.

I know she wants to ask about my parents, but it’s not something I normally talk about. Never actually. I can’t remember the last time I talked about them. Even though my parents are an essential part of me, I keep the memories of them locked away inside me as though they’d fly away anytime I mention them.

I'll tell her, but right now isn't the time.

We spend the next fifteen minutes or so finishing off our stew before moving on to hot chocolate as we watch the falling snow. We haven't found our Christmas tree yet but I think I might know the perfect spot. It's an old favorite of my dad's and I have no doubt we'll find the right one.

"We better get going," I say. "We've got a tree to cut down."

Eva's eyes flare. "I hope you don't expect me to wield the axe."

I hop to my feet, offering her my hand. "Eva, I'm surprised. Where's your Christmas spirit?"

"I think it's frozen right now. I'll need more hot chocolate to melt its icy cage."

She grabs my hand and I pull her to her feet—a little too hard because she collides with me. She lets out a breathy gasp as she glances at my lips for a brief moment, and I stare at hers.

I know something that would warm her up. One kiss is all it would take to melt her and everything around us. One. Single...

"We should probably get going or we'll be out here all night."

Wouldn't be the worst thing. Huddling together for warmth in some cave. Fire blazing. Our bodies melded together. A fucking dream, but not for her.

"Yeah," I rasp. "The wolves come out at sunset."

"Wolves?" she gasps, pushing off of me. "There are wolves around us?"

I laugh and she groans. "Hilarious, Nick."

"It was a little funny, right?"

She's fighting a smile as she says, "No."

“Alright. Well, I’ve got another present up my sleeve that might make up for it.”

I reach into my pack and pull out a sugar cookie, handing it over to her.

She snatches it and takes a bite.

“Am I in your good graces again?”

“Find me a Christmas tree and we’ll talk.”

I clap away the sugar from my gloves. “I know just the place.”

“We couldn’t have headed there an hour ago?”

I wrap my arm around her. “What’s the fun in that? It’s about the journey, Eva. Not the destination.”

She groans. “Your last name isn’t Griswold by chance is it?”

“Griswold?”

“Have you seen *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*?”

I shake my head. “No, why?”

“Oh, no reason. That’ll be our next movie.”

I shake my head. “Not so fast. I pick tonight, remember?”

“How could I forget?” she says, sighing. “I can’t wait for *Die Hard*, the Christmas classic.”

I rub her hooded head. “Don’t knock it until you see it.”

“Giving me permission to knock your favorite Christmas movie?”

“Only if you stay awake this time.”

“Look, it was a long day. The fire was warm. The couch was comfy. I regret nothing.”

She gives me a look and then a light jab to my shoulder. “Let’s see this perfect spot.”

“This way,” I say, dragging the sled behind me.



“THERE SHE IS,” I say, dropping my grip on the sled. The gray sky seems to part as we approach, spotlighting the nicest tree we’ve seen all day. The perfect tree. It’s a bit bigger than I’d wanted, and we might have to shave a little off the bottom to get it back inside, but it’ll do.

Besides, I don’t want Eva to freeze out here. I want to get her back to the cabin and warm her up.

“She?” Eva asks. “How do you know it’s a she?”

“I suppose it’s also a he. Douglas Fir have both male and female parts on them.”

Eva snorts. “I see you know your Christmas trees.”

I walk back to the sled and take out my axe, slinging it over my shoulder as I pause next to Eva.

“Spend enough time on the mountain and you pick up a thing or two.”

“Any other fun facts?” she asks, bumping my side with her shoulder.

I think for a few moments. “Mistletoe.”

“What about it?”

“It’s parasitic. Well, partially. They’re photosynthetic, but they also take their nutrients from their host plants. Enough mistletoe on a tree and—” I click my tongue. “No more tree.”

“Photosynthetic?” She bumps me again. “That’s a big word.”

“Big guys use big words too.” I bump her with my hip. “They also use big axes to chop down big trees.”

She sighs. “You’re telling me. How are you going to get this tree back? Because if you’re relying on me, we should cut our losses now.”

I smile as she glances up at me. “I’ve got the sled. Ropes. Muscles. Shouldn’t be more than half an hour’s work. You’ll be taking the first swing. Consider it your initiation.”

Eva hums, and then folds her arms across her chest. “You sure we can’t find a smaller tree?”

“That’s a twist.”

“What?”

“I thought I’d be the one trying to convince you to pick a smaller one.”

“It’s *huge*. We’re talking Rockefeller Center big.”

“It’s big, I’ll give you that. But this is our tree.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“I’m not the one picking it. The tree picked us.”

She snorts. “Okay, so you can talk with trees now? I guess random trivia isn’t the only talent you picked up in the mountains.”

“Spend enough time out here and you’ll understand.”

Her shoulders rise and then fall as she lets out a deep sigh. “This will be interesting. How’s it going to fit again?”

“It’ll fit. Do you trust me?”

“Of course, Mr. Mountain Man.” She sighs. “Of course.”

We spend the next few minutes trimming away excess branches from the bottom of the tree to expose the trunk. I pull back a few branches to give Eva some more room to slide in and take a swing.

“Ready?”

She stares at the tree, at me, and then at the axe. “I can’t even lift the axe. How in the world can I swing it?”

“I’ll help. Come here.”

She drags the axe as she walks over to me, each step sinking into the deep snow.

“Okay,” she says as she positions herself in front of me.

I bite the inside of my mouth as I try to focus on the task at hand and not the beautiful girl backing into me.

I reach around her, sliding my hands down her arms until they enclose hers. “Lift,” I say, my breath fogging the air in front of me.

We lift the axe together. My heart is slamming against my chest as it takes everything inside of me not to toss the axe aside, throw her to the ground, and capture her lips.

She smells heavenly. Feels heavenly. But the thoughts I’m having are anything but.

“Now what?” she asks as she scoots back, her back sliding against the steel rod growing in my pants. Fuck, it’s torture having her this close. It’s freezing out but my body is on fire against hers.

“Now,” I rasp, trying to regain my focus. “We check where we’re aiming.”

I tap it with the blade of the axe.

“Okay.”

I swallow hard as she rubs against me again, repositioning herself.

“Pull back, swing, and drive through the trunk,” I say through gritted teeth. “The axe will take care of the rest.”

The first swing glances off of the trunk. “Try again,” I say. “But take in a deep breath. Focus on that point.”

“Okay.”

A few seconds later the blade bites into the wood with a satisfying *thump* as lumps of snow fall around us, a soft tinkling sound through the branches.

“How’d that feel?”

“Amazing,” Eva says gleefully. “Again?”

“Of course.”

I’ll go until she’s tired or the tree falls because all I want is to hold Eva close. Feel her body on mine. Breathe her in.

“What’s that sound?” Eva asks after the third swing.

The branches above us are rustling even though we stopped swinging.

“Wind probably. Again?” I ask.

“Sure,” she says, unconvinced.

We connect solidly with the trunk. Snow falls through the branches again, but so does a family of raccoons. Two land behind us, screeching as they scurry away while the last one lands next to Eva.

Eva screams, clinging on tight to me as it rears back on its haunches. It chitters at us for a brief moment before spinning around and following the rest of its family up a nearby tree.

“Holy crap,” Eva says, her hands still on my chest. “Has that happened to you before?”

I stroke her back absently as I hold on to her. “Usually on the first swing.”

She stares at me and then gives me a little thump on my chest. “You couldn’t have warned me?”

I snort. “Rite of passage.”

She groans and then moves away from the tree, heading back to the sled.

“I need some more hot chocolate after that.”

I need more Eva after that. I meet her at the sled, dropping the axe on top of it.

“Tired?” She takes a sip of her hot chocolate.

“Not at all,” I say, bending down to open up the pack. “It’s time to take this tree down.”

I pull out my chainsaw and let her rip. I can’t help but laugh when I see Eva’s face.

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“What?”

“You had that chainsaw the entire time?”

I nod.

“Why didn’t you bring it out earlier? And don’t tell me rite of passage.”

Partly. The main reason is that I wanted to feel her body against mine, holding her as we swung the axe together. Can’t get that experience with a chainsaw.

“You’re going to make this up to me.”

“How so?”

“Sleigh ride. Tomorrow. I scheduled it with Evan, but we both know what happened there. I’m not going to show up to some romantic sleigh ride alone.”

“Romantic?”

If this is her idea of me making it up to her, sign me up.

“I mean. I guess. I’ve never been on one but all the sleigh rides in Christmas movies are with couples, right?”

“Sure,” I say. “Sounds great.”

“Good,” she says. “It’s a date.”

“It’s a date?”

Eva mumbles something as her cheeks flush bright red. “No—I mean. That’s what people say, right? It’s not like we’re dating. We don’t know each other. We just met. We—” she shakes her head.

“Easy, Eva. If you get any redder, Santa will enlist you to guide his sled on Christmas Eve. I’m just messing with you a little.”

Not really. By the time we’re done with the sleigh ride, she’ll know it was a date. I’ll make it a sleigh ride she’ll never forget.



“A LITTLE TO THE LEFT—NO, to the left.”

I glance back at her. “Yours or mine?”

“Both of ours,” she says, shaking her head. “We’re facing the same direction.”

I brush a branch out of my face. “Right. I’m kinda losing my sense of direction hugging this tree.”

“I wasn’t the one who wanted the biggest tree in the forest.”

“It’s not that big,” I say, pulling my head back from the branches again to get a better look.

“Nick, I’m not sure if you realize this but you’re not a small man. This tree is not small. It had an entire family of raccoons inside. I’m surprised that all the birds from the *Twelve Days of Christmas* haven’t flown out by now.”

“There’s still a chance. I haven’t cut all the rope yet.”

She stares at me blankly. “Don’t joke like that.”

I laugh and Eva grumbles something and then eyes the tree again.

“I brought boxes of decorations but I’m not sure it will be enough. I might have to raid the Christmas store in town after our sleigh ride tomorrow.”

“There isn’t a Christmas store in Whispering Winds.”

“Well, there should be.”

“You should open one up.”

She pauses for a moment, fingering the sleeves of her sweater. “No. I’m not qualified for something like that.”

I laugh so hard that I nearly let the tree topple over.

“What’s so funny?”

“If you’re not qualified to open up a Christmas store, then who? The only person with more Christmas spirit is Santa Claus and he’s a little busy this time of year.”

“It’s not that. I’d love to open a store, but I don’t have the money or know the first thing about business.”

“You’re a fast learner. I have no doubt we’d find a way to make it work.”

“We?”

I swallow. “Yeah. I know a thing or two about construction. Business. And I think you’d be surprised with how many people in this town would jump at the opportunity to invest in something like this.”

I’d do whatever it takes to keep Eva here. I’ve got plenty saved—haven’t spent a dime of the money my parents and grandparents left me when they passed. What’s mine will be hers...

“Well,” she says, thinking about it. “I’m not sure how it would work. I can’t quit my job.”

“What do you do for a living?”

“Interior designer.”

I swallow hard. It’s like we were meant to find each other.

“We’re hiring an interior designer,” I rasp.

Eva snorts. “You’re pulling out all the stops, aren’t you?”

“Maybe I am.”

She shakes her head, smiling at me. “If I knew any better, I think you might li—*crap!*”

The fire alarm goes off as both of us look at the smoke billowing from the oven. Looks like we won’t be making a gingerbread house.

“Ohnonono,” she moans as she rushes to remove the charred remains of her gingerbread from the oven and I open up a few windows.

By the time I come back to the kitchen, she’s standing in front of what looks like pure carbon.

“Looks like your gingerbread house went up in smoke.”

She tries to glare at me but she can’t keep a straight face. “It did, didn’t it?”

“I guess we’ll have to wait another day for your Christmas tradition.”

She shakes her head. “You’re not going to get out of it that easily. And I’m not going to watch *Die Hard* unless I can split my attention between it and a gingerbread house.” She taps me on my chest, and all I’m thinking about is what I can do to keep her hand there. “I’ve got backups.”

I laugh. “Of course you do. You probably have an extra tree in the back of your car.”

Eva stares at me without saying anything. She doesn’t have to because her response is painted on her face.

“Seriously?”

“What? It’s just a small one. Artificial, but I love it. I haven’t decided where I want to put it yet. Also, I have my entire Christmas village collection that we need to set up, but I’ll save that for another day.”

I shake my head. If you were to ask me a week ago how I planned on spending Christmas, this wouldn’t be it. I’d be spending Christmas like I have for the past decade. Alone. Far away from any festive atmosphere. There’d be no trimmed trees. No gingerbread, boughs of holly, or colored lights. I definitely wouldn’t be setting up an entire Christmas village.

But now that I’ve met Eva—this is the first holiday season where my pain doesn’t feel so bad. I’m remembering what it was like having my parents around rather than dwelling on what I lost.

“Probably lights up too, huh?”

“Of course,” she says, like it’s the most insane thing for me to think otherwise. “If it doesn’t light up, can it be called a Christmas village?”

“I don’t know, you tell me. You seem to be the expert in the field of all things Christmas.”

She affects a haughty tone as she brushes her shoulder. “I believe I am.”

“Ah, a graduate of Santa’s workshop. How’d you get in?”

“Everyone born on Christmas gets invited.”

“A Christmas baby? You really were born to love Christmas.”

“They don’t call me Christmas Eva for nothing.”

“Who’s they?”

“Oh, um—my parents. Friends and family.”

“Boyfriend?”

She swallows. “You know I’m single, Nick. I wouldn’t be using Juliet’s matchmaking service if I wasn’t.”

She starts fidgeting with her fingers. Drags her teeth across her bottom lip. Am I making my Eva nervous? Am I pushing a little too hard?

Or not hard enough... I don’t know because I’ve never felt this way about anyone before. I’m out of my element, acting on instinct. Guided by nothing but urges. I can’t help myself. I can’t stop myself. And I don’t want to until I make Eva mine.

“Yeah,” I rasp. “Just find it hard to believe.”

“What?”

Her voice sounds so light and delicate, and I can’t help but take another step forward for another breath of her intoxicating scent.

“That you’re single.”

“Have you seen my car?” she asks.

I snort-laugh as I picture her Crosstrek reimagined as a reindeer.

“Okay,” I say. “It might be a lot for some men, but for some...” I swallow hard because all I want to do is reach forward, cup her face, and taste those lips once and for all. “I doubt they’d ever get enough of you.”

She opens her mouth to speak but she stops. It takes her a few moments, but then she says, “Let me know when you find one.”

He’s staring right at you, looking at you like you’re the only one he sees. Because you are. You’re the one I want, Eva.

The one I need. The one that turns my insides into a twisted mess that nothing can disentangle except for your lips. Your tongue. Your body.

Jesus, I can't even fucking think straight right now. I don't even remember how we got here. We were in the forest. We cut down a tree. And now I'm standing here, losing my fucking mind because all I want to do is taste the one thing that will soothe it.

"We should start the movie soon," she says, finally. "We have a long day tomorrow."

"I'll grab the backup gingerbread house."

"No," she says. "I'll watch *Die Hard* without a distraction. It's only fair."

I smile. "I'm not choosing *Die Hard*."

"Ohthankgod," she lets out in one breath. "What are you picking?"

"Someone recommended *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*."

"Well, whoever did," Eva says, leaning in, "has a very good taste in movies."

She has no idea what she's doing to me, being this close. A few more seconds and we wouldn't watch any movie. We wouldn't make it to the sleigh ride tomorrow. We'd be here all day—incapable of leaving the bedroom for more than a few minutes at a time.

That's what I want for Christmas.

The only thing I want.

Eva.

We only make it about halfway through the movie before she falls asleep again. This time I'll take the blame. I dragged her all over the mountain to find the perfect tree, and as I look at it, all done up in lights and tinsel. Garland and sparkling ornaments. I know we found the perfect one, and we only had to fight off a family of raccoons to claim it.

That's a battle I'd fight any day because seeing Eva's face light up when we finally erected it, decorating it as we watched the movie, it was all worth it.

Eva's worth it.

And with her head on my lap, a roaring fire, and a Christmas movie droning on in the background, I'm content. Happier than I've ever been in a long time.

And it's all because of Eva.

Chapter 6

Eva

FOR THE SECOND TIME, I wake up in a hazy state. It was another night of amazing sleep but again, I don't remember falling asleep. I especially don't remember resting my head on Nick's lap.

Holy crap.

Does he have... Well, that's a question I already know the answer to because it's staring me right in the face. There's a bulge. A big bulge. And my face is inches away from it.

I slowly move away from it as I try to gather my thoughts.

Nick's fast asleep, sitting up on the couch. Did he not want to move me? Did he move at all after I fell asleep? God, I feel awful knowing he slept like that all night because of me.

But it's not like I asked him to. He could've woken me up, and I'd have gladly walked back to the bedroom. Or he could've left me on the couch and taken the bed. It's only fair that we share the only bed.

Together maybe? *No*. Crazy thoughts. *Penis*. Stop looking.

I let out a long breath as I force myself to look away. For a few seconds. I look back at it and then at Nick, still fast asleep. Finally, I toss a blanket over it and then pull myself off the couch.

I stretch out groaning as my tight muscles refuse to unclench.

"Morning, Eva," Nick says. "How'd you sleep?"

His voice is way deeper in the morning. Wow. And that slightly groggy expression on his face as he stretches his arms above his head and smiles is making my heart flutter.

“Morning, Wood.” My eyes widen the moment it leaves my lips. I only barely resist the urge to clap my hand over my mouth. “Nick. Morning, Nick.”

Wow. Great recovery. It feels like my body has been lit on fire.

“What was that?”

Oh, thank god. He was groaning too loudly to hear me.

“Oh, nothing. I can’t believe I fell asleep again.” I stretch out my arms above my head and then down to my toes but I stop halfway. Going off my luck I’ll pull a hamstring. Both probably if I keep going. “I’m so stiff this morning.”

Oh no. Ohnonono.

“Yeah, same,” Nick says, stretching out as though he’s completely oblivious to the mighty oak rising in his pants.

“Are you alright, Eva? You’re looking flushed.”

“I’m oaky. Okay,” I stammer. “Just going to spruce up for the big sleigh ride. Can’t wait to ride you—with you—*ahem*—today.”

Smooth.

The only Christmas miracle I need right now is from divine intervention. I need to be struck down where I stand. Then again, I’m doing a great job at it myself. Death from embarrassment will claim its first victim.

“Same,” Nick says as he slides one arm across the back of the couch, his other hand resting on his lap. Dangerously close... *stop looking!* I need to get out of here now.

“Alright, well. I’m going to go,” I say as I awkwardly back away, gesturing toward the bedroom and the hour-long shower I’ll need to take to cleanse the cringe away.

“I’ll have coffee and breakfast ready,” he says.

“Great,” I say, disappearing into the bedroom.
Just... Great.



“ARE you sure we’re in the right place?”

It’s only been a few weeks since I signed up for the sleigh ride, but I don’t remember a lodge, especially one as gorgeous as this.

“Cherry Ridge Farm, right?”

I swallow. “Yeah. But this doesn’t look like any farm I’ve seen before.”

“Not what you were expecting from a small town?” Nick asks as he parks the car.

“Not exactly, but I’m glad we finally made it.”

It was a longer drive than I expected, but the only sleigh ride I could book wasn’t in Whispering Winds. If this is anyone’s backup, I wonder what the first choice looks like.

He cuts the engine and the music turns off. “We almost didn’t make it.”

I turn to him, finally peeling my eyes away from the lodge that looks like one enormous gingerbread house. Way better than that monstrosity we made last night, but it probably doesn’t taste as good though.

“Why’s that?”

“If I had to listen to *Sleigh Ride* or *Dashing Through the Snow* one more time...” He shakes his head. “Well, let’s just say that the cliff was beginning to look enticing.”

“It was a little excessive, I guess. I couldn’t help it though. This is going to be my first sleigh ride.”

“Oh yeah?”

“You’ve been?”

“I have.”

“And how was it?”

Nick considers the question for a while. It looks like he’s reaching back for a long forgotten memory.

“I mostly remember the smell,” he says finally.

“Fresh fallen snow?”

He turns to me, a serious expression on his face. “The farts, Eva. I never realized just how much horses farted.” A few seconds later. “And pooped.”

“Oh god,” I mutter as I turn back to face the lodge.

Nick reaches over and places his hand on my leg and immediately I feel my body become electric.

“And we’re going to have a front-row seat.”

Aaaaaand it’s gone.



WELL, as it turns out. Nick wasn’t wrong. There’s been a lot of farts. A couple of poops. But now that we’re about halfway through our sleigh ride, it seems like everything has worked through Rudolph’s system.

“We’re almost there,” Archie says, the gentleman steering our sleigh who looks shockingly similar to Santa Claus. Although, it might be the full Santa Claus uniform he’s wearing.

I sigh. “Over already?”

The sleigh ride has gone better than expected. Rudolph, or as Archie calls him, Dolph, has guided us through a veritable winter wonderland as snow falls softly all around us. We passed through a forest and now we’re riding around a big lake filled with ice skaters, bundled up in caps and scarfs and gliding all over the ice.

It’s quite romantic, to be honest—far more than I expected. But then again, I’d booked this as a date.

“Over?” Archie says. “Oh no, we’re almost to the gazebo. You booked the Deluxe Adventure.”

“The Deluxe Adventure?”

Archie nods, giving the reins a gentle tug as sleigh bells ring. “Upgraded just this morning. Juliet, I believe. You’ve got yourself some nice friends.”

“Yes,” I say. I guess I do. “What does the deluxe adventure entail?”

“It’s our finest package. Most romantic too. Perfect for a couple like yourselves.”

“Oh we’re—”

“That sounds great. Doesn’t it, babe?” Nick says, placing his hand on my leg.

My eyes flare as I tilt my head and stare at Nick. “That’s right... babe.”

Archie launches into everything included

“So how long have you two been together?”

“Not long at all,” Nick says. “It’s our first Christmas together.”

He’s not wrong... And he’s not creating some elaborate story. Is he for real?

My stomach clenches tightly as I stare at his hand on my leg. Even though I’m bundled up in more layers than my mother’s Christmas lasagna, it feels like his hand is on my bare skin.

“It will be a memorable one, I’m sure,” he says.

Nick meets my gaze and my breath hitches in my chest. He’s so damn handsome, especially with flecks of snow in his beard. I take a deep breath, letting it out as I rest my head on his shoulder.

If we’re together, I might as well play the part.

“Here we are,” Archie says not long later.

Nick and I both look at the gorgeous white gazebo, covered in wreaths and lights and festive decorations. And when Archie pulls the sleigh in front of it, I can't help myself. I hop out of the sleigh and trudge through the snow, making my way through the pathway lined with oversized candy canes.

And wow—Archie wasn't wrong. This gazebo *is* romantic and the table is set with all sorts of delicious food, including a self-serve hot chocolate station with all the trimmings.

“Wow.”

Nick wraps his arm around me a few moments later while I'm still trying to take it all in.

“This is amazing.”

Nick smiles. “It's something.”

I shake my head. “I hope you're not getting Christmas'd out. I know it's a lot.”

“Not a chance. There's nothing I wouldn't do to see that smile of yours.”

He brushes his thumb against my lip and I swear I'm melting. He cups my cheek and for a brief moment, I think he's going to kiss me. I want him to kiss me. Where's the mistletoe, dammit? All these decorations and no mistletoe?

But then the carolers start singing.

“Well, maybe there are some things,” Nick says.



BY THE TIME we finish our date, I'm exhausted.

Date. It *was* a date. Although I haven't been on too many in my life, this one felt the most romantic. The kind of date you'd see in a movie: Romantic ambiance—well, the carolers were a bit much after a while. Great food. Wonderful conversation and company. And to top it all off, they cleared

off the lake for a little while so we could have private time ice skating together.

It was short-lived. I have no idea how to ice skate, so I spent more time on my butt than on my feet. Nick was the dark horse. Surprisingly, they had ice skates that fit him and when he laced them up and took off, I was blown away.

You'd never think a man of his size and bulk could look so graceful but he was a veritable Bryan Boitano. If Brian Boitano looked like a full-grown grizzly bear.

Nick surprised me, that's for sure. He continues to surprise me. And I'm sure if Quinn or Juliet could see him now, he'd surprise them too. There's more to this mountain man than meets the eye.

"Worth it?" I ask as we finally pull up to our car.

"Every second, Eva."

He brings my gloved hand to his mouth and kisses it. Warmth spreads to my chest and for the second time today, I'm wondering why I don't carry mistletoe on me.

"Here we are," Archie says. "Don't forget to leave a review. We're on Footloose, Instantcarp, and Tickle Tock."

I understood a few of those words.

"Oh and as a parting gift for patrons of our Deluxe Adventure..."

Archie reaches for something at the foot of the sleigh. A few moments later he pops out with a stick. My eyes light up when I see what's attached to it: A string and some mistletoe.

Maybe I'll be getting my kiss after all.



SPOILER ALERT: I didn't get my kiss.

But I did walk away with some mistletoe on a stick, so there's that. I'm not sure what I'm going to do with it but I

have it in my back pocket. Not literally of course. That could be dangerous unless Nick gets on his knees and... *Nope!*

I might not have gotten my first Christmas kiss yet, but I'm not going to let it dampen my mood. I'm having a wonderful time with Nick and it's only getting better the more time I spend with him. He's been a great sport today, showing me around the area.

Whispering Winds is an amazing little town. I've always loved living in a big city. There's so much to do. People are always out and about. I love the energy.

But after spending a few days here with Nick, I'm warming up to the idea of a small town. Or maybe I'm just warming up to Nick. When I first met him, I wasn't sure what to expect.

Most of the men in my city wear form-fitting suits. They style their hair. They shave their faces. They drone on and on about their *very important* jobs.

He's nothing like them in many ways, but the most important: I like him.

"How long have you lived in Whispering Winds?"

We're strolling down Main Street, a cup of Mistletoe Madness in each of our hands. Quinn was surprised to see us. Or maybe surprised to see Nick. I was able to wrangle him into a Santa hat that I bought at the gift shop in Cherry Ridge Farm.

He grumbled a little but I think he's enjoying himself. He's not the Scrooge people make him out to be.

"I was born here. Lived here until I was fourteen when I went to live with my grandpa."

I swallow but it's painful. There's a small lump forming in my throat because I'm not sure why he'd have to live with his grandpa, but it usually isn't a good story.

Yes, she was. Nick's comment from yesterday surges back to me. I wanted to ask him about his mother, but it didn't feel right. It still doesn't.

“Oh,” I say, not wanting to pry.

Nick gestures to a metal bench, the back of it wrapped up in garland. We both sit for a few moments, watching the stream of people walking down the sidewalk. Everyone’s bundled up. Some are wearing typical wool hats and scarves, but others have on festive hats and sweaters.

I think Nick looks the best.

“My parents died in a car crash when I was fourteen. That’s why I left to live with my Grandpa.”

I don’t know what to say. I place my hand on his leg, trying to soothe him but I know it’s not enough. To lose both of your parents at that young age—I can’t imagine how painful it must have been for him.

The lump in my throat begins to grow, tingling as I try to take a sip of my drink. It’s no use though. It’s unbearable to swallow right now.

“I’m so sorry,” I say, finally, but it sounds more like a croaking noise.

He covers my hand with his, squeezing it gently. “There’s nothing to be sorry about. It was a long time ago.”

I can feel my eyes begin to water as I picture a young Nick. “I can’t imagine what it must be like. Losing both parents.”

“It was rough. I can’t lie. And even though it’s been a while, the pain is still there. It’s more acute during the holidays. They died in an accident a few days before Christmas.”

There’s a sharp pain in my chest as I suck in a deep breath. And when I let it out slowly warm tears fall down my cheek. “I don’t know what to say.”

Nick turns to me and his warm eyes soothe me almost immediately. I’m the one who’s supposed to be comforting him. He removes the glove from his hand and places it on his lap.

My breath catches in my throat for the second time today when he reaches for me, his thumb scorching my skin as he brushes away my tears.

“You don’t have to say anything. I’m fine. Truly. You’ve done more for me than you could possibly know.”

I shake my head. “What do you mean?”

“Ever since my parents passed, I’ve ignored Christmas. I pretended it didn’t exist.” He pauses, turning his attention to the festive atmosphere around us. “To the extent it’s possible,” he adds with a snort.

He takes a few more moments to collect his thoughts, his eyes on the ground but his hand still resting on my cheek. It feels so good.

“But you’ve changed that for me. I was content with spending Christmas the way I always have. Alone and as far away from everyone as possible. Not to return until the new year when all traces of Christmas disappeared. But I don’t want that anymore, Eva. That’s not the life I want to live. That’s not what I want.”

My chest is so tight I can hardly breathe but I ask the one question I’ve been begging to ask with what little air I have.

“What do you want?”

He brushes my lips with his thumb. Strokes my cheek as he looks at me in a way I’ve never been looked at before. The way every woman wants to be looked at by the man she wants. Like she’s the one he wants. Like she’s the only thing in this world that he desires. Needs. Loves.

“If you don’t know by now, let me make it clear to you.”

I try to still my beating heart but it’s no use. I’m no longer in control of my body. I’m no longer in control of anything. Nick’s in control, and I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather want.

“I want you, Eva. There’s nothing in this world that I want more.”

“Not even that working heater?”

“Already have it. It came a few days ago.”

“You...”

He could’ve left the cabin. Could’ve left me all alone. But he stayed.

He smiles. “What? Did you think I was going to give up my time with you?”

I shake my head because I don’t know what to think.

“What do I want?” Nick says, repeating my question. “The thing I want right now is to taste your sweet lips.”

His finger brushes against my lips as I exhale softly, my breath turning to fog in the cold air.

I’d like that too, and when Nick leans forward, it’s going to happen. His lips are mere inches away from mine, but before we’re able to kiss, Juliet interrupts us.

“Nick! Eva! How are you two?”

NONONONONO! is what I want to scream at her as I feign a smile and greet her with a hug.

“Great,” I say, my voice a little tight and brittle.

I’d be better if Nick *finally* kissed me. We were so close.

“How was the sleigh ride?”

I glance at Nick. He’s talking with a man about the size of him with a beard just as large. Juliet’s husband?

“It was amazing. I haven’t had the chance to thank you. The Deluxe Adventure?”

“I know right? Aiden and I went on it last year. I thought you two would love it.”

“Are you working your matchmaking magic?” I ask in whispered tones.

Juliet smiles. “Is it working?”

I smile. “It might be.”

“Well, the Christmas market has some mistletoe in stock.”

“That’s where we’re headed next.”

After talking for a few more minutes, Juliet and her husband leave and it’s just us again.

“Ready for the Christmas market?”

Nick stares at me like he’s ready for something else. So am I, but I know if we start kissing now, we’ll never make it.

Maybe that’s not such a bad idea.

Chapter 7

Nick

I WAS fourteen years old the last time I went to the Whispering Winds Christmas market. My parents dropped me off on the way to a Christmas party so I could meet up with Aiden and a few of my other friends.

It was the last time I saw them before the funeral.

Sometime on their way back, they hit a patch of black ice and spun out into oncoming traffic. The silver lining in it was that it was all over in an instant. Neither of them suffered.

I didn't find out until the next morning when a cop showed up at Aiden's house instead of my parents.

It used to be painful to think about Christmas in Whispering Winds. Christmas in general. I avoided it as best I could because I couldn't bear to feel a sliver of the pain I felt that morning when I realized I'd never see my parents again.

It never really worked. The holiday would come around and the wound I'd tried to heal every new year would be reopened again. Fresh and just as painful.

But for the first time, that's all changed. The pain is still there but it's not the same as it used to be. Rather than dwelling on what I lost, I'm thinking about the good times. All the memories that I buried away.

Being with Eva and seeing Christmas through her eyes is unearthing them. I thought it would be painful to celebrate Christmas without my parents, but now that I have Eva, I want to create more memories.

I want a family of my own.

“Do you want to leave? I’ll understand. If I knew, I wouldn’t have made you come.”

I pull Eva into a hug. I told her everything once she asked me when the last time I’d been here. I didn’t want to dump it on her, but I’m tired of burying it. I don’t want any secrets between us. I want her to know everything about me, scars included.

“You haven’t made me do anything. I want to be here with you. I’m tired of running from my past. I want to make new memories.” I brush the hair out of her face. “With you.”

She smiles at me. “I’d like that too.”

And for a brief moment, I think we’re finally going to kiss. I lean in for it but then her smile fades.

“I’m supposed to leave after Christmas. What then?”

“I’ll go wherever you go.”

“I can’t make you leave. You have your entire life here. You’re building a cabin.”

“But it will be empty without you in it, sweet girl. I don’t want to live here unless it’s with you.”

I don’t want to *live* without you. I’d be a shell. A walking corpse. I’d be nothing if Eva left Whispering Winds after Christmas and never returned.

She swallows as her eyes search my face, looking for something I’m not sure she’s going to find.

“I need to think about this,” she says after what feels like an eternity.

I stroke her face with my fingertips. “Take all the time you need.”

I kiss her forehead, my lips sizzling with electricity the moment they touch her skin. She grabs hold of me, hugging me tightly as snow falls all around us.

We stand like that for what feels like hours until we finally break free. Eva smiles up at me and it warms me up again.

“I have an idea.”

“Yeah?”

“And it involves a little mistletoe. Come on! Let’s go.”

Before I have the chance to respond, she’s off to the races, running around with the mistletoe attached to a stick that Archie gave us earlier. I’m a little annoyed that she’s not using it on us. Instead, she’s running around looking for couples, trying to, in her words, spread a little Christmas cheer.

If she let me control the mistletoe, cheer isn’t the only thing I’d be spreading.

“There’s another couple!” she squeals. “Awww... They have a baby.”

She rushes over to them with me in tow and screams Merry Christmas.

It’s Wolfe. I frown a little because I’m surprised to see him out. He lives about as far up on the mountain as you can get. He needs to because he’s the area’s fire watchman.

Before I have the chance to even say anything, Eva rushes off to the next couple. This wasn’t how I thought I’d spend Christmas, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.



“I’M EXHAUSTED,” Eva says as soon as we walk through the door to the cabin. “But that was the most fun I’ve had in a long time.”

Eva looks back at me, and I realize the meaning of stunning. I can’t move. I can hardly breathe as my girl takes me in, radiant with windswept hair and frost-kissed cheeks. Fuck, she’s gorgeous.

It takes me a few moments but I recover, sealing the frigid air behind the door. “Spreading Christmas cheer is serious

business.”

My heart’s racing—absolutely slamming against my chest as I watch her remove layer after layer. Leaving one or two for me to peel off later.

We dropped by the cabin earlier for a hot minute to feed Dasher. And when Eva went out with him, I set up my own little surprise for her.

For us.

I’d picked up a few things at the Cherry Ridge Farm gift shop. Spread them out on the bed. Left one hanging above it.

She glances up at me as she unlaces her boots. “Glad you’re finally coming around to it.”

I kneel to undo my laces as Dasher hops off the couch and runs over to greet us. Eva angles herself to pick him up but he dodges her, jumping all over me instead as he licks my face.

“Wow. Never thought I’d be replaced that easily.”

I reach into my coat, pulling out a treat I’d picked up earlier for him. He snatches the bone off of the ground as soon as I set it down and scampers off as best he can, given it’s about half his size.

“I know what he likes. Isn’t that right, Dasher?”

“Wow,” Eva says. “You got Dasher a present but not me? I’m hurt.”

“You think I forgot about you?” I shake my head as I stand. “Check the bedroom.”

She makes a face but she backs away slowly, turning a few times as she heads into the bedroom.

I take off my coat, gloves, and shoes and follow after her. She’s already unwrapping the present when I make it into the bedroom.

“Matching pajamas? Are you serious?” She laughs as she holds out her pair in front of her.

She's not going to have a chance to wear it though. Not yet. I have other plans for how we'll be spending either and it doesn't involve clothes.

I swallow hard as I move toward her. "That's not all," I rasp. "You're missing the bonus gift."

Eva turns over the wrapping paper on the bed and then checks the pockets of the pajamas. She's not going to find what she's looking for on the bed.

"Where is it? I don't see it."

"Look up," I say, directing my gaze at the pop of green and red above the bed.

She gasps when she sees it, her eyes flaring as she looks back at me. "Mistletoe?"

I step forward, the gap between us closing. The air around us crackles with tension and energy. Static in my head as everything around me dissolves. All I see is Eva. All I want is Eva. And finally, I'm going to have Eva.

She's mine.

I drag my fingertips lightly across her cheek as her eyes close and she takes in a shuddering breath.

"Did you think those couples at the market were the only ones going to enjoy the magic of mistletoe tonight?" I tunnel my fingers into her hair, gripping as she opens her eyes.

She's staring at me like she's in a haze. Lips parted as she grabs my wrists while I slide my hands to her neck. My thumbs stroke her jawline as she licks her lips.

"I'd hope not," she says, blinking up at me, the haze finally lifting. "I've wanted to kiss you all day."

Heat floods through me as her voice ignites a fire inside me. Possessive. Obsessive. There's nothing that will hold me back from claiming Eva.

"I've wanted to kiss you from the moment I laid eyes on you Eva."

She smiles. "Because I was naked?"

I shake my head. “No, but I’d be lying if I said it didn’t add more fuel to the fire you lit inside me.”

My thumb brushes against her lips and she kisses it, sending a shockwave through my body. And then again when she presses her hands against my chest, dragging them down across my stomach.

“Do you want some more fuel?”

Fucking douse me in it. Burn me until there’s nothing left. I’ll die a happy man to see those tits again. Feel them in my hands. In my mouth.

“Yes,” I growl. “Fucking all of it.”

I tilt my head towards her, my forehead against hers as she drags her hands all over my body. I kiss her nose. Kiss her eyebrows, cheeks, and neck. I’m kissing her at random because I can hardly control myself as I breathe in her scent.

“What do you want?” she asks, gasping as I drag my tongue across her collarbone.

“You, Eva,” I growl against her skin. “All of you.”

I nip at her neck, pulling her sweater off her shoulder as I press my teeth against her skin. Lick again. She’s so fucking soft. Like velvet against my mouth.

“Then take me. I’m all yours.”

Something primal takes over. I don’t think—I react, gripping Eva against me as our mouths slant together. Her lips are lush, softer than silk. Smoother too. Her taste is heavenly as our lips merge, my tongue searching for hers as she whimpers against my lips.

My lips tingle, pulsing as I tug at her hair and deepen our kiss. I could kiss Eva forever and it wouldn’t be long enough. Nudging her lips open with my tongue, I slide into her mouth. Wet and warm and mine. She tastes so fucking good as I fuck her mouth with my tongue.

“Enough fuel?” she asks when we finally break away and her ass collides with the bed.

Her cheeks are a deeper red than when we face the biting cold.

“You have no idea,” I rasp, cupping her cheek.

“I think I might,” she says, glancing down.

“Fuck,” I moan when she strokes the outline of my cock delicately. It’s a light touch but it makes my entire body quake. And when her lips touch the tip, I damn near spill.

“Jesus, Eva,” I rasp, gripping her hair and tugging her back.

“Just saying hello,” she says. “Waking him up.”

She might be staring up at me innocently but those lips and hands are devilish, and her body’s as sinful as the thoughts in my head.

“He’s wide awake. Has been—”

“Since this morning,” she says. “I remember.”

“Has a mind of his own, I’m afraid.”

“I’m not.”

She drags another finger across my cock, and I lose my mind. I tear off my shirt and then push down into the bed, her hair fanning out above her.

“Naked,” I growl. “Now.”

She stares at me for a few moments before she grabs the hem of her sweater and pulls it over her head, revealing the body I’ve dreamed about every single night. Fantasized over. That drove me crazy because all I wanted to do was touch it. Explore it with my hands and mouth.

“Good girl,” I rasp, removing my belt.

She removes her leggings, tossing them aside to reveal a pair of Christmas-themed panties. Green with red ribbons. A pretty little present, just for me.

I let my pants fall, stepping out of them as I grip my cock through my boxer briefs. I’ve never been so hard than I am

right now, staring at that wet spot, darkening the green fabric of her panties.

“Do you like your present?” Eva moans as she slides a hand between her legs.

“You’re not making me wait until Christmas?”

“It’s Christmas Eve. You’re allowed to open one present.”

“Is it?”

“It’s not, but we can pretend. Do you really want to wait?”

“Fuck no,” I bellow as some primal, animalistic noise tears through my chest as I continue stroking, urges building. Need.

Eva’s eyes glaze over as she touches herself, little moans leaving her swollen lips. Never seen a sexier sight than Eva pleasuring herself, her eyes locked on mine. Drifting down the length of my body. My skin’s electric everywhere she looks. And when she finally stares at my cock, I damn near bust as her speed increases and she bites down on her bottom lip.

“Can’t wait any longer. And when the present I’ve had my eye on for a while is spread out in front of me...” I swallow the growl rising in my throat as I stare at that tiny red bow on Eva’s panties. Her eyes track me as I reach for the mistletoe hanging it above the bed.

“What are you going to do with that?”

Eva’s legs are already beginning to shake and we haven’t even started. I stare at the beautiful woman spread out before me like a decadent meal. I don’t even know where to begin. I want to taste every inch of her. Drag my tongue everywhere. I want to palm those tits. Spank her ass. Drive into her until my body gives out.

But first...

I kneel at the foot of the bed, setting the mistletoe to the side. I grip her ankles and yank, pulling her legs off the bed and over my shoulders. My mouth is inches away from her sex. Every muscle in my body tenses as I grab the mistletoe and dangle it above her pussy.

“This,” I growl before diving in.

“Nick!” Eva screams as my mouth encloses around her.

She’s drenched. Her panties are completely soaked through as I suck them into my mouth and revel in her taste.

“Just like that,” she moans, her hips bucking off the bed as her legs clench around my head.

I rest my arm on her belly, pinning her against the bed as I slide a finger beneath her panties to reveal her pink pussy.

“Fucking perfect,” I rasp as I finally taste her unobstructed. “Fucking mine,” I growl as I lap my tongue against her and then take her clit between my lips sucking hard.

She screams as I push that little button, writhing and bucking against me as I hold her in place. She’s not going anywhere. I’m not leaving this pussy until she comes all over my lips.

I yank at her panties hard enough to rip the waistband, sliding it down her thigh as she moans louder and louder. Dasher paws at the door. Fuck, the little guy must think I’m hurting Eva as curses explode from her lips.

“Are you going to come for me, Eva?” I rasp as I continue fucking her with my mouth, sucking every last drop she’s giving me.

“Y-yes,” she moans. “Just like that. Don’t... Don’t...”

She bellows, back arching against the bed as she fists the sheets. I slip a finger inside, so tight as she clenches against me. “That’s it,” I growl. “Come for me.”

I curl my finger inside her, stroking her, pulling her closer to the edge. I glance up when she fists my hair, our eyes locking. Fuck she’s gorgeous. And her face when she’s on the verge of coming? A damn miracle.

“Nick,” she says breathlessly before biting down on her lip. “I’m... I...”

Her eyes close as she wrenches her head back, her body shaking as her orgasm thunders through her, pussy pulsing

against my finger, my lips, trembling as I refuse to stop.

“Good girl,” I rasp when she finally collapses against the bed.

I slide my boxers off as I rise, her legs slipping off my shoulders.

“Remind me to keep mistletoe near year-round,” she says, snorting softly as she stares at me.

My lungs feel like they’re collapsing. Does she know what she’s saying? Does she... “Year-round?” I croak.

She nods. “I’m not letting a mouth like yours go, especially when it’s attached to a face like that. And a body...” She giggles as she traces her finger through the air. “I want you, Nick. Do you want me?”

Everything falls into place. It feels like I’m floating as I stare down at my girl. My perfect present. The only one I love...

I swallow hard. I love Eva. I felt it the moment we met. There was no other way. She might think it’s a Christmas miracle, but I think it’s fate.

We were meant for each other—the last and only puzzle piece in my life.

“Want you?” I rasp as I scoop Eva up and then set her down closer to the headboard. “It’s more than want or desire.”

I spread her legs, sliding in between them as she looks up at me. “It’s a need. An obsession that has taken root and possessed me.” I run my hands all over her perfect body, so smooth and delicate under my oafish hands. “I’m not whole without you. You’re essential. A fundamental part of me. Without you, Eva, I’m nothing.”

Eva gasps, as I unfasten the clasp on the front of her bra, her perfect, luscious tits spilling out.

“Nick,” she moans as I lean forward, cock sliding against her wet folds as I mold my hands against her tits, cradling them and I thumb her tight nipples.

“I-I don’t know what to say.”

A deep, guttural noise spills from her lips as I wrap mine around one of her nipples and suck.

“I do,” I say, finally pulling back. I drag my finger across her lips as flames flicker behind my eyes, burning for the only woman I’ve ever needed like this before. Ever loved like this before. “I love you, Eva.”

She stares at me for a few moments until she finally takes a breath, blinking away unshed tears as her bottom lip trembles.

“Nick,” she says as I wait, my breath lodged in my chest. Finally, she smiles. “I love you,” she says, shaking her head. “I love you too.”

That’s all I need to hear. Eva’s words are the only salve I need.

She reaches down, grabs the mistletoe, and hangs it over her head. “Kiss me.”

I grab the mistletoe, tossing it aside as her eyes flare. “I don’t need mistletoe to kiss my girl,” I rasp, seizing her wrist with my hand, pinning it above her head as I cage her against the bed and kiss her harshly. Wildly. Like a fucking madman.

Her hands rove all over my body, gripping and kneading and clawing at me as the need to claim her surges through me. I can’t think. I’m driving my hips against her as her nails dig into my skin.

“Fucking need you,” I growl against her lips as mine throb. Raw and bruised but I don’t mind.

She takes my bottom lip between her teeth and tugs, releasing it a few seconds later. “Then take me. I’m yours,” she rasps, her breath warm against my ear.

Her hand wraps around my cock, sliding up and down as my vision explodes in colorful lights. “Fuck,” I moan, sinking my lips into the crook of her neck. “You’re going to kill me.”

“I just want to make you come.”

And I damn near do at the sound of her innocent voice saying dirty things. She moans as I kiss her neck, sliding backward onto my knees as I drag my hands all over her body.

“Gorgeous,” I say, my voice hoarse as I mold my hands around her waist, unable to take my eyes off of her body as I slide my cock up and down along her sex.

“God, you’re big,” she says, dipping a finger into her mouth. “All of you.”

She draws a lazy circle in the air around me.

“I’ll try not to crush you,” I say.

“Would you crush me if I asked you to?”

“I’d do anything for you, Eva. But I won’t hurt you.”

She smiles. “I know. But I want to feel you. All of you,” she adds, cupping her breasts. “Don’t make me beg.”

I sigh long, hard, and deeply as something else takes over. “Anything for you,” I rasp as I angle my cock towards her, sliding the head against her slick, hot entrance before pressing in.

She moans and then bites down hard on her lips as she fists the blankets. “Oh, god,” she moans, her eyes sealed shut as I keep pushing. “Nick.”

Fuck, she’s tight, squeezing my tip as I fight for another inch. “Does it hurt?” I reach for her, dragging my hand between her tits before settling on her stomach.

She shakes her head, but I’m not buying it. “Tell me, Eva.” It comes out harsher than I mean, but I can’t help it. I need to know if I’m hurting my girl.

“It’s... it’s so big.” She says as I slip back out, pressing gently into her again as I repeat it slowly. “But I’m fine.”

Her eyes finally meet mine. “This is new for me.”

My heart stops. I stop. I try to swallow but my throat’s dry.

“You’ve never?”

She shakes her head. “Never.”

I can't believe it.

"Why are you staring at me like that?"

"I can't help it, Eva. You're gorgeous." I drag my hands down her sides, feeling her soft skin. "You're perfect. And the only question in my mind is how?"

"How?"

"How lucky can I be to have found someone like you?"

"You're not the only one," she says after a few moments. "You're—*ohmygod!*"

"Claiming my girl," I rasp, finally sliding my cock inside. In and out—deeper with every thrust. I press my palms against the back of her legs, pressing down as I drive deeper into her.

"Just like that. Keep going," she begs as her eyes seal shut again, her tongue rolling over her lips.

I lower myself onto her as I grab her jaw. "Eyes on me," I rasp. "Need your eyes on me."

As soon as she fixes her gaze on me, I kiss her again. My tongue slides into her mouth as her walls squeeze against me. Clenching. Milking. Strangling my cock as she cries out, nails digging into my back.

"Good girl," I moan into her ear. "Mark me."

I keep the pace slow, smooth, and gentle, but it's becoming difficult to hold back. Each thrust sends me closer to the edge and every noise she makes drives me insane with need.

"Harder," she begs. "Don't hold back."

"I don't want to hurt you." I kiss her shoulder, and collarbone and then lick the column of her throat up to her jaw, savoring the taste of her damp skin.

She digs her heels into me, urging me deeper.

"I want you to come," she moans. "I want to feel you come."

Something else takes over and I start driving into her. I can't think straight as the sound of me thrusting hard and deep

into her rents through the air.

Eva screams my name, her pussy clenching around me as I lose all semblance of control. I grab her wrists, pinning them above her head as the bed shakes. It creaks and moans as I grunt, unable to take in enough air.

A few seconds later Eva orgasms, clenching against me as I let go of her wrists, grab her hips, and keep driving. "I love you," she says when she finally comes down. "I'm yours."

And when I hear those words, I unleash, sealing our souls together. I hook my arms beneath hers and pull her against me, holding her tight as I keep spilling inside her.

It feels like we've merged with our bodies entwined. My cock is still pulsing as we breathe in unison, holding each other.

It takes a few minutes, but both of us realize Dasher's barking.

"Poor guy," I say. "Must've thought something bad was happening to you."

"Mmm," Eva moans. "Something happened. And it's going to happen again and again so he better get used to it."

My cock hardens damn near instantly, and I start rocking my hips into hers.

"Already?" She giggles, moaning after I fall onto my back and start thrusting as I grab her tits.

"Can't fucking help it, Eva. Need to see you come again."

She plants her hands on my chest. "You first."

And she starts riding me fucking hard. Fuck, this girl's something else. She's... Mine.

Chapter 8

Eva

IT'S CHRISTMAS MORNING. Snow's falling softly outside. I'm snuggled up in bed with the man I love. I should be happy because this is all I've wanted. Nick's everything I ever wanted in a man and more, but I can't fight the sadness that's been creeping up on me for the past few days anymore.

I'm supposed to leave tomorrow, but I don't want to. I want to stay with Nick but it's not realistic. I can't live in this magical world we've created for ourselves where problems don't exist. Where we can spend our days however we want, baking cookies, watching Christmas movies in front of roaring fires, or more importantly, exploring each other's bodies in front of roaring fires.

I couldn't have asked for a better Christmas. But now that it's coming to an end, are we coming to an end?

As I trace a lazy line across Nick's bare chest, it's the only thought that's in my head. I've been ignoring it for too long. We've been ignoring it. And now that it's here, we have to face it head-on.

"What's wrong?" Nick asks me, jolting me out of my head. "It's Christmas. It's snowing. Do you want me to sing Christmas carols?"

I snort. "I'd love that."

"I only accept payment in the form of kisses."

I press my lips against his, savoring the feel of them against mine. They're perfect. He's perfect. And that's what's

making this so hard.

When we finally break away, he starts belting out *Deck the Halls*. That or someone is strangling a raccoon.

I cover his mouth with my hand. “On second thought, I’m good.”

“Is my voice too angelic for you?”

“That’s not exactly how I’d describe it, but sure.”

He kisses my forehead, and for a brief moment, I feel good again.

“Eva, there’s something wrong. I can see it in your eyes. I can feel it coming off you.”

“Am I that obvious?”

“I know you,” he rasps, nudging me with his nose.

I push gently off of Nick and sit up. “What happens next?”

He cups my cheek, brushing my lips with his thumb. His touch always soothes me, but right now, it’s not working. Nothing can soothe my mind when everything is up in the air.

“Whatever we want. I don’t care, so long as we’re together. I love you, and I’m never letting you go.”

Tingles radiate all over my body. It happens every time he tells me that—a giddiness that consumes me. I’m happy when I’m with Nick. For the first time in my life, everything feels like it makes sense.

“I’m not letting you leave Whispering Winds for me.”

He takes my hand, kissing it. “Whether I go with you, or you stay here, it doesn’t matter to me. I want you. That’s it. Nothing else matters. I’ll talk with Juliet about hiring you. Or as you said, it’s crazy that there isn’t a Christmas store in town. We can build a life here. Or not. My home is with you, wherever that may be.”

I swallow. Maybe I am overthinking things. Maybe it is this straightforward. I want Nick more than anything else.

“Okay,” I say. “I’ll talk with Juliet.”

“And I’ll see about building you a store.”

I snort. “As much as I’d like that, I don’t know the first thing about running a business.”

“Well, I believe in you, Eva.”

I don’t think—I kiss him. Long and hard and deep. I keep kissing him until my lips are sore and my lungs ache because I forget to breathe.

“Are you ready to open presents?” Nick asks when we finally break our kiss.

“I don’t care about the presents...” I sing softly, knowing the response I’ll get from him.

Nick sighs. “Underneath the Christmas tree?”

I smile. Nod. “I just want you for—” Nick kisses me, refusing to allow me to continue quoting the song I think he secretly loves.

“That was just a ploy to get you to kiss me again.”

“You think I need a reason to kiss you? I always want to kiss you.”

“Is there anything else you want?”

Nick smiles and then leans in close, nudging my hair aside as he takes my earlobe into his mouth.

“All I want for Christmas...” He kisses me below my ear, nips at my neck. “Is you,” he rasps before sliding on top of me and claiming my lips again.

And he does have me.

And I have him.

All thanks to a little Christmas magic... And some tainted eggnog.

Epilogue

Nick - 11 Months Later

“MERRY CHRISTMAS, NICK!” Quinn says, sliding two cups of Mistletoe Madness across the counter.

I take both cups in my hand, inspecting the mistletoe pattern on a bright white background. “Wasn’t Thanksgiving a few days ago?”

I glance back at Quinn. She’s wearing her usual elf outfit for this time of year—a green dress with a red collar and candy-cane striped leggings. But the thick leather belt is gone. I’d imagine it would be a tight fit around her belly.

“The countdown begins,” Quinn says smiling.

I shake my head. “It started after Halloween. But if Eva had her way, it would’ve started earlier. Right after Valentine’s Day.”

Quinn laughs. “It almost did, right? You two opened up that Christmas store in record time.”

I smile. “When Eva puts her mind to something, nothing stops her.”

I take a sip of Quinn’s concoction, make a face, and then exhale harshly. “Change the recipe this year?” I ask, biting back tears like I just down a few shots.

“A little more potent?”

“I’d say. Eva’s going to love it.”

“Christmas overload.”

I snort. “I’m not sure that’s possible. Merry Christmas, Quinn. Give my best to Beau. He must be on your case to get off your feet.”

“Speak of the devil,” she says as the door to the coffee shop opens.

Beau’s cane is already decorated like a candy cane, bells jingling as he limps through the cafe, eyes fixed on Quinn. I’ll leave him be for now. Looks like he’s about to make his case to Quinn, and I’ve got my own girl to get to.

“Good luck,” I say, clapping him on his back.

He grunts at me and continues ahead.

The frosty air nips against my nose as I exit the cafe. Christmas music is already playing softly down Main Street as a few volunteers begin wrapping red ribbons around the lampposts.

It used to be grating—all these holiday decorations, but now I look forward to them each year. They no longer remind me of what I lost. They remind me of what I gained.

Eva.

I gained my wife.

It wasn’t a long engagement. It wasn’t a long courtship to begin with. Eva’s not the only one who acts fast. I knew she was going to be my wife the moment I laid eyes on her. People might think I’m crazy. I thought I was a little crazy, but sometimes a little crazy makes for a great life.

And as soon as I see the giant poinsettia flanking her shop, my heart begins to race. A couple of children burst out of the front door, complimentary candy canes in hand while their parents follow behind them with a bag each.

The snow that wasn’t supposed to start until tonight comes down in small, icy flurries as I stare at the facade. Fresh garland filled with red ribbons, silver bells, and pine cones hangs across the cedar awning with two oversized wreaths on either window.

I take a deep breath, filling my lungs with the rich balsam scent and crisp air. I'm not the only one enthralled by the store. A few kids watch as a train chugs along on a track through a thriving Christmas village. It's a custom-made one found nowhere else because it's a replica of Whispering Winds and all its landmarks.

I might be biased, but the log cabin in the mountains is my favorite. I built it myself after I built our cabin. I had to change the plans during construction but the new additions were well worth it. And I can't wait to fill those rooms.

"Are you going to stay out there all day?"

Eva leans against the door, hugging a shawl wrapped around her shoulders.

I sigh as my body reacts as it always does when I see my beautiful wife. My heart pounds. My head pounds. My stomach coils into a tangled mess that puts any box filled with Christmas lights to shame. I can't help it. And the only thing that does is Eva's lips.

"It's freezing out here," she says.

"I have something that can help with that," I say walking over to her.

I hand her a cup and she frowns.

"I was hoping for something else."

"That's coming too."

I wrap my hand around the back of her head, threading my fingers through her hair as I pull her into a deep kiss that feels just as good as our first. Better. I'll never get enough of kissing Eva. The way she tastes. The way she feels. The way she makes my soul scream.

I love her with all my being, and it's less than what my sweet girl deserves.

"That was some kiss," Eva says when we finally pull away.

She sucks in her bottom lip, stumbling a little as she grips onto me.

“I missed you.”

She smiles. “You were gone for fifteen minutes.”

I lean in, whispering. “Felt like an eternity.”

I kiss her again. I kiss her until she pulls away back inside to help another customer.

I wait in the back of the store, watching Eva in her element. Laughing and joking as she maneuvers through the store to find the exact thing her customer needs. I can't keep my eyes off her, and she knows that, turning to me as she rings a young couple up.

When they leave, she takes the cup of Mistletoe Madness to her lips, pausing before she takes a sip. She sets it down, shaking her head.

Something's off. I've never known Eva to snub her favorite drink.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” she says, grabbing hold of my shirt and pulling me into another kiss.

“Worth it,” I rasp against her lips. “Those lips are always worth it.”

She stares up at me as Christmas music plays softly in the background. I tend not to notice it anymore now that it's played almost year-round.

“I love you,” she says.

I kiss her forehead. “I love you too.”

“Come,” she says, tugging my hand. “I've got something for you.”

“Is there mistletoe back there?”

She smiles. “Of course, but this is better.”

She guides me into her office. There's a small box on the desk, wrapped in shiny silver paper and a red ribbon.

“An early Christmas present?”

“Picked it up this morning,” she says, her voice wavering a little. “I hope you like it.”

“You know I love every gift you give me.” I pick up the box and shake it a little as my chest tightens. “And this one sounds special.”

I pull the ribbon, letting it fall away before removing the tape and taking the box in my hands. I open the lid, my eyes fixed on Eva’s greatest gift to me.

“Eva,” I rasp, dropping in on the desk.

I turn and see tears streaming down her cheeks and I waste no time collecting her in my arms, kissing her all over her face.

“Do you like it?” she asks, sobbing through ragged breaths.

“I love it,” I rasp, my own throat closing up. “It’s perfect. The best gift you could have ever given me.”

I kneel, wrapping my arms around her as I kiss her belly.

We’re finally going to fill those empty rooms in our cabin.

“And I love you. Both of you.”

Epilogue

Eva - 10 Years After That

IT'S CHRISTMAS DAY.

The kids have already opened their presents, and based on the mayhem I hear unfolding downstairs, they're having a great time playing with their cousins.

We're at my parents' house this year. Everyone's here. There's not a single empty room in the house, and with the kids sleeping with Nick and me, we've hardly had a moment to ourselves.

Until now.

With the kids distracted with their new gifts, I've slipped away to put on mine. It's for Nick, but once he sees it, I'll enjoy it just as much as him. All I have to do is wait.

Thankfully, it's not long.

The door swings open, and the raucous screams from the kids fill the room until Nick slides inside, closing the door behind us.

"Lock it," I say. "Can't have a repeat of last Christmas."

"I'm looking forward to a repeat," Nick rasps as he takes a few steps forward. "But point taken."

"I'm the only one who gets to see that ass," I say.

Nick lets out a guttural sound, and then takes a swig of something from a mug before cringing.

"You know you don't have to drink that stuff."

“If it wasn’t for this stuff,” he says, shaking the mug. “I wouldn’t have you.”

He downs the rest of the eggnog in his mug, exhaling harshly after swallowing. It’s his Christmas tradition. Drink a glass of eggnog in remembrance of the glass that made my match miss out on our festive getaway.

“You know I never liked the stuff.”

“To the surprise of no one,” he says, setting the mug down. “It’s horrid. How anyone could voluntarily drink that stuff blows my mind.”

I swallow. “How about I blow something else?”

I bite my lip, staring at the tent growing in his pajama bottoms—the same ones that match mine. Another Christmas tradition.

“What did you have in mind?”

I snort. “Shut up and take your pants off.”

I don’t have to ask twice. I’m not sure how much time we have to ourselves, but I want to make the most of us.

His pants hit the floor. “That’s better. Would this be a good time to show you your last Christmas gift?”

“You’re not...”

I shake my head, smiling. “I think you’ll like it just as much. But you have to unwrap it.”

Nick swallows. “Where is it?”

“Beneath the covers.”

Nick lets out a raspy sigh as he gets that look in his eyes. The one that makes my insides twist into knots and sets my body on fire. It’s the way he looked at me the first time he saw me. The way he still looks at me every day.

He grabs the covers, pulling them aside in one smooth movement.

“What do you think?” I ask as his gaze travels the length of my naked body, save my panties.

“Is that...” His throat bobs as he stares at the mistletoe on my panties. Another Christmas tradition. He started it, but I’ve made sure to continue it.

“It is,” I say.

He tears off his shirt, throws it aside, and then slides between my legs. “I told you I don’t need mistletoe to kiss you, especially here,” he rasps before dragging his tongue across me, making my entire body shudder.

I grab his hair involuntarily as he continues to lick me, his hands roving all over my body. I shove my face into a pillow, trying to dampen the noise, but Nick takes it and throws it away.

“I need to hear you. Fucking scream for me, Eva,” he growls before tearing off my panties and diving back in—his hands riveting me in place.

I can’t hold back. I can’t think. My mind is obliterated by the feel of my husband’s mouth devouring me. Sucking and licking. Grunting as he does what he does best.

Making me feel wanted.

Desired.

Making me feel like I’m his special little gift.

I love every second I’m with him.

Especially the ones he spends like this.

It’s one Christmas tradition I hope lasts for as long as we both live.



MERRY CHRISTMAS! For Aiden and Juliet’s story, check out [*The Recluse of the Mountain!*](#) Free in KU.

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