

A romantic couple in winter coats embracing in the snow. The man is on the left, wearing a dark coat, and the woman is on the right, wearing a red coat. They are looking at each other with their foreheads touching. Snowflakes are falling around them.

Jeannette
winters

Winterberry
Christmas Magic

A Barrington Billionaire Winter Novella

WINTERBERRY CHRISTMAS
MAGIC



JEANNETTE WINTERS

An original work of Jeannette Winters, 2023.

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my very dear friend Anne Welch. Not just a fellow author, but a friend who is always ready to brighten someone else's day.

Also a huge thank you to Deepti Mahajan, my editor, at mahajandeepti@hotmail.com. We make a wonderful team.

And to my wonderful readers. You continue to challenge me and I love it. Please keep those emails coming

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WINTERBERRY CHRISTMAS MAGIC

Have you lost track of all the Hendersons and their children? It's time to catch up as they gather for a family Christmas reunion. Enjoy this second chance love story as Mark reveals his secret to the family.

Mark Lane

Being born the son of a Henderson came with some sweet benefits, but also meant your life is under a microscope. I am about to shake that all up. My family is not going to agree with my choice, but I know someone who will.

Adilyn Winterberry is the one person who accepted me for who I am, not what my family expects me to be. Maybe that is because she has no idea that I'm a Henderson.

That's all about to change. The entire Henderson family is spending the holiday together at Winterberry ski lodge. My cousins are looking forward to a week of fun. I know it's going to be a week of trying to keep my secrets.

But I can't hide anything from Adilyn. Now that she knows the truth, the question is, will she still want to be with me? Is our love enough, or will it take Winterberry's Christmas Magic to keep us together?

CHAPTER 1



Mark Lane

“I can’t believe you’re doing this. And you haven’t even discussed this with Mom?” Christopher said, mouth gaping wide open as he stood in my room.

He was talking as though he’d have done anything different. We loved our parents, but when it came to letting us live our lives, well, mom was a bit overprotective, and opinionated. You’d think that would’ve been our dad since he worked for Homeland Security.

“I’m about to turn twenty-three. I don’t need their approval to make a career change,” I explained.

He laughed. “Glad you think that. I have a feeling mom is going to think differently.”

It wasn’t as though my parents had paid for my education. They easily could’ve, but they believed that people appreciate things more if they earned those things themselves. They were right. I, was graduating early with a bachelor’s degree in science and still had a grade point average of 4.0. Just because I nailed my courses, didn’t mean it was the field I wanted to pursue.

“She’ll understand when I decide to tell her and explain why,” I replied.

“And what about Uncle Logan? Does he know you decided not to go to medical school?” he asked.

“Like I said before, no one knows.” *And I regret telling you.* Christopher and I had always been close. He was only two years younger than me and we stuck together. Even though we weren’t twins like Robert and Lindsay

“You expect me to keep this a secret for how long?” he asked.

“Just until after the family reunion.” The last thing I needed was the entire Henderson family telling me what an idiot I was for not following in my uncle’s footsteps.

“Our cousins might be more understanding than the elders, but if you do something that comes in the way of Christmas week on the ski slopes, they might think otherwise. I mean, so far this reunion has been drama-free. It’d be nice to keep it that way,” he stated.

“Trust me, if they don’t find out, then the reunion will be perfect. So, I suggest you keep this quiet,” I warned. There was more I could share with him, but that would only lead to more questions that I wasn’t ready to answer.

“I won’t say a word, but I suggest not telling Robert. You know he’ll tell Lindsay.”

It had to be a twin thing, but those two shared everything. I didn’t mind Robert but telling Lindsay would be like taking out a billboard ad because she wouldn’t just tell everyone, she’d put her own twist on it. And somehow that always made things worse.

There was a knock on my bedroom door and I called out, “It’s open.” One thing about being home from college for the holidays was my mother continuously checking in to see if I needed anything. *Please don’t be coming to ask if I’m hungry again.*

Sure enough, she popped her head inside and asked, “Just checking to see if you guys need anything.”

“Nope. We are just finishing packing,” Christopher said, shooting me a side glance.

Don’t even think about it. If he so much as grinned, Mom would suspect something was up and start the interrogation.

Mom walked into the room and looked at me. “I don’t know if I’ve told you before, but I’m so happy you and your cousin Nicholas suggested this reunion. I have no idea why we haven’t done this before.”

Even though our motivation isn’t the same, I am excited too. I shrugged. I replied with what she could relate to. “It beats all of us trying to squeeze in time together. At least now we will all be at the same location instead of going from one house to another.” And I could do what I really wanted to for Christmas, and it wasn’t skiing.

Our lives had changed drastically almost fifteen years ago when we were introduced to our long-lost family, the Hendersons. Granted, I got along great with my cousins, but my uncles were a different story. They were friendly and welcoming, but each one got the same look in their eyes the moment you started to ask too many questions about the family. It was like there was a huge secret, and nothing was going to make them tell. I mentioned it to my mom once, and guess what? I saw that same damn look in her eyes. She told me she never wanted to look back, and only forward. Also gave me a stern lecture on how I needed to respect her and my uncle’s privacy. No problem. I just wanted that respect extended to me as well. And once my secret came out, I hoped I got the same respect they expected.

Mom smiled and said, “Very true. I just wish everyone could be there.”

“I thought they were. Who can’t come?” I asked.

“Uncle Colton and Aunt Annabella won’t be there,” she sighed. I could see the disappointment in her eyes.

Before I could ask, Christopher did. “How come? I thought they were the last people who wouldn’t show.”

“They are traveling with her parents for the holidays and won’t be back until after the reunion,” she said.

I knew she had wanted her twin brother there. Even though they hadn’t grown up together, they had become close since reconnecting six years ago.

“I’m sure he is bummed that he can’t come too,” I said.

“He sounded it. And Tyler won’t be there either,” she said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Shaun said that it would be too difficult for Tyler to be away from home that long. So, he’s staying with Morgan’s parents, Loras and Elizabeth for the holidays.”

Tyler’s autism affected him in ways that I hadn’t understood in the beginning. Now I did. He might be a couple of years older than me, but he still functioned as a three- or four-year-old. And one thing he needed most in his life was routine.

“I’m surprised that Uncle Shaun and Aunt Morgan are still coming,” I said.

“They won’t be there for the entire week, but I guess they felt like the rest of them. That being together as a family was important. Even if it was only for a short time.”

“I knew it was going to be impossible to get everyone there for a week,” I said. My mom had tried to get them together for one day on Thanksgiving and hadn’t been able to pull it off. I knew that the only reason I was successful was because my younger cousins were looking forward to skiing, snowboarding, and snowmobiling. The parents were calling it a reunion, but my cousins were calling it a vacation.

“You did better than I was ever able to do. And Winterberry Lodge sounds amazing. You never said how you found it,” she prodded.

“Heard about it from a fellow student last semester. When I mentioned it to Nicholas, he said that he had also heard about the place,” I explained. “All the cousins started talking about going on a trip there. With some of them still minors, I thought we might as well try to make it a reunion.” It wasn’t quite that simple, and Mom had to know that.

Christopher nodded. “Skiing is awesome!!!. Can’t wait. I already told Nicholas that I’m going to show him how it’s really done.”

Mom gave Christopher a warning look. “Leave your competitiveness at home. This is a *family* vacation. The last thing we need is one of you boys getting hurt doing something dangerous trying to outdo one another.”

I stopped packing and looked up at her. “Mom, we’re not boys any longer.”

She shook her head. “No, you’re not. But one thing I have learned over the years is that the Henderson competitiveness runs deep in your veins, just like your cousins. Not everything has to be about winning. You can just enjoy spending time together.”

Christopher laughed. “Sure. I’ll enjoy seeing who makes it down the slope first.”

Mom rolled her eyes. “I bet Brice and Lena are giving Nicholas and Johnny that same warning.”

“And probably having just as much success,” Dad said entering the room. “Rhonda, why don’t you stop worrying about the trip? It’s going to be fine. The worst thing that could happen is one of the boys ends up in a cast. Wouldn’t be the first time.”

Her mouth gaped open, and I was sure Dad regretted saying that. But she didn’t hop on that like I expected. “Phil, I’m not worried,” she tried to lie to him.

He kissed her on the forehead and said, “Good. Then leave them to finish packing. Maybe you should go and check on Robert and Lindsay’s progress so we can get going.”

Mom nodded. “I think Lindsay has packed and unpacked ten times already. You’d think she was going on a date instead of a reunion.”

I almost choked at that thought.

“Mom, it is just going to be family there.” *And the people who run the place.*

“You’re right. I’ll go and move her along,” she said and left the room.

Dad turned to Christopher and added, “I want you guys to enjoy this vacation. Just whatever crazy stuff you pull, don’t do it in front of your mother.”

We nodded and he smiled before leaving us alone. I stuffed the last of my clothes in the suitcase and zipped it shut.

“Why do you think Mom is so uptight about the trip?” Christopher asked.

“I’m not sure. Maybe it has to do with Uncle Colton not coming,” I replied. It was the only thing that made sense to me because she got along well with everyone in the family.

“Maybe there’s something big going on that we don’t know about. I wonder if Nicholas knows anything,” he said.

“How about we stay out of it? Whatever it is, let’s hope it stays a secret until....”

“After the reunion. Wow. A family filled with secrets. Good thing I don’t have any,” he grinned.

I cocked a brow. “That makes me think you’re the one with the most.”

“I’m not telling,” he chuckled.

“Exactly.”

Mom was right. *Hendersons are competitive. But we also are secretive.* I bet that I wasn’t the only one going to this reunion hiding something. Just hope it won’t be my secret that was revealed first.

CHAPTER 2



Adilyn Winterberry

“Adilyn, there is a limo pulling up. Please tell me that all the rooms are ready,” my mother said nervously.

“Yes, everything is perfect like it always is.” She nodded and headed to the door ready to greet the guests.

I wiped down the check-in desk one last time just in case there were any fingerprints I’d missed. I knew there weren’t any, but I did it to help ease my mother’s mind. My family was everything to me, and I’d do anything to help save Winterberry Lodge.

What I didn’t understand was why she and my dad were so stressed out. I came home from college so they wouldn’t need to worry about the staffing shortage. My younger brother Billy was handling the ski lifts, snowmobiles, and snowboarding, while I took care of the horse-drawn sleigh ride, ice skating, and maintenance of the lodge rooms. Helping my mother with food prep and serving meals had also fallen on me. *So much for enjoying the holidays. I’ll be lucky to remember my own name by the end of the week.*

Having the lodge fully booked for a week was a great thing. A month ago, my parents had been worried because we had no bookings for that week. It was the first time that had ever happened. But the Henderson family called and offered top dollar to rent the entire lodge. And that made all this extra work worthwhile.

I heard my mother's cheery voice say, "Welcome to Winterberry. I'm Doreen Winterberry and the young lady over there is my daughter Adilyn. And you are?"

"I'm Brice Henderson."

"A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Henderson."

"Please let's use first names. It'll be a lot less confusing with all the Hendersons that will be here," he suggested. Mom nodded and he continued with the introductions. "This is my wife Lena, and our children Nicholas, Gwendelyn, and Johnny." Then he pointed to another couple. "This is my sister Zoey and her husband Bennett."

Zoey smiled and said, "And this is our daughter Pearl, and son Simon."

Simon asked, "When can we go skiing?"

Bennett shook his head. "I believe we discussed this in the limo. We are waiting for all your cousins to arrive first so they can give the rules all at once."

Simon sighed. "Well, I hope they hurry up and get here. I can't wait to ski."

Mom replied, "If you love skiing, then you came to the right place."

"He's never done it before," Zoey said wearily.

Oh, I knew Billy was going to have his hands full with that one. I walked over and asked, "Anyone here not into skiing?"

Gwendelyn and Pearl raised their hands. Pearl said, "I play the piano, and I have a concert on New Year's. I can't risk breaking my wrist."

"I'd rather be sitting by the fire reading," Gwendelyn said.

I grinned. "How does reading on a horse-driven sleigh sound?" Both girls nodded. "Awesome. The weather looks like it will be great all week, so you let me know when you want to go."

"Thank you, Adilyn. I'm sure some of the other children will want to go as well," Lena said.

“There are plenty of things to do besides skiing. If you would like, I can walk you through some options and you let me know what you think the children would like to do,” I offered.

“That would be nice, thank you,” Lena said.

“Let me show you to your rooms, and then I’ll have your bags brought up,” Mother said.

Nicholas said, “Don’t worry about the bags. Johnny and I will grab them.”

“Me too,” Simon added.

Nicholas nodded and the three boys headed back out to the limo. Just as another was pulling up.

My mother stopped and I suggested, “Would you like me to show them to their rooms?”

Smiling at me she said, “That would be lovely, thank you.”

It didn’t take me long to show them their rooms and head back down to help my mother. She waved for me to come over. At this point, I easily picked out each Henderson. Each had dark hair, dark eyes, and a gorgeous year-round tan. I was jealous. Since returning home a couple of months ago, I stopped even dreaming of going on a vacation where I could soak up the sun rays and get a golden tan. The only color I was going to get was a red nose from the fridge air.

“This is my daughter Adilyn. Adilyn, this is Shaun Henderson, his wife Morgan, and their daughter Jenny.”

“Welcome to Winterberry,” I said.

“I’m Dean and this is my wife Tessa and our children, Michael and Avery.” Said a very Henderson-looking gentleman.

Avery said, “Can I go and see Pearl and Gwendelyn now?”

“After we get unpacked,” Tessa said.

Avery huffed, and Micheal said, “Let me guess, no slopes until everyone is here.”

Dean nodded, then said, “This is my brother Logan and his wife Cori.”

Cori added, “And here we have Cloe and Clark who don’t want anything to do with skiing.”

“I’ve already started a list of options that I will have for you all to look at shortly,” I said.

“I hate snow,” Cleo said.

There was always one, and here she was. Just going to have a few more things on that growing list now. “Don’t worry. I have plenty of things that don’t include going out in the snow.”

Cleo smiled. “See. I told you Clark that we didn’t need to go skiing.”

“Why don’t I show you all to your rooms,” I suggested.

This time it took a little longer, as Cleo and Clark seemed to be full of questions. Things that had nothing to do with rooms or the resort. But I smiled my way through it all and rushed back down to the lobby as I rattled off all the names trying to memorize them. I arrived just in time to hear the introductions of the next bunch.

Alex Henderson and his wife Ziva arrived with their three children, Charisa, Jason, and Jaxson. I loved Ziva’s accent. It was so different from the Boston accent that all the others seemed to have.

Caydan and his wife Allyson also arrived with their children, CJ and Lexi. So far, those kids seemed to be the youngest of them all. Since Lexi asked if Santa knew how to find the lodge, I figured she was about five. A very magical age, at least it had been for me.

Once again, I showed them to their rooms. Lexi was so cute and held my hand while we went upstairs. And instead of letting me leave to return to my duties, she insisted on showing me the stuffed animals that she had brought along with her. When I finally returned, the lobby was quiet.

There had been one last family to arrive, Rhonda, her husband Phil, and their four children. I didn't want to go and start my list until I knew they had arrived and were settled in their rooms.

I heard Billy talking to someone as he came into the lobby. I turned around and my heart stopped for a minute. I never thought I'd see him again, and especially here. "Mark? What are you doing here?"

He walked towards me smiling. "Here on vacation."

I didn't know why Billy didn't inform him that there were no rooms available. Now I was stuck doing so, and the last thing I wanted was to send him away. We weren't a couple or anything, but we'd gone out for pizza several times and chatted often. There was no doubt that there had been some chemistry between us. We shared some very passionate kisses under starry skies, but that was as far as it ever went. And all those sweet moments ended abruptly when I had to leave school and return home without even finishing my second semester.

Don't think about it. Doesn't matter right now. Think about work. Think about the lodge.

"Sorry, but it is a private affair this week. You'll need to come back another time. I'll be happy to see if another lodge close by has any vacancies for you," I offered.

"You're sending me away?" he asked. "Not the welcome I expected."

Trust me, not the one I want to be giving you either. I missed that playful grin. I missed our long talks about our dreams for the future. I hope your dreams are coming to fruition because mine are on hold for now.

I grabbed hold of his hand and pulled him to the fireplace where we could speak alone. "Mark, it's not that I don't want you here, because I do. I've been meaning to call or text you, but I've been so busy. The lodge has been rented for a private party and even though I want you here, you can't stay," I explained.

I hadn't realized that we were still holding hands until he brought my hand to his chest. "So, you want me here?"

"Mark. This isn't funny. I have guests that I need to attend to and standing here...flirting with you is unprofessional."

"But what if I was a guest?" he asked.

"You're not, so it doesn't matter, does it?" I reminded him.

My mother came into the lobby and said, "Mark, I see you found my daughter."

I quickly pulled my hand from his, grateful that my back was to her, so she hadn't seen us holding hands.

"Yes, I have. And Billy was kind enough to show me around as well," Mark said.

I turned around and wanted to ask why she was allowing him to stay but instead, Nicholas joined us in the lobby and walked over to Mark.

"About time you got here. We were told no skiing until you arrived," Nicholas said to Mark.

I turned to Mark and asked, "You know him?"

Mark nodded. "Yes, he's my cousin."

"You're...you're a Henderson?" I asked. He nodded and I added, "I thought your last name was Lane."

"It is. My mother is a Henderson," he explained.

I blushed. *And here I was about to kick you out.* "Well, I hope you enjoy your stay with us. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some things I need to do and I guess you have some slopes waiting for you as well."

"So, I can stay?" he teased.

"The lodge is yours to enjoy for the week," I said, saving myself so my mother didn't question that comment later. Turning to Billy, I said, "They are all yours."

Quickly I left the lobby and went into the kitchen. I closed the door and leaned against it. I could feel my heart racing. Mark Lane, the only guy I'd ever had feelings for, was here.

All the deep conversations we had shared came flooding back. I told him all about my life growing up at the lodge and he said that he could relate. He made his life sound so...normal. I even insisted that I paid my own way when we went out to eat because I felt bad that he was a struggling college student just like me.

I felt sick. He was nothing like me. Heck, he was a Henderson. Born with a silver spoon in his mouth and probably thought I was ridiculous for insisting on paying my own way. I can't believe that even for a second, I had thought he was here because of me.

His family chose to have their reunion here. I needed to remind myself of that. I had too many important things to do instead of wasting my time indulging in some childish fantasy that he was here for me.

As though my week wasn't going to be hard enough, now I have to hide my feelings from everyone too.

This was going to be a week from hell and there was nothing I could do about it. But Winterberry Lodge's future was riding on me not screwing this up. The Hendersons were a well-known influential family and if they decided we were subpar, then our reputation would be ruined.

Oh, God. Please let this just be about a family reunion.

I had told him why I needed to leave school. He knew my parents' lodge was in financial trouble. Did he tell the rest of his family? Is that why they are here? Were they scoping out the place to see if they wanted to buy it cheap because my parents were going through difficult times?

It was the only thing that made sense. Why else would such a wealthy family come here to ski and not go to the Alps? Granted, our lodge was nice, but we couldn't compete with a luxury resort.

I needed to make sure my parents didn't find out the real reason behind their visit. With everything they'd put into this week, it would just break their heart. I couldn't let that happen.

CHAPTER 3



Mark

As much as I wanted to, I couldn't blow off skiing with my cousins. I knew they would have only insisted or worse, guessed why I was really here. To see Adilyn.

I know it didn't make any sense, but I had always been able to talk to her. She seemed to always understand and listen. With all the changes I was thinking about making, I missed having her as my sounding board.

Christopher could never be that for me. He might want to, but he'd end up cracking jokes which were not going to help any. If anything, he knew just the buttons to push to piss me off.

But Christopher was busy with Robert, Johnny, and Simon doing exactly what our mother said not to do, race down the slopes. I hadn't seen Nicholas yet, but I'm sure he was involved in that somehow. I was staying the hell out of it. I was sure that as the eldest cousin, I was going to be blamed for whatever went wrong. I gave them a stern warning not to do anything foolish and left them in Billy's hands.

Kind of odd, because Billy looked around Robert's age. Maybe not even that old. But from what I saw on the slopes, he knew what he was doing, and had no problem taking charge. Despite Christopher being several years older, he put him in his place for being reckless.

The younger, more inexperienced ones like Simon, Jaxson, and Jason had opted for snowboarding on the smaller slopes. When I checked on them, all I heard was a bunch of laughter and what looked more like a snowball fight than snowboarding.

This left me with what I needed, time to go and find Adilyn. I had been looking forward to seeing her again, and even though she was shocked to find me at the lodge, the sparkle in her green eyes was still there when she looked up at me. Well, at least it was until she learned I was a Henderson. Everything about her demeanor changed then. I needed to find out why.

When I entered the lodge, I had hoped to find her in the lobby, but instead, I ran into my aunts Zoey, Ziva, Lena, and Morgan by the fireplace. I would've thought my mother would have been with them. All she had spoken about before the trip was how much she was looking forward to spending time doing nothing but relaxing. Maybe that meant avoiding everyone, and she was in her room.

It was possible that she also felt like me. I loved my family even though I didn't know my aunts and uncles well. But we'd never spent such a long period of time together. The reunion was a good idea, and it would provide us with time to learn more about each other. Yet there were a lot of strong personalities all under one roof and that also meant some heads could butt.

I was planning on doing some hiding away myself, but only so I could have some time alone with Adilyn.

"Have you seen my mother?" I asked, trying to give a hint that I noticed her absence.

Lena answered, "Yes, she was with us earlier, but now she's with Cori and Tessa in the kitchen. Doreen mentioned baking Christmas cookies with the kids, and those three seemed more excited than the kids and quickly volunteered to help."

Sounded like Mom. She used to love doing that kind of stuff with us when we were young. "Was Adilyn in there too?"

Zoey and Morgan looked at each other and smiled. Then Zoey said, “No. But I do know where she is.”

And you are going to make me ask.

Morgan snickered and said, “She’s in the library.”

Ziva added, “Guess she’s preparing some craft stuff to do with the kids later. Maybe she could use your help.”

Zoey chuckled. “Oh, I’m sure she could.”

“So much to do, and she is all...alone in there,” Lena grinned.

This kind of stuff was what I expected from Christopher, not my aunts. Shaking my head, I looked around searching for which door that may be.

Ziva pointed to the one behind the staircase. “That’s the library.”

“Thanks,” I said, “but I don’t want to disturb her.” They all giggled in response.

I had never heard grown women giggling. Maybe that wasn’t their first round of wine.

“I think you are disturbing her even through the closed door,” Morgan said.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said, truly puzzled as to why they were teasing me like this.

“Well, Christopher and Nicholas seem to be under the impression that you are smitten with Adilyn,” Lena stated.

More than smitten. Whatever that is.

“Why would they think such a thing?” I asked.

Ziva said, “Guess you were seen in a very intimate conversation earlier.”

I laughed. “Oh yes, we were. She was telling me that I had to leave.”

“What?” Lena asked in a shocked tone.

Nodding, I said, “She even offered to help me find another resort to stay at.”

“Why would she do such a thing?” Zoey asked.

“She didn’t realize that I was here with all of you.”

“Well, that’s still odd. I mean why would she assume you weren’t with us?” Zoey asked.

“Maybe because I am so well-behaved,” I said, turning the tables and teasing them. Not something I normally did with them. Even after all these years, I wasn’t still as comfortable as I would have liked to be. *Hopefully, this vacation together will help change that.*

“Does this mean you’re not going to go and ask Adilyn if she needs help?” Lena asked. “Because some of the younger children had a list of things they wanted to do, but she’s just one person and we don’t want her to feel as though she must cater to their every whim. Goodness knows we don’t.”

Ziva said, “Someone should go and tell her.”

Not a very subtle hint, but it did provide me with the excuse to go and see her. “Fine. I’ll tell her. Any other messages you want me to deliver for you?” I said, playing it off as though this wasn’t my idea.

“Not that we can think of at the moment, but we’ll let you know later,” Morgan said.

I left them sitting there sipping their wine knowing damn well they would be gossiping about me. But for now, I think they bought my explanation. I would rather no one learnt that Adilyn wasn’t a stranger to me.

Even though it was a library and not her room, I still knocked on the door. “Come in,” she called out. When I got inside, I closed the door behind me. “I heard you could use some help.”

She sighed and slumped on the leather couch. “Help? I think a miracle is more like it. You wouldn’t believe all the things your cousins want to do.” Before I could say a word, she sat upright and blurted out. “I’m so sorry. That was

unprofessional of me. I wasn't complaining. Just a little overwhelmed for a moment."

Before she left college, she had told me that the lodge was in financial trouble. From what I saw, the only staff they had was themselves. With all of us Hendersons here now, who wouldn't be overwhelmed? *Damn it. I did this to them. To her.* I felt horrible. Coming here was supposed to accomplish two things, first to help them financially without offending her, and second to get an opportunity to talk to her like we used to. I hoped that talking to her would help me clear the clutter in my head.

Right now, my issues would need to wait. I couldn't add anything more to her plate. Adilyn needed me, not in the way I might want, and I knew she'd never ask, but she still needed me.

I walked over and sat down beside her. "Adilyn, if anyone knows that Hendersons can make someone feel... overwhelmed, it's me."

"You? You're one of them," she said.

Somehow it sounded more like an acquisition instead of a statement. "I am, but..." *How much do I tell her?* "But we weren't close to them, and only connected about fifteen years ago." There was so much more to tell, like the fact that I never knew I was related to them until I was eight. How my mother hid that from us and even now all these years later, no one will explain to us why

"So, you were eight?" she asked.

I nodded. "Yes. And even after that, we mostly saw them on special occasions, and holidays. They are very busy, and we also have our own lives."

"Yet you are all here together now. Something must have changed," she said.

She was right, something did. As we grew older, the cousins found that we had more in common than we thought and were becoming friends, not just family. At least most of them were. I still felt like an outsider no matter how much I

tried to feel otherwise. The fact that Christopher was still on the slopes skiing with them and I wasn't...was evidence enough.

"I think it's the cousins wanting to spend the time together that made this happen." I was just the one who pushed to ensure that it did.

"And they just so happened to want to come to Winterberry Lodge?" she asked.

That was the question I was hoping to avoid for a little longer. But I couldn't bring myself to lie to Adilyn. "No. I suggested it."

She wasn't pleased to learn that. Her green eyes darkened. "Why? I mean, you knew this was my family's resort. You knew why I was here instead of at college with you. So why bring your family here?" she asked. "Are they looking at Winterberry as an... investment?"

I didn't want to insult her, but this wasn't the type of business they were into. They owned multi-billion-dollar corporations. The only resort they owned was in some foreign country, Tabiq. Even that was a five-star luxury resort on a tropical island. I'd never been, but I'd seen the photos. *Sorry, Adilyn. Winterberry is no tropical resort.*

Even though I was a Henderson by blood, I wasn't born into their money. I remember my parents struggling, especially when my dad was in the military. We had been shuffled all over the world following him from one base to another. When he left the service, he joined Homeland Security. That was the first time my parents had bought a home and put down some roots.

I wanted to tell her that I was the same guy she knew in college. My being related to Hendersons hadn't changed that.

"I don't talk business with my uncles if that is what you're asking."

"Then why here?" she questioned again.

"Because I wanted to talk to you."

She looked at me as though waiting for me to say it was just a joke, but it wasn't. I had missed her ever since she left months ago. I never expected to, but I did.

“You do know there are easier ways to go about it than to drag your family here. I mean I haven't heard from you since you checked on me to make sure I made it home. So why now?”

And this was something I liked about Adilyn. She made me think about what I wanted and why. “I...I am thinking about my future. And... decided not to go to medical school.” There. I said it.

She looked surprised. “You don't want to be a doctor?” I shook my head. “Okay. That's your choice. What does that have to do with me?”

When said like that, the answer was clear. It had nothing to do with her. “I guess I just wanted to tell you.”

“Once again, a text message would've been a lot easier. So, how did your family take the news?” she asked.

“And here lies the problem. I haven't told them yet.” I admitted.

“And you felt as though Winterberry was the best place to do that?”

“No. I don't plan on telling them until we return home. I just want to enjoy this vacation,” I said. *Enjoy being here with you.*

“Well, I'm glad one of us will be enjoying this. I'm going to be so busy that I don't think I'll get any sleep until this week is over.” She picked up the papers that were on the table in front of her and held them out to me. “I'm only one person. How can I do all this?”

I took the papers and didn't even bother looking at them. Instead, I laid them back on the table and said, “No one expects you to. This is a wish list, not a demand list. Why don't you pick a couple of things to do each day and let the rest slide?”

“I can’t do that. Do you know what will happen if your family doesn’t think this is an amazing vacation? They could ruin our reputation. My parents are struggling as it is to keep the lodge open. It could sink us,” she stated, her fear showing clearly in her eyes.

“Then let me help you,” I offered.

“You can’t do that. You’re a guest here,” she said sternly.

“As a guest, I believe I can spend my time as I wish.”

“Yes, but not...”

“Helping you is what I want to do,” I replied honestly.

“Mark, you should be on the slopes having fun,” she stated.

I reached out and took her hand in mine. “I’d rather be here with you. I meant it, Adilyn. I suggested Winterberry Lodge because I wanted to be here with you. So let me help.”

“This isn’t right,” she said.

“I’m not taking no for an answer,” I stated firmly.

Adilyn said, “Fine. You can help. How do you feel about glitter and glue?”

“Sounds messy.”

“Exactly. We are going to make traditional Christmas ornaments. If you want to help, we will be starting in an hour,” she said.

That would take away the possibility of finding time for us to have a deep conversation. As much as I wanted to talk about my new career choice with her, I’d rather spend the little time we had talking about us. Yeah. I liked her. I wasn’t sure how a long-distance relationship would work, or even if she was interested in dating me. But hopefully, I’d have that answer by the end of the week.

“Yeah. Glitter and glue. Sounds like fun,” I said sarcastically.

“Oh, the fun will be the clean-up. Because glitter is the worst.”

“And yet you picked this craft to do?” I asked.

“It’s not about me. It’s about the guests. It’s my job to ensure I do everything I can to make them happy. And the girls really want to do it.”

I smiled and said, “I am a guest you know.”

“I know. I reminded you of that a moment ago,” she said.

“So you want me happy?” I asked.

“Of course. What do you want?”

A kiss for starters because I’ve missed your kisses more than you know.

“I’ll tell you later,” I said, still holding her hand.

Adilyn looked me in the eyes and said, “By later do you mean after the vacation?”

I shook my head. “After we finish with the ornaments.” *When we’re not rushed, and when we can finish what we start.*

She smiled. “Guess there is just one thing left to do.” *Kiss me?* “Go and set everything up. How do you feel about carrying the boxes for me?”

Since she wasn’t picking up on my thoughts, I better find a way to stop thinking them. It was only going to make this a long, frustrating, vacation.

“Lead the way,” I said, reluctantly releasing her hand.

As we left the library, I saw my aunts, just sitting there smiling.

I didn’t say a word and just followed Adilyn. Whatever they thought wasn’t even close to the truth. And with any luck, they won’t guess what that was.

CHAPTER 4



Adilyn

I felt horrible. Yesterday Mark had agreed to help with the ornament decoration activity and had ended up helping me with so much more. Granted, I was grateful for the extra set of hands, but I could tell by my mother's expression that she wasn't pleased at all.

No one was up yet, and this awkward silence was killing me. As I took the fresh pecan rolls out of the oven I said, "Mom, I want to explain about yesterday."

"Not sure what you could say that would make it any better. I mean, Mark is a guest at the lodge, and you had him help you clean the horse stall? I'm so embarrassed," she said, taking her frustrations out on the eggs she was whisking by hand.

"I know it sounds bad, but he offered."

She stopped and looked at me. "He was being nice. You shouldn't have accepted," she snapped.

My father entered the kitchen to hear her. "Doreen, please tell me you're not discussing Mark with her now."

"Paul, do not defend what she did. You know it was wrong," she warned him.

Dad remained calm. "Wrong? Let us hear her explanation before jumping to any conclusions."

“Ha. She said he offered. That doesn’t sound like an explanation to me,” she huffed, going back to whisking the eggs.

Dad walked over and took the bowl from her. “Don’t need to take it out on the eggs.” Then he turned to me. “I saw him helping you several times yesterday. As a man, I can think of only one reason why I’d offer to shovel horse shit when I was on vacation. It would be because I liked the girl. My question is, do you like him in return?”

I never thought it would be my father who’d figured it out. He was usually so quiet. Now I didn’t know what to say.

“I...I...like him.” It was the first time that I’ve ever admitted it out loud. Never thought it would be to my parents under duress. I could only imagine the list of questions that they were about to ask me. But they didn’t.

“Good. Because allowing him to do your work if you didn’t, would be using him, and for that, I’d be even more angry than your mother.” He turned to Mom and said, “It appears that Mark wants to help, and she wants his help. So, we stay out of it.”

“But...”

“No buts. She’s not a child any longer,” Dad stated.

Thanks Dad.

Mom turned to me and changed the subject. “Do you think we should do French toast as well?”

“How about we save them for tomorrow? You already have enough food here to feed an army,” I said.

“I figured it would be easier doing it buffet style so they can grab whatever they want and whenever they want,” she said. “Now I am worried that they might find that too....casual.”

“Mom, I was worried about all the activities too. But the more time I spend with them, the more I realize that they are not so different from us. They just have more money, that’s

all.” At least that was what Mark said. I hadn’t seen anything to prove otherwise.

“Ok. We will keep it the way it is. What do you have planned to do with them today?” she asked.

“Many of the older kids are spending their time with Billy on the slopes. Several wanted to do another sleigh ride tonight, but I’m hoping I can talk some of them into doing some ice skating. Do you have anything planned with them?”

“The ladies want to go into town, so I promised to go and show them around,” she said.

That was great, but that meant more pressure on me. Mark hadn’t mentioned anything about helping me today. I knew I shouldn’t ask, but what choice did I have?

“Dad, how do you feel about Mark and me cutting down one of the pine trees?”

“What do you have planned?” he asked.

“The Christmas tree is already decorated. I thought it would be nice if we could get everyone to decorate another one together. You know, like the old days. String popcorn and have hot chocolate with Christmas music playing.”

It’s what we used to do before the lodge started being booked for Christmas. Then our Christmas traditions were set aside to make room for theirs.

“That sounds like a wonderful idea. Maybe you should cut the tree today and have the decorating party tomorrow. It will give you more time to have them make more decorations for the tree,” she suggested.

“We’ve already done that. Not sure they will want to do it again,”

“You’re right. But I’m sure you’ll think of something,” Mom said.

Just because they didn’t like skiing, didn’t mean they didn’t like sledding. That might be fun. Getting them to agree was going to take...Mark.

We set up the buffet and I headed off to get ready for the rest of my day. Once they were all up, I needed to go and tidy up all their rooms while they ate. It was a good thing I had that second cup of coffee this morning because I was going to need it.

I quickly made my way from one room to the next. First, I washed down the bathroom, then emptied the trash, fluffed the pillows, and made the bed before moving on to the next. Mark saw me leaving Brice and Lena's room and asked, "What are you doing?"

I had no time to slow down and chat. "Cleaning. Got to go." I opened the door to the next room and went inside. Mark followed me. "You can't come in here. This is not your room."

"Not yours either," he said.

I crossed my arms. "I am here to clean. It's my job."

"Let me help," he said.

"You can't help me clean," I said.

He laughed. "I shoveled horse shit last night. I think I can empty the trash."

"Don't remind me. My mother was livid at me for allowing you to do it," I stated.

"I don't recall giving you much choice. If you want, I'll explain that to her," he offered.

"What you can do for me is not distract me. I must get all these rooms done before they finish breakfast. Which by the way, you should be enjoying as well," I reminded him.

"Not hungry yet." He slipped past me and said, "You can either stand there and waste time arguing or let me help. Your choice."

"Why do all your choices sound as though I don't have a choice?" I asked.

"Still not cleaning," he said.

"Fine. But you're not washing the bathroom," I stated firmly.

“I’ll make the beds,” he replied.

I went into the bathroom, cleaned it, and emptied the trash. Once they had their fresh towels, I went back into the bedroom. Mark was still working on making the bed. The quilt was hanging onto the floor on one side and hardly any on the other. And he put the pillows under the quilt.

Biting my lip, I tried not to laugh. “Mark, how often do you make a bed?” I asked.

“Every day. Why?”

“Oh, no reason. But I guess maybe I should make them. How about you collect the trash and place new towels on the racks?” I suggested. I mean, towels were easy. How could he screw that up?

I fixed the bed, and we went to the next room. But when I went to check the bathroom, I got my answer. He had placed one bath sheet on the towel rack, and the rest were face towels.

“Mark, these rooms are for couples. Two of each,” I explained and fixed them. “How about you just handle the trash.”

“Wow. No faith in me at all,” he said.

Had I hurt his feelings? Goodness, that would be rude of me. I turned around to apologize and saw the huge smile on his face.

“Okay, so the truth is, I’m horrible at making beds. And I never looked at the towels when we stayed at a hotel. Kind of embarrassing since I’m almost twenty-three. Growing up we each had our own chores. I had to wash dishes, put out the trash, and mow the lawn. My sister made beds and did dusting with my mom. Robert swept the floors and Christopher helped with laundry.”

“Why did I think you had a maid to do all that?” I asked.

“Because you still think I was born with money. Sorry, Adilyn. You got the wrong Henderson. My parents didn’t have much when we were young, and when things changed, they insisted we all still contributed to the house. As my mother

liked to say, ‘no freeloaders allowed’. Even in college, I had to pay my own way.”

“You had said that, but when I found out you were a Henderson, I thought...that maybe you had said that so I wouldn’t feel bad about not having any money,” I explained.

“Nope. We were both struggling college students. I actually had to get a job when I was sixteen to start saving for school. My parents believe that if you want something, you work for it. Even paid my own way here,” he said.

“I’m sorry for misjudging you.” I couldn’t believe that just the name Henderson had made me forget all the good things I liked about him as though our brief time together hadn’t been real.

“Don’t worry about it. The name affects a lot of people. Usually, no one knows that we are related. It’s so much easier going through life with the last name Lane instead of Henderson. Of course, my cousins don’t seem to mind it,” he said.

I was enjoying chatting with him, but I was falling further behind. “Well, they might like the name, but if I don’t get going, they won’t like how messy their rooms are,” I stated.

It wasn’t so bad. I’d gotten all the parents’ rooms done, just the cousins remained.

“Okay. You can trust me with the towels now. I watched and I learned. Two in each room.”

“One now because we’ve moved onto the cousins, “I said.”

“Oh yeah. One bath sheet, one face cloth and empty the trash. Got it. Anything I’m forgetting?” he asked.

“Yes. To go down and enjoy your breakfast. I can finish this.” Probably *faster without you distracting me*. “Please, Mark. Go. We can finish this conversation later. Besides, you’re going to need the energy for what I have planned for us.”

“Do tell,” he said.

“We’re going out to cut down a Christmas tree,” I said.

He smiled. “You do know that there is one in the lobby already.”

“I do. This one will be special. One that we all can decorate together.”

“Who else is joining us on this tree adventure?” he asked.

“No one,” I replied.

His smile was huge. “Well, you win. I’ll go and eat. What time are we going?”

“Give me an hour, if that’s okay,” I said. I needed to finish the rooms and make sure the guests were all set before we headed out.

“Perfect. And by the way, you don’t need to clean my room. I can do that myself,” he said, before heading down the stairway.

It was nice of him to let me off the hook, but no matter what, he was still a guest here, and after seeing how he made a bed, he needed my help, even if not as much as I needed his.

CHAPTER 5



Mark

I didn't care what we were doing. Just like last night. I mucked horse stalls just to have time alone with Adilyn. Cutting your own Christmas tree was something I'd done many times with my family. But this was different. We weren't on someone's tree farm. She and I were hiking through the woods looking for the right tree.

"How about this one?" I asked.

She examined it closely, then shook her head. "It's uneven. Won't look good." She walked a little further into the woods and said, "How about this one?"

It was at least nine feet tall, and its girth was massive. "How do you expect us to get that back to the lodge? That is if we can even find our way there."

"I know these woods like the back of my hand. But if you don't think you're...strong enough to carry it, we can look for another," she teased, reaching out, giving my bicep a squeeze.

Even at college, I started my day with an hour at the gym. I wasn't a bodybuilder, but a good workout somehow energized me for the day. Guess I got that from my dad who used to get up at four in the morning to go out for a run.

But this wasn't about my health. This was a challenge, and I wasn't about to turn it down. *Strong enough. Ha. I'm plenty strong. I'll carry the tree and you back to the lodge.*

I pulled the protective sleeve off the axe and said, “You might want to stand back.” Then I took a couple of forceful swings hitting the trunk of the tree just right. Within minutes, the tree started to sway, and I gave it a push and it fell to the ground. “How was that?” I asked.

“Not bad,” she said, but I knew she was impressed. “I mean for a city slicker.”

I laughed and enjoyed seeing the sparkle back in her eyes. This was the Adilyn that I wanted to see all the time. One who was stress-free and happy. Even if it was just for the afternoon, I planned on keeping that smile on her beautiful face.

Putting the protective sleeve on the axe, I handed it to her. “You can carry that, and I’ll get the tree.”

“Wait. That’s going to be heavy. Why don’t we carry it together?” she suggested.

Because you questioned my manhood. No way am I letting anyone help. The least of all you.

“Nope. I got this.” She watched as I bent down and lifted the base of the tree onto my shoulder. As I went to stand back up, I regretted my arrogance. It was damn heavy. But I didn’t care how badly my back and the rest of my body hurt later. I was out to prove a point and was just too stubborn to admit I was wrong.

The lodge seemed so much farther than before, and with each step, I could feel my legs threatening to give out. The rough bark was digging into my shoulder even through my heavy sweatshirt. It wasn’t just the weight of the tree, but we were hiking in at least eight inches of snow. Great for skiing or cross-country skiing but sucked when you were carrying something.

“Sure, you don’t want my help?” she asked when we were halfway.

“Do I look like I need help?” I said, flexing my arm.

“Honest? You look like you’re about to drop. But if you insist on doing it your way and spending the rest of your

vacation laid up recovering, who am I to offer to help?” she said.

I stopped and let the trunk of the tree roll off my shoulder and rest on the ground. “Who said anything about being laid up?”

“Oh, that would be me. Mark, you’re being ridiculous. You have nothing to prove to me. But if you want to hurt yourself, be prepared, I *will* say, ‘I told you so’,” she stated.

“So, it would be better if I let you get hurt?” I asked.

“No. But what I have learned is that things are easier when we are working together. Why should one person carry the load when there are two of us?” she questioned.

Because I’m stubborn and it is a Henderson trait that I hate.

But I hadn’t missed her comment about *us* working together. She’d agreed to let me in and help. Shutting her out now because my ego would take a hit was wrong.

“Okay, I’ll let you help but under one condition,” I said.

“I’m afraid to ask what that is,” she said.

“That you tell me if it is getting too heavy or if you’re getting too tired. Got it?” I asked.

“Well, that wasn’t as exciting as I’d thought it would be,” she sighed.

I cocked a brow. “What were you hoping I’d say?”

She stepped closer and looked up into my eyes. “I thought you’d...have me bribe you with a kiss.”

Her long eyelashes batted at me, and the curl of her lips was too enticing to resist. Reaching out, I pulled her into my arms. “You don’t need to bribe me with a kiss. But I’m willing to accept one for carrying the tree when we get back,” I grinned.

“We’re halfway. Maybe I can...thank you now,” she offered.

I would take all the kisses she was willing to give. “The tree *is* very heavy. I think the appropriate reward would be to kiss me now, and again later,” I suggested.

“I agree,” she said, closing her eyes and leaning into me.

As soon as our lips made contact, it was just as I remembered. Her lips were sweet and soft and made me forget about everything else.

Adilyn didn’t pull away. Instead, she wrapped her arms around my neck, drawing me closer. The only ache now was the growing need for more.

She and I never had sex. She’d made it very clear that she was waiting for marriage. I respected her for that, but that didn’t mean my body liked the idea. Even the cold breeze wasn’t cooling me off any.

I had to end this before my body gave away the physical signs of my need. Slowly I ended the kiss, but didn’t let her go. “That was very...motivating. I bet I could carry that tree over a mountain now.”

“Funny, it had the opposite effect on me. I’m not sure I can even walk anymore,” she said, resting her head on my chest.

“Hate to tell you this, but I was joking about carrying you and the tree back,” I teased.

“Why did you let me pick such a big tree?”

“Because I can’t say no to you,” I admitted.

She lifted her head and said, “Really?” I nodded. “Then kiss me one more time before we head back,” she ordered.

Her eyes had turned deep green. Claiming her lips again, my body came to full attention, and there was no hiding it. At this rate, the tree wasn’t ever going to get decorated.

This time it was Adilyn who pulled away. “We better get back before anyone starts to worry about us.”

I could stay like this forever but didn’t want anyone enjoying the show. Stepping away, I bent down and lifted the tree trunk back onto my shoulder.

“Remember what we agreed upon. That we do this together,” she said.

“I don’t recall agreeing with that,” I said. “All I remember is the kiss.”

She blushed. “Sweet as that may be, we are working *together* or not at all. Which is it?”

Damn, she could be as stubborn as me. It was just so much more attractive on her. But everything was.

Before I could argue, she added, “Don’t forget, you said you can’t refuse me anything. And it is my wish for us to do this together.” The victorious smirk on her face said I’d lost this argument just like all the others before.

“Fine, but I’m carrying the axe,” I said, grabbing it out of her hand.

I waited until she had the top of the tree in hand, and we slowly started making our way back to the lodge. She was right, it was so much easier together. Adilyn had a way of making everything seem easy and fun, but I made sure we stopped several times along the way. I didn’t want her to overexert herself either.

When we finally arrived back at the lodge, Christopher and Nicolas were just getting back from skiing. “Wow, that’s an impressive tree,” Nicholas said.

Christopher shook his head. “Mark, what are you doing letting a girl carry it?”

Adilyn said, “For the record, he carried it most of the way, and I insisted on helping on the last leg. It’s my job and I didn’t want to get in trouble by not helping.”

Was that the reason behind it? I highly doubt it. Kind of funny that she thought she needed to fight for my honor. I had no issue setting my brother straight. But he was just giving me a hard time as brothers normally do. I’d have done the same to him.

Christopher walked over and said, “Let me help you, Mark. You’re looking a little...tired.”

You want to play that game brother? Fine. “It’s all yours.” I lifted the trunk and let it drop onto his shoulder, making sure he had a hand on it first.

“Damn, this thing is heavy,” he said.

Adilyn replied, “Would you like me to go and take that end?”

I controlled my laughter, but Nicholas didn’t. He was still laughing as we entered the house and carried it from the lobby to the living room. So many eyes had been on us wondering what we were up to. It was up to Adilyn to explain. She would when she had time.

When the tree was set securely in the base, we finally relaxed. Adilyn turned to me and said, “Thank you so much for doing this for me.”

I wish I could claim that kiss she’d promised, but that wasn’t about to happen now.

Thanks bro.

“What about me?” Christopher said.

“Thank you. But I think Mark and I were managing just fine,” she said.

He looked at her then at me. “I have a feeling you’re right. Mark doesn’t seem to need us right now. Let’s go Nicholas.”

“Why? I just sat down,” he replied from the couch.

“Because these two want to be alone,” Christopher said, shaking his head. “You’ll get it someday when you have a girlfriend.”

“For the record, I have a girlfriend, and for another, they just met,” Nicholas said.

Christopher looked at me and said, “Well, at least you still have him fooled.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I replied, lying.

He patted me on the shoulder as he and Nicholas headed out of the room. He shut the door behind them.

Adilyn looked up at me and asked, “Why does he think I’m your girlfriend?”

Maybe because I wish you were.

“Not sure. I never even told him anything about you,” I replied. There was a hurt look on her face. “Did I say something wrong?” Most likely, yes. Adilyn wasn’t the first girl I liked, but she was the one that I couldn’t forget. There was something different about my feelings for her. I just had never told her.

“No. It’s just that...that you and Christopher seem close.”

“We are.”

She sighed. “Then why doesn’t he know anything about me? I mean, I...I told my friends about you.”

Yup. As expected, it was something I had said.

“I am not one who kisses and tells,” I stated.

“Is that all I was to you? A few kisses?” she asked.

This wasn’t going the way I wanted it. “Your kisses are memorable, amazing, and delicious. But no, it was never about just kisses. I enjoyed being around you. With you, things were easy.”

“You mean I was easy?” she asked.

“Hell, no. That’s not what I am saying at all. I mean, each conversation with you, however simple or complicated, was so easy.” *Yet here I am screwing up what I’m trying to say.* “What I’m saying is even though we had only talked for a couple of months, it felt as though we had known each other longer.”

“Yet I still wasn’t someone that you talked about,” she reminded me.

I nodded. “I have never been one who shares my personal life with anyone. Christopher would attest to that.”

“You shared a lot of things with me,” she stated.

“Exactly.” Stepping forward I took her hands in mine and said, “With you, things have always been easy.”

The tension of the moment vanished, and she said, “I felt it too. No one knows the real reason I left school except for you. Well, my parents too, because they would’ve questioned why I was back home.”

“Thank you for trusting me,” I said. “You know things about me that no one else does too. I’ve missed talking with you.” *Missed being around you. Holding you in my arms and just watching the stars.*

“Mark, if you missed me, why didn’t you ever call?”

“Because when you left, I had a lot of time on my hands to do some thinking. And I realized my life wasn’t heading in the direction that I wanted. It was going the way everyone else wanted it to,” I said. “I needed to make a change and that’s why I’m here. I wanted to talk to you about it.”

“You know you can tell me anything,” she said.

I nodded and was about to voice everything that I had bottled up, but the door opened, and in came her mother. Instantly, I dropped her hands and stepped back.

“Ah, there you are. And look at that tree. It’s magnificent,” she said.

“Thank you, Mom. I was just about to announce the plan to the guests. But I thought maybe you and Dad would like to do it instead.”

She looked at Adilyn with excitement as though she was dying to do so, but then something changed and she said, “No. I think you should do it.”

“Me?” Adilyn asked.

Doreen nodded. “You and Mark. I mean, you two got the tree together, I think you should do the announcement the same way.”

Adilyn turned to me and asked, “What do you think? Want to do this with me too?”

I smiled down at her and said, “I told you, I’m all yours this week. Whatever you need, I’m here.”

Doreen touched my arm and gave it a little squeeze. It was odd, but that was something I was getting used to. When she left, she kept the door open. I no longer cared.

Turning back to Adilyn, I said, "I meant it, Adilyn. I'm here for you."

"For the week," she said softly. "After that, you go back to your world, and I'll still be here in mine."

I wanted to tell her that we could make it work and I'd come and visit her all the time. But that wasn't true. I wasn't going to be able to return any time I wanted.

"Yes, I will, but this time, I promise, I'll call."

That wasn't going to be enough, and we both knew it. But it was all I had to offer.

"You were about to tell me something. What was it?" she asked.

"It can wait. Let's go and tell everyone about the Christmas tree party," I suggested.

"Are you sure? Because it seemed like it was very important," she stated.

"I'm sure. We'll talk about it before I leave. I promise," I said, kissing her on the top of her head.

She grabbed my hand as I went to turn away and went up on her tippy toes and kissed me on the lips briefly. "That was for the tree."

I smiled down at her. "I told you it was *really* heavy."

Adilyn chuckled and said, "Good try. It was a kiss. No one said what kind."

I wrapped my arms around her waist and pulled her hard against me. "And no one said I couldn't kiss you back."

I claimed her lips and kissed her long and hard.

"Damn it. Guess Christopher was right," Nicholas said from the doorway.

I lifted my head and reluctantly released Adilyn. Turning to Nicholas I said, "I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything to anyone."

"Hey, no problem. Doreen had us all gather in the lobby. She said that you two had an announcement. Are you getting married?"

"God, no," Adilyn blurted. "It's a Christmas tree decorating party."

"Damn. I was hoping I knew something Christopher didn't."

Don't we all?

"Guess we better go since they're all waiting," she said.

Waiting is something I've gotten used to. But I shouldn't wait much longer.

I hope she understands when I tell her. Even if no one else did, I really wanted her to.

CHAPTER 6



Adilyn

Alex's children were practically leaping out of the ski boots. Charisa was holding Mark's hand, "You promise you won't leave?" she asked.

"I won't. I promise," he said.

"Good, because Jason and Jaxson keep laughing at me because I'm scared of the big slopes," she said.

I felt for her. Her brothers, although a couple of years younger than her, still liked to tease her. Charisa was only thirteen, and from what she said, she lived on a tropical island. Skiing wasn't something she'd ever done before. Sounded like she would've been okay never doing it. I was glad that Mark was going to be by her side in case fear overtook her.

"My brother Billy used to tease me all the time too. I used to think he was just being mean, but I found out that in reality he wanted to go skiing with me. I'm glad I learned how. Now we go and have fun skiing together all the time," I told her.

She smiled at me. "You mean they want me with them? They're not just being mean?"

I couldn't guarantee that, but I hoped that was the case. "I think so."

Charisa looked at Mark. "Do you tease your sister?" she asked.

He shook his head. “No. I’m the oldest like you are. We are the ones that get picked on. But think about it. We also get to do everything first. You’re thirteen and in three years you’ll be driving, and your brothers will still have to ride their bikes.”

That did it. She was glowing. “Yes. And I’m going to make them beg me to take them.”

Mark laughed. “See. Sometimes being the oldest isn’t so bad. Now are you ready to hit the slopes with me?”

She nodded and said, “I want to ski as good as Avery. She’s thirteen and I heard she skis better than her big brother Michael.”

“I’m sure you can if you practice. But today, let’s not worry about what the others are doing. Let’s just go and have some fun. How does that sound?” he asked.

“Okay. I can do that,” she said. Charisa let go of Mark and turned to me, giving me a tight hug. “Thank you, Adilyn. You are making this vacation the very best.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying it,” I replied.

“I am. And the tree decorating party last night was the best.” She looked up at Mark and added, “Even though you can’t sing.”

Now it was Charisa’s turn to tease. But she wasn’t joking. Mark couldn’t hold a key to save his life. Smiling, I said, “Maybe he will get better with practice. Should we sing more Christmas carols tonight?”

Mark raised his hands and laughed, “No way. Uncle Brice said if he had to be tortured by that again then I wouldn’t be invited to the reunion next year.”

Brice and Lena had entered the lobby with Shaun and Morgan. Shaun said, “Don’t feel bad, Mark. You didn’t hear Brice singing, did you?” Mark shook his head. “There’s a good reason for that,” Shaun made a face of someone in pain.

“For the record, most Hendersons can’t carry a note,” Morgan clarified. “But it’s not about how it sounds; it’s about

participating and having fun.”

I liked Morgan. She was so good with children. Mark had told me a little about them and how they have two children, Jenny who is sixteen, and Tyler who is twenty-six. When I asked about Tyler, assuming he hadn't wanted to come, he explained that Tyler had autism and wouldn't function well in this type of setting. That he needed a routine. Thankfully Morgan's parents lived close by, and Tyler was staying with them.

“You better get going. Jenny is already on the slopes and was excited when she heard you were going, Charisa,” Shaun said, changing the subject.

Charisa took Mark's hand again, gave us all a wave, and headed out the front door.

I was going to miss having him around today, but he couldn't spend his entire vacation shadowing me. I was glad that Mark was off skiing with his cousins. I thought that Christopher and Nicholas were the ones to drag him away. But seeing how good he was with his younger cousins touched my heart. He was a good man. And though he kept telling me he was nothing like his Henderson family, I wasn't so sure I believed him.

When I heard they were the family renting the entire lodge, I must admit, I was nervous. I had seen their names in the news and tabloids. Not a family one would want to piss off. But everyone had been so nice. No one was boasting about what they had and what others didn't. Everyone, even the children, carried their dirty dishes to the kitchen after meals. And last night, it didn't feel as though we were putting on a tree-trimming party for strangers. They made sure we were included in every part of it, from the decorations to the songs and then the holiday trivia and charades games. My body ached this morning, but I didn't think it was from carrying the tree. I think it was from laughing so hard last night.

Now that breakfast was over, I needed to go and tidy all the rooms. I had a little more time because some of the couples were heading back into town. This time the women were

dragging their husbands. Something about last-minute Christmas shopping.

I hadn't even started mine, and at this point, I wasn't going to get to it at all this year. Any time I had to myself, I would close my eyes and get some sleep. Billy seemed to feel the same way because I hardly saw him except for in passing.

Dean and Tessa joined everyone in the lobby and said, "Sorry to keep you waiting."

Brice said, "No problem." He turned to me and said, "Don't worry about the rooms today. All we need is fresh towels. All the beds are made, and the trash is minimal."

"What? How?" I asked.

Lena smiled. "Don't look at us. Somehow all the children decided today to get up and do it themselves. I have no idea what possessed them to do it, but boy, I wish it would happen at home like that."

Mark. What did you say to them?

I appreciated it, but hopefully, he didn't tell them I couldn't handle it on my own. I could ask him when he returned, or just shut my mouth and be grateful for all he had done for me. I wasn't sure which option I was going to go with yet. I'd know when I saw him next.

"They didn't need to do that," I said.

Brice shook his head. "Yes, they did. Adilyn, I don't mean to offend you, but it is obvious you and your family weren't expecting such a large group of people for the holidays. The least we can do is show our appreciation for all you are doing to make this reunion special for everyone. Adults and children included. If making their beds for a couple of days alleviates some of your workload, then please, let it be our way of saying thank you."

Now I wasn't so sure it was anything Mark had said. Smiling at them all, I said, "I'm touched. And thank you. We really are trying to make this reunion memorable for you."

Tessa walked over and hugged me, very unexpectedly. “Adilyn, no one has ever put so much thought and care into every single thing like you and your family are doing. “

She released me and Lena said, “I agree. We don’t feel as though we’re on vacation. We feel like we’re all home for the holidays. Without all the workload that comes with it.”

Phil and Rhonda, Mark’s parents, joined us and she said, “Home for the holidays. Maybe that’s what we need to call this instead of a reunion.”

Morgan said, “That’s a wonderful idea. I just wish everyone could’ve been here.”

Lena said, “Maybe next year you can bring Tyler and your parents.”

“That might work,” she said.

Rhonda added, “And I’d love it if my brother Colton and his wife Annabella could come with Jace too. Although I’m not sure what a two-year-old would’ve done here this year.” She turned to me and said, “But I have a feeling Adilyn, you’d have thought of something for Jace to do too.”

“I’m sure he would’ve enjoyed himself with all the aunties doting all over him,” I replied.

They all laughed. “Very true,” Rhonda replied. “The children are all getting so big, and Colton is the only one with a little one now. Cayden and Allyson’s children are already five and seven. We really could use some more babies in the family.”

Lena raised her hands. “Don’t look at us. We already have our three and are done.”

Morgan said, “Two is our limit, thank you.”

Tessa said, “Our baby is thirteen. Not starting again now. There’s always Logan. His youngest is eight.”

Morgan smiled. “So is Alex and Ziva’s.”

Brice shook his head. “I don’t think any of my brothers are thinking about more children.”

“You don’t know until you ask,” Tessa snickered.

“I have no problem asking Logan,” Rhonda smiled. “Maybe it’s a good thing they are not coming with us into town. Who knows what this vacation brings.”

Tessa giggled. “Who knows? But there is something special about this place.”

“It’s called Winterberry Christmas Magic,” I said. “A lot of dreams have come true on Christmas morning. Never one about a baby, but there is always a first.”

The women all got excited. “Wouldn’t that be great if Cori, Ziva, or Allyson announced they were pregnant?” Tessa said.

“Who’s pregnant?” Logan asked when he entered the room.

“No one,” Brice said firmly. “Now if you ladies are finished, let’s go before you cause too much trouble.”

“Babies are not trouble,” Lena said.

“Who’s having a baby?” Logan asked.

“Trust me, Logan. You want to drop this subject,” Brice warned.

Logan looked at all the women and then said, “Hell no. We are done. Don’t even think about trying to talk Cori into it.”

“That’s what I said. Next stop for us will be grandchildren someday,” Brice said.

Tessa smiled. “That works. Mark is the oldest. Who knows what Winterberry Christmas magic brings.”

I felt as though all eyes were on me. *Oh no. Not me.* “Have a great time everyone. I have got to get to work.” *And get the hell out of here before you start plotting my life.*

When I was safe behind closed doors in the library, I finally exhaled. I really loved the Henderson family and how they joked and teased each other, even at their age. But I wanted to watch it, not be dragged into it. I was only twenty and not thinking about children right now. And besides that, Mark was leaving in a couple of days, and who knows if or

when I would see him again. Right now, the only magic we had was what we made this week.

And that isn't going to be a baby.

Thankfully, Mark knew where I stood on that. Kisses were fine, but sex wasn't happening. Not now at least. I planned on waiting till marriage, *but when he kisses me like he does, it's not just my knees that get weak. So does my control. I'm not worried about him making the first move. It's me.*

Good thing he's spending the day with his family. Maybe this time apart is what I need to regain my self-control.

Just a few more days and the burning desire growing within me would be snuffed out. I couldn't handle walking around with raging hormones. I needed to use my head and think about the future. My future.

One that probably didn't include Mark. We hadn't spoken, but he had something important to tell me and my gut said that it wasn't that he wanted to stay at Winterberry Lodge. I needed to find out what it was before I got any more attached to him than I already was.

Even as I thought about it, I knew it was too late. I was falling for him. That started when we were in college, and it was growing every day that we were together. He admitted he liked me. Was that the extent of his feelings, or were they growing for him as well?

I wasn't sure what I wanted. My parents needed my help. They needed me. It wasn't as though I could abandon them. They would lose everything they worked for. They had given me and Billy so much over the years. *Now it's our turn to give to them.*

A tear rolled down my cheek. Whatever this was between Mark and me might have to wait. I couldn't choose anyone over my parents and be happy.

There was a knock on the door, and I wiped my tears away. It was my father.

"Hi. Is everything okay?" he asked.

I nodded, lying. “Yes. Just about to prepare the activities for tomorrow. Can’t believe it will be Christmas Eve already.”

He said, “This time is really going by so quickly. But may I suggest something?”

“Of course, what?”

“Don’t plan anything. Let tomorrow night be,” he said.

“You mean nothing at all?” I asked.

He nodded. “You have done so much, and they have been busy all week. I think a quiet night is in store. Take tomorrow night off. If they need anything, your mother and I will attend to it.”

“But Dad, I don’t have anything to do. Might as well help,” I said.

“Maybe you can do something for yourself.”

“Like what?” I asked.

“Only you know what you need. I’m just telling you that tomorrow I don’t want to see you working. Consider it a Christmas gift from us,” he said.

“Thank you, Dad. I love you.”

He kissed me on the top of the head and said, “I love you too, Adilyn. Thank you for coming home. We know what you gave up for us, but I hope you know that we don’t want you to give up on your happiness for ours.”

It was as though he had been reading my mind.

Why can’t everyone be happy? Why does one have to lose so the others gain?

Sometimes life just didn’t seem fair. But I knew I was lucky. I was surrounded by people who loved me. Who wanted me to be happy. The same thing I wanted for them.

I walked over to the window and looked outside. Snow was starting to fall. *I really could use some Winterberry Christmas magic. My dream is for everyone to have what they want.*

I might be able to have everything I wanted, but my father just gave me the perfect gift. Christmas Eve night off and I knew exactly how I wanted to spend it.

CHAPTER 7



Mark

It was the first day since arriving at the lodge that Adilyn and I only saw each other for a few minutes at a time. I was really looking forward to catching up with her after dinner. Hopefully, she hadn't planned another singalong or something like that for tonight. If she did, I'd understand because she was working and wasn't here to entertain me. But time was running out, and I needed to talk to her.

I'd looked just about everywhere she usually would be, and I couldn't find her. I knew where all the guests' rooms were but had no idea where she resided at night. It would be very embarrassing if I accidentally knocked on her parents' door by mistake.

Texting her was out of the question because she didn't carry her phone with her while she worked. They used old-fashioned walkie-talkies to communicate from the slopes to the sleigh rides. Made sense since the service here wasn't great and most calls got dropped anyway.

The barn. That was one place I hadn't checked. Grabbing my coat, I headed for the door when Uncle Cayden asked, "Where are you off to this late?"

"I was just going for a walk," I said.

"Not wise to be out walking when it is dark."

That made me worry about Adilyn. If she wasn't in the lodge, then she had to be outside. "I won't be long."

"You wouldn't happen to be looking for Adilyn, would you?" he asked.

Was it that obvious? "I was hoping to talk to her."

"Well, that will need to wait. She's working."

"Doing what? It is almost eleven," I said, sounding overprotective and I knew it.

Caydan laughed. "There was a last-minute request for a sleigh ride."

"Really? Who?" I knew my cousins had been going out a lot with her. The young girls couldn't seem to get enough of it.

"Your parents," he grinned. "You look like a man with a lot on your mind. Come. Sit. Let's talk," he said, not really asking.

I knew Cayden the least of all my uncles. Not sure why. I followed him to the leather chairs by the fireplace and sat down.

"What did you want to talk about?" I asked.

"I don't believe you and I have ever actually had a conversation."

I shook my head. "Not that I recall."

"Then it's long overdue. And I take full responsibility for that."

"Why?" I asked.

"I'm older and should've made more of an effort. But my wife Allyson is the one who usually puts me in situations where I socialize with family. I'm still working on getting used to all of this."

"Me too," I admitted.

"I heard that you only found out about being a Henderson fifteen years ago," he said.

“Yeah. You’d think that was a long time, but sometimes I still feel as though we are outsiders. Mom said we’re not, but that doesn’t change how I feel.”

“I understand that feeling extremely well. Like yourself, I never knew I was a Henderson either,” he said.

That shocked me. I knew I hadn’t heard much about him before, but he was the eldest in the family. How could he not know? “When did you find out?” I asked.

“Eight years ago. That’s probably why you don’t recall my sudden appearance in the family.”

“Wow. I’d ask how, but I guess that doesn’t matter at this point. You found them now,” I said.

“I did. But like yourself, there are times when I feel like I’m on the outside. They don’t do anything intentionally to make me feel that way. If anything, they go overboard trying to make me feel otherwise, but I can’t help it.”

“Yeah. I get it. I kept thinking that I was nothing like them, that they couldn’t understand me, but then when we are together, I feel all the similarities. At times I am thrilled and then sometimes....”

“Scared to death coz we Hendersons are stubborn and sometimes very difficult to be around.”

I laughed. “Exactly. Funny, that even if you’re not raised with someone, your connection with them still seems to have followed you through the DNA.”

“Times like this week remind me of how lucky we all are to have each other. I want CJ and Lexi to grow up knowing their cousins and not wondering who their family is,” he said.

“I agree. I’d want the same thing for my kids if I had any,” I said.

“You’re young and have plenty of time for children later. What are your immediate plans?” he asked.

Had he missed the memo that everyone was expecting me to become a doctor? “That’s still in the works.”

He stared at me and said, “As I said in the beginning, you look like a man with a lot on his mind. What is weighing so heavily on you? Adilyn or college?”

“Both,” I admitted.

“Want some advice?” he asked.

Would it matter if I said no?

“I guess it all depends on what it is,” I said.

“You can’t make everyone happy, but the best way to start is by doing what makes you happy,” he stated.

What if you don’t know what that is? I thought I had before I came here. Now I wasn’t so sure. “Sounds like good advice.”

“My mother gave it to me. I didn’t listen to her for years. I regretted it. But the older I get, the more I heed her advice.”

“You mean the saying the older the wiser is true?” I questioned.

“Not necessarily. I mean you’re twenty-three but you’ve accomplished something that even Brice hasn’t.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“You got most of us together for an entire week without any incident. From what I’ve seen, no one is even discussing business. It’s practically unheard of in this family. The wives are thrilled. Shocked, but thrilled. And we have you to thank for that,” he said.

“I had help,” I said.

“Funny, Nicholas said it was all you. And so did Christopher.”

“I’m glad everyone is enjoying themselves,” I said.

“Me too. We may have all been related, but something about this week has made us all feel like family.”

“Yes, it has,” I said, and glad I’m part of it.

Allyson came down and sat on the arm of Cayden’s chair. “I was wondering where you went off to.”

“Just talking with my nephew,” he said. “Are the kids asleep?”

“They are.”

Cayden turned to me and said, “That’s my cue. Someone might need help with the horses.”

My thoughts exactly.

“Thanks for the advice, Uncle Cayden,” I said as they got up.

“Anytime. I’m only a phone call away,” he said.

“Mark, your uncle means it.”

“Thanks, Aunt Allyson.”

They went upstairs and I put my coat on and headed for the barn. Cayden gave me something to think about while I waited.

I must make myself happy to make others happy.

I had been doing the opposite. Even the courses I picked had been to make others happy. Just because I was good at it, didn’t mean that’s where my passion lay.

Would the family understand if I told them? They were all such big businessmen. Even my parents were successful in their own way. Hell, they owned a home in Cambridge, Massachusetts. That was a prestigious area. But that’s not where they started. They struggled like most people did in the world.

Adilyn knew. I’d told her what my childhood had been like. My passport had more stamps in it from my youth than most adults ever would have. You’d think that was enough traveling for me. That I’d jump at the chance to settle down. Nope. Not me.

The sounds of the bells jingling from the sleigh grew louder and I knew Adilyn would be entering the barn shortly. My parents would’ve been dropped off at the lodge. I hated the thought that if I hadn’t come to look for her, she’d be out here all alone with the horse and whatever wildlife was watching.

I'd told her about the dangers, and she reassured me that she was with one with nature. Glad she felt that way. I was still worried about her.

When the sleigh stopped in front of the barn, I stepped out and said, "You look cold."

She smiled and looked as though she wasn't surprised to find me there. "Not bad. I brought a thermos of hot chocolate for us. We must get the mares taken care of first and then we can sit and have a cup."

I hadn't been around horses much before this week, but she'd given me a crash course in how to care for them. We worked together and quickly got them settled and in their stalls.

When we finished, she pulled a blanket from the sleigh and handed it to me. I spread it out inside the barn on a bale of hay. Adilyn poured us a cup of hot chocolate each. Even in the cold, you could see the steam rising from the mugs.

This seemed to have become our signature drink lately. Not what I'd have thought, but now I looked forward to it. Not the drink, but the company while sipping it.

"Your parents seemed to enjoy their ride," she said.

"I'm glad. But I wish it hadn't been so late. You must be exhausted," I said, looking at her eyes that fluttered as though threatening to close.

She took another sip, then leaned her head on my shoulder. "I am, but it was a good day. How was yours? Did Charisa master skiing?"

"She mastered falling without getting hurt. But skiing is definitely not her thing. I spent hours on the slope with her. She really tried, but it's not for her," I said.

"Oh, poor her. I know she wanted to be able to do it. Did her brothers give her a hard time?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Actually, they were cheering her on with each small victory she had. At the end of it all, they told

her how proud they were of her. That she never gave up even when it was hard.”

“Wow. Sounds like they had a special bonding moment up there. Wish I could’ve seen it.”

“I heard you had your hands full all day too.”

“Yeah. The little ones wanted to bake more cookies. Gingerbread to be exact. It is funny how they want each cookie to be perfect. I tried explaining to them that they will taste the same even if they are not beautiful.”

I laughed. “I can imagine how that went. Hendersons strive for perfection.”

“It was worse when we moved on and made gingerbread houses for the parents as Christmas presents. What was I thinking taking on that project all alone?” she sighed.

“Why didn’t you tell me? I’d have come back and helped you.”

She sat up and said, “That’s what I didn’t want to happen. This is your family time. You needed to be with them and they needed you out there.”

Adilyn was right. There were too many places to be and only one of me. “Did Lindsay make one for my parents too?”

“She did. And she was a great help. After we were all finished, Lindsay, Pearl, and Gwendolyn stayed and helped me clean everything up. It was unexpected but appreciated.”

Thanks, Lindsay, for watching out for Adilyn when I couldn’t.

“I’m sure all the parents are going to be thrilled with their gifts.” No one expected anything like that, and I was sure they would appreciate all she’d done to make it happen.

“I hope so. I let them each put their own twist into personalizing them. But they all have the same theme. Lots of candy.”

“Well, now I wish I was getting one. I have a major sweet tooth if you haven’t figured that out yet,” I said.

“Noticed that on our first date. Well, guess it wasn’t a date, but the first time we went out. We each ordered a dessert, but you finished yours first and then helped me finish mine,” she reminded me.

“I was being thoughtful. Didn’t want it to go to waste,” I lied.

“Funny. I had no plans on *not* finishing mine. Just like that brownie last night. Someone snagged my last bite.”

“Guilty. I have no idea why I do that. It’s not like I eat off anyone else’s plate. Just you,” I replied. “Guess you’re special. But I’ll try not to do it again.”

She reached into her pocket and pulled out a Hershey’s bar. “Really? Because I only have one candy bar.” The smirk on her face said she was enjoying teasing me. I watched every bite. “Are you sure you don’t want some?”

“Oh, I’ll have mine later.”

She shrugged and popped the last piece in her mouth. “That was delicious,” she said, licking her lips.

“I think I’ll have mine now.”

“I told you I only brought one,” she replied.

“I know.” Pulling her close to me, I claimed her lips. My tongue traced her lips and all I could taste was the sweet milk chocolate. I moaned and said, “Yes. Delicious.”

Adilyn wrapped her arms around my neck pulling me closer. “Maybe you need another taste.”

She didn’t need to offer twice. We fell back onto the blanket and kissed her until we were both aching for more. I knew if I didn’t stop, we would take it further. But that wasn’t what she had said she had wanted. I cared too much about her to ignore her feelings.

I rolled over onto my back and brought her to lay beside me. With her head on my chest I said, “Next time I think you should bring two candies.”

She laughed. “Really? That’s what you’re thinking right now?”

“No. But I’m trying not to think about anything else,” I warned her.

She understood my meaning and then sat up. “Mark, I must ask. You said you needed to tell me something. What is it?”

I sat up and the moment we shared was gone. Time to voice what I’d been hiding all this time. “I haven’t told anyone yet and would like you to keep this between us.”

“Okay. What is it?”

“I’m not returning to college.”

She asked, “You mean not continuing to get your masters?”

“No. And I’m not pursuing a career as a doctor either,” I said.

“What have you decided to do?” she questioned.

This was the first time I was going to utter the words. It was going to change my life. But what scared me was what it might do to us.

“I’m...I’m joining the Marine Corps.”

“What?” She wasn’t prepared for that. Anyone who knew me wouldn’t be. It was so different from what anyone thought I’d choose to do.

“Yes. I’m following my father’s footsteps.”

“Mark, you never mentioned anything about that before. What made you change your mind now?” she asked.

“It isn’t something new. I wanted it even before I went to college. But my parents and the rest of my family all wanted me to be a doctor. I was living the life they all wanted for me. Not the one I wanted for myself,” I admitted.

She stared at me for a moment, then said, “I know that feeling very well.” Reaching out she took my hand in hers and

said, "I'm proud of you for being able to follow your dreams."

"You're not upset that I'm leaving?" I asked.

"I never expected you to be staying."

Ouch. She probably didn't think how cold that sounded but it felt like a knife to me. But why would she have thought anything else? I never gave her a reason to.

"Adilyn, I'm leaving Winterberry Lodge, but not you. I...I will be gone for a while, but when I return, I'd like to return to you," I said.

"What are you saying? You want to live at the lodge?"

"I don't care where I live. I just want it to be with you. I know this is unexpected, but hasn't everything been since we met?" I asked.

"Yes, but we are on different paths. I must stay here and help my parents get the lodge back in the black. And you... you'll be off protecting our country somewhere. Neither of us can commit. At least not so far off into the future," she stated.

"What are you saying?" I asked, afraid she was going to tell me we had no future.

"That you can't be spending your time worrying about me. I will be okay. And when you get leave, I'll be here. I'm not going anywhere," she said.

"I promise you, Adilyn, I'll come back to you every chance I get."

She kissed me and said, "I know you will."

Could it be that simple? Was she understanding and accepting everything? That was great, but I wanted more, no needed more, at least on my part. Just not sure what that should be.

Asking her to marry me was out of the question. We were both too young and still needed to spend more time together. We knew a lot about each other but there was so much more to learn. Boot camp was going to be tough and then all the

additional training afterwards. I couldn't blame her if she didn't want to wait for me, but I truly hoped she would.

She yawned and I said, "Come on, sweetheart, let's get you to bed. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve, and I don't want you to sleep through all the festivities."

Yawning again, she replied, "My parents gave me the day off. I was hoping that we could spend it together."

I scooped her into my arms and said, "Nothing would make me happier. But tonight, you sleep."

She rested her head on my shoulder, and I carried her back to the lodge. Somewhere along the way, she fell asleep.

When we got inside, her father was standing there, stoking the fire. In a low voice, he asked, "Is everything okay?"

"She fell asleep," I said.

"Her room is the first door on the right after the kitchen."

I was surprised he was willing to let me take her to her room. Then again, I knew he'd be counting the seconds on how long I was in there.

Once I laid her on her bed, I pulled the quilt over her, shut off the light, and left the room, closing the door behind me. When I returned to the lobby, her father was still standing by the fire.

He said one word. "Sit." I did as he instructed and waited. He stoked the fire again, then sat directly across from me. "I'd like to speak to you, man to man, and not as a guest if you don't mind."

"I'd prefer that," I replied.

"Good. I know you have been helping my daughter tremendously. It isn't the norm here, but I allowed it because I believe you have feelings for her."

"I do," I replied.

"I'm going to guess that you're being here wasn't a coincidence. That you knew Adilyn before. Am I correct?"

He was good. I had no idea how he was guessing this, but then again, I had no idea how anyone else hadn't.

"Yes. We met in college. We had a class together and got to know each other over a couple of months before she left to return home," I said.

"Did she explain why she left suddenly?" he asked. I nodded. "Wow. Adilyn does not share such information lightly. I guess your feelings are reciprocated."

"I'd like to think so, Mr. Winterberry." Up until now, he had been called by his first name, but this wasn't a casual conversation. At that moment, he was her father, and I needed to respect him as such. He didn't correct me either.

"Are you returning to school after winter break?"

"No. I have finished my studies early and have earned my bachelor's in science," I said.

"And now what?" he asked.

Do I dance around the truth? I hadn't shared it with my family yet and I couldn't tell him first. "I am working on the details of that now."

"And where does Adilyn fit in your plans?" he questioned.

"I would like to continue dating her. That is if you don't have an issue with that," I said. I knew her parents meant the world to her, and if they outright refused, she might not date me.

"There is no issue from me or my wife. You seem to be a levelheaded young man who wants what is best for my daughter. But I must confide in you."

"What is it?" I asked.

"She doesn't know what is best for her," he said. "I want her to return to school. Staying is good for me and my wife, but not her. She is putting her dreams aside for ours. We don't want that. I am hoping that you can convince her since we can't."

I think he is asking the impossible. How could I talk her into going back to school when I just told her I wasn't continuing mine?

"I am not sure she'll listen to me, but I will try my best," I replied honestly. I saw his point and agreed with him. She was doing exactly what I had done. But I wasn't sure how my parents were going to react when they learned what I was about to do.

Paul got up and shook my hand. "That is all I can ask. That and for you not to break my little girl's heart. She is the most loving and giving person you'll ever meet. If she loves you like I think she does, then you're the luckiest man alive."

Loves me? She never used the word, nor did I. Was this love? Never felt anything like this before. It could be, but I hadn't thought about it like that. I thought it took more time for it to become love.

"Thank you, Mr. Winterberry."

He nodded and said, "Good night, Mark." He left me sitting by the fire alone, but not for long.

My father and Uncle Bennett came into the lobby. "You finally returned. Thought you might spend the night in the barn," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "It's not like that, Dad."

"Really? Because you seem very into her," he said.

"I am. She's very important to me."

"As we can all tell. I'm happy for you. She seems like a lovely girl. Are you planning on telling her?" he asked.

"That I like her? She already knows," I said.

"I'm talking about school," he stated.

Fuck. I was going to kill Christopher if he told him. He'd promised he wouldn't.

"I already told her." He looked surprised.

“What about your next career choice? Have you shared that with her?”

“Dad, why all the questions about what I tell Adilyn?” I asked.

“Because not all women are okay with it. Some find it difficult being alone so much of the time, he said. “I know it wasn’t always easy for your mother.”

“What do you and mom have to do with me and Adilyn?” I asked.

Bennett said, “Let me help you out a little bit. I’m friends with the recruiter. He called me when he found out who you were.”

Damn it!

“He had no right to,” I blurted out.

“You’re correct and I reminded him of that. But it doesn’t change the fact that your father and I know,” he said.

“And I don’t understand why you didn’t come to either of us when you were thinking about joining the Marines. Hell, Mark, Uncle Bennett and I both served in the Corps. We would’ve been happy to answer any questions you had. We still are,” my father added.

“Because I thought you’d be pissed. I mean, four years of college and I choose the Corps instead of becoming a doctor.”

“Mark, I love you, and if you want to be a doctor then be a doctor. And if you want to join the Marines, then I support you as well. You’re a man. You make your own choices. I do not regret my decision to join when I was twenty, and I also don’t regret leaving the Corp to work for Homeland Security ten years later. But whatever you decide to do, do what is right for you. Not me. Not your mother. And not the rest of the family.”

“You’re not mad,” I asked again, shocked. He shook his head. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Don’t thank me. Just do me one favor,” he said.

“What is it?”

“Don’t mention this until we return home. I’d like us to sit down, just the six of us, when you make the announcement. The rest of the family can find out later,” he said.

“Sounds good.”

Bennett said, “I won’t say anything either. But you know you can call me anytime. If I’m correct, you haven’t signed your official enlistment paperwork yet.”

“No, I haven’t, but I plan on doing so the first of the year.”

He nodded and said, “Just remember, you’re not alone. You have us.”

“I know. Thanks.”

Dad said, “Back to Adilyn. Does she know about the Corps?”

I nodded. “I told her tonight.”

“What did she say?” he asked.

“That she was proud of me for being brave enough to follow my dreams. And that she’d be here waiting for me,” I said.

“She’s the same age your mother was when I told her I joined. Not easy. Be prepared for some rough times. But if she loves you and you love her, it can work. Just don’t take her for granted. When you join the Marines, it’s not just you that goes through it. It’s your family too. Remember that,” he said.

I thought back on my early years and understood what he meant. Holidays and birthdays without my dad. But my mom was the rock at home making sure we all knew how much dad loved us and why he wasn’t there.

“I won’t forget, Dad. You have shown me what it takes to be a man. I hope I can make you proud,” I said.

He hugged me and said, “You always have.”

Bennett smiled and said, “Semper-fi.”

For some odd reason, I felt as though they no longer looked at me as one of the kids and now a man.

We all headed up to our rooms, but I knew tonight I wouldn't sleep. I had so much to think about, but Adilyn was at the top of my list.

CHAPTER 8



Adilyn

I didn't even remember getting into my bed or leaving the barn. But I had been so tired and Mark, the perfect gentleman, made sure I got home safe and sound.

He knew I had the day off, well most of it at least. I still had to help my mother with the food preparation, but that was nothing compared to what I'd been doing. So, when I found the note that he slid under my bedroom door saying he'd see me later in the afternoon, I couldn't help but be disappointed. This was our one chance for 'us' time. Tomorrow was Christmas and he'd be spending it with his family. Then the next day, he'd be gone.

"Adilyn, be careful. You almost spilled the juice all over the floor. What's wrong?" she asked.

"I don't know. Guess I'm sad that the week is almost over," I said.

"I'd have thought you'd be thrilled," she replied.

"I kind of like having them here."

Mom laughed. "You always said that you wish you were part of a large family, but never thought you meant that large. Sorry, all I had to give you was a brother."

"He's plenty. Trust me." I loved Billy. No one could ask for a better brother. But it wasn't the larger family I needed. I

was just going to miss the Hendersons. Well...one Henderson in particular.

“Well, if you’re going to make a mess of my kitchen you might as well go and spend the day with Mark now,” she said.

I sighed. “He is busy.”

“Ah. Now I understand. You’re wondering what he’s doing instead of being with you?” she asked.

“Do you know what he’s doing?” I asked.

“I just know that he went into town with some of the other men.”

That was more than me. “Good. I’m glad he’s getting out. He’s been here helping me so much that I was worried he wasn’t having any fun.”

She stopped what she was doing and said, “I don’t think any guest has had as much fun as Mark. Granted it’s not what one usually does on vacation, but he definitely has been enjoying himself. The man walks around smiling every time you’re in the vicinity.”

“He’s just a happy person,” I said.

“No, he’s a man that is falling in love. Just not sure if that’s a good thing or not,” she said.

“What’s wrong with love?” I asked.

“Nothing. But you seem adamant about staying here. I can’t picture Mark wanting to live here, do you?” I shook my head. “Then that would mean you leave and follow him. Are you ready to do that?”

That answer was easy. “No.”

“Then I guess you better tell him that.”

“Mom, he’s leaving in two days. It’s not like he was planning on staying,” I said. There was so much more, and I couldn’t tell her. Couldn’t tell anyone. But I promised to keep the secret and I wouldn’t break my word.

“Then I guess this conversation is for nothing,” she said. “Unfortunate, because I really thought you two had something...special.”

“We do. We care a lot about each other.” I am totally in love with him, and I can’t tell him that. If I do, he might walk away from his dream and think he must stay for me. I didn’t want that to happen.

“And are you planning on seeing each other again?”

“We are. In time. But we both have busy lives.” He said he wanted this to continue, but he never gave a timetable. Probably didn’t have one either. One thing about joining the Marines was he no longer had control over a huge part of his life. That didn’t mean I didn’t respect him for doing it. If it wasn’t for men like him, we wouldn’t have the freedom we do today. But was there room in his life for me? Not sure if he knew that answer either. Only time would tell.

“Adilyn, if you love each other, then you’ll find a way to make it work. It’s that simple.”

“Simple?”

“Yes. Your father and I had to compromise on many things in order to make it work.”

“But the lodge is in trouble,” I said.

“Adilyn, that is the lodge. Your father and I are just as much in love today as we were twenty-five years ago. Maybe even more,” she said.

“But the lodge is your life,” I reminded her.

She shook her head. “No. It’s a place that we live. Do we love it? Yes. Are we happy here? Yes. But I would be happy anywhere as long as I am with your father. That’s love. It’s not a location. It’s a feeling and it relocates where your other half goes.”

“That is so...romantic. You don’t usually talk like that. Why now?” I asked.

“Because my baby girl is in love. And it’s time for you to realize that love needs to be nurtured. Don’t take it for granted.

Put the work in, and you and Mark can have whatever future you want if you put in the work.”

“Mom, we aren’t even an official couple.”

“Hmm. Is that what you think or know?” she asked.

“It’s what I know. We never voice it,” I said.

“That doesn’t mean anything. A man doesn’t do all he’s done for you if he’s not committed to you. Call it what you want, but he’s crazy about you. All you need to do is decide if he’s the one you want. If he’s not, then tell him. If he is, then hold on tight and don’t let go,” she said.

I wiped up the small amount of juice that I had spilled and said, “Thanks, Mom. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good. Now get out of my kitchen and go enjoy your day off,” she ordered.

That was easier said than done. For the first time in almost a week, I was bored. I had nothing to do. So I went to the place I loved being. The barn. The horses enjoyed my company, and I could talk to them, and they never told my secrets. Right now, I had a lot of those.

The next few hours were spent brushing the mares and cleaning the stalls. Not what one would usually do on their day off, but I didn’t want to be at the lodge. I wanted to be alone. At least until Mark returned. I knew what I needed to do. What I had to say. And he knew where to find me when he wanted me.

Day was quickly turning to night and the sun was beginning to set. I could hear the sounds of music from the lodge. They were all having a good time. Maybe Mark was in there with them and had forgotten all about me.

That would break my heart if it were true, but I couldn’t imagine him doing that. I headed to the lodge and snuck in the back door so no one would see me. I showered and changed, then went back outside and sat on the swing looking up at the stars.

I saw a vehicle pulling up the driveway. They could see me as the vehicle approached. When the door opened, Bennett, Phil, and Mark got out. It was true. He had gone into town with the guys. Couldn't blame him for that. When they got to the deck, Bennett and Phil greeted me but went right inside. Mark didn't.

"Sorry I was gone so long."

"That's okay. Family time is important."

In a low voice he said, "We actually were talking to the recruiter. Just finalizing a few things."

"So you told your family?" I said, surprised.

"No. My uncle Bennett happens to be friends with the recruiter, which I didn't know beforehand. Last night they cornered me and let me know that they knew. "

"Well, they didn't seem upset, so I guess that's a good thing. Everything is fine," I said.

"No one else knows. I promised not to say anything until we got home. But they know that you know," he stated.

"Oh." I could only imagine what they thought about that. Me knowing before them. Eeek. So much for them liking me.

"Yeah. They were very impressed with how you handled the news."

What had he expected me to do? Cry and beg him not to join? That wasn't right. You don't do that to someone you love.

"Well, I'm glad they know. But I will continue to keep your secret until you tell me otherwise," I said.

"Never doubted that. Hey, do you want to take a walk?" he asked.

"Sure." I had been up on my feet all day at the barn, but I'd walk miles if he asked me to. "Where are we going?"

"Just someplace a little quieter. All that singing is killing me," he chuckled.

“Yeah. Hendersons really can’t sing, can they?” I teased.

“Nope. Well except Uncle Bennett and Aunt Zoey.”

He took my hand, and we walked down a path towards the slopes. “I have the keys to the lift if you want to go up.” I offered.

“Sounds good, but I saw a place from the lift that I wanted to check out in person. I think it’s over here.”

I knew there was nothing around here to see. But when we turned the corner, there was a table set up with a red tablecloth, and gold candles lit in the center. “What’s all this?” I asked.

“I believe it’s called dinner for two,” he smiled.

“How did you do this if you weren’t even here?” I questioned as he held the chair for me to sit.

“I am very resourceful.”

“I guess you are.” Funny. This was my family’s lodge, and I was kept out of the loop. *Nice move, Mark. I better keep an eye on you.*

He said, “I’d have requested a bottle of wine, but you’re only twenty, so instead, I have our signature drink.”

Opening up the basket that was on the ground by his chair he pulled out a thermos.

“Hot chocolate. Thanks.” Then two Hershey’s bars, and two sugar cookies. “I am beginning to see a pattern here. Your Sweet tooth is acting up.”

“Close. But I was going for something else. That the best things come in pairs. Like us,” he said.

I smiled and said, “I like it when you say that.”

“Us?” I nodded. “Good, because I want there to be an us. Adilyn, we talked last night about me leaving and you waiting. But I meant what I said. I don’t want to lose you. If my joining the Marines means losing you, then I won’t go.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Mark, you can’t be serious. It’s your dream.”

“It is, but you have my heart. I can’t live without that,” he said.

I reached across the table and took his hand in mine. “And you have my heart. But I can’t let you walk away from your dream. It would be a roadblock in our relationship.”

“But being in a relationship with someone who is serving in the military isn’t easy,” he warned.

“I’m sure it’s not. But do you know what is harder?” He shook his head. “Not being in a relationship with you. I love you, Mark. And I meant it when I said I was proud of you. If you love me too, then you will do this. Follow your dreams and trust us to be there for each other too.”

He smiled. “You sound like my mother did when my father was in the Marines. She stood by him too.”

“And they seem very happy,” I replied.

“They are. And you’re right. Love is what binds them together, and love has seen them through it all. I love you too, Adilyn. If you are really okay with me doing this, then I will sign the enlistment papers after the New Year.”

“I am,” I said.

He got up and pulled something out of his pocket and sat back down. “I know we haven’t even officially dated, but I want you to know that I am fully committed to you. This is a promise ring. I promise to love you. I promise to return to you every chance I get. And I promise to replace this ring someday, with a diamond. Will you wear it?”

My heart was pounding as he held my hand and the ring just inches from my finger. “Yes. Yes, I’ll wear it. Yes, I’ll wait for you. Yes, I promise to be yours and to be here every time you return.” He slipped the gold band with two hearts entwined and a ruby gemstone in the center. “It’s...beautiful,” I said.

“No. You’re beautiful.” I looked up at him and he lifted my hand and we stood. “Do you know I’ve wanted to dance with you from the first time I saw you in the study hall?”

“Why didn’t you ever ask?”

“Afraid you’d say no,” he said.

I slipped my arms around his neck, and we started to sway to the music. “Mark, you once told me that you couldn’t deny me anything. Funny, I can’t seem to say no to you either. Never have been.”

“I hope you still feel that way when I step on your toes,” he warned.

I beat him to it. I intentionally placed my feet on his and said, “Now I don’t have to worry about it. Problem solved.”

He kissed me and said, “You were right.”

“About what?”

“That everything is easier when we’re together.”

“It sure is,” I replied.

I rested my head on his shoulder just as the music stopped. But we continued dancing to our own music, the one in our hearts. Under the peaceful quiet of the night, we just held each other.

I felt the cold wet flake land on my cheek, then another. Looking up, large snowflakes started to drop. “Maybe we should go back inside,” he suggested. “I don’t want you catching a cold.”

“Not yet. It’s almost midnight.”

“I know. And it’s snowing like crazy.”

I looked at my watch and waited. Then it turned to twelve. Looking up to the sky, I closed my eyes and made my wish.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Calling on Winterberry’s Christmas magic.” I said, then looked at him. “You know, making a wish. Don’t you want to make one?” I asked.

He shook his head. “Why? I have everything I’ve ever wished for right here in my arms.” He stopped and then said, “I do have one wish.”

“Hurry. It’s not too late. Make your wish and it will come true,” I said.

“I wish for you to follow your dreams as well. Go back to school or don’t. But don’t live your life following someone else’s dreams.”

“But my parents. They need me,” I said.

“They need you to be happy. And they have a silent partner now in the lodge. So that will help them financially.”

“You didn’t tell your family about their problems, did you?” she asked.

“No. I’m the partner. I want the lodge to be here so we can come back every Christmas that we can and celebrate together as a family.”

“How did you do this?”

“While you slept in late, I had a meeting with your parents. That was before heading into town.”

“You’ve had a very busy day, haven’t you? Doing a whole lot of thinking and so many other stressful things” I said.

“None of them was as stressful as asking you to be mine.”

“Why were you nervous?” I asked.

“Because I could deal with your parents turning down my offer. But if you had said no, I’d have been crushed,” he said.

I raised my hand to his cheek and said, “But I said yes.”

He kissed me. “Yes, you did.”

“I love you, Mark.

“I love you too, Adilyn. Merry Christmas sweetheart.

“Merry Christmas.”

I knew this was the first of many Christmases that we would spend together. But this was one I’d never forget. A

promise of a love that will last forever. Where Mark and I could both follow our dreams that would always lead us back to each other.

CHAPTER 9



Mark

When I got back to my room last night and found a gift on my bed, I thought it was from Adilyn. It said open now. To my surprise or shock, it was a pair of pajamas. They were red and white striped, like a candy cane with green writing on the chest. CHRISTMAS CREW 2023.

Not my usual attire at all. They fit more like a pair of long johns instead of the loose fleece I had packed. Showing up downstairs in anything but these wasn't an option.

Oh, what we do for family.

I opened my bedroom door, and their voices carried all the way upstairs. Seems I was a late sleeper. But I had a good reason. Adilyn and I spent most of the night talking. Guess we had forgotten that the younger Hendersons weren't going to sleep in on Christmas morning.

When I got downstairs, they were not in the lobby as I expected. Instead, everyone was in the living room. Gifts were piled high around the Christmas tree that we had all decorated. I had to assume that was what all the trips into town had been for. Even though we had agreed to no exchanging of gifts, my aunts weren't going to play by the rules. But they were all still untouched, surprisingly.

Dean and Tessa were by the tree with Michael and Avery smiling while Alex snapped their photo with his phone. Then

he turned and asked, “Who is left?”

Lindsay hopped off the floor and said, “We are.”

Mom looked around the room and our eyes finally met. “Merry Christmas, Mark.”

“Merry Christmas, everyone.” I walked over and stood with my family. My mother gave me a quick peck on the cheek, then arranged us all for our photo.

A moment later Alex said, “That’s it. The photos are all done.”

Doreen entered the room and said, “Oh no, they are not. You’re missing one.”

The kids all grumbled, and I knew the last thing they wanted was to get up and start again. Another thing Hendersons all hated. Our pictures being taken.

I looked around for Adilyn. She wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

Paul said, “We need a Henderson group photo. This is a family reunion after all.”

He was right. Most of us were here, and who knew when the next time would be that this happened.

The adults all stood and their children, including me, all either kneeling or sitting on the floor in front of them. A few minutes later after all being told to smile again and again, she slipped her phone into her apron pocket and said, “Now that was a perfect Christmas picture.”

Lexi turned to Cayden and asked, “Daddy, can we open presents now?”

CJ, her older brother said, “How many times are you going to ask?”

“I’ll stop when he says yes,” she smiled, innocently.

Lexi was five and this was her magical Christmas. You could see it in her eyes. She was filled with Christmas joy.

Looking around the room filled with all that joy was contagious. I'd never seen my family so relaxed, so at peace.

The Winterberry Christmas magic is still at work.

Cayden said, "We will open them in a minute."

"Ho. Ho. Ho," came a deep sound from the hall. I turned around and there stood Santa, fat and jolly, and the cutest little elf I'd ever seen. Even with her face all covered in make-up, I'd know Adilyn anywhere.

Lexi ran over and wrapped her arms around Santa screaming, "You found me. You found me."

Santa said, "Of course I did, Lexi. I know where to find all the good little girls and boys. And I hear you have been very good this year."

She shrugged. "I didn't eat all my vegetables like mommy told me to. I fed them to the puppy, and he got sick. But I was good the rest of the time. Do I still get a present?"

"Yes, Lexi. But you need to promise to eat your vegetables from now on," Santa said.

"I will. I will. I promise," she said, hugging him again.

Santa took her hand and led her to a chair by the tree. He sat down and Lexi hopped on his knee. My sweet elf reached into the large red sack she was carrying and pulled out a wrapped box. Santa took it from her and said, "This is for you, Lexi."

She hugged him and said, "Thank you, Santa."

When she got off, Adilyn continued to pull out gifts for each of them, both young and old. Seeing my Uncle Brice sit on Billy's lap was priceless, especially dressed in his candy cane PJ's. I couldn't recall ever seeing him dressed casually. I can't imagine how Aunt Lena got him to agree to wear the PJ's. I wish I had brought my phone, but Alex was snapping pictures. Hopefully, we got to see them before he had to delete them all.

It was great fun and a reunion that will never be forgotten. Part of me knew that there would be many I would miss like

my father and Uncle Bennett had before me. But that just made the ones that we were all together all the more special.

After Santa and my sweet elf had left, the rest of the gifts were opened. I had one under the tree as well. When I opened it, I found a picture of me and Adilyn sitting on the swing cuddled up in a blanket while it snowed. I don't remember seeing anyone around, but when I was with her, the world vanished.

I looked around to see who it had come from. Doreen was standing with Paul, smiling. She nodded and mouthed *Merry Christmas*.

It was a very thoughtful gift. This photo will be coming with me to boot camp for sure.

Adilyn and Billy entered the room and she said, "I guess we missed all the fun."

Logan's daughter Cleo said, "Guess we will have to do this again next year, so you won't miss it."

Pearl turned to Zoey and asked, "Mom, can we do this next year? I mean all of us come back and have another reunion?"

Shaun looked around at his brothers and said, "I'm for it. I know we would love to bring Tyler with us next year."

Alex said, "Count us in." Charisa, Jaxson, and Jason cheered.

Dean asked, "What do you say? Want to come again next year?" he asked Micheal and Avery.

"Really, Dad? You know we don't want to leave now. What makes you think we wouldn't want to come back," Avery said.

Dean gave a thumbs-up.

Caydan said, "I know what Lexi will say."

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" she shouted.

Everyone in the room laughed, and Logan said, "We will be here."

I looked at my parents, and my dad knew there was a chance I wouldn't be. But his response was what I hoped for. "Count us in."

Mom said, "And I had a call with Colton earlier this morning and he said Merry Christmas to everyone and that he promised to be here if we ever did this again. And he also gave me something else to share. Jace is going to be a big brother. Annabella is pregnant!"

The women all cheered and started hugging each other as though they were having a baby. I looked at my uncles who had a different expression. One like they dodged a bullet but were happy anyway.

Adilyn slipped her arm around my waist and said, "I guess the Winterberry Christmas magic extended to even the Hendersons that couldn't make it here."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

She smiled and said, "I'll explain later." She pointed a finger up.

I saw we were standing beneath the mistletoe. That wasn't there the last time I had looked, but I wasn't going to break tradition. Besides, this was all I needed for Christmas. I kissed her tenderly.

This might be our first Christmas together, but it wasn't going to be our last. Hopefully, in several years from now, we will have a couple of our own children running around in this sea of Hendersons.

"Merry Christmas, Mark."

"Merry Christmas my sweet elf," I winked.

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