

For those who love the warmth of Hallmark Christmas movies, *Christmas Tree Wars*, by Delores Topliff, will be a holiday favorite. Topliff has crafted a heartfelt tale full of joy, faith, and family, centered around a hometown rivalry that will delight her readers.

— GABRIELLE MEYER, AUTHOR OF *WHEN THE DAY
COMES*

Offering a fascinating inside look at Christmas tree farms, Topliff's *Christmas Tree Wars* is a sweet story of two feuding families who come together to claim the best prize of all—love. With charming characters and a setting where the scent of spruce nearly lifts off the pages, *Christmas Tree Wars* is a story you'll want to add to your holiday collection.

— LISA JORDAN, AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR FOR LOVE
INSPIRED

Christmas Tree Wars

A Novel



DELORES TOPLIFF



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I loved working college summers for the U.S. Forest Service in Washington State and later for B.C. and Alberta Canada Forest Services doing forest fire support including driving through fire lines plus flying over incredible scenery in spotter planes. I actually considered a Forest Service career.



Kris Lundquist jingled the change in his pocket and looked through his 15th story window over Rockefeller Plaza. He weighed a decision and glanced at his calendar. So far, 1966 had been a good year for him. Would he stay in New York City these next two weeks building more accounts? Or fly home to his parents' Christmas tree farm to help them through a financial crisis? He'd come a long way from Balsam, Wisconsin, population 1924.

His eyes returned to the window. Although his office space and window were small, he never tired of his million-dollar view. He checked the meeting planner on his desk and reviewed his schedule for the next two weeks.

August was almost gone. Should he focus on the Greenshaw account? No, it was on track. Mandeville and Sykes? They were on track and moving forward as well. The Hutchinson Trust? He smiled. They loved his new health benefits package and promised final approval soon. He'd delivered impressive account growth last quarter and had a nice bonus check to prove it. His employer, Morgan Guthrie of Guthrie and Associates, was pleased and vocal about bigger and better plans. Maybe including a new office with a bigger view.

Kris picked up the photo of Mom and Dad on the other corner of his desk. Standing in front of their Lundquist Christmas Tree Farms sign, arms around each other and smiling for the camera, they were his two favorite people on Earth. But ... Kris couldn't understand how Dad had landed in financial trouble again since the farm had so much going for it. Still, if returning home for two weeks could make the difference, Kris would do that for them. He made up his mind and made the call.

"Mr. Guthrie? You know the possible trip we talked about? I do need two weeks off. I'm ahead on projects and will do some work by phone. Yes, flying tomorrow to include the Labor Day weekend. I'll make up more time when I'm back."

Minutes later, he smiled and disconnected. Tomorrow he'd be in Balsam with two weeks to turn his parents' Christmas tree farm around.

Next, Kris dialed home, his smile warming his voice. "Dad? I've worked it out. But don't tell Mom."

"Coming tomorrow but don't want me to tell her? She'll kill me, and I like living."

Kris held his phone away from his ear as his father almost shouted. Was he getting hard of hearing?

"If you tell her, she'll start a housecleaning frenzy and claim there's nothing to eat, which is never true."

Dad gusted a sigh. "I'll try. She's out collecting chicken eggs now, but she's practically clairvoyant. She's probably heard every word. Which airport?"

"I tried Duluth, but they're out of car rentals because of Labor Day."

"You don't need a car. Fly into the Twin Cities and drive our farm truck while you're here."

"No, I don't want you to make a trip all the way into Minneapolis."

"I'm heading to Hudson for hardware anyway, and it's a straight shot from there." For several seconds there was silence. "I'm glad you're coming, but why now?"

“Because you helped me through school. It’s about time I do something to repay you for all the support you gave. I help other people through financial troubles. Why not you?”

Dad blew a raspberry. “How much time you got? Three months? Four?”

“No. Barely two weeks. If we can’t turn things around by then, maybe you should sell out and take an eight to five job.”

“I’m not ready for that.”

Kris sucked in a breath. “You know I love our farm, but it has to pay for itself, or taxes will eat it up.”

“Some years it pays, but it’s hard. If you can turn things around in two weeks, I’ll agree you’re the genius people say you are.”

Kris chuckled. “We’ll see. I’ll phone you my flight details later. See you soon.”

The next day, memories of home overflowed Kris’s heart as his Boeing 727 broke through clouds to descend over evergreen-forested hills into the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport. The nearly four-hour flight from Idlewild wasn’t a long enough transition from big city financial wars to small-town Christmas tree farm challenges. Each trip, Kris promised to return sooner, but big-city demands interfered.

After landing and deplaning, Kris grabbed his carry-on and rushed through the baggage doors. Yup, Dad stood leaning against the Lundquist Christmas Tree Farms pick-up truck. They flung their arms around each other in backslapping hugs.

“You’re a sight for sore eyes, big fella. Welcome home.” Dad wiped his eyes.

“Great to be here.” Kris threw his carry-on into the back and climbed into the front. He took a closer look at Dad.

“Are you doing okay?”

“Sure, just tired.”

Dad looked older since Easter, with deeper lines tunneling his face. How old would he be next birthday? Was something going on with him physically besides the finances?

“Mom didn’t want to ride to Hudson?” Kris asked.

“Nope.” Dad started his engine. “She says hardware shopping isn’t her thing.”

He eased into traffic and turned onto Hwy. 494 East. “You brought work clothes and boots?”

“Sure. I’m ready for Christmas tree fresh air.”

“Better than Big Apple fumes?”

“You know it. A thousand times.” Kris rolled down his window and inhaled. Why did Dad look guilty? “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Okay, I fess up. I had to tell Mom. She would have scalped me, and I don’t have hair to lose.” He doffed his farm cap. “She’s cooking up a storm for her number one son.”

“Her *only* son, Dad. You both overdo it.”

“When you’re a dad, you will, too.”

“That won’t be any time soon. First I’d have to find someone to build a life with, and they keep me pretty busy at work.”

After listening to Dad talk non-stop for forty miles, Kris stared through the truck window at the final highway curve before the first glimpse of Balsam.

“There’s still no place like home.”

Dad heaved a sigh. “Son, I would have been okay if Norway spruce prices had held up and we didn’t have that cursed blight.”

“That’s the thing about farming. No guarantees.”

Past the sign reading, *Welcome to Balsam, Wisconsin’s Christmas Tree Capital*, Dad’s truck brakes hissed as he pulled to the curb in front of the town’s grocery store.

“Mom needs whipping cream for your pie. Wanna come?”

“Might as well.”

Dad was still tall, lanky, and strong, but couldn’t shed the spare tire around his middle. In fact, he might have gained since Easter, which likely strained his heart.

Kris studied him. “Are you on an exercise program?”

“I don’t need an *exercise program*. I work hard, Mr. City Boy.”

“That’s not getting rid of your stomach.”

Dad patted his paunch.

"I should cut back, but it's hard with Mom's good cooking. She thinks if she cooks her best, you'll come home more."

"Ridiculous." Kris snapped his fingers. "That has nothing to do with it."

"We know that, but it's how she thinks."

Rain started, and Dad climbed out and pulled a tarp over the hardware items in his pick-up bed. Kris jumped out of the truck to help.

"So, your job's going good?"

Kris shrugged. "Not bad. Guthrie's pleased. I'll do a little phone work from here."

"Not much, I hope. I'll keep you plenty busy."

Dad had just opened the grocery store door when a whirling human mass struck his middle like a bowling ball.

"I've had it with you, Lundquist." The small man grabbed Dad's arm. "You have some explaining to do about what you said at the last Chamber of Commerce meeting."

Kris narrowly avoided falling onto the men as Dad jerked free.

"Stow it, Halvorsen. My son just got home."

The smaller man stopped and stared. "Kris?"

Kris nodded. The guy was bundled up, but he recognized their neighbor, owner of the original farm they'd bought their land from at auction.

"I don't care who's home. This town's too small for both of us." His spindly neck swiveled like a turkey gobbler. "For a newcomer, you act like you own the place!"

Newcomer? Kris stiffened. "We've owned our place fourteen years!"

"Another time, Halvorsen." Dad reopened the door that had closed.

Halvorsen's face deepened to purple. If he were a match, he would have exploded. Several shoppers stopped to watch.

"Uncle Hal!"

Kris's gaze swept past the older man to a young woman approaching with a frown on her heart-shaped face. Memory stirred. Those soft auburn curls. Wait, was this Marcie? Halvorsen's gangly niece he'd played tricks on in her teens until that summer when they'd been an item? She wasn't gangly now. His mind updated old images with the lovely woman standing before him. He should never have lost track of her—she was a knock-out.

"Marcie, you look great."

She tilted her head. "You, too, Kris."

Her uncle poked Kris's dad's chest. "Skip the niceties, Lundquist. Just because you folks came along when I had to sell half our place doesn't make us neighbors. After I win this year's state tree growing contest, I'll have money. Then, if you're any kind of Christian, you'll sell your half back at the same price."

He hunched his neck like a turtle withdrawing into its shell.

Kris's dad squared his shoulders. "Halvorsen, you can't seriously expect me to do that. Your place was for sale, and I bought it fair and square."

"Except you shouldn't have." Halvorsen's arms flared like he would strike while Dad's stiffened his against his sides. "If I offer enough money, you'll sell. Besides, Marcie's home from university now to cure our blight. We'll turn things around so fast, we'll leave you in the dust." He thrust out his chin.

"Uncle Hal!" Face ablaze, Marcie took his arm.

Dad turned from Halvorsen to her "Wait. You're Marcie? The little girl in pigtails?"

"That's right."

Ouch. Dad should have at least said, "the cute little girl in pigtails," because she was.

"It's been a long time." Her expression held none of her uncle's rancor.

Dad blinked. "Either you've been away too long, or we haven't crossed paths when you're home."

"Both." Her shoulders eased. "I've been tied up because my

forestry course runs year-round. I'm only home to help now because I can do my last semester from home."

"Like Kris is here two weeks to help us." When Dad offered his hand, Marcie took it.

Kris did the same and let his grip linger a moment.

"You know where we live, Marcie. Come see us."

"I doubt that's wise." She reclaimed her hand.

"Forget that," her uncle growled. "They're on the other half of our land. Tears me up every time I see them."

"It's been fourteen years, Uncle Hal. Time to forget and move on."

"Never!" He blew through his lips like a horse resisting a saddle. "Not until we get our land back."

"You sold it, and my dad bought it." Kris spread his hands open to show it was simple math and then turned to Marcie. "You're studying Forestry?"

"Nursery management. I graduate next June. You?"

"I graduated in business and then an MBA from University of Minnesota. Now I'm a financial planner in New York City."

"And climbing the ladder fast," Dad said with pride.

Her eyebrows lifted. "Impressive."

Kris shook his head. "Not so much. Mostly hard work."

Marcie's uncle waved a fist. "You went to Minnesota? Figures. Too good for a Wisconsin school, like Marcie. And I suppose you're a Vikings fan!"

Kris froze at the acid in Halvorsen's tone.

"Does it matter?"

"Sure as shootin' it matters."

"Uncle Hal!" Marcie tugged his arm. "Our schools are partners. They help each other."

"Not the way I see it. They're rivals, just like Lundquist and me. Always will be, and I keep track."

"Maybe you shouldn't." Her tone stayed gentle, but she tugged his arm harder. A few nervous customers eased around them. "Let's go, Uncle Hal. We're blocking the entrance."

During Halvorsen's outbursts, Kris watched Marcie. Her shoulder-length auburn hair swung as she spoke, its red highlights accenting her emerald eyes. Her cheeks flushed, either from the day's cool temperature or her uncle's behavior.

Her green slacks and jacket complemented her coloring. Kris glanced down at his clothing and wanted to sigh. He'd worn a coat and tie on the plane but removed both as soon as he got in Dad's truck. In rolled-up shirtsleeves now, he wished he'd worn the dress shirt Mom had mailed for his birthday instead. Plus, on the flight, he'd managed to spill food on one pant leg, making him wish he were anywhere else on the planet right now. He slid that leg behind the other. Mom had often said, "Always dress your best. You never know who you might meet." This was vacation. He was not at work. Still, he wished he had listened.

After checking her watch, Marcie hooked her arm through her uncle's, managing him as easily as a skilled trainer turns a high-strung horse. "We need to get Aunt Ingrid. We can't keep her waiting."

Marcie's words snapped her uncle awake. His lips firmed. "We'll talk again, Lundquist. May the best man win."

Dad nodded. "I hope we both do well."

Kris exhaled a long breath as he watched Halvorsen and his niece cross the parking lot. Her uncle took the passenger side of a dented pick-up while Marcie slid into the driver's seat.

"All of that to stop for whipping cream," Dad said. "I'd better get it now so we can get out of here."

As they paid, Dad pulled truck keys from his pocket and dangled them. "Want to drive, son?"

"Sure. I'd like that." They climbed into the truck. "Wow, Marcie has grown up!" Kris said.

His dad chuckled. "Most folks do. I admit, she turned out well. I'm sure Ingrid is happy to have someone cheerful around."

"I'll bet. What's going on with them, anyway? Halvorsen seems tense enough for a mental health check."

"I know. Today is the worst I've seen him. His finances are

down, plus his wife is feeling puny. Some kind of sickness the doctors haven't diagnosed."

Kris flashed the turning signal and eased onto the street. "Sorry to hear. Who would have thought there'd be more drama in Balsam than New York theaters lit with neon lights? Are things really that bad?"

"Depends on who you ask. Worse for some." Dad lifted his green Lundquist Christmas Farms cap and combed his thinning hair with his fingers before slapping his cap back on. "Everyone's hurting. I don't fully know Halvorsen's situation, but the blight hit him hard with him only growing Norway spruce. We're more diversified, which puts us in better shape. Plus, the other half of this year's property taxes come due this month, which pressures us all before we get sales. But I should hush. Mom told me not to burden you with our stuff."

"Burden me?" Kris laid a hand on his dad's arm. "We're family. Besides, how can I help solve your problem if you don't tell me what's going on?"

"But your life's in New York now." Dad hiked an eyebrow. "It sounds like you're getting chummy with the boss's daughter."

"Laura? Maybe." Kris's gaze surveyed Main Street's historic buildings and then returned to the road. "It's too soon to tell. I love Balsam, just wish there were more opportunities here. Once you phoned, I had to come."

"Thanks. I'm glad your boss let you off."

"I had to push a little, but he values people helping family. He should appreciate loyalty in someone getting serious with his daughter, don't you think?"

Dad nodded. "Definitely."

Kris lightly punched his dad's arm. "Hey, I learned from the best."

They shared a laugh.

"Say, I almost forgot," Dad said. "We need to stop at the post office for two rolls of stamps for our Christmas mailing."

"That many customers?"

“I’m building our list.”

“Sounds good.” Kris entered the parking area and braked at the sight of a familiar dented truck. “Oh, no. The Halvorsens are here.”

Dad craned his neck. “They’re allowed. It’s a free country, but I don’t want to see Halvor again today. It looks like Marcie’s getting out. If you park on the far side and he stays in the truck, we might be okay.”

“I hope so. Our encounter earlier was more than enough.”

“He’s not usually that bad. We’ve had decent conversations, just not lately. Something more must be going on.”