

THE LIGHT OF A
Christmas
STAR

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*To those who love God, Christmas, and sweet romance. On this and every
Christmas, may you seek and follow the true star of Christmas.
Matthew 2:2*

CHAPTER

One



"A MONTH in some podunk town at Christmas?" Trenton Wills jammed his fingers through his hair. The unruly golden blond locks his fans adored were probably standing on end now, giving him an attitudinal teenager vibe in front of the director. Not a good look under the circumstances, but it couldn't be helped. "What is that going to accomplish?"

One dark brow raised above the top edge of Miles Everling's glasses. "I don't know." His eyes narrowed. "Maybe save your job."

Gut punched, Trenton forced a breath. "You're serious?"

"As sin." Miles shuffled through the papers on his desk, stopping to read one. "Lacks the spirit of Christmas. Missing the heart. Where's the spark?" He glanced at Trenton. "Need I continue?"

The sandwich Trenton snagged from the craft services table before heading to Miles's office had been a mistake. The harsh comments from the focus group left the ham and Swiss dancing a jig in his gut. He swallowed hard.

"Those must be the odd ones out." Trenton's attempt at assurance failed. Criticism, even deserved, was hard to accept.

Miles sighed. "Listen, Trenton. We've been friends for years. That's why I'm giving you this opportunity rather than sacking you to make the investors happy."

"Am I really that terrible?" Doubt laced the words meant for his friend, not the movie's director.

"You're a great actor." Miles shoved the papers into a folder in the bottom desk drawer. "No one else could've played Crimson Phoenix like you. No one else would've received an Oscar nomination for a film from a trilogy of superhero movies. You did, and you won because you're a great actor. The audience loved your hero despite his questionable past. You redeemed him. That was all you."

Trenton rubbed a hand across the side of his neck. "I can't do another superhero movie." He shook his head. "I thank God for the opportunity, but I want to be more than Crimson Phoenix. Play more than comic book characters. It's why I auditioned for *Dear Christmas*."

"I'm aware." Miles slid a business card across the desk. "It's why you're packing up and heading to this B&B for the next month."

Trenton leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. Miles pushed the card a couple more inches forward and removed his hand. Trenton reluctantly took it. *Christmas Bell Bed & Breakfast. Elena Bell, owner.* His sigh bordered on an irritated harrumph.

Dear Christmas was his chance to play more than a superhero, to earn real acclaim and prove his worth as an actor and leading man. But instead of filming, Miles was shipping him off to Tannenbaum, Missouri, the town everyone forgot, if they even knew about it in the first place.

"What if I stay here and watch Christmas movies, twenty-four-seven."

"Nope." Miles shook his head. "Won't work. We're on hiatus since Darcy decided to go into early labor. One month off will do you good. Give you time to soak in the Christmas ambiance."

"I have no issues with Christmas. It goes with the Christian faith thing."

Miles remained unconvinced.

"How'd you find this place?"

"Mindy's cousin Tara lives there." Miles shrugged. "I met her when Mindy and I married. They keep in contact. Mindy's always oohing and aahing over the, and I quote, 'adorable photos, like a scene from a Hallmark movie' that Tara posts. Apparently, they host a lights festival every year. So, go. Glean all you can about Christmas in a small town. Bring the feeling back to the set. Pour it into your performance, and make every woman with a pulse wish they were the one falling in love with you over cocoa and Christmas lights."

Trenton rolled his eyes. "A small-town Christmas won't help me understand falling in love at Christmas."

"I'm sure you can find a willing woman or two to escort you to the festival activities." Miles smirked. "Having a real date for once in your life couldn't hurt either. Keep your eyes open."

"You want me to woo one of these small-town women with my big-city charm to experience falling in love? That's low."

"Don't be ridiculous. I want you to date because you're closing in on thirty and haven't had a real date since ... well, ever. If you learn something to enhance your performance, even better."

"Thirty is half a decade away. Not close."

"Not my point."

Trenton glared. "I'm ignoring your point."

"So long as you don't ignore your director's orders. I don't want someone else for this project. Not when you've got romantic drama lead hidden somewhere beneath your super suit."

"Fine." Trenton stood. "When do I leave?"

"Tomorrow morning." Miles smiled and held out the packet containing the reservation details. "Don't look so defeated. If nothing else, it's a paid vacation. Relax. Have fun."

"Whatever." Trenton accepted the envelope. Miles's low chuckle rankled as Trenton walked down the hall. It was all well and good for Miles. He wasn't being shipped off to the middle of nowhere to save his job.

And there was the rub. No matter what Miles said, this wasn't a paid vacation. This was research, and if he didn't get it right, he'd lose the best opportunity he'd had since the role of Crimson Phoenix launched him to stardom. If he lost this job, fat chance of landing another opportunity to move from superhero to leading man.

One thing was certain; Trenton wouldn't find the inspiration and motivation he needed if everyone knew that research was the purpose of his visit to Tannenbaum. His time there would be as fake and uninspiring as his current performance apparently was.

Besides, *I need to get this right or get fired* was not the image he wanted to broadcast to the world. If doubt existed, the tabloid sharks would circle. Once they got a whiff, the story would spread like blood through the open water. Hard to come back after that.

No. This was one more acting job. Nothing more. Busy actor on hiatus seeking down-home Christmas fun. He could do this.

He had no choice.