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*Sortir du froid*

(Come in from the cold)

It had come to this. Daniel Malone sold instruments of torture just to keep food on his crappy Formica table for one. Of course, that probably wasn't how others saw it.

They were bringing home a piece of the outdoors, a symbol of the season, a reminder of Christ's nativity and resurrection, the eternal—evergreen—promises of God. Dan had seen things that way too before the past year took everything he had and shredded it with a mulcher. Mustering his remaining whit of self-respect, he'd succumbed to desperation and now sat in a drafty shack waiting for the next giddy Christmas revelers to select a fresh-scented, needle-dropping nightmare.

Okay, so maybe the trees weren't exactly torturous, but he'd had enough of rough bark, sticky sap, and sharp needles to last a lifetime. After this, he'd be an artificial tree enthusiast—if he bothered to put up a tree at all.

Inside his small, weather-beaten shack, the one he'd assembled mostly from leftover wooden pallets, Dan couldn't smell the fresh, evergreen scent, the only trait of Christmas trees he still enjoyed. Instead, the odor of burnt coffee lingered though he hadn't made a pot in days. He never cared for the taste, burnt or not, but he had needed something to keep him awake during the long, boring hours when no customers visited his lot.

The space heater at his feet gave a death rattle, and its electrical hum ceased. He kicked it with the tip of his boot. Nothing.

Great.

Dan folded his large frame under the wooden table that served as his desk and jiggled the wire where it entered the cheap heater. It knocked against the laminate floor remnants and hummed to life. A blast of warm air hit his face and then penetrated his boots. As he sat upright, he glanced out one of the two square windows and spotted a young couple beneath the lights in the rear of the lot.

The man had lifted a Douglas fir from where it leaned against the rope Dan strung across the lot. He stamped its trunk on the frozen, dry ground a couple times and then twirled it around so the woman could see every side. It was a woman, wasn't it? No telltale pink gloves or hand-knit, sparkly scarf. No expensive boots designed for gawking rather than walking. Just a puffy, navy jacket and white tennis shoes. It could be a skinny dude.

The person spent less than three seconds observing it before planting hands on hips and signaling disapproval with a shake of the head. Yeah, definitely a woman.

Dan rolled his eyes. Another one. If nothing else, this job had given him an unforgettable real-life lesson in male-female dynamics—a lesson that would've been helpful a couple of years ago. The man would ferret out the best-looking tree, well-shaped and full, and the woman would turn up her nose, forcing them to cycle through four to seven more trees before one met her approval—sometimes the same tree the man had first shown her.

Poor sap. He had at least three more trees to go.

Dan grabbed his gloves from the table, pulled the lined hood of his jacket over his knit cap, and made for the door. He knew from experience that if he wasn't standing at the ready the moment the woman found *the one*, he risked losing a sale.

Dan glanced down to kick aside the rags that kept the cold air from creeping beneath the entrance. He twisted the knob and used his hip to shove open the door. The wind nipped at his bare neck, so he zipped his jacket over his beard and past his chin. He strolled toward the couple, expecting to see them examining another tree. Instead, he witnessed a scene that could serve as a death knell for any romantic relationship.

The man leaned toward her, gesturing wildly with one hand while the other clasped the tree trunk. When his hand dropped to his side, the woman yelled something Dan couldn't quite make out and kicked the guy in the shin. He hunched to rub his injured leg, and she swatted his back with her gloved hand. The tree careened forward, hit the ground, and sent out a small spray of dust and gravel.

The man regained his footing, gave the woman a light shove, and stomped down the row, out of Dan's line of sight.

The shove hadn't been forceful, but Dan decided he should probably check to see that she wasn't hurt. And that his tree hadn't been damaged.

A small, white puff of breath billowed in front of the woman and then dissipated. Unaware of Dan's approach, she crouched down and seemed to search for the best place to get a hold of the trunk. She muttered something to herself, the words unintelligible.

Dan stood beneath one of the overhead lamps, casting a shadow on the tree.

She rocked back onto her heels. "I'm sorry."

Light brown eyes with amber flecks peered out from under long lashes and a worn, gray knit hat. He expected a huffy, controlling glare, not that doe-eyed innocent look that reminded him of his oldest sister, especially with the twin rosy patches blooming on her fair, winter cheeks. She wore no trace of makeup, but by his estimation, she didn't need any.

She moved to grab hold of the tree.

"I got it," Dan said. From the kick and the whap she'd given her companion, Dan knew she didn't need his help, but the scrap of chivalry he maintained required him to at least offer.

"I didn't think he'd drop the tree. I make one little suggestion, and . . ." She growled. "I should've kicked both his shins, the big jerk."

Dan raised his brows. No way would he interfere in their lovers' spat. He'd right his tree and head back to his shack. She could stay out here and fume about her boyfriend or husband or whomever he was as long as she liked. He set the tree against the line and brushed the needles from his gloves.

"Did you see which way he went?" She stood and squinted towards the parking lot.

"Uh—" He jerked a thumb in the opposite direction. "Walked off that way."

Her gaze followed the path he'd indicated. Beyond the tops of the Christmas trees, a neon sign glowed in the narrow window of an aluminum-sided building. The front door swung open and shut as a couple of rotund men in flannel jerseys exited and thumped down the five wooden steps to the sidewalk. The unlit sign affixed to the second floor read: *The Watering Hole*. Beneath it, a smaller, vinyl sign read: *Voted Pittsburgh's Favorite Hometown Hangout*.

The woman huffed again. "I should've known. He only told me three times I was keeping him from relaxing with a beer."

Dan knew it was none of his business, but in an effort to wrap up the uncomfortable conversation and retreat to the relative warmth of his shack, he asked, "You going to join him?"

She let out a scoffing laugh. "I'd sooner army crawl naked over broken glass and a swarm of scorpions than sit in that stinky rat hole with him. I'll wait."

Dan suppressed a smile and shrugged. "Suit yourself."

He retreated to the shack, closing the door behind him, and toed the rags back toward the base. He dropped onto a folding chair and rubbed his gloved hands together. Not feeling any warmth coming from the heater, he nudged it with his boot until warm air circulated at his feet.

He gazed out the window, expecting the young woman to have gone back to her vehicle, but instead she stood beneath the light where thick snowflakes landed on her hat and jacket. She rubbed her hands together and jumped up and down, presumably trying to warm herself. Maybe the guy had taken the car keys with him.

The snow came down harder, sticking to the cold ground. The wind gusted, blowing the flakes against the side of the shack. The woman clapped and did some kind of awkward hip-wriggling, bouncing jig to keep warm.

He didn't want company, especially female company, but his heart would have to be colder than his toes to let her stay out there when he had four walls and a roof, paltry though they were. He cracked the door and called to her.

"You can wait in here if you want."

She jogged toward him, her heel sliding on a patch of black ice partially covered with snow. Her arms flailed as if she were making a snow angel in mid-air before she caught her balance and stumbled forward, her cheeks redder than before.

He pushed the door open wider, and she slipped in. A blast of cold air followed.

"Thank you." Her teeth chattered, and she hugged her arms close to her body.

"You want some hot cider?" He motioned to a miniature slow cooker on the battered table in the corner. The pot and its contents came courtesy

of his sister Colleen. The strangely odorless, brown liquid didn't tempt him, but maybe it would help warm her.

"I'd love some, thank you."

He stirred the cider, ladled it into two mugs, and handed one to her. *Now* the spicy, warm scent of cinnamon wafted through the cool air.

She slipped off her gloves and wrapped her hands around the steaming mug. After blowing on the hot liquid a couple of times, she raised it to her lips. "Mmmm. That helps."

Dan opened a metal folding chair and dusted the cushioned seat with his glove. He set it on the side of the table opposite him. "You can sit."

"Thank you." Her pink lips turned up in a small smile. She sipped her cider, draining the mug in no time. It must have worked in warming her because she unzipped her jacket and slipped the hat from her head.

Luxurious auburn-brown tresses spilled onto her shoulders, dark and luminous. His gaze traveled her back as her hair cascaded down. How could he have mistaken her for a man?

Her magnificent hair mesmerized him, but otherwise her features were pretty but not glamorous or beautiful like—

No. He would not allow her to invade his thoughts.

He turned his attention back to the cider and took a sip. Not bad. "I'll, uh, keep an eye out for your . . . your boyfriend? Husband?"

She sputtered and covered her mouth with the back of her hand.

"You okay?" He didn't need some stranger choking in his ramshackle workplace.

She nodded and cleared her throat. "He's not my husband or boyfriend. Robert is my stupid, know-it-all brother."

"Oh." Dan lifted his chin in acknowledgment. "Whoever he is, I'll keep a lookout." It explained their unnecessary roughness. He had four older sisters, and he'd admit to having shoved them a time or two. Not that he'd treat another woman that way.

"My name's Emily." She extended her right hand. "Thanks for letting me come in out of the cold."

"You're welcome." He took her small hand in his and gave it a firm shake. "Dan Malone."

She withdrew her hand and laid it inside her jacket, over her heart, her expression pinched.

"Are you okay?"

“Uh, yeah. Just . . . that was weird.”

He had no clue what she was talking about, nor did he want to know. She wouldn't be hanging around much longer. He hoped. He'd give the guy another five, ten minutes before he went over there and dragged him out himself. Apparently they were no longer in the market for a tree. Another lost sale, and only one day left before Christmas Eve.

“I don't know how Elizabeth puts up with him.”

Dan raised his brows. Should he have known who Elizabeth was?

“His wife. He can be such a blockhead. Insists it's ridiculous for me to get a real tree when I'll hardly be at my apartment for Christmas. But he can't let it go at that. He's got to lay into all the old spinster jokes.”

“Spinster?” Dan peered at her through squinted eyes. She couldn't be more than twenty-three.

“I know, right? I'm not even twenty-five.” She flung her hair back and pouted.

Dan shrugged. “I'm twenty-eight. Guess that makes me an old bachelor.”

She smiled, and it lit her face. It was a reserved smile intended to be polite and nothing more, but it made him wonder. When would a woman smile for him again? Not *at* him, at something funny he said or did, but because the joy he brought her couldn't be contained.

He hoped never.

Dan switched on the radio, wanting to fill the dead air with something other than silence, and dialed through four stations before he found one that wasn't playing Christmas songs.

The woman's eyes, *Emily's eyes*, glimmered, and her lips turned up as if she were suppressing a laugh.

“What?” It was his shack; he could listen to whatever he pleased.

She shrugged. “For someone selling Christmas trees, you seem intent on avoiding the sounds of the season. I understand passing over ‘Santa Baby,’ and ‘Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer,’ but ‘Greensleeves’ and ‘O Tannenbaum’?”

“It's not Christmas yet. When it's Christmas, I'll listen to Christmas carols.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but Dan pointed toward the window to cut her off. “Your brother?”

Robert stood in the center aisle of the lot, snow swirling around him. He called Emily's name as he turned in each direction.

"I should make him sweat," Emily said, her eyes narrowed at her brother. She stood, zipped her jacket, tugged on her gloves, and grabbed her hat. "Thank you for the heat and the cider."

Dan nodded.

"Oh, and I'll take the tree. The one we were looking at."

Dan rubbed his hand over his beard. Her brother may be a know-it-all, but she was one headstrong lady.

2

*L'un est le nombre solitaire*

(One is the loneliest number)

Emily rubbed her boot over the blue ice-melting pellets on the sidewalk, crushing the beads beneath her toes. She scanned the end unit apartment building with its nondescript red brick, darkened windows, and green shutters. With her arms folded over her chest, she huffed and waited as her brother untied the twine holding the tree to the roof rack of his minivan. He'd spent the first ten minutes of their ride badgering her about her stubborn streak and her foolishness for—how did he put it?—“getting cozy in some love shack” with a strange man.

“All I'm saying, Emily,” he said as he stepped off the van's running board, “is you can't be too careful. You went behind a closed door with a guy you don't know. He's bigger, and he's stronger. He's got that Grizzly Adams thing goin' on with the beard. Who would've heard you if you screamed?”

“Certainly not you, since your butt was glued to a bar stool in that dive.” Emily clenched her fists at her side. Robert had been smothering her with his overprotectiveness since their parents died seven years ago. If she didn't know his concern was born of love, she may well have strangled him by now. “If you hadn't stomped off to the bar, leaving me stranded in a blizzard, I wouldn't have been forced to sit in that rickety shanty with Scrooge, the tree salesman.” A closed-off Scrooge, who obviously didn't want her there.

A twinge of guilt stung her conscience. Maybe she wasn't being fair to Dan. He had been kind enough to welcome her in out of the cold, but even a wallflower like her could tell his invitation was grudging. Sitting uncomfortably in his folding chair, he'd only contributed curt responses to the conversation. He was a man well-practiced in avoidance.

Had Dan not told her his age, she would have guessed older—maybe late thirties? With a hat pulled low over his forehead and a scruffy beard and mustache bristling the lower half of his face, the only clues to his age had been his eyes. Those hazel irises guarded more pain and weariness than a man in his twenties should harbor.



“Earth to Emily. You gonna get the door for me?” Robert stood at the edge of her walk, the tree hoisted over his shoulder.

“Oh. Sorry.” Emily jogged to the door of the three-story building and opened it.

Robert stomped the snow from his boots, dragged the tree inside, and balanced it against the wall.

Emily, fiddling with her keys, rushed past him to get to her apartment door. Jostling the key in the lock, she turned it and held open the door.

Robert trudged by with the tree, trailing green and brown needles. “Where do you want it?”

“In front of the sliding glass door.” Emily walked to the far side of her living area, which extended via the doors to a concrete slab patio outside.

The small apartment, nondescript in its pale walls and beige carpet, had been home for almost four years. Robert and her sister-in-law Elizabeth had protested when she announced she’d be moving out of their house, but she suspected they were secretly relieved. At the time, there had been three adults and three children under the roof of their 1,600-square-foot house. Since she’d moved out, they’d added two more children. While Emily appreciated their generosity, it had been well past time to strike out on her own. She’d moved less than two miles away, but it managed to give her and them some much-needed privacy.

“Okay,” Robert said as he adjusted the tree in the stand. “Hold on and let me tighten it.”

Emily steadied the tree as Robert lowered himself to the floor and slid beneath the lowest limbs. In several minutes, he secured the tree.

“Thanks, Robert. You’d better get home.” Emily glanced at the wall clock. If he didn’t leave soon, Elizabeth would be drowning in bedtime madness getting all the kids bathed and ready for sleep.

Robert groaned. “Yeah, don’t want to miss an opportunity to chase a wet, naked toddler down the hall, strain a turd from the tub, or read *How Do Dinosaurs Say Goodnight?* for the thousandth time.”

Emily smiled. She knew from experience that his kids were exhausting, but his small home nearly burst with love and life. *Will I ever have that kind of life, or am I doomed to always be alone?*

She ushered Robert to the door with a kiss to the cheek despite his infuriating behavior at the tree lot. Before she bolted the door behind him,

she remembered she hadn't gotten the mail and padded out to the group of mailboxes in the entryway.

Robert called from the open door beneath the exit sign. "You're coming for dinner on Christmas Eve, right?"

"Yep. And we're still doing that seven o'clock children's Mass, aren't we?"

"Yeah. Hopefully they all fall asleep on the way home." The door swung shut behind him.

Emily hugged an arm across her midsection to fend off the cold air and gathered her mail from the metal box with her free hand. As she shuffled back to her apartment, she sifted through the mixture of catalogs, bills, and junk mail, finding two Christmas cards.

She closed and locked the door behind her, then plopped onto the couch. Sliding a finger under the seal of the first card, she pried it open. The photo card showed the smiling faces of her cousin, his wife, and their children in matching red and green scarves, relaxing in front of a fireplace. Twice she turned the envelope of the second card over in her hands, looking for a return address. Nothing. The postmark only said "Pittsburgh."

Emily opened the envelope and pulled out a card decorated with glittering poinsettias. A three-by-five-inch photo slipped out and landed in her lap. A blond-haired, blue-eyed, fair-skinned man in his late twenties stared up at her. The most handsome face she'd ever laid eyes on. The face of the only boy she'd ever loved. His arm wrapped snugly around an olive-skinned woman whose exotic dark hair, dark eyes, and flawless skin made her a natural candidate for Miss Universe. She possessed the kind of looks that made men—and women—stop in the street and take another look.

A text banner at the bottom read, "We're Engaged! Save the Date: August 3." Emily scooped up the card and photo along with the other mail and flung them onto her end table. She kicked off her boots and shuffled to the kitchen. Her stomach rumbled, and she realized she hadn't planned anything for dinner. Scanning the refrigerator, she found only yogurt, fruit, and lettuce. Nothing appealed to her. Celebrating Bryce's engagement to Miss Universe required carbs, specifically sugar and chocolate. She yanked open the freezer door. Pushing aside a bag of frozen baby peas and a container of leftover soup, she reached for the quart of Moose Tracks ice cream in the back.

Retail therapy befitted the rich or perpetually in-debt. Ice cream therapy? Now, *that* even an average-looking girl overlooked by men and boys of every age and race could afford to indulge.

“So, you’ve decided to take the plunge, eh, Bryce?” She lifted her spoon and gazed up, as if he stood before her. “You could’ve had the plain but virtuous Emily Kowalski, beloved by small children and dowagers. I see instead you’ve chosen beauty, which I’m sorry to say is shallow and fleeting.” She jabbed the spoon into the ice cream, digging for a hunk of chocolate. “So, boo for you.” She slid a heaping spoonful of ice cream over her tongue, slowly scraping the metal spoon between her teeth. Tears welled in her eyes, and she sniffed. “In your defense, Bryce, I don’t think you knew I could make pierogies from scratch.”

As her spoon hit the bottom of the paperboard container, Emily’s stomach revolted. When would she learn? She pressed her hand to her belly and moaned. This wasn’t the first time she’d drowned her disappointment and envy in empty calories.

After tossing the nearly-empty carton into the trash and the spoon into the sink, Emily plodded to the bathroom, uncertain whether or not her chocolaty meal was going to stay down. She stared in the mirror at her plain, ordinary face. Brownish hair, brown eyes. But her nose was cute, right? She bared her teeth. Perfectly straight (after thousands of dollars of orthodontic work). She wasn’t ugly. She wasn’t!

With a hard swallow to force back the rising tide of Moose Tracks, she breathed deeply and resolved to change. *Lord, I’m tired of waiting for life to happen to me. You have a plan for my life, and I’m fairly certain it’s not written at the bottom of an ice cream container.*

The nausea settled. She filled a Dixie cup with water and held it up. “Here’s to the new Emily.” She sipped and tossed back her long, thick hair, easily her best feature. She lifted her chin and, for good measure, added, “Amen.”