

A Christmas Clash

Mountains, Plains and Mullets



By Kristen Ashley



“I don’t know about this, Dad,” his daughter Mamie said from the backseat.

Hix stared at the building in front of him, able to see it in the blinding blizzard they’d been navigating for the last hour only because you could also probably see it from space, it was so lit by Christmas lights.

“It looks like they’re open,” Hix shared. “At least we can get a roof over our heads, pull up a forecast, talk to a local about the lay of the land and sit down together somewhere safe and regroup.”

They needed to do that because there was no way they’d make it to their rental that night. The roads were a nightmare. It took them an hour to drive fifteen miles. And according to GPS, they had another seventy-five to go.

He just hoped this little town had a hotel and they had vacancies this close to Christmas.

“No, I mean that crazy Christmas place,” Mamie corrected. “Seriously, if you asked me yesterday if I thought there could be too much Christmas, I would have said no. But now, I’m changing my mind. This is like...the opposite of the Grinch, and I’m not sure that’s a good thing.”

Greta, his woman, sitting next to him in the front of their SUV, chuckled.

Hix, still staring at the building, silently agreed with his daughter.

He turned his head when he saw movement out the side window, and there was his son, Shaw, gloved hand lifted to knock.

His two eldest, Shaw and Corinne, along with Greta’s brother, Andy, were following them in Shaw’s new SUV, another reason to stop.

Shaw was a good driver, but even a short convoy in this storm was not giving Hix good thoughts in keeping safe the ones he loved most on the planet.

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They'd decided on two cars not only because there were too many of them to fit comfortably in one, but also so they'd have more freedom to do the things they wanted to do on their Christmas ski vacation.

In other words, Hix and Greta were cognizant of the fact his twenty-two-year-old son, who was on leave from the marines, and his twenty-year-old daughter, who was home from college, would have different ideas on what Christmas in the mountains would mean.

Mamie, his baby, was eighteen. She still held on to being Hix's little girl, but as much as he'd like to deny it, she was all but grown up. Not to mention she missed her brother, even if he'd been serving his country at home and abroad (but never anywhere near Nebraska, where they lived) for the last four years.

You never got used to a loved one leaving.

Mamie was less apt to admit it, but she also missed her sister, who was in her sophomore year at Purdue.

From this, Hix suspected Mamie would be half and half with hanging with her dad and stepmom and going off with her siblings.

Hix didn't mind what they did, he was just so fucking happy to have his three kids and his wife together at Christmas.

A whole week, no one was states away or oceans away. A space of time where they rested their heads under the same roof and woke up to share coffee and time the next day.

His version of heaven.

And he was holding fast to that, even with this chink in the plans.

He was holding because he knew his Christmases were numbered.

At least ones like this.

Shaw had flourished in the marines, unsurprisingly. He had no interest in college but did have an interest in continuing his pursuit of being an NCO. He also had a healthy interest in women, and was like his dad, so he'd find one and settle down, probably soon (seeing as Hix had screwed that pooch the first time around, he hoped his son learned from that and found a good one right off the bat).

Corinne was pre-law, and she'd lost none of her fire to eventually pass the bar. What was new was a taste for travel, something she got by making friends at college from all over and going home with them every time she was invited. This she did to the point the concept of her settling

in tiny Glossop, Nebraska had zero possibility of happening after she'd decided she *adored* Chicago, thought Boston was *life*, Atlanta was *everything* and *would kill* to live in Manhattan.

Mamie still purported that she'd leave her father when hell froze over.

However, of late, Hix spent a considerable amount of energy ignoring this next fact—but it couldn't be denied—she was boy crazy. Someone would eventually take his place, they'd build their own dream together, and who knew where she'd go from there.

But now, he had them all.

In a raging blizzard.

In some small town somewhere in the Colorado Mountains.

Outside what looked like a bar that Buddy the Elf would decree was over the top.

He hit the button to slide down his window.

“Why have we stopped? We should press on before it gets bad,” Shaw noted.

Hix blinked at his son.

Greta burst out laughing.

“Are you in another world than us?” Mamie asked, throwing out a hand toward her window.

“This isn’t bad? Rudolf, Hermey and Yukon Cornelius had better weather than this.”

“Ohmigod!” Corinne materialized beside her brother. As was her norm since her teenage years, she was wearing an outfit that looked camera-ready for her photoshoot, complete with slouchy hat with a fuzzy ball at the tip and big parka with fake fur trim on the hood, her long hair curled and tumbling down her chest. She wasn’t boy crazy, as such. But the boys were crazy about her. “Can we go inside? Like *now*? I hope they have food. Shaw packed ‘provisions.’ He didn’t pack ‘snacks.’ His trail mix is actually *trail mix* and it doesn’t have a single M&M in the whole bag!”

Greta was laughing again.

“Who packs ‘provisions’ for a road trip?” Corinne went on to demand, like she was ready to have this conversation...in a raging snowstorm.

“We’re gonna keep going, Cor,” Shaw erroneously informed his sister.

“Are you *high*?” she returned. “We’re driving two miles an hour. At this rate, we’ll be there in July.”

“We’re going to go in that building, get a drink and find somewhere close and safe to spend the night,” Hix contradicted. “Sorry, son, we’re not putting our women in further danger trying to get to our cabin through this. We’ll head out again tomorrow.”

“But tomorrow is Christmas Eve,” Shaw pointed out.

“Yeah, tomorrow is Christmas Eve.” Andy, Greta’s brother, joined their side-door huddle.

Andy was a lot younger than Greta, somewhat older than the kids, but he had a TBI, so he acted more like their kid than his new-adult kids did.

But Shaw and Andy had become best buds, Corinne and Mamie loved him like another brother, he owned a huge part of Greta’s heart.

And Hix’s.

“We’ll leave early. If the weather clears, we’ll be there in an hour and a half,” Hix replied.

“We can still have the whole day there, mostly.”

“Oh no! Do we *have* to get up early?” Mamie asked. “It’s vacation! You’re not supposed to *have* to get up early on vacation.”

“How about we go inside and have this chat, hmm?” Greta suggested.

“Yeah, before Shaw turns into Bumble,” Mamie mumbled, sticking with her Rudolf theme.

But she wasn’t wrong.

Shaw had come out in only his heavy plaid flannel and insulated vest. The snow was sticking to his clothes, hair and even his eyelashes. And his boy was a big boy, tall and built, and now, fast becoming the abominable snowman.

Hix made moves to shut down the car, declaring, “Let’s get inside.”

He rolled up the window and they all rolled out.

It could not be said they didn’t have warning.

They still were unprepared when they opened the door and Stevie Wonder’s “What Christmas Means to Me” was playing so loud, it was a wonder their hair didn’t jet back, the sonic waves were that strong.

And that was the least of it.

There wasn’t an inch of stationary space that hadn’t been laced with Christmas lights. It almost hurt the eyes, and the outside could be seen a half a mile away through a whiteout.

A pool table to the side had been covered with a festive, but heavy plastic cloth.

This was a good call, because on it was a massive punch bowl filled with something red with cloves and orange slices floating on top. This was surrounded by a cornucopia of food, everything from a dizzying variety of Christmas cookies to dips, cheeses, cheese balls, overflowing bowls of snack mix, chips, nuts and pretzels, and platters of artfully arranged crackers and sliced cured meats.

Although there were only a few cars in the parking lot, the place was packed, and everyone was wearing *Christmas!* from ugly sweaters to necklaces made of lit Christmas bulbs to antler headbands. There were female elves in short skirts and a Santa behind the bar who had overlong salt and pepper hair and a real, thick salt and pepper beard. He had a red wool beanie on his head that had a white roll around the edge, as well as a long-sleeved t-shirt printed as a fake Santa suit. He was also wearing faded jeans and had the body of a linebacker.

People were dancing to Stevie, talking in groups, laughing, a movie screen was set up in a back corner and *White Christmas* was about halfway through, and there was a general air of joy and revelry everywhere.

“We thought we were going west. But I think we made a wrong turn and passed the invisible barrier, Dad. We’re in the North Pole,” Shaw, standing at his side, muttered.

A woman carrying a tray filled with drinks who—Hix narrowed his eyes to be certain he was correctly seeing what he thought he was seeing—had on elf ears and was sporting...*a mullet* and wearing a t-shirt that said, I’M YOUR WAITRESS. DON’T BE NAUGHTY. TIP ME. MERRY CHRISTMAS.

“Yo,” she said to them. “We don’t do hostess seating. Go graze the trough,”—she jerked her elf ears and mullet toward the pool table banquet—“then sit your asses down. Today’s punch bowl special is wassail. Or mead. Or some shit like that. Advice: avoid it. The egg nog’s on the other end.” She eyed up Corinne and Mamie. “We got it leaded and unleaded.” She did the two fingers to eyes thing toward his girls then started to take off.

“Sorry, I think we might have stumbled on someone’s Christmas party,” Greta said before the woman melted into the crowd.

The waitress stopped and turned back.

“Nope. Bubba’s is like this every year, from December first to January second.” She tipped her head to the side, doing a top-to-toe of both Hix and Shaw. “You,” she said Shaw’s way, “I’m gettin’ old. Don’t got it in me anymore to take you on.”

Take him on?

What the fuck?

“You,” she said to Hix, “when the arm wrestling starts, you’re first up. I’m thinkin’ I gotta be fresh to best you.”

And again.

What the fuck?

With that, she wandered to a table of bikers who had not a small amount of tinsel poking out of their leathers in various places, and one had plastic-wrapped candy canes hanging off the bandana that was rolled around his head.

“Dad...that’s... Holy shit, Dad,” Shaw began. “That Santa is Tatum Jackson.”

Hix’s gaze shot right to the man behind the bar with the beanie who was smiling down at a blond who had Scrooge’s hat on her head decorated with fake snow and some pine greenery and holly. The black of her hat was partially see-through and it lit up inside.

She was a looker.

But she was also obviously like the rest of them.

Christmas crackers.

And...well...

Shit.

This must be Carnal, Colorado.

Not that he knew the town because he saw the sign out in that storm or was cognizant that they’d be driving through it to get to their cabin.

Just that anyone in law enforcement knew where Tatum Jackson, ex-NFL tight end turned bounty hunter, lived. Mostly because, a number of years back, the guy caught a serial killer.

And the reason he eventually caught the guy was the woman he was still smiling at and had now drawn into his arms. Hix didn’t recall her name, but she was Jackson’s, she’d been picked up by that lunatic, and Jackson did what no one else had been able to do through too many victims.

Within hours, he hunted him down.

The door behind them opened, a gust of wind and snow blew through, and when Hix turned, if he saw Bill Murray or Jimmy Stewart or Bing Crosby or Kurt Russell dressed up as Santa or just the real Santa, he would have been completely unsurprised.

Instead, it was a thin man smiling a broken grin who looked mostly normal, except he was wearing a black baseball cap with a skull on the front.

And the skull was wearing a Santa hat.

“Got caught in that mess out there, did ya?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Mamie answered. “Where are we?”

The man drew a bit closer, dipped his head to the side, and he answered, “You’re where love and hope and miracles and second chances collide.” He clicked his tongue. “Looks pretty good, doesn’t it?”

Before Mamie could reply, the man winked and then strode by them.

“Hey, Jim-Billy. ’Bout time!” a mammoth man wearing a blue sweater with a massive white Christmas tree stitched in, shouted from behind the bar.

“Please tell me you haven’t run out of beer,” Skull-Santa Baseball Cap Guy returned. “I’m not drinkin’ no wassail.”

“It’s not wassail,” Scrooge Hat Blonde said. “It’s mulled wine.”

“It sucks, JB!” Mullet Waitress’s disembodied voice shouted from beyond the dancers and bikers.

Jim-Billy slid onto one of the only open barstools in a way that Hix knew it was open because it was Jim-Billy’s.

“You just gonna stand there, or are you comin’ in for a drink?”

A woman with *a lot* of red hair and a very tight red sweater with fur at the neck, cuffs and hem had materialized in front of them.

“I know,” she went on, even though no one said a word. “It’s loco. It’s also Laurie. She’s bonkers for Christmas. Every year, it just got bigger and bigger. In the beginning, we tried to fight it, but...”

She looked left, and all her hair went that way, she looked right, and her hair followed, then she looked back at them.

“Eventually, we wondered what we were fighting. Grab yourselves some grub,”—she gestured to the pool table banquet—“we got a pot for donations to cover it at the end, feel free to add, or don’t. Seein’ as it’s Christmas, up to you. And that mulled wine isn’t as bad as everyone says. I kinda like it.”

“Is it alcoholic?” Mamie asked.

“Not enough for you to worry about,” the redhead replied.

“I’m her dad, and a law enforcement officer,” Hix told her.

“It’s still not enough to worry about,” the woman retorted. “Go ahead, arrest me for serving a minor on Christmas Eve’s Eve. Bubba’ll bail me out before you can blink, and it won’t be *me* being visited by the Ghosts of Christmas because I was a scrooge.”

And with that, she sashayed off.

“Okay, I think I might...I might just have died and gone to heaven,” Greta, suddenly cozying up close to his side, whispered.

His woman liked Christmas.

But this?

“Honey, that’s Justice Lonesome,” she finished.

And again, Hix turned his head, and sure enough, the single most celebrated singer-songwriter of her generation, the daughter of the same of his generation, was sitting at the bar, laughing at a big man with a man-bun in his blond hair who was sitting next to her.

“And that’s her guy, Deke Hightower,” Greta’s voice was pitching high. “The one who nearly died for her.”

Yeah.

Hix had forgotten.

Lonesome lived here, and not too long ago, her man had taken some bullets for her when one of her family members went off the deep end.

Before he could say anything to Greta, something happened.

Something that had Hix stretching out his arms and gathering his family close, inching them back toward the doors as Johnny Mathis’s “I Need a Little Christmas” started playing on the jukebox.

And the whole joint got in on the action.

Even the tinsel bikers.

Everyone started singing, shouting that shit out, with the big guy in the blue and white Christmas tree sweater being the ringleader.

This meaning the man was on the *fucking bar* bellowing the words out at the patrons while he marched up and down, avoiding glasses and bottles as he went, like he was practiced at this shit.

There was some twirling close by among the dancers when the instrumental part struck up, and when the lyrics came back, the big man threw his arms out and no other way to put it.

He *went for it*.

When it was done and everyone was cheering and catcalling, Shaw muttered in Hix's ear, "I think they need a little *less* Christmas, and *we* need to get the hell outta here."

But Hix knew he and his son were screwed when his three girls turned big eyes to him and almost in unison breathed, "I love this place."

And Andy added, "It's better than Disney Land. It's the greatest place *on earth*."

"Fuck," Shaw mumbled Hix's precise thought.

Then he found his hands seized by his wife and his youngest and he was being towed to the pool table banquet.



"So yeah, she just blew him away, right on the side of the mountain, doing that shit literally barefoot and pregnant."

"I don't want to condone that manner of violence, but he sounded like he deserved it," Greta said to the redhead.

They were seated at the bar, he, Greta, Mamie and Andy, listening to tales of Carnal as delivered by the redhead, whose name, they'd learned, was Krystal.

Hix was also sitting there ignoring the fact that Corinne was flirting with a guy who thankfully was age appropriate, but that was all he, as her father, thought the guy had going for him. And Shaw had found a fellow marine home on leave, and they were off somewhere, shooting the shit.

His family were all having fun.

For his part, listening to these stories, Hix was regretting not pressing on when Shaw suggested it.

Because in Krystal's Tales of Carnal, they'd learned that the townsfolk hadn't just dealt with a serial killer and Deke Hightower getting shot which, any sane person would agree, was plenty

bad enough. Krystal just finished telling the tale of a dirty cop, and that was after she told them about some woman who'd been buried alive.

"He deserved that for sure, and a kick to the penis..." Andy chimed in, then finished, "*Before* she shot him."

Mamie giggled.

"Truer words were never spoken," Krystal agreed.

Hix's eyes wandered to where Tatum Jackson stood, hips to the back counter, arms crossed over his Santa t-shirt, watching Krystal scare the shit out of Hixon.

He'd met the man too, along with a bevy of other staffers and locals.

Scary shit might happen in Carnal.

It was still a friendly town.

Tate caught Hix's eyes and shook his head, his gaze intent, sharing he was hearing Krystal, and they might be stories to entertain out-of-towners now, but they hadn't been all that fun to live through.

"Lexie and Ty are up the mountain. Their kids are too little for this lot." Krystal circled a hand to indicate the bar. "And Chace and Faye are home too, for the same reason. Jussy and Deke are here because Jussy's mom and stepdad are at their house, watching their babies."

"It's good there were happy endings," Greta noted.

"You got that right, sister," Krystal replied.

"Hope and miracles and second chances, Ta-Ta," Andy reminded her.

"Yeah, baby bro," Greta replied on a smile.

"How is everybody getting here in a blizzard?" Mamie asked after the crowd in the bar.

"Most the people live close, so they walked," Krystal replied. "But...you live in the mountains, you get used to driving smart in different weather conditions. It's those freakin' Californians and Texans who come to ski who drive like imbeciles. Reckon there's none of them out in the likes of this, though."

"We get snow back home, and we can get a lot of it, but this is crazy," Mamie shared.

"Wait until you wake up tomorrow morning," Krystal advised. "Fresh snow in the mountains, nothin' prettier. Totally worth the pain in the ass to get it."

And they'd earn that prize.

Good News: Greta had shared their predicament and Krystal had made a call. They now had three rooms booked in a motel a few blocks away.

Uncertain News: Even though they were safe for the night, and this crew seemed to be solid, with all that had gone on in that county, they could wake up to a lot more than just fresh snow.

Hix had learned the hard way that sleepy was good. He'd been a metro cop. He currently was a low-population-county sheriff. They'd had one murder in his tenure there, and that murder was the only murder in sixty years.

He'd had a spell of struggling to feel relevant.

A young father shot dead, he got over that fast.

The vibe changed again, and Hix wondered if another favorite song was coming on (they'd since learned Barbra Streisand's "Jingle Bells," and Andy Williams's "It's The Most Wonderful Time of the Year," were like Johnny Mathis, but they lost their goddamned minds to Whitney Houston's "Joy to the World," and since that last was Hix's favorite, he was on board with that).

"Oh my God, baby," Greta breathed, grabbing his arm.

He turned to her only to twist further to follow her gaze.

Fucking hell.

Justice Lonesome was setting up at a karaoke machine.

Justice Lonesome, award-winning, platinum-earning, arena-filling rock star, was going to do karaoke.

Okay, maybe this *was* better than Disney Land.

The big guy with the blue sweater, a man they now knew was the bar's eponymous Bubba, Krystal's husband, joined his wife behind the bar, noting, "Now the night's about to get good."

He wasn't wrong.

Lonesome went right into Karen Carpenter's version of "Christmas Waltz" and honest as fuck, it was so fantastic, Hix got goosebumps.

The crowd though, low in a hum so as not to drown her out, sang along.

When she was done, she said into the mic, "Heard word we have another singer here tonight. Thought maybe I could talk her into doing a duet. Greta, you wanna come on up?"

Hix could sense Greta growing wired, but his eyes scanned the crowd, and it wasn't long before he saw Shaw and Corinne standing by the karaoke machine, smiling like lunatics.

They'd set this up.

Fuck, but he had good kids.

“Go, Ta-Ta, go go go,” Andy encouraged, bouncing on his barstool.

Greta looked anxious and swung her gaze to Hix.

“Go, baby,” he whispered.

She licked her lips, nodded, then his wife got up and wound her way through the crowd, meeting Lonesome, who gave her a mic. He could see from the line of her frame and the shake of her smile that she was nervous, but he had no doubts.

She had this.

The women talked for a few beats before Justice broke away to cue something on the karaoke machine.

It was when the piano notes sounded that Hix felt it in his throat.

Then he watched the woman he loved, who loved to sing and found a way to do it all her life, even through some seriously rough times that would quiet the most talented canaries, standing in a Christmas-crazy, crazy-friendly bar and singing David Bowie and Bing Crosby’s “The Little Drummer Boy (Peace on Earth)” along with one of the artists she admired most on this earth.

It got dusty in that room as he watched, and he gave zero fucks it did.

Outside his newborn babies, the same at their graduations and proms, and his current wife walking down an aisle his way, it was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

And thank God Mamie had the presence of mind to get in position to film it on her phone.

When they finished the song, the room was quiet for a beat as the women smiled at each other.

And then the room exploded with applause and cheers and hoots, everyone taking their seats.

“Your woman want a job?” Bubba asked from behind him.

“She’s already got one. You come see us in Nebraska, I’ll take you to see her at the Dew,” Hix replied, not taking his eyes off Greta as, after she gave Justice a hug, then did the same with Shaw and Corinne, she wound her way back to them and a tinsel biker took the karaoke mic from Lonesome.

His wife had flushed cheeks and bright eyes and her drop-dead-gorgeous smile was blinding him more than the Christmas lights that shone all around.

“Figure you just had your merry Christmas,” he murmured as she fit herself front to front to him, sliding her arms around him, and he returned the favor.

She tipped her head back, and happiness a glow emanating from her, replied softly, “Yeah.”
And with that, he just had his.



“Shit, man. That was a lot.”

Deke Hightower said that.

Tate and Jim-Billy exchanged a glance.

Things had thinned out a bit and quieted down a bit more.

The storm still raged, but tomorrow was Christmas Eve, a big day, presents to wrap, toys to put together, last-minute errands to run, so folks had headed out to get some shut-eye in order to greet the next day.

Corinne’s guy was gone, so she, Mamie and Andy were hanging with Shaw’s new friend close to the movie screen that was now playing *Miracle on 34th Street*.

Greta was gabbing with Lauren (Tate’s wife), Krystal, Twyla (the mulleted waitress) and Justice at the other end of the bar.

Hix was with Deke, Tate and Jim-Billy at what was clearly Jim-Billy’s end of the bar.

And he’d just finished telling the men about how he and Greta got together within weeks of his divorce being finalized and during his only murder investigation in his current position.

“What?” Hix asked after the glance between Tate and the older man.

It was Jim-Billy who answered.

“Don’t know if you go in for this kind of thing, I normally wouldn’t, but livin’ through what we lived through with Tate and Laurie, Ty and Lexie, Chace and Faye, Deck and Emme, Deke here and Jussy, and Wood and Maggie, feels like you were meant to find your way here to spend some time during a holiday among your people. I mean, you got in close proximity to us, and a higher power made sure you connected with those who would get you on a level not many would.”

“My people?” Hix asked.

“Some happy endings happen,” Jim-Billy replied. “Some are a lot harder won. Yours took some time, and a lot of heartbreak. But you eventually won it.”

He paused, the air seemed heavier for some reason, and then he finished.

“Folk around here know all about that.”

And with that, before anyone could say anything, Jim-Billy tipped his chin and slid off his stool.

“Be seein’ you tomorrow night,” he murmured to Tate, then he quietly slipped out of the bar without saying farewell to anyone else.

Not that there weren’t men who could be openly sentimental, but Hix had some experience with the type who got that way after drinking too much, so he asked, “He okay to be out on his own?”

“He’s good,” Tate answered.

“His wife died in a fire,” Deke shared.

“During Christmas,” Tate added.

“Fuck,” Hix said, turning his head to look toward the door that had closed behind Jim-Billy, and closed them all in, keeping them safe and warm.

When he turned back, he saw Tate was looking across the bar. He followed the man’s gaze and noted that Tate was nonverbally communicating with Lauren.

“We take care of him,” Deke said low. “Or, more to the point, Tate and Laurie do. Especially at Christmas.”

Hix nodded.

Took a sip of his beer.

Decided it was time to drive the few blocks to their hotel and get his family settled.

And was thwarted in this when Twyla hefted herself up on the stool next to him, planted her elbow on the bar, hand up, fingers curled, and said, “Right. I’m in a festive mood so I’ll warn you, the spread favors you, but not by much because people ’round here know my upper body strength is off...the...charts. So...let’s do this.”

Hix looked at her, he looked to Deke, he looked to Tate, and they were both smiling.

So he put his elbow on the bar, clasped hands with Twyla...

And very nearly lost arm wrestling a waitress with a mullet.



Greta was done and he was done, but he was still hard and inside her, when he pulled his face from her neck and looked down at his wife.

“Merry Christmas Eve,” he said.

Those were the first words either of them said since he woke her half an hour before.

“I love you with everything that is me,” she replied.

His post-coital, mellow happy place dissolved, something far more intense replaced it, Hix growled, dropped his head, and it was not a mellow, post-coital kiss he laid on his wife.

He was set to gear up for round two, even if it took him an hour to get them there, when there was a hammering at the door.

He lifted his head and both he and Greta turned to look across their motel room toward the sound.

“Dad! Greta! Tragedy!” Corinne shouted.

“Fuck,” Hix bit, and as gently as he could, he pulled out of his woman.

He then wasted no time as he rolled them both out of bed, already reaching for their clothes.

He had his pajama bottoms and a thermal on, she’d pulled on her panties and robe before he prowled to the door, hoping to fuck whatever it was, it wasn’t another serial killer...or dirty cop...or shooting.

He yanked it open to the brightness of sun glinting off snow that was entirely natural, but it also was nearly blinding, and saw Corinne standing there with two people, one of whom he didn’t know. Both of them were not old, but they were older, and the male was a man named Ned. He’d checked them in well after midnight last night, doing it as bright, cheerful and welcoming as if it was three in the afternoon.

“Sorry, Mr. Drake,” Ned said. “Your daughter popped in to get some of our pastries, we gave her the news, and she thought you’d wanna know as soon as you could. The pass was closed and they’re saying it’s so bad, they won’t be able to get it open for a while. No way through or around. Everyone is stuck in this valley until after Christmas.”

“Fuck,” Hix bit again.

“It’s okay, darlin’...we’ll, um...” Greta trailed off, because their rooms were decked out in tasteful Christmas, including lights around the windows and intermingled in greenery draped around the headboard with holiday knickknacks placed around the room.

But he was a holiday person. His wife was a holiday person. His kids and Andy were holiday people. That meant eating junk, swimming in a sea of spent wrapping paper, lazing around watching football and movies, and having a big hearty meal, all together around a table.

The cabin he'd rented was a five-bedroom monstrosity with multiple decks, inside and outside fireplaces, amazing views, seven television sets, a full, modern kitchen, and a dining room table.

Their rooms in that motel were nice, but they were a far cry from that.

This was gonna suck.

"Maybe the tree farm has a few stragglers," Ned went on. "Get you out there. Grab you a tree, set it up in your room." He turned to the woman beside him, "We can dig through the attic, see if we got some decorations we aren't using."

The Carnal Hotel didn't go hog wild like Bubba's Bar did, but they weren't slouches in the decorations department, and they had a lot more ground to cover, decorating every room. Hix couldn't imagine they didn't use every last bauble.

The doubtful look the woman was failing to hide told him his assumption was correct.

She wiped it clean and turned his way. "You can have dinner with Ned and me. I'm Betty, by the way."

"Hey, Betty," Hix murmured.

"That's very sweet, but..." Greta started.

She stopped when a big, black GMC truck crunched through the minimal remnants of snow Ned, who'd been busy that morning, left in his parking lot.

He'd even shoveled around the cars.

It parked by Hix's SUV, and Tate Jackson folded out.

His sunglasses on Hix as he made the approach, he stated, "Figure you heard the pass isn't passable."

"We were just inviting them share the holiday with us," Betty told him.

"Unless you're willing to duke that shit out with Laurie, just sayin', I'm screwed if I get back up to the house and I don't have them with me."

Betty didn't hide looking freaked by the possibility of "duking out" with Tate Jackson's wife giving Christmas to mostly strangers, and since Lauren was responsible for what became of Bubba's during the season, Hix understood that completely.

Jackson read this on Betty and turned back to Hix. “We got room for you all. A guest room for you and Greta. Another for your girls. The boys can camp out on couches, but they’re comfortable couches. My wife pretty much lives to make sure me and Jonas have every challenge imaginable not to become couch potatoes.”

“We really—” Greta started, her tone saying she was going to try to find a way to kindly turn him down, not because they didn’t think the Jacksons were great people, just that this was a huge imposition at this late hour.

He didn’t let her get any further.

“Please, God, serious as fuck,” Jackson cut her off. “Do not make me go back up to my house without you trailing me. It’s all fun and games when the mulled wine is flowing, but you bein’ stuck here, your Christmas plans thwarted, if you deny her the opportunity to stuff you full of Christmas cheer, her head is gonna explode all over *me*. She’s not here herself because she’s already at the grocery store, buying more food so you can eat it. Our boy Jonas and me call her the Christmas Beast. It lurks under the surface when we’re dancin’ to her tune. Trust me, you don’t wanna see it break out.”

Ned and Betty were grinning happily through all of this.

Corinne looked like she was about to laugh.

Greta had a tendency to go overboard during holidays, especially Christmas, so Hix sensed he felt some of Jackson’s pain.

Though, not all of it.

Which was why he said, “We’ll pack and follow you up.”

“Obliged,” Jackson grunted.

“How old is your son?” Corinne asked.

“Twenty-one,” Tate answered.

“Was he at Bubba’s last night?” Corinne asked.

Tate did a once-over on her that was a father’s once-over of a young woman his son’s age, and his lips thinned.

Which made Hix’s lips thin.

“No,” Jackson replied.

“Does he look like you?” Corinne asked.

Betty emitted a truncated giggle.

Greta semi-snorted.

Hix sighed.

“Yes,” Jackson answered, and it sounded like that word was torn out of his voice box.

Corinne turned starry eyes to Greta.

Jackson turned sunglassed eyes to Hix.

He couldn’t see through those shades, but he still knew they shared a moment of keen understanding.

“Give us half an hour?” Greta requested.

“Sure,” Jackson replied.

“Come on to the office, Tate,” Betty urged. “I’ll get you a cuppa and one of my chocolate-custard twists you can enjoy while you wait.”

“Appreciated, Betty,” Jackson murmured.

They moved away.

“Go tell your sister and the men,” Hix ordered his daughter.

“Kay, Dad,” she replied, then strutted off.

Hix watched the strut and his mouth got even tighter.

Greta drew him into their room and closed the door.

“Calm down, smokey,” she said. “With all the bodies in that house, there isn’t going to be any opportunity for young-love shenanigans.”

Hix said nothing.

“Okay, Tate’s attractive, and if his son looks like him, that’s going to be a sitch.”

Hix remained silent.

“And okay,” Greta went on, “girls tend to repeat the behaviors of their mothers and find men who are like their fathers. And he reminds me a lot of you.”

Hix still didn’t speak.

“Right,” she caved. “I haven’t even met this kid, but if he’s like his dad, who’s like you, and I just got the business from you, and it was everything, we’re gonna have to watch them like hawks,” she muttered, then pressed her lips tightly together, probably so she wouldn’t laugh.

“Don’t try to butter me up with talk about how good the sex was.”

“The sex is always good.”

“This is not the Christmas I wanted for my family.”

Her expression changed, and she erased the space between them, pulling him into her arms.

“Last night started out weird, baby, but it ended amazing,” she reminded him. “This motel is cute. Everyone we met is salt-of-the-earth, good people. We’re making new friends who are kind and looking out for us. And we’re together. This is exactly what Christmas should be.”

She had a point.

He didn’t admit that.

“And you sang with Justice Lonesome so you could go home now, and your holiday would be made,” he pointed out.

“With a cherry-on-top, Christmas-Eve-morning orgasm from my husband? But of course.”

That almost made him smile.

She shook him. “It’s going to be perfect, Hix. Isn’t it always?”

Since she forgave him for being an asshole years earlier, they’d had their lumps and bumps and patches of rough road.

And still, she was right.

She was in his arms, at his side, in his life, it was always perfect.

He agreed with her by kissing her.

Then they broke, showered together quickly, and packed to go settle in for Christmas at a mostly strangers’ home.



“I’m findin’ this mighty interesting,” Bubba noted.

The men, that being Hix, Tate, Shaw, Bubba, Jim-Billy, and a man called Shambles who they’d met a few hours earlier, along with Twyla, were sitting outside by a big firepit with a roaring fire.

The women, those being Greta, Mamie, Krystal, Cindy (Twyla’s wife) and Sunny (Shambles’s woman) were being entertained by Andy in the kitchen.

Corinne was also with that group, playing it cool.

Jonas was on his phone in the living room, not out of eyesight or hearing, but well closer to Corinne than the other men were. He was also playing it cool.

“She’s used to them going after her,” Shaw pointed out.

Hix tasted something funny in his mouth, and he didn’t like it.

“Jonas is used to them going after him,” Bubba noted.

Tate grunted a grunt that, it was strange, but it sounded like Hix’s mouth tasted.

“It’s been said over and over, but it don’t make it any less true. Youth is wasted on the young.

Those two’re gonna regret that they are not right now takin’ a moonlit walk through the snow.

And from the sizzle I’m feelin’, if they don’t figure it out soon, and that path clears, and you take your family out of this valley, her leavin’ him behind, him lettin’ her go, they’ll regret that for the rest of their lives,” Jim-Billy decreed.

“Maybe we should stop talkin’ about this,” Bubba suggested, eyeing up Tate and Hix.

In unison, Hix and Tate grunted.

“Well, always like me some crisp air mingled with the scent of wood smoke, but you are all a whole lot uglier than the gaggle in there, so I’m switching teams,” Jim-Billy noted, pushing up from his Adirondack chair, and making his way inside.

“He is not wrong,” Twyla agreed, and followed him.

It didn’t take long before Bubba, Shambles and Shaw did the same, leaving Hix and Tate out by the fire.

Tate spoke first.

“We decided, Laurie and me, with how rough it was when Jonas went off to school, that we weren’t done with kids. We did our foster program, and we’ll start gettin’ placements in the new year. We want older kids. They’re tougher to place. I said no girls. She said we’ll get what we get. But I know she wants girls. Not much in my life has brought me to my knees. Nearly losin’ Laurie, that did it. Droppin’ Jonas at school every fuckin’ time I gotta do that shit, that does it too. I got a girl who sneaks into my heart, by the looks of you, I’m done for.”

“I barely survived when Shaw left for basic,” Hix told him. “Thought, since I did, I was ready for Corinne to go. I was wrong. It tore me up. Greta is already gearing up because she knows Mamie is gonna break me, and she’s going to the University of Nebraska, so she’ll only be a few hours away. In my experience, it doesn’t matter, boys or girls, it fucks with you. That said, there’s a different terror that lives in your heart when you gotta let go of your girl.”

“Mm,” Tate hummed.

“Kids need good homes though, especially ones who haven’t had much of that in their lives.”

“Mm,” Tate repeated.

“Gear up, though. Girls are a fuckuva lot more expensive. The shoes. The clothes. The makeup.”

Tate’s “Mm” had a different tenor now.

Then he stiffened, straightened, and twisted toward his house.

Hix did the same.

And through the windows, he saw Mamie and Corinne dancing with Jim-Billy in Tate’s living room. The girls were both clearly laughing, and Jim-Billy was grinning...huge.

“Holy fuck,” Tate murmured.

“What?” Hix asked.

“That.”

“What about it?”

“Jim-Billy dancing at Christmas?”

Hix looked at Tate.

Tate finished, “Miracle.”

Hix looked to his daughters and their new friend, having a blast, cutting a rug in a living room.

Then he looked back to Tate.

“You got a chance at a girl, brother, take that girl,” Hix advised.

“Yeah,” Tate replied.

They then both turned their attention to watching a Christmas miracle unfold.



Tate

His eyes were closed, the better to focus on it as it coursed through him.

When it left him, he felt her snuggling his neck, her tits pressed to his chest, her hips in his hands, sitting on his cock.

He squeezed his wife's flesh, then wrapped his arms around her, settling back into the headboard and holding her to him.

She lifted her head and looked down at him, illuminated by the Christmas lights of their personal tree in their bedroom. His present to her was under that tree. As hers was to him. They'd open them later that morning.

It was midnight-oh-twenty-five.

A tradition.

Laurie always woke him up and fucked him first thing Christmas Day.

Now, their house was full. The presents Hix and his family had packed for their Christmas trip were spread out under their tree, and along with theirs, they covered half the living room floor. The refrigerator was bursting with food. Their dining room table would be filled to the limit for dinner.

And Jonas was home.

But in that moment, it was Tate and his Laurie, in their bed, on Christmas.

"Happy?" he whispered.

Her beautiful face softened, her body melted deeper into his, she lifted a hand to cup his jaw and stroked his beard with her thumb.

She spoke no words.

But Tate had his answer.

And it was a Merry Christmas.

The End

Happy Holidays to All!