

EPILOGUE: MISTLETOE IN MALIBU

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EPILOGUE

DEE

Christmas Eve One Year Later...

Buck was being absolutely ridiculous. After months on the road with the rodeo, he was finally back and his hair was a mess, shaggy and long like some defiant teenage hooligan. I knew it was shallow but the first thing I thought when he came through the door was, *Man, my man needs his haircut*. Thankfully, I didn't actually say the words out loud. But after some long-awaited kissing, I'd turned to head to the bathroom to grab the scissors I kept in the drawer next to my sink, but he stopped me, insisting that he wanted me to cut his hair at the shop.

"We're supposed to head over to the Morgan's for Christmas Eve dinner. This will be faster," I argued.

"We pass right by the shop on the way there," he said. He was very matter of fact, completely ignoring that cutting his hair at the shop was definitely more complicated.

"Don't be silly." I smarted, "I have scissors right here in the bathroom."

His tone serious, he interjected, "It's not the same, Dee."

"What do you mean, it's not the same? It's still me cutting your hair."

He shook his head, "You do it in the kitchen where there's no mirror, and I don't get to watch you work."

Okay, fine. That part was kind of sweet. But still, we were gonna have to get all bundled up in our coats and hats and such and head out to the shop and then get all unbundled, cut hair, re-bundle, and only then, drive out to the Morgan's. Also, Tyler was supposed to meet us there. A friend was dropping him off, and I didn't want him to get there before us, just in case he might feel awkward. Honestly, it was a whole lot of kerfuffle, just so he could get a look at me while I worked. Especially because I had a perfectly good pair of scissors sitting right in the other room. "You hardly even open your eyes when I'm cutting," I said half-heartedly, already aware that I was gonna give in.

He smiled and his eyes glazed over a bit. "Mmm..." He rumbled, then he stepped towards me, reaching out and pulling my hips flush to his. "That's because your fingertips feel so damn good on my scalp." He said the words close to my lips and then he kissed me again.

I had missed him so much. He was gonna be home now for a while. He was working over at the Morgan Ranch for the winter - and staying with me. A few weeks ago, I'd nervously suggested that maybe he would like to live with me. We were talking on Facetime and I tried to seem nonchalant about it, but I could see myself in that little box

in the corner of the screen and my attempt to seem chill about the whole thing wasn't working.

He'd smirked at me when he said, "But Dee, what will the churchgoers think?" We had long ago put other people's opinions of our relationship behind us, but he still liked to needle me about it.

"Fuck 'em." I said sweetly. "If they don't like it then they can suck a ..."

Buck interrupted me, "Um...Tyler, just behind you."

I felt the heat rising in my cheeks. "Petunia. They can suck a petunia."

Tyler and Buck laughed, and Tyler pushed his face into my airspace so that he was on screen with Buck too. "So, you moving in with us, Buckaroo?"

Buck smiled genuinely. Giving me a constant feeling of tear-inducing joy, he and Tyler got on like two peas in a pod. "Well, maybe," Buck said, "Would that be okay with you, Tyler?"

"I mean, you're gonna have to learn to accept being regularly schooled on the Playstation but other than that it should be fine."

"Bullshit." Buck joked. "I can more than handle myself."

Constantly, making fun of Buck's age, Tyler said, "Sure you can, old man. Sure you can."

As Tyler backed out of the frame, Buck called after him. "It's on, dude. Challenge accepted."

When Tyler was gone, the door to his room shut behind him, I asked, "Does that all mean that when you get back to Conway, you're gonna share my bed?"

Again he smirked, "Delores Reed, I would climb Everest for five minutes in your bed. Hell yes, I'm living with you."

And now, he was finally home. Standing in our home, together, and all he wanted to do was go to my shop to get his haircut. It was a certain kind of insanity. But what's a girl to do when she loves a boy? Sometimes she has to give in to his silly whims.

SINCE IT WAS CHRISTMAS EVE, town was quiet. There were a few cars parked here and there, more than I would have thought, but who knows what people do on nights like this. The spaces in front of the shop were open and Buck pulled into one. He turned off the car but he didn't move right away. I wasn't sure what had him ruminating, but something was banging around in that brain of his.

"You okay?" I asked.

He turned to me. His face was quiet, and his eyes were sort of sad or nostalgic or something.

"A year ago today, I made love to you for the first time," He said softly.

I swallowed, trying to clear my guilt, but still wound up saying, "And then I broke your heart."

"Sure, for a few hours, but then you made it fly to the heavens and it's been there ever since."

I giggled, "You're so corny."

Unbuckling my seatbelt, he pulled me across the truck cab, onto his lap, "You love my corny."

"And your horny," I teased.

He kissed me to acknowledge my little joke, but only for a moment. He was in serious mode. "I love you, Dee."

I cradled his face in my gloved hands, "And I love you Buck." I could see his eyes searching my face, looking for something. I didn't know why he was so needy but I added, "More than I ever thought possible. My heart is right there next to yours, flying high in the heavens. You are everything."

He kissed me again, deep and dirty as he could, considering the confines of the truck cab and the puff of my down jacket. Then, as if our kiss filled him with the spirit of the season, her whooped and threw open the truck door, carrying me and hollering, "Come on baby, this cowboy needs his hairs cut."

As he placed me down gently on the ground, I grumbled, "Haircut. You need a haircut. Why can't you just say it like a normal person?"

"Pfft, that's nonsense, Dee," He half argued, half joked as he headed for the shop door. "We've got lots of hairs to cut, not just one. It's just terrible grammar."

Pulling the key from my pocket, and putting it in the lock, I asked, "How many times in our life together are you going to make this argument?"

"A lot of times, I hope." The way he said his words was downright reverent.

So much so that, while I was flicking on the light switch, I turned to look at him, wondering what the hell he was getting at, but I didn't quite get all the way around to glance at his face because as the lights flickered on, a crowd of people hollered, "SURPRISE!" And, I just about pissed myself. Okay, maybe not, but I screamed bloody murder.

Trying to catch my breath I looked out over the sea of people, all the Morgans, my favorite clients and friends, Tyler. Anyone who mattered in my life was standing in front of me.

With my heart still racing, I said "Jimmy Crickets, y'all. What the hell? It's not my birthday." No one said anything back. My eyes landed on Maddie, who was using one hand to point up towards the ceiling above my head. Taking her hint, I glanced in that direction and hanging from the ceiling above my head was a bundle of mistletoe. Clearly, the goal was to intentionally remind of my offering to Buck a little more than a year earlier. *Cheeky bastard*, I thought, then I turned expecting to find him standing behind me waiting on a kiss. Only instead of standing, he was down on one knee, holding a little black ring box.

I gasped and my hands instinctively jumped up to cover my mouth. In a rush my mind revisited the evening, the nincompoopery, the nervous neediness, it all made sense now.

When he started to speak his voice was bold and solid because when it came right down to it Buck always was always full tilt about me. He made it perfectly clear that for him there was never any doubt, I was his woman. "Delores Reed, I'm not the richest man or the most handsome..."

I interrupted him. “Debatable. I’ve yet to meet anyone prettier. I mean, you could use a haircut but ...”

There was a smattering of laughter from the peanut gallery. Buck smiled, blushing right at the apple of his cheeks. And then, he stage whispered, “I’m trying to look humble, here.”

“Right, sorry. Go on.” I felt myself grinning, a full-on foolish grin, the kind that would make your cheeks ache after a minute or so.

“The thing is, I’ve got a lot of good qualities. I can open jars, change light bulbs, mow a lawn, clear a gutter.”

Everyone laughed again and Tyler joyfully cat-called, “She’s got me for all that. Come on man, you can do better.”

Buck made a show of looking like he was considering it. Then he said, “I’m loyal and strong. I know how to do my own laundry and I’d be willing to do yours. Also, I own a horse. She’s a real beaut. You can have her if you want.”

I was giggling nervously because I could feel him getting past the silly part. He took my hand as he said the next bit, “I promise I’ll keep you laughing. But more than that, I will love you and Tyler with every breath. I already do. I just want to make it official. I want to know that you will always be mine, Dee.”

Letting go of my hand, he opened the little box he was holding to reveal a ring that he’d obviously had made for me. It looked like a crown of mistletoe with diamonds for the little buds. It wasn’t just beautiful. It was thoughtful and utterly perfect.

Clearing his throat, he said, “So, what do you think? You want to be my wife, old lady?”

Always so darn cheeky. And handsome and sweet. God, how did I get so lucky.

Again, Tyler called out from the crowd. "Go on, say yes, mom. Wait, ask him if he'll do my laundry too."

For a third time or maybe a fourth, the crowd around us laughed. And when they grew quiet again, I reached out and touched Buck's cheek. His eyes fluttered closed, just an instinctual response to my hands on him. I was sure there was a joke to be had, some quip about him being a boy, but I didn't need to make one. Instead I said, "It would be the honor of my life to stand by your side."

He looked up at me, his eyes sparkling, happy. Smiling, he bit his lower lip for a second and then he pulled the ring from the box and slipped it on my finger. Once it was there, he asked, "You sure?"

Nodding my head and giving him a little wink, I replied, "Oh yeah. I'm sure."

And then, he was on his feet and I was in his arms, getting kissed so hard that for a second I forgot we were standing in a room full of people. When I regained my senses, I considered being embarrassed, but we were standing under the mistletoe after all.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lola West writes short, sweet, smart, silly, sexy romance. With a PhD in women's studies and a flair for the dramatic, Lola likes to keep it real. Her loves are cotton candy, astronomy, kitten heels and small-town hunks. Lola's heroes make you swoon and her heroines that talk back. Also, she believes that consent is always sexy, even in books.

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