

*The*  
**CHRISTMAS  
TREE  
FARM**



A Christmas Novella

**MELODY  
CARLSON**

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*A Christmas in the Alps*  
*A Quilt for Christmas*  
*A Royal Christmas*  
*The Christmas Tree Farm*

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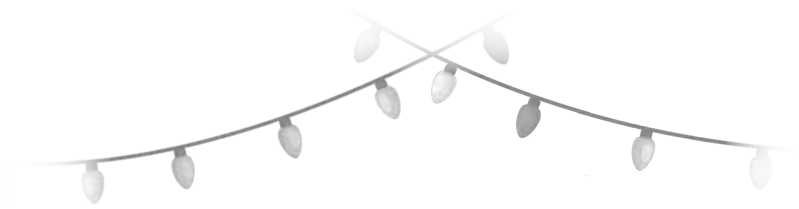
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# 1

**T**he pungent smell of damp burnt wood stung Madison McDowell's nostrils even before she opened her Jeep door. She glumly shook her head as she took in the vicious devastation of what used to be the loveliest section of the McDowell's Family Christmas Tree Farm. She zipped her fleece jacket to hold off the stiff autumn breeze whipping across the rippling river. Sadly, there was even more wildfire damage on the other side of the water. The once-valuable Douglas fir timber growing straight up the side of the steep ravine was now reduced to row after row of blackened skeletal poles. Were they even salvageable? The fast-flowing water was strewn with fallen trees from both sides. A good habitat for fish perhaps, but hazardous to riverboats and rafts and fishers. Hazardous to the local economy too.

Maybe she'd made a mistake in stopping by the burnt acreage before heading up to the old farmhouse, but curiosity had gotten the best of her. According to her sister, Addie, who'd been helping their grandmother manage the farm since their dad died, only part of their land had been damaged by last year's wildfire. But from this vantage point, it looked far worse than Madison had imagined.

She looked east to where the Thompsons' neighboring hazelnut farm was—unrecognizable. Addie had told her how the Thompsons were burnt “clean” and how nothing, including their home and outbuildings, had survived. Madison spied a lonely brick chimney over by the river and what looked like a large camping trailer next to it. Was that all that was left? The vastness of the fire's rampage was hard to absorb. She'd seen photos and videos while overseas, but nothing compared to seeing the place firsthand.

Her eyes stung with unshed tears that she blamed on the acrid air that hung heavy in the aftermath of the morning rain, but the lump in her throat belied her. How could one not react to so much loss and devastation? She marveled at how cool Addie had sounded when she'd written Madison the full report last year. But other than the fate of the Thompsons, she'd barely mentioned the state of the rest of the area. Madison still wasn't sure who had been hit and who had been spared. But she'd observed many victims on her drive up the highway this morning. It seemed the wildfire had played some cruel version of leapfrog all along the river. Some places were untouched while others held nothing but stumps and cinders. It made no sense.

She wondered how long it would take for everyone along the river to recover. Or would they? Hopefully the Thompsons had good insurance on their hazelnut farm. Apparently none of the McDowells' agricultural losses were covered. But compared to the Thompson farm, they'd been lucky. Or “blessed,” as Grandma had said in her last letter to Madison. “God spared us for a reason,” she'd written in a shaky hand last November. She'd passed away only two weeks after sending that letter. Madison had longed to come home for the memorial service, but her teaching semester in Mongolia had just begun and there was no one to replace her. Now the only McDowells remaining were Addie and Madison. Co-owners of the Christmas tree farm. Partnering with her “baby” sister would be interesting. Especially considering how

Addie had never held any interest in agriculture. Even as a child, Addie had preferred to stay in the house, her nose in a book, to romping and roaming the great outdoors like her tomboy big sister.

Madison strolled over to the riverbank, curious as to whether the old oak tree and rope swing had survived. On her way through the burned area, she noticed a few spots of foliage near a large, charred stump. There in the midst of the defiant green plant bloomed bright orange daisy-like blossoms. Defiantly optimistic, as if to say, “There’s still life here.” She bent down to pick a flower. Studying its dark center, she remembered how Grandma had called these Mule’s Ears. Madison smiled as she spied a number of these brave plants here and there, thriving in the darkened soil. But the old oak tree, though still standing, was blackened on one side, with no signs of life above. But perhaps its leaves had already fallen. And the old swing was nowhere to be seen.

She walked to the river’s edge and peered below at the deep pool where the local kids used to swing out and jump—the perfect way to cool off on a hot summer day. Summers on the Christmas tree farm had been amazing. Even when Dad put her to work, it had been fun. And playtime always followed. She’d wanted those summers to go on forever, but it all would end right before Labor Day each year. Mom would drive from the city, pick her girls up, and take them back to their stuffy condo and nearby school.

That’s how the joint custody agreement had been written. Madison would mope in her room for a few weeks, literally counting the days until she and Addie could return to the farm to spend Thanksgiving and Christmas with Dad and their grandparents. She envied local river kids like the Thompsons’ brood whose parents were not divorced. Kids who got to live here in paradise year-round.

As she returned to her Jeep, she picked a few more Mule’s

Ear flowers, making a small bouquet that she planned to give to Addie. She slid the stems into her water bottle, then smiled when she set it in the cupholder. Beauty from ashes . . . maybe there was hope after all. She started the engine and considered texting Addie that she was almost “home,” but then decided it would be more fun to surprise her sister. Addie was such a meticulous planner, a real type A—maybe *triple A*—that it was fun to catch her off guard sometimes. Fun for Madison, anyway. Addie probably wouldn’t appreciate it.

She drove slowly down the long, graveled driveway, beyond the burned area, and into the lush green rows of various-sized Douglas fir and spruce and noble fir trees. They were untouched by the fire, and she couldn’t help but be amazed at the contrast. It was as if someone had simply drawn an invisible fire line, and the flames had stopped. Yet she knew that hadn’t happened. Addie had already explained that the wind had just changed its course—in the nick of time—and leaped across the river instead of consuming the remainder of the farm. Whether it was the result of fickle wind or God, as Grandma claimed, it did seem slightly miraculous.

As the driveway curved, Madison spied the old red barn behind a protective grove of enormous fir trees that had been planted around seventy-five years ago, back when the barn was built. It was reassuringly intact. Perhaps in need of some fresh paint, but stalwartly standing with a somewhat wizened expression. What a wild scene it must’ve witnessed. Not far from the barn stood the old white farmhouse. Even from this distance, she could see it, too, needed fresh paint, and some of the shutters looked askew. But the old two-story remained brave and tall, as if to proclaim, “I’m a survivor.”

She knew she should be encouraged by this section of the family farm. It really was a blessing that it was unscathed by the wind-driven blaze that had roared through here last summer. And yet her heart still felt heavy. So much loss . . . so much to be

sorted out . . . so much work left to be done. In a way, like her own life. She'd been through her own wildfire of sorts . . . with Trevor. But that was safely behind her now. Something to be grateful for. Something to forget.

Being back here on the farm felt like a much-needed fresh start. Hopefully her baby sister would see it that way too.

Madison parked her Jeep in front of the wide front porch. The old wicker rockers were still there, and for a moment she imagined she saw Grandma out there, rising from a rocker with a huge smile and big wave to welcome her. Madison had always gotten along well with her grandmother. Perhaps because Madison's temperament was similar to Grandpa's. Both were fun-loving and adventurous risk-takers. Addie, who was more like their grandma, was dependable and responsible and reliable. But unlike Grandma, Addie could be a real stick-in-the-mud at times.

Still, Madison had to give her sister credit for stepping in to help after their dad got sick while Madison was out of the country. Madison had offered to stick around and help when she'd returned for Dad's funeral, but Addie had held her at arm's length, assuring her that everything was under "perfect control." In other words, Madison was not needed. And so Madison had returned to Mongolia to finish out her five-year commitment to teach English in a rural area. The fulfillment of a dream she'd nurtured during her tenure of teaching language arts in a Portland high school that was known for its high teacher turnover. But when her term of service had ended last spring, Madison had been eager to come back with hopes of being useful on the tree farm.

But once again, Addie insisted she didn't need any help. And so Madison had taken the opportunity to see more of the world on her way home. It seemed a good way to get Trevor out of her system. Traveling through Asia and Europe proved a good distraction to a broken heart. If she could call it that. The more time

and space she put between her and Trevor, the more she realized it was probably a case of wounded pride and disappointment.

She got out of her Jeep and, with her wildflower bouquet in hand, went up the front porch steps. Just like the last time she'd been here, the boards as well as the handrail seemed a bit rickety. Worried about their elderly grandmother, Madison had mentioned this to Addie a time or two in emails. Addie had assured her she would get them fixed. Maybe she'd been too busy.

Madison peeked through the window of the old door, curious whether Addie was inside the house or working in the office next to the barn. She quietly knocked. Bracing herself for whatever kind of reception she was about to receive, she waited. When Addie didn't come, Madison let herself in. She felt a bit intrusive, but then she reminded herself she owned half of this farm and had every right to be here. Still, she wondered . . . how would Addie react? Oh, she knew that Madison was coming for a visit . . . eventually . . . But she probably didn't expect her sister today, or for her to stay on indefinitely.

The sound of footsteps on the pine plank floors came from the kitchen. Madison stood up straighter, waiting for what she hoped would be a happy reunion. But when Addie rounded the corner, her eyes opened wide, and she stopped so abruptly that her coffee sloshed onto her crisp white shirt.

"Madison!" she exclaimed. "What're you doing here?"

Madison's grin felt apologetic "Just happened to be in the neighborhood," she joked. But when Addie neither smiled nor laughed, Madison shrugged apologetically and held out her wildflower bouquet. "I thought it was time to come home."

"Home?" Addie pulled a neatly folded tissue from her pants pocket, then took her time to blot her soiled shirt before she looked up with slightly narrowed eyes. "You honestly think of the farm as your *home*?"

Madison didn't know what to say. Tilting her head to one side, she studied her younger sister. She was still as petite and

pretty as always in that blue-eyed-blond, rosy-cheeked sort of way. So much like their mother. But Addie also had a new hardness about her that felt foreign to Madison. One thing hadn't changed however. Her baby sister hated surprises as much as ever.