

Meddling with Mistletoe



A RED DOOR INN
*Christmas
Romance*

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Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and
shall bring forth a son,
and they shall call his name Emmanuel,
which being interpreted is, God with us.

Matthew 1:23

For the dreamers without a dream.
For the ones unsure what to long for,
the ones afraid to hope.
You are seen.
You are loved.
You are not alone.

one

IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES, it was the worst of times.

And she was definitely in the wrong Dickens story. Because this was really, very much the worst of times. At least the worst possible time for her house to fall apart. Not even the shimmering snow swirling outside the window and the scent of the real pine tree in the living room could transport her into old Bob Cratchit's kitchen.

With a grunt, Whitney Garrett kicked her oven door closed and threw herself against the stovetop. The downright chilly stovetop. The one that should have been toasty warm by now since she'd turned the oven on to preheat twenty minutes before.

Resting her head on her crossed arms, she groaned in the direction of the nearest burner.

It probably didn't work either.

The stupid oven had been on the fritz for months. But she'd thought it would hang on at least a little while longer. Just through the Christmas season. That was all she needed. Five weeks. That was not too much to ask.

Except, apparently it was.

She kicked the white metal frame and promptly screamed as her big toe throbbed. Stumbling toward the adjacent counter, she hopped on one foot until the pain subsided.

Letting out a soft sigh, she stared at the three pies—uncooked as they were—sitting on her counter. All apple cherry with precise lattice tops and rippled rims. But they were missing the golden color and rich scent that made everyone’s mouths water.

She shot one more scowl at her broken appliance for good measure.

Whitney had called her landlord, Craig, about getting the oven looked at a week ago. He’d stopped by and fiddled with something near the pilot light. And it had worked for exactly five days.

He’d done the same thing with her washing machine the summer before. It had lasted for three weeks. Craig was one of those guys who insisted on being the first line of defense. He wouldn’t pay for a repairman until he’d tried to fix it himself.

Picking up her phone, she punched in Craig’s office number. It rang and rang, and no amount of tapping her toe made him answer. She was just about to hang up when his voicemail kicked in.

“Hey, this is Craig. The missus and me are in the Maldives for our fortieth anniversary. Leave me a message, and I’ll get back to you when we get home the middle of December.”

Whitney put her phone on the counter and glared at it. “Seriously?”

Craig was literally halfway around the world and clearly not checking voicemails. For three weeks. Those were weeks she couldn’t spare. Not when she could bake only a couple

pies at a time. And when she'd already paid for her stall at the Summerside farmers' market in two weeks.

Staring at her phone for a long moment, she debated her next move. She snatched it up and put it back down just as quickly.

Just call them.

No.

Maybe they'll change their minds.

Her fingers brushed her phone before she yanked them back. Her dad had been more than clear.

But these are extenuating circumstances.

Every other absolute failure had had extenuating circumstances too.

Her parents weren't going to bail her out of another hare-brained scheme—and she'd had many of them. Even though she'd fully thought through her plan to attend the culinary institute in the spring, if things fell apart, she'd already used up every single favor a daughter could ask for.

With a huff, she pushed her phone across the rust-colored counter and turned to the pies, already picturing the way the cherries would bubble and turn the apples bright red. She just needed a place to cook them.

An image flashed across her mind. Double ovens built into the wall. Stainless steel. Meticulously maintained. Enough room for even the biggest Christmas feast.

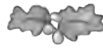
The very best place to cook in North Rustico was Rose's Red Door Inn. Everyone knew Caden Holt Jacobs's kitchen was charmed. Maybe it was Caden who brought the magic.

Whitney had certainly thought so as a high school student learning to cook from the inn's chef herself. Maybe Caden had left some fairy dust behind. And the inn was closed this time of year—really any time of year that threatened frost.

Which meant . . .

Whitney barely dared to hope. But it was her only chance to save her stall at the farmers' market. To save her business this season.

After carefully tucking the pies into her fridge, she pulled on her thick jacket and tied her scarf around her neck. Wind whipped inside when she opened the kitchen door, but she stepped into the ankle-deep snow and hurried along the path toward the big blue house with the bright red door.



Whitney let the warmth of the inn's mudroom fully embrace her before loosening her homemade blue scarf. Thumping her boots on the floor, she knocked off as much snow as she could, but not enough to risk tracking it beyond the tiled floor. So she toed off each fur-lined boot and crept into the kitchen.

The inn was oddly silent. At least upstairs. The echo of children's play seeped through the floorboards, shrieks of laughter and delight. But Marie and Seth Sloan, proprietors of Rose's Red Door Inn for nearly ten seasons now, didn't seem to be around.

Whitney tiptoed through the immaculate kitchen, giving the stainless-steel double oven an envious glance before making her way down the short hall to the office. The big wooden door stood wide open, revealing a desk piled with papers in nearly every color of the rainbow. The sleek computer monitor was on, but the little room was empty.

She turned back to the kitchen and stopped mid-stride.

Chubby cheeks and a near-toothless grin greeted her from

the hardwood floor. Squishy hands grabbed at the air as the baby reached up. “Nee-nee. Nee-nee.”

Whitney scooped up the little doll, pulled her into a tight hug, and pressed a kiss to her silky brown hair. “Well, hello there, Miss Jessie. Where’s your mama?”

The little girl blew a series of bubbles in response and giggled with glee, her rosy cheeks positively pinchable.

“Should we go find her?”

Jessie blew some more bubbles, which Whitney took as agreement, and they trotted around the rest of the main floor. Decorating had already begun in the parlor, which featured an evergreen in the corner, adorned with ribbons and bows and strings of popcorn. A warm fire crackled in the hearth, a cozy blanket laid across the oversized chair. It looked ready to welcome any and all guests.

Except the inn was officially closed. It wouldn’t open up again until tourists returned in May.

Suddenly a cry split the air. “Jessie. Je-essie!” Footsteps pounded down the back stairs, and Whitney raced to meet them in the kitchen.

“She’s here. She’s fine.”

Marie landed on the bottom step with a sigh of relief, swinging her mass of brown waves out of her face as she put her hands on her hips and frowned at her youngest. “Her brother thinks it’s funny to take her downstairs and then promptly forgets about her.”

Whitney chuckled. That sounded about right.

Only then did Marie seem to realize she hadn’t even greeted her visitor. “I wasn’t expecting company today,” she said, giving Whitney a quick side hug. “How are you?” She offered a smile that hadn’t changed much since they’d met so many years ago. Perhaps there were a few new wrinkles

around her eyes, but if she had any gray hairs, she hid them well. “Would you like a cup of tea?”

Whitney flashed hot beneath her puffy coat, but she nodded anyway. “Please.”

Marie set about putting the copper kettle on the gas stove before wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. “You can pick your flavor.” She nodded toward the cupboard. Whitney knew it well.

But when she pulled the metal tea box down, it was suspiciously light. She flipped open the lid to discover exactly one package—a sleepytime tea.

Marie’s entire face went red. “Oh no. I’m so sorry. I thought I had . . . I guess I need to add that to my list. I’m just . . .” She rolled her eyes at herself. “I can’t seem to keep up with anything right now. The kids. The house. The guests.”

Jessie began to squirm at the stress in her mom’s voice, and Whitney bounced her until she calmed down. “Guests?”

Marie opened another white cupboard and produced two white packets. “Will instant hot cocoa do?”

Whitney nodded, her eyebrows still pinched together. “What guests? Aren’t you closed?”

“We should be. But Aretha needs a favor, and you know I can’t say no to her.” Marie swiped at a frizzy curl, suddenly looking more unraveled than she had just a moment before. “So now I have two guests checking in in a week, a Christmas pageant to direct, and I promised Little Jack that we’d make gingerbread houses and go see the lights. Plus, I’m supposed to host the cookie exchange this year, and I need to buy presents for the kids. Seth too, I suppose.”

The way she tacked her husband’s name on as an after-

thought made Whitney chuckle, but the deep lines of stress around Marie's mouth quickly sobered her.

This was the worst time to beg for a favor—yet Marie was the only person she could think to ask. If her parents hadn't just moved into the condo in Charlottetown, she'd have asked to borrow their oven. Borrowing an appliance wasn't quite like being bailed out. It was just a little bit of assistance.

But her mom and dad were tucked into their cozy two-bedroom along the harbor, where they insisted they would revel in their pension years.

And if all went as planned, she'd be moving to Charlottetown shortly after the first of the year too. That just didn't solve her immediate dilemma.

Whitney pressed the tip of her thumb to the corner of her mouth and chewed gently on her nail, which tasted suspiciously like cinnamon. She frowned at her finger, and Jessie seemed to giggle at her problem.

Fine. That earned the little cherub a one-way trip to the floor. Which was apparently not punishment. Jessie scooted across the floorboards, opened the first cupboard she encountered, and immediately pulled plastic containers and their mismatched lids to the floor.

"I'm sorry." Whitney rushed to retrieve Jessie, but Marie stopped her with a hand to the arm.

"Don't worry about it. Jessie has long since decimated whatever organizational system Caden had in place in those bottom shelves. Better she's making a mess in here than exploring the Christmas tree again." Marie released a long-suffering sigh, pairing it with a smile that looked a lot like love for her youngest.

As she stirred the cocoa mix into two steaming mugs,

spoon clanking, Marie looked over her shoulder. “So, what brings you by?”

“Oh, um . . .” Whitney was unable to form even the most basic words, her tongue having lost its way.

Marie held out one of the green mugs. The ring around the base was clearly the island’s famous red clay. It was probably from Mama Potts’s Red Clay Shoppe. Marie sold their plates and platters, bowls, and other dishes to guests all summer long.

Whitney wrapped her fingers around the warmth of the mug and inhaled the sugary steam. The sides of the cup were just a little bit uneven, a testament to the way each piece was crafted by hand.

From her place tucked into the corner of the counter, Marie raised her eyebrows as she sipped her own drink. “Are you all right since your folks moved? Are they doing okay?”

“Oh. Yes. They’re great. They’re . . . I guess they really like living in the city.”

Marie’s dark eyebrows dipped together over her perfect nose. “I haven’t seen you at church the last couple weeks. Is everything . . .”

“I’ve been selling my pies at farmers’ markets around the island.”

Marie’s face relaxed, and she blew into her mug, sending steam spiraling.

“But that’s . . . kind of why I’m here.” Whitney released the last words in a quick stream, still afraid to ask, yet terrified not to. She couldn’t back out now. “My oven broke. Again. And I can’t make more pies if I don’t have an oven. And I need . . .”

Her mom had always said that it was uncouth to talk about money. But she needed it.

The Culinary Institute of Canada in Charlottetown had

no problem talking about money. And asking for it. And reminding her that if she wanted her spot to remain reserved, she needed to make a payment. That just wasn't going to happen without an oven—a fully functioning one at that.

“Oh, Whitney. I'm sorry about your oven. How can we help?”

Great. Marie was going to make her say the words. It would only take five of them. But really, couldn't she just offer?

Whitney took an unsteady sip of her cocoa. It was watery and fairly flavorless, but at least it gave her something to do while she stared at the floor and plucked up all her courage. “Maybe . . . if it wouldn't be too much trouble . . . would it be okay if . . .”

Marie's eyebrows pinched all the way together, confusion clearly written across her face.

Taking a deep breath, Whitney closed her eyes and opened her mouth and prayed that the words that came out would make sense. “Would it be okay for me to maybe use the inn's oven to bake my pies?”

“Oh.” Marie's mouth hung open, her eyebrows raising nearly to her hairline.

The silence between them fell heavier than a blanket of wet snow, and Whitney rushed to fill it, but Marie beat her.

“I mean, I'd love to help you out. It's just . . .” Her arm waved toward Jessie happily clapping pan lids together like cymbals. “It's such a . . .”

Busy time.

Marie didn't need to fill in the words. The whole island was nearly buzzing in anticipation of Christmas and all the activities the season held. And Marie's season was going to be extra full.

After struggling so much to find the words only minutes

before, Whitney had no trouble spitting out a wholly unexpected trade. “I could watch your kids while you have guests.”

She was certain she looked as shocked as Marie in that moment. She liked Marie and Seth’s little ones more than any others in their little hamlet, but she didn’t know much about caring for kids. Her own sister was only eighteen months younger, and there were no nieces or nephews in the family yet.

The offer hung there like week-old laundry on the line, nearly forgotten but refusing to be ignored.

A slow smile stretched across Marie’s face, her eyes lit by a flame within. “Really? That would be amazing. Even a few hours a day—like when I’m at the church for rehearsals or going shopping. Seth has been focused on a remodeling job in Cavendish, and he’s trying to wrap it up before Christmas. He’s been leaving early in the mornings. And we agreed to the job before Aretha told us about her guests.” Marie sighed as though she’d set down a heavy weight. “Do you truly have time?”

A glimmer of hope flickered inside. Whitney didn’t have time not to, so she nodded quickly. “Sure thing. I’d be happy to.”

“And you would just need to borrow the oven?”

Hesitating to stretch the request, Whitney swallowed softly. “And maybe the kitchen to do some prep.” Caden had top-notch tools that could make her even more productive.

Marie took a step forward, resting her mug on the island. “And maybe cook some breakfasts?”

Her mouth went dry, and no amount of sipping rapidly cooling cocoa could change that.

“The Lord knows Caden is a wonderful teacher, but she hasn’t taught me squat.” Marie chuckled. “Nearly ten years

of friendship and I can barely cook scrambled eggs. I'd like to be able to offer our guests a little something more."

"You want me to fill in for Caden?" Whitney began shaking her head to answer the question before she had even finished asking it. "I don't think I'd be . . ."

Marie slipped around the edge of the island and leaned in close. "But you're a natural. And you were part of Caden's first class of summer school students. I'm not asking for much. There are only two guests. It doesn't have to be elaborate. Simple. Edible."

"So, if I watch the kids and make breakfast, I can use the whole kitchen?"

Blue eyes flashing bright, Marie nodded. "Please."

This wasn't exactly how she'd planned to spend the Christmas season. Then again, she hadn't really made *any* plans. She had booked farmers' markets and festivals all the way up until December 22. Then, if the roads were clear, she'd venture down to the city to see her parents.

Suddenly the next five weeks stretched before her, all bags of flour and cups of sugar, fresh fruit and warm pies.

Just her. And some pastries.

Jessie pulled a pot from the cupboard, and it crashed to the floor, making both women jump. Setting down her mug, Whitney scooped up the little girl and looked at her mom. This didn't have to be a lonely holiday season. And if spending the upcoming weeks helping at the Red Door meant access to Caden's kitchen, she couldn't possibly refuse.

"All right. I'll do it."