

## CHAPTER 23.5

*Nolan*

Nolan Ash juggled the supplies in his arms as he opened his truck's passenger door for Penny Lark. He didn't look at her as she slid past him into the seat. He didn't want to see the pity in her eyes. It was clear by the way she apologized that she knew he'd been at his father's grave that morning, that someone had even possibly told her more details surrounding the death of his father.

He tossed his bow saw and rope into the bed of the truck, pulling his coat closer around him to ward off a bitter blast of winter air. It was almost as harsh as the grief he felt penetrate his heart only hours ago, standing at the headstone of a man gone too soon.

Hopping into the driver's seat and starting the engine, he turned the heat to high in hopes it would warm the interior of not only his truck but also the recesses of his mind, the corners that held and hid his grief, guilt, and pain. Penny shivered next to him. He reached behind her, grabbing a quilt from the backseat, and tucked it around her. Again, not looking into her eyes. He hated the looks he'd received for the past three years from people trying to be kind, looks of pity that reminded him of his sorrow. It was as if they couldn't get past the fact that he'd gone through trauma, when all he wanted to do was push through it.

Penny whispered a thanks to him for the blanket, then he started down the inn's drive, merging onto Wayne Street toward the Christmas tree farm. As cars whizzed by, so too did memories from his morning: placing fresh poinsettias at the grave, removing the dead ones, brushing snow from the engraved letters that spelled the name of the man Nolan's heart longed for. On the daily, Nolan was

able to keep his emotions in check when it came to his father. He could keep himself busy enough not to allow himself to grieve.

But there was something about standing before a headstone that made things real, that stabbed him all over again. The silence of the graveyard and icy air was punctuated by the sound of his ragged gasp and the few, wrenched words from his lungs. It was in these moments that he talked to his dad, filling him in on what he'd been missing. Nolan stole a glance at Penny. This morning, Nolan had told his dad about Penny Lark, a reporter staying at his B&B. "I'm sorry," he'd said, thinking he had somehow betrayed his family by letting her in. After he'd said it, he knew it wasn't necessary. In fact, he felt his father's peace.

Nolan downshifted at a yellow light and joined a throng of cars at the intersection, his hand nearly brushing Penny's leg. He noted how kind she'd been this morning and how respectful she was as she sat by him, not pressuring him with questions. Not being a reporter. The woman sitting next to him may have more to her than her occupation, like Anthony had told him. Maybe he needed to give her the grace that his father seemed to have given him this morning.

As grateful as Nolan was for the silence Penny had allowed in their drive, he shifted his focus from himself onto her, trying to start a conversation. Any conversation. He cleared his throat. "Looks like we're caught in the Black Friday crowds," he began, indicating the jammed street and packed parking lots of mini malls and restaurants. It was kind of a lame comment, so he tried a question instead. "Are you a Black Friday shopper?" Still lame. It was as if Nolan had never spoken to another human being before.

"No, no, no....not anymore," she said with an emphatic shake of her head.

"Anymore?" Nolan inched the truck along their route. The car next to them had its turn signal on, wanting in Nolan's lane ahead of him. *Not today, pal.*

“My only experience was disastrous.” He could hear the laughter in her voice.

“Care to elaborate?”

“My ex-boyfriend was a deal-finder. He loved bargaining and finding the best deals and sales around. He once purchased an entire brand new living room set for under a hundred dollars.” Before he could ask how, she told him not to ask. “I’m still not sure to this day. Something with a trade-in and convincing the furniture company it was a donation and some sort of tax write-off. I’m not sure. But he did it.” She picked at a fingernail.

“He probably loved Black Friday, then,” Nolan surmised.

She nodded. “Yep. I admit that his enthusiasm was contagious. He convinced me not to sleep the night before because the best deals were at midnight. Between his energy and my adrenaline, it started off kind of fun.”

She stared out the window. They were moving slightly faster now, past a car with reindeer antlers on its roof and a giant red nose on its front grill and another car packed to the brim with bags from various department stores.

“I’m assuming that fun didn’t last?”

Penny smiled at him with a twinkle in her eye. “Aren’t you the investigative reporter all of a sudden?”

He smiled. “I might have picked up some things from this reporter I know.”

“Really, sir,” she said into an imaginary microphone in her hand. “What are some of these things?” She put the mic in front of his face, pulling a laugh from him.

“Like how to ask probing questions.” He took his eyes off the road for a moment — they weren’t really moving very fast anyway — and assumed his best reporter face. “Miss Lark, when was it that you realized you would never shop on Black Friday again? Tell us about this experience that changed your life forever.”

“Well, Nolan,” Penny said in a reporter voice, making him chuckle. “It was around two in the morning that fateful day. While I was holding a giant television box in a store crammed with people, my ex spotted a coffee maker he had to have and actually fought someone for it. He literally threw punches.” She looked directly into Nolan’s eyes. “Over a coffee maker.” She emphasized each word.

“Wow,” was all Nolan could say. He’d gotten mad in his life, angry enough to want to punch something or someone, but he’d always restrained himself. He had to.

“Wow, indeed. I broke up with him after the police released him. Our relationship lasted all of three months.”

“So a Black Friday filled with chaos, assault, battery, and jail time. I get why you’d not do it again.”

“You got it.” Penny glanced around as they picked up speed, being belched from the masses onto a smaller side road. “So, do you have any Black Friday love stories like I do?”

“Nope. Growing up, the Friday after Thanksgiving was always Christmas tree day for my dad. It was always about family on that day.”

“So no girls allowed?” Penny teased.

A grin pulled at Nolan’s mouth. “Nope. No girls then or since.”

Penny turned in her seat to see him better, a playful smile on her face. “So I’m the first girl you’ve brought to the tree lot?”

He glanced at her. “Lot? Why do you think we’re going to a lot?”

Her smile faded a little. “You said we’re getting a live tree today.”

“From a farm. Didn’t you wonder about the bow saw I brought?”

“I am learning not to ask when it comes to you,” she said, a hint of tease in her voice.

“We’re cutting down our own tree today,” he said.

“We?”

He caught her eye. “Yes, we.”

They drove past larger properties and fewer houses. The trees were denser. After winding down country roads and curving several times, Nolan spotted the entrance to the Christmas tree farm. The thought of Penny Lark on another farm had him curious: would her clumsiness from the turkey farm follow her here?

\*\*\*

*Penny*

*Nolan may have been on to something with this whole live tree thing, Penny thought, as they pulled into the St. Joe Christmas Tree Farm lot. This place could turn Scrooge’s heart faster than any ghosts could. It was absolutely festive from the perfect photo backdrops to the red barn, stark against the green trees topped with snow, to the mini train transporting families across the vast acreage. She hopped down from Nolan’s truck to the sound of children’s laughter and the smell of fir and balsam. Nolan grabbed his supplies and trekked toward a path leading to the trees.*

“Wait,” Penny called after him. “Aren’t we supposed to check in at the barn or something?” The faint tune of Christmas music wafted from the barn where families gathered, buying natural wreaths and sipping hot drinks. Outside of the barn, workers were feeding a tree into a machine that squeezed it into a net for easy transport home. There was storytelling and laughter, and Penny’s normally cold Christmas heart was warming to it. She found herself walking away from Nolan toward the intoxicating scene.

“Penny?” Nolan said, snapping her back. He was standing with the rope slung over his shoulder and the saw dangling in his hand. “We don’t need to check in. I know where to go.”

“But –” She couldn’t help looking back at the barn.

Nolan sidled up to her. “Do I sense a little Christmas spirit in you?” The corner of his mouth turned up.

“Maybe,” she admitted. “Can’t we just get some hot cocoa before heading out for the tree?”

He hesitated.

“You did promise me good Christmas memories at your mom’s, remember?”

A grin slid across his lips. “I did.”

“And you would never break a promise, right?” She was already sliding her gloved hand into the crook of his arm to pull him in the direction of the barn before he could answer.

“Right,” he mumbled, but when she glanced at him, she saw he was smiling. An actual smile. And this brought one to her lips.

They entered the barn to the delectable aroma of cocoa, the muted buzz of the tree netting machine, and the tinkling tunes of “Let It Snow.” Small children were admiring a row of ornaments for sale, while their parents kept a watchful eye on them. An elderly couple was thanking the cashier for the mailbox topper they’d just bought, its bright, green leaves a stark contrast to the red bag it was placed in.

Before she knew what was happening, Penny and Nolan were being ushered toward a festive photo backdrop by a young woman with a Polaroid camera hanging around her neck.

“Complementary photo and cocoa,” she said, moving them here and there and adjusting them so that they were posed for a picture. The photographer took the saw out of Nolan’s hand, not without the smallest grunt from him, and eyed their positioning with a squint. “Not quite right.”

Penny found herself being pushed closer to Nolan's body, and his face showed surprise when the photographer made him put his arm around Penny's shoulders.

"Now look at each other," she directed them, not giving Penny a chance to explain that they weren't a couple, "and smile."

At first it was a little awkward, especially when Penny saw the reluctance in Nolan's face. But when he made an under-the-breath comment through teeth clenched in a fake smile about how much more comfortable Etta would have been in front of the camera, posing with her bony arms high in the air or some other nonsense, Penny laughed out loud. Nolan did, too, in fact. And the sound was glorious. A snap, then a whir, and soon a rectangular white photo was placed in Penny's hand. The picture was still developing when the photographer handed her some hot cocoa. To help Penny juggle the cocoa and photo, Nolan slipped the picture out of her hand and slid it into his coat pocket.

"This is like Christmas on steroids," Penny mused as she took in her surroundings. Santa and his elves walked into the barn, brushing snow from their costumes, and accepted the hot drinks handed them. A few children's squeals were echoed with a "Ho, ho, ho," before the group disappeared through a side door, apparently on break.

"Ready for a little peace and quiet?" Nolan asked, indicating the great outdoors.

Penny gave one final glance at the barn, twinkle lights strung across its ceiling in a zigzag pattern and cutout snowflakes on the walls, and nodded. She took a sip of her cocoa, silencing a moan at the taste, and followed Nolan outside. He started down a path toward the trees, then stilled at the sound of a train whistle. Nearing them was a small train, large enough for adults to ride but nowhere close to the size of an actual train. Its sides were open for people to hop on

and off its benches with ease, including the conductor. Families, their faces aflush with the cold wind's touch, smiled as they held on.

He eyed Penny. "I bet you want to ride the train out to the trees."

She nodded and took another sip of her cocoa. "Good memories, remember?"

The side of his mouth turned up. "I remember." He signaled to the conductor of the train, who put on the brakes, stopping just in front of them. Nolan and Penny climbed onto a bench, getting squished together for the second time at the farm, this time by the crowds.

"All aboard!" came the conductor's shout, and they were off again. The lurch of the train jolted Penny, and she instinctively grabbed Nolan's leg to steady herself. It helped stabilize her but forced her heart to race, especially when he didn't jerk his leg away. After a prolonged moment, she removed her hand and tried taking another sip of her drink, finding something else to do with her hands.

The train wound through acres of trees, stopping here and there for passengers to get on and off. At each stop, Penny questioned if it was theirs, always to the shake of Nolan's head. They rode by perfectly good Scotch pines and Douglas firs, trees Penny wasn't familiar with but was learning quickly about from Nolan, yet did not stop. Finally, Nolan signaled for Penny to disembark, as the conductor announced it was the end of the line.

She hopped down onto the snow, its flakes dusting her boots. "I can't believe you thought I'd walk all the way out here," she said, as the train pulled away, leaving just the two of them in the vast open field. No one could be seen across the small rolling hill.

"I didn't," was all he said, as he turned his focus to their surroundings.

“Why are we way out here?” she asked. She was grateful for the hot cocoa in her belly, the drink spreading its warmth throughout her whole body as they stood among the massive rows of trees.

“You can find the best tree out here,” he said, walking around and examining each one. “The one that most people don’t take the time to find. The one that flourishes when people are looking for something else.”

His statement made Penny wonder if he was somehow talking about himself in a roundabout way. Had no girl ever taken the time to find him? Had he always been overlooked? “What kind of guy were you in college?” she asked. “Or even before you moved back here?”

He stopped short and raised his eyebrows, seemingly surprised by her question and not at all following her train of thought. He quickly picked up his pace and cleared his throat. “Nothing like I am now,” was all he offered.

“I told you about my crazy ex. Did you have anybody like that in your life?”

“You mean someone who went to jail?” His tone was teasing, but he seemed to be guarded again.

“No. Just someone.”

He stopped and squared his shoulders, stepping closer. “The truth is I had my priorities screwed up for a long time.” He looked beyond her, his eyes lifted. “When I wasn’t studying in college, I spent my days partying, not taking anything seriously, especially girls.” The wind blew his dark hair across his eyes. He brushed it away and held her gaze. “Then after my father’s death, my focus became the inn and my mother and sweet Bonnie.” His voice was thick. “And just trying to keep it all together.”

Snow was falling on them in heavy, white flakes. Penny brushed some from Nolan’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry for all you’ve gone through.” Just then, a child’s delighted squeal pierced the air,

and a waddling toddler came running through the trees right between Penny and Nolan, his parents only steps behind.

“Sorry!” they called as they chased their son to the next tree. He tripped and fell face first into the snow, then rolled over and laughed a high-pitched laugh, his red cheeks round like Christmas ornaments.

Penny tried to swallow her laughter, but Nolan only pulled it to the surface with his own. She was losing track of how many times they’d laughed together on this outing, and it made her happy. He tousled the hat on her head – his own hat – and signaled to the trees. “Let’s get you your first live Christmas tree.” She gladly followed.

\*\*\*

*Nolan*

Nolan pulled the rope taut against the bed of his truck, securing the white pine against the metal. Penny had already climbed in the passenger seat with another cup of cocoa in her hands. As he fished in his coat pocket for some cash to tip the hard workers at the farm, his fingers grazed something else.

He pulled out the Polaroid taken of them in the barn. His heart stopped. The smiles in the picture – both his own and Penny’s – were remarkable. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d seen a picture of himself smiling like that. Or laughing. A warmth spread through him despite the chilly air.

Keeping a grip on the picture, he offered a tip to the workers and slid into his seat in the truck. He placed the quilt around Penny’s legs again – this time making eye contact – then placed the photograph on her lap. Her eyes lit up when she looked at it.

“So, good Christmas memories today?” he asked.

She looked at him with a smile as sweet as the cocoa on her lips. “The best. Thank you.”

“Anytime,” he answered, putting the truck into gear and backing out of the lot with a smile on his face.