

Chapter One

Kira North hated Christmas. Which was unfortunate considering she was currently the proud owner of a Christmas-tree farm in a town that was far too cute for its own good, with residents that couldn't seem to take the hint and leave her the hell alone.

She breathed out a frustrated sigh as she closed the door on her latest visitor. Some guy named George, who'd dropped off a complementary sample of Christmas gingerbread cookies from the bakery in town and a business card, and more than a few hints about a plan to do business together. He was the third one this weekend.

Yesterday, Deputy Mayor Mindy Walsh had dropped by on behalf of the town council to hand her a flyer for the annual Tree Lighting next week, as though Kira hadn't seen half a million of those every time she went into town for food. And just this morning, an entire family showed up, kids in tow with matching Christmas sweaters, asking if

they could cut down a tree. She'd pretended not to see the children's tears as she turned them away.

It was all a bit much. She slid down to the floor, her back against the door, and tore open the red and green cellophane protecting the cookies. She picked a Santa-shaped one and bit off his head. Unfortunately, he was absolutely delicious, all nutmeg and cinnamon. Damn him.

The cold seeped through her back as she finished him off one decadent bite at a time. The door was freezing. The floor was freezing. The entire crappy old house she'd moved into three months ago was freezing. She leaned her head back against the door with a soft thud, attempting to pretend that she was fine. It was fine. She would just put on another sweater even though she was already wearing two. She'd put on a warmer pair of socks. People sometimes wore hats inside, right?

The ancient radiator beside the door let out a defeated whine.

Right. Time to get up. Time to get up and get back to work because the 'quaint farmhouse' she'd bought, sight unseen, was actually a decrepit old farmhouse with a heating system on life support, and the 'acres of scenic farmland' was actually a beloved, but totally run-down Christmas-tree farm, and even though she'd sworn not to reopen it, now she had to in order to make some money and fix up this place, seeing as how she'd spent all hers buying it in the first place.

If she wanted to survive the winter and not be found frozen to death by a nosy but well-intentioned neighbor, she

needed to get this place up and running. And fast. It was already the Sunday after Thanksgiving, and judging by the family she'd devastated this morning, people were dying to get their trees up.

She grabbed a blanket on her way past the couch and shuffled over to where she'd left her laptop on the ancient wooden dining-room table the previous owners had left behind. They'd left a lot of junk behind, actually. She kept finding old mail tucked away in odd places but hadn't bothered opening any of it. The table was nice though. It fit her farmhouse aesthetic.

She flipped open her computer. Still no Wi-Fi. It hadn't worked right since that power outage last week.

Damn it.

How was she supposed to hire people, set up a website, *and* create a social media presence for this place without Wi-Fi and with an incredibly unreliable cell signal? In, like, two days? She slumped down in the closest chair and practiced not crying. Her tears would probably freeze on her face if she did. She sniffled them back in and tried not to think about how pitiful she must look right now wrapped in a worn comforter, packed into way too many layers of clothing, nose red from cold and crying.

This wasn't at all how things were supposed to go.

First of all, she wasn't supposed to be alone. Her sister should be here with her. Her other half. Her much more competent, reasonable, level-headed half. Her twin and best friend since birth. Chloe never would have bought this place on a whim. Chloe never would have agreed to the sale

without a visit and an inspection, at the very least. Chloe would have asked questions like: why do you want to live on a farm in New England despite having no idea how to grow things or cook things or really do anything on your own? Questions that Kira had no desire to answer.

Because this whole plan wasn't so much a whim as it was a last-ditch effort to start over. To get as far away from her old life, her old self as possible. It wasn't a whim so much as a radical reimagining of who she wanted to be.

But Chloe had abandoned her. Ran off and got *married*. And moved to *Denmark*. Denmark! Of all places. And what was one supposed to do when their soulmate, their other half, finds a new other half?

Well, apparently they absorb too much homesteading social-media content, decide they can totally do that, use their trust-fund money to buy a farm, and essentially, ruin their lives. Okay, so maybe this specific plan was a little bit of a whim...

But here she was. Miserable and alone. And really freaking cold.

Kira wiped her cheeks with the back of her hand. This was ridiculous. She had to do something or that image of herself, frozen to death in her bed, was about to become reality. She shoved another cookie in her mouth for strength, grabbed her phone, wrapped her blanket around her more securely, and headed for the back door. She slid on her new boots and stepped outside. It might have been warmer outside than it had been in her house. The sun, however weak this late in November, definitely helped.

If she was going to survive this, she was going to have to get used to these northern winters. It hadn't even snowed yet and she already felt wildly unprepared. The temperature in Georgia rarely dropped below fifty degrees and certainly not in the middle of the afternoon. Today couldn't be warmer than thirty.

She was so screwed.

No tears. Not right now. Not until later when she was huddled under her blankets in bed instead of out here in the backyard where any roaming resident of Dream Harbor could pop up like some kind of jack-in-the-box nightmare of glad tidings.

She held up her phone and started wandering through the rows of trees just past her tiny yard. Surely, if she walked far enough, she'd get some kind of signal. She could probably go into town and work at the library or that café everyone seemed to love, but that would require being out in public, which she did not feel up to in her current state of mental breakdown. So ... wandering the fields in her flannel pajama bottoms, ratty old sweaters, and down comforter it had to be.

The trees stretched in tidy rows ahead of her ranging in height from her waist to at least a foot or two above her head. Luckily, the trees had just continued being trees even without an owner for the past few years. They could use some trimming and shaping, but overall, her crop was in good condition. It was the barn that was nearly falling down, and the house that required significant work.

But first, money.

And before money, employees, and a real live business. Something Kira had never done nor aspired to do in her entire life.

But she didn't have time to dwell on that. Not before a giant black blur raced across her path with two smaller blurs at its heels.

Kira shrieked.

The dogs barked.

The man following them skidded to a stop.

'Elizabeth, heel.' His voice was stern and harsh and the biggest dog loped happily to his side. 'Good girl.' He patted her head.

'Odie, Pudgy, heel.' He tried to get the other two dogs' attention with the same stern tone, but it was far too late for that. Kira was already squatting to pet the two little wiggly bodies at her feet.

'Look at you, sweet babies,' she crooned. 'Little angels.' The smallest dog, some sort of Westie mix with wiry white hair, pushed its cold snout into her palm, huffing in excitement. The other one, who must have been at least a hundred years old in dog years, waited patiently for scratches between its floppy ears, its tongue lolling out of its mouth.

'What good doggies you are, so sweet,' Kira went on, petting and scratching and so generally delighted to have such precious babies on her property that she'd nearly forgotten the man until he was towering over her.

'Uh, sorry about that,' he said. 'I didn't realize... I mean,

I thought this place was abandoned. Otherwise, I would have had the dogs on their leashes.'

'It's okay,' Kira said, still crouched low, but now paying proper attention to Elizabeth who was starting to whine at not being part of the lovefest happening with the other dogs. 'Look at you! What a beautiful girl you are,' she told her, and it seemed the larger dog smiled at her. Kira smiled back, for the first time in days. It was nice.

Until she finally stood and looked at the man who had brought the puppies to her farm. The smile dropped from her face. He was staring at her with a mix of confusion and horror.

It was then that Kira remembered her unwashed hair and her red eyes and her blanket-as-outerwear fashion statement. Ugh. This day, this town, these people! They were everywhere!

'Yes, well, actually, I own this farm,' she said, standing to her full height. 'So, you are trespassing.'

Elizabeth whined and Kira scratched between her ears. 'Not you, sweetheart. You didn't know.'

'To be fair, I didn't know either,' the man said, a slight smirk on his face.

'How is that possible? Everyone in this nosy town knows about it.'

He shrugged. 'I don't live in this nosy town.'

Kira frowned. 'Then what are you doing here?'

'Visiting.'

She didn't like his tone. Or his face for that matter. It was too ... too ... handsome. But in like an obnoxiously

conventional way. Too much symmetry. Too much perfect dark hair. It was annoying. And entirely uninteresting.

Too wholesome.

‘Well, whoever you’re visiting should have told you that I own this land now, so you can’t just traipse through here on your little hike or whatever you’re doing.’

The man’s obnoxiously straight smile grew. *‘Little hike or whatever?’*

‘I don’t know! What’s with that vest? You look like you’re going on a hike.’

He looked down at his puffy vest and dark jeans and hiking boots and then let his gaze wander over Kira’s ensemble.

‘You’re wearing a blanket,’ he observed.

‘Yes.’

‘And you’re making fun of my vest?’

‘Yes.’ She crossed her arms over her chest, not that he could see that since they were tucked under her blanket, but still. Her stance was defiant. She was pretty sure that came across. She didn’t like this guy and his teasing smile. And his light eyes with dark lashes. Really? Ugh, could he be more basic?

Kira only went for men that had ‘bad idea’ tattooed across their forehead (sometimes literally) and this guy looked like the model for ‘the guy your mother wants you to bring home for the holidays to sip cocoa under the tree in your matching pajamas’. Highly undesirable. Downright unattractive in every way, really.

Except for maybe the way his thighs were filling out those jeans.

But that was neither here nor there.

‘Sorry again for the misunderstanding. We’ll get going.’

Oh, right. He was going to take the dogs with him. Shoot. She *liked* the dogs. She looked down at the three precious faces in front of her and she could swear she could hear their thoughts.

‘You might as well finish your walk,’ she blurted out, ignoring how his dark eyebrows rose in surprise. ‘I mean, you’re here now and the dogs need their exercise and I would never deprive them of that.’

‘You’re a big dog person, I take it.’

‘They’re better than people in every way.’

His laugh was low and deep and did absolutely nothing for her.

‘I agree.’

She gave him a curt nod, expecting him to go on his way, but he was still looking at her like he was working on a puzzle.

‘What?’ she snapped.

‘I just... Are you okay?’

Was she okay?! How dare he?! How dare he presume just because she was wandering around outside wearing bedding and waving her phone in the air like she thought it worked via witchcraft that she wasn’t okay?

She smoothed her blanket down with a hand as though it were an evening gown. ‘I’m fine, thank you.’

A small crease of worry formed between his obnoxiously

perfect eyebrows and Kira wanted to throw something at him and see if she could hit it.

‘It’s just ... you’re walking around with your phone over your head. I thought maybe you were having trouble with it. I work in tech, so I thought...’

A tech bro? Oh, just what she needed! Always trust your first instincts and her first instincts were right. She didn’t need some Silicon Valley, let’s go for a hike wherever we damn well please because we think we own the whole world, Clark Kent lookalike, to rescue her. Not today, buddy!

‘No thanks, Elon. I’m managing just fine.’

‘Elon?’ Now he looked highly offended. Hmm ... *that* did something for her. ‘Wow, I was just trying to help.’

‘No one asked you to.’

He held up his hands. ‘Sorry. You’re right. I’ll ... uh ... get out of your hair.’

‘Thank you.’ She didn’t look at him as she said it. The hurt expression on his face had taken some of the fun out of the whole thing. Instead, she crouched one more time to say goodbye to her new friends.

‘Bye, sweet babies. Enjoy your walk.’ She gave them enough pets to last for a while and by the time she was standing again, the mystery man had already turned and was walking down the row of trees, whistling for his dogs to follow.

And unfortunately, they did.