

# Tis The Season

By: Sarah Slane

I watched the string of white Christmas lights flash on and off in a never-ending pattern of holiday spirit. The little bistro of which these lights decorated was crowded, as it always was on Christmas Eve. Inside, the twenty small tables were packed with couples, small groups of friends, and even a few families with children, all celebrating the joyous evening before Christmas.

I, however, was not exactly what one would call merry. I was sitting on a bench in the downtown area of my little hometown; cold and bitter, waiting for the friend that I knew most likely wouldn't show. I crossed my arms across my chest, wishing my black pea coat was warmer than it looked. I pulled my white knit cap farther down on my head, not caring anymore if it frizzed my straight brown hair.

People-watching was something I was used to doing, because I was always on time everywhere I went, and my friend was always late. So I sat on this cold bench, bundled up and shivering, and watched people flood in and out of the bistro. A young man leaped out of a taxi to my right and practically skipped to the door, shaking out his hands and smiling like a mad man.

"Adam!"

The man turned around and, if possible, his smile widened. He rushed towards the girl and hugged her tightly, pecking her lightly on the lips. Their gloved fingers laced together and they walked inside the crowded restaurant.

Just by looking at him, I could tell Adam was going to propose, and I grimaced. Proposing on Christmas Eve? How tacky and unoriginal.

I watched a few more people stroll up and down the street and checked my watch. I huffed in frustration.

"Emma, you're an idiot."

I turned around and tried not to smile. "You're twenty minutes late, Kevin," I said, stating the obvious.

Kevin had been my best friend since we were six. That's seventeen years of friendship under our belt. He was spontaneous, hilarious, careless, and almost always late for everything. Even now, I could tell he was rushed in getting ready. His black coat hung open, revealing a tight-fitting gray sweater, and his hair, despite being short, was a curly mess on top of his head, still a bit damp from the shower he must have taken not too long ago. Somehow, he managed to pull it off as a sexy-disheveled look.

"I know," He replied, not hiding his grin. "Andrew was giving me shit about leaving him with Mom and Dad, but I told him nothing was more important than seeing Emma." I sighed, standing up and giving up at the same time. I smiled. "Why is it so important you see me tonight?"

"Irrelevant," He said, looking in the windows of the bistro. "And it's Christmas Eve, why wouldn't I want to see you?" Not giving me a chance to respond, he started walking down the street, in the direction of Main Street. "We're not eating here, it's too crowded."

I groaned and trudged after him, having to run a little bit to catch up with his large steps. "Why? I had them put my name down—"

"Emma." Kevin grinned, looking down at me from his six-foot-three frame. "Can't we just take a walk?"

"But I'm cold," I whined, hugging myself tightly for effect.

He slid his arm around my shoulder and pulled me into his side. “Oh, poor you; I think you’ll survive a walking a few blocks.”

I didn’t respond. I was too surprised by his sudden gesture. In all our years of friendship, Kevin and I had never been physical with each other. We weren’t ones for hugs or anything like that. As comfortable as we were with each other, we never really crossed that boundary. I was fine with it, and he was fine with it, until now, I guess.

“You’re too quiet,” He observed, looking down at me with his mischievous hazel-brown eyes. “Plotting my demise?”

“How’d you guess?” I fired back, trying to act nonchalant.

Kevin smirked. “That’s what I thought,” He said. “Just make it quick and painless, okay?” I rolled my eyes and looked around as we jumped onto Main Street. “Where are we going?”

“What say you to slumming it with me on Christmas Eve?” He glanced down at me questioningly as we crossed a street.

“I hate Christmas,” I muttered, as we walked through a crowd of squawking women carrying large shopping bags.

“Yet you love Valentine’s Day,” Kevin finished, pointedly not looking at me.

I frowned. “That’s completely beside the point, and totally off topic. I was just mauled by those ladies. Do you even care?”

“Yes, you could have died,” He sighed sarcastically, and then tugged me closer. “Because I would let you get trampled.”

“You probably would,” I mumbled, staring down at my black boots.

Kevin stopped walking and removed his arm from around my shoulder. He locked eyes with me, but I quickly looked away before we started a staring contest or something silly. But Kevin didn’t laugh; he just kept staring. “Emma,” He said quietly, so I could barely hear him in the hustle and bustle. “What’s wrong?”

I ignored him. I hated Kevin when he went into the caring friend mode. It wasn’t him, and talking about feelings definitely wasn’t me. Instead of meeting his gaze, I looked at the small park we’d stopped in front of.

I used to go to this park as a kid. There was a small merry-go-round, a slide, two swings, and a small white gazebo that was always decorated for the season. At the moment, it was lit up with white lights, looking almost unreal; like something from outer space.

I snapped out of my reverie and forced myself to look back at Kevin. “Nothing,” I said. “Nothing is wrong. I’m *fine*.”

I stalked towards the gazebo, because frankly, it looked pretty to me, and I didn’t want to be pestered by Kevin any longer. I regretted ever sneaking out of my family’s dinner to go meet him.

Of course, he followed me down the sidewalk. “Emma, it’s Christmas Eve; *fine* isn’t good enough.”

“What do you want me to say?” I snapped, turning on him.

“I want you to tell me what’s bothering you,” He said, running a hand through his hair.

I folded my arms across my chest and huffed out of a breath, watching the fog it created in the air. “Do you want to know what’s bothering me?” I asked incredulously.

“Yes,” He replied, his face serious. “Emma, I would love to know what’s bothering you.”

“Fine,” I said coldly. “What’s bothering me is that Josh broke up with me this morning; on fucking Christmas Eve. What’s bothering me is that you,” I thrust a hand in his direction. “Were twenty minutes late; I had to wait outside for twenty minutes! You’re always late, and you think no one ever cares-“

“Emma,” He interrupted, grabbing my hand and pulling it away from his face, though he didn’t let go. “Back up. Josh broke up with you? Why?”

“Irreconcilable differences,” I muttered, staring down at our intertwined hands.

Kevin snorted. "Are you two getting a divorce or something? When was the wedding?"

"You know how Josh is," I said defensively. "He's just very... professional."

"Professional," He scoffed. "With his relationship? It's Christmas Eve! What kind of person ends it with his girlfriend of a year and a half on Christmas Eve?"

I moved my gaze to the cement at my feet. "I don't know."

He didn't say anything more, and for that I was glad. We stood in silence for a few moments, looking anywhere but at each other. Then, he spoke. "Do you want a hug?"

"I don't want your pity," I said with a snuffle. I willed myself not to cry. I hadn't cried this morning, and I sure as hell wasn't going to cry now.

He rolled his eyes and leaned forward, wrapping me in a somewhat awkward, somewhat comforting bear hug.

I wanted to shove him off me; I wanted to say something witty and clever to make light of the situation. But instead, I let him rub his hands gently up and down my back. When the tears sprang to my eyes, I roughly pushed him away, because I was not going to cry.

"I said, 'I don't want your pity'. What part of that did you not understand?" I snapped, glaring at the snow-covered ground.

"Em," He said with a sigh, stepping closer to me once again. Then, he suddenly looked up at the ceiling of the gazebo and laughed his deep, rumbling laugh.

I followed his gaze to the single sprig of holly leaves dangling above our heads. I looked back at Kevin, who had a mischievous grin on his face. "Oh, no," I said, stepping backwards. "No way. Just because I let you hug me doesn't mean you can *kiss* me!"

He grabbed me by the shoulders and gently pulled me closer. "Tis the season," He said quietly, leaning in close.

He was so close; I could feel his breath on my face. He was going to kiss me. My best friend since kindergarten was going to kiss me under some piece of crap mistletoe in a God-forsaken old gazebo in our pathetic little town-

"Em," He whispered, causing me to lock eyes with him. "Stop thinking so much, you're giving me a headache." And with that, he swiftly captured my lips with his.

I was so surprised, that I didn't even close my eyes. I expected it to be a simple peck, but it was nothing of the sort. I let my eyes fall closed, and I kissed him back.

It was Christmas Eve, my boyfriend just dumped me, and I was kissing my best friend under mistletoe. Tis the season indeed.

He lightly pushed us apart and smiled; not one of his big, million-dollar, Oscar-worthy smiles, but a sort of lazy, half-grin, half-smirk. "I can't believe I had to do that under mistletoe."

"Do what?" I asked dazedly. Everything seemed a bit hazy at the moment.

"Emma, you're an idiot."

"Merry Christmas to you too," I replied, leaning up on my tip-toes. "Now, kiss me again before I change my mind."