

A SOUTHERN ARCANA FREEBIE



# A PEYTON FAMILY PC CHRISTMAS



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# A Peyton Family Christmas

*A Southern Arcana Free Story*

*(Set between Crossroads & Deadlock.)*

“I didn’t *steal* the jet.” Nick tightened her grip on the ranch truck’s cold steering wheel and cast a sidelong glance at her passenger. “I borrowed it.”

“Uh-huh.” Next to her, Kat squinted out through the frosted window. “I can’t remember the last time I saw this much snow.”

“A white Christmas.” Derek had been enjoying it, but it paled next to how much he wanted to see his baby cousin. “He’s going to be so glad to see you.”

“Who, Derek?” Before Nick could answer, Kat half-laughed. “No, of course Derek. Luciano and your dad probably aren’t breathless with anticipation or anything.”

“We’ve all missed you.”

“I missed you too. I’ve just...been busy.”

You didn’t have to be an empath of Kat’s caliber to hear the lie, but Nick let it slide. “Mahalia’s here, you know. For the holidays.”

“Yeah?” For the first time since Nick had coaxed Kat out of her dim, cluttered apartment, the girl seemed to brighten a little. “I thought she’d be back in Boca by now.”

She probably would have been if Nick’s father hadn’t asked her to stay. “My dad is a little worried about Michelle. Well, he’s worried about *Michelle’s* worrying, if you know what I mean.”

“Yeah. I’ll be able to tell. If she’s worrying too much, I mean.”

Again, you didn’t need to be an empath to know. “She is, definitely, but

there's no way around it." It had been long enough for Nick's shock to wear off and the grim reality to set in. "The love of her life is dead, and the only thing keeping her alive is this charade with Luciano."

A quiet noise of sympathy escaped Kat. "Poor Michelle."

Driving with tears in her eyes was a recipe for disaster, so Nick dashed them away and shook her head. "You're going to like Luciano. He's a good guy."

"He must be." Kat's borrowed winter coat rustled as she turned a little in the seat. "Have you heard anything about how Andrew's doing?"

According to Alec, her main source for updates, Andrew had had a rough time of it, but was doing surprisingly well. "He's making it. A strong wolf, which makes it harder in some ways, but he'll be all right."

"For sure? There's nothing else that can go wrong?"

"No." Pretty much everything that could have changed or gone south in Andrew's life already had. "He's going to be fine, Kat. He's still himself, and he's doing a good job of getting the wolf under control."

"Okay. He's fine." Kat sucked in a breath and let it out in a gusty, tired sigh. "New problem. I, uh, didn't know I was coming up here. Obviously."

"I didn't kidnap you, either," Nick said automatically, just in case. "What do you need? Clothes? Contact lens solution?"

"Presents." She sounded honestly concerned. "I don't have presents for anyone."

It was so unexpected that Nick blinked. "You're worried about *stuff*?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Kat's cheeks turning bright pink. "It's Christmas. I don't have anything to give everyone."

"Hey, you're here. That's a million times better than stuff."

Kat wrinkled her nose in a gesture Nick hadn't seen in months. "Depends on who you ask."

Almost a joke, and it gave Nick hope. "Ask your cousin in about ten minutes, because this is it. The ranch."

Kat turned to look out the window again, a little of her old curiosity bubbling to the surface. "So it's ten minutes from here to the main house?"

“Mostly because the road winds around some foothills. The ranch isn’t actually that big. Just horses.”

“Everything I know about horse ranches I learned from questionably accurate books.”

“Mm-hmm. I know all about your dirty cowboy fetish. Plus, I saw the romance novels you and Mackenzie sent up for Michelle.”

Kat actually smiled. “If there aren’t ten stupidly hot men working for Luciano, I’m going back home.”

Nick laughed. “There are a few, and if you tell your cousin I said so, I’ll deny it.”

“No one with eyes would believe it,” Kat murmured. “You don’t see anyone else.”

No, there had been only Derek, for so long it still seemed surreal that he’d put a ring on her hand and promised to marry her. “I better not have to come and drag your ass to the wedding on a purloined jet, by the way.”

“You won’t have to. And I thought you didn’t steal the jet.”

“I didn’t.” She cleared her throat. “My dad just doesn’t know I took it.”

When Kat laughed this time, it didn’t sound quite so rusty. “You Peytons rebel in style. I stole Derek’s car once, when I was nineteen. Never stole a private jet, though.”

“Stick with me, kid.” Then she snorted, because she had less than two years on Kat, but you wouldn’t know if from the way everyone treated her. “Sorry, it’s not funny. You’re not a kid any more than I am, but everyone forgets that—including me—and it sucks.”

Kat didn’t bother to lie. “Yeah, sometimes. But I don’t put up all that much of a fight, especially with Derek. Sometimes he needs that, and I get it.”

He needed it less these days, but it was hard to tell if that translated to freedom or near abandonment for Kat. “I don’t know when we’ll get back down to New Orleans, but we’re going to. I promise.”

It had never been easy to hide things from Kat. “Your sister needs you, and I’ve got some stuff to work through on my own. Derek is great when you need a

champion or a protector, but he's not so good at letting you pick yourself up just so you know you can."

"Especially not when he's used to thinking of himself as your guardian, I suppose."

"God help your kids, Nick. Maybe, if you're lucky, he won't lock them in a padded room until they're thirty."

After some of the difficulties Michelle had already experienced in her pregnancy, Nick would be lucky to escape that same padded room before their children were born. "Maybe he'll mellow with age?" she suggested.

"Uh-huh." Kat's lips twitched, and she tugged up the high collar on her coat, presumably to hide her smile. "Here's to hoping."

They lapsed into silence for the rest of the drive. The guest house came into view first, followed quickly by the main house, though it was hard to see anything beyond the outline of twinkling white Christmas lights in the encroaching darkness. "There it is."

"Wow." The younger woman used her mitten to clear the fogged window. "It's *huge*."

"Right?" Nick was accustomed to the careful use of space in the French Quarter, and it had taken her a while to get used to the sprawl of the ranch house. "You'll get lost a few times, there's no way around that."

Kat was still staring, eyes wide. "I don't know what I was expecting. All of you crushed into a house like Alec's, maybe. No wonder Luciano doesn't mind all the guests."

In addition to the second, smaller house used for visitors, Derek and Luciano had been talking about adding another wing to the main home. "Not guests," Nick corrected as she parked and shut off the engine. "Family."

"Family," Kat echoed in a whisper. "We haven't had much of that. Not since our parents died."

No, they hadn't. Nick slid her hand across the seat and squeezed Kat's. "Come on. Let's go see what kind of trouble your cousin's gotten into in my absence."

Dashing across the yard was miserable, a blast of cold so profound it made Nick's bones ache, but warmth greeted them when she slammed open the front door. "Cookies," she chattered. "I smell cookies."

Kat fumbled her mittens off and commenced a fight with the zipper on her fluffy coat. "Sugar cookies. Derek is addicted to them."

"But he never burns them." An acrid edge still lingered in the air, proof enough that whoever had been doing the baking had scorched at least one batch. "Did I miss dinner?" she called as she unzipped her own coat.

"Nick?" Derek's voice reached them before the sound of his footsteps. "I was just showing Michelle how to..." The words trailed off, and his footsteps quickened.

Next to her, Kat shifted nervously. "He can probably tell I'm—"

"Kat." Derek rounded the corner from the hallway and swept his wide-eyed cousin up into a hug that left her snow-covered boots dangling three inches off the ground. After a second, her arms went around his neck, and Nick heard the way her breath hitched when Derek murmured, "I missed you, kiddo."

The grateful look he shot her over Kat's shoulder was nothing compared to the happiness that was already melting through his shock, and it was entirely worth admitting what she'd done. "I stole the jet."

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Kat had been there for four hours, and she already had Michelle's laptop in pieces.

Derek leaned against the door frame, half watching as Kat pointed to various parts of the computer and described their function to Michelle. Nick's sister was either honestly interested or faking it so well Derek couldn't tell the difference. Either way, it was a scene just shy of surreal.

Derek ducked back into the kitchen and accepted a mug of coffee from Luciano. "Better keep an eye on her. She'll be rewiring your security system next."

"With all the protective spells Mahalia's been busy laying, the thing's dead

weight now anyway.” Luciano closed the last cookie tin and grinned. “Are you feeling the Christmas spirit now?”

Clearly he hadn’t been as subtle as he’d thought. “I haven’t had a Christmas without her in...God only knows, man. Before our parents died. Her dad and my mom were both serious about the holidays.”

“You should have said something. Then again, I guess you didn’t have to, after all.”

No, he hadn’t. He’d called Kat once or twice to invite her up for the holidays—careful conversations where he’d gritted his teeth against the urge to push her. Kat had been through hell, and he could see the chasm behind her, waiting to swallow her whole. Such a delicate balance, trying to assure he was there without making her feel trapped.

Nick must have seen how much those calls took out of him. How exhausted he would be after hanging up the phone, how worried. “I don’t know how she managed it,” Derek admitted, sliding onto a stool set at the counter. “Nick, I mean. Maybe Kat just needed an invitation from someone who wasn’t me.”

Luciano arched an eyebrow. “I wouldn’t put it past your little fiancée to drag her onto the plane. Literally.”

A few months ago, he might have laughed. But the last people to try to drag Kat anywhere had ended up worse than dead. Empathy, it turned out, could do some fucking scary things when fueled by a powerful gift—or powerful fear.

Derek shook off the momentary moment of bleakness and reminded himself that Kat was here, safe, and clearly willingly enough. “Maybe it’s the simple fact that Nicky Peyton doesn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. From anyone.”

“No. No, she doesn’t.” Luciano sighed. “To be honest, I hope Michelle’s like that under all the crap the Conclave heaped on her for so long.”

“She is.” In that fact, Derek had absolute confidence. “It’ll take time, though. Her life before... I can’t even imagine what she went through.”

“You don’t want to. I wish *I* didn’t know.”

The Conclave had feared her. Derek knew all too well what it was like to fight every day against the disdain of the ruling elite. “For better or worse, we’re

all out of it now. No politics here. No Conclave. Family.”

“Damn straight.” Luciano crossed the room and opened the pantry. “Want a little kick in your coffee? Gus stocks liqueurs sometimes.”

“Lay it on me.” Derek set down his mug and reached for a cookie tin. A few at the top were crisp around the edges, and remembering Michelle’s cute little frown of frustration made him smile. She looked nothing like her sister most of the time, but Nick sometimes glared at things in the exact same way, with her eyebrows pulled together and her lips pursed.

Of course, Nick usually followed such an expression with curses foul enough to make a grown man flinch. Michelle had actually uttered the word *drat*. Derek had assured her that he’d eat the burned cookies, so he picked up three of them now. “Is anyone going in to town tomorrow? Kat’s going to fret until I take her to buy some last minute gifts for everyone.”

“Take my SUV.” Luciano had barely driven it since having it delivered, but he’d insisted that an old pickup truck with a bench seat and questionable suspension wasn’t appropriate anymore. Not with a baby on the way.

One of a dozen little ways he’d changed life at his ranch, so carefully and quietly that perhaps Michelle didn’t even notice. Derek supposed that was the point—Luciano’s way of taking care of the wife who was wife in name only, and still weighed down by grief.

He swallowed a mouthful of slightly singed cookie and nodded. “Thanks. After Christmas, I think Nick and I are going to buy a car of our own. Since you’re pretty well stuck with us for the foreseeable future.”

Luciano laughed. “Nick mentioned bringing her car up from Louisiana, but then started talking about getting a Land Rover instead.”

“Car, Land Rover... Whatever works.” His next bite of cookie was particularly burned, and he made a face as he rose. “I’m going to run over to the guest house and check on Nick. If Kat comes looking for me, send her over, would you?”

“Want me to have her call first?” Luciano asked with mock innocence.

Derek made a rude gesture, then slipped out the back door and braved the



quick run to the guest house in his sweater, his shoulders hunched against the wind. It wasn't far, at least, and the lights glowing from the windows pooled across fresh snow that had fallen that morning.

He was shivering by the time he slipped through the front door. "Nick, you over here still?"

"I'm here." She appeared in the kitchen archway, a bowl in one hand. "Want some soup?"

"Just ate half a dozen cookies." Three long strides took him across the room, where he bent down to kiss her forehead. "You are amazing. Do I tell you that enough?"

She dropped the bowl—which, thankfully, was empty—and slid her arms around him. "I don't know. How often is enough?"

"Every day, at least." Straightening his body pulled her off the ground, but she was used to tangling her legs around his hips, and shapeshifter strength had its advantages. "How'd you do it? How'd you get her on the plane?"

"Told her she didn't have to put on a happy face or anything, but you missed her. And it's *Christmas*."

"How was she—" He bit his tongue, told himself not to pry. Failed. "Was she okay, when you showed up? I mean, *is* she putting on a happy face?"

Nick bit her lip and tilted her head. "Yeah, I think so. But it hasn't been very long, Derek. She needs time, and we can't begrudge her that. *Or* push her."

Kat had killed to protect the man she loved. Derek had killed to protect Nick and her family, but he'd won, and had the woman who made the fight worth it. Kat had nothing to show for what she'd done but heartache and a man who couldn't bring himself to see her. If he'd fought a challenge and had lost Nick anyway...

His throat felt tight. "Time," he agreed gruffly. "I can give her that. As much as she needs."

"Yeah." Nick laid her head on his shoulder. "This is a start. We're not right next door anymore, but we're still here for her."

We. God, he loved that word. Loved knowing that Nick would take care of Kat as surely as he'd fight for Michelle. The truest kind of comfort, having someone he could trust with the people most important to him. "When I left, she was teaching your sister about laptop motherboards."

"She was *not*."

"She must have had the screwdriver in her back pocket or something. Pieces of Michelle's computer are all over the table."

Nick's soft laugh tickled his skin, a precursor to the gentle scrape of her teeth. "How long do you think it'll keep them occupied?"

Over a month with her in his bed, and the barest touch still stirred him. "Not nearly long enough for everything I want to do with you."

"Obviously, you should make a list and start prioritizing." She laughed again. "I'm way ahead of you on that, because there's one thing I want to do more than anything else."

She kissed him, not an easy peck or a slow exploration, but a kiss blazing with a need that took him back to the earliest days, when instinct rode every touch and the mating urge boiled over without warning, leaving them helpless in the grip of desire.

Not so different than how it felt as he groaned and eased her higher, lips parting over hers. Except it wasn't just the mating instinct now, but also affection and love, which magnified every touch until she threw her head back with a shaky groan.

"We have to go back," she muttered. "And if we don't go now, we *won't*. I swear to God, I'll tie you to the bed and keep you there for a week."

Derek eased her to the ground, not because her idea didn't sound good, but because it sounded damn good—and now wasn't the time to give in to temptation. "I'm taking the SUV into town tomorrow so Kat can do some shopping. Do you need anything while we're there?"

"Can you pick something up for me at the post office?"

"Sure." See? He could talk to her. Have nice, easy discussions where no one's pants came off. So what if he had to take a step back to make sure it

stayed that way? “Did you order something?”

“Mmm, sort of. It’ll be addressed to you, but don’t open it.” She smiled, the expression tinged with nervousness. “It’s your Christmas gift.”

“How mysterious.” He chanced another kiss, a quick peck this time, and jerked his head toward the door. “Come on, let’s go save your sister and the rest of the electronics.”

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“Shit.” Nick snatched back her hand and examined her fingers. That was the third time she’d almost sliced off her fingernail with the gift wrap cutter. “Do you know how to work this thing? I’m going to lose a digit.”

“Here.” Michelle held out her hand without looking, most of her attention on the perfectly wrapped gift in front of her. “I did this every year, you know. Wrapped dozens of gifts.”

“Yeah?”

“Mm-hmm.” After depositing the cutter next to her growing stack of presents, Michelle flipped the current gift over and reached for a length of wide ribbon. “I bought presents for all of the people directly under the Alpha’s offices. Spouses and children, too, for the ones we worked with a lot.”

Nick had always bought people fruit-of-the-month subscriptions or arranged for gift baskets. “I’m bad at this holiday stuff.”

“No, you’re not.” With deft movements, her sister wound the ribbon around the flat box and tied it, leaving two trailing ends. It looked like something she’d done often enough to relegate the movements to absentminded habit. “I always overdid it a little because it was one of the few things I *could* do. Shop online, wrap everything in the penthouse. It was my quiet, silly rebellion—giving the secretary’s son an iPod because they never paid her enough to be able to afford one.”

“It doesn’t sound silly at all.” Nick picked up a small box and twirled it between her hands. “Together, we can knock this stuff out. You’re good at presents, and I’m good at parties. We’ve got it handled.”

"The best Christmas ever," Michelle agreed. She finished the bow and twisted in her chair. "Except...I don't know what to give Luciano. It's all so..." She trailed off.

Marriages of convenience had to be sticky under the best of circumstances, and this was much, much more complicated. "Do you want to give him something?" Nick asked carefully.

"It's the right thing to do."

"I didn't ask that. I asked if you *wanted* to."

Michelle's hand dropped to her abdomen, where a loose sweater still managed to hide signs of her pregnancy. "Yes. And no."

There were no guidelines here, and Emily Post had never written about what to do in a situation like Michelle's. "You just have to do what feels right, honey. The most right, anyway, whatever that ends up being."

"He gave me my own rooms. He bought a new car, he built a crib, he's even baby-proofing his ranch for a child who's not his own." Michelle gestured helplessly to the table, where plenty of unwrapped presents towered on the far end. "Everything I buy for him ends up seeming shallow. Stupid."

"Well, here's your problem." Nick rose and walked over to pick through the pile of gifts. "You can't pay him back for doing those things with a new GPS system. You can't pay him back for it at all. That's not the way it works."

"No, I suppose not." Michelle sighed and leaned back in her chair. "Every time I feel grateful to him, I feel guilty. Like I'm not missing Aaron enough."

"They're two entirely different things," Nick asserted gently. "I'm grateful for what Luciano's done, but that has nothing to do with where my heart lies."

"Rationally, I understand. Emotionally?" She laughed, sounding a little tired. "Can I blame pregnancy hormones? I don't feel very rational about anything right now."

"Blame anything you want. Hell..." Nick nodded toward the bay window, where the snow outside glowed gently in the dim light. "Blame it on the moon."

"It is pretty tonight. It's always pretty here, though. And peaceful."

When Michelle said it like that, Nick couldn't tell if she truly appreciated

the peace, or if it was just a nice way of saying *boring*. “Do you miss New York at all?”

“No.” It came out too fast, and Nick could tell Michelle realized it. Her sister closed her eyes and shrugged helplessly. “I miss the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center. Aaron always used to find an excuse for us to be there for the lighting ceremony. But everything I miss, I miss because of him, so I don’t want to be there anyway.”

Nick went to her and curled an arm around her shoulders. “Maybe next year. Surely we could visit Dad for that.”

But Michelle shook her head. “I’m not taking my son to New York while the Conclave is there. Not for Dad, not for anyone. He can be a normal kid here.”

“All right.” Her sister’s pain was palpable, but so was her resolve. “What do we have left to wrap?”

“The digital camera can go to Kat. Unless you think she’d like a Kindle? We could give her both...” Michelle rose and circled around the table to retrieve a flat package wrapped in brown paper, which she set on the table. “I had this made too,” she said, sounding a little uncertain as she pulled a framed picture from the wrapping. “One of the ranch hands took it in for me last month.”

It was a black-and-white shot of Luciano’s favorite horse, one he’d raised from a foal and taken special pains to care for and train. “I think you should give it to him,” Nick whispered. “Say it’s from both of us if you want, but I know he’d love it.”

Michelle’s fingers hovered over the frame for a moment, and she nodded. “From the Peytons, then. We all have plenty of reason to thank him.”

“Yeah, we do.” Nick eased onto the edge of the table. “I bought part of Luciano’s ranch.”

Her sister froze. “You—you did *what*?”

“I bought a few acres down by the creek, and I had Derek’s friend Andrew draft a design for me. A house plan. It’s Derek’s Christmas present.”

Tears filled Michelle’s eyes, and she blinked them away as she drew in a ragged breath. “You’re staying with us.”

“We’re staying.” It hadn’t been a quick decision, and certainly not a unilateral one—though she hadn’t talked to Derek about building a house. She hadn’t needed to, not after he and Luciano had begun discussing additions to the main ranch house. “At least for the next year or two.”

“Thank you, Nicky.” Michelle twisted and wrapped her arms around Nick. “Just...thank you. To both of you.”

Much more, and the gratitude Michelle imagined she owed everyone would break her. “It’s as much for us as it is for you,” Nick insisted, hugging her sister tight. “Derek, too. He’s kind of fond of you, you know.”

Michelle eased away and wiped at her cheeks. “He’s wonderful. You found a good man.”

“Yeah, I did.” Life with Derek was better than she’d dreamed, and all because it was *real*. Fantasy could never measure up. “And I have it on good authority he’ll make a protective but doting uncle.”

“So I’ve heard,” her sister murmured. “Kat’s already issued her warnings. To be perfectly honest, I find that comforting.”

Yes, she probably would. Nick made a show of rolling her eyes. “God help me if I get pregnant. Will you protect me when *I’m* the one he’s fussing over?”

“Not a chance. Not with the way all of you hover over me.”

“Hey, I’ve been behaving myself.”

“Mostly.”

“You should take it.” Nick grinned. “‘Mostly behaved’ is as good as it gets with me, or have you forgotten?”

“Uh-huh.” Michelle pointed to the chair. “Sit down. I’m teaching you how to use the wrapping paper cutter.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Anything to keep the hint of sparkle in Michelle’s eyes, to hold sadness at bay for a little while longer.

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Derek handed Mahalia a cup of eggnog. “If we stay in the corner, maybe Kat won’t make us wear Santa hats.”

She laughed. "You keep clinging to that impossible optimism, but your cousin's putting a hat on your head before the night's out."

Since she'd just coaxed Luciano into donning a cheerful red stocking cap, Derek thought Mahalia was probably correct. "Who am I kidding? If she'll keep laughing, I'll wear anything she puts on my head."

Mahalia's amusement softened into a smile. "Of course you will. And you're lucky you found a lady who needs to take care of family just as much as you do."

"I know I am." Across the room, Nick had coaxed her sister to her feet and into a reeling swing dance that Michelle navigated with effortless grace. Knowledge imparted by tutors, Michelle had confessed, because the Conclave had never allowed her to attend the dance lessons she'd wanted as a girl.

John Peyton had done everything in his power to carve out a life for both of his daughters, in spite of the obstacles. It wasn't hard to see where Nick's devotion to her family had been learned.

"That's what matters." Mahalia patted his leg. "I'm glad I convinced Kat to bring you to my bar. Though I have to admit, I didn't think it'd take you and Nicole so damn *long* to get it right."

Derek laughed. "That's what happens when you meddle. Us thick-skulled fools get it wrong and ruin all your plans."

"Mm-hmm, and I've learned my lesson."

"Say it isn't so. You're retiring before you marry Alec off?"

"Fate," she declared, "will take care of Alec Jacobson. Just you watch."

Fate had its hands full with Alec. Then again, who could have traced the wild path of events that had taken him from human to shapeshifter, from a man with a crush on Nick to a man who would kill for her? "Fate's sure got a funny way of doing things."

"That it does." Mahalia flashed him one last smile and rose, heading to the kitchen.

Nick stumbled over and dropped into the spot the woman had vacated with a giggle. "Pregnant and barfy, and Michelle can still dance circles around me."

What's wrong with that picture?"

Derek dropped his arm across Nick's shoulders and nestled her closer against his side. "Don't worry, baby. I bet you could still kick her ass at target shooting."

She brightened. "That's true."

"Course it is. We all have our strengths, and I like yours just fine."

An unusual blush colored her cheeks. "Yeah, you do." Then she reached under the end table by the couch and pulled out a flat, square box with a ribbon tied around it. "You haven't opened your present yet."

The box was even lighter than it looked, as if there was hardly anything inside. Derek frowned in concentration as he eased the ribbon free. "The mysterious package I picked up at the post office?"

"Part of it." The paper fell away to reveal a folio stamped with the construction company's logo. Nick reached over and eased open the leather folder. "Call it an artist's rendering, courtesy of our architect."

He recognized Andrew's work. Precise lines and neat handwriting, all of it combined to paint a picture of a gorgeous... "A farmhouse?"

"Our house," she whispered. "If you don't like the layout, Andrew said you two can work together to modify the plans. And Luciano agreed to sell me a few acres. I was thinking something by the creek..." She tucked her hair behind her ear.

Nick had been thinking about building a house. For them. He traced the edge of the top sketch with one finger and tried to think past the design to what it would mean.

A home.

"It's beautiful, baby," he murmured. "And the creek is perfect."

Nick made a soft noise and curled closer to his side. "I know you've been talking to Luciano about building additions to the house here. Maybe, in the spring, you can do this instead."

Close enough that they'd be on hand whenever Michelle needed them, but far enough away to have a little bit of privacy. And it would be *their* place, a



place where Kat could have her own room, where he wouldn't feel awkward about inviting guests into another man's home. "Andrew did a good job."

"He was the only architect I could think of who knew you well enough to take on this project."

Nick could be sneaky, but this time he didn't have much trouble reading between the lines. "And one you think I should be talking to more often than I am?"

She shrugged one shoulder and flashed him a sheepish smile. "He's your best friend."

Across the room, Kat fiddled with her new digital camera, trying to line up a shot of Michelle and John. She was smiling, damn near laughing, but he'd known his cousin her whole life. Pain lingered in the quiet moments, when her smile faded and her eyes lost focus. She'd loved Andrew from the first moment Derek had introduced them, helpless puppy love that had grown up as she did.

Shattered, now. Andrew would never be that man again, any more than Derek could go back to being human, and Kat would never understand any more than Nick could. Nick had been born a wolf. She didn't know what it was like to wake up in a body beyond your control, in a world that wouldn't fit and instincts that wouldn't be quieted.

Nick stroked his cheek and spoke in a low-pitched whisper. "Are you okay, baby?"

"I'm supposed to protect her," he replied quietly. "But I can't, and I can't help him, either. I can't do *anything*."

"You can't protect her from this because no one can." Nick slid her arms around him. "There's nothing to fight here, Derek, and the only thing you can do for either of them? Is love them both enough to stop blaming yourself for what happened."

"I know." He did, that was the hell of it. He knew, because he'd done the same thing as Andrew. Pushed Nick away with both hands, for all the good it had done. *And that turned out okay...* "I might fly back down with Kat, then. It will give me a chance to talk to Andrew."

"I think they would both like that."

Derek grinned and eased his fingers down to her unprotected side. "And I'm going to *ask* your father before I steal his jet."

She laughed and twisted away from the tickling touch. "Not to point out the obvious, Gabriel, but that's called borrowing."

Before he could reply, Kat appeared, followed by a blinding flash of light that made the room appear as a ghostly inverted image until he blinked it free. "Candid shots," Kat proclaimed, grinning at them both. "This camera is so awesome it's wrong. The digital zoom is out of control."

"Michelle knows a thing or two about gift giving." Nick rose and held out her hand. "I want a few of you and Derek."

Judging by the reluctance with which Kat handed over the camera, Michelle had indeed done an excellent job. Derek let his cousin drag him to his feet and donned the required Santa hat with a dour expression he had to feign. His family was happy. Nick's family was happy. They were safe. They were together.

After the last few months of heartache, it was the best gift of all. A Christmas miracle.

\* \* \*

Nick almost tripped over the threshold and had to fight to keep hold of her armload of presents as she steadied herself. "How much booze did you guys put in the eggnog?"

"Enough." Even Derek seemed a little unsteady, though he was carrying twice as many packages. "Your sister takes her gift giving seriously."

"She's always loved Christmas." After a moment of trying to remember whether she held anything breakable, Nick began to carefully place the boxes and bags on the coffee table. "Can you catch the lights? Just the tree, though."

Derek deposited his stash haphazardly on the table before moving to obey. "It was a good night. Good food, family, I think I even saw your father laughing."

She peeled off her coat, sank onto the couch and kicked off her shoes. “He’s happy,” she said simply. Happy to have his daughters safe, not to mention... “You saw him laughing, and I’m pretty sure *I* saw him holding Mahalia’s hand.”

“Bullshit.” Even in the dark, Derek seemed to have no trouble finding the plug for their Christmas tree. Lights flickered on, the steady glow of white joined by the colorful bulbs that flashed in impossible to predict patterns.

“I’d say it was the liquor talking, but I saw what I saw.” She held out her arms. “Come here.”

He did, but not into her arms. Instead he sank to the floor in front of her, easing his body between her knees. “Thank you, Nicky, for all the presents. Especially stealing your dad’s plane.”

“You’re welcome.” Her heart thumped, and she sat forward and framed his face with her hands. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” His breath ghosted over her lips as he leaned in almost—*almost*—close enough to kiss her. “So what’s it gonna be, Peyton? Run now, or run later?”

“It’s cold outside.” She slipped one hand to the back of his neck and eased it under his collar, relishing the heat of his bare skin. “Warm in here, though.”

“Mmm.” His hands dropped to her hips and then slipped up under her shirt. “About to get warmer.”

Nick shivered and slid off the couch to land astride his lap. “On the floor, no less.”

He just laughed as his fingers danced up her spine, dragging her shirt along with them. “Nothing new with that.”

“No, not new.” She raised her arms to let him coax her shirt over her head. His hands were strong on her skin—confident, like he was so used to touching her already that he knew exactly how to do it.

“Maybe in twenty years I’ll be patient enough to make it to a bed.” In spite of the teasing words, he took his time, lowering his lips to hers with only the slightest pressure. “Thirty years. Fifty, tops.”

“Who cares? Floor’s good enough for me.” She nuzzled his jaw and wove her

fingers into his hair. “The floors, walls, chairs, kitchen counter—I’m game.”

“The woods.” He kissed her jaw and licked a path down her throat, teasing every once in a while with a hint of teeth. “Plenty of room to run here, as long as we don’t spook the horses.”

“Or the ranch hands.” A careful shift of her hips settled her body more closely against his, close enough to feel his arousal through their clothes. She moved again, this time with a whimper, and bit his ear.

“That’s it.” One hand tangled in her hair, tilted her head back to bare her throat for another bite. “Wiggle all you want. I like it.”

“I know.” She laughed and clutched him tight. “I want to marry you. Be your wife.”

“Good thing I already proposed.” This time his teeth caught the strap of her bra. “I’m not stopping for anything.”

“Not even if a jolly old man with a big belly drops down the chimney?”

“Woman, your dirty talk is getting twisted.”

Nick’s giggle dissolved into a moan. “Yeah? I haven’t even gotten to the part about the elves yet.”

Derek groaned and lifted his head. “This better not be some kinky roleplay fantasy, because I’m not putting on a big red suit.”

“That’s okay.” She tugged impatiently at his shirt. “I like you better naked anyway.”

“Naked’s good.” The shirt fell away, leaving his chest bare to her touch. He caught both of her hands and pulled them to his shoulders with a soft growl. “Touch me, Nicky.”

Her fingers curled, just a little, molding to the hard, muscled planes of his chest. She shuddered, suddenly desperate to do more, so she licked his collarbone. “Taste you?”

“Only if you want me to return the favor.”

He’d do it, too—push her down to the rug and make her scream with his fingers and tongue. Nick gasped a curse and rocked down against him as she scraped her teeth over his shoulder.

Derek let out a choked noise and closed his hands on her hips. The world tilted as he lifted her, almost threw her back on the couch, then groped for the fastening on her pants. “Naked. Naked is *necessary*.”

She lifted her hips so he could strip the denim away and clutched at the back of the couch as he started at her chin and began a slow, dedicated march down her body, dropping kisses to her collarbones and nips to the curve of her breast.

It was sheer sensual torture, and Nick whispered pleas and encouragement when he lingered over sensitive spots. Her body throbbed with pleasure and anticipation, both of which skyrocketed when he settled between her legs with a wicked smile. “Now?”

She’d beg if she had to. “Please, Derek. Make me come.”

He gave her a soft touch. Knowing fingers stroking over her, teasing her with the promise of pleasure. Then his lips, his tongue, and he wasn’t teasing anymore, but demanding, using his knowledge of her body in the very best way.

It made no sense that he could know her so well so quickly, but he did. Nick clutched his head, her fingers tight in his hair. She clenched her jaw, but couldn’t stay silent. “Christ,” she panted, arching off the cushions. “Jesus Christ.”

“Come on, baby,” he whispered, stroking his fingers deeper. “Come for me.”

*Come*. Yes, another gift she could give him—the gift of her pleasure. Her trust. She sucked in a ragged breath as the tense wave crested and crashed through her, but all that escaped her lips was a whisper. His name, as much of a prayer as a plea.

His touch vanished as she drifted down, and she heard the sound of frantic rustling. He had to be looking for the box of condoms he’d stashed under the couch, and Nick groaned. “I tossed it. We used them all.”

“*Already?*” The word came out as a snarl. A second later, she was over his shoulder, and they were already halfway to the bedroom. “We need to buy them by the pallet.”

She swallowed a giggle. "That delivery might be hard to explain."

Derek spilled her onto the bed and swatted at her hip. "So have pity on me. Find a damn condom while I get my pants undone."

It took her only moments to dig through the nightstand drawer. Nick dropped the foil packet on the bed and reached for him, nipping at the flat expanse of his stomach as he opened his pants. They both pushed at his underwear, and she laid her hand over his, curling his fingers around his cock as she looked up at him. "I want you in my mouth."

He panted heavily, his eyes glazed, fingers shaking. "Honey, that'll pretty much render the condom unnecessary. Self-control's not running high right now."

He was beautiful like this, as snared by need as she. Nick dropped her hands to the bed. "I'll give you whatever you want, Derek, all you have to do is say the word."

For a moment, he stayed frozen. Then he collapsed on the bed with a groan. "Have your way with me."

Whatever *she* wanted, his gift to her. "You sure?" She pulled at his boots and jeans, leaving him naked on the bed. "My way's terribly dirty."

"At this point, that's about as newsworthy as electricity."

"Smartass." She knelt over him, letting her hair brush his skin. "I love watching you like this."

He reached down, wrapped those strands of hair around his fingers and tugged. "Funny, I like the view, too."

She moved slowly, closing her hand around his shaft with a light touch meant to tease.

"*Nicole*." His grip tightened. "Please."

"Yes." One more quick tease with her tongue, and she licked her lips and slid them down around the head of his cock. It was his turn to beg, and he did, without hesitation. The words slurred as they stumbled free, all variations of encouragement mixed with pleas, and the occasional promise to do anything she wanted if she'd take him deeper, or harder, or faster.

She did all three, trembling when he pulled her hair so hard it hurt. It was something he only did when his orgasm was imminent, when release loomed so close and sure that he forgot to be gentle or careful.

She loved it.

When he came, it was with a sound that started as her name and ended with a growl of helpless pleasure that left her shivering. Nick stroked him, every inch of her body alive with satisfaction and the knowledge that he belonged to her.

"You're mine," she murmured as she crawled up his body. "Mine, baby."

"Forever," he agreed in a raspy whisper. "You and me."

They had to pull back the covers, and they couldn't leave the Christmas lights on all night. For now, though, she wasn't about to move from the cradle of his arm. "Derek?"

"Yeah, honey?"

"If you needed for us to spend more time in New Orleans, you'd tell me, right?"

He sighed softly and shifted her until she was nestled against his side. "Michelle needs you. Right now, I think Kat needs me to let her breathe. And I'm trying. But if that changes, I'll tell you."

She exhaled a shaky sigh of relief. "You've given up so much to be here. I worry that it's *too* much."

"Things don't matter. Places don't matter." A finger under her chin tilted her head back. "You brought Kat here, and you gave me a kick to go see Andrew. They're the ones who matter. And since I haven't given them up, I haven't lost a damn thing."

"I'm glad." Someday, Michelle wouldn't need her to be on hand so much, and they could find their own space for good, whether it meant staying in the house Derek would build, moving back to New Orleans, or even another place entirely.

A little bit of wrangling got the blankets out from under them. Derek smoothed the covers down and curled around her. "Your sister is one of ours."

So is Kat. We'll take care of them together."

She smiled and tucked her face against his shoulder. "Did Mahalia give you a stern lecture about how long we avoided each other?"

"Nope. I distracted her before she really got going. That's the secret to avoiding her stern lectures, you know."

"Damn, I should have figured that out."

"I'm tricky," he murmured around a yawn. "Damn. I think I'm getting old."

"No, you're just—" The clock in the front room began to chime the hour, a long, slow succession of twelve deep rings. "Merry Christmas, darling."

He pulled her closer. "Merry Christmas, Nicky."

She craned her neck to look out the window and smiled when she caught sight of the white flakes drifting against the glass. "It's snowing again."

"It's always snow—" Derek sat up so abruptly he nearly spilled her off the bed. "Damn it, I almost forgot your present."

Nick rolled upright, laughing. "No, you didn't."

"The most important one, then." Instead of leaving the bed, he leaned over and jerked open the bedside table. After a few moments of digging, he surfaced with a simple white envelope, which he handed to her in silence.

Inside was a folder containing pages featuring a travel agent's logo—and itinerary information. "We're going to Barbados?"

"Over Kat's spring break," he confirmed, sounding the tiniest bit nervous. "Your father's already made arrangements for Michelle and Luciano to come, too. Just family. And a beach."

A word on the reservations confirmation caught her eye, and she sucked in a breath as she realized what he was saying. "Our wedding?"

"If you want something else, somewhere else, we can change it. Any of it. I just thought—why wait?"

*Why wait?* He'd planned the entire thing to be precisely what she'd talked about, the perfect way to confirm what they'd already begun—a life together—but his nervousness was unmistakable. "It's just right," she hurriedly reassured him. "Exactly what I wanted."



“Thank God.” Derek flopped back against the bed, heaving a sigh. “I told Kat, and she asked me if I was an idiot. So I got worried.”

Nick shook her head and laid the open folder on his stomach so she could examine the tickets and brochures. “If you’d planned some sort of stuffy formal affair, I might be asking you the same thing. But this... This is *awesome*.”

“Not going to kill me for making arrangements for our wedding, then?”

“What? No.” She leaned over and kissed him. “I gave you house plans, baby. This is arguably less presumptuous.”

“Maybe.” He caught her lower lip between his teeth with an amused noise. “It’s okay. You’re cute when you’re presumptuous.”

“Mmm, but will I still be cute when I’m an old married woman?”

“Nope. You’ll be mine.”

It didn’t get any better than hearing him lay claim to her the way she had with him. Nick held his gaze as she gathered the papers and tossed them on the nightstand. “How tired *are* you?”

Derek stretched his arms over his head, then rolled from the bed. “You owe me a run. A race. To the creek and back, and the winner gets whatever they want.”

She reclined there on her side, crossing one leg over the other as she pretended to consider his proposition. “When you decide to embrace your inner wolf, you don’t mess around.”

“I don’t have to hate it anymore.” His smile lit up his whole face, even those bright blue eyes that watched her like she was the best thing in the world. “You made it okay. You made it fun.”

His happiness matched her own, and both warmed her so thoroughly she probably could have braved the icy chill outside the guest house without the benefit of fur. “We made it fun. We’re crazy in love, remember?”

“In love and crazy,” he agreed, backing toward the door. “Come on, Nicole Peyton. Get wolfy with me.”

She climbed off the bed and followed. “I’m smaller and faster, so I’m bound to win. Or is that what you’re counting on?”

“Maybe I’m counting on the fact that you like getting caught.” Derek hauled open the front door, letting in a burst of cold air. “Run.”

Nick knelt and shifted, using the bump of magic to fuel a charge past Derek and out the door. It would take him precious moments to secure the door and follow, but she knew he would.

She did, after all, love getting caught.

THE END

### *A Peyton Family Christmas*

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