



A Down Home Christmas

Liz Talley

KRIS PAUSED AT THE SCRAPE of metal beside them. They both turned as Bria climbed atop a folding chair and stood on the seat. The child reached up and taped a piece of mistletoe directly above Tory's head. Then she tossed them a smile and hopped down, folding the chair and taking it with her. Kris stood there with Tory, both of them apparently speechless.

Tory looked at Kris. "She did *not* just do that."

He started laughing. "I think she did."

"That child," Tory said, her eyes wide but reflecting amusement. She leaned out to look into the hallway then she leaned back in. "And she's hiding around the corner spying on us."

"Is she?"

"Yes." Tory's cheeks were still pink, and she was somehow even more appealing than she'd been when he first saw her standing outside the door. That was the thing about Tory. She became more tempting second by second.

"We really shouldn't disappoint her," he said, looking up at the scrap of mistletoe, wondering where in the world Bria had found it. Then he remembered the sprawling oak

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that anchored the parking lot right outside the center door. Probably full of the stuff.

“Oh, don’t be silly. You don’t have to kiss me because of this,” she said, glancing up at the bit of green taped on the frame.

“I think I do,” he said, studying her lips. She had beautiful lips. A full bottom lip and a beautiful bow on the top. They invited odes to be written to them. No, they invited a kiss beneath the mistletoe.

“Kris,” she murmured, glancing back nervously.

“Tory,” he said, leaning toward her. “It’s a perfectly good piece of mistletoe. We can’t waste it.”

She licked her lips, her eyes widening as he lowered his head.

Just as he was about to press his lips to hers, Tory reached up and yanked down the mistletoe.

He drew back, surprised, because her eyes had seemed to invite the kiss.

“We’re at the center,” she whispered, her gaze giving him an apology. “There are children around.”

Disappointment socked him at the same time as the reality of her words penetrated his intent to kiss the daylights out of her. They *were* in the middle of the center, and kissing, even at the urging of Bria, wouldn’t be a good idea. Definitely not here. Probably not anywhere.

“Right,” he said, shaking his head. “I don’t know what I was thinking. Caught up in the spirit, I guess.”

Tory pressed her lips together but not before a nervous giggle escaped. She put her hand over her mouth as if to stop from bursting into laughter.

Finally, Tory seemed to catch hold of herself. “So, anyway, I came to see if you would listen to the other participants.

They've all been working on their performances and would love some feedback. I'll warn you though—they've been listening to some of your songs on their phones. You may have made some new fans."

"Sure. I can do that," he said, turning out the lights and shutting the door behind him. He glanced down the hallway where Tory had spied Bria. The girl stood with her arms crossed, looking disgusted.

"Dang," Bria said, before turning on her heel and disappearing around the corner.

"Nice try," he called out before pushing into another large room where ten or so kids sprawled at computer desks, awaiting him. All of them sat up straight and proceeded to look nervous.

"Everyone, this is Kris Trabeau. I know some of you already know who he is, but his songs can be heard on the radio, so he's got some knowledge to share about performing," Tory said, glancing over at him. Her cheeks were no longer pink, but he could tell what had happened a minute ago had affected her. And that was strange comfort. They hadn't kissed, but if he were a betting man, he'd lay down a Ben Franklin that Tory Odom had sure wanted to.