



Deck
the
Halls

BY JORDAN MILLSAPS

“Are you sure this is a good idea?”

I shifted the string of Christmas lights to my opposite shoulder and surveyed the ladder leaning against my new house. “I can totally do this, Meg. No problem.”

“But if you could just wait a few days, I’m sure Dave could find time to come put them up for you. You know he’d be happy to help, Becca.”

I huffed. “Your faith in me is touching, truly.”

“I just want you to be safe, you know that.”

I did know that, but the fact remained that I was a grown-up woman who had just purchased her first home and could string her own Christmas lights. No way did I need a man to do this for me, not even my thoughtful, long-suffering brother-in-law. Girl power! Down with the patriarchy!

“I appreciate your concern, but I’m really fine. I’m going to go now so I can get these hung before it gets dark.”

“Okay, just...be careful. Love you.”

Stowing my phone in my jacket pocket, I squared my shoulders and stepped onto the ladder. The puffy pink coat I was wearing made climbing awkward, but when it’s thirty degrees outside there’s not much help for it. As I ascended, my mittened hands felt a little slippery, and I made a mental note to buy some work gloves with a little more grip for next year.

Humming ‘Deck the Halls’ to augment my decorating, I paused at the top to sling the lights and a bag of clips to attach them onto the roof, then hauled myself over the edge. As I sat

up, my phone fell from my pocket and careened toward the edge of the roof. I reached to save it but lost my balance, my feet and arms flailing. My boot collided with the ladder and I watched, frozen in horror, as both my phone and the ladder clattered to the ground below.

Two things became a priority for me at that moment. Getting down safely, and ensuring that Meg never, ever found out about this. Ever.

Army crawling to the edge, I peered down to survey the situation. It was at least a twelve-foot drop to the ground below, so dangling and letting go was out of the question. Shimming down drainpipes was a thing, right? People did it all the time in books and movies. I pushed experimentally on the pipe running down from the corner nearest me. Nope. People who did that must only weigh about twenty pounds because I was pretty sure that was the limit for my gutters.

Thirty minutes later, I had installed the lights, because why waste the trip up here, and circled the whole perimeter of the roof without discovering any hidden emergency exits. Darkness, the temperature, and my spirits were beginning to fall in equal measure now. I surveyed my surroundings critically.

I only had two neighbors close enough to hear me if I yelled. The neighbors to my right, the Camdens, were an older couple whom I knew were still out of town visiting family for Thanksgiving. They'd asked me to keep an eye on their place while they were gone — if only they knew what a bird's eye view I had now.

The neighbor to my left I hadn't met yet. Mrs. Camden had said his name was Dylan and that he worked a lot. I eyed his house, looking for lights or any other indication that someone might be home, but it looked dark and quiet.

Suddenly, a light flickered on downstairs. A moment later, a shadow moved past the window and I audibly gasped. I was saved! If I could get his attention, that is.

"Hello?" I called tentatively. After a moment I repeated my call a little louder, then louder still, adding a pathetic "Help!" for good measure.

This wasn't working. Preparing to try again, I moved to the edge closest to Dylan's house but paused when my eye caught on a handful of acorns resting in the corner of my gutter. An idea came to me, and I scooped up the little round nuts.

Taking aim, I hearkened back to my high school softball days and lobbed one toward the lit window. It fell short by a few feet, so I adjusted and tried again. This one pinged off the bottom corner. I waited a moment to see if he had noticed, but when nothing happened I wound up and hurled one as hard as I could.

A horrifying crash resounded in the stillness as the window shattered.

"Oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh." This day could not get any worse. I heard the front door slam and cringed into my puffy jacket.

My neighbor stalked around the side of his house and paused beside the broken window, before turning to look around in bewilderment.

“Hello,” I called, “Up here!” I threw in a friendly wave when he tilted his head back and spied me. “I’m stuck, can you help?”

He paused, clearly needing a moment to let this situation sink in, then said, “Uh sure, I’ll grab a ladder.”

“There’s one in front of my house,” I replied quickly. “It fell when I climbed up.”

As he hustled around the corner, I maneuvered myself to meet him, sighing with relief when the top of the ladder came into view.

“I’ll hold on to it while you climb down,” he called. Stuffing the leftover light clips in my pocket, I hurried to obey. When my feet hit the ground, I felt my entire body relax, except for the shivers that I’d been ignoring until now.

“Thank you so much,” I said, hoping my words were infused with as much gratitude as I felt. “I was beginning to think I might be spending the night up there. You’re my hero.”

Turning to look at him, my mouth went dry. From up on the roof in the dimness of twilight, I couldn’t make out much more than an outline. But from here? I could see him *really well*, and I liked what I saw, especially when he smiled.

“Your hero, huh? I’ve been called a lot of things, but never a hero.”

“Well, it’s true. Without you, I would have been nothing but an embarrassed icicle by morning.”

“It’s supposed to get down into the low twenties tonight,” he said, his smile giving way to a serious expression. “I’m glad you didn’t have to stay up there much longer. Look, you’re

shivering. You should probably get inside and warm up. Besides,” he propped one hand on his hip and brushed the other over his close-cut dark hair. “I need to get that window boarded up.”

“Oh, yes, definitely. Do you, uh, want some help?”

“Nah, I’ve got it. Sure is a mess though. Did you see what happened?”

“Actually…” Time to come clean. “It was my fault. I’d been calling for a while with no luck so I chucked an acorn at the window to get your attention. I guess I don’t know my own strength.” I forced a chuckle. “Anyway, I’m so sorry about that. I insist you let me help you clean up the mess and I’ll absolutely pay for a new window.”

He didn’t say anything for a minute, then threw back his head and laughed. “An acorn, huh? Who would have guessed that could do so much damage. You must have quite an arm.”

Relieved at his gracious acceptance of my explanation, I grinned back and popped my arms up in a muscle pose.

“You bet. Now let’s put my impressive strength to work cleaning up.”

“I’ll take you up on that. C’mon.”

I followed him up onto the porch and into his house. We entered a huge, open space that housed a living area on one side, and a dining room on the other. I had a clear view of a crackling fireplace and a gaping hole where his dining room window should have been.

I winced at the crunch of glass beneath my boots. “Where’s your broom?”

“Hold on, I’ll grab it.” He returned quickly with a broom, dustpan, and a couple of large cardboard boxes. “I’ll start taping these up while you sweep.”

In a matter of minutes, the glass was double-bagged and ready to be taken out. I let go of the cardboard I'd been holding up as Dylan smoothed the last piece of duct tape in place and stepped back to examine the results.

"I'm sorry again," I said, turning to look at him. "Be sure to let me know as soon as you have it fixed so I can reimburse you."

"I'm not sorry," he said, swinging around to meet my gaze. "If you hadn't broken it, you might have been stranded all night. And I might not have ever had a reason to introduce myself."

"Technically, we still haven't officially met. Do you even know my name?"

"Trouble?" he teased.

"That's my middle name," I shot back primly. "My first name is Rebecca. People call me Becca."

"Hi Becca, I'm Dylan. You know," he said thoughtfully, "Normally I wouldn't ask you this so soon after meeting you, but I feel like we've been through a few things together."

I chuckled at this.

"Would you like to stay for some hot chocolate by the fire?"

The look he gave me, intrigued and intriguing, had me shucking off my puffy coat. "I would be delighted."

He gestured to the living area. "Make yourself at home. I'll whip us up some cocoa. Whipped cream?"

“You bet. Oh, and Dylan? If you ever talk to my sister Meg, can you not mention the part about me being stuck on the roof?”

“That wouldn’t be very heroic of me, would it?” he answered with a wink.

I pulled off my jacket and sank onto his couch, amazed at how quickly my evening had turned around. With any luck, next year I’d have help decorating for Christmas.