

TWISTED LEGENDS BOOK ONE

NORTH
bound

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Scarlett climbs out of her car, wrapping her scarf around her neck, when the wind threatens to take it off her into the forest.

The predicted snow storm is already building, the wind howling through the trees, and around the cottage. It's rare to have a white Christmas in Ireland, but this year is to be an exception. But she doesn't mind. She's prepared for the worst. The shed out back has plenty of wood for the fire, she's got oil for the generator, in case the power goes, and the boot of her car is filled with enough food to last her a few weeks.

The quaint cottage sitting at the end of the cobbled path is as inviting as she remembers. The paint on the bright red door and white window frames could use a little attention, but it just adds to the character, in her opinion.

She carefully makes her way through the creaky gate, each footstep crunching on the freshly fallen snow. One whole week here. All. By. Herself. No interruptions. No visitors. No work stress. Just a lot of good food and great company.

Or maybe that last part is wishful thinking. She's spending Christmas with a pile of book boyfriends. When did her life reach such new and exciting levels? Then again, spending seven days with super sexy fictional men sounds like heaven.

She unlocks the door, giving it a good shove when it initially refuses to open. Before she does anything else, she lights a fire in the huge fireplace, then goes back outside to grab her bags and the groceries from her car.

She parks her car in the shed to the side of the house, closing and locking the shed doors to keep it secure. As she reaches the front door of the cottage, she turns around, taking in her neighbours for the next few days. Not neighbours exactly. The cottage is surrounded by trees. That's it. A lot of trees. And a lot of privacy. Just perfect.

Scarlett shakes the snow from her coat and shrugs it off, hanging it on the back of the door. She pulls off her gloves with her teeth, then throws them on the table next to the groceries. It takes a few minutes to unpack the food, then she helps herself to a large glass of wine, and drops into the overstuffed armchair by the fire.

One week until the big day, and this year, it's all about her. After missing another promotion at work, and her flatmate getting engaged, being around people was not on her to-do-list for the immediate future.

Or ever, if she had her way.

Her grandparents' old holiday cottage was left to her in their will. It's in the middle of nowhere, near Roundwood in Co. Wicklow, with a scattering of neighbours, the nearest about a mile away.

She goes into the cosy kitchen, takes a packet of crisps from the cupboard, and works her way through it, as she double checks the windows and doors are secured. They're predicting one impressive snowfall just in time for Christmas week. Bring it on!

Spending the holiday alone, with not even so much as a bauble anywhere in the cottage, might seem a little miserable to some, but she's fine with it. More than fine with it. Christmas was for families, and when her grandparents died, so did her family. She'll leave all the festive cheer to everyone else.

She doesn't begrudge anyone celebrating Christmas. Far from it. But decorating and going all out, just didn't make sense to her when she's up here all alone.

She smiles and takes another sip of her wine. Spending this time alone, with wine and her growing to-be-read book pile, sounds like heaven.

She opens the bag overflowing with books, takes the first from the top of the pile, then wraps up in a blanket by the fire.

One and a half book boyfriends later, Scarlett jumps when a loud bang sounds from outside, followed by a crash. She freezes, holding her breath as she listens. But there's nothing else. Just the wind howling through the trees surrounding the cottage.

She checks her watch. Three in the morning. She must have dozed off for a bit. The fire has gone out, her book is on her lap, and the moonlight is visible through the window. She jumps as another loud bang comes from outside.

Common sense is telling her to ignore it. She's read enough thrillers in her life to know you never head towards the suspicious sound. Especially when the sound is coming from a dark forest in a snow storm. Big no-no.

But two minutes later, she does the very thing she had decided not to do. She creeps over to the window, peering around the window frame into the darkness outside. Except it's not completely dark. There's a fire at the edge of the trees just beyond her property. 'Shit, shit, shit!'

Scarlett bundles into her coat and stuffs her feet into her winter boots, then grabs her torch. Having second thoughts, she stops by the door, picking up the axe resting against the log pile. Never can be too prepared.

With her head down against the driving snow, she slowly makes her way across the garden to the trees, using the moonlight to help her find her way.

By the time she gets to the fire, the snow has helped extinguish it. She guides her torchlight over what looks like some kind of vehicle wreckage. In the dark it's difficult to figure out what it is.

One end of the deep red vehicle is embedded in a tree, the trunk of the tree snapped in half by the impact and lying over the top of the vehicle.

As she examines it, she realises it's not a car. It doesn't have a roof for one, and she doubts you would take a convertible out in a snow storm. But it's also completely the wrong shape and doesn't have wheels. Two huge black runners sit in place of the wheels, stretching the full length of the wreckage.

Scarlett frowns, then shakes her head. As ridiculous as the notion is, she can't escape the fact it reminds her of a sleigh. A massive, deep red sleigh. But if it is a sleigh, what was pulling it?

Her attention falls on a huge footprint beside the sleigh and she swallows thickly. She's no wildlife expert, but she'd swear that's a reindeer footprint! And it's from the biggest reindeer ever, judging by the size of it.

'Shit...' she mutters to herself as she looks around the dark wood. The moon is casting strange shadows everywhere she looks. The thought of a mutant reindeer of some sort, potentially being out there, hiding in the forest has her firming her grip on the pick axe.

She tucks her chin in against her chest, as a gust of wind threatens to knock her over. The weather is deteriorating fast. She needs to stop worrying about giant reindeer and find the driver, or whoever was in the sleigh.

'Hello!'

Nothing.

Pulling her hat further over her ears, she cautiously makes her way around the wreckage, moving her torch in slow arcs across the deep snow. There are no footprints apart from her own, so where's the driver?

Scarlett pushes through the trees, scanning the darkness around her. 'This isn't creepy in the slightest,' she mutters to herself as the wind howls through the thick trees. 'Not one little bit. What the hell are you doing, Scarlett?'

Not finding anyone at the edge of the forest, she makes her way back to the clearing, turning in a slow circle, squinting against the falling snow. Then she spots something. There's a dark shape in the snow a few feet ahead of her.

'Shit!'

She trudges closer to the shape, half expecting whatever it is, to jump up and attack her at any minute. But it's not moving and is already covered in a thick layer of snow.

'There you are!' Scarlett crouches down beside the body and examines it. From the sheer size she'd guess it's a man. If he wasn't wearing a red coat, she seriously doubts she would have caught sight of him through the snow.

The poor guy is lying chest down in the snow after presumably being thrown from his... sleigh thing, or whatever it is? She slowly reaches out, pressing her fingers to his wrist to check for a pulse. It's strong and steady, much to her relief. 'Hello? Sir?'

But he's out cold. And he's cold. Really cold. She brushes the snow from the side of his face and hair. 'Hello?'

Still nothing.

She pulls her mobile out of her pocket and checks the screen. 'Of course there's no signal,' she mutters to herself. Even standing up and waving the phone in all directions doesn't help. Perfect! Now what is she supposed to do?

'Any ideas?' she asks him, but the man is utterly unhelpful, choosing to remain unconscious. She looks down at him and curses to herself. Not a lot she can do. She can't exactly leave him out here to die of exposure.

'Okay. So you stay put. I'll be back in a minute,' she says, before slowly picking her way through the snow back to her house.

'This was supposed to be a nice quiet break,' she says to herself as she searches around the back of the cottage for a sled, or anything she can use to drag him back to the house on. 'But no. Only you could have a random guy land on your doorstep.'

She moves some junk from the corner of the garage and smiles. 'Bingo!' Scarlett drags the sled from the bottom of the pile and brushes the years of cobwebs and dirt from it.

The bright pink sled came out every time they were lucky enough to have a white Christmas when she was growing up. It was designed to carry a child, not a grown man, but it will have to do.

She quickly replaces the flimsy string with some rope she finds hanging from the wall, before locking the shed behind her again.

With the sled trailing behind her, she makes her way back through the snow to the mysterious man. 'Is it too much to ask for a little peace and quiet? I just wanted to read a few books. Have quite a few glasses of wine. Eat myself into a stupor. Instead, I'm freezing my ass off, rescuing some random lost man that seems to have dropped from the sky.'

Unfortunately he's still out cold when she gets back to him. She places her hands on her hips and glares at him. 'You're just going to make me drag you back, aren't you?' She pulls the sled up beside him, then grabs the back of his heavy coat. 'I'm just rolling you over.'

It takes a hell of an effort to roll him onto his back, but she manages to get him onto the sled. His head and some of his upper body are on the sled, but that's the best she can do. He's a lot longer than his rescue vehicle.

She picks up the rope attached to the sled and digs her heels in. 'Right. Let's get you inside.'

The first few attempts to move him, end with her lying on her face or ass in the snow. He's one heavy guy. Cursing him for the umpteenth time, she tries again, nearly shouting aloud when the sled slides towards her.

She readjusts her feet, then goes again. Two steps down. Only a few dozen more to go.

Over half an hour, and a hell of a lot of cursing later, Scarlett braces her legs and gives one last heave, dragging the man into her living room. She's sweating and out of breath, but she's done it, and just in time too. The wind is now howling around the cottage as the storm worsens.

The man is still unconscious, sprawled out on top of her pink sled. She thought all the jostling would have brought him around, but unfortunately it didn't. It would have helped if he had woken up and was able to at least partly assist her getting him back to the house. He weighed a ton.

She hauls him over to the fire and positions him in front of the hearth to warm him up. His skin is pale and cold to the touch, but other than a wound on his head, he seems in good shape and he's breathing normally.

Scarlett would like nothing more than to leave the sled where it is, but she needs to remove it, or he'll wake up in serious pain from the uncomfortable position.

It takes another ten minutes to extract the sled from under him, but she finally succeeds. He's now lying on the wooden floor, but that's where he's going to have to stay. She's surprised she was able to get him as far as she did. Lifting him onto the couch is more than she's willing to attempt.

After stripping off her coat and boots, she adds more fuel to the fire, trying to get it going again. When the kindling catches, she drops onto the couch and looks at the man lying in front of her fire as she composes herself.

The entire situation is weird. Really, really weird. Things like this don't happen to her. Her life is remarkably uncomplicated. No drama.

She tucks her legs under her and stares down at the man lying at her feet. Clearly someone thought her life needed a little spicing up, so decided to send her a man.

She leans forward. A very nice man. Whoever he is, he's undoubtedly the most attractive man she's ever seen.

She brushes her wet hair back from her forehead, as she shuffles to the edge of the seat to get a closer look. Yeah, he's still stunning up close too. Even more so in fact.

She'd guess he's about five years older than her, probably in his early to mid-forties. His short light brown hair and tight beard are peppered with grey which she finds extremely sexy.

Stop staring at the man!

She sits back, but there's no way she can stop staring. It's impossible. He is so much taller than he appeared out in the wood. She knows the hearth is six foot wide and he's taller than that, maybe six-two. Definitely too tall for the low ceilings in the cottage.

What exactly is she supposed to do now? She can hardly sit here staring at him all night, however appealing that may sound.

She checks her phone screen again. Still no signal. There's no way she'll be able to get her car out either. She looks at the man as she considers her options.

Which right now aren't plentiful.

She's stuck here for the foreseeable with a strange man, who, now she sees him in the light, appears to be dressed a little like Santa.

The heavy red leather coat fits his broad chest and thick arms like a glove. The same with the red trousers. Teamed with the black combat boots he's certainly an edgier version of the typical Santa you'd usually see this time of year.

Maybe he was booked for a party? Could explain his mode of transportation too. Wherever he was going, she doubts it was to the local shopping centre for all the kids to swarm around. Certainly not to any centres she's ever been to.

She shakes herself out of her thoughts and gets back into serious mode. The least she can do is deal with his injuries, instead of leaving him bleeding on her floor, while she drools over him.

Scarlett gathers some first aid supplies, then fetches a bowl of warm water from the kitchen. Once she has everything she needs, she kneels on the floor beside him.

'Hey. Me again. I need to clean the cut on your head.' She pauses and narrows her eyes, waiting for a response. Still nothing at all. She shrugs and examines the wound. It's about the length of her thumb, but thankfully isn't too dirty.

Scarlett carefully moves his head to the side, so she can wash the blood from his forehead and side of his face. Not only is he handsome, he smells incredible. Just like the cinnamon cookies her grandmother used to bake. He certainly went all out with the outfit and the scent. He's Christmas in one seriously hot package.

And now she's drooling over an unconscious, injured man. Getting back to the first aid task, she fixes a plaster over the cut on his forehead, satisfied with her efforts. She sits back on her heels and frowns at his coat. One situation dealt with, and another presents itself. He's going to overheat if she leaves it on.

'I'm just going to open your coat. That's it. No funny business, I promise. I don't want you boiling on me.'

She waits for a second and, after getting no reaction, gingerly reaches over and unzips the heavy leather coat, opening it to each side.

She sits back on her heels and licks her suddenly dry lips, when she gets a better look at what was hidden under the coat.

A pair of black leather braces are attached to his trousers with a fitted long-sleeved white top underneath, which hugs his body in a seriously distracting way. The three buttons at the neck are open, showing a silver necklace with locket attached.

‘Okay. Not too shabby at all.’ She grimaces. ‘I’m so sorry if you heard that. It was meant to stay in my head.’

Grimacing at her remark, Scarlett gets her duvet from her bed, then makes herself a cup of coffee and sits back on the chair by his feet. ‘Sorry. Me again. If you can hear me I’d appreciate if you could let me know. Move your hand or something.’

But there’s nothing. His breathing is steady and his colour returning to normal. The cut on his head isn’t too bad. It doesn’t look like that’s the reason he is unconscious. It’s nasty, but there’s no bruising or swelling around it. Hopefully after some rest, he’ll wake up.

She checks her phone again, but the signal is still non-existent. Scarlett picks up her book and looks at the model on the cover. ‘What do you make of all this? Yeah. I agree. It’s weird. Very weird indeed. Not an unpleasant weird, but certainly up there in the weird category. Are you getting a Santa vibe off him?’

The cover model chooses not to answer, but she’s used to that. Having a conversation with a book can be a little one-sided.

‘I mean it’s not the typical Santa, but he’s definitely giving off the vibe.’ She glares at her book. ‘Or I’ve read too many of these.’ She places the book back on the nest of tables beside her chair. ‘Yeah. Probably far too many fictional men.’

She shrugs to herself and wraps the duvet around her. There’s no way she’s going to go up to her room to sleep and leave a strange man in her house. She’ll stay up and keep an eye on him until he wakes.



It’s been a long time since he woke up with such a rotten fucking headache. Decades in fact. He also feels like he’s going to throw up, which hasn’t happened for decades either.

Groaning with the effort, he opens his eyes and winces, closing his eyes again. Fuck, he feels terrible. He rolls onto his side, feeling rough wood under his fingers. This isn’t his bedroom floor. Not that he’s spent a lot of time up close and personal with it. Where the fuck is he?

He pushes up to his elbow and winces as a ball bounces around his skull. Nope, not ready for that. His head is fucking killing him.

‘Don’t move.’

The female voice is unfamiliar, which immediately puts him on alert. He works with a lot of people, but he’s sure he’s never heard her voice before. He slowly turns his head towards the voice, blinking as he tries to get his vision to focus.

When it finally clears, he finds a woman sitting in an armchair next to him, her legs tucked up in front of her. She's peering at him over the rim of a large mug with steam coming out of it.

It's the wrong thing to think considering he hasn't got a clue where he is or what's wrong with him, but the woman looking strangely at him is one hell of a looker, whoever she is. Her pale skin is peppered with freckles and her green eyes have a hint of blue in the centre. She twirls the end of her long auburn hair as she peers down at him.

Who the fuck is she? She's definitely not someone from the workshop. He's sure he'd remember her.

She puts down the cup on the table beside her, and tucks her hands into the sleeves of the oversized Snoopy pyjamas she's wearing.

He leaves her staring at him as he takes in the rest of the room he's in. It's a cottage of some sort, with heavy wooden beams in the ceiling and walls. The open fire beside him fills the room with the scent of peat turf.

It's warm and homely, but doesn't help him figure out where he is.

'Where...' he groans, as his own voice echoes loudly in his head. 'Damn, that hurts.'

'I wouldn't move around too much if I were you. I found you in the forest a few hours ago. You were unconscious. There's a cut on your forehead but I don't think you've had a bang to your head. Well I hope not.'

He reaches up, quickly finding the cut she's talking about under a bandage. 'Ouch. You did this?'

'The cleaning and bandaging. Not the original cut. I promise that had nothing to do with me.'

She smiles and a little of the worry eases. So a pretty girl smiles at you and you trust her. Not the best move for someone in his position.

He convinces himself to stop staring and get his ass off the floor. He tries pushing upright again, but she joins him on the floor, gently guiding him onto his back. 'You really should take it easy. You've been out of it for about six hours. Go slow.'

He ignores her and drags himself to his feet, wobbling as the room shifts. Bracing against the wall, he just stops himself from crashing to the ground again. 'What date is it?'

'What?'

'The date? What is it?'

'The twenty-first of December. Why?'

The room sways again, but he forces himself to stand tall, cursing when he whacks his head on one of the very old, very solid ceiling beams.

The woman stands up, grimacing as she watches him rub the other side of his head. 'Ouch. That sounded like it hurt. You okay?'

'No I'm not okay!'

'At least you didn't hit the same side twice,' she replies, the small smile irritatingly attractive.

He glares at the beam, deciding he's going to have to stay stooped over, or risk continuously knocking himself out. 'Where am I?'

The woman examines his head, moving so close to him he can smell the coffee on her

breath. 'Roundwood.'

'Where?'

'Wicklow. Ireland,' she adds, giving him a strange look. 'Do you remember how you got here?'

He knows full well how he got here. It's what happened after that, that's giving him problems. He can't remember anything. 'You said you found me. Where?'

She crosses her arms, probably irritated he's not answering her question, then nods to the front door. 'Outside. At the edge of the forest. I heard a loud crash. I went outside and there you were, lying in the snow.'

He stumbles over to the window and peers outside. Not that it does much good. That's one hell of a snow storm. 'Where exactly did you find me?'

She joins him at the window and points to the left. 'Over there.'

He opens the door and goes outside into the blizzard.

'Hey! What are you doing? Are you crazy? Come back inside.'

He scans the area, but it's near on impossible to make out the trees, let alone anything else. 'Was there anything with me,' he shouts back at her.

'A bit of wreckage from something, but I was kind of more focused on you.'

'Was anyone out here with me?'

She joins him on the path, wrapping a heavy coat around herself. 'What?'

'Was I alone?'

'Yes. Why? Should there be someone with you? I only found you. Have I missed someone else?'

He shakes his head. 'I was alone.'

'That's a relief. I thought there was someone else lying out there for a minute. Will you come back inside now? It's Baltic out here and you might have a head injury.'

He concentrates on his surroundings, ignoring her continuous efforts to get him indoors. There's something out there. Something he can't quite get a hold on. It's familiar, but he can't figure out where it's coming from.

He opens his eyes and looks over to the forest. He's got a niggling feeling they're not alone out here. He looks at the sky and whistles. Nothing. No surprise there. 'Did you see any animals around me?'

She frowns at him, clearly thinking he's lost his mind.

'Were there any animals?' he asks again, trying not to let his irritation show. Whoever was in the forest has moved away. If his head wasn't so sore he'd go after them. It's probably nothing. Maybe just a nosy neighbour. Maybe.

'Were there any animals?' he asks again. He understands why she's giving him strange looks, but right now, he couldn't give a fuck what she thinks about him.

'No, nothing. I did see a foot print from...'

'From what?'

'Okay so it might have looked like a reindeer print. But it was larger. I looked around, but couldn't see any actual reindeer - just the print.'

He checks his wrist and curses. The leather band with the tracking device is gone. He curses, reaching up to his neck. It's still there. The locket is still around his neck. Whatever else is

going on right now, losing the last connection he has to them would be unbearable.

Losing his temper won't help him in the slightest, but he's seriously fucked off. He kicks the pile of logs, dislodging the wood, sending it tumbling to the ground. This is a fucking disaster. How the hell is he meant to get home? 'Shit, shit, shit!' He paces the driveway, stopping to punch the gate post, knocking the gate out of its catches.

'Whoa there! I get you're confused, but taking it out on my gate won't help. And it's flipping freezing out here. Your head is bleeding again too, so can you please come inside.'

She's right. It's not like he can see anything out here. He nods and turns back to the house, stumbling as a dizzy spell hits. She catches him before he falls, helping him back into the house.

Once inside, she shuts the door again and helps him over to the chair by the fire.

'Sit down and this time stay down. If you keep running around the place like a blue-arsed fly, your head will never heal and I have a finite first aid supply.'

He does as he's told, but only because his head is killing him. He's taken bumps to the head before, but this feels completely different. The pain encompasses his entire head, keeping his thoughts fuzzy.

'Stay there. I'll get you something to drink. Tea? Coffee? Chocolate?'

'What?'

'Would you like a drink?'

'Anything but tea, thanks.'

'You hungry?'

He nods absently.

'Okay, I'll sort that out. Can you please try not to hit anything while I'm gone.'

He smiles briefly and she winks, then goes into the kitchen.

This is a fucking nightmare. One week from Christmas and he's trapped in a snowstorm in Ireland, with no way of getting home. No ride. No tracker. No way for anyone to find him, even if they could, in the middle of a blizzard.

He gingerly prods his forehead, blood staining his fingers when he pulls them away. He can't remember what happened. Why can't he remember? Every time he tries, the pain ramps up a level. She mentioned a crash, which was presumably him, but that doesn't help in the slightest. He doesn't crash. It never happens. It's impossible. While he was travelling he was protected.

Something happened to disrupt that. It's the only explanation. But what?

He looks out the window at the snow swirling around the cottage. Until he can check out the crash site, he's just guessing at what might have happened.

And that's the part that's going to drive him crazy. Patience isn't his top quality. It isn't actually a quality of his, full stop. He's not so good at sitting around and doing nothing.

The cottage is small, barely enough head room for him to stand. There's nowhere to pace or run. He's stuck in this room, with a strange woman, until the storm blows over.

He turns his attention back to the kitchen when he hears the woman humming to herself. From what he can tell, she's alone out here, yet she took the time and effort to help him, even though she knows nothing about him. She could just as easily have ignored the sounds she heard outside and got on with her night.

That says something about her. Heading out there alone and dragging him back to the

house would have taken one hell of an effort, and he appreciates that. There's no doubt he owes her his life.

She passes by the door and opens the fridge, taking out a bottle of milk. He's not one of those guys who claims to have a type. On the rare occasions he went out to meet someone, he tended to go for women who wanted the same thing from the night as he did. Sex. Nothing more. He can't have anything more than that. With his job, finding time to date came a distant last to everything else he has to do.

This woman hasn't said or done anything to even hint she wants something from him, but that just makes her all the more appealing. No make-up. No fancy clothes. No perfectly groomed hair. Just naturally stunning. And as for the Snoopy pyjamas... that's a new one, and he really likes it. He rests his head against the back of the chair, unable to take his eyes off her, as she butters a slice of toast.

His body isn't taking the headache into account. Potential head injury or not, he's turned on by her. He wants to see, to feel what's under her Snoopy pyjamas. He's never been more jealous of a cartoon dog before!

Being trapped here for the moment may not be ideal, given the time of year, but if he's going to be stuck with someone, he can think of worse people. In fact, spending a day or so with her sounds pretty fucking amazing.

He smirks, as she hums a little louder and he recognises the tune. *Santa Claus is Comin' to Town.*

Even though he's not in the best of situations, his smirk grows to a full smile. How would she react if she knew that, not only is Santa actually in town right now, but he's sitting in her armchair beside her fire, with one hell of a headache?