



# A Down Home Christmas

Liz Talley

“**W**HAT ARE YOU DOING?” THE woman asked, sounding slightly alarmed.  
“Trying to calm this chicken down.”

“By taking your shirt off?” Her eyes grew wide as she looked from him to the chicken.

“I’m going to drape it over her so I don’t get pecked. Then I’ll try to free her.”

“Oh,” the woman said, tugging as her beast leapt against the restraint. “Good idea. Birds have a higher visual stimulus and covering her eyes should calm her down.”

*Visual stimulus?*

He shrugged out of his shirt, glad he’d pulled on an undershirt to ward off the early morning chill when he left Nashville that morning. Then he approached the chicken, who grew even more agitated as he moved toward it. Carefully, he drew his shirt over Loretta, then slid his hands around her now-clothed body, pinning her wings to her sides. The hen went still. “There.”

“Her sweater’s still hung,” the woman said unhelpfully.

“I got it,” he said, pulling the royal blue yarn free from the

## A Down Home Christmas

branch and looking back at the woman and dog. “Why is this chicken wearing a sweater anyway?”

“That’s Loretta Lynn. Miss Tansy’s pet. She likes to knit sweaters for her hens. She got the idea off Pinterest.”

“Pet? She calls them pets?” Kris arched a brow. “And people make clothes for farm animals now?”

“Haven’t you seen the videos of baby goats in pajamas? They’re so cute.” She paused and then shook her head as if she knew she’d gotten off track. “For some reason, Edison really likes Loretta. I think it’s because she’s very flappy.”

Kris couldn’t stop his smile. “Flappy?”

“Miss Tansy sometimes gives Edison dog biscuits, and he remembers. So when he gets loose, he comes here. Unfortunately, the chickens intrigue him. Maybe he prefers Loretta because she makes the most noise.”

“That makes sense. He’s a dog, after all,” he said, turning back to the chicken. He carefully lifted and tucked her beneath his arm. The hen, oddly enough, seemed to sink in relief against his side. Poor Loretta Lynn. “There now.”

“I’m so relieved she’s not dead. Miss Tansy would have killed me and Edison.” The woman let out a sigh.

“And who are you exactly?” he asked.

The woman pushed back the hair curling into her eyes and held out her hand. “I’m Tory Odom. I live next door to Tansy.”

“You’re one of the Moffetts?”

“No, I live in the cottage on the other side of Tansy,” she said as he took her hand. It was small and capable-looking, like she could smooth a child’s fevered forehead or hoe a garden equally well.

“Oh, the Howards’ old place?” Last time he’d been home,

he'd predicted a strong wind could topple what was left of the Howard place.

"I restored the cottage. It's really nice now." Edison took that moment to spring toward the bundle under his arms. She tugged on his leash and pushed him into a sitting position. "And you are?"

"Oh, I'm Kris. Tansy's nephew."

"The country music singer?"

Kris felt pride stir inside. He'd waited a long time to be known as a country music singer. Being named CMA's New Artist of the Year just weeks ago had cemented his position in the country music scene. He'd placed his award in the center of his mantel and made sure the accent light hit it perfectly. The award was the first of many he'd use to decorate the downtown Nashville loft he'd purchased earlier that year with the royalties on his first album. *A Simple Dream* had hit big last spring, but it had taken years of sweat, tears, and sore fingers from playing guitar for his dream to come true. He'd hit number one with two songs on his debut album and was in the process of putting together his second one. Of course, he still had to write some songs for it, but they would come. He prayed they would come. So, heck yeah, he was *the country music star*. "Star is kind of a strong word, but, yeah, I play country music."

"I didn't say star."

She *hadn't* said star. She'd said singer. He glanced away so she wouldn't see that he was embarrassed about the faux pas. He felt really stupid. "Right, right."

"I don't really care for country music. You could be a star and I wouldn't know it," she said, sounding like she offered an apology.

Her admission embarrassed him even more, and he found

### **A Down Home Christmas**

he hadn't a clue what to say to her. Maybe the sweater-bedecked chicken nestled beneath his arm paired with an ego smackdown had something to do with not being able to find the right words.

Or maybe it was the fact he'd not been able to find the words for the last few months.

And that was what worried him most.