

# CHRISTMAS IN EAST KANSAS

REGINA SMELTZER



# Christmas in East Kansas

Regina Smeltzer

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

## **Christmas in East Kansas**

**COPYRIGHT 2018 by Regina Smeltzer**

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author or Pelican Ventures, LLC except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

eBook editions are licensed for your personal enjoyment only. eBooks may not be re-sold, copied or given to other people. If you would like to share an eBook edition, please purchase an additional copy for each person you share it with.

Contact Information: [titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com](mailto:titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com)

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version<sup>(R)</sup>, NIV<sup>(R)</sup>. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.<sup>TM</sup> Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. [www.zondervan.com](http://www.zondervan.com)

Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

White Rose Publishing, a division of Pelican Ventures, LLC  
[www.pelicanbookgroup.com](http://www.pelicanbookgroup.com) PO Box 1738 \*Aztec, NM \* 87410

White Rose Publishing Circle and Rosebud logo is a trademark of Pelican Ventures, LLC

Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2018

Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0165-3

**Published in the United States of America**

## *Dedication*

Dedicated to the ladies of Central Baptist Church.  
Thank you for your support and being Godly role  
models for me.





# 1

Olivia tingled with anticipation as she strode across Miller's field with ice skates dangling from her shoulder. She watched frozen clouds form and then disappear as she breathed in cold air and exhaled. A soft wind wafted down the mountain, shifting black hair across her eyes. She tucked the loose strands into her red knit cap. In spite of Christmas being only three weeks away, and her pre-holiday to-do list stretching long, this moment took precedence over everything else.

Around noon, Jake Hanson, East Kansas's Fire Chief, had declared the pond officially safe for skating. She'd heard the blare of sirens, three short shrieks, broadcasting the event, just as it had every year of her life. Anyone who was able headed to the pond, vying to be first on the ice. And now Olivia was finally on her way.

The scent of burning wood laced the air. Already Mr. Carl had the fire going for skaters to warm their frozen hands.

The last few yards took her downhill toward the pond. A dozen people occupied the ice, some skating, some sliding on booted feet.

"Hey, Olivia!" Mr. Carl called as he dropped a log into the closest of two metal barrels. "I figured you'd show up sooner or later." The elderly man chuckled. "The school kids beat you this year."

"I've never missed opening day in my life, Mr. Carl."

"That hotel keeps you busy. You need a man—"

"Now Mr. Carl, we've been through all that."

"Maybe this Christmas Santa will bring you a Christmas miracle."

"Maybe so."

"I pulled the lights for the pond out of the shed. Probably start putting them up tomorrow."

"Just in time. You remember my friend, Donna?"

"The girl with the red hair? How could I forget that sassy little lady?"

Olivia laughed. "She's arriving Saturday to help me with the Christmas party."

"Now you've gone and put the pressure on me, Miss Olivia."

"You always make the pond look beautiful. No one can do it quite like you." Olivia gave a wide grin and continued to one of the wooden benches. She pulled off her heavy boots and tugged on the skates, shivering as her toes settled against the cold leather.

"Miss Olivia! Watch me!" Sarah Carter, brown curls peeking from beneath a pink stocking cap, slid across the ice in awkward starts and stops, arms flapping like sticks.

"Nice job, Sarah! By February you'll be doing spins and jumps!"

A gray-haired couple, arm in arm, moved in synchrony across the frozen pond. Half a dozen boys raced by, seeming to revel in both the speed and the freedom of being released from school.

With her boots pushed under the bench, Olivia moved to the ice. The first glide always felt the best, and this year, with consistent cold and the lack of

snow, the surface of the pond remained smooth. No need to begin slowly to get her ice-legs; skating was second nature to her. Sashaying back and forth, she coasted across the surface, wanting to be nowhere except where she was.

Nothing matched opening day at the pond in East Kansas. Well, almost nothing. The Christmas party at her hotel rivaled ice skating as the town's most anticipated event. But for now, she would skate.

"That's a mighty big grin on your face. You see me coming, did you?"

The smile faded. "Hey Mitch." She didn't try to hide her lack of enthusiasm. "Shouldn't you be at work?" Mitch Carter, Sarah's much older brother, lacked everything Olivia liked about his ten-year-old sister.

"The bank can survive a few hours without me." Mitch paired his pace to hers, his leather bomber jacket hugging a perfect waist.

If she looked straight ahead and ignored him, maybe he would move on.

The leader of the pack of young boys flew by, his breath coming in hard puffs. He was followed by the second. A third boy passed Mitch, lost his footing, and flailed wildly before landing on the ice. Mitch fell on top of the boy, Olivia on top of Mitch.

Mitch's body felt too warm, and his breath too hot. She tried to look beyond his grinning face to the boy at the bottom of the pile. "Are you all right?" she asked the child.

"Yeah. I'm fine. Maybe a little squished."

Small skates stopped in front of her. "Miss Olivia, are you hurt?"

"She's couldn't help falling for a handsome man

like me," Mitch said.

"I'm fine, Sarah, thank you for asking." She rolled off Mitch onto the ice. "We tripped over..." She turned to the boy. "I don't know your name."

"David Hunter," the child mumbled as he jumped to his feet and skated toward his comrades who stood laughing a few yards away.

Mitch extended a gloved hand. "Let me help you up."

"I can get up myself."

"Still Miss High-and-Mighty, are you?"

Olivia got to her feet. "I have to go. Unlike the bank, my hotel won't survive without me."

"Ah, yes. *Miss Independent I'll Do It Myself*. I almost forgot. But word is out you may soon change your mind about my proposal. Christmas day. That's our agreement."

Olivia glared, refusing to respond to his taunt. Yes, he had proposed, flaunting his money and her lack of resources. But she'd made no agreement with him, and no way would she marry him, even though he topped the list of most handsome bachelors in East Kansas. *He is a good catch, they'd told her. You need a man around now that your folks are gone, they'd said.* Well-meaning townsfolk, all of them; but she saw Mitch more as a know-it-all than a helpmate. She slid off the ice and hobbled to the bench.

The best day of the year, ruined. Yes, her parents were dead. Yes, she needed money. But no, she wasn't desperate enough to marry Mitch Carter. Not yet anyway.

Besides, it was Christmas. Maybe Mr. Carl was right, and this year she would get a Christmas miracle.

## 2

Three weeks until Christmas and Thomas Baker felt the beginning of the depression that descended on him like mountain fog this time every year. The lethargy he could hide, but his lack of sleep transformed his face into a gaunt mask, bringing calculated glances from his men. He stepped from his old truck onto the frozen ground at the staging site, a flat spot in the Allegheny Mountain peaks wide enough to hold the road equipment and mobile office. The hundred-yard swatch of land had been green at the beginning of the season. Now frozen mud crunched under his feet.

To the west, mountain peaks covered in balsam firs rose as high as ten thousand feet. To the east, like a landslide, the earth fell a thousand feet into the valley. Mud-splattered vehicles were parked at random around the clearing.

A man in heavy work clothes unlocked the door to a blue pickup truck. "Hey, Thomas, Merry Christmas."

Thomas lifted an arm in greeting. "Same to you, Donny."

"You know, Linda wouldn't mind if you came over for the big day. She puts on quite a spread for Christmas."

"I'll keep it in mind. Thank her for me, will you?" Thomas wouldn't go. This Christmas would be just like

the others, filled with mindless television and fast food from a local Chinese take-out.

"Any chance of some late season work?" another man asked, his boots making a rasping sound as they scraped across the frozen ground.

"Haven't heard of any, but the boss wants to see me." Thomas nodded toward the trailer. The men knew as well as he did that the chance of work until spring was slim. He hated this time of year.

Thomas tapped his knuckles against the frame of the trailer, bouncing the artificial wreath hanging from a nail in the door.

Stephen Shuster stood behind a metal desk rummaging through stacks of papers.

"Hey Thomas, thanks for coming by." The big man motioned for Thomas to sit. "Ah, found it!" He picked up a large envelope with the outline of West Virginia embossed on the front. The rolling chair squeaked as the man settled behind the desk. "Nice job getting the Upshur County project finished on time."

"I'm happy the weather stayed dry a couple weeks longer than expected. Putting in a culvert during a snowstorm isn't fun."

Stephen chuckled. "Guess you've done that a couple times. So, are you up for a winter project?"

Thomas raised his eyebrows. Most winter contracts with Shuster involved using hammers and nails, and he and his crew moved mountains and made roads, not buildings. "I'm not sure we can handle that type of work."

"Oh, this is your type of work." Shuster ran his hand across the graying stubble on his chin. "State contract and no one else bid on it." He gave a humorless chuckle. "Afraid of the timeline, I guess."

He tapped a yellow contractor's pencil on the desk. "Before I accept, I want to run it by you. You are my best foreman and the only man I trust with the job. If you say it can't be done, then I'll turn it down."

Winter road work was tough, but was it worse than being unemployed? Worse than being alone for weeks? He thought of his mother's unpaid medical bills. He needed the work as badly as his men.

Stephen pulled the contents out of the envelope. "The contract is to create an access road off Interstate 250."

"Sounds like basic engineering and construction, unless the weather hits hard."

"The town is about five miles from the highway." Stephen slid the contract aside and unrolled a map on his desk, securing the ends with rocks. "Fortunately, the town owns the land. The Town Council is pushing to have the work finished before next summer's tourist season."

"So, where are we looking?" Thomas leaned over the desk to look at the map.

His boss ran a finger along the worn paper. "Here's Interstate 250, and I think you can follow—"

"What town are we connecting to?" Thomas closed his eyes.

"A little hollow in the Allegheny Mountains called East Kansas."

Thomas wiped his hands across his face. "East Kansas."

"You know, the small town nestled between the peaks of—"

"I know where East Kansas is." He spent a summer there fifteen years ago and fell in love with a raven-haired girl. And then his mom had fled from the

man whose name still evoked hate.

“If we can meet the deadline, the state has guaranteed Shuster Construction will be the contractor of choice for the next few years. You know what that means—no more scrambling to find work. It’s hard times out there.” He stared at Thomas. “So what’s the problem? You don’t think it can be done?”

Thomas glanced out the window. Brown trees blended with green pines. The voices of his men calling a final goodbye and Merry Christmas filtered through the single-pane glass. They were good men and deserved the work. If only the job was anywhere but East Kansas...

Stephen cleared his throat. “Besides regular pay and a substantial bonus for your crew, this includes a big raise for you.”

Thomas could use the money. No doubt about that. He thought again about his mother’s medical bills shoved in a drawer at his apartment. She had died three years ago, and still her expenses were not fully paid. Cancer and no health insurance. No life insurance, either. She was a great mom, but not one for anticipating the future.

Could he go back to the town that held the woman he loved and the man he loathed?

“All right,” Thomas said with resignation. “I’ll do it.”

Stephen clapped him on the back. “I knew I could count on you.”

Finishing a road in the winter was the easy part of the East Kansas contract. The challenge: avoiding the two people who were as much a part of the town as were the mountains surrounding it.

### 3

The Town Council had purchased the old Baptist church building when the congregation erected a more modern edifice on the south side of town. Besides being historic, the building met the council's need perfectly, with a large central area and half-a-dozen smaller rooms. Much of the original integrity of the building remained, including the pews divided by a central isle, the narrow floor-to-ceiling windows lining the right wall, and the stage which now held a Christmas tree decorated with red, white, and blue lights and ribbons. In front of the tree, three long tables sat waiting for the council members.

Even though Olivia arrived early, a dozen people were already mingling, the anticipation in their voices sounding like the chirp of summer grasshoppers. Sometimes getting a quorum for the Town Council was difficult, but tonight's agenda would bring the council members along with most of the town's business owners. Olivia positioned herself in a pew near the front.

Council members wandered to their assigned seats, some rifling through the stack of papers behind their name plates, others taking the opportunity to chat. Their mix of suits and jeans fit well with the town's demographics.

"Oh, Olivia! I hoped you would be here." Hannah

Flannigan, fifty, flashy and the town council president, slid into the pew in front of Olivia. As owner of the local boutique, she expected herself to set the fashion standard for the community. No one followed her lead. Either she didn't notice or didn't care. "I want you to meet Thomas Baker, representing Shuster Construction. And Thomas, this is Olivia Miller, the last remaining descendent of the founders of our dear East Kansas."

That wasn't quite true. The old hermit who lived up in the mountain and was the sworn enemy of her family, was the last of the second original family. Olivia started to correct Hannah but paused when she looked up at Thomas Baker. Green eyes and pale blond hair. Something tickled the back of her mind...

"Olivia?" Mrs. Flannigan mumbled.

Olivia took Thomas Baker's outstretched hand, feeling the roughness of his skin against her palm. "Mr. Baker." She cleared her throat. "I'm eager to hear your presentation tonight. We've been wanting this road for a long time."

"I told Mr. Baker how much access to the highway will mean to the businesses of our town. And you, dear, with your hotel..."

Olivia noted the slight rise of Thomas's eyebrows. Lest he imagine the place was akin to a Holiday Inn, she added, "It's an old house, really, not much of a hotel, but it's mine."

"I need to start the meeting," the chairwoman said. "Time to visit later." She directed Thomas toward the stage, but not before he turned and sent Olivia one last smile.

She all but swooned. A tweed jacket, dress shirt and tie, jeans and boots. Perfect.

Matthew Dixon moved across the wooden pew and settled beside her. If Olivia were to have a father-figure, it would be Matthew Dixon with his graying hair and the perpetual scent of pipe tobacco. After her parents died in the automobile accident two years ago, Mr. Dixon helped settle the business parts of their death. He'd advised her as she chose to keep the hotel rather than sell it. His financial savvy had allowed her to maintain her heritage, at least for a while.

"I was hoping to see you here," Mr. Dixon said. "We need to meet."

"I've been so busy—"

"Olivia, I know this is painful, but I've stretched your money farther than I thought possible. We need to discuss options. How about my office, tomorrow, at 10 AM?"

"Tomorrow's Saturday."

"I'll come in for you."

She nodded in agreement.

Mrs. Flannigan tapped the gavel against the wooden block. All the council members were present, and three quarters of the pews occupied. The room hummed with excitement. Coats draped the back of the pews, scarves and gloves were tucked into pockets or lay in laps ready for the return outside. The murmur of voices changed to the sound of shuffling feet as everyone stood for the pledge of allegiance and Pastor Robert's prayer.

"Let's begin the business that brought you here tonight," the chairwoman said. "We have a beautiful town nestled among the mountains, and we offer many fine shops and hiking trails for tourists, but no one can find us. There is no easy way to get to East Kansas. At the prompting of some of you," she smiled at Olivia, "I

have been lobbying our state legislature for a road to connect us to Interstate 250. As you know, the interstate is the route of choice for many people heading south. Our lobbying has been successful!" She paused long enough to nod to Thomas Baker. "We are getting our road!"

The room erupted into applause. A few people whistled.

Olivia smiled, enjoying the enthusiasm. Most of East Kansas's businesses were barely in the black. Without this change, shops would close, employment would dwindle, and a once-thriving town would become one more down-and-out place to live.

After several raps of the gavel, the room quieted.

"I knew you would be delighted. And now I want to introduce the man who will make this happen, Mr. Thomas Baker, representing Shuster Construction." Hannah pointed a remote control toward the back wall and a screen lowered from the ceiling.

Olivia's heart pounded. She was not usually swayed by good looks, but something inside her resonated, as though they were best friends. She took a deep breath. This was a big day, no time for silly emotions.

Thomas handed a thumb drive down to Ted, off stage, and soon a picture of Shuster Construction's home office building in Morgantown filled the screen.

Hannah passed a remote control to Thomas and whispered to him.

He smiled and aimed the remote toward the computer. The picture on the screen changed to a map of East Kansas and the surrounding mountains. "I guess this works." He grinned.

Olivia shifted in her seat.

“As you can see, this is a topographical map of the area.” Thomas, using a laser pointer, identified the mountain ranges, the rock formations, and the general landscape that surrounded East Kansas.

Olivia, unconcerned with the details, listened to the sound of Thomas’s voice, the easy way he addressed the audience, how he seemed to pull them all in, as though he were talking to each person individually.

The door opened and cold wind blew in. The latecomer would have a hard time finding a place to sit.

“As you can see, Allegheny Mountains—” Thomas stared at the back of the room, his pause continuing a second too long, “—surround East Kansas.” He turned to face the map. “Here is the only logical place to put the road.” He indicated a red line on the map with his pointer. “It will extend from here, onto the interstate, and connect with the town’s eastern edge just south of Rocky Point.”

The picture on the screen changed.

“This is a timeline for the project. My team needs to start immediately. We will move in some of the heavy equipment right after Christmas, do the necessary surveying, and break ground in early January, if the weather holds.”

“What if we get three feet of snow?” a man in the back asked.

“Your unique position in the mountain limits the snowfall in this area, but we work around snow. Our equipment can move whatever needs moved. We can’t work with mud, so I prefer to get the base down before the spring thaw.”

She had to have misunderstood what was on the

screen. Hesitantly, Olivia raised her hand.

"Miss Miller?"

"Can I see the last picture again, please?"

"Sure." Thomas pointed the remote and the image changed to the map of East Kansas. "Do you have a question?"

She looked. Her chest tightened. Wanting a better view, she stood, just to be sure. "You're taking the road right through the pond?" She dug her fingers into the pew in front of her.

"You mean that pond on the west side of town? Yes, we'll fill it in. It won't cause a problem."

The room became silent. "No, you don't understand." Her heart raced as she looked at each person sitting on the stage, needing someone in authority to tell Thomas this couldn't happen. Council members averted their eyes. No one looked at her. No one supported her. And yet everyone in the room knew why the pond could not be destroyed.

Matthew Dixon placed a hand on her arm; she brushed it off.

Finally, Hannah spoke. "Olivia, we all understand your attachment to the pond—"

"You can't destroy the pond!"

"No one wants this road more than you, and this is—"

"This can't be the only place to put a road!"

Behind the computer, Ted stood. "Madam chairman, perhaps we can adjourn and give the Council time to review Shuster Construction's proposal."

"Excellent idea, Ted." Hannah Flannigan's face relaxed. "We will adjourn until seven o'clock Monday evening. That will give the Council time to review the,

ah, proposal." She hit the gavel once and the room erupted into a myriad of voices.

"Miss Miller." Thomas Baker reached a hand toward Olivia.

She ignored him and pushed through the crowd, almost colliding with Mr. Goodman, who stood by the door. For a brief second Olivia wondered why the old hermit was in town. But the thought fled because she had to leave before the tears fell.