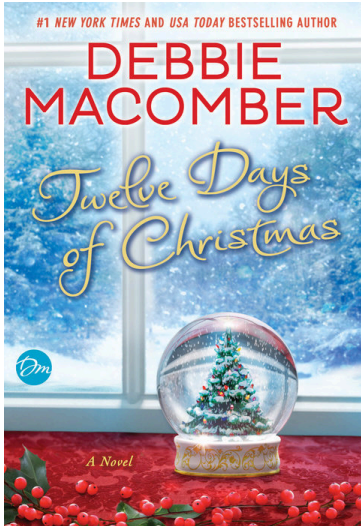


I know it's January and you've finished all your Christmas reading until December again, but that's what I'm about to share with you. I read a boat load of Christmas stories in December and wrapped up a non-fiction book that I'd been slowly working through.



### **The Twelve Days Of Christmas (Macomber)**

Julia Padden is bubbly, friendly, and outgoing. Her neighbor, Cain Maddox, is not. She's convinced he's rude just for the sake of it. While bemoaning this to her bestie, they come up with a plan: Kill Cain with kindness. After all, it's the Christmas season, so why not throw as much holiday cheer at him as possible? Plus, Julia needs a great blog idea that will help her win the job of her dreams. She can use her kindness project to not only draw her Scrooge like neighbor out of the humbug attitude, she can use her experiment to draw in readership.

When Julia's blog becomes a sensational hit, and her experiment with Cain goes far better than expected, she has to make a tough decision about telling Cain what she's up to, and why. The problem is, now that Julia has a better understanding of her neighbor, she's more than a little infatuated with him. If she tells him, will it mess everything up?

Cute and somewhat predictable, but I enjoyed it. It inspired an idea for a short story that plays off this idea, but slightly different.



**The Best Christmas Ever (Emmons)** — This is the sequel to [The One Hundred Days Of Sunlight](#) I read in November, so I was already familiar with the characters and interested to see how they would grow. Now, I kinda knew how that would happen because in one of Abbie's videos she pitches this book to herself, and in another talks about her outline for it. Still, it's always interesting to know the raw ideas and read the actual story.

It's almost Christmas and Tessa is excited. She loves Christmas, but when her mother shows up, she goes from loving Christmas to hating it. She spends as much time as possible with her boyfriend, Weston, and his family to avoid being at home where her mother is. Tessa intentionally arranges fun outings and dates with Weston to create distance between herself and her mother.

The issue I had with this story is that Tessa was a tad whiny, but in her defense with reason. She was dealing with abandonment issues because of her mother leaving her at such a young age with no explanation. Tessa's grandparents raised her after her mother left. In the years between whenever that happened and now, Tessa's mother hadn't been around or attempted to bridge the gap. But now, she shows up because she misses her daughter and wants to get to know her. Everyone thinks Tessa should give her mother a chance, and unintentionally shames Tessa for not doing that.

It's all great story fodder, but as a person who deals with abandonment and rejection issues, shaming someone for how they feel when they wrestle with those deep emotions and fight to function in a normal capacity outside of them misses the mark for me. Yes, as a teen Tessa could have given her mother space, but her mother injects herself into every aspect without care or consideration for what the plans were, or what the normal traditions are. And while the story explains why Tessa's mom made the choice she did, there are still some heavy flaws, and in a small way they get addressed in the book.

I had to agree with Tessa when she said, "Where was mom when I needed her the most? Where was she after the car accident? Not her, that's for sure." This was a monumental moment in Tessa's life, one that had the chance of permanently altering her health. I believe it was Weston who points out that it doesn't matter. Her mother is here now and doing her best. There are so many problems with that statement from the perspective of a person who deals with feeling abandoned and/or rejected. It's not about the now, it's about earning back the trust that someone has broken.

There were a lot of sweet scenes in the story, and it was fun to see how both Wes and Tess were growing in their relationship with each other. Still, I liked the first book the best, so much so I asked for a physical copy for Christmas.



## **Faking Christmas (Steel)**

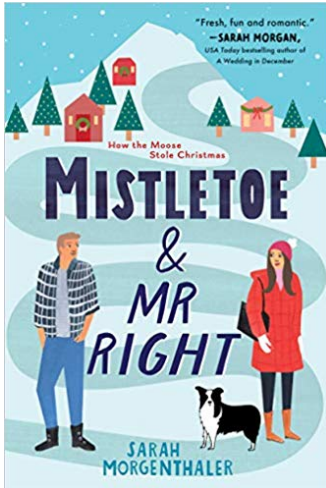
Olive can't stand the new English teacher, Miles Taylor. Everyone fawns over him because they believe he's good looking, funny, and the students love him. In fact, the students love him so much they've been dropping Olive's class so they can take Mile's class instead. There's a thing about Friday donuts, and Olive is sure it's part of the lure.

So, Olive emails her best friend. A very long-winded email in which she picks apart every aspect of Miles Taylor that she finds downright irritating. The problem is, she accidentally emailed it to Miles instead, and he's quite smitten by the email — minus the poor grammar.

Olive is overjoyed that the Christmas break is upon them, although she's not looking forward to the family gathering. Her Dad hasn't been gone a full year yet, and her mother has already remarried, leaving Olive a little bitter towards her step-father. The good news is they aren't meeting at the family house, but out in a "winter wonderland" where everyone will have their own cabins. Olive intends to take her kindle, and spend most of her time avoiding family and reading. Until her sister calls to warn her that mother has invited long time family friends which includes Olive's ex boyfriend.

To fend off the incoming chaos, Olive tells one tiny little white lie: "I'm already seeing someone." And the only name she can come up with when pressed is Miles Taylor. Her sister is dubious knowing just how much Olive has complained about her fellow co-worker, and when Miles shows up, Olive knows she's made a big mistake. The only way out is to convince Miles to fake date her.

This was my top favorite book I read this month. Right from the opening email, it was both funny and cute. While it drives me a little bonkers that most Christmas stories are romances, I'll enjoy reading this one annually.



## **Mistletoe & Mr Right (Morgenthaler)**

Lona Montgomery is everything the small town of Moose Springs, Alaska hates. Not only is she rich, she's a tourist, & she's come to make improvements in the small town — and stay. Lana has never felt at home anywhere except Moose Springs, and she's willing to do whatever it takes to prove herself. Like offering to capture the Christmas Moose, who hates all the twinkling blinking Christmas decorations the people of Moose Springs decorate with. What she didn't expect was to fall in love with one of the locals.

Rick Harding has had a rough couple of years. His wife left him leaving behind her nephew. Rick doesn't know how to be a parent, or to cook, and his business is barely making enough to keep a roof over their head. When Lona grazes Rick with a tranquilizer dart meant for the Christmas moose, he ends up spilling his heart to her.

Big city meets little town, and the chaos ensues. It was a pretty simple read, and I wrapped it up in a day. My favorite scene might be where Lona accidentally grazes Rick with a moose tranq when she thinks he's a moose.



### **LoveLight Farms (Borison)**

Stella is the proud owner of LoveLight farms. The very Christmas Tree farm she used to visit with her mother when she was a child. The problem is, when she bought it, the previous owner failed to tell her she was also inheriting a large debt, and someone keeps sabotaging the farm. Someone has destroyed all the trees in the south pasture, there are raccoons in the barn, they have tampered with the cameras, and someone has been stealing shipments of goods.

Stella is in over her head and surviving on ramen noodles to keep her business afloat and keep the promise she made to her friends who joined the business venture with her. So when an Instagram influencer holds a contest that could bring them millions of new customers and land them \$100,000, Stella signs up immediately. The problem is, she may have lied on her application and said she has a boyfriend.

Technically, it's not a lie. Stella and Luka have been friends for over a decade now, but they aren't boyfriend/girlfriend. However, to keep good on the application, Stella summons her courage to ask Luka to be her fake boyfriend for the Christmas holidays. He happily agrees, only he's not faking it.

Stella has lost many people in her life, and she's scared when the Christmas season is over she'll lose Luka, too. Not to mention her friends who help her run LoveLight farms when they

find out the farm is sinking.

The thing about romances is that they follow the same tropes: enemies to lovers or friends to lovers. This was most certainly a friend to lovers, and it was intriguing to watch the way the author made this happen. The downer was the book had a fair bit of language in it.



### Faking Christmas (Winfrey)

Before I tell you about this book, I have to share a funny with you. Remember the title I mentioned previously? It was also called [Faking Christmas](#). It was my top favorite book of the month. Well, when I started reading [LoveLight Farms](#) I thought I was reading the second [Faking Christmas](#), and in fairness it had the whole “faking boyfriend” thing going on. It was not until I got to the end of that audio book and they read out the credits, giving me the title of the book again. I sat bolt upright, and pronounced to the room, “Guys, this is not Faking Christmas!”

The men-folk just stared at me for a minute before returning to whatever it was they’d been up to before I’d made this profound and earth shattering announcement. And then, thinking I’d been mistaken about having two books that shared a similar title, I brought up my [Libby](#) and [Audible](#) libraries. Upon spotting the second [Faking Christmas](#) book, I then announced, “Wait, look see there IS another book with that title!” They ignored me this time. When I

started reading the book, the following day I made a family announcement about it, and in absolute fairness, they rolled their eyes.

In this version of [Faking Christmas](#), Laurel Grant is the social media manager for an Ohio tourism magazine and website. Most of her articles are the real life happenings of her sister's family and the farm they live on. The problem is, Gilbert, Laurel's boss, doesn't know that, and when his wife leaves him two days before Christmas, he invites himself to Christmas Eve dinner. On the farm. Where he can't wait to meet her children and husband.

Laurel doesn't even have a boyfriend, much less a husband, but her sister, Holly, has a plan. She is more than happy to play along and let Laurel pretend the farm is hers. She'll even let her seven-year-old twins pretend Laurel is their mom, but she will not share her husband. Holly has a better idea. His name is Max Beckett. He's a family friend, and Laurel knows him, so what can go wrong?

For starters, Laurel hates him for something she overheard him say about Holly at Holly's wedding. For the sake of her sister, she has sworn to hate Max Beckett for his entire life, and now she's stuck with him being her fake husband. It's only for one day, though, and Laurel is sure she can make this work. Until a snowstorm rolls in, trapping everyone at Meadow Rise Farm for the weekend.

Another enemy to lovers story here, with quite a lot of hilarity thrown in. After all, when a city girl is supposed to be pretending she owns a farm, makes her own soap, and cooks the best Christmas Eve dinner ever. Except, not only does she not own the farm, she has never successfully cooked anything aside from ramen, having even burned food in the microwave before. The ending was predictable, but I admit I still laughed while reading this.





### **Home Sweet Christmas (Mallery)**

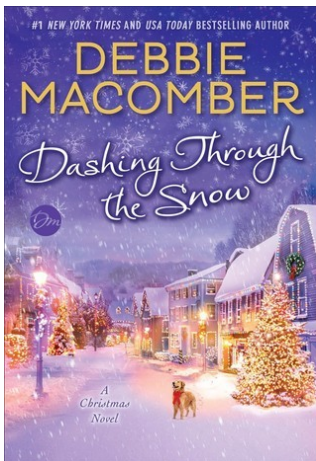
Helen Crange beckons Cameron to the Crane estate at two sharp. She shows up, expecting her gift wrapping services to be needed, and has even brought sample wrapping paper along. Much to her surprise, though, Helen informs Cameron she's been selected as a potential candidate to be Jake's wife, Helen's only son.

Cameron heads straight for Jake's office to give him a head's up, and he promises he'll end his mother's campaign and have her taken off the list. Except Helen Crane is not so easily distracted. Not to mention Jake and Cameron have to see a lot of each other as Wishing Tree's festive Christmas season begins, and if they're honest with each other, they like each other — a lot. The problem is, Cameron is the legal guardian of her fifteen-year-old twin sisters, and she just has to get them through three more years of high school. Then, she's moving out of Wishing Tree and heading back to Chicago, where life was normal and easy before her mother died.

River Best is in town. She's shy, and only moved to Wishing Tree so her sister wouldn't be all alone. River is doing her best to make friends and get to know the town. What she doesn't expect is for her friends to all nominate her to be Snow Queen for Wishing Tree's famous winter festival. And when she wins, Dylan Tucker, the Snow King, helps her not feel quite so intimidated by the mayor's rigid bossy behavior, or the many eyes that are always on the Snow Couple. When River realizes she genuinely likes Dylan, she spills her life story. She also

mentions that she doesn't like surprises. Dylan, equally smitten with River, has a secret, and one that's caused him heartache in the past. Before he has time to share it with River, she discovers it for herself. Can they overcome the hurt?

This was probably the most dramatic read of the Christmas stories. It still had its funny moments, one of which I'm dying to share, but it might spoil the scene for you.



### **Dashing Through The Snow (Macomber)**

Ashley Davison, a graduate student in California, is desperate to get home for Christmas to be with her mother. She hadn't expected having the time off, but now that she does she's standing at the ticket counter in the airport being denied a ticket. When she asks to be put on standby, the clerk asks her to step aside and wait a minute.

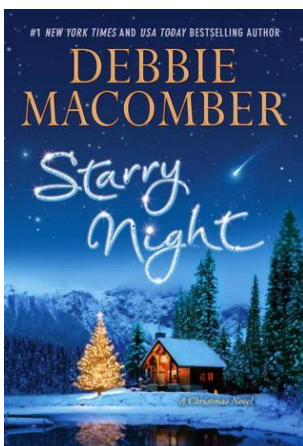
After denying Dashielle Sutherland a ticket, the clerk adds him to the standby list. Convinced the clerk is being a sexist scrooge, Ashely storms off, wondering if she could take a train or bus home to Washington when the brilliant idea to rent a car hits her.

Who should be behind her in line at the rental counter, but Dash. Ashley is delighted to see that there's only one car left and she's first in line. Dash offers to split the fee with her, but in her arrogant pride, Ashely declines. Except Ashely is under 25 and can't legally rent a car.

Ashley accepts Dash's offer, and the two set off to make the long drive from California to Seattle. Just about anything that can go wrong does, from squabbles and motorcycle gangs to the car breaking down.

What they don't realize is that Ashley is on the no-fly list, and there's a soon to be retired FBI agent who wants her imminent arrest on his record before he does. No matter how ludicrous the trail he follows is, he has an excuse for the blatant breadcrumbs left in Ashley and Dash's wake.

I found this book predictable on the romance side with the enemies to lover trope, but also downright funny. I'm talking funny that makes you laugh out loud. After finishing this book, I replayed a condensed version by telling my husband the entire story on a grocery expedition.



### **Starry Night (Macomber)**

Carrie Slayton writes for a big-city society-page, and she hates her job. She loves writing, and she loves being a journalist, but she hates the society parties she's sent to. She hates the fake that surrounds her at every event as she interviews people and they beg for their photos to be taken or to be quoted in the article.

Determined to hold her boss accountable for not promoting her, she opts to hand in her two-week notice. Her editor declines the notice and tells her if she can get an interview with the

elusive Finn Dalton, she can cover any topic she wants for the newspaper.

So begins Carrie's adventure to find the illusive Mr. Dalton who wrote the number one selling book, *Alone*. Carrie finds road blocks everywhere she turns until she finds his estranged mother. That interview leads her to Finn's best friend, and eventually to Finn himself.

A quick trip to interview Finn Dalton turns into an overnighiter when a storm blows in, and in the few days spent with Dalton, Carrie agrees to not publish the article. Returning love-struck to Chicago, she tells people she never found him. Until he shows up just in time for Thanksgiving.

I was a little surprised by this book. I expected that the crux of the book would involve Carrie looking for Finn, but it doesn't. Instead, it revolves around them being in love and not sure what to do about it.



### **A Cross-Country Christmas (Walsh)**

Lauren Richmond doesn't like Christmas, and it's one reason she doesn't travel back to the Midwest to spend time with her family in December. But this December is different. Her brother is expecting his first birthday, and he really wants her home for the occasion. Besides, he's tired of dealing with their divorced, squabbling parents on his own. It's been three years since she's been home for the holidays, and so she agrees.

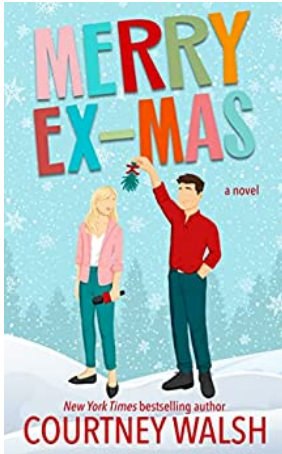
She hates flying and opts for a train, but there are no available tickets. Her brother tells her his best friend, Will, is making the drive, and will give her a lift. Lauren has no choice but to accept the offer, no matter how much she despises Will. Her big brother's friend that she's had a crush on since she was twelve. The man who broke her heart and destroyed Christmas for her.

Still, it will only take 3 days if they don't make too many stops, and Lauren is determined they will make as few stops as necessary. Unfortunately, Will isn't in on the plan, and he has no intention of hurrying. In fact, he stops at many off the beaten track tourist destinations, and despite claiming he has no plan, Lauren suspects he does.

No matter how kind Will is, Lauren is convinced people can't change. Except, Will has changed. He's put a lot of effort into changing after multiple bad choices in college cost him his dream, and he's also convinced that because of his poor choices, he doesn't deserve any goodness in his life.

Across the many miles they cross between California and Illinois, they both learn there's more to their traveling companion than they first thought. The question now is, can Lauren let go of the past to enjoy her future? And can Will forgive himself for his past mistakes in order to take chances with his own future?

This was my second favorite read of the month. I enjoyed this story immensely as Will and Lauren made the long trek home for Christmas. Amongst the hard was humor, and a few unexpected little bits along the way.



### **Merry Ex-Mas (Walsh)**

Maren hasn't been home in eight years to celebrate Christmas with her family, but this year is different. She's talked so much about the Christmas traditions of her small hometown on the tv show Good Morning Denver that it seems like a great way to get the followers she needs to break out and have her own tv show.

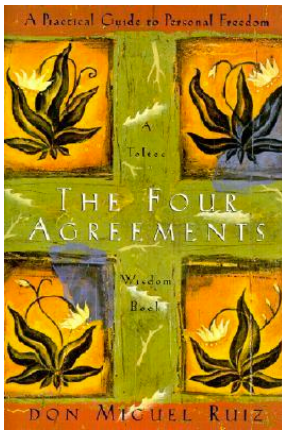
What she doesn't expect is to find her ex, Max, in her parents' home when she gets there. Not only is he there for the holidays, this isn't his first time either. Plus, he's staying in her old room, and she's stuck sleeping on the futon in the sewing room.

Maren is furious with her mother for inviting Max to be a part of their family traditions. Never mind, Max has been a family friend since long before Maren and Max were dating.

Being around Max reminds Maren how much she loved him, but also how much he hurt her when he couldn't come to terms with his parents' death and pushed her away. Except, Max hasn't stopped loving Maren, and has to find the courage to tell her he pushed her away out of fear of losing someone else he loved. He was stupid and made a mistake, and he knows that now. He knew it then, too, but was too lost in the suffocating grief to make amends. Can Maren offer Max grace and put her pride behind her?

I didn't realize when I'd selected this book that it was also by Walsh. Her stories seem to have the focus of forgiveness and grace nestled deep in the heart. There was quite a bit to chuckle

about in this story, and a few groan worthy scenes.



### **The Four Agreements (Ruiz)**

Ruiz addresses the four limiting beliefs we as humans have that cause us to stumble and fail to accept radical grace, self-love, peace, and change in our lives. He bases his teaching on ancient Toltec wisdom that has been passed down, and he believes should be public in order to change the world.

Based on his culture, he uses a variety of terms like dark magic to indicate evil, sin, or wrongdoing, and white magic to show good. The first agreement is to be impeccable with your word. Speak with integrity, don't gossip, avoid using words that would inflict derogatory statements on yourself and others. Use the power of your words to offer love and never use it to cause fear.

The second agreement is don't take anything personally. The idea is to remember that nothing people say or do, even if it's aimed at you, is because of you. It's a reflection of themselves, their beliefs, their burdens, their hurts, and their own inner fights. If we can become immune to the actions of others towards us, we won't be the victim of needless suffering.

The third agreement is not to make assumptions. Instead, be curious, ask questions, speak clearly about what you want without making people guess. Communicate clearly to avoid

misunderstandings, which can lead to anger, sadness, and drama.

The fourth agreement is to always do your best. Your best will change from day to day. If you're unwell, your best is going to look drastically different than it would on a day when you are full of energy, got just the right amount of sleep, and are raring to go. By always doing your best, you will avoid self-judgement, self-abuse, and regret. You will always try to do your best with the first three agreements as well, which brings you full circle.

If you slip with any of these, you offer yourself grace, get back up, & keep going. The purpose of these is not to impose new rules on you, but to serve as a reminder that you are your own person. You may find that the rules you were raised under are no longer beneficial to you. The rules and constraints that friends or family live with might not apply to you. It doesn't mean we open the door to judge them. The focus is on self and how we interact and behave with others and towards our self.

Overall, I enjoyed reading this and think it offers some worthy advice on how we can be as kind to ourselves as we are to others.



I will confess that I enjoyed every book I read this month. My favorite, of course, was [Faking Christmas \(Steel\)](#) with [A Cross Country Christmas](#) coming in second. They are two I'll probably pull up each year. What I did not realize until after reading them is that a few of these books were part of a series. I'm usually one of those, "You can't read out of order!" people, so it took me by surprise.

[Home Sweet Christmas](#) is one of those books. Depending on the website, it's listed as either book 2 or book 3 in the series. People list the two before it as 1 and 2 or .5 and 1. I haven't listened to them yet, but based on the blurbs they include other characters that were present in [Home Sweet Christmas](#).



I also spotted that Walsh has a valentine's book out. And speaking of Walsh, when I realized I'd read two of her books, I looked a little closer at the details. According to the information on Audible, *A Cross Country Christmas* lists Walsh as the publisher. That might not mean much to you, but it made me smile and whisper at, "Good for you!" while resisting the urge to throw some confetti. Thomas Nelson, Tyndall, & SweetHaven Press have been credited with publishing her books. Although, I couldn't find anyone else published with that last publishing house.

The Reluctant Author 