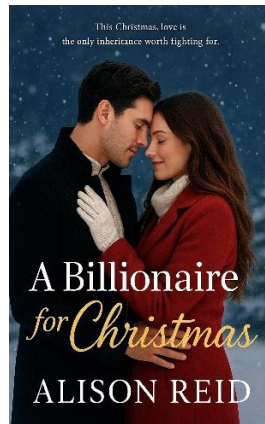


A Billionaire for Christmas

by Alison Reid



Eliza clutched her passport and the neatly stacked flight tickets Sally had organised, staring down at the itinerary that looked both impossibly long and impossibly thrilling. Brisbane to Zurich. Twenty-four hours of airports, flights, and a layover in Dubai before she would finally set foot in Europe. Her stomach fluttered, part nerves, part excitement. It was her first time travelling internationally alone, and every anxious heartbeat reminded her of the disaster she had only just escaped.

For a fleeting moment, Brad crept into her mind—probably lounging somewhere with Clair, smug and careless. She tightened her grip on the tickets. No. This trip wasn't his. It was hers. Her suitcase held not only clothes for St. Moritz but the carefully counted spending money Brad had once promised to use to dazzle her—or more likely, squander on himself. The thought made her shiver. At least now, every cent was hers.

When she finally landed in Zurich, she stepped onto the crisp pavement with awe and trepidation. The train awaited—a winding, scenic journey through the Swiss Alps: Zurich to Chur, then onward on the Rhaetian Railway to St. Moritz. Three to four hours of snow-tipped mountains, glacial lakes, and forests dusted with ice. Each turn of the track carried her farther from the

humiliation in Queensland and closer to a world of mountains, escape, and maybe—just maybe—freedom.

For the first time since the wedding debacle, a spark of anticipation stirred in her chest. She was alone, yes, but for once she was choosing herself. Avalanches, icy slopes, clumsy skis—let them come. St. Moritz would be her playground, her sanctuary, her “honeymoon gone rogue.”

When the train pulled into St. Moritz, the peaks glittered in the late afternoon sun like cut crystal. Eliza stepped onto the platform, her boots crunching against the icy cobblestones. Cold air bit at her cheeks, sharp and exhilarating, carrying the scents of pine, wood smoke, and snow. She pulled her coat tighter and smiled. She had left her old life behind—if only for a while.

A short shuttle ride delivered her to the chalet. The reception glowed with polished wood and bowls of fresh flowers, the staff brisk yet friendly, their German- and Italian-accented English filling the air. Eliza approached the desk, fumbling with her passport and tickets, nerves prickling after the long journey.

“Good afternoon. Welcome to Chalet Edelweiss. Do you have a reservation?” the receptionist asked warmly.

“Yes... yes, I do,” Eliza stammered, passing her documents across the desk. For a moment, she faltered. The booking had been made months ago, back when she had expected to arrive with Brad. Her heart twisted. Then she steadied herself. “Eliza Clarke,” she said firmly, giving the name she was meant to take.

The receptionist typed, then smiled and slid a keycard across the counter. “Room 212, second floor. Enjoy your stay, Mrs. Clarke.”

Eliza’s fingers closed around the key, a shiver running through her—not from the cold, but from the surreal strangeness of checking into a room under

a name she didn't yet own. Clarke. Not today. Today she was still Eliza Preston—but tomorrow, for appearances, she would be Clarke. A small part of her winced, but another, stronger part—the part Brad had underestimated—thrilled at the defiance.

Balancing her suitcase in one hand and her overnight bag in the other, she navigated the gleaming foyer toward the lifts. The scent of pine and firewood wrapped around her, grounding her, but all she could focus on was not dropping her bags—or herself. Then—a soft impact. Someone brushed against her, and she stumbled.

“Oh! I'm so sorry,” she blurted, her Australian vowels sharp with panic. She looked up—and froze.

He was tall, impeccably dressed, dark hair falling across his forehead with effortless precision. His eyes met hers—calm, steady—and for a heartbeat, everything else disappeared.

Christian looked down—and froze. She was beautiful in a way that stole the air from him. Dark hair spilling to her waist, green eyes wide with embarrassment, a figure unpolished yet impossibly alive. Juggling a suitcase and overnight bag, she looked unsteady, and yet astonishingly composed.

“No, no. My fault entirely,” he replied, calm, measured—but for a heartbeat, he forgot everything else—the slopes, Clarissa, the calculated perfection of his life.

They lingered, caught in a moment neither had expected. She noticed the faint curve of his lips, the quiet assurance in his stance, the way his gaze held hers without judgment. It was nothing—just an accident. And yet it felt like something. Her cheeks warmed. She tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, painfully aware of how flustered she must look.

“Th-thank you,” she managed, tugging her suitcase forward, desperate to appear composed even as her pulse raced.

Eliza shook her head as she reached the lift. Foolish. She wasn't here to notice men. But deep down, she couldn't deny the faint spark of curiosity unfurling in her chest. Perhaps this “honeymoon gone rogue” held more surprises than she'd imagined.

By the time she reached the second floor, her arms ached from the bags, but she pushed on until she found Room 212. Sliding the card into the reader, she heard the beep and stepped inside.

The room was an alpine dream. Polished beams crossed the ceiling, honeyed wood panelled the walls. A thick wool rug softened the floor beneath her boots. To the left, a stone-framed fireplace waited to be lit, promising warmth on frosty nights. Fur throws draped across a deep sofa, and a small writing desk stood ready for plans and thoughts.

Floor-to-ceiling windows unveiled St. Moritz rooftops dusted in snow, jagged peaks gleaming beyond. Ski lifts in the distance creaked steadily toward the glowing summits.

She set her bags aside and inhaled deeply. The faint scent of pine and wood polish cleared her chest. Running her hand across the fur throw, she let out a small, incredulous laugh.

“This is really mine... even if just for a few days,” she whispered.

The heartbreak and betrayal back in Queensland felt far away now, blurred by snow and silence. She catalogued the details—the antique lamp, folded towels, the coffee station with mugs stamped St. Moritz. Finally, she sank onto the bed, exhaling long and deep.

She had made it. Alone, yes. But free—at least for now.

Christian had been distracted, thoughts split between the promise of the slopes above and the taut, unrelenting presence of Clarissa. Two days in the chalet, and all she had done was hold court at the bar—dazzling, distant, untouchable—while he lingered in the background, restless, quietly suffocating. He longed for solitude, even a sliver of it.

He watched the green-eyed beauty go, faintly smiling before he could stop himself. She was bright, fragile, alive—and for reasons he didn't yet understand, she lingered in his chest even as she moved toward the lifts.

For the first time in days, Clarissa seemed irrelevant. Someone—someone like this—might awaken something in him that wealth, duty, and perfection never could.

Desire? He understood. Attraction? He had been surrounded by beauty all his life. But this was different. Not lust, not the calculated assessment of worth. It was a spark—strange, inconvenient, rare—that burned quietly in his chest.

He didn't even know her name. A woman with dark hair and green eyes who had collided with him in the hotel foyer, who had looked at him without calculation, without hunger for recognition. Just flustered apology, a faint blush, and something disarmingly unguarded that left him unsettled.

It shouldn't have mattered. It shouldn't have lingered. Yet the echo of that brief encounter hummed beneath his skin long after she had gone.

Christian forced himself to focus, dragging his mind back to the reasons he was here—the slopes, the appearances, the endless game of managing Clarissa's moods. Clarissa, who at that very moment was almost certainly holding court at the bar, her diamond flashing, her laughter loud, her presence impossible to ignore. Clarissa, who demanded everything and gave nothing.

Clarissa, who symbolised obligation, empire, legacy—all the shackles his grandfather's will had bound him with.

And yet... it wasn't Clarissa who was on his mind. It was the woman in the foyer. The one who blushed. Who looked at him as though she saw not a name, not a fortune, not an heir—but a man.

He shook his head sharply, tugging at the cuff of his sleeve as though the gesture could steady him, banish the absurd pull in his chest. She was no one. Just another guest. A fleeting encounter.

And still... she remained.

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