

Holiday Kisses



Hana
SHEIK

Traci
DOUGLASS

Dani
COLLINS

Katie
METTNER

Hana Sheik

Kwanza with Her Rival

Hana Sheik

All of Nichelle Brown's coworkers knew by now that *nobody* was getting between her and her deserved and highly coveted job promotion.

Everyone but Khalif Hameed.

Apparently his overly smug and annoyingly handsome self had missed *that* office memo. Otherwise, he wouldn't be crowding her space from behind, giving her a good whiff of his woody cologne, as they climbed the front steps to their boss's palatial home and rang the doorbell to announce their arrival.

Nichelle hadn't thought Khalif would show up, despite knowing he was the only other one closely qualified to challenge her for the promotion to team lead of their auditing and assurance department.

"I see I'm not the only one who got an invite," he observed, his deep, mellow baritone breaching the late December wintry silence.

Nichelle snorted at his insinuation that she would be overlooked by their boss. She was indispensable to Rainier Accounting; she knew that because she'd made it so. Through years of tireless work and personal sacrifices, no less. Khalif hadn't started at the office until last year, and yet he'd swiftly climbed heights that had taken her twice as long to scale, and with half the effort. It was an impressive feat, but she wasn't about to inflate his ego by complimenting him.

She snorted again.

Frustratingly, the indelicate sounds she made merely pinged off Khalif's boyish smile. He never seemed cowed by her sharp attitude and sharper tongue. It confused her that he showed no fear around her. She was used to people telling her she was overly loud and opinionated. Sadly, her parents and siblings thought so, too. They never tried to accept who she was, but rather forced their

expectations onto her. Being around them drained her energy, and so she did what was best for herself and limited her time with them. Hence why she had begun skipping out on journeying home for the holidays.

Nichelle agreed she wasn't an easy person to get along with, but they were her family.

Shouldn't they love me for who I am?

With tears welling up in her eyes, she was grateful for the distraction when the door opened.

That gratitude morphed into annoyance at Khalif leaping forward to greet their boss and shake his hand first, completely blocking her in his effort. By the time Khalif moved out of the way, their boss, Magnus Rainier, blinked in shock at her being there. Like he'd forgotten she was invited, too.

"Nichelle, I didn't see you hiding there! Welcome."

Then after a quick handshake with her, he turned to Khalif, clapped him on the shoulder and ushered him inside.

Nichelle followed them slowly, devastated. Her confidence took a hit, as it appeared Khalif was far more of a competitor than she believed him to be.

* * *

Khalif's eyes kept wandering over to the distraction in the room.

Nichelle.

In her brightly patterned African-print jumpsuit, and with her soft, honeyed brown hair curling over her bare brown shoulders, she filled the space in the same way a vase of freshly picked flowers or a pervasively scented candle would. Sweetly...and oh so incessantly. It bordered on impossible to do anything else, forget wooing their boss into giving Khalif the promotion over Nichelle.

Soon after, Magnus temporarily abandoned the living room and his guests to assist his lovely wife, Shayann, in the kitchen with dinner. Khalif hadn't had the opportunity to speak to Mrs. Rainier all that much, but she seemed perfectly matched to her powerful husband, a strong Black woman who radiated when she briefly greeted her guests.

She reminded him of another woman.

And now that they were alone, Khalif gave up pretending like he was interested in anything or anyone else and made his move.

Nichelle had her arms folded, her back stiff and facing him, pointedly ignoring his presence. Subtly, her shoulders rose a little higher when he slowly approached her.

Standing behind her, he peeled his eyes off her to look out the large picture window she was gazing through intently.

Since they'd arrived, the sky had darkened more, and snow began to fall in thick, fluffy flakes. It might have been pretty if he didn't have to travel through it later to get back to his apartment in the heart of the city. Living in the Midwest now for a year, he should have been used to the heavy snowfalls and frosty temperatures during this season of time, and yet he hadn't shaken off his warmer Pacific roots.

"So, what was in the bag?" he asked her, recalling that Nichelle passed a mysterious fragrant-smelling plastic bag over to Mrs. Rainier at some point after their introductions.

"I could ask you the same question," she said, side-eyeing the backpack he'd brought along with him.

"Nah. I asked first," he teased.

"Fine," she muttered, her tone spiced with annoyance. "It's *sambusa*. And before you ask, *no*, I didn't make them. There's this Somali restaurant near my place that makes good ones."

Being Somali, Khalif understood what she meant, though he had yet to meet a *sambusa* that he hadn't eaten and liked.

"Your turn," she reminded him.

He figured showing her would be easier.

Nichelle turned away from the window, her attention on him fully as he pulled out the gift he'd brought their boss. Seeing her face soften with confusion at the sculpted wooden piece in his hands, he explained.

“It’s a traditional milk jar from Somalia. My grandfather’s a generational camel farmer, and he usually carves these to hold camel milk. I had so much time on my hands when I was visiting him last, that he taught me to carve. This wasn’t the first piece I made—that’s in the scrap heap.”

“You made this?” The incredulous look she gave him was warranted.

Tweaking his bow tie and smoothing his hands over his tweed sweater, he smirked. “What? Don’t I look the part?”

“Of a camel farmer who carves stunning jars? Yeah, that would be a definite *no*.”

He chuckled at her adamance. “Anyway, the vase fits the whole Kwanzaa theme. I figured Magnus would get a kick out of it.”

“He likely will,” she murmured.

Movement behind them ended whatever else might have been said.

Magnus reappeared, popping his head in from the entrance hallway, keys in hand and a winter coat on. “Sorry, just have to step out for a moment. It seems we have nothing to light the candles in the kinara. Can’t have Kwanzaa without the kinara.”

“I can go grab a lighter or matches.” Nichelle sprung the words out, the eagerness in her voice at odds with the gleeful gloating look she snuck at Khalif.

Magnus protested, but Nichelle wouldn’t budge.

Seizing the opportunity, Khalif said, “I’ll go along with her.”

Nichelle’s glare was swift and killer, still worth it when Magnus gave in and walked them out the front door to run the errand for him. As soon as the front door closed and they were alone once more, Khalif waited for her to cut him down with her words or even leave him out in the cold.

Surprisingly, she marched toward her vehicle, and when he didn’t immediately follow, she stopped to look back and growled, “Aren’t you coming? I don’t want to freeze out here.”

* * *

Matchbox in hand, Khalif had barely slipped back into the car when Nichelle floored it out of the overcrowded parking lot.

He buckled himself in and gripped the handlebar above the passenger seat. "Whoa, what's the hurry? They're not going to start dinner without us."

"Well, they just might. You took so long in the store," she said grumpily.

"Are you forgetting that it's the day after Christmas? It was packed in there." Khalif shook his head. "Consumerism at its finest."

Nichelle scoffed but didn't argue, which was about as close to agreeing with him. He smiled at the way she jutted her lip out in a cute little pout, the only sign that she wasn't happy about not being right.

He liked seeing this softer, vulnerable window to her soul. He'd already fathomed she was a woman of many faces. Strong, independent and brainy he knew from having watched her working. She hadn't won Employee of the Month several times for no reason. Nichelle was a force of energy, and though he hadn't admitted it before, Khalif could see her winning the promotion over him easily.

And if he had to lose, he wouldn't mind if it was to her.

"The snow is getting heavier," he observed, wiping fog from the cold glass of the car window. "But the lights are beautiful."

Almost every other house had festive lights strung up. Some had even gone as far as elaborate Christmas displays on their snowy front lawns. From inflatable Santas and red-nosed Rudolfs, to full-on detailed Nativity scenes, Khalif couldn't imagine anyone being in a bad mood with so much holiday cheer in the air.

"They're too bright. It's not like we need more light pollution."

Nichelle's grumpy statement proved that there could be exceptions.

"I didn't peg you as a Grinch." Khalif had just thought that maybe she was unhappy because she hadn't expected to see him over the holidays. Certainly not at their boss's home, where it was apparent that one of them would be closing the night celebrating a new promotion, along with perks like a significant pay bump.

That could put anyone in a bad mood.

He hadn't considered she could be upset about something else entirely.

"I'm *not* a Grinch," she snapped with a harrumph. "I just don't see a point to all this."

"Right, what's the point? Let's forget the delicious feasts, family time and break from obligatory day-to-day activities."

He didn't think anyone could make a growl sound adorable—yet somehow Nichelle managed it.

"As pleasant as that sounds, not all of us has the kind of family you're thinking of." Her hands fastened on the steering wheel and her eyes narrowed on the windshield. "I'm just not very close with mine, and the holidays were always tense for me. Christmas especially."

That he understood. Close as he was with his parents and younger brother, they still had their tough moments. Like when Khalif had chosen to move away and do his own thing. It had taken his mom and dad time to adjust to the change, and some harsh words were said before they eventually accepted he needed his independence.

"Sorry for being callous. I'm Muslim, so Christmas doesn't apply. *But* my family throws some pretty wicked New Year's parties." And just the reminder of his family had him sighing despondently. "Of course, there won't be a party this year. My parents are visiting relatives in Somalia, and my brother will be too busy hanging out with his friends in his new college digs to care if I visit or not."

At first Nichelle was silent, but then her words filled the emptiness, both in the silence blanketing them and in his heart.

"At least you're not alone for this first night of Kwanzaa."

He smiled, the light of it creeping through him like the sun melting snow on a warm winter's day. "Good point."

A few minutes later that smile wiped away at the sound and feel of tires spinning through snow hopelessly. Then Nichelle's sedan came to a jerking halt.

* * *

The car wheels sputtered out snow before Khalif flagged her to stop and resumed shoveling. When Nichelle bounded out into the cold to help, she recognized it was futile. They didn't have an extra shovel.

She felt useless—and very cold at that moment.

“Get inside and warm up. I got this covered.”

“We should take turns,” she argued, rubbing her gloved hands together and blowing warmth onto her frozen fingers.

Khalif pinned her with a stern look and pointed to the car. “Inside. Now.”

Something about his authoritative tone had Nichelle backing away to do what he ordered. Khalif was a good-looking Black man. His deep brown skin, dark curly hair, thick black beard and full, kissable lips had not gone unnoticed. If he weren't her rival for this promotion, she'd have tossed out her rule not to fraternize with a coworker and complicate a work relationship and made her moves on him already.

But being as they were work rivals, she had to dampen the temptation he'd been posing her all night.

Nichelle bit her lip while she watched him work hard to free them, his comfort put aside for hers. Eventually Khalif opened the car door and a frigid winter air blew in with him.

“Try it now,” he told her.

A couple minutes later, they were freed of the snow. Khalif gave a whoop, his grin victorious. Nichelle caught herself stopping the car and returning his infectious triumph. Never had she smiled so widely her cheeks hurt from the result.

He then surprised her by taking her cold hands and peeling her leather gloves off. Setting the gloves on the car heater, he cranked the dial and cradled her fingers in his bigger, warmer palms.

When she winced, he opened his hands and stared down at her bloodless white fingers.

Knowing what he was thinking, she said, “Raynaud's phenomenon. It happens during really cold temperatures.”

“Does it hurt?” he asked thickly.

“It’s like tiny pinpricks under my skin. Irritating, but not life-threatening.” She knew what he was about to ask next, so she said, “The best thing I could do now is warm up.”

Without missing a beat, Khalif lifted her fingers to his mouth and, with his lips hovering inches from her tingly digits, he puffed his warm breath over her.

Her heart stuttered in her chest, her face growing hotter.

He did this for several minutes before he guided her hands to the car heater and held them gently in his palms again.

“Better?” he probed, soulful brown eyes holding her in their spell.

“Better,” she eked out blushing.

* * *

Magnus and Shayann were guilt-ridden when they learned of their car troubles. After apologizing profusely for having sent them out for the matches to light the candles of the Kwanzaa kinara, they ushered them to the dinner table where two new faces awaited them.

Khalif was just as shocked as Nichelle was to see their coworker Samuel and Samuel’s wife at the dinner table.

It appeared they weren’t the only ones being considered for the promotion. The thought was annoying after the ordeal and hoops that he and Nichelle had endured on this night alone. After all, it wasn’t Samuel whose fingers nearly froze off, or Samuel that had to shovel his way out of snow holding them back.

He couldn’t even gripe to Nichelle about it because they were now stuck at the dinner table for the foreseeable hour.

Somehow, though, as Magnus aligned seven candles in the kinara—three green, three red and one black—and explained how the ceremony would work to open the first night of Kwanzaa, Nichelle’s eyes bounded over to Khalif.

That quick look, and the eye roll that followed, was enough to communicate what she thought.

Khalif bit back the urge to smirk.

Magnus lit the black candle in the center. Smiling broadly at them, he said, “*Habari gani?*”

And after their boss’s thorough explanation, they knew exactly what to say in unison.

“*Umoja.*”

* * *

“If I’m not wrong, *umoja* means ‘unity’ in Swahili, and I’m not sure about you, but I’m feeling far from unified about what just happened.”

Nichelle smirked, amused at Khalif’s complaint at how the night ended.

Following their delicious African meal, Magnus had taken her, Khalif and Samuel aside to discuss business. Their boss kept it short, citing his reasons for choosing who he had for the promotion, and briefly complimenting them all before he named his choice. Samuel.

Nichelle expected for the blow of rejection to land harder—

To her utter revelation, she was feeling all right after Magnus’s reveal. She even congratulated Samuel.

Shortly after, she waved farewell to their hosts and stepped out into the cold night, thankful that it had stopped snowing long enough for her to get home without getting stuck again.

Khalif had asked her for a ride, and now they were in her car again, waiting for the engine to heat up before they drove off. He turned to her and drawled, “Considering we both lost out on the promotion, I’m up for a little mutual commiseration if you’re down.” Khalif gazed at her, his grin as winsome as ever. “I was thinking we could meet tomorrow for coffee, maybe? And I’m totally free on New Year’s.”

“Uh-huh,” Nichelle hummed, amused by his enthusiasm.

Suddenly, Khalif’s jocular mood faded as his hand settled over hers atop the gear stick. She recalled how he’d warmed her cold fingers earlier in the night and blushed at the tender memory.

He was giving her a similar soft look now. Like his world narrowed down to her alone in a heartbeat.

“I’m being serious,” he rasped, his expression shone earnestly. “I know you’re not much of a holiday person, and I respect your reason for it, but Nichelle, I’ll be real with you. I want more time. Even more than what’s left of Kwanzaa.”

Nichelle remembered to breathe. “There are another six days of Kwanzaa between now and then.” Days that—if she accepted his offer—she wouldn’t have to spend alone, dreading the holidays and wishing she could be with someone who wanted her as she was.

“What do you say?” he urged softly.

Nichelle’s wobbling smile, as hot and bright as a fully lit Kwanzaa kinara, overtook her face and seared into her heart. Best of all, her joy was echoed in Khalif’s features when she nodded her acceptance wordlessly. In celebration, he raised her hands to his lips, and with his eyes never leaving her face, he kissed the soft pads of her fingertips.

She might not like the holidays, but Nichelle had a feeling that if she were spending that time with Khalif, she could be persuaded into changing her position on the festive season for the better.

*

If you loved *Kwanza with Her Rival*, be sure to catch
Hana Sheik’s latest book, *The Baby Swap That Bound Them*.

Out now!

Traci Douglass

A Secret Hanukkah Proposal

Traci Douglass

“Annie, slow down, please,” Jen Geller said as they raced along South Bayshore Drive toward Regatta Park, where they’d planned to celebrate the first night of Hanukkah at The Great Chanukah Street Fair. There was supposed to be a menorah lighting, live music, *sufganiyot*—the delicious pastries that were a cross between a beignet and a jelly donut—and even a bounce house for kids and adults alike. And while Jen loved inflatable toys as much as the next gal, her feet were killing her. “You’re walking too fast.”

“I can’t help it. I like speed.”

Wasn’t that the truth? Back in Boston, where they were both EMTs at Boston Beacon Hospital, Annie was known for white-knuckled rides in her rig when they went out on emergency runs. Jen had been on too many of those runs to count with Annie over the years, and each time she said a silent prayer they’d make it to the patient in one piece. Still, Annie was the best EMT Jen knew.

She tugged on Annie’s hand again to slow her down. “I know you like to move fast, but you’re making me nervous.”

Annie finally slowed and glanced back at Jen over her shoulder, her dark eyes narrowing. Annie was also far too perceptive for her own good. A great asset in a paramedic. Not so much sometimes in a girlfriend. “Are you sure it’s just my speed making you nervous? Or something else?”

Jen took a deep breath, glancing around at the growing crowds gathered for the annual festival of light celebrations. “*Maybe* something else.”

Chuckling, Annie kissed her hand, then tugged Jen into her side, keeping her close. “Don’t worry. They’re going to love you.”

“You say that now, but you don’t know for sure.”

“Yes, I do. I love you, so they’ll love you, too.”

Jen and Annie had met at work, and at first Jen had wanted to keep their relationship under wraps. Not because she wasn’t comfortable with who she was and what she and Annie had. Jen had come out to her family and friends before college and had never looked back. No. Her concerns were

more about getting involved with a coworker. And while romantic relationships weren't against the rules at Boston Beacon—pretty much all the doctors Jen knew at the place had been pairing off recently—Jen didn't want to risk her beloved career going up in flames if she and Annie didn't work out. She'd been there, done that in the past, didn't want to do it again. It's why she'd resisted the instant spark between them for about six months before agreeing to go on a date with Annie. Their connection had been immediate and powerful from the first day they'd met, though. Annie's dark eyes had found Jen's during a morning meeting, and even though they'd both glanced away quickly, they'd kept looking at each other again and again. Finally, Annie had smiled, and the moment Jen saw the dimple in her cheek, that was it.

She'd always been a sucker for dimples.

From then on, they'd spent as much time with each other on the down-low as possible.

The fact Jen might have fibbed a little to her roommate and best friend, Kali Mitchell, about where exactly she was going during her month-long leave of absence from work over this holiday season—saying she was going to Israel to see family, rather than to Miami to meet Annie's parents and close friends—was a problem Jen would address when she got back to Boston in the New Year. Besides, from the texts she'd been getting recently from Kali, the woman had enough on her plate to deal with, between her recent adult autism diagnosis and Jen's brother, Dylan, showing up to stay with her in the apartment for the next few weeks. Jen might or might not have been playing matchmaker there a little. Lord knew Kali would never approach Dylan on her own.

Sometimes a sister had to do what a sister had to do.

And speaking of doing what you had to do, the first night after they'd arrived in Miami, Annie had proposed. Talking about moving fast.

The memory of them standing out on the balcony of their hotel room overlooking the glittering city and the ocean beyond at night still stole Jen's breath... She'd never considered herself an overly romantic person, but Annie had swept her off her feet. Remembering the details now still made her flush with joy. The flicker of candlelight on the table beside them making the tanzanite and jade ring Annie had bought for her sparkle. Both of their favorite stones, shaped like hearts, were nestled together on a platinum band, gleaming. The confidence in Annie's voice as she'd said, "I've never been this happy before, Jen. I feel like everything that's come before this moment in my life has led me to you. Will you marry me?"

Despite all the picture-perfect romance, though, Jen hadn't been able to give her an answer that night. Which made no sense, Jen knew. She loved Annie. Annie was her world now, but still...old

fears ran deep. Jen wanted to get over them, wanted to say an enthusiastic “yes,” but so far, she’d held back. For what? Jen couldn’t say. Maybe a sign that this was it. The one. Meant to be. Fate. Those words terrified a part of her. She’d never felt that way about anyone before, not even the woman she’d risked her career for. So, until she made a decision, she wore her engagement ring around her neck on a platinum chain, close to her heart.

Perhaps her brother wasn’t the only Geller with commitment phobias.

Annie, of course, had seemed unfazed by it all. She’d told Jen she was fine to wait, steady in her certainty that eventually Jen would say yes. Jen wished she could share that same unshakable confidence.

Now, as Annie released her hand and cupped her cheek to kiss Jen soft and sweet, those lovely butterflies swirled inside her all over again. She trusted Annie and loved her with a ferocity she’d only ever reserved for her family and Kali.

Perhaps that was the sign she’d asked for. It certainly felt like one.

Annie had grown up in Miami before moving to Boston for college. She’d invited Jen to join her this year over Hanukkah to see her childhood home and meet her family here in Coconut Grove, including Annie’s parents, one grown sister, two younger brothers, her biological father, at least four aunts and uncles, a whole bunch of cousins and scores of loyal friends.

“Tell me again,” Jen said, rising on tiptoe to catch a glimpse of the huge, seashell-covered menorah at the center of Regatta Park. Annie’s family was meeting them at the street fair. “Your mom’s name is Rena and your stepdad’s Jack, right? And your biological dad is Henry?”

Annie nodded, adjusting the straps on her pale pink sundress. Even in mid-December, the temperatures in South Florida were in the seventies. A far cry from the frigid winter conditions Boston frequently dealt with this time of year. One more reason to love Miami. “Yep. We went over this at least thirty times already in the room, Jen. Stop stressing. You’ll be fine.”

Jen wished she was so confident. “Okay. And your sister Connie is how old now?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“And what does she do again?”

“Besides give me a hard time when I’m in town?” Annie grinned. “She claims she’s an independent filmmaker because she went to film school, but mostly she does wedding videos.”

“Wedding videos are films,” Jen chided.

"I guess. I just like to mess with her. She's good at what she does," Annie admitted.

"And your younger brother Rory, he's a full-time event planner?"

"Part-time now, I think. One of my cousins took over the business."

"Which one?"

"Mark."

"And he belongs to..."

"Tom and Flo." Annie laughed again, glancing at Jen. "You're still trying to get them all straight before we arrive? Seriously."

"This is important to me. I want them to like me. If I remember names and details quickly, I think it'll help." Jen pulled her phone out to scroll through her notes again. "Tell me one more time who works at the event-planning business."

"They'll like you anyway, but okay. Peretz Parties is owned by my aunt and uncle, and all their kids work there, plus Rory. So ... Mark, Sylvie, Tucker and Yael."

Jen typed the information into her phone. "Got it."

"You know, I haven't formally met all your family and friends, either." Annie glanced over at her. "I hope you're not expecting me to memorize every single detail about them like you are. I'll probably forget all their names before I meet them. I mean, I know Kali from the hospital, but otherwise..."

Jen giggled. "Hey, as long as you get it together by the wedding, I'll still marry you."

Annie gave Jen her best menacing stare, which wasn't menacing at all. "You better."

They walked on, weaving through the crowds as best they could, the sounds of laughter and music filling the air around them. The smell of freshly baked *sufganiyot* filled the air from the food trucks parked around them. **Jen's stomach growled. She'd been so nervous earlier that she hadn't eaten since breakfast.**

Annie smiled again. "You have everyone figured out now?"

Sighing, Jen slipped her phone back into the pocket of her denim minidress. "No. But I'll try my best."

“Don’t worry, no one will quiz you. But you know there is one question we will have to answer tonight, right?”

“When are we getting married?”

“Exactly. What should I say?”

“I haven’t even said yes yet.”

“I know, but you will,” Annie said, confidently. “And there’ll be a bunch of event planners there tonight whose favorite thing on earth is a wedding.”

“Well, what do you think?”

Annie shook her head. “Honestly, I just want to get married. If it were up to me—”

“We’d have been married already at City Hall,” Jen finished for her. “Or flown to Las Vegas to get hitched by a bad Elvis impersonator.”

“Hey. I can’t help it if I don’t care about flowers, cake and fancy clothes. I don’t need two hundred people there watching, either. As far as I’m concerned, all we’d need is us, a couple of rings and Elvis.”

Laughing, Jen shyly nudged Annie’s shoulder with her own. “*If* we get married, how about something in between?”

“Like what?”

“Like maybe family and a few friends, nothing too fancy. We can do it here in Miami. I’m sure my parents and brother would love to visit South Beach. Maybe I can even get Kali to take some time off to come and be my maid of honor...”

“Or everyone could fly to Vegas,” Annie said again, smiling.

“No Vegas, babe.”

Annie exhaled. “Fine. But you have to write your own vows.”

Jen’s pulse stumbled at Annie’s beaming smile.

She squeezed Annie’s hand. “Of course.”

They’d just reached the edge of the park when a high-pitched wail bit through the air, followed by a panicked scream. As trained emergency responders, both Jen and Annie snapped to attention.

“That didn’t sound good,” Annie said, scanning the crowd around them.

“No, it didn’t,” Jen agreed, glancing over to see a small huddle forming near one of the vendor booths along the side of the park. “There!”

They raced over to find a woman on her knees, holding a child of maybe four or five, who appeared to be nonresponsive, in her arms. Beside them a neon-green boomerang sat on the ground. “Help me!” the woman cried. “That thing came of nowhere and hit him on the head!”

Jen moved in beside the child to check his pulse. “Heart rate is steady, and respirations are normal.” She palpated the kid’s head next, gently feeling the small knot growing on the boy’s right temple. “Swelling over the temporal bone. Probable concussion with possible skull fracture.” She cupped the boy’s flushed cheeks and stared down into his face. “Honey, can you open your eyes for me?”

Meanwhile, Annie spoke to the vendor whose booth the accident had happened in front of and asked for some ice wrapped in a towel. Then she knelt on the other side of the child and his mother from Jen and applied the cold compress to the kid’s head.

“Any idea where the boomerang came from?” Annie asked the mother.

Used to working as a team, Jen and Annie had the situation under control quickly while someone in the small, gathering crowd around them called for an ambulance.

“No,” the mother said. “They’ve been selling those things everywhere for Hanukkah. I knew someone would get hurt. It’s too crowded here to throw them.”

“Agreed.” Jen sat back as the boy’s eyes fluttered open. “Hey, honey. Do you know where you are?”

The boy blinked a couple of times, frowning up at his mother. “The North Pole?”

Annie chuckled, glancing up at the Santa display on a nearby vendor booth complete with fake snow and stuffed reindeer. Several trees sparkled with lights and decorations, too. “Not quite, but good guess.”

“What’s your name?” Jen asked the boy.

“Joshua Katz,” the kid said, trying to sit up.

His mother and Jen kept him down.

“Stay still,” Jen said. “People are coming to check you out and make sure you’re okay.”

The boy's bottom lip quivered. "What happened?"

"You got beamed in the head by this." Annie held up the boomerang. "You must have a hard head."

"That's what my mom always says." The boy glanced at his mother, and they all laughed, breaking the tension.

Sirens emanated from the arriving ambulance and the EMTs fought their way through the people who had gathered to see what was going on.

The boy and his mother thanked Jen and Annie as the handoff was made to the medical team. After it was over, it was almost time to light the seashell menorah at the center of the park.

Jen took Annie's hand as they searched for Annie's family, and Jen realized she wasn't nervous anymore. Work had always settled her, even more so now that Annie was her partner in every sense of the word. No matter what happened in the future, she knew it would be okay because they were together. They were a team, at work and at play. Annie was her other half, her *bashert*. There was no one else she wanted to walk through the future with, regardless of what it held. What was she waiting for?

"Hey," Jen said, squeezing Annie's hand to get her attention as they moved closer to the beach. "Yes."

"What?" Annie turned to look back at her.

"I love you." Jen took the chain from around her neck and removed the ring, slipping it onto a very important finger. "I love you, Annie Peretz, and I want to be your wife."

Annie blinked at her a moment, her grin growing wider by the second. "See? I knew you'd say yes eventually. Also, I love you, too."

They shared a kiss as a cheer rose from the crowd, after the first candle on the giant menorah was lit and the Hanukkah blessing was recited.

To Jen, it felt like their own miracle of light.

* * *

If you loved *A Secret Hanukkah Proposal*, be sure to catch Traci Douglass's book *Home Alone with the Children's Doctor*. Part of the Boston Christmas Miracles series, which also includes:

Traci Douglass

The Nurse's Holiday Swap by Ann McIntosh
A Puppy on the 34th Ward by Juliette Hyland
A Surgeon's Christmas Baby by Deanne Anders

All available now!

Dani Collins

'Tis the Season for Seduction

Dani Collins

Chapter One

Natasha Braun was leaving a job she loved, which made her sad, but the way her coworkers were reacting to her Secret Santa gifts had her biting back joyful laughter.

When had she last felt this happy? Years ago.

Or...exactly one year ago?

She skimmed her gaze to the office where she'd left a package for Silvio Russo.

He wasn't back from lunch yet. Would he come back? After today, the office was closing until the New Year. Silvio ran the New York arm of Russo International Finance, but his family was in Italy. Perhaps he'd already left.

"Natasha! It was you!" Penny from Accounting came up to the reception desk holding the courier envelope Natasha had given her.

"I got one, too." Natasha pointed to the envelope she'd made for herself so she could throw people off the scent.

Because you're like your father, lying to people who trust you.

She brushed aside that dark thought and showed Penny the contents. "Soap. What did you get?"

"The bobblehead toy my daughter asked for!" Penny was bright-eyed with excitement. "I thought I'd have to spend all week searching for it."

“Now you can put your feet up.”

“I wish! But it’s one thing off my list at least. Maybe Barbara did this?” Penny walked away to accuse a different colleague.

Natasha was envious of Penny’s to-do list. She didn’t have celebrations or crowds to prepare for. Outside of work, she had nothing but time to scour shops and plot to surprise people who had become her community. She was going to miss them.

She surreptitiously watched Omar, the office IT specialist, give in to curiosity and read the note she’d attached to his envelope. *Secret Santa knows you don’t celebrate Christmas, but hopes you’ll accept this gift for the baby you’re expecting.*

He opened the envelope and grinned widely at the onesie with a character from his favorite video game on it.

Nailed it.

The elevator pinged and her heart stopped. She held her breath with anticipation.

Silvio strode out. Even though she braced for his impact, the electrical jolt that shot through her was strong enough to sting.

He looked even more amazing than he had this morning, having visited the barber. His lean cheeks and strong jaw were shiny and clean of the groomed stubble he usually sported. His haircut was more precise. Today’s scrupulously tailored suit was gray-green, with a snow-white shirt and cranberry-red tie.

He gave her one of his polite nods as he strode straight past her, the way he always did.

Natasha swallowed back the disappointment that had been sitting in her throat all year. It had turned into a jagged lump two weeks ago when he had called her into his office.

“HR tells me you’re leaving?”

“For a marketing firm closer to home, yes.” Home being a rented bedroom with a shared kitchen and bath in New Jersey. “I enjoy the variety here, but copywriting is more in my wheelhouse.”

She’d been working piecemeal for them on the side, but they’d offered her a full-time role. The salary and benefits were comparable, but mostly she couldn’t take seeing Silvio every day, feeling *this* every day. Yearning. Sexual tension that was aching one-sided. Did he not remember what they’d done last December, when they’d been tangled in those hotel sheets?

Yes, they had agreed it was only for the night. He’d been leaving a party in the hotel ballroom and was “returning to Italy tonight.” Natasha had come into Manhattan for a job interview. One of her few remaining friends had used their points and insisted she treat herself by staying at a swanky hotel.

Natasha had never hooked up with a stranger in her life, but she’d been so lonely and miserable, she’d let Silvio buy her a drink, then kiss her and come to her room. Over the next two hours, he’d delivered so much pleasure, she was embarrassed to recollect how uninhibited she’d been.

“Can you leave while I’m in the shower?” she had asked him while they were still damp and catching their breath. “I hate goodbyes.”

“Why’s that?” His warm accent was so sexy, she knew she could listen to him her whole life and never grow tired of hearing his voice.

“I’ve had some difficult ones.” *How could you do this to your family? Get out.*

She sat up, then leaned back to set a light kiss on his cheek.

“Thank you for this. Even if I don’t get the job, my trip wasn’t wasted,” she teased.

By some Christmas miracle, she did get the job. She had been elated—until she sat down at this desk on January 2 and discovered her one-night lover was her new boss. She had nearly blushed herself into spontaneous combustion!

“It never happened,” Silvio had said after he got over his shock at finding her there. “It won’t happen again.”

It hadn’t. He treated her like any other employee, never betraying he saw her as remotely feminine or desirable.

If she hadn’t needed this job, she would have quit immediately, but she had stuck it out until she couldn’t bear his distant attitude any longer.

As she had waited out his reaction to her resignation, she had wondered if he would finally treat her differently. Her heart had lifted a little, wondering if he would ask her to stay. *Please*, she had thought, not even sure what she longed for him to say. Something personal. Something that told her he remembered their night as something special, too.

“I wish you the best in your new endeavor,” he had said with a remote expression.

“Thank you.” Her throat was so tight, she could barely speak. “Can I ask you to keep it from the staff? I don’t like goodbyes.”

For the first time, there was a flash behind his flinty, dark brown eyes. He had spiky black lashes, stern, thick brows and a mouth that was too sensual for a man. He was so compelling, she had to fight not to stare every time he was anywhere near her.

He nodded and she was dismissed.

Now she was regretting that she’d included him in her Secret Santa gifts. He’d been impossible to buy for, literally rich enough to get himself to the moon if he wanted. If she’d had the

least bit of faith that he was still interested in her, she would have given him a room card for the hotel they'd met in.

Not that she could afford to stay in a place like that! Oh, she wanted to put her head in her arms and disappear.

"Natasha." Her name in his deep voice always made her stomach flip.

She jerked her gaze upward.

"Your year-end bonus." Silvio offered a white envelope. "No need to work the rest of the day. Leave whenever you're ready."

Chapter Two

Natasha waited until everyone had gone so they wouldn't see her take her few personal items—her cardigan and mug, the quirky, telephone-shaped clock that had belonged to her grandmother, and an African violet starting to bloom.

Downstairs, she handed in her security badge and stepped into a wonderland of swirling flakes that hid the grit of city life, muffling the din and turning the fading sky indigo. It was almost pretty. Hopeful.

"Natasha."

She halted so abruptly, her boot slid in the collecting snow.

"Careful." Silvio loomed beside her, sending more of those infernal shivers of nervous awareness down her spine.

I'm just cold, she tried to tell herself, but she didn't feel cold. Not anymore.

"Let me carry that for you." He took the box. "I'll take you home."

"Wait. What?" She hurried to keep up with him, realizing he'd been in the back seat of an SUV parked at the curb. The melting droplets on the tinted glass reflected the blinking strings of white lights framing the windows behind her.

"Have dinner with me," Silvio said as he handed her box to his driver.

She was bedazzled into speechlessness as she looked up at him. He was as tall and unreadable as the concrete skyscrapers that surrounded them. Why now? Why—

“If you don’t want to, that’s fine.” His voice cooled when her hesitation stretched to the point of rudeness. “I’ll take you home regardless, but you no longer work for me, so I *can* ask.”

Was he asking? It sounded more like an order. She tugged her glove on more firmly, not knowing where else to look.

“And I’d like to thank you for my gift. *Santa*.” His voice turned rueful. “How did you know I get homesick?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” She grew even more self-conscious. She had come across a unique frame for photo collages that suited his office. She’d filled it with high-quality snapshots of Trieste that she’d bought from a photographer online. She was glad he liked it. It took the edge off her own homesickness.

“Good thing it’s the holidays and we’ll see family soon.” Something in his narrowed eyes and intonation tightened her stomach, making her think that was not a throwaway comment.

And she was so sensitive to that word, *family*, she couldn’t hear it without wanting to crawl into a hole. She slipped into the back seat instead.

“Home,” Silvio said to his driver as he came in the other side. He sent her another incisive look. “Or would you rather go to a restaurant?”

Agreeing to go to his apartment felt like agreeing that sex was on the table, but she had been thinking about making love with him again every single day for the last year. Maybe it was the only way she’d get him out of her system?

Maybe one more night with him was all she wanted for Christmas.

“That depends,” she said wryly. “Who’s cooking?”

“Me. I’m Italian.” He sounded borderline insulted that she would pose such a question, which made her suppress a grin and look out her side window.

She liked him. In the last year, her attraction had gone from mostly physical to knowing he was arrogant, yes, but had a right to his supreme confidence. People respected him because he was intelligent and competent and honorable. He cared about his family.

He was everything she wanted for Christmas, but that wasn’t going to happen.

Twenty minutes later, he helped her remove her overcoat inside his penthouse.

She left her damp boots by the door and wished she was wearing something more festive than a black turtleneck, tweed skirt and black tights. After living expenses, most of her income went to clearing her conscience, so she wasn’t nearly as pretty as the decor.

His sleek furnishings were ultramodern and the walls of windows probably offered killer views in the daylight. The whole place was decked out for the season with a wreath on the wall, a garland down the stair rail and life-size reindeer sculptures made of twinkling lights on the terrace. A fourteen-foot tree stood next to the fireplace, covered in blue lights and silver baubles. Dozens of wrapped gifts were tucked under the boughs.

“For my sisters’ children. Red wine? Or something else?”

“Red is fine, thanks. How many sisters do you have?”

“Five. All younger.”

“No brothers?”

“Several cousins who might as well be. You?”

“One of each. Things are...strained.” Understatement.

“Oh?” He poured the wine.

She shrugged philosophically as she took her glass, hoping he wouldn't pry.

As she looked up at him, her gaze was caught by something dangling from the chandelier above them.

"Oh, no."

"Why do you think I hurried over?" he asked dryly.

He hadn't. He had ambled over with his usual laconic grace.

She brought her gaze down from the mistletoe to the self-deprecating amusement curling his pensive mouth. There was always that hint of suspicion in his gaze when he looked at her, as though he *knew*.

"No?" he prompted quietly.

A kiss? She wished she had the strength to refuse. She was very confused by everything that was happening, but not about that. She very much wanted to feel close to him again. She closed her eyes in surrender.

His warm hand cradled the side of her neck. She was sure he could feel the thud of her pulse against the heel of his palm.

Warm lips brushed hers once, twice, lighting small fires deep in her belly, teasing her with such allure, she couldn't help tipping forward, seeking.

A growling noise rumbled deep in his throat, and his mouth settled more possessively on hers. Questing. Insistent. *Let me in*.

Her heart skipped. Her breath stalled. She opened her mouth, and he angled his head so his mouth slanted across hers and *claimed*, pulling her into a tunnel of sensual heat and sparking desire.

The next moan was hers. It was another capitulation, one that gave up everything to him. It wasn't healthy to let herself go this way, she knew it wasn't, but she had been waiting so long to feel this way again. Wanted. Cared for. *Good*.

He abruptly pulled back, breath hissing in. "We can't do this. I know who you really are, Natasha."

It was her turn to draw in a searing breath, one filled with the secondhand smoke of her father's duplicities.

Silvio's hand shot out to close around her numb fingers, keeping her glass from tipping. "Don't spill your wine all over my carpet."

"I want to go home."

Chapter Three

Silvio's expression tightened. He took the glass from her hand and set both aside. "If you want to go home, I'll take you, but I'd like to know what happened."

"You just said you knew," Natasha cried, waving her empty hand wildly. "My father was running an admissions racket and getting a kickback for referring students to high-interest loan companies. Preying on them. I figured it out and reported him."

"You testified against him."

"I had to." It had been a nightmare. "I wasn't trying to be dishonest, using a different last name when I applied at RIF. Braun is my birth name. He's my stepfather." And the only father she'd ever known. For most of her life, she had believed he was a good one.

She squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to succumb to the pain of betrayal, but tears leaked against her lashes. "I needed a job. A good one. I'm helping pay his legal bills—"

"Why?" Silvio cut in.

"Someone has to! He can't. The rest of my family didn't put him in prison." That was all on her. It was a lodestone on her chest every single day. "They don't even speak to me. They *hate* me." She covered her stomach, where it felt as though she was being sawn in half. "All this time I thought you were so cold toward me because I was your employee and you didn't want to encourage me. I didn't realize it's because..." She couldn't imagine how much contempt he had for her. Probably on the same level as her family. "Why did you even keep me on?"

"I couldn't fire you without cause. If I tried, you might have exposed our affair."

"You wanted to fire me?" She had longed to clear the air with him, but now she wanted to shrivel up and die.

"It's my job to protect the company. People have to be able to trust RIF. The responsible thing was to let you go so there was no risk of associating with your scandal, but..." He pushed his hand through his dark hair.

"I feel so foolish." She had come here believing this was a romantic overture on his part, but he was one more person putting her on trial. "You've known how horrible I am all this time and said nothing?"

"I don't think you're horrible," he said sternly. "No one went home smiling today because of their bonus. The thoughtful gifts you gave them made their day. You think I don't see how hard you work? That you jump to help without being asked? *Mio Dio*, how can you call yourself horrible when you're paying legal bills for a man who stole from others?"

"I benefited from his actions all my life! I have to do something," she cried. "And if you think I'm so great, why didn't you ask me to stay? You're glad I quit. Admit it."

All the wretched lights on the tree were glinting against her wet lashes, making everything look diffused and ethereal, but she caught the culpable way his mouth tightened.

"I thought I was doing the right thing." She hugged herself. "But given all that it cost me..." Her family, her home. *Him*.

Oh, she couldn't bear for him to see her so full of self-pity! She turned her back and stared at the blurred reindeer standing in the gathering snow outside.

“Quit torturing yourself.” He came up behind her to clasp her upper arms. “Your stepfather is the one who did something reprehensible. If your family sides with him, that’s their mistake, not yours.”

She didn’t respond, only stood very still, savoring the feel of his hands moving consolingly from elbows to shoulders, sending tendrils of warmth into her chest.

“If it hadn’t happened, would you have come to New York?” he asked quietly.

“No. I would still be...” She flashed a look up to his reflection. She wouldn’t have met him.

“I’m sorry for what you’ve been through,” he said sincerely. “But I’m glad you’re here. I kept you on because I wanted to see you, Natasha. Even if it was only when I walked past your desk every morning. And I didn’t keep you on because I wanted this.” He gently turned her and slipped his arms around her. “Is this something you want?”

Him? Her mouth was trembling. She nodded. “So much.”

A tender smile transformed his expression, one that put a shy glow in her heart. When he kissed her, she could have wept at how sweet it tasted. At how much his embrace felt like a homecoming.

Passion was as quick to flare as it had been last year, sending their hands roaming, searching. They pressed tightly together, their response as immediate and unconstrained as longtime lovers.

He broke away with a husky laugh. “I’ve been making love to you daily in every setting you can imagine, but tonight, I want you in my bed.”

She was guilty of the same fantasies, making it feel very natural to discard her clothing on the stairs, to pause for an ardent kiss or an intimate caress and grow lost in a moment.

He said the most seductive things, too. "You're so beautiful. So soft. You've been driving me mad, pretending to ignore me. All I think about is how good it was..."

It was every bit as good again. Better. When she was at a fever pitch, rolling naked with him across his bed, feeling positively revered by his attentions, he loomed over her and pressed inside her and, in that instant, she ceased to feel broken and alone.

The ceiling reflected the dancing lights from the terrace. His smooth back was under her hands, his consuming kiss stole her thoughts, his body moved with power, delivering such pleasure, she could only think, *Yes. More.* She had never felt so attuned to anyone. So perfectly loved.

Was this love? She feared it might be, on her part at least, but she didn't mind losing her heart to a man who suffused her with such joy.

As the tension built and he moved faster, she clung, urging him on until they were both shouting in ecstasy.

The waves went on and on, making her think they might remain fused forever, but slowly they relaxed and caught their breath.

In the aftermath of long kisses and lazy caresses, she felt more than physical gratification. She felt new. Accepted. *Forgiven.*

For that, she would always love him.

The emotions that welled up in her were so powerful, she had to close her eyes to withstand the strength of them.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing." She pressed a smile onto her lips. "Just thinking that you must be flying out soon?" Ugh. Not another goodbye. "I should go." She tried to sit up, but he firmed the arm and leg draped across her, keeping her on the mattress.

“I’ll call you when I get back. We’ll keep seeing each other.”

“Why?” Her heart lurched. “There’s no happy ending for us. We both know that.” With that, she gathered her things and walked away from the only happiness she’d experienced in years.

Chapter Four

“I don’t want to say goodbye, either. You’re punishing me because you want to punish yourself,”

Silvio growled as she left his apartment, insisting his driver take her home alone.

Untrue. This wasn’t only about avoiding another painful goodbye. She didn’t want him to see how she lived. Her place wasn’t squalid, but it wasn’t *this*. And maybe he didn’t see her as a disloyal associate of a white-collar criminal, but he had been right to worry how her past would reflect on him, his family and the company.

They might have passion, but they didn’t have a future.

She only wished they had ended on a less antagonistic note. Those last angry words haunted her as she started her new job at the marketing firm, which was running at half capacity because so many people had already left to visit family.

By the time Christmas Eve rolled around, her housemates were all out of town. The only people in the office were her and the self-professed atheist who admitted he was going to mass to please his elderly mother.

Natasha would give anything to be with Silvio right now. She missed him. At the very least, she should have agreed to keep seeing him when he returned. Maybe she *was* punishing herself because she thought she deserved it.

“Natasha.”

She thought she was hallucinating when she heard his voice as she started up the steps of her brownstone. She turned to see him climb from the SUV parked across the street.

“What are you doing here?” she asked with astonishment.

“Spending Christmas with you.” He slung a travel bag over his shoulder before accepting a stack of boxes from his driver.

“What— Silvio, no. I don’t even have an apartment. Only a bedroom.”

His brow quirked, asking how that was a problem.

She sputtered a laugh, too incredulous to do anything else.

“Enjoy your time off!” he called to his driver, who was leaving without him. “You have to take me in, Natasha. It’s Christmas.”

Exasperated, she led him into the empty house. At least it was clean. As a present to her housemates, she had been scrubbing all the common areas and, given how many houses she had staged for her mother through the years, had it looking good enough to show.

Silvio glanced around at the exposed brick wall, the decommissioned fireplace with the fern inside it, the fading area rug on blond hardwood and the well-worn furniture.

“No tree?” He set the stacked boxes on the coffee table, separating them to reveal one was full of wine and groceries, the other brimming with wrapped gifts.

She covered the ache in her chest. “Silvio, what have you done? What about your family?”

“What about a coffee?” he teased. “Or...” He handed her a beautiful, embossed tin. “Hot chocolate. My sister gets this from Belgium.”

He didn’t seem to be in a hurry to explain himself—or go anywhere—so she removed her coat and went into the kitchen to put the kettle on.

He brought the groceries in and began putting them away, leaving out biscotti, a bottle of amaretto, cinnamon sticks and a clear-topped tray of rosette-shaped marshmallows.

“Isn’t your family angry that you’re here?” she asked.

“I was angry with *you*.” He sent her an admonishing look as he stowed a bottle of white wine in the door of the fridge. “Until I was in the air. Then I was angry at myself for leaving. I knew I hadn’t offered you enough. No, listen.” He forestalled her interruption. “You didn’t see a future for us because I didn’t give you one. I left you thinking I only wanted to have sex with you, but by the time I got to Italy, I was ready to quit my job so we could be together.”

“Silvio, no! I won’t let you.”

“It’s not up to you,” he said dryly. “But my father said the same thing. I explained the risk of bad press, but I told him I can’t live without you. I said I spent a year waiting for you to do something wrong and the only wrong was the year I lost when we could have been together.”

“Oh.” This was too big. It felt like a miracle, a real one. She couldn’t take it in.

“My mother said we could have had a baby by now if I hadn’t dragged my feet. Most of the gifts are from her. My father believes that with appropriate disclosures to the board, concerns will blow over— Oh, *bella*, don’t cry.” He hurried across to cup her wet cheeks. “I hoped you would be happy. That you would want us to be together?”

“I am. I do. But I didn’t think there was any way. I didn’t think...”

“I had to *find* a way. I love you, Natasha.”

“But I—”

“*Because* you stand by your principles,” he stressed. “You deserve to be happy, *bella*. Will you let me try to do that?”

“You already have.” Her eyes filled with emotive tears at the sacrifice he’d been prepared to make. “I love you, too.”

His kiss was a benediction. A vow. A foreshadow of the wondrous life he promised her. Slowly their kiss deepened, imbued with something bright and glorious. *Love.*

As his hand burrowed under her shirt, she drew back. “I only have a single bed.”

His brow quirked again in a silent *Where is the problem?*

With a chuckle, she led him to her room.

* * *

One year later...

Natasha had met Silvio’s parents and sisters through the year as they came to visit him, but this was her first time spending the holidays with all of them in Italy. She was excited, but nervous. She still wondered what they must think of her.

If he had had his way, he would have taken care of her, but she insisted on still working to cover her father’s legal fees. She was at a real estate firm in Manhattan now. It paid obscenely well, allowing her to cover the lion’s share of her father’s bills. That had warmed her sister enough that they had had lunch a few weeks ago. Her sister felt very much in the middle as she continued to support their mother, but it was enough progress to brighten Natasha’s outlook.

Now she had something else to look forward to. *They* did.

She was waiting until Christmas morning to tell him, but he surprised her Christmas Eve by handing her a bauble to hang on the tree.

“Oh, wait. What’s that inside it?” He stopped her from hanging it.

The diamond ring winked at her. She gasped.

He went down on one knee. She tried to muffle her scream with her hand, but it came out as a squeak.

Everyone seemed to be in on the joke except her, laughing and calling children to “*Vieni, vieni.*” More than one phone was aimed at them, but she felt so surrounded by love, she thought she would be smothered by it and die happy.

“Yes. Of course! I love you!” She stooped to hug him and he rose, drawing her into a proper embrace, kissing her once, then placing the ring on her finger before he kissed her again—with a dramatic dip and plenty of passion.

Then everyone was hugging her while she was still in shock, glowing and smiling so hard her cheeks hurt.

Later, when they were in his palatial room with its private balcony overlooking the Adriatic, she lifted her hand over her head so that the stone caught the moonlight spilling in from the window.

“I thought I would be the one to surprise you,” she murmured.

“Oh? How so?”

“By telling you you’re going to be a father.”

“A—” His voice cut off.

She turned her head on the pillow. “You didn’t guess?”

“You haven’t been drinking because we were trying. I didn’t expect it to happen so quickly. *Anima mia.*” He gathered her naked body against his so she could feel the rapid drum of his heart against her breast. “That makes me so happy, I won’t catch my breath for a year. I love you very much, you know.”

'Tis the Season for Seduction

“I love you, too. You’ve given me a life that...” She couldn’t have imagined it two years ago, when she had thought a night of solace was all she could hope for. Now she was a member of his boisterous family and had her own child on the way.

He drew her atop him so her hair spilled around their faces and he could roam his hands up and down her back. Her eye caught the clock: 12:01 a.m.

“Merry Christmas, my love.”

“It is.” He cupped her cheek, saying against her lips, “It very much is.”

* * *

If you enjoyed *'Tis the Season for Seduction*,
be sure to read other books from Dani Collins,
and check out her latest Mills & Boon Modern novel:

Awakened on Her Royal Wedding Night

Available now!

And look out for her dazzling Bound by a Surrogate Baby duet:

The Baby His Secretary Carries

The Secret of Their Billion-Dollar Baby

Coming soon!

Katie Mettner

Code Name: Santa

Katie Mettner

Elliott Beech was exhausted. As the newest crew member of the Secure One team, he worked double time to prove himself. He thought that had ended when he left the army, but it turned out a person spent a good part of their life proving themselves to others.

It was no different at Secure One, but he should have known that, considering the team was led by a former army special ops military policeman. Elliott was still grateful for the opportunity to work for Cal Newfellow. His team understood what it was like to return stateside while parts of yourself remained on the battlefield and parts of the battlefield remained in you.

When his phone delivered a text at nearly 10:00 p.m., he pulled it from his pocket immediately. The notification said Jolene Callahan. She was his best friend in his hometown of Winterspeak, Minnesota. It was a mere two-hour drive from Secure One, but Elliott hadn't visited since he'd been freed of his commitments to Uncle Sam. The woman behind the text was the reason why.

She'd been his best friend since the sixth grade when he helped her up after another kid pushed her down and stole her crutches. Elliott wasn't a fan of bullies, and when he caught the dude who took her crutches, he'd made sure he understood why he shouldn't do it again. That suspension was worth every second of homework he had to make up.

Elliott read the text twice, but the second time, anger thrummed through his veins. He walked back to command central, stuck his head in the door, and motioned for his boss to join him in the hallway.

Cal walked toward him and Elliott instinctively took a step back. Cal was a giant of a man, making Elliott look small as a six-two, two-hundred-pound man. Cal never once thought to sit at a desk all day while the rest of the team did the grunt work. Cal was hands-on all the time. Speaking of hands, his right one had been mangled by a car bomb while in the service. That had ended his army career, but only death was going to end his service to humanity at large.

"You need something, Elliott?"

Elliott's mouth went dry, and he almost walked away until he remembered that Jolene needed him. He'd walked away years ago when she needed him most, and he couldn't do it again. "A friend needs some help with security around her farm. I know we're already strapped for manpower, but—"

"But we're in the security business, Elliott," Cal finished. "Run it down for me."

"My best friend from high school, Jolene," Elliott said, the name rolling off his tongue like butter, "runs a resort and tree farm in Winterspeak. Someone is vandalizing the farm and breaking into her cabins."

"And?" Cal asked as Elliott rubbed the back of his neck.

"I'm worried about her. She has cerebral palsy and uses crutches. She can't run, so she's at the mercy of an attacker. In a life-and-death situation, she's so far out of town that the police would never get there—"

"Son, you need to go," Cal interrupted. "You've worked hard to get our perimeter secured, so I can spare you for a week while you take care of her perimeter. Winterspeak is near International Falls, right?" Elliott nodded once. "That's too far to drive back and forth. Can you stay in town?"

The cabin he used to live in flashed through his mind and he nodded again. It might not be available, but he had other options. Hell, it was probably better if it wasn't available. Too many ghosts lived in that cabin. There wasn't room for the living.

"That won't be a problem."

"Excellent. Stay for the week and see if you can get to the bottom of the break-ins while you develop a security plan with Jolene."

"I don't intend to reveal why I'm there," Elliott explained. "I'll pretend to be a guest so I don't tip off the vandals."

"Agreed, but you still need to work on a plan. Do that in private. Grab the basic gear to surveil the situation and head out. Call in once you know what you'll need to secure the farm. We'll get the equipment to you so you can finish the job."

"Will do. Thanks, boss."

Cal walked backward toward the command center. "You can thank me by figuring out if you want more from Jolene than an old childhood friendship."

Elliott tipped his head in confusion. "A what now? What gave you that idea?"

"The look in your eyes when you said her name." Cal gave him a finger gun, turned, and walked away.

Elliott grunted as he headed to his room. It didn't matter what he wanted because he could never have it. He was only going to Winterspeak to keep Jolene safe. He was all she had, even if he would never be enough.

*

Jolene Callahan wished she could enjoy the beauty of the sunrise as a fresh flocking of glittery snow on her evergreens danced and sparkled in the new day. Instead, she had to deal with the now lopsided sign that announced Frosted Evergreen Resort and Tree Farm to her guests as they pulled down the lane. The haphazard way it hung this morning felt more like an omen than a welcome.

Even if she could lift the heavy sign to fix the chain, the wood it should connect to lay busted on the ground from a hammer's blow. Tears filled her eyes as she stared at the damaged sign. It was the sixth incident of vandalism in two weeks. The police promised to find the vandals, but it was getting worse instead of better.

In a fit of frustration and anger, she swung her pink crutch hard against the damaged wood and let out a rebel yell. She would not let some two-bit vandals ruin the legacy she'd assumed eight years ago. The Frosted Evergreen Tree Farm had been part of Winterspeak for three generations and it wouldn't end on her watch.

Tires crunched on the lightly snow-sprinkled gravel, and she glanced up in surprise. It was barely 7:00 a.m., which was too early for guests, and she didn't have any deliveries this morning. A full-size silver pickup rounded the bend, came to a sudden halt, and then the driver's door cracked open.

The man who stepped out was the last person she expected to see. "TT!" Jolene cried. She launched herself into his arms, where he caught her and held her tightly to his warm, now ridiculously ripped chest.

"Jo-Jo," he said, burying his nose in her hair the same way he used to when they shared a hug as kids. "It's so good to see you."

Jolene didn't answer. She couldn't. The lump in her throat dammed up the words she wanted to say to her best friend. Words that she'd held so tightly to for the last eight years. Those words were part of her foundation now. They were part of her soul and the driving force behind her solitude in the trees. Jolene would never say them aloud, but they had been the mantra of her life while she watched Elliott's success from afar.

"I'm going to set you down," he warned, as he always had, so she grabbed her crutch handles as her feet touched the ground. Once she was steady, he released her and took a step back.

"I can't believe you're here," she whispered, shaking her head as though he were nothing more than a mirage on this cold December morning.

"I got your text last night, Jo-Jo. I'm here to help."

Jolene had to hope he didn't notice her shoulders slump. Of course, he was here to help with the security issues. That was why she texted him, after all. Thinking he was here for any other reason was a good way to get her heart broken again.

"You didn't have to come all the way out here, TT. We could have talked on the phone and made a plan. I don't want to monopolize your time."

"I should have come home months ago, but..." He paused and then shrugged. "Your text was the wake-up call I needed to stop being a coward and show up for you."

"You're not a coward, TT," she said, using her childhood nickname for him. When they were kids, he always had to say, *That's Elliott with two Ts*. Jolene knew she was the only one he allowed to use the nickname. "I'm just so happy to see you."

"I'm happy to see you, too, angel," he said, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I didn't realize how much I missed you until I drove into town. Tell me what's happening," he said quickly, as though to move past what he'd just admitted. "That doesn't look like an accident." He pointed at the broken sign.

She grimaced despite the happiness filling her. "Not an accident. I found it this morning. I don't know who's doing this, but I can't take much more."

Elliott walked over and picked up the broken wood from the ground. "When my dad built this, he said it was temporary, remember?"

Jolene laughed as she braced her crutches on the gravel and leaned on them. "I'm not sure your dad ever grasped the concept of temporary. He built things to last and this would still be standing if it weren't for someone with a bad attitude and a hammer."

"I'll fix this first thing," he said, turning back to her. "Are the tools still in the main barn?"

"Yes, but you don't have to fix it, Elliott. When I texted you, it was to have Secure One help me catch the vandals."

When he strolled back over, she couldn't help but notice that the army had made him strong and hard in all the right places. She also noticed the look in his eyes that said he didn't feel strong. She hated that the place she loved with all her soul made him feel weak and ashamed, especially since he had nothing to be ashamed of.

"I am Secure One, Jolene. Cal sent me out to catch these idiots while we build a security plan for the farm."

"You're staying? Like overnight?" Jolene asked in surprise. Considering everything that happened before he left for the army, she didn't expect to see him again, much less for him to stay where his ghosts were buried.

"Secure One is two hours away, so it's not feasible to drive back and forth. Since I know this property like the back of my hand, I'll use my time wisely. After I place a few hidden cameras to catch these yahoos," Elliott said, holding up the wood, "I'll have a better idea of the property's weak points to include in the security plan. Does that make sense?"

Jolene nodded as she rubbed at her forehead, her crutch banging against her leg. "That's above and beyond, TT. Are you sure you can be away from work that long?"

"Secure One will be fine without me, but you won't be if we don't catch these guys." He hefted the wood in his hand. "I'm not okay with that."

"I only have one cabin open right now, Elliott." Jolene bit her lower lip while she waited for the penny to drop.

When his chin fell to his chest, she knew it had. "The caretaker's?" he asked as he leveled his gaze to meet hers.

"The last one left over a year ago. No one's been in it since. My tentative plan is to convert it into a guest cottage this summer."

He lifted a brow. "With no caretaker, how are you managing everything yourself?"

"Oh, I'm not," she admitted. "I hired good people, although it takes several now to do what your dad did himself. These days, it's hard to find someone who will dedicate themselves to something they don't own, which is understandable." She waved her hand. "Regardless, it's the only cabin available, but maybe I can see if one of the other guests wants me to comp their stay, and they can move into the care—"

"Jolene," he said, interrupting her nervous chatter. "I'll stay in the cabin. It's on the edge of the property, which means I have easy access to the woods to install the cameras."

"Are you sure?"

"About the cabin?" he asked, and she nodded. "Absolutely not, but I'm sure you need to be safe, which trumps anything else I'm feeling. Okay?"

"For now," she said, following him to the truck.

As he helped her in and they lumbered off toward the barn, she wondered if the magic of the season could lighten even the grumpiest of hearts. She glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, and the glower he wore was the answer. Not even good old Christmas magic could overpower the bad memories the Frosted Evergreen held for Elliott Beech. There was no use wasting another Christmas wish on something never meant to be.

She stared out the window to hide her tears, which made the beautiful green trees nothing but a blur in her silent heartbreak. She'd convinced herself that Elliott was out of her system, but his reappearance in her life told her nothing was further from the truth.

*

Elliott paused on the top step of the cabin and spun to take in the surrounding trees. The forest encroached on the structure, which would have worried him years ago, but now it felt poetic. Maybe it was time for the forest to reclaim the wood of this cabin and lay its ghosts to rest for good. Elliott wondered if one of the ghosts beyond the door was his innocence—the ghost of his hopes and dreams. Seeing Jolene again reminded him of that boy and made him wish he'd done things differently all those years ago.

He shook out his shoulders and grasped the handle, shoving the door open before he could change his mind. Jo-Jo had planned to help him get settled, but when the farm got busy with guests, he used that opportunity to escape. For this walk down memory lane, he wanted to be alone. When he dropped his duffel bag on the wooden floor, it made the same thwap it always had in high school. He was transported back to the day of his thirteenth birthday when they had moved into the cabin.

As he walked past, his finger trailed through the dust on the old bookcase. It was a time capsule that brought an immediate ache to his chest. His father's belongings were long gone, but the furniture hadn't changed. He could still see himself and Jo-Jo sitting on the old couch playing Nintendo late into the night. Those were the days he wanted to remember, but they were overshadowed by the ones spent next to his father's bedside, hoping and praying for one more day against a losing battle. He had died a painful death from lung cancer in this cabin on Christmas Eve. He always said smoking would kill him, and it did at the ripe old age of fifty-five. Elliott's mother had taken off not too long after he was born, which made him an orphan at seventeen. Since Mrs. Callahan was still alive then, though already ill, she asked him to stay on and do his father's work on the farm. He had nowhere else to go, so it was an easy yes for a grieving young man. Staying on the farm meant seeing Jo-Jo every day, too. Then, in all his teenage wisdom, he decided that if he didn't leave, he might end up just like his dad. Stuck in a one stoplight town with no way out and dead before he'd had a chance to live. How wrong he'd been, and all he needed was to see Jolene again to drive that point home.

Elliott walked to the doorway of the first bedroom and leaned against the doorjamb. The bed was new and against the other wall, but the room still smelled of pipe tobacco and death. The hinges creaked as he pulled the door shut. That closed door would be daily motivation to do his duty here once again, see that there was nothing here for him but bad memories then drive away and never look back.

*

Jolene hung her apron on the hook behind the cash register and grabbed the bank bag with the cash and receipts inside. She didn't want to admit that having Elliott here the last few days had been a massive weight off her shoulders. Lately, she'd been scared to death walking to the house to lock the bag in the safe, so she was glad he'd been waiting for her last night when she finished. Tonight was

no different. Shutting the lights off, she gave the old barn a loving pat before she grabbed her crutch handles.

"I'll get the door," Elliott said, sliding it closed and locking it with the padlock.

"Thanks, but I'm still capable of shutting the barn door."

"I know," he said, taking the bank bag from her so she could use her crutches easier. "But while I'm here, enjoy a vacation from the tedious."

Her laughter carried across the tops of the trees and bounced around them until it disappeared into the woods. "Well, if that's the case, I have a few more tedious chores you can do."

Elliott held her crutch, and she looked up at him. "Whatever needs to be done on the farm, I'll do, Jo-Jo. That's why I'm here."

"No, you're here to catch the vandals. I take it there was nothing on the cameras this morning?"

"Nothing, but if they follow the same pattern, something will happen early tomorrow morning. I'm prepared."

"A little part of me hopes I'm wrong about the pattern."

"From what I've seen, you're not. Someone is out to get you, but I won't leave until we figure out who and why. In the meantime, how about we have dinner and catch up?"

"I'd love to," she said, crutching toward the house, her feet scuffing through the snow and gravel. Fatigue had kicked in and she would be lucky to make it to the door before she collapsed. "I'm sorry I couldn't spend the evening with you last night. The Christmas centerpiece class is always booked solid months in advance."

"It was no problem. I used the time to put up more cameras and look for weak spots on the property."

"Well, if you're still here next week, you can help me run the Christmas wreath-making class."

"You still do that?" Elliott asked while laughing. "That's a throwback."

"Yep, and each year is a different theme. This year, it's Willy Wonka."

He laughed again and shook his head as they neared the steps to the house. "I should have known it would involve candy. You always had the biggest sweet tooth."

"Still do!" she exclaimed, starting up the first step, conscious of her twisted right foot. She had to clear the lip on the stair before she tried to take the second one or— She didn't get to finish the thought before her chin hit the top of the steps when she fell.

"Jolene!" Elliott exclaimed as he scooped her up into his arms.

"I'm okay," she assured him, resting her palm on his chest. "My foot caught the step."

He glanced down at her legs and frowned. "Where's your other brace? You're only wearing one."

Elliott jogged up the steps as though she weighed nothing and strode into the house. He set her down on the couch and pulled her boots off, his frown deepening when her right foot tucked itself behind the left at an uncomfortable-looking angle.

"I need my crutches," she said, scooting to the end of the couch. "Then I'll round up some dinner."

"You're not going anywhere until you tell me where your brace is," he said, carefully taking her left foot in his hand and sliding her house slipper on to hold her brace in place.

"It's broken, Elliott."

"A rivet again?" His sigh was heavy when she nodded. "I'll fix it after dinner. How long have you been without it?"

"Too long," she answered, afraid to tell him the truth. "I need new braces but don't have that kind of money."

"You can't keep going like this, either. Does the clinic have a payment plan?" he asked, standing and holding out his hand for her to take.

"I suppose," she said before she changed the subject. "I could go for something hot. How about you?" She grabbed her rolling walker and pushed it toward the kitchen, since he'd left her crutches outside. "How about a famous Lydia Callahan cinnamon apple pie waffle?"

His soft moan from behind her made her smile. Elliott was easily distracted by waffles, and she was never more grateful for that than she was tonight.

*

"This is pointless," Elliott muttered as he rolled to a sitting position and rubbed his hands over his face. His phone said it was only 3:00 a.m., but his mind didn't care.

Pulling on his pants, socks, and boots, he stood and strode into the small kitchen. While he made a cup of coffee, he couldn't stop thinking about dinner with Jolene. Determined as ever, she wouldn't allow him to help her in the kitchen, so he'd busied himself with fixing her ankle foot orthosis instead. Saying she needed new ones was an understatement. The plastic was worn thin in more places than he could count, the padding was nonexistent, and the hinges that allowed the plastic to bend at the ankle were shot. Growing up, he had learned to fix her AFOs on the fly as they always broke at the most inopportune time.

Since she was a little girl, Jolene had downplayed her cerebral palsy because of the circumstances of her birth. She wanted to spare her parents the pain by not reminding them of what they'd lost that day. Her twin brother had gotten stuck in the birth canal, and her mom needed a C-section to rescue them. Unfortunately, her twin didn't make it. Jolene always felt that her cerebral palsy was a hindrance to her parents, who expected two healthy babies but came home with a baby girl with a serious disability while they buried their only son.

Pretending she didn't have it had done her no favors as her bones and muscles grew, and situations that could have been prevented weren't because no one took action. It still angered him that her parents had done the bare minimum to keep her mobile. It also made him angry that she considered herself less than someone else. Less than her brother. Less than a *normal* woman, as she would say. It didn't take him long to see that her self-esteem had gotten worse rather than better. He wanted to ask why but didn't want to make her mad this early in his stay.

Carrying a cup of coffee, he grabbed his jacket and stepped outside for fresh air. Steam poured off the hot coffee to warm his nose as he brought it to his lips. There was something transcendent about Winterspeak and the Frosted Evergreen. Elliott had noticed it last night as well. His soul rested

here in the silence of the trees. He didn't sleep, but not from the usual nightmares that haunted him. He didn't sleep because he felt alive for the first time in eight years.

A man could walk for miles on this property and never encounter a single soul, which was the exact opposite of Secure One. There, a man could only walk within the confines of the fence and never alone. In the army, everyone told them they were fighting for freedom, but he had never felt more caged until he parked his truck by this old cabin.

The coffee forgotten on the porch rail, Elliott flicked his jacket around his shoulders and zipped it up, burying his hands in his pockets to ward off the chill of the night. He took the stairs two at a time, hoping a walk would tire him out, and he'd fall asleep for a few hours before daybreak. The lights were off when he strode past the old farmhouse, which meant Jolene had no trouble sleeping. He was glad about that. She practically ran this place herself and needed rest to make it through the season, especially when she was expending extra energy trying to walk without adequate braces.

After much cajoling, he'd convinced her to use her rolling walker outside instead of her crutches for extra safety. Once Christmas was over, he'd figure out how to pay for her new braces so she wasn't in pain and at risk of falling. It was bad enough that her chin would be bruised from hitting the stairs. Imagine if she'd hit her head while alone. He couldn't have that on his conscience, too.

Glass shattered to his right, and he sprinted toward the sound. "Security!" Elliott yelled as he rounded the side of the barn. A figure dressed in black stood in suspended animation until he turned and threw a rock at Elliott, which he managed to dodge. "Stop!" he yelled, finally close enough to grab the guy and throw a punch. Unfortunately, his fist glanced off the vandal's black helmet while the thug's fist hit home. The gut punch sent Elliott backward a few steps, and the guy took the opportunity to throw a leg over an ATV and speed off in a cloud of snowflakes.

Elliott let out a breath. There was no sense chasing him. He'd be long gone in seconds. All Elliott could hope was one of his cameras picked the guy up as he barreled through the woods.

Spinning on his heel, Elliott took in the damage to the barn. The vandal had broken out two windowpanes on the display window. He scowled at the mess as he shook out his fist. Not only did he have to clean it up and replace the broken panes, but he had to be the one to tell Jolene. He'd barely finished the thought before he turned and ran for the house.

*

Jolene sat up in bed. Was that Elliott yelling? She waited but heard nothing but an ATV off in the distance. She was ready to go back to sleep, but her phone chirped on the nightstand. She read the text from Elliott that he was using his key and coming in. She quickly typed back an okay and then pulled her legs from under the covers. There was no way she would allow Elliott into her bedroom, or to see the twisted mess her legs were without the braces, so she quickly strapped them on, zipped up her robe, and trundled out to the entryway. She flipped on a light and caught sight of herself in the mirror just as the doorknob jiggled. A giant bruise had turned her chin black and blue. Not a great look, but at least she didn't break her chin or nose when she fell. If there was one thing she had going for her, it was the ability to find the bright side of any situation.

"Jolene." Elliott pushed the door open and stopped as though he was surprised to see her in the hallway. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," she said as he closed the door behind him. "The better question is, are you?"

"I'm fine, but you were right."

“Vandals?” Elliott nodded in the affirmative, and she sighed. “What happened this time?”

“Busted glass on two panes of the display window on the barn. He threw a rock at me, I got a punch in, and he took off on an ATV.”

Jolene closed her eyes for a moment and swallowed. “It could have been worse. Thank God you were out there,” she said when she opened them.

“It could have been worse, but it’s still escalating, Jo-Jo. We need to find the person responsible for this and stop them.”

“Is that why you were out there? Running security?”

“No,” he answered, rubbing the knuckles on his right hand. “I was taking a walk to shake off my anger about your broken leg braces.”

“TT, they aren’t your problem,” Jolene said, shaking her head. He always had a problem with how she approached her disability, but he didn’t have to live her life.

“Maybe not, but that doesn’t change how I feel,” he said with a shrug.

Jolene rolled toward him and took his hand, the mottled skin on his knuckles starting to bruise. “What did you punch? His chin?”

“His helmet,” Elliott said with a sardonic grin. “I aimed for his chin, but he moved.” He trailed a finger over the bruise on hers. “I should have helped you up the stairs, angel.”

“Again, not your responsibility, Elliott.” She kept rubbing his knuckles, allowing his touch to warm her all the way to the organ that only ever beat for him. When she gazed into his eyes, they told her of the pain and sacrifice of the last eight years better than words ever could.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“For what?” Jolene asked, her heart pounding when she noticed a change in Elliott’s eyes. There was tenderness there, but not like when they were kids and he was protecting her. This was different. This kind of tenderness softened a man’s eyes when he looked at a woman he wanted to kiss.

Not possible, Jolene. Stop fooling yourself.

“For leaving the way I did, Jo-Jo. I was a coward and couldn’t face losing someone else I loved, so I ran.”

“I know,” she promised with a sad smile. “Your dad had only been gone for a few months when Mom was diagnosed. Besides, you had no obligation to us, TT. You had to go out and build a life. Mom and I both understood that.”

His shrug said he didn’t believe her. “The fact that I’ve felt terrible about it since I drove out of town tells me otherwise. I’m glad I can be here for you now.”

“To assuage your guilt and be the hero?” Jolene asked, dropping his hand as disappointment filled her. She was angry with him, but she had no right to be. She could only be angry with herself.

“No,” he said, stepping closer and leaning on the front of her walker. “You don’t need me to save the day. You’ve run this place alone and improved the property tenfold since your mom died. Am I worried you could get hurt if you got in the way of these vandals? Yes, but that’s not why I’m here.”

“Why are you here, then, TT?” she asked, curiosity getting the better of her anger.

“I miss you, Jo-Jo. I miss your smile, laugh, and positivity. I miss this land and the peace it always offered without demands. I miss being free, but I miss who we were as kids most of all.”

“We aren’t kids anymore,” she said, realizing it was unnecessary to point that out. Then again, maybe it wasn’t. He had his head in the past and not the present.

“No, we aren’t,” he whispered, his gaze taking in her body in a way that lit her on fire and made her uncomfortable simultaneously. She wanted more from him than she could ever have, but her body was the least desirable thing possible to a man. She’d learned that the hard way several times over.

She’d once dreamed they could be more, but the reality of her situation had always been evident to Elliott. She couldn’t hide her twisted legs or the braces she wore at night to keep her hands from spasming. Elliott had seen some of it, lived all of it, and walked away once already. She would never ask him to sign on for it permanently.

“I want to stay here and talk to you about everything running through my mind, but I need to clean up the mess. There’s snow moving in. Do you have extra panes for the barn windows?”

“Yes, in the back storage room of the barn. I’ve had a couple windows break before when mowers or vehicles tossed rocks into them. I’ll help you.”

“I can do it,” he said without missing a beat. “You go back to sleep.”

“As though that’s going to happen,” Jolene said with a chuckle. “How about if you fix the broken windowpanes while I clean up the glass inside the barn and the display? Thankfully, I recently switched the display from stuffed animals to candles, or all that stock would be ruined.”

“That’s a deal. I’ll wait while you get dressed.”

She knew better than to argue with him, so with a nod, she turned and walked back to her room, hyperaware of his gaze on her the whole way. When she turned to close the door, the look on his face told her everything she needed to know. No matter how many Christmas wishes she wasted, he would never be hers.

*

“Jo-Jo!” Elliott called as he ran down the gravel path. When he rounded the corner, Jolene was handing a cup of hot chocolate to a little girl. “We got something!” he expelled on a breath of air as he stopped by the table filled with goodies.

“From last night?”

“Yes. He went past several cameras I have up in the woods.” Elliot showed her the images on his phone. “Do you recognize that ATV or person?”

After enlarging the images for her, she shook her head. “No. I mean, we all use ATVs. I have one like it. With no plate, there’s no way to know.”

“Which I’m sure is on purpose,” Elliott spat. “You don’t recognize the driver?”

Her frown said it all. “He did a good job disguising every feature with the heavy coat and helmet.”

Elliott expelled a frustrated breath. “I was hoping you’d have the easy answers. I sent the images to Mina at Secure One to see if she can get anything.”

“Good idea, but we can look at it as knowing what he’s driving. That’s a start. We should check with the police, too, just in case they’re familiar with the ATV.”

“Already done. The police have the rock he pitched at me, too. I doubt they’ll get anything from it, but no stone unturned.”

“Well done,” Jolene said with a smirk. “I see what you did there.” She smiled as she handed another cup of cocoa to a little boy and waved goodbye. “You missed the sleigh ride.”

“Sleigh ride?”

“Over the river and through the woods,” she said with a cheeky grin.

“Someone had to keep watch on the place. Plus, I was tired from all the fresh air.”

It had started snowing as they finished the glass cleanup and had snowed the better part of the day. Elliott had hoped to get to the cameras sooner, but Jolene’s plow driver called in that his truck had broken down. Elliott had jumped on the snowblower to plow out the resort so guests could come and go. Since this was her busiest time of year, she couldn’t afford to close for the day. He was exhausted, but it was a good kind of tired. Fresh air and an honest day’s work always did that to him.

“You don’t know how much I appreciate you stepping up to do that,” she said, turning and nearly running right into him. Her tiny hand grabbed his jacket to keep from falling. “I would have had to close for the day if you hadn’t been here.”

“I’m going to be here more, Jo-Jo,” Elliott promised. Their gazes locked in suspended time. He leaned closer, her lips a magnet he’d fought long enough. He had to know if his feelings for his best friend were real or imagined. Molten lava slithered through his body when his lips touched hers, and he knew this attraction was real, not imagined.

Jolene’s lips were cool under his, but they warmed as he tenderly brushed his lips against them. It was a chance for her to end the kiss if she wasn’t interested. Instead, she leaned into him, grasping his coat in both hands. That felt like permission, so he leaned into the kiss, keeping it closed-lipped and gentle, but the heat that filled his gut didn’t allow him to deny his feelings for his best friend. He wanted it to be more, and Jolene’s soft moan said she did, too. He wrapped his arm around her waist and lifted her to draw her closer. His lungs burned, but he didn’t want the kiss to end. Finally, Elliott pulled his lips away but kept her plastered against him.

“I had to know,” he whispered as darkness enveloped them.

“If we could be more?” Jo-Jo asked, and he nodded. “Because that felt like more.”

“That felt like heaven,” Elliott said, tracing a finger down her cheek.

“It felt right to me,” she said, gazing at him. “But you and I can’t be a thing, TT.”

“Why not?” He lowered her to the ground, and she dropped his coat and stepped back.

“The Frosted Evergreen is my home, Elliott, but this is the last place you want to be. Regardless, you deserve a woman who is beautiful, smart, strong, and capable. I may be some of those, but not enough of them.”

“You’re wrong,” Elliott said, eating up that step until he’d trapped her against the table. “I look around this farm and see just how smart, strong, and capable you are, Jolene Callahan. As for beauty, no one has ever turned my head like you.”

"Maybe," she whispered, scooting to the side and grabbing her walker, "but what I'm not is whole." His confused stare had her waving her hand in the air. "The whole package. You don't want any of this, TT," she said, motioning at her legs. "You don't need to live this life. You got out once, and you should go again. I shouldn't have asked for help. As long as you were just a memory behind a keyboard, I could pretend I was happy. When you showed up on my doorstep, I remembered how much it hurt to give you up. I survived that once. I don't know if I can survive it again, Elliott."

Before he could say anything, she took off for the house, pushing her walker through the snow like a plow, her booted feet slapping against each other as she crossed the driveway. Elliott could have easily stopped her and forced her to finish the conversation, but he knew her. Talking would get them nowhere. If he wanted to convince Jolene that what she felt in that kiss was worth fighting for, he would need a little help from good old St. Nick.

*

There was a knock on the door, and Jolene wiped her hands on a towel with a sigh. She'd managed to hide in the house since her tirade earlier, but it seemed the piper had come calling. Rather than expend the energy to walk to the door, she ducked her head around the wall and yelled. "It's open!"

The door swung open, but instead of Elliott, as she'd expected, the top of an evergreen poked through the door.

"TT?" she asked, grabbing her walker and pushing it toward him. "What on earth are you doing?"

"Bringing you a Christmas tree. Isn't it obvious?" he asked, setting the trunk on the floor while he toed off his boots.

"I can see that, but why? I don't put a tree up in the house."

"Which is just sad," he said, shaking his head. "You own a tree farm."

"There's a tree in the barn. Considering my physical limitations, I have to be happy with that."

"Not when I'm around," he answered before he lifted the tree and carried it into the living room to lean against the wall. The tree was shorter than him, which meant it wasn't more than five and a half feet tall, but it was gorgeous with its natural flocking. The room was filled with the scent of Christmas, and she couldn't help but run her fingers through the needles. They were soft against her skin, and the heat released more Christmas magic into the room.

"Where are your decorations and tree stand?"

"Same place they always were."

Elliott dashed off, and the wooden door creaked open within seconds as he dug for goodies under the stairs. He returned with the tree stand and got busy leveling the trunk. A timer sounded, and she held up her finger, pushing her walker into the kitchen and removing the pans of sugar cookies from the oven. There were angels, trees, stars, and snowmen as she lifted them off the pan to cool. She paused with a star cookie sitting atop the spatula. A star for the top of the tree he'd brought her.

He must have remembered how much she cherished putting up the Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving and leaving it up as long as she could until the needles fell. She had tried to push him away so he'd keep his distance, but he hadn't done that. He had dug deeper.

Jolene worried her bottom lip, unsure of her next move until music floated into the kitchen. Bing Crosby was dreaming of a white Christmas. Finished with the cookies, she pushed her walker back into the living room. Elliott was already winding brightly colored lights around the tree.

“Are you ready to decorate?”

Her unabashed joy filled the room as she laughed. “Ready!”

*

“It’s time for the tree topper,” Elliot said, lifting Jolene by her waist to set it on the top branch.

Once it was perfect, he lowered her to the ground. He didn’t want to let go of her, but he knew this was her favorite part of decorating a tree. Every part of him wanted to see the smile on her face. “Nice job. Let me get the lights.” He jogged to the wall and hit the switch, then jogged back. The tree sparkled with festive colored mini lights, and Elliott knelt while keeping an eye on Jolene. He plugged the angel tree topper into the connection and her face lit up with the golden ray of light from the angel’s candle. Jolene’s joy for the season filled the room, and Elliott sighed happily.

“It’s so beautiful, TT,” she whispered, her hands under her chin.

“I couldn’t agree more. I haven’t seen the smile you’re wearing in so many years,” he said, holding his hand out. “Come dance with me.”

Her face fell. “Elliott, I don’t dance.”

“Just like in high school,” he said with a wink. He wasn’t going to let her shy away from him anymore.

He bent over so she could wrap her arms around his neck. Then he held her to him by her waist as they swayed to the music. They danced in a slow circle to “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” It was simultaneously romantic and melancholic. The joy of the season filled him, but it was mixed with sorrow that he couldn’t stay and hold this woman in his arms every night. The Frosted Evergreen had worked its magic on him again in the most unexpected ways. As he gazed into Jolene’s eyes, he wondered if it was the woman and not the place making him feel this way.

“Thank you, TT,” Jolene whispered. “Tonight has been lovely. I won’t forget your kindness.”

“You deserve nothing but happiness and joy, but I know you don’t feel those often.”

“How do you know?” she asked, her tone slightly miffed by his assumptions.

“Your emails say more than your words, angel. They tell a tale of loneliness, weariness, and sadness.”

“It’s been a long eight years, TT.”

“I know, and my time here, while hard to face, has reminded me of why I stayed after Dad died. I shouldn’t have run away. I should have stayed and told you the tru—”

Glass shattered down the hall, and he turned in one smooth motion to set her onto the couch. “Call 911!”

When Elliott reached the hallway, smoke filled the area, but he ran into it and quickly stomped on the burning rag before it could ignite the bottle’s contents.

"The police are on their way!" Jolene yelled as she pushed her walker forward. "What is it?"

"Molotov," he said between clenched teeth. "Thank God they used the wrong kind of bottle, or the house would be in flames." He turned and noticed the tears in Jolene's eyes. "Hey," he said, moving the walker aside to take her into his arms. "It's going to be okay. We will find this guy. I promise."

"I don't know how much more I can take, TT. I'm terrified to be here alone."

"You aren't alone. I'm staying here tonight. Once the police leave, I'll board up the window. While you're working tomorrow, I'll replace the window and clean up this mess."

"That's not your job, Elliott."

"My job is keeping you safe. That includes making sure you don't get hurt."

"Don't you have to go look for whoever threw this?" she asked as she melted into his chest.

"No point. They threw it and ditched. I heard the engine roar."

"You can sleep upstairs, and I'll sleep on the couch." She motioned at the door of her bedroom with smoke tendrils filling it. "I can't sleep in there."

"I have a better idea," he said as he heard sirens in the distance. "Once we're done with the police, we'll sleep under the Christmas tree's lights, just like old times."

Her sigh told Elliott she loved that idea, and he tightened his arms around her. He had to keep his angel safe, which meant she could never be alone. Thankfully, there was always a coworker with her during the day, so he'd use that time to do a little recon, even if it meant breaking a few laws.

*

The past few days had left Jolene exhausted. Spending so much time with Elliott was heavenly, but being that close to him and knowing she'd never have him was a special kind of hell. Their evenings were filled with good food, laughter, movies, and long conversations. When the morning came, he would escort her to work and spend the day traipsing around the farm's perimeter while making notes on an iPad.

"You do this every year?" Elliott asked, pulling her from her musings.

"This is year six," she answered, knowing he meant the tree lighting on Main Street. "I donate the tree, and the kids make ornaments to decorate it. We light it up tonight, and it stays lit until after New Year's. Then the tree is chipped and used on the school playground under the bench dedicated to my parents. Everyone in town brings their trees to be chipped in January, and the school uses them for wood chips on the playground."

"A fabulous way to recycle them rather than throw them away."

"Exactly, which is why I started the program. As a tree grower and seller, I didn't like being part of the problem."

"So, now you're part of the solution." TT gently shoulder-bumped her, since she was using her crutches.

The choir finished singing "O Christmas Tree," and the mayor began to speak. "Every year, our own Jolene Callahan lights the tree, but she has a helper this year. Some of you may remember Corporal MP Elliott Beech." Jolene noticed Elliott's shoulders square and his spine stiffen as an automatic

response to mentioning his service. "Elliott is visiting for the holidays, so as an honorary tree lighter, he will start our countdown!"

Elliott leaned into the microphone, wearing a grin that filled her with all their childhood memories until she wanted to burst. "Ten, nine..." Elliott joined her again near the tree, and their hands hovered over the switch. They flipped the switch as one, and the tree lit up in pure white lights the moment the choir began singing "Silent Night."

"It's so beautiful," she whispered, her gaze glued to the tree that sparkled, bringing light to the darkness.

"So are you," he whispered.

Those three words sent a shiver down Jolene's spine while heat flooded her veins. Suddenly, she wondered if all of her Christmas wishes hadn't been wasted after all.

*

"Mina?" Elliott asked when the line connected. It was late, and Jolene was asleep, but this couldn't wait.

"Hey, Elliott. Need me to get Cal?"

"No, this is a follow-up on those ATV pictures I sent earlier. Can you run a plate for me?" On their way home, they'd passed a truck with a sticker on the back. The same sticker Mina had enlarged and sharpened on the ATV pictures.

"In my sleep," she said with a chuckle. "Hit me."

He rattled off the numbers and letters and waited while Mina typed on the other end of the line.

"That plate belongs to Thunder Mountain Resort. The address butts up—"

"To Jolene's," Elliott finished.

"Sounds like you can take it from here. Let us know if you need anything."

"Will do. Thanks, Mina."

He hung up the phone and tapped it on his palm. He had a bad feeling in his gut about this. He walked down the hallway to check on Jolene and was surprised to see her awake.

"Did I wake you?" he asked, stepping inside the door.

"Who was on the phone?" she asked rather than answer him.

"Secure One. I wanted to check in today, but time got away from me."

"Is everything okay?"

"Of course," Elliott answered, though it was a solid lie. He didn't want to tell her what he suspected just yet. He'd need to investigate more before he accused her neighbor of vandalizing her property.

"You should get some sleep."

"I can't sleep. My right leg keeps spasming and waking me up."

Elliott frowned but held up his finger. He jogged to the living room, gathered blankets and pillows for the couch, and then returned to Jolene. Without warning, he scooped her out of her bed and into his

arms. She squealed and grabbed his shirt as he returned to the living room. He relished the sensation of her against his chest, her sweetness a balm to his tired soul. When he lowered her to the couch, he noticed the smile that lifted her lips.

"I thought maybe the tree would help distract you," he said as an explanation. "Did you take your meds?"

"They should kick in soon," she answered, refusing to look at him.

Elliott tipped her chin until she was forced to make eye contact. "Let me help." Slowly but with purpose, he moved to the end of the couch where her legs were hidden under the blankets. She never liked him to touch her legs, but he knew it wasn't because of pain. She was ashamed of them. It was time she stopped feeling that way. He gently lifted her right leg from under the covers, even as she resisted. "Let me help," he whispered again, keeping his gaze linked to hers while he started to massage her twisted ankle. "Does that ease the pain?"

"Your touch always makes me feel better, Elliott. It's sweet torture, though, knowing you're not here to stay."

"Being here again has me confused about my place in this world, Jolene. That's all I can say right now."

"I know." She nodded in agreement but said nothing more as he turned his attention to her leg.

It was easy to see the massage relaxed her, and slowly, her foot stopped spasming, so he tucked it under the blanket to keep it warm.

"You're the most beautiful thing of all, Jolene Callahan," he whispered, taking her hand and holding it against his chest. "Thank you for trusting me to take care of you."

"It's always been you, TT," she whispered.

He'd longed to hear those words, but he wondered if it was too late. When he pressed his lips to hers, he knew it wasn't.

*

Jolene noticed Officer Cooper's cruiser pull up while she was helping a family with their Christmas tree. By the time she finished, Cooper was having a conversation with Elliott. She crutched to where they stood, suddenly aware of their posture and facial expressions.

"Cooper? Did something happen?"

TT took a step forward and propped his hand under her elbow. "We found the vandals, angel."

"What? When?"

Cooper was the one to answer. "Elliott noticed a sticker on a vehicle last night."

"A sticker?"

"The same sticker we saw on the ATV," TT explained. "Mina traced that plate to Thunder Mountain Resort."

"Okay, but lots of people probably have those stickers."

"That's true," Cooper agreed. "So, I paid them a visit and found the ATV. The story unraveled quickly when confronted."

"Wait, you're saying they're the ones attacking me?"

"I'm afraid so, angel," TT said.

"Why?"

"Financial troubles," Cooper answered. "They wanted your guests to feel unsafe so they'd stay at Thunder Mountain instead."

"Wow," Jolene said as though someone had punched her. "I have no words. What happens now?"

"I arrested Shawn, and he'll be charged with multiple counts of vandalism, including attempted arson."

"I had no idea business was that bad for them. I could have helped."

"Some people don't know how to ask for help, Jolene. That's not on you," Cooper said. "I'll keep you posted as to the charges and pleas. You shouldn't have any problems from now on," he assured her before climbing back into his cruiser and pulling down the drive.

Jolene turned to Elliott. "I'm angry and sad. I thought we were more than neighbors. I thought we were also friends."

TT put his arm around her shoulders and kissed the top of her head. "Mina did a bit of digging and told me their resort is close to foreclosure. That's nothing you did. That's mismanagement of a business."

"I know, but I still feel bad. So, this is it? Secure One is expecting you back?"

"They are," he answered, holding her closer. "I'll head out in the morning. Either Roman or Mack will return to install the equipment we discussed for your security system."

"Why can't it be you? I trust you."

"I'm not an installer, Jo-Jo," he answered. "Come on, let's lock up for the night and then share dinner one last time."

Jolene nodded and smiled a smile she didn't feel. Her appetite had disappeared the moment she knew he was leaving. She thought it was hard to let him go eight years ago. This time, it would be impossible.

*

Elliott couldn't sleep, so he returned to the cabin and stood in the bedroom doorway. He stared at the empty spot on the wall where the bed used to sit and closed his eyes. His father's waifish frame on the mattress, holding Elliott's hand while he tried to speak, filled his mind. It would be ten years tomorrow since he took his last breath. Elliott hadn't mentioned it to Jolene but wondered if she remembered. She probably did because that was Jolene.

"What do I do, Dad?" he whispered into the empty room.

You've done two of the three, a voice whispered.

His mind flashed to just a few days before his father had passed. He'd said, "Elliott, there are three things you need to do to be successful in life. Have a good moral compass, serve when called, and treat the woman you love the way you'd want a man to treat your daughter."

Elliott didn't have to think hard to know he hadn't treated Jolene the way he'd want a man to treat his daughter. He closed the door to the room, hoisted his duffel bag over his shoulder, and walked out the cabin door. With a final glance at the stars, he tucked himself into the truck and pulled away from the Frosted Evergreen and the woman he loved.

*

He'd left without a word, on Christmas Eve, no less. Christmas Eve. She did the math and realized it had been ten years today since his dad passed. Her heart filled with sadness for him. She took out her phone and typed a text.

I wish I'd had a chance to say goodbye. She paused and glanced up at the stars. She wanted to cry from the beauty of a cold Christmas Eve, but also from the pain of losing Elliott. She'd held it together all day, but now, alone with the stars, a tear fell. *I was thinking about you and your dad today. You're my best friend, TT, but I—* She paused with her fingers on the keyboard.

Was that a car on the driveway? A few moments later, a truck she was familiar with stopped next to her. When Elliott stepped out, another tear fell. Her heart cracked in two when he walked up to her and brushed them away.

"You're back? I was sending you a text. I realized it's been ten years since your dad died."

"It has," he agreed, his gaze intense as he held hers. "That's why I left last night. I had some things to do."

"Did you do them?"

"Yes. The first stop was for this." He handed her an envelope. She opened it, and inside was a business card for an orthotist in the Twin Cities. She flipped it over to see *January 10th—10 a.m.* written on the back.

"Wait. This guy is the leading expert on CP bracing. I have an appointment with him?"

"You do, and the expense is covered. You'll get new braces that work for you. It turns out Cal has some connections."

"This is too much, TT," she said, her lips trembling.

"No," he said with a shake of his head. "It's not nearly enough. When my dad was dying, he told me I should treat the woman I love the way I'd want my daughter to be treated. I haven't been doing that. That changes now."

"The woman you love?"

"That's you," he said with a lip tilt. "In case you hadn't figured that out. I love you, Jolene Callahan. I'm tired of pretending I don't."

Her chin trembled for seconds before she could speak. "I love you, too, TT. Always have. I've spent every Christmas wish hoping you'd be mine."

“I’ve always been yours, Jolene. I wish it hadn’t taken me so long to realize it. As soon as I did, I quit my job.”

“What? At Secure One?”

“Cal understood that I had to go, but he wouldn’t let me quit. We’re going to talk after the holidays about helping Secure One as a remote security specialist.” He paused and took her hand. “That won’t be a full-time job, though, so I was wondering if the caretaker position is still available. I want to apply.”

“It is, but I planned on remodeling the cabin this spring. I’d have to find you different housing.”

“I’d like to make a suggestion.”

“You may.”

“The house is awfully big for just you. Maybe we could arrange a place for me there? Maybe in your bed every night?”

“You’re hired,” she said in a breath. “We can discuss pay and benefits after the holiday.”

Elliott lowered his head toward hers. “Angel, a life with you on this beautiful property is all I’ll ever need. We should negotiate the fringe benefits, though.” His gaze was intent on her lips as he lowered his head and welcomed the start of their new life with a gentle kiss.

As Jolene wrapped her arms around the man she loved, she couldn’t help but think that her Christmas wishes had come true after all.

* * *

If you loved *Code Name: Santa*, be sure to catch Katie Mettner’s next book, *The Perfect Witness*.
Out February 2024