



Tina Beckett

A Christmas Kiss with Her
EX-ARMY DOC



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Her Ex-Army Doc**

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Beckett T.

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Can a Christmas kiss... ..lead to their happy ever after? Nurse Hollee Cantrell is stunned when ex-army doc, Clancy deOliveira, begins working at her hospital. Years ago, they shared a passionate kiss – but then Clancy left and Hollee married his best friend. Now widowed, it's time for Hollee to admit that her marriage was a sham and she's never stopped thinking about Clancy. And as their desire reignites, it seems Clancy hasn't forgotten her either...

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Nurse Hollee Cantrell is stunned when ex-army doc Clancy deOliveira begins working at her hospital. Years ago, they shared a passionate kiss—but then Clancy left and Hollee married his best friend. Now widowed, it's time for Hollee to admit that her marriage was a sham and she's never stopped thinking about Clancy. And as their desire reignites, it seems Clancy hasn't forgotten her either...

Three-times Golden Heart® finalist **TINA BECKETT** learned to pack her suitcases almost before she learned to read. Born to a military family, she has lived in the United States, Puerto Rico, Portugal and Brazil. In addition to travelling Tina loves to cuddle with her pug, Alex, spend time with her family, and hit the trails on her horse. Learn more about Tina from her website, or 'friend' her on Facebook.

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A CHRISTMAS KISS WITH HER EX-ARMY DOC

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To my husband, who believed I could.

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PROLOGUE

THE FUNERAL MADE her squirm, her grief and tears for her husband having already been spent long ago. The second the news had reached her that Jacob's chopper had been shot down in a remote part of Afghanistan, Hollee Cantrell had instinctively known he hadn't survived. But protocol demanded he be listed as MIA until the helicopter and his body were found.

A year later, both had been.

It was official. She was a widow. The ache in her heart bloomed to life all over again.

She stood on the plush lawn of the cemetery beside her parents as guns fired one blistering shot after another until all she wanted to do was press her hands to her ears and muffle the sound.

Instead she stood frozen in place.

The military salute ended and almost against her will her eyes shifted to a spot to her right.

He was watching her. Again.

When he mouthed, *Are you okay?* her eyes filled with hot tears.

All she could think about was herself, and here was Jacob's best friend—looking as handsome as sin in his dress blues—asking her if she was okay. He'd separated himself from their little band of friends before she and Jacob had started dating, deciding that playing the field was a lot more fun than hanging out with them. So she was surprised to actually see him here. And even more surprised that he cared about how she felt. If only he'd known all those years ago that, given the choice, she would have chosen...

No, it would have changed nothing.

She forced herself to give an imperceptible nod, even though she wasn't okay. Not at all. What she felt was numb.

Her dad put an arm around her shoulder and dropped a kiss on her head, which made her tears come even faster.

Using her fists, she rubbed them away and prayed neither Clancy, his sister nor his mother came over to speak to her after it was all over.

She felt the worst sort of traitor. She'd married Jacob and only a couple of years later had she realized she'd made a mistake. But there'd been no going back, even as the ring on her finger had become a noose she had been desperate to escape. She'd planned on having a long talk about their future once he came off deployment. Only he'd never come home.

And now she was done with love. Done with relationships. Forever.

As soon as she could, she was slipping away. Far away from Virginia. Far away from Jacob's memory. And most of all far away from the man who hadn't wanted her. A man she'd never quite forgotten, no matter how hard she'd tried.

CHAPTER ONE

Five years later...

CLANCY DE OLIVEIRA SETTLED behind his new desk, putting the picture of his significant other on the corner of it with a smile. Gordy might not be human, but he was the only kind of permanent companion Clancy needed or wanted nowadays. The part basset hound had followed him to his car after the funeral, and they'd been together ever since—except for his nine-month stint in Syria. The last one of his career.

It was almost like Jacob had sent the dog to apologize for what he'd done. At least that's what Clancy would like to think. The truth was they'd barely spoken since Jacob had confessed that he was in love with Hollee all those years ago.

Clancy tried to find her after the funeral, but she'd been long gone. Besides, would he really have told her the truth about what her husband had done while overseas? Probably not. Better to just let the truth be buried with his old friend. The last he'd heard, Hollee had moved away from Arlington, probably needing a fresh start.

Clancy was now a civilian taking his place in a vast network of hospitals and private practices in the area. His plastic surgery skills would morph from treating combat injuries to treating children with facial injuries and defects. The devastation of war had changed him in ways that no one could imagine. In addition to the scars he wore inside, he'd suffered a physical injury, a shard of shrapnel that had sliced a path through his eyebrow and across his cheek, barely missing his left eye. The thin scar had faded somewhat—leaving just a line and a narrow bald patch in his brow. The exterior package had been cleaned up. The interior, however...

He shook himself free of his thoughts and opened his laptop, logging into the hospital's computer network and clicking the different tabs to see what was there. The administrator had told him to take the first week to acquaint himself with the way the hospital did things. There was a staff meeting in fifteen minutes, where he'd meet some of the folks he'd be working with, which included trauma and general reconstruction specialists, and there was a volunteer opportunity he was interested in. He was anxious to get started. Sitting still had never been one of his strong suits.

Which was why he'd decided not to take a vacation after leaving the military. The offer from Arlington Regional Medical Center couldn't have come at a better time.

Prying himself from his chair, he took the elevator to the third floor, where the administrator had said the meeting would be held. Some of the muted but elegant decor made him frown. He took a deep breath and let it hiss back out. It would take time to transition from the sparse military installations he was used to. Arlington Regional believed in focusing as much on atmosphere as it did on quality of care, saying it was all part of the healing process.

And it probably was. He'd just never practiced in a place like this. But at least here he would never have to worry about things like whether their stock of gauze pads would be depleted before the next supply run.

He turned a corner, following the blue stripe on the floor that would take him to the business areas of the hospital. There. People were ducking inside a door to the left, and a couple of others were standing outside the room, talking. Just as he got ready to enter it, one of the people waiting glanced up at him.

Bright green eyes—all-too-familiar eyes—met his, and her soft gasp came as complete recognition dawned. Hell. It couldn't be. She no longer lived here.

But that had been years ago. And she'd been a vet tech back then. So what was she doing here at the hospital? *His* hospital? Dressed in scrubs?

“Hollie?”

The word came out before he could stop it, and the person she'd been chatting with must have decided to get while the getting was good because the woman murmured a goodbye and shot through the door.

Hollee stood there without answering for a minute and memories from the past washed over him. Specifically, the moment when his nineteen-year-old eyes had met hers and he'd thought he'd captured something swirling in those green depths. Intrigued, he'd moved in to take a closer look. Before he'd known what was happening, his lips had brushed over hers.

The light touch had deepened into an actual kiss that had had his hands cupping her face. When they'd finally parted, they'd both stood there staring at each other, and she'd whispered his name. The wonder in her tone had almost transformed a friendship into something else. Almost. Until he'd remembered that she was the apple of her daddy's eye, and Clancy was a motorcycle-riding rebel.

A few days later his best friend had told him he'd asked her to their prom and that she'd said no, but he was hoping she'd change her mind. Clancy had instinctively known that Jacob was right for her in all the ways that Clancy was wrong. So he'd set out to prove that to her. And had succeeded far too well, since she had indeed accompanied Jacob to the prom.

Only what he'd found out about his friend later had made him rethink that decision.

He shook off the thought.

"Clancy, what are you doing...?" Her eyes widened slightly when they passed over his chest, and it took him a minute to realize she wasn't looking at him, rather at his lanyard. Maybe she'd been hoping he was just here to visit someone.

No such luck, sweetheart.

And since she was sporting a matching lanyard and had a stethoscope draped around her neck, she was here on business as well.

His gut tightened. So much for this job being a godsend. "Did you change professions?"

"I did, actually."

His gaze strayed to her left hand. Jacob's ring was gone and no one else's graced it. Dammit. It was none of his business whether or not she was involved with anyone.

More people were entering the room, a few of them sending quizzical glances their way as they passed. "Well, I guess I'd better head in," she said. "I was waiting on someone, but they're evidently running late."

Waiting on someone. A boyfriend? Friend?

His gut gave a painful spasm. She'd already been married once. And Jacob wasn't around to care.

But Clancy was.

Again, none of your business.

"All right. I'll see you in there."

He let her go, purposely waiting a minute or two before moving into the room. That way he wouldn't feel obligated to sit by her. Not that she'd want him to. If anything, she'd made it pretty obvious that seeing him hadn't been a pleasant surprise.

Why would it be? He had done a good job of playing the field. He'd convinced her and everyone else—including himself—that he was not the settling-down type.

He grabbed the first seat he could find, forcing himself not to try to locate her in the group. But of course he did, because what his mind dictated wasn't always followed by his body. She was two rows ahead of him, talking to the person next to her. The same woman she'd stood outside with.

She was a nurse.

Hollee loved animals, so he was surprised by her career change. And dismayed. It was going to be hard to avoid her, and after not seeing her for five years... Well, the memory of their past and that kiss had hit him a lot harder than it should have.

She hadn't changed much, that red hair combined with the tiny freckles that dotted her nose were all still there, and still just as beautiful.

Fortunately, before he could dwell on that thought any further, the hospital administrator went up to the podium and called for everyone's attention.

"Thanks for coming. I'll try to be brief." A few chuckles went up, which Clancy took to mean that brevity wasn't normally the man's forte.

"First of all I'd like you to welcome the hospital's newest addition. Clancy de Oliveira will be joining our reconstructive surgery team. Dr. de Oliveira, could you stand so people can see you?"

He did as he was asked, nodding to those who turned to look. He gave a small smile at the one head that hadn't turned toward him before taking his seat again.

The administrator went on to talk about the terrible tragedy that had befallen several small towns in Appalachia. The poverty-stricken area had suffered flooding from the record rainfall, and just as the waters had begun receding, and they'd been trying to dig out from beneath the mud, a tornado had ripped through, leaving a wide swath of destruction. Dozens were dead, and a big part of the population was in misery. People in the area had opened their homes to those who were without. But there was a lot still to be done.

Arlington Regional would be sending in a team to help with medical care and to get the biggest of the clinics back up and running again. They needed both doctors and nurses to volunteer.

Hollee sat up a little taller.

Was she thinking of going? Damn. He'd already expressed an interest to the administrator. It would be hard to back out now.

"The catch is the team will be gone the first two weeks of December. Close to the Christmas holidays, I know. But that's even more reason to go and help. We'd like to have about ten to twenty people from Arlington Regional participate. A soup kitchen and field clinic are being set up as we speak."

Someone raised his hand. "I'm interested. Where do we sign up?"

"Great, I'm just getting to that. I'm sure there are a lot of questions, and I've prepared a handout with some of the details. I know there's not much prep time, but Arlington Regional is all about quick response, so look at your schedules and decide if you have room in it to participate. If your department needs help with coverage, come see me and we'll take a look at what we can arrange. Lodging will be provided and meals will be served on site."

Clancy could remember mess meals. Despite the desire to be home, Christmas was still celebrated with gusto complete with a holiday meal with all the trimmings. When the meal was over, though, it was back to work. It was after one such meal that they'd come under attack from a missile, and he'd been injured. Several others hadn't been quite so lucky, with five people dying.

He'd been haunted by those deaths long after his wounds had healed.

He shook off the memory and concentrated on the administrator, his thoughts racing. He knew he would be an ideal candidate to participate, since he had nothing on his schedule yet and could keep those surgery dates open. And he was used to less-than-ideal working conditions.

And if Hollee was going...

Since when did his personal issues supersede doing the right thing? They hadn't back when they'd all been friends, and they didn't now.

The information sheets were passed out row by row. Clancy took his and gave the stack to the person beside him with a smiling nod. Then they were dismissed. Glancing over the paper, he worked through the logistics then sensed a person standing nearby. He looked up to make sure he wasn't blocking someone in. Instead, his jaw tightened when he saw Hollee.

"Sorry if I seemed short earlier. Welcome to the hospital," she said. "I didn't know you were back."

He nodded, knowing she was talking about his deployment. “I could say the same of you.” He stopped short of admitting to visiting her mom years ago. Besides, Shirley had probably already told her daughter about it.

“I’ve been back for a while.” She hesitated and then touched her left brow. “What happened?”

He wasn’t sure what she was talking about for a second then realized with a jolt. She’d noticed his scar. “Wrong place. Wrong time.” He didn’t actually want to tell her, and he wasn’t sure why. If she wanted to think he’d gotten into a bar fight or something, that was fine with him.

He changed the subject, nodding at the page in her hand. “Are you thinking of going to help?”

“I am, why?”

“Just curious.” Her voice was reawakening synapses in his brain in a way that he didn’t like. Synapses that suddenly couldn’t grasp the concept of “in the past.”

“With the devastation in that area, I’m sure there are some pregnancies that have been affected. I want to help, if I can.”

“Pregnancies?”

“I’m a labor and delivery nurse.”

That surprised him. “Do you regret trading being a vet tech for being a nurse?”

“There are always things to regret. But it seemed like the right thing to do.”

Her answer could have been taken right out of his own playbook. Hadn’t he done what he’d thought was right, only to discover later that he’d set Hollee up for a world of heartache? Luckily, he’d never had to deliver on the ultimatum he’d given Jacob in the months that preceded his friend’s death. “Will my going on the trip make things awkward?”

“It’ll be no different than working at the hospital together, right?”

Except if Clancy had known she was here, he would have given more thought to accepting the position. Would it have stopped him? He couldn’t honestly say for sure. And she didn’t know what he’d done back then. Just that he’d turned a cold shoulder to her a few days after that kiss. “True. Only I’ll be working on a different floor.”

He was still surprised that she was a labor and delivery nurse, although he wasn’t sure why. Having children wasn’t a prerequisite for working there or anywhere else. But it was a relief to know her face—as beautiful as it was—wouldn’t greet him every single day. Because the question that had beaten in his skull for years was: *Had he done the right thing?*

Jacob’s confession that he’d asked someone to the prom hadn’t been what had shocked him into silence back then. Neither had the fact that his friend had thought he was in love with that person. It had been the who behind the speech. Because it had been Hollee. Their Hollee. *His* Hollee. Only she hadn’t been his. One shared kiss did not a relationship make.

Returning to the present, he stood firm, meeting her eyes. “It doesn’t matter where either of us works, so don’t worry about it. If you’re worried about what...happened, don’t. It was a long time ago. Before you and Jacob ever got together, and it was obviously a mistake.”

At the swift look of pain that flashed through her eyes he went back and tried to soften his words. “Let’s just let bygones be bygones.” And like his retirement from the military, it was best if he just kept moving forward.

“Thanks for that, Clance.”

The shortened version of his name made him clench his jaw. Mainly because hearing it on her lips brought back memories that were better off forgotten.

And if he couldn’t forget?

No, he’d grown harder and wiser during his time in the military. And part of that included discipline. The discipline to compartmentalize areas of his life so that they never touched. If he had been able to do it then, he could do it now.

So he forced a smile that was less than sincere and said, “Nothing to thank me for. I’ve moved on. And obviously you have too.”

Up went her chin in that familiar stubborn tilt. Only he wasn't sure why she'd feel the need in this case. He was giving her an out. And himself as well. There was nothing to discuss. Now. Or ever.

"Yes, I have." She moved a hand as if to brush a strand of hair behind her shoulder. Except her hair was pinned up with a clip, exposing the long line of her neck. Nervous gesture? It didn't matter if it was. "Well, anyway, the hospital is very fortunate to have you here. I'm sure I'll see you later."

He was sure she would. Only Clancy was pretty sure he'd rather just avoid her whenever possible. But if they were both going to help in the flood-damaged area, there would be no avoiding anyone. They would be working closer than they'd ever imagined possible.

And he'd imagined all kinds of "closeness"... Once upon a time. His jaw tightened. Why was all this coming up again? Was it the shock of seeing her after all these years?

That had to be it.

As she walked away he was pretty sure it was more than that. And that he was doomed. Doomed to dig up things best left in the past. Doomed to sleepless nights of hearing her whisper his name. But there was one thing he wasn't doomed to do, and that was to dwell on the mistakes of the past.

No matter how difficult that might prove to be.



Hollee punched her pillow for what seemed like the thousandth time and tried to get her racing mind to take a break. God. Why did he have to land at Arlington Regional of all hospitals?

And why did they both have to volunteer for this trip?

She could stay in Arlington, except the thought of pregnant moms not having access to health care wouldn't let her take the coward's way out. If she'd stayed the course with being a vet tech, she wouldn't be in this predicament. She'd loved her old job with a passion, except for one thing. Putting animals to sleep. She'd thought she could get past it with time, but while she had been relieved when an animal's suffering was finally over, it had been the decisions made for financial reasons that had killed her.

She'd gone home in tears one too many times, although she'd known it wasn't the pet owner's fault in many cases. So she'd chosen to retrain, focusing on the human side of health care instead. There were still problems and things she didn't like doing, but at least people could understand what was happening to them and, for the most part, they could have a say in the decision-making.

Adopting one-eyed Tommie was the last act she'd performed as a vet tech. Glaucoma had stolen the dog's right eye, but it hadn't stolen her life. Her elderly owners had turned her over to Hollee, knowing she was the dog's best chance for survival, since glaucoma in one eye could attack the other at a later date, and they weren't equipped to care for a blind dog.

Tommie was getting older herself now, but Hollee loved her fiercely. Two weeks away from her was a long time, but Hollee's mom was going to stay at her house and keep her company while she was gone. And it wasn't like she'd be in another country. Just a different part of Virginia.

Maybe sensing her turmoil, Tommie chose that moment to hop on the bed and nudge her hand before curling up beside her. She smiled. "You know you're not going to get away with that when Mom is here."

She draped her arm over the dog's side and sighed. "But I won't tell her if you don't."

With that, Hollee finally felt a blessed heaviness invade her limbs, and her mind began to shut down. When Clancy's rugged face strayed a little too close, she nestled into her pillow, suddenly too tired to fight it off.

How could one person go from hot to so very cold and indifferent? She'd seen it not only in Clancy, but in Jacob too. A couple years after their marriage, he'd seemed to cool, and all the insecurities she'd felt after Clancy's rejection had returned with a vengeance.

She'd have to work on that problem after she'd gotten some rest.

Maybe then she'd have the strength to throw all the demons of her past away once and for all.

CHAPTER TWO

HOLLEE RACED DOWN the corridor toward the room at the end of the hallway, skidding to a stop when she saw Clancy heading toward the same door. “Clance? What—?”

“It’s Ava.” His head swiveled toward her, but he didn’t stop walking. “She called when I was in the middle of surgery and said she was on her way. Dammit! I can’t believe she drove herself in.”

Clancy’s sister! She’d actually meant to check on her pregnant friend this week, but with how crazy things had been, she hadn’t gotten a chance. Of course if she had, maybe she would have known that Clancy was headed to her hospital. As it was, she’d only heard that a woman with pre-term labor was being prepped for an emergency C-section, so she’d come to see if she could help. But she’d never dreamed it would be Ava.

Worried he was about to burst into the room and create a scene, she caught up with him and put a hand on his arm. “Stay here. Let me see what’s going on.”

His eyes narrowed. “She’s my sister.”

Which was why she didn’t want him charging in there. He was worried. She got it. But that kind of raw, exposed emotion helped no one.

No one knew that better than Hollee.

“Yes, and that’s exactly why I should go in first. You don’t need to upset her.” Or everyone else. Though she left that part unsaid.

At his brusque nod, she slid into the room, and encountered a chaotic scene. Ava was thrashing around on the bed as two nurses and the attending doctor did their best to quiet her.

“You need to hold still!”

“My baby! It’s too early!” The fear in that voice was almost Hollee’s undoing. But she held it in and went to the nurse who was trying to physically hold Ava down.

“She’s a friend. Let me try.”

“Okay, but put on a mask, she tested positive for influenza b.”

Oh, God. Not good. She took the mask the nurse thrust in her hands and pulled on gloves, then she smoothed Ava’s bangs out of the way, not liking the heat that rose in waves from her forehead. The fever explained some of her agitation. “Ava, it’s Hollee. Can you look at me?”

“Holley?” Her demeanor changed almost instantly, and she sagged against the bed. “What’s happening?”

She, Clancy, Jacob and Ava had all been so close back in the day. She and Ava were still friends, but Hollee avoided talking about Clancy. And when Ava had made passing comments about where he’d been currently stationed, Hollee had just smiled and nodded, then changed the subject. Her friend hadn’t mentioned him leaving the military. Of course, her friend had had other things on her mind.

“The baby’s coming.” Fresh pain speared through Hollee. What she wouldn’t have given to hear those words during her marriage. “You need to let them take you. They’re going to do everything they can for both of you.”

Tears streaming down her face, Ava nodded. “She’s supposed to be my Christmas Eve baby. Please don’t let anything happen to her.”

A promise no one could make.

Holley stepped back to let the other nurse take over again as an anesthesiologist swept in. “What do we have?”

“Preterm labor secondary to flu. We need to get her into the OR. Do you want to do the epidural here or there?”

“There.”

One of the worst things that could happen to the maternity ward was for the flu to find its way inside these protected hallways.

As if reading her thoughts, Dr. Latrobe grimaced. “We’ll need to follow protocols for disinfecting the ward. I’ve already called it in.”

Hollee needed to let Clancy know what was happening. “Does the baby look okay?”

Latrobe glanced up. “She’s five weeks early, but the baby’s registering some early signs of distress. The sooner we deliver her the better.”

She took that as her clue to get out of their way. She went back to Ava. “I’ll check in on you as soon as I know which room you’re in. Dr. Latrobe is one of Arlington’s finest, so you’re in great hands.”

“No! Don’t leave!”

Fearing Ava was going to start getting agitated again, she said, “Clancy’s outside, and he’s worried sick. I need to let him know what’s going on.”

“Poor Clancy.” Ava’s face flushed with fever. “He had a thing for...” Her face contorted as a contraction hit.

Hollee turned to leave while she could. Peeling off her gloves and mask, she pumped a couple of squirts of hand sanitizer before touching the door. She encountered resistance in pushing it open and found Clancy with one hand on the wooden surface as if he’d gotten tired of waiting.

“You can’t go in there. She has the flu. They’re taking precautions to keep it from spreading.”

“Damn. I asked her to get her flu shot. I thought she did, but maybe not.”

Ava had always been the free-spirited, independent one in their group. Even so, she’d been devastated when the baby’s father had decided he couldn’t do the whole parental responsibility thing. As if to prove that fact, he’d found someone else almost immediately after they’d broken up. “You know about the dad.”

He gave her a searching look before nodding. “Yeah, he made her promises he never intended to keep. He should be ashamed.”

Had Clancy aimed that jab at himself? They’d shared a kiss that had been pretty hot and heavy, but a week later he’d become someone she hadn’t recognized. All he’d said was that the kiss had been a mistake, showing up with another girl soon afterward. And another one a few weeks after that. It had been a slap in the face and had proved that bad boys did not make good marriage material. Even Jacob had commented on the way Clancy had been acting.

While she’d still been stinging from Clancy’s rejection, Jacob had asked her out, and she’d accepted. At first it had been a way to get back at him. But slowly, over the course of six months, she’d realized she and Jacob actually had a lot in common and when he’d proposed, she said yes. She’d loved him, but that spark of passion she’d felt for Clancy had never been there.

At first she’d thought it was because she’d over-romanticized that kiss and the connection she thought they’d shared. That feeling had gotten worse when Jacob seemed to distance himself emotionally. Initially, she’d chalked it up to her imagination. But a year before he died, that apathy had become marked, and her request to start a family as a last-ditch attempt to put things right had been met with a chilly response. She’d been crushed, and a seed of inadequacy had sprouted. First Clancy and then Jacob. Was there something about her that drove away people she cared about?

All but Ava. They’d remained close, but she’d never felt comfortable sharing her problems with Clancy or Jacob with her. Clancy was her brother. And Jacob...well, he’d been one of Ava’s friends too.

In the end, Clancy hadn’t even come to their wedding, something that had hurt both her and Jacob.

The funeral had actually been the first time she’d seen him since getting married. That had been five years ago. It might as well have been a lifetime.

Ava was whisked out of the room and down the hallway, reminding Hollee what was really important right now—and it certainly wasn’t her melancholy thoughts. Or things she could no longer change.

Clancy's face was a tense mask, and she gripped his arm, the warmth of his skin making her realize how cold her own hands had become. Ava had a big team of staff with her, and Clancy had no one right now, and she ached for him. "Come on. Let's grab a cup of coffee. And then we'll sit and wait for news."

"I want to be in there."

"You can't, Clance. You know that. Ava needs to concentrate and so does her team. And the last thing you need is to carry the virus into one of your surgeries."

"Hell, how did I not know she was sick?"

She smiled. "Are you serious? Ava is one of the strongest people I know. She's also the most stubborn. 'Show no weakness'—remember?"

That had always been the de Oliveira siblings' motto.

The flexing of muscles made her realize her fingers were still clutching his upper arm. She released him in a hurry.

"I can't believe she didn't come in sooner." He dragged a hand through his hair.

"I've been checking on her periodically but, honestly, she probably didn't even realize she had the flu. We get sick, and we wait it out. It's the way humans are geared. She had a pretty high fever, which is probably what triggered labor."

He leaned a shoulder against the wall. "She wants this baby. Despite everything."

"Of course she does." Hollee would have too, had the situation been reversed. But it wasn't. She swallowed away the sudden lump in her throat and inclined her head to point down the hallway. "The sooner we hit the cafeteria, the sooner we can come back and wait for news."

"Are you on break?"

"I actually worked the night shift. I just got off about fifteen minutes ago, but I heard the noise and decided to see if I could help."

He nodded. "I'm glad you were here. I might have gotten myself tossed out of the hospital before I'd been in town a week."

"That would be unfortunate. Especially with the Appalachia trip coming up."

And why had she even brought up the relief mission? The last thing she needed to be thinking about right now were those two weeks. Not when she hadn't quite figured out how she felt about being there with him.

They made their way to the first floor, and as the elevator doors opened she was met with the hospital's Christmas trimmings that had gone up in the last couple of days. Three festive trees were clustered to the side of the huge glass entry doors, the sparkle of silvery tinsel catching the light. On the other side stood a life-sized animated Santa, his bag of toys thrown over one shoulder, his head swiveling from side to side as if looking for his sleigh.

Above them, glittery snowflakes hung from fishing line, the climate-control system making them dance.

She'd always loved this time of year. "The hospital does a great job decorating."

"Hmm..."

The sound was so noncommittal that it made her laugh. "You don't like it?"

"It's just different from the places I've worked."

Of course it was. "The military doesn't decorate for the holidays?"

"They do, it's just not normally so..." He paused, as if searching for the right word. "So extravagant."

Holley looked with different eyes and could see how he might think that. "I'm sure where we're going, then, you'll feel right at home." Then, wondering if that sounded pompous, she added, "It's not the decorations that make Christmas special. It's the spirit behind it. Arlington Regional has a lot of children who walk through those doors. And sometimes they need a little bit of hope—a little bit of magic."

“I never thought of it that way. I guess I’m used to dealing with cynical adults whose deep pockets only give up funds for other things.”

“Things that save lives.” She smiled. “But you’re right. I think it all depends on its target audience.”

If things went as planned she would be here to help out on at least one of the hospital’s “Staff Santa” afternoons in the next couple of weeks, when they handed out gifts in the pediatric ward. It was always fun to see who they got to play the part of Santa. After that, she’d be away in Appalachia, in a town called Bender, for the rest of the festivities, playing a completely different kind of Santa. Two groups so very different but that both needed a shot of hope and happiness.

They arrived in the cafeteria, which was also decorated for the season, boasting small centerpieces on each of the laminate tables. She headed straight for the coffee machine, where she dumped a couple of sealed creamers titled “Mint Fantasy” and three packets of sugar into a cup.

He smiled. “I see you like a little coffee with your flavored syrup.”

“It’s the only way to enjoy it.” She scrunched her nose. “I’ll never understand how people can drink theirs black.”

“Since that’s how I like mine...”

“Okay, so maybe I was being a little judgmental. But for me, coffee is a dessert. Best savored in tiny delicious sips that make you tingle all over. Sweet, luscious and silky smooth.” She closed her eyes for a second, her tongue already anticipating the flavor.

Clancy didn’t answer, and when she glanced up, she found his eyes on her in a way that made her swallow. Oh, God. She’d made her coffee sound almost like...sex.

Strangely, they’d only shared a single kiss but, like her dessert coffee, she could still taste him. That light touch between them had been romantic and sweet and had hinted at things that had made her skin heat.

Their kiss had happened at Christmas too, and she could still remember exactly what had led up to it. Ava had pointed above her at something on the ceiling of her and Clancy’s childhood home with a wink, and when Hollee had glanced up, she’d seen a sprig of mistletoe.

And she had been standing right underneath it. And Clancy... She could still see his mischievous grin. That time he’d kissed her on the cheek. He’d saved the real kiss for later that evening, when he’d driven her home. Only that time he’d been the one holding the sprig. And when their lips had met...

She closed her eyes, suddenly angry with herself for even thinking of that night.

It might have meant something to her, but it hadn’t to him. He’d made that very clear.

It was as if someone had flipped a switch and turned Clancy into a totally different person. He’d still been intense, his loose bad-boy vibe deadly to the senses. Obviously a lot of other women had found him just as attractive. He still was.

When his attitude toward her had shifted, she’d nursed that hurt until it had festered, convincing her that Jacob was the better choice. After all, she felt like she knew him, whereas Clancy had become a stranger. When Jacob had wanted to save sex for their wedding day, she’d been fine with it. But when they’d finally slept together, it had been a huge letdown, and she wasn’t sure why. But she’d loved Jacob and had convinced herself it didn’t matter.

But maybe it had. Maybe if she and Clancy had had let-down sex, she wouldn’t be sitting here now wondering if he would have been as delicious as her coffee.

She turned away, feeling like she was betraying Jacob’s memory somehow. Maybe she’d been guilty of comparing them all along, and Jacob had figured it out. Maybe that’s why he’d changed.

Forget it. She concentrated on pouring and stirring her coffee and snapping on the lid. She should have just gone home, instead of offering to keep Clancy company. Tearing open old wounds was not something she was interested in doing. Especially if it would cause forgotten memories to come creeping back, dragging a matching bag of emotions with it.

“Ready to head to the waiting room?” she asked.

“Yes.” Then he frowned, touching her hand. “Thank you for checking on Ava. And being her friend.”

“She’s always been there when I’ve needed her. How could I do any less?”

“Well, I’m glad you were there anyway.”

“I’m sorry about the father. It was a rough time for her.”

He shrugged. “Mom didn’t even tell me what happened until I came home. I knew she was expecting, but not that he’d run off with someone else while I was still in Afghanistan. Maybe that was a good thing.”

“Will you go back overseas?”

“No. I was ready for a change.”

Something shifted in his demeanor, making her say, “It couldn’t have been easy.” Her glance went back to his face and the separation in his eyebrow. If anything, the scar made him look even more gorgeous, which was ridiculous. A scar was simply epithelial tissue that filled in a wound. It didn’t change who he was.

Or did it? He seemed less carefree than he had ten years ago. Harder in ways she couldn’t quite put her finger on. He was twenty-nine, just two years older than she was. There were no strands of gray in that thick, dark head of hair, but he almost seemed ancient, his frown line carving a deep groove that nothing would erase. She hated to think what he’d seen over there.

As they walked back toward the elevators, Neil Vickers, the hospital administrator, stopped them. “I don’t know if either of you have been in the staff lounge, but I put a sign-up sheet in there. I want to get an idea of how many we have for the Bender trip.” He looked from one to the other. “That is if you two are still interested in going.”

Hollee didn’t hesitate. “I am. I’ll make sure I put my name on the list.”

“Great. FEMA has just finished setting up a disaster relief camp. So they should be ready for us by the time our group arrives.”

Clancy hadn’t said anything, and she wondered if he’d changed his mind about going. Neil must have thought along the same lines because he glanced over at him. “How are you settling in?”

“So far, so good. I’ll take a look at the sign-up sheet.”

Hmm, that was rather noncommittal. What happened to all that talk about them both being adults and able to handle situations like this?

If he decided not to go, that would be a relief, right?

“That’s all I can ask,” Neil said.

“My sister is in surgery right now for preterm labor, and my decision has to hinge on the outcome.”

The administrator frowned. “I didn’t know. I’m sorry.”

“Not a problem. Hopefully everything will turn out all right, and I can join the team.”

Hollee had almost forgotten about that. Of course he wanted to see what happened with Ava and the baby. She felt like a fool for thinking his hesitation had anything to do with her.

She steered the conversation away from the subject, hoping to reassure Clancy that everything would turn out okay. “Do you think it would be all right if I bring some Christmas lights to decorate the tents or wherever we end up staying?”

“I didn’t see anything against that in the paperwork. It might even help morale. We’ve already planned on bringing some small gifts for the kids. They’re going to send me a rough count of the numbers once they get organized.”

“That’s great.”

“Don’t forget to sign up,” he said again, before waving and heading the way they’d just come. Why not? Even Neil had to eat.

“Let’s head right to Maternity,” she said. “I can sign up afterward.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m anxious to see if there’s any word.”

Making their way there, they stopped at the nurses’ station, and the person behind the desk gave them a smile, not even asking what they wanted. “She’s doing well. The baby’s out and being assessed. She’s tiny, but perfect. I don’t think she’s going to need as much support as many born that early.”

Clancy planted a hand on the desk as if to support himself. “Can we see her?”

“Not yet. They’re still closing her up.” The nurse hesitated. “And she does have the flu, so we’re taking extra precautions.”

“We’ve all had the flu shot, obviously, but we’ll be careful.”

Wow, Clancy had said “we” as if expecting her to go with him to see Ava. And of course she wanted to. Even if seeing the relief in his eyes had just about done her in. How hard would it be to see Clancy’s niece, knowing that his family was growing, while she was alone?

In five years of marriage, Jacob had continually put off having children, at first saying they had plenty of time. The last time, he’d said he wasn’t sure if he wanted children at all...with her.

Those words had hurt in a way that went beyond description. But he’d said he didn’t want a divorce, he wanted to work things out, even though she’d seen no evidence of that before his last deployment.

In the end, nothing had been settled between them. Had Jacob somehow known about her youthful crush on Clancy? No. Of course not. That had been over before they’d gotten married. And Hollee never would have cheated on him. Not even with Clancy. Her infatuation had been just the foolish stuff of youth.

She was over it now. And she’d donned her anti-Clancy armor as soon as she’d seen him again. She was well protected and ready for anything.

At least, she hoped she was. Especially if he ended up going on the relief trip. The last thing she needed to do was dig up that old crush and start mooning over the man again. Especially if he still played the field, like he had when they’d been younger. If that was the case, and he tempted her to share more than a simple kiss, she would be setting herself up for a whole lot of hurt. And this time there would be no one there to catch her when she fell.

CHAPTER THREE

CLANCY PUT HIS gloved hand through the opening of the incubator and touched Jennifer Jay de Oliveira's tiny hand, marveling at the sweet face. The Jay stood for Jacob, a nod to their friend. That rankled. When he got the chance he was going to advise Ava to choose something else. But he didn't want to do that in front of Hollee.

He didn't want to hurt her if he didn't have to. If that meant taking his old friend's secret to the grave and letting her continue to think Clancy had been a jerk back then, so be it. If he hadn't been such a kid at the time, he might have sat back and thought for a while before letting his friend's veiled hints and his own insecurities convince him that he was not what Hollee—who was valedictorian of her class—needed. What she deserved. But at the time he'd thought Jacob was right.

Clancy had coasted along for most of high school, wandering aimlessly, drifting from one pretty girl to another. His friends had been the one constant in his life. Until he'd kissed Hollee and found it mattered more than he had expected it to. And then even that friendship had been destroyed. Thanks to his own stupidity.

His life had changed when he'd joined the military and had seen the need for medical personnel. It was like he'd found his purpose in life.

"She's so beautiful." The low voice of the person he'd just been ruminating about slid past his ear, making his insides tighten.

"Yes, she is." He'd invited her here. He wasn't sure why, except that Ava and Hollee were close friends, their friendship bound so tightly together that they'd weathered all the ups and downs of childhood. Not so with his and Hollee's friendship. He'd made a choice he'd never dreamed he'd regret.

But he did regret it, even though Hollee had been happy with Jacob, and since she'd never learned the truth, she continued to believe her marriage had been perfect.

Clancy had done his damndest to stay busy, dating lots of women. He hadn't wanted Jacob or Hollee to guess the battle going on inside him, so he'd played up the freewheeling commitment-phobe aspect of his personality.

Maybe there'd been more to the act than he realized, since he was still single and had no desire to change that fact.

"At least Ava is okay, even though she can't see Jennifer yet."

They'd come to see the baby first to avoid any possibility that they'd pass something from mom to newborn. As it was, Ava wouldn't be able to see her baby for four or five days, until the period of contagion was over. It was for the baby's safety mostly, but Ava had been through an ordeal on top of being sick. She needed rest, and her body needed time to heal. She could still provide nourishment for the infant, since the flu virus didn't pass into breast milk. She couldn't feed her directly, but she could pump and have it sent to the NICU.

He turned and glanced at Hollee, noticing that she had a faraway look in her eye. She and Jacob had never had kids. Was she regretting that? He hadn't talked to his friend enough after his engagement to know if there was a reason, other than a choice he and Hollee had made. Maybe they couldn't have kids. Or maybe he hadn't wanted to be tied down by them.

That would explain a lot, actually, knowing what he did about Jacob.

"Better to wait and be sure than to endanger the baby out of impatience."

He'd have done well to heed that advice himself.

"Yes, I agree."

"Do you want to touch her?" he asked.

"Oh...um, I'm good. You take all the time you need."

A shakiness to her voice made him pause. "You don't like cuddling babies?"

"I do. My mom is watching mine."

Shock made him turn around, his hands sliding out of the incubator's access ports. "Excuse me?" She had a child? He'd assumed...

"Well, maybe I should amend that. My 'baby' has four legs and is covered with fur."

He went slack with a relief that took him by surprise. "A dog?"

"A German shepherd named Tommie."

"I actually have a dog too. Only he's a basset hound mix."

She laughed. "I love bassets."

"He's quite a character. Mom comes over to let him out during the day. She's coming up to see Ava and the baby in a little while."

"I'd love to meet your dog sometime."

A sliver of surprise went through him. She'd barely said twenty words since they'd come into the NICU area, and the change from then until now was dramatic. Her eyes were bright green and a smile revealed a peek-a-boo dimple at the corner of her mouth that he'd almost forgotten existed. It fascinated him as much now as it had when they had been teenagers. It was what had drawn his gaze repeatedly to her mouth after that kiss on the cheek, and the very thing that had instigated the very real kiss at her house later that night.

Dragging his gaze away, he focused on her eyes instead. "We'll have to get them together for a walk, although I have to warn you that Gordy doesn't always match his soulful brown eyes. Sometimes he can be a grump."

"That's okay. Tommie has enough cheer for five dogs."

What the hell was he doing? They were not two single parents planning play dates. Seeing her outside the hospital was not a good idea. But since they might be spending two weeks together in the near future, this might be a good opportunity to ease their way into things. It wasn't like they were going on an actual date. Just walking their dogs together.

"I guess we'll see. It looks like Ava and the baby will be okay, and if that's the case I'll probably go down to the Appalachian area with everyone else. What are you doing with your dog while you're gone?"

"The same as what you're doing while you're at work. My mom will come over and take care of her. She'll probably stay at the house with her, actually. She has a soft spot for Tommie. It almost makes me jealous at times."

He stiffened. That had been exactly what had gotten him into trouble with Hollee. He'd had a soft spot for her that had morphed into something else entirely. And, hell, if he hadn't been a jealous bastard the day of her wedding, even though he'd been a continent away. He'd drunk himself into oblivion just to keep from calling Jacob and saying he'd changed his mind. That the union no longer had his blessing.

Knowing what he did now, maybe it would have been better if he had. But hindsight was twenty-twenty, and there was nothing he could do about any of it now.

"My mom likes Gordy as well. He kept her company after I was deployed. She said it eased her loneliness while I was gone." Gordy had to be pushing seven now, although Clancy didn't know his exact age. And he was glad he could spend the dog's remaining years with him. Staying away had been the easier choice, but he truly believed that coming home was now the right one.

Hollie turned away, wrapping her arms around her waist. "Are you ready to see Ava?"

Damn. Had his mention of his mom's loneliness reminded her of her own loss?

"You don't have to come if you don't want to."

She turned back. "I do. She's my friend, although I should have been checking on her more. It's time I made amends for that."

Maybe it was time he made amends too for the way he'd behaved. He might have been trying to do the right thing but had ended up hurting her, according to what Ava had said all those years ago. His sister had not been happy with him. But that was okay. He hadn't been happy with himself.

He moved closer and tipped her chin up. "About what I said all those years ago—"

"Don't. Please." Her whispered words shook.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry."

Shimmering green eyes looked into his, and she opened her mouth as if to say something before shaking her head. "You have nothing to be sorry for. We were both kids."

Yes, they had been. He paused, then decided to ask a pivotal question. "Are we good?"

"Of course." Her chin went up, and she pulled away. "Shall we go?"

Once outside his sister's room, which was no longer in the maternity ward for the safety of the other new mothers, they donned surgical caps and gloves once again. Ava was sitting up in bed, a pillow pressed over her stomach, probably to ease the pain of the incision. She looked pale and drawn, but she smiled when she saw them. "Did you get to see her?"

"We did. She's beautiful."

"I didn't get to hold her. Or even get a good look at her."

Hollee smiled. "Well it's a good thing I snapped a couple of pictures then, isn't it?"

"You did?"

Ava said what he'd just thought. He hadn't noticed her taking pictures.

"Of course." She took her phone out of one of her pockets and punched a few buttons and then held it for Ava to see.

"Holy Moly! I did that?"

"You did indeed, honey." Hollee started to touch her, before thinking better of it.

Ava looked up at him. "Being an uncle suits you. You should see your face."

"What do you mean?"

"Come look."

He wasn't sure he wanted to, but to say no was bound to make both of them wonder why. So he went around to the other side of Holly and glanced at the images as she scrolled through them.

Hell. He looked like he was in love. Well, that's because he was. That tiny creature was his niece. It was normal to have a goofy grin on his face.

"Too bad you caught my bad side."

Their heads both came up at the same time. Ava spoke first. "Don't say that. You look fine, doesn't he, Hollee?"

He'd meant it as a joke, but evidently it fell flat. And he certainly didn't want Hollee to feel trapped into making some banal comment about his scar. Again. So he held up his hands to show capitulation. "Okay, I'm sorry. I won't say it again."

It did seem kind of incongruous that a plastic surgeon wouldn't have his own scars fixed or resurfaced. It would be easy enough to make them fade further into the background. But the reconstructions Clancy did were things that resulted from injuries or congenital conditions and he wanted his patients to love themselves, even if their after-surgery results weren't that of an airbrushed model. Not that he was the greatest example of loving himself either. Jacob had given him a pointed reminder of that a few days after he'd kissed Hollee.

I'm not like you, Mr. Bigshot. I'm a one-woman kind of guy, and between you and me, I'm crazy about Hollee, so don't go getting any ideas about adding her to your collection.

He'd never looked at himself that way, but evidently it was how Jacob—and maybe lots of other people—had seen him. It had been enough to make him pull back and put a stop to things with Hollee before he'd got in any deeper and ended up hurting her.

According to Ava, though, he'd ended up hurting her anyway. But, as he'd seen for himself, she'd recovered, and Jacob had gotten his wish.

Ava bent her head to the side, cracking her cervical joints. “They tell me that Jen-Jen is doing well.”

Despite her illness, her personality refused to be squashed. She’d always been a firebrand, but Clancy had been fiercely protective of her when they had been kids, even though she would have clobbered him if she’d known.

“Jen-Jen? Is that really what you’re going to call her?”

“How about Jenny J.? Or J.J.? No?” There was a happiness in her grin that he hadn’t seen in a while, despite the evidence of exhaustion in her face. Now wasn’t the time to approach her about her new daughter’s middle name. But he would have to make a point to tell her. And soon.

“I personally like Jen-Jen.”

“Hmm...” Her smile faded. “It’s still so sad when I think of Jacob as being gone forever.”

Hollee tucked her phone away, her head down, not looking at either of them.

“Yes, it is.” He shifted and decided to change the subject. “Any idea when the baby can come home?”

“She needs to gain some weight obviously, but her lungs are strong. I heard her cry before they rushed her away.” She shut her eyes and then looked at him. “I have to tell you it was the most beautiful sound I’ve heard in my life.”

“I can imagine. When we saw her, she seemed...content.” In fact, he’d been a little worried about how quiet she was, but Ava’s words made him feel better.

“She really is beautiful.” Hollee smiled, but this time it seemed a little forced.

It had to be hard hearing people talk about her late husband. Which was another reason he wanted to talk to Ava about the name, although he wasn’t sure why it mattered. It mattered to him, though. Jacob had betrayed Hollee in the worst possible way. A one-woman man? It seemed that had been a lie. The last thing he wanted was for his niece to bear the man’s name.

He took hold of one of his sister’s toes through the blanket and gave it a wiggle. “We’d better let you get some rest, but I’ll come see you tomorrow.” He was careful not to include Hollee in that. She could set up her own visitation schedule.

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