

THE WEATHER OUTSIDE IS FRIGHTFUL

THE *Christmas*
STALKING

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THE CHRISTMAS STALKING

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Dedication

To my wonderful husband, Ronny. Through good times and bad, you make me smile.

Praise for *Pursued*

This is one of the best Christian fiction books I've read—definitely the best suspense/drama book I've read in the Christian genre. Lillian Duncan is a good writer, and her strong character is evident throughout the book. ~ Chad Young, author

Duncan's story was deliciously romantic and breathtakingly paced. Her characters were wonderfully portrayed and I was drawn into Reggie's plight from the moment an ex-English teacher businessman drops her firm over a misplaced word. Those readers who enjoy some great kissing in between bullets and prayers will enjoy *Pursued*. ~ Lisa Lickel, author

1

Holly Stone needed a place to hide. Well, not Holly Stone, but the persona she had become—Destiny, Nashville’s brightest country music star. Her sultry voice and trademark long, blonde hair had made her famous—her only goal in life.

Unfortunately, along with the notoriety came unwelcomed attention from a stalker. Not just any run of the mill crazy, but one who mailed her a dead cat. That had been enough for her. She skirted the security team’s suggestion, attended a charity concert in her blonde wig, and then two-stepped it out of town.

Now, her car’s headlights flashed on the welcoming sign for the Village of Serenity and Peace, better known by the locals as plain old Serenity. Legend said a group of monks hid behind their cowls and founded the little town in the wilds of upstate New York.

What better place was there than where she’d spent so many wonderful summers with her grandparents? She could ditch the wig, hide, and celebrate Christmas. Of course, she would spend this Christmas just the way she had last year—alone.

Serenity still loved to celebrate Christmas in a big way. Strings of multi-colored lights wound their way through the garland that decorated old-time light poles like antique gas lanterns. Christmas bulbs framed every window in town, adding to the festive look.

A few people scurried down the streets, braving the cold, probably on their way home.

Home. She wished she had a real home with real family and friends. Not just business associates. Her choices had made her rich and famous, even if she was a bit lonely at times. Especially at the holidays.

Her gaze focused on the snow-covered streets. Why had she thought coming to upstate New York in December was a good idea?

She shivered.

The stalker wouldn't be able to find her here. Though she'd spent summers in Serenity with her grandparents, she had never listed the place in her official bio. No reason for anyone to look for her in this tiny Adirondack town.

The sparkling lights dimmed as she drove to the outskirts. Slowly, she weaved her way through the darkness of the rural road.

Lights from a following car glared.

Her stomach lurched. Was it her stalker?

Stop being ridiculous and paranoid.

He couldn't have followed her. She'd spent the past two days making sure of that. But the lights continued to shine in her rearview mirror even as she pressed her foot to the accelerator. She didn't want to take the chance of leading a psychopath to her remote cabin.

A blue and red light show flashed on the snow bank.

Great. Just what she needed.

But a ticket was better than being followed by a stalker.

She squinted at the flashing police lights as she pulled the car beside piles of packed snow.

She hit the button and the window moved down. A gust of icy wind froze her flirtatious smile into a grimace.

“Ma’am, I need to see your license and registration.”

She stared up at the officer. No expression. No smile. All business. Here came a ticket.

“Why?”

“Excuse me?”

Yikes. That was Destiny talking, not Holly Stone. “Oh, nothing, Officer. Sorry. Hold on.” She pulled out the rental agreement and her license and handed them to the officer, glad she’d taken the time to get a license in her real name, with her natural hair color.

“Holly Stone?”

“That’s me.” *Sort of.*

He stared down at her for a moment—almost a glare. Then his blue eyes twinkled and a hint of a smile played across his lips. “My, my, my. It couldn’t really be the little Holly Stone I used to play tag with in the woods, but she did have red hair and a temper to match. Just like you.” The voice held a familiar taunt.

Holly looked closely at the man.

His vibrant blue eyes contrasted against his tanned skin and curly black locks.

“There is no way you’re that bully, Robby Trenton. He was a short, fat thing.”

“I was not fat. I was stout. I hadn’t hit my growth spurt yet.”

“Well, you certainly seemed to have hit it, now.”

“Six two. You really are that Holly Stone?”

“One and the same.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I thought I’d spend a few days at my

grandparents' cabin."

"Your family still owns it?"

"I never had the heart to sell it after they died." Another gust of wind slammed into her face. Numbness was settling in. "It is so ridiculously cold. How do you live here all the time?"

"Well, it's only cold in the winter. Still not a skier, huh?"

"The only skiing I do is on the water. Give me beaches and sunshine. You can keep the snow and ice. That's why I only came up to visit in the summer."

"Hey, how about going to the diner for a cup of hot chocolate to warm up? We can catch up on the last fifteen or twenty years. How long has it been since we've seen each other?"

"That's sweet, but I've been driving all day and I'm exhausted."

A look of disappointment flickered across Robby's face. "Sure, I understand. I'm just going to follow you out to the cabin so I know you get there safely. These roads can be tricky if you're not used to them."

"You don't have to do that."

"Not a problem, Holly. I do it all the time for tourists."

"Is that what I am? A tourist?"

He grinned. "And a very welcomed one. Drive careful. Good to see you again."

"I guess you're not going to give me that ticket."

"The only ticket I'm giving you is for a rain check for that cup of hot chocolate."

"Sounds like a plan." An old friend who still remembered her would break the monotony of being stuck in a cabin while her security team and the FBI hunted for the stalker.

And hopefully found him.

Robby followed as she drove down the dark country roads. Who would have thought chubby little Robby would turn into such a hunk? Who was she kidding? A guy that good-looking had to be married.

After her father died, her mother had gone back to work, so in the summers, Holly would come to the cabin to be spoiled by her grandparents. She ran through the woods with the other neighborhood kids and biked to town for treats.

Pulling into the drive, she stared. Her grandparents' cabin looked different than she remembered.

Smaller, more rustic.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Isolated in a country cabin in the middle of winter?

Too late, now.

She'd stay a day or two, and if it was unbearable, she'd leave for warmer climates. But for now, no one knew where she was and that meant the stalker couldn't find her.

Holly pulled up to the cabin and when Robby flashed his lights, she waved him on. She tugged her shawl over her shoulders and hurried to the cabin. Her little shawl was no match for the frigid, icy winds. With half-frozen fingers, she fumbled with the door key.

Once inside she built a blazing fire in the cabin's fireplace. The crackling warmth filled the cabin.

Holly allowed the tension to drain from her.

2

Holly peeked out the cabin's window.

A world of pristine white made her flinch as the brightness of the early morning sun twinkled on the snow. The trees looked as if they'd been frosted with white icing.

Beautiful.

She appreciated the scene, despite the cold. Especially since her cabin was nice and toasty, thanks to the fire and the wood someone had chopped and stacked. She would have to send a Christmas gift to the real estate manager. He'd gone above and beyond the call of duty.

What was she going to do all day? Taking a walk was out of the question. Too windy. Maybe she could write a few songs. But she wasn't really in the mood.

Perhaps a drive to town?

Grabbing the shawl off the sofa, she realized just how ridiculous the inadequate covering was. She would need some sensible clothing while she was holed up in this frozen winter wonderland.

She smiled.

Shopping was a good way to spend the day.

She sloshed her way to the rental car. Her feet turned numb as the icy slush seeped through her shoes.

Wishing for sunglasses, she squinted at the snow-covered countryside as she drove. It was more desolate

than she remembered. Or maybe she was so used to Nashville and wall-to-wall people that she'd forgotten what it was like to live in a rural area.

Holly struggled towards her car, arms full of bags. It would feel good to take off her ruined shoes and put on a pair of warm wooly socks.

Serenity's gazebo had been transformed into a huge nativity scene. On both sides of the giant manger stood decorated pine trees.

Her ears tingled from the chill, even though she'd only been outside a few minutes. She juggled packages, trying to reach into her bag.

"Looks like you could use a hand."

Holly's stomach lurched, and she turned. "Robby. Are you stalking me?" Visions of the dead cat in the box popped into her mind's eye. Brushing away the memory, she smiled up at him. "You keep turning up."

"Just like a bad penny, but that's my job. I get paid to help damsels in distress. Can you believe that?" He held out his arms. "Here, give those to me. What are you're looking for, anyway?"

"Thanks, I'm looking for my keys." She handed him the shopping bags, and then rummaged in her purse.

"What did you do, buy out the stores? They're going to love you."

"My shawl wasn't exactly the right clothing for the season. So I bought a few things to keep me from freezing to death while I'm here."

"How long are you staying?"

"I'm not sure." She opened the trunk, and let him

dump the bags in it.

She reached into a shiny red bag and pulled out a lavender mohair stocking cap. Holly tugged it over her head, making sure her ears were covered, and then pulled out matching gloves.

With her hands protected, she unzipped the garment bag and lifted out a plaid ski jacket. Stuffing the shawl into the bag, she zipped into her new coat. "Now, I look like I belong."

"Hardly. Your beauty puts the locals to shame."

"Is charm school part of the police academy curriculum?"

"I'll tell you all about it when you have that hot chocolate with me."

She pointed at the snowflakes falling. "Maybe later, Robby. I've got other errands to do and all this snow makes me nervous. I'm not used to driving in it."

"No way. It's either hot chocolate or that speeding ticket." He pulled out his ticket book and arched his brows at her. "Take your choice."

"You wouldn't."

He winked. "What's it going to be?"

She sighed and held her hands up in surrender. "Fine. It's not like I can't grocery shop later. Lead the way." She picked up a boot box, tucked it under her arm, and then slammed the trunk closed.

He took her elbow as they walked across the street. "Wouldn't want you to fall."

"And I thought southern men were the only ones with charm. Doesn't it ever stop snowing here?"

He put his palm up. Little white flakes decorated it. "What, this stuff? It's not snow; it's barely a sprinkle. The weather guy is predicting a snow storm sometime next week. Just in time for Christmas."

“Wonderful.” Hopefully, her stalker would be in jail by then, and she’d be back where the weather wasn’t so brutal.

He held open the diner’s door.

She was greeted with the scent of fresh-baked bread and bacon. After another deep whiff, her smile grew and her mouth watered. Her stomach rumbled. She’d skipped breakfast.

A grocery store was next on the list, since the cabin’s cupboards were empty.

Holly looked up at Robby. “I don’t think a cup of hot chocolate’s going to do it. I just realized I’m starving.”

“I could eat a bite myself.” Robby unsnapped his jacket. “They make the best breakfast in town. Of course, they make the only breakfast in town. But still the best.”

A waitress rushed over. After a smile and a curious glance at Holly, she tossed two menus on the table. “Hey, Chief. How’s it going?”

“Not bad, Renee. How’re things with you?”

She motioned at the filled tables. “Can’t complain. Coffee? And your regular?”

“Not today. Make it two hot chocolates, and I’ll wait for the lady to order.”

“Are you from around here?” Renee looked at Holly.

“Not really.”

“Mmm. You look familiar.”

“I can’t imagine why.” Holly cringed, hoping Renee wouldn’t recognize her.

“It’ll come to me. I never forget a face. Be back in a minute with the hot chocolates.” She turned away, but then turned back. “Marshmallows?”

They both nodded.

As the waitress walked away, Holly made a mental note to avoid the diner. The last thing she needed was to be recognized. She glanced at Robby. "Chief, huh? You didn't mention that last night."

"It's no big deal. We only have four full-time officers, including me, and a few part-timers."

"Still that's quite an accomplishment."

"I'm happy with my life."

She didn't know anyone who was truly happy, including herself. There was always another album to make, more awards to win, bigger offers to find, and larger venues to fill. "That's nice. Married? Kids?"

"Not yet. Still looking for the right woman to be mama to my children. How about you?"

"Married once. Big mistake."

"That bad?"

"And some." At least the man had deserted her in Nashville.

"Well, you must have bounced back from it, and from the shopping bags, I'd say you're doing well for yourself."

She leaned forward, her arms of the table. "Maybe. Or maybe I just maxed out my credit cards. You never know."

Robby laughed. "I guess that's true. What do you do for a living?"

"You don't know who I am, do you?"

"Know—"

"Ready to order, yet?" Renee asked, placing steaming mugs of hot chocolate in front of them.

Red, green, and white marshmallows swirled amidst the rich brown chocolate. Ho. Ho. Ho. Maybe it would taste better than it looked.

"I want a short order of pancakes with real maple syrup. And two sausage links." She averted her face. She'd thought her new hair and no makeup would make her unrecognizable, but now she wasn't so sure.

"Make mine a regular order of pancakes along with bacon and sausage, and add a couple of scrambled eggs and some toast."

Renee's eyes narrowed. "Are you sure that's enough for you?" She turned to Holly and rolled her eyes. "Wish I could eat like that."

Holly nodded with a smile.

"So, ready to tell me your secret yet, Renee?" Robby asked.

A smile played across the waitress's face. She winked at Holly, and then looked back at Robby. "What secret?"

Robby looked over at Holly. "Renee's our choir director at church, and rumor is she has a secret plot for the Christmas Eve service this year."

"I'll never tell." She walked away, calling back over her shoulder, "Be a few minutes."

Holly picked up her hot chocolate. "Mmm. Smells great."

"And tastes delicious." He blew on it, and then took a sip. "Best in town."

Holly did the same. "You're right. Yummy-licious."

"So, what is it I don't know?"

"Oh, nothing. It's not important."

"It sounded important."

She slipped off her ruined shoes and reached into the shoe box. First, she put on the warm wooly ski socks. They felt like heaven on her frozen toes. "You asked what I did for a living. I figured you probably

knew."

"How would I know? I haven't seen you in fifteen or twenty years."

"Eighteen to be exact. I was twelve the last time I was here." She tugged on the hiking boot.

"That long ago? Wow, time sure does fly. Why did you stop coming?"

"After my dad died, my mom had to work. And she didn't like me being home all day by myself while she worked, so I'd come up here in the summers with my grandparents. When I turned thirteen, she said I was old enough to stay at home without a babysitter. And besides, Grandma and Grandpa were getting older by then."

He nodded. "We had some fun, didn't we? Do you remember the time you fell into the creek?"

"I did *not* fall into that creek, Robby Trenton. You pushed me. And you know it."

His blue eyes twinkled as he laughed. "That's not how I remember it. All I remember is rescuing you."

She laughed, surprised how safe she felt sitting with Robby.

Renee walked over with a carafe and their food. "Need a refill on the hot chocolate?"

"Hit me," Robby said, but Holly put a hand over her cup.

Renee stared at her for a moment, and then said, "Are you sure I don't know you? You sure seem familiar."

"I don't think so. I spent summers here, but that was almost twenty years ago."

"Then that's not it. I've only been here for ten." She shrugged. "I guess you must remind me of someone."

Holly sure hoped not. "I must have one of those faces that everyone thinks they know."

"I guess." Renee walked away.

With an inward sigh of relief, Holly speared a bite of pancake and stirred it in the maple syrup before popping it in her mouth. Delicious.

They ate and talked about old times.

After the last bite was gone, Renee slapped the check on the table. "Clean plates mean happy customers. See you later."

Not likely. This place made number one on Holly's list of places to avoid. She couldn't take the chance of Renee learning her identity. Holly reached in her purse for money, but Robby picked up the check.

"My treat. Especially since you helped the local economy by maxing out those credit cards of yours."

She laughed. "I didn't say I did. I said maybe I did. Thanks, Robby. I better get going." She picked up her boot box and stood.

"The church is having their Christmas program tomorrow night. It's always fun with all the kids acting their little hearts out. You might enjoy it. Want to come?"

She should say no. The point of coming here was to stay hidden, but she would go stir-crazy in that cabin. "Sure, why not?"

"It starts at seven. I'll be out to get you at six thirty."

She pulled on her stocking cap and gloves. "Sounds good. Back out into the frozen tundra. See you later."