

City Sidewalks

Julia M. Toto



a holiday
romance

CITY
SIDEWALKS

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

To my family who encouraged, to the many who helped, and to The One who makes all things possible.

1

Blessed are they that hunger and thirst for righteousness for they shall be filled. ~ Matthew 5:6

“Breaking news. Tulsa police have now released a composite drawing of the elusive Santa Stalker, whose last victim was—”

Christina King hit the mute button on her steering wheel. No need to frighten the twins. What did people expect this time of year, with men masquerading in Santa suits? She steered her SUV under the portico of Riverside Private Academy and shifted into park. Then she licked her thumb and wiped toothpaste from 7-year-old Alex’s chin.

“Gross!” Alex pushed her hand away. “No kissing, either, Mom. OK?” He bounced from the running board and waved to a group of boys wearing matching shirts.

“Love you, too.” Christina raised her brows. When had her son become so brazen? At least she had Olivia. Brushing bangs from her daughter’s eyes, she planted a kiss on her forehead before shooing her away. “Hurry, baby. Give it all you’ve got today. Love you.”

Christina sighed. Her live in house keeper had been called away on a family emergency, leaving Christina to referee squabbles, clean up messes, and then fall exhausted into bed at night, all with a minimum of tears—mostly her own. How did other

women manage this every day?

Coaxing the twins out of bed each morning was more difficult than pushing a chain. Not only was the house a wreck, but she'd found it impossible to concentrate on work while two young children bounced in and out of her office.

Now, the twins' Christmas break and her project deadline approached like on coming trains. Christina needed help.

She turned up the radio, and pulled away. A popular singer lamented having a blue Christmas while Christina dodged a wave of navy blue uniforms. Could she make it home for her eight a.m. conference call?

By nine fifteen, Christina sat behind her desk, having regained a semblance of control. An hour later, the doorbell chimed. She smiled. The temporary housekeeper was early. Good. She'd have time for a thorough interrogation of the new hire. Stress Busters Temp Agency boasted an impeccable reputation. Still, she couldn't be too careful.

Opening her heavy front door, Christina's smile took a plunge. The man standing on her porch towered at least six inches above her. Taking a step back, she tried not to stare at the scar on the side of his face.

"May I help you?" She scanned his pressed slacks and crisp button down shirt. The logo on his shirt pocket identified him as an employee of Stress Busters Temp Agency.

"Mrs. King?" He peeled off his sunglasses while extending his other hand to her. "The agency sent me. My name is Rudy Gallagher."

His deep voice hit Christina like a smooth flat stone. It skimmed across her memories and then

splashed into the cool deep waters of the place she'd last heard it. Lake Tenkiller. Summer camp. She'd been seventeen. Memories rushed in, displacing the air in her lungs.

Rudy was taller now, with broader shoulders. His dark cropped curls sat higher on his forehead. Same eyes, though. Soulful, penetrating, and as green as the forest under which they'd roamed in their youth.

"Rudy Gallagher?" she forced the name.

"Mrs. King?" His brow creased. "Something wrong, ma'am?"

Despite her pounding chest, Christina forced herself to breathe. Obviously, Rudy hadn't recognized her yet. But then, why would he? Fifteen years had passed since that hot August day when they'd last seen each other. At seventeen, she'd worn her auburn curls in a ponytail. Her name hadn't been King then, and he'd never called her Christina. She sucked in her gut, suddenly conscience of the ten extra pounds she'd kept after the twins' birth. "You're the housekeeper?"

Color rose all the way to the top of his ears. He shifted his weight and thrust his hands into the pockets of his khakis. "Actually, ma'am, the title is Lifestyle Manager."

Ma'am? Did she look that old? Christina opened her mouth to protest, but then changed her mind. She should tell him, of course, but tell him what? That she was a thirty something workaholic widow unable to manage her own household while the nanny was away? She flinched. The truth hurt. Hadn't the truth of her private life always hurt? Isn't that why she'd protected him from it when they were younger?

And what about Rudy? Employed by a temporary housekeeping agency? If that didn't smack of

desperation, then what did?

She swallowed hard. Why stir up trouble? Let him walk away. No one will ever know. After all, she'd always been good at keeping secrets.

"I take it you were expecting a female applicant." He crossed his arms. "I assumed the agency had told you about me."

She stroked her arms, dragging her memory. Had she been told? Christina couldn't remember. The agency could have promised anyone, male or female, and she wouldn't have cared. She just needed help. Desperately.

"To be honest, I'm rather shocked to see you."

"I understand. My apologies, ma'am. I'll have them contact you."

She smiled. He was still a gentleman. "Perhaps that would be best for everyone. Thank you."

"Yes, ma'am. I'll be on my way, then." Rudy returned her smile. He was too young for laugh lines, but they were there anyway, adding mystery and character to those eyes that had haunted her dreams so long ago. Sunshine cast a halo around his coal black curls. He turned and sauntered down her walkway.

She took a deep breath and squeezed the doorknob. Was she really willing to let him walk away? Again?

"Rudy, wait! Don't go." Christina cringed. She'd cast the words and now it was late to reel them back in. "Please."

Rudy turned, locking his gaze on her.

Time raced backwards.

She held her breath, expecting to hear the nickname he'd given her as a kid.

He stopped in front of her, his eyes narrowed. The

force of unspoken words hung between them. "How've you been, C.J.?"

Her heart raced. Christina's hands dropped to her side and she forced herself to hold his gaze. "Hello, Rudy. It's been a long time."

"I'll have the agency send another candidate over for you to interview as soon as possible. Trust me, I understand."

Christina swallowed hard. The charade was over. She didn't blame him for not wanting to work for her, but at least he could acknowledge her. Planting her hands on her hips, she lifted her chin. "Am I to assume you don't want the job?"

"Of course I want the job. I wouldn't be standing here right now in this ridic—" He exhaled loudly. "I'm sorry. When I took the job I never imagined I'd be working for...you." He crossed his arms and closed the distance between them.

His stare bore through her, hot as steel, burning her chest, her neck, her cheeks. She should say goodbye, turn around, and walk back into her house. Into the world she'd worked hard to create. A world that she'd managed, so far, to keep safe from her past.

Presently, however, chaos reigned and she needed help. If she didn't meet the Horatio deadline, her neck could be on the chopping block next. It hadn't been easy finding help. Besides, she'd never left the twins care to anyone but Gertie, who lived in the guest house at the back of her property and was now more like a grandmother than a housekeeper.

Christina bit her lip.

Rudy loved kids. He'd always been great with them at camp. Who else could she trust with her twins?

She sighed. "I know this is awkward, Rudy, but if

you still want the job, it's yours. I'm in a real bind until my housekeeper returns." She swallowed hard and extended her hand. "I need your help. Strictly business?"

Rudy heaved a sigh, and stroked his jaw before accepting her hand. "All right, Mrs. King. Strictly business."

2

Employee. Think of him as employee. Christina briefed him on the children's schedule before mapping the route to Riverside Academy.

She found it difficult to concentrate with Rudy shadowing her, and was glad for Gertie's concise instructions.

"I'll inform the school that you'll be picking up the twins, but you'll have to show ID at the office. Security is tight until they catch that stalker."

"For good reason." Rudy frowned.

Christina lifted a grocery list from beneath a magnet on the refrigerator and handed it to him, along with two one hundred dollar bills. "This should cover it, I think."

"Got it." Rudy slipped the bills into his wallet and the list into his shirt pocket. "Paper or plastic?"

"I'll leave those hard decisions to you. Oh, and the library down town has books waiting for me."

He pulled a small note pad from his pocket and scribbled something on it before securing it under the vacant magnet on her fridge. "My cell phone number. In case you think of anything else you could possibly need." Was he being sarcastic?

Christina scowled, grabbing several garments from the hall closet. "I use the dry cleaner on 15th Street. Be sure to point out the spot I pinned. It's where I..." She bit her lip. Did she really want Rudy to know

she'd dribbled toothpaste onto her cashmere scarf? Her cheeks burned as she handed him the bundle. "Never mind. They'll figure it out."

Rudy raised a brow. "Yes, ma'am."

"I'm pressed for time, so when you return with the twins, I'll show you around the place. Maybe we can figure out where Gertie keeps everything." Although she worked from her home office, business trips and social obligations kept Christina far from the heart of her home. She'd never have made it this far up the corporate ladder without Gertie's help.

Rudy's smile still warmed her.

Christina reached for her purse and dug to the bottom. "You can take my SUV. The twins' booster seats are already in the back. Don't let Alex tell you he's too old for it." She held out her car keys to the guy who'd taught her to drive.

"Thanks," he said, reaching for the keys. "I'll make them buckle up."

Her children rarely rode with anyone other than Gertie. Would the streets still be slick? She curled her arm, pulling the keys away. "The agency assured me they don't hire anyone with traffic violations. Is that true?"

Rudy opened his palm. "Still clean as a whistle. Promise."

Christina felt foolish for asking. There'd been a time she'd trusted Rudy with her life. She dropped the keys into his hand and watched as he whistled down the sidewalk towards her SUV.

Closing the door, she blew out a deep breath and leaned against it. How would she possibly concentrate on her deadline with Rudy Gallagher whistling around her house, smelling like aftershave and sweet pine

scented summers of long ago? The errands should keep him busy most of the day. But what about tomorrow?

Hastening down the hallway to her office, Christina tripped over a mound of dirty clothes that spilled beyond the laundry room door. She nudged the pile with her foot and gasped. Grabbing an empty basket, she filled it with silk garments and tossed it to the back of her walk in closet. It was one thing for Rudy to handle the twins' soiled clothes, but he'd never lay those gorgeous green eyes on her dirty laundry, thank you very much.

By noon, thoughts of Rudy Gallagher were far from Christina's mind as she resolved one escalation after another. Recent layoffs and the approaching holidays had wreaked havoc within the department. She massaged her temples while reading again the latest email from her boss. Had there been a mistake? A new development? Or was she being asked to "spin the truth" on the Horatio project? Christina inhaled before hitting number three on her speed dial.

"Flannigan here." The woman's voice on the other end of the phone was terse, as usual.

"It's Christina. I won't keep you. Just need clarification about a parking garage. Did I miss something here? There's no vacant land for sale within three blocks of Horatio's project."

"Didn't you get the memo? Brown was supposed to contact you. Don't tell me he forgot again."

Christina scrolled through her in box. "No memo."

Flannigan coughed into the phone. "Horatio needs more parking. He's got his eye on an old church building on Main. The broker's renting it out, so he's in no hurry to sell, but I've promised Horatio we'd

convince him otherwise. Come up with a pitch. Make it happen.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

“I know you won’t disappoint us, Christina. Sell the pitch at the Christmas party, and we’ll consider that partnership. We need fresh talent at the top, and you’re the best team player we have. Ciao!”

“Ciao.” Christina’s tossed her phone on the desk, leaned back in her chair, and grinned. Just what she’d been waiting to hear. She’d be a team player all right—the MVP at that. She’d persuade the broker to sell, and nothing could stop her now.

Nothing.

3

At the cleaners drive through window, Rudy paused, letting the scent of C.J.'s perfume tease him before handing the garments to the attendant.

He'd known she was C.J. the minute she'd called his name from her front porch. The short blonde crop had thrown him off at first. What was with those big chunky glasses? She was still beautiful, though. He wondered what the chances were of running into her after all these years. One in a million? Ten million? He frowned. About the same odds as ever learning the truth from her.

"Mister, your ticket," the attendant called.

Rudy tucked it above the visor, adjusted the mirror again, and drove away. Nice vehicle. She'd married well.

His gut twisted. He wasn't surprised she'd found a rich guy.

Her father had probably arranged the engagement. Rudy had never met C.J.'s dad, but she'd talked as if he'd hung the moon. A wealthy globetrotter who'd only wanted the best for his little girl. Rudy hadn't stood a chance.

"Forget it, Gallagher. That was a long time ago." He pounded the steering wheel. How could he forget?

C.J. and Jasmine were the only two women he'd ever loved. Now his wife was gone, and C.J. was Mrs. King. His new boss.

4

Christina looked up from her laptop in time to see a flash of blue race past her office door.

"Hi, Mom!" Alex waved before disappearing into the game room.

"Hi, honey!" She looked at her watch. Two forty-five. Right on time. Pulling off her glasses, she pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled.

At least the afternoon had been productive, and with Rudy on board to care for the twins, she might make that deadline after all.

Stepping into the kitchen, Christina shot a disapproving scowl at her daughter, who was perched on the countertop. "Off." She snapped her fingers. "Now."

Olivia curled her lower lip and slid from her granite roost. "But, Mommy, I'm telling Mr. Rudy what to do!"

Rudy looked up, crouched in front of the open stainless steel refrigerator. His shirttail fit neatly into the waist band of his slacks, accentuating his athletic build. He'd certainly kept fit over the years.

Christina averted her gaze. Maybe she'd start hitting the gym again—right after the holidays.

Rudy chuckled and tossed Olivia a navel orange. "If you want to help, Olivia, put this in the fruit bowl for me. Please?"

The orange bounced off Olivia's closed hand and

rolled across the floor. The child's mouth fell open and her eyes grew wide. She planted her hands on her hips. "But that's your job!"

Rudy stood, color rising up his neck. Picking up the rogue orange, he shot Christina a glance. "So it is."

Christina crossed her arms, resisting the urge to chastise her daughter. "I take it everything went smoothly today?"

"Yes ma'am. By the way, your library books are over there." He nodded towards a side table. "I see you're still a fan of the classics."

She sighed. He'd known her well when they were younger. At least, he'd thought he'd known her. Christina cleared her throat and turned towards the door. "I'll be in my office. When you've finished, I'll show you the rest of your housekeeping duties."

"Lifestyle Manager." He shot her a look.

"I stand corrected." She winced.

A bit touchy, wasn't he? Rather out of character for Rudy, but then, it'd been fifteen years. People change.

He folded a paper sack and slipped it inside the pantry door. "Thank you."

"By the way," she said, "I'd like to keep the twins on their schedule. Dinner at five. I take mine in my office. Baths at seven, and—"

"Wait a minute." His interrupting tone went icy. "You don't eat dinner with your kids?"

She tilted her chin. Did he have a problem with that? "As I was saying, baths at seven. They may watch an hour of TV or video games, not both. No violence. No reality TV. Bedtime is 8:30. After that, you're free to go."

Rudy's hands were on his hips. "C.J., I think we

need to—”

“What did he call you, Mommy?” Olivia’s nose crinkled. “Who’s C.J.?”

“Mrs. King, may I speak with you a moment, please? Alone?” He tossed Olivia a package of bathroom tissue. “See how fast you can put this away. I’ll time you. Go!”

The little girl caught it this time, and giggled as she bounced out of the room.

Christina placed her hands on the back of the chair, finding it difficult to hold Rudy’s gaze without also holding her breath.

“I think there’s been a mistake.” Rudy said. “I was hired for the dayshift only. I’ll be happy to have your family’s dinner ready before I leave, but I’m not available evenings.”

Christina took the blow, caught her breath, and repositioned. She was accustomed to insubordination, and not easily intimidated. “I see. We have a problem then, Rudy. I’m under a grueling deadline, and I’ll need someone to oversee the twins in the evenings while I work.”

He scratched his head and leaned against the counter. “Did you request a temporary live-in?”

“No. However, I thought I’d made my needs clear to your agency. I have a very important job—”

“Look, C.J., as pleasant as I’ve found your children to be in the...” he looked at his watch, “45 minutes I’ve known them, I have an important job to do as well. I’m a father.”

Christina squeezed the back of the chair and looked away.

So, Rudy was married with children. Good. He deserved a good woman. Probably had a picket fence.

Maybe even a dog. But what would she do about the twins? The deadline on the Horatio project wouldn't wait.

"I'm sorry for the misunderstanding," he said.

"So am I, Rudy. So am I." Christina sighed and walked out of the kitchen towards her office. She'd call the agency and request another housekeeper, of course. It was probably for the best.

After all, it was only a matter of time before Rudy would ask why she'd never answered his calls or e-mails after their last summer together. She'd regretted her actions a million times over the years, but as complicated as telling him one small lie after another had become, telling him the truth would've been even harder.