

Guarded Hearts—Book 1

MISTLETOE  
and  
MALICE

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*For Kristi and Wendy, critique partners extraordinaire and much-loved sisters in the Lord.*



## Prologue

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“I met someone, Ri.”

Riley grinned at her friend seated across from her at the cozy café, the promise of new love sparkling in Caitlyn’s blue eyes. “Explains the dreamy grin you’ve been wearing since I got here.”

Leaning over her garden salad, Caitlyn’s smile widened. Her eyes shone brighter than the Christmas lights on the tree standing sentinel in the restaurant’s front window. “He’s incredible. I’ve never felt so much so fast for anybody.”

Ladling a spoonful of lobster bisque, Riley regarded her across the table. “I’m so happy for you, Cait. Has your dad met this guy?”

Caitlyn’s smile dimmed as she sat back in her chair and picked up her fork. “You know my father. Nobody will ever be good enough. And Shane doesn’t come with a name. At least, not one that will pass muster with Dad.”

Riley cocked her head. “How’d you meet, then?”

“At the club. He was working in the golf shop last month when I went in for a new glove. We talked for a bit, I saw him a few times working around the club, and he finally asked if I’d

like to go for coffee. We met up the next morning and talked for hours. Good thing it was Saturday so he wasn't late for work."

"An employee? You're not concerned he's trying to get close to you for the wrong reasons? Like that guy last year who kept asking you out?"

Cait rolled her eyes. "You mean that Jacob guy? He was harmless. I never saw or heard from him after that day you saw him bugging me and told me to report him."

"And did you? Report him?"

"No. I decided if he didn't get the message, I would. Guess he moved on to someone else. But Shane's not an employee. He's an IT contractor hired to overhaul the club's computer system. The day we met, he was installing software on the golf shop computer. He did such good work that they gave him a lifetime membership *gratis*. We've seen each other every day since that first coffee. We work out, play tennis, golf. He loves all that stuff as much as I do."

"He sounds amazing." Riley took a sip of the warm bisque, perfect on this rainy mid-December day. "What does he think about your work as a social media influencer?"

Caitlyn shrugged. "He wasn't sure what to make of it at first, me living my life in front of the world. But then he saw it's only a part of my life I let them see. What products I'm endorsing, where I'm traveling, events I attend. And now, my faith."

After taking a dainty bite of her salad, Caitlyn regarded her again. "When you led me to the Lord six months ago, that didn't sit well with my dad when I shared my decision with my family. Not at all. Now ..." She shook her head. "I bring home this middle-class boyfriend and I'm sure to get another earful about my *poor* choices."

Sighing, she pushed a cherry tomato around leaves of radicchio and kale, her gaze following its path. "I'm dreading it, but I know I need to introduce them soon." She put her fork

down and brought her shining eyes back to Riley. “Because I think this guy could be the one. We just click.”

Riley’s heart went out to her friend. The path before her could be a difficult one if she should choose Shane over her father’s wishes. But Caitlyn was one of the bravest women she’d ever met. It wouldn’t be the first time she got on the wrong side of her status-focused parents. Thankfully, Riley’s own family put more stock in integrity and breadth of character than net worth.

“Makes a good living, but Dad won’t be happy with anything less than seven figures a year. I’m praying he’ll take all the other things into account, though.”

Riley set her spoon on the saucer under her bowl. “Okay, here’s the big question. Is he a man of faith? I know you’re new to your own, but I hope that’s a non-starter if he’s not.”

“Oh, he is. Definitely.” Her smile broadened. “I’ve been attending his church with him, and he prays with me, Ri. Isn’t that amazing?”

It was. And Riley couldn’t be happier for her friend. “Just make sure I’m invited to the wedding, if he is indeed *the one*.”

Caitlyn giggled. “Oh, honey, you’ll be standing right up there with me.”

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With his 9 mm Glock resting in its shoulder holster under his suit coat, Colton watched the post-funeral guests milling quietly around the opulent living room of The Honorable Josiah Mulaney and his wife, Priscilla. Their older daughter had married and now lived in her own estate in The Woodlands, according to unsolicited intel provided by his current client.

Their younger daughter had been lowered into the ground that afternoon, under a late April sun, in a box befitting a woman of her means. Rosewood, the officiant had said at the

funeral. “A rare and beautiful wood for the rare and beautiful Caitlyn Rose Mulaney.”

Colton moved toward the entry hall. He hadn’t known the young woman buried today, but his heart still sat heavy in his chest as he’d watched the guests congregated graveside, and now the few chosen attendees partaking of catered *hors d’oeuvres* at the Mulaney estate. He felt like an interloper. A *voyeur* watching grief penetrate this place like a fog. Dense and dark and without remedy. This fog would never go away.

He knew that all too well.

Nodding to his co-worker stationed at the front door, he turned to scan the room. “You ate?”

“Yes, sir. You?”

“Not yet.”

“Go get a bite. This place is locked down tighter than the White House. I can keep an eye on the Senator from here and let you know if he wants to leave.”

“Not hungry.”

“Then at least go get some air. It’s been a trying day.”

Colton shot a glance at Trevor, a fairly new agent with the private security firm he’d been with for the past four years. Was he that obvious? He’d have to do a better job at not letting his personal life seep into his work.

Still, Trevor had a point. Some fresh air might help him regroup. Senator Congdon was safe enough, ensconced in an armchair, speaking with the judge and two other men Colton recognized as Houston nobility.

“Okay. I’ll be back in ten.”

“Make it twenty.”

He shook his head as he stepped away. The job usually kept his mind and body busy, which he preferred to days like today, when he had too much time on his hands to think. To feel. More than he’d wanted to over the past year, seven months, and four days.

At the graveside, he'd been on alert, watching for anybody who might be a threat to the senator after a high-profile vote last month had garnered more hate mail than normal. Anybody who might know he'd be back in Houston to grieve with his old friend.

Here at the estate, though, there was nothing for Colton, Trevor, and the driver out by their black SUV to do but cool their heels. At least, until the senator was ready to return to his own River Oaks estate, which he kept as well as the tony brownstone he used while working in the nation's capital. Colton's employer had scheduled round-the-clock protection here, along with the detail in D.C. But as head of the team, Colton traveled with the Senator back and forth.

He let himself out a back door, into the waning sunlit afternoon. Dusk would settle in soon, and darkness after that. As it did every day. Day in. Day out. Repeat.

Life went on. Never waiting for grief to loosen its insidious grip.

His gaze raked the area around the large terrace, his focus landing on a woman seated on a stone bench, head bowed and arms crossed over her stomach.

The door shut with a soft click behind him, and her head snapped around.

"I'm sorry." He'd assumed she'd been crying, but there were no tears that he could see. "I didn't mean to disturb you. I'll go back inside."

"No, it's okay." She stood and smoothed her dress over narrow hips. "Just having a little talk with God." She took a few steps his direction. "I don't want to keep all this sunshine to myself."

Praying. She'd been praying. Something he hadn't done in ... well, one year, seven months, and four days.

As she moved closer, his brain took the usual notes. Shoulder-length dark hair worn straight and pulled behind her

ears. Bangs that brushed her eyebrows. Petite and slender. No doubt another society princess, if the obviously expensive black dress she wore was any clue. Not to mention the ridiculously high-heeled, red-soled shoes, designer sunglasses, the diamond pendant around her neck, matching earrings, and tennis bracelet on her delicate wrist. No wedding ring, but an emerald surrounded by diamonds sparkled from her right hand.

She halted a few feet away and crossed her arms over her middle. “Are you a friend of the Mulaneys?”

“No, ma’am. I’m on the job.”

“Oh? What job would that be?”

“Petersen Security. Personal protection detail.”

One eyebrow hitched, and she pushed her sunglasses up onto her head, revealing eyes that competed with the emerald ring for most intense color. “And who are you protecting? Personally? From out here?”

He held back a chuckle. This one had spunk. He could hear it in her voice, see it in the set of her shoulders—pulled back, confident. “Senator Congdon. But I’m not needed until we leave the premises.”

“I see.” When he said nothing further, she offered her hand. “Riley Hudson.”

Of course. Daughter of Andrew Hudson, one of the Houston moguls sitting with the grieving judge and the senator inside. A billionaire financier and another of Petersen Security International’s high-profile clients. The Hudsons didn’t have a protection detail, *per se*, although Petersen installed and manned the high-tech security system at their posh estate. Their driver was also a Petersen security specialist, *aka* bodyguard, as needed.

He gave her hand a quick squeeze and let go. “Ms. Hudson.”

Anxious to take his leave, he didn’t offer his name. He wasn’t there to make friends. And his ten minutes were about to expire.

“I take it the guy with the earpiece by the door is with you?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She nodded, then turned her eyes to the horizon, with the sun settling into its journey to the other side of the globe. Eyes shimmering with the fallout of grief, yet she held a measure of quiet strength about her. Not like she would fall apart any second. Fortunate, because comforting a distraught woman was not among his specific skill set.

He cleared his throat. “I’m sorry about your friend. Everything I’ve heard today tells me she was special.”

“Beyond. She wasn’t”—she waved her arm around—“all this. She had depth. Intelligence. People didn’t give her enough credit, what with her online presence and all. But everything she did was done with purpose. With thought.”

She swallowed and crossed her arms again as her gaze went back to the grounds beyond the terrace. “Only four months ago, she was practically giddy about ... Shane. I can’t believe—it doesn’t make sense ...” She shook her head and turned back to him. “She shouldn’t have died like this. Nobody should die like this.”

His chest tightened at the anguish in her eyes. He’d been on the other side of the country when Miss Mulaney had reportedly been found dead by her boyfriend. Stabbed over twenty times in her own kitchen.

That same boyfriend now sat in jail, Caitlyn Mulaney’s blood on his hands.

And if there were any justice in the world, Shane Everett would be locked away in a cage for the rest of his life.