

# **A Quantum CHRISTMAS**

J. L. BURROWS

*To Robert E. Henley, you'll forever be missed.  
Can't wait to see you again in heaven.*

# chapter one



## Research Findings

### *December 2325—Elshaddai's Mission Command*

DYCE MUNROE TRUDGED into the Commissioner's waiting room and slid into one of the hard, white, Z-shaped chairs that left his lower back aching. His team did everything right. He rubbed his palms down his thighs. Still—called into Mission Command?

Why couldn't his team have taken out the enemy's tech before it took a young boy's life? A heavy sigh did nothing to ease the weight of his failed mission.

So, why was he here now? Holding his hand in front of him, he squeezed his aching fingers. He'd held his weapon at the ready for so long, carried the line with the best team—his team—but it still didn't matter.

Dyce folded his arms across his chest to still his nervous habit. A slip of a woman, the only other person in the waiting area, sat staring at the Commissioner's door. Curious. A silver pencil secured her twisted knot of black hair, exposing an earring dangling just above the spot where her sharp jawline met her

slender throat. Her gaze caught his, and his brain dissolved into mush. His heart skipped.

She let out a tiny gasp as if she'd just discovered he was waiting with her, instantly dropping her gaze to her hands. Her cheeks flushed a pleasant pink. What thought brought such lovely color to her face? She now focused intently on the door handle of the Mission Commissioner's office.

Something about her, the way she carried her shoulders, the navy Research Team uniform resting on her small but strong frame, or the tilt of her head as if she were ready to take on the world ... He wasn't trying to stare, but he couldn't put his finger on a familiarity that drew him in like family or friendship or something so kindred it detonated the emptiness inside of him.

Dyce swallowed.

Strength didn't prepare him for the sensations rattling him, despite being trained with many generations of various weaponry known to date. His team—actually, all of MI12—didn't carry weapons of their own. They used anything and everything to neutralize a hostile. Hand-to-hand combat was his specialty. But with a glance, she'd made him weaker than the Nano2314 Virus.

Had he met her before?

She glanced his way again. Dark brown eyes searched his face. Lips pursed, she turned back to stare at the door.

The experience, however, left his heart racing.

What was hiding in those dark brown eyes? And why did something so strong seem to call him by name?

This woman sent thoughts he had no right to allow juddering around in him.

A desire to be safe enough to allow feelings of weakness flashed through him. On its heels, the crazy desire to feel comforted in her arms after a day like today, a place safe enough to be broken by the hard world, if only for a moment ... They were wild, dangerous thoughts he shouldn't even imagine.

But after a failed mission.

Warriors couldn't let their guard down. They stood strong

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when others cowered, carried the weak when they couldn't make a way themselves, fought for the friends and family they had and the ones they'd lost. Defending the defenseless—the young boy's last expression passed like a ghost through Dyce's mind.

The woman refused to send her wayward gaze his direction again. Dyce let out a slight scoff, and her head inclined just barely toward him.

Was the young woman in trouble too?

If she were in trouble, Dyce would shield her and take the brunt of the Commissioner's ire. Clearly, whatever she'd done would never compare to what his team had failed to do. Either way, they needed to get on with whatever this was, so they both could get back to their lives. He needed to brief his team, meet up with psych, and get back on the field. Defending and protecting didn't happen all by itself.

Dyce stood, and the woman glanced at him. Her dark brown eyes widened a touch before she cast her heartwarming attention back to the door.

Skin prickling, Dyce smirked. *Fine. Be that way.* He didn't want to deal with her either. Whatever vibes she was giving off were obviously ... *Keep a clear head.* The Mission Commissioner would dispense with—whatever—and then Dyce would be out of this confounding room with this woman.

He marched up to the steel door and delivered three sharp knocks.

“Come in.”

As Dyce twisted the knob, the Commissioner said, “Invite Dr. Stein in too.”

Dyce took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. Though everything in him said *avoid, avoid, abort*, he turned to where her gaze waited for him. “I assume you are Dr. Stein.”

The woman nodded. Somehow, she contracted into herself as she drew to standing, all the while shifting around Dyce as if to enter the room first.

Dyce put his hand on the doorknob. No way was she going in first. He pushed the door open—

Dr. Stein slipped in before Dyce's brain commanded his foot forward. A wash of lavender left him stunned on the spot.

And there! That was clear evidence that the woman was a threat to his ability to function. How was he supposed to protect her from the Commissioner if she charged ahead of him and left him at the door empty-handed?

Dyce cleared his throat and followed the faint hint of lavender. He stiffened his upper lip and decided right then to keep his distance so he could protect her with a clear head in case she needed him to hold off the Commissioner or anyone else.

He extrapolated scenarios that could explain being called into the Commissioner's office with Dr. Stein.

Nothing good came to mind.

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Refusing to run like archaic instinct commanded, Ellery Stein slipped past the handsome, muscle-headed beast before he could take charge of the room and scramble a year and a half of her research. With confidence she didn't feel, she strode toward the Commissioner and took the closest chair.

Why was MI12 here, anyway? A tremble took root in her gut and the tips of her fingers. She crossed her legs and curled her hands on top.

Since the Commissioner assigned her to this project, she and her team of research assistants followed every potential historical trail they could put together. She finally delivered the results yesterday.

"Dr. Stein, thank you for sending me your report and attending this meeting." The Commissioner steepled his fingers in front of his ever-creased forehead above an expression that pivoted from gentle, as he glanced her way, to sharp and assessing when taking in Mr. MI12.

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Ellery's stomach twisted into knots. Muscle Man better not be the elite soldier the Commissioner planned to pair her with on-the-field research plans. Even as the thought struck her, at least three plausible reasons for MI12 to be present at her meeting now flitted through her mind, and it was simple to select the strongest potential. With photographic memory, she easily envisioned the page she'd sent to the Commissioner. Clearly written was the request for a time travel research permit and an MI12 escort. Ellery let out a breath she'd been holding.

To think she worried about facing resistance to her requests. Was Muscle Man to be her escort? Just the thought sent a spark of warmth through her stomach, which was not a Lead Researcher's appropriate response. *This was ridiculous! I'm malfunctioning—and for what? A few shared glances?* She couldn't trust herself around a man who affected her so.

Her responsibility to her position had to come first.

Nodding in turn to Muscle Man, the Commissioner added, "Thank you for meeting us here, Munroe."

"Yes, sir." Muscle Man Munroe was not one for many words, it seemed. That worked to Ellery's advantage.

Ellery steered her focus away from Munroe's penetrating blue eyes. "Sir, as you know, I've spent the better part of a year and a half researching your assignment, and it's an incredible discovery."

"That's why I called you both here." The Commissioner picked up what Ellery assumed to be a printed copy of her report. "Your research request has been approved."

"I'm honored." Ellery frowned as her stomach dropped. With his stamp of approval, she was going to December 2025. Never had she ever truly imagined she'd get this far, yet—

"Dyce Munroe will be the MI12 who will protect you from danger as you both travel back in time." The Commissioner glanced over Ellery's report as if maybe he could understand her facts and figures.

Ellery twisted her lips to the side, refusing to let her eyes wander to Dyce Munroe. If her instincts were correct, this

mission would require a team of researchers—not just herself and one MI12. “Thank you, sir. I was hoping to request—”

“For me to give my final sign-off on this, I’ll need the precise date and location for your insertion point.”

Ellery had hoped to keep this hard-fought-for intel to herself, but in order to travel back to the precise moment in the past she’d pinpointed, she’d have to share the exact information not only with the Commissioner but with Dyce Munroe as well.

Those blue eyes caught hers again, and it was like he saw through her, penetrating into her brain, reading her thoughts.

Her thoughts were classified.

“The intel was for our eyes only.” And she wasn’t interested in letting Blue Eyes into the operation.

The Commissioner leaned forward, chair creaking. “In order for Munroe to protect you on this mission, you’ll bring him up to speed on your research and the parameters of your request.”

Her stomach did a funny somersault at the word *mission*. “I understand. However, the dangers of that archaic time period are slim—nearly nothing. Maybe MI12 isn’t necessary.”

“It’s protocol.” The Commissioner turned to the second page of her report.

“I wasn’t aware. Yes, sir.”

When she had been researching safely behind her desk, she’d triple-checked the results before reporting her team’s discovery. The twelve families’ life trajectories, now traceable through specially curated AI tech, crossed paths in time and space, stepping from obscurity to prominence and longstanding leadership. Her heart might have burst out of her chest, except there was no scientific explanation for this shift in trajectory. The AI simply noted it, but she wanted to explore why that intersection caused such a shift. She needed to do more research, but going without her team and in the presence of Dyce Munroe was less than perfect.

The Commissioner needed her focused.

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“Sir, may I speak?” His voice sent a shock through Ellery. It was deep and warm, comforting, despite his bitter tone.

Ellery forced her gaze to remain on the Commissioner and noted the flash of irritation in his expression.

“Speak.”

“I’m not a babysitter. I don’t do research. My team needs me now, especially after today’s loss.” Munroe stood at attention just past the corner of the Commissioner’s desk. As he mentioned his loss, his whole body seemed to deflate.

A pang of compassion struck Ellery for his loss, but to call protecting her research babysitting—how dare he dismiss the one thing she’d worked her entire life for? *Babysit?* “This mission is more important than anything you’ve ever been party to.”

Those consuming eyes locked on hers and dared her to look away. His entire frame leaned into his words as he said, “Look, I understand achieving the Historical Researcher Degree and joining the summative comprehension of human history compiled from the lost archives might make you think you are some kind of special—”

“Enough!” The Commissioner hit his desk with his meaty fist, sending Ellery jumping in her skin. “Munroe, you have orders. A break from the team might just be enough to refocus you.”

Munroe didn’t react.

Ellery took a deep breath. Was MI12 a rogue? Or worse, some kind of broken soldier?

“Commissioner, this mission is too important for it to double as a break for MI12.” Ellery fought the spark of rage filling her cheeks with fiery heat. What good were ten years of specialized training in Elshaddai’s elite school only to have her research ruined at the eleventh hour?

The Commissioner waved his hand as if to erase her words. “That is not up for debate. I know exactly how hard you’ve worked. It’s the reason I selected you for this assignment almost two years ago. Don’t let Munroe get under your skin.”

Dyce scoffed, and Ellery bristled. This mission was paramount to understanding life trajectories, especially for their current leadership. Besides, she finished things. Hard things like research that cost her friendships and a huge chunk of her life.

She took a deep breath, remembering what she contained within herself. It was so important that it held a life of its own, drawing breath, requiring secrecy, demanding a life for a life. She'd combed through and committed to memory three hundred years' worth of video and AI recordings. So, a life for three lifetimes.

Something in Dyce Munroe's gaze shifted, and she realized she'd been staring. She flicked her eyes back under her will and to the Commissioner. "Yes, sir. We'll need to travel to the Starlit Inn, December 2025."

"I'll add that to the directive, sign, and send it up the chain for final approval. Both of you need to prepare yourselves. Time travel, as I'm sure you already know, Dr. Stein, is dangerous."

"We might get lost in the quantum time-travel space loop." She stretched her neck and pressed her glasses back up her nose.

Some risks were worth it.

The Commissioner nodded.

Munroe touched the Commissioner's desk. "I didn't sign on for that."

The Commissioner stood. "Young man, you signed on to serve the people of Elshaddai. As your Mission Commissioner, you'll do as I order. Is that clear?"

Munroe shifted, almost dissolving into a sort of mission-ready stance. "Sir, yes, sir."

Ellery stood, since the two men were. "Sir, with all due respect, maybe it would be best to select a member of MI12 who can not only protect me but also the research. Mr. Munroe clearly has no interest in preserving historical records or research of any kind, for that matter."

As Research Lead, Ellery would not let her team down by allowing anything to ruin this mission, which could potentially reveal the most important historical information gathered since

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the war on data, when a radical group's cyberattack took out all historical records over a hundred and fifty years ago.

Despite the gravity of her thoughts, her eyes wandered to MI12. Again.

"Munroe, will that be necessary?" The Commissioner sneered at the soldier.

"Sir, no, sir." Munroe cut a sharp glare at her before focusing back on the Commissioner.

Ellery couldn't read anything more from Dyce Munroe's expression.

In her research, they'd found the exact period when the twelve families of Elshaddai experienced an event so indelible it marked their future trajectories for leadership. An ancestor from each family had touched this one moment, possibly this one place, and their lives pivoted in a totally new direction.

Ellery and Dyce might get lost in the quantum time-travel space loop, but they might also discover something ... dare she say ... monumental?

A cornerstone moment that could influence everything going forward.

## about the author



Jennifer Burrows has a message in her heart about God's love, and she's shared that when she was a musician in her father's church, as a missionary to underprivileged children in a third-world country, and as a wife who stood by her

husband through terminal brain cancer that God miraculously healed.

Now, she's sharing God's powerful love through the art of fiction, raising awareness of supernatural influences, and helping others understand how to use faith in the face of adversity. Jennifer teaches in the greater Nashville area where she lives with her husband and their two children. Get to know Jennifer better at [jlburrows.com](http://jlburrows.com), or connect with her online and on social media at:

[www.facebook.com/jenniferlynnburrows](https://www.facebook.com/jenniferlynnburrows) or  
[www.instagram.com/jlburrowsauthor](https://www.instagram.com/jlburrowsauthor).