

What Readers Are Saying about *Mistletoe and Malice*

Mistletoe and Malice is everything I want in a romantic suspense—danger that keeps you breathless, characters you can't help falling for, and a love story that makes your heart squeeze in the best way. Lori DeJong balances swoony chemistry and high-stakes tension so beautifully that I honestly couldn't decide which had me holding my breath more—the threats closing in or the sparks flying between Riley and Colton. These two warmly drawn protagonists are just so good together—and as individuals—that it was a pleasure getting to know them. Add in heartfelt faith threads, an unforgettable supporting cast, and moments that made me laugh, tear up, and fan myself (sometimes all at once), and this one easily earns a top spot on my 'Best of 2025' and my re-read list too.

— Carrie Schmidt, Reading is My Superpower
Review

For Lori's debut into romantic suspense, she knocked it out of the park! I loved the forced proximity/bodyguard tropes. The action scenes were well written and participating in the unraveling mystery of who and how and where really kept me turning the pages.

— Casey Cline, Goodreads Review

I loved this book!! Well written and fast-paced, *Mistletoe and Malice* has it all—a swoony romance, exciting intrigue, and a grounding spiritual element. Once I picked the book up, I couldn't put it down. Fabulous read!! Highly recommend.

— Nancy Lavo, Amazon Review

I found myself so involved with the characters and story, I didn't want it to end. Can't wait for the next book to be released. Lori writes with a style that brings you in as if you are familiar with the characters. I can definitely see this book as movie!

— Jamie Turner, Amazon Review

I thoroughly enjoyed this story! I loved the suspense elements, the wonderful characters and how they interacted with one another, the strong faith thread, and everything in between! I'm so glad I read this book, and I encourage you to as well.

— Deena Adams, Goodreads Review

Love, love, LOVE this novel. I almost exclusively read either Women's Fiction or contemporary Christian romance—not romantic suspense. But that's not a problem with this story. *Mistletoe and Malice* combines both romance and suspense in a way that's not too intense on the suspense part and a lovely story on the romance side.

— Kristi Woods, Amazon Review

I recommend *Mistletoe and Malice* to romantic suspense readers who like friends-to-more bodyguard romances with forced proximity, unknown danger, a stalker with a twist, intriguing mysteries and strong faith elements in the story.

— Narelle Atkins, Goodreads Review

Guarded Hearts—Book 2

SANCTUARY and SABOTAGE

LORI DEJONG



Scrivenings
PRESS

Quench your thirst for story.
www.ScriveningsPress.com

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Published by Scrivenings Press LLC

15 Lucky Lane

Morrilton, Arkansas 72110

<https://ScriveningsPress.com>

Printed in the United States of America

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Paperback ISBN 978-1-64917-636-3

eBook ISBN 978-1-64917-637-0

Editors: Elena Hill and K. Banks

Cover design by Linda Fulkerson - www.bookmarketinggraphics.com

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*To Lauren Long, DVM, and the dedicated doctors and techs at Georgetown
Veterinary Hospital, who take such good care of Buddy and Lily, my two
furry writing companions.*

Chapter One



Almost to the finish line.

Trevor sat in the back seat of the Petersen Security SUV beside their principal. He and his team of bodyguards had achieved their objective—keeping the up-and-coming country music star alive the last four months. Four months traveling the US, standing sentinel outside a myriad of hotel rooms, backstage at too many concerts to count, keeping watch through interviews and morning talk show visits.

Thankfully, they'd had no run-ins with the bitter ex who had followed up a barrage of calls and threatening texts with an attempt on her life two weeks before her first headlining tour. But a job was finished only when the principal had been safely delivered to their final destination.

Once inside the gate, the SUV rolled up in front of a rambling house. As the rear watch vehicle came to a stop behind, Trevor stepped out onto the stone-paved drive, his gaze panning the grounds inside the now closed gate, the front of the house, and both sides.

All clear.

Piper and Stan exited the rear car while he held the SUV's back passenger door for their principal. "Home sweet home, Miss Young."

Her bright red lips turned up in a smile, lighting up her heavily made-up face. A little much for his taste, but he'd always preferred

simplicity over excess. "All this time together and you still won't call me CeCe? I thought we were getting close."

He caught the bemused grin from his co-worker Piper as she joined them, followed by Stan, their third member and driver of the rear watch car. Both of them, and the SUV's driver on this four-person protection detail, were well aware of their principal's undisguised interest and gave him no end of grief about it.

He chuckled as he closed the door. "I'm afraid this is where our road ends, Miss Young. But it's been a pleasure."

Her smile faded. "Hmm. Could've fooled me."

He didn't respond as he took point in front of her, Piper following her to the left and Stan to the right. A few more minutes and she'd be the responsibility of her new permanent security team. And he would be done with her incessant invitations to *pleasures* he had no intention of accepting.

"Pax, tell me you've planned something fun for the next few weeks," Stan said from behind him as they escorted their client up the walk to the column-flanked porch. "Something I'd have done back in my bachelor days." He laughed. "Although, honestly, I can't wait to get home to my way better half and Little Man."

Trevor couldn't blame him. In his eyes, Stan was the lucky one. He'd found his soulmate. Settled down, started a family. Trevor would trade bachelor life in a heartbeat for someone to go home to. Make a life with.

"I have some ideas." His head swiveled back and forth, surveying again the grounds and front of the house. "Preferably on a beach somewhere in the Caribbean." In shorts and a T-shirt. No suits.

Miss Young took his elbow as they climbed the steps to the front door only feet away. "Let me know if you want company. Have passport, will travel."

Yeah, not going to hap—

A shot rang out from behind. Cecily ducked and screamed. He whirled, drawing his weapon at the same time. Piper pushed the panicked singer to the ground. Covered her with her body. Both splattered with blood. Whose?

His eyes met Stan's, standing in a stupor before crumpling to the ground. Blood gushed from his neck, above his protective vest. A scarlet pool spread on the white-stained concrete porch.

Sanctuary and Sabotage

No. Not now. Not this close.

A second shot shattered the glass beside the door. Cecily let out another scream.

He swung his Glock side to side. Took in every bush. Every tree. Searched along the wall surrounding the property. Saw nobody.

Voices yelled from the outer perimeter. Law enforcement had a visual of the shooter.

When he heard no other shots, he holstered his weapon. Fell to his knees beside his co-worker. Grabbed his wrist. Checked for a pulse.

Nothing.

While Piper tried to calm their sobbing client, Trevor pumped Stan's chest.

One. Two. Three. "Come on, Stan." Six. Seven. Eight. "Not like this."

Their driver helped her get the singer inside.

One. Two. Three.

Gunshots outside the wall. Not toward the house. More yelling.

Four. Five. Six.

Once their hysterical principal had been secured in the house, Piper ran outside and knelt on the other side of their fallen co-worker. "They got him. Sniper. DOA."

He nodded. *Ten. Eleven. Twelve.*

She put her hand to Stan's neck. "He's gone, Paxton."

No. He had a wife. A toddler son. A baby girl on the way.

"Paxton." Crimson streams poured through her fingers. "Let it go."

He shook his head. Keep going. Keep pushing. If Stan's heart wouldn't beat, he'd do the work until it could. Ignore the ache in his arms. The burning in his lungs. Ignore the blood. Lifeless gaze staring heavenward.

Eighteen. Nineteen. Twenty. Start over.

Sweat poured down his face. Keep pumping. Keep going.

She reached out with her free hand and clutched his arm. "Trev. He's lost too much blood. Let it go."

Another half-dozen chest compressions. Still nothing. He studied Stan's face. Pupils fixed. Dilated. Black. Pale skin. Blue lips.

Trevor's lungs heaved. Spasms shot up his spine. He sat back on the porch, perched his shaking arms on his raised knees.

Cecily's sobs drifted outside. Sirens blared in the distance. Too late. Much too late.

The voice inside grew louder with each hard-fought breath. The voice he'd first heard four-and-a-half years ago on that last classified mission.

This is on you. It should be you.

He hung his head and held it in his aching hands.

This is on you.

"What do you mean you're not accepting this?" Trevor hesitated before taking the letter his boss held out to him across the desk. "With all due respect, Blankenship, you don't have a choice."

With a sigh, Colton perched his hands on his hips. "You might be right. But, *with all due respect*, I still refuse. What happened Wednesday is still too fresh. Too raw. Not a good time to make a life-altering decision. Like quitting a job you were made for."

"Apparently not." Trevor stuck the resignation letter in the inside pocket of his suit coat. The letter he'd penned yesterday on the way to Houston from Nashville on the company plane—with Stan's body in the hold below, resting in a plain wooden, flag-draped box for the Marine veteran. "I got a fellow operative killed. Why aren't you firing me?"

Colton gestured for Trevor to take a seat in front of the desk while he took his own behind it. "Mack and I discussed Wednesday's unfortunate outcome, and we both agree you're not to blame." Mack Petersen. Renowned and highly respected owner of Petersen Security International. "Neither of us considered terminating your employment. You're a top-notch protection specialist. Great instincts. Intelligent. Cool under pressure."

Trevor's gut clenched, and the bowl of cereal he'd forced down that morning churned in his stomach. He hadn't slept much after accompanying his co-worker's body to the morgue last night ... and holding on to a distraught newly minted widow after the sight of her husband on a cold, stainless-steel table.

Knowing the shooter had been taken down by the police within minutes brought the only consolation he'd taken from the day's tragic events. A life for a life, but nowhere near an equal balance.

Heading home to an empty apartment reminded him he had so

Sanctuary and Sabotage

much less to lose than Stan had. Nobody waiting for him. No children to raise. No wife to grow old with.

It should be you.

Every time sleep started to close in the last two nights, Stan's face appeared—devoid of life, of that twinkle in his eyes when he shared another lame joke. The one who kept things upbeat when the tension of the job bore down on them.

A bright light snuffed out far too early.

"Great instincts. I don't know about that."

Colton sat up and folded his hands on the desktop. "Trev, what happened was not your fault. You didn't miss something or make a poor decision for your team. Your main objective was to secure the principal. That's what your team did. Ms. Young is safe because you all did your job. No one knew this guy had been an Army sniper. Yet you still requested law enforcement keep a perimeter when you transported her home from the airport. Smart move."

"But Stan—"

"Stan took *her* bullet. Not *your* bullet. He did his job as a shield between the shooter and his target. Granted, most of the time, it never comes to that, and if it does, rarely is it at the cost of a bodyguard's life. You know that full well, after taking one for Riley last year."

Trevor nodded. He'd worked heiress and high-profile attorney Riley Hudson's detail last year with Colton, then his Team Lead, now VP of Security Operations. She'd been targeted with no idea why or by whom. A danger with no face. No identity. Until the night they brought him down.

Trevor had taken his first bullet meant for somebody else on that detail, but by the grace of God, the soft body armor he wore under his tux had prevented any permanent damage. Kept him on the sidelines for a week, but he'd survived.

Stan hadn't.

"I'd do it again, you know. For your wife. Riley didn't deserve the nightmare she went through."

"Which strengthens my point that now is not the time to leave this behind, Pax. It's been two days. Take some time to process, to regroup. Take the month, like you'd already planned. Paid leave.

Work Tech Ops for a while if you need to. You're too good to walk away."

His sleep-deprived brain whirled back over the shooting. And its devastating end. How did one regroup after that?

Bowing his head, he swallowed against the tightness in his throat. He'd attempted to pray the past two nights. Lying in the dark, trying not to hear the sound of the shot, Stan bleeding out on the ground, Piper covering their hysterical principal, both splattered with Stan's blood.

Tried praying for understanding he'd never find.

"Have you ever lost someone on an op?" He met his friend's gaze across the desk. "Did you ever have to *regroup* from something like this?"

Colton shook his head. "But if that bullet you took last year had hit six inches higher, you wouldn't be sitting here today. And I'd be the one wanting to run."

Trevor's eyes narrowed. "I'm not running. You know this is best." Because how could anybody trust him on another op? How could he trust *himself*? "You left Riley's detail last year, after I got shot."

"Because I was a liability to her and the detail. But I didn't quit. I distanced myself. Remaining on a detail when you have feelings for the principal is unacceptable. I should've removed myself sooner."

"Turned out all right in the end. We caught the guy. You're married now, in the new house, a baby on the way. Happy for you, my friend."

"I appreciate that. But the point is, with Ms. Young's stalker dead, she's now free. You and your team kept her alive. No one more so than Stan. He understood the risks of the job, as we all do. I've no doubt he'd be the first to tell you what happened is not on you."

If only it were that easy to convince himself.

Colton opened a side drawer and pulled out a business card. "Here. Call this guy and make an appointment."

Trevor took the card and read it. "A therapist?" He glared at Colton. "I don't need counseling."

"You absolutely need counseling. When you've come so close to death, your mind needs help processing it." Colton leaned forward. "This is not a request, Paxton. You don't return to the field until we get the go-ahead from Dr. Shea."

Sanctuary and Sabotage

Trevor's heart raced. Rehashing things he couldn't change would only drive the knife in further. Reliving those awful minutes and hours afterward.

And inevitably lead to questions about that last deployment. Something that had lived deep in his psyche, out of sight ... until two days ago.

"What am I supposed to do with all this time off?"

"I don't care. Just don't go looking for a new job. Do some volunteer work. Go kayaking or hiking. Spend time with your folks and your sister. You have a new nephew, don't you?"

He nodded. "Tanner. Five months old."

"Go catch up with your family."

Not a bad idea. He hadn't seen his family since Father's Day four months ago, before he'd left on the assignment with Cecily Young. His first as lead.

And likely the last, since he had no interest in seeing this Dr. Shea.

He stood and shook Colton's hand. "I appreciate your time."

"My door is always open." Colton came around the desk to walk him out. "And you know I'm always up for golf."

"I'll keep that in mind."

In the parking garage of the Petersen Security headquarters building in downtown Houston, Trevor sat in his truck, letting the air conditioner chase away the muggy heat of mid-October. He tossed the business card into the glove box and put his head against the seat back with a sigh.

Stay busy. Keep moving. Don't think.

If he hid out in his condo, the memories would eat him up. But what could he do with all that time? Where could he—

His head popped up. He knew somewhere he could do all three.

He grabbed his cell and hit the icon, waiting through two rings.

"Trevor? Everything okay?"

"Yes, sir, Uncle Luke. Turns out I have some unexpected downtime. Thought I'd come out to the ranch. It's been too long."

"It surely has. And you'd be an answer to prayer, boy. Come on. You can stay in the guest room. We gave your folks' old house to one of the hands who has a family."

"Not a problem. Sunday afternoon okay to get there?"

Lori DeJong

“Whenever you get here will be perfect. Your aunt will be beside herself. Missing Kai so much, I doubt she’ll let you go for an hour.”

He chuckled, feeling lighter already. Having his cousin Kai there instead of who-knew-where in the world as an Army Ranger was the only thing that would make it better.

Next call, Mom, who squealed when he told her he’d come spend the day with them tomorrow. Then he’d have lunch with them after church and hit the road to the Paxton Ranch in little Bandry, a couple of hours northeast of Houston in the Piney Woods of Texas.

The best place to stay busy. Keep moving. To not think.

And not a therapist in sight.