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*White Collar
Christmas*

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Chapter One

New job. New boss. Same old story.

Undercover FBI agents didn't get the fun jobs or the cushy jobs, and rookie undercover agents? Well, they got the jobs from hell.

Sara Amos put the Mercedes in drive and ignored the hair on the back of her neck standing at attention. Her new boss—drop-dead gorgeous and charming in that sexy, Spanish, Antonio Banderas sort of way—watched her in the rearview.

"I don't believe you are just a chauffeur," he said from the leather backseat. Casual. Cunning.

Engaging Alexander Batisto in conversation about what she could be, other than his chauffeur, was dangerous territory. He might sense her fear, taste her deceit like licorice on his tongue.

A fluffy white snowflake hit the windshield, and she counted the seconds it took to melt before answering. "Would you like to listen to some music?"

Without waiting for his reply, she punched the stereo button. Latin guitar music, with holiday overtones, floated out of the speakers.

Batisto, however, couldn't be dodged so easily. He slid forward, graceful as a leopard, putting his lips an inch from her ear. "There are opportunities in my company for a beautiful woman like you, beyond driving my car."

She'd seen the look in his eyes when she'd applied for the job and knew he was still wondering what was under her tight-fitting uniform.

Let him wonder. She didn't fall for white collar criminals any more than she fell for drug dealers and gun runners...

Even when they smelled like her mama's decadent spice cake and moved with the grace of a leopard.

Nudging her chauffeur's hat down half an inch, Sara glued her gaze to the road, recently scraped by plows. Batisto's wavy, black curls and roaming dark eyes had left her momentarily speechless at the interview, but even his soft, teasing voice and gentle hands didn't fool her. He was as cold and hard under that sexy exterior as the steering wheel she now gripped in place of a life preserver.

And soon, very soon, the black deerskin gloves on her hands would do more than grip the steering wheel of this criminal's car. If all went as planned, they'd be gripping her Beretta when she finally took him downtown.

Chapter Two

Same job. Same story. New rookie.

Was it his imagination or were the undercover recruits getting younger? And sexier?

Alex scanned Sara's profile as she drove him home from his fake meeting uptown. Olive skin, full lips, and eyes the color of good whiskey. She'd worked hard to keep the Jersey Girl out of her voice, but the silver hoop earrings the size of Lady Liberty that dangled from under the chauffeur's cap gave her away. He made a mental note to put that in his final evaluation. Employees of the local chauffeur service had rules, and one of them was no jewelry. If he'd been the criminal the fake file she'd read claimed he was, he would have known the rules and questioned the earrings, which in turn, might have blown her cover.

Guitar music filled the car's interior with a Christmas tune. Alex slid his gaze off Sara and glanced at the snow falling outside. The year from hell was almost over and he was ready to lay some ghosts to rest. While it wasn't his fault, he couldn't shake the guilt of his partner's death, and yet he'd made some inroads into coming to terms with it. The Clarke Project was one of those inroads. Rookie undercover agents came to him, full of fire and inexperience, believing they were in a real life situation with a criminal. Since training only went so far in either police departments or the FBI, the Clarke Project, named after his partner, Randy Clarke, was in essence the ultimate undercover op, and had probably saved a few lives since inception.

If Alex got his way, Sara'd be the next rookie to graduate from the Clarke Project with a new set of survival skills.

Holiday traffic clogged the one-way, forcing Sara to slow to a crawl. Another mental note. An experienced chauffeur would have known this street would be a quagmire this time of day.

The snow-filled sky darkened the afternoon. Street lights popped on as Sara inched the car forward a foot, and the brake lights of cars ahead of them glowed brightly in the gloom. Trees strung with white Christmas lights dotted the nearby sidewalks. A romantic setting.

Romance? Where had that come from? Alex huffed. Sara's very female presence was messing with his neurons. She was the first woman he'd had in the program, and he'd never expected her to be so damned attractive.

The obvious button to push was sexual. Using sex as a tool to make her blow her cover, however, would be playing with fire. Bottom line, though, she was sure to face sexual harassment from real criminals, so putting her in a few hot situations would be good experience for her.

And probably for him too. Getting back on the bike was not as easy as everyone said it was. A little flirting, that would lead absolutely nowhere, was safe, and when it came to women these days, Alex liked safe.

Again he huffed. Was he really trading in his days as an adventure-seeking Romeo for *safe*?

Ten years of Romeo with no Juliet in sight made it easy for him to answer yes. He didn't want safe necessarily, but he did want a woman he could trust. Someone who was good and nice and...

Sara lowered the volume of the music, snapping him out of his reverie. "I apologize for the delay, Mr. Batisto. I should have avoided this route and gone past Times Square before doubling back to your penthouse. I thought this would be faster with the plows out."

Slipping back into Batisto's persona of a playboy art forgerer, Alex called up his Basque roots and slid forward in the seat to put his mouth beside Sara's ear again. "You can make it up to me by joining me for a drink once we get back."

Her whiskey-brown eyes blinked once before she turned her head to meet his gaze. In their depths he could see a hint of fear, but also a hint of anticipation. "While I appreciate the offer, I'm not allowed to drink while I'm on duty."

A sudden hot need sizzled in his veins. Undercover or not, he wanted to spend more time with her. "I make a mean virgin martini. Chocolate if you like."

Chocolate got them every time. A crease formed in the corner of her bottom lip as if she were biting the inside of it as she considered his offer. She wanted to find information to warrant an arrest, and he'd just given her the opportunity to have a look at his place. The consequence, however, was ending up alone with him. Her lip returned to normal. "Fraternizing with the boss isn't allowed. Company rules."

There was no umph behind her words. He could almost smell her weakness. "On company time, yes, but off-duty, you may fraternize with whomever you choose. Believe me, I'm familiar with your employer's rules."

Again the crease in her lower lip before she spoke. "Really, Mr. Batisto, it wouldn't be wise for us to share a drink."

"Call me Alex, please." With his finger, he traced the outline of one earring. She shivered. "And do you always do the wise thing, Sara? It's just a martini, after all."

Pressing her lips together, she turned her gaze back to the street and inched the car forward with traffic. Alex slid back in his seat and smiled at her when she chanced a glance at him in the rearview.

Her shoulders rose and fell as she sighed deeply. "I take my martinis dirty, no chocolate."

The sizzling in his veins popped and cracked with his success. He nodded at her. "Dirty it is."

Chapter Three

Sara stood in front of the penthouse door and wanted to shoot herself as she listened to the doorbell *boing, boing, boing* inside. She'd gone back to her hole in the wall, cleaned up and then spent twenty minutes trying to figure out the right outfit. Everything she owned either screamed cop or Jersey party girl. The party girl was long gone but the cop paycheck barely covered rent and basics. What was left went to pay her mother's hospital bills. She couldn't afford a new wardrobe to fit her party-less lifestyle.

She'd settled on a red turtleneck and black jeans, eschewing stilettos for shiny black flats and keeping her make-up subdued. The only thing she hadn't resisted was her Christmas lipstick—HollyBerry Pout. It matched her turtleneck perfectly.

The door opened and Batisto greeted her with obvious approval and a knowing smirk. He'd shed his business suit and was also wearing a turtleneck. Ash gray with designer ribbing. Probably cost more than her entire month's pay. "You came."

"One drink, that's all."

He ushered her in, helping her out of her coat. "Of course."

The penthouse was what she expected. Hardwood floors, floor to ceiling windows, high-end furniture and an open layout for the kitchen, living room and dining areas.

Contemporary paintings hung on the walls—real or fakes? An iron sculpture accented one corner – had he bought it legitimately or stolen it? And in the kitchen, she glimpsed chef-grade appliances and marble countertops.

"Have a seat." He motioned her toward the sofa which brimmed with brightly colored throw pillows.

She sank down and found, to her surprise, the elegant sofa was actually plush and comfortable. Norah Jones music played from hidden speakers, and Batisto hummed along as he mixed martinis at the bar.

There were two doors off the main living area. One had to be the master suite and probably the second, a bathroom. Unless he only had one bathroom, in the bedroom suite, and then that doorway might lead to an office.

He arrived at her side and handed her a glass. "One dirty martini, no chocolate."

"Thanks," she said, taking a sip. The salty olive juice accented the dry alcohol perfectly.

He retrieved a second martini for himself before sitting across from her on a matching chair. Another surprise that he didn't invade her space. As he sipped his own drink, his sexy, dark eyes lingered on her lips. "Dirty enough?"

Her breath caught for a second until she realized he was asking her about the drink. "Oh, uh, yes, it's delicious." She tilted her head to the bank of windows, attempting to redirect his gaze. "Who'd you kill for the view?"

He smiled, but his eyes dimmed as if a bad memory had just crossed his mind. "Did you eat?"

"Not since lunch."

He set his martini down and retrieved a tray of appetizers from the fridge. They were as colorful as the throw pillows, and Sara realized, to her embarrassment, she couldn't guess what any of them were.

As if reading her mind, he named them one by one. That triggered a discussion about foods, which led to travel. Soon, their glasses were empty, the appetizers devoured, and Sara found herself completely enthralled by Batisto's self-deprecating manner and contagious laugh.

Enjoying herself a bit too much, and still wanting to check out the rest of the penthouse, she declined a second martini and accepted a Perrier instead. Before she knew it, the sparkling water was gone and Alexander—when had she started thinking of him by his first name?—had yet to make a pass at her. The desire was in his eyes, but never went further. He stayed on his side of the coffee table and only occasionally took their conversation into a flirtatious zone.

All the liquid finally hit and she had to ask about the bathroom. That, too, was masterfully decorated. When she returned to the living room, Alexander was absent but she could hear his voice coming from another room. His bedroom? He was on the phone from the sounds of it, and Sara immediately went into cop mode.

First she tiptoed to the edge of the door and listened. His voice was muffled and all she could make out were a few words. It sounded like he was upset about a change of plans, although she couldn't be certain.

The dining area contained a buffet. The kitchen had multiple drawers. Unlikely a criminal would keep damning evidence in either, but what did she have to lose? She crossed the floor, listening for any hint that Alexander had terminated his call, before methodically sorting through the kitchen drawers first. A notepad and pen by the landline caught her attention. Breaking the pad in half, she stole the top section and slipped it into her bag. Later, she'd run a pencil tip over it and see if she could read names or numbers he'd jotted down.

Obscured by the refrigerator was another door. Alexander was still talking, so she stuck her head inside.

Bingo. A laptop. On a desk cluttered with papers.

Before slipping inside, she grabbed the pen by the phone and dropped it in her handbag. At the desk, she hurriedly scanned the papers. Invoices, bills and assorted faxes. Any of it could have been evidence, but she didn't know what, and she couldn't take all of it. She eyed the laptop. No doubt it was password protected.

Without warning, she heard someone clear his throat. Her head snapped up, and there he was, the most wanted art forger in the state, catching her snooping in his office.

He crossed his arms over his sizable chest and leaned against the door frame. A very predatory look gleamed in his eyes. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

Good thing she'd taken the pen. She forced a smile. "Actually, no. You were on the phone, and I have to go so I was looking for a pen to write you a note."

Suspicion was evident in his face. "There's one out here next to my kitchen phone."

"Really?" She tried not to overplay it. "I only saw a notepad."

He left the doorway and she followed, ready to make a hasty retreat.

"I guess you're right," he said. There was a moment when Sara swore he grinned at the floor and shook his head before he met her gaze. "I enjoyed tonight. Perhaps we can do it again."

"I'd like that." No lie there. It just figured the first man she'd met and liked since landing on the White Collar Crimes taskforce had to be a criminal she was investigating. What was wrong with her? The child's holiday tune played in her head, only to different lyrics. *All I want for Christmas is a new love life. A new love life. A new love life.*

The perfect gentleman, Alexander helped her with her coat again and walked her out to the elevator. As the doors opened, he squeezed her elbow. A silent thank you? "See you tomorrow. Eight o'clock."

While she fought it, this time her smile was real. "I'll be here."

Chapter Four

Two weeks later, Christmas Eve, Sara stood outside the penthouse doors, again wanting to shoot herself. The last of the evidence was in her handbag. She was turning it over to the Special Agent in charge of the taskforce tonight. Within hours of doing so, a search warrant would be issued. By tomorrow morning, Alexander's penthouse and storage unit—where she was sure he hid his forgeries—would be searched and his property seized. Alexander, himself, would be arrested.

Since Martini Night, as she'd dubbed it, they'd shared childhood stories every morning in the car, watched the entire first season of Rome on DVD, and been on a holiday wine tasting tour in the Burroughs. They'd talked art and art history for hours.

He got her snarky sense of humor, while she got his lame jokes.

Through it all, she'd ridden a roller coaster of emotions while still doing her job. Her training had prepared her for the ins and outs of serving justice, but it hadn't prepared her for the discovery she'd made on this undercover assignment...that a criminal was also a human being, with hopes and fears and dreams just like hers.

So now she stood there, ready to risk her job by seeing Alexander before the search warrant was executed and the arrest went down. She needed to see him smiling and happy one more time. She needed to be Sara Amos—not an agent or fake chauffeur, just a woman—for a few precious moments.

Taking a deep breath, she rang the doorbell. Her chest constricted with doubts, she forced more air into her lungs as the familiar *boing, boing, boing* announced her presence.

Before she could hyperventilate, the door swung open, and Alexander's face brightened. He scanned her head to toe, taking in her white wool coat, red dress, and killer heels.

"Merry Christmas," she said.

Heat flashed in his eyes. Without a word, he drew her inside, slammed the door and pressed her up against it. His lips came down on hers and she accepted the kiss, wrapping her arms around his neck.

Her coat came off, his skilled fingers working the buttons free to slide it down her arms. He nibbled her earlobe, his hands skimming the silk fabric of her dress, and she moaned as he lingered in certain places. Her body moved of its own will against his, even as her brain screamed *no* at her.

This was wrong. She could lose her job for sleeping with him, and really, in the end, did she want to deepen the betrayal he was sure to feel when the undercover op was over? Did she want him to hate her even more than he would for her deception?

As his fingers grazed the hem of her dress and worked it up to touch her thighs, she grabbed his hand. "Wait."

Immediately, he released her, stepping back. Embarrassment showed on his face as if he couldn't believe he'd lost control like that.

If only they'd met in a different place and time. If only he wasn't a criminal.

She cleared her throat and smoothed down her dress. "I brought you a gift."

Grabbing up her coat, she dug a small, black jeweler's box out of the pocket.

Still breathing hard, Alexander reached out to take it. He looked her in the eye, looked at the box, and then at her again. "You bought me a present."

He sounded dumbfounded; the incredulous tone in his voice twisted her gut. "Just a little something." *To remember me by.* "It's nothing, really. I saw them at Macy's, and they we're just so...you."

The chuckle he emitted untwisted her gut. His grin made him look like a kid about to open the biggest present under the tree.

As he lifted the lid, she held her breath.

"Miniature martini glasses?"

"They're cufflinks."

"Ah, ha.," he said, still grinning. "In honor of Martini Night, yes?"

"Yes."

He opened his arms and she went into them. A moment later, he laid his forehead against hers. "I love them."

"Are you sure? They're not fancy or expensive, but I wanted you to remember our first evening together."

"They're perfect."

Contentment flooded her chest. *If only...*

Hating herself, she broke free from his embrace. "I'm sorry." *For everything.* "I have to go."

"What?" Confusion shadowed his face. "You just got here."

She shrugged her coat over her shoulders. "I know, but duty calls."

"You're working tonight?" His gaze dropped to her cleavage. "In that?"

She started for the door, turned and took one last look at him to preserve in her memory. "I really am sorry."

He propped a hand on the doorjamb. "Well, I'm not. You did good, even tonight. There're a few things we have to work on, but otherwise, you passed. Congratulations."

Huh? "Passed what?"

Crooking a finger at her in a follow-me motion, he said, "I have a present for you too."

Completely confused, she trailed him to his office, where he opened a wall safe and extracted a black leather wallet. He tossed it on the desk and directed her to have a look.

Sara knew what it was even before she opened it to see the shiny silver badge that said NYC Police Department. "I don't understand."

Alexander, a twinkle in his eyes, handed her a navy blue file folder. "Maybe this will explain it."

Taking the file, she began reading an abbreviated personnel file-slash-dossier of Detective Alex Balasko, one of New York's finest, listed as the Clarke Project team leader of the White Crimes taskforce. Sara had to sit down to finish reading.

When she finally looked up, his expression was almost unreadable. Only a hint of worry creased his forehead. "I apologize for lying to you, but it was important."

"What is the Clarke Project?"

He waved a hand. "All of this. The penthouse, me, the cover, all of it. It's a special training op. You can't work the taskforce unless you pass."

"You tricked me."

"Yes. Like I said, I'm sorry. If there were another way..."

"But why? Why keep this a secret?"

"Because if you knew it was training, you might not act or react the same as you would in a real life situation. In your job description, the Clarke Project falls under 'any further training deemed necessary'. This project may be the very thing that helps save your life down the road."

For the next twenty minutes, Sara's emotional roller coaster went up and down again as Alex told her about his former partner, Randy Clarke, and the reason the Clarke Project even existed. His story touched her heart, but she still demanded and received answers to all her questions. Finally, there was only one question left.

"So you and I..." she started, then stopped, wondering if there was a *you and I* to even talk about.

Alex took her hand and drew her out of his office chair. "Where we go from here is totally up to you."

Up to her. *If only...* "You're not my boss or anything, right?"
"The only thing I do for the taskforce is this project. We won't work together after tonight."
"And off duty you can fraternize with whomever you choose?"
He traced the outline of one silver hoop earring before skimming her neck with his fingers. "Of course."
She shivered at his touch. "I think I'd like a martini, then. Dirty."
He grinned before bending her back over his desk. "Dirty it is."

About the Author

When people discover Misty is an author, they assume her books are children's stories. A student in one of her creative writing classes once stated, "I can't believe you write suspense. You seem so nice."

What they don't realize is underneath Misty's girl-next-door façade beats the heart of a kick-butt heroine. As a young girl, she forced her friends to act out scenes from her favorite adventure stories—Alice in Wonderland and the Wizard of Oz. At nine years old, she applied to be one of Charlie's Angels. She's still waiting by the phone for Charlie's call.

These days she forces her characters, instead of her friends, to act out the adventures in her head. Her kick-butt heroines face heart-stopping danger and suicidal odds whether they're bringing justice to all or simply clicking their leather boots together to find their way home. Misty bases all her female characters on the stuff Alice, Dorothy and the Angels were made of:

girl-next-door facades with the heart of a kick-butt (but always nice) heroine beating underneath.

Ready to spring into action if Charlie should call, Misty meanwhile cultivates her nice girl persona in Illinois with her husband Mark, her twin sons Sam and Ben, and her big dog Max. She's a member of several writing organizations, teaches creative writing classes at the local YWCA, and blogs on Tuesdays twice a month at Shades of Suspense blogspot (www.romanticsuspense.blogspot.com).

For more information, visit her website at www.readmistyevans.com. To receive her bi-monthly newsletter, send an email to misty@readmistyevans.com or join her Yahoo! Group www.groups.yahoo.com/group/MistyEvansSuspense to receive news and announcements.

Misty believes adventure lies in the heart of every girl-next-door and welcomes hearing about the daring exploits of her readers!