



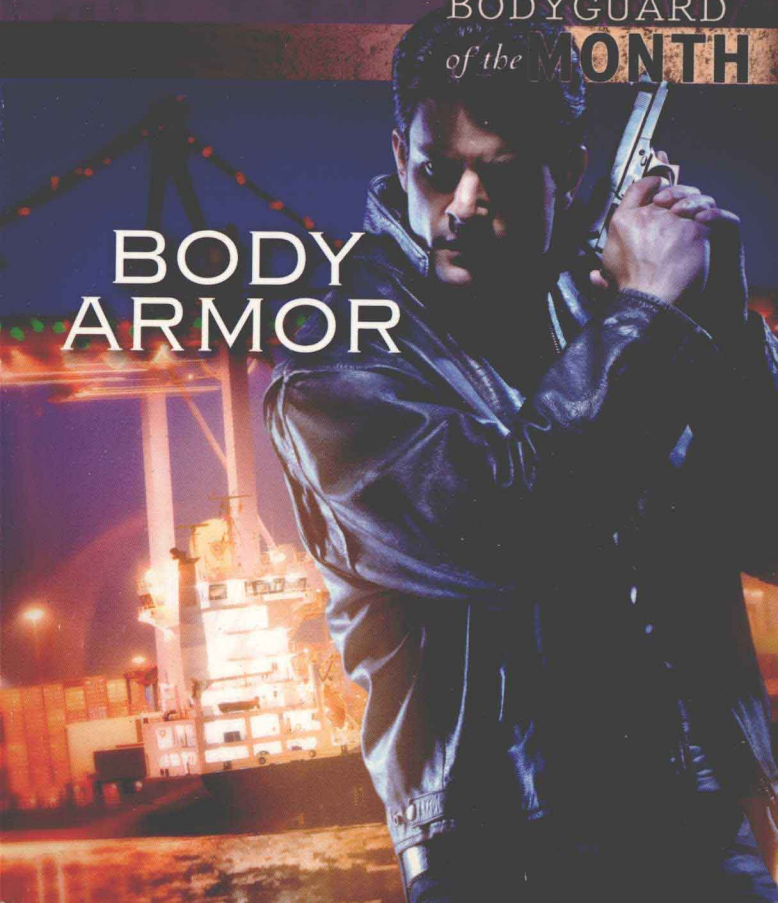
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*Introducing DADDY BY CHRISTMAS by Patricia Thayer.*

MIA caught sight of Jarrett when he walked into the open lobby. It was hard not to notice the man. In a charcoal business suit with a crisp white shirt and striped tie covered by a dark trench coat, he looked more Wall Street than small-town Colorado.

Mia couldn't blame him for keeping his distance. He was probably tired of taking care of her.

Besides, why would a man like Jarrett McKane be interested in her? Why would he want to take on a woman expecting a baby? Yet he'd done so many things for her. He'd been there when she'd needed him most. How could she not care about a man like that?

Heart pounding in her ears, she walked up behind him. Jarrett turned to face her. "Did you get enough sleep last night?"

"Yes, thanks to you," she said, wondering if he'd thought about their kiss. Her gaze went to his mouth, then she quickly glanced away. "And thank you for not bringing up my meltdown."

Jarrett couldn't stop looking at Mia. Blue was definitely her color, bringing out the richness of her eyes.

"What meltdown?" he said, trying hard to focus on what she was saying. "You were just exhausted from lack of sleep and worried about your baby."

He couldn't help remembering how, during the night, he'd kept going in to watch her sleep. How strange was that? "I hope you got enough rest."

She nodded. "Plenty. And you're a good neighbor for

coming to my rescue.”

He tensed. Neighbor? *What neighbor kisses you like I did?* “That’s me, just the full-service landlord,” he said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. He started to leave, but she put her hand on his arm.

“Jarrett, what I meant was you went beyond helping me.” Her eyes searched his face. “I’ve asked far too much of you.”

“Did you hear me complain?”

She shook her head. “You should. I feel like I’ve taken advantage.”

“Like I said, I haven’t minded.”

“And I’m grateful for everything...”

Grasping her hand on his arm, Jarrett leaned forward. The memory of last night’s kiss had him aching for another. “I didn’t do it for your gratitude, Mia.”

*Gorgeous tycoon Jarrett McKane has never believed in Christmas—but he can’t help being drawn to soon-to-be-mom Mia Saunders! Christmases past were spent alone...and now Jarrett may just have a fairy-tale ending for all his Christmases future!*

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**She had expected to see a stranger, forever grateful that he had intervened, but to her utter astonishment the man looking back at her was someone she knew.**

Intimately.

She hadn't seen him in four long years, but his face was so achingly familiar that she suddenly felt her legs weaken, thinking for a moment that she might collapse again.

All at once her heart began to thump wildly against her chest and she couldn't quite breathe as shock began to overcome her.

He smiled at her then, a smile laced with a hint of melancholy, a subtle sadness reflected in his intense blue eyes—eyes that spoke of a history between them that would never be forgotten.

“How’ve you been, Anna?”

The man she had once hoped to marry.





# ALANA MATTHEWS

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alana Matthews can't remember a time when she didn't want to be a writer. As a child, she was a permanent fixture in her local library, and soon turned her passion for books into writing short stories and finally novels. A longtime fan of romantic suspense, Alana felt she had no choice but to try her hand at the genre, and she is thrilled to be writing for Harlequin Intrigue. Alana makes her home in a small town near the coast of Southern California, where she spends her time writing, composing music and watching her favorite movies.

Send a message to Alana at her website,  
[www.AlanaMatthews.com](http://www.AlanaMatthews.com).

### **Books by Alana Matthews**

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## CAST OF CHARACTERS

**Anna Sanford**—The recent death of her brother has been ruled a suicide, but Anna doesn't believe it.

**Brody Carpenter**—Once a sheriff's deputy accused of taking a bribe, Brody will always regret walking away four years ago. Now tragedy has brought him back home.

**Adam**—Anna's three-year-old son and her reason for living.

**Deputy Frank Matson**—He tried to pick up the pieces when Brody left, but still couldn't repair the damage.

**Joe Wilson**—Frank's partner, whose dislike for Brody Carpenter knows no bounds.

**Sylvia Sanderson**—Anna's grieving mother once welcomed Brody into their home. Now she wishes he'd go away.

**Sakey and Chercover**—Two thugs who want something from Anna that she doesn't know she has.

**Owen Sanderson**—His sudden suicide has raised Anna's suspicions. The message he sent just before his death brought Brody home.

## Chapter One

There was something not quite right about Santa Claus.

Anna didn't *see* it so much as *feel* it, a vague uneasiness that spread through her the moment he glanced in her direction. But it was there, and it was unmistakable, and she wondered for a moment if she should call security and have him checked out.

He stood in the middle of the crowded mall, between Anna's shop and a small dress boutique across the aisle, ringing his bell next to a Save the Children donation canister. Something in his eyes said he couldn't care less about the children, however, and for the brief moment he looked at Anna, she was pretty sure his interest lay somewhere else entirely.

Like the area just south of her neck and shoulders.

Anna was in the middle of helping a customer—a gentle old woman who wanted a peach-blossom body care set for her granddaughter—and did her best to ignore Santa's leer, chalking it up to typical

Neanderthal behavior. But Anna had her share of lascivious looks in the past, and this one seemed to go beyond the norm and straight into the realm of creepy.

Was this guy even authorized to be here?

He wasn't your typical holiday bell ringer. Most were retirees looking for something to do, but not this one.

He was about thirty years old, and there was a shady, wanted-poster quality to his demeanor that couldn't be disguised by the floppy hat and the fake white beard. Strip away the red suit and all the padding, and you'd probably find a common street thug underneath.

Maybe Anna wasn't being very charitable herself. Maybe he was just a poor unfortunate who was down on his luck and needed any job he could find. That wasn't unusual in this economy.

After what she'd been through over the past week, Anna would be the first to admit she wasn't in the greatest frame of mind. So maybe she should cut this guy a break.

Still, there was a sense of menace in his look that seemed to say he *wanted* something from her, and the kernel of dread doing somersaults through her stomach right now was not a feeling she could easily ignore.

*Just go away*, she felt like telling him. *Pack up your stuff and leave.*

And to her surprise, a few minutes later, he did.

ANNA HAD DOUBTS ABOUT coming back to work tonight. Thought it might be too soon. In fact, she didn't normally *work* at night, but with only three days left until Christmas, and a store overflowing with anxious last-minute shoppers, she didn't feel she had a choice.

Trudy had done a wonderful job of covering for her the past week, but it was time for Anna to swallow her grief and get on with her life. If not for herself, then for little Adam. He deserved a normal Christmas.

As normal as it could be, that is.

She also had other matters to consider. Anna's Body Essentials was *her* baby, and with her lease about to expire and her rental fee threatening to increase, she couldn't afford to sit at home obsessing over all the things she could have said or done that might have kept her brother, Owen, alive.

The sheriff's department psychologist had told her that it's typical for the family of suicides to wonder where they might have gone wrong.

"Owen took his life because he *wanted* to," he'd said somberly. "Not because anyone drove him to it. It's unlikely there's any way you could have stopped him, short of catching him in the act."

"My mother thinks that if we'd paid more attention, seen the signs..."

"The signs aren't always evident, Anna. Especially when you only see someone a couple times a week.



Owen probably felt it was his duty to put on a brave face, make everyone believe he was okay. Such behavior isn't atypical."

Anna had listened carefully, nodding politely, more stunned by this turn of events than the psychologist could ever possibly know, but she hadn't said what she was thinking at the time.

That she wasn't entirely convinced that Owen *had* committed suicide.

It just didn't make sense.

Admittedly, her brother had seemed agitated lately, and he hadn't been in the best frame of mind after losing his job. But he was one of the most happy-go-lucky people Anna had ever known, and even if he *was* depressed, she just couldn't believe he'd try to find the solution through a bullet to the head.

Not the Owen Sanford she knew.

She had no proof of this, of course. Just gut instinct. But one thing Anna had learned in her time on this planet was that her instincts were rarely wrong.

When she finally broke down and confessed this belief to the psychologist, however, she was treated as if she were a child with a vivid imagination, her ability to reason clouded by grief.

And who knows? Maybe that was true.

Maybe she hadn't known Owen as well as she thought she had.