

Christmas Chains
LK Hunsaker

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Smashwords Edition

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“It’s been a horrendous day.” Deanna kicked off her shoes and started shrugging out of her damp coat while she held the phone against her ear. “Make that a horrendous week, and I’m putting it nicely.”

“You sound out of breath. Are you all right?”

She couldn’t help a light grin. His voice always soothed her. “I was just coming in and ran for the phone since I figured it was you. Got home late. Glad you held on so long.” She switched ears and let the coat fall from her other arm, grabbing it before it hit the carpet.

“Glad you were willing to run to the phone for me.”

Dropping the garment over a chair, Deanna sank to the floor. She wanted to see him. It had been too long.

“Deanna?”

“I’m here. I’m just ... unwinding.”

“Should I call back?”

“No. I mean, just talk to me. It’s the highlight of my day. Every day.” She couldn’t believe she felt so emotional. She was absolutely not an emotional type. Everyone commented on her strength. They were amazed by it, as though she had a choice.

“What happened?”

With a breath so deep her ribs nearly ached – or maybe it was from the frigid weather – Deanna tried to decide where to start and just what she should tell him. Maybe she shouldn’t. He couldn’t do anything from Fort Drum, where he had only a few months left to finish his term of duty. Maybe they were in the same state, but New York City was much too far away from him.

“Talk to me, Baby. I’m here for you as much as I can be.”

Tears started at his concern, at the way he called her *Baby* – not with a condescending tone as some men had, but nurturing, caring ... with respect, something she had never had much of from anyone before Freddy.

She wiped them away. He didn’t need to hear that in her voice. “Oh. Most of it was stupid things, you know, rude people for no reason and things happening that shouldn’t. Not worth the breath it takes to repeat it.”

“Something’s bothering you more than little things.”

Deanna sighed. “My general manager.” She rubbed the back of her neck and envisioned Freddy doing it instead. “I may have to change jobs.”

“Why?” His voice changed. Suddenly. “The one who’s been flirting? Did you report him?”

“I report him and I get fired. They’ll make up a reason. With my track record, no one will believe me over him. You know that.”

“Deanna...”

“I don’t like the job, anyway. I’ll start looking for something else after the New Year. I’m still hoping for a decent bonus, although since I ... I probably won’t get one now.”

“What happened? Everything, Deanna. Tell me what happened.”

She bit her lip for a moment to compose herself. No one could get to her like he did. Anyone else, she would tell to mind their own business and that she could take care of herself. She always had. She always made sure they knew she could, and would.

“Anna.”

She closed her eyes at his soft voice, imagining his strong arms around her. “I threatened him. I shouldn’t have. It was stupid, just before bonuses go out, but ... Freddy, he...”

“He *what*?” Fred Dawson’s tone said he would jump through the phone cord and go strangle the man with it if he could.

“He rubbed his disgusting body up against me. Then he acted like it was an accident. I told him I wasn’t that stupid and that if he ever so much as put a finger on me again, I’d bring my Army boyfriend in to meet him and to *talk* about it. I’m sorry. It was only a threat. I wouldn’t bring you into anything like that. You know I wouldn’t, but I ... I don’t think he believed me, anyway. I don’t talk about my private life at work. No one knows...” Deanna grabbed a quick breath. “I’m changing jobs. I just can’t stay there. Tomorrow night’s the Christmas party. Mandatory. But I’m not going to bother. What does it matter if I’m leaving anyway and since he’ll never give me a bonus now...”

“You should go.”

Stunned at the suggestion, Deanna couldn’t answer. After she’d told Freddy what happened, he thought she should go? How could he want her to be around him more than she had to be? Why didn’t he tell her to never go back in again?

“Deanna, don’t go alone. Go with a coworker, someone you trust, but don’t let him win.”

“Win? They always win. You know that. They have every card and I’m nothing but the joker. I have no power. They always win, no matter what I do, no matter how I fight. I’m *good* at my job. They *know* I’m good at my job. Why can’t they just let me do it and leave me *alone* when I make it clear I’m not interested? I file sexual harassment and I’m still the one who loses because they’ll spread it around and no one in this city will hire me for a decent job. You know that.”

“Anna. I know.”

“So do I sue them for having to leave and look like I’m taking advantage? I don’t want that, either. I just want to do my job and be left alone.”

“Anna. Okay, calm down. I’m not arguing. And I don’t want you around him any more than you want to be around him. Baby, I agree with you. Just do this one thing. Go to the party with someone you trust. It’ll be fine. I promise, it’ll be fine. In fact ... how about taking a friend of mine with you? He owes me a favor and I know I can trust him.”

“A friend?”

“He’ll pick you up. What time?”

“Freddy...”

“Anna, do you trust me?”

“Of course, with everything I am.” She leaned her head back against the chair her coat was hanging over and closed her eyes. “And you’re the only one in the world.”

“Then go to the party. His name is Enrico. He just went home recently. We’ve worked together for a couple of years.”

“Is he as big as you are? Because I kind of made it clear how big you are and if he’s going to play you...”

“No, he won’t do that. Just say he’s a friend.”

Suddenly, she wanted nothing more than to go take a hot bath with a glass of wine and go to bed. Actually, she did want more. She wanted Freddy there with her in the bath and in his bed, the one they barely shared before he had to go back to work. In his apartment. But he couldn’t get off for the holidays. He was nearly ready to leave for good, to come home to her, or at least to his apartment she was living in, taking care of. She’d asked. She desperately wanted him home for Christmas.

Next year, he said. Next year, they could spend it together.

Giving him her agreement, she changed the subject and asked about his day and anything that wouldn’t remind her of her manager and having to job hunt again.

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Deciding if she was going to do it, she was going to do it all the way, Deanna donned one of her favorite holiday blouses, shiny, silky deep red, and just low enough to almost show her cleavage, with a black fitted skirt that almost touched her knees. She had plenty of curves to fill it out and admired herself in the mirror. Freddy said she could trust her escort. She hoped he was big enough to intimidate the jerk.

Her stomach twinged at the doorbell and she hurried to answer. The man was nice enough to help her out, she didn’t need to keep him waiting.

He wasn’t anywhere near as big as Freddy. He was hardly bigger than she was.

“Deanna?” His smile was friendly, not too friendly.

“Yes. And you’re Enrico.”

“At your service.” He gave her a slight bow. “Are you ready? I’m glad to wait out here if you’re not.”

“Freddy says I can trust you. You might as well come in.”

“No ma’am, I wouldn’t dream of it. In case neighbors are watching.”

“Oh.” Taken aback, she couldn’t do anything but tell him she’d get her coat and be right back. She did ask him to please not call her ma’am at the party.

He had Freddy’s manners, opening doors and keeping distance without being rude about it, assuring her he was glad to be able to return the favor to his former Staff Sergeant who had helped him plenty. She enjoyed the way Enrico held

Freddy in such high regard, and she got him to talk about some of their ‘adventures’ as he drove easily through the city. Maybe the evening wouldn’t be as bad as she expected.

Her coworkers turned to stare when she accepted Enrico’s arm for support as they walked down the stairs. Her quite-high heels, as Freddy called them, clicked her rhythm. Let them stare, she figured. She wouldn’t see them past the New Year. Her resignation would go in tomorrow.

Deanna introduced him as a friend and saw the looks pass back and forth. They could think as they wished. Maybe, when Freddy did make it home, she would find a reason to return to the building just long enough. The thought of showing him off sent a grin to her face and kept it there well enough to at least look like she was enjoying the party.

Even when the jerk came by, his wife at his side, and threw Enrico a suspicious look. Her escort saw it and asked if Deanna would like a glass of punch, offering his arm again, taking her away from the man. He knew about him. Freddy had told him. Deanna pointed the manager out as soon as they arrived. Enrico found ways to make sure they were never very close.

“Deanna.”

She turned at Missy’s voice and tried to be almost polite to the office snitch who was sure to get a huge bonus. Deanna glanced at half her breasts hanging out over her tight sweater and half-turned away from her again as a dismissive gesture. She answered Enrico’s question about her favorite Christmas movie. “*Miracle On 34th Street*. ‘Faith is believing when common sense tells you not to.’ I just love it. I watch it at least once a year, sometimes more. Guess it’s an attempt to make myself keep believing there is such a thing as Santa ‘and all the other intangibles’.”

“Believe there’s a Santa?” Missy laughed after her loud proclamation that turned heads. “That’s too rich. Aren’t you too *old* to believe in Santa?”

Enrico stepped up toward the brunette with bleached streaks running through her bob. “When you’re too old to believe in Santa, you’re just too old period. It’s a shame so many are.” He threw Deanna a grin. “Those who keep believing are the ones who end up with what they really want.”

“Hm.” Missy tossed her head. “I guess some need to believe someone will give them what they want. Others of us know to go after it ourselves. Speaking of...” she moved her eyes across the room, “Mr. Grebner wants to see you.”

“Does he?” Deanna shrugged. “I’m not at work. He can come to me if he wants to see me.” She absolutely loved watching the girl’s jaw drop. The jerk could wait all night. Deanna would not go to him.

“I think there’s someone else here who wants to see you, also, and I know he’ll be glad to walk with you to see your boss.” Enrico nodded toward somewhere behind Deanna’s shoulder. “In fact, I think he’s very much looking forward to it.”

She turned. “Freddy.”

He caught her eyes and held them until she couldn’t resist studying him while he ambled toward her. Fred Dawson was a spectacular sight in his black

trousers and dark green shirt showing off every inch of his large, trim build, his tight abs, the rock-hard arms. The sexy eyes. She loved his eyes.

He wasted no time as he took her side, leaning in to plant a kiss aside her head and whisper how glad he was to see her, then pulling back enough to notice what she wore. "You look incredible, as always."

"You said you couldn't come."

"After your call last night, I decided to make it work." He gave a nod to Enrico. "I appreciate you escorting her here. Nice to see you again."

"My pleasure. You've found a very lovely woman. We've had a nice conversation."

Deanna couldn't resist. She hadn't seen him in three months. Knowing she was interrupting whatever Freddy was about to answer, she threw her arms around his neck and found his lips. She felt his chest rise and his arms wrap around her waist. She wasn't a small woman although she stayed in shape, but he always made her feel cozy and protected.

"Tell me you're not only here for tonight." She spoke into his ear, as close as she could get to his ear.

He caught her eyes.

"I mean, if you are, I'll gladly take it and I can't tell you how grateful I am, but ... it's been so long..."

"Are you still serious about quitting this job?"

"Yes. Not that I want to start again. I hate job hunting, but ... you didn't answer me." She allowed her hands to slide down from his neck to his chest. Eyes were on them. Deanna could feel eyes on them. If he noticed, he didn't show that he did.

"Where's your manager?"

She hesitated. As much as Deanna wanted Freddy to intimidate the jerk, she didn't want a scene at the party, or to get Freddy involved in anything that might hurt him or his career. He was about to ETS with an incredible record. He couldn't blow it because of her.

"Anna." He ducked his head down closer to hers. "I very much want to take you out of this crowd and be alone with you."

She grinned and slid her hands down to his stomach. "Already? Miss me, did you?"

"More than you can know. But we can make the rounds first. Point him out to me."

As she did, she watched Freddy's face. It was calm; nothing of what he felt showed other than when he looked at her. "I was told he wants to speak to me."

"Does he?" His eyebrows rose. "Then we should go speak to him."

"Don't get yourself in trouble. Not over me."

Freddy stopped his forward motion and found her eyes. "No one treats you that way, Anna. No one. Not ever again." He raised her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers. "And don't worry. I have better things in mind for tonight." With a light teasing grin, he headed toward the jerk, not in a hurry, stopping whenever anyone dared speak to her and sliding a hand up and down her back.

Showing possession, she guessed. When any other man had done the same, she backed away. She was no one's possession. This time, she moved closer to him. And she enjoyed every second of it. The rounds would have to be quick. She wanted him home.

"You wanted to speak to me?" Deanna interrupted the jerk as they came up behind him.

He turned with a leer on his face, then saw Freddy at her side and stepped backward.

"Mr. Grebner, Staff Sergeant Dawson."

Her manager offered his hand. Freddy glanced at it and kept his on Deanna's back.

"So it's true." The jerk threw her a glance. "And I half thought you were making him up. But aren't our soldiers supposed to be polite to civilians? Accepting when offered a handshake is the polite thing to do."

Deanna had to give him an ounce of credit. She expected him to crumble away at the sight of her boyfriend.

"I am being polite, which is why I'm keeping my hands to myself, unlike some who don't know better." Freddy's stare didn't waver. Even when those around exchanged glances. "We came to let you know Deanna will not be returning to work. She'll mail her formal resignation, but consider this notice."

Grebner's eyes widened. "You can't ... I need two week's notice..."

"Unless she has due cause. Would you like me to elaborate her due cause?" He paused only a moment. "I'm in town through Christmas and I plan to spend the days with her while I can."

"Through Christmas?" Deanna studied his face. He wouldn't make it up. He would never get her hopes up that way.

He softened as he turned his eyes to hers. "If you can stand me that long."

"Longer. As long as I can have."

"Glad to hear it. And I'll tell you why later. Ready to go home?"

She smiled and touched a hand to his stomach. "Yes. I'm ready to be home."

Cuddled in front of the fireplace, Deanna and Freddy gazed at the small tree. Although she'd left it with nothing but lights strewn around its edges as she went to her company party, she'd found it decorated when they returned together. The boxes sitting next to it had been put away and the tree was dazzling. Deanna told him over the phone she hadn't been able to bring herself to finish it. Enrico taking her to the party was a way to get her out so he could. And there were gifts underneath.

"Come back to Drum with me."

Deanna tilted away to find his eyes. "What?"

"I don't want you here alone. I don't want you to have to find another sleazy boss to avoid. Come back with me."

"But you have to leave the day after Christmas. Two days. How will I ... what about the apartment?"

“Enrico will watch it. There are openings on base. Jobs where you won’t be bothered because they would lose rank, or more, if they ever did.” He shifted and stroked her hair. “I have missed you. Come back with me until I’m free to be here with you.”

“Am I allowed?”

“In my apartment? Why wouldn’t you be?”

“Oh, but you have a roommate.”

“He just left. PCS’d.” He touched her lips and reached behind him to bring out a small box. “I know you don’t want to be married, so I’m not proposing.” Freddy opened it to show her a ruby, emerald, and diamond ring. “It’s an ‘I want to be with you forever or as long as you’ll have me’ ring. Come with me, Anna. You’re still free to leave whenever you wish. No chains.”

No chains. She’d told him she was tired of feeling chained by every man who tried to possess her. Freddy didn’t need to try to chain her. She was hooked. And she would keep him forever if he would allow. “Yes. Yes, I’ll go with you.”

He kissed her, slipped the ring onto her finger, and kissed her again.

She couldn’t help but smile during the kiss and he gave her a curious look.

“I guess there is a Santa Claus.” Deanna ran a hand down his chest. “And miracles don’t only happen on 34th street.”

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“Christmas Chains” is an *Off The Moon* related short story, pulling the minor characters of Daws and Deanna into their own. This story has been transformed and is now part of a novel started during Nanowrimo 2010, with a working title of *Daws and Deanna*. A prequel of sorts, it occurs nearly a decade before Ryan’s story. Look for it under a new title sometime during 2011.

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