

# CHRISTMAS IN THE CROSSHAIRS

by Deena Alexander

## EXCERPT

### ONE

“We’re losing her!” Chaos erupted as two paramedics shoved a gurney through the emergency department doors at a dead run. One of them called out, “It’s Jaelyn Reed. She was attacked.”

Jaelyn’s heart stuttered. She recognized the voice of her friend and fellow firefighter Pat Ryan. But what was he talking about? She was fine, just finishing up her Christmas Eve shift at the hospital, where she worked as a nurse when she wasn’t volunteering as a firefighter for Seaport Fire and Rescue. Since she had no family to go home to, she often worked the holidays.

Footsteps pounded as doctors, nurses, and technicians rushed toward a commotion in one of the nearby cubicles.

She followed the sound of Pat’s voice rattling off vitals down the corridor. Why had he said it was Jaelyn? That she’d been attacked? She’d known Pat Ryan since she was a kid, was friends with both him and his fiancée, Rachel, and she’d never heard the slightest edge of panic in his voice. Until now.

She stepped into the cubicle. “What’s going on?”

Pat glanced at her then snapped his head back in a double take. “Jaelyn?”

“Pat, what happened?”

His gaze shot to the gurney, where a young woman lay unconscious as the nurses assessed and began treatment.

When Jaelyn followed his stare, her breath caught in her throat. Looking down at the woman’s face was like looking into a mirror. The stranger shared the same long, nearly black hair as Jaelyn, though hers was tangled and matted with blood; the same delicate features, at least it appeared so beneath the contusions and swelling; and even the same slim, athletic build.

“I don’t understand.” Pat frowned and grabbed the woman’s purse from the bottom of the gurney. “She looks enough like you to be your—”

“Sister.” The one word escaped on a shallow huff of breath. Could this woman be her sister? The sister she hadn’t even known existed until a month ago? It’d been almost a year since she’d taken the DNA test—just for fun, something she’d let her fellow firefighters convince her to do to pass the time amid a blizzard that had gripped the area last winter.

Jaelyn had grown up in Seaport, New York, a small town on the east end of Long Island’s south shore, daughter of a prominent couple in the community, Dr. and Mrs. Elijah Reed. And she was an only child. The last thing she’d ever expected was to shake loose any deep, dark secrets from the Reed family tree. And then her results had come in...and last month the friends and family app had connected her to her twin. “Maya Barlowe.”

“Yeah.” Pat held out a slim photo holder with the woman’s driver’s license. The picture of the woman staring back at her could have been, well, her twin. “That’s the name on her ID. Is she your sister?”

Apparently. Since Jaelyn’s parents had been killed in a car accident five years ago, she hadn’t been able to ask them about her. She had no other family—no one to lean on after her fiancé had left her for another woman while she was grieving—and she hadn’t wanted to go to any of her parents’ friends. At least, not yet. She’d needed time to process the information first. Jaelyn had yet to decide whether or not to reach out to the woman, try to ascertain how they shared not only the same DNA but the same birthdate as well. Even as she’d debated her options, she hadn’t fully accepted the fact it could actually be true, that she could have a long-lost twin sister she’d never known about.

“Out of the way, guys.” One of the other nurses shoved past her.

Coming to her senses, Jaelyn stepped aside, careful not to upset the delicate choreography as the doctors and nurses worked together in a desperate effort to save the woman’s life.

Pat gripped her elbow and led her out into the hallway. “Hey, you okay?”

Was she? She honestly didn’t know. While she hated the thought of seeing anyone suffer, what was she supposed to feel for this woman who might be her twin but whom she’d never met? Confusion was the overwhelming emotion. She shoved a few stray strands of hair out of her face. “Yeah, I guess, but I don’t understand what’s going on. Where did you find her? And what happened to her?”

“A call came in.” With a glance over his shoulder, Pat ushered her farther across the hall so they’d be out of the way. “A couple of kids riding dirt bikes came across her just before dusk in

the woods behind the Seaport Bed and Breakfast. She'd been attacked, badly beaten. I'm sorry, Jaelyn, I didn't even know you'd reached out to her. I guess with the holidays and all..."

"No. That's the thing..." Only a handful of people knew about the secret Jaelyn's DNA test had revealed, Pat being one of them. Could someone she'd trusted have contacted Maya? No, not possible. The few close friends she'd told knew that Jaelyn wasn't sure how she wanted to handle the situation yet. None of them would have betrayed her confidence... Besides, she hadn't shared Maya's name with anyone. "I didn't reach out, nor did she contact me. I have no idea what she was doing here. I didn't even realize she knew about me."

"Assuming she's here because of you," Pat pointed out.

"I guess, but according to the information I have, she lives in New York City. What are the chances she just happened to show up a few miles from where I live and work?" Even though plenty of people from New York City visited the south shore of Eastern Long Island, especially around the holidays, most of them flocked to the Hamptons or Montauk. Seaport wasn't exactly a thriving tourist destination.

Pat frowned. "Slim to none, I'd say."

So her sister must have been trying to find her, which begged the question, why hadn't she tried to contact her? Or had she? Jaelyn had been on duty for the past twelve hours and hadn't bothered to check her messages. "My phone is in the locker room. I'll have to see if she tried to reach out."

"The police officers were questioning the kids who found her, but they'll be here any minute." He gestured in the direction of the locker room. "You should probably see if she tried to make contact before they get here. I'm sure they'll want to know if that's why she was in Seaport."

Dazed, Jaelyn paused and glanced into the cubicle where her coworkers and friends worked to save Maya. Should she go in? Try to help? Technically, she was off duty now, but still...

"There's nothing you can do for her in there, Jaelyn. She's being taken care of. It would probably help her more right now to find out if she tried to call you, if she left any kind of message, maybe indicated she was in trouble, anything that would help the police find who did this to her."

She nodded. He was right. "Yeah, okay."

“And Jaelyn...” He turned to face her, rubbed his hands up and down her arms. “I’m really sorry about your sister, but I’m glad you’re okay. I’m not gonna lie, when we first arrived on scene and thought it was you, it gave both Jack and me a jolt.”

She covered one of his hands with hers. “Thank you, Pat.”

“Sure thing.” Releasing her, he stuffed his hands into his pockets and started down the hall with her.

“You didn’t check her ID there?” Jaelyn asked.

He only hesitated a fraction of a second, but it was a telling pause. “She’s in bad shape, Jaelyn. We stabilized her and transported. Plus, like I said, we thought it was you, both recognized you immediately.”

She nodded, understanding the urgency of the situation in that moment. Nothing but saving the patient would have mattered to the paramedics.

“I’ll tell you what, I’ll wait here and keep an eye on her while you go ahead and get your phone. You may as well get changed while you’re in the locker room, so you can sit with your sister afterward.”

She smiled at him, grateful he understood her need to know how Maya was doing. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” He squeezed her arm once more, as if needing to reassure himself she was fine. “I’ll let the guys know you’re okay.”

She nodded and started toward the locker room at a brisk pace. Since she was not only a nurse in the emergency room, but also a volunteer firefighter and a member of a well-known family in the community, news of her being attacked would have spread quickly. Especially in the small town of Seaport. It would be good to squash the rumors before they could gain any real traction.

Thankfully, with Pat taking care of that, it was one less thing she had to worry about, and she could turn her attention to her sister. *Sister*. She still couldn’t quite wrap her head around the idea. Being an only child was all she’d ever known. She shook off the confusion and increased her pace. None of that mattered now. The sooner she gathered her things, the sooner she could return to Maya and hopefully get some answers.

As she passed the nurses’ station, a man’s voice brought her up short. “I’m looking for Maya Barlowe?”

Jaelyn turned at the mention of her sister’s name.

“Can you tell me if she was brought in—” A bulky man who had to be better than six feet tall shifted his attention from the nurses’ station even as he asked the question. As he glanced in her direction, his gaze clashed with Jaelyn’s. His expression showed confusion at first, but then it hardened and he straightened.

Jaelyn hesitated, caught off guard by the hostility marring his features.

His focus narrowed on her as he reached inside his jacket and pulled out a handgun.

Her breath caught in her lungs. A dull ache spread through her chest. Fear paralyzed her.

Eyes hard, hand dead steady, the man lifted the weapon toward her.

The chaos of the emergency department receded, and blackness tunneled her vision. It seemed nothing existed but the two of them caught in some deadly stare down. She desperately wanted to believe she was just in the wrong place at the wrong time, but her mind wouldn’t allow her to accept that. The gunman’s glare was too intense, his attention too pinpointed on her, and he’d just asked about her sister.

“Get down!” another man yelled.

Jaelyn couldn’t react. All of her training as a nurse, as a firefighter, had her remaining calm in the face of the weapon. It was the look in his eyes that had her blood running cold. She’d never seen such emptiness, such coldness, such...darkness.

And then someone tackled her from the side, even as the first bullets flew. Sheer terror swamped her.

More gunshots erupted. Screams, crashes, sobs tore through the emergency department as patients and staff ran or dove for cover, trying to protect those who were unable to flee.

Jaelyn landed hard on her elbow. Pain shot to her shoulder and her wrist, and her fingers went numb.

“Go, go, go!” The stranger half-dragged, half-shoved her toward an examination room door, knocking over the Christmas tree in an out-of-the-way corner.

Jaelyn scrambled in the direction she was led, hit the door at a crouch, and tumbled through.

Another round of gunshots pierced the air, too many for just the handgun she’d seen. Had the attacker had another weapon beneath his jacket, or was there a second gunman? Two shots shattered the window in the door.

Jaelyn covered her head and ducked against a row of cabinets.