

Read a Sneak Preview of 'Classified K-9 Unit Christmas'!

This is a special excerpt from Love Inspired Suspense®.

When danger strikes at Christmastime, K-9 FBI agents save the holidays and fall in love in two exciting novellas!

Read on for a sneak preview of A Killer Christmas by Lenora Worth, one of the riveting stories in Classified K-9 Unit Christmas.

The full moon grinned down on her with a wintry smile. FBI Tactical K-9 Unit Agent Nina Atkins held on to the leash and kept an eye on the big dog running with her. Sam loved being outside, no matter the weather, no matter the crunch of snow underneath his paws. The 3-year-old K-9 rottweiler, a smart but gentle giant that specialized in cadaver detection, had no idea that most humans were terrified of him. Especially the criminal kind.

Tonight, however, they weren't looking for criminals. Nina was just out for a nice run and then home to a long, hot shower. Two weeks before Christmas, and after a harrowing year where one of their own had gone bad and lost his life, thankfully all was quiet around the Billings, Montana, FBI Tactical K-9 Unit headquarters. Special Agent in Charge Max West would be back before Christmas, but right now he was taking some time off with his bride, Katerina. Even tech wiz Dylan O'Leary had taken a few days away to spend some time with the parents of his wife, Zara. So many of her friends and fellow agents had fallen in love lately, Nina's head was spinning, which was probably why she'd felt the need for a quick run. She lived for her work. No time for romance. OK, maybe she'd just given up on a love life since her last brief relationship had

fizzled out like a mountain stream in a serious drought.

Nina lived about 20 miles from downtown Billings, in a quaint town of Iris Rock. Regardless of her single status, she loved going on these nightly runs through the quiet foothills near the Elk Basin.

"C'mon, Sam," Nina said now, her nose cold. "Just around the bend and then we'll cool down on the way home."

Sam woofed in response, comfortable in his own rich brown fur. But instead of moving on, the big dog came to an abrupt halt that almost threw Nina right over his broad body.

"Sam?"

The rottweiler glanced back at her with his work expression. What kind of scent had he picked up?

Then she heard something.

"I don't know anything. Please, don't do this."

Female. Youngish voice. Scared and shaky.

Giving Sam a hand signal to stay quiet, Nina moved from the narrow gravel jogging path to the snow-covered woods, each footstep slow and calculated. Sam led the way, as quiet as a desert rat.

"I need the key. The senator said you'd give it to me."

Nina and Sam hid behind a copse of trees and dead brambles and watched the two figures a few yards away in an open spot.

A big, tall man was holding a gun on a young woman with long dark hair. The girl was sobbing and wringing her hands out, palms up. Nina recognized that defensive move.

Was he going to shoot her?

Then Nina noticed something else.

A shallow, open pit right behind the girl. Could that be a newly dug grave?

Nina didn't stop to ponder that question, but she knew to be careful too. Giving Sam another "quiet" signal, she called out, "Hey, everything OK here?"

The girl gasped and stared at her with fear-filled eyes, but stayed frozen to the spot.

The man turned to face her. Nina used a hand signal to allow Sam to bark, hoping to distract the man so the girl could run. The dog did his job, his ferocious bark echoing loudly out over the winter woods. Since she didn't have her weapon, Sam was Nina's only hope right now in stopping the girl from getting shot. That could give her time to call for help.

The man stared at Nina, giving her a good view of his face in the eerie white light from the moon. He shot at her and just missed her, and then pivoted back toward the girl, weapon in hand. Sam kept barking. The man looked panicked, so Nina motioned the rottweiler forward, all the while taking in the assailant's appearance.

The big dog growled, but stopped when she signaled him. "My dog is trained to attack," she said. "You should drop that gun now."

The man shook his head and raised it, but Nina signaled Sam again. The animal danced and barked, causing a panicked expression on the man's face. He started backing away, but in a lightning-fast move, pivoted and took one quick shot at the girl.

She screamed, grabbed at her shoulder and fell into the open pit behind her as the gunman disappeared into the woods.

Sam kept barking, eager for some action.

Nina pulled out her phone and hurriedly called in the crime, describing the scene and her location. "Suspect somewhere in the Iris Rock woods just off the Eastern trail."

Jumping down into the pit, she breathed a sigh of relief. The girl was still alive, though her pulse was weak. Nina almost sent Sam after the man, but instead ordered him to guard in case the killer came back. Nina knew in her gut that he would return. She hoped by then she'd have backup.

She'd need it, and she'd need to pray for protection. He'd left his victim alive, and the girl had seen his face. So had Nina. She and Sam had surprised the man and thrown him off guard long enough to defuse the situation. And because of that, he'd probably come back for all of them.

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U.S. Deputy Marshal Thomas Grant brought his big Chevy pickup to a halt just off the edge of the woods. Something was certainly going on. Several police cars and a few big black SUVs sat caddy-cornered off the narrow road ahead, lights flashing to warn any passersby. Official-looking people milled around, some dressed in black and wearing FBI vests. A couple officers had K-9s with them, sniffing here and there.

He decided to investigate, because his gut told him this was more than a traffic stop or an accident. This looked like an all-out manhunt in progress.

Dressed in civilian clothes as he was, he pulled out his ID as soon as he climbed from the truck, and flashed it at the first officer he came into contact with.

"What are you doing here?" the young patrolman asked with a skeptical tone.

"Looking for a wanted man," Thomas replied on a droll note. "He could be in these parts."

The cop nodded and let him through.

Then Thomas spotted her.

A female wearing heavy jogging clothes and a bright purple wool hat hopped up out of a dark, 6-foot-long hole in the snow-speckled ground. A big, fierce-looking dog met her and wagged his tail, while she held up her hands to show the crime scene techs what looked like dirt and blood.

Thomas watched as the woman talked to an officer, her hands lifted in the air. Then he glanced to where an ambulance had backed up into the woods. Two EMTs pushed a stretcher carrying a young woman hooked up to an IV toward the waiting bus.

Before he could announce his presence, the jogger glanced over at Thomas and stalked toward him. "May I ask what you're doing here, Deputy Marshal?"

He took in the light blonde hair underneath the wool hat and the big brown eyes full of distrust. He had to look down at her, but she stood straight and didn't flinch.

He showed her his credentials even though he'd given the officer his name already. "U.S. Deputy Marshal Thomas Grant. I was passing by and saw the ruckus. I'm looking for a man—."

"Hey, Nina, can you come over here?"

"Hold that thought," she told Thomas with a puzzled glare, before she turned back to a man wearing an official FBI jacket.

"Coming," she said, scooting toward where a group of FBI agents gathered by the open earth. They stood in a cluster and talked among themselves, the woman right in the middle.

Thomas waited and listened, two things he was good at. Soon enough, he'd stitched together the details. The cute blonde had been out jogging and had stumbled across a crime in

progress. A man holding a gun on a young girl. The jogger must have called it in.

So the young woman was on the way to the ER and the man was long gone. And from the way the blonde was calling out information and discussing details with the K-9 agents, he'd guess she had to be someone official too. That and the big dog shadowing her summed it up.

She was an FBI agent. And the dog was obviously her K-9 partner. Off duty and on a run, but now on full speed ahead to find the man who'd tried to kill that girl. A girl she'd obviously tried to save, from what he'd seen.

Before Thomas could corner her, someone shouted out, "Nina, we've found another body. That makes two."

"Coming, Tim." She whirled like a little cyclone and took off.

Thomas's gut burned even hotter. Two bodies and one girl shot?

Could the man who'd done this be the assassin he'd come to Montana to find?

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Nina did a final sweep of the scene and then turned to leave for headquarters. She needed to file her report and meet with a sketch artist so they could get an image of the shooter to put out to the local media. The team also now had the gruesome task of helping the medical examiner to identify the two female bodies. They'd already sent out the necessary warnings and alerts to be on the lookout, and she'd talked to SAC Max West a few minutes ago to give him an update. The few agents on holiday duty had come through on doing what needed to be done, and the local sheriff's department was on it, too.

Now if she could factor in why a U.S. Deputy Marshal had suddenly shown up, she might be able to get home and have a good night's sleep. No, that wouldn't happen. She'd seen that

gunman's cold black eyes and heard that poor girl screaming. She probably should stay at headquarters and work tonight.

"OK, Deputy Marshal Grant," she said, marching up to the tall, big-boned man wearing the suede jacket and worn jeans. "I'm Agent Nina Atkins from the FBI Tactical K-9 Unit in Billings. What's your interest in this crime scene? Did you just happen to be in the neighborhood?"

He stared her in the face with a calm scrutiny that made her shiver inside her wicking outerwear. "I happen to be here on a case. Looking for a man who could allegedly be a hired assassin, reported to possibly be last seen in Montana, near Billings. The MO mentioned here tonight sounds like his. I'd hoped you could fill me in so we can compare notes."

Suspicious, Nina gave him a long once-over while she tried to sum him up. "I'm not so sure about that."

"I know your unit," he said. "I was assigned to protecting Esme Dupree earlier this year. She was in the witness protection program, before she bolted on me. I hear she testified against her brother Reginald and that she's married to one of your team members now."

Nina gave him another scrutinizing look, surprise sparking through her system. She did hazily recall his name from that investigation, but then being a new member of the team, she hadn't been front and center on every aspect of the Dupree case, so she'd never met him. Nina felt sure she would have remembered Thomas Grant.

"So, Deputy Marshal Grant--."

"Thomas," he said, his stormy gray eyes still and quiet.

"So, Thomas, tell me more about who *you're* looking for and maybe I'll share what I know." She turned to go to her SUV, thinking he'd follow her.

When she looked around to check, she found him right behind her. How did he do that without her hearing him?

"Where're we going?" he asked with a wry smile, and a husky Southern accent that shouted Texas.

"I'm going back to headquarters to finish out this night," she retorted. "I've got to get my partner some food and let him rest. But we can talk after I put Sam in his kennel."

She hit the fob button and the rear door to the SUV popped open. After letting Sam inside, Nina made sure he had some water and a treat. Then she turned back to Tall, Blond and Intimidating.

She decided to stake her territory. "I need whatever information you have before I can confirm what happened here tonight."

"Of course. I'll follow you to headquarters," he said, not moving.

He looked so relaxed they could be talking about the weather. He wasn't going to give up.

"Why not tell me here?" she asked.

He glanced around and shrugged. "It's dark and cold, and if my gut is right, there's a storm coming. It's gonna be a long night. I could use some coffee and food. Y'all do have a kitchen there, right?" Then he blocked her in a going-bodyguard way. "Plus, that shooter could be watching."

Nina blinked, taking in that summary and the way his voice got all gravelly and husky again. This man made her nervous, which was silly. She didn't do nervous. But if the marshal had information on the person who'd committed this shooting, she didn't mind spending some time with him. And he had a point.

It wasn't safe in these woods.

"I've got all night," she said. "Follow me."

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Thomas did as the lady asked, thinking he'd better not slip up and call her a *lady*. She'd probably deck him. If he wasn't so intent on finding Bernard Russo, he could have enjoyed getting to know Agent Nina Atkins a little better.

But that was probably a bad idea on all accounts. They both had dangerous, stressful jobs. One reason he didn't do long-term dating. That and him being a nomad of sorts. Women wanted a settle-down kind of guy. He wasn't that.

And he had a feeling this particular woman wasn't a settle-down kind of girl, either.

Better to stick to business and get his man so he could decide where to land for the holidays. Hunting and fishing here in Montana, or maybe surfing and sailing in California? Too many options. Thomas thought about that as they traveled up the interstate to Billings.

A few minutes later, he turned into the drive leading to an impressive building in the center of the city. He'd heard the FBI Tactical K-9 Unit occupied two floors here, one for administration purposes and one for training.

Thomas followed Nina's SUV into a gated garage and found a spot two down from where she parked on the ground-floor level. They walked to the elevator together.

"The few team members we have on holiday duty are in and out," she explained. "We've had some suspicious fires in the downtown area that could be arson, but nothing much else has been going on around here until tonight."

"Well, if we're looking for the same man, your holiday duty might get a little more exciting," he replied, taking in the sight of her in the dull elevator lights.

She was buff and solid muscle, petite but with a stance that didn't mess around. Her hair shone a deep golden blond and went every which way around her face and neck. Her eyes were expressive and sparkling, a muted brown like apple cider and cinnamon.

Boy, did he have it bad. He needed to date more often. He was latching on to this woman like a puppy trying to form a bond.

Nina straightened from leaning on the elevator wall when the door opened. "I think this holiday season has already gotten exciting. We often have a lot of U.S. Marshals coming around, but never one for Christmas. Santa must have decided I've been good this year."

Thomas had to chuckle at that sarcastic remark. Then he turned serious about what they had ahead of them. "Sorry you had to deal with this," he said. "I hope that girl makes it."

The agent gave an appreciative nod. "I'm praying for her to survive. We need to find the man who put a bullet in her shoulder."

If the man who'd shot that girl was indeed Bernard Russo, then they had a deadly killer to track down. A killer who this feisty agent had seen up close.

He could come after her.

And that would not be a good Christmas at all.

Don't miss CLASSIFIED K-9 UNIT CHRISTMAS by Lenora Worth and Terri Reed, available wherever Love Inspired Suspense® ebooks are sold. Copyright ©2017 by Harlequin Books S.A.

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