

9 Chaos at Christmas by Lori Lee Palmer

My family has always been known for our open-door policy at the holidays. “The more the merrier” is my mother’s motto, and we were encouraged to bring home strays—people with no family who would otherwise be alone. I wasn’t surprised when my cousin Carla brought an unannounced guest for Christmas Eve dinner.

Until I saw his face.

I tried to close my mouth quickly after my jaw dropped down to my knees. I grabbed the back of an overstuffed upholstered chair to hold myself steady, my fingers digging into the cushion. Carla stood in the wide entryway to the living room of my childhood home with him, her arm looped around his possessively. I studied his face as she introduced him to our family members one by one. What would his reaction be when she came to me? I tried to keep my face impassive with a tightly controlled, disinterested smile.

“That’s my cousin Janice in the red dress.” Carla pointed at me, and Troy nodded. Did I see a flicker of recognition in his eyes? If so, it was gone in an instant.

Could he really have forgotten me? We had a short but intense affair a couple of years ago, which ended when I found out it was an affair. I thought we were starting a relationship until I found out the skunk was already married!

“Janice, I think you’ve pulverized the onions enough. I love having you here in the kitchen with me, but you’re usually out in the living room entertaining our guests. What gives?”

“I just want to help you out, Mom. I know how hard you work putting holiday dinners together, and I’m trying to give you a hand.”

Mom’s side-eye glance let me know she wasn’t fooled, but she didn’t pry either. I remained in the kitchen until dinner was served, and then purposefully took a seat as far away from Carla and Troy as possible. I don’t think I said two words during dinner. I sat between good old Uncle Ralph and Cousin Charlie, who bantered back and forth about sports and politics. Charlie kept my wineglass full. My ears were buzzing from all the different conversations, which I did my best to respond to with smiles and nods.

I bounced out of my seat and began cleanup duty as soon as guests started pushing their plates away. I carried dirty dishes into the kitchen and scraped my practically full plate into the trash. I was tying up a garbage bag and pulling it out of the trash bucket when I felt arms around my midsection.

“Hey Janice,” Troy whispered in my ear, and my face flushed. My traitorous body responded by melting into his even while my mind said stop this! “Let me help you with that.” Troy grabbed the trash bag and pulled me out the back door.

I tried to swat him away but stumbled in my high heels. He caught me and held me longer than was necessary for me to regain my balance. “It’s so nice to see you again.” His lips on my neck made my head swim and I gasped for breath. I shook my head to clear it and pushed him away.

“What are you doing? What’s up with you and Carla? Are you still married?” I fired questions at Troy, but he laughed and pulled me closer. His lips found mine, and I was about to push back (I swear I was!) when Carla shrieked.

“Janice! Why are you kissing my boyfriend? You always want what I have!”

I looked back to see at least half of my family in the kitchen watching us from both the back door and the windows. I heard some female gasps, as well as laughter from Charlie. (He’d never liked Carla.)

Troy took my hand and asked, “Do you want to get out of here?” It seemed like a better idea than to go back inside with my family and their judgement, so I nodded, and we ran to his car.

That’s the story of how I became the black sheep of the family. ❄️

Lori Lee Palmer is a retired accountant who lets her creativity run wild in Seminole.

