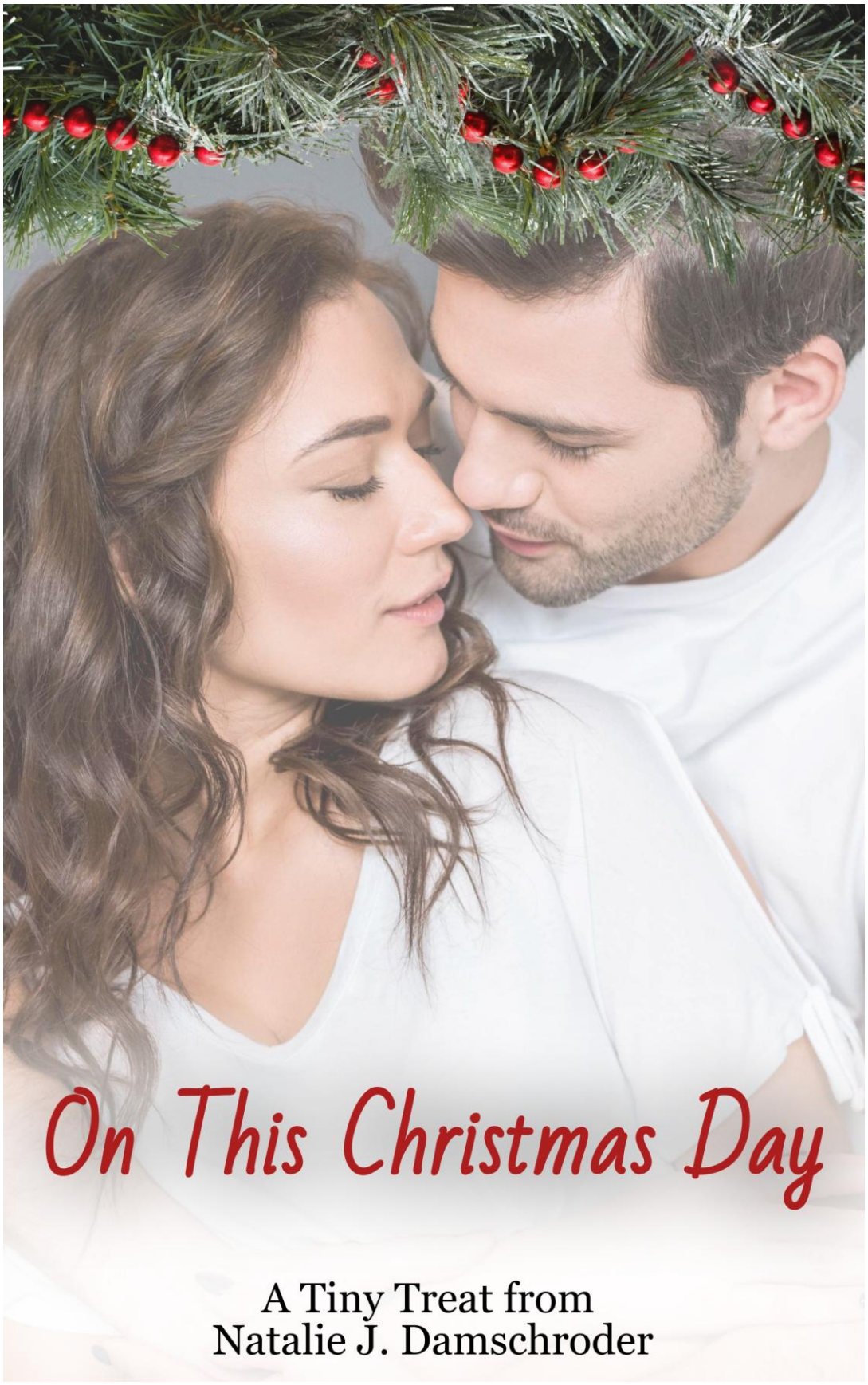
On This Christmas Day
A Tiny Treat from
Natalie J. Damschroder

On This Christmas Day

A second after Danny opened the door, a sheet of ice slid off the roof and crashed on the porch in front of him. Shards bounced into the foyer and off his boots. While he'd been buried in Rina's boiler repairs, the street and his truck had become coated in about an inch of ice.

Well, that sucked.

Rina peered around his arm. "When did that happen?"

He glanced down with a smirk. "You weren't paying attention?" When she leaned forward to get a better view of his truck, her body brushed against him. His smirk slipped as his own body tightened. Chilled air wafted past them, lifting her spicy scent and making him a little dizzy. What the hell?

"I was in the kitchen with my headphones on. There's no window in there." A fact she complained about every time he was here, as if he'd just add one for her. She shivered and pulled back, wrapping her arms around herself. "I guess you're not going anywhere."

He closed the door and bent to untie his boots. "You got a towel? I'll mop up this mess." The shards of ice had melted already, soaking into the mat and puddling on the tile.

"Thanks." She disappeared down the hall and came back a few seconds later with an old bath towel. "I'll be in the kitchen. The bread needs to come out of the oven."

He made quick work of the water and would have hung the towel on the door handle to dry, but noticed a draft coming under the door. He stuffed the towel against it instead and made a mental note to bring some weather stripping over next time he came. He'd just gotten a new shipment into the hardware store. Even though many of Crestview's residents had lived in Massachusetts for decades, there was always a rush on weatherproofing once things turned bad.

"Sucks that it's Christmas." He walked into the tiny, depressing kitchen made comforting by the yeasty warmth of the bread she'd just taken out of the oven. She leaned over the island to grab a trivet and her shirt gaped, giving him a clear view of luscious breasts cupped by a black lace bra. His mouth went dry and other parts of him seemed to wake up from deep sleep.

He didn't get it. He'd known Rina since kindergarten. They were close friends. The kind who did favors for each other like fix a cranky boiler or give relationship advice. Why now?

Why not now?

He didn't have a response for that one.

"I'm sorry you won't make it to your brother's." Rina pulled a bottle of red wine

from the fridge and nodded to the cupboard above her. "Can you reach the wine glasses up there?"

"Sure." He took the three steps to reach her and opened the cupboard. She didn't move, giving him no free space. As he reached up to the top shelf—since when did she keep something she used so much so high?—their bodies brushed again. This time her breast made full contact with his side, and when he settled back on his heels, he couldn't help looking. Her nipples were tight against her silk shirt. Why was she wearing a thin silk shirt, anyway? It was frigging cold outside, and maybe she was baking bread in a tiny kitchen, but the rest of the house had yet to heat up from the boiler problem. And he might not be much in the kitchen himself, but he knew cooking in silk was courting trouble.

So what else was she courting?

"Rina."

"Would you open the wine?"

He'd seen her routine a million times. Some called her a maneater. She had a lush sensuality and body language that said "come and get it, if you think you can handle it." Her confidence was off the charts, and she was far more likely to be turning a guy away than trying to seduce him. But he'd swear that was what she was doing now.

And he had no clue how he felt about it.

He took the wine bottle and the corkscrew and retreated to the other side of the island while she pulled out plates and what looked like leftovers from the fridge.

"I have some beef stew from Murphy's. Seems good for the weather."

"Sure." He worked the screw into the cork. He'd be lying if he said he'd never thought about sex with Rina. She was adept at light relationships with no promises. But that had never been what he wanted. He *thought*, for a long time, that he wanted one of his other best friends, Rina's cousin Amber. But once Amber was out of the picture—she was now happily married to their friend Kale, who'd been missing in action for several months last year—Danny had realized he loved the idea of settling down with her more than he loved *her*. And he'd also wanted to fill the hole in her life.

Rina, licensed psychologist, had been the one to help him figure that one out. But she hadn't pushed him to figure out what came next.

He poured the wine, started to hand her a glass, and froze, stunned by the look in her eyes. It was a deep, yearning hunger…and way, way more.

"Danny," she whispered, and before he knew what he was doing, he was across the kitchen. The wineglass made a barely secure landing on the counter, and his arms were around her, his mouth covering hers.

And Jesus Christ, she was everything he'd been missing. Her body fit tightly, perfectly against his, her back strong under his hands, her hair lush and wild. She moaned. He pulled her tighter, gentling because this was not about simple lust. Her mouth…she tasted like *home*. Not the family-around-the-Christmas-tree kind of home.

This was deeper, more primal. She *belonged* here, in his arms, and he belonged there, holding her. He lost track of where they were, of how long they kissed. He couldn't let go, as if the warmth and need filling him would disappear if he did.

But eventually, he had to. He cradled her face in his hands and realized he'd crowded her against the wall next to the refrigerator. He lowered his forehead to hers so his heaving breath wouldn't blast her in the face. "What is happening?" he murmured.

Rina wrapped her hands around his wrists. "I don't know. I think I'm dreaming."

"How long?" He meant, how long had she wanted him this way, but he couldn't get all the words out.

"Far longer than I realized." Her voice was low, hesitant. *So* not Rina. "When I thought you and Amber would—well, it hurt. Ever since… I know it's weird. We've—"

"No, that's the thing. It's incredibly far from weird." He backed up a little and grinned down at her. "Ice storms are now my very favorite weather."

She laughed, and he'd never seen her so happy. Not amused or cynical or calculating. Just…happy.

And on this Christmas day, so was he.

Natalie J. Damschroder writes high-stakes romantic adventure, sometimes with a paranormal bent. Occasionally, she also writes contemporary romance such as *If You Believe in Me*, a reunion Christmas story, and this sequel. Fun fact: The titles come from song lyrics. IYBIM is from "Santa Baby," and OTCD is from her very favorite Christmas album, Trans-Siberian Orchestra's *Christmas Eve and Other Stories.* Learn more about her at her website, www.nataliedamschroder.com, follow her on Twitter @NJDamschroder, or like her Facebook page at /NJDamschroder.

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