

THE



Christmas  
CATCH



A SWEET  
HOLIDAY  
NOVELLA

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*To the Author and Finisher  
of my faith.*

# PROLOGUE

Wide receiver Jahleel Walker wiggled his fingers as he took his place on the line of scrimmage, waiting for the ball snap. The crowd roared for the San Antonio Desperados despite the fact that they were the away team. No way he wanted to lose to the Atlanta Falcons on Thanksgiving Day. Not if he could help it. He'd eat that turkey leg and make sure the holiday season was an epic one for the team.

Quarterback Colton Montgomery had called a pass route in the huddle, so Jahleel mentally ran the play while waiting for it to start. Since he'd started his career in the NFL eight years ago, the team had yet to earn the coveted Vince Lombardi trophy. If the Desperados could pull a win for the Super Bowl, maybe his father would finally approve of his career choice.

*Get your head back in the game.*

The ball snapped, and Jahleel took off. He juked a defensive player, arms pumping as he got to his spot and in the clear. His heart raced as he spun to catch the ball, watching as it spiraled through the air. *Come on, baby, come on.* When it

neared, he pushed off on his toes, leaping into the air, arms splayed out to grab the ball. His hands gripped the pigskin, and he grinned, bringing it to his chest in one fluid motion as his body descended.

Someone slammed into his leg.

“Ahhhh!”

Excruciating pain exploded in his right knee as he collapsed onto the field, ball still clutched in his hands. He reached for his leg, gritting his teeth against the throbbing that radiated from his knee. The sound of a whistle barely penetrated the haze of agony. The white-hot heat caused his stomach to roll. He hissed, trying to keep his stomach contents inside.

A hand touched his shoulder. Someone removed his helmet. Another took the ball.

“Talk to me, Walker,” Coach Brennan said.

“Right knee,” Jahleel managed to grit out.

Hands stilled him as an athletic trainer examined his leg. A bout of pressure brought tears to his eyes, and a groan tore from his lips.

“What’s wrong with it?” Coach asked.

Jahleel listened for the response, but silence greeted his ears. The trainer had either ignored Coach or simply shrugged in reply. Jahleel tried to lift his head to take a look, but a hand stayed him.

“You’re going to feel more pressure.”

Was that the team doc?

He inhaled, preparing himself, but it was no use. The agony shot up as the doc squeezed Jahleel’s knee, shredding that ridiculous emoji scale for pain. Stars danced behind his eyelids, and he willingly succumbed to the darkness.

## Chapter ONE

**G**od love her daughter, but going to early morning flag football games utterly exhausted Bebe. The two cups of coffee she'd drunk this morning hadn't adequately prepared her for ear-piercing whistles and yells from overzealous parents. A couple of times she'd been tempted to snap at the cheering adults or offer them a sip of her coffee in hopes the liquid gold would calm them down. She wanted to enjoy watching her daughter play. Instead, the steady pounding in the back of her head had picked up its pace with every shout of approval.

As much as Bebe loved football—and she did with all her Falcons-lovin' heart—she valued sleep above all. Well, except the Lord.

She watched as Hope played defense, grabbing a flag to stop the other team from scoring. Bebe clapped her hands, happy to see her seven-year-old enjoying herself. As much as she complained about the cold and early hours, Bebe would be here next week just to see that same big smile on her daughter's face.

Finally the game ended, and Bebe got her sweaty but precious child into the car so they could go home and relax for the rest of the day. Soon she pulled her car into their driveway. With a turn of the key, the car shut off, bringing a moment of blissful silence.

“I can’t believe we won, Mama,” Hope said, unbuckling herself from her booster seat. She was skinny for a seven-year-old and didn’t yet weigh enough to go without the safety precaution.

“You did good, baby.” Bebe turned around, giving her daughter a quick kiss on the cheek. “Now, let’s go in and get you cleaned up.”

“Who’s that, Mama?”

Bebe turned left, following the direction of her daughter’s pointed finger. Thank goodness she had a good tint on her car windows. She wouldn’t have to worry about someone seeing Hope point. Why did kids have to be so obvious in their curiosity?

The thought evaporated as soon as she saw the object of Hope’s question.

*Jahleel Walker. What on earth is he doing here?*

Bebe’s mind immediately transported her back in time to an era when she and Jay had laughed and joked, sitting on the front stoop while eating whoopie pies as children. Then her thoughts fast-forwarded to senior year, when their relationship took a dreamy turn. One filled with moonlight kisses under the oak trees.

Her heart pinched with concern, pulling her from memory lane. Jay wore a full-leg brace, and his parents flanked each side of him. He was hurt? Had it happened playing football or in some kind of car accident?

Bebe pushed the car door open, barely noting the sound of Hope’s opening as well. Before she could caution her feet or brace her heart, she’d met the Walkers on their front lawn. “What happened?”

Mrs. Walker turned, her brow wrinkled with heartbreak. Bebe could only imagine the torture the woman was going through. No one wanted to see their child hurt, even if he stood at five-ten with corded muscle. A mother's heart would always see the baby she gave birth to.

"He tore three ligaments in his knee during the Thanksgiving game."

"What?!"

"That sucks," her daughter commented.

"Hope Marie Gordon!"

Her daughter stepped back, head dipping in shame. "Sorry, Mama."

Bebe shook her head, observing Jahleel. He turned slightly, eyes unfocused as he glanced her way. Her heart dipped again, but for a different reason this time. *Lord, have mercy! Why is he still so good-looking?* His warm brown skin leaned a little toward the lighter side but remained darker than her complexion. His coffee-colored eyes beckoned to her, daring her to remember their past.

She blinked, trying to bring herself back to reality. There should be a rule that you could only return to your hometown with a bald head and a potbelly. Yet the muscles rippling his forearms as he gripped the crutches could not be ignored, nor the way his full lips caught her attention. Jahleel Walker had only improved with time.

*So not fair, Lord.*

"We told him to come home. He needs someone to nurse him back to health." Mrs. Walker's hands fluttered nervously at her side.

Rumor had it that Jay had been kicked out of the Walker household shortly after his college graduation. Bebe had been shocked when she heard about it. Sure, everyone knew Reverend Walker didn't approve of his son's love of football, but surely that wasn't the reason his son had been banished from

their home. Jay had confided in her about his dad's behavior when they were in high school, but once he'd cut off all ties with her, she lost the inside scoop.

Had Jay willingly returned home, or had there been no other choice? Then again, if he remained as heavily medicated as he was right now, his location might not even register. She gave an inward shake of the head.

"We need to get him inside," Reverend Walker stated.

Before Bebe could nod in agreement, Jahleel's eyes seemed to find their focus, narrowing on her face. Lines appeared around his eyes as they crinkled with amusement. "Bebe Wilabee."

The use of her maiden name brought her eyes back to his mouth, perfectly framed by his neatly edged beard and mustache. *The better to catch your eye.*

A goofy smile appeared on his face. "Don't you look like a fine Georgia peach."

Wow. Those must be some Grade A painkillers. "Hey, Jay."

"Bebe." A chuckle slipped through, as if he found their reunion funny. She guessed the medication prevented him from feeling the awkwardness of a twelve-year reunion.

Her mouth twitched. Despite how their relationship ended, Bebe didn't know whether to laugh or cry at his current state.

Jahleel squinted as he looked back and forth between her and Hope. "Either you have a mini-me, or I'm more tired than I thought."

"He's funny, Mama." Hope giggled.

Jay tilted his head. "You have a child?"

"I do." Why did her stomach tense at the admission? It wasn't like she'd cheated on Jay. He'd broken up with her, and she found someone new. Though she could now say her ex-husband hadn't been the wisest choice.

"Huh? How did that happen?"

Reverend Walker shook his gray head. Lines drew his face

downward, either with age or disapproval. One could never tell with the good pastor. “You can catch up later, son. Let’s get you inside.”

“Bye, Bebe. I have to go before I get in trouble.” Jay snickered with amusement.

She watched as Mrs. Walker held the door open while Reverend Walker escorted the prodigal into their brown craftsman bungalow.

A tug on her arm captured her attention. “Mama, I’m *hungry*.”

“Sorry, pumpkin. Let’s go get you a snack.”

“Don’t forget, I get a bath too!” For some reason, Hope loved baths in the middle of the day. She wasn’t satisfied until rainbow-colored bubbles filled the tub.

Bebe led her daughter across the yard toward their home. It was practically identical to the Walkers’ except the exterior had been painted slate gray. She glanced back, giving the Walker residence one more look.

*Jahleel Walker.*

Funny how a day could turn out completely different than it had started. Would he be okay? *Why do you care? You haven’t talked to him in twelve years. Your best friend ghosted you to chase a football.*

Yet she couldn’t help but identify with returning home feeling broken. After all, she’d been back in the coastal town of Peachwood Bay for three years now, still feeling a little lost. Bebe sighed and walked inside her childhood home—the one she rented from her folks.

Being back home had helped lessen the shock of her divorce. Too bad it hadn’t removed the lingering disappointment or the stench of failure. It didn’t help that Hope still wished for some type of relationship with her father—simply showing up for her birthday party would thrill her. Instead, Will’s idea of a good relationship with his child was to let

money do the talking. Bebe prayed Hope's disappointment would ease as she got ready to celebrate another birthday and Christmas without her father. Even though Will was slated to take Hope for the holiday, Bebe knew the other shoe would drop. It always did with him.

At least the Walkers were finally all together for the holiday season. A first in almost eight years. The speed with which Jahleel had walked—or rather lack of speed—spoke of a long recovery.

*Guess you should've watched his Thanksgiving game after all.*



Jahleel groaned as his eyelids tried to flutter open. The painkillers were giving him messed-up dreams. Visions of Oompa-Loompas and Whos dancing with Buddy the Elf lingered in his mind. He'd obviously watched too many Christmas movies lately.

Once more he tried to open his eyes to pull himself from the drug-induced nap. He sighed, thankful when the residual sleep slowly eked away. His eyes took in his surroundings. Pale blue walls. Football posters of Hall of Famers. Shelves lined with sports trophies.

*Great.*

Apparently some of his dream had been true. He was back in his hometown. Back in the bed he'd slept in for eighteen years. Of all the times to injure himself, it had to be during the Atlanta Falcons game, within driving distance of Peachwood Bay.

As he looked around the room, clarity returned, and he recalled the events leading up to this point. The doctors hadn't wanted him flying right after surgery, since his knee needed to be elevated as often as possible. So returning to Texas had quickly been crossed off his list of options. Since his parents had been watching the game when he made his

glorious catch, they'd seen his dismal fall. And surprisingly enough, they'd rushed to the hospital in Atlanta. His mom had been waiting in his room the moment he was wheeled in from recovery.

At least the Desperados had beaten the Falcons.

A small grin appeared, then disappeared just as quickly. A win got the team one step closer to the playoffs, but now he lay here, sidelined by a blown-out knee. No way he'd be ready for the playoffs—or the Super Bowl, if the team managed to get that far—considering recovery was at least six months, if not longer. An ache filled his chest, and a ball of hurt filled his throat.

*Why me?*

The grandfather clock in the hall chimed. Jahleel glanced at his watch. *3:00 p.m.* Apparently the painkillers were more potent than he'd realized. The drive down the coast remained a blur. He sat up and groaned as pain radiated from his right knee. Had he sat up too suddenly? The immobilizer should have prevented him from jostling the injury. Instead, the brace weighed his leg down and added to the pain.

Jahleel willed his mind to ignore the hurt. Instead, he focused on the slight movements going on in his empty stomach. Food sounded good right about now. He searched for his crutches and frowned. *Who placed them beside the door?* They were at least nine feet away. What sense did that make?

Before he could complain, the bedroom door opened.

*And the hits keep on coming.*

“Good. You're awake.”

Jahleel swallowed. There wasn't much he wanted to say to his father. The silence that had spanned between them over the last eight years had been wonderful. Carefree. *Guilt-free*. No one telling him to take up the mantle to preach because apparently a life of ministry was the *only* way Obadiah Walker believed his son could serve God. But if the

Lord gave Jahleel the talent to play football, wouldn't he be doing Him a disservice not to use that talent? The argument never persuaded his father, so Jahleel had stopped speaking in hopes his actions would back his words. Now he couldn't even achieve his Super Bowl dream this year.

He braced himself for his father's impending lecture. The man could write a book on criticizing a disappointing child.

"Your mama made some food. You feel like eating?"

"Yes, sir." Jahleel's lips barely moved as he aimed for a poker face.

"Good. I'll have her bring it in. You still like shrimp and grits, or is that too *common* for your taste?"

Hit one.

His father failed to remember that Jahleel had *never* looked down on his upbringing. He gritted his teeth. "That's just fine."

"Humph. We'll see how long that lasts."

Hit two.

His father walked out the door, not even sparing a backward glance.

The old irritation sparked at the slight. Jahleel could give in and feed the resentment or thank God that he wouldn't have to stay here forever. As soon as he got the okay to travel, he'd be on the first plane back to Texas.

Why had he let his mother talk him into coming home? Surely he could've found some hotel to lay up in while the swelling eased in his leg. Snippets of a conversation pressed on the edges of his memory. What had the doctor said? How long would he be off his leg? How long would he be beholden to Obadiah Walker?

Jahleel grimaced. He had the perfect reason never to step foot in Peachwood Bay again: his father. He had never measured up to the Reverend's standards. When he'd turned to football in junior high, their differences became starkly

evident. Over and over Jay had been told how much time he wasted with a pigskin.

A snort escaped. His father hadn't even been satisfied when Jahleel earned a business degree before going to the NFL. First draft pick. Number one wide receiver for the San Antonio Desperados. Nothing pleased his father. *Nothing*.

A light tap sounded on his bedroom door.

"Come in."

His mother entered holding a tray of food. The smell of blackened shrimp wafted over to him. His mouth watered at the thought of the grits that would accompany the meal. Mavis Walker was famous for her shrimp and grits. Earned a blue ribbon year after year at the church showdown. The only other place a person could get shrimp and grits as good as his mama's was Sam's Shack. The diner served the best coastal Southern cuisine in Peachwood Bay. People actually drove in from a few towns over to enjoy the food.

Jahleel's shoulders dropped as the tension eased from the base of his neck. *Thank the Lord for moms*. His mother was the complete opposite of his father in every way.

"Brought you some lunch."

"Thank you, Mama."

Almond-shaped eyes resembling his stared back at him, filled with love and topped with blue eye shadow. Some things never changed. The thought lifted his mouth in a smile. Sure, a few more wrinkles lined her forehead and around her mouth, but the heart of his mama remained the same.

"You're welcome, baby." Her wide nose lifted with her smile.

The sound of her warm Southern voice soothed the bitterness that remained from his father's latest retort. She'd sounded the same when she fussed over past injuries he'd incurred growing up. In high school she never hovered, but as soon as he appeared hurt, she would be there, ready to soothe the ache with a meal and a hug or two.

He would never admit to anyone how much that had meant to him. Was that why his room had stayed the same? To welcome him home when he was ready to return? To prove she hadn't forgotten her only son? Or had his father forbidden her to come in and change it?

She placed the white tray over his lap and fluffed the pillows behind his back. "How's that?"

"Great, Mama." He squeezed her hand. "Thank you."

Just because he didn't want to be here, in this house, under his father's roof, didn't mean he'd take his foul mood out on her. She hadn't done anything to deserve an angry son. No, the fault had always been with his father. Jahleel started to say something and stopped. Why complain? It wouldn't fix anything or make a difference. He picked up his spoon.

"Don't forget to say grace."

"Right." He bowed his head and whispered a prayer of gratitude for the woman who could handle his father's bad moods *and* his. A twinge of guilt hit him. When was the last time he'd said grace?

"I've tweaked the recipe since your last visit."

He took a bite and moaned. The shrimp paired wonderfully with the cheese grits. He'd yet to find something like it in San Antonio. The best Mexican food: yep. Soul food: not so much.

There seemed to be an extra kick to the recipe. "Is it cayenne pepper?"

"Mm-hmm. You like?"

"Love." Spoonful after spoonful disappeared as his stomach warmed. "Too bad you didn't put my meds in here. Remember, you used to hide them in applesauce?"

"And you knew it. Every single time." She chuckled. "I can't believe you remember that."

"Ha! There's a reason I can't eat that stuff now. All I can think of is that chalky aftertaste."

“Then aren’t you glad you can swallow them down like a big boy now?” She winked.

He shook his head, a smile on his face. “Man, the guys would rib me good if they heard how you talk to me.”

“Please. I’m sure they would get a bigger kick out of your little reunion with Bebe.”

*Bebe?* He froze. She was back in town? He hadn’t seen her since before they both left for college. *You mean after you gave the whole “let’s be friends” speech?* “What do you mean?” Caution slowed his words as nerves spiked his pulse rate. He set down his spoon.

“You don’t remember?” His mother arched a drawn-on eyebrow in surprise.

“Please tell me I didn’t do something stupid.” *Not with Bebe. Anyone but Bebe.*

“You called her a ‘fine Georgia peach.’”

*Kill me now!* “I didn’t.”

“Sure did. Hope got a kick out of it.”

“Hope?”

His mom’s head fell back, and a full-out belly laugh filled the air. She shook her head, her shoulder-length brown hair shaking from the movement. “Oh my goodness. I never thought some painkillers could be that powerful. Hope is Bebe’s daughter. You asked her if she had a kid or a mini-me.”

Jahleel let his head drop against the headboard. He didn’t know what was worse, the fact that his mouth had gotten away from him or that Bebe Willabee had a child. Did that mean she had a husband too?

*What does it matter? You ended the relationship, remember?*

Jahleel licked his lips, searching for something to say to change the subject. To forget about a pair of pale green eyes that seared into his soul. His knee beckoned to him, ready to join the conversation. “I cannot believe I blew out my knee.”

His mom’s eyes softened. “God will heal you.”