



# *Sometime in* **WINTER**

*Winter Wonderland Anthology*

**JOHANNA ROTHMAN**

# Sometime in Winter

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# Chapter One

*8:36 a.m., Thursday, February 11*

Amy emerged from the Kendall T station into yet more snow. This winter was nuts. It had snowed almost every single day since December 20, with no thaws. Boston winters were sometimes this snowy, but they almost always had thaws every week or so. In that case, the ice turned to slush, the slush melted, and the sidewalks cleared.

Not this winter.

Today was just like all the other days it snowed. The snow coming down looked all pristine, silvery, light snow. Until you looked at the sidewalks or the streets.

The streets and the sidewalks were several shades of gray to black. The darkest black was on the street and the sidewalk. The color got lighter as the snow drifts rose. The very top of the snow drifts were still white.

It had been that kind of a winter. Bad weather. Bad love life, too.

Her most recent potential love interest didn't like all her black clothes. She normally wore black T-shirts and black jeans in the summer, black turtlenecks and black jeans in the winter.

She didn't wear black because she was depressed. She wore black because it was easy. Easy to buy, wash, and wear. She didn't have to worry about wrecking or smearing her clothes when she had to drag computers and cables wherever they needed to be.

Okay, she needed to be honest with herself. She was a wash-and-wear person who didn't like to have to make too many decisions in the morning. Black was easy in so many dimensions.

And, it made it very easy to decide if a potential date was a jerk. She didn't date guys who cared more about clothes than she did. If he didn't like black, he could pound sand.

Oh, and her best friend Betsy thought she should spend more time on clothes, but *really*?

She and Betsy were opposites, and had been since they'd met all those years ago in high school. Betsy'd had trouble with math in the ninth grade. Amy had had trouble with history. The two of them decided to help each other, and that was it. They were totally different people and were fast friends.

Regarding that potential love interest, she'd dated one guy for a few weeks, mostly coffees. Then, during their first dinner date, he had "suggested" in that know-it-all tone of voice that she should wear pink.

Pink! Amy snorted to herself.

Why did guys think they could recreate you to be a cheerleader? Not that she had anything against cheerleaders. Nope, Betsy had been a cheerleader all the way through high school. But perky and pink? So not her.

Then, when she'd told him he was too much of a know-it-all, he'd replied that she was too. Just not about clothes.

She smiled at that. He was right. She was proud of it. She knew her stuff. That's why she was a cyber security professional.

If it hadn't been so windy and icy today, she might have strutted to work just thinking about that discussion. As it was, she was a bundle of black today scuffing along on the icy sidewalk in the cold, snow, and wind.

She looked like an ad for Bean's: the big puffy black coat, the fleece hat—black of course—and the dark brown Bean lace-up boots. She did not understand why Bean's couldn't make them in black.

Amy pulled her black fleece hat down lower over her blond curls to block the cold and wind.

Amy debated getting a cup of coffee from the local Starbucks. No, it would be too busy. And, she would be way too tempted by all the sugar. She wasn't even that close and she swore she could smell and taste the sugar in the air.

Maybe if she had a good day and had enough willpower, she would go later on a break. No, she would get a hot cup of something

at work.

Work coffee was not quite strong enough, but it was hot. Maybe today would be a hot tea day.

She'd had her normal breakfast of eggs, bacon, and avocado—a low carber's dream. She'd started working at this biotech company six months ago. For five of those months, she'd worked way more than 40 hours a week. She'd gained seven pounds, five over her wiggle room weight.

Enough was enough. She'd started low-carbing three weeks ago, and had lost three pounds already. Her jeans were no longer a struggle to pull on and zip. At just a scooch over five feet tall, she could not afford to gain any weight, never mind five pounds.

Amy arrived in her office at 8:45. She pushed through the revolving doors, and stomped the snow off her boots as she walked on the mats toward the elevators.

By the time she reached the elevators, her boots were just wet, no longer snowy. She got in the elevator and pushed the button for the fourth floor.

No more blind dates. No more men. Nope, she was done with that nonsense. She'd have her challenges with the bozos who thought they could break through her security.

Of course, there were plenty of those bozos. She grinned to herself. She would always have a job. This biotech company had plenty of interests to protect.

Amy was excited about working here. This company was working on applications for CRISPR, a real potential for gene editing. The company had departments for cancer and some of the long-term neurological diseases, such as Parkinson's. Amy was happy to work for a company that was doing something so useful for people and society.

Of course, everyone else experimenting with CRISPR wanted the data, the experiments, and their results—everything that this company wanted to keep a secret. She was vigilant about keeping their secrets.

She got off the elevator and turned right to walk to her office.

“Hey, Amy, wait up,” her boss, Mike, called out to her.

Amy stopped and turned. Mike was striding down the corridor. A guy jogged behind him. All she could see was the top of his black fleece hat.

“What’s happening, Mike?” Amy was concerned. Her boss never arrived at work this early.

“Don’t stop at your office. Come back here to look at the admin’s computer.” Mike pointed to one of the offices along the wall. The lights were on and no one was inside.

Stepping through the open door, Amy saw it. The skull and crossbones of a ransomware message. She stepped closer to the computer to read the message on the screen:

*We have all your data. All your data. And your friend.  
Prepare to pay. We’ll call you at noon. Be ready to pay.*

“Uh-oh. We’ve been hacked,” Amy said. She immediately started running through a mental checklist of the firewalls and other virus and malware-checking software she’d installed last week.

“Ya think?” Mike said. “We don’t pay you to twiddle your thumbs and look scary.”

Amy turned to Mike and lifted one eyebrow.

Mike sighed. “Sorry, I’m a little stressed. I haven’t even had my coffee. I’ve been in and out of the CEO’s office all morning.”

“Mike, let me remind you of a couple of things. We have backups of everything. Remember the disaster recovery plan I talked you into?” Amy asked.

“Well, yes, I remember,” Mike replied.

“Okay, that’s the first part. I’m positive that they don’t have all the backups we have in place. They have a snapshot of our data. So, we have to manage what they have and what they’ll do with it,” Amy said.

“Okay,” Mike sighed.

“But, we appear to have another problem. This *and your friend* business? That scares me,” Amy said. “Hackers don’t normally deal

with people. They're introverts. They hang out with other people electronically. They don't normally meet each other in person. Why would they talk about a friend?" Amy was puzzled.

Mike shook his head. "This is why I brought in help already," he said gesturing to the guy behind him.

"Trevor, please come in in here and let me introduce you to Amy," Mike said.

Amy turned around.

Mike said, "Trevor's with the Massachusetts Cyber Initiative. I called them first thing when I heard about this from the CEO. I was pretty sure we'd need help."

Trevor walked around Mike to shake hands with Amy. His handshake was firm, but not crushing. Some guys liked to crush her hand because they couldn't crush her code.

"Nice to meet you," he said.

Wow, his voice was nice too. An assured baritone. Not so low that he rumbled, but low enough to get her attention and send a few shivers up and down her spine. And, a few of her girly parts, too.

Taller than she was, but that wasn't surprising. Everyone was taller than she was. At least this guy wasn't two heads taller than she was.

He was wearing a black coat similar to hers. Amy wondered if he dressed all in black underneath it, or if he was a normal—boring—guy. Ah, she'd bet anything he had on a blue oxford shirt and khaki pants. A typical uniform for guys in tech.

At least, he was good looking, with his brown hair and twinkling brown eyes. He had a dimple in his left cheek when he smiled. Which he was now. It made her want to frown in reply just to be contrary.

What was she doing, wondering about voices and dimples and twinkles? She must have lost her mind on the walk over here. She refocused on the problem.

"Mike, why not call the Boston or Cambridge police departments? Why did you go right to the Mass Cyber Initiative? That's not the normal protocol," Amy said.



Mike sighed. “The CEO arrived at 8:00 a.m. He saw one of these messages on his computer when he docked it at his desk. His first reaction was to call me. Luckily, I was already on my way here for the early meeting we were supposed to have.”

Amy nodded. “Okay, got it. What happened then?”

“I was all set to call the Cambridge police department to see whether they had anyone available. But, the CEO said he had already called the Cyber Initiative. Trevor showed up at about 8:15, ready to start work,” Mike replied.

“Okay, that all makes sense. Although, I don’t understand why the CEO didn’t call you or me first,” Amy said, turning back to the screen.

Mike and Trevor exchanged a look.

Amy said, “Okay, there’s a lot of strange things going on here. We have a repeating phrase, *all your data*—which doesn’t make sense. I have a feeling I’ve seen something like this before. And, we have the personal part about *your friend*. Who is *your friend*?”

Mike shrugged. “Why would I know? I was hoping you knew,” he said.

“Mike, do you have any enemies? Anyone who wants to hold you and your job as ransom?” Amy was pretty sure she knew the answer. But, she thought she’d ask.

Trevor spoke for the first time. “Mike doesn’t have any enemies that would do this. But, we think *you* do,” said Trevor.

Amy turned and looked at him. “Why do you think I have enemies? Hey, are you a detective?” Amy asked.

“No, but I have several years of experience with the MCI and hacking crimes,” Trevor said.

Amy sighed. “Several years, huh? Okay, why do you think this guy is my enemy?”

“We think this is aimed at you. You were a white-hat hacker, back in your teens, right?”

Amy nodded. “Yes, I’ve never made a secret of that. I told Mike when he hired me,” she said.

“We think this is someone from your past. We started the analysis on the code,” Trevor started.

“Mike, you started on this without me? You couldn’t wait for me? I don’t believe this. I have a bad taste about this whole thing. Not just the hacking, but what you’ve done so far,” Amy said.

“Well, maybe I can help with that bad taste,” Trevor said. “We didn’t examine any code. We haven’t touched the internal network. We’re waiting for you for that part.”

Amy sighed, “Ah. Okay. What did you do?”

“I started running the repeated phrases through my database on my laptop. I kept my machine isolated from your network so I wouldn’t make anything worse. Mike told me when you normally arrive, so I knew I didn’t have long to wait,” Trevor said.

Oh, this just got better and better. Now Amy had a not-sufficient-caffeine headache and a bad feeling about the whole business.

“Well, that makes some sense,” Amy said.

Trevor nodded.

“But, Mike, why didn’t you call me right away? I could have helped,” Amy said. She shook her head.

“I asked him not to call you,” Trevor said.

“Why? That doesn’t make any sense at all,” Amy said.

“If you or any of your friends are being targeted, it makes perfect sense,” Trevor replied.

Amy’s phone dinged with a text message notification. She ignored it.

It dinged again.

“Would you like to get that?” Trevor asked.

“No, I’d like to see what’s behind this. Nothing on my phone can be as important as what’s going on here,” Amy replied.

Trevor frowned.

“Since you were so good as to start the analysis already, I’d like to get started,” Amy said.

“I’d like you to check your text, please. I suspect it ties into this case,” Trevor replied.

# **About this Sample**

I hope you enjoyed the sample. To read the rest, please purchase the book.

If you are interested in the other authors in this uncollected anthology, please see the collective bio on the next page.

# CollectiveBio

## ABOUT THE INKSLINGER WRITERS COLLECTIVE:

This novella is part of the Winter Wonderland Collection put together by a group of authors who love a smart, sexy romance.

[Click here](#) to learn more about the Inkslinger Writer Collective.

Please check the Winter Wonderland books from all of our fantastic contributors:

***B. A. Erickson***

### **Reclaimed Wonderland**

Penny Andrews is a restless monarch. Years have passed since she and Jonathan Zadock embarked on the sensuous marriage ceremony called The Almach. But time hasn't been friendly to their passion. After far too much time alone, Penny decides to travel home to Minnesota. But living in the "powder keg of the world" makes travel not only risky, it's downright dangerous.

Jonathan Zadock has his hands full managing the volatile Henri Zone land dispute. His failure to manage this situation would result in worldwide catastrophic consequences. After a horrific altercation, Jonathan fears he'll not only lose his empire but he discovers his entire family disappeared.

Forced to accept assistance from a covert terrorist organization, Jonathan and Penny's reunion hinges on the newbie skills of a middle aged operative with a Pepto Bismol infused tunic, loose weave terrorist operatives, and a man so dashing women swoon in his wake.

Will Jonathan and Penny bridge their past and reclaim the passion they once shared? How will they Reclaim their Wonderland?

***Emma Foster***

### **Winter Heat**

Raven Darke writes sexy stories about Jaxon Dawes.

Then one day she met him.

Real life is much more complicated than she ever imagined.

***Jordan L. Hawk*****A Christmas Hex**

A wolf shifter holds the clue to stopping a gang of thieves. Now, if he can only keep a sexy detective from stealing his heart.

***Kate McQueen*****Lesson in Love**

Olivia decides to go skiing alone after her girlfriends flake on her for girls' weekend. On a whim she takes a snowboarding lesson and learns a lot more than snowboarding from her sexy instructor Aaron. Their chemistry is all consuming but will it end when the vacation is over? Or can they build something more, maybe even love, beyond the raw lust that drew them together?

***R. A. Roque*****Frozen Minds: A Sci fi Romance**

Chad and Yumi, two of the most powerful Telepaths in the galaxy, want to be free of The Agency more than anything. But will their plan to escape keep them together or end up tearing them apart?

***Johanna Rothman*****Sometime in Winter**

Reformed white-hat hacker Amy's past stands between her current success and her best friend's life. Can she rescue her best friend without helping the black hats?

Trevor has no sympathy for hackers. As a cyber security expert, he knows some of what's going on, but not all.

Amy has the insights Trevor needs. Trevor holds the key to Amy's success. Can they work together and restore sanity to their worlds?

# About Johanna

Johanna Rothman provides frank advice for your tough problems in her non-fiction. She writes about tough, smart women in her fiction. Her heroines have more guts than she does...

See [Johanna's main site](#) for all her writing and [Johanna's fiction](#) for just her fiction.

I'd like to stay in touch with you. I have two newsletters:

- [Pragmatic Manager](#), where I provide tips about product development.
- [Johanna's Romance Readers](#) where I discuss fiction, especially romance.

Johanna's non-fiction book list:

- [Agile and Lean Program Management: Scaling Collaboration Across the Organization](#)
- [Predicting the Unpredictable: Pragmatic Approaches to Estimating Cost or Schedule](#)
- [Manage Your Job Search](#)
- [Hiring Geeks That Fit](#)
- [Manage Your Project Portfolio: Increase Your Capacity and Finish More Projects](#)
- [Manage It! Your Guide to Modern, Pragmatic Project Management](#)
- [Behind Closed Doors: Secrets of Great Management](#)

In addition, I have essays in

- [Readings for Problem-Solving Leadership](#)
- [Center Enter Turn Sustain: Essays on Change Artistry](#)

Please do invite me to connect with you on [LinkedIn](#), or follow me on Twitter, @johannarothman.

I would love to know what you think of this story. If you write a review of it somewhere, please let me know. Thanks!

Johanna