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Mistletoe and Mario



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One

The intercom buzzed. Alexa looked up and glared at the intercom unit. Now what?

"Someone to see you, Miss Devereaux."

Crap. Office hours, as such, were over, and she still had to finish the proposal for the Landry's condo reno. If she was going to get the project design exactly right, working the entire holiday weekend and all of next week was the only thing on her agenda. Maybe, just maybe, she'd be able to squeeze in Christmas dinner with her dad and stepmom Nikki. Alexa double-checked her PDA, and she didn't have a single scheduled appointment.

"Who is it?" Maybe it was her stepmother Nikki. No, Nikki visited frequently. The concierge and doormen knew her quite well, so he wouldn't have said, "Someone..."

"Looks like a naval officer, Miss."

"A *sailor*?" One who was desperately in need of her interior design services on a Friday evening? *Give me a break.*

"An old friend." A deep and resonant masculine voice came over the intercom.

Could it possibly be? No, surely not. Eight years ago, her teenage crush Mario Judson had left for the Naval Academy and never once looked back.

"I don't have any *old* friends." Her snarky tone hid the telltale pounding of her heart. Damn good thing he couldn't see her burning cheeks.

"Come on, Lexxie. You wouldn't deny a man who's getting ready to ship out, would you?"

She sucked in a deep breath and finger-combed her unruly curls with hands that shook as if she had a full-blown case of the flu.

"Okay. Send him up." Glancing around the Soho loft, she tamped down the impulse to scramble around and try to straighten things up a bit. No point. The studio was always in a disarray of fabric and carpet samples, paint chips, and a hundred other things was a given. The fact she was in the homestretch of a project only made the mess worse.

So the sailor boy wanted to be sent off with a smile on his face. Was that it? Well, she'd show him. Three lousy e-mails in eight years—not that she was counting. As if she had nothing better to do and could just drop everything to see him.

On the way to the door, her cell phone beeped. She stopped and pulled it from her jeans pocket and read a text from Nikki saying she hoped Alexa didn't mind, but she gave Mario the loft address.

Now she texts me. What—couldn't she give a little more warning?

She swallowed the lump in her throat and tried to control her breathing. Wasted effort, of course. Reaching for the knob, her hand still shook with a slight tremor.

Dammit. Time to quit acting like she was still a teenager crushing on a gorgeous older guy. A struggling interior designer who was a year or two from being marginally successful—that's what she was. And who had time for dating or seeing sailors off to war?

Was he really going to war? What if something happened to him?

His knock snapped her back to reality before more hideous scenarios could pop into her head.

She took a deep breath and opened the door. Her chin dropped at the sight of him. Tall, broad shouldered in his navy blues and gold braid, he smiled broadly, displaying dimples so deep she could've lost a knuckle in each. His dark eyes shone with merriment.

Omigod. More handsome than ever. Mouth dry, she made an effort to speak, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth. "M-m-m—"

"Lexxie!" Without giving her time to breathe, he swept her in his strong arms and

swung her around as if she were as light as a down pillow. Which she definitely wasn't.

She let out a squeal and he set her on her feet. Legs still wobbly and unable to meet his cheerful gaze, she held onto him until the room stopped spinning. "Why now?" she finally managed to gasp.

His gaze darting around the room, he removed his white navy cap and held it tentatively. "Ma'am, could you offer a poor navy lieutenant some coffee? It's damned cold outside."

She glanced toward the tall windows that lined one side of her loft. Christmas lights twinkled in the distance. "Is it?" Grateful to have something to do, she moved to the kitchen area of the loft that served as both home and studio and poured fresh water into the coffeemaker.

He followed her and perched on one of the kitchen stools. "Yeah, it's Christmas Eve, in case you haven't noticed."

Still dazed by his presence, she measured the coffee and dumped it into the [filter](#). "I'm in the middle of a design project. It's a renovation for my dad's attorney and his wife. It's a big job, and I'm sure they would've never considered me if it hadn't been for him." She bit her bottom lip then continued. "So I have to do a really great job with my presentation which is due on Monday morning at nine." Needed to make it clear she was way too busy to waste time with him. Okay so it was Monday, January fifth, when her project was due. He didn't need to know that.

"Fantastic. You're doing what you always wanted to. You'll do your dad proud—and yourself." He glanced around the loft, then back. "How are your dad and stepmom?"

"Dad's busy with the modeling agency, as usual, and Nikki's always attached to her laptop."

Mario chuckled. "You know I tried to read one of her books, but I have to admit I was pretty surprised. What I mean to say is there was a lot of— It was pretty racy." His tanned cheeks darkened as he stumbled for words.

Bridling at his disparaging remark, she took a deep breath. "You have something against romance?"

Her becoming more unwelcome all the time guest stood and held out his hands in surrender. "No! No, that's not what I meant at all. It's just not what I'm used to reading. I'm more of a Tom Clancy fan."

She set her hands on her hips. "I think Nikki'll do just fine without you buying her books. She writes *women's* fiction, and you certainly don't fit the profile of her usual readers."

"I'm sure she will. She's famous for them anyway." He frowned and sat again. "This isn't going too well, is it?"

"*This?* You mean our grand reunion after eight years?"

"I just wanted to see you before I shipped out. I'm assigned to the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, and we're being deployed to the Persian Gulf."

He really *was* going off to war. Maybe she shouldn't be so harsh. "When?"

"This is my last night in New York. I fly out to Norfolk tomorrow morning."

Her heart raced, then a wave of anger flashed over her. "Tomorrow..." She paused, then zinged him. "And out of all the women you must know, you chose little old me to send you off with a smile on your face?"

"No!" He shook his head, got to his feet and started pacing. "I should've kept in touch better. I plead guilty to being a jerk."

"Eight years." She folded her arms across her chest. "Three lousy e-mails. I'll say you could've done better."

"The Naval Academy and then law school didn't leave me much time. After I graduated, I had to study for the bar exam and pass. This is my first duty assignment." His voice faltered. "My first chance to make up for those years. I *really* wanted to see you again."

His tone rang with sincerity, and as tempted as she was to throw herself in his arms, she wouldn't let him off so easily. "You honestly think I stopped living and was waiting for

you to come and sweep me off my feet like Richard Geer did at the end of that old movie?" She leaned across the counter and got in his face. "Think again!"

"Are you trying to tell me you're seeing someone? When I talked to your stepmom, she didn't mention anything about an engagement or a boyfriend." He angled his head, as if checking out her ring finger.

"Not currently. I've been entirely too busy building my clientele to give you or anyone else a second thought."

"But you remember I only sent three e-mails." The corner of his mouth went up in a half grin. "Funny I thought it was more."

The coffeemaker burred and the aroma of fresh coffee filled the air. "It'll be ready soon." She leaned back against the stove and eyeballed him. "And didn't I hear a rumor about you being engaged to some debutante from somewhere?"

"Should've known you'd hear about that." His cheeks darkened again, but he met her gaze dead-on. "Right after I graduated from the academy, it was a crazy time. Didn't take long for us to realize it was a mistake and call it off. One of those heat of the moment things."

His "heat of the moment" remark she could've done without. She busied herself with pouring two cups of coffee. "How do you take it now? Still with a ton of sugar?"

He grimaced and shook his head. "Black's fine. If I remember correctly, *you're* the one who took tons of sugar in her cup of joe."

A grin tugged at her mouth. "Yes, I did, but now I use substitute." She glanced down at her decidedly plumpish body, suddenly embarrassed. Why, oh why, couldn't she be tall and slender like Nikki?

"You look great."

"That might be the smartest thing you've said all night," she said, giving into the grin.

"Does that mean I've finally removed my foot from my mouth?"

"I said 'might'." She dumped three yellow envelopes of sweetener in her coffee and stirred. "You could have an ulterior motive." She took a sip. "Mm. Just right."

Okay, what now? There wasn't any food in the loft, none to speak of anyway. Three pints of Ben and Jerry's didn't count, did it?

"What about you? You claim you've been so busy, but I heard you were hot and heavy with some actor a couple of years back."

She shrugged. "Ancient history. For what it's worth, your mom and my dad have big mouths." Mario's widowed mother was the agent in charge of investigating Nikki's kidnapping ten years ago. Several years ago, Lorena met and married another FBI agent. Now she and her new husband were great pals of Alexa's father and stepmother.

"Apparently they don't have anything better to do than talk about their children." She gave a sniff. "Speaking of your mother, why aren't you spending your last night in the city with her? Some son you are."

"She's in Lansing, Michigan, building a profile on a serial killer."

"Tough way to spend the holidays."

"No worse than yours. It's two days until Christmas. What're you doing? Instead of heading out to a party, you're hard at work."

"I told you I have a project due." Alexa took another sip then set down the cup. Her stomach was on the verge of announcing it was time to eat. "I was going to order in."

He glanced at the door. "We could go out if you want."

The wind whistled and rattled the tall windows. A shiver ran up Alexa's spine, and she wrinkled her nose. "Too cold." She opened a drawer and pulled out a menu. "Chinese okay?"

"More than okay. Order lots of everything. My treat."

"You better believe it is!" She grinned. "Still like it hot?"

He grinned, showing his irresistible deep dimples again. Probably did it on purpose. "Smoking hot."

"Make yourself comfortable while I call. And light the fire?"

"Will do. Captain."

The smartass saluted her. Dammit. Being with him was so easy, as if it'd been last week instead of eight years ago. Falling in love with him again would be too easy and far too dangerous for her heart. All she had to do was keep calm, and tomorrow he'd be on his way out of town and out of her life.

Again.

Mario stood, unbuttoned his navy wool jacket and then loosened his tie. He surveyed the loft where Lexxie lived and worked. Natural brick walls lined the space, pierced by tall windows. Her work area occupied about a third of unit and was littered with the accoutrements of her occupation. The other two-thirds was her living area, somewhat straighter. The military had taught him neatness. Minimal was good. But her space was warm and comfortable and it reflected her personality.

In spite of their somewhat heated exchange, she hadn't changed much. Still had a riot of curly blond hair and the bluest eyes he'd ever wanted to lose himself in. And her woman's body—curves where a woman ought to have curves. Thank God, she was too smart to fall victim to being model thin. Her breasts were full and her bottom round. That was about all he could tell without touching her. But since his life and limbs were of great value to him and the Navy, he resisted the urge. For now.

Hunkering down in front of the fireplace, he grinned and reached forward to turn on the gas logs. The flames blazed up and sent an immediate note of cheery warmth throughout the loft. He stood, then in the corner he spied a cello and a music stand. "Do you still play?"

Still on the phone ordering dinner, she held up a finger, gesturing for him to wait. The woman was definitely in her element and in control. Why had he waited so long to renew contact?

Simple. He'd never want to leave her again. Just like right now, he didn't want to leave the warmth of this loft with her bustling about in the kitchen. True, they'd been kids when he left for the academy. Him almost eighteen to her sixteen. They'd never gone all the way. Not even the last night before he left for Annapolis. Third base was as far as they dared. The memory of her rubbing his cock through his jeans blasted through him, causing him to shiver. Even now, he could almost smell her musk.

He shook the images from his head. Lexxie was all woman—a lush sexy one, although she didn't seem aware of her allure. Before tonight was over, he hoped something would change between them. Something that could outlast time and distance.

But was it fair? No, coming to see her when he was on the verge of leaving for a six month deployment was pure selfishness on his part. But he just couldn't leave without seeing her and finding out if they stood a chance of ever having a future together.

After Mario paid the delivery guy for their dinner, Alexa set the cartons of food and two light beers on the low teak table in front of the fire. No point in making a fuss over an old friend who just happened to drop in two days before Christmas. Too busy to decorate the loft for only one person, yet now she wished she'd made the effort. At least the fire lent a cozy atmosphere to her casual decor.

At least *he* seemed to feel right at home as he sat cross-legged beside her on the faux fur rug. He flashed a wide grin and started opening the various cartons and sniffing the contents.

"This is great." He rubbed the chopsticks back and forth then dipped into a carton of noodles. "You never said if you still play." He jerked his head in the direction of her cello.

She gave a quick shake. "Don't have time, and I'm way out of practice." Watching him dip into the different cartons of food made her mouth water. "Better leave me some General Tsao's chicken. I'm addicted to it."

He grinned and shoved the chicken container closer. "You don't even have a tree. I would've thought an interior designer's place would be decorated to the gills."

She shrugged. "You know what they say..."

"The cobbler's children don't have any shoes?"

"Yeah, something like that." His elbow was just inches from hers. Too close for comfort. She tried to ignore his body heat, radiating and warming her even more than the gas fire.

"Hate to think of you all alone." He paused eating and gazed at her solemnly.

"In case you haven't noticed, I'm not alone." She wrinkled her nose and snagged a piece of the spicy chicken with enough red pepper flakes to set her mouth ablaze.

"You know what I mean." He got to his feet and glanced around. "Do you have decorations? We could go out and get a tree and decorate it together."

"Uh—"

"You can't say no."

"I'm going over to Nikki and Dad's for Christmas dinner. Sort of silly to—"

"That's enough, Lexxie. We're going to pick out a tree and drag it home. On my way here, I saw a place a couple of blocks away. As soon as we finish eating, we're going."

"Aye. Aye, Captain." She snapped a salute. Obviously the man was determined, and somehow she didn't mind his take-charge attitude. Not that she'd ever admit it.

"That's Lieutenant, ma'am."

"Oh, I thought two bars on your lapel meant captain."

"It does, except in the Navy, lieutenant is an equivalent rank to captain in the other branches of service."

"I see. There's just one problem with your decorating the tree scheme. I'm on deadline for a project, and I still have tons of work."

"A small tree won't take anytime at all, and then I'll get out of your hair. How long has it been since you've had some fresh air?"

"Fresh air isn't exactly a priority, but having my presentation ready is."

"And it will be. You always did your best work under deadline. I bet that hasn't changed."

What a man. He could make fresh air and picking out a tree sound like fun. Maybe if they hurried, she could kick him out by eleven.

Not that she wanted to kick him out. Falling back into their good-natured back-and-forth kidding was so easy. Didn't seem like it'd been eight years.

"Okay. But you're out the door by eleven. Promise?"

He pushed up his sleeve and glanced at his wristwatch. "Already half past eight. We'll have to hurry."

"Hold on. You didn't promise."

"Cross my heart." He grinned, made the time-honored gesture, then held out his hand and pulled her to her feet. She gazed into his dark brown eyes. Her heart sped up double-time, and her breath caught in her throat. "You can kick me out as soon as the tree's decorated." Then he nudged her toward the hall tree where her red wool coat hung. "Grab your coat, baby. Last weather report I heard, it's eighteen degrees outside. Maybe colder."

Who needed food when she could spend time with an old friend? "I can't believe I let you talk me into this." But then he always could talk her into just about anything. Like going AWOL from boarding school for the weekend.

"You know you wanted to spend a little more time with me." He winked and she popped his shoulder with her fist.

"Arrogant—not much."

"Always." He grabbed his jacket and buttoned it. He took his white Navy cap. "You ready?"

She nodded and wound a scarf around her neck. "Where's your coat? Are you sure you'll be warm enough in that?"

"It's wool and don't you know I'm hot-blooded?" He grinned, showing his irresistible deep dimples. "I've got you to keep me warm."

"In your dreams, sailor boy."

Mario laughed and nudged her out the door. "Now what would you know about my dreams?"

"I'd be afraid to hazard a guess." Speaking of dreams. Over the years, she'd had entirely too many starring said navy officer. Long sexy dreams that went far beyond their tentative experience the last night before he went away. He'd brought her to orgasm with his touch alone...as she had him.

She swallowed hard, wiping away the mental images. Her body remembered all too well. "Let's go, if we're going." She pulled her coat tighter. Time to brave the elements. Braving the emotions this man erupted in her could come later.

TWO

The smell of roasting chestnuts filled the air along with the smell of snow which was predicted to fall sometime that night. Mario held Lexxie tight against him as they wove their way through throngs of shoppers.

"I thought you said a couple of blocks."

"We've only gone a block. Don't you ever get out of that studio and walk?"

"Not if I can help it and certainly not when it's this cold."

He spied the tree lot and the lights strung around the perimeter. "See there it is. Less than a block." He tugged her hand. "Let's hurry. No time to waste." He began to run, pulling her along with him. "The perfect tree might get away."

She huffed along, but kept up with his pace. "What are you a Navy Seal or something? This isn't an obstacle course."

"Don't be a whiney baby. We're almost there."

They entered the lot, and truly there weren't many trees left. "We don't have time to be picky," he told the salesperson. "We need a tree, a wreath and some green stuff—you know, to decorate the mantle."

She shook her head and let out a low giggle. "Who are you? I thought *I* was the designer."

"Guess I'm used to taking charge." He flashed his best killer smile. "Do you have any additional wishes, ma'am?"

"No." She frowned and reached in her coat pocket.

"Your money's no good here. My idea and I'm paying."

"But—"

"Listen, Miss Young Struggling Designer. I can afford this."

He wasn't sure, but thought he saw her eyes go shiny bright. No tears. Not tonight. No way. He reached over her head. "Mistletoe warning."

With one hand, he snatched a sprig and held it over her head, then pulled her close for a kiss. Maybe it was a mistake, but he didn't care. Her mouth was warm, willing and soft. Her lips opened, and he held her tight. His cock hardened and his heart raced while his emotions surged.

God. He'd missed her. Her smile. Her eyes. Even her tendency to challenge him at every turn. What a fool he'd been to leave her without a backward glance.

"Hey, pal! Pay for this stuff and get a room." The lot salesman scowled at the two of them over the top of Lexxie's head.

She stepped back, her cheeks red from blushing, or maybe just the cold? "That was some kiss, sailor."

He winked and forked over the cash for a Lexxie-sized spruce and all the greenery they

could carry. "Let's get out of here." He pulled her close with one arm and shouldered the tree with the other. "I don't know about you, but my toes are getting numb from the cold."

"Now who's whining?" She took the wreath and looped it over her shoulder along with a bundle of greenery.

"I missed your smart mouth, Shortstuff." He jerked his head in the direction of her loft, and they trudged forward, dragging the tree.

"And I didn't miss you calling me names."

"But you *did* miss me?"

"I did—at first. But life goes on. I dated and school kept me focused as well."

"Yeah. That I understand."

"Yes, you were so busy you couldn't call, much less drop over."

As they hurried through the cold night, he laughed. "My mother kept me up-to-date in a sort of absent-minded way. That's how I knew about the actor." Eight years of school and studying for the bar had kept him busier than he ever thought possible, and the breaks between were few.

"He wasn't the *only* one I dated."

"But he was the only one my mom described as hot and heavy."

"Only until I found out he wanted me to use my influence with Dad to get him modeling gigs with the agency."

"A user?"

She nodded. "I politely showed him the door."

"Good for you." He shifted the weight of the tree to his other shoulder. "You deserve better."

They reached the converted warehouse, ran up the steps and stopped at the door. He set down the tree, as a snowflake landed on his nose. "Look up, Lexxie. It's snowing."

The flakes reminded him of large icy balls of cotton as they swirled and floated downward.

"We're going to have a white Christmas after all." She gave a hop and squeal, then whirled with her arms outstretched and her face upward as she caught snowflakes on her tongue.

Such joy in life and simple things. Yes, he'd missed her, but the time never seemed right for reconnecting. He'd come home at the end of his second class year fully intending to call her, but she was studying in Italy. After graduation, he found himself engaged to—let's face it a Lexxie lookalike. As soon as Pamela found Lexxie's picture in his billfold, the jig was up and the engagement over.

Once inside, Alexa dragged her stash of decorations out of storage while Mario stabilized the small tree in a stand. She hung the wreath on the front door, then arranged the greenery on the mantle. The smell of pine emanated throughout the loft. Together they strung the tree with strings of tiny white lights.

She stood back and tilted her head from one side to the other.

"What's the matter? Is it crooked?"

"Nope. But the mantle needs something." She grinned. "My Santas should work. Don't you think?"

"You mean you still have all those Santa Clauses from different countries?"

She nodded.

"You going to trust me to decorate the tree while you play with your Santas?"

"Sure. Quicker that way."

Working together they made short work of the decorating. They stepped back, and shoulder to shoulder, they admired their handiwork. "Pretty good, for a spontaneous job," Alexa smiled her approval.

"Yeah." He frowned and glanced at his watch. "It's getting late. I promised—"

No. Too soon. "I *could* reheat the Chinese. And there's a bottle of merlot in the fridge."

His eyes widened. "But your project... I don't want to interfere."

"I'm pretty far along..." Not wanting to seem too desperate or too flighty, she chewed her bottom lip, considering her next words. "...and I guess I've enjoyed your company more than I thought."

"Ah ha! I knew getting out of here for a while would do you a lot of good." He raised one brow. "And I haven't ruined your evening. Is that what you're saying?"

"No." She favored him with a smile. "You haven't ruined my evening or my work. So Chinese or wine or both?"

He turned and set his hands on her shoulders, his gaze soft and warm. "I can't think of anything I'd rather do than sit in front of the fire with you and a glass of red."

It may've been eight years, but this man still had the same knack for charming everyone he met and for saying the right thing at the right time.

Sure as hell charmed her...then and now.

Couldn't help it, she smiled and willed the nervous trembling of her hands to cease. Wouldn't do to spill merlot on him, now would it?

She swallowed the annoying knot already forming in her throat. "Merlot it is."

Somewhat bemused, Mario watched Lexxie tiptoe to pull out two wine glasses from an upper cabinet and then the wine from the fridge. "You're supposed to let red wine breathe."

She turned and shot him an unmistakable glare.

"Or not," he said, amending his suggestion. Hell, who wanted to wait another thirty minutes? She could still change her mind and kick his ass out into the cold winter night.

She lifted her chin a notch or two. "It may be the rule, but I'm not in the mood for following rules tonight."

The challenge in her tone—intriguing. What other rules might she break? "What can I do?"

"Just relax there on the sofa. I think I can manage a couple of glasses of wine." She stared at the bottle, frowned, then pawed through a drawer and pulled out a cork remover. "Um, you could open the wine if you're of a mind to."

Anxious for something to do, he sprang from the couch. "Sure."

She smirked and handed him the wine and the opener. "So nice to have a man around the place."

"Smartass." He gave her butt a playful tap. "Just when we were starting to get along."

She gave a deep sigh. Clearly he was in danger of getting on her bad side again.

He opened the wine with a nice *pop* of the cork, then carried it to the coffee table. Lexxie followed with two glasses. Grinning, he plopped down on the couch and waited. There. Let her decide how close to sit beside him...or not.

She casually sat with one leg tucked under. Just close enough for him to reach out and put his arm around her. She held out her glass for him. "Just a half glass." She pursed her lips and eyeballed him dead on. "Now, about this last minute booty call."

"Booty call?" His hands shook and he almost spilled the wine. "Nothing about this visit is a booty call." How could she think so little of him? Damn. All he wanted was to see her again and maybe kiss her before he deployed. Maybe a bit more, but only if it was what she wanted, too.

"Oh, really? How is it *not* a booty call?"

"If this was a booty call, we'd have done the deed and I'd be on my way."

"So you have great experience in this field?" Her tone was arch. Is that what she really believed?

Was she playing with him? "No, but by definition—"

"Gotcha!" She laughed, then downed the rest of her wine.

Pity she didn't seem to savor the taste. He took a long slow drink of the merlot. The deep rich flavor burst on his tongue. "No fair teasing the poor deploying serviceman."

"You're a naval officer, not a serviceman."

"Semantics. You sure you want to argue semantics over this great merlot?" He took another sip and relished the subtle nuances of its taste.

She inched closer. Her breasts rose and fell with her breathing and laughing. "Told you I'm not in the mood for rules. Not tonight."

Closer still. For a second it seemed like his heart stopped. Her gaze met his. "All right. No rules."

She set her glass on the coffee table and squirmed into his arms. His mouth grew cotton dry. He took a quick sip and set the glass on the table, too. "Wait a minute, Lexxie. Are you sure this is what you want?" How much wine had she drunk? Would she be sorry in the morning? Would he?

Alexa, emboldened by the wine rush, nodded. "*You* are what I want, and I want you right *now*." Her arms snaked around his neck. She felt his dick stir and press against her belly. He wanted her, too. Before she could change her mind, she blurted, "Get naked." God, had she really said that? "I'm sure the navy won't like it if I rip off your clothes."

Amazing how quickly he divested his navy uniform. But not as quickly as she did. Suddenly she stood before him. No longer did she have to imagine what his muscular body looked like. Or what how aroused she'd be merely caressing his rigid cock.

From the time she touched him, she was a goner. With the sensation of moisture forming between her thighs, her knees weakened. She gazed up into his dark brown eyes and swallowed hard. "Touch me. Make love to me."

"Protection." His breath came in gasps. "I-I really didn't come prepared."

Then it's a good thing I have a stash." She wiggled from his embrace, ran over to her sleeping area, and rummaged through a drawer." She held up two foil packets. "Just hope there's no expiration date."

She ran back into his arms. A head taller than she, he stood proudly, his dick jutting thickly from a thatch of crisp black curls while the rounded head glistened in the candlelight. He lifted her up and carried her to the sofa. His mouth on her neck, his warm breath at her ear sent shivers of delight floating through her body. Her head tossed back and forth.

"Hurry," she gasped. *Before I change my mind.*

He tore open the foil packet with his teeth. Together they sheathed him. He moaned at her touch. He kissed her in a take-no-prisoners manner. Then his mouth went to her breasts, teasing one nipple and then the other with light raking of his teeth. She held back a scream, not from pain, but from the sheer pleasure he excited in her. He clasped her hands and held them over her head, leaving her feeling as if she never wanted to let him go.

He then took one of her hands and slid it between her legs "See how wet you are. Your pussy feels like silk." He slid one of his fingers inside and then another. The sensation of him inside her made her inner muscles clench. She arched upward to meet him and moaned with his intimate touch.

Relaxing her thighs, she opened more than her body. She revealed herself and her absolute willingness to be exactly where she was and with him. His fingers were replaced by his nudging his cock up and down her cleft. She grasped his thick penis and centered it as he thrust. Her body's moisture allowed her body to adjust easily to his size and breadth. She wrapped her legs around his waist, grasping his buttocks and pulling him even deeper.

She gazed into his face, reddened by his exertions. A vein bulged in his forehead as he thrust into the depths of her being. With each sure swift stroke, the base of his cock pressed hard against her clit, sending waves of heat to her breasts and neck. He sucked her nipples until they felt twice their normal size. How long she could hold out against the onslaught of emotions and sensations his lovemaking awakened she didn't know.

His paced quickened. "Come for me, baby. I can't hold it."

She bucked with each fevered thrust, her pussy tightening on his cock. Never wanted to let it go either. Her inner muscles contracted, and she let out a low guttural cry as they climaxed as one body. One mind. One heart.

Outside the wind blew and rattled the panes in the tall loft windows. The usual noises of the city, the sirens and traffic, were muffled by the heavy white blanket of snow that continued to fall steadily throughout the late evening. The loft was lit only by the tree lights on and by the low burning candles Alexa had placed strategically set around the room.

Easing off the sofa and careful not to awaken Mario, she wrapped an afghan around her bare shoulders and padded over to one of the windows. She gazed across the street at the neighboring warehouses, all of them loft conversions like hers. Most of them had seasonal decorations as well. She made out a partially lit menorah in one of the loft apartments diagonal to hers and one floor down and smiled. "Not a bad idea at that."

From the sofa, Mario stretched and yawned. "What?"

She turned and smiled at the sight on his long muscular body gleaming in the low candlelight. The memory of their quick and fevered lovemaking would have to last a long time. She pointed. "Over there, I saw a menorah in one of the other buildings. When I was younger, I didn't understand why I didn't receive presents for eight day the way some of my friends did."

She watched him rise slowly from the sofa where they'd just made love and fallen asleep in each others' arms. He came up behind her and wrapped his strong arms around her. "You took the cover, woman." His voice was low and even now had a sensual undertone, sending ripples of desire curling through her.

She turned and let the afghan drop, revealing herself again.

He leaned down and nuzzled her neck, their bodies warm, skin to skin. Heart to heart. "You're a beautiful woman, Lexxie. Do you even know how perfect you are?"

Her breath caught in her throat. "Yeah, you're just saying that. You don't have to, y'know?"

"You don't see yourself the way I do." He took her hand and led her over to the antique mirror she'd bought at last week's Saturday flea market and made her face her image.

Her cheeks burned. "Stop. I know I'm not one of my father's models."

"You're so much better. Let's do an inventory."

Not knowing where he was going, she tried to pull away. "Don't make fun of me."

"I would never make fun of you." He gazed down at her as if she were a shiny new bike on Christmas morning. "First you have this amazing hair and the darkest blue eyes I've ever seen. Only the Adriatic Sea is a deeper shade. Skin—it's perfect. Soft, so touchable." He kissed her neck while he caressed her back and shoulders. Curves of need shot to her lower belly.

"You're lucky you haven't spent a lot of time in the sun. Your neck was made for kisses." He turned her back to face him, leaving a trail of butterfly kisses from her earlobe to the spot between her breasts. Her thighs jittered as he cupped her breasts. "You have the most beautiful breasts I've ever seen."

"An expert on breasts, are you?" She lifted her shoulders in a casual shrug, trying to hide how his words touched her heart. "Well, they're big anyway. Men seem to focus on them."

He tweaked each nipple between his thumb and forefinger. They peaked at his touch, drawing into nubs of exquisite sensation. She let out a ragged breath. "You've made your point. You don't have to keep this up."

"But I do." He spanned her waist with his hands. "Small waist and full hips."

"Oh, gee. What a nice way of saying I have a fat ass." And if he didn't stop soon, she

was going to attack him *again*. Her face burned at the memory.

"Just trying to make a point, Lexxie. You have a woman's body, and it's beautiful."

"You're making a point all right, and if I'm not mistaken, it's nudging my belly." She tried pulling from his arms, but he held her fast. "I feel ridiculous."

He knelt in front of her. "And you're beautiful down here." He eased apart the tender skin and teasingly flicked her clit.

Unable to resist the pulsations of pleasure centered at her core, spreading in ever widening waves of sensation, she caved. Her thighs trembled. She moaned her release, grabbing his shoulders to steady herself and gasped his name.

He stood, picked her up and carried her to her bed. Poised astraddle he grabbed the last condom and tore it open. She sheathed him quickly, and he thrust home, quickly bringing her to another shuddering climax.

To think he was leaving tomorrow. *No. Don't think.*

She wrapped her legs around his waist, meeting him thrust for thrust, pulling him even deeper. As if powered by pistons, he plunged and plunged as deeply as she could take his length. His body burned hot and damp against hers. Seconds later he groaned and came with a final powerful thrust that sent her flying over the edge along with him.

Perspiration ran down his brow as she brushed back the damp waves. A feeling of tenderness overwhelmed her. Tears sprang to her eyes. Tomorrow, he'd be gone for six months. Life would go back to normal, and no matter how wonderful being with Mario was, it would definitely be at least six months before she saw him again. Plenty of time for another case of relationship amnesia to kick in.

He kissed her, a sweet and tender kiss it was, leaving her on the verge of tears. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Nothing's wrong." She swallowed the emotions of love and loss that threatened to overwhelm her if she surrendered. Everything is very right. Wonderful even."

He stayed propped on one elbow. "You sure?"

"Very sure."

He withdrew carefully and lay beside her, cuddling her in his strong arms. Too bad they couldn't stay joined all night, but the heat of his body combined with hers would keep them warm. And his male scent would remain after he was long gone—or until she washed the sheets.

"It was beautiful, Lexxie. *You're beautiful.*"

"Not that again," she said, trying to brush him off. Too bad they couldn't stay joined all night.

"You're beautiful to me. Ever since we were kids, once I met you..." His voice trailed off. and his breathing became even and regular.

The sound of his even and regular breathing comforted her. Her heart would always belong to this man, and his lying beside her was way beyond so right.

THREE

The smell of coffee. The low bubbling sound of the coffeemaker. Alexa opened her eyes and smiled. "Mm. You made coffee. You're a keeper." Crap. What made her say something like that? Whether or not Mario was a keeper was immaterial. She'd spent one beautiful evening with the man of her dreams. Together they picked out a tree, decorated her apartment, ate takeout and made love.

Just like a real couple.

Truth of the matter was they weren't a real couple. Things might be different If he wasn't deploying. But he was. Dreams sometimes came true and hers came true last night.

Now it was morning and she was wide awake the reality of the situation.

Mario ambled over to the bed and handed her a cup of steaming brew. "Morning, Shortstuff." He was already dressed, minus the jacket. His hair was damp from the shower he must've taken while she slept in.

"Good morning." Somewhat embarrassed, she took the cup gratefully and took a quick sip. Ouchy hot, but vital if she was going to make it through an uncomfortable morning-after scene.

Yawning and stretching, she slid her legs off the side of the bed, then wrapped the sheet around her body. "Coffee's great." She set it on the bedside table. "I'm going to grab a quick shower while it cools." She dashed for the bathroom before he could stop her.

Inside the relative privacy of the shower, maybe she could wrap her head around what happened between them last night and emerge clean and clear-headed.

Maybe.

Alexa belted her white terry cloth robe around her waist, then rubbed the steam from the mirror and peered at her image. Definitely clean, so one out of two wasn't bad. Clear-headed might not happen until a certain naval officer left for Norfolk. Maybe not even then.

Okay, you can do this. Her heart racing, she reached for the knob and discovered her hands were no longer shaking. *Thank heaven for small favors.*

She found Mario in her kitchen, leaning on the island and grinning. "That was quick. Feel better?"

"Human at least." She picked up her coffee cup and tested the temperature. "Just right." Anxious to avoid facing him a little longer, she carried it over to the small bistro table and gazed out onto the street below. Three to four inches had fallen during the night, but snow plows had already cleared the streets. Funny, she usually heard the plows.

Not last night.

"May I join you?" He set his cup on the table.

"Of course." Her cheeks started burning. Why did she have to blush like a virgin? She swallowed. "This is so awkward."

"Doesn't have to be. We didn't do anything to be ashamed of. Lots of people did it last night. Probably even your parents."

She shuddered. "Oh, please. That's not even funny." She rubbed at smudge on the glass-topped table. "I just don't want you to think I—"

"Lexxie, it's been a long time since we saw each other. What happened between us just happened. And it was as right and natural as anything I've ever experienced. Wasn't it that way for you?" The muscles in his jaw tensed as he waited for her answer.

"Am I wrong?"

"No." The word came out as a whisper. "Being with you—like that—was perfect. The way I always dreamed..." Now he knew what a romantic fool she was. Now he'd run for sure.

"My coming here last night was selfish. I admit it. But I couldn't go another six months without seeing you again. Had to know if you still had any feelings whatsoever."

"Feelings for you?" She smiled and the tension in her shoulders and throat began to ease. "I never forgot you. But I think maybe you forgot *me*, sailor boy." No point in letting him off the hook too quickly.

"Never." He reached across the table and took her hand between his. "I thought about you. It just never seemed like the right time. And now I've left it kind of late in the game."

"That's an understatement if ever I heard one."

"My deployment is scheduled to last six months. Could go a little over. You never know about those things." His gaze never left hers. "Will you wait?"

"Wait? For what?" Damn, couldn't he make it clearer?

"For me? Will you wait for me?"

Like she hadn't already waited. "You honestly expect me to wait six months. And then what?"

"Then I'll have some leave time, and we'll have some time together. Get to know each other again. See if we have a future."

A future with Mario? She gave a casual shrug. "What the hell? I've already waited—sort of—eight years. What's six more months?" It might seem like forever, but another six months to build her clientele and get her design business on firmer ground was heaven-sent. Her work alone would keep her so busy she wouldn't have time to miss him...much.

"Now that we've been together... It's selfish—I know, and I sure as hell don't have the right, but I can't bear the thought of another man laying his hands on you."

"Feeling territorial, are you?" She smiled, enjoying what was for her a novel experience. "I suppose you'll have access to e-mail onboard that ship?"

"I will." He grinned. "I'll e-mail you every day. And I want to hear all about your design work. All the nitpicky details. Crazy clients—whatever makes up your day."

She nodded. "And I want to hear about—just what does a lawyer do on an aircraft carrier anyway?"

"Mostly wills and small stuff. Investigate thefts, drug usage. It's pretty mundane, but it's a start. I'm sure your days will be more interesting than mine."

"I'll do my best to entertain you, okay?"

He caressed the back of her hand with his thumb. "So...you'll wait?"

"I may be crazy, but I will."

Her intercom buzzed, and then came the words she dreaded hearing. "Taxi's here."

"Be down in a minute," he said, then rose slowly, as if reluctant to leave. "I have to go. I love you, Lexxie Devereaux."

She sprang from her chair and gazed into his warm brown eyes. "Then move your very fine ass, Lieutenant Judson, and kiss me good-bye."

He gathered her in his arms and lowered his lips to hers. Softly at first, then harder as if he never wanted to let her go.

He broke the kiss and she let out a soft sigh, unable to quiet the fear tugging at her heart. "You *will* stay safe, won't you?"

"I'll do my damnedest." His eyes shone with confidence and warmth.

All too soon, he was out the door and she was alone. But his warmth and scent remained. In the few hours they'd spent together, he'd brought so much life to her loft. The small spruce tree they decorated. The scent of the pine boughs decorating the mantle. And a sprig of mistletoe started it all.

Forever in her mind, this would be the Christmas of mistletoe and Mario.

About the author

Marie-Nicole Ryan is an award winning author of romantic suspense and an occasional erotic historical western. A former nurse case manager, she lives and writes in Nashville, TN, with Cassie the Wonder Sheltie at her side, in her lap, and sometimes on the keyboard.

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