

The Trouble With Mistletoe
By Erin Nicholas

“I personally think mistletoe is the best Christmas tradition of all.”

The deep voice rumbled from behind Olivia, just loud enough to be heard over the noise of the party going on in her friend Shannon’s house. The low bass and the warm breath on her ear made goosebumps dance down her spine until even her pinky toe tingled.

She turned with a smile. That quickly froze, then died, as her eyes widened.

Jason.

She thought that she’d said it out loud, but when he stood looking down at her with an amused smile and one eyebrow cocked, she realized that his name was just rattling around in her head without making it past her bewilderment to her mouth.

Of course, it was just his first name rattling around. They had agreed not to share last names, or where they were from, or what they did for a living. For one thing, they had agreed they were having a casual flirtation brought on by the fact they were far from home, were frivolously spending large amounts of money and time, and were drinking large amounts of rum—none of which was usual for Olivia in any way. For another they knew they’d never see each other again.

Well, so much for that last thing.

“Liv?” he said.

“Yeah?” she choked out.

“How do you feel about mistletoe?”

It had been a year since they’d seen each other. Almost exactly. A year since the emotional breakdown that led to her emptying her savings account, booking a last minute flight to Mexico, and forgetting every bit of her usual common sense, upstanding morals and aversion to being seen in public in a bikini, all in an attempt to escape her first Christmas without her dad. A year since Olivia had heard Jason’s deep mellow voice use her nickname. A year since she’d looked into his dark green eyes and run her hands through his thick dark hair and felt his lips on hers.

Suddenly all she could think about... or focus on... were those lips.

She'd never been kissed like Jason had kissed her. She'd never even *imagined* being kissed like Jason had kissed her. too.

She pulled her eyes to his with some effort. *Focus, Liv*. They had spent forty-eight-hours together dancing, drinking, eating, walking in the moonlight by the ocean and kissing... among other things. They also had had exactly zero contact of any kind since then and now the first thing he said to her was some dumb question about mistletoe?

She frowned at him as the ridiculousness sunk in. "I can honestly say I haven't given much thought to mistletoe one way or another."

"Oh, that's not good. Because among the Christmas traditions I really think mistletoe has the best case for being number one."

She looked up and found a sprig of mistletoe dangling from his fingers. "Better than hot chocolate and Christmas carols?" *Why* was she participating in this insane conversation?

He grinned. "Without question. Cocoa can make your body warm, carols can warm your heart, but neither can do what mistletoe can do."

And there was the charming grin, mischievous twinkle in his eye, and sexy drawl that had gotten her into his bed in the first place. Mistletoe meant kissing meant Jason's lips meant her losing her mind all over again.

She didn't know what he was doing here. She didn't know how she could still feel the things she was feeling. She didn't know a lot of things. Like his last name. But she did know that she could not kiss this man. Not again. Ever. Mexico had been a one time, not-in-her-right-mind four days. The three hundred and sixty-one days since were what mattered. And the three hundred and sixty-five days that were to come.

She didn't know what he was doing here, but she was going to have to do what she was doing somewhere else.

Battling his expectations, their chemistry, the memories that could still turn her body temperature up several degrees, and the fact that part of her wouldn't mind being that woman again with him, was going to be tough. Or impossible. Which would be bad in so many ways.

Determined *not* to pursue a conversation about kissing with Jason she finally answered, "Gee, I just can't seem to remember what it is that mistletoe is good for."

"Ah, Liv, thank you for the perfect opening." He cupped the back of her head, dipped his knees and covered her lips with his.

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Kissing Olivia Starling—he'd found out her last name from their hostess just before crossing the room—had not been on his to-do list today. Or this week. Or year. But he was not a man to ignore an opportunity like this.

Besides, it was in the Christmas spirit. Amazing things happened at Christmas. It was a well documented fact.

“At least duck behind the tree,” a voice muttered over his left shoulder just before he felt the not-quite-gentle push into the corner of the room which was, not accidentally, behind the Christmas tree.

His lips were pulled from Olivia's as he stumbled slightly over her feet when she was slower to react and he wound his arms around her, twisting slightly, to take the brunt of the evergreen needle pokes himself. She blinked up at him, looking adorably confused.

“You're making a spectacle of yourselves.”

Jason looked over Olivia's shoulder and saw their hostess, Shannon, shaking her head, her hands on her hips.

“I would say I was sorry.” He looked back at the woman in his arms. She was beautiful and he'd missed her so much that it was like a punch to the gut. “But I don't like lying.”

“*What* is going on?” Shannon demanded, though her eyes danced and she was smiling. “One minute I'm being introduced to my husband's newest officer and the next I'm watching him make out with my best friend.”

Jason waited for Olivia to answer her friend, but she was simply staring at him, the pads of her first two fingers pressed against her recently very-kissed lips.

He set her back away from him and moved a comfortable distance from the tree. “We met about a year ago,” he offered.

Shannon's wide eyes focused on her friend. “When?”

“Christmas,” Olivia said quietly, still staring at him. “Mexico.”

Shannon turned to stare at him, too. “You're *that* Jason?”

He couldn't help but grin. “She told you about me.”

“Um.” Shannon cleared her throat. “Yes.”

“I didn't tell her your last name,” Olivia said, sounding distracted.

He looked at the way her long blond hair turned in corkscrew curls over her shoulder and then into the big brown eyes he still dreamt about at times. “What?”

“I couldn’t. I don’t know it. Even now.” She frowned as if very irritated by the fact.

“Macklin,” he supplied. “I’m...”

Olivia turned startled eyes to her friend again. “Did you say he’s Alan’s new officer?”

It seemed that their kiss had slowed her thought processes slightly. Jason felt a little proud of that fact.

Shannon nodded. “Yes, he...”

“You’re a cop?” she asked as she caught up further. Her eyes widened before he could answer and her voice went up an octave. “You live *here* now?”

“Since Tuesday.” It was now Friday.

Olivia turned panicked eyes on Shannon. “You didn’t tell me?”

“I didn’t even know his name until tonight,” Shannon defended herself. But she was clearly not concerned about her friend’s distress. “I would have never guessed he was your Jason even if I did.”

“He isn’t *my* Jason,” Olivia muttered with a frown.

Jason frowned too. He certainly hadn’t been anyone else’s in Mexico. Or really since. He had compared every woman to her for the past year and none had measured up. Which he’d felt rather pathetic about. At least, until he’d seen her standing in the Christmas lights, suddenly, inexplicably in his life again. Then he’d realized that no other woman ever would. At least for him.

“Do you have a boyfriend?” he asked her suddenly.

She looked stunned. “No.”

“Good.” He wasn’t sure how he would have handled that.

“Do you?” It was clear the thought hadn’t occurred to her until that moment. “Have a girlfriend?”

“No.” He smiled at how relieved she looked. He reached up and touched her cheek. “I never thought I’d see you again.”

“That was the plan,” she agreed.

“Well, now the plan seems to have changed.” He wasn’t upset about that at all.

Her eyes dropped to his lips. She wet her own.

Oh, boy. That one little innocent action was enough to speed his heart rate and it instantly sent his mind spinning back to the few hours they'd spent together.

"We're having horse drawn carriage rides outside," Shannon interrupted. "Go. If the cold air doesn't cool you two off at least you'll be out and away from the audience in here." She turned Olivia and pushed them both toward the front door. "If you keep looking at each other like that I'm afraid my tree's going to go up in flames."

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Olivia welcomed the cold air on her hot cheeks. She couldn't believe she'd just forgotten where she was like that.

She never did stuff like that. Well, other than Mexico, of course. But she liked to blame that on the rum and the moon.

Of course, she'd never met a guy, told him everything about herself and then slept with him all within twenty-four hours of meeting him... until Jason Macklin.

She led an upright, fun but relatively conservative lifestyle. She taught Sunday school for Heaven's sake. Then Jason walked in and she instantly shifted back into let's-get-naked-and-who-cares-about-tomorrow-mode.

This was terrible. How could she be expected to live her with Jason hanging around? Especially if he kept looking at her, kissing her, and touching her while he was hanging around? If they were making out all the time the other guys might get the wrong idea.

She snuck a peek at him as she pulled her mittens on. Jason's warm breath clouded in the cold air and she watched as he shrugged into the heavy fleece pull-over jacket Shannon had dumped on the porch with Olivia's coat after kicking them out. The muscles of his shoulders bunched impressively with the action.

Well, maybe this wasn't *terrible*.

"I'm not sure Shannon really made the carriage ride a choice," he said grinning at her. "It was more of an order. You ready?"

She should say no. Prolonging her time with him would just make staying away from him harder. Extremely difficult. Impossible, even.

"I don't know..."

"Fine. I don't have any complaint with continuing what we were doing out here on the porch." He wiggled his fingers, causing the sprig of mistletoe he still held to bounce.

She shook her head and stepped back. “I don’t have to kiss you just because you have mistletoe, you know.”

He grinned and stepped forward, wiggling the tiny branch again. “It’s a Christmas rule, Liv. You break that and what’s next? No sugar plums dancing in your head? No eggnog? No Popsicle ornaments on the tree? Soon all of Christmas is gone.”

She was fighting a smile by the end of his recitation and he noticed.

He stepped closer still. “It’s just a kiss,” he said huskily.

Which was *exactly* the problem. It wasn’t just a kiss. It had never been just a kiss.

“Oh, look! A horse-drawn carriage!” She pushed past him and descended the porch steps, loosening a loop of garland from the handrail as she hurried to put some distance between her, Jason and the mistletoe.

He was chuckling when he climbed up in the seat beside her. He sat so their legs were touching, draped his arm across the seat behind her and tucked the blanket around their laps.

They pulled away from the curb and started down the snowy street. Colorful lights adorned the lamp posts, the stars overhead were bright and air was crisp. It was a perfect night for a horse-drawn carriage ride.

But it was wasted on Olivia. All she could concentrate on was the warmth of the man beside her, his thumb gently stroking the side of her neck, and the fact that she really did want to kiss him.

She had to resist this. She knew that the kissing itself wasn’t wrong. It was all the other things she wanted to do. With anyone else it might be just a kiss, just a carriage ride, just mistletoe and Christmas tradition, but with Jason it was more. It seemed stupid considering she knew everyone in Shannon’s house better than she knew this man. But there was something about him that was *more* in every way.

She glanced at him and then back to the sparkling bits of snow swirling around them as the horse kicked it up from the ground. Maybe the problem was that she *did* know him. They’d spent only a few hours together, but it had been uninterrupted one-on-one time. They hadn’t shared last names, where they lived or other details, but the pseudo-anonymity had made it easier to be candid about deeper things—their pasts, what they wanted in life, favorite memories, most embarrassing moments, friends, families.

He was a great guy. In fact, he could have been one of those guys she thought about interviewing for the position of possible-future-husband. Except for two very important points. One, Jason liked her just fine, as long as she was naked, moaning his name and not expecting anything more. Two, she couldn't concentrate on asking things like how his 401K was doing or how he felt about lilies for the bridal bouquet when he was looking at her like he was remembering each of her erogenous zones. And he'd definitely found them all.

Okay, time to get things back on track. Everyone knew the perfect way to scare a guy off...

"I want to get married," she blurted out.

Jason's thumb paused against her neck. "Tonight?"

She turned to face him. He was grinning at her and she didn't want to tell him that she simply couldn't kiss him anymore. But it was for her dad. She had to do this.

"No, not tonight. But, I do want to get married." She looked him directly in the eye. "It's time for me to settle down."

Jason looked at her for a long time before saying, "I hope you're not saying this to dissuade me from kissing you."

It took her a moment to comprehend what he'd said. "You don't think I mean it?"

Jason shifted to face her, his hand moving to cup the back of her neck. "I hope, very much, that you do mean it. And if you do, it will only make me want to kiss you more."

Her heart skipped a beat. Cautiously, she admitted, "I was kind-of saying it to dissuade you from kissing me."

"Because..."

"Kissing someone who is thinking marriage is different from ... just kissing."

"It's never been 'just kissing' between us, Liv," he said softly.

Her thoughts exactly. His hand was warm against her neck and she leaned into his touch more fully. "No, it hasn't," she admitted. "But I'm a different woman than I was the last time we were together. Kissing me now should be different than kissing me in Mexico."

"I can't imagine anything that would make me want to *not* kiss you."

The words were exactly what she wanted to hear. The heat from his hand seemed to intensify where it rested against her bare skin. She wanted this to be real. She wanted him to know that she wanted to get married and still want her as much as he had in Mexico. Or more.

Well, if he didn't want to get serious, and monogamous, she had to know. The sooner, the better. Like before she got addicted to him again.

"Even if I told you that every guy I even have coffee with has to be a potential candidate for walking down the aisle or I don't want to waste my time?"

"Yep."

That was all. Just 'yep'. She looked at him intently. "Even if I told you that I have vowed not to kiss anyone that I don't think I could spend the rest of my life with?"

"Yep."

"You wouldn't even be scared off if I told you that I'm not having sex again until after I'm married?"

He smiled. He'd smiled at her so many times and they'd all done something to her heart. But this one was different. It made her sit up a little straighter, lean a little closer and hold her breath.

"Last year on New Year's Eve, I got a letter from my dad," he started. "In it he told me that he was proud of me and loved me and wanted nothing more than for me to be happy. He didn't like that I was alone and wanted me to think about settling down, finding the person I could share my life with. So, I've spent the past few months turning over a new leaf and looking for The One."

Olivia stared at him. That was... weird. And amazing.

"Are you making that up?" she demanded.

He smiled but looked puzzled. "You don't think it's possible for people to change?"

"No the part about the letter from your dad."

He shook his head. "I can show it to you if you want."

She took a deep breath. "Then I'll show you mine."

"Are we still talking about letters?"

She laughed. She couldn't help it. "Yes. But maybe not *just* letters."

He grinned. "You have a letter too?"

"From my dad," she said. "On New Year's Eve last year. That said I should settle down."

He blinked at her. "Well... wow."

"Yeah." Olivia took a deep breath. "So, have you find her?" she asked. "The One?"

He brushed his finger over her cheek. “Maybe.”

“Oh,” she felt her heart drop. But at the look in his eye she perked up. “*Oh.*”

“Yeah.”

“So.” She took the sprig of mistletoe from his slack fingers, lifting it over their heads.

“Kissing me now is different than kissing me in Mexico.”

He pulled her close. “It certainly is.” But he paused with his lips millimeters from hers. “The trouble with mistletoe is it’s only good for Christmas.” He took the leaves from her and tossed them over his shoulder. “And I intend to make this a year-round thing.”