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One of the highlights of a trip is to experience new customs. Believe it or not, this is possible even in your own country.

Jo Duval

WOULD SHE LIKE HIM to be a gentleman or not? Oh, good Lord. What kind of question was that?

The best kind.

Jolie wriggled in the saddle. For some reason, her movement made Thad grunt and shift in response. She only heard the faint sound because he was still so close, his body fused to her back, his face hovering just above her left shoulder.

She cleared her throat. “I’d like the truth.”

He turned, threading his fingers through hers. Such an intimate gesture.

Leaning down even closer—his lips within touching distance of her ear—he whispered, “I think you know the answer.”

“I do.” She wondered if he heard her, because the words were more air than sound.

“Are you shocked?”

She shook her head.

He let her hand go in order to capture her chin and turn her face so their gazes could meet. His eyes reflected the bright sun, giving his rugged features an almost otherworldly quality. “I apologize for the inappropriateness.”

The lines bracketing his eyes deepened, telling Jo he was not sorry in the least.

She wet her lips and his gaze dropped to her mouth. Her stomach swirled in anticipation of something. Another kiss, maybe?

Oh, yes, please!

Thad's lids slid half-closed and Jolie lifted her chin in invitation.

Waiting.

She licked her lips again.

Nothing happened.

“Uh, Ms. Jolie?” Thad coughed or laughed—it was hard to tell with her eyes shut.

She opened them. The horse had stopped moving. She turned in the saddle. All the other horses were circled around, facing them. Curious glances and secretive smiles from the guests and hosts made Jolie's cheeks heat. She sat up straight, removing contact between herself and Thad

Dillon cleared his throat. “Plenty of good trees to choose from here.” He dismounted. “We're looking for one about nine feet tall.” He reached up high, showing everyone about how big the tree should be. “Anything catch your eye?”

“How about that one?” Zak called, pointing to a large tree just to Dillon's right.

Dillon circled around the tree, checking out the branches and the height. “I think this one is pretty near perfect. Any objections?”

“Looks good to me.”

“I like it.”

“It's lovely.”

“Thad? You've got the ax?”

“Of course I do. You know me—always prepared.”

Why did just the sound of the man’s voice send shivers down her spine? And then when Thad took her hands gently in his and gave her the reins? Shivers coursed over her shoulders and ran the length of her arms.

“You hold tight to these, Ms. Jolie, while I go help with the tree.” As he leaned forward to dismount, he rasped, “And don’t think I’m not going to finish what was started back there on the trail. I mean to kiss you like you’ve never been kissed before.”

JOLIE’S DOE-EYED GAZE and wide parted mouth stole the air right out of Thad’s lungs. Lord, the woman was a looker. He hadn’t seen it so much last night; he’d been too focused on her fear of the dogs. Then there was the tub, and he’d been too intent on teasing her to really notice her looks. Her nudity? Oh, hell yes, he’d noticed that just fine.

But now, with her cheeks pink from the air—or was that a blush?—and her brown-gold eyes shining in the light, she was something else. How he’d wanted to taste those lips again. Particularly when she was apparently so willing, her chin tilted up, waiting, expectant, so close...so sweet.

Someone tugged on his sleeve.

Gloria stood there, smiling up at him, though something in her clear blue gaze told him she was none too pleased. She spoke in a harsh whisper through her fake smile. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Why, Ms. Gloria.” He held up the ax. “I was about to help that husband of yours chop down this fine tree.”

The phony smile that spread across her face was in direct proportion to the degree her brows drew together in displeasure. “That’s not what I mean,” she whisper-yelled. Gloria flicked her gaze in Jolie’s direction. “Don’t you dare screw this up for us.”

“Well now, I would assure you I wouldn’t except that I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Gloria’s chin came up in frustration and Thad had a hard time keeping his grin in check.

She tugged on his arm, pulling him in a direction away from the circle of horses. “Come take a look at this tree,” she said, loud enough for everyone to hear. “Maybe we’ll chop two. One for the foyer and one for the great room.”

Once they were out of hearing distance, Gloria punched Thad on the arm.

“Ouch.” He feigned injury.

She poked him in the chest. “Stop screwing with our guest.”

“I’m not screwing with her.”

“No, but you’d like to.” She threw her hands up in the air. “Men. Can’t you keep it in your pants, just once?”

Thad gave her a second to rant about the unruliness of male sexual desire.

“She’s a guest and you work here. It would be totally inappropriate.”

“Kinda like sleeping with your boss?” That stopped her long enough for him to continue. “So you’re saying I can’t take her up to the Doghouse?”

Gloria’s eyes went wide at the mention of the old homestead that sat up on the hill, the place she and Dillon had used multiple times as a rendezvous point for sexual trysts when she’d first come out to Montana. When she’d been in Dillon’s employ.

“A little hypocritical of you, don’t you think?”

She crossed her arms over her chest and pursed her lips. Then her features softened as she turned her head to gaze up the hill at where the place stood. “I just...” She sighed. “It’s really important Jolie write a favorable article about the place. It could make or break us.”

Thad propped his arm across Gloria's shoulders and gave her a reassuring squeeze. For as much as he loved tormenting this woman, he cared deeply for her and for Dillon. Plus, he needed the job, and this place was the perfect cover for him.

“So, what do you want me to do?”

“Stay away from her.”

“What if she can't stay away from me?”

She elbowed him in the ribs. “Tell her it's part of the rules. You can make her feel comfortable, special, but stay out of her bed and no kissing.”

“You're no fun at all.”

“I know you, Thaddeus Knight. The longest relationship you've had lasted all of twelve hours.” She glanced back toward the group. “This writer, she doesn't seem like the one-night-stand type. You know?”

Damn. Maybe she was right. Thad wasn't a relationship kind of guy. His life didn't allow it. His gaze followed Gloria's. “Okay,” he said finally. “I'll keep my hands to myself.”

“Good.” She looked him up and down. “And everything else, too.”

JOLIE HAD NEVER decorated a Christmas tree—not a real one, anyway. There was the fake minitree she'd bought for her tiny apartment a couple years ago, with all the cute little decorations to go with it. But a real live tree?

Never.

Even before hanging decorations, the big tree took her breath away, twinkling with multicolored lights and bringing its fresh pine scent indoors. She helped herself to glass of mulled wine and stood back from the group, watching the flurry of activity with a warmth that spread from her

tummy out to her extremities. After riding back to the ranch with Gloria—so that Thad could haul the tree—she’d decided to head to Half Moon Creek to pick up a couple of things.

New boots? Check.

A bathing suit? Check, check.

Some gifts for her hosts and the guests? Check, check, check.

Plus she had a special surprise tucked away in a florist’s box in her room. She went to retrieve it now, glancing over her shoulder to see if Thad might follow, feeling giddy after her second glass of spiced wine.

Thad didn’t follow. What did she expect? He was working and she wasn’t the only guest. She retrieved the box and presented it to Gloria.

“What is it?”

“Open it.”

Gloria opened it and gasped. “Real mistletoe?” She grinned. “That’s so thoughtful.”

“Half Moon has the sweetest little florist shop, and the girl was so helpful. She…” Thad joined them at that moment and her sentence trailed off as she gazed up at him. More specifically, at the way his shirt stretched across his broad shoulders and opened at his throat, giving her a glimpse of the strong cords of his neck.

She’d like to sink her teeth into them.

“Do you want me to hang that?” His lips twitched and Jo’s gaze slid to his lips, imagining his mouth moving closer and closer to hers.

“Sure, that’d be great,” Gloria answered. Then she turned to the rest of the room and clapped her hands. “Okay, everyone, let’s get decorating. There are plenty in the boxes or you can come on over to the dining table and help make some.”

The last time Jolie had made a Christmas ornament was in grade school—when the whole class made them—and she eagerly joined Gloria at the large dining room table where there were bowls of multicolored candies, cookie cutters and molds of different sizes all laid out on cookie sheets.

Kaylee joined them. “Oh! Christmas candy ornaments. I saw this on Pinterest.”

Gloria explained how they were going to melt the cut rock Christmas candies into beautiful, tasty ornaments. Jo half listened to the instructions as she snuck glances at Thad out of her peripheral vision. He was hanging the mistletoe from the door frame that separated the large dining room from the great room.

While Gloria was busy explaining how to make the ornaments, Jolie was busy imagining a scenario under the mistletoe.

“So, we’ll just spray some oil on the inside of these molds and then place the candies loosely inside...”

She was *accidentally* standing beneath the mistletoe when Thad walked by. He looked up. She looked up. Their gazes met.

“We’ll pop them in the oven so the candies melt together...”

He bent down to kiss her and...shit! He’d caught her watching. Grinning, he stalked toward her, and Jo’s pulse fluttered in her veins as he closed the distance between them.

“Once they’ve cooled, we’ll tie ribbons to hang them and this is how they’ll look.” Gloria held up some samples of ornaments that looked like mini stained-glass windows.

“Don’t mind if I do, Ms. Gloria.” Thad plucked a decoration out of her hand and stuck the candy in his mouth.

“Thaddeus Knight. That is an ornament for the tree. It is *not* for you.”

He bit down on the hard candy, snapping it in two, and offered the other half to Jolie. “It was all Ms. Jolie’s fault.” He winked.

She smiled up at him. It was impossible not to beam in delight when Thad was around. Except his grin froze when Gloria caught his eye. She scowled at him. It was only when she met Jo’s gaze that her smile reappeared.

Apparently she was very serious about these ornaments.

“Why don’t you go give Dillon a hand with the garland.” Gloria waved toward the other room.

“I’m thinking this candy operation looks like more fun.”

“Thad...” There was a warning note in Gloria’s voice.

What was that about?

Whatever it was, Thad ignored it. He propped his arm across Jo’s shoulders and said in a conspiratorial voice, “Now, ladies, did y’all know that the barn out there is haunted?”

“Haunted?” Kaylee asked, intrigued.

“Oh, yeah.” He winked at Gloria. “You remember, Ms. Gloria? There was that one time I was heading for the barn, needing to get something from the tack room at the back...” Thad scratched his jaw, all serious now. “This must have been a year ago now? Maybe a year and a half? Anyway, there was this awful strange sound coming from that room.”

“What kind of sounds?” Jo leaned closer.

“Scratching. Panting. A woman’s scream...or sigh. It was hard to tell.”

“No way,” Kaylee said, eyes wide.

“Yes, ma’am. I been careful going in there ever since. Never know what a body will find.” His grin was pure wickedness as he smiled at Gloria.

“Thank you for that, Thaddeus,” Gloria said, giving him a shove toward the great room. When she returned to the table, her cheeks and neck were flushed bright red. “Now, let’s make some ornaments.”

Jo had just started filling up her molds with candies when Gloria came to stand beside her. “I apologize for Thad.”

“What do you mean?”

She crinkled her nose. “He’s a flirt.”

“No need to apologize for that.”

“Just be careful.”

“Careful?”

“I…” Gloria frowned. “You know, even though he’s worked here awhile, we still don’t know all that much about him.”

“What are you saying? Don’t you trust him?”

She opened her mouth to reply, but Dillon appeared at her side at that moment, carrying an open box of ornaments. “Hey, Red. Curtis found these in the Quonset. They must be from Kenny’s family.” He picked out an ornament wrapped in tissue paper and passed it to Gloria, who unwrapped a pretty colored glass ball.

“Oh, this one’s beautiful.”

“What should we do with them?”

“Let me sort through them. I’m sure we can use some.”

Jo frowned after Gloria’s retreating back. Why would Gloria warn her about Thad? Was there something dark and dangerous in his past? The very idea got Jolie’s creative juices flowing and she considered all sorts of possibilities.

If Gloria's intention had been to warn her off Thad, it was having the opposite effect, because all Jo could think about was ways to seduce him.

She smiled as a vivid image of how she could get him into her bed came to mind.

This was going to be the best Christmas *ever*.

THE FITTED RED turtleneck and black skirt Jolie wore suited her, probably because they fit so well. The turtleneck reminded him of all her lovely curves; the skirt looked feminine and showed off her long, shapely legs. She was a sight, that was for sure, her eyes shining brightly in the candlelight as everyone sat around the fireplace in the great room. Now that the tree was done, they ate and drank and chatted as if they'd all known each other forever. It'd been a long time since Thad had spent the holidays with other folks. Not that he didn't like people. He liked them just fine; he just had to be careful of strangers.

Funny how they'd all just met, but there was something about the holidays that made people more open, made this setting more familial.

More intimate.

He glanced Jo's way and caught her watching him. Her cheeks flushed. Was that due to him or was it the combination of the fire and mulled wine?

Maybe both. Either way, he liked it.

He had wanted to heed Ms. Gloria's warnings, but there was something about this woman that he couldn't seem to shake. He just had to be near her. His fingers twitched with wanting to touch; his nostrils flared with wanting to sniff—did she always smell like peppermint?—and he found himself constantly wetting his lips, longing for another taste.

He hadn't meant to tease Ms. Gloria about overhearing her and Dillon in the tack room that time, but he couldn't resist. Kind of like he couldn't seem to help himself around Jolie.

Of course he should stay away from her. He never got too close to anyone, couldn't afford to, but...

He met her eyes again. Beautiful doe eyes. Sweet. Innocent. Yet he knew from the kiss out in the yard that she had a fire burning inside of her. That and her innocent passion was an intoxicating combination.

"So," Jo said, holding his gaze. "What is Tip's Eve?"

"Well now, it comes from some of my Cajun, Catholic roots."

"You're Cajun?"

"I'm a little of this and a little of that." He changed the subject from his family back to the tradition. "Catholics are all about abstinence followed by overindulging." He lifted his rum and eggnog. "It's the pre-Christmas party for all of us who can't wait for the twenty-fourth."

"Cheers to that," Zak's dad said.

"Cheers." Zak ran around the room clinking his glass of punch with all of the adults' glasses.

It'd been a long time since Thad had been around a kid. Something about that brought back memories, stuff he hadn't thought about in years. "Now, Zak," Thad said, "have you heard of Père Noël?"

Sitting back down on the rug in front of the fire, Zak shook his head, eyes wide. "What's a pear Noel?"

"*Père Noël* is French for 'Papa Christmas.' You know about Santa Claus, right?"

His head bobbed up and down real quick.

“Well, lots of kids are curious how Santa can get all around the world in one night, leaving presents for all those kids. You ever wonder ’bout that?”

“Yeah, I wonder that sometimes.” Zak glanced at his dad. “But, he’s magic, right?”

“Oh, yeah. Most definitely. But that’s not all.” Thad leaned down, as if he was talking only to the kid, but out of the corner of his eye, he watched Jolie, aware of her more than anyone else in the room. “I’ll tell you a secret about how Santa does it, but you’ve got to promise not to tell anyone else.”

Zak scooted closer, coming to sit right down at his feet. “I promise,” he whispered excitedly.

“Okay, well...the secret is, there’s more than one Santa.”

“What?”

Thad turned to Jolie because she was the one who’d uttered the question, not Zak.

“Sorry, keep going.” She waved at him to continue.

“It’s true. There’s the one that lives up north, there’s one that lives in Sweden, there’s one from Russia, a couple from Africa. Probably a few down in Asia—there’s lots of kids there. And there’s one that lives in the swamps of Louisiana, and his name is Papa Noel.”

“Really?”

“Mmm-hmm. You think about it, not every place is cold. A sled doesn’t work where there’s no snow. Papa Noel? He doesn’t have reindeer and a sleigh, he’s got a pirogue—you know what a pirogue is?”

The kid shook his head.

“It’s a flat-bottomed boat that skims nice and light over the swamps.” Thad glided one hand over the other to illustrate. “Now...instead of reindeer, what do you figure pulls Papa Noel’s pirogue?”

“I don’t know,” the kid said.

Thad glanced up. Jolie’s eyes were as wide as the boy’s. Her gorgeous mouth parted a bit.

“Gators.”

“No.” Again, this came from Jolie, not the kid.

“Oh, yeah,” Kaylee, the young newlywed said. “I had a storybook about Papa Noel when I was a kid.”

“Well now, if it’s written down in a book, that must make it truth.”

The boy nodded as if that made perfect sense, and Thad went on to explain how in Louisiana they set up huge bonfires on Christmas Eve to light the way for Papa Noel because it could be so dark at that time of year.

“Can we light a bonfire?” The boy looked at Dillon excitedly. “Can we? So Santa doesn’t get lost?”

Thad didn’t wait for Dillon to answer. Pointing to the big fireplace, he said, “We don’t need bonfires. We got a fireplace to let him know where we’re at.”

His story led to others in the group swapping their own, and while Dillon talked, Thad got up to refill his glass with eggnog, smiling as he ladled. What was it about this year that felt so different? It’d been almost twelve years since he’d left NOLA. Since Katrina and everything that came before. But this was the first Christmas he actually felt like he belonged somewhere.

It was nice.

A soft step followed by the scent of peppermint alerted Thad to her presence.

“That was quite the story,” she said, her voice husky and low.

Thad shut his eyes before answering because he already knew why this holiday felt different.

Jolie.

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