

Midnight Mistletoe



*Christmas
magic is
real...if you
believe.*

Christine DePetrillo

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Warning

This material is meant
for mature audiences.

Midnight Mistletoe

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Christine DePetrillo

Midnight Mistletoe
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Dedication

For Donna, who needed a smile...

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Chapter One

Dr. Melina Fairlee clenched her teeth as she stood on the sidewalk in front of her apartment building. Watching her twin daughters, Amanda and Rachel, pile into their father's BMW carved a hole in her chest. Each suitcase loaded into the trunk widened the pit where her heart once beat.

Each giggle the winter wind carried from her daughters' mouths hit Melina like spear-tipped icicles. She shuddered and pulled the edges of her jacket together, but that did nothing to rid her of the chill.

Well, this is what happens when your heart is removed.

Melina kicked at the snowdrift at the edge of the curb and sent a white spray into the street.

I'm going to freeze from the inside out. The girls will come home to find my stiff, blue, lifeless body stretched out on the floor of the apartment somewhere.

"Bye, Melina." Her ex-husband, Adam, ducked into the driver's seat of that ridiculous car. If her girls weren't going to be riding with him, Melina would wish for a convertible malfunction, so Adam couldn't close the top and would freeze his nuts off on the drive to the airport.

She gave a half-hearted wave and stared at the car until it disappeared from view. With any luck it

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would rain buckets in Disney World, where Adam was taking the twins for Christmas. Maybe the lines would be unbearable, the rides out of order. Maybe Disney World would be closed. That's what Adam deserved for kidnapping her babies during what was supposed to be the most wonderful time of the year.

“More like the suckiest time of the year.”

The elevator ride to her apartment was slow and quiet. How the hell was she going to last a week without Amanda and Rachel? They were her world. The last ten years of her life had been all about them.

Everything Melina did was for the girls. She fed them, clothed them, helped them with their homework, wiped their tears, tucked them in. Well, she hadn't been doing much tucking anymore. The twins had decided they were too old for tucking.

Melina's job as an art history professor at Columbia University allowed her to give the girls a decent roof over their heads, even if they had to share a room in the two-bedroom apartment overlooking Manhattan. Day-to-day, the girls never complained about not having their own rooms, but as soon as Adam showed up, it was all, “Daddy, we're squished in that tiny apartment. Girls need their space.”

He'd actually offered to buy them a bigger place. Adam had no problem dishing out money to keep the girls thinking he was a hero. What he had

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a problem with was the fact that marriage meant *one* woman until death did he part. He preferred more of a buffet of females. Pick and choose. Mix and match.

Melina flopped onto the couch and twirled a chestnut coil of hair around her finger. She flicked on the television to have some noise, but the sound of Burl Ives singing “A Holly Jolly Christmas” made her want to throw something at the flat screen.

She wrapped her jacket around her and folded her arms across her chest. She wasn’t thawing. Not even a little bit.

One scorching shower and two hot chocolates later, Melina settled back on the couch in her fleece pajamas. She glared at the Christmas trees and reindeer scattered all over the pant legs and wanted to take scissors to them. Only days before Christmas and all her holiday spirit had flown off to Florida.

Amanda and Rachel had even taken their stockings with them to hang in the hotel room for Adam to fill. He’d probably stuff them full of fifty-dollar bills and make Melina’s usual stuffers—school supplies, peanut butter cups, and lip gloss—seem stupid.

Growling over her misery, Melina reached for her laptop and decided to kill the millions of hours before the twins returned with some lesson planning. She was teaching a class on Spanish painters next semester. Picasso, Goya, Dali, Velasquez. She loved them all.

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She smiled as she thought about her trip to Madrid when she was in college. She'd gone to the museums, soaked in the genius on display, lost herself in the creativity of the greats.

Melina shifted her gaze to the picture hanging between the bookcases in the living room. The Palacio de Cristal. She'd painted it after visiting the glass and steel palace located in the center of Buen Retiro Park. Sunshine reflected off the lake at the entrance. Windows shimmered with captured rays, alive and golden. She'd had to paint it, so she could take a piece of it home.

Good Goddess, that felt like a lifetime ago. She minimized her lesson plan on her laptop and hopped online. She typed in Prado Museum and clicked on a website offering a virtual tour of some exhibits. Though the pictures were amazing, it wasn't the same as being there.

Being there. Melina hadn't been out of New York in forever. She'd always had the girls to worry about. Their busy schedules and teaching kept her days full. No time to take a vacation, to explore.

But now? The university was on holiday break, and the twins would be shaking hands with Mickey Mouse. Melina had something she hadn't had in a long time.

Freedom.

As if possessed by some higher power, Melina scouted out flights to Madrid and hotel availability. She found several reasonable flights and hotels right in the center of the city.

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“This is crazy,” she said, but her left foot tapped in time to the Spanish guitar music already playing in her head. After a couple of clicks, her credit card had played Santa Claus and had given her quite the unexpected gift—three days in Madrid to do whatever she wanted.

It wouldn’t be the same as decorating Christmas cookies with Amanda and Rachel, but it would be better than letting the silence of the apartment tear her to bits.

* * * *

“Your morning lesson has arrived.”

Diego Ramos looked up from his desk at his sister.

“I’ll be right out, Christa.” He waited for her to leave, but she leaned against the doorway instead. He wasn’t in the mood for people today.

The emptiness of the holidays was pressing down on him, as it always did. His parents had hung mistletoe all over their house, and every time he visited they were making out. Wonderful they still loved each other so much, but seeing them made Diego feel he’d never find such love.

This December alone, he had twirled an endless stream of women across the dance floors of *Estudio de Noche de Baile*, his dance studio. Diego was sick of the “care to be my Christmas present” innuendos he received regularly.

Dancing was sensual. He understood that, but it didn’t mean he was looking to have sex with every skirt that came in for a lesson.

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Nowhere in his marketing pamphlet did it say, “One-night stands available after lessons. Please inquire.” Yet, it didn’t stop them from pawing and propositioning.

“Is there something else you needed, Christa?” he asked.

“No, but you might want to channel a more festive mood. You’ll scare the students away with that scowl.” She turned on a ballet-slipped foot and padded away.

Diego stood and stared at himself in the full-length mirror on the back of his office door. Christa was right. He looked like a browner-eyed, darker-skinned, longer-haired Ebenezer Scrooge. The only thing holiday about him was the fitted red T-shirt he wore over his black dress pants. He tried a smile, but it looked forced.

Diego rolled his shoulders and opened his office door. He drew in a deep breath and wondered how he could get back his love of dancing. It had become just a way to make money lately, and he questioned if it was worth it anymore.

At the end of the day, he didn’t feel inspired or satisfied like he had when he’d first opened the studio.

Now he just felt cheap. His students considered him eye candy—he’d received a few tasting licks yesterday from one woman. He didn’t look forward to being anyone’s lollipop today.

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Voices from the front classroom filtered into the hallway, where Diego stood summoning lost motivation.

“C’mon, *hombre*,” he said to himself. “You can do this.”

He stepped into the classroom, and a hush fell over the students. He pulled a smile out of thin air, hopefully a convincing one. It must have been, because the group of ten middle-aged women breathed a collective sigh as he approached.

“*Buenos días, señoras*,” he said.

A medley of greetings floated back to him as he strode to his MP3 player plugged in to a large speaker at the front of the classroom. The faces were the same as last week. Always the same. They may have been too touchy-feely, but they were loyal customers. He couldn’t ruin their dance lesson because he was in a funk.

Diego flipped on the music and quick-paced, cha-cha music flooded the classroom.

“Ready?” he asked.

Enthusiastic nods swept over the women as they bumped into each other to get a spot directly behind Diego. With he being the only male in the class, he always started the lesson with whole group instruction on the female steps.

Then he circulated among them and danced with students individually. That’s when the groping hands took liberties on his arms, his chest, his back, his ass. He spent most of the individual time repositioning and biting his tongue.

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Just once, he'd like someone to come in for a lesson and really want to learn the dance. Not treat him like a living, breathing piece of porn.

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Chapter Two

Melina craned her head back to take in Hotel Luna stretching into the gray Spanish sky. Her feet were actually planted on *Paseo De Las Delicias*, a street within one kilometer of the Reina Sofia Museum. A hot bolt of giddiness zipped through her body and defrosted some of the Manhattan blues.

She stepped past two Christmas trees framing the doors of the hotel lobby with her carry-on bag rolling behind her and her purse slung over her shoulder. She approached the front desk and searched her mind for the few words of Spanish she once knew.

“Good morning,” the woman stationed at the front desk said.

Melina let out a breath, thankful her appearance had screamed American tourist. “Morning. Melina Fairlee, checking in.”

The woman smiled and tapped at her keyboard. She accepted Melina’s credit card and processed her reservation. As Melina waited, she turned and scanned the lobby. Red and gold ornaments hung on trees that twinkled with tiny lights. An abstract version of the nativity adorned a fireplace mantle.

The figurines were smooth, curvy wood, but faceless. They were painted solid red and gold as if they had been specifically made for the hotel’s

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color scheme. Ornately decorated shoes lined the windowsills and waited for the Three Kings to fill them with gifts.

“Here you go, Dr. Fairlee.”

Melina tore her gaze from a porcelain cow wearing a wreath of red berries. The woman at the front desk slid a receipt and keycard across the counter.

“The elevators are to the right.” The woman pointed and Melina nodded.

“Thank you.”

“Enjoy your stay. *Feliz Navidad.*”

Melina stepped onto the elevator and rode up to her room. A Spanish guitar version of “Joy to the World” wafted into the elevator, pious and somehow sexy at the same time.

Her holiday spirit was rekindling by the moment. It blazed brighter when she entered her room and found a miniature Christmas tree on the dresser across from the queen-sized bed.

She tucked her carry-on and jacket in the closet by the door and opened the balcony curtains. Madrid sprawled out before her and although the day was cool and overcast, she found hope in the streets crisscrossing through the city.

Hope that she could have an enjoyable Christmas even though Adam had stolen her reasons for living. Hope that she could be inspired by the art she would view at the museums during her stay.

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Hope that when she returned to Manhattan things wouldn't seem so stale and routine.

She sat on the edge of the bed and tested its firmness. Comfortable enough, though the last thing her bottom wanted was more sitting. Over twelve hours in flight had her body hollering for some motion, some use. She rifled through a welcome folder on the bedside table.

Most of the brochures were about the Prado and Reina Sofia museums. A few advertised local shops in the Plaza Major, Madrid's city center, but Melina wasn't ready for browsing or buying. She needed something to regain her balance, align her chakras, stretch out the kinks in her back and neck from airplane napping.

She tapped the pile of papers on the table to put them back into the folder, and a pamphlet fluttered to the floor. She picked it up, and the crimson rose superimposed over a huge full moon on the cover caught her attention.

"Estudio de Noche de Baile," she read. "Dance Night Studio." Melina opened the two flaps and scanned them. "Dance lessons. Tango. Cha-cha. Pasodoble. Rumba." The list of dances went on for an entire flap with times and rates on the opposite side.

She checked her watch. The cha-cha group class started in thirty minutes. She found the address of the studio on the back panel. *Paseo De Las Delicias*, the same street as the hotel.

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Deciding to walk there and jumpstart her system, Melina changed into a flowy black skirt, red tank top, and a black hooded sweatshirt. She grabbed her purse and set out to cha-cha her way into Christmas.

* * * *

The last of his cha-cha students trailed a manicured finger down his chest as she backed him toward the floor-to-ceiling mirrors. When his back hit the wall, Diego took hold of the woman's hand still on his chest as she leaned in to kiss him.

"Señora Veroni," he said. "Our lesson is over."

"The song is still playing. We shouldn't let the music go to waste." She pressed herself against Diego.

"I..." He searched his mind for a kind way to tell this vixen to back the hell off. His gaze flicked to the front door of the studio as the sleigh bells above it—Christa's idea—jingled. "I have a private lesson," he finished.

Mrs. Veroni took a tiny step back, and they both watched the door. Wavy, chestnut hair filled the doorway as a slender woman entered. Diego didn't wait to see her face. He scooted out from between Mrs. Veroni and the mirrors to shut off the music.

"Enjoy your holiday, Señora Veroni." He ushered her toward her purse on the classroom's bench.

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She picked it up and puckered out her lips. “I should have brought mistletoe with me. Then you’d have to give in to what we both want, *mi amor*.”

What we both want?

Diego shook his head and herded Mrs. Veroni to the door while the woman who had come in—his savior—studied his Picasso prints. Framed copies of *Three Musicians*, *Dance of Youth*, *The Old Guitarist*, and *Bullfight III* hung on the walls of the studio. He turned to them for inspiration when choreographing.

Mrs. Veroni closed the door behind her, but not before she rubbed herself cat-like once more along Diego’s body. He hoped she hacked up a hairball on the way home.

He faced the woman admiring the prints. All he had to do was get rid of her, and he could go hide in his office until the next class.

“Can I help you?” he asked.

The woman didn’t turn around. Instead, she angled her head at *The Old Guitarist*. “Waiting for the cha-cha class.”

“I’m afraid it just ended. You missed it.” Diego came to stand behind her.

When she turned around, a set of Mediterranean blue eyes froze him where he stood. Layers of thick, ginger-brown hair framed delicate cheeks. Her glossed lips parted as if she were about to speak, but she didn’t. Diego wasn’t sure angels could speak. She surely had to be one. He’d never seen anyone like her.

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She unzipped her sweatshirt, and the flawless, milk-white skin at her throat had Diego's pulse drumming in his veins. Her body was lean but curvy, muscled yet soft. He suddenly had to dance with her. He *must*.

After a few moments of staring at one another, a little crease formed between her brows as she dug in her handbag. "Did I get the time wrong?"

Diego almost couldn't contain the urge to iron out that wrinkle in her forehead with his fingertip. He slid his hands into his pockets and willed them to stay there.

"This pamphlet I saw in the Hotel Luna said this was the time." She handed the pamphlet to him, and their fingers brushed one another's as the paper changed hands. A shiver rippled through his body. Through both their bodies.

He tore his gaze from her face and scanned the pamphlet. "This is last year's brochure," he said. "I had to change the times to fit in two more classes."

"Business that good, huh?" Her lips curled up into a smile that set Diego on fire. Her entire face glowed with the grin, and he wanted to be burned by that sunshine.

"People love their pasodobles." He shrugged.

"Do you have a recent brochure? I have a few days in Madrid, so maybe I can come back at the right time and catch a lesson."

"On vacation?" he asked.

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“Yes. Snap decision. I was in New York like thirteen hours ago.”

“And now you’re here.”

“In Spain.” She laughed.

“For Christmas.”

“*Feliz Navidad.*”

It is now. Diego smiled—a genuine one this time—and folded the old brochure. He tossed it into a garbage bin by the classroom door and walked back to stand in front of...of...

“What’s your name?” he asked.

A faint blush colored her pale cheeks, and she looked like a child’s doll, all perfectly painted. “Dr. Melina Fairlee.” She held out a hand.

As his eyes connected with hers, Diego dropped a light kiss on the back of her hand and held onto it. “Diego Ramos. Your private teacher for the next hour.”

Chapter Three

“I couldn’t let you give me a private lesson,” Melina said, but good Goddess, she wanted one. His hand was so solid and warm. Those eyes, dark chocolate pools, hypnotized her. A scruffy beard framed full lips as if they were works of art, and she wanted to bury her fingers in that forest of hair.

“Por favor, señorita,” Diego said. “I insist.”

The Spanish words rolled off his tongue and stroked Melina somewhere deep inside her body. If what he said could do that, what could his dancing do?

“You must have other business to tend to.” She let her hand slip from his, so the blizzard of sensations blustering inside her might quiet.

Diego shook his head, causing some of his hair to fall into his face. He combed his fingers across the top of his head and pushed the wayward strands back into the mix. The dark waves slithered into place, a shiny curtain that hung to his chin.

“You are my only business right now.”

He offered her a grin, and Melina reminded herself to give special praise to the Goddess for her ingenuity in putting this male specimen together.

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He slid her purse off her shoulder and placed it on the bench, then tugged her to the center of the classroom. “You came for the cha-cha lesson, but you can have any dance you’d like.”

Any dance? Which one involved the most touching?

She swallowed her thoughts as heat crept over her skin. Hard to believe yesterday she was worried about freezing to death in her apartment without the girls. Now melting was the concern.

“You decide.” Melina slipped off her sweatshirt, and Diego’s eyes closed for a moment. When he opened them, his pupils were huge, black puddles. She felt like prey under the intensity of his gaze.

“Rumba it is then.” He walked toward the mirrors with the grace of a tiger, muscles shifting under his T-shirt and pants. As he turned around to face her again, music sifted into the classroom. He held out his hand, and she slid hers into it.

When his fingers closed, her breath caught in her throat. The music’s beat reached into her chest and reset her pulse to a rhythm she didn’t recognize. A rhythm that made her feel alive.

They began the dance with an arm’s length between their bodies. Diego’s hips executed rumba moves with liquid perfection, while Melina dug around in her memory for the female steps. They came back to her from her high school years as if they had been merely sleeping, and all they needed was a glimpse at Diego’s body to wake.

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She matched his movements and soon found herself pressed against the contours of his chest, his hand spread out below her shoulder blades. They slinked across the dance floor in a swirl of red and black, their bodies moving in perfect synchronicity.

Melina was vaguely aware their dancing no longer conformed to the exact rules of rumba. They were too close, too slow, too lost. She forgot she was in a classroom while Diego slid his hands down her arms, grabbed her right wrist, and flicked her away from him.

When he spun her back, she braced herself with two palms on his chest. They stood like that for breathless seconds, gazing at one another, until Diego ran his fingers up her bare arms. Melina couldn't stop the sigh that escaped from her lips.

"*Mis disculpas*, my apologies," Diego whispered. "I seem to have forgotten the steps."

"Me too." Melina knew she should step out of his arms, gain some space between their bodies, but her feet refused to even consider the notion.

"I hate when my students grope me," Diego said, "but *dios mío*, my God, I want your hands all over me."

Before Melina could stop herself, she was on her tiptoes pressing her lips to Diego's. He wrapped one arm around her back while the other hand slid up to rest at her neck. His fingertips massaged the base of her neck, relaxed every muscle in her body

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until she had to lean against him to remain standing.

Her mouth savored the peppermint taste of him as if he were a tall, dark, handsome candy cane she'd found in her stocking, or shoe, or whatever they did in Spain. She ran her hands over his shoulders, and a fresh burst of desire exploded in her center.

She raised her leg, let it rub along the length of Diego's until he caught it in his hand. He pushed her skirt out of the way and raked his fingers across her bare thigh.

Melina let out a cry and wondered if Santa was erasing her name from the "nice" list.

* * * *

Arándanos. Cranberries. Melina tasted like cranberries. As Diego teased and nibbled her lips, he remembered he was severely allergic to cranberries, but he couldn't stop kissing her. It would be worth the anaphylaxis. She was like a forbidden food that his life hadn't been the same without. And he was starving for it, for her.

He couldn't breathe. Was it the allergy? Did he need a shot from the Epi-pen in his desk drawer? Or was it Melina stealing his breath away as she parted her lips and explored his mouth deeper, her hands gripping his shoulders, pulling him closer?

The skin on her thigh was smooth and toned, expensive silk sliding beneath his fingers. As he stroked that softness, Diego wanted her naked.

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Every inch of her exposed and under him. Calling his name, melting with his touch.

“Diego, *Mamá* called and...” Christa’s words got lost in the music still playing in the classroom.

Melina tore her lips, her body, from Diego’s and skittered back a couple of steps. That distance left him cold, the fire she’d kindled inside of him instantly hardening to ice. He wanted her back beside him.

Hell, he wanted more than that. Looking at her now, her lips swollen and her cheeks as red as their shirts, he wanted to whisk her away and make love to her until day turned to night, winter to spring, Hell to Heaven.

“*Perdón*. So sorry to interrupt.” Christa’s dark eyes danced with amusement. “I didn’t know you were giving a...private lesson.” She winked at Melina, and Melina’s face blushed redder.

“I should go.” Melina took a step toward her purse and sweatshirt on the bench, but Diego grabbed her hand. He couldn’t let her leave. Not yet.

“The lesson is not finished,” he said. He cleared his throat, trying to get rid of the pleading desperation in his voice. “The hour is not over, and *mi hermana* was just leaving.” He glared past Melina, and Christa winced.

“*Sí*, on my way out.” She smirked and disappeared into the office.

The back door opened and closed. Now he'd owe Christa a favor, a sizable one, but when his gaze swam back to Melina, he didn't care. He'd do whatever Christa demanded.

"I really should go." Melina looked to the watch on her delicate wrist. "I only have a little time to get into the Prado and Reina Sofia. They are closed on Christmas."

"*Mi primo*, my cousin, is a security guard at the Prado. Why don't you stay for the rest of this lesson—just dancing, I promise—and go to the Reina Sofia this afternoon? I will take you to the Prado tomorrow, *Nochebuena*, Christmas Eve, and give you a special tour before it opens to the public."

If she didn't say yes, Diego wasn't sure what he would do. Kidnapping her would make him *un loco*, a lunatic, but he feared not being with her might do the same.

"Surely you have Christmas Eve plans," Melina said.

"In the evening only. My entire day is free. For you." Diego knew he'd answered too quickly, but the more Melina deliberated, the more he unraveled. Why did this American have such an effect on him?

"If you're sure you don't—"

"I don't," Diego cut in. "I don't mind at all."

"Okay," Melina said. "Thank you. I would love a special tour."

He grinned in victory and held out his hand. "Let's finish the rumba properly, and you can be on your way then."

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Melina accepted his hand, and he focused all his attention on the dance steps. Well, most of his attention. Some of it was still thinking about kidnapping Melina.

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Chapter Four

Melina floated on a cloud through the Reina Sofia Museum. She barely noticed Picasso, Dalí, and Miro as her mind replayed the dance lesson, if that's what she could even call it. She'd done less dancing and more fantasizing as Diego navigated her across the dance floor. His body had fit against hers so perfectly.

It had never been that way with Adam. She'd always tried too hard to jam the puzzle together with him, and it had taken his cheating to finally make her see the picture the two of them made sucked. She'd never regret her girls that came out of that union, but now she understood what had been missing.

The fire. The instant passion. The magnetic connection that came when two souls found each other. And to think she'd felt all that in an hour-long dance lesson with a Spanish stranger! She leaned against the wall in one of the exhibit rooms until the dizzy bewilderment passed.

All she could do now was fill the time until seeing Diego again tomorrow. She didn't want her little get-away to pass too quickly, but if tomorrow didn't come like right now, Melina wasn't sure she'd make it.

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Drawing in a deep breath and sifting it out slowly, she pushed off the wall and spent the rest of the day wandering through the Reina Sofia. She managed to jot down some notes for her course. She visited the museum library and walked out of the bookstore, toting several volumes packed with Spanish art. She finished off her tour with a stop at the gift shop to buy a collection of postcards.

Back at the Hotel Luna, she ate dinner in the restaurant on the lower level. More holiday guitar music filtered throughout the dining room, and Melina realized Christmas was more than presents and fawning all over her children. She'd enjoyed surprising the girls and making them happy, but what about her own needs? Her happiness?

It had been so long since she'd thought about what she wanted. Today had shown her what she wanted.

A dancer with hair the color of midnight and six feet, three inches of athletic grace. Diego was a souvenir she wanted to cram into her suitcase and take home. He certainly was a piece of Spain's finest art, and she truly believed in appreciating art with all her senses.

Melina wiped her brow with her napkin and pushed her plate aside. Suddenly the dining room had grown hot, or perhaps the scandalous thoughts circling her mind had cranked up her temperature. She thanked her waiter and retired to her room.

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When morning came, she dressed and bounded down the stairs to the lobby, too excited to be caged in the elevator. She stopped short when she saw Diego sitting in one of the lobby chairs. He wore jeans and a brown leather coat that lightened the color of his eyes.

His long legs were stretched out, knees angled away from each other. The free space in front of him screamed out to Melina. She wanted to crawl into that space and rest her head on his thighs, wrap her arms around his waist.

A fresh sweat broke out on her skin just thinking about being that close to him again. She was definitely wearing too many layers of clothing for this outing.

* * * *

Diego's entire body responded when Melina walked toward him. He'd spent all of last night dreaming about touching her, and looking at her now, he knew why. She was exquisite. Her thick mane was pulled into a low ponytail that spilled russet waves over her left shoulder.

The silvery threads in her scarf made her entire face sparkle. Or was it her smile that sparkled? Framed by peachy-pink lips, that smile was weaving a spell that left him wondering if he could exist without it.

"*Buenos días*, Diego," Melina said.

"Good morning, *mi hermosa*, my beautiful." He stood and had to stop himself from scooping her up into his arms. He had to remind himself

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she wasn't his. He barely knew her, but he would change that. Today.

He settled for taking her hand and leading her to the hotel doors. Outside, the sky was gray and the air cool. It couldn't touch the warmth having Melina beside him created, though. He could live for days off that heat.

Diego turned left down the street, and Melina's hand tightened in his as they passed through a crowd of pedestrians. When they cleared the congestion, he pulled her a bit closer and loved that she didn't shy away. Instead, Melina settled in beside him, her long strides matching his, and soon they stood in front of the Prado.

He tugged her to a service entrance around the side of the museum. Diego pounded his fist on the door three times slowly and then finished with two quick knocks. The door opened, and his cousin let them in.

"Gracias, Amoldo. Se trata de Melina." Diego motioned to Melina. "This is my cousin, Amoldo."

Amoldo nodded and smiled. "Nice to meet you. Hope you enjoy the museum."

"I will. Thank you," Melina said.

Diego ushered Melina to the stairs. The museum would open at nine o'clock. That gave them one hour to browse without a crowd.

"Do you have some artists in mind you must see?" Diego asked.

Melina dug in her coat pocket and produced a small notebook.

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“I have a list. With room numbers.”

“My, aren’t we organized?” He elbowed her as he took the notebook. That simple brush of his coat against hers sparked his arousal.

“I’m a teacher,” Melina said. “I can’t help being organized. It’s in my DNA.”

So is being absolutely fascinating.

“Let’s see.” He focused on the list. “*The Crucifixion. Las Meninas. The Garden of Earthly Delights.*” He rattled off the rest of Melina’s list and nodded. “We can certainly hit these and then some.”

He angled his bent arm out to Melina, and she hooked her arm through his. They spent the early hour viewing and discussing the artwork. Diego was delighted by the extra knowledge Melina offered about each artist and the museum itself.

“Did you know the Prado started out as a natural history museum?”

She scribbled her notes and examined the exhibits. Her eyes were wide blue oceans soaking up everything. Even when the general public was admitted into the museum, Melina eagerly waited for her turn to get up close to the displays. She was patient and interested in everything.

But is she interested in me? Diego thought so. He caught her studying him several times as if he were a painting she was trying to figure out.

“I think that’s everything,” Melina said at almost two o’clock. They stood at the main doors of the museum. “They’re getting ready to close for

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Christmas Eve.” She rested her hands on Diego’s shoulders. “You blew your entire day here with a stupid American tourist. I don’t know how to thank you, Diego.”

“*Número uno*, you are not a stupid American tourist.” He placed his hands on her hips and guided her closer. “*Dos*, I can think of no better way to spend a day.” He leaned down and caught her lips with his, a light brush, quick and gentle. “*Tres*, you can thank me by not letting the day end here.”

Melina’s lips curled up at the corners as she stepped back from another kiss. “It’s Christmas Eve, Diego. I’m sure your family is expecting you.”

“*Sí*, and I want you to come with me.” He nuzzled his nose into the curve of her neck. She smelled of cinnamon apples today. *Not allergic to those.*

“I can’t crash your Christmas Eve.” She laughed and squirmed away from him.

“You are alone here, *sí*?”

Melina nodded as Diego circled his arm around her and led her out of the museum. “My daughters are in Disney World with their father.”

Diego almost tripped down the stairs. Daughters? Father? He let his arm slide from her waist. “You are married?”

Fate was cruel. How could she bring this lovely flower of a woman into his studio, into his life, and then have her belong to another? His chest ached with the thought.

“Divorced,” Melina said. “My ex-husband is an ass, but my ten-year old daughters are wonderful.”

Diego’s lungs resumed their duties. “Of course they are. They are yours and no doubt as beautiful and intelligent.”

Melina raised her eyebrows and grinned. “I see what you’re doing here, Diego.”

He held his hands out to either side, trying for an innocent look. “What am I doing?”

“You’re using flattery to convince me to come with you.” She poked a finger into his stomach.

“Is it working?”

“I don’t know, Diego. I only came to Madrid to get away from the quiet in New York. Without my daughters, I didn’t know what to do with myself.”

“You might miss them more if you go back to your hotel alone.” Plan B was all about logic. “There will be a full house at my parents’ tonight. Big celebration.”

He could see the mixed emotions in her eyes, and he took her hands, weaving his fingers between hers. “Melina, you must spend *Nochebuena* with me. You must.” Pleading, plan C, and he didn’t care if it made him sound ridiculous.

“Will there be mistletoe?” Melina arched an eyebrow.

“At every doorway. My parents get carried away every year.” Why did he suddenly love them for that?

“Count me in, then. I wouldn’t want to miss chances to kiss you.”

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“Not to worry,” Diego said. “You have a free pass to kiss me whenever you want.”

He touched his lips to hers and moaned when Melina slid her hands up into his hair. She’d just earned a free pass to do whatever she wanted with him.

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Chapter Five

Melina gasped as Diego pulled up in front of an enormous, white brick house with a red clay roof. Tiny lamps flickered in every one of the windows, and voices mixed with laughter rode the wind. Icy flakes fluttered down from the dark sky, making the house look as if it were inside a snow globe.

“Bienvenido a la casa de mis padres, welcome to my parents’ house,” Diego said.

“It’s prettier than some of the artwork we saw today.”

He trailed a finger down her cheek. “There are many things prettier than the artwork we saw today.”

Lava rose inside her, even in the sleeveless black dress she’d bought at one of the shops before Diego picked her up. How could someone she had just met have that effect on her?

She accepted his hand as Diego held open her car door. She enjoyed a brief kiss before turning toward the house, but hesitated at the front door.

“Do your parents know you’re bringing me?”

“I called and told them. They were delighted I wanted to bring you.”

“Delighted, huh?”

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“*Sí*.” Diego smiled. “I’ve never brought a woman here for *Nochebuena*.”

“Never?” Melina said. He had to be joking. Surely he had loads of women who wanted to be with him, wanted to meet his family. She couldn’t have been the only one to fall for him so suddenly.

Diego shook his head. “You are the first.”

He opened the front door and was immediately hugged by the woman from the studio.

“*Feliz Navidad, Diego!*”

“Christa, you remember Melina from yesterday.”

“*Sí*, I do.” Christa smirked, but then hugged Melina as well. “*Bienvenido*, come in.”

The first thing to catch Melina’s eye was the vast table full of food. Lamb, pig, every kind of seafood imaginable, and desserts to rival any gourmet bakery in New York. If the world should suddenly end, this was where Melina wanted to be.

A woman with silver streaked hair pulled into a tight knot came toward them. She moved like Diego, as if she were meant to dance instead of walk. She cradled a large, orange cat in her arms.

“Here comes *Diablo*,” Diego said.

“Don’t call *Mamá* that.” Christa nudged Diego, and they both laughed.

Melina braced for the harshness a woman referred to as “Devil” would undoubtedly wield.

“*Mamá*.” Diego took the woman’s hands and kissed her cheek.

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She cupped Diego's face and slid her gaze to Melina. She said something in rapid Spanish that Melina had no hope of understanding.

She hates me, Melina thought.

Diego laughed and replied just as quickly. When he turned to Melina, the amused look on his face stopped her heart.

"*Mamá* says I wasn't supposed to open my presents yet."

Diego's mother wagged a finger at Melina, handed the cat to her son, and gave Melina the biggest hug she had ever received. She then herded Melina to the food table.

"Eat. Now." She put a dish and silverware in Melina's hands.

"I'd do what she says. Leftovers piss her off," Diego whispered. "Right, *Diablo*?" He rubbed his chin on the top of the cat's head.

"That's *Diablo*?" Melina laughed and scratched the cat's cheek until its green eyes turned to slits. She gazed at Diego, wondering what would happen to his eyes if she rubbed his cheek.

She gestured to the food. "I'll eat if you promise to show me to the nearest mistletoe."

"I can agree to those terms."

Melina had hoped to find the mistletoe sooner than later, but every member of Diego's family stopped them to chat. He had been telling the truth about never bringing a woman to Christmas Eve, and everyone had wanted a closer look at the first to make the cut.

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Normally, Melina would have been self-conscious about the attention, but they were all so friendly and...comfortable. They asked about New York, her job, her daughters. She felt right among them.

La Misa Del Gallo, or The Mass of the Rooster, the Spanish version of Midnight Mass, came next, followed by dancing and singing in the streets. Guitars, drums, tambourines, and castanets filled the snow-dusted night with music. Melodies Melina would never forget.

Her body had brushed up against Diego's enough times as they danced that she had become addicted to his touch.

As the celebration wound down and some of Diego's relatives left, he found her talking Picasso with his cousin.

"May I steal her away, Amoldo?" Diego stood behind her and placed his hands on her shoulders. That simple contact made her want to lean back and wear him like a coat.

"*Sí, sí.*" Amoldo nodded and shoed them away with a smile.

She followed Diego through the main house, where he reached up to the top of the veranda doorway. He plucked free the sprig of mistletoe hanging there and shot Melina a wicked grin.

"I've behaved for long enough," he whispered as he pecked her lips.

He led her through the veranda doors and across the yard until they came to a small cabana.

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Diego unlocked the door and pulled her into the darkness. After a moment of soft scuffling, a golden glow fell over the one room hut as he lit several candles.

The flickering shadows danced to the distant music still echoing from the main house. He fastened the mistletoe to the ceiling fan and turned his gaze to Melina.

The dark abyss of his eyes called to her. She didn't care that all the oxygen had left her lungs. She didn't care that her heart threatened to burst through her ribs. All Melina cared about was diving into that abyss.

* * * *

She was bathed in candlelight, and Diego was more certain than ever Melina was an angel. An apparition, creamy white and perfect. He half-expected for her to disappear when he reached for her.

On that thought, he strode over to Melina and pressed his lips to her forehead. When she leaned forward, most of her body touching his, he breathed a sigh of relief. She was real. She was here.

She wanted him.

"I don't want to disrespect you in any way," he said, "but if I don't have you right now, my Christmas will be absolutely ruined."

Melina chuckled softly. "We can't have that. Not when I hear you've been so good this year."

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She slid her hands to the front of Diego's shirt and unbuttoned it slowly. As his chest became exposed, she forged a trail of kisses from his throat to his abs. Her lips were feather soft and hot, and every inch of him longed to be buried inside her.

Diego shrugged out of the shirt and unzipped the back of Melina's dress. It slid from her slender shoulders, fabric whispering as it pooled at her ankles. The black lace of her undergarments was so dark against her snowy skin, and her hair cascaded to the tops of her breasts like an auburn waterfall.

Melina worked his pants off as Diego concentrated on the fragrant skin in the curve of her neck. Still cinnamon, still rousing his hunger even more. He couldn't remember ever being this famished, this eager to feed his desires.

When he eased her onto the daybed set up in the cabana for guests, Diego took a moment to drink her in. Her cheeks were slightly flushed, her breasts freed from their restraints. Silky legs slithered around his waist, drawing him down.

His hand found her breast, and he brushed a thumb over her nipple until it hardened. His mouth closed over that bud while his other hand explored Melina's ready depths. She shuddered and moaned beneath him.

"Feliz Navidad, Diego."

"I don't think I knew how merry Christmas could be until you walked into my studio."

Diego quickly produced a condom after rustling around in their discarded clothing. He slipped it on,

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crushed his lips to hers, and burrowed his length into her.

Melina's hands tightened on his back, pulled him closer as if she wished to fuse their bodies into one. With each thrust of his hips, each arch of her back, that empty spot inside Diego filled. Filled to overflowing. Filled until he understood what it meant to find his perfect match.

Filled until Diego knew he'd never spend another Christmas without Melina. No matter what it took, he would keep her.

Had she ever felt this alive?

No way.

Melina was quickly becoming drunk on Diego, on a man she had spent mere hours with. She could see, however, how those few hours had been more than enough to show her what kind of love he was capable of giving her. Something passionate and consuming. Something perfect. He'd been knowledgeable about art as they'd walked through the museum. He was obviously a skilled dancer. His family absolutely adored him.

Why shouldn't she?

They climbed a peak together, their bodies moving with a synchronicity she wouldn't have thought possible. When they reached the top—that point where both of them were ready to take the leap—she squeezed her arms around Diego. He let out a husky rumble deep in his throat and that was her undoing.

She jumped.

He followed.

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Melina swore she left her body for a couple seconds as every one of her nerve endings experienced pure bliss. She sighed with total satisfaction and Diego's body draped over hers on the daybed. He didn't move, and she grew concerned that he'd passed out or something.

"Diego?" She ran her fingers through his glorious hair. Soft and thick, she loved the darkness of it against her pale skin.

"Yes, *mi amour?*" He grazed her thigh with his lips, and she immediately wanted him to make love to her again.

"Have you ever felt...*that*...before?"

He shook his head, his lips still pressed to her bare flesh. "No. I never understood the difference between sex and making love. Until right now."

Diego lifted his head and offered her a smile that, had she been standing, would have brought her to her knees.

"Do people actually fall for each other this quickly?" Her heart had been stomped on before by Adam. A tiny voice in her logical brain warned her to be careful.

He pushed to full sitting now, the dim lighting casting shadows over the muscles cut into his chest and arms.

"My family has a saying." He paused, no doubt looking for the best way to say it in English. Cupping her cheek and running a thumb across her lower lip, he said, "Trust the mistletoe."

His lips came down on hers and Melina knew Christmas was the most wonderful time of the year after all.

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About the Author

Christine DePetrillo spends her days teaching children to love reading and writing and her nights writing everything from adult romance, young adult romance, science fiction, to poetry. She fell in love with writing the first time she held a crayon in her hand and realized the blank wall in her bedroom was full of possibilities. Since then, she has been mystified by the magic of words and enjoys playing with them every chance she gets.

Enjoy her current titles available at Amazon [here](#).

Look for the following books coming soon:

SAIL WITH ME, a YA historical romance, writing as Christy Major

A LESS PERFECT UNION, a political thriller, co-authoring as Goodwin Reed

MORE THAN PANCAKES, a contemporary romance, writing as Christine DePetrillo

*For more about Christine and her books, visit www.christinedepetrillo.weebly.com
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Happy Holidays!