

The background of the entire cover is a romantic image of a man and a woman in a close embrace, about to kiss. The man is on the left, shirtless, and the woman is on the right, wearing a dark top. The background is a deep red color. Overlaid on this are various festive elements: white snowflakes of different sizes, glowing yellow and orange stars, and thin, swirling golden lines. The overall mood is warm and intimate, with a clear holiday theme.

SAMHAIN publishing

# Pillow Talk

Marie Nicole Ryan

*Holiday eBook Freebie*

Dear Reader,

If you enjoyed meeting fun-loving Alex MacGregor, the younger FBI agent, in *Holding Her Own*, I hope you'll enjoy this little interlude with him and a damsel in much distress.

No one should have to spend New Year's Eve all alone. Now really!

Happy Holidays,

Marie-Nicole Ryan

Pillow Talk

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Stranded in Music City on New Year's Eve? Make no mistake about it—it sucked. What a colossal joke. While Alex drank two cups of coffee and waited for his flight out of Nashville International Airport, a freakish-for-Nashville winter snow storm—Canadian Clipper the weather guy called it—dumped a foot of the miserable white stuff.

All flights cancelled. All hotels full...except for this one dump where he'd finally found a room.

Granted his experience in the city was limited to the last six hours—three hours in the airport and the three hellish hours it took for the cabbie to go from the airport to a low-rent motel on Murfreesboro Road that smelled of stale cigarettes and illicit sex. Limited experience or not—Nash-vile still sucked.

Sucked a big one, indeed.

Don't get him started on Tennessee drivers. Hadn't any of them ever seen snow before? Didn't drive like it.

And now the people in the next room were celebrating the end of the year by fucking their brains out. The headboard banging was incessant and judging by the woman's unwavering crescendo, it had to end soon.

Not soon enough.

He snatched the remote from the scarred bedside table and hit the power button. A quick channel surf. Nothing but basic cable. Geez, a dump like this should have some porn, at the very least.

Of course all he had to do was listen to the couple next door and he could have as many vicarious thrills a guy could want. Take matters in hand, so-to-speak.

*Lck.*

If the airport hadn't misplaced one of his bags, he could've at least listened to his iPod and drowned out the noise.

Here he was, late for his next assignment, Chicago's local Bureau office, sitting on a bedspread more than likely imbued with an unimaginable number of body fluids. Good thing he didn't have Luminal or a black light. Whole damned room would probably fluoresce.

Oh, hell. Couldn't hurt him, could it? If he didn't know for sure.

A door slammed. On the side opposite his room.

Great. Now he'd have another New Year's Eve reveling couple.

Fun and games for all.

Except for one lonely FBI agent. Hell, he should have *loser* tattooed on his forehead.

He waited, listening for the new arrivals to go at it.

Think about something else.

Wonder what Jake and Kate were doing tonight? Probably all warm and cozy in front of the fire in Kate's Georgetown house. She was about ready to pop out their baby any time now.

Looking forward to being the godfather, yes, he was.

They were one lucky couple. The life of an FBI agent didn't always lend itself to happy marriages. But if any couple could make it work, Jake and Kate LeFevre could.

####

Bettina slammed the door, locked, it and slid the flimsy latch and chain into place.

And looked around.

What a dump. A faded bedspread covered the bed. The carpet underfoot was as green and crunchy as Astro Turf. Glued to concrete. No cushion. The motel chain must've purchased it at an everything-must-go sale about five years before she was born.

Someone had been over generous with eau de Lysol. Maybe that was a good thing. Or maybe it was to hide the smell of something really, really bad.

She tossed her overnight bag onto the bed. She'd barely managed to get away with a change of clothes and undies. Fled out the back door just in time before Rod came storming through the front.

Luckily she'd seen this night coming and had already packed her bag a week ago and hid some traveling money in the liner.

As soon as the roads were cleared, Music City would see her backside. She'd run as far as the money could take her. Get a job. Anything would do, then move on again before he could find her.

She shivered and tiptoed over to the heating unit under the window and turned up the thermostat.

Nothing but cold air. And next to the heater, the carpet squished. She bent down and looked at the bottom of the HVAC unit. A small, but steady, steam of cold water was leaking from underneath.

Great. Just freaking great.

Shivering from the cold or maybe from the adrenaline rush following her successful escape, she called the motel office.

"Sorry, Miss Smithson. Can't get any one to come round until first thing day after t'morrow. It's a holiday, or didn't you know?"

"But it's dripping. I can't stay in this room. It's cold and wet. Don't you understand?"

"Don't change the facts. You got the last room, lady. It's that one or nothing."

She thanked him for *nothing*. Damn. Better change into her pjs and get under the God-she-hoped-it was-clean bedspread. With all the moisture, there was bound to be mold growing up to the ceiling by morning. Well, maybe not that high.

She opened her bag and ran her hands through scraps of material.

What?

No.

Her pjs and change of clothes were cut to shreds. And her white granny panties, too.

*Wait. The money. The money.*

*Nooooo!*

Instead of money in the liner, she found a handwritten note.

"Dream on, bitch. See how far you get on this."

A wail erupted from her throat; her shoulders shook and she broke into sobs. Hiccups wracked her body whenever she tried to catch her breath.

Then came the banging on the door.

Oh no. Had he found her already? Bile rose in the back of her throat. What had the bastard done: fitted her car with some kind of homing device? Wouldn't put it past him.

Cautiously she edged over to the window and peered through the tattered draperies. Actually draperies was too fine a word for the limp, cheap polyester fabric hanging there. She heaved a sigh of relief. It wasn't scumbag Rod. But it was someone. One of his PI pals maybe?

"W-who is it?" Her heart beat fast as the wings of a baby bird about to leave the nest for the first time. Not a bad simile since she was definitely a bird in flight.

"Room next door. Heard you crying. Everything okay in there?"

She opened the door a crack, but kept the brass chain engaged, just in case sneaky-ass Rod had put someone up to knocking on her door while he stood back ready to pounce.

All she saw was a tall, blond guy with a concerned expression on his very handsome face.

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

*Ma'am*. He actually called her "ma'am". His tone was kind as he stared down at her. And he was very, very hot. As in Josh Duhamel hot.

"N-no—I mean, yes, I'm okay."

"But I heard you crying. Can I help?"

She tried to sniff back the tears, but wasn't entirely successful. "I'm cold and they won't fix

the heat. And water's leaking all over the place. I have the last room..." She snubbed back the tears. "Cause it's a holiday and they don't have any more. And my bag—he cut up my clothes and stole all my money."

"Your husband?" He turned and gazed out at the parking lot.

"Boyfriend, but that's a gross exaggeration."

"Pimp?"

"*Pimp!* Do I look like a hooker? Don't answer that. No. He's a control freak of a PI who's stalking me. I ran away."

"Look. I've a double room, and plenty of heat—" He stopped and cleared his throat. "I mean the heater works just fine...if you want to spend the night. Folks are on the other side are pretty noisy—don't know how much sleep you'll get, but you can sleep in one of my T-shirts and a pair of sweat pants."

*Right. Jump out of the frying and into the fire. Escape one loser and trade him for another?* At least he was a thoughtful loser. She rubbed the chill bumps on her upper arms.

It was so damn cold. "Okay, but I'm warning you. No funny business."

A grin spread across his all-American-boy face. "No, ma'am. No funny business."

Hell, at least he was polite, not that she was old enough, by any stretch of the imagination, for him to 'ma'am'.

"All right, Galahad." Besides if he got a little too frisky, she'd stun him with the Taser she kept in her purse. And tonight she would definitely tuck that sucker under her pillow.

"Alex. Alex MacGregor."

"Like James. James Bond?"

He shot her a boyish grin and shrugged. "Sort of."

"Okay Double-O Seven it is then." She thrust her hand forward. "I-I'm Bette...Smithson."

His hand was large, well-shaped, with long fingers. And warm. Goodness. Touching him was like sticking her hand into a furnace.

Forgetting where she was, she stared into his blue eyes and lost herself in their cerulean depths.

"Shall I—uh, take your things for you?"

"Oh! Sorry." Her cheeks heated. She jerked back her hand and rubbed it to cover her embarrassment. *I am such a dunce.*

###

Alex grabbed Bette's, if that was really her name, bag and zipped it. "I'm right here." He nodded to the right. "202."

He followed her out the door, closed it, and assessed the woman he was about to spend New Year's Eve with. After all he was a guy...a horny one, too.

She wore a pair of jeans, some ugly brown suede boots and a heavy sweater along with a denim jacket lined in fake sheepskin. Thin, about his age, her dark head barely came to his shoulder. Her complexion was tanned, even in the winter, so either she was a tanning bed fanatic or it was genetic. Her brown eyes were so dark he could barely make out the pupils. Maybe Italian or Hispanic, but without any trace of a foreign accent. Barest hints of north Jersey, but she'd apparently worked hard to conceal her origins.

And his trained eye didn't miss the yellow-green stain of a four- to five-day-old bruise along the side of her cheekbone. Certainly couldn't blame her for ducking out. Angry controlling men were pretty much a waste of skin. Sooner or later someone died.

He reached around and opened the door for her. "Can't vouch for how clean the beds are, but take your pick."

She chose the one farthest from the door. Good choice. It placed him between her and whoever might be following her. She trusted him. For once she was right, but she'd probably made other bad choices. Or she wouldn't be in this situation.

She sat on the bed, her features tense and controlled. But her eyes gave her away.

They shone with unshed tears. She let out a loud sniff, then reached around and unzipped her bag, pawed through the shredded clothes, took a deep breath, as if summoning all her gumption.

She glanced around the room. "Is there a wastebasket?"

"There." He gestured toward the dresser. "You know, if the planes are cleared for takeoff tomorrow, I'll be out of here. You can keep the room." He dug in his pocket and pulled out his wallet. "But you're going to need some money to get the hell out of Dodge and make a new start."

With an expression as appalled as if he'd offered to pay for sex, she held up her hands, warning him back. "No, I can't take your money."

He counted out four hundred dollar bills. "I'm not rich, but my expenses are few. Besides, I can always use plastic." He handed them to her with a smile. "Take it. Consider it a late Christmas present."

Her gaze darted from the money to him and back to the money. Clearly she was torn. "But you don't know me. This could be a scam."

"The bruise on your cheek doesn't say *scam* to me. You need help...and that's kind of my line of work."

"Right, Double-O." She raised her hand and held it like a gun, fired, then blew the smoke away from her finger.

He tried to drag his gaze from her full mouth. "Are you hungry? Had anything to eat today?"

She snorted. "What? You're going to take me out to dinner? First of all the roads are terrible, and there's no place I'd care to eat along this stretch of road."

"Okay... no going out." He shrugged. "I had coffee at the airport, but there are vending machines around the corner...somewhere."

She shook her head. "I'm not really hungry. And I don't think my stomach could handle a dinner of peanuts and Diet Coke."

The headboard banging next door started up again. "I warned you. They're a little noisy."

Her cheeks pinked up a bit. "Sounds like someone's having more fun than either of us."

"There's not much on TV, just basic cable."

She sat tentatively on the bed and swung her feet like a little girl admiring new shoes. "Let's see. We have a choice between Dick Clark's Rockin' New Year's Eve or the porn channel next door. Freaking great." She screwed her face into a frown and lay back against the headboard, then sent him a questioning look. "Too bad you're missing out on New Year's with your family. I hope they understand about the weather."

"Was there a question in there?" He grinned, then sat on the side of the bed and rested his ankle on the opposite knee. "What you really want to know is if I have a girlfriend, right?"

Bette gave a tiny shrug. "Just curious. Have to admit, I'd be surprised if you didn't. You're not wearing a wedding ring. Of course, you're so good looking, you could be gay."

Cool. She thought he was good looking, but— Alex straightened up. "Do I look gay? Or is it just because I haven't already tried to jump your bones?"

"Well, most guys would try to take advantage of the situation. Two ships passing in the night. Who would know or care?" Her tone deepened with an air of cynicism.

He schooled his features into his sincerest expression. "I have a sister. I'd like to think someone would treat her right in the same circumstance."

Her expression softened with the barest hint of a smile. "Where's this sister live?"

"Upstate New York in the Finger Lakes. What about you?"

"New Jersey originally."

Ah ha. He was right. He leaned back on the bed. "What do you do when you're not on the run from your boyfriend?"

"He's *not* my boyfriend!" she said with a huff. "Believe it or not, I was an interior design assistant. Went to night school and was working for a local firm. I loved it, and before I met Rod

the Creep, I was saving money to finish my Bachelor's degree. The owner of the design studio liked me, and she was going to help me with working out my schedule and my classes."

"And then you met Rod."

"Yeah, one of my friends and I went out to the Cannery—that's a local club—one night to hear this band. And there he was. I only went out with him a couple of times. Right away, he tried to intimidate me. He followed me to school and work. Came around to the design studio and was such an absolute nuisance my boss let me go. She was nice enough to take me down to police headquarters to file a restraining order, but said I couldn't come back until I got rid of him. I don't blame her. She has the safety of her clients to think about."

She let out an aggrieved groan. "I *tried* to get rid of him, but he wouldn't take 'no' for an answer."

She brushed back her dark bangs. "I don't know how I got into such a mess. I don't fit the profile. Not really."

His ears perked at the word 'profile'. "What do you mean?"

She sat up straight, her small hands clenched at her side. "I didn't come from an abusive family. No one ever treated me like that before. It's not like it's a pattern with me. Once I finally figured out he wasn't ever going to leave me alone, I moved. Then he got me kicked out of my new apartment. And once you're in a situation like this, it's hard to see a way out. He's one scary dude and his associates are even scarier."

"What about the restraining order?"

"Fat lot of good that did. He still came over all the time, sat in front of my next place. I guess he broke in and saw I was getting ready to run. The thought that he was actually in my place...going through my things..." She shivered and rubbed her arms. "By the time I reported him for violating the RTO, the police said they couldn't find him. I think since he used to be a cop, they let him slide."

"When did you get the bruise?"

"Last weekend. I went out with some friends. He was waiting when I left the club. And he grabbed my arm and—"

"He hit you." It wasn't a question. He'd seen too many battered women in his career. Anger flashed through him. What he wouldn't give to teach the bastard a lesson.

"Actually he didn't hit me. I jerked away and Miss Grace here..." She held her hands to her chest. "Miss Grace—that would be me—stumbled and smacked her face into the fender of a Honda Civic Prius." Her hand went to her bruised cheek, as if she could still feel the pain.

That was another lie he'd heard too many times. At least *her* explanation was more entertaining than the usual 'walked into a door'.

"Right," he drawled. "I want to help you get as far away from Nashville as possible." Where could she go? Wait. An idea dawned. "Know anything about animals?"

"Animals?" Her tone rose with confusion.

"Yeah. You know those furry, four-legged creatures that like to snuggle and chew up your favorite shoes."

She shook her head slowly, her brow furrowed in a frown. "Dogs...when I was a kid. Where're you going with this?"

"My sister—she's a vet. She always needs help either in the front office or in the back."

"You want to dump me and all my problems on your sister? You don't like her for some reason? She peed in your Captain Crunch when you were kids? What?"

He laughed. "I'm a better judge of character than you might think. Just consider it. Do you have any connection to that part of New York? He'll never find you as long as you don't tell anyone here where you're going."

She rolled her eyes and shot him a smirk. "Hey, I've read this story at least a dozen times. The ex-boyfriend-slash-stalker always finds the woman in jeopardy."

Alex stared her down. No matter what she thought about his plan, it was the best possible

solution. "You can change your name. I can help you with that."

Her brows rose and her gaze widened. "Oh really? Are you some kind of documents forger?"

"Sorry to disappoint you." He grinned and shook his head. "I'm in law enforcement. Federal."

"Well, as tempting as your proposition is, I don't think I'm exactly a candidate for witness protection."

"No, but I can find you a women's shelter program. If you don't want to work for my sister, the shelter will relocate you." He paused a minute to let it sink in. "I'd take you to Canandaigua myself if I weren't on my way to a new assignment." Why was he so ready to help her? Because he'd like to see her again.

The noise next door grew louder and more frenzied. Alex held back a groan. "Reckon they won't be at it much longer." Bad enough to feel like a voyeur, but with a fragile and vulnerable woman in the next bed, the last thing he wanted—or needed—was to make her uncomfortable.

She let out a self-conscious giggle. "Sounds pretty silly, doesn't it...when you're just listening."

"Yeah." Still his gaze crept to her breasts. Round, full and firm.

Dammit. It'd been too long between relationships.

"Pop your eyes back in your head, Double-O," she warned.

"Sorry. I'm guilty of being a man. Can't help it. Look, I'll turn away and you can change in the bathroom. Hey, we can even watch the ball drop on Time Square. No champagne. Best I can do is a bottle of water."

"Not a problem."

He heard her scurry away and the bathroom door open and close...and lock.

Smart gal. She didn't trust him that much. But in other circumstances she'd be a lot of fun to know. Easy to talk to and get along with. Too bad she got picked for stalker bait. Maybe his need to help her was the result of some lingering caveman instinct, but he couldn't just abandon her. That's just the kind of guy he was.

Dammit. She needed his help.

###

Bette quickly changed into Double-O's T-shirt and sweat pants and emerged from the bathroom. His back was still turned toward her. She yanked back the covers and slipped between the cold sheets. For a minute she lay there almost afraid to move. Best of all, there'd been a lull in the activities next door. Thank heavens.

Maybe her new roommate had gone to sleep. Crazy to risk everything and stay in the same room with a strange man. Even if Double-O had called her *ma'am*. "You asleep?" she asked softly, just in case he was.

"No."

She pulled the sheet and blanket up to her chin. "What's it like in—where you said your sister lives?"

"Canandaigua? This time of year, it's cold and there's usually a lot of snow, but they manage to keep the streets clear...unlike *Music City, USA*." He drawled that last bit.

"Canandaigua means 'beautiful place' in the native Seneca language. Spring comes late and fall comes in mid-September. But like its name, it's a beautiful place. There's the lake. And tons of tourists in the summer."

"Sounds nicer than the Jersey farm town where I grew up."

He shifted in the bed. She cut her gaze quickly to see what he was up to. A sigh escaped her. His head was propped on his hand and he was watching her. And yes, the intensity of his gaze sent a sudden shiver up her spine.

"What about your parents?" he asked. "They know what you've had to put up with?"

"No, they're both gone. Died in a house fire five years ago."

"Man, that's tough."

"What about you? Married? You know you really didn't answer earlier," she said, giving him a knowing smile.

"Nope. Kinda cramps my style. I mean if you have a family you might think twice about doing what needs to be done on the job. I do a lot of undercover work. Helps to be unencumbered."

"I can see how it would." Message received, Double-O.

"Take this friend of mine in the Bureau, Jake LeFevre. Went on this deep undercover assignment with a female agent. During the mission, they fell in love and it got complicated fast. He discovered he already had a child, an autistic daughter, one he'd fathered when *he* was a teenager. After the mission was over, he and Kate married. Now they're having a baby of their own, so they had choices to make."

"What did they decide?"

"He hasn't decided yet, but I'm thinking he'll apply for the psychology behavioral unit."

"And the agent who's having the baby?"

"She decided she really didn't have anything else to prove and gave up her career to stay home with his autistic daughter and the rug rat on the way. Don't get me wrong. I've never seen a happier couple. But somehow I think they're the exception to the rule."

"Wow. Relationships screw up everything, don't they?"

"Most of the time. Think you'll ever give it another shot?"

"No way! I've figured out one thing. I don't pick'em very well. Next time..." She shivered. "I don't even want to think about it."

*Unless he's someone like you.*

###

Alex growled and checked the time. Already eleven-thirty. The happy humpers next door were at it again. Damn guy must have lifetime supply of Viagra. He could even hear the woman moaning...pleading.

God. Now his cock was like a brick and it wasn't a piss-hard-on either. He shifted his position on top of the bedspread and made sure he wasn't on full display.

"Thin walls," she said.

"They woke you?"

She shook her head. "Couldn't sleep. Too nervous. I keep thinking what I'll do if he finds me before I can get out of town."

"Look, I'm putting you on the first plane to Buffalo or Rochester. I won't leave you until you're in the air."

She turned to face him. A strip of light from the streets outside streamed through the curtains. Her eyes were shiny. Had she been crying?

"I don't understand why you're being so kind."

Her throat sounded as if it were clogged with tears. "I wasn't always the handsome special agent you see before you. My sister and I grew up rough."

"Oh *really*?"

"Yeah." He nodded, remembering the bad years. "We were in the foster care system. But we lucked out. This couple took us in, eventually adopted us. Educated us. We're one of the success stories."

"What about your biological parents?"

"Dad died in an industrial accident. Mom was already sick with diabetes—she'd had it since she was a kid. She gave us up to the state. She died not too long after they amputated one of her legs."

Here he was telling her things only his federal handlers knew. Not everything, but more

than he ever shared with anyone socially.

Why was it so easy to talk to this particular woman? All right a cute, sexy-as-sin woman. But it was as if he'd known her all his life.

What a crock of sentimental claptrap. Once he put her on a plane to upstate New York, he'd go on his way and never see her again...except every time he went home to see his sister.

"Were your parents happy?" he asked.

The sweetest smile curved her mouth, quickly followed by a hint of sadness in her dark-as-night eyes. "They were childhood sweethearts. They died in a fire, holding hands while they were trying to get out of the house."

"Man. That's awful, but kind of touching, too. At least they were together." He rested his hands behind his head and lay back against the headboard. "So tell me, Jersey, how did you wind up in Nash-vile?"

He hated she was all alone with no one but herself to depend on. Made her too vulnerable to creeps like the one she was running from.

She giggled. "That's cute. Nash-vile. Well, I love country music, so I came down for Fan Fare one summer. Met a guy, of course, and in spite of the heat and humidity, I decided to stay. I really loved Nashville. It's like a small town...that used to be a good thing. Now—not so much."

"From what I've seen so far..." He let out a groan. "I hate it. And country music isn't my cup of tea."

"Oh, what is your cup of tea, Double-O?"

"Hard rock, man. That's my music."

More headboard banging and shrieks next door. *Give it a rest, dude.*

In desperation Alex turned up the volume on the TV, ready to do anything to drown out the sexual Olympics next door. One way to muffle the noise was make some of their own. But that wasn't going to happen—at least not that kind of noise.

Not that he was against an occasional one-night stand, but the time wasn't right. Jersey was in a difficult spot and doing the best she could to get out of it with her hide intact.

"Where's your next assignment?" she asked over the sound of the TV.

"Chicago."

"Short flight from Nashville."

"Provided the flights aren't all *grounded*."

"Wonder how long before flights can be cleared for take off?"

"Depends if it keeps snowing."

She let out a merry giggle. "You know what they always say about Nashville's weather: if you don't like it now, stick around a few minutes, it'll change."

He hit the mute button. Clearly his roommate was in the mood to talk. "They say that, do they?" He levered up on his elbow and faced her.

"Yes, they do. And just in case you've never seen the weather report for Chicago, they have a lot more snow than we do here."

"Yeah, I've heard that about Chicago. And I'm thinking about it right now. But I'm willing to bet Chicago knows how to keep the streets clean."

Another giggle erupted from his new roommate.

"What's so funny?"

"Nashvillians don't know how to drive in the snow either."

"No shit! My cab was nearly struck twice before we made it to—this road—what is it again?"

"Murfreesboro Road."

"Say, if you ex took your money, how'd you pay for the room?"

"I told you he's not my ex! Don't you listen?"

"Sorry." A little sensitive on the issue, wasn't she?

"Well, I had a little cash on me, but the room was more—I think they gouged me because of the snow. I paid the rest with my credit card, but I wasn't going to use it anymore."

Alex sat up and swung his feet off the bed. "You need to cut it up now. You said he's a PI. There's a chance he could use your credit card trail to trace your whereabouts."

Alarm shot across her face. "You think?"

He reached in the bedside table and removed his SIG, ejected and checked the clip, then jammed it back into the butt. Her eyes widened. "Don't worry" he said. "I'm sure I won't need it, but I believe in being prepared."

"I get it—like the Marines."

"No, that would be the Coast guard's motto, but yeah." He stood and walked over to the dresser, retrieved his lap top and opened it.

"What are you going to do? Google him to death?"

He scratched his head and shot her a grin. "Google yes, to death no." What's his last name?"

"Jenkins, Rodney T. Date of birth is October twenty-second, 1975."

Frowning, he entered the demographics and set the search parameters. Funny she should know his middle initial and his DOB if they only had a couple of dates. "How—?"

"I can Google, too." She gave a quick eye roll. "He's a former cop. Got kicked off the force, I found out too late, for stalking his ex-wife."

"You sure know how to pick'em."

"I didn't exactly pick him. More like he picked me."

"Maybe next time, get a dog. Speaking of which, I'm an idiot. I need to call my sister and give her a head's up."

"Well, yeah. That might be nice."

He made the call, listened to his sister's five-minute, half-hearted rant about his tendency to pick up strays—a trait she shared, thank you very much—but over the sounds of partying on her end, she agreed she'd love to have a new office assistant. "Yes, she can type. Knows computers, too." He glanced in Jersey's direction. She gave an affirmative nod. He wished his sister a Happy New Year and closed his cell with a snap.

"You really do know computers?" he asked, hoping he hadn't lied to his sister.

"Yes, I really do." She dope-slapped her forehead. "That's how he knew I was leaving. During one of his visits to the design studio, he bragged he'd hacked my e-mail account. I wasn't sure if he was telling the truth or not, but he seemed damned proud of himself. I changed my passwords—just in case. He must've done it again. And I left so quickly, I didn't even bring it with me."

"Where were you headed...before the snows of hell hit?"

"I was going to make it back home eventually. I have a brother I haven't seen in about six years. He said I could stay with him and his wife until I get back on my feet again."

"So this Rod might be heading to Jersey, as we speak?"

"I guess."

"All the more reason you need to go somewhere else fast."

"Makes sense he'd do something like that." She gave a nervous laugh. "He'd better not tangle with my brother. Rod'll get his ass kicked good and proper. You wouldn't want to fool around with my brother or his...friends."

A shriek and a series of concurrent grunts pierced the air. Alex groaned. "Uh, maybe they'll settle down now and have a glass or two of champagne." He glanced at the red LED numbers on the clock. "Five minutes 'til midnight. Won't be long."

"One can only hope," she said, chewing her full bottom lip. "I—uh, this is completely weird, isn't it? I feel like a peeping Tom...sort of."

He nodded. "Yeah. All the more reason I hate Nash-vile more every second."

"Not much of an introduction to the city's nightlife, is it?"

"God no." He stood and walked over to the dresser, snatched up two bottles of water from the scarred dresser. "Here." He handed her one.

"Goody. We can toast the New Year." Her tone was bright and forced.

Not the worst New Year's, but not the best. He grabbed the remote and channel surfed until he found one with Times Square. Together they watched the ball drop at Times Square. Silently they raised their bottles of water and drank.

"Happy New Year, Jersey."

"You, too, Double-O."

From outside popping sounds erupted. Actually sounded more like gunfire, but given the holiday...

"Fireworks. Won't last too long," she said.

For a good fifteen minutes the fireworks exploded and farted, then finally petered out. Jersey shifted in the bed and pounded her pillow. "I think I'll just try to go to sleep. At least they're quiet for now."

He nodded and turned off the boob tube. "Yeah. I'll check on the outbound flights first thing in the morning." He bounded from the bed and yanked back the curtain. Fat flakes of snow were falling softly, adding to the mess already there. Nothing moved on the road in front of the damned motel.

Not even a snow plow.

"Not looking good."

###

Bette watched his tall well-built body silhouetted against the window. Any other time she wouldn't have kicked him out of bed. She reined in a deep sigh. The man was just too observant. No point in letting him know how much the rutting and sexual high jinx next door had turned her into a seething mass of hormones.

He turned. She quickly averted her gaze. No need to let him know what a lech she was. She snuggled down under the scratchy sheet and fuzzy blanket. "Nite."

"G'night, Jersey. Sleep tight." He lay down on top of the spread and toed off his boots, clearly planning to remain alert for whatever might happen.

"You, too."

Never in her entire life had she felt less like sleeping. Her heart sped along like an out of control race car. But he was too much of a gentleman to take advantage. Honestly what man in his right mind would find a woman interesting with baggage like hers?

Another time. Another place. Damn. Why did she have to run into the most intriguing man she'd met in ages at the lowest point in her life?

###

In spite of a hammering heart and throbbing body parts, Bette must've fallen asleep because she awakened with a start. Something...someone crashed...and it was close.

Her roommate must've heard the sound, too. He sat up and raised a finger to his lips, then eased off the bed and pulled his gun from the bedside table. Moving silently to the door, he held the gun down by his side.

He glanced through the peephole. Frowned. Shook his head. "No one there now." He moved over to the window, then back to the bed and sat. "Someone was there," he said in a low tone. "Fresh footprints in the snow. I'm just going to have a look around. Make sure he's gone."

Bette hugged her body and trembled. "I knew he'd find me. B-but it could just be someone taking refuge from the storm. Couldn't it?"

His broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. "Yeah. Maybe."

In the light filtered by the cheap curtains, she saw his jaw set in a determined jut. "You go in the bathroom and lock the door. I'm going out to see what's going on."

"Lock myself in?" Where did he get off pulling the white-knight-to-the-rescue card? Must be all that Double-O-Seven training.

"Yes. Just *do* it. Don't go all feminist on me. I'm trained to take care of ex-boyfriend, stalker bullies. You're not."

"Fine." She hopped from the bed with a huff and headed to the bathroom. Hesitating a moment before shutting the door, she took a deep breath. God, she hated being helpless.

###

Alex sucked in his breath. Damn, Jersey's breasts were full, but perky. Beaded nipples poked through the T-shirt he'd loaned her for the night. Her hips were slim, almost boyish, but somehow just right.

*Focus!*

As soon as he heard her shut the door and engage the lock, he slipped on his boots and jacket, then opened the door. Da-amn! It was colder than an ice fisher's ass in Canandaigua.

He glanced to his left and saw someone had kicked in the door to Jersey's former room. That was the noise that had awakened them. He stepped inside. Someone had taken a baseball bat to the mirror and lamps before taking off. He checked the john and it was clear as well.

He left the room and closed the door behind him. He'd notify the management so Jersey wouldn't be blamed for the damage. The footsteps led past their room and down the second level walkway toward the stairs, then turned the corner to the vending machines. The snow and ice crunched under his tread. He followed the footprints down to the corner; they led down to the ground level where they faded from view.

He returned to their room and locked the door, then tapped on the bathroom door. "All clear."

"You're not just saying that?" Her voice was muffled behind the door.

"No, ma'am. Agents don't lie unless they're trying to get the truth out of a suspect."

A pop of the lock. The door opened slowly.

"See. It's just me. Scouts honor." He even held up his hand in the Boy Scout salute.

"Just you...and looking better than any man has a right to." She finished that last bit with a low mumble of words.

"What? No *thank you, agent MacGregor, for saving my ungrateful hide?*" he mimicked in a falsetto. "No kisses for the conquering hero?"

She drew up to her full five foot whatever and set her hands on her hips. "I'll have you know kisses are only for heroes with serious boo-boos. You appear unscathed even to my sleepy eyes."

"Yes, I admit I'm unhurt," he paused for effect, "all due to my skill as a government agent."

She shot him a satisfied grin. What did she have to be so satisfied about? He was the one who'd braved the cold and unknown dangers, not to mention being stranded in Nash-vile.

"Thank you, Al—I mean, Double-O."

"Belated as your appreciation is, I still accept it as my just dues." As much as he liked flirting with her, they both needed some sleep—she did anyway—he was used to going long hours without sleep. "Now go back to bed and get some sleep."

She batted inky black lashes. "Yes, Double-O. I surely will." Her tone was pure Southern belle with only a tiny hint of Jersey.

###

Sometime after three he heard the snow plow. He straightened up in bed and listened again. Yes, it was. Quietly, to keep from waking Jersey, he slid from his bed and padded barefoot across the rough carpet to the window and peeked outside. The snow had stopped. Two plows, one heading north and one heading south were meeting on Murfreesboro Road. Maybe they *would* get out in the morning.

He pulled out his cell and punched in the number for the Southwest Airlines. "Status of

outbound flights this morning?”

“Flights will be permitted to leave on a case by case basis,” the Southwest agent told him, but recommended coming early. Alex confirmed his flight to Chicago and another to Buffalo.

Buffalo was somewhat iffier, but the agent took the reservation. If the Buffalo flight left on time, it would leave before his flight at eight forty-five. He thanked the agent and disconnected. He frowned and cast a worried glance over at Jersey. Good, she was still asleep. He’d let her sleep until five.

Just because her stalker had given up, it didn’t mean the bastard wouldn’t show up at the last minute and foul up their departures.

As for transportation, they’d be better off hiring a car and driver instead of taking a chance on a cab’s not showing up.

He made the call—okay it took several calls and more money than he’d imagined it would, but he finally found a car service willing to haul their asses to the airport at five in the morning.

The adrenaline rush had just about petered out, but he wouldn’t be caught off guard again. He stared into the dim light of the room. At least Jersey could sleep. She had a long day ahead of her tomorrow—no, today.

Maybe he’d even take some time off in a couple of months to see how his sister and Jersey were getting along. Make sure the ex-boyfriend-slash-stalker hadn’t shown his ugly face in Canandaigua. Of course he could call—and he would—and seeing Jersey again, once she was settled, was something he’d look forward to.

###

Alex showered and shaved, then woke Jersey at five.

“What?” she mumbled, rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “It’s still dark.” She pulled the pillow over her head.

“Nope, that won’t work with me, missy.” He yanked the pillow from her head. “The car and driver’ll be here in fifteen minutes.”

She groaned, then muttered a flow of unintelligible words but still she scrambled from the bed, picked up the clothes she’d worn the night before and escaped into the shower.

Five minute later she emerged, dressed, but with wet hair and a face free of makeup. “You could’ve given me a little more warning. There’s no hair dryer.”

“No hair dryer. Sorry. Didn’t know I’d be entertaining.”

She dug in her bag, pulled out a stocking cap, twisted up her hair and stuffed it inside the cap. “I’ll get a cold and it’ll be your fault.”

“My sister makes a great chicken soup.” He stopped and chuckled. “No, I can’t do that to you. She’s strictly chicken noodle straight from the can. She has a lot of wonderful qualities, but the cooking gene isn’t one of them.”

“Why am I not surprised? Maybe it was something in the way you said ‘chicken soup’ and laughed your ass off.”

Outside a horn tooted.

“Okay that’s the car. He took a deep breath. “Ready””

“As I’ll ever be.”

Seconds later he heard by a sharp rap at the door. The driver was Indian or Pakistani, his skin slightly swarthy, but his eyes were clear and he appeared up to the challenge of Nash-vile streets. He introduced himself as Patel.

“Any problems? See anyone?” When making the reservation, Alex had warned he’d need a driver capable of fancy maneuvers if the occasion called for it.

“No sir. None at all.”

Patel’s excited tone clearly said he was looking forward to an adventure.

Great—a cowboy.

###

Bette slid into the most elegant Hummer she'd ever seen, Alex scooted over next to her. "Don't forget your belt," he cautioned. The driver shut the door behind them and Alex turned. "Patel, how are the streets?"

"Murfreesboro Road has a single lane clear on each side. Should be okay. At least it stopped snowing, sir. I will get you to the airport in plenty of time." The charming musical cadence of his Indian accent capped off what had been a restless night. Although she'd managed to sleep, she doubted her secret agent man had.

Just starting to relax. The driver deftly negotiated the icy parking lot, then eased onto the main road. The tree branches were laden with just enough snow that they looked like sugar frosted candy. No traffic. The Hummer was the only vehicle on the road.

"Are we the only ones crazy enough to be out in this mess?"

"Certainly. This is the best time," the driver announced. "We'll go straight until we hit Donelson Pike. Then we're almost there."

They'd gone about a block. The car was comfy, cozy and most of all warm. If she wasn't careful she'd be tempted to lay her head on Double-O's broad shoulder. She gazed over at him. Honestly the man had the weirdest expression on his face.

Without warning, he pulled down her head and threw his body over hers. She shrieked. Then a hard bump pitched the vehicle slightly sideways.

"That's what I was afraid of. Step on it, Patel!"

"Yes, very quickly, sir." The driver floored the accelerator and the Hummer's tires bit into the pavement and zoomed ahead.

"Describe your ex." His voice was a low rasp.

"He's not my ex! Not really."

"Don't care about that. Just describe him!"

Her cheeks heated with embarrassment. "Okay, he's tall and has a dark pony tail tied back. Drives a red Dodge Ram truck."

"Bingo, sugar."

Her heart hammered. Unable to speak, her breath came out in hoarse squeaks.

"Don't worry. All we have to do is make it to the airport. There's so much security, he and that big mutant with him won't have a chance. No way they can get in there with weapons."

The truck kept coming. Whenever it could get up enough speed it slammed into the Hummer's rear bumper again and again. Other than shaking the living daylights out of the passengers, the Hummer suffered little damage.

"Shall I call the authorities, sir?"

"Not unless it looks like he's going to get the upper hand. Calling in the local LEOs will slow us down."

Alex's confidence buoyed Bette's. Her stomach growled. "Guess McDonald's drive-through is out of the question."

"You'd be right about that." Come to think of it, his stomach was reading empty, too. "Quit complaining. There'll be food at the airport."

Her stomach growled louder. "There damned well better be."

###

In spite of several more annoying bumps and near crashes, Bette and Alex made it made it to the airport. When he helped her alight from the Hummer at the Southwest check-in point, there was even some time to spare. Rod and his big hulking henchman were just smart enough to realize airport security would take them into custody if they tried anything. She let out a deep sigh when the Dodge Ram drove slowly by. The stalker and his minion must've left the airport grounds because they didn't circle back around. Double-O showed his Bureau ID and followed her inside where it was a hell of a lot warmer.

###

Too soon, it was time to go.

Alex towered over her. She gazed up at him, bit her lips and did her best not to cry. "Thank you for everything."

He ruffled her hair, his blue-eyed gaze fixed on her. "See if you can stay out of trouble up there in Canandaigua. It's a quiet little town, especially in the winter. You and my sister should get along fine."

"Well, if she's anything like you, we will." Her cheeks heated up and burned under his close scrutiny. Dammit. Why did he have to be such a damned hunk? And so nice.

"Well, I guess I'd better board. Don't want to miss my flight—not after all the trouble you took to get me on it." Hands shaking, she reached for her bag and cleared her throat. "Thank you. I'll pay you back for everything. I really will."

"Here's an idea. Open yourself a savings account...and when I get up to the Finger Lakes, we'll settle up. Okay?"

"Okay. And good luck on your new assignment. They say Chicago's a great city."

He laughed. "Tell that to someone who hasn't seen the weather report."

She turned toward the jetway, then back. A strange sense of loss swept over her. Her chin started to tremble.

Dammit. She'd known him less than twenty-four hours but honestly it felt more like she was saying good-bye to her best friend. She sucked in a deep breath and tried to swallow the apple-sized lump in her throat. Her eyes stung with tears.

*Just don't cry. Save it for the flight.*

And overhead the PA system announced, "Last call for flight 204 to Buffalo."

"That's it." She blinked rapidly. "I really have to go."

Without warning, Alex pulled her into his arms and kissed her right on the lips. Kissed her hard. And a lot longer than a mere it's-been-nice-getting-to-know-you kind of kiss. Her body relaxed, not to say she was weak-kneed, but it was a close call. She wrapped her arms around his neck and went for it, pressing her body against his long enough to regain her sense of equilibrium.

And it was over. "Take care, Jersey," he said. "And tell my sister, 'Hi', for me." A wide grin was plastered across his boy-next-door face. "I'll be seeing you...soon."

In shock she blinked and raised her hand to her lips. They still tingled. After a second, she snapped out of it. "Yeah. That sounds like a plan."

He'd be seeing her soon? Hot damn!

She nodded and ran for the jetway. Was she crazy? Running away to a town she'd never heard of, to a job she had no experience in, to work for a woman who'd never heard of her until last night. All at the suggestion of the man with whom she'd shared a single night of pillow talk.

Maybe she was crazy. But crazy had never felt so good.

The End—not very likely.

## **Author Biography**

Marie-Nicole Ryan is a former professional student. She studied nursing and worked in that field for a very long time. She also studied and graduated with a degree in interior design which she seldom puts to use. Actually she really prefers the isolation involved in being a writer. She writes romantic suspense and mystery/suspense. And if you think this short story could lead to a full-length book, you might be right.

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