

CHRISTMAS

IN

HIGH

HEELS

by

Gemma Halliday

“Maddie, what is that?” a deep voice asked behind me.

I looked up at the green sprig I was currently pinning to the ceiling of my boyfriend’s living room.

“Mistletoe.”

“Mistletoe?”

“Yeah, you know, you’re supposed to kiss under it.”

I felt a pair of large, warm hands at my waist as I strained forward on my stepladder. “I know what it’s for. I just don’t get why you’re risking life and limb to stick it to my ceiling. Whoa, careful,” he added, grabbing my hips as I teetered to the left.

“Use your imagination, big guy,” I responded, stepping down to face him.

“Hmmm.” He looked up. We were standing directly underneath the green sprig. “Good point.”

He leaned in close, his warm breath hitting my lips just a second before his mouth did. He tasted like coffee and the rocky road ice cream we’d had for dessert. Yum. I kissed him back. Hard. With tongue.

“So,” he said when we finally came up for air. “What’s on the agenda tonight?”

I nipped at his lower lip. "Use your imagination, big guy," I repeated with a grin.

Tonight was Christmas Eve. Our first together. Not that it was the first Christmas Eve that had passed since we'd started dating, but it was the first one we'd spent *together*. In fact, it was the first holiday of any kind that we'd really spent together.

Jack Ramirez was tall, dark, and handsome with a capital H-O-T. He was also a homicide detective with a captain who tended to call at all the wrong times. Like on my birthday when our opera tickets had gone to waste over a double homicide in the West Hills. And last Valentine's Day when he'd made reservations at this romantic, little Italian bistro with drippy candles and everything. Then had to cancel when some stockbroker got hopped up on one too many triple lattes and shot his partner in their office downtown. And then there was Halloween. My best friend, Dana, had thrown this huge costume party, and Ramirez and I were supposed to go as two-person horse. An outfit that doesn't work so well when the front half gets called to a triple homicide near the airport.

So, when Ramirez had sworn on his grandmother's grave that his captain was not only *not* calling him in this Christmas but was also in Vancouver visiting his mother, I immediately made the agenda for our evening. Ramirez, me, and a nice romantic evening at home. Quiet. Alone.

Possibly even naked.

And from the look in Ramirez's eyes, I'd say he was totally on board with that plan.

He leaned in close again, doing a sort of deep growl thing in the back of his throat, before his hands snaked up my sides, pulling me taut against a six-pack Budweiser would kill for.

I planted my lips squarely on his, nibbling again until we both started panting like Dobermans.

But just as his fingers began flirting with the button fly of my jeans, the “William Tell Overture” rang out from my purse.

Ramirez groaned.

“Hold that thought,” I told him, quickly locating the offending cell and hitting the on button.

“Hello?”

“Merry Christmas, Maddie,” my mom’s voice sang out from the other end.

“And Happy Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, Ramadan, and Yule, too!” I heard Faux Dad (as I’d affectionately dubbed my stepfather) add in the background.

“Thanks, same to you guys, too.”

“We’re heading to your cousin Molly’s right now,” Mom said. “Are you there yet?”

“Uh, no.” I glanced across the room to where Ramirez was folding up the stepladder, while conspicuously standing just beneath my mistletoe. “We’re actually staying in tonight.”

There was a pause. Then Mom’s voice rose two octaves. “What do you mean *staying in* tonight? Don’t you know it’s Christmas Eve?!”

“Yes...” I hedged.

“A holiday.”

“Yes...”

"A day for spending with family."

"Mom, I swear I will be at your house for turkey dinner tomorrow. But, Ramirez and I wanted to spend our first Christmas Eve together with just a nice, romantic, quiet evening at home."

"I never promised to be quiet," Ramirez teased, grabbing my butt as he walked past with the ladder.

I gave him a playful swat.

"All right," Mom said with a long-suffering sigh that only those who have given birth can master. "Spend the evening at home. You can catch up with us at Midnight Mass with your grandmother."

"Um, actually..."

"Don't say it, Maddie," Mom warned.

"Well, I kinda..."

"If you love me at all, don't tell me you're not going to Midnight Mass with your grandmother."

I bit my lip. "Okay. I won't say it."

Expectant silence hung on the other end.

"Maddie, how could you!" Mom screeched.

I pulled the phone away from my ear.

"I'm sorry?" I said. Though it came out more as a question.

"Your grandmother is Irish Catholic. Your grandmother lives for the church. Christmas Eve is maybe the most important day in the church. I just know you would not make your own mother, who loved you through every scraped knee and over-pierced adolescent boyfriend, tell your grandmother that you're not

coming to Midnight Mass on Christmas Eve because you're having a quiet evening at home!"

I bit my lip again. Then said, "No, I wouldn't."

Mom let out a sigh.

Then I added. "Make Faux Dad do it."

"Maddie..." she warned.

"Loveyou,MerryChristmas,you'rethebest," I slurred together and quickly hung up the phone.

Then dropped it in my purse again as if it were a time bomb waiting to go off.

Yes, I know it was mean to leave Mom alone with Grandma. But I was pretty sure that I had years of dealing with my own mother's eccentricities left, so it was only right to let her do her time with hers.

"Did she blow up?" Ramirez came up behind me, wrapping both arms around my middle.

"Like a hurricane on a trailer park."

"She'll get over it."

"Maybe. Or maybe she'll poison the cranberry sauce tomorrow night."

"Still worth it," he mumbled, his lips nuzzling against my neck. His hands slid down to frame my hips, his mouth nibbling just at my pulse.

I sighed. Yes. Yes, it was.

"Hey," I said. "I got you a present. Wanna open it?"

"Now?" His hands moved upward, cupping my bra, as his lips gave way to teeth, doing tiny little nips along my throat.

I giggled. "Yes, now. Trust me, you're going to like it."

I wriggled away, grabbing a bright green package from beneath our little Christmas tree in the corner. And, I was pleased to notice as I settled onto the sofa with it, Ramirez had a box of his own in his hands.

“Is that for me?” I asked, looking at the red, candy-cane striped paper.

He nodded. “Uh huh. Here, you open first.”

I wasn't a girl who had to be told twice.

I took the box and shook it. “What is it? Jewelry? Candy? Shoes?”

His eyes twinkled mischievously. “Open it.”

I tore into the paper with gusto, ripping the red wrapping off to reveal a plain white box beneath. I lifted the lid, pushing aside some very pretty pink tissue paper, and came out with...

“What is this?” I asked.

I held up a scrap (and I do mean *scrap*) of bright red fabric.

“Lingerie.” Ramirez grinned at me, obviously pleased with himself.

Me - I frowned, holding the red lace up to my torso. “A lace teddy?”

He nodded, the grin growing.

I dropped the fabric back into the box. “You got me *lingerie* for Christmas?”

His grin faltered. “Yeah...”

“That is a terrible present to give your girlfriend.”

“Why?”

“Because, it's not for *me*, it's for *you!*”

He gave me a blank look.

“You do realize that we girls don't go prancing around the house in little lace teddies when we're home all alone, right?”

Ramirez's wicked grin returned. "You'd look pretty damned cute prancing around in that," he said.

I gave him a playful swat on the arm. "You are so bad."

"Yeah, but you love me that way," he said, drawing me in for a warm, wet kiss.

He was right. I did kinda.

Especially when his hands slipped inside my shirt and began fumbling with the clasp on my bra. Despite the fact he'd given me such lame present, I was just about to help him out when the doorbell rang.

Ramirez groaned again.

And I thought a really dirty word.

"If that's my mother..." I trailed off, leaving the threat hanging as I stalked to the door.

Only, I threw it open to find Dana, standing there. Or, more accurately, teetering there, in a pair of six inch heels that looked like they were bordering on stilts.

"Merry Christmas, Maddie!" She said, throwing both arms around me in a big hug. That turned into a stumble as she tripped on one heel.

"What are you wearing?" I asked.

"What?"

She looked down. The heels were red with little green holly leaves all over them. Which matched her green mini-skirt with little red holly leaves. Which matched her red leather bustier and green earrings shaped like, you guessed it, holly leaves.

"I'm in the holiday spirit," Dana responded.

I took a step back. "It smells like you've been drinking some holiday spirits."

She giggled, stepping into the living room and giving Ramirez a wave.

"You bet I have! Ricky and I just came from his after party." Dana gestured behind her to a gorgeous guy in a velvet Santa hat at the wheel of a convertible parked at the curb. Ricky was Dana's boyfriend, who currently made his living as an actor on a highly rated primetime soap. I waved. He waved back.

"What after party?" I asked.

"A Christmas Carol. Down at the Civic Center. Ricky played Bob Cratchet. He was so sexy."

A sexy Bob Cratchet. Only in Hollywood.

"Anyway," she went on, "we're on our way to the big Sunset Studios bash. You guys want to come?"

I looked behind me to Ramirez. He'd shoved the gifts aside and was searching the sofa cushions for the TV remote.

"Actually... well, we were going to spend a quiet, romantic evening at home."

"Oh, come on," Dana said, flipping her strawberry blonde hair over one shoulder. "You can do that anytime. It's Christmas Eve, Maddie. There are rockin' parties happening all over Hollywood. You can *not* spend the evening at home."

"But it's our first Christmas Eve together."

"Oh, ours too!" Dana said, clapping her hands with glee. "All the more reason to come out party hopping with us. I swear you'll have a blast."

I glanced over my shoulder. Ramirez had flipped the TV on to some football game. If I didn't act now, I was afraid I'd lose him altogether to the pigskin gods.

"Thanks, but I think we're going to decline this time. You two go have fun, though. And tell Ricky 'happy first Christmas together,' from me."

Dana did a little pout. But, considering she had about a bazillion more bowls of eggnog punch to sample, she finally gave in. "Okay, fine. Well, enjoy your quiet evening at home. But don't come running to me in the morning if you get coal in your party pooping stockings," she called over her shoulder as she skipped out the door to join Ricky in his convertible.

I waved as they pulled away from the curb, then shut the door behind her.

"I thought she'd never give up," Ramirez mumbled from the sofa.

"You and me both."

I crossed the room, snuggling up next to him.

"Mmmm," he growled in approval, one hand curling around my shoulders.

"Where were we?"

I lowered my mouth slowly over his, sampling his lower lip. "Right about there."

"You know," he mumbled. "I didn't open your gift yet."

I froze. "Oh, well, it can wait. I mean, it's not even really technically Christmas yet."

He shook his head. "No fair. You opened one. I get one, too."

"No, really, it can wait. I mean, it's nothing really, it's just..."

I trailed off as Ramirez grabbed the package, ripped off the green foil wrapping, and pulled a scrap of red fabric from the box. He stared at it, the corners of his mouth quirking north.

“What’s this?” he asked.

I did a deep sigh. “Lingerie.”

The grin broke out into a full bellied laugh.

“See, I told you it was more a gift for you!” I protested.

“You know what this means, don’t you?” he asked, that wicked twinkle back in his eye.

“What?”

He looped both arms around me, pulling me onto his lap. “Fashion show.”

I grinned. Well, I guess there were worse ways to spend an evening...

I leaned in to kiss him.

But never actually got to it as the doorbell rang. Again.

I was seriously contemplating disconnecting the thing.

“Don’t. Move,” I commanded, getting up.

Ramirez did a deep resigned sigh in the back of his throat, reaching again for the remote.

I jumped off the sofa and threw open the door...

Only to be immediately assaulted by the voices of no less than four men standing on the porch.

“...five Prada pumps! Four Gucci bags, three Hermes scarves, two Chanel wraps, and a Dior belt on a leather trench!”

I blinked, my eyes going from one man to the next until they landed on what was clearly their fearless leader. He was dressed in a matching orange scarf and

knit hat set even though it was barely below 60 degrees out. (We don't believe in weather here in L.A. any more than we believe in public transportation.). He held a songbook in one hand and a sprig of holly in the other, rocking onto the toes of his hot pink Converse. Topped with turquoise leg warmers. And hot pink tights.

Marco. The receptionist from Faux Dad's hair salon.

I watched in awe, barely stifling my laughter, as the colorful quartet finished their West Hollywood version of the "Twelve Days of Christmas." They finally ended with a drawn-out falsetto note, then Marco launched himself at me with air kisses.

"Merry Christmas, Mads!" he sang out.

"Same to you," I returned. "All of you," I said, nodding to his merry little band of fashionistas.

"Maddie, I'd like to introduce you to GAYMAS."

"Gaymas?"

He nodded, his heavily lined eyes taking on a serious look. "The Glendale A Cappella Young Men's Activity Squad. What do you think?"

I bit back a giggle. "Very clever."

"Thanks. We've been practicing for months, right fellas?"

The men behind him all nodded.

"We only have one problem," he went on. "We're going caroling down Venice Beach tonight, but Aldo, our tenor, got the flu and we're one short for our big 'Deck the Halls with Diamond Tiaras' finale."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," I said, still struggling to keep a straight face.

"So, we were wondering, I mean, if he's around, if maybe we could borrow your man for the evening?" Marco batted his enviably long eyelashes at me.

"Ramirez?" I choked the word out on a laugh.

Marco nodded. "Pretty please? Just for a couple of hours?"

"Um, I don't know that he's much of a singer." I looked behind me.

Ramirez once again had the TV on, the strains of some sports announcer filling the living room.

"Oh, all he really has to do is the fa-la-la-la-la parts. I'm sure he can manage those," Marco pleaded.

"Well, we actually planned to spend the evening together just the two of us." I said. Not to mention Ramirez was more of an NFL guy than a fa-la-la-la-la guy.

"Oh." Poor Marco's face looked so crestfallen I felt sorry for him despite how ridiculous his plan had been.

"Listen, Dana and Ricky were just here and they're chock full of holiday spirit. Maybe Ricky would be your tenor?" I suggested.

Marco's face brightened some. "You think? Okay, I'll call Dana as soon as we get to Venice. Thanks, Mads. Merry Christmas," he called as he led his merry troupe back down the drive.

As I shut the door, I swore I could hear the first bars of "I'm Dreaming of a White Tie Christmas".

I was still grinning as I settled myself back on the sofa, curling into the crook of Ramirez's arm.

"So... I believe we left off at fashion show," I said, coyly running my finger down his chest.

"Uh huh."

“You, me, Christmas lingerie, your big bed...” My hand trailed lower, flirting with his belt buckle.

“Uh huh.”

“I think that lacey one with the little ribbons might be a good place to start. Maybe you can help me put it on. Or better yet, take it off...” I trailed off, whispering my lips along his neck.

“Uh huh.”

I pulled back. His eyes were glued to the guys in little helmets running across the TV screen.

I put my hands on my hips. “Or maybe I could send you off caroling with Marco and the GAYMAS singers.”

“Uh huh. Sure, babe.”

I threw my hands up. “Did you hear anything I just said?”

Ramirez tore his gaze away from the TV and gave me a blank stare. “What?”

I opened my mouth to tell him I was disconnecting the cable through the rest of football season.

But didn’t get a chance as the doorbell rang.

Yes. Again.

I shut my jaw with a click, mumbling a, “Never mind” as I got up and threw open the front door.

Standing on the front step was my mother’s oldest and dearest friend, Mrs. Rosenblatt.

Mrs. Rosenblatt was a three-hundred pound, five time divorcee, Jewish psychic with Lucille Ball red hair and fluorescent-colored muumuus (currently

dotted with pink poinsettias) who talked to the dead through her spirit guide, Albert. Eccentric didn't even begin to describe Mrs. Rosenblatt.

"Fruitcake," she said, pushing past me into the room.

I blinked. "What?" I asked, thinking she'd read my mind.

She shoved a round, metal tin at me. "I brought you and Ramirez a fruitcake."

"Oh." I took the tin (which weighed at least a ton and a half) and lifted the lid, peeking inside. A round cake dotted with bright red maraschino cherries stared back at me. "Thanks." I think.

"No problem. Sally Slovesky and I baked a whole mess of them for the senior center, but only a few of them old folks ate any. Turns out they're murder on dentures. Go figure." Mrs. R shrugged her massive shoulders. "Anyhoo, your mom called and told me you weren't going to Midnight Mass with your grandmother--"

I rolled my eyes. I was never going to live this one down.

"- and she said you *deserved* one of my fruitcakes for Christmas."

That's it, I was totally inspecting the cranberry sauce tomorrow before eating it.

"Great," I said, trying hard to hide my sarcasm. "That's very... nice of you."

"So," she said, sweeping a glance around the living room. "Where's your menorah?"

"My what?"

"Your Hanukkah menorah? I don't see it."

"Oh, uh... I'm not sure we really have one."

Mrs. Rosenblatt turned on me, her eyes wide above her pudgy cheeks.

“What do you mean you don’t have a menorah? What are your neighbors gonna think?”

I looked to Ramirez for help, but he was either a) deeply engrossed in the game or b) pretending to be deeply engrossed in the game so he didn’t have to deal with Mrs. Rosenblatt.

“Uh, well, we’re not really Jewish, Mrs. Rosenblatt,” I said.

She waved me off, her underarms jiggling with the effort. “Nonsense. This is L.A. You live here longer than three years, you’re Jewish by default. I guess we’ll have to improvise. Where do you keep your candles?”

I blinked at her. “Uh...”

But she didn’t wait for an answer, charging into the kitchen and rummaging through the drawers until she came up with four tapered dining candles, two votives, a citron mosquito repellent candle, and a Glade scented oil light.

“This oughtta do it,” she said, huffing the entire group over to the front window. She arranged them in a line, then proceeded to light two of the tapered candles and plug in the Glade light. Immediately the room started to fill with Tropical Tryst air freshener.

Mrs. Rosenblatt cocked her head to the side. “Not strictly traditional, but I like it.”

“Great.” I wrinkled my nose. “Thanks.”

“Anytime, *bubbee*. Just don’t forget to light that mosquito candle tomorrow night, huh?”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“Now, as much as I’d like to stay and visit with you young folks, I’ve got other stops to make.” She headed for the door, her muumuu swishing around her ankles. “Happy Hanukah, kids.”

“Thanks for the fruitcake,” I said, quickly getting the door for her.

“You betcha. And you just let me know when you’re ready for a New Year’s aura cleansing. It pays to start the year off with a clean slate, karmicly speaking, you know,” she called, as I let the door click shut behind her.

Then locked it.

Then, just for good measure, turned out the porch light.

Praying we were done with visitors for the evening, I made my way back to the sofa.

Where I found Ramirez, slumped in front of the game. His eyes shut, his jaw slack, a soft snoring sound vibrating from his throat.

I felt a deep sigh seep through my limbs. Not exactly the romantic Christmas Eve I’d had planned.

Resigned, I grabbed an afghan from the armrest and covered his sleeping form with it. Then flipped off the TV and dropped a soft peck on his cheek.

“Merry Christmas, Jack,” I whispered. Then tip-toed off to bed.

* * *

Bright sunlight filtered through the curtains, invading my deep, dreamless sleep. I sighed and stretched, rolling over to find Ramirez beside me, still snoring slightly.

I grinned. I couldn’t help it. It was Christmas.

I quietly slipped out of the bed, throwing on a robe as I padded into the kitchen to make coffee. I contemplated the fruitcake for a moment, but, luckily, as the scent of French roast filled the kitchen, I came to my senses and dropped the tin in the trash instead. Never trust a food that's been delivered as punishment. Instead, I took my "I Heart My Cop" mug over to the Christmas tree and flipped on our sparkly red and gold lights. Never mind that I was flirting with thirty, I suddenly felt like a little kid again as I watched the colored lights chase each other around the tree.

"Morning, beautiful." Ramirez's arms went around my waist, snatching me in a warm hug.

"Morning."

"Sleep well?" he asked.

I nodded. "You?"

"Like a baby." He leaned in close, nuzzling my neck. "Sorry I fell asleep on you last night."

"Sorry my friends kept showing up."

"Not really the evening alone you had planned, huh?"

I shrugged. "It doesn't matter." And right then, as I leaned into his warmth, it didn't. So, it hadn't been the picture perfect romantic evening I'd envisioned. But, we had spent it together. That was what mattered.

Hopefully the first of many we'd spend the same way.

I sighed out loud at the pleasant thought.

"What's that?" Ramirez asked.

I followed his gaze to a red envelope shoved under the tree.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I didn't put it there."

I bent down, retrieving it from the floor. On the outside was scrawled both Ramirez's and my names.

"Should we open it?" I asked.

"It is Christmas," he replied.

As I may have mentioned, where gifts are concerned, I don't need to be told twice. I ripped the sucker open and slipped my hand inside... pulling out two airline tickets. To Hawaii. For an entire week's stay.

I felt my breath catch in my throat.

"Whoa," Ramirez said, voicing my sentiment. He grabbed the envelope, looking inside. "There's a hotel voucher in here, too."

"Who's it from?"

Ramirez pulled a little slip of red paper out of the envelope, then smirked, the corner of his mouth tilting upward as he read it. "S. Claus. He says, 'Enjoy your first Christmas alone together with a quiet, romantic vacation just for the two of you.'"

I took the paper, examining it even as I felt my lips curving into a matching smile. I flipped it over, wondering just which one of our visitors last night had slipped this little goodie under our tree.

"Well, what do you think?" Ramirez asked, his eyes twinkling.

"I guess we can't very well disappoint Santa, now can we?" I replied coyly.

"That doesn't sound wise," he agreed.

"Tell you what, you pack and I'll call Mom and tell her we won't be making it for that turkey dinner after all."

"Think she'll be mad?"

I shrugged. "I'm sure by Easter she'll have forgotten all about it."

“Then it’s settled. We’re going to Hawaii.” He leaned in and planted a soft, warm kiss on my lips.

“Hey,” I mumbled. I reached toward the sofa and grabbed our ‘gifts’ from last night. “Don’t forget to pack these.”

His eyes went dark and liquid, his lips twitching into his trademarked wicked grin.

“Trust me, they were the first things on the list.”

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