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MISTLETOE MAGIC

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Mistletoe Magic

Christine Pope



PPB

If Celia never heard her store's overly cheery mix of "holiday highlights" again, it would be too soon. Ditto for the elaborate decorations and unending crush of cranky last-minute shoppers. She risked a quick glance at her wristwatch. Twenty minutes to eight. Damn. She was already overdue for her break by almost half an hour, but at the rate she was going, she'd miss her chance entirely and would have to work straight through until nine. Merry-freaking-Christmas.

A red cashmere sweater was shoved under her nose. "Do you have any of these in an extra-large?"

"If there aren't any left on the table, then no, we don't." She forced a smile as she met her latest customer's gaze. "I'm sorry." Actually, she wasn't all that sorry -- people shopping at the last minute on Christmas Eve deserved what they got, as far as she was concerned -- but retail etiquette demanded at least a façade of concern.

The woman heaved an exasperated sigh. The rhinestone Christmas tree pin on her jacket lapel glittered under the fluorescent lights, but this particular customer's expression was anything but festive. "Can't you call another store to see if they have any?"

Right. The closest store was a half-hour away, and Celia would've bet her holiday overtime that they were as sold out of extra-large red cashmere sweaters as her own store was. The big sizes always got snapped up first. And never mind getting someone to even answer the phone, let alone leaving the sales desk long enough to go check inventory.

A flat denial would not go over well. She hesitated, trying to decide which of several neutral non-answers would get the woman off her back without causing a scene. None of them seemed particularly appealing.

Someone tapped on her shoulder, and she turned. Salvation appeared to have arrived.

"I'll take over from here," said Monica, the lead salesclerk. She'd been on an overdue break of her own, one she must have cut short by at least five minutes. She turned to the woman with the garish Christmas tree pin. "The cashmere sweaters? I'm very sorry, but those are a special-purchase item, and once we're out of stock -- "

Celia didn't bother to stay to hear the rest of the explanation. She gave Monica a grateful nod and ducked out from behind the counter, making a beeline toward the employees' lounge at the back of the store. Since women's clothing was located on the top floor, at least she didn't have to fight for an elevator or dodge the overburdened last-minute shoppers on the escalator.

Coffee. That's what she really needed. So what if it would keep her up past midnight? She already had a date with the DVD player her parents had sent her for her birthday last year and Bill Murray in *Scrooged*. An underrated gem, that one.

Maybe not the world's most exciting Christmas Eve, but with her family two

thousand miles away and her roommates off doing their various things, she didn't have much choice in the matter.

The smell of coffee drifted out of the lounge, and she hastened her pace. Fifteen minutes should be enough for a good, reviving cup. And then only an hour more, and she could be free of this place for a whole day. Thank God the management hadn't jumped on the bandwagon with some other stores and decided to stay open on Christmas Day as well.

She was so intent on heading straight for the coffee maker that she collided with a *thunk!* into something solid. She stumbled, then glanced up as a pair of hands reached out to steady her.

A month and a half on the job had allowed her to recognize most of the other store employees by sight, so she knew she'd never seen him before. She was pretty sure she would have remembered if someone that good-looking was on the staff, even though she'd only been at the store since right before Thanksgiving and still didn't know half of her co-workers' names.

"You might want to slow down a bit," the stranger said, but the crinkles around his hazel eyes told her he wasn't too upset by the collision.

"Sorry," she replied immediately. "Just trying to grab some coffee before I have to get back out on the floor."

He laughed. "I should have known better than to get between a woman and her caffeine."

At that moment, Celia heard an ostentatious throat-clearing, and she turned to see Alan, who worked in electronics, pointing upward toward the ceiling. "You two are both missing something."

The man she'd bumped into looked puzzled, and Celia let her gaze follow Alan's out-thrust finger. Uh-oh.

"Whose brilliant idea was that?" she asked. Seriously, as exhausted and frazzled as they all were by the onslaught of holiday shoppers, who had the time -- or energy -- to mess around with hanging up a sprig of mistletoe in the employee lounge, of all places?

Alan gave an innocent shrug. "I don't know. But it's bad luck to ignore it."

"You made that up," she snapped. Really, she wouldn't put it past him. He was one of those guys who oozed an indefinable essence of sleaze. At least she'd never been asked to work in electronics, and so had managed to avoid him most of the time.

"No, it's true," the stranger put in. Hazel eyes laughed down at her. "I promise I won't bite."

Could this really be happening? Was this man actually expecting her to kiss him under the mistletoe?

Apparently he was. Celia cast about in her mind for some way to beg off without having it sound like a personal rejection but couldn't seem to come up with anything that wouldn't sound unbelievably rude. Besides, it was just a kiss, right? It wasn't as if he expected her to do the horizontal polka on the floor of the lounge.

She would have preferred to not have Alan as an audience, but the lounge was a semi-public place, and he had as much right to be there as she did. Best just to get this over with as quickly as possible. She'd already wasted enough valuable break time as it was.

At least it was a good-looking stranger who'd caught her under the mistletoe, and not Alan. She thanked God for that, right before the unknown man stepped a little closer to her, bent his head downward, and pressed his lips against hers.

It had been awhile since anyone had kissed her, but Celia knew it wasn't just her love life's current drought that made a rush of heat explode outward from her stomach and set every inch of her tingling. For just a few seconds, everything fell away — her tired feet, the worries whether she'd even have this job after the New Year, the strident voices of dissatisfied customers. The only thing in her world right now was the pressure of the stranger's lips against hers. His mouth was firm and warm, and God, she wanted him to keep on kissing her.

Of course he didn't. After a few seconds he straightened, then shot her an awkward little smile. "Now that we've satisfied tradition, you can go ahead with that coffee."

Coffee? Oh, right. That had been the real reason she'd come here in the first place. Affecting a nonchalance she certainly didn't feel, she nodded and went over to the coffee maker, where she made more of a production than was strictly necessary of pouring herself a cup and mixing the creamer and sugar. By the time she was done and had turned back around, the stranger was gone.

Alan, unfortunately, remained. He grinned at her, and she shot him an annoyed glance.

"So who was that guy?" she asked, hoping she didn't sound too casual.

"Him?" Alan jerked a thumb toward the now-closed door to the lounge. "Jason Fielding." He paused, then added in significant tones, "Our regional manager."

~ *** ~

For a working Christmas Eve, things weren't turning out too badly. Jason caught himself whistling "God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen" as he descended the escalator and stopped before anyone else could hear him. Most of the clerks on the sales floor had started to resemble extras from a zombie movie, and it probably would be better if they didn't see their regional manager roaming around the store with a big dopey grin

on his face.

Not that they all looked like zombies. He could still feel the pressure of the young woman's soft lips against his mouth. *Celia*. Now that he thought of it, nametags could come in pretty handy sometimes.

He hadn't meant to kiss her at first. Mistletoe or not, it wasn't exactly professional for someone in management to be engaging in a little holiday cheer with a subordinate while standing in the employee lounge. But she'd gotten such a look of panic on her face when that tool -- what was his name? Alan? -- from the electronics department pointed out the mistletoe that Jason decided he wanted to prove to her a kiss from him wasn't so bad after all. And, judging by the flush that had spread over her cheeks and the studiously casual way she'd gone to get herself a cup of coffee afterward, he guessed she hadn't found the experience to be completely distasteful.

Word had come down from the top that the regional managers had to put in some face time on Christmas Eve to show the rank and file that management was down there in the trenches with everyone else. Jason had decided to do his time at the Costa Mesa store because it was only ten minutes away from his parents' house in Newport Beach, and he'd be able to shoot over there right after closing without missing too much of the festivities. Now, however, he wondered whether some force had guided him to choose this store over all the others.

He hadn't recognized her, and guessed she was someone who'd been hired for the holiday season. Shouldn't be too hard to figure out which department she worked in, though.

A quick survey of the cosmetics counter showed she wasn't working there. Not in fine jewelry, either. He tried to maintain a sober expression as he scanned the faces of the women in accessories. For all they knew, he was there observing their performance. Actually, that was what he was supposed to be doing, but tonight someone would have had to tap-dance naked on a countertop before he gave them any grief for their behavior on the job. Common sense dictated that these people should have all been home with their families hours ago. Too bad that common sense had very little to do with the realities of retail in a slumping economy.

Jason finally spotted Celia's green cardigan and long, wavy brown hair behind one of the cash registers in women's sportswear. The line that stretched away from the register was disturbingly long. He glanced at his watch. Fifteen minutes until closing. He didn't see how she could possibly process that many customers in such a short amount of time.

There was an empty register next to her. He wondered where the other sales associate was, then decided it really didn't matter. It had been a long time since he'd manned a register, but he'd just have to hope it was like riding a bike and go with it. Besides, it'd look good to the employees if upper management pitched in to help.

He slid in behind the counter and approached the register, then typed in his

access code. The code was supposed to give him access to any of store's computers or registers, but he still held his breath for a second until the display showed a reassuring "ready."

"Next?" he called out.

Celia shot a startled glance in his direction. "What are you doing here?"

"Helping out. What happened to the other associate?"

"She spotted someone trying to stuff a bunch of silk camisoles into their purse and called Asset Protection. I think she's still giving a report."

Lovely. While Jason would have liked to believe the suspect in question had merely been some in-need individual trying to pick up gifts for family members, he knew better. Thieves loved Christmas Eve; the sales staff tended to be over-extended and not as likely to catch someone helping themselves to a ten-finger discount.

"Guess my timing is pretty good, then," he replied, as a heavy-set young woman approached and laid a veritable mountain of sweaters, blouses, and jackets on the countertop. If those were all for family members, she was going to have a massive wrapping job ahead of her. Still, it wasn't his place to comment. He rang up each of the items, made a grim attempt at folding them neatly, and shoved them into a series of bags. At least her credit card went through. He didn't feel up to dealing with declined charges at this stage in the game.

Celia refrained from further comment, working efficiently and with a friendly smile somehow still plastered on her pretty mouth. How she managed it, he wasn't sure. She had to have been at this since at least noon, possibly earlier if they'd needed her to work overtime today.

Overhead, the lights flickered once, and he allowed himself a little sigh of relief. That was the warning sign; if people didn't get in line now to check out, they'd be out of luck. He braced himself for the inevitable last-minute onslaught, but only a few more people joined the queue. Apparently even the die-hards had realized they had other places they needed to be.

He finished about a minute after Celia; she folded a silk blouse with easy efficiency and handed the bag with accompanying gift box to a harried-looking man with a comb-over that wasn't fooling anyone. He hurried off just as Jason told his final customer, "That'll be seventy-six forty-five."

The woman handed over a hundred, and he made change while thanking the universe that this final transaction was a cash one. Then she left, just as the security guards began making their sweep of the floor. No one was in any mood to linger merely to rake in a few extra bucks.

A metallic noise signaled that the security gates had begun to descend, and at once Celia opened her cash register and began pulling out the currency and credit card slips. He did the same.

“Pouch under the counter?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied, without looking up. “It’s in the second drawer.”

He bent and retrieved the money pouch, then put the haul from his own register in it.

She handed her cash and receipts over to him. “The guard will be here in a minute to take it back to the safe.”

“I know.”

A flicker of surprise showed in her eyes, and Jason smiled.

“I did my time on the floor a few years ago,” he told her. “Even management has to get in some real-world experience.”

As promised, a security guard came by just then. He did a double-take as he saw who was manning the cash register, but managed to say, “Evening, Mr. Fielding.”

“Evening, Sam,” Jason replied. It was tough keeping track of all the employees in his district, especially with such high turnover during the holiday season, but Sam had been with the store for almost ten years now and was about the closest it came to having an actual institution. “Here you go.”

Sam took the proffered pouch of money and receipts. “Thanks, Mr. Fielding. You have a nice Christmas.”

“You, too, Sam.”

Then he left, heading toward the down escalator. The safe was located in the manager’s office in the basement. Jason realized he probably should have checked in with Cliff, the store manager, at some point during the evening, but the truth was that he couldn’t stand the bastard. He treated his employees like crap, and Jason would have loved to give him the boot. Since the store was the best-performing in the region, he didn’t have that luxury. Maybe at some point Cliff would slip up and provide an opportunity to be thrown out on his ass, but until then Jason tried to make sure he spent as little time as possible in his company.

“So,” Jason said, and paused.

“So,” Celia said. She shut the cash register and began sweeping some of the detritus on the countertop — torn tags, forgotten receipts, even a couple of empty gum wrappers — into the trash.

Spurred by a sudden impulse, he asked, “So what are your plans for the rest of the evening?”

She turned slightly and stared back at him with raised eyebrows. For the first time he noticed what an unusual color her eyes were: light brown, limpid as fine tea. “Go home and collapse. What else would I do after a ten-hour shift?”

“Understandable,” he agreed. “But not much fun. So why not come to a Christmas

party with me instead?”

If possible, her brows shot up even further. “Are you asking me out on a date, Mr. Fielding?”

“It’s Jason. And I wouldn’t classify it as exactly a date. I just thought you might not want to spend Christmas Eve alone.”

Some indefinable expression passed over her face, and her mouth thinned a little. “I know it’s the season of charity, but I’m good. Really.”

Great. He hadn’t meant to offend her. On the other hand, he wasn’t sure he wanted to tell her the truth — that he was hoping for another chance to get her under the mistletoe. And for some reason, he didn’t want to think about her going home and heating a frozen dinner and watching a rerun of *It’s a Wonderful Life*. He didn’t know her at all, but he knew she deserved better than that.

“It’s not charity,” he replied. “Actually, if you want to know the truth, I was hoping if I got some of my mother’s punch in you, you’d dish some good dirt on Cliff so I’d finally have a reason to fire the bastard.”

For a few seconds she just stared back at him, as if trying to gauge whether he meant what he’d said or was merely teasing her. Then that lush mouth of hers curved up in a smile, and she said, “Sounds like reason enough for me.”

~ *** ~

This was insane. She shouldn’t be sitting in the passenger seat of Jason’s BMW, watching as the lights of South Coast Plaza disappeared behind them. She should have politely declined and then gone off to catch one of the last buses home.

But something had taken hold of her, some wicked impulse that echoed the dancing light in Jason Fielding’s eyes. She’d known he was teasing her about firing Cliff, but if he wanted to hear some dirt, she had plenty, even from the short time she’d spent at the store. The other salesclerks called Cliff “Mr. Grabby-Hands,” but no one knew what to do about it. Jobs were too scarce to take the chance of calling him out on his behavior.

She’d been a little reassured when Jason told her he was taking her to his parents’ Christmas Eve party. Not exactly the type of event for a seduction, if that was what he had in mind. Some part of her wondered if a seduction would be all that bad. It had been awhile, and he was awfully good-looking. She watched his hands as they curved around the steering wheel and had a brief flash of what it might feel like if they were wrapped around her waist instead.

She shivered.

“Cold?” he asked at once, and began to reach for the climate controls.

“No. No, I’m fine.”

He nodded and returned his attention to the road. Just as well; a light rain had begun to fall, and the street glistened gold beneath the sodium-vapor lights lining it to either side. Yes, it was much better to be cradled in this soft leather seat and surrounded by warmth than freezing at a bus stop.

Celia didn’t know Newport Beach very well. Ever since her car had died and she’d been restricted to taking the bus, her excursions had been pretty much limited to work and the grocery or drug store. From time to time she’d bummed rides from her roommates, but their hours tended to be crazy, and that wasn’t a mode of transportation she could rely on very often.

So she didn’t recognize any of the streets around her, although she thought they crossed Pacific Coast Highway at some point. Jason turned into a neighborhood of large houses, although to her Minnesota-bred eyes they looked horribly packed together.

The narrow streets were wall-to-wall with cars, but luckily someone pulled out just as they turned a corner, and he maneuvered the big BMW into the empty spot with the ease of long practice.

“It’s still about a block away,” he told her, “but I think this is as good as it’s going to get.”

“No problem,” she replied. “Ten hours on shift, remember? I’ve got my comfy boots on.”

Actually, her feet ached a little, and she hoped she could find a quiet corner to sit down once they got inside, but she thought she’d be all right. At least she’d dressed festively, in the green beaded cashmere sweater she bought last January on clearance, a black pencil skirt, and black knee-high boots. And she’d taken a few minutes to freshen her lip color and dust the shine off her nose when she returned to the employee lounge to retrieve her purse and coat.

“I’ve got an umbrella in the trunk. Why don’t you wait in here until I can come around and let you out?”

Celia nodded, and smiled a little to herself. *And they said chivalry was dead...*

Still, she was happy to wait, since the rain had begun to come down a little harder. Nothing compared to a Minnesota winter, of course, but just because she’d spent her early years shoveling driveways and sidewalks didn’t mean she wanted her hair to get soaking wet on the way into the party.

He opened the car door while holding a large black umbrella overhead, and she climbed out. Since she’d been anticipating a long wait at the bus stop, she wore a wool

overcoat and was glad of it now. Maybe six years in Southern California had thinned her blood. Back home, temperatures in the low fifties would have been laughed at as T-shirt weather.

She had to stay close to Jason in order to keep as much of the umbrella overhead as possible. If he took that as some sort of signal, he didn't show it; he walked quickly, obviously intent on his destination, and Celia was forced to lengthen her stride in order to keep up.

Then he turned up a path that led to a large Spanish-style home, and she shot a quick glance over at him. She figured his family must be fairly well-off if they lived so close to the ocean, but for some reason she hadn't really been expecting a mansion.

"What exactly do your parents do?" she asked. She couldn't help comparing the oversized structure to the modest ranch-style house where she'd grown up.

His mouth quirked a bit, and she wondered if the question had sounded a little too accusatory. But he only said, "My father's an ocular surgeon, and my mother is a professor — molecular biology — over at UC Irvine. I'm the failure of the family, since all I was able to manage was an MBA."

All? Celia thought. And here she was widely considered the star of her own family, what with her full scholarship and degree in English — not that her fancy degree had done much for her on the job market. Still, her mother had never even gone to college and had always seemed content to be a homemaker. And her brother thought higher education was a waste of time. Then again, he made a lot more as a mechanic than she'd ever been able to earn.

She refused to let Jason see that he'd made her feel inadequate. "Yes, I can imagine you must have been a great trial to them."

He laughed outright, then opened the front door for her. Light and noise and the smell of about fifty different delectable dishes drifted out into the cold night. "Let me introduce you to everyone. I have a feeling you're going to fit right in."

~ *** ~

If Celia felt out of her element, she didn't show it. Jason watched her carefully as he took her around and made all the necessary introductions. Since he hadn't mentioned a current girlfriend to either of his parents, he received a set of raised eyebrows and one of his mother's patented "we'll discuss this later" looks, but that was the extent of it. He knew if their situations had been reversed, he wouldn't have been able to keep all the names straight — his mother tended to invite her entire department, including the TAs and grad students, to the Christmas Eve party, and there was his older sister Janine and her brood as well, along with several of the nurses

and assistants from his father's practice — but Celia seemed to navigate the crowd with aplomb. She did, however, shoot him a grateful glance when he handed over a cup of his mother's famous punch.

She took a sip, then grinned. "Wow. So what exactly is in that?"

"It's my mother's secret recipe. I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you." He paused. "Actually, I can't even tell you. She won't let any of us watch while she makes it."

"Sounds like my mom's pineapple upside-down cake."

Jason had a feeling the cake was a good deal less alcoholic than the punch, but he decided not to mention that. He knew that one cup of the punch was all he'd allow himself, since he'd have to drive Celia home after the party.

Speaking of which —

"So where do you live?" he asked.

They'd drifted out of the hubbub in the living room and adjoining dining area, and had paused in the entryway to the family room. Celia sipped at her punch before replying, "Not too far. Well, about a mile from the mall, actually. How about you?"

"Long Beach. So it won't be too out of the way for me to drop you off."

A little silence fell, and Celia looked away from him and back toward the front door. Was she worrying about that drop-off? Those sorts of things could be awkward enough on a first date, and this wasn't even a date. Or was it?

"Looks like you two are forgetting something," came his brother-in-law Steven's voice.

"Uh — what?" Jason replied, even as Celia shot him a puzzled glance.

Steven pointed up toward the curve of the arched doorway overhead. A mistletoe ball decorated with red ribbons hung there. "Janine got on a kick when she picked up the wreaths this year. Better watch out — I think she's got 'em scattered all over the house, like landmines. Cheers."

And with that he raised his cup of punch in mock-salute, then wandered off toward the living room. Jason felt Celia's accusing gaze latch on him.

"I swear I did not do this on purpose," he told her. What, was he going to have to spend the rest of the holidays staring up at the ceiling in case some busybody decided to decorate the whole thing with mistletoe?

Her voice quivered with amusement. "Did I say anything?"

"You didn't have to."

She had a delicious little dimple. It flickered into life on the right side of her mouth, right before she said, "Guess we'd better observe the tradition."

He didn't need any more invitation than that. At the moment, he really didn't care who saw them kissing. Besides, the mistletoe provided the perfect excuse for this particular public display of affection.

She tasted of punch, sweet and hot at the same time. His arms went around her, and she pressed against him, her sweater soft beneath his hands, but not as soft as the stray strands of hair that brushed against his fingers. A rush of heat went through him that had very little to do with the spirits in his mother's punch. All he wanted then was take Celia away from here, to feel every inch of her, to have her flesh warm against his in the cold night.

Footsteps sounded on the tile floors, and at once she pulled away. The newcomer was someone Jason didn't recognize, probably one of his mother's latest batch of grad students. At least the kid had the sense not to comment on Jason and Celia's liplock; instead he mumbled, not meeting Jason's eyes, "Your mother's looking for you. Something about a ham."

It was her ritual every year. Appetizers always abounded, from the time the doors to the house opened at seven-thirty, but the ham always came out at ten. And woe betide the son who missed its ceremonial unveiling.

"I'll be right there," he told the young man, who nodded and headed back to the dining room.

"That must be some ham," Celia remarked. The color in her cheeks was a little high, but otherwise she seemed composed enough.

"You have no idea." He held out a hand to her, and she took it. "Ready to eat, drink, and be merry?"

"Well, I've already taken care of the last two." She shot a rueful glance at her half-empty cup of punch. "It might be a good idea to have some food with this, before I lose all feeling in my toes."

He smiled. Maybe the way they had met was completely random, but he suddenly realized he liked this Celia far more than any of the girls he'd met lately through far more conventional means: friend fix-ups, encounters in bars, one never-to-be-repeated foray into online dating. "Believe me, around here food is not a problem. Be prepared to eat your weight in ham, or I'll never hear the end of it."

She answered his smile with one of her own. "I'll do what I can."

~ *** ~

Truly, it was a Christmas Eve Celia knew she'd never forget. Somehow it didn't matter that her family was two thousand miles away, or that she had a cold and empty townhouse waiting for her when she returned home tonight. The lively conversation

and sumptuous spread of food kept her so occupied that she was actually surprised when Jason told her it was almost one in the morning, and did she want to get going?

Not really, she thought, but she knew even Cinderella had to head home from the ball eventually. She nodded, then waited while he went to retrieve her coat and purse.

The rain had stopped, but the air outside was still damp, startlingly cold against her skin and hands after the warmth inside the house. Her breath puffed out in clouds as she followed Jason to his car.

Of course it started right up. No worrying about whether the damn thing would turn over, although Celia found herself subconsciously holding her breath. Too many months of nursing her ancient Corolla along before it died altogether had left her wary of cars, even though Jason's gleaming charcoal-gray BMW bore about as much resemblance to her fifteen-year-old econobox as his family's gracious home did to the cramped townhouse she shared with her three roommates.

She gave him directions, then sat back and let the afterglow from the food and drink she'd consumed earlier that night wash over her. Whatever else happened, she'd had a wonderful evening, and she mentally thanked Jason for that.

At this hour on Christmas Eve, the streets were almost deserted. It seemed as if almost no time passed before he came to a stop on the shabby cul-de-sac where her townhouse complex was located. Still silent, he got out and came around to open the passenger door. It felt a little strange to sit there and wait for him; none of the men she'd dated recently seemed to be concerned with such niceties.

Celia got out of the car, then hesitated on the sidewalk. Her townhouse was one of the two in the complex that fronted the street, so they didn't have very far to walk. Just a few short steps, and then it would be good-bye.

But did it have to be? She had the townhouse to herself, since all of her roommates were out of town for the holidays. At least there wouldn't be that impediment to inviting him in. Never mind that she wasn't the type for one-night stands. The fastest she'd ever gotten into bed with anyone had been on the third date. This, technically, hadn't even been a date.

And really...so what? She wanted him to kiss her again. Actually, she wanted a lot more than that. She wanted to feel his hands on her, to feel the heat of his body next to her in her lonely bed.

She cleared her throat. "So..."

"So?"

"Would you like to come in?"

His teeth flashed in the chancy light from the street lamps. "Sounds great. It's freezing out here."

She gave a nervous chuckle, then fished in her purse for her keys and headed for

the door. At least she'd left one lamp on, so the place wasn't completely dark. She tossed her purse on a chair and headed for the thermostat; to save money, she'd turned it way down when she left that morning, and the temperature inside wasn't appreciably warmer than it was outdoors.

Jason didn't seem to mind. He took off his overcoat and draped it over the back of the same chair where she'd dumped her purse.

"A drink, maybe?" she asked, then hoped she actually had something to offer him. Oh, right, there was that jug of Chianti her roommate Alison had bought for their last pizza party. Celia figured it had a few glasses left.

He shook his head. "I'm good."

Then he moved closer to her, twining her fingers in his and pulling her close. There was no mistletoe in her house, but that didn't stop him. He pressed his mouth against hers, and once again she tasted his heat, felt a flood of warmth take over her whole body.

She let the kiss linger, then stepped away just enough so that she could lead him by the hand up the stairs to her bedroom. It was warmer there, warm enough that the air didn't shock her skin as he undid the buttons on her sweater and pulled it over her head. His hands were warm as well, strong and yet gentle as they moved across her bare skin and down to unhook the clasp of her bra.

Jason made a sound low in his throat just before he bent his head and took her nipple into his mouth. Celia gasped. Too long since she'd felt those tingles of ecstasy tracing their way down her back, too long since she'd felt that heat blossom between her legs.

With impatient fingers she reached out and fumbled with the knot of his tie. Then it was gone, and she moved on to work the buttons of his shirt. He lifted his head from her breast just long enough for her to pull off his shirt, and then they were both somehow falling onto the bed, his bare flesh meeting hers, his hands moving to undo the hooks of her skirt before it joined his discarded shirt and tie on the floor.

Celia kicked off her high-heeled boots, and he pulled at the waistband of the tights she wore underneath. Finally they both lay naked on the bed. His body was lean and warm against hers, unfamiliar and yet so very welcome. She took him into her hand, felt how hard and ready he was for her. At almost the same time, his fingers brushed against her mound, tracing their way into the warm wetness between her legs. She cried out and pressed herself against him, shifting her weight so the pressure of his fingers would hit the exact place she needed for release.

"Yes," she breathed, her own hand moving up and down the length of his shaft. So close now, so close...

The orgasm hit hard, waves of heat pulsing along every vein and nerve ending. The dark room seemed to swim around her, and she found herself falling against the

pillows as she gasped for breath.

She lay there for a few seconds, then felt the bed shift a bit as he moved away from her. She heard a bump and a whispered curse. "Everything all right?" she managed to ask.

"Fine." A crackle of foil, and he added, "Just trying to find one of these damn things. I think I tripped over one of your boots."

A little giggle worked its way up her throat. "Sorry about that."

"Not a problem." Another pause, and then she felt his weight against her once more in the darkness. "Ready?"

"Absolutely."

Oh, yes, she was more than ready. He slid into her, and she rocked her hips against him, finding the rhythm that would bring them together. She hadn't realized how empty she had been, until she was finally filled once more.

He came before her, but that was all right; he kept moving until she climaxed again, this orgasm not quite as explosive, but more a gentle shudder of pleasure that seemed to go on and on. And then he held still for a moment, their bodies locked together, before at last he moved away from her and stood.

"Bathroom?"

"Second door on the left."

She lay there and waited for him to return. That was one nice thing about condoms; she didn't have to bother much in the way of clean-up.

Jason disappeared for a few minutes, and then slid into bed next to her. Thank God she'd decided to go for a queen when her last mattress gave up the ghost; his tall frame would have made her old double bed decidedly cramped.

He reached out for her and pulled her close, and she went to him willingly. Nice to know he was a snuggler. Too many men wanted to scoot over to the far side of the mattress once the deed was done. He smelled good, too, of a faint touch of expensive cologne and maybe the slightest whiff of his mother's high-octane punch.

His lips brushed against the top of her head as his voice came to her in the darkness. "You know what?"

"What?"

"You're the best Christmas present I've ever had."

A wave of warmth rushed over her once again, although this one had nothing to do with the orgasms she'd just experienced. She knew he was definitely the best Christmas present she'd ever had, all the better because he'd been so unexpected. And all because of a sprig of mistletoe, hanging in the employee lounge.

A sudden thought struck her, and she said, "I guess I'd better go and put on one of

my nightgowns.”

“Um...why? Are you cold?”

Hardly, she thought. She couldn't remember the last time she felt so warm. She turned and kissed him on the cheek, then smiled in the darkness. Surprised a little by her own boldness, she replied, “Because I want to make sure you can unwrap me all over again on Christmas morning.”

“That always was my favorite part of Christmas.” Jason pulled her a little closer, the heat from his body better than any electric blanket. “Unwrapping things, that is.”

“Oh, really? What about playing with them after they're unwrapped?”

“Mmm...that part's good, too.” His hands moved lower, and he added, “In fact, let me show you.”

And his mouth brushed against her neck, just before he traced a line of kisses down her throat to her breast. Celia arched up against him as he proceeded to show her how seriously he took his playtime, then closed her eyes and smiled.

Thank God for mistletoe....

About the Author

Christine Pope is a native of Southern California and has worn various hats in the publishing industry, including editor and graphic designer. She's also a die-hard romantic whose own true-life love story has convinced her that love will always win out.

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