

Merry and Bright

An Elvira Christmas Story

By Kristen Ashley

Dedication

This short is dedicated to my girls, Beth Bullard and Michele Harrison, and the memory of when we'd go out in the cold and snow during the holiday season, walk the streets of Denver, and take in all that was merry and bright.

It's also dedicated to all my Rock Chicks out there, far and wide. Gratitude straight from the bottom of my heart for making 2015 another amazing year!



Elvira

“I cut the bonus checks for the cleaning people. And I bought those big popcorn tubs to send to our techie firm, the boys in building security, the other boys in building maintenance, and I sent one to Zipp at his Gun Emporium.”

As I ran down my activities on the workplace Christmas list that I gave myself because my boss would never think about that shit, I noticed that the eyes of said boss, Hawk Delgado, had glazed over.

So I quit talking for a nanosecond.

Then I asked, “You don’t give a shit about any of this, do you?”

“Nope,” he answered.

“Right,” I said. “Then I’ll get to the important stuff. I ran the extra payroll. The bonuses for the boys are good to go. The payroll slips are printed and ready to be handed out. You wanna do that at our annual Christmas party?”

His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

This was because he knew me.

“We don’t have an annual Christmas party,” he stated firmly.

“I know,” I told him. “Just sayin’, you change your mind this year and do that, I’ll be all over planning it...like *instantly*.”

“Elvira, it’s December twenty-second.”

I threw a hand out to the auditorium-style command center that lay beyond Hawk’s office, returning, “They’re commandos. They don’t wanna dress up and hit some fancy restaurant with their bitches in tow. They wanna get smashed, egg nog optional. I just pick a bar that’s decorated for Christmas, send a company-wide email to meet at a certain time, *poof!*” I lifted both hands and flicked them out to the sides while snapping. “Instant commando Christmas party.”

“No.”

“Hawk,” I leaned forward. “It’s *Christmas*.”

He stood from sitting behind his desk where I was standing opposite him.

“Yeah, it is,” he replied. “And they’re gonna get what they want in the form of an extra payroll run.”

I crossed my arms on my chest, pivoting to keep my gaze on him as he walked around his desk at the same time I was speaking.

“Some of those boys have more Christmas spirit than that. Hell, Mo has a reindeer with a red nose at his work station.”

Hawk stopped beyond his desk, doing this turned to me. “Mo has a reindeer at his work station because his woman showed for lunch with it, put it there and he’s got better things to do so he isn’t at his work station long enough to toss it in the trash.”

This was probably true.

I still glared at Hawk.

“No Christmas party, Vira,” Hawk stated, his voice a warning.

“Gwen would want one,” I told him, referencing my girl who was also his wife, a woman who would totally be all over the minimal planning we’d have to do for a commando Christmas party.

“Gwen’s ready for any party,” he muttered, beginning to move again and only glancing my way as he did, finishing on a decree of, “No party.”

I rolled my eyes on a, “What-eh-*vah*.”

Hawk made no response. He just sauntered out of the room.

I did not saunter. Sauntering in five-inch-heeled Jimmy Choo boots was impossible. I wouldn’t even try.

I strutted.

When I got back to my desk, I saw the stack of envelopes containing bonus payroll slips and realized the man did not tell me how he wanted them disbursed.

I looked out my one wall of windows, these having a view of the command center. There were no windows to the outside world in Hawk’s base. There were, but they were tinted so the men could watch the screens and stare at their computer monitors without any glare. In order to make this so, the tint on those windows was extreme so you could barely see out of them.

I also noted that Hawk was nowhere to be found in that area which meant he was out on the job which meant I grabbed my cell phone.

You didn’t say how you wanted the bonus slips disbursed, I texted to him.

It took a while for him to text back simply, *Work stations*.

I did another eye roll. The man couldn’t even send a proper text, this being one that ended in *And thank you for all you do, I don’t know how I’d run my commandos without you*.

I mean, at Hawk’s decree I ran *my own* bonus payroll slip.

The bonus was nice.

But seriously.

I snatched up the envelopes and walked out to the main space, going along the levels and flipping out the envelopes that belonged to each station, watching them flutter and land on each desk. Some of the stations had men at them, eyes to the bank of screens affixed to the wall at the front of the space or tapping at their computers, also on the job.

They barely glanced at me.

Merry freaking Christmas, I thought, fighting the urge to do a few Christmas slaps upside the head like that curly-haired, glitter-clogged Ghost of Christmas Present from *Scrooged* (my favorite character in that movie) to smack some Christmas spirit into them.

I also did what I would frequently do. This being reconsidering my employment in a place made up entirely of testosterone, bullets and explosives.

Then I remembered my Jimmy Choo boots and the fact that the salary Hawk paid me to run this joint meant I could have Jimmy Choo boots.

So I changed my mind.

I was just in a foul mood and this foul mood centered around the fact it had not snowed. Not once the entire month of December.

We got a dump in October. Another one in November.

But none in December.

And that was when the damned city needed it to be merry and bright for Christmas, for fuck's sake.

An hour later, I was packing up to go home when my cell went.

I checked the screen, saw it was Tracy calling and took the call.

"What's up, beanpole?" I asked as greeting.

"*It's snowing!*" she shrieked.

My heart skipping a happy beat, my eyes flew back out my wall of windows even though I couldn't see anything.

"*It's snowing, snowing, snowing!*" Tracy yelled.

I felt my lips curl up.

Hallelujah!

"We're all celebrating it. You, me, Gwen, Camille, Tess, Mara and Tyra. We're meeting at Club for hot toddies. Though, not hot and the toddy will be in the form of martinis or cosmos, but you get me. Gwen's idea. She got Meredith to watch the kids so we're a go! Meeting there as soon as everyone can get there. I'm headed there right now to save seats."

Yep, Gwen was always up for a party.

But I was not meeting there as soon as.

I was going to do what I'd been wanting to do since Thanksgiving. What I *had* to do for the Christmas season, in my mind, to officially begin.

Then I'd hit Club with my girls.

"I'll be there a little later," I told Tracy. "But I'll be there."

"Cool, Vira. Let us know when you're on your way," Tracy replied.

"Will do."

She hung up.

I hurried through shutting down and packing up so I could get out there.

Out there in the snow.

Where all was being made merry and bright.



I had my taupe knit cap with the wide fake-fur trim pulled down on my forehead. I had my taupe, wool winter coat with its fake-fur lapels covering my dress buttoned up, the lapels turned in to

keep me toasty warm. And I was pleased with myself that I was smart enough to treat the suede of my chocolate brown, spike-heeled, Choo, over-the-knee boots against wet.

All of this as I walked the sidewalks and watched the fat flurries fall fast and furious, lighting up the city night that twinkled with Christmas lights.

I did this every year, the first snowfall that happened in December after the Christmas decorations came out.

I loved being with my girls. I loved being with my family (when they weren't working my nerves, so that love frequently took timeouts from being around them). On a good day, I even loved being with my commandos (and, I tell no lie, I had more good days with my commandos than I had with my family not working my nerves and those commandos were regularly a pain in my ass).

But I was also that woman who could be by herself and this was one of my favorite times to be just that.

Even with the cars going by—people in a rush to finish holiday chores, get home and make dinner, hit a party—wandering those streets with the snow lightly falling, the Christmas lights blinking, God and by His hand through man working together to make a beautiful city magical, I felt a peaceful contentment in my aloneness. A centering. A reminder of why we were all on the planet we shared: to love, bring joy, be generous and create beauty.

When, of course, no one was working our nerves or being a pain in our ass.

No one was working my nerves right then as I stopped to take in a display at the front of a high-rise where every tree, naked of leaves, was adorned with the profuse lace of fairy lights, five foot tall, shiny red ornaments in a pyramid that had to rise two stories just beyond the front doors.

So far, my favorite.

That list was getting long.

It was on this thought, that thought making a smile curve my mouth, I heard something that penetrated my peaceful contentment.

Running feet.

I turned that way and saw I was right. A man was running along the wet sidewalks that were just beginning to fluff over in drifts at the edges with the snow that had long since started sticking to the grass, roofs of cars and awnings.

Half a second after I saw him, I saw two other men also running.

Chasing him.

Shit.

I made my decision, deciding to step into the street behind a car to get well out of the way of whatever was going down.

But in my boots I was unable to move much beyond a strut as I attempted to carry out this plan and all three men were running flat out.

Still, the sidewalk was wide and no one was on it. If I didn't make it to the end of the car closest to me, they could easily pass me, no worries. Then I could put them out of my mind and get back to my merry and bright.

The problem was, the man being chased didn't pass me.

He ran right *to* me, taking me off guard (because why in the damn hell would he do that?) catching me with a strong arm around my neck, whirling me around to face the men chasing him, my back to his front.

Through this, my ankle twisted on my spike heel, pain shooting down my foot and up my calf at the same time I very nearly dropped my fabulous Valentino clutch to the wet cement.

Uh.

Hell no.

“What the fuck!” I shouted.

His arm not around me rose and I saw him point a gun at the two men who were chasing him.

“You have got to be kidding me,” I snapped.

“Shut up!” he yelled so close to my ear, those two words reverberated painfully against my eardrum, making me wince. “And you,” he motioned with the gun to the two men who had stopped five feet away, “back off!”

“Right, man, be cool,” one of them said.

I didn’t look to those men.

My peaceful contentment had been shattered by an armed man who’d taken me hostage on a Denver sidewalk that had been made magical by God and man.

So I was focused.

Which meant I was *pissed*.

“Let me go,” I demanded.

“Shut up!” the man who held me yelled.

“Brother, I’m on my annual inspection of merry and bright,” I bit out, struggling against his hold and shifting my eyes way to the side to try and catch sight of him. “No one disturbs that. Not for any reason. Sure as hell not to grab me around the neck, come dangerously close to breaking the heel off my goddamned Choo and dropping my *Valentino* to *wet cement* all while brandishing a freaking gun.”

“I said shut up!” he kept yelling, doing it jostling me roughly with his arm. “And stop squirming.”

“I ain’t gonna stop squirming, motherfucker,” I shot back, my voice rising along with my temper. “It’s Christmas! It’s the first snow of December! And you’re ruining it!”

He turned the gun to point it at my temple, shifting his head slightly away so he could more easily catch my eyes.

His were manic.

“I said,” he whispered, his tone chillingly contradictory to the wild in his eyes, his hand pushing the gun into my temple. “Shut *up*.”

“Fuck this,” I muttered.

Raising a hand, I wrapped it around the wrist that held the gun at the same time I lifted a boot and slammed it down, spike heel into the top of his foot.

He yelped, his hold on my loosening.

Instantly, I yanked the gun away from my temple and tore from his hold. I let him go, whirled on him, cocked an arm and punched him hard in the nose.

He staggered back, both hands going to his face, even his gun hand.

As he was out of control, I went for the gun, wrested it from his grip, got it in mine and turned it on him.

“’Tis the season for a lot of shit, motherfucker, but not this,” I hissed.

I felt my wrist seized.

I twirled that way, looked up into beautiful brown eyes in a handsome brown face and I felt my mouth go slack, seeing as, in this situation, I couldn't help but be totally stunned at being abruptly assaulted by the vision of the most amazing man I'd ever seen.

It was one of the men chasing the gunman. What with my peaceful contemplation of the goodness of the brotherhood of man being interrupted by an asshole with a gun, I hadn't noticed how unbelievably gorgeous he was.

Or how tall.

Or, at this present moment, how totally pissed off.

I heard things happening with his partner and the gunman behind me, including the words, "You're under arrest..." just as the tall drink of chocolate goodness lifted a badge an inch from my face and stated, "Police."

He was outrageously gorgeous.

He was the po-po.

But no man shoved anything an inch from my face.

My spine snapped straight and I opened my mouth to let loose.

I didn't get a word out because suddenly something else was an inch from my face and that something else was *his* face.

Mm-hmm.

I was right.

Up close and personal, he was *outrageously gorgeous*.

"Are you fucking *crazy*?" he asked irately.

Even irate, he had a voice smooth as warm molasses.

I did not give one shit about his smooth-as-warm-molasses voice.

"Step back, brother," I demanded.

"The man had a gun to your goddamned head," he clipped.

"Now he doesn't," I pointed out sharply.

"While you pulled your shit, he could have pulled the trigger and shot off that cute hat, but worse, shot off that pretty face," he retorted angrily.

He thought my face was pretty?

I didn't have to ask about my hat. I knew my hat was cute.

"He didn't," I told him something he knew.

"He could have," he returned.

I took the inch of space that separated our noses down to half an inch. "He *didn't*."

"Malik, you wanna give me a hand, bro?" his partner called.

He pulled his face out of my face but only to point a finger that same half inch between my eyes.

At that maneuver, my anger escalated and I felt those eyes get so wide, I thought my eyeballs would pop out.

"You. Do not fuckin' move," he growled then turned and prowled to his partner.

I turned to watch and stood, one foot out, arms crossed on my chest, the fingers of one wrapped protectively around the edge of my Valentino, too damned pissed to fully take in how fine his ass was when I saw his leather jacket ride up as he bent down to pull up the gunman. A gunman who his partner had cuffed and who was lying belly to the sidewalk.

Though, that said, I only didn't *fully* take in his fine ass.

I still took in his fine ass.

They hauled the asshole up, turning him. His partner had a phone to his ear, the man named Malik aimed still-angry eyes to me.

“Tell them to send a squad to get this guy,” Malik ordered his partner before jerking his head my way. “We’re takin’ her in with us.”

Oh no they weren’t.

“No you aren’t,” I declared while the partner spoke in the phone.

Both of them had hands around the biceps of the gunman and they yanked him to a halt four feet away from me.

“Yeah, we are.”

“I’m doing my annual merry and bright tour,” I shared.

“I don’t know what that is and I don’t care,” he returned. “You’re comin’ in to give a statement.”

“Fine,” I agreed then continued, “When I’m done with my tour. And after I have hot toddies with the girls to celebrate the first December snow. After all that, I’ll come in.”

His brows shot together.

“Are you being serious?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

He shook his head sharply. “Right. We just apprehended a guy who’s wanted for murder, he grabbed you and held you at gunpoint, and you think you’re gonna go out and have drinks with your girls before you come in to give a statement?”

Hmm.

Wanted for murder.

No wonder the man looked manic. He sure was not going to have a merry Christmas.

I didn’t let Malik in on this train of thought.

I just said, “Yeah.”

I heard a siren just as I heard him state, the warm back in the molasses of his voice, “Your plans just changed, pretty baby.”

Oh Lord.

I felt that *pretty baby* in a very good place.

Even so, I glared at him.

And suddenly we were lit not by Christmas lights but by red and blue police lights which were bright but not ever merry.

They dragged the guy to the cruiser and I stood there, arms still on my chest, watching them.

Once they did the handoff, the guy secured in the back of the squad, they talked briefly to the officers. Then the uniformed po-po got in their car and took off while the plainclothes po-po, Malik and his partner, moved to me.

“I’ll go get our vehicle, don’t wanna make this lady walk all that way in those heels,” the partner murmured, his gaze carefully aimed not at Malik or me, a smile flirting at his mouth.

Before either of us could speak, he turned and jogged away.

“I’m Elvira by the way!” I yelled after him. “Nice to meet you!”

Still jogging, he twisted, gave me a salute, now flat out smiling his head off, turned back and kept on jogging.

“Manners,” I muttered.

“You punched an armed man in the nose,” Malik did not mutter.

Lord, we were back on this?

“That being *after* you ranted to him about your boots,” he went on. “This rant happening while you were in the hold of an *armed man*.”

“Uh, just in case you missed it, Detective Handsome,” I swept a hand down my front, “I’m fine. It’s over. All done. Movin’ on.”

“No argument you’re fine,” he returned, making his meaning clear with the tone of his voice even with the thread of ticked still in it, and I felt that in a good place too. “You’re also a lunatic.”

I didn’t feel *that* in any good place.

What I felt was my eyes narrowing.

“Are you flirting with me in the same breath as you called me a lunatic?”

“I am,” he confirmed boldly.

Bold. Black. Beautiful.

Uh-oh.

My eyes stayed narrowed but even narrowed, they could not fail to take in all that was him.

He thought I was fine.

I *knew* he was fine.

Time to do the all-important rundown before shit went south.

“Are you married?” I asked.

“No,” he answered.

“Seeing someone?” I kept at him.

“No,” he replied.

“Baby daddy to one or more children?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Not a good answer,” I snapped.

“Maybe not, but it’s true,” he returned.

I’d give him that.

I kept going.

“Do you have commitment issues?” I asked.

“I’m thirty-six and unmarried, does that count as commitment issues?” he asked back.

“Yes,” I told him.

“Pretty baby, you’re aware you’re asking me if I have commitment issues and I haven’t even asked you out on a date.”

I pointed out the obvious, “Not worth your breath to do that if I don’t like what I hear because no matter how much I like the view, if I don’t like what I hear, the answer will be no.”

“Fair enough,” he murmured, the angry vibe drifting away, now he appeared amused.

I studied the glory that was him no longer pissed off, but amused, doing this sending word to the heavens.

Lord, please answer my prayers.

“You do know that if I find at some future time, if there is some future time, that you lied on any of the above questions, I have the right to burn down your house,” I informed him.

“You’re a woman who’s got no problem unarming a man who has a gun pointed at her head, I’d expect nothing less. But just saying, that isn’t the only reason why no way in hell I’d lie to you.” He paused as those beautiful brown eyes went intense before he finished, “Ever.”

Now *that* was a good answer.

I still kept narrowed eyes on him

All of a sudden, he smiled.
I didn't feel that in one good place.
I felt it in five.
"I'm Malik," he shared.
"Got that," I told him.
"You're Elvira," he went on.
"You don't miss much, do you?" I asked.
He got closer.
I wanted him to get even closer but I didn't share that. I just stood my ground.
His voice had lowered, warmed even further, coating me in sticky sweet I was pretty damned sure I didn't mind even if it stuck the flap of my Valentino closed forever when he said, "Seems like you got plans tonight, after you give your statement, that is."
"I do."
"Feel like changing them?" he asked.
I absolutely did.
"I don't dis my girls," I shared.
"Right. Then dinner. Tomorrow. Eight. Barolo Grill."
I was totally going to go to dinner with this brother.
However, I gave him the flat truth.
"Honey, at this short notice two days before Christmas, you are never gonna get a reservation at Barolo Grill."
"Watch me."
Oh boy.
Mm.
"Elvira," he prompted when I said nothing.
My name in his voice was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard.
And I wanted to hear it again.
A lot.
"You're on," I said.
That was when I got another smile.
It was also when he got even closer.
So much closer, I had to tip my head far back to look up at him.
Nice.
"What's a merry and bright tour?" he asked quietly.
"It's the first snow of December," I told him.
"You mentioned that."
"And that means it's the first snow when all the Christmas decorations are out."
"Yeah, that goes hand in hand, sweetheart."
I nodded. "So, every year, on the first snow of December, I do my merry and bright tour. Wander the streets of Denver. Take in the lights blinking, God and man working together to make my pretty city a place of magic. Reminding me why we're all here. To love, bring joy, be generous and create beauty. And I was enjoying all of that until some asshole grabbed me and stuck a gun to my head."
Malik said nothing.
I felt my eyes narrow again. "You think it's stupid."

“No.” His voice was no longer warm and liquid but heated and fluid like melted steel, and he was using it while enunciating every word clearly. “I do not.”

I didn’t feel that in those good places.

I felt that only in one place. A place that sat deep in my chest.

I stared up at him.

“You do this tour alone every year?” he asked.

I nodded.

He lifted a hand, finger extended, running it along the bottom edge of fur at my cap from just above my left eye and across. When it got to my ear, he dipped down and touched the diamond stud there.

Oh yeah.

Mm-hmm.

Felt that in five places too.

“Think, next year,” he murmured like he wasn’t talking to me, and he wasn’t, his gaze had watched his hand so he was talking to my ear, “you might have company.”

I fought my knees getting weak.

His gaze came to my eyes.

“Baby, it’s not gonna happen to you again, pray God, but if it does, promise me you’ll never put yourself in harm’s way like you did tonight.”

“I was just walking down a street,” I reminded him.

“And then you were being held at gunpoint,” he reminded me.

“Yeah, and I didn’t like that much.”

He nodded. “I hear you. Just promise me, the impossible happens and lightning strikes twice, you won’t do anything rash like that again.”

He didn’t know my job, the company I kept and this wasn’t just Hawk and his commandos. My job was a desk job but Hawk sometimes had alternate uses for me.

No, mostly it was my bitches. They were magnets for trouble.

I didn’t share that at that juncture seeing as that was fodder for dinner conversation (not) at the Barolo Grill the next evening.

I just said, “You get to know me, handsome, you’ll learn I can take care of myself.”

He moved into my space.

My breathing went erratic.

Lord, he smelled *nice*.

“Elvira,” he whispered, “promise me you’ll never again put yourself in harm’s way like you did tonight.”

I could not promise that.

But looking up in his beautiful brown eyes in his outrageously handsome face, smelling his subtle but attractive cologne, I could give him something.

“I’ll do my best.”

His face softened as he grinned.

Oh my dear Lord, but You do work in mysterious ways.

“Best call your girls. You’re gonna be late for hot toddies,” Malik advised.

“Right,” I whispered.

He didn’t move out of my space as I called my girls. He only moved out of my space to grab my elbow and escort me to the unmarked cop car his partner pulled up in five minutes later.

We went to the station.
Malik took my statement.
I found out his partner's name was Oscar.
Malik drove me back to my car.
He didn't kiss me, which was a disappointment.
But he did smile at me, and if I wasn't wrong, that smile was a promise.
And the promise of that smile warmed me all the way to Club to get drinks with my girls, all the way through drinks and apps and all the way home.



Malik got reservations at Barolo Grill.



And Malik went on my merry and bright tour with me the next December.



It would take time but I'd learn that my man didn't have commitment issues.

I knew this because, now, Malik and I were walking quietly, hand in hand through the streets of Denver as the first snow of December fell lightly around us.

Inside my lined leather glove, I felt the gold of the band of the diamond ring he'd given me at my finger.

See?

No commitment issues.

We were getting married.

We were doing it next Christmas.

And I wandered the streets, peaceful and content for the normal reasons as well as a new one.

This reason: feeling that band, Malik's quiet contentment beside me, knowing at the end of our tour we'd be going to Barolo Grill for a delicious meal then we'd be going to the home we shared, but mostly knowing with this man—*my man*—at my side for a lifetime....

All would always be merry and bright.