

Unwrapping

HIS GIFT

MISTLETOE LOVE SERIES

JENNA ROSE

UNWRAPPING HIS GIFT

JENNA ROSE



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ABOUT THE BOOK

Daisy Ryan isn't a fan of the holidays. But her work Christmas party is a requirement, so she has to go. She expects to suffer, but what she doesn't expect is the man playing Santa this year to be her highschool crush who disappeared right before date to prom.

Craig Johnson can't believe it when he sees Daisy again for the first time in five years. Leaving her was the biggest mistake of his life, but reuniting with her for the holidays may just be his Christmas miracle. And there's no way he's going to blow his chance with her again.

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DAISY

AS I SIT HERE on the windowsill, cold as a piece of ice fresh out of the freezer, gazing out at the black night and the tiny white wisps of the waves breaking in the river across the street, I can't help think about my father and how much I hate Christmas because of him.

Ten years ago, when I was thirteen, he died on Christmas Eve, and ever since then, I haven't been able to enjoy the holidays because of him.

He said he was taking the car out to pick up some Chinese food for everyone so my mom wouldn't have to cook the night before the big day, but really he was going out for a late night joy ride with a bottle of whiskey in his stomach. It had been raining that night with just below freezing temperatures, and my father lost control of the car – the only car our family owned – and ended up rolling over four times before plummeting into the river. Police say the cause of death was more than likely drowning.

I try not to think about it, but every time the holidays roll around and I see the Christmas lights go up, all those memories just keep flooding back like a dam letting loose.

I always wonder what he was thinking when he left that night. *Oh, I'll just have a quick drive and I'll be back before*

the gals even notice, or Who cares if they notice? I'm the man of this house, I can do what I want!

Did he even think about it? Or did he just sneak out like some teenage boy who'd just had his first few drinks and had taken his dad's car out for a late-night ride? Surely a grown man like him should have at least taken a look at the weather and seen that it was not a night to be out driving, regardless of whether or not you were sober.

But nope, he just hopped behind the wheel like a numbskull and got himself killed, leaving a wife and a daughter behind. Some kind of man he was.

I always looked up to my dad too. He made me feel safe and secure when he was around – when I was with him. And then one day he was just gone. Like a snap of the fingers, I had to just come to terms with the fact that I'd never see him again.

Police officers just showed up at my door with this news that I could barely even comprehend, like a surprising, devastating Christmas present meant to destroy me. And that's why, ever since then, I've done everything I can to avoid everything about the holiday.

Normally, I just lock myself in my room and watch movies or whatever show is hot right now until I'm able to come out of my cave and most of the celebration has blown over, but this year is different. This year I've been compelled to take part in the “festive occasion.”

The company I work for is throwing a mandatory work party, and seeing as how I am but a lowly secretary with no pull whatsoever, and have clearly not been sick at all recently, I have no way of getting out of it. I am, however, doing my best to avoid most of the festivities – the drinks, the buffet, the

fake tree, and Tasha (who loves singing Christmas songs until her voice is hoarse), which is why I am here, in an out-of-the-way conference room, sitting on the chilly windowsill with a glass of red wine in my hand, staring out into the black of the winter night.

Has it started snowing? I can't quite tell as I gaze out the window, but I'm pretty sure it has. To be honest, I'd rather be out there on a bench shivering than be up here where it's warm. That's just my mood right now.

"Still sulking, I see."

The voice behind me instantly causes me to smile, and I turn and see my friend Marissa standing behind me with some kind of Christmas cocktail in her hand. Marissa is a regular person, so Christmas doesn't bother her. In fact, she really gets into it, and she is dressed up as a sexy elf, but not *too* sexy, because after all, this is still a work party.

She tugs on a little cord hanging from her hat that causes her big green ears to flare up, while at the same time cracking a silly, over-the-top smile and kicking her back left foot up like a 1950s pinup model.

"Like my outfit?"

"I think you look like you should be working at Costco selling Christmas trees," I reply.

Marissa frowns. "Don't be jealous because you know I'd be Santa's favorite."

"Tell me the others didn't send you in here to get me."

"The others didn't send me in here to get you," she says, taking a seat beside me. "None of them care enough that you're in here. It's only me, girl. The rest didn't even notice you're gone."

“Oh, well that’s comforting.” We both laugh.

“It’s not that they don’t like you,” she replies. “It’s just that we’ve got a Santa out there, and let’s just say he’s got basically all the girls’ attention.”

I groan. “Please don’t tell me someone hired a male stripper.”

Marissa cracks up and takes a sip of her drink. She shakes her head and puts a hand on my thigh. Marissa and I have been friends since somewhere near the end of high school. She was the one who got me this job, and we’ve been through so much together. I owe her a lot.

“No, no, but that would be *awesome*,” she laughs. “Although I don’t think the guys in the office would care for it.”

“What then?”

“Well...I think the best way for you to understand would be to just come out and see.”

I sigh – probably a lot more dramatically than necessary. “I’m really quite happy right here, Marissa–”

“I know, I know you are,” she interrupts. “But seriously, you have to see this. Just come out for a few minutes, and then you can come back to your little cave here. Who knows, you might even find yourself enjoying yourself!”

I frown back at her with my *as-if* face. “Oh, sure. I’ll have a *great* time!” I counter, causing us both to laugh. But still, I get up from the windowsill and go lean on Marissa as we both make our way from the dark office and back into the hallway leading into the front where the actual party is going on.

I can already hear it as we start getting closer: the Christmas music playing, Tasha singing along, people laughing and talking to one another, telling stories about how much they all love the holidays – but then I hear something else, something different. Grown women giggling. They’re all going on about something that seems to have them quite happy, and as we approach the main room of the office and their voices get louder, I can feel Marissa’s eyes on me, watching my reaction.

“I feel as though I’m being led to my own execution,” I tell her.

“Oh, stop,” she laughs. “You’ll be fine. If you let yourself relax, you might even have some fun for once!”

“I was having fun before—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Marissa scoffs. “In your cold, dark room feeling miserable by yourself. Tell me, in your room back there, did they have *this*?”

With a dramatic, magician-like flourish, Marissa waves her arm, beckoning me forward to join the others.

Part of me wants to spin around and run back to safety. But I know that would be wrong. I am a twenty-two-year-old woman. I can’t be behaving like that! It’s just a Christmas party, after all. How bad could it really be?

So I put one foot in front of the other and step past Marissa into the large office space that’s normally filled with cool, hip, “work friendly” furniture that has now been transformed and opened up into a “holiday space” where everyone has gathered to celebrate and have a great time.

But really, Daisy, how bad could it be?

I see Tasha over by the speakers, some kind of Christmas cocktail in her hand, singing along to “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas,” Claire picking cookies off the table filled with snacks, and Rhonda leaning against the wall with a smile on her face, looking off in the direction of where most of the noise is coming from.

“Over there,” Marissa whispers, pointing like she’s sharing a dirty little secret with me. I know I’m going to regret it, but I look anyway. And sure enough, what I see makes me want to run back for the cover of my nice cold, dark room.

He may not be a male stripper, but someone decided that hiring a mega-hottie to play Santa this year would be a great idea. He’s wearing the all-red outfit – cap and everything – which has all been perfectly designed to show off his body. And it’s clear from one quick look that this is a guy who spends plenty of time at the gym.

Jasmine is on his lap right now, giggling and squirming around as he asks her what she’d like for Christmas, and whether she’s been a naughty girl or not this year, while the rest of the girls in the office stand around in a circle, giggling like it’s one of the Jonas Brothers they’re waiting to get a chance to meet.

“Oh my God, Marissa,” I groan as I start to turn away. “Are you kidding me?”

“Oh, stop right there,” she says, snatching me by the wrist. “You’re not going anywhere. Don’t you want to meet Santa!?”

“I’m not five anymore, Marissa,” I reply. “And *that* is not Santa. *That is a total* Chad from the Harvard rowing team. *That is...*”

My voice trails off as it hits me. A punch in the gut of pure realization. A tornado-like wind that sweeps through my mind, tearing up memories from the past that I thought I'd buried forever and would never be brought up again.

The whole world seems to slow down as Jasmine, laughing like she's having the time of her life, gets up from "Santa's" lap and reveals his face fully to me.

He's five years older, but I recognize him immediately, and something comes over me. It's like every nerve in my body starts to tingle. My stomach starts doing backflips, and parts of me start to tense up.

The urge to run ramps up inside of me, but not to run back to my back room where I was hiding before. Now I want to run as far away from here as I can go. Because sitting on the chair in front of me, surrounded by women ogling him like he's the hottest thing in the world, is Craig, my high school ex-boyfriend who ghosted me on prom night and I haven't seen or heard from in five years.

He's laughing. Why wouldn't he be? This is every guy's dream, isn't it? To be surrounded by girls fawning all over you like you're Justin Bieber? He watches Jasmine as she skips away from him, surveying his crowd of man-hungry office women to see which one is up next to hop on his knee, and that's when our eyes meet.

It's like nothing's changed in the last five years.

A rush of emotion hits me like I've been clobbered in the chest by the Hulk's fist. I nearly double over as I watch the expression in his eyes change. I can see him trying hard not to let everything he's feeling inside show (typical guy), but he's feeling something.

His lips part like his jaw is going to drop, but he manages to hold back.

He's surprised to see me, that's for sure. No, he's more than surprised. He's shocked, but he's doing a good job keeping a straight face. He's still got a job to do. He has to make all these girls happy, right?

Well forget it. I'm not sticking around to watch.

I spin on my heel and bolt for the elevator door.

"Daisy, where are you going?" Marissa calls after me. But I ignore her. I grab my coat from the hanger and thumb the call button.

No, this is going to take too long. The elevator's in the lobby, and I feel like my heart is about to explode. I can hear Marissa calling after me, so I just sprint for the stairwell. I'm not waiting.

I shoulder the door open and take the steps two at a time on my way down to the ground floor, trying to come up with an explanation as to how in the world Craig could have ended up here in the first place. How could something like this even be possible?

"Daisy, where are you going?" I hear Marissa's voice echo from above me as she shouts down the stairs.

"I – I gotta go, Riss. I'll see you later!"

Thankfully, I'm bursting through the door to the lobby floor as she's calling back her reply, so I manage to save myself from the rest of that uncomfortable conversation. It's already enough to have Craig on my mind as I'm rushing toward the front doors. I mean, what is he doing here? I haven't seen him in five years, and now he's suddenly at my

office Christmas party playing Santa? Of all the places to run into him! This is absolutely absurd.

So many questions are running through my mind as I race out into the night: why did he leave me that evening when we were supposed to go to prom together? Why did he invite me at all if he was just going to ghost me? Why haven't I heard from him in five years? Where has he been all this time, and why is he back at *my* Christmas party, of all places?

So many questions. But I know one thing – I'm damn sure not going to stick around and ask *him* to answer them for me. I'm getting the hell out of here.

CRAIG

IT CAN'T BE. Can it?

It's taking every ounce of self-discipline I have to maintain a look on my face that won't send every woman in the office running for the hills right now. On the outside, I've got to look cool as a cucumber, but on the inside, I'm a hurricane of emotions. I'm also starting to sweat like crazy under this Santa costume, despite the office being not much warmer than it is outside.

Another smiling woman hops on my lap, spilling red wine on my leg. "Hey, Santa baby," she giggles, clearly tipsy – if not drunk. "I've got to confess...I've been a naughty girl. Does that mean I don't get any presents this year?"

Two minutes ago, I would have played right into her ridiculous flirting. I probably would have found it cute – maybe even somewhat sexy. But not anymore.

Not since I locked eyes with *her*.

With Daisy.

I was never supposed to see Daisy again. The last time was supposed to be five years ago. And it's not like we're back in Great Barrington High School either. This is Boston. There's more than half a million people here. What are the chances

that I'd run into *her* while I'm playing Santa at some random office Christmas party one night?

I've worked so hard to put her out of my mind, and I succeeded. But when our eyes met, all that work went right out the window. All the emotions I hadn't felt since high school came flooding back. It was like I'd been placed into a time machine and sent back to when I was eighteen.

"Did you hear me, Santa baby?" the woman on my lap whispers into my ear. I can smell alcohol on her breath breaking through the overpowering layer of perfume. "I said, I've been a *naughty girl*—"

"Yes, I heard you," I say as I stand up and brush her aside, probably a bit more gruffly than I should. One of her friends grabs hold of her shoulders and glares at me, a hint of anger in her eyes as I push my way through the crowd, following in the direction where Daisy was just headed. "I'm sorry, everyone, but I just got a text. A bit of a family emergency I have to check on!"

There's a collective "Aww" behind me as I race for the elevator. I pull out my phone and pretend to look at it like I just got an important text or something, but the doors just so happen to open right at that moment, and I step inside and press the button for the lobby. Daisy must have not wanted to wait and took the stairs.

I look up as the doors are closing and see some girl with a sexy elf outfit on, complete with elf ears, glancing suspiciously at me. I ignore her. I don't care – or have time for her right now. All I want to do is catch up with Daisy.

It was cold up in the office, but when the elevator reaches the ground floor and the doors open to the lobby, I realize I've left my jacket upstairs. Oh, well. I race across the tiled floor,

my heart pounding in my chest, shove the doors open, and crash out into the night like some kind of wild bull dressed in Santa's clothing.

I look left. I look right, and then I see her running down the street in the direction of the enormous Christmas tree that's been erected in the courtyard between this cluster of office buildings.

"Daisy!" I call out, racing after her. She doesn't hear me, so I pick up the pace, but it's icy out tonight, and I can only run so fast without slipping and falling and breaking my neck. So, I call out again, louder this time. "Daisy!"

And she hears me.

She stops and turns, and again that feeling from upstairs in the office hits me straight in the gut like a punch from a heavyweight boxer. Backlit by all the sparkling lights hanging off the Christmas tree, with white snowflakes softly falling down all around her, she couldn't look any more beautiful.

Her eyes shine like two brilliant, shining globes as she looks back at me. I think I see a smile cross her face for the briefest of moments, but then she's turning away from me again. Her hair flutters as she spins and rushes away through the night.

My heart sinks, but can I really blame her? This is all my fault to begin with.

I focus on the ground in front of me, watching for patches of ice as I race after her. There's no way I'm letting her get away from me. My heart pounds in my chest, and the cold tears down my throat and into my lungs as I run as fast as I can, fighting to catch up with her.

I finally do, just past the enormous Christmas tree, which must be at least three times as tall as I am.

I reach out and grab her wrist and pull her back to me, spinning her like we're dancing. Her arm is so warm in the cold night. I never thought I'd see her again, let alone touch her or be this close, but when she turns and I see the look on her face, I know that she is definitely not happy to see me.

"Don't." That's all she says.

Don't.

And at the same time, she tugs her arm away from mine. Suddenly, that warmth is gone. That soft feeling is gone.

"Daisy, I—"

"Shut up, Craig," she says. It's then I notice her eyes are beginning to fill with tears.

"Daisy, please. I'm sorry, okay? I—"

"You're *sorry*?" She scoffs, nearly laughing as the tears spill down her cheeks. "It's been *five years*, Craig! We were supposed to go to prom together, and you ghosted me completely out of nowhere!"

"I know," I reply, regret and terrible feelings filling me up inside. "And I feel awful about it. But if I could just explain—"

"Oh, you want to explain?" She's almost smiling at me now, but the way that you smile at someone or something you just can't believe or understand. She crosses her arms and looks away, and for a second, I'm sure she's just going to turn around and start walking. But she actually turns back and glares at me. "Fine, Craig. Start talking."

This actually shocks me. But then again, Daisy was always fiery. That's one of the things I liked about her back in the day.

I smile. “Okay, but not right here. We’ll freeze to death.” I look over to our right and spot a coffee shop, twinkling with Christmas lights, still open at this time of night. It couldn’t look cozier. I nod to it. “How about there? I get you one of those Christmas coffees everyone loves?”

I’m expecting her to say no, but two seconds ago, I was expecting more of a protest out of her as well. To my surprise, she actually glances over at the shop, then back at me, and bites her lower lip.

She’s thinking about it, and boy does she look cute when she’s thinking about something.

“Fine,” she finally says. “But you are definitely paying, and I can leave whenever I feel like it.”

“Absolutely,” I reply as harmlessly and cooperatively as I can. I can’t help but smile as I take her arm and lead the way to the shop, but Daisy steps aside and puts some distance between us.

Still not ready yet, I guess.

It’s almost surreal walking beside her through the gently falling snow, across the courtyard as the Christmas lights twinkle all around us. Once we reach the coffee shop, I reach out for the door to open it for her, but she’s too quick for me; she darts ahead and takes the door and opens it herself, then looks back at me as if to say, *I got this myself, thank you.*

I can’t help but smile as I walk in behind her. She’s already made her way to the counter, so I join her as she’s ordering a peppermint-mocha-latte. I order myself a green tea and hand the girl behind the counter, who’s wearing a big pair of antlers, my card before Daisy can try to pay for her own drink.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” she whispers as we find a table and sit.

“Well, I’m making up for other things I shouldn’t have done,” I reply with a smile.

“Craig, I really don’t know if we should get into this—”

“Listen, Daisy, I owe you an explanation.”

“Well, that won’t be happening tonight.” I look up and see the girl with the elf ears from back at Daisy’s office standing beside our table looking down at us, a very unhappy look on her face. She glares at me, then looks over at Daisy. “Come on, Daisy, we’re leaving.”

“Whoa, wait a second, who do you think you are?” I ask.

“Don’t even start with me,” the girl snaps, flashing angry eyes at me. “Daisy? I’ve got a water leak back at my apartment. I need your help with it *now*.”

“Oh my God, a *water leak*?” Daisy gasps, instantly rising from her chair. I realize she hasn’t even taken her coat off yet, so within three seconds, she’s nearly out the door with this girl in the elf outfit.

A kid from behind the counter calls out my name. “Craig!?” I look over and see him hold up our drinks and catch my eye, just as Daisy follows her friend out into the night.

“Daisy?” I call out, but her friend points back at me and shakes her head.

“We’ve got to go, Santa. She’ll call you.”

“But she doesn’t even have,” I watch as both girls step out of the shop and the door closes behind them. “My number...”

DAISY

“A WATER LEAK AT YOUR APARTMENT?” I ask as I walk quickly through the brisk night beside Marissa. “So that didn’t really happen, right?”

“Are you kidding?” She laughs. “I came to get you out of there and away from that guy. Who was he, by the way?”

“Ugh,” I sigh. “My ex from high school.”

“You’re kidding,” she gasps. “Come on, I’m parked over here.”

“Nope, not kidding. And somehow he ended up playing sexy-Santa at our office Christmas party tonight.”

“Wow. And you guys must have had a bad breakup or something, right? I saw the way you made a mad dash for the stairwell, practically tearing up on the way out.”

“Well...I wouldn’t call it a breakup,” I reply, as we hop in Marissa’s pickup. It always cracks me up how such a small girl can drive such an enormous truck. “But I don’t really want to talk about it right now.”

“Oh, come on, girl,” Marissa says, pressing me as she pulls out and starts heading in the direction of my apartment. “This is just too crazy of a situation for you *not* to tell me.”

I mean, she is right. But that doesn't make it any easier to get into, especially right after running into Craig. I'm not sure why, but for some reason, I feel like it would be easier talking to her about it if I hadn't just seen him.

"Okay fine," I say as she drives. "I told you about how my dad died when I was thirteen. So I guess you could say I had 'daddy issues' for a while after that. And Craig was the first guy who really made me feel safe."

"And then he cheated on you!" Marissa suggests.

"No!" I reply quickly. "No, Craig isn't that kind of guy."

"Well, the girls back at the office seem to like him, that's for sure."

I think back to Jasmine on his lap, giggling and loving every second of it, and for some reason, a tinge of jealousy ignites inside me, pinching at my heart. I haven't seen Craig in five years. Why should I be jealous?

"Well, he definitely did something to piss you off," Marissa replies. "I saw the way you reacted when you saw him. The way you stormed out of there like he was a grenade about to explode."

"Yes, yes," I say quickly. "He *did* do something, but it wasn't cheating on me."

"Okay, what then?"

We're nearly back to my apartment now, and I'm doing the best I can to simply describe everything that went down between Craig and me without actually reliving it or replaying it in my mind – and I'm failing miserably.

The emotions are coming back, rising up like a thousand balloons inside me. I do my best to push them back down so I

can continue the story.

“Well, he invited me to prom—”

“Terrible!” Marissa jokes. She can tell all this is upsetting me, so she’s doing her best to lighten the mood. Just another reason I love her so much as a friend. She really knows how to read the room.

“It wasn’t *that*,” I laugh. “I said yes to going to prom. I was nervous, but all excited of course. I had my dress and was all ready to go, but when the big day rolled around, Craig completely ghosted me.”

Marissa gasps as she pulls into the lot of my apartment building. “He did not!”

“He sure did.” I nod. “Not only that, but he didn’t just ghost me, he completely vanished. Word is he moved with his family or something, but he never texted, never let me know where he went or what happened. I never even heard from him again until I just ran into him tonight.”

Marissa usually has a witty remark or comeback for everything, but I can see even she’s a bit taken aback with this one.

“Wow,” she says simply. “That is...”

“Crazy?” I suggest, pushing open my door. “Yeah, I know.”

I step out into the cold night and head for the door leading into my apartment, knowing Marissa will follow. She’s right behind me by the time I’ve got my key in the lock and am stepping inside.

“Aren’t guys just the worst?” she asks as we make our way down the hall toward my unit. “You just can’t trust them.”

Easy for her to say. Marissa's had nothing but great luck with guys. They all seem to love her, and she's been with her current long-term boyfriend, Jason, for three years now. But I appreciate her doing her best to commiserate with me. It's sweet.

"I guess not." I shrug, stepping up to my apartment door. I am sliding my key into the door when I hear another door at the end of the hall open up, and my whole chest goes tight. I try to hurry, but it's no use. I'm too late.

"Well, well, well, look who it is." I turn and see Dana, my landlord, stepping out of her room with a very displeased look on her face like she just caught someone in the act. She crosses her arms over her chest and scowls. I don't know why, but Dana has always given me the impression of a boot camp instructor.

"Hi, Dana," I say, trying to sound as harmless as possible. "Happy holidays?"

"Yeah, yeah, it'll be a happy holiday when I get all that back rent you owe me!"

I cringe inside.

Did you have to say all that in front of Marissa?

"I know, Dana. I know I owe you, and I'm sorry. I'm working on it—"

"Well, don't work on it," she snaps. "Get it to me, or you'll be finding a new place to live."

Thankfully, with that last remark, she turns and heads back into her apartment, but not without slamming her door behind her. I feel like I have spiders crawling all over my body from embarrassment as I unlock my door and step inside. I can just feel Marissa's eyes on my back as she follows me.

Please don't say anything. Please.

“Charming lady,” she scoffs.

“Oh, you have no idea,” I reply.

I kick off my shoes and go slump down on the couch, feeling defeated and deflated at the same time. Marissa comes over and takes a seat beside me. I can't even anticipate what she's going to say next, but I know she's got something in mind.

“You know, I'd avoid this guy if I were you. What's his name again?”

“Craig,” I reply.

“Craig.” She nods. “I had something similar happen to me in the past, and he came crawling back to me looking to apologize, and like an idiot, I took him back. You wanna bet on whether or not it worked out?”

One look at her face is all it takes for me to get my answer.

“So what happened?” I ask.

“I was dating this guy – great guy – and then out of the blue he just vanished on me. He was gone for like three months. Then he comes back and tells me his dad was like part of some military special ops program and they'd been overseas on a secret mission and hadn't been allowed to speak to anybody. And you know what? I actually bought it.”

“Aw, Rissa.” I smile.

“Right?” She laughs at herself. “It turns out he'd been cheating on me with some chick up in New Hampshire, which I found out later. But I took him back, and he just ended up cheating on me, and we broke up four months later.”

“Gosh, I am so sorry, Rissa.”

“My point is, Daisy, sometimes it’s best to just let these things go.”

IT’S chilly when I wake up the next morning, and I have to really fight to swing my feet out of bed. I race to the bathroom and crank the shower on as hot as it will go. Then it’s another battle to get out from under the nice warm water and go get dressed for work.

I run into Dana in the hallway when I’m coming out of my apartment and quickly turn my back on her, hoping to escape another repeat of our conversation last night, but to my surprise, she sees me and smiles, which throws me completely off guard.

“Hey, thanks for catching up on your rent this morning!” she says happily. “I guess our little talk last night really drove the point home, huh?”

My head instantly starts spinning. *What the hell is she talking about?*

But I might as well go along with it. The last thing I want to do is get into some kind of confusing conversation with her.

“Yeah...of course—”

“And sending that hot guy over with the money?” She winks. “That was genius. If you send him by every month, I might consider knocking fifty bucks off!”

She laughs, turns her back on me, and walks off toward her apartment. I don’t want to get caught up in any more of a discussion with her, so I quickly head the other way and take the stairs to the door, my head absolutely spinning.

Sending a hot guy over with the money? What is she talking about?

But then, as I step outside into the crisp December air, I get my answer.

Craig, no longer dressed as Santa but looking somehow even more handsome, is leaning up against my car, grinning at me, with his arms crossed over his chest.

“What’s cookin’, good lookin’?” he asks with so much charm that I have to fight with every bit of willpower I have to keep from smiling.

“What are you doing here, Craig?” I ask. “How do you even know I live here? Kinda creepy, don’t you think?”

“Was paying your back rent creepy?” he counters.

I frown and purse my lips together. Now there’s a question I don’t want to answer. “Kinda, yeah.”

I brush past him and open the door to the Uber I have waiting to take me to work. I have to get out of here. Too many emotions are flowing through me right now. Just seeing Craig again after five years is too much. Now I have to process this?

“Listen, Daisy,” he says, stepping up beside me. It feels so strange to be this close to him again after all this time. “I just want to give you an explanation. I – I owe you that. Can I give you one? Please?”

All I can think about is what Marissa told me – about her ex and how I shouldn’t even think about giving Craig a chance. But at the same time, I’m dying to know what happened and where he’s been all this time. I was nearly at an explanation last night before Marissa came and yanked me out of the coffee shop and drove me home. And I have enough

self-control to not succumb to his incredible good looks and charm, right?

“Besides, I owe you one of those lattes that I didn’t get a chance to give you last night.” He smiles.

I take a deep breath and avert my eyes from him, mulling over his invitation and Marissa’s warning. I really wonder what things would have been like had he actually picked me up for prom that night.

“I never even got to wear my dress, you know?” I say, turning back to him. A crack in the charming veneer across his face begins to form. I pull my car door open and slide a leg in. “Pick me up after work. I get out around five.”

“Sounds good!” Craig calls after me as I close the door behind me and pull out of my driveway. I can see him standing there smiling, but it looks like he’s doing his best to force the expression onto his face. He waves, but I don’t wave back. I just nod and look at the road as I drive off, careful of all the ice that may have formed during the night. Ever since I got my license, I’ve been very aware of ice on the road. I guess after what happened to my dad, I’ve been scared of driving in the winter.

I’m thinking about Craig all day at work. I just cannot get him off my mind and end up accidentally hanging up on a few callers and taking a few things to the wrong offices – basically behaving like I used to behave back when I just started working. I’m still nervous as all hell about meeting up with Craig later, but I’m also so excited that I’m jittery all over. Just before lunch, Marissa sneaks up from behind me and pokes me in the ribs, nearly scaring me out of my skin.

“Hey there, girl!” she hisses in my ear.

“Oh my God!” I whisper, clasp my hands over my mouth, doing my best not to yelp and let the whole office know just what a scaredy-cat I am.

“Going out tonight with Jasmine, Tasha, and Brittany. Hitting up PJ’s. You down?”

“Um, not tonight,” I reply, doing my best not to let her see my expression. “But thanks for asking.”

I’m hiding my face, but I can practically see the look on hers as I listen to the long pause. “You’re going to meet up with him, aren’t you?”

Damn it.

That’s one thing about having a friend like Marissa; they always know you *too* well.

“He wants to give me an explanation,” I reply, turning to face her. “And I want one. That’s all that’s going to happen.”

“Uh-huh.” She nods. “That’s what men always say. But believe me, Daisy. They always want more. *Always*. Be careful.”

DAISY

I'VE NEVER BEEN MORE conflicted in my life about a workday being over. On one hand, I'm all nervous and anxious and excited to be going to see Craig and be given the explanation as to what happened on the night he was supposed to take me to prom and where he's been for the last five years, but on the other hand, I'm also wondering whether or not I'm making the right decision or if it's best to just listen to Marissa and let sleeping dogs lie.

I already felt it when I first saw him sitting out there dressed as Santa – a spark inside my chest, just like the one I felt back when he and I were dating back in high school. I had so many daddy issues back then that while I was desperate to find a boyfriend, I didn't trust a single guy at my school because I was sure they were all going to do what my dad did and leave me.

But then I met Craig, and for some reason, he was able to convince me – simply by just being him – that he wouldn't do that.

He was on our school's tiny rowing team, he came from a really good family, he was a model student, and something about him just made me feel protected and cared for. We just clicked right away. He even knew better than to push me too

quickly. It's like somehow he just knew that it would push me away.

So we ended up together. And when senior prom came around, he invited me to be his date. I kind of suspected he would. I mean, we were both seniors, and I was his girlfriend at the time, but it was still exciting. I spent way too much money on a really pretty sea-green dress, got all glammed up, and waited...

But he never came.

I texted and texted. But he never came.

He never texted back. He never called.

Big day tomorrow. See ya soon :)

That was the last text I ever got from him. And the peck on the cheek he gave after he dropped me off at my house was the last time I ever saw him. Until I walked into the office Christmas party and saw him dressed up as Santa with Jasmine giggling on his lap.

I don't think, in my wildest dreams, I could have ever come up with a crazier, more unexpected scenario.

I keep glancing at the time as the day goes on. By the time five rolls around, I feel like I just might have a heart attack. Part of me is actually second-guessing whether or not I should go through with it. But when I see the rest of the office picking up their jackets and heading for the elevator, I think about just going back to my apartment or out for drinks with the girls, and I know that I have to go through with it. I have to meet up with Craig. I have to know what happened and where he's been for the last five years.

So I grab my purse and my coat and take the elevator down with a couple girls from H.R. I don't really know them

that well, and I don't know what they're talking about, but that's fine. I kind of like it that way because my mind is on Craig and whether or not I'm making the right decision.

But it's not like I'm given much time to mull it over. As soon as the elevator doors open, I find myself staring directly at him. He's standing with his arms crossed in the lobby, smiling like he couldn't be more happy to see me. And I have to confess, it warms me up inside.

"Hey there, Bear Bear," he grins. *Bear Bear*...the name he gave me way back when we first started dating. I don't even remember how he came up with it, but hearing it again after all this time just triggers so many memories.

"Um, hey!" I say, giving a little wave as I walk over to him.

"Ready to go?"

"Yeah," I lie. I am *so* not ready for this. My heart is racing, my palms are sweating, and I'm kind of wishing Marissa was here with me to support me. Although that would be crazy awkward.

"Great, let's go!" Craig smiles, looking like he's got all his feelings completely under control.

He walks beside me to the lobby doors, and this time, I let him hold them open for me so he can be a gentleman. I don't know why I do that, but it just sort of feels like I should. It's like many of those feelings I had for Craig back in high school have come back and are slowly draping over me like a warm blanket, not only protecting me from the cold December air but also from whatever else might be out there in the world that wants to hurt me.

Oh God, Marissa might have been right.

I follow him outside into the chill, and he leads me past the massive, sparkling Christmas tree and in the direction of the same coffee shop we went to last night. “I thought we’d go back here,” he says. “We never got a chance to finish our drinks. Heck, you never even got to try yours!”

“That’s true.” I smile.

“Don’t worry, I drank it for you. It was pretty awesome.”

“You drank it for me?!” I reply, pretending to be aghast. “That was mine!”

He smirks and shakes his head. “Actually, I let the staff have both of our drinks. I didn’t think it would be right to have them without you being there.”

A warmth starts in my chest and spreads out through my body. It’s winter, but it could practically be the start of summer with Craig by my side.

“Always the gentleman, aren’t you?” I ask. “When you’re not bailing on taking a girl to prom.”

Craig gives me a very embarrassed look, and we continue on the short walk to the coffee shop. Again, he holds the door for me, and we step inside. It’s kind of crazy, but I’m already having a lot of fun. We haven’t even ordered or sat down to talk, but I’m really enjoying myself.

“Why don’t you grab a table and I’ll order?” Craig suggests. “Whatever one you think looks coziest.”

“Okay!” I reply, reaching for my debit card. But Craig quickly shakes his head and puts his hand out to stop me.

“Don’t worry. I’ve got it. Same as yesterday, right?”

“Yeah,” I reply. “Are you sure? I can get my own drink—”

“Of course I’m sure.” He smiles. “Be right back.”

What is even happening right now? I’m tingling all over, taking deep breaths as I find a comfortable couch in the corner surrounded by nice Christmas lights. I take a seat and watch as Craig orders for us and makes his way over to the spot I’ve chosen.

He towers over every other man in the shop. I guess I’d forgotten just how tall he was back in high school. Either that or he’s grown even more since then and I just wasn’t paying enough attention last night, but he must be at least six-two. I do my best not to stare, but I simply cannot take my eyes off him as he walks over to me.

“All right, one peppermint-mocha-latte coming up.” He smiles as he takes a seat beside me.

“What did you get?” I ask.

“Just a green tea. I’m a simple guy when it comes to coffee and teas.”

“Are you a simple guy when it comes to using mobile devices?” I counter with a bit of a biting quip. “Because you do know how they work, I’m pretty sure. And you have had my number for the last five years.”

Craig sighs and looks down at his lap. “All right, you want to launch right into it, huh? Okay.”

I can see he’s not eager to get into this conversation this early into our...date...or whatever this is right now, but I’m starting to feel things inside for him that I haven’t felt in years, and I have to hear what he has to say before I let him unleash any more of his incredible charm on me. I may have already gone against Marissa’s advice and met up with him just like

she told me not to, but that doesn't mean I completely disregarded everything she said.

I'm still hesitant. I want to know why he ghosted me and what he has to say for himself before I give any more of myself to him.

Or at least, that's what I'm trying to do.

"Well, Daisy, would you believe me if I told you it was all my parents' fault?"

"Really, Craig?" I scoff. "That's what you're going with?"

He sort of laughs and sort of sighs at the same time, then shrugs. "I know, I know, it sounds incredibly lame, but at the same time, it's kind of the truth."

"How?" I ask.

"Craig! Daisy!" one of the baristas calls out, jolting us both out of the moment. Craig rolls his eyes and quickly gets up and brings our drinks back to the couch. I can tell by just feeling the cup that mine's way too hot (as they usually are at coffee shops), so I set it on the table beside us and give him a look for him to keep going.

"Okay, so...this is hard for me to say," Craig continues, taking a deep breath. "So try not to get *too* mad at me."

"I'll try."

"My parents...are snobs. And you know this."

"Well..." It's true, but I don't want to just come right out and say that.

"It's okay, Daisy, they are." Craig nods, as though we're sharing in a secret only a handful of people know. "And my

parents never particularly liked your mom, the fact that she never re-married, or how she...behaved sometimes.”

Yep, Craig was right. I’m finding it pretty hard not to get mad at him right now.

“How she *behaved*?” I ask. “You mean how she’d get drunk for most of December, you mean?”

Craig’s not even looking at me now, but he nods. “Yeah. They were okay with me dating you for a while, but when it was approaching time for me to go to college, they started not being okay with it.”

“You mean...they didn’t want us dating?”

“Right,” he replies. “And just to be clear, I fought them on that. I told them I’d date whoever I wanted, and they could fuck right off!”

I snicker. “Yeah, that sounds like you back then.”

Craig chuckles too. “But then they gave me an ultimatum.”

“What ultimatum?”

“Either I break up with you, or they don’t pay for my college, they don’t let me live at home – they would basically cut me off, Daisy. I’d be completely screwed. My entire future.”

My head kind of goes on autopilot: I can’t stop nodding slowly over and over as I process everything he just told me, and my eyes are just sort of staring vacantly off into the distance at the red and green Christmas lights hanging around the window of the shop.

I can feel him waiting on me. He must be anxious – wondering what I’m going to say – but I’m not going to rush

my response just for him. After all, he kept me waiting and wondering for five years.

Finally, I look up. “Your parents aren’t just snobs, Craig. They’re assholes.”

There’s a pause, then Craig bursts out laughing. “Yeah, you’re right about that one.”

“So why didn’t you eventually call me or text me or something once you were away from them? Once you were at school? Or once you had graduated?”

“Honestly? I was afraid to.” Again, he lowers his gaze. “I knew how excited you were to go to prom. I was too. I really wanted to see you in that dress. And I just didn’t want to hear you all mad at me for screwing things up so badly. So I just...”

“Ghosted me?”

“Yup.” He shrugs, giving me the *I-was-an-idiot* look. “But hey, now I’m back, and somehow the universe brought us together again. And maybe, if you can find it in your heart to forgive me—?”

“Excuse me everyone!” a barista dressed as a reindeer calls out from behind the counter. “I’m very sorry, but we will be closing in five minutes! Thanks for coming in to join us tonight!”

“Oh, wow. I haven’t even had a sip of my latte yet. It’s still too hot!” I laugh.

“Well, I’ll tell you what,” Craig says. “It’s still kind of early. Why don’t we go over to my place, you can let your latte cool down, and we can both actually get sips of our drinks this time?”

Bad idea. Don't do it. That's what Marissa would tell me. But Marissa isn't here right now. She hasn't had to deal with his charm, his gentleman-like behavior, his dashing good looks, or his height and how he stands tall over every other man around him. I wonder if she'd feel as warm and tingly around him as I do right now.

"Okay," I reply as I stand up with my latte in hand. "But *just these drinks*. No cocktails or wine or any of that. Got it?"

Craig smiles. *God he's handsome.*

"Got it."

CRAIG

I CAN'T EVEN EXPLAIN what it feels like to have Daisy sitting beside me in my car on the way back to my apartment. Seeing her last night at the office party was shocking enough – especially while I was dressed as Santa – but now I'm even more shocked that she actually agreed to come home with me after the coffee shop closed. Especially after what I told her about my parents and why I ghosted her when I was supposed to pick her up for prom.

I thought for sure she was going to flip out on me and *maybe* even toss her latte in my face before storming out on me. But nope – she got in my car with me and now we're headed back to my place.

I'm the luckiest dress-up-Santa in the world.

Daisy was always beautiful back when we were dating, but I can't even believe how gorgeous she is now. I can barely keep my eyes on the road because all I want to do is stare at her.

Even under her winter layers, I can see her curves, her long legs that go up to her womanly hips, and her ample breasts beneath the coat protecting her from the winter's chill. All I want to do is tug down her zipper just enough to fit my hand underneath so I can get a feel of her.

Before I even realize it, we're at my place. I nearly go past the driveway because I'm so busy thinking about her. But I manage to pull in without looking like a drunk driver or something. I quickly hop out and go around to her side of the car and open her door for her. She smiles up at me as she gets out and takes my hand.

"Watch the ice," I tell her.

"What a gentleman." She smiles. *God is she gorgeous.* "But shouldn't you have taken us here in a sleigh and landed us on a roof or something and skipped all the ice? After all, you *are* Santa."

"My sleigh's in the garage having some work done to it." I grin as I lead her up the steps and inside. "Working the elves overtime. They're very upset with me."

Daisy laughs, and I feel my chest go warm. It's amazing how much I like making her laugh or just seeing her smile. It's like magic, and a very different sensation than I get when I bring my eyes to her hips as she walks past me into the apartment.

"So you can't just be dressing up as Santa, right?" she asks, hanging her coat by the door. "I mean, it must be fun having girls fawn over you and wanting to sit on your lap, but it can't be bringing in the bucks to afford a place like this."

"Oh, so you like my apartment?" I ask. I do happen to live in one of the fanciest buildings in town that just went up at the beginning of this year.

"I'm not even going to answer that," she replies, giving me a playful smile. "Seriously though, Craig. What do you do?"

We both kick off our shoes by the door and take a seat on the couch. I sip my green tea. It's as bland as ever. Just as I

like it. Daisy remembers suddenly that she has her latte in her hand and takes a sip. I watch her whole face light up.

“Good?” I ask.

She nods vigorously. “So good! Tastes just like Christmas!”

“Great.” I smile. “Well, back to what we were talking about, at school I got my law degree and will be heading to law school next year at Harvard.”

“Wow, smarty pants,” she teases.

“And regarding my family, I’m far more independent from them now. I make my own money in a small tech company that a few of my friends and I started up during our sophomore year helping advertisers optimize where to spend their money, and I just do the Santa thing for kicks.”

“Geez, Craig, is there anything you’re *not* good at?” Daisy asks, taking another sip of her latte.

“Taking girls to prom?” I suggest. We both laugh. “I still feel terrible about that, Daisy. We never got to have our prom dance. Our prom kiss...”

I’m pushing it. I know I am. But I just can’t help myself. Daisy is just too beautiful. It’s like I can feel a gravitational force from her body just tugging at me, and I’m completely helpless against it. There’s simply nothing I can do.

Her eyes lock with mine.

Five years. Five years that feel like fifteen.

“Our prom...*other things*,” she says back, her voice quiet.

That’s it. I can’t take it anymore. I set my tea aside and move in for the kill. Her lips are so plump, and there’s nothing

between us, so I just go right for them. If she moves away fine. But at least no one will be able to say I didn't try.

But she doesn't. She doesn't move away.

Our lips touch, and it's like fireworks exploding all around us. *Is this real? Is this really happening?*

I slip one hand inside her shirt and cup her breast. It's warm and soft, perky and feels like heaven in my hand. I feel myself getting hard quickly, my manhood pressing against the fabric of my pants. Daisy kisses me back, igniting my passions even further, and it sends me over the edge.

I tear at her clothes like an animal, unwrapping her like a gift left out for me beneath the tree. Christmas hasn't come quite yet, but she's my present, and I absolutely must have her *now*.

And I can if I want to, right? After all, I *am* Santa!

I press her back onto the couch beneath me as I undress her. She lets out a moan as I grasp both of her breasts and squeeze. They're like two perfect globes in my hands. My cock is swelled completely between my thighs now, almost painfully, screaming to be let loose. I didn't even realize how much my primal instincts had flared up inside me. I was so busy explaining myself and the last five years to Daisy that all I was focused on was her and whether or not she would accept my explanation. But now that that's over, all I can focus on is how badly I want her.

I slide a hand up her inner thigh, causing her to gasp and break our kiss. But at the same time, our eyes lock, and she looks up at me with an expression that goes right to my core. Lust, innocence, desire, expectation – it's all there. But most of all, trust.

She's waiting for my next move, and she trusts me enough to give herself to me despite the history between us. And that causes a spark to ignite in my heart like nothing I've ever felt before.

I let my lips graze gently against hers as I continue up her thigh with my fingers. Then I feel it: warmth, wetness, her womanhood nice and ready for me. I don't hesitate.

I slip my middle finger inside. I do it gently, giving her time to get used to it, but still the look on her face as it goes in is enough to nearly cause me to explode in my pants.

Her jaw drops, a moan escapes her lips, and she whispers my name. "Craig..."

I ease my finger in and out of her, curling up from the second knuckle, feeling that sweet spot that will drive her wild as I begin to tug my pants down with the other hand. I've got to get myself undressed now too.

Daisy starts to sway her hips slightly and pulls at my shirt.

"Give me all of you," she tells me.

You don't have to ask me twice.

I wriggle out of my shirt and toss it aside. I'm completely hard, my cock standing out straight like a spear ready to take her.

"You're so sexy," I growl, gazing down, taking in every inch of her body with my eyes. "I knew I was missing you for the last five years, but I didn't realize just *how much* I was missing."

Daisy's cheeks go rosy red as I lay myself down on top of her. I wrap my arms around her neck and pull her close as I press forward with my hips and enter her slowly. We both gasp

in unison. I feel her stretch as she accepts my cock, and her warmth and wetness cause a deep growl to rise up from deep within me.

“Oh, fuck, baby,” I groan into her ear as I pull her even closer to me.

“Oh my God, Craig,” she whimpers as I slowly press deeper, giving her everything I have to give until I’m all the way inside, right up to the base. “You’re so big. I can feel you all the way up in my stomach.”

“Does it feel good?” I ask as I begin slowly thrusting.

“So good,” she says with an adorable sigh as I brush back a strand of hair that has fallen across her face.

I pick up the pace now that she seems to have gotten used to it. She feels like absolute heaven. I’m already holding out to keep myself from coming. We lock lips again and kiss. My pulse is racing and my heart is pounding so hard inside my chest that I wonder if she can feel it against her breasts.

This is a kind of bliss I’ve never felt before. First being reunited with a girl I never thought I would see again, and then repairing something I never thought could be fixed between us. I’m so hard inside her I could chop down a tree with my dick, and the way Daisy keeps running her small, soft hands across my back as I fuck her just gets me going even more.

She’s a goddess. A dream. Being together with her again has me feeling things I never knew were possible.

This time, she’s never getting away. This time, I’ll never leave her. That’s one thing I’ve learned as I’ve grown into the man I am today: never make the same mistake twice. And I won’t. Especially not with Daisy.

My hands glide across her breasts, and I feel her tightening up on my cock. I know what's coming soon, which is good, because I'm almost there too.

“You're going to come for me, aren't you, baby?”

She moans and nods back, her lips pressed against my neck as she clutches on to my shoulders with both arms.

“Good. So am I.”

I fuck her faster, riding the razor's edge of lust that is about to send me over the edge. I'm *so close*. I just can't hold back any longer. She's too sexy – feels too good.

My cock flexes and jerks inside her. I spray as my balls begin to empty, unloading my warm, sticky seed as the rest of my body tenses up. Daisy cries out, and I feel her join me in ecstasy as her body trembles and she grabs on to me for dear life.

“I'm coming!” she cries out. “Oh my God, Craig, I can feel you! It's so warm!”

We writhe together, enraptured by each other, lost in orgasmic joy, until finally we come down together, clutching each other in our arms, sucking deep breaths of air like we both just got back from a run.

Finally, I brush her hair back and kiss her on her cheek. “Wow, that was incredible.”

Daisy smiles, her eyes closed, stretches, and smiles as she kisses my chin and wraps her legs around my waist. I could stay like this forever. “Imagine if we'd been doing this for five years.”

“I already feel guilty,” I groan, tickling her side. “Don't make it worse.”

She giggles and pulls the blanket I leave on the back of the couch over us. “Would you mind terribly if I passed out right now?”

“No, I would not,” I chuckle. “As a matter of fact, that sounds like a fantastic idea.”

I take the blanket and make sure it’s draped over us just right, then pull Daisy into my arms. She rests her cheek on my bicep like it’s a pillow, and I can’t help but smile as I gently run my fingers through her hair.

I can’t believe I found her again.

I was dressed up as Santa. I was supposed to be the one asking people what they wanted for Christmas, and here I am with the greatest gift I could imagine.

I WAKE up to sunlight coming in through the windows and nailing me right in the face. It’s that winter sunlight – the kind that bounces off the snow that feels like it’s been magnified a thousand times that makes you want to just crawl back under the covers and hide.

But then I remember I’m not in bed and I’m just under a single blanket on the couch. A smile creeps over my face as the events of last night come back to me, and I roll over, expecting to find Daisy sleeping beside me like the angel she is, but instead I find myself staring at some empty cushions.

I catch a blur behind me and swing around to see Daisy, fully dressed, glancing down at her phone, stepping into her shoes. She sees me looking at her and gives me one of those smiles you give someone when they’ve caught you doing something you didn’t want them to see you doing.

“Oh, hey,” she says, letting her hair fall across her face. “I didn’t want to wake you.”

“Nah, don’t worry about that,” I reply. “Where you headed?”

“Just work. I’ve got to go in, and I wanted to let you sleep.”

“Don’t be silly, I can drive you.” I start to get up, but she instantly comes over and presses a hand against my chest.

“That’s okay,” she says quickly. “I’ve already got an Uber on the way. It’s almost here. Hey, I had a really nice time last night. Thanks for the latte!”

“Yeah, no problem. So did I.” I lean in for a kiss, but Daisy twists away like she’s friendzoning me. Then she’s rushing out the door like she actually owns the company she works for and she’s late for a meeting.

I try to tell myself that she’s just late and really needs to get to work, but I’m no dummy. There’s something else going on here. Something upset her this morning – something about last night is weighing on her mind, and she isn’t talking to me about it. If I had to bet, I’d say it has something to do with that elf-eared friend of hers who came and yanked her away from the coffee shop that first time I took her out.

I really want to just rush out the door after her, but I’m still naked from last night, and I can hear a car out front pulling up to pick her up. Rushing out there with no clothes on (and in the snow) probably wouldn’t be the best way to go about talking to her right now, especially when she does have to get to work.

But that won’t be the last of this. There’s no way I’m going to just going to let things fall apart between us again. I’m

going to figure out what she's afraid of, and I'm going to fix it.

If she's worried she can't trust me, then I'm going to prove to her she can. Because the way I feel when I'm around Daisy is a feeling I can never let go of.

DAISY

I'M TREMBLING ALL OVER AS SIT in the back of the Uber on the way to work. And it's sure not the cold that's got me shaking either. It's the anxiety from what I just did back at Craig's house.

God, what am I even thinking?

I don't even know right now. Last night was magical. Just thinking about it starts heat waves rushing through my body. I told myself I'd just meet up with him for a drink – I even told Marissa, but then things just *happened*. The way his hands felt...the way his lips felt...the way he felt inside me...falling asleep in his arms...

I felt so safe again. I felt a way I haven't felt since my father died.

But then I woke up this morning, and it was like something had shifted in my mind. It was like a lever had been pulled, or a button had been pressed, or some secret compartment had been opened, and all these suspicious thoughts I had pushed back for that incredible evening just dumped onto me like a bucket of fish guts, and I suddenly felt like I had to just get the hell out of there.

And I know who I have to blame too.

Marissa.

She planted that seed in my mind with that story about her ex. She's the one who got me thinking about how Craig could be some secret, double-agent-bad-guy and how if I let myself fall for him again, he's just going to betray my feelings and leave me feeling emotionally deflated like a month-old birthday balloon.

Everything he told me made sense, though...for the most part.

I believed him when he said his snobby parents forbade him from seeing me anymore. When they said they would completely cut him off if he continued dating me. But I guess the fact that he listened to them and never got back in touch with me for the following five years is still kind of bothering me.

I mean, I get it – he was afraid of how that conversation between us would go, but still...to just leave me wondering like that? Not cool.

I want to look past it, though. I really do. Especially after everything that happened last night. It was like a dream or something out of a movie.

“Here you are, miss.” I look up and realize we've arrived at my building. I was so lost in my own thoughts that I wasn't even paying attention to the ride.

“Oh, thanks!” I smile, pushing my door open. “Have a nice day. Hope you don't get any drunks puking in your car!”

“That makes two of us!” He laughs.

I head up to the office, picking the skin by my fingernails – a nervous habit I've had since dad died as I continue to mull everything over that has to do with Craig. I try to focus on

something else, but it's impossible. He's the only thing on my mind.

It suddenly occurs to me that for the first time since my dad died, I actually enjoyed something Christmasy. The peppermint-mocha-latte that Craig got for me was actually really good, and I didn't get all annoyed or anti-Christmas about it when he asked me to get it with him. I wasn't sitting there in the coffee shop looking at the lights, thinking about my dad, wishing I was back home away from it all; I was just focused on Craig. Somehow, he'd managed to take my mind off everything I normally think about when the holidays come around. And that is one incredible feat in itself.

The elevator doors open, and as soon as I step out, I am instantly attacked by a crazy Marissa, who leaps at me like some kind of insane monkey creature.

"You slept with him, didn't you?" she hisses into my ear.

"What!?"

"You slept with him!" she repeats. I'm glancing around the office like a criminal on the lookout for the cops as I make my way over to my desk. "Didn't you?"

"What are you, my mom?" I ask, taking a seat. "Do I have to report to you on everything I do now or something?"

A smile breaks out on Marissa's face – a knowing, pleased-with-herself smile. She wags a finger at me as she leans up against the wall. "I *knew* it. You just couldn't stay away!"

"Would you stop?"

"Hey, I don't blame you," she laughs. "Look at the guy. He had every gal in the office swooning over him – wanting to sit

on his lap and tell them they'd been a naughty girl this year so maybe he'd punish them a bit."

"Oh my God," I sigh, rolling my eyes.

"But those were the ones who *didn't* have a history with him," she says. "Who *didn't* get stood up and ghosted by the guy. Who *don't* know what kind of potential for trouble he truly has."

"Look, it wasn't *just* about the sex, okay?" I whisper, dragging my chair closer to her.

"Uh huh." She smirks.

"Look, I'm serious! He took me back to the coffee shop and explained everything to me!"

"Everything?" she asks. "And you bought it?"

Something about her tone and the way she asks the question catches me off guard. "Bought it? I didn't *buy it*, Rissa. I listened, I processed it, and I asked myself whether it made sense or not."

This time, it's Marissa who's rolling her eyes. "Okay, and did it?"

"Yes." I nod. "For the most part."

"For the most part?"

I shift uncomfortably in my chair, trying not to think about the five years Craig had where he could have called me but didn't. So I may still be harboring a bit of resentment toward him about that – so what? It's not something I want to get into with Marissa about right now. Right now, I have to defend myself!

"You heard me," I reply, nodding. "You know what else?"

“What?” she asks.

“He paid my back rent. All of it. Without me even asking him for help.”

Marissa nods and smiles. “Ah, so he’s your sugar daddy?”

My jaw drops. “You did *not* just say that.”

Marissa shrugs. “Hey, if I were you, that’s what I’d keep him as for a while. Until you’re absolutely sure you can trust him not to break your heart.”

“Rissa—”

“Look, I just don’t want you to get hurt, okay?” she says, coming over and placing a hand on my shoulder. “Asshole ex-boyfriends are no fun. You know what *is* fun? Hanging out with your awesome friend. Me!”

With that, Marissa walks away from my desk and heads off in the direction of her cubicle. At that moment, a thought springs into my mind; what if part of the reason Marissa is trying so hard to convince me not to hang out with Craig is because she likes me being single so I can spend time with her? After all, I did turn down going out with her and some other girls from work just last night. Sure, she’s got the other girls to go with, but Marissa and I are a lot closer than they are. I shake my head. No, I really shouldn’t think something sinister like that about a good friend of mine. She’s just looking out for me I’m sure.

DAISY

THE WORK DAY seems to just crawl by like time has suddenly transformed into the world's slowest slug. I keep glancing at the clock on my phone, which of course doesn't help things one bit, hoping the next time I look, it will be time to go.

Despite the fact that we both do everything we can to avoid partaking in any kind of Christmas festivities during December, I need to go check on Mom and make sure she's all right. Her drinking during the holidays has gotten worse in the last couple of years, and I'm starting to get worried about her.

I don't know what it is – whether she thinks Dad's death is her fault, or whether she's upset about our family not being together like it used to be, or whether it's just how she handles this time of year like I handle it by avoiding everyone and everything that has anything to do with Christmas, and turning into basically a female Scrooge until the second week of January.

Either way, it's just another one of my responsibilities now – to go check in on Mom and make sure she hasn't let herself go too far, to see if she needs me to go pick her up anything from the store, and if things have gotten *really* bad, to take away some of her alcohol.

By the time the work end of the workday rolls around, I'm practically ready to break out of the office like a prisoner busting out of jail. I wave to Marissa, and she joins me in the elevator on the way down.

"So going over to Craig's for a little red wine and dick?"

"Would you shut up?" I ask, doing my best not to laugh as she smirks back at me. "I'm going to check up on Mom."

Marissa is basically the only person who knows about Mom, so she understands immediately what I mean when I say that and backs off.

"How do you think she'll be?"

I shrug. "Good, hopefully. But you never know with her, ya know?"

Marissa nods in a commiserating fashion. I've always gone to check up on Mom by myself, except for one time when I had to get a ride from Marissa because my car needed its oil changed or something – or maybe it was its oil filter, I can't remember – but that was the time my mom went off on me for taking away one of her vodka bottles, and Marissa could see her screaming at me from the driveway. So although she hasn't been through the whole experience of dealing with my mom with me, she's got a pretty good idea of what it's like.

"I could come if you want," she suggests.

"No." I shake my head. "That's okay. It's actually easier if I go on my own. I don't know why."

"Okay." She nods as the elevator stops in the lobby and the doors open. "I understand. But we can always meet up after, so let me know."

“Yeah, I will. Let’s just see how this all goes,” I say, letting out the most pathetic laugh in the universe.

I can’t help but think how strange and almost cruel the world is as I make my way to my car. I may hate the holidays and do everything I can to avoid Christmas, but there’s no denying that the snow falling lightly around me, the decorations in the shop windows and the sparkling lights hanging everywhere make for a beautiful setting.

It’s almost like a postcard. I should be out taking photos and enjoying myself, but here I am, emotionally scarred by the loss of my father, going to check in on my equally emotionally scarred drunk mother to make sure she hasn’t drunk herself to death.

Normally, I’m okay checking in on her. It’s always awkward and never something I *want* to do, but I’ve gotten used to it, and I treat it like just another one of those things you have to do now that you’re an adult. But today, as I drive over to her house, I feel off balance. I feel anxious. And I know exactly why that is.

Craig.

All those things he said last night about his parents looking down on her – on me – are running around in my mind like rabid little mice, chewing away at my brain. I feel judged, but judged by people who aren’t even here. People I haven’t seen in years. I feel like my mom is being judged, while at the same time, I’m on my way to go check on her and probably end up judging her a bit myself.

Were Craig’s parents right to force him to break up with me?

“Oh, come on, Daisy,” I groan at myself as I pull into Mom’s driveway. “Don’t be an idiot.”

Of course they weren’t. What kind of parent would do something like that to their son or daughter? It’s not like Craig was dating the son of a drug kingpin or a mafia boss or something. The just didn’t like my mom, and so they forced him to break up with me and cut me out of his life completely. And I think that makes them a couple of jerks!

It’s a very cold evening, and I wrap my jacket tighter around myself as I walk through the snow up to mom’s steps. She hasn’t done a bit of shoveling, which isn’t a good sign. I don’t even bother knocking; I just use my key and open the door and let myself in.

It’s warm inside – too warm for the amount of money she brings in working part-time at the grocery store and the subsidies she gets from the state. That means I’m going to have to lend her more money just to keep the heat on. It’s things like this that cause me to be behind in my own rent at my apartment.

“Mom, it’s me!” I call out, kicking off my shoes. There’s no answer, but I can hear the television in the living room, so I go in and find her sleeping on the couch, an empty bottle of peach schnapps on the coffee table in front of her. There’s another bottle of gin beside it. I take it and set it by my shoes to take out to the car later.

Some kind of trashy reality show is playing with the volume cranked. I find the remote and turn it down. Ironically, this wakes her up.

She rubs her eyes and glances up at me. “Daisy? What are you doing here?”

“Came to check on you, Mom.” I smile. “How are you feeling? Kind of hot in here, don’t you think?”

“Eh, you know how cold it gets this time of year,” she grumbles. “All that snow, all that ice. If I don’t keep the heat on, all that cold will get in here and turn me into a popsicle.”

I have to laugh a little, but it’s sad the way Mom thinks sometimes. She’s not making a joke; she truly believes what she’s saying.

I point to the empty alcohol bottle in front of her. “Been drinking a bit tonight, Ma?”

She waves a dismissive hand, takes the remote, and turns the TV back up to an intolerable volume. “Do you watch this show? It’s great. So much drama. See, *that* guy, Jeff, was dating *her*, but now they broke up because she slept with his best friend—”

“Mom!” I snap, snatching the remote away from her. *Calm down, Daisy. Don’t get angry.* I take a deep breath and close my eyes, then open them again. “I don’t want to hear about your show, I want you to answer my question. Did you drink all that tonight?”

Again, she waves her hand dismissively, then puffs air through her cheeks. “Oh, who can remember? All of it? Most of it? It’s the holidays, right? We’re supposed to be *celebrating!*”

I can hear the sarcasm in her voice. She’s screwing around with me. If I don’t like Christmas, my mom *really* doesn’t like it.

“It’s not good for you, Momma. You know that. You’ve got to cut back—”

“Wait a minute,” she says as she sits up. “Who’s the older woman here? Me or you?”

I see her reach for the space where her bottle of gin was, but it’s gone now, and she’s not sure exactly how she should react to that.

“You’re my mom, sure. But I’m also the one sending you money to keep your heat on—”

“Did you take my gin?” she interrupts, glaring at me, her eyes glazed and angry. “I had a bottle of it sitting right here.”

For a second, I think about just lying and telling her I don’t know what she’s talking about. But then something inside me flares up and tells me not to accept that – tells me not to back down. I don’t know why, but I know Craig has something to do with it. Maybe it was having to justify myself to Marissa earlier. I really don’t know what it is, but I do know that I’m not going to just hide from her on this one.

“That’s right, Mom,” I reply, folding my arms over my chest. “I did. You’ve had enough alcohol, and you don’t need any more. Your drinking has gotten *way* out of control.”

A shocked look comes over her face. She was *not* expecting that response.

“Who are *you* to say whether or not I am in control or out of control? You’re barely even here to notice!”

“I’m *working*, Mom,” I reply, doing my best not to shout. “Working so I can keep sending you money! And when I do come by, you’re either watching TV, moping around and don’t want to talk, or you’re passed out on the couch like when I came in just now!”

She shakes her head like she always does when she knows deep down, I’ve got her and she has nothing to say. Her next

move will be to try and make me feel like I'm just a kid again and I have to listen to her because she's older than I am and she's my mom.

“You're going to give me my bottle back, Daisy. It's *mine*, and you don't take things from other people.”

But it's not going to work on me. Not tonight.

“Am not.”

Quickly, I turn my back on her and walk out of the living room and over to the front door where I've left the bottle by my shoes. I know she's too drunk to follow me, so I simply slide into my shoes and step outside with the gin in my hand – but not before turning the heat down a few degrees on the thermostat.

“I'll see you later, Mom!” I call out, trying not to sound too combative, despite her mood and behavior. “I'll come check on you again in a couple days.”

I can hear her shouting something at me as I close the door behind me and walk to my car, but I honestly don't even want to hear it. It's probably not that kind, considering the state she's in right now, and she'll probably be apologizing to me for whatever it is the next time she sees me. If she remembers, of course.

How did things get to this? I wonder as I drive back to my apartment. At the time, losing Dad felt like it was the worst thing that could ever happen, and maybe it was. But as it turns out, it was just the start to a chain reaction that sent Mom's and my lives spiraling to where they are now, and I honestly don't know what to do about turning them around.

CRAIG

I'M NOT GOING to take this lying down. I'm not going to just let another gap form between Daisy and me. No way. I'm not going to sit back passively like I did before when I could actually do something this time to keep her close to me.

Maybe she doesn't trust me. Maybe that's what her friend told her, and maybe I can understand that. But I have to find a way to make her trust me again, and I'm going to figure out a way, because after all our time apart, seeing her again made me realize just how much of a fool I was to have not reached out to her during those five years.

And there's only so long you can blame your parents, isn't there?

Now that I've graduated, now that I have a scholarship to law school and am bringing in my own money, I'm not beholden to them. I don't have to do what they say anymore. If they want to cut me off for dating Daisy, then that's on them. But that won't change whether or not I end up becoming a successful lawyer – which I most definitely will.

I am *driven*. Nothing is going to stop me from achieving professional success. And I can only believe that having Daisy by my side, I will be even stronger.

It's only been one day that I haven't seen her, and I'm already missing her. I'm wondering how I managed to even make it a month, let alone five years like I did. I'm lying on my back on the couch, tracing the single, tiny crack in the paint on the ceiling above me (like I've been doing for the last half hour), debating on whether my next move is the right one.

Give her space, Craig. That's what part of me is saying. But the other part of me?

Get your ass over there now and show her you won't take no for an answer.

The problem is, I'm not sure which part of me I should listen to.

I do know that last night with Daisy was incredible – beyond incredible. I don't think I even have the words to describe it. When it comes to legal terminology, I'm fantastic. But when it comes to things like this – coming up with descriptions of things on my own – I'm absolutely horrible.

All I know is that last night was pretty much the best night of my life, and I was beside myself that Daisy accepted what I had to tell her and came home with me.

“Give her space,” I mutter to myself, tonguing the inside of my cheek. Something about that doesn't sit well with me, and I grunt unhappily. “No, get your ass over there and show her you mean business.”

That's it.

Smiling, I swing my legs off the couch and go put my shoes on. I am *not* going to wait on this. Who knows what could happen in the meantime – what other thoughts that friend of hers could put in her mind that could cause Daisy to

not want to see me? This is up to me now, just like it was up to me these last five years when I did nothing about it.

Time to man up, Craig.

I hop in the car and head for her apartment. She's out of work now, and unless she went out with the girls, that's where she'll be.

It's another cold evening, but just thinking about Daisy's naked body against mine last night has me feeling warm as I drive. Any hesitance I had in my decision has left me by the time I'm pulling up to her apartment and parking. I can see her light is on, which means she's most likely home.

I smile as I get out of the car and start walking up the front steps.

I've got that pseudo-nervous feeling I used to get when we first started dating and I wasn't quite used to hanging out with her yet. That feeling of wanting to impress her and also being just really excited to see her. I don't quite know how all this is going to go – especially with me just stopping by unannounced – but I know it's better than doing nothing.

Someone has left the front door to the building slightly cracked open, so I just head inside and take the stairs to Daisy's floor. I'm just about to knock on her apartment door when I hear a voice down the hall call out.

“Hey, there!” I glance up and see Daisy's landlady waving at me, a big grin on her face. “Taking your girlfriend out for a nice holiday meal?”

I get the distinct impression I'm being questioned and hit on at the same time.

“Not sure on our plans just yet.” I smile back, not giving anything away.

“Well, I’ve got some great green bean casserole in my apartment,” she replies, almost winking back at me. “If the two of you...or *you* would like any...feel free to drop by any time.”

Christ, she really is hitting on me, and she’s not even being subtle about it either.

“I’m actually allergic to green beans, but thanks!”

I turn away and raise my hand up to knock on Daisy’s door, hoping she’ll get the message, but as I do, the door opens to reveal Daisy, in full winter attire, looking like she’s ready to go out somewhere.

I waste no time and duck into her apartment for cover and shut the door behind me.

“Hide me!”

“Craig? What are you doing here?” she asks.

“Your landlady is like a lioness, you know that?” I ask, stepping away from the door.

“What? What are you talking about?”

“She’s hitting on me! She just invited me into her apartment for green bean casserole at *any time*.”

Daisy stares back at me, giving me a strange look for a couple of seconds before bursting into laughter. I follow her, laughing myself.

“She did *not* say that!”

“She did!” I insist. “She’s got a thing for me. I’m telling you.”

Daisy smiles, but it’s not her usual smile. There’s something lackluster about it. For a second, I think it might be

me and the fact that I just dropped by unannounced and maybe that made her uncomfortable, but then I take a deeper look and see that's not it. There's something bothering her.

“Daisy, what's wrong?”

My question seems to startle her. She forces a smile and shakes her head. “What? Nothing.”

“Come on, Daisy. I know you. I may not have seen you in a while, but I could always tell when something was eating at you, and I can still tell. Something's bugging you. So tell me what it is.”

Daisy sighs. “So you're still a mind-reader?”

I grin and put an index finger on each temple and squint. “Let's see...you're thinking about just how handsome I am and how you want to tell me what's wrong so I can help you with it.”

This pulls a struggling laugh out from Daisy's lips, but at least it gets her there. She practically rips her coat off as she kicks her shoes across the room and crashes down on the couch. I step out of mine, much more gently, and follow her and take a seat beside her.

“It's my mom,” she groans. “She's completely out of control, and I don't know what I'm going to do about it.”

“Out of control?” I ask after giving her a second to take a few deep breaths.

“Her drinking has gotten worse, she won't listen to me about anything, she's spending exorbitant amounts of money on the heat because she leaves it cranked all the time.” She lets out another deep sigh and drops her palm over her forehead then brings her eyes to mine. “Remember my back rent that you so nicely paid for me? Wanna guess where that money

was going when it *should* have been going to your fan-lady down the hall?”

“Sending it to your mom, huh?”

She nods and groans. “It’s like *I’m* the parent. Only I’m the parent she won’t listen to. So what good am I, Craig?”

“Well, kids often don’t listen to their parents,” I chuckle. “So there’s probably a lot of parents out there who know exactly how you feel.”

“Yeah, with teenagers for children. Not fifty-three-year-olds.”

“You’ve got a point there,” I reply, sliding closer. Despite the fact that we slept together last night, I’m still feeling a little hesitant getting physical with her right now. Maybe it has to do with how she left my place this morning. “So what do you think you’ll do about it?”

“God, I don’t know. I need to get her some help, but I don’t see her agreeing to that.”

“Well I could help you with that.”

Daisy turns and looks at me. I don’t think she was expecting to hear those words come out of my mouth.

“Help me? Wh-what do you mean?”

“Get your mom into a program.” I smile. “I actually have experience with that sort of thing.”

That gets her attention. She props herself up on her elbows, brushes her hair out of her face, and looks at me intently. “What do you mean *experience*?”

“Well, back in college, there was this guy, Max.” I can’t help but smile when I think back. “He was a great guy,

everyone loved him, especially when he was drunk and acting crazy. So what did he do? He started getting drunk *way* too much and all the time.”

Daisy nods. “I see.”

“Pretty soon, it became clear he couldn’t control it any longer. He started failing classes he should have been passing easily, and he was on the verge of flunking out of school.”

“That’s awful!” I smile. Daisy was always so sweet and so concerned about other people. That was one of the things I loved about her so much, and it’s so nice to see that quality hasn’t gone anywhere in the last five years.

“He and I were always close, so I was able to talk to him about it,” I continue. “It took some convincing, of course, and a lot of work, but I finally was able to get him into a program, and last time we spoke, he was two and a half years sober.”

I can see my story settling into her thoughts and the gears of her mind starting to crank and whir as she ponders my proposition. She always did look adorable when she was thinking about things, and that hasn’t changed either.

“You’d do that for me, Craig?” she asks. “You’d help me with my mom?”

“Of course I would, Daisy,” I reply. “And listen, I know what I did to you was wrong, and I know that friend of yours is telling you to be careful of me or whatever, but Daisy, I’d do *anything* for you.”

DAISY

CRAIG'S WORDS rock me deep down to my core. I don't even know how to process them.

First he shows up here completely unannounced, then he tells me he's willing to help me with my mother, and now he's just said something that only men in the movies say to women.

Am I dreaming? Am I actually dreaming?

"Pinch me."

Craig's beautiful eyes light up, and he laughs. "What?"

"Pinch me," I repeat, taking his hand and pressing it against my cheek. "Because I refuse to believe this is actually happening."

"I'm not going to pinch you, Daisy—"

I force Craig's thumb and index finger to squeeze my cheek until it hurts, but he quickly pulls away. He doesn't want to hurt me, and that just makes me like him even more. God, all those feelings I used to have for him back in high school are reigniting with such intensity. It's like they've been simmering there just waiting for more fuel to be added to them, and now, with Craig's return, they are absolutely raging like a fire ready to burn up the entire universe.

I didn't even fully realize how much I missed him until he showed up again. I guess I'd put those feelings behind me, or beneath me –buried them deep inside me like I tend to do with everything in my life.

If I never saw Craig again, I probably wouldn't have even let myself think about him more than a handful of times. But now, no matter what Marissa says, I'm absolutely falling for him again – more deeply than I ever fell for him before.

“Nope, still awake,” I tell him.

“Well, duh.” He smiles. “This would be a pretty specific dream if you actually *were* dreaming. I mean – me working as Santa doing office parties during Christmas time? If you were coming up with that out of nowhere, I'd be pretty concerned.”

We both crack up laughing. “That would be pretty random,” I admit. “But despite how shocked I was at seeing you that night – thinking back on it – you *did* look pretty damn good.”

“Yeah?” Craig smirks, flashing me that charming smile of his. “If you didn't know me – if we didn't have history – would you have come and sat on my knee?”

I can feel myself blushing. Why, though? Craig and I used to date. We slept together just last night. It's not like I should have anything to feel embarrassed about.

“Maybe,” I reply bashfully, looking down at my knee. “Would you have believed me if I'd told you I'd been a good girl?”

I feel the warmth of his hand first before I feel the rough, callused skin touch my chin as he lifts my face to look at him. “I would hope you'd been a good girl. Because that would mean you hadn't been with anyone else but me.”

Something about his words grips me. It's like a set of chains have been draped over me, wrapping me up to connect me to him. Chains I never want to escape from either. Suddenly I feel like I've been bound to a home where I've always meant to belong.

"Craig...I haven't," I say softly. "I haven't been with anyone but you."

His expression changes, and his eyes fill with excitement and desire. "You haven't? Are you telling me the truth, Daisy?"

"Of course I am," I reply. "You know how hard it was for me to even date you, thanks to my trust issues with men, so when you left...that was it for me."

Craig's lips part like he's going to respond, but he says nothing. Instead, he leans in and kisses me. My whole body goes pliant beneath him. I accept his kiss and lean back, letting him know that I am his, asking him for more and at the same time, telling him that he can do whatever he wants to me.

He presses his body down against mine, and I revel in the warmth, the weight, the musculature that traps me beneath him. As he applies more pressure, I instinctively lift my hips to grind up against him. My raw instincts are overpowering me now. I have no choice but to obey them. No reason to even think about questioning them.

I trust this man. I trust Craig.

I want him in my life more than anything.

I cry out as he grips my hips and flips me over onto my stomach. He does it with such ease it's like I weigh nothing to him, and that just tugs at every feminine urge and instinct I have inside of me in a way I've never felt before.

In response, I tilt my hips up and glance back at him over my shoulder just in time to watch him, eyes full of lust, as he grabs my pants and pulls them down to my ankles, taking my panties with them.

And then he spanks me.

“God, look at that ass,” he growls.

I nearly have a heart attack. I don’t know what to do. Craig has never treated me like this before, but I love it. I absolutely love it. I feel like a stick of warm butter that’s melting under the sun as my lungs spasm, causing me to gulp down air as my heart begins to pound like one of those old steam engines.

Sparks burst from every one of my nerve endings, and I grasp at the couch cushions, trying to just grab hold of something to anchor myself as Craig licks and nibbles his way up my inner thighs. When his tongue reaches my sex, I bury my face in the fabric and scream.

I can feel his lips twist into a smile, even as his tongue moves up and down on my most tender of tender spots. My most sacred of sacred. Fire lights in my toes and spreads quickly up my body, taking me over quickly as Craig grips my ass and spreads me open, giving him an even better angle to pleasure me.

I’m barely even able to keep myself together at this point. Every warm, wet pass of his tongue across my clit is like pure heaven raining down on me. I can’t hold it any longer. Euphoria grips me, and my climax crashes into me like a torrential wave intent on sweeping me into the sea.

Every muscle in my body goes stiff. The air is forced from my lungs as I completely stop breathing. Craig, who seems to be able to read my body language perfectly, stops moving his

tongue and simply applies pressure, holding it right where it needs to be, allowing me to ride out the rush of wonder until I finally come crashing down from what has to be the most intense orgasm of my life.

“Good girl.” I can hear him stripping off his clothes behind me as I suck air back into my lungs and try to come back down to Earth from where it is up in space that Craig just sent me. I’m just about to roll over onto my back to face him when I feel his thigh on the side of my hip. Then I feel his other thigh on the side of my other hip. And then I feel *him*, pressing hungrily against my entrance.

I didn’t realize just how wet I was until I feel him slide inside me, spreading and stretching me with his thickness. And he does so this time with one strong, demanding thrust, taking me all at one time. I can feel his hunger and lust with that one strong movement.

“Oh my God!” I cry out as Craig crashes into me with his wonderful, powerful thrusts. Every one of them causes those same sparks across my nerve endings to go brighter and brighter. He’s so thick, so big, slamming against that spot inside me that drives me wild with the crown of his cock.

I whimper as he lifts my shirt and takes my breasts in both hands. I feel his lips on that sensitive spot where my neck meets my shoulder and instinctively turn to meet his kiss as he continues pumping faster and faster.

“This is for those five years, Daisy,” he whispers, our bodies locked together in heavenly intimacy. “This is for all the mistakes I made and how I will make it all up to you.”

He pumps faster, filling not only my body with his manhood, but my soul with his words and his pledge. “I swear

I'll be there for you. I will never make the mistake I made again, Daisy. Never. I love you."

My whole body explodes as his words hit me – the same time causing my second orgasm to go off and rock me to my core. Every muscle in my body seizes up and trembles. I grip his thick, striated bicep and hang on for dear life, my eyes locked on his.

"Did you hear me?" He grins, no doubt feeling my sex squeezing down on his.

"Y-yes," I gasp. "I love you too, Craig."

Apparently that was all he needed to send him over the edge too. The next thing I know, Craig is exploding inside of me, his cock flexing and spasming, spraying his hot, sticky load deep into my sex.

"That's what I needed to hear, baby," he whispers, pulling me close, threading his fingers through my hair. "You're mine, Daisy. Mine again."

My waves of pleasure rush through me as my hips buck against his. I take all he has to give me, relishing in the feeling of being so, *so* full. Finally I come down and realize that I'm starting to cry. Not completely, but my eyes are swelled with tears that are just on the verge of spilling down my cheeks.

For a moment, I feel silly, but then I think about just how much has happened in the last few days, and I give myself a break.

"That was amazing," Craig says, caressing my cheek. "I didn't go too hard on you, did I?"

"No." I smile.

"Are you sure?"

“I’m sure,” I reply, wiping my eyes clean. “I would have told you. You’re sweet for asking, though. How can one man be so sweet and so big and manly and...” I make a silly face and growl at him, doing my impression of how I see him, then raise my eyebrows.

Craig chuckles and shrugs. “What can I say? I guess I’ve just got it all down.”

He leans in and kisses me, and I snuggle deep against his chest, feeling so safe and protected.

This is where I belong.

“Five years,” I whisper. “Never again, right?”

“Never again,” Craig says instantly. “I promise.”

EPILOGUE

CRAIG

FIVE YEARS LATER...

IT'S warm in the house, but it must be a real chilly night as I look outside and watch the snow fall. The trees are still covered in a layer of soft, milky white from the flurries we had last night. I guess I'll have to shovel the steps and the walkway again, but I don't mind. There's something peaceful about working outside in the winter. Everything's so quiet. The snow just insulates everything – stops the sound from bouncing everywhere. I like it.

Halloween used to be my favorite holiday, but it's Christmas now, and that's not because I go around dressing up like Santa and making girls who work in offices happy either. Those days are long gone.

I'm a married man now. A happily married man with an amazing three-year-old daughter and the most incredible wife in the world. I have my law degree, and I'm working as an associate attorney at a very distinguished firm here in Boston. I really don't see how things could be going any better.

“Honey, are you going to make me drag you down to the party? Everyone's waiting.” I turn to see my wife, dressed up as Mrs. Claus, a Christmas cocktail in her hand, standing in

the doorway behind me, and smile as my chest fills with joy. “You know, it used to be me that would hide in the back room during the Christmas festivities.”

I walk right over to her, slip my arm around her waist, and pull her up against me. I’ll never tire of how warm and soft she is, but seeing as how we have company downstairs, I have to restrain myself from grinding against her and getting myself excited. Five years together and I still feel like a horny teenage boy when I get my hands on her or see her walking around in something that shows off her sexy curves.

“I’m sorry, baby, I just came up here to answer a quick work e-mail, then I looked out the window at the snow and just sort of got lost in my own thoughts.”

“Yeah?” She gives me one of those adorable smiles I love that just melts me. “What kind of thoughts were those?”

I smile back and wrap my other arm around her, careful not to spill her drink. “Thoughts about you mostly. About our life and just how lucky I am.”

“Stop, you’re going to make me cry.”

I lean in and give her a gentle kiss on her soft lips. “Well, it’s true.”

I hear the soft pitter-patter of footsteps that can only belong to one person: my sweet daughter.

“Daddy, Daddy!” Caroline cries out. I brace myself as she throws herself against my leg. “Come downstairs, it’s tea – it’s tea time!”

Daisy makes that little noise she always makes when she’s taken by just how cute our daughter is. I can barely handle it myself as I reach down and lift her into my arms.

“Tea time?”

“Uh huh!” She nods.

“Don’t you mean *tree* time, honey?” Mommy asks.

“Yeah!” Caroline yelps happily, tossing her arms in the air over her head. My daughter’s happiness brings me such delight. I look over at Daisy as we take the stairs down to the living room. She’s grinning ear to ear.

The voices downstairs grow louder as we reach the bottom of the stairs and turn left down the hall. Everyone is laughing and having a good time, which just causes my smile to grow. I can feel Caroline squirming to be let loose. She’s so excited about decorating the tree with everybody, so I set her down and put an arm around Daisy, and we both watch as she scampers off, waving her arms shouting, “Tea time! Tea time!”

We enter the living room a few seconds after her, where Marissa, my parents, and Daisy’s mom are all gathered around the tree, discussing the best course of action as far as the lights and decorations go.

As usual, Daisy’s mom is being the most vocal, followed by my dad. My mom is nodding a lot and sipping her glass of wine but not really saying much. While she may be a bit of a snob, my mom isn’t the most creative. She’ll just mostly end up backing up my dad on whatever he says and chip in with the actual decorating part, but she won’t have much to say when it comes to the brainstorming aspect of it all.

Marissa turns when we both come in the room and smiles. To this day, I still feel a sense of relief and happiness when she smiles at me, knowing that she was once distrustful of me when I first reentered Daisy’s life.

“There they are!” she says, loudly enough to get everyone else’s attention. “Now we can finally get to it!”

The parents turn around, and instantly Daisy’s mom rushes over to me, grabs me by the sleeve, and pulls me over to the tree.

“Okay, we need your opinion here, Craig. Do you think we should have white lights and have them start at the top and coil down counterclockwise and do green and red lights going up in a clockwise fashion? Or *just* green and red? Because you can’t do a Christmas tree without green and red or it looks like a window at Macy’s. At least that’s what I think!”

I have to stop myself from laughing. I love Daisy’s mom, I really do. This is her fourth Christmas with us now. Sadly, we weren’t able to make the first Christmas Daisy and I spent together work, as she was still drinking and still avoiding everything that had to do with the holidays, but as I promised Daisy, I worked with her, and we were able to get her mom into a program, and as of this December, she’s just over four years sober.

“Wow, I’m not sure, Shelly,” I reply, pretending to ponder her question. I really think both would look fine. I turn and motion to Daisy to come join me. “What do you think, babe?”

“I think green and red,” Daisy replies instantly. I chuckle. She always has an opinion. Just like her mom. “I’m not a huge fan of the white.”

“I don’t mind white,” my dad chimes in. “What do you think, Caroline? Do you like white lights?” My dad has really taken a liking to my daughter over the years and always makes sure to include her in everything.

Caroline looks up at the tree, then over at me like she's been stumped on a Jeopardy question. "I...yes!?"

My daughter's adorable response draws a laugh from the crowd. Sometimes I think she'll grow up to be a standup comedian.

"Marissa?" I ask.

"Hey, I don't care!" she replies, stuffing another one of my mom's gingerbread men cookies into her mouth. "I'm just here for the drinks and the grub!"

"I am *so* glad you like those, dear," my mom says. I can tell she means it too. My mom and Marissa have become quite friendly as well. I think it has something to do with both of them always thinking they know what's best for other people. But hey – as long as they don't steer that habit in my direction, I'm fine with the two of them being as friendly as they like.

It took a bit of work getting my parents to come around on my relationship with Daisy, but a few months after we started dating again, I let them know that if they ever wanted to have a relationship with me as their son again, they were going to have to accept her and understand that she was going to be a part of my life forever.

They tried to fight me on it, but I just refused to back down, and I think my dad respected me for that. He came around more quickly than my mom, who kept telling me I needed to find a girl from a "more respectable family," but once Shelly got into her program and it became obvious that Daisy and I were not going to break up, my parents started to change their view on things.

We didn't do a full Christmas with them the first year, but the next year we did, and it was incredible. The next year we

just combined everyone into one big celebration with all the families, and now that's basically how we do things now. We just pick a house, get everyone together there, and celebrate the holidays like one big family. This year Daisy and I are hosting. I was a little nervous at first. I thought it would be a lot of work and didn't want to go and mess things up and let anybody down, but Marissa and Daisy helped get things set ahead of time, and everything came together just perfectly.

Who would have thought that my wife, a woman who used to hate Christmas, is now not just celebrating the holidays with her family, but is also helping to set things up and is even dressing up like Mrs. Claus? What a transformation.

"Okay, I've got the lights!" my mom says, tugging a string of lights from one of the boxes of decorations I set out earlier. "At least...I think these are the right lights."

"Yes, those are the right ones, Ellen," Daisy replies. "That other string is missing some bulbs and won't work if you plug it in."

"Tea time!" Caroline cries out.

"Tree time, honey," Daisy laughs.

"Tree time," she repeats, reaching into the ornaments box and retrieving a red bulb with a big smile on her face.

"Okay, let's get started then, shall we?" I say, the warmth of the moment taking me over.

"Yeah!" Caroline giggles, rushing over to the tree, her bulb in hand.

I take Daisy's hand and pull her to me, giving her a hug that's appropriate in front of the parents but also getting her close enough so that only she can hear what I whisper in her ear.

“Five years. Can you believe it?”

She smiles back at me, and I see the tears forming in her eyes. “Yes, I can.”

“Do these last five together make up for the five I was gone?” I ask, feeling my heart expanding in my chest as the warmth of my love for her swells within me. Sometimes I wonder how it’s possible to love someone this much. Sometimes, at moments like this, I feel as though I’m about to completely explode with just how much I love her.

I see the playfulness sweep into her gaze as she wipes away her tears and looks up at me. “I don’t know,” she whispers. “But if you keep doing what you’re doing, I think you might.”

“So you like what I do to you?” I ask, keeping my voice extra quiet.

“You know I do.” She smiles, squeezing my shoulder.

“Well later tonight, when Caroline’s in bed...” I give her a silly little wink that always makes her laugh.

“Sounds like a plan, Santa.”

“It’s going to be tough to wait until tonight, Mrs. Claus. But I’ll do my best.”

I wrap my arm around her and take her back over to the tree, where we join the rest of the family and begin putting up the decorations.

What a journey we’ve been through. I thought when I left the first time that I’d blown it with her forever. But thankfully, that wasn’t the case. Thankfully, fate brought us back together, and my love was able to forgive me. Thankfully, I was able to prove myself to her, and we were able to build a life together.

Because truly, I don't know where I would be without her.

I'd have a career, sure. I'd be successful, sure. But would I be happy? Would I be fulfilled? Absolutely not.

She's given me love, she's given me Caroline, and I'll spend the rest of my life giving her my love and doing everything I can to keep her safe and happy.

Daisy, my Christmas gift.

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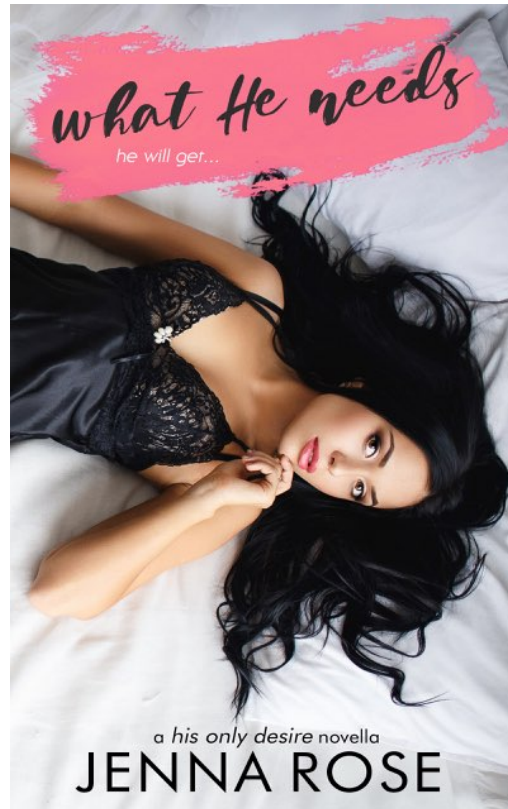
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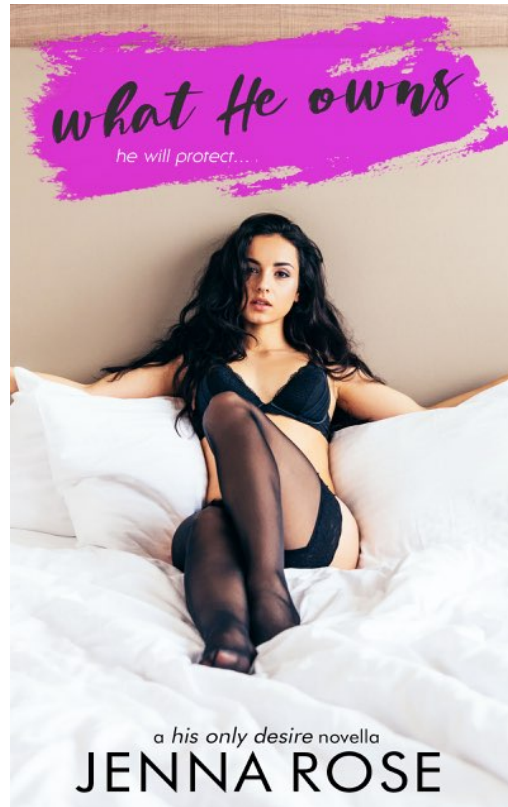
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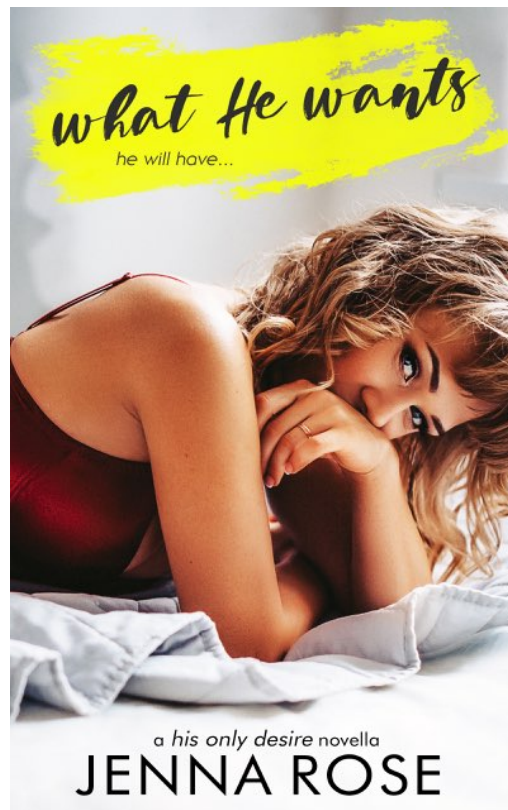
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