



Two
CHRISTMASSES

Anne Brooke

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I SLIPPED the letter into my jeans pocket the moment I saw it, feeling the faint crackle of paper between my fingers. Didn't need to ask who it was from, the bastard. Bloody Marty. He'd thought I wouldn't be able to stop Jake from reading it, but I'd left early, laughing off my boyfriend's surprise and catching the first tube up into town. Beating the weekday Christmas shoppers. Now I was here at Jake's office, rifling through his mail tray, trying to stop my world from blowing apart.

It had been a stupid thing to do. I knew it. *Mental note to self: never agree to see an old boyfriend and, if you have to, whatever you do don't go drinking with him. Especially not in the Heaven nightclub.* God knows what had possessed me anyway. Even though Jake was a good ten years older than Marty, he was far better in bed—by miles. You weren't supposed to admit that kind of stuff these days, were you? But it was true. Jake always took his time. I liked that. Even now, the thought of him doing the kind of stuff he did with me made my cock push against my fly. I shook my head and tried to ignore it. Couldn't afford to be slowed down by anything.

Because I liked Jake. I mean *really* liked. Since I'd met him—early spring at his work of all places—my life had improved beyond all belief. I was off the drugs, almost. I'd gone easy on the drinking, and even the boss was smiling at me more. Now and then. Not only that but, what was rare for me, I hadn't messed around with anyone apart from Jake since we'd been together.

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Not until last week, that is. Bloody *bloody* Marty. How could I have been so stupid? And what the hell was Jake going to do when he found out? I couldn't bear the thought of losing him, couldn't begin to imagine it. Whatever the cost, I had to stop him finding out.

I made a quick search of the rest of the mail on my boyfriend's desk, found nothing else with Marty's handwriting. So I sat down on Jake's executive chair and took out the letter. When I glanced at the clock, it showed 7:30 a.m. I knew Jake usually got here at 7:45, and his secretary arrived at eight. Unless there was something urgent on. Today I hoped there wasn't. I fingered the letter. I should just shred it, cut the bastard out of our lives, try to find some way of stopping him doing this again, God knows how.

I shouldn't have read it.

But I had ten minutes before I needed to leg it, and the next thing I knew I was tearing open the envelope, hands trembling, and unfolding the paper inside.

Dear Jake,

You don't know me but my name's Marty Smithson and I used to know Danny. I gather you're a straight-up kind of a bloke, so I won't mess with you. You think Danny's clean from the drugs now, but I think you should know he isn't—at least not by the amount of skunk he smoked outside Heaven when I met up with him last week. Thursday night, if you're interested. Don't know what you were doing then but I sure as hell know you weren't doing Danny. That's because I was—I like revisiting old pastures once in a while. For your information, we did it twice—once in the Gents' and once outside, by the bins. He was up

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for it both times. Maybe he's told you all this, though, in the new, civilized, totally honest life he apparently has with you? I certainly hope so.

With every good wish

Marty Smithson

As I read, I felt my face color up and my hands start shaking. God, the bastard. I could just see his smug smile while he wrote it too. If he were here now, I'd wipe that smile off his face. Big time.

As soon as I'd finished the letter, I tore it into as many pieces as I could and put my head into my hands. A small groan escaped me. The trouble was Marty was right; I'd been out of my head that night, and I'd have been up for it with the first bloke who came along. I should never have let myself get into that state, and I should never have been out with Marty anyway. And from the sound of what he'd written, it didn't seem like he'd be giving up on this one so easily either.

My own fault. Again. If I hadn't dumped him like I had just after I met Jake, then maybe he wouldn't be doing this now. Because I hadn't been nice. I'd been a class one bastard about it, so I was probably getting what I deserved. I'd been drugged up at the time then too; that was the only thing that could explain it. I didn't usually make a habit of being cruel to my exes. Now, though, all that crap was coming back to haunt me.

I should go. No time for moping.

Scraping back the chair, I sprang to my feet and gathered up the scraps of paper, stuffing them into my jeans pocket again to get rid of them later. It felt like they were burning a hole through the denim. At the same time, Jake's office door swung open, and his PA, Miranda,

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marched in, all high-heeled shoes and executive calm.

Her eyes widened when she saw me, and she stood stock still, holding her PDA a little closer to her chest as if I might be about to leap over the desk and mug her for it.

Mind you, I couldn't blame her reaction. Next to her, I must have looked like a tramp. Second-best jeans, jumper, unbrushed hair and the beginnings of stubble I hadn't got round to shaving yet.

"Hi." I stumbled sideways, banging my knee on the table edge as I did so and trying not to swear. "Didn't expect you yet. Sorry to startle you. Just thought I'd give Jake a surprise, leave him a message, you know? But then I... I decided against it...."

Even I realized how pathetic that sounded. How very unlikely.

Miranda glanced 'round the room, presumably to check I'd not taken anything I shouldn't. She then pursed her lips and tried to smile. Almost as if she'd decided to be generous to the no-hoper street life that had just crawled out of her boss's office. Snooty bitch. She'd never liked me.

Still, I couldn't blame her for that now. I didn't like me much either.

"Hello, Danny," she said, somehow making my name sound like a newly discovered crime. I wished I had that talent. Could come in handy when I next saw Marty. "You should have spoken to me first. I'm sure I could convey any messages you might have far more easily."

"Yeah, sure. I'll remember that for next time, thanks, Miranda."

I swaggered to the door with all the self-confidence I didn't feel, gave her my brightest smile, and left. I could feel the steely fire of her gaze on my back all the way through the open-plan office, past the enormous gaudy Christmas tree, and toward the lift door. I was only

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glad I didn't knock into any other ruddy piece of office furniture. I'd have bet a good couple of tenners that she was busy planning to disinfect Jake's desk and chair after I'd gone. The cow.

As it was, I only just made it to the corner of the street before seeing my boyfriend himself arrive. He was frowning, mobile clutched to his ear, and didn't see me. But I would have given anything to kiss that frown away, smooth down that glorious fair hair, and take the both of us back to the middle of last week when everything was fine and life was good.

I didn't do any of those things. Instead I walked to work.

On the way, I rang Marty. His voice mail clicked in.

"Look," I said, struggling to keep my voice calm. "What happened between us on Thursday. I'm sorry for it. And I'm sorry for the way I treated you earlier in the year too. It was appalling, and you've got every right to be angry. But there's no need to involve Jake. We... we need to talk about this. Ring me. Please. For God's sake."

I ended the call and kept on walking, trying not to think too hard. The heat on my skin in spite of the crisp air told me this wasn't over. Not by a long, long way.

Twenty minutes later, I was opening up the office for the small catering suppliers I worked for. Not much of a job and I spent most of the time on the telephone firefighting, but it paid the bills and it was the only reason I'd met Jake at all.

The boss wasn't happy when I got in. As Robert was, as always, the only other person in the office apart from me, that didn't bode well for the day.

"You're late," he mouthed in the middle of his telephone call.

"Sorry," I mouthed back. I sat down at my desk and tried to get

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on with the job.

All in all, I wasn't that bad at it. I might not have been much to look at, but for some reason I could sweet-talk people over the telephone into giving the business a chance. If only I could sweet-talk Marty into leaving us alone. Jake and I, we meant something. Didn't we? I'd met him in March, when one of our regular clients had come up against some last-minute difficulties with the equipment they needed to run a management event, and I'd been dispatched with the company van carrying several boxes of wine glasses and thirty burgundy tapered catering candles to sort them out.

The chef at the Holston Hotel wasn't the laid-back sort—were any of them?—and so before I knew it, I was being shepherded into the dining area, a tea towel was thrust into my hands, and I was wiping glasses and laying them onto creamy white tablecloths like a pro while the rest of the staff ran around in an atmosphere of barely contained panic. Or almost like a pro anyway. Thank God someone else turned up to arrange the candles. I was never any good with fire.

As it was, I'd only just finished sorting it out when the first of the guests started arriving, all management, out and ready to party. Couldn't say I blamed them. A day's worth of high-maintenance team building would be a day's worth too long for me. I clocked Jake at once, appreciating his long lithe body and that swept-back hair. Eyes to sink into as well, I remember thinking, if I ever got close enough. I allowed myself the privilege of a few more glances on my way out and, to my surprise, at the last of them his eyes caught mine and he gave me a slight but unmissable smile. The heat flared in my skin and my heart beat faster. I didn't pursue it though, not in front of a roomful of strangers and when attempting to look professional in front of a client. Robert would have killed me otherwise.

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At the door though, my luck proved to be in. One of the waiters came racing toward me, his bow-tie askew and his hair looking like it would need a good comb before the evening was out.

“Danny? Danny Brigson?”

“Yeah? That’s me. What’s up?”

“Chef says we’re still short of staff. Would you mind giving the barman a hand with the drinks? We’ve got two parties in tonight. We’ll pay you.”

I nodded. Frankly I could do with the cash and, even then, the chance to see a little more of Jake had brought the smile to my face.

I worked like a dog that evening. The crowd were eager to celebrate, and the empty glasses kept on coming back. And back. Every now and again, I saw Jake and, once, our hands touched when I refreshed his wine. A good Pinot Noir, which made me smile. He didn’t strike me as a Chardonnay man.

It was way past midnight when he finally gave me the eye. God knew I’d been making what I wanted obvious enough—serving him first when I could, even though that was a real no-no in the secret Barman’s Code. Anyway, at a quarter past midnight, I looked across at my fellow barman, a bloke called Arnie who seemed like he’d been around the block a few times. And some.

“Is it okay if I...?”

He grinned. “Sure. It’s easing off now. I think I can cope. Besides, it looks as if *you’ve* got business to attend to.”

I smiled back. “Yeah, if I’m lucky, but for God’s sake, keep it quiet.”

“My lips are sealed. Not my bag, but live and let live, eh?”

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I made my way out of the bar, only needing to glance back once to make sure Jake was following. I wondered how long it would take him to talk to me and what he might do or say, whether I would need to take charge to get things moving.

I needn't have worried.

In the corridor between the hall and the Gents', I found myself being pushed back against the wall, and then warm fingers on my face, and Jake's tongue in my mouth. He tasted of wine and lemons. I kissed him back. No, I did more. I pulled his shirt free and ran my hand up his spine, desperately seeking skin. I groaned into his mouth as if I'd been waiting for this for a lifetime and had almost given up hope it would ever happen, even though I'd only seen him for the first time tonight. I pulled his body toward mine and pressed my straining dick against his legs, feeling his answering hardness against my own.

I swear it was the best kiss I'd ever had up until that point. Better than any sex I'd had or even dreamed of. It lasted forever. It was way too short.

When we finally pulled apart, we were both gasping. I couldn't take my eyes off him. While I wiped my mouth, my fingers trembling, still relishing the taste of him on my lips, he recovered enough to speak.

"Jesus," he said, and his voice was shaking too.

We spent that weekend together. The whole of it, most of it in his bed, though occasionally we had to eat or go to the bathroom, of course. But each second I spent away from his body, away from *him*, stretched out like an impossible desert, and I couldn't wait to get back to him.

I loved the way he touched me. Hell, he didn't even need to touch

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me for me to get hot. He simply had to look at me. I loved the feel of his body on mine—the sheer *physical* weight of him pressing me down. I loved his fingers stroking my skin, his tongue on my dick, and the way his dick felt inside me. The way he took it so slow it made me almost beg for him to finish me off. Honestly, I would have been happy for him not to use any protection right from the start; the way I felt then it wouldn't have mattered at all. I just wanted to feel his spunk as deep within me as he could get it. But he insisted. It was only later we went bareback.

From there it didn't take much for me to move in, become part of his life. The only negative thing I remember from that time was the row I had with Marty. Leaving him proved to be vicious, and I was just at fault as he was, pulling no punches. Until then I'd never realized it was anything more than a casual fling, but fight we did. I told him I was leaving in his living room. He gazed at me and I noticed the specks of saliva at the corner of his mouth, the way the sunlight from the open window behind him lit up his dark hair. He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his jeans but said nothing. The wind blew one of his line of family snaps on the mantelpiece down onto the thin blue carpet, but he paid it no attention. I took a step forward to retrieve it for him, and it was then that he spoke.

“Leave it.”

I stopped at once. “Okay, but I was just—”

“No. Leave it. So you've found someone else?”

“Yes.” I could see he was sweating now. “Look, I'm sorry, but it was never anything serious, what we had, was it?”

A sudden pain on my mouth and the next thing I knew I was flat out on the floor with Marty scrabbling on top of me, tearing at my skin and punching my face. And all the time he was swearing at me, called

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me a bloody bastard and a wanker. We rolled from side to side together, each trying to gain the advantage, slamming into the sofa and then back into the wall. I tried to reason with him, but it was no good. After a few minutes of this, my nose was blood-soaked and my stomach felt sore. Finally I managed to grab his hands, knee him in the balls, and push him away. He let go with a groan and started to sob.

“For God’s sake, Marty,” I muttered, putting as much space between us as I could. “For God’s sake.”

I wiped my face, and the blood smeared over my fingers. Whilst trying to catch my breath, I pulled my handkerchief from my pocket and thrust it into Marty’s grasp.

“For God’s sake,” I said again.

I waited until his crying had stopped, and then I got up. “Look, I’ll go then. Okay? I’m sorry. I didn’t know you felt like this, I swear it. I-I’ll just go.”

“Yes. You do that, you bastard.” Unexpectedly his hand gripped my arm, causing a bruise that would last for a week. “You’ve always done exactly what you wanted when you wanted it anyway. But don’t think you can go that easily. I’ll pay you back. Maybe not now, but at some point. Just you see.”

His eyes were shining now, but not with tears. I’d never seen him look more determined. Trying to ignore the way I’d started to tremble, I shook him off, stood up, and left without another glance.

I was still trembling when I made it back to Jake’s flat, and I only really stopped when I found myself in his arms. It was always the place I felt most at home. I swore then I’d forget about it and simply get on with my life.

Well, my own stupidity and thoughtlessness had come back to

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haunt me now, hadn't it? Now I suppose he'd want to go back to using condoms again, if he found out what I'd been up to. Not that I'd been stupid with Marty; I'd been sober enough to make sure I wasn't, just... but even so...

"Danny?"

My boss's voice brought me out of my meanderings with a jump, and I knocked yesterday's unwashed coffee mug off my desk. It broke into almost perfect halves. Robert ignored it and fixed me with a firm but perceptive stare.

"Aren't you well? Is there something wrong?"

"No. What makes you say that?"

His eyes narrowed and a frown creased his forehead, a sure sign he knew I was lying. "Easy. You've forgotten to shave, your hair's not seen a comb at all today, and you look like it's a long time since you last got any sleep. Are you sick?"

I ran my hand across my chin, feeling the bristles against my palm. "Sorry. No, I'm not sick. I'm just...."

Just what? I thought. What the hell did I think I was going to say to my boss at this point anyway? After all, I couldn't tell him the truth. I couldn't say I was terrified I was about to lose the bloke I loved because I'd got plastered, smoked some skunk (pretty damn good skunk actually), and screwed around with a bloke I used to go out with but didn't love. Robert wouldn't react well to any of that. Not that he had anything against gays; he knew about Jake and me. He simply didn't like it when personal life made its way into work life. And who was to say he was wrong? Today I didn't much like it either.

All of which explained why I gave him my brightest smile and trotted out the answer he really wanted to hear. "No, it's nothing. Just

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overslept, that's all. I'll freshen up now and buy a razor at lunch. You won't know the difference by the time the day really starts. Trust me."

For another moment, Robert stared at me and then the frown disappeared. "All right. Just don't be late again tomorrow, will you? It's going to be a busy few days."

I nodded, and he left me to my own devices. He was right about the busyness though. I didn't have time to think and only barely managed to fit in that promised shave before six p.m. came 'round. Which was probably a good thing, as I didn't have time to worry about Jake. Or Marty. Though twice, in between potential client phone calls, last-minute event changes and the sudden disappearance of the previous week's hen party file (we found it eventually, between the radiator and the furthest filing cabinet, God knows why), my fingers itched to dial Jake on the mobile, just to hear his voice. But he'd be busy, and that wasn't our way. We rarely chatted whilst at work, not unless it was something urgent. If I rang he'd think something was wrong. Hell, he'd be right too.

Marty hadn't rung me back either. I began to wish I hadn't left that message on his voice mail. Maybe that had been stupid. Tidying my desk at the end of the day—Robert always insisted on a clear desk policy—I couldn't seem to get my notes into any sort of order. Or at least none that made sense. My skin felt as if I'd been running, and my brain was firing in all directions. I could have done with a smoke, of any kind, but I knew that was impossible.

Swearing softly under my breath, I was about to go through the whole damn pile again when a hand was laid on my shoulder and the sound of a soft cough reached my ear.

It was Robert. He smiled, but the frown was back on his forehead.

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“Don’t sweat it, Danny,” he said. “You’ve worked like a demon today. God alone knows how you do it, but thank you. Why don’t you sod off home now?”

“But—”

“Just do it. That’s an order.”

I blinked. “Okay. Thanks.”

At the door, Robert spoke again. “Danny?”

“Yes?”

“Whatever it is that’s been bugging you all day, get it sorted, will you? For your own sake, let alone mine.”

I nodded, tried for half a smile, and left. Would to God it might be that easy, I thought.

All the way home, my mind was racing, going through all the possibilities that might happen, over and over again, and some that probably wouldn’t. By the time I arrived, I was desperate for a smoke, but I had to discount it. Jake would be able to tell if I was spaced, and he hated that kind of stuff. It was part of the reason I loved him.

It took me a while to open the front door. I couldn’t seem to get the key in the right place. Sometimes it warped slightly during the winter, but if you jiggled it around in the lock, it could come free easily enough. Jake must have heard me, but when I finally made it into the hall, he was nowhere in sight, though I could hear movement from the kitchen and the sound of the kettle boiling. Around me, the decorations he’d already put up for the holidays glittered like an accusation. My throat suddenly felt dry and I blinked. I think I knew then that my stupid game was over.

Every step I took toward the kitchen felt as if my feet were

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weighed down with rock. I was sweating and couldn't catch my breath. In the kitchen, Jake was facing away from me, leaning on the marble-effect work surface. The kettle clicked off. He didn't turn round. His mobile phone was on the floor, as if he'd flung it away in frustration. Or anger. Or something else. I looked at the way his hair curled against the smooth skin of his neck, knew how much I wanted to touch him. And then I spoke.

"Jake?"

He made a sudden movement with his right hand, and I shut up. It looked like an order. I wanted to say I was sorry, but I didn't dare speak. Instead I edged into the room and stood in the corner so he could turn and see me if he wanted to. The cupboard carved its shape into my back. I waited.

When Jake spoke, it was quickly and almost a whisper, so I had to lean forward in order to hear him at all. And he still wouldn't face me.

"People said you'd be trouble when I met you," he said. "My friends told me you had a reputation. They said you were just out for some fun, and they warned me about the drugs too. Is that what made you do it, Danny? Was it the drugs? No, don't answer that. I haven't finished. It's my fault, isn't it? Because I knew what you were like when we started, but I wanted to be with you. More than anything I'd ever wanted before. And then I thought you were different from how everyone said you were. I believed you at first when you said you were off the drugs, and I thought you weren't sleeping around. Is this the first time, Danny? Is it? *Really?* You've got to answer me that."

He turned round then, brushing his hair away from his face. I could smell the faint echoes of his aftershave. Armani's *Code Homme*. I could almost taste its lemon sharpness on my tongue. He was

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frowning and his skin looked pale.

“Answer me,” he said again.

I swallowed. “Yes. It’s the first time. Please, you’ve got to believe me—I’m so sorry. I was drunk and I just lost it. I’m sorry. Did Marty tell you? Is that how you know?”

“Yes. Your *easy screw* texted me on my mobile and then rang me and told me all about it,” he said. “Talked about a letter, but I didn’t understand him. I didn’t get any letter. And I didn’t believe him initially either. I thought he was just jealous. But then it all made sense, the way you looked when you came home on Thursday. The way you acted. Were you drugged? Had you taken anything? Was that why you fucked with him?”

Slowly, I sank to the floor. The metal handle of the floor cupboard felt cold against my head.

“I don’t know why I did it,” I whispered, refusing to look at Jake but feeling his anger rolling around us both. “I was drunk, I told you. And yeah, I had some skunk too, but it was a *club*. That’s what happens. But it didn’t mean anything. It’s not like you and me.”

He laughed, but the laughter ended with a gulp. “Not like you and me? Bloody hell, at least you admit there might be a ‘you and me’. I suppose that’s something. I should be grateful. I should be, but I’m not. I’ve *always* been faithful to my boyfriends. That may be old-fashioned, though God knows in this day and age, that’s surely no bad thing. You *knew* what I was like, how I felt about things like that, when you moved in. You told me it would be fine. You said you wouldn’t do drugs any more or any of the other stuff. You *promised* me. So how can I believe you now?”

Then he couldn’t speak any more. Again I wanted to touch him

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but thought it would be unwelcome. Why would he want me here anyway? I'd let him down, big time. When we started living together, he'd talked about his family life and his parents' drawn-out breakup. I knew perfectly well about his father and how much he'd messed Jake's mother around, how there'd always been his father's other women throughout Jake's teenage years. The rows, his mother's tears, the difficult court case. Oh yes, I knew how he felt about monogamy, how important it was to him. And I'd taken that knowledge and put the knife in with it. What sort of a boyfriend did I think I was? Still, I thought he was wrong about the drugs. Wasn't he? Yes, I knew I hadn't given them up as I'd promised him I would. Not entirely. But my encounter with Marty hadn't been to do with any of that. It had been something else—the way the evening had shaped up; that feeling of being a little out of control but not dangerously so; the fact that I'd just wanted to have sex and hadn't much minded who with. It was nothing to do with the drugs.

Or was it? Maybe I was simply fooling myself. Maybe I'd had too many after all, breaking yet another promise to Jake, and I'd been nothing more or less than an accident waiting to happen.

"I'm sorry," I said. And I meant it too. "I'm sorry in a way you can't possibly believe. Bloody hell, Jake, I wish *so much* I could go back to last week and put it all right again. I wish I could, but I can't."

I didn't know what else to say. It felt as if whatever I said or did would never make it right. This time I made a move to touch him, but he shook his head, veered away from me.

"You know... you know what the really funny thing is about all this," he whispered.

I didn't think anything about this was funny, though I knew what he meant, so I simply waited.

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“I was going to ask you. It’s Christmas, so I was going to do it.”

I stared at him. “Do what? Ask me what?”

He took a deep breath. Turned to look at me. His eyes were red and his face crumpled.

“I was going to ask you to be my partner,” he said. “I’d had it planned for tonight. It’s our nine-month anniversary of getting together. And, as I said, it’s nearly Christmas. I wanted... I *thought* I wanted to be with you forever. I didn’t mind about the drugs—because yes, I do know you still do them sometimes. I’m not a fool, Danny. I just thought we should be together. But now, well, now I’m not so sure.”

I didn’t know what to say. I could feel my face growing hot, then cold. And hot again. I wiped the back of my hand across my mouth, found I was shaking.

Outside the window, snow began to fall.

Neither of us spoke for a while. Finally, Jake got to his feet. Walked over to the kettle and reached up to the cupboard for a mug. Just the one, I noticed. Just the one.

“Do you want me to go?” I whispered, not able to look at him.

He made a sound, halfway between a groan and a sob. “Yes. Maybe that would be best right now.”

I didn’t remember leaving. Not really. I couldn’t catch my breath properly. All I remember is walking for a long, long time and how very cold I was. The London streets, the houses, the people, the Christmas lights, and the clubs were nothing but blurs at the edge of my vision. All I could hear was the sound of my own breath, all I could feel was the beating of my heart against my chest. Somewhere during that time, I rang Marty.

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He didn't answer. I left a message.

"All right," I said, my voice not sounding like my own, but like someone far older. "All right, you've won. I've messed up, and I'm the bastard you said I was after all. I'm sorry I hurt you before, and I'm sorry I've made you so angry because of what happened last week. You're right and I'm wrong. Jake's thrown me out. He knows everything. I'm not sure there's anything else you can do, but whatever you want to do, that's fine. You're entitled. Whatever. The only thing I want to say is I'm sorry. And it's over, Marty. Really over."

I cut the call, switched off my mobile and kept on walking. And walking. One or two people jostled me—hookers maybe—but I didn't pay them any attention. Just kept my head down and plowed on through.

Eventually, somewhere between midnight and one a.m., I found myself on familiar territory. Outside the office, shivering with the cold, I found the key in my pocket, opened the door, switched the alarm off, and walked in.

At night, the office seemed completely different than it was during the day. Everything was as it should be for the morning, but it didn't feel like a working space. The desk looked menacing, and the computers seemed to be alien creatures waiting to be called back to their own world. I shook my head. God, I was sounding crazy. Even to myself. I desperately needed some sleep. It might clear my head. Maybe things would look better in the morning. They had to. I didn't want to think it might be otherwise.

As quickly as I could, I locked the door, grabbed a handful of clean towels from the bathroom, and made a makeshift bed behind my desk where people couldn't see me. I didn't want to be arrested for breaking and entering my own office.

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The last thing I remembered was wondering if I'd be able to get to sleep at all.

The next thing I knew after that was that someone was shining a vast light in my face and my shoulders hurt.

"What the hell are you doing?"

It was Robert. Who else? I blinked at him until my eyes focused and then glanced at my watch. It was 7:15 a.m.

"Are you drunk?" My boss stepped back from me, wrinkling his nose. "Honestly, Danny, you smell. What the hell have you been up to? Why aren't you with Jake?"

I swallowed. The whole damn mess I'd made of things came flooding back. Right now, I was totally fed up with myself—with my thoughtlessness, with my ability to kick the man I loved in the gut, with my attempts to cover it up. It was all my fault, each and every sordid detail of it. Maybe then it was time to face up to the fact that I wasn't really one of the good guys.

So, with that in mind, what came out of my mouth in response to Robert's perfectly reasonable question wasn't what I expected.

"I'm not with Jake because I'm an idiot," I said, raising my head and staring right at him. "I fucked up. I slept with an old boyfriend last week, someone I'd already pissed off big time when I left him for Jake. I was drunk and... and high when I did it, but I know that's no excuse. It's my fault. He said he'd tell Jake and split us up. He wrote to him, to Jake's office. I took the letter, tried to cover it up, but he told Jake about it anyway. Rang him. Of course. God knows why I bothered trying to lie. So. Last night, I told Jake I was sorry, but it wasn't enough. He'd been going to ask me to be his partner. Some sort of romantic Christmas he'd got planned, but I've kicked him in the teeth

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with my own *bastard* decisions, and he asked me to leave. God knows but I can't blame him. Why would he want me to stay? I walked for a long time, and then I came here. I know you'll probably tell me to get lost—well, now that you know I do drugs, you will—but I didn't know where else to go. I'm sorry."

For a long moment, Robert did and said nothing. I held his gaze. Then he turned on his heel and walked away. Into his office. Slowly I got to my feet. My mouth tasted of dead cat and my legs felt weak. This was it then. This was the day I lost both my boyfriend and my job. Great, Danny, good work.

Robert came back in. He was holding something which he offered me. I took it and found I was clutching a few pages of A4 paper stapled together. There was a picture of a narrow brick house on the front.

"What's this?"

My boss sighed, sat down, and waved his hand for me to do the same. I drew up a chair.

"You're a good worker," Robert said. "But I know you've got issues. As well as being a total and utter wanker of course. Now I'm not saying you have to be perfect—God knows, I'm far from that—and I know you don't do hard drugs. But the soft stuff can be deadly too. So, a while ago, I printed out the brochure of the Drugs and Alcohol Foundation in case you should ever think you need it. They're in London, not far from St James' Park. Easy to get to. And maybe now's the time to think seriously about it, eh? That is, if you want your boyfriend back *and* you want to keep your job."

I looked up at him. Saw he was serious. Knew then what I'd have to do.

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* * *

IT TOOK me a year. It started with another difficult scene with Jake. Between that first Christmas and New Year when he found out what a shit I was, I stood in front of his house until he allowed me to speak to him. It took a couple of hours, and he was shaking when he finally opened the door. I think he'd been crying too, though he wasn't the only one.

I didn't come in. Not then, though later the two of us had to endure me clearing his house of the stuff I'd left there. Then, I simply stood at his doorstep and said what I needed to say.

"I'm not here to annoy you, Jake, and I'm not here to ask you to do anything you don't want to do. I wanted to say I'm sorry. And you're right about me, and I'm so very wrong. I'm staying at a hostel at the moment, and Robert's giving me some help. I'm starting counseling sessions in January. To do with the drugs and other things. I don't know if it might sort my head out, God knows if anything will do that, but I'll try. I wanted you to know that and that I love you. That's... that's it really."

I stood there for a moment, staring at his face, wanting to fix it on my mind so I wouldn't ever forget it. He looked like he needed to speak, he might even have started to reach out for me before changing his mind and letting his hand drop. But I couldn't see for sure. I was so caught by his eyes.

Then I turned and walked away.

Of course, I wondered if he'd follow me, ask me to come back, but life wasn't like the films. Not ever. So I kept on walking, and blinking hard to keep the tears at bay. I kept on walking right into the most difficult year I've ever known.

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Being me, you see, I thought it might be simple. I thought I'd stop smoking the weed, cut down on the drinking, binge or otherwise, go easy on the sex, and then after a couple of months or so I could go to Jake, beg him to take me back, and we could start all over again.

As if.

My counselor, Adrian, didn't let me get away with a thing. Ever. I found myself, over the weeks and months I spent with him and in the groups he suggested I join, talking about a personal history I hadn't thought of in any real sense for years: my father and the family I never talked to now, how sex made me feel, what the drink and the cannabis really did for me. He let me talk about Jake too, and what I'd done with Marty and why that might be.

It helped a lot. Keeping the job with Robert helped, too, gave me a focus and stopped me thinking all the time about Jake and how difficult it was being sober. And clean. I found I enjoyed the job more; I even managed to sweet-talk a couple of new clients onto our lists. After a while, sometime during the summer, Robert began to mention taking on more staff, maybe putting me into a managerial role one day. It made me feel nervous. Excited too.

During that year, I met Jake three times. The first time, I bumped into him in Sainsbury's, of all places. He was with some slim dark-haired guy. We both said hello, shook hands even. I said it was good to see him and he smiled. He introduced me to the new bloke, but I forgot his name at once. That night I rang Adrian when the wanting to drink myself to oblivion got too much, and it was okay. In the end.

The second time, it was at a London Pride event. I couldn't believe it—in the middle of so many people, someone patted me on the shoulder, I turned 'round, and it was Jake. The sight of him set my mind buzzing, and I couldn't think of what to say. But it didn't matter.

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We walked along, not really looking at the people or the stalls, and we chatted.

After a few minutes, I asked about the Sainsbury's bloke, and Jake shook his head.

"I don't see Pete anymore," he said. "It didn't really work out."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Which was only partly a lie. I didn't want him to be unhappy.

He shrugged. "No need. We were just mates, really."

When we parted, he leant forward and kissed me lightly on the cheek. I didn't know whether it was where we were or the people we were with or if it was something he actually wanted to do, but it felt good. I watched as he walked away, unsure how things were between us now but more than anything not wanting to push it. That night I dreamed about him, and for the first time that I could remember it didn't end badly.

The third time we met up was December, nearly a year after we'd split and just two weeks before Christmas. This time, I'd rung him. It took me four attempts to actually make the call, but when I spoke to him, he was fine, even sounded like he might be pleased to hear from me. Unless I was imagining that, of course. Anyway, I asked if he'd like to go for a coffee, he said yes, and that was why I found myself the following Saturday afternoon sitting at Starbucks and feeling the heat in my face when Jake walked in from the packed street.

Somehow, I managed to smile. "What would you like? Is it still a tall espresso and leave room for the milk?"

He nodded. "Please."

When I got back, carrying his order and my own cappuccino, he'd

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taken off his raincoat and was hanging it over one of the other chairs. I sat down opposite him. When I pushed his mug over, our hands touched. It might have been me, but it felt like he didn't draw away that quickly.

There were things I wanted to say to him—the reason I'd called in the first place—but he got there before me. His words were low, urgent. Like he'd been storing them up for a while, and this was his one chance to set them free.

"I'm glad you called," he said, reaching to take my fingers in his. "I've wanted to call you for a while, but I haven't had the guts. I'm sorry we left it so long. I'm sorry for a lot of other things too. I don't think I've treated you fairly. Yes, you hurt me—*really* hurt me—but maybe I should have listened to you, too, before it came to... what it did. Seen how it was. Maybe I just expected you to play by my rules when that was the worst thing I could have asked for. I don't know. What I do know, Danny, is this: I don't think it's worth throwing away what we had. I know how hard you've worked at being clean this year and going easy on the drink. That's more than I've done to sort myself out for a lifetime. You've got more courage than I've ever had. The other thing I know is this: I thought it was over, but I still have feelings for you. They won't go away. If anything they're stronger. So I need to ask you this before I lose my nerve. We both managed to mess up last Christmas, but do you think that if I play my cards right with you, then there might be a chance this one will be better?"

I blinked. Then blinked again. Put my other hand on top of his where he still held me. The cappuccino could wait. "How did you know about what I've been doing this year?"

He had the grace to blush, but he didn't stop looking at me. "I speak to Robert every now and then. He didn't tell you?"

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“No.” I shook my head, making a mental note to confront my elusive manager at the next opportunity. “He didn’t.”

“Oh.” Then, “Danny, what do you think? About... about us, I mean?”

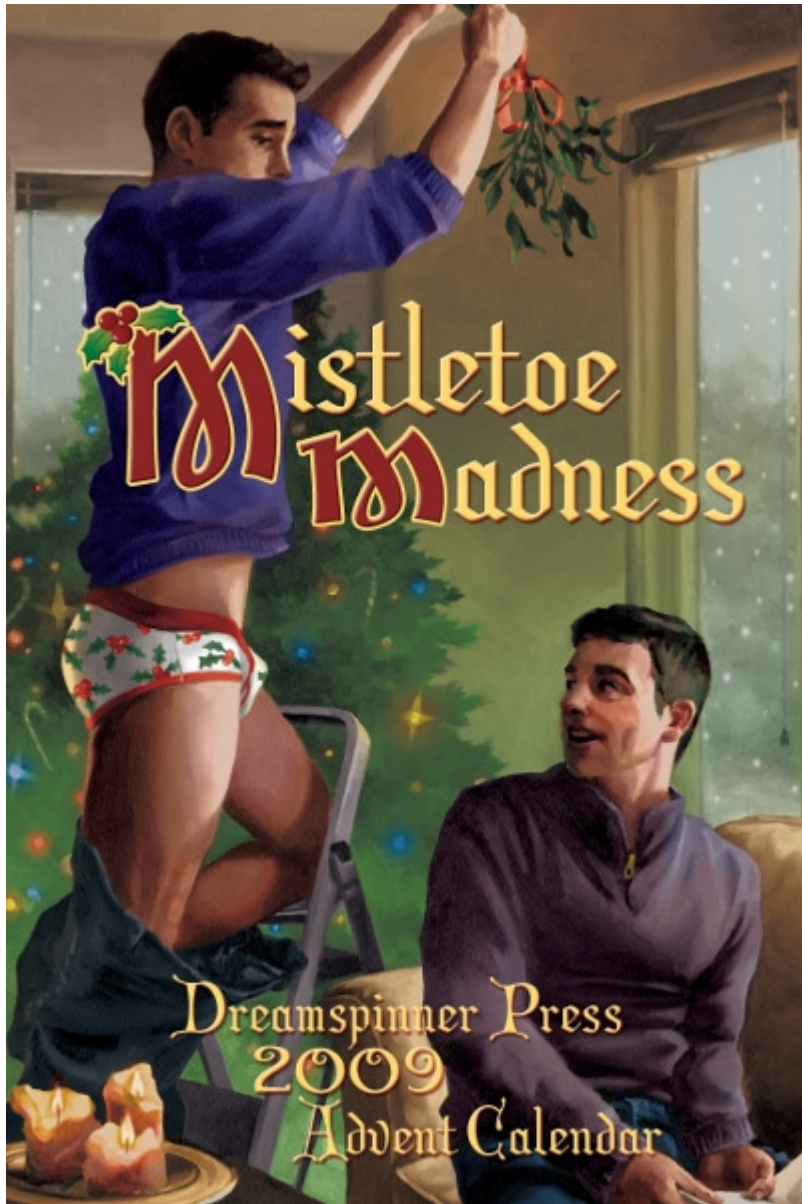
“I think,” I said, slowly. “I think I’ve needed this year. We’ve both needed it. I’m sorry for cheating on you. It wasn’t your fault. It was mine. I should have been more honest with you from the start. About me. I don’t want it to happen again—hell, I’ve not had sex with anyone apart from myself this whole year, though a couple of times it came bloody close. I think about you all the time. I don’t want what I did to happen again, but if I feel myself being drawn away, I swear I’ll tell you. Maybe we can help each other. As for how I feel about you, I told you straight up last year, and that’s still the same. I love you. I love who you are, I love how you make me feel, and I love how we are when we’re together. With the commitment you talked about or without it. I don’t mind. And even through the tough times too. So my answer to your question about Christmas, Jake, is this.”

Having spoken for way *way* too long, I let go his hand, moved the coffee mugs to one side, reached across the table, and kissed him. I made it short and sweet, as I didn’t want to frighten the shoppers, but I put everything I had into it too.

It turned out to be *exactly* the answer he wanted.

And Christmas? Ah well, it turned out to be one of the best ever, I swear it.

Got Mistletoe Madness?



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