EXCLUSIVE
BONUS EPILOGUE

Before The Thaw

ALISON REID

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by Alison Reid

Ten Years Later…

The Armstrong family home had never been quiet at Christmas.

It certainly wasn't today.

Laughter echoed through every room, tiny feet thundered across polished timber floors, and the unmistakable aroma of Helen Armstrong's roast turkey drifted from the kitchen, competing with the scent of cinnamon candles and fresh pine from the enormous Christmas tree standing proudly in the lounge room.

Helen stood with her hands on her hips, smiling as wrapping paper exploded across the carpet.

"I only wrapped those presents an hour ago," she laughed.

"They've been attacked by tiny savages," Gary replied, rescuing his coffee before four-year-old Harry crashed into him.

"I'm not a savage!" Harry protested.

His older brother Scott rolled his eyes with the confidence only a six-year-old could manage.

"You are."

"No, I'm not."

"You ate Christmas chocolate before breakfast."

Harry grinned.

"So?"

Their parents exchanged amused looks.

Leanne shook her head. "See what I live with?"

Her husband, Gerard, slipped an arm around her waist.

"You wanted boys."

"I did." She smiled fondly. "I just didn't realise they'd both have endless energy."

"They get that from you," Gerard said.

Across the room, another burst of laughter erupted.

Eight-year-old Simone Armstrong had gathered the younger children around the Christmas tree and was assigning everyone roles for what she insisted was "The Official Christmas Treasure Hunt."

"You two are on my team," she announced to Scott and her younger sister, Heidi.

The four-year-old beamed.

"Can I carry the treasure basket?"

"You can," Simone said seriously. "But you have to stay with us."

"I will!"

Bryan, now six, folded his arms.

"Why do the girls always get to be in charge?"

"Because," Simone replied with the confidence of a born leader, "I'm the oldest."

Bryan groaned dramatically.

"That's not fair."

"It is until you're nine."

"It still won't be fair then."

The adults laughed.

Watching the children together never got old. Duncan leaned against the doorway, coffee in hand, unable to stop smiling. Jade slipped beside him, gently linking her arm through his.

"They've grown so fast."

He kissed the top of her head.

"They have."

She watched Simone patiently helping her little sister untangle a ribbon from her hair while Bryan and Scott argued over the treasure map.

"Our babies aren't babies anymore."

"No." Duncan smiled. "Although Bryan still thinks he's taller than me."

"I will be one day," Bryan called from across the room.

"I heard that," Duncan replied.

"You were supposed to!"

Everyone laughed.

Gary looked around the room, taking in the beautiful chaos before him. His grandchildren filled the house with laughter, Duncan and Jade chatted quietly on the sofa, while Leanne and Gerard laughed together over steaming mugs of coffee.

He reached across and gently took Helen's hand.

"Best Christmas we've ever had," he said softly.

Helen squeezed his fingers.

"It is."

Her eyes wandered to Duncan and Jade.

Ten years earlier, Duncan had walked through a blizzard determined to reach the woman he loved.

Now he sat beside her, exactly where he'd always belonged. Jade caught her looking and smiled—that same smile that had first stolen her son's heart all those years ago.

Only now there were tiny fingerprints on her Christmas jumper, flour dusted across one sleeve from making cookies with the children, and laughter lines beside her beautiful blue eyes.

She'd never looked more beautiful.

Heidi tugged on Duncan's hand.

"Daddy?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

"Can you help me find the treasure?"

He looked at Jade.

She smiled.

"You'd better go. Apparently, the treasure hunt can't continue without Daddy."

He sighed dramatically.

"I've become an essential employee."

"You have."

Heidi took his hand and immediately started pulling him across the room.

"Hurry!"

"I'm coming."

Jade watched him disappear into the chaos of excited children, laughing as he allowed himself to be ordered about by five determined youngsters.

For years she'd believed love was supposed to be difficult. Something you earned. Something you constantly fought to keep. Duncan had taught her something entirely different. Real love showed up. It stayed. It chose you every single day.

She felt his eyes find hers across the room. Even surrounded by family, children and Christmas chaos, he still looked at her like she was the only person there.

He always would.

"Mum!" Simone called.

"We found the treasure!"

Jade laughed and walked toward the children, Duncan reaching for her hand as she passed. Their fingers intertwined as naturally as breathing.

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After lunch, the excitement of Christmas morning finally caught up with the children.

Gary led the procession downstairs to his den, carrying an oversized bowl of popcorn while six-year-old Scott insisted on helping despite dropping half of it along the way.

"I've picked the perfect Christmas movie," Gary announced.

"It has to have reindeer," Harry declared.

"And explosions," Bryan added.

"There aren't explosions in Christmas movies," Simone said with all the authority of an older sister.

"There should be."

Heidi climbed onto the enormous sectional sofa, clutching her new teddy bear.

Within minutes, blankets had been spread across the floor, the lights dimmed, and the opening credits rolled across the television.

The adults smiled knowingly.

"They'll never make it through the whole movie," Helen whispered.

"They'll prove you wrong," Gary replied.

Twenty minutes later, he quietly opened the den door.

Five children were sound asleep.

Scott was sprawled across a beanbag, Harry snuggled against his brother's shoulder, Bryan had somehow claimed an entire recliner to himself, while Simone slept sitting upright with Heidi curled against her side, teddy bear tucked securely beneath one arm.

Gary chuckled softly.

"Told you they'd…" He stopped, laughing under his breath. "Actually… I suppose you were right."

Helen smiled.

"They've had a very exciting morning."

Leaving the movie playing quietly in the background, they gently closed the door and returned upstairs.

The living room was peaceful for the first time all day.

Christmas music played softly through the speakers while mugs of coffee and glasses of wine rested on the coffee table.

Duncan settled into the corner of the sofa, and without thinking, Jade curled onto his lap, resting comfortably against his chest. His arms slipped naturally around her waist. It was second nature after ten years.

Leanne looked across the room and grinned.

"You know," she teased, "there are plenty of empty chairs."

Duncan didn't even look up from brushing a loose strand of hair behind Jade's ear.

"My wife," he said simply, "is right where she belongs."

Jade smiled without opening her eyes.

"I couldn't agree more."

Leanne laughed.

"Ten years and you're still ridiculous."

"Hopeless," Gerard agreed.

Gary chuckled into his coffee.

"I remember when he barely managed to string a sentence together around Jade."

Helen smiled fondly.

"And now look at him."

Duncan shrugged, completely unapologetic.

"I learned."

Jade tilted her head to look at him.

"What did you learn?"

"That if you're lucky enough to marry the love of your life, you never waste an opportunity to hold her."

Jade's cheeks warmed despite the years that had passed.

"You always know the right thing to say."

Duncan smiled and gently kissed her forehead.

"No," he said softly. "I just tell the truth."

Jade smiled back before leaning in to kiss him gently on the lips.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart," she whispered.

He rested his forehead against hers; his smile filled with the same quiet love he'd carried for her all those years.

"Merry Christmas. Thank you for another wonderful year. Thank you for our beautiful family… and thank you for loving me."

Her eyes shimmered with happy tears.

"I'll never stop."

Across the room, Gary reached for Helen's hand, while Leanne leaned comfortably against Gerard.

Outside, fresh snow drifted gently over the gardens, covering everything in a blanket of white.

Inside, surrounded by the family they had once only dreamed of, Duncan and Jade knew they had found everything they had once believed was beyond their reach.

Sometimes the coldest winters really did lead to the warmest forever.

—The End—

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