



It's Time

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A heartfelt Christmas story

Jake stretched an arm across the back of the sofa, the taste of eggnog still on his tongue even though he'd abandoned the glass long ago. The aroma of tomatoes and basil seeped through the swing door slats of the kitchen, above which twinkling lights from the freshly hung garland mocked at him. He tapped in those tacks himself, but he shouldn't have. His tongue latched to the roof of his mouth but he didn't have stomach for another sip of the high-calorie holiday beverage.

A chorus rendition of *Away in a Manger* ribboned through the air and intermingled with Evie's giggle from the kitchen and his insides twisted.

He used to love that sound. Like the tinkling of bells on a cold winter's night. Like a long-asked for prayer finally being answered.

Now her light and airy laughter sounded like pain. And betrayal.

As she entered the living room, bringing a platter of buttery garlic toast, the recessed lights caught her long amber hair and outlined the red silk flowing off her hips. As she settled the platter on the coffee table, she slid next to him and leaned close to kiss the corner of his jaw. He closed his eyes and breathed deep of the scent of her—gingerbread and sugar. She smelled like Christmas.

If he looked at her, he might even believe she had been gift-wrapped just for him.

"Well, look at you all dressed-up." Her soft laugh warmed his neck, his temperature spiking more than was healthy.

Her fingertips tiptoed up the holiday tie he'd managed to pinch out enough pennies to purchase for tonight. There wasn't enough time in the season to donate it to Goodwill, but he'd try to give it away nonetheless.

Having reached his chin, she pressed her cool skin against his scalding cheek. He cracked open an eye as she turned his head to face her. "Ready for homemade spaghetti and sauce?"

"I gotta go."

She shook her head, her tresses falling over her bare shoulders. Man, she looked especially beautiful tonight. "The meatballs are the frozen kind though. Let's keep that secret between us, hmm?"

And then she was kissing him—and he was letting her. Against his better judgement, he threaded his fingers through her silky strands.

Her hands dug into his back, pressing him against her.

Until he turned his face away, breaking the kiss. Ruining the moment. Breathing hard, he pulled the rest of the way out of her embrace. “Really, Evie. I’m done here.”

He took his time to study the sweep of rouge on her cheekbones, the mascara detailing her long eyelashes... Finally his gaze sank into the jades of her eyes.

All perfectly done up—but she wasn’t his.

His heart hammered against his ribs. “I should have left a long time ago. While you were still stirring the sauce in the pot.”

She laughed—the same bubbly sound that he had fallen in love with two weeks ago. That heavenly music had made his heart sing after he had managed to find the shut-off valve to her kitchen faucet. When her tears had finally subsided and he’d been able to wipe her sadness with his kisses.

He should have trusted his gut then. When she’d moved into the apartment next to his with one carry-on luggage case, warning bells had initially gone off. Her haste, the text messages she ignored. The idea of a wife running away had trickled into his mind but he’d chased it away the moment the blush found her cheeks. His compliment of her coloring had her eyes glowing, her smile a few inches wider. She’d been easy to fall for when he’d confessed he’d never been great at dating and she’d taken his hands, accepting him with all his clumsy attempts at romance. Her understanding had him bending to her every whim.

He should have known.

When he’d turned forty last month and declared himself unfit to hold a steady relationship, he’d surrendered to bachelorhood. Maybe he was too demanding, expecting too much. Maybe he deserved to live alone.

And then Evie laughed at his jokes. Radiated under his praise. How she melted into him, as if she wanted him to stay as much as he didn’t want to drag himself the few steps to his apartment next door.

But that was before he saw the text flash on the screen. Only two words, so he hadn’t been mistaken.

Caressing her soft cheek with the back of his knuckle, he watched her eyes light up as she faced him. Bright. Expectant. He would miss that expression the most.

When she leaned up to kiss him, he sucked in his breath. "It's time for me to go home—and you should too."

In his arms, her body stilled.

He let the darkness overwhelm him. The suffocating loneliness. Why would God give him a gift, just to take such a prize away?

"I am home."

Her eyes were so tender, so full of longing. All he wanted was her to *stay*. What if he kept what he knew to himself? What if he played the game along with her? A husband she decided to leave behind, to discard her past life to explore a new version of herself.

"All you want is sweet nothings. A kiss for no reason—I know." His voice was rusty in his own ears, punctuated by the acapella swelling around him of a babe without a crib for a bed. "I know you. The need to be loved. Cherished. Adored."

She shook her head. Those green eyes hidden under long eyelashes now shimmered with tears.

But she wasn't denying it. She was holding back the deep ache. Being neglected, rejected. He knew that world all too well.

And she deserved all that too. To find someone who would appreciate her beauty, remind her how special she was. To comfort her when she was hurting and lift her up when the heaviness of life kept her down.

"The little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay..."

"Tell me then." Jake drew in his breath. "You can't go back—why? Because he hurts you? Beats you up so badly your life is at risk?"

She looked away. The tear running down her cheek was his answer. *No. Never.*

"He stays all night out drinking, then?"

Her head wobbled from side to side.

"He had an affair? You'd be a fool to trust him again."

Another shake of her head, disturbing the amber waves cresting her shoulders. All it would take would be a stroke of his fingers, a whiff of that shampoo and he'd be a goner all over again.

“Or is he *good*?” When she didn’t answer, he answered for her. “You don’t have any complaints because he’s always gentle and kind and sweet. Never argues or fights with you. Always accepts you as you are.”

“Yes.” She gave a huff. “He’s *boring*. Quiet. Happy with everything.”

“Sounds like a content man.”

“But he never *says it*—the words you say.” Her face snapped up, her eyes flashed. “You told me you’ve waited your whole life for someone like me. When you say you love me, I *feel* loved—for the first time. It’s a sensation I crave. Need. Shouldn’t I feel wanted?”

Of course! he wanted to yell. *And you’re worth saying it! Over and over again for eternity.* His fingers tingled to rest on her bare flesh, to whisper those three little words. So small but so significant. If he could blurt out words her husband couldn’t, why was he sinner and the one who shared her name a saint?

Resisting every desire in him, he kept his hands fisted in his lap. “Not saying the words isn’t the same as not loving you.”

And he wanted the same for himself—someone to love him, to keep him company at night. The last thing he wanted was to return to the loneliness he’d barely survived from. Back to hoping and wondering and praying ceaselessly.

Clearing his throat, he attempted to clear the depressing thoughts. “He might not say it, but he loves you, Evie.” He glanced at the phone, the screen now dark. A single touch would bring that notification to a steady glow with glaring LED lights.

“I’m not going back.” Tears welled in her eyes. “I’ll *never* go back.”

“Yes, you will. You want to—because you want him to love you. Because you love him too.”

She bit on her bottom lip and as she turned to look at him, her green eyes glistening. His chest ached for her sadness. Her confusion.

And for his too.

But then a small voice reminded him who he was doing this for. The one who had never left him, who was with him still.

“I love thee, Lord Jesus. Look down from the sky...”

His voice was hoarse when he found the courage to speak again. "He's your husband. Go back to him."

She pressed her lips together. A quick shake of the head.

"While you were in the kitchen he asked you to come home. He might not be romantic, but his heart is in the right place. Believe in his love."

And I should too.

Jake might not have anyone to cuddle with him at night, but he had a Savior who left glory behind to show him the way to his Heavenly Father, a King who laid down His own life so Jake could finally claim his own.

His path might not be smooth or without bends, but he was on the road nonetheless. If God had a future for Evie, God had a plan for him too.

He rounded up to his feet. She came up with him. The vivid red of her dress. The plunging neckline—

He looked into the eyes that would haunt his dreams. Sandpaper scratched the lining of his throat as he took a shallow breath. "It's time."

Stepping past her, the sweet scent of her filled his nostrils and he quickened his pace. He heard the swish of her dress as she spun around. Felt the displaced air as she reached out for him.

But Jake kept his eyes on the door. His palm was slick on the knob and it slipped as he tried to turn it. Another twist and he stumbled into the hallway. Took a step. Another. The door fell shut behind him. The fluorescent light stung his eyes and a chill snaked down his spine as he trudged past his door. Out the side entrance. Down the slick fire escape.

Took the stairs to the garage. But he didn't get in the car. He walked. And kept walking. Until the sun appeared in the horizon, the light of dawn shone down on him.

Christmas morning.

"Be near me, Lord Jesus. I ask Thee to stay." The stanza that had been in his head all night came to him again. *"Close by me forever, and love me, I pray."*

And at last he could lift his face and let the sun warm his frozen features.

Stripping off the tie, he let Rudolph's red nose crumple in his red-chapped fist.

“Bless all the dear children in thy tender care, and take us to heaven, to live with Thee there.”

On the edge of the city, he squinted into the sunrays at the steeple piercing the sky and finally managed to take a breath of the cold wintery air. After years of searching where he never should have been, Jake had arrived back at the beginning where he belonged.

Dear Reader,

Thanks for reading Jake and Evie's Christmas story! Not a romance, but about love all the same, I hope you were inspired to tell that special someone those three most important words. And were reminded of the King who loved you more than words can ever say.

Want to read romance—a real one this time?

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Have a very merry CHRISTmas!

-Cheryl