

The Perfect Present
(or 'Tom and Olivia's First Christmas')

Olivia stared at the mug in her hand. It had a bar of chocolate with a smiley face printed on the side. *A mug. Is that it? He's just picked up the first thing he found in the supermarket. No thought, no consideration, just a random gift you'd give to anyone.* She'd thought her budding relationship with Tom was going well.

'I thought of you as soon as I saw it,' he'd said when he handed her the gaily wrapped box.

What did he mean? Am I getting fat? Is this his way of telling me?

In spite of her pressing desire to know how he really saw her, Olivia had resisted the urge to rip it open there and then. Instead she'd taken it to her Dad's and saved it until Christmas morning. Each time she passed the dressing table she'd carefully placed it on, she'd thought of Tom and smiled to herself, occasionally giving the present a gentle caress. She hadn't given too much thought to what was inside, but that didn't stop her daydreaming about opening it and seeing how much Tom loved her. Those daydreams were at war with the part of her that hated how special the sight of the gift made her feel.

Tom could be an idiot at times and he had some odd ideas about chivalry but he never made her feel anything less than loved and that wasn't a feeling she was used to. In fact, it scared her to death. She'd got used to surviving on her own and that was the way she liked it. *If you don't let people get close, they can't hurt you.* That was the problem – Tom made her feel vulnerable. *Well, she thought, not him exactly. More the fact of his existence. It's not his fault I fell in love with him so quickly.* Her mind wandered back to their weekend in Plymouth and a shiver ran through her as she remembered the touch of his hands on her skin. After that there'd been nights in the common room, her room, the laundry room, even a very cold night outside. They made do with anywhere they could find to be together. She was missing him. He'd notice she'd lost weight over the holidays. Now he regularly saw her naked there was no hiding it from him. He was intimately acquainted with every inch of her and seemed to love them all. She couldn't understand his fascination. *But then I guess he doesn't see the fat that I do.* She pinched her waist. The roll of flesh was still there. It always was, no matter how little she ate or how much exercise she did, it was her constant companion. It was inevitable that one day he'd wake up and wonder what on earth he'd seen such an unlovely lump. She was sure his previous girlfriends had all been willowy brunettes. *Why me?*

The fact he'd had previous lovers bothered her far more than she would ever have admitted to him. However, even that hadn't been enough to deter her from wanting him. When they'd slept together, she'd had no doubts it was right for her. Whatever happened in the future, she'd never regret that he'd been her first.

She looked at the mug again. The smiling chocolate bar seemed to be mocking her and she hastily put it down on her dressing table before she could give in to the urge to hurl it against the wall.

'Grin at me then, would you?' she muttered, glaring at it. Unperturbed, it continued to smile back at her.

A door slammed somewhere in the house and she winced. The Christmas cheer had been distinctly lacking in the Whitely house so far that holiday. Her dad and Lisa had done nothing but argue.

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'For the love of God, can you just keep it in your trousers occasionally!'

Lisa's face was bright red, but Olivia didn't think she looked upset, just angry. Awkwardly, she tried to sidle out of the room without being noticed.

'She's your daughter's age, Adam. It's embarrassing.'

Olivia froze. Had Lisa found out what had happened in Exeter? *I don't see how she could have done. Who would have told her? Surely even Dad wouldn't be stupid enough...*

Lisa interrupted her thoughts. 'We need her, Adam. She brings a lot of custom in with her friends. We can't afford to lost customers because you fancy having it off with the staff.'

Not Exeter then. Olivia sighed with relief, though her chest was still tight.

'It was a one-off. She knows the deal.' Her father's tone was dismissive, but Lisa cut him off with a wave of her hand.

'Does she? Are you sure about that, Adam? She was giggling about the extra discount she'll be able to give her friends when she's running the business.'

Adam's face went pale and his fists clenched.

'Cheeky cow.'

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There was a knock at the bedroom door. It opened in response to Olivia's 'Come in' and Lisa's face appeared in the gap.

'Happy Christmas, love.'

Olivia grimaced but returned the greeting. She liked Lisa. Not enough to think of her as a step-mum but enough to say she cared about her. She'd been the manager at her dad's first shop and after a string of failed relationships, Adam Whitely had moved their relationship from business to personal. Lisa had turned out to have more staying power than her predecessors and reluctantly, Olivia had begun to warm to her and accept her as a fixture in her dad's life. She hoped he hadn't screwed up yet another relationship. Lisa closed the door and came into the room to sit down on Olivia's bed.

'Can we have a chat, Liv?'

Olivia eyed her warily but nodded.

'I know your dad and I have been arguing a lot this last few days, but I don't want you to worry. I've known Adam and you a long time and I knew what he was like from the beginning. He's not made to be faithful. He doesn't set out to hurt people, they're just

collateral damage because he never stops to think about the consequences of jumping into bed with someone.'

Olivia pulled a face. 'Ew... Lisa, I don't mean to be rude but I don't want to think about my dad like that.'

Lisa laughed softly. 'Sorry. I just mean that we both know what he's like. I'm not some naïve teenager who thinks he'll change because he loves me. I don't mind turning a blind eye occasionally as long as he comes home and so long as it doesn't affect the business. The latest one could and that's why I'm angry.' She paused. 'I just...'. She reached out and took Olivia's hand. 'I just don't want you to think I'm going to leave him. I know things haven't been easy for you but I just want you to know that as long as I'm here, there'll always be a home for you here. You've done so well with everything and I know how huge you coming here for Christmas is – your dad was thrilled when you said you'd come – and I don't want us rowing to spoil it for you.'

Tears sprang to Olivia's eyes and impulsively she leaned forward and hugged the older woman.

'Hey!' Lisa returned the hug, but then pulled back to look at her. 'What's with the tears?'

Olivia forced herself to smile. 'It's nothing, honestly. I'm just missing Tom, I think.'

Lisa's eyes slid past her to the mug on the dressing table. 'Is that your present?'

Olivia nodded, her fingers twisting together. Lisa sighed.

'What did you get him?'

'Silver cufflinks with his initials on.'

Lisa nodded but didn't say anything. The telephone rang downstairs and was answered.

'It's for you, Livvy!' her dad's voice floated up the stairs.

'I'll go,' Lisa said and slipped out of the room.

Olivia picked the receiver up and covered the mouthpiece with her hand. 'I've got it,' she yelled through the open door. 'Hello?'

'Olivia, is that you?'

'Hi, Tom.'

'Happy Christmas, darling! I wish you were here and I could say it in person. I'm missing you so much.'

Olivia's heart lifted a little. Perhaps all wasn't lost after all. 'I miss you too,' she said, quietly.

'Have you opened your present yet? Do you like it?' Tom sounded so eager she didn't have the heart to tell him what she really thought, but it didn't matter because he didn't wait for a response. 'I've just opened mine and they're fabulous. I love them. I'm sorry mine's so rubbish by comparison, but I wanted to get you a present that meant something.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well chocolate's sweet and so are you, so it reminded me of you and you always want a cup of tea when you get in so I thought it was perfect. Then I saw what you'd got me and my present seemed so silly by comparison.'

The tears streamed down Olivia's face even as she laughed and hiccupped a response. 'It's not silly. It's very appropriate.'

'I'm glad because I love you and I wanted it to be just right. It took me ages to find the right present and then I was terrified you'd hate it.'

'It's perfect and I love it.'