

# *Daisy & Levi's Christmas Special*

*When the flowers wither, I reach for a wreath. A wreath wrapped in ribbons and lights and snow. She embodied it at all, and she didn't even know.*

“Maybe the Yule Log was too much?” Daisy fretted from the curb, wrapped in a wool coat, as I pulled our bags out of the taxi.

“Not at all,” I said.

“What if Sarah doesn't like milk chocolate though?”

“This Log has passed over the Atlantic with us. It's a Transatlantic Log now. She's eating it.”

She shook her head with a laugh, the ends of her short hair curling around the snowfall. “So you're not worried?”

“I'm not worried. You're a wonderful bakist.”

*“That was one time, Levi! I forgot they were called bakers one time.”*

I didn't try hiding my laughter. Giggles already rose from her.

“I've missed this place,” she sighed.

“I have too,” I exhaled.

Paris was magical, especially around the holidays. It was a home with Daisy.

Subway rides became trips on the metro. Walks in Central Park were now strolls past the Eiffel Tower at night to watch it glimmer. Movie nights and trips to the soccer field for Rhea and Claire were now nightly outings to bookstores and fashion shows.

It was the definition of magic.

But this, in New York, was *our* home. The first place I told her I loved her. The first place I kissed her. The first place I fell asleep beside her without the secret of my admiration for her.

And now our first Christmas together with her as my girlfriend.

“One more semester and we’ll be back, baby.” I leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to her lips as I set down our suitcases. A blushful smile bloomed across her face. It prompted the burgundy lip gloss I bought her to sparkle.

It made my chest ache. I resisted the urge to lean in again, sweeping the suitcases up instead—the bags already over my shoulders.

“What?” she asked.

I bit the inside of my cheek. “Nothing.”

“For a man who’s always writing? I don’t believe that.”

“It’s different when I’m in front of you. English becomes useless.”

She leaned forward. “What about in French then?”

“Aucune langue n’est satisfaisante.”

Her head tipped. “What does that mean?”

“You’ll have to practice your French, my love.” I paid the cab, watching the snow fly off its roof.

“Let me help—”

She stopped once I eyed her. “We can’t risk losing the Log.”

Her pink nose scrunched before begrudgingly walking up the stoop to my mother's.

Candlelight winked at us from the windows across the brownstones. The big velvet red bow hung on the door like a wreath, courtesy of Rhea's newfound interest in arts and crafts. Claire tried to help, but Rhea had pushed her away. Hence, there was a second, smaller bow below the larger one.

A Facetime call could be very drama-filled.

The bows rattled as I knocked.

A creak from the door and the smell of pumpkin pie flooded out with my mother. "You're home!" she cheered, diving in with hugs. "They're home!" she announced to the house.

Before I was even through the threshold, determined feet slapped the hardwood floor.

"My girls!" I dropped the bags and scooped up my eight-year-old twin sisters. "You look beautiful!" Ribbons were strung through their braids, and snowflakes and snowmen dangled from their tiny ears. Rhea was dressed in red footie pajamas, and Claire was her companion in green.

Once they had enough of me, they stretched their arms out for the radiant woman on my left. I put them down and let them race to her. Daisy crouched down and embraced them.

"You look like perfect little gumdrops!" she gushed.

"Can we bake those thumb cookies?" Rhea asked.

"And the sprinkle ones?" Claire tacked on.

"We have to watch a Christmas movie!" Rhea demanded.

"Did you bring us gifts?" Claire pushed her lip out.

"Alright girls, let's give her some space!" They *awed*. "And yes we have gifts for you." I squished their shoulders and watched

them run out of the foyer, into the living room.

Seconds later, Sarah, her husband Jeff, Daisy's mom, Linda, and Aunt, Mandy, followed suit.

After the greetings and hugs, we stripped off our coats and boots and dropped our bags in my bedroom to gather in the kitchen for Christmas Eve dinner before the hecticness of my extended family rushing through our doors the next night.

A mistletoe red tablecloth rested on our dining room table for tomorrow, along with a row of garland and candlesticks as its centerpiece.

Forks clinked porcelain plates, and glasses brushed the cloth. Daisy's hand found my thigh under the table as I reached across for stuffing, and I almost jumped out of my seat. Turning, I found her lips folded in, withholding a laugh.

"I don't think you're funny," I whispered.

"It's a good thing I wasn't trying to be. I just happened to make myself laugh," she responded slyly, spooning stuffing into her mouth.

"Linda, you never filled me in on your date Monday night," Mom spoke up from the head of the table on the left.

Daisy's head whipped to Linda's spot at the opposite end. "*You're dating?*"

Both mothers' eyes popped open with a look that said *How do we backtrack on this?*

Linda said, "It was casual—"

As my mother responded, "A really nice man from my work—"

Mandy, Sarah, Jeff, Rhea, and Claire's heads swiveled back and forth between the women.

“I can’t believe you didn’t tell me!” Daisy reprimanded her mother.

“Well, you didn’t tell us when you two were pretending to date!” Linda retaliated.

“Yeah!” Mom added on.

*Not helpful*, I mouthed to her.

*Oops*, her wide eyes said, before taking a sip of wine.

“That was completely different!” Daisy replied.

“You pretended to date Levi for a *month*. I only went on a few dates!”

“*A few?*”

“That one’s on you,” Mandy whispered, patting her sister-in-law on the shoulder.

“Why haven’t you said anything?” Daisy asked softly.

Linda fussed with the thin scarf draped over her shoulders. I’d never seen her flustered. “Because it’s nothing, really! I haven’t been on a proper date in over ten years, and even then, I didn’t have to do much. Now it’s all just embarrassing. The small talk and deciding who pays the bill and figuring out what to wear. It’s dreadful.”

“Tell me about it,” Claire piped in, holding up a fork with a mac ‘n’ cheese noodle prepared to make a treacherous fall to the carpet.

“Who are *you* dating?” I leaned forward, slightly horrified.

“Either Tyler from art or Ryan from the fifth grade,” she stated. “I’m still deciding.”

Rhea rolled her eyes.

“You have options?” Daisy snickered.

“Did you just say *fifth grade*?” I asked. “As in a boy older than

you?”

“Levi, let’s not make everything about me. We have other problems here.” She waved her arms.

I sat back flabbergasted.

“So the date was bad?” My mother asked.

“Not bad,” Linda reassured her.

“Oh, it was bad. He was an hour and a half late,” Mandy spoke up.

“*An hour and a half late?*” Daisy gawked.

“You waited that entire time?” Sarah added with surprise.

“See, now this is why I didn’t say anything.” Linda began twisting the end of her scarf around her index finger.

“Did he apologize? Please tell me he apologized,” Mom begged.

“He apologized. And then he called me ‘Lisa’ for the entire date,” she winced.

The whole table groaned. Even Jeff was offended.

“You still could’ve told me,” Daisy said.

“You’re right, I should’ve. I guess I was just a bit embarrassed. Next time we can laugh about my embarrassments together.”

“It’s *him* who should be embarrassed. I’m never offering him a client again,” Mom said.

“You know, I have a professor who’s single. He teaches international marketing, and he also has a daughter. Wears nice cashmere sweaters every day. When you and Mandy come for fashion week in March, I can introduce you two,” Daisy offered.

Linda responded, “Oh, I don’t know about—”

“Is he hot?” Mandy interjected.

Daisy rolled her eyes. “He’s very handsome.”

“You’re meeting him,” Mandy told Linda. “And if you don’t like him, then I sure will.” The whole table erupted in laughter that warmed my sternum the same way bubbly wine or Daisy’s hands did.

By the time we finished dinner, we had retold stories of Paris in December, covered all of Rhea’s arts and crafts projects, heard about Sarah and Jeff’s new neighbor, and discussed a game plan for the morning before everyone would arrive.

Afterward, Rhea, Claire, Daisy, and I focused on making dessert in the dining room while everyone else cleaned up in the kitchen.

The girls focused on pressing their thumbs into the dough balls as I continuously rolled out the dough and divided it into equal ball sizes. Daisy scooped the strawberry jam into a piping bag and began filling the empty gaps in the unbaked cookies.

“How are you doing?” I asked. Short strands of her hair fell forward, slipping out of the red bow she was able to get around the ends.

“I’m good.” She smiled reassuringly. “I guess, I’m more sad than anything that she didn’t tell me. But I get it. She was right. I hadn’t told her about us originally because I was embarrassed. I’m proud of her though, for putting herself out there. She deserves to find love again. It’ll be weird to see her with someone though. I’m so used to it just being us for so long.”

“Of course. But you’re doing the right thing. For you and your mom.”

She nodded. “How are *you*?”

“I’m good, of course.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean then?”

She looked at the girls to make sure they weren't listening. “I know you've noticed how much Sarah and Jeff handle for the girls now.”

I had. And it was conflicting in an unexpected way. To put it plainly, it was hard.

Knowing that I could be here to fill in on school pick-ups and lunches and dinners and bedtime rituals, but had chosen not to, was difficult. Knowing that I was putting myself before them, was hard to grapple with. It was easy to forget when I was busy teaching or racing to get home after work to meet Daisy for dinner.

But now I was faced with the reality that I hadn't been here. And that they were still okay without me.

“Sweetheart, did I lose you?” Her hand fell over my knuckles on the table.

“No, sorry. I'm okay. There will be lots of life to be part of when we move back in the summer. You only have so many chances to live in Paris.”

“You're doing the right thing too. Just because you're not here, doesn't mean they don't need you.”

I didn't know what else to say. She was right, despite how much my subconscious wanted to believe otherwise.

I kissed her temple and took a breath, looking up. Where Claire's face was somehow covered in jam.

“Claire, are you eating the jam?” I laughed.

Her tiny brows furrowed. “No,” she said sternly. “I'm trying to make you a special cookie. Don't look!”

Collectively, we all looked down at the unbaked cookie in



front of her. Instead of a thumbprint, the dough ball was pressed flat with jam spread into an unidentifiable shape.

“What ... is it?” Rhea asked with a cocked brow.

“It’s the Eiffel Tower!”

We all tilted our heads.

“Oh, I see it!” Daisy squeaked. “That’s the top, right?”

“Yes! *See*, Daisy gets it,” she told Rhea.

“I love it, it’s perfect,” I said.

A wide smile spread across her face. “I’m going to live in Paris one day like you.” Daisy gave me a knowing look. “Will you come and visit me and my husband?”

Rhea and Daisy held in laughs, terribly.

“Of course I will, bug,” I said warmly, kissing the top of her head. “Let’s finish up these cookies now so we can start our movie.”

Daisy lounged on the couch in front of the roaring fireplace, watching the snow fall outside the window, collecting in the street.

I leaned over the cushions and kissed her neck. “Everyone’s asleep, even the girls. Should we go for a drive?”

She turned abruptly. “No way.”

“I already bagged the cookies. I just need you to write the notes.”

“I call shotgun!” She jumped from the couch and raced to put her coat and boots on.

“As if I was going to make you drive!”

“Had to confirm!” She raced through the foyer to the front door and grabbed the keys.

“Wait, wait!” I stopped her. Grabbing my bag by the stairs, I found what I needed. “I made you these.” I held out the hand-knit scarf and hat. “They’re not great by any means, but you’ve been wearing this merlot red color a lot and you keep saying how badly you need a scarf but don’t want to settle for one made out of itchy wool or polyester so I thought I’d give it a try but I understand if—”

Her lips hit mine and I melted. My hand instinctively found her waist and I pulled her in for more. Her hands found my neck and pulled me down closer. She tugged at the hair at my nape and I parted my lips. Traces of vanilla and strawberry lip gloss dancing along her tongue made me lightheaded.

My heart was beating so fast it felt like a candle flame flickering against the wind, struggling to stay strong. I clutched onto the doorframe behind her, giving up a section of her waist to remain standing.

We were caught in the middle of a dance, fighting for the leading position. A battle between two dancers who’ve known each other’s moves forever. We were battling for more, but I couldn’t tell who was winning.

She’d grab my neck; I’d press her against the door. She’d whisper my name; I’d groan. She’d grab my bottom lip; I’d lead my kisses down her neck.

“Levi Coldwell,” she exhaled, “did you eat one of the cookies already?”

“No, I’d never,” I breathed.

“You taste like strawberry puree and sweet almonds.”

“That’s the new gum I’m chewing. I didn’t tell you?”

She laughed; comparable to a warm pie crust bubbling to a

crisp *pop* in the oven.

I pulled away, trying to compose myself. Finally, I wrapped the scarf behind her neck and sat the hat over her hair. Giggles escaped her as I fixed a few stray hairs crossing her forehead.

“Just to be clear, this isn’t your only gift,” I said.

“Levi, this could be the last gift I ever received and it’d still be enough.”

I grabbed the sides of her face and pressed a solid kiss to her lips. “I love you, Daniella.”

“I love you more.”

“Yeah right.”

“I’m older than you, so technically I have more love to give.”

“Older by *thirty-five days*.”

“Still older!”

The heat from the car vent blew across my face, warming my frozen nose after brushing the snow off my mother’s car.

Outside the windshield, the snow fell from the night sky leisurely.

Most likely because I was driving fifteen miles an hour—the only reasonable speed for when you were judging each brownstone’s Christmas decor against its neighbors, trying to determine the best on the block.

“Sir, I choose number one hundred and twenty-five as the winner,” Daisy announced.

“Milady, I think I agree. The Grinch with the bow deserves the cookies.”

“Wonderful, spin around!”

I performed a very illegal three-point-turn, since the cars parked on either side made a U-turn impossible, and drove back to the brownstone with the sparkly Grinch standing at the stoop.

I pulled up to the sidewalk and she jumped out, running up the stairs to drop the small ribbon-wrapped bag of cookies, along with a note that delegated them as the “Best Christmas Display on the block,” written in glittery green pen, in their mailbox.

“Don’t slip!” I shouted. Snow decorated her hair and hat like ornaments on a tree as she raced back down.

“To the next neighborhood!” she ordered, jumping back into the car.

“Onward we go!” I said, putting the car back in drive.

The next neighborhood was lacking any decor, so we moved a street over. The brownstones here were decorated with garland hugging their thresholds, twinkling lights wrapping their iron banisters, lit Christmas trees peeking out their windows, and wreaths dawning their front doors.

“This one is going to be difficult,” she thought aloud, her eyes glued to the homes, analyzing each window and door as if they were finished threads and pleats on a gown.

“I don’t know. That house is the only one with a pair of Santa legs sticking out of the snow,” I pointed out.

“We can’t choose winners based on funny decor!”

“We just chose the last winner based on a sexy Grinch!”

“*How* was that Grinch sexy?”

“There was a bow on his *ass*! I just assumed that’d be on the label on his tag!”

Her head bowed with laughter. “We’re definitely having a sexy Grinch outside our house.”

“Really?”

“Really,” she affirmed.

“Where do you picture us living?” I asked curiously.

Her laughter lulled. “In the West Village, I hope. Unless you rather—”

“Dais, you could tell me you wanted to live in the middle of a desert and I’d make it happen.”

“But what about what you want?”

“You are all I want.” I parked the car so I could look at her. I found brown swirls of sincerity in her eyes. Pressing my elbow into the console, I took her chin between my fingers. “I thought the French poetry book made that pretty clear.”

She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. “I just wonder sometimes.”

“Wonder what?”

“That this will all end. That your feelings will go away.”

Air escaped me. This wasn’t the first time she had mentioned it. But it’d also never be the last time I reassured her. “Daniella Maria, I love you more than you’ll ever know. And I will never grow tired of telling you.”

A faint blush dotted her cheeks before she leaned in and gave me a soft kiss.

“Is this about how poor my scarf knitting skills are?” I asked, hoping to make her laugh. When she did, my shoulders relaxed.

“Spin it around. We need to see if the other side of the street has anything better than a pair of Santa legs,” she said.

“Yes ma’am.” I took her hand, pressed a kiss to her knuckles, and turned the car around.

“It’s Christmas!” a tiny voice shrieked.

“It’s Christmas!” another tiny voice added.

“Okay, okay, we’re coming, just get off the bed please!” I begged as Daisy began waking up from her usual heavy sleep.

Their giggles followed them out of my room and down the stairs.

“Baby,” I whispered against her neck. “It’s Christmas.”

“Hmm,” she mumbled, turning her head into my bare chest.

“Wake up, I have a gift for you,” I said, kissing her temple and getting out of bed.

“Okay, I’m coming,” her groggy voice answered. “Only if you stay shirtless though.”

I laughed. “I don’t think Mandy and Linda would appreciate that.”

“I mean, you never know—”

I tossed a pillow at her chest, right as she was sitting up. “I’m keeping the gift now.”

“No, no, come here,” she petitioned, a wily smile on her lips. I would’ve protested, but the hand seizing the waistband of my pajama pants was difficult to ignore. “Merry Christmas, Vi,” she said warmly, retrieving a wrapped gift from beside the bed. “Open it.”

I peeled the wrapping paper back and found— “A copy of *Mansfield Park*?”

“First edition,” she confirmed.

“How ... how?” I stared at her in astonishment.

“Well, you know how I usually get to our café before you? Well, me and the woman at the counter have become pretty close,

so I was telling her that I was searching for a first edition Austen, and she said that she had a friend who had a grandfather who owned a bookstore and would she'd ask him to keep an eye out for me. And his eye didn't forget, fortunately."

"When did this happen?"

"In October." Two months ago. She started looking for my gift two months in advance.

"I ... I don't know what to say." I looked at her in awe.

"That's the biggest compliment of them all," she said, pressing her lips to my cheek.

"The gift I have for you feels terrible now."

"There's no possible way."

Reluctantly, I reached behind me into my bag on the floor and pulled out the small gift.

Slowly, she undid the ribbon, pulled off the paper, and then just ... stared. Then she launched herself into my arms, almost tossing us off the bed. "*You got me the same earrings Audrey Hepburn wears in Breakfast at Tiffany's?*"

"Yes," I exhaled with a mixture of relief and joy. "I'm happy you like them."

"I *love* them."

"Come on guys, we're opening gifts!" My mom yelled from down the hall.

After making a cup of coffee, and a hot chocolate for Daisy, we sat on the floor with my mother, Sarah, Jeff, Rhea, and Claire in front of the Christmas tree as gifts were passed around, a festive movie playing in the background.

“We’ve finally arrived!” Mandy sang, walking through the door with two giant poinsettias from Daisy’s Flower Shop.

Linda walked in behind her in an ivory wool coat, balancing a box of pastries and tea. “Mandy insisted on going through every poinsettia she had.”

“You haven’t missed anything yet, so don’t worry!” My mom urged, getting up to help.

Within minutes, everyone had a pastry in hand and a present in the other. We spent the morning helping set up Rhea and Claire’s new toys, and *ooing* at everyone else’s. Daisy’s cheeks even grew to a sweet pomegranate from laughing so much at the enthusiastic reactions. I couldn’t remember a Christmas so full and warm.

By noon, the house was full of footsteps racing through the kitchen or stomping up the stairs to get dressed before everyone arrived in a few hours for dinner.

Daisy took to the kitchen to help prepare sides while Linda watched the ham in the oven to ensure no mishaps. Mandy set the table, I cleaned up the wrapping paper, and everyone else took turns in the bathroom getting ready.

“It’s your turn. Get upstairs and get dressed before everyone arrives in twenty minutes,” I said, dragging Daisy out of the kitchen. “The stuffing will be fine without you.”

“Fine, fine, I’m going!”

When she came back down twenty minutes later, she wore sheer tights beneath a black skirt, paired with a rich red wine sweater (bows tied around the wrists) and matching ballet flats. The tips of her hair were curled and swayed as she moved. Pieces shifted to reveal a new pair of earrings.



“Finally ready.” She smiled.

“You look gorgeous,” I said, pulling her in for a kiss. She gripped onto my sweater, and I did my best not to fall to my knees altogether.

A whisper of cold air came through the hallway—the first sign of everyone arriving.

I spent the rest of the night catching up with family, being tugged by the girls through the living room to see their *new* new gifts, and holding onto Daisy’s lower back, resisting the urge to pull her upstairs.

When dessert was served, everyone gawked at the perfect transatlantic Yule Log.

“Told you,” I whispered, squeezing her thigh under the table. She simply nudged my arm with her elbow.

Full of dessert, some remained seated, while others stood right outside the dining room swaying together to the Christmas music.

Daisy and I were the said ‘others.’

“I think we have an audience,” she said into my ear. I reacted so quickly to her proximity that I almost caught her lips. It felt as if I took a shot of hot Bordeaux wine. Her thick eyelashes and rosy cheeks were a never-ending line of poetry. I couldn’t understand them but I didn’t want to stop reading either.

I turned and found Rhea and Claire watching, their eyes peeking out through the doorway.

“Claire told me she thinks you look beautiful,” I whispered.

“Really?”

“I told her I couldn’t agree more.” She let her head hit my shoulder. “Hey, let me see that beautiful face.”

“You’re the most amazing man I’ve ever met, Levi. You’re

my best friend.” She said it in a tone as soft as cashmere.

I looked away, trying to hide a blush.

Her hand left my shoulder and took my jaw, making me face her. “I love you so much, Levi Coldwell. And I’m so grateful I get to spend Christmas with you.”

“Every Christmas from now on,” I said.

Bubbling laughter caught my attention. To my left, I found a piece of paper taped to the wall in the girls’ wake.

*Look up!* it said in green marker. Looking up, I found a sparkling mistletoe strung above us.

Tilting my focus back to Daisy, I placed my hand over hers on my jaw, and leaned in, taking in a kiss that—every time—felt more magical than the last.