

The Christmas Ornament
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“It’s *Christmas*, blast it! I don’t want to argue with you!”

Jennifer’s shoulders trembled and her hands, snug in winter mittens, covered her face. She’d fallen in an exhausted and despondent heap on the snow-covered sidewalk in front of me only a moment ago, and now she was sobbing, finally losing it.

“Get up, Jennifer,” I said, my voice cracking, not as confident now. I turned away from the bright red holiday sock with miniature reindeer peeking out from the top of her left rubber boot. They’d been an early Christmas present to her just that morning. When she’d opened the gift, she’d given me a weak smile and pulled them on in silence.

I reached out to her, but she didn’t take my hand. That hurt. Instead, Jen looked up at me with big teary eyes, mascara trailing in dark smudges down both cheeks, her bangs damp from the cold. I noticed the faded, greenish-blue bruise on her cheek and quickly looked away, distraught.

“It was an accident, honey,” I whispered, trying to calm her. How many times had I uttered these five words in the last month? Hundreds? Thousands? “I’m just... just so *thankful* you’re still here, Jen. If I would have lost you—”

My voice broke and I couldn’t finish my sentence. I loved Jennifer with all my heart. To protect and love her was my life’s mission. After the car accident with our son, we’d been distraught for days. Jen came out with only a bruise. Little Billy didn’t come out at all.

I stood next to her, silent, taking deep breaths, each exhale like a smoke signal, a cryptic cry for help. Something caught my eye and I watched a hawk circle above us, its head swaying side to side, searching for dinner. It moved so gracefully, weightless, not feeling the cold. I wish I was a hawk.

My face tingled with the sharp briskness of the air. What did I expect? It was only supposed to be only twenty-eight degrees today. Then I felt wetness. I brought my cold, shaking hands up to my face and touched my cheeks like a blind man. When I realized what I felt were tears and determined that I was crying, I felt like a failure. I had finally lost control, too. I was no longer the strong one.

My hands clenched into fists at my sides and I felt like ramming them through something solid. I began punching into the air. One-two, one-two, bop, bop, bop. My feet skipped in place, sliding a little on the frosty grass. I continued this way until I went around full circle, breathing heavily. I wanted to feel satisfaction, but, of course, I couldn’t. After all, I was only punching air.

I stopped, defeated, shoulders slumping as I looked down at Jennifer’s hunched body, her face in her tear-soaked gloves again. She was on her knees now, bent forward so that her

forehead almost touched the small, thin patch of ice before her. How could I fail her like this? What kind of man *was* I?

An abrupt, guttural noise erupted out of me, interrupting my thoughts. I found myself sobbing, shaking my head side to side in denial. I heard my father's stern words in my head— "*Big boys don't cry, dammit!*" My chest hurt.

Jennifer snapped her head up, eyes widening in confusion. She looked so vulnerable kneeling there, so lost. She was shivering from the cold and her endless sobbing. Her face showed a sadness that I hadn't witnessed on anyone until now. My heart tore in two.

"Donnie!"

My shaky legs suddenly buckled and Jennifer reached up to keep me from falling too hard on my knees. My wife, always thinking of me, even on her worst days.

"Donnie, listen to me! It's okay. It'll be okay!" Jennifer was desperate to make things right. I didn't deserve such a good woman, such a loving wife. I felt like a fraud. I wasn't a real man.

Real men don't cry, I admonished myself.

Jennifer hugged and rocked me. I felt like a blubbering baby. But, as always when I'm in her arms, I felt loved.

"I'm sorry... I'm *sorry*," I said over and over. We swayed together in our embrace, oblivious to the world around us.

"Shh, shh, it's okay," Jennifer whispered in my ear. "It's Christmas. We'll get through this, baby. We'll get through this."

I reluctantly leaned out of her warm embrace, a wave of sadness crashing through me as she flinched when I caressed the fading bruise on her cheek. I reached into my left pocket and brought out the object that had started all this ruckus. I held it flat in my palm, offering it to my wife.

She eyed it warily, tears glistening. "Baby's First Christmas," she whispered, reading the ornament's inscription as if she'd never seen it before.

Tentatively, with lips quivering, Jen took the ornament from my hand and enclosed it in a tight fist. She drew it to her chest, pressing it over her heart. She closed her eyes for a moment, her face relaxed and serene.

We helped each other up as if we were stiff eighty-year olds instead of only thirty and twenty-eight, respectively. Jennifer clenched the *Baby's First Christmas* ornament in her right hand, holding my hand equally tight with her left, as if *I* was *her* lifeline.

Will she ever realize that it'd always been the other way around?

We slowly strolled home, the only dark house on the block. Jennifer squeezed my hand and motioned to the unadorned tree, seen through our front window. "Here, hon. You do the honors," she said, returning the ornament to me.

I wrapped my arms around the woman I adored and breathed in her scent. She clung to me for a moment before letting me go.

"Merry Christmas, Billy," I whispered as I caught a snowflake on my tongue.