

Just A Little Christmas B&E

Episode 1

The lights came on at exactly 7 p.m., just as they had every night for the last two weeks, the green-and-red glow creating a moving shadow show against the darkened walls as a gentle breeze made the decorations sway. Santa waved energetically from the snow-covered roof as Matt scanned the windows for movement, then relaxed. They were gone.

He'd been casing the place for a couple of weeks, watching The Crempsen's movements to make sure everything was going as planned. Planned? What a joke. Nothing about this had been *planned*. Chance alone had brought him here. One tiny mail delivery gone wrong, and the next thing he knew, he had been driving by their house, checking. No real thought in mind, not at first, but in the back of his mind, a seed had sprouted and slowly, against his conscious will, grew.

The fact was, Matt was no thief. Sure, he might've picked up a pack of cigarettes from a broken case once in a while, or walked away from a gas station with two bags of ice instead of one, but real theft? Never. But ever since lockdown, times had only gotten worse. The *fact* was, Matt was one failed payment away from being out on the street, and in this weather, that might just be the end of him. If the cold itself didn't kill him, a bit of lead for lunch might. The *fact* was, he was at the end of his rope. Even the car he was driving had been borrowed from a friend. A friend, by the way, who would probably keel over from a heart attack if he knew what Matt was doing right now. He grimaced and snuffed his stolen cigarette against Benny's dash, saving the remnant in his tattered jacket pocket for later.

He reached out to grab the door handle, but hesitated there, a rush of unexpected guilt causing his fingers to linger lightly on the latch. What would happen to Benny if the cameras were really on, anyway? Had he remembered correctly how to check? Or what if someone saw the unfamiliar car parked along the side of an otherwise deserted country road? Matt had parked a couple of hundred feet away from the house, out of sight of the first camera, but let's face it, he'd been driving by in this car for weeks. Would the police put it together? Read the license plate number and peg Benny for the crime? Benny had a rap sheet, and robbery *had* been his hobby of choice, after all. *Had* been. A thing of the past. Benny had a kid now, and things had changed for him. If he had any idea what Matt was up to, he never would've loaned him the car. Matt knew that, no question about it. That kid meant everything to him, and there's no way he would risk going back to jail now, not even for an old cellmate.

But, Matt rationalized, Benny was the only reason Matt was here anyway, so maybe, in a way, he was really the one responsible. After all, where else would Matt have learned how to tell if the cameras were on? If not for Benny's lessons, if not for Benny talking and talking and *talking* all through those long nights in jail – even when Matt had asked him to stop, to just shut his mouth for one *minute* – Matt wouldn't be here at all. Yeah, if Benny went down, maybe that was *Benny's* fault. Matt opened the door with an aged creak, letting the snow flurry in, powdering his clothes and the floorboard with a light coat of quickly melting ice. On the rooftop, Rudolph's red nose blinked out the beat to "Jingle Bells" while Santa's black, beady eyes stared down upon the hapless thief.

Matt pulled his dark gray ski mask down over his face, hiding the raised childhood scar along his temple as well as it hid the remnants of his teenage acne and his loosely hanging ear flaps, the gauges that had once decorated them long gone. With one last, nervous glance across the darkened windows, he turned and began to trudge down the road toward the house, even as a car's headlights blazed over the nearby hill, illuminating each snowflake against the evening sky, and Matt heard the distinct crunch of tires on gravel.